THE BEST LAID PLANS SOMETIMES CRUMBLE...



A FAKE DATING ROMANCE

A. AKINOSHO

The Marriage Agreement

A. Akinosho

A.Akinosho

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Trigger Warnings

Full Trigger list of The Marriage Agreement.

Please review the following list of triggers carefully. If you feel any of these topics might cause distress or discomfort of the story. Please pass on reading this book. Much Love, Ade

Rape

Miscarriage

Assault

Kidnapping

None of listed triggers were between the FMC and the MMC

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Chapter 1

LUKE



Today is an extraordinary day for me—peaceful and unburdened by the usual chaos of my job. I take a moment to bask in the stillness. It had been a deliberate decision to relocate my office closer to my dad's, and I revel in the less stressful environment it provides.

The walls are adorned with framed photographs showcasing my father's grand architectural creations, each one a testament to our name and success. The only picture on my desk is a snapshot of my family, taken years ago at my college graduation. My mother, father, stepfather, and brother stand together with beaming smiles, captured in a moment of pure joy and love.

As I close my eyes, a sense of peace washes over me. I barely take a minute before my phone rings with my mom's ringtone. I sigh. I love my mom, but she's the queen of hovering. Out goes my quiet moment. I answer the call.

"Hello, Mom," I say, resting my head back on the chair.

"Luke, I need you to please talk to him. I'm afraid he's going to get into trouble." Mom's voice is shaky, her words jumbled and panicked. "I don't want him doing anything crazy that involves the government. What he plans to do is fraud," she says, hysterical. I don't need to ask who "him" is; only my knucklehead brother Osei would make mom this hysterical. I love him very much, but he sure knows how to get mom's heart rate pumping fast,

which always creates a headache for me. "He's insisting on getting married right away," she sobs, her voice cracking with emotion.

I try to remain calm as I respond, "I thought you wanted us to get married." I hold back my sigh. I was enjoying my quiet moment.

"I do, if it's for love," she says.

"It's not?" What other reason would Osei have for marrying?

"No, he's marrying to make his friend a U.S. citizen." *Fuck!* My head snaps forward as a wave of frustration washes over me, realizing who my brother intends to marry—the woman I've secretly desired for months now, though I've hidden my emotions behind a stoic façade.

"Mom, I'll talk to him," I assure her.

"Please, Luke, I know he listens to you. I don't want him to go through with this..."

"Okay, Mom, I've got to go. I'll call you later," I interject before she can spiral further.

It's like a switch flipped inside her, from an emotional outburst to normal family curiosity. "Alright, honey, how's Simon?"

"Dad is good," I answer, adding a mental period. Their relationship is complicated, and I can't get involved. My mom is happily married to my Ghanaian stepdad, who's the father of my knucklehead brother Osei. My dad is living his lonely life, now sick and trying to correct all the wrongs he's done as a ruthless businessman.

"Alright, honey, please update me on your brother. He needs to drop this idea."

"Bye, Mom," I say, hanging up and exhaling a frustrated sigh. My emotions are running wild with the information my mom just shared. I can't let Osei's plan to marry her come to fruition. That's the life I want—with her in my arms. It's not his to have. Like a "got ya" moment, my dad's words invade my mind: "The worst thing that can happen to you is watching the woman you love pregnant with another man's child." It echoes loudly in my mind. I can't say I'm in love with her, but I want her. And I have an intense yearning for her—a goddamn itch I can't scratch, because she's my brother's girl.

I get off my chair and make a slow pace to the window. My feet can barely hold the added weight I feel in my being. My heart is racing, like I've just finished a sprint. Hands in my pockets, I close my eyes and rock on my heels. I let the cool air chill the burn in me, trying to control the fiery

jealousy flowing through my veins. I let out a weighted sigh. I rest my heels, open my eyes to view the blue, bright sky with the sun peeping through. The decision is as clear as the sky.

I'm going to marry her. She'll be my wife—even if I have to cheat and steal her from my brother.

With a clear decision made in my mind, I now need to craft a meticulous plan to persuade my stubborn brother. With anticipation, I call Osei, only to reach his voicemail. Undeterred, I leave him a message and soon receive a text from him.

Osei: Mom called you, right?

One thing is certain—our mom is as predictable as the sun rising in the east. I don't respond to his text, knowing he'll call soon enough, and then I'll have no choice but to answer. Another certainty about Mom and my stepdad is the fact that they've droned into us an unwavering constant: we are brothers first. Whenever either one calls, we answer first and ask questions later. Are Osei's calls annoying and ridiculous sometimes? Yes. But I answer because he's my baby brother. His arrival into the world brought me both love and responsibility, driving me crazy in the same breath.

Despite the flawed and unfriendly side of me that I present to the world, only with Osei and my four other brothers can I be myself. The only time I was uncontrolled and acted out of character was the night I met her. Ayodele.

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Chapter 2

LUKE



6 months ago

A few months ago, during one of Osei's crazy calls, he insisted that I show up to his Halloween party. I pushed back, but he used the family code of "You call, your brother answers." I grunted in frustration and begrudgingly agreed to go; besides, I didn't want him to get in trouble should things go awry at his Halloween party—which, with my brother, was a ninety percent chance.

Mom would not be okay with it, and that's never a good thing. I have seen first-hand what a "not okay" status for mom looks like, and I have no desire to ever see that again.

So, off I went to the party, with Declan and Bruce, my brothers in everything but blood, laughing at my poor costume choice of just a Venetian mask. They mocked me, saying, "Going as grumpy self with a mask?" I didn't want any of Osei's female friends to recognize me. The moment they realize I'm the Luke Blythe of the real estate empire, everything about them changes. That always gets an eye roll from Osei, which is why he sometimes doesn't want me around.

I arrived to find everyone dressed in Halloween costumes, already half-drunk, laughing in the poorly lit, Halloween-decorated living room. Loud music blared. I found my brother dancing and laughing in his police

costume, complete with an ugly mustache and fake glasses. Looking around, I was glad I was there, to make sure things didn't spiral. His unit was packed. He was close to breaking the building code. Another reason I had to stay.

My brother's friendliness is great, but a few people know he's my younger brother, which makes him a target for some women who want to get close to me and some guys who want favors.

Over the years, Osei has learned to weed them out, but his good nature still attracts some people with hidden agendas. I, on the other hand, can count my friends on one hand. He's a one-woman-at-a-time kind of guy, and I'm the more-the-merrier type with a few repeats in between. Hence the ring that felt heavy in my pocket. I had the jeweler pick one that would suffice and deliver it to me. No need for emotional attachment; this was to be a pure business arrangement. Though, I was still unsure if it was a wise decision to even think about taking such a step, yet it seemed like the acceptable decision with my gut churning and refusing to check on that decision.

I watched as the guests' numbers grew. I found a spot away from the noise but kept a close eye on Osei. Soon, I noticed a woman walk in, and Osei was all excited, hugging her tightly. She was wearing a half-face lace Venetian mask, hospital scrubs, and Crocs.

Like me, the Venetian mask seemed to be the only effort she had put into her Halloween costume. My brother kissed her cheeks, holding her hand and smiling widely at her. They seemed pleased to see each other; whatever he whispered to her brought a bright smile to her face, but her smile also captivated me. That smile should be for me only. Someone soon called Osei's attention, and he let go of her hand. I moved closer as she surveyed her surroundings.

Finally, she looked my way, and our eyes locked. We held each other's gaze, even as the party around us continued, but for us, time stopped. We alone existed in that moment. I had heard about the look felt across the room, but not once had it happened to me—until that evening. I was captivated, my heart pounding.

Our gaze was abruptly interrupted when a drunk clown bumped into her, jolting her. I looked away, but longed to look back at her. I didn't understand what had happened, but I wanted to explore it.

I looked back and noticed she was now in the kitchen, filling her plate, then leaning into a corner to eat. She was attentive, watching the party, seeming content in her corner. Just as I seemed content watching her, curious about who she was and, more importantly, who she was to Osei.

I moved closer and grabbed some food. She didn't notice me, but I found myself drawn to her. My body reacted in a way I had never experienced—a burning desire for her. I moved away immediately to avoid whatever magnetic force was drawing me to her and returned to my corner to continue my watch.

I've never dabbled in emotions, and I've always kept them at bay, especially for a serial dater like me. But I was genuinely feeling emotions for her—though I didn't even know her name.

Osei went to check on her, and she smiled at him. He held her hand and whispered in her ear, making her laugh. Even with the mask, I could tell it was a cheerful laugh. Osei left, and I watched her head out to the balcony. Without my mental permission, my legs followed her direction.

It was a bit chilly in Chicago—not cold, but rare for October, almost November. She spread her arms out and lifted her head to the dark skies to take in the air. I watched as she breathed it all in. She must have felt my presence and turned to look at me, hands down, a slight smile curving her lips.

"Hi." Her soft voice was a subtle calm to my stormy mind.

"Hi," I responded to her with a fucking wide grin slapped across my half-covered face.

"I needed some air. It's stuffy in there, plus I've been inside all day."

"Yeah, me too. I need fresh air as well—too stuffy in there." *Fucking liar*.

"Good," she said, looking up again to inhale and exhale the air. I watched subtly, finding myself more drawn to her. She sat on one chair; I sat too. We sat in palpable silence, watching the city, the cool air cocooning us. The music boomed behind us, but my body was attuned to her presence.

I could sit with her forever. Where the fuck did that thought come from? You know it's true. That's fucked up. I didn't need any "forever" shit. What I needed right now was the perfect arrangement that I planned to make with the ring in my pocket. In that case, go back inside.

Fuck that! I'm staying.

"The view is better on the other side," I found myself saying impulsively to her, which was never me. Osei is impulsive, and I'm controlled, but

something about her made me lose my usual self-control.

"There's a better view than this?" She asked, looking my way, her voice tinged with curiosity and hesitation. I couldn't see her eyes behind the mask in the dim light, but her voice was one my brain had now etched into my central system.

"Yes, I can take you there if you want." I answered, noticing her quick hesitation.

"That's okay, this is fine," she said, turning her attention back to the view. That's just buildings with lights and nothing interesting.

"I assure you, it's better, and we won't leave the unit. I just know where to look." I noticed she wanted to say no, but then her body relaxed. Somehow, I noticed her resting heart rate was calm, a stark contrast to my own racing heart as I sat next to her—a strange juxtaposition. I needed to nip whatever this was; it's definitely messing with my well-crafted sense of control.

"Okay, as long as we're not getting into Osei's things." Did I detect a warning in there?

"He'll be fine," I said, chuckling. I rose, and I swear something inside me flipped when she rose, too.

I led us back into the unit and bypassed more party groups, with bodies in costumes gyrating to the music. I headed toward the second bedroom, which was off a small office. A bee and honey jar were making out on the sofa in the office. I opened the bedroom door, and she hesitated.

"I just want to show you the view, nothing else," I said. She nodded, and the bee and honey jar making out on the loveseat didn't look our way. I opened the door and left it open, dashing toward the sliding door that led to the balcony. Opening it, I pulled back the curtain and turned to see that she was still at the door. I widened the door so she could see the view of Navy Pier and the moonlight kissing Lake Michigan. She slowly ventured into the room, leaving the door wide open.

We stepped onto the balcony. "It's more beautiful, isn't it?" I watched her smile. I liked seeing her smile. She inhaled the air again, wrapped her arms around herself, and stared at the open view. I watched her, trying not to ogle her. The half of her face I could see—mostly her full lips—had me intrigued and wanting to see what she looked like.

"Thank you for showing me this," she said. I nodded. She dug into her pocket to get a scrunchie and pulled her braids into a ponytail. As she

moved, it revealed a scar on her arm. Without thinking, I grabbed her arm. Unexpected fury built up in me at the thought of someone harming her.

"Who did this to you?" My voice was harsher than I intended.

She jerked her arm out of mine. "I'm a nurse. A patient pushed me, I fell, and got a cut. An unfortunate case of occupational hazard," she snapped. I was right about her costume effort being just the mask.

"Does it still hurt?" I asked in a calm, controlled voice. I wasn't sure why the thought of anyone hurting her upset me that much.

"Yes, a bit, but not as bad as when it happened." I nodded, accepting her explanation.

"Should I find the guy and punch him for you?" I said to lighten the mood. She laughed, and the sound of her subtle laughter pleased me.

"I'm sure you'll be charged with assaulting a minor. My patient was a fourteen-year-old mini giant boy. He was profoundly sorry."

"A mini giant, uh." I chuckled. I couldn't have envisioned her patient as an underage boy. I had some crazy older man visualized in my head.

"Yeah, I call him a giant baby because he's 6ft 4 inches tall, also bulky, which he doesn't like."

"Well, I hope he stays sorry."

"I'm sure he will. He's a sweet boy when he's not having an episode." I moved closer, and her aura engulfed me with a deep urge to kiss her. Despite my attempt to retreat, the persistent urge consumed me. Like a ferocious beast, it demanded to be satisfied.

I took a step away from her, fighting within me not to do what my whole being was yearning for. In the silent yet loud moment, a gentle breeze blew our way, contrasting the fiery warmth of my desire for her. My heart was pulsating with every beat.

Succumbing to my inner beast, unable to resist the urge any longer, I swiftly pulled her into my arms, capturing her mouth in a kiss that released the full force of my burning desire. Instead of a slap for my unusual behavior, our tongues danced in perfect synchrony, a passionate exchange that ignited more desire in me. As I guided her to the sliding door, her back against it, the taste of her fueled the fire within me as our bodies melded together in a passionate embrace. She moaned softly, sending waves of pleasure through me. The softness of her lips and taste of her had me enthralled.

My phone rang, it was my mom's ringtone, disrupting our moments of intense desire. She pushed against my chest, breaking our kiss with a startled look in her eyes. Did she know the effect she had on me? My phone stopped ringing; I gazed at her as I gently lifted her mask to reveal her face.

Her features were even more stunning without the mask. I focused, committing her details to memory. The light made her brown eyes appear lighter, but it didn't diminish the fact they captivated me. Her lips, full and inviting, beckoned for another kiss. Taking in every detail, I was mesmerized by her natural beauty. I was certain she couldn't see my eyes—my mask was on, and with my back to the light and my height, I was blocking more of it.

Her small nose sat in perfect harmony with her full cheekbones and those lips. She was a beauty to behold. I wanted to know everything about her. Before I could utter a word, my phone rang again. I reached for it to answer the call. The moment I did, she quickly put the mask back on, shoved me away, and fled.

Frustration bubbled inside me as I let out a sigh and answered the call. "Hello?"

"Are you with your brother at the Halloween party?" Of course, mom at her best, hovering.

"Yes," I answered in a controlled tone. My mom sure knew how to call at the most inopportune times.

"Okay, just wanted to check. You two have fun. Bye." She hung up. *Fuck*, mom! You just ruined a perfect and beautiful moment. I let out a grunt.

I rushed back into the party. The bee and honey jar were replaced by Superman and Cleopatra making out on the sofa. I had just kissed a woman with no idea of her name, yet everything about her felt right. The party was still going on, and I searched everywhere for her, but she was nowhere to be found. I looked for Osei but couldn't find him either.

That kiss had my mind reeling. I needed to find my mystery woman. I moved through the crowd, which seemed to have doubled since I stepped out onto the balcony with her.

Finally, I found Derek, one of Osei's mischievous friends. Don't ask how I knew it was him in a clown costume, but I did.

"Hey, have you seen Osei?"

"Yeah, he just walked his girl out. She said she had to leave." I was taken aback. My brother and I talked about everything. I didn't know he had *a*

girl.

"Osei has a girl?" My tone questioned it.

"Yeah, his favorite girl." He made air quotes with his clown hands, making faces that looked awful with his clown-painted face. "You probably saw her: black girl in blue scrubs and half-mask."

"Maybe," I lied. Shock spread through me at the realization that I had just kissed my younger brother's girlfriend. A rant of vulgar words flowed through my head as I awaited the remorseful feeling of kissing Osei's girl, but I didn't feel remorse. Neither was the desire for her suppressed. I still wanted her, despite this newfound information.

"Osei should be back in a few. He just wanted to make sure she got to her car safe. He's very protective of her," Derek interrupted my thoughts. I nodded. Turns out I was protective of her, too.

I returned to the second bedroom, closed the door, and headed to the balcony. The view was still good, but no longer held any excitement for me. The music grew louder. I fixed my gaze upon the dark skies. An indescribable sensation took hold of me. *I shouldn't want her*, I told myself. *She's Osei's girl*, I reminded myself, but I couldn't shake her. It was like I had taken a bite of a delicious and juicy forbidden apple, and I couldn't ever untaste her sweet flavor. I felt her before I saw her, then tasted her, and I knew with the feeling I was having, letting go wasn't an option either.

I shouldn't have touched her, let alone kissed her. Now, I couldn't go back. I could still feel the softness of her lips on mine and the harmonic swirl of her tongue with mine. *Damn it! Why did she have to be Osei's girl?* She's far from my first kiss, but kissing her ... fucking ignited a fire in me. *How do I live with this revelation?*

I sat alone, wrestling with my fiery emotions, and kept my gaze upon the skies, hoping if I stared hard enough, the cool breeze would kill my desire for her. Only it didn't. I lost track of time until Osei opened the slide.

"There you are. I've been calling you. I thought you left?" Osei's husky voice interrupted me. He sounded tired. I'd turned my phone off after my mom's call interrupted my moment with her, *something I should have done after the first ring*. I wanted to understand the conflicting emotions I felt towards her and the undeniable fact that I kissed my brother's girl without remorse.

"I needed a quiet moment away from mom's calls," I answered as he laughed, and I rose and entered the room, shutting the slide.

"She called you to confirm my story that you're here," he said. I nodded. "Well, the party's over, and no disorderly conduct reported," he affirmed.

"You mean the police didn't knock on your door and you're not in handcuffs?" I mocked.

"That's yours and mom's interpretation. Handcuffs are only necessary when I'm with my girl." He said with a cheeky smile—just as my stomach turned at the thought of him and her together. I doused the image of her in his arms in gasoline and fucking lit it on fire in my mind.

"Well, I'm going to bed. A few of my friends cleaned up with me, and Paula is coming in tomorrow to finish up the cleaning," he said casually, like he didn't just steal my housekeeper, and I paid for the upkeep of his unit and mine.

"I'll head home then." I pulled out my phone to call my ride. I wasn't in the mood to drive.

"You won't stay the night?" He questioned. "We can do breakfast in the morning," he offered as he took off his fake police costume. I smiled. It was three a.m., and I knew my brother wouldn't be up for breakfast. I'd be surprised if he woke up before sunset.

"You need me to tuck you in and read you a bedtime story?" I replied, mimicking how mom used to respond to him when he was little.

"Goodnight, Luke," he said, tossing a pillow at me. "Lock the door behind you," he hollered. I left when Martin texted, letting me know he was waiting, making sure I locked the door.

I knew Osei would drop onto his bed and knock out. Osei sleeps like a log. When he started house shopping, our mom insisted on helping him find the right place. I bought him the place for his twenty-third birthday. My stepdad wasn't happy about me buying Osei such an expensive unit. He said Osei was getting a free ride. Mom said it was me looking after my baby brother.

I just thought he was my knucklehead baby brother, and since I had a surplus, I was happy to buy him a house. He's been good, but only when he plans to throw a party does he throw me into a loop—and mom is in my ears every fucking second.

I went home that night, struggling with what I wanted and how it would affect my relationship with my brother. Every thought I had about the engagement ring in my pocket was crushed that night. I got home and locked away the ring. It was a decision that didn't feel right anyway, but

everything about the kiss felt right. I realized I needed to explore the meaning of that kiss before I followed through with my planned-out arrangement.

It was a night that changed my plans—the first meeting with Ayodele, who my brother calls Dele. In the last few months, I've watched them together, driven with him to drop off lunch or dinner for her, and I've taken my craving for her out to the clubs, lounges, midday in my office, and allaround Chicago with my friend Declan. But then Declan found Anne again and stopped partying with me. For Declan, once he laid eyes on Anne, no other woman mattered.

I've managed to seal away in a box every nauseating thought of Osei and Ayodele together and found ways to change the topic whenever he mentioned her name. He's convinced I don't like her, so he doesn't talk much about her to me. If only he knew the truth.

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Chapter 3

LUKE



Three months ago , at Declan's wedding, I watched in emotional turmoil as my brother and Dele danced and laughed together. She wore an elegant orange dress that screamed sexy, accentuating every sleek curve of her body. The side slit, exposing her thigh, was killing me, and the more I watched her synchronize dance moves with Osei, the more it gnawed at me. Each time our eyes met, I just gave her a brief nod and quickly looked away, acting dismissive, as if I wasn't staring. But even as jealousy churned in my stomach, its grip grew tighter with every hug Osei gave her, his arm possessively wrapped around her. I've always protected Osei, but just that once, I wanted to break his arm.

"You going to drink yourself to death, or start throwing literal daggers at them?" Declan said to me, breaking my thoughts. I turned to him, flashing a grin I hoped looked real.

"Not working," he replied, seeing through my fake smile.

"I'm having fun at your wedding, bro," I lied. "You and Anne are a beautiful love story." I wanted that too. I could have had it with Dele, but she was Osei's girl. They were laughing like they were in their own world, his arm casually draped around her.

"Not sure I can say you're having fun with the way your eyes are laser-focused on the woman Osei is dancing with." Declan declared.

"Whatever, man," I muttered, taking another sip of my hard liquor. I was edging dangerously towards being drunk, far beyond tipsy. Even as I kept telling myself not to look at Osei and Dele, I kept failing.

"I've never seen you like this. You need to let her know, before you drink yourself into a coma," Declan said, his concern now painted on his face.

"She's Osei's girl."

He looked over at them and back at me.

"I don't think they're together," he said, shocking me.

"They are together," I grumbled. I'd known since the night I kissed her, and three weeks after that balcony kiss, when I couldn't shake thoughts of her. I followed him to drop off her lunch, and he introduced her to me as "his favorite girl," that moment hit me like a hammer to the chest.

My scowl at the way he grinned at her only made me not want to touch her at all. So, when he introduced her, I muttered "hello" and ignored her offered handshake. Instead, I took out my phone and pretended to answer an imaginary call, snubbing her hand completely.

Osei shot me a death stare, but I'd rather he be upset with me than I touch her and I couldn't control what happened next. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Osei hugging her, whispering something that made her smile and kiss him on the cheek. She nodded, heading back to the hospital without a second glance, but of course, I glanced at her ass and felt a stir. *Fuck!*

Osei didn't let it go. He told me how much he disliked me for acting pompous and annoying with his girl. His words, "Dele is special to me," are something I would never forget, tearing through me as we drove to his place. He slammed my car door when I pulled up to his building. His anger didn't stop me from paying for the teardrop diamond earring Osei wanted to buy for her birthday two weeks later, which, to my surprise, was also his birthday. I didn't like knowing they shared a birthday and were born in the same year. I paid for his watch, making him believe that paying for her earrings was my apology to him. The truth was, I didn't want him to give her a precious gift. I wanted to give her that gift.

I've avoided her like the plague and any talk about her, while torturing myself with images of her in his arms. The few times he mentioned her name—and believe me, Osei made sure not to mention her name around me since our formal introduction—was painful.

I've accepted that it's probably for the best that he's tight-lipped about the depth of their relationship. I told no one about the kiss we shared at the

Halloween party. I should be upset about the fact that she's with my brother and kissed me, a total stranger. Somehow, I find it impossible to dislike her or be upset with her for kissing me while dating my brother.

"I don't know, but I doubt they're together. Close, maybe, but I doubt they're together," Declan interrupted my rambling thoughts.

"How can you say that?" I challenged him, as if he must be blind, or so in love with Anne that his eyes weren't working properly.

"Well, call it the fact that I can see or read these things. Now, watch," he said.

I followed his gaze. "Osei's hand on her is carefully placed. If he were dating her, he wouldn't be so careful. His hand would be on her ass," Declan succinctly stated.

He's right. Why didn't I see this before? I know my hand would be on her ass if she were my girl. I've been so consumed with them seeing each other, and my brother being tight-lipped about their relationship, that I've been suffering in silence.

"I suggest you make your move soon because that song they're happily dancing to is a forever love song. And I'm sure my wife is looking for me." The words barely left his lips when Anne showed up, pulling him to dance to the song.

Since the wedding, I've tried to find out more about Dele. Osei, as always, wouldn't provide any information. His usual line of shutting me down was, "You don't like her, so you don't need to know about her." I usually nodded, sometimes asking myself how he'd feel, if he only knew the truth. I told myself not to involve Bruce, the security intel in our group. He'd surely ask questions that I can't answer.

Now, with Osei planning to marry her, it's time I made my move. It's a situation of act now or forever hold my wrath, because there won't be peace for me if Osei marries Dele. I refuse to imagine her pregnant with his child. It will certainly kill me, or I'll have to kill my brother. Devastation will come regardless of the choices, if I don't act.

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Chapter 4

LUKE



Osei arrives and drops his ass onto the chair, the same way he's been doing since he was fifteen. Never mind that he's now twenty-four years old. And I'm eleven years older than him.

"What is our dear mom worried about now?" His tone is nonchalant. He's used to Mom's constant worry.

I lean back in my chair and watch him. We look nothing alike, except for the hazel eyes we've both inherited from Mom. He's the son of a professor and biracial, always laughing, while I'm the son of a real estate mogul, almost a reformed asshole, and all white, never laughing.

Mom is our link—and a hovering one at that. She fought my now-getting-reformed asshole dad to have me live with her and my stepdad, who I call Piah, a short version of his last name, Appiah. My dad agreed to give Mom full custody of me, on the condition that I never call Piah "Dad."

Mom agreed, as long as she had full custody of me, and it was the best decision, because Piah was always there. All I had to do was look behind me and he was right there, making sure I had someone to count on, come rain, cold, or sunshine. Dad only showed up when he didn't have a business meeting or when he threw money at me, insisting I spent my summers learning about the business that had made Mom file for divorce. After he'd accidentally pushed her too hard and stormed out for another meeting, she

had a miscarriage because she was fighting him about going to yet another late meeting. I shut out the image and the crushed feelings of that day. It was a tragic sight to witness—my mother's suffering, and my utter helplessness to help her.

All Mom asked for in the divorce was full custody and tuition payments from my dad. She even returned every piece of jewelry he bought her. I know the fact that she returned all the jewelry still upsets him to this day.

I'd refused to spend my summers with Dad, but Piah had talked to me about the importance of understanding my dad's work. Piah's a smart man, for sure. Up until two months ago, Dad had tried using every tactic to force me into marriage to grow his empire, threatening to give all his wealth to charity. I'd told him to go right ahead. Like I'd suddenly be poor without his wealth.

The beauty of being raised by Piah is the way he lets you know that money is something you have, and it helps make you comfortable; it should never control your life or have a hold on it. That's what my dad doesn't get. Money controlled him and he lost Mom in the process of chasing it—the woman he called his only love.

The news of Dad's cancer shocked both of us. All his wealth can't save him. Now he's switched from being grumpy and mean to everyone, finally realizing that I'm the only person he can call family.

He doesn't want Mom to know about his diagnosis. I've kept it from her, and I've been taking on a more active role in the company. With his sickness comes more confessions from him. He admitted saying, "Your mother was right to have fought for full custody. With Appiah, she gave you a better life." I nodded. Like I said, he's getting reformed daily.

"Bro, what's Mom's worry this time?" Osei's voice slices through my thoughts.

"She said you're planning on getting married to help your friend become a U.S. citizen. Basically, you're trying to make yourself a candidate for marriage fraud with the U.S. government. Can I ask who this girlfriend is?" I ask, my tone warning. Though, I already know; I just need to hear him confirm it.

"It's Dele. She's in a bind, and I'm the only one who can help her—or more like, I'm the one willing to help her." He sends me an impish smile.

"Help her by marrying her and breaking the law?" I say, my tone harsh. But Osei can't be bothered by it. He's convinced of his decision, but he's unaware of the strength of my conviction.

"No one needs to know we're not in love; she and I are quite close, and she already moved in with me. That asshole guy she was living with stole all her money. Plus, he was making her life a living hell." He explains, but the news of her moving in with him is all I hear. If they weren't together before, her living with him will certainly expedite the process.

I control every emotion of jealousy and the overwhelming desire to fight him for her that's starting to seep through with the new information.

"Wait, I thought you two were dating," I state.

He gives a jesting laugh. "Very funny! Dele and I aren't dating. She's my twin from another life." He relaxes in his chair after making fun of me. "I thought she was dating the Ramsey guy, but she recently confessed it was just a living arrangement with him to get her papers. But the idiot was happy to rob her and spend her money on other girls he's fucking. He'd agreed to marry her, but kept stringing her along. Now she's about to lose her job if she doesn't produce a work permit, and that would affect her schooling too." He sighs as I listen. "You know, I was surprised to find out she was born in the UK, and her plan is to finish her nursing program here and then move permanently to the UK, but she doesn't want to leave without completing her degree either, so I'll marry her." I let the plan sink in, a plan that I intend to shut down. "What good am I if I can't help my favorite girl?" He smirks. He just had to say it again.

"By your account, your only good is to be Mr. Noble and get yourself involved in fraud," I replied, also realizing Declan was right. Guess I was clouded by jealousy that I didn't notice they were friends. His tight-lipped attitude about them didn't help. Now, if he marries her, with her already living with him ... I don't even want to think about how fast they'll get to the finish line.

"Living up to my name, I guess." He winks.

"Here's what we're going to do." I state and lean forward. He does the same. "I'll marry her, because she'd be doing me a favor." I maintain eye contact. When he doesn't flinch, I continue. "I'll pay her a million dollars to stay married to me until she becomes a U.S. citizen. We can sign a marriage agreement laying out the terms. She gets a million bucks, and I get my dad off my back about marrying one of his friend's daughters." I lay it out as the best laid plan in a convincing manner.

"You mean Lily, right?" he interjects. He's right; she's the only one who came close to me succumbing to my father's push. I killed the plan to marry Lily for my father's sick need for control the night I met Dele. As it turns out, my dad is no longer pushing, though he keeps mentioning that I need to get married, as if being married is the next best thing in life. I'd told Osei and my other brothers about the pressure from my dad to marry his chosen woman, but I kept his cancer and his reforming behaviors a secret from Osei and mom.

Osei's face is speaking volumes of doubt. His mind is racing at the suggestion of me marrying Dele, though I don't respond to the mention of Lily. As lively as my brother can be, he's also a thinker, thanks to Piah always teaching us to explore our minds. However, now isn't the time for him to explore; I already did that for both of us.

"I doubt Dele would go for it. She's convinced you don't like her—or anyone, for that matter," he mocks. I glare at him, not surprised that Dele would think that way. His words confirm how effective my aloof and stoic demeanor has been in concealing my true feelings for Dele, from both my brother and her.

The only words I've exchanged with her after our first meeting were a brusque 'hello,' and the fact that I didn't shake her hand when we were officially introduced still makes me the bad guy. Good thing Osei isn't thinking about the fact I'm planning to commit the same fraud I just chastised him about.

"I don't have anything against her," I say to interrupt his thoughts, except the fact that my body and soul want to fuck her like my life depends on it. She's like that unattainable thing you want so badly, always within your grasp, yet you can't have it. Only, I'm Luke Blythe, and I'm going to claim every inch of her.

"The million bucks sounds great, but I'm not sure I can convince her to marry you. Plus, the elusive Luke Blythe marrying a nobody black woman, and in secret, too? Won't that raise eyebrows and have ICE agents digging more into her? I want to help her, not create more problems for her. All she wants is to finish school," he remarks, shaking his head. "Your idea has 'bad idea' written all over it. Thanks for the offer, but I think I can say no on her behalf."

I chuckle inwardly at the thought of him still believing he has a stake in marrying her.

"I know you want to help, and I don't want you to get into trouble if they find out it's not real. My elusiveness, as you call it, makes it clear I can marry any woman without broadcasting it to the world. This is a win-win for both of us. She gets to finish school with a million dollars in hand, and I get my inheritance without drama," I state convincingly.

"Luke Blythe marrying her will attract more attention. That's something she doesn't want or need. Dele needs to fly under the radar, and your name alone equates to a bullhorn radar alarm," he leans back in his chair, while I try to read him, asking myself if I should let him marry her. The thought barely made purchase before *'Hell no!'* rang out loud in my head.

"I have enough lawyers and power to shut down any attention that would jeopardize our best laid plan," I say to him as I watch him quietly. I know he's analyzing and thinking it through. I'm eager for him to fucking say yes, but I remain quiet, pretending his thinking isn't bothering the heck out of me. Finally, he lets out a sigh.

"Fine!" he says in frustration. "You are right on both counts," he grudgingly admits. "I'll talk to her and convince her this is a good move. Guess she'll have to suck it up and live with you. I'm going to need you to make it two million for her," he says the last part in a stern tone. Is he really negotiating for her? I stare him down and he matches my gaze. Damn, I taught him well. The real question is, am I willing to let her go if he refuses to back down from the two million? Fuck no! I'll pay more, but he doesn't know that.

"Fine, two million. My place is big, and I'm rarely ever there; she'll be fine." I relax and watch his scrunched-up face. "We are adults, and we need each other to make this plan work," I state to convince him a little more.

"Deal! Just don't make her feel uncomfortable. She's genuinely a nice person. Try not to suck that out of her," he snickers.

"I'm sure we can both manage to be polite and act like two people in love," I cheekily reply, glad it didn't take much to convince him, and I'm sure he'll convince her.

"Let me talk to her and bring her over to your place once she agrees."

"Good. Call me, and don't tell mom anything," I remind him. He tells her everything, which sometimes ends up being my problem. This situation is the only time I'm glad he told her before he went ahead and put a ring on my woman. *She's not yours yet*.

"You know mom will ask?"

"Just tell her I'm looking into it," I sternly state, holding his gaze.

"Good luck taking her calls. So, what's for lunch?" he asks, relaxing into the chair and crossing his legs.

"Get out, Osei. I'm busy."

"Yeah, yeah, Mr. Big Shot." He leaves without a backward glance.

The universe must be working in my favor. Though I can't believe Osei said she's scared of me. I've avoided her since that kiss. I barely acknowledge her whenever I see her. If I'm elusive to most, I'm certainly mysterious to her. Now she's going to be my wife and live with me right where I want her. I just lied to Osei to get a woman—not just any woman, but my woman. I'm getting my woman and bringing her home. She's probably going to find it shocking that I want to marry, but little does she know, I have a craving for her.

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Chapter 5

DELE



"What do you think of the proposal?" Osei asks again, but I remain silent, trying to comprehend everything he's just told me about marrying his brother. The guy who avoided shaking my hand or even looking at me and acts like he tolerates me being friends with Osei. All I ever get from him is a mumbled or whispered 'hello.' I've found every excuse in the book to avoid his presence. Being friends with Osei doesn't help because they're brothers.

I rub my brow to ease the stress I'm feeling, and the hyperventilation coming on in my chest. Osei must be messing with me, but he looks serious. I've known him long enough to read and understand his facial expressions. We communicate without talking during gatherings. We've always had a good connection, with no sexual attraction. The more we have in common, the more we realize we were probably twins in another life.

"Did you hear what I said?" He reaches across the table to take my hand and shake it, bringing me back to earth from whatever planet I zoned off to at high speed. My ears are still echoing from the crash-landing back to reality.

"I heard you, but I'm not sure I comprehend everything you just said. So, please, explain it to me slowly, like I'm five years old." He chuckles and nods, lets go of my hand, and leans back.

"I know it's a lot, so I'll be very slow. My older brother, Luke Blythe, the enigmatic billionaire, wants to marry you. In exchange, he'll pay you two million dollars to be his wife for three years. He'll also have his lawyers file the spousal immigration papers to make sure you get to stay in the U.S.."

"Why does he want to get married now?" I ask. I still can't understand.

"Even billionaires have problems," he teases. "You agreeing to marry him gets him the inheritance from his father. Everybody wins," he exclaims like he's just completed a magic show.

"Is this really a win for me?" I manage a croaky ask, surprised I can speak at all because there's a fist lodged in my throat. I start to rub my brow as a stormy headache brews, not to mention my heart pounding against my ribcage.

"My mom called him when I told her about us, and he thought this would help you both out." I nod, but my whole being is experiencing something I can't explain. My hands feel sweaty, so I wipe them on my pants. My stomach churns at the thought of marrying a man who barely tolerates me, much less likes me. My brow massage does not stop the sledgehammer headache racing toward me or my rocketing heart rate.

"Your brother is rich, handsome, and I want to believe a healthy, thirty-something guy—"

"Thirty-five," he interjects. I nod.

"He's made it clear he doesn't like me. I don't think marrying him is a good idea. Tell him thanks, but *no thanks*. I'll find someone less complicated." I let out a sigh of relief after saying "no thanks," words I can't believe I managed to say considering how desperately I need to extend my stay to finish school. Osei chuckles.

"Did you miss the two million dollars part in all this? And his lawyers working for you?"

"No, but it sounds too good to be true. Ergo, it is too good to be true." He gives me a side-eye.

"Think about it—your brother changes dates like he changes shirts. One of those women will be happy to warm his bed, be his arm candy. No lawyers needed, and I'm sure he'll pay less for them too. I just don't see anyone believing he'll leave all those options for me." Osei laughs hard at my words, but I'm correct. He doesn't lack women who would gladly jump at his agreement.

"Correct on all counts, but they might also catch feelings and want to make it a real marriage, which my brother isn't interested in." He gets up, sits next to me, takes my right hand, and turns my face toward him. "Honestly, you're the best candidate. Beautiful arm candy, no feelings involved, strictly business. You do your thing, and he'll do whatever he wants to do. The best part is you get to finish school and be eligible to live here, or return to the UK either way—with two million bucks to your name." He arches his brows with a questioning look of "What's there to think about?"

"The money sounds good and scary at the same time. Besides, I don't plan to live here once I graduate." He scrunches his nose.

"I know, and I still don't like the thought of you leaving, but I think you and Luke will accommodate each other just fine." He chuckles. I smack his hand and remove it from mine. This is not funny.

"This is freaking me out—marrying a guy like your brother would call attention. I don't belong in his world. I want to exist in plain sight, not call attention to myself." My voice is jittery.

"I think you'll do just fine," he says like it's a walk in the park, while my brain is trying to find ways to freeze his lips. I'm so scared it feels like my heart will jump out of my chest; the stakes are high against me. It doesn't help that I fancy his brother, and talks of him with other women always bring out claws I didn't know I had. I've trained myself to tune out and act nonchalant whenever Osei mentions his brother's activities. I seem to have done a good job because Osei can't tell I have any feelings for his enigmatic brother.

"Let me think about it. Frankly, it's a lot all at once," I reply in a clear tone.

"Okay, bedtime." I nod. We rise, hug, and bid each other goodnight. I head to my room. Everything he said makes sense for me to jump at it. Only, it sounds too good to be true, which is how I ended up in America. I don't regret coming. I've just learned that I need to be more cautious.

When men offer money and appear to agree, it's important to delve into the true intentions behind their words, because that's where the truth lies—something I've experienced twice now. Once with my no-good uncle, and again with my loser former roommate, Ramsey.

With asshole Ramsey, I should have known better than to believe his lying tongue. The worst part is I stupidly told myself that if I played along

with all his demands, except for sex, he would eventually help me—even as he showed signs of being irresponsible and spending the money I worked hard for on frivolous stuff.

"Reality hit when he didn't know he had butt-dialed me, and I heard him bragging to his friends about how he had me locked down to his every whim, while I was thinking he would marry me and file legal papers for me.

I cried sitting in my car that night when I heard the loose talk on my voicemail. Then, I drove home and laid in my bed, pretending I didn't know his intentions. Thankfully, he was asleep when I got home. I didn't sleep that night and left early the next morning.

I arrived at Osei's door, helpless. He took me in without question. He followed me home to help take my stuff out. Ramsey would return to an empty house that evening.

I closed out our negative-balance joint account, brought it to zero, and opened a new account. I changed my direct deposit to the new account I had opened. I blocked Ramsey from my phone. Basically, I closed his chapter faster than a light switch. He's now a blip in my story.

I did it all before my next paycheck. He now has to live within his broke limits. He stopped by the hospital, and I refused to talk to him. He called me names and said I would regret leaving him dry.

The idiot even tried to play the victim, which was infuriating. I wanted to slap him, but thank God for my friend Jax, who pulled me away and acted like spilling hot coffee on him was an accident. Now, I'm living with Osei until I get my own place. I hope to graduate with my BSN soon, but I need legal working papers, or I'll be forced to leave the U.S. without completing my degree. I'd like to get my master's in nursing, but I guess I should plan to do that in the UK. My brother advised that I finish my education in the U.S. before going to the UK. He said it would make a big difference in settling into life in London. I can get to work right away and won't have to worry about school in between.

Osei, I trust, but Luke is a puzzle I can't figure out. Why would he think I'm a viable option to marry? Something smells fishy. I'm not about to marry him just to find out how smelly his fish is.

It took a while for me to sleep after that mind-blowing conversation with Osei. I'm working the night shift tomorrow, which will give me time to absorb and digest this, though it's more like a rock sitting in the pit of my

stomach that I can't digest. Truth be told, my stomach is in a knot just thinking about marrying Luke.

The money he's offering will go a long way in helping my dad, but the two-million-dollar question is: will I make it to the finish line to get the money and not catch feelings? The fact is, I already caught feelings. I just need to seal those feelings in a box and face reality.

The guy is handsome, and I find myself attracted to him, though I would never confess that to Osei in a million years. Subconsciously, thoughts of the guy I kissed on the balcony at Osei's Halloween party months back still linger in my mind. A part of me tells me it was Luke, but it can't be him because Luke barely tolerates my presence. Most times, he mumbles 'hello' like speaking to me is painful. He's very good at keeping his distance, and I've learned to do the same. So, he can't be my mystery guy. *But damn, that kiss is ingrained in my brain*.

Luke's eyes followed me at the wedding of his friend, and I was Osei's plus one. A few times, our eyes collided at the event; he would look away like he was upset. The wedding was fun for me—Amaka made sure of it. Her words, "Hope you catch a guy," echoed in my mind. I didn't catch any man's eyes, just Luke's, which felt like he was laser-focused on me and simultaneously undressing and roasting me.

I chose to ignore Luke at Osei's request when I mentioned that his brother was looking at us with a furrowed brow. Osei and I had fun dancing all night. It was the one night I got to be carefree and let loose.

Now, the guy who shows constant disdain for me wants to marry me. Unfortunately for me, I need to keep my attraction locked up. My body annoyingly wants Luke, which is crazy because the guy can't hide his dislike of me. My body may want him, but it isn't getting Luke Blythe. And yet, in a way, I am.

I will marry him, he's my most viable option to solving my real-life problems. I have about a month at best to submit work authorization to the hospital. My dad's medical bills are piling up faster than my brother and I can handle.

No work equals no money.

No money equals no school.

No school equals no degree.

No degree means more hardship, which means less pay, and less money means I could lose my dad, which is something I can't bring myself to process right now. And if I don't marry Luke, with his dislike of me, he might convince Osei not to help me.

I don't have a choice but to accept his marriage offer. I just need a mental and strategic plan for how to survive hanging close to hurricane Luke Blythe and not get blown away by the elusive bachelor who dislikes me.

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Chapter 6

LUKE



Seven fucking days. Why is it taking her this long? I've reached out to Osei while trying not to act eager, though every cell in my body is in hyper-eager mode. Osei tells me he discussed things with her, but she asked to think about it. Who thinks this long about two million dollars? Seven mindfucking days.

I haven't slept and mentally crushed the vision of her in Osei's arms or any thought of him backing out and marrying her. He occasionally has a rare impulsive side that always throws me off. I, on the other hand, always stay focused and don't give in to impulsive actions.

I asked Bruce to watch Osei and immediately alert me if he goes to a courthouse. Bruce had a long list of questions that I refused to answer. He did keep an eye on Osei, and no, Osei hasn't gone anywhere near the courthouse or a church, which means Dele is the one holding out on me. It's time she and I chat—without Osei.

I know her schedule because Osei is no longer tight-lipped about it and was happy to share it. Yet, I'm not getting the answer I want. So here I am, about to ambush her.

I get off the elevator, and just before I use my key to unlock the door, I hear the elevator from the garage open. I see her heading toward me, head down, reading something on her phone. She looks up right at the door,

almost as if she mentally counted the steps to the door. She's startled to see me. We stand there, gazing at each other. A ping from her phone is her wake-up call, and she steps back.

"Hi," I say to her.

"Hi, Osei isn't back yet," she replies, fumbling with her keys.

"I know. I came to speak with you." Now I have her attention as she looks at me, wide-eyed.

"About?" she croaks.

"Let's get inside," I say, taking the key from her, opening the door, and signaling for her to go ahead. She moves gingerly. I step in after her and shut the door. "Shall we?" I say the moment she takes off her shoes and puts them away. She nods, and we take a seat on opposite ends of the room.

"I know marrying me is a big decision, and we barely know each other. I'm open to answering any questions you have. You have to understand, my company is important to me, and you will be helping me a great deal if you agree to this. Plus, it will also give you the chance to finish school as you've planned. This arrangement could really benefit both of us." I state in a controlled voice. Though inside, I'm screaming, 'What the fuck is taking you so long to say yes? Just fucking say YES!'

"Why me?" she asks, locking eyes with me and not flinching. I see strength behind her eyes, and her upright, steeled sitting position shows a backbone I can't mess with.

"Why not you? Osei speaks highly of you. You're the one person he can vouch for. We both need this arrangement. I will use all my resources to get you your legal documentation, and my father can stop pushing me to marry one of his friends' daughters. Otherwise, he'll distribute my inheritance to charity."

"Please, tell me the truth. The devil, as they say, is in the details. I know and trust Osei, but I don't know you." She fidgets, her skepticism not masked. Of course, she trusts my annoying brother, and I want her to trust me. But I can't tell her the truth—the simple fact that I've wanted her since that kiss on the balcony. Scratch that. I have an insane craving for her.

"I don't have a hidden agenda. I'm laying all my cards on the table. We both have something to lose and gain, but if we both play our cards right, we both win. You get to finish school and leave for the UK, and I get my inheritance. It's that simple." She nods. I think I've convinced her because she relaxes a little. I put my hand out for a handshake, and she looks at me,

stunned. Her eyes widen in incredulity at my extended hand. I'm not surprised she's stunned because I've avoided any physical contact since the day Osei introduced us.

Now, as she slowly places her hand in mine, we both feel the charged connection. Her blatant expression is a mix of shock and uncertainty as I hold on, refusing to let go. It confirmed that my decision to avoid physical contact before was not unfounded. "Is this a yes?" I ask, my heart racing with anticipation for her answer.

"Yes," she answers, and inside, I bubble with excitement and relief at her agreement. I speedily freeze my desire for her. I pull back. *Control*, I chant to myself.

"Great, I'll have my lawyers draw up the paper for our marriage agreement. Do you have a lawyer?"

"No, Osei said he would get me one." Of course he did.

"Okay, do you have any requests for a ring or any bridal preferences?" I want to know her every desire.

"No, a simple band will suffice." Her reply is casual.

"Since you are marrying a Blythe, it will be more convincing to wear a ring when not at work." The thought of other men not knowing that she belongs to me—even if it is only temporary for business purposes—makes me possessive. She's fucking mine in our time together, business or not.

"Okay, nothing flashy."

"Any preference for the stone shape?" She turns to face me, confusion in her eyes. My brain immediately responds with, "Yes, I've been shopping for you."

"Round is fine," she answers hesitantly.

I can't hide my smile as I mentally check off another task on my list. Everything is falling into place perfectly, and soon she will be legally bound to me. And in our time together—whether it's business or pleasure—she will be mine.

"Round it is, then." I pause and smile at her, looking directly into those beautiful brown eyes. "Thank you for doing this," I say, hoping to ease the thick tension between us.

"I should be the one thanking you. You are helping me more than you realize." She nods as she wraps her arms around herself. Her body language shows she's still skeptical.

"So, a week from today to get married," I state. Her perplexed look is blatant. I'm not giving her a chance to think, let alone find another guy or consider backing out. I close deals all the time and never act eager, but this deal is far greater than any deal I've closed, and I'm not giving any chance for the tiniest gap of air to slip through—let alone a loophole for her to backtrack. I'm locking us down.

"Won't that be too quick?" Her shaky voice and eyes question.

"Anything holding you back?" *Please*, say no.

"No, I just thought we had to meet with lawyers to sign the agreement before going to the courthouse to get the documents."

"I'll take care of all that. The lawyers will bring the papers by tomorrow, and your lawyer has a day to review. We can get married in a church; I know someone." If only you knew I put the lawyers to work the moment Osei agreed, before he even mentioned it to you.

"Okay." I rise. I need to leave. I can't stay this close to her and not unleash the craving to kiss her. If I kiss her, I doubt I will stop, so not now. Just a week, I remind myself. Seven fucking days, and she'll be my wife forever.

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DELE



I watch him leave, and I race to lock the door. My back to the door, I let out a long sigh. Being that close to him was intense. Why, for the love of all good things, do I always feel a visceral desire for him? He doesn't like me, but today we shook hands, and it felt downright like an electric shock charging through my whole body, which is crazy. His hazel eyes bore into mine.

I'm still in awe of the look that felt like he was mentally undressing me and caressing me at the same time. *Again, crazy*. I refuse to think he has any desire for me. Even my active mind came to a stop as I stared into his beautiful hazel eyes. He had me hypnotized. *Shake it off*, I tell myself.

Reality is, desperate times call for desperate measures, and that is my reason for saying yes. I haven't thought about anything since Osei told me. *My* "*yes*" *to him means a lot to me*.

At one point, I thought Osei would come and tell me it was a joke. I kept waiting for that "gotcha" moment to surface until I saw Luke at the door. My heart raced as it always does at the sight of him. A good thing he took the keys from my shaking hands.

He must need me more than I realize; that is why I said yes, though I can't pinpoint why me? I honestly think he has more choices available to him, and yet he picked me, which makes no sense at all. Or it could only

mean he wants to make sure I don't marry his brother, which, quite frankly, is bizarre because Osei and I have a close bond—not a romantic relationship—but whatever his excuse for picking me, I pray he goes through with all he has promised and isn't another disappointment on my long list of men who have disappointed me.

Getting my work permit and finishing my education is crucial to my future, and quite frankly, it's a game-changer in my life. Once I graduate, I can leave for the UK with two million dollars and settle there for the next chapter of my life.

To be honest, I hope I'm not shooting myself in the foot with this guy. You trust Osei, my subconscious reminds me, and I nod inwardly.

Moving from the door, I go to my bedroom and drop my body and weighted mind on the bed. I realized I need to let Osei know about the plans.

Me: Your brother stopped by, and I said yes. Guess we're getting married.

Osei: Congratulations on your engagement

Me: Not funny

Osei: I'll be home soon, and we can celebrate your future nuptials.

Me: He said next week for the nuptials, is this a good idea?

Osei: Living in luxury, lawyers working for you, two-million-dollar ... good idea, yes.

I let out a loud, frustrated grunt. First, I must survive the three years being his fake wife. He sounds and smells so much like my balcony guy, but it can't be him because he doesn't like me. The balcony guy saw my face. Luke and I met for the first time when Osei introduced us. So, it can't be him—my mind is just playing tricks on me.

Note to self: I must conceal my monumental attraction to Mr. Enigma Blythe, the one who dislikes me. *Damn it! This is going to take a lot of strength from me, especially when I only have strength for work and study.* I let out another frustrated sigh because in seven days, I'll be Mrs. Luke Blythe. That sounds scary in ways I can't express. It's something I never imagined. Life is throwing me lemons with a life jacket—like I need to make lemonade while wearing a life jacket to protect my traitorous heart from Luke Blythe, the enigma and known serial dater.

I roll to my side and dream of my happy place. The monster in my dreams tries to invade my happy place. I push at them; they get bigger, and

I keep fighting until Osei wakes me up with a shake.

"Hey, I got us dinner." I nod and pick up my phone, only to see two text messages from Luke.

Luke: I'll send the movers to come and get your things tomorrow.

Luke: The document and your ring will be waiting for you at our place.

What the fuck?! I barely said yes, and he's already packing up my bags. I turn my phone to Osei in anger. He reads and cracks up.

"My brother acts fast," he says with a laugh. This isn't funny. I haven't even placed my mind and body in a sealed box away from him, and he's already packing up my bags.

In that mischievous smile, I see his resemblance to Luke.

"I didn't say I was going to move in with him," I blurt out. Osei laughs even louder.

"You're joking, right, Dele?" he laughs more. "If you are marrying him, of course, you're going to live with him." I realize that I sound stupid. How do I expect to answer any immigration questions about us if I'm not? *Holy shit*.

This isn't good; sheer willpower was what I used to control my wanting him earlier. I'm going to need to summon every ounce of strength to shield my desire for him. A good thing is he has zero interest in me, and that should be a turnoff for me. I just need to remind myself of that little fact: *he doesn't want me*.

I can't tee up a smart and convincing response to Osei. "Where is our dinner?" I ask instead.

Following Osei out to the kitchen, my mind drifts back to the first time Osei brought me lunch and introduced me to his brother Luke, whom I had heard so much about and was eager to meet. One thing Osei failed to mention was that his brother was *THE* Luke Blythe—the enigmatic billionaire and the ladies' man of the year. I was just ready to meet my bestie's brother, Luke. Only, he wasn't just Osei's brother; he was also one of the richest guys in this city. And to my surprise, I had an instant attraction to him that felt exactly like my mystery balcony guy, something I'd failed to mention to Osei.

My attraction dried up in the awkward moment when he barely looked at me or shook my hand. Osei had pulled me into a hug and whispered, "I'm sorry, baby twin, Luke doesn't take the time to get to know any girl. He can't understand how wonderful you are." He made me smile before heading to his car. I watched Luke follow Osei without a backward glance.

Unable to discern what had happened, I went back to work and kept my focus, placing Luke in the category of people I must ignore.

Living with him should be easy, right? Since it's clear he doesn't like me. I won't be in his way, that's for sure. This is strictly business. More overtime and study time await me. Then London.

<u>.</u>

DELE



After class, I follow the usual routine—head to work. I keep my focus on my job and my upcoming exams. I also make sure to shut my phone off. I don't need any more texts from Luke. It's as if he refuses to be on the backburner. Before dinner with Osei last night, I'd already received several texts from him:

Luke: The movers will be there around 2PM; Osei mentioned he will be home.

Luke: Osei will give you the address and the key to our place.

Luke: A stylist will stop by to measure you for your dress.

Luke: Text me the name of your lawyer.

We'd finished eating and cleaned up when Osei handed me the keys, address, and garage code to the building. I put them in my backpack, refusing to think about the implications, while reminding myself of what's at stake if I back out now.

To be honest, all I thought about was ways to back out, and not a single idea surfaced. It was like he'd magically blocked my mind from any creative thoughts.

I wrap up my notes, simultaneously wrestling with my thoughts to keep Luke Blythe out of them. As much as he keeps creeping in like an annoying fly buzzing around, I swat it away and think it's gone. Two seconds later, it's back, buzzing louder in my ear. I swat him harder this time.

My mind keeps comparing Luke to my mystery guy, and the more I try to kill the thought, the more my mind reveals the attraction. But he can't be the mystery guy because the balcony guy kissed me with so much passion and had me dreaming of a possible fairytale. Luke Blythe, on the other hand, wouldn't even look at me, let alone speak to me or shake my hand. Though he did yesterday, which shocked me.

Focus, *Dele*. On the legal documentation, work, and school—he won't matter.

After work, I head to my study group. I talk and laugh with them, but I barely comprehend anything we discuss. I leave the group and head back to Osei's place. A part of me refuses to believe that I'll no longer live here.

Osei is watching a show when I open the door. He turns to me and starts to laugh.

"Why are you laughing?" I ask, baffled.

"For starters, Luke has been texting me all day asking your whereabouts, because you haven't responded to any of his texts, even though I told him you were at work."

"I shut my phone off." That's my only response. What's Luke's deal with this constant texting?

"Well, you seem to have found a way to drive him crazy. He's not used to people not jumping at his every command."

"I hope he's not expecting me to ask how high every time he says jump," I retort, and he laughs more.

"This is going to be quite entertaining for me to watch." He gives me that annoying laugh that I detest, and he knows it, too.

"Not funny. He doesn't like me, and the best thing for both of us is to be amicable and stay out of each other's way. You know, the proverbial 'stay in your lane.'" I snicker.

"Like I said, this will be a great show," he mocks. I drop my backpack and head towards my room.

"He had all your stuff moved earlier today," Osei shouts, stopping me in my tracks.

"Ugh!" I let out a muffled grunt. *I forgot about that*. I turn to Osei, who smirks at me. I move to grab my backpack, always prepared with a change of clothes. My ever flight mode.

"I just texted him that you're here."

"Why would you do that? Your brother is intense. I need a minute to think," I snap at him.

"I had to, so he can stop blowing up my phone." He shrugs.

"Fine. I have a change of clothes here, and I'll spend the night. Tomorrow morning, I'll decide what to do."

"Okay with me. Let's hope it's okay with Luke," he mocks.

"Why wouldn't he be okay with it? I'm sure he doesn't want me in his space. Doesn't he have some socialite to bother tonight? Please, find him one." I grumble. Osei chuckles and nods, but I don't buy his skeptical nod. I head to my room to shower, only to discover that everything I use is gone.

It's clear they moved it all, down to my bobby pins. I step back out to speak with Osei.

"I'm going to need to borrow a T-shirt and some soap." I plead. He points to his room, telling me to go ahead and get whatever I need. I go in, pick the first oversized T-shirt I can find, grab his soap, then head to my room. I shower with my braids up, upset that my shower cap is gone. I change into Osei's T-shirt and knee-length leggings from my backpack. I throw my dirty clothes into the wash, turn my phone on, and see all the messages from Luke. I ignore every single one. He can't have both my days and my nights. I'm going to eat, sleep, and tomorrow, I'll think about him.

I head out to speak with Osei and stop mid-stride when I see Luke. He turns to me, and his eyes rake in slow motion—from my braless T-shirt to my leggings and painted toenails. To my dismay, my nipples harden. *Fuck!* His eyes are drawn to the hardened nipples, clearly visible beneath the fabric. *He needs to look away*. His brow arches, and a mischievous grin tugs the corner of his lips.

"There you are. Sorry, I didn't tell him to come over, he did that on his own," Osei shouts behind Luke, whose eyes darken. I notice his immediate tense jaw. Our eyes do not leave each other. How am I going to live 1,095 days with this guy and not beg him to have his way with me, knowing he would never notice me, let alone feel an ounce of what I feel for him?

Osei isn't reading the translucent emotions flowing between Luke and me. He shouts, "Dinner is here, let's eat. Dele, I ordered from our number one place," he excitedly states. I smile at Osei. Why couldn't the universe make this easy for me and let me feel for Osei instead of Luke, the enigma?

Osei pulls my arm, and I follow him to the kitchen. My stomach growls loudly at the smell of grilled lamb and biryani rice. My mouth waters at the flavors. I grab a plate, and Luke is right behind me, so much so that I can feel his closeness and heat from his body, which causes me to fan myself with the T-shirt. I move with my arm against my chest to prevent my nipples from sticking out. They're so hardened that it hurts.

"After dinner, we are leaving," Luke announces. I should argue with him, telling him I want to stay here tonight, but my tongue is tied, and my lips are sealed. I simply nod. Might as well face the reality that he's going to disturb my night.

Osei talks nonstop during dinner, making jokes that I normally would laugh out loud at, but I just chuckle. Luke, on the other hand, seems fine, laughing with his brother without a care for the intense air flowing between us. Though his eyes never leave mine each time he laughs or responds to Osei.

After dinner, Osei says he will clean up, and I go to my room to put on the spare sports bra and grab my backpack. "I put my clothes in the dryer; I'll pick them up tomorrow," I say to Osei.

"I'll send someone to pick them up tomorrow," Luke says. *What's his deal?*

"I'll bring them over tomorrow afternoon. Remember, we are meeting with your lawyer?" I nod, though I'd forgotten about that too. This guy is already sucking the not so common sense out of me.

"Good, let's go," Luke says in a low growl. Now I wish Jace hadn't decided to sleep again, causing me to leave it at the hospital parking lot and hitch a ride home with Jax.

I follow him out and mumble a thank you when he opens the passenger door for me. I make sure our bodies don't touch in any way as I get into the Range Rover. The luxury smell and feel hit me as I tuck my backpack in front of me. I'm quiet on the drive to his place. In ten minutes, he pulls into a garage. I didn't know he lived this close to Osei. Which means I can walk back to Osei's place. I smile inwardly as the silver lining is revealed to me.

As we step out of the car, I follow him with a racing heart and an overwhelmed mind. I clutch tightly to my backpack, like a security blanket. The elevator ride is quiet, but the silence between us crackles with tension. My thoughts are a jumbled mess as I try to resist the urge to reach for his hand. He smells familiar, comforting, and his proximity is both exhilarating

and nerve-wracking. I shift my backpack from one arm to the other, trying to distract myself from his alluring presence. But it's no use. His energy keeps pulling me in like a moth to a flame. I mentally scold myself for letting my irrational subconscious take control. *Shut it down, now!* I yell at my inner mind as I desperately try to regain control of my emotions.

The elevator door dings and opens at the exact moment, almost as if I had some magical power, but I know it's pure coincidence. I follow him until he stops and opens the door. I exhale a slow and heavy breath, one I didn't know I was holding in, at the confirmation that behind the door is my new home for the foreseeable 1,095 days. I lace my fingers as I take guarded steps into the unit, and I'm blown away by the large open space. The floor-to-ceiling window shows a beautiful view of the city, with Lake Michigan sitting serene, kissed by the night sky.

The off-white leather sectional with a chaise on one end is my style. The beige carpet with beige and black throw pillows complements the matching coffee tables. The dark wood flooring is certainly a preference I would have chosen. The curtains are also a hint of beige and black. Like Osei's place, four bar stools with a granite counter and dark wood make up the luxurious kitchen. A peek at the appliances from afar spells high-end. I should be excited because I love to cook, but I also need to remember that I need to stay in my lane. There's a pivotal reason why I'm here, and he might have girlfriends coming around.

The dining area sits openly between the living room and the kitchen. I must say, the entertainment design, adorned with a large fireplace in the living room, is sumptuous and covers the whole area. I catch a glimpse of a dinette that looks more inviting to me. My breath catches as I feel Luke's breath so close to me.

"I had them move your stuff into the bedroom next to mine. Feel free to look around, and if there's anything you don't like, let me know, and we can change it," he says, then turns toward a long hallway.

"Okay, thank you. Where is my room?" I ask. He leads the way, and I follow him, admiring the simple and bold décor in the hallway. When he opens the door, I'm marveled at the size of the room and the simple yet elegant décor. I notice a chaise in the corner, and I am doing a happy girl dance inside. I've always wanted one. The sage blanket draped over the chaise looks soft. I can see myself enjoying every minute in that chaise. Maybe the 1,095 days won't be torturous after all. *Just maybe*.

"Thank you. This is really nice," I state, without looking at him. I can feel him a few steps behind me. The heat radiating from him has my body responding in ways I've never experienced. My nipples are hard again. Oh Lordy, this isn't good.

"Glad you like it. I had the men put all your stuff away in the drawers and closet. If you don't like it, just tell Paula how you want it changed," he urges. My mind blows with the thought of men touching my underwear.

"My underwear too?" I blurt out. I can't believe he had strange men packing up my undergarments. They are personal. I only ever splurge on two things: underwear and shoes. By splurge, I mean the final sale on the semi-luxury items that I like.

"Paula took care of that. She was with the movers at Osei's and here as well." I breathe in relief. Paula and I will get along well. I've met her the few times she comes over to clean Osei's place.

"Thank you." He nods.

"Good night," I say to him.

"We'll talk in the morning," he states, like it's an order, not a request.

"I have to be at work by seven and meeting with Osei and my lawyer at four. Can we talk after?" I turn to him and notice a frown that's quickly hidden.

"Sure, goodnight." He leaves, and I let out a breath, dropping my backpack. I step into the oversized closet; it smells like fresh linen. All my clothes barely fill one side of the large closet.

My shoes look fancy on the shelves. The reality is, none of my shoes are high-end, and I didn't pay full price for them.

I open the drawers, and my panties are arranged by color and fabric. The next drawer holds my bras, also arranged in the same format, by color and fabric. I check out the large shower with multiple showerheads and white marble tiles and the soak tub next to it. I'm definitely going to use that. The grand mirror with bright light that I can adjust is nice. I pull open the drawers and find my toiletries. I return to the bedroom to lock the bedroom door, then go back to the closet. I remove Osei's T-shirt and my bra, then pull on one of my nightwear pieces. I also replace the items in my backpack once I'm done. I bounced onto the bed like a kid. I get under the soft sheet; a charger is next to me, and I plug in my phone. Lights out. It doesn't take long for me to fall asleep.

LUKE



I know, I was a tad bit overbearing, texting her all day, but no way was I going to give her a crack to wiggle out of marrying me, let alone a small room for the crack to get bigger. It upset me when she didn't respond to a single text, and even more so when my calls went to voicemail.

I called Osei, who informed me that she always turns her phone off at work and at study group. *Who does that?* Most people put their phone on silent, not off. *That's the first thing she and I are going to address*.

When Osei texted that she was at his place, I knew she was defying me on purpose, and no fucking way was I going to let her spend the night there. Did she not realize how much pressure spending another night at Osei's places put on my mind? I grabbed my keys and drove to his place. I arrived right as the dinner order was getting delivered.

"I knew you would show up," Osei mocked, stepping aside as I barreled my way into his unit.

"Where is she?" My tone was harsher than intended—maybe subconsciously I intended it, causing a raised brow and a confused look from Osei.

"Taking a shower and getting ready for bed." He scoffed.

"She's not sleeping here tonight." My voice was firm as I headed towards her bedroom. She came out in my brother's T-shirt and no bra. *How fucking*

close are they? Seeing her so relaxed in Osei's shirt upset me more than I would ever admit. Her braids were pulled into a messy bun on top of her head. I was almost positive she had no panties on under those leggings. No fucking way was I allowing her to spend the night there. She was quiet as Osei talked nonstop about their favorite restaurant. It was clear they'd been there several times. I laughed along with him, even as I realized I needed to chip away at some of that closeness. Jealousy is an emotion I'd never experienced before now, and I do not like it at all.

Our ride home was quiet. All I could smell was Osei on her. She had showered with his toiletries, and I absolutely disliked the smell of another man on her. It didn't help that she was wearing his shirt. It all irritated the fuck out of me.

Now, she's in our home. I didn't get much out of her, but I sense she likes the unit and the décor, most especially her room. Though she had her back to me, even as my eyes were trained on her. I want her to be comfortable and happy living here with me, but I'm also realizing that it's an uphill battle.

Why would she think I would ever let any man touch her underwear? I don't know how I felt when Osei mentioned he would get that done. I'd asked him to let Paula do it and follow the movers to my place and have her arrange everything for her.

An hour after pacing in my bedroom, I went to check on her, only to find her bedroom door locked. *Oh no, she didn't*. I unlocked the door and moved towards her bed. She'd left the closet light on. I stood at the foot of the bed and watched her sleep. *My God, she's beautiful*. I moved closer to the bed and kissed her forehead. She stirred, and I tiptoed back out and locked the door. No point in letting her know I snuck in despite the lock.

I slept happy, knowing she was in my unit. When I woke up the next morning, it was clear she'd left. Her bedroom door was wide open. I controlled the annoyance building up in me at the fact that I didn't see her before she left.

I call her, and to my utter surprise, she answers.

"Hello." Her soft tone cracks my armor. *I'm happy she answered*, but now *I'm at a loss for words*.

"Return home after meeting with your lawyer. There's a lot we need to discuss," I state, regretting how forceful my voice sounds.

"Okay." Before I could say another word, I hear a masculine voice in laughter saying, "Got ya." And her voice responds, "Eww, Kai, don't put those stinky lips on me again, especially when I have no idea where those lips were last night."

"You love me," the male voice replies.

"Do not," she responds, and the line disconnects. Does my blood pressure rise? Abso-fucking-lutely!

I bottled up my emotions and head to work. My dad is feeling better this week and plans to make an appearance today.

My day goes nothing as planned, with my dad making more demands and changes to things I'd already set up. The only good thing is Dele's ring is delivered, and the deed changes to have her name on our home are sent to me. I signed it without question, and her signature is also needed. I take both items home when I notice it's after seven pm.

I dash out faster than I normally do because my soon-to-be wife just might decide to head to work again, and I won't see her. I get home to find Dele singing and dancing with Osei and Paula laughing alongside.

I watch her carefree and happy as she sings, laughs, and dances to the beat. I've heard the song before; it's some afro beat tune that Osei plays all the time. Please don't tell me, they have a song. It's a good thing Paula is here, because I sure as hell feel like punching Osei for how close he is to her and how casually he touches her. Dele is getting down and twisting her hips to the beat when she sights me looking at her. She stops right away and taps Osei, who turns off the music. Paula is now fidgeting with the dough. Guess I'm the party pooper.

"Can I speak to you alone, Dele?" I say to her, shooting my brother a glare. She nods, just as Osei says, "Hello to you too," in a snarky tone. I ignore him and head towards Dele's room. I know she's following me. The moment she steps in, I close and lock the door. I notice her eyes widen in fear, her lips tremble, her hands begin to shake, and her chest heaves like she's about to go into shock.

Fuck! I quickly unlock the door and open it wide. She doesn't look at me but makes a brisk move closer to the door, like she's about to run. *What the fuck happened to her?*

"I would never hurt you," I say in a gentle tone. "I wanted to speak with you alone, without the noise or Osei coming to interrupt." She starts to relax

but won't leave the door. "I brought your ring." I take the box out and open it. She moves a tad closer and leans in to look at the ring.

"It's beautiful," she says in a soft murmur. I take the ring out, dropping the box. I extend my left hand to her. She's hesitant, but slowly, she places her hand in mine. The moment our hands touch, a shocking wave passes through me. I know she feels it, too. I slip the ring on. It's a perfect fit and looks beautiful on her slim hand. She quickly withdraws her hand, and I watch her admire the ring.

"I can't wear this at work; it looks very expensive."

"Wear it whenever you're not at work. Once I put your papers in, you might be watched, and it's best you always have the ring on." *Dare I make her believe I'm not claiming her as mine?*

She nods, but I doubt she's convinced by my lie. "I had the deed changed to include your name." She gasps, quickly covering her mouth with her hand, and I have to control the urge to kiss that mouth. Getting a hold of herself, she relaxes.

"You didn't need to do that," she says, looking at me in awe.

"I want to, and I didn't want anyone second-guessing our marriage."

"Thank you." She comes in and closes the door, drowning out the music and Osei's laughter. As relief washes over me that she's comfortable enough to be alone with me behind closed doors, I realize something happened to her, and I intend to find out who hurt her.

"How was the meeting with your lawyer?"

"He said everything looks good and is fair, so I signed." Yes!

"How much is his fee? I can have the money sent to him."

"It's free; he did it as a favor to my friend."

"I thought he was Osei's friend?"

"No, Osei's friend said he was busy, but Deji said he could review it. Osei said we should go with Deji."

"Do you have any questions for me?"

"When are we getting married? I need to clear my calendar and get a dress."

"A week from tomorrow, at a church. I'll get you all the details. I can arrange a stylist for your dress."

"No need. My friend Jax will help me with that." I nod. Though I want to be involved, I let it go.

"When Osei and Paula leave, we need to start getting to know each other."

"Can we do that after I return from work tomorrow? I have the next day off, no work, and no school." A wide, happy smile graces her face. I like seeing her happy. "Osei has said we should go out, but I can let him know now that I'm staying in."

"Sounds like a good idea."

"Anything else?"

I shake my head, and she opens the door and turns to me.

"It's a beautiful ring. I promise to keep it safe. Thank you."

"Glad you like it," I reply as she dashes out, hollering to Osei.

I follow her out but head to my room to shower and change into lounge pants and a T-shirt. When I come out, Paula is gone. Dele's laughing at Osei, both sitting at the dinner table. Osei has a pouty face.

"You lost, so we're seeing the cheesiest rom-com," she grins at him.

"I so dislike you right now," Osei replies, pouting.

"Sore loser," she replies with the "L" sign to my pouty brother, who knocks her hand off.

I clear my throat, and she immediately starts cleaning up the plates and heads to the kitchen sink. Osei gets up and goes to hug her.

"See you tomorrow," he says. She doesn't say anything. I want her to say something about tomorrow, but I remain quiet.

"Night, Luke," he says to me.

"Night, Osei." He leaves, and the moment he closes the door, I head to the fridge.

"We left you some food in the warmer," she says. I nod and head to the warmer.

She quickly rinses the kitchen sink and says, "Goodnight, Luke."

"Goodnight, Dele," I answer, though my body craves a hug too. I stab the grilled potato.

I grudgingly finish the food and dump the plate in the dishwasher. Work is all I need now to take my mind off my future wife.

When I come out of my office, I notice her light is off. When I try to open the door, I find it locked. Explicit words explode in my head. I soon calm my mind and unlocked the door. She's asleep with the closet light on. I move closer, kiss her forehead, then leave and lock the door. The next morning, she's out before I wake up. I head to work with a happy feeling that tonight will be just us, and we can talk. I'll get my chance to know all about her. I'm happy all day and excited on my way home.

I get home, expecting to see Dele, but she's not here. Her room is empty, with no shoes on the mat or evidence she has returned since the morning.

I grunt in frustration. I call her phone, and it goes straight to voicemail, exacerbating my annoyance at not finding her at home.

I call Osei, who answers right away.

"Hey," he shouts. He's in a crowded place. I will fucking beat him up if he's with her.

"Where is Dele?"

"Library, I think. She said something about an impromptu exam tomorrow, and she can't afford to fail, so it's study time."

"Okay, can you have her call me when you speak to her?"

"I doubt she will call me, but sure."

I hang up with him, and my anger dissipates. I decided to go out too. Maybe I need to fuck some girl to release the tension building up. On my way out, I called Adam, who I'd turned down earlier in the day. He's the software guy in our group. Though he believes he's the most fun of us all.

Adam and I drank and chatted. Soon, Adam and I find our picks for the night. As soon as I step onto the street, the lady kisses me. It feels wrong; I don't want her.

"I'm sorry. I just realized I have an early day tomorrow."

"Can we do this some other time?" the lady asks, though I don't remember her name.

"Sure, we can share numbers." I nod and give her the number to my second phone, the one that's not my private line. Martin pulls up, and I get in the car, and we drive off. I'm upset at myself for not taking a willing partner, and the one I want is somewhere in Chicago, and I'm the least important thing on her mind. I say good night to Martin and take my ride up, feeling lost.

Dele still isn't back when I enter our unit; it's after midnight. I call her line again, and it goes to voicemail. No point calling Osei. I go to shower and change, then return to the living room, TV on, sitting and waiting for her.

When I suddenly woke up, I look around. The TV is off. There's a blanket on me with a Lavendar scent, Dele's smell. I check my phone, and it is 2:30 am. I turn towards the door and notice her shoes on the mat.

She's back. Relief washes over me. I jump right up and race towards her room. I slow my pace at her door, touching the knob; the door is locked.

I unlock the door to find her sleeping. I kiss her forehead and return to my room.

I'm up at eight, and it's clear Dele is gone again. She's a fucking energizer bunny that doesn't stop. Before leaving for my day, I call her phone.

"Hello." There's a lot in that one word. My heart races at the sound of her voice. A year ago, if anyone had told me the sound of her voice would affect me, I would have laughed. Now, hearing her voice wakes my heart.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. Heading to my exam, then another class, and work."

"Okay, what time will you be back?"

"Around midnight."

"I'll see you then, and good luck in your exams."

"Thanks, I need it. Bye."

The week goes by in the same manner. We don't get a chance to sit and talk. I can't conclude if this is how hectic her schedule is or if she's using every tool in her playbook to avoid me. I only talk to her a few times during the week and send her details about our wedding. I know she comes home late every night, and every night I sneak into her room and kiss her forehead.

At one point in all the craziness, I question whether she will show up for our wedding. Osei assured me she'll be there. A part of me is preparing for my next move if she doesn't show up.

÷

LUKE



I've tried not to show my eagerness at the fact I haven't seen Dele since last night. It doesn't help when Osei tells me she's running late because her best friend's flight from LA was delayed—the only witness she's bringing to the wedding.

"Relax," Declan says to me. "She'll be here."

"She's strong-headed and could probably decide not to go through with it," I confess my fear. She may look and sound meek, but I've discovered grit in her and a subtle stubbornness.

"And you'll just walk away?" he challenges.

"Did you walk away from Anne?" I retort with the obvious question.

"Fuck no!" He scoffs at me.

"There's your answer."

"So, relax. Osei already said she's coming and will be here." I nod, but my heart is pounding against my ribcage. It's a good thing she's unaware of how I lose all control when it comes to her. A few minutes later, Osei comes in, smiling.

"Dele is here." And relief washes over me. I signal to the pastor, who has been very accommodating, that we are ready. He gets up, and the door opens. I swear my heart stops for a moment. She's stunning. Her friend is behind her, but my eyes are only on Dele.

Declan taps my shoulder. "See, she was worth the wait." That's when I blink. She's worth every second of my thirty-five years waiting for her.

She's wearing a white, deep V-neck, long-sleeved dress with feathers on the wrists. The elegant style accentuates her figure. The dress is long with a front slit and buttons from her slit to the center of the V. Her makeup is flawless, her braids are pulled into a big chignon at the base of her neck, showing off her slim neck. A matching feather headpiece with a birdcage veil adorns her as an accessory. I notice the diamond earring on her ear and a matching bracelet. Where the fuck did she get that bracelet from? She moves with a ginger step next to Osei. When she gets closer, she undoubtedly takes my breath away. I can't help but grin at how lucky I am. I take her hand as she hands the bouquet to her friend.

The pastor gets closer, recites all the words. I don't hear anything he says until he asks if I take her as my wife.

"I do," I hastily answer and hear Declan snicker behind me.

When he asks if she will take me as her lawfully wedded husband, she's hesitant. Then, "I do," slowly escapes her lips. The pastor continues to speak, but our eyes are on each other. We go through the motion of putting the ring on.

When the pastor says, "You may kiss the bride," I gently pull her to me and take over her mouth. I've waited months for this moment. She kisses me right back, and a soft moan escapes her. I pull her body to mine, forgetting my surroundings and feeding my inner craving for her. A tap on my shoulder stops me. Her mystified eyes bore into mine. I read her face, the pieces of the puzzle clicking into place. Recognition sets in; she knows I'm the balcony guy.

÷

DELE



After agreeing to marry Declan, I'd called Amaka to tell her about my decision and the agreement.

"I'm surprised you're telling me after you've already decided," she'd chastised.

"I'm sorry. I decided to just go for it and not overthink it."

"He's Osei's brother, and we trust Osei; he can't be a bad decision."

"I hope you're right." I meekly stated.

"Relax, he can't be that bad. At least you're getting out of your comfort zone. I'm proud of you," she says with excitement.

"Please, come and stand-by and for me, so I don't run away before that day. He intimidates me." She was quiet for a while. I had to look at my phone to see if the line had suddenly disconnected.

"Maks," I call out.

"I'm here. Are you trying to tell me you're attracted to him? I need to Google this guy, then."

"Please, don't Google him. Promise me you won't Google him. Come and see him and make your assessment in person."

"You still haven't answered about the attraction."

"You haven't promised either."

"Promise; now answer the question."

"Yes," I answer in a whisper, as the thought of voicing my attraction to Luke out loud is scary. "It doesn't matter. He doesn't like me, and he's only agreeing to marry me because he doesn't like me, and I won't catch feelings for him."

"How are you going to handle it when he starts fucking girls all over the place?" Trust Amaka to be blunt.

"I'll bury my head in my books or find a guy who will fuck me into oblivion." She laughed out loud.

"I'm so coming to see this guy, and I will try not to Google him."

"You promised."

"Fine," she snapped. "Who's helping you with your dress?"

"Jax has agreed to help."

"Cool, I'll bring all my stuff so I can get your makeup done for you."

"Thank you."

"Yay!" Her shrieking sound pierced my ears. "Dele is getting married!" She sings, and I can visualize her dancing. We ended the call, and I sent her all the details. As the week progressed, Jax and I managed to fit in a dress fitting and did a few errands for the accessories. I have diamond earrings from Osei and a bracelet from Nosah. I should be fine. I leave the rest of the plans to Luke.

Now that he has kissed me in a way that exploded the wires in my brain to the fact that he's my balcony guy, I can't decide if I should be happy or upset with him. I've struggled with my attraction toward him, while he was having fun messing with me. I couldn't understand my crazy attraction to him, but he knew who I was, and he acted differently toward me. He made the bed, and he's going to lie in it because there's no way I'm going to make this easy for him. Luke holds onto my hand tightly, and I try to pull away, but he won't let go.

Amaka pulls me into a hug. "He's handsome and totally smitten with you," she whispers. "Congratulations," she says louder, but my mind is still reeling from the fact Luke is my mystery guy. I stare at him, but he turns to answer and hug Osei, who seems very happy, just as I would like to slap my husband. *Damn it*.

I try to pull out of his grip, but he's not letting go. His friend Declan also hugs me and kisses my cheek. Osei pulls me into a hug and lifts me up, breaking Luke's hold. Amaka is laughing. I turn to see Luke frowning at Osei and me. I still can't believe he would do this. There's absolutely no

way he didn't know all along that I was the girl on the balcony. We smile for pictures with everyone.

We thank the pastor, and we all head out to our place.

"Osei, I'll ride with you," I hear Amaka say out loud. I shoot her a glare, but she smiles at me as she follows Osei.

I'm left to ride with Luke. I get in his car with his help.

"Is your friend staying with us?" he asks.

"Yes." I remain quiet as he drives.

My mind goes to our mysterious first meeting.

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DELE



6 months ago

I've just finished a twelve-hour shift, and I'm burnt out. I'm also glad Ramsey is out of town, which means I can sleep in peace and have the apartment to myself for a few days. I should be heading to my warm bed, not Osei's party, but I have to show up or Osei will never stop reminding me about not showing up for his spectacular Halloween party. The plus side of going to his party is that my dinner is guaranteed.

I'm sure Osei will be pleased when I show up, even if it's only for a little while. We went Halloween shopping together, and I settled on just the mask while he purchased the police costume for his party. He called me 'boring' for wearing just the mask. I reminded him that I can be creative with my scrubs and a mask, though Halloween isn't my favorite holiday. Even worse now, as a nurse, I see all kinds of crazy stuff on Halloween. I'm glad my shift ended before the madness in the ER begins later tonight. Osei laughed, saying he can't wait to see what genius costume I would come up with.

Unfortunately, I'm too tired to think of anything creative, so I'm driving to his place in my plain scrubs, a mask, and crocs. I'm sure his friends won't notice my boring costume, which is really my everyday life.

I start my car, named Jace, and the damn thing sputters like it's about to die. I pump the pedal and try again after giving Jace a pep talk; he comes to

life, as if I've just woken him up from his slumber.

As annoying as Jace is, he gets me from point A to point B, and right now, I need him to do just that for a little while longer. I'm saving for Jace 2.0. Osei nicknamed my car Jace, and somehow, I agree with him that the name suits the car, so now I talk to Jace whenever he acts up or goes into a deep sleep, reminding him to please hang in there with me a little longer.

Getting into Osei's place and seeing the party in full swing is a good thing. I can sneak in and out easily. I find Osei as soon as I step in. He gives me a hug and whispers, "Boring," making me laugh.

"Too tired after my shift, and I doubt most people will notice," I reply, smirking.

"Still boring, but you came and I'm glad."

"Me too," I say, hugging him again.

"Food is in the kitchen. I made sure to order lamb chops from our place. If you don't find any in the tray, I saved you some in the oven." I smile and grip his hand in thanks. He nods, and someone bumps into him. Letting go of my hand, he turns to the person, and my eyes lock with a guy across the room wearing a mask. He holds my gaze, and weirdly, I get a warm feeling and a racing heart just from looking at him. I'm grounded in place. Another bump from one of the party dancers interrupts our smoldering gaze, and I head to the kitchen to get some food. The tray is empty, just as Osei guessed. I open the oven and find a foil wrap. Taking it out, I sniff, inhaling the sweet aroma of flavors that fill my nostrils, sending a growl from my stomach. I grab a plate, filling it with roasted potatoes and veggies and my lamb chops. I find a spot in the kitchen and eat the whole plate like no one is watching. Only I feel eyes on me as I gulp down my drink. The guy in the bespoke suit with the mask—we locked eyes earlier. He comes into the kitchen and breezes out like I've suddenly stung him. Oh well. I'm not interested either, even as my heart beats rhythmically like a talking drum whenever we lock gaze.

He must be just as boring as I am, wearing only a mask like me, though with his height, his visibly chiseled jaw, and non-smiling face, he certainly looks more mysterious. "*Girl*, *you need to stop etching his lips into your brain*," my mind chastises. I take a drink to calm my nerves and head to the balcony. It's getting hot in here—literally—but the heat I feel is between my legs from gazing at a guy with lips I want to kiss and caress.

I need air as some kind of nerve relaxant. I step onto the balcony, inhaling the fresh air and exhaling every emotional attraction I'm feeling toward Mr. Mysterious. I've just done my second exhale, feeling good with myself when he steps in behind me. Damn it!

I've just finished letting out every nerve-racking aura of his presence, and he just kicked it all back in. I scream inwardly, unable to control my body's reaction, experiencing a desire for him.

"Hi," I say, hoping his voice would be a turnoff.

"Hi." His deep voice caresses me like a breeze.

"I needed some air; it's a bit stuffy in there. Plus, I've been inside all day," I hastily state to control whatever this attraction is between us. Hoping that speaking to him would make him magically go away. Of course, I'm two hundred percent mistaken because the moment I sit, he sits beside me. *This isn't good*. The laws of male and female attraction don't apply to me. My body is seemingly immune to the pulls of physical chemistry, so it makes no sense that my heart is racing as I sit next to him under the blanket of stars. Despite my confusion and inexperience with these emotions, I can't deny that I want to know what it would be like to kiss him. *Lord*, *help me*.

We sit in silence, our eyes locked on the twinkling lights above us, but I can feel the tension between us growing stronger by the second as we both hide behind our masks of indifference.

He mentions the other side with a better view, and my immediate answer is to turn it down. Until he says all he wants is to show me the view. I don't trust men, but I find myself feeling a subtle comfort and some annoying butterflies swirl around in my stomach. I know I shouldn't follow him, but the moment he stands, I find myself following him.

We weave through the dancers, and he keeps turning to make sure I'm following. I smile each time he checks on me.

I feel a little skeptical when he opens the door to a bedroom. My mind questions why I'm following a guy I've never met. Yet, something about him is comforting and draws me in. I want to know him. He must have sensed my hesitation because he leaves the door open, almost as if he's telling me I can be free with him. I venture into the room and onto the balcony, and yes, the view is spectacular. I smile.

Again, we gaze at the sky, and I feel the need to do something, so I grab a scrunchie to pull my braids back. He grabs my arm, the one where Curtis

caused a cut. I yanked my arm away, shocked by the electric pulse of his touch.

He relaxes when I tell him about Curtis, and I notice he steps back. I'm glad he does because something tells me I'm on the verge of jumping him.

I don't react to men; my life is work and study. The few times I laugh are when Osei insists on taking me on walks or says something silly enough to crack me up.

Why am I attracted to a quasi-mystery man behind a mask? I have no idea who he is, yet my body craves him. Before I can process my thoughts, his lips are on mine.

I should stop this or push him away, but *my god*—the feel of his lips on mine is incredible. Without my conscious permission, my mouth opens for him. I deepen our kiss as a moan escapes me, and my tongue swirls in harmony with his, sending tidal waves of desire through me. If a kiss could have sound, then our tongues and our entire being are dancing to a beautiful crescendo. If a kiss—

His phone ringing abruptly shakes me from my haze. I break the kiss. I look into his eyes, though I can't see them. But I feel them—his eyes caressing me. I wish I could see his eyes, but his height blocks the light, and the mask doesn't help.

He pushes my mask off, and I look at him, hoping he'll remove his mask and reveal himself. His sandalwood scent envelops me. But before I can speak, his phone starts ringing again. The moment he answers it, I push him away, pull my mask down, and rush out of the room. It was probably his girlfriend. A guy like that surely has one or two.

I found Osei immediately.

"I need to get going," I tell him. He gives me a sad look.

"I'm burnt out—the ER was brutal today. I need sleep. And since I'm a glutton for punishment, I'll be back there tomorrow."

He smiles. "Yes, you really are a glutton for punishment. I'll walk you out. I have no idea how you do these long hours daily."

"Not all of us have rich big brothers." I look around at the sea of Halloween costumes and makeup. "Is he here? I've heard so much about big brother Luke."

"Yes," Osei replies. He looks around too. "He was here; maybe he left." He shrugs. "Let's get you home. You'll meet him some other time."

"Okay." We head towards the door, and bump into Derek in a clown costume.

"Hey, you two, where to?" he asks, his clown makeup looking like an artist's furious work, but I smile at him.

"Dele's tired. I'm walking her to the car. Be right back," Osei replies. I wave at Derek.

"Goodnight, Dele."

"Bye, Derek."

Osei and I head to the elevator. He tells me about the crazy things his friends are doing. I laugh along, but truthfully, my mind is on the kiss with the quasi-mystery man. All I have is his voice, smell, touch, and a taste of him. And boy, does he have me twisted.

I can't tell Osei, he'll surely grill me. Right now, I lack the energy to respond.

We get to my car. "Good ol' Jace is still standing. You know the offer to co-sign on a car loan still stands."

"Yes, I know, and I'll let you know when I need your help." I hug him goodnight and get in my car.

Thankfully, Jace starts with no pep talk or hail Mary from me.

I wave to Osei and drive home to the quiet apartment. I'm saving money to move out. Once I get a place, I'll think about a car. Ramsey's a fucking asshole; I don't know why I thought he would stick to our agreement. I should've known better. Guys like him keep my faith in men at its all-time low.

I head straight to my room to shower. I need to wash a few times to dry out the lingering wetness. Mr. Mystery Man sure did a number on me today. *No more kissing guys you don't know.*

But it was a good kiss, though. I roll my eyes at myself. Back to reality, girl. You've stepped out of your comfort zone, give yourself a pat on the shoulder and move on. No need for girlfriend drama. End of story.



Today, I'm married to the man I thought was a mystery. We pull into the garage, Osei and Amaka following right behind us. We ride up to our unit in

palpable silence. As soon as we get in, I grab Amaka's hand, and we head to my room.

"What's going on?" Amaka asks the moment the door closes.

"First, help me out of this dress," I say, turning my back. She unzips me, helping me out of the dress. I pull her into the closet, and my tears flow uncontrollably. She hugs me.

"What's wrong? We can walk out of here if you don't feel safe. He can't stop us."

I chuckle at her ready-for-a-fight mode. "No, I'm physically safe with him. I'm afraid my emotions are unsafe with him."

"Start from the beginning."

I tell her about the Halloween party, Luke rejecting my hand and never noticing me, the agreement in the marriage, and then discovering that he's the mystery man. I stop speaking, and she wipes my tears.

"Call me crazy, but I think he likes you. He may have gone about it the wrong way."

"You're too much of a romantic," I snicker, sinking into my seat in my undergarments.

"And you're too cynical," she retorts, throwing me a dramatic eye roll. "Maybe try being a romantic just this once. I saw his eyes when you walked in, and the way he kissed you. He didn't want to let go of you. That guy looked happy. You have two options here: You can have fun and not fall—"

"I've already fallen for him." I interject.

"Well, have fun with him while you can, or you can bury your head in books or—"

"Or what?" I keenly anticipate her words.

"You can find a boy toy, whose only task is to help you extricate all that tension however, I doubt that your newly minted husband will let anyone near you. He has that vibe—" Her hands wave around.

"What vibe?" I ask in anticipation.

"A vibe like, 'She's mine, so back off,'" she barks in my face with a wide smile.

"I doubt that's the vibe. Remember, he doesn't like me," I remind her, though it feels more like I'm reminding myself.

"If a guy doesn't like you, but looks at you the way he looked at you when you walked into the church, and kisses you the way he did, I wonder what it would be like when he does like you. Babes, you are pretty, whether

you want to admit it or not. I know what happened in New York lingers, but I think your husband is a mountain that wants you to climb, and I think you should climb this sexy mountain. I'm quite sure the view at the top might be worth it. And if you don't get to the top, you'll never have to wonder about climbing such a sexy mountain." I laugh out loud and pull a boho summer dress over my head.

"Only you, Maks, would find the silver lining in my romantic mess."

"Isn't that the reason you made sure I got on the flight?"

"I needed my bestie here with me. Plus, I certainly can't announce us to the world."

"You may not want to announce, but your hubby is ready to bullhorn. Anyway, you have me for tonight. Nosah wants me back tomorrow."

"Come on, he can't give us two days?" I tossed a dress at her.

"He's travelling for two weeks, and you know him, he has to make sure I can't walk for three days after he's gone." I laugh.

"How true." I snicker. At least I no longer need to pretend I didn't hear the sex marathon with her fiancé, Nosah. My adopted big brother.

"Let's fix your makeup and go talk to Osei and your sexy hubby." I nod.

She applies powder to fix my tears and some mascara. The smell of food hits us as we step out.

We all sit and eat, laughing at Osei's jokes. Ever the life of the party.

Amaka soon takes the third room, and I can hear her talking to Nosah. Luke heads to his office. Osei and I talk for a while before he leaves. I decided to speak with Luke.

I ignore the frantic beat of my heart and knock on his office door. Slowly, I open it. The moment my eyes lock with Luke's, I'm transported back to the moment I entered the church and saw him looking debonair and downright handsome. The best part was the fact he was waiting for me. He stole my breath away as his hazel eyes bored into mine. Osei squeezed my hand, grounding me as my stomach fluttered with excitement. I couldn't believe I was marrying Luke Blythe. I looked away to hand my bouquet to Amaka, but the moment Luke took my hand in his, I felt a shiver down my spine from his touch. My eyes shot back up to his, and all I saw was warmth and desire. I didn't hear a thing the pastor said. I was so lost in gazing at him that I hesitated in saying 'I do.' Good thing Amaka nudged me.

"Did you need something?" His words interrupt, breaking me out of my trance.

"I came to say goodnight and thank you for letting Amaka stay."

"Your best friend is always welcome. Goodnight." I nod and turn to leave.

"Dele, we are going to my parent's place for dinner tomorrow."

"Okay, goodnight." I leave, though I want to ask him about the balcony, but I'm too chicken to bring it up. So, I head to my room, change, and lock the door.

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LUKE



I was surprised to see Dele at the door. I wasn't working. I was notifying the lawyers about getting Dele's documents ready to send in when the pictures from Declan came through. He captured moments of Dele. One of the pictures is from when she was gazing into my eyes after the kiss. I intend to have it framed.

After getting a few more things done, I went to her door. As usual, the door was locked. I unlocked it and moved closer to check on her. I noticed the ring still on her hand. I kissed her hand and forehead before leaving for my bed.

When I woke up the next morning, I found Dele cleaning the kitchen alone with no friend in sight.

"Morning. Is Amaka still sleeping?"

"No, she left early." She checked her phone. "She's boarding right now."

"Okay, hope she was good."

"She's good and will be back in a few weeks." I nodded. "I made breakfast. It's in the warmer. Eggs and pancakes. I wasn't sure how you like your eggs, so I made scrambled and omelet."

"I prefer omelet. Thank you." She nodded.

"What time are we heading to your parents' place? I made Nigerian bean pudding for your mom. Osei told me she likes it." Her tone is formal, as if she's trying to keep a distance.

"We'll leave at four."

"Okay, I have a few hours to study and will be ready." I nodded, and she left, much as I would've liked her to sit with me.



Dele and I arrive at my childhood home. I see Osei is already here. I didn't tell him I'd be bringing Dele, nor did I tell my mom. I know she's aware that I married Dele, thanks to Osei, and I've avoided speaking with her since yesterday. I notice the curtain is pulled, and Mom is peeping. If I expected her to act like she didn't peek, I must be dreaming of a different mom, because the front door swings open, and she's racing to wrap Dele in a big hug.

"Welcome," she says to Dele. "I'm so happy to have you here."

"Nice to see you too, Mrs. Appiah."

"Please, call me Stella." Dele nods, but I know she won't call her Stella.

"Come on, Osei is inside already eating all the food." She pulls Dele with her.

"Hi, Mom," I say to her. She looks back and waves at me, then continues inside the house.

The moment we walk in, Mom calls out to my stepfather, "Danso, Osei. They are here!"

Osei and Piah come out from the family room. Piah shakes my hand first, just as Osei gives Dele a big hug, lifting her off the ground, making my mom laugh. He sets her down and says, "Don't tell me you didn't bring food."

"I brought something, I know you like to eat," Dele mocks.

"That's my girl." He kisses her cheek and turns to me. "Keys." I'm hesitant, but his impatient self snatches the key fob from my hands and races to the car.

"Welcome to our home, my dear," Piah says to Dele.

"Thank you for having me, and you have a beautiful home."

"Thank you, dear. Come on, dinner is almost ready," my mom says, pulling Dele with her to the kitchen. "Osei tells me you like to cook."

"I do, whenever I have time."

"He brought me the bean pudding you made, and I've asked him for the recipe."

"It's called Moin-Moin, and I can share the recipe with you. I brought some. Osei mentioned that you like it, but forgot to ask for the recipe."

"Oh, my! That's so nice of you, dear." She smiles at Dele and turns to me. "Luke, can you get your brother?"

"Mom, he went out to get the food. He'll be back inside soon," I answer dismissively.

"No, go and get him. He might hide some of that bean pudding in his car."

"Fine," I grumble, noticing Piah chuckling. I move fast to get my brother and, to my shock, Mom was right. Osei is putting some of the bean pudding in his car.

"Are you kidding me right now?" I shout at him.

"What? You won't eat it, and I know she made it for me."

"No, she made it for Mom, and Mom sent me to come and make sure you didn't hide some in your car, which is exactly what you're doing."

"Damn it! Dele with her big mouth." He sneers.

"Let's go, Osei, and bring it all. I know Dele brought ten."

"She's such a sell-out," he says as he slams the car door. I watch him come inside with all the food.

As soon as he gets to the kitchen, he turns to Dele.

"Sell-out," he says.

"I saved you some, this is for your mom." Of course she did. I mentally roll my eyes.

"Now you're talking." He immediately wraps her in his arms. I inhale and exhale in silence. This is going to be a long freaking evening. I need to know what the fuss is about this food. I reach out to grab one, and my mom smacks my hand.

"This is mine," she says.

"I can't have one?" I ask, surprised.

"You three can share one while Dele and I set the table." She grabs the plate and turns to us. "One."

"I like to sleep in my bed, dear. I'll make sure the boys share just one," Piah jokes and turns a stern face to Osei and me. "One. I like sleeping in my bed." Osei laughs and takes one.

He unwraps it and digs in, taking a big chunk. I cut a small piece and taste it. The flavor and softness explode in my mouth. I quickly stop Osei's hand from taking another big chunk.

"Now you know what the fuss is all about." He smirks. "Dele doesn't make it all the time, so when she does, it's a big deal. I've tasted this, but none is like when she makes it." Piah takes a small piece as well, and I see the softness and flavor burst in his mouth. He takes the whole plate and walks away, shocking Osei and me. Mom walks in with Dele in tow.

I turn to Mom, "Can I ..."

"No," she interrupts, like she already knew what I was going to ask. Osei starts to laugh, and I turn to him.

"The rest is in my house. Let's see how you get it." I smirk.

"Mom, you have to tell him that's not fair. It's mine!" Osei whines.

"His house, his rules," Mom replies. I grin at him, making him grumble. Piah laughs.

After dinner, Piah signals to me to come with him. I follow him to his office, leaving Dele with my mom and Osei to clean up. My mom is already trading recipes with Dele. I close the door to the office and sit on the love seat. He pours us a drink. I chuckle, remembering the many times in my younger days when I tried to sneak in here for a drink, and he would give me the look of 'don't you dare.' I'm only ever in this room when he has a lot to discuss with me. He hands me the drink as he takes a seat next to me. We both take a drink, and I watch him set his glass on the side table.

"Does your wife know that you are in love with her?" he says with conviction, not blinking, looking me straight in the eye, the way he does when he wants to remind me who's in charge.

"Not sure what you're talking about. Why would you ask me that?" I attempt to brush off his observation, taking a sip of the drink that's not having any effect on me right now.

"My son can't keep anything from your mother, and she, in turn, can't keep anything from me." Why sip when I can gulp the drink? *Fucking Osei*.

"I've known you since you were a boy, and not once has anyone made you do something you didn't want to do. I know why your brother wanted to marry her. I wasn't totally against it, to be honest. My son getting married might be good for him. I think your mother thought the worst, like the entire U.S. government, was going to lock Osei up. When your mother announced you married Dele, I must admit it was a surprise to me because I couldn't think of a reason you'd want to marry her, until tonight, when you kept looking at your brother like you were going to stab him each time he and Dele whispered or giggled about something. Of course, your mother is too delighted that you're married and already thinking of grandchildren to notice that one son is about to kill the other."

I forgot how observant he is. I guess I can't hide my emotions from him when it comes to Dele.

"Back to my original question, does your wife know that you are in love with her?"

"No, she doesn't know," I answer in a whisper.

"There lies your first task: you need to show her how you feel." I nod.

"She believes I don't like her and somehow convinced herself that I have zero interest in her."

He laughs.

"Clearly, she doesn't know the only reason you married her is because you have a whole lot of interest in her and not because of your inheritance." I hear the teasing in his tone.

"Yep," I answer, putting the glass to my lips only to realize it's empty. *Fuck!*

"Your mission, should you choose to accept, is to woo your wife and not kill your brother, who I must say is also clueless to the fact you're in love with your wife." I chuckle because it's so true. Osei sometimes fails at reading the room.

"What if she doesn't want me?"

He sighs.

"She does want you but, like you said, she believes you don't like her, and that keeps her guarded around you. You need to figure out how to make her see the love you have for her. Believe me, convincing your mother to give me a chance wasn't an easy task, but twenty-five years later, she wouldn't doubt my love for her."

I nod. Piah lives every day to put a smile on my mom's face.

"Thank you. Can these stay between us?"

"Yes, as long as you don't kill your brother." He says, and I get up from the seat.

"He really is a pain in my behind," I say with a smirk.

"I know, and he's also your brother," he replies. I take the glasses with me, heading to the living room. I hear the laughs of my mom, Osei, and Dele. They are having a great time. I turn to Piah, who's next to me, watching as well.

"Told you, your mother's mind is all about grandbabies. I'm sure Simon won't mind, nor I." He smiles.

"No pressure at all," I reply. First, I need to get past my wife locking her bedroom door.

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<u>:</u>

LUKE



We left my childhood home after lots of laughs and chatter. Osei and Dele kept us all engaged. As soon as we got in the car, she's quiet. I want her to keep talking. I should come up with something.

"So, you like cooking?"

"Yes, my mom was a chef. She trained in the UK. She made cooking look fun and easy."

"And your dad?"

"He loves to eat everything, like Osei." I chuckle, though I wish the topic didn't always keep coming back to my brother, who already knows too much about her, and I know nothing. I hold it all in, just like I've been doing all day.

"Osei says we're the best match for friendship since I like to cook, and he likes to eat."

"I'm sure he likes that." I need to change topics.

"What does your dad do?"

"He was an architect, but since the accident, he's home now, and my mom takes care of him." Her voice is low. I hear the sadness in it.

"Does he have a caregiver?"

"No, the money my brother and I send to them every paycheck is how they get by." "Is that why you work so many hours?"

"Yes." Her voice is barely a whisper. She's lacing and unlacing her fingers.

"Why didn't your lawyer negotiate for you to get half of the two million upfront?"

"He suggested it, and I said no. I didn't want any delays," she answers, and I nod, but I'm upset. She's carrying this much burden and won't fight for herself or ask for help.

"You know, you can use the money in the joint account I set up for us." I remind her of the account. A smile curves the side of her lips.

"Thanks for the offer. You've already helped me out a lot. I'm not paying rent or any bills. Just my tuition. I think that's plenty. I can take extra classes next term and be done faster with my program. Once I'm done, I can head to the UK." Now she's going to take on more school load, so she can leave. A chuckle escapes me at her laid-out plans. Good thing I have plans too.

"Did I say something funny?" Her question is a challenge. I turn to her.

"No, it just amazes me how you have so many plans."

"I don't have the luxury of not having a plan. A plan keeps me focused, and it gives me something to work towards and not derail from my path." I nod, even as I plan to derail some part of her plans, especially the part of her leaving. She just doesn't know it.

"Have you registered for your next classes?" I ask, wanting to know more about this plan.

"Yes, I signed up for next semester yesterday." I nod.

"I mean it. Spending the money in the joint account is fine with me."

"Are you serious that I can take some of the money?"

"Yes. Do you need something?"

"My dad needs some meds; I will put the money back once I get paid."

"You don't have to put it back. It's yours to spend as you wish."

"I'll feel better putting it back." Is she serious? The look on her face tells me she's serious.

"Do you know how rich I am?" I had to ask.

"No." I can't believe it, but everything about her wide eyes and tone tells me she's telling the truth.

"You didn't google me to find out about me."

"No." Unbelievable!

"Why not?" I'm curious, though I like that she didn't, because there are lots of pictures out there with me and several women.

"Osei told me everything I needed to know about you, and since I trust him, I decided not to google you. Isn't he a reliable source?" The question hangs. I simply nodded. My fucking brother again. "Did he miss telling me something?" Her tone sounds skeptical.

"No, I'm sure he told you everything, but I still would prefer you get to know me without his opinion."

"Okay, I will try to do that. So, how rich are you?" Her question surprises me. I smile.

"Let's just say I have many zeros in my bank account."

"Hmm, good for you." Are you fucking kidding me? That's all she has to say.

"Any plans to negotiate better now that you know?"

"No, I'm already getting what I need and want." Dare I think, her want, is me?

"What's that?" I ask. She turns my way, locking eyes with me, and the tension builds up—the honk behind us is loud, breaking our smoldering gaze.

"My legal papers and money. When this is over, I can start strong in London. Thank you." I nod and grip the steering wheel tight. She doesn't know it yet, but the mission I accepted is to make her fall in love with me.

"When are we meeting your dad, and what do I need to know to play my part and not mess things up for us?"

"Nothing, just be you. And if he asks any questions, just answer him truthfully. We're meeting him tomorrow."

"Thanks, I can do that. Osei told me he can be scary at times." My grip gets tighter on the steering wheel. *Fucking Osei again*.

"Don't believe everything Osei tells you. He sometimes exaggerates."

"I hope he didn't exaggerate about you." I detect doubt in her tone. Now that has my attention.

"What did he tell you about me?"

"He said you are the best big brother; kindest, though you try to hide it; also annoying, grumpy, but still the best." She says like she'd memorized it. I chuckle.

"You can believe everything but the grumpy."

"Actually, that's the one I truly believe. You're always frowning or wearing a scowl on your face every time I see you." If only you knew the reason for the scowl—because I couldn't hold you or express my feelings.

"Let's just say I'm done with my scowl phase," I reply, and she smiles at me. Fuck, it feels good to have her smiling at me. I want to take her hand, but I know she's not comfortable with me yet. I pull into the garage and put the car in park, and she's out of the car fast. I quickly get out as well and meet her at the elevator. We ride in silence to our unit.

Once inside, she takes off her shoes. I've noticed she does that.

"Why do you always take off your shoes at the door?"

"It's how I grew up. Plus, shoes that have roamed the street pick up germs. You shouldn't wear them in your house. I work in a hospital. You don't want shoes I wear in the hospital in your house, trust me." Her 'trust me' is firm with wide eyes.

"Okay." I take off my shoes as well and put them on the mat like she did.

"Thank you for that. What time are we meeting with your dad tomorrow?"

"Around two p.m." I noticed a slight frown. "Do you have other arrangements?"

"Nothing important. Osei and I were going to see a movie. We can do that another day."

"We can see my dad, and I'll take you to the movies."

"Actually, we don't need to. It's a sci-fi movie, and I don't really like those kinds of movies, but I lost a bet, and I must go with him. Now I have a perfect excuse to bail on him." I nod.

"What was the bet?" She smiles shyly.

"Promise not to laugh." I return a straight face, but I'm already laughing inwardly.

"The bet was, I had to sit and watch Rocky Road ice cream glazed with caramel melt." I didn't expect that. By her looks, I can tell it was a bet she lost before it started, and I'm pretty sure my brother set her up to fail.

"You didn't let it melt?" I ask with an amused smile.

"I don't like waste." She replies with a straight face.

"That's your excuse?" I chuckle, trying not to laugh, but she laughs.

"Yes, and I'm sticking with it." I nod, but it's fun to see her laugh.

"Well, good night. I have a study group at ten. I should be back by one." I want to keep talking with her, but I can sense she's keeping me at arm's

length.

"Good night, Dele. And please, use the money for your dad's medication."

"Thank you very much. Night." She turns and heads to her room. I go to the wine fridge cabinet and open a bottle. I fucking need a drink to get through the night. She has no idea what the faux leather pencil skirt is doing to me.

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LUKE



The next afternoon, we are driving to my dad's place. Dele is quiet on the drive while my mind can't get past how beautiful she looks in the one-shoulder brown dress. It hugs her curves perfectly. We pull into the garage parking and get on the elevator.

"Should I be worried?" she asks.

"No, you'll be fine. Forget what Osei said and just judge for yourself."

"Okay." She exhales. I take her hand, and it warms my heart when she doesn't resist. I use my key to unlock the door and go in. The nurse gets up right away.

"Hi, Susanna. I'd like you to meet my wife."

"Hi!" She hugs Dele immediately. "Welcome, dear." She leans into me. "She's pretty," she whispers.

"Thanks."

"Mr. Blythe, Luke is here," Susanna calls out.

We follow her, and I can sense Dele relaxing a bit. My dad is in the living room, watching the news, which is all he does these days. He's in shorts and a T-shirt. He turns my way, his eyes zooming to our locked hands.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi." His voice is low.

"I brought my wife, Ayodele Blythe." His eyes widen. He looks at Dele closely.

"Hello, my dear. Welcome to the family." He smiles at her and extends his hand for a handshake. Dele drops my hand and moves closer to shake his. "Sit, dear. I'm happy to meet you," he says, and she takes the seat closest to him.

"When did you get married, Luke?" His voice is stern. I haven't moved to take a seat by Dele.

"Yesterday," I lie. He would be upset if he found out it was two days ago, and my mom found out before him.

"My invitation got lost in the mail, I guess." He sounds upset.

"No, Daddy. It was just Dele and me. We'll wait for you and her dad to get better before we have a proper wedding and invite everyone." He nods. That seems to satisfy him a bit.

"Does your mother know?"

"Yes, we stopped by there earlier," I lie again.

"At least you keep it consistent," he says wryly. He's okay as long as he and Mom find out at the same time.

"Dad, come on." He waves me away and turns to Dele.

"My dear, what's your name?" He asks her again, like I didn't mention it —maybe he just needs to hear it again.

"Ayodele, but everyone calls me Dele," she says, pronouncing her name clearly.

"Dele," he says it right the first time, which makes me smile.

"What's the meaning of your name?"

"Joy comes home." Dad smiles and takes her hand, placing his other hand on it. She smiles at him, and I watch as my dad warms up to her. She truly has the gift of warmth.

"Yes, I agree. Joy has indeed arrived home. Welcome home, dear," Dad says happily. We spend the next few hours talking. He asks Dele more questions when he finds out she's a nurse and working towards her bachelor's degree.

"I plan to do my master's right after," Dele says, surprising me. I didn't know she planned to go further.

"That's great. Just make room for my grandbabies," he says.

"Noted," Dele answers, smiling at him. I keep a smile plastered on my face, even as the idea slowly soothes me.

We have dinner with Dad and Susanna, who seem chirpy all evening. Dad gets all chatty, telling stories that make Dele laugh. When she leaves to use the bathroom, "I like her, though I'm not happy my only child got married without me," he says.

"Dad, Dele's schedule is tight."

"She goes to school." He sounds like, 'How hard can it be to plan a wedding around a school schedule?'

"Dele works full-time at Lakeshore Meds and goes to school full-time. I'm trying to get her to work fewer hours."

"Hardworking one like your mother, just don't mess things up."

"I won't."

"Good. Congratulations," he says after hours, and I know it's sincere. "Just get to work on making my grandbabies."

"No pressure, Dad," I answer. I just need to get past my wife's locked bedroom door.

Dele returns, and we head out. To my surprise, Dad summons the energy to hug Dele. We say goodnight to Dad and Susanna.

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LUKE



In the next few days of us living together, Dele has piled on her schedule so tight that I only see her when she's sleeping. She's gone before I wake every morning, and asleep when I wake during the night. One night in between, she doesn't come home. I'm pulling my hair out, wondering if she's visiting the guy who said, "You love me," or if she went to Osei's place. Luckily, Mom told me Osei is home with her and my stepfather. It doesn't stop me from wondering where she is.

I stayed home until she arrived around noon the next day. She looks tired and worn out.

"Hi," she says, surprised to see me home.

"Hi," I answer in a gruff tone.

"Is something wrong?" she asks, looking perplexed at me.

"You didn't come home last night. I thought something happened to you. I called and texted you several times, and you didn't respond," I state in an even tone, though I'm beyond pissed, but glad she returned. Not like I wouldn't have chased her ass across the continent. Still, I'm relieved she came home.

"I'm sorry. I went straight to class yesterday morning. After classes, I went to work at three. I didn't leave until one a.m. I had my finals this morning, so after I clocked out, I went to the library. I usually turn my

phone off at work and at the library. I slept for about two hours at the library, then went to class to take my exams.

"I just came home to shower and sleep for four hours before going back to work. I didn't think you would notice I wasn't around. I'll text you next time." I watch as she takes her phone out and turns it back on. All my texts and several notifications ping at once. I want to yell at her for working so much, but instead, I ask,

"Have you eaten? Do you need anything?" She looks bewildered at me and shakes her head.

"Thanks for asking, but I ate after my exams. I just need to shower and get some sleep before going back to work." I nod and watch her head to her bedroom. I hear the shower and all the rustling. An hour later, I go in to check on her; she's asleep. I kiss her forehead and leave the room. I should leave for work, but I stayed. She might need me, I tell myself.

She comes out at about 2:30 pm, dressed and ready for work with her backpack. Honestly, I want her to stop working these many hours and just concentrate on school and us.

"Hi, I'm heading out. I won't be back until midnight, and I'll text you if my plans change about returning." *What the fuck* did she just say? Her ass is returning to me, no *ifs* about that.

"Okay, I'm home all day today." She nods and leaves. I let out a heavy sigh, at a loss on how I'm going to get through to her. I'm still in the same spot when she returns ten minutes later.

"What's wrong?" I ask as soon as I see her.

"My car won't start. I'm saving up to buy a new one. Do you mind giving me a ride to work?" I get up, put on my shoes, and call my driver on our way down to get the car out front.

"Give me your keys," I say to her. She hands them over without saying anything.

"I'll have Martin check out your car," I say, but I'm buying her a new car today. I don't want to imagine her at one a.m. trying to get home and her car not starting.

When we get out front, Martin is waiting. "Keys," I say to him as he hands me the keys with a questionable look. I hand him Dele's keys. "See if you can get my wife's car to start. I'll call you with next the steps." He nods as I get in the driver's seat and Dele gets in next to me.

"Thank you for giving me a ride. Jax or Kai can give me a ride back home tonight," she says, as if it's settled, not realizing it annoys me that she would rather ask them than me.

"Text me when you're getting ready to leave. I'll come pick you up."

"I don't want to inconvenience you. It's on Kai's way, and I'm sure he won't mind."

"No, call me." I turn a stern look at her. "You are a Blythe now." My voice rises. I need to control my frustration at the distance she keeps from me.

"Okay," she says, turning away from me.

"Martin is going to drive you everywhere until I decide what to do about your car."

"No need. I prefer to drive myself. I was saving money to buy a certified used one, but Ramsey spent all my money. Osei already agreed to co-sign for me once I save up some more money. I'll keep Jace happy until I can replace him." At least now I know that Jace is her freaking car, not some guy. That had my mind going crazy. Once I heard Osei asking her about Jace, I wondered who the hell that was.

"Jace is getting replaced this week. I'm buying you a new car or Martin will drive you everywhere. Quite frankly, the latter is my preference."

"You don't need to get me a new car or inconvenience your driver. I'll be fine." I pull the car to a stop in front of the ER Dept of the hospital.

"Go to work, Dele, and call me when you're ready for pickup." I say to end the conversation. I'm not going to keep arguing with her. I'm buying her a car today.

"Thanks for the ride," she says, getting out. I watch her go in and then drive off. I called my brother.

"Hey."

"How long has Dele's car been dying on her?"

"Jace dies and wakes up whenever he sees fit. She was trying to get a new one, but her ex-roommate stole her money. I told her I'd help her get a new one and she can pay in installments, but she said no, she would save up and call me when she needs me."

"And you didn't think to mention this to me?" I want to yell at him, but I'm starting to realize how stubborn my wife is.

"I didn't think you cared," he mocks. Now isn't the time for his mockery.

"As far as the world is concerned, she's my wife. So how would it look that she's married to me and drives a beat-up car that dies at any time? I. Fucking. Care," I yell at Osei.

"Fine, buy her a new one. Just know that Dele won't take it and kiss you thank you. Her uncle and Ramsey did a number on her. She doesn't take gifts from men."

"What did her uncle do to her?"

"She wouldn't tell me, but whatever it was, it gives her nightmares sometimes."

Fuck! I can't go down that rabbit hole right now.

"What type of car did she want to buy?"

"She wanted to get a Toyota Camry, but if you ask me, what she really wants is the Lexus NX—black, with light brown interior and wood trims."

"Thanks, that's what she's getting."

"Cool. Be gentle and explain to her why she needs this car. Don't try to shove it down her throat."

"Fuck off," I say, hanging up. She's going to take the fucking car. I care about her safety. I call Kevin, my PA, giving him the specs on the car that Dele wants. I tell him to get it in her maiden name and have it delivered to my house today. I call Martin, who tells me the car is working and just needed a change of plugs.

"Go and sell that car. I'll have the papers ready for you later today."

"Okay, sir." I head back home to work and wait for her call. I know she's going to try and defy me. I try not to think of what her uncle might have done to her. Her ex-roommate needs to watch out.

Kevin informs me that the car is on its way to my house for delivery with all the paperwork sent.

I thank him and go down to meet and accept the delivery. I take a minute to admire the car. Good choice, I think to myself.

I sent a picture to Osei, and he calls me right away.

"I see Blythe money is at work," he mocks. "She's going to love it."

"Good. Has she called you today?"

"No, but she texted saying one more final exam and then she gets three days off—no work, no class."

"Good. I'm really concerned she's working too hard. It's not good for her health."

"Look at you, acting like a real husband," he teases.

"Get off my phone," I say, hanging up on him. I can hear his laughter as I end the call. I'm going to convince her to take more days off. We are going on a well-deserved honeymoon. Even if it involves dragging her ass onto the plane.

At 10 PM, I get a text from Dele, which surprises me.

Dele: I'll be ready at 11 PM if you can pick me up, or I can have Kai drop me off.

Me: I'll be there.

I'm waiting at the exit by 10:50 PM. I text her to let her know I'm waiting. Fifteen minutes later, I see her coming out with an Asian guy and a biracial woman. I'm guessing it's Kai and Jax. They wave at her as she heads toward my car. She gets in, dropping her backpack.

"Thanks for the ride." I nod and drive toward home. She's quiet on the ride, yawning a few times.

"Osei tells me that you have one more exam tomorrow and the next three days off work and school. Any chance you can take three more days?"

"I'll see if I can get Kai and Jax to help me out."

"Good," I answer, but I'm surprised she agreed without a fight.

"I'm tired. This semester was brutal. I could really use the extra days to rest," she says, like she read my mind.

Our drive is quiet until we pull into the garage. She looks at her parking space and doesn't see her car, but the new one instead.

"Where's Jace?" She turns to me.

"I had it sold." Her mouth drops open.

"Before you get upset, your new car is sitting in the same spot. And before you tell me you can't take it, I want you to think about how bad it would look with the many zeroes in my bank account and the fact that I can't buy you the car you really want." I watch a tear drop, and she wipes it.

"Thank you." My heart opens at the simple words of appreciation. She unbuckles her seatbelt and, to my surprise, reaches over to hug me. "Thank you," she says again, kissing my cheek before getting out and going to check out the car. I unlock it for her to get in.

"Osei told you, right?" I nod. No point in lying; there's no way I would have guessed what to get her without him.

"Can I drive it to work tomorrow?"

"Yes, it's yours and I bought it in your maiden name." She gasps.

"I love it. This is Jace 5.0!" I laugh.

"Thank you. This means a lot to me," she says. I nod, glad she's happy.

"Come on, you can see it better in the morning." She nods, retrieves her backpack from my car, and we head upstairs. She's all smiles. She puts her shoes away and heads to her room. When she comes out in her shorts and T-shirt, she plates some food and puts it in the microwave. I feel the stir right away, and I can't hide it. I grab one of the pillows to cover it. Fuck! It's best not to get up from my position in front of the TV.

Soon as she returns to her room, I race to mine. She doesn't need to see my open desire for her.

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DELE



I can't believe he bought me a car! A wave of happiness washes over me, but I must set it aside to focus on my last exam and work, then I can rest for a few days and enjoy the car. The idea of getting extra days off, filled with relaxation and rejuvenation, isn't a bad one. I'm ready for it.

When I return to the living room, Luke is gone. I was hoping we'd talk, but I guess he's tired, and it's a good thing. I've used work and books to lock all thoughts of him out. I eat and wash the single dish. Back in my room, I text Osei about my new car.

Me: Luke bought me the Lexus I was dreaming about.

Osei: I heard. I hope you didn't give him a hard time about it.

Me: 🖯

Osei: Congratulations, Mrs. Blythe.

Me: Thank you. Heading to bed—exam and work, then a few days to rest.

Osei: Finally, we get to party!

Me: Rest, not party.

Osei: We'll see. Goodnight, Dele.

I turn my phone off, get my clothes out for tomorrow morning, and make a mental note to stop at the library quickly to review my notes before the exam. I turn off the light and doze off.

LUKE



We boarded our commercial flight, something I haven't done in a long time. On such short notice, the possibility of one of the ladies I've been with showing up as a flight attendant is very likely. I didn't want to introduce Dele to that, if I could help it.

I asked my PA to arrange our itinerary and book a commercial flight for us to visit Honolulu on the first flight out. The commercial flight was better. The thought of women from my past getting catty at my wife wasn't something I needed her to experience just yet. This is, after all, our honeymoon, and I didn't need it ruined before it even began.

To my surprise, yesterday she texted saying she had gotten three extra days, so she would have six days to rest. I asked what time she was returning home. She responded, saying 11:30 p.m.

I called Paula to pack a bag for her with summer clothes, and Dele could check it when she got back.

When she returned, our bags were by the door.

"Are you traveling?" she asked when she saw the bags.

"We are traveling to Honolulu for six days." Her forehead creased into a frown.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said, surprising me.

"Yes, it is. Besides, if we're ever asked where we went for our honeymoon, it'll be easy to answer." She seemed to think over my words for a moment.

"Okay. Did Paula pack my bag?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. I'll check it to make sure it has everything I want. What time is our flight?"

"First flight out at 7:00 am"

"Okay, I'll be ready. We'll make it to O'Hare in time. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I answered as she grabbed her bag. I'm just glad she didn't fight the idea of us traveling.

During the day, I moved a lot of things around and let my parents know Dele and I are traveling. My mom was very excited about the fact that Dele and I are going on our honeymoon, almost as if her plan is working. Weird.

The connection between Dele and me deepens. I know she's pulling every string to block any attraction between us while I'm doing everything I can to keep the flame burning. So, my one-night stands or quick flings harassing my wife? That's bad, with a capital 'B.'

She's looking out the window as our flight touches down, gripping my hand tightly—just as she had done during takeoff. "Takeoff and landing always affect me," she says. I nod my understanding. I watched her take a pill at takeoff, then knock out throughout the flight. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I refused to let them wake her for a meal. She was tired.

We make it to our hotel room swiftly. Soon as, she sees the one king-size bed in the bedroom.

"I can take the couch. It's big enough for my size," she quickly says. I wanted to say we could share the bed; it's big enough for both of us. But before I could say anything, she went to the bathroom and closed the door. I let out a sigh.

Step one, I got her here. Now I need to strategize how to get her from the couch to the bed. I've overcome the challenge of our apartment to Honolulu. I think I can manage getting her from the sofa to the bed in five days.

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DELE



I feel better after that long flight. I slept through most of it. I'd bought Dramamine at the airport and taken it just before boarding. I still gripped Luke's hand during takeoff, but I slept after that, which was good. Now, I'm hungry, and I need to shower and change. The suite he got is huge, a mini luxury apartment, I would call it. Not your usual hotel room, but then again, it's Luke.

I just don't understand why he would get a one-bedroom suite. Luckily, the living room sofa looks big and comfortable, so I'm sure I can manage it for the next five nights. The water and waves look inviting, and the breeze is refreshing. I put my toiletries down and step back out to speak with Luke.

"I'm hungry. Can I quickly shower, and we can get something to eat? But if you're tired, I can go alone." I say to him.

"Do you want to go out, or would you prefer to stay in?" He asked in return.

"I prefer to stay in. The water is inviting, but I could use a few more hours of rest. You can go out if you want." I shrug.

"We'll stay in. What would you like to eat?"

"Seafood," I quickly answer, smiling.

"Seafood it is." He smiles back and I like it.

"Thanks." I go to my bag to grab shorts and a T-shirt. After checking the weather yesterday, I had repacked my bag with a couple of outfits for the night and stuffed it with clothes I would love to wear in this kind of weather but never get to because of my crazy schedule.

I quickly shower and put on shorts and a T-shirt, comfortable outfits to sit in. I come out as our food is wheeled in. My stomach growls out loud.

"Yes, we need to feed you," Luke says. The bellhop chuckles. He sets the table. Once he leaves, I take my seat and grab a plate. Digging into the lobster, I eat without looking at Luke. I'm starving. After I stop for a moment, my first plate is clean.

"More?" he asks. I chuckle.

"Yes, please," I laugh. He fills my plate again, and we eat in silence for a few minutes before he asks.

"Do you have any allergies?"

"None that I know of, but I have a love for pastries, and I have a sweet tooth. Osei tells me I could probably die from an ice cream overdose if I'm not careful." he laughs. It's true; he probably noticed my love of ice cream and pastries, especially with Osei's deliveries of sweets in the past week. Paula has also stocked the pantry with more sweets for me. I noticed, Luke doesn't care for sweets.

"Which part of your name means 'Joy'?"

"Ayo means 'Joy'."

"So, if I wanted to say 'my joy' in Yoruba..."

"Ayo mi," I answer, even as the thought of him calling me his joy stops my heart. I take a sip of the water. He eats as though he didn't just sizzle the air flowing our way.

"So, 'Ayo mi' it is, if anyone ever asks for your pet name." I nod my understanding; not sure my heart won't smile each time he calls me "my joy."

<u>.</u>

LUKE



"Tell me about you?" I ask as we sit next to each other. I want to know everything about her.

She shrugs. "There isn't much to tell. I'm what most people would call boring."

I'm sure there is more to her than boring. "Tell me something Osei doesn't know about you."

A smile curves her lips. "That's a tough one because Osei probes without you realizing he's probing. I honestly think he should have ventured into law enforcement because he'll smile, and you won't even realize you've told him everything."

"So, he knows everything about you?" I ask, trying to control my annoyance at my brother knowing everything about her.

"He knows a lot, but he doesn't know everything. I sometimes surprise myself, which means not even I know everything about me. But I do know he doesn't know I like to sleep in my birthday suit." She smirks, just as that answer has my imagination reeling. Even as I act as if it doesn't move me, my body is responding.

"Anything else he doesn't know?" I ask, though I'm glad he doesn't know about her birthday suit.

"Can't think of anything else he doesn't know about me."

"Okay, let's keep the question basic, then—do you like movies?"

"Love musicals and romance. No horror, though. I can handle some scifi. Everything else is okay. What about you?"

"Not sure about musicals, dislike horror, too. As for romance..." I shrug, I smile, our union being the only romance needed.

"Now tell me something you would never do?" I ask.

"I won't eat pork, and I won't have an affair that would soil your name, though our marriage is a business arrangement." I'm pleased by her consideration, though I have my work cut out for me on the business arrangement aspect.

"Why won't you eat pork?"

"My dad was born and raised Muslim. Hence my middle name, Iman, and my last name, Kabir. He converted to Christianity for my mom. To avoid getting disowned by his father, which is considered an abomination, he let my grandfather give my brother and me Muslim names. Since my dad grew up Muslim and we still visit my grandfather, pork was an absolute no-no in our household. Besides, my brother converted back to Islam. My family is half Muslim, half Christian. I must point out that your brother likes to tell me how juicy and sweet pork tastes." She rolls her eyes.

"I bet he does." It sounds like something Osei would do.

"You can eat pork; it doesn't bother me." *No, I'm no longer eating pork.*

We sit and talk more about her likes and dislikes. The more we talk, the more I find myself liking and wanting her. She starts to relax, feet tucked under her legs, talking with her hands flying and expressive eyes, making comical sounds. I watch and catalog her happy moments.

"Would you like to take a walk on the beach with me?"

"Yes, I like walks. It calms me. Plus, I need the sun." Something in me rejoices at her yes.

Twenty minutes later, we are out the door, walking along the beach side by side. The breeze once again is our cocoon. We talk more about everything; I realize I like laughing with her.

We return to the hotel to eat and relax together. I call my dad to check on him, and she calls Osei, who makes sure to call me and remind me to be nice. We order dinner in and watch a movie together. She falls asleep. I didn't have the heart to move her because she looks so peaceful and beautiful. She has me enchanted. I could talk to her all day, every day, and never get bored. Her mind and laugh are amazing. I can also sense she has a

stubborn side, which is bound to drive me crazy—just as it's also a bloody turn-on at the same time.

I kiss her forehead, cover her up, and head to the bedroom, leaving the door open. It's late; I should go to sleep, but I'm wide awake. I decided to work.

I've just changed into my lounge pants when I hear her screaming and shouting in a language I don't understand. When I get close, I wake her up. She fights me as I try to keep her still.

"It's Luke, Dele." She fights. "Open your eyes, Dele," I repeat multiple times. She finally opens her eyes and sees me. She immediately collapses into my arms, pulling her body close to mine. I hold her tight to comfort her.

"You were having a nightmare."

"Please ... Don't leave me... please." Her voice shakes as she cries and clings to me for dear life. Without thinking, I lift her up and carry her to the bedroom. She doesn't let go. If anything, she holds on tighter to me, crying softly.

I place her on the bed and get in next to her to hold her. She doesn't flinch when I pull her close to me. Her body molds right into mine. I hold her tight until she falls asleep.

What demon is chasing her? I need to catch up and destroy her demons.

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DELE



When I wake up, I feel Luke's hands and legs intertwined with mine. His breathing is soft. I hope I didn't squeeze the life out of him with how tightly I clung to him. I slowly detangle from his arms and legs; I feel an emptiness and miss his closeness. I race to the bathroom to pee, brush my teeth, and wash my face. I should go to the living room, but I feel a need to be in his arms, so I return to lie next to him and wrap his arms around me again. It only takes a minute for me to realize he's awake but feigning sleep. Summoning the courage of Amaka, I decide to speak up.

"I know you are awake. I know you come into my room every night, though you lock the door to make me think you don't come in. I also know you're the guy I kissed on the balcony facing Lake Michigan. What I don't know is why you agreed to marry me when you wouldn't shake my hand and Osei tells me you don't like me." My words are succinct. He stirs and wraps his hand around me tighter, his face buried in my neck.

"Rule number one: don't ever mention my brother or any man's name when in bed with me," he growls in my ear, then nuzzles me. "After you ran away from the balcony, I followed and ran into Derek, who told me you were my brother's girl."

"What?! That's not true," I quickly interrupt.

"I know that now. Before now, I kept quiet. It didn't help that when he introduced us, he called you his favorite girl." With a chuckle, I turn to him, our breaths mingling in the space between us, a silent, intimate connection. I'm loving this closeness, the feel of his heart beating next to mine.

"He uses that line, 'favorite girl,' to stop his friends, especially Derek, from asking me out or getting handsy."

"I couldn't touch you. It was better you thought the worst of me than let Osei know I wanted his girl."

"You want me?" I ask, surprised. His voice sounds genuine. His hands are making tender movements on my body.

"Yes, I've wanted you since that evening on the balcony." I should be happy and jumping, but I need to remember the reason he picked me is because I wouldn't fall for him. As Amaka said, "have fun and don't fall." I can have sex with an experienced guy and not fall for him. Right? At least I'm already attracted to him. This should be easy, right?

"I want you too, but I have a request." There's no point in pretending we both can't feel the attraction. I can feel his dick poking me already, and boy, do I want to find out how to climb this mountain. *You go, girl!*

"What is your request?" Call me crazy, but there's desire in his voice.

"Be gentle with me." My voice is barely a whisper. His mouth is on me fast, devouring every inch of my mouth. His hands are caressing my body. He pulls down my shorts. His finger finds its way inside me, moving in ways I didn't know a finger could. I let out a moan. Oh, my God. He's an expert; his finger and mouth drive me wild. His other hand squeezes my breast, and a new set of sensations flows through me. I help him toss my T-shirt and bra aside. My body is on fire—only he can quench it. His lips take a nipple in his mouth, sucking and licking the life out of it. I'm soaking wet. His lips shift from nipple to nipple before dipping down my body, kissing down to my navel. My body twists in ways that could only have been generated by his kisses.

"Please," I cry out in need.

Then I feel the warmth of his tongue on my lower lips and cry out in pleasure, squeezing the pillow tight. I try to control my heart rate, but I can't because Luke's tongue is driving me crazy. My legs start to shake on their own, my toes curl, and my walls tighten as I barrel through the overwhelming sensations, letting out a scream. Luke raises his head and smiles at me.

I cover my face in embarrassment. I can't believe what just happened. He gently pulls my hand away from my face. "I want to see you," he says, his voice a deep caress filled with desire. I open my eyes and watch as he licks his fingers, having dipped them in my wetness. My mouth drops open in shock. He returns a cheeky smile.

He pulls his pants down, and all of him is now staring at me. "I can't promise to be gentle. I've waited almost nine months for this moment, so I will try. Do you understand?" I nod.

He crawls on top of me, keeping his eyes locked with mine, his legs spreading mine wider. I keep my gaze fixed on his hazel eyes, which seem to drill into my soul. I feel him at my entrance, and he rubs gently as he makes his way into my wetness. I let out a moan, spreading my legs wider so I can take him fully. He fills me to the hilt.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yes," I murmur.

"Good, now wrap your legs around me." I do as he asks, and my eyes widen because I feel him more deeply. Then his stroke begins, and the rumbling in my core intensifies. He doesn't take his eyes off mine as he moves, each stroke cracking into my soul. Then he takes over my mouth, sending me into a bliss I'd never experienced in my life. I moan louder into his mouth, and he breaks the kiss to increase his speed. I can't take it anymore.

"Luke!" I scream, my walls tightening, my body reaching its crescendo before I erupt with a loud cry: "L...uke!"

"Right behind you, Ayo mi," he says. I feel his hot stream inside me, and it feels both intense and potent. He falls onto me. Then it occurs to me—we didn't use protection. *Oh no!*

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LUKE



She was worth the wait. This is the first time I've felt a connection and truly understand the concept of love making. I want to share all of myself with her. I roll off her and pull her into my arms.

Our heart rates are slowing down. She curls into me, and I wrap my arms around her.

"We didn't use protection. I promise you I'm clean. I haven't had sex in three years, and I can't get pregnant right now because my period just ended," she spills, and I laugh. My wife is inexperienced, and I like it.

"I promise you I'm clean, and I'll show it to you. You're the first woman I've made love to without protection. Guess you do that to me." She chuckles and moves closer to me. I love the feel of her body next to mine. I feel my dick come to life again. *Fuck!*

"How about we make up for lost time?" I say.

"Okay." She smiles.

I turn her over onto her stomach, pull her ass up, and fill her all the way. Every inch of me is buried deep in her, moving at a steady pace to savor the moment. Her wetness engulfs me, and I cup her breast, squeezing her nipples as she cries out, "Oh God," in a sultry tone. A sound that's now etched into my mind. This is when I lose control, plunging into her,

grabbing every inch of her beautiful ass as she screams my name in different echoes.

I feel her walls sucking me in again, and she comes with a loud cry. Right away, I cum all over again, pouring it all into her. I feel a pang of disappointment that she can't get pregnant right now, but we have time.

I roll onto my back just as she falls onto her stomach. I throw my legs over her and she puts her head on my chest, wrapping her arm around me.

"We might have to do that again, so I know I'm still on earth," I say as my breathing returns to normal.

"You have to feed me first." She mumbles as she cuddles closer to me.

"What do you want?" I ask, kissing her head, my hands freely running over her smooth skin. I've waited months for this moment. Though it felt like a lifetime.

"Carbs and protein." I laugh, smacking her luscious ass. I pull up to lean my back against the headboard, and she rolls out of bed.

"Where are you going?" I want her to be close to me.

"Shower, then eat all the food you're ordering." I nod and watch her ass, which is now *mine*, as she goes to the bathroom. As soon as I hear the water running, I quickly placed the food order and race in to join her. She's lathering when I step into the shower with her, wrapping my arms around her waist and rubbing her breast.

"Whatever we do, my shower cap must not fall off."

"Duly noted," I reply, my hand going down to her spot, and she gasps. "Hold on," I say as I slide down, and my tongue takes over her lips, licking and swirling. She pulls on my hair, crying out, "Oh God," in that sultry tone. It fuels me to go deeper. Using my fingers, I have my way with her pussy, which is drenched as the water flows down our bodies. She makes a loud cry, her body jerking, and I lick every last drop of her orgasm.

"I can't ... stand... Luke."

"On your knees," I say, and she obeys. I get behind her and fill her up, moving fast. We both cry out.

She lathers me and takes her time washing me. I've never felt more intimately connected with anyone than I feel with her. I'm a happy man.

I'm out of the shower first and get a towel for her. I watch as she dries off and removes the cap. Her braids fall down her back. She puts them back up in a scrunchie and starts creaming her body. I notice she's meticulous about covering every inch of her skin. I keep watching her as I brush my teeth. I watch because I'm inquisitive, plus I enjoy it. My stepfather is right: I'm in love with her, but I doubt she wants to hear that from me yet. For now, I'm determined to show her how deeply I care.

"I have psoriasis. To prevent breakouts and itching, I must cream well and get some sunlight, natural vitamin D. I enjoy walking, but with my psoriasis, I take my walks during the day most times. Can you help with my back?"

"Sure." I take the cream from her and cover every inch of her back and ass.

"I believe I got my ass myself," she smirks.

"Can't be too sure. I'm making sure we get every inch of you covered."

"Liar, you just want to touch my ass," she teases. I smirk and smack her ass.

"Yep." I lotion myself and watch her head back to the bedroom, to our suitcases that are still unpacked. She takes out an oversized T-shirt and puts it on. I notice it's my brother's shirt, and I have an urge to rip the shirt off her body. I watch her put on underwear, then a pair of shorts.

I put my shorts on and take out two T-shirts from my bag. I put one on and hand the other to her. She looks at me, clueless.

"Take that off and put this on," I say to her in a succinct tone.

"What? Why? Is it torn?" She starts to look around the shirt for possible holes. She can't be that clueless, but clearly, she is.

"I don't want another man's shirt on you." There, I said it out loud. She smiles.

"This is Osei's shirt. I like the softness and the fact that it's oversized."

"Last I checked, my brother is a man." She gasps as comprehension sets in.

"Okay." She takes it off and takes mine from me, putting it on. We hear a knock, and I go to answer the door. Our breakfast is brought in. I tip the guy, and he leaves.

She comes out quietly, avoiding eye contact with me. We sit down to eat. I notice she doesn't touch the bacon and sausage—only the pancakes and eggs.

"No sausage?" She shakes her head. I forgot she doesn't eat pork.

"Look at me, Dele." She raises her head to look my way.

"I don't like you wearing his shirt or that of any man."

"It's just a shirt," she mumbles.

"It's his shirt. It has his smell all over it, and that smell is all over you." She stares at me, wide-eyed. I maintain the stare and don't blink. "I'll buy you the exact same shirt and size, but you are not wearing that shirt or any other shirt that belongs to him."

"Okay," she agrees and starts to eat. Good, because there's no way I was going to back down on her wearing his shirt. We finish eating and push the tray out into the hallway.

"Do you want to go out?

"No, I'm tired. I think I overworked my ass the last few weeks with school and work. Can we go out later or tomorrow?"

I agree; she overworked herself. "We can go out whenever you are ready." I'm completely happy if she wants to stay in. I open the slides to let the breeze in, then take a seat on the sofa and pat the space next to me. She smiles and takes the spot, curling up to me. I kiss her forehead. I pick up the remote and turn the TV on.

"Any requests?"

"Action movie."

"Do you have any in particular?"

"Can we watch all the *Bad Boys* movies?"

"Bad Boys it is." I find the movie and play it. I wrap my arm around her and find myself in complete contentment just having her next to me. My phone rings, and I see it's Lily, my fucking ex. I honestly wish we didn't work together; unfortunately, we have business ties. I rejected the call and put the phone on silent right away.

"We can pause the movie if you need to take the call." Dele says.

"No, it's not important," I tell her, but I know Lily won't stop calling, which is really where the problem lies. I've avoided taking her calls in the last week since I got married. She's probably wondering how that happened. Dele stirs next to me, and I toss thoughts of Lily aside. I'll deal with her later; right now, my attention is on someone much more important. My wife.

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DELE



"Are you up for a dinner date night with me?" he asks. I smile.

"Yes, are we dressing up for this date?" I keenly ask. He nods. "Yes! I have a dress I've been dying to wear." I'm already rising. "What time are we going out?" I ask.

"In two hours." He answers as my eyes widen.

"I better go and start getting ready."

"You don't need that much time."

"Of course I do," I answer with a duh look as I race to the room to get the dress and hang it in the bathroom. I start to use my cream on my skin, covering my legs. I piled my hair up and styled it the way Amaka did for the wedding. I apply makeup using her style and hacks. Once that's done, I quickly paint my fingernails. It looks horrible. As it dries, I apply the oil perfume. I take off my bra and panties, then slip on the thong. Then the dress. Dresses like this make me happy to be a B-cup. I tuck my breasts into the hold and my hands into the sheer sleeves. The inner tuck gives my boobs a lift. The dress enhances my slim waist, hips, and ass. I add strappy nude sandals with freshly painted red toenails, put on the teardrop earrings and bracelet—my favorite pieces—and my wedding ring. I open the door.

Luke is already dressed in a black suit. Guess Mr. Handsome doesn't need all the time I do.

I smile at him. He looks debonair. His eyes move in slow motion from my face to my toes, a sensual perusal that makes me want to jump him. My nipples are hardened, and I'm wet. *God help me, this man will be my downfall.*

I step out, and he paces in front of me without saying a word. Did I disappoint him with my dress?

Oh, no! He doesn't like it.

"If you don't like it, I can change. I have a pantsuit," I blurt out.

"I love how beautiful you look. The thing is, I'm territorial, and I get the feeling other men will look at my wife—that's what I don't like. So, can we agree that you stay by my side all evening?"

"Yes, I can manage that without issues." I smile.

"Good." He comes closer and pulls me into a hug, then kisses my cheek. "Please tell me you are wearing a bra." I shake my head; he arches a brow. "Panty?" he questions with a hopeful look.

"Thong," I say, and he exhales.

"Stay right by my side all evening." I nod.

He takes my hand, and we head out, our hands interlaced. We get on the elevator. As soon as we step into the lobby, we get a few stares as we head toward our waiting car. Luke takes my hand and pulls me closer to him.

The limo is waiting when we get out. He helps me in and is quiet on the drive.

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LUKE



As soon as Dele race to the room to get ready, I call the hotel concierge to make the reservation. Our day has been beautiful and mind-blowing. I'm buzzed. I take out my phone and listen to my voice messages; it's all business and messages from Kevin, until Lily's message. She is crying that I got married without telling her. I broke up with her after I kissed Dele. It's been over seven months, and I haven't laid a hand on her. Do we see each other and work together? Yes, but that's as far as it goes. I know her dad, Nathan McIntyre, has been pushing my dad to convince me to marry her as a good alliance. It irked me, but I ignored it because I knew I wasn't going to ever marry as Lily long as Dele was around. I deleted all her messages.

Now, Dele is my wife, and I couldn't be happier. After checking on a few other items, I get my suit on, get ready in the spare bathroom, and wait for Dele.

When Dele steps out looking stunning in the deep V black dress and sheer sleeves, I know right away she isn't wearing a bra with the cut of the dress and her cleavage. Her slim waist and hips are enhanced by the dress fitting her body like a glove. Dele is already about five feet six inches tall, and with heels, she looks taller and ravishing. I no longer want to take her out—I know men will ogle her, and I might lose my shit. I also know she has spent hours looking this gorgeous for a date with me. So I suppress all

the thoughts of other men's lascivious eyes on my wife and decide to show her off.

It's all good until we step into the lobby. Men openly stare at my wife, but I keep reminding myself that Dele is happy with me, and that's all that matters.

We are seated in a private corner once we arrive at the restaurant. Dele loves the atmosphere and gentle breeze. We put in our order, as we talk and laugh.

"Can I ask where you got the bracelet?"

"Amaka's fiancée gave it to me." I arch a brow.

"It was three gifts in one," she happily says.

"Do tell." I smirk.

"Congratulations on completing your RN program, Happy Birthday, and sorry for taking Amaka away." I laugh. "That's exactly what Nosah wrote on the card," she says, smiling.

"Nice. He covered all the grounds." She nods.

"Yes, he did, and Osei gave me the earrings for my birthday; it was coincidental that the bracelet and earrings match."

"I was there when Osei got you the earrings," I tell her—no need to tell her I paid for it.

"Well, thank you, if you convinced him to pick this one. I love it."

"Good, glad you like it." She smiles.

Our dinner arrives, and we eat and talk a little. She tells me about Amaka, Jax, and Kai. Sounds like she has her own fun clique.

"So, you've dated lots of women," she says out of the blue, which shocks me.

"Yes, and I still waited to marry you." I answer right away. She smiles.

"Any ex-boyfriends I should know about?"

"No, I dated ages ago, and it didn't last. I joined my uncle in New York, and after I left New York, I haven't dated anyone." I hear sadness in her voice. Whatever caused her nightmares and fears happened in New York. "But I kissed a guy once at a club. He'd been checking me out and asked for a kiss. He said, 'Please grant me a kiss, even if you won't date me." She says impishly.

"So, you kissed this mystery guy?" I state.

"Yes. The only other time I've ever kissed anyone on impulse is when I kissed you." I take her left hand and kiss the ring.

"You are meant to always kiss me, Dele. We are magnets. If it didn't happen that evening, it would have happened eventually," I say, locking eyes with her.

"How about now?" she challenges. She moves closer and starts to kiss me. A gentle kiss, but I take over her mouth in a kiss that fills my mind with happiness. My hand is on her legs.

"Luke Blythe, I thought that was you," I hear a voice and break from the kiss. I gaze at Dele for a moment before turning to the throaty voice I know belongs to Chase Brock. I can't stand the guy.

Of all the people in the world to surprise me, it had to be him. I plaster a fake smile.

"Chase Brock, what a surprise." We shake hands. I briefly dated his sister. I hope this asshole doesn't bring it up in front of my wife.

"You guessed right. What are you doing here?" I ask in a wry tone.

"Celebrating Mom and Dad's fortieth anniversary." Right on cue, Mr. and Mrs. Brock show up. I get up to greet them and congratulate them. They are always nice and pleasant, unlike their douchebag son. I congratulate them on their anniversary.

"How's your father doing?" Mr. Brock asks right after the pleasantries.

"He's great, resting these days," I reply.

"That's wonderful," he says, just as Mrs. Brock, with a charming smile, reaches out to shake Dele's hand, inquiring, "And who's the lovely lady?" Dele takes her hand.

"Dele Blythe, my wife. We got married last week," I say. Mr. and Mrs. Brock exclaim in excitement. Dele gets up to greet them. They both shake her hand; Mrs. Brock hugs her. I notice Chase looking at my wife salaciously. He takes her hand and kisses it.

"Your parents must be very happy. Congratulations," Mrs. Brock says.

"They are, and thank you." I pull Dele closer to me, glaring at Chase, but he acts like he doesn't notice. It's clear he did notice my glare, but he's undeterred by it.

The concierge soon comes over. "Mr. Chase, your car is delayed for twenty minutes. We're sorry. Mr. and Mrs. Brock, your car is outside."

"Alright then, we'll see you later, son. Good night, you younglings, and congratulations, Luke."

"Thank you," I say, bidding them goodnight. They leave, and Chase turns to me.

"Mind if I join you guys for a few minutes?" I don't want him here. Before I can say something, he's seated.

"Sure," I say with a stiff smile. Dele sits too, and he's right next to her.

He starts to talk about nothing, really, and I notice Dele is moving closer to me. I call the concierge to pay our bill and have our car brought up. I don't want to throw punches, but fucking Chase is pushing my limits. He's not hiding his glued eyes on her boobs and doesn't help that Dele is clearly uncomfortable. Fuck this! I get up and pull Dele out with me.

"Sorry, we have to head out," I say to Chase without a backward glance. I practically rush Dele and me out of there before I lose control.

<u>.</u>

DELE



Luke's phone buzzing wakes me up. I turn to my side and lie quietly. I hear him answer the call.

"What do you want, Lily?" he whispers.

"Yes, it's true. I got married."

"No, I can't discuss this with you right now."

"Fine, I'll see you when I get back." He hangs up and goes to the closet to grab some clothes, then heads to the bathroom. I feel the trickle of tears in my heart. Who was I kidding to think he wanted more than sex? He has no interest in me. He opens the door, scribbles a note, and leaves it by my bedside. He kisses my forehead and goes out. As soon as the unit door shuts, my tears fall. I wipe them. I won't cry. I'm finishing school and will never have to worry about money again. That's what's important. I take the note.

Going for a run on the beach, brb, the note reads. I set it down and wipe the tears I can't control.

Memories of him kissing me all over and making love to me flood in, and I cry more. I can feel him in my being, but he doesn't want me. I'm just another one of the many women he has dated. Lily is the one he wants. I need to remember that, enjoy the days, and remember I signed a contract. I pull myself out of bed with my shattering heart and go to shower. I put on

the only bikini I have and never wear, then a T-shirt and shorts. I order breakfast and have just finished eating when he returns.

"Going somewhere?" he asks when he sees me dressed with my backpack.

"Figured I'd enjoy the beach today." I answer in a collected tone.

"Good, let me just shower, and I can join you."

He heads towards the bathroom. Against my control, I blurt out, "What are we doing, Luke?" He pauses and turns to me, perplexed.

"What do you mean? We are going to the beach," he says.

"What's going on with us? We signed a contract, remember?" His eyes widen.

"So..."

"So, I don't think it's wise that we should be having sex." His mouth drops open, and he closes it. After an intense stare, I wish I'd kept quiet.

"How about we do this? We enjoy ourselves here in Hawaii, and what happens here, stays here. And when we get to Chicago, we can adhere to the contract. Will that work?" he asks, and I nod.

"Sure," I answer as my heart wails louder.

"Don't leave. I'll shower quickly, and we can go down together."

"Your breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry," he snaps and goes into the bathroom. When he comes out in swim shorts and a T-shirt, we head out. I keep digging in my bag to make sure I have everything I need and not hold Luke's hand. He looks upset, and I don't get why he would be upset. He's not the one with a broken heart.

Luke gets us a cabana; it's comfortable. I pull the chair out so I can lay out in the sun once I remove my shorts and T-shirt, leaving me in the bikini. Sunglasses and hat on, I lie to get some sun. It helps to reduce the flares of my psoriasis. Luke tells me he's taking a walk and will be right back. I simply nod.

I call my parents and say hello to them. My dad sounds better; the meds arrived last night, and they're helping. I try not to cry again and hurriedly tell them I have to go.

Luke's money is helping my dad; I don't have to love him. I only need to enjoy him and his money while it lasts. I close my eyes and try not to think about Luke, who has a pesky way of staying on my mind.

"Fancy seeing you here," I hear and turn towards the voice. It's the guy from last night, Chase Brock. He kept his eyes on my breasts and tried to run his hands over my thighs, making me uncomfortable.

"Oh, hi," I say, faking a smile. He pulls Luke's chair out and sits beside me. I sit up, pull my T-shirt out, and put it back on.

"Luke just took a walk that way," I say, pointing in the direction. "You can probably catch up with him." He needs to leave; I don't like him.

"No need. I'll wait and talk to you," he says. I don't want to talk to him right now. I'm in no mood to be nice.

"So, you guys are on your honeymoon?" *Ha, the joke of that.*

"Yes," I answer.

"How's that going?" I look away, hoping he takes the hint. I don't want to talk to him.

"It's going good. We're having fun," I say. *Ain't that the truth*? He smiles and gently touches my thigh. What the fuck? I move my legs away from him. He does it again.

"Please, don't touch me," I snap at him.

"Come on, I'm sure he won't mind." My hand is already in my backpack, reaching for my knife.

"I mind. I don't like being touched by strange men." He grabs my thigh before I can get my knife out.

A fist is thrown at his face. Luke grabs him and punches him again.

"Do." Punch.

"Not." Punch.

"Fucking." Punch.

"Touch." Punch.

"My wife!" Punch. Luke yells before tossing him onto the sand.

"Fuck, Luke! You broke my nose."

"You fucking touched my wife!" Luke yells back.

"I'm pressing charges. This is assault."

"Yes, please do that. Give me the opportunity to fucking destroy you." He stares at Luke, bewildered. I can't see Luke's face, but I can sense the tension and anger radiating from him.

Chase moves closer to Luke as though he's about to punch him; instead, he says, "First you mess with my sister, and now this..." He wipes at his bloody nose and walks away. Though he doesn't finish the sentence, the threat and anger in his words can't be missed.

Luke turns to me. "Let's go," he says, anger oozing from him.

I don't question him; I pack up and follow him. He's walking fast, and I try to keep up with him. In the room, he heads to the bathroom, and I sit on the bed quietly, unsure of what to do.

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LUKE



Fucking Chase made me lose it. I was already on edge from his crap last night. Dele and I had a good night, despite Chase poking me. Then Lily woke me up this morning. I didn't want to answer her call, but the non-stop calling was annoying. I decided to answer. I should have stepped onto the balcony, but I didn't, and that was my mistake because I know Dele heard, though she pretended like she was asleep. I went for a run to clear my head, only to return and have Dele throw my own bullshit contract in my face.

In anger, I responded with, "What happens here stays here." Not my smartest answer, because I seem to lose all control and sensibility around her. As I showered, I thought about my stepfather's words:

Your mission, should you choose to accept, is to woo your wife. I figured all I needed to do was make the next few days count, so she wouldn't question my feelings for her.

On our way down, I could tell she was doing everything to avoid touching me. I let it go. I decided to take a walk on the beach to strategize how to get through to her, only to see Chase from afar, sitting next to her. I fucking lost it. Chase and I never liked each other. His sister was the first girl I dated, which really upset him more. When she broke up with me, I didn't argue or tell him she broke up with me. I just let him turn his anger toward me. The worst part was when a sex tape of her was leaked, and he

thought I did it to spite her. On that, I told him it wasn't me, but he didn't believe me. Declan told me to let it go and avoid him. Which is what I've done most of our lives—and avoided dating since then. Now, I'm racing to protect Dele from him. I can tell he sees Dele as a tool to destroy me.

I went behind the cabana, then I heard Dele saying, "I mind, and I don't like being touched by strange men," and the asshole grabbed her thigh. The audacity.

I reacted fast and punched him. Not only was he stomping on my territory, but he'd also ogled her last night, and this same asshole called my brother the N-word. Time to let out all the bottled anger.

I tossed him once I felt some semblance of satisfaction. Idiotic Chase had the guts to say he would press charges; he better try it so I can have a good excuse to destroy him.

I rinse my face and wash my hands. I step out to find Dele looking lost.

She races into my arms; I pull her close to me.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay?" she mumbles.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. He's an asshole. I'm sorry I left you alone."

"I'm fine, and I'm glad you came back in time. I was reaching into my bag for my knife. I would have cut him." I pull back to read her face with a widened look.

"You carry a knife around?" I ask quizzically.

"I work late hours, and sometimes old Jace won't start, so I take a cab or walk home if Kai or Jax are unable to drop me off. After New York, I keep a knife close to me."

I pull out of the hug and take her hand. She follows, and we head to the living room.

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LUKE



Once seated, I ask the question that's been burning in me for a while now.

"What happened between you and your uncle that brings fear to your face every time I close or lock the door, or when you talk about New York?"

"I'll tell you, but you can't stop me to ask any questions until I stop speaking, and you can't get angry or tell anyone." That's a steep ask. I guess I have to hold it together.

"I can promise not to ask questions now, but I can't promise to control my emotions, but I will try."

"Please don't tell Osei. I don't want him to look at me with pity." She says in a definite voice.

"I can promise not to tell Osei. If anything, I prefer to know things about you that he doesn't know," I reply.

"Okay, and no judgment from you, either." It's a command; I notice the skepticism on her face.

"Promise, no judgment," I confirm to her. "I could never judge you." I watch her pull away from me and I sit back to listen.

"I was born in Kent, UK. But we moved to Lagos when I was two, and my brother was six. My mom is a chef with a catering business, and my dad is an engineer. Life was good; I had nothing to worry about. I was raised conservative, like I mentioned, but with a little progressiveness. Anyway, during my first year at uni, my dad had an accident, and he was in the hospital for almost a year. The company paid for most of his expenses, but he couldn't work anymore. By the end of my second year, we'd started to feel the financial strain. My mom had to sell her business to be home with him. My older brother was sent back to the UK, but each time he called, he was barely getting by." She sighs.

"In comes my uncle, dad's younger brother, who my dad had paid for his studies here in the U.S.. He told my dad he would take me with him, basically pay forward my dad's help, and he promised to look after me. My parents and I had no reason not to trust him. He was, after all, *family*," she air quotes.

"I moved here with him as my guardian. We lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, New York. My uncle was divorced with a son who lived with his mother but came over on weekends.

Uncle Timi was nice and got me registered at community college. While he tried to get me a legal resident status, I babysat to make money. Everything was moving in the right direction, as planned. About eight months after I arrived, he got injured at work. Some machinery fell on him. Between insurance and his company, a lot of the expenses were covered, but the problem began when he became addicted to Vicodin." Her voice starts to shake. I know the darkness is about to begin. She's quiet, and I want to say something so badly, but I remain quiet. Her glassy eyes won't look at me.

"At first, we were getting by, but the money was dwindling faster than his addiction. He started selling everything he could get his hands on. His son stopped coming over. He would yell and scream at me. I had nowhere to go, and I couldn't tell my parents what was going on. If anything, my dad was always telling me to make sure my uncle was okay. My brother wasn't okay in London. I was alone, though I had people around me. My world and everything around me felt dire and lonely. All I could do was face work and school. It was the only thing I could focus on." She sighs

"My uncle started going to the parents I babysat for to collect my pay before I'd even worked. The parents, as you can imagine, fired me. I found work, but I didn't make enough to pay the rent and certainly no more school. We were behind on rent, and my uncle continued to spend every dime I made to feed his addiction. No matter how well I hid the money, because I was always getting paid in cash. I arrived home from work one evening to see my uncle with a heavyset guy smoking weed. Something about the leer of the man made me uneasy. I retreated to my room and locked the door.

I knew my uncle was making shady friends since he wasn't working, but something about that particular guy was off. My instinct was on high alert." She lets out a weighted exhale and starts to look down.

"Two nights after my first encounter with the guy, he was back, and as soon as I walked in, my uncle announced, 'We have rent money.' I will never forget those words." She sniffs and wipes the tears that are starting to trickle. I watch her lips tremble and her hands tremble.

"I wanted to ask him how we got rent money, but I was raised not to question an adult. My reply was: 'Should I take it to Mr. Hernandez?' It really was my excuse to get out because the heavyset man, who I still did not know his name, was in my peripheral vision, grabbing his crotch and leering at me. My uncle's reply was: 'You will go inside and spread your legs for my friend here. He just paid for your virginity.' Shock overtook me. I couldn't believe what I was hearing."

The tears are now uncontrolled. She's trembling so much. *Fuck!* My promise. I move fast and pull her into my arms. She keeps crying. All I do is hold her close to me and not say a word, as much as I want to tell her to stop talking. I also know she needs to get it out.

"I refused to go and raced towards the door to get out of the apartment, but it was locked and blocked. I couldn't get out. While I talked to my uncle, the guy had blocked the door. My uncle smoked as the guy dragged me, kicking and screaming, to my room. He raped me over and over. He kept telling me, 'Three thousand is a lot of money, and I should be happy he wants me.' Each time I tried to race for the door, it was locked. I screamed for my uncle, hoping my scream would save me, but I could smell the weed. I knew my uncle was high, and I had to save myself. Eventually, he tied me to the bed."

I'm going to commit murder.

"I'd lost track of how many times he stuffed himself inside me, using his smelly hands to prevent me from screaming. The worst was the pain of his slaps, to stop me from fighting back. He then told me that if I told anyone, he was going to kill my uncle by shooting him up with cocaine and make sure I got deported. He knew my parents were struggling, and obviously, my uncle had sold his soul to the devil. I laid there and cried. When he left,

I showered over and over to get his stench off me. I pulled the sheets off the bed and threw them in the garbage. I wanted to lock myself in there forever, but something about the way he looked at me when he was leaving made me believe he would be back, and no one would save me. Rather than remain a sitting duck, I went to work, despite how much my body felt like it had been railroaded by a freight train. I also knew that I needed to get out of the house because I wouldn't eat if I didn't work. My uncle was stoned out on the sofa when I left. I left him; betrayal and hurt were crying loudly in my bones." She wipes her tears.

"My only friend, Esther, asked what was wrong with me after I expressed fear of going home. I broke down and told her everything. Esther then told me that I needed to get tested. She gave me Plan B meds and told me that I didn't want to get pregnant by a monster like that. She also warned me not to report Floppy—that was his name—because his threats weren't a bluff. So, I kept quiet." She wipes her tears but rests her head on my chest.

"I slept in the breakroom that night and every night for a week. When I finally returned home, because the owner of the store said I couldn't continue sleeping in the breakroom — he could get in trouble if someone found out that I was getting locked inside the store or some crazy accident happened. I went home, hoping my nightmare was over. When I got home, the neighbors informed me that my uncle was in the hospital. He'd overdose. I knew Floppy had done it. I went to see my uncle, and he didn't remember anything. I told him what had happened. He apologized and told me to go home. He said he was going to work on getting clean and begged me not to tell my dad." She starts to shake and I hold her tight to me.

"I went home thinking everything was okay, that everything was back on track. Our apartment reeked of weed, like someone had a smoking party there. I was too scared to open the windows and air it out, so I made sure I locked all the doors and windows, making sure everything was secured."

"I woke up with the same guy on top of me. He taped my mouth, tied my hands, and had his way with me. After he was done, he said, 'I couldn't get enough, and I knew you would be back once your doped-up uncle landed in the hospital. I've claimed you, and no one else can ever have you, and remember: if you tell, I'll finish him off.' He untied me and left. I ripped the tape off to let out a muffled scream, then raced to the bathroom to wash myself until my skin broke. The next day, I filled my backpack and went to work. I told Esther that Floppy had returned, and I wasn't safe at home

anymore. He'd taken my uncle's key and broke the door chains to get in. Esther told me I needed to get far away from the area because Floppy was a notorious psycho, and he wasn't going to stop because he was fixated on me." She pulls out of my arms and wraps her arms around herself.

"I had nowhere to go and didn't know anyone. Esther said I needed to start thinking of going far away and forget my uncle. So, I went to my uncle's ex, Aunty Dee, the only other person I knew who would take me in. And she did. She also made me promise not to return to my uncle. She said my parents had been nice to her, and the least she could do was return the favor. I was happy to stay with her and help babysit my cousin. About a month into living with her, she ran inside, shaking. I asked what was wrong. She told me that I needed to leave that night for Chicago, that Floppy was tailing her. I couldn't believe it. At first, I told myself she was lying, but I knew she wouldn't lie to me. She was just as frightened as I was. The reality was my world was crashing again. I felt like I was in a vicious cycle of a nightmare that was never going to end. As my mother used to say, 'Can't go forward, and can't go backward.'"

"While I stood horrified at my new reality, Aunty Dee packed my backpack. She also packed a bag for her and my cousin. We left for the train station, and on the way, she told me I was heading to Chicago and that I shouldn't look back. She bought me a burner phone and a one-way ticket to Chicago. She gave me the information about her cousin, Amaka, and said she would be expecting me. She told me not to call her or send a message; Amaka knew what to do." She heavily sighs.

"That was how I ended up here in Chicago. Amaka came to get me at the train station. I came with a backpack, forty dollars, and a shitload of fear and anxiety. Floppy had stolen my passport. Amaka took me in, no questions asked. I call her my Angel." She smiles for the first time.

"We got along well. She told me that nursing was the route of education I needed to pursue, and she could easily get me to work in that area. So, I started the nursing program and realized that I liked it. I didn't tell my parents where I was, out of fear they might tell my uncle, or for all I knew, he could tell Floppy. I want to believe he probably moved on and won't care about me, but a part of me errs on the side of caution and safety. It's better to assume he would do something crazy, like try to come and get me, than to be carefree and find myself living the horror again." She pauses and

looks at me with her red and teary eyes. I maintain a poker face, much as I am raging inside, and I wait for her to continue. She exhales and continues.

"For months after I moved in with Amaka, I slept with a knife under my pillow and a ready bag to escape. I put cash in the bag as well, in case I needed to run. Amaka didn't care that I locked doors and windows every second; she understood my dilemma. I would later find out from Amaka that Aunty Dee had heard all about Floppy and had called Amaka to please help me before the night she'd rushed home. Aunty Dee's plan was for Amaka and I to talk beforehand, but things changed drastically." She wipes her tears.

"As I got comfortable, I stopped sleeping with a knife, but I still keep my backpack with an extra change of clothes, some cash, and a knife in the bag. Amaka was true to her words about helping me. She got me a job at a nursing home. I completed my LPN program and continued for my RN. That's when I met Jax." Her voice is steady now, and the tears have stopped.

"I didn't ask Amaka how she got me employed, long as I was working. I continued my RN program. After my graduation, I told my mom why I'd left New York. She cried. I begged her not to tell my dad and my brother. She agreed that it would only make Dad's condition worse." I put my hand out to her, and she takes my hand, squeezing it a bit.

"I kept my head down and lived my life. I was normal again, or at least I thought I was. I didn't date and disliked guys grabbing or touching me. It all just felt like Floppy was grabbing me again each time any guy did that, and I would freak out. Though Nosah, Amaka's fiancé, and Kai, my co-worker, are notorious for trying to make me less tense about touches. I'm slowly getting used to not freaking out every time. Before Floppy, all I'd ever done was kiss a boy. That was the extent of my sexual encounters with boys." She smirks at me.

"Amaka then decided to move to California after Nosah proposed to her, which meant I needed to move soon, because the lease was going to expire in two months. Nosah and Ramsey are cousins. Amaka asked Ramsey if he could marry me and file legal papers for me so I could finish my BSN and return to the UK." The pitch of her voice is angrier now.

"My brother is okay now, but he said it was best that I finish my BSN program before returning to the UK, that way all I'd have to do is study for the license and not go through the rigor of school and working again.

Ramsey agreed to file for me so I could work and finish school. I wanted to pay him, but he said Nosah was his cousin and I was Nosah's adopted younger sister, so all I had to do was move in, help him with the rent and bills, and that would make us even. What I didn't know was the fact he was bad with money. When Amaka left, against Osei's wishes, I moved in with Ramsey. I even lied to Osei that we were dating so he wouldn't worry." Her anger resonates more now in her voice.

"Ramsey convinced me to open a joint account with him. I did. He said he couldn't change the lease, but I could put my name on the utilities with his name. I did it because I trusted him. After two months, I asked him when we would get the papers started. He said he hadn't filed his taxes because he would owe, and they would need that, so I should just give him some time, or if I wanted to expedite things, I could help him pay what he owed and he would pay me back." A sad chuckle escapes her. "Stupid me agreed, so I worked double shifts and paid his owed taxes." I get her anger at the predator in friend's clothing.

"Once his taxes were done, I asked when we would go to the lawyers. He said I needed to get a current passport, which was true, so I worked on getting a new passport, which came three months ago, and had my parents send all the other documents I would need." She exhales.

"One evening, Ramsey used his key to unlock my bedroom door and came into my room. I fought him hard and kicked him out. At this point, Amaka had encouraged me to learn how to fight, so we'd gone to some training classes. The only silver lining about that night when he snuck into my room was the fact I no longer slept with a knife under my pillow. I'm sure I would have killed him. The next morning, he apologized, saying he was drunk, but it wouldn't be bad if we dated. That would make it all real. I told him I wasn't interested in dating anyone. He then called me a tease and walked away. He would return home with different girls, hoping to make me jealous, but I didn't care. As long as he wasn't sneaking into my bed or coming after me." She sighs.

"I asked him again about our agreement, and he shrugged, saying he was working on it, but it would move faster if I put out. I reminded him that wasn't our agreement, and I was already footing most of the bill. I told him I would work to pay him, he said no. He wanted me to come willingly and have sex with him. He said I'd let Nosah and Osei touch me, but I wouldn't let him touch me. I told him I don't like men touching me, and I especially

didn't like him touching me, but I didn't share my horror stories with him. Amaka knows, and I know she told Nosah, who is always protective of me, and they were kind to me. After our conversation, I stayed out of his way, and I also knew that he wasn't going to help me, and I needed to start finding a way to leave his place.

"I didn't act soon enough, though, because he spent all my savings, laughing with his friends about me. That's when I called Osei." She removes her hand from mine with a sad smile. "Now you can ask all your questions."

"Right now, I just want to hold you." A faint smile crosses her lips, and she leans back into my arms. We sit in harmony with our heartbeat and the sea breeze is the only sound. Fucking Chase, touching her the way he did probably triggered her. I wish I'd punched him more.

"I will never hurt you," I say to her.

"I know. Can we go for a walk and get ice cream?" I chuckle. Guess we need something sweet after the heaviness of today.

"Yes," I answer, kissing her forehead.

She kisses my lips. "Thank you for listening." I nod.

We change clothes and head out, holding hands. I put a lid on my internal rage. It's best I hide that emotion from her, because I know that's not what she wants. Bruce is going to take care of Floppy for me and I'm going to derive pleasure in breaking Ramsey's face. I will ask more questions later.

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LUKE



I take Dele out for ice cream as promised. I sit with her close to me, talking and laughing. She tells me about the defense training classes she and Amaka used to attend, but she hasn't had time to go in the last few months. She showed me some of her moves, and I must admit, she's quick and fast.

"I'll try and go again. I feel like I'm getting sloppy," she says in between licks.

"No rush, take your time," I say, though I'd prefer she doesn't go, but I don't say that. I can't afford to say the wrong thing to her. She's smiling and enjoying her ice cream. It's best I save more of her happy moments than ruin it with words.

We decide to explore the area. Dele buys a few items that she likes and picks up stuff for Jax, Amaka, and Vanessa. As it turns out, Dele's hair stylist is Vanessa, who is also Kai's girlfriend.

She tells me more about herself. We had dinner out before heading back to the room. She tells me Vanessa is very good with her hair and has helped it grow fuller and longer.

"When do I get to see and touch this full and long hair?"

"See, not touch. Maybe when I take my braids down. Depends on what Vanessa suggests."

"Okay," I respond, though I do want to see her hair, but it sounds like I don't get a say. I let it go, take her hand, and return to our room.

Once the movie ends, we lie in silence. I rub Dele's back. She sits up and turns to me. I turn toward her, knowing something is wrong.

"What's wrong?"

"You said what happens here stays here, right? No judgement." I fucking hated saying that. It was meant to make her relax, but she seems to have taken it as the mission statement.

"Yes," I answer, and a radiant smile is all I see.

"I want to try something," she says, getting off the bed. "I need your consent that you'll play along."

"Yes," I answer, though I have no idea where this is going, but she looks happy, so I'm down.

"Okay." She claps excitedly. "I'm going to change, and when I come out, I want you sitting on that sofa. You answer my questions." She's grinning.

"Got it. Sit on the chair and answer questions," I state, though I'm unsure where this is going. She races to the closet, takes out a dress, shoes, and a few items. I watch her head into the bathroom. I pick up my phone and turn it off. No need for interruptions, especially from my mom, who's the queen of inopportune calls.

I sit and wait for Dele. My mind wanders about what or where she might take me. The door opens, and my wife steps out in a blue silk short-sleeved wrap mini dress and, peep-toe blue heels. Her braids are piled up with a few loose strands, glasses on her face, light makeup, but that deep red lipstick is coloring me intrigued. I quickly get up and sit on the sofa, my hands spread out. This is going to be interesting. She moves toward me once I'm seated. I notice her legs are shimmering. What did she rub on her legs? She takes the pen and paper on the table and gets closer to me. The scent of her perfume hits my nostrils. She sits on the edge of the bed, facing me.

"Hello, Mr. Blythe. My name is Nami'k." She winks. "And I'm your girl for tonight," she says in a sultry voice. My eyebrow arches in amusement. This is going to be fun. "Before we proceed, I need to know you understand the rules." I smile and nod.

"Rule one: You cannot touch me." She smiles. I give her a side-eye. "Do you agree, or I can leave?" Her sultry voice almost pleads for me to agree with this foreplay.

"I agree," I respond to appease her, knowing that's a challenge for me. She smiles and bats her eyelashes at me, smacking her lips with a playful air kiss.

"Rule two: you won't speak to me." I nod. She smiles more.

"Rule three: you can't touch yourself either." This is going to be interesting. I smile.

"Good, because my husband is watching, and I wouldn't like him breaking your fingers." I can't help but laugh. "I see that you want everything on the menu, and you've picked a song. You said no bra. I'm sorry I missed that." She bats her eyelashes, smiling at me in a flirty manner. Now, I'm intrigued.

She sets the pen and paper down, then pulls her bra off, dropping it on the floor. Her nipples peek through the silk material. I'm grinning like a schoolboy who's about to get with his crush. She loosens the wrap a little and turns the music on. I sit back and watch as she starts to dance seductively. I can feel the stir in my pants. She comes closer and leans into me, her hands moving at a slow, seductive pace all over me.

My face is tucked in her breast as she dances. She caresses my ears. Her hand is everywhere as she moves in a sexually arousing rhythm, teasing me. Her tongue pricks my ear, sending waves of sensation through me. I reach to grab her, but she blocks my hand and whispers, "You can't touch me. My husband is watching." Fuck this imaginary husband.

My body is on fire. With her back to me, she sits on me and dry humps me. My dick is about to rip through the zipper. Why the hell did I wear cargo pants? I try to loosen the zipper to let him out, but she blocks my hand.

"Can't touch yourself either," she teases.

Her wrap dress falls open, revealing black lace panties that I want to rip off with my teeth. Her nipples are hard, awaiting my eager mouth.

She moves, taking the dress off and starts pulling her panties down slowly. I watch this beautiful siren as she tortures me alluringly. She sits on me, using her knees to lock me in place. She kisses me all over, and I swear, I'm about to break all the fucking rules. She blocks my hand again.

"You can't touch me. My husband is watching," she whispers in a conspiratorial tone. The mention of the imaginary husband frustrates me further. She kicks her heels off and slides down my body to her knees. She unzips my pants, licks her lips, and takes me out. My dick bounces in

happiness from being freed. She massages me, top to bottom, repeatedly. Just as I'm about to lose it, she licks the tip, rolling her tongue on it. I'm about to come in her mouth, but I hold it back. She goes deeper, rolling her tongue and sucking me hard.

"Fuck! That's so good." She does it again, making me even harder, pulling all the way to the tip and rolling her tongue, then stops. She massages me again, and I lose control, splattering my cum on her breasts. I couldn't hold it back any longer.

"My job here is done, Mr. Blythe." She smiles. "Have a good night." She gets up with my cum dripping off her. She bends down to grab her dress and wipes my cum off her. I want her more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. I move quickly, tossing her onto the bed. I kick my shorts off. She laughs.

"What about my husband?" she playfully asks.

"Fuck your imaginary husband. I'm the husband in your dreams and real life. I'll break his fucking face and hands if he touches you, imaginary or not." I turn her onto her stomach and pull her ass to the edge of the bed, filling her all the way. A different sensation of warmth flows through me. "Are you ready for me?"

"Yes!"

"Good girl." I begin moving fast inside her. She screams out loud. I stop and rub her ass, smacking it.

"Who's your husband?"

"You are." Smack.

"What's my name?"

"Luke Blythe." Smack.

"Good, that fucking imaginary guy better remember who you belong to." I increase my pace, smacking her ass gently between thrusts. She moans louder, fisting the sheets.

"I'm ... coming... Luke..."

"Good, come for me and only me."

She comes, screaming out loud. Her walls tighten around me, sucking me into bliss. I cum in her, releasing all of me. I collapse on her, then roll off once I realize my weight.

"You can be my dancer anytime you want, just no fucking imaginary husband, because I can touch my wife whenever I want." She laughs and rolls onto her back. I turn to face her.

"That's the point of the game. You were a good participant," she teases.

I pull her to me, her head resting on my chest. "We make our own rules, Dele. I like touching my wife."

"Maybe you can touch yourself next time." She laughs.

"Okay, but no damn imaginary husband, too."

"Imaginary husbands are fun. He's handsome and debonair, sitting mysteriously behind the imaginary glass, with a glass of whiskey, watching to make sure you don't touch me." She pokes my chest and smiles.

"I will never share you, not even with an imaginary husband. He's out."

"Uh, you are no fun." She pokes me again and gets off the bed.

"Where are you going?" I call out.

"Shower, with my imaginary husband before you kick him out," she answers, sticking her tongue out at me.

"Oh no, you won't." I race after her.

We spend the next hour in the bathroom, with me sinking inside her again, making her scream out my name, reminding her who her husband is. By the time we're out, and she creams her body, I've worn her out. We're not going out today. I order our dinner, and we sit on the balcony facing the beach to have our meal. I listen to her tell me all about her friend and the crazy dares Osei makes her do, or things to get himself out of a hot spot. She laughs as she recounts one instance where one of Osei's girl threw a drink in her face.

"It wasn't funny when she tossed the glass of red wine at me," she says, rolling her eyes.

"What did you do?"

"I was shocked at first, then made Osei pay for my pain and suffering," I chuckle.

"How did he pay?"

"He took me shopping. I made him watch two rom-com movies with me. As you know, Osei would rather walk on hot coals than sit through a rom-com at the theatre, and he had to bring me lunch for two weeks."

"Looks like you got the best of it."

"I did, because who else is going to carry the banner of his favorite girl and deal with all his women drama?" She rolls her eyes. "Osei has drama." I laugh at the way she stresses the word.

"How did you guys meet?" I ask. She arches a brow.

"You really want to know?"

"Yes, at least I get to know where the cord-tangling begins." She laughs.

"We met in the ER. I had just started working at the hospital. It was the night shift, and he brought one of his girlfriends in. She had food poisoning and couldn't keep anything down. I was her nurse. When she finally slept and the ER quieted down a bit, Osei and I started talking. When my shift ended, her friends came to get her. Osei offered me breakfast, but I had to head to class. He asked if I would meet him at a restaurant, which is now our favorite, for lunch. I got a good vibe from him, so I decided to meet him. We started hanging out more after that. Some of his friends got handsy with me, which wasn't pretty, a few thought I was the next girl of the month and felt I needed to date them. That's when Osei started calling me 'his favorite girl,' just to keep the handsy guys and the daters at bay."

"Good idea that he started doing that. Do they still get handsy?"

"No, but Derek still asks me out. He's the only one who knows Osei and I are just friends. Others think I'm just happy to be in a polygamous relationship with him." I laugh. Time to set them all straight.

"He tells me you are his twin." She smiles.

"I like that better." She winks. "Yes, we both like to believe we were twins in some other life, especially since we share a birthday, born on the same day and the same year in two different countries. Based on the time calculation, I'm the older twin and he doesn't like me reminding him of that." She chews on her food. I take her hand and kiss it. We finish our food, and I push the tray aside. I take my seat back on the balcony and pull her onto my lap. She leans into me, resting her head on my chest. We remain quiet and enjoy the breeze.

"So, where did Nami'k come from?" She laughs.

"You know, it's my middle name backwards, with the first letter of my last name. Anyway, Jax introduced me to this gentle lady's club. All women, and the stripper guys sit while the ladies do whatever they want—most times seductive dances—and I watch." Interesting. "That's where I kissed the guy. He'd been watching me and came up to me that one time and asked for a kiss."

"And you kissed him."

"Yes," she answers, her voice fading as she nods off. She's not going clubbing with Jax again. Before I know it, she's asleep. I carry her to bed.

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DELE



I wake up the next morning wrapped in Luke's arms. I like waking up this way; I feel protected and safe. I get up, pick up the scattered clothes from the floor, put mine on, and then open the balcony door to enjoy the breeze. This is what you'd call a beautiful day in paradise, and if I had my way, I would stay here forever. *Too bad you don't have your way*.

I feel arms wrap around my waist. He nuzzles my neck, and my hand reaches up to touch his face.

"Good morning," I say.

"I would have liked to hear that in bed. I don't like waking up to find you gone."

"I was five steps away, and you looked peaceful. I didn't want to disturb your sleep."

"Next time, kiss me before you leave the bed."

"That will wake you up, Luke."

"Exactly my point, and I get to see you when I open my eyes, not an empty bed."

"Okay."

"What do you want to do today?"

"A walk on the beach sounds appealing, unless you have something planned."

"A walk on the beach it is." He kisses my lips before heading back inside.

We change, order breakfast, and head out for our walk. As we walk, Luke starts to ask questions about New York, and I answer every single one. If I thought Osei should have gone into law enforcement, Luke should have had a master's degree in interrogation. He does it gently, but he asks a lot of detailed questions. I know he's going to take care of my problems—he doesn't have to say it out loud.

I need ice cream to replenish the sour taste from our discussion.

After my ice cream, we enjoyed the town: lunch, fun and laughter, more shopping. By evening, when we returned to our room, we packed our bags. Luke informs me we're flying back to Chicago on a private plane.

"I've never been on a private plane before." It sounds exciting, but I'm scared—it's a smaller plane.

"It's just us, and you'll be fine."

"Will I be, okay? You know takeoff and landing affect me. I need to buy more Dramamine. I can't find the pack I bought at the airport."

"We'll pick one up on the way, and I'll be right next to you."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise to always be by your side and have your back." I smile and kiss him, though a pang of hurt hits as the reminder of his promise stings—it's temporary, while we are here, or at most until our contract ends.

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DELE



Five nights and six days, and now we must return to reality. Do I want to go back? *Nope!* Could I stay here with Luke forever? *Yes!* But as much as I desire to stay, I also know our return to Chicago isn't optional. Chicago is our home. The bellhop takes our bags down. I lace my hands with Luke's, clinging to the bliss of Honolulu and everything about us. Just a little bit longer before reality comes. I can almost feel reality pulling us apart, but only for a few hours, I'll enjoy our bliss.

I lean into him during our drive; we are content with us, just like this.

My grip on his hand tightens as we board the flight. He holds my hand firmly, reassuring me that he's got me. Inside the plane, everything is fancy and luxurious. The moment we sit, he must realize something, so he leaves his phone on the seat next to mine and heads to speak with the pilot.

The phone rings, and the display shows Lily M. with her picture. I don't need to wonder who it is—I know she's his ex-girlfriend. Honestly, the fact that she keeps calling him bothers me.

Osei told me how Luke was getting serious with her, and he thought they'd get married at some point. A knot forms in my stomach knowing she's still calling him—they have history and so much in common. Besides my heart, the insane attraction, and the mind-blowing sex, we have nothing else. With her, they make a powerhouse couple. Plus, she fits better in his socialite world.

I'm only here because I won't break the contract. Shit! The contract—how could I have let myself forget the pivotal reason he married me? It's because I won't break the contract. He sure knows how to make a girl fall for him, but I need to get my head straight. Hawaii was just that—a short pause before reality, which is coming back in full force now. I honestly can't count how many times she's called in the last five days.

When he thought I was asleep and answered her call, he promised to call her when he returned. I'd laid quiet, pretending I didn't hear him, or that my heart didn't wail at the thought of him promising to see her once he returned.

Guess she can't wait. She's calling him now. Before I can make excuses for her calling, the phone rings again—it's her again. *Dang*, *girl!* I better start downloading reality before we take off.

No point in waiting until we arrive in Chicago. I reach into my purse to get my Dramamine and realize we forgot to buy it. Guess I'm just going to suffer through takeoff without clinging to him.

He returns, takes the phone, turns it off, and pockets it. Then, goes back to speak with the pilot before the seatbelt light comes on.

I ignore his offered hand—no more clinging from me. As soon as the plane starts to taxi, the noise begins to bother me. I grip the seat tight; my chest constricts. I can't breathe, I feel sweaty.

Luke pulls me into him, holding my hand. I squeeze his hand tight. "Breathe," he says. "Breathe, Dele." I lean into his comfort, into the strong arms wrapped around me like a guardrail, preventing me from falling.

My tightening chest begins to ease. The flight takes off, and the plane turns. Once it's at a cruising altitude, I pull away from him and wrap my arms around myself. I know it surprised him, but it's for the best.

He doesn't need to pretend we are anything more. We are heading back to reality.

I pretend to sleep, waking up to eat the food served, then return to feign sleep. He didn't let me sleep last night—we made love several times. I'm sore. No, he fucked me to multiple orgasms, had my vajayjay dripping, and I was begging for more. Lest I call a spade a spade.

His driver, Martin, is waiting for us when we land. I greet him and sit at the other end of the car. I can feel Luke's eyes on me, but I keep my focus on the buildings and moving cars. The silence in the car thickens. The moment we step into our home, I head straight to my room. No point in pretending anything has changed. My ignorance was bliss for five nights. After all, what happens in Hawaii stays in Hawaii.

I go to shower; I've missed this multiple-showerhead system. I change into my pjs and call Osei.

"Hey, are you back?"

"Yes, got back a short while ago."

"Hope you enjoyed Hawaii," he teases.

"I did. It was beautiful, but back to school tomorrow and work."

"That fast?"

"Yep, you know the drill. The sooner I get back into the swing of things, the better." I manage to keep my voice controlled so Osei doesn't ask questions.

"Cool, so I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Sure, but I'll call you to let you know what time. I'm going to pay my tuition and run a few errands. We can meet up before I head to work—I have an evening shift."

"Sounds good. Keep me posted."

"I will, and I can't wait to hear all you've been up to."

"More like what you, *Dele*, have been up to with my big brother."

"Yeah, right. Bye, Osei."

"See you tomorrow."

I pull my legs close to my chest. I miss Luke, even as I know he's just a few feet away. But the sooner I start detaching from him, the better. I repack my backpack with my essentials, change out the clothes in the bag. I step out to grab a few snacks, knowing Paula always keeps the pantry stocked.

Luke stops me on my way back to my room. "Why are you shutting me out?" Is he fucking kidding me right now? I'm protecting myself from you, and if it means I must shut you out to achieve that goal, then so be it. That's what I want to say. Instead, I respond,

"I'm not shutting you out. I'm just tired. I have work tomorrow. Plus, you said we should stick to the contract in Chicago. I'm just making sure not to break it. Good night." I get past him and lock the door. I then remember he can get in. It's pointless locking the door. Besides, he won't hurt me, that much I know for certain. I unlock the door and tuck myself into bed, starting to count sheep. I toss and turn, and nope, sleep eludes me. My body

has an intense craving for him, and I refuse to succumb. I count sheep until I eventually fall asleep.

I'm up the moment my alarm goes off. Not that I had a sound sleep to begin with. He invaded my dreams, every kiss and touch still ingrained in my body. He did a good job of getting my walls down. Now, I'm like an addict withdrawing from desiring him.

I shower again and leave before he's up. I greet Martin when I see him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Blythe. Where to?"

"Good morning, Martin, please call me Dele. I'm heading to school."

"Okay, have a good day."

"You too." I unlock my Lexus, trying not to cry at how thoughtful it was of him to get me this car, but my subconscious reminds me it was just to fit into the charade of our marriage and nothing more. Think nothing of it, all part of our marriage agreement. I just need to remember why I was chosen.

I drive to school and head straight to the student accounts office to make payment for the semester. I still have a few more days, but I'm first in line, and the lady pulls up my account. To my shock, she says, "I show you are paid in full for the semester." I stared at her, perplexed.

"Please, check again. I know I haven't made payment." She turns the computer screen towards me, and right there before me, it shows paid. I look at the date the payment was made. It was the day I told him I needed to work a few more hours so I could cover half of the semester's payment.

"This is you, right?" the lady inquires.

"Yes," my voice chokes. "Thank you. Have a nice day." She nods and smiles.

"You, too." I nod back and leave. When I step outside, my emotions are all over the place.

He paid my tuition in full. I'm not sure how I feel about it. He bought me a new car, paid my tuition, and listened to my horrific story without judging. Why would he do all this? Why!? This isn't fair.

Fuck him! He doesn't get to be the Mr. Nice Guy to me, so I don't react to the fact that he's probably fucking Lily right now or plans to later today. Fuck him! I wail inwardly. The thought of him with her makes me angry. I sit in my car for a few minutes to control my emotions because he doesn't get to have this much power over me. I drive to the store to get more supplies of my body lotion and a few other items I'm running out of. It's almost noon by the time I'm done. I call Osei.

"Hey, where do you want to meet up?"

"Our usual place, is that okay with you?" he asked

"Of course, is 12:30 okay with you?" I replied.

"Yep, that sounds perfect."

I hang up with Osei and call the hospital to ask if there's an open shift. No open shift, but they could use help for four hours. I jump at the extra time. Anything to keep me from thinking about him or having a restless night.

I shop for new gym shoes before driving out to meet Osei, who is already seated when I arrive. He gets up and gives me a big bear hug.

"I missed you, and you do look well rested."

"Thanks."

"I already put in our order."

"Good, because I'm hungry."

We talk about the last few days and how much I enjoyed Hawaii, leaving out the details of sleeping in Luke's arms every night. He tells me more about his new girl, which is a new one every two weeks, no surprise there. He shows me pictures of them, but I know Osei. She's going to have a flaw he can't stand in a few days.

"Luke paid my tuition," I blurt out.

"That's good." He stares at my face. "Right?" He says with a questioning look.

"I don't know why he would do that."

"Other than the fact it helps you work less and focus on school more. It will also look bad if you're working so hard while you're Mrs. Blythe. You do know, that wouldn't help you guys, right, if some idiots think it's his god-given right to poke his nose in your business?" He's right, I'm slowly dying at the rate at which I'm going in this rinse and repeat cycle of work and school. Maybe I can reduce the hours and focus on school more. The sooner I finish, the sooner I can leave and not have to worry about Luke and Lily.

"True, I didn't think of it that way."

"I'd say accept the helping hand. Besides, he can afford it and then some." He snickers.

"Thanks, Osei." I feel better after speaking with him. I'll thank Luke when I see him. But that tiny side of me that can't help itself has to ask:

"What's the story with Luke and Lily?" I ask in a calm tone, even as jealousy tears into me. He shrugs.

"Honestly, I don't know. I thought he was going to marry her when his dad started pushing him to get married. I was surprised he didn't and wanted to marry you. What I know is she's the only one who has lasted longer with him. Maybe his plan is to marry her once he gets his inheritance."

"Maybe." I smile to hide my sadness. "She called him a lot while we were in Hawaii."

"No surprise there. He can't let go of her." I nod my understanding as my heart dies within me. It was too good to be true. Osei wouldn't lie to me. Luke just wanted to fuck me, and that's what he did. No need to think it was anything more than that. I just need to plan around seeing him, so I don't make a fool of myself. "Hey, now that you might stop this vicious cycle of work and school, maybe I can introduce you to Trey. He won't stop asking about you." I smile. *Oh*, *Osei*, *you are a godsend*.

"Sure, it's time I get out there." I happily replied, maybe dating can help me stop thinking of Luke.

"For real?" He rubs his hands, excited, grinning like my yes is winning the lottery.

"Yes, for real. He and I can be on the down-low, so it doesn't ruin my best laid plans with Luke." I state.

"Good, don't tell Luke or his mind might work overtime on how everything could go wrong." Osei reminds, I nod my understanding. He doesn't need to worry about that. Luke and I aren't talking, and he doesn't care who I date.

"Good, because I signed us up for a rap battle this Friday." Now my eyes widen in surprise.

"Think about it. We can show our talent."

"We can try, but are you sure?" I ask, still flabbergasted. He nods. I see his 'why not' look, and I might as well join. After all, nothing is holding me back. "Okay, why not?!" I happily exclaimed.

"Perfect. We can meet at my place and practice our lyrics." He puts his hand out. I smile and shake his hand.

"Deal."

"Yeah! That's what I'm talking about." I laugh. We spend the next hours talking about everything. He tells me more about Trey and shows me a

picture. Cute. I see potential. My mind starts to chant *I can do this*.

Osei and I part ways after lunch, and I go home to change and get ready for work. Luckily, Luke isn't home, but a side of me is disappointed he's not. I shake it off and change, remove my ring, and place it in the drawer. I add extra clothes to my backpack, then head to work. Jax welcomes me back with open arms. Kai squeezes the life out of me with a bear hug.

"We missed you," they both say in unison.

"No, you didn't. You both didn't have anyone to cover your asses." I smirk.

"Exactly why we missed you," Kai says with a duh look, making me laugh.

I return to work with my two best buddies, and my phone shut off. It's the only way I can concentrate despite how much Luke tries to linger. When asked if I could stay extra hours, I jump at it without question. Once I signed up, I turned my phone on to see the text from Luke.

Luke: What time are you getting home?

Me: I picked up a shift. I won't be home tonight.

I breathe a sigh of relief after sending that message. I will clock out in the morning, hang with Jax and Kai for breakfast, load up on coffee, go to class, sleep a few hours, and head to Osei for practice. Then, I'll return to work. Let my cycle of work and school begin, hopefully, it purges Luke Blythe from my system.

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LUKE



On our drive to the airport for our flight home, Dele was relaxed next to me, her head on my shoulder and her hands wrapped around my arm. I placed my palm on her cheek, and she rubbed against it. At the airstrip, we boarded our return flight, smiling, hand in hand. I had arranged for a male flight attendant for us. I liked us this way—happy. I got up to speak with the pilot and heard my phone ring as I talked. I had set it down next to Dele, and it rang again, and again. I stopped speaking with the pilot and returned to get the phone. I saw that Lily was calling. I turned the phone off and put it in my pocket before returning to the pilot. I took my seat next to Dele, who was now looking out the window, subtly ignoring me. Her hand was wrapped around her. I stretched mine out to her for takeoff.

"No need," she said. "I took Dramamine; I'll be fine." Her tone was dismissive as she turned away from me.

"Are you okay?" I asked calmly.

"I'm fine. I just want to rest. I have work tomorrow."

"Okay," I responded. There was a shift in the energy between us. I could feel it. She wouldn't look at me, and I knew she hadn't taken any pills. We had forgotten to buy it. What happened to cause such a sudden shift between us, I didn't know. What I did know was that I didn't like it.

We buckled up for takeoff, and the plane's noise ramped up. Like a switch, she gripped the seat, her nails digging into the leather, her chest rising in fear, sweat forming on her forehead. I didn't care what was off between us at that moment. I took her hand, and she gripped it tight. I pulled her closer to me.

"Breathe," I whispered in her ear. "Breathe, Dele." Slowly, she started breathing in sync with me until we were airborne.

I held on to her, but once the plane had leveled out, she pulled away from me. I tried to pull her back into my arms, but she gently pushed me away. She barely ate during the flight, sleeping for most of it.

I woke her when it was time to land and held her hand close. Again, she pulled away once the plane landed. Our drive home was quiet. If I hadn't guessed before, it was now clear that something was off between us.

Once inside our home, Dele went straight to her bedroom and closed the door. I heard the shower running, and I wanted to demand that she tell me what was wrong. But I also knew pushing her wouldn't help.

When she came out later to get some food, I stopped her. She was driving me insane with the silent anger, and I had no idea what was wrong or how to deal with it.

"Why are you shutting me out?" I asked, trying to maintain the calmest tone I could, though silent dismissal is ticking me off.

"I'm not shutting you out. I was just tired. I have work tomorrow. Plus, you said we should stick to the agreement in Chicago. I'm just making sure not to break it. Good night." She moved out of the way and returned to her bedroom. I wanted to scream, but I held it in.

The fucking contract that I had used to get her now stood like a fucking wall of China between us, keeping me out. But I was going to tear that wall down, brick by fucking brick.

I went to my room to shower and get into bed. I couldn't sleep because she wasn't next to me. Five fucking nights was all it took to turn me into the guy *who* needed her softness and curves to mold into my body. I punched my pillow repeatedly, staring at the ceiling as my mind refused to cool. In frustration, I took another cold shower. It helped cool my body, but not my mind. My thoughts were consumed by her—the feel of her soft skin against mine, the smell of her perfume, the soft moans she made when I kissed her body. I missed tangling my legs with hers.

I returned to bed and gave my pillow another serious beating. I honestly believe I knocked out a few of its teeth, if it had any. I needed to find a way around this fucking mountain called the marriage agreement.

When I woke up, I stretched my hand to feel for Dele. Her side of the bed was empty. The memory of her sleeping in a different bed returned. I reached for my phone and noticed that it was already 9 am. Dragging myself out of bed, I went to her room and found the door open. I knew she was gone. I looked anyway and noticed her backpack was missing. *Damn it!*

I returned to my room and called Martin.

"Good morning, sir."

"Is my wife's car there?"

"No, she left around seven for school," he said.

"Thank you. I should be down soon." I hung up, letting out a loud *ugh!* Dele sure knew how to push my buttons. She didn't have class today—her classes started tomorrow, and her work wasn't until later in the evening. But of course, she was trying to avoid me as if I had suddenly become a plague. I was damned if I was going to let that happen easily.

My plan had been to spend the day with her, but there was no point in sitting around. I left for work, knowing she wouldn't return until the evening. I worked all day, called Dad to discuss work, and tried not to think about my wife. But every fucking second of the day, she was on my mind. Out of frustration, I sent her a text.

Me: What time are you getting home?

After waiting and getting no response, I went home late in the evening, expecting her to show up. Instead, I got a text from her.

Wifey: I picked up a shift. I won't be home tonight.

Fuck! I didn't reply. I knew she picked up the shift on purpose. Two could play this game, dear wife. Another night of cold showers for me.

I ate dinner, then went to take my cold shower. Another night of no sleep. It didn't help that I went to her room to smell her perfume. I was torturing myself, but it also brought me closer to her.

I punched my pillow again for the second night in a row. I must've knocked out a few more imaginary teeth this time. I finally fell asleep at some point. When I woke up the next morning, I went straight to her room, expecting her to have returned. But it was clear she hadn't.

I left for work, my anger and frustration brewing deep inside. Dele hadn't come home.

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<u>:</u>

LUKE



Three fucking days. I haven't laid eyes on her. I know she comes home and leaves traces of herself around the house, along with text messages about her whereabouts, but this passing-in-the-night craziness ends today. Enough of this fucking stalemate. She wins, and I'm breaking the silence. Today, we are spending it together.

I look through her class schedule—at least she shared that with me. I get into the car with Martin.

"We're going to Dele's school." He nods and pulls out. Checking the GPS tracker I had installed in her car, I locate it. He parks near it, a few spaces away. I get out and lean against her car. Checking my watch, she should be out soon—an hour-long break between her next class.

She steps out, and I watch her talk to a friend. Then, another guy—he leaves after hugging her. She takes off the oversized shirt she's wearing, revealing a crop top that shows off her stomach. The ripped jeans hug her body in all the right places. Her high-top shoes add some inches to her height, which attracts attention—though she's oblivious to it because she's distracted by her phone. I feel a stir. *Down*, *boy*—*we're in public. Yes*, *we've missed her*, *but we don't need the nasty side-eye from people*.

As she gets closer to her car, she finally lifts her head and notices me leaning on her car. I catch the mixed emotions crossing her face—a glint of

joy, changing to surprise, and finally settling into a neutral expression. She looks around and sees Martin. I think that confirms her mind isn't playing tricks on her.

I lean off the car as she approaches.

"Hi," she murmurs. I hear it all in her voice—the silent cry for each other, but she's quick to mask it.

"Did I forget to text?" I smile. She's good; her texts were her way of keeping me at bay, but they only frustrated me more.

"No, you did the texting perfectly—so perfect that at one point, I had to wonder if you were doing it to avoid me."

"Why are you here?" Her voice is firm.

"I'm spending the day with you." She gasps, and I know that's the least expected thing she thought I'd say. She makes a good effort to rile me up, but I don't take the bait. I'm upset when she tells me her parents don't know about me. Livid is a better word, but I hold it in. She's not getting a fight from me today. As she explains her reasons, I smile. All the reasons I would fight for—well, I'm going to use every one of them to my advantage.

Twenty minutes later, we sit across from each other. She's devouring her sandwich, while I'm barely touching mine. We're quiet—a silent battle for power is brewing between us. My wife has a spine, I'll give her that. My phone rings. It's Kevin. I take the call and step a few feet away from Dele.

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DELE



Three days into my cycle and still no sight of Luke. I've just been texting him my whereabouts, so he doesn't feel obligated to wait around for me to show up. I step out of class and head towards my car, but I freeze in place when I see Luke leaning against it. My eyes dart around and land on Martin idling at the corner.

"Hi," I murmur. His tired eyes and the faint five o'clock shadow on his face lend him a rugged charm. But what's he doing here? My gaze shifts again, scanning for any onlookers.

"Hi," he replies, stepping away from the car and moving closer to me.

"Did I forget to text you?" A sly smile tugs at the corner of his lips, but I still can't figure out why he's here.

"No, you were perfectly diligent with your texts—so perfect, in fact, that I started wondering if you were avoiding me," he says. He can't be serious.

"Why would I avoid you? I've just been busy. Besides, we live in the same house."

"Yet, we're like two ships passing in the night," he counters. I scoff lightly.

"That's not true. We're just both busy, that's all. I was about to grab lunch before heading to my next class."

"Well then, let's have lunch," he says casually.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Lunch is a sandwich from a vending machine, a quick call to my parents, and then rushing to my next class."

"A sandwich from a vending machine it is. Then we can both say hello to your parents before class. I'm tired of this passing-in-the-night dynamic."

Frustration bubbles within me. I really don't want him here—keeping him out of my mind has been hard enough.

"Can we not do this, please?" I plead. He steps closer, grabs my waist, and presses my back against the car. His body is flush with mine, one of his legs nestled between mine. His lips graze my neck, nuzzling me, and the familiar scent of him coupled with the soft kisses awakens every nerve in my body. My mind shuts down, leaving my body yearning for just a small taste of him.

"We are doing this. I'm spending the day with you. Since you've decided not to come home, I'll just have to come everywhere with you," he whispers, sending shivers coursing through me.

"Don't you have a company to run?" I mutter, trying to hold on to reason.

"Not when my wife has gone missing in action every night."

"Fine. If you want to spend the day eating vending-machine sandwiches and sitting through pharmacology lectures instead of being in some fancy boardroom, who am I to stop you?" I retort.

"Good, glad we're on the same page. Don't forget—you still need to call your parents," he adds dryly.

"I can call them after class," I answer, avoiding eye contact. There's no way I'm letting them know about this marriage just yet. But his gaze sharpens.

"They don't know about me, do they?" His voice hardens, tinged with steel. I want to lie, but his eyes dare me to, so I slowly shake my head. He steps back, hurt flashing in his expression.

"Why?" he asks softly, his voice laden with pain. I take a deep breath and decide to explain.

"My parents are conservative. If I tell them I got married, they'll first get upset, then worry, which my dad's health can't handle. Next, they'll demand to know why you didn't ask for my hand or have a traditional wedding with both our families involved. If we somehow get through that, they'll start asking for grandchildren. And if we explain that school is

delaying that, in three years, when you decide to file for a divorce, I'll be breaking their hearts because they'll never understand why." I exhale, then continue.

"The only reason they might accept for a divorce is if I claim you're abusive, and that wouldn't be fair to you. Believe me, they'd rain curses down on you for hurting their daughter. You don't want that." I stop, watching his face carefully.

"I want to talk to them," he says firmly, catching me off guard. My mouth drops open before I snap it shut and glare.

"Did you not hear a word I just said?" I sneer.

"I heard everything. That's why I'm saying, let's talk to them. But first, let's grab your lunch," he insists.

"No, I'm not calling them until you and I have set clear rules." I fix him with a stern look, refusing to budge. My parents are not to be trifled with.

"Fine. We'll discuss it later. What time is your next class?"

Relief washes over me, but I mask it with a firm expression. "In forty minutes," I reply. "You're not seriously planning to come to pharmacology class with me, are you?" I still can't fathom what's going through his mind.

"I am. I'm spending the day with my wife, who, by the way, isn't wearing her wedding ring."

"I told you, it's expensive. Taking it on and off between school and work increases the chances of losing it." I shift uncomfortably. "You're not wearing yours, either."

He flashes his hand, showing the ring, and I'm at a loss for words. I glance away and say, "Let's go. I don't want to be late." He's throwing me off-kilter with all this "husband" talk.

I pick up the pace, but he matches me easily, his strides steady.

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LUKE



After the call, I know I need to leave, but I don't want to—not after making such a big fuss about spending the day with her. I head back to sit with her. She's still eating her sandwich.

"Much as I don't want to leave, I have to," I say, and I catch a fleeting look of disappointment on her face. It gives me a faint hope that she misses me, too.

"It's okay. I doubt you'd have enjoyed pharmacology class anyway," she says with a shrug.

"Can you come home early so we can have dinner together?" I ask softly. "I don't like these missing-in-action stunts you keep pulling on me."

"I'll come home early, but I'm not pulling any stunts—just giving you space."

"I don't want space, Dele—" My phone pings again, interrupting me. I let out a sigh. "Come home early tonight, please," I plead. I can't believe I'm begging my wife to come home, but if that's what it takes, I'll do it.

"Okay," she answers simply. I get up, kiss her cheek, and leave. A proper kiss doesn't feel right at this moment. Martin looks surprised to see me back at the car so soon.

"We have to head back to the office," I tell him, and he nods.

On the drive, my phone rings. Bruce's name flashes on the screen.

"Hey."

"I looked into that Floppy guy. You're a year late. He's dead—shot last year."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"Yes, I'm very sure. They never found the killer, and I doubt the police looked too hard. The guy was notorious for taking what didn't belong to him and threatening a lot of people. Some of those threats he carried out. Word is, he messed with the daughter of a Marine. People think the father arranged to take him out, though it can't be proven. Honestly, I think the cops were glad someone did their job for them and just closed the case."

"Okay. Thank you."

"I'll send you pictures of the crime scene so you can confirm, but I'm certain it's him."

"Thanks, Bruce. I'm relieved as hell."

"Talk later."

We hang up, and I exhale deeply. Floppy is dead. I need to let Dele know —maybe she'll relax a bit and stop living in fear of him showing up.

At work, Kevin and I dive right in. Everything that can go wrong seems to. Calls, reports, and patchy resolutions consume the day. Despite our efforts to implement temporary fixes, it looks like I'll have to travel in a fortnight if none of the proposed solutions hold. The thought of leaving Dele so soon doesn't sit well with me, but it's unavoidable.

By the time I get home, it's late. I find Dele asleep on the living room sofa. I kiss her forehead gently, and her eyes flutter open.

"You're back?" Her voice is groggy.

"Yes, Ayo mi. Sorry I'm late."

"Did you eat?"

"Yes, I did."

"Okay, goodnight." She staggers toward her room.

Minutes later, I try to check on her, but her door is locked. Fuck!

÷

LUKE



When I wake, Dele is gone. My day unfolds much like yesterday: busy, shitty, and draining. Only this time, I leave a little earlier. I notice Dele is home when I arrive. I've just changed into my lounge pants when my phone rings, Osei's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey, I've been calling Dele, and she's not responding. I know she's getting ready. Can you tell her I'm on my way and she better be ready?" he states casually, like it's just normal for him to take my wife out. Maybe it is for him, but it sure as hell isn't for me.

"You do realize it's almost midnight? Dele isn't going anywhere with you." He laughs, like I'm joking. The sound grates on my nerves, and the fact that he seems to sense my irritation only makes him laugh harder.

"I mean it, Osei."

"Just let her know I'll be there in fifteen minutes." He hangs up without another word. Fuming, I head to her room and knock on her door. She opens it, dressed in an off-shoulder, short red dress with slits on the sides, accentuating her pinched waist and hips, her breasts pushed up. She's putting on a large loop earring.

"Hey, did you need something?" she asks, her tone casual, like the fact she's going out with my brother this late at night shouldn't be a big deal.

"Osei said he's on his way." Her eyes widen, and her mouth drops open in surprise.

"Oh no, I'm not done yet." With her earrings secured, she starts adjusting her hair. "Did he say how long?" she asks, moving back into the room to continue getting ready.

"Fifteen minutes," I reply, struggling to hide my disapproval of her outfit. It's too short, too revealing—too everything I don't approve of, leaving nothing to any red-blooded male's imagination.

"Where are you and Osei going to?" I ask as she continues fixing her hair without even glancing at me.

"Tonight's our rap battle night. We've been practicing, and we're hoping to beat the team that took us down last time." *She raps?*

"You rap with Osei?" I know my brother likes to think he's the best freestyle rapper, but I had no idea my wife rapped too.

"He's my partner. If we don't win tonight, he says we should quit unless we make the top five. Fingers crossed we do." Her hair is now pinned up, with a few curls left loose. I watch as she starts applying makeup.

What I want to do is tell her not to go out at all. Instead, I walk out, fuming more than when I knocked on her door.

I dial Osei, who answers immediately. "Where the fuck are you taking my wife?" I demand, keeping my tone controlled.

"She's your wife on paper only, and tonight is our rap battle night," he retorts.

"I'm coming with you guys," I blurt out.

"No, you can't." His refusal only adds to my frustration.

"Open the door," he snaps. He's already here—barely ten minutes have passed. He was probably parked outside when he called. I swing open the door, my anger fighting for containment.

"You can't come because you'll throw her off," he says the moment he sees me.

"That's ridiculous," I snap.

"She's not comfortable when you're around, so having you in the audience would throw her off. And we need to win tonight to make the top five—or we might as well quit trying to compete." *Maybe you should quit*, I reply inwardly.

"Again, that's ridiculous. If she can perform in front of strangers wearing next to nothing, then she can perform in front of me."

"Maybe next time, but tonight is huge for us, and I don't need you scowling at her. Save your intense looks for your staff, not Dele."

"I don't like this. Find another partner," I demand. His eyes widen in shock, like I've lost my mind.

"You can't be serious. Dele and I flow is why we're partners. Do you think I can just pluck a freestyle rapper off a tree and say, 'Come on, you're my new partner, let's go'?" he mocks.

"I don't care. I don't like you taking her out this late to a fucking club." He looks at me like I've said something absurd.

"Fine. You tell her she can't go and why," he challenges. Before I can come up with a response, Dele walks out, striding toward us in red strappy heels to match her dress. Her flawless makeup enhances her delicate features and, her full lips adorned with red lipstick that screams for attention.

The dress barely covers her ass, her toned legs shimmering with some dusted-on product. How the hell am I supposed to let her leave with my brother dressed like this? My body reacts despite my anger, knowing full well how many guys will be looking at her tonight.

Before I can say anything, Osei blurts out, "Damn, girl, that outfit alone is gonna make us the winners."

"Shush." She waves him off with a smile. "We're winning on our style, but thanks for the compliment." She spins around, showing off for my brother, who openly admires her while laughing. I had to look away from her well-formed ass in that dress.

Fuck it. I'm going with them. First, I need to control my reaction to how sexy and beautiful she looks. I move to the kitchen, hiding behind the cabinets.

Then I notice it, her hand raised to adjust her hair. My body freezes, icy fury flooding my veins and shutting down all other sensations.

"Where's your ring, Dele?" I ask, my tone harsh.

"On the bedside drawer," she replies casually, as though the fact that I've laid my claim to her is some kind of secret. I'm fucking shouting it at the top of my lungs.

"Go back and put the ring on, otherwise, you're not going to this rap battle," I sternly say to her. She turns to me, stunned. I match her look with my unwavering stare. She looks to Osei for help, and he shrugs. She turns and heads to her room to put it on. I can tell she's upset, but I don't give a

fuck. No way my wife is going out dressed like that without my ring on her. She's lucky Osei is the one taking her, though we're still having a mini war in our home. I'm going to lay down some fucking rules after tonight.

"Did you have to say it like that?" Osei's voice interrupts my thoughts; his chastising tone irks me.

"Fuck that, Osei. Text me the address of the place you're taking her to, and if you're not back by three, I'm sending Bruce's men to drag both your asses out of there." My voice is stern, and I lock eyes with him, so he knows I mean every word.

"Three is when they announce the winners, and I don't like this macho 'dear husband' move, especially when she's your wife on paper only." *What the fuck did he just say to me?* I ignored it the first time he said it. Not happening again.

"Say she's my wife on paper one more time. After I'm done knocking your teeth out, I'll call an ambulance and then call Mom myself." He turns to me, perplexed. Dele comes out before he can respond with the ring on her finger. She doesn't look my way; her eyes remain trained on Osei.

"Ready?" Osei says to her. She nods and heads to the door.

"Text me now, Osei. And Dele, that ring doesn't come off at any point tonight. It stays on throughout." She nods and averts her eyes. My phone pings with a text from Osei. I check and see it's the club's name and address. I nod to him. They leave without a backward glance. The moment they are out, I immediately call Bruce.

"You do realize it's late, right? And I could be tuning some sexy ass out," he says the moment he answers the phone.

"You're obviously working as always; I need two guys with me tonight. I might get in a fight." He laughs.

"That's the most outrageous thing you've ever said. Clear and concise explanation needed, leave nothing out." I hear his laughter through his words. Glad someone finds this situation funny.

"Osei just left for a rap battle club with my wife. I couldn't stop her from going with him. Turns out my wife freestyle raps, and the dress she's wearing is openly asking for trouble. Osei says I can't come with them, but I'm going."

"Wait ... Dele freestyle raps?" He's shocked, and that's rare for Bruce, especially in his line of business.

"Apparently, she does. Osei is her partner."

"Where do you and Declan find these women? Anne speaks four languages and salsa dances. Your wife is a nurse-slash-freestyle rapper. I thought you guys wanted trophy wives, and you both ended up with women who color me intrigued—who are complete opposites of trophy wives."

"So, can I get two guys with me? I know it's late," I interrupt, not in the mood for his analysis tonight.

"I'm coming with you. I want to see her myself. Text me the club address. I'll meet you there."

"Fine," I state, hanging up, and text him the address.

I go in to get dressed and head out. A part of me admits that I want to see Dele in action, but I'd prefer she went to this event in oversized sweats, not a dress barely covering her ass and showing her curves and shimmering legs.

I'm wearing all-black cargo pants and a black long-sleeved T-shirt. I head out to the club. After valet parking my car, I find Bruce already waiting at the entrance. How he moved so fast, I don't know. He's with two guys, his usual bodyguards. Good, I have three with me.

Bruce ushers us in. I don't need to ask if his guys are carrying guns; I know they are, and they're well-trained and licensed to carry.

We get in just as they announce the battle is about to begin. The club erupts in a loud roar. The announcer goes on to say that the group already battled in the back, and the top five are going to battle, but only three will move to the next round. The MC calls the first team, two black guys called 'Smoother Lyric.' The crowd claps.

"The next team, you know them for their ying and yang, please give it up for 'Zen Zin.'" The crowd claps again for the team of three—an Asian guy, a black girl, and a black guy.

"The third group are our favorite ladies, 'Swag Lady.'" The three white girls get on stage with a louder clap.

"The fourth team, you guys love them, and once again, they are not dating—please welcome 'Ay-sei.'" The crowd erupts in applause. I realize they've synched their names. The name syncing barely sinks in before I start hearing the whistles and catcalls from guys in the room. One even shouts, "Can I take her home?" Everyone laughs, which irritates me. Bruce turns to me, trying to calm me down. It doesn't help that Dele's hand is behind her, hiding her ring.

"And last but not least, our returning champs. Give it up for The Blazers." The duo—one black guy and one Eminem lookalike white boy—gets on stage.

"A'ight, guys, you know the drill. Three stages, and we move to the next stage based on how well the lyric flows. And as a reminder, no insults, just good flows. Let the battle begin!" The MC shouts.

The battle begins with the returning champs, and the teams go at each other. My wife is amazing, with her moves and lyrics that Osei matches or finishes for her. They make it through the first round. The Smoother Lyric team is out.

Bruce turns to me. "She's good." I nod in agreement. My chest beams with pride at how good she is.

The next round begins. The Swag Lady team brings on their A game, as does the champ. Osei and Dele respond with a rap that sounds like a love lyric; they are moving in harmony, her back to his front. They are rhyming together, each one matching the other. When they finish, the crowd is clapping and hailing them. A guy shouts, "Bro, you sure you ain't tapping that ass?" It sounds like the guy that asked to take her home.

"They are friends, and obviously very good, since they have you convinced," the MC chastises the guy. "Give it up again for the Ay-sei." The crowd erupts in cheers and claps.

"Zen Zin, can you top the Ay-sei performance?" the MC asks. The group jumps on stage with dance moves, shouting to get the crowd rising. The lead gets ready to start rapping. Before he can begin, the obnoxious guy shouts again, "Can I take Ay home without the Sei?"

"Dude!" the MC sounds upset. "She's way out of your league, in case you didn't notice. Someone already put a ring on it." Everyone laughs at the guy.

"Damn! Anyway, her husband ain't here, so..." he shouts in a sly tone.

"I'm right here," I shout out loud, causing Dele and Osei to look in my direction. I step into the light with Bruce and his men. I see the moment my wife retreats into her shell. I don't like it. The goal was to stay hidden tonight, but I couldn't let the guy keep trash talking to my wife.

"Got something you want to say to me?" I say to the guy, who I can now see is a wannabe rapper mini-dude with no voice and no swag—just a small guy with a big mouth. He shakes his head.

The crowd erupts in a mix of laughs and cheers when I show up with Bruce and his men.

"Sit your boney ass down!" a lady shouts at the rude guy.

"Yeah!" the crowd shouts in agreement. I see some bouncers moving closer to the guy. He raises his hand in surrender. I bet they are telling him he'll be kicked out soon.

"Let the battle continue!" the MC shouts, and the crowd claps. The Zen-Zin perform. It's clear they've been thrown off their game, but they still give a good performance. I knew that dress was trouble. I bet there are a few silent ones who want to take my wife home as well, hidden in the crowd.

The Swag Ladies are out in this round. The next round begins. Dele locks eyes with me for a moment and says something to Osei, who shakes his head. The round begins with the champs, then Zen-Zin, but my wife fumbles through her words, and Ay-Sei loses the round. Osei turns a glare at me, and I respond with a shrug. They get off the stage and come towards me.

My brother is no doubt upset that I showed up and ruined their chances of making it to the next final round. Even the crowd isn't happy they lost.

Bruce gives Osei a proud big-bro hug. I pull Dele into my arms before she can think about why I'm here. She relaxes in my arms. I hold her close and whisper, "You were amazing." She chuckles. The moment we pull away from the hug, she shakes Bruce's hand as he fangirls over how good she was. She's all smiles until some guy out of nowhere grabs her, pulls her into a tight hug, his hands on her ass. Bruce and I react fast, pulling her from him. I fucking knew her dress would make me throw punches tonight.

With haste, she takes her place behind me, safe and secure with the bodyguards guarding her. Bruce has the crazy guy's hand in a hold behind him; the guy can't move. I turn to the asshole who touched her.

"The ring on her hand is not for show. It means she belongs to me. Touch her again and I'll break your fucking fingers," I growl at the guy who dared to put his hand on my wife. I was right to think a few silent admirers were here. I just didn't think they would dare to show up and act like an idiot. He's lucky we are in a crowded place.

"I'm sorry. Can I apologize to her?" he asks, his eyes ogling her. Motherfucker is testing me!

"Hell no!" I yell at him. "I should press charges for assault." That gets his attention.

"I'm sorry," he mutters.

"We got him," the club bouncers say. Osei had gone to get them. They take the guy away. Bruce nods to his bodyguard, and one of them follows the bouncers. I turn a questioning look to Osei. He nods to me, acknowledging what we both know would have been a disaster if I wasn't here. She's not returning here. I put my hand out to her.

She races into my arms. I hold her tight as we head out of the club, not bothering to find out who won the battle.

Dele is quiet on the drive home. The fucking asshole triggered her. She's not sleeping alone tonight. I'm bulldozing every brick wall between us tonight.

•

DELE



I'm quiet on the drive, still a little shaken by the crazy guy grabbing me and pulling me into a strong hold. He squeezed my ass like he owned it, and I froze instead of fighting. I froze in the arms of my attacker. Why didn't I fight him? He could have dragged me out of there without a fight from me, which would have been disastrous. I'm losing my grip on fighting. I'm glad Luke was there. Though he threw me off my game, a part of me knew he was going to be there tonight. I knew our dance around the imaginary wall was driving both of us crazy, but neither of us was ready to wave the flag.

Well, I'm waving the flag right now because I'm bound to have nightmares if he doesn't hold me tonight. Jax bought me this dress last Christmas—it was her message to me that I should enjoy life, appreciate myself, and not give a fuck. I'm not sure I can live in a world where I don't give a fuck.

Earlier tonight, when Osei and I stepped into the club, someone smacked my ass. I didn't know who it was, but I knew it was intentional, not an accident. I started to feel uncomfortable, and Osei said not to let them dim my light, that I looked great. I was happy to have the ring on, hoping a few would get the message that I'm unavailable, even if it's on paper only. I started to relax and enjoy myself as we battled with the other rappers.

"You are not sleeping alone tonight." Luke's stern tone interrupts my thoughts. I turn to him and nod.

I don't want to sleep alone. The week in Hawaii, sleeping in his arms, was the best, but I didn't want to start believing we were possible. We have a contract, and the main reason I was picked was because I won't change the contract. So, the sooner I detach from Hawaii, the better. What happened in Hawaii stayed in Hawaii.

He pulls into the garage. We both get out, and he takes my hands. I embrace the comfort of his hands keeping me steady. We ride in silence to our unit. As soon as we close the door,

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"No," I murmur. "I'm just going to shower and get in bed," I say, an octave above a whisper.

"Good, I'll be there soon." I nod and head to my room. I can't decide if I should keep the dress or toss it. For now, I undress and get into the shower, letting the water soothe my body, calm and relax me. Once done, I put on an old T-shirt of Luke's that I'd found in the dryer since I'd somehow lost Osei's shirt in Hawaii. Luke probably won't miss this shirt, but I like the soft cotton, and it makes me feel close to him.

He walks in, wearing lounge pants as I cream my legs. I lather it up. His hair looks damp, like he showered as well. He always takes my breath away every time I see him. The good thing is, he doesn't know how much I've fallen for him, and it's best I keep that to myself. We have a contract that I agreed to. I put the cream away, pull the sheets, and get into bed. He doesn't say a word, but his eyes are on me as he gets in bed with me, turns off the light, and pulls me to him without any resistance from me.

"Nice T-shirt, by the way." His warm breath caresses my ear, sending a slither of warmth down my body. I pull my legs close.

"The owner didn't want it anymore, so finders-keepers." He chuckles.

"Guess whenever I find certain underwear in this unit, I can keep it," he teases.

"Not cool," I say, a yawn escaping me.

"Go to sleep. I'll stand guard and watch over you," he states, and I'm comforted, knowing he's with me and watching over me.

"Thank you," I murmur and let sleep take over, trusting that I'm safe in his arms.

DELE



I wake to strong arms wrapped around me like a vine and a smell that I've missed. I sniff him for a second, just as the bathroom calls.

I try to move his hands away so I can get up. He tightens his grip. I know he's awake. "I need to go and pee," I whisper to him.

"Liar, you're trying to sneak out." He wraps his hands tighter around me.

"Maybe, but I do need to pee right away," I plead.

I try to wiggle my way out of his strong hold, but he's stronger. It should freak me out that his hold tightens around me, but I know deep within me that he won't hurt me. Though he's not releasing his tight grip.

"Tell me why you've been shutting me out and avoiding me."

"I really need to pee; I'm too grown to wet the bed while wide awake." I clipped.

"Tell me, and I will let you go," he commands. I see his playful eyes and roguish smile.

"Please, Luke." My wiggle continues, but I can't get out, putting my legs together to hold in my pressing need.

"Tell me, and I will let you go." He's so annoying.

"Fine! Lily!" His hands fall off in a snap. I jump right out of bed and dash to the bathroom. My shorts are down fast as I sit on the potty and let it all

out, groaning in relief. He comes in, staring at me. I slammed the door in his face.

"I'll be right here when you come out," he shouts.

"I still get my privacy," I shout back.

I finish, clean up, flush, but I don't want to open the door. I'm not ready to face Luke.

"We can do this all day," he says in a dry tone. Damn. A part of me actually thought he would go back to his room, and I would spend hours showering, taking care of my hair, and all the stuff I could do to keep me in here longer before I dress for my meeting with Osei. Guess I can't escape him. *Fine!* I sigh and fling the door open, going past him to wash my hands. I grab my toothbrush and start brushing. He opens the drawer, pulls out a spare toothbrush, and starts to brush with his eyes on me. I rinse my mouth and the toothbrush, then start to part my hair. It needs oil; my scalp is too dry.

"We can do this all day," he says, reminding me. *Captain obvious much?* It's going to be a long-ass day.

"Not sure what we're doing all day. I already answered your question, and I plan to care for my hair, shower, and meet up with Osei. He's introducing me to a friend of his." His furrowed brow is immediate. Damn it. I shouldn't have told him that—Osei said not to mention it to him.

He pulls me close to him, his chest rising, and his scowling eyes scanning my face for something, but I don't know what. His closeness is messing with my senses and body, and my temperature of desire is rising.

"What did you just say?" he growls at me.

"I said I already answered your question." I snap to control, my rising need.

"After that, the part with my brother." The wide 'O' of my mouth is immediate. I start to wiggle out of his hold, never mind that I'm wet and my nipples are hard this close to him. Never mind that I can feel his manhood pushing against my stomach, or the fact that our bodies are crying out to each other, almost melting into each other, despite the anger emanating from him and my resistance. Yep, never mind all that.

"Yes, OH, that part about my crazy brother," he sneers.

"Forget I said anything. I'm hungry." I try to pull out of his arm. He releases his hold but grabs my wrist and drags me with him to the bedroom.

"Sit," he commands in a stern tone. I flinch at the deep anger in his voice.

I sit and fold my arms on the chaise, watching as he paces the room.

"First, I want you to tell me why you said 'Lily." I turn my face away in a pout. He turns it back to face him.

"Tell me," he says, in a subtle snap, holding my face so it remains facing him.

"I know you guys are still together, which is fine. I'll be sure to stay out of your way and stick with the signed agreement." I pull my face away from his hold. He sits next to me. I shift, and he does the same, until I'm backed into a corner.

"New rules: we tell each other the truth. I won't lie to you, and you won't lie to me." I scoff, as if I was born yesterday to believe that. "I promise to always tell you the truth, and I expect the same from you." Sincerity bleeds from his voice. I want to scoff again, but I nod.

"I broke up with Lily after our balcony kiss. Yes, she calls me because we have business together. She works with her dad, and their company works with Blythe Enterprises. Does she use that excuse to call me? Yes. But I assure you, my business with her involves the respective companies and nothing more."

"Okay," I respond dismissively, attempting to get up, but he pulls my ass back down with a swift move.

"I need more than just 'okay." I shrug.

"Fine, I believe you. Can I go now?" I attempt again, and he pulls me back onto the chaise. I turn a frown on him.

"What did Osei tell you?" he asks. I begin looking at my feet. He lifts my face to make me look at him.

"What did he tell you about Lily and me?" I want to lie that he didn't tell me anything, but his eyes bore into my soul, pleading and commanding the truth simultaneously.

"He said you were going to marry her, and you probably will once our contract is over, but he doesn't know why you decided to make the arrangement with me now, and you always go back to her." His palm is on my cheek, and I involuntarily rub my cheek in his palm.

"If I had married Lily, it would have been a good business transaction. I didn't want to come home to a business transaction. Besides, I met you, and there was no way I was going to sign up for a good business transaction." I chuckle.

"We are a better business transaction," I snicker.

"No, Dele. We are a couple, not a transaction." My eyes widen. Before I can process his words, his lips are on mine. My mouth opens wide to take all of him. *God*, *I have missed him so much*. My vjayjay is happily soaking and expectant. Luke pulls away fast, and I'm left staring at him, dumbfounded.

"I have told you the truth. I need the truth from you. What did you say Osei was going to do?" Damn, I was hoping he would forget I said anything.

"If you were hoping I would forget, sorry to disappoint you." *Great, he reads minds now, too.*

"I was kinda hoping you would forget I said anything." He smirks.

"You got jokes, Dele. Start talking before I call Osei." I stare meekly at him, hoping he'll back off. Instead, he returns a stern face to me. *Fine*, I summon the courage to speak.

"When I asked Osei about you and Lily, because she was calling you non-stop in Hawaii, he told me what I said earlier and suggested I start dating, too, and that he had the right guy for me. I was supposed to meet him last night at the club, but he couldn't make it." I fall silent as I watch his stern look shift to anger. I feel the flare of his nostrils and the intensity of his darkened hazel eyes.

"You wore that dress to meet the guy?" His voice booms. I shake my head.

"No, he canceled earlier in the day. The dress fell out while I was trying to decide what to wear. I just picked it up as a last resort." I watch him relax a bit. I didn't think he would be jealous about me dating someone, but I was a hundred percent wrong about that. He gets up and goes to the laundry basket in my closet. I follow him, clueless about why he's digging through my dirty laundry. Then I hear it — the rip. He rips the dress into shreds. My mouth falls open in shock as I stare at him.

"You are not wearing that dress ever again." I wasn't planning to, but I certainly didn't want him ripping the dress.

"Are you out of your mind? That dress was a gift from my friend, Jax." I shout, "Why would you rip it?" I facepalm and exhale my anger. "I can't believe you ripped my dress." I scorn at him.

"I can't believe you would think I would stand by and watch you wear that dress ever again. God knows how many men ogled you in that dress. A good thing I can't press charges for their salacious eyes. But I can keep you from exposing your body to them." *This is madness*.

"I'm not your property!" I shout at him. He can't be going nuclear over a dress and a guy I haven't met yet.

"That is correct. You are not my property, but you are my wife, my woman, and my partner, and I protect what is mine." He moves closer to me and takes over my mouth in a kiss that's a cross between pleasure and punishment. He pulls back once I start moaning, and my stomach growls. I can't conclude if my stomach's cries are for food or desire for him. One thing is certain: I'm starving for both.

"Go and have your breakfast. I need to have a word with my brother." He turns to leave, and I quickly grab his arm.

"Please, it wasn't Osei's fault. He was just trying to help me," I plead. His palms caress my cheek.

"Go and eat. I'm just having a word —" He shrugs. "—or two with my brother." I let go of his arm, but I feel the pressure of being the cause of their fight. I race to my phone as he walks out. Before I can dial Osei, he grabs the phone out of my hands.

"Fine, I won't call him. Give me my phone back." I move to take it back, but he blocks it.

"Go and eat, Dele." His command is unwavering. He leaves with my phone in his hand. My stomach growls right on cue. I leave my room and head to the kitchen. I'll get my phone back once I've eaten. Not sure I'm a fan of this new side of him that I can't decipher. One that blows hot and cold within seconds. I need a game plan to neutralize his steam.

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LUKE



I take her phone and head to my office. Closing the door, I lean against it, trying to control the mixed emotions my wife stirs in me. She may not know it, but she's very good at shifting my feelings from desire to anger in an instant. First, I need to take care of Osei and Lily, then I'll get back to dealing with my wife. I've missed her so much, and we're staying in today. She's not going anywhere. Not today.

Her phone pings with a text from Osei.

Osei: Be ready by 3pm.

When I say my brother is a pain in the ass, I'm understating it. He's a fucking pain in my entire being. I inhale deeply, exhale, then dial Osei.

"Hi," he says cheerily.

No need to respond to his greetings. He's already ruined part of my day, so I might as well return the favor. "Dele tells me you're planning on introducing her to some guy. On what insane planet did you think it was okay for you to set my wife up on a date with one of your friends?" I state in a controlled voice.

"Dele and her big mouth," he mutters, his voice low.

"Tell me, why do you think it's appropriate to introduce her to some guy?" My voice rises. Anger is no longer controlled.

"Listen, she was asking all about you and Lily. I just thought you would be cool with her dating since it sounded like you were back with Lily," he explains. I feel my temper flaring. "I didn't think you'd mind. Trey's a cool guy, and he's always asking about Dele—"

"Let me stop you right there. I broke up with Lily months ago. We aren't back together. We work together, so stop telling Dele things you don't know anything about," I yell at him.

"Fine, I'm sorry." If I didn't know him better, I'd think he was sincere, but his apology is just to appease me. He's not sorry.

"And don't you ever play matchmaker for my wife with other men. That's a line even Mom can't help you cross."

"Like I said, I didn't think you'd mind since you guys have an agreement."

"I fucking mind! And unless you want me to mess up your friends, you'll keep them away from my wife. Is that clear?" I shout.

"Crystal," he says and hangs up on me. I toss my phone on the table, trying to picture this friend of his, Trey.

Dele's phone rings, and the display shows Osei. I answer the call.

"Dele, what the fuck?! You told Luke about Trey, and now he's yelling at me."

"I have her phone, and she's not going out with you today," I state.

"She's not a child. Why do you have her phone?" He sounds upset, which makes me smile.

"I took it from her, so she won't call you. And now that you're yelling at her, I think it was a wise decision."

"Fuck you, Luke. Have Dele call me when she gets her phone back." He hangs up again.

If I was angry before, I'm laughing now because I've managed to upset my brother. I get up, smiling, and head to the kitchen. I hand Dele her phone. She takes it from me without speaking and continues to eat her food.

"You're not going out today," I say to her before heading to the fridge to get some food. I turn to see her looking angrily at me.

"And Osei wants you to call him back." She gets up, places her plate in the sink, and turns to say something to me. I face her, waiting for her to speak, while my eyes roam from her breast to her thigh and back up to her face. Whatever she had planned to say stops. She turns and walks away. I admire her ass, too. A small chuckle escapes me at the thought of my wife trying to be defiant.

She can talk to Osei, but she's not going out today, and he's not coming over either. Maybe I need to remind him of that as well. My stomach rumbles for food, and that deserves more attention than Osei right now. I finish eating the scrambled eggs and pancakes Dele had prepared for me.

Lily is next, my subconscious reminds me. I've avoided her calls all week, but it's time I set things straight with her. I can't afford another moment where Dele turns away from me. I take more bites of my food.

"If I'm not going out, you're not going out either," she says. She's back in the kitchen, trying to stare me down.

"That's fine with me," I reply, grinning as she grunts and storms off.

I smile, finish my food, and put the plate in the sink. I want to call Lily. Instead, I find myself heading to find my wife. Lily can wait. She's on the bed, glued to her phone. I get into bed with her. She refuses to look at me. I smile inwardly—only one of us is going to win this silent battle, and it's going to be me.

"Dele."

"Not talking to you," she retorts, still avoiding me.

I roll her on top of me and quickly toss her phone aside before she can fight me for it. She's underneath me now. I kiss her. At first, she resists, but soon she softens, letting me in. I take over her mouth and her tongue. It's all mine. She keeps her legs tight together, but my hands slip under her t-shirt to squeeze her breast. She moans. I pull away from the kiss and rip her shirt off, sliding down her body to undress her completely.

My hands yank her shorts off, and she sits up, raising an eyebrow at me. I raise mine back, my finger slipping inside her, stroking the way I know she likes. She gets wetter with every stroke. She smacks her lips in resistance, eyes closing as she fist the sheets in defiance. A soft, caged moan escapes her as her eyes flip open. I smile, and she smirks back at me. My lips take over her nipple as my fingers keep filling her. She fights, but we're in a battle of wills. I know it's taking everything in her to hold off while I enjoy every second of working her. She's drenched, even as she tries to close her legs.

"Fine, you win!" she blurts out. I laugh.

"If you dare stop, this unit can't contain both of us." She challenges.

"With a threat like that, I dare not stop," I tease, taking her mouth and kissing her neck.

"I can't promise to be gentle. I've been deprived for a week."

"Luke, it was just five days," she moans.

"My body counts seven, so it's seven," I say, pulling my pants down. She stares at me with a raised brow.

"Did you grow bigger in the last five days?"

I chuckle, massaging my girth as I prepare for her.

"That's where the extra two days come in. You shouldn't have starved me," I tease, spreading her legs as I fill her completely. Her warmth encases me, and I groan.

"I've missed you," I whisper.

"Oh God, Luke, she cries out. I wrap her legs around me before taking a nipple in my mouth and begin to move. Her cries fill the room. I increase my speed as she screams my name more. "Don't stop ... Please don't stop... I've missed you so much," she cries out, closing her eyes.

"L...u...k...e." Her voice crescendos as her walls tighten around me.

"Eyes on me, Dele," I say to her. She opens her eyes to look at me. "That's it, Ayo mi." Her mouth opens wide with a loud cry, and she lets it all out. I cum right after, letting it all pour in her. It's potent enough to impregnate her. I fall on top of her, then roll to the side and pull her close to me.

"I missed you, Dele. Don't shut me out again."

"I missed you too," she says, resting her head on my chest. "I didn't shut you out. I was busy."

"Liar, just please don't do it again. I can't handle you not speaking to me."

"Okay."

We spend more time in bed and laugh about funny ER stories she tells me. We order in and decide to watch a movie. Before the movie starts, I pull her to me.

"I have to tell you something important." She tries to sit up, but I pull her back and, she rests her head on my chest.

"What is it?" she shakily asks.

"Floppy is dead." A loud gasp escapes her. "I had Bruce investigate him based on the information you gave me. He didn't stop his ways, and someone took him out." I feel her tear on my chest. I pull her into my arms

and wipe her tears. "He's dead and can't hurt you anymore." She nods as I hold her close.

"You have no idea how relieved I feel, knowing that monster is dead." Her voice shakes.

"When you're up for it, I can show you the pictures."

"No, I don't want to see it. I believe you. Seeing his face would just remind me of what he did. Knowing he's dead, I can be free of the invisible hold he has on me." I pull her closer and kiss her forehead. "Can you please look into my uncle?" she asks.

"Yeah, I think I can manage that."

"Thank you, Luke."

"You're welcome."

I keep my arms wrapped around her. It doesn't take long for my hands to cup her breast. She turns to me with an arched brow. The movie starts to play, but our eyes are only on each other.

"Can't blame me. I was starved for seven days."

"Five days, Luke." She smiles, kissing me.

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DELE



Luke and I are in our own world for the next two days. He managed to convince me to reduce my work hours and focus more on school, which really isn't a difficult request. I called my parents, and Luke got to speak with them. They had lots of questions for me, and I had to reassure them that I am fine. Dad isn't happy to hear that I got married without them knowing. I explain the situation, and he's appeased for now. Though my dad still demands to know when Luke and I will have a traditional wedding. Luke is a little too keen, in my opinion, to say right away. I remind them that it's best after I graduate, and that Luke's dad is better. Another hurdle jumped.

Overall, it is a good call. My brother doesn't warm up to Luke. He feels that marrying Luke is derailing the planned move to London.

I reminded him that part of our plans required that I graduate with my degree, so the plan isn't derailed. At the rate he was expressing his annoyance, I switched to speaking in Yoruba so Luke wouldn't understand, but he could tell that my brother isn't accepting him.

The next few days go by fast. I'm home most of the time before Luke gets home, and we either go out or have a quiet evening at home.

One evening, he returns home with four boxes and sets them on the living room center table. I set my books aside and lean closer.

"What's in it?" I ask.

"You'll have to open them to find out."

I roll my eyes at him and open the first one—a simple two-tone necklace with white and yellow diamonds from Effy. I smile, leave it open, and open the next box. It's Van Cleef & Arpels Frivole rose gold set. My mouth drops open. I turn an incredulous look at him.

"Keep going," he says.

The third box is a bigger diamond set—earrings and a bracelet I already own, along with a matching necklace and ring. A complete diamond set. The fourth box is Cartier: a Trinity collection of ring, bracelet, earrings, and necklace. I sit back and turn to him.

"Thank you, they are all beautiful pieces," I say, looking at them again. "I love them!" I jump on him. He wraps me in his arms.

"Glad you like them. We have a black-tie event coming up on Friday for you to wear them to."

"Yes!" I shout in excitement. Then I remember that I need a dress.

"What event?" I ask, perplexed.

"I can assure you it's going to be boring, but I have to attend on behalf of the company, and I want you there with me."

"Okay, but you know I don't do well with boring, so you must promise not to leave me alone."

He raises his hand and says, "I solemnly promise to stay next to my wife all evening at the upcoming boring black-tie event." I poke him.

"Fine, I'll come with you and will beg Jax to help me get a dress tomorrow."

"Good, get whatever you want." I nod.

"Now, do you want to eat dinner first, or do you want Nami'k to say a proper thank you for the lovely gifts?" I bat my eyes at him. A roguish smile ensues.

"Forget dinner. What would Nami'k be wearing?" he teases.

"Since her imaginary husband no longer exists..." I roll my eyes at him. "No thanks to some people. I think she can be a bit naughty."

"Good, I'll take a naughty Nami'k." I blow him a kiss; he catches it, making me smile.

"Relax, and she'll be right back." I race to my room to change into the lingerie I bought earlier today.

"I'll bring a gift every night for my favorite dancer," I hear him holler, making me laugh.

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LUKE



I arrive at the event earlier than most because I have to speak with a particular person crucial to the project I'm working on. He likes to be sly, but catching him off guard will give me an upper hand.

After I talked with him, we split up. I bump right into Lily. She's all smiles.

"What a surprise," she says with a fake, hysterical laugh.

"We both know it's no surprise that you or I are here, so cut the bullshit," I grit.

"Fine," she says, grabbing a glass of champagne and rounding her lips on it like it's supposed to arouse me. Only, I'm averse to her moves.

Lily openly flashes her pushed-up boobs in my face. If I didn't know her, I'd say she just happens to dress like this, but I know her black dress—boobs pushed up so high they look about to fall out—is her attempt to seduce me. If only she knew nothing about her is attractive to me anymore.

"Oops," she says with a flirty smile as wayward drops of champagne fall into her cleavage. She uses her index finger to collect the drops and licks her fingers. I present a stoic face as she does her best to elicit an arousal from me.

When she realizes her act didn't move a bored audience, she moves into my space and rubs against me. I'm doing my darndest not to make a scene because we have some project to work on together.

"So, where is this supposed wife of yours?" she snickers. Thank goodness she gets that I'm not interested or realizes her act is quite terrible. Either way, I'll take the reprieve.

"She should be here soon." I'd sent Martin to pick her up, but it seems she's running late.

"I really would like to meet her. After all, she's the only woman to make you extinguish your bachelorhood." *Someone sure sounds bitter and jealous*.

"I'm right here." I hear her voice behind me. I turn to see my stunning wife flashing a demure smile. Her hair, a shoulder-length sleek bob, is parted in the middle. A simple yet elegant black halter dress accentuates her curves. I do not approve of the side slit, but we can discuss that later. For now, her red lipstick is doing wicked things to my mind—things only Nami'k can do. I return a wide smile to her.

"Ayo mi," I whisper, kissing her cheek and inhaling her floral scent that's already messing with my senses. I wrap my hands around her waist and feel her bare back, which makes my eyes widen as I turn to her with an arched brow.

"I thought you might like it," she whispers.

"I do like it; just not sure I want every man seeing my wife's body." The cleared throat behind us stops her possibly cheeky answer. I see her puckish side about to surface but tamed at the sound of the cleared throat. I turn to see Lily's look of disdain on Dele, even as she tries to hide it.

"Lily McIntyre, my wife, Dele Blythe," I say with a wide smile on my face. I notice the quick eye roll Lily throws my way and the fake smile she gifts to my wife, who returns the smile, putting her hand out to shake Lily's.

"Nice to meet you, Dilly, I'm Lily." She shakes Dele's hand like she's expecting Dele to kiss her hand.

"It's Dele, as in Day-lay," I correct without hesitation. Dele drops her hand.

"Right, Deli," she retorts with a feigned gesture, as if it was an error, but I know she's mispronouncing 'Dele' on purpose.

Before I can correct her again, Dele adds, "It's okay, I know my name isn't common like a Lily. Ayodele might be a bit too ethnic for you, so in the meantime, you can call me Mrs. Blythe. That should be easy for you, right, Miss McIntyre?" Dele says with a straight face, emphasizing 'Miss'

and 'Mrs.' Lily's scowl is immediate. She turns to me, and I present her with a wide smile and a nod, signaling, 'You asked for it.' Without a word, she turns and walks away from us. My gentle wife has put Lily McIntyre in her place with class, rendering her speechless. I squeeze Dele's hand, reassuring her that she did well. I feel her relax beside me.

I take a glass of white wine and hand it to her. She gulps it down, and I hand her another with a sheepish smile. Another waiter passes by us, and we each grab a bite. When she reaches for another item from a different tray, I stop her hand and pull her closer to me, whispering gently in her ear, "That has pork in it." She nods. I close my eyes, taking a moment to inhale her scent, then plant a kiss at the base of her neck, my hands moving steadily on her back. She lets out a soft moan. *It's going to be a good night*.

I want to say more, but I feel eyes on me. I look in the direction of the gaze and my eyes clash with Lily's fiery eyes, aimed at me and invisible daggers in Dele's back. I send her a wide smile. She scowls back and looks away.

"Well, hello there." I turn at the sound of Declan and his wife, Anne. Anne immediately pulls Dele into a hug.

The evening gets more pleasant as I watch Dele relax, talking and laughing with Anne. I should do this again with her, hang out with Declan and Anne. It's clear they get along.

On our drive home, I tell her about my upcoming trip that's coming up faster than I had planned.

"Ayo mi, I have to travel in a few days for work." I'm not happy about this trip. In the last few days, I've chipped away at Dele's brick wall, and that can only happen when I'm on the ground. If I leave for two weeks, some bricks might get rebuilt. I'll just have to find a way to stay on her mind for the next two weeks. I know she's all about work and school. She has agreed to stop taking extra hours, which was shocking but made me happy because she's not overworking herself. My being away shouldn't be a reason for her to pick up extra hours, but I know her. I'm going to have Bruce keep an eye on her, make sure she's safe.

"For how long?" she asks.

"About two weeks, hopefully, shorter if I can help it."

"It's going to be weird not having you around."

"Does that mean you're going to miss me?" I say, taking her hand. She blushes. "I think it does."

I smile, with a feeling like I'm walking on air.

As soon as we get home, I don't waste time taking her dress off and making love to her. When she curls up in my arms, I dislike the idea of leaving her for the next two weeks even more.

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DELE



Luke has only been gone for two days, and it feels like he's been gone for months. I miss him a lot. The house is too quiet. I just clocked out and don't feel like going to our quiet home or studying. The space feels like a perfect magazine cover—eerily quiet without Luke. I know Osei is out with his new female interest; he's been buzzing about her. I'll find out in a week how much he likes her.

Where do I go now?

"Go and visit your father-in-law." My eyebrows rise. "Think about it—he's probably alone without Luke as well."

"A bit bold, but why not?"

Starting my car, I head to my father-in-law's place. I'm a bit nervous, but he'll either receive me or kick me out. At least I will know what to expect going forward. My heart races against my ribcage as I drive to Mr. Blythe's place. I found a parking spot in front of the building across the street, since I don't have a code to get into the basement parking like Luke did the first time we came here. Grabbing my backpack, I head to the front door. The doorman remembers me and lets me in. My hands shake as I press the bell. When the door swings open, I see a new nurse, not Susanna.

"Hi, I'm here to see Mr. Blythe."

"And you are?" Her tone is polite, but her hesitant stance seems questioning.

"His daughter-in-law. My name is Dele Blythe." Her eyes widen but she quickly hides the shock of seeing a Black girl in scrubs as Mr. Blythe's daughter-in-law. She gives me a doubtful look.

"Wait here," she says, closing the door. I interlace my hands and shift my backpack, trying to find a good balance. I feel sweaty, with more sweat building up in my armpits. *This was a bad idea. I shouldn't have come.*

I start to count to ten. If she doesn't return, I'm leaving. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... The door swings open.

"Mrs. Blythe, please come in."

"Thank you," I respond, letting out a sigh. I follow the nurse inside.

"Sorry for making you wait. Mr. Blythe Senior doesn't get any visitors, and I didn't know the younger Mr. Blythe was married. Congratulations, by the way," she says, smiling.

"Thank you," I reply.

She stops at the door and I gently knock before entering. He's in bed and looks tired.

"Good evening."

"Come, my dear. I'm so happy to see you." He puts his arms out, which surprises me. I go to hug him.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Fighting like hell," he jokes. I nod. "Sit, dear." I pull the only chair in the room and sit close to him.

"I hope it's okay that I came to see you. I just thought I should visit you, since Luke isn't home." He smiles.

"Thank you, dear. I like that you're here." We fall into silence, not much to say, but it feels somewhat palpable.

"Dele, where are your parents?" he asks.

"They're in Lagos, Nigeria. My dad was in a car accident and is in a wheelchair; he also had a mild stroke recently. My mom is with him." I'm not sure why I had to tell him that, but I do anyway. No need to expect to meet any in-laws anytime soon.

"Sorry to hear that, but I'm glad your mother is with him."

"Yes, he's got her by his side. I miss them," I quietly say. People don't understand the power of getting to hug or see their parents often. I only see mine on the phone. I guess I should be grateful they're still alive.

"I'm sure you do. What do you miss most?" he asks.

"I miss watching and discussing football with my dad."

"Nice, he likes football, that's great." I realize right away that he's probably thinking about football in the U.S., and I'm talking about soccer.

"I meant soccer. I do sometimes forget that football in America is different."

"I don't know much about soccer, though I've heard about it, but can't say I know anything about the rules of the game."

"I'm a huge soccer fan. Would you like to know about soccer?"

"Sure, I've got nowhere to go and nothing to do. Luke won't let me review any documents. He has threatened to stop visiting me if I try to dabble in the day-to-day of the company, so let's talk soccer." He smiles, and I smile back. I reach for the remote and turn on the TV.

"So, there's a lot to know in soccer, and call me biased, but it's the world's greatest sport." He laughs.

"Yes, you are biased," he says through laughter as I search through the channels to find the recent World Cup games.

"We're going to start with the basics—the rules of the game, the penalty cards, red and yellow, the offside rule, free kicks, and then we'll get into the team rivalries." He's all smiles.

"Okay." he says, ready with all ears. I turn the game on and begin explaining the rules to him. We talk and laugh at some of the highlights. By the time the first game begins, he's enjoying the sport. The nurse brings his dinner, he insists that I eat with him as we watch the game, screaming at the screen like fans at the stadium. We talk all evening until the nurse comes to give him his meds, and I check my watch, realizing how late it is.

"I better head home."

"Okay, dear. I won't watch the next game until you return." My heart smiles, we had fun together.

"My schedule is tight tomorrow. How about the day after?"

"That sounds good. But if you don't show, I can't promise I'll wait," he teases.

"I will, I promise." I give him a hug.

"Dele, is it okay if we don't tell Luke you were here?" It surprises me, but I nod.

"That's fine with me, Mr. Blythe."

"Call me Simon, not Mr. Blythe. It makes me sound old."

"My dad will whoop my behind if I call my father-in-law by his first name. How about I call you Baba? It means father." He nods with a big smile.

"Baba it is." I nod in agreement with him, squeezing his hand.

"Good night, Baba. See you soon."

"Good night, Dele." I leave, feeling good. I'm happy I visited him.

I drive home, smiling at some of the things we laughed about together. As soon as I get into our home, it's too quiet without Luke. I already ate at Baba's place. I smile just thinking about his new name. I shower and change into my PJs. My phone rings as soon as I tuck myself in. It's Luke, and I think about telling him I visited his dad. I immediately decide not to—I agreed not to with Baba. I hope it's okay.

"Hello."

"Hi." His voice is deep and cool, and it caresses my body. I take a deep breath. "How are you and how was work?" I know he's asking me to make sure I didn't pick up extra hours.

"I'm good, in bed. Work was quiet, which is a good thing whenever the ER is quiet."

"Good, and school?"

"Still kicking my butt. Can't wait to be done."

"You're almost at the finish line."

"I know, and I can't wait. How's work in Singapore?"

"Crazy and kicking my butt." I laugh.

"Nothing you can't handle, right?"

He sighs. "Yeah, I've got it. Just wish it were a bit easier so I could head home," he says, and we both fall quiet.

"I miss you, Dele." My heart smiles. I can't believe he just said that.

"I miss you too. The unit lacks warmth without you here," I reply, putting a pillow between my legs.

"Just the unit lacks my warmth?" he teases.

"My bed lacks it too," I whisper.

"Good, I'll be back before you know it."

"Okay, good night, Luke."

"Good night, Dele. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Night." I hang up and turn to sleep with a warm feeling in my heart.

Waking up the next morning, I'm out the door to school quickly and spend the day studying and then working. I talk to Osei a few times. He's

floating in bliss with his new girl. I'm on the back burner. I speak with my mom; we try to stay positive as my dad shows some improvement. I call Amaka, who makes me laugh with all the madness of LA. She's enjoying it way too much. I'm burnt out by the time I clock out. Jax certainly has enough energy; she thinks we should go out for drinks. I can barely stand, let alone party. I tell her I'm heading home.

I leave my car parked in the perfect spot I found when I arrived today, knowing I won't find a spot when I come in at seven in the morning. No point in moving it. Kai agreed to give me a ride home; he'll be doing the afternoon shift, so he can take my parking spot when I leave tomorrow. It's something we try to do because finding a parking spot here is a bit of a treasure hunt. I'll take a cab home or ask Martin to drop me off—he comes in every day, and I'm sure Luke told him to be there for me.

Kai pulls up in front of the building.

"Wait, you live here?" he asks in surprise. He probably didn't put it together when I gave him the address, telling him I'd recently moved. I don't wear that very expensive ring at work. I just mentioned to Jax and Kai that I married someone for my papers and didn't go into details.

"Yes," I answer. "Thank you for the ride, much appreciated."

"Girl! You and I will talk about this, your bougie crib."

"Later, Kai," I respond, and to make matters worse, the doorman greets me.

"Good evening, Mrs. Blythe," which Kai hears.

"Mrs. Blythe? You and I are talking tomorrow," he shouts.

"Good night, Kai. And thanks for the ride. And nothing to talk about."

"We'll see about that," he yells back.

"Good evening, Mr. Lance," I say to the doorman as he opens the door for me, nodding my thanks to him. I go straight up, shower, and eat the food Paula had in the oven for me. I send up my thanks to her. I eat alone and head to bed.

Me: ER was draining today. I'm heading to bed. I'm tired.com.

Attach a tired GIF

Luke: Okay, good night.

I want to say I miss him. Instead, I set my alarm and head to bed. I sleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

Like clockwork, I'm in the garage at 6:45 am, only to realize I left my car at the hospital. Damn!

I turn to see Martin next to me. Where did he come from? I don't care right now.

"Can you please give me a ride to work?"

"Yes, Mrs. B."

"Thank you." I race into the front seat; he looks at me like I'm sitting in the wrong spot.

"Please, drive, Martin. I don't want to be late," is my response to his look.

"Okay." We drive in silence to the hospital. I checked my phone, and there are no missed calls from Luke. I'm a little disappointed, but I tuck it away and realize I don't have class today, so I will visit Baba and return for my car to join my study group in the evening. Kai will be coming in about that time. I know he'll call me once he gets here.

When we pull up at the ER, Martin asks, "Would you like a ride back after work, Mrs. B?"

"No, my car is over there. The perfect spot is why I didn't drive yesterday. You can have the rest of the day off. I'm good."

"I'll be on standby should you change your mind."

"Okay, Martin. Bye."

I race inside to clock in, ready to face a few more hours of work.

<u>:</u>

LUKE



I return four days sooner, hoping to find her at home, but she isn't here, and it irks me that I practically jumped on the next flight as soon as I could because I've missed my wife. Only to be greeted by an empty house. I'd called Dad as soon as I landed, as I always do, telling him I'll see him later because I wanted to see Dele first, but she's not here.

We talked a few times, though we didn't get much in with the time difference and priorities higher than me taking up her time. I called her phone, and it went straight to voicemail. I checked the time and her schedule, and her phone shouldn't be going to voicemail; it should be on. I tell myself maybe she's driving in a dead zone. After about fifteen minutes, I call again. It still goes straight to voicemail. I decided to call Bruce. I'd asked him to keep an eye on her for safety reasons, plus it's my way of making sure she's not working too many hours.

"Hello."

"Hey, I'm back. Do you know where Dele is?"

"Hold on a sec." I hear a click and some sounds.

"I don't know where she is. We only track her phone and car GPS, but the records show her phone is off, and her car is stationed at the hospital. Hold on." I mute my phone and let out a frustrated sigh. She certainly knows how to push my buttons.

"Luke, the report shows that a few times last week and this week, her phone is turned off at the same time and on the same days of the week." *Fuck!*

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Sorry, man. I have a new guy, and he sent this earlier today."

"Are you sure? You have no idea where she is or where she goes when her phone is turned off?"

"Pretty certain. I checked again."

"Okay, thanks."

I hang up and drop my phone on my desk. I fucking need a drink. I down it quickly. My mind is questioning if she would have an affair. Her words play in my head: *I won't have an affair. That would soil your name*. I pick up my phone, and her picture with Osei flashes.

I scroll through the pictures Bruce has been sending me per my request. Most of the time, she's at school and work. A few times, she's hanging out with Osei, laughing without caring about who's watching. Have I had moments of jealousy watching how she leans comfortably into Osei whenever they are out together? It boils my blood whenever I receive the ones with her in Osei's arms. That isn't as raging as the fact of the information that Bruce just shared: two to three hours on certain days of the week. They have no idea where she is, and Bruce can't track her. To my annoyance, it occurs to me that only one person is bold enough to have an affair with my wife. That is Osei Appiah, my fucking brother, and he's clueless. If he thinks I won't fiercely fight for her, he's in for a rude awakening. She's my wife, and that's final. I look at another picture of them together. He looks like he's gazing into her eyes or hanging the fucking moon for her. No way am I going to sit back and let him take her from me. I call Osei; he sends a customized message saying, "Can I call you later?"

I text him:

Me: I'm back. Stop by; I need to speak with you. It's urgent.

I call Bruce back. I dive right in as soon as he answers.

"Hey, can you tell me what day of the week and what time her phone is usually off?"

I listen as he reads off the days and times. A few coincide with Osei's off schedule, which only aggravates me more. "Thanks," I say, hanging up and taking another drink.

I try Dele's phone again, and again, it goes straight to voicemail.

Osei texts shortly after, letting me know he'll be here. I tell Paula to direct him to my office once he arrives, and she can leave for the day. I don't need a witness for when I beat up my brother.

Osei comes in and drops onto the sofa in my office. "Welcome back. Hope your trip made you more millions," he mocks. He's clearly not reading the room or the scowl on my face.

"Are you fucking my wife?" I ask him straight, in a steely tone, staring him down as I place a gentle lid on my anger before it explodes and I unleash the bad side of me onto my brother.

"I can't believe you just asked me that." He looks at me, shakes his head, sits up straight on the sofa, rubbing his palm on his thigh to keep from clenching. His body shifts to the edge. I know he's upset by the question, but I don't care. He should know not to cross the fucking line.

"It's a fucking yes or no question," I shout at him, slamming my fist on the table. Again, he's unmoved, but he turns an angry face to me.

"Like I said, I can't believe you just asked me that." His voice deepens. I hear the anger brewing in his tone.

"I taught you that trick of answering a question with a question. You do not want to mess with me." I slam my fist on the desk. The pound echoes through the room. Our glare at each other is as loud as the pound.

"If you knew your said wife, you wouldn't be asking me that question," he retorts. He's now clenching and unclenching his fist, eyes blazing, nostrils flaring, but he's no match for me right now.

"Answer the damn question. I'm not in the mood for your nonsense," I sneer.

"Was there a question? Because last I checked, Dele is your wife on paper only. Why then do you care who she fucks?" he sneers back at me. I rise in anger, and he gets up too. We're snarling at each other. My desk is between us.

My phone rings; it's my dad. Now isn't a good time. My brother and I maintain a stare down. My phone stops ringing.

"Fucking answer me!" I shout. He scoffs at me with a side-eye just as my phone starts ringing again.

I answer my dad's call. I know he won't stop calling.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Come and get Dele," he yells back at me. What did he just say?

"What are you talking about, Dad?" I ask, perplexed.

"Your wife, Dele, has fallen asleep at the foot of my bed. I can't move her. Come and get her, so she can rest properly and not fall. Susanna isn't here to help if she falls."

"I'm on my way," I say, hanging up. Without a word to my brother, I raced out.

He doesn't say anything or try to stop me. As soon as I get to my car, I drive fast to my dad's place. Luckily, traffic is light, and I get there in record time. I go straight to his bedroom and find her right where Dad said she was—asleep at the foot of his bed. He motions "shh" to me the moment I brisk in.

"She must be tired today; could barely stay awake. That's why I called you."

"What do you mean by today?"

"She has been coming to visit me since you traveled," he snaps, like I'm asking stupid questions.

"What?! You have a nurse, Dad. She doesn't need to work here." His words sound senile to me, but Dad is coherent.

"She visits, not works, and her visit is appreciated. I enjoy her company." The reformed asshole is back again.

"Fine, I'm taking her home. You and I will discuss this later."

I lean close and gently tap her, whispering, "Ayo mi." She slowly opens her eyes and looks around like she's unaware of her surroundings. "You fell asleep. Dad was worried," I say in a low tone. I know she clams at the sound of noise when she wakes.

"I'm sorry, Baba," she says to Dad.

"It's okay, dear. I was worried you would fall and hit your head hard and I can't help you." She smiles at him and rises to her feet, saying "Thank you," but her sudden rise causes her to lose her balance, and I quickly grab her to prevent a fall.

"Whoa, thanks for catching me," she slurs.

"Come on, let's get you home."

"My car is at work," she mumbles. "I walked here," she says. "It's sunny out today."

"Go home and rest, Dele. Luke will take care of your car." She nods and lets me guide her out. I grab her backpack, which feels like a mountain is sitting in it. I bid my dad goodnight and inform his housekeeper that we are leaving.

I guide Dele to the car. She doesn't argue with me, which tells me she's burnt out. I know she's off work tomorrow. I'm staying home with her. As soon as we get into our unit, she takes off her clothing, like it's stinging her, as she staggers to her bedroom. I pick up the clothes as she tosses them on the floor. A good thing Osei didn't go with me to my dad's. She goes to bed, tucks herself in. I kiss her forehead and turn the light out.

I call Bruce to loop him in.

"Hey, please tell me you didn't beat up your brother." I exhale.

"Can't say I wasn't close, but I didn't. Dele is home now."

"Where was she?"

"Turns out she's been visiting my dad since I traveled and didn't want anyone to know. She fell asleep there today, and he called me to come and get her home."

"Only an angel can see good in a man like your dad. She's a keeper."

"She certainly is a keeper. Just wanted to update you. Talk later, bro."

"Sure," I hang up with Bruce. I suck it up and call Osei, before I talk myself out of what I must do. Just this once, I appreciate our code. *Your brother calls, you answer.*

"Is she okay?" Of course, that's the first thing he asks.

"She's fine, tired, and now in bed."

"Good, and since you asked: no, I'm not fucking my bestie." Guess he can't bring himself to call her my wife; he's poking me, but I know better.

"I know, and I'm sorry," I state genuinely to him.

"Good, because it's going to cost you an expensive dinner tomorrow." And Osei is back.

"Fine, you just have to make me pay for your dinner."

"Yes, and I'm bringing a friend."

"No, not allowed."

"Okay then, I'll tell Mom you punched me." I let out a frustrated sigh.

"Fucking bring two friends," I say, defeated, as I hear him laugh.

"Good night." I hang up on him. If he tells Mom I punched him, I will be getting a call three times a day. And our monthly dinner will become a weekly family dinner. I barely live through every other day calls from Mom. No, thanks. I'll pay for dinner with all his friends to avoid my mom's hovering calls trying to make peace between Osei and I.

I go back in to check on Dele. She looks tired. Looking at her, I'm glad I came home sooner. I kiss her forehead, she stirs, and I leave to find

something to eat in our home. I should work. Instead, I watch TV. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the fact Dele was visiting my dad when I traveled. Neither Dele nor Dad mentioned it. I talked to him from the airport till I got home. He didn't say she was there.

What the fuck is going on?

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LUKE



I stayed home with Dele. She agrees that she is burnt out. A few school tests and ER shifts have been brutal lately. We stayed indoors all day, talking and laughing. I work while she binges shows on Netflix. She turns her phone off after talking to her mom and dad, something I've noticed she tries to do daily. I do the same, and spent the evening cooking and talking about everything.

The next morning, on her way out, she promises to take things easy. I don't want her back out yet, but she can't miss her classes, and she won't give up working. So, I have no choice but to let her back into the world. Martin is her driver today, regardless of how much she loves to drive her car. She has had enough Vitamin D, no need to keep walking around town.

During lunch, I decide to pay my dad a visit. We both know I'm not happy to find out my wife was visiting him, and I didn't know about it.

Arriving at Dad's place, I say hi to him and he nods. He's watching a soccer game, which surprises me because that is so not my dad. We sit in silence, both of us stubbornly refusing to talk.

- "Why didn't you tell me Dele has been coming to see you?"
- "Because I didn't want you to stop her from coming," he gruffly says.
- "Why would I do that, Dad?" I ask, perplexed.

"I don't know why you do anything these days, Luke. First, you get married without either of your parents knowing about it, to a girl I've never met. Fortunately, she's a sweet girl." His voice is rising in anger.

"I didn't marry Dele because of you and the money. I married her because I chose her," I snap at him. He can't possibly think Dele is an agenda for money.

"That much I know, considering how long I've been trying to get you married, and I thought you were going to marry Nathan's daughter, Lily. But, out of nowhere, you showed up with Dele," he challenges.

"Lily would have been a business transaction, not a marriage," I retort.

"I know, but given the direction you were heading, a business transaction would have sufficed. But I'm glad you made a much better choice. I don't see Lily visiting an old man in her free time," he adds, the tone in his voice one of acceptance. He accepts Dele.

"Not in this lifetime," I scoff. We both know Lily would never visit him on her own. It just isn't who she is.

"I was pleasantly surprised when Dele showed up. We talked and laughed. I do like her, and I didn't want you to end it." Now, he shows a side of him that I didn't expect.

"Visiting you is good for Dele, too. She's all work and school, so time with you is good for her."

"How did you two meet?" That's a question I didn't think my dad would ever ask.

"She's friends with Osei. I met her at his Halloween party last year."

"You've been dating her that long and didn't say anything?" His voice rises in disbelief.

"No, dad. I stepped back after meeting her because I thought she was dating Osei. I recently found out they're just friends," I explain, not wanting to give him all the details. "As soon as I found out, I made my move and married her. It's pointless wasting time when I know she's the one."

"Good, I knew your mother was the one the moment I met her. Don't mess things up like I did." I nod in agreement. "Who would have thought the child I wasn't happy to see your mother carrying would one day bring home my lovely daughter-in-law." He smiles and returns to watching his game. I certainly didn't think of my meeting with Dele that way, but Dad is reforming. His focus is back on the game. I rise to leave.

"I need to head back."

"Okay. Tell Dele to stop by."

"I'm sure she will when she's free, Dad."

"Bye, Son."

"See you later, Dad." I leave his place and return to work. Still, I can't understand why he thought I'd stop Dele from visiting him. I just didn't like being in the dark about it, but I'm glad she thought of him while I was away. He's right—that's something Lily would never do unless there was something to gain. I'm thankful for the chance encounter that blew in Dele and me that Halloween night. I felt the power of our connection and the flicker in my heart. I know she feels it, too. My mission is to turn the flicker into a radiant sparkle that never fades and burns bright forever in us.

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DELE



It's been great having Luke back home. I honestly prefer it when he's home and not traveling, though the last few days have been hectic for him—back-to-back late nights. He's now the one doing the rinse and repeat cycle. I understand the grind, even though I dislike going to bed alone. He crawls into bed and wraps his arm around me every night.

Every day for fun, I leave something in his pants or jacket or send him a photo. Today, I left a black lacy thong in his jacket when we left together this morning. I'm still waiting for the cheeky messages he sends whenever he finds my items. For now, I focus on work. I say hey to Jax and clock in.

I set my bag in the usual spot, sight Dr. Beiz, and move in the opposite direction. He's been staring at me lately, and I don't like it. It doesn't help that Jax has noticed it too and teases me about it. I can't exactly tell him to stop staring at me, so I stay as far away as possible and only speak to him only when needed.

Transport comes to take my patient for an MRI, and I return to the nurse's station, only for Jax to hand me the information for my new patient. I stare at the name in disbelief.

"Can you take her?" I ask Jax.

"No, somehow it got assigned to you, though based on the rotation, Lynda should've gotten her, and Matron said we can't switch," she replies. I sigh. Matron is the head nurse, and Jax likes to joke about her like she's a mean drill sergeant. I honestly don't want to speak to this patient, but I have no choice and need to put on my big girl pants.

I step into the room. "Hi, Miss McIntyre. I'm going to be your nurse today. I'm Dele."

"Hi, Dele." Her shrieking voice pierces my eardrums. She's grinning as if she's found her best friend. We both know we can't stand each other.

"What brings you to the ER today, Ms. McIntyre?" I ask.

"I have this headache that's non-stop. It feels as if someone is jackhammering my head, and my eyes are getting blurry," she says. I take notes and begin to check her temperature and blood pressure, which are both normal, thankfully. I ask a few more questions, then inform her.

"The doctor will be here in a few minutes. In the meantime, press the call button if you need anything." I leave to complete her chart.

Back at the nurse's station, I grab my next iPad and move on to my next patient, trying to keep moving and not think about the woman under my care. I make two stops before returning to the nurse's station.

"Hey, your new socialite patient has been pressing the call light," Jax says.

"Did the doctor see her yet?"

"Yes, and she ordered an MRI for her. I went to see her, but she insisted that she wants to speak to you."

"Fine. I'll go talk to her." I sigh.

I pause at the door, inhale, and exhale before going in. "Hi, Ms. McIntyre. I hear you want to see me. What can I do for you?"

"Call me Lily," she interrupts, and I nod.

"Your transport for the MRI should be here soon."

"Good, because the wait is killing me."

"I understand, but I'll check to find out how long." I turn to leave.

"I was with Luke two nights ago." I freeze in my stride. "We had a great time together. When he told you he was working late, he was with me."

I force my whole body to relax, then turn to face her, keeping my expression neutral. "You see, he'll always return to me, no matter how many times he samples the ethnic girl. He'll come back to me because I make sense to him." She rolls her eyes.

I maintain a straight face. "I know you are a fast track to his inheritance, so I understand why he married you, but he's back with me now, and I don't

share." She stops talking.

"Would you be needing anything else, Ms. McIntyre? Otherwise, I have other patients to attend to, and I'll let you know about the MRI," I say, my voice controlled.

"No," she answers with a sly smile at me, and I want to punch her in the face. Instead, I turn and leave, making sure not to slam the door or let her know how much her words affect me. I signal to Jax that I need a minute and race to the bathroom. My heart is shattering. He lied to me. I refuse to let the tears out. My brother was right. I'm derailing from the plan. I let the idea of Luke derail my goals. Osei said he always goes back to her. She might be lying, but it's also possible he went back to her. My heart tells me he loves me. No, it's not love, it's just fun. I don't have to keep up the charade. I have my work permit. I can move on. I put a lid on my shattered emotions and poise myself to return to work.

The MRI nurse soon returns to take Lily, and I keep my focus on work. They don't find anything, just as I'd guessed with Lily. She only came to inform me about Luke. She can keep him.

When I clock out, I want to head home, but I realize I promised to visit Baba, so I went to his place. It may be the last time I get to see him. I should visit.

I arrived at his place and put on a brave smile.

"Dele, are you okay?" he asks after I've spaced out a few times or zoned out completely. I haven't been moving as usual.

"Yes, I'm fine," I answer, managing a smile. "Just a little tired from work," I lie to him, but I can't get over Luke's betrayal. I barely watch the match and give monotonous answers to Baba. Once the game is over, I make up an excuse to leave.

"Are you sure you're okay?" His concern is clear.

"Yes, I just had a rough day at work," I smile again.

"You work too much. Maybe you should take some time off."

"I'll think about it." I hug him. "I'll see you later."

"Alright, dear." He doesn't look convinced by my work excuse, but I leave anyway.

In my car, I decided not to go home and text Osei.

Me: Are you home? Can I stop by?

Osei: I should be home in ten minutes. Yes, you can stop by.

Me: Thanks, see you soon.

I'll ask Osei if I can stay with him. No way will I live with Luke and watch him lie to my face. I can't believe I trusted him. He and Lily can live together. He doesn't need to keep up the charade.

I arrived at Osei's place. Luckily, I found a parking space in front of the building. When he opens the door, I race into his arms, crying. I can't hold it in any longer. I'm not strong enough.

"Dele, what's wrong?" he asks, holding me close.

"Nothing, please can I stay here tonight?"

"Sure, anytime." I pull away from the hug. "I can't talk right now. I just need a bed."

"Okay, I'm here when you're ready to talk," he says. I simply nod and go to my room.

Dropping onto the bed, I pull the cover over my head and let my heart cry until I hear his voice.

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LUKE



Mom has been insisting on lunch since I returned from my last trip. I'm finally able to make it happen. I arrive before her and order our usual. After all, we've been coming here since I was a kid, and my mom, ever the creature of habit, orders the same thing every time.

She soon arrives and cups my face, kissing my cheeks like I'm still a little boy. I smile and let her. Trying to stop her would create a new set of drama. Osei inherited her dramatic ways.

As soon as she sits, she dives right in. "Your brother tells me you punched him." My mouth falls open.

"He's lying, Mom. I didn't touch him. I was angry with him, but I didn't touch him." I emphasize.

"Good, just making sure you're both telling me the truth. He did say you didn't punch him, but you wanted to, and that's what I want to talk about."

"I don't want to talk about it. We resolved it, and we don't need to bring it up again," I snap. My mom arches a brow.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"You know he would never sleep with Dele. They are like siblings." *Fucking Osei. He told her.* I sigh. I might as well get it over with.

"I know. I was just upset. That was it."

"Good, because I need to make a confession." Great, Mom has a secret.

"Please, do tell." I smirk.

"Don't sass me, Luke." I sit up straight. "The first time I met Dele, call me crazy, I got the strangest thought that she would be your wife." I move to say something, but she raises her index finger, telling me to hold on. "I kept it to myself. Of course, I later asked Osei if you'd met Dele, and he said yes, but you didn't like her. He told me you were rude to her. I honestly thought that was strange, but I told myself my gut feelings were wrong. Then I saw how you couldn't keep your eyes off her at Declan's wedding." Fuck. Seems everyone but Osei and Dele noticed my emotions that day. "You were drinking, and I actually thought that at some point, I would have to pull my sons from fighting each other. So, when he told me he was going to marry her, I knew I had to stop it, because it was clear you wouldn't be happy if that happened." I smile at her.

"So, you set me up."

"No, honey. I gave you the nudge you needed."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome. And I'm glad you opened your eyes." I laugh.

"How's Simon?" Great switch, Mom. The waiter brings our food, and my mom's smile is wide.

"He's fine," I answer.

"So, when were you planning on telling me he's sick?" I stared wide-eyed at my mom in shock.

"Don't think about lying to me. I was married to Simon, and I know him." I relax. I might as well let them deal with each other. Like I said, their relationship is complicated.

"He asked me not to tell you," I state.

"I'm sure he did, and he's getting a visit from me." I nod. I doubt I can stop her. "How bad is he?"

"Prostate cancer, caught early." She nods and masks her sadness.

We eat and talk about other things. She seems more interested in how Dele and I are doing. I let her know we're fine, not in any trouble or anything to worry about.

I head back to work. I reach into my breast pocket and feel Dele's panty. I smile. She's been leaving me notes from Nami'k: funny keychains and, smut stickers to make me laugh. Today, I got the thong, which was fun, until my PA accidentally knocked my jacket off the chair and my wife's thong fell out. His eyes widen in shock. He bends down, and I shout, "Don't

touch that!" He stops and just picks up my jacket. I picked up the thong and put it back in my jacket pocket. I decided not to text her about it. I'll see her when I get home, but I make a quick stop to Dad, then head home to my naughty wife.

I step into Dad's unit. I barely say hello to his nurse when his voice booms from the living room. "Luke, get in here, right now!" Interesting. Someone is certainly in a mood and has gained a little strength. I wave to the nurse and head toward the living room down the hallway. He's in his favorite chair, watching a soccer game, legs raised, with blankets on him.

"Hey, Dad." He mutes, the TV, though I doubt he was actually watching it.

"Dele was here." Okay, not news. "She was upset." There's the news.

"Maybe someone upset her at the hospital." He shakes his head.

"No, I think it had something to do with you." I chuckle and take a seat next to him.

"Dad, I didn't upset Dele. We're fine." He shakes his head again, angrily this time.

"I'm telling you, I know this sign. It's you. She had the same look your mother had whenever she was upset with me." Chill, Dad. "I'm serious, son. If you upset her and she leaves, you can kiss that inheritance goodbye." Yeah, Dad, chill.

"Relax, Dad. No one's leaving the other." Yep, he likes her more than me.

"Call her and see if she answers. Believe an old man, I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did, by dismissing your wife's concerns. You have a good woman in Dele. Don't mess it up." Great. Reformed asshole is back.

"I'm going to call her so you can see it wasn't me." I take out my phone and dial Dele. She doesn't answer. Dad is watching me intensely. I send a text, but no response either.

"She'll call me back, Dad. You'll see." We sit in silence. He doesn't unmute the TV. I check my phone every few minutes. No call or text from Dele. I text Osei.

Me: Have you heard from Dele?

Osei: She's here crying but won't tell me what the fuck happened. What did you do?

What the fuck is going on?

Osei: Don't come over, she won't like it.

Fuck you, Osei. You and what army are going to stop me from speaking with my wife?

"I have to go," I say to Dad.

"Make sure you return with Dele," he yells to my back as I head out.

I make it to Osei's place in record time, racking my brain on what I could have done or what I'd missed. As annoying as my dad was, he nailed it. Osei doesn't open the door. I bang on his door, louder, until he opens it, glaring at me.

"What the fuck, Luke?!"

"Where is she?" I growl after barging my way in.

"She doesn't want to speak to you right now." He jumps right in front of me as I head toward her old room.

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LUKE



"Get the fuck out of my way, Osei!" I growl, my voice dripping with rage. I try to sidestep him, but he blocks my path. Challenge is clearly written on his face as he stands like a brick wall in front of me.

I feign a scoff, controlling the anger building inside me, because it's clear he doesn't understand that I'll tear down any and every wall standing between me and Dele. *Every. Fucking. Wall.*

"I mean it. This is between me and my wife. Stay the fuck out." My voice is louder, anger emanating from both of us, our nostrils flaring. He's no match for the anger seeping into my blood right now, and he needs to get the fuck out of my way.

"It's okay. I'll speak to him," I hear Dele say behind him.

"You sure?" Osei asks in a grating tone, without taking his eyes off me. I maintain my glare.

"I'm sure," she answers and returns to the room. I move past Osei and follow her in. Closing the door, I pace, trying to control my anger at Osei. She sits on the edge of the bed, lacing and unlacing her hands, her nervous tell. She's looking down at her feet. I stop pacing and draw in a long breath, then a slow exhale. I reach into my pocket and take out the black lace panty she's left in my jacket, which had freaked my PA out when it fell out.

"What the hell happened between when you left this—" I hold her panty out to her "—and when you visited Dad today?" She looks briefly at me, then turns her face away, shaking her head.

"You can't tell me nothing happened when Dad could tell you were upset, and you've clearly been crying. Not to mention the fact my brother wants to take me down for upsetting you." I pause, and she still won't look at me. "We agreed to always tell the truth. I need you to tell me the truth," I say in a gentler tone, moving closer to her on the bed. My palm caresses her face. She leans into it, letting her cheek rub on my palm, though her eyes remain closed even as tears trickle down her face. My thumb wipes the tears away. I get on my knees and pull her close to me. "Ayo mi, please tell me what happened," I whisper as she sniffs.

"Lily came to the hospital today." *Fuck!* That can't be good. "I don't know how she did it, but she made sure I was her nurse for the supposed headache that she had. She said you guys were together two nights ago when you worked late, and you always return to her." *What the fuck?!* I keep my anger controlled. "She said you told her I'm just a faster track to you claiming your inheritance." She pulls out of my arms. "I'm sorry, Luke. I didn't say anything to her. I just focused on work. I know we have a contract; I just got a little emotional. It won't happen again. You and Lily are good. Just give me the heads-up next time so I don't get blindsided." Though her voice is calm, there's anger at the base.

What the fuck?!

"Yes, I worked late two nights ago with five other guys and Lily; we were closing a deal. I was never alone with her. I was surprised she came with the team, but all we did was close the deal, and she left with the team. At no point was I ever alone with her. I came home straight. I didn't stop anywhere in between."

"It's okay," she murmurs, like I'm lying and she's willing to accept it.

"It's not okay, I promise you. It's just you and me all the way." She nods, but doesn't look at me. I cup her face. "Look at me, Dele, please." She opens her eyes. "You are the only woman for me and the only one I want."

"Am I enough?" she asks, a simple, weighted question. Everything about us narrows down to this fulcrum moment. I feel the weight of the question that hinges between us. My heart pounds against my ribcage. This is the moment to unveil my feelings to her. I kiss her forehead, then her cheek, inhaling her sweet smell. "You are more than enough and will always be

enough for me," I state with conviction, making sure our eyes are locked and she can read me. "Ayodele Blythe, you are more than enough for me," I repeat.

She pulls me into a hug, and I breathe relief, feeling her relaxed in my arms. She clings to me, the way she does whenever she's vulnerable, and my heartbeat slows to normal, just as the fire to crush Lily burns for lying to Dele.

Lily McIntyre is going to feel my anger. I want to kiss Dele, but I also know I won't stop until she's naked in my arms.

"Let's go home," I say. She pulls out of my arms.

"I'll meet you back out. I need to clean up." I kiss her forehead and her lips. I leave and close the door to the bedroom. Osei is watching a soccer game. I sit next to him.

"Don't ever get between me and my wife again," I say in a stern tone. He scoffs.

"Don't expect that I won't protect my best friend from you if she comes to me," he replies, matching my tone.

"Dele is my wife and mine to protect." Seems I need to keep reminding him of the fact.

"Dele is my best friend and she'll always be my friend, even after she stops being Mrs. Luke Blythe."

"She will always be Mrs. Luke Blythe." He scoffs at my response. I have a fight on my hands, but we live to fight another day.

"She is coming home with me," I snap.

"Sure, and if she returns tomorrow needing my help, I'll open the door for her, guaranteed," he snaps back.

"You and I will talk about this later," I reply when I hear the door to the bedroom open.

"Sure, I'm always right here," he retorts in a low growl as Dele's steps get closer. I get up and head to the door. She goes to hug Osei, who whispers something in her ear that makes her laugh. I watch them for a moment. Much as I dislike the fact she ran to him, I also know he'll always protect her. Annoying as he may be, it's comforting to know that he's got her back, but I have it first.

They pull from the hug; she takes my hand. "My car is outside the building. I'll drive behind you," she says the moment we get on the elevator. She tries to pull out of my hand. I won't let go.

"I'll have Martin pick it up."

"Okay," she agrees, no doubt trying to stop any argument with me, but I'm not letting her go just yet.

We get in the car. "Dad was worried about you and—" I pause. If I tell her he threatened my inheritance if we broke up, she might think all I said was for my inheritance.

"And?" she asks.

"He wants us to come together tomorrow for lunch."

"I can't do lunch. I have a study group, but I can stop by tomorrow to see him."

"He wants to see us together, or he's coming over to our place."

"No, he shouldn't be moving around. You can pick me up at work during my break hour. We can pay him a quick visit and you can drop me back at work."

"Okay."

Our drive is quiet. The good thing is, it's a short drive, and we head to our unit with me holding her hand.

She heads to her room; I still can't get her to move into the primary room. For now, I sleep where she sleeps. She goes to shower, and I join her there. She keeps her back to me as my hand caresses her breast. I wrap my arms around her; she relaxes in my arms as the water cascades down our bodies, but she doesn't turn to face me.

"I love you, Dele." She stiffens for a moment. "I love you and only you. I have loved you since your eyes met mine and I felt a connection deep within my soul, making my heartbeat for you. I've loved you since my feet followed you onto that balcony, and when your lips touched mine there. I knew your kiss is the one I want forever. I would never cheat on you." She turns to face me, her eyes glassy despite the water running down our bodies.

"Do you mean that?" she asks in a shaky voice.

"Yes, with all my being." She cups my face and starts to kiss me. I take over and pull her closer, passionately kissing her, before sliding down to her breast and then to her lips to feast on them. I hold her steady as I swirl my tongue deeper into her, licking and sucking on her, causing pleasurable gasps and moans to escape her mouth. She grips my hair and shoulder tight and lets out more cries of pleasure as she climaxes in my mouth. I lift her up. She wraps her legs around me, and I enter her slowly, savoring every moment of our connection. I move her back to the shower wall and hold

nothing back from her. We make love with the warm water cascading down our bodies, our movements synchronized and filled with pure bliss. She comes again with a loud cry that's pleasing to my ears and soul.

When she drops her head on my shoulder, the low rumbles in my heart whisper, "I love you," to her, and she nods. We dry off and go to bed, curled up together. I doubt I can ever sleep soundly again without her.



Next morning, as soon as I walk into my office:

"Come with me," I say to Kevin. He grabs his iPad and follows me in. I sit, and he does the same.

"The deal we just signed with the McIntyres—I'm killing it." His mouth drops open.

"It's going to cost five million in losses," he says, clearly shocked. I always find my way to a deal; I never kill a deal. Considering what's at stake here, the only way around is to end it and send a loud message *You upset my wife*, *you deal with me*. Besides, it's going to cost the McIntyres even more in losses. That should really get the message across to fucking Lily.

"Draft a formal letter for our pullout." He nods. "Draft another specifically for Lily, with her dad in copy. It should read: 'My wife's name is Ayodele Iman Blythe.' Anyone who wants to associate with me needs to remember that, or we can part ways." He stares at me. I know he wants to say something.

"Can I ask what happened?" His tone is subtle.

"Lily went to the ER yesterday to meet my wife and told her lies—that I've been cheating on my wife with her," I answer, holding in how much the audacity of Lily upsets me.

"Is Mrs. B. okay?" he asks, concerned.

"She was a mess yesterday, but she's fine now. I need that message loud and clear, a bullhorn in Lily's face to back off." He nods.

"I'll get right on it now."

Firing up my laptop, I get to work. Kevin returns with the draft. I approve them and he sends them out.

DELE



"Dr. Beiz is checking you out again," Jax whisper-shouts to me. I swear she's going to get me in trouble someday soon with her repeated side comments about Dr. Beiz checking me out.

It doesn't help that all I've told Jax about my marriage is that it's just someone to help with my legal documents and it's all transactional. I didn't tell her who my husband is, and she cares less about him, as long as she and I get to keep working together—and I'm fine with that. She seems to think Dr. Beiz is a golden ticket for me, because every single nurse or doctor is trying to land him. I barely paid attention to him before I married my freakishly handsome husband. I was too busy with life kicking my ass to notice a sexy doctor. Now, with strong arms wrapped around me every night, like he's trying to make sure I don't slip away while he sleeps, Dr. Beiz is so far off my radar that Alaska is closer than he is for me to notice.

Unfortunately, in the last few weeks, I've felt his eyes on me, and Jax doesn't help by calling it out every fucking second. He finds ways to talk to me about stupid stuff, in my opinion, and sometimes finds ways to keep me attached to his patients. He claims he likes my attention to detail. Yes, I do have that skill, but Jax does, too. I honestly believe her eager vibe turns him off, which she sometimes laughs off. My work bestie can be over the top;

subtle isn't in her vocabulary when she's man-scouting—or as she likes to say, when she's horny.

"Dele, how about dinner sometime?" Dr. Beiz says to me. I need not turn my head or body to know that Jax is giving me the 'I told you so' look. I wish he didn't ask at the nurse's station. Aside from Jax, little Ms. Gossip, aka Lynda, isn't far. I hear her gasp. I can't bury my head in the sand and act like I didn't hear him. I get the feeling he won't get the message. I sign the information on the iPad and pass it to Jax, who throws me a wink. I returned a furrowed brow to her. Sucking it in, I put on a brave face and a feigned smile, then turn to him.

"Rain check, my evenings are booked," I say with a convincing smile—or I believe it's convincing.

"Lunch then," he replies with a tone of 'I'm not giving up that easy.' I mentally grunt my annoyance. The sounds of a wheelchair squeaking by distract me for a second. He takes my hand to get my attention. I pull my hand away from his hold. Since when did we become touchy friends? I give him a questioning look to check him, but I'm not getting the vibe that he understands. I check my watch. Luke will be calling me soon. We're making a quick visit to Baba's place.

"Classes and work have taken that as well," I reply and hope that answer suffices. I look away from him and turn my attention to a file that isn't mine, just to show my disinterest.

"I guess you don't eat. Maybe a coffee?" he says, flashing me a smile. I'm thinking, seriously, dude? I'm letting you down politely. Get the hint. Again, he's not reading my body language, nor is he getting that my short responses are indicative of a polite *no*.

"Maybe another time, I have a full cup already," I say, raising my covered cup of tea.

"I can go get my cup and we can meet at door 5." He's killing me. I'm running out of polite ways to say 'no' to a powerhouse like him in this hospital.

"That would be a 'no' as well." I hear him behind me, and my body responds to his deep, gruff voice. Every part of me awakens. I know he heard the conversation. My husband is here.

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DELE



"Sorry, Doc. My wife can't go on dates with other men. She politely said 'no.' I don't need to be polite. My 'NO' is succinct." His voice and tone are calm, but I detect the growl beneath the cool exterior, just as Jax's mouth opens wide enough for a swarm of bees to make a new colony in her mouth.

"Excuse me, did you say wife?" Oh no! Dr. Beiz just had to ask in that questionable tone, like he can't fathom that I'm married to Luke. Knowing Luke, he isn't going to walk away. I wish dear Doctor had kept his fucking mouth shut and walked away. Too late for my wishes.

"Yes, I didn't stutter. Ayodele Iman Kabir is my wife. She is Mrs. Blythe," he confirms.

"And you are?" *Damn!* He didn't just ask Luke that question. My mind is blown by Beiz's words as I shoot him a glare.

"Luke Blythe, the guy who donates a large sum to this hospital every year." Great, the arrogant side of my rich and semi-annoying husband has been unleashed.

"As in The Luke Blythe of—"

"The Blythe placard name behind you." Hubris and arrogance with a spice of 'fuck you' are written all over my husband. Dr. Beiz turns to read the name again, like it's not something we've all seen multiple times and ignored.

"Hi, Ayo mi." Luke turns to me, flashing me a smile that spells 'my naughty game hat is on.' He pulls me closer to him and kisses my lips. Jax tries not to choke on the bee colony. Lynda is scooting her chair closer to get blank papers she doesn't need, gazing like a lost puppy at my husband, whose arms are wrapped around my waist like a steel grip.

"Hi," I respond back. "I didn't know you were coming inside. I was waiting for your call." He arches a brow with a smirk.

"I decided to be a gentleman and pick you up from your station. I even gave Martin the afternoon off so I could drive you around," he teases.

"How chivalrous of you," I reply with a smirk, though the corner of my eye is on Dr. Beiz, whose eyes have darkened, with a tight jaw and a steely face, despite his efforts to mask it. I can't discern what could possibly be upsetting him right now.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Blythe. Dele is very hardworking," he says, clearing his tight voice.

"That she is," Luke responds, kissing my cheek. I inhale his scent.

"Just curious: why is she working with all your wealth, if, as you say, she's your wife?" His words are spoken with the venom of a man not used to being the little man when a bigger man steps in. He's grasping for a semblance of his pride, when he should have walked away.

I feel Luke tense next to me, the fury in his eyes immediate. He drops his hands from my waist and steps in front of me like he's shielding me, turning to Dr. Beiz.

"My wife can work if she damn well pleases, or not work if she damn well pleases. The question is, how the fuck is it your goddamn business what my wife is doing or not doing?" His tone is harsh, even from behind him. I can feel the anger emanating from Luke. Dr. Beiz poked the Lion of Blythe.

"Do I need to pull my power strings and have you transferred so my wife can work without harassment? Or do I need to file a harassment suit against you? Take your pick. I can make either happen in a snap." Dr. Beiz's eyes widen at the realization of the power he's dealing with.

"Have a good day," Dr. Beiz says, walking away. A little too late, Luke is already upset.

Luke turns to me. "Come on," he says. I quickly signal to Jax that I'll be back. I already informed her that I would be gone for lunch, and she promised to cover if I ran late. She nods. I avoid little Ms. Gossip's eyes. I

know the news of Luke and I will spread like wildfire around the nurse's station before I return. I really wish Luke had called. I'll think about that later. Right now, I need to calm my husband, who's moving fast. I know he's upset. *Fucking Beiz*.

Luke's car pulls up, he tips the valet, and I get in. He drives without saying anything to me. Thankfully, traffic is light, and we arrive at his dad's building in record time. The moment he puts the car in park, I have to say something.

"I'm sorry Dr. Beiz upset you," I say, holding his hand. He squeezes my hand.

"How long has he been asking you out?" His tone is angry. He's not looking at me.

I turn his face to me. "Today was the first time. He never approached me. I've worked with him many times and he's never asked me out until today. I'm sorry you witnessed that."

"I'm glad I witnessed it, and hope he got the message." I smile at him.

"I'm sure he did, Lion of Blythe," I say to him, and his smile widens. I'm glad I broke through his anger.

"What did you just call me?" He turns to me with a smile.

"Lion of Blythe," I repeat. He pulls me into a passionate kiss, devouring my mouth. I break away from the kiss when I feel his hand cupping my breast.

"I need to get back to work. Let's see Baba and we can continue this when I get home from work." He nods.

"I like my nickname." He kisses my forehead, my seal of safety. I smile. We get out of the car. I realized I left my backpack behind with him. I hold his hand, the comfort and safety I feel as we ride up to my father-in-law's place is everything.

He unlocks the door, and we go in smiling. I follow the sound of the commentator shouting, "Goal." I drop Luke's hand and race towards the living room, a quick hello to the nurse as I pass her.

"Dele, you missed it. It was a good goal. Here, I'll rewind." Baba says the moment I race into the living room. He rewinds the play, and I stand, watching as the player makes a pass. The goalie catches it, but the ball falls out of his hands, and another player kicks it right back in. I jump up, shouting, "That's a good goal!"

"Yes!" I give Baba a high five and a hug for our team scoring. I pull back from the hug.

"Is my son behaving?" Baba asks. I nod to him. I feel bad for coming here yesterday in my mood, but I wasn't going to disappoint him and not visit him as promised.

"I can kick him out if he's not behaving." I smile.

"He's fine. I think I'll keep him," I joke, and wink at Luke, who winks back at me.

"Good riddance. I don't want him anymore," Baba jokes back.

"You two know I can hear you, right? Because I'm right here." Baba waves him off.

I sit next to Baba and continue to watch the game. Luke's on his phone. We go through our moments, enjoying the game together, yelling at the TV. When the game is over, I get up and give Baba a hug.

"I need to get back to work. I'll see you tomorrow," I say, promising Baba.

"Alright, my dear," he mumbles.

"Bye, dad," Luke says to him. Baba just waves him off. "Nice one, dad." I smile.

Luke and I wave at the nurse so she knows we're leaving. On our elevator ride, Luke takes my hand.

"I need you to tell me if that doctor guy comes anywhere near you again." His tone is serious. Here I was thinking the kiss made him forget about Beiz. Guess I was wrong.

"Luke, I work with him, but I'll let you know if he makes me uncomfortable or asks me out again," I say in a dulcet tone.

"Thank you, I trust you." A roguish smile graces his face, but beneath that smile, I know he's not joking about Dr. Beiz. "Or I can show up on every shift for him to get the message."

"Don't you have an empire to run?" I tease.

"I can multitask," he says, pushing my back to the wall and taking over my mouth. This guy is going to be the death of me. The elevator dings when he stops kissing me.

We drive back to the hospital in comfortable silence. He pulls me into another kiss when we pull up at the hospital. I have to pull away from him.

"I'll see you at home after my shift."

"Or I can come and get you myself and have Martin drive your car."

"I actually like driving my car, so I promise to head home and not make any stops."

"Okay, see you soon." I nod and open the door. He pulls my hand to stop me. "I'm only a Lion for Dele."

I crack up laughing and race into the ER to clock back in. I'm a few minutes late, but it was well worth it.

<u>:</u>

LUKE



I watch her go in and decide, right then, to pick her up myself by the end of her shift. Fucking Dr. upset me. My goal was to surprise her when I went in, instead of calling her to come out, but to my shock, I watched him trying to take my wife on a date. I don't trust him; he may have walked away, but I doubt he's giving up that easily. He seemed shocked to find out Dele is married. He looked like a guy who was pretty sure of himself, only to find out she's married. Much as he tried to hide it, I could read the look of shock and disappointment on his face. I need Bruce to get me everything on this guy. He daringly stared at me like I may have won, but he's not done.

I've barely cleaned up the mess with Lily, which cost me millions, but the message did get through to McIntyre House. Lily has been calling me, and I've asked Kevin not to put her calls through.

I know pulling the rug from under them will set them back a couple of million, which is exactly what I wanted. Now this fucking doctor is attempting to poach on my territory. I noticed when he looked at her hand and didn't see a ring there. He probably thought I was lying. I know she doesn't like to wear her ring at work. This fucking doctor is going to make me enforce a simple gold band.

I pull into the parking space at my dad's building and ride up alone. I chuckle, remembering how I kissed Dele in here. Letting myself into my

dad's unit, I can hear him still watching a soccer game.

My wife has created an obsessed soccer fan. I must admit, watching them together earlier was interesting. I know she visits him, but not once did I imagine how much fun they have together. Dad was happy to see her; I was surprised to see her give him a hug. My dad doesn't hug anyone. I hid my shock at that action, but it also made me happy that they get along well. Now I must break it to Dad that I killed the deal with his friend, Nathan McIntyre.

"Dad, I need to talk to you," I say.

He pauses the game and turns to me. "Make it quick, this is a good game," he says, as if pausing the game is against the rules of watching soccer.

"I killed the Rock River land deal with Nathan McIntyre," I say. His face can't hide his shock.

"Why would you do such a thing?" His tone is incredulous.

"Lily was the reason Dele was upset yesterday."

"What?" He shouts, perplexed. Dad sure knows how to use his deep vocals when not needed.

"Lily had the audacity to go to Dele's job yesterday, faking a headache. She made sure Dele was her nurse, then lied to Dele, saying she and I were together privately on the day we worked late on the Rock River deal. She told Dele that I wasn't at work. She went further to tell Dele that I married Dele as a fast track to my inheritance and I would dump her soon. That was why Dele was sad yesterday." I need not mention she was at my brother's place crying.

"A good thing you killed the deal. You don't want idiots thinking your wife can be a pawn in their sick games, and you don't want anyone ever thinking it's okay to mess with your wife. Nathan called me a few times today, but I wasn't in the mood to speak with him. Now I know why. You are in charge, and your decision is final," he says with conviction.

"Thanks, Dad," I say. I'd prepared myself for a battle with Dad, but to my surprise and relief, he agrees with me.

"Is Dele okay?" Dad asks, watching me. His concern is clear.

"She's fine, Dad. You just saw her. You and I know coming to see you is something she does on her own."

"Good, I enjoy her company. She makes me forget my illness and the fact that she could be pregnant soon keeps me alive and fighting." He grins. My wife has charmed my dad. Who would've thought?

"I know, Dad." I tap his shoulder and lean back. He turns the game back on. By the time the game is over, he's fallen asleep. I help the nurse get him to bed and then head home. I pull into the parking space, call Martin, and inform him that we'll be picking Dele up. He can drive her car back. If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

Each time I arrive home, it always feels empty without Dele. I don't like it, but knowing she'll be home soon always puts me at ease. A few months ago, my place was just my hiding spot, which meant I got to keep my flings out. Now it feels like home. I head to the fridge after taking off my shoes. Dele's pet peeve is wearing shoes around the house. She dislikes it with passion, saying shoes worn outdoors are petri dish for bacteria. I put on one of my in-house slippers—my wife makes sure I have a few around—and head to the room to change into cargo shorts and a T-shirt. I set my alarm for her pickup, then head to my office to work on a few items that need my attention. Though my mind keeps going to what Dad said about Dele getting pregnant soon, it gives me a warm feeling I didn't know I wanted. Watching Declan with his kids always creates the urge for me to have my own family. Even the funny and interesting things he laughs about, plus he started learning French because Anne speaks French to their children, and he has no idea what they're saying when they laugh. I've kept the desire for a family tightly under wraps because I didn't see the possibility of it. But lately, with Dele, the possible fruition of my desire feels high, and I welcome it.

The alarm goes off right on time. I head out with Martin to pick Dele up. When I pull up, I send her a text.

Me: Your chariot awaits, my lady.

Dele: Are you here or just messing with me? I'm tired and hungry.

Me: I'm outside, waiting for you. Martin is here, he'll drive your car home.

Dele: For real?

Me: Unless you want to leave your car here and he can drive you around tomorrow.

Dele: I like driving my car. Ten minutes, I'll be right out with Kai.

I turn to Martin. "She's on her way out; you can drive her car home."

"Okay, boss." He gets out of the car and heads toward Dele's usual parking spot. He has a spare key, something I've told him to always keep

close.

I sit back and wait for her. A few minutes later, I see her coming out, dragging that heavy backpack with her. She looks tired. Kai has his hands on her shoulder like he's holding her up. He gets to the passenger side and opens the door. I push the button to roll the window down.

"Delivered in one piece," Kai says, waving at me.

"Thanks, Kai," I say to him. Dele buckles, and I drive off. She's barely awake by the time we arrive home. What the heck happened in the last few hours?

When I pull into the parking garage, I wake her up.

"What did they do to you at the hospital?"

"I returned, and my patients were switched. I got all the ones that had me running around the hospital. I'm drained."

"Isn't the schedule set at the beginning of the shift?"

"Yes, a nurse had an emergency while I was out. When I returned, I got all the patients left."

"Come on, let's feed you and get you rested." I carried her heavy backpack and held her up, just like Kai did.

There's no way she would have driven home safely. As soon as we stepped into our unit, she took off her shoes and scrubs, balled them up, and, in her underwear, headed straight to the bathroom. I went to the fridge to get some food warmed up for her. She came out in my T-shirt and shorts, grabbed the plate, and devoured the food without a word to me. Yep, my girl is burnt out.

"Do you have class tomorrow?"

"Yes, at 1 pm. I get to sleep in a little."

"No work tomorrow, right?"

"Jax was begging me to come in tomorrow. She doesn't want to be alone with Lynda and a few nurses we don't like. I told her I'll think about it. Depends on how I feel tomorrow."

"I think you should rest." She smiled.

"I knew you would say that, but I'll decide when I wake up."

"I don't like you working this many hours."

"It's good for me. I get firsthand knowledge. I need to be in the hospital if I'm going to be a nurse practitioner someday." She got up, kissed my cheek, and headed to the bedroom. I let out a frustrated sigh. More school and

more work is what she's focusing on; I'm not sure how I'm going to handle her draining herself this much. I cleaned up the plate and followed her.

She was asleep when I looked in the bedroom. I turned off the light and got into bed with her. As soon as she stirred into me, my whole being relaxed.

<u>.</u>

LUKE



Another early day for me. I leaned back as Martin weaved through traffic. Dele hasn't said the words I want to hear. I didn't think a day would come where I would crave hearing those three words, which mean so much to me. I can sense how she feels about me, yet I still need to hear the words from her lips. I'll give her time; after all, I have forever.

The elevator ride to my office was quick, but I stopped dead when I saw Lily staring at Kevin like she wanted to kill him. I didn't bother greeting her; I just walked right into my office. She followed me and dropped her purse onto the side chair. I went straight to my desk and sat down.

"No 'good morning'?" she asked.

"Good morning, and let's cut to the chase," I retorted in a controlled tone.

"Fine," she snapped, though shaken. I'm not sure what she expected. She took a seat.

"I wanted to talk about the Rock River."

"What's there to talk about? I already backed out of the deal."

"You never back out of a deal after spending hours combing through it. You always make it work." She sat back and crossed her legs, which looked forced in the tight pencil skirt. "So, I think that email was some kind of joke or a way for Blythe Enterprises to take more." I sat back and smiled.

"That email was not a joke. Blythe Enterprises is backing out of the Rock River deal with McIntyre." I reiterate. She scoffed.

"You can't be serious; you'll lose five million dollars, and my company will lose even more." She still thought I was bluffing. Though her earlier composure was now gone, she stared at me, perplexed. She turned a stern look at me. "Is this what we do now, back out of deals after a signed agreement?" Her voice rises.

"Every agreement allows one week to back out with the upfront cost loss. I'm willing to lose the upfront cost," I stated in a calm tone.

"You can't be serious about this crap you're pulling!" she shouts.

"My decision is final, and I can't keep going on about this. I have other deals to work on." She inhaled and exhaled as I rested my chin on my hand, watching her.

"Is this really what we're doing now?" Her angry tone matched her scowling face.

"Yes. Next time you think it's okay to blatantly lie to my wife and mess with me, just remember, I hit back harder!"

Her eyes widened. "I tell one little white lie to your little wife, and you blow up millions of dollar deal."

I didn't respond. I kept watching her as she tried to compose herself. "You know, the word around town is that you broke Chase Brock's nose. I ran into Chase Brock last week, and he told me he saw you in Hawaii with your wife. Somehow, you ended up punching him." I remained quiet, unmoved by the inconsistency of her Hawaii tale. "Is this who you've become because of her? Punching old friends and killing million-dollar deals because of your wife?"

"Yes, and tell Chase he's lucky all I did was punch his face." I leaned forward. "Lily, you've taken up enough of my time. I need to get back to other pressing matters."

"Now you're kicking me out?" she said, trying to stare me down.

"Yes, I'm kicking you out," I retorted, not wavering from my stern face that said, I'm in control, not you. She got up, picked up her purse, and muttered, "You'll regret this. I won't forget, and CB won't forget either."

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind," I answered.

Finally, she got the message. I returned to work, unphased by her threats.

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DELE



The last two weeks with Luke have been great. We've both made efforts to be home for dinner. Our movie nights are always fun. A few evenings, we take walks so I can get more Vitamin D before winter comes. Midterm exams are coming up, and I need to study. Pharmacology isn't a piece of cake. I left home for classes with everything I needed, but after my class, I realized I left some of my notes on the table in the living room. I decided to return home for the documents before heading out to join my study group.

I hurriedly got onto the elevator, and it stopped a few floors below. An old lady got on. I greeted her, and she nodded at me, which was fine, but then she leaned on the walls, sweating profusely. She grabbed her chest tightly and slid down to the floor. I rushed to her and hit the alarm. I laid her down, and as soon as the elevator doors opened, I shouted to Mr. Lance, "Call an ambulance. Tell them she's having a heart attack."

Lance made the call. I loosened her clothing and supported her head with my backpack. I noticed she was losing consciousness. I checked her pulse —it was faint. Removing the backpack, I began CPR on her. The paramedics arrived and took over as I continued compressions. I rested for a moment when they took the woman to the hospital.

The crowd that had gathered dispersed. "Mrs. Blythe," Lance called to me.

"Thank you for saving Mrs. Grayson," he said, helping me up. As I grabbed my bag, my phone alarm beeped, reminding me why I came home. I nodded to Lance and raced back out to join my study group.

I got home late, showered, and texted Luke that I was home before heading to bed. He replied, saying he was hanging out with Declan.

I wake during the night with his arms around me. He's still asleep when I leave the next morning. I kiss him and head out to take my exams. After the brutal exams, I race home to change clothes and relax a little before heading back for my shift. I find Paula cleaning.

"Dele," she seems surprised to see me.

"Hi, Paula."

"I heard about Mrs. Grayson. Thank you for helping her."

"No need to thank me. I'm just glad I was there when it happened."

"Would you like to eat?"

"Yes, that's why I came home, to change and grab something to eat."

"Okay. I'll warm up chicken and rice for you while you change."

"Thanks, Paula." I quickly change into my scrubs and eat the warm food Paula set out for me. After saying my goodbyes, I head out for my shift.

My gang welcomes me with open arms. The shift is going smoothly until a girl is rushed in.

<u>:</u>

LUKE



My phone vibrates in my pocket, and it's Dele. I check the time: it's four p.m. She never calls me during the day. This meeting is important, but Dele calling me at this time has me concerned.

After work, her plan today is to visit my dad. I signal to the guys to continue, and I answer the call, leaving the room.

"Hello."

"Hi," I hear it right away, the low rumble and crack in her voice. Something is wrong.

"Are you okay?" The phone is silent. I can hear her breathing, then a sigh.

"Fine, just wanted to hear your voice. Hope I didn't disturb you."

"Not at all, I was just reviewing papers," I lie. I know her; if I tell her I was in a meeting, she'll get apologetic and might not reach out again.

"Okay."

"Do you need something?" I ask.

"Not really, but can you please let Baba know that I can't make it today?" Yes, something is wrong with my wife.

"Sure, no problem." I pause. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No, I'll see you when you get home."

"Okay." She hangs up right away. Rather than return to the room, I head to my office, open my laptop, and check the link to Dele's GPS. She's driving towards home. I close the link and head back to the room. Everyone stops when I return.

"I need you guys to finish up and send me the breakdown," I say, walking out. Kevin is right on my heels.

"I'm heading home; something is wrong with my wife. Stay in the meeting and update me on what's discussed and what needs to happen."

"Got it."

I return to my office to pack up my laptop. I text Martin that I'm on my way down. Getting off the elevator, I call my dad.

"Hello."

"Dad, Dele can't make it today."

"Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. She's working a few extra hours," I lie to him. I don't need him worrying any more than I am, plus not knowing what's wrong doesn't help.

"She works too hard. Have her call me when she gets home."

"Dad, she'll call you tomorrow morning." I answer.

"No, I want her to call me today." Seriously?

"Fine, Dad." No point arguing with him; he's not going to stop.

Martin is waiting in the car when I get out of the building. I get in.

"Head home." He pulls into the street. Our drive is short, but in that brief time, my mind is reeling about what could possibly be wrong with Dele. Soon as he pulls up, I dash out of the car and onto the open elevator. I almost knocked an old lady down. I quickly apologized and move on. At our door, I quietly open it. The house is quiet, but I see her backpack on the living room floor.

Yes, something is wrong. That bag is always close to her. I remove my shoes and move quietly to our bedroom. The door is slightly ajar, and I can hear her sniffs and tears. I slowly push the door open and see her on the bed, but she doesn't even notice I've opened the door. She's so far gone in her tears.

My first thought is to get into bed with her, but startling Dele is never a good thing. It's best to let her know that I'm here.

"Dele," I call in a low tone. She lifts her head and turns to the sound of my voice. "Hi," she croaks, wipes her face, then sits up in bed, pulling the sheets close and wrapping her arms around her knees.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she whispers, wiping her tears. I move closer to her and wrap my arms around her. She rests her head on my shoulder.

"Ayo mi, why are you crying?"

"Why are you back so early?" Clearly, she hoped to cry her eyes out and be good before I got home.

"You never call me after work. What you do is send me a text, and most of the time, it's to tell me if your plans are changing. You don't miss time with Dad. Today you called me and asked me to cancel on your behalf." She chuckles.

"I didn't realize I'm that predictable."

"Not predictable, just sharing with me." I pull away from the hug and kiss her forehead. She straightens her legs and leans back on the headboard.

"A girl was brought in today. She escaped her kidnapper. He'd locked her up for months, beating and raping her repeatedly. Her friend was the only one who kept looking for her. What if no one had looked for her? I guess I just got emotional and entered a labyrinth of despair with no exit. My mind just darkened on what could have happened to me if I hadn't run from my uncle's place or if Aunty hadn't helped me. I can't imagine living in an endless circle of torture with no end in sight or anyone coming to help." I take her hand and lift her face to look at me.

"I'm sorry that girl's situation triggered you, and I'm thankful she had a friend who didn't give up on her, just like your Aunty and Amaka helped you. Floppy is dead, and you never have to worry about him again." She nods. I let go of her hand and move closer, cupping her face. "No one is ever going to take you away from me. I need you to know that I will always send an army for you, and I will always protect you. Do you understand?"

"I do." She pulls me into a hug, clinging tight to me. "I understand, my Lion of Blythe." I chuckle and hold on tight as well. We stay together, the sound of our heartbeats being the only noise in the room. She pulls away from the hug, but I take over her mouth, kissing her. She kisses me back, my hand sliding under her T-shirt, squeezing her breast. She moans.

We lay wrapped in each other, her head on my chest, our breathing slowing to normal.

"Thanks for coming home, Luke," she says. My hand trails her back. She snuggles closer to me.

"Always, Ayo mi."

"Is Baba okay?"

"He's fine. I told him you were working extra hours, so don't be surprised if he presses on you to work fewer hours."

"Noted," she says, just as her stomach growls. We both laugh.

"Guess it's time to feed you."

"That would be a good idea. Can we go out?" She sounds like herself now.

"Yes, we can. Get dressed up nice; I'll take you somewhere special." She kisses my cheek and rolls off the bed to the bathroom.

As soon as I hear the shower running, I get up. My phone pings with messages from my PA. I read them, and shit is hitting the fan with this project. Pulling my pants on, I head to my office to turn on my computer. I call Kevin on Zoom. He starts breaking down the report, and everything is going crazy: massive cost overruns and delays that look like they're going to continue unless we act soon and figure out how to block the areas causing us to hemorrhage. How the hell did the guys not catch the errors in spending?

Kevin and I dive into the numbers and pull the team into the call to discuss the situation. The more I look through it, the more it becomes clear: I'll need to travel to fix things. I need to speak with certain powerful players, otherwise, this project is toast. By the time I hang up, I realize I've been on the call for the last two hours. Leaving my office, I turn toward the sound of the TV in the living room. She's in my T-shirt and shorts, her hair pulled up in a messy bun.

"I'm sorry, Dele. Stuff was going crazy."

"It's okay, we can stay in. I already ordered and waited for you. I did eat the bread, though; my stomach wasn't going to wait that long." I chuckle.

"Come on, I'm starving too." She gets the food out and we sit to eat, watching the espionage movie she had on.

"I called Baba."

"Good. What did he say?"

"Nothing much, just warned me to work fewer hours and stop by soon. I told him I'll stop by tomorrow."

"Okay."

We finish our food, clean up, and return to finish the movie. Dele gets in position: her head on my lap and my hand on her ass. Our moment of comfort and trust.

As the movie wraps up, she sits up.

"I might have to travel soon," I say to her.

"When?"

"I don't know yet. I'll find out when and how long tomorrow." She nods.

"You're starting to own my heart," she says, surprising me. Not the words I wanted to hear, but they're getting warmer.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Depends." She lays her head back on my lap, facing the TV. I move so she can sit up. I lean in and nuzzle her neck, moving closer to her ear.

"You've owned me since that day on the balcony," I say. She pulls out of my cuddle and turns to face me. I'm short of words as we lock eyes.

"Let's go to bed," she says, getting up. I take her hand and we head to her room. She still refuses to sleep in the primary room. I've left it alone for now.

"Will you be fine while I'm gone?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. Osei called me today. He only checks on me from time to time, but I think he's probably dumped the new girl." I laugh. It sounds right.

"You guys hang out, but don't let him drag you into his craziness."

"He can't. He knows my limit. Besides, the semester is still on. I won't have that much time for him."

"Good, and no extra hours." She scrunches up her face, and I maintain a straight look.

"Fine," she exclaims like she's giving in.

"Come on, bedtime."

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LUKE



I managed to push my travel plans out for a few more days, but I can't push it past this weekend. So, I'll leave on Sunday evening.

When I arrive home from work, Dele isn't home, which surprises me. She's usually on the sofa or studying at the kitchen table. I spoke with her when she got home but didn't get any text from her saying she was leaving. Paula comes out of the laundry room, hauling a basket of our laundry.

"Mr. Blythe, you're back." She sounds surprised to see me.

"Where's my wife?" I demand, causing her to startle.

"Dele was here, but she got a call and said she couldn't miss the chance. I think the call was from her hairdresser. She left right away."

"Okay, thanks." I call Dele, and she sends a custom reply: 'Call you back.'

I go in to change clothes. Dele calls while I'm changing. "Hello."

"Hey, sorry I didn't text you. Vanessa called and said someone canceled, and she could take me if I made it over in twenty minutes. She was calling everyone—first come, first serve. So, I raced over."

"Alright, just wanted to know you're okay. I'll see you when you get back."

"It might be a few hours, about four hours."

"Okay," I reply, though I don't like the idea of four fucking hours before she gets home.

"Talk later." She hangs up, and I toss my phone, drop my weight on the bed, let out a few exhales, then roll off and head back to the kitchen.

Paula helps me warm my food. I've just finished eating when the doorbell rings. I'm not expecting anyone. Paula and I look at each other.

"I'll get it," I say to her.

I fling the door open to see a white male, about my age and height, with brown hair and a clean-shaven face. He's well-dressed, holding a bouquet of flowers and a hamper basket of goodies.

"Hi, can I help you?" He's probably lost, which is rare, but crazy things do happen.

"Hi, my name is Levi Grayson. I'm looking for Dele." My frown is immediate.

"I'm Dele," I answer, and his incredulous look is instant, followed by a subtle scoff.

"My mom said Dele is a beautiful black woman with gentle hands. Her words, not mine." His tone is clear, but I detect a hint of mockery for catching me in an obvious lie.

"I'm Luke, Dele's my wife. She isn't home right now. What do you want with her?"

He hands the flowers and hamper basket, which is filled with nuts and chocolates. I'm hesitant to take anything from him.

"Dele saved my mom's life last week. Mom got on the elevator with Dele, who noticed the distress on my mom. She helped her and stayed with her until the ambulance arrived. It turns out my mom was having a heart attack and happened to get on an elevator with a nurse. I just wanted to thank her, and my mom wanted to know if Dele would like to work with her."

I take the items from him.

"Hope your mom is better."

"Yes, thanks to your wife."

"Dele isn't home right now. I just spoke with her. It'll be hours before she gets back."

"I'm staying the week with mom and will stop by later. I'd just like to thank her in person, if that's okay." Did he just indirectly call me out for being protective of my wife? "You can return in about four hours. I don't mind. She should be back by then if it's not too late for you."

"No, that should be fine. My mom won't let it go unless I tell her I thanked Dele in person." I nod. I bet my mom would do the same.

"Thanks, and I'll see you in a few hours."

"Good, see you then." He leaves, and I close the door.

Setting the items on the kitchen island, I turn to Paula, who is standing a few feet away from me. I bet she heard it all.

"Is that Mrs. Grayson's son?" I nod. "Glad to know she's okay. The whole building is talking about how Dele helped Mrs. Grayson."

"What are you talking about?"

"Dele is popular in the building. Everyone is talking about how she helped Mrs. Grayson, who might have died in the elevator had Dele not been there."

"Dele didn't tell me."

"You know, for her it's an everyday thing since she works in the ER saving lives, and last week was her exam week, so she probably forgot too." Paula sounds like she's trying to appease me.

"When did this incident happen?" As Paula tells me the day, I realize it was the day of her exam, and the next day was the incident at the ER that triggered her. I nod to Paula.

"You can have the flowers and the hamper, if you like."

"It's for Dele," she answers in an alarming tone, questioning why I would give away the gift that's for Dele.

"Fine, take the flowers. I don't like other men giving my wife flowers." She smiles and nods. At least she gets it. My wife probably won't.

I head to my office and shut the door. I need to talk to Bruce. My wife is being herself—helping people—but some in that group might not be innocent; they might just be out to take her. Call me paranoid, but she has barely survived such horrors, and last week I promised to always have her back. The only way I can do that is by putting things in place to keep her safe and protected from wolves in sheep's clothing.

The Levi guy will be back, and I told him to come back today because it was clear he would return when I'm not home, and I don't want that.

Bruce answers my call.

"I'm guessing Dele isn't home," he snickers.

"That would be correct, and it's a good thing. I need a favor."

"Shoot."

"I need some kind of monitoring device on Dele."

"Seriously? You want to monitor her every move? Where is this coming from?" Disbelief drips from his voice.

"I'm not asking because I think she's cheating. I know she's not—that's not who my Dele is. She's an all-or-nothing kind of person. I'm asking for a device to protect her. She's kind, and people will abuse that kindness. A guy just pressed my bell looking for her."

"What guy?" Now he's alarmed.

I go into how Dele saved Mrs. Grayson and what Paula told me about the talks in the building, which I'm sure Dele is unaware of. "I just don't want crazies twisting her kindness for their own selfish needs."

"Whoa, so she saved this woman?"

"She did, and it's the talk of the building, and I didn't know about it. I just don't want her out in the pouring rain without an umbrella. I need her protected. Her safety is important to me. It's either a device or I have a guy following her around. You and I know she won't like that idea." Though I may win, the fewer issues Dele and I fight about, the better.

"I hear you, but you're still a tad bit worse than Declan."

"Declan has guys watching Anne every day, I don't," I argue. He laughs at my argument. "Whatever. What do you have?" I say to cut off his laugh.

"I can get you something for her: a watch or a necklace, so it'll always be on her. Should her phone go missing, we can still have eyes on her."

"Do both—the necklace and the watch."

"How soon do you need it?"

"Like yesterday." He chuckles.

"Two days is the best I can do."

"Fine, two days it is."

We talk for a few more minutes, and I hang up. After he called me obsessed with my wife—which I'm not, just very protective of her.

I return to the living room, turn the TV on to watch a game, but not really watching. I keep checking the time. I check Dele's GPS; her car is still parked at the same location—the stylist's shop. I must have slept off, because I woke up to Dele kissing me.

"Hi," she says when we break from the kiss, her makeup flawless and the cornrows showing off her face.

"Hi, beautiful," I reply, just looking at her, smiling. She turns her face for me to see her hair. I'm just mesmerized looking at her. The doorbell rings.

"Are we expecting someone?" she asks. Before I can answer, she's already on her way to the door, swinging it open, and there stands the Levi guy. My mind wakes up fast.

"Hi, can I help you?" Dele asks, and the guy is just gazing at her. I clear my throat.

"My mom mentioned you were beautiful. I think she understated how beautiful." He flashes a salacious grin at her, not realizing that it makes Dele uncomfortable.

"Do I know you?" Dele asks. She's already taking a step back, and I stand behind her, wrapping my hand around her waist. I feel her body relax.

"I'm Levi Grayson. You saved my mom last week."

"Oh, hi! How's Mrs. Grayson? I wanted to check on her, but I've been busy with school and work."

"She's much better and wanted me to thank you in person." He puts his hand out to Dele, and she shakes it. He lifts her hand to his lips. "Thank you for saving my mom."

"You're welcome. I just happened to be there when she needed help." He doesn't let go of her hand, and I'm getting close to knocking his hand off. It is almost as if he can read my mind, or maybe my scowl communicates that. He drops her hand.

"I'm thankful you were there and knew what to do. It made a lot of difference." She smiles.

"You're welcome."

"She would like to see you, so if you have a minute to stop by this week, that would be great." *Motherfucker*.

"Dele and I will stop by tomorrow," I immediately answer, and he nods. If he is disappointed and hoping to have Dele alone, he hides it well. No fucking way are you getting any closer to my wife. I smile at him.

"Great, I'll tell mom to expect you and your husband tomorrow," he says. "Have a good night."

"Goodnight," Dele answers, and I close the door.

"Oh my god, what a crazy week. I forgot to mention Mrs. Grayson to you," she says as we head back to the living room. Paula took the flowers. Good.

"No worries. I heard all about my superhero wifey. Levi brought that basket of sweets for you earlier." She has a sheepish smile. Sweets are her Achilles' heels.

"I just happened to be there when she needed help and knew what to do," she answers, admiring the basket of sweets.

"Good." I pull her to me. "So, what's with the makeup? Any outing plans with my crazy brother?" I've come to accept him as her usual partner in crime.

"No outing. Vanessa just used my face to practice her technique. I was her model," she answers as she unwraps the gift basket.

"Tell Vanessa I'm going to need payment for my wife's modeling work."

"Very funny, Luke," she laughs. I smack her ass. I'm so lucky to be able to do it whenever I want. "This is some good stuff. Mrs. Grayson's son went all out." She grins. "A man after my heart," she says, opening one of the chocolate boxes, and two unwrapped chocolates go into her mouth. The unexpected constriction in my chest alarms me. I know her words are casual, and it's all about the chocolate display, but the fact that the Levi guy couldn't stop staring at her annoys and concerns me at the same time. I need Bruce to work faster.

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LUKE



The next afternoon, as promised, Dele and I visit Mrs. Grayson, who seems pleased and grateful to Dele. She tells us that she has told everyone about Dele saving her and how thankful she is. The fact that she's telling everyone makes me cringe, but I put on a smile and agree with her that I'm proud of my wife. Levi doesn't say much, but his eyes seem to zone in on mine and Dele's connected hands. As soon as Mrs. Grayson starts to yawn, Dele says she needs her rest, and we get up to leave.

The doorbell rings as we head to the door. Lily walks in, smiling and hugging Levi, then turns to see Dele and me. I pull Dele close to me.

"What a surprise to see you here," she says to me, ignoring Dele.

"I could say the same of you."

"You two know each other?" Levi asks.

"Yes, Luke and I dated," she offers with a sad laugh. "But we still work together," she adds, and I turn a stern look toward her.

"Small world. Lily and my sister went to college together, and Dele saved mom," Levi offers his own unsolicited connections.

"Well, have a good evening," I say, taking Dele's hand. She waves at Levi and follows me out.

"Do you still work with Lily?" Dele asks right as the elevator opens. Her voice is low, and her head is down. We get on, and I lift her face to look at

me. I need her to know I have nothing with Lily.

"We still have a few projects with McIntyre, but I've delegated them to my team. The last project we worked late on, I've canceled. She's bitter about it, but she'll live." Dele nods and doesn't say much. Our evening is quiet, which I don't like, especially with my travel plans coming up. I keep her close to me all evening, the more she tries to pull away.

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DELE



I sit for a moment. Today has been nonstop at the ER. I'm tired. My nipples are tender, which I can't understand. I've adjusted my bra a few times today. The text from my brother doesn't help my mind. We haven't talked in a while; he's asking if I'm still sticking with the plan. Truth is, he's right.

I'm choosing Luke.

I want to be with Luke. I want a future with him. He did say he loves me, and I believe him, but crazy Lily and my trust issues with men are tying my tongue, stopping me from saying it back to him. Maybe I need to say it to believe it and manifest it into our lives. I'll tell him when he returns from this trip.

One more hour, and I'm out. I'm already dreaming of my bed and some sexy talk with Luke. I smile just thinking of our nightly conversations. A good thing Martin dropped me off this morning, which means I'll get a ride home. I can barely stay awake these days. Tomorrow will be my rest day. I hear the ER door open; the paramedics are bringing someone in. I get up and see Curtis, the patient I call "giant baby." I work with the paramedics to transfer him to bed.

"I see you can't stop coming to visit me, Curtis, or you just love this place," I joke with the boy I call "giant baby," who's a frequent flyer at the ER. Once he doesn't take his meds, which is often because he dislikes the

side effects. According to him, the meds make him slow in playing baseball, and as he's always said to me, baseball is all he lives for. I've often tried to change his thinking that he can be more than just baseball, but he's too young to understand.

"How else do I get to see the most beautiful woman if I don't make an excuse to be sick?" He smiles. This young, and he's already a flirter.

"You got jokes, giant baby," I laugh with him as I get ready to inject him with his meds prescribed by the doctor. It all happens so fast—before I can inject him, he jerks and pushes me hard. I stumble into the equipment.

Everything makes a loud crash in the room. I try to get up, and before I can balance myself, he comes at me and kicks me, then picks me up and throws me.

"I don't want medication!" giant baby shouts at me.

My head hits something hard, and I black out.

When I open my eyes, I'm in a hospital bed with doctors checking on me. "You had us worried for a second there," Jax says to me.

"What happened?" I ask with all my strength, though it is barely a whisper.

"Giant baby went nuclear on you. We don't know why, but he's sedated now, and guards are watching him."

"Oh god, my head hurts," I say as I try to get up and feel the ghastly pain in my head. I lay back down.

"You hit your head hard against the metal cabinet. You have a mild concussion, and girl, you are pregnant," she says with excitement.

"What!?" I ask, my voice trembling. She holds my hand. I squeeze it with the little strength I have, as I try to comprehend the shock of the information she just shared.

"We found out during the x-ray to check if you had any broken bones. Giant baby went nuclear and kicked you hard a few times before they pulled him off you."

"I didn't know," I murmur in response to the news of my pregnancy.

"I figured as much, but your baby is okay, and they can discharge you tonight."

"Can you please call Osei to come and get me?"

"Not your husband?" she stares at me, a bewildered expression on her face.

"For now, I need to hide this from Luke. Luckily, he's out of town for the next two days, and maybe I'll be better by the time he gets home."

"Why are you hiding this from him? I don't think that's a good thing." Her voice echoes her concern.

"Trust me, Luke will raise hell if he sees me like this, and now that I'm pregnant, it will not be a pretty sight. It's best I'm better by the time he returns, and I can break it to him more mildly."

"Okay, I'll call Osei," she says, agreeing with me. "You rest for now." I nod and close my eyes. I feel pain all over, but they can't give me too many meds because of the baby. I can't even rejoice about my baby, considering I don't know how Luke will react to this. What I do know is I'm keeping my baby.

I rest and wait for Osei to show up.

"Thank God you're okay. And good thing Luke is out of town."

"Yeah, can you help me get home? I should be good by the time he gets back."

"Sure, let's go."

An hour later, we sign out and head home. Osei helps me get into bed. The nurse in charge already told me I should take all the time I need to rest. I just nodded, not sure how this injury will affect things, but I can't think about all that right now.

We arrived home, and Osei helped me get into bed. As he tried to move my leg, I cried out loud in pain.

"Gosh, I'm so sorry. You need to move some of these bones so they don't become stiff." He states.

"Not now, Osei. Tomorrow we can do all that. Right now, I need to sleep and try not to think about my baby."

"Wait, what? Did you just say baby?" His voice is loud.

"I just found out that I'm pregnant. They said the baby is fine."

"You didn't tell me you've been getting cozy with my brother," he teased. "That explains why he's been crazy jealous." He laughed. "I'm so going to enjoy messing with him now that I know."

"Please don't do that. You know Luke won't find it funny."

"Fine, I won't poke him yet. But about the baby, was this planned?" Way to switch, Osei.

"No, but can we keep this news to ourselves for now?" I pleaded, though I knew that was nearly an impossible request with Osei. He might keep it

from Luke, but he sure as hell wouldn't keep it from his mom. "I need to speak with Luke first." Before Stella calls him. I'm not sure if a baby was even in the plans for us.

"Please don't tell me you don't want to keep my niece or nephew," he says with a scowl. I turned a perplexed face to him.

"The one thing I do know is that I'm keeping my baby. I just don't know how your brother would feel about it. But for now, please keep it between us."

"Go to sleep. We'll talk in the morning when you look and sound a lot better," he grumbled.

"Thanks." I watched him leave. I felt weaker than I let on. Luckily, I have 48 hours before Luke gets home. I should be good by then. I managed to rub my flat belly despite the pain and weakness I felt. I just need to rest, and all would be fine. I told myself that and closed my eyes, just for a minute.

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LUKE



As soon as I closed the major part of the deal, I delegated the rest to Kevin and Carlos to finish up and call me if anything changed. They were surprised when I mentioned I was heading to the airport, but the last five days away from Dele had been torture. We'd talked briefly about her work and school schedule.

I really wished she would come with me, but she had work and school, both of which were important to her. School, I understood, but she doesn't need to work. I couldn't tell her that, she'd bite my head off before the words left my lips.

Now, I'm realizing I needed to delegate so I can leave two days sooner and be with my wife. My plane touched down, and I raced to the car, eager to see Dele.

Hopefully, she gets home soon, and I have a surprise for her. Soon as I entered our home, I heard the loud, painful cry of my wife. I dropped my bag and rushed towards our bedroom. Before I could open the door, I heard my brother's voice.

I paused at the door and listened as they talked. I held in my excitement when I heard about the baby. She can't leave me if that's what she's thinking.

Osei stepped out of the room, and I faced him with a frown.

"Before you go all supernova, protective-husband-beast mode, be quiet," he chided as soon as he saw me.

"Fucking tell me what's going on," I sneered at him.

"She was attacked at the hospital today."

"The fuck?!" I yelled as he shushed me. I let out a low growl. "Fuck," I cursed under my breath.

"She looks bad, and you need to hold it together when you check on her."

"Tell me how bad?" I made a low growl at him.

"Bad, but please don't say anything." He encouraged me to move gently, and we opened the door. She was asleep. I saw the bruises on her face and turned to my brother, who signaled that I should relax. We stepped outside.

"What the fuck happened?" I yelled as soon as Osei and I closed the door.

"Giant baby attacked her earlier today; she's concussed and bruised. They had to do an x-ray on her—that's how they found out she's pregnant. Thankfully, no broken bones."

"The baby?" I asked, looking confused. "I overheard you guys, plus you just said she's pregnant without realizing."

"My niece or nephew is fine." I let out a breath of relief. "Now that you're here, we can each take turns checking on her during the night."

"Okay." We sat facing each other.

"She's going to be okay," Osei said quietly. I nodded, but something inside me didn't feel right. I went to another bathroom to shower and quietly grabbed a change of clothes from our room. I kissed her forehead as she slept before going to join Osei in the living room. He played a movie, but I wasn't watching it, just staring at the screen, trying to control my anger at the fact the hospital was negligent in protecting my wife. They were about to face my wrath.

Osei fell asleep, but I went back in to check on Dele. I kiss her forehead again. An hour later, I went in and lay next to her. I feel wetness on the sheet. I pulled the cover away. It's right there in front of me—blood all over the bed. I lifted her up and noticed her breathing was shallow.

"Osei!" I shouted. I tried to wake Dele; she's limp in my arms. I shouted again, "Osei!" He came rushing in and saw the blood. I held her close to me. She was barely breathing.

Osei took charge and called an ambulance. He checked her pulse as he talked to the 911 dispatcher, telling them her pulse was faint, and all I could do was hold her as I watched her slowly slipping away from me. The

ambulance felt like it took hours. I watched them work on her as I rode in the ambulance with her. Osei followed the ambulance. One of the paramedics confirmed the faint pulse and massive blood loss.

It all felt like déjà vu—the same way I'd watched my mom, bleeding, and I helplessly stayed next to her until the ambulance arrived. I couldn't think or function; I was gripped by fear of losing her.

As soon as we arrived at the hospital, they rushed her inside. As they worked on her, they came to ask me questions. Osei answered all the questions for me, down to her blood type being O negative. I couldn't function. My mind was on replay with the phrase "I can't lose her."

"We need a next of kin or family to sign for her surgery." It was like someone woke me up from my daze.

"I'm her husband. I'll sign for her. And someone is going to answer for my wife's pain and our loss."

The lady looked frightened. They soon returned to tell us what we already knew—that she had lost a lot of blood and would need a blood transfusion. Only O negative blood would work for her, and, right now, there isn't a supply of O negative, which was the only blood type she could receive.

"Right now, we are calling other hospitals to get a supply of O negative."

"I'm O negative," Osei said. "I will donate to her." I looked at him. "Thank you," I whispered, so relieved.

"It's part of our friendship code. We are both O negative, and we'll donate for each other in times of need."

I hug him, so grateful we are brothers and that we both love Dele. Osei leaves with the nurses. I lose track of time until Osei returns with shorts and a shirt for me to change out of my bloodied clothing. After changing, I call my brothers. It's late, but they each answer.

"What's wrong?" Bruce asks the moment we are all on the call.

"Dele is in surgery; she lost our baby. She was barely breathing when they rushed her here," I rattle out in a shaky voice.

"Fuck," I hear Adam curse.

"What happened?" Declan asks.

"Someone attacked her earlier today at the hospital. I call it negligence on the hospital's part because it has happened before between her and this patient. They didn't protect her."

"Do you need your brothers?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, I fucking need my brothers. I'm taking a fight to this hospital for our loss and her pain."

"I'll get on the next flight and be there in a few hours," Daniel says. He's our legal guy.

"Send the hospital info. I'm on my way," Declan says.

"On my way too," Adam says.

"I'm only a phone call away. I will be back in Chicago tomorrow," Bruce says.

"Thank you," I say before we hang up.

Osei comes closer to me and sits quietly. We both know we can't lose her. An hour later, Declan and Adam arrived. They each hugged me and take a seat with Osei and me. Another hour goes by before a doctor comes out to speak with us.

"She's on her way to the recovery room. We were able to stop the bleeding. It will take a few hours before she wakes up, but she's going to be okay. I'm sorry she lost the baby, but there's no permanent damage."

"Thank you," I say to the doctor. She nods.

"A nurse will come and get you soon to see her." I nod, and Osei pulls me into a hug, and I finally hear him whimper. He has been holding it in.

"She's going to be okay," I whisper to him. He nods.

My brothers each tap and comfort me. I let out a breath of relief. She's alive. Then I inhale the anger I feel and exhale my fight. I'm ready to fight.

The nurses return to tell me Dele is in the room. Adam and Declan tell me they'll head home and see me later in the day at the corner when Daniel arrives. I go in with Osei to check on my wife. I lean in and kiss her forehead. I hear her soft breath and feel her pulse, which is stronger. The machines and devices connected to her are the only sound, reminding me she's alive. Now, I wait until she opens her eyes and talks to me.

Osei holds her other hand, and we sit across from each other, waiting for her to wake up. I won't leave her side. The tension in me relaxes, knowing her sedation is going to wear off soon and she'll be awake. I fall asleep holding her hand.

I wake up to her hand in my hair. I raise my head to meet her eyes.

"Hi," she murmurs.

"Hi." I smile, holding back the tears that well up in my eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says quietly. I jump out of my seat and lean onto her.

"I'm just happy you are alive, and that's all that matters," I say to her and notice Osei raise his head.

"Look who's back and smiling," he says. She manages to chuckle as I pull away from her.

"Hi, Osei," she says to him.

"That's my favorite girl," he answers, pushing me away and hugging her, making me laugh. "You just had to put our O negative deal to the test."

"Thank you, Osei," she croaks with a smile.

I sit and hold her hand, signaling to Osei to get out. He kisses her hand. "I'm going home and will be back later, now that you are in safe hands," he teases before leaving.

"Did I lose the baby?" her soft voice inquires, and I can see the hurt in her eyes.

"Yes, but what's important is that you are alive and well. I thought I lost you when I saw all that blood."

"I still have work to do on earth, not going anywhere soon." I wipe the tears trickling down her face.

"Good. Rest now and I'll be right here."

"You can go home, and I'm certain that I'll be right where you left me."

"Very funny. Go to sleep. I'm not leaving." A side smile graces her face as she closes her eyes, holding my hand. I know she doesn't want me to leave, despite what she may say.

I don't want to leave either. It's like I can't blink for fear I might lose her.

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LUKE



I've been staying next to Dele. Much as the nurses and doctors would love to kick me out, they can't. Daniel already served them the papers. I've had to step out a few times to speak with the administrator and tell them to speak with my lawyer each time they try to talk to me.

They are scared, as they should be, because my wife and child were perfectly fine, and they knew giant baby would go nuclear, but did nothing to protect her. A few of them are shocked to find out Dele is married, let alone to the man who donates millions to this hospital.

Dad can't stay away; he comes in to see Dele and sit with her despite how much pain it causes him. He holds her hand for a while and tells the administrator he will withdraw his donations if they don't take care of Dele. That certainly shocks them. Mom and Piah also come to see her, but Dele is sleeping through it all. Osei and I take shifts in staying at her bedside. Each time she opens her eyes, I'm right here. It comforts both of us, just knowing the other is there.

She stirs and squeezes my hand, and I return the squeeze. Then she mumbles, "I love you," and goes back to sleep. I kiss her hand, then her forehead, overwhelmed with emotions.

I step out for a few minutes to get some air. She finally says it. I'm thrilled. I need to get her home, but the doctors are now extra cautious with

her.

I return inside, and shock grips me when I see someone leaning over her in a position that seems off. I can't see what the person is doing, but something about it is wrong.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?!" I shout, and he pauses, likely not expecting me to return. He probably thought I'd left.

"I'm adjusting her bed," the guy lies. I'm pretty sure that's not what he was doing. My guess is, he was trying to kiss her. He turns, and my eyes widen when I see the fucking Dr. Beiz, the guy who wants my wife.

"Get the fuck out! You are not her doctor. I don't want you anywhere near my wife," I sternly state. I also do not want to shout and wake her up, much as I would love to punch his fucking face.

"Yes, I'm not her doctor, but I do work with her, and I only came to check on her."

"She doesn't need you checking on her," I growl.

"Fine, my apologies."

"Get the fuck out and don't return. If you do, I'll be sure to take your license."

He doesn't respond but leaves. He's still after her; he needs to stop. I need to figure out his angle. I know Dele isn't encouraging him, but his actions now tell me he's going to keep pursuing her.

In anger, I take my seat next to Dele.

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DELE



I open my eyes to find Luke in the same position as before. I'm comforted knowing he's here with me, and I see him every time I open my eyes. I still feel tired and sore, and I would like to go home, where I can lie next to Luke. I'm told that I have been in and out for the past two days, and my parents have called. Luke lied to them, saying I was sick with a cold. I thanked him for that, knowing how my parents would worry. Now that I'm awake, I'll give them a call.

- "I love you," I say to him. He smiles and kisses my forehead.
- "I love you too. You scared me."
- "I know. I didn't see it coming. I'll be more careful next time."
- "We'll talk more when we get home. For now, you rest, my love." I nod. He kisses my hand. Then one of the hospital administrators walks in.
 - "Can we speak to you, Mr. Blythe?"
- "Now isn't a good time. My wife just woke up. I'll stop by in a few." Luke says, and I notice the disappointment on their faces as they leave.
 - "What's going on?"
 - "I'm suing their asses for negligence in our loss and your pain."
 - "Oh, Luke, please don't do that." He turns to me, shocked.
- "Dele, you almost died because they were negligent. They knew about Giant Baby's violence and did nothing to improve security."

"I agree with you on the security part. Get them to increase it, but don't sue them, please. Instead of a lawsuit, can you please push for Giant Baby to get the surgery he needs? Insurance won't cover most of it, and he's being raised by a single mother who can't afford it."

"Dele..."

"Please, Luke. We don't need the money, but it would be life-changing for Curtis. He probably didn't even know he was attacking me. I don't want him to lose his future or end up in prison."

"He came with his mom to see you. I didn't let him in." I confess.

"He's a good kid who really needs the surgery to help reduce his seizures. The meds aren't helping, and the side effects are causing more problems for him." I squeezed his hand. He sighs.

"Is this what you want?" He asked in a low voice.

"Yes, zero-cost surgery for Giant Baby and eight weeks of full pay, plus rest for me." I smile.

"They were going to give you the time anyway, but I'll push for the surgery for Giant Baby."

"Thank you."

"Stay here while I call Daniel."

"I will be right here. I'm not going anywhere soon."

<u>:</u>

LUKE



Dele is released from the hospital on doctor's orders to take it easy. She has adhered to that thus far. Luckily, there are no exams on the horizon. Her instructors are informed of her medical situation, so she's taking some classes online.

The hospital seemed relieved to offer zero-cost surgery for Giant Baby instead of a lawsuit. They tried to play games about covering what insurance wouldn't, but I made it clear to them that I didn't care what they did as long as Curtis—Giant Baby, as my wife calls him—got the surgery he needs, and it was at no cost to his mother. They agreed, and Daniel is now involved in making sure they don't play games. Curtis's surgery is scheduled for next week.

Osei has been coming over to visit Dele. He pretty much stays with her while I work. I still don't trust leaving her alone. Paula is here as well, making sure Dele is well looked after.

Today, I had to stop at the office, and Dele calls me, excited when Osei shows up with ice cream for her. After talking to her, I call my annoying brother.

"I'm going to put you in a coma for bringing my wife ice cream."

"Good idea, bro. On the plus side, she and Mom would sit by my bedside until I wake up." He's fucking right about that, and even more annoying because I can almost visualize the smirk.

"Get out of my house."

"Dele and I are watching a horror movie. She lost a bet. Why do you think I brought her ice cream?" How the hell did I end up with an evil brother? I'm too far away to fight him. I might as well plead with him and then break his nose when I see him.

"Osei, please don't watch a horror movie with Dele. She doesn't like scifi either, but she can handle it—play that and call it a day. She's not fine yet; you can torture her later when I'm there to keep her from screaming her lungs out."

"The fact you're pleading is refreshing, to say the least," he mocks.

"I'll beg if I have to, to prevent my wife from having nightmares." I'm pleading. I honestly think horror movies exacerbate her fears.

"You're lying, but fine. We'll watch sci-fi together."

"Let's do this. I'm ready. I won't scream or hide!" Dele shouts.

"She's excited, Luke," he whispers.

"Yeah, until she starts to scream in her sleep."

"Bye, Luke. You are disrupting our movie time." He hangs up before I can say more. I hope he sticks to sci-fi. I decided to sweeten the deal for him and send him a text.

Me: Lunch and dinner for you and a friend on me.

Osei: Now you're talking, bro. Sci-fi it is.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm tied up at the office and might get home late. Dele screaming in her sleep is never a good idea.

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LUKE



Dele is on her way to visit and have lunch with me today. It's her first check-up after the surgery. I wanted to go with her, but she refused and insisted on going alone. She's convinced I'd intimidate the doctor with my scowl. I've agreed on the condition that she calls me once she's done with the update.

Right after the visit, she calls and tells me everything is good, and the doctor has given her permission to resume normal activities. Now she's on her way here. Kevin has ordered the lunch Dele wants.

As soon as she walks in, she's wearing black pants and a white silk blouse. Her full head of hair has my attention—it's lovely, though it was in cornrows last night. She looks around my large office. "So this is where the decisions are made. I like it," she says, taking one of the chairs facing my desk. She picks up the framed picture on my desk, the one Declan sent me.

"Do I get a kiss?" She sets the frame down.

"No." I raise a brow. "It's never just a kiss with you." I laugh.

"A hug then?"

"Even that is questionable. Where's the lunch you promised me?" I press my phone to call Kevin. He comes in with bags of food.

"It just arrived," he says.

"Perfect," Dele says, getting up to help Kevin. I watch as they set the food on the side table next to the loveseat in my office.

"Thank you," Dele says to Kevin, who nods and leaves. I know he won't let anyone in.

I get up from my desk and move to the sofa. Dele hands me chopsticks for ramen. I take them and plant a quick kiss on her lips.

"I always get a kiss," I say to her. We eat lunch, and I ask more questions about her check-up.

"Everything is back to normal," she says.

"Good, so we can resume normal activities." I wink at her, making her shake her head and smile.

"Yes, we can," she says, poking at me.

We finish our lunch and throw the bags into the trash. We sit back, and I take her hand.

"Why do you refuse to move to our main bedroom?" I ask. She gives me a skeptical look, and I know she's about to give me a diplomatic answer. But I've had time to think about this, and I'm not about to let her wiggle her way out of it.

"I just like the room I'm in," she says, giving me a forced smile. I can tell she's not telling me the truth. I pull her to sit on my lap, and she buries her face in my neck.

"You know I'm not letting this go, right?" I say. She immediately tries to get up, but I hold her in place. "I know you like the room you're in, and I'll sleep anywhere you are. But I also know you make a conscious effort to avoid stepping into the primary room." She moves from my neck to give me a side-eye.

"You're over-analyzing things," she says. "How about we go home, and I'll step into the room, then?"

"Good." I reach for my phone. "I can call Paula and have her move all your stuff in there now—"

"No!" she screams, knocking my phone out of my hand. "Do not move my stuff in there. I like where I sleep," her voice rises. And here I was thinking it was just some weird thing, but it's deeper than that. She tries to get up again, but I hold her in place, and she grunts in anger. I need answers.

"Tell me what I'm missing," I say, turning her face to look at me.

"Please, let this go. I like the room I'm in," she pleads, and I realize I need to get to the bottom of this.

"No, I can't let this go. I need to know why you won't move into our main room."

"Fine, I don't want to live in a room or sleep in a bed where you used to sleep and fuck Lily in. Plus, god knows how many other women," she says.

My eyes widen in shock, and I realize she's jealous. I like that, but she doesn't know it. I smile at her.

"It's not funny," she says, fighting to get off my lap again.

"Ayo mi, Lily has never been to our home," I say.

She rolls her eyes at me, but at least she's no longer fighting to get off. "I moved into that unit after Declan and Anne's wedding, when you were shaking your ass with my brother." She smacks my chest. "I requested the services of Lande DeMoore and asked for three designs. I showed them to Osei and told him I was tired of my old place, and that some girl was stalking me. I asked him if he wanted to design a place you would like. Which design would you pick?" She pauses and looks at me. "He selected one with a few changes."

Now her eyes are wide with disbelief.

"He didn't question why you would pick me, considering you didn't like me then?" she asks.

"He did, and I've always loved you. I just had a different way of showing it." She rolls her eyes. "I told him I wanted a different perspective, not Lily's, and he nodded and helped me out."

She relaxes in my arms and hugs me back.

"Thank you," she murmurs, pulling out of the hug.

"So, can you please move into our room?" I say, kissing her cheek and trailing kisses down to her neck. She jerks when I get to the spot I want.

"I'm waiting for a yes, but I can do this all day, too, until I get a yes."

"Yes," she moans out. I stop and she turns to me, dumbfounded, then with an arched brow. "I still like my room," she says, her voice challenging.

"And you said yes to moving into the primary room."

"I can always move back to my room," she smirks.

"Too funny, Dele," I laugh, and she scurries off my lap, making me laugh harder. I'm ready for the chase. She heads toward her backpack, but I'm quicker. I pull her into my arms, her back to my front. She leans into me, and I kiss her neck.

"We are not having sex in your office," she says.

Now I'm laughing harder.

"Not funny, you have staff all around, and anyone can just waltz in," she continues.

"No one will walk through that door because it's locked, and I told Kevin not to disturb me," I reply.

She pulls out of my arms quickly. "Even worse, now he thinks we're getting our freak on in here." she gives me a stern look.

"I pay him not to think about what I do in here," I smirk, but my wife just frowns at me.

"Please, tell me you're not about to have sex with me on the desk after you've fucked different women," talk about icy cold water douse moment. *Fuck!*

"Let's go home," I say, grabbing her arm and her heavy backpack. I open the door, and Kevin gets up immediately when he sees us. I place her backpack on my shoulder and hold her hand. "Replace all the furniture in my office," I say to Kevin.

"Got it," he answers with a straight face, as though I've made this request before. I pull Dele with me, and we head home. Our ride in the elevator is quiet. The need is back, and we're both holding it in. I text Martin to have the car ready for us.

"I'll drive behind you," she says.

"No, Martin will come back for your car," I respond. She nods, knowing better than to argue with me. We get out of the elevator, and Martin is waiting. I'm bursting with anticipation. Our ride home is also quiet, with Martin checking on us in the mirror. Dele and I continue to steal glances at each other, the sexual tension between us intensifying. Our bodies are exclaiming an unspeakable urge to devour each other, but we remain quiet, the build-up creating an almost unbearable longing as Martin weaves through traffic.

As soon as he pulls up, we both race out of the car and into the elevator. Our unit door can't open fast enough. I pull her into a kiss the moment we close it. Our hands are all over each other, pulling clothes out of tucked places, shoes getting kicked off.

"Welcome back, Mr. and Mrs. Blythe," Paula says behind us.

Dele breaks the kiss and hides her face in my chest. "Get out!" I yell at Paula, who grabs her bag and scurries toward the door.

"Food is in the oven," she says, avoiding our eyes, as Dele laughs.

Soon as the door closes behind Paula, I lift Dele up in a fireman's hold, smack her ass, and she laughs. I carry her to the bed in the main room and drop her on it.

She laughs and tries to run. I pull her legs back and land on her, taking over her mouth.

"I've missed you," I say, kissing her neck as she struggles to unbutton my pants.

"I missed you too," she says, finally pushing my pants down and, kicking them away. I try to unbutton her blouse, but the buttons are too many, so I rip the shirt. "No, you didn't!" she laughs.

"Yes, I did," I respond, unfastening her bra, and her breast spills out. I take one of her nipples in my mouth. "God, I've been starved for ten months," I say between sucking on each nipple and squeezing her breast.

"It's not even a month, Luke," she says, laughing. My hands make their way to unzip her pants, and my finger traces the line of her wetness. I smirk at her.

"Maybe it's two months too long," she teases.

I pull her pants and underwear down and kiss her thigh, slowly working my way toward her center. As soon as my tongue finds it, she lets out a moan that fills my head. I feast on her like a starved man, because that's exactly what I am. She comes multiple times, and I stand up.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

"Yes, my love," she honeyed, the sound sending shivers of delight down my spine, my heart pounding. She spreads herself wide open, inviting me in. I climb on top of her and fill her completely. As always, she wraps her legs around me tight. Our hands interlace, and we both experience the soulconnecting pleasure of our union. I make sweet, slow love to my wife as she cries out my name in ecstasy.

I pull her close after releasing inside of her, holding her tight.

"You do know I've only just started, right?" she says.

"I'm quite sure you've just started," she laughs.

<u>:</u>

LUKE



I answer Osei's call. "So, before you go all super alpha batshit crazy husband mode—" I guess no hello today. "—Dele and I are going out tonight. She already said yes." I sigh. "Plus, I think she needs to get out a bit more, and no, you can't come." I'm quiet, trying to figure out how to handle my annoying brother. "Are you there?"

"Why can't I come?"

"Because you're too bossy, and Dele needs to relax and have fun like she used to." As much as I want to disagree with him, the idea of Dele going out doesn't sound bad.

"Fine, but I'm sending a bodyguard with you because the last time she was out with you, you couldn't handle the crazies."

"Yeah, yeah. It was that one time. Do you have any idea how many times we've gone partying together?"

"I don't care about the past; I care about now."

"Whatever, I'll be there at eleven."

"Okay. The guard will be informed. Text me the address of where you're taking her."

"We might make multiple stops." I honestly wish he was standing in front of me so I could glare at him.

"Absolutely not. She's not strong enough, despite what she puts forth. Do I need to call Mom on your ass?" I know that behind the veneer of laughs lies Dele's pain from our loss. As much as she tries to tell me she wasn't attached yet, I know she feels the loss and uses the physical pain to mask the emotional one. Underneath it all, she still isn't a hundred percent herself.

"Fine, one stop." I can visualize his eyes rolling. Calling Mom works both ways.

"Good. Now get off my phone, and please, no craziness with my wife."

"Bye." He hangs up, and I call Dele.

"Hello."

"How are you feeling today?"

"I'm good. Zero pain, and I'm going out with Osei and Jax tonight." She sounds excited.

"Osei told me. I didn't know Jax was going too." I'm not too happy about this information. From what she's told me about Jax, she's a wild card. You never know what you might get.

"I just told her, and she's more excited than I am."

"Okay. I'm going to work late, and please don't overexert yourself; you're still healing."

"I promise I won't."

"Talk later, Ayo mi."

"Bye." I hang up and call Bruce. "Hey, Dele's going out tonight with my knucklehead brother. Can I have a guy keep an eye on her?"

"Hello to you too, and is she good to go out yet?"

"Osei thinks it'll be good for her. I just need someone to keep an eye on her should my brother forget that she's a priority. The tracker only tells me where she is; it doesn't help if some asshole thinks it's okay to grope her."

"Got it. Text me the details of where they're going, and I'll have someone keep an eye on her."

"Thanks, Bruce."

"Talk later." I hang up, lean back, exhale, and before I can lean forward, my phone rings. It's my dad. Just my life.

"Hello."

"I just spoke with Dele, and she tells me she's feeling much better and going out for the first time with your brother. Do you think that's wise? She

needs more time to rest." He barks at me. I swear he cares about my wife more than he cares about me.

"Dad, she'll be fine, and she needs the air. She just wants to go out for a few hours, and I'll have a bodyguard with her."

"I still don't think it's a good idea. Call me when she's home safe."

"Dad, you'll probably be asleep by the time she gets home."

"I don't care. Call me, and I mean it." He hangs up before I can say anything. I think he loves my wife more than he ever loved me, but that's because Dele is so special.

"Ugh!" I grunt in anger, my fist clenched. Osei is a fucking pain in my ass. I let out another exhale just as my mom's ringtone comes through. *Fuck!* I control my frustration and answer the call.

"Hello."

"Hi, darling. How are you?"

"I'm fine, and actually busy right now, Mom."

"I won't take too much of your time," she says. If only that were true.

"Your brother just told me—" Here we go. "—that he's going out with Dele tonight. I don't think that's a good idea." I'm going to fucking punch Osei. "Danso doesn't think it's a good idea, right, dear?" She calls my stepdad, who's probably next to her. "Yes, dear." I hear him answer in the background.

"Mom, Dele needs to go out and get some air. She's been inside for over a week now."

"Yes, get some air and take a walk, but not clubbing with Osei. You and I know Dele can't match his energy right now."

"I know, but she has promised not to overexert herself."

"She still needs to rest. She's a strong woman, but even strong women need pampering and rest."

"Mom, I'll go with her and bring her home after a few hours."

"Good idea, Luke. Dele needs her rest."

"Yes, boss." I say in a snarky tone.

"Don't get sassy with me, and call me when you two get home." Great, now I'm required to text my mom and dad that I'm home safe with my wife. Why did the universe have to punish me with a younger brother like Osei?

"I gotta go, Mom. Bye, Mom," I say quickly and hang up before she starts talking about something else. I take a moment to rest my head on my

desk and get my focus back to work. I received the location text from Osei and forwarded it to Bruce. It's after nine when I feel accomplished. I race home to my wife. I want to see her before she leaves with Osei.

I get home, and she isn't there. I call her phone.

"Hello."

"Where are you?"

"Jax came to pick me up early. I'm at her place. We'll meet up with Osei."

"Okay, text me when you get to the place."

"Will do, talk later." She hangs up fast before I can say anything. I sit for a while. The house is too quiet. I decide to call Declan; he might be willing to go out tonight.

Declan and I meet at the corner. We talk, and I ask about his French lessons.

"Not quite there yet," which surprises me.

"You sounded good last time at the restaurant."

"Apparently, I'm not that good when my wife speaks French rapidly whenever she's upset." I burst into laughter.

"So French is Anne's go-to language when upset?"

"Unfortunately for me, yes. And when she's super upset, it's Arabic, and no, I have no plans to learn Arabic. I just have to make sure she's not super upset." I laugh out loud.

"At least Anne yells at you in French. Dele tunes me out and disappears on me, which I fucking hate." He's now laughing at me. Such is our lives now.

"Speaking of Dele, how's she feeling?" he asks.

"Much better. She's out tonight with my annoying brother."

"Good. At least you're no longer killing him." I down my drink right away and feel the burn in my throat.

"Believe me, I've thought about it but realized it would upset my wife and my mother, so he stays." Declan laughs harder.

We spend the next hour talking and laughing until he decides to head home, and I realize Dele isn't home either. I decided to head to the lounge, where Dele is hanging out with Jax and Osei.

Arriving there, it takes a minute for me to find Osei, sitting with two women and acting like the king of the small space. The women are soaking up his words. I stand in front of him. "Where is she?" The ladies look at me

like I'm ruining their fun. He points to his left. Dele is at the bar, and a guy is chatting her up. I shoot a scowl at Osei; he shrugs, and I head towards Dele.

I get closer and see the guy is Levi. I want to believe it's just a coincidence that he's here at the same lounge, but I don't trust the guy. I hide behind her so I can hear their conversation.

"No, I can't take my ring off. Luke has zero tolerance for me removing my ring," she says. *That's my girl*.

"Can't say I blame him," he says, putting his hand out to her. She takes his hand, feeling comfortable around him because of his mom. I'm not. He zones in, examining the ring. "Your husband has taste. This is a custom-made ring. It's not off the shelf."

"I didn't know that. I just think it's beautiful." She happily answers as he ogles her.

"It's certainly worth a king's ransom," he says as Dele pulls her hand back and takes a sip of her drink.

"Since we're here, can I buy you a drink?" That's it. I turn and wrap my hand around her waist, which startles her. She turns to see it's me and smiles, kissing my lips.

"I have zero tolerance for men buying her a drink or flowers," I say to him. He nods, and I can see the unmistakable disappointment on his face.

"Nice to see you again, Luke." He puts his hand out. "I just ran into Dele, and we were just chatting." I take his hand and squeeze hard, making him wince.

"No worries, but I came to take her home. It was nice seeing you again." He nods. I help Dele off the chair and take in her beauty in the black lace dress that shows her curves. Her hair is beautiful in bouncy coils that fall off her shoulder, and her makeup is all glitters, making her eyes glow. I bet Jax did that for her.

"Where is Jax?" I ask her. She looks around but doesn't see her.

"She was here a few minutes ago." She looks again and points in the direction of Osei. "She's over there." I look and see Jax making out with some guy.

"I need to let her know I'm leaving." I nod and take her hand. She grabs her purse and turns to Levi. "Goodnight." He nods and smiles at her, then meets my eyes, which are watching him closely. His smile falls away.

I lead her towards Jax and Osei.

Osei jumps up to pull me from Dele, but I don't let go of her hand. "Hey, Dele said he lives in your building. That's why I didn't worry," he whispers.

- "Yes, he does, but I don't trust him. It's fine. I'm taking her home."
- "Come on, man. She was safe."
- "I know, but I don't want her burnt out."
- "Okay, I'll see her tomorrow." I nod just as Jax comes over to hug Dele.
- "Guess you are leaving," she says to Dele, who nods.

"Will talk tomorrow." Dele nods again. She follows as I lead her out of the lounge. Once outside, the breeze hits us, and I pull her into my arms, devouring her mouth. She wraps her arms around me. I pull away from the kiss because my phone is ringing. She rests her head on my chest. I answer the call; it's Martin. I tell him to bring the car around. We're ready to leave.

I feel eyes on me. I turn in the direction and see fucking Levi scowling at me. What the hell is this guy's problem? If I wasn't already suspicious of him before, the way he's scowling at me right now—like he wants to kill me—makes me even more wary of him. I pull Dele closer and kiss her forehead.

Martin pulls up, and I help Dele into the car. I turn and wave at Levi, letting him know I can see him. He looks stunned. Asshole didn't know I could see him. The light was on him.

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LUKE



Bruce and I have been looking through the documents he brought over. This is us doing our groundwork before forming a partnership. The guy we are reviewing on paper is completely different from the guy in person, but there's potential for Blythe Corp to make a killing if we play our cards right.

"So, when are you going to admit that you are in love with your wife?" I turn a scowl towards Bruce. *Not now. That's a confession I'm not making to him.*

"I'm not in love with her. We have an arrangement that's working fine, and we have an end date," I respond, just as my subconscious yells at me, *Liar!*

Bruce looks at me like I've lost my mind. I turn my attention back to the information we've been reviewing for hours to find the best ace to use. I need an ace on this guy before the next steps are discussed.

"I ran into Lily yesterday and asked her out on a date."

"Good, have fun. You will make a good catch for her," I respond without looking at him.

"Since you don't mind me dating Lily, when your contract is over with Dele, would you mind if I went on a date with her?" When I don't respond, he continues, "When are you two over again?" I look up from the document

to see his relaxed face. *Is he fucking serious?* We stare at each other for a few seconds, neither of us blinking. I lean forward.

"I don't care how good you are at what you do, and I love you like a brother, but if you go near my wife, I'll put a fucking bullet in your head," I state with every intention to act on it. He burst into laughter. *Fucking asshole. He just called me out.*

"Yet, you are not in love with your wife. I mention Lily, and you didn't even look up from the documents you've been reading for hours. I mention getting with Dele years from now, and you're putting a bullet in my head. Dude, in case you didn't know, you are worse than Declan."

"Fuck you." He laughs harder. Declan is crazy about Anne. The guy put his father six feet under for Anne. Granted, his father was a top-notch asshole.

Bruce starts sniffing. I already know he's going to stay for lunch. There's no kicking him out now that he smells the aroma of Dele's cooking.

"Who's cooking?"

"Dele is cooking," I respond with a duh look.

"I'm so staying for lunch, invited or not, and if you try to kick me out, I'm calling Daniel. He's in town."

I figure Daniel would be in town, since he texted last week about meeting at 'The Corner.'

"Like I said, fuck you." Having him and Daniel over isn't a bad idea, but I was looking forward to a quiet afternoon with Dele. She's working tomorrow.

"I can make the same arrangement you made with her, if I get to come home to such aroma."

"Once again, bullet. Head." I pantomime a gun aimed at him; he laughs again, getting off his seat.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry, and I'm done talking to you. I need food." He heads towards the door as I jump out of my chair, racing after him. "Dele, what are you making?" I hear him holler. I doubt she heard him over the music. I get closer only to see Osei popping some of the fried plantain into his mouth. No way am I having a quiet afternoon with Dele. I wink at her as she stirs the rice. My stomach growls once the smell of spices hits my nostrils. Bruce takes a seat next to Osei after a quick handshake and mimics Osei by taking a few of the fried plantain and

popping them into his mouth. His eyes widen at the taste of it, then he turns to me. "I'm so calling Daniel."

I mouth, "Fuck you," to him.

"Daniel is going to shorten our portion," Osei whines next to him.

"I'll make more," Dele says, like she wants more people over. I know she loves to cook, but no way is she going to spend her time cooking all day.

"Bullet. Head," I snicker to Bruce. He laughs louder at me, grabbing his phone. He calls Daniel. I move closer to Dele and wrap my arms around her. She leans into me as I kiss her neck.

"Don't overwork yourself," I whisper.

"It's fine, I don't mind."

"She's fine, Luke," Osei says, as though I'm disturbing her cooking process and that's serious business.

"I can still kick both of your asses out," I say to him.

"Sure, after we're full," Bruce replies, and I chuckle.

Hours later, Daniel, Bruce, Osei, and I laugh together. We're all full and have all enjoyed Dele's cooking. She packs a few to-go packs for all three of them. Bruce seems happy about that. I tell Dele to go and rest while Osei and I clean up the kitchen. The guys helped as well, making the night a good evening.

I check on Dele a few times and find her studying. I leave her to her books and return to the guys. We make a night of hanging out together, watching a basketball game and having a good time. As we all laugh, I realize this moment only happened because my wife is warm and welcoming, plus her cooking brought us all together. I smile and enjoy the moment. When they all leave, I turn the light off and go in to find Dele already in bed.

Getting into bed with her, my hands go under the T-shirt and cup her breast. She stirs. I run my hand over her smooth skin and take a nipple in my mouth. "Luke," she purrs. I roll my tongue around her hardened nipple, giving each one attention. My finger finds its way inside her wetness, and she moans. I know she's tired; we'll have to make a quick one of it. I pull the T-shirt off and get on top of her, spreading her legs. I kiss her nipples and kiss her body while my fingers work on her. She moans louder. I pull my pants off and sink myself into her wetness. Her walls tighten on me, sucking me in. I kiss her mouth, and she opens up for me, our tongues rolling in harmony. She wraps her legs around me, I sink deeper into her

wetness, moving in slow ecstasy. I break the kiss, my tongue trailing her neck, it sends her wild. "Luke, faster please." I smile and increase my pace. She matches my movement. "Oh god," she cries out loud as she comes. I move faster and soon explode my seed in her. I fall on her, kissing her neck more. She laughs, and I roll off her to her side. I lace our hands and bring it to my lips.

"My plan was to have a quiet evening with my wife, but those guys just had to show up." She laughs.

"Next time, let me know the plan and we can join forces in kicking them out."

"Sounds good," I say and kiss her lips. She turns to her side, and I clean myself and her off with my shirt that was close by, then pull the covers over us and wrap my arms around her.

"Good night, Dele."

"Night, Luke."

<u>:</u>

LUKE



I made a quick trip to New York to close some deals. I wanted Dele to come with me, but New York is still a place with bad memories for her, and she wants to stay away. I had Bruce look into her uncle per her request; he was bad. I had to tell her about it, and she begged me to get him help if I could.

He's been at a rehab center for the last few months and getting better, but Dele doesn't want to see him yet. She will in the future, she says. I won't push until she's ready to take that step. After my meeting, I'm hanging out with Daniel at his place. We're both not interested in going out. We've just finished discussing his plan to move to Chicago when my phone rings.

It's Bruce. Since it's just Daniel and I, I answer it on speaker. "Hey, I'm with Daniel. What's up?"

"Luke, we have a problem," he says, and my heart pounds right away because the only problem we could have is something happening to Dele. She's out clubbing with her friends tonight—what went wrong for Bruce to call me?

"Dele just cut one of my guys." I exhale the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

"Did the guy try to grab her?" I ask. The only way Dele will use her knife is if some guy grabs her, triggering her to fight back.

"Yes."

"Fuck! Why would he grab her instead of talking to her?"

"He was trying to get her out of the club, but she's refusing to leave with him unless you confirm her pet name and her dance name—" I smile. That's my girl. "—and the place she's at is about to get chaotic. A fight is about to break out. My guys see guns."

"Are your guys listening?"

"Yes."

"Ask them all to mute and give the phone to her."

"I can't mute."

"Fine." It only takes a second, and I hear her voice.

"Hello."

"Your pet name is 'Ayo mi' and your dance name is 'Nami'k'. Please go with them before things get out of hand."

"Okay," she says. As if on cue, a gunshot rings out loud. The line disconnects.

"Dele!" I shout.

"Luke, the line was cut off. We should know in a few minutes. Let me call you back," Bruce says. Before I can say anything, he disconnects.

"Fuck!" I pace with my heart pounding again. My mind is reeling with lots of crazy scenarios. In each one, I can't handle it if anything happens to her. I call Bruce's line back, and he keeps sending me to voicemail. While I pace, Adam arrives to join us. I barely notice him as I await updates on Dele. My phone rings.

"Tell me she's okay," I ask right away.

"She's fine. They lost signal for a moment. I should let you know that Dele feels bad and is insisting on treating the wound of the guy she cut." Of course she is.

"Get him out of there as soon as she treats his cut."

"I knew you would say that." He laughs at me and hangs up.

"She's good," I say to the faces looking my way. Daniel nods.

"What's this I hear about Dele liking to dance? I'll test her dance moves," Adam says.

"That shit you always pull with Declan, keeping Anne on the dance floor with you. Don't try that shit with me," I warn.

Daniel and Adam laugh.

"Told you he has it bad," Daniel mocks.

"Fuck it, I do. So, keep your hands to yourself," I add, and they laugh harder.

We spent the evening laughing and hanging out. My phone rings on FaceTime. It's Dele.

"Hi," I say, answering the call in the privacy of Daniel's office.

"Hi," she greets with a scowling face.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just trying to understand why you have men watching me. Did you think I was cheating whenever you travel?"

"No," I answer quickly. "That's not why I have men watching you. They're there to protect you. I don't want to come back and find you injured ever again."

"Oh," she pauses. "Good, because with the rate at which you've plastered your name all over my body, I'm pretty sure my vajayjay will set off an intruder alert if any other dick goes in there." I burst into laughter, but I like the thought of an intruder alert. And I'm glad she's taking it with ease—better than I'd hoped.

"Are you saying I can put my personalized ring in there?" I tease.

"I'm saying your personalized ring, AKA your dick, is already in there all the time." I laugh.

"Did you at least have fun with your friends?"

"Yeah, it was good with Jax and Vanessa before the big guy showed up, saying, 'Mrs. Blythe, we need to get you out of here,'" she mimics his deep voice, making me laugh as she pulls her hand. "I didn't know who he was, so I reacted."

"It's fine. He shouldn't have touched you."

"Maybe. But he jumped right on me when the gun went off, like he was taking a stray bullet for me. I felt bad for cutting him, so I treated his cut."

"Bet he learned his lesson," I say to her.

"Next time, let me know, so I don't go cutting people who are there to help me."

"Yes, Ayo mi."

"Alright, have fun with your friends. I'm going to bed. When do you get back?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Good night, Luke."

"Good night, Dele."

DELE



My second week back at work has been hectic, and my body needs to adjust to the fast pace.

My shift is over, and I'm tired. Just this once, I almost want to agree with Luke that I need to stop working and just stick with school. Luke will probably lock me up once I tell him the news that I'm pregnant, or he'll probably allow me school only and no ER work. My nipples are tender, and I feel nauseated at almost everything lately, though I pretend and hide it well. The three tests I did today were all I needed to confirm what my body was already experiencing. I'm pregnant, and I can't wait to tell Luke. Stella and Simon will be so happy. My body shudders as the memory of the last pregnancy creeps in.

I can't afford to have any mishap that could lead to another miscarriage. Much as my body bounced back, my mind didn't bounce back that quickly. I just managed to shove it to the back of my mind, even as it lingers every now and then. *Shove it back again, yes!*

I'm happy with the news today, and I'll take each day as it comes, doing everything to protect my baby. I drag my feet toward my car, toss my bag in, and send a text to Luke.

Me: Just clocked out, heading home, and I'm tired.com Luke: Can you drive? Should I send Martin for you?

Me: I'm fine. I can drive. See you soon.

I press the brakes to start my car, attach my phone to the holder, and pull my seatbelt on. A sudden knock on my window startles me. I turn to see Dr. Beiz. He is talking through the glass, and for a second, I'm disoriented until he signals for me to roll down my window. I do as he asks, pushing the button, and the window rolls down.

"What's wrong, Dr. Beiz?" I ask, perplexed.

"Sorry, Dele. I've been trying to call you, but you didn't hear me. I noticed you didn't sign that you gave meds to Mrs. Zapata. As you know, we're monitoring her meds."

"I didn't have Mrs. Zapata. Jax is her nurse, and she's still inside."

"I just spoke with Jax. She said Mrs. Zapata is your patient. Can you stop in quickly, and we can clarify this?"

"Sure," I answer, but he could have called me. Fuck it, I'll just go and clear this nonsense up. I roll my window up and turn my car off. Before getting out of the car, I decide to let Luke know.

Me: Going back inside to clarify something Dr. Beiz said I forgot to do. I should be on my way home in about ten to twenty minutes, tops.

I pocket my phone and follow Dr. Beiz, not talking. We just walk in silence. He takes the back route into the ER, but I'm too tired to care which route he's taking, as long as we get this sorted out, and I can head home.

"How's your husband?" he asks. My eyebrow rises at the strange question of him asking about Luke. I know he doesn't like Luke, but whatever. Just get this mix-up over with.

"He's fine," I answer and keep moving. He uses his badge to open the door, and I follow him in. The hallway is dim, which is weird, but maybe maintenance is doing something, because it's quiet here at this time of the day, anyway. Before I can ask him about the light, I feel a hit on my head. Something hard hits me from behind, and my body starts to fall. Dr. Beiz catches me, and I black out.

<u>:</u>

LUKE



I see the second text from Dele. It was sent twenty minutes ago, saying she'd be home in another twenty minutes. I don't like that she went back because of Dr. Beiz, but I'll wait a few minutes before checking on her. Kevin calls my attention to some documents I need to sign. By the time we're done, it's well over forty minutes. Dele should be home by now. I call her number, but she doesn't answer. I check her GPS, and her car is still at the hospital. She would have sent me a text if she was going to stay longer.

My gut is telling me something's wrong. Bruce calls me paranoid for always keeping an eye on Dele. Before I call him, I better check first.

I call Jax.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jax. Is Dele still in the ER?"

"No, she left a while ago."

"She sent me a text saying Dr. Beiz said she forgot something, and she was going to clarify it and then head home."

"I didn't see her come back here, and I don't see Dr. Beiz either."

"Okay, thanks."

I call Osei. Maybe he's heard from her and she just forgot to update me. Dele prefers to go home when she's tired.

"Hello?"

"Is Dele with you?"

"No, I talked to her before she clocked out, asking her to join me, but she said she was tired and was heading home."

"She's not home, and she's not answering her phone. Can you try calling her and let me know?"

"Okay," he replies.

I hang up with him and call my dad's nurse.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Is my wife there?"

"No, Dele didn't come here today."

"Okay, thanks."

I call Paula next.

"Hello, Mr. Blythe."

"Is Dele home?" I ask, without wasting time.

"No, I just left your place about five minutes ago, and she wasn't there."

"Okay, thanks." I hang up and call Osei again. He answers right away.

"Any luck?"

"No, her phone keeps going to voicemail, and Jax said she left earlier."

"Something is wrong, Osei," I tell him, confirming what I've been feeling.

"I'll drive to the hospital to check myself."

"Don't go there yet. I'll call you back."

Fuck it, I'm calling Bruce. I don't care how many names he calls me. I need to know Dele's okay. The feeling I'm having isn't good.

"Hello?"

"Bruce, something is wrong. Dele isn't answering her phone. I know you think I'm paranoid, but I've called everyone and no one's heard from her. Can you activate her tracker?"

"Alright, hold on." I wait patiently as he clicks through his system.

"You're right, something's wrong. Her watch is moving on I-294 south. Her phone is moving around inside the hospital. Her bag is in her car at the hospital parking lot, and the last tracker shows she's in a building in Bucktown. Someone's trying to throw us off."

"I know for a fact she's not at the hospital because if she were, her bag and phone would be close together. They're not. Can you tell which one of the two—her watch or necklace—is with her?" "Someone is wearing the watch, and both devices are showing a heart rate. I can't tell which one is hers."

"Fuck! I'm coming over," I say, hanging up before he can protest.

I text Martin as I head downstairs to have the car ready. When I arrive at Bruce's office, we find him and his men gearing up.

"I'm coming with you," I say as I walk in. He turns to object.

"You trained me, and I won't slow you down. I'm coming."

"Fine," he says, and someone starts passing me all the gear. I change into it quickly.

"A group already took the chopper and they're tailing the car that's on the highway with law enforcement. We're heading to the Bucktown building. Law enforcement will meet us there."

He signals to the guys, and we all head out. The drive is fast, and I stay quiet, trying not to think the worst. I check my phone again, but there's still no change. Osei calls, and I update him on everything. I can hear the worry in his voice.

"Can I let mom know?"

"Yes, but tell her not to call me right now. I need to think."

"I'll go over and tell her in person. She'll probably call Simon."

"That's fine. Just make sure they don't call me."

"Got it."

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DELE



Breathe, I remind myself for the umpteenth time. I have a purpose. Today is not my dying day. Luke will find me. I have people to live for. I'm not alone. Luke and I are going to have children. I'm not going down without a fight. Luke will send an army for me. I just need to hold the line as long as possible.

She strolls in, looking proud but with an edge of unease. I just need to find a way out of here before she goes nuclear.

"I tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen." Her voice is reedy. I can't tell if she's upset with me or herself. We both know she's reached a point where going back is impossible. Yet she holds her head high, her aura dripping with entitlement and half-baked intelligence. The question is, can her little intelligence help her? I need to keep her engaged—maybe I can buy time until Luke shows up. I know in my heart he will find me, but time is my enemy and my ally right now. It's also the invisible weapon I have. *Use it, Dele.*

- "What did you warn me about?" I ask flatly.
- "Walking away from my man, Luke," she snickers, rolling her eyes.
- "I don't know what you're talking about." Her sad laugh and angry eyes terrify me, but I refuse to cower to her twisted mind.

"Yes, you do. I told you Luke and I were meant to be together, but you ignored me and stayed with him. You even lied to him and cost my father millions in losses." She moves closer, her breath sour with anger. "Do you finally understand? You stole my man!" she yells in my face, her saliva hitting my nose. I turn to wipe it off my shoulder.

"He's not yours," I mutter.

"What did you say?" She steps back, eyes blazing. I lock eyes with her.

"He. Is. Not. Yours." I vehemently state.

The sting of her palm striking my face is loud. I take in a sharp breath, blood seething. I won't back down.

"Luke is my husband. He's not yours," I reiterate.

Her hand slaps me again. I breathe through the pain as a hysterical laugh bursts from her. It seems endless. Then she turns on me and punches me in the face. My lips burst open, blood filling my mouth. I suck it in. I try to clean the blood dripping from my nose with my shoulder, but it's hard with my hands tied.

"You may have stolen him, but once I get rid of you, I'm getting him back, and he will marry me, as planned and agreed upon by our fathers. You are ordinary and a nobody." I can tell she truly believes what she's saying. Weirdly, it causes me to laugh. I can't explain it, but I laugh at her ignorance and my despair, despite the pain.

"What's funny? Stop laughing." I laugh harder. Eventually, I stop laughing and give her a pitiful look.

"You think Luke will marry you? To think I actually thought you were a smart woman," I scoff.

"Yes, he will. You are the barrier in our way. As soon as I get rid of you, he'll see me."

"I've only known him for nine months. You've known him all your life. Don't you think if he wanted to marry you in the last, say, five years, he would have? The truth is, he doesn't want you. He loves me," I sneer.

"Liar!" she shouts in my face, delivering another punch that sends my head rolling back. Blood pours from my nose. Pain radiates through my body, but I refuse to cower to her.

"I'm lying?" I scoff. "I. am. Mrs. Blythe. I. am. Luke's wife. That's. a. fact." I forcibly state, hoping her crazy mind will come to terms with reality, even if it's just a small dose of it. I refuse to let fear take over and cripple me.

"Yes, you are lying. You seduced him, and now you think he loves you, but I won't let you get away with this because he's mine!" she screams at me, striking me once more.

"This shit hurts like crazy," I murmur. I should stay silent, but I can't let her win, not while I'm tied to this chair, unable to fight back.

"I seduced Luke?" I snicker. "Little old me seduced Luke Blythe? Thanks for letting me know about the power that I unknowingly have, considering you called me a nobody and ordinary. How is it possible that an ordinary nobody can seduce a man like Luke, unless, of course, he chose me?"

"I don't know how you did it," she yells. "But you did, and I intend to break the spell or whatever charm you used to capture him. Before you bewitched him, Luke never walked away from a deal, he always found a way to work things out, but you came in, and now he's punching old friends and backing out of millions of dollar deals." I chuckle at her, and at my own dilemma.

"I can tell you with absolute certainty that Luke will never be the same if you harm me. He will never forgive you. So, I suggest you let me go before things get out of hand."

"Nice try. I may not know what to do to you yet, but you are never seeing Luke again," she says with such conviction, rage, and hatred in her eyes. It rocks me to my core, and I know that any chance I had to make her see reason is now gone. She has the wealth and power to make me disappear, and I fear what she might do when she finds out I'm pregnant.

Her phone rings. She looks at it, then turns the phone toward me. I see Luke's face on the screen. My eyes widen when she pulls a gun from her back and points it at me, a finger on her lips, telling me to shush.

"Hello." She keeps her gun pointed at me while pretending to sound normal.

"I'm good, just working." Pause. "No, I haven't seen her." Pause. "I took your warning and didn't go near her or get in contact with her." Pause.

"Well, I hope she didn't run off with some loser." She smiles. Pause.

"I've heard crazy things, so don't let it shock you." Pause.

"How about you and I have dinner tomorrow so we can patch things up, no hard feelings? Sure, she can come too." Pause.

"Okay, bye." She hangs up.

"He's looking for you, and I will make sure he never finds you. I'll be his comforter, and once I'm pregnant, he won't have any choice but to marry

me," she says with a look of triumph, as if her plan is working. She makes another phone call, leaving the room and closing the door. I struggle to free myself from the zip ties. The more I struggle, the more they cut into my skin.

She comes back after a few minutes, giving me a pitiful look, like my time is up. "I'm handing you over," she says with a grin.

"To whom?"

<u>:</u>

LUKE



We finally pull up behind the building, and I spot a car I recognize. I turn to Bruce.

"That red Mercedes is Lily's car."

He looks at me, stunned. "Are you sure?"

"I'm certain."

"Then we're at the right place. But before we go in, call her office and ask about her whereabouts."

"Good idea," I dial her office number.

"Lily McIntyre's office," the PA answers, though I can't remember her name.

"Hi, this is Luke Blythe. Is Lily available?"

"Mr. Blythe, I'm sorry, Ms. Lily left for the day. Can I take a message?"

"No need. I'll try her cell. Thank you," I say, hanging up.

"She's not in the office," I tell Bruce.

"You're going to call her and keep her on the phone. But before you do, let me check in with the other guys."

I nod my understanding, watching as he calls the others. When he hangs up and turns to me, I notice his serious expression.

"The car was pulled over, and they found the watch on a lady. She claims a guy gave it to her, saying he didn't want it anymore. Law enforcement is

taking her in for questioning about the guy and where the watch was given to her. Dele's active signal in that building just went off. We need Lily's exact location. We know she's on the fourth floor, but there are at least six units on that floor." He signals to the guys to check if they're ready. They nod, and he adds, "Remember, you have to keep her talking. She's not a pro at this. Just keep her talking."

I dial Lily's number. It rings a few times before she answers.

"Hi, Lily," I manage to keep my voice calm.

"Hi, Luke."

I ask her about her day and her whereabouts, and she happily lies. I ask her about Dele, and she lies again, inviting me to lunch, claiming she's willing to bury the hatchet. She even says Dele may have run off with some loser. I'm upset, but I stay calm until the guys inform me that they have what they need.

As I hang up, she makes another call. I overhear her speaking to a man, arranging to have Dele picked up and "dealt with."

"Is she awake?" the man asks.

"Yes, but I can knock her out again, if that works better for you." Lily replies.

"I don't like you hitting her, just blindfold her. I'll call when I'm close."

"Fine, I don't know what you stupid men see in her." The guy hangs up without responding.

I'm fuming, but now isn't the time for anger. Bruce pats my shoulder to reassure me before dispatching his team. We head into the building quickly, and the guys break down the door to Lily's unit. Inside is an empty space, and the team restrains Lily as I rush to my wife. She has a busted lip, swollen face and a bloody nose, with blood on her scrubs. The necklace lies on the floor next to her feet, probably the reason the signal went out.

She leaps into my arms the moment the zip ties on her arms and legs are cut. I carry her out of the building as she cries non-stop. Lily is screaming my name. I tune her out and take Dele to the ambulance that's waiting. Whether Bruce or law enforcement called them, I don't know, but I'm thankful. I sit quietly with Dele, squeezing my hands tight; she's not letting go. She flinches when the paramedic tries to break our hold and check her blood pressure. I signal to the guy not to bother. He gently cleans her bloody nose and lips.

When the paramedic mentions taking her to the hospital, she shakes her head and starts crying. I know she doesn't feel safe away from me.

"I'll take her home." She clings to me as we head to the car Bruce has waiting for us. Her cry is breaking my heart, but I can't tell her to stop, knowing she's just escaped her worst fear. On the drive and elevator ride up, she frighteningly clings to me. In our unit, I remove all her bloody clothes, shoes, and socks, down to her underwear. She doesn't say anything, just follows my lead and continues crying. I carry her to our bathroom and set her on the counter. She doesn't protest when I start to wash her body in the shower.

Her winces seethe my blood at the pain Lily inflicted on her. I will exert my revenge. Right now, I'll take care of Dele.

<u>.</u>

DELE



Her sad laugh rings in my ear like a siren, piercing my eardrum. The sound echoes through my body, signaling the undesirable fate I'm about to encounter.

"The guys that will make you disappear, of course," she snickers. "Fuck, if I care where they take you, long as I don't know, and you're no longer my fucking problem," she states casually with a shrug.

"Please, don't do this. I'll ask Luke for a divorce," I plead, even as my heart breaks at the thought of doing that. She returns an evil laugh.

"Like I'm going to believe you, lying bitc—" A loud bang, and light breaks through. Men in armor gear rush into the room. They quickly restrain Lily, and Luke rushes in, dressed like the men, and comes to hug me as another cuts the zip ties.

"I'm so sorry, Ayo mi." His voice cracks as he whispers in my ear. Relief rushes through my being. I break into a barrel of tears that fall uncontrollably. As soon as the ties are cut, I leap into his arms, crying. He carries me out to the car. I hang on tight to him, my face buried in his chest. He's here. He saved me.

"I'm so sorry, my love," he says repeatedly. There's a medical team waiting outside. They check on me as I hold on tight to Luke, my lifeline, my comfort, and my safety.

"Any pain?" the medic asks. I shake my head. They clean my bloody nose and busted lips and check for any bruises or breaks on me.

"We can take her to the hospital for a more thorough check-up, but she looks fine." I shake my head and grip his hand tight with all my strength.

"No, she's going home, and if anything changes, we'll come to the hospital." Luke answers.

He wraps his arm around me, and we head to the car. I can't stop crying. Our drive is taking forever. We pull up to the basement. I'm still clinging to Luke for dear life on the elevator ride to our home. I cling tight to him. Once in our unit, he takes off my shoes and scrubs. In just my underwear, he carries me to our bathroom and places me on the bathroom countertop. I wrap my arms around myself, tears still flowing. He turns on the water, grabs my shower cap, wraps my hair up, and covers it with the cap. Then he removes his gear down to his boxers and comes to get me off the countertop. He removes my bra and underwear, then leads me into the shower. I sit on the tiled floor, and he takes his time washing and inspecting my body for injury. I wince when he tries to wash my face, and I see his scowl and anger even as he tries to hide it. Once he's done cleaning me up, he wraps himself in a towel, gets me out, and wraps me in a towel to dry me off. After tossing the wet towel, he rubs me down with my cream. Grabbing the t-shirt I'd left on the hook this morning, he puts it on me and leads me back to our room. Tucking me in bed, he kisses my forehead.

"Are you hungry?" I shake my head. "Go to sleep; I'll stand guard and watch over you." I nod and close my eyes.

<u>.</u>

LUKE



I sit in the wet towel and watch until I hear her steady breathing that she's asleep. I get up and return to the bathroom to remove the clothing off the floor and to the living room to remove her scrubs. Engaging in this mundane task is my way of keeping a lid on the rage bubbling beneath the surface that's waiting to explode.

I go back in to check on her, put on my sweatpants and t-shirt, and return to the living room to call Bruce.

"Hello."

"Where is Lily?"

"Booked at the police station, she'll be spending the night."

"She's not leaving that jail cell ever. Find out her connection to Dr. Beiz and the man she called; there's no way Lily did this alone. They are all going down."

"Did Dele say anything?"

"Not a word. She has been crying since we found her. She's asleep now. I can't leave her."

"How about Osei comes to stay with her with some bodyguards?"

"No, I want her to see me when she wakes up. No one else. She needs to see me." Or I need to see her. Either way, we are staying together tonight.

"I already told Osei that we found her, and he'll let your parents know that she's safe."

"Thank you." I hang up and hear the door open. I get up fast and head towards our room. Dele is moving gingerly with her arms wrapped around her. I pull her into my arms.

"I can't sleep. I have a headache," she says as I pull away from her. Holding her hand, I lead her to the kitchen.

"Come on, let's get you something for the headache," I say.

"I'm pregnant," she whispers. I stop in my stride and cup her face. I kiss her forehead. I'm thrilled at the news, but we can't share the joy right now; my Dele is emotionally checked out.

"Are you sure?" She nods. "Did she hurt you?" I ask, hoping we won't lose this pregnancy too.

"Someone knocked me from behind with something. I don't know what object; it must have been Lily. She slapped and punched me in the face a few times." My blood seethes, but I try to hide my stormy emotions from her.

"Let's get you pain meds and have the doctor check on you."

"Okay." I go to the cabinet to get some Tylenol and prepare some food. I show her each marked bowl, and she shakes her head.

"You have to eat something. Should I order something?"

"Soup." I nod and pick up my phone. I text Osei.

Me: Can you please order soup for Dele and have it delivered fast?

Osei: Sure, how is she doing?

Me: She can't sleep, she has a headache.

Osei: I will see her in the morning. Bruce said she's fine otherwise, right?

Me: Yes, she's fine. Please order the soup for her.

Osei: Got it.

I turn to Dele; she's gazing absentmindedly at the wall as if a horror show is playing. I can't wrap my mind around how to get her back to her normal self. Lily did this, and there's no way I'll ever forgive her. She has crossed a Rubicon, and forgiveness is not an option.

I take Dele's hand and lead her to the living room. She sits and wraps herself in a blanket. I sit next to her and hold her. I turn the TV on and find a comedy show. I do find one she likes, but Dele just stares at the screen,

completely lost. My phone soon beeps with a notice from the front desk. I respond to the message to have the delivery come up.

When our doorbell rings, I go to answer and tip the delivery person. I return to the kitchen to grab a tray and spoon for her. I take the food to her, and she sits up. I watch her eat and take the pain meds I set out for her. Afterward, I return the tray once she's done. She rests her head on my lap, and we continue to watch the comedy show. At some point, I hear her chuckle. Somehow, it breaks through my heart that she's able to show that emotion, and it gives me hope she'll return to herself again. We keep watching, and as she laughs more, she eventually falls asleep. I want to move her, but I fear waking her. So, I sit with her, asleep on my lap.

When I wake in the middle of the night, I'm covered, and she's not next to me. I jump up and race to our bedroom. I find her sleeping in our bed, her hand under her pillow. She probably has a knife underneath it. I return to the kitchen to find that one of the knives is missing.

I leave her to sleep alone and return to the living room. She's back to living in fear because of my crazy ex-girlfriend.

When I wake up in the morning, Dele is still in bed. I slowly reach under the pillow and remove the knife before kissing her.

"Ayo mi, wake up." She stirs and opens her eyes. It takes a moment, but she begins to shake and reaches under the pillow. "I'm here, Dele, you're safe." She looks at me, almost as if her brain needs to register that I'm safe. Once she does, she hugs me immediately. "Any pain or headache?"

"No, just tired," she murmurs.

"Well, you rest the whole day. I will take care of everything else."

"Please, don't leave." She holds my hands tight.

"Osei and Jax will be here soon. They will stay with you until I get back."

"You will come back, right?" she asks, fear in her eyes.

"Yes, Ayodele. I will come back, I promise. I need to take care of a few things and I'll be back to stay with you all day." I give a gentle kiss to her lips and forehead to reassure her.

Paula soon arrives. I ask her to make breakfast for Dele. I go to change and wait for Jax and Osei to arrive. I send Bruce and Daniel a text, letting them know I'll be on my way soon. When I return to the kitchen, Dele is eating and talking with Paula. The doorbell rings, and Paula races to open it.

Osei and Jax rush in to hug Dele, making her cry again. Osei whispers in her ear, and she starts to laugh. I mouth "thank you" to him, needing her to

not focus on last night's ordeal.

Jax is talking fast, saying lots of things that earn chuckles and smiles from Dele. I signal to Osei. He follows me to my office, leaving Jax to keep Dele engaged.

"How is she, really?" he asks the moment he shuts the office door behind him.

"I honestly don't know. What I do know is she'll laugh and live without worry again, and I'll be by her side every step of the way." He nods.

"I'll stay with her. Where are you headed?" His face questions why I'm going out.

"To deal with Lily. She's in custody, and I intend to make sure she stays behind bars. All the McIntyre money can't save her from what she did."

"Good. She went too far. She's a fucking psycho." His anger is clear in his words. I nod in agreement.

"Listen, Dele told me last night that she's pregnant." He cracks into a big smile, his mood switching quickly from anger. "Please make sure she doesn't push herself or anything. I don't know how this ordeal might affect her. I just want her to be cared for."

"I got you. Go and deal with Lily. Dele is in good hands." He pulls me into a hug. I know Dele going missing yesterday was hard on both of us. We pull from the hug, and I head out to the living room. I kiss Dele on her lips.

"I'll be back soon, Ayo mi." She nods. "I promise." She nods again. "I love you very much." She nods once more.

I leave and head out. Martin is ready with the car. I send a text to Bruce that I'm on my way. My phone rings. Dad is calling.

"Hello."

"Is she okay?" he asks. I can detect fear in his voice.

"Yes, Dad, she's okay."

"Nathan called me, pleading for his daughter. I told him, I'm not in a forgiving mood right now, and I doubt my son will ever forgive. What madness possessed Lily to do this?" I know his question is rhetorical, and I can hear the anger in his voice.

"I'm certainly not forgiving Lily for what she did. She hit Dele and was planning to have—" I choke up, remembering Lily's plan to make Dele disappear.

"What was she planning, son?" Now is not the time to choke; now is the time to attack.

"She was going to make Dele disappear for good. Even the darkest corner of my imagination cannot process it." I choke up again, but shake the thought off. I refuse to let my imagination go there. "Had we not arrived in time..."

"I'm glad you got there in time to save your wife."

"Dad—"

"Yes?"

"Dele is pregnant," I say, fighting back the tears of joy I've been keeping in since she told me.

"Congratulations, son. Go and deal with Lily and return home to care for Dele."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You got this, Luke."

"Bye, Dad." I hang up.

I pull up at the police station to find Bruce waiting. We go in to find Daniel already inside with his stern 'don't mess with me' face. It seems he has pulled some strings because Lily is seated with her lawyer and the state attorney. I sit and turn a scowl toward her. She must be in some kind of crazy realm because she's smiling at me.

"Luke, please, I love you," is the first thing she says. I furrow my brow at her words; she has no idea how much control I'm holding in, resisting the urge to attack her right now.

"Don't speak to my client," Daniel says in a stern, commanding tone. She shrivels. Bruce is standing and leaning by the wall. Daniel pushes papers toward the lawyer. The lawyer flips through them and turns to us.

"You can't be serious about this. Seven years in prison?"

"That's generous," Daniel says.

"Come on, she lost her way, and she has no priors," she asserts. A sad chuckle escapes me—if only she knew the extent of anger I'm taming.

"So, you say. We have enough to show all the atrocities she's committed in the past and gotten away with, and I believe the ASA is ready to go to trial, but we don't want a trial. We don't want to put Mrs. Blythe through any more trauma of reliving the attack by your client."

"I didn't touch her; she stole Luke from me," Lily blurts out with an eye roll. She must think this act is going to get swept under the rug, but not this time.

"Her busted lips and the bruises on her face says otherwise. She may not have a visible mark on her head after you cowardly hit her from behind, but I'm sure we will find it in the hospital cameras. You should have tried facing her instead of being a coward," I reply sternly. "We have the recording of you saying you were going to make her disappear. I warned you to stay away from my wife. Be thankful that prison is all you're getting. Imagine if you had to disappear like you were going to do to my wife. Take the deal and don't make Dele go through the trauma. If you keep fighting this and make her go through it, once I'm done with you, your father is next for every atrocity of yours that he has covered up." Daniel puts a firm hold on my hand. I get up in anger and move close to Bruce.

"Give us a minute," her lawyer says to Daniel. I stand, trying to control my anger. What I want is for her to disappear into a dark abyss.

"My client will take the deal, but she wants to speak with Mr. Blythe alone," the lawyer says in a shaky tone. Even she knows it's a risky request.

"No!" I blurt out. "I do not want to speak with you alone." I take my seat and lean in. "I never want to speak with you again after today. You and I have nothing to discuss." She starts to cry.

"We had something, Luke." I scoff at her words. I get back up and head to the door, turning to her.

"We never had anything, and that was always your problem. You kept thinking we had something when all we were was *nothing*. My wife is pregnant, and you better pray that what you did doesn't cause her to lose the pregnancy, because if she does, prison can't save you from my wrath." I open the door, and walk out with Bruce by my side. We leave Daniel to deal with the legal aspect. Bruce knows how upset I am. Once we get outside and I inhale some air—

"Congratulations," he says. I exhale, a load of regret for ever dating Lily.

"Thank you. I just hope what fucking Lily did doesn't affect her in any way."

"Dele will recover because your love for each other is so strong," he states.

"You head home to Dele. I'll wait for Daniel."

"Thanks, bro."

"Can we all meet tomorrow at 'the corner'?"

"I'll see how Dele feels. Right now, she's in this space between okay and reliving the experience of her worst nightmares." He nods. Martin pulls up, and I head home.

On the drive, I realize we still don't have the man on the phone or Dr. Beiz. We need these kidnappers teed up. I need to know who that man is, otherwise Dele still isn't safe, and that worries me.

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Chapter 70

LUKE



In the next few weeks, Bruce worked round the clock to find Lily's partners. She refused to give up the names of her accomplices. Bruce picked up Dr. Beiz, who had sworn that he was blackmailed, with receipts to prove it. It turns out Dr. Beiz had had sexual relations with an underage patient, which could easily cost him his license. Lily had paid someone to spy on Dele and her spy had informed her about Dr. Beiz. She had picked him because she thought he would do anything to have Dele, only he loved being a doctor and she decided to use his license as blackmail.

Bruce let him off with a warning to stay far away from Dele, because he saw him as a victim as well. It was clear: Dr. Beiz was forced into the kidnapping.

I asked Bruce to look into Levi Grayson, but we didn't find anything connecting him to the kidnapping. The guy was happily living his life in Atlanta.

Bruce sent Dr. Beiz to speak to Lily; that did not yield any results. If anything, he was threatened into keeping quiet or having his past leaked.

Bruce dug through Lily's electronic devices. Her phone had been taken when we picked her up, and men were sent to her place to get her laptop and all her devices. It took a lot of digging, but the name "CB" kept showing up. At first, we couldn't decode who it was. Then Dele talked

about us going back to Honolulu and hoping we wouldn't run into that guy. She'd said it, and I remembered—Chase. Holy shit. Chase Brock is Lily's accomplice, and I know my wife isn't safe. I called Bruce right away to let him know.

I also ordered round-the-clock guard for Dele. Crazy Chase is still out there. I called Adam to investigate him and find loopholes to buy out his company. Chase must have guessed we were looking for him, because he went into hiding, but we were determined. It took months, but we found him in a small town in Costa Rica. I immediately flew out to speak with him face to face. If he had the guts to kidnap my wife, he should know I will face him.

He's tied up when I arrive. No time like the present to get right to business.

"Why did you have my wife kidnapped?" I ask. He scoffs at me.

"Why not? After the way you dumped my sister and leaked a sex tape of her to the world, she was never the same after that. You deserve every pain you get."

"I'm genuinely sorry that happened to her, but she broke up with me and I told you, I had nothing to do with the sex tape. You should have done your homework and tried to find out the truth. Instead, you kept your focus on me."

"I didn't believe you then, and I don't believe you now." I turn to Bruce, who opens his computer and plays the video. "You see, when it happened, my dad asked me, and I told him it wasn't me. But to be certain, he spent time and money getting to the truth, which turned out to be your sister's boyfriend after me. He did that to extort money from your parents." I nod to Bruce, who plays the video. Right there, the guy is confessing in a police interview to leaking the video because the Brocks wouldn't pay the extortion money. When the tape ends, I turn to him.

"Fuck you, Luke, you could have told me!" he shouts and fights to break free of the ropes.

"No. Your parents should have told you, and I'm sure they tried to tell you to let it go, but you kept your focus on me."

"Fuck you, what do you want now?" he sounds dejected, knowing his hatred has led him down the wrong path.

"You went too far. My wife didn't deserve what you did to her."

"Well, I'll kiss her feet and apologize." I scoff. This asshole still thinks I'll take a chance on letting him live.

"See, that's a chance I can't take. I stayed away from you, and you should have done the same and stayed away from me." I stare him down, knowing I won't shed a tear for what's about to happen.

"Goodbye, Chase." I leave the room, knowing it's the end of Chase Brock.

Bruce's men took him out. I knew he would never stop coming after me, and I couldn't gamble with Dele's life in his twisted game. Though I do not understand his hatred for me, I also knew that punching him had probably aggravated whatever grudge he had before. But kidnapping my wife was crossing the line. A newspaper report of his death was sent to Lily with a message: **Fuck with me again, and you'll find out.**

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Chapter 71

LUKE



Dele and I couldn't be happier. She decided to stop working and focus solely on school so she could get closer to graduating before the babies are born. As much as she loves to drive her car, Martin is now her driver, despite her disagreement. She needs to slow down. My wife believes that by not working, she has slowed down. I beg to differ.

It turns out we are having twin boys. My dad is feeling better and excited. Mom and Piah are just as excited. Osei has plans for the boys, which I remind him he can't turn my boys into drama boys like him.

Dele and I cozy up every evening, and I kiss her forehead and her belly. Every night, I'm thankful that my grumpy self went to that Halloween party. Though I'm convinced we would have met at some point because we are soulmates, I like that we met sooner rather than later.

Getting into bed with Dele, I curl up to her. "How are my babies and their mother doing?"

"The boys are quiet, and I'm big."

"You are beautiful, and I love you."

"I love you too, and I'm still big."

I laugh, turning off the light. "Goodnight, Dele. Go to sleep. I'll stand guard and watch over all three of you."

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Also by

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Ebun and Noah in **Themes of Kismet** a Meet-Cute Romance
https://tinyurl.com/y2dwfuzh

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About the author

A. Akinosho lives in her own little nest in Illinois. An avid reader and enjoy reading thrillers, suspense and romance novels (partial to romance genre). When, She's not reading or keeping up with life. She enjoys writing and creating twist to stories. She loves writing about diverse characters, friendship and overcoming challenges through, what is perceived as a weakness.

Connect with me.

I would love to hear from you.

Your reviews and thoughts, even a book recommendation is welcome.

I'm a reader too and enjoy good reads.

IG: https://www.instagram.com/a akinosho/

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/authora.akinosho

Website http://www.authoraakinosho.com/

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