

FROM INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Adesuwa O'man Nwokedi



MALOMO HIGH  
REUNION SERIES

# A Betrayed Kind of Love

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## **A Betrayed Kind of Love**

By Adesuwa O'man Nwokedi

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# **DEDICATION**

To Onyeabor and our three musketeers.

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# CHAPTER ONE –

## NEVER TOO MUCH



*There's not a minute, hour, day or night  
That I don't love you  
You're at the top of my list  
'Cause I'm always thinkin' of you*

**APRIL 2019**

### **Bonju**

*'A MILLION RIGHT NOW IS THE BASELINE narrative, as long as rates stay under control.'*

Cup of coffee in hand, Bonju listened with rapt attention as the CNBC analysts discussed the continued upward movement of stocks on the NASDAQ Stock Exchange, gaining thirty-five per cent from inflow from its listed tech giants. With the other indices - the FTSE, Nikkei, and S&P 500 - recording similar boosts that week, and the assurance that his fortunes were on the up and not the converse, it was music to his ears. As the program cut to a commercial break, he flipped to the Bloomberg channel and listened to the breakdown of the day's activities in the Asian financial market as it wound to a close, until the timer on his phone chimed, his cue that, at 10am, it was time to take his phone off its default *Do Not Disturb* mode, a habit he'd adopted at the start of the year. Text messages, DMs, and other inane social media chatter could wait till after his morning meditation, early morning gym run, a cup of coffee or two, and a dose of finance TV.

As his phone lit up with the backlog of incoming notifications, scrolling through them, there were none of any particular importance. Not even the messages from two of the women he'd been out with the previous weekend, one of whom he'd even brought back to his Sloane Square townhouse. It was the same old thing, the same story of the plethora of women in and out of his life like a revolving door in the last few years. Actually, that wasn't quite the truth. It was definitely more than 'a few' years. For much longer than he was proud to admit, he had been on the rollercoaster that was the smooth incline of getting attracted to a drop-dead-gorgeous woman, and the sharp descent of losing interest after only a date or two. The hotter, the sexier, and the younger the women got, the shorter was the life span of his attention. He had finally accepted that was as far as his emotional evolution had progressed, and that he just wasn't able to give more to a woman than an expensive dinner date, good sex - at least he hoped it was good sex - and a nice gift afterward. He couldn't give what he didn't have. What he no longer had. What he hadn't had for twenty years.

His phone vibrated and the name on his screen elicited his first smile of the day.

"Guy, so what happens if you have a family emergency when your phone is on DND?"

Bonju chuckled at the sound of Emeka's voice, his friend. "Any emergency will still be there when my phone comes on. There's nothing like taking charge of setting the tone for what your mind feeds on in the morning. You should try it."

"My wife would skin me alive if I were to as much as attempt that."

Bonju smiled, understanding that, as a married man with a young son and another on the way, his friend didn't quite have that luxury.

"What time is your flight tonight? Are we still meeting up for lunch?" he asked. Emeka was passing through London on his way to the States, to be present for the birth of his second child.

"8pm, so yeah, enough time for lunch," Emeka answered. "Same place as the last time? That place on Pimlico Road, I forget the name."

“Let’s meet at St. James’s Market this time. There’s a nice Nigerian fusion restaurant there that you’ll like.”

“Oh yeah, Erin told me about that place,” Emeka answered. “Meet you there for, say, 1?”

Bonju’s eyes darted to the acrylic wall clock, twelve glossy metallic Roman numerals mounted on the stark white wall. Meeting up at 1pm would give him enough time to shower, check his digital currency investment dashboards, stop at Covent Garden to upgrade his phone, and still get to the restaurant with enough time to spare.

“1 is good. See you then.”

The line disconnected and he made his way to his bedroom, his feet welcoming the transition from the hallway’s cold acrylic tiles to the plush carpeting of his boudoir, once again grateful for the flexibility of his life, the latitude to pretty much do anything he damned well wanted, whenever he wanted. Quitting his father’s company seven years before and returning to London had been the best decision of his life.

—

“It’s a shame you won’t be in Lagos while I’m there,” Bonju remarked as he and Emeka tucked into plantain, smoked kelp, and blackberry maitake at *Ikoyi*.

“So, you actually decided to go for the reunion,” Emeka laughed. “If I were a betting man, I’d have put my money on you *not* attending.”

Bonju shrugged. “I figured, why not? It’ll be fun to spend a weekend catching up with old faces.”

The truth was that, even though he was still in touch with a good number of his former classmates, receiving the invitation for his class’s 20-year reunion had given him pause. Yes, the detailed itinerary the organizer, Bioye Laguda, shared painted what promised to be a fun-filled weekend, and, yes, he could think of worse things than reliving what had been some of the best years of his life with the people that had made it happen, the truth was that the possibility of seeing the one woman who had possessed

his heart and mind for the last two decades was enough reason for him to consider declining outright.

But it was also the very same reason he'd decided to attend.

"I'm sure you'll have a good time. And it's a whole weekend?"

"We check in on a Friday afternoon and check out the following Sunday morning," Bonju nodded. "I'm actually quite looking forward to it."

"When do you leave?"

"Next week. I land in Lagos the night of the 18<sup>th</sup>."

"You should make out time to see my friend, Destiny," Emeka said, raising his glass of palm punch to his lips.

"Ah yes, your friend with the radio station."

Emeka nodded. "It's right up your alley. Just the kind of deal you like."

Even though he and Emeka had only been friends for a couple of years, becoming acquainted when Bonju attended Emeka's art exhibition and bought several of his paintings, they had bonded over the fact they had more than just a love of art in common. Emeka was one of the few people who didn't judge him for his lifestyle, a lifestyle many considered flashy, entitled, and maybe even a little lazy. To most people, he was a spoilt rich kid, living a life of leisure off the generous allowance he was paid as a non-executive director with his father's company. What they didn't know was his penchant for investing in niche startups, taking a chance on companies with outrageous business ideas, business ideas oftentimes too outrageous for the standard, risk-averse investor. He'd been known to jump in headlong with many an idiosyncratic kid with a dream, and even though he had been burned a few times, more than half of these seemingly harebrained investments had given him returns in several multiples of what he had ploughed in, creating for him immense wealth and according him the lifestyle he now enjoyed. His money was working for him, and if he chose to spend his days lounging, dining in luxury restaurants, and dating a slew of exotic beauties, it was his prerogative to do so.

Bonju shrugged, no more convinced about the business prospect than the first time Emeka broached it to him the night before. “What’s so special about a radio station?”

“Its focus is only ‘80s and ‘90s rock and pop,” Emeka grinned. “The kind of music you like.”

“Still nothing special about that.”

“Just meet with him when you’re in Lagos,” Emeka said, reaching for his phone. “I’m sending you the link to the station. It only airs at night right now but check it out when you can. Check it out and meet with Destiny when you’re over there. One meeting, that’s all.”

As Bonju’s phone vibrated with Emeka’s incoming message, glancing at the web address, he was fairly certain he would be doing neither.

But later that night, sitting in his living room and nursing a glass of Burgundy Pinot Noir, his curiosity got the better of him. Emeka’s assertion of him favouring ‘80s and ‘90s music was no exaggeration. For many reasons, that was the era of music that had the most of his heart. While, on the one hand, it reminded him of a happy time of his life when, as a child, he had listened to that genre of music with his father, it also reminded him of another happy time...the one and only time he’d ever given his heart away.

Clicking on the link, he smiled as Luther Vandross’s *Never Too Much* started playing from his surround Wilson Audio speakers, memories of the same song wafting from his father’s study as the man hunched over engineering drawings at their Richmond-upon-Thames home in the mid and late 1980s. As lyrics of the song Bonju hadn’t even thought about in years flooded his mouth, he sat back in his chair, already enjoying Emeka’s friend’s radio station.

## **Alero**

Lying on her bed as her favourite Luther Vandross song, *Never Too Much* , came on right after Spandau Ballet’s *True* , Alero was once again thrilled

with her playlist for the evening. Even though the radio station had been running for nearly five months without even a hint of any consistent listeners, talk less of a serious investor, being able to unwind to good music after a long, tedious day still felt like a win for her.

Scrolling through her phone, she prowled Instagram pages and websites for inspiration for the children's bedroom a new client had engaged her to decorate. As much as she remained grateful for the trickles of business she got, the bigger jobs that would make a more significant financial impact were way too few and far between. Her last major job had been the previous year, when she'd been commissioned to decorate a new couple's home. Since then, she'd had no choice but to settle for small gigs like this. But small gigs would neither renew her rent nor get her car back on the road. If she was going to keep a roof over her head and not have to hop in and out of taxis or, worse, buses, she was going to have to find for herself a bigger gig...and quickly.

The ringing of her phone interrupted her online research.

"Hey," she said in greeting to her brother, Destiny.

"Hey," came his weary voice, and she could immediately tell he'd had yet another difficult day.

"How did it go?" she asked, referencing the meeting he'd been scheduled to have with an older friend he was hoping would invest in their radio station.

"Same as the others. He agreed it's a great idea but expressed uncertainty over it taking off because of the existence of another, and I quote, 'old school station'."

"Didn't you tell him it would be more than just an 'old school station'? Didn't you share with him our plans?"

"I spoke till my mouth ached!" Destiny answered, letting out a deep sigh. "I just need to focus on this properly and I'm sure I'll find someone who can see our vision. I might have to quit my job so I can dedicate enough time to finding us an investor."

The thought of him giving up his job at the radio station where he currently worked tied her stomach into knots, especially as he had a young family to

cater for.

“There’s no need to quit your job now,” she said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “We can just keep streaming online until we get an investor.”

“We need to think bigger than online, Divine,” he scoffed. “We need to show investors that we’re serious about this thing.”

Divine. Even though she’d been answering the name professionally for nearly a decade, after deciding to start an interior décor business following the loss of her low-paying job with an insurance company, it still felt strange hearing her brother use the name their father had called her when he was alive. Born to different mothers, Alero and Destiny hadn’t been particularly close when their father was alive, but years afterwards, they had gravitated towards each other, soon becoming the most important person in the other’s life.

“Anyway, how far with your reunion next week?” Destiny asked, changing the topic. “I hope you haven’t changed your mind about attending?”

“I don’t think I want to go,” she answered, unhappy to disappoint her brother after the hour of pep talk he’d given her only the day before. “I made a mistake attending the 10-year reunion and it was awful. Those people are strangers to me.”

“How won’t they be strangers when you haven’t kept in touch with any of them?” Destiny exclaimed. “Divine, you need to get out and socialize more. You’re not getting any younger, babe.”

She grimaced, the reminder that she was on the wrong side of thirty not one she liked to get.

“Besides, how are you going to manage with the station while I’m away?” she countered. “Or would you want me to stream while I’m there? Bear in mind it’s an entire weekend.”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to manage. I’ve been doing this for a living for many, many years, in case you’ve forgotten. Take that weekend and go reconnect with your old schoolmates. You need to let your hair down now and then.”

Let her hair down indeed.

After he'd hung up, she pulled up the reunion invitation on her phone, her heart hammering against her chest and her anxieties rising as she thought of the one person she absolutely did not want to see. But considering he'd been a no-show at the 10-year reunion, maybe he wouldn't show up for this one either. With any luck, maybe the reunion would be her opportunity to find much needed new business, or maybe even an investor for the station. She was nowhere near as skilled as her brother was with pitching their business idea, but she was determined to do the very best she could, if need be. So, rather than fixate on someone she had neither seen nor spoken to in twenty years, she would work the reunion in other ways that could favour her.

Because seeing him again was the last thing she wanted.

Not after what he did to her.

## **Bonju**

"I hear bitcoin surged by over seven percent today," Bonju's father, Bankole Adalemo, remarked as they sat together the following evening.

"Since when did you start paying attention to bitcoin?"

"I started paying attention to bitcoin when you plugged your money into it," the older man answered. "I hear *Oracle* and *American Express* stocks are also up, so it looks like I'll soon be asking *you* for money."

"I'll bet you can't wait for that day," Bonju chuckled.

"From all indication, those two clowns in Lagos will probably beat me to it." The 'two clowns' were his older brothers, Babawale and Bolu, the Managing and Deputy Managing Directors of the company their father had started as a young idealistic engineer, a fifty-year old family legacy, Oceadrill, a legacy Bankole had steered to become one of the biggest drilling businesses in Africa. "I hear Mideastern has decided to take us off their drilling campaign for next year. More business your dimwit brothers have lost for the company."



Bonju said nothing in response, choosing instead to look away, lest the resentment he still felt for the old man for the decision he'd made seven years before, show on his face. As a young engineer, Bonju, too, had been roped into working in the family business, but after being stifled one too many times by his older brothers, who consistently made questionable operational decisions that were often backed by their father, he had made the decision to resign and return to England.

"You're not saying anything."

Bonju shrugged. "Nothing to say, pops. You've always trusted Babawale, so maybe you should trust that he has some kind of plan."

"A plan, you say?" the man chuckled, exhaling a gust of aromatic smoke. "If you say so."

Bonju cast an anxious glance at the Cuban cigar his eighty-five-year-old father was puffing away at. "Should you really be having that?"

"I've been smoking these long before you were born, so, yes, would be the answer to that daft question."

Bonju chuckled again, amused that three heart attacks and a stroke had done nothing to dim the old man's wit. As was his weekly ritual, he had made the long drive to see his father, his chance to enjoy the scenic views from the man's Sandgate house. After the last heart attack five years before, Bankole had left Lagos, bought an old cottage overlooking the English Channel in the quaint Kent coastal town, torn it down and built an expansive edifice in oakwood and glass, with sun-drenched windows and a decked courtyard to take in the sweeping ocean view. Much smaller than the other homes he owned around the world, the house had become the old man's hideout and perfect getaway from his otherwise chaotic life. Living there with only a nurse and a housekeeper for company, it was difficult to believe that this same man had once been surrounded by so many people, wives and children alike.

"Keep talking like that and I'll stop coming all this way to see you every week," Bonju teased.

“You come here every week to rest and recharge for your wild weekends. Don’t think I haven’t heard about all you get up to,” his father sniggered in response.

Bonju grinned. The man was absolutely spot-on. Coming there for a night every week gave him the chance to not only bond with his father, but to isolate and rejuvenate himself, if only for one night, before his very busy, very social, very active weekends. But he would never admit that to the old man. “Well, at least I come. Tell me the last time anyone else here to see you.”

“And who says I miss them?” the older man scoffed. “I’m in paradise, boy. I would take sitting here, staring at the sea, with only John for company...”

“His name is Justin, dad.”

“John, Justin, same difference. I would take this any day over the circus back in Lagos,” he muttered, before sighing deeply. “I hear Busayo has been appointed MD of Mineshaft Drilling.”

Bonju cast his father a tentative glance. He had also heard about his other brother’s recent appointment with the American drilling company and had made every effort to refrain from discussing it. Busayo’s long-strained relationship with their father had led to his decision not to work in the family business, instead accepting a job offer in America right after his first degree at Imperial College, the same school Bonju would attend years later. Over twenty years after that decision, it was still a very sore topic of discussion.

“Anyway, I’m off to Lagos next week,” Bonju said, changing the topic. No benefit could come from talking about his father’s prodigal son. “A Malomo High reunion. It’s been twenty years since I finished secondary school, can you just believe that?”

“I believe it every day I’m reminded of the fact you’re thirty-seven and still living the bachelor life. At your age, I was already on my third marriage.”

And he wasn’t joking. After seven failed marriages, it was safe to say the man was an expert on the subject.

“Keep your eyes open while you’re there, boy. I’ve told you several times you’re not going to find a good woman to marry over here,” his father went on, his eyes twinkling and a small smile playing on his lips.

“I’ve got loads of time. You had me at age fifty, and I didn’t turn out too bad,” Bonju answered with a sly wink.

“I was forty-eight, silly boy,” his father retorted, giving him a playful nudge with his walking stick. “And considering your old man’s track record, I’d get a head start if I were you.”

They continued to laugh and banter, but later that night, sitting alone on the beach, drinking a can of beer, and staring ahead at the ocean, its waves rising and falling with rhythmic ease, Bonju allowed his mind wander, thinking about the looming reunion...and the likelihood of seeing her again. In twenty years, this was the closest he had ever come to that possibility, and now that it loomed, he was the most anxious he had ever been.

## CHAPTER TWO –

### FATHER FIGURE



*If you are the desert  
I'll be the sea  
If you ever hunger  
Hunger for me*

#### **Alero**

SHE KEPT A NERVOUS EYE on the temperature gauge of the 1999 Honda Accord Destiny lent her for the drive to Epe, unhappy that, even after topping the radiator thirty minutes before, the temperature was starting to rise again. With almost an hour left of the drive to Nonso Aguta's hotel, where the reunion weekend was happening, she couldn't afford to stop the car again on the lonely expressway.

The temperature continued to climb but, luckily, the car got her to her destination. As she pulled into a vacant spot in the parking lot, she looked at the tall, impressive building in the not-too-far distance, so much more imposing than anything she had imagined. She'd thought that, as was the case with several other beach resorts in the vicinity, it would be nothing more than a cluster of lacklustre bungalows, with their group's festivities taking place on the beach. But there was nothing lacklustre about the building she was looking at, a building that looked like it had come from the same design sheet as the UAE's Burj Al Arab or Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Towers. She'd heard Nonso had done well for himself, and if what she was looking at was anything to go by, the boy was darned well minted.

But there was a more important matter at hand.

Waiting a few minutes for the car to cool, she contemplated topping the radiator with more water. But the last thing she needed was to be scalded by angry steam the minute she popped open the hood. Deciding to leave the car to cool for the rest of the day, she got out, taking in the even more impressive grounds, soothed by the sound of the crashing waves from the nearby Atlantic Ocean, feeling equal parts thrilled about the luxurious weekend that awaited her...and out of her depth. Grabbing her bag from the back seat, she proceeded to make her way to the hotel.

“Alero!” came the voice of a smiling lady seated at a table facing the door when she walked into the lobby.

Alero smiled back at the person she recognized as Bioye Laguda, one of the few people she had fond memories of from school. Apart from the fact she had been nice and friendly to her, in those awful last weeks of school she’d been one of the few people who hadn’t treated her like a pariah.

“It’s so great to see you,” Bioye said, rising and embracing her. “You look as beautiful as ever. Your hair is still so thick and long!”

“You look great as well,” Alero smiled, returning her embrace. “This already promises to be better than the 10-year reunion.”

Bioye rolled her eyes. “Please don’t remind me of that awful experience.” Brightening, she handed Alero a card key and what looked to be a brochure. “The turn out for this one is already so much better. I’ve already checked in sixty-two people.”

Alero’s eyes widened. There hadn’t even been up to fifteen at the 10-year reunion.

“And I’m sure more will arrive before the end of the day,” Bioye said, before glancing at her watch. “The mixer starts in just a little over an hour, so I’ll advise you to start getting ready as soon as you get to your room.” Beckoning over a nearby porter, she smiled again at Alero. “You’re in the west wing. Dotun will help you with your things. See you at the mixer.”

Alero smiled again before following the porter as he carried her single box, walking behind him as he approached the elevator. Once in her room on the

twelfth floor, the unabashed panoramic view of the ocean took her breath away. Looking around the room, taking in the king-sized four poster bed made from what looked to be African blackwood, the thick white bed sheet with a sheen she recognized as pure Egyptian cotton, the welcoming Chesterfield chair upholstered in crushed velvet in the richest navy blue, the same blue as the thick wool carpet on which she stood - real wool and not the commercial grade found in most hotels - the part of her mouth was involuntary. The bathroom door was ajar and from where she stood, she got a decent view of the marble bathtub that sat in the middle of the room like a washbowl, and the shower cubicle made from the finest tempered glass. So in awe was she that it wasn't until she had handed Dotun several notes from her wallet as a tip did she realise she had parted with a whole lot more than she'd planned to, nothing having prepared her for the luxury oasis that was her lodging for the next two nights.

Feeling her anxieties rise again, she reached for her phone and hit the *play* button on her playlist, immediately eased as George Michael's *Father Figure* started to play. Of the possibly hundreds, maybe even thousands, of songs that reminded her of her late father, this wasn't one of them. She had no special reason for loving the smooth ballad, except she just did. Setting it to play on repeat, she unpacked the pink cord lace summer dress she was to wear for the mixer and exhaled, trying to muster all the bravado and enthusiasm she had talked herself into before leaving home.

## **Bonju**

Letting himself onto the balcony, he marvelled at the stunning ocean view. He had come there expecting functional, but everything about the hotel from the moment he got out of the car that had chauffeured him there, to being ushered into the spectacular room he had been assigned, to taking in the orange-gold sunset over the Atlantic Ocean, had blown his mind. Looking in the far distance towards the east of the grounds, he spotted the golf course he'd heard so much about and regretted not having pushed his friend to accept his offer to partner on the hotel project. When word about the place got out, it was going to be a tourist haven, a real cash cow, and if there was one emotion Bonju didn't like, it was regret.

Not especially when he'd already been nursing a twenty-year-old one.

Less than an hour later, after a shower, as he slipped into a light blue Brunello Cucinelli shirt over a pair of dark blue jeans, he exhaled several times, his nerves amplifying with every passing second.

Earlier that evening, he'd walked into the hotel lobby at the same time as Ikenna Idozuka and Deina he-couldn't-remember-her-surname, and through all the enthusiastic greeting and hollering, as Bioye checked them in, he'd been too scared to ask about Alero, to ask if she'd RSVP'd to come, or if she was already there. As desperate as he had been to know, his lips had remained sealed, locked by some unseen force. But, if she *had* RSVP'd to come, and if she *was* already there, then it was only a matter of minutes before he saw her again.

After twenty long years.

Once dressed, he stood before the bathroom mirror and exhaled several times in quick succession.

It was time.

## Alero

With a smile plastered on her face, she made her way to the hall where the mixer was holding. Walking into the brightly lit hall, her eyes scanned the room, looking for faces that didn't remind her of her awful final weeks of school. Her eyes lit up when she spotted Zinna Aniche and Tomi Aguda, girls who had been too studious to get caught up in gossip back then, and just the kind of people she wanted to be around.

"Hi, girls. Is this seat taken?" she asked when she approached their table.

Turning to her, their faces broke into wide grins, both genuinely happy to see her.

"Alero!" Zinna exclaimed, rising to her feet to embrace her. "Still as cute and adorable as ever. And you still have all this hair!"

Alero beamed, patting her long, lustrous hair secured in a thick ponytail, grateful anew for her father's genes. Taking a seat on the table and seeing that Zinna and Tomi were also simply attired, with the former in a fitted denim shirt over a floral summer dress and the latter in an Ankara and lace dress, she was even happier with her choice of table. From the little she had seen since getting there, many of her former classmates were just as alien to her now as they'd been then.

"You look lovely!" Zinna remarked again. "I don't know what you and Tomi are eating, because you both look like you're still teenagers."

Alero giggled, tickled by the compliment. "Please, I'd rather be a big shot like you, than look like a kid. Who looking like a teenager *epp*?" From what she'd heard, Zinna was a top shot with a major international bank.

"What do you do?" Tomi asked.

"I'm an Interior Decorator," Alero answered. "I'd like to say I own my practice, but that would be exaggerating. I mainly freelance."

"Freelance or not, it means you're your own boss!" Zinna remarked. "Isn't that what we're all aspiring to?"

"*Abeg*, let's exchange places, please," Alero giggled. "Give me your fat salary, and I will happily give you my so-called freedom."

"This table seems to have reasonable people," came the voice of Ogugua Ejiofor, Head Girl of their graduating year. "More reasonable than some of the other people sitting around, talking the same kind of trash they did twenty years ago."

As more people joined their table, and as laughter and salutations rang out, Alero started to lose the nerves she had walked in with. She had no reason to be anxious. It had been twenty years, so nobody remembered her scandal. And from the look of things, Bonju hadn't even deemed it fit to attend the reunion anyway.

But it turned out she spoke too soon.

Eva and Omoruyi, the most unlikely of couples from their set, had just joined their table, and everyone was teasing the pair about their uncanny



switch of personalities, with the hitherto studious nerd Eva now turned a sexy vixen, and the once gorgeous star athlete and playboy, Omoruyi, now several kilograms overweight and with eyes only for his wife.

After a few minutes of sitting through the ladies' conversation, Omoruyi rose to his feet. "Let me go find the guys. You ladies have fun."

As the girls burst into laughter as he walked away, teasing Eva for transforming Hercules to McFatty, Alero saw him.

Bonju.

The laughter died on her lips and her heartbeat accelerated as she recognized the person walking in through the glass doors. Broader and more solidly built than she remembered, he had the same self-assured pep in his step and half smirk on his lips. As he stopped to exchange pleasantries with Feyi Anifowoshe, one of the popular girls from their year, she was reminded he was still the same Bonju. Twenty years later, he was still the same arrogant ladies' man...the same guy who had broken her heart and obliterated her pristine reputation.

And she felt an all-too-familiar ache in her chest.

## Bonju

"Hey, man!" Omoruyi called, as he walked up to Bonju.

Happy to excuse himself from Feyi Anifowoshe, who looked like she had more in mind than just a quick exchange of greetings, Bonju turned in the direction of his old friend's voice.

"The big man!" Bonju exclaimed, hugging Omoruyi. "So, it's true what they say about us turning into our dads in the end!"

Omoruyi scoffed. "Clearly not all of us. Unless *your* dad looks like he spends every waking day in the gym. You look great. I didn't expect you'd fly all the way for this."

Bonju shrugged. "It's no big deal. Ikenna came from L.A, and Zinna from Geneva, I think."

“Eva says Zinna just got a high-profile job with a new bank here in Lagos,” Omoruyi answered. “And speaking of Ikenna, he just walked in with Nonso.”

Turning in the direction of the door and seeing the two men emerge, Bonju grinned, getting more excited about the evening with every passing minute.

“My homies!” Bonju called out, as he and Omoruyi walked up to Ikenna and Nonso. “Take it easy on the ladies o, *awon* fine boys!”

Ikenna shook his head and chuckled. “I hear you.”

“But seriously though, I can’t get over how you transformed from Steve Urkel to Michael B. Jordan overnight!” Bonju remarked. “Didn’t I still see you a few years ago in ATL?”

Ikenna smiled. “It’s amazing what you can achieve with a little determination and motivation.”

“Are you sure you won’t share some of that motivation with Omoruyi here?” Bonju laughed.

“I am very fine the way I am, thank you very much!” Omoruyi beamed. “My Madam likes me this way.”

“I didn’t give Eva enough credit back in school. The babe is a cunning fox. She fattened you up so she could have you all to herself!” Bonju continued to tease.

“And I’m more than happy to be all hers!” Omoruyi answered, waving across the room at his wife.

“Ah, there they are!” Ikenna remarked. “Can we go say hello? I need to touch base with Tomi or she’ll kill me.”

Looking across the room at the table in question, his eyes landed on the very person he was both excited and frightened to see.

Alero.

And it felt like all the blood had drained from his body.

She was the only one on the table not laughing, and if her stiff body language and rigid posture were anything to go by, she'd probably already seen him...and wasn't happy she had.

And he lost all the confidence he had entered the hall with.

"You guys go ahead," he said to Ikenna, Nonso, and Omoruyi. "Let me go say hello to Ogonna and Deina over there."

Not waiting for a response, he turned in the other direction, wanting not just the distance of a few tables between them, but wishing for the distance of a few continents like it had been for the last two decades.

"I'll have a Martini, please," he said to the guy mixing cocktails at the open bar on the far side of the room. "Bone dry, if you can."

As soon as he was handed the glass, he downed the potent liquor in a single gulp. But not even the alcohol was enough to calm his raging emotions. He knew seeing her again would leave him shaken, but he had underestimated just how much.

"Can I fix you another?" the bartender asked.

Bonju shook his head and handed the guy a twenty-pound note as a tip. It was too early in the evening to get inebriated. Not only had the main event not even begun, he wanted...needed...to be in control of his senses when he spoke with her. Because, God help him, he was going to talk to her. Not even if the mere thought of it was making him tremble like a leaf in the wind.

"So, we've had our drinks, our cocktails, and have had our mixer as we've caught up with old faces," came Bioye's voice from the stage, as Bonju made his way to a table where Ikenna, Nonso, and Omoruyi were now seated. "Now, it's time for us to play a game I like to call *1999 versus 2019*. Many of us haven't seen each other in twenty years, and some of you look so different, I'm still trying to be convinced you're who you say you are."

Keeping his eyes on the stage, he laughed on cue when he heard everyone else laughing, despite barely hearing a word of what Bioye was saying, his mind on one person, and one person only. But as glued to this person as his mind was, he was unable to even as much as look in her direction again.

Because he couldn't guarantee that seeing her again wouldn't make him completely unravel.

“One of the other awards from 1999 was *Most Likely to Get Married First* , aka *Girl You Can Take Home to Mama* , won by the stunning Alero!” Bioye’s voice cut into his reverie, the mention of Alero’s name grabbing his attention.

“And she’s still exactly that. So, to all the many bachelors here, y’all better shoot your shot. That’s one million yards of wife material over there.”

Unable to stop himself, he looked towards where she sat, Alero, the only woman he had ever given himself free rein to love, and his heart crashed when he saw the despair on her face, knowing how much she hated being the centre of attention. Looking away, he grit his teeth, wishing forward the hours so the silly game would be over.

“No surprises who won *Biggest Flirt* in 1999,” Bioye laughed, turning to look at him, prompting more laughter from the crowd.

It was his turn to be dismayed, horrified by the thoughtless overlap. Looking at Alero again, his breath caught in his throat when his eyes met with hers, and if her icy stare was anything to go by, she wasn't pleased.

She wasn't pleased at all.

## **Alero**

As everyone laughed, she bit the inside of her mouth to keep from crying, their giggles and laughter taking her all the way back to those last awful weeks of school in 1999, when everywhere she looked, everywhere she turned, there had been whispering, sniggering, poorly concealed pointing, and all because of one person. Turning where she’d seen Bonju take a seat half an hour before, he turned to her almost at the same time, and she glared at him, the hatred she had once felt for him bubbling from her core like a volcano in agitation after a long spell of dormancy, while at the same time colliding with the fluttering butterflies in her stomach.

Distracted by loud laughter from their table as Bioye's spotlight now shone on Zinna, Alero looked away and plastered a smile back on her face, presenting the façade of having just as good a time as anyone else, of not caring at all about the ugly events that had marked the end of her time at Malomo High, trying to pretend that over half of the people in that hall hadn't torn her apart with their awful, vile words, or that someone seated only a few feet away hadn't broken her heart and damaged her irreparably.

The awards over, as everyone took to the dance floor, she decided she'd had enough pretending for one night. All she wanted was to be alone.

"Are you going?" Zinna asked, interrupted from rapping along to Heavy D's *Don't Be Afraid* .

She forced a smile and nodded. "Headache. I've had a long day."

"So sorry about that. Get loads of rest, okay? Maybe even a nice soak in the bath? Put those expensive candles there to good use."

Alero laughed as Zinna winked, cheered by her former classmate's wit, even if only for a few seconds. "Thank you. See you tomorrow."

Once outside, as she walked out through the courtyard that separated the hall from the lobby, as vivid images of Bonju's eyes flashed in her mind, her first sight of them in twenty years, the betrayal she had sat with for just as long was so overwhelming, it suffocated her.

Coming there had been a very, very bad idea.

## **Bonju**

He watched as she made her way out of the hall, crestfallen he hadn't been brave enough to talk to her. His eyes remained on her as she headed to the door, his first proper view of her in years, his breath coming in short, uneven spurts, noting how much she had changed...but was still so much the same. Her walk was still the same, quick paced like she was in a hurry, but tentative like she was skirting around eggshells. The same constellation of freckles still marked her right shoulder, the perfect accentuation to her flawless light brown skin. Her hair, the same long, beautiful hair, still thick,

glossy, and dark, secured in the same bun she'd favoured on occasion even then. But there was a hardness in her eyes, a furrow in her brows, a pinch to her lips that had not been there before.

She was the same...but different.

Back in his room a few hours later, he clicked on the link to Emeka's friend's radio station, eager for a chance to calm his frayed nerves. Since getting the link the week before, listening to the station every night had become food for his soul. It wasn't that he didn't have access to the songs they played. He did. What made the station special was that every song that was cued elicited nostalgia...so much nostalgia. But that night, he was disappointed to find the station offline. Putting his phone down, he let out an exasperated sigh, blaming the remoteness of their location for the poor service. Deciding against streaming music from his plethora of other options, he lay on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, determined to do one thing that weekend.

Find a way to rebuild the bridge back to her.

## **Alero**

Lying in the tub, with the bubble infused water grazing her chin and a vanilla and cinnamon candle burning on the counter, relaxation eluded her. Instead, vivid memories she had long tried to suppress came rushing back.

## CHAPTER THREE –

### BLACK HOLE SUN



*In my youth, I pray to keep  
Heaven send hell away  
No one sings like you anymore*

#### **Bonju**

AS FAR AS CHILDHOODS WENT, hers was the most idyllic. Born to Eyitemi and Tofe Gboye, two people who had found love a second time around, their passionate, powerful, and sometimes even a little overwhelming, love had encompassed her like a protective blanket from the very moment she took her first breath. Even though her mother's first marriage had produced no children, her father, determined to right the mistakes he had made his first go at fatherhood, made it clear from that rainy morning on that eighth day of the month of March, when Alero made her debut into the world, that she was the centre of his universe. They were the perfect trio, she and her parents, and her life was filled with joy, laughter - lots of laughter - and music.

Eyitemi was a music lover, and from the moment he opened his eyes in the morning, there was sure to be something playing on his stereo system. Getting ready for school, eating at the dining table, making pancakes with him in the kitchen, riding in his Peugeot 505 salon car, Alero grew up to music as the constant background sound of life. She didn't know anything other than having a constant soundtrack for everything she did, which explained why she filled the non-musical moments of her life - being in

school, church, visiting older relatives - with humming and singing to herself. Weekends were spent with her shadowing her father as he sampled new records he'd just bought or, as often was the case, recorded cassette mixes for friends. And Eyitemi never turned her away anytime she peered over his shoulder or burrowed an inquisitive nose as he perused the details of an LP album, telling her about the various artists and answering her endless stream of questions.

"You see this right here, Divine," was one of the things he'd said to her, holding up an LP record with the black and white picture of two men, which was Tears For Fears' *Songs From The Big Chair* album. "It's the greatest album of all time. Many would disagree and rate *Thriller*, *Purple Rain*, or even *Joshua's Tree* over it, but I tell you, this album is solid gold!"

"Divine, when you turn 16, I'll take you to see The Eagles in concert!" he'd said another time, as he pulled out the said band's 1976 *Hotel California* album. "Best concert I ever went to, and I've been to quite a few - Bob Marley at the Lyceum Theatre in 1976, The Beach Boys at St. Paul Civic Centre in 1975, David Bowie's world tour in 1972 - but The Eagles' 1977 US tour..." he shook his head, a wistful smile on his face. "It was an experience! I can't wait to take you to see them."

He would spend hours talking her through every song, every sound, and indulging her every whim. From buying her first Walkman at age seven, to updating it with a newer model every year, her every wish was his command. And her musical whims weren't the only ones he indulged. From his lucrative salary as an architect with a major firm, he could afford to give his little girl anything she wanted. Everything she asked for, she got. She had the perfect life.

Until she didn't.

In October of 1994, she was only a few weeks into the first term of her second year at Malomo High, when she was summoned to the Principal's office. Getting there and seeing her father's older brother, Uncle Tuoyo, seated with a man she didn't recognize, she'd known. Even when they had given her a flimsy excuse about why she was to follow them home, assuring



her all was well, she'd known. She'd known her life was about to change forever.

And she was right.

They hadn't taken her home directly as, she was later to find out, her mother was under sedation at a hospital near their house. Instead, they had gone straight to Uncle Tuoyo's house a few streets away from theirs in Ikeja GRA, where his wife, Aunty Mobola, and her father's sister, Aunty Bawo, had broken the news to her. Her father was dead. Eyitemi had been knocked down by a bus while crossing the road on his way to a construction site. One minute, he had been hale and hearty, and the next, he was dead, dead at the age of only forty-four.

But the worst was yet to come.

In the next few days, Alero's life unravelled as disturbing truths came to light, the first being that not only had Eyitemi died intestate, he had left behind no savings. It turned out that his salary, though generous, had been just about generous enough to fund their comfortable lifestyle and nothing more, not even cover his funeral expenses. He had lived a life of extravagance, living for the moment, optimistic that the future would take care of itself, living by that ethos as far back as his days as a college student in America. Unfortunately, the future hadn't quite done that.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the gratuity and benefits his company paid were to be shared with his first and, as it turned out, only legal wife. Alero had been stunned to find out that her parents had never legally wed and that the photograph that hung in their living room, with her dad in a smart brown suit and her mother in a frilly, champagne-coloured dress, a small bouquet of flowers in her hand, had been them getting an informal blessing from a Pastor friend after finding out they were expecting a baby four months into being a couple and two years after his separation from his wife, Omasan. Alero had known her father was previously married to another woman, and had met her older half-brother, Destiny, a handful of times, when he had visited their house but done nothing but sit quietly and refuse anything offered him to eat or drink, evidently on strict instruction from his mother. But Alero had no idea that her father was still legally bound to his

first wife, Destiny's mother...and Destiny's mother only. His union with her mother was illegitimate. Just as she was.

In the weeks that followed, she saw a different side to her paternal relatives, all of whom suddenly took sides with Omasan. The same Uncle Tuoyo her mother would cook pots of soup for when he and his wife briefly separated a few years before, the same Auntie Bawo whose three children her mother had helped nurse, the same Uncle Ejiro for whom her mother had risked her life to accompany to the deep creeks of the Niger Delta when he took a bride, were now the same people loudly declaring Omasan as Eyitemi's 'legal wife'.

Just like that, Alero and her mother were forced to take a back seat as Omasan and Destiny were recognised as late Eyitemi's family. On the obituary posters, her name was the very last name in the list of people that had survived Eyitemi, coming even after his nieces and nephews, included as an afterthought. But worse than that was the outright omission of her mother's name. Just like that, her parents' thirteen-year union was wiped away with a single swipe, like it had never happened. And that broke her mother worse than the loss of the man who had been the love of her life.

After the funeral, Alero and her mother were faced with the looming reality that their share of her father's benefits would not be enough to continue paying for their duplex in Ikeja GRA or her education at the prestigious Malomo High, the school Eyitemi had taken a lot of pride sending her to. But in a much welcome reversal of their bad fortune, the school's proprietor, Professor Ajibola Malomo, having been taken by the vibrant, charismatic, and actively involved parent Eyitemi had been, awarded Alero a personal scholarship from his own private purse, for the rest of her stay at the school. But with their house, they hadn't been quite as lucky, and had been given only six months to remain after their rent lapsed a month after the funeral.

In the years that followed, she and her mother would drift from apartment to apartment, like nomads, much the same way her mother drifted from job to job, unable to hold any down for longer than a few months. Losing her partner, her home, her stability, had broken Tofe, making her unable to

function, unable to focus on anything. Eyitemi had taken along with him Tofe's very essence, and, to Alero, it was like losing both parents.

But even as they moved from place to place like gypsies, even as their address changed more times than was acceptable for a girl her age, one thing that went everywhere with them was the chest that contained her father's records. Somehow, her uncles hadn't considered it valuable enough when they came to retrieve his car, certificates, electronics, glossy oak Steinway piano, expensive clothes, shoes, and watches, leaving the chest behind along with the other things they considered worthless. Even though there was no more stereo to play them, Alero got comfort just from looking at the LPs, remembering something her father had told her about every one of them, each time she did. It wasn't until two years later, during the Christmas holiday of 1996, when an eighteen-year-old Destiny paid them a surprise visit, that she found someone who shared the same passion. He'd traced Alero and her mother to where they lived at the time, a one-bedroom apartment in Ketu, and she had been immediately suspicious of him, especially after everything he had indirectly stolen from her, her legitimacy being one of them.

"I'm so sorry about what you and your mother had to go through," he'd said, accepting the meal of stewed beans and plantain he was offered, the very first time he would as a visitor they were hosting. "I hated that you had to go through that. I know how much you loved him."

In his eyes, she had seen sincerity, and she realised he had been too young to do anything about the role their relatives had played two years before. So, she had accepted his hand of friendship, and when she took him to see their father's music collection, he had also been filled with nostalgic sadness, having also been schooled on many of them whenever he visited. From how taut his face had been when Eyitemi talked to him about the records, and how he'd barely ever said a word in response, Alero hadn't thought he'd even been interested in their father's passion. But from how emotional he got looking at those records, he clearly had.

After that day, whenever she was home on holiday, Destiny would come to visit her from the Unilag campus where he studied, wherever she and her

mother called home. Soon, even though she had lost a father, and only had a shell of her mother left, she gained a brother.

At the start of 1998, her mother finally began to shake off her melancholy, becoming more present in important things once again; her new job with a printing company, relationships with friends and family members she had neglected for years, and, most importantly, parenting her daughter. With Alero having turned sixteen, as if making up for lost time, her mother now wanted to know everything she was up to, everything she was doing, anything she was thinking. When she was home on holiday, her mother made sure they did everything together. From going to the market, to attending social functions, Alero became Tofe's handbag.

And that fateful Sunday afternoon during the summer holiday of 1998, the holiday before she was to return to Malomo High for her final year of secondary school, accompanying her mother for the annual luncheon hosted by the old girls of the high school she had attended in Warri, Alero had no idea her life was about to change forever.

## **Bonju**

Bonju's mother was the realtor who'd sold the Richmond-upon-Thames house to his father, Bankole, and his fourth wife, Taiwo. As Taiwo made plans for the massive, detached, Edwardian house, Bankole Adalemo made plans for the attractive thirty-one-year-old Nigerian woman his long-time realtor had sent in his place, Omere. So captivated had he been by the chocolate-coloured beauty, charmed not only by her looks but her dogged ambition and resilience, having seen herself through graduate school in the U.K while at the same time catering for her parents and siblings back in Nigeria, he dispatched Taiwo and her son, Busayo, back to Lagos, and took in the beautiful Omere. By the time the scorned Taiwo served him divorce papers, Omere was already pregnant and on her way to becoming wife number five. They were soon quietly married in a small chapel in Wimbledon, with a handful of friends as witnesses.

As Bankole shuttled between London and Lagos, to man his growing drilling company, Omere made London her home, enjoying all the perks

and largesse from being the wife - the only wife - of Bankole Adalemo who, in turn, spoiled her and their son rotten.

From the moment Bonju was born on that misty afternoon of the eighth day of March, he was the apple of Bankole's eye. His fourth son and eighth child, there shouldn't have been anything special about his birth, but there was. For the first time since his first child was born in 1962, Bankole took an entire month off work, helping his wife tend to their new born, subsequently spending at least half of his year with his new family in London, doting on the boy who bore a striking resemblance to his own father and named him after him too; Gbonjubola...a name Omere was to later crop to Bonju, so 'people would be able to pronounce it properly'.

From attending the prestigious Wetherby Prep School for boys, to exotic holidays, to toys in his playroom before they even hit the shop shelves, to being gifted a stallion he named Rocky which he rode on the grounds of their thirty-five-acre holiday home in Maidenhead, Bonju wanted for nothing. But with everything he enjoyed, nothing compared with the weekends his father visited, the evenings he would lurk by the study as the man listened to music while catching up on work. Having his father around was the highlight of his month, and he was happiest when he made the man proud, which he often did with his impressive grades. Better than the princely monetary rewards and the extravagant gifts, Bonju's ultimate reward was the broad smile that would spread on his father's face, alongside a ruffling of his high-top fade. That, to him, was everything.

But things changed one year. From visiting at least two times a month, Bankole only made it to London three times the whole year, and, that Christmas, as Bonju and his mother celebrated it alone for the very first time, his nine-year-old heart was broken. The following March, on his tenth birthday, not even the delivery of the new Sega Mega Drive console with a boxful of Sonic the Hedgehog, Desert Strike, Taz-Mania, Thunder Force, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles games was enough to make up for his father's absence on such a landmark event. As Bonju cut his cake, surrounded by friends and cousins, he had seen the sheen of tears in his mother's eyes. The very next day, word reached them that his father had taken on wife number six about a year before, and that he had just moved

her and her infant daughter to his Lagos home. For the first time in Bonju's ten years of existence, the sound of screaming and yelling had rent the air of their tranquil home, as his mother yelled and cursed on the phone speaking with his father. Leaving Bonju in the care of his nanny and aunt, Omere set off for Lagos in her determination to assert her rights as Bankole Adalemo's legal wife and eject from his home the one now parading herself as such. Omere had remained in Lagos for weeks, doing everything she could to remind Bankole why she was the one he had, until very recently, called the love of his life, but when he remained unflinching in his desire to keep them both - herself and the twenty-eight--year old Salewa, a woman less than half his age and younger than his two oldest children - Omere had decided returning to London would be akin to waving the white flag of defeat. So, she had stayed back, and at the end of the school year, Bonju had joined her in Nigeria, both of them settling in the Ikoyi house Omere had acquiesced to accept when it became clear there was no room for her in Bankole's Victoria Island home, where Salewa now held sway.

The change had been too much for the young Bonju. He was no longer the centre of his father's world, a position now occupied by the ten-month-old baby girl the man cradled every time Bonju visited. Visited. Never a word he would have imagined using to describe time spent with his father, but now he and his mother were the ones to *visit*, his father returning the favour only on occasion. Bonju and his mother no longer had the man to themselves, but now had to share him with, not only Salewa and her daughter, but the other siblings he had previously heard about but never met before. And the change broke his heart.

"Mom, can we go back home?" he would often ask his mother, sometimes in tears, because home wasn't this awful place where he blended into nothingness, now just one of Bankole Adalemo's nine, soon to be ten, children. Maybe if they went back home, the man would come to his senses, and things would return to how they had once been.

But Omere wouldn't hear any mention of putting further distance between herself and her husband. She had seen what had happened to the wives before her and she was not about to go down without a fight. She was determined to remain close enough to wage the war with her enemy.

So, they had stayed. Bonju had been enrolled at the British Prep School and he'd had no choice but to adapt to his new life. As the months progressed, he grew accustomed to, and even started to enjoy, a new kind of change, the kind of change that saw people defer to him and treat him like nobility because of the way he talked and the cars he was chauffeured in. Back in London, he'd been no different from any of the kids in his school or neighbourhood, but here in Nigeria, he was upper echelon with a surname with enough gravitas to make people around him quiver. And he liked it.

By the time he started at Malomo High the following year, the change in the dynamic he had with his father no longer hurt quite as much. No, that had taken a back seat to the adulation he enjoyed from his new friends. And as the years progressed, as his wealth and social status accorded him popularity with everyone around him, boys and girls alike, he couldn't imagine ever having wanted to return to England. Here, he was king, and he loved it.

Alas, his once stellar grades took a tumble, and he coasted through Malomo High as a less-than-average student, moving to the next class by the skin of his teeth every year. But in the summer of 1998, as he prepared to start his final year of school, his mother decided to take action.

"This holiday, there will be no travelling, no parties, no friends visiting. Instead, you will sit at home every day with your tutor. It's not me you will disgrace!" she had retorted. "No be Omere pikin go first fail!"

What he had thought was a meaningless threat soon became actuality as, true to her words, he not only remained in Nigeria for the holidays, but was also barred from receiving visitors or attending the plethora of parties that were the norm for that time of year. His only exit opportunities from the house were the times he accompanied his mother on errands or to visit relatives. And that Sunday afternoon in August, as he accompanied her for the annual luncheon hosted by the old girls of her high school, he was filled with anger, resentment, and determination to prove her wrong as he geared up for his last year of school, dogged in his resolve to earn the kind of grades that would make her see he wasn't the academic basket case she now believed him to be.

As his mother chatted and laughed with her old classmates in the home of the hosting classmate, he found his way upstairs where the bored husbands were watching TV, away from the babbling mothers and boisterous kids downstairs. Taking a seat at the balcony, digging into the large plate of grilled chicken, smoked ram, and roasted corn, Bonju was glad that the food was just as great as it was every year. But unlike previous years, this year's music selection wasn't contemporary but a 1980s blast from the past, making him remember a time when life had been pure, simple, and uncomplicated. As Midnight Star's *No Parking* played, he bobbed his head as he chewed on the grills. If for nothing, the music and food would make the afternoon worth his while.

And then he saw her.

Standing downstairs, under the shade of a tree, was a light-skinned girl dressed in a pair of jeans and a spaghetti strapped top, her full hair cascading all the way down her back, dancing to the music alone. Squinting, he angled his head forward for a better look, wondering where he had seen her before because, as familiar as she looked, he just couldn't place it. As Klymaxx's *The Men All Pause* started playing next, a smile played on his lips as he watched this mystery girl sing along unaware she was being watched, her facial expressions matching the sassy lyrics. Leaning on the balcony railing, Bonju watched her, his intrigue building. Not many kids their age would even know songs dating as far back as the early '80s, let alone sing along. Michael McDonald's *Sweet Freedom* started playing next and a broad smile broke on his face as the girl sang along, his intrigue now full-on fascination. Wiping his hands and putting down his plate, he made his way downstairs.

"You don't look old enough to know the lyrics to this song," he said, a smirk on his face. Up close she was even prettier...and more familiar.

She looked at him and her brows creased in a small frown. "It's a 1986 song."

"Yeah, I know that," he chuckled, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically nervous. He was used to girls fawning over any attempts he made at humour, no matter how inane they were. "I was just playing with you. The



music today is great and it's nice to see someone else enjoying it. You and I seem to be the only people doing that."

"Those daddies over there are having a good time," she said, a small smile on her lips as she tilted her head in the direction of a couple of pot-bellied men, dancing with glasses of beer in their hands.

"It's the alcohol. Those guys would be dancing along to German folk music in their state."

Her laughter gave him the much-needed boost to his ego. Yes, this was the way he expected girls to react.

"I'm Bonju, by the way."

A frown replaced her laughter. "I know who you are, Bonju. We're in the same class."

And like shutters torn open, recognition set in, and he could immediately identify her as one of the quiet, demure girls in his class he barely cast a second glance. Out of uniform, and with her long, full hair falling down her back, she looked nothing like one of his wallflower classmates.

"Alero," she went on, correctly guessing he had no clue what her name was.

"You look different," he said in his defence. "I think it's the hair."

"True. It's usually in cornrows," she answered with a casual shrug. "What are you doing here anyway? Did your mother go to Our Lady's as well?"

He nodded. "Class of 1969. Since we moved back home, she's never missed this reunion." He chuckled. "I wonder if Malomo will have anything like this going strong almost thirty years after graduation."

"I doubt that," she scoffed. "We haven't even finished school and you couldn't even recognize me."

"Touché."

"I only speak the truth," she said, turning away and nodding her head as The S.O.S Band's *The Finest* started playing.

“The music here is really good,” he said, aware he was repeating what he had already said, but with his brain unable to think of anything else meaningful to say. “A lot of people our age wouldn't appreciate music like this.”

She smiled and shrugged to him. “My dad was really into ‘80s rock and pop music.”

“Same as my dad,” he echoed. “But he got rid of his older albums in favour of,” he made air quotes, “‘newer sounds’. Did your dad hold on to his collection?”

Her smile faded and she looked away. “My dad died.”

He bit his lower lip, hating himself for the goof, now remembering her as the Alero whose father's death the entire teaching faculty had been distraught over several years before. “I'm sorry. That was tactless of me.”

## **Alero**

His apparent distress was enough to make her laugh. She'd known who he was when he approached her - her arrogant, flashy and pompous classmate, Bonju, who went through girlfriends quicker than some of them went through a roll of toilet paper - and she hadn't been entirely surprised by him not immediately recognizing her. In their five years of being classmates, she didn't think he had ever once looked her in the face, let alone uttered a word to her. They existed on separate planets; he, with the cool kids, and she, well, with those who weren't.

“It's okay,” she chuckled, turning back to him. “You didn't kill him. And to answer your question, he didn't get rid of his collection. As a matter of fact, I still have it.”

## **Bonju**

Remorseful about having put his foot in his mouth, he was grateful for the line she had thrown him. “Really? The entire collection?”

“The entire collection. Name an album, and it’s there.”

“Prince’s *Purple Rain* ?”

She rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t everyone’s dad have that album? Next thing, you’ll be asking about *Thriller* . You have to do better than that.”

“U2’s *Joshua Tree* ?”

“Got it.”

“Paul Simon’s *Graceland* ?”

“Got it.”

“The Police’s *Synchronicity* ?”

“Got it.”

“The Human League’s *Dare* ?” he went on, his interest reaching fever pitch, hearing her confirm ownership of albums he hadn’t heard in almost a decade.

“Got it.”

“Chicago’s *16* ?”

“*Chicago 2* all the way to *21* !”

“Wow!” he exclaimed, in awe. “Is it okay if I borrow them some time? I’d love nothing more than to burn these classics to CDs, or something.”

Her gaze dropped from his and he could immediately sense her hesitation.

“I promise to return them within twenty-four hours,” he added, to give her comfort.

“Sure, I guess,” she answered, shrugging. “But only a few at a time.”

“Certainly not the entire collection at once, especially if it’s as extensive as you say it is,” he laughed, prompting laughter from her.

“Maybe you could even record them on tapes for me,” she said, her eyes wide. “We no longer have my dad’s stereo.”

There was an underlying tone to the second statement that made him want to question what she meant by ‘no longer having’ her dad’s stereo, wondering if it was stolen or taken from them...whomever *them* was. But that wasn’t his business.

“Sure, I’d be glad to do that,” he answered. “Just give me your address and I’ll come pick them tomorrow afternoon.”

His tutor was usually done by 1pm, and he figured he could make a quick dash to her house, wherever it was.

“I live in Ebute-Metta,” she said, correctly guessing he didn’t know.

Darn it! Not quite where he could make a ‘quick dash’ to, but quick or not, he was going to make that dash, the music worth incurring his mother’s wrath over.

“That’s no problem at all. I’ll be there. Just give me your address.”

Minutes later, holding the hastily scribbled address on a paper napkin, he watched as she walked over to where a petite woman had summoned her, wondering how he could have gone five years without noticing her.

## **Alero**

The next day, she woke up nervous, her anxiety rising with each passing hour, hating that their home telephone wasn’t working. By 3pm, just when she had convinced herself Bonju had only been spitting sweet raps and never really had any plans to come, the knock on her door was the indication that he had, in fact, come.

“Hello,” she said, as she let him into their living room, her steady voice belying the quake of her stomach over her first guest of the opposite gender. Granted, he wasn’t quite her guest and had only come for the albums, but it didn’t stop her palms from sweating and her pulse from racing. With her visiting grandmother in her bedroom, they weren’t alone in the house, but they could as well have been with how nervous she was.

“Hi,” he answered, not looking quite as sure and composed as he usually did.

His six-foot-three-inch frame and rich perfume dwarfed and enveloped the apartment, and she was suddenly aware of the very modest furnishing of their living room, with its lone double sofa, old model TV and VHS player, and well-worn carpet that was taken apart and reinstalled more times than it had been designed to as they moved from house to house, at far odds with the luxurious home she was sure he had come from.

“I’ll get the box,” she said, not bothering to ask him to sit, eager for him to be quickly out of the place.

Walking away before he had a chance to answer, she went to her bedroom where her grandmother still lay and attempted to lift the steel chest from where it was placed by the wall, right by the head of the bed. But as she heaved, she realized moving it would be a tall order.

“Wetin happen, my pikin?” her grandmother asked, a puzzled look on her face.

She looked at the older woman, fleetingly contemplating asking the sixty-eight-year-old for help.

“It’s nothing, mama,” she answered. “Please, can I bring my friend in here to look at the records?”

“Your friend wan see Eyitemi music?” her grandmother beamed, her affection for the father of her grandchild in no way dimmed four years after his death. “*Eiya ! Oya, call am, make e come.*”

Minutes later, Alero led a wide-eyed Bonju to her bedroom.

“Good afternoon, Ma,” he said, touching his foot in half prostration, immediately winning the older woman’s heart.

“My pikin, doh!” she beamed. “Welcome.”

Thankfully, she rose from her lying position and walked out of the room, easing what was already a tense situation. As they, Alero and Bonju, rummaged through the album collection, his amazement was apparent.

“Wow! Tears For Fears!” he exclaimed, holding their *Songs from The Big Chair* album.

She smiled, nostalgic. “My dad thought that was the best album ever made.”

“It’s definitely top three for me,” he said, a wide smile as he looked through the song list. “This and *The Seeds of Love* .”

“That’s here as well,” Alero said, burrowing further into the box to retrieve it.

So caught up were they that they didn't notice time fly by, until Alero’s grandmother peered into the room. “Alero, come dey boil rice for your mama. She go soon come house.”

That was when, her eyes flying to the wall clock, Alero saw that, at 5pm, her mother would be returning from work any minute.

“Umm, so you have what you need, right?” she said to Bonju, rising from her kneeling position. “You can start with these ten and come for the rest when you return them.”

“Can we please make it eleven?” he asked, a plaintive look on his face as he held up Bryan Adams’ *The Three Musketeers* album.

Her face fell as she beheld one of the few albums that had been damaged in the process of their first move, when they’d evacuated the home once shared with her beloved father.

“It’s broken,” she answered with a shrug, trying not give in to the emotions that arose when she saw that album in particular.

Bonju slid it out of its jacket and examined it. “It’s badly scratched, yeah, but I might be able to restore it.” He smiled at the inscription on it. “*To my darling Divine* ,” he read out loud. “Who’s Divine?”

“That was his name for me,” she answered, her skin flushed in her embarrassment. “And don't even think of calling me that,” she added, when she saw the broad grin on his face. “Don't even try it.” She looked at the album and a smile formed on her lips. “He bought it on my twelfth birthday

and decided to write my name on it as a gift.” She smiled at the memory. “One of his gifts.”

“All the more reason why it needs to be restored.”

She shrugged again, not holding out any hope. But after she walked him out of the bedroom, stood by as her grandmother tried to coerce him to join them for dinner, and finally saw him to the door and waved him off, not only was she amazed by how easily she had parted with a good chunk of the most important thing to her, her father’s music collection, lending them to someone who could very well trash them for all she knew, she was left with a keen awareness of him for the rest of the day; his smell, the lyrical sound of his words, and the tingle in her skin anytime his hand had brushed hers in their search through the box.

Just as promised, he returned on Wednesday afternoon, with all the albums intact.

“I was able to restore the Bryan Adams album,” he said, as he held his next eleven albums in hand. “Not the vinyl you gave me, but I succeeded in burning it to a CD.” He handed her a bag. “Here are your copies, just like you asked.”

“CDs, Bonju? I asked for tapes!” she wailed. “I don’t have a CD player.”

“Yikes, my bad,” he said, with a grimace. “I’ll record them on tapes tonight and bring them back on Friday.”

She smiled at the Bryan Adams CD she was still holding. “This was the last album he bought. It was at the very top of the pile, so that’s why it was one of those that fell out when the chest was first moved.” Her eyes pooled with tears. “*All For Love* was the last song I listened to with him, the night before I left for school in September 1994.”

“Do you want to listen to it in my car?” he asked, his dilated eyes showing his empathy.

Eagerly, she nodded, desperate for a chance to listen to the song again. In his car, as they listened to the 1993 classic, she made no attempt to contain her emotions, singing along despite the steady stream of tears cascading down her face, the reminder of her father so strong, it was as if he were

right there in the car with them. Bonju hadn't interrupted her, allowing her sing and cry as she wanted, and she was grateful to him for that.

"Thank you so much for this," she said, when the song was over. "You don't know what an amazing gift this was to me. Back then and today."

"No, *you're* the one who's given *me* a gift," he answered, tapping the stack of albums on the backseat. He turned to her again and held her gaze. "You sure you're okay?"

"Never better," she answered, smiling, and truly meaning it.

"So, Friday?" he asked.

She laughed as she got out of the car. "Friday."

As his Volkswagen Passat made its way out of her narrow street, she found herself wishing the hours away, and not just because she was eager to have the tapes she could play at home...but because she couldn't wait to see him again.

## **Bonju**

Lying on his bed and listening to Lionel Richie's *The Only One* after two weeks of burning Alero's father's albums, he was unable to shake thoughts of her from his mind. For someone who had never particularly been attracted to light-skinned girls, the more times he saw her, the more drawn to her he was, noticing more about her than he should have; that she had the longest, darkest eyelashes he had ever seen on a human being, lashes that framed the brownest and most expressive eyes, eyes that seemed able to speak their own language without any need for words, and the smatterings of freckles at the nape of her neck and on her right shoulder. Listening to the Lionel Richie sing about the only one who stole his heart away, Bonju scoffed and chided himself for even contemplating something as ludicrous as having feelings for Alero Gboye. Clearly, it was his banishment from his normal social scene that was giving room to these ridiculous thoughts. Thankfully, he had burned all the CDs he wanted and had given her the



tapes she needed, so they had no business with each for the remaining two weeks of their holiday.

He didn't see her again, but when school resumed, he found himself on the lookout for her, and, seeing her walk into class just before their first assembly, his heart lurched at the sight of her. With her long hair now bound in tight plaits, and the grey shirt and maroon skirt having taken the place of the denim skirts and tank tops she'd worn during the holidays, even though the visual of her was more like what his prior memory of her had been, it was a prior memory now with a current overlay, as he could now see those lashes, those expressive eyes, those freckles on her neck.

"Hi," she said, lifting her hand a shy wave.

"Hi," he answered, offering a small smile with his reciprocal wave.

"I hope you enjoyed the CDs you burned."

"Still enjoying them, actually. I can't tell you enough what a treasure you gave me. I was listening to Paul Simon's *Graceland* on the way to school and can't wait to continue when I head home this evening."

She shook her head, her smile broadening. "I can't believe you come all this way every day. Epe isn't exactly next door."

He shrugged, not caring to add that his mother would sooner have her head on a platter than send him off to boarding school. Before he could say anything in response, Morin Biobaku waved at him from where she stood at the door. Before going on holiday the previous term, after his messy breakups with Temi Fawaz and Emilia Fom - both of whom he'd been dating at the same time and both of whom had issued him ultimatums to make a choice when they found out, prompting him to dump them both - he and Morin had started flirting and had planned to continue their rendezvous in London over the summer. Alas, his mother had truncated those plans. But now, there she was, Morin, a girl who was more his type, a girl who was a part of his actual world, and not some imaginary musical one.

"Great to see you again, Alero," he said, rising his feet and winking at Morin, who was still standing at the door. "Have a great term."

He made his way to Morin, pushing all thoughts of Alero to the back of his head. But even as he reunited with Morin and the rest of his friends, thoughts of Alero still resurfaced, no matter how hard he tried to quell them.

## **Alero**

Seeing him leave to join Morin, Alero nursed no grudge. This was their reality. Their worlds were planets apart, intersecting for only the short period their interaction had lasted. So, for her, there were no hard feelings.

For the rest of the term, she watched him from the sidelines as he got closer to the beautiful Morin. Apart from more intentional greetings and a casual wave here and there, she and Bonju had no interaction that first term of their final year of school. Not until the last day of the term, when he'd walked up to her.

"So, Santa is here to grant you any musical wishes you might have this Christmas," he said, a broad grin on his face. "I leave for London this weekend, so your music wishes are my demand."

She could only manage laughter in response, completely taken off guard. "There's none that I can think of. But thank you for the offer."

"You're sure? I can pick for you anything you ask for. And by anything, I mean anything."

"I'm positive," she laughed. "Thank you."

And it had been on that happy tone she had left for home for the holidays, cheered that, even though they weren't exactly friends, he still thought enough of her to want to gift her something for Christmas.

## **Bonju**

Walking through the aisles of the music store, HMV, a few days to Christmas, he smiled as Wham!'s *Last Christmas* played, thoughts of Alero resurfacing the way they did every time he heard a song they had either

talked about or which he knew she'd like. Buoyed, and wanting to introduce her to the era of '90s rock she had missed out on after the death of her father, he picked up for her CDs from East 17, Oasis, Aerosmith, Sound Garden, and Wet Wet Wet, smiling as he imagined the look on her face when he gave them to her. From HMV, he stopped at Currys and bought her a Discman. Wrapping the gifts that night, he placed them delicately in his suitcase, suddenly wanting to fast-track his long-desired holiday.

On January 4<sup>th</sup>, the day after he got back home, he headed to Ebute-Metta.

"Merry Christmas!" he declared when she opened the door. "About ten days late, I apologise!"

His heart melted at the look of pure delight on her face as she accepted the gift.

"Oh, my goodness! This is too much!" she squealed, opening the gift, and seeing the Discman. "I have no words, Bonju. Thank you!"

He beamed at her, the look of glee on her face pleasing him more than anything she could have ever said in gratitude. At that very moment, he would have happily given her the moon if she had asked.

"How are you preparing for school?" he asked, as they drank bottles of soda after she had taken her gifts to her bedroom.

"I have to go to the market tomorrow to buy my school supplies," she answered. "Alone, as my mom can't take time off work."

"I could take you," he offered, surprising even himself.

She stared at him, wide eyed, for a few seconds before smiling and nodding. "I'd appreciate that. Thank you."

And he had, showing up at her house a few minutes after 11am, and driving her to the nearby Tejuosho market to buy the supplies she needed for school; a replacement bucket, a couple of towels, flashlights, stationary, biscuits, and cereal. By the end of the day, after being unable to find a suitable pair of brown sandals, he had come again the next day as they broadened their search, heading to a shop in Surulere where she eventually found a decent pair.

“Thank you,” she said, as the car pulled up in front of her apartment building. “You saved me a whole lot of stress.”

“It was my pleasure,” he said, and meaning it. Even though he’d been forced to venture to places previously unknown, it had been worth everything just to spend time with her.

“So, I guess the next time we’ll see will be at school,” she said, turning to him, a smile on her face.

As their gazes held, he could barely manage a coherent thought, lest of all the right words to say to her in response. All he could think of was how much he wanted to kiss her.

Leaning forward, she did the same and, with Bryan Adams’ *Do I Have to Say the Words* belting from the car’s sound system, their lips melted together. Tilting up her chin, his tongue traced the outline of her mouth, before blending with hers in a gentle fusion. It wasn’t his first kiss, far from it, but as they pulled apart, as his eyes met her wide ones, it felt like it was, with the way his heart was racing, the way his mouth was tingling, and how giddy he was from the rush of dopamine, oxytocin, and serotonin in his system. He wanted to kiss her again. He needed to kiss her again.

“Won’t your girlfriend be mad about that?” she asked, recovering first, a slow smile forming on her face.

“There’s no girlfriend,” he said, leaning in to take her lips again, and meaning it. Nothing he felt for Morin, or any of the other girls vying for his attention, even came close to what he now felt for her.

## **Alero**

By the time they were back in school, there was no more denying the fact that they were into each other. Bonju made good on his word to end things with Morin and, even though he and Alero decided to keep their brewing relationship to themselves, they made do with subliminal flirting and stolen kisses the few times their paths crossed.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, their shared birthday, as their class dispersed that afternoon, with day students headed home and the rest to the dining hall for lunch, Bonju presented her with an orange frosted cupcake in a clear, plastic box.

“Orange, because you don't seem the pink type,” he said, grinning as she took a bite of the decadent treat.

“Yumm, this is good!” she exclaimed. “Chocolate and peanut butter?”

“And salted caramel,” he nodded. “I knew you’d love it. I got it from this place that just opened, Crust Alchemy I think it’s called.”

“Thank you so much,” she said, wiping frosting from her upper lip. “I didn't get you a gift.”

“It’s okay,” he said, leaning forward and brushing his lips with hers. “You just did. And you still taste of chocolate.”

“What are the odds we were born on the very same day!” she remarked, beaming at him. “It’s truly uncanny.”

“It must mean we’re soulmates, Alero Gboye.”

“I guess it must mean that, Bonju Adalemo.”

Stealing a few more kisses before he had to leave, for them, those few minutes spent had been the highlight of both their days.

A few weeks later, they broke off for the Easter holidays, during which time they spent every day with each other, with Bonju showing up at her house every morning, them watching made-for-TV movies on the Hallmark channel and stuffing their faces with the fried *puff puff* and *chin chin* her grandmother made, stealing kisses every chance they got. Sometimes, they would go for drives, mostly around her neighbourhood, but a few times venturing further away. There were a few half-hearted attempts at studying for their final exams, but for the most part, they remained engrossed in each other...and in the love that was blossoming between them.

Halfway into the holiday, Bonju invited her to his house for the first time. She had been apprehensive, her anxiety less from what his family would think of her but more from how out of place she would feel there. In the

end, she'd accepted, but as his car pulled into the large compound on Reeve Road, her stomach dropped at the sight of the imposing building, gleaming white with beams and pillars that made it look like a miniature version of the White House. Clutching the raffia handbag Destiny had gifted her for Christmas, as they made their way through the solid oak doors into the impressive lobby, the stunning décor in themes of white and gold took her breath away. Suddenly, she felt like a fish out of water.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked, as Bonju led her up the stairs to his bedroom, her eyes darting around for anyone who could see him taking her there.

"It's just me and my uncle at home, babe. Relax."

That had eased her nerves by a fraction, but as he pushed open a door at the end of the second floor, she gasped at the size of the room, a room that looked like it could perfectly contain her mother's entire apartment.

"Welcome to my man cave!" he beamed, throwing his hands open and walking backward into the room. "Just relax, babe. *Mi casa, su casa*."

Her smile was taut as she nodded, her eyes taking in the sheer magnificence of the room and the state-of-the art TV and sound system that many would display with pride in their living rooms. As her eyes fell on the large king-sized bed, she couldn't help but wonder how many other girls he had already brought there...and just how far he'd gone with each of them.

Picking up a remote control, he tapped a few buttons and soon Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit* was playing. Turning to her, he took her handbag from her. "Have a seat, babe. What can I get you to drink? Soda? Wine?" He winked. "Something stronger?"

"Nothing yet," she answered, sitting on the bed as the only chair there was stacked with clothes and shoeboxes. Luxurious though the room was, it still belonged to a teenage boy. "Maybe later."

Bonju nodded and was soon next to her on the bed. Turning her head to his, he took her lips in a kiss, starting out slow and gentle as their kisses usually were, but soon graduating in intensity, more demanding, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. Leaning into her so that she was now lying on the

bed, he was soon on top of her, his hands roving her body, going places they'd never ventured before. Her eyes widened with horror as she felt one of his hands slip under her shirt, with the other tugging at the zip of her jeans. This was going too far, too fast. Still kissing him, she guided his hands away, but every time she moved them, they returned, determined to have their way. But when his hand cupped her breast, she let out a yelp and pushed him off.

"What the hell, Alero?" he exclaimed in his surprise.

"What's wrong with you? What were you trying to do?" she threw back at him, her arms clasped over her chest. "Is this why you brought me here?"

"What was I doing wrong? What's wrong with taking things to second base? You're my girlfriend. This is what girlfriends do, Alero." he retorted.

And that, the confirmation that he had indeed brought other girls there to do the very same thing, was enough to push her over the edge.

"Well, I'm not one of the girls you bring here who'll let you feel them up like a piece of meat!" she snarled, sitting upright. "I'd like to go home now. Take me home now."

He glared at her before rolling off the bed and storming out of the bedroom. Sitting there alone, Alero looked around the room, not knowing what she was supposed to do - go after him or just wait. As much as she wanted to spend time with him that day, it wasn't going to be under those circumstances. The seconds rolled into minutes, and when one hour soon became two, she rose to her feet, grabbed her handbag, took a deep breath, and pushed open the door, making her way down the same stairs that had brought her up. Following the sound of music coming from the left side of the base of the staircase, she walked into a large living room with tufted furniture in different shades of green, vintage coffee and side tables made of brass and onyx, large twin crystal encrusted chandeliers that looked like birds in flight, and a glossy black piano just like the one her father once had. On another day, she would have spent time admiring all the room's exquisite details, as she did anytime she encountered living space that fascinated her, but she was too upset to even do that, angered by the sight of

Bonju seated on a chair, a can of Coke in his hand, nodding his head along to hard rock music she couldn't identify, as if nothing had happened.

“Why did you leave me upstairs?” she demanded. “I told you I want to go home.”

“I’ll take you when I’m ready,” he muttered.

“I need you to take me home now!” she demanded, her voice several decibels higher as her frustration skyrocketed.

“I don't know why you’re making such a big deal about...” he yelled back, rising to his feet, but was silenced by the sound of a car driving in through the gates. Peering through the curtains, he cursed under his breath. Turning to her, the rage on his face had given way to anxiety. “You should sit down. Your standing would be harder to explain.”

She complied without argument, taking the nearest seat she could find. Voices soon filled the lobby, the more dominant one being that of a commanding female, and as a strong rose and vanilla smell wafted in, Alero didn't need to be a soothsayer to know the woman of the house had returned.

The loud click of heels announced her entry in the room, and Alero followed suit as Bonju rose to his feet.

“Welcome, Mom. You’re home early.”

The woman, a beautiful woman with glossy dark brown skin, hair cut in a sharp bob, and wearing a smart black suit cinched at the waist with a thin gold belt, gold that matched the large clasp on her designer shoes, merely nodded at her son, her eyes on Alero the whole time.

Bonju noticed and he immediately cleared his throat. “Erm, this is my friend, Alero.”

As if snapped out of a trance, Alero curtsied. “Good afternoon, Ma.”

“I know you,” the older woman said, her eyes trained on her. “I saw you at the family picnic last August. Are you not Tofe’s daughter?”

Alero smiled, a little more at ease. “Yes, Ma. I am.”



The woman's head snapped in her son's direction, before turning back to Alero, her mouth parted in surprise, before she dissolved into laughter. "Abi you miss road? Abi you and your mama miss road?"

"Ma?" was all Alero could manage in response, shocked equal parts by the elegant woman's switch to Pidgin English and the less than pleasant reference to her mother.

"Tofe get mind o!" Bonju's mother was still laughing, shaking her head this time. "She get mind to send this pikin she born for born-troway come my house!"

Born-troway. A term Alero hadn't heard in years. A term she'd heard for the first time when an old neighbour threw it at her father during a heated argument over parking space. It wasn't until years later she'd found out it was a derogatory term used for biracial people - like her father - with an absent parent, his own father in this case. Eyitemi and his two siblings were the illegitimate products of an affair between their young mother and a Dutch engineer with Shell in Warri, who had returned to The Netherlands without even leaving a forwarding address. In his lifetime, it was never something Eyitemi liked to discuss, constantly evading Alero's questions about why he had a different surname from the Van Der Beek last name Uncle Tuoyo and Auntie Voke had. It wasn't until his death that she found out her father, at the age of twenty-one, had legally changed his last name to his godfather's, ridding himself of the surname his mother had insisted they maintain even after their father's abandonment, not wanting anything to do with a man who had turned his back on his children without as much as a backward glance.

'Born-troway' in the truest sense of the word.

"Mom," Bonju admonished, casting an anxious glance Alero's way.

"Tofe no know her size at all!" his mother was still ranting, all traces of humour gone. "She look left, look right, and na my own pikin she select? She no see the other people wey dey for gutter like am? Na me, Omere, she come see? She think say we dey the same boat?"

Alero pursed her lips in her rising anger, the import of Bonju's mother's words not lost on her; she didn't find her, or her mother, worthy of their acquaintance. And even though it was something she had feared, hearing it voiced and confirmed, stung like crazy.

"Let me take you home," Bonju said, reaching for Alero's hand.

"Take her where? To Ajegunle, abi where dem dey stay?" Omere exclaimed, before reaching into her bag, bringing out her purse, and throwing crisp notes at her. "Young girl, do yourself a favour and find a taxi, bus, or *okada* . I don't care what or how you do, just get out of my house immediately!"

As the notes fell to the ground at her feet, Alero stared from them to the woman, unable to move a muscle, her feet frozen to the spot. Never in her life, not even when her father died, had she experienced hostility like that. Ignoring his mother, Bonju grabbed Alero's hand, nudging her into motion, and she walked with him, both of them ignoring the incensed calling of his name from inside the house. Once outside, Alero needed no prompting to get into the car, wanting, needing, to be as far away from that woman, that house as she possibly could.

The drive through rush-hour traffic to the mainland was in silence, and Bonju's car had barely parked in front of her compound when she hopped out, slamming the door for good measure.

She never, ever, wanted to see him again.

## **Bonju**

Fuming when he got home, he didn't know whom he was more furious with; his mother for the awful words she'd thrown at his guest, or his supposed girlfriend for rebuffing him. No girl had ever said no to him and remembering how she had recoiled from his touch like he had a leprous hand made him so angry, he wanted to yell till he was hoarse.

But by the second day, lying in bed with the realisation that he wasn't going to see her that day, and that chances were high that she never would want to

see him ever again, made him hyperventilate. The thought of not having her in his life, of never again looking into those eyes, of never again kissing those lips, of never again listening to music with her, music that only she could appreciate, made him so distressed, he was unable to focus on anything.

“What’s wrong with you?” his Uncle Ize asked, as Bonju toyed with his dinner. “I hope it’s not a woman giving you a face this long. Boy, don’t forget you’re your father’s son!” And then looking around, to be sure his sister, Omere, wasn’t within earshot, something he did anytime he wanted to verbalize his admiration of Bankole Adalemo, Ize pumped Bonju’s back. “Na man your papa be! The guy dey control women like remote. Dem never born the woman wey go do your papa yeye like this.”

But rather than embolden him, Ize’s admonition had only succeeded in making Bonju sink into deeper despair. Two days in, and he already missed Alero something awful. There was no way he was going to survive losing her forever.

On the third day, as Omere set off for London to spend the Easter week with her husband, having gotten wind that there was trouble in paradise between Bankole and Salewa, and that he had gone to his London home to clear his head, Bonju also set off for Ebute-Metta, stopping at a flower shop on the way for a bouquet of flowers. As he made his way up the dark stairway leading to her apartment, his heart pounded in his chest, worried about how she would receive him, not only after what he had done...but the godawful things his mother had said to her.

When she opened the door and saw him, he expected her to slam it shut in his face or yell caustic abuse at him, both of which he deserved. But she did neither, instead standing at her door and glaring at him, the sheen in her eyes showing her anger, her disappointment, and her pain.

Dropping to his knees, he reached for her hand. “I’m so sorry.”

She bit her lip and turned away, but not fast enough for him not to see the line of tears trailing down her face. Shooting to his feet, he pulled her to himself and held her just as tight as she held him, burrowing his head into her hair, repeating over and over again, “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Inside her house, they didn't talk about what had happened in his bedroom or what his mother had said. Instead, they settled in front of her TV, kissing and eating her grandmother's snacks like none of it had. This they repeated the next day, and the day after that, falling into pattern like it had never been broken.

"What are you doing for Easter?" he asked, as she saw him to his car on Holy Thursday.

She shrugged. "Nothing much. It's just Grandma and me. My mom left for Sapele this afternoon. She says it's for a friend's wedding, but Grandma and I suspect she's seeing someone who lives there."

He raised a brow, an amused smile on his face. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

She shrugged, the subject clearly not something she wanted to discuss.

He looked at her, afraid to verbalize what he wanted to ask, not especially after royally bungling it the first time. But he decided to anyway. "Will you spend the day with me tomorrow? I promise not to push you like I did last time. I'll be content to just hold your hand, you have my word."

The request out of his mouth, he wished he could retrieve it, to spare himself the anguish of a rejection, because there was no way, absolutely no way, she was going to agree to it.

"Your mom is away, right?" she instead asked. "In London?"

He nodded. "For another week at least."

"And your uncle?"

"As good as not there, with all the time he spends out with friends."

He watched her with bated breath, worried she would catch herself, worried she would scoff and insult him for daring to make such a request after what had happened the last time he did. But instead, she looked up at him and smiled.

"You better be on your best behaviour this time," she said, pointing a finger at him.

“Scout’s honour,” he answered, raising a hand as if in oath.

And so, it was settled. The following day, he picked her up, and they returned to his house.

“We can stay downstairs if you want,” he said, motioning to the living room as they walked into the house. “Our cook made his signature pineapple upside-down cake, and I know you’ll like it.”

She cast a nervous glance towards the place where the incident with his mother had happened, and he could see in her eyes that it wasn’t a place she wanted to return to just yet.

“Or we could go upstairs?”

She smiled and nodded at this suggestion. “I’d prefer that.”

Once in his bedroom, she sat on his bed, ignoring the chair he had cleared of the shoeboxes that were stacked there before. Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, he took the chair instead.

“You don’t have to sit all the way there, Bonju,” she smiled, patting the side of the bed next to her. “Put on a movie and come sit here with me.”

Obliging her request, he slipped *Armageddon* into his DVD player and went to sit beside her on the bed, his arm around her and her head on his shoulder. After the film’s 150-minute-duration, he went downstairs to fetch the pineapple upside-down cake, some grilled chicken, bottles of soda, and slipped in *The Wedding Singer* next. By the time that movie was over, it was almost 7pm.

“I better take you back,” he said, even though the last thing he wanted was to move from his position of holding her.

“Let’s wait a few minutes,” she answered, clearly feeling the same way.

The crack of thunder from the heavy rain that had been pouring for over an hour further justified their decision to wait.

“I guess we could wait till after the rain,” he said. “Want to watch another movie?”

She shook her head, her hair tickling his chin from her lying position on his chest. “Let’s listen to music instead.”

Obliging her, he reached for the remote control, clicked off the TV and set Soundgarden’s *Superunknown* album to play.

“I like this song,” she said when *Black Hole Sun* , the seventh track on the album started to play.

He smiled as she echoed his sentiment of it being his favourite song on the album. “It was the most successful song on the album. It won the Grammy for best hard rock performance in 1995.”

“My dad used to do that,” she said, and he could feel the outline of her smile on his chest. “He used to give me background information about every song we listened to, every album he bought.” She was quiet for a few seconds. “He would have liked this song.”

Reaching for the remote control, he set the song to play on repeat, and they lay there listening to the song in rotation, the only other sound coming from the humming of the air conditioner and the intermittent thudder of the windows from the howling wind outside. After being still for so long, he looked down at her to see if she had fallen asleep, but his eyes met hers as she looked up, nudged by his own movement. Their eyes held for several seconds until he lowered his face to hers, his lips claiming hers in a kiss that, from the very onset demanded more; more of him...more of her.

## **Alero**

As his mouth explored hers, as she pulled him closer until he draped her entire body, her body ached for him in a way it never had before. Even though she had felt assaulted the last time he’d attempted to take things further, even though she’d resented him for pushing her, even though she’d sworn never to have anything to do with him especially after the awful confrontation with his mother, she had melted like butter at the sight of him standing at her doorstep looking contrite, a bouquet of the most beautiful flowers in his hands. And now, kissing him with the sound of the rain and Soundgarden as a backdrop, she was the one now deepening it, the one now

drawing him in. Groaning, he made to pull away, his eyes on hers in silent question, and her eyes holding his in silent acquiescence. As he lowered himself back to her, as she let him feel and kiss places he never had before, as they progressed through several stages of undress until they lay before each other as naked as the day they were born, she had never wanted anything more in her entire life. Grasping him as their love transcended several planes, riding waves of intense pain and euphoric joy, of sinking yield and rushes of desire, evoking sensations she never knew she was capable of feeling, it was everything...and nothing...like she'd heard it was. It was more than just a cleaving of their bodies. It was a cleaving of their hearts...of their souls.

"I love you, Alero," he said afterwards, as they lay intertwined.

She looked up at him, a flash of lightning illuminating his face, the emotions she felt so powerful, she couldn't even say a word. Even though she had always imagined her first sexual encounter being at a much later age, she didn't feel any regret or shame over what had happened between them.

An hour later, she called a neighbour to tell her grandmother she was stranded in a friend's house because of the rain, and had decided to spend the rest of the Easter weekend there to 'study', knowing she would have to do a lot more explaining when she did get home, as her grandmother was in no way stupid, but ready to take the risk nonetheless. Falling asleep in Bonju's arms that night, all she could think was that he was worth any trouble she would get into.

The next morning, dressed in his t-shirt and joggers, they drove out to pick up food from a fast-food diner, and to a pharmacy to buy toiletries she could use...and several packs of condoms. She had been unable to make eye contact with the cashier at the checkout counter as the packs of Durex were bagged, her eyes darting around in fear someone would recognize them. But back in the house, as they fell back into their abyss of passion, any discomfort she felt was forgotten.

She was the happiest she had ever been.

Bar none.

## Bonju

Waking up on Easter Sunday, and looking at the woman in his arms, a wide smile broke on his face as it did anytime he saw her, anytime he realized the last few days hadn't been a dream, but the sweetest reality of all. From her deep, even breathing, she was still asleep, and, running trails down her back with his fingers, he was the most content he had ever been. It was not his first sexual encounter, but everything from his past paled in comparison to what he had found with her. His heart yearned for her just as insatiably as his body craved hers, and, for him, that was a first.

He was head over heels in love with her.

The sound of loud pounding on the door made him start.

"Bonju! I know you're in there! Ize told me you're in, so open the door!" a voice bellowed. "Open up. I have a message from the old man."

Bonju cursed under his breath, wondering why on earth Babawale, his older brother from wife number three, had chosen to come by the house that morning, of all mornings.

"Who is it?" a Alero asked, waking up with a start and clutching the bed sheet over her chest like a shield.

"My older brother," Bonju answered. "He's not going to go away, so I think we should get dressed." Sighing as the knocking intensified, he looked at the door like it was the culprit, and yelled, "I'm coming!"

Scrambling off the bed, Alero reached for the discarded t-shirt and joggers, running a hand through her dishevelled hair.

"Babe, relax," Bonju said, trying to sound more confident than he felt, as he put on his shorts and slipped on a t-shirt. "Let's just act normal."

She nodded, sitting upright in the sofa, but still looking as harried as ever. Realizing they had tidied themselves to the best of their ability, Bonju opened the door. From the smirk on Babawale's face, he already knew what to expect.



“Ize told you me you’ve had a babe here since your mom travelled,” he chuckled, walking in, his eyes lighting up upon seeing Alero. “Hello, gorgeous.”

Bonju’s nostrils flared just as Alero flushed.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice timid.

“Morning *ke* ?” Babawale exclaimed in mock horror. “It’s past noon. This love must be serious to make you lose all track of time!”

“What do you want?” Bonju cut in, impatient for his brother’s visit to be over and done with. “You said you have a message from dad. I spoke with him on Friday so what message could he be sending through you that my mom, who’s with him by the way, wouldn’t have already passed on?”

At thirty-one, Babawale was much older, but from the moment he and Bonju had set eyes on each for the first time seven years before, their dislike for, and resentment of, each other had been mutual...and instant. As the years progressed, they’d learned how to co-exist, but there was no love lost between the pair.

His eyes still on Alero, Babawale shrugged and chuckled. “He was worried about you being alone on Easter Sunday so wanted me to check on you. I guess he had no reason to be worried.”

“Is that all?” Bonju asked, not bothering to conceal the edge in his voice.

Babawale, still laughing, patted Bonju on the shoulder. “Calm down, baby brother. No need to burst a vessel. I’ll leave you two to...whatever you were doing before. Enjoy.”

As he walked out of the room, Bonju slammed the door hard after him. “Asshole!”

“Is he going to tell your parents?” Alero asked, her eyes wide with fear.

“Nobody listens to him anyway!” he muttered. It wasn’t true. Having joined Ocedrill right after graduating with a first-class degree from Cambridge, Babawale had proven himself well enough for their father to place him in very high regard. But Bonju was ready to take his chances.

“I better go home. My grandma will be getting worried by now.”

Bonju sighed, understanding the need for her to return after two nights away, but also not wanting to be separated from her for even a minute. “Will you come back tomorrow?”

A slow smile formed on Alero’s face. “Do you want me to?”

Lifting her from the chair, he carried her back to bed. “Let me show you just how much.”

A little over an hour later, showered, groomed, and dressed, they both made their way downstairs. To his annoyance, Babawale was still there, standing in the lobby with Ize, his eyes following Bonju and Alero as they made their way down the stairs, a derisive smile on his face.

“Such a pretty girl,” Babawale said, his voice with a mocking lilt. “You can do better than a clueless sixteen-year-old boy still tied to his mother’s wrapper.”

“I’m seventeen,” Bonju said through grit teeth, glaring at his brother.

That only served to prompt Babawale and Ize into more raucous laughter, and Alero tugged at Bonju, clearly wanting to be out of the place as fast as their feet could carry them.

“Never mind them,” Bonju said, leading her to his car, once outside. “They’re just a pair of jobless farts with nothing better to do. They have no bite to their bark.”

“You’re sure?”

He squeezed her hand in reassurance. “Positive.”

It took a little over thirty minutes to get to Ebute-Metta, and it had taken all his willpower not to kiss her goodbye.

“It’s broad daylight, and my neighbours could be watching,” she teased. “Tomorrow is only a few hours away.”

“Will you pack a few things to stay over?”

“I don't think that will be a good idea. My mom will be back from Sapele any minute, and I need to start getting ready for school next weekend.”

“Just one night. I could bring you back on Tuesday.”

She contemplated it before smiling and nodding. “Just one night.” Then blowing him a kiss, she got out of the car and disappeared through the gates of the compound.

Back home, he was disgusted to find Babawale still there, drinking beer at the dining table, having been joined by his younger brother, Bolu.

“Bonju, come here!” Babawale beckoned him over, grinning. “What is this I’m hearing about you losing your head over that girl?”

“That girl don finish im brain!” Ize chimed in. “Since this holiday started, every morning, before the day even breaks, Bonju has already fired his car to the mainland, not returning until night. And these few days she was here, he didn’t even peep out of his room at all. The girl has him under lock and key!”

“At this age when you’re supposed to be sowing your wild oats?” Bolu laughed. “You’re getting yourself pussy-whipped by a girl?”

“I’m not pussy-whipped!” was Bonju’s defiant retort, angered by the mocking.

“Girls like that don't wait for boys like you,” Babawale went on, clearly enjoying the effect their teasing was having on him. “You think she won’t dump you like a bad habit when a bigger fish comes around?”

“Alero isn’t like that.”

This elicited even more laughter from the trio.

“Wo, e go do you like film show!” Ize chortled.

“Boy, don’t be a cunt!” Babawale admonished. “Adalemo men don't get pushed around by women. You should know that by now.”

Done with listening to them, Bonju charged up to his room, immediately comforted by the reminder of Alero, with her mild fruity perfume still lingering and snapshots of her in every corner of the room flashing vividly

through his head. But lying on the bed, his brothers' and uncle's words replayed in his head. Was he really being stupid loving her as deeply and uncontrollably as he did? Was he setting himself up for future heartbreak? Would his father be disappointed in him for this display of brazen, unabashed affection?

Those worries stayed with him as he made his way to pick her up the next day.

"Grandma didn't even ask me too many questions," she said with a giggle, as the car raced along the Third Mainland Bridge. "I think she knows I'll be with you. I think she even knows I was with you over the weekend."

He smiled at her, her enthusiasm infectious and the sight of her making him forget the apprehension he had nursed all night. Who cared what anyone thought, when he had the love of a girl he loved with everything? Who cared what his father thought, when he was the happiest he had ever been? Back in his bedroom, as they melted into each other again, it was magic. And nothing else mattered.

Later that afternoon, after a midday shower, convinced the house was empty, they ventured downstairs, and in the living room, she walked around, her eyes taking in the room, smiling at the very many pictures of Bonju that adorned the walls and gold-leaf credenza. Walking over to the piano, she smiled.

"This is exactly like my father's piano." She shook her head and sighed. "I haven't touched a piano in almost five years." Running her hand across its glossy lid in a caress, she turned to him. "May I?"

"You play?"

Taking a seat, she nodded. "My father taught me. Funny thing is I wasn't keen on it before he died. I found it a chore every time he sat me down to learn a new piece. But now, it's one of the fondest memories I have of him."

Her fingers tapped first a key, and then another, until they were gliding across the keyboard in a classical melody. He listened, enraptured by the sound and sight of her as she skilfully played the stringed keyboard instrument, falling deeper in love with her with every note.

“Wow,” was all he could manage when she was done.

“*The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book One*, by Bach,” she said, a rueful smile on her face. “It’s the only classical piece I learnt to play well. My dad was so frustrated by my preference to only play the *Happy Birthday* song and tunes from *The Sound of Music*.”

Bonju sat beside her on the stool facing the piano and put his arm over her shoulder, just as she rested her head on his, giving her the silence he knew she needed, the memory of her father poignant.

They soon returned upstairs, remaining there the rest of the day and for the better part of Tuesday, not coming out until he was ready to take her home at 5pm. As they walked down the stairs, the front door opened, their housekeeper having let in Folarin and Demola, their classmates from school. All four sets of eyes widened, Folarin’s and Demola’s in surprise, and Alero’s and Bonju’s with the wide-eyed astonishment of deer caught in headlights.

“Hey, man,” Folarin finally said to Bonju, but with his eyes on Alero, the furrow of his brows registering his confusion over seeing her there. “We’ve been calling you for days. Didn’t your uncle tell you? We left messages.”

“Um, no. He didn’t,” Bonju answered, unsure whether to hide Alero, retreat upstairs, or simply act like nothing untoward had happened.

“Hi, Alero,” Demola said, the smile on his face showing he had deduced exactly what was going on. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“I was just leaving,” she said, casting an imploring gaze at Bonju.

“Yeah, I was just about to take her home,” Bonju said to his friends, raising his brows and hoping to convey to them that it wasn’t a good time to visit.

“A’ight, no worries. We’ll come back later.” Folarin said, now smiling as well, as all four of them walked out of the house.

“Do you think they guessed anything?” Alero asked, once they were in the car.

Bonju knew they had, but instead shook his head. “Nah. I’ll just tell them you were in the area and decided to drop by to say hello.”

Traffic was heavy headed to the mainland, and they didn't get to Ebute-Metta until almost 8pm.

"I have to pick my mom from the airport tomorrow, so I might not be able to see you until Thursday," he said, kissing her hand before she got out of the car. "I'll miss you."

"You have Daso's number." Daso was her neighbour. "Call me when you're back?"

"I most surely will. I love you."

"I love you too."

And driving away from her house, that was all that mattered.

For the hour it took to get back home.

Driving into the compound, he frowned at the sight of Folarin's Audi still parked there. Hadn't he seen Folarin and Demola get into that very car and drive out behind him when he left the house hours ago? What were they doing back?

"Bro! Your Uncle says Alero has practically been living here, man!" Folarin guffawed, the minute he pushed the door open.

Bonju glared at Ize, who was grinning as he stood with the boys in the lobby.

"You're shagging Alero Gboye?" Demola exclaimed in wide-eyed amazement. "Goody-two-shoes Alero?"

"I'm not..." he stuttered in an attempt at denial, only to be shoved on the shoulder by a laughing Ize.

"You're not what? My friend, don't even try to lie! You two never came out of that room. What were you doing in there from Friday till now? Singing hymns?"

"From Friday till today?" Demola repeated, his eyes wide in astonishment...and awe. "That's five friggin days, man!"

Bonju could only look on, tongue-tied, wanting to say she had gone home on Sunday, but knowing that would only serve to confirm that he and Alero had indeed spent time together.

“Just accept that you’re a sharp guy! The sharpest! We no dey carry last for our family. Guy, you too much! See as you clear the girl like palm tree!” Ize was hailing.

Bonju looked at his uncle, amazed by the tune he was now singing, a very different one from what he had sung when his brothers were there. The scorn and disgust that had been there then now replaced by what looked to be admiration.

“This is wild! Alero Gboyel!” Demola exclaimed, still stunned. “You shagged her?”

With all eyes on him, he suddenly wanted nothing more than to accept the praise, to accept that he was what he was meant to be as a scion of Bankole Adalemo.

“Yeah, I did.”

Those words, those three words, turned out to be the biggest mistake of his life.

As soon as they were out of his mouth, he wanted to take them back. He wanted to take them back as Folarin and Demola roared in amazement over his pronouncement. He wanted to take them back when they made him drive with them to a pub on Awolowo Road. He wanted to take them back when they relayed their supposed eyewitness account of the juicy information to Omoruyi and Juwon who joined them there. He wanted to take them back as his friends hailed him as the guy who had taken down the hitherto untouchable Alero. He wanted to take them back as the guys repeated the story to the growing number of friends joining them there. And, waking up to his home telephone ringing off the hook, the news spreading like wildfire, he would have done anything to take them back.

But at that point, it was too late. And he hated himself. He hated himself for letting her down.

## Alero

She suspected something was wrong when Bonju didn't call her that Wednesday. And when he didn't turn up or call on Thursday or Friday, she knew that something had gone horribly wrong. Calling him several times from Daso's phone, all she was told was that he was out, sleeping, or unavailable. As relieved as she was that he hadn't come to any harm, she couldn't understand how he had gone from not wanting to be away from her...to not taking her calls. But that Sunday, as she got to school for her last term, she got her answer.

From the moment she pulled her boxes into her dormitory room, she felt the negative energy. At first, she wasn't sure if she was imagining the people she saw whispering or staring pointedly when she walked by. But when her bunkmate, Oseyemi, sat her down to ask why she had cheapened herself by sleeping with Bonju Adalemo of all people, with a sinking feeling in her stomach, Alero realized that, not only had she not been hallucinating, not only had she actually become the discussion topic of the entire school, Bonju, the love of her life, had betrayed her.

He wasn't in school the next day, Monday, or for the rest of that first week. He was absent, but her shame grew ever more present with each passing day. The gossip was on everyone's lips. She had gone from being considered pure and almost angelic...to being the skank who had given it up to the Lothario of their set.

And she felt like the biggest fool in the world. The biggest heartbroken fool.

He finally showed up the following Monday. Knowing they were under the watchful eye of the rumour mill, it took all restraint not to ambush him the minute he walked into their classroom. It took everything in her not to lunge at him as he laughed and exchanged greetings with his friends, getting a hero's welcome while she had been made the school's laughingstock. But as the class emptied at the end of the day, she pulled him by the sleeve of his shirt.

"Bonju, what have you been telling people?" she shrieked. "Why did you tell everyone that I...that we..." She wasn't even able to verbalize what she



had thought, only two weeks before, the most beautiful experience of her life.

“I...um...I didn't...” he had stuttered in response, unable to look her in the eye. “It was Folarin and Demola...”

Her grip on him loosened as her heart crashed to her feet, the guilt on his face all the confirmation that the rumour *had* come from him, and not Folarin and Demola as he was claiming, or any other person. Somewhere in her heart, she'd hoped he was just as much a victim of the ugly gossip as she was, but the downward cast of his eyes made her realize he was no victim, but, on the contrary, the perpetrator.

“I tried to get them to stop, but I can't,” he went on. “I've tried, but there's nothing I can do about it now. I'm sorry, Alero.”

And he had walked away.

It was that moment, not even when the rumours first started, but that moment when he turned his back on her, that she completely fell apart. Withdrawing deeper into herself, even from the few people she called her friends, she became a shell of herself. Even though she hid under the guise of studying, using that to explain her isolation from everyone else outside of classroom hours, she wasn't able to do even that. From the moment she opened her eyes in the morning, to sitting in class as they revised for the upcoming JAMB exam, to every time she opened her books in an attempt to study, all she could see was Bonju's face as he'd looked at her like she was his entire existence, all she could hear was his voice as he'd told her how much he loved her, all she could remember were those moments in his arms. All of which had been a lie.

And she was broken; mentally, physically, and emotionally.

The last weekend of April, she returned home to write her JAMB exam. As she struggled in the examination hall, unable to kick-start her brain into action, unable to focus or even think of what to make of the questions let alone what answer options to select, she knew she had failed the exam even before she left the centre. Back at home, her anguish and devastation morphed into boiling rage, annoyed with herself for falling for the oldest

trick in the book, enraged at Bonju for deceiving her and making her trust him with her body and her heart.

*“It must mean we’re soulmates, Alero Gboye.”*

His words tormented her. Her naiveté haunted her. She hated him. She hated herself.

Her mother’s new boyfriend had fixed their home telephone to allow him better communicate with her from his Sapele base. Upon getting home after writing the disaster that was her JAMB exam, that night, Alero called Wonder F.M.’s request show.

“Hello there, you’re my last caller for the evening,” came the voice of DJ Layo, the popular on-air-personality. “What’s your request?”

“My name is...is...Modupe,” she said, using the name of a popular girl in their set, Modupe Beecroft, a girl she was sure Bonju had once dated. “And I would like to dedicate TLC’s *No Scrubs* to Bonju Adalemo. Because he’s a lowlife and a scrub.”

As DJ Layo and her studio guests hollered and guffawed over the caller’s request, Alero quickly terminated the call, sitting back and biting her fingernails as she waited for the song to play, but when it did, as T-Boz, Left Eye, and Chilli crooned the feisty lyrics, the joy and satisfaction she’d thought she would get were nowhere to be found. Instead, she felt even emptier, more damaged. Bonju had taken away her joy, and not even a childish act of revenge would be enough to restore it.

Returning to school on Monday, it turned out more people than she’d expected had heard the song dedication on the radio, and, worse, had guessed it wasn’t Modupe, but rather the very scorned Alero, thus adding more fuel to the gossip inferno, making the fire rage even more ferociously, something she hadn’t even thought possible. By this time, she and Bonju no longer even spoke to each other. They barely even looked at each other. The boy she had thought the love of her life had become her sworn enemy. As their GCSEs started weeks later, she managed to pull herself together to write her eight papers, and the very day she finished, she left for home, not bothering to wait for any of their graduation festivities.

She had nothing, absolutely nothing, to celebrate.

## **Bonju**

He had never felt more helpless than finding himself in the middle of the furore his verbal slip had caused. As his phone rang off the hook that first night, as the gossip of his relationship with Alero spread like wildfire, he had been faced with the overwhelming reality that he'd let down the person he loved the most in the whole world. He had betrayed her...and he couldn't bring himself to face her. When his uncle or housekeeper announced her calls, he had recoiled, not having the words to say in his defence or in any kind of redundant apology. He couldn't face her.

He had feigned illness that first week of school, but by the second week, he'd had no choice but to bite the bullet. He'd seen her the minute he walked into class. She was staring out the window, gazing at nothing, but even from his less than vantage view, he could see the sadness in her eyes. And it had broken him. And that afternoon, when she'd held him by the sleeve of his shirt, the anguish in her voice and the desolation in her eyes had been too much for him to bear. He hated himself for his lapse of judgement, for his cowardice. But at that point, the damage had already been done. The house had already been razed to the ground, and it was too late for fire fighters. The night of their JAMB exam, he'd gotten several calls to tell him Alero had just slagged him on the radio, but he hadn't even been upset by it, understanding why she had done it. She had called him a lowlife, and she hadn't been at all far from the truth. He was a lowlife. And he didn't deserve her.

Throwing himself into his studies, he didn't come up for air until after their exams were over. And the weekend after, when his mother threw him a party to celebrate, as his friends laughed and made merry, he was still eaten up - by guilt, by self-loathing, and by the crushing emptiness he felt without her in his life.

## **Alero**

Two months after school was over, her mother made the decision to move them to Sapele, after accepting her boyfriend's marriage proposal. Packing up from their Ebute-Metta apartment, Alero handed over to Destiny their father's music chest.

"Are you sure about this?" he protested.

"I think you should have it. I don't think there'll be room for it in Clark's house," was her response, when the truth was that she didn't want to see it - the music chest - ever again, because of the losses it reminded her of; her father...and a love that never was.

"I'll hold on to it for you," Destiny said, embracing her. "When you get to Sapele, find a business centre and send me an email, okay?"

"Or I could just call?" she laughed, embracing him, certain she wasn't about to go looking for a business centre in a strange town.

As she, her mother and grandmother set off for Sapele, even though there were tears in her eyes, she was happy about the opportunity to leave behind all the sorrow and heartbreak.

It was time to start over.

## **Bonju**

Months after arriving in England for his A-levels, he was unable to shake his melancholy, unable to think of anything but her. When school broke in December for the Christmas holidays, he left immediately for Nigeria, landing in Lagos at 5:30 in the morning, going home for a quick shower and change, and heading straight to Alero's Ebute-Metta home. But he got the surprise of his life when an unfamiliar middle-aged woman opened the door, with no knowledge whatsoever of whom he was asking for.

"They've moved," Daso told him, when he went to inquire from the neighbour he'd been friendly with. "Since August. They've moved to Sapele."

“Do you have their address? A phone number? Anything?” Bonju asked breathlessly, crestfallen when Daso shook his head, his face a mask of sympathy.

Bonju had walked downstairs in a daze, and standing on the street by his car, he was hit with the realization that he had indeed blown it.

And that he had lost her forever.

# CHAPTER FOUR –

## TAKE MY BREATH AWAY



*Watching, I keep waiting,  
Still anticipating love  
Never hesitating to  
Become the fated ones*

**APRIL 2019**

### **Alero**

AT 6:30AM, HAVING TOSSED AND TURNED the whole night, Alero decided to take the opportunity of being awake to top up her car radiator, so she wouldn't have to do it in full public glare when it was time to leave the next day.

Walking across the grounds as dusk gave way to dawn, the place was even more beautiful, more striking, the sun blooming in the horizon, its golden petals stretching outwards into the rich blue of the receding night sky. It was truly a spectacular place, and she could just imagine how special a weekend it would be for those who had come along with a significant other.

In the car park, she popped open her bonnet, secured it with its strut and topped the radiator with the bottle of water she had brought from her room. That done, she shut the bonnet and got into the car, starting it and revving its engine like Destiny had taught her to. The first car he bought a year after getting his first job at Voice of Nigeria, he had flogged it for over ten years, handing it over to his wife, who'd flogged it for another five, before relegating it for a minivan to accommodate their growing family. So, Alero had known just what she was getting into when she'd borrowed it for the

weekend's trip. But it was either that or an expensive taxi ride, the latter of which was not an option.

On her way back to her room, the sound of a whistle made her look towards the south side of the grounds, and she saw, in the far distance, guys playing football on a make-shift field, with several people cheering them from stands. She stilled when she recognized Bonju's dark, athletic form, as he tackled Ikenna for the ball and, for the first time since seeing him the previous night, she gave herself permission to look at him, to look at the boy she had lost herself to two decades before. As he ran across the field, she saw that this was no longer a boy, but now a man. But boy or man, she hated him for everything he reminded her about; her foolishness, her gullibility, and the darkest period of her life. Clenching her jaw, she turned away, quickening her pace in the direction of the hotel, grateful she hadn't even been invited to watch the blasted game anyway.

## **Bonju**

He was distracted all through the game, his eyes scanning the stands for her, hoping to spot her amongst their cheering classmates. But she wasn't there.

Later that morning, as they reconvened in the same hall the previous evening's mixer held, this time for their class picture, as he exchanged greetings with familiar faces, his eyes roamed the room in search of one in particular; eager to see her...dreading to see her. And just when he'd started to think she had decided to leave and not partake in the rest of the weekend's activities, she entered the room.

He watched as Alero walked in, her pace quick, her eyes focused ahead, his heart almost jumping out of his chest. In a floaty, yellow, floral print, boat neck dress, she was so different from the young girl he remembered, the girl always in tank tops and jeans. He watched her take position in the middle row, smiling at the people near her, and he was teleported back to the days when that smile was directed at him, the days when those lashes had fluttered only for him. His eyes remained on her as everyone fell into position, unable to look away, drinking in the visual of her he had longed for, for more than half of his life.

“B.J!” came Morin’s voice, as she and her husband, Mofe, took position next to him. “My boyfriend that year!”

Finally pulling his eyes away from Alero, Bonju smiled at the curvy woman he had briefly dated in school. “Mofe, you should be thanking me, or it would have been me in your place right now.”

“And I would have been on your side of the fence, wishing you all the luck in the world!” Mofe chuckled.

Morin laughed as well, but not before Bonju saw a fleeting flash of anger in her eyes.

“Don't mind the silly boy,” she teased, punching Bonju playfully on the shoulder. “After toasting and whining me for months, you ghosted me like a bad habit after that Christmas holiday.”

“That’s because you were way too good for me, darling!” Bonju winked.

She was about to say something in response when a flash of fuchsia pink caught all their eyes. Cat-walking across the room was Keji, Morin’s best friend and Mofe’s girlfriend back in their Malomo High days. In a tailored trouser suit with a deep cut that went all the way down to her sternum, Keji exuded both class and raw sex appeal, her slender hips swaying and her endlessly long legs crossing one in front of the other like a model on a runway. Theirs weren’t the only eyes fixed on her, but pretty much everyone’s in the room. Bonju cast a glance at Mofe, wishing he could send him a subliminal message with his eyes to quit the brazen admiration of the girl that had once been his girlfriend. Alas, he couldn't, and he coughed nervously in a bid to diffuse the rising tension as Morin glared at her husband, having noticed his unabashed ogling of his high school sweetheart, her smiles and laughter now replaced by a deep scowl. And that was how they were captured for their class picture; Bonju with a strained, lopsided smile, Morin with a clenched jaw and icy stare, and Mofe with eyes still drifting to the other side of the room.

**Alero**



She made small talk with the people around her, doing everything not to look across the room at Bonju, even though his presence had electrified the whole room. From the corner of her eye, she could see him laughing with Morin and Mofe, and she hated how at ease he was, while she could hardly carry out a conversation without wondering if the person she was talking to was remembering her scandal...their scandal. But while she was still stuck with its stigma two decades later, he was having the time of his life, his popularity not having waned even a little bit. And she resented that. She resented him.

She managed to maintain a good distance as their class pictures were taken, and, making her way to the assigned restaurant for the luncheon with Malomo High's current administration, she sat at a table far from where the 'popular kids' had clustered, wanting nothing but just to be able to get through the afternoon and the evening's Prom event, wondering why she had even agreed to come for the reunion weekend in the first place.

She sat through as the speeches were made, and her face lit up when her favourite teacher, Abolore Desalu, took the microphone, listening with rapt attention as he spoke, his voice as clear and his diction as euphonious as she remembered. When he was done speaking, her applause was probably the loudest in the room, her former teacher's speech the first pleasant throwback she had experienced all weekend.

As Abolore walked to his table, she rose from hers and walked over to him.

"Good afternoon, Sir," she greeted, a wide grin on her face. "It's so good to see you again. That was an amazing speech."

"Gboye!" Abolore exclaimed, accepting her outstretched hand in an enthusiastic shake. "It's great to see you, too. And thank you. I hope you'll give the school your support for the plans we have for the kids."

"I'll try to help anyway I can," she answered, hoping there were non-financial ways to give this support.

"You look very well," he said. "What have you been up to?"

"Interior décor," she answered, before adding. "I freelance." Remembering Destiny's admonishment to pitch their business to anyone she could, she

decided to take the plunge. “My brother and I also run an online radio station, which we’re trying to take mainstream...”

Her words were cut off as several of her old classmates walked up to the table, all of them just as eager as she was for Abolore’s attention. Standing back as Omoruyi and his wife, Eva, asked to take a picture with him, she realized she had missed the golden window to pitch the investment opportunity. In resignation, she walked to her table, picked up her handbag, and walked out of the hall.

## **Bonju**

He watched Alero talk to Abolore, his breath catching in his throat as she smiled, a real smile that reached her eyes, a smile that unlocked time and gave him a glimpse of the girl he had fallen head over heels for. Deciding there was no point delaying the inevitable, he exhaled to quell his nerves, but as he made to rise from his seat, he saw her head to her table, pick up her handbag, and leave.

Another lost opportunity.

Later that evening, walking into the hall gaily decorated with fairy lights, tulle, and floating blue balloons, his eyes scanned the room for her.

“Looking good, Bonju,” came Eva’s voice from behind him.

He turned around and smiled at her as she walked up to him, holding hands with Omoruyi. “Thank you. You don’t look bad yourself.”

“I have to give it to you men from ’99. You all came correct. My ‘Uyi topping the list, of course,” she grinned, looking up at her husband.

In a purple bustier dress, Eva was well matched with Omoruyi, who wore a shirt in the same shade of purple under his black suit. Bonju had kept it simple, opting for a black Thom Sweeney tuxedo with a satin lapel, over a white shirt and black bow tie.

“Bioye really pulled this off,” Nonso remarked, walking up to them, dapper in a satin tuxedo in a blue so deep, it could have passed for black. “This

place looks amazing. You all look amazing.”

Ikenna and Tomi soon joined them, followed shortly by Zinna and Ogugua, and as they raved about the reunion weekend and how great it had been so far, Bonju barely listened, his eyes scanning the room for Alero, determined to talk to her that evening, no matter what.

## **Alero**

Getting to the hall at the same time as a large group, she took advantage of the horde to quietly slip in unnoticed. In a green, floor-length wrap dress that had cost her a tidy fortune, her hair in a chignon that had taken forever to tame, and heavier makeup than was usual for her, the burgundy lips and thick mascara no way a part of her typical regimen, she was happy with the outcome, satisfied that, even if her old classmates were still gossiping about her, she would at least look good while they did. The hall was already packed, so she couldn't have spotted Bonju even if she tried, and she was grateful for that. Her plan was to find a quiet table, try to enjoy the evening, and leave for her room the very first chance she got.

“Hey, Alero,” a voice called out.

Turning in its direction, she smiled as Bioye and her reunited lover, Toju, walked up to her.

“You don't have a date?” Toju asked.

Alero blanched, embarrassed by the reminder, and horrified that she might have missed any instructions mandating one. “Um, no. I didn't know we had to...”

Bioye pinched Toju and smiled at her. “Don't mind him. There are many people here unaccompanied. You look gorgeous. I love your dress. It's really beautiful.”

Alero's smile brightened. “Thank you. It means a lot coming from you. You look stunning. Both of you.”

“Thank you so much,” Bioye said, interlinking her arm with hers as she led her to a table. “I’m so sorry about yesterday. I hope I didn’t embarrass you.”

The jokes from the previous evening’s mixer rushed at her and she swallowed hard to brush off the unpleasant memory.

Shaking her head, she plastered on a smile. “Of course not. It was all in good fun and we enjoyed ourselves. You’ve done an amazing job putting all this together.”

“Thank you,” Bioye beamed. “It has been so much better than I could ever have imagined.” As they took their seats, she turned to her. “We haven’t even had a chance to catch up all weekend. What have you been up to all these years?”

“Interior décor mainly. I freelance.”

“Oh, really. That’s great. You were always the artistic type,” Bioye remarked.

Noticing her companion’s attention was beginning to wander, Alero decided on a last-minute attempt to pitch her business. “I also run an online radio station with my brother.”

Bioye turned back to her. “Are you serious? A radio station?”

“It’s just online for now,” Alero shrugged. “But we’re trying to raise money to set it up properly...”

Bioye nodded, rising to her feet, and Alero could immediately see she had failed to hold her attention long enough.

“That’s wonderful, dear,” Bioye said, her tone borderline patronizing, as Toju tugged her in the direction of a group across the room. “Let’s catch up later, okay?”

As Alero’s eyes wandered to the group they were heading towards, her pulse quickened when she saw Bonju there, laughing to something someone had said, suave in a fitted tux like he was 007 himself. Quickly looking away, she switched seats on the table, such that she now had her back to them. She wasn’t going to allow him steal her joy - not that evening...not ever again.

“Hi, Alero,” Jachike, another old classmate, said, taking a seat beside her. “I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all,” she smiled at him, grateful for, hopefully, impartial company. From what she remembered of Jachike in school, little was known of him apart from the fact he was dating Ogugua, their Head Girl. Mostly reserved, he hadn't been prone to gossip or even hang with the ‘cool kids’. From the gold band on his left ring finger, and the fact she hadn't seen him with Ogugua all evening, it was a safe assumption to make that they hadn't ended up together in the long run.

“Hi, lovely people!” came Morin's voice, as she and Mofe approached the table.

Alero forced a smile as they sat, her mind cast back to the weeks following the scandal, and all the caustic looks Morin had thrown her way, clearly peeved about whatever role she had played in Bonju dumping her the previous term.

“You look stunning,” Morin complimented her. “Still as slim as ever, while people like us have been lugging around baby weight for years.”

Unsure if she was throwing shade, mocking her for not yet being in a position to ‘lug around baby weight’, Alero turned to her, but the smile on Morin's face as she kept on complimenting her on everything from her hair, to her skin, to her dress, was sincere.

“Thank you,” Alero said. “You look lovely, too.”

And it was no flattery. Even though heavier than she had been as a teenager, Morin was stunning in a sequined wrap dress in red ombré.

“I see the guys over there,” Mofe said, his eyes drifting beyond Alero's shoulder to where she knew the group was talking.

“Don't even think about it,” Morin said, turning to him, her face devoid of the smile she had only just worn. “Don't you even think about it.”

“I just want to go say hello.”

“Or run into her, I'm sure,” Morin retorted, glaring at her husband. “I'm not going to be made a fool of, Mofe. Not here of all places.”

“I think you’re doing a good job of that all by yourself,” Mofe muttered, pulling his phone out of his jacket, signifying the end of their conversation.

As a waiter approached their table, Alero accepted a cocktail, grateful for the interruption. Uncomfortable about having heard them argue, she tried to look anywhere but at the couple.

“So, what do you do, Alero?” Jachike asked, also looking for a way to diffuse the tension on the table.

Grateful for the out, Alero smiled at him. “Interior décor. My brother and I are also looking for investors for our radio station.”

Soon, she and Jachike were engrossed in conversation, chatting through their dinner, and watching as everyone else, even the bickering Morin and Mofe, hit the dance floor as the DJ thrilled the room with songs from their school years of 1993 through 1999. And as Ogonna and Ikenna were crowned Prom Queen and King, Alero found herself relaxing and truly beginning to enjoy the evening. The coronation over, Jachike left the table, and as she swayed along to Paula Abdul’s *Rush, Rush*, for the first time that weekend, she was happy she had come.

But that changed as Bonju took the seat Jachike had vacated.

## **Bonju**

After spending all evening watching her, as she chatted first with Morin and then with Jachike, as she watched everyone else on the dance floor, as she cheered along when the Prom Queen and King were crowned, Bonju wanted to go to her, but it felt like his legs had suddenly turned to lead, unable to move in the direction of her table. Using humour to ease his fraught nerves as he teased Ikenna about the odd-looking plastic, velvet, and diamante crown he’d been coronated with, the minute Jachike got up from the table, leaving Alero seated there alone, Bonju knew it was then... or never.

With his heart pounding so hard, it pulsed in his ears even louder than the music from the DJ’s speakers, he walked across the hall to her table and

took the seat next to hers.

“Hi, Alero.”

## **Alero**

Two words, but they were enough to unravel all the healing and recovery she had managed over the last two decades.

She turned to look at Bonju, and as her eyes connected with his, up close for the first time in twenty years, time dissolved into a capsule. His eyes held an uncertainty that showed his anxiety, and his voice was deeper than she remembered, but they were still his; his eyes, his voice...the same eyes and voice she had fallen for. Looking away, she inhaled deeply, all her senses at attention like they had parted only the day before. Tucking her hands under her seat to control their trembling, she knew she was in no way ready to be in such proximity with him.

“I’ve looked forward to seeing you again,” he went on. “We have so much to...”

Shooting to her feet before he could get the words out, she walked away from the table as fast as she could, meandering through the throng of people on the dance floor, headed in the direction of the exit as fast as her feet could carry her.

## **Bonju**

“Alero!” he called out, his desperation rising as he chased after her. “Alero!”

Rather than slow down, she quickened her pace until she was almost running across the courtyard. But he wasn't about to give up, not after finally finding the courage to talk to her, not after looking into those brown eyes for the first time in too long.

“Alero, please. I just want to talk. Please!”

Without warning, she spun around, her eyes wide and wild. “Talk? What do you want to say to me after what you did?!”

“Alero, please. Let's just talk. I know I hurt you, and I'm really sorry,” he exhaled and took a tentative step forward. “I came looking for you. I went to your house, but your neighbour told me you'd moved out of town.”

“You came looking for me!” she retorted, her face contorted in her rage. “You came looking for me after you'd already destroyed me and ruined my reputation?”

“Alero, please,” he made to reach for her hand, but she took a step back, out of his reach.

“I trusted you more than anything,” she said, glaring at him. “But you not only broke that trust, you turned me into a laughingstock.” Her voice quivered as a lone tear rolled down her face. “Even now, twenty years later, I'm still a laughingstock.”

“What I did has haunted me every single day for the last twenty years,” he answered, a painful lump in his throat. “Not a day has gone by that I haven't regretted what happened. I'm sorry, Alero. I'm so, so sorry.”

She wiped her face with the back of her hand, and she shook her head. “Keep your ‘sorry’, Bonju. I can never, ever, forgive you.”

He deflated and watched powerlessly as she turned around and walked away, crushed by the confirmation of his worst fear. A large part of him had romanticized their reunion, imagining all the nasty things that had happened fading away the moment they lay eyes on each other. But a small part had worried she would hate him, probably even more than she had in those last weeks of school when he had been too helpless to stand up for her. Dejected, he watched her receding form as she walked into the hotel, but even though the realization that the worst scenario had played out, he was determined to get her to listen to him, resolute in his growing need to win not only her forgiveness, but maybe even her heart. Because one thing he now knew for sure...

Was that he still loved her.



The next morning, he walked into the restaurant where breakfast was served, his resolve reinforced, determined to get her to listen to him by any means necessary. As he bantered with Ikenna by the buffet table, he scanned the room for her.

“Are you looking for Alero?” Deina asked, an amused smirk on her face as Ikenna walked away. “I saw you chasing after her last night.”

“Do you know where she is?” he asked, not even caring that he was giving their set’s biggest gossip all the ammunition she needed.

“I saw her leave about an hour ago,” Deina answered, still smiling. “She didn’t even stay for breakfast.”

Bonju’s shoulders slouched and he blanked out to what Deina was still saying, staring ahead at nothing.

He had lost her again.

## **Alero**

Her eyes once again drifted to the temperature gauge as Berlin’s *Take My Breath Away* played from the car’s sound system, relieved that, as she was now approaching the second tollgate along the Lekki expressway without the car overheating, she had made it back safely, and that she had escaped any other confrontation with Bonju. The memory of coming face-to-face with him the previous evening made her grip the steering wheel tighter. Shaking her head to remove the visual of his imploring eyes, to forget the sound of his velvety voice, she exhaled, on the one hand happy to have communicated to him exactly how she felt, but on the other hand, angered by the effect he still had on her after so many years.

Thankfully, the reunion was over, and they could all go back to living their real lives, which, for her, did not include Bonju Adalemo. With any luck, he would quickly return to England, and she never would have to suffer the pain of seeing him again.

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## CHAPTER FIVE –

### GRACE



*I know I've sold my soul  
I'm going to earn it back now*

#### **Bonju**

HE WAS DETERMINED to find her.

Leaving the resort that Sunday morning, he sent her full name to Ajayi, his father's 'fixer' of many years. Even at the age of almost seventy, Ajayi was still relied on by the aged Bankole Adalemo to find and, or, fix anything under the sun.

"All I have is a name. Alero Gboye," Bonju said to the man over the phone. "And a picture," he added, having gotten a pre-edited copy of some of their group photographs. "I'll send these to you. I just need an address."

"That's not a lot to work on," Ajayi said to him. "But I'll see what I can do."

Ajayi's modus operandi had always been to under-promise and over-deliver, so Bonju wasn't discouraged by the man's lack of enthusiasm. As he waited with bated breath for the outcome of Ajayi's search, the meeting with Emeka's friend, Destiny, was the last thing on his mind. And his faith in Ajayi wasn't misplaced as, by Tuesday afternoon, he had her address.

#### **Alero**

***Hi, babe. Just a reminder that the rent will be due next month. My landlord hates late payment, so try to get it across to him before the 10<sup>th</sup>.***

Alero's heart sank as she read Ranti's text, the reminder of her looming rent not one she needed. She had been lucky when Ranti, an acquaintance she'd met on a project, had approached her the previous year, to take over her flat while she was away in England for school. She had gotten the one-bedroom apartment off Chevron Drive for a steal, a fraction of what the going rate was, and she knew it would be in her better interest to pay the due rent, and quickly.

Except her bank account wasn't particularly in the mood to cooperate.

Palming her face as she brainstormed, the money she was expecting from the bedroom renovation project would only cover half the money, if she was lucky. And that was if she forgot about repairs on her car altogether. Even though Destiny had told her to hold on to his old car till hers was ready, she still wanted to quickly get her own car back on the road. As it was, she was going to have to do what she hated having to do; ask her mother for money. Her mother and stepfather were always happy to help, but she hated having to disturb their quiet, tranquil life in their Sapele ranch. With her mother now retired and her stepfather having considerably scaled down his furniture making business, they weren't exactly swimming in money. But, at this point, she didn't have much of a choice.

Her eyes drifted to the wall clock and, at 6:54pm, she decided to start streaming music six minutes early, as she was much in need of music therapy. Selecting Robbie Williams' *Grace*, she grabbed a half-eaten bag of kettle popcorn from her fridge and settled on her bed, the swaths of fabric she had bought from Balogun market for her client's child's bedroom curtains splayed on her bed. Her money problem, like it always did, would figure itself out.

## **Bonju**

***In three hundred meters, turn right to Olatunde Street.***

As he spun the steering wheel in line with the instruction from his Google Maps navigator, Robbie Williams' *Grace* playing from the online station, which had thankfully come back online, calmed him. Casting a glance at the large bouquet of flowers delicately placed on the passenger seat, he knew he would need a whole lot more than flowers to appease her. But at least it was a start. He had contemplated waiting till the next day to see her, realizing arriving at her place unannounced that late in the day was probably not the best of ideas. But he had been too excited, too eager to wait a second more, desperately needing to begin the process of undoing his wrong.

***You have arrived at your destination.***

Pulling up his car in front of the block of flats, he exhaled, his breathing labored from his rapidly beating heart.

It was time.

## **Alero**

The knock on her door made her brows furrow. She hardly had visitors, lest of all after 7pm in the evening. Remembering Destiny had promised to stop by during the week, to update her on the recent pitch meetings he'd had, she rose to her feet, walked out of her bedroom, down the short corridor and opened the door, the sound of The Bangles' *Eternal Flame* now filling the small apartment from her room.

Except it wasn't Destiny.

Looking at the tall man at her door, with a bouquet of red roses in hand, wearing a black shirt and black jeans that, on his dark skin, almost made him invisible in the dimly lit corridor, it took a few seconds to register that it wasn't an apparition, it wasn't her overactive imagination conjuring him to life, but that Bonju was actually standing there.

"Hi, Alero."

His deep voice was enough to jump-start her brain and she immediately made to shut the door.

“Alero, please,” he pleaded, holding the door. “Just listen to me, please.”

“Let go of my door!” she yelled, still pushing it. “How did you find me? Who told you where I live?”

“Please, let me come in, and I’ll answer all your questions,” he implored, his grip on the door tightening. “I know I don’t deserve it, but please listen to what I have to say.”

“You’re right, you don’t deserve it,” she snarled. “And I have no interest in listening to you. So, let go of this door.”

“No, Alero. I let you go on Saturday, and I’m not going to do that again. I’m not leaving here till you listen to me.”

“Then I’m going to have to call the Police!” she retorted, deploying all her strength to push the door even harder. “This is harassment! I don’t want you in my house, Bonju!”

Still with his hand gripping the door, he dropped to his knees. “Please, I’m begging you from the bottom of my heart, just spare me only a few minutes. You owe it to us, Alero. You owe it to us to listen.”

She hesitated for a few seconds, momentarily thrown by the beseeching look on his face.

But not thrown enough.

Hissing, she pushed the door hard and shut it, missing his fingers by a whisker. Locking it with the twin bolts on the door, and twisting the key twice for good measure, she stepped back, staring at the door, her breathing ragged. The nerve of him! Standing before the secured door, she was unable to walk away, her eyes welling with tears as she stood there, hating that he was still able to elicit such strong emotions from her.

## **Bonju**

Still on his knees, he rested his head on the shut door, defeated.

“I’m so sorry, Alero. You don’t know how sorry I am,” he moaned against the door. “I was a stupid, foolish kid. I was a coward, a jerk. You don’t

know how much I wish I could have done things differently. Given the chance, God knows I would.” He wiped tears from his eyes. “I have spent the last twenty years regretting what I did. All I want to do is make it up to you, Alero.”

He waited, hoping she would yield and open the door, not just to her apartment, but to forgiveness and, if he was lucky, her heart. Because after carrying her in his all these years, seeing her again had confirmed he was still deeply and desperately in love with her.

But the door remained shut.

“Alero...” he called out again, overcome with grief, crushed by what his teenage foolishness and cowardliness had cost him. He remained kneeling at the door for several more minutes, before accepting that there would be no recompense, no romantic reconciliation that night. And probably not ever.

Placing the bouquet on her floor mat, he rose to his feet and walked away in defeat.

# CHAPTER SIX –

## IN THE AIR TONIGHT



*It's the first time  
The last time  
We ever met*

### **Bonju**

OPENING HIS EYES THE NEXT MORNING , for the first time in a very long time, he wasn't motivated to get out of bed, an even heavier weight than the one he'd been carrying for twenty years sitting on his chest like a fifty-tonne tractor, the hope he'd been nursing for so long, that Alero would forgive him and they would recreate the magic they'd found as teenagers, now evaporated. If his last two encounters with her were anything to go by, she despised him. And there would be no coming back from that.

Reaching for his phone, he contemplated asking Ajayi to get her phone number. The problem with his father's longtime fixer was that he only provided solutions to specific problems, and specific problems only. Bonju had asked for an address, and that was all he'd gotten. Surely, finding out her phone number would be an even easier task for Ajayi, especially now that he knew where she lived. But as Bonju opened his messaging app, he remembered the look of loathing and disgust he had seen in her eyes and knew that not even calling her on the phone would undo what he had done so many years before.

It was time to accept that their love could never, would never, be revived.

Forcing himself through his morning routine of watching financial news and checking his digital currency investment dashboards, after a shower, he

contemplated cutting his trip short by a few days and leaving that night, because there was nothing more for him in that town.

“I don't know why you're staying in a hotel when I have all this room here,” his mother said, as they lunched at her house that afternoon. “One would think you'd want to spend time with me, considering how seldomly we get to see each other. Or have you forgotten you're my one and only?”

He smiled at her, not quite knowing how to articulate why the mere thought of setting foot in his childhood bedroom, let alone sleep in it, triggered too many painful memories for him. “I'm not your one and only. You have a husband, remember?”

She hissed and took a sip of her orange juice, her desperation to hold on to Bankole Adalemo having faded after her failed attempt to win back his affection following the end of his marriage to Salewa, waning even further when he had gone on to take yet another wife after that. Now, even though she was the only one still legally married to him, a cold indifference had replaced the desperate love she'd once had for her husband. “How is he anyway?”

“He's great. Still as feisty as ever,” Bonju chuckled. “Enjoying the Kent seaside.”

“That little cottage doesn't become him,” his mother grunted. “And neither does this prolonged bachelor life for you.” She paused as she took another sip of her drink, peering at him over her winged reading glasses, embellished with Swarovski crystals. At sixty-eight, Omere Adalemo hadn't allowed age diminish her penchant for fashion and the good life. “I hear Bukun is already expecting her second child.”

Bukun was the older of the two daughters from his father's short-lived marriage to Salewa.

“Second already? Wasn't her wedding only a few months ago?”

“It was January last year,” Omere retorted, casting him a scathing look. “You're over ten years older and look at her already expecting her second child.”



“Nine years older, and it’s not a competition, mom,” he muttered, reminded of another reason he didn’t like dining with his mother.

“You’re not getting any younger, Bonju! Do you want to be in your forties or fifties before you start a family? Your father could barely walk Bukun down the aisle last year. Is that how you want to be?”

With the renewed heartbreak he was nursing, talking about marriage was the last thing he wanted to do. But there was only one way to end the subject of discussion.

“I promise to find a lovely lady soon,” he said, plastering on a smile he hoped would adequately appease his mother.

“You better,” she smiled back. “Or I’ll be forced to find one for you myself.”

He chuckled as he took a sip from his glass of water. Like he would ever subject himself to anything as tortuous as that!

Back in his hotel, as he poured himself a glass of wine, he got a text message, inviting him for a party celebrating Mofe and Morin’s tenth wedding anniversary. Reading and re-reading the message, he couldn’t help but marvel that they had been married a whole ten years...an entire decade. And there he was, still hung up on a girl who would never again be his. Sending a reply to confirm his attendance, he decided it was worth staying back in Lagos a few more days for.

And as Phil Collins’ *In the Air Tonight* played from the online station he had slowly become addicted to, he scrolled through his phone in search of the contact card Emeka had sent him for his friend. He might as well hear what the guy behind the station had to say. Sitting up, he dialed the number.

“Hello. Am I speaking with Destiny?”

“Yes, you are,” came a smooth baritone in response. “Who’s speaking, please?”

“My name is Bonju, and I’m a friend of Emeka Agboti’s,” he answered. “He told me you’re looking for an investor for your radio station.”

“Oh, yes! Yes, I am,” Destiny said, his voice more animated. “We, actually. My partner and I.”

Bonju’s brows furrowed. Emeka hadn’t told him anything about a partner. But it wasn’t a deal breaker.

“Are you free tomorrow? Can we meet up to talk some more?” Bonju asked. “You and your partner.”

“Absolutely. Divine and I would love to meet with you.”

“Great. Do you know where The Admiral is?”

“Along Queen’s Drive? Yeah, I do.”

“Does 7pm work for you?”

“7pm is perfect. See you then.”

The call over, Bonju felt a sense of satisfaction, the inner ear he had for sensing a good investment at attention, having heard the eagerness in Destiny’s voice. One thing he had learned from angel investing for almost a decade was that passion was the single most important ingredient. And, alongside what already looked to be a good product, Destiny appeared to have what he looked out for in entrepreneurs before deciding to take the leap.

## **Alero**

She sat at the desk in her bedroom, her frustration rising with her inability to find a substitute for the pink, patterned day blinds she had pitched to her client, day blinds that had been all over the market only a couple of weeks before, but which could now no longer be found. The only person still stocking them was now charging almost double the previous price, a price that would eat into her already lean fee by over fifty thousand naira.

But as she clicked from one retailer’s website to the other, she knew her frustration wasn’t only about her inability to find an alternative. She hated that she could still see Bonju’s face as he knelt there on the corridor, hated

that she could still hear his voice as he pleaded with her through her shut door, hated that she was even thinking about him at all.

Her ringing phone was the perfect distraction, and she reached for it, happy to see her brother's name on the display screen.

"Alero, I just got off the phone with someone interested in investing!" Destiny exclaimed, as soon as the line connected, not giving room for any exchange of pleasantries. "He wants to meet with us tomorrow!"

"Wait, slow down," she cut in. "Us? As in the two of us?"

"Yes! We didn't talk much, but Emeka had already told me about a wealthy friend of his who loves that genre of music," Destiny answered, talking so fast, he sounded as out of breath as if he'd just run a race. "Emeka told me he'd talk to the guy, but I never imagined anything would come out of it. Now, he wants to meet with us."

"But why does it have to be the two of us? You're the one who usually meets with these people."

"Did you hear anything I just said, Divine?" Destiny retorted. "This is the first person who's approaching us to talk, and not the other way around. I told him I have a partner, and he asked that I bring my partner along. What's wrong with that?" He paused for a few seconds. "This is the first real bite we're getting, the first real indication of interest. I'd think you'd be more excited than this."

She squinted and massaged her temple. "I'm sorry. I've had a really stressful day. Of course, I'm excited. What time does he want to meet tomorrow? And where?"

"The Admiral in Ikoyi. 7pm."

She frowned. "But we start streaming at 7."

"Madam, missing one night won't kill us. Not especially when it's someone ready to elevate us beyond this world of online streaming."

And she just had to live with that.

## Bonju

He got to The Admiral early and was ushered to the table he'd booked. Despite having the meeting to look forward to, he'd spent the better part of his day torn between letting sleeping dogs lie with Alero, or asking Ajayi to get her phone number. Choosing self-preservation, he decided the former was probably the better option, and set about replying a text he'd received from Nonso, agreeing to meet up for drinks later that evening. He would use the remainder of the time he had left in town to catch up with his old friends, and hopefully progress discussions around his possible investment in the radio station.

At 7:03pm, his phone rang. It was Destiny.

"Hi, we just got here."

"I'm seated already," Bonju answered, waving at the duo that had just entered the lounge, but as they approached, as his eyes took in the woman walking a few paces behind the burly, dreadlocked, light-skinned guy, his raised hand froze as his eyes widened.

*'To my darling Divine.'*

*"That was his name for me. And don't even think of calling me that."*

The memory unfurled in his head like a long-hibernated bear rising from its slumber. Divine. Divine was Alero's other name. Alero was Destiny's partner. It was her business he would be investing in.

## Alero

She froze as her eyes landed on the man waving them over, stopping dead in her tracks, her legs unable to move her an inch further, shell-shocked that the investor her brother was so excited to meet was Bonju.

Bonju?!

"Divine?" Destiny called, looking back at her with concern in his eyes, when he saw she was no longer walking.

Spinning around, she rushed out of the lounge, feeling like she needed air, feeling like she needed to vomit.

“Divine!” Destiny yelled, rushing after her. “Divine!”

But she quickened her steps, not even knowing where she was going, as she was now walking in the opposite direction from where they were parked. Looking back, she saw Destiny walking quickly, but this time headed back to the lounge, eager to salvage what there was of his meeting with the very last person she wanted to be associated with, let alone do business.

Of all the sick coincidences that were possible, this took the cake!

## **Bonju**

“I’m so sorry about that,” an apologetic Destiny pleaded, walking up to where Bonju sat. “I don’t know what came over her. It’s not like my sister to behave that way.”

His sister? Remembering Alero had mentioned an older half-brother, the dots were slowly connecting.

“Alero and I have history,” Bonju said. “We went to high school together and...and things didn’t particularly end well between us.”

“High school was a lifetime ago. This is business,” Destiny retorted, his annoyance evident. “I hope her behaviour hasn’t put you off this meeting.”

“Not at all,” Bonju said, beckoning him to one of the seats on front of him. “But let’s order drinks first.”

Several minutes later, as they nursed glasses of gin and tonic, Destiny went on to tell Bonju how music had played a major role in his and his sister’s formative years, how it was their shared dream to own a radio station in their late father’s memory, how he had already spent several years working in radio, and how his own music interests went further than his sister’s fixation on ‘80s and ‘90s rock and pop.

Bonju barely listened, his mind flashing decades back, memories of him and Alero burrowing through her father’s music chest, of them listening to

music in his car or sharing the headphones of the Discman he gifted her, of him kissing her for the first time as Bryan Adams' *Do I Have to Say the Words* played, flashed through his mind.

And he knew this was kismet.

Fate had brought her back to him. Even after thinking all hope was lost, fate had brought her back to him on a platter of gold. And, by God, he was going to accept that gift.

"I'll do it," Bonju said, cutting into Destiny's speech. "Emeka says you're looking to raise five hundred thousand dollars. I'll give you all the money. I'm in."

## **Alero**

Disembarking from the Uber ride she'd taken home, Alero was incensed beyond words. This was no mere coincidence. Bonju had orchestrated the meeting, the bogus investment offer, as a way to get to her. Peeling off the blazer she had wasted, a blazer she saved only for important meetings, and kicking off the black patent leather pumps that were inches higher than anything she found tolerable, she sat on her bed, not bothering to break the room's uncharacteristic silence with music, as she normally would have. Bonju had some nerve to think he could just throw his money in her face and she would come running back to him.

Well, he was about to see there was one thing his money could never buy, and that was her forgiveness.

The ringing of her phone jolted her awake. Looking at the clock on her bedside table, she was surprised to see it was past 11pm, meaning she'd been asleep for three whole hours. If Destiny was only just calling her, it meant he was just concluding his meeting. And she was eager to give him a piece of her mind.

But it turned out her brother had an even bigger axe to grind.

"What kind of silly stunt was that, Divine?" he yelled, his loud voice even louder still. "What kind of silly, childish stunt was that, running out on our

investor?”

“Investor in which universe? Clearly not this one that you and I exist in!” she retorted. “Over my dead body will I have any business dealing with Bonju Adalemo! God forbid!”

“Over something that happened twenty years ago? Are you for real?”

She paused, momentarily taken aback. “He told you?”

“He told me you guys had an episode that didn't end well. Big deal! Big deal, Alero!” he shouted, using the name he only did when he was as angry as he now was. “If we were all to be mortal enemies with people we’ve once dated, half the world would be at war with the other half. Many of my closest friends are people that I either dumped or dumped me as recently as the year before Sophie and I got married, not twenty whole years ago!”

She clenched her jaw as a painful lump formed in her tears. “You can undermine my feelings all you like, but I’m not going to stand for it. I don't want to have anything to do with that man.”

“He is prepared to give us all the money. ALL of it! All five hundred grand of it!” Destiny roared. “Have you forgotten how long we’ve been trying to get anyone interested in even a small portion of it? Have you forgotten how difficult it has been to get anyone interested enough to even *listen* to us?”

“He’s only doing this to get to me.”

Destiny sighed deeply and was quiet for so long, she started to wonder if he was still on the line.

“Divine, you need to get your head out of your ass and focus,” he said, when he eventually spoke. “Bonju and I spoke for several hours, and apart from the fact he’s a seasoned financier with a track record of successful investments, apart from the fact he’s personally inclined to this kind of music, he’s the kind of strategic partner we need. He has helped several startups, he’s seen all the problems that could arise and knows how to solve them. He has grown businesses from a few coins in the bank account to turning over billions in revenue. And I’m not going to miss out on an opportunity like this. So, you’re either in or out, Alero!”

“Well then, I’m out!” she snarled, before terminating the call, flinging her phone across her bed, and covering her face with her hands as she burst into tears.



## CHAPTER SEVEN –

### LIVE TO TELL



*If I ran away,  
I'd never have the strength  
To go very far  
How would they hear  
The beating of my heart?*

#### **Alero**

SITTING ON HER BED IN THE DARKNESS of the room, still in the camisole and tailored pants she'd worn beneath the blazer, her mind went all the way back in time.

She remembered that Sunday afternoon at their mothers' school reunion luncheon when Bonju had approached her, not even recognizing her as someone he went to school with, and the involuntary tingle she had felt in his company. She remembered what he'd worn that day; a grey Tommy Hilfiger t-shirt with a large white, red, and blue flag emblazoned on it, over faded blue True Religion jeans.

She had shared him with her father's music, something she'd treasured more than anything. She had opened up to him in a way she'd never done with anyone, giving up to him her heart, her soul, her body.

Her mind wandered back to that rainy Friday night, the night she had lost her sanity and allowed herself to be seduced by the weather...the music...and his eyes.

What a fool she had been! What a crafty predator he had been!

He'd had it all planned...from breaking down her walls with a rueful look and pretty flowers, to convincing her to go home with him that Friday, to selecting the two romantic movies they'd watched that afternoon, to making her feel too cozy to venture out of his arms and back home in the pouring rain, to the selection of the music – Soundgarden - to telling her about the band like he knew her dad used to, to kissing her, to holding her, to touching her the way he knew her body would respond to. He'd planned it all. He had set his trap and she had fallen into it...without even knowing she'd been ensnared.

And he had capped it all by making sure his friends were there to witness her fall, calling them over in time to see her emerge from his bedroom. Walking down the stairs that evening, little had she known that she was on display, the head of the sacred deer he had slayed and which he was now waving proudly for all the world to see.

He had fooled her, conquered her, and had needed an audience to see it first-hand.

Reaching for her phone, at 3:33am she doubted sleep would find her again that night. Deciding to stream some music even though the night was almost over, she selected Madonna's *Live to Tell* , got off the bed, and stripped off her clothes. As she did, she had flashbacks of crying under her sheets in her Malomo High dormitory that last term of school, unable to walk two steps without people finger-pointing and whispering. With one snap of a finger, Bonju had destroyed her respectable reputation, giving her infamy in its place.

And her life had never been the same.

As expected, her JAMB and GCSE results were woeful, and they'd remained so when she repeated them the year after, and then the year after that, and even the year after that. Even though she had always been an average student at best, it had taken her years to get over the devastation of the betrayal and, worse, the heartbreak.

At the age of twenty-one, she'd finally been able to pass the exams with decent enough grades to get into school. She had been accepted into Delta

State University the same year most people her age were finishing, finally graduating at the age of twenty-five, with a degree in English.

But that hadn't been all she'd lost. It turned out she had also lost the ability to give herself to another man. Several tried, even while she was struggling with the exams that would get her into school. But with the few she'd had initial interest in, all it had taken were a few conversations for her to freeze them out, triggered by any words of endearment, any declarations of affection, everything she equated with lies, deceit, and betrayal.

Efosa, a doctor she met during her one-year Youth Service, had gotten the farthest. Slim, only an inch or two taller, and with skin even lighter than hers, he looked nothing like Bonju, and she liked that. He'd also not been a sweet talker and hadn't tried to bamboozle her with professions of any affection. Instead, he had endeared himself to her with his humour, using laughter as his bait to get her attention. And it had worked. For the first time since Bonju, she slowly let another man in. She slowly started the process of letting go of her heart, slowly started believing she could put her past behind her and move on with someone else.

But she was soon to realize it wouldn't be quite as simple.

After putting him off for almost a year, she finally gave in to his sexual advances. As he'd kissed and groped her, she'd been breathless, not with desire, but panic and anxiety.

"What's wrong with you? Am I hurting you?" a concerned Efosa had asked as he tried to undress her. "I haven't even touched you yet, Alero."

"You're not hurting me. I'm fine," she'd answered, wide-eyed. "I'm fine."

She had pulled him back to her but had to swallow back tears as he slipped off her blouse and reached for her bra, wincing when she felt the bulge in his trousers. Shutting her eyes tight, she decided it would be best to simply get it over and done with. But Efosa had decided not to 'get it over and done with', and instead she'd felt his weight ease off her as he got off the bed.

"What's wrong?" she'd asked, sitting up.

“Someone would think I’m trying to rape you, with the way you’re squeezing your eyes shut and clenching your fists,” he’d retorted, reaching for his discarded shirt.

“Clenching my fists?” she’d repeated, releasing her hands from the balls she hadn’t even known they’d formed.

“Get dressed. I’ll take you home.”

He’d taken her home, and that had been the last she had seen of him. In the eleven years it had been since, she hadn’t had the courage to attempt another go at intimacy or get into a relationship at all.

Bonju had destroyed her. While she was still grappling with the aftermath of their affair, he had gone on to live his life to the fullest. And for him to think he could just waltz back into hers like nothing ever happened was further proof of his narcissism. But he was a fool if he thought he could get his way with her a second time.

Slipping into a long-sleeved flannel nightgown, she was headed to her kitchen to fix a cup of coffee and continue with the search for the pink, patterned day blinds, when her phone vibrated with an incoming text message. Walking back to her bedside table, she picked up her phone from where she’d placed it.

***I had no idea you were affiliated with Destiny’s radio station, but I also don’t believe in coincidences. This is the universe bringing us together so we can talk, Alero. I just want to talk to you. Please.***

***Bonju***

She glared at the screen, realizing Destiny must have given him her number. Reading and re-reading the message, she was filled with several emotions, the strongest of which was anger. The universe had brought them together indeed!

Clicking the *reply* button, she was about to put her feelings into words, to tell him just where he could shove his need to ‘talk’, when she hesitated. If he was texting her at, she glanced at the time, 3:52 in the morning, it meant he was thinking about her. What if this was her chance to hurt him the way he’d hurt her? To kick him below the belt the way he’d done her. To raise

his hopes the way he'd done hers, and send them toppling down the way hers had done. A slow smile formed on her face as she realized what was there before her; the chance to kill two birds with a single stone, an opportunity she would be foolish to pass up.

Closing his message, she opened a new message box and typed a message to Destiny.

***I'm sorry about this evening. You're right. It's foolish of me to let what happened so long ago get in the way. I'm in.***

Then reopening Bonju's message, she hit the *reply* button.

***Okay, let's talk then. Where do you want to meet?***

# CHAPTER EIGHT – THEY DON'T KNOW



*I know what's on your mind  
You think I'm doing wrong  
Can I say what is real?  
You are the only one*

## **Bonju**

HE HADN'T EXPECTED A REPLY to his text. After getting her number from Destiny, his plan had been to wait until the following day to reach out to her, knowing it would take a lot more than one text to thaw her. But after tossing and turning in his bed, sleep eluding him as the visual of how she had looked that evening, stunning in a fitted black jacket over a red camisole that looked blood scarlet over her bright skin, rolled in a loop in his head, he'd reached for his phone and texted her.

He hadn't expected his phone to vibrate a few minutes later, 3:58 am, with a reply.

***Okay, let's talk then. Where do you want to meet?***

He sat up, reading the text again, his pulse racing as he realized she was no longer running. She wanted to meet with him. She was open to talking to him. Exhaling to calm his rapidly beating heart, he was equal parts excited and nervous, ecstatic he was finally getting the chance to right a long-overdue wrong.

***Can we have dinner tonight? I could pick you up*** he quickly typed before she had a chance to change her mind.

Biting his fingernails, he waited for a reply, praying she wouldn't think he was moving too fast.

***Let me know where, and I'll meet you*** , her reply chimed in two minutes later.

That she had agreed to have dinner with him that night made up for her refusal for him to pick her up. One thing he knew for sure was that he wasn't going to bungle up this golden opportunity, an opportunity he'd spent the last two decades hoping for.

***Atmosphere?*** he replied, the upscale restaurant the first name that sprang to mind. ***7pm?***

***Works. See you then.***

A content smile on his face, he set his phone on the bedside dresser and fell asleep the minute his head touched his pillow, feeling the lightest and happiest he had in years.

Waking up at 10:44 the next morning, everything seemed that much brighter, that much more exciting, that much more special. Not even the dip in the American stock markets was enough to dampen his mood. After watching the financial news and checking his dashboards, he showered and got dressed in a plain white shirt, dress pants, and a grey blazer, having agreed to his father's request to sit in at Oceadrill's board meeting that afternoon. Prior to waking up that morning, he'd had absolutely no plan to go to the office, let alone attend the meeting, but he'd woken up in such good spirits, he decided to do it for the old man.

Leaving the hotel a little after 1pm, he drove into Oceadrill's sprawling car park less than thirty minutes later. Finding his way to the visitors' parking area, getting out of his car and looking around, very little had changed in the seven years it had been since he'd left. But rather than feel wistful, he was awash with relief that he'd made the decision to leave.

"Bonju Adalemo for the board meeting," he said to the woman at the reception, who, from the blank look on her face, didn't know who he was.

But hearing his surname did the trick, as she immediately shot to her feet, almost short of genuflecting in greeting, a broad smile replacing her

hitherto deadpan expression.

“Good afternoon, Sir. You’re welcome, Sir.” She reached for a plastic card on the table. “Your access card, Sir. I’ll have someone take you up, Sir.”

He raised a hand and smiled. “Thanks, but I’m sure I can find my way. Still the Executive Board Room on the twentieth floor?”

She nodded and smiled back, deference, admiration and, if he wasn't mistaken, fascination, in her eyes. “Yes, Sir. The twentieth floor, Sir.”

“Thank you,” he squinted to look at the name on her ID card secured over her neck with a lanyard. “Lolade.”

Walking to the elevator, he smiled at a few familiar faces, exchanging hearty pleasantries with the lift operator who had worked with the company from as far back as when they still occupied their former building. While it felt good being there, it was also bringing back memories, memories he could have done without. And getting out on the twentieth floor, as he approached the boardroom, as he beheld the room full of the company’s board and top executives through its glass walls, the memories of the skirmish that had forced him out came rushing back.

After finishing top of his class at Imperial College, he’d worked for a few years with one of Europe’s largest drilling companies, before accepting to return home to join the family business. At twenty-seven, and ten years after leaving home, he had been keen to not only impress his father, but also rebuild a relationship with the man after so many years estranged. And it had worked, as he began to make his mark immediately, bringing a fresher perspective to the business, navigating projects with better ease than more senior engineers - his older brothers included - were able to. But the result was that it soon became clear that his brothers, Babawale especially, considered him a threat.

Things came to a head three years later, when they were engaged by Eldabra, one of the leading indigenous oil producing companies, to run its drilling campaign. After drilling the first exploratory well, the appraisal well they drilled next had encountered only oil, but no water.



“This means the reserves are even more than we thought,” Babawale had raved. “Let’s proceed to the development well.”

“No, we need to know where the water cut is,” Bonju had countered. “We can’t plan a development well without knowing that. Apart from understating the actual reserves of this well if we don’t drill further, we need to have an idea where the water contact is, so we don’t run into problems later.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Babawale had sneered unable to keep the disdain from his face or tone. “That we drill another appraisal well?”

“Yes, Babawale,” Bonju answered, looking him square in the eye, confident in his assertion. “Eldabra engaged us because they trust us. It’s important that they understand the true extent of the pool, so they can size their facilities adequately and have a better idea of how much they can commercialize. If we need to drill a second appraisal well to show that, then that’s what we need to do.”

“They can get all that information now,” Babawale countered.

Bonju shook his head. “This well doesn’t show them how much hydrocarbon is in that well. They need to properly establish the pool so they can be sure whatever investment is going into it can be recovered.”

“We’ll lose money if we drill another appraisal well. The sooner we start drilling the development wells, the better.”

“And if water is encountered later, then what?” Bonju pushed. “What happens to the integrity of the drilling campaign then? What’s a smaller profit compared with the loss of business we’ll suffer when we lose our credibility? Have you even thought about that?”

“Don’t bring your textbook ideas here, boy,” Babawale had scoffed. “This is business. And in business in the real world, you have to keep your books in the green. I’m not about to approve the drilling of an unnecessary appraisal well just so you can tick a box from one of your guidebooks.”

Bonju had turned to their father, who’d sat at the head of the table in that same boardroom, but as Bankole looked from him to Babawale, who was to succeed him as Managing Director in the coming months, Bonju could see

the man's dilemma. He could tell their father knew he was right but was also swayed by his older son's argument to manage their costs.

In the end, Bankole had yielded to Babawale and given the go-ahead for a development well. Unable to come to terms with the decision that was at odds with everything he knew about drilling, Bonju had tendered his resignation, accepted his nomination and subsequent election as a non-executive director, and returned to England. Less than a year later, the operator of the field neighbouring Eldabra's had declared proven reserves double Eldabra's. Eldabra had suspended Oceadrill's drilling of its development well, which was already underway, commissioned the rig the neighbouring operator was about to demobilize, and proceeded to drill a second appraisal well, realizing reserves of almost nine hundred million barrels of oil, almost treble the earlier declared reserves of three hundred and fifty million barrels. Eldabra had engaged another drilling contractor to continue with its drilling campaign, leaving Oceadrill with sunk costs in tens of millions of dollars. But rather than penalize him for what he had cost the company, Babawale had been appointed Managing Director, with their father retaining his position of Chairman of the Board. Angered though he was, Bonju had channeled his angst to investments of his own and, seven years later, his portfolio was proof that had been the best decision of his life.

"Ah, Mr. Crypto Currency!" Babawale exclaimed, as Bonju walked in. "You grace us with your presence this time."

Bonju plastered on a smile as he nodded at the other occupants of the room; his other brother, Bolu, the other directors, the acting chairman sitting in for his father - a board member for all thirty years there had been a board, Dogo Jatau - and the company secretary, his father's longtime companion, Oladipo Kamson. "Good afternoon. Sorry for coming late. Please, carry on."

"Mr. Crypto has given us permission to carry on," Babawale sniggered. "How lucky are we!"

"When did you get into town?" Bolu asked, smiling at Bonju as he took the seat next to him.

“About a week ago,” Bonju answered, not offering any more details. As friendly as Bolu liked to present himself, he was just as dangerous as Babawale, if not even more so.

As Bonju settled in, the engineer who had been speaking before his entry, continued with his presentation, sharing with the board their client’s plan to drill several wells in its field in the northeastern Niger Delta. Reaching for a copy of the pre-reads that had been earlier distributed, Bonju’s brows furrowed as he scrutinized the information before him, information that showed, with its stated reserves, that the field only had the capacity to produce two wells at best, and not the three the engineer was declaring.

“How many wells do you say you can get from this field?” Bonju asked, to be sure he wasn’t misunderstanding the young man.

“That would be three, Sir,” he answered. “Maybe even four.”

“Four? You’re certain?”

“Is there a problem?” Babawale snapped, turning to glare at Bonju. “We know it’s been a while and these things are like Greek to you now, but rather than take us back, why don’t you study the information pack before you, and stop asking stupid questions!”

As Bonju held his older brother’s gaze, he knew he wasn’t the only one with a sense of *déjà vu*, most people in that very room having witnessed their last confrontation. And like they’d witnessed their clash, they’d also borne witness to its consequences, consequences the business had never fully recovered from. But if they were all happy to listen to the man who had steered the company down the path of destruction, who was he to stop them? Besides, he was way too happy that day to allow himself get worked up over anything.

“Nope. Just wanted to confirm,” he answered instead, smiling at the young engineer. “You may carry on.”

If the people in the room needed another expensive lesson to show them Babawale was running the business to the ground, well, that was on them.

Back in his hotel, with Jon B’s *They Don’t Know* playing from his Spotify library, Bonju stood before his closet, the options he’d packed for the trip

no longer as adequate as he'd thought. The black, velvet blazer he'd brought as a backup to his outfit for the mixer was too dressy, and the simple white and pink Ralph Lauren shirts weren't special enough. In the end, he settled on a coffee brown, short-sleeved, military style, button down shirt over a pair of indigo-coloured jeans. Standing in front of the mirror, he had nerves that were never there when he got dressed for dates. But this wasn't just any date...and she wasn't just any woman.

She was the love of his life.

Reaching for the Tom Ford perfume he favoured, he smiled as his eyes fell on the Calvin Klein staple he'd used since he was a teenager, and which he'd brought along only as a backup. Spritzing it on instead, he was cast decades back to spraying that same perfume in his bedroom before setting off to see Alero, and a rush of warmth spread through his entire body. Time had done nothing to dull his feelings for her.

An hour later, seated in Atmosphere's VIP section with a vantage view of the Atlantic Ocean, his breath caught in his throat as he watched Alero emerge from the elevator, wearing a loose-fit, navy-blue jumpsuit, cinched at the waist with a wide, red belt, her long hair slicked back in a single ponytail plait. As she walked to him, he saw that she was more changed than he'd noticed before. Her hips were wider, and she stood several inches taller thanks to the heels she wore. Rising to his feet to greet her, he took in her light makeup, the coating of black on her already long lashes and the hint of pink on her small, pert lips, and even though these went further to show him that he was no longer dealing with a young girl but a woman, his heart raced with the same anticipation of one beholding a long-lost love.

Because that was what she was to him.

## **Alero**

Swallowing hard as she walked to him, his full height unfolding as he rose to greet her, she tried not to notice that he was taller than she remembered or how his fitted shirt clung to biceps that hadn't been there before, tapering into a narrow waist with not even an ounce of extra midsection flesh. She

kept her eyes trained on his forehead, in a bid not to notice anything about his body, or his eyes, or anything that would make her unravel and forget the real reason, the only reason, she was there.

“Hi, Alero,” he said, smiling at her as he reached to embrace her. “You look lovely.”

She stiffened beneath his touch, battling with the pull and the push she was feeling, the bi-polar longing to be near him, her senses re-awakening to him...and to run as far away as she could.

“You too,” she said, her smile stiff as she took the seat he offered. “This is a nice place. Lovely ocean view.”

*I can only imagine how many women you’ve brought here, and deceived on this same table*, she thought as she looked around the swanky place.

“Yeah, it is. It’s one of my favorite spots here in Lagos,” he answered, beaming at her. “Gosh, you’re breathtaking, Alero. You’re absolutely stunning.”

She flushed at the unexpected compliment, the unabashed adulation in his eyes, and she had to remind herself whom she was dealing with. This was a master in the art form of deceit, and she wasn't going to lose her head a second time around.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet me,” he said, reaching for her hand. “It means the world to me.”

Slipping her hand away from his touch, she looked around for a waiter. “I’m starving. Let’s order.”

Taking her cue, Bonju beckoned one over, and as they placed their orders, baked sea bass and fries for her and lobster ravioli for him, she was able to regroup. She’d known coming there wouldn't be easy, but if she wanted to get what it was she wanted, it was a price she was ready to pay.

“So, what have you been up to these last twenty years?” he asked later, as their meals were served, smiling at her in a way that quite literally stopped time, making it seem like they were still seated in her cramped living room, watching cheesy made-for-TV movies.

She shrugged, focusing her attention on her plate. “The usual. There was school, I worked for a couple of years, and now I decorate spaces.”

“And run your own radio station,” he grinned, adding the obvious.

This prompted a smile from her as she looked up at him. “And run my own radio station. With my brother, of course.”

“I should have guessed it was you,” he said, his smile not wavering and his eyes holding hers. “From the first time I streamed and heard Luther’s *Never Too Much* playing, I should have known it was you. Every time I’ve tuned in to listen, I should have known the glow I’ve felt has been from more than just good music. I think my heart always knew it was you.”

“What have *you* been up to?” she asked, swiftly deviating the conversation from where he was taking it to, in no way ready to go there.

His smile waned and it was his turn to shrug. “I finished with a First from Imperial, worked in London for a few years, moved home to work for my father, returned to London three years later, and I’ve been there ever since.”

“Doing?”

He shrugged again. “This and that. Investing in stocks, bonds, digital currency,” his smile brightened as he looked at her pointedly, “and startups.”

“That’s good,” she answered, returning her attention to her meal, his smile unnerving her and making the fish in her mouth taste like coal tar.

“I already told Destiny that I’m ready to invest the entire amount you need for the station,” he went on. “I don’t even think five hundred thousand will be sufficient. I think a million would be more like it.”

She looked up, rankled by the covert, yet ostentatious, declaration of his wealth. “And I suppose you’d be open to funding the full million as well.”

He nodded, oblivious of her rising irritation. “Absolutely. In a heartbeat.”

“First of all, Bonju,” she called his name for the first time that evening, “we don’t need a million dollars. Five hundred thousand is all we do. Secondly, while you might have plenty of money to play around with, don’t you have

a financial advisor who can review our pitch for you? Someone to look at our projections to let you know this is a good investment opportunity? Or not?”

“I’ve done this with several businesses, several times,” he answered, his brows furrowing. “I know a good opportunity when I see one.”

“I still think you should slow this down a little,” she said, an edge creeping into her voice. “Destiny and I will work on a formal proposal and we’ll send that to you. If you’re still keen to invest after that, then we’ll be more than ready to talk business.”

Even though she had no idea who would help them package a formal proposal, she needed him to have an empirical basis for his investment, to insure their project from what she was planning.

A slow smile spread across his face. “You were always the sensible one.”

She bit her lip to refrain from retorting *not quite sensible enough* .

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. “Alero, I’m really sorry about what happened between us. It’s one of the biggest regrets of my life.”

She glared at him, wanting to yell at him, wanting to ask if he was the one who’d been robbed of the ability to hold his head high as he walked along the corridors of their school, if he was the one who’d lost four years of his life, unable to focus well enough to pass university admission exams, if he was the one who had lost the capacity to be in another romantic relationship, if he was the one whose life had been destroyed.

“It’s water under the bridge,” was what she said instead, pulling her hand from his.

One thing it most definitely was *not* was water under the bridge.

## **Bonju**

He noticed her terse answers and stiff body language, accepting it would take time for her to warm to him. But no matter how much time it took, he

was determined to give it to her.

“Are you coming for Mofe and Morin’s anniversary party on Sunday?” he asked, as they made their way to the glass elevators after their meal.

“This is the first I’m hearing of it, so it’s safe to say I wasn’t invited,” she answered, pressing the button to summon the elevator.

“You could be my plus one,” he said, winking at her.

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

They were silent until the lift doors opened, and he stepped back as she walked in, stepping in behind her.

“I leave for London on Monday morning,” he said, hoping she would ask him to stay, ready to reorganize his entire itinerary if she did.

But instead, she nodded, her eyes on the view of the Lagos skyline from the glass doors of the elevator as it made its way down.

“Can I see you tomorrow? Or Sunday?”

“Don’t you have Mofe and Morin’s party to attend?”

He grinned. “I’d be happy to ditch them for another evening with you.”

“I’m busy on Sunday,” she answered, shrugging. “So, that won’t be necessary.”

The glass doors opened, and he walked her to the car park, stopping in front of an old Honda.

“It was great seeing you, Bonju,” she said, extending her hand to shake his. “I guess we’ll talk when next you’re in town?”

Ignoring her hand, he pulled her in for an embrace, closing his eyes as he basked in the familiar feel of her body against his, never wanting to release his hold on her again.

**Alero**



As he held her, she closed her eyes, struck by the familiar aromatic and spicy notes of his perfume. How was it that he smelled the same? All too vividly, she could remember soaking in the smell as she sat, tucked in the crease of his arm, as they ate her grandmother's snacks and watched TV. She remembered the allure of that same smell as they kissed that rainy night, unable to get enough of each other. She remembered how that smell had lingered on her clothes, on her furniture for weeks, making it harder to forget him, making it harder to forget what she had foolishly thought the most magical time of her life.

But, still, all she wanted to do was smell it forever.

Stepping away from his hold abruptly, she nodded at him. "Thanks for dinner. Have a safe trip back."

"Can I call you?" he asked, keen eyes holding hers. "Can we talk while I'm away? I don't ever want to lose you again."

She looked at him, her brows furrowed, and he smiled.

"I mean lose *contact* with you."

She shrugged. "Sure. You have my number. Take care."

Getting into her car, she gave him a quick wave and started the car, reminding herself that she hadn't met with him that evening to get intoxicated by his smell or any other reminders of their past. No, she wasn't going to allow herself get sidetracked by those. Instead, she would ensnare him the same way he had ensnared her, and would humiliate him the same way he'd humiliated her.

With any luck, maybe even worse .

## CHAPTER NINE – UP, UP AND AWAY



*If by some chance  
You find yourself loving me  
We'll find a cloud to hide us  
Keep the moon beside us*

AUGUST – SEPTEMBER 2019

### **Bonju**

GETTING OUT OF HIS BMW convertible, the first thing he did was take a picture of the ocean, just like he did every time he arrived his father's Sandgate home. Positioning his phone, he took several pictures of the picturesque body of water, a flash of blue in the amber light of twilight. At almost 9pm, the sun was still making its slow descent that late summer evening, painting a picture so beautiful, he wanted to stare at it forever, a picture almost as beautiful as its recipient. He smiled as he uploaded the images to a message box.

*Beautiful and unfiltered...just like you.*

He knew it was cheesy, but that was how Alero made him feel; unrepentantly cheesy.

*You've arrived?* Her reply came as he made his way up the pathway leading to the bungalow's glass doors.

*Yep. Just got out of my car. My meeting ran late* , he replied.

***Great. Enjoy your weekend.***

He smiled as he read her curt response, which was just as brusque and detached as her messages had been in the three months since his return to London. He knew he had a long way to go to get her to open her heart the way she once had, and he was ready to work for it, no matter how long it took. For now, he was satisfied she was communicating with him at all, content to hold on to that until he returned to Lagos in a few weeks, during which time, hopefully, he would scale the last few hurdles keeping her from succumbing to him completely. But, until then, he was happy with whatever he got.

“I almost thought you weren’t coming,” his father muttered, a smile on his lips as Bonju joined him where he sat in the conservatory.

“My meeting ran late,” Bonju answered, patting the old man on his shoulder. “You look good.”

“I look bored!” his father retorted, lighting his pipe. “I think I’m beginning to tire of just staring at the ocean every day.”

“You don’t say!” Bonju chuckled. “I was waiting for this day to come. So, you want to come back with me to London? Or back home to Lagos?”

“Not even if you paid me!” his father scoffed. “I’d rather be bored and *alive*. One minute back in that circus, and it’s curtains for this old man.”

“Anyway, you have me until Sunday, so I’m sure you won’t feel quite as bored.”

Bankole Adalemo raised a brow, amused. “Another full weekend? What happened to rushing back to London every Friday? Isn’t sitting with your old pops every weekend destroying your social and, dare I say, sex life?”

Bonju grinned. “Let’s just say I’ve put all that behind me.”

“Is that so?” Bankole prodded, peering at him keenly and taking in another deep puff from his pipe.

Bonju turned to the floor-to-ceiling glass window, his eyes on the thrashing waves in the distance, a smile on his lips.

“Who’s the girl?”

He returned his gaze to his father, who was now wearing a broad smile, making his own smile broaden. “What makes you so sure there’s a girl?”

“Oh, *there’s* a girl. Only a girl would keep you constantly grinning like an idiot, gazing at the ocean starry eyed like it’s the first time you’re seeing it.”

Bonju shook his head and chuckled, knowing denying it would be futile. “You’re right, there is a girl.”

“Someone you met when you went to Lagos? Because you’ve been like this since you got back.”

Bonju nodded. “Yeah...” he began, before shaking his head. “Actually, that’s not true. I didn’t *meet* her this last trip. We were classmates at Malomo High, and we...we reconnected at the reunion.”

“I’ve never seen you like this, so this one must be special,” his father remarked. “You must really like her.”

“No, dad,” Bonju answered, smiling at his dad. “I love her.”

The smile faded from the older Adalemo man’s face and there was a wet sheen in his eyes as he nodded. “Well, I’m glad to hear that. I’ve waited a long time to hear you say those words.”

A lump formed in Bonju’s throat, his father’s words echoing his own emotions. He had waited twenty long years for her.

Bankole cleared his throat. “What are you waiting for? Show me a picture or something!”

Bonju chuckled, happy for the distraction, because another second, and he and his old man might have been bawling their eyes out in that conservatory.

“Here she is,” he said, scrolling to a head shot from the profile Destiny’s friend had packaged for the investment opportunity, a picture with Alero staring, unsmiling, ahead at the camera, dressed in a simple white shirt with a thin string of pearls adorning her neck, her long hair secured away from

her face, and her make up at a bare minimum with only the slightest hint of gloss on her lips.

His father reached for his glasses on the coffee table, letting out a whistle when he saw her. “I’m glad you inherited my good taste. She’s stunning.”

Bonju smiled, his heart bursting with pride as he accepted the phone from his father. Yes indeed, she was stunning, beautiful inside and out.

“She runs an online radio station with her brother, a station focused mainly on ‘80s rock and pop music. The kind you and I used to listen to when I was younger,” Bonju said, not adding that he was investing in their business, so as not to colour his father’s initial impression of her. “As a matter of fact, it’s probably streaming right now.”

Connecting his phone to the room’s Bluetooth speakers, on clicking the station’s link, The 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension’s *Up, Up, and Away* was playing.

His father frowned. “I thought you said it was ‘80s music. This song is from the ‘60s.”

But Bonju wasn’t listening, a memory forming in his head as vividly as if he were watching in third person, remembering Alero telling him about the song she’d fallen in love with after watching one of the earlier episodes of Sesame Street, where the character, Bob, sang the song to a young girl. Her father, having seen how much she’d loved the song, proceeded to sing it to her most evenings, making it one of their special songs. But her father had never gotten around to getting the record, and, at the time she’d told Bonju the story, even she hadn’t known the name of the original group that sang the song.

Well, she’d clearly found them.

“This song is special to her,” Bonju said, rising to his feet. “I’ll be right back. I have to make a phone call.”

## **Alero**

She was looking at the most recent pictures Bonju had sent, of what had to be the most beautiful sunset ever, over the scenic English Channel. Scrolling through the large gallery of similar images he had sent in the three months he'd been gone, several pictures of the ocean at different times of the day - sunrise at dawn, as the large summer sun shone brightly overhead in the afternoon, as the sun bade goodbye at dusk, and as the stars twinkled like little gems over the water in the pitch darkness of night - she hated that she loved these pictures, hated that she was never able to follow through with her plans to delete them, hated that she looked forward to getting them every weekend.

And as her phone started ringing, as she saw Bonju's name flash on her screen, she hated that his calls made her stomach flutter. She watched her phone ring, not wanting to hear his voice, because the more they spoke, the more she heard it...the weaker her resolve got.

And she couldn't have that.

Deciding she might as well answer the call, she swiped the *answer* button.

"The 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension," he said, when the line connected. "You didn't know their name before."

She pursed her lips, knowing exactly what he was referring to.

"You know, I went looking for that episode of Sesame Street," he went on, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "It was episode five, aired on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 1969. Every time I watched it, every time I listened to this song, *Up, Up and Away*, it took me back to that day you told me the story as we sat on your couch, eating the fried chicken we'd stolen from the pan as your grandma made them."

It had been fried turkey, but she didn't see the need to correct him. Instead, she was angered that he even remembered. Why did he remember these little details like they had even mattered to him? Why did he remember so much about the months they'd spent together like he'd even cared, when it was clear he'd been doing nothing but toying with her and her emotions the whole time? She remembered very clearly opening her heart to him, telling him things she'd never even said to anybody. There was probably not

another human being in the world who knew her father had learnt the lyrics to *Up, Up, and Away* after they'd watched that Sesame Street episode, just to serenade her with it nightly. No other human being but Bonju.

"Yes, I found their album," was her curt answer. "Has your advisor had a chance to review the proposal?"

He chuckled and she was relieved he was sparing her his usual argument about having done this kind of investment so many times, he didn't need anyone to review the proposition to know it was one he wanted to do. But after she had convinced Destiny to get their pitch professionally done, and they'd sent it to Bonju two weeks before, he'd finally agreed to engage someone to review it.

"Still ongoing, but I'm sure he'll have some feedback for me by the time I get to London on Sunday."

"Great."

"I'm back in Lagos in a few of weeks," he said. "I can't wait to see you."

Yeah, she also couldn't wait. She couldn't wait to set her plan properly in motion. She couldn't wait to ram a sharp dagger through his deceitful, betraying heart.

"Yeah," was her noncommittal answer. "I have to go now. Enjoy your weekend with your dad."

"I told him about you, and he..."

But she terminated the call, not wanting to hear him say another word. Because the truth was, she was closer to caving than she cared to admit.

## **Bonju**

He smiled as he put his phone down, her abrupt exit not new. But as cold and detached as she still came across, it was plenty of progress compared to how hostile she'd been at the reunion. In time, she would come around, and he was ready to wait for it.

Sitting on the deck with the moonlight his only illumination as he looked on at the water, each wave coming with a cold draught of air, bringing with it the salty taste of the ocean, all he could think was how much he wanted to share it with her; the beautiful ocean view...his heart...eternity.

He didn't call her again that weekend, deciding to give her some space. Back in London on Sunday evening, he called Ikenna, who was helping him look through the pitch document.

"The numbers for the first few years are modest, but you already know that," Ikenna said. "This investment is one you'll have to sit out for a while to see decent returns. But if you have the appetite to wait, it'll pay off in the long run."

As a serial entrepreneur, that was one thing he knew how to do well. Wait.

"Are you investing the entire five hundred grand in equity, or will it be some kind of mezzanine structure, with some of it in debt?"

"All equity."

"And just how much are you prepared to give the promoters as a carry?" Ikenna asked. "Tomi went through something like this recently, and even though the forty percent carry her proposed investor offered her and her partner was incredibly generous, it still felt like she was giving away too much. As your friend and advisor, I can tell you to give away only as little as you need to, but looking at it from the promoters' angle, how little ownership will they need not to feel cheated?"

"I'm happy to go fifty, fifty," Bonju said, knowing that went against every investment ethic in the book, not especially when his partners were not coming to the table with anything other than a dream.

"Right off the bat, or have them claw back some of that after achieving agreed milestones?"

"From the beginning," Bonju answered, ready to give Alero the entire hundred percent if she as much as asked. "They can claw back more if we hit certain targets."

"Giving them a majority stake?" Ikenna asked, his tone incredulous.



Bonju shrugged. "I guess. Thanks for having a look at it, man. I'll have my lawyer draw up the required agreements before I head to Lagos in a few weeks."

"Great. Tomi and I will be back in Lagos about that time as well."

"Weren't you two just there?"

Ikenna and his high-school-best-friend-turned-wife, Tomi, had recently volunteered at their alma mater's summer camp for underprivileged children.

"Yeah, but we could only spend two weeks because of the meetings with the company we're hoping to partner with for the robotics company. We're going back for the Valedictory Ceremony at the end of the camp. Bioye is even helping them with their Prom."

"A Valedictory Ceremony and a Prom," Bonju remarked. "An entire production."

"Nonso and Abolore wouldn't have it any other way," Ikenna chuckled. "Bioye is even raising money for the kids' outfits. She hasn't called you?"

Bonju frowned. "No, she hasn't."

"She called Tomi and I yesterday, and Tomi said she'd also reached out to Zinna, Eva, Omoruyi, Ogugua, and Alero I think..."

Bonju stilled upon hearing Alero's name, his desire to be a part of Bioye's fundraising increasing a million-fold.

"Maybe she forgot to call me. She might not even have my number," Bonju said, more for his benefit than Ikenna's. "I'll call her."

And, off the phone with Ikenna, that was exactly what he did.

"Hi, Bioye," he said, as soon as the line connected. "I heard you're raising money for a Prom for the summer camp kids. What I don't understand is why you didn't call me."

"I'm so sorry, Bonju," Bioye answered, sounding genuinely regretful. "My head has been all over the place. But please, every donation is welcome."

“This is a wonderful thing you, Abolore, and everyone there is doing for these kids, and it would be my pleasure to contribute,” he said, before hesitating for a few seconds. “Have you spoken to Alero?”

Even though Ikenna had already alluded to the fact she probably had, he needed to know for certain.

“Yes, she even offered to DJ,” was Bioye’s emphatic answer.

“So, she’ll be there?”

“Maybe,” she answered, after a long pause. “I’ll text you the payment details. Thanks so much, Bonju. You’re a star.”

Getting the details, he transferred a generous amount without a second thought. He contemplated calling Alero, to tell her he was back home in London, to tell her about his contribution to the summer camp, but as much as he craved hearing her voice, he knew it was best to wait until later, not quite ready for the terse and cold conversation they would have. Instead, he headed to his photo gallery and selected the last picture he’d taken before leaving Sandgate that evening, a picture of the English Channel complete with seagulls in flight, and sent it to her, the pictures the one way he could express his feelings, with the ocean representing his love for her...and how endlessly it ran.

He just hoped she was able to recognize that.

Getting to Lagos a month later, he headed to the same hotel he’d stayed the last time. That afternoon, he invited Destiny over to his room, to discuss the agreement.

“While fifty percent is very fair and more than what I was expecting, to be honest,” Destiny said, as they sat at the coffee table, the agreements spread across it. “The ultimate goal for Divine and I is full ownership, especially as it’s in our father’s memory.”

“And that’s fair,” Bonju agreed. “We could discuss the milestones the station will need to hit and what each of these would equate to in terms of dilution for me, and more shares for you two.”

“That works,” Destiny nodded, a broad smile on his face. “I’ll have my lawyer look at these and I should get back to you in a few days.”

“There are a few things we’ll need to talk about, though,” Bonju said, walking him to the door. “Mainly about how much time you’ll each be dedicating to the station, and how you intend to staff up.”

“We’ll be in a hundred percent,” Destiny answered, emphatically. “I already quit my job as far back as May, and Divine mainly freelances with her decorating gig, nothing serious, so she should also be able to give this all her time as well. We intend to hire a few other DJs, but she and I will be the primary voices of the station.”

“And speaking of voices,” Bonju added after a brief hesitation. “And this is just purely sentimental for me. Is there any chance she’d consider going by the name I knew her by in school? Alero? I think the listeners will connect better with that.”

Destiny smiled at him, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “You could ask her yourself, when you see her.”

Chuckling as he shut the door, knowing that Destiny had seen all the way through his bullshit, he had every plan of doing just that.

## **Alero**

Stepping out of her building, she saw Bonju standing by his black Mercedes, a bouquet of burgundy and white flowers in hand. Smiling as he saw her, she swallowed hard to compose herself, her breathing shallow as she made her way to him. In a light pink polo shirt over brown pants, he looked like an edible confection of strawberries and chocolate. She hated that he looked so much better than anything she remembered from before, hated how much more eagerly he looked at her, hated how much stronger her body was reacting to his.

“Wow. These are beautiful,” she said, accepting the flowers from him, burgundy dahlias and white carnations.

“Because you don't seem like the roses type,” he said.

*“Orange, because you don't seem the pink type.”*

The memory hit her, and she looked up at him with a start, wondering if he had said it out loud. But from the way he was smiling, and not presenting her with anything orange coloured or flavoured, she realized it was just her imagination running wild.

Her imagination...and her memory.

“Aren't you going to invite me up?” he asked, his eyes holding hers.

There wasn't a chance in heaven or hell she was going to invite him up to her apartment. Not only because she didn't trust him, but more because she didn't trust herself. Standing before him that evening was already awakening physical sensations she hadn't thought herself capable of ever having again; the wild fluttering of her stomach, an intoxication that made all her composure evaporate into the air like steam from a kettle, and the inexplicable urge to nestle her head in his chest, to burrow her face deep in the crevice of his neck and inhale his musky, aromatic scent forever. Alone with him, her desire for him would overpower her.

“I don't think that's a good idea,” was all she offered in response.

He nodded and she could see his disappointment. “Can I take you out for dinner then? Drinks?”

“I have to start streaming in a few minutes. It's almost 7pm.”

“You can do that from your phone, can't you?”

“I also have something to work on for a client,” she answered, when the truth was she hadn't had a new client in several weeks. She needed to prepare herself mentally and emotionally before spending extended time with him and seeing him that evening had already left her feeling undone. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“I'll take tomorrow,” he said, the smile back on his face.

And before she could do anything to stop it, he tilted up her face and lowered his to hers, his lips grazing and softly prodding...and hers responding as if the last two decades had never happened. Her mouth parted as she melted into him, her free hand resting on his chest as the other held

the bouquet, in a fusion that was more than just their lips, in what felt like the most natural and beautiful thing in the world.

The siren from a neighbour's electricity restoration alarm was enough to jolt her back to her senses and she immediately pulled back, her eyes lowered, unable to look him in the face.

"So, tomorrow then," she said, backing away. "Goodnight."

Without waiting for a response, she turned around and walked back to her building, bounding up the stairs leading to her apartment. Once there, she locked the door, leaned on it, and exhaled. She wanted to kick herself for the lapse, for letting herself go the way she'd just done, for showing him just how much she still wanted him. But then again, how else was she going to hurt him if she didn't string him along first? Yes, she was still attracted to him, and probably would forever be, but as long as she was able to rein herself in the way she'd managed to that evening, she would find a way to work around it.

She just had to.

There was too much at stake for anything otherwise.

# CHAPTER TEN –

## EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD



*It's my own design  
It's my own remorse  
Help me to decide  
Help me make the most*

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

### Bonju

AND, JUST LIKE THAT, he got his girl.

After that first kiss, standing under the streetlight a few feet from her doorstep, as her lips responded to his, he knew in that very moment that, despite her cool façade and seeming indifference, she was still in love with him. And the next day, as he dropped her at home after dinner, and she responded to his kiss with the same longing as the day before, he was even more certain.

In the weeks that followed, her defensive armour chipped away a little more with each time they spent together, her responses no longer as clipped, her body language no longer quite as closed. She talked more, smiled more, and was more and more like the girl he had fallen in love with before he even understood the real meaning of the word.

He was in heaven, the happiest he had ever been.

Not even the fact that the paperwork for his investment in the radio station was taking much longer than either party had anticipated, was enough to dampen his spirit. Destiny's lawyer had kicked against some clauses in the agreement Bonju's lawyer had drafted, specifically regarding non-compete, non-circumvention, indemnification, and governing law, and as various drafts of the agreement went back and forth between both sets of lawyers, neither he, Destiny, nor Alero were bothered. They knew they wanted to do business together, their legal teams taking a long time to align, a small inconvenience. So, as their lawyers slugged it out, the trio was already discussing the finer details, agreeing on a name – 'Tempo', Destiny and Alero's father's nickname – securing a frequency - 92.5, in honour of their father's February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1950, birthday - and an official launch on that date in 2020, the day Eyitemi Gboye would have turned seventy.

And to make things even better, Bonju's acquisition of Oceadrill's former corporate building, a building strategically located on Adeola Odeku Street, the heart of Victoria Island, but left fallow for years after the company moved to its permanent site, and which he'd bought a year after his resignation, proved itself a useful investment. With its top three floors - the eleventh, twelfth, and penthouse – recently vacant after the fin-tech company that occupied them shut down its Nigerian operations, Bonju couldn't think of a better location for the radio station. His proposal was for the station to occupy the twelfth floor and penthouse, while he set up an operating base for himself on the eleventh.

"Wow!" Destiny exclaimed, when Bonju took him and Alero there to show them the place. "I don't know what to say."

"Imagine it with a large Tempo 92.5 logo, in bright neon colours, mounted at the very top of the building," Bonju was grinning. "People will be able to see it from Ahmadu Bello, Akin Adesola, heck even Eko Bridge. There won't be a person in this town who won't know about the station."

As they jubilated and popped champagne, it hadn't mattered that the addition of the building would be yet another nuance to their already contentious contract. Securing a physical location made the radio station more real, for all of them, and it was with that confidence they proceeded to

order the station's long lead equipment, giving them enough time to arrive before their February launch date.

Life couldn't be better, and everyone around Bonju could tell there was more to his happiness than just another startup investment. When his friend, Emeka, returned to the country with his wife and sons, Bonju took Alero to meet them, eager to show her off...and also hear what they thought of her.

"She's gorgeous," Emeka remarked, as they had drinks in the garden, while Alero and Erin, Emeka's wife, chatted in the living room. "So, this is why you've never been interested in any woman for longer than twenty-four hours!"

Bonju chuckled, his grin stretching from one end of his face to the other, as he watched his woman, the love of his life, through the glass door that separated the garden from the house. "Will you make me a portrait of her?" he asked. "A large, life-sized one. I'd like one to hang in the hallway of my house back in London, so even when I'm there, she'll be right there with me." His smile broadened. "Until she's ready to come back with me as my wife."

Emeka let out a low whistle and smiled. "Wife? I never thought I'd ever see the day. I'm really happy for you, my friend. Love is indeed a beautiful thing."

But Erin wasn't quite as convinced.

"She's a lovely girl, but she seemed rather, I don't know, cagey, guarded almost," she remarked, when Bonju stopped by their house the next day, eager to hear his friend's wife verdict. "She seemed to be holding a lot back."

"She's very shy," Bonju said in Alero's defense, remembering how quiet and reserved she had been back in school. Heck, she'd been so quiet, he hadn't even noticed her for their first five years of being in the same class. Well, that, and the fact he knew she was still in the process of taking down the walls she'd built over time. While astute people like Erin could still see those walls, what he saw was the debris from what he had already succeeded in pulling down, remembering a time in the very recent past



when he couldn't even see Alero through those protective walls. Now, he could not only see her, what was left of the walls was so small, it could be crossed with a mere sidestep. So, if that was Erin's only concern, then there was really no concern.

He had gotten his girl back.

When they were not together, when he listened to her stream her music at night, almost every song held meaning, almost every one of them songs or albums they had listened to together or talked about in their short relationship years before. And even though she had refused to progress their intimacy beyond kisses, listening to those songs always felt like she had her arms wrapped around him.

"From your dad's favourite album of all time," he said, as they spoke on the phone one night, Tears for Fears' *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* playing from his car speakers. "*Songs From the Big Chair* ."

## Alero

She had lost control.

Since kissing him that September evening, she'd tried to convince herself going out with him for dinner, then lunch, sometimes even breakfast, were just ways to reel him in, justifying yielding to, first, that one kiss, and then another the next time they saw, and then another, as mere ways to make her ruse more believable. But the truth was that, with every passing day, week, and month, it was becoming less of a ruse. Whether or not she wanted to admit it, she was slowly falling into an age-old pattern, one wherein she looked forward to his company and her lips tingled from the imprint of his even when they were not together. And it was taking everything for her to remember her real reason for doing what she was doing.

Or at least, what she told herself was the real reason.

When he invited her to accompany him to visit his friend's family, she had balked at the very idea, not wanting to be subsumed into so intimate an act as becoming acquainted with his friends and family. She'd wanted to give

an excuse, make up a lie about not being available, but she had surprised herself by accepting, her recalcitrant heart betraying her brain that knew too well the folly of such an action.

She had gone, and when Bonju and his friend, Emeka, left her and Erin, Emeka's wife, alone to 'bond', she had felt like a fish trapped on the shore, flapping about and choking itself to death, away from its natural liquid habitat.

"Bonju says you were high school sweethearts," Erin had said, kind eyes twinkling at her as she swung her infant son's swing with her free hand. "It must be so amazing being reconnected, right?"

Alero had only been able to manage a stiff smile. "Yeah."

Erin's smile had waned, as if disappointed by her response, maybe expecting her to show more enthusiasm and excitement. But how on earth could she have been excited when she was waging a raging war with herself?

Alero's plan was to wait for the paperwork for the investment in the station to be signed, to wait till Bonju was so vested in their relationship that when she did drop him, his crash would be just as catastrophic and even more calamitous than hers had been. But with her resurrected feelings getting deeper with each passing day, with him saying and doing just the right things to pull her to him, she didn't know if she could make it that long.

"Yes, you're correct," she answered, smiling in spite of herself as he correctly remembered the Tears for Fears' *Songs From The Big Chair* album as her father's favourite of all time. "And it was top three for you. That and *The Seeds of Love*."

"You remember," he said, and she could hear the grin in his voice. "Every time I heard a Tears for Fears song, I always thought of you. You never ever left my mind, Alero."

*Except when you chose to throw me under the bus*. She grit her teeth, her mind flooded with unpleasant memories, exhausted by the vacillating nature of how she felt towards him; lightheaded with desire one minute, and boiling with rage the other. She was relieved when the next song on her

playlist, Chicago's *Hard to Say I'm Sorry*, came on, but the relief was short-lived, as even that came with its own memories.

"I need to go," she muttered, sitting up in her bed. "I need to rustle up some dinner."

"Well, I guess it's a good idea that I got you some," he chuckled. "Open your door."

Her eyes widened. He was there? At her door? Glancing at the gingham shirtdress she wore, she ran a hand over it to smoothen it. Stopping mid-thigh, it was much shorter than what she typically wore in his company, but deciding that getting changed would be pointless, she got out of bed, gave herself a cursory look in the mirror, before walking over to the door.

Opening her door, Bonju stood there, holding a pizza box and a six-pack of ginger ale. Wearing a plain white t-shirt over blue jeans, she could tell the trip to see her had been impromptu.

"To what do I owe this?" she asked, smiling and crossing her arms, while at the same time blocking the entryway. At well past 10pm, there was no way she was letting him in.

"I thought you'd be hungry," he grinned, raising the pizza box.

"You thought right," she said, putting forward her hands to accept it. "Very thoughtful of you."

"I was hoping to share it with you," he said, taking a step closer and closing the small gap between them. "You've never invited me in before."

"And I'm not going to start now," she laughed, even though she had started to feel a warmth radiate through her entire body. "It's past 10, Bonju. But thanks for this."

Taking the box and pack of ginger ale, she smiled up at him. "Thanks for dinner. I'll see you tomorrow when we meet Faiza for lunch."

Faiza was the brand consultant who was designing the station's corporate collateral.

The words were hardly out of her mouth when he bent his lips to hers, taking her first by surprise, but then deepening the kiss enough to make her want to fling away the pizza box and pack of drinks in her hands, throw her arms around his neck and succumb to him as completely as she wanted to. But rather than do that, still with the box and drinks in her hands, she closed her eyes and melted into the kiss the only way she had given herself license to.

And, with every passing day, that license got longer and longer.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked, pulling away from her by mere fractions of an inch, his finger tilting up her face. “After all this time, you should know that what I feel is real, Alero.”

She was tempted to simply just say yes, tempted to let him in and have his way with her, but an explosion of thoughts made her eyes fly open, the realization that her desire for him was less to satisfy the lust of her body... but more to satisfy the longing in her heart.

She was skating on very thin ice.

“You should go,” she said, taking a step back.

He smiled, his eyes wistful. “I’m ready to wait for you, Alero. However long it’ll take for you to completely trust that what we have is different this time.”

She nodded dismissively, wanting...needing...him to leave, so she could regroup. Because she didn't know how much longer she could withstand him if he remained there longer.

“You didn't give me an answer about coming with me for Tomi and Ikenna’s wedding reception,” he said.

She frowned. “Isn’t that in Ibadan?”

“Yeah, next Thursday.”

“Isn’t that Boxing Day? I’m not sure how eager I’ll be to spend the day all the way in Ibadan.”

“I’d really love for you to come with me,” he implored. “Ikenna’s a good friend, and I’ll really love to see him and Tomi married. And I’d love for you to be with me.”

“I’ll have to think about it, Bonju. I’ll let you know.”

He nodded in understanding and was about to retreat before looking at her again. “Also, my mother asked me to invite you for lunch on Saturday, the 28<sup>th</sup>. She wanted it to be Christmas or New Year’s Day, but I told her you and your family already have plans.”

*“Abi you miss road? Abi you and your mama miss road?”*

*“Tofe get mind o! She get mind to send this pikin she born for born-troway come my house!”*

*“Tofe no know her size at all! She no see the other people wey dey for gutter like am? Na me, Omere, she come see? She think say we dey the same boat?”*

The words echoed in her head like a discordant tune, the reminder of the words flung at her, a mere child, several years before. And her rage surged anew, drowning any wayward emotions that were lurking. Bonju and his ilk had done too much, taken too much from her. Surely, even he had to remember the degradation she had suffered in his mother’s company. For him to think all that could be swept under the carpet was conceited, selfish...and downright wicked.

And she knew she couldn't wait until the partnership papers were signed.

“Does that work for you?” he was still asking.

“Sure. The 28<sup>th</sup> is good,” she answered, plastering on a smile. “And about Ibadan, I’d love to come .

# CHAPTER ELEVEN –

## STOP CRYING YOUR HEART OUT



*Take what you need  
And be on your way  
And stop crying your heart out*

### **Alero**

HER PLAN WAS TO DUMP HIM right there at Tomi and Ikenna's wedding reception, to humiliate him in front of their peers the same way he'd done her. That was truly the only recompense for all she had suffered those awful last weeks of school...and the last twenty years.

But stepping out of her house that Thursday morning and seeing him by the car that was to convey them to Ibadan, tall and dapper in a fitted, dark blue suit...she melted.

"To match your dress," he said, tapping the pink boutonnière on his lapel, before leaning in to kiss her cheek. "You look out-of-this-world beautiful."

She forced a smile in return, her heart racing, her skin tingling as he reached for her hand and helped her into the car, now understanding why he had been so insistent on knowing the colour of her outfit, despite her declining his offer to pay for an expensive Iconic Invanity dress.

With her hand in his for the entirety of the two-hour drive to Ibadan, she soon found herself questioning her resolve.

### **Bonju**

Walking out of her building, Alero looked like an angel. With her pink dress billowing in the morning breeze, her long hair hoisted in a loose, high bun with ringlets draping her face and the nape of her neck, her pert lips a glossy, pastel pink, and those thick and dark lashes that went on forever, she was pure perfection.

And with her hand in his as they made their way to Ibadan, he knew one thing was for sure.

He was going to ask her to be his wife.

## **Alero**

Walking into the venue, her hand ensconced in his, her heart pounded furiously in her chest, her nerves sky high in anticipation of what she planned to do. As they exchanged greetings with their old classmates, she struggled to even keep the plastered smile on her face. It was an impressive turn out of their class of 1999, almost as many that had shown up for their reunion eight months before, and pretty much most of the people who had been witnesses to her topple from grace twenty years before. There was no better time, no better audience, to return the favour.

“Are you cold?” Bonju asked once they were seated. “You’re shaking.”

If only he knew her trembling had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. “I’m fine, thank you,” she answered, smiling at him.

He covered her palm with his and squeezed it, leaning into her. “This will be us soon.”

Turning to look at him, she was thrown by the sincerity in his eyes. One part of her told her that was the best time to strike, the best time to pull the rug from under his feet.

But she couldn't.

And as he put his arm around her shoulder and planted a kiss on her forehead, she squeezed her eyes shut, realizing she had failed.

Back in their hotel that night, he walked her to her room.

“Come to my room, babe,” he asked, his eyes imploring. “This is ridiculous.”

She shook her head, desperate to hold on to the last bit of control she still had. Sharing a room with him, giving up her body to him, would take that away, making her feel even more helpless than she already did.

“Not in Ibadan, of all places,” she chuckled. “Maybe when we get back to Lagos, we can talk about that.”

He smiled in response but didn’t make to leave where they stood in front of her door, his hand still holding hers.

“I meant what I said earlier,” he stated, his eyes holding hers.

She didn't have to ask what in particular. She knew. They both knew.

“I didn't want to do this until I got a ring, but my heart is screaming there’s no better time than now,” he said, dropping to one knee right there in the lobby of the three-star Bodija hotel. “I love you from the bottom of my heart, Alero. I’ve loved you more than half of my life, and I’m going to love you the rest of it. You’re my soulmate and I want nothing more than the chance to look into those brown eyes every day into forever. Will you marry me?”

Her eyes widened as she gaped at him. Even though he’d alluded to it earlier, hearing him verbalize it knocked her for six. As his imploring eyes held her dazed ones, the part of her heart, the larger part of it that she had restrained in the months since their reconciliation, the part that wanted nothing more than to completely give in to this love he was offering, the part that wanted to love the man - the only man - she had loved since she was a teenager, with no holds barred, wrestled for freedom. What was the use of childish revenge when she now had the love of the man she’d once desperately wanted it from? But all the years of desolation and despair flashed through her head, the humiliation she had suffered, everything she had lost because of him, and she knew she couldn't back out now.

Not when she’d gotten him right where she wanted him.

“Yes,” she said in response, smiling at him. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”



As he yelped for joy and shot to his feet, as he swept her off hers and twirled her around, she shut her eyes tight to keep tears from finding their way out. No, this was no time to give in to silly emotions. This was the time to get revenge for the seventeen-year-old Alero. It was no time at all for love.

## **Bonju**

“She’s going to love you,” Bonju said, as they made the drive to his mother’s Reeve Road home the following Saturday. “I’ve never taken any woman there, and it has been her number one prayer point for me to do just that.”

And that was putting it mildly.

He smiled as he remembered the shrieks of delight from his mother when he’d told her he’d not only met someone special but wanted to bring her over for an introduction.

“Bring her over for our family lunch!” she’d instructed when he told her Alero wouldn’t be available on Christmas Day, referring to the annual gathering she and her siblings had the last Saturday of every year, one he’d avoided for the better part of the last decade. “You don’t know how delighted hearing this has made me!”

He’d beamed at his excited mother, thrilled the woman he was finally bringing home wasn’t one imposed on him, but one he wanted with every fiber of his being.

One worth every second of their twenty-year wait.

## **Alero**

Surely, he couldn’t have forgotten the encounter she’d had with his mother. She turned to look at him as he talked, realizing he clearly had.

*“Tofe get mind o! She get mind to send this pikin she born for born-troway come my house!”*

Pursing her lips, Alero looked away, welcoming the memory of the naira notes falling at her feet, needing as much fuel for her rage as she could gather. Because nothing was going to make her back out of her plan like she'd done in Ibadan.

Absolutely nothing.

Oasis' *Stop Crying Your Heart* played from the car's sound system, its lyrics ominous. If only Bonju knew, as he sang along, that he would truly need his destiny to keep him warm after that day.

As they drove into the large compound, vivid memories of the times they'd done that in the past, assaulted her. Even though there had been a lot of changes - the lush lawn and garden more professionally tended, the shrubs bordering the driveway trimmed with artistic precision, and the flowers in full bloom - it was every bit as oppressing as the first time she'd been there.

Walking into the house, it almost didn't feel like the same place, the daunting white and gold décor of the hallway now comelier and more welcoming in cream and peach floral tones, large vases with similar coloured live roses testament of the fact it was unapologetically a woman's home.

"Uncle Ize!" Bonju called out.

As a man turned to them, Alero recognized him as a balder, portlier version of the uncle who had lived there with Bonju and his mother so many years before.

"Bonju, my guy!" Ize exclaimed, embracing his nephew. "It's always a pleasure to see you. See as you just dey chop life!"

"We dey try," Bonju chuckled in response. "What about Aunty Fikayo and the boys? Are they here?"

"They're already seated in the dining room," Ize laughed. "You know your mother hates tardiness." His eyes flitted to Alero and squinted, like he was trying to jog his brain. "I know this face."

Bonju grinned and put his arm around her, pulling her closer. "This is Alero, Uncle. My fiancée."

Ize's eyes widened. "The same Alero from that time? The same Alero wey scatter your head that year?"

"The same one!" Bonju laughed.

"It's so nice to see you again!" Ize beamed, looking at Alero with the same kind of unfiltered joy and amazement one would behold a long-estranged child. "You haven't changed a single bit."

Alero had to force a smile in response, remembering too well how he and Bonju's older brother had laughed at her as she left the house that Easter Sunday morning, the first set of witnesses to her shame. But, even if only for the success of her plan, she decided to play along. "It's good to see you, too."

And that was what she did as Bonju took her to meet the rest of his relatives...play along. As he led her to the living room, redecorated in varying shades of peach and burgundy and maple wood, introducing her to his mother's sisters and cousins, and as they all raved over the ravishing beauty he had finally brought home, she did her best to reciprocate their enthusiastic greetings, smiling till her cheeks ached. As he introduced her to yet another eager aunt, the familiar rose and vanilla smell wafted in, announcing the arrival of the almighty Omere Adalemo.

Alero turned to look in the direction of the clicking heels and eager greetings, and the sight of the woman who walked up to them, a broad smile on her face, surprised her. This woman, this woman in an easy, flowing gown, bejeweled sandals and a smile that crinkled her eyes, appeared nothing like the tough, stony-faced person she remembered. With glossy brown skin that belied her age, her hair in brown and amber highlights, this woman radiated a warmth her younger self had not. But Alero knew better than to be fooled by that.

"Welcome, my darling" Omere exclaimed, pulling her into a warm embrace. "It's such a pleasure to meet you."

Alero's arms hung limp, unable to return the hug, wondering how she was the only one who remembered the ugly words that had been thrown at her

in that same living room, that living room that had once been decorated green, that living room where once sat a piano just like her father's.

That same room.

"Mom, this is um...Alero."

But Bonju's momentary stutter and the fleeting flicker in his mother's eyes told Alero otherwise. She wasn't the only one who remembered. He remembered. His mother remembered.

And she was enraged anew.

"Such a gorgeous girl!" Omere exclaimed, planting a kiss on both her cheeks. "I've waited such a long time for this."

Taking her hand, Omere proceeded to introduce her to everyone Bonju already had, adding the juicy tidbit her son had just told her; that they were engaged to be married. She still held her hand as everyone was ushered into the grand dining room, a large room with an equally large dining table running almost its entire length. Omere took her place at its head, with Bonju and Alero seated on either side of her. A quick headcount of the table revealed twenty-nine other people seated, a number that both unnerved Alero...and pleased her. She might not have gotten her first choice of audience with their former schoolmates who'd been there for her own humiliation, but the large number of his family members would also do.

Sitting through the hors d'œuvres of roasted mushroom and caramelized onion bruschetta, the food tasted like wood shavings in her mouth, the chatter around the table fading into oblivion as she steeled herself for what it was she had to do.

What she needed to do.

"We've actually met before, Ma," she said, turning to Omere, as the entrée of honey glazed turkey and roast potato was served. "I came here to visit Bonju many years ago."

Omere hesitated before she smiled. "Yes, I remember, Tofe's daughter. How is she doing? We never saw her again at our annual picnic."

"She's very fine. She's married now, I'm not sure if you heard."

Omere nodded. “Yes, I heard she married and moved to Sapele. A former policeman, right?”

“Navy. He retired as a Commodore but has a thriving furniture business now. And my mother is his *only* wife.”

Bonju looked up from his meal and Omere’s hand stilled momentarily on the glass she was reaching for, but she quickly recovered and smiled at Alero.

“That’s nice. I’m happy for her.”

“Not bad for someone who had children for a *born-troway*, right?” Alero threw back, raising her voice high enough to carry down the table, satisfied by the shocked glances in reaction to the derogatory term.

“Alero,” Bonju called, his brows furrowed in his bewilderment.

“I beg your pardon?” Omere said, her own brows raised, but the flatness of her eyes showing she knew exactly what Alero was referencing.

“The last time I was here, you were angry that Tofe had sent the ‘*pikin she born for born-troway*’ to your house,” Alero answered, her voice firm, carrying louder as the room grew even quieter. Then plastering on a sardonic smile, she added. “Or have you forgotten, Ma?”

“Alero,” Bonju called again, his own tone more desperate.

Omere took a sip from her glass, the tremble of her hand the giveaway of her discomfort. Setting the glass cup down, she turned to Alero and smiled. “Unfortunately, I do remember. And I’m not proud of any of the things I said to you. To be honest, it wasn’t even you my anger was directed at. I wasn’t in a good place at the time.”

“You didn’t think me worthy of your son’s friendship back then,” Alero went on, ignoring Omere’s attempt at placation. “You went as far as ordering me out of your house, asking me to take a taxi, bus, or *okada* back to Ajegunle, or whatever slum I had come from.”

“Alero, that’s enough,” Bonju reprimanded.

“And now, you’re proudly introducing me to everyone as his fiancée,” she went on, riding the wave of courage she knew could leave as quickly as it had come. “The same person you pretty much walked out of your house.”

“Alero!” Bonju’s voice was now as loud as hers, but she didn’t even care.

Omere raised a hand to silence him, her eyes still holding Alero’s. “I acted poorly, Alero, and I do apologize. I had no right to say those awful things about you, your mother, or anyone else for that matter. What right have I to dictate who is or isn’t right for my son, when I’m not God? Bonju loves you, and that is all the assurance I need that you’re right for him. Him choosing you is more than enough for me.”

By this time, there wasn’t even the sound of cutlery or chatter in the room, all eyes now on them. And Alero knew there would be no better time.

“Well, unfortunately, *he* isn’t good enough for *me* !” There were gasps from different parts of the room, and she turned to glare at a Bonju, who was looking at her with his mouth parted. “And he is the last person in this world I would ever want to marry!” Reaching for her bag, she brought out crisp one-thousand-naira notes from her wallet, placing them before Omere. “Repayment for the money you threw at me back then. I don’t know how much it was, but they were fifty-naira notes, so it couldn’t have been more than five hundred, a thousand tops.” She looked up at her. “This is ten thousand, so consider the balance interest.”

Rising to her feet, Bonju also shot to his.

“Alero, is this some kind of joke?”

“Read my lips, if your hearing has failed you,” she said, glaring at him. “I will never marry you. You are a vile, sorry excuse of a man, and I would rather slit my throat than be in your company a minute longer.” Turning to Omere, she smiled. “Thank you for lunch, Ma. Happy Holidays!”

As she walked the distance to the door, the sound of her heels clicking on the wooden floor was the only one in the room, twenty-nine pairs of wide eyes on her as she made her way out of the room. Once out in the lobby, she quickened her pace, desperate to be out of the compound before anyone stopped her, her bravado dissipating in large gusts with every step.

“Alero!” Bonju’s voice rang desperately behind her as she walked to the gate. “Alero, wait!”

She contemplated ignoring him and hastening her steps to quickly exit the premises, but decided against it. So, she turned to him, pinching her palm to refrain from buckling at the sound of his voice, melting at the sight of his eyes.

“Alero, what was that?” he exclaimed, his eyes wide and frantic. “Why would you say things like that? Was it to get back at her for what she did?”

“Ever the narcissist, ever thinking the blame is anyone’s but yours,” she sneered, glaring at him. “*‘It was Folarin and Demola !’*” she mimicked. “You’ve always been quick to throw the blame anywhere else but where it really lies...which is with you!”

He stared at her, and she saw the confusion in his eyes slowly give way to knowing.

“Did you really think I would just fall into your arms, after what you did to me?” she retorted. “That we would fall in love and ride into the sunset after you destroyed my life?”

“Is this what the last few months have been about, Alero?” he asked, his gaze unfocused like he was in a battle with himself, a battle against the acceptance of what was unfolding before him. “Revenge?”

“How dare you ask me to marry you, after you deceived me into your bed, took my virginity, and broadcast it for all the world to hear?” she yelled, a lump welling in her throat. “How dare you think all that would just go away after a few winks and kisses?”

“Fuck!” the expletive came out as a gasp, as he covered his face and took a step back. “Fuck!” The second one came out as a yell that made her jump. Taking his hands off his face, he turned to her, his forehead burrowed with lines she had never seen there before. “All this has been an act? The last few months have been an act?”

She squared before him. “Now you know what it feels like. Now you know how I felt when you hurt me so horribly. Imagine this, in addition to being

the joke of the whole school, and you should be grateful I chose to return the favour with only your relatives to witness it.”

He shook his head. “No, no, no, this isn’t possible, Alero. Quit playing. The last few months were real. I saw in your eyes everything that was there when we were kids. You’re just as in love with me as I am with you!”

“Keep telling yourself that!” she cackled. “It was the same way I tried to console myself back then, convinced you loved me too much to do something so cruel.” Then with her laughter disappearing as quickly as it came, she glared at him. “These last few months, I have barely tolerated you, desperate for the day I would be able to look you in the eye and tell you how much I despise you. After today, I never want to set my eyes on you again. So, you can go to hell with your so-called investment. We don’t need it.”

The clench of his jaw was his only reaction as he stood there, quiet for several minutes, before finally saying, “You would do that to your brother?”

“Don’t worry about my brother. Destiny and I will be fine!” she retorted. “As for me, it’s good riddance to bad rubbish, Bonju Adalemo. Go back and eat your pretentious lunch with your pretentious family. I’m more than happy to rid myself of you!”

“Wow!” he said repeatedly, nodding and staring ahead at nothing, before turning to her, an unmistakable sheen in his eyes. “I guess I don’t know you at all then, Alero.”

Her nostrils flared and she swallowed back the stubborn lump in her throat. “I guess you don’t.”

Turning around, as she walked to the gate, she could feel his eyes on her. Out of the compound, as she made her way down the street and connected with Glover Road, she waited for the euphoria she expected to feel after finally getting the revenge she’d so desperately wanted. She waited for the triumphant feeling of victory over bringing Bonju to his knees. But as she raised her hand to summon a yellow taxi, the large lump that had lodged itself in her throat was more painful than ever, and boarding the car, she had to wipe away unruly droplets that found an outlet from her eyes. As the taxi



got on Kingsway Road before connecting with Falomo Bridge and on to Ozumba Mbadiwe, she finally gave in to her tears, weeping as the taxi raced down the Lekki Expressway.

If revenge was supposed to be sweet, why was it hurting so bad?

## **Bonju**

He remained standing there, immobile for several minutes after she had left, unable to move even a muscle, unable to believe what had just played out before him, unable to believe the last few months with the love of his life had been nothing but a sham.

“Bonju.”

He didn't turn at the sound of Ize's voice calling him from where he stood at the door. He didn't turn, for fear the look of pity on his uncle's face would make him unravel. He looked up at the sky, to force back the tears that had gathered in his eyes, but it was an attempt in futility as they were soon rushing down his face in a steady stream.

“Bonju!”

Ize's louder voice was the indication his uncle was walking towards to him, and Bonju turned around in the direction of the gate, waving a dismissive hand he hoped communicated he didn't want to be followed and needed to be left alone.

Left alone to grieve the implosion of his world...and everything he'd thought to be true .

## CHAPTER TWELVE –

# GOODBYE HEARTBREAK



*You know that you'll survive  
The day you realize  
You can't stop day  
From turning into night*

### Alero

SHE COULDN'T EVEN GET OUT of her clothes.

The minute she got home, she'd only been able to kick off the kitten heeled sandals she'd worn, curling into bed still in the ruffled ankara dress she'd been in all day, not minding the many layers of fabric spread ungainly around her.

Feeling even more heartbroken than she had twenty years before.

Her eyes were open all night, not shutting even for a second in any variant of sleep, the image of Bonju's anguished face haunting her. Covering her face with her pillow, she reminded herself that he deserved it after everything he had taken from her, but the longer the night wore on, the less potency the reminder had.

And she knew the reason why.

She hadn't been careful enough with her heart and had gone on to fall deeper in love with him a second time around.

But there was no going back now. She'd gotten her revenge, and whether or not she was jubilant about it, it was time to move on with her life. With any

luck, maybe, just maybe, she would be able to rid herself of the ghost from the past that had followed her for the last two decades. Maybe she would finally be able to release herself to intimacy with another man.

Maybe.

And speaking of things that needed to be done, there was one very important one. Reaching for her phone, the time stamp on her screen being 3:02am, she typed a message to her brother.

***The deal with Bonju is off. We'll need to get another investor. Send me a copy of the pitch document so I can email it to some people I think might be interested.***

Setting her phone down, she returned to her lying position, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, praying that they would, indeed, find someone else to invest.

## **Bonju**

How had he missed the signs?

Lying awake, his mind combed through the months it had been since the reunion, the last four months in particular, scanning through every detail of the time he and Alero had spent together, wondering if there were any warnings he had overlooked, any red flags he had ignored.

But he already knew the answer to that.

He had excused her coolness and detachment, convinced himself she only needed time to warm up to him completely. He had brushed away the fact she was nowhere near as animated and expressive as she had been before, convincing himself she had simply grown up. The fact that, when he kissed her, whenever he did have her in his arms, the woman who looked up at him, the woman who kissed him back, was the same girl he had fallen in love with in 1998, had been enough to keep him going, enough to make him lose himself completely to her.

But it turned out, she hadn't needed time to 'warm up to him' neither had she simply just 'grown up'. From the very beginning, she had embarked on

their so-called relationship with nothing but vengeance in mind, and, by God, she'd gotten it. She'd struck him directly in the heart...in the very core of his soul.

Vengeance. Revenge. The more the words echoed in his head, the more he felt like it was a dream, a nightmare he would soon awake from. Those were words that belonged in a Bollywood movie, not in his life, not in the relationship he thought had been restored by God Himself.

He lay awake as the darkness of night faded into daybreak, the ache in his chest, physical, the devastation he felt, total. He had gone from being excited about building a future with her at last...to feeling like he had been pushed from a moving plane with no parachute, crashing to the ground face down.

She had broken him.

Seeing it was already 7am, he reached for his phone and dialed his lawyer in London.

"Hey, Bonju," Nigel's voice rang clear over the phone. A morning person, Bonju was sure his lawyer had not only already had his morning workout but had probably showered in anticipation of what the day had in store, regardless of the fact it was a Sunday and only 6am his time. "How are you enjoying this last weekend of 2019?"

"We need to sign those agreements," Bonju cut in. "All of them."

"But Kofo is still insisting we take out the non-compete and non-circumvention clauses," Nigel protested.

Kofo was Destiny's lawyer, who was still playing hardball. He had already succeeded in getting the other contentious clauses removed, but the non-compete and non-circumvention were clauses Nigel had refused to back down on.

"Take them out. Destiny isn't going to circumvent himself."

"I don't know, Bonju. Those clauses are important to..."

"I don't care, Nigel!" Bonju snapped. "Take them out. I want those agreements executed immediately. It's dragged for way too long."

“Not a problem, I’ll take them out and append your electronic signature,” Nigel answered, before pausing. “Is everything okay?”

*No! Everything is not okay* was what Bonju wanted to yell back, but instead he exhaled and nodded, despite the fact Nigel couldn't see him. “Everything’s fine. I just need this to be over.”

And that was an understatement if there ever was any.

## **Alero**

Rising from her lying position, she walked to her kitchen to see what she could rustle to eat, more out of want of a distraction than any actual hunger. Finding the fridge’s egg tray empty, she grabbed some change from the stash she usually left beneath the toaster on the counter, and walked out of her flat, still in the ruffled dress. It wasn't until she caught sight of her reflection in a neighbour’s car window that she saw that her face was an equal mess, with her eyes blotchy and streaks of mascara staining her cheeks. But as awful as she looked, it still paled in comparison to how she felt.

After buying half a dozen eggs, as she walked back to her apartment building, her pace slowed when she saw Destiny’s SUV pull up in front of it. Their eyes met as he disembarked, and she saw the myriad of questions in his.

“What was that text message, Alero?” he demanded, calling her the name he hardly ever used. “What do you mean the deal with Bonju is off? I tried to call you several times after I read your message this morning, but your phone has been switched off.” A frown formed on his face as he took in her unruly appearance. “And why are you walking around your estate looking like that?”

“Bonju won’t be investing in our radio station anymore,” she answered, ignoring his second question. “I told him to go to hell with his investment, and that you and I will do it without him.”

“You did what?!”

“I told you I’d rather die than have anything to do with him. Or did you think I was joking?”

“But I thought you guys had put all that behind you?” Destiny exclaimed, his eyes wide as he gaped at her. “Aren’t you two together?”

“Did you really think I would let everything go just like that?” she retorted, her emotions welling inside her anew. “You thought I would agree to just pretend nothing ever happened?”

Destiny put both hands on his head and squatted by his car, his eyes still on her in amazement. “Ha! Alero, you have finished me! You have finished me!”

“We’ll find another investor, Destiny,” she said, her voice quivering, as she had never seen her typically calm and collected brother that distressed. “Get up, the neighbours are watching.”

Shooting to his feet, his face was a mask of anger as he pulled open the door of his car. “You better pray I’m able to fix this mess. You better pray so, because if this opportunity is gone, so is this partnership of ours.”

She bit her lip to keep from crying as he pulled his car into reverse, swung it in the direction of the estate gates and roared off.

And she realised she stood the risk of losing a whole lot more than she thought.

## **Bonju**

As Bonju walked into the hotel’s lounge, Destiny rose to his feet.

“Hey, man,” Bonju managed a smile, shaking his soon-to-be partner’s hand.

“Hi,” was all Destiny could manage, his wide eyes conveying a thousand questions.

“You wanted to see me?” Bonju asked, sitting. “Would you like something to eat? Drink?”

“Not at all,” Destiny answered, also sitting, his eyes still on Bonju. “My guy, honestly, I don't even know what to say. I saw Alero this morning, and she told me...”

Both their phones chimed at the same time. Bonju reached for his phone and nodded at Destiny. “Those are the executed agreements. Once you and your sister sign, we’re good to go.”

Destiny’s eyes widened as he clicked open the email app on his phone. “They’re signed?”

“I asked Nigel to remove the problematic clauses,” Bonju said. “It’s taken too long, and I want these signed before I leave for London tomorrow.”

“You’re going back to London?” Destiny asked, his brows furrowed in his confusion.

Bonju shrugged, the reminder of the sharp change of his plans triggering emotions he had tried to suppress all night. Having planned to remain in Lagos indefinitely, after the ugly incident with the woman who had inspired that decision, it was no longer an option. He wanted...needed...to be as far away from her as possible...and everything that reminded him of her.

Destiny rubbed his eyes and exhaled. “Bonju, I am truly sorry for whatever happened. I don't even understand it. But, from the bottom of my heart, I’m grateful you’ve decided to proceed, regardless.”

“Too much work has gone into this. It would be foolish to pull out now,” Bonju answered, waving over a waiter, needing to numb the pain that was showing no sign of abating, with some alcohol. “Once you sign, the money for the investment will be released from escrow, in full.”

“What about what we’ve already spent ordering equipment? And branding?” Destiny asked, blinking rapidly in his surprise.

“Part of my sunk costs. I’ve asked the building manager to send you a copy of the signed lease for the floors you’ll occupy, and if you start early enough, everything should be set for launching in February, as planned.”

Destiny blew out a big puff of air, overwhelmed. “Wow! This is really happening.” Then looking up at Bonju imploringly. “But I can't do this

without Divine...”

“I’m not asking you to,” Bonju clarified. “What has happened between your sister and I has nothing to do with any of this.” He paused, searching for the right words. “I just won’t be as involved as I’d initially planned, but I’m sure you can understand that.”

He rose to his feet, knowing what he needed to ward off the emotions that were threatening to choke him was not an alcoholic beverage, but to get out of there, and quickly.

Taking his cue, Destiny also stood. “I’ll speak to Kofo, and if he’s fine with the agreement in its present form, we’ll have it signed and returned before the end of the day.” He sighed and shook his head. “I wish things could have been different, man.”

Bonju shrugged, trying to appear more composed than he felt. “I probably should be thanking her...your sister. I’ve spent the last twenty years carrying around so much guilt, killing myself with thoughts of ‘what if’. What she’s done has freed me of all that guilt and released me from all the fantasies I’ve nursed for way too long. There are no hard feelings.”

There were plenty of hard feelings, but those he would find a way to deal with. As he shook Destiny’s hands, he could see in the man’s eyes that it was just as bittersweet for him. But regardless of what had happened, the show had to go on. Business was business, and he hadn’t gotten this far by allowing emotions get in the way.

Or at least, that was what he was determined to make himself remember at all costs .



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN –

## BROKEN WINGS



*So, take these broken wings  
And learn to fly again  
Learn to live so free*

**JANUARY – FEBRUARY 2020**

### **Bonju**

WALKING INTO HIS APARTMENT on New Year's Day, it wasn't the triumphant homecoming he had dreamed, one in which he would have been hand-in-hand with the woman he'd hoped would be his wife. Instead, he was even more desolate than when he'd departed four months before. At least then, there had been the hope of the future to look forward to. But now, standing in the hallway of his townhouse, he wanted to kick himself for getting as carried away as he had. His life had been good before the blasted reunion almost a year before. It hadn't been perfect, but at least he'd been content. Now, he was going to have to find a way to banish the memory of the feel of her lips, the smell of her hair, and the way her skin felt when it brushed his. Now, he was going to have to find a way to banish her.

But seeing the large package leaning on his living room wall, a package earlier delivered, and received by his housekeeper who came by once a week, Alero wasn't about to be easily banished. Even before opening the package, Bonju knew what it was, and, tearing it open, the note inside confirmed it.

***Decided to drop this on my way to Milan*** was all Emeka had written.

Emeka had left for a series of scheduled exhibitions in several European cities in early December and had returned to Lagos before Christmas. Bonju had been too caught up in the euphoria of his renewed love to remember the painting he had commissioned a few months before.

Tearing the package open, his breath caught in his throat at the life-sized portrait staring back at him. Using a picture from their last Prom which Bonju had gotten from the reunion photo gallery, Emeka had brought Alero alive in oil on canvas. Resting the frame on the wall, Bonju took a step back and looked at the picture, so real, it felt like she was right there in the room looking at him, every single detail of her essence captured, right down to the freckles on her shoulder, the slightly bulbous tip of her nose, the honey brown of her eyes, the even sheen of her caramel brown skin, and the multiple piercings on her ears. In a floor-length chiffon emerald-green dress, her smile was less with her lips and more with her eyes. As he looked at her, the Alero in the picture wasn't afraid to hold his gaze for longer than a few minutes. The Alero in this picture looked right back at him, communicating with him with her eyes in a way she hadn't since they were teenagers. The Alero in the picture reminded him of the one he had fallen in love with all those years ago...and not the one who had just broken his heart.

*"Won't your girlfriend be mad about that?"* she'd asked years ago, a coy smile on her face, the very first time they had kissed.

*"What are the odds we were born on the very same day! It's truly uncanny,"* she'd beamed, as they'd shared a cupcake on their first, and only, birthday together.

*"You don't have to sit all the way there, Bonju. Put on a movie and come sit here with me,"* she'd giggled when he brought her back to his place after the first disastrous visit.

*"I love you, too."* The last words she'd said to him the night before everything had fallen to pieces.

He remembered the look in her eyes as they made love for the first time and as she reciprocated all the feelings he had for her...and his heart sank with the realization *that* Alero never did come back to him. He'd never gotten her back. The woman he had just spent the last four months with was nothing like this girl who had expressed her love with her words, with her touch, with her gaze.

And he felt cheated.

Grabbing the elaborate bronze frame, he pulled it till it came apart, leaving exposed the painting it encased. He grabbed the canvas, tugging it till it tore, first into two parts, and then four, the number of pieces multiplying as he attacked it with ferociously, all the rage, angst, frustration, distress, and defeat he felt rising to the fore.

By the time he was done, as he stood in the carnage that was shredded cloth and twisted bronze, he felt the lightest he had in the four days it had been since his world had been upended. And as he cleared and disposed of the mess, braving the winter chill to lug the debris to the skip down the street, he was determined to do the same to any lingering memories of someone who no longer existed. Because that was exactly what those memories were.

Trash.

## **Alero**

She hadn't expected Bonju to go ahead with the investment. Of all the fallouts, of all the possible outcomes she had anticipated, Bonju signing the agreements hadn't been one of them.

"I told him I'm not doing this without you," Destiny had said to her later that Sunday evening, the day Bonju had signed. "But if you insist on not getting into business with Bonju, I'm going to have to do just that. This has been our dream for a long, long time. I'm not going to have you fuck it up, for whatever reason." He handed her the agreements. "You already know what's in them. I've already signed. It's up to you now. You decide whether you still want to do this...or not."

From the hard set of his eyes, she knew her brother meant every word.

As much as she wanted a complete break from her former flame, she couldn't walk away from this dream...her dream...when it was on the cusp of realization.

So, she'd signed.

In the weeks that followed, as they took possession of the office space, as they took delivery of their state-of-the-art equipment - mixer consoles, audio processors, broadcast decks, monitors, transmitters, processors, acoustic panels, microphones, and headphones - it got more and more real. By the end of January, the station had been fully outfitted and set up, and they had concluded the hiring of the five personnel that would support them. Everything was set.

On the first of February, the Tempo 92.5 sign was hoisted atop the building, and as its illuminating neon green and yellow lights came on, as Destiny and his wife, Sophie, popped champagne over the milestone feat, there was a hollowness in Alero's chest.

*"People will be able to see it from Ahmadu Bello, Akin Adesola, heck even Eko Bridge. There won't be a person in this town who won't know about the station."*

Bonju's words rang true as Alero drove her car down Adeola Odeku Road, connecting with Akin Adesola, getting on the Falomo Bridge, driving down Awolowo Road into Marina, getting on Eko Bridge, descending at Apongbon, getting back on Outer Marina Road, turning into Bonny Camp to connect with Ahmadu Bello Way, driving down Ahmadu Way and making a U-turn at the Bar Beach, and driving back to Adeola Odeku. Save for Awolowo Road, their station's sign was visible from every location.

And it was a bittersweet triumph, a triumph that didn't feel complete without Bonju.

On Saturday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, the day before their official launch, they had a party right there in the station, with family, friends, former colleagues and honchos in the broadcast industry in attendance. Alero struggled to stay focused as felicitations and well wishes rang in the air. All the while she

and Destiny hobnobbed with the who-is-who in Nigerian radio, all the while they posed for pictures their PR team mandated them to, all the while she smiled in appreciation of the greetings and salutations from people in attendance, her mind was on the one person who should have been there, the one person who had made it all happen.

But the following day, as they stood by as Destiny made the inaugural broadcast from the new station, she deployed every ounce of willpower to enjoy the momentous occasion. It was better for all of them, her especially, that Bonju was partnering from a distance.

“Good morning, Lagos. My name is Destiny, and you’re listening to Tempo 92.5FM,” Destiny crooned into the microphone, prompting wide grins from everyone in the station. “Your destination for ‘80s and ‘90s rock, pop, rap, hip-hop, and a bit of soul. It’s a beautiful Sunday morning, and the best hits are coming your way. So, strap yourselves tight and prepare for takeoff.”

Alero wiped tears from her face as she watched her brother in his element, doing what he was born to do. After so many years of dreaming, it was now a reality. Later that evening, when it was her turn to take the microphone, even though she had never done anything like that before, having never had the need to speak when they were streaming online, as Destiny gave her the thumbs up sign, she willed herself to remember all he’d coached her.

“It’s time to slow things down with some smooth classics. My name is Divine,” she saw Destiny’s raised brow, in acknowledgement of her last-minute decision not to use the earlier agreed name, Alero, “and I’ll be your pilot tonight. Enjoy the ride.”

The reactions to their station’s daytime rap and hip-hop, and nighttime’s rock and pop classics were instant. It turned out there was an eager demographic of listeners ready for that kind of music, and between them and their aggressive PR and marketing campaign, by the end of their first month, not only were they the number three station in the state with an average of 6.9% of listeners, their advertising slots were also in hot demand.

Tempo 92.5 was an overnight success.

With the DJs they had hired - Soroh, Nabila, Usifo aka Syf, Bash, and Onyeka - all gaining popularity on their respective shifts, and with Destiny handling the day-to-day administration of the station, Alero was able to spend only a few hours in the station, programming playlists not only for her show, but all the others. With this latitude, she had enough free time to pursue her interior décor gigs.

It was the best of both worlds.

But when she had cause to pass the empty eleventh floor the times she opted for the stairs instead of the elevator, she couldn't help but wonder what it would have been like to have Bonju there, as had been the original plan. She couldn't help but wonder what it would have been like if she hadn't been so bent on revenge, if she had just released herself to enjoy the love he had offered.

But every time her mind wandered like that, she was quick to rein it back in.

The die was already cast. There was no point crying over spilt milk.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN –

### SAY, SAY, SAY



*Take, take, take  
What you need  
But don't leave me  
With no direction*

**JUNE 2020**

### **Bonju**

THE MUSIC AT THE CAFÉ was starting to get louder and the crowd, rowdier. Looking around as the place filled, Bonju knew he'd have to leave if he wanted to conduct his virtual meeting with his trader in peace. Time was when the Chelsea café was tranquil enough for him to carry out all his business from the moment he got there at noon till when he left at 8pm. But summer had brought along with it not only a different kind of crowd, but the owners' seemingly changed business model. Because he couldn't understand why DaBaby's *Rockstar* was playing at a volume comparable to a nightclub's. And it wasn't even 7pm yet.

Deciding no more work would be possible, at least not there, he texted Hiro, his Japanese trader, asking to push forward their meeting, before proceeding to light a cigarette. That was one of the perks of frequenting a café like Armando's, one of the few places he could indulge in the habit he had resumed in January, after the trip to Nigeria he'd rather forget.

With a lazy drag of the cigarette, his eyes scanned the room, taking in the young and effervescent crowd, deciding they were possibly students on

holiday, or maybe even tourists. As a particular group laughed and bantered, Bonju chuckled under his breath as he exhaled a puff of smoke. Oh, to be young, naïve, and clueless again! If only they knew how much of a shit show life would turn out for them, an inevitability none of them would be able to avoid, no matter how much money they made.

Squashing the cigarette stub on an ashtray the waitress, Noelle, had snuck to his table, he left a generous tip beneath it for her, rose to his feet and left. It was a five-minute walk to his town house, and as he ambled down Gatliff Road, he passed several more groups of excited holidaymakers, young girls scantily clad and eager lads with only one thing on the brain. Shaking his head, he walked into an off-license to buy some more cigarettes, and as he waited his turn at the till, an olive-skinned woman smiled at him from where she stood on the line. Undoubtedly beautiful, she looked Mediterranean, with her thick, dark hair falling in waves down her back. With a chiseled face and curvy derriere like a Kardashian's, time was when he would have been too glad to flirt back. But flirting was the last thing on his mind.

Without even returning her smile, he handed the cashier some notes, told him to keep the change, and walked out of the store without a backward glance. Getting involved with any woman, romantically or casually, wasn't on the cards for him.

Not when he was yet to recover from his last encounter.

His phone vibrated with a message from Destiny as he walked into his house.

***Still waiting for your feedback on the app, so it can go live on the Apple Store tomorrow. The developer says Play Store will follow next week.***

Bonju set his phone on the dining table, ignoring yet another reminder from Destiny about testing the app, something that would mandate him to listen in to the station's live broadcast and, very likely, hear her voice.

The station's quick success was no surprise to him. It had been a no-brainer that there would be a ready market of listeners looking for a varied mix of



classic genres of music. It made his impulsive investment worthwhile, especially as his initial motive had been anything but sensible.

Pouring himself a glass of wine, he settled down for his Zoom call with Hiro, to discuss the stocks he wanted to offload as the Tokyo Stock Exchange continued its downward spiral. With Hiro already on the same page, the call lasted only fifteen minutes, forty-five shorter than Bonju had expected. The call over, he glanced at his phone on the table. And his curiosity got the better of him.

Downloading the app from the link, after a few minutes of set up, as he clicked the *Playing Now* button, the sound of Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson's duet, *Say Say Say*, filled his living room.

And he immediately wished he hadn't downloaded the damned app.

It was a song from Paul McCartney's *Pipes of Peace* album, one of the second set of albums he'd taken from Alero.

*"There's this song from Paul McCartney I like, but it's not on any of the albums I've seen anywhere,"* he had said, scanning the songs on the back of the LP.

She'd laughed. *"I know exactly which one you're talking about. My dad didn't have it, but it played a lot as a video interlude on Channel Five. Goodnight Tonight, right?"*

She'd started singing it and he had joined her, laughing along as they did.

*Don't say it. Don't say it. Don't say goodnight tonight!*

He shook his head to brush off the memory, something he did every time recalcitrant thoughts of the woman he never wanted to think about again, invaded his mind. Which was often...more often than he liked.

*"Say, Say, Say by Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson...a forever classic."*

He froze, hearing her voice wafting through his phone's speakers as the song faded.

*"Released just about a year after the pair's first duet, The Girl Is Mine, I honestly don't know which of the two is my favourite."*

She laughed and he felt knots form in his stomach at the sound he'd once loved, the sound that had come so easily when they were teenagers, but which he'd had to pry out of her this last sham attempt at a relationship.

"But my all-time favorite Paul McCartney Song has to be *Goodnight Tonight* . First released in 1979 with a group called Wings, I'm sure many of you, like me, enjoyed it as an interlude on NTA2 Channel Five back in the day. Don't remember it? Well, thank me later. Divine has always got you covered."

"Divine!" he scoffed at the name, as *Goodnight Tonight* started playing, rankled she hadn't even done the one and only thing he'd asked her to. Deciding he was done torturing himself that night, he exited the app and briefly toyed with the idea of deleting it altogether. But that wasn't the kind of impulsive thing to do as a primary investor.

Pouring himself another glass of wine, he reclined on his couch with the intention to shut his eyes for only a few minutes, before checking in with Siti, the owner of a French and Asian fusion restaurant he had just invested in. It was the ringing of his phone that startled him awake. Momentarily confused by the streaks of sunlight peeping through the blinds, he realised he'd not only slept through the night, he'd forgotten to set his phone to its usual overnight *Do Not Disturb* mode. Wondering who could be calling him at, he checked the time, 6:45am, he felt a rush of panic seeing Justin's name on his screen. It wasn't a good sign for his father's nurse to be calling him that early in the morning.

And he was correct.

"I'm sorry, Bonju, but your father has died," came Justin's voice, sounding as heavy as the weight of the news he bore. "I went to check on him this morning and found him dead."

Bonju squeezed his eyes tight, devastated. He had looked forward to seeing the old man later that day, the weekly visit to Sandgate the only thing that kept him sane and genuinely put a smile on his face.

"I've called for an ambulance," Justin was still talking. "I think he went into cardiac arrest overnight."

“But he was fine when I saw him on Sunday,” Bonju lamented, his eyes tearing. “Was he in any distress yesterday? Did he complain of being ill?”

“Not at all. We even played a game of cards last night,” Justin answered, his voice breaking. “Just a few days ago, he was joking about celebrating his ninetieth birthday in Vegas in a few years.”

The reminder of his father’s sassy wit was enough to release the tears that had gathered in Bonju’s eyes. Even though their relationship had been testy for many years, in the last few, the old man had become his best friend.

“I’m on my way,” he said, rising to his feet.

As shattered as he was by the news, he had to pull himself together to take charge of everything he needed to, top of the list being moving the body out of the house.

Body. Bankole Adalemo was now a body.

He pulled up in front of his father’s house at a little after 9am. Justin had asked the EMTs that came with the ambulance to wait until he arrived before moving the body. Seeing his father lying in bed, looking like he was in a deep, peaceful slumber, broke him. Kneeling over the old man, Bonju wept without restraint, wanting to shake him to ask why he hadn’t cared to give any of them any warning, wanting to yell at him for leaving when he needed him the most.

“How’s your girl? When do I get to meet her?” was the question his father had asked every week, since his return from Nigeria.

Not wanting to break the old man’s heart like his had been, Bonju’s answer was always, “She’s fine. And soon.”

Whether or not his father knew he was lying was anybody’s guess. Instead, the man never probed any further, waiting until the following week to ask the same question again.

And now, he was dead.

Regrouping, Bonju got into autopilot mode, overseeing the movement of the body to the ambulance, accompanying the ambulance to the mortuary,

and completing all the required paperwork. But the paperwork done, it was time to make the difficult phone calls...to his mother...to his siblings.

It was time for him to man up.

## **Alero**

“Bonju’s dad died this morning,” Destiny said to her, standing in front of the door of her studio, later that afternoon.

Her shoulders sagged upon hearing the news. If there was one thing she knew, it was that Bonju was very close to his father.

“He called you?” she asked. When Destiny nodded, she pushed further. “How is he? Did he sound okay? Is he taking it well?”

“Losing a parent is never easy, no matter how old they are,” Destiny said. Having lost his mother only a few years before, he knew this even more so than she did, almost twenty-six years since the death of their father. “But he’s handling it. You know him, always on top of everything.” His eyes held with his sister’s. “You should call him.”

Even though she gave a perfunctory nod, she knew there was no way Bonju was going to want to hear from her.

“I’ll call later in the week,” she said, knowing she wouldn’t. “But please, do extend my condolences.”

Her gaze remained on the door long after her brother had left, her mind several miles away, over three thousand miles to be exact. Six months after she’d gotten the revenge she’d thought the only panacea to the heartache she had been carrying around for years, it had become clear that hadn’t been the solution after all. She still thought of him, except now a whole lot more vividly than she had before their reunion weekend. Before then, time had slightly blurred his face, and even his voice hadn’t rung quite as distinct when she thought of him. But now, every time she closed her eyes, she could draw that face from memory and could hear that voice like he was speaking to her through her headphones. What had been a dull flame

before, their brief dalliance had turned into a full-on inferno, her revenge vendetta having in no way extinguished the blaze like she'd hoped.

All she could do was hope that time would be the cure-all she'd needed all along.

## **Bonju**

With the arrival of Babawale and Bolatito, their eldest sibling, in London that weekend, Bonju was glad to take a step back and let them handle the planning and logistics for moving their father's body to Nigeria as soon as possible, per his wishes.

"Don't keep me in a freezer for too long!" the old man had admonished on several occasions. "When I kick the bucket, make sure you take me back to Ijebu, and put me in the ground immediately."

And that was what they were going to do.

Six days after his death, and two days before the body was to depart London for Lagos, Bonju got a call from his father's longtime friend and one of his many solicitors, Charlie Ward, asking to see him. Charlie, at eighty, was a few years younger than Bankole, looked several years older, but was showing no signs of slowing down, actively running his thriving law firm with his two sons.

On getting to Charlie's Marylebone chambers, Bonju was surprised when Charlie handed him a small box. Opening it, Bonju's breath caught in his throat at the sight of the three-stone tapered baguette diamond ring in shiny platinum.

### ***For your girl.***

A lump formed in Bonju's throat, reading the note in his father's cursive handwriting.

"He got it originally for Adunola," Charles said.

Adunola, the woman who had been his father's second wife and, as rumour had it, the one none of his wives could ever live up to. Married between

1965 and 1968, Bankole and Adunola had no children and, upon discovering his affair with a young nursing student, who would later go on to be wife number three and Babawale and Bolu's mother, Adunola had walked out of the marriage. A repentant Bankole had done everything he could to win her back, and just when reconciliation had been in the offing in early 1969, she had been killed in a car accident on her way to Ibadan to visit her ailing mother.

"The ring cost him a tidy fortune. He wanted to give it to her as a symbol of his renewed commitment, but he wasn't able to before that unfortunate accident," Charlie said, a nostalgic smile on his face. "When she died, he was absolutely gutted. He even swore he'd never get married again," he chuckled. "But we know how that turned out."

"Why didn't he give it to any of his subsequent wives?"

Charlie shrugged. "Same question I always asked, wife after wife. But Banky wouldn't hear of it. I think he couldn't bear the thought of anyone else wearing it."

Bonju clenched his jaw as a mix of emotions swirled inside him; gratitude and anger. Gratitude that his father had found him worthy to be bequeathed the ring, and anger that he'd intended it for a woman who wasn't.

Later that night, as he examined the ring again, he was tempted to pawn it as soon as he could. Not only would he never be presenting the ring to the person his father had thought he would, the odds were high he wouldn't be giving it to anyone else ever either. The large diamond looked to be at least four or five carats and would fetch him a few tens, maybe even hundreds, of thousands of pounds. But as tempting as that idea was, he knew he couldn't do away with this special memento his father had left him. So, the next day, he sent it off to the safety deposit box he had with his bank.

Getting to Nigeria, Bonju's primary focus was his mother. While the others had each other to comfort, Omere had nobody but him. Despite being separated from her husband for over two decades, Bonju hadn't been surprised to meet his mother beside herself in her grief, aged overnight. She and Bankole might have gone on to live separate lives, but the truth was that she had never given her heart to another man after him. Having never

divorced, she was his only legal, living wife and, with his sprawling mansion empty for over five years, her home had become the hub for people wanting to pay their last respects. Bonju took his place by her side as they received them, sympathizers and well wishers alike, and also through all the commemoration events held in Bankole's honour - several wakes and tribute ceremonies organized by his various alma maters and social groups. These were soon followed by the family's official program of ceremonies; a formal wake, a formal tribute ceremony, and, on that last Friday of June, a funeral service in Bankole's childhood church, Cathedral Church of Our Saviour, in his hometown of Ijebu-Ode.

Bonju held his mother's hand through the spectacle of it all; the blare from the loud trumpets, the throng of large crowds at every event all bedecked in whatever expensive attire his older sisters had decided would be worn that day, the obscene amount of food enough to feed a small country, the jostle from the teeming horde of people trying to make their presence known, and the constant push and pull from photographers and pretty much anyone with a phone, shoving a camera into the face of whomever was presumed an Adalemo. His father had been correct. It was a circus...and he would have hated it.

But as the rest of his siblings and extended family didn't seem at all bothered, but rather even appeared to revel in the festivities, Bonju had held his peace, focused on supporting his mother through the process. He'd looked on as his siblings tried to outdo each other over who could spend the most money. Starting with Babawale, who had spent over fifty thousand pounds on a Promethean casket, a custom-made solid gold coffin which encased their father's body as it was flown back to Nigeria. The money being spent by all and sundry was obscene, and Bonju couldn't wait for it all to be over. His younger sisters, Bukun and Bidemi, even though he could tell weren't keen on the mayhem, were roped into the thick of planning and hosting by their older sisters and were soon running around and entertaining like the rest of them. The only person who seemed as irritated by the obscene display as he was, was Busayo, who had come from the United States alone, without his wife or any of his kids, and had sat through all the ceremonies, quiet and sullen-faced, like he was being forced to be there.

When they got to Ijebu-Ode, the reality of the final farewell to the man she loved bore down on Omere, and Bonju held her as she crumpled upon sighting the casket, as the man who had once stood larger than life, lay grey and ashen in the padded box. Bonju had a protective arm around her the whole time, fencing off relatives trying to get her to perform some rite or the other, redirecting them to his older sisters, who all seemed more than happy to do their bidding. At the grave site, as the casket was lowered into the ground, Bonju bit his lip so hard he tasted blood, willing himself not to break down, reminding himself he couldn't do that for his mother's sake. If he were to break down crying, who would support her? He guided her as she was handed a shovel of sand to pour into the grave, and swallowed back several tears as Bolatito, as the oldest child, and Babawale, as the oldest son, did the same, the reality of the fact they were, indeed, saying goodbye to the man hurting even more.

At the reception afterwards, when he was not keeping a keen, watchful eye on his mother, he was entertaining his friends - Nonso, Ikenna, Tomi, Omoruyi, Eva, Emeka, and Destiny - who had made the trip to Ijebu to support him. But by 5pm, when his guests had left, even though the party was still in full swing, Bonju was more than ready to leave as well.

"We need to get a move on, if we want to make it back to Lagos before dark," he said to his mother, glancing at his watch. "Bolatito and Bisi are taking care of the guests just fine. If anyone asks, I'll tell them you got tired and I had to take you home."

But Omere shook her head vehemently. "Kamson says we should all stay back. He says the will is to be read tonight."

"Tonight?!" Bonju exclaimed. "Here? Uncle 'Dipo said so?"

Omere nodded again. "He said it's important we all wait."

Bonju clenched his jaw, starting to get irritated. Even though there was more than enough room in the palatial, castle-like residence his father had taken plenty of pride building decades before, he had absolutely no desire to stay longer in the town than he needed to.

"Not everyone is here. Busayo already left," Bonju pointed out.



Immediately the interment was over, Busayo had gotten into the car that ferried him from Lagos and had zoomed off in a cloud of red dust.

“Are you out of your mind? You’re comparing yourself to Busayo? Busayo that is as good as no longer a member of this family,” his mother retorted, glaring at him, standing stronger than she had only minutes before. “We have to go in there and fight for ourselves, if need be.”

Bonju sighed, his impatience rising. He didn't need a penny of his father's fortune and, the last he checked, his mother now had full ownership of her Ikoyi residence. They didn't need to fight for anything. But knowing arguing with her would be futile, he'd had no choice but to sit with her till the party wound down, and they, alongside the rest of his siblings, were ushered to the great room of the mansion. Seated in the large parlor that Bonju estimated was anywhere between eight hundred and a thousand square feet, with ostentatious, gold-plated baroque furniture and heavy, handmade silk and linen drapes, it was a dichotomy of opulence and obsolescence.

“Good evening, everyone,” Oladipo Kamson, Bankole's lawyer said, offering a plaintive smile. “I'm sorry to have held you back this late. Your father insisted this video be played the same night as his burial.”

“Video?” Babawale asked, chuckling in his amusement and puffing away at what Bonju could now see was a Cuban cigar from their father's stash.

“Yes, a video,” Kamson affirmed. “Bankole updated it every year. It has also been transcribed into a legal will,” he held up a thick binder. “Signed and witnessed by myself and Charlie Ward.”

Without further ado, and with the deftness of someone who had already done a few dry runs with the TV, Kamson inserted a memory stick and flicked the channel until Bankole Adalemo's weathered face appeared on the screen.

“Hello, all,” Bankole grinned, his white veneers lending youth to his face. “When was the last time you all gathered for a movie? I hope you have some popcorn!”

As he burst into his characteristic boisterous laughter, a few people in the room laughed, while some scowled and looked at their watches. Bonju smiled at the screen, a lone tear rolling down his face. He sure was going to miss the man!

Bankole cleared his throat. “Okay, where were we? I decided to make this video in support of my written will, because I don't trust some of you not to contest and drag it for years, until it's useless to any of you seated there. At least, if you can see and hear me say it, there shouldn't be too much to cry about.” He slipped on his glasses as a pile of sheets were handed to him. “I, Bankole Alaba Timothy Adalemo, a legal adult, being of competent and sound mind, do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament and do hereby revoke any and all wills and codicils heretofore made jointly or severally by me. I further declare that this Last Will & Testament reflects my personal wishes without any undue influence whatsoever.”

Bonju's attention zoned in and out as the names of beneficiaries were read, starting with his mother, and then his older siblings, all of whom were bestowed large sums of money, in all three relevant currencies, alongside shares in several blue-chip companies, pieces of property, and jewellery. Babawale, in addition to several houses in Lagos and a Manhattan penthouse, had been left the Ijebu mansion.

“To my son, Busayo,” Bankole chuckled and shook his head, saying to whomever was filming. “I'll bet you a tenner he won't be there when this is read.”

“And how are you going to pay me back, you twit? You'll be dead!” came Charlie's gravelly voice.

The men laughed and bantered for a while, and Bonju started to wonder why that hadn't been edited out of the final video. From the look of impatience on the other people in the room, it was clear they weren't amused either, and not just because it was dragging their precious time. If the look on Babawale's face was anything to go by, he wanted to know what their father had left his prodigal son.

“To my son, Busayo,” Bankole finally continued, before looking up from the sheets. “If you're there, I want you to know that I'm very proud of you.

I'm sorry you and I haven't had the best relationship, and if I could do it all over again, I'd do better."

"Then do better!" came Charlie's voice.

A sad smile formed on Bankole's mouth. "I think it might be a little late for that."

Shrugging, he returned to the sheets, reeling off identical monetary amounts as what he'd left his older children. But, in addition, he left Busayo his most prime property in the States - a Bermuda-style estate in Miami and a mansion in The Hamptons. From the clench of Babawale's face, and the frowns on all four of their older sisters' faces, they weren't pleased by this at all.

"And now, to my son, Gbonjubola."

Bonju's heart lurched at the mention of his name and knew everyone in the room was listening keenly to hear what he would get.

Bankole grinned at the camera. "Bonju, my partner in crime, my wingman, and my best friend..." His voice broke and he removed his glasses, tears streaming down his face. "Thank you for the gift of your time. Thank you for caring for me, coming to see me when you really didn't have to. Sitting with you in the conservatory every weekend, shooting the breeze with you, listening to stories about your stock market and digital currency adventures...I live for your visits. Hearing your car down my driveway every Thursday is the highlight of my entire week."

His voice broke again and there was pin-drop silence in the room as everyone gaped at the screen, the sight of an emotional Bankole Adalemo as rare as a hen's tooth.

"From the bottom of my heart, I thank you. I love you, and I hope you put to good use what I left for you with Charlie." He smiled at the person behind the camera again before he cleared his throat and slipped on his glasses. After reeling off the monetary amounts he had left him, Bankole looked up at the camera, no longer from the sheets. "In addition, I leave to him the terrace house on Bruton Place in Mayfair, the Maidenhead manor, the beach house at Sandgate, the office complexes on 10 to 12 Main Street

in Marina, Lagos, and lastly, the house on Walter Carrington Crescent, Victoria Island.”

“He left him the Walter Carrington house?” Babawale erupted, but Bolu raised a hand to silence him, as their father kept on talking.

“Lastly, at the next Annual General Meeting of Ocedrill Nigeria Limited, I cast my vote for him, Gbonjubola Nathan Aboyowa Adalemo, as replacement for Babawale Abiodun Alexander Adalemo, as Managing Director.”

“What?!” Babawale roared, shooting to his feet, and glaring at the TV like Bankole was seated right there before them. But the old man was back to bantering with Charlie and Kamson.

“This video is for 2020, right?” Bankole was asking the people behind the camera. “So that would be for the 2021 Annual General Meeting?”

“Yes, Sir. February 2021,” came Kamson’s voice.

Bankole winked at the camera. “With any luck, I might be able to come cast that vote in person.”

“This is an outrage! This is nonsense! This is nothing but a senile man talking nonsense!” Babawale yelled, his face red and swollen.

“Watch your tongue, boy,” Auntie Anike, Bankole’s younger sister, scolded.

“But how can he make this kind of statement out of the blue?” Bolu chimed in support of his brother. “Babawale’s position isn’t up for a vote. Not a single shareholder has demanded his removal from the position of MD.”

Kamson raised another pile of sheets. “As Chairman, your father mooted it as a discussion point for the agenda of next year’s AGM. And it will have to be put to a vote.”

“This is a joke! Bonju? MD of Ocedrill? A man who has probably forgotten what a rig looks like? A man who does nothing but party and womanize seven days a week?” Babawale bellowed, advancing towards Kamson like he was going to punch him square in the face. “The old man was clearly senile when he made that video. Shame on you and Charlie for

allowing this! Show me proof of testamentary capacity before I believe any of this garbage!”

“Babawale, calm down,” Bolatitio admonished.

But the sixty-one-year-old Kamson was unphased, not even taking a step back to protect himself. Instead, he brandished another pile of sheets. “All your father’s medical records proving he was of sound mental health. His body might have been weak, but his mind sure wasn’t.”

“So, that’s what you were up to this whole time?” Babawale snarled, turning to Bonju. “Going to lick the old man’s balls to curry yourself favour?”

“Babawale, you better watch your language here!” Aunty Anike shouted, her wide eyes showing she wouldn’t tolerate another slip.

Bonju could only stare back at his older brother, himself also stunned by the turn of events. Not even once had he and his father discussed anything remotely about him returning to Oceadrill, let alone to head the company.

“But there’s no issue,” Bukun said to Babawale. “If you say you have the support of your shareholders, then you should be confident they’ll all vote for you. What’s the big deal if dad is asking for it to be put to vote?”

“Why should I have to defend my position after everything I’ve done for the company? I’ve carried it on my back for the last eight years! Without me, this company would have long sunk!”

“*Lori iro !*” Bolanle, the youngest of the four daughters borne by their father’s first wife, retorted. “You’ve carried the company on your back straight to ruin. Weren’t you the reason it lost Eldabra’s business? And Pan Marine? What about Armada Energy that I heard just dropped Oceadrill from its drilling campaign because of an overstatement of its well drilling capacity? Boy, sit down and stop talking nonsense!”

“And what does this retired drug addict know about running a company?” Babawale threw back at their sister. “You better sit down and save your contribution for matters within your compressed comprehension!”

Chaos erupted as the other people in the room jumped straight into the argument, irate siblings supporting even more irate siblings, incensed aunts first cautioning and then castigating the shouting participants, hurling abuse when their words of reprimand yielded no result. Through the mayhem, Bonju looked on, like someone in a trance. The only people in the room who weren't arguing were Kamson, who stood unruffled, waiting for calm to be restored so that he could continue, and Omere, who sat peaceful and poised, with the smallest hint of a smile on her lips. After almost half an hour of arguing, Kamson resumed playing the video, not caring whether the people in the room had calmed themselves enough to listen. This restored sanity, as all attention returned to the screen, with Bankole rounding up the video with the money and property he was bequeathing his youngest children; twenty-nine-year-old Bukun and twenty-seven-year-old Bidemi.

Once the video came to an end, Babawale rose to his feet and turned to glare at Bonju. "You better not get carried away. The day will never come when I will lose my position to an idle, philandering, mommy's boy."

And with that, he took his wife, Tolu, by the hand and they stormed out of the house. As the room emptied, Omere squeezed his hand in silent felicitation, the serene look on her face a portrayal of the triumph she felt. But he still couldn't see anything to feel triumphant about, certain it was all a big mistake.

Kamson walked up to where he and Omere sat and took a seat beside Bonju. "I hope you don't have plans to return to London anytime soon."

"I leave on Monday," Bonju answered, still feeling like he was having an out-of-body experience.

Kamson shook his head. "No, that's not a good idea. You need to remain in town until everything is settled."

"Tell him!" Omere cut in, throwing her son a sharp look.

"This must be some kind of mistake, Uncle 'Dipo," Bonju protested. "I'm not interested in going up against Babawale for anything. I have no interest in running Ocedrill. Let me leave for London as planned, please. I intend

to take my mother with me and have her recover and relax at the beach house.”

“Take who where? I’m not going anywhere with you!” Omere retorted.

“Gbonjubola, this was your father’s last wish. It’s what Bankole wanted,” Kamson said, his sharp tone silencing them both. Sighing, he added. “Listen, it’s been a long day. You’ve all been through a lot these last few weeks. When we get back to Lagos, let’s find time to talk. Okay?”

Nodding, Bonju realised there was nothing more he could do than comply.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN –

### ONLY FOR A WHILE



*You've got to lie down for a while  
This will pass, its only mild  
You've got to ease your mind  
For a while*

#### **Bonju**

STANDING IN THE MIDDLE of the five hundred square meter open plan space, Bonju decided it would have to suffice as his temporary base, especially with Babawale having made it clear he wouldn't be availed any space in the Oceadrill building, not even in his capacity as a non-executive director. In the days since their return from Ijebu, Bonju had gone from being aghast at his father's unexpected declaration, to actually wanting to take...save...the company from his brother, who was running it like a bull in a China shop. Oceadrill was hemorrhaging business by the day, gaining infamy in the industry while at it. Cynical and sarcastic though their father was, he never made any decisions lightly, and for him to have come to this one, it was clearly something he had thought through.

And Bonju had decided to honour the old man's last wish.

That morning, driving into the premises of the office complex he owned, he could see all the changes that had been made, right from the car park. Getting into the elevator, he was tempted to go straight to Tempo's penthouse studio, to see what they had done with the place, to meet their new staff, to thank Destiny for all his support in the weeks since his father's



death. But instead, his finger hit the eleventh-floor button, not quite ready for any encounter that could...would...unsettle him.

And now, standing there, he decided the space was large enough for both work and living spaces for him. With his stay indefinite, he didn't want to have to remain long term in a hotel like he'd done the last time, and having finally convinced his mother to leave for the Sandgate beach house, for a well-deserved rest, he wasn't keen on staying at her house either.

The AGM was eight months away, and while it was a long time to live like a nomad, if that was what he had to do to get the director and shareholder votes in his favour, then it was what he had to do.

## **Alero**

Bonju's black Mercedes stood out in the car park like the Batmobile Itself.

Her pulse raced as she pulled up her car in the parking slot three spots from it, the realization he was in the building making her heart threaten to burst forth from its rib cage. She'd known he was in the country for his father's funeral but had hoped he would return to London immediately after it, without feeling the need to stop by the station. But if the sleek Mercedes was anything to go by, he was there...in the flesh.

In the elevator taking her to the station's twelfth floor studio, somewhere between the eighth and ninth floors, her finger hit the eleventh-floor button, her curiosity getting the better of her, wanting to see if he was there for a quick inspection of his investment, or if he had decided to put his assigned space to use. When the elevator doors opened on the eleventh floor, and she saw him through the glass walls, standing in the middle of the large space, with crossed arms and a pensive look on his face, she knew she had to, at least, commiserate with him over his loss.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the lift.

## **Bonju**

He turned at the sound of footsteps, and his brows furrowed seeing the person approaching, his eyes on Alero as she walked up to him. Wearing a fitted t-shirt over a pair of jeans, with her hair in long braids, she looked more like the Alero from his past, the one he had fallen in love, and not the vindictive siren who had strung him along with the sole intention of breaking his heart.

“Hello, Bonju,” she said when she was near enough for him to smell her light perfume, with its vanilla and licorice notes.

There was something different about her, and he couldn't tell what exactly it was.

“I...um...I saw your car downstairs,” she stuttered.

And then he knew what it was. Her face had softened, and she had lost the permanent knot between her brows. She had found her peace...by destroying his.

And this incensed him.

## **Alero**

She swallowed, her nerves rising before his piercing gaze, unnerved by his silence.

“I heard about your dad,” she went on, smiling in what she hoped conveyed her sympathy. “I’m so sorry. I remember you being very close to him. I wanted to call you earlier, but...”

Her mind went blank, unable to come up with an excuse for the much-delayed condolences...when they both knew the real reason why.

There was a visible clench to his jaw as he nodded in response. “Thank you.” Adding, as he turned to walk away, “You can see yourself out.”

“Bonju,” she called, making him turn back to her. As his eyes probed hers, she had never seen them that flat and impassive. But there was no turning back. “I’m sorry about the way things ended between us. I behaved

unacceptably and I've been haunted by the things I said to you and your mother. I'm really sorry."

"How gracious of you!" he scoffed.

"Honestly, I am. It's the reason I haven't been able to call or even visit since your father died, because I haven't known how to face you."

"Alero, or rather, *Divine*, I have a very busy afternoon with a lot more important things to think about," he retorted. "Thank you for you for the visit. It was very kind of you. But, if you'll excuse me, I have several phone calls to make."

As he turned away again, headed to the other end of the open plan space, she was filled with a sense of panic, realizing she had made an enemy of him.

And the realization echoed in the pit of her stomach like voices in a hollow cave.

"Can we at least be friends?" she called out, desperately... suddenly... wanting at least that.

## **Bonju**

Her words struck his back like poisonous arrows. Friends? She wanted to be friends?

*"Read my lips, if your hearing has failed you. I will never marry you. You are a vile, sorry excuse of a man, and I would rather slit my throat than be in your company a minute longer."*

Her words from six months before rang in his head and he grit his teeth, his anger threatening to consume him. After what she'd done, after she'd butchered his heart like slaughtered meat, she had the nerve to stand there... and ask for friendship?

Without even turning back to look at her, he walked out through the glass door. He had more than enough to worry about and absolutely didn't need to add her to his already long list.

## Alero

It wasn't until she got to her studio that she realised she was trembling, the short encounter with Bonju having left her shaken. But what had she expected, really? She chided herself as she put her bag down, scolding herself for childishly thinking they could be cordial after what happened between them. Closing her eyes, she reminded herself she had gotten what she wanted, or at least, what she'd thought she wanted. Pining now for friendship was her wanting to eat her cake after already having it...even if she hadn't enjoyed it at all.

She spent the next couple of hours programming the playlist for the rest of the day, after which she called Syf on the phone.

"You'll be flying solo tonight," she said to the DJ who sometimes co-anchored the overnight show with her. "I need to leave now."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I have to get to a client's site, and it might run late," she answered. While she, indeed, had to oversee the designer painting on wall murals for an office she was decorating, she wasn't in the frame of mind for an overnight shift. "I've uploaded the playlist, but you might want to have a quick look at it so you can come up with interesting trivia to share."

"Aye, aye, boss," Syf said. "Take it easy."

If only she could.

Walking into the lift, she hit the ground floor button and shut her eyes as the doors closed and the elevator began its descent, wishing she had known, back in December, that the hole that would be left in her heart would be so much larger than the one she'd been desperate to fill. The elevator stopped suddenly only one floor down, and her eyes flew open, widening at the sight of the person who stood at the lift landing.

Bonju's eyes were just as expressionless as they had been earlier on, and he said nothing as he entered the lift, standing with his back turned to her. As the elevator raced down, it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the

car. Taking in the visual of him from behind, his hitherto closely cropped hair now overgrown into a mini afro, his white linen shirt slightly creased as would be expected after several hours of wear, his six-foot-three frame and perfume dwarfing and enveloping the small box. And the déjà vu she felt was so strong, it literally took her breath away, her mind cast back to him entering her small Ebute-Metta apartment for the first time, and how his presence had both intimidated and thrilled her. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, wanting to drink in more of the thick aroma of his perfume, but the elevator came to its stop, opening onto the ground floor, and he walked out without as much as a backward glance.

Leaving her standing in his wake.

The next morning, she drove into the premises earlier than she typically did, after waking up to a text from Destiny.

***Bonju would like to meet with us by 11am. So, you might need to get here earlier.***

As their partner, a meeting with him wasn't out of place, but it didn't stop a tide of fear from rising all the way from her toes, the sense of foreboding she had so strong, she could taste it. But foreboding or not, she was determined to look her best. Wearing the fitted navy-blue Ralph Lauren blazer Destiny had gifted her for her thirty-eighth birthday in March, over a white camisole, a pair of distressed jeans, and black lug sole loafers, she loosened her hair from the more convenient plaits that had been her recent preference, allowing her curly mane fall down her back. Whatever Bonju had to say, she would look good hearing it.

But walking into Destiny's office in the penthouse a few minutes after 11 o'clock, and seeing him and Bonju already seated, made her lose all the confidence she had left home with, their serious faces not doing much to make her feel better.

"I'm so sorry," she said, taking the seat next to Bonju's, facing Destiny. "I left home at 9am, but there was crazy traffic at the toll-gate."

“That’s okay. I was just telling Bonju you’d probably get here by noon, or thereabout,” Destiny chuckled. “He’s already been here an hour, and I’ve shown him around.”

“You guys have done an amazing job. You’ve exceeded all my expectations.”

There was an edge in Bonju’s voice that diluted his praise.

“But I’ll get straight to the point,” he said, spinning his chair at a ninety-degree angle, such that he was now facing her. “I’m curious about what exactly your operating hours are.”

Alero’s brows furrowed in her confusion, and she cast her brother a plaintive glance, but Destiny was quick to avert his.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you mean,” she finally answered, looking back at Bonju.

“When you stopped on my floor yesterday, if the handbag you were carrying,” Bonju answered, his eyes falling to the brown suede fringed bag at her feet, “that one specifically, was anything to go by, you were just getting to work. It was about 12:35pm, if I’m correct.”

Alero’s shoulders slumped, realizing exactly where he was headed.

“At 3:15pm, you were already headed out,” Bonju went on. “And you didn’t come on air for the rest of the day.”

“I had an appointment. But we have an automated playlist system and I had it programmed all the way through Destiny’s show this morning.”

“You’re the Director of Programming, are you not?” Bonju prodded. “Or at least, that’s what it says in our contract.” He turned to look at Destiny. “Or did anything change?”

Destiny shook his head. “No, nothing changed. She’s the Director of Programming and has done a great job, even with all that she’s juggling.”

“But that’s the thing, she isn’t supposed to be ‘juggling’ anything,” Bonju cut in. “You’re here from 6am every day, aren’t you? From what I gather,

you're here until sometimes midnight. I don't understand how she, as a director, can be pulling in scanty shifts."

"We have very capable DJs who are more than able to hold the fort while I'm away," Alero answered through grit teeth.

"I don't care about your DJs, Divine," Bonju retorted. "I put in my money based on what I heard *you* do when you were still online. You are the livewire of the station, and you should be here a minimum of twelve hours every day."

"Twelve hours?" she exclaimed, not bothering to look at Destiny for support, considering she and her brother had argued about the same thing several times before. "I can't spend twelve hours here! I have other things I do."

Bonju's brows raised. "Other things you do? That wasn't the premise of my investment. I didn't invest based on your being part-time."

This time, she did turn to Destiny, and she could see that the meaning of Bonju's words was not lost on her brother either.

Destiny cleared his throat. "I'm sure Divine would be open to an adjustment that would suit all parties. I'm already here from 6am, so maybe she can get here for noon and leave at midnight?"

Alero bit her lower lip to keep from wailing. Working at the station from noon to midnight would be the death knell to her interior décor business.

"I would actually suggest 4pm to 6am," Bonju said. "So, there's always one of you here, at least for the first year."

Destiny turned to her, and she shrugged. At least, the latter option would give her some hours to commit to her side hustle.

"Great! That's settled then," Destiny beamed, rising to his feet. "I was about to take Bonju for an early lunch at our usual spot." He grinned at Bonju. "Some authentic starch and banga soup for your *aje butter* stomach."

Bonju laughed. "I've probably been eating starch longer than you, bruv."

Alero glared at them laughing and bantering without a care in the world, when her own world had been thrown into chaos.

“Come with us,” Destiny offered, his eyes on her as he grabbed his sports jacket from where it hung by his chair.

“No, thank you,” she said, reaching for her bag as she stood. “I have work to do.”

As she walked out of the office, from the side of her eye, she saw Bonju watching her, and she was ready to wager a bet that his tirade had more to do with what had transpired between them the previous day...and the previous December.

But she was used to rolling with the punches, and in this instance, that was exactly what she was going to do.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN –

### BRIGHT LIGHTS



*I got a hole in me now  
I got a scar  
I can talk about*

#### **Bonju**

“BUT WHAT WAS HE THINKING?” Bonju asked Kamson, as they dined at the upscale Indian restaurant in Victoria Island, Roti Palace, the following afternoon. Kamson had just returned to Lagos after leaving for Ile-Ife to see to his own family affairs, so this was the first time they were meeting after the reading of the infamous will. “I worked as a drilling engineer for less than ten years, and I’ve been out of the game for almost as long. I don’t have the capacity to go up against Babawale, who’s been doing this for almost thirty years.”

Kamson shook his head. “Quite the contrary, your father thought very highly of you. He deeply respected your bullish appetite for stock trading and angel investments.” He reached for his glass of tonic water and took a long sip, quiet for a few seconds before looking back at Bonju. “One of his biggest regrets was not listening to you about the Eldabra campaign eight years ago. The poor decision Babawale made cost the company its biggest client and hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue. Bankole told me several times that he believes that was when Oceadrill’s business took a turn for the worst.”

Well, that was stating the obvious.

The waiter arrived with their orders, chicken tikka masala for Bonju and coconut lentil curry with basmati rice for Kamson. They ate in silence for a while, both men in deep thought.

“Oceadrill would do better with different leadership, and Bankole knew that,” Kamson said, before smiling. “In his ideal world, it would be you and Busayo running the company, not Babawale and Bolu.”

Bonju chuckled at his father’s lofty aspiration. It would be easier to ride a cow to the moon than to convince Busayo to have anything to do with Oceadrill.

“But before we go any further, I need to know how much you want it,” Kamson said, leaning forward on his elbows and holding Bonju’s gaze. “Your father’s wishes are one thing, but whether you want it is another. So, do you?”

If Kamson had asked this question the previous Friday, Bonju’s answer would have been an emphatic no. But in the days that had followed, apart from wanting to honour his father’s last wish, apart from wanting to rescue Oceadrill from the doldrums it had found itself in, his desire to prove a point to everyone who thought he couldn’t, grew in multiples by the second. Holding Kamson’s gaze, he nodded. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Then we need to set the ball rolling,” Kamson answered, leaning back in his chair. “We need to get the other directors and shareholders on board. A casting vote will only make a difference in a deadlock. But if Babawale has more votes in his favour, it will count for nothing.”

Bonju nodded, having already figured that out, but prepared to do whatever it would take to win over the directors and major shareholders.

Kamson leaned forward again. “Gbonjubola, perception is everything. These are very conservative and principled men, so you cannot be seen as this London playboy out to have a good time.”

“But you know that’s not what I am,” Bonju scoffed.

“I know that. Your dad knew that. But these men do not. And trust me when I say Babawale will be more than happy to sell them that narrative.”

“But if these people trusted my dad, surely they’d also trust his judgment.”

“Babawale is selling to them the belief that you took advantage of Bankole’s frailty and the fact he was too fragile to think for himself.”

“Frailty? Fragile?” Bonju scoffed. “You know very well there was nothing frail or fragile about the man, and that his brain was needle-sharp till the very end.”

“But they don’t. Bankole left Nigeria over five years ago, and many of these people haven’t seen him in just as long. So, we must do everything to not only change this narrative but to sell you as the better person to take over Oceadrill,” Kamson answered, before exhaling. “You need to get yourself rooted here. Find yourself a wife or a serious girlfriend, before next year’s AGM.”

“A wife or serious girlfriend?” Bonju began to laugh, but stopped when he saw, from the serious look on his face, that Kamson wasn’t joking. “Uncle ‘Dipo, the AGM is in eight months.”

“Let’s just do whatever we need to, to convince everyone you’re stable and capable,” Kamson said, returning his attention to his meal.

“But you know he’s right,” Bukun said later that evening, as they stood on the verandah of their father’s old mansion on Walter Carrington Crescent.

At his younger sister’s invitation, he had driven there, and, standing there on the balcony, overlooking not only the imposing premises but the Lagos lagoon, memories of visiting as a child flooded his head, memories of him wishing he and his mother lived there with his father, memories of him resenting the new wife and her daughters who did. That the man had decided to leave the place to him was uncanny.

“How come he didn’t give you the house?” Bonju asked, turning to Bukun. “Or Bidemi? You two were the ones who lived with him here.”

“Because you were always the apple of his eye, silly,” his sister giggled, punching him playfully on his arm. “And don’t change the subject. Uncle

‘Dipo is correct. You need to find yourself a nice girl. You’re almost forty, bros! What’s the delay?’

“Meanwhile, when did you become Bolanle’s disciple?” Bonju chuckled, in another attempt to change the subject. “The way you joined forces with those attacking Babawale that night in Ijebu got me all shook!”

“That brother of yours is a bully. Does he know how serious addiction is? Why would he be using Bolanle’s past struggles as ammunition to attack her? There are some things I don’t stand for, and bullying is one of them!”

Still smiling, Bonju held her gaze, a brow raised in his amusement, prompting laughter from her.

“Well, that, and the fact she’s close friends with Taiwo’s mother,” she chuckled. Taiwo was her husband. “My dear mother-in-law would have reversed all the way back to Ijebu that night, if she heard I didn’t stand up for her friend in an argument.”

Bonju chuckled. “I didn’t think you had it in you to go up against the almighty Babawale.”

“To be honest, I was happy for the opportunity. That man is nothing but a big tyrant. You don’t know how thrilled I was when daddy left those juicy *Yankee* houses to Busayo, left you the ones in *Jand* , and then now finished the whole thing by nominating you to take over Babawale’s position. I felt like breakdancing when Uncle Dipo said it.”

“You’re evil.”

“Anyway, stop changing the subject, Bonju. We need to get you a nice girl, especially now that you’re back home for the foreseeable future. I know many lovely women, and it would be my pleasure to fix you up with any one of your choice.”

He shook his head and chuckled. “Whatever you say, Ma.”

Seemingly satisfied, she returned her attention to the lagoon, as a jetboat roared across. “I’ll never get tired of this view. It’s a lovely house, and the sooner you move in, the better.”

“You think I should move here?”

Bukun turned to him. “Dad knew what he was doing leaving it to you. You should move here and start the process of positioning yourself for your role as the Managing Director and Chief Executive of Oceadrill.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

“You should,” she said, sliding open the glass doors leading to the private living room. “We just need to get this place in livable condition.”

Bonju followed her into the room. She was right. In the five years it had been since their father left the premises, having dismissed all his staff before he did, only the longtime and retired butler, Magnus, stopped by weekly to air the house.

“This place is weeping for an update,” Bukun remarked, her eyes sweeping the large living space, with its damask wallpaper, floral-patterned chairs, glass block partitioning, and parquet floor treatments interspaced with heavily patterned Persian rugs. “My mom decorated it and bad taste is still her middle name. Her current house has so much animal print, it legit looks like a zoo.” That the Walter Carrington house had been decorated by someone who hadn’t lived there for over twenty years was even further proof of how dated the place was. Bukun’s face lit up. “I know just the person who can refresh this place. She decorated our house right after our wedding, and she did an amazing job. I’ll give her a call and ask her to come take a look.”

Bonju shrugged, more interested about the corporate politics that lay ahead and less about how the drapes in his father’s old mansion that needed to be changed.

Bukun sighed as she looked up at the crumbling Plaster of Paris ceiling. “But it’s going to take a lot of work. You might not be able to move for another few weeks, at best. Will you stay at your mother’s place or move to a hotel?”

“I’m in the process of fitting a floor at Tempo Plaza. I intend to stay there while I figure things out.” The building had been renamed when Tempo launched.

She nodded and started scrolling through her phone. “I’ll call the decorator. The sooner she starts, the sooner you can move.”

Later that night, as Bonju sprinted on the treadmill at the gym near his mother’s house, he thought about everything Kamson and Bukun had said to him - selling himself to the directors and shareholders, getting rooted, moving into his father’s mansion, getting married. The last thought made him chuckle, but as he pummeled down the running deck of the cardio equipment at the breakneck speed of twelve miles per hour, with Matchbox Twenty’s *Bright Lights* playing from his headphones, his mind drifted to the person he had been trying to avoid thinking of.

Alero.

Since seeing her when she’d walked into his eleventh-floor space, she had been on his mind more times than he wanted. That encounter had left him shaken, but he had been even more so when the elevator door opened later that day, and he’d seen her staring back at him with wide, stunned eyes. It had taken every ounce of his willpower not to turn to look at her as they rode down the lift car, not to pin her to its wall and kiss her small, luscious lips, not to sweep her up in his arms and carry her off into the sunset. But somehow, he had managed not to look back at her, not to kiss her, not to sweep her into his arms, but to walk off to his car without looking back. But putting physical distance had done nothing to keep her from invading his senses, and tuning to the radio for the first time that evening, he’d wanted desperately to hear her voice and had been disappointed when another DJ had anchored the overnight show. It was that disappointment over not hearing her voice, over his even *wanting* to hear her voice that had prompted the impromptu meeting in Destiny’s office the following day.

Slowing the treadmill’s speed, he trotted, sweat pouring down his face and chest, as he remembered how the visual of Alero as she’d walked into Destiny’s office had made him momentarily forget to breathe, her curly, tousled mane taking him several years, several decades back, to a time when he’d thought their love the best thing to ever happen to him. But that girl no longer existed. She’d gone and left behind a cold-hearted predator, a man-eater who was nothing like the sweet and innocent girl he’d fallen in

love with. Ramping the speed of treadmill back up, he grit his teeth as his trot heightened to a sprint.

It was in his better interest to remember just that.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN –

## DON'T DREAM ITS OVER



*Now I'm walking again  
To the beat of a drum  
And I'm counting the steps  
To the door of your heart*

### Alero

TRUDGING THE SHORT DISTANCE from her bedroom to the kitchen, Alero felt like lead weights had been tied to her feet. After getting home at 8am that morning, she'd hoped to be able to sleep until at least 2pm, but just like it happened every one of the three days it had been since her new work hours had taken effect, her eyes had opened on their accord by noon, making it impossible for her to return to sleep, while yet too tired to function properly. Having splurged on a new car, she couldn't afford to move nearer the station, to Oniru like Destiny had, meaning she still had to contend with the forty-five-minute-to-an-hour drive to and from work. And with a schedule as tight as hers, it was an added stressor she didn't need.

She rubbed tired eyes as she made herself a cup of coffee, relying on the hot brew to jump-start her energy and fast track her alertness. And it did. Sitting on the small table in her kitchen, with both hands palming her mug, she shut her eyes as she savoured the taste and aroma of the beverage, welcoming the rising sensation of wellness and serenity that came with it. In truth, Bonju's demand had not been out of place, and if she was still



determined to juggle the radio station with her interior decorating, this was a small price she just had to pay.

Her cup emptied, she was contemplating making another, when her phone rang. Her eyes lit up when she saw the name on her screen, a name she hadn't seen in the two years it had been since she designed her home.

"Hi, Mrs. Adu!" she grinned.

"Divine, two years later and you're still going on with this 'Mrs. Adu' business," the woman on the other end of the line laughed. "My name is Bukun."

Alero smiled, remembering their constant battle two years before, with her client insisting she call her by her first name, and her own constant push back. "It's good to hear from you. Thank you so much for all the recommendations."

"Girl, I should be the one thanking you. People still compliment us on our place when they visit. The stenciled walls you did in our living room...I still have no words."

"I'm flattered. Thank you," Alero gushed.

"Anyway, I have a project for you. I hope your schedule can accommodate it, as it's quite an urgent one."

By this time, Alero was all ears. "Shoot."

"It's an old house. Big mansion, old money, 1990s décor," Bukun added with an audible shudder. "The place needs help. Apart from the obvious update of its tired and archaic décor, it will also need some structural restoration."

Alero nodded, grabbing the sheet and pen she kept in her kitchen, taking notes. "Okay."

"But here's the thing," Bukun sighed. "We kind of have a short window for the project."

Alero smiled. "How short is short?"

"The-owner-is-currently-living-out-of-a-box-in-a-hotel-short."

Alero laughed, remembering Bukun Adu's propensity for exaggeration.

"The owner also happens to be my older brother whom I love to death, so that's another reason why I'm anxious for the place to be done quickly."

"Say less," Alero said, understanding very well the sentiment. "After I have a look at the house, I can let you know what timeline would work."

"Yay! I was hoping you'd say that," Bukun squealed. "The house is on Walter Carrington Crescent. I'll text you the address and maybe we could meet there on Sunday afternoon? Say about 1pm?"

"Can we make it 2?" Alero asked, not wanting to head that way earlier than she needed to, considering her shift didn't start until 4.

"2 is perfect. Thanks, Divine! See you then."

The line disconnected, Alero rose to her feet, no longer needing the rush from another cup of coffee, the phone call having given her all the rush she needed. Invigorated, she returned to her room, grabbed her tablet, and began the process of browsing her music library, in search of what would make up her playlist for the second half of the station's workday.

She was truly living the best of both worlds.

But walking into the station three hours later, the brio and enthusiasm she had left home with evaporated like a pool of water under the hot desert sun when she saw who was standing there in the main studio, flanked by Destiny, Syf, and Soroh, all of them talking and laughing like that was what they did together every day.

Bonju.

He was leaning on a table with his arms crossed, laughing to something Syf was saying, inaudible through the soundproofed booth. In a black V-necked t-shirt over a pair of dark blue jeans and black Converse trainers, he looked more relaxed and less formal than he had on the two occasions she'd already seen him, but the ease with which he was laughing and bantering made her want to be right there in the room with them, made her want to be the one making him laugh like that. He turned at that moment, and as their eyes held, she felt a sharp surge of adrenalin, quickly followed by

lightheadedness, the switch immediately making her feel faint. Quickly looking away, she made her way to her private studio at the end of the hall, hoping...praying...that his interest in the radio station and its operations would only be fleeting, and he would leave for London as soon as was possible.

Because she didn't know how much longer her heart could handle his overbearing presence.

## **Bonju**

He watched her as she walked away, no longer listening to Syf. Having come up to the studio at Destiny's invitation, the informal mingling with the DJs was the kind of stress relief he'd needed. He'd loved seeing, firsthand, the station's setup and equipment, talking to the young and passionate DJs, and the chance not to think about Oceadrill's politicking, even if only for a few minutes. But all it had taken had been one look at Alero, and everything had come undone.

His eyes remained on her as she bounded down the hallway, the oversized patchwork denim jacket she wore almost completely covering her short denim skirt from view, leaving her shapely legs with their toned calves in view.

*"You have a runner's legs,"* he remembered constantly teasing her about how her thick thighs and muscular calves were at odds with her tiny, diminutive frame.

The memory brought a smile to his face, his eyes still on her as she walked, the espadrilles she wore giving her stride a bounce, until she got out of view when she entered her studio.

He stayed with Destiny and the DJs for another hour before returning downstairs to his makeshift apartment. There was truth in the saying that with money, pretty much everything was possible, because in seventy-two hours, he had gotten the place painted and rugged, and after buying an executive table and a few chairs for his work area, a bed for his living space, and fitted the inbuilt cabinets for his personal storage, his temporary

abode was ready for occupancy. It was neither flashy nor luxurious, but rather it was effective and functional, which was exactly what he needed.

And, sitting reclined on a chair that night, his phone connected to his portable speakers, he tuned the radio to Tempo's station. It was 8:50pm, Alero's show was on, and as Crowded House's *Don't Dream It's Over* played, he remembered the same song playing the one time they had ventured as far as Alpha Beach. The air conditioning of his Volkswagen Passat had been faulty and as they drove down Ozumba Mbadiwe Road to connect with the Lekki-Epe Expressway, he vividly remembered the song playing as her hair blew about, unruly and tousled by the wind. With a sheen of sweat on her forehead, she'd sang along to the song without a care in the world. And he'd thought they were going to always be that way; happy, carefree, and in love...forever.

What a fool he had been!

As the night progressed, as he continued to listen to song after song, unable to turn off his radio, enraptured not only by the songs she was playing but by the sound of her voice, all he could do was wonder why it was so hard to tune her out, not only from his radio...

But his heart.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN –

### TIME AFTER TIME



*Flashback, warm nights  
Almost left behind  
Suitcase of memories*

#### **Alero**

THE GATES LEADING TO the large compound slid open, allowing Alero drive in, much to her relief, considering, with the plethora of embassies located there, parking was close to impossible on the heavily secure Walter Carrington Crescent. Pulling her car up, though the grounds were well tended, she could immediately get a sense of what Bukun Adu had talked about. The house that stood on the impressive grounds, stately though it was, looked dated, its symmetrically spaced cathedral-style windows, column-supported porch, and overhanging eaves betraying the fact it wasn't designed or built in the last two decades.

"Divine!" came Bukun's voice from the front door, where she stood waving, her svelte figure in the playsuit she wore making her easily pass for a teenager. "You're right on time."

Alero smiled at her as she walked up to the door, grateful she'd had the presence of mind to check her Google Maps for a traffic update, subsequently leaving home thirty minutes before she'd originally intended. Otherwise, she would have still been sweating her way through the traffic caused by Sunday-after-brunch motorists on the highway.

“You look lovely! I don't think I've ever seen you in a dress before,” Bukun remarked.

And she was correct, the fitted brown jersey dress Alero wore was a marked difference from the t-shirts over jeans or shorts that was her norm on site. But Alero had wanted to put her best foot forward, to make a good first-time-seeing-again-after-a-long-while impression.

“It's a lovely house,” she remarked as she walked inside behind Bukun. Even with the loud wallpaper and patterned fabric furnishing, it was obvious a lot of money had been spent decorating the space. Whistling, she looked up at the exquisite flush mount lighting and multi-shaped crystal pendant lights and gave the wall a rap with her knuckles, nodding in her approval. “And the structure is pretty solid.”

“But it needs to be brought to the year 2020!” Bukun said, with an exaggerated plop in one of the chairs. “I love my mother, but good decorating taste was not her forte.”

Alero smiled and nodded. “The wall treatment will have to change for sure. This wallpaper isn't doing this amazing space any favours. I'm thinking we should do up this room in white and shades of blue. Even though the high walls of the fence don't give a view of the lagoon, it would still be nice to give the room some sort of aquatic vibe.”

“You can see it from upstairs, though. The lagoon.” Bukun beamed. “The view from the family room, and even the master bedroom, is breathtaking. Maybe we could remove the windows here and have an all-glass slide, like there is upstairs.”

“No, we could work with these,” Alero answered, walking towards the arched casement of the windows. “They give the room a very classic look. We could just lose the tinted glass, as it's keeping away the amazing natural light from outside. It will be a nice juxtaposition with everything else we could do here, like wooden floors maybe, velvet sofas, and lots of mirrors and glass-top coffee tables to bounce off all the light.” She turned to Bukun. “Does your client have kids?”

“Not yet. But hopefully soon.”

“Okay, maybe not too much glass then,” Alero said, making her way into the living room, descending the two stairs that took her to another level. “This room is huge! You’d never be able to tell because of how dark the walls and windows make it.” Her eyes landed on a large white piano, tucked in a corner of far side the room. “And why wouldn't this kind of beauty take center stage?”

“After my mother left, my old man decided to move her piano completely out of sight,” Bukun chuckled. “He sent it to its own naughty corner.”

As Alero approached the grand musical instrument, a wistful smile formed on her face the way it always did anytime she saw a piano. Though a larger and more sophisticated one than her father’s had been, it still brought back very cherished memories.

“May I?” she said, looking imploringly at Bukun.

“Sure. You play?”

Alero shrugged, taking her seat before the piano. “Only a few pieces.”

Caressing the keyboards with her fingers, they soon started to glide across the keys in the one melody, the only melody that was her love letter to the one who had tried to get her to master the machine.

## **Bonju**

He heard the melody the minute he was out of his car. His brows furrowed as he walked into the house, the unmistakable tune getting louder with each step he took.

Surely, it couldn't be.

Walking into the living room, seeing her back as she sat at the piano, playing the same tune she’d played in his mother’s living room, he was teleported to that afternoon many years before, sitting there next to her as she played that same piece, transported to how enraptured he had been by the look of concentration on her face and the ease with which her fingers had danced along the keyboard, playing the melody like it had been

composed in her soul, like a language that needed no translation, a gift that came from her fingertips to the world. And the nostalgia he felt was so strong, it smothered him, the memories from that night so intense, he could smell the lavender vanilla potpourri of his mother's living room, and the cocoa butter body cream of the girl playing the piano next to him. He could feel the brush of her soft skin on his arm, and the dampness of her curls, still wet from the shower they had just shared, on the side of his face.

And now, twenty-one years later...here she was.

*"The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book One ,"* he said, when she stopped playing. "Bach."

Alero spun around with enough speed to cause her whiplash, and her eyes widened in her surprise when she saw him.

"Hey, I didn't hear you enter," Bukun said, walking up to embrace him.

He hadn't even seen his sister standing there.

"I told you I'd stop by," he answered, his eyes still on the woman seated in front of the piano. "Fancy seeing you here, Alero."

Bukun's eyes widened as she looked from him to Alero, whose face was now flushed, and her hand flew to her face to keep at bay the smile that was forming, in comprehension of who her decorator really was.

"Hello, Bonju," Alero finally said, rising where she sat and turning to face him.

Holding her gaze, he didn't know whether to walk her out of the house or pull her into an embrace, his warring emotions oscillating between wanting never to set another eye on her...and wanting her so much, it was killing him.

"Alero! Wow! I had no idea you were Bonju's Alero," Bukun grinned at Alero. "It's such a small, small world." With a twinkle in her eye, she turned to her brother. "It's a wonderful coincidence and will make the process even more seamless. She has some fantastic ideas we were just discussing..."



“That won't be necessary,” he cut in. “I'd rather find a decorator myself. Uncle 'Dipo has promised to send me the contact information of a few he has used.”

Alero smiled, just as the grin disappeared from Bukun's face.

“Uncle Dipo?!” Bukun retorted. “Are you kidding me? I thought the plan is to update this place, not make it even more dowdy.”

“Hasn't your shift started?” Bonju asked Alero, riled by the smile on her face.

That was enough to wipe it off.

“Apart from having my playlist already cued, I have an hour before it does,” she retorted, glaring at him, before turning to Bukun. “Thanks so much for the consideration. I appreciate it. Do enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Divine, please wait!” Bukun called out, as she walked after Alero.

Bonju watched them both as they disappeared from the living room and as they appeared in his peripheral vision through the tinted windows. He turned to get a better look, not having recognized the red Kia Soul parked outside as Alero's. His eyes remained on them as they talked, unable to look away, drinking in the sight of Alero in the dress that hugged every curve of her body, in a mahogany brown that made her skin look almost porcelain and her freckles more pronounced. She laughed at something Bukun said, using one hand to keep her hair in place as the wind blew it in all directions.

How did she get more beautiful every time he saw her?

She soon got into her car and as she drove out, the smile on his sister's face disappeared as she stalked into the house.

“What was that about, Bonju?”

“I'll get this place fixed, don't worry about it,” he muttered in response, fishing for his phone as a distraction.

Bukun observed him for a few seconds, before her characteristic large smile returned to her face. “So, that's the girl that scattered Aunty Omere's Christmas Party?”

Bonju glared at his sister, before returning his attention to his phone. But she wasn't in any way deterred.

"I've never seen you like this. You still like her," she declared, still smiling. "Listen, I don't know why what happened between you two happened, but Divine is a lovely girl. If you're still feeling her the way it appears you are, then why don't you two have another go at it? Taiwo and I broke up at least five times before we..."

"There's not even a ghost of a chance of that ever happening again," he scoffed, turning around to leave. "I'll sort this place out when I'm ready. So, go home to your husband and kids and stop wasting your Sunday afternoon here."

He walked out without waiting for her to say anything in response and proceeded to drive around aimlessly for over an hour, stopping at a patisserie to buy snacks he didn't need, then a sports bar to watch a game of basketball he didn't even enjoy, anything to keep from returning to the place of abode he happened to share with the radio station.

By the time he walked into his converted apartment, it was past 8pm. Throwing his car keys on the table, he sat on one of the executive chairs, the only sound coming from the muted honking of cars on the busy Adeola Odeku Street. Unable to control himself, he reached for his phone and hit Tempo's app icon. The sound of George Benson's *Kisses in the Moonlight* soon filled the room, and, almost as clear as day, he could see the *While the City Sleeps* album it was from, with the young George Benson looking on pensively and fading into the album's all-black cover, one of the ten albums from his third haul from Alero's father's rich collection. Rubbing his eyes, he groaned inwardly, wondering when she would stop haunting him the way she did. But as much as he hated to admit it...

He knew he couldn't fight it forever.

## Alero

"*Kisses in the Moonlight*, the second song off George Benson's 1986 *While the City Sleeps* album," Alero spoke into her microphone as the song faded

out, the *On Air* sign overhead lighting up as the audio console came on. “A lot of his jazz fans weren’t crazy about this album, and it didn’t do as well as his previous ones, but for us music lovers, it’s still a favourite.” Yep, it was definitely one of Eyitemi’s favourites. “Before that was *Higher Love* from Steve Winwood’s 1986 *Back in The Highlife* album, and *Sledgehammer* from Peter Gabriel’s *So* album, also from 1986. But now, we’re going to take it a few years earlier to 1983, with one very dear to my heart, *Time After Time* by Cyndi Lauper. As always, it’s all about that nostalgic sound, so keep it locked here on Tempo 92.5, playing all the music you love.”

Pushing up a slider on the audio console to amplify the song’s sound, the *On Air* light went out as she flicked off the microphone button. As the song played, she reclined in her chair, replaying that afternoon’s events for the millionth time, wishing she had at least asked for a name, wishing she’d known the brief had anything to do with Bonju, wishing she’d declined meeting Bukun Adu from the get-go.

Wishing the sight of Bonju still didn’t make her knees go weak.

There was a rap on the upper glass partition wall, and swinging her chair to see whom it was, her gaze remained on the person standing out on the hallway, unfocused, unsure if her mind wasn’t playing tricks on her. But when he tapped it again, she realized it was no hallucination. Leaning forward, she pushed the door release button, allowing him push it open and step inside.

“I was waiting for that to go off,” Bonju said, pointing at the *On Air* sign.

She could only nod in response, her brain frazzled and trying to comprehend why he was there.

“Still your mother’s favourite song?” he asked, a tentative smile on his face as he pointed at the studio monitor speaker.

She stared at him for several seconds before a smile formed on her face, his impeccable memory of the finest of details no longer surprising her. She remembered telling him how, after her father serenaded her mother with

that song at the surprise party he had thrown to celebrate her thirty-second birthday party, it had become the woman's favourite.

"I think Mr. Clarke has made her more of a Timaya and Duncan Mighty fan these days," Alero chuckled.

Bonju smiled. "Mr. Clarke is her...boyfriend?"

"Her husband of almost twenty-one years."

He nodded, the reminder of how long it had been since they had first fallen in love...and parted...standing there between them.

"Bonju, I didn't know it was your dad's house..." Alero began to say.

He raised a hand to silence her. "No, you don't need to explain. I acted like a jerk this afternoon, and I apologize."

There was more silence before she smiled again. "So, Bukun is one of your bratty little sisters you despised so much back then?"

He laughed as he leaned on the wall. "Well, she's not so little anymore, as you can see. She's still bratty though." His laughter faded and he shrugged. "And also my closest sibling now, believe it or not."

"Well, I'm glad it worked out for you and your siblings in the end."

More silence.

"Are you volunteering at this year's summer camp?" Bonju asked, clearly in want of something to say.

"Not as much as I would have liked," she answered, truly feeling regretful. "There's so much going on here, I won't have the time to. But Destiny is DJ'ing their Prom again, though."

"Did you hear Bioye and Abolore are getting married?" he asked. "In October."

She let out a squeal, delighted by the news. She had heard the two had hooked up the previous year but had also heard they'd broken up shortly before he'd gotten a high-profile Government job and moved to Abuja.

Hearing they were not only back together, but also getting married, was music to her ears.

There was more silence until he cleared his throat.

“Listen, Alero, I really don’t want there to be bad blood between us,” he said. “I get it. You wanted to hurt me like I hurt you...”

“Bonju...”

“No, please let me finish,” he cut in. “I was a jerk to you, and you returned the favour. And that’s cool.” He paused as his eyes held hers. “But I’d really prefer that we get rid of this negative energy between us. I’m going to be around for a while and I’d rather the air is clear between us.” He extended his hand. “So, friends?”

She accepted his hand and smiled. “Friends.”

Shaking his hand, her skin tingled from the feel of his. As happy and relieved as she was that they had cleared the air, she couldn't help but feel wistful about the label, unsure if she would be happy being just his ‘friend’.

“I better leave you to it,” he said, pushing himself off the wall. He had already turned to go before he turned back to her. “About the house, are you really as good as Bukun says?”

She grinned. “Better.”

“Alright then, show me what you got,” he grinned back. “I’ll let her know you two are free to proceed.”

She was still smiling long after he had left the studio, excited about being back on the project, and just as tickled-pink as she’d been after his visits to her Ebute-Metta apartment in what had seemed like a lifetime ago, a period she’d wanted to forget for the longest time.

But which now left a broad smile on her face.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN –

### WALK



*Do you remember the days  
We built these paper mountains  
Then sat and watched them burn?*

### Alero

BUKUN OFFICIALLY COMMISSIONED HER for the renovation project, and, after engaging the best of the contractors she usually worked with, the extensive restoration project began. Having only seen the living room the first time she visited, by the time Alero returned and saw all the work that had to be done in all the other rooms, she realized she had grossly underestimated the amount of work that would go into it; the walls that would have to be stripped or torn down outright, the ceilings that would have to be re-plastered, the floors that would have to be re-laid, the kitchen and bathrooms that would need to be refitted, not to mention all the furniture, in pretty much every room, that would have to be replaced. It was a whole lot, but she was determined to deliver the restored house before the end of September. This saw her burning the candle from both ends, resuming at the site as early as 9am despite her 6am clock out from the station. But she didn't mind this, instead she was buoyed by the thrill of seeing the changes take shape before her eyes.

The weeks also brought along amiable co-existence with Bonju. For the first time in years, the thought or sight of him didn't come with any waves of anxiety or dread, but instead, she found herself looking forward to the

sightings of him driving into the premises, hanging out with Destiny in his penthouse office, or stopping by to banter with the DJs in the twelfth-floor studios. Every day, she awoke with excitement over the mere prospect of running into him, her heart flying into her mouth every day she drove into the car park and saw his car parked there, butterflies fluttering in her stomach when he waved or smiled hello. It felt like a schoolgirl crush, like she had been teleported all the way back to 1998, but unlike the previous year, 2019, this time she wasn't going to fight her emotions.

## **Bonju**

Cordial though they now were, he knew better than to allow himself get too close. So anytime he walked by Alero along the hallway, bumped into her in the car park, or shared an elevator with her, he made certain to keep his distance, not going any further than a polite smile or wave. Because he knew that, with her, he was still crisscrossing landmines that could detonate at any time, the foremost of which being his growing desire to pull her into his arms and kiss her the way he'd once been able to. And that was something he could never allow repeat itself again.

So, instead, he occupied himself with the rounds of visits he and Kamson were making to board members, one by one. While some of them were receptive to the idea and eager to honour the late Bankole Adalemo's choice for a new Managing Director, a few of them had expressed, in no uncertain terms, their unwavering support for the incumbent, Babawale.

The last Sunday in July, they visited Dogo Jatau, the acting Chairman of the Board, at his Banana Island home. Seated beneath the large crystal chandelier overhead the Chinoiserie gloss lacquered table in a dining room that screamed opulence, Bonju and Kamson made small talk with Dogo and his wife, Asabe, as they feasted on the spread of roasted lamb, fillet steak, baked scallops, grilled potatoes, and goat cheese soufflé, discussing banal topics from politics, football, to the alarming crash of the naira and the diminished spending capacity of ordinary Nigerians. That was Kamson's *modus operandi*, to relax people with idle talk, before honing in with the real agenda of soliciting for support for Bonju.

But Dogo beat him to it.

“Last year, when you dropped by the board meeting we held in, I believe it was Q1, when that boy made the presentation, you knew that field couldn't produce more than two wells, didn't you?” Dogo asked, peering at Bonju over his glasses, as they tucked into the sumptuous meal.

Bonju smiled, but said nothing, having decided he didn't have to put down Babawale to garner support for himself.

“I could tell you knew,” Dogo went on. “Especially when you asked the young man to clarify. Why didn't you make known your reservations? Why didn't you put your foot down?”

“You're aware of what happened the last time I tried to assert my position, Sir,” Bonju answered, picking his words carefully. “I didn't want to undermine Babawale's authority.”

“But you should have. It would have saved Oceadrill the embarrassment of coming up short with its client, and yet another lost drilling campaign.” Dogo leaned back in his chair, his eyes still on Bonju. “You had the chance to step in and do something, but you chose not to, because of what? A chip on your shoulder?”

Kamson cleared his throat. “Dogo, we all know nothing Bonju could have said in that room would have swayed the decision that day. Babawale's mind was already made up before he even walked into the room. It's that kind of unilateral, impulsive decision-making that made Bankole lose confidence in him. Bankole sorely regretted not listening to Bonju during the Eldabra debacle. We all know that was the beginning of Oceadrill's downward turn. The company is still yet to recover from that. Add to that all the several drilling campaigns we have been dropped from, and the recent embarrassment with Armada Energy when we couldn't even properly ascertain how many wells they could get from a single field. Can you imagine that kind of pedestrian mistake?” He sighed and shook his head for effect. “It grieves me to hear people question Bankole's lucidity. Trust me when I say he didn't come to this decision lightly.”



Dogo shrugged and reached for his glass of sparkling water. "I spoke with Bankole in May, and his mind was still as sharp as a steel trap. What I don't understand is why he didn't say anything about his plans to me directly."

"If I were to guess, he probably hoped to do so himself. You watched the video. He had plans to attend next year's AGM," Kamson sighed again. "But it was not meant to be."

Bonju took a sip from his glass of punch, trying not to laugh over Kamson's theatrics. But amused though he was, he knew he couldn't have made it through a tenth of these visits without the man.

"Anyone ready for dessert?" Asabe asked, steering the discussions away from office politics. "It's a choice of vanilla rice pudding, lime sugar madeleines, or cinnamon creme caramel cakes. Or all of them, if you so desire."

"Asabe! Your second name should be 'Assassin'," Kamson exclaimed in mock exasperation. "Because you kill me with food anytime I come here!"

This time, Bonju did laugh, and as he did, a young woman walked into the room. Upon seeing her, Dogo's eyes lit up.

"Ah, you made it!" he beamed.

"I told Hasana you'd strangle me if I didn't make it home for lunch," the woman answered, taking her seat, her curious eyes landing on Bonju. "Mom, that cinnamon crème caramel doesn't sound like a bad idea."

"Gentlemen, this is my daughter, Jummai," Dogo introduced. "You've met her before, haven't you, Kamson? She accompanied me for the company Christmas Party in...2017?"

"2015, dad," Jummai answered, laughing, her eyes still on Bonju. "That was the last time I was home."

As Kamson complimented Jummai on how much more beautiful she was than when he'd last seen her, and Dogo lamented about being abandoned for five whole years by his beloved daughter, Bonju kept his eyes trained on the plate of lime sugar madeleines a uniformed server had just placed before him, wanting to avoid any further eye contact with the woman seated

opposite him, recognizing the look of interest she had in her eyes. Flirting with the Acting Chairman's daughter was the very last thing he wanted to do. With large, expressive eyes, a small button nose, full lips, and angular cheekbones, combined with her glossy, honey-coloured skin and svelte figure, she could pass for a runway model. But attractive though she was, he wasn't in the mental space to contemplate anything beyond that friendly lunch meeting.

"So, are you also new in town?" she asked, her question directed at him.

He was forced to look up. "Yes and no. Yes, I returned about seven weeks ago, after my dad died. But no, I grew up here and have been back several times over the years, too many times to be considered a newbie."

"Oh, nice," she said, smiling at him. "Maybe you could show me around sometime?"

Bonju managed a small smile, before turning in response to a remark Kamson had made about his plateful of dessert, echoing his uncle's sentiments about how wonderful everything tasted, and requesting a serving of the pudding and crème caramel cakes, even though he had no interest in eating an extra crumb. Thankfully, Jummai got the message and didn't make any more conversation.

"You know you could do a lot worse than marrying someone like her," Kamson remarked, as they walked to the Cadillac Escalade they had been chauffeured in.

"Someone like whom?"

"Don't act the fool, Gbonjubola. Dogo's daughter was brazenly flirting with you, but you chose to act like a world-class *ode* !" Kamson said, getting into the car. "Marrying her will yield more for us than all these door-to-door salesmen visits we have been making."

"Uncle 'Dipo, quit playing," Bonju laughed, also getting into the car, amused that his uncle still believed his getting married would be the magic ticket to assuming his rightful position.

"Bankole wouldn't have slacked on that opportunity, I can tell you that!" Kamson chuckled.

“Yeah, and look where that got him,” Bonju sniggered.

They spent the thirty-minute drive to Victoria Island making jokes about the late, great, Bankole Adalemo’s insatiable appetite for women, and when they got to his father’s Walter Carrington house, an excited Kamson turned to Bonju.

“I can’t wait to see this place restored to its former glory,” he said, the high walls making it impossible for him to see any of the progress inside.

Bonju nodded, his sentiments echoed. He’d made sure not to stop by the house in the weeks it had been since the Sunday he had, but several weeks in, he was curious to see just how far the restoration had progressed.

“How are you going to get back to your place?” Kamson asked.

“Relax, Uncle. It’s only a ten-minute walk.”

He waved as the Escalade pulled away, and as the gates slid open for him, his phone vibrated with a text message.

***I mean it. I’d really like you to show me around.***

***Jummai***

Shaking his head, he slid the phone back into the pocket of his fitted black kaftan, wondering who the guilty party was that had given Jummai his number; Kamson, her father, or maybe even her mother. Nope, he was absolutely not going to bite.

Loud banging noises made him look up, and his mouth parted at the sight of his father’s once-stately home now turned into a construction site. With scaffolding covering the entire building, several openings where windows had once been, and workmen dangling from a ladder leaning on the structure, it was chaotic.

And it was even worse inside.

Stepping over a pool of sludge where the floor re-tiling had commenced, he made his way to the living room, where the extensive but intricate Plaster of Paris ceiling was being re-plastered. He smiled, seeing Alero standing between two workmen, showing them something on her tablet which she

held with one hand, just as she gesticulated animatedly with the other. In a simple black t-shirt over a pair of dark blue jeans and dusty Doc Marten boots, he could tell she had been there a while. Looking up, her eyes lit up when she saw him and she dismissed the men she was talking to, before walking over to him.

“Hi,” she beamed. “I had no idea you’d be coming.”

“I wanted to see how things are going,” he said in part grimace as he looked around. “To be honest, I thought I’d see some more progress.”

“Oh, we’re totally on course. There was a whole lot to do, and we spent the first couple of weeks just stripping things down. But everything is going as planned and we’re one hundred percent on schedule. You have my word that you’ll be able to move in before the end of September.”

Her enthusiasm was enough to make him smile. “If you say so.”

She glanced at her watch and her eyes widened. “I know my shift starts in less than thirty minutes, but I promise I’ll be at the station on time.”

“Relax, Alero. I’m not the Time Police. Even if you don’t get there on time, I trust that you’ve got things covered,” he chuckled, before his smile waned. “I was wrong to have demanded such Draconian hours from you. You’ve trained good DJs, so you really don’t have to be there round the clock.”

She regarded him for a few seconds before a smile formed on her face. “Thank you. That takes a huge load off my neck.” Looking at her watch again, she grimaced. “I better run, though. Depending on how fast I drive, I just might be able to get to there on time still.”

“May I ride with you?”

It was out of his mouth before his brain even had a chance to process it, but when she nodded in agreement, it was suddenly the thing he wanted the most.

## **Alero**

He was back to wearing his old perfume.

After their first dinner after their reunion weekend, when he had smelled just like he had as a teenager, over the course of their short-lived relationship the previous year, he had switched to a heavier, earthier cologne. But as they made the short drive to their Adeola Odeku building, the aromatic notes of his old Calvin Klein perfume reminded her of the many times they'd been in his car, its citrus accords reminding her of the many times she had burrowed her face in his neck, drinking in his very essence. And she found herself wishing he would remain in the car with her for longer.

Once in the premises, as they made their way into the building, she watched with fascination as he exchanged familiar pleasantries with everyone from the guards, to the lift operators, to the occupants of the other floors in the building they occupied, nothing at all like the snobbish and conceited boy he had once been. And, settled in her studio, as she replayed the evening's events in her mind, she wondered if she had been wrong about him all along, and not only about his teenage arrogance. Last year, he had been unable to convince her he hadn't deliberately hurt her, but now, she wondered if, perhaps, she had been wrong about even that.

Cuing on East 17's *Deep*, she smiled at the memory the song invoked. Reaching for her phone, for the first time since the previous December, she sent him a text message.

### ***Remember this song?***

She bit the inside of her mouth in anticipation, one part of her kicking herself for being so brazen, and the other waiting with bated breath for a reply. So engrossed was she with staring at her phone that she jumped when it began to ring.

"Are you kidding? Of course, I remember."

She grinned, reclining back in her seat. The East 17 single had been one of several CDs he had bought for her that Christmas of 1998, as he tried to introduce her to a new sound of rock.

"*I don't get this song, Bonju,*" she had remarked back then, not at all impressed as they'd listened to it in his car. "*Is he singing, rapping, or*

*what?"*

*"You need to calm down and listen to the lyrics," he had laughed. "The song is deep! Pun intended."*

"I see the song eventually grew on you," Bonju said, breaking through her reverie.

"It did," she answered, the smile on her face widening, relishing the sound of his voice. After a brief pause, she added, "Has anyone told you how different you are from the brat you once were?"

"I don't know whether to consider that a compliment or an insult," he chuckled.

"It's definitely a compliment, Bonju. You're a different person. Back then, everyone knew you to be this cocky guy who talked down on people, with that thick British accent of yours."

"I still talk the same."

"True, the accent is still there, but..." she hesitated, before continuing. "You're different now."

Silence followed and she struggled with something, anything, to say to fill the void, desperate to engage him so he wouldn't get off the phone.

"I know you pre-program your playlists, but is it possible to make a request?" he finally asked.

"Of course. You want to hear a song?"

"No, I want you to listen to one. It's a song by Foo Fighters. It's been out about nine years, but it really struck several notes with me when I first heard it."

This piqued her interest.

"What song by Foo Fighters?"

"It's called *Walk*, from their *Wasting Light* album. 2011, I think is when it was released," he answered. "Let me know what you think. Have a lovely evening."

Thirty minutes later as the song played, she listened to the lyrics, mulling over every line.

***Learning to walk again. I believe I've waited long enough. Where do I begin? Learning to talk again. Can't you see I've waited long enough? Where do I begin?***

And she couldn't help but wonder if, every time he'd listened to it, he had thought about her.

About them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY –

### PURPLE RAIN



*I never wanted to be your  
Weekend lover  
I only wanted to be  
Some kind of friend*

#### **Alero**

TWO SUNDAYS LATER, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, the entire Tempo 92.5 team, excluding Soroh, who'd stayed back to start the first half of Alero's show, went out for drinks to celebrate six successful months on air. Ten minutes after they got there, Bonju joined them at the rooftop bar, and as they all laughed and made merry over cocktails and platters, Alero couldn't believe how markedly things had changed between them - her and Bonju - in not just the last two months but, indeed, the last year. In the four months of their time together the previous year, she had been on edge the whole time, constantly guarding her heart from succumbing to his charm, constantly reminding herself how horribly he had hurt her in the past. But now, as the group laughed as Bonju teased Syf about the fake Timex watch the young DJ had been hoodwinked to buy, Alero had never felt so comfortable in his company. Not even over the period of their short teenage romance.

As the evening wore on, Destiny suggested they play a gratitude game, picking the name of someone in the group and saying things they liked about them, a game he suggested to stop himself from getting emotional



with a long speech. Having the first go at their makeshift ballot box, Destiny smiled when he unfurled the piece of paper he'd picked.

"I couldn't have picked a more appropriate person," he grinned, turning to Alero. "My dear sister...Divine...Alero. Thank you for sharing your love for our father's music with me. Thank you for showing me it was okay to love him, even if I resented him for choosing you. Thank you for leading me down this path that has been my life's journey." His voice broke and he shook his head. "See why I didn't want to make any speeches?"

"You're actually supposed to say what you like about her, not thank her for things that happened centuries ago," Onyeka remarked, prompting laughter around the table.

"I can't even follow the rules of my own game," Destiny laughed along, wiping his tearing eyes. "Okay, okay. Divine, even though you have a thick coconut head, and are stubborn as fuck, I love that you're loyal to a fault and that I can depend on you for just about everything. You're not only my sister, you're my right-hand man and best friend. Thank you for riding this radio journey with me."

Syf was next, and he picked Destiny's name. "My big boss, Destiny," he grinned at him. "You've been my inspiration since I was a little kid. I fell in love with radio from listening to you on Fantasy 95.7. But the day I walked in for my interview and saw you seated on the other end of the table, I was scared I'd be let down, scared that my fantasy of you would be just that - a fantasy. I love that you didn't turn out to be just a fantasy. I love that you are so much better in person. I love that you're not just my boss, but my mentor, my friend, and my big brother." His voice broke and his eyes started to water as well. "Thank you!"

More emotional tributes followed, as Bash picked Onyeka, Onyeka picked Nabila, and Nabila picked Bash. When it got to Alero's turn, the butterflies in her stomach fluttered as her eyes landed on Bonju's name. She glanced across the table at him, and his brows raised in silent question, to which she nodded and smiled.

"Things I like about Bonju," she said, still smiling as she looked at him. "I like that you are dogged and determined. I like that you believed in this

radio station, even when some of us didn't." She paused, remembering the ugly exchange from the previous December that could have scuttled everything. "I like that you are kind and generous to a fault. I like that you know every cleaner, every janitor in our building by name. I like that you give Mr. Saviour such ridiculously large tips, even though it's common knowledge the man blows it all on local gin." She paused as the others laughed, the others but Bonju, who was still holding her gaze. "I like that you remember everything...every single thing. I like that you smell exactly the same." A small smile played on his lips prompting hers to wane. "I like how you make people feel special just by smiling at them. You're a good guy, Bonju, and I like that I can finally see that for myself."

Their eyes continued to hold after she had finished speaking, until Bonju was nudged to pick the last obvious name, Syph's.

He cleared his throat and smiled at Syph. "My man, Syph. I like your spunk, your drive, your spirit. I like how you have stood up for your grunge music, and how you fought for your own afternoon slot. I like how deep your knowledge is about that genre of sound that's even older than you. I like how you always know the right thing to say to diffuse any situation. I like how you always crack me up, even when you're not trying to. So, keep being you." He cleared his throat as he looked at Alero. "I know we only get to pick one person but indulge me to pick a second."

Destiny's eyes flitted from him to his sister, and he nodded. "Sure, go ahead."

"Alero Divine Gboye," Bonju smiled at her. "I like...no, scratch that...I love how passionate you have been about music since that first day I met you almost twenty-two years to the day this August. I love how you turned your passion into a whole establishment." He paused. "I love how you wear your heart on your sleeve, how with you, things are either black or white, and never, ever, grey." He chuckled. "I love how you still always walk like you're in a hurry. I love how you still talk with your hands. I love how your eyes still speak a million languages. And I love that I'm able to sit here and tell you all the things I love about you."

His eyes held hers even as chatter and banter returned to their table, and looking at him, it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room.

And she could hardly breathe.

## **Bonju**

“Gosh, is that the time?” Alero said to nobody in particular, looking at her watch and breaking their gaze. “I better run. I promised Soroh I’d return, so he can join you guys.”

Bonju looked down at his half-eaten plate of grills, doing everything to keep from watching her as she grabbed her handbag, said her goodbyes, and walked away from the table. But he was unable to keep his eyes off her that long. Disappointed she was leaving, he looked up as she made her way across the packed bar, her hair secured in a topknot, leaving her freckled back exposed in the lime green, linen, halter neck jumpsuit she wore.

And he knew, without a doubt, that he still loved her.

## **Alero**

Back in the privacy of her studio, having released Soroh to join their merrymaking colleagues, Bonju’s words replayed in her head.

*“And I love that I’m able to sit here and tell you all the things I love about you.”*

Did he still love her? Even after how she had hurt him only months before? Thinking about how heady his gaze had made her, how out of breath she was just thinking about it, she knew the real question was what her own feelings for him were. But even as the question resonated in her head, she knew it was a redundant one. Her feelings for him were no longer in question. The truth was, they never had been. Not even when she’d been hatching the foolish revenge plot the previous year. She’d fallen in love with him the first day he’d set foot in her mother’s house to borrow her father’s albums. She’d been in love with him even when she tried to make

herself believe she hated him. And, dear Lord, she was falling even deeper in love with him now.

Prince's *Purple Rain* started to play, and she rose from her sitting position, wanting to stretch her legs. But turning around, she saw Bonju standing out in the hallway, watching her from the glass partition, his face impassive. Pressing the buzzer, she released the latch on the door, allowing him to push it open.

"You left them?" was her unnecessary question.

"Yeah, I didn't want to drink too much. Busy day tomorrow." He smiled and opened his mouth as if to say something, but decided against it.

"What were you going to say?" she prodded. "And before you ask if I remember this song, I do."

Back then, using her neighbor Daso's video club membership, they'd rented Prince's 1984 classic, *Purple Rain*, and as Prince, aka The Kid, stood silently on stage, holding his white guitar, before breaking into the legendary performance of the same titled song, Bonju and Alero had been electrified by the rendition of the song they both knew so well. It was the day he'd come begging after the awful encounter at his house with his mother, and, even with her grandmother rustling in the kitchen nearby, the atmosphere in the small living room was thick with their mutual longing for each other.

And as he stood there in the studio, only inches away from her, she wanted him even more than she had the last time they'd heard the song together. He put his hand on the wall behind where she stood, closing the distance between them, and as he stood before her, so close she could feel the warmth of his breath on her skin, more than any time before, she wanted him to kiss her.

## **Bonju**

Her lips parted in silent invitation, and just like that afternoon when they were teenagers, when he had desperately wanted to kiss her, even with her

grandmother only feet away, he wanted to cover her lips with his...and kiss them till they were numb. Staring at her pert mouth, he wanted to trace their entire outline with his tongue. He wanted to caress it, ravage it, worship it. And if her dilated pupils were anything to go by, so did she. She was his for the taking.

But he wasn't about to get sucked back into that rabbit hole.

So, he pulled away.

## **Alero**

Her heart sank in her disappointment as he stepped back, her hopes dashed.

“I better leave you to it,” he said to her. “Like I said, I have a busy day tomorrow.”

She plastered on a smile as she nodded, wondering if she had misread his signs all evening, wondering if she had misunderstood the look she had seen in his eyes only seconds before, wondering if she had gotten it wrong all along.

“Take care,” she croaked as he pressed the release button by the door before pushing it open.

She remained standing there long after he had left, feeling like she was sinking in quicksand.

## **Bonju**

He walked down the hall as fast as his feet could take him, racing down the flight of stairs that separated his floor from hers like he was being hunted down by demons. Because in a sense, he was...by the demons in his heart that had sworn allegiance to this woman whom loving had proven perilous, not just once, but twice. And he would be a fool to dive headlong into it a third time.

Back in his apartment, he reached for his phone, desperate for a distraction. Opening his messaging app, he clicked open Jummai Jatau's two-week-old message and typed in response.

***Anytime you're ready, I'm at your service.***

His phone vibrated with a reply almost immediately.

***Hey, stranger. I was beginning to think Uncle Dipo had given me the wrong number. What about tomorrow? Are you free for lunch?***

He nodded as he typed back. ***Lunch sounds good. I have a meeting at noon, but we could meet at 2pm?*** He backspaced the last few words, remembering she allegedly didn't know her way around town, ~~***but we could meet at 2pm***~~ ***but I could pick you up for 2pm?***

***2pm sounds great. I can't wait 😊***

Setting his phone down, he stripped off his clothes and padded over to the makeshift bathroom for a shower.

It was time to exorcise himself of Alero Divine Gboye.

Permanently.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE –

### COPACABANA



*They were young  
And they had each other  
Who could ask for more?*

#### Alero

SHE WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING with a smile on her face, the memory of Bonju - their near kiss, the feel of his breath on her face, and the intensity of his gaze - making the butterflies in her stomach flutter. Yes, he had changed his mind about the kiss at the last minute, but the encounter was all the confirmation she needed that this thing she was feeling, he was feeling as well. It felt like a fresh start, a clean slate, a brand new day...and every single such cliché there was in the book.

With Barry Manilow's *Copacabana* playing on loop, she sang out loud as she made her coffee, shimmying as she fried sausages and an omelet, the large grin she'd been wearing all morning broadening every time she remembered Bonju's words from the previous evening...and the way he had looked at her. One thing she now knew for sure was that, more than anything else, she wanted him back. They needed a do-over, not the kind of do-over that involved melancholy or revenge, but one where they would be able to relive the beautiful love they had once shared.

After a shower, she stood before her closet, pondering over what to wear that would be both practical for her visit to the renovation site, but alluring enough to grab Bonju's attention. Her eyes landed on a green silk tie and

dye bustier jumpsuit, and even though she knew it wasn't at all a sensible choice of attire for the first part of her day, she was more than willing to suffer the inconvenience of hopscotching over workmen and equipment at the site just to get Bonju to look at her with the same kind of desire he had the previous day.

Because if he did, if he as much as threw her even only a glance, she was ready to fall right back into his arms.

Like the last twenty-one years had never happened.

## Bonju

Sitting with Jummai at the French-style bistro in Ikoyi for their lunch date, Bonju kept a smile on his face as he struggled to pay attention to her stories of living the single life in Manhattan, and why she had made the decision to move back to Nigeria. In a short fuchsia pink shirtdress that not only complimented her smooth brown skin but also showcased her endlessly long legs, she was even more attractive than he remembered. But attractive though she was, she was struggling to retain his attention, very reminiscent of the women he'd dated in the past. But his distraction was even worse now, no thanks to the face, the voice, the very essence, of the woman that had taken possession of his mind from the moment he'd opened his eyes that morning. Smiling and nodding as Jummai spoke, he found himself mentally teleported to the rooftop lounge from the evening before, replaying the things Alero had said to him, the visual of her glossy, parted lips assaulting his memory.

"Oh wow!" Jummai exclaimed after he told her about his trading and investing activities, her dark brown eyes twinkling above bronzed cheekbones. "That's so fascinating. Very *Dragon's Den* ! I knew there was more to you than just living a life of leisure off your dad's money."

Bonju chuckled. "That seems to be the general notion."

"My dad says your personal worth could even be more than your late father's," she said, contradicting her earlier display of ignorance about what



he did for a living. “He says your dad was really proud of everything you’ve achieved.”

A wistful smile formed on Bonju’s face as he nodded. That, his father sure was.

“My dad thinks you’re extremely smart and understands why your father chose you,” she shrugged as she took a spoonful of her chocolate ganache tart. “But he’s also very loyal to Babawale and isn’t convinced he should lose his position as Managing Director.”

“Even after all he and Bolu have cost the company?” Bonju asked, an eyebrow arched in his surprise.

Jummai shrugged again. “He says these things happen in business.” She winked at him. “But I’ll be happy to put in a good word for you.”

“That’s not what this is about, Jummai,” Bonju quickly said, because it really wasn’t. He’d reached out to her because of his desperate need for a distraction, and not because he needed her to sweet-talk her father in his favour.

Even though, in truth, that wouldn’t hurt either.

“I had a really nice time,” Jummai said, looking at him with wide, expectant eyes as he drove her home. “Let’s do it again soon?”

The prospect didn’t at all excite him, but he smiled at her and nodded. “Absolutely.”

She continued to talk, but her words faded as a Natalie Imbruglia song played from the radio. He grit his teeth, wanting to switch stations or even turn the radio off altogether, but was unable to, assailed by the strong memory of listening to that same song, *Torn*, as he and Alero combed all the shops down the Ojuelegba and Itire Road axis of Surulere, in search of school shoes for her. He could see the two teens they had been very clearly in his mind’s eye, not yet lovers but no longer just friends, their mutual attraction growing with each visit. It had rained that morning, she had been wearing a red cardigan over an old pair of jeans, and he could remember looking at her as she crossed off the items they had bought from her list, her brows furrowed in concentration as she tried to balance her accounts, and

thinking she was the most beautiful thing he had ever lain eyes on. He shook his head slightly and even rubbed his eyes, trying to erase the vivid memory. He was with another woman, for crying out loud. He had no business still carrying in his heart an old flame from his childhood.

An old flame that had refused to be extinguished.

“Are you okay?”

He turned to Jummai and plastered on a smile. “Just a little headache. Is it okay if I turn this off?” He pointed at the radio.

“Sure,” she answered, patting him on the thigh in what was supposed to be a demonstration of sympathy as he did that. But when she left it there, it was evident it hadn’t quite been such a sympathetic gesture after all.

“Call me,” she said as she got out of the car, blowing him a kiss.

He waved in response as he drove off. Though a beautiful and charming woman, she hadn’t quite been the distraction he’d hoped for. As he exited Banana Island, he was tempted to turn the radio back on, but he knew better than to do that. He also knew better than to return to the station at that time, 6:45pm, when Alero would be there. For his self-preservation, he needed to stay as far away from her as he possibly could.

“Hey, man,” he said to Emeka, calling him on the phone, as he drove down Bourdillon Drive. “You home?”

“No, I’m pulling an all-nighter at the studio,” his friend answered. “Erin and the boys are still away for the summer, so I decided to take advantage of being alone to finish working on my exhibition pieces for Milan.”

Even better.

“Would you mind company?” Bonju asked. “I could bring some boxes of pizza and a six-pack of beer?”

“Music to my ears! Throw in some suya and you’ll be my VIP guest.”

Bonju laughed. “I’m on my way.”

As he navigated his way to Glover Court to buy the suya, before heading to Awolowo Road to pick up the beer, he was more than happy for the

opportunity, any opportunity, that would keep Alero from being at the forefront of his mind.

## **Alero**

Her heart sank in further disappointment when another glance out of the window showed Bonju's parking space still empty. After spending an hour at the site, where she had done everything to dodge any splash of paint or grime on her outfit, she'd been excited driving into the premises, her pulse racing in anticipation of seeing him again. She'd been disheartened not seeing his car, and also when she'd stopped the elevator on the eleventh floor and found the whole place dark. She'd held out hope for his quick return and, even better still, his coming to seek her when he did. Even though she was freezing in the air-conditioned studio, she'd refused to wear the denim shirt she'd brought along. Every half hour, she reapplied her lip-gloss, not wanting to look anything but perfect when he did come. But as one hour became two, and then three, and then four, as it became clear he wouldn't be making an appearance that day, her enthusiasm crashed so low, it took everything in her to muster the needed excitement for her show.

And driving out of the premises the next morning, her stomach sank when she saw that his parking space was still empty, which meant he hadn't slept in his apartment. Her stomach sank lower as her mind conjured images of where he probably was, what he was probably doing, and whom he was probably doing it with.

Hissing under breath, now with her thick denim shirt over her impractical jumpsuit, she chided herself for allowing her imagination run wild. He was very likely back on the streets, back in the arms of the many nameless and faceless women men like him cavorted with. He might have loved her once...but that was clearly over.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO –

## DON'T WANT TO BE A FOOL



*Whenever a fool's in love  
He doesn't know he's to blame  
He's caught in the game*

### Alero

SHE LASTED ONLY a few days.

Having already seen his car parked, on her way up to the studio the following Friday, she pressed the eleventh-floor button. When the lift door opened, as she stepped out of it and headed to his door, as she saw Bonju through the glass doors, hunched over a pile of paper on his table, her heart raced so fast, her breathing could barely keep up. It was her first sighting of him since Sunday, and even with his brows furrowed in a frown as he examined the documents in his hands, seeing him again was sending alternating waves of excitement and anxiety through her body. Pushing the door open before she could balk and change her mind, she walked into the room and was immediately hit with the heady scent of his perfume. He looked up when he saw her, and she raised her hand in a tentative wave.

“Hey, neighbour,” she flashed what she hoped was a ‘neighbourly’ smile. “I haven’t seen you in a few days, so I thought to come check on you.”

A small smile formed on his lips. “That’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

“I see you’ve been busy,” she gestured at the pile on his table. “That’s a lot of paper.”

“I’ve been reviewing Oceadrill’s - my father’s company -projects over the last eight years,” he answered, shrugging. “Its Executive Management has made a lot of questionable decisions over the years, and I want to see just how many there have been outside of those I already know of.”

“How questionable is questionable?”

“Questionable enough to have cost the business tens of millions of dollars. Possibly even more.”

She let out a low whistle as she craned her head for a better view of what he was looking at, but was unable to make anything from the data on the sheets before him. “No wonder you look so stressed. I don't think I’ve ever seen you so tense.”

He looked up at her. “I look tense?”

“As tense as wire pulled taut from both ends.”

He smiled and shrugged. “It’s a lot of information to take in, and I want to know as much as I can before the meetings I’m scheduled to have next week.”

As curious as she was about why the information was so important to him, she decided to instead go for the opening she’d seen.

“It doesn't look like you’ve had more than a few hours of sleep,” she said, walking over behind his chair and placing her hands on his shoulders, rubbing them in a massage. “It will surprise you how refreshed you’ll feel after even just a short nap.”

“A short nap?” he scoffed. “I haven’t shut my eyes in an afternoon nap in over three decades. I was probably four years old the last I did.”

“I know some yoga techniques that will have you fast asleep in no time.”

“Nothing short of a heavy dose of sedation would do that,” he scoffed.

“Try me.”

He observed her for a while, with a raised brow and a smirk on his face. "Okay, you've got ten minutes."

"I'm going to need you to come join me here," she said, walking to the spacious area facing the windows. Dropping her bag on the guest chair, she slipped off her sandals and lay on the floor, patting the spot next to her.

Still with a smirk on his face, he rose to his feet and took off his Oxford loafers. She watched him as he did, taking in all six feet and three inches of him, in a white cotton shirt rolled up at the sleeves, tucked into a pair of tan chinos.

"This is called the Waterfall pose," she said, bringing up her knees to her chest and extending her legs in a ninety-degree angle from her body. "You don't have to keep your knees straight if you don't want to. It's all about relaxation."

Chuckling, he lay beside her and did the same. "Nothing relaxing about suspending your legs in the air."

"Trust me, it's known to provide a calming effect to the nervous system."

"I didn't know you were a yoga aficionado," he said, a teasing lilt in his voice.

"Shhh! It's not going to work if you keep talking."

They held the position for a few minutes before she switched to a sitting position, each hand holding its corresponding foot. He did the same.

"This is called the Sleeping Butterfly. Take a deep breath," she inhaled deeply. "And move your body forward, like you want your forehead to touch your feet."

"What?!"

"You don't have to, of course," she laughed. "Just go as far as is comfortable for you. And then hold when you find your sweet spot."

They both moved in unison and when his head halted a few inches away from his knees, she halted her own movement there as well, holding it with him for a few minutes, both of them completely silent.

“Hold it right there. Don’t move a muscle,” she said, rising to feet. “Do you have any pillows?”

“The door behind my table leads to my bedroom,” he answered, still in position.

Even though she knew he’d made a living abode from the space, walking into the makeshift bedroom, with its disheveled bed and the lingering smell of cologne and aftershave, made her feel heady, taking her decades back to his teenage bedroom. But though only a fraction the size that one had been, without the clothes and shoes strewn around, this was no boy’s room. And she found herself wanting to wrap herself in those sheets he had used, to inhale even deeper his smell, to pretend she was lying in his arms...

“Alero, my neck is beginning to hurt!”

Startled back to sanity, she grabbed two pillows from the bed, made her way back to the office area, and placed them before him.

“Now kneel,” she said to him, standing as she watched him obey her instruction. “Gently lean forward to one side,” she positioned him that way, propping up a pillow below his stomach. “And place your head here,” she guided his head to the other pillow, placing it on its right side. “Relax into both pillows, let them hold your weight, and just relax. Remain in that position for about ten minutes, and then we’ll switch to the left side.”

“And what’s this position called?”

“The Supported Child’s Pose,” she answered. “And remember, no talking. You need to set all thoughts free for this to work.”

“I hear you,” he scoffed.

She walked to the other guest chair and sat, her eyes on her watch’s timer. Exactly ten minutes later, she walked over to get him to switch positions, but smiled when she saw that he had fallen asleep. Only a few minutes in, and his face had already lost the strain it previously held. Watching him, undisturbed, she remembered gazing into that same face so many times during that magical Easter weekend the many times she had awoken before him, and the memory warmed her heart. She wanted so badly to touch that face, to trace its outline with her fingers, to assume a similar crouching

position close enough for her body to touch his, for their breath to be intermingled as one. But the last thing she wanted to do was disrupt his state of rest.

Putting his shoes neatly by his table, she picked up her handbag, set the door to a jam lock to prevent anyone from gaining unauthorized entry while he slept, and gently made her way out.

## **Bonju**

He was disoriented for some seconds when he opened his eyes, until he was assailed with the memory of being positioned into random yoga poses. Pushing himself to his feet, he stretched, unbelieving of how quickly - and soundly - he had slept. A quick glance at his watch showed that, at 8:40pm, he had been asleep for over five hours. But greater than his amazement about his first afternoon nap in years, was his anger with himself for melting like butter in Alero's hands...again.

Picking up his shoes from where they were stacked by his table, his nostrils flared as he walked to his bedroom. When she'd entered the office that afternoon, after getting over the initial surprise, his intention had been to just engage in polite conversation, but the minute she'd crossed over to the back of his chair and put her hands on his shoulders, the first time she would deliberately touch him in over twenty years, he had lost any ability to reason. The waves of bliss and pure ecstasy that coursed through his entire body as her soft hands kneaded his shoulders had turned his brain to mush, hypnotizing him to her every word. As he undressed, he grit his teeth as he remembered how he had obeyed all her instructions like a robot under the stimulus of a remote control. *Lie here. Kneel there. Crouch this way.* He'd been like someone under a spell.

So much for his decision to keep her at bay.

Standing under the shower, all he could remember was her touch, her smell, and the way her eyes had twinkled at him as she'd smiled. In the months of their sham of a relationship the previous year, he could count on one hand how many times she'd smiled. Her eyes had always been shuttered and



she'd never deliberately touched him. But no matter how different she appeared to be now, he couldn't afford to fall again.

After his shower, and dressed in a t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, desperate to fill the silence in the room, he turned on the radio. But as her voice filled the space, he realized too late that probably wasn't the best option.

“And that was Chicago’s *You’re the Inspiration* , from their fourteenth studio album, *Chicago 17* , released in October 1984,” Alero’s voice resonated from his surround speakers. “A little bit of trivia about this song. Peter Cetera and David Foster originally wrote it for Kenny Rogers, but he decided to pass on it, a decision I’m sure he sorely regretted. Anyway, Peter decided to record it with Chicago, and the rest is history.” She laughed and the melodious sound prompted a smile from him. “Up next is *Don't Want to Be a Fool* from Luther Vandross’s 1991 *Power of Love* album, and then *Liberian Girl* from Michael Jackson’s 1987 album, *Bad* . It’s a rainy evening in the city of Lagos, and, as always, we’ve got you covered with good music. My name is Divine, and this is Tempo 92.5.”

As Luther Vandross sang about a fool in love, Bonju shook his head and smiled as he returned to his earlier seating position at his desk. He’d already been a fool one too many times for Alero Gboye. And he wasn't about to let there be another time.

## Alero

9:12pm.

That was what the overhead clock flashed. It had been almost six hours since she’d left him and she was sure he would have awoken. Her eyes fell on what she had taken delivery of a few hours before; an orange frosted cupcake in a clear, plastic box. She’d ordered it as soon as she returned to her studio from Bonju’s makeshift apartment, her time with him the motivation she’d needed to do what she should have done since his return.

Let him know she wanted him.

Making sure her playlist was cued, she got up, grabbed the cupcake box, and walked out of her studio. Taking the stairs one flight down, a flash of lightning illuminated the stairway, and she knew then that even the elements were working in her favour that night. Yes, she'd messed up months before, but that night, she was going to make him remember how magical things between them had once been.

Getting to his floor, she tapped on the glass door. When he looked in her direction, she smiled and braced herself through the rapid pounding of her heart.

"I had no idea the door was even locked," he said as he opened it.

"You were sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to risk you getting burgled," she said, her lips upturned in a smug smile as she walked in. "Emphasis on 'sleeping so soundly'. You know, I wish I were a betting girl. What was it you said about only napping under heavy sedation?"

"Don't go claiming any credit. I was extremely tired. I was up almost all night."

"Mmmm, well, believe whatever you like," she smiled, holding up the cupcake box. "I got you this."

The smile cleared from his face as he looked at it, and she knew he remembered.

"Orange, because you don't seem like the pink type," she said, her eyes holding his as they both went down a twenty-one-year memory lane. "Go on, taste it," she urged. "It's chocolate and peanut butter."

He bit through the frosted confection and the smile returned to his face. "With salted caramel? Crust Alchemy? They're still in business?"

"Yes, with salted caramel," she answered, her eyes still holding his. "Yes, from Crust Alchemy. And, yes, they still are."

## **Bonju**

As he looked at her, he could feel all his resolve crumble like a pack of cards, worsened as Soundgarden's *Black Hole Sun* began to play. She didn't break her gaze, and he knew none of it was a coincidence - not the cupcake, not the song, and maybe not even the rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning from outside.

"This song," he said. "You remember."

It wasn't lost on either of them that it wasn't a question...but a statement.

"I never forgot," she answered, her eyes still holding his with an intensity that communicated a million words.

Taking a step closer, she took the remaining cupcake from his hand, threw it in the bin by his feet, and encircled his neck with her hands, her wide eyes never leaving his in what had started off a question, and then became an invitation.

Leaning down to her, his lips took hers and she melted into him in a kiss that was both deliciously familiar and exhilaratingly different. She tasted of chocolate, peanut butter, and salted caramel, and he didn't know if it was all her or him, but what he did know was that he wanted to taste it...taste her... forever. Reaching for her waist, he lifted her off her feet. In that moment, their lips parted, and he saw his desire mirrored in her eyes. This was further, a whole lot further, than they had gone the last time they were together but if she was feeling what he was, there was no way they could stop.

There was no going back now.

## **Alero**

The desire she felt was almost alien to her, a feeling her body had fought off for so many years. But as he held her in his arms, looking at her with enough heat to ignite the whole building, she knew without a doubt that she wanted him.

Wholly.

Completely.

Cupping his face with her hands, she resumed their kiss as he held her in place with his hands around her waist, her legs still straddled around him. It was in that position that he carried her to the adjoining room and to his bed, and as their passion raged, as he undressed her and she undressed him, as she beheld the toned and ripped body of a man and not the boy she remembered, as his hands and lips explored her body with the kind of dexterity his younger self could never have imagined possible, as he worshiped her body with his own, as waves of ecstasy quickly overtook the fleeting pain she felt, she knew one thing for sure.

She never wanted to let go ever again.

Afterwards, as they lay in silence, she turned to look at him, and saw that his eyes were closed. From the shallow heave and fall of his chest, she could see that he wasn't asleep. Like her, he was probably trying to process what had just happened because, as amazing as it was, there was still a lot of figuring out to do.

"I need to dash upstairs quickly," she said, pushing up to a seating position. "Just to be sure the early morning ads are on cue to roll on schedule."

He simply nodded, his eyes still closed.

Rising to her feet, she got dressed, slipped into her sandals, and made her way out of the apartment.

Determined to return as quickly as she could possibly manage.

## **Bonju**

He shouldn't have slept with her.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he groaned inwardly. Kissing her, touching her, smelling her, holding her, feeling her velvety smooth skin against his, had taken him back several years, reawakening a raging desire time had started to turn to a faded memory. But there was nothing faded about the

lingering taste of her, the burning imprint her hands had left on him, or the way his body had responded to her like it never had with anyone else.

And he knew he had only succeeded in taking himself several, several steps back.

Several years back.

Rising to his feet, he got into his tracksuit bottoms, stalked to the radio modem from where The Human League's *Human* was playing from the apartment's surround speakers, and switched it off, sending the place into silence. He didn't need to listen to any music that would further cloud his already clouded mind.

Alero Divine Gboye was a drug he could not afford to get intoxicated by ever again.

The push of the door alerted him of her return, and looking at her as she approached where he stood by his bed, came with a sharp intake of his breath. Still wearing the denim shirt and leggings she'd been in all day, there was a flush to her face and tousle to her hair that gave away the throes of passion she...they...had been in only minutes before. She smiled at him, and he could feel every iota of any restraint he was hoping to exercise, completely dissipate. She had him completely under her spell.

"Miss me?" she asked, walking to him and placing both hands on his chest as she gazed up at him with those brown eyes that had always been his undoing.

"This isn't a good idea, Alero," he said, but already knowing he was fighting a losing battle. "You and I...this isn't a good idea..."

But he was silenced by her kiss.

## **Alero**

Standing on tiptoe, with her hands cupping his face, she grazed his lips with hers, in a touch that was barely a kiss.

"Do you want me to stop?" she asked.

Her pulse raced seeing the hesitation in his eyes and how his jaw tensed beneath her touch, but her anxieties faded as he tilted up her chin and kissed her with more fervor than he had all evening. Maybe even ever. And as they dissolved into a world where only the two of them existed, his every touch setting her nerve endings on fire, all she wanted was for it to last forever.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE –

### ONE NIGHT



*Though you're the kinda girl  
Who likes to  
Take her time with love  
I'd gladly wait  
Forever for you*

### **Bonju**

BONJU STRUGGLED TO STAY FOCUSED as Kamson rattled his usual campaign speech as they met with another longtime board member, Marvin Iwenofu, at the Ikoyi Club the following afternoon, trying to keep all thoughts of Alero at bay. But the more he tried, the more they flooded his mind, vivid memories from the night they had spent together, an experience like none he'd ever had with anyone before.

“Come over to Walter Carrington later,” she had said to him as she prepared to return to her studio in the early hours of the morning. “We’ve made a lot more progress since the last time you were there.”

“I have a very busy day,” had been his non-committal answer. “But we’ll see.”

“Well, I’ll look forward to it,” she’d smiled, leaning up to kiss him, supporting herself with her hands on his chest, the combined feel of her lips and hands sending shock waves through his body.

All he'd been able to manage in response was a stiff smile as he stepped away from her touch, angry with his body for reacting like a teenage boy after a first sexual encounter. He wasn't a teenage boy, and he'd slept with way too many women to be responding to her that way. And, considering what had happened the last time he'd offered her his heart, he knew it wasn't in his best interest to take her up on her invitation.

But sitting through Kamson and Marvin's animated discussion, all he could think about was how quickly the meeting could be over.

"You don't even need to say much to convince me. I'm already Gbonjubola's apostle!" Marvin exclaimed emphatically to Kamson. "One of my biggest regrets is not believing the young man when he tried to prevent us from that Eldabra disaster years ago." The rotund septuagenarian shook his head and clucked his tongue. "Babawale is a mad man we have allowed to run amok and ruin the business. Because of all the goofs Ocedrill has made, companies that were nowhere near it have taken over the drilling campaigns of all the majors. Even Chinedu's company has more business than we do!" Chinedu was Ocedrill's former head of drilling who had started his own company. "I am so happy Bankole decided to take action before his death, and you can be one hundred percent certain of my vote next February."

It was their first definite yes, and Kamson grinned at Bonju from where he sat across the table. While most of the other board members they had visited now appeared open to the idea of Bonju taking over from Babawale, none of them had been willing to openly throw their hats in the ring just yet. So, Marvin's statement of support was very welcome indeed.

"That was a very good one. I'm certain we can get most of the people we've already spoken to on our side," Kamson said, as they walked to the car park. "I hear Dogo is leaning strongly in your favour. That reminds me, did you ever take his lovely daughter out to show her the town?"

It took everything for Bonju not to roll his eyes. Show her the town indeed! From the little he'd gathered from taking Jummai out for lunch, she probably knew more of Lagos than he did.



“Anyway,” Kamson continued with a dismissive wave of his hand, knowing he was barking up the wrong tree, Bonju’s lack of interest in Dogo Jatau’s daughter as clear as day. “This old man needs a break. I was waiting for this last meeting with Marvin, and I’m so glad it went well. Come Monday morning, I’m off to join my family in Marbella. Let me enjoy these last weeks of summer, at least.”

Bonju smiled and nodded. After the last few months they’d had, if there was one person who deserved a holiday, it was his Uncle ‘Dipo.

“How is your mother doing?” Kamson asked, as they approached his car. “Still in England?”

“She’s loving the beach house. She keeps scolding me for not letting her know before how lovely it is,” Bonju chuckled. “Every time we agree on a date for her return, she pushes it forward.”

“Let Omere relax. She needs it after the chaotic experience of the funeral.” Kamson remarked, turning to Bonju. “Are you riding with me? Or did you drive?”

Bonju clicked his car key and the chirp from his Mercedes was the response to Kamson’s question. “I want to drive by dad’s house.” So, he was definitely going there then. “The decorator says the place is almost ready, and I’d like to see what they’ve done with the place.”

“I’d have come along if I weren’t so tired. Some other time,” Kamson sighed, patting Bonju on the shoulder. “You should also try to get some rest while I’m away. By the time everyone is back in September, it’s going to be very hectic. Are you sure you don’t want to go back to London and cool off a little?”

“Erm, I have a few things that need my attention here,” he answered, shouting down the voice in his head yelling Alero’s name as one of the things that needed his attention. Perhaps even the only thing.

He waved as Kamson’s car roared out of the car park, before getting into his, driving out on to Club Road and hitting Kingsway Road. Traffic was light, and several times during the nine-minute drive, he was tempted to just go elsewhere. It had been a long time since he’d seen Nonso, and he

contemplated calling his former classmate to see if he was available for drinks. Or he could go to see Emeka, who was still putting finishing touches to his exhibition pieces. Anywhere, really. Anywhere but where the woman who controlled him like a puppet on a string would be. But rather than drive straight on to Akin Adesola Street in the direction of Nonso's Eko Atlantic bachelor pad, or turning right on to the Lekki Expressway to Emeka's studio, he made a left turn down Ozumba Mbadiwe Drive, cutting into its last right turn to Walter Carrington Crescent.

Parking his car in the compound, the changes were already evident. The building wore a fresh coat of white paint and its tinted windows had been replaced with clear glass. The front door was still cordoned off, so he made his way around the house to the back. Unlike the last time he was there, there were no workers milling around, save for two men who walked past him in the direction of the gate, bowing in greeting as they did. Inside the house, his eyes widened as he took in the new outlook of the lobby, with its wood paneled floor and marbled wall. Running his hand along the wall to see if it was wallpaper, he whistled at the unmistakable solid, smooth, cool feel of marble. It was like he was in a different house.

As he approached the living room, the sound of Irene Cara's *Flashdance... What a Feeling* got louder and louder. Walking in, the updated look of the once familiar space took his breath away. Gone was the gaudy wallpaper and in its place were stark white walls, with only the front facing wall painted a blue so light, it could pass for white. Spaced around the wood floors were small Persian carpets in different shades of blue, a trend the crushed velvet sofas also followed, in shades of blue from navy all the way to turquoise. The glass tops of the coffee tables were interspaced with what looked to be seashells and corals, and if the blue and green ombré drapes that were being hung where anything to go by, the ocean-effect theme had been translated to perfection.

And speaking of the drapes.

He turned to the left of the room where the music was coming from, and saw Alero standing on a ladder, holding a curtain rod in place as a man drilled in a bracket. She had her back to him and was rocking her body to the music as she helped with the set up. Wearing a tank top over the

skimpiest of shorts, as she danced, oblivious of his presence, he smiled, no longer quite as interested in looking around the house, remembering the very first time he'd seen her, when he had noticed her at the summer barbecue, and the déjà vu was so strong, it felt like the twenty-two years it had been since that Sunday afternoon had been suspended in time. But as his eyes dropped to her rounded hips, firm thighs, and the hint of the curve of her butt cheeks where the shorts stopped, his feelings were of a more carnal and far less nostalgic nature.

"Good afternoon, Sir," the man drilling the bracket greeted when he noticed him.

Alero spun around and her eyes lit up as she grinned. "You came!"

"Irene Cara," he remarked, tilting his head in the direction of her phone, from where the music was playing. "With those itty-bitty shorts and tank top, you look just like her in the music video. All you need is to get drenched in water for the look to be complete."

"You think?" she grinned, climbing down the ladder. "It's my default song anytime I work. It gets me all pumped."

He nodded and looked away, his eyes scanning the room again. "This place looks amazing. Unrecognizable."

"It's not all done," she said, walking ahead of him and pointing towards the center of the room. "That's where the piano is going to be when it comes back. It's being retuned and its exterior overhauled. And we're installing a wall aquarium over there."

He had to force his eyes away from her bottom as it rolled beneath her tiny shorts. "I see you're taking this ocean theme very seriously."

"The final look is going to be awesome, you'll love it."

"All done!" the man installing the curtain declared, as he descended the ladder.

And truly he was, the last of the lightweight linen curtains draped over classic white shutters in place.

“Thank you, Oga James,” Alero said to the man. “So, on Monday, we’ll fix the day blinds in the study and guest bedroom downstairs. Oh, and the rattan blinds in the kitchen.”

“Yes, Ma. See you on Monday,” James said, before bowing in deference to Bonju. “Goodnight, Sir.”

“Bye, James,” she said, before looking around. “What about Wahab and Ime? They’ve gone?”

“If you’re referring to two guys wearing hardhats and dungarees, I walked past them on my way in,” Bonju stated.

She shrugged. “I guess that means they’ll finish the utility room on Monday then. I decided to give everyone a break tomorrow. It’s been a stressful few weeks, and they deserve a day to rest. But we’re almost done, really. Only a few finishing touches left.”

“So...rattan blinds?” Bonju asked.

“We had them painted in the kitchen’s new red and white theme. You’ll love it,” she smiled, turning off the music and putting it in her pocket. “But the rooms upstairs are all done. Can I show you?”

“By all means.”

He walked behind her as they made their way to the spiral staircase at the end of the living room, lit with pendant lights in varying heights, with tall indoor plants rising from the stair well, giving the feeling of walking through an outdoor forest.

“Is this real marble?” he asked, palming the glossy wall on the side of the stairs as they approached the first floor.

“Something like that,” she winked.

Taking him to the bedrooms on the first floor, rooms that had once belonged to his stepmother and sisters, as he couldn’t remember how they’d looked before, he had no reference for comparison. But reference or not, walking into each one, he could see why Bukun had been insistent on hiring Alero for the restoration project. Done in neutrals of brown and grey, each room

was exquisite, with Roman shades, Savoir beds with hand carved headboards, and plush carpeting that sank in their feet.

“Tiles are so hard and sterile for sleeping space,” she said, as they walked out of the last room on that floor. “It might be old fashioned, but I’ll always be a carpet girl.”

Bonju nodded in agreement as they walked up the stairs to the second level, his eyes dropping to her rounded bottom as she climbed in front of him, no longer fighting his urge not to look.

“And this is the master bedroom,” she declared, spreading wide her arms with pride as they walked into what would be his room.

“Your father’s bed was in such good condition, I almost didn’t want to change it,” she said. “But Bukun insisted you’d want a new one, so we sent the old bed to your family house in Ijebu. I hope you don’t mind.”

He said nothing in response, awed by the room, done in his favorite shades of greys and blues, with a large Savoir bed with a hand-carved Carrara marble headboard, silver detailing, and deep midnight blue velvet paneling. But the best part about the room was the floor-to-ceiling glass partition that had replaced the concrete wall that led to the balcony, giving the room an unfettered view of the Lagos lagoon from behind sheer white drapes.

“This is just as solid as concrete,” Alero said, pushing at the glass. “And if you ever want to block out the sunlight, you could always pull those. They slide all the way through,” she pointed at a thin column of dark blue curtains draped on the far side of the wall. “Otherwise, you could just enjoy the view all day and all night.”

*She* was the view he wanted to enjoy all day and all night.

“Bukun says you might want to hang some paintings from your friend, so those can go over there,” she pointed at spots on the vertical striped wallpapered wall. “Or there,” she pointed at another spot. “We’ll use the next two weeks to finish the kitchen, utility rooms, put some finishing touches to the living room and study, and we’ll be done. All by the first week of September.”

“I’m impressed.”

She smiled, her delight and pride in her work evident. Turning to him, she cocked her head to the side. “How come your father left his house to you? You have older brothers, if I remember correctly.”

Bonju shrugged. “The old man made a lot of crazy, last-minute decisions. This being one of them.” He looked at her and chuckled. “He also nominated me as the new Managing Director of the family business, if you can imagine that.”

“That doesn't surprise me at all. I always knew you were smart, even though you liked to let people think otherwise. If your father chose you, he must have done so because he knew you're capable.”

Her affirmation was everything he needed to hear, and as their eyes held, he wanted nothing more than to hold her...to kiss her...to love her...right there in that room. Of all the very many things in that new, shiny room... she was his favourite one.

He held out his hand and she placed hers in his, her touch soft yet electrifying. He took a step forward right about the same time she did, bending just as she leaned up to him, her arms circling his neck as their lips blended into each other in a kiss that succeeded in stealing whatever part of his heart he was still holding on to. Breaking the kiss, his hand still in hers, she led him to the imposing bed, pulling him to her as she sank into it. They lay like that for several minutes, neither of them moving, their only communication with their eyes - hers, wide and searching, and his... conflicted. He knew he was only setting himself up for pain even greater than anything he'd endured in 1999, or even 2019. This game they were playing was a dangerous one. They weren't kids anymore, and if the past year was anything to go by, love would never be on the cards for them again. This game, this very dangerous game, was sure to burn him, and it was in his better interest to stop while he was ahead.

But he couldn't.

Because he was in no way ahead.

Lowering his head to hers, as he kissed her, her lips, her smell, the feel of her hands, everything about her slammed his senses. And as they made love

on the silk and cotton comforter, he set aside all his fears and reservations, wanting nothing more than to revel in the euphoria of their unison.

If only for that night...and that night only.

## **Alero**

She was in heaven.

She was floating in the clouds.

And she never wanted to descend.

Ever.

But she had to.

“I have to go,” she groaned, as they lay entwined beneath the sheets, several hours after they had collapsed into them. “It’s almost 8pm, and I asked Syph to only start my show, not run the whole thing. He’ll probably want to leave now.”

But Bonju pulled her closer, his head buried in her hair. “Send him a text and ask him to cover for you tonight.”

She smiled, ascending back into the clouds, basking in the joy of knowing Bonju wanted to be with her just as much as she wanted be with him...in that bed...forever.

Reaching for her shorts where it lay discarded on the floor, she brought out her phone and grimaced. “Yikes. My battery is at two percent.”

“You don't need up to two percent to send a text.”

She giggled. “True.” The smile was still on her face as she sent a message to Syph, imploring him to cover for her and bribing him with an offer of lunch anytime he wanted. “Done! Now, it’s at one percent.”

He reached for his phone and laughed. “Mine is completely dead.”

“I have a power bank in my car. I could go get it,” she said, making to get out of the bed, but his hand circled hers as he pulled her back.

“We don't need our phones.”

And they most surely did not.

The next morning, lying together on the hammock that had been set up on the veranda, the Egyptian cotton sheet from the bed draped over them to cover their decency, watching the sun rise over the lagoon, its golden petals stretching outwards on the seemingly endless body of water, casting a crimson glow over them, she was the happiest she had ever been.

Ever.

“Your father sure loved a water view,” she remarked, before smiling. “I still have all the pictures you sent from his beach house...every single one of them. They were the highlight of my week.”

“You sure didn't act like it. I lived in constant fear of you blocking me, with the way I was spamming you with those pictures.”

“I loved them,” she looked up at him. “And I love you.”

He said nothing in response, but he didn't have to. Everything she'd needed to hear, he'd told her in the way he had kissed her, touched her, held her, but even more so, looked at her. He still loved her, and his body had told her so in more ways than one.

Later that morning, dressed, she retrieved the power bank from her car, and plugged in his phone first. As it came on, a message flashed in its notification banner.

***Hey, handsome! Don't leave me hanging. Call me.***

She saw it was from someone saved as Jummai, and looking up, she saw him watching her.

“A friend of yours?” she asked, forcing a smile as she handed him the phone still plugged to the charger.

His brows furrowed as he read the message and he nodded. “Something like that.”

“So, will you order us breakfast, or should we wait till I charge my phone?” she asked, making a concerted effort not to think too much about the



message she had just seen. He was an attractive man and was bound to have a plethora of female attention.

“I should probably leave,” he said, unplugging his phone from her charger. “It’s almost 11am and I have a few people I need to see today.”

“Oh, okay,” she couldn't mask the disappointment in her voice, wondering if the Jummai was one of those ‘people’.

He looked at her and opened his mouth as if to say something, and she looked at him in anticipation, suddenly needing the validation she hadn’t needed only minutes before. But instead, he smiled at her and slipped his phone into his pocket.

“I’ll see you later, Alero.”

“See you later,” she answered, her heart sinking to her feet as he walked out of the room.

Turning back to the rumpled bed, she set about returning it to its state of earlier perfection, trying to ignore the state of upheaval her own heart had been thrown into.

## **Bonju**

Back in his apartment, he busied himself with catching up on stock market news he’d missed during the week, and touching base with the owners of the businesses he’d invested in all over the world, doing everything he could not to think about the night before. But the more he tried to distract himself, the more present Alero was in his apartment.

She was everywhere. She was in everything.

She was sitting in a yoga pose on the carpet in his work area. She was massaging his shoulders as he sat in his chair. She was smiling up at him from where she lay in his bed, her unruly mane spread all over his pillows. Everywhere he looked, he saw her. Everywhere he turned, he smelled her. And as the hours turned the day to night, he wanted to hear her as well. As the clock chimed 9pm, he lost his battle of wills and turned on the radio

modem of his phone, holding his breath in anticipation of hearing her voice again.

What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he just end this fixation?

He listened to three songs play, but as *After 7's One Night* started to play, he reached for his phone and dialed her number.

"So, you finally concede that this is the best song on the album?" he asked.

He smiled at the sound of her laughter, loving that she knew exactly what he was talking about, loving how they made reference to things from over twenty years before like they had talked about them only minutes before. That day, back in 1999, she had walked him to his car, and as she was wont to do, lingered there with him until dark. That particular evening, she'd been sitting on his bonnet as he stood with his arms on either side of her, *After 7's After 7* album playing from his car. They'd sang along to *Heat of the Moment*, and *Can't Stop*, but when *One Night* started to play, a wide grin had broken on his face.

*"This is the best song on this album. The lyrics are something special!"* he'd said to her.

Her face had contorted into a frown. *"Are you being serious? You can't even compare this song with Ready or Not. This one is all about sex, while Ready or Not is a beautiful ballad about a man doing everything... EVERYTHING...for the woman he loves."*

He'd rubbed his nose with hers. *"Like I would do everything for you."*

"I have done no such thing," Alero answered, bringing him back to the present, and he could hear the smile in her voice. *"Ready or Not* is still the best song on that album, hands down."

"If you say so," he said, his smile waning, her voice kindling his desire. "What are you up to now?"

"Thinking of you."

And that was all he needed to lose the control he'd struggled all day to regain.

“Want to come down?”

“I’m on my way.”

She was down in four minutes.

Sitting on his bed, he heard her push the main door open and listened to her footsteps as she made her way to his living space. When she appeared at the doorway, he was sure his heart stopped beating for at least a solid minute. In a long, thin-strapped, free form dress that flowed past her ankles, the light from his work area cast on her an ethereal glow, her long, curly hair framing her face like a halo. He wanted to tell her she was beautiful, probably the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. But instead he watched, silent, as she walked to him, their eyes never breaking their hold. Kneeling astride him on the bed, she placed her hands on his shoulders, just as his hands travelled to her waist.

There was no need for words.

It felt like the room was electrically charged, fissures of electricity bouncing from one end to the other, as his body responded to her lips on his, her hands now travelling down his chest. She was his opium. His kryptonite. The drug he needed rehabilitation from. But that could come some other time - the rehabilitation - because that night, all he wanted to do was get high on her.

“I love you, Bonju.”

He stiffened, hearing her repeat her declaration from the previous morning. Twenty-four hours later, lying with her nestled in his arms as another day broke, the words still gnawed at his insides, with him on the one hand thrilled to hear her say them, but on the other hand, thinking they were too little, too late. He said nothing, hoping that, like the previous morning, she wouldn't push, but, unlike the previous morning, this time she looked up at him.

**Alero**

She stared up at him, this time wanting...needing...to hear him say the words back to her. Unlike the previous morning, this time she needed the confirmation from much more than his body. But as their eyes held for ten seconds, twenty, fifty, she realized she wouldn't be hearing him say the words.

“Did you hear me, Bonju?” she prodded. “I love you.”

“I heard you,” he answered, sitting up such that she had no choice but to sit up as well, before swinging his feet off the bed.

She watched him slip on his shorts, walk into the bathroom, listened to sound of water from the faucet, and waited for what had to be the longest two minutes of her life. He finally emerged, patting his face with a towel, and when their eyes met, for the first time in the week it had been since the night at the pub, and their near kiss in her studio, she was awash with a strange emotion.

Fear.

“It’s almost 7am and Destiny will soon get here,” Bonju said. “He might wonder where you are if you’re not back in your studio.”

“Bonju, what are we doing?” she asked, doing her best to keep the desperate lilt from her voice, a desperation she was beginning to feel with every passing second.

“We’re having a good time, Alero. We’re enjoying each other’s company,” he answered, shrugging as he scrolled through his phone. “I thought that was pretty clear.”

It felt like a bucket of ice-cold water had been tipped over her.

“Bonju,” his name came out of her mouth as a wheeze, as her body began to tremble, not believing, not daring to believe he was doing anything but teasing her.

He barely glanced at her as he replaced the phone on the nightstand, pulled on a t-shirt and padded over to his work area.

“Bonju, I know you don't mean that,” she called out, getting off the bed and tugging the sheet along with her as a cover. “You can’t tell me that

yesterday...Friday...were...were nothing.”

“Alero, let’s not make a big deal out of this. We have a great physical connection, so why don’t we just enjoy that?” he muttered, turning to her so suddenly, they were inches away from a collision. But the eyes that held with hers, the cold, brown pupils that stared back at her, were at complete odds with the nonchalance of his words.

“You don’t mean that,” she said, grabbing his arm as he made to turn away. “This isn’t just a physical hook up...not for you, and definitely not for me. You love me. You’ve loved me since we were kids. Stop saying these things just to get back at me!” She held his eyes, hers wide and imploring. “We’re soulmates, Bonju. You said so yourself all those years ago. I know you haven’t forgotten that.”

## **Bonju**

*“And he is the last person in this world I would ever want to marry!”*

*“Read my lips if your hearing has failed you. I will never marry you. You are a vile, sorry excuse of a man, and I would rather slit my throat than be in your company a minute longer.”*

*“Did you really think I would just fall into your arms, after what you did to me? That we would fall in love and ride into sunset after you destroyed my life?”*

*“These last few months, I have barely tolerated you, desperate for the day when I would be able to look you in the eye and tell you how much I despise you. After today, I never want to set my eyes on you again.”*

Her words reverberated in his head as if she were still saying - no - shouting them, shouting them through megaphone speakers.

“Nobody finds their soulmate at sixteen,” he scoffed. “What did you think, Alero? That we were getting back together?” He clenched his jaw to keep at bay the strong emotions that welled inside him when he remembered that afternoon of December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and how long it had taken to pick himself up after it. Her eyes widened and even though his own emotions

were warring within him, he knew this was the time to pull out the dagger. It didn't even matter if doing that would make him bleed out himself. "I can never trust you with my heart again. Not after what you did." He swallowed back the lump that was rising in his throat. "I was vulnerable with you. I was the most vulnerable I have ever been with anyone in my life. But all you were doing was taking me for a ride."

She just gaped at him, a film of tears coating her wide eyes.

"You can see yourself out," he said, turning back around in the direction of his workspace, grabbed his car key and wallet from the table, and walked out of the room. It wasn't until he was alone in the elevator, that he let out a loud roar of frustration, hating himself for his inability to be indifferent to her even now, hating himself his inability to enjoy the golden opportunity he'd been given to hurt her.

Hating himself for still loving her.

And he knew he could no longer be around her, especially not intimately. Because as deep a pit he'd thought he'd dug for her, he'd dug for himself an even deeper one.

Regrouping as the elevator chimed open on the ground floor, he plastered on a smile at the people waiting to enter it, waving in greeting at the cleaners and janitors milling around. Starting his car, in the rugged shorts and t-shirt he had left his apartment in, and with no destination in mind but getting as far away from there as he could, he reminded himself about the reason he was still in Lagos, a reason that had nothing to do with Alero Divine Gboye. He was supposed to be working towards securing the mantle his father had bestowed upon him. He was supposed to be thinking up ways to convince the board members who were still undecided. It was high time for him to stay focused on his target and not allow his wayward emotions overtake his common sense. And if meeting up with Jummai would help him do that, then, damn it, that was exactly what he was going to do!

## **Alero**

She stood there, frozen to the spot, long after Bonju had left, her mind replaying not only the events of their weekend, but the two months since his return...and that awful December afternoon.

*“How dare you ask me to marry you, after you deceived me into your bed, took my virginity, and broadcast it for the world to hear? How dare you think all that would just go away after a few winks and kisses?”*

With a sinking heart, she knew she'd been a fool to think he would forget what she'd done. She'd been a fool to think they could ever come back from what had broken them apart in the first place. Whatever love they'd shared had died in 1999.

And there would never be any coming back from that.

Later that day at home, she was reluctant to return to the station, but finally dragged herself out of her apartment at 6pm that evening. There was considerable traffic on the expressway, and she didn't drive into Tempo's premises until almost 8pm. After offloading from her car the bag of biscuits, chocolates, and sweets she'd packed for her shift, hoping the sugar rush would give her the comfort she needed, she walked in the direction of the building, her feet just as heavy as her heart. And then her eyes landed on a couple exiting the building. Bonju had his hand on the small of a woman's back, a beautiful and elegant woman who looked like a cut out from a glossy magazine. From the way they were dressed - he in a smart white shirt over fitted navy blue trousers and her in a yellow halter neck dress - they were clearly headed for a night out. And her heart sank lower to a depth she didn't even know was possible. He looked in her direction, and as their eyes held, the flatness in his was all the confirmation she needed that, indeed, what they had just shared had meant nothing to him.

Absolutely nothing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR –

### JUST AN ILLUSION



*Follow your emotions anywhere  
Is it building magic  
In the air?*

**OCTOBER 2020**

#### **Alero**

SITTING IN THE CONVERTED CHAPEL on the grounds of Nonso Aguta's hotel, Alero tried to keep her eyes trained on the couple standing before the Priest as they exchanged their vows; Bioye, resplendent in a glimmering ball gown in a soft gold shade, with a semi-transparent bodice, illusion yoke and sleeves, and a sparkly, lightweight tulle overlay, and Abolore, dapper in a midnight blue peak lapel tuxedo. Alero dabbed her eyes as they exchanged their vows, and even Destiny, seated next to her, appeared emotional. The love the marrying couple had for each other was evident from the heartfelt way they repeated the age-old oaths the Priest prompted them to, and Alero couldn't help the small tinge of envy she felt. There they were, Bioye and Abolore, promising each other forever, while she was there, doing everything possible not to look two rows behind her.

She had seen them - Bonju and his date - arrive only a few minutes into the start of the ceremony. Since that evening that she had seen him and the mystery woman walking out of Tempo's building, she had seen them together a few more times after and, as always, they'd been the flawless



pin-up couple. And that afternoon was no different, what with them colour synchronized in black and white, he in a classic black tuxedo and her in a black and white bandeau wrap dress with a slit that ran thigh high. They were picture-perfect, and it still grated, two months later.

It had been the longest two months of her life, spent doing everything to keep their paths from crossing, and working hard to ensure his house was ready by the date she'd communicated. While she was successful with the latter, she wasn't quite as much with the former. It was ironic that there had once been a time when she'd lived for those sightings, the times when she'd kept her eyes peeled for a glimpse of his car, the times when hearing his voice along their hallway sent shivers of excitement down her spine. Now, she scurried from her car to the building with her head down, kept her face buried in her phone in the elevator, and hardly ever ventured out of her studio to the general studios or to Destiny's penthouse floor, keeping herself sequestered for almost the entire time she was in the building. Yet, she hadn't been able to avoid them - Bonju and his glamorous girlfriend - always entering or exiting the building. She tried to keep from imagining them doing the same things she had done with him in that same apartment, on that same bed, on those same sheets, but was unsuccessful each time.

It was all she could think about.

And she hated him for it.

Having successfully handed over the fully restored house, all she could do was pray he would quickly move there, so she wouldn't have to suffer through watching him move on as quickly as he had.

## **Bonju**

He couldn't take his eyes off her back, her freckled, caramel-coloured back. In a purple bustier dress, and with her long hair secured in locs at the top of her head, as she always did, Alero sucked the air out of every room she was in. Especially any room that had him in it.

The afternoon of their last encounter in August, Jummai had sent him another text, and he had been grateful for the distraction. So, he'd called

her.

“Na wa for you oh, Bonju. I didn't know I'd have to wait a whole week for the honour of your call.”

“You know we've been busy making rounds,” had been his lame excuse. “But I apologize.”

“I don't need your apology. I need you to make it up to me. Dinner tonight? My treat.”

“Isn't it meant to be my treat if I'm the one making it up to you?”

“I want to watch you squirm with guilt as I treat you to a nice deluxe meal,” she'd giggled. “Have you heard of this new place that just opened near you, on Idejo? It's a French restaurant called Balthazar, and I hear their chef has three Michelin stars.”

But that wasn't the detail that had made his ears stand at attention.

“How do you know where I stay?”

She'd laughed. “Don't be silly. Of course, I know where you live. And I've been desperately waiting for an invitation.” She paused. “How about I meet you up there, and we can go to Balthazar from there?”

It had been a request he hadn't given much thought about...until they were departing, and he'd seen Alero.

After giving Jummai a quick tour of his apartment, doing everything to discourage her from lingering in his living space, he'd seated her in his work area with a few copies of GQ and the Financial Times magazines, while he got ready for their dinner date.

“Or we could just eat here,” she had suggested after he was dressed, her eyes sending the poorly concealed message of her desire for more than just food.

“Maybe some other time. You've roused my appetite for good French food,” he'd winked, leading her out of his apartment.

It had never even crossed his mind that he...they...would run into Alero. But they had, and even though seeing the pain in Alero's eyes had hurt him,

he'd known it was for the best. It was the final nail in the coffin that held the carcass of their ill-fated relationship.

Dinner with Jummai hadn't been as tedious as their first outing. She had talked less and listened more, and he'd been impressed that she was also active in the digital currency investment space. So, one date had led to two, and then three, until they became a bona fide couple...if a non-amorous pair could be called that. As much as he liked her and was grateful for her company, he was unable to yield to more than a few shallow kisses. It wasn't that he didn't find her appealing. He did, just not enough to dive headlong into another intimate situation so soon after his last one had ended.

It also didn't help that the last one still pervaded his every waking and sleeping thought.

"Let's just take this slow," he said to pacify Jummai, the many times he pulled away when she tried to deepen their kisses, or the times she'd run her hand up his thigh, stopping inches short of cupping his member. "I don't want to rush this."

The good news was that he hadn't bored of her, like he usually did his former love interests. But the bad news was that the fire of sexual attraction wasn't showing any signs of igniting anytime soon.

Now, two months later, looking at nothing but Alero's bare back, his body was fully charged, his every nerve, taut. He wanted her to look back, wanted to look into her brown eyes again...but he also didn't, as he knew she would see the hunger in his, see that his desire for her had not abated one bit in two months. Gritting his teeth, he forced his eyes to the couple exchanging their vows at the altar.

He hadn't come all the way to Epe to undo all the progress he had made in the last months.

## **Alero**

“Hey, man!” Destiny exclaimed, shaking hands with Bonju as they filed into the banquet hall for the wedding reception. “Hi, Jummai. You look lovely.”

Oh, so this was the Jummai.

“Thanks, Destiny,” Jummai said with a dimpled smile, her eyes flitting to Alero. “Is this your wife? I’ve seen her at the station a few times.”

“This is my sister, Divine,” Destiny answered. “Divine, this is...”

“Jummai,” Jummai said, extending her a hand. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

Alero forced a smile as she shook her hand. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“Hello, Alero,” Bonju said, making her turn to him.

“Hello, Bonju,” was her stiff response.

“Alero? I thought Destiny said your name was...” Jummai remarked, her brows knotted.

“We went to school together, and back then, she was called Alero,” Bonju explained, his eyes still holding Alero’s.

Alero looked away, not wanting her rising anger to show. They went to school together? Was that the best he could do? As Destiny and Bonju chatted, Alero kept her eyes averted to keep from making any further conversation with Jummai. The less she knew about the new love of the man she still did, the better it would be for all of them.

Looking around the hall, it was no surprise it was packed to its rafters. When Bioye and Abolore had chosen to have their ceremony all the way in Epe, Alero was certain crowd control had been their goal, what with Bioye being so popular and Abolore a much respected and sought after government top shot. But if the large number of guests was anything to go by, they hadn’t succeeded. As was typical of any social event that had Bioye’s stamp on it, it was extremely well coordinated. The hall, beautifully decorated with suspended and cascading flowers, trailing garlands, floral arches, and flowing, floral silk ribbons as table runners, all in rose gold, peach, burgundy and champagne, with tapered, pillar, and votive candles illuminating the room, completing and perfecting the romantic ambience.

“How are you?” Bonju’s voice cut through her musing, and she turned to him. Jummai and Destiny were making small talk about the impressive hotel.

“Very well,” she answered, looking away and hoping her accelerated heartbeat wasn’t visible from the throb she could feel in her neck.

No, he didn't get to talk to her. Not after he had clearly made his choice.

“Hey, guys!” Ikenna called out as he approached them, a wide grin on his face.

Bonju grinned, embracing his old friend. “Good to see you, man!”

Ikenna beamed, looking from Alero to Bonju. “I see things are still waxing strong. I’ve been waiting for word about your wedding.”

The clench in Bonju’s jaw was at odds with the plastered smile on his face. “No, man. I’m afraid it didn't quite work out. I thought I mentioned it when we saw in June. I didn't? My bad.” He turned to the woman chattering beside him. “This is my girlfriend, Jummai. And that’s Alero’s brother, Destiny. Babe, this is my old friend, Ikenna.”

*This is my girlfriend, Jummai.*

Those words echoed in her head like a discordant tune, his verbal confirmation that the ship of his emotions had docked in another port, stabbing her in the very core of her heart.

“Oh, I had no idea. I’m so sorry about putting my foot in it,” a flustered Ikenna apologized. “It’s great to meet you both.”

“It’s lovely to meet you, Ikenna,” Jummai smiled at him, as Destiny waved his own greetings

“Where is Tomi?” Alero asked, trying to diffuse the tension. “I don't see her.”

Ikenna smiled. “She couldn’t come. Her doctor didn't give her permission to fly, so even *I* must hurry back to L.A. tomorrow.”

“You’re expecting?” Alero asked, a wide grin breaking on her face.

Ikenna nodded, his wide smile matching hers. “We’re having a Christmas baby.”

As everyone extended their congratulations to Ikenna, Alero looked in Bonju’s direction and saw him looking at her. And all she could do was wonder if he was thinking the same thing she was - that it could have been them if all the ugliness hadn’t gotten in the way.

Ikenna’s attention was soon called by Omoruyi, Eva and Zinna, who were already seated at a table, and as he walked away, Nonso approached them were they stood. As the Best Man, he was in a tuxedo in a similar navy blue as Abolore’s, and he had one of his now rare smiles on his face.

“Bonju, my man!” he exclaimed, pumping his friend’s hand in greeting, before smiling at Alero. “And hallo to the missus.”

The missus? Alero threw a perplexed glance at Bonju. Why on earth did his friends still think they were together almost a year after they had been? Well, officially anyway. Surely, her not being at his father’s funeral should have been enough indication.

“Best man for two weddings in a row!” Bonju grinned at Nonso, not in a hurry to correct him. “You seem to be making a habit of it.”

“Well, three times isn’t the charm, so think twice before you ask me to be yours,” Nonso chuckled. “What about you two? Now that the radio station is up and running,” he gave Alero a small bow. “And congratulations on that, by the way. Now that the station is up and running, you two should have set a date by now.”

Bonju cleared his throat and reached for Jummai’s hand. “*This* is my girlfriend. Her name is Jummai. Babe, this is...”

“Nonso Aguta,” Jummai said, smiling as she shook his hand. “I’m a huge fan.”

“Let’s go sit. My shoes are killing me,” Alero said to Destiny, as Nonso exchanged pleasantries with Jummai. Her platform heels were very comfortable, but she couldn’t take another minute - heck, another second - of watching Bonju parade his new girlfriend.

There was only so much a person could take.

## **Bonju**

He watched her walk away, no longer paying attention to the discussion Nonso and Jummai were having about hotel investments. Jummai had plans to fund some friends starting a small boutique hotel in The Gambia and was picking Nonso's brain about landmines to look out for.

But Bonju wasn't interested in any talk about hotels and investments, his only interest in the light skinned woman in the purple bustier dress now seated at a table across the room, and engaged in conversation with their old classmates. Even though their paths had crossed a few times in the months since their acrimonious parting, that afternoon was the first time they would make eye contact, and he noted, with dismay, that hers were back to being shuttered, just like they'd been the previous year.

They were truly back to their post-1999 status quo. And it rankled more than he cared to admit.

"That was such a lovely ceremony," Jummai remarked later that night, as they sat at a table at The Admiral, nursing cocktails. After returning from Epe, she had suggested a nightcap before he dropped her at home. "They're such a gorgeous couple. And you say he was your teacher?"

He managed a smile. "Yeah, our math teacher."

"Aww, so romantic. I'd love to hear their love story."

Bonju shrugged and took a sip of his Long Island Iced Tea. From the pieces of information he'd picked here and there, he knew enough to share Bioye and Abolore's story, but he wasn't inclined to, his mind many miles away.

"I didn't know you once dated her, the mixed race girl from the station. Destiny's sister."

He looked at Jummai and shrugged again. "A long time ago."

And that was all he was prepared to offer, because all three times he and Alero had made any attempt at a relationship - twenty years before, the year

before, a few months before - were all periods of time he wanted permanently banished from his heart.

If only wants were needs.

Jummai must have read his mood as she returned her attention to her Whisky Sour, taking several sips, a distant look in her eyes. Just when he was about to suggest they call it an early night, she placed her hand over his.

“Let’s get married, Bonju.”

He stared at her like she had just spoken a foreign language. As a matter of fact, she had, because talk of marriage was as far removed from the vocabulary of their relationship as it could possibly be.

“Huh?”

She squeezed his hand. “I know we haven’t been together a long time, but it feels right. I knew from the first time I saw you at my parents’ house that you were *the one* .”

“Jummai, we hardly know each other,” he protested, making to pull his hand from hers, but her hold on his tightened.

“When you know, you know, right? And I know you’re the one my heart wants,” she stared at him with imploring eyes. “I know you’re not there yet, but I also know it’s only a matter of time before you’ll feel just as strongly about us as I do.”

He reached for his drink with his free hand, wondering how they had gone from having a wind-down after their busy day to...to this.

She released his hand and sat back in her chair, her eyes trained on him. “It’s the perfect plan, Bonju. You know just how well this will work in your favour.”

It was no secret that her father had declared allegiance to neither Babawale nor himself. Even though a few more directors had joined Marvin Iwenofu in their support for Bonju, there was still a considerable number who had decided to keep their cards close to their chest. But looking at Jummai as she dangled that fruit in front of him, he realized he was tired of playing



that game. He was done with it all, sick to death of the endless politicking and campaigning.

He was completely drained.

“I’m going back to London tomorrow,” he said, voicing something that hadn’t even been a consideration before that moment. “There are still a few months to AGM, and I think I need a break.”

Her shoulders slumped momentarily, before her eyes brightened. “I could come with you. I can connect remotely with my project team from anywhere in the world.”

“I need a break, Jummai,” he repeated, firmer this time. “From everything.”

As callous as it sounded, he knew it was better that way. For both of them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE –

### LAST CHRISTMAS



*Last Christmas, I gave you my heart  
But the very next day, you gave it away  
This year, to save me from tears  
I'll give it to someone special*

**DECEMBER 2020**

#### **Bonju**

IT WAS A LITTLE PAST 7AM when he pulled his single trolley box past the exit doors of Murtala Mohammed airport's arrival terminal, but in a smart black suit, sky blue shirt, and a sky blue, indigo, and silver tie, he was ready for the meeting that was scheduled to start in less than two hours.

"Welcome back, my boy!" Kamson beamed as they shook hands. "You sure took your sweet time coming back."

"Uncle 'Dipo!" Bonju grinned. "You didn't have to come here so early in the morning. You could have just waited for me at the office."

"I promised your father I'd be by your side, and I intend to keep that promise," Kamson said, gesturing at his aide to take the box from Bonju, glancing at his wristwatch as he did. "Let's just hope traffic cooperates. I don't want us getting there after Babawale and Bolu do."

It was Christmas Eve, and Oceadrill's executive management had convened an extraordinary board meeting to pitch to its directors the need to divest a large stake of the business.

"From what I hear, Babawale wants to sell as much as sixty percent," Kamson said, as their car weaved through morning traffic along Apapa-Oshodi Expressway, the downturn of his lips reflecting just how he felt about that prospect.

"Is that inclusive or exclusive of the ten percent already owned by Weybros?" Bonju asked.

Weybros Capital was a private equity firm that had bought a stake in the company a decade before, when Oceadrill had needed inflow of new capital for the acquisition of new rigs.

"Exclusive!" Kamson exclaimed, his exasperation evident. "That would mean losing seventy percent of your father's business! Bankole will be turning in his grave by now. This is the last straw. Anyone who still supports Babawale after this never had the interest of the company at heart in the first place."

Bonju's brows furrowed in a frown as he read through the document Kamson handed him, an information memorandum prepared by an investment bank based out of London that he knew very well, marketing Oceadrill to potential equity investors. Considering how close to the AGM they were, it was too much of a gamble for Babawale to make so controversial a move. If he knew his brother well, he had an ace up his sleeve. But Bonju was determined to take advantage of the fortuitous gathering of all the directors and use it to his advantage.

They got to Oceadrill at 8:43am and, walking into the boardroom with Kamson by his side, Bonju fought off a wave of anxiety as he beheld the packed room, with all the directors seated and Dogo Jatau at the head of the table in his position as Acting Chairman. A fleeting memory of his father seated on that same seat flashed through his head, and Bonju swallowed back a lump in his throat. God, he missed the man!

He made his rounds from director to director, exchanging pleasantries, and when he got to the head of the table, he smiled at the man who, ultimately, had the casting vote if it were to come to that.

“I thought you had conceded to your brother, when I heard you’d returned to London,” Dogo remarked, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Not at all, Sir,” Bonju answered, as the shook hands. “Even from over there, I’ve been doing nothing but brainstorming ways to dig Oceadrill out of its hole.”

“That might be what your brothers are already trying to do,” Dogo answered, his searching eyes probing deep.

“That might be their intention, but their method is guaranteed to sink Oceadrill even deeper still,” Bonju answered, his eyes sweeping the room again as he stepped away from Dogo. “Good morning, everyone,” he said, projecting his voice to the room. “Do we have a quorum?”

“Babawale and Bolu are on their way down with Dave,” Afini Briggs answered.

“Well, we’re starting anyway. It’s already 9 o’clock,” Bonju cut in, not about to allow his brothers dictate the tone of the meeting.

He paused for a few seconds, to allow for any protest, and squared his shoulders when none was forthcoming.

“You’ve all seen this,” he held up the information memorandum. “Pitching this company, sixty percent of this company, to anyone out there with two hundred million dollars in their pocket. Basically valuing the entire business at a mere three hundred and thirty three million.” He paused as Babawale, Bolu, and Dave walked into the room, making eye contact with his oldest brother, before continuing. “We’ve earned more from single drilling campaigns.”

Bolu made to speak, but Babawale tapped him on the arm as they took their seats, a mocking smile on his face, his attention still on Bonju.

Having expected some pushback, Bonju was momentarily surprised but quickly recovered, deciding to take advantage of this rare platform he had

been given.

“Before 2012, Oceadrill was the number one drilling company in Africa,” he went on, his voice strengthening. “At the time, we had maintained thirty-nine years of near perfect project execution, with an average score of ninety-seven percent as rated by our clients, and ten straight years of smooth and incident-free drilling operations. But then, Eldabra happened.” He paused for effect, a small smile playing on his lips. “Apart from Mr. Briggs here, we were all in this same board room when I flagged the mistake in proceeding straight to a production well when we hadn’t encountered the water cut with the appraisal well. I was shut down, and we all know what happened after that. And no, it’s not what you’re thinking. The loss of millions and millions of dollars is secondary to the biggest thing we lost when we failed with that campaign.” He looked around the room. “We lost our credibility. And that was the watershed moment for Oceadrill. Almost every drilling campaign after that came with problems. Every year, the company bled money from basic drilling mistakes. How many hole deviation problems were encountered? Pipe failures? Circulation problems from the miscalculation of mud flow?” He spread out his arms and shook his head. “School boy mistakes for a company as established as ours. Apart from the tremendous amount all this cost the business, it further dragged our sinking reputation deeper in the hole, pun intended. And then the recent mistake with Armada Energy, when we couldn’t even correctly ascertain how many wells could be drilled in that field? What are we doing here, people?”

“But you were here when we were discussing the Armada drilling campaign,” Afini Briggs cut in. “You were seated right there,” he pointed across the table where Marvin Iwenofu sat. “And you also concurred when the engineers presented their plan.”

“I didn’t concur, Mr. Briggs.” It was Bonju’s turn to interrupt. “If you recall, I did take the young engineer up, asking him if he was sure about the number of wells he said they could drill in that field.” He turned to Babawale. “And if you will also recall, I was again shut down by our Managing Director.”

“So, what is the point of this wonderful speech of yours?” Abiodun Turner, an executive director, asked. “You have stated everything we know already, which, if you ask me, has further buttressed why we need to divest. Mistakes have been made and significance has been lost. What is your value proposition?”

“Rebuilding industry trust,” Bonju answered without missing a beat. “Overhauling the technical team and hiring the kind of firm, solid hands that return Oceadrill to the top of the ladder in the African drilling space.”

“And who will lead this new technical team?” Babawale chuckled, making his voice heard for the first time. “You? Mr. Crypto Currency? Do you think we’re selling bitcoin here? You, a man who hasn’t drilled a well in almost a decade?”

Laughter broke out amongst some of the board members, but Bonju’s smile didn’t ebb. When the laughter in the room had faded, his smile broadened.

“But yet, my crypto currency and bitcoin dabbling can buy this company three times over. If you needed two hundred mill, all you needed to have done was just pick up your phone, big brother.”

That was enough to wipe the smirk off Babawale’s face and he rose to his feet. “I think we’ve given this clown enough audience for the morning. Let’s get to the business at hand.”

Still smiling, Bonju took his seat beside Kamson, happy to have at least planted the seed of doubt in the room. Babawale proceeded to talk through the document that had already been circulated, projected on a large screen.

“While it’s true that two hundred million doesn’t sound like a lot for sixty percent, the truth of the matter is that the industry, as a whole, is in decline, and it isn’t a problem particular to Oceadrill,” Babawale said, circling the room. “Spending on drilling has been on a steady decline for years, globally, and we would be fools not to put on our diversification hats. We’re not trying to raise two hundred million dollars so we can all retire to Cancun.” He gestured at his assistant, and a picture of a gas plant was beamed on the screen. “The future is gas, people. The future is gas. We want to invest in this gas plant located in Oghara, Delta State. With all the

neighbouring oil producing fields in the vicinity, all of them desperate to process and commercialize their gas instead of flaring and paying the resultant penalties, this three hundred million standard cubic feet per day capacity plant will make us more money in the long run. And if we can get a deal on the condensate from their feed gas, we all just might still be able to retire to Cancun after all!”

More laughter rang out and Bonju was reminded why his brother was so popular with the board. Like him or not, Babawale knew how to turn on the charm when he had to. But charm wasn't going to save their company.

“There are at least three other gas plants located in the area,” Bonju cut in. “Off the top of my head, I know of one in Ovade and another in Oredo. But, more importantly, you want to gamble this business to roll the dice in a sector we haven’t even established any competence or capacity for?”

“We will be purchasing the gas plant complete with its staff and equipment,” Babawale answered, unable to mask the clench of his jaw.

“Not to mention its legacy debt,” Bonju said, scrolling through his phone. “I just ran a quick search and the only gas plant in Oghara is owned by Vura Energy.” He raised a brow as he looked at Babawale. “Vura that recently got its oil mining license revoked? Vura that has had its bad loans transferred to AMCON? And even without all that, the plant was built in the early ‘80s. Do you know how much will have to be spent to refurbish it? Are you aware another two hundred million dollars could be spent on that, easily? Bro, if you spend four hundred million dollars on this gas plant, you can kiss your retirement to Cancun goodbye forever.”

Pin drop silence followed, until Babawale shook his head and laughed. He laughed for what might have been a straight minute, before his laughter faded and he glared at Bonju. “You don't have the courage for this fight, boy. Everything has always been handed to you on a pretty platter. Don’t get into this ring, or you’ll be eaten alive.”

“Don't underestimate me,” Bonju kept the smile on his face as he held Babawale’s gaze. “I know everything I need to know about saving a business from the brink.” He leaned forward on his elbows.

“You think I’m not aware of Vura Energy’s problems? You think I don’t know about the state of its gas plant?” Babawale said, circling the table and walking up to where Bonju sat. “You think the value of the plant, even in its current decrepit state, isn’t double the two hundred we’re paying for it?” He leaned forward such that his face was mere inches away from Bonju’s. “In this business, you’re either smarter...or you cheat. It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there, kid. How do you think we’ve managed to stay afloat even with all the financial holes we have to plug? How do you think we’ve stayed able to pay your fat director’s allowance? By playing by the rules?”

“You have eroded so much value here, this company is barely worth what you’re even pitching it for,” Bonju sneered, his anger rising. “You’ve killed this company, Babawale. And you’re just looking for a nice pay-off to ride into the sunset with.”

He and Babawale held their face off for some seconds, before Babawale retreated, laughing as he did, prompting laughter from several other people in the room.

“He thinks this is an MBA class,” Babawale chuckled. “*How To Save a Company 101*. Bankole Adalemo didn’t grow this company to where he did by doing things by the book. It’s all about survival!”

As echoes of agreement rang in the room, Bonju’s heart sank, crestfallen that his brother still had the upper hand with only weeks to the AGM the following February. But he was bolstered by the smile on Kamson’s face when he looked in his direction. His counter to Babawale’s pitch might not have yielded the desired result, but it was a step in the right direction.

“It’s good to have you back in town, man,” Destiny said, as they spoke on the phone later that evening.

Bonju nodded, the initial excitement of his return having ebbed after that morning’s meeting. Standing in the master bedroom of the house he had inherited, all he could see was the woman he had spent the last two months trying to forget. On the bed, lying on the hammock on the veranda, he was assaulted with memories of loving Alero everywhere in that bedroom, that one night in August.



“Are you still downstairs, or have you moved to your old man’s place?”

Bonju looked around, not even knowing how to answer the question. Returning to Tempo’s building would put him in closer proximity with Alero than he wanted, but being in that house...that room...was messing with his mind even more.

“I’m at my dad’s house right now, but I might come over to my apartment later.”

“Great. Listen, we’re headed to Buzz Bar for drinks in about an hour. Come join us.”

“Buzz Bar? I don’t think I know that one. Is it new?”

Destiny chuckled. “Forgive me. It opened a few weeks ago, just in time for ‘Detty December’. I’ll text you the address.”

As he terminated the call, Bonju pondered the wisdom in accepting Destiny’s offer, but the pull to go was stronger than the push not to. Still undecided about unpacking or not, he opened his box, pulled out a black Henley shirt, a distressed pair of jeans and a pair of brown Holger Milano slip-on sneakers, and proceeded to have a shower, hopeful that a night out would help reset his brain. With the AGM nearby, a return to London wasn’t on the cards in the near term. So, he had to find a way to live in the town without being in constant fear of seeing the woman who still invaded him like venom coursing through his veins.

He was stepping out of the shower when his phone rang, and he sighed upon seeing Jummai’s name on the screen. After bombarding him with video calls and messages in his first month back in London, she had finally gotten the message when he’d evaded most of them. As the phone rang, he contemplated not answering it.

“Hey, Jummai,” he said, when he finally did.

“Merry Christmas, Bonju,” she cooed. “My dad told me you’re back in town.”

Bonju nodded. “Yep. I flew in for this morning’s board meeting.”

“I heard you really tackled Babawale. My dad says you gave it to him hot.”

Bonju forced a smile as she laughed, wondering what else her father had told her, the man's poker face not having given anything away.

"Anyway," she said, as her laughter faded to small chuckles. "What are you up to tonight? I hear you've moved to your house now. I could come over and, you know, give you a housewarming gift?"

Sighing deeply, he knew there was no point beating around the bush. "Jummai, thanks a lot for the offer. It's very sweet of you. But I don't want to string you along. You're a lovely girl and I'd love to remain friends, just not in a romantic way. I hope you understand."

"Not even if it will swing my father's casting vote your way? From what I hear, the board is almost equally split between you and Babawale. My father has the casting vote, Bonju."

And hearing that further strengthened his resolve.

"Not even with that, Jummai," he answered. "Merry Christmas."

Getting off the phone, he heaved a sigh of relief. Any votes he couldn't win based on his own merit, were votes he didn't want.

Buzz Bar turned out to be a trendy lounge that doubled as a nightclub after midnight. With its loud music, purple and blue strobe lights, and haze from cigarette and shisha smoke, midnight might have come a lot earlier that night. Filled with merrymakers eager to usher in Christmas Day with good music and good vibes, Bonju could immediately tell why it was the place to be that season. The vibe was the bar, and the vibe was the people.

Just as he was wondering how he would find the Tempo crowd, he spotted Destiny's burly form, waving him over from across the room. He smiled and waved back, and as he weaved through the people on the dance floor, with Reekado Banks' *Ozumba Mbadiwe* playing from the loudspeakers, he spotted her.

Alero.

Wearing a thin-strapped yellow top over fitted, dark blue jeans, her hair in long plaits interwoven with gold threading, she was dancing with a man he

couldn't recognize. He stopped walking, his eyes on her as she danced with her partner, unable to look away from her. She was smiling at her companion as she rolled her shoulders to the dominant beat of the song, her hips swaying to the alternate rhythm, her every movement sensual, even the bobbing of her head.

And he wanted her more than anything.

She turned in his direction and their eyes held. She stilled for a nano second, before looking away, smiling again at her companion as she resumed her dancing, continuing the sultry motion of her body.

As Bonju continued to watch her, his steady composure evaporated, his self-control spiraling like a spinning top unable to stop. And that was when he knew, when he accepted, that no matter how much he tried to fight it, his heart would be enslaved to her forever.

Tearing his eyes away, he looked in Destiny's direction and waved, rotating a finger in the air in a gesture that implied he would soon return. But as Bonju turned around and exited the bar, he knew he wouldn't.

## **Alero**

Back in her studio, she was still shaken after the Bonju-sighting hours before. She'd had no idea he was back in town and seeing him again had shaken her to her very core. Even though she'd continued dancing with their new DJ, Tommy, she was grateful for the physical distance that had prevented Bonju from noticing the tremble of her hands and the unevenness in her breathing.

His being back in town was the last thing she wanted. Not when she was already feeling melancholy about spending Christmas alone, having declined her mother's invitation to come over to Sapele, or Destiny's offer to accompany him and his family to a beach resort in Badagry later that afternoon. Tempo had hired enough DJs for her to have done either, but sitting in her studio that early Christmas morning, all she was in the mood to do was feel sorry for herself.

As Luther Vandross's *Every Year, Every Christmas* played, her mind wandered to the previous Christmas - going with Bonju to Ibadan for Ikenna and Tomi's wedding...his declaration of love to her...his proposal of marriage.

*"I love you from the bottom of my heart, Alero. I've loved you for more than half of my life, and I'm going to love you for the rest of it. You're my soulmate and I want nothing more than the chance to look into those brown eyes every day into forever. Will you marry me?"*

She thought about the revenge she'd been so blinded by, the vengeance she'd been so desperate for, but which had done nothing but leave a sour taste in her mouth. Not even when she'd been mouthing off to his mother or storming out of the packed dining room had she even felt a glimmer of triumph. Instead, all she'd gotten for her effort had been emptiness and sadness. And she wanted nothing more than to go back in time for a do over.

Because, as it appeared, the one thing she didn't know how to do was to stop loving him.

## **Bonju**

He sat in his makeshift apartment, listening to Luther Vandross's *Every Year, Every Christmas* as it played from the speakers, wondering how he had found himself there that night. As he'd driven away from Buzz Bar, rather than head back to Walter Carrington, he'd driven to Adeola Odeku, letting himself back into the work and living space he'd vacated two months before, his heart pining for the woman he had left dancing a few streets away.

He sat in silence for a while, eventually turning on the radio, listening to it as the hours ticked away, wondering if it was an auto playlist on cue, a stand-in DJ, or if she had eventually returned to the building.

Wham!'s *Last Christmas* started playing next, and he couldn't help but smile at the memory of walking through the aisles of HMV and Currys that Christmas of 1998, in search of gifts for her. Defying all reasoning and

everything he'd convinced himself otherwise, he rose to his feet, walked out of the apartment, and took the single flight of stairs separating him from her.

Getting to her studio, peering through the glass partition, she was staring ahead at nothing, seemingly lost in thought. Taking advantage of the opportunity to watch her unnoticed, he feasted on the sight that was Alero. A black sweater had replaced her yellow strappy top, and with her elbow on the table, her hand propped her face. Bonju smiled as he noticed her faint lilac nail polish, reminiscent of the shade she'd worn on her toenails that Easter holiday of 1999.

As if sensing his gaze, she turned around and her eyes widened as they collided with his. In response, he raised his hand in an awkward wave. She didn't budge, her eyes holding his for several more seconds before the beep of the buzzer indicated she'd released the door lock. Pushing the door open before she had the chance to change her mind, he walked into the studio.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Merry Christmas."

"When did you guys leave that bar? I saw you were having lots of fun. Who was that guy?"

He knew he was rambling, that his questions colliding into each other...but he was unable to stop.

She shrugged in response. "I left at about eleven and came back here. If you mean the guy I was dancing with, that's Tommy. We just hired him." There was a pause before she continued. "I didn't know you were back in town."

"I got in this morning," he looked at his watch. "Yesterday morning."

She nodded and more silence followed.

"I always think of you anytime I hear this song," he finally said, his lips upturned in a melancholic smile. "I remember it from the Christmas I was in London trying to buy you all the CDs in HMV. And also from last year."

Her brows furrowed. "Last year?"

“The lyrics are so apt for everything that happened. *Last Christmas, I gave you my heart, but the very next day, you gave it away .*”

And it was out. A one-year-old elephant.

Their eyes held, neither of them knowing what to say after that, just as *Last Christmas* faded and Nat King Cole’s *The Christmas Song* started playing. But even though there were no words, as the classic crooner sang the timeless Yuletide tune, Bonju could feel the last shards of ice in his heart melt, taking along with them any anger, pain, and resentment that had taken root after the incident the previous Christmas.

“Why can’t I get over you, Alero?”

She looked away, breaking their intense gaze. He remained in his position, leaning on the glass door with his arms folded, his eyes still on her.

“It’s almost 6am, I better call myself a cab,” she said, her voice unsteady, glancing at the overhead clock, with the digits 5:57 flashing in red. “I want to be home before 7am.”

“What’s wrong with your car?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t drive. Destiny came over to my place earlier and gave me a ride here,” she said, reaching for her handbag and throwing in her things that lay scattered on her table; a half drunk bottle of water, a magazine, and uneaten wraps of candy. “Syf is already here somewhere. He’ll be covering for me for a few days and is anchoring the morning shift at 7. But I can’t wait till 7 before I leave. It’s been a long day...a long night.”

“I could drive you,” Bonju offered. “I wouldn’t want you calling a cab so early in the morning. Not to mention there might not be many about on Christmas Day.”

“Oh, there’ll be taxis about,” she chuckled, rising to her feet and hoisting her bag on her shoulder.

“I insist,” he said, his narrowed eyes conveying that he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

After a brief hesitation, she shrugged. “Okay.”

“Let me dash downstairs to get my keys. Do you want to come with me?” he asked, trying not to allow the accelerated beating of his heart carry in his voice.

The swift shake of her head let him know she wasn't in a hurry to be back in his living space. “I'll meet you in the car park.”

And so they did, fifteen minutes later, and as she got into the passenger seat of his car, all he could do was pray for restraint and self-control. Because all he wanted to do was take her into his arms...and never let her go.

## **Alero**

As the car pulled out of the park, she hugged herself, her thick sweater not doing enough to ward off the tremble of her body from the car's aggressive air conditioning, the dry but cool harmattan morning, and her keen awareness of the man in whose car she sat. Driving down Ajoye Adeogun Street, she kept her eyes trained on the elaborate Christmas decorations that bedecked the street from the roundabout at its beginning all the way to its end, anything to distract herself from stealing glances at Bonju, or being hypnotized by his rich perfume. It wasn't the Calvin Klein one she knew, but a deeper, richer fragrance, with cinnamon and tobacco notes, which still left her feeling heady. What had she been thinking accepting to be in such proximity with him? She could only hope traffic would be light and they would quickly get to her estate, because she wanted...needed...to keep him at arm's length.

If she wanted to keep her sanity.

“So, what are you up to today?” he asked, as he turned on to the Lekki Expressway.

“I don't have anything planned,” she answered, keeping her eyes on the road ahead. “I declined my mother's invitation to spend the holiday with her in Sapele, and Destiny and his family are probably headed to Badagry as we speak.” She shrugged. “I'll probably just spend the day sleeping and watching TV.” She turned to him. “And you? I'm sure you have plans.”

He shook his head as their eyes held. “No plans. My mother has been in Kent for almost six months, so it’s just me. Bukun invited me for dinner, but it’s unlikely I’ll go. Her mother-in-law only knows how to throw gatherings of mammoth proportion and I’m not in the headspace for a loud party.”

“You’re not spending the day with your girlfriend?” She regretted the question the minute it was out of her mouth.

“Jummai?” he answered. “We broke up before I left for London in October.”

She looked away, pleased to hear it, but hating the glint in his eyes she was sure was from his amusement at her question. “That’s a shame. You looked good together.”

He returned his attention to the road, and the rest of the drive was in silence. But even in the silence, even without him saying a word, by the time he drove into her estate twenty minutes later, the steady thump of her heart at the start of the journey had become a chaotic staccato, pounding so loud she feared he too could hear it in the silence of the car.

“Here we are,” he said, pulling up in front of her apartment block, smiling up at the building as if it were a dear, old friend. “I haven’t seen this place in a while. How ironic that this was as far as I ever got, if you discount standing out on your hallway like a chump.” He turned to look at her. “You never did invite me in.”

“You can come up if you want,” she answered, in her best attempt at nonchalance. “There’s really nothing to it. It’s just your normal, run-of-the-mill apartment.”

“Well, I’d still like to see it, if for nothing but to satisfy my curiosity.”

She shrugged, opening the passenger door when the ignition went off and the central lock clicked open. Walking ahead of him in the direction of the building’s access door, she was so nervous, her legs felt like they were detached from her body.

“Nice place,” he remarked, walking behind her into her third-floor apartment.



“Thank you,” she answered, hanging her bag on a hook by the door, where hung several other bags, exhaling a breath she hadn’t even been aware she’d been holding, his presence dwarfing her small apartment the same way he’d done her mother’s tiny Ebute-Metta flat.

“It’s very *you*,” he grinned, walking into the living room, his eyes taking in the white and orange walls, multi-coloured Aztec print throw pillows, emerald green sheepskin center rug, and potted green plants at almost every turn, one of which was a cactus plant from which red Christmas baubles hung and on top of which sat a small stuffed smiley face emoji in a Santa hat. “Quirky, but stylish.” He turned to look at her. “Just like you.”

She exhaled again, her lungs feeling like they had been shortened in capacity.

He reached for one of the half-wrapped candles on the small round table that doubled as a coffee and dining table. “You made these?”

She couldn't tell if he was genuinely interested or just trying to make conversation. “Yeah, I make candles in my free time, which isn’t a lot these days. Those are candles I was trying to gift Sophie, Destiny’s wife, for Christmas, but as you can see...” she gestured at the cluttered table. “I wasn't able to finish on time. Same goes for the flowers drying on my balcony that I’d hoped to use for potpourri.” She sighed. “Well, anyway, this is it for the living room, and the kitchen is over there,” she pointed opposite where they stood. “The only bedroom is over there,” she pointed down the hall. “And that’s it.”

He said nothing in response, his eyes still on her, such that she started to doubt if she’d imagined giving the rushed verbal tour of her apartment.

“Why did you do it, Alero?” he asked, his voice barely audible. He didn't have to explain what it was. She knew. They both knew. “I was so in love with you. I’d been in love with you for more than half of my life. Why did you hurt me the way you did?”

And the age-old indignation rose to its fore. “Because you also hurt me. However badly you felt last year, I felt a thousand times worse after what you did to me that last term of school.”

## Bonju

“Oh, for crying out loud! Enough with that last term of school already!” he retorted. “We were just silly kids, Alero. What did I do that was so horrible, it deserved your plotting revenge for twenty whole years? I didn't get you pregnant or run away leaving you with a kid to raise by yourself. People had sex all the time! There was no big deal.”

“It's easy for you to say, because you weren't the one who couldn't walk two feet without people whispering, gossiping, or pointing. You weren't the one whose life got completely upended, the one made a complete laughingstock!” she yelled.

“You're the one who made it worse by calling that damned radio station! What did you think was going to happen after you dedicated to me a diss track on the radio, while at the same pretending to be someone else? Did you think it was going to make things any better? Well, newsflash, it didn't!” he yelled back, trembling in his own rising agitation. “And for your information, you're not the only one who suffered. From the moment I made the mistake of admitting what happened to Demola and Folarin, I could barely sleep, eat, or even function. I hated myself so much, I couldn't even look you in the eye! I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror.”

“You hated yourself, but everything about your life still went on as normal,” she threw back at him. “It took me years to scrape back a semblance of any normalcy in my life. It took me years to pass university admission exams, and even when I got there, I couldn't settle down well enough to get decent grades, scraping through by the hair on my teeth from start to finish! And I couldn't trust another man enough to come near me to form any kind of relationship. My whole life unraveled, and it's all because of you!”

He deflated, finally hearing, finally grasping, finally understanding her anger, finally understanding why she had nursed the grudge and hurt for so long.

“And the worst part,” she cried, hitting him on the chest, first with one small fist, and then the other, “wasn't even the gossip or the finger-pointing.

It was you turning your back on me. That afternoon in class, when you walked away after I tried to talk to you, that was the worst part of it all.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, a quiver in his voice as his eyes held hers, imploring, pleading. “I never wanted to hurt you. God, I was so in love with you, and what I did haunted me every single second of every single day. I never stopped thinking about you, dreaming about you, loving you...” His voice drifted off as he realized, as he accepted, that he still did. “I love you, Alero. I never stopped...not even when I wanted to.”

She stopped hitting him, and they stood there, all the layers of angst, resentment, and bitterness that had built in twenty-one years, falling on the floor around them, like leaves off a tree. For as many times as he had tried to stop loving her over the years, all he’d done was keep on falling, each time harder and deeper than the last. As their eyes held, as his imploring ones held hers, it felt like the world had stopped on its axis, the space between them no longer an impenetrable barrier but now an open door, one on whose threshold they both stood. Her hands, still on his chest, raised to his face, her eyes still holding his. And he needed no further prompting. Claiming her lips with his, his hands encircled her waist. As they kissed, he knew this was different from any of the other times.

She had stolen his heart anew...and he didn't want her to ever give it back.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX – SOMEWHERE ONLY WE KNOW



*Is this the place  
We used to love?  
Is this the place  
That I've been dreaming of?*

DECEMBER 2020 – JANUARY 2021

## Alero

IT WAS THE FOURTH DIVE. It was the deepest dive.

She thought she loved her apartment - the charming, little space she'd gotten for next to nothing and decorated with all her whimsy - but over the next few days, cocooned there with the man she loved, she fell in love with the place a whole lot more.

She fell in love with *him* a whole lot more.

It was better than the last time - when he'd been guarded. It was better than the time before that - when she'd been guarded. It was better than the first time - when they'd been much too young. This time, there were no guards, no reservations, no walls. This time, there was no holding back, both of them ready for the deep dive, and dive deep they did. Making love, as their eyes held each time, it was more than just a coupling of bodies, it was a union of souls, two souls that had been joined when they were barely

formed, two souls that had reconnected after so much ugliness, angst, and pain.

Two souls that had found their way back to each other.

From spending the rest of that Christmas Day in her bedroom, only coming up for air to receive the Chinese takeout they'd ordered for dinner, both of them eager to make up for lost time, they spent the next few days rediscovering each other, their intimacy transcending the physical as they talked into the wee hours of the morning every day, addressing their demons, talking about their dreams, sharing parts of themselves they'd never had the courage to share with any other person.

"I fell in love with Alero in 1998, that Sunday afternoon at that the family picnic," he said, propping his head with his hand as he lay beside her on their third night together. "But now, I find myself falling deeper in love with Divine."

Propping up her head with her hand, such that they were eye level, she smiled at him, his statement reflecting everything she was feeling. While she had fallen for the teenage Bonju, the suave boy with the nice accent and nice eyes, who loved the same kind of music she did, and who sure knew how to kiss, she had fallen hopelessly in love with the man he had become, and not just because he was so much sexier and more attractive. This Bonju was kinder, smarter, and, now, without any holds barred, so much more emotionally available than his younger self had been. This Bonju was a better man. And it also didn't hurt that he was also a much better kisser, or that he made her body explode with the kind of insane ecstasy she'd thought was exaggerated in books and movies. This Bonju was the real deal. Bonju the kid had hurt her, but she knew Bonju the man never would...again.

And she was ready to trust him with her heart all over again.

But she knew it was the reverse for him. Alero had been the dependable one, but Divine had hurt him. And she wanted, with all her heart, to let him know he could also trust his heart with her.

“I used to torture myself with images of you happily married to some boring guy, with two kids, a dog, and a white picket fence,” Bonju said, smiling at the memory. “For twenty years, the thought of you being with someone else ate me up like a cancer.”

She placed her hand on his face, not wanting to tell him how *all* thoughts of him had eaten her up like a cancer, never wanting to remember that dark period of her life. He placed his hand over hers as it stroked the interplaying smoothness and bristle of his skin and cropped beard. Guiding her hand to his chest, he placed it on the spot right above his heart.

“But despite all those thoughts and fears, this is where you’ve always been,” he said. “Where you’ll always be, Alero.”

A coy smile played on her lips. “I thought you said you were falling in love with Divine.”

“There’s more than enough space for both of you,” he grinned, lowering his face to hers, his body enveloping hers.

As they melted into each other, in a perfect opus of stillness and rhythm, hunger and satiation, ragged gasps and breathlessness, she knew she had found her heaven in him.

A few days later, she packed a bag of her things and followed him back to his new place. Walking with him into the master bedroom, she was, on the one hand, thrilled to be back there with him, but on the other hand, mindful of the horrible memories from his mother’s house from exactly a year before.

“This place looks better with you in it,” he said, cupping her face and kissing her. “Maybe I can finally unpack and get myself settled now that you’re here.”

She smiled through the kisses, tickled by the suggestion, by his unmasked desire to have her there with him, by the feel of the hard thumping of his heart against her throat. “Maybe you should.”

Pulling away such that their lips were no longer touching, but not far enough for their breath not to be intermingled, for his every exhalation not to be her inhalation, his gaze remained pinned on her.

“I love you, Alero,” he said, brushing his lips against her temple, the first time he would say those words in exactly a year. “You have bewitched me body and soul,” his lips traced her cheekbone.

She smiled, recognizing the words from the movie adaptation of her favourite Jane Austin book, *Pride and Prejudice*, remembering the day she’d read to him the chapter of the book where the two protagonists, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, finally sheathed their swords and professed their love for each other.

“And I love you, I love you, I love you,” he continued saying, his lips still trailing her face.

“I love you, my very own Mr. Darcy,” she said, rubbing her nose against his.

They remained like that, their foreheads touching and her arms circled round his neck, their gaze not breaking, the only sound coming from the gentle purr of the air conditioning unit.

“My heart won’t be able to survive getting broken again,” he said, his eyes still holding hers, imploring. “I don’t think I’ll be...”

She pressed her finger against his lips, silencing him, not even wanting him to further articulate the thought.

“I’m never going to hurt you again, Bonju. I promise.”

The tension in his face eased and he tilted up her chin with his finger. “And I promise I’ll never hurt you.”

As far as an exchange of vows went, that was all she could have asked for.

## **Bonju**

It felt like he was in freefall, except this time, he wasn't falling alone. This time, they were falling together, their bodies entwined in their plunge into this abyss that was their love, a love more profound and intense than it had been in the twenty-two years since its ignition.

They were inseparable, spending a few days at his place before returning, again, to hers, and, after she resumed work, moving to his apartment below the radio station, neither of them wanting to be separated even for a minute, both afraid of anything that would disrupt their state of euphoric bliss.

Euphoric bliss.

That wasn't even enough to describe how he felt. He awoke before her most mornings, and each time, he found himself unable to peel his eyes away from her face, stroking her hair to make sure it was real, that it wasn't a dream, and that she was really there lying next to him. His touch always awoke her, and he saw in her eyes as they adjusted, in the smile that formed on her still drowsy face, and in the feel of her hand on his chest, that she, too, was savouring the fact that he was lying there beside her. She loved him just as deeply as he loved her, and that was what made this time so, so much better.

It didn't take long for the people around them to pick up on the fact they were now a couple. Destiny had greeted them with a wide grin on his face when he'd walked into Alero's studio on his first day back at work, his delight evident, a sentiment shared by the other members of their radio family. Walking down the hallways with her hand in his, pulling her in for a kiss when they were in the elevator, regardless of who else was in the lift car with them, sitting so close to her every night they dined out that their bodies were almost fused into one, falling asleep and waking up to the smell of her hair and the feel of her skin, not being afraid to show her all of him and to see all of her, made everything more special now. Being with her felt new, it felt old, it felt exciting, it felt comfortable, it felt thrilling, it felt calming, it felt scary, it felt safe. It felt like everything he'd known it would...and like nothing he could ever have imagined.

Later in January, they were invited for dinner at Emeka's house, and it was a marked difference from the last time he had taken her there. This time, she was more relaxed, smiling and laughing freely as they talked about everything from Kanye West's shot at the United States Presidency, to Megxit, to Jada Pinkett Smith's entanglement with August Alsina. Even when Emeka's sister, Ijeoma, joined them with her boyfriend, Emeka's



Italian agent, Massimo, Alero was nowhere as closed and guarded as she'd been the last time.

As they prepared to leave, Erin pulled her into an embrace. "It's nice to *finally* meet you, Alero."

And her meaning was lost on none of them, because, in truth, they were, indeed, meeting her for the first time.

On the last Friday of January, Bonju and Alero set off for Abuja for Omoruyi's fortieth birthday party. The first person in their set to turn forty, it was understandably a big deal, and Eva was pulling out all the stops to throw a big party to mark her husband's landmark birthday. As they got ready in their hotel, standing in front of the mirror in their suite's hallway, Bonju adjusted the lapels of the black leather jacket he wore over a black t-shirt and black pants, hoping his attire would suffice for the party's Grown & Sexy theme. But before he could further contemplate his outfit, the door to the bedroom opened, and Alero walked out in a black lace dress that hugged every single curve of her body. Lined with nude fabric the same colour of her skin, with a plunging neckline that dropped all the way down to her sternum, and a high slit that stopped barely an inch under her hipbone, she was the very definition of the theme.

"You like it?" she asked, inching beside where he stood by the mirror as she fastened on teardrop ruby earrings. "Is it too much? I think it's too much. Nabila convinced me to get the dress, but I think it's too much. I don't even know why I agreed to get it because it's so not me..."

He smiled as she rattled on, watching as she arranged the long locs her hair had been twisted into. Keane's *Somewhere Only We Know* was playing from the TV in the lounge area, and, looking at her, his heart swelled with the gargantuan quantum of love he had for her. And that was when he knew he would ask her to marry him again. He had lost all the lingering fear after what happened the last time he had, and he was never more grateful for his late father's foresight, for the gift of the ring he had left him. Unlike the last time when he had proposed on a whim, Bonju decided he was going to wait till he had the ring. He was going to do it right this time.

“You don't like it?” she asked, her eyes wide in anticipation of his verdict. “I brought along another dress I could change into.”

“It's perfect,” he answered, kissing her on the gentle slope of her neck. “You're perfect.”

Because she was perfect...in every single way possible.

“You guys are giving me whiplash,” Nonso said to Bonju later that evening when the party was in full swing at a banquet hall in Maitama. Having just welcomed their daughter weeks before, Ikenna and Tomi hadn't made the trip to Nigeria for the party, and, with Alero engaged in conversation with Bioye at the other end of the room, Bonju was happy to be Nonso's drink buddy for the evening. “Are you two together or not?”

Bonju chuckled, raising his glass of champagne to his lips. “We're together,” he answered. “The last time, well, let's just say we were having a rather long intermission.”

“I'd say,” Nonso smirked, his eyes flitting from Bonju to where Alero stood across them. “Well, I'm glad to hear. Shame about that girl you introduced me to, though. What was her name? Jummai? Very attractive woman.”

Bonju raised a brow and smiled. “If I didn't know better, I'd think you were interested. That reminds me, I haven't seen Ogonna around. She didn't come with you?”

“I'm not interested in Jummai,” Nonso scoffed. “Am I not allowed to notice a beautiful woman?” He shrugged. “About Ogonna, she changed her mind about coming at the last minute. I would tell you why, but I think Bioye would be in a better position to.”

Not wanting to pry, Bonju was glad when Abolore walked up to join them. Having just come out of his own dramatic romantic episode, Bonju had absolutely no desire to be privy to anyone else's. As they discussed Abolore's recent decision to join the race for his party's Senatorial ticket for Oyo Central, Bonju's eyes kept straying to where *his* heart stood several feet away, his heart in human form. Glancing at his watch, he wondered just how soon would be too soon to make their getaway.

## Alero

“Aww, bless,” Bioye gushed, looking from Alero to Bonju, where he still stood with Nonso and Abolore. “You two have been cutting eyes at each other all night.”

Alero flushed, taking a sip of her sunrise cocktail to mask the involuntary smile on her face, a smile that bubbled from the core of her stomach whenever any reference to Bonju was made, more so when it was any reference including her. She still had to pinch herself to be sure it all wasn't one long-drawn mirage, a dream she would soon wake up from. And that evening, especially, with him all shades of sexy in black leather, she was so chuffed that she could finally call him hers.

“I'm really glad,” Bioye continued. “When I saw you two at Ikenna and Tomi's wedding, something just didn't seem right. But now,” her smile broadened. “I can finally see it in your eyes.”

Alero looked at her, understanding fully well what she meant. At the Ibadan wedding reception, she had been present only in the flesh, her heart and mind at war. But now, her love for him was seeping through her every pore and couldn't be contained even if she tried.

“Lovely party, by the way,” Alero remarked. From the moment they'd set foot in the hall with its burlesque-styled décor - red tapered draping that gave the effect of being under a canopy, tall vases with large red roses and black feathers, floating candles in lace-wrapped glass bottles as center-pieces on tables, and white pearls strewn across red runners - it had Bioye's signature all over it.

“Eva wouldn't let me say no, especially now that I live here in Abuja,” Bioye answered, with an exaggerated eye roll, when it was clear that she had probably enjoyed the planning and coordination even more than Eva and Omoruyi had. “With my book release coming up soon, it was really a stretch for me to handle, but I'm glad everything came together nicely in the end.”

“Book release?” Alero echoed, intrigued.

Bioye nodded and grinned. "I'm self-publishing my first book. *Adura's Mask* . It releases on Valentine's Day."

"That's amazing! Congratulations!" Alero said, raising a glass to her. As someone who'd had the privilege of seeing a dream come to fruition, she was more than happy for her old classmate for achieving the feat.

"And congratulations to you and Bonju," Bioye said, smiling as she raised her glass at her, just as Zinna and Ogugua walked up to where they stood. "Here's to another Malomo High wedding happening soon."

"Here, here to that!" Zinna exclaimed, raising her glass as well.

"Cheers!" Ogugua chimed in, doing the same.

Even though she didn't want to jinx things, Alero was unable to keep from smiling as she clinked glasses with them. Because, from the very bottom of her heart, that was what she wanted.

Forever with Gbonjubola Adalemo.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN –

### STRONG



*Excuse me for a while  
Turn a blind eye  
With a stare  
Caught right in the middle*

**FEBRUARY 2021**

### **Bonju**

HE RUBBED HIS EYES, seated in Federal Palace Hotel's Ancestors Bar, an apt name for the meeting he was about to be subjected to. After a long-winded meeting with Inyang Ette, with Kamson reiterating everything they'd said to the director the three goddamned times they'd already met before, all they'd gotten for their effort had been a few grunts, a few nods, and a 'we'll see'. As if that wasn't bad enough, Dogo Jatau had cancelled their appointment last minute. Bonju had refused to think his failed relationship with the Acting Chairman's daughter was the reason behind the man's attitude, which had done a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree swing in the last few months, but after yet another cancelled meeting, he couldn't help but wonder if that, indeed, was the reason for it. And now, having been summoned for a 'family meeting' by his father's cousin, Uncle Kola, his already awful day was looking to get even worse.

"He's here," Kamson said, his eyes on the glass doors behind Bonju, as he rose to his feet.

Bonju stood and turned around, still not understanding why they had chosen to meet in such a public place. A few years younger than Bankole, Kola Adalemo was no spring chicken, but as he walked into the exquisite lobby, in an impeccably tailored *Senator* kaftan, his back rod-straight and his lean physique a testament to the hours he still committed to the gym, he looked twenty years younger than his eighty-one years of age. Bonju bowed in greeting, touching his toe in deference.

Kola patted his back in acknowledgment and nodded at Kamson, before taking his seat, his eyes flitting around the room. "Where are Babawale and Bolu? I asked them to meet us here."

Bonju and Kamson exchanged a bewildered glance. Babawale and Bolu? Meeting them there? Bonju wasn't sure how wise an idea that was.

"I summoned you all, because this has to stop," Kola said, noticing the looks on Bonju's and Kamson's faces. "How can blood brothers be dragging each other like this? Can you imagine what would happen if the press gets wind of all this? It would destroy Bankole's legacy, just like that!" He snapped surprisingly still nimble fingers.

Before either Bonju or Kamson could respond, Babawale and Bolu walked in through the glass doors. Trim and athletic in a red logo-emblazoned Gucci tracksuit, black Gucci loafers, and Gucci aviator sunglasses slid on top of his bald head, Babawale was a walking billboard for the brand. The only thing out of brand was the Rolex Platinum Diamond Pearlmaster on his wrist, a watch Bonju recognized from their father's collection. Gritting his teeth to control his rising rage over the fact Babawale had helped himself to their father's personal effects in the short time before they conveyed his body home, it took everything for him to rise with Kamson, in greeting. Bolu, on the other hand, was nowhere as well presented, his distended stomach stretching his Ralph Lauren polo shirt to its limits.

"As I was saying," Kola continued, after all pleasantries had been exchanged. "This madness must stop. How can two of Bankole's biological sons be pitched against each other? How can it be a case of Babawale versus Gbonjubola? Adalemo versus Adalemo? This is madness!"

“Bankole expressed his wish for Gbonjubola to take over from Babawale. It’s as simple as that,” Kamson answered.

“I’m aware of that. I am also aware of the fact that compromises can be made,” Kola answered. “Bankole must have just wanted Gbonjubola back at Oceadrill. Why don’t the brothers simply find a way to work with each other?”

“Forget about it, Uncle Kola,” Babawale retorted, glaring at Bonju. “I can never work with this backstabber, this snake trying to take from me what is rightfully mine as our father’s first son.”

“This is not a matter of inheritance, but competence,” Bonju answered, holding his brother’s icy gaze.

“What are you trying to imply? That you are more competent than I am?” Babawale demanded, before turning to their uncle. “You see what I mean, Uncle Kola? You hear the kind of things that come out of his mouth? This redundant fool who was been doing nothing but gambling his money away on bitcoin and women in England?”

“A redundant fool who can buy your company many times over, based on its current valuation,” Bonju retorted, his own temper also rising.

“If you’re so wealthy, why are you so interested in this position?” Babawale yelled. “Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is, and buy the company then?”

“I’m interested because our father knew that would be the only way to save Oceadrill from the path of destruction you’ve taken it on for a decade. And I wouldn’t spend a single red cent on the business in its current state, as that would be throwing money down the toilet!”

“Both of you, enough,” Bolu entreated, but his dancing eyes showing he was enjoying the exchange much more than he ought to have. “Wale, it’s not nice to call Bonju a redundant fool. Just because he was idle in the U.K., and betting on wild and risky currency schemes, doesn’t make him redundant.”

“Enough! From all of you!” Kola bellowed, glaring at the men, one after the other. “Is this the kind of behaviour you intend to carry to the AGM? Name-

calling and insults? That's what you want to show the company's shareholders, the press, the outside world? God rest his soul, but your father was a mischievous and manipulative man. He must have known the confusion a declaration like this would cause. But I will not allow it. Not on my watch. We are going to find a solution to this imbroglio before that AGM, if it's the last thing I do on this God's green earth."

"Brown now, with global warming," Bolu chuckled. "And you know you'll probably outlive us all, Uncle Kola."

*Speak for yourself*, Bonju wanted to interject, especially as Bolu looked closer to a heart attack than anyone else on that table. But he opted, instead, to hold his peace.

"No problem, Uncle Kola. I hear you," Babawale said. "And you're correct, maybe dialogue would be a better means of resolution." He threw a caustic look at Kamson, as if to imply their father's long trusted legal counsel had failed by not suggesting that. "I would have invited you all for lunch tomorrow, but Tolu and I are renovating our house. Maybe we could meet at a neutral location later in the week? Somewhere moderated by a non-family member, for neutrality?"

Bonju's brows furrowed as he observed his brother, not trusting him as far as he could throw him, his suggestion as suspect as everything that came out of his mouth. But from the wide smile on Kamson's face, and the nod of Uncle Kola's head, it was an invitation that was music to their ears. Bonju tried to catch Kamson's attention, to convey to him that any such meeting would be a horrible, costly mistake, but from Kamson's wide eyes when he finally did, the older man conveyed the non-verbal message that declining was not an option.

When Babawale, Bolu, and Uncle Kola had left, Kamson turned to Bonju.

"A meeting will give us a better chance to get into Babawale's head," the older man said, tapping his temple. "The best battles are won by perfectly understanding one's adversary."

Bonju shrugged. "It's just as well that this meeting isn't happening tomorrow. I'm having lunch at my mom's."



Kamson's eyes widened. "Omere is back in town?"

"Two days ago," Bonju answered, nodding. "Just when I'd started to think she'd decided to make Sandgate her new home."

Kamson beamed. "And you're taking this girlfriend of yours that I am yet to be introduced to? Have they met before, Omere and your lady?"

Bonju's smile waned, not having told Kamson of the colourful history the two women in his life had. "A couple of times."

A couple of disastrous times.

All he could do was pray this time went much better than any of the others, and that the women he loved could start anew on a brand-new slate.

"And you'll meet her soon as well," he nodded, his smile returning. "Maybe lunch next weekend?"

"Lunch next weekend - Sunday preferably - sounds brilliant!" Kamson grinned. "I'm looking forward to it already."

## Alero

She wrung her wrists as the car turned into Reeve Road, the last time she had made the journey there, in that same car, fresh in her mind. If there was one thing she wished they could avoid, it was this visit.

But, alas, they couldn't.

She exhaled, trying to allow Level 42's *Something About You* that was playing from the car's sound system soothe her. As far as music went, it was a much better omen than the song that had played the last time they'd made that drive there.

"Don't be nervous, babe," Bonju said, patting her on the thigh as the car approached the imposing steel gates that reflected back the bright afternoon sun.

Turning to look at him, from the way he was chewing his bottom lip, he would have done well to give himself that advice as well.

“Did I tell you about yesterday’s meetings?” he asked, as the gates slid open. “The meetings we were supposed to have before the one with my father’s cousin, Uncle Kola?”

Alero looked at him, her furrowed brows less from curiosity and more from being aghast that this was the time he had chosen to share that update.

“Yesterday was a disaster,” he went on, as he drove into the compound. “I think Inyang Ette has pitched his tent with Babawale, and as for Dogo Jatau, it’s the third consecutive meeting he’s blown us off. It’s not looking great.”

“But you have about eight of the directors on your side already,” she repeated what he’d shared with her about where he stood in the race with his brother. “That’s half the board, isn’t it?”

“Just about,” he answered, pulling into the same spot he’d parked that Christmas of 2019, and even when he’d brought her there in 1999. “But voting will be open to shareholders outside the board, and let’s not forget that Dogo, as the Chairman, will have the casting vote in the event of a tie. I was really hoping to have him on my side.”

“You’ll be fine,” she said, covering his hand with hers. “I have one hundred percent confidence in you, and I’m certain the other shareholders will too.”

“We’ll find out in a few weeks, I guess,” he said, sighing again, raising her hand to his lips. “And don’t worry about my mom. Let’s just do things the way we discussed, and I’m sure you two will be chatting like old pals in no time.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, looking at him with wide eyes. “Maybe it’s not a good idea for me to be with you for this first meeting with her. Maybe it would be best for you to see her alone today and throw in a good word for me.”

“I’ve thrown in all the good words possible every time I’ve spoken with her on the phone,” he chuckled, leaning to kiss her cheek. “Besides, there’s no better time than the present.”

Getting out of the car, her heart raced as Bonju walked across to where she stood, took her hand, and led her to the solid oak doors. Tightening her grip,

she smiled as she remembered him leading her in the same way, the first time he'd brought her. But as memories of the last time she was there, that December 2019 afternoon, assaulted her, when she had been less focused on the man holding her and more on the plan she was hatching, her smile faded, vanishing completely as vivid memories of her verbal tirade flooded her head. When the door was opened and they were ushered in, her heart was thumping so loud and aggressively, she feared it would beat itself right out of her chest. Clutching the large bouquet of white and yellow roses, she squeezed Bonju's hand so tight, she wasn't surprised to hear him wince. And when the familiar rose and vanilla smell greeted them as they walked into the living room, she realized, with trepidation, that there would be no last-minute opportunity to compose herself before appearing before the great Omere Adalemo.

Because she was already there, waiting for them.

"My love!" Omere called out to her son, her voice with the velvety depth of a seductress forty years younger, with a firmness that snatched its listener's attention - all of it.

"Hello, gorgeous!" Bonju grinned as he walked into his mother's arms.

Alero stood back as they embraced, trying not to watch their intimate moment. But her curiosity got the better of her, and as her eyes drifted to the pair, her heart smashed against the wall of her chest as they met Omere's watching her from over Bonju's shoulder.

"Good afternoon, Ma," Alero genuflected, her lips stretching in an unnatural smile.

Bonju pulled apart from his mother and stepped back, putting his arm around Alero's shoulder, his smile a lot less forced than hers. "Mom, you remember Alero, don't you?"

Omere nodded, the smile she'd had upon first sighting her son now completely gone. "How could I forget?"

Alero dropped her eyes, the older woman's meaning not at all lost on her. Unlike their last meeting when Omere had been warmer and more congenial than their dreadful first meeting, this time, there was nothing

warm or congenial about the atmosphere in that living room. This time, there was a hardness in Omere's eyes much like the first time they had met in that same living room almost twenty-two years before, worsening the foreboding that had been stirring in Alero's stomach since Bonju suggested the visit.

"This is for you, Ma," Alero stepped forward and handed her the bouquet.

Omere made no move to accept it. Instead, her eyes swept all the way from the locs of Alero's hair, down her red and white cap-sleeved cotton dress, to her petite feet strapped in white gladiator sandals, and back up to her locs, in a not-too-flattering once over. "Thank you. You can drop it over there." She waved her hand at the credenza, before sitting on a plush, high-backed, armchair in a rich burgundy velvet. With highlights now in amber and honey blond tones, her hair was secured in a tight bun away from her face, which didn't soften her face like the layered waves from thirteen months before, or even the sharp bob from two decades before. This hairstyle, though flattering, gave her face an unapproachability that hadn't been there before. That, alongside the deep furrow of her brows and the downward curve of her glossy scarlet lips.

Bonju took the flowers from Alero, dropped it on the glass and walnut wood credenza, and led her to the sofa, correctly guessing she wouldn't sit uninvited, and seeing that his mother wasn't about to issue any such invitation.

"You look great, mom. Even better than the last time I saw you in December. And there I was, thinking you were going to make a permanent home there in the house by the sea."

"So that I can drop dead like your father? Heaven forbid!" Omere scoffed. "It served its purpose as a place to hide away for a while and clear my head. But now, I'm back here, where I belong." Then turning to Alero, she arched a brow. "I'm surprised *you* have the nerve to show your face here. If you weren't with my son, I would have had the guards pick you up and throw you right out of my house. "

## Bonju

He shut his eyes, disappointed by his mother's hostility, despite her promise to let bygones be bygones. "Mom, this isn't what we agreed."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Alero give him a sharp look, but he kept his gaze on his mother instead.

"I didn't agree to anything with you," Omere said, lifting a wine glass from the side table. "I only accepted to let you bring her here. I didn't tell you I wasn't going to express my displeasure."

"Ma, I'm really sorry about the way I behaved the last time I was here," Alero said, sitting forward in her chair. "I acted despicably, and I deeply apologize. I'm truly sorry."

"Sorry indeed!" Omere laughed, a dry, mirthless sound. "Sorry for humiliating my son in front of his relatives? Sorry for throwing in my face my welcoming you with open arms, even though you are no way suitable for my son?" She shook her head, still laughing. "Oh, Bonju, the things I accommodate because of you. Because explain to me why I must sit here with vermin like her, when I could be enjoying a nice afternoon with my you, or at the spa, treating myself to a nice massage?"

Bonju shut his eyes again and shook his head, not believing how horrible a turn the conversation had taken. Determined to set her right, he leaned forward. "Look, mother..."

"I'm sorry, Ma? Vermin?"

Alero's firm voice overlapped his. Turning to his companion and seeing her reddened face, a raging mask of anger on her face had replaced the one of fear she had entered the house with.

"Alero," he said, placing his hand over hers, desperately not wanting the conversation to veer any further in the direction of the cliff it was leaning towards.

"With all due respect, Madam, you do not get to call me that!" Alero said, pulling her hand from underneath Bonju's. "What right do you have to call me vermin? You who come from the same neck of the woods as my parents,

the same parents you've loved to crucify? You whose relatives could barely eat with a complete set of cutlery the last time I was here? Relatives who looked like they'd rather be home, eating a more familiar meal of starch and *banga* soup than the pretentious meal they served that day?"

"Alero!" Bonju called out again. He knew his mother, and this was not the way they were going to gain the upper hand in this conversation.

"Ah, there she is! There is the street girl who showed herself that day!" The combination of Omere's wide smile and downturned eyebrows was menacing. "After hiding behind flowers and fake remorse, this is the girl I've been waiting to see."

From the flare of her nostrils and the tremble of her hands, he could see that Alero was getting increasingly agitated. He reached for her hand again, in a bid to calm her, but she brushed it off.

## **Alero**

"The only reason I agreed to apologize to you was because of my love for Bonju," she said, glaring at the older woman who, with her condescending smile, looked downright maleficent. "All I'm truly sorry about are the things I said to hurt him, the things I said to imply I didn't love him, because I do. I did, and I always have."

Bonju squeezed her hand again. "Alero, please."

Fed up with his interference, she pushed his hand away again, her glare remaining on his mother.

"But I regret nothing of anything I said to you," she continued. "As a matter of fact, I demand an apology from you...for myself, for my mother, and most especially for my father, God rest his soul. Many years ago, you attacked me in this same room when I was no more than a child, but I will not sit here and allow you do that to me again. You're no better than me. If you're trying to accuse me of aspiring too far out of my reach, need I remind you that you did the very same when you married your husband?"

This was enough to wipe the smile of Omere's face.

“This is the one you’ve chosen?” Omere turned to glare at Bonju, the chords in her neck straining. “This is the one you chose over Jummai Jatau? This gutter girl without any modicum of respect or tact? This one?” she shook her head and reached for her glass again. “Please, get her out of here before it gets ugly. Because, by God, you *know* how ugly that can be.”

Alero turned to Bonju, waiting for him to tell his mother off for insulting the woman he loved, for daring to compare her with his former lover, for being audacious enough to ask her to leave, but her heart sank when he rose to his feet and stretched his hand out for hers.

“Baby, let’s go.”

She glared at his outstretched hand before returning her gaze to Omere, who was watching them with keen interest, her returned smile barely hidden from within the glass she drank. It was a look of triumph, and it riled Alero so badly, a pool of her tears formed in her eyes. Standing, she ignored Bonju’s hand and stalked past him out of the living room, pushing open the oak doors in the hallway that led outside.

“Alero, wait up.”

Hearing his voice was the spark that detonated the bomb that had been ticking in her core from the moment Omere uttered the word *vermin* .

“Why didn't you stand up for me in there?” she demanded, spinning around to face him, her vision impaired by the tears gathering momentum in her eyes. “You just sat there and listened to her call me names...”

“That’s not true, babes. I tried to call her to order...”

“When? When did that happen, because I didn't hear it?” she cut in, her eyes wide and body trembling. “I didn't hear it when she called me unsuitable for you, or when she called me a street girl, and definitely not when she called me vermin.”

“I know my mother, and I know how fast things can go from zero to one hundred with her. I know the best way to get what we want from her, and it isn’t by squaring up against her. I understand that her words might have upset you, but she’s my mother, Alero. The least you could have done, for my sake, was to hold your tongue instead of getting all cantankerous.”

“Canta...” she began, unable to get it out, the word stuck in her throat in her disbelief.

“Babes,” he reached for her hand. “Things didn't go the way we planned today, true. Let's just go home, give it a few days, and I know what we'll need to do to make everything right.”

“What did your mother mean by ‘it isn't what we agreed’?” Alero asked. “You told me you hadn't discussed anything with her, apart from letting her know we were together. Did you talk to her about this meeting before now?”

He dropped his eyes, and she could see that, indeed, he had.

“I only pleaded with her to behave,” he answered. “I gave her a heads up that you were coming to apologize, and I made her promise not to be on the offensive, that's all.”

“Well, that clearly didn't work,” she retorted. “And Jummai? She met Jummai?”

“She never met Jummai, at least not to the best of my knowledge. Yes, they spoke a few times when we were still together, but she hasn't met her, even though she does know her father. I told you Jummai's father and mine were friends for many years.”

“Clearly, she finds her more suitable for you,” Alero said, her mouth upturned in a smile that was at odds with the tears now pouring down her face. “And you just sat there and did nothing. Said nothing.”

“Alero, I know the way to handle my mother. A few minutes longer in that living room, and there would have been wine pouring and bottles flying. Trust me when I say I know how to handle her.”

“You never have defended me, Bonju,” Alero went on, his words hollow and meaningless to her. “Not a few minutes ago, not when we were in school...”

He threw his head back and groaned. “Are we honestly back to talking about that?”



“And not when your mother insulted me and my family,” Alero continued. “Not when she called my late father a ‘born troway’. Not when she threw money in my face. You just stood there and did nothing.”

As they stood before each other, she recognized the larger elephant that had been trailing them in the twenty-two years it had been since that first incident with his mother. She recognized it as the bigger problem than even him being loose lipped with his friends when they were teenagers.

“You’ve never stood up for me,” she said, her voice so quiet now, it was barely audible. “And I don’t think I can be with a man like that.”

## **Bonju**

Her words pelted him like darts hitting their mark, right on a bullseye.

“You don’t mean that,” he said, his eyes holding hers in a prompt to get her to rephrase her words.

But instead, she shook her head. “What happens when the excitement and passion go away, Bonju? What happens when I need you to be there for me? I can’t count on you to defend me...because you never have.”

He held his head, the feeling of *déjà vu* so strong, it felt like they were right back to having *that* conversation that last time she’d been there, when she’d looked him in the eye and told him all she felt for him was a lie.

And he realised one thing.

She was never going to forgive him.

“We’re never going to get past all that, are we, Alero?” he asked, a quake in his voice as his emotions rose. “No matter how far we go, no matter how much progress we make, we’re always going to come right back to this, aren’t we?”

“Maybe we’re too different. Maybe we’re just forcing this,” she said, wiping away the tears that were streaming down her face.

But, at that point, he had just about heard enough, and he turned around and walked in the direction of the house. As he advanced away from her, he

waited to hear her call his name, waited to feel her arms flung around his back in reassurance. But he neither heard her voice nor felt her arms. All he did hear was the sound of the gates, and turning back, his heart sank as he saw her walk out of the compound.

Again.

Once again, she had broken his heart.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT –

### AGAINST ALL ODDS



*And there's nothing' left here  
To remind me  
Just the memory of your face*

#### **Alero**

SHE LAY AWAKE FOR MOST OF THE NIGHT, replaying the events of the evening - Omere's cold reception and the awful words she had thrown at her - hating that the older woman had gotten one over her, yet again.

But as the night progressed, she wondered why she'd so desperately wanted to have the last word. She and Bonju had gone to see his mother with reconciliation as the intention, and that had somehow gotten lost in the shards that the afternoon had splintered into.

As vile and nasty as Omere's words to her had been, Alero knew she had also taken things too far. And even though it still grated that Bonju hadn't defended her the way she'd wanted, even though it brought to the fore the other times he hadn't, Alero asked herself if that was enough to throw away this beautiful love they had now found, if the ghosts that still lingered from their past were enough reason to terminate this new and beautiful thing that had blossomed and fruited between them.

And the answer was no.

She didn't want to have to suffer through the pain of losing him again. She'd already had to do that more times than she cared for, and, this time,

rather than kill it, she was ready to do anything she needed to make things right.

And she knew the very first thing.

## **Bonju**

It took everything for him to pull himself out of bed the following morning, everything to muster the zeal to get dressed, everything to honour the meeting Kamson had scheduled last minute at Dogo Jatau's house that morning. But, despite never wanting to emerge from beneath his sheets ever again, Bonju had eventually pushed himself out of bed, pushed through getting ready, pushed through getting into his car and driving to Banana Island for the breakfast meeting, pushed through the haunting reminders of Alero's declaration of not wanting to be with him. As much as he wanted to bury his head in the sand and cry his heart out, there was the issue of the looming AGM to consider.

Getting to Dogo's house, he and Kamson were ushered into the expansive living room and, walking in, Bonju's jaw clenched when he sighted Babawale, Bolu, and Uncle Kola already seated, nibbling on biscuits and drinking coffee. As his eyes clasped with Babawale's, the smirk on his older brother's face was reminiscent of the condescending looks, the taunting laughter, the jeers, gibes, and insults he'd meted him as a young boy. It was obvious Babawale considered this battle already won, but Bonju would be damned if he allowed him win. And this wasn't just because he wanted to fulfil their father's wishes, but more because he wanted this win for himself.

"I'm sorry I haven't been available for the last few meetings you've requested," Dogo said, with a casual shrug. "I could lie to you and say I was busy, but the truth is I want to remain as neutral as I can until February 26<sup>th</sup>."

"That's less than three weeks away," Kamson remarked. "You ought to have picked a voting side long before that time."

"That might not even be necessary," Kola interjected. "It's the reason I called for this meeting. I believe both of them, Babawale and Bonju, can

reach a gentleman's agreement that won't involve pitching brother against brother at the AGM."

"And what do you have in mind, Uncle Kola?" Bonju asked, even though he had a good idea what the older man's suggestion would be.

"Let Babawale keep his position as MD, and you can replace Bolu as his deputy," Kola answered, his firm voice conveying he didn't expect any argument on the matter. "Bolu can assume the role of an executive director. It works for everyone."

"That's not what our father wanted," Bonju scoffed, throwing Babawale a scathing glance.

"You're also the very last person I'd want to run the company with," Babawale chuckled, taking another sip from his cup.

"And why should I be the one to give up my position?" Bolu countered. "No, that's not going to work."

"Or..." Kola looked Bonju's way. "We could leave things the way they are. We could allow Babawale and Bolu continue running the company, and you can support them in your current capacity as a non-executive director."

"That's not going to happen," it was Kamson's turn to interject. "I gave Bankole my word that Bonju's nomination as Ocedrill's next MD would be put to vote, and I intend to keep that promise."

As Kamson, Bayo, and Bolu argued, Dogo looked on, his chin propped by his fist, watching them with the kind of mild interest one would have observing petulant children bicker. And Bonju realised coming there had been a colossal waste of his time.

"I hear you're back with that sweet looking girl I saw in your bedroom when you were a kid," Babawale's gruff voice suddenly filled his ear, as his brother pulled his seat closer to his, taking advantage of the distraction in the room. "I saw you two the other night, at Atmosphere I think it was, and no wonder you lost your head over her all those years ago. That girl sure is a looker! That smooth skin, those pert little tits, those luscious lips..." He shook his head as if relishing the memory before running his tongue over

his upper lip. “The Good Lord sure did take his time with that fine piece of ass.”

Turning around, Bonju grabbed Babawale by the collar, dragged him to his feet and pushed him to the wall behind them, toppling over the coffee table before them, sending mugs, saucers, and biscuits flying in all directions. Ignoring all the emanating shouts from the shocked men in the room, Bonju raised his hand, wanting nothing but to beat his brother black and blue, to throttle him until he couldn't even register Alero's face, let alone speak her name.

“Gbonjubola! Are you out of your mind?” Kamson exclaimed, rushing to him and pulling him off a laughing Babawale.

“Look who wants to be Oceadrill's MD,” Babawale snorted, adjusting his collar. Turning to Dogo, he smiled. “Surely, this should make your decision-making much easier.”

Shrugging Kamson off him, Bonju pushed Babawale away, making his older brother stumble backwards, grabbing the refreshments tray to break his fall. Done with the whole charade, Bonju stormed out of the room and made his way outside. He was done trying to convince anyone - Dogo in particular - that he was the better choice. He'd been doing that in all seven months since his father's death, and he was done. Anyone who wasn't convinced at that point, well, wasn't convinced.

Getting into his car, Bonju's body trembled with rage as Babawale's taunts from minutes before, and Alero's words from the previous day, echoed in his ears. And even though it was easy to dismiss his brother's words as a weak attempt to taunt him, the ease with which Alero had decided to, yet again, walk away, broke him.

As he drove down Alexander Road, his phone vibrated with a call from Jummai. He frowned at the device, not having received a call from her since their last conversation the previous December. Initially tempted to ignore it, his curiosity made him swipe the answer button.

“Bonju, what did you do that has gotten the knickers of these old men in a twist?” her chirpy voice rang through once the line connected. “I saw you

speed out of the compound a few minutes ago, and there is so much arguing and shouting from our living room, I'm scared World War Three will soon break out."

He exhaled and shook his head. "I'm just fed up with all the politics."

"Understandable," she said, before pausing for a moment. "You can't have gone that far. How about I meet you at The Mocha Cauldron? It's a café on Thompson Avenue, right off Bourdillon."

"I know where it is."

"Great. How about some coffee to ease your tension? If you're anywhere as mad as these men still shouting here, you really shouldn't be driving alone."

He exhaled again, not sure if company was what he needed. But when he thought of the alternatives - driving around aimlessly until his anger abated, or going back home, to Walter Carrington or his apartment over the studio, both of which were absolute no's for him - he decided a cup of coffee with an old friend couldn't hurt.

"Sure. I'll meet you there."

And fifteen minutes later, Jummai walked into the quaint café, in a smart red shirt tucked into a pair of dress pants, looking like she was there for a business meeting and not an unplanned coffee date.

"How have you been, Bonju?" she asked, a smile on her lips as their drinks were served, a cappuccino for him and a caramel Frappuccino for her. "What have you been up to since dumping me?"

"I didn't dump you, Jummai," he muttered, suddenly thinking meeting up might not have been the smartest of ideas, because the last thing he needed was to add to his already overflowing cup of problems. "We weren't working out, and we both knew that."

She smiled and shrugged, sipping her drink, and closing her eyes as if relishing its taste. "I hear you got together with that girl from the radio station. The mixed race one. The one everyone thought you were still dating at that wedding."

The clench of his jaw was his only indication he'd heard her and, thankfully, she didn't press further on the topic.

"So, the AGM," she said, a knowing look in her eyes as she grinned at him. "It's almost here. It's almost time for your father's last wish to come to fruition."

He nodded. "I want it so bad now, I can taste it."

She leaned back in her seat and observed him for a while before she reached for her drink again. "You know I can help you with that, right? You know all it would take would be one word from me and my father's vote will be yours."

Bonju sighed, and as he looked at her, as he contemplated the option of permanently jumping out of the dramatic rollercoaster that was his relationship with Alero, as he pondered over accepting the offer Jummai was once again making him, he realized, with startling clarity, that as much as he wanted to do whatever that was needed to secure enough votes at the AGM, his love for Alero trumped it all.

And he knew he had to fight for her.

## **Alero**

Alero's palms were damp as she gripped the steering wheel of her car, parked in front of the imposing mansion on Reeve Road, waiting to gain access to the compound, not knowing if Omere would agree to let her in without Bonju in tow or, more importantly, an invitation. After a ten-minute wait that seemed more like ten hours, the steel gates slid open, allowing Alero drive through. Once inside, she navigated her way to Bonju's default parking space, which, thankfully, was vacant. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed the gift bag she had put together for Omere - candles and potpourri she'd intended to send her mother for her birthday and some rose oil she'd bottled for the dried flowers - got out of the car and smoothened the creases of her dress, wondering why she had decided to wear not just a linen dress, but in black, of all colours.



But it was too late to make any changes now. And the heady smell of rose and vanilla as she was ushered into the living room told her just how much.

Omere was seated there, deep in conversation with a middle-aged man, and the brief sideways glance she threw at Alero was the only acknowledgment of her presence. Alero stood there, not knowing whether to interrupt their conversation in greeting, or simply stand there until they were done. It was the man, who kept glancing in her direction, that finally cleared his throat and gave Omere a pointed look.

“What is it?” Omere demanded, turning to look at Alero, her stare blank. “What do you want?”

“Good afternoon, Ma,” Alero said, bending her knees lower than she had in all the times they’d met prior. “Good afternoon, Sir.”

“Good afternoon,” the man answered, his brows furrowed as he observed her. “You must be Alero.”

“Yes, Sir,” Alero answered, genuflecting again, before returning her gaze to Omere, lifting the bag. “I got you a small gift, Ma.”

Omere’s brow rose and a small smile played on her lips. “A small gift? Really? To add to the wonderful things you said to me yesterday? Or didn’t you quite get everything off your chest?”

“Ma, I’m...” Alero began, stepping forward. “I didn’t...”

“You can drop it over there,” Omere cut in, pointing in the direction of her credenza in much the same way she’d done the previous day’s flower bouquet gift, a bouquet that was conspicuously not on display. “You can go now.”

“Ma, I was hoping to speak with you,” Alero pressed, not ready to be dismissed, not after how far into the lion’s den she’d already advanced.

Omere clucked her tongue. “Young lady, you’ve already wasted enough of my time...”

“Let her talk, Omere,” the man said, making to rise. “I’ll wait in the dining room.”

“Sit down, Kamson!” Omere’s raised voice was stentorian as she glared at the man, making him immediately sink back into his chair.

Realising she had no choice but to say what she needed to, regardless of the extra pair of ears in the room, Alero inhaled deeply, steeling herself. “I’m really sorry for the things I said to you yesterday. There is no excuse for how shamefully I behaved. It was wrong of me to demand another apology from you. From the bottom of my heart, I’m truly sorry.”

“My dear girl, I have so much more important things to concern myself with than this sham of an apology. You’ve already cost my son enough!” Omere snapped, her bulging eyes and reddened face a departure from the icy apathy that was typical for her.

“Omere,” Kamson cautioned.

“Don’t ‘Omere’ me! This lowlife has cost Bonju his only chance at getting what Bankole wanted for him!” Omere yelled, rising to her feet. Putting her hand over her forehead, she exhaled. “I need a moment, Kamson. I have a splitting headache, and it’s no surprise why. I’ll talk to you later.”

And with that, she walked out of the room, brushing past Alero in a billowing cloud of chiffon, rose, and vanilla. But for the first time, it was neither her signature smell nor commanding aura that left Alero subdued, but what it was she had said about Bonju. Turning to the man Omere referred to as Kamson, Alero realized it was Bonju’s much loved and talked about Uncle ‘Dipo Kamson.

“She was exaggerating,” Kamson said, smiling at Alero. “You haven’t cost him his only chance. His best chance, maybe, but not his only chance.”

“I don’t understand, Sir,” Alero said, her voice quiet...weak. “What chance?”

“As I’m sure you are aware, Bonju is on the cusp of getting elected the next Managing Director of Oceadrill,” Kamson said, before sighing deeply. “Or at least, that was what we hoped. There has been a new development that could scuttle everything.”

“But what has that got to do with me, Sir?” Alero asked, her breathing accelerated in her confusion...in her trepidation.

Kamson held her gaze. “Because of you, Bonju no longer has the joker that could have made a difference. Because of you, he has very likely lost not just Dogo Jatau’s casting vote, but the votes of the dozens of shareholders Dogo can influence. And with the information that has just been brought to our notice, we need these more than ever now.”

As Alero stared at him, realization sank in. Jummai was Dogo Jatau’s daughter. And because of her, he had lost her father’s vote.

“You can’t just reduce Bonju’s chances to whether or not he’s dating the right person,” Alero said, the wobble in her voice belying the defiance she wanted to project. “From everything he’s told me about you, you’re one of the people who knows this the most.”

“But it’s not left to me, is it?” Kamson countered, shrugging. “If it were left to me, Bonju would have taken his place on the twenty-first floor at Oceadrill a long time ago. Unfortunately, it *does* have to come to a vote and, despite all our hard work over the last few months, it *has* come to this.”

Alero remained standing, the message he was not-too-subliminally passing thick in the air between them.

“There is a little under a month left to the AGM. It’s not a lot of time,” Kamson said, his gaze pointed. “But it’s enough time for Bonju to do the right thing.”

He rose to his feet, walked to where she stood and patted her arm. “Love is sacrifice, Alero. Do you really want to be the reason Gbonjubola loses this thing we both know he wants so much? No matter how much money he has, or how many businesses and investments he’s involved in, he will never have an opportunity like this again.”

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked, the weight of the responsibility he was placing on her shoulders bearing on her like a thousand-pound barbell around her neck. “How am I supposed to magically fix things in his favour?”

Kamson laughed, a short sound that was more like a cough, the smile on his face not getting to his eyes. “I don’t have to tell you what to do, Alero. His

mother told me things got heated yesterday and that you even left here without him. If the way he behaved when I saw him earlier this morning is anything to go by, it's safe to assume things are still, how should I put it, acrimonious between you two. All you have to do now is maintain your distance. Make no further contact." He shrugged, as if he was simply giving her directions to get down the road, and not walk away from the only love she had ever known. "That's all."

Alero swallowed back the knot in her throat and bit the inside of her mouth to keep her rising emotions from bursting forth. The next thing he would probably do was offer her money.

"Look," Kamson said, as the silence stretched uncomfortably. "We can make it worth your while. If I speak with Omere, I'm sure she will offer you enough money to keep you comfortable for a long, long time."

Unable to stop the tear from escaping from her eye, she glared at him. "And Bonju thinks so highly of you. All I've ever heard him say about you is how wonderful you are to him, how much you've supported and loved him like your own son."

Kamson's gaze didn't waver. "It's because I love him like my own son that I'm doing this. It's because I want the best for him that I'm doing this. I'm doing this because I don't want anything to stand in the way of his achieving the excellence he was born for. And if you love him like you say you do, you will do the same." He sighed and glanced at his watch, as if weary of the prolonged conversation. "Just keep your distance...and leave the rest to me."

A sudden tautness assailed her middle, the nausea she felt making her head swim. And she knew she had to be out of there...fast. Without another word, she dropped the gift bag in her hand on a side table, turned around, and walked out of the room. But Kamson's words echoed in her head as she made the drive home, the realization she was the one standing in Bonju's way, enveloping her like a fog, a fog so thick, she could hardly breathe. Did she want to be the reason he lost the critical vote? Could she live with herself knowing she had cost him something he wanted so desperately?

Would their relationship survive the inevitable regret and resentment he would feel afterward?

And as her heart sank, as her car tailgated the one in front of hers at the tollgate, she knew what it was she had to do. Even though she could already feel her heart splintering, she knew this was the only way she could really, truly love him.

By releasing him to the greatness he was born for.

## **Bonju**

He took the stairs to her apartment two at a time, impatient to see her, desperate to make up for the ugliness of the previous evening. He'd had enough time to think, enough time to understand why she felt the way he did. After the despicable way he'd acted as a teenager, the truth was she couldn't be blamed for thinking that way. She'd been right to accuse him of not defending her the two times he'd had the chance to when they were kids. But he needed her to understand that, now, he would shed the very last drop of his blood to protect her. He needed to let her understand why he'd taken a more taciturn approach with his mother the previous day, and it hadn't been him shirking his responsibility to defend her...but him desperate to protect her at all costs.

Knocking on her door, the sound of silence almost made him retreat, as there was always sure to be music playing from her apartment if she was there. But after being told by the guys at the radio station that she'd taken the rest of the day off, and after seeing her tomato red Kia Soul parked in its typical spot, he knew she was there. More especially as she wasn't where she really should have been. Back home with him.

"Alero," he called out, knocking again. "Alero, please open up."

The unmistakable sound of footsteps on the other side of the door confirmed that she truly was home, but when she didn't make to open the door, his brows furrowed as he knocked again.

“Babe, please. We both said things we didn't mean yesterday,” he exhaled, knowing he needed to narrow the statement a whole lot more. “*I* said things I didn't mean, and I'm sorry. Please, open the door.”

His heart raced as he waited, and the relief he felt as he heard the jingle of keys made him deflate, the apprehension he had come there with leaving his body like hot air out of a balloon. But his relief was short-lived when he beheld her unsmiling, impassive face as the door opened.

“Alero, let's not do this,” he said, holding her eyes. “Please, let's not do this again. Yesterday, lines got crossed and a lot of things got misunderstood...”

“Nothing was misunderstood, Bonju,” she answered, her voice clipped. “Everything was pretty crystal clear.”

“Can I at least come in, so we can talk inside instead of out in the hallway?” he asked, taking a step forward.

But she raised one hand to the doorframe, the other one holding the door itself. “I don't think that's a good idea. We said all we needed to say. You and I can't be together.”

“You don't mean that. God, you don't mean that, Alero,” he said, a tight knot forming in his chest as he searched her eyes for something, anything, to show she meant anything but what she had just said. “I'm sorry about yesterday, and I should have been more upfront with you about how I wanted to handle my mother, but that's not enough for you to say that.”

She shut her eyes and exhaled. “Bonju, we had no business thinking we could make things work now, twenty years after the last time we tried. We're too different...”

“Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me, Alero?” he yelled, his exasperation mounting. “This is madness! Let me in, so we can talk about this!”

But her grip on the door tightened, her palms whitening as they gripped the frame. “You need to leave now, Bonju. You and I have nothing more to discuss.”

“Alero, please,” he implored, his eyes reddened. “Please, don't do this to us. I gave you my heart twenty-two years ago, and I never, ever got it back.” His voice trembled, and he bit the inside of his mouth to keep from completely breaking down. “I love you. I love you more than anything. We’ve spent more than half our lives fighting our love, and it needs to stop. We can’t keep doing this! Please, don't give up on us.” He inhaled, losing the battle with his tears as a torrent broke through from his eyes. “Please, pick us this time, Alero. Please! Please, choose us. Choose us.”

She clenched her jaw and looked away. “There’s no us, Bonju. Not anymore.”

Taking several steps forward, he placed his hand on the doorframe, covering hers. “We’re soulmates, and you know that. We’ve known that since we were kids. You can’t just give up on us, Alero. Not without a fight. Not after everything we’ve already been through.”

Her red eyes had a hardness he had never seen before. “You said so yourself, Bonju. Nobody finds their soulmate at sixteen.” She shrugged and looked away. “What we had back in 1999 was an itch between hormonal teenagers, and now that we’ve gotten that out of our system, we both need to get back to our normal lives.”

“You can’t even look me in the eye and say that,” he said, now almost completely blinded by his tears. “If you really mean that, look me in the eye and tell me to fuck off. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't love me.”

She bit her lower lip, her eyes still averted. And just when he thought she had buckled, she turned to him, her stare icy. “You need to leave now.”

He deflated and his grip over hers on the doorframe loosened enough for her to pull her hand away from his. Her gaze remained unwavering, and the set of her eyes communicated her resolve, the finality of her dismissal.

“You can’t even say it. You can’t even say the words,” he said regardless, his voice breaking as he stepped back. “Well, fuck you, Alero! Fuck you!”

Her lips pursed as she closed the door, shutting out everything he thought they’d built in the last month...in the last year...in the last twenty-two years. Punching the door so hard, a sharp wave of pain rippled through his

knuckles, his hand, his entire body, his heart, he turned around and gripped the banister of the stairs, his body vibrating in his pain, hating that, yet again, he had found himself back at square one.

## **Alero**

Clasping her hand over her mouth to push back the wail that had been thrashing about in her heart, desperate for an exit, tears coursed down her face, fast and furious. She flinched at the sound of the thump on the door, and shut her eyes as she heard Bonju's footsteps retreat, her entire being reeling from the finality of it all.

## **Bonju**

Driving down the expressway, a dense numbness replaced his tears, and he navigated the road in autopilot mode, not caring if he was run over...or ran anyone over. Approaching the traffic lights at Four Points, his phone rang, and he reached for it, willing it to be Alero calling to tell him it was all one big tasteless joke, but when he saw Jummai's name on the screen, he tossed the device to the back seat, riled all over again. Clutching the steering wheel tight, he let out several guttural screams, his anger no longer directed at the woman who had hurt him, but at himself for getting exposed to that kind of pain again. As his phone continued to ring, he didn't reach for it again, not interested in talking to whomever it was that was calling, not even if was Alero. At that point, all he wanted was to be left alone.

Once on his street, tapping the censor behind his rearview mirror, his automatic gates slid open, and as he drove into the compound, he was taken aback when another car followed immediately. Recognizing Jummai's white Range Rover Vogue, he exhaled and rapped his hands on the steering wheel, in no mood at all for whatever it was that had brought her there. Deciding it was better to get her visit over with, he turned off the ignition and got out of the car.

"I've been calling you, Bonju. Why didn't you answer?"



“Jummai, I’m really not up for this. I’ve had a long, shitty day, and I’m not up for company right now.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere,” Jummai answered, looking up at him, her eyes devoid of their characteristic glint, and her mouth of its usual upturn. “I’m not here to play games with you, Bonju. So, maybe you can stop thinking with your balls and use your brain for once.”

He recoiled, taken aback.

“After meeting with you this morning, I could tell there’s trouble in paradise between you and your...your babe. She might be the one you love, but that doesn't matter to me. You might not love me now, but I’m prepared to wait,” she answered, not breaking gaze. “Because you need me, Bonju. You need me so much more than you know.”

And that was when he realized there was nothing spontaneous about her being there.

“Are you aware that your other brother, Busayo, is in town?” she asked.

He frowned. “Busayo is in America.”

“See how little you know,” she chuckled, shaking her head at his ignorance. “Busayo has been in town for over a week, and he has been courting several directors for much longer. He’s also interested in the MD position, and from what I hear, a lot of the directors, even those who’ve already promised you their votes, have been swayed in his direction.”

Bonju shook his head. “That’s not possible.”

She shrugged. “It’s no secret he was your father’s real first choice, and many of the board members and shareholders, my father inclusive, are aware of this.” She took several steps forward, until they were standing toe to toe. “But if you and I are engaged to be married, that will tilt things in your favour. If I let my father know we’re engaged, you can be assured you not only his vote, but those of the people loyal to him.”

He gaped at her, thrown, not only by the information of Busayo joining him and Babawale in the race, but also by her boldfaced proposition.

“What are you afraid of Bonju?” she asked. “You’re almost forty. What’s so difficult about making a decision that will pay you in more ways than one?”

He pondered over the question, asking himself why. He had spent more than half his life pining for a woman who had proven herself unworthy of all the emotions he had expended. If marrying Jummai would help him at least fulfill his father’s dying wish for Ocedrill, was it such a bad thing?

“You can’t just show up here and throw something this huge at me,” he muttered, suddenly lightheaded from the upheaval of emotions he had suffered in the space of twenty-four hours. “There’s a lot going on now, and I need time to think about what my next move will be.”

She was quiet for a while, before smiling and tapping him on his face. “Don’t take too long, babes. You’re already running against the clock as it is. The AGM is in a matter of weeks.”

She leaned forward to kiss him, but he stepped away from her touch, prompting another smile from her.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He remained standing there as she got into her car, as it purred to life, and as she put in reverse and backed out of the compound, wondering just how much time was enough time...

To forget about Alero Divine Gboye.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE –

### YOU SHOULD BE MINE



*You've got to fortify my love  
To fortify me*

#### **Bonju**

SITTING IN THE LOUNGE OF THE HOTEL he'd once called home, Bonju cracked his knuckles, his anxiety rising with every passing second as he sat in wait for the person he was there to see. His brother, Busayo.

“Did you know about it?” Bonju had confronted Kamson earlier that morning, after having tossed and turned all night, after Jummai's revelation. “Did you know Busayo is in town, and that he has been courting members of the board for their nomination and votes?”

Kamson had sighed and nodded. “Busayo reached out to me a few weeks ago. He had already been in touch with some directors, like Fadayomi and Marvin...”

“Marvin Iwenofu?” Bonju exclaimed, stunned to hear the name of the man who was purportedly his biggest supporter.

“And several others,” Kamson went on, sighing again. “Gbonjubola, your father never made it a secret how highly he thought of Busayo. If he'd known Busayo would consider it, he would have been Bankole's first choice.”

“So, what are you saying, Uncle ‘Dipo?” Bonju had exploded. “That I step down for Busayo? You’re supporting him now?”

“Absolutely not. What do you take me for? I’m not a turncoat, and I take exception to any insinuation of such,” Kamson had retorted, glaring at him. “I gave Bankole my word that I would support *you* , and that’s what I will do till the very end. But I also owe it to Busayo to include him as a nominee. That’s what Bankole would have wanted.”

“But you should have told me,” Bonju muttered, regretful of his outburst but still upset about being blindsided. “You shouldn’t have left me in the dark.”

“I had it in mind to tell you today,” Kamson answered. “But I see someone beat me to it.”

“How many people have we lost?” Bonju asked. “How many of the directors have we lost to Busayo?”

Kamson shrugged. “Marvin and a few others. But we still have a decent number. Inyang Ette called last night to let me know he’s on our side.”

Bonju raised a brow. “Inyang Ette that barely looked interested in anything you said on Saturday?”

Kamson chuckled and patted him on the knee. “I keep telling you not to conclude anything from their faces. These men have had a lifetime of keeping their cards close to their chest. They have it down to a science.” He observed Bonju for a few seconds, before continuing. “And, of course, we can have Dogo’s vote if we play our cards right.”

Holding the older man’s gaze, it was clear what cards, what *card* , he was talking about.

“I hear Busayo is staying at The View,” Bonju said, changing the subject, not quite ready to make any decision where Jummai was concerned. “I need him to tell me to my face that this is what he is doing.”

And that was exactly what he had done, reaching out to Busayo with the phone number Kamson gave him. And, sitting in the lounge, waiting for his older brother, Bonju rubbed clammy hands on the tailored pants of his

bespoke charcoal-grey Alexander Amosu suit, the admiration and trepidation he had felt of, and for, his elusive older brother joining forces to almost suffocate him. Exhaling several times in quick succession, he reminded himself that he wasn't a thirteen-year-old desperately trying to win the affection of his nineteen-year-old brother, but rather a grown man there to talk to another grown man...on equal terms.

"Hello, Gbonjubola," Busayo's deep baritone rang from behind him.

Turning around, as he rose to his feet, Bonju momentarily forgot all the pep talk he had just given himself, the awe he felt for his brother leaving him fleetingly tongue-tied. Wearing a simple white polo shirt over khaki pants and black sneakers, Busayo had more presence than anyone else in the room, Bonju and his ten-thousand-pound suit included.

"The boy who wants to be MD," Busayo chuckled, patting Bonju on the back. "It's good to see you."

*The boy who wants to be MD ?* The condescending dismissal was enough to erase Bonju's schoolboy admiration and give him a much-needed reality check.

"You've been in town over a week and didn't get in touch," Bonju remarked, taking his seat as Busayo did. "So, clearly not that good."

Busayo smiled, beckoning over a waiter. "I see you still have a mouth on you. And that Eton accent is still as strong as ever."

"I wasn't old enough for Eton when I left England," Bonju retorted, feeling less enamored with each passing minute.

"Or whatever posh, preppy school you did go to," Busayo chuckled, leaning back in his chair, enjoying every word of their exchange. "You know many of Ocedrill's shareholders are traditional pensioners, right? With that accent of yours, I doubt they'll be able to understand a word of what you say at the AGM."

"They'll understand me just fine," Bonju answered, glaring at his older brother. "What do you want here, Busayo? You were estranged from our father for years. You cut him off like a leprous foot, not responding the many times he tried to reach out to you."

“Oh, that’s right. I did hear you became his little minion before he died, the one he told everything,” He made air quotes in the air. “His ‘confidant’.”

“Fuck you, Busayo,” Bonju snarled. “You didn’t give a rat’s ass about the old man. The man was desperate for a relationship with you, but you treated him like crap.”

“He treated my mother and I like crap!” Busayo answered, leaning forward in his chair, all humour gone from his face. “He discarded us, trading us in for...you and your mother.”

“Oh, get over yourself,” Bonju scoffed. “The man left my mother as well, but you don’t see me still walking around with a boulder sized chip on my shoulder.”

“Maybe you and your mother were happy to live with the crumbs of his affection,” Busayo retorted. “But *my* mother taught me how not to accept being treated like a discarded shoe. There was no way he and I could ever have had any kind of meaningful relationship after what he did to us.”

“But yet, here you are, trying to take over his company.”

“Last I checked, it’s a family business,” Busayo answered. “And, also last I checked, my surname remains Adalemo. And I *am* the best choice for the role, so I’d bear that in mind if I were you and not waste any more of your time.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Busayo. This was dad’s last wish, and I’m ready to fight you and Babawale with everything I’ve got.”

“Oh, Bonju,” Busayo laughed, a sound that grated on Bonju’s nerves like nails on a blackboard. “You haven’t even worked in an office in a decade, let alone planned a well. This isn’t one of your psychedelic investment schemes. This is real life.”

Bonju rose to his feet and buttoned his jacket. “Let’s leave that for the votes to decide. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Turning around and walking away, he was tempted to take a detour to the bar to order himself a stiff drink, hating how small the short encounter with his brother had made him feel, hating that even this part of his life was

fragmenting into small pieces, hating that he no longer had Alero to call to vent about the awful day he was having...the awful days.

Back home that evening, sitting on the edge of his bed facing the glass floor-to-ceiling windows, he had never felt more bereft, his ache for Alero crushing his entire being. Looking out at the tranquil lagoon reflecting the lights from the Lagos skyline like a million tiny jewels strewn over it, he felt her presence in the room, and it wasn't just because her floral fragrance still danced around the room like a fairy in flight. She had cleaved to his body, becoming one with him, and now, without her, he felt dismembered...mutilated.

Even though his head told him they were over, very likely forever this time, to fill the hole in his heart, the part of his soul that still yearned for even if only a little piece of her, he tapped on the Tempo 92.5 app icon on his phone. Jeffrey Osborne's *You Should Be Mine* was playing and a sardonic smile formed on Bonju's lips as his mind was cast back to that summer of 1998, sitting in his room, and recording the 1986 Jeffrey Osborne album, *Emotional*. It was from the last batch of albums he'd borrowed from Alero, and as he sang the along to *You Should Be Mine*, it had been a struggle not to think about her then, not to project the lyrics of the song on the surprising friendship they had formed over music, not to think she should be his. And now, almost twenty-three years later, it was the same struggle.

Lying on his bed, he threw his arm over his face, accepting that he had a very, very long road ahead to be free of her.

# CHAPTER THIRTY –

## I DON'T WANT TO MISS A THING



*I don't want to miss one smile  
And I don't want to miss one kiss  
And I just want to be with you  
Right here with you  
Just like this*

### Bonju

THREE WEEKS LATER, AND MERE DAYS to the AGM, as he got dressed for a party at the Lagos State Government House, celebrating Governor Ibilola Olumide's sixtieth birthday, Bonju did his best to center his mind on the woman who would be his date that evening, Jummai. Even though, three weeks after her proposition, he was yet to give her an answer, he'd accepted the gift of her company. When she invited him out for coffee, lunch, dinner, or drinks, he accepted, hoping being with her would fill the vacuum that had been created in his heart. Alas, just like their first attempt at a relationship, it didn't. But unlike their last attempt, he was ready to keep trying until it did.

Standing back and looking at his reflection in the mirror, he smoothed down his black, shawl-lapel tuxedo, checking that the red pocket square Jummai had insisted he wear was in place. Even though they hadn't officially declared their relationship, by taking her as his date for the Governor's party, it was as good a declaration as any. But with a sinking feeling in his stomach, he wondered if he was even ready for that.



If he would ever be ready.

## Alero

With shaky hands, she watched the live stream of the Governor's party on a popular Instagram blogger's handle, after happening on a red-carpet picture of the two, Bonju and Jummai, looking picture perfect and synchronized in black and red. In a satin, off-the-shoulder red dress that showcased her dark skin, with a long slit that made her long legs look endless, standing tall and Amazonian next to Bonju, Alero noted, with dismay, how much better a fit Jummai was for him. So attractive a couple were they that the cameras kept cutting to them, capturing them from the moment they walked into the hall and as they made their way around and were introduced to the bigwigs in attendance. Alero watched Jummai as she worked the room, fully in her element, smiling, composed and unruffled, shaking hands with governors and other high-profile politicians like she was born to do it.

But as Dogo Jatau's daughter, she was.

And that was when Alero understood it, *really* understood it. If she'd been the one with him at that party, she would have been a quivering, quaking mess. She could see now that she and Bonju were water and oil that could never mix, no matter how hard they tried. And now, both had settled into their respective states of matter...separated forever.

Jummai Jatau was better for him.

Closing the live feed video, Alero dropped her phone on her table and wiped the tears she hadn't even known were falling down her face. Aerosmith's *I Don't Want To Miss a Thing* was playing from the studio's monitor speakers, and her mind was cast back to that rainy evening of April 1999, the song playing as the credits rolled at the end of the movie they had just watched, *Armageddon*, neither of them knowing how dramatically their relationship would change in a matter of hours, neither of them having the faintest clue about the rollercoaster they were getting on over the next twenty-two years. If only those two kids had been given a crystal ball to see what lay ahead, she was sure neither of them would have willingly signed

up for any of it. She, for one, would have insisted on going back home that night, regardless of how heavily it was raining outside. The inconvenience of heading home in bad weather would have been nothing compared to the excruciating heartache she had lived with for the most part of the last two decades.

And sitting there in her studio, as Steven Tyler belted and screamed the soul stirring bridge, she was filled with nothing but regret.

## **Bonju**

“That was such a lovely party,” Jummai said, as Bonju’s car pulled up in front of her house. “I can’t wait to see what the pictures look like. With all the people struggling to capture us, I’m sure our pictures will be everywhere.”

Bonju could only offer a stiff smile in response as he got out of the car, the thought of having their pictures plastered all over the Internet not one that filled him with excitement.

“We look too good to call it a night so early,” she said, after he had opened her door and helped her out of the car, tracing his face with her finger. “How about we go somewhere for drinks. The night is still young.”

“It’s past 10, Jummai,” Bonju said. “And I’m really exhausted.”

“Or I could go back home with you,” she insisted, her eyes holding his. “You asked me to be patient, and I’ve been patient, Bonju. But it’s been three weeks, and my parents are anxious for news.”

And he knew that he couldn’t go through with it.

“I’m sorry, Jummai, but I can’t do this,” he said, apologetic even while feeling like a heavy weight had been lifted off his chest. “It’s not right for me to be with you just for your father’s vote.”

“Who says I mind?” she protested, her hand gripping his. “I don’t mind, Bonju.”

“But I do,” he countered. “And I won’t be able to live with myself.”

Her lips formed a thin line, and she dropped his hand. “You’re making a huge mistake. The AGM is on Friday and my father is seriously leaning in Busayo’s favour.”

He nodded in full understanding of the repercussions of his action. “It’s a risk I’m ready to take, Jummai. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes narrowed and there was a tremble to her lower lip as she turned around and walked through the pedestrian opening of the large steel gate. Bonju watched her leave, standing on the street for many minutes after she had, hating that he’d hurt her, hating that he hadn’t been brave enough to tell her no from the beginning.

But driving home, alone, he felt the lightest he had felt in weeks.

*Boy, what the hell are you thinking?* He could almost hear his father’s reprimand. His father of a decade earlier would have prodded him to go ahead with the charade, if it would mean securing Dogo’s casting vote. But his father from the last year of his life, the man with whom he had shared several heartfelt moments sitting in the glass conservatory and looking out at the English Channel, would have urged him to do only the honorable thing. And marrying the lovely Jummai Jatau, a girl he didn’t love, just for what he stood to gain, was anything but honorable.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE –

### KEEP IT TOGETHER



*And my mind is spinning in circles  
And my thoughts are running wild  
And you know that I would take a bullet  
Just to save your life*

### **Bonju**

ON FRIDAY, THE 26<sup>TH</sup> OF FEBRUARY, Bonju declined Kamson's offer to ride together to The Mandarin Hotel, where Oceadrill's AGM was to take place. Standing in front of his mirror before he left home, he exhaled as he adjusted the grey, black, and red Burberry tie he wore over a crisp white shirt and a fitted, black Ede & Ravenscroft suit. The day was finally here, the day of reckoning, the day that would decide the fulfillment of his father's wishes, the day that would decide his fate.

As he made the drive to the hotel's location along the Lekki Expressway, he made sure not to turn on the radio, affixing all his attention on the cars lined up in front of him in the morning traffic. He couldn't afford to think about Alero, especially not that morning. That day, especially, was all about his future with Oceadrill...and nothing more.

Walking into the banquet hall twenty minutes later, he exchanged greetings with the directors; those who had pledged allegiance to him, those who'd made no secrets of their loyalty to the incumbent Managing Director, and those he'd heard had cross-carpeted to Busayo's side. With a smile on his face, he shook hands with all of them, and also the shareholders he walked

by, the latter of whom he considered more important, especially as he hadn't had the chance to pitch himself to many of these people with shareholding in the company, significant and otherwise. Engaging them in conversation, both those there in person and the proxies for those unable to, he answered the questions they had, many of whom only knew of him as much as was prior circulated in the agenda.

Looking across the hall, he saw Busayo doing the same thing he was, talking to the seated shareholders, his attention on each person, listening with rapt attention to whatever they had to say. In a smart navy-blue suit, Busayo cut the picture of the corporate guru he had been for over two decades. His recent resignation from the world-renown Mineshaft Drilling was now common industry knowledge, as was the global drilling company's desperation to retain him, offering him mind-blowing inducements in cash and equity to convince him to stay. From the way the people Busayo was talking to were grinning from ear to ear, Bonju could tell they were in awe of his charismatic brother, but, determined not to feel beaten before the battle even began, he made a concerted effort to include in all the conversations he was having, the things he had done for Oceadrill in the past, as well as everything he intended to do, in his informal manifesto. Babawale, dapper in a grey Hugo Boss suit with a black overcheck, was seated with Bolu, Abiodun Turner, Afini Briggs, and a man Bonju recognized as Adegbola Adedeji, Oceadrill's Head of Corporate Finance, all of them chatting as if it was another day in the office. At the other end of the hall, Dogo and Kamson were deep in conversation, both men holding the hotel's signature white mugs as they sipped on the hot beverages of their choice.

As the meeting began, Bonju took his position in the front row, flanked by Inyang Ette and Marvin Iwenofu, the latter of whom separated Bonju from Busayo. Babawale, Bolu, and Kamson - as the company secretary- and Dogo - as the acting Chairman - sat facing the room. Dogo gave the welcome address, and Morayo Allison, a senior counsel with Kamson's law firm, gave a run through of the minutes of the last meeting. As she did, Bonju's eyes followed the text in the program in his hand, even though his mind registered none of it, his heart pounding hard in his chest. A few times, he cast glances Busayo's way, and was surprised to see Busayo also

doing the same to him. Every time their eyes met, Bonju was quick to look away, not wanting his brother to see the fear and anxiety in his eyes, not wanting him to know just how threatened he was by him. Babawale, he wouldn't have lost any sleep over, but with Busayo, he knew it was going to be a harder fight.

Babawale went on to present his report, an overstated and embellished account of Oceadrill's performance in the last year, downplaying their big losses, which included the loss of even more key accounts, and listing prospective business that any discerning ear could tell would never come Oceadrill's way, given its current industry standing. Bonju shook his head as Adegbola Adedeji presented the audited reports, layering lofty projections from the planned midstream diversification over the company's current dismal financial position. Bonju grimaced, looking around the room to see if the other shareholders could recognize the presentation for what it was; a whole load of garbage. But he couldn't tell from the focused looks of the people in the room if they were buying any of it. A gifted orator with enough charm to spin falsehoods into fairy dust, Adegbola answered all questions asked with deftness and confidence, and Bonju could see why Babawale did nothing without him. But, intelligent, charming, and eloquent though Adegbola was, he was one of the first that would get the chop when power changed hands.

Because change hands, it had to.

With no amendments to the constitution, the next item on the agenda was the election of a new Chairman and Managing Director, all the other board positions running unopposed. In a last minute, and Bonju thought foolhardy, move, Bolu had presented himself as a contender for Chairman, pitching himself against Dogo Jatau. Having reverted to the previous statutory voting system instead of the cumulative one, each share of the delegates amounted to a single vote, with larger shareholders entitled to more votes, instead of the previous system that allowed smaller shareholders accumulate all their votes for a single candidate. Now, even if such smaller shareholders chose not to partake in the Chairmanship vote, they would not be entitled to any more votes than the quantum of their shares in the vote for Managing Director.

As Dogo Jatau and Bolu's pictures were projected on the big screen, it was a no-brainer for Bonju as he picked up the keypad-voting terminal that had been handed to all the meeting's participants. No matter how he felt about the man, the truth was that Dogo was the only logical replacement for the legendary Bankole Adalemo as Oceadrill's Chairman, and not his slippery worm of a brother. Without hesitation, Bonju clicked the button next to Dogo's unsmiling portrait, the same one beaming life-sized from the overhead screen. After about fifteen minutes, the pictures on the screen were replaced with pictures of himself, Babawale, and Busayo, all of them in smart suits, all of them with plastic smiles, all of them Adalemo brothers, all of them Bankole's sons, none of them willing to back down for the other.

Exhaling, Bonju replaced his deactivated keypad in its holder on the chair and looked around the hall, wondering how the seated shareholders were voting. His eyes drifted to Marvin next to him, who was hogging his keyboard like someone protecting his sheet in an important exam, a deep frown on his face in his concentration. Realizing why his father had changed the voting system from the conventional hand-raise years before, Bonju returned his attention to the large screen, in acceptance of the fact there was no way he could tell how people were voting just from sweeping the room with his eyes. Thirty minutes later, as Kamson took the microphone, the long wait was finally over.

"I am delighted to bring you the results of the elections for the 2021 Oceadrill Board of Directors. As I call out your name, please stand to be recognized," he said, reading from the tablet in his hand. "The vote for Board of Directions nominations included Chairman-Elect and Managing Director-Elect. The elected Chairman-Elect, with ninety-four percent of the votes, is Mr. Dogonyaro Matthew Jatau."

Applause followed and Bonju had to fight off the smirk from his face, following the disgraceful outcome for Bolu. Why Babawale hadn't stopped his brother from getting into the race was a mystery.

"For Managing Director-Elect," Kamson went on, his face completely unreadable. "The elected Managing Director-Elect, with thirty-seven percent of the votes," he paused for a moment, "is Olubusayo Adeniyi Alfred Adalemo."

Bonju sat, immobile, as rapturous applause broke out from the segment of the room that were Busayo's supporters, hot and cold waves coursing through his body. Looking up at the stage where Kamson stood, their eyes met, and the mild shake of the older man's head reflected his disappointment. After all the months of trying, after all their effort and hard work, they had failed.

As the agenda moved on to the appointment of an Auditor for that financial year, Bonju rose to his feet and made his way out of the hall, no longer interested in staying there till the end. He acknowledged the sympathetic waves and greetings from people he walked by, making sure not to make eye contact with any of his brothers, Busayo and Babawale especially, not interested in seeing the victory in the eyes of the former, and the indignation in those of the latter.

As he exited the hall, his eyes met with Dogo's as he stood by the coffee table with a few of the other directors, the older man's holding his in silent communication that the outcome of the vote could have gone very differently. Looking away, Bonju walked quickly out of the hall, down the lobby, exiting to the foyer and then the car park, one thing on his mind the whole time.

How quickly he needed to get the hell out of there.

Back home, standing in his father's den, a small room adjacent to the main living room, the only room that had been left untouched in the home restoration, with his hands in his pockets, Bonju stood before the portrait-sized picture of the man, tears pooling in his eyes. The image of Bankole was captured about fifteen years before his death, and as he smirked at the camera in a white tuxedo jacket with black satin lapels and a scarlet red pocket square, his salt and pepper beard and goatee neatly trimmed, his arms crossed, revealing the large, gold, signet ring with a black onyx stone that he wore on his ring finger, Bonju's heart sank to his feet.

"I'm so sorry," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

As the tears streamed down his face, he knew deep down that the outcome was exactly as his father would have wanted it. If the old man had even had a hint of Busayo's interest in Oceadrill, it would have been an open-and-



shut case. But accepting that truth did little to make Bonju feel better. He'd wanted to be the one to rescue Oceadrill, to restore the company to its glory days of old. And even though he had no doubt Busayo would do just that, his failure hurt his already bruised ego.

Pulling out the leather swivel chair, he sat on it, his eyes still on his father's portrait. And he knew it was time to go back home.

The vibration of his phone startled him awake. The room had gone considerably darker, and a glance at the time on his phone showed that, at almost 7pm, he had been asleep for a while. The frown on his face deepened when his eyes registered the name flashing on the screen of his phone.

Busayo.

He watched the phone ring for a while, tempted not to answer, not in the mood to listen to his victorious brother gloat. But he knew he couldn't run away from facing him forever.

"Yeah," was all he said, answering the phone.

"Open the gate. I'm outside."

The line disconnected and Bonju stood, wondering if Busayo was, indeed, outside the gate of what had once been their father's house. Pushing open the front door, the headlights of a car outside flashed through the slit openings of the gate, and Bonju punched in the code to open it, the furrow in his brows deepening as the silver-grey Land Rover Discovery entered the compound. As Busayo disembarked from the driver's side, now wearing a light blue shirt over a pair of jeans, Bonju realized, with dismay, that he was still in his suit from earlier in the day, complete with his tie. Reflexively, his hands moved to his neck to loosen it.

"I was looking for you," Busayo said, walking up to where Bonju stood outside the door. "Why did you leave so early?"

"I needed to," Bonju answered, not bothering with any falsities or excuses. "Congratulations, by the way."

“Thank you,” Busayo answered, his keen eyes on Bonju. “It was very close, you know. You had thirty-five percent of the votes.”

That, Bonju did not know. But not even the realization that he had lost by a mere two percent was enough to make him feel better.

“Listen, you were right about what you said the other day,” Busayo went on. “I have carried around a chip on my shoulder. I hated the old man,” he looked away for a moment, before returning his gaze to Bonju. “And I was crazy resentful of you.”

Even though it was an emotion Bonju could understand well, having felt the same way towards their younger sisters, Bukun and Bidemi, for the longest time, hearing Busayo say it struck a deep chord.

“He loved you,” Bonju said, his voice breaking. “And this is what he would have wanted.”

“But he chose you for a reason as well,” Busayo answered. “I know everything you did for Ocedrill when you worked there. I know you tried to stop the Eldabra fiasco before it happened. I know you also excelled when you worked at Fluor before then. And I know that you’re a damned good drilling engineer.”

“Please, don’t patronize me, Busayo,” Bonju retorted. “This coming from someone who, only a few weeks ago, was quick to remind me that I haven’t planned a well in almost decade, and have instead been focused on,” he made air quotes, ““psychedelic investment schemes””.

A wistful smile formed on Busayo’s lips. “What would you say if I told you how jealous I am of everything you’ve accomplished for yourself, Gbonjubola? I’ve heard about your successes in stock trading, digital currency, and venture capital, and I’m so jealous that, at the age of forty-five, I haven’t had the courage to do half of that. Heck, not even a quarter.”

Both men stood at the porch, observing each other for a while.

“Why are you here, Busayo?” Bonju finally asked, breaking the silence. “You’ve gotten what you want. Why are you here?”

“I want you to run the company with me,” Busayo answered. “Let’s clear the mess those two idiots created.” He bit at his lower lip, and Bonju saw, for the first time, his older brother’s vulnerability. “I can’t do it on my own.”

Bonju shook his head. “I’m sorry, man, but I’m leaving. I’m going back to London. There’s nothing more for me in this town.”

“Don't run away because things didn't go your way,” Busayo said, his crinkled eyes registering his disappointment. “We can fix Ocedrill, you and I. Starting with scrapping the idiotic plan to acquire that gas plant, we can purge the place of the chaos Babawale and his cohorts created there.”

“It’s a lot more than that,” Bonju cut in. “I need to leave. I’ll be happy to support you from London, but I desperately need to leave.”

Busayo said nothing for a while, before he stretched out a hand. “I’ll bank on that support.”

Bonju took his hand, but before he could return the handshake, Busayo pulled him into an embrace. As the two men hugged, Bonju wished things were different, and that they could both really tag-team to restore their father’s legacy. But, after everything he’d been through, self-preservation was more important for him.

After a quiet weekend indoors with his phone switched off the whole time, Bonju finally set out on Monday, first to touch base with Oladipo Kamson, to express his gratitude to the man for his unflinching belief in him and his dogged efforts to get him elected, and then to Gaston & Elias, a brasserie, for lunch with Destiny. With patio seating that gave the impression of dining on the streets of Paris, as Bonju sat in wait, he was reminded of sitting in wait for Destiny the first time they had met at The Admiral lounge, almost two years before. His heart raced at the memory of that evening, when he’d realized Destiny’s partner, Divine, was the same Alero he’d been in love with for years, the one for whom he had groveled only the day before. Like scenes from a filmstrip, the turbulent ride that was their relationship from the moment she replied his early morning text, flashed through his mind, the high highs of loving and feeling one with her, to the

low lows of her breaking his heart twice in a row. And he was filled with a deep sense of regret, regret for not accepting right from their reunion weekend, when she'd done everything to push him away, that they'd had no business reviving the dead bones of their relationship. But as more images of her face flashed, her icy scowls in the beginning, the flushing of her face when he told a racy joke, the smiles that lit up not just her entire face but her entire being like a bonfire had been kindled in her very core, the way she arched her back in the throes of their passion, the way she called his name with the soft pat of her lips that made the B of his name sound lower case...and he knew he could never hate her, no matter how hard he tried.

He would carry her in his heart forever.

"Hey, man," Destiny said, disrupting Bonju's reverie as he walked up to him. "It's good to see you. It's been a minute."

Bonju rose and both men embraced. "It's good to see you, too."

"I heard about the outcome of the AGM. I'm sorry, man. I tried to call over the weekend, but your phone was off."

"Thank you," Bonju answered. "I needed to tune out for a bit."

"Understandable," Destiny nodded. "I know how much you wanted it. So, what's next?"

"Not much, really," Bonju answered. "I'm going back to London."

Destiny nodded again, even though his brows were now furrowed. "Permanently?"

"Yeah. It's one of the reasons I asked to see you," Bonju answered. "I'd like to convert my equity in the station to debt. Something of a reverse swap."

Destiny's eyes widened and he leaned forward on the table with his elbows. "You're pulling out?"

"It would mean signing over a hundred percent ownership to you and Alero, and we could work out the repayment terms, spread for as long as you like," Bonju went on. "Nigel will be in touch with you and Kofo, and we can figure out whatever terms work for you, for whatever duration and rate."

“But Bonju, it’s only been a year. You can’t pull out now!” Destiny exclaimed, his eyes wide and his voice several pitches higher. “We haven’t gotten to the good part yet!”

“I have to, Destiny.”

Destiny deflated, hearing in Bonju’s tone what he wasn’t saying. “Does this have anything to do with Divine?” he asked.

Bonju studied Destiny, pondering if he knew that his sister had ripped his heart out of his chest again, chewed it and spat it right out again, leaving behind its ragged pulpy mess at his feet *again* . But if Destiny’s knotted brows and bulging eyes were anything to go by, he probably didn’t.

“It’s for the best,” Bonju said, dropping his eyes. “I’ll be here for another week to sort things out with the house and other things. After that, I’ll be gone. For good this time.”

## Alero

She stared into space, barely listening as Puddle of Mudd’s *Keep It Together* played from the studio’s monitor speakers, the bombshell Destiny had dropped in her lap detonating in back-to-back blasts in her head, in her heart, in the space all around her. Bonju was not only pulling out of their partnership in the station, he was also returning to London permanently. And that was when the last thread of hope she didn’t even know she’d been holding on to...disintegrated.

After hearing about his losing the Oceadrill Managing Director position, she’d wanted to call him, wanted to stop by to see him, but had been scared off the idea by the very likely possibility of running into Jummai there. As much as she wanted to see him to make sure he was okay, seeing him again with the woman who had replaced her would have been too bitter a pill to swallow.

As the night wore on, her despondence gave way to anger, furious with him for still going on to lose the position after the sacrifice she’d been forced to

make. If Jummai hadn't been able to secure for him her father's influenced votes, then what had been the point of it all?

As the song faded, she put on her headphones and switched on the voice input button on the audio console. "That was *Keep It Together* by Puddle of Mudd, a song from their 2009 *Songs in the Key of Love & Hate* album, and a special request from our last caller, Franklin, dedicated to his special lady, Iyabo." A sour smile formed on her lips. "It's a song about doing everything, taking a bullet and even dying, just to save love." The exact thing she had done for her own love. Exhaling, she rolled her head around her neck's axis and shook her shoulders to physically shake off her melancholy. "Up next is *Total Eclipse of the Heart* from Bonnie Tyler's 1983 album, *Faster Than the Speed of Night*. Fun fact about this album, in 2015 it was voted the third best song from the 1980s by the British public. While I'm not sure it's in my own top three, it's a top twenty song for sure. It's also a song about loving hard...but also knowing when to walk away. And that's what we all need to do, really. Know when to walk away." Exhaling again, she forced on her face a brighter smile, hoping it would convey in her voice. "This is Divine, and I'm playing all the music you love, as always. So keep it locked here on Tempo 92.5."

Pushing down the slider that disconnected her microphone, she leaned back in her chair. It was time to start taking her own advice.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO –

### LOVE IS ALL AROUND



*There's no beginning  
There'll be no end  
'Cause on my love  
You can depend*

**MARCH 2021**

### **Bonju**

SITTING AT THE BAR OF THE VIEW, Bonju twirled his glass, pushing around the brown liquid that was his bourbon drink, barely registering its taste or feeling its usual kick. He had spent the past week finalizing terms with his father's retired butler, Magnus, transitioning him to the role of caretaker of the Walter Carrington premises, to watch over it to ensure it didn't fall into a decrepit state in his absence. Having packed up the house, Bonju had chosen to spend his last couple of nights in the hotel he'd called home for several months two years before, convincing himself it was because he needed to be able to get up and leave without hassle, when the truth was he was hoping to spend his last nights in a place free of reminders of Alero...because she'd haunted him, night and day, at the Walter Carrington house. But after one night in the hotel, he realized the problem wasn't the house. It wasn't the house she haunted. It was him.

The thought of never seeing her again haunted him.

Downing the rest of his drink in one gulp, he rubbed his eyes as he summoned the bartender for another one, determined to numb his mind enough to keep all thoughts of her away, even if only for that night.

To keep from forgetting that their shared birthday was only hours away.

“Looks like I’m not the only one with plans to get totally wasted tonight,” came a voice from behind him.

Turning around, Bonju’s brows lifted when he saw his old classmate, Mofe Thompson, take a seat next to him at the bar.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Mofe grinned.

“Hello to you, too,” Bonju managed a smile. “I haven’t seen you since, what, your anniversary party?”

Mofe nodded. “That’s about right. I’ve been...out of circulation for a while.”

It was Bonju’s turn to nod, remembering the rumour he’d heard about Mofe’s marriage to his wife, Morin, crashing.

“It’s almost midnight, so I take it you’re also staying here?” Mofe asked, after requesting for a gin and tonic. “I thought I heard something about you living in your old man’s mansion somewhere in Victoria Island.”

“You heard correct, but I recently had to pack it up,” Bonju answered. “I leave for London tomorrow.”

“For good?”

“Yep,” Bonju nodded. “And you? Why are you here so late at night?”

“I’m actually in between homes right now,” Mofe answered, turning to Bonju. “You probably heard about Morin and I.”

There was no point pretending he hadn’t. “I’m really sorry, man.”

Mofe nodded and exhaled. “Anyway, I have contractors working at my new place. I initially moved to a small apartment, thinking I wouldn’t need much space since the kids are with her, but it got way too small, especially as I have the kids for a weekend a month. So, I bought a bigger place. It wasn’t



in the best of shape, so it's being restored. Until it is," he gestured around the bar, "this is my home."

"What happened between you two?" Bonju asked, deciding to take advantage of Mofe's candor to satisfy his curiosity.

Mofe shrugged. "I was short-sighted and I ended up throwing away a good thing." He paused as his drink and Bonju's were served, took a sip of it, before turning again to his companion. "If given the chance, I would do things differently. Differently enough for me not to be sitting alone in a hotel bar, when I could be home with my beautiful wife and kids."

Both men were quiet as they nursed their drinks, both mulling over Mofe's words, Bonju understanding too well his sentiment. If things had turned out different, he, too, wouldn't be sitting in a hotel bar, set to return to his life of solitude in the United Kingdom.

"I heard you're with Alero now," Mofe remarked, breaking their congenial silence.

Bonju pursed his lips, the sound of her name regurgitating the swarm of emotions he'd only just succeeded in quelling. "Not anymore."

Mofe frowned. "Really? I just heard you two were all over each other at Omoruyi's fortieth birthday party. Even from the pictures I saw on Instagram, you both looked so happy and loved up. What happened?"

Bonju was quiet for a while, before he shrugged. "I don't know, man. One minute, we were talking about a future together, and the next..." He shrugged again. "She went all cold on me."

"For no reason? Did you guys have an argument or something?"

Bonju thought back to the afternoon that had precipitated their breakup, the aborted reconciliation attempt with his mother. "Nothing that should have made her decide to give up on us. She was simply done, I guess. Whatever we had clearly meant more to me than it did to her."

"Hmmm," Mofe was pensive for a while. "I had to learn the hard way that sometimes you have to fight hard for a love you believe in. I got so into my feelings about many things Morin said, and I didn't fight as hard as I should

have. But anyway,” he smiled and nudged Bonju on the shoulder, changing the subject. “Now that you’re single, I hope you won’t take the opportunity to make a move on Morin. I remember how sweet she was on you that last year of school. Back then, Keji and I were sick of hearing your name every time Morin opened her mouth. And don't think I didn't notice how she was looking at you like a snack at the reunion.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bonju chuckled. “Even though you two were fighting half the time, it was clear you had eyes only for each other.”

Considering how blatantly Mofe had lusted after his high school sweetheart, Keji, at their reunion weekend, that was stretching the truth.

“I knew you had a thing for Alero back in school,” Mofe said after they had sipped their drinks in silence for a while. “Many times, I saw you two stay back in class when everyone else had either left for home or the dining hall, talking and laughing the way only kids in love would. Just looking at you, I could tell you were crazy about her.” He turned to Bonju. “Why didn't you defend her when those crazy rumours started flying around?”

Bonju was silent, not even knowing how to answer the question he’d asked himself for almost twenty-two years. “I was a coward, I guess,” he finally answered. “I was a foolish kid.”

“That seems to be in our male DNA,” Mofe chuckled. “Making foolish decisions when it comes to the women we love.” His laughter faded and after several minutes had passed, he looked at Bonju. “Don’t be a fool a second time around, man.”

Long after they had parted, as Bonju tossed and turned in his hotel bed, Mofe’s admonishment resonated in his head, as loud and clear as if he were lying right there next to him, yelling it in his ear with a loudspeaker, making him wonder if that was what he was.

A fool a second time around.

## **Alero**

“I’m so honoured you let me take you out today,” Austin raved, reaching for her hand. “I’m still bummed I had to find out from your colleagues it’s your birthday, though.”

Alero forced a smile, keeping her eyes trained on her pasta meal. Having agreed to finally accept the lunch date with the handsome banker, Austin, whom she’d met in the elevator two weeks before, as he made his way out of the optician’s office on the ninth floor of the station’s building, and who had badgered her non-stop every day after that, for a date. That afternoon, he’d come to the station, bearing yet another large bouquet of roses, and Syf and Nabila had let it slip it was her birthday. Alero had been on the verge of declining his offer for lunch, when she’d decided she couldn’t spend a lifetime warding men off, men that weren’t Bonju Adalemo. On her thirty-ninth birthday, with it clear there was no future with the said Bonju, she lost nothing by giving someone else a chance.

But sitting opposite the attractive, bespectacled Austin, in one of the few restaurants she hadn’t visited with Bonju, she knew moving on would be a longer shot than she anticipated.

“I have a confession to make,” Austin said, smiling at her, his lasagna meal neglected in his adulation of his companion. “I had a crush on you long before meeting you at the station. Listening to your voice every night on the radio always left me wondering about the woman behind the smooth, beautiful voice. I picked Nu View as my optician specifically after finding out it was in the same building as Tempo. And meeting you in person has had an even stronger effect on me, Divine.”

The plastic smile on her face was beginning to make her cheeks hurt. As he continued to talk, telling her about studying Economics at the University of Ibadan and how he came from an all-academia family, her mind wandered, everything he said reminding her about Bonju. When he talked about his work at the bank, her mind drifted to Bonju’s stocks, wondering if the markets he traded on were still bearish...or maybe now bullish. He talked about taking daily runs by the beach near his estate, and she thought about the English Channel, wondering if Bonju was there that very minute, wondering how he was spending the day, their thirty-ninth birthday,

wondering if Jummai had followed him back to London, accepting she probably had.

Smooth jazz music had been playing since they got there, but when Wet Wet Wet's *Love Is All Around* started to play, she was filled with a sadness so deep, it felt like she was suffocating.

"I really like this song," Austin remarked. "It reminds me of that movie, that Hugh Grant movie, what's the name again?"

"*Four Weddings and a Funeral*," Alero answered half-heartedly, her mind catapulted several years back, listening to the song on one of the CDs Bonju had bought for her from London, on the Discman he'd gifted her, and the despondency she felt was overwhelming, the finality of the fact she would probably never see him again, hitting her anew. She thought back to the times they had spent together - as kids and, more recently, as adults - times that would never be recreated with any other person. As Austin rattled on about his love for Hugh Grant movies, she looked at him, knowing that they would never bond over music the same way, he would never make her body burn the same way, their souls would never connect the same way.

She would never love him the same way.

A loud clap of thunder as their plates were cleared, disrupted her thoughts.

"It looks like it's going to rain," Austin said, stating the obvious as the sky outside darkened considerably. "Maybe we should leave before it does?" he asked. "We could go to Ricardo's? It's near here and their desserts are to die for." He grinned. "Since I didn't get you a birthday present, at least let me buy you a cake."

His eagerness, though endearing, was also depressing, and she knew she couldn't afford to raise his hopes any further than she already had.

"Thank you for lunch, Austin," she said, patting his hand, having pulled her other one from under his. "But I'm afraid I'm not emotionally available for a relationship now."

His face fell and he nodded. "Oh, okay. I'm told you just got out of a relationship, so if it's time you need..."

She shook her head, not wanting to drag things longer than she already had, the Wet Wet Wet song making her more desperate to leave.

“I don’t want to waste your time, Austin. You’re a nice guy, and you’ll meet a lovely girl someday, someone more deserving of you,” she said, reaching for her bag. “Please, allow me at least pay for the meal.”

When he shook his head, she rose to her feet and smiled at him again. “Thank you for a wonderful birthday meal. It’s been the high point of my day.”

Not waiting for him to answer, she made her way out of the restaurant, fighting off the tears that were pooling in her eyes, wondering if she would ever be able to move on from Bonju, or if memories of him would plague her forever. Driving back to the studio, her eyes drifted to Crust Alchemy’s signboard from its new location along Akin Adesola Road, a few streets away from where it had opened over twenty years before. And, even though the memory of the cupcake they had shared for the first time exactly twenty-two years before, the same one they had shared that magical night the previous August, sat like a heavy weight on her chest, she found herself desperate for that one reminder of Bonju, the one memory of him she could still hold on to.

A chocolate and peanut butter cupcake...with a dash of salted caramel.

## **Bonju**

“Must you really go back? And on your birthday, of all days?” Omere asked, her eyes imploring. “Apart from the fact I was hoping to treat you to a lovely birthday lunch, I was looking forward to having you here on a more permanent basis.”

He smiled as he handed his mother the keys to his house. “We’ve had this discussion before, mom,” he said. “Magnus will pick these up tomorrow. I have the master set.”

She placed her hands on his face and smiled back. “Don’t worry about the Oceadrill position, my love. Kamson and I have been speaking with several

people, and they have promised to put it to vote at next year's AGM..."

He winced and shook his head. That was one rodeo he wasn't about to get on again. "I already told Uncle 'Dipo not to bother. Busayo is exactly what Ocedrill needs, and I have every confidence he's going to do great things there."

Omere curled her upper lip and rolled her eyes, her displeasure evident. "Anyway, when you get back to London, if Justin hasn't already couriered my items, tell him not to bother. If you're going to be there, I might have to come to Sandgate more often than I'd planned."

Bonju half listened as his mother rattled on about spending more time in the United Kingdom against her preference of remaining in the Lagos home she had called home for almost three decades. As he tried to restrain himself from glancing at his watch, his eyes landed on a set of candles on the mantelpiece. He frowned and moved nearer, recognizing the bright orange and red Aztec-print textured paper Alero had customized for her aromatic wax creations.

"Where did you get these?" he asked, interrupting his mother, holding one of them up. When she didn't answer, he turned to her. "Was Alero here?"

"Must we really talk about her now? You have barely five minutes before you have to leave and not run the risk of missing your flight."

"Was she here?" Bonju repeated his question, heat rising up his neck, as a sick, hollow sense of knowing stirred in his stomach.

"She was here the day after you both were," Omere answered, waving a hand in dismissal. "Some half-arsed attempt at an apology. Can you imagine her nerve? After running her mouth the way she did? Honestly, that young woman is infuriating. Thank God Kamson was here to handle her."

"Handle? What do you mean by handle?" Bonju asked, his eyes narrowing as he observed his mother, the flicker in her eyes, the fleeting look of culpability he saw there, fanning the fire of Hades inside him. "Mom, what do you mean by handle?"

She threw her hands up. "I don't know, Bonju. I left her with Kamson because the sight of her was giving me a headache. I don't know what he

said to her. I was just happy that you finally saw some sense after that and got back with Jummai.” She clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Only for you to bungle even that up. If you’d just seen things through with her, at least until the AGM, Busayo wouldn’t be the one taking the seat that is rightfully yours.”

Bonju covered his face with his hands in agonizing comprehension, his mother’s words sinking in, word after word, syllable after syllable, letter after letter.

“That girl is a peasant. You shouldn’t be wasting any more time on her,” Omere said, taking the candle from him. “I only kept these because they’re surprisingly good. This one is cinnamon, I think, and the others are peppermint and gingerbread. A bit Christmassy, but shockingly high quality.”

“I’ve always wondered why everyone calls you mean and awful,” Bonju said, looking at his mother and feeling everything from shock...to anger...to disgust. “I’ve always wondered why nobody ever wants to spend more than a few minutes with you, and why even your own relatives tolerate you in only small doses.” He shook his head. “Until now.”

Omere’s face drained of colour. “Bonju,” she said, reaching for him.

But he stepped out of her grip and marched out of the house. It was raining as he got into the car he’d hired for the trip to the airport, but the dampening of his clothes took a backseat to the devastation he felt. As the car pulled out of the compound, he brought out his phone and dialed the only person who could give him answers, explicitly.

“What did you say to Alero?” Bonju demanded as soon as the line connected to Kamson. “At my mother’s house.”

“Ahn ahn, birthday boy. I thought you’d be at the airport by now,” came Kamson’s voice. “Isn’t your flight at 7pm? Why are you still...”

“Answer me!” Bonju yelled loudly enough for the driver to look up with a start.

“Calm down, Gbonjubola. I only had a little chat with her. All I did was to explain why Jummai Jatau was critical for your successful election at the

AGM. And she understood. She saw why she needed to step aside.”

Bonju bit his fist, his body trembling in his rage. “How could you do this to me, Uncle ‘Dipo? You know how much she meant to me!” His voice trembled. “How much she *means* to me. How could you do this?”

“Don't be silly, boy! I've done nothing but work in your best interest,” Kamson yelled back. “For the last year, I haven't had a waking moment without thinking about how to get you in the seat your dad wanted. Even after you blew the opportunity with your own hands, all I've done is to look for a loophole, a strategy, anything we can do to kick Busayo out and get you there next year. Bankole will be turning in his grave, hearing you sniveling like a woman. Get yourself together!”

Unable to listen to any more, Bonju disconnected the line, all the jigsaw puzzles falling into place, the biggest one being the sacrifice Alero had made for him.

“Turn left,” he called out to the driver, as they approached the Falomo Roundabout. “Get on the bridge.”

The driver looked at him through the rearview mirror. “I thought you said we're going to the airport, Sir”

“I need to get to Victoria Island right now,” Bonju answered, his heart racing in his desperation to see Alero, to set right all the wrong things that had been said to her, to bare open his heart, to tell her she was still the only one.

Complying, the driver made the turn onto the Falomo Bridge, descending into and driving down Akin Adesola Street, turning into Ahmadu Bello Drive, and eventually into Adeola Odeku Street, making a U-turn after five hundred meters and driving into Tempo's building. Getting out of the car, Bonju hurried into the building, quickly, the downpour having increased. As he exchanged greetings with familiar people in the lobby, and as he got into the elevator, his heart pounded furiously in his chest as he pondered what he would say to her when he saw her...or if she would even want to see him. He winced thinking how she would have felt hearing he and Jummai were together, his heart breaking over how that would have been the



confirmation of everything she'd been told. But as the elevator opened on her floor, it was too late to change his mind.

"Hey, man," Soroh called out, walking up to him with a large grin on his face. "I haven't seen you in a while. You've been out of town?"

"Umm, no," Bonju answered, his eyes colliding with Onyeka's as she walked down the hallway, but unlike past times when the pint-sized DJ would have been excited to see him, if the flatness in her eyes counted for anything, she was anything but. "I was in the building a few weeks ago."

"Yeah," Onyeka cut in, her tone just as unwelcoming as her eyes. "I saw your car."

Clearing his throat, Bonju returned his attention to the more hospitable Soroh. "Umm, I'm here to see Ale...Divine? Is she in her studio?"

"She was there earlier," Soroh answered, glancing at Onyeka. "But it's been a good hour since I last saw her."

"She went out," Onyeka answered, turning to a furrow-browed Nabila, who had peeped her head from the studio to the right of the lobby. "You guys were with her, right? You and Syf."

Nabila nodded, still frowning as she sized Bonju up, a startling contrast from how she would have reacted to him in the past. And he knew it had everything to do with Alero...and how they all perceived he had treated her. How he had indeed treated her.

"No, she's not. She went out with Austin," Nabila declared, a smile on her face as she answered Onyeka, her eyes holding Bonju's and twinkling with delight.

"Austin was here?" Onyeka asked, grinning, her eyes also darting to Bonju.

"Who's Austin?" Bonju asked.

Soroh, who looked decidedly uncomfortable, cleared his throat. "Some banker guy like that."

"He works with Metropolitan Bank across the road," Nabila seemed very eager to offer. "He came to take her out for lunch. You know it's her

birthday, right?”

Oh, he knew alright.

He stood there, allowing the information sink in, the realization that Alero had moved on stabbing at his heart like a million tiny needles. A part of him wanted to wave the flag of defeat, accepting he had lost her forever, but a rising part of him was desperate to see her any way he could...even if for the last time...even if she shut him down and told him off...even if just to see for himself how she reacted to this Austin...to see for himself if she had truly given her heart to someone else.

“Where did they go?” he asked, his eyes darting from Onyeka, to Nabila, to Soroh.

“Like we’d tell you that,” Nabila scoffed, returning to the cubicle she had emerged from.

He turned to Onyeka, and she waved her hands and shook her head as she walked away, non-verbally communicating he wasn’t going to get that information from her. When he looked at Soroh, the DJ simply shrugged, clearly having no answer to his question.

“We’ll let her know you were here,” was all Soroh was able to offer.

Except that wouldn't be anywhere near enough.

Walking out of the building, Bonju remembered Onyeka saying Syf had also been there when Alero left on her date, so he whipped his phone out of his pocket.

“Hey, Syf,” Bonju said, as soon as the line connected. “Where are you?”

“On my way home,” Syf answered, the sound of honking horns buttressing his answer. “I had to cover for Destiny this morning, and now, I can barely keep my eyes open. What’s up?”

“Where did that guy take Divine for lunch?” Bonju asked, not bothering with any preamble.

There was a long pause before Syf finally answered. “I shouldn't be telling you this, not after what you did to her. Divine has been a shadow of herself

for weeks, and when we saw videos of you with that other chick at the Governor's party, it wasn't hard to figure out why."

"I need to see her, Syf," Bonju answered, knowing defending himself would be pointless, knowing there was really even no defense. "Please."

Syf sighed. "He said he was taking her to the restaurant that just opened on Tiamiyu Savage Street. The white building next to Marquee."

Nodding, Bonju made his way out of the glass doors, pushing the button to summon the lift. But there was more he needed to know. "Who's this guy? This Austin."

"He's a nice, simple guy, who really likes her a lot. Tommy and the guy are friendly, and he said he's mad serious about her."

Syf's words hit him like a meteor, and he pressed the lift button harder, even as the fear that he was about to embark on a failed expedition grew in leaps and bounds.

"But I can tell she doesn't like the guy like that," Syf went on. "It's the only reason I've given you this information. He came to see her today, and her eyes didn't light up when he entered the room." He sighed. "Bonju, go fix whatever you broke."

The elevator door opened at that point, and after muttering a hasty goodbye to Syf, Bonju rushed in, willing the lift to accelerate faster in its descent. Looking at his watch, at almost 4pm, he was already cutting it close to leave for the airport to catch his 7pm flight. But as he rushed out of the building, the downpour not showing any signs of abating, he didn't care. His flight was the last thing he cared about.

All he cared about was getting back his girl.

"We're going to Tiamiyu Savage Street," he said to the driver, as he scurried into the car.

"Sir?" the driver asked, his eyes meeting his in the rear-view mirror, clearly confused about the change in the communicated itinerary.

"Right away, I beg you," Bonju pleaded, his eyes and tone desperate enough for the driver to immediately kick the car into action.

The drive there took less than ten minutes, and, again, Bonju rushed out of the car into the rain, unbothered that he was now drenched. Once inside the restaurant, as his eyes combed the room, he was crestfallen to see she wasn't there.

“Please, I’m looking for a girl,” he said to a passing waiter, holding him by the arm. “A pretty girl about this tall,” he raised his hand a little below his shoulder. “Light skinned, her hair in...” He paused, not knowing - three weeks after the last time he’d seen her - if her hair was in plaits, locs, or free falling down her back. “With long hair,” was what he settled for.

The waiter frowned and shook his head, tugging his arm away from Bonju’s grip and walking away. Bonju sighed in his exasperation, torn between finding another waiter to interrogate...and the harsh truth that he had gotten there too late. The Austin guy had probably taken her somewhere else, somewhere he could woo her properly, somewhere he could ignite whatever fire Syf believed was missing from her eyes.

Walking out of the restaurant, Bonju stood at the door, looking out at the building traffic on the street, but his mind registering none of it. He had lost her.

And, this time, he had nobody but himself to blame.

## **Alero**

Scooping the last forkful of her third cupcake into her mouth and licking a large dollop of frosting from the top of her lip, Alero could feel the sugar rush already start to ebb. Seated alone on a table in Crust Alchemy, she watched the heavy downpour through the glass doors, equal parts soothed and agitated by the flashes of lightning and loud cracks of thunder.

What a birthday this was turning out to be!

Yet again, her mind drifted to Bonju, wondering how he was spending the day, ready to wager a bet he was having a much better one than she was, what with her sitting alone in a patisserie on a rainy day, stuffing her face with cupcakes.

“Your cupcakes, ma’am,” a server said, appearing at her side bearing the two boxes she’d ordered to go, each containing a dozen cupcakes.

Two-dozen orange frosted chocolate, peanut butter and salted caramel cupcakes that would keep her company for her late-night show, cupcakes she had no intention of sharing with anyone, cupcakes that, with every bite, reminded her of the man she would always love.

“Thank you,” she smiled at the server as she accepted the boxes. Rising to her feet, she glanced at her watch, and then at the heavy downpour outside, deciding she would have to brave the rain. She had a show to prepare for, schedules to finalize, and, much as she wanted to, she couldn't sit there forever. So, she pushed open the swinging doors and rushed outside .

## **Bonju**

The flash of red on the other side of the road caught his eye, and as the car raced past, he saw that it was a Kia Soul exactly like Alero’s.

“Stop, please,” he yelled, causing the driver to immediately step on the breaks, making them both lurch forward.

“Oga, the rain is heavy,” the driver entreated, as Bonju made to open the passenger door.

But his words fell on deaf ears as Bonju stepped out into the pouring rain, stepping back just in time to avoid being run over by an oncoming car. Dashing across the road, his heartbeat accelerated when he recognized the plate number of the car as Alero’s, and as his eyes caught the sign on the building.

Crust Alchemy.

And the memories that formed were enough to pool tears in his eyes.

Once on the other side of the road, as he braved the rain and headed towards the building, the glass doors opened and a form he knew, a purple blouse he knew, long locs of hair he knew, the woman his heart, body, and soul knew, rushed out, shielding her face with the cake boxes in her hand.

He watched as she darted to her car, unable to say a word as his eyes took her in, watching as she opened the passenger door and threw in the cake boxes, transfixed to the spot at the very sight of her.

“Alero!” he finally called out.

She turned to him, the rain slapping her face making it impossible for her to make him out, but the furrow of her brows the indication she’d made out his voice. Clearly.

Walking to her, he stopped a clear foot away from her, his breathing accelerated not only by being forced to brave the relentless elements, but from standing before her again, and realizing how near she was...but yet how far. Standing by her car, even though she was getting more drenched by the minute, her hair now hanging lank and heavy and the purple of her blouse now a dark indigo, she stood there, the conflict in her eyes visible as she looked back at him. And he knew he had to say something before she yielded to the side of her that wanted to get into her car and leave.

Because he couldn't afford to lose her again.

## **Alero**

She didn't even notice the heavy torrents of water still striking her, the rain washing over her skin so strongly, it felt like more like she was in the flow a river than a rain shower. She hadn't been sure if she'd imagined hearing her name, hadn't been sure if the melancholy in her heart had made her start to make out voices that weren't there. But standing before him, his eyes holding hers despite the heavy raindrop pellets hitting him, despite the fact he was so wet his black shirt looked one with his skin and his jeans like they were moulded to his body, she saw he really was.

“Happy birthday,” he said.

She shook her head, not knowing whether to laugh or hit him.

“What do you want, Bonju?” she had to raise her voice several decibels to make it carry through the angry crashing of water around them.

He hesitated before answering. "You, Alero. I want you."

## **Bonju**

There was a flash of anger in her eyes, and he took a tentative step forward.

"I'm a fool...an idiot...a halfwit," he said, taking another step forward, desperate eyes holding hers. "And I'm nothing without you. Our love shaped me into the man I am, and I don't want to do another minute of life without you." The tears from his eyes comingled with the steady stream of rain still striking his face and falling from his head, making breathing and talking more difficult.

Taking another step forward, he sighed, not knowing how to articulate everything he had...and hadn't...in the almost twenty-three years he had been in love with her. Their eyes held and he could see the thaw in hers, the crack in her veneer, a glimpse of the raw affection for him that ran deeper than anything he'd ever experienced.

"I was lying when I said it wasn't possible to find one's soulmate at sixteen. I did. I found her. I found you. Whatever our souls are made of, Alero, yours and mine are the same. You're my heart, my whole heart, and in a thousand years, a million lifetimes, I will fall in love with you over and over again."

## **Alero**

And she unravelled, the tears she had been struggling to contain finding their release upon hearing the Emily Brontë quote, hearing him lay bare his heart, his soul before her.

She walked, ran, towards him, just as he hastened towards her until she was swept up in his arms, her arms flung around his neck as their lips connected in a kiss that ignored the barrier that was the rain on their faces, a kiss that didn't care that the water from the storm had soaked them through and through, a kiss that blurred the world around them to indistinction and faded everything into oblivion, a kiss that broke straight through to the heavens, a

kiss that reconnected their bodies and their hearts. A kiss that led them back to each other.

A kiss of soulmates.

**The End.**



# **MALOMO HIGH CLASS OF 1999 –**

## **THE TURNING POINT**



**SANDGATE, KENT - APRIL 2021**

“I don't think I can ever get over this view,” Alero said, sitting with Bonju on the sand, her head on his shoulder and his arm around her as they watched the sunset over the English Channel. “The pictures you sent didn't even do it justice. It’s breathtaking!”

It truly was, and for the millionth time in the month it had been since finding their way back to each other, Bonju said a silent prayer of thanks, grateful to have her back in his life, determined never, ever to mess things up again.

That rainy evening in front of Crust Alchemy, he hadn’t made his flight back to England. Instead, they had scampered into Alero’s car, and she’d driven to the other side of the road where they had offloaded Bonju’s boxes from the car he’d hired. He’d tipped the driver heavily and they had made their way to her place after putting a call through to the studio, delegating her show to Tommy. Despite Alero’s entreaties, Bonju refused to see his mother, yielding only to send her a message to inform her he was still in town. The Tempo 92.5 family had been excited about their renewed love, even though Destiny had been wary at first, having already been on that carousel a few times before. But it hadn’t taken him long to see that it was a different kind of carousel this time.

In early April, Bonju and Alero finally left for England, with him desperate to show her how he lived there, but more importantly, to propose to her with the ring his father had intended for her. She’d fallen in love with his

Chelsea townhouse and, even though it wouldn't be where they would call home, she'd started to envision ways to update its décor to make it less like a bachelor's house. They spent a full week there before heading to Sandgate.

The day he asked Alero to marry him, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, he had first presented her with tickets to The Eagles *Hotel California* concert at Madison Square Gardens scheduled for later that year, and she had dissolved into tears, happy tears, reminded of the one concert her father had wanted to take her to. She was still gushing over the tickets when he'd gotten down on one knee and presented her with the ring Bankole had designed for his one true love, and which his son was now presenting to his. Alero had gaped at the three-stone tapered baguette diamond ring, resting on a shiny platinum band, her crying intensifying. And there, under the sunset on that cool spring evening, she agreed to be his wife.

"You're right. It's breathtaking," he answered, pulling her closer as they watched yet another sunset a few days later. "And it never looks the same. Every night is a different tapestry of perfection." He sighed. "It makes me wish we could stay here forever."

Alas, they couldn't. Before leaving Nigeria, Bonju had agreed to Busayo's request to run Ocedrill together, and, come May, he was to assume his new position as the company's Deputy Managing Director. He had also finally yielded to Alero's pleas and accepted his mother's invitation...to both of them...for lunch at her place their first weekend back. As for the radio station, Bonju maintained his decision to proceed with the equity swap, intent on allowing the brother and sister duo of Destiny and Alero own their business completely. But as much as he would miss the Kent seaside house, he was looking forward to creating a home, a family, with the love of his life.

"We better go inside before we fall asleep out here like yesterday," Bonju chuckled, pushing himself to his feet and pulling Alero up. His phone vibrated as he did, and he reached for it from his back pocket. But reading the message, the smile on his face disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” Alero asked, concerned. “Is it from Busayo? Are they still at a crossroads about the staff severance payments?”

Bonju shook his head. “It’s not from Busayo,” he answered.

Taking the phone from him, Alero’s hand flew her to her mouth as she read the message, her eyes darting back to Bonju.

## **LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA - APRIL 2021**

“Listen to that,” Ikenna said, as he and Tomi walked in through the doors of their Malibu home. “Can you hear that? Beautiful, blissful silence!”

Tomi laughed, shrugging off her beaded jacket. “I actually miss her.”

“It’s three blissful nights, babes. She’ll be back on Monday. But in the meantime,” Ikenna said, pulling his wife closer, a glint in his eye. “There are several ways I want to show this lady how much I’ve missed her.”

With Tomi’s mother finally getting her American visa, she’d only just arrived to help them out with their baby, Jeweluchi. Tomi and Ikenna had taken advantage of her arrival to visit their partner’s site in Encinitas, a city two hours away from Los Angeles, where Tomi’s automation designs for a prospective client were being rolled out. Her mother had opted to take her granddaughter with her to spend the weekend with a relative in the San Francisco Bay Area, giving the couple a much-needed break from parenting an infant, and much needed time for each other.

“I’m not sure I can wait till we get upstairs, woman,” Ikenna said, nuzzling his face in Tomi’s neck. “I think I’m going to make love to you right here in this hallway.” He kissed the base of her throat. “Or the living room floor, just like old times.”

“With Jewel’s stuffed toys as props, *abi* ?” Tomi giggled. “Have you forgotten she’s our landlady, and we need to act by her rules?”

“The stuffed toys can be props, aids, spectators, or whatever you want to call them,” he said, hooking his thumbs around the thin straps of her dresses and rolling them down. “All I know is that I need to have sex with my wife, like yesterday!”

The chime on her phone indicated an incoming text message.

“Don’t get that,” Ikenna whispered, his hands sliding down her back to her bottom.

“It might be my mom. I need to know if they’re okay,” Tomi said, stepping out of his embrace and reaching for her bag from where she’d placed it on the mantelpiece. Throwing her husband an imploring look, she winked. “Don’t worry, I won’t send a reply. I’ll just read it and come over, and help you out with my dress. I could tell you were struggling.”

“How won’t I struggle when it’s been months since I’ve been able to undress my wife,” he grinned, unbuttoning his shirt. “Just read the message and get right back here!”

Tomi was still grinning as she swiped her phone open, but as her eyes skimmed the screen, she let out a gasp. With trembling hands, she handed the phone over to Ikenna.

## **ASOKORO, ABUJA - APRIL 2021**

“Just think about it, Bioye,” Ayanda prodded, as they sat in restaurant where they were dining. “You’re the only person we can trust to set up an office here.”

Bioye sighed and took a sip from the glass of orange juice she had been nursing, very conflicted. When she married Abolore and moved back with him to Abuja the previous year, she’d given up the dream job it had taken forever to find and which she’d had for less than a year. She’d proceeded to throw herself headlong into finishing her writing projects, self-published her first book, *Adura’s Mask*, and had recently gotten an offer from one of the biggest publishers in the country for her fantasy romance, *Silver Flames and Starlight*. So, even though she’d been sad to walk away from FlixYard, she wasn’t sure she had enough space on her full plate to accept their offer to run their new office in the nation’s capital.

“Can I get back to you on this, Ayanda?” Bioye asked, before exhaling. “We’re not telling anyone yet, but we just found out we’re expecting.”

Ayanda's eyes widened and the grin on her face was from ear to ear. "That explains the orange juice! Oh, my goodness, I'm so happy for you, Bioeye!"

Bioeye smiled, the joy she had felt upon finding out two weeks before, still bubbling in her stomach like soda pop in a glass. Seven months after their wedding, she'd been on the verge of suggesting visiting a fertility doctor to fast-track things. Abolore, in his usual laid-back manner, hadn't been bothered, but Bioeye had been all too aware of the fact that, at thirty-nine and forty-four respectively, she and her husband did not have the luxury of time.

"It won't involve any heavy lifting, I promise," Ayanda maintained, eager eyes on her. "Honestly, you can work from the comfort of your bedroom. All we need is your keen eye for projects this side of the country. Ubong will be here for the office set up and all the running around you might need to do."

Hmmm, now if she put it like that, Bioeye couldn't deny that it sounded very tempting indeed.

"Or should I be asking permission from the happy dad-to-be?" Ayanda's smile broadened as her eyes drifted behind Bioeye.

Bioeye turned around, her brows raised in surprise as she saw Abolore approach their table. He had given her a ride to the upscale Boulevard 66 restaurant, and the agreement had been for him to return at 9pm, giving her and her former boss a couple of hours to catch up. But that had been only forty minutes before.

"Hi, Abolore," Ayanda said in greeting, rising to embrace him. "You look better every time I see you. Bioeye is really doing a good job taking care of you."

Bioeye laughed, relieved Ayanda hadn't said anything about her pregnancy, especially as she and Abolore had made a pact not to share the news with anyone outside of their immediate family for the first trimester. But her laughter faded when she saw that the smile that was always on her husband's face was missing.

“Thanks, Ayanda, she’s doing a great job,” he answered with the slightest upturn of his lips.

“Babe, are you okay?” Bioye asked, her concern rising over his uncharacteristic behavior.

When he turned to her, as their eyes met, she knew she was about to hear something unpleasant.

“We have to go.”

## **FESTAC, LAGOS - APRIL 2021**

With her elbow on the seat of the couch, Ogugua propped her head with her hand as they listened to her uncle reel off the list of requirements for her father’s funeral.

“We must renovate the house. We should probably budget about five million for that. And then we have to make provision of at least another two to three million naira for all the clearance we need from Umunna, Umuada, and, most importantly, from the church,” Ebubedike Ejiofor continued to read off the list in his hand.

Ogugua’s eyes drifted to Uloma, her older sister, and the disgusted look on her face was almost enough to make her burst into raucous laughter. Almost ten million naira, and they hadn’t even gotten to the good part yet.

“Please, why are we settling Umuada and Umunna two to three million naira?” Uloma retorted.

“I said mostly the Church, or didn't you hear?” Ebubedike retorted. “You people haven’t been to Ogidi in over ten years and all your dues have piled up. And the same goes for Umuada and Umunna. When was the last time any of you paid or attended any of their meetings? Don't you know you’re a member of Umuada?”

“*Biko* , continue,” Ogugua’s mother, Onyinye, prodded, her rapt attention on her brother-in-law, her puffy eyes and drawn face betraying the fact she’d hardly gotten any rest in the four days it had been since her husband of forty-six years, Onuorah, had lost his battle with prostate cancer. From

the struggle to settle the hospital bill so that the death certificate could be released, to receiving the steady flow of visitors and sympathizers trooping in and out of the house, Onyinye was already physically, emotionally, and mentally drained. And they were only less than a week in.

Ebubedike needed no further push. “We need a casket...a very good one. We can’t bury my brother in anything but the best!”

Oluchi, Ogugua’s younger sister rolled her eyes, and Ogugua could wager a bet she was thinking the same thing she was. So, *now* his brother deserved the best. He hadn’t deserved the best when none of their kinsmen made any attempt to support him as he’d endured the grueling and very expensive treatment for his ailment. He hadn’t deserved the best when none of his brothers - neither Ebubedike nor the rest - had done anything to support his children as they ran from pillar to post to raise money in excess of the fifteen million naira needed to net off the hospital bill.

“By the time we add the cows, at least four or five of them, considering your father’s status as a high chief, food for the villagers, food for VIP guests, rentals, drinks, regular juices and soda and quality liquor, decorating the canopy area and where the corpse will lie-in-state, top notch security, and the canons that will be shot...”

“Canons?” Chigozie, Ogugua’s soft-spoken older brother, cut in, clearly confused.

“Canons, local guns, whatever,” Ebubedike retorted. “They will need to shoot something when the corpse arrives the house, when the casket enters the ground, and when the special guests like the Governor arrive. For all of this, for us to give Onuorah the befitting burial he deserves, we’ll be looking at twenty to thirty million naira.”

“Are you people okay?” Chigozie erupted. “Are you people sick? Where are we expected to get that from, after everything we’ve already had to spend? Do I need to remind you that both Ogugua and Oluchi are out of work right now? Should Uloma and I go get these canons, guns, or whatever and hit the highway to rob people?”

Ogugua pursed her lips, hating the reminder of her state of unemployment. After five years as the legal counsel of a small startup, she'd been out of a job since the company shut down its operations three months before.

“Gozie, *biko* ,” their mother sighed and patted her son's hand. “It's just an estimate. We can always eliminate some things and haggle some things down.”

“I don't know what we can eliminate oh. The villagers expect a lot from Onuorah, and we can't give him anything less than a befitting...”

“The villagers expect what? Where were they these last few years when the man was struggling?” Uloma flared. “Now, you people suddenly want a carnival. You better go and tell your people that it's not going to happen. I swear to God, if any single kobo should drop from my purse for any nonsense Umuada or Umunna, call me a fool!”

“Who do you think you are talking to?” Ebubedike bellowed, the chords in his neck straining as he glared at Uloma. “Because I took the pains to gather these requirements and costs, you think you can talk to me anyhow? Don't allow me to put you in your rightful place and teach you the respect my brother omitted to!”

As Uloma and Chigozie's voices rose in unison as they counter attacked their uncle, Ogugua watched as they argued, already sick of the whole thing. And from the deep sighs coming from their mother, so was she. Oluchi had the amused smile of a spectator at a boxing tournament, and Ogugua envied her. If only she could have been as amused by and detached from the whole thing.

Scrolling through her phone as a distraction, her eyes stopped at the message from Jachike that had dropped the previous day, a message she should have deleted the second she got it, a message she'd already read at least a hundred times.

***I'm so sorry to hear about your dad, O.G. Let me know if you need anything.***

*I need you to erase the last twelve years, that's what I need* , she thought to herself, scrolling past his message. The last time she'd seen him was at



Morin and Mofe's tenth anniversary party two years before, and seeing him with his wife had made their long separation even more real. No, she didn't need any reminders of him. What she *did* need was for him to crawl back into whatever hole he'd crawled out of.

So, she deleted the message.

Almost immediately, her phone vibrated with a call from Zinna. Even though they had already spoken that morning, as part of her friend's daily check-in routine to make sure she was doing okay, the distraction of a phone call was a welcome one.

"Excuse me, I have to take this," Ogugua said to nobody in particular, her mother having joined in the shouting match after Ebubedike implied their father would have been bitterly ashamed of Uloma and Chigozie if he could see how they were talking to him, the woman unable to stomach any more verbal attacks on the children who had not only tended to the old man, but had borne the entire financial brunt of doing so for years.

Once out of the room, Ogugua slid the answer button. "Hey, babe. Your call couldn't have come at a better time. My uncle is here saying nonsense, and it's a blood bath. Uloma, Chigozie, and our mother are about to eat the man raw," she chuckled, but stopped when she heard the next thing Zinna said to her. "What?"

## **LEKKI PHASE ONE, LAGOS - APRIL 2021**

Morin inhaled deeply, steeling herself to face Mofe, as she opened the front door for him.

"Good evening," she said in the most impersonal tone she could muster, the impersonal tone she'd had to master after their ten-year marriage crashed like a pack of cards. "The kids are on their way down."

Mofe smiled at her and nodded. "Thank you."

He stood at the doorway, the way he did when he came to pick up the kids for their weekend outings, and, just like the last time, she was attacked by her conscience.

“You can come in and sit, if you want,” she said, giving in to the nudge in her spirit. “You know how indecisive Malachi can be about his footwear.”

Mofe’s eyes widened, pleasantly surprised by the gesture. “Thank you,” he said again, stepping into the home that had once been theirs, the home they had designed together, the home they had built and decorated together, the home that was no longer his.

Morin shut the door behind him, and when she turned back around, she walked straight into him, as he was still standing by the door.

“Goodness. I thought you’d have taken a seat by now,” she muttered, flustered by the closest contact she’d had with him in almost two years... and the fact she could remember every single note of the cologne he wore.

“I just...I was just...” the truth was he had no explanation for why he’d remained standing by the door, except that he wanted to be as close to her as he could manage. In a loose fit tunic that flowed all the way past her ankles, in a rose gold colour that perfectly complimented her honey-coloured skin, he had never seen her more beautiful. But then again, that was what he thought every time he saw her; that she looked more and more beautiful each time.

She walked past him into the living room, and as he followed her, his eyes drank in the sight of her alluring curves, her wide hips and ample derrière, wondering for the umpteenth time how he could have been foolish enough to let all that go.

“Please, sit,” she gestured at a single seater opposite the couch she’d chosen, wanting to keep as much physical distance as she could from him. As she sat, she kept her eyes trained on his face, so she wouldn’t notice how good his body looked in his fitted white *Senator* outfit, but as his brown eyes drilled into hers, she dropped hers to a point somewhere on his neck, the safest place on him she could trust herself to look.

He placed his phone and car keys on the glass table between them and took the seat she’d offered. Silence followed, the only sound coming from the whistle of the pressure cooker from the adjoining kitchen and the distant

whirl of the washing machine from the utility room. Two years later, and the place still felt like home to him.

“So, how have you been?” Morin asked, desperate for anything to keep from remembering what they once were...and everything they no longer were.

Mofe shrugged. “Very busy. Very stressed. Work on my new place is taking a lot more time and money than I expected.”

“You’re the one that decided to buy a house in Ikoyi.” It was out of her mouth before she had the chance to censor it.

He shrugged. “I got a good deal and the payoff from the business came at the right time, thankfully.”

“How’s that going?” Morin asked. “The business.”

Mofe shrugged again. “I can't complain.”

Morin was about to ask more questions, wanting to know how things *really* were with the unpredictable piggery and farming business he had invested in with friends, after his earlier foray into hospitality had left him badly burned, but his phone started to vibrate on the table, the name of the caller flashing like a neon light.

Keji Oladoyinbo.

And all the questions dried in her mouth, any concerns she might have had, evaporating. Instead, a sardonic smile spread on her face.

“Why did you save her number with her full name, as if she...” Morin allowed her sentence fade off, not having the courage to complete it, not able to say what it was she really wanted to.

*As if she wasn't the person that destroyed our marriage.*

*As if she wasn't the person with whom I made the biggest mistake of my life*, was how the sentence ended in Mofe’s mind, his dalliance with his high school lover the thing he regretted the most in all his almost thirty-nine years alive.

“You better answer it,” Morin said, her eyes holding his, in a silent dare.

A dare he didn't have the courage to accept, and he remained in the eye hold with his estranged wife until the phone stopped vibrating on the table.

“Morinsola...” he called her by her full name when the phone had stopped moving.

“My lawyers need an address so they can serve you,” Morin cut in, the hardness he had come to know as normal, back in her eyes. “We need to start this divorce process, so we can move on with our lives. It’s been almost two years.”

His heart crashed at the mention of his trigger word- divorce - the one word he detested more than anything, the one word he wanted to just go away and never be remembered, especially when it came to him and the woman he still loved.

“Well?” she insisted, glaring at him. “Or should they serve you at your hotel? Michaela says you’re at The View.”

“I’m only there at night. That might not be the best...” he muttered but was interrupted by the vibration of his phone again, this time with an incoming text message.

Morin’s phone purred at the same time, and she reached for it just as he did his, both their eyes widening as they read the messages that had dropped. And when they looked up at each other, they knew they had both read the same distressing thing.

## **EKO ATLANTIC, LAGOS - APRIL 2021**

Nonso’s brows furrowed as he stepped into his penthouse apartment, the unmistakable smell of his favourite soup, *Ofe Onugbu*, fighting with the bergamot and vanilla scents from the reed diffusers strategically located all around the apartment. Walking to the kitchen, he shook his head and smiled, leaning on the door as he watched the woman he wasn't even sure was still his girlfriend, stirring a pot on the stove.

“I thought you said we were done,” he said, a smirk on his face. “And that you were never coming back here.”

Ogonna shrugged, her back still to him. “Well, I’m here now. Are you ready for your food? Which are you more in the mood for? Semo or pounded yam?”

He sighed, not leaving his position by the doorframe, the memory of their argument two weeks before vivid in his memory.

“Are you going to marry me or not, Nonso?” she’d asked, tears in her eyes as they’d sat at their favourite table at their favourite restaurant, Atmosphere. “It’s been two years. People who weren’t together when we started, people like Ikenna and Tomi, Abolore and Bioye, and now Bonju and Alero, are either married or set to marry. We’re not getting any younger and I’m tired of waiting.”

He’d looked at her, wishing he had it in him to say to her the words he knew she was desperate to hear in the two years it had been since they had reunited. In that time, she had not made any secret of the fact she wanted him for keeps this time. But as intoxicated by her as he still was, he was still unable to forget how she had treated him when they were teenagers. Now, she told people they were high school sweethearts, but the truth was it had been more of a master and servant relationship. Back then, she hadn’t even allowed him hold her hand, let alone kiss her. But now that he was one of the wealthiest men in Africa, she was now desperate to be his wife. Much as he loved her, it was still something he couldn’t reconcile.

“I don’t know if that’s what I want, Ogonna,” he had answered truthfully, unable to give her any false hope. “I don’t know if marriage is what I want at all.”

She had glared at him, the pain and anger she felt in every tear that rolled out of her eyes. “Then I have no business with you. If you don’t want to marry me, what am I doing with you?”

“Ogonna,” he had said, reaching for her hand, but she’d withdrawn it before he could even make any contact.

“If you don’t see marriage in our future, then we have no future,” she’d said, her eyes holding his, pleading with his to retract the words that his mouth

had spewed, to tell her he hadn't meant anything he had said, to tell her he wanted nothing more than to make her his wife.

But instead, he'd dropped his eyes and shrugged, keeping his eyes down as she'd thrown her napkin on the table, as she'd picked up her handbag, and as she'd walked away. In the two weeks that had passed, as much as he'd wanted to call her, he'd decided it was better to release her to find someone who could give her what she wanted. Yes, he loved her deeply, but no, the hurt she'd once meted him was one too deep to forget.

"Which one, Nonso," Ogonna repeated, this time turning to face him. "Pounded yam or semo? I also made some *abacha*," she tilted her head in the direction of a glass bowl on the counter. "Maybe for later?" She untied the apron around her waist, her eyes still holding his. "I had a long time to think about us, and I'll be lying if I say I don't know what the problem is. I know. I know it's our past that's holding you back. But if Bonju and Alero could..."

"Bonju and Alero are different."

She put her hands on her hips. "How? Their case is no different. As a matter of fact, their high school relationship was even worse than ours. But look at them now."

He said nothing, looking at her, torn between his joy over seeing her again after two weeks of missing her, and never again wanting to fully open his heart to her again.

Or was it already too late for that?

"I'm not going anywhere, Nonso," she said, placing a hand on his arm. "I'm going to fight for us with everything I've got. You'd best believe that."

He couldn't help the smile that formed on his lips, endeared by her determination, by her unashamed desire to fight for them. "Yes Ma'am."

And as she leaned forward to plant a kiss on his lips, as he felt the familiar stirring that came with it, he couldn't help but ask himself exactly what he was running from.

The phone that had his private number rang, and he reached for it in the breast pocket of his jacket. He smiled, seeing Olu's name, Omoruyi's youngest brother whom he was working with to develop an app to pair local suppliers of agricultural commodities with interested buyers overseas.

"It's Olu," he mouthed to Ogonna, before answering the call. "Talk to me." As he listened to Olu, the smile on his face faded. "I'll be there first thing in the morning," he said, his voice as heavy as he now felt.

"Is anything wrong?" Ogonna asked, her face pinched in a concerned frown.

Nonso turned to look at her, feeling like the room was spinning. "Omoruyi is dead."



This book!!!

I totally indulged myself with this book! If you've been reading my work for a while, you know I love music, and oh my days, writing this one was such a joy, as it allowed me dive right into the music I loved growing up in the '80s and early '90s. And Bonju and Alero's rollercoaster of a relationship, I loved that too. I think theirs is my favourite one so far. As for the others, I've given a small peek into each of their stories and I'm really looking forward to sharing them with you.

As always, I remain grateful to you, my reading family, for sticking with me on this storytelling journey of mine and supporting my work everywhere. Thank you so much for all the amazing feedback I have gotten over the years. I wouldn't be able to do this without you, and I'm already looking forward to sharing with you Ogugua and Jachike's story (featuring, I don't know, a possible new love interest for one of them...wink, wink) later this year.

I remain grateful to you always!

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Y. Alero' or similar, with a stylized flourish at the end.



# THE 6-PART MALOMO HIGH REUNION SERIES



## Book 1 – An Unlikely Kind of Love

Tomiloju and Ikenna have been best of friends since high school. Both academic high flyers, they've always had a lot in common and have remained close without it ever getting romantic. In the years since graduation, they have remained there for each other, through personal and professional turmoil.

They are each other's safety net and as they head for their 20-Year High School Reunion, are banking on each other for the support they both know they'll need. They are inseparable the whole weekend...until a slip reveals things weren't always only platonic for one of them, disrupting their dynamic of over two decades?

Can their friendship survive it?

## Book 2 – A Complicated Kind of Love

**She is on the rebound.**

After her short-lived reunion with her high school love implodes, Bioye is left devastated and doubts everything she thought was certain.

**He has sworn off love.**

Childhood trauma and a bad break up have made Abolore swear off love. A confirmed bachelor, his career has become his passion.

**But all that changes that fateful summer.**

Seeking solace after her broken engagement and desperate to get away from reminders of everything she has lost, Bioye volunteers at the Malomo High summer camp that her former teacher, Abolore, has organised. Neither of them sees the explosive romance coming. As their love affair blooms, a volcano of secrets and lies erupts, and former flames, political aspirations, and hidden insecurities threaten to unravel everything.

## **Book 3 – A Betrayed Kind of Love**

In the very last weeks of high school, angelic Alero gives up her virginity to ladies' man, Bonju. Their relationship proves to be no different than his other casual liaisons, and not only does he go on to break her heart, he leaves her reputation in shreds.

Twenty years later, she still feels horribly betrayed and is unable to even remain in the same space with him at their high school reunion. She is blinded by the desire to strike back, to hurt and humiliate him just as badly as he did her so many years before.

But they soon discover that there is a thin line between being vindictive... and falling in love again.

## **Book 4 – A Broken Kind of Love**

After a ten-year long engagement, the love between childhood sweethearts, Ogugua and Jachike, comes to an abrupt end, with Jachike leaving her to marry someone else. Six years later, and still single, an embittered Ogugua dreads the prospect of seeing him again at their high school reunion. But she is left confused when he appears to still carry a torch for her. And when tragedy throws them back in each other's company, they have to decide

whether to work their way back to their love...or walk away from each other for good.

After the loss of his older brother, Olumese finds himself captivated by Ogugua, and is determined to win her heart, irrespective of a daunting ten-year age difference.

Caught between these two men – her first love who is still married to another woman, and the way-too-young man whose love for her is like nothing she has ever known – Ogugua finds herself at a crossroads.

Until an unexpected bombshell changes everything.

## **Book 5 – A Renewed Kind of Love**

Best friends from kindergarten, while Morin chose not to date in high school, Keji very quickly became an item with the handsome Mofe. After graduation, Keji goes abroad to university and Morin and Mofe soon form a connection, a connection that leads to love...and marriage. After a heartbroken Keji ends their friendship, Morin, though saddened by the loss, is determined to make her marriage work, and she succeeds. Until Keji's reappearance at their high school reunion sends everything unravelling.

Reignited emotions put the decade-long marriage in jeopardy, leaving Mofe torn between the woman he has pledged forever to...and his high school love.

## **Book 6 – A Forever Kind of Love**

Twenty years after Nonso is heartbroken by the beautiful Ogonna, she is desperate for a comeback, doing everything she can to win him back. He starts off loving the fact that tables have turned, and is determined to enjoy every minute of it, before finally doing to her what she did to him. Except he finds himself losing his heart to her all over again.

Happy-go-lucky Zina is just as popular with her schoolmates twenty years after graduation as she was when they were in school. After building a very

successful career, she is now set to marry a guy who is perfect on paper. But is he the perfect guy for her, or are there any old embers from years past ready to start burning again ?

# **BOOKS BY ADESUWA**

## **Standalones**

Accidentally Knocked Up  
Faith's Pregnancy  
You Used To Love Me  
The Love Triangle  
Golibe  
Where Is The Love?  
Iya Beji  
You, Me...Them  
A Love Of Convenience  
Jaiye Jaiye  
Adanna  
The Sisters  
The One!  
The Marriage Class

## **The Ginika's Bridesmaids Series**

Ginika's Bridesmaids 1: Ara  
Ginika's Bridesmaids 2: Isioma  
Ginika's Bridesmaids 3: Ife  
Ginika's Bridesmaids 4: Ozioma  
Ginika's Bridesmaids 5: Ginika  
Whatever It Takes: A Ginika's Bridesmaids Epilogue (Summer 2023)  
Any Love: A Ginika's Bridesmaids Epilogue (Christmas 2023)

## **Malomo High Reunion Series**

An Unlikely Kind Of Love  
A Complicated Kind Of Love  
A Betrayed Kind of Love  
A Broken Kind of Love (Fall 2023)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



INVESTMENT BANKER BY DAY, romance writer by night, Adesuwa O'man Nwokedi began writing by accident and what started as a few scribbles for friends has led to 21 titles...and counting.

A self described hopeless romantic, when she's not creating new characters, she's a loving wife and mom of three.