From the bestselling author of Paradise: A Twin Bliss Novel
Rosemary Okafor
Many Waters
The Soldier's Story: Book One (I)

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Rosemary Okafor

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DEDICATION

Behind every strong soldier, there is an even stronger woman who supports and loves him with all her heart.

To all the strong soldiers and their women.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

No greater sacrifice than that of a woman who stays at the threshold waiting for the man she loves to be back home from a mission where he’s gone to save the world.

This story was born out of my love for Nigerian service men and my respect for the women that stand by them.

As usual, the characters in this book are not perfect. You would get to a point in this book where you would want to slap them hard in the face or scream at them. Then, you would fall helplessly in love with them because... come on, there is nothing not to love about two hearts that beats for one another.

Writing Captain Ebube was my favorite part in this project. It was as though I was with him, or he with me, guiding my hands, telling his own story, leading me through his ordeals—even through the Somalia hot soil to the battlefield.

Elizabeth, is one stubborn woman who refused to have her story written unless I prove to her that I was worthy of her time and her story.

In all, I am grateful to both of them, and hope that you, as a reader, would love them as much as I love them.

PROLOGUE

“What’s wrong, boy?”

It was as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on, the masked man didn't have his gun pointed at the heavy bulldog of a man with black tufts of hair sprouting in a horseshoe pattern around the center of his balding scalp.

“Can’t go through with it?” Unperturbed, the man polished his yam pottage clean, before placing a spoonful in his mouth. Chewing as he spoke, making irritating licking sounds. “I killed your brother...” Lick. Swallow.

The clattering sound of his cutlery as it hit his plate made the masked man jumpy.

“Shot him in the eye first...”

“Shut up!” The masked man tightened his grip on the gun, his aim shifting from the man’s chest to his head. “I swear I’ll shoot you right here and now. I’ll __”

“You won’t.” The man cleaned his teeth with his tongue, pushing his plate away before leveling a glare at the masked man. Glare for a glare. A wry grin worked its way up his face.

“That’s a brave challenge from someone on the wrong side of the gun.” The masked man’s hand twitched on his last word.

“It’s not a challenge. You simply can’t kill me. You don’t have the balls—just like your stupid brother.” The man shook his head. “You think I don't know who you are?” Chuckling when he noticed the masked man’s eyes widening. “I can recognize you even in the dark.”

“It doesn't matter.” Feet apart, in classic shooting position, the masked man’s finger closed around the trigger.

“Your brother...” The man started, unbothered. “He had the gun to my face like you have now, but couldn't shoot.” He chuckled. “Big brother was out there talking peace, little brother took the bullet.”

“I said, shut your disgusting mouth. Now!” The masked man marched up to the man and slapped him hard on the face—the force of it sent the man reeling off the chair. Thump. Crumbling on the floor like a sack of potatoes. “My brother would have pulled the trigger if you weren’t a fucking senator.”

Slowly, the man raised himself into a sitting position, slouching. “Same reason you wouldn't shoot me.” He ran his hand over his upper lips and stared at

the red smear on his fingers. Grimacing, he said, “You are going to have a hard time explaining to your superiors.” Taking a laborious breath his gaze darted between his blood-stained finger and the masked man. “Why you barged into the house of a senator of the federal republic,” he snarled, “to assault him—”

“You bloodthirsty animal. Rotten bastard!” He didn’t care about his superiors. They wouldn't believe him if he had taken this case to them.

The man knew this, the same way he knew the masked man wouldn't pull the trigger— he wouldn't want to risk his career.

The man grinned widely, revealing a mouth full of expensive orthodontic work. “I don't know how you walked past my security men at the gate, but you will be sorry, soldier boy.” He grinned, shaking his head. “You will be sorry.”

“I came prepared.” The masked man scoffed. “Now get up!” Bending, he took a fist full of the man’s shirt and pulled him up, holding the gun to his temple.

“Please.” A woman ran into the sitting-room, throwing herself on the man, causing the masked man to lose his hold on the man. “Please, don't shoot him.” The woman cried; her body wrapped around the man on the floor. “He is all I’ve got.”

So was the masked man’s brother.

“He has children! Don’t make them fatherless!”

He took another woman’s child!

“Don't make me a widow, please!”

The woman was better off without the rotten bastard!

“Look at him...is he worth soiling your hands? Will his death give you satisfaction? Please... don’t do this.”

Killing him would avenge his brother’s death. A life for a life, wasn't it how things worked?

“Get out of the way, woman!” The masked man roared, shoving his shotgun inside his pocket. Pushing the woman aside, as everything around him faded into non-existence. The woman's cry. The man’s phone that chose that moment to go off. The figure that rushed out to grab him by the waist—all he could see was the lifeless body form of his brother. Elbowing whoever owned the hands around his midriff, gave him the opportunity to pummel the man with greed.

His punches had the impact of a bag of bricks, his kicks, that of a sledgehammer. Connecting with every part of the man’s body.

He didn't stop until he was sure the man wouldn’t be speaking to anyone about what happened that night.

PART ONE

‘I will rise now and go about the city in the street, and in broad ways. I will seek him whom my soul loveth.’
—Songs of Solomon 3:2

ONE

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Happiness didn't suit Elizabeth. Every time she wore it, it slipped off her shoulder like a borrowed coat. The ill-fitted feeling would come when she was ready to share testimonies that would wrench the heart of her enemies, and like an *Ogbanje* child, it would disappear, dragging her deeper into emotional darkness.

The crashing sound of a plate in the sink as it slipped out of her hand jolted her back to the present. She blinked, as though the action could shake off the emotional darkness crowding her. There she stood in the shoebox sized room with all the kitchen gadgets one could only imagine, an apron over her pajamas and no will to proceed with the cake baking she'd planned the previous day.

Hissing, she picked the plate, rinsed it and placed it on the drying rack, grateful the fanciful plastic was still intact. It was one of her possessions that had remained loyal to her. That, the house and her farm.

Washing her hands, she brought down her little radio from the upper cabinet and tuned to C*lassic FM PH*, placed it on the freezer, before proceeding to mix the ingredients for the cake. The radio presenter spoke about the current traffic situation before taking a music break. Of all music genres, the presenter decided to play hard rock. Elizabeth loathed rock music as much as she hated her birthdays—since her ancestors started changing her luck from good to bad on the twenty-sixth August of every year. Hissing, she abandoned the mixture she was mixing, wiped her hand on her apron and stomped through the kitchen to the offending object on top of the freezer.

If she had a way to reach the anchor of the program, she would have requested a solemn song. Something to make her cry. That's how she felt at the moment—to cry until there were no tears left to shed for her empty, loveless life.

Elizabeth turned the radio off, drew in a satisfied breath and strolled back to her worktable.

It wasn't the fact that happiness had refused to stay permanently with her that bothered her, but that her shame and failure were always easily spotted by her mockers.

Mockers—the last *people* she should be fretting about. She shouldn't even be stewing over anything. After all, she was the daughter of an honorable minister, and her mother was the state's chief judge.

On a day like this, people would expect her to throw a lavish party sponsored by her parents. She chuckled at the thought of her parents paying for a huge birthday party. Not that they wouldn't oblige, she didn't see herself making such a request from them. It had been two years since she last asked for a dime from her father who would gladly give her the world. Her mother had grown stingier since her divorce from her father six years ago.

Not throwing a lavish birthday or throwing one wasn't what bothered her or made her angry when a fly innocently perched on the other side of the window. Rather, it was the fact she'd been dating scumbags. Idiots who would rather have her footing their bills, burning her ass in their kitchens, practicing Kamasutra on their beds. She liked the Kamasutra part, but still...

And... and the fact they had always dumped her on or close to her birthday made it look like the hands of her village people were in it. Maybe she should be mad at her village people and not the men who treated her like shit.

She would have dismissed the previous two as coincidence, but this recent one made it obvious that either her father had given her marital destiny as a collateral for his political appointments or some aggrieved demons were executing their revenge upon her.

Henry... He was her lover until this morning. A loud hiss erupted from her mouth as she thought of him. With his complete lack of interest in her money, Elizabeth had settled that he was 'the one.' Henry was a lawn mowing, bill paying, trash-toting kind of guy. Never, not once had she caught him looking at another woman... Hell! She doubted he ever told her a lie. Which made it more difficult to swallow when he called her around one in the morning to tell her he had to call off their relationship, like it was a mission.

On her birthday!

"Men are scum," she muttered under her breath, slamming the wooden spoon hard into the mixture after turning on the oven to pre-heat it. And Henry, the worst of all scumbags. If one could put a face to the word 'scum' it would be Henry's pretty face.

Was it not three nights ago they talked about marriage, raising kids and growing old together? They were curled up on his sofa, in his rented flat at old GRA, his idle hand stroking her thigh while he laughed hard at her jokes on who would die first. He had tickled her to change her statement but she slid out of his grasp.

"Women live longer, so you would die first," she'd managed to say between

her tickled senses.

It was then he aimed a throw pillow at her head.

Was that why he called the relationship off unceremoniously? He thought she wished him death? *But... we'd enjoyed each other's body after, and he'd reaffirmed his love and commitment to me.*

"Fool." She didn't know if Henry was the fool or she. Hissing loudly for the millionth time that day, she grabbed a pack of mixed fruit, tore it open with her teeth, poured a handful into the mixture and started mixing.

Her plan had been to take the cake to Henry's.

Same three nights ago, he asked her what her birthday plans were.

"It's a surprise..." she said, wrapped in his warmth.

"Tell me now..." He nuzzled her neck, causing her to shimmy in excitement. "Lizzy baby," he purred.

He surprised her first.

"I got a woman pregnant and I want to marry her."

"Henry? Are you okay? This is a birthday prank, eh?"

"Goodbye Lizzy."

Gripping the rim of the bowl, she fought the urge to turn the mixture into the sink and flush it down the pipe. But that would give Henry joy, wouldn't it?

He wanted her broken, for reasons best known to him, but she wasn't going to give him that pleasure. Neither would she call to beg him to reconsider.

She was going to bake the cake and eat it. All of it. Alone. She didn't need anyone today. Not even friends and family. Hopefully, her brother wouldn't knock on her door with his group of hippie friends like he did on her last birthday, and her mother would have one-day amnesia—the woman had contributed to turning her birthdays into nightmares.

"Every woman needs a man, Eliza," she would say over the phone after her long, depressing prayers. "Stop making it hard for men to approach you. if you show them you can do without them, they will run away..."

Ha! If only her mother knew how many men she'd slaved for, yet they all left when they were done having fun.

Done with the mixing, Elizabeth pulled her baking pan down from the cabinet, at the same time, the oven beeped—ready.

Her phone chose that moment to buzz.

Henry, she thought, her heart doing a pitter-patter dance.

Rolling her eyes, she allowed the phone to ring while she pushed the cake inside the oven and set the timer. She couldn't ignore the phone on the fourth ring. Snatching it off the kitchen slab, she checked the caller and grunted, "No, God, no!"

If there was any doubt that God hated her, this just confirmed it. Why couldn't the big man up there grant her this one wish? *Give my mother one-day amnesia,* how hard was that?

”Good morning mom. Yes... Thank you mom...” Trapping the phone between her ear and her shoulder, she started cleaning her work space.

“I was going to call.” Lie.

“It’s still...” She checked the time on the radio. “Seven thirty-six... I wasn’t going to ignore...” Goodness! Who poked on her mother’s bile?

“I am serious, mom... I thought you would still be sleeping... Nothing...”

And in five. four. three. two. one! The marriage talk.

“I am not seeing anyone at the moment. No boyfriend.”

Elizabeth strolled out of the kitchen to her room, lip syncing her mother’s marriage mantra; *a woman is not a woman until she has a man by her side,* yet the woman wasn't able to keep her own husband by her side. Hypocrite.

Moving some clothes from one side of the bed, she sank her buttocks on the mattress, desperately willing her battery to run down or the network to go bad. That way, she would be saved from the reiterative speech.

“I cannot put a noose around a man’s neck and drag him to the altar, mom.”

Wrong response! Now she had unlocked her mother’s mouth, and like a damaged tap, the woman wouldn't stop until she had exhausted all that was in her. What was it with her mother and her desperation to see her get married anyway? Not like her own marriage did her any good. Six years and her mother was yet to recover from her scandalous divorce.

I want you to have a better story than me. Sure! Five men—add Henry and that would make it six—and so far, it had been marvelous.

Tired of holding the phone to her ears, Elizabeth put it on speaker and dropped it on the bed. Her mother would have a seizure if she knew that she had left her to rant while she proceeded towards the standing mirror to check her weight loss progress. Something beeped and she hoped it was her battery signaling it was low.

Tsk tsk tsk. She shook her head as her eyes beheld the voluptuous beige skinned lady staring back at her.

“I have been scammed.” Her hand grazed along her face and stopped at her cheeks. “That treacherous girl did assure me the slimming tea would start working in three days.” It’s been a week and her cheeks were still as puffy as sizable loaves of bread and her neck as though she had three doughnuts stuck in there.

“Eliza, are you still there?”

Jesus! She’d totally forgotten that her mother was still talking. “Yes mom!”

She was about to pick up the phone where she left it when she remembered—

"My Cake!"

Not that the pastry was worth saving. She would probably not eat it any more as she had lost the desire to do so. Thanks to her mother. And to the lie she bought as a weight loss supplement which seemed to have left her more bloated than she was before.

Passing a toothpick through the pastry, she sighed. "Thank goodness." Her cake was safe and almost done. The kitchen smelt divine, a combination of warm nutmeg, vanilla, and other spices.

Her mother's call had gone off and another number was on her screen when she hurried back to the room. Gritting her teeth, she picked and waited.

"Babe, where are you? The music director is blowing hot..."

"Oge."

"Who were you expecting?"

Definitely not you, *bad influence.* She didn't know whether it was Oge that infected her with the *men repelling* virus. Come to think of it, since she met Oge, her relationships had never lasted more than eight months.

"Babe, it's Sunday and you are not here."

"Is it Sunday? Wow!"

"Why do I feel you are being sarcastic?"

"Because I am." Oge was one person that knew her so well. "Tell your music director to shove his anger up his flat ass."

"Girl, don't do this. You rehearsed yesterday and everybody is counting on you."

"I'm no longer part of your church choir."

"Since when?"

Since God struck my name off the lists of ladies that deserve to be married this year. She hadn't thought about it that way, but that sounded like it. "Since today."

"What? Come on Lizzy, don't do this. The general overseer is visiting the church today, and you don't want to let the pastor and the Music Director down."

"Tell your music director to lead the praise and worship."

"You are serious, aren't you?"

"Never have been more." See that God! Do I get your attention now? She gloated.

"Girl, I don't know what has come into you but they need you here."

"They don't need me, they need my voice."

"Yeah, right—whatever, but please come *nau*. The man of God is restless."

"Who's the man of God you are talking about? Chinda, your music director

that has bedded half of the girls there? Please spare me."

"May Jesus have mercy on you."

"Amen."

"It's the pastor I am concerned about. The GO will rate him low if something goes wrong with today's service."

"I am not coming. You guys should tell Jesus I am thirty-six today and I am as sad as a fish in shallow water."

"My goodness! It's your birthday girl! Happy birthday to you, love."

"I have nothing to celebrate."

"Of course, you do... You are financially stable. You have your business running and a car too..."

"And can't make a man commit to me. As for the car; I will gladly hand it over to you."

"I would rather walk all my life than have that sorry thing you call a car."

"Says someone with no bicycle."

Laugher filtered through the other end of the line. "Girl, you know you would have changed that car long ago if you wanted to, you only chose not to."

She was indirectly telling me to ask my parents. "I am only trying to remain humble." *Not anymore. It's time to start living for me. All the men in the world could hang themselves.*

"So, what happened to Henry your perfect—"

"The snake dumped me this morning."

"What?" There was a brief silence. "How could he?"

The question should have been, how dare he?

"How are you feeling?" There was a subtle change of tone that no one would have noticed. A subtle text like; *how could he wait this long to leave you the hell alone?* Oge hadn't liked Henry from the day Elizabeth introduced him and had predicted a day like this would come.

"You know..."

Why did she feel what Oge was about to say would make her feel no better?

"If you can find someone like Josh and settle with him, you will not be having heart ache with all those riff raffs you've been dating—"

"Just because I played the role of wife to Josh in school plays many years ago doesn't mean we are destined to have a 'happy ever after' together." Why would everyone think that because she grew up with Josh, falling in love with him or someone like him would be as easy as licking a pot of soup? *The same Josh I've not even seen or heard from for eleven years and counting.*

"You broke his heart."

It was like Oge heard her inner thoughts. "It simply didn't work between

us."

"Anyway, please come to church. There are lots of things here that could put you out of your sour mood." Her friend laughed. "We will go out after church to talk about how to get you a better man. Henry was a *no gooder* from the beginning."

"You never liked him." Elizabeth eased herself off the bed. Toppling over her pajamas as she tried to remove it with one hand while holding her phone with the other.

"And see what he did to you."

"Get off my phone." Feeling a little better, she kicked the cloth aside and walked into the bathroom. "Jesus!" She ran out. "Girl, I have a cake in the oven!"

"Oh, you still had the heart to bake a cake after your lover ditched you? You are not heartbroken then."

"Oge, don't you have a bellowing music director to attend to?" She said, hurrying to the kitchen that now smelt of burnt cake, buck naked. "Get off my phone!" Click, the line went dead.

One thing about a day that started like this one? It never gets better. First, it was Henry. Second, her mother and now...ouch! She snatched her hand from the hot pan, flapped her throbbing fingers and cursed under her breath. Waking up to having one's heart wrenched was bad enough, adding burnt fingers to it was too much for one morning. Hissing, she grabbed a towel and went back to rescuing what was left of the pastry.

There went the one thing she thought would turn out right that morning.

Twenty minutes later, she was pushing her way through the church nave to the altar where the prayer coordinator, mopping his shiny forehead, was already rounding up the intercessory prayers and the music coordinator had his eyes pinned to the main entrance door. His face reminded her of her grandfather's rickety truck.

"Excuse me." She edged an usher and lifted a leg up to the altar step, but the other foot had a mind of its own. Before she knew it, she was toppling over. It would have been a 'London bridge fall' had she not grabbed the altar rail.

Lips pursed into a thin line, she walked past the pastor, ignored his wife whose neck muscles strutted so much, Elizabeth feared they would burst out, and took the mic. She was about to start singing when she noticed the pastor's sixteen-year-old son on the keyboard.

Bile rose from her stomach to her throat. She could taste her own anger.

Right. She looked away from the boy, her eyes searching the auditorium. Would the day get any worse than this? She had to kill her singing career —not

that she had one outside this local church filled with frustrated people —because of a Wanna-Be keyboardist who couldn’t differentiate the *‘Do’* note from *‘Fa.’*

Where the hell was Jerome! He was supposed to be the one playing, not this... this.... Hot tears of frustration threatened to spill from her eyes. But before they could slip down, a very smooth, balanced melody emanated from the keyboard, engulfing the auditorium. Like the waves of the ocean keeping the beach clean, the melodic sound rushed in and around her, to her amazement. Stripping her of all sadness.

Oh, wow. The full band joined in and she raised her first song.

The worshippers were already elated in the spirit when Elizabeth decided to know who her savior was.

He had his head bent over the piano his fingers were frolicking over. Feeling her gaze on him, he looked up, straight into her eyes, she found herself dissolving like sugar in a cup of hot coffee.

The devil had come to church.

The devil had a handsome face.

The devil was in a navy-blue tuxedo showing off his pristine white shirt underneath.

He arched one brow and thrust his head towards the worshipers.

She didn't understand.

A subtle smile played on his lips as he shook his head and changed to another song. Raising his head and catching her still staring, he gave her a wink.

TWO

The look on her face when he caught her staring made him want to fling caution out the church's lancet window and laugh out loud. He liked her already. Though he couldn't say the same for the woman who must be the pastor's wife. The woman had sat throughout the worship session, glaring at the lady, as if she reeked of sin and hell.

She was a talented singer. Her voice, like warm milk, flowing through his body, leaving him in a wakeful dream. And her eyes? He would have paid anything to have her look his way again. But the lady had ended the worship, handed the mic over and had marched off without throwing him a glance.

What a charming way to say *'thank you'* to someone who just saved her from embarrassment.

He walked back to his seat a little disappointed. It wouldn't have been bad to hit it up with the voluptuous lady, a sister to Delilah in the house of the Lord.

Observing her with amusement, he'd watched as she almost fell when she tried climbing the altar earlier. *Cute*. Undeniably *sexy*. The kind of sexiness that rebooted his biological systems, which was stupefying because it'd been years since he got laid. He hardly focused on women these days. Distraction, that was what they were. But this one he couldn't ignore. She was a head turner.

Tugging gently on the lapel of his tux, he brought his head up, glanced around in search of her but caught the piercing glare of the pastor's wife instead. The woman's sunken cheeks and the feathery *mother in Israel* hat gave her a funny look—a chicken with its wings behind it, inspecting what's happening, biting off weaker chickens' heads. The picture he conjured of her almost made him sputter out in laughter.

"Nice sound you made on the keyboard today," someone whispered beside him.

"Thanks." He threw a passing glance at the seats behind the altar. *There you are...* He thought as his eyes settled on her. She was engrossed with her phone. Her tongue grazed the surface of her full lips and Jesus F Christ! The effect that single act was having on him...

His imagination came alive—his lips mashed against hers, she hungrily

taking his tongue which he would push past her teeth to the moist space within.

Damn! He shouldn't be having these thoughts in the house of the Lord. Madam hen might be looking. Flicking glances around to make sure no one was watching, he settled his gaze on her again. *Look at me,* he willed and she did. Her face blushed pink as he offered her his best smile. Lips pouted snidely. She — *Wha...? Did she just give the...?*

What in tha... "I like this lady!" he whispered. *Who gives someone the middle finger in church?!*

"Who?"

Shit. He didn't realize he was loud, enough for the guy beside him to hear.

"Don't worry." He said, his eyes still on her.

"Oh her," the guy said. So much for not being obvious. "Girl has a voice that can wake a corpse."

And a body that can make a man cum in his pants. "Good Lord." Ebube chuckled, glancing down a bit before looking her way again. "Have mercy," he murmured.

Everything about his sudden wild desire was wrong. If there was something the military had taught him, it was control and self-discipline, especially towards women. But this definition of gorgeousness was making him lose his composure.

"You're new in this church?"

"Obvious, huh?" His eyes still on the curvy lady who seemed to have forgotten about him totally.

"I know every face in this church, and yours I've not seen before."

"You are right. A colleague recommended here. Said I'll enjoy good worship." But he'd ended up not just enjoying the section but being part of those that made it as amazing as he was sure it was. Thanks to the man he was sure was the pastor, who had agreed when he walked up to him and asked if he could help.

"That's great," the man said, brushing an imaginary speck from his 'yellow as the sun' suit. "Hope you have come to stay?"

"That depends." He tore his gaze away from her for a few minutes. "I am a man on the move. No permanent resident."

"What does that mean?" The man leaned his face closer, his minty breath wafted through Ebube's nostrils.

"I'm with the military."

"An Army man huh?" The man's face was small, but when he smiled, the action made his face bigger and brighter, like the sun. "This must be my lucky day. I don't mind having a military friend."

"Be careful what you ask for. Military men can roast your ass when you go

out of line.”

“You don't say the A S S word in church.”

If only the man knew the words that had crept into his head since he set his eyes on the sensual chorister lady. Crazy, sinful words—kissing, slick bodies, panting.

“My name is Mark, Dike.”

“Ebube Nwafor.” Intermittently, he threw glances toward the choir pew. She was there one minute and then she wasn’t. His gaze darted left, right, left again and he saw her walking in through the door that led to the pastor’s office, chin up, head straight, as if welded to her neck. Someone must be responsible for making my cupcake turn to a sour beancake.

Look at me, sweetheart. He willed again, as though his words held the power to make her do his bidding. And she.... didn't even throw a glance.

Disappointment stroked his heart, but he shrugged it off. It wasn't every day a man gets what his heart desires, but he wasn't a man accustomed to not getting what he wanted. Well, there was a time he’d thought he should change his name to disappointment.

The church announcements seemed to be taking forever. Bored, he took out his phone, browsed for a little while then decided to ditch the service.

“Excuse me,” he murmured to the man—Mark—so he could get out and get things rolling.

“Where are you going?” Mark’s forehead creased with a frown. “The service is about to close.”

That's why he had to leave first. To wait for her. “I have to meet... someone.”

“Her?”

He gave Mark a brief knowing grin. Mark shook his head in disappointment but adjusted enough to give Ebube space to move. Maybe he didn’t want to cross a military man.

He’d only turned his attention to a little girl who just greeted him, and she was gone the second he returned his eyes to the spot he'd sighted her some few minutes ago, with another lady that was a sharp contrast to her—dark skinned, as skinny as an anchor rope. She couldn’t have disappeared that fast.

Now he had to revisit the church—next Sunday. Perhaps he would be able to speak to her then. They could even exchange contacts if he’s lucky.

He was halfway to the church’s parking lot when he saw her moving quickly with an underlying nervousness that was somehow appealing. It seemed like

she’d seen him and was trying to get as far away from him as possible. With a smirk on his face, Ebube picked his pace and caught up with her as she was about to unlock her car.

“Hi.”

“What!” She near screamed. Turning to face him, eyes scanning him and their environment.

Must be having a rough day. Did mother hen have anything to do with it? “Hey.” He smiled. “I just came to say hi.”

“Sorry. Bad day,” she murmured, crossing her arms and leaning on the door, trying to act calm, even when she just confirmed she was having a bad day.

He considered taking the key off her trembling fingers and opening the car himself. Whatever was making her edgy must be something serious.

“It is obvious,” he responded, trying hard to look for words to carry on their baseless conversation, but her dark brown eyes narrowed. “I mean the bad day.” He was rusty at this, it had been years.

Lips pursed, she stood straight, staring him down intently. “What do you mean?”

“Who comes late to church with anger written all over her and says ‘fuck you’ to the guy that rescued her during a praise and worship session heading towards a disaster?”

“I didn’t...” Her cheeks turned deep pink. “What are you doing in this church by the way? Adding to my problems?”

“For a lady with your kind of body, this attitude doesn't suit you.” That came out wrong, but he was going to stand by it.

Her head snapped backward as if she had taken a heavy punch. Arms that were crossed became loose, and she held them together. “What? Did you just...?”

Hands folded across his midriff, he observed her with a mixture of interest and amusement. Not too tall, full and tidy as the interior of a first-class cruise ship cabin. Her hair was held up in a ponytail, exposing the sexy folds of her neck. Her face wouldn’t bore him if he decided to watch her all day and the movement of her red painted heart shaped lips when she talked could turn a monk into...

“What do you want?” She glared. “What are you looking at?”

“You.” His gaze lingered on her face. “You are damn beautiful,” he muttered, holding her gaze. He could swear he read a thousand words from her chestnut shaped eyes in that split second. And oh... they reminded him of melted chocolate, warm and addictive atop a cupcake. She shook her head, implying he was wrong, and he wouldn’t want her believing that.

“I am serious.” He moved closer, held her elbow and he didn’t want to let go.

In fact, he would have loved to do more than just hold her arm. There was this insane desire to touch her cheeks. Her lips. Bury his face on her neck. Kiss her eyes. Her mouth... and every other special feature of her body which was all of her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt such a strong pull towards a woman.

"What do you say we go on a date? You and I." He gestured. "Get to know each other." Her forehead kept scrunching up as he went on and he remembered he hadn't introduced himself. Before she thought of him as some random stranger, he solved that issue. "Forgive me, my name is Ebube."

She eyed him with a fair amount of discomfort and suspicion, which didn't surprise him. If he were a woman, he would also be skeptical toward a man as presumptuous as he was now. He was holding her elbow, asking her on a date and—what was he thinking?! "This sounds inappropriate," he said, letting go of her hand like he'd been ordered to do so. "I'm so sorry."

"Uh, I have to go," she muttered, hurried into her car and drove off.

THREE

“What a man,” Elizabeth muttered, some minutes after she had driven out of the church premises. *Who does he think he Is?* Sauntering towards her with such confidence to tell her what?

You are damn beautiful.

What a lame pickup line. Irrespective of the fact that she was having a bad day, she found the whole thing more amusing than offensive. How on earth did he think those few words would get her gushing over him? And the way his eyes roamed all over her body, it was obvious he was after one thing. It was bad enough he’d flirted with her inside the church—winking and giving her that suggestive grin that got her almost fumbling through the lyrics of the songs.

Shaking her head, she increased the volume of the radio, her finger tapping in sync to the music playing on the stereo. But her heart was far from connecting to the tune that filled the car, she found herself giggling; a guy ditched her today, of all days, and another— a darkly tanned prince of cuteness, came on to her with such impetus.

Yeah, go on lady universe. Go on... mock me.

And to make her situation laughable, her heart, instead of romancing the hurt Henry had served her with, had chosen to settle on the arrogant handsome devil she’d met in church.

Spotting him walking through the car park, his gunslinger’s gait at odds with his Savile Row tux, throwing glances around, she knew instantly that he was searching for her. She tried to get away from him but her legs weren’t in sync with her mind.

Or maybe she actually wanted him to find her—hard to admit though.

His voice was a mixture of authority and easy humor. His hands manicured to perfection, she noticed. She’d also noticed the power behind those breath-taking eyes the moment she looked into them. Whatever game this man came to play, he wasn’t one accustomed to losing.

He must be one of those *too perfect* men, and she knew she wouldn’t trust a man so perfect any more. Henry had taught her that the more perfect the image, the greater damage underneath.

For Christ’s sake! Thinking about a sensuality dripping strange man wasn't what she should spend her time doing a few hours after a heart-ripping breakup.

Tapping her fingers on the steering wheel, she darted her head both sides before she took the road leading to Trans-Amadi. Her mother’s house came in view and for the third time that morning, she wondered if visiting the place that had been her home until two years ago, when it became obvious that she had to either move or die of frustration, was a good idea.

If only her mother would not raise the issue of marriage, God! She was beginning to have PTSD over that topic.

Well, she’d already promised to visit and her mother would be waiting.

Nosing up to the gate, she honked, waited, and let her thoughts slide back to the man.

Ebube.

Even his name excited her in a way she didn't like.

“Bad day,” she’d said.

He had felt a strong urge to pull her into his arms and hold her until the effect of the *bad day* dissipated. Jesus, F Christ, the lady was gorgeous! Her face irresistible to look at. Whoever was responsible for that dent on her countenance deserved to be thrown into the ocean.

Come on now, Ebube, you just met this lady. His only regret was not pressing for her number, because definitely, he wanted more than a meeting with her.

Attraction at first sight wasn't something he was used to. The kind of strong and electrifying pull that he believed only happened in romantic movies.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered, tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

He’d seen women, beautiful and curvy. But this one had captured him the very moment he set his eyes on her. Exhuming long forgotten feelings with her beautiful eyes.

“She’s an item.” He threw a glance at Mark who had prattled his way into his car, with the excuse of going the same direction with him.

“Who?”

“The lady that sang today in church.”

“Oh, Elizabeth?”

“That’s her name?” Elizabeth, huh. Ebube savored the name as if it was a succulent grape in his mouth.

“She is the daughter of one political money bag.” A daughter to a politician?

Ebube felt a sudden need for more air, stretching his hand towards the dashboard, he increased the AC level in the car. She is a daughter to a politician not one herself, he tried convincing himself. “Thirty-five and as single as a coin in a beggar’s plate. She is bad news, trust me.”

Ebube gave the man who was nodding to the soft tone from the stereo, a sidelong glance. “What makes her bad news? That her father is a money bag or that she is thirty-five?”

“That lady has no patience for levity. And...uhm, she’s not nice!” The little man shifted his buttocks uncomfortably on the seat, casting a defensive stare on Ebube. “She doesn't make it easy for us to... you know...”

Should he take it that this lady was notorious for bruising the ego of the male folks or was it just Mark? “You don’t like her.”

“Not my kind of woman.” Mark tsked.

Definitely mine.

Talk of one man’s poison being another man’s choice drink. Slowing the car, Ebube stuck his hand out from the window, signaling other vehicles to halt for some kids to cross the road. Then he continued.

She's intriguing. Like puzzles, she aroused his curiosity. Maybe that's what attracted him. He wanted to know her more.

Adjusting his rear mirror, he navigated to the left, and entered Woji road, taking in the greensward of Port Harcourt Naval Park across the road and feeling lucky to be transferred to the garden city. He thought of the lady again with a tight-lipped smile.

“I wish you were going farther than this,” Mark hissed at the realization that his comfort trip had ended.

“Unfortunately.” Ebube pulled the car to the shoulder of the road, shifted himself so he was face to face with Mark. “I want her number.”

The guy cocked his head backward, narrowing a gaze at him. “Officer, are you sure you–?”

“Does it sound like I’m not sure?”

“I don’t know.”

Had something gone on between Mark and this Elizabeth lady? A relationship offer that wasn't considered? Which explains the deflecting feeling oozing out of Mark whenever this lady was mentioned.

“I don’t have her number.”

“Why do I feel that you are lying?”

“But I am not, why will I have her number? She’s not my girlfriend.”

“She’s your church member.” Ebube raised a brow.

“I don't even have the pastor's number.”

Ebube understood the point the man was trying to make. One doesn't go about collecting numbers of all the members of his church.

"So, can you help me get it?"

Mark frowned.

"Please."

"I would rather give you her friend's number, you'll get every detail about that lady from her."

"Good, thank you so much. I owe you one." He patted Mark on the shoulder and unlocked the door.

He watched Mark cross to the other side of the road before he pulled the car into the base.

His phone rang as he killed the engine. It's his step-mother.

"When are you coming to see us?" She said immediately he answered. "You have to increase our allowance. Things are hard, one hundred and fifty thousand naira no longer takes care of our monthly expenses."

"I pay every bill in that house." The woman would call him for something as ridiculous as renewing their cable subscription. "Buys foodstuff in bulk and still sends you money every month." He opened the glove box, picked his shotgun and shut the compartment.

"Ebubechukwu, your father was a policeman for twenty-eight years, yet we slept and woke up with lack. *Ogbenye kpuru m Isi ka udene!* We ate poverty as food under his watch!"

Ebube could picture her in her room, leaning against her open window where she would either be looking at her vegetable garden or Omalicha his daughter running around. But he knew from the ice-cold ferocity in her voice, that she wasn't paying attention to any of those.

"I will not tolerate that from you, *I na anu*? You're making big money now. You shouldn't leave me looking like death warmed up. *K'onye onwu juru*."

Jesus! "What do you want?" He had tried to make the woman comfortable—had built her a house with all the basic amenities.

"Your father was a mistake. I wish I didn't..."

"My father did all he could for you—for us." The woman was simply insatiable. Always wanting more, until his father couldn't stand the constant reminder of how much he'd failed. Ebube remembered that night vividly, they'd had one of their verbal fights and as usual, his father had left the house but this time, he returned a corpse. It was a hit and run driver. "I'll add an extra fifty thousand to the allowance." He sighed.

"*Ehen, Ugbua ka I biara nu*."

He cursed under his breath as he heard the laughter in the woman's voice.

“Now you are talking,” she said. “Eh...let me call Oma so she can speak to you. You know how she loves hearing your voice.”

The only good thing his stepmother had ever done and was still doing for him was taking care of his daughter. The relationship between the old woman and the child amazed him all the time. The bond between them. Irrespective of what the woman thought of him, she treated his daughter as if she was the center of her world.

“Daddy!” His little girl came on the phone.

“Hey, my little lady.” Turning the phone to the other ear, he stepped out of the car, shoved his gun inside his pocket and started walking towards his house. “You’re good?”

“Yes, grandma roasted yam for me.”

“With her special oil and pepper sauce?”

“How did you know, Dad?” The girl exclaimed. “I’ll tell grandma to keep some so you can eat when you come home.”

FOUR

Visiting her mother had been a terrible decision, it left her feeling like an earthworm that had salt sprinkled on its body. While nursing the ill-feeling, Oge had walked in and had decided that a bar and getting drunk on alcohol was the best way to unlive the shit that just happened.

She'd drank too much; it took the edge off her nerves. However, it did nothing to the guilt that came in the morning, a burning shame tearing through her heart, reminding her she should have spent yesterday morning her abruptly ended relationship instead. There was no one to tell her it's alright, life's too short to spend even a second being gloomy.

She woke up to find Oge gone, a note dropped on her table.

Don't go anywhere. Pamper yourself, you deserve it, it read.

Elizabeth wasn't planning on leaving the house anyways even though it was a Monday and she was supposed to be at the farm. She'd chosen to do nothing today; she could afford it, she wasn't answerable to anyone. If she decided not to work for the next three years her bank account was fat enough to take care of her even.

She had achieved financial independence, through stubbornness, hard work and a little help from daddy—eventually. Initially the old man didn't want to invest in her business idea when she took the proposal to him. Suggesting a boutique or a jewelry store instead. Farming wasn't dignifying enough for him to stake his money in.

Determined to pursue her dream of owning and running a standard fish farm, it was either daddy provided the funds or she wouldn't give him peace. It worked, eventually, he gave in with a generous amount of blessings. The old man might have fallen out with his wife but Elizabeth still had a special spot in his heart.

Elizabeth glanced up at the clock by the wall. It was 7pm. Dumping the magazine she'd been glancing through on the table, she—in shorts and singlet—got up from the dining chair, walked through to the sitting room and settled on the sofa with a plate of tiger-nuts.

A noise outside made her look over her shoulder, a few seconds later, Oge

walked in.

”These things are killing me,” Oge said, kicking off her shoes and collapsing on the sofa beside her. She grabbed a handful of nuts and threw a few into her mouth.

“Did anybody force you to wear them?”

“I have to look smart.”

“Hanging on shoes that have six-inch nails as heels is your definition of looking smart, thank God I work for myself.”

Oge reached for more nuts but met with resistance. “Let me have more of those nau.”

“You’ve eaten enough.”

“You stingy bitch!” Oge reached for the bowl and a tussle ensued, the plastic was overturned, scattering its content on the floor. The two friends jumped off the sofa, grappling for the nuts.

“Jesus. You are a beast, Elizabeth!”

“And what are you?” Elizabeth asked, sputtering cracked nuts from her mouth.

They threw their heads back laughing.

“So...” Oge’s laughter turned into a cough, she slapped her chest to ease it. “I thought you’d be at the gym.”

“You thought, yet you came.” Her friend had given up on the nuts now, leaving the job of cleaning the mess to her. “What were you planning to steal from my house while I was away? I think it’s time I collected my spare keys from you.”

“You know I can take anything I want with or without you around.” Oge leaned back against the sofa. “So, why didn't you go to the gym?”

“You said I shouldn't go anywhere.”

“When did you start doing what I asked you to do?”

“I’ve asked myself that.” Done with the picking, she sat right back on the sofa. “Anyway, I’m done with the gym.”

“The instructor wanted a little some'n? Not that I will blame him though.” Oge unhooked her bra, slipped it off from underneath her shirt and shoved it inside her bag. “Who would see voluptuous titties and not be tempted to touch them?”

“These titties aren’t begging to be touched by any idiot. Men should learn how to tame their wild eyes.” Elizabeth said. Her mind made a trip to the man she met yesterday in church, her stomach fluttered as she remembered the way his eyes ran through her. He was an exception to the *men* she was referring to. She wouldn’t mind having him look at her everyday.

“So, this one touched you?”

“Said it was a mistake. But I know it wasn’t. The idiot had been ogling at my breasts from the first day I registered there.” She hissed. “Babe, I am sticking to morning jogs and that’s it.”

“What happens to the money you already paid?”

“It’s my money, leave it there o.” Standing up she headed to the kitchen. “Come, I have some rice and stew in the fridge.”

“I thought you said you are on a no carbs diet?” Oge said, following behind.

“Jesus didn’t die for me to starve to death.”

“You don't want your stomach bulging out again, you know how hard you’ve worked to keep it down.”

“Kudos to me.” She proceeded to warming and serving the food. Minutes later, they settled down for dinner.

“Girl, I am glad you are no longer brooding over that imbecile, Henry,” Oge said with a mouth full of rice.

“I don’t know how to mourn dead relationships for too long.” Maybe, that was the reason this kept happening to her. She was accustomed to men waltzing in and out of her life.

“He doesn’t deserve a tear from you.”

“I’ll not honor him with even a drop.”

“You go hun!” Oge dropped her spoon, raising her fists above her head. “That’s the spirit!”

“Henry is a fool.” She felt like a bigger fool for not knowing this earlier.

They slid into silence, concentrating on their food.

“Guess who called me today?” Oge stretched her hand to get the salt shaker.

“How would I know?”

“You remember the dude that came to your rescue last Sunday?”

“Which guy?”

“The one that played the keyboard.”

“Oh, I remember him.” As if she would ever forget.

“He called me this morning.”

Throwing the stubborn bone she was trying to crack back into the plate, Elizabeth gave Oge her full attention. Holding her breath, hoping her heartbeats weren’t as loud to Oge ears, as it was to hers. “And?” *Goodness! Why was she suddenly warmed up just discussing this guy?* “What did he say?”

“Said he got my number from Mark.”

A mushroom of jealousy grazed through her heart. “What does he want?”

“The question should be, who does he want?”

“Okay, who does he want?”

“You.”

“Wha... what? Don't be ridiculous,” she said. Suppressing the sudden, unwelcome excitement that was bubbling inside her, she returned her eyes to her now empty plate.

“I am serious.” Oge, pushing her plate aside, picked a toothpick from the dispenser. “He likes you and wants me to give him your number.”

I cannot believe... “You gave him?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Why would you?”

“Dude was straight to the point about what he wanted and wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Typical of him. The guy almost got her agreeing to go on a date with him.

“Besides, I felt you needed a distraction, someone that would help you get over Henry.”

“Really? You think I need another heartbreak to get over a heartbreak?” As far as she was concerned, she was over Henry, having thrown him out with the burnt cake on Sunday evening. “I don't need any man now. Even if I do, I wouldn't consider one who feels the world should crumble at his feet.”

Yet, a warm sensation ran through her at the mere thought of him. She tried to hide the crack of her lips and blinked off the gleam that would have betrayed her excitement.

“Girl, his voice was damn so sexy.”

And his hands too. Those elegant sculptures that had sent warmth up her nape when he held her arms.

She drew in breath, mentally shaking off the stupid desire that welled inside her. He was no good for her, she knew this from that moment she set her eyes on him.

FIVE

Twenty-nine days later...

She had a suspicion the universe was trying to make her pay for the one week she'd luxuriated in Abu Dhabi without having a care in the world.

Although guilt had crept in between her indulgences, she pushed the intruding feeling away and had gone ahead to spend money on frivolities as if her bank account was an ocean that would never run dry.

Reality had now set in, she had to work like an ox to make up for the time off and equally refill her screaming account.

She was working three times more, spending longer hours on the farm than she'd done before the vacation. Not that she didn't envisage it, but she felt she could stay home for more days relishing the pleasurable experience she had in the UAE capital. However, *Lizzy's Aqua-Farm* wasn't going to run itself. She'd had enough leisure.

"I guess we are done." Peeling off her rubber gloves she handed them to one of her workers. Her body ached, her legs screamed for a good stretch, but it would take another hour for her to actually get to sprawl on her bed and wish that morning would come later. "Bury the dead ones before you leave. The weak ones will be dried in the morning," she said, marching to her office, confident her instructions would be carried out.

Once in the comfort of her little workspace, she hung her apron on a nail by the wall. Rubbing her palms together, her eyes scanned the record books before her—another job to be done.

"Ma, someone is here to see you," one of her workers announced, as he popped his head through her door.

Right. Just when she thought she could spread her limbs on the only sofa in the office and catch a little sleep. "What does the person want?" She propped her chin with her palm, fighting to keep her eyelids open.

"He didn't say."

"A *'he'* shows up here at this time of the night and you didn't bother to find out why he wants to see me?" Not knowing whether it was fatigue, hunger, or the sight of the record books spread on the table that was responsible for her

sudden edginess, she sucked some nerve calming air into her lungs. “Did you at least ask him if he wants to buy fish?”

“Ye... no ma... he just said...”

Hissing, she unstuck her tired butt from the chair, grabbed her apron and headed out.

The silhouette of a man bent over a pond slowed her steps. There was no guessing who the visitor was. His boot-covered feet planted firmly on the ground, his clean haircut glimmered under the searchlight that illuminated the compound. Then he turned, aiming those strong dark eyes at her, a wry smile plastered at the corner of his lips.

Slipping her hands into the pocket of her apron, she resumed walking, determined not to allow him affect her in any way.

But...

What was that tingly sensation at the pit of her stomach? For God’s sake! She was supposed to be pissed! No, that was mild. She should be mad right now. Mad that he should have called.

Oge gave him her number for crying out loud. Why didn’t he use it?

And why were her eyes lingering over him—taking in every detail, mirroring the movement of his body?

It wasn’t just his eyes that got her shivering all over, but the way he used them. His gaze was so penetrating, so intimate, as if he was seeing through her.

“How did you get here?” She wouldn’t dare walk any closer, for fear that he would hear the throbbing of her heart and the heaviness of her breath.

“I took the easiest route, avoided the traffic and, wala! I’m here.” He stood with his thumbs stuck out from the pocket of his woodland camouflage, chest thrust out.

“You are in the military?” The question rushed out of her mouth. She hated military men. They were so... so randy, irresponsible.

“The Navy. Is that a problem?”

“No! Not at all.” Sexy bastard!

“You are making miracles here.” He walked over a pipe and moved towards her. “Your farm is beautiful.”

“Don’t come closer.” She could perceive the stench of fresh fish and perspiration from her body. God! She wished she could disappear.

“Why?” He stood there, in that hip-shot stance that was both relaxing and...attractive. “Oh!” His gaze swept over her. “Wrong timing huh?”

Was he struggling not to laugh?

“Sorry, I was in the neighborhood and decided to pay you a surprise visit.” He tried a charming smile as he walked closer.

“Please don't...come near me. I uh... smell awful.” She wasn't dressed for a sexy dude’s confrontation.

The laughter he was trying to suppress, burst out. “I'm sorry.” But he continued laughing. “Didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” Grinning, he started to say something, but the irritated line he must have seen between her eyebrows made him change his mind. “I’m really sorry. So, can I stay? Or are we rescheduling?” he added.

“This is not my house.”

“I know.”

You are unbelievable. Sweetly unbelievable.

“Excuse me.” Hurrying back into her office, very sure he had his eyes on her backside, she shut the door and dialed Oge.

“He is here.” she said.

“Who?”

“Who else? The man you gave my number to.”

“In your house?”

“In my toilet, Idiot! He is on my farm!”

“What? He came? I gave him the address to your house, he said you weren't home.”

“And?”

“I am sorry, okay? He asked and...and...I couldn’t lie to him.”

“I don’t know what to do, can’t even face him.”

“Why? I thought you could handle anything.”

Anything but a toned-up man with eyes that exuded lust, creating an unsolicited spark of sexual excitement inside of her.

“Oge I am so dirty right now, I smell like a rotten fish.” She pushed the words through clenched teeth.

“You always smell of fish and sadness, so?”

“Thank you Oge.” Goodness! Who tells a friend that she smells of sadness? “Thank you so, very much!”

”Wait, I didn’t mean that.”

A soft knock on the door interrupted the conversation. “I wish I never ever speak to you again,” she said, ending the call.

The knock came again. “Hope my presence doesn't discomfort you?”

He had already confirmed that it does. “Why would you think that?” she replied, opening the door.

“I don’t know.” Walking in he slipped his hands in his pockets and shrugged.

Don’t stare too much or you will be hooked, Elizabeth. “Do you normally invade people’s spaces or is there something you want from me?” Stepping

aside, she shut the door and leaned on it.

“What if there is something I want?”

“Then I am so sorry soldier, I have nothing you might be interested in,” she cut in and walked past him. There was no reason for him to be here, neither was there any sane reason why she should care what he thought about her looks. But she wished she had showered and had changed out of her dirty farm clothes!

“Is there something about me you don’t like?” He followed her.

“Do I say I don't like you?” Jeez, that wasn’t what she wanted to say. “I mean, I didn’t....” Fucking voice tremor, betraying her when she needed to sound firm.

“I get it.”

She stopped and faced him. “What did you get?”

“You like me, but you don’t want to like me.”

Nothing could be more complicated than that.

“Want to know the truth?” Despite the breeze flowing from the opened windows into the work space, she felt alone with him, boxed in by the way he looked at her. “I feel a kind of...” What word would she use to describe the excitement? The bubbling desire that welled inside of her? “I shouldn’t be feeling anything for you—or any man at all. Not now.” She quickly added.

He shook his head and chuckled.

She didn’t know what annoyed her the most; the effect his smoldering laughter had on her core or the glint in his eyes that told her that he knew what his presence was doing to her.

“And why are you laughing this time?” She asked, hands akimbo.

“You know, fighting attraction is the next frustrating thing after a failed military mission.”

She didn't know the frustration that followed a failed mission, but she sure knew how hard she was trying not to encourage this spark...this twine pulling her towards this man. So far, she hadn't succeeded.

“Why are you here?”

“To know if you have given any thought to going on a date with me?”

“No.”

His grin flashed at her flat answer. “What if we bet on me talking you into it?”

“Then be ready to lose all of your money. I’ll not be a bed warming bitch for a military man who has a family or a lover waiting for him somewhere.”

“I don’t have a family and no lover is waiting for me. And while having you on my bed would be my pleasure, what I’m asking is that you give me a chance into your life.”

“I am sure you have had tons of women, those you have enjoyed and those waiting in line.”

“Come on lady, I don't play around. I want what I want and go for it,” he said, reaching for her hand, examining it as if he was seeing something other than flesh and nails.

“Why do you want me?” Having this man stroke her hand felt so good, yet so... embarrassing. She shouldn't be encouraging him, shouldn’t be fanning the sweet flame that rose within her each time he touched her.

God! She didn't understand the power this man possessed that could wipe all sane reasoning from her head each time he was this close, but one thing she knew was that she wanted his hands on her body.

Elizabeth, get a hold of yourself!

His gaze settled on her face. “Why shouldn’t I want you?”

Deliver us not into temptation. She was shivering, not from cold but the unabashed bout of lustful desire his touch was sending all over her body.

“You...” She dared not to look into his eyes, so she settled her gaze on the anchor logo on his shirt, beneath it had *‘Onward Together’* boldly written. “You are used to touching women?”

“Only those I have something going on with.”

A trickle of jealousy moved through her, but she dismissed it, unwilling to think about the women he’d stroked.

“I’ve not had anything going with a woman for a long while.”

Was she supposed to be pleased?

“Well, Soldier.”

“Ebube. Call me Ebube.”

She would rather call him the sexy son of the devil.

“Stop doing that.”

“What?”

“Biting your lower lip. You are putting suggestions into my head each time you do that.”

So smooth, soldier. So smooth.

Palming her cheeks, he lifted her face so her eyes would meet his, his thumb trailed the line of her lips. “You are such a beautiful woman,” he said with strong emphasis on *beautiful*.

This was wrong. She shouldn't be seen in this intimate position with a man she’d only met a few weeks ago, and to think that she didn't want him to let go of her face made her want to cry for herself. “You are crazy.” No, I am crazy, she thought.

“So, my lady, are you going to say yes to this poor soldier?” The huskiness

in his voice wrapped around her, she didn’t want to pull away.

She wished she could tell him to screw off. He had a lot of nerve, dropping by her farm unannounced to ask her out. But she didn’t want to, unfortunately. “I don’t like military men.”

“Ouch. That hurts.”

She suddenly felt sorry she said that.

“I can make you reconsider your feelings if you give me the chance.”

“I don't know anything about you.”

“I’ll tell you all you want to know, here and now, “ he responded.

“Sorry, storyteller. This is not the right place nor the right time to listen to your life history.”

“You agree to go on a date with me tomorrow then.”

”Don’t know...maybe.”

“Shut the fuck up.” His grin widened.

“Not promising you anything yet, let me think about it.”

“So, shall we seal this with a kiss?”

Their faces were close. So close she felt his warm breath stroking her lips. Fresh. Minty breath. For goodness' sake! Why was her body reacting shamelessly to him?

“You have a gum in your mouth.”

He spat it into his palm and threw it into the trash basket beside her desk. “There,” he said with childish excitement. “So shall we?”

“Pity, you just did that for nothing, I wasn’t going to kiss you, Soldier.” Liar! Liar! She was dying to have his lips on hers.

He smiled, enjoying her uneasiness. “You know, you want me as much as I want you.”

He was right. She wanted him with passion she was too ashamed to admit. Who would believe that a few weeks after Henry, she was comfortable with another man holding her so intimately?

Elizabeth, something is wrong with you. “I must have you know that I am not normally like this.” She slipped out of his hold and walked past him to lean on the desk.

“Like what?” He didn't draw closer this time. Arching his brows, he feigned ignorance of what she was talking about, but she could read past that face.

“Get out of my farm, soldier.”

SIX

The early morning’s drill went a long way in purging any lagging limbs and prepared the men for the mission that brought them to Bonny. The tasks were simple; rid the community of criminal elements, clampdown on the violent group responsible for the destruction of the Federal Government facilities. Fish out the individuals sponsoring the group.

His brain was still lagging with thoughts of Elizabeth, he had just left Elizabeth’s the previous night when his phone beeped. Last night...

“Sir! Yes sir...Bonny ...yes sir... I will put a call across to the commander in charge of Operation Delta immediately and get back to you sir... yes sir!”

He’d thought of going back to tell Elizabeth their proposed date wasn't going to work, but had decided against it, he needed to see the commodore in his house immediately.

Will give her a call after, he thought.

Three hours later, he realized he was still waiting for a convenient time and place to make the call. He didn't want to do it while in the commodore’s house, where he eventually slept after making a dash to his place to pick a few personal things. From there, he’d taken off to meet the rest of the team at the jetty where they had boarded a boat to the Island.

“If the Commodore wants you on this mission, then make yourself useful,” his colleague, a tall, darker than crude oil, good-looking in a rough way, man said while running a finger on a burn scar on his neck.

Ignoring the edge in the man’s tone, Ebube bent to lace up his boot. The plan was to dialogue with the community chiefs first. The decision to deploy the full weight of the force would depend on the outcome of the meeting.

“Every passing minute you will spend dialoguing with these bloody bagger-lizards, our men are being killed, facilities are being blown up!” The man spat.

Done with the lace, Ebube gave his colleague a long stare. “Abdul, you know you can discuss this with the commodore, not me.”

“As if I haven't tried. He wouldn't listen to me. The man thinks I’m irrational. I guess that’s why he sent you—the boy with the magic words.”

Magic words. Same thing the commodore said last night. *“You have a way*

with words. If there is anyone who can get this job done without a repeat of what happened at Mabiagu, it's you." But talking doesn't always end conflict, and in this particular mission, he didn't feel dialoguing would do much. But he had to try.

Feeling the weight of Abdul's disapproval, Ebube cleared his throat, fiddling with his phone that hadn't trapped on to any network service since he arrived on the island.

"Soldiers don't talk, they fight!" The other man hissed. "They fight!"

"The Commodore told me what you suggested."

"Raze the damn village down!"

"Innocent people will suffer."

Abdul stared at him, mouth agape as if he'd been slapped with wet fish, then a dark cloud descended on his face. "Who gives a fuck? We lose men everyday here!" Every word came with a jab of Abdul's finger on his chest. "Every fucking day!"

The pain in Abdul's voice was palpable. Damn! He could taste Abdul's bitterness and it reminded him of his, twelve years ago when he'd returned from a similar mission in Bayelsa with the corpse of his half-brother.

The mission had been successful. He had talked the militant group leaders into calling their boys to back down and come to the dialoguing table. But his brother had still died.

There had been no time to mourn his loss, as he was back to work two weeks after. The military never gave you time to agonize over anything or anyone. That's the call, the service he was sworn into.

His step-mother never forgave him for not protecting Dozie, and he never forgave himself.

There was a part of him he'd locked away to help him remain sane and do this job, he'd suffer if he ever tried to unpack it. It's part of the sacrifice protectors make.

The same sacrifice he was supposed to make here, or things would go from bad to worse. *'See if you can bring them to the dialoguing table,'* was the instruction. The commodore didn't want more blood wasted.

Abdul should understand that or he would make costly mistakes.

"I would have loved nothing more than to drill holes in the heads of those bastards and watch them die painfully. But we have to put our feelings aside and explore this alternative for the sake of peace. We don't want a repeat of the Mabiagu massacre." He had been part of that mission, had seen the destruction resulting from the stubbornness from both sides.

By the time it was over, there was nothing left of the community that once

bubbled with life; the Nigerian Military was accused of committing a crime against humanity.

There was a moment hesitation while the reality of Ebube's words hung in the air.

"The letters have been sent out, I hope they respond. But I tell you, dialogue will never work with these bagger-lizards. I've been here long enough to know," Abdul said and walked off.

Ebube shook his head to prevent beads of sweat running into his eyes, wiping his face with the back of his palm he bounced along, catching up with Abdul who was heading towards the waiting speed boat.

Sudden beads of sweat broke out on his forehead each time he had reason to remember that dreadful day he allowed his brother walk into his death. Each time he remembered how bullets turned his brother's body into a gelatinous mess of flesh and gore, glassy eyeballs staring straight into his own eyes, blaming him for not being there on time to take the bullets instead.

He'd found the man that did it. Took him months to trap the rotten bastard who had lured his brother to his den and had shot him multiple times just to send a direct message. Ebube got the message alright, and had responded the only way a man with the power of the gun would— not totally as he couldn't pull the trigger when he pointed the gun at the man. So, he'd used his fists instead.

The rotten bastard died of a heart attack a week later—the media carried the story.

Grimacing, Ebube pushed the memory back to the storehouse of his mind and locked it. Maybe, one day he would let the memory go.

One day, his step-mother would forgive him for allowing Dozie to die.

She would forgive him for not trying harder in dissuading Dozie from joining the Navy. Two service men in the family was enough—his father was a policeman—adding the youngest and the most doted son to the count was a mistake he didn't deliberately make.

But Dozie had looked up to him like one would a mentor and had wanted to follow every of his footsteps, including career choice.

"First time in Bonny, Terminator?" Another colleague, Felix, an imposing-looking man with a sharp Fulani nose and a shocking pretty face, asked as Ebube slowed his gait, his eye taking in the large mass of water.

They had arrived at the island at 3:22 am; some of them had been lucky to catch some sleep, a few others didn't have that luxury as there was so much to be done.

"Hmm." He nodded. "But something tells me I should have stayed back in Port Harcourt, snuggled under the duvet while reminiscing about the beautiful

lady I met some weeks ago.” His cupcake. Thinking of her would push the bad memories away.

“Snuggling under your duvet by...” The man glanced at his watch. “Six a.m? Even the Chief of Naval staff doesn't have that privilege, T-man.” They embarked. “Regimented life is what we signed up for.” The man picked two life jackets from the sole and tossed one at him. “So, who is this beautiful woman?”

Laying his m4 carbine gun down, he threw the life jacket over his shoulders, fastened and secured his M11 pistol on his waistband and leaned on the bulkhead. A smile crossed his lips. “Elizabeth, just met her a few weeks ago,” Ebube replied, acknowledging the two lieuts on board with a nod.

“Amazing,” Felix said.

“What’s amazing?”

“I’ve not seen you with any woman, and that has given me a lot of concern.”

“Concern as in how nau? My friend, mind yourself.”

“T man, your mates are fast becoming grandpas.”

“I am 42, man.” With no wife. He used to have one, Amara, the mother of his only daughter. He was twenty-four and she twenty when they got married. Not out of love but because he felt it was what he should do. She endured the marriage for six years until she couldn't deal with the discomforts that came with marrying a serviceman, one with no money to make up for his unavailability. “And I am not a monk.”

“Hear! Hear!” Felix slapped him on the shoulder, gave Abdul who was lost in his own world a sidelong glance.

“You have been living like a monk since I can remember.”

Felix knew why. The death of his brother, his wife leaving the marriage, all happened during the same period. Grief and disappointment made him shut his emotional door and channel his energy on taking care of his late father’s wife, becoming a great dad to his daughter, and serving the country.

“You sure need a feminine touch, man.” Felix chortled.

“May take some time though, this lady is strong-headed.” Ebube said, shutting his eyes and enjoying the cold breeze that was grazing past his face. His mind went to Elizabeth. They had agreed to go on a date today—well, not actually. But she didn’t turn down the request either.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

He had promised to come and pick her anyway. Now he wasn’t going to show up.

He should call to apologize, but the network... “Damn this place,” he muttered under his breath as he checked his phone again for a bar or two. It suddenly occurred to him that he could still reach her via SMS. The delivery

might be late, but it would get to her eventually.

Or he could surprise her. Does she like surprises?

“Then go for another woman.” Felix was saying. “You’re no longer a low rank officer, you have money and a fucking killer body under that uniform.”

Slowly opening his eyes, he considered what his colleague just said. Yes, he looked better now than before—buffed up, his confidence had soared too. Promotion and an increase in salary had come faster than everyone envisaged. But he also knew the kind of woman he wanted. “Hey, man. You have the contact of any pastry maker?”

“You're planning a party?”

“I want to send something to my lady.” He hoped the message would be delivered to whichever vendor he settled for on time.

A few minutes later, after the plan was set in motion, he held onto the rail and observed the rushing water. No matter how long he’d been in this service, this still remained the best part of it. He was born for the water, same thing his step-mother said the day he’d taken her and his daughter on a boat ride. It was the first and the only positive compliment the woman had ever given to him.

It amazed him, constantly, how much beauty there was in the world and the best of which could be seen standing where he was at the moment. The way the sun struck the water at one point and spread with every ripple.

Their boat docked at the jetty.

“Sir!” He was greeted as the crew disembarked.

“What is the situation here?” He kept walking, Abdul and Felix followed.

“Not too good sir!” One of the men on ground followed them.

“What do you mean not too good?”

“Another pipeline was blown up this morning and Lieutenant Ayo said the boys took two vessels.”

“They took vessels from you?” Abdul bellowed as the men slowed their gait.

“They were more than our boys could handle...”

“Bloody militants were more than you can handle?”

“Sir, these boys have sophisticated weapons; we need reinforcement of arms...”

“They know the terrain more than we do, it's been difficult locating their hideout and capturing them,” another man added.

“This is serious.” Ebube grunted.

“And dialogue will solve the problem in a flash.” The sarcasm in Abdul’s voice wasn't subtle.

SEVEN

"*This is your season to be blessed, your season to locate your partner, the devil has kept you bound for so long, come and receive your own miracle husband..."* The preacher's voice boomed from the television.

Hissing, Elizabeth placed the tray that contained a plate of almond seeds and a cup of green tea on the table, strolled towards the window and scooped the curtain up. She stared into the early darkness of thick clouds as if she was expecting someone.

Maybe she was...

Her sexy soldier crush who was supposed to pick her up for a date today.

Was he even serious about the date? Yes, he was, and didn't she dismiss him? Said she'd think about it? Well, his big head should tell him what her subtle response meant.

Dropping the curtain and making her way through the dining to the sitting room, in heels much higher than she was used to, she realized that with the clinging red dress, the new hair-style and the super-sleek make-up, she'd totally taken herself out of her comfort zone.

The last time she'd gone out with this dress, it had attracted a lot of unwanted attention from men. She had felt exposed and vulnerable. Speaking of feeling vulnerable, the dress didn't allow for a bra, so her breasts jiggled with every movement.

Pulling up the neck-line of her dress, she sat down and stared at the television for a while. The preacher was now calling out his contact number for special prayer requests. Elizabeth kicked her shoes off, at the same time picking the TV remote to change the channel.

"What the hell," she grumbled as she gave the neck-line of her dress a tug-up again. She had turned into a *sex in the city* kind of girl in just few weeks of meeting the soldier, and that was not like her at all!

What was wrong with her? Why the sudden need to get all glammed up for a date, with a man who might not even show up? Because obviously, she was competing with the legion of women whom she imagined were constantly chasing after him.

Irrationally she started feeling angry. At him! It was all his fault. Why did he come after her with all vigor, dripping of sensuality and confidence and... and... a kind of arrogance only a man who is good at what he does, possesses.

He was bad news, and she? A fool to allow her emotions run like a lovesick girl desperate for a man.

But you are desperate.

I am not!

She snorted, draining what was remaining of the green tea and sat the cup back on the tray. A rap made her look over her shoulder, standing up she went to check who was at the door.

“Big sis! I thought you weren’t around o. If not for your gate being unlocked, I would have turned back.” Her brother pushed through the door, with a box of cupcakes in his hands.

“Ike,” she hissed. The boy was the last person she wanted to see now. “I wasn't expecting you,” she said, closing the door.

“I know. You would have slammed the door in my face, had I not entered fast.” He picked a cake from the box and sat down. “I know you don’t want me around. And... wow! wow!” He gave her a look over. Amused. “Where are you off to, dressed up like a girl on a sugar daddy hunt?”

His comment was like a punch in the lower abdomen, *pau... pau*. What hurt more was the effort she’d put into achieving this look. If Ike didn't like it, how was she sure the soldier would?

“Seriously, sis. what’s going on?”

“Shut up.”

He did and sat down, not after a snigger sputtered out of his mouth.

“So, what brought you to my house? Hope you’re not here to ask me for money, I don't have any to give you.”

“Com’ on, sis. It ain’ abou’ money always.” Her brother switched to the treacherous black American accent.

To that she arched her brows.

“K... Yeah... it’s always been money bu’ it ain’ mah faul’! ’ve gah a lo’ o’ friends depending on me.” To bankroll their stupid lifestyles.

“I kin’ le’ ‘em down. ’ve gah to live up to mah family status.”

Really? “You’ve got parents, Ike. And don’t use that accent around me, young man. You know how it pisses me off.”

“Okay, sis. But you know how mum can be, and dad will ask me to write a business proposal if I need money. You are the only one with the brain and the will, Ain’t’ gah any o’ those.”

She glared at him.

“Sorry. But I don't possess the sweetness you have. Only you can get daddy to part with money with ease.”

“Mum and dad don’t trust you enough to give you money. And I don't blame them, I wouldn’t give you a dime if I were them,” she said as her brother took another cake, eating it all up at once.

Lucky son of...

She envied her brother. While a cup of water was enough to get her bloated, the boy had remained lanky, yet he ate like an elephant. “Which of your girlfriends gave you that?”

“None. They are all broke ass bitches,” he said with his mouth full.

“So, who gave it to you? I know you are too stingy to give yourself a treat.”

“Big sis you don’t know me, I can spend money on mah self, yu know woh they cu’ me in dah hood?” He licked his fingers. “Bu’ I din’ buy it.”

“I know.”

”A delivery man gave it to me at your gate.” The widening of her eyes sent a familiar message, putting the box down he scaled over the sofa and ran, flinging a small card in her direction. “I think it's meant for you.”

Catching the card mid-air, she ran after her brother who had slipped into the kitchen and locked the door. “You are dead, you know that, Ike! I’ll kill you!”

“You’re on a ‘no cake eating’ diet!”

Little brothers, always trouble, she thought as she walked back and sat legs folded on the floor. Her thumb stroked the glossy surface of the card that had ‘*To a precious one’* written on it.

She flipped it open, reading the handwritten words.

‘A little peace offering for not showing up on our first date, duty called, and I couldn’t refuse. Last night, you were still beautiful with those clothes on and yeah, you did smell like tuna a little, but I loved it anyway.

My cupcake.

E’

“A new guy, huh?” Her brother snuck closer to her.

“Just an...” she trailed.

The soldier was a romantic at heart, she mused. The kind of man that would get any woman eating off his palm. *Cupcake*, he called her that?

“Just who?”

“A guy I met some weeks ago.” Dressed up like a party doll, waiting to go on a date with him. Unfortunately, he wasn’t going to show up.

Duty called, he said. And he had to answer. “See, there is nothing more to this, Ike.”

“Why will a guy give you a box of cakes if there is nothing going on

between you two?”

“He is...why am I even explaining to you? You are just like Mum.” She left him laughing and strolled into her room. Settling on the bed with her legs pulled to her chest, she drew out the card and read again.

Cupcake, huh...

EIGHT

Look at us, Elizabeth thought as she watched Oge clatter about in the corner of her farm-office where a kettle and a tea tray on top of the fridge formed a makeshift kitchen. Two girls unlucky with men, wasting a precious Saturday on a farm when they should be in some man's kitchen wearing oversized shirts and nothing underneath.

"So, aren't you going to tell me about it?" Oge put down two mugs of tea on the desk, the bags still bobbing about in them.

"About what?" Elizabeth fished the bag inside her mug and dropped it in the bin beside her.

"The 'Prince Charming' that visited you two Thursdays ago, see I told myself that I will not ask you, you are supposed to give me the full gist."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Come on, get it all out."

Elizabeth blushed. As much as she'd want to forget about this soldier, he had a way of creeping into every conversation. Every thought. Making her insides flutter.

"I want to hear everything that happened that day, every sweet little detail," her friend added, giving her *'that look'*.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to talk about. He asked her for a date, she had wanted to think about it, and vuum! He was gone. Okay...he sent a present and that was it—he disappeared as suddenly as he'd appeared.

"Nothing happened."

"What do you mean nothing happened? You told me he paid you a visit, in the night! What will two adults be doing alone, at night?" Her friend leaned forward, widening her eyes.

"T-a-l-k-i-n-g" Elizabeth stressed. She'd wished they had done more than talking. They would have kissed; he'd offered and she'd refused.

Elizabeth, you are a coward!

What was she afraid of? That he would get to know her hunger and longing for him? "Seriously, nothing happened."

"Did he come to buy fish?"

“No.”

“Then he came to see you.”

“Yes.”

“What happened after seeing you?”

The desperation in her friend’s tone amused her. “Okay, first I was surprised to see him, and thanks to you, I was smelling like one dug out of a heap of rotten fishes.”

“Thanks to me? How is it my fault that you chose to do this degrading, fish selling...”

“Don’t say it.”

“But that’s who you are.”

“An aqua culturist, not a fish seller.” They’d talk about this severally, but the annoying fowl she had as a friend had insisted on referring to her business as local fish selling, and her— a fish seller.

“Aqua culturist, fish seller, what’s the difference?”

“The former owns an aqua-farm where she breeds fishes ready for distribution, the latter sells fish in the market.” Why was she even explaining again? Not like Oge didn't know the difference. The flat nosed girl was only taunting her.

“Whatever.”

The yeye fowl she landed as a girlfriend must be thinking; *tsk tsk... girlfriend, stop deceiving yourself.* “So, back to your admirer.” Oge leaned forward.

“He’s a military man.”

“What! Are you serious?”

“Said he is with the Navy.”

“Suweett!” Oge shrilled. “He kissed you. Tell me hun, how was it?”

“Oge!”

“What? Don’t stare at me as if you didn’t feel like grabbing him by the shirt and sucking the hell out of his lustrous mouth that day in church. I saw that guy don’t forget, and his lips are one any woman would want to chew on. So, tell me, what else happened?”

Head tilted to one side, she wondered how she ended up with a shameless B-I-T-C-H for a friend.

“Spill, girlfriend. Tell me all.”

“He’s witty.”

“I love them witty and humorous. Girlfriend, I like this man already!”

“And as sexy as damn!” She might be angry at him but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t appreciate his spectacular looks. Goodness, gracious! The guy dripped

sexiness! “Asked for a date.”

“And?”

“Nothing. I couldn’t breathe with him all over me.”

“What is wrong with you girl? This guy is handsome, comfortable and he wants you.”

“He told you that?”

“He asked you out!”

And thank God I didn’t accept. I would have been more disappointed than I am right now.

“Lizzy, this guy is cute!”

Cute and full of shit! What man would ask a lady for a date and disappear the next, sending just a note...

And a box of cakes.

“I’ve not seen him since then.”

“Call him. Dude may be scared you’d say no to him.”

Scared? You bet! It was difficult to picture him perturbed by a woman’s rejection. *Ha!* The guy was so sure she would jump at his proposal.

And she would have. One would have expected giving herself time to get over her latest heartbreak, but with this soldier, she didn’t mind diving into another disaster. She was attracted to him in an intoxicating way and she had decided, the moment he left that night, she was going to explore the feeling welling inside her towards him.

Fighting attraction is the next frustrating thing after a failed military mission, he had said, as if mocking her efforts not to fall for him. She hated it that he was right. No matter how safe she felt it was to run from him instead of to him. She found herself not wanting to close the door on his face.

I want him, Elizabeth thought, stroking her lips, remembering the shiver that went down her spine when his thumb grazed over them.

“L-i-z-z-y?”

“Huh?”

“You are blushing.” Oge's observation came out in an exciting whimper. The bitch was having fun at her expense. “I thought you said you don't like him?”

“When did I tell you that I don’t like him?”

“So, you do like him?”

“You are an idiot, you know that?”

“What does that make you? A friend to an idiot.”

Laughter took over the both of them.

NINE

Six weeks!

Six weeks of bursting their asses in the godforsaken island trying to take out the rotten bastards. And when they were at the verge of breakthrough, they were being recalled?

“Jesus, F Christ!” He flumped on a wooden chair in the shack that doubled as his office and his sleeping quarters. With his legs stretched out, he exhaled deeply and shut his eyes.

“The order came from the top,” the commander had said some minutes ago when Ebube contacted him through the field telephone.

“From the top my black ass,” he hissed. The bloody bastards terrorizing the island would launch fiercer attacks if the team pulled out. The situation would get worse.

Ridding the creeks of the rotten bastards wasn’t an easy task. Though he hadn’t expected it to be a piece of cake. The community had made it obvious during the town hall meetings earlier, if their sons being held in the DSS custody were not released unconditionally, they would spread the violence through the rest of the Niger Delta.

Abdul was right. *Soldiers don't talk, they fight.* And that was what they’d been doing for the past five out of six weeks, since they arrived.

“Bastards,” he muttered, reaching for a can of beer on top of his desk, clanging it open, he took a long drag and set it down. The break out of a regimental chant outside, made him look out of the window. He watched his men dancing around a bonfire, celebrating the day’s victory—perhaps. Good for them. As for him, frustration was having a swell time inside his soul.

Leaning back in his chair, he clasped his hands behind his head and stared up. His men were not slowpokes. They'd relentlessly engaged the violent group in gun battles, confiscated several weapons.

And just when they were about to start fishing out those despicable chiefs who were sponsoring the unrest, an order came from *‘the top.’*

Fuck the order! Those buffoons mocked the entire armed forces! Each time he scheduled a meeting, those gangbangers who ran the group would either not

show up or when they did, would dare the military to do their worst.

“Get it together, you dumb shit!”

Ebube’s eyes flipped open and settled on Abdul who stood by the door, staring at him with anger? He wasn't sure. The man’s face was difficult to read in the semi-darkness.

“You’ve heard then.” He expected Abdul to say, *“Fuck you!”* and walk away as unannounced as he came.

But the man gave him a slow stare while cracking his knuckles. “Shit like this have always happened.”

Moving the mess of papers on his desk with a swipe of hand, Ebube grabbed the receiver of the field telephone that chose that moment to ring. “Go home. And in case I haven't made myself clear, captain, no off-duty snooping,” the commodore ordered.

Ebube threw his colleague a glance while transferring the receiver from one ear to the other.

Not able to contain the anger punching his stomach, Ebube pushed his chair backwards, knocking the piece of wood over as he got to his feet. Pulling the phone off his ear he put the voice on speaker for Abdul to hear.

“There’s nothing left for us to do there,” the commodore continued.

The hell there is! “Sir, we cannot just drop this, like we were never here. We are very close to ending this, their sponsors...”

“You think I didn't tell them that?”

Ebube could imagine the man wiping his sweaty face with the blue towel he was known with. “We have been given the order, don’t go messing around. Forget about this mission, tell Abdul to do the same.”

He had to be kidding me, Ebube thought, turning to stare at Abdul. The other man shook his head in resignation and walked out of the shank.

“Thank you, sir, for... for trying your best.” Didn't he mean ‘Thank you for allowing some political idiots to turn you into a wimp’?

Later, when the camp was quiet and the moon rode over the water. He walked barefooted by the river bank. Desperate to push the past weeks out of his mind, he thought of Elizabeth— the last time they were together.

With a grin on his face and a weak network on his phone, he dialed her number. He'd been tempted to call her with the field telephone earlier, but rules were rules, the telephone was strictly for field communication.

Fuck, her number wasn’t connecting. Giving up after a third try, he guided his feet back to the shank.

Sleep didn't come immediately. When it did, it was an uncomfortable one.

Some hours later, his eyes flashed opened at a rap on his flimsy door. Jerking

out of the bed, he hurried towards his desk to grab his weapon when the door creaked open and a figure stepped in.

“Keep the gun aside.”

The silhouette was partially visible from where it stood. “You are the army people’s spokesman at the meeting.” The man was wearing a cap and the red amber of a cigarette moved back and forth from his mouth.

Ebube lowered his gun and inched forward. “Don’t come any further. You don’t have to see my face clearly.”

“Who are you?”

Pausing, the man took a puff, sizing him up. “I understand you were hot on trailing the sponsors of the violence.”

The man speaks well, Ebube observed.

Were. The perfect phrase. This man, whoever he was, must have heard about the aborted operation.

“You are trying to get information from the villagers,” the man continued, not waiting for any response from Ebube. “Nobody here will give you what you want. They will rather watch this place burn.” A hesitation. More puffs of cigarette smoke in the air. “That’s if it will.”

That’s if it will? “What do you mean by that?” The man knew something and was reluctant to tell.

“Can your people arrest and sentence high ranked military officials... Political bigwigs...”

“What are you not telling me?”

A long pause. Then, “Berepiki Dickson. The man you should be looking for.”

Chief Dickson. Founder of one of the most prominent armed groups that operated in the Niger Delta region in the early 2000, was granted amnesty fourteen years ago and was also compensated with a seat in the house of reps. Ebube wasn't surprised to hear the strange visitor mention Dickson. Nothing about the man inspired trust, from his shifty eyes and greasy smile to rumors of illegal arms dealing that had his scent on all of them.

Ignoring the man’s warning, Ebube inched forward. “Tell me the connection Chief Dickson has in this.”

The man blew a lungful of smoke. “Him and three of your top ranked officers should be locked away in hell.”

Who was this man?

“What do you know?” *Tell me, damn it!*

The man flicked the cigarette to the ground, where it glowed for a second. “The chiefs and elders are not your problem. Find a way to nail those assholes.”

And the man was gone as if he was never there.

The break of dawn didn't meet him better. He could smell his own failure, making him want to snap at anything and anyone. The mystery man that visited him last night left him feeling even more strongly that they would be making a big mistake if they left without finishing what they started.

What would he do? The commodore wanted the mission aborted. But he hated leaving jobs unfinished, it grated on his nerves. And now that he got a name, a possible denominator in all of this, it vexed him that he couldn't do anything about it.

Or could he?

His eyes passed over the boys tossing lines and securing boats at the dock, then settled on Abdul who stood ahead, earpiece plugged in both ears, probably listening to *BBC Hausa*.

With his hands behind his back, Ebube ambled forward and stood beside Abdul.

“Ever heard of Berepiki Dickson?” He said without giving Abdul a glance.

“He is a bagger-lizard.” Abdul said, searching his pocket and came out with a half-eaten kola-nut. “Why do you ask?” Throwing the nut into his mouth.

“I got a visit from someone who thinks the man should be sentenced to hell.” He waited for Abdul to say something. “The mysterious dude said we have to get Berepiki if we want to end this.”

“What?” Abdul turned to face him fully. “Who is this guy?”

“Don’t know... could be a side-lined member of the pack who is out for revenge, or a disgruntled relative... I just don't know...” Ebube slipped both hands inside his pocket, shrugged and told Abdul everything.

A long pause passed between them.

“And this guy mentioned three of our top officials?” Abdul asked.

“No names given.”

“It’s like this guy knows more than he was ready to give out,” Abdul murmured. “Fuck! And the commodore wants us to just pack up and go home?”

They watched more men joined the others at the dock.

“You told them?” Ebube asked, gesturing towards the dock.

“Last night. Crushed their spirits and their party.”

Ebube felt more terrible. The men were hopeful yesterday. Looking at them now, with their MOLLEs on their shoulders, they looked like sore losers.

“Some are still happy with the development.” Abdul said as though he read his thoughts. “At least, they are going home to fuck their women.”

That was supposed to make Ebube feel better. It did more than that, it sent

his mind to his own woman.

Was she his yet?

He had to find out. His gaze followed a bird until it vanished, then settled on the rippling water before them.

“The woman you met...” Abdul started.

Ebube turned sharply to face him.

“I overheard your discussion with Felix.”

“You son of a...” Ebube gave the other man a punch on the chest. “You were actually listening.” He grinned.

“I always listen.” Abdul chuckled. “So, she’s just a one night lay?” He asked as the two walked to join the others.

“Elizabeth will never be a one off lay.”

She was much more.

TEN

Stepping out of the bathroom, she slammed the door as if she was having a quarrel with the piece of fine wood.

In all sincerity, her fight was with herself.

She shouldn't be thinking so much about the soldier, not when he'd gone incommunicado for weeks now. But there was something about him that was damn irresistible. Not only was he so gorgeous in a manly way, he was actually... it was so difficult not to think about him.

For Christ's sake! What she should be doing was backing away big time. All her concentration should be on her business and how to start enjoying singlehood to the fullest. Not dreaming about a man, she might probably never see again.

A soldier, a handsome looking one. The kind of man who was *a heartbreak* waiting to happen.

Slipping out of her bath slippers she loosened the towel around her chest, and walked through the room to get her nightgown. Her phone buzzed, before she could stop herself, she hurried towards the bedside table to get it.

A loud hiss escaped from her mouth as a call center's automated voice greeted her instead. Flumping buck naked on the bed, she sighed. It was time she stopped the madness. How could she allow the thought of someone who obviously didn't give a hoot about her, gut her up like this?

Yes, he didn't care. He would have at least called if she meant anything to him.

"I don't care about him either."

Liar. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't help the flutter that coursed through her body any time the thought of him floated into her head.

A knock on her door dispersed the images forming in her mind.

Who now?

The sound came again. This time louder.

Slipping her red silk sleeping mini-dress over her head, she hurried to get the door.

On opening, her jaw dropped and her heart skipped in several pieces as her

eyes caught a well-formed masculine figure striding off her porch, forcing unwelcomed warmth to crawl up her neck.

Even without the beam of brightness from a high-powered searchlight she had fixed on her lintel, she knew it was Ebube.

Then he turned to face her.

Hmm... who knew that a mere stare from a man could send a chill down a girl's spine? This guy has charm, and sure knows how to use it.

“Wrong timing again, I guess,” he said as he started walking back, towards her.

Wiping her palm on her revealing dress, she wished she could be anywhere but under his lustful scrutiny. “I wasn’t expecting anyone.” She said, crossing her arms over her breasts in a bid to shield herself from his perusal. “Sorry.”

He gave her a slow smile.

Oh man! Those whiter than white teeth. Those lips. Should she be getting turned on by the mere sight of this man who may vanish out of her life the next day?

She thought not.

But... but...

“You shouldn’t be apologizing, cupcake.”

Now standing a few inches away from her, his gaze wandered over her body in a way that made her regret leaving her robe in the room. And... goodness! She had missed him so much. But, scratch it if she was going to tell him that.

“I’ll want you to know that I don’t entertain male visitors in my house by this time of the night.” The words rushed out with the air trapped in her lungs.

“A rule player huh? Sexy.” He inched closer, picked something out of her hair while his finger brushed through a line of her natural cornrow braids.

Why couldn’t he keep those fingers away? She screamed in her head, her inside trembling to the magic in his fingers and the sound of his voice.

Embarrassed by the emotions bubbling within her, she pulled away and folded her arms across her chest. She was endangering what was remaining of her heart, by allowing this man to envelop her like this.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“Nice to see you too,” he replied.

Reminding her that she should be telling him how excited she was seeing him after a long time.

Long?

“Do you always show up without information?” She asked as if she hadn't been expecting his visit. But he’d caught her unprepared, again.

“You’re mad at me?”

“You can't just walk into someone’s life and vanish the next day.” No no no... that wasn't what she wanted to say. Now he would think she’s already dying for him.

Are you?

Of course not!

“But I sent you a peace offering.”

It wasn’t enough. Six weeks, six freaking weeks he’d gone away.

“You missed me.” He chuckled, narrowing his eyes to a squint.

“I didn't say that.” Who was she kidding? “Okay, yes.”

“Yes what,” he teased. Reaching out, his finger trailed down the side of her face and traced her jaw. “Stop being too stubborn.”

“You are full of yourself,” she whispered, closing her eyes and letting out a soft moan.

“It comes with my job as a military man,” he admitted. “So, cupcake. Tell me you missed me.” He was too close.

His warm breath on her face sent desire down her essence. “Not in your life, soldier boy.”

“Now come on, Elizabeth.” He turned away from her, splaying his hands in frustration. “Have a heart. Why are you being so hard?”

And why are you damn irresistible? “Because the last man I was quick to fall in love with left me in a heart-breaking manner. He broke up with me on that Sunday you played the keyboard in church.”

“That was the reason... I knew something wasn't right with you that day.” His eyes were clouded with belated concern. “I’m so sorry, cupcake. The guy is a punk.”

Punk. She almost laughed, not at the word but the way he spat it. “You need to see your face right now, like you would beat Henry to a pulp if you set your eyes on him.”

“Henry, that’s the rotten bastard’s name? He's a prick.”

I know, and I’m glad he left.

“But...” His demeanor changed instantly. “Don’t you think his leaving is to our advantage?” That pleased smile was on his lips again and his eyes held a glint of triumph. “We found each other.”

“Don't get ahead of yourself, soldier boy.”

“Tell me you’re not excited about us.”

Us. Elizabeth wanted to roll her eyes and tell him to keep dreaming. Then he cupped her face. His thumb grazed over her lips and she found herself fighting to suppress a moan that clogged her throat.

“Cupcake, can’t you see how much we want each other?”

He pulled her closer and tilted his head to the side slightly, so his lips gave hers a seductive tease while his hand cruised down her body and stopped at her waist. He murmured her name over her mouth, then parted her lips. Searching out her tongue with his.

She should have stopped him. In fact, the seething tugs in her belly warned her to end this, but when the hardness of his groin pressed against her, she was the one who moved in, curling her hands around his neck and pulling his head down to meet her hunger.

He tore his lips away from hers. “There was no day I didn't think about you,” he said, his voice deep and husky.

“Me too,” she admitted, touching his face.

“What?” He teased. “There was no day you didn't think about you either?”

“Hey...” She giggled. Oh God! She was so not a giggler. What was this man doing to her?

“Let’s go to my place, Elizabeth. I have a comfortable bed.” He ran his lips on her cheeks, bent towards her neck and kissed before he came back up. “Or we can use yours.”

Breathing hard and fast, her body yearned for more of what he was giving. But it was too early. She wouldn’t want to give in to this lust yet, until she was sure. “We can’t.” Shaking her head, she stepped back.

“Why? We have this thing. This connection...”

“It’s wrong to jump into bed with someone because they ignite some...you know.” She gesticulated. “I have to be sure I want you, the whole of you.”

He considered her response and shrugged. “Okay, fair enough. So how about dinner tomorrow night?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to fall in love with you.” She feared she already had. “Yet. I don’t want to fall in love with you yet.”

“Sweet, beautiful witch,” he muttered under his breath.

She let go of the laughter that was bubbling inside of her.

“So, what do you want me to do with myself now?” he asked.

“Let’s go in so you can tell me where you’ve been all this while,” she said, pushing the door open.

“I don’t think I want to do just talk.”

“Sad, that’s what we will be doing over a cup of tea or anything I can put together for you now.” She wasn’t sure if it would work. The electrifying connection between them was strong.

And she could still taste him in her mouth.

ELEVEN

“These guys worked with Afini before the DSS took him. They are your boys posted here four years ago. Ruffle them up and you may get a lead towards Berepiki and the officers who are on his payroll...”

A few seconds later, three names stared back at Ebube from the screen of his phone. Sender unknown as usual, though he suspected the stranger that visited his shank the night before he left Bonny. If the man could walk into his shank by night—unnoticed, he could easily get his mobile number.

He dialed the sender immediately, but the line was switched off. The phone could probably be resting at the bottom of the river as the sender wrote.

“This is not good,” he murmured, aware of the consequences of investigating the case alone as this anonymous informant wanted him to do. If found out, he could be charged and court-martialed— or dismissed. But the more he wanted to ignore the case, the more he was being pulled into it.

Adjusting himself on his seat, Ebube read the message again, mouthing the three names as if doing so would help him put faces to them. It didn't work so he gave up.

He needed to speak to someone who would know the men but asking the wrong people would raise suspicion and his superiors would come for him.

Running his palm over his head, Ebube realized how messed up the situation was. He was in deep shit. Why did the man, if his suspicion was true, choose to come to him instead of going to the DSS with his information?

Leaning forward, he watched some new recruits parade through the field, their voices echoing in an exciting chorus, distracted him for a while. His eyes followed them until they thinned out, then he decided to make a few calls. Perhaps, one or two old friends in the Human Resource Department knew these three officers.

One out of the four colleagues he called, after asking what he wanted to do with the information, agreed to look up the names and get back to him.

With that task out of the way, Ebube settled for other duties awaiting him. He still had memos and queries to write, reports to proof-read, and more calls to make.

“It’s going to be a hell of a day,” he murmured, fiddling with his phone.

For some reason, his thoughts wandered towards Elizabeth and he did the one thing that had been on his mind since he woke up —.

“Hi Beautiful,” he typed and sent it to her via WhatsApp.

Licking his lips and waiting for her reply, he reminisced on the taste of heaven he had from her mouth last night. What in God’s green earth were her lips made off? One sip of her sweetness and he was incapacitated. There were no thoughts, no considerations, only burning desire—fanned by her own hunger.

If he ever doubted her feelings, last night gave him hope. She wanted him as much as he did her.

Running his thumb on his lips, he sucked in air through his clenched teeth. The kiss wasn’t a closed-mouthed one, it was full, open-mouthed, sexual and he loved it. He loved the way her body melted into his, the way their lips fit like two puzzle pieces. When they reluctantly broke away, she was trembling. He loved that too.

Checking his phone again, he noticed she had read his message but chose not to reply. He knew it was deliberate, a way of flushing him out of her system.

Not so fast, missy.

It’s strange when something dramatic happens in your life, everything else seems unimportant. Few months ago, Elizabeth had been obsessed with Henry, but right now she couldn't care less. Had she really felt that the world had come to an end when he broke up with her? Silly her, she must’ve been having a brain freeze then.

Now, all she could think about was Ebube, her soldier crush and how he’d driven her crazy with need as he took her lips last night. His kiss was consuming, hungry, yet sweet. Teasing her with a hint of promise and driving her body to new heights of awareness.

Itching to reply to his message, Elizabeth stared at her phone, drumming her fingers on her desk. Maybe she should call him. Pretend she just wanted to know how his day was going.

But she didn’t want to make him think of her as desperate. And for God’s sake, she wasn't a lovesick fool who had nothing to do! She had a business to run, more money to make and that should be of topmost importance to her.

With that last thought, she pushed her chair backwards and stood up. Her phone pinged, forcing her to sit right back.

‘What did I do this time?’ The message read.

Suppressing the excitement that was running through her, she picked the phone and stared at the message as if she could see his face in every letter.

She should reply.

No, she shouldn't.

Last night, they had argued on who would call the other first, after he took her phone and typed his number. He was so confident that she would be the one.

"Who's having fun now, Soldier?" She finally replied and glanced out of the window with a smile on her face. The early morning buying rush was over, she could now count about eleven buyers— nothing her sales people couldn't handle.

She settled her gaze back on her phone. He hadn't read her message.

Taking your time now, aren't you? She typed and sent, hating that she was desperate.

'And I'm not your Beautiful,' she added.

'Cupcake,' he finally replied.

'Not your cupcake, either.'

'Why are we acting like teens?

She'd asked herself the same question. From the day they met, the chemistry between them was obvious. The lust loud. When he kissed her, she had wanted him to rip her gown off and fuck the hell out of her.

Yet...

Her phone started ringing.

"Cupcake," he rasped immediately she picked.

'Why do you call me that?"

He took time to reply. She imagined him running his hand over his head, something she'd noticed he did when she asked him a question he had no answer to.

"It's my favorite snack, and you make me think of it."

"Oh."

"You don't like it? I can stop..."

"No." It was the way he said it. Relishing the word as if she was actually a meal, a favorite snack. "I don't mind."

He must have grinned because she could feel the warmth of it from his next question.

"So, you like it then?"

Avoiding the question, she asked; "Why did you join the force?"

"That's the reason you don't want to be my lady?"

"No...not that. Actually, it suits you."

"Now she's lusting after me." A mischievous glint must be playing in his eyes.

“What? No! I mean...what is wrong with you?” She giggled.

“Damn,” he moaned.

“What?”

“I love the sound of that. Sweetheart, you are killing me.” His voice was a little more than a whisper, heightening the ache at her core. “Hey, I’ve come up with this crazy idea.” His excitement was evident from the lilt of his voice.

“Okay...”

“Why don't we spend some time together this weekend? You and I... we can go anywhere lovers go.” He paused. “I swear on my honor that as much as I'd love to make love to you, I'll not do that without you wanting me to.”

I’d love to make love to you. Goodness! The way he said it sent desire pooling in her lower belly.

“How does that sound to you, cupcake? Cos it makes sense to me.”

“Uh...” Any other time she would have agreed to this, but she had a lot on her hands at the moment— her fingerlings were coming in that weekend and her workers might not be able to handle that.

“I’m off duty from Thursday, so we can start our vacation on Friday.’

“I have no idea I’ve agreed to the plan.”

“But you liked me already.”

“I’m so sorry, Ebube. I can’t leave the farm for two days.”

“Three.”

“Whether two or three days, I still can't. I’m sorry.” She heard him groan. “Look,” she said. “I’m sure you have more than enough women who would want to spend the weekend with you on this lover's island.”

“I don’t want ‘enough women.’ I want you, Elizabeth. You.”

“Ebube...”

“Cupcake.”

“What do I do with you?”

“Say yes to me.”

Then yes! Yes soldier, you can have all of me. “I can't”

“You can't or you won't?”

God! She exhaled deeply. “You persuasive sexy man.”

“You call me sexy? That's a thing.” His laughter was a thing. “So, it’s a date then?”

A perfect one, but... “I am so sorry, wish I could.”

“Okay, I give up...until you are ready.”

“Until I am ready.”

“Have to go now. Enjoy the rest of the day, my cupcake.”

And he was gone.

She gazed at the phone for a while, squawked with mirth and dropped the gadget on the desk. Putting on a low masculine voice, she did a lively imitation of how he sounded. “You call me sexy? That’s a thing.” She said huskily.

TWELVE

“It's my lucky day.”

The owner of the voice saw the shock on her face before she could hide it, and a subtle smile played on his lips.

Elizabeth guessed he had expected that reaction.

Wasn’t it five weeks ago, that he sent her an SMS, asking her to forgive him for being stupid? He was leaving town permanently, his company had transferred him to Enugu, and so, he had wanted her to bear no grudge against him.

“Henry, what are you doing here?” She’d loved him when they were together, though he was clingy— which she didn’t mind. He was a good man— until he wasn’t.

“You look good, Elizabeth.”

What do you think? That I would become miserable because you left? “I always look good.” How in Jesus’s good name could she have given her heart to this man? Was she blind?

“You weren’t picking my calls.”

It’s ‘cause you're an asshole, Henry. She pursed her lips.

“I miss you. I miss us...”

What game was this?

“The times we...” he trailed off while his eyes finished his words. *Disgusting!*

The way he leered and licked his lips made her want to vomit.

She dropped the bottle of *Tom Ford Noir* she picked off the shelf inside her shopping cart. “Henry, I thought you relocated to Enugu?” She asked, checking out a bottle of *Flower boob.*

“You read the message.” She could hear the relief in his voice. “I thought you wouldn’t.”

She almost rolled her eyes.

“I spent twenty-eight days in Enugu and decided that city isn’t for me. So, I wrote to the head office for a transfer back to Port Harcourt.” He moved closer and she took a few steps back.

“I couldn’t live with myself, knowing what I did to you.”

Was he being serious?

“Before I left, I wanted to tell you how sorry I am, but you wouldn’t pick my calls. I want us back.”

“So how is your girlfriend, the one you got pregnant?” She was surprised she didn’t feel bitter asking him about it. A few months ago, it would have been different.

“She lost the baby.” He chuckled nervously. “It was a mistake, sure you understand that.” He slipped his hands in his pocket and avoided her gaze.

“I am sorry about the baby,” she said for want of words.

Beads of sweat broke out on his furrowed forehead. “It’s... it’s for good. We didn't want the baby anyway.”

He was glad he lost a baby? Did she actually date this sick man?

“So, who are you getting that for?” He grinned, pointing at the perfume in her cart.

“I’m at liberty to buy any fragrance that catches my fancy.”

“It's masculine.”

“And what’s wrong with a woman wearing a man’s perfume?”

“Nothing.” He allowed a few seconds’ silence.

She wondered where the conversation was actually heading.

“No man yet?” He asked.

She could see the flicker of joy in his face, the way he looked at her with lust and something else, something that gave her an ugly, disturbing chill.

“You don’t expect a beautiful lady like this to be single,” a familiar voice said.

Ebube. She turned, he was right behind her!

Warmth bloomed within her, while her heart beat with excitement as he gripped her waist and pulled her possessively against him.

“Cupcake, you got all we are here for?” Ebube spoke into her ears, so intimately that she thought he was going to kiss her.

“I am so sorry, I don’t know she is with you, my name is Henry by the way. Elizabeth and I were ...you know...”

“I know that I'm one lucky man to have this lady as my woman,” Ebube cut in.

Attitude never leaves a man. No matter how much Henry wanted to hide his jealousy, the daggers of anger in his eyes didn’t go unnoticed. She knew Ebube saw them too and was doing a fine job in giving the other man something to go hang himself with.

In their glare was an expansion of their hostility towards each other. Sensing trouble, Elizabeth placed her palm on Ebube's thrust-out chest, praying the big

guy would back down.

Ebube finally tore his eyes away from Henry and focused them on her, giving her a sensual kiss on the lips, she could swear she turned rose pink instantly. “I will be waiting for you at the counter,” he said jauntily.

Yes Tarzan. Nodding, she watched him saunter off before she turned to Henry. “You look like you have lost some weight,” she said and walked away. Leaving her ex- a seething infuriated wreck.

“What you did back there...” She started as they walked out of the mall together. Could the soldier ever look unattractive? Draped in faded baggy jeans and a red striped shirt which he folded the sleeves, he was a perfect picture of a black Hollywood movie star. “Thank you.”

“Glad I could help.” Ebube shrugged.

They were now standing by her car. She leaning against it, while he stood facing her.

“You did more than help, you almost started a fight.”

“He was getting on my nerves.” He stamped off sand from his legs, drawing her attention to his feet that looked like he just had a pedicure.

Why wasn’t he in boots? One glance at his toes and her mind had already formed an image of her sucking on them.

“Mine too,” Elizabeth agreed. “So, what brought you here?”

“Shopping.” He held up a bottle of wine. “Just dropped a friend off and decided to get me a bottle of this.”

“A friend...”

“Is she a woman?” With a grin, he gave voice to the question in her mind.

An attendant walked towards them and stopped beside Ebube. “You forgot to take your shopping printout, sir,” she said, giving him an extra-special smile.

They were yet to pick up the conversation when the same girl returned.

“Your change, sir.” She handed him a hundred naira note, added with an extra- extra smile.

That’s what it would be like, being with a man like this soldier—women coming onto him all the time.

Why do I always pick the handsome ones? Elizabeth thought as she moved her eyes from the girl to Ebube who had equally shifted his amused gaze to her.

“You know she wants you.”

“Too bad, I am taken.”

She didn’t want to ask further, his eyes said it all. *God! Are you teasing me with this man or is he real?*

“Hey,” he moved nearer and touched her face. “You’ve been staring at me as if I said something wrong.”

“Sorry, I seem to have lost words.” *And a part of my senses*.

“Something I did?”

He wasn't supposed to be this perfect. “Can you for once make yourself unlikable?”

The question seemed to take him aback. “Like— become a bad guy?” He asked. “You like bad guys?”

His phone chose that moment to vibrate. He hurriedly answered the call, after talking for a few minutes, he sighed. “Duty calls, I have to go.”

“But you said you were off duty.”

He shrugged. “Emergencies happen—unfortunately.”

It was easier than the man expected—the soldier walking into the scene without much effort.

From the windscreen of his car, the man could see the soldier touching the woman’s face. Laughing freely. Who would do that? Who would easily carry on with life after wasting lives?

But it was good for him.

Not so good for the soldier, and definitely not so good for the poor, soon-to-be grief-stricken, self-doubting lady leaning on her car, smiling at whatever the soldier was saying.

How was she able to find the soldier? Did she know what he did many years ago?

Relaxing back on the seat, the man pulled a wicked, toothy grin. He’d seen the lady first, inside the mall. She reminded him of the life he once had, the woman that was part of it. Then the soldier had joined her. The man has watched the couple do those irksome things lovers do, oblivious of the mess the soldier left behind years ago. A mess he should be made to suffer its consequences but no one seemed to care.

Except the man. He was going to make the soldier pay for what he did.

And it would start with the lady.

He would take her for himself. Would own her forever. The man liked things to be his. He’d never been good at sharing—it wasn’t his most attractive trait—he would rather destroy something than share it.

So, he would not share her.

Seeing her voluptuous backside and those large pair of breasts reminded him of the woman he used to fuck. Her moan. She was a wild one. This one would be too.

Closing his eyes, the man licked his lips as he felt his hardness.

The soldier mustn't have her. He would make sure of that, same way he would make sure of every horror that would befall him.

Looking back at the couple, he had to admit to being a little bit pleased. How he was able to tuck his emotions in on seeing the soldier.

Fool.

The soldier.

He didn't recognize him. Why would he? It was dark on that fateful day and the soldier's eyes were set only on his target. So engulfed was he with rage that he didn't care about the man that stumbled into the scene—the hands that grabbed his waist... the hands he shoved away.

But he'd known he would recognize the masked man anywhere... his eyes... the sound of his voice. HIs father had called him a soldier and had described him over and over— days before his death.

The soldier was gone now and the lady just entered her car.

The man waited for her to drive out, then he followed, slowing a little to throw some naira notes on a beggar at the entrance of the parking lot. She swerved her car to

the next junction and parked a tiny distance away from a dark blue gate, he watched as she stepped out, fumbled with a bunch of keys, opened the gate and walked back into her car.

As he drove away, he allowed himself a smile. Apart from anything else, making her his seemed to thrill him more.

THIRTEEN

“Hope you’re okay.”

It was the fifth message she was sending to him that evening and he hadn’t replied any of them. It shouldn't bother her that he chose to ignore her. After all, they had nothing serious going on.

Oh, crap. Who was she kidding? Her lips might have said ‘no' to his proposal but her heart had sung a million ‘yes' from the first day she met him.

He had awoken something in her, now she couldn’t stay an hour without thinking about him. Without wanting to hear his voice and read his messages.

This was madness.

Yet, she dialed his number again and groaned when he didn’t pick up.

Abandoning the phone on a side stool, she lay down on the sofa and decided to occupy her mind with... with... the thoughts of him!

Hissing, she turned to her side, wishing that sleep would come upon her instantly. But she feared that he would be in her dream, with his handsome face and knowing smiles.

Another hiss erupted out of her mouth and she turned to her other side. Her phone rang, it was him.

“Cupcake! hey!” There was a conversation going on where he was. “I’m so sorry darling, I’ve been very busy.” More background discussion, this time he shouted at someone... a junior officer? “I’ve not sat my ass down since I left you. It’s been crazy over here.”

“I take it you’re not having a good day then.”

“Now I am. Hearing your voice has worked a miracle inside me.”

She wasn’t surprised he would say that, neither was she expecting the reaction those few words stirred inside of her.

“Anything I can do to help?” she asked.

“Don't do that, girl,” he teased.

“What? I just want to make you feel better.”

He hesitated. “You don’t want to know what is going on in my mind right now. Things I would want you to do to me.”

Oh, she wanted to hear it, though that wasn’t what she had in mind when she

offered to help ease his stress.

“Who was that guy at the mall, anyway?”

“Henry. You already know him.”

“That Henry?”

“That Henry.” And had she not stepped in when she did, she knew Ebube’s fist would have connected violently with Henry’s jaw.

“You should have told me it was him while we were there.”

“Thank goodness I didn’t.”

“He was trying to insult you, nobody insults my lady,” he retorted.

His lady. She loved the sound of that.

“There’s something about him that doesn’t sit right. I can't lay my fingers on what it is, but please stay away from him, will you?”

“Okay,” she agreed. “So, back to what I can do to make you feel better.”

“A date, Let’s start with a date. I ruined the first one.”

“But...”

“We are partying this Saturday, inside the base. I want you by my side, as my lady.”

“What would happen if I say no to you?”

“I will keep asking until you say yes.”

She knew he wasn’t talking about the date alone. “You are a dangerous man.” In a sweet way.

“I know.”

And she had helplessly fallen for him. “I don't want to feel like this for you,” she moaned.

“Cupcake?”

He must be alone now because his voice had become more intimate— husky, awakening every sexual nerve in her. She fought the picture forming inside her head—she in bed with him, his arms stroking her body while his lips whisper sweet nothings into her ears.

“How do I make you feel?”

“You put ideas into my head.”

“My pleasure.”

“Dirty ideas,” she purred. Feeling a light flush spread across her skin, she rolled over to lay on her stomach, then she began to swing her legs which were hung up from side to side. It was her turn to go flirty and suggestive.

“Even better.”

“So, what is it going to be, soldier?”

“Hmm... let me see....’ He chuckled. “Come over on Saturday. Let's party first, then... who knows...”

The number of power bikes in the drive made her newly acquired Toyota rav4 look like a dolphin in an ocean filled with sharks. Taking time to find a free spot to park, Elizabeth gave the collection of bikes a mental assessment. She knew nothing about these beasts, though she had always loved them.

Her gaze fell on a black larger than life lion face designed one, cleverly named *the terminator,* parked not too far from where she was.

“Magnificent,” she breathed as her eyes lingered on it for a while, then she turned off her engine.

“Thirty minutes,” she reminded herself, and grabbed her purse.

The music emanating from the venue became louder as she neared the entrance, her steps unconsciously timed to the beat of Rudeboy’s *‘Audio money.’*

Stepping into the auditorium, her eyes roamed. This wasn’t anything near a sane people’s party. These men were loud, loud and messy. It was nothing like the few classy dates she’d attended, nothing like her mother’s fancy dinner parties.

Her gaze darted here and there in search of him while thinking that she should just turn back and leave and save herself some trouble—the man was trouble. But she didn't want to. She was in love or lust or something along those lines. So yeah, she was ready to ride with this trouble.

Her eyes caught him dancing in a circle of some guys and she couldn't help the girlish grin that worked up her face.

Adorable, she thought. Simply gorgeous.

“Hey queen.”

Elizabeth turned to see a pretty man—shockingly pretty in a feminine way, with skin as light as the sun, walking up to her.

“Looking for someone?”

“Uhm, officer... Captain Ebube. Over there.” She pointed.

“You’re Elizabeth?” The man looked her over. “T-man sure has a huge appetite.” The man said with glee. Turning away from her, he announced, “Everyone! The Terminator ‘s got a woman!” His words were lost to the loud music, though some heard him and turned to appraise her.

“My name is Felix, by the way.”

Elizabeth nodded while wondering why he had referred to Ebube as the Terminator. And the bike she saw at the parking lot that had the same name written on it, was that his? He's a biker too?

Sexy.

Returning her attention to Ebube, her eyes took in the whole of him—height, biceps, the man was magnificent. The name suited him. “Can you please, uhm, inform him that I am here?”

“No need, lady. He’s making his way to you.”

Sure, he is.

They made way for him, teasing and clapping as if the night was his. Most women in the room had their eyes on him. Why wouldn't they? He had the look, not the bad-boy kinda, but an innocent sexiness that radiated warmth. And the most endearing quality he possessed was that he didn’t seem to know how good-looking he was.

“Why do you refer to him as the terminator?” Elizabeth asked Felix, her eyes still on the man. *Her man*.

“Are you kidding me? Dude has an iron fist! A punch from him could send a man to the grave.”

He never thought she would come. She had sounded reluctant when he invited her. What made her decide?

“Handsome devil. You should have been a model,” she remarked, joking. “Maybe I should hook you up with some agents. I know a couple of them.”

“I don’t mind,” Ebube said, taking her hands and pulling her closer. “Anything that will give me money.”

She was beautiful. Nervous but still beautiful and she was here—for him. Her perfume as he gathered her in an embrace, was a scent he wanted to keep inhaling and never stop.

“Are you broke?” She asked.

Would it be a red flag if he was? “Not exactly, but who doesn’t want extra money?”

“Bring her over here, man!” Someone shouted from the far end of the auditorium.

“Mind your own woman!” Ebube responded amidst laughter without moving his eyes away from her. “They have been waiting to meet you,” he said.

“You told them about me?”

“I couldn't help it. I’m crazy about you and every one of those guys have to know.”

Tonight, everything about Elizabeth Jaja was alluring. From her luscious lips which were emphasized with a brownish gold lipstick, matching the subtle shadow on her eyelids, to her maroon wrapped bodycon midi-dress.

He wished she had not worn the blazer over her dress, but she still exuded sexiness. Every curve was subtly visible, he knew he would be the envy of most of the men at the party.

Slipping an arm around her waist, he stroked hair away from her forehead with his fingertips. He should kiss her now, in front of everyone, would she like it? Or would she feel embarrassed?

“You make me feel special,” she said, in a voice as warm as her skin.

“You are special.” God! “I can’t believe you are actually here.”

“Well, I decided to surprise you.” Her face beamed with a heart-warming smile.

“My oh my, I love this kind of surprise,” he said.

“Don't keep us waiting, man. Bring her over here!” Smiling, Ebube shook his head at his colleague’s impatient voices.

“I don’t mind meeting your friends.” She said, the beautiful smile still on her face.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t want to.” Taking her hand, he began to lead her deeper into the hall. “You’ve made me a proud man tonight.”

You are not allowed to go back soon. It upsets the target.

If there was a manual to this thing, that would be the first rule—never go back—swiftly followed by rule number two: never let yourself be seen.

You have to move on as if nothing happened.

But it was hard to move on when the man was a non-person. When he’d left behind the life he knew and hadn’t yet begun a fresh one. When the universe had presented him the opportunity to get back what was stolen from him.

Years after his life was destroyed, he’d followed the rules and had disappeared into this half-life, lonely and bored.

Then he found a lady—so curvy, so sexy. She reminded him of his mother with her manicured fingers and classy clothes. And he loved his mother, so he loved the lady. Then he didn’t love his mother, so he loathed the lady.

Now he missed his old life, the life the soldier took. It was his fault that his mother turned out the way she did. His fault that the man loathed the lady.

His fault!

The man leaned against the fence and watched a young mother push a pram past the house before he made the second attempt to get in.

The gate was locked, but he found another way in.

Surely, the lady wouldn't have any problem with him visiting the house.

FOURTEEN

The plan was to stay there for just thirty minutes, but she had ended up spending more than an hour with a group of impressive species of individuals, who though weren't related by blood, were obviously fraternal. And Ebube? She turned her head to meet his stare. Tonight, more than any other day, he exuded masculinity like a pleasant perfume. The way he smirked each time he caught her staring at him, whispering into her ears and winking at her as if both of them shared a naughty secret, left her shivering with excitement. She didn't doubt for a moment that he knew the effect he had on her and was satisfied with it

As a woman, she found his innate self-satisfaction attractive, and the constant swaying of his smokey dark eyes to her direction even when he was speaking to someone else, sent a warm kind of heat through her skin.

"You're a biker," she said as they made their way out of the hall. It was his idea that they ditch the party and go to somewhere more private.

"Most of us are." He pulled her to a stop when they got to the porch. "You know I can ask one of our female officers to get you something flat and comfortable if your sandals are hurting your feet.

"How did you know?" She'd been trying to hide her discomfort after their last dance. Now the pain was becoming unbearable.

"You're my responsibility, m'lady," he said, pulling her closer to plant a kiss on her forehead, then he turned to go back into the hall.

"Wait," she called as a crazy idea came into her head.

He turned, fixing a questioning gaze at her.

"You don't have to stress anyone for my sake."

Before he could object, she bent down to unstrap the sandals.

"Allow me," he said, getting down on one knee to help her. His forehead brushed against hers as she lifted her head to stare at his face.

Who was this man?

Where did he come from?

A whimper bubbled up her throat and she tightened her lips to suppress it from pushing out from her mouth.

"You can remove your leg now," he said, sliding down the back strap so she

could pull her foot out with ease. He repeated the same with the other sandal.

“Done.” He straightened up. “What now?”

“We can go now.”

“Wha... but you...” he burst out laughing.

She joined in.

“Jesus, lady! You're my kind of woman.”

And you, dear soldier, are a true king. “So, shall we?”

They abandoned their rides at the lot and took a leisurely stroll down the road—her sandals hanging on his fingers while she walked barefooted beside him.

The night was too beautiful—perfect for lovers.

Lovers?

Hmm...

“They call you ‘the terminator.’”

“Unfortunately,” he said.

“Unfortunately?”

“I killed someone in a street fight.”

“What?!”

“Just kidding.” He laughed. “You should see your face right now.” Pausing his stride, he turned to face her.

Trapping the sandals between his thighs, he held her shoulders. “Let me get this off you.”

Her body betrayed her, giving a full-form shiver as his fingers brushed her skin while he eased the blazer off her shoulders.

“Are you cold?”

Yes! And only the warmth of your body will make me better. “Uh uh.”

For a moment, he simply gazed into her eyes, then he frowned. “You sure?”

Okay... this guy has the most soulful eyes I’ve ever seen. “The truth or should I lie?”

“We have gone past lying to each other, Lady.” He said, faintly amused.

Suddenly, she felt boldness draining out of her. What was left was this annoying, girlish shyness.

Fucking nerves. She drew a breath, avoiding his gaze, she focused on two skimpily dressed ladies standing across the road.

“Come on now, out with it. I swear I will do anything to make you feel better.”

For a military man, you are being too nice.” *And too desirable.*

“We are servicemen and not monsters. We have families, loved ones and we care for them.” Hanging her blazer over his shoulder, Ebube reached out to palm

her face, trailing down to her arms, he took her hands. “Some of us love hard too, and would do anything for the woman we love.”

Sweet Jesus! His voice was magnetic to the core of who she was. Resonating with all of her when others had barely achieved a fraction of it.

“I am in love with you, Elizabeth.” His voice as soft as the night's breeze. “I love you. You want to know why? Because... because... everything about you warms my heart. Your smiles, your frowns... everything. From you, Elizabeth, I never want to be apart. I am so comfortable with you. So, so comfortable.”

He held her gaze.

“It was lust at first. An overwhelming attraction. Now I want you, the whole of you. I want to be your choice, the sound that you wake up to every morning, your first and last thought every day. Give me the opportunity to be the spark that brightens up your eyes, the touch that warms your thighs, your safe space.” He shook his head. “Elizabeth, I want to be the love of your life.

He was asking for commitment. Demanding for something stronger than the burning sexual lust they had felt for each other at first. “Bube.” *It’s Bube now?* She almost sputtered out laughter. Yes, she should laugh at herself. “I’ve fucked as many men as have opened their mouths to say the same thing you just said. All of them ended up leaving me because...I’m not...I don't even know... they just left.”

“Those men were losers.”

“No, they are not. I was a fool. A headless fat lady desperate to get a man.” Cooking and giving them all the winery access and levels, from baking to helping them with their laundry.

She wasn’t ashamed and insecure of her body anymore—or so she thought. After Henry, she’d decided to throw all *fuckry* out of the window and enjoy singlehood the way Oge was doing. But now, she could feel the claws of self-doubt all over her. “This thing you talk about, this love... It scares me. No, I’m not scared of you. In fact, I’m helplessly into you. But...” She shook her head. “After my last relationship, I told myself I’m not going to go down that road again.”

He turned slowly. “Let me try. Let me prove to you that I’m not like those other men. That day in church, when our eyes locked, you spoke to me—without your lips moving, I heard you speak to my heart. I wasn’t searching for love, but...” He shrugged. “You happened. The more time I spent with you, the more I realized how alone I am and how much warmth you bring to my life.”

He loves me.

He looooves me.

And I think I love him too.

Too fast, too sudden but it was true. Didn't they say that the eyes are the window of the soul? In his, she saw not just desire, but a plea for her to bind with him. She felt the liberty in being caught in his divine spell.

Yet... "Give me time, soldier."

"Okay, I will. At least you like me, that means a lot."

I don't just like you, handsome. I am crazy about you.

Light from a streetlamp flickered over his smile, causing her to grin. "Aren't we going to turn back? It's getting late and I have to go."

"We won't do that now because we are already here." He gesticulated. "Welcome to my home," he said, guiding her towards his house.

It was a cul-de-sac of bungalows most probably built in the eighties, she observed while waiting for him to unlock the door. However, some of the bungalows had been modified—like his.

"It's beautiful," she said as she stepped inside, distracting herself by allowing her eyes to roam the sitting room. Distracting, because following him to this place had started a small hammer thumping in her heart and her other place. She didn't want to pay attention to either place.

Biting her lower lip, she fought to focus her gaze on the well-worn piano standing by the corner, instead of returning it on the man who was just a few feet away from her—staring at her with... lust...sinful, sweet hunger in his eyes.

Jesus Christ! If he kept looking at her like that, she would have to beg him to ride her hard and fast on the hard floor...wall...anywhere. "Your place..." She swallowed hard, walking past him to stand at the center of the sitting room. "It's nice." The sofa appeared new; the tiles decent, not too classy. Nothing like her baroquely furnished *little palace*. "Quite plain and stylish. I like it."

"A lady so true and original," he said with admiration. "Come, sit." He led her to the sofa and eased her down. "Let me pamper you. Wine?"

"Water, we already had wine at the party."

"Okay ma'am, I will be back." He disappeared.

She was replying to Oge's WhatsApp message when he walked in with a glass of water.

"Thank you." She took it from him, her eyes reluctant to leave his face.

"So... uh..." He sat at the edge of the center table, facing her with a half-smile. "What made you wear heels today?"

"Excuse me?" *Behave yourself girl,* she thought as the strong feeling to walk up to him and stroke the light stubble on his chin came on so strong.

"You don't wear heels."

"Correct."

"So, why today?"

“Actually... if you must know, I bought them after we spoke yesterday. I wanted to wear them for you.” There he had it, he could laugh for all she cared.

“For me?” He raised an eyebrow.

“I thought I could look different tonight.” What would he do if she told him she’d love to have sex with him now? That’s the reason she came. His kiss, the way his lips and his hands had set her skin on fire that first time. His voice that always made her writhe with need... she wanted more. Wanted him inside her—. “You’ve always seen me in casual clothes and... you know.”

“Oh, cupcake. The heels made your legs even more beautiful and I am glad it’s all for me.” His half-smile turned into a full grin.

“Excellent. That means I haven’t wasted forty-nine thousand naira.”

“Elizabeth.” He sighed and came to kneel before her. “Don’t you know? The clothes don't make the woman, the woman makes the clothes.”

She knew, she just wanted to look different for him.

“Tell me your story, soldier. Why do they call you ‘the terminator?’”

Getting into her house took longer than the man expected, but his frustration dissipated once he stepped inside the sitting-room. Like a prisoner on parole, he drank in his surroundings, marveling at the resemblance the place had with that of the woman that was once part of his life.

The same snake plant by the dining window, same lavender smell—he hated it, he wished she'd changed it but she had stubbornly refused to.

The man walked slowly into her bedroom, reveling in the illicit freedom he’d seized for himself. His eyes ran through everything that was kept in precise order.

He knew that he could be caught, and every action had consequences. He could lose his next life, languishing instead in purgatory, but the buzz of being back, of finally getting to destroy someone was hard to ignore.

As his eyes settled on her underwear drawer, his senses tingled and for the first time since he slid into this half-life, he gave in to the lust he’d tried to suppress. Hurrying toward the drawer, he opened it and picked a random one, sniffing it he collapsed on her bed, filled with excitement.

An image of him over her nude body...

His tumescent organ angled towards her big backside...

He groaned. Warmed with excitement and anticipation, he sprang off the bed, yanked his trousers off and hurried into her bathroom. Legs widely spread, he reached for the petroleum jelly on the bathroom cabinet, taking a generous

amount, the jelly dissolving as he rubbed both palms together. Then softly, he began to touch his erection, feeling it's quick growth and throbbing sensation. With his eyes half closed, he threw his head backwards, fixed his gaze on her imaginary bare pink wetness and imagined himself gradually pushing his engorged shaft until it was buried deep inside her.

He increased the pace of his strokes. Faster. Intense. Back and forth. He concentrated on her arched back, her raised buttocks, full hips, glistening body.

He trembled. "Bitch! Fuck!" he croaked. Stroking harder and shooting his hips forward. He squeezed his eyes tight and whimpered as his climax came. His cum-shot splattered on the bathroom wall and covered his fingers.

He was still, his breath gradually steadied. Turning on the shower he collapsed on the bathroom floor.

She would return to the mess he made.

Or maybe not.

He wished she would, but he had to clean up. He wouldn't want her to panic and go running to the soldier for help.

Not yet.

FIFTEEN

It was too easy, he thought, sitting beside her. Too easy to let her help him bear his burdens. One by one he had told her everything—about a father that wasn't aware of his existence until he was eleven and had taken him in against his wife's strong objections. A mother who hadn't looked for him since she eagerly handed him over to his father. A step- mother that would never accept him as a son no matter how hard he tried. A half-brother who should have been alive had he not been foolish enough to encourage him to join the military.

It was my fault, he claimed.

It wasn't, Elizabeth insisted.

"So, you vowed to find his killer?"

"Found him." Shifting on the sofa he glanced into the distance. "Made sure he never killed anyone again."

"You killed him."

It wasn't a question, so he didn't answer.

At his silence, she pushed again. "Was his death enough?"

Yes. No. It was supposed to make everything better, but somehow it didn't give him redemption.

"Was it worth it?"

Now she was what? Judging him? Reminding him of the burden of regret he bore since that night. "Tell me, my love."

My love. Hmm.

"I didn't kill him. Maybe I did." His eyes rested on the strands of beads around her left ankle. "He died of a heart attack a week later." Triggered by his many punches and kicks.

"This story... Felix..."

"Yes." He met the extraordinary beauty of a man in the Navy Academy and they had remained friends—more like brothers. Periodic transfers had separated them several times, but their brotherhood had not wavered. "He knows this story and gave me that name, 'The Terminator' when he heard about the man's death." Ebube said, cracking his knuckles. "Years later, I felt I could adopt the name. Not because I was proud of causing the death of a man." Though he wasn't

sorry. “But...” He shrugged.

“The others, they know too?”

“No.” He faced her again. “They thought I earned the name because of my heavy-weight lifting.”

She didn’t question him again; must have sensed his struggle.

But he went ahead to tell her about his ex-wife that almost shattered his life, and his daughter that meant the world to him.

“You are a good man, Captain Ebube.”

“You can’t say that.” He slid down the sofa and took her leg, placing it on his bended knee. “You barely know me.”

She didn’t respond.

“Can I touch your anklets?”

“Yes.”

His index finger trailed the beads. All the emotions he had stifled throughout the night flooded over him as his fingers made contact with her skin and an almost imperceptible moan escaped her throat. “You’re beautiful.” He brought her leg down, sat on the floor and went on to massage each foot sensually.

“You do this often?”

“Giving foot massages?”

“Hm.”

“Practiced with my dad and perfected with my ex-wife. Never did it to anyone else after she left.”

Raising a foot to his lips, he kissed her big toe.

She rewarded him with a squeeze of his shoulders. “You are so sweet. Thank you for treating me like a queen.” Her words came slowly, thickened with emotion.

“You are my queen.” He lifted his face to stare into her eyes. “Some minutes ago, you called me your love.” His hands came up to her lap—stroking. “Was it because of my story? Tell me, Elizabeth. Do you really mean it or you fe...”

“I'm in love with you too. Big head.”

He put on a smile to make light of her admission. It was hard for her to admit to her feelings for him this soon, though both of them already knew. But having her say it this way was something he wouldn’t make her feel ashamed of.

“Excuse me,” she murmured. Getting off the sofa, she walked towards the door that led to his mini-passage.

“Where are you going?”

“To drop this.” Lifting the empty glass over her head.

“The kitchen is to the left.” His smile widened into a full grin as she did a turn to the right direction.

She's in love with me! He thought as his phone beeped.

I found the names and other things that may interest you—the message read.

What was wrong with openly admitting to being in love with the soldier?

It’s too early...No it’s not.

Who gives a damn?

Her eyes roamed the kitchen—in search of nothing in particular. The place was neatly arranged. Did he clean his house by himself or had someone do that for him? A woman?

And why would that even bother her?

Dismissing that thought, she walked over to the cooker, curious to see what was in the pot, sitting there alone... She lifted the lid...

“Hungry?”

“Oh, Jesus!” She turned sharply to face him. “Don’t do that again!” Slapping his chest. He was uncomfortably, yet excitingly close.

“Startled?”

“Of course, I was.” She had her backside against the kitchen unit and his groin was some inches away from her pelvis. *Could he... did he want to... argh!*

“Sorry, didn't mean to do that,” he said, stroking his jaw and avoiding her gaze. “I can make you noodles.” He was already headed towards the refrigerator as if looking for an opportunity to widen the gap between them.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” He turned his head to look at her, his eyes clouded with... pain? Desire? “Why?” he asked.

“You seem to be uhm...One minute I could feel your desire for me, the next, you uhm...” *You are distancing yourself.*

“Oh, God.” He shut the fridge and came to her. Pulling her to himself. “I need...” he said, in that deep, husky, stomach fluttering voice. Pressing his face into the curve of her neck. “Goddamn it. I need...”

“What?” Why was he fighting it— fighting her? Hadn't he come on to her with heat and desire? Why was he unsure now, tonight, when all she needed was him?

“You.” He lifted her as if she weighed nothing, sat her on the kitchen top in a move as sharp and shocking as whiplash. Gripping her neck, his mouth captured hers, cutting off her gasp of surprise.

“I want to make love to you, hard and fast, then slow until you’re ready for another fast ride.” He stared into her eyes. “But I don’t want to do this the wrong

way. I wouldn't have minded before. But now...”

“Now.” She gripped his shoulders, her gaze stayed on his. “Now, I need you. I’m not fragile and you will not be doing me wrong by loving me tonight.”

“Cupcake.” He kissed her again, long and hard. A forceful penetrating kiss which established the urgency of his need. “Once we become this intimate, I will be hopelessly tied to you and won't let you go. So, for our sake, I need you to feel the same, that this is something you want. You will keep me and will want me to keep you.”

“Bube...” She inhaled his masculine scent and excitement burst inside her with the darkest of sexual longing. “You are mine even from the first day I met you.”

“That is what I want to hear.” His hand glided to her back and her nerves sparked under his touch. Those nerves, a separate kind of thrill, running along with a tingle of need as his lips trailed over her cheek.

Goodness! She was in the throes of wild sexual heat. She did not care how many women Captain Ebube Nwafor had bedded, or if he would disappear the next morning. She only knew she wanted him.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmured.

“No.” She would go insane if he dared withdraw now. “I don’t think I want you to stop.”

“Okay.” He was still stroking. Easy hands, easy lips. “Then, you are sure.”

“I am sure.” Leaning back, she held his face. “So sure.” She touched his lips with hers, teasing him with her tongue.

“Jesus, lady,” he exclaimed.

She could feel the charging emotions in his warm breath as he nudged his tongue inside her mouth. Moaning softly as his kiss deepened— tasting, sucking, licking, his hand skimmed down and dragged her dress up to her waist. Then, it pressed between her legs and spread them apart.

“Cupcake...” he moaned. “Let me touch you down here.” He found her folds, and with two fingers, he parted her and found her clit, rubbing it in small circles.

“Oh, yes... yes... I like that.” She cried out against his lips and was lost. The sensation was overwhelming. Pleasure shook the whole of her when he pushed her head backwards and sucked on her neck—His two fingers now deep into her —working, changing her breath with every thrust. Her eyes rolled into her head as he steadied the rhythm while his tongue flickered over her face.

Who was this man? She’d known the gentle, witty, humorous side of him. She’d never known the kind of desperation he was showing her now. Desperation that was ruthless, reckless and rough.

She loved it.

She loved him. Now. In his kitchen. With his fingers assaulting her canal and her senses, turning her into a mess.

“Bube...” She shifted forward, raising her hips slightly to meet his thrust. “I am close...” Oh goodness! She was riding his hand, so shamelessly. Moaning without care. And he was enjoying what he was doing to her.

“I am fucking coming!” She screamed in a voice she didn't recognize as hers. Her body was coiling tighter, grasping at his fingers.

“You are gushing wetness.”

Yes, she was. She could hear the slippery sounds every time he drove back into her and it heightened her excitement. “My captain,” she moaned. Feeling her orgasm near, she sank her fingers into his shoulders.

“Oh God! Bube...” she whimpered.

“That’s it my darling. Come for me, let me have it.”

“Oh... Oh... Bube!” And she came on a violent leap that left her helpless and shuddering.

The next best thing to making love, in Elizabeth’s opinion, was floating on the warm river of satisfaction after the act.

Making love. Was that what he did to her, with his clothes on and his need yet to be satisfied?

She opened her eyes and stared into his. “You didn’t fuck me.”

“I did.”

“Not with your dick.”

“I know.” His face held a boyish grin as he licked off her cum from his fingers. Gosh! That was so sexy. He was so sexy—and naughty in an innocent way. “You coming so hard all over my hand is the most beautiful thing I have seen in a long while.” He planted a feathery kiss on her lips. “You taste divine.”

She giggled, feeling comfortable in his arms. “But why didn’t you do it?”

“I want the time to be right.”

SIXTEEN

It wasn’t just lust.

He was sure now that what he felt for her was true and pure. Something that wouldn’t hurt her like her other relationships did.

Relationships. A subject Ebube had cancelled from his to-do list three years after his divorce. Then he met Elizabeth and suddenly he was eager to dive into another one with gusto.

Love could make a man take back his words, *and turn a placid dick into a high-powered one.*

To ease the heaviness in his groin, Ebube increased the water temperature and raised his face to the shower. His hand grazed over his unspent hardness. Fuck!

Why didn’t he do it? What was he trying to prove? A hard guy, in full control of his desires?

Jesus, F Christ. What was he going to do with his turgid dick that had refused to deflate? The image of her arching impatiently against his hand wasn’t helping either.

Slowly, he began stroking his length and a moan escaped his lips as the sound her pussy made when he was ravishing it with his fingers filled his head.

He should call her back. The five minutes since he saw her off to the parking lot and watched her drive off seemed like an hour. Was she home? Would she like it if he showed up at her house, right now?

What would he tell her?

Hey, I figured out my dick needed to fuck you after all, so here I am...

Christ! Letting her go wasn’t such a good idea. The image of what they did in the kitchen kept replaying in his head.

“I am so messed up,” he hissed, abandoning all thoughts of wanking off. It was a waste of good action.

By the time he stepped out of the bathroom, he’d made up his mind to go after her.

What did it matter if he made love to her today or next year? It didn't change the fact that he was in love with her and she already said she loved him.

His phone buzzed as he was about to pick a shirt to go with the shorts he already brought out, walking buck-naked across the room to his bed, he picked the phone.

“Been thinking about your idea of us pursuing this case,” Abdul started. “I think we should let Commodore Dambo in on it.”

Ebube thought so too, but wasn't sure how the man would react. His instruction when their mission in Bonny was called off, was not to snoop around, like he knew they would. “I don’t know, Abdul.”

“What do you mean you don't know? I’ve gone through the names and the information you forwarded to me. Man! This is huge, bigger than we can handle!”

“As if I don't know that already.”

“Then you also know that these boys have the backing of some top officials and this Berepiki guy...”

Placing the phone on speaker, Ebube dropped it on the bed, got dressed and picked his helmet from the floor of his wardrobe. He would get his jacket from the sitting-room where he left it. “Tell me what I don't know, man.”

“What is wrong with you? This could swallow the two of us.”

“Three, Felix is now involved.”

“What? Do you trust him?”

“With my life.”

There was silence at both ends. “There are rumors. I think you’ve stirred something.”

“What rumor?” Ebube picked the phone and sat on the bed. “Tell me man. What did you hear?”

“I am not sure, someone has said something to the wrong person.”

Fuck! The guy he sent the names to... Had they spoken to someone who shouldn't know about the investigation? “Abdul, what do you know?”

“I am coming over to your place.”

“I am getting ready to go out.”

“Who gives a fuck if you are going to meet with the president?”

An involuntary shiver trickled down her spine as she unlocked her door and stepped into the sitting-room. Dropping her bag and the beverages she had picked up on her way back on a side-stool beside the long sofa. She hurried to the window and peered outside, it was dark but she caught a glimpse of something moving... a silhouette...

Inching closer, she stared properly and just saw her horrified face staring back at her, distorted by the glass.

“I thought... I could swear...” She hissed. Walking away from the window, she picked her bag where she dropped it and headed upstairs, to her bedroom.

The rest of the night would be spent basking in the intense pleasurable experience Ebube gave her, certainly not looking over her shoulders in search of a ghost.

Christ! He had made love to her, not with his dick but it still had been amazing. She was now more eager to have him ram his rod inside her.

How would it feel? Sucking air into her mouth through clenched teeth, she grabbed the door handle when a noise outside made her jump. *Pull yourself together Elizabeth.* It’s the drink she had at the party. She took too much and now she was beginning to see and hear things that weren’t there.

But wait, she could hear footsteps...

Slow and deliberate, as if the owner didn't want to be heard. Someone was out there—she was sure of it now. Tiptoeing back downstairs she thought of the possibility of burglars breaking into her house and a hard knot of fear formed in her throat. How did they get in?

She should go back upstairs, pull the chest drawer in her room across the door. The burglars could take what they wanted from the sitting-room—it didn't matter.

The crunch of footsteps got louder, competing with the rush of blood singing in her ears. She heard a dragging noise. A ladder? Was that how they entered?

She needed to call someone, but who? The police? Oge? Ebube?

Searching through her recent calls, she pressed Ebube’s number as she tiptoed back towards the stairs. Then three things happened...

The crunch of gravel beneath feet became the solid tap of shoes on steps.

The tiny ringing of Ebube’s phone at her ear was mirrored by a louder version coming from outside the house.

And there was a knock at the front door.

When she summoned courage to open, Ebube’s ringing mobile was still in his hand.

“You rang me, m’lady.” He grinned, slipping his gun inside his back pocket and tapping his phone to end the call.

She lowered her own mobile and exhaled deeply. “Do you always carry guns with you?”

“One cannot be too security conscious.” Another grin. “Makes you uncomfortable?”

”No.” She hurried into his arms. “I don't mind you carrying an AK 47 even.”

Close to tears, she tightened her grip around him. “I am so glad you are here.”

“Hey.” He chuckled. “Are you okay? You miss me this much?”

“I heard someone walking outside, I thought...”

“Someone did. Me.” He planted a kiss on her head. “You left your gate unlocked.”

The gate! Why did she always forget? “And you decided to creep about? Why didn't you come right in?”

“I’m sorry, cupcake. My instinct told me to do a security check around your house, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It doesn't matter now.” He was with her, in her house, holding her as if she meant the world to him.

“You parked your bike outside?” She asked.

“Yes.” Gently easing her away from him, he shoved his hand inside the pocket of his shorts and brought out his keys. “Give me a minute.” He walked out and rode his bike in, locking the gate behind him.

She was glad he slept over, though they didn’t get the chance to continue from where they stopped at his place. He spent half of the night in the sitting room, having an online conference meeting with his colleagues. She'd waited for him to finish until she couldn’t wait any more and had gone to bed, telling him to join her later in her bedroom.

She met him the morning in the same place she left him, in the sitting room, lying on the sofa with all his clothes on.

But he was there, and that was enough—for now.

They said sudden goodbyes are easier, less painful. They were wrong. Any pain saved from the lingering farewells of a drawn-out illness is offset by the horror of a life stolen without notice. A life taken violently.

That’s what the soldier did—snatching the man’s father without giving him and his mother time to adjust. The doctor said it was a heart attack, but the man knew it was him... the soldier.

He made his mother suffer.

A woman that had adored him—perhaps too much. As the only son, she had kept him by her side and only let him go when he had to travel to San Diego for his university education. Suddenly, she became manipulative, assertive and pulled outrageous stunts to get him to do her bidding.

Like the day she soaked herself in gasoline and threatened to light a match, just to get him not to move out of the house. “I am scared... that bad man... he

could come back... I don’t want to be alone,” she'd wailed.

The man hated the way she always had him, yet he couldn’t set himself free from her hold. She was the only family and friend he had then.

Violent sobs began to shake through him. Strange, silent sobs as he collapsed against the wall of his room, sliding with a thud on the floor as he covered his face with his palms. It was happening again—his obsession.

His lust.

His mother.

She was the first woman he knew, the woman that trapped him, so that he had not desired any other woman.

Then his mother had to go, and it was the soldier's fault. He made the man do it, as he would make him send the lady to perpetual sleep too if she refuses to become his.

‘The soldier is evil.’ He made the man do bad things. That’s why the man must make him go away forever.

That’s the right thing to do—make the soldier go away forever.

His father would be happy he avenged his death. and his mother? Well, she would then forgive him for making her go.

But the lady. She would suffer and it wasn’t her fault. He felt sorry for her. However, her suffering would be a necessary evil.

SEVENTEEN

Sleek. Sensual. Powerful.

The vessel was everything and more.

As the heavy baby docked, Ebube extracted a wad of gum from his pocket, put it into his mouth, and strolled towards the latest arrival. He couldn't wait to board the ship, inhale its fresh smell, the sweet scent of new wood, steel and paint.

"I should kill you right now!"

Ebube turned to the left to see Abdul jogging towards him.

"What in Allah's name is wrong with you?"

"Felix opted for a conference call too, you were the only one who insisted we meet physically."

"Because the matter was serious!"

Both men stood side by side, gazing at the vessel. The crew members were now disembarking.

"I told you not to step out."

"We still came up with a solution without you grabbing Felix's neck." Knowing how short-tempered and impatient Abdul was, and how Felix wouldn't tolerate the much bigger man's assertiveness, it was best to keep the two of them apart. An online conference meeting was the best. "Felix can't stand you."

"And you think that I can stand his 'I know it all' attitude?" Abdul threw Ebube a glare. "The feeling is mutual, Terminator."

Both men ambled towards the vessel.

"Where were you by the way?"

"With someone special." *And thank you guys for turning my hard dick placid.* The meeting had lasted longer than he thought. With all their minds on overdrive, they had haggled the possibilities of outright dismissal if the rumor Abdul heard was true. The news was out that some officers had embarked on a secret investigation and the force wasn't taking it lightly.

"You sonofabitch!" Abdul pulled Ebube to a stop. "You turned down my suggestion to meet in your house just because you wanted to get some..." Pulling his arms to his chest, Abdul rolled his waist while faking a moan. "So how was

it? Sweet huh? Those tits and rump...”

“Asshole.” Ebube slapped the man on the shoulder. “Unlike you, whose main interest in women is to shag them. I didn’t fuck her.”

“You disappoint me man.”

Staring at the charcoal dark-skinned man, Ebube wondered how he was able to land him as a friend and how their friendship had lasted that long. Abdul could sleep with anything that had breasts and a hole between her legs. “It's always boobs and pussies for you, old man.” He laughed.

“What else is there to gain from these girls from hell?”

“Maria, your wife wasn't a girl from hell.”

“All the good women in this world died the day she died. That woman was everything. My friend. A perfect mother to our kids, not to mention a maniac in bed.”

“You’ve not gotten over her death.”

“I don’t want to,” Abdul said.

“I’ll be seeing the Commodore today, as we discussed.” Ebube changed the topic.

“Oh, yes. He asked you to report to his office as soon as you get back.”

What? “And you are just telling me this now? Do you know what time it is?” He gave the other man a punch on the shoulder and ran off.

Outside the Commodore’s office, he rolled the gum over his tongue, sucked on it, spat it out into a trash can and walked into the large workroom.

“You will be leaving with the chopper tomorrow morning to Abuja. You’ve been enlisted for a Joint Task Force mission in Somalia,” the Commodore said without raising his face.

“Sir?”

“Gone deaf, Captain?”

“No sir.” The news hit him like a shot in the gut. “Sir, the new recruits just arrived, their training has started in earnest. My attention will be needed.”

“Someone else will fill that gap.”

This is ridiculous. The tall and weathered commodore with knowing eyes and high-pitched voice had to be kidding him. “Sir, I can’t just pack up and leave.”

The commodore didn’t slap the table like he always did when he is pissed. Instead, he fixed Ebube with a look cold enough to give a snowman hypothermia. “Mind telling me why?”

Ebube knew he had pushed farther than he was supposed to, but what time would be best to let the commodore in on their investigation if not now? “I am... we are hot on something, sir.”

The commodore seemed to stiffen. “Go on,” he grunted.

“I have every reason to believe that the Bonny mission wasn't just called off, someone... some people didn't want us to go ahead with it because of their personal interests.” When it seemed that the commodore wasn't going to interrupt him, Ebube continued. “I got a strange visit the same night the mission was called off and have been getting anonymous text messages that contain information too direct to be ignored. You want to see them?”

The man nodded grimly.

Ebube scrolled through his message box and gave the phone to the man who glanced through and handed the gadget back.

“You can’t prove anything with this.”

“The accuracy in these messages can’t be ignored, we are already digging...”

“See where that got you? You arrogant piece of shit.” The commodore snapped. “You think you can handle the outcome of what you are doing?”

“Sir.” Was there a hint in the man’s tone that suggested his being included in this whole JTF mission to Somalia was linked to the Bonny saga? “I was thinking...”

“You don’t think, you do as you’re instructed! I told you to get your ass out of that Island. Do not snoop around, you are not a freaking superhero!”

“Should I take it that I’m being punished for trying to uncover rot in the system?”

“Don't speak to me about rot, boy! I have been in the system long before you thought of joining the navy,” the commodore barked. “You are lucky you are not being dismissed.”

Ebube absorbed the situation with more composure than he knew he had. Staring at the man behind the desk who had his hands folded across his chest, he realized it was over. There was nothing he could say here to make the man change his mind—not that it was in the man’s place to change what had been signed though.

“So, this is it?”

“Don't use that tone on me or I will have you court-martialed,” the commodore said, staring him hard in the face. He searched through the papers on his desk, bent to open a drawer and came up with an envelope which he offered to him.

Ebube took it, nodded and walked out.

“How did it go?” Abdul asked, leaning against the wall. Ebube handed him the mission letter and kept walking.

Abdul took it, eyes wide for a moment, an unreadable expression quickly replaced the surprise. Tearing the envelope, Abdul unfolded the letter, bringing

it close to his face to read. “What’s this horse poo? What is this?” Abdul snapped, leaning off the wall, he hurried after Ebube, scrunching the paper into a ball and throwing it away.

“Exactly what you read.”

“We are fucking naval officers. missions like this are not our fucking business.”

“He said it’s a JTF mission.”

“Did you get the chance to speak to him about the...”

“He knows.” *And the coward is sending me away to save his neck.*

“Shit!”

Yes, real shit. “Heard from Felix this morning?”

“Saw him earlier. The colder-than-ice motherfucker seemed to be having a not so nice morning.”

Now it made sense. The missed calls, the message from Felix asking him to call back. “It’s urgent,” Felix had added.

And he had called, but... “His number wasn’t connecting.” What could be going on? Was it possible that... Jesus! Ebube turned sharply to face Abdul. “Do you know if he also got a letter?” What would it be for Felix? An outright dismissal? A suspension?

“I don’t know, man. Mr pretty face refused to say a word to me.”

This is so fucked.

They were so fucked.

“Where in Jesus’ sweet name have you been? I've been trying your number and it’s switched off!”

“I took some weeks off,” Oge, who turned up unexpectedly at the farm, announced, linking her arm companionably through Elizabeth’s as they headed towards the little office. She was grinning as if she just discovered she’d won a lottery. “I went to Dubai, to shake my ass on a yacht, wearing a thong.”

“Jesus, girl, you didn’t breathe a word about it.” Elizabeth walked to her fridge, brought out a bottle of groundnuts and returned to her desk.

“I am so sorry, my new guy didn’t give me the time to inform friends and family.”

A simple call would have been okay. “There’s a new guy?”

“Lizzy, there’s always a new guy.” Oge grabbed the bottle of groundnuts, poured a handful in her palm and started stuffing them in her mouth. “But trust me, you’re going to like this one.”

Oge had always said this about all the guys she dated. “How did you convince your boss to let you go? You quit your job?”

“Told the man that I had a fearful pain in my gut and needed some time to treat myself,” Oge boasted, relaxing on the chair. “So, how is our soldier boy?”

“You mean Mr Romantic?”

Leaning closer, Oge gave her a slow, knowing stare. “Spill. Don't spare even the tiniest detail.”

“You didn't tell me about your new man and your trip, so I’m going to hold this gist to myself.” She turned her face away from her friend, her heart throbbing as if Ebube had just walked in.

“Come on girlfriend, take pity on me, I promise to tell you about Malaki.”

“That’s his name?”

“Yup, cute right?” Oge took more nuts. “Let's forget about him for now. Babe, I want to hear this gist!”

“You do know you’re a bad influence, right?” Elizabeth faked a grumble.

“Me?”

“Yes you. And for your information, we didn't do anything.”

“Don't play dumb with me, Lizzy.” Oge shifted closer, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. “So how is he? You know...is he a full option? Double silencer? Did he shift your womb?”

“You are disgusting,” Elizabeth said, shaking her head.

“I know, that’s why you love me.” Oge let out a loud peal of laughter. “So, you did the deed!”

“Well... maybe... it’s kinda complicated.” Would him finger-fucking her count as ‘doing the deed?’ Goodness! The pleasure he gave her with those magic fingers—skillfully playing her pussy as if he was making a melodious tone on the piano.

“Which means both of you finally did it!”

One look at Oge’s face, her decision of keeping last night to herself came crumbling. She shouldn’t be spilling everything out until she was sure. But she was sure. The problem was him; did he mean every nice thing he said to her? “Okay... okay... we didn’t actually do it.”

“What do you mean you didn't actually? Did you fuck the handsome soldier or not?”

“He fucked me.” Elizabeth licked her upper lip while throwing a glance at her friend. “Like, he didn’t really fuck me but...”

“Okay...”

“His fingers...”

Oge was grinning widely now.

“On his kitchen top.” Oh God. That was one teaser she wouldn’t forget.

“Dude finger-fucked you on his kitchen top?”

It was the sweetest thing she’d ever experienced.

“And you enjoyed it.” Oge exclaimed triumphantly. “It’s written all over your face. Girlfriend, if his fingers could do this to you, what would his little johnny do?”

Don't make me think about that, she flushed. “I told him that I love him.”

“And what did he say?”

“He loves me too, said that over and over again yesterday.”

“Girlfriend, some guys don't say these things out. They’d rather show you how much they love you. But this guy actually sang the L.O.V.E song to you and you are seated here?”

“Where else should I be seated?”

“You should be on his bed, wearing nothing!”

Shaking her head, Elizabeth stood to get her phone that had started chiming. “That’s why you keep changing men,” she murmured.

“We are in the same boat, honey.”

Not anymore, Elizabeth thought and placed the phone to her ear with a smile on her face. “The captain of my heart...” She stole a glance at Oge who had drawn closer and was straining to catch the conversation. “Are you okay? Your voice... okay I believe you... in the farm... yes... you're coming?” She elbowed Oge and moved further away. “I would rather come over... no, Bube, it’s not a bother... I am sure.”

“You want to go meet him?” Oge cried immediately Elizabeth dropped the phone.

“Yup.”

“When?”

“In the evening.”

“Can I come with you? I can get me a soldier lover.”

“But you just got a new boyfriend?”

“Double dating doesn’t hurt anyone.”

“How did we become friends?”

EIGHTEEN

“How dare you?”

It took all the reserves of her composure to remain calm when he broke the news. That and the fact that his living room was crowded. His friends, two of them she recognized from the party, the others she didn't know, were all around him. Now they were all gone and he’d busied himself with dumping stuff inside his duffle bag that was on top of the sofa, obviously avoiding staring at her.

“Look at me, damn it.” She roughly turned him to face her. “Why would you do this to me, to us?”

“I... It’s...” He broke off. Swearing under his breath, he pulled his gaze away from her again. Not before she read the pain in his eyes.

“You made me fall in love with you, you took the whole of my heart—every part of it. Now you want to hang your bag and leave?” Her voice was dangerously low.

“Cupcake.”

With hot tears running down her cheeks, she made for the bag, elbowing him aside as he tried to grab her.

“Elizabeth, please.”

“Don’t say that to me,” she said, her voice broken, her lips trembling. Reaching for the bag, she pulled out clothes, toiletries, throwing them at him. “You want to go? You want to leave me, Ebube,” she yelled, throwing punches on his chest, seething anguish gnawing the pit of her stomach.

“I didn’t plan this.” He reached out to hold her.

She pushed him away. “Of course, you didn’t. Tell me soldier, what didn't you plan? Getting me to fall in love with you or walking away?”

“I am not walking away.”

“Then tell them you don’t want to go.” She gripped his arms, her fingers depressing his flesh. “Make them understand you can’t leave me... or... or... just tell them anything, but please don't go away.”

He was shaking his head.

“Don’t you say no to me, don’t do that!” Was this what love meant to him? To wake up one morning and walk out on someone he claimed to love?

“You don’t understand.”

“I don’t want to understand.” Holding his face, forcing him to look at her. “Damn it soldier, you made promises to me and you are bound to keep them. You’re not going anywhere.”

He ran his palm over his head, she knew he was searching for the right thing to say to her.

“I’m also bound to the oath I took when joining the service,” he whispered.

“Arh!” She threw her hands up in despair. “I said it. How can anything good ever come to me?”

“Stop it,” he said, shaking her vehemently. “Elizabeth, stop!”

She was angry, tired and confused. “How do I survive? How can I face life knowing that you’ve been sent to your death?”

“What do you think is going on here?” Taking her hand, he guided it to his chest. “How do you think I am feeling about leaving you and my daughter? What I want from you is strength. Be strong for me.”

“I can’t, Bube I can’t.”

“I’m a soldier, this is what I do.”

“I don’t even know how long you will be away, what if... you forget me?”

He cupped her face, brought down his lips on hers and sucked hard, drawing a painful moan from her. “Don’t say that m'lady, please don’t,” he murmured.

His kisses were like that of a starving man, eating forbidden food. As though he wanted more than just her lips but was holding back. It left her body trembling with longing.

She wanted more of him. Not just now but every other day until he could either want no more or want her forever. If there was anything she desired at the moment, it was to become one with him.

“Let’s get married,” she blurted out.

He let go of her face as though it was searing hot.

“I want to marry you now.”

She would knock on the door of every church she knew until she found a reverend who would be willing to wed them. Then they would make love all night like there was no tomorrow.

“No.”

For God’s sake! “Why? You love me, right? Give me your ring, soldier. Let me answer your name just for one day.”

“Nothing else would make me happy than to make you mine forever, but that would be so selfish and unfair. I can’t do it to you. How long will you wait for a husband who is gone a day after his own wedding? What if you find happiness with another man?”

“That will not happen. I’ll wait for you no matter how long it takes.”

“No. I can’t do that to you, cupcake.”

“Then, make love to me, Ebube.”

“Elizabeth, not like this.” He grabbed her shoulders.

His breath was warm, his voice raw with desire, then why was he rejecting her?

“Please Bube.” She might wake up the next morning to regret it, but today, this moment, she wanted him inside her.

“You don’t know what you are saying.”

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled his head down, so her lips would meet his. She kissed him with all the anguish wrecking her heart. “Bube please, love me like a woman tonight.”

“I am going away tomorrow.”

“Take a part of me with you.” She slipped her overcoat off her shoulders, and it fell on the floor, revealing a sleeveless red dress, one she’d carefully picked out with the intention of seducing him, only that this wasn't a date as she previously thought. “Drink of me my love, let my essence remind you that I will be waiting.”

“Jesus Christ, cupcake,” he muttered, squeezing his eyes shut. “It shouldn’t be this way. I want it to be...”

“Now,” she cut in. “I want it now.” She took his hands, settled one on her ass and guided the other to her breast. “I command you, soldier.”

“Fuck!” He pulled her roughly against him. “Say that again.”

His dark eyes were deeper than usual, she couldn’t tell what drove him more — the hunger for her or the pain of separation.

“I, I order you to make love to me, soldier.”

“Yes, m'lady.”

Spinning her around, he guided them to the wall and shoved her back against it. “I may not be able to treat you like a queen tonight.” Staring into her eyes, he grabbed her breast and squeezed hard. “You're not going to want me to.”

The roughness of his voice made her shiver with excitement. This was what she wanted, the man she wanted.

“Bube,” she breathed, arching her pelvis up so she could feel his hardness against her groin. “We may have no tomorrow. Take me here... now.”

“Fuck it if I don't.” He snapped one of the thin jeweled straps of her dress so the material slithered down to cling to the tip of her breasts. “You may not be ready for what I will be doing to you tonight.”

“I have always been ready for you.”

“We are about to find out.” He whipped her around, pressed her against the

wall and fixed his teeth on the nape of her neck.

She cried out, her hands fisting against the wall as he raced over her. His teeth and tongue worked on her neck while his hand found her throbbing pussy.

"I want to make you cry. When it's too much. When it feels too good." He stabbed his fingers into her, driving her hard and fast, assaulting her in a sweet way. "I bet you'll like that, won't you?"

Yes... Yes... craving for his hardness was already making her want to cry.

"Your dick, soldier, I want your dick."

"Yes, m'lady." His fingers left her pussy as he yanked the second strap, breaking the elegant jewel length in half so the dress slid down into a red puddle on the floor. "I guess I have to pay for damaging that lovely dress later." He turned her and she suddenly became aware of her vulnerability as she stood before him on her strapless bra and lacy panties.

"Take me to bed." She was quivering as heat raced all over her body.

"No." With one yank, her bra moved down to her stomach and he started molding her breast. "Not yet." Then his hands were below her ass, lifting her up while she voluntarily wrapped her legs around him. Holding her tight, his lip found hers again.

He was plundering her mouth with raw intensity—breathing fast, heart racing fast. It was as if he wanted to eat her raw, to feed on her until his pounding hunger was finally sated.

She dragged at his shirt, her finger fumbling in her rush, her choked cries muffled against his mouth. Desperate, she yanked at the belt of his trousers.

"Please, Bube. Take me to bed."

"Yes, m'lady." He eased her from the wall and carried her to the bedroom.

Settling her on his bed, a sudden shyness crept into her, she reached for the sheet to cover herself but he seized a corner of the fabric and pulled it away.

"You are beautiful," he said. His voice a throaty growl. When he finally dropped his pants, he gave her time to watch and she took in every detail, every line of his damp body. His long, thick, solid member. He was everything she wanted.

He chuckled, seeing the hunger in her eyes. Then he frowned. "I don't have..." He ran his palm over his head. "I don't keep condoms. Haven't had sex in a long while so it didn't occur to me that I should stock them."

"It's okay," she cut in, wishing he could stop talking and join her in bed.

"We can stop..."

"No, please." As insane as it sounded, she didn't want him using the 'rubber'. His skin inside her. Raw. Unrestricted, was what she wanted. "I will not forgive you if you don't make love to me now, soldier."

“Are you sure of this?”

She didn’t care if this single act would plant a new life inside her. All she wanted was fervent, reckless lovemaking.

So. “Yes. Yes, my captain.”

“I must have you know that sex means a commitment to me. When I make love to a woman, I tend to possess her, make her mine... not for the moment but for a very long time.”

Wasn’t that what she wanted? “Then, make me yours.”

She experienced a shiver of delight as he straddled her, his hard dick, brushing against her swollen mound. “I’m a jealous lover, cupcake,” he muttered against her nipple, then he started running his tongue around it in a circular motion. “I will not want to share you with another.” He began sucking.

The warmth of his mouth flushed pleasure down her core. “Bube Please...” She thrust her hips upward, willing his hardness to pierce through her slit into her canal.

The level of his control was amazing, one moment he wanted to pump into her on the sitting room floor, the next, he was going slow... teasing, licking, fondling.

His hand made a downward journey to her panties, his fingers grazed through the soaked fabric. The groan that climbed its way out of his throat was downright sinful. Elizabeth wanted to hear it again and again. She wanted her body to be the only one that could elicit that sound from him.

“I want to eat your pussy right now.” He was already kissing his way down, taking in the scent of her essence. “It’s been long, cupcake. It’s been a long time since I had this.”

His confession sent a rushing excitement through her body. The cracking of his voice... oh... “Then hurry, take me till you want no more.”

“I’ll never get enough of you,” he said as he rolled her panties off and balanced her legs on his shoulders. The first introduction of his tongue sent her squealing and thrusting her pelvis into his face. He was licking and using his fingers all at once. Then he brought his face up, watching her body writhe, feeling how her legs shook. In seconds, he was on her again, fucking her hard with his fingers while flicking his tongue up and down her clit intensely, just long enough to intoxicate her mind before stopping again.

“Oh...mmm...Babe please,” If it was begging he wanted, she was ready to scream it out loud.

“What do you want?” He asked.

“Don’t stop please.”

“Yes m'lady.” He buried his face on her pussy again. Taking her full clit in

his mouth, he sucked as if it was his last meal, slapping her hands off each time she tried to touch him.

“Oh...” she whispered. “Ooh! Oh... oh.”

“Does it feel good?” he asked, licking and giving her labia gentle bites.

“Yes... God, yes.”

“Then don't stifle your moan. Babe, reward me with your scream.” He plunged his tongue inside her hole and started fucking.

Lost in her own pleasure as she felt her explosion close, she cried out. Clamping her thighs against his head, she snapped her hips up, once, twice, three times before she froze, all the muscles in her thighs and belly and bottom tense and quivering.

Before she could recover, his body came up and leveled against hers. In that split second, every nerve in her body and brain was electrified, it was the anticipation of being together in a way that was more than words, the awareness that this could be their last. He captured her lips, took a long drag, then adjusted himself and slammed his dick inside her already throbbing canal. She felt him right inside her soul, writing his name and his vow, “I belong to you,” it said to her.

“Oh...my...God...” she murmured. Clenching the sheet on both sides, shutting her eyes.

“Fuck... cupcake.” He pulled out and slid in again. Pumping her hard and fast.

His groan, the sound of his flesh slapping against hers, all made her lose her mind to the pleasure of the moment. “So...sweet, so hard.”

“Only for you, cupcake, only for you.” He continued plundering her hole, demanding to own her, and she didn’t restrain.

“Take every part of me, my captain. Cage my soul and my body for your pleasure only,” she cried, tears trickling down from the corner of her eyes.

“Yes, m’lady.”

She flexed her core muscles, grasping his dick with her walls and he let out a loud groan and held still.

“Are... are you okay?” She asked, wondering if she did something wrong.

“You naughty girl,” he whispered. “Your exquisite tightness and the warmth from your maddening clenching made me nearly explode inside you.”

Wasn't it good? Didn't he want to pour his seed inside her? The thought of him pulling out alarmed her and she rolled him over and started riding him.

“Stop... Elizabeth...don't,” he pleaded. His voice, coated with pleasure.

“I’m not one of your boys, soldier.” She continued pumping— hard and fast. “You don't give the orders, captain, I do. So be a good boy. I’m going to drive

you crazy, then stop, then do it all over again until you beg me to finish this."

His breathing got heavier and she knew he wasn't far off so she leaned against his body, slamming her pussy on his dick, clenching and releasing. "Do you like what I'm doing to you?" She whispered into his ears, sucking on his earlobe.

Then he couldn't hold back any longer. Grabbing her ass, he pressed her hard against his groin and began to thrust from underneath her. Every slam came with a grunt. Elizabeth moaned louder, her hands locked into his shoulders, her breath against his check, her voice floated into his ears, urging him on.

"I want your cum," she cried.

"Oh, baby." He gasped as she felt her own orgasm coming, he must have felt it too because he rolled her over and resumed fucking her wildly, whispering her name over and over, like a chant, or a song, or a prayer.

Her orgasm came in a strong spasm, rocking the whole of her body, tightening her muscles and her core, gripping his dick.

He let out a low growl and held onto her as he exploded—pouring his seed inside her.

"Thank you," he whispered, collapsing on top of her, panting.

"No, thank you," she replied, wrapping her arms around him.

"Come have a bath with me." He said after a while. Rolling off her, he pulled her up and both of them walked into his bathroom.

NINETEEN

“How do you feel?” He asked her later as they lay— spent, used and blissful on his bed that now smelt of cum and fulfillment. The pounding of blood in his ears had faded and he could hear the sound of the night coming from his open window. The security dogs barking from afar, the song of insects.

The heat that was still pumping from her was spreading through him like a drug. He reached out and pulled her closer so her bare ass would rest on his thighs.

“Cupcake?”

“Hmm.”

“You’re sleeping?”

“I was.”

He gently stroked her arms. “How do you feel?”

Snuggling even closer, she rubbed her foot indolently on his ankle. “Like I’m home.”

Home. That sounded good. They’d given themselves to each other, had embraced their fears and hoped for a brighter future and that spelt *home.*

Yet...

“There are still things you don't know about me, cupcake.”

“I imagine there’s a lot of things we don’t know about each other. Both of us have pasts we don't want to remember, relationships that have gone sour. Things ahead of us that give us the shiver when we remember we have to face them. but we are not kids, my love. We’ll hold on to this feeling that’s grown inside us and everything will be alright. you’ll see.”

How could she be so sure? He would have loved to have her kind of faith, if only he wasn't going away.

She turned to face him. “I have sampled relationships before, none of them tasted like what you’d given me in these few months,” she said, stroking her fingers up his neck. “Mission or not, you are mine. know that soldier.”

He was hers as she was his. Making love to her wasn't just to satisfy hunger, but to claim her. Yet he was afraid they had no time.

“You didn't want to cum inside me.” She said, Tracing a circular pattern

around his right nipple with her fingernail.

Trapping her hand to his chest with his, he brought his lips down to her nose and kissed. “I don't want to saddle you with the burden of pregnancy.”

“Having your child will be the best thing that’ll ever happen to me.”

“To us.”

“Yes, to us.” Bringing her face up, she kissed him. “Making plans now to start a family, are we?”

He would love nothing better than to start a family with this amazing woman. if only the situation was different.

“I called my step-mother before you arrived.”

“It must have been hard for the two of you.”

Hard? The woman had cursed him and his late father for bringing nothing but pain to her. Sometimes he wondered if she would ever accept him as her son and not a stranger who destroyed the perfect home she thought she had—the symbol of his father’s deceit. “I told her I’ve got a nice woman who I would bring home when I return.”

“Okay o... If only the bullet that found Dozie doesn’t find you before then,” the woman had said with no emotions.

Did his step-mother’s words hurt?

Well, he was human, so they did. A little. No, much more. He’d thought she would at least... at least... he blinked the thought away and tightened his arms around his Elizabeth.

How his father’s wife chose to treat him shouldn’t bother him anymore. He was a man now and had seen to it that the woman lacked nothing as he was sure his father would have done, if he had still been alive. If she chose to still punish him for his father’s mistake...well...

“Bube.” Elizabeth gave him a gentle bite on the chest, snapping him back to reality. “Where are your thoughts?”

“Here.” He kissed her forehead, “With you.”

“Your step-mother, what did she say?”

He wasn’t going to tell her that the woman cared less whether he remarried or died single. That the decision to marry her was not his step-mother’s to make but his and his daughter. And that he only informed the woman because she was his father’s wife and needed to know. “She can’t wait to meet you.” He wished it was true. Or was it? It was impossible to read hope from the woman’s response. “And my daughter, she wanted to speak with daddy’s girlfriend.”

“She did?” Elizabeth pulled herself into a sitting position, resting her cheek on her knees, blushing.

“Goodness me,” he muttered as he felt a burgeoning arousal. Throwing off

the bed covers he reached for her.

"What?" Giggling, she let herself go.

He pulled her into his arms, wetting her face with kisses. "Just looking at your face is getting me hard."

"I like when you are hard."

Straddling her, he pinned her arms above her head. "You are beautiful, Elizabeth Jaja."

"Morning is fast approaching, soldier, let's make love again with the little time we have."

"Yes, we should..." Leaning in to claim her lips. "Make the best of this moment."

His mother had fire all over her.

His mother was screaming.

She shouldn't be doing any of these things, shouldn't even appear in the man's dream at all. But it wasn't a dream. It was a nightmare. The same one that had been his unwelcome companion since he let her go.

He didn't like it, because he didn't like his mother. Or the fire burning her. Or her screams. That was why he had tried to stop it, and it worked—until now.

The screaming wasn't a problem, no one would hear except him. The screaming meant his mother was awake, and she was aware that the soldier had returned, ready to do more bad things.

But the burning flesh was what tormented him. He didn't want to see the fire or the horror in her eyes as she realized it was him that did it.

The man wouldn't allow a resurrection. He wouldn't make the mistake of bringing back terrifying memories. But how did it resurface? He calculated his dosage correctly, took it at the right time. He was sure he got it right.

It was the soldier's fault.

He came back and brought the past with him. Memories of the bad thing he did. More memories of what he made his mother do to him when his father died.

His torture in the hands of his mother took another turn when he decided to get himself a girlfriend in Nigeria as he wouldn't be going back to the states. The girl was plain as well as naïve.

That day, he had sneaked her into his room and she knew why he brought her there as she didn't object when he took her blouse off and unhooked her bra.

Pulling off her panties hurriedly, he had grabbed her pale slim body and settled her on the bed. He was so excited. So aroused and didn't know when his

mother walked in.

She had yanked him off and had beaten the poor girl mercilessly, chasing her out naked into the street.

When she returned, she glared at him but said nothing. He thought for a moment, she wouldn't want to sleep on his bed like she used to and that would have been a relief.

But that night, as he skimmed his hand down his engorged cock, thinking about the girl he would have fucked, lost in the pleasure that followed his action and his imagination. The light came on and he turned his head.

His hand froze.

Standing close to the bed, watching him was his mother, and she was naked!

"You want to know what it feels like to sex a woman?" Her eyes were on his covered erection.

When she ripped the sheet off, exposing his turgid cock, he should have screamed and ran away, but he lay there, eyes fixed on his mother while she gently stroked him.

Then she climbed on top of him and guided his penis into her warm wetness...he had shamefully loved it...it felt so good, more than any white girl's pussy and any other he'd imagined. He'd come in less than a minute. Turning his face away and sobbing.

She'd stroke his cheek. "This is it boy...this is how to take care of mommy. You will not desire the pussy of any girl except mommy's own now."

But he did. Eight years later, and it was everything his mother had- and more, it became his obsession.

Then he couldn't stand her because she started reminding him of his mother, and he didn't want to make her go the way he did his mother. So, he disappeared from her life.

It was the right thing to do.

Because he was a good man.

Unlike the soldier who did something bad and hadn't been punished.

The man wouldn't let that happen. He would save the lady by making her his or making her go.

But he didn't want to hurt her

He wouldn't hurt her.

However, he needed her perfect. Flawless and unsoiled. That's the only way it could be. The only way it could work.

So, he had to do what was necessary. He had no choice.

Walking into his sitting room, the man picked his car keys. It was time to go help his aged neighbor buy some groceries.

TWENTY

UN Camp Somalia.

May Allah help you both.

"Rotten bastard," Ebube murmured, filling his lungs with humid air and continued climbing. *'May Allah help you both.'* It was the Rear Admiral's way of saying 'fuck off, I hope you die out there.'

Ebube had restrained his hand from reaching for the man's sorry idea of a mustache and peeling the damn thing off his puffed face. When he walked closer to him, smelling of cheap aftershave, he whispered, "Who do you think you are? Digging around like a fucking excavator?"

Ebube had known instantly that the rotten bastard was as filthy as shit! He had a stake in the Bonny deal and had felt threatened when the rumor of their investigation got to him.

"You are too small, soldier." The man had added, throwing a glance at Felix who was standing like a statue with his hands behind his back. "Both of you are nothing!" He had laughed at them, called them fools.

How many of their top officials were involved in this? Did they think sending both of them on this mission would put an end to the investigation?

Unfortunately, it would. Aside from the two of them, no other officer had the spunk to pursue the case. Abdul had freaked out at the slightest ruffle.

"Candy-ass. Thought he had the balls." Ebube hissed. Dude couldn't walk the talk. He was more concerned about what his involvement in the case would do to his father, the Emir—a man who seemed to be in an alliance with the government and the military big-wigs. "Weakling, with broad shoulders."

And the men involved in the rot? Bloody pigs.

Standing on top of the hill some distance away from the camp, Ebube's eyes roamed the plain while his thoughts drifted back to the encounter with the rear Admiral. With his ill-fitted uniform, accompanied with a shirt straining at the buttons, the man had walked through his densely carpeted office to look out of the window, humming with satisfaction.

He probably had a generous amount lodged into his already fat account to take care of the little *disturbance*.

“May Allah help you both,” he had said, and then dismissed them.

Screw him.

Screw every one of them.

And Abdul too. Screw him for getting just a slap on the wrist, while he and Felix had to be punished this way.

A soft grunt and some footsteps behind made him turn.

“Hi.”

Mother Catherina. The white woman who had welcomed them the day they arrived at the camp gave her a cheshire cat smile.

“Thought I’d find you up here.”

Ebube offered his hand and helped her up, wondering how this frail looking woman, with her little voice and nervous look could manage a place like this. He couldn't imagine her surviving the madness that came with taking care of a thousand grown men.

“You take note of every soldier that comes here?”

“Every one of them.”

“Follow up on their activities?”

“It’s my responsibility to make sure my boys are fine.” The woman shifted closer to his side. “You are a burdened one. I saw it immediately you stepped into my office to register your arrival.”

Silence. “You said you know I’d be here.” Ebube finally said.

“This hill has served as a sanctuary to men with heavy hearts. It beckons them.”

Another short silence.

“This city, there's nothing remaining of it.” Ebube exhaled.

The lady adjusted the glasses that were seated crookedly on her nose. “Some places are worse.” She turned and started heading down. “I shouldn't be out here this long.”

He followed the woman, wondering why she came up to the hill in the first place if she wouldn’t stay for at least twenty minutes. Her coming up had brightened his mood and he wished they could talk more. “How long have you been here?” He asked, as they descended.

“Long enough to lose count of dead soldiers, sick women and children. but it’s not all sad news....” Her voice bounced with her steps. “I have also seen things that made my heart rise with hope.”

“Don’t you have a family?”

“The Red Cross is my family.” She said amidst a chuckle. “So, you think your being here is a mistake?”

Not a mistake, Reverend Mother. But a calculated plan to get him off some

bloody, corrupt bastards' back. “I’m a soldier. Bound to duty, no matter how far it calls.” *And how dangerous it is.*

“The almighty has a reason for everything.”

Yeah right. And what was his purpose for allowing those shameless scoundrels take his life away from him?

“Do you have anyone waiting for you back home?” She asked as they approached the billets.

Chewing on the question, he waved at a couple of black soldiers. “My daughter and my...” He trailed off.

“Wife?”

“We would have gotten married weeks ago.” But he was whisked out like a thief and dumped here. For what? “I hope she waits.”

The woman turned to face him, a smile crinkling the corners of her eyes. “You miss her.”

Like hell. “It hurts more when reaching home is so difficult.”

“Oh, I understand that. Bad network service.”

Bad? Terrible was the right word!

“You can get a pretty fair service from that hill, you know...”

“Wha... what? How come I didn't know? Nobody told me!”

“You didn't ask. And didn’t try, you would have figured it out.”

“Jesus fucking...”

“Language, young man.”

“I am sorry.” Pecking her warm cheek, he started hurrying back towards the hill. “Thank you so much!”

Now who would he call first?

Elizabeth?

His daughter?

Hearing the voices of his two best people in the world would be the very first good thing that would happen to him.

And probably the last.

Probably...

TWENTY-ONE

She was pregnant.

Stroking her stomach, she sighed. It didn’t feel real. She didn't feel pregnant. If not for the absence of a period and the test result, she would have sworn it was a dream.

“You didn’t tell me you’ve been busy,” Oge said.

“We had sex once.” Actually, many rounds in one night. And Ebube had hinted on this, as if he knew the strength of his loads.

”You know you just sounded stupid right now.”

Thanks, girlfriend, I know.

They were seated in a cafe opposite the bank where Oge used to work. The rascal had been sacked after running off to shake her ass on a yacht in Dubai. Lucky her, she found a new job taking customer calls for an online shopping company.

“How long gone are you?”

“Three weeks and some days.”

“For goodness' sake, why are you telling me now?”

“I just found out about it myself.” She scampered through her handbag and came out with an envelope. Handing it over to her friend. “What do I do?” It was so shocking she could ask that question. wasn't it what she wanted?

“He has to know.” Oge dropped the test result on the table, picked a sausage roll from the plate in front of them and took a large bite.

How the hell was she supposed to tell him? The last time they spoke was two Saturdays ago. “I can't reach him.”

Taking another bite out of the snack, Oge leaned forward. “Girl, what’s your mind telling you?”

“What do you mean what’s my mind telling me?”

“I’m not gonna beat around the bush Lizzy, here is the thing. You’re pregnant for a guy who’s gone on a mission without slipping a ring on your finger. He's not called you for God knows how long, and you don’t even know if he’s coming back.”

He might not have slipped a ring on her finger, but he’d inscribed his name

in her heart and that meant a lot. “He is coming back, Oge.”

“To you? You think he would give two cents about you when he eventually returns? Don't take these men too serious. You’ve been involved with a lot of them so you should know better.”

“I have faith, Oge.” That’s what he left her with. Faith and his seed growing inside her.

“I say you get rid of it,” Oge insisted, lowering her voice even though there was no one within earshot.

“I can’t.” Doing away with the only tangible thing of his she has? “It will never happen.” She was pregnant for Ebube and that was exactly what she wanted.

So why did she feel lost and empty?

“Well, then.” Oge held up her bottle of drink in a mock toast. “Congratulations, mommy.” She downed the beverage. “Seriously girlfriend, what if he doesn’t return? Or you meet and fall in love with another man?”

“I shouldn't be having this conversation with you.” What was wrong with Oge? One moment she’s going all aww on her relationship, the next moment, she’s as tactless as... Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “And so you know, I’m having this baby and his daddy will return to hold him.”

“The tadpole is a he?”

Her phone rang, stopping her replying her crazy friend.

“Is it him?” Oge asked with glee.

As if she’d not just asked her to abort the baby of the same man she was getting excited about.

There was no caller ID. The number wasn't a foreign one either. Fighting off a feeling of disappointment, she turned her face away from her friend.

“Hello.” Her voice came out as a whisper.

Nothing.

“Hello.”

Silence.

“Who is this?!”

Heavy breath.

Letting out a loud hiss, she put the phone down.

“Who was that?” Oge asked.

“I don’t know—one of those idiots that call random numbers to play pranks on them.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot too. Got an anonymous WhatsApp message last month. The weirdo sent a picture of his dick and left a message.”

“What did it say?”

“I can fuck you till my cum shoots out from your mouth.”

“That’s so sick.” Elizabeth picked her drink and sipped. “You should report to the police. Don’t take things like this lightly.”

“Forget it.” The other lady glanced at her watch. “I’ve to go back to the office. Break time is over.”

But none of them made any effort to stand. “Lizzy, if Ebube is here with you, this would have been the best news ever, but he is not here, he may never be here again. Perhaps, he’s gotten himself a beautiful Somalian girl...”

“It’s too early to jump to that conclusion, Oge.” Elizabeth cut in. “Let’s just concentrate on the baby.” And the promises. The hope. The sweet taste of him that she still relished when she was alone.

“I’m just concerned. This pregnancy may complicate your life.”

“Not in any way.”

“Do you have a blood oath with him?”

“For Christ’s sake no!” As spontaneous as she was, having a blood oath wasn’t one of the things she would ever think of doing.

“Okay, I was wondering why you’re being stubborn about this.”

“I love him.”

“He is a soldier and soldiers are known for sowing wild oats everywhere. Love means nothing to them.”

“Not this one, he will honor his word, he will come back for me.”

Both of them stood to leave.

Her call was active all those times and the man was listening.

She's *having a baby.*

The man felt a rush of anger all over him. He tossed his half-filled can of beer to the wall and the contents splattered. His racing heartbeats competed with the sound of the AC in his grubby room.

Clutching his chest as he felt a stab of pain, he staggered to his feet. He had never had a heart attack, could this be it?

Slamming his fist on the table to contend the pain that spiraled through his body, he groaned. Hurriedly loosening his tie and unbuttoning his shirt.

He needed to get to her.

To get his hands around her neck and squeeze.

No.

It wasn’t her that needed to go. It was the abomination in her stomach.

The thing that had soiled her.

Kicking aside the shoes he'd pulled off some minutes ago, he teetered to the door and leaned on it.

She's having a baby.

That would change everything. It would change her. Motherhood would make her vulnerable to the soldier's charm.

And the Soldier... he knew the man didn't like sharing, yet he had gone ahead to take what belonged to the man.

That's a bad thing. The soldier's always doing bad things.

Now the man would destroy, and it would be the soldier's fault.

The man would destroy, because he was a good man whose duty was to get rid of bad things.

And abominable things.

TWENTY-TWO

UN capitol, Somalia

"...We hope that soon, the rebellion will be crushed and peace will be restored..."

So far so good. The mission wasn't as hopeless as he thought. Their duties well defined; the protection of women and children, defend the Somalian territory— what was remaining of it. Not so different from what he was used to. In fact, he'd begun to look forward to the day he would head home.

Blinking at the sharp sting of sweat that ran from his forehead into his eyes, he wiped his face with the back of his hand, suppressing the urge to pull off his Tee shirt that clung to his body like a second skin. There's nothing timid about Mogadishu heat that sent sweat running on his body like condensation on cold glass. Drinking water was almost a full-time occupation.

"...Remember as you go back to your districts, that this nation is an inestimable jewel to Africa and the rest of the world. It is worth fighting for..."

Except for the gaunt looking boy with the crooked scar on his neck down to his collarbone they met at a roadblock weeks ago on their way to Jowhar, that snaffled his Chopard wrist watch and his phone and had waved a rifle at him when he had demanded that he give them back, the troop hadn't encountered any serious threat yet. The rebels had recognized the joint force by their blue helmets and had avoided causing trouble.

Shifting his weight from one foot to another. He fixed his eyes on the adjutant General rendering the rather too long speech. Good gracious! Someone should get the frontliners some umbrellas for the spittle raining out of the General's mouth. Every word delivered carried a generous amount of the liquid.

"...these troops are already divided into battalions, but I am going to merge you to form brigades. Today, each brigade will be sent to districts in the capital to repel the attacks there. If you must, shoot to protect the district and to save yourselves. Am I clear?"

"Yes sir!"

"Hey, man." Felix caught up with him as the soldiers scampered in different

directions. “You’re still alive.” He was heavily laden. In addition to his service rifle and webbing, he carried a canvas kitbag across his shoulders. If there were times when a service man should move light, it was times like this one. But Felix loved to be burdened.

“That’s the deal. I’m not dying here.”

How many weeks has it been since he last saw Felix? The pretty face looked like he’d been having a good time instead of fighting.

“You look unscratched.”

“And you have bumps all over your chin.”

That's what happens when razor blades become the only available tool for shaving. “So, we are back together, thanks to the merging.”

“The universe is on our side. She knows we are blood and shouldn’t be separated.” The men laughed. “I miss home.”

“We don't have homes.”

Ebube would have agreed to this statement months ago, when he had not met Elizabeth. “Anywhere the ship carries us to is home.”

“No fucking ship brought us here.”

“Anywhere the plane carries us to is home.”

“You’re planning to pitch your tent here?” He gave his friend a side glance without breaking his stride.

“I met a sweet Somalian lady who’s taking care of me.”

“Are you shitting me? How long have we been here and you’re already fucking around?”

“Haven’t fucked her yet.”

“You are married, man.”

“Separated. About to be divorced.”

Yeah. He’d forgotten that the dude was going through a gut wrenching, blood draining marriage crisis. His beautiful—in a trashy way—wife had insisted on leaving the marriage irrespective of pleas from family and friends.

“Heard from Abdul yet?”

“No. His number isn’t going through.” They joined the other soldiers heading towards the open van. “You?”

“I traded my phone for peace.” Then something struck him. “Hey, can I use your phone? I want to call home.”

“You want to call her.”

“I miss her with a deep, wrenching hurt in my gut.”

“My man!” Felix slapped his shoulder as they climbed the van. “Of course, you can have it.”

He dialed but her number wasn’t connecting.

Mogadishu University Somalia

"Not bad." Felix muttered, swallowing a mouthful of malt drink. Another luxury that was made available to them.

"The day so far, or the ass you were staring moronically at?" Ebube said as the owner of the backside—a Somalian lady that brought the drinks disappeared.

"There's nothing bad in appreciating a nice ass."

"That's how irresponsibility starts."

"Who defines irresponsibility?" Felix scoffed. "Anyway, I was talking about this university." Felix downing the remainder of the drink, squashed the can.

Ebube still had words forming in his head when it happened.

It was the wild billowing of amateur soldiers streaming down from afar, towards them, hoisting rifles above their heads, shouting their lungs out that first caught his attention.

About five figures were swooping ahead, screaming something different from the wild crowd in hot pursuit.

Soldiers!

Somalian soldiers, he realized as they drew near and one stumbled towards him, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets. Grabbing Ebube's shirt, the man whispered, "there are many of them."

In less than a second there was commotion all over. Civilians and soldiers scurried to safety.

"Get in here, soldier!" Someone shouted behind him.

The gray looking soldier who'd grabbed him was long gone, leaving him transfixed, staring at the swan of rebels. Snapping out of his shock as a bullet passed his ear, hitting the wall behind him, he made a sharp twirl, crouching, and ran.

"Push them back! Don't let them get closer!" The loud voice of the commander rang out.

Pulling his pistol, he scattered bullets behind him while pushing his way towards safety.

The boys were only a decoy. A distraction. The real fighters had surrounded the institution, pushing forward, trapping the soldier.

"Hold them back!"

Ebube felt fear clenching his heart, as the building before him surrendered to grenades, forcing whimpering civilians out of their hiding places.

"What do these motherfuckers want!" A soldier shouted.

Same thought he had. The rebels weren't supposed to attack them, what changed? He dodged the shelling bricks, spat dust out of his mouth, straining his eyes to pick out figures.

"What are you doing, soldier? Shoot your way out of there. Hurry over here now!" He followed the voice, toppled over a body, gave it a glance and continued.

It was a perfect siege. None of them had expected it and that was their woe. His brigade was made up of a thousand and four hundred men, some of whom were now probably dead or wounded...

Felix.

"Felix! Felix!"

"Get over here, Soldier!"

It's useless looking for someone in this commotion. Besides, Felix wasn't a novice in this kind of situation. Scattering more bullets around, Ebube ran to join the others.

It took them till dark, but the soldiers were able to force the enemies to retreat. The stench that was left behind was rich in memory. The dank smell of earth, overladen with the odor of roasting flesh, burned cordite and spent explosives.

Ebube sniffed it and spat with distaste. He knew that within an hour he would be so accustomed as not to notice it, but now it seemed to coat the back of his throat like grease. Once again, he spat and entered the hall that served as their camp.

"Felix!" Moving deeper into the hall, he shouted, peering at faces of soldiers, wounded and not wounded.

"Felix!" The decking of the building was caved in, stones hung on bent rods. His ears picked a groan—the hall was filled with the baritone painful whimpers—but he swore he heard Felix's so he headed toward the sound. The pretty soldier was stretched on the floor, smeared with blood and dirt.

"What the fucking hell? What happened?"

Felix tried to sit up, groaned loudly and fell right back. That was when he noticed an iron pole that pierced through Felix's rib cage.

"Jesus, F Christ! How did you..." Getting down on his knees beside the wounded man, his hands trembled as it grazed through the blood-soaked flesh surrounding the pole. A sickening slide went through his gut while a cold hand gripped in his chest.

"Damn it." Felix gritted his teeth. "This bitch hurts like the devil's pitchfork."

"Man up. Let me get the *'bitch'* out of you." Wrapping his fingers around the

object, he was ready to pull.

“I’m going to try.”

“Try? Losers whine about trying, strong men stay alive so they can go home and fuck their queens.”

“I don’t have a queen but a crazy hyena.”

“Whatever man, you’re not dying on me.”

“Don’t pull it out,” someone said behind him. “You may not be able to control the bleeding.”

“He won't live through the night if that shit isn’t pulled out,” another added.

“It’s a shitty situation, T man.” Typical of the pretty sonofabitch to make light of horrible situations, Ebube thought as Felix coughed out laughter and blood, and grimaced to the pains that must have shot through his body.

Tightening his grip on his friend’s arm, he swallowed the fear that had formed a lump in his throat. “Not what I can’t get you out of,” he said, curbing the sudden rush of panic that filled the whole of him. “Where’s the commander? I need help!”

Nobody moved.

“This man is badly hurt, damn it. Somebody do something!”

“The radio transmitter is missing, we can’t reach the commander,” one of the soldiers called Boro said.

“We’re on our own now,” another added.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He was going hysterical. “What of the medic box? Has anyone found that?”

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Allow me.” Boro knelt beside him, examined the wounded man.

“We have to get this rod out of him.” Boro muttered. “Anyone with spirit?”

“Here.” A soldier handed a flask to Ebube. “I knew this would come in handy.”

“You've done this before?” Ebube asked, handing the liquor over to Boro.

“I've seen where it's been done,” Boro said, unscrewing the flask. “This shit will sting like a bitch.” He poured a little on the body.

“Are you ready?” Ebube picked a plank from the floor and shoved it between Felix's teeth. “Bite on this for me, will you?” He grabbed Felix's arm.

Wrapping his hands around the rod, Boro pulled. Drawing a stifled roar from the wounded man.

“He’s losing blood.” Ebube grunted. Snatching the flask from Boro, he poured on the trauma, ripping a loud scream out of Felix.

“Hold still!” He ordered, unwinding the silk scarf around his neck. Four more soldiers joined him on the floor, pinning the wounded man down so he

could cover the wound, and immediately, blood soaked through the thin material.

More scarves left their owners' necks, eager to be used to mop up blood. At first, it seemed like a futile gesture, but it served to keep his hands occupied and detract from his sense of helplessness.

More spirit on the pierced flesh. More blood damping, and after what seemed like forever, Ebube sat on the rough floor, holding his friend’s head on his laps, his heavy shoulders bowed forward. And then he sighed once, deeply and carefully lay the head aside and stood up.

“You know, if you were a nurse, you would have been so mean.”

“Bastard.” Stroking his nape, Ebube walked through the hall and stood by the shattered window, staring into the night—that was disturbed by the periodic flicker of sparks and the sound of gunshots. He wished he could lay his hand on a bottle of cold beer, The thought of it made his throat ache.

“He needs medical attention.” Boro joined him by the window.

Now that he had the time to take a good look at the soldier, Ebube realized the man was massive, with a thick rumpled face and hands the size of shovels.

“Navy?” The hefty man asked.

“How could you tell?”

“Just guessed.”

“You?”

“Army. Lieutenant.”

Dude looked like ten lieus put together.

They slid into silence.

“How long do you think he can hold on?” Ebube asked as Felix's groan grated through his ears to his heart. Wincing, he swallowed a spree of fear that raced up his throat.

“It depends on the organs affected, and how fast he gets help,” the other man replied. Gulping from a bottle, he offered it to him.

Ebube greedily downed the water and wiped his mouth. “Where did you get it from?”

“A damaged tap at the other end. Aren't we lucky to see one in this dilapidated place.”

Yes, they were. As lucky as a cat in the middle of an ocean.

“He needs to see a doctor soon, or that wound will get infected,” Boro added.

’Ebube threw a glance at Felix and frowned. “What of the Commander?”

“Incommunicado.” Boro spat on the floor. “We are running out of bullets, very soon we may have nothing to protect ourselves with.”

”Put a call to the general himself, we need backup fast.” And he needed to save a brother.

“If only we could find the transmitter.”

TWENTY-THREE

“You should have stayed away from him.”

A cold chill of fear ran through her at the sound of the voice. Turning, Elizabeth was greeted with a venomous expression that made her shudder.

“It’s his fault. The soldier, he did bad things.”

“Excuse me?” There was something eerie about the man that stood before her. Something sinister and... and dark. Tightening her fingers around the cart, she took a few steps back.

“Are you scared?” A crooked smile worked up the man's face, avoiding his eyes.

“Do I have a reason to be?” Elizabeth replied, her inside jittering.

“He did bad things.” His voice came out as a whimper.

“Who?” She glanced around then fixed her gaze back at him.

“The soldier. He wants to take you. I don’t want to share.”

“You must be out of your mind.” She said, hardly able to conceal her fear, because right now the man was scaring the hell out of her.

“I must do the right thing.” He balanced his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other.

“You are sick!” Grabbing a bottle of lotion from the shelf, Elizabeth hurried with her cart to the cashier.

Glancing over her shoulder, she noticed that the man was no longer where she left him.

Senseless creep, she muttered. Groping inside her purse for her card, she paid and hurried out of the mall.

But he was there as she stepped out. Leaning on the wall, unperturbed, like an average guy waiting for a friend.

Oh, for goodness' sake! Gritting her teeth, as he leaned off the wall to follow her.

Ignore him and keep walking, Elizabeth, eventually he will leave you alone.

But no matter how fast she walked, he was right there—behind her. The street was quiet and peaceful. Occasionally disturbed by joyriders cruising by. Most people were at work and being an entrepreneur, she could move about

without thinking of a boss complaining. She was beginning to think going shopping at midday was a bad idea. Hell, this man could kill her here and no one would know until... Oh no. Her destination was just some steps away. Two minutes' walk max, but with the guy tailing her, spewing confusing things, the distance loomed.

"Stop following me?!" She turned sharply, almost colliding with him. God, please save your daughter. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me.

Her reaction got him taken aback.

"Don't raise your voice at me." Jaw clenched, he threw glances around.

"I'll damn shout louder if you don't leave me the hell alone!" She looked around, hoping someone would appear from the corner to rescue her from the asshole who was becoming creepier by the minute.

"Shut up!" The man was furious. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" He was turning hysterical.

She felt a sudden explosion of panic all over her.

"You're following me like some kind of...psycho," she said, "Stay away from me!" She was ready to scream and run if need be.

"I'm here to help you," he said incredulously. "You better do as I say." He began to move close to her.

She backed away.

"You are carrying his seed." He said, eyes blazing in fury. "You are carrying his seed... that is bad Elizabeth. His seed is bad. It makes you impure."

Something had happened to this man. Something *very, very* terrible.

"What is the matter with you?" He snarled. "Are you just going to stand there staring at me?"

"How did you know about..." she whispered, then realization hit her. "It was you? The mystery caller?"

"I don't like it. I don't like him... and this..." He threw a disdainful glance on her stomach. "I must take care of it." His words filled her with dread.

"Stay away from me or I will get you arrested!" She pulled out the lotion from her shopping bag, ready to throw it at him like a dog playing fetch.

"I must take care of it," he muttered, taking a few steps backwards. "The soldier, he did this to you... he is bad."

By the time she settled inside her car, a helpless feeling of panic coursing through her, and she realized it wasn't just the way the man looked at her that scared her, but the fact that he had mentioned something about a soldier doing something bad.

Was it possible that he was talking about her soldier—Ebube? Could it be

that there was something that... Jesus! That night she feared someone broke into her house... Ebube had shown up and... and... with a gun! Claiming he was doing a security check around her house. Then, the night before his departure. What was that thing he said to her?

There is so much you don't know about me.

She felt a cold knot of fear in the pit of her stomach. Maybe he was right. Maybe she knew nothing about him after all. But...but...

At that moment, she knew she would give anything to see Ebube or hear from him.

TWENTY-FOUR

Mogadishu University, Somalia

Perhaps, if he had the desire to do something else, he'd be at the desk, or in a hospital saving lives...or even become a musician. But this was the life he chose, the world that accepted him. Hissing, Ebube pulled his eyes away from where his friend lay, mumbled his frustration and stood up to meet Boro by the window.

"We need supplies," he said, becoming more infuriated by the '*tatatatata*' of guns which had turned into a regular song, and the periodic dust bath from the caving decking. The whole place would come down soon and God help them if they didn't move before that happened.

"We need to get the fuck out of here," an Asian soldier said, joining them by the window.

"Getting the *fuck* out of here will not be easy."

Ebube felt despair laced with anger gnawing the pit of his stomach. Darting his eyes around the room, he felt worse, at the plight of energetic able-bodied men cowering like children, due to the absence of arms they could have used to stop the rebels in their tracks. The fast-crumbling building, an indictment of how perilous their position was.

But the rebels were not supposed to attack, it was between the bastards and the Somalia government.

"Can someone tell me why we have not heard from the commander or the general?!" The Asian soldier blurted out.

Turning his attention on Felix, Ebube felt his heart lurch to his mouth. The soldier's breath had turned from regular to a panting gasp. He sucked at the air as if it had suddenly become thick and was now difficult to draw in.

"His children will not forgive me if he doesn't return," Ebube muttered. He wouldn't forgive himself either. It was his fault. He shouldn't have put his friend into this mess.

"He needs medical attention," the Asian soldier said.

Turning to Boro, he asked, "Is there nothing else you can do?"

"I'm not a doctor," the big man retorted. "I did all I know."

It wasn’t enough. There must be something else that could help keep Felix alive.

If only he could find the medic box or whoever was supposed to be in charge of it. “I can’t let him die. He has a family.”

“We all have families,” Boro snapped as he strolled off. “Including those that died last night.”

Last night was a horror. A mistake Ebube regretted, he had suggested they move out, to a safer place since the place they were, was fast coming down.

Wrong move.

Wrong timing.

Fighting off rebels while carrying the wounded wasn’t an easy job. More men went down, twelve in all and the infuriated Boro couldn’t get over it. Neither would he.

“I did what I thought was best for all of us,” Ebube muttered. He didn’t want to start this again today, but the big man wasn’t over it.

“You dragged everyone into a death trap.”

“How would I know that?” His anger was soaring now, and he wouldn’t mind taking it out on someone. “This place is caving in.”

“Yet we came back to it.” Boro did a sharp turn, closing the distance between them. “You chose to play the hero, you are responsible for last night’s deaths.” Every word came with a jab of the hefty man’s finger on his chest.

“At least, I did something.” Ebube fended off another jab. “What did you do!”

Both men stood toe to toe, teeth bared, breaths heavy, glaring at each other. Being abandoned in this place was not only taking a toll on their minds, it was also turning them against each other.

“I’m sorry Boro. I was only trying to help.”

The big man grunted and walked off.

Plodding towards the end of the cracked blocks, Ebube flumped on the rough floor, legs pulled to his chest. He bit his cracked lips. Another day in this dump. No news from the capital. None from the commander.

Wiping his face with his hand, he crawled to Felix. “Brothers stay alive for each other.” But Dozie had died. “Don’t die on me too, man,” he whispered. “You have to stay alive.”

“The general is on the line!” Someone raced towards them with the said missing transmitter.

”It’s about time.” Ebube sprang to his feet and hurried towards the commotion.

“Who is in charge there?” The general barked from the other end.

Silence.

“Who is in charge!”

“You are in charge, Captain,” someone muttered behind him.

“What’s the situation, can someone speak up?”

“We lost many of our men sir! There's a need to evacuate the wounded. Backup and supplies are needed sir!” Ebube shouted.

Muffling...distorting signal.

“We are sending some trucks and two tanks in the next few hours, that’s all we can do for now. The wounded should be evacuated first. Understood?”

“Yes sir!”

The line went dead.

“What are you doing? He’s dead!”

“He’s not!” His voice scaled above the growling sound of the trucks. “I’ve got a pulse!” Though faint.

“You can’t do much for him now. Save yourself before it’s too late!”

Boro was right. It was their chance to get out of the hot zone and any delay might result in them being left behind. There was no assurance that Felix would last a few minutes longer.

But... “I can’t leave him.”

“The trucks are moving man, let’s go!”

“I want him in!”

“The space in there can barely take the two of us!”

“Then the Tanks. One of them would still have some space.”

Groaning, Boro pushed his gun to the back, hefted Felix and placed him on his shoulder. “Let’s go!” He ran effortlessly towards the moving tank.

Ebube followed behind. “We need to get in,” he shouted, waving at the soldier in charge of the gun turret.

“No space!”

“Create one, damn it!”

The soldier yelled at someone below and the vehicle slowed. “The wounded soldier first!”

Feeling a surge of adrenaline, Ebube gave Boro a push. “Hand him over!”

The big man released the weight on his shoulder to the man up and mounted the vehicle. In a few seconds he was in.

Riffle pushed to his back, Ebube got hold of the Turret ring, pulled his bulk up and his legs found the side skirt. He was about to grab Boro's extended arm

when he felt a hit at his shoulder blade.

A loud groan pushed itself out of his mouth as his feet slipped and pain spiraled through his body.

“Come on,” Boro shouted. “Get in!”

Ignoring the terrible twinge in his arm, Ebube held on to the Turret ring, and his feet found the side skirt again.

The second bullet crushed his body against the tank. Losing his grip, he fell face down into the debris.

“Get up, man!”

He couldn’t. He was sure he was dying as his eyes gradually began to close and he felt something warm and sticky sipping out of him. Then, a burst of light whirled around in his mind. Opening his eyes, he heaved up onto his hands and knees. A spasm of strength launched him to his feet and he staggered after the rolling tank.

“Come on, hurry!” His senses were dulling again, and he could feel a syruplike stickiness of his blood as it tickled under his clothes, over his thighs and down to his legs.

“Slow down and let him in!” Someone shouted.

A volley of automatic weapons fire echoed not too far from him. Ducking, he turned around but all he could see were the swirling colors that made his eyes weak and his limbs heavy. Another round of fire tore through the thick air. He guessed it came from only a few yards away. A rebel patrol guard must have been firing blindly in the random hope of hitting a government or UN soldier.

The tank had picked up speed. He knew he would never make it inside now, so he sank back in the debris, all thoughts of fighting to live vanished. The bleeding had weakened him beyond further physical effort.

But the rebels must not find him. If he must die, his body must not be discovered. Painfully, he began scraping dirt and sand over himself. Soon, he would be a small brown mound on war ridden Somalian soil.

Dying in active service was supposed to be a noble course. It’s what made them gallant. However, only the dead could tell you that death was a lonely business.

Dying... the darkness that surrounded the word amplified the agony and fear that gripped his heart as pictures floated through his mind.

Elizabeth. He’d promised to return to her. How long would it be before she realized that he was gone? Sorrow washed over him in waves of anguish and aches as his strength slowly ebbed out of him. He accepted the cold hands of darkness and embraced the emptiness that followed.

TWENTY-FIVE

Quincy’s spa was one place Elizabeth felt she could truly relax after a very hectic day. Oge had introduced her to the heavenly place, like she’d introduced her to other self-pampering parlors.

“You are late,” Oge pointed as soon as Elizabeth rushed in.

“I am aware of that.” She walked into the changing room to exchange her clothes for a comfortable towel. Pulling off her wig she shoved it inside her handbag before heading out.

“How is your new man?” She asked once she and Oge settled in the treatment room where two beautiful Chinese women slathered thick mud all over their bodies.

The ladies had agreed on a no sauna or steam room treatment, it would hurt the baby. So, getting all mudded up it was.

“You know...” Oge, who was totally naked except for a polka-dot thong, propped her jaw on her hand to stare at her friend. “I think you are feeling I am crazy. Changing men the way I do...”

“Hey, whatever makes your life beautiful, Oge.” Why did she feel that Oge was about to tell her that this new man wasn’t the prince charming she thought he was?

“He’s a pig.”

There it goes... Elizabeth mentally rolled her eyes. Man number—she’d lost count—gone.

“I am so sorry girlfriend.”

“Huh huh.” Oge stopped her with a raised hand. “I’m glad he left.” Popping her head down. “You can laugh. Probably chant the *‘I told you so'* mantra.”

“I am the last person to judge anyone now,” Elizabeth Muttered, relaxing as one of the women applied a healthy coat of mud on her legs. She had so much going on in her life at the moment, so picking spikes from another person’s eyes wasn’t what she would enjoy doing. “Josh is back,” she said.

“Fuck me!” Oge spread to a sitting position, sending mud flying everywhere. “What did you just say?”

“Mom told me.” In a rather disturbing way. “I paid her a visit yesterday.”

“Oh, wow. Isn’t it raining good men for you lately? First, it’s the sexy as sin soldier, now Josh—though he’s uh... on the big side but I like him.”

Elizabeth wished she could feel for Josh what everyone wanted her to feel. Her mother had announced the homecoming with glee, giving her that *‘don't blow this chance’* look. The same look Oge was giving her now.

“So, when are you going to see him?”

She knew that was the next question. “Don’t know.” Don’t want to. Goodness! The pressure from everyone to see her get involved with another man was beginning to wear on her nerves. Ebube was only away for a mission, not dead. “I don’t think I want to go see him. Not yet.”

Surprisingly, and to her relief, Oge didn’t push further.

“So, any luck?” Oge waved at the women who announced their exit as they’d accomplished the task of covering their bodies with mud. “Lizzy?”

She knew what Oge was asking about, but was too ashamed to give the same response over and over again. So, she lowered her head.

“He hasn’t called, has he?”

She could hear the silent *‘I told you so,’* in her friend’s voice. “Why are you doing this to yourself?”

“I’m carrying his child.” Why was nobody seeing it? As long as she had his seed growing inside her, moving on would be difficult.

“That’s the reason you should accept the fact that he...uhm.... You don’t want to hurt yourself or the child, Elizabeth. Trust me, that’s what this whole thing would do to you,” the other lady said. “Forget that this man ever came into your life, concentrate on giving birth to the baby, give it to his mother and move on.”

She stared at the glass door where the women had disappeared through. “It's hard to do that when he lives inside me.” Her friend should understand that. But again, Oge had never really been in love since she knew her.

“Maybe I should go to the base. Someone must have spoken to him since he left.” Someone...Abdul. He must know how to reach him. “I have to speak to him,” she muttered.

“Who?”

“Ebube.”

“Girlfriend, how long are you going to hold on to nothing?”

“Maybe something has happened to him.”

“Someone would have reached you if that’s the case.”

“Only two of his colleagues know about us. And one of them went with him to Somalia.”

“I still think you would have gotten a word somehow...see, the more you

keep hoping, the more you set—”

“I’ll lose my mind if I don’t.”

SALDHIGA BOOLISKA DEGMADA YAAQSHIID

Tossing and turning on the narrow bed, the mind behind his sweating face was lost in the depths of a nightmare. his eyes flew open, he squeezed them shut immediately as the blinding ray of the sun made harsh contact with them. Slowly opening his eyes again, he focused them on the silent fan that hung from the ceiling of where he was.

His hands traveled over his face and the pain in his shoulder ramped up from stiffness all the way to searing blinding agony, faster than he could blink. Just when the pain was at its worst, it dissipated, like fog off some terrible lake.

His ears picked the clinging of metal, someone was in the white-washed poorly ventilated room with him. The heavy footsteps, sound of running water and muttering under the breath, was enough to convince him.

Ebube held his breath as the feet approached. Whoever it was could either be a friend or a foe. The military part of him accepted the latter.

“You gave me a scare last night.” Turning his neck, his eyes settled on a white-haired old man with a blood-stained apron. “I am glad you decided to join us in the land of the living.”

Ebube flinched as the man touched his forehead with a wet palm. The man looked friendly. Maybe he wasn’t an enemy... or he was... arh! The headache that attacked him at that moment, must have been sent from hell. Gritting his teeth, he tried to relax the pain as well as clear his head.

Where was he? And what the fuck was he doing in this sorry place? A bubble of panic floated over his consciousness.

Come on... remember! he willed his brain.

“How’s he doing doc?” A gravelly voice coming from the doorway asked.

The old man whirled around. A short, hard-faced man had entered the room followed by two others, and a lady.

”He is coming around General,” the old man said.

General?

“Good.” A long stick dangled between the lips of the man called ‘General’ as he spoke. “Keep him alive.” The man, now standing by the bed, pulled the stick out of his mouth and poked his bare torso with it.

“You are alive!” the man feigned surprise. Flinging the stick out of the opened window, the man plucked a cigarette stuck behind his ear, groped inside

his khaki combat trousers for a matchbox and lit. Taking a long drag of lung-cancer-inducing smoke, he blew rings towards the already blackened ceiling.

“You would have died if not for my mercy.” Taking another drag, the man stared at Ebube through slit eyes.

“Where is this...” A spasm of pain clenched his back again. He bit down against it, his mouth shut, as ragged breaths came from his nose. “Where is this place?” Ebube managed to ask, wincing at the pain—like a thousand needles in his throat. “Water,” he croaked.

“Sagal!” The man beckoned the girl that came in with him. “Get water for our guest.” He looked down at the soldier again, “I am benevolent you know.”

Ebube grimaced. Every part of him hurt as if he had been run over by a truck.

A truck...

Trucks! He made to spring out of the bed.

The old man with a blood-stained apron offered him a hand but he shrugged him off. “I am not an invalid,” he grunted. But the tremors that began at the bottom of his spine and rolled up all the way to the base of his skull said otherwise. It was like every muscle in his back, shoulder and neck were clenching at once. He lay back, avoiding the eyes staring at him.

At first, the pain that berated him had exact centers—the spots in his back and left shoulder where the bullets had hit. But as days dragged by, in that exhausting place between unconsciousness and being awake, the center points seemed to migrate to his neck, across to his ribs, as if it was seeking a happier home.

“Biyo.” He didn't know what that meant but he drained the water offered to him in one gulp, ignoring the excruciating burning sensation in his throat.

“Better?” The General asked.

He nodded

“Good. Nothing must happen to UN property.”

UN property? More memories came rushing...

The evacuation... Felix... the bullet... He died!

He was supposed to be dead. “You save me,” he muttered.

“Should I have killed you?” The man took a drag from his cigarette, threw the stub to the floor and crushed it with his boot. “You are lucky I came around anyway; you would have been roasted meat by now. That’s what we do to the dead, we burn them.”

The man walked out with his entourage.

Running his hand across his torso, he felt the bandage that was wrapped around his stomach and up to his shoulder. He didn’t want to think about the

clothes he had been wearing earlier; they must have been soiled beyond repair. Someone must have taken them off and cleaned him up.

"What will he do to me?"

"He wants you to heal, you should concentrate on that," the doctor said.

"Why?"

"My job is to get you up on your feet."

The door swung open again and the girl that had come in with the General, walked in with a bowl and uncovered it before him. He didn't know how hungry he was until the aroma from the food assaulted his nostrils, making his stomach rumble.

"*Cunto."* The girl pushed the plastic to his face. "*Cunto*."

He would have been suspicious of this high-level hospitality had he been in sync with his sane mind. Sanity was something belly-filled people possessed.

Grabbing the plate, he started wolfing down the contents.

"Thank you," he muttered to the girl who had stood and watched him while he ate.

"Be careful with that one," the doctor said as the girl left.

TWENTY-SIX

“He will not be coming home anytime soon.”

Anytime soon? Not words she wanted to hear in connection with the father of her child. “What do you mean,” she asked Felix. Her voice tightening with the beginnings of worry. “Did he tell you that?”

“Yes...no...” Felix stuttered. “He’s stuck in the war and... it would take some time before he... he returns.”

The twitchy, unsure look in his eyes belied the calm reassurance of his tone. Elizabeth’s stomach fluttered, then contracted. She had a sudden violent urge to vomit.

“He didn’t return with you,” she said, as calm as she could. “But he spoke to you... he told you... he told you... he would come back tomorrow, or next month.” Licking her dried lips. “It’s a prank, isn’t it?” She almost smiled with relief. Ebube must have planned with his friends to prank her.

Yes, that must be it. The relaxation that flooded into her as she thought of this was almost palpable, like the glow from a stiff drink.

“Ebube was my friend,” Felix said in a strangled voice.

Was?

“He wouldn’t play pranks with something like this.” The hopeful flow faded, her mouth went powder dry. “He... He couldn’t make it out.”

She looked over Felix’s shoulders to the gate that was still open from when he drove in and back to him. “Couldn’t make it out. How?”

“They saw him fall. He... they lost him.”

She suddenly felt frozen, unable to think. She looked at the man again. “You are joking with me.” Sure, he was. If not, how could he... what was he...

Felix shook his head, avoiding her eyes. “I am so sorry...”

The ground moved under her feet, and she felt herself sinking. Now she wished she’d agreed to go inside when the man had arrived, but she was eager to hear the news that brought him and had insisted on them standing beside his car.

“He will return to me.” She collapsed on the body of the car, trying to picture her soldier, walking in from the gate with a mischievous grin on his face.

“He’s just waiting somewhere.” The words didn't relieve her of the fear and

panic knotted somewhere between her stomach. Her sternum suddenly grew so big and real and hard that it was making it difficult to draw breath and keep her head from going dizzy.

But she had to act. And the quicker the better. So she ran towards the gate, determined to go to the base and demand for them to help her find him.

“Elizabeth!” She heard Felix shout behind her. “Elizabeth, wait!”

She should hurry before Felix stops her.

Exiting the gate, she faced her first confusion. Which way led to the Naval base? Left, or right? She was yet to choose when a hand grabbed her from behind.

“I am sorry, Elizabeth.”

I have to find him, Elizabeth thought. Letting him go just like that isn’t what I’m ready to do.

“You need someone by you now. Tell me who to call, your mother... any friend...”

“Ebube.” She whispered. “I am carrying his child.”

So, the soldier left her.

The man didn’t expect that but it was okay. Crawling back to the side of the house where he’d been all the while, listening to the conversation, he let out a satisfying sigh.

Coming in and going out of the house had become as easy as masking his suffering. In fact, he no longer feared being caught. He would never be caught. He had his way and the lady was also a bunch of forgetfulness— always leaving her gate unlocked, windows unchecked, electric burglary alarm was never turned on.

It was to his advantage.

Relaxing his back on the wall, with his legs stretched out, his mind went back to the conversation he just overheard.

The soldier was gone. Should he be happy or sad? Wasn’t he destined to be the one to mete out punishment on the soldier? What would he do with the plans he’d already set?

He would adapt. That was another one of his skills: recognizing when things change and changing himself and his plans accordingly. It was like evolution. Adapt or die. But evolution was dumb. Animals don’t know that they were adapting, they don't see change around them or when there was a need to shift plans. But the man does.

He was an observer, one that recognized when there was a need to change strategy and plans. A watcher, one that would never be surprised by events.

But he acted too. When necessary, he acted swiftly and decisively. and the time had come for him to do what he was called for.

The soldier was gone. The universe had taken care of him and that was a sign that the man was called to do this task.

The soldier was no longer the target. This time, the seed in the lady's stomach was.

His seed was corrupt. It soiled the lady and it was the man's duty to take it out and set the lady free.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“General wants you to have breakfast with him.”

The human that gave the message ran off before Ebube could start a conversation.

Sighing, he walked along the floor that had multiple little holes and rested his arms on the window. His eyes fixed on two birds chirping on top of the tree outside, not too far from where he was kept. The physical grind and the mental torment of the last few weeks had exhausted him to the raging edge of madness. During his waking hours, he found his mind wandering down vacant channels, losing all track of time and reality. He had to remind himself continually where he was and most times it would take him asking someone to know what day it was.

He was losing his mind, slowly but irrevocably, and the worst part of it was that he knew he was losing his mind. He tried to tell himself that he’s safe here, but his mind refused to accept it, in spite of the fact that with each passing day he got better and stronger, his wounds were healing faster too, only periodic burning sensations, itches and soreness around the area.

However, boredom was eating him up like moths would do to fine wood. And the stronger he got, the deeper he fell into depression. How many times had he slipped in and out of nostalgia? Reminiscing on the last time he spent in the place he called home?

Home. Elizabeth. A sad smile pushed his lips up. The thought of her gave him a refreshing surge as well as sending him further into despair. She had become a silhouette that floated through his mind every now and then, leaving him aching.

Would she still remember? Did she love him enough to wait a little longer? He felt the sharp teeth of jealousy in his abdomen as the thought of her with another man flashed across his mind.

He needed to get his hands on a phone, she should know he was alive but trapped in this place.

Easing away from the window, Ebube grabbed the kaftan he wore to sleep and had pulled off, needing air on his skin. He didn’t know to whom it belonged

to, but he was grateful these people could offer him something to wear. Slipping into a pair of slippers, he opened the door and walked through the passageway, out of the building and crossed over to the other side to get to the general's chamber.

A man, standing at the entrance of the building, stared disdainfully up at him. Obviously annoyed at seeing a stranger, who should have been killed, wandering into his master's house like a free man.

"Is he expecting you?" He asked.

"Hm." Ebube nodded, lowered his head to avoid the low door lintel and stepped in.

"Ah ha...here is the man I want to see!" His host announced with mirth. "I am not stingy my friend, come share my food and my women."

The man looked better today—washed and his hair combed with an unevenly shaved beard. Stroking his chin, the harsh feel of stubble against his palm reminded Ebube that he also needed a shave too, and a haircut.

His gaze settled on the man's crooked nose, nothing changed there, only that it was a little bigger, complimenting the vicious scar on his cheek. The man gave him a quizzical stare and he looked away.

Not tall, but the man gained what he lost in height in muscles.

"Are you done checking me out, soldier?" The man asked cheerfully, the upward quirk on his mouth and the crinkling at the corner of his eyes, gave his rough face a touch of youthfulness. "Come." He patted an empty seat. "Come sit with me."

From the outside, the place could be dismissed as a dilapidated building. But on the inside, it was obvious the general was a man of mean and great taste. The interior hummed with the air of comfort and relaxation.

"You want to see me." Ebube said, moving deeper into the room.

"Yes, eat with me." It was an order.

Ebube hesitated, then he took the vacant seat.

"Sagal! Bring our guest the best of the foods we have."

The girl came in bearing a tray of assorted foods. another young boy, not more than fifteen, followed her with a jar of water.

"The bread is a little stale." His host broke some pieces of bread immediately the tray was set on the table and threw it in his mouth. "Fresh ones are hard to come by when at war."

"What do you want?"

"Call me General. General Adsame. You must address me with my title."

"General."

"Good." The man bit off a chunk of meat from a roasted chicken thigh.

“What do I want from you?” Licking his oil smeared fingers, he lifted a bottle of wine to his lips and guzzled. “This is still good,” he muttered, then turned to Ebube “You are not eating? You don’t like our food, UN Soldier?”

“You’ve kept me here for too long. What do you want?”

Mouth hanging open, brows arched, Adsame stared at him, then his shoulder rocked up and down with his guffaw. “You questioned me! Nobody questions the General.” The man washed down the laughter with another swig from the bottle.

A steely silence followed.

“Maybe I do need you for something.” The man wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Your people are beginning to send a different message to us and I don’t like that. We would not normally attack a UN convoy or kill their soldiers, but you people are taking sides. You are helping our enemies win.”

“Why did you declare this war?” Ebube asked, glancing at the mass of food displayed on the table. What would happen if he didn’t eat any of them?

“Is that what they told you, soldier? That I declared war?” The man cackled. “I didn’t start this war. General Mohammad Barkhad declared war when he promised to step down three years ago but didn’t.” The man’s face darkened. “What did your UN do? Nothing. When they came to Somalia, we thought they had come to help us, but...” The man shrugged, took a stick of cigarette and lit.

“So, how do I come in?”

“I want your people off our land. And you are the man to get that message across to them.”

Like hell he was. “If you want the UN to get off your land, go tell them yourself.” Filling the cup before him with water, Ebube drank and stood to leave.

“I wouldn’t be too arrogant if I were you.”

Ebube stopped.

“Could cost you a lot, you know. Even your life.” The man was threatening him. “Don’t be a fool, soldier. I heard you want to go back to your people; I can make that happen.”

Ignoring the man, Ebube resumed walking, unaware of the ferocious stare given to him by the man that stood motionless by the door.

Mid-afternoon. Maybe one p.m. Or two... She had no idea of the time as she sat back in the armchair on her veranda with a pounding head and blurred vision. Last night she slept little. Two troubled, nightmare-haunting hours. The rest of the night she lay in the darkness, checking her phone for messages. Waiting for it to ring, so his voice would float into her ears, telling her he was on his way

home.

But the phone didn’t ring.

Ebube was gone. She had to face it. He wasn’t coming back to her. Flipping through photos in her phone until she found his, Elizabeth studied his face, the eyes that’d seen through her, the lips that'd kissed her skin, the boyish grin she’d come to love. The hands that’d made her ache to have him do more things with her body...

She’d always thought that the stories about people keeping pictures of dead loved ones were a bit morbid, but she understood them now. She couldn’t imagine deleting any of his. Not now, not ever.

Biting her trembling lips while fondling her phone, Elizabeth considered whether it was the right time to speak to his step-mother or should she put the idea away again? It felt like the right thing to do. The woman should know that a lady somewhere was going to have a baby for him.

How the woman would receive the news wasn’t going to be her problem. She’s not looking for acceptance nor a home for her baby.

Leaning forward, she dialed the number.

“My grandma is not around.” A kid answered from the other end of the phone. Her little sing-song voice melting her heart to a puddle.

But she had a problem, how would she introduce herself to this kid whom she had no doubt must be the child Ebube talked about? His daughter.

“Hello?”

“Hi girl...”

“I’m not a girl.” The child giggled. “I’m a lady. Daddy calls me his little lady.”

“Okay, little lady.” Elizabeth cleared her throat, “Uhm...I am a friend...To your daddy.”

“You’re daddy’s girlfriend!” The excitement in the child’s voice made her swallow a sob. “Daddy said he will bring you when he comes back next time. My daddy always comes back at the end of the month, will you come with him?” The little girl asked with a burgeoning excitement. “My grandma is coming...” the girl whispered.

There was a faint conversation in the background, then the girl giggled and must have run off because Elizabeth heard the sound of running feet that faded shortly.

“Hello...” The voice of an adult came up and Elizabeth suddenly lost the will to make the big reveal.

“Hello?”

It wasn’t the right time, Elizabeth realized, stroking her chest to ease the

weight in her heart. The woman just lost a son—it didn't matter that he wasn't from her womb. She should give the woman more time to get over the grief.

"*Onye di kwa nu ihea na'choghi ikwu okwu? Bia,* I have something I'm doing in the farm..."

"I'm pregnant!" The word came out so fast. "...for your son." Now she had to wait.

With her palm grazing up and down her little bump, she swallowed hard—which didn't calm the palpitation of her heart.

"Ebube?"

"Yes, ma."

"Did he know?"

"No ma."

The silence that followed made her shift uncomfortably on the chair.

"The only woman my son ever mentioned..." *My son?* She called him son! "...was the one he said he met in Port Harcourt," the woman said.

"I'm the lady. My name is Elizabeth."

"You are the Elizabeth Ebube wanted to bring home?"

"Yes."

"*Oh, chim o...*" the woman moaned and started sobbing as though something broke inside of her.

Her own tears began to trickle down without warning. A few seconds of silence passed as the women pulled themselves together.

"I wasn't fair to him. Never told him I love him. But I do," the woman finally said. "He was a good boy." The woman's voice had gone thin.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Elizabeth inhaled deeply, wishing things were different, that Ebube was alive and this woman was saying these words to his face. Last night she dreamt of him and had woken up to find her bed cold and lonely. She missed him so much that it was threatening to tear her apart.

"What do you want to do now?" The woman asked.

"I'll keep him. And raise him to be strong and brave like his father."

The woman sighed heavily. "*Ngwa nu.* Thank you...so much my child. I hope to see you one day, before or when the child is born."

She found peace after that call. It could be temporary but for the first time since she woke up, she felt the cold morning breeze caress her skin and smoothened her soul.

Yes. She did right, and Ebube would have been proud.

“How did this happen?”

“Madam, I don't know o.”

Elizabeth blinked a couple of times to make sense of the horror that was staring back at her. “These fishes were alive when I left last night. Now they are all dead. Dead, Okon. Nine hundred and twelve mature fishes, all dead!”

“Madam I am telling you the truth; I don’t know what happened to them.”

“All of them, dead?”

“Madam I don't know what happened.”

“Get me my gloves and my boots.”

It wasn't the death of her fishes that got her the most, but the possibility that someone might be behind it. Though this kind of disaster wasn’t inevitable in her business. A sudden disease could cause it. But this wasn’t caused by any disease.

Stepping into one of the ponds, she picked a fish, turning it over with her fingers, half expecting it to wiggle and flap its tail. It remained inert.

She allowed that one to slip off her palm, bent and picked another, and another, and another...

This wasn’t any sickness. Someone did this to her, but who?

Then her phone rang and she got it out from her apron. “What?” She snapped.

“Hope I got your attention now.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

With every rippling muscle movement of his arms as the ax rose and fell, a harsh grunt and beads of sweat poured down from his face as he shredded wood to pieces. He needed to take out his frustration on something and the unplanned duty seemed to be serving the purpose well. He could feel exasperation seeping out of him with every stroke of the ax.

Ebube propped the tool on a tree beside him, stretched and rolled his shoulders. He still felt periodic soreness on his shoulder and on his back, but the old doctor had assured him the discomfort would vanish with time, if he would take it easy on heavy lifts and strenuous duties. But he’s a damn soldier not a sissy.

Untying his shirt which was knotted around his waist, he wiped his face with the cloth, his eyes caught a movement a few feet away.

Sagal. She was gone before he could turn fully to the direction he had spotted her.

Last night would have landed him into a mess. He’d dreamt of a slender body nestling close to his on a bed. Two pointy pebbles and soft mounds brushing against his back and feathery breaths stroking his neck. His arousal had been immediate. But when he’d turned to explore the feminine body, he realized it wasn’t a dream.

Sagal was in his bed.

It took will power stronger than a sea storm to push her away.

The girl wouldn't be anything more than twenty... twenty-three at most. Too young for him. Besides, he was sworn to another woman.

Throwing a glance over his shoulder, Ebube picked the ax and went back to work.

This morning he’d thought so much about home. A horrible sense of dread had spread through his stomach as he thought of never returning to the two most important people in his life. He laid awake for nearly an hour, his eyes roaming but seeing nothing, while his mind sampled possible ways of escaping from the den.

Adsame. The rebel General. He held the key to the freedom he sought.

TWENTY-NINE

“Searching for sharks?”

Elizabeth turned to meet the man who owned the modulated feminine voice. Leaning against the rail on the balcony, her face softened as the man approached. Her secondary school sweetheart. The shy fat kid everyone loved making fun of. Where did all the fat go?

“Am I so glad to see you again Liz.” He grabbed her in a tight embrace, releasing her when she reminded him that she’d be needing the attention of an orthopedic surgeon if he didn’t loosen his grip. “Sorry.” He chuckled. “Look at you...you’re now married?”

“Oh, Josh, it’s a long story.” Growing up, Josh was the only best friend she had. They got along so well that people had called her Joshua’s wife, and their parents wouldn’t have minded had they ended up together. But she didn't like him, not the way everybody thought she should.

To satisfy her conscience, she had allowed him drag her into a relationship that ended as abruptly as it had started when Josh moved to the states.

Best friends don't always make the best lovers, she had concluded.

“I got to know about your home coming from my mom! she couldn't stop gushing about your success.” Elizabeth looked at him with admiration, “You are doing pretty well Josh. You’ve even got a pool in your hospital! What do you have in mind? A hospital and a hotel put together?”

Taking her hands, he grinned, “You know me, I love aesthetics and excellence. Anyway, we just opened five months ago and we can’t start counting profit.”

She gave the pool another glance and turned her face towards her friend—now a doctor. “So, my mom said you would take care of me and my baby.” The woman wouldn’t stop talking to her about registering with Josh’s hospital. “She’s been here? My mom, I mean.”

“Yes. severally.” He removed the stethoscope that was around his neck and slipped the instrument inside the pocket of his coat. “First time was during the opening. I invited the both of you but...” he shrugged, “I guess you were busy.”

Under the bright afternoon sun, she noticed he looked more handsome than

the last time she'd seen him. "I'm so sorry, Josh. I traveled out of the country during that time." Soft, with a backside like that of a woman, but good looking.

"Your mom told me. So, you're forgiven."

"Thank you so much."

"You're welcome, princess." Princess. That's what he used to call her back then.

Giggling like a kid, because she felt like a kid again, she gave him a smack on the arm. "Where has all the fat gone, Josh?" She asked, following him into the building.

"You know... rigorous exercises, dieting and a surgery to tighten flabby skin."

"You look amazing." She hoped he didn't detect the envy in her voice. Exercises and dieting seemed to be working for everyone but her. "Women must be falling at your feet now," she said as he led her through a passage, into his office.

"So, tell me about you, princess. Who is the lucky guy?" He pulled out a chair for her and settled on his at the other side of the desk. "Someone I know?"

Pushing a hand through her shaggy blond wig, she averted his quizzical stare, gazing around the opulently furnished office instead.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked." He understood. Josh had always understood and knew when not to probe or push. Picking the cellular on his table, he dialed a number. Spoke into the receiver and returned his attention to her. "If you don't want to tell me about your marriage, that's okay."

No Josh, my pain and anguish is not okay. It hurts like a knife in the heart each time she remembered the man who'd promised her a happy ever after but didn't return to fulfill it.

Did he actually promise?

"I'm just pregnant," she muttered. "I don't have a husband."

"IVF?"

"Uhm, my fiancé went for a UN peacekeeping mission seven months ago and..." She broke off and shrugged.

"He didn't return to you?"

A nurse walked in with a file, handed it to him and walked away.

"Got himself another woman I guess?" he asked. "Military men, they're all the same."

"He was the most committed man I've seen." Her Ebube was too true. Too unfeigned...

"Was?"

"He died on the mission."

“Oh my God! Princess, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” He hurried to her side. “I don’t know...nobody told me.”

“It’s okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine, really.” She forced a smile which she knew didn’t convince him but he nodded, dropped her hand and walked back to his seat.

“Glad you are. And I will do everything in my power to keep you and the baby safe.” He gave her a lingering stare, then returned his eyes back to the file. “Meanwhile, I have to conduct an ultrasound to know what I am working with.”

“Two? There are two minions in there?”

Why didn’t she see it earlier? Seven months of being pregnant. Three ultrasounds and the results had been the same—one baby. A boy. Now Josh found them two. Two Ebube’s in her womb.

“Anyway, I made this for you.” Oge edged her aside mildly and walked into the sitting room, dropping a food flask on the table.

“What is in there?” Elizabeth followed behind.

“Open it first.” Her friend sprawled on the couch, arms spread on the back pillow.

“So, our soldier planted two mini-him inside you?” Oge reiterated the question, yawning with no iota of lady-like poshness. “He’s a badass.”

Badass in everything. Elizabeth agreed. Capturing her heart, making love to her, and now leaving her with two humans to take care of. He is the *baddest* of all *badasses.*

Picking the flask, she settled beside her friend and uncovered the lid. “Chicken pepper soup!”

“Someone has to help you fulfill your cravings.”

“I swear I would have gone knocking from door to door asking for who made chicken pepper soup if you hadn’t brought this today.” Making it herself was out of the question. Lately, she had no pleasure eating food made by her own hands.

“Knock yourself out then.”

That I would do, she thought, sniffing in the aroma. “Thank you so much. Don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“I’m only practicing how to be nice, so the minions in your womb do not tag me a wicked godmother when they come out,” Oge shouted after her as she left for the kitchen.

“You’ve always been nice, Oge,” she replied. And who said anything about Oge being her children’s godmother? Ha... ha... the rascal would unleash terror if the ‘godmother’ title wasn’t bestowed on her.

“You think so?”

“I know so,” Elizabeth answered, returning with a spoon.

“So, you are pregnant with twins, whose father won't be...”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I’m sorry.” Oge said with a wave of hand. “You also have your ex making your life miserable, and now some terrifying fucked up shit is happening to you. Your life is more complicated than Heart Evangelista’s ‘Pirouette’”

“Who’s Heart Evangelista?” And what the hell is Piro... whatever...

“Girlfriend, you are not a lover of art so no need explaining art to you,” Oge said, stretching her arms above her head. “Back to your life, I think Henry is behind those hellish pranks.”

“You're not sure yet,” Elizabeth said, her attention drifting back to the soup. True, Henry had some loose nuts missing from his head and had been acting weird lately, but she was sure he wasn’t capable of sending disturbing text messages, delivering notes that left blood humming in her ears like a wasp trapped against glass. The last one was the weirdest, coming three days after her fishes were killed.

The card was thick and expensive—she had to wiggle it out of the envelope. Bright colors danced across the page as she opened it. At the center, two champagne glasses clicked together, the greeting was embossed and finished with glitter.

Happy purification, it read.

She was still wondering what the words meant when she noticed a piece of paper, cut and glued faced down.

The message on it was written with something she was sure was a brush dipped in blood—Oge had disagreed.

The process will be painful, but it is worth it.

Her hands had trembled, making the words swim before her eyes and the wasps in her ears to buzz louder.

She’d rang her mother but got a voice mail instead. Calling her father was out of the question, he would want her to abandon her house and come stay with him and his latest wife. That she wasn’t ready to do because she wasn’t ready to explain her pregnancy to her father yet.

Next was Oge and she’d insisted she come over with the said note.

That was three weeks ago.

“Henry is capable of doing anything, Lizzy,” Oge said.

Elizabeth still didn’t want to agree. Henry was an asshole but not a creep.

“He wants you back and will do anything to get you running into his arms.” The reason why Oge had taken one look at the note—the only evidence she would have gone to the police with—and ripped it in pieces.

“Sick bastard,” she had muttered with a tightened jaw. “He’s doing this on purpose,” Oge continued. “Crazy son of a deranged woman.”

“I wish Ebube was here,” Elizabeth muttered, dipping her spoon in the soup and leaving it there.

“Well, he’s not, so we have to deal with this piece of shit ourselves.”

“What are you suggesting?” She asked, really wishing Oge was right. If Henry was behind all the jump scares, then to get him trashing the ground with his teeth wouldn't be difficult. The guy was a coward... he had always been.

“You need a total life overhaul.” Oge lifted her legs and relaxed them on the table.

“You know I don’t like legs on my table.”

“These tired legs need to rest on something.” Oge threw a glance at Elizabeth and let out a guffaw. “You should see your face right now.”

No matter how much she would have loved solitude, having Oge visiting her every now and then, lifted her spirit. Except for the day she’d suggested that she abort the baby— babies now. She smiled inwardly, yes...babies.

“So, girlfriend, what ya say?”

“About what?”

“Starting a new life.”

“With a stomach as big as a hot balloon of course.”

“I don’t mean that. I’m talking about flushing your sim down the toilet and getting a new one, then you should think of moving into a new place, you know ....”

“What happens to all the important people in my life?”

“It depends,” Oge said. “If they’re people you can’t do without, like me,” Her cheeks puffed in a grin. “Copy their numbers. Others can go to hell.”

“My farm?”

“Oh... I didn’t think about that.”

“I wish he was here.” Elizabeth muttered again. Ebube would have known what to do. He always did. Showing up each time she needed security, as if he had a chip planted in her that enabled him to know when she needed him— like that day at the mall, when he almost beat up Henry, and the other night when she was so sure someone had broken into her home.

“You know,” she whispered more to herself. “You know how much I need you and you still left me.”

THIRTY

“They want dialogue,” Adsame repeated thoughtfully.

“That is the only way.” He’d just returned from the capital where he’d been to see the adjutant Generals after waiting for what seemed to him like eternity. The meeting started off as a battle of angry voices. How he’d persuaded the four-man committee to finally come to an agreement was a miracle. “And I say you take the offer.”

Downing his drink, Adsame dropped the bottle on the ground, nudged it so that it rolled and stopped at the foot of a log. “General Adsame dialogues with no one.” He sank deeper into the chair, plucked his hat off his head and started fanning himself with it.

There was a short silence broken by Sagal who padded in barefooted with a cell phone for the rebel general. Muttering a few words in his language, the warlord sprang off his seat, walked a short distance while shouting incomprehensible orders to whoever was at the other end.

“Dumbass people make me keep repeating myself like a freakin’ *baqbaqaaqa*!” Walking back to his chair. “Fucking *siils*.” Shoving the phone in the back pocket of his trousers, he dismissed the girl with a wave and sat down.

Another silent beat as both men watched the girl leave, walking as if the ground would bite off her heels if she stepped hard on it.

“She wants you to fuck her.”

“What the... why would you even think that?”

“I see the way she looked at you.”

How the girl chose to look at him wasn’t his fucking business, getting back to Nigeria was the only thing occupying his mind at the moment.

“I’ll cut off your *guska*, dick...*guska* and feed it to the dogs if I catch you looking at her, soldier.” That was one hell of a threat. But the general had once offered to share his women with him, why was he being protective over this one?

“I have other things to do with my time.” Like dealing with the emptiness and vexation that always attacked him each time he thought of Elizabeth. Her scent. Her softness.

Jesus, F Christ! He didn’t want to remember. Yet, it was all he had left—the

memories of them together.

She was everything and more. Her responsiveness made her more irresistible. Before that night, when he imagined making love to her, he'd pictured hot and steamy sex. But when it finally happened, it was beautiful beyond words. Elizabeth was a fucking goddess who knew how to please and be pleased.

It had been one night only but no woman would ever match her. Not this Sagal who never struck him as someone he would stick his rod into, or any other woman the rebel general had offered him since he arrived here.

Stifling a groan and a burgeoning excitement in his crotch, he leaned forward, stylishly squeezing on his responsive dick.

"No time for women," he muttered. It had to be with Elizabeth or no one. How could he even think of another woman when it was hard to push away the image of her voluptuous ass slapping against his groin as he fucked her from behind? The warmth between her legs, the musky welcoming smell of her secret pleasure garden, the eagerness in her thrusts.

Elizabeth was a queen.

His queen.

"No time huh?" Adsame put his hat back on his head. "Adsame has all the time in the world for *siils*."

Siil. A word he'd come to understand meant *pussy*. And the warlord loved using it a lot. He'd reduced every woman to *Siil*.

"I have no intention of bedding any woman here." The memories he made with Elizabeth wouldn't permit that. He missed her so much his chest ached. Why would God bring such a woman into his life for a brief moment and cruelly pull them apart? "My woman's waiting for me."

"A one-woman soldier? That's disappointing." Lifting a butt cheek, the man released a fart so loud, it's stink was worse than a broken sewage pipe. "Why did you join the military, soldier?" He asked, not sparing him a glance or an apology.

"I don't know. Guess I was tired of hearing the litany of how my father couldn't achieve anything as a policeman."

"So, you joined the military, to prove yourself a better man?"

His father was a great man. Only his step-mother didn't acknowledge that. She was always wanting more, demanding for what the man couldn't afford. When he died, life became hard at home, with no job offers on the horizon after his youth service, Ebube needed to get away.

The military had opened its gate and arms for him.

"I was once in the Army. Got to the position of a Major General," Adsame

said nonchalantly.

“Why did you choose this part then?”

“The part chose me.” The warlord sighed. “We planned the coup that brought Mohammad Barkhad in as the military head of state. The *‘dhaadhaan’* was supposed to hold the country for five years and hand it over. But he wanted more, and we were so stupid not to see his greed, so we allowed him to hold power for another five years. When the extra tenure ended, he came with an offer.”

Rubbing his nose. “Settle his loyalists for life, in return they would support him to become head of state till his death.”

Ebube had heard that part of the story.

“The bastard managed to gain supporters who were ready to sink the country if Barkhard wasn't given what he wanted.” Adsame swatted a fly that was buzzing around his head. Muttering a curse under his breath and continued, “Somalia was already in a huge mess, deep in debt and depression. Barkhad, his family and his group of supporters plundered Somalia.” He leaned back on the wooden chair, padding the back of his head with his crossed arms and shut his eyes.

Sensing the man’s need to be left alone, Ebube rose and made to walk away.

“Soldier.”

Ebube stopped mid stride.

“I will agree to a dialogue if your people assure me that Barkhad will be there. I want to look that butthole in the face and give my conditions.”

Ebube nodded.

“One more thing, soldier, if this turns out to be a trap, my men will unleash the greatest reign of terror ever seen in Somalia.”

THIRTY-ONE

Bouts of coughing tore through her throat as she pulled her car inside the farm and stepped out. It was exceptionally cold that evening and her body wasn't agreeing to it. The slug hadn't been agreeing with a lot of things lately. But today, it was in the mood for strolling so she decided to visit her farm.

Stepping out of the car, her eyes roamed around the place that doubled as her second home. The popping sound of fishes, the bubbly movements inside the ponds, all reminded her of how much she'd missed the place. How long was it?

Oge would go red with anger if she got to know that she came here tonight. And her mother? That one would make sure she was on the next plane out of the country by tomorrow morning.

The two women thought that the best way to stay safe was to stay away from anywhere or anything that had her name on it. They might as well have asked her to stop existing. With Ebube gone, and the babies ready to come out in a few weeks, her farm was important to her. She wouldn't let it rot just because some psycho decided to play an expensive prank on her.

Her mother and Oge believed the culprit was Henry, she thought otherwise. Henry didn't have the balls to play these kinds of high-level mind games.

The loser hadn't been able to look her in the eyes, the numerous occasions she'd bumped into him after Ebube left.

However, whether it was Henry or some crazy idiot—for all she knew it could even be a woman, Elizabeth was done hiding. She had a business to run, a life to live. This psycho wanted to ruin her, she wasn't going to give whoever it was, the pleasure.

So, here she was, on a Sunday night to go over her record books. Her manager had kept the place running in her absence, but it would never be the same as when she had been fully involved and in charge of affairs.

Walking towards her office she dialed the manager, it kept ringing... probably having a good time with his new wife. Giving up when the voicemail clicked in, she went ahead and unlocked the door.

If Ebube was alive, they would have been married by now, she thought as she stepped inside the warm workspace. Instead of standing in her office at

night, she would have been in his arms, enjoying his lips on hers and other sensitive parts of her body. Would he be gentle with her now that she was pregnant? Of course, he would. Her soldier would make love to her tenderly.

Stop, Elizabeth. Thinking about him didn't do her any good, rather, it had aggravated her anguish.

Putting a tea bag in an electric kettle, she turned it on and sat behind her desk and began to go through her record books. She hated this part of the business, checking sales, going through invoices, plotting sales figures against her stock. Someone had to do it and that someone was her.

Her darling Ebube, the night she followed him to his house after the party had suggested she employ an accountant to help ease the burden of paperwork. The same night he made her quiver like a jellyfish in his arms on his kitchen top.

God! She was doing it again, allowing herself to slip into nostalgia. The past was a place she wasn't meant to visit, but she kept doing it because it was so comfortable. So... so... real. His face, his laughter... those brilliant eyes.

Her heart leaped at the thought of him, his hands on her body, his mouth branding her skin, his shaft claiming her pussy... her core clenched and an unsettling ache to have him touch her took over her body.

"It hurts," she whispered, knowing that talking out loud was not the action of a sane mind, yet she was unable to contain it for a second more. "You know how much it hurts and you did it. You left." Would she have been able to stop him?

She remembered offering to speak to her father on his behalf, that was the morning after they had ravished each other's body for the third time. Daddy would do anything for her, he may even know some of the top officials who would speak to the Chief of Staff on Ebube's behalf. But her arrogant soldier had refused.

His pride wouldn't allow him to accept any offer from her *'politician father.'*

"I'm a soldier not a coward," he'd blurted. "I cannot accept a favor from any politician, what would that make me?"

He'd gone to Somalia and had died there. What did that make him?

"A brave fool," she hissed, blinking off tears from her eyes. "A stubborn, heartless fool." Cold, hard, hopeless fury coursed through her body. She hated him for doing this to her.

The worst that would have happened was him being dismissed from the navy.

And so what? He would get another job. She would have made sure she pressed her father to help him. But he wouldn't have that, would he?

Pushing the record books aside, she laid her head on the desk and allowed the tears to run. She should have listened to Oge and not come here. Instead of

filling time, it only served to amplify her loneliness and that wasn't good for her. She needed a distraction.

Her mind went to Oge, she could call her so they could go see a movie or go binge on junk food. Anything that wouldn't involve thinking about Ebube, going over old ground, obsessing over the lovely moments they shared.

Lifting her head, she wiped her face, angry at her outburst. There was no logical reason why today should be any harder than any other. Ebube was no more dead than he was yesterday, the day before or the day Felix brought the news.

And yet...

She took a deep breath and tried to snap out of it. Grabbing her phone, she typed rapidly and sent the messages. Hissing loudly, as though an audible admonishment to herself would make a difference. She would go out tonight with Oge, or Josh... whichever one of them got her text message and arrived first, she would apologize to the other person later.

This abrupt decisiveness was a trick her father had taught her, and it had worked so far.

Fake it until you make it, the old man would say. *Pretend that you are okay, and you will feel okay*.

She would work on this last bit.

Feeling the ache in her heart lessening, and the pressure behind her eyes fading away. She pushed the chair back and walked to the couch to wait for whoever would come first. Record checking would have to wait, what she needed now was distraction.

Food... Entertainment...

What... what was that?

She heard something... footsteps.

Or not.

Tilting her head towards the sound, she waited. Nothing... just the bubbling sound of fish in the ponds.

For a brief second, she thought she heard the sound of someone walking through the farm. Her gate was locked; Oge and Josh would need to dial her number when they arrived, so she could open it for them.

That sound again.

The crunch of sand that made her think of the other day when she'd returned home and suspected that someone was in her house, it turned out to be Ebube. This time around she was sure someone was out there... on her farm.

A shiver ran down her spine, not the usual cold, but a heart palpitating shiver as she heard a soft thud of something being dropped at her doorstep. The softest

of finger taps told her the intruder wanted to alert her of a delivery.

With her heart in her mouth, she waited for the footsteps to fade, giving her more time to calm her nerves before unlocking the door.

It wasn't the sight of a stranger with a weapon that made her take a few steps back—There was no one out there. Nor the cold sucked instantly into the warm office as she threw the door open.

It was the blood smeared across the threshold, and the pile of entrails on top of the step.

The cat was placed with its stomach cut neatly opened in one continuous, careful slice. Fresh blood oozing out of the cut down to her steps.

She opened her mouth to scream, but there's no air in her lungs so she took a few steps backward instead, holding on to the door frame for support.

Feeling a trickle of water letting down between her legs, she panicked. The horror before her had induced labor.

Finding air. She let out a loud scream at the first stab of contractions.

They say money is the root of all evil. The cause of all crime.

That's not true. Injustice is.

There were many others like the man—other people wandering around in this half-existence, and they were all here because of injustice.

They had no one to right the wrong done to them.

They wanted to find someone who would help them cleanse the evil, or they would do it themselves like the man would.

And the result?

Lives would be taken.

But it wouldn't end there.

The soldier might be dead, but he had set something in motion that couldn't be stopped until the man dealt with it.

How long was he going to stay hidden? Until he decided it was time to lay ghosts. The same way he did his mother's.

His mother was a torment. Her demands torturing.

"You should take care of mommy. Boy, mommy is sick without you around. Ain't no pussy better than mommy's, you know that boy...don't you?"

She was messed up.

He was messed up.

She had a noose around his neck and knew how to pull it.

"Ain't no pussy sweeter than mommy's."

He knew that, he craved it. And it made him cry after.

He pitied her, because it wasn't her fault. The soldier did it, he took her husband and that made her crazy and scared.

So, he decided to cleanse her and set her free.

The day he did, he pleasured her the way she liked. Throughout the night as if it was their final act.

And for one of them, it was.

He'd given her orgasm and death that night.

Watching fire lick her flesh wasn't what he would have loved to do, but that was the perfect ending. Purification by fire. Wasn't that in the Bible?

Purification by fire.

The man watched the door open and the lady stepped out. Her eyes roamed and lingered on the flowers by the wall. Thank goodness the searchlight wasn't positioned towards that direction; she would have seen him.

How he hated what pregnancy did to her. Her nose was bigger, her lips swollen, and she had darkened. Her backside had grown larger too.

His lips crooked up in a smile.

Maybe he would have her for the last time, then purify her.

No, she was soiled. The seed of the soldier was in her and he had to take it out.

Then she screamed. A very terrifying shrill that reminded him of the day he set his mother on fire. Her eyes widened in shock and her body trembled.

He didn't mean to do that to her, but it was necessary. She had to get the message, she had to get prepared.

Then he would come to perform the duty.

Soon. Very soon.

THIRTY-TWO

The girl was particularly nervous around him that evening and he understood. Wanting a man who doesn't want you could evoke such a reaction from a lady like her, so he wouldn't blame her. He would have wanted she didn't attend to him at all, but the warlord had instructed she do it.

As a set up?

Was the crazy sonofabitch looking for something to justify putting bullets inside his skull?

Crazy bastard, Ebube thought, looking down at a slim red book he had in his hands. A crash at the far end of the room made him jerk his head up. His half-filled glass of water was shattered on the floor, the girl stood by the mess transfixed. Snapping the book shut, he grabbed a rag by the foot of the desk and walked towards the spill.

"Careful there, lady. You don't want to hurt your feet," he said. Dabbing the water while avoiding the pieces of glass. He wasn't sure she understood his short sentence, but she stepped aside and watched him carefully pick the shattered pieces, using the rag as a holder for them.

Done with cleaning, he stood and leveled a gaze at her. "Are you okay?"

There was something unsettling about her today, as though she was scared of something or someone.

"Hey." He took a few steps towards her.

She backed away, her eyes widening in shock.

"Is there something wrong?" It was useless trying to communicate. She understood almost nothing in English, and all his efforts to learn Somali had proven vain. "Just help me dispose of the pieces of glass."

The girl opened her mouth, he thought she was finally going to say something to him. To his disappointment, only a whimper escaped from her throat.

Striding back to the desk, he picked his book. His butt had barely touched the seat when the first stab of gut-wrenching pain hit him, he groaned. The second jolt knocked him down.

The girl screamed and sped out of the room.

On his knees, clutching his stomach and groaning, his eyes caught a man's feet walk in and stand before him.

"Bloody *doofaarka*. My face will be the last you'll see before you die."

"Who are... what..." Blood sputtered out of his mouth with each word that struggled to get out of his throat. "What's happening to me?"

"You are dying."

Ebube staggered to his feet, determined not to succumb to death like a coward. Not when he would be a free man in two days. Settling his eyes on the man's face, he began to recollect—The *weasel-like* face, twitchy left eye, creepy look, ferocious stare. It was the same man that manned the general's entrance door and had always looked at him with open belligerence, the kind of aggression that he'd seen mostly in poorly socialized dogs.

"Pig!" Dragging a bad leg, the man walked towards him. "He made a mistake keeping you alive, now you want to make him go negotiate with those dogs!"

Forcing air into his thinning lungs, Ebube lurched himself to the wall and steadied his feet. "What did you do to me?"

"Not me. Him," the man blurted. "He's suddenly realized that you are nothing but a pig sent to weaken him."

Ebube felt his knee giving way, but he held on, he wouldn't go down before this crazy man. Planting his trembling feet firmly on the floor and using the wall for support, he waited for the man to get closer.

"You fucked his woman..."

Wha... what? How in the world...

"I have been watching you, soldier. The whore sneaks in and out of your room."

Jesus!

"How sweet is her *siil*, soldier? Better than your Nigerian whores? How many times did you have her?"

"You told Adsame." If only he could gather back the strength that seemed to be seeping out every passing second. He would decapitate this man limb by limb and wait for Adsame.

"I have to protect the general from you. Backstabber," the man spat and gave off a maniacal chuckle that tore through Ebube's body, sending burning anger down his gut.

Summoning faltering strength, Ebube whacked the man. His fist caught the

jaw, shifting the man’s heavily bearded face to the side while air and spittle wheezed out of his mouth.

The man managed to balance his weight on his good leg and limped backward with his hand on his bleeding mouth. A mixture of shock and rage clouded his face.

Staggering forward, Ebube kicked and punched frantically, missing his target twice, but the man’s bad leg left him at a disadvantage. One more heavy jab on the ribs and the man crumbled to the floor, rolled on his side, with his hands he made to stand up. Too late. The soldier reeled towards him again, dug his heel on his ribs and sent the surprised man flat on his face.

Feeling his strength ebbing, Ebube dragged himself towards the exit, gasping for air.

Two more days, he thought. Two more days and he would go home. To his family. To his lady.

His hand got hold of the door handle and he pushed. Letting out a guttural roar as he felt jagged claws walking through his lungs to his heart. Clutching his chest, he floundered out to the open yard, blood dripping down from his mouth, damping his robe.

Where was Adsame? Where the fuck was that coward that wouldn’t face him like a man?

Toppling over a stone, his legs finally gave way and he crumbled to the ground.

Get up, T man! He heard Felix’s voice.

What are you doing, Soldier? Get your ass up! Boro... Boro is here?

Daddy, come back when you are done fighting the bad guys...

Sweetheart... His eyes darted around in search of his daughter; sweetheart, daddy is coming home.

Was he?

Bube, I want you here, with me...

Elizabeth, Fuck! Elizabeth...

He rolled to his side. *Don't lie there like a boneless chicken,* his father would always say to him, *Get up!*

And he did!

For the second time, death came knocking.

But the soldier wasn’t going to give in that easily.

THIRTY-THREE

“They are beautiful.”

Elizabeth looked down at the babies in a single crib stretching their tiny lungs. Pulling herself into a sitting position, she turned her eyes to Josh who was standing at the foot of the bed and smiled.

“Josh.” It may not have worked between them, but one thing was sure, Josh had never stopped caring about her. He was the one that found her on the farm, petrified and in labor. She hadn’t asked him how he got in, the gate had been locked, she wasn’t going to do that today. “Thank you for everything.” Her blood pressure had spiked and everyone feared she would either lose her life or the babies. But Josh had swung into action, opening her up immediately.

“Come on, princess. I wouldn’t have survived it if anything had happened to you,” he said, walking to the crib.

She wasn’t going to talk about the horror she saw that night that induced the labor pains, and she was sure Josh wasn’t ready to discuss it either as all his attention was on the babies.

”They are so adorable,” he said, drawing closer.

“Yes.” They reminded her of what she had with their father. Something beautiful and adorable.

“You would want to carry them now, princess.” Josh lifted the babies, rocked them a little and placed them in her arms.

“A boy and a girl,” she said softly. “He gave me a boy and a girl.”

“So thoughtful of him.” Josh smiled. “And thank you princess, for making me part of this beautiful experience. Maybe I should get myself a woman who will give me little, beautiful beings.”

“Oh, Josh,” she said, not knowing how to respond to his comment. An impatient knock on the door reminded them that some people were waiting.

“Your family is here.” The cheshire cat grin didn’t leave his face.

“Let them in.” Clutching the babies to her breast, she felt a warmth that radiated through her chest. “My Soldier man, we made it. We brought lives into this world,” she muttered.

Suddenly she knew that if love was what she had heard and read from the

holy book, this was it. Selfless. He'd given her part of himself, while he had sacrificed the other part for a better course.

Feeling a rush of air in his lungs, Ebube gasped and opened his eyes.

"You cheated death again." Yes, he survived. Won the race with death that had pulled him into a spiral dark emptiness. Yet he had stubbornly held on, refusing to release his grip on life.

"I wasn't going to die." The sound of his own voice shocked him— raspy and coarse. Hurting as if an iron seared in fire was placed there. "My inside feels as though it's cooked." He tried to roll to his side.

"It is." The same doctor that attended to his gunshot wounds checked his pulse, said something in Somali to someone Ebube didn't know was there until then, turned back to Ebube and said, "You've got nine lives."

He was too weak to share in the joke. "How did...you saved me. Why?"

"Sagal. The girl wouldn't let me be until I agreed to risk Adsame burying bullets inside my gut, to save you." The man adjusted the pillow under his head. "I told her you were already dead because I know the potency of the poison that was slid inside the water that was given to you."

Poison? The water was poisoned? Now it all made sense—Sagal had tried to warn him but he didn't understand.

"Don't blame me," the man continued. "I was following orders. Adsame wanted you dead, so...." He shrugged and walked through the room to the sink at the corner to wash his hands.

"You saved me."

"Turns out I like you more than my old head." Walking back to him, the old man thumbed an object against the wall, the sound was barely audible but for some reason, it grated on Ebube's nerves. "I have never believed in miracles. But you, soldier, made me consider going back to church. That substance kills a man in less than twenty minutes. You still being alive is baffling."

"I should have put a bullet in your head instead." Adsame walked in, puffing out cigarette smoke from his mouth. Beside him was Sagal.

"You didn't."

"I'm benevolent, I told you."

"You wanted me to have a painful death."

"And it worked. Only that you didn't die."

"How did you know the truth?" Ebube asked.

"She told me."

Ebube looked past the General to Sagal who had her arms wrapped around her midriff. “Thank You,” He muttered.

“In five days, we’re going to the capital to meet with those *hooyatha wass.”*

“He’s been out for three days and just regained consciousness,” the doctor cut in. “You have to reschedule.”

“No need.” Five days would be enough for him to get back to his feet. Not totally but he was sure he would be able to make the journey. The sooner it was done the sooner he got home.

“Good.” Adsame slapped his chest.

He stifled a groan.

“You’re getting out of my country after that or I'll shoot your stiff ass and make sure you are truly dead this time.”

With all pleasure, Ebube thought. “What about Limaan?” He finally learnt the name of the man who oversaw his poisoning. The creepy man with a bad leg.

The general sat with a thud on a couch, stretched his legs and yawned. “Three bullets in the head.” With his fingers formed like a shotgun, the man aimed. “Pow... pow... pow.” Then blew imaginary smoke off the tip of his fingers. “The preek had his eyes on my woman all along, and he made me believe you were the dickhead.”

So that was it? Jealousy? The freak had wanted a piece of his master’s dish but wasn’t bold enough to ask nicely.

Pervert.

“Sagal?”

“What about her?”

“You like that girl.”

“Don’t know what I feel for her anymore.” Adsame pulled another stick of cigarette from his breast pocket and stuck it into his mouth.

“You have a weird way of expressing your emotions, General.”

“General Adsame doesn’t show emotions. That's for weak men like you.” The man lit the stick. “You have a woman waiting for you in Nigeria?”

“Was planning to propose to her but didn't get the chance.”

“And you think she is still waiting?”

He wished she was. “For the sake of what we shared.”

“Enjoy the moment, Soldier, live life. Fuck women. One doesn’t know when he will die you know. Your woman may have moved on.”

“She promised to wait.”

“They all promise shit.”

“Any woman ever promised you?”

“Don’t want to talk about it.”

“Sagal?”

“General Adsame isn’t a weak man.”

“But you like her.”

“Like her pussy.”

Four nights later, as he ambled back from where he went to pipe out the pressure that threatened to tear his bladder, he heard grunts and soft moans emanating from the warlord’s chamber. He paused by the opened window and peered in.

What he saw made him smile. Adsame might have women at his disposal, but this mousy one seemed to have his heart.

Unable to return to his laborious sleep, he turned and walked back to the open shade behind the building. Closing his eyes, he inhaled the scent of dry bush and night breeze. His inside still hurt, but not so much.

Thanks to the doctor.

And thanks to God for the gift of a second chance—third chance rather.

For a reason.

Yes. He remembered when the Reverend Mother Catherina spoke to him on top of that cliff at the UN military base. *“The good Lord has a reason for everything.”* Burning with fury and a sense of betrayal, he had dismissed those words.

Now he understood better. Tomorrow he would accompany Adsame to meet the UN council in the capital. Hopefully, the dialogue would go well, and the five-year war would be over.

Then what?

Home.

His little girl must be worried sick now. He had always gone to Warri to see her every month end. When he got the letter for this mission, he’d only broken the news to his step-mom and had pleaded that his daughter shouldn’t know about it.

The sound of laughter drifted into his ears. Two voices; one boisterous, the other a low whimper. “Things women do to strong men.” Ebube chuckled, getting up from the bench he was seated on. “This gender is capable of making a bad man sing,” he muttered, walking back to his room.

The voices made him think of his time with Elizabeth.

“My cupcake.” He groaned as his brain was flooded with the image of her.

PART TWO

"...Many waters cannot quench love, neither can flood drown it."
—Songs of Solomon 8:7

THIRTY-FOUR

“Josh...” The shadow of concern on his face told her she was about to live with the guilt of hurting someone that cared about her. “I don’t know what to say.”

Did she have feelings for him? She would be deceiving herself if she answered in the affirmative. But Josh was as soft as a jelly, he may not take her rejection well.

She’d suspected his intentions towards her when he started to bring loads of gifts with each visit. “They are for the babies, not for you,” he had said each time she objected.

“You should know how much I love you, princess.”

Only a blind man wouldn’t see how helpful Josh had been. He was the one she always rang when the hair on her back stood in fear. Of course, he didn’t believe, like the others, that the dissected animal placed on her porch was something to worry about.

A wild animal could have done that, he said.

As for the notes, he thought it was someone *shit-stirring. Some jumped up fools who think it's funny to trawl single, independent women*. But he had followed her to the police and also forced her into letting her father know about the threats.

And thanks to him, her father had moved her and the babies into another house, far from her former place. She now had security men manning her gate twenty-four hours every day.

“You are a nice man,” she said.

“Then marry me, be my wife and I will take care of you and our babies.”

Our babies. He had treated those little ones as if they were his from the day they were born.

The sofa dented as he shifted his bulk to face her, placing his hand on her thigh. She tried not to think of him running his hands on her naked body, she couldn’t imagine both of them under the sheets. It wasn’t what she would want to do with him.

“Let me be the man in your life, I will take care of you.”

That was the problem. He hadn’t realized she was not looking for someone

who would take care of her, she wanted what she had with the soldier.

“I can’t.” Placing her hands on his, she shook her head.

“Why?”

“It’s too early.” What kind of wife would she make when her heart was occupied with thoughts of another man?

Who is dead.

That was the problem. She hadn’t healed from the hurt losing him caused her, neither had she let go of the memories of him.

“Your mother told me you wouldn’t stop thinking about him,” Josh said, withdrawing his hand from hers.

“I told my mother that I’ll get over it.”

“It doesn’t seem like you are doing that.”

Her obsession with this dead soldier had become a source of concern to everyone. They said she’d spent barely a year with him, yet, she was mourning him like a woman who lost her husband of twenty-five years.

“Princess, if there’s anyone who can help you get out of this feeling, I think I am the one.”

She wished it was that simple.

“I will take care of you like I used to back then. If you don't love me now, I understand, I’ll wait for you to come around.”

“Josh...” Now she felt like a heartless bitch.

“No man would want to share his woman with another, dead or alive. But I am ready to take that risk. Just let me help you flush him out of your head.”

“You don’t understand,” she cut in. Flush he said? How would that even be possible when she had his babies! Every moment she stared at their faces, his stared back at her... His eyes...

“I do.” Josh stood up, reached out for her hands.

She flinched.

“That's why I want us together, your mother wants that too.” His eyes searched her face. “It didn’t work between us earlier because we were young, I want it to work now. Please, princess.”

“I can’t do that now. I need time.”

“How much time do you need?” He snapped. “I, uh, I am sorry, I didn’t mean to raise my voice.”

She understood and wouldn’t blame him if his emotions ran riot. It had been over a year now and she was supposed to have moved on. Maybe Oge was right, she needed a therapist.

Guilt and pity ran through her as he made his way towards the door. “Josh please, don’t feel bad.”

“I will be fine,” he said and continued walking. Then stopped. “If you were the one gone, do you think he would mourn you this long?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“Don’t waste your life mourning the dead. You are still young and have your life ahead of you.” And he was gone.

It was for his good. Josh would come to appreciate what she had done when he realized she would bring him nothing but depression if she agreed to marry him like this.

But why did it hurt so much to watch him go? The man fed her kids, bought them toys and carried them on his shoulders. He bought her groceries and refused money for them. Why couldn’t she accept him?

She could learn how to love him with time. Both of them could be happy together.

Wearing flowered printed leggings, teamed with a light gray sweatshirt that fell off one shoulder, and a blue, fuzzy slippers, Elizabeth sat cross-legged on the bed, arms depressing the mattress on both sides, head slightly bowed, her blond weave zigzagged to her back— a handful covered her face.

Oge stood in the doorway, one hand on her waist, her bag hanging on her arm. “You are out of your mind if you are going to sit here and allow a good man slip out of your fingers!”

“He deserves happiness and I feel I can’t give him that.”

“You’ve been feeling shitty lately.” Oge walked inside and sat on the bed, picked a fashion magazine that was on top the bedside table and began to fan herself. “What kind of hell is this?” Oge muttered, got up and opened the windows for more air.

“Sorry,” Elizabeth said. Her generator had chosen that day to pack up and the technician had refused to pick when she called. “We have to manage the heat tonight.” The rechargeable lantern on her bedside table cast a warm glow across the room.

“Okay.” Oge shrugged. “Back to what I was saying. I used to think that you have a little sense in your head, but now I know you have none at all.” Picking her bag up from the bed and dumping it on top of the bedside table, so she could shift closer to Elizabeth. “What did you say is your reason for rejecting Josh?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Please make me understand.”

”Don't do this, Oge.”

“You flung his proposal back into his face because of what? You want to remain single for the rest of your life?”

Elizabeth slumped like a two-decade hobo on the bed. “I’m tired, Oge.” The truth was that she didn’t know why she couldn’t get herself to accept Josh’s proposal. He was a very caring man who had loved her in his own way.

“You are tired? A good man asks you to marry him and you are tired?” Oge adjusted herself so she could stare Elizabeth in the face. “Let me ask you girlfriend, are you okay? Why would you want to hurt that good man?” Tilting her head backwards, she gave her friend a quizzical stare. “Are you going out with someone else?”

“No! Why would you say that?”

“Either that or you are crazy.”

“I’m not seeing anyone and I’m not crazy. I just want to be left alone.”

“Till when? It’s been a year and four freaking months, Elizabeth. Move on!”

“I have moved on.”

“You’ve not,” the other lady said. “Do you at least love him?”

She shook her head. She wasn’t capable of loving anyone yet, so the answer was no. But she could try... Josh deserved her love. “Not yet,” she replied.

“Not yet. That means there’s hope.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“You can’t say that if you don’t try.” Her friend cleaned off some lint from her shoulder. “Come on Lizzy, Josh is a good man. don’t break his heart.”

“I don’t know...”

“You are just scared.”

“That’s not it.”

“Shiii... no more words. Get your fat ass off the bed, pick your phone and give him a call now.”

“Hm hm.” Shaking her head, she rolled away from her friend. “Not now.”

“When?”

“Maybe later.”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe.” She was never going to call.

THIRTY-FIVE

“You have a set of twins waiting for you.”

She was pregnant? I have two babies?

The news ran through him like electrical sparks and he burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“Guys I am going home to a set of twins!” He announced to the four men with him in the chopper, throwing his fist in the air. He had fathered another child— Children! If there was any reason why this whirlybird should fly faster, this news was one.

“Congratulations, sir!”

With a satisfying grin, he tried her number one more time, then his heart sank to his stomach as fresh fear crept in. Could it be that she was deliberately avoiding everyone?

Felix said she’d moved from her house and he hadn’t been able to reach her.

“No one seems to know where she moved to.” Felix had said after expressing the shock of being called by a man everyone had assumed was dead.

“Find her, man,” Ebube Instructed the awestricken Felix. “Her friend stays somewhere around waterlines.” The bigger problem now was that he didn’t have Oge’s house address and phone number to aid Felix in the search. “Help me find her. I don't know how you will do that but, please.”

“I would go to the end of the world for you, T man. You saved my life,” Felix assured.

His was one of the few phone numbers Ebube had memorized by-heart. He’d gotten himself a phone and a new line at the airport from the wand of money given to him—gifts from Adsame. The warlord had given him the cash and two guns—a shotgun and a Glock.

You will need them, the warlord had said when he had wanted to refuse the gifts.

With his head pressed against the window, he thought of the possibility of Elizabeth married to another man.

Then what happens to his children? Or were they not his?

The whirring sound of the chopper became the marker of time, distracting

him from the anticipation that grabbed his whole body.

He must see Elizabeth, there’s a lot they had to talk about.

Today is the day.

The man took his time getting ready. He had to. There was no way he could allow a mistake now.

He’d found her new place that had security men stationed everywhere. And the new man that always visited her.

She was having an affair. The man didn't expect her to, but he wasn’t surprised. The soldier had touched her and made her a whore. The same way he made his mother crazy.

It would end today. She and her abominations would be cleansed, it would be the soldier’s fault.

The man ran a bath, soaked himself and scrubbed his body. A purifier must be cleansed first. It’s called baptism of water.

The one he would give to her and her abominations would be that of fire.

Done with the bath, he picked his surgical gloves, disposable clothes—and a mask—just in case.

Getting into her house wouldn’t be difficult. The men guarding her wouldn’t stop him because he was on a just mission and the universe was in his favor. though he didn't know why he delayed and had allowed her to bring forth the abominations.

But it didn’t bother the man. They would go with the lady.

Only then would the right thing be done.

THIRTY-SIX

There was something wrong with the silence.

Jolting her from deep sleep, even before she was fully awake, she knew... Opening her eyes she gasped, she was staring into the eyes of a masked man seated on her bedside table.

“It’s 12:05 in the afternoon.” The man said. “You shouldn’t be sleeping, less the enemy comes in like a thief.”

Like a thief...

A thief! Elizabeth tried to jerk up but she couldn’t. Something heavy, like a tidal wave was pulling her down into dark oblivion. She was powerless to it, as it seeped through her, she had no strength to resist the urge for unconsciousness. At the back of her mind something equally powerful was forcing its way into her consciousness... Telling her to wake up... Get up...

Her babies.

The last thing she remembered was breastfeeding them, placing them on the bed beside her. Tired, she had decided to take a short nap.

“They are fine for now,” the masked man said, reading her thoughts.

A satchel she didn’t recognize stood on top of the table, beside it were syringes, a bottle of chloroform and some small bottles, the kind she’d seen in hospitals and drugstores.

“A little of this...” the man said, pointing at the bigger bottle. “...placed close to their tiny noses knocked them out.”

Panic coursed through her at the thought of her babies dying in their sleep.

“As for you?” The man uncrossed his legs but didn’t stand. “A moderate dose. I was afraid you wouldn't regain consciousness. That wasn’t the best way to go.” He shook his head. “You must be purified, saved from that man before you will be allowed a passage.”

Panic rose in her throat; she opened her mouth to speak and felt pain. There was some kind of gag, a hard, thin metal band which pressed against the corner of her mouth. She tried to make a noise with her mouth closed but something else was in there, holding down her tongue and all that came out was a low moan.

When... how did this man get in? Her security men... the CCTV cameras... how did he bypass every one of them?

She didn’t know how it was possible that a masked man was in her room, but she knew one thing, she was in trouble. Her babies would also be in great danger.

Pulling on her hands that were bound over her back, pain coursed through her... God, the pain. What had the man done to her... knock her out or hit her with a hammer?

Please. She mentally pleaded, fixing her eyes on him.

“Oh, here.” The man moved from the table and came to her, grabbing her by the hair. “Do not try to scream if I undo your mouth.” He hesitated as if waiting for her to say something. “Will you shout?”

She shook her head.

That voice... that voice... though muffled but she could swear she had heard it before ... somewhere.

“Anyway. I should warn you I won’t hesitate to cut your two abominations into tiny bits and feed you their flesh if as much as a whimper leaves your mouth.”

Fear got her nodding again

He moved his gloved hands behind her head to undo the gag.

She had to get out from this man. Had to get to her babies... No strength but she had to do something.

Without thinking, she threw her weight at him, knocking him down. Immediately, rolling off him, wiggling towards the door...

Must get out.

Must get help.

The door was closed. Her feet and hands bound. There was no way she could reach the handle. Crap! She felt his hand on her legs, dragging her through the floor back to where he was, as she rolled over, the intruder no longer had a mask over his face.

She knew him... the voice... the coldness in his touch.

Henry!

She had to scream. She must scream... but she couldn’t find her voice as the man lifted an object over his head. His eyes were wide open and starring, his face pale, his lips drawn back over his teeth—like a psychopath.

Then he swung.

Elizabeth lifted her hands to defend herself.

And then, nothing.

The single Bell 206, Airbus Helicopter took off from Lagos fifteen minutes later than previously scheduled. All four passengers on board, anxious to get to Port Harcourt for different reasons. One— Commodore Dambo who couldn't wait to show him off.

For Ebube it was homesickness. He missed the feeling of sleeping and waking up in the place he had gotten used to in a short while. And the woman he'd fallen deeply in love with. The mother of his babies.

How could he ever forget that? Knowing he was a new father had left his heart somersaulting in a good way.

"Nervous, boy?"

"Can't help it sir." He didn't realize how tense he was until Dambo slapped his thigh and made him stop tapping his shoes on the floor.

"I am glad Allah brought you back," the man said.

Rotten bastard. How did he even know about his homecoming? He had been at the airport to welcome him, and had even arranged for a chopper to fly them down to Port Harcourt.

Felix the big mouth must have made the announcement, now the man had taken the pain of flying to Lagos to atone for what he did to them. He could ask the commodore about the case. Whether someone else pursued it. But now wasn't the time. Seeing Elizabeth was his top priority at the moment.

Felix found Oge, both of them would be waiting for him at Port Harcourt International Airport. In the next fifty minutes he would be there, heading to her house.

To his relief, Felix confirmed from Oge that Elizabeth had refused to give another man a chance even when she was told he was dead.

His Elizabeth. His woman. A thrill ran through his body at the thought of seeing her again. How would she receive him? He didn't want to imagine how it would play out.

Running sweaty palms up and down his thigh, he searched through the pocket of his white uniform, for his phone, searching through his contact list for her new number. Since he got it, he'd been itching to dial it and hear her voice again, but his partners in crime had suggested he surprise her instead.

"Make it a social media worthy military homecoming," her friend had said. "Like those white military men we see on Instagram and TikTok."

"I suggest you try and catch some sleep, son." Dambo said, leaning back and shutting his eyes.

Glancing at his boss, Ebube nodded, though he knew sleep was a thousand

miles away from his eyes. It was difficult to calm the excitement that was almost making it difficult for him to breathe.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Feeling the first stirrings of consciousness, she opened her eyes. She didn’t want to wake up. She wasn’t even sure she could. Then she tried to sit up from the...

Oh!

Collapsing back on the floor, she shut her eyes. She was in a lot of pain. Her back ached. Her shoulders felt like someone was pulling them from her body and her hand throbbed in time with her heartbeat.

The pain was worse in her head which felt as though it had been hit with a heavy piece of metal. Whenever she tried to move it, her neck was stiff and the muscles protested loudly. Something cracked, flaked and fell down her shirt. Dry blood.

Panic rushed up her spine immediately.

Henry had hit her.

Where was he? Where were her babies?

Her babies!

No! She must find them, must get them back from him. If only there was a way to loosen the cords around her hands and her legs. If only she could get closer to the window, or the door, and scream for help.

But he said he would kill the babies if she screamed. Sitting idle wouldn’t work, she had to do something. She began to crawl towards the bedside table where he’d left his satchel bag. Praying something in would help her cut the cord.

Heart beating fast, hope crept in as there was a pocket knife. She picked it with her mouth. Thank God, he didn't gag her this time.

Dragging herself into a seating position, she began the difficult task of cutting her arms loose with the knife trapped between her lips.

Blood had pooled in her mouth by the time she was done but she didn’t care. Quickly losing the cord around her feet, she staggered up and headed for the door.

The eerie silence that greeted as she stepped out of her room, sent panic through her. Her ears didn’t pick the voice of the man or the whimper of the babies.

The trickle of her milk letting down—an instinctive reaction to her babies being in danger —aggravated her panicking. Dragging her feet down the stairs, she got to the sitting room and found it empty.

The urge to abandon herself to the floor and weep came so strong, but she bit back the tears and continued searching. Then he heard his voice... an incoherent murmur... a chant?

Edging toward the sound, she found herself standing in front of her visitor's room. The door was slightly open and the man was there—his back on her. She could see her babies, stripped, their bodies pink as if they'd been scrubbed hard, lying there... sleeping peacefully...

But she knew better. They were sleeping deeply due to Henry's sedative. She wasn't going to cry. there was no room for showing weakness, it could cost her, her kids' lives.

"Cut out the abomination... clean the world of evil..." he murmured. His hands raised as though he was summoning an invincible being. "Destroy the seed of the wicked and rid the earth of sin. Slay the children of the soiled..."

He was going to kill her babies. Bile rose up her throat, followed by a sudden urge to vomit, she clutched her stomach.

This was sick! Henry was sick. She wouldn't allow him to practice his wickedness on her and her babies.

Without the prompt of conscious thought, she rushed towards him. At the sound of her feet, he turned but it was too late. Her hand flew to his face; she pressed her thumb into his eye socket as hard as she could.

"Leave us alone!"

The two of them struggled. His hands in her hair, pulling hard, while she summoned the remaining strength in her to push into his eyes. Her fingers with their nails sunk in, cracking a ball and drawing blood.

His scream filled her ears but she didn't care.

He pulled harder on her hair, jabbing her ribs with his fist.

She lost balance.

"Bitch!" He screamed. His hands covering his bleeding eye. "Whore!"

His voice was loud. The security men would hear now.

Or they wouldn't.

The house was soundproof, it was her father's property, one of the places he'd used for political meetings.

"Yes?"

“We want to see your madam.” His heart thumped with excitement, so wildly that he feared it would burst in tiny pieces now he was this close to holding his babies and his woman in his arms.

“Does she know you are coming?” One of the Mopol guys at the gate asked. Oge stepped out of the car and approached the men. “Oh, Madam na you and them follow?”

“Yes. Is my friend in?”

“I think so. She never comot since today.” The man beckoned to his colleague, asked if he’d seen Elizabeth that day, then turned back to them —his focus on Oge. “Call her nau.”

“We can’t. You see,” Oge turned to face Ebube. “This man here is her, huh, fiancée who just returned and we want this to be like a surprise.”

“Ah. Oga!” The mopol men hailed, ushering them inside the compound. “Welcome sir...”

Oge rang the doorbell and they waited. A few seconds passed and nothing.

She rang again.

Seconds turned to minutes as they waited and no one answered the door.

He was forced to dial her number.

THIRTY-EIGHT

It was time to run.

Gathering her still knocked out babies in both arms she fled the room without looking back to know if he was in pursuit.

He wouldn’t because he had lost an eye. She wished he lost the two, then he wouldn’t come after her.

Getting to the sitting room she heard her phone ring. Going back upstairs to get the phone would be too risky. Getting out of the house before Henry found her was the right thing to do. So, she headed for the door the same time the doorbell chimed for the umpteenth time.

The door was locked from the inside but with the key mercifully still in the lock. Throwing a glance over her shoulder, she lay the babies on the couch and started fumbling with the lock.

The key slid out of the door and fell on the floor as she heard Henry's cry behind her. Looking back, Henry was staggering into the sitting room. Should she go back and finish off the other eye or continue trying to unlock the door?

“I will kill you!” He bellowed, heading directly towards her as if he could still see clearly.

Trying to get the key from where it had fallen wouldn’t do much good. So, she left the door and headed towards the window, shifting the curtain with one swipe.

She felt a surge of hope on seeing some people standing outside.

Slapping her face to the glass, she tried to call for help, but they had their faces away from the window, oblivious of her need for help. Then Henry was at her back, snapping the curtain shut and pulling her by the hair. She wished she had hurt him more than just blinding an eye. God knows he deserved it.

But it was too late. He got her now and she feared she may not have the chance to fight back.

Dragging her to the wall, he slammed her head on the hard brick. Once. Twice and it was done. She felt exhaustion flood her body, overwhelming her.

“What the fuck!”

He could swear he caught a glimpse of Elizabeth’s face in the window as he looked over his shoulder. Then it was gone!

Something wasn’t right.

Shoving Oge out of the way, he banged at the door. “Elizabeth! What in the world is going on in there?” He banged harder.

“T man?” Felix called.

“I saw her from that window. She... something isn’t right in there,” he said, striding towards the window. The curtains were drawn as though they had never been disturbed. Only three lines of red... stains?

Was that blood?

And the lines looked to him like some fingers had left them there.

“Hey!” He shouted to one of the mopol men. “Anyone entered here to look for her?”

“No sir.”

“There’s something going on inside there. We have to break into the house.”

Forcing the heavy steel security door open would be a futile effort. But what other option did he have? “Is there any other way into the house?” He asked no one in particular.

“Yes, from the back. Let me go check.” Oge ran out and returned as fast as she’d left. “Locked.”

Jesus!

“Calm down, Terminator...”

“Don't tell me to calm down!” Dread flooded him. “I have this kick in the ass that she’s in trouble!” He caught a look in Felix’s eyes that told him that the other man was confused at his sudden apprehensiveness.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath thinking of what next to do. The answer came to him fast. Without hesitation, he walked back to the window, and with his elbow he hit hard. Once. Twice. The glass shattered, cutting through his skin.

It took another long minute for them to dig through the wall and pull out the burglary proof and move in. The first thing that greeted them were the babies on the sofa.

Still. Lifeless.

“Jesus!”

“Where is she?”

Pulling out his gun, he took the stairs two at a time, kicked her room door open and swung in, his finger on the trigger. Two figures were at the foot of the bed. One was on his knees, astride the other that seemed to have no life.

Elizabeth! He saw her chest rise and fall and a sense of relief washed through him.

“Get away from her, now!” His words were clipped. His gun trained on the man’s chest.

“Put the gun down.”

The man shook his head and groaned to the pain that must be emanating from his damaged eye. The wound looked fresh.

“Damn! Drop the gun or I’ll kill her now!” The man shouted, raising a syringe Ebube hadn’t noticed earlier. “I am warning you. I’ll stab her with this and you will be sorry!”

The man wiped his chest, skin shredded as if he'd been whipped with barbed wire, and pointed the needle at Elizabeth’s neck. “Put down the gun!”

Various ways of how to take the guy out ran through Ebube’s head. But all of them needed someone who would aid him in executing it. Felix. If he was there, this rotten bastard would have been taken him down by now. But Felix and Oge had rushed the babies to the hospital. He thought of the two mopol men. Where the fuck were they?

“I’ll do it!” The man barked, pushing the needle into the skin of her neck.

The man wasn’t joking, Ebube could see from the tightening of his face but he kept his finger on the trigger. “Stay away from her.”

The man pulled the syringe plunger. “I’m warning you!”

“Okay... okay.” Ebube dropped the gun and raised his hands, waiting for the man to give him an instruction.

The man looked shocked, as if he didn’t believe Ebube would actually drop the gun.

“Let her go.”

“I can’t.” The man’s voice shook with pain... fear? Was the man afraid of... him?

There was something familiar about... “I know you...” Ebube said.

The man’s face broke into a smile as he stood to his feet.

“Henry?”

“They said you were dead. Now you are here.”

There was no trace of the delicate young man he had walked into at the mall. His hair that had been well trimmed and rich-dark, was now tattered and bleached. He now had the look of a man who was in a long-term commitment to drugs.

The faint sound of a siren from afar shattered the silence. Maybe someone had alerted the police—the mopol men? “Henry. What are you doing?”

“It’s your fault. Everything is your fault. Now she has to go.”

The blaring of sirens was now closer. “You hear that sound? Those guys are coming here.”

“I don’t care.” Henry snarled, wiping the fluid trickling down from his bad eye. “Must finish the cleansing.”

Ebube didn’t know what the hell the man was talking about, but he wasn’t going to stand like a moron without doing anything to save his woman. “Henry, let her go.”

“It was you that night. You started this... you killed my father,” Henry snared. “And my mother, and her!” Pointing at Elizabeth. “Murderer! bad, bad soldier.”

What the fuck was this man talking about?

“You do bad things... make people do mad things...You and your seed must go...you are soiled, so are they... so is she...”

“Henry, calm down and let’s talk.” Part of what he’d been taught in the military. Negotiation. Engaging the threat in a conversation buys you time and also weakens the threat. “Let me help you.” He wanted to remain calm, but his heart was hammering in his chest as the reality of what was happening lay before him.

“I know why you came for him that night, and why you are here now.” Henry glanced at Elizabeth and focused back on Ebube. “You’re a bad man. Bad man...bad man.”

He was wasting a lot of time, but any wrong move could cost him Elizabeth. “Drop the syringe, Henry. Let me help you.”

“You can’t.” Henry laughed. “You can’t even help her now. It’s my duty to make her go.”

Help her go...what in God’s name was he talking about?

“It’s your fault, you make me do bad things.”

Enough of listening to this rotten bastard. With his shotgun at his feet, Ebube calculated it would take his right hand about ten seconds to draw his Glock from the back pocket of his trousers.

Bad idea, he thought.

But there was another option... Without thinking, he threw himself on Henry, catching him unawares. Henry dropped the syringe as his arms flew. Seizing the opportunity his fist started pounding on his face, including his battered eye.

Pulling Henry away from the foot of the bed, he landed a kick on his stomach. “You are sick! Sick and crazy.”

Another kick on Henry's ribs and the man jerked as if a string was pulled through his chest. Kneeling astride him, Ebube let his punches flow freely. All the anguish of being away from them fell in those punches. "You don't touch my family." He grunted. "You get that? You don't fucking come close to what belongs to me!"

"We will take it from here, sir." A police officer walked in through the door, followed by Felix and the mopol men.

Felix moved in and grabbed him from behind. "Leave them to do their job now. The suspect is their responsibility."

"Suspect? This guy is a maniac!" Ebube said, releasing his hold on Henry's neck.

Henry's lips stretched, with blood oozing beneath the silver caps in his teeth. He was smiling. The asshole was smiling. Ebube pressed his hand to his battered chest, feeling his broken ribs move beneath his fingers.

Henry screamed in pain.

Ebube pushed harder, grinding the bones together. "You bastard! You deranged bastard!"

Short laughter gurgled out of Henry's throat. "Isn't history repeating itself?"

Every word was followed with a trickle of blood.

"The soldier is about to kill the son the same way he killed the father, the only difference is that he was wearing a mask when he attacked the father."

"Wha...what did you just say?" It didn't take more than a few seconds after those few lines left Henry's mouth for Ebube to remember. *The soldier wearing a mask...the soldier killing the son the same way he killed the father...* "Who are you?"

"I waited. Patiently..." Henry said, lifting a hand, placing it on Ebube's back as if he wanted to pull him into a hug.

His fist...thumb...pressing hard. His nail? Broke into his skin with a sharp prick like a needle. "Finally..." Henry whispered, dropping his hand back on the floor.

"That's enough, officer!" A policewoman shouted. "Step aside, let's do our job."

If any of the policemen heard his discussion with Henry, they didn't show any sign, but Ebube was sure Felix heard because he too was close, pulling him away from the mentally sick man.

They watched the policemen haul Henry up and lead him to the door. Catching them unawares he slipped out of their hold, breaking into the shambling run of a badly injured man.

Ebube called out to the police.

But it was too late.

The man went through the closed window with an eruption of glass—it was later they found out that the protector had been pulled out earlier—and fell into thin air. And just a second later, they heard a thump as the man landed on the floor below.

“Good for h...” Ebube began to say, then he felt a snap inside. Snap snap...as if his organs were being attacked. “What the fu...” His throat was constricting with each word. “What is...” He was thrown backward by the pain that rushed from his back and was spreading all over his body. His nerves were strutting as if they were being pulled all at once. In his head he was calling on Jesus and God to help him as his fingers clutched his chest. *Shit. He stabbed the needle in me.*

Oh God... oh Jesus...

He heard Felix shout, then the two of them were falling over and flat with his body landing on top of Felix’s.

“Terminator!”

Oh God... oh Jesus...

Struggling to sit up, the pain that was numbing his body held him down. His vision blurred, all he was aware of were voices... someone was shouting, someone was calling his name.

Then, nothing.

THIRTY-NINE

Three days Later...

She lost the power of speech and the power of thought. A thousand questions raced around her head and she wondered if, perhaps she had gone mad—if she was imagining Ebube—her dead lover, bending over her. Staring into her eyes.

“Bube.” She whispered it, afraid that speaking out loud would break the trance, and that her soldier would disappear.

He opened his mouth, but it seemed she wasn’t the only one lost for words. She saw the tears built below his lower lashes and as they fell, she felt wetness on her own cheek.

“Bube?” Louder now, but still hesitant. She didn’t know what was happening but she didn’t want to question it. Her soldier had returned back to her, like he promised. Pressure built in her chest and her ribs couldn’t contain the thumping coming from her heart. Tugging on her right arm she felt a restriction, she had been placed on the drip. Trying to confirm where she was, she needed to free her hand so she could put it over her face and feel if she was real—if all this was real because this couldn’t be happening.

“Hey, cupcake.” His voice shook, as he struggled with fighting his emotions.

“You’re—” Dragging every word. “Actually here?” If her heart had ever raced— it was sprinting at the moment. “You came?”

“And in time too.” Breaking out in a boyish grin, his tongue grazed the surface of his lips. “I thought I'd lost you.”

Then she remembered. Yesterday. The deep sleep. Henry in her room. Her babies...

“My babies!” She cried, jerking up, but he stopped her, laying her head back on the pillow.

“They are fine.” He brushed strands of hair away from her forehead. “We saved them.”

Tears flowed freely down the corners of her eyes. Yesterday had been the scariest day of her life. She had thought it was over. “That man...Henry.”

“He won’t be bothering us again.”

“He knows you.”

“Yes. He’s... I don’t know how he...” He paused. “It’s his father. The man that shot my brother and I had to... do what I thought was right.”

“How did he...”

“Let’s not talk about it now, cupcake. I’ll tell you everything when you’re back on your feet.” He bent and planted a soft kiss on her lips.

Her body responded immediately. Lacing her free arm around his neck, she fused her lips with his. Wincing, she pulled away and grimaced.

Every part of her body hurt including her lips.

“I’m so sorry, cupcake,” he said. “For everything that has happened to you. I caused you pain, my love.”

“Don’t say that, Bube.” She wound her hand around his neck again and pulled him into a hug. “You look so...” Her face scrunched with concern.

“Undesirable?”

“No... God no...” Giggling, she gently pushed him back so she could look at him. “What did they do to you?” Touching his face.

Taking her hand, he planted a kiss on her palm. “Do you still feel something for this soldier? Do I still attract you?”

“You will always have my heart.”

Leaning forward, he buried his face in her neck, giving her the pleasure of inhaling his cologne— a new one, but she loved it.

“My total package,” he murmured.

“I almost lost my mind when I heard you were killed.”

“I thought of you all the time I was away, my lady.” His voice faltered with emotion. This was where she belonged, with this man.

The door opened and Josh walked in. “Princess,” he said as he approached her bed and bent over her to check her signs.

Ebube stood up to make room for him.

“I was told you’re getting better.” He leaned back, slipping his hands into the pockets of his coat.

“I am fine now.”

“I know you are.” He smiled. “Especially now he’s here.” He added, turning to face Ebube.

“Josh,” Elizabeth started. “This is...”

“Captain Ebube.” Josh finished for her. “We’ve already met.”

It must have ended on a friendly note from what she saw. Josh had his hand stuck out for a shake and Ebube grabbed it without hesitation. Both of them regarding each other with admiration and respect.

“You saved our lives.”

“I was only doing my job,” Josh replied, slipping his hands inside the pocket

of his lab coat. “What a scare you all gave me that day.” Letting out a nervous chuckle, he turned away from the taller and more masculine Ebube, focusing his eyes back on Elizabeth. “I can’t remember the last time I prayed the way I did that evening. I couldn’t imagine a whole family dying in my hospital.”

“A whole... What are you talking about, Josh?”

“Your soldier got himself stabbed with a... let’s just say a substance that would have burned him from the inside out.”

“Jesus!” She moved her gaze from Josh to Ebube. “Jesus!” Now she noticed. His breathing as if he was drawing air from the deepest of holes. The almost imperceptible slur in his words. Was that why he asked if he still attracted her? “Bube...”

“Come on cupcake. Don’t waste a precious tear on this.” He said, moving to sit beside her. “I’m fine.” He turned his head towards Josh. “Isn’t that true, Doc?”

“Sure. His system fought back. And from his progress so far, every part of him will come back to normal in a month or two.”

“Bube, you would have died.” She moaned.

“My love.” He took her hands. “This body passed through worse things in Somalia and yet I survived. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Yes.” She swallowed a sob. “God, yes.” He was alive and back to her. It told her a lot.

“Thank you once again, Doctor Josh for everything.” Ebube turned to Josh.

“That’s nothing,” the other man replied. “I would do anything for her.”

“I know. Her friend told me about the relationship between both of you.”

“Unfortunately, she chose you over me.”

It was a friendly remark, she observed. One not born out of bitterness or envy. One that set laughter rolling out of their mouths and warmth stroking her cheeks. “It’s okay. The most important thing is that you make her happy.”

“I’ll make her happy.”

That she had no doubt. Her soldier would make her happy.

FORTY

Some weeks later...

She had her back on him, leaning on the car. The moon did a perfect job in accentuating the glow of her skin. The gentle breeze ruffled the yellow silk robe wrapped around her; he was sure she had nothing underneath.

His body responded with a surge of desire as she swayed her ass from side to side, oblivious of him. It's been about six weeks now and he didn't think he could wait any longer.

She was feeling better. A little pain here and there once in a while but she seemed stronger, and him? As strong as if he'd never had any accident.

Moving closer, he reached for her ass and scrunched a handful, then leaned against her body. "Hot sauce," he whispered into her ears, curling his arms around her middle and pulling her closer so her ass would brush against his arousal.

"Hmm," she moaned.

A naughty idea came into his head—unfurl her robe, part the slit of her fleshy mound and dig into her moist core.

"You left me all by myself."

Turning to face him, she stroked his bare chest. "I didn't want to disturb your father and children bonding," she purred, drawing an invisible pattern with her nail around his nipple.

She wasn't helping him take things easy, with the way she was going, he would have to yank off her robe and slide his engorged staff inside her.

"I have to make up for the times I didn't spend with them." Holding her by the waist, her breasts rose and fell against his chest, stroking and stoking flames inside him.

"Look at me," he ordered.

She laughed but didn't.

"Come on, I've missed looking into those eyes." He tipped her jaw so her face would meet his. "A day didn't pass without me thinking about you. I was so scared I was going to die without spending any time with you, but when I didn't, a new fear took over." His fingers traced their way down her neck, stroking up

and down. “The fear that I may lose you, I thought you have moved on.”

“I died the day Felix brought the news of your...”

“Oh, my cupcake. I am so sorry.”

“You left me in the dark, didn’t call.”

He pulled her into his arms. “My love, it wasn’t intentional, I couldn’t get my hands on any phone. When I finally did, your number was switched off! I thought maybe...maybe something had happened to you.”

“So, tell me, how many women warmed your bed over there?”

Her question should have offended him, but no, his cupcake had the right to ask all the questions in the world and he would oblige her with a reply, one he was proud of.

“No woman was worthy enough.” Brushing his lips against hers, he slipped her robe off her shoulders. His fingers hooked under the straps of the mini nightgown and looped them off. It dropped down, leaving her naked from the waist up.

“My endowed witch,” he muttered, burying his face between the huge pair. “Your breasts, my God!” Her nipples were one of her best features, flicking them gently with his thumbs, stiffened them further.

She shivered.

“Relax cupcake,” he said. “It's just us in this large compound.” It was also a good thing that the house wasn’t surrounded with storey buildings, so they wouldn’t be giving neighbors a free show. He tilted his head, captured one nipple between his lips and let it go.

Wrapping her arms round his head she gasped. “I thought you’re tired after your day with the Admiral,” Stroking his head, her voice throaty.

“Tell me you don’t want me tonight.” He gripped her waist tighter and kissed her. Once, twice, then she parted her lips and let him in. He knew he would never stop until he was inside her. Soon his hands were everywhere up her back and over her arms. His kiss harder, deeper, with an urgency he’d buried these past weeks as he waited for her to get better.

“Bube...”

“Cupcake.” Lifting and sitting her on the bonnet, she widened her legs to accommodate him. Her arms were around him, as sure as a ship’s anchor. Feeling again the rush of desire, the surging tide of warmth only her body could arouse. He let out a painful moan and bent back her head across his arm so he could run his tongue on the rings of her neck.

His hands roamed down her body, stroking every bit of skin. She trembled in his arms like a leaf and his heart swelled at this effect. Possessing her body and having her crave...begging for him had been a huge turn on. “I missed you. God,

it was crazy not having you for this—”

She pulled his face up. The rest of his words were lost against her mouth. It wasn’t words she needed, he realized. Not now, not after all this time.

Knotting her fist in his shirt, she pulled him harder against her. A groan rippled out of his throat, he pushed his tongue deep inside her mouth, hoping to make her feel the burning desire charging through him.

She accepted him without delay

They pulled apart and took shaky, shallow breaths. He pulled her into a fiery, passionate kiss again, his hands working their way around her body, feeling each crevice as if new...

“Oh, my goodness! Lizzy, what have you done to me?”

She laughed, reached down to stroke his hard dick.

Gasping. “Damn you, woman.”

If she had done that the second time, he would have cum in his pants. Elizabeth had him under her sweet spell. The way she made him lose control with her scent, her moaning. It’s all too much. So much. Good much. “You are driving me crazy; do you want me to make love to you here?” He asked with his cheek against hers as he stroked her nape.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Please my soldier, plunder this pussy that you’ve left for a long time.”

“Don’t say those words.” Fuck! She knew the right things to say that would make him go mad with need. “I don't want this to be quick.” Lifting her gown, he gently pushed her legs wider. His fingers slipped between the damp folds of her sex, two slid inside her canal of lust. A mushy pool welcomed him—she was warm and wet.

“I have missed you so much my sweet, sweet, sexy girl.”

His thumb pressed on her clit, stroking it in a circular motion.

She writhed in pleasure.

“Open your eyes.” Withdrawing his fingers from her pussy. Holding her gaze, he slipped the juice covered finger inside his mouth, sucking with relish. “You taste golden.”

“Bube...Oh my!” She moaned.

He slipped his finger in again, with the curve of his other palm around her neck, he whispered, “I want to suck your pussy until you wash my face with your juice.”

“Bube please...”

“Please what?” He asked, thrusting her feminine cove, the stubble around her fleshy mound brushed against his palm. He was torturing her—and torturing himself, his engorged dick was threatening to explode, heat pulsed through his

blood, the sound coming from her mouth and pussy as his fingers ploughed inside her was driving him mad.

He would have wanted to fuck her senseless, but he had to control himself.

Fuck, that would be difficult...

“Make love to me.”

“Yes m’lady.” He carried her down from the bonnet and they ran like two new lovers into the house.

She was practically tearing his pajamas off by the time her back touched the bed, hers was yanked off where? He couldn’t remember, but he knew that by the time they pushed the room door open, she was all flesh and no clothes.

“Let me fuck you, soldier.” Her warm breath brushed his face as she pushed him to the bed. Every thought of taking it slowly dried up.

He had wanted to make her ache, to leave her pussy satisfied and sore on his own terms, to have his sweat drop on her body while watching her squirm as he pumped into her, but as she got on top of him, his rippling dick throbbing against her warm pussy....

“I may not last long with you on top,” he groaned, liking every feeling of her.

“We will see about that.”

He got only the briefest look at her crotch—the trimmed line of her pubic hair, the rich brown of her labia—before she ceased his shaft and guided it into her warmth, he arched his pelvis and drove deep inside her.

She was warm and dripping, her walls clamping his dick, squeezing and releasing, sapping every atom of control in him. He wanted to ask her to stop, yet he knew the whole of him would protest if her pussy released his dick.

Then she leaned forward and started moving slowly, thrusting and rolling. Fuck! It was so good. She was so good. Pulling out when she felt he was about to explode, guiding his dick back in again and started ministering to him. Her hips going up, down, round and round.

Her warm breath stroked his ears causing his to hitch. Turning his face towards her, he took her lips and sucked hard. A soft moan floated out from her throat, he felt her pussy clench against his dick.

“Fuck... Fuck!” He groaned, grabbing her ass and kneaded. Spreading her cheeks, he found the puckered circle and began to rim.

Throwing her head back, she let out a loud moan. She’d lost control and was pumping hard and fast. With his hand on her ass, he pressed her hard against his groin and started fucking her from underneath.

“Oh. God, soldier!” She screamed, losing herself to the frisson of spasm that was building up inside her. “Fuck, don’t stop!”

He wasn’t planning to. Her sweet pussy was sending drones of pleasurable

sensation up his brain. making him want to burst inside her.

“Cupcake.” His tone was strangled. His explosion near. “Damn, girl. you are killing me.”

“Fuck me harder.”

“Yes... yes.”

“I’m going to...” Her orgasm finished the statement for her. Oh God! Having his dick inside her while she climaxed wrapped him with excruciating pleasure. His whole body gave off a series of shudders as his cum rumbled, the last one caught him groaning loudly and he spewed deep inside her. It was one of the longest orgasms he had experienced as he had continued thrusting and grunting until gradually, he slowed down and went still.

Sighing, he gradually pulled out and she rolled off him.

With his chest against her back, and his heavy breath brushing her nape, he planted kisses on her hair while his hand made a leisure trip from her arm down to her tits.

They fell asleep shortly, wrapped in each other’s arms, peacefully and voluptuously contented.

Ebube woke up with a sudden jolt. He automatically groped for his watch and realized it was only four in the morning and he wasn’t alone. He pulled his bulk up and rested his back on the tufted headboard, wiped his face and lazily scrubbed down to his bare torso. It would take some time for his body to accept the fact that he was no longer in Somalia.

Relaxing his mind, he observed the woman who was asleep beside him, lying on her side with the sheet tangled around her waist. His fingers traced her curve from her shoulder down to her hip, she shivered but didn’t wake up.

He planted feathery kisses on her cheek.

She stirred.

“Hey,” he breathed. “Are you awake?”

“Hmm.” She snuggled closer.

Reaching for her breast, he flicked her nipple. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“Hmm...” She sighed again. Turned fully, the sheet thrown off, her hand languorously above her head.

He couldn’t remember what he wanted to talk about as his eyes sucked in every detail of her glorious body, the fat mound between her legs... He was caught up in a sharp burn of desire. Was it not just last night that they had an

intense lovemaking session? Yet his arousal was immediate.

Damn!

He slid back down, and started stroking her stomach, drawing a pattern around her navel.

A soft moan escaped her lips and her stomach clenched.

The feeling was mutual, he thought.

When she finally opened her eyes, she smacked her lips as though she was savoring the taste of morning. “You are awake already?”

“Unfortunately.”

“You shouldn’t drag me with you then, I like my morning rest,” she protested.

“Well cupcake, we are now in it together,” he said, stroking the mound between her legs. “Since I’ll not be heading to work yet.” He’d been given three months off to heal. “You’ve become my suitable morning engagement.” His fingers parted her labia and slipped inside her wet canal.

Parting her legs wider, she let out a sigh. “I will enjoy getting used to this.”

“You will.”

They allowed a few minutes of silence, enjoying each other's touch and soft moans.

“You want to talk to me about something,” she said, sliding further down the bed and knelt beside him. Freeing his hard-on from the confinement of his boxers, she took it gently into her mouth, holding still for a moment.

His heart already told him what she was about to do but he wasn’t ready for the excitement that coursed through him as she wrapped her mouth around his dick, warming and thrilling him.

“Fuck, girl...”

“What do you want to tell me?”

She’d always thought of having him in her mouth. All those times, she’d flutter as she pictured them—his hands at the back of her head, holding her still while he assaulted her mouth with his dick.

Yesterday left no time for that. They’d made love like savages. But this morning she wouldn't miss the chance. Closing her eyes as if she had a blind fold on, her tongue ran laps around the rim of his dick. He grew harder and harder with every flick of her tongue, his precum trickled down and she lapped up with greed.

“Hmm? You want to say something?”

“Yes... fuck, cupcake!” He groaned. “I’ll forget what I want to tell you if you continue with this.”

“Then say it now.” She dived deep. Making him jerk his hips up, his hardness pushing against the back of her throat.

She was ready for him. Her lips and cheek in sync with him rocking back and forth. She liked the swish, swish sound they made like waves and then the way he groaned. Knowing that she had the power to make him sound like that excited her.

“Cupcake.”

“Hmm.”

“Fuck!” Clenching his jaw, pulling her up with speed, he turned her over so her ass would arch for him.

When he filled her, it was so good that she wanted to burst. She had thought that sucking him till he came in her mouth was the best way to start the morning but having him slamming his thickness inside her wildly was better.

“You will be the death of me, babe,” he said, smacking her ass.

She quivered as she felt her orgasm. Oh goodness! This was a pleasure overdose if there was something like it.

“Damn! babe.” He leaned against her back, wrapping his hands around her waist and trashing her pussy hard and fast.

Both of them came crashing together, filling the room with the sound of their voices and the scent of their cum.

When they finally evened their breaths, she asked, “What was that you wanted to tell me?”

“Marry me.”

“Not that I have any other option.” She grinned.

“You actually don't.”

“So, when are we getting married?”

“Come here.” Laughing, he pulled her to him. “I love you so much.”

“I know.”

“I promise to be everything you want in a husband, the perfect man for you...”

Crossing a finger over his lips, she shushed him. “No more words, soldier. you are perfect for me; you are all that I want.”

He embraced her again, kissed her lips. “When do you think I should see your father?” Her mother wouldn't be a problem. In fact, the woman would organize a wedding for them tomorrow if given the chance.

“When are you ready to meet him?”

“This weekend.”

“I like that.”

If you enjoyed Elizabeth & Ebube's story, keep reading for Felix & Oge's story titled Scented Waters. Available 2024

SCENTED WATERS

Soldier's story book 2

Prolog

Nigerian Navy Logistics College Kano, Nigeria.

The Naval Policemen saw it first, had stopped their gentle martial display and were staring. Then Felix saw it too.

The newly recruited boys who had been undergoing an Air Force-1 kind of drilling since they arrived at the newly built college, were now pouring out of the tree line where Commodore Dambo had led them into, covered in red earth, their thin limbs flying.

That shouldn't have made him raise a curious brow. Rolling in dirt and mud was part of the drilling process. A right of passage in the military.

But the boys were crying. He could hear their animal noises of shock and grief as they ran past. He grabbed one of them by the arm.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Please, sir." The boy sobbed. "It's Commodore Dambo, sir. Somebody is killing him."

Then Dambo came out of the tree line with his hand around his neck and his white tracksuit livid with fresh blood. Stumbling across the parade field, his legs on the edge of going, his eyes told Felix that the man was drowning.

Quick, he ran, along with other officers, towards the dying man. And as Dambo collapsed in the arms of someone Felix didn't know was there until then, the blood began pumping out of the wound.

Abdul! It was Abdul crutching on the field, holding the dying Commodore. Tearing off the old man's vest already soaked with blood, Felix saw the wound, a far deeper red than the blood that was flowing. Abdul was winding the torn vest around the commodore's ravaged throat, pressing it against the wound, trying to staunch the terrible flood.

"Abdul!"

"The bagger-lizards that did this must still be out there," he growled.

"We need an ambulance!"

"Get into that wood now!"

“Abdul we have...”

“Get your ass up and find who did this!”

Pulling his gun out of the holster, Felix began to run towards the tree line.

He kept running until he came to another open field, as barren as the surface of the moon. Then he stopped, finding his breath, uncertain if he should turn back or cross the plowed field—there was a farm on the far side.

Still looking around, he noticed a perfect bloody handprint on the tree trunk he was standing next to. He looked across the farm again, there was nothing moving. And then, something seemed to stir inside. Narrowing his eyes, he could see a glimpse of a shadow. Was it his imagination? Or a man? Or a trick of the dying light?

He began running towards it.

There was a mud house, crumbling with age and, as he paused by it, he noticed that the wooden windows had been joyfully smashed. It seemed like nobody had lived there for years.

He leaned against the wall and jolted when he heard a noise. A whimper. Looking into the house from the window, he saw a dog, its fore and hind legs had been tied with some kind of twine, as if in preparation for slaughter. Stepping over some broken brickwork, he dropped his shotgun on an aged ridden table he saw there, crouched down beside the terrified animal and pulled at the twine with his bare hands until it came loose. He stood and watched the dog scamper away.

As he turned back to pick up his gun, there was an explosion of pain at the back of his skull. And the inner edge of a forearm smashing into his throat and a fist hammering into the small of his back.

Everything happened simultaneously and he had no time to defend himself in any form.

Shit! His attacker was right behind him, strong arms wrapped around him in a wrestling position, forcing his head down. The person was near enough for Felix to kick his shins or rip his balls off, but he was suddenly not strong enough to do it. Too drained by shock and pain to even try.

The attacker had him.

The palm of his left hand pulled hard against Felix’s right cheek, his fingertips pressing through the flesh, into his teeth, twisting his face to one side.

Struggling to release his head from the powerful grip, Felix caught a glimpse of a knife.

Shit! Oh shit! His heart froze in terror as the long thin blade moved, its steel tip pressed into the side of his neck, found a muscle it didn’t like, edged forward, prodded his adam’s apple for a moment and then slipped back to the side and

broke his skin with a sharp prick of pain.

Felix could feel his attacker’s steady breath at the back of his throbbing head as the wet warmth of fresh blood slid down his neck.

Terrified now, Felix lashed out with the heels of his boot, fighting the man and his own exhaustion, biting and cursing, refusing to be overwhelmed.

But the man held tighter, pushing the knife deeper, weakening him with pain and the horror of death.

He felt himself sag in his attacker's arms.

“Please,” he said, wondering where the other officers were. Was no one searching for him or the person that attacked the commodore? “I have kids.”

The attacker stopped.

The stump of metal at the knife handle base banged once against Felix’s right temple. And then once against his left temple. This must have put him out for a while because the next thing he knew he was down on his knees, dizzy and sick.

“Please,” he said again, looking up but couldn’t get a clear face. All he knew was that his attacker was a huge man and was wearing a...Camoufl...

A boot’s steel toecap slammed with full force into the base of his spine, sending blinding pain all over him, and exploding stars racing through his eyes as his back went into spasms of agony.

He didn’t know he was screaming until hands grabbed him and he heard familiar voices.

“Who was it?”

“Who did this?”

“Where did he go?”

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With many of her stories packaged in anthologies and sold in different countries, and two standalone novels "One more night," which was released August 2020, and "Paradise, A Twin Bliss Resort Novel," she's known for giving readers insider knowledge of marriages while icing the stories with hot sex scenes.

Rosemary writes about real people with real issues, sometimes in the funniest way, because, hey, we need to smile.

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