

THE  
CUPID'S RISK  
SERIES BOOK

Edited by

Myne Whitman

## FROM THE EDITOR

The Cupid' Risk series was borne out of an idea I came up with in a discussion with my SO. I had read some serial stories on blogville and sometimes wished they could have gone a different way. We wanted to produce a story where the readers were involved and had a say in the direction of the plot.

I also did not feel it necessary to restrict it to some particular people. We are all writers, that is why we blog, and many of us can spin a decent tale. So I threw it out there and the response was so encouraging and effusive that we got through a season in two months with 20 chapters. This time it is season two and more is expected from the story and from all of us.

The interactive story follows the adventures of a 25 year old Iphey who is only 6 months gone in her bank job. Her love interest is Chinedu, an engineer with a shady past. It also turns out that Iphey's missing brother in-law had abandoned his family in dire straits.

Romance or mystery, thriller or action, the readers determined what went on!

You can click on any of the underlined/linked names and chapters to go to the original website and the contributor's blogs.

Myne Whitman

## THE MAJOR CHARACTERS

**IPHEY:** A 25 years old lady who recently moved to Lagos from Port Harcourt with a new job in Diamond Bank. She is quiet and a 'good' girl.

**CHINEDU:** Iphey's love interest. They were introduced and met through a blind date where he confessed his hell-raising past. Since then it has been one rocky patch after the other as they try to negotiate a relationship that works for them.

**AISHA:** Iphey's best friend who linked her up with Chinedu. She is married and wants Iphey to be settled too.

**NGOZI:** Iphey's older sister. She is married but her husband has been missing for the past three years. She plays the role of a single parent to her asthmatic son.

**MAMA IPHEY:** Iphey's mum. She is of the meddling and match-making type. She gets on Iphey's last nerves with marriage queries but is a pillar of support for both Iphey and Ngozi.

**TJ:** Aisha's husband.

**JAMES:** Ngozi's missing husband. It has been shown that he actually abandoned his family due to financial woes. He has decided to keep away despite Iphey's pleas to return.

OBI: Iphey's six years old nephew and Ngozi's son.

HABIB: Aisha's brother and also a close friend to Chinedu. He works as an officer in the EFCC.

BISI: Iphey's colleague at work. She pretends to be a friend while doing only what benefits her interest in the office without regard whether it affects Iphey negatively.

FUNMI: Iphey's immediate boss. She is jealous and uses Iphey's inexperience on the job to get back at her. She is on very good terms with Bisi and colludes with her to harass Iphey.

AYO: The branch manager at Iphey's office. He does not hide his hots for Iphey and this makes his previous lover, Funmi, even madder at Iphey.

TUNDE: Another work colleague of Iphey.

OTUNBA: A suitor who starts courting Ngozi, Iphey's sisters a couple of years after the disappearance of her husband. Their mother does not like him.

ALHAJI GALADIMA: Chinedu's benefactor. A police officer who works with informants willing to give details of criminal activities.

GBENRO: An informant and former colleague of Chinedu while he lived a dangerous life.

DABARU: An Ajegunle gang boss. Chinedu's former leader in criminal activities.

## CONTRIBUTORS/WRITERS

**MYNE WHITMAN (Producer/Editor):** I am the author of A Heart to Mend. I am on a journey to seeing more of my stories in print and helping others do the same. There is more to come because I also want these stories on the big or small screen. Come with me...

**ATALA WALA WALA:** Here are a few random facts about me:

- This is my the third continent I'll be living on, after Europe and Africa. But I don't think I'm cut out for the 'Ajala' life, so I have no plans to move to Asia or Australia (but then again, two years ago I didn't know I'd be moving to Seattle, so who knows?).

- I love listening to the sound of a well played piano. Whether the notes are being played in spartan isolation, or whether I'm listening to a concordance of chords, I get caught up in the performance, especially if there's feeling and melody to go with it.

- I don't get Facebook. I've tried, but honestly, poking and messaging on walls is just not my thing - I'd rather correspond via mail or phone. I guess I'm old fashioned that way.

**FABULOLA:** "Its amazing.

Barely 4 months ago all Brokeass wanted to do was bare her thoughts and just release all the mental tension suffocating her.

But she got more than that. With all the encouragement she got, Fabulo-la was born. And I can honestly say it has been pleasant

I am not going away"

**ISHA**, and she has the following to say on her blog.

"Anyways, I think I find myself drawn to bad guys. I'm a complete fun lover, and I don't mean to be 'racist' but those plain-and-simple looking guys don't seem like they can be as exciting as I like my men. Then again, I often hear that people need comfort zones to really express themselves. That's all good, but I've learnt from experience to be weary of those quiet guys, many of them become beasts in their comfort zones. I'd rather deal with someone who's openly daring and tough-looking, than find out that my quiet, serene lover is a wife-beating freak. You know what I'm saying?"

**REALNAIJABLOKE** I think he's also in 'team bad boys'. He replied a meme on his blog so;

Have You Ever Stolen Anything: Hmmmmmm ..... who hasn't?

Been Drunk Before Noon: College days was crazy is all i could say!

Had Sex In A Public Place: Hmmmmmmmm.....

Got Caught Telling A Lie: Who Hasn't?

Been Arrested: Got To The Station and was let go 'cos it was mistaken identity.

Littered: Story....tell me you've not.

Fantasized About A Co-Worker: Omo HR fit dey read this arena

Cheated On A Test: Well ...depends on what you call cheating...is spying cheating?

**CEREBRALLY BUSY**. This is an excerpt from the last entry on her blog. She and her siblings stole. Not armed robbery ooo...LOL, meat from the cooking pot.

"My mother opened the door, planted her hands on her hips and glared at us...my heart stopped, then took off in a sprint. cold sweat broke out all over my body, and my hands became ice. i can't tell how my sibling-partners in crime reacted, cos i was too busy praying for my life. She was going to flog us, she had even taken my brother's belt, but then she sat down on the couch, and tears silently coursed down her face..."i was child-less for ten years, and all that time, while i was begging God for children, i didnt ask him to give me children who would be thieves, why are you doing this? don't i do enough for you? what have u asked for that i haven't given you?"

**BUBBLES** reminds me of a post on her blog. LWKMD when I read it...

"Ok my first high school...I would take a girl's uniform/house wears from her room and put it in another girl's closet in like room 20. Then I would take the clothes from the girl in room 20 and put in another girl's closet in like room 1. These girls will wake up the next morning tryna figure were the fuck their uniforms went?! I took ALL of their uniforms! I didn't even leave a shirt. nope...I would switch people's books. I was in JSS1B. I would take books from 1B and put it in people's lockers in like SS2A. Like I showed them PEPPER! I would take people's school bags and throw them outside. Only if these people pissed me off tho! I didn't just do things randomly..."

**DAVID**. This is an excerpt from the last entry on his blog;

**WHY ARE YOU SCARED TO LOVE?**

Well, I'm not really scared to love...I'm the kind of person who gives it all when he loves someone who loves him back but until then, I'm pretty much not accessible.

**HAVE YOU BEEN HURT BEFORE?**

Of course...lol! Contrary to the belief that I'm not human or that I do not have a heart, I do. DANG!!! IT HURT LIKE CRAZY AND I DO NOT WANT TO HAVE TO FEEL IT AGAIN...but the irony is that, the pain makes you appreciate LOVE on a whole different level.

**LEGGY**. This is an excerpt from the last entry on her blog on the topic of marriage and would be matchmakers, LOL...

i hate it when people ask me if i dont want to get married.

marriage is something that will happen if it will happen

its not an institution that is an attractive venture for me.

well, unless someone pays me to marry them...that'd be super cool.

im 18, marriage is a thought that barely crosses my mind.

ill cross that bridge when im done living my life and feel like i need an extra hobby.

**FABULOSITY UNWRITTEN**. Go visit and add her to your blogrolls people. She needs feedback for her upcoming novel as she says in her last post excerpt below.

"Writing

I did a lot more creative writing this year than I've ever done

before, and I have you bloggers and readers to thank for that. All of

your feedback and support have been really encouraging, and I'm glad

that I finally rekindled my love for writing. Every year I promise

myself that I'll complete a novel before the end of the year, and sadly this year, like all the others, I failed to accomplish that. Hopefully with some support from you guys and a lot more self-discipline from my end, I won't be saying the same thing this time next year."

Aeedeeae of **THE SOUNDING BOARD OF A BUSY BEE**. And while she is a bizzzy bee indeed, she is also very creative. Check out her last Dr. Doolittle-type post with the talking books and stuff. Also Aeedeeae is a trained script writer and writes for both Radio and TV. I'm honored to host her on the blog.

Mr FunnyHoneyMoney of **A PEN IN THE RIGHT HAND OF A LEFT HANDED GENIUS**. And he is a genius indeed, at least when it comes to writing and rhyming. Check out his blog. When I saw his contribution, I wasn't too surprised, he said this on his page. "I gained quite the reputation for being a prankster; it just naturally happened that at any given point in time i was always doing some' mischievous."

Nita of **Fafali's Boredom Maximus**. She is a talented writer and I just love the poems she shares on her blog. She has this to say about herself..."Alright here goes, Im a jalapeno sized mouth teen who cannot stop raving about her life and how she prefers to write poems about her conconculated( ehn?) life whiles being bored at the same time."

Vivianne of **VIVIANNE'S VISTA**. I guess she is a very good person to start off this chapter which focused on Ngozi. Vivianne is a single mother who has gone through a lot but continues life with her two kids and "a basket filled with hope". I love her writing and her spirit as she rediscovers herself. I was impressed by how she follows the story and her use of pidgin in her contribution even though she is one of the non-Nigerian readers of this blog. Go over to her blog and show her some love.

Neo of **PLETHORA - ME AND MY EXCESSES**. She is currently giving up on love but heart mender that I am, lol, I can't allow that now can I? Go over to her blog when you can and show her some love.

Lately i have become a cynic (i was always the realist though but i think i'm being pushed over the edge) especially when it comes to love. I have just become so disillusioned with it that i have decided i can do without it. Dont get me wrong o, i'm not about to dash off to the pound and pick myself up a litter of kittens. I'm not saying i want to be the spinster-aunty forever knitting horrible sweaters nobody likes.

DEVINE of Be-e. I liked this post, Bisi being the woman scorned. It reminds me of Devine's last post on her blog called Playing with fire:

"I'm playing with Fire and I cant stop.

I see the flames but its kinda fun!

You know how you strike a match and watch it burn to the tip and quickly shake your hand before it gets to the tip of your fingers?

But has it ever happened that you got so caught up in watching the flames burn that you forgot the plan and it burnt the tip of your finger?"

I CALL ME G FUNC He is one talented writer blogger and also one of the hot bachelors in blogsville according to The Gist. The ending was his idea and this is from his profile;

"I've been told a couple of times I'm handsome hehe. I also have a funny sort of humour about me some of the time and also ... real importantly.... heaven and maybe hell knows that I'm not stupid GOD didn't make me that, on the contrary..."

RENE writes faction and fictional series on her blog Cuppy Cakes and has a story collection she's working on. Here's little ranting from her last post. **"Now, for a struggling size 0/1 individual like me who think she's too thin and trying to reach a size 3, all these things bruise my ego(i Kid) but they annoy me because everywhere I turn it's always about loose weight fast! Blah! Blah! Blah! It's never about add a little pounds in 30 days. I eat a lot like literally so saying that wouldn't help me reach a 3 and since I got to this country(well maybe long before that) I've been alternating between 48 kg and 51 kg(of which I think most is bone mass) for several years now! I know some people will go "oh! I wish I had your body, I would never complain" WRONG!"**

Beautiful of PIECES OF ME, she's a very emotional romantic femme fatale who loves to belive she's heartless...\*wink\* I love the way she writes and this is from a poem on her blog.

"i miss that part of me

that part where you dwelled so comfortably

that part that knows your smell, touch , smile, voice

that part that can sense you a mile away

that part that yearns for you

that part that feels your lips after they have left mine

that part that believed strongly in love

that part that prayed for you

that part that never thought you'lld walk away  
that part that's broken now  
that part that doesn't exist anymore..."

Neefemi at **DIARY OF AN UNPAID INTERN.** Neefemi is trying to lose weight through implementing a healthier life style filled with more physical activity. This is what she adds about the whole process;

"Now this is the physical. It's useless if you are not emotionally and mentally baggage free, stress free. That's the most important thing. I'm a very busy girl, I always have my hand in multiple projects at the same time, but I'm not one to keep anything in my mind. I also make sure to laugh a lot. I always write lol a lot. It's because I almost always laugh out loud, for the silliest things too. Besides even when there is something to worry about, I remember I have a God that loves me and I pray (well pray always, but get my point)".

**SPESH of Spesh's World.** She is a hard working lady with a beautiful and big heart. She inspires me with both her words and actions. This is an excerpt from one of her poems;

**"I love truly,  
I love crazy.  
I trust completely.  
I dont do reservations.  
I share with loyalty.  
I give unconditionally.  
I dnt wait to recieve...  
But meet me half-way!"**

Basola Afolake. Folake is an aspiring writer who saw the series on Facebook and became hooked. I enjoyed the challenge of working with an upcoming talent and maybe I'll be doing more of that. You can read more of her write-ups **HERE.**

**La-Pimpette?** She is the blogger behing **STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART.** In her latest post she talks about the Nigerian way of raising children: **"Some people had it good, while others had it so bad and this got me worried. Before this time, I'd say the reason why most Nigerian kids turn out right was because their parents flogged them into shape, thought them respect, proper home training, and all the 'goods' that come along with being Nigerian. But now I feel like the respect and fear is replacing what is actually more**

**important- a relationship with the children. Some people respect and fear their parents but do not love or even know what it means to love them. Why will I be calling my father sir? I'm not saying there should be no ass whooping but it doesn't have to be everyday! Sometimes we really do deserve it, other times, no!"**

F, now I wonder what that stands for. She is one part of **Half and Half**. F is just beginning to tap into her writing talent and I think she is amazing. She has a shortlisted entry in the **Naija Stories** Contest (BTW, you can go over and vote for her) and a great write-up of a Bar scene on her blog. Writing about her entry she said, **"I've always had it in me to write so I reluctantly put in a few entries over there, and even entered one for the website launch contest which fortunately got shortlisted. Did I mention I was scared out of my mind and DID NOT want to do this? Writing is the easy part, showing it to people is TERRIFYING."**

**KUSH or Afronuts** of the Kush Chronicles is a creative writer based in Lagos Nigeria. He sometimes runs some illustrated series on his blog and I simply love those. He also blogs about some topics which are eye-openers or food for thought. The last one was titled Bizarre jobs from History and the current one is The Murderous Innocents. Go over and check him out.

Tisha at **I LOVE BECAUSE I CAN**. Tisha says she's "pretty and intelligent but not street smart". I want to add that she's also talented. I love her poems. Check this out from the last one.

**"I am restless  
i wanna kick some one  
i wanna scream, shout  
i am restless  
i want to let go  
and just jump and shout  
gone shopping  
it doesn't take off  
the pressure like  
when i was younger..."**

HappyBBB of **WHO I AM!!!!** Her name already gives us an idea of who she is but her last post on the ten things I love meme sheds even more light.

**"1) Smiles: i am a smiling person, i always smile that's my personality, its easy to know when am down you wont see a frown, there just wont be a smile, my brother calls me ismaila... hehehehe,**

**2) My blackberry: its my blogging and twitting machine, i am addicted to it i swear down, my mum has threatened to seize it times without number, what was i doing when i didn't have one,**

**3) Love: i totally love love, love stories,movies , novels,songs, they all speak to me, i love watching people fall in love, hearing people speak about love, i love weddings and d smile on the brides face, i love awwwwing and ooohhhing, i love giving love out, making TY feel loved, i love the four letter word in its entirety"**

**His DarLyn of a testament of love, life and living. She describes herself as an ordinary girl with His extra-ordinary love. A young lady making her way through life, love, work and all. You know how it is said that perfect love casteth out fear? I love His DarLyn poems, talking about the love of God especially this one.**

I fear what I see

I fear what is hidden

I fear what is assumed

But all the fear feeds on

is my imagination

I refuse to be cowed by fear

I refuse to be crowded by fear

I refuse to be conquered by fear...

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## 1: The Story begins ...by Myne

Iphey got back from work that day sweating heavily and knew she was going to be very late for her date. It had been a hot and humid day and she had been caught in the rush hour traffic returning home from the office. She now rushed about her apartment like a headless chicken putting her stuff together for the date when her phone rang.

“Hello?” She panted struggling into a deep purple skirt.

“Hello, my daughter is that you?” It was her mum's voice.

“Yes mum, it's me.” she replied with a bitten off, “who else could be answering my phone?” under her breath.

“I just heard from your sister. Her son is in crisis again and they are at the hospital.”

Her heart sank and the wind was knocked out of her sails. She had thought this was one of those her mum's infrequent marriage badgering calls. The sister her mum mentioned was her elder sister who had a 6 years old asthmatic son. He had often got this sort of crises during this period but it had seemed to subside in the past year. However, this was the second within the same month this year.

“Mum, I have to go out this evening and I'm already running late. I'll call her when I get back and give you feedback later OK?”

“That's fine, talk to you later dear. Take care of yourself and be careful.”

Yes mum,” she replied as she pressed the end button.

She wanted to continue getting ready but the “be careful” from her mum got her thinking of the stormy events at the office today.

## 2: The Date ..by Atala Wala Wala

She had just returned from seeing one of her clients about an overdraft facility he wanted on his account, and was walking back to her office when her manager beckoned her into her office.

Funmi gestured to a seat. “Good morning, Iphey. Please shut the door - this won't take long.”

Iphey sat down, wondering what was up; she got on reasonably well with her, so she couldn't figure out why she sounded unusually curt. Her apprehension mounted as Funmi went on to talk about the unprofessionalism she said she had observed in Iphey's work, and how she preferred to let her know about it first rather than writing a query. Iphey was quite shocked; she tried to ask her to be more specific, but Funmi cut her off, saying that she had said everything she wanted to say.

Iphey responded by emphatically stating that Funmi was being unfair in not giving her a fair hearing, and things went rapidly downhill from there. The encounter left her really rattled, she was certain that there was more to it than met the eye. “Best not to think too much about it”, she muttered to herself. After all, there was this date to look forward to.

Her friend, Aisha had been pestering her forever to go out with this friend of her brother's. She wasn't exactly filled with confidence; the last person that Aisha had recommended had not turned out so well. She'd almost refused, but Aisha pleaded that this guy was really good. The truth was she doubted that Aisha even knew the kind of person she wanted.

Iphey sighed as she put finishing touches to her makeup and prepared to step out of her flat. Aisha had managed to persuade her this time, but only after she swore never, ever to trouble her with her randomly picked blind dates if this didn't work out.

She had also agreed because of the impression she had got when her date called to set up the time and venue. He had appeared charming, intelligent and well-spoken - definitely no red flags. He seemed a bit reticent to give more information about himself, though. All she knew was that his name was Chinedu, and he “ran an engineering business”. Well, at the very worst, it sounded like she might have a more interesting time going out than staying in, even if nothing happened.

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The skies were already darkening when she stepped out of the cab in front of the restaurant that they'd agreed to meet at. She looked around, wondering if he might be waiting outside, but she didn't see anyone who looked like they might be him. Maybe I'll have more luck inside, she thought as she walked in. Again, she scanned the dark interior.

“Is he late?” she wondered aloud. She hoped not; one of her pet peeves was people who disrespected others by not keeping to time.

“No, he's not. In fact, he's been watching you since you entered, and he's quite impressed by what he's seen,” she heard a voice say in the same deep baritone she had heard on the phone.

She turned round, startled, and saw someone who looked to be in his early thirties, of average height, a bit slim and medium complexioned.

He smiled at her and continued, “Sorry for the unusual introduction... I shouldn't have chosen a table out of sight, but I usually find the view outside the window provides interesting things to talk about. I don't think that will apply this evening, my eyes will be taken up with a much more beautiful spectacle.”

She smiled back. “Thank you, Chinedu - that's a very nice compliment.”

He led her to her table, and they ordered their entrees straightaway. The evening passed pleasantly; she told him all about herself, her schooling, how she got a job at Diamond Bank, what she would really like to do if she had the money, places she would like to travel to, her views on the different places she had been to, and so on. Chinedu seemed genuinely interested and impressed by her ideas and her views; the more she talked, the more he wanted to know. She was definitely enjoying herself.

Iphey leaned back and smiled at him. “You sound like a very interesting person. I'd like to hear more of your views on the world; you've not talked a lot about yourself.”

Chinedu smiled. “What business does the moon have in the sky when the sun is out shining? My life these days is not that interesting; you'll agree that we've both enjoyed ourselves listening to you talk.”

“But what if we could enjoy ourselves even more by listening to YOU talk? Oya... spill the beans!”

He made an expansive gesture. “OK, what do you want to know?”

She grinned back mischievously. “Tell me your deepest, darkest secret.”

Chinedu appeared to think for a while. Then he leaned closer to her and whispered, "I used to be an armed robber."

Iphey stared at him. Then she laughed. "Be serious now."

"I am being serious."

Iphey shook her head. He must be joking - who would come out openly and say such a thing? Even armed robbers wouldn't do so. "So assuming you're telling the truth - why did you go into armed robbery?"

"For the same reason that most other people do - lack of opportunity elsewhere, and a friend drew me into it with the promise of making a lot of money from it. The honest truth is that back then, I felt that I had to do what I had to do. I saw people as objects rather than as human beings with feelings, so I didn't feel bad about doing what I did. But that was then."

"I don't understand how you can be so open about your past."

Chinedu smiled, and made the same expansive gesture as before. "Well, you wanted to know my deepest, darkest secret... there's a saying, 'beware of what you ask for, because you may get it'."

They continued chatting, but the earlier pleasant mood of evening for her had definitely soured. After a few more minutes, she stood up and announced that she had to go.

"What a pity. I feel that we were really enjoying ourselves. I came with my car; I can drive you home if you like."

"No, but thanks anyway."

He insisted, but she was firm. She did assent for him to wait with her while she hailed a taxi, but responded to his chat in monosyllables. Eventually, a cab turned up, and as she got in, he gave her his number and said that he would like them to meet again sometime.

"Let's see how it goes," she murmured.

As the taxi sped off towards her flat, she reminded herself to call her sister and update her mother. Aisha would have to answer about Chinedu later.

### 3: Office Politics: It's complicated ...by Fabulo-la

“Cucku-roo-koo!” 6 am, and the cock had barely finished crowing as Iphey walked into the bank premises. ‘Click-click-click’ as her heels hit the concrete.

Truth was, Iphey was nervous about meeting with her boss Funmi again, which was why she was at the office early to take a closer look at her work. She had no idea what she could have done. Funmi had called her ‘unprofessional’. Why? She couldn’t think of a reason. Since she started at this bank, she has consciously been professional about everything.

She hurried to her desk in the common office and began shuffling through files and to-do lists making sure she had left no stones unturned. As she began to work, she turned on some music to keep her company. She had another hour or so to herself before the first set of bankers began to arrive. The crooning voice of Michael Buble will work wonders to calm her nerves.

“..Somehow I know that it’ll all turn out, You’ll make me work so we can work to work it out, And promise you kid, I’ll give so much more than I get, mmmm....I just haven’t met you yet..” she sang to herself, bobbing her head to the music.

“Well I have certainly met you.” A voice said behind her. Startled she dropped the file she was holding.

“Oh I didn’t mean to startle you” It was the bank manager. Her bosses’ boss, Ayo.

“Oh its not problem sir. I wasn’t expecting anyone to be here. I’ll just turn the music off”. She replied. She was a little uncomfortable being in the same room with him.

“Ah, but I didn’t ask you to turn it off.”

“No, its ok. I will turn it off. I have to run to the basement anyways.”

“Why are you avoiding me, eh Iphey?”

“Ah no it’s nothing sir.” She got up to put the files away. As she walked by him, he grabbed her by the waist and held her close to him.

“I don’t bite.” he whispered in her ear.

“Ahem!” A voice said behind them. It was Tunde, her colleague. She hurriedly released herself from Ayo's grip.

“I will see you later, OK Iphey?” He smiled at them both. “Good morning Tunde.”

“Good morning sir,” Tunde eyed their boss as he strolled out.

“There is nothing going on, before you start to accuse me abeg!” Iphey began defending herself.

“Have I said anything?” Tunde laughed in her face. He ran a finger down Iphey’s arm and caught her palm in a lingering handshake.

“Now if only you will agree my own....” He let the words hang and then turned away. “See you at lunch?”

He smiled on his way to his office on the other side of the hall. He was in marketing where as she was in clearing operations. Oh lawd. Why did she attract all these men? Chinedu, Ayo and now Tunde. The latter was her friend but he would get her in trouble soon if he didn't stop.

Tunde had just gotten engaged but would not stop his flirting with all the girls in the bank especially her. Other staff began to arrive including those who shared her office and they all settled down to the day's grind.

Knock knock! She spun on her seat. It was Funmi. “Meet me in my office in 10”.

Great. The day just got worse, Iphey muttered under her breath. She tidied her desk, as she got ready to head over to Funmi’s office. What could I have done? She wondered to herself trying to figure out what it was. As she approached Funmi’s office, she heard voices, so she stood outside waiting.

“Why did you call this meeting Funmi?”

“This girl is not doing her work Ayo! Her work is sub standard, not up to par. She needs to be taught a lesson.”

“But you know this is not the company policy. You need to tell her privately first before bringing me into this.” Pause. “ Are you doing this because we are not sleeping together anymore Funmi?” He queried her.

“What we had was more than sleeping together Ayo and you know it!” Funmi yelled.

“You're married now, Funmi. YOU went and got married but decided NOT to tell me...”

“Did you tell me when you got married three years ago? And did that stop us?”

There was silence in the room and the sound of Funmi's heavy breathing.

“Funmi, I believe you're being harsh on your staff because you're frustrated more than anything else. So leave the girl, she has done nothing wrong. You know, the transfer offer to be with your husband is still open. I think you should consider it. Me and you are finished.”

The door swung open and Ayo nearly ran over Iphey in the doorway. Iphey avoided meeting his eyes. He smiled at her.

“I'm guessing you heard all that then?” he asked her. She looked everywhere but at him.

“It was bound to come out sooner or later,” he muttered, almost to himself. “But you should keep it to yourself.” Ayo gave her a look-over, with a knowing twinkle in his eyes as he walked away.

Iphey rubbed the back of her neck feeling very uncomfortable. Just then, a visibly shaken Funmi opened the door.

“What are you standing there for?” she snapped.

“Err...you asked me to come and see you?” Iphey answered.

“Forget it. Let me just warn you that I will not take kindly to any silly mistakes from you again. You hear me?”

“Yess ma,” Iphey answered sheepishly.

“Now get back to work, before I change my mind,” Funmi spat at her.

Iphey spun on her heels and raced back to her desk. It wasn't yet 10am and the day was already off to a rocky start. She still had to call her mother when she got home that evening. Thoughts of Chinedu had chased it from her mind last night...

#### 4: Get out of my dreams ....By Isha

“What?!” Iphey spluttered.

She could have sworn that she just heard her supervisor tell the entire operations staff and their managers that the procurement schedule template would be available at the armed robber meeting.

“I said it would be available at the advisory board meeting,” Funmi spat at her.

“Yes ma,” Iphey responded, suddenly finding something very important in her notebook. She wiped at a bead of sweat that wasn't there, trying to relax. She passed her notebook to Bisi who was seated next to her, “Please, help me take notes. I'd be right back,” she whispered and she excused herself.

She didn't exhale till she had shut the bathroom door behind her. “Oh dear, I'm losing my mind!” she said to the empty bathroom with her hand on her chest. She walked up to the sink, and washed her hands though they weren't dirty. The running water provided some kind of solace.

It started when Funmi called on the intercom at about 10am, asking for a client's armed robber, which was actually the client's asset report. She felt like her mind was playing tricks on her. It had been a few days since she met with Chinedu, and she thought she had wiped him off her mind; only, to wake up this morning and find him sleeping peacefully next to her. She screamed and then woke up, and realized that the first wake-up sequence was only a dream.

She didn't understand why this thing with Chinedu bothered her so much. After all he'd said it was in the past. Could it be that this hit so close to home because she refused to accept she was attracted to him? The finely chiselled frame

of his face fluttered in her head as it had done every so often since her date, and gave her an instant thrill.

“But how could someone with such an honest demeanour ever have used a gun in his life?” she thought. She shook her head rapidly like it was the proven method of clearing ones thoughts and winced at the headache she gave herself.

“OK,” she spoke to the washbasin this time, with new found determination, “I’ve had enough of this. I have a job to do.” She straightened her empire waist dress in front of the mirror and looked herself straight in the eye. “You can’t let this worry you. He’s not important. You’re probably never going to see him again.”

She looked around to ascertain that no one else was in the bathroom, ignoring what it seemed her conscience was saying to her. She didn’t want to become ‘office gist’ for having a nervous breakdown in the bathroom.

She pulled open the bathroom door holding her head high with square shoulders, but weary about how far the pep talk she had just given herself would go.

\* \* \*

She got home that evening and finally decided to return Aisha’s missed calls. Her friend had tried to reach her non-stop since the night of the date, and she had ignored every one of the calls, because she couldn’t decide what to tell her. What if her well-meaning friend didn’t know of Chinedu’s past? What if it turned out that Aisha’s brother had a history of armed robbery as well, since they were so close?!

Her friend picked up on the second ring and didn’t bother with the perfunctory pleasantries. “I know what you’re trying to do,” Aisha started with a tone that made Iphey feel that she was furious, “you want me to drop dead in suspense!”

Iphey managed a believable chuckle before responding, “No be so now. I’ve been busy. How body?”

“Body dey as you leave am. No use that one waste time. Give me all the juicy details. Did you guys hit the club after dinner? Is he a good dancer? More importantly, is he a good kisser? Did he take you home? How was it?”

“It was nice,” Iphey replied. The silence that followed hinted that Aisha was waiting for more.

Aisha spoke up when he friend said nothing else, “Come on! Who do you think you’re talking to? Your mum? I’m asking for gist, you’re giving me the version for the people who still believe that you’re a good girl.”

“It was just a regular date now, abi?” Iphey replied, “I met him at the restaurant. We talked about our backgrounds, our families, secondary schools; etcetera. The food was good sha.”

“Ehen?”

“And I went home after the meal!”

“As in? Did you ask for his number?”

“He gave it to me but I’m sure he can call me if he really wants to.”

“Hmmm. What are you not telling?”

“Nothing important, I’m serious.” She decided that she would not be the one to tell Aisha about Chinedu’s past if she didn’t already know.

“OK o,” Aisha replied, in a resigned tone, “but be sure that I don’t believe you completely. Do you want to see him again?”

“I don’t know,” Iphey laughed to lighten the moment and avail herself a change of subject. “Meanwhile,” she continued, “Ayo PM’ed me while we were sitting across from each other at a meeting this afternoon.”

“Who’s Ayo again? I know Tunde the flirt...”

“No, this is my branch manager now. The one who wants me to schedule my leave at the same time he’s taking his, so we can travel together.” She emphasized the last two words to stress the idiocy of the idea.

“Wait, are you sure you’ve told me about this guy before?”

“Yes now, Mr. You-like-me-but-you’ve-not-realized-it-yet.”

Aisha burst out in peals of laughter, “He said that?!”

“Well, maybe not in those exact words, but he might as well have. In his message today, he was like: ‘so why do you look so sexy this afternoon. I’m trying so hard not to be lustful’. This man is married o...”

“OK, that’s just nauseating. You need to teach him a thing or two about appropriateness.”

“Oh, I sent him a very nice email, which is probably why he didn’t stop by my desk to say goodnight when he was leaving. There’s more gist oo...”

“OK, hold it for me.” Aisha’s voice was hurried, “My dear, I have to get off now. TJ just drove in, and dinner is almost not ready.”

“No starve my broda o,” Iphey replied with a laugh.

“Goodnight hon.”

“OK then, goodnight!”

## 5: She asked didn't she? ....by Real Naijabloke

The day after the date, Chinedu called his friend Habib, Aisha's brother, as he walked to his car after work. Habib picked up after the 6th ring. As he waited for an answer, Chinedu recalled how he stood there staring as Iphey's taxi sped off. It wasn't hard to figure out what went wrong with the date. Why had he blurted out that he was an armed robber? That was certainly what made Iphey's attitude change.

"Hello?"

"Hey Habib, what's cracking with you and where you at?"

"Hey 'Nedu, am good. What's the deal?" Habib answered grudgingly.

"What you up to over there 'cos you sound like you kina busy or something." Chinedu asked.

"Nothing much dude, just doing some overdue laundry over here at the moment, but I can talk" chimed Habib.

"Anyway I had an incident with your sister's friend yesterday, the one that she setup with me for the blind date? I think I might have spooked her."

"What happened" Habib asked.

"Well, we were just rambling, you know trying to know each other. She insisted I talk about myself, so I thought why not? You remember I told you about the crazy things I did when younger, the stuff with the street gangs that almost destroyed my life. Well I told her that I used to be an armed robber, which isn't far from the truth really. She you get my drift?"

"What did she do?" Habib chuckled.

"I think she got the wrong impression. She ended the date before I could go into details or say any other thing."

“You sef, how you go talk that kain thing? Of course she ran away!”

“Well...” Chinedu stuttered. “She asked didn’t she?”

“U don kolo sha! You like the girl abi na to move on be this?” Habib queried.

“Well it seems like there might be some potential there...”

“Then you need to apologize dude, and in a big way too. Chicks like that sort of thing, like flowers saying you are sorry...”

“But dude, did I do anything wrong?”

“Then call her and say you were just trying to make conversation.” Habib suggested.

“OK. Fine. I will think of something but I’ll wait till Aisha gets back to me. She was the one that arranged this so I’m sure Iphey will tell her how it happened and she’ll come blasting me.”

“If you say so...” Habib concurred. “In the mean time, we go still see tomorrow night?”

“I’ll meet you at the SWE bar by 10pm if that’s OK.”

Habib was already on his second bottle of Gulder when Chinedu walked in the next day.

“My guy why you dey always late?” Habib queried him.

“I like to move by night, thought you already knew that?” Chinedu joked and both of them laughed it off.

“Yea back to my wahala, Aisha still hasn’t called.” Chinedu started after his drink was served. “And I kind of felt a connection between me and Iphey. Just talked to her for an hour and I felt something I have not felt in a while. It was like we had known each other for a long time and were just catching up. Well...until I decided to yield to her and opened my big mouth.”

“I have told you that honesty will get you nowhere but you no dey listen.” Habib spat out.

“Well you know most people I meet get to hear my life story one way or the other, so this time I decided to bring it up before Iphey hears it somewhere else. Especially because I feel I might have a relationship with her, a very personal one...”

“I don’t like this kain lovey dovey gist,” Habib joked. “Abeg make we change topic...”

“My guy this one serious oo.” Chinedu laughed before he obliged.

They hung out again the next day and went to Cubes lounge inside the Silverbird Galleria to meet up with a couple of their friends. Kunle and Jide were already there with three ladies and Kunle introduced them. Immediately, one of the ladies started paying a lot of attention to Habib who whispered that she would make a nice laundry. Chinedu shrugged but was not really interested. His mind was caught in a loop of Iphey and why Aisha had not called. He knew

Habib would not appreciate him raising the topic here with the new girls so he decided to snap out of it.

“So Bisi what do you do?” Chinedu asked one of the other ladies after some heavy flirting.

“Oh I work for Diamond bank as an account reconciliation protocol officer” Bisi replied.

“Hmm...with all those titles you must be the biggest shot in that bank.” Chinedu teased even as he thought; another diamond banker again.

“Don’t let those titles fool you o! I’m one of the smallest fishes.” Bisi replied.

Chinedu couldn’t stop himself. “Hey I have a friend that works for Diamond bank; her name is Iphey. What branch are you in?”

Bisi straightened up when she heard the uncommon name. It must be the same her new colleague who had acted strange at the meeting today. Where had Iphey met this guy? She was the nice but quiet type and judging by his friends, Chinedu was the opposite. Bisi sat forward with a smile.

6: Could this be love? .....by Cerebrally Busy.

Iphey got out of her car as fast as she could and hurried up the steps of General Hospital Ikeja. In the corridor beyond the nurse's station, she saw was a slightly harried, fifty-something year old woman with an arm around a sobbing younger woman. Her heart rose into her throat. It was her mother and sister. Something really was wrong...her nephew had crises all the time...but this time was different. Her sister had a strange...aura around her. She was crying like there was no tomorrow, like all hope was lost.

Iphey swallowed. She didn't know how to deal with grief. Her legs suddenly felt like lead, but she managed to lift them one after the other, each step filled with dread.

"Mum...Ngoo, what did they say?" she asked, dreading the answer. Her sister looked over and the despair in her eyes cracked Iphey's heart. She reached for her.

"Iphey...Iphey...my baby, the doctors...said...he's going to...die," her voice broke on the last word. "Iphey, what will I do...he's my life..." she sobbed "my life..."

She clung like a leech and Iphey could do nothing but cry too and murmur useless soothing words. When she could finally get up, she handed her purse to her mother and went into Obi's ward.

He was sleeping so peacefully, but there were so many tubes...It should be illegal for so many tubes to be attached to one small child, Iphey thought angrily, what kind of world is this, where the young die and leave the old? Minutes passed...or was it hours?? Her mother came in and hugged her, offering wordless support. They stood like that for a long time, looking at the boy beneath the sheets, each thinking their own thoughts.

“One Chinedu called,” her mother said.

Iphey looked at her mother in shock. “Who?”

“Chinedu...the same number called so many times, I decided to pick it. Who is he?”

She pulled out of her mother's embrace. “Just someone I met some days ago...”

“Anything I should know about?”

Should I tell her? Iphey wondered. No, she decided as she put on a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

“Not yet mum, I'll let you know if there is.”

“You know I want you to settle down soon right?”

“I know but not now...”

Her mother shrugged. “OK but I told him where you were and that you will call him back later. Anyway, you can go home and have some rest.”

Iphey stared. Trust her mother to make all the arrangements. Iphey hugged her without a word and said goodbye to her sister who came back in then.

As she drove home, she became depressed and the tears brimmed over again. Her mother had called after her earlier phone conversation with Aisha. When she had not heard from Iphey, her mother had flown in from Port Harcourt to be with her sister in the hospital. Iphey had gone straight over totally ashamed of herself. She had assumed her sister and nephew were back home. She now thought of all Ngozi had been through. First with her husband's mysterious disappearance, and now her son, Obi, was about to die. She prayed that by some miracle, the little boy pulled through this.

In her street, she noticed a car parked beside the gate and wondered who it could be. Could it be him? The headlights shone brightly on the figure leaning against the wall. It was Chinedu. Her heart gave a very uncomfortable lurch that had nothing at all to do with her family. She frowned and got out of the car, she really didn't need any distraction right now. All she wanted was to crawl into her bed and cry her eyes out, for Ngozi and for Obi. She hoped a brusque dismissal would get him off her case.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Aisha called me after you both spoke earlier...” he trailed off at the sight of her tears. “Your mother told me about your sister and nephew. Is it very bad...”

She raised her hand and halted him. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“Iphey, I'm sorry I didn't call in the past few days. I wanted to hear from you or Aisha first. I'll like to talk to you...”

“Can I just go in please?” She tried to move away.

Chinedu held her hand. It hurts, he realized. It hurts me that she's hurting. “I left some friends to come over here after speaking with your mother. You can talk to me you know?”

Don't be nice please, she inwardly pleaded. I can't take it if you're nice.

To her utmost horror she began to sob. The sound grabbed his heart and squeezed. He pulled her into his arms while she wept it out. He gathered little from her unintelligible gabbling, but it saddened him the more. He pried the keys from her fingers and opened the door, and then guided her over the threshold.

"First you're going to sit down, and then I'm going to get you some water. Where's the kitchen?"

"First door to the left," she sniffed. She loved being babied.

He sat her on the couch then he removed her shoes and her jacket. He smiled at the way her eyes widened.

"Don't worry, that's all." He could guess where her thoughts had gone. He gave her a wink that was absolutely charming...it had her staring stupidly at the door long after he had left the room.

Good man, she mused. What could have possessed him to be an armed robber? She fell asleep with the barest hint of a smile on her lips and the slightest frown on her forehead.

That was the exact expression Chinedu saw on her face when he came back out. He held the sweating glass in his hand as love budded in his heart for the girl who had fallen asleep with a stranger in her house.

## 7: Please don't judge me.....by Atala Wala Wala

Chinedu watched her as she slept, taking in the delicately curved lashes, the slight upturn of her nose and her long, tied-back hair. As he did, once again he regretted the reckless streak that had made him tell her that he was an armed robber during their previous encounter. He shrugged; I guess that's just who I am.

Iphey stirred and opened her eyes. She sat up with a jerk and looked around. How could she have fallen asleep with a guest in the flat?

“Madam, drinks are served.” He bowed with an exaggerated gesture and presented her with the glass.

She sat up and took it with a grateful smile. “How long have I been sleeping?”

Chinedu smiled back. “Not long enough. After the stress of today, you definitely need some rest. Even your body agrees.”

While Iphey drank, her mind turned cartwheels. He was kind and considerate; he was funny; and he was good looking. She did want to like him, but... that history. And how could he be so comfortable and nonchalant about it, too? What exactly had happened to drive him down those darker paths of life?

But did she really want to know, anyway? Wasn't it her curiosity that had saddled her with the burden of this knowledge? What if he revealed even darker secrets - secrets that made it too difficult to bear the contrast between the person she was getting to like and the person she wanted to keep at a distance?

A musky scent intruded into her thoughts as Chinedu settled beside her. “You seem to be a lot better, but it looks like you also have something on your mind.”

“Oh... I was still thinking about my nephew... I'm praying that he'll pull through.” Iphey was thankful for the handy smokescreen Obi's hospitalization presented to her.

Chinedu nodded. "I completely understand. Was it very shocking to hear the news?"

"He's had asthma attacks before, but nothing like this..." Her voice trailed off.

"I hope he pulls through; in any case, he's in good hands now. There's not much else we can do except pray".

They sat together for a while, each lost in thought.

Iphey broke the silence. "Oh, I feel so bad; you've been so kind. I am a bad host. Can I get you anything?"

Chinedu laughed. "This isn't a proper visit; I only came over when your mum told me about your nephew's crisis. I've put some Indomie in the microwave for you; otherwise, I'm happy to just talk. Like I said earlier, once I heard from Aisha, I was hoping we could set another date. "

Again, Iphey felt herself torn apart by the self that said "go for it, he's a great guy" and the other self that said "watch out, he used to be an armed robber!"

The cautionary self won out. "Well, I don't know... right now, my mind is not settled enough to think about that."

"I understand, and that's why I'm not asking you for anything immediate. I only want to know if you would like to meet at all."

Seeing her hesitate further, he added "Think about it. You'll get the chance to hear about my adventures during my life of crime."

At that remark, all her apprehension boiled over into indignation. "How can you be so callous and talk about it as an adventure, as though you had been on holiday? Don't you even feel any remorse?"

Chinedu nodded his head. So it was the armed robber thing; he had thought as much. "I regret what I did then, but that doesn't mean that I cannot describe some of them as adventures. Or do you want me to lie about my past to you?"

"I'm not asking you to lie, but please show a sense of shame! Why should I want to hear about the adventures of an armed robber on a date?"

Chinedu began to feel irritated; he had meant to bring the issue up in a light-hearted way to diffuse any possible tension, but that sure wasn't working.

"OK, I'm sorry that I'm not perfect. I'm sorry that my life has this smear you disapprove of. But at least, one good thing is that if I meet someone who made mistakes and turned their life around, I'm less likely to judge them harshly."

Iphey was defensive. "I'm not judging you; I'm just saying that you shouldn't take it so lightly."

"Really?" Chinedu smiled bitterly. "Avoiding Aisha's calls and not even calling me to say thanks all this while has nothing to do with me being an armed robber before? Do you remember the anger and force with which you responded to the revelation?"

Seeing that Iphey had been embarrassed into silence, he continued in a softer tone. "I don't blame you; others have judged me before too. I found it wiser to be quiet about my past. Even now, I don't tell everyone. I only tell people I've known for long enough to trust.

"But sometimes, I take a chance, follow my instincts and tell people who I feel I have strong connection to, even though I've just met them; people who I feel will be willing to listen more and judge less." He looked into her eyes, and continued. "The trouble is, sometimes, my instincts are wrong."

Chinedu rose and stretched. "It's getting late so I must head out." At the door, he stopped and turned. "My instincts may be wrong sometimes; but somehow, I don't think this is one of them. How do I know? Maybe it's my instinct telling me."

He smiled wanly and added. "I really hope your nephew makes it out of intensive care. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help. Have a good night, Iphey."

She listened to the door latch slowly, her head bowed in thought. The ping of the microwave brought her out of it.

## 8: Office Politics: Small small girls....by Bubbles

Bisi was on her BlackBerry as she stepped out of the bank's official car. Her last marketing call had been very successful indeed. She was smiling as she walked into the closed banking hall from the back entrance.

Iphey and Jane were at the front desk. "Welcome back." Iphey greeted.

Bisi nodded. "Follow me," she mouthed since she was still on the cell phone.

She walked into the marketing office which was empty, all her colleagues must have left for the day, and settled into her swivel chair. "I will see you once I get off here...ok bye bye." She pressed the end call button and turned. Iphey was leaning on the door looking at her with a smile.

"Hey babes, I've told you to relax with me. Come and sit down, I have gist."

Iphey walked over and took the seat opposite.

"I met your boyfriend..."

"Who are you talking about?" Iphey looked surprised.

"I met Chinedu in Silverbird last night. Fine hard working bobo like that. All he could talk about was you; his friend said he even left us to run to your side..."

"Oh, he's not my boyfriend ooo abeg..."

"But wouldn't you like him to be? Maybe if Funmi hears about you both, she'll know you left Ayo for her..."

"Shhushh. Don't let anyone hear you say that. I told you about them in confidence."

Bisi motioned of zipping her lips.

“I...” Iphey moved forward but the ringing intercom cut her off.

“Hold on.” Bisi picked it up, listened for a bit and hung up. “Jane said she needs you back, she wants to leave soon.”

“OK, let’s talk tomorrow.” Iphey stood up and left the office.

Bisi tidied up her desk, put all the necessary documents in a black folder and slammed it shut. She shrugged into her dark purple blazer, and re-applied her lip gloss. She smacked her lips and walked down the corridor around the corner. On the right stood a beige door, she knocked twice.

“Come in.”

Bisi walked in with a smile on her face. “Oga mi...” She walked towards the table.

“I’ve told you to stop calling me that. Wetin sef?”

“Ahn ahn, Funmi calm down jo! Body too dey pepper you.” Bisi huffed and crossed her arms in annoyance.

The head of operations backed down. “OK, OK sorry! But I don’t know when you’re being sarcastic with the oga thing.”

“I just dey hail you. I know that when the time comes, you will help me just like Ayo gave you a double promotion.” Bisi uncrossed her arms and sat down.

“You can trust me on that. Did Alhaji give you the account?”

Bisi took off her blazer and leaned forward with excitement. “Yes now, don’t you know me again?” She waggled her eyebrows. “Who can resist this?” She bent low till her pendant was hanging in the exposed cleavage.

Funmi laughed. “No forget say na me give you the connections and 411.”

“I fit?” Bisi sat back and placed the black folder on the desk between them. “He said we should expect turnover of at least five hundred million a month...”

“Wow, with this, you’ll soon be head of marketing and I’ll be branch manager.” Funmi jumped to her feet and came around to hug her.

“So you want to displace your former lover?” Bisi laughed.

Funmi leaned on the corner of the table. “Don’t mind that stupid randy goat. He wants to push me over because of small small girls. Did Iphey tell you anything else?”

“She said she’ll hook him to displace you, and is still bad mouthing you sha...”

“I will show her...” Funmi shook her head and bit a nail.

Bisi laughed. “Listen to new gist first. I went out during the weekend and met this guy...”

“Where did you go sef? I hope it wasn’t that razz place in Silverbird?” Funmi interrupted, eyeing her with disdain.

“The place is not razz jo! Please let me finish my story now?”

“Ok, ok continue.”

“As I was saying, I met this guy who asked me if I knew Ipey. He wants her. I don’t know how or where she met him but she is one lucky girl, he is very handsome.”

“How is that my concern?”

“Don't you want her to date him and leave Ayo for you?”

Funmi pursed her lips. “Hmmm...that one is her business o. Imagine, less than three months and she wants to pull weight with me. Ayo or no Ayo, she has to leave this branch if not the bank. I can't stand her.”

Bisi got up and faced Funmi. “So Ayo is not getting back with you?”

Funmi sucked her teeth, “So he says but I'm still working on him...”

“That fool! Maybe you should just forget about him.”

“We shall see.”

“Ok o! I have to go now. I'm meeting Alhaji.” She put on her blazer.

“Alright, full gist tomorrow?”

Bisi nodded and tapped her folder. “Abeg get the small small girls to open the account. You can add more mistakes to bounce on their head as usual.”

“I need the ammo to show that small girl pepper.”

They both laughed as Bisi walked out.

## 9: The game takes a turn ...by David

Iphey got home early from work and dressed to go to her sister's house. She had had a fair enough day but wasn't to be pushed...she was almost at her limit.

Her mom had been in Lagos for the past couple of weeks. Though their mother was staying with Ngozi to help take care of Obi, her presence still weighed heavy on Iphey. The bright side was that her nephew had been released from the hospital two days ago. They had all been surprised, considering his still weakened condition but the doctors said he was stable and would bounce back faster at home.

"Mum, how can you have a party for Ngozi and Obi? Shouldn't they be resting and besides, how come I'm just finding out about the party?" Iphey recalled her conversation with her mum just last night.

"My daughter, I'm sorry but seeing as you are a very busy lady, I didn't want to stress you more than you are. I know the few times you could come to the hospital. This is also my send off, I'm returning to Port Harcourt on Sunday."

That was the only excuse she got from her mom. An excuse that raised suspicions that didn't sit well in her stomach. Though her attempts to find out who the other guests were from her mom seemed futile, she was so relieved her mum was finally leaving that she let it slide. Her mum had visited her office twice and she'd also caught her going through her phone. Iphey was beginning to feel like a third wheel with her colleagues and friends where her mum was concerned.

Oh well, she didn't want to overdress so she wore a pink, light sweater on a faded, deep blue jeans and a black, sleeveless leather jacket over that. She wore no make-up that evening. Looking into the mirror to make sure that her curves were not too pronounced, she stepped out of her apartment.

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Chinedu parked his car on the street his heart beating a little bit faster. He had taken a chance to accept the invitation from Iphey's mother. He and her daughter had not spoken in nearly a week. Aisha had asked what he did since Iphey didn't want to talk about him though she had tried several times to find out what was happening. He was of half a mind to give up but something told him not to.

He had never had it this difficult with a girl. He had the looks, the money, and the charisma. She was different...he suspected that she was not swayed by frivolities but was more interested in his personality. If so, he'll take things slow.

He walked into the house and saw other guests that had been invited, holding drinks and making conversation. He scanned for Habib but first found Aisha and her husband in a corner of the room with the lady who most definitely made his heart stop. ONLY ONE WOMAN MADE HIM FEEL THIS WAY! He took charge of his emotions, mustered a bland expression and walked up to them. Before he got there something unexpected happened.

A tall, well dressed man joined the group, greeted them and hugged Iphey with familiarity. Even Chinedu couldn't deny that this new man was very attractive and he looked like he's got money as well. He felt a stab in his chest and his face betrayed his cool demeanor. He was full of jealousy in a way he had never been, especially as the stranger's hand was still resting on her hips.

"It's not that she's my lady but I know I can't stand her with another man..." A voice broke into his thoughts. It was Habib, "Why you stand here, come on..."

Chinedu walked with him to say a very brief hi to everyone. He saw an expression of guilt on Iphey's face...this made him a little happy. He walked away after a muttered excuse to get a drink.

"Chinedu, Chinedu...hold on. Stop! Please..." Ipey called out. She had left the man she was with and came after him. He smiled.

He turned around so suddenly that she ran into him and almost fell. He caught her on impulse and held her close. His heart raced and seemed to beat twice as fast. He looked into her eyes as the adrenaline pumped through his veins...and drowned in the beauty before him. A thousand years could have passed and he would not have traded that moment for anything. He stood there oblivious to his surroundings and wondered what was going on in her head. He wanted to know.

Without warning, she kissed him. For a second, he thought he was dreaming, only to realize that it was for real. She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek but he remained tense and unyielding. Although he wanted nothing more than to fold her close he still smarted from the jealousy she had stirred in him. He pulled away and watched as she looked at him in disbelief.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"I wanted to say welcome and thanks for coming..." He could see she was embarrassed by his aloofness and didn't know what to say. She followed the direction of his gaze and gripped his arm. "I know what you're thinking but trust me, he's not..."

Cutting her short, “What does that have to do with me? Why should I care? At least you’ve made it clear that you want nothing to do with an ex-armed robber. Now I know why you refused to hear the circumstances that led me down that path...”

“Chinedu please...”

He smiled without mirth, “Well I came on your mother's invitation, so I’ll go greet her and your sister and be out of here...let's just say my eyes are now opened.”

With that...he walked away, leaving her transfixed and at loss of what just happened.

## 10: Match-making Mother....by Leggy

Chinedu stalked out of the party looking really mad. He couldn't even bear to face Iphey's mum and sister, he was that angry but confused at the same time. There was just a way that man hugged her with so much familiarity that he didn't like, granted he had no reason to be mad. He wasn't anything to her, not her boyfriend, not her brother, not even her friend, no matter how much he wanted to be the first.

Chinedu got into his car and drove out of the parking lot into the dim lit streets, easily manipulating the steering of his brand new Porsche Carrera GT. What didn't he have that Iphey could possibly want in a guy? He was handsome-going by what other girls said to him, he was rich, he had his own company, and he was living the good life. He had paid for his mistakes over and over again; he deserved to be happy now without the shadow of a terrible mistake of his youthful days crowding his life. An occupation that didn't even last that long and one in which he was pushed into by necessity.

He had to admit that Iphey looked really good in those clothes, very casual, not even a bit of make up on that face and she still looked so good. After watching her sleep in her apartment on the day of her sister's son's crisis, his feeling that they had a connection had become stronger. She had tried to apologize before he left and he kept expecting her call or something. After over a week and he had not heard from her, he had accepted her mother's invitation to come for the party. He had been hoping that Iphey secretly knew about the invitation and really wanted to him to come. If wishes were horses....

But why exactly am I mad? He thought to himself, she kissed me, she left him and she kissed me, he might be whatever to her but it was me she chose to kiss. So why exactly am I angry?

The truth was that he felt he was getting so fed up with her games, fed up with wondering- does she like me? Always asking himself, Is she just fronting? Is she like all those other girls?

He gently drove into his drive way and got out of the car, picked up his coat and phone from the backseat of the car and walked into his house. As he undressed slowly he thought back at the events of that night, the taste of her lips still lingered on his lips, he liked Iphey with all his heart but he felt like he was being manipulated, being tested, she kept opening up to him and withdrawing. Maybe she doesn't even like men, he thought and as that crossed his mind he smiled, okay he was going crazy.

He stepped into his pajamas, picked up his phone and called her mum. After the fourth ring she picked up and yelled 'hello' into the phone, it was really loud in there.

"Good evening ma," he responded.

"Hey, my son, I heard you left, you didn't even think to come say goodnight to us?"

"Ah ah mama, it's not like that now. There was an emergency in the office I had to attend to, all these newbies in the office always messing up one file or the other." he answered. A little white lie couldn't hurt, he thought.

"And they had to call the CEO to attend to such details on a Friday evening too? No problem my son, at least you thought to call. So is Iphey with you? I can't find her anywhere around here and she isn't picking up her phone." Iphey's mother sounded a little worried.

"No, ma," he replied. "When I was leaving she was still there. I'll try and track her down for you and get back to you on her whereabouts, she's probably somewhere around there and can't hear her phone ring because of the loud music." Or maybe she has gone off with the other guy an inner voice taunted him.

"I hope so oh. I assumed that you both went off together, you know I saw you both." She laughed, 'well, call me when you speak to her oh. I'm just a little worried because the last time I saw her she looked upset."

"I think I upset her by coming without her knowledge, there was another guy..."

"Rubbish, of course that's not true. That guy works at her office that's all, he's still here."

"OK no problem, ma. I'll call her right away. Bye bye ma," he replied, not in the least bit relieved and even a little worried.

"Bye bye my son" she answered back.

As Iphey's mother closed her phone, she smiled cunningly to Iphey's sister, Ngozi who looked at her with a mixture of a frown and a smile.

"Iphey is going to kill you if she finds out you are meddling in her personal business. Just because you were right about James and I getting together doesn't

mean you should consider yourself a matchmaker. Remember that we still don't know whether he only missing or he's deserted me," she said.

"I'm sure James will still come back. Isn't Obi back home after what the doctors said? Trust me on this, I'm still the very good and wise mother who married you off single handedly. As for Iphey, she is being too much of a fool and I can't just stand by and let her send this nice Chinedu away like all the others."

She smiled at Iphey who stood quietly with her colleagues looking sad and annoyed at the same time. Iphey's mum turned and winked at Ngozi; she could already hear the wedding bells ringing.

## 11: Singing the Monday blues ....by Miss Fab

Iphey was having the worst possible Monday in the history of Mondays.

To begin with, she didn't hear her alarm ring at 6am and flew out of bed at 6:43 instead. Rushing to get ready and stepping out of the house within an impressive 35 minutes, she was beginning to have faith that the day could still be salvaged when her car refused to start. Her mallam-cum-makeshift-mechanic insisted he could fix the problem in "pife" minutes. "Madam, only pife minutes I need," he declared but Iphey had neither the patience nor the mood to wait and angrily stomped out into the sunless morning to hail a taxi.

The rapture or something like it must have occurred that morning – that was the only explanation she could think of for the practically standstill traffic, and she spent many angry minutes uncharacteristically cursing the taxi driver, the other drivers, the okada riders, the Lagos state government, the Nigerian government, and every other entity she could think of.

Walking into her 9am meeting at 9:26, she fumbled into the nearest empty seat, muttering a breathless "Sorry I'm late. Got caught in traffic."

"And they say you're professional," Funmi muttered. "Do you have the report?" She snapped more loudly.

"I'm really sorry," Iphey said, shuffling through the papers she held in her hand. She picked out a couple and asked Bisi to pass them down. "Here they are."

Funmi shot her a withering look before resuming her presentation.

Iphey could not have been more embarrassed. It's this stupid Chinedu, she thought to herself. She had gone home fuming from the party, thinking she'd made a huge mistake. She didn't even know what made her kiss him; it wasn't

like her to do so. She was never quite the forward type, but somehow Chinedu had waltzed in on his high horse and messed up her rhythm. She hadn't been able to get much sleep the past few nights, tossing and turning and staring at the pitch-black darkness way into the early morning.

Feeling cranky from lack of sleep, she willed herself to disappear in her seat. It didn't seem like she was doing a very good job because she caught Ayo winking at her. Suddenly she was very annoyed. What was wrong with this man? He'd shown up to a party on her mum's invitation as her boss but then proceeded to get chummy at every chance as if he'd just proposed. Had he no shame or sense of decency? Did he not care about his wife? What's wrong with men these days even? It's like they don't know what they want.

She didn't realize she'd hissed out loud until all eyes in the boardroom turned to her.

"Excuse me, did you have a problem with something I said?" Funmi asked, sounding irritated.

"I'm-I'm sorry," Iphey stammered and for lack of a meaningful explanation to give, reorganized her papers and tried to look busy.

That was her Monday so far, and it wasn't even 10 o' clock yet.

Determined to make up for her double strike at the meeting, she decided to skip lunch and use the time to put in some extra work. Iphey felt upset with herself for being so careless, and she reminded herself that now was not the time to slack off. The recent spate of terminations all over the banking sector was nothing to joke with, especially now that she was due for confirmation.

Around 12:30, Bisi and one of the girls from Accounts Reconciliation stopped by to ask if she would join them for lunch.

"Oh, thanks for the invite," Iphey smiled, "but I really have to finish all this work."

The other girl excused herself for a phone call, and Bisi waited until she was out of sight before saying, "So when are you going to gist me about you and you-know-who at your party on Friday?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Iphey laughed nervously, she didn't want to talk about Chinedu.

"Ahahn don't form for me jo," Bisi teased. "I heard he was all over you and even gave gifts to your mom."

Iphey stared back at her blankly for a few seconds before realizing she was talking about Ayo.

"Oh you mean that one?" she said and then hissed. "I don't understand why he won't leave me alone."

"It's so obvious he likes you," Bisi said, pausing to add, "He's really rich you know. And I hear he and his wife haven't lived together in over a year."

Iphey was about to ask why Bisi was sharing this information with her when the other girl returned.

“You guys should enjoy your lunch,” Iphey said. “I’ve to return to this portfolio anyway.”

“We’ll talk later sha,” Bisi replied and left.

Iphey turned back to her monitor and thought about the conversation. A nagging feeling at the back of her mind told her trouble was breeding somewhere, but she convinced herself she was being ridiculous and tried to focus on her work.

At 8 pm, she decided to head home. Most of her co-workers had gone by then, so she packed her papers and hurriedly left the building. Stepping outside the gates of the bank, she suddenly realized she hadn’t eaten all day and she stood for a few minutes, the cacophony of the evening hustle and bustle interspersing her angrily growling tummy, until she spotted an empty taxi heading in her direction. She stretched out her hand to flag it down and, without a word, got into the backseat.

The driver turned around to ask where she was going, and Iphey gasped as she recognized the disheveled, unkempt stranger as James, her sister’s missing husband.

## 12: Who is James? ...by Aeedeeae

“James...?” Iphey stared, mouth agape and eyes wide in shock.

“Wetin be that?” The driver asked. “You dey ok?”

“Are you not James?” She demanded as shock and all kinds of emotions coursed through her body. He looked exactly the same as her missing brother-in-law.

“That no be me oo. Who is James? Madam you well so?”

“I’m alright. It’s just that...you look like someone I know.” She continued looking at him intently. “My sister’s husband...”

“I say no be me,” said the cab driver in an unflinching tone. “Where you dey go?”

He did look different. Thinner harder, meaner. The voice was also a bit different from James'...or so she thought. It had been almost three years. She really couldn't remember what James' voice was like anymore; partly because of the time lapse and partly because she had almost believed he was dead...

Stop it, Iphey, And tell the man where you're headed!

“Lekki Phase 1...” She finally replied.

Scratching his head, the driver said “Oh...Sorry o! I no dey go that way...I don close for today and na Surulere side I dey go.”

Iphey pierced him with her gaze but again he remained unmoving, “Madam go now make I fit find another passenger.”

“Oh..ok. I'll just get another cab.” She jumped out, hunger and tiredness now replaced by angst, memories of the nights when she had to stay with her sister. When Ngozi would cry herself sick; her son sick and her husband missing. Lost in her reverie, Iphey almost got knocked down by an Okada rider...

“See, no be me go kpai you o!” He cursed at her.

“Sorry! Sorry...” said a very confused Iphey. Cursing okada riders were the least of her problems at that point. Damn! This had to be the day devil came out with his entire clan. A stressful day at work and now a James look-alike!

She hailed another taxi. Thankfully, this one was headed her way. The thought of what happened a few minutes ago just wouldn’t leave her.

That driver had definitely put her on the edge. He looked so much like James...but that voice, or maybe that was because of the pidgin he was speaking. She had never heard James speak that before, and the taxi driver seemed very fluent. She cursed her car for not starting. Cursed the mechanic for not fixing whatever the problem was.

“Chei! I must be more fatigued than I thought.” She said aloud.

“You say wetin?”

“Abeg, no vex. I was talking to myself” She said embarrassed.

Something about this entire business smacked of lies...or was she paranoid?

Yes. She was paranoid alright. And hungry. And fagged out.

“Lord help!” She said aloud.

The cab driver obviously worried about the young lady constantly talking to herself said “Take it easy o madam. It is well.”

The first thing she did when she came in was to call her best friend.

“The strangest thing happened today o, Aisha!”

“What happen...Iphey abeg, Hold on, I don’t know what TJ dey call me for now...”

“No wahala...I’m here.”Iphey said in between nervous laughter. Who would believe it? She thought to herself. Should she tell her sister?

Aisha was soon back on the line, hissing “Walai! Can you imagine! It’s that rubbish Mutallab boy that TJ called me to come see!”

Iphey laughed at her. “Say after me, Mutallab is a mu-mu.”

Aisha hissed again. “Tell me joo, wetin happen today? Has Chinedu finally called?”

“Please don’t talk to me about Chinedu!” She had thought of him at work most of her free time but what happened on the way home had pushed him to the back of her mind. And she preferred him to remain there.

“You want make I speak with am again?” Aisha interrupted her thoughts.

Iphey was mortified. “Did you already call him?”

“I’m sorry Iphey, I called him for something to do with Habib, but your name came up.”

Iphey sighed. “It’s OK. I’m tired of that guy oo, and no I won’t call him. After kissing him in public, I think the ball is now firmly in his court.”

Aisha agreed. "So wetin you call to tell me?"

"Aisha you won't believe it..." Just then her doorbell rang.

"Aisha, hold on, someone is at the door." Iphey she sprang up off the bed and headed back towards to door. It was just as well she had not changed out of her work clothes.

Aisha went on, mischief in her tone "At this time? Or is it him?"

Iphey was busy peering through her windows when Aisha blared in her ears "It's him! Bad child! You you were just pulling my legs abi?"

"Aisha please go jo!" Iphey said chuckling, one hand unlocking the door. "I'll call you."

She froze when she saw who rang her bell. He who now stood in front of her on her doormat that said "WELCOME".

"Can I come in?"

### 13: A man should provide for his Family...Myne + Aeedeeace

“What are you doing here!?” Iphey screamed.

“Please let me come in, I have to talk to you.” He pleaded.

“You!?” He looked the same as when she’d seen him earlier in the cab but now his face was softer, more like the brother-in-law she’d known. He was James, her sister’s husband.

Not knowing how to process the information her eyes were feeding her, her first impulse was to choke him by the collar and demand reparation for all the pain he’d caused her family. Since she couldn’t do that, the next best thing was to slam the door smack in his face. She did just that but James caught the door with his foot.

“Iphey! Please wait!” He begged again.

“Are you James or not?”

“Yes...” He breathed with downcast eyes.

“I knew it! I knew it was you.” She opened the door wider. “How did you find me?”

“I knew where you lived...”

“Damn you, James! Damn you to hell!” Iphey cried hitting his chest repeatedly with both hands till he caught them in his.

“Iphey, please calm down... listen to me!”

“Please, shut up! Shut the hell up! Why did you deny it when I called your name in the cab?”

“Iphey...I’m sorry but I had to...” He pushed her back into her apartment and closed the door. “I was shocked as much as you were, Iphey. I needed time to put myself together...”

James had managed to push her into one of the living room chairs at this time but remained standing. A tense silence ensued.

“Where have you been all this while?” Iphey asked in a low voice. Her hands hung between her knees.

“I’ve been here in Lagos...”

“My God! James, you live here? Ngozi waited...she pined for you all this time and you live here in Lagos?!”

Pictures of her nephew in his bed during the most recent stay in the hospital flashed before her eyes...Her sister’s depression...The fear in her mother’s eyes...Her own tears.

“Please Iphey, You need to relax...hear me out at least...”

She sprang to her feet. “How dare you come here after all these years and tell me to relax?! Why are you even here? What am I hearing you out on? That you abandoned my sister and her child, YOUR SON!?”

Iphey knew she was getting hysterical but couldn’t stop it. “How am I going to break this to Ngozi? How will I tell my sister that her long lost husband is infact alive? That he has lived in this same state all the while she was crying herself to sleep?” Several thoughts ran through her mind at once.

James came to stand before her. “See, I had to do what I did...I didn’t want to but it was the best thing I could’ve done at the time.”

Iphey was confused. She hadn't thought there was a happier couple than her sister and James at the time. She'd just gotten into university when they got married seven years ago. A year later Obi had been born and everyone had been overjoyed. He was three when to everyone’s shock, James had gone missing.

James went on...”Almost four years ago, something happened.”

Iphey’s shook her head vigorously. “What is it, James? What happened?” She cried, perplexed.

James breathed out and turned around. “I lost my job.”

“What?? What are you talking about?”

“You see Iphey; two years after we got married, I lost my precious oil company job.”

“What does that have to do with it?” A shiver went over Iphey. The talk of job loss was a bit close to home with the recent spate of lay-offs in the banking sector.

“I never told your sister. I kept going out to work for nearly six months afterwards and never breathed a word of it to her. I looked for other jobs, gambled, took to drinking, chased other women. Nothing helped.”

Iphey found the sofa. This is only a bad dream. If I shut my eyes, it will go away.

James continued. “The few people who knew advised me to tell her but I couldn’t face the disappointment on her face. When Obi’s asthma came up while she was still on maternity leave, we had agreed for her to remain at home. So there was no other source of income...”

He looked at her face. “I know what you’re thinking...I wouldn’t be first or last to lose my job but I was so proud! Your sister didn’t know, her behavior didn’t change but I became paranoid. I blamed her for my woes and our sickly son for my quickly dwindling savings. Then I blamed myself but still I did not tell her.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” Iphey kept saying.

“I began to resent everyone. My family, you and your mother, you all boasted so much about my status...”

She could see it was very painful for him but she wouldn’t let that go. “Leave us out of this.”

“OK.” He sat down. “The thing was, I was brought up to believe that a man should provide for his family. In those six months, that belief made me mad!” He was crying now, the tears trickled down his cheeks.

“Are you saying...?” Iphey started.

James cut in. “I’m not saying I became actually mad but I eventually did something insane.”

Iphey's phone began to ring.

#### 14: Cupid's comedy...by Mr. FunnyHoneyMoney

The phone rang through without any answer.

\*Sigh\*

She was still not picking his calls.

“There could be a hundred different reasons. I know she wouldn't just ignore my calls,” he told himself.

Chinedu ignored the part of him that said maybe she was angry with him and wanted nothing more to do with him. There must be something else. He had not talked to Iphey since the party incident. He had tried to call her but never seemed to be able to hit the green button each time. However, today at work after his conversation with Aisha, he had managed to press it but the call didn't go through; the network was busy or her phone was switched off.

One hour passed in which he kept staring at his phone on the table. He had been trying since with no luck and now he sighed. That was all he did: call, no reply, sigh, scratch his head, sigh, stand up, pace the length of the room, sigh, sit down and do it all over. He battled the temptation to get into his car and drive over there. Was she with someone else? According to Aisha, the man at the party was her bank manager going overboard with unwelcome advances.

He called again. She didn't pick as before but this time he managed to send off a text message. He felt like someone was playing a game with him as the guy who always got something wrong. He still couldn't explain to himself why he had been so angry when she had kissed him. Maybe she'd done it to annoy her manager but he had really enjoyed the kiss. He could still feel it even days after; he even remembered the stray strand of hair that had brushed against his face when they kissed. God he needed to talk to her. He knew though that this time

there was no beating about the bush. They both spoke their minds or forgot it. It was all or nothing.

Thirty minutes later, he was still sighing and pacing. He picked up the phone and decided to try again. As if on cue the slideshow he had put as his phone's wallpaper changed to the only picture he had of her. Iphey sleeping, a smile on her lips. He sighed once more and began to dial.

His doorbell rang.

He knew she was the one even before he got up from his chair.

"She has come, God she has come." He banged into a stool in his zest to get to the door in record time and cursed. He opened the door and there she stood looking so beautiful, prim and proper in her suited banking attire. She looked like she just got ready to go to work instead of after a hectic day at the office.

"Hi," she said, "may I come in?"

Every cell in his body screamed for him to refuse, talk with her right there, close the door and run back into the house. Instead he said, "sure, come on in."

He wasn't as happy as he thought he would be. That was because it wasn't Iphey shrugging off her jacket right from the door, it was Bisi.

Straight away knew he would regret that decision; more and more he felt like some unknown force was playing a game with him.

15: Once a gambler...by JuaNita

Both stared at the phone and boy was it a tense moment “Well? Answer it.”

She gulped, “No I'm not going to. I want to know what you did.”

“You don't even want to know who your caller is?”

Iphey snatched up the phone and checked the ID. Her stomach plummeted when she recognized it but she wouldn't allow herself to be deterred. “Look, don't change the subject.”

James remained silent and she summoned all the firmness within her, “James, what did you do?”

“Iphey I- It was- I had to -for the sake of my family. I borrowed money...” He was stammering in anxiety, nonetheless his eyes held a mysterious glint, one too dangerous for comfort.

“That doesn't sound too bad,” she shrugged, regaining her composure.

“Iphey, stop interrupting me please, just listen...” demanded James. “At first it was from the bank but when their payments came up, I couldn't make it. And the last thing I wanted was for them to start sending letters to my office or the house. I had to find somewhere else to get the money. Look, it was my only choice; either that or the bank would sue me or Ngozi would find out. I wanted none of that to happen”

It began to dawn on Iphey what might have happened. The suspense was driving her insane. She wanted to wring his neck to get the truth out but simply gestured for him to continue.

“I had been gambling heavily, losing a lot of money but still hoping for my big win. Luckily the owners of the place agreed to loan me money in advance to pay off the bank. I would then owe them...wait before you say anything!” Seeing Iphey about to talk, “I now know I was stupid, but then I was like a man possessed. I won a little sometimes, and it felt good at that time because I could pay off some of the debt, I could buy stuff for your sister and pay my son's bills. It felt like I was working again, like I was a man...” He leaned back with a faraway smile on his face.

Without warning, she sprang from the sofa, towering over him. Iphey's mind raced a hundred ways and her heart pounded with seething ferocity. This was too much to bear. “Of all people James, you should know better than to stoop so low. How could a man in his right mind abandon his wife, and don't let me get started about Obi. You allowed yourself to be sucked into gambling? As a man my dear in-law, family must always come first, regardless of any financial woes you may have incurred.”

He stood abruptly, fuming “What would you have done in my shoes? Gone to church to pray for your debts to be cleared in an instant?”

“You abandon your loved ones and you stand before me expecting pity? So now, have you paid off your debt? HAVE YOU?!” Unable to control her thoughts, the damage was done as the bile spilled out.

“DON'T YOU DARE JUDGE ME!” His voice was raised to match hers. “Tell me what to do because I have waited for God to send money down and it hasn't happened. He may have answered your prayers but not mine. So NO! I have not paid it back.”

She backed down shaking, however, he had set her mind in motion; she had judged Chinedu too. Acted as an arbiter and almost written him off because of his past. And here she was doing the same to James, will she never learn?

He began talking once again “I messed up big time, borrowed more money from the group and couldn't pay because I kept losing...”

“That's still not enough reason. James...” She began more gently, “Whatever action you took in the past is in the past. I'm not in the position to blame or point a finger at you, but please let's go see Ngozi...”

“Iphey the people I owe are after my family. I owe them millions! The gang are after Ngozi and Obi. That's why I had to leave, for the protection of my family. “

Her mouth fell open. “Oh my God...”

James turned sideways and glared at her with dark eyes, coming closer till they were an inch apart “You see why I left them? Why I cannot go with you? Not this time and not ever. You never saw me, I was never here and I don't exist...are we clear on that?”

Iphey nodded vigorously. He'd changed. She was right, the James everyone knew, the kind-hearted one who humbled most with his modesty, was gone and

so was the spark in his eyes, in their place was the remnants of a wounded man and shattered dreams.

“Don't mention this to your sister. If you do, I know she'll come looking for me and I can't allow that. That was why I followed you here. I managed to get away before the gang could trace me or my family. Still I remained in Lagos to keep an eye on all of you just to be sure. Coincidence rocked the boat when we met this evening. Don't tip it over. It would be disastrous.”

Iphey was speechless. What on earth was she supposed to think at a time such as this? Waving away her thoughts, she willed herself back into reality to see James storming out the door in a hurried manner.

“Why?” she mouthed at his retreating back. The heavens sympathised and joined in her despair, a drop at a time. She stood at the door unable to close, knowing she had to go out again. She couldn't keep it to herself, she had to tell Ngozi. Nausea flooded her every being, overcoming her senses but she wouldn't allow it.

## 16: Tell me everything...by Vivianne

Iphey picked up her car keys from Musa at the gate and drove out of the compound on her way to her sister Ngozi's place in Surulere.

Ngozi was puttering about her home getting ready to turn in for the night. She felt exhausted and drained after the events of the last few days and especially after the rousing party her mother held this past weekend. Although it was a great distraction, she felt overwhelmed by the loud music and gaggle of people with their mundane conversations. The emotional roller coaster she endured while her son Obi was in the hospital left her feeling hollow and somewhat vulnerable.

As she dried the last few dishes and placed them into the cupboard, Ngozi breathed a deep sigh as she realized she missed her mother already. She had been a great help to her during Obi's illness and despite her nosiness, it had been nice to have another adult in the house to talk to. She shook her head ruefully as she recalled her mother's scheming to bring Chinedu and Iphey together at the party.

She walked around her home switching off the lights. It was quiet and Obi was fast asleep in his bed. She stood for a moment by the windows in the dark, and stared into the moonlit sky. The stars were twinkling and the sky was midnight blue. A thought entered her mind and a wave of loneliness washed over her, nearly knocking the breath from her lungs.

"Where are you?" she choked out between clenched teeth as grief overcame her. "I miss you, James, I need my husband back." She wondered if he was staring at the same stars, or if he laid in the ground cold somewhere. It was the not knowing that killed her, an answer that never seemed to come.

At that moment there was a knock on her door. Who could that be? She wondered. It was late and she certainly wasn't expecting anyone. She opened the door to find Iphey looking distressed.

"Ngozi! I must talk to you but you need to sit down," Iphey told her as she rushed into her living room.

"Ah! Iphey, Na wetin? Why are you coming here so late?"

Iphey took her hands into her own and led her to the couch. "Tie your sokoto. There is news I must share with you. Ngozi... James is alive! I saw him!"

Ngozi's hand flew to her mouth as she held back a cry. She didn't want to wake Obi.

"How? Where? Where has he been? Where is he?" She stuttered, her words tumbling over themselves.

She looked at her sister and began to feel faint and the edges of her sight began to darken. Her sister's mouth was moving as if she was talking but Ngozi heard nothing. She was back to the day before the Monday her husband went off to work and disappeared.

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That Sunday, she and James had lingered in bed late into the afternoon. Obi had gone to church with her mother and after that they were to visit and sleep over at a friend's so there was no fear of interruption. Obi was growing fast and strong and she very happy at how proud James was of his son. Her wish was that a sibling would be made that day.

She turned to James, wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face into his broad shoulder. "Let's make a baby," she whispered quietly. Just saying the words made her glow with hope.

James drew away quickly then kissed her gently. As he drew his face away from hers, he stroked her curly hair and stared at her brown eyes wistfully; it seemed a thousand thoughts had passed through his mind. She wondered what he was thinking. He looked like he was struggling to say something but couldn't get it out.

"I love you Ngozi," he said instead in his gravelly voice, as he nuzzled her neck and caressed her body. He deeply inhaled and a deep growl rolled from his throat. For once she was grateful for her mother's meddling ways, because if not for her, they never would have met. Although they had been married only a few years, in that short time she had never felt happier and more content with her life.

"Ngozi... I want you to remember this-"

"Shhhh, I will. I love you too," she said. No more talk. She only wanted to focus on the feelings he stirred in her.

She looked at his face colored like dark chocolate. She had memorized every fold, every crease and every expression on it. He then kissed her forcefully until their breaths became ragged. She would never get tired of this. Hunger quickly

overcame them both and the afternoon flew by colored by passion, love and togetherness.

When he disappeared the next day she often questioned the meaning behind that afternoon. What was it he struggled to say and didn't? Were there secrets he hid from her? Was the love she thought they shared really true? These questions had plagued her incessantly for the years she failed to hear from him again. Maybe he became victim to the ravages of an unsafe city. Or let's face it, sometimes you can live with someone and not really know them.

"Ngoo, Ngozi! Are you listening to me?" Iphey exclaimed worriedly. She rubbed her sister's cold hands and brought her a drink.

Ngozi snapped back to the present, "I'm fine! Bodi just weak me small."

"Are you sure?"

"Wetin dey do you sef! Tell me everything!" She took a deep drink and waited for her sister to explain James' sudden reappearance.

17: Why isn't he here?....by Neo

Iphey shook her head not quite looking her in the eye, "Is Obi sleeping?"

Ngozi peered at her closely as though she could read something off her face "Obi is sleeping. Iphey, please go on. O gini?"

Iphey sighed, "Ngoo, I don't know how to say this..."

"I don't like all this suspense o. Whatever it is, just say it." Ngozi snapped, her patience running thin.

"James came to my house. He's alive and has been in Lagos I...I bumped into him...in a taxi. Ngoo he looked different but I confronted him, initially he denied it but later he came and..."

Nothing could have prepared Ngozi for those words; she stiffened barely allowing herself to breathe. In silence, her eyes willed Iphey to continue.

"I told him I'd have to tell you, I even suggested we come together but he said he couldn't face you after everything that's happened."

"Where is James?" her voice was surprisingly calm and sounded strange to her. "Is he here? Outside?"

"No, he was gone before I could convince him..." Iphey leaned towards her, "Ngoo, it's a very serious matter...infact we have to..."

Iphey was still talking as she rose to her feet and started walking towards her room.

"Sister, where are you going?"

Ngozi turned and smiled at her, it was a bitter smile that left her eyes cold and empty "Iphey, you just told me that my husband who has been missing for three

years is alive and well. And not only has he been in Lagos the entire time, he's also not here to tell me himself. I'm going to bed and maybe tonight I won't dream of him or wake up in tears and cry to God for him..."

Iphey stood up, "Sister, you have to hear what happened..."

That was the trigger, it was enough for her to lose it and for all the emotions that had been locked up inside her to burst forth like a broken dam. She threw the mug she had been holding against the back of the settee. Iphey cringed as it bounced and then fell to the ground. Water splashed all over the light blue fabric sofa and the matching floor tiles as the cup rolled to a stop.

"Hear what?!" Ngozi tried not to scream, to keep her voice low for Obi's sake. "When he doesn't want to see me? I have cried every night for the past three years! I fought off his family who wanted to declare him dead! I held our son at night watching to make sure he's still breathing! And James is not here. He's alive, not decaying in a grave, he can walk and he can speak so why isn't he here? Iphey why isn't he here? He left us, he left me..." She let herself crumble to the floor as the sobs filled her throat.

When Ngozi looked up, tears had started to run down Iphey's face. She hated her sister seeing her like this, so broken. She was supposed to be the older one. Iphey crossed the distance between them, sat down and wrapped her arms around her.

"I have to see him Iphey, I have to see him." Ngozi mumbled into her shoulder.

"You will, we'll find him" Iphey said firmly.

After she left, Ngozi watched as Obi slept, noting the rhythmic rise and fall of his small chest. She remembered the scare when those doctors had told her to prepare for the worst, when she thought that her world was coming to an end. If she had lost Obi, she would have had nothing left to live for. Luckily they passed through it. Obi slept now his face creased into the deep frown that signaled he was in deep sleep. These days he insisted on sleeping only in his pyjama bottoms and though he had been asleep for just a few hours, his small bed looked like a riot scene with his tiny frame sprawled diagonally across the bed.

As she wandered into the kitchen to fix herself a cup of tea, she tried not to blame James but it was hard, especially having had to bear this burden of worrying about their child alone. After James had disappeared, their friends had been supportive, offering words of comfort and prayers but after a year the tune had started to change. No one could explain why he abandoned his wife and child leaving them in such financial insecurity. They said he was dead and advised her to remarry while she was still young, while Obi could learn to accept another man as a father. She had refused and slowly one by one the friends grew tired and began to keep away.

Iphey and her mother helped out as much as they could but she couldn't depend on them solely, so she had fallen back on one of her hobbies and turned it into a lucrative career. She worked from home as a baker, and on her own terms so she could keep an eye on Obi. It had been hard when Obi had constantly

asked after his father and she had told him the same thing each time, “Daddy traveled”. But now that he had stopped asking, how was she going to tell him the truth. What would she even tell him? Where was James?

## 18: Cupid's Comedy 2...Mr. FunnyHoneyMoney

If there was anything worse than shit, that was what Iphey felt like as she drove back home that fateful Monday night. It was almost eleven and she was still out. And tomorrow was another work day. At least her car had been repaired. She tried not to think of the incident with James and then Ngozi, and remembered she had wrapped the day up by 'cooking beans', a banker's slang that meant she and thus the bank had not been able to balance their books for the day. She prayed she wouldn't lose her job for that.

Just as she was wondering what else could possibly happen, her phone buzzed and began to ring. Instantly she knew it was him. It was Chinedu again. She hadn't realized how much she had been waiting for his call until it actually came while she was with James earlier. She couldn't take it then and had switched off the phone while with Ngoo but now she would. She immediately parked by the side of the road and started rummaging through the junk she had dumped on the passenger seat for her phone.

"Damn" she thought, it was now when she really wanted to pick a call that the phone would be under the pile. By the time she found the phone the call had finished, she read the text and decided to pay him a visit. She sent off a text to Aisha and then Bisi as back-up of where she was going.

It took half an hour before she got there. As she parked her car outside, she noticed a car that looked somewhat familiar but she didn't pay it much attention. Just as she was getting to the door it suddenly opened; and out came.....

"Bisi?" Iphey couldn't believe her eyes.

"Oh, hi Iphey how you doing?" replied Bisi with a smile on her face.

“Wha...what are you doing here?” asked Iphey.

“I just came to pay Chinedu a visit. You nko?”

Chinedu came out with a jacket in his hand “Bisi, your...” The words were stopped in their tracks by the sight before him

“Thanks darling.” Bisi collected the jacket with a smile and walked away.

Chinedu walked closer to his new visitor. “Iphey...” She stood there in his driveway like she had just taken a bullet to the heart.

“Is that all she forgot?” There was so much shock in her voice.

“Iphey I can explain...”

“There’s really nothing to explain,” she scratched the back of her neck. “I guess I’ll just be on my way, goodbye.”

She turned away quickly to hide the tear that was making its way down her cheeks.

“But you came here for something...”

“It doesn’t matter anymore!”

“No, wait. Iphey, it’s not what you think. Nothing happened I swear it.”

“Funny, I don’t remember saying anything.” She ran the final steps to her car. To think that she had thought to ask his help for her sister's problem. She had been so excited to read his text, but it was all a sham.

“SHIT!” shouted Chinedu as he punched his palm and let out a string of curses.

Cupid must sure be having a very good laugh with himself playing these silly games. He wished he had never opened that door, damn he so wished he had never opened that door.

## 19: Office Politics: Hell hath no fury...by Devine

Bisi drove away smiling but she had not smiled over her glass of vodka at SWE Bar that night. vodka wasn't really her thing, but the way her life was going these days, a daiquiri didn't cut it.

When everyone had gone from work earlier today, Funmi had called her in to say that her name was on the list of those to be fired soon. Iphey was to have been laid off due to lack of experience but Ayo had exchanged their names. Imagine! She tossed back her drink and gestured the bartender for another. Look at that 'miss goody two shoes', the small girl had scattered her life.

Bisi remembered the party last Friday and it pierced her heart. First Ayo and then Chinedu fawning over that small girl! Both men could have been hers. She had slept with Ayo a few times soon after getting her job but he'd dumped her for Funmi. She had got her own back when he married someone else. And it helped that Funmi was on her side. But now for the bank manager to put her job on the line for Iphey.

"Damn!" Bisi tossed back another drink.

Then Chinedu. They had met at Cubes Lounge and he'd been paying her some good attention. They'd talked, they'd danced, they'd laughed. And then he'd asked of Iphey. From then, he was no longer looking into her eyes, no longer flirting, no longer touching her hips, no longer wanting her. And why? Always Iphey, Miss'oh look at me, I'm all innocent, I don't know why men run after me.'

The bartender shoved the drink into her hand and walked away. First vodka and coke, now strawberry daiquiri. She'd asked for a vodka! Bisi hissed and wished she could throw the glass at his thick head, but knowing Lagos clubs, she'd hit someone else and the end wouldn't be pretty.

Bisi hissed again and walked to the opposite end of the bar.

“Vodka.”

“What would you like that mixed with ma’am?” That bartender replied.

“Just give me vodka jo!”

She’d been about to gulp it down when her phone buzzed with a new text message. It was her nemesis, Iphey. “I’m on my way to Chinedu’s place just in case. Call me in thirty minutes.” Bisi shook in shock and horror.

“Oh, no.” She gulped her vodka and stormed out.

“You’ve taken over my work, everything that’s good, but you won’t go scot free.” She knew Chinedu’s address, had asked that first night. She was closer and would get there first.

“Danladi, I won’t need you tonight.”

“Eh, Madam.”

Bisi hissed, slow people irritated her and this old man was painfully slow.

“Go home Ladi, I’ll drive myself.”

She got there fast and pressed the doorbell. She heard a crash followed by a curse and there he was.

“Hi, may I come in?” she said.

“Sure, come on in.”

Bisi chuckled knowingly. Her blue camisole always did that. She dropped her jacket and sat down uninvited. “I know I should have called first, but...”

“It’s no problem.” He cut her off.

“Are you okay? You seem aloof.” He was still standing.

“I’m good. How may I help you?”

“I would you like something to drink.” Bisi smiled, “A glass of you would be nice.”

“Excuse me?” Chinedu jumped a foot as though burnt.

“See, I don’t usually do things like this but I really like you and...” Bisi got up and placed her hands on his chest. “...I find you attractive and I...”

She kissed him slow at first, tasting, savouring and then hot, passionate like he was her sustenance to life.

The alcohol fueled her ardor till there was no possible way to turn back. She played the imaginary encounter, conversation and well, the aftermath until it seemed to materialize itself before her. In her mind, he deliciously responded in kind. She could feel his muscles tense as he made intense love to her.

“Blood of Jesus!” He shoved her so hard she toppled over the futon.

“Ouch! Hey...”

“I’m sorry Bisi. But what are you doing? You know I like your friend. I don’t want this. I want Iphey.”

It wasn’t like her thoughts. There was no Iphey in her thoughts.

Bisi shook in pure rage.

“Ha!” she spat. “Iphey? You want Iphey don’t you? Ha!” She exhaled in pure anger.

“I’m sorry. Bisi, I really-”

“Shut up! You’re not sorry, not as sorry as you will be when I walk out that door!”

“Now Bisi, I don’t understand-”

“I said, shut up! You want to be with Iphey huh? Ask her about the bank manager.”

“Bisi what is wrong with you?!”

“Aw, baby, I love you too.” She hissed and stormed out.

Now she smiled as she recalled the expression on Iphey's face. Served her right!

20: To delete or not to delete...by G-Func + Myne

“Damn! My fist is bleeding.”

Chinedu had hurt himself while trying to “express his anger” about Iphey leaving like that but hadn't even noticed until his eyes caught the blood on the floor.

He walked into the house and went to the toilet to fix it up. He had just finished washing his hands and was about to wrap it his fist in bandage when his phone rang. He immediately ran out to look for it thinking it was Iphey. He pressed on the screen to answer.

“It's not what you think, I'm not...” he began.

The voice on the other end broke him off saying, “Chinedu, it's me Aisha.”

“Oh, Aisha. How are you? You're calling so late, is everything all right?” He sank back on one of his armchairs and tried to breathe more calmly.

“I'm fine, only I just wake from sleep.” He heard her yawn on the other side of the phone. “Iphey still dey there? She texted that I should call her in thirty minutes but her phone is not going through. You sabi where she dey?”

“So she told you she was coming here?”

“Yes now. She usually does that when she's out late.” Aisha laughed. “Nothing personal to you...”

Chinedu grimaced. “Do you know whether she told someone else? Like Bisi for example?”

“It's possible since Bisi knows you too but I think she'll rather let her sister know.”

“I see.” Chinedu replied. “So was it just because of Iphey you called?”

“Yes but now you mention it, I still dey vex with Habib. How could he say I should not expect to hear from him in the next month and not say anything else? If you can, please speak with him o. This one is a new thing he wants to start. Abeg I no like am o.”

“I told you not to worry when we spoke earlier. But I will talk to him.” Chinedu knew her brother who worked for the EFCC had just gone undercover but he wouldn’t tell her that.

“OK, make I go back to sleep. TJ go call me any moment from now. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Chinedu replied, “and greet TJ for me.”

He dropped the phone and his mind went to Iphey. The scene with Bisi began to make sense now. Iphey must have told her she was coming and the girl decided to ruin it for them. It was lucky Aisha had added the last bit about why Iphey let people know where she was. He had almost begun to wonder if they were back to his checkered past. The truth was he really admired girls who had character and virtues like Iphey.

There was just something about her that made him weak, she had that “damsel in distress” look but somehow still managed to take care of herself. He also thought she was incredibly cute, even cuter than his kid sister, who he had thought before then was the cutest person in the world.

He still didn’t know what Bisi’s reason could be to mess them up. He’d never dated her so it must be something to do with the office. And then she had mentioned their bank manager. What did she mean? That Iphey was sleeping with the man? He decided he wouldn’t think about all that, if Iphey wanted to think that he was fooling around with Bisi, so be it.

“If she can't trust me now, what makes me think she will in the future?”

He was never one for drama. He picked up his phone and scrolled to the phonebook. According to Aisha, Iphey had switched off her phone. He guessed it was so he couldn’t reach her.

Over the years in his life, he had learnt one policy. He never pursued something he couldn't let go of whenever the moment demanded it. So now he scrolled to her name and chose the option delete. He hesitated, and then he pressed on the button. The phone asked him if he was sure he wanted to delete that contact and all their details. He closed his eyes and...

21: Number deleted... by Myne

Over the years in his life, Chinedu had learnt one policy. He never pursued something he couldn't let go of whenever the moment demanded it. So now he scrolled to Iphey's name and chose the option to delete. He hesitated, and then he pressed on the button. The phone asked him if he was sure he wanted to delete that contact and all their details. He closed his eyes and...

The ring tone to his phone startled him and had his eyes flying open to the phone in his hands. Chinedu glanced quickly at the screen, his heart beginning to race once again. It was Habib's new number.

"Hello?" His tone was dull.

"Hey Nedu, what's up my guy?"

"I'm at home, where else do you expect?"

"Dude!" Habib's voice was surprised. "What's the deal? Wetin I do you?"

Chinedu forced himself to laugh. "Sorry dude, na just some wahala with Iphey."

"You and this Iphey babe. It's nearly three months since you start to chase that girl." Habib laughed, "always one palava after the other. You go out today, tomorrow you're not talking. If it's not your past, it's her boss. What is it this time?"

Chinedu laughed at himself and the situation. It really was funny. The truth was that he'd had relationships - if he could call them that - that lasted less than three months. This thing he had with Iphey had just been messing with his head.

He determined to delete the number immediately after this and he would tell Aisha it was over if she ever asked.

“Let's not talk about it, I think I'm done.” Chinedu sank down on the sofa behind him and leaned back against it. “What did you call to tell me?”

Habib paused for some seconds, “Are you sure, dude? I can talk if you want.”

“No no...it's fine. I don't make my decision.”

“OK...” His friend drawled and Chinedu visualized him rolling his shoulders in his typical shrug before he continued. “Did I mention I am now embedded in your old area?”

“What are you doing in Ajegunle?!” Chinedu sprang up from the sofa as though burnt. That part of Lagos did not have very good memories for him. His parents had moved away more than ten years ago and he had not been back there since. He missed some of his old friends but the thought of the people he'd pissed off kept him firmly away.

“Relax dude, I'm not asking you to come down here.” Habib chuckled. “It's part of the job I told you about and nobody knows of the connection between us.”

Chinedu breathed easier. Habib was his closest friend and knew more of his past than any other person. He also reminded himself that Habib was a trained operative of the EFCC and could take care of himself. Still he couldn't shake the dark sensation that crawled over his skin.

“I thought you said it was Mushin?” he murmured. “Anyway, promise me you'll be careful.”

“Of course I will dude.” Habib laughed. “I'm not so sure about this new guy I'll be working with sha...”

“You got a partner?”

“No, I just met this guy. He was introduced as my neighbor and it turns out he knows some people I'm working on. Some illegal gambling and loan networks on the Island. This is sure going to be interesting.”

“Habib, I know you live for such thrills but believe me, you don't want to get on the wrong side of those kind of people.”

Habib laughed. “I know and that's why I called you. I want you to be more careful now so you can remain in the loop. The information you continue to give us is very useful. And keep an eye on Aisha for me OK?”

“No problem. She actually called tonight to complain to me about you.”

“Well dude, call her more often because I don't want her number on this new phone in case it falls in the wrong hands.”

Chinedu sighed, “I will sure breathe easier when you guys complete this job successfully.”

“With this new dude, his name is James, it might take less than the expected six weeks.”

“Keep me posted, and be safe.”

“Roger, will do. Over and out.” Habib hung up his end.

Chinedu shook his head as he pressed the exit call button. Habib will play cops and robbers even on his deathbed. He looked at his screen and it had gone back to delete number. He pressed yes.

## 22: What the doctor ordered...by Rene

Iphey opened the fridge and stared into it like it was a strange being. Finally she reached for a bottle of water. As she poured it into a glass, she looked at the clock. The time was 4:32am....strange! She'd never woken up this early before. Well at least for once she was following her doctor's orders.

*"You should drink a cup of water when you wake up every morning..."*

She smiled as she remembered the way he'd said it and then was brought back to her dreams. They were strange and she couldn't understand them. She'd never been one to put much stock by dreams but these ones were beginning to freak her out. The latest one felt all fuzzy as she tried to remember the details.

For the past few nights she'd been having the same dream but each day it got longer. A guy was in it, he'd stood at a distance and beckoned her to come closer. She had refused outright the first night. The second night he'd come closer, and even more the third night. Yesterday, something had obstructed them and they couldn't reach each other no matter how much they tried. Today would make it the fifth night, and this time he'd spoken. He'd whispered her name.

Unlike the other times, she just couldn't go back to sleep when she woke up after the dream, no matter how hard she tried. She'd kept tossing and turning until she finally gave up and here she was on her sofa trying to decipher these strange dreams. Who could be the man in the dreams, it couldn't be Chinedu or could it? He had not tried calling her since that night; maybe he tried when she'd switched off her phone and then given up.

That night, she'd driven home trying not to think of what she had seen. He'd sounded so guilty, *"Iphey I can explain..."* Explain what? She'd thought over and over again. It was too late for a business meeting so she knew Bisi was not at his

house with regard to the accounts they've been trying to get his people to open at their bank.

It could not be that Bisi was out to sabotage Nedu and her. She'd been encouraging right from the first time they discussed him. She tried to understand what had happened that night again, Bisi's attitude to her, the guilty look on his face. It just didn't add up. And to think she'd driven over there to declare her willingness to fully commit to the relationship. Iphey shook her head and hissed. She'd expected him to call the next day but it hadn't happened. More than a week later, no calls, no messages, nothing!

The sound of her ringtone brought her back...5:27am...who could be calling this early on a Saturday morning? She looked at the phone, no caller ID, strange! She decided to pick it up, she was tired of hearing herself think, and anybody's voice would help her right now.

"Hello, who's this...speaking...? Are you kidding me...I cannot believe this, you called me, so you still remember me...WOW!...when?.....are you serious?..." After almost an hour on the phone, she finally said bye, but not without a number. She quickly added the number to her contact and added the PIN on her blackberry messenger. She was still learning how to use the phone; she'd got it at her most recent session of retail therapy two days ago, not that it had helped her.

Feeling really pumped, she called Aisha.

"You'll never believe who just called me...Oh! I'm so sorry, I forgot it was so early. I shouldn't have called...anyways, guess who called me...no...no...no...I'll tell you when you come later today...I'll make breakfast...no I won't tell you, not until you come...just go back to sleep...my fault! Sorry for disturbing you and TJ...yeah! Yeah! Bye...I said bye....when you come I'll tell you."

8:53 AM

"Girl you're fast o...you like gist too much shaaa! I didn't think you would show till like 9-10..."

"You offered me the perfect combination...gist and food...how could I waste time on that? I discharged TJ with cereals and here I am." Aisha flopped down on the settee.

"I never shower and food never ready finish...shey you fit help me look after am? Make I go brush."

9:15 AM

"You remember that time in school when I had this mad crush on Dapo? The one with the fine *janded* sister that all the guys were trying to get with...I mean Dapo Smith."

"Don't tell me you woke me up, made me rush to your place, all for one stale gist. The guy dumped you after chasing you madly for two months. He left for the States and didn't even tell you and that was what? Two, three years ago?"

"I know...I know..."

“So where's the gist?”

“His sister called and I spoke to him...he's coming back this month and he wants to meet...can you imagine?”

Iphey launched into full details. Aisha asked her what she was doing awake when she got the call and Iphey told her about the dreams. But with the excitement of hearing from Dapo after all these years, the conversation moved back to him, to their school adventures and flings.

Aisha made a note of not asking or reminding her about Chinedu, knowing that Iphey would talk in her own time. Maybe the distraction of an old flame was just what the doctor ordered for Iphey. The dreams showed she'd been fretting about the situation with Chinedu. The day after the botched trip, Aisha had pressed Iphey for details but her friend's reaction had cut the discussion short.

Aisha had seen Chinedu earlier this week and he too hadn't said anything about it, it was like that night never happened but it had been less than a week! She knew Iphey really liked Chinedu and he felt the same. She considered herself their fairy godmother and would make sure they gave this a real try. Maybe with Dapo coming back, she would find a way of telling Chinedu about his competition. Nothing like jealousy to make the sparks fly.

Hmm...April wasn't so far again!

23: Love from the Past. really? ... by Beautiful

\*\*\*\*\*Edited by Wordsmythe and Myne

“Some people jealous me, some people jealous me...”

Bisi sang as Iphey walked into the Ladies Room. They had both been avoiding each other at work and so far, there had been no confrontation. Iphey blanked Bisi and acted like there was no one else in the toilet as she freshened up.

It was already almost six and time for her date. Thinking about the date gave her the strength to totally ignore Bisi but it also brought thoughts of Chinedu to the forefront of her mind. She had tried to stop thinking about Chinedu since she'd spoken to Dapo and his sister but it had been impossible. She just couldn't stop thinking about him.

“Well, all that will end now,” she whispered to herself.

Bisi stopped in her tracks as she walked out of the toilet and turned to Iphey.

“What did you say? Were you talking to me?” she asked.

Iphey pretended not to hear her, finished applying her lip gloss and brushed past on the way out.

“Nothing, nothing whatsoever will spoil my joy this evening,” she kept saying in her head.

The sound of her phone ringing startled her. Iphey picked it up expecting to see another caller id but instead she saw Aisha's name on the screen. She was slightly irritated that it wasn't the number she was expecting but she took the call.

“Uhum...”

“Ah ah, are we fighting? You can’t even say hello, all you’re saying is “uhum”?”

“Sorry jare, just that it should be Dapo’s sister calling me. It’s almost six thirty and she said she would be here by six, what do you think could be wrong?”

“Hehehehe haba babe, take am easy o, someone will think it’s even a guy you have a date with, they won’t know it’s his sister. Anyway sha, I assumed she would have come so I called to know where you guys decided on, you know I too like gist.”

“Gist monger!” Both girls laughed. “I will call you after I see her. At least make she first show cos me I dey hungry o. I go just vex go house...”

“Hahaha girl, why you dey deceive yourself? We both know you won’t leave there so sit your butt down and wait for her. Talk to you soon. Take care and have fun.”

Aisha hung up and Iphey continued browsing on the internet, all in a bid to while away time. Her mind began to drift and she recalled how excited she’d been when Dapo’s sister told her she would be coming to Iphey’s neighbourhood to pick up a delivery from someone. She had further said it would be nice to hang out and Iphey had said yes immediately.

Dapo’s sister had joyously said, “so it’s a date!, coooool.”

Iphey wanted to hear all about Dapo. She was already anticipating his arrival. She was not sure how he would react to her so seeing Dapo’s sister would give her a heads-up on the situation. Now she could not help but think it might have been a test, maybe she’d been too hasty in her answer and had seemed desperate. Well the deed was done and she just had to live with it.

The truth was that she needed some distraction. On her own, she would think too much and the issue of Chinedu would crop up if she hung out with Aisha. She surely didn't want that. Iphey looked at her wristwatch, it was a quarter to seven already. She made a mental note to leave the office at 7:00p.m.

“Somethings are not just meant to be,” she told herself.

She decided to try Dapo’s sister’s number one more time. She had been trying it for over an hour now and it was switched off. She tried it again and got the same response, it was now a minute after seven. She was livid. She grabbed her bag and left the office.

As soon as she she got home, she went straight to the kitchen to make some Indomie chicken noodles. That was the fastest meal she could think of and she had barely eaten all day due to the excitement of the date with Dapo’s sister.

“Don’t break what’s left of my heart” by Banky W was playing on the television. She just smiled. She remembered Dapo singing that same song to her years ago. She asked herself now why she had never dated him but couldn’t find an answer. Her younger self had been playing hard to get unnecessarily.

The last memory she had of Dapo was of him walking out of her room. He had come to beg her that day as usual and she had once again said no to him. It was Valentine’s day and he had come with flowers, jewelry, a teddy bear and

chocolates. She remembered the look in his eyes and the unspoken words they relayed. A familiar smell drew her out of her reverie.

“Oh no!” She jumped off the kitchen stool and took the lid off the pot. The noodles were burnt to the bottom of the pan. She just went to bed. Her phone rang, it was Aisha. Iphay couldn't bear talking to her now as she felt like crying. She put her phone in silent mode and shut her eyes. Sleep proved difficult, and when she finally drifted off, the recurring dream came back.

This time, she looked right into the eyes of her mystery man.

## 24: Office Politics: Like a woman scorned....by Neefemi

When Iphey woke up the next morning, she promised herself she was not going to bother about Dapo or his sister. They could call if they wanted but Chinedu was on her mind now. From the way Bisi had been behaving the last couple of weeks, Iphey realized that it was entirely possible that she had gone over to the Chinedu's house after getting the text from her, but why did he even open the door to her? What she felt right now was anger at herself. How stupid and naïve can I be? "I am a grown woman and I know better than to make childish mistakes like I did. Sending a message telling Bisi I was going to Chinedu's house was probably the dumbest mistake, if there was ever one." she murmured to herself as she got ready for work. She was hoping she could continue to avoid Bisi at the office.

The next Monday morning she walked in to the office looking better than she had in days. Over the weekend she had gotten a new hair cut that made her look considerably younger. Eyebrows done, nails done and she even got herself a massage. She was dressed in a grey tank top and red skirt with a black jacket complimented with red and grey shoes, red lipstick and nice silver earrings. She was determined that Bisi would not get the best of her today. Every day for the thief, one day for the owner. Today was her one day, no matter what Bisi said or did, she was going to continue being the bigger person. At least that was the plan.

She walked in with all the guys at work whistling at her. Tunde came over from Marketing to flirt as usual. She kept him at arm's length but was glad that she decided to make the decision to spend more effort on her looks. She saw Jane waving at her furiously and she quickly walked over.

"Haha Iphey, na you be this, you look good o, what's the occasion? Is there something I should know?" Jane asked.

“No now Jane, I just decided to get myself out of this rut I have been in this past couple of weeks. With all that has been happening,” Iphey thought of her sister and Obi and the whole episode with the still missing James. Her mother was still disturbing her about a husband, and it had become worse with Chinedu not working out as she hoped.

She continued speaking. “I have let myself go and forgotten myself. To be honest I would rather be on a vacation right now, so I can clear my head but I cannot afford it so I decided a makeover will have to do.”

“I feel you my sister, you have tried and you deserve it, you look really good,” Jane replied. “But don’t let Bisi see you, I heard that she is leaving earlier than expected. We should be having a situational report from Ayo today. And I don’t have to tell you the witch. Funmi is on the rampage, she is vexing because of her pet.”

“That’s the plan o, shey I will see you at lunch? We can go get Designer rice?” Iphey asked.

“Sure I will come get you then.” Jane said.

Iphey quickly walked over to her desk, managing to avoid both Funmi and Ayo. She was busy all day and didn’t even realize time had gone until she looked up to see it was 1.30pm. She needed to go use the bathroom before she stepped out for lunch. As she passed Funmi’s office, she noticed that the door was cracked open a little. Though she figured no one inside would be able to see her, still she was going to tiptoe across so no one noticed her.

“That Iphey girl walked right into that trap.” It was her boss talking and Iphey stopped in her tracks. Funmi continued, “I know you’ve told me before but I like hearing about the expression on her face. I can’t wait till I see it myself when she is sacked from here.”

Bisi hissed, “Funmi I can have any man I want. Can you imagine Chinedu telling me he wants Iphey. What does she have that I don’t have, except my job now, the bitch cost me my damn job and then had the nerve to text me she was going to his house. She set herself up for that. I wish her more heart break sef.”

“I trust you girl, that was very smart of you, I tried to talk to Ayo to change his mind and he wouldn’t listen to me. Where is the Iphey girl gan? tell me she’s not here so I can have a reason for me to fire her now now!”

“I don’t know o, haven’t seen her today, I know she’s avoiding me. She better!” They both laughed. “Wo let me go to the bathroom we will talk later,” Bisi said.

That was Iphey’s cue. She rushed into the bathroom stall and Bisi walked in half a minute later. She waited for Bisi to get done and then come out. Bisi saw her from the mirror and appeared shocked to see the fierce look on Iphey’s face.

Iphey looked at her with disgust through the mirrors. “What have I ever done to you Bisi, I have barely worked here 6months and in that time I have treated you with all the respect you deserve. You were nice to me and I was naïve to think that I could trust you or call you a friend.”

“Iphey, now mind your words...” Bisi began.

Iphey cut her off. “People like you can’t prosper, because you don’t ever wish others good and are just selfish. Some people in this office warned me about you but I didn’t believe them. You seemed to be looking out for my interest both here and with Chinedu once you met him. So it was all a lie? Out of spite you went to Chinedu’s place so I could think you slept with him...”

“Who said I didn’t?” Bisi blustered.

Iphey stared her down. “You know that is a lie. He is more trustworthy and honorable than that. He called me just before I sent you the text and it took me just over thirty minutes to get there. I was only taken by surprise that was why I reacted that way. Pride has been keeping me away but the scales have fallen from my eyes fully now. I am glad you have been fired, and I don’t have to work here with you for much longer. Good riddance to you though I still wish you well.”

Iphey said all this and swiftly turned around to leave the room. She did not even give Bisi a chance to say anything. She didn’t even realize other people had walked into the bathroom. Jane and the another girl were standing by the door. They were smiling at her and Jane gave her a thumb up as she passed.

“I’ll be waiting in the lobby for you.” Iphey told her not stopping.

Whew!!! She was glad she got that out of her chest. Every day for the thief, one day for the owner and today was her day. The thought was barely out of her head before her phone began to ring.

25: Time to move on? ....by Spesh.

Ngozi still didn't get it!

It had been two weeks and yet, each time she came back to it she was baffled all over again. She wanted to respect James wish to stay away but anger burned within her. What would make her supposedly loving and caring husband, to abandon his family for this long? Did Iphey leave out something? Because it that was all there really was to the story, then she was disappointed. She thought their relationship was better, she felt the bond was strong enough that he could confide in her. But instead he'd lied to her for months, even before finally disappearing.

The memories of her sick son having a brush with death made angrier at James...the way she had suffered, running from place to place to make ends meet. The showdown with his family, the nights she had cried herself to sleep, the nights when she found solace in looking through his stuff; some documents, his TM Lewin shirts, his shoes. She always believed he was still alive somewhere and that he would surely come back for her. But now that she knew he had been in this Lagos all this while, she was beginning to think that she was mistaken afterall.

"Mtsssss," she hissed with all the energy in her. She sank into the cream sofa in her living room, still lost in thought.

She caught an image of herself in the adjoining mirrored wall.

"So, this is how I've become," she said out loud as she looked closely. There was definitely a look of sadness in her eyes. Her once-upon-a-time model's body had shrunk with time. She was slimmer and looked darker. She noticed something in her eyes, stood and moved closer for a better view. She just

couldn't believe it but yes, there was a blood spot in her right eye. That was a new one.

"James, how could you?" she wailed in anguish, and then the tears came again. Just like the night with Iphey, she broke down, and let it all out. She sobbed uncontrollably for a while with her hands covering her puffy eyes and then she told herself to stop!

She wiped the tears and said "Ngozi, enough!!!" At that moment, she made up her mind. James wasn't doing this to her anymore. She was a successful "single" mother, and a force to be reckoned with when it came to gourmet cake making in Lagos. Her shop which was her garage was always bubbling with the high and mighty trouping in to check out her latest cup cake designs.

She had always loved baking and so her business was more like a hobby for her. She made sure she had the right things at affordable prices and she was supplied directly from the wholesalers which made her shop even more unique. Her mind diverted to Otunba's side. Hmmmm...that man was just too good to her.

A superior at her former office, he had stood by her through it all. James disappearance, her son's illnesses, her business. Otunba had really done well to help finance the expenses to start her up, but she had refused to remain indebted to him. She had insisted and actually paid up just a year after she started. That hadn't stopped his friendship. In fact, after Obi's near shave with death, he had proposed. He said she was the first woman to have ever made him feel this way since his late wife, but she thought his marriage proposal was just a way to entice her into an affair. Alas, she couldn't bring herself to 'cheat' on James.

To now find out that the man she had been keeping herself for did not even want to return to her. She shook her head vehemently and strode back to the sofa. One man couldn't do this to her. As much as she thought he was worth it, she had mourned him enough. If he didn't want her, it was time to move on.

She walked into her bedroom and hurriedly reached for her Louis Vuitton bag. She ransacked its contents for her W90i...her resolve began to weaken, but she caught herself, and dialed the number instead.

"Hello," the masculine voice on the other end supplied.

"Hi," she replied almost regretting the action, short of words.

"Are you still there?"

"Ehmmmmmm, yes...I..." her voice failed her again.

He must have decided to take over the conversation even though she had made the call.

"Ngozi, how are you?"

"Otunba, I really need to talk to you," she said, hitting the nail on the head.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked with worry in his voice.

"No! but its important, I need to see you.....are you free this evening?"

“I am not even in town at the moment. I’m in Abuja for a business meeting, but I’ll come over once I get back.”

“When will that be, if I may ask?” she was getting impatient, and she just couldn’t hide it.

“I’m taking the last flight back today.”

“Okay, I guess it can wait.....see you then.”

“Alright and please don’t panic. Whatever it is, we can handle it,” he replied affectionately.

She ended the call still not satisfied. Her thoughts just seemed disjointed.....she wanted someone to convince her that this wasn’t happening.

After all she had been through? James had shown no remorse, had not even wanted to see her or talk to her. Her mind played back that fateful night on its own.....

*“I have to see him Iphey, I have to see him.” she had mumbled into her sister's shoulder.*

*“You will, we’ll find him” Iphey had said firmly.*

But did she really want to find someone who didn't want to be found. Maybe it was time to start divorce proceedings and accept Otunba's offer. “It's just that I don't want wahala with those his ajebo kids sha,” she thought to herself.

She was brought back to the present by the shrieking sound of the doorbell. Reluctantly, she walked to the door and peered through the peephole. She was taken aback by the sight of her mother on the other side of her front door.

“When were you going to tell me, eh?” Her mother charged at her with eyes filled with annoyance once Ngozi let her in. She dumped her overnighter just inside the door and marched to the sofa.

“Mama, please let me call Iphey. She's in the best position to tell you about it. She was the one that talked to him.” Ngozi dialled her sister immediately. “Iphey, Mama is here. I think she's heard about his return...” She stumbled to a stop as she noticed her mother looking strangely at her.

“What has Iphey got to do with Otunba's proposal to you? Who did she speak with? Whose return?” The older woman walked back towards her in measured steps.

“You're not here about James?” Ngozi could have kicked herself. Her mother was standing right before her shaking her head.

“Tell Iphey to get over here now!”

26: Mama says, "He made the right choice." ... by Myne + Folake Basola

By the time Iphey finished her call and begged off from lunch with Jane, she had developed a headache. She knew the cause of the headache was the coming showdown with her mother. Coming on the heels of her face-off with Bisi, it was a bit too much to know that her mother was in town and spoiling for a fight. Still numb from the things she heard from the conversation between Bisi and Funmi, she grumpily set about getting ready to leave the office. She was further taken aback to realize that the dark-blue pencil jacket which the dry cleaner had dropped off now sported a very visible stain at the collar. And he had left with his full payment. Terribly frustrated because she had so set her mind on wearing the dark-blue jacket the next day, she felt like cursing him for ruining one of her best jackets.

About thirty minutes afterwards, she was at Ngozi's place. As Iphey rolled down the driveway and parked, she saw her mother outside, pacing the length of the small compound. She had to pause for a minute when she noticed Mama's eyes boring into hers with hurt and disappointment. Immediately Iphey knew this was one of those days one wished to go back to bed and wake up with all the past events being a bad dream. Not that her dreams had been very peaceful at the moment. Iphey sighed and got out of the car.

As she walked towards her mother, it was obvious Mama was angry. She was as tense as a cat on a spring and ready to pounce. Instantly, Iphey began to dread the days ahead. She didn't totally welcome her mother's temporary visit under any guise because she knew how much Mama loved planning other people's lives. As she guessed, Mama was too angry to notice Iphey's discomfort and began to barrage her with questions even before they were inside.

"So that was why you ignored all my calls to your mobile phone these past few weeks and just sent me text messages? If the information had not now

slipped out of Ngozi, you had no intention of telling me that you found my missing son-in-law?"

Iphey continued on her way into the house. "Mama, I'm sorry but..."

"How long did you think you could keep such vital information from me, Iphey? Or do you think I have no right to ask?"

"I didn't want to be the one to tell you. I hoped Ngozi would do that. James is her husband..."

Her mother cut her off again. "Or as you believe and have never minced words to let me know, it is not my business? You don't want to get married and now you want to put your sister's marriage in jeopardy?" Mama poured out more questions.

They were now inside and Iphey spied Ngozi on the sofa. She sat with legs crossed and her jaw resting on her flexed fist.

"Ngozi, you better tell your sister that life is not all about work, work work!"

At that point, all Iphey could see was Funmi's smiling face as she handed over a query or termination letter if she returned a minute late to the office. She turned to Ngozi for help, finding none there, she turned back to her mother.

"Mama, I'm sorry for everything, but could we do this quickly? I have to get back to work."

Giving her a smothering look, her mother retorted, "Not this time around, Ifeoma, you will stay here and answer all these questions I'm asking you!"

Being fully acquainted with her moods, Iphey knew her mother could be highly irrational when she got like this. In a reconciliatory voice, she quickly gave a short version of the whole story.

"I bumped into James about two weeks ago in a taxi. That evening he came over to my house to explain why he abandoned his family. He said he lost his job but kept going to work for months, borrowing money from banks to cater for his family and also to take care of Obi's high medical bills. Soon the bank began to mount pressure on him to pay back or forfeit his house which he had used as collateral. He resorted to gambling and loan sharks whom he now owes millions of naira. He said he had to abscond when he realized the loan sharks were getting ready to draw blood since he was not forthcoming with their money."

Looking at Mama when she was done, Iphey saw that her mother looked skeptical. Ngozi had the same raw look she wore two weeks ago when Iphey was in her house.

"Is that all? Ngozi said the same and I was hoping you could add something more."

"There's really nothing else."

There was silence in the room. Finally, Mama in a small voice quite unlike hers said, "I think that was a very brave thing James did."

Both Iphey and Ngozi looked at their mother in horror. How could Mama approve what James did?

Mama faced Ngozi, arms on her hips, “It is fine for you to feel that what he did was unfair, making you go through so much agony all alone and turning you into a single mother overnight. But believe me, at that point, I think he was left with no choice. I've told you this and I'll say it again, James had to make the painful decision of abandoning you and Obi thereby guaranteeing your safety or staying and bringing about your death. He made the right choice.”

“You say he did right? Abandoning us for three years and refusing to see me even now?” There were tears in Ngozi's voice.

The doorbell rang. When their mother rushed to answer it, Iphey shook her head. One would think Mama owned the house. It was Otunba, Ngozi's benefactor and the quick way their mother returned to her seat left Iphey wondering if she was expecting someone else.

Ngozi got to her feet. “Otunba, are you back already?”

“Yes I did,” he replied. “You sounded so worried when you called earlier I had to take the next flight back and come here immediately.”

“Thank you so much.” Otunba folded Ngozi into the thick folds of his Agbada and stroked her hair.

The long hug was Iphey's first clue that the couple's relationship was more than business as she had thought. Her raised eyebrows to her mother got a nod with pursed lips.

“He called me and asked to marry her.” Mama whispered. “No way!” She folded her arms and sat back in her seat.

“Good evening Mama,” Otunba greeted. Mama sniffed and Iphey almost choked on the laughter bubbling up her throat. “Iphey, how are you?”

Iphey got to her feet and walked towards him and they shook hands. “I'm fine, thanks Otunba.” She turned to the others. “I have to return to the office now.” There was obviously a lot of gist but she could wait.

“No, Iphey wait. There's...”

“Mama please, not now. My boss will have my head on a platter...” Iphey opened the door and the words flew out of her head.

Someone stood at the door, hand upraised to knock.

27: I'm sorry but YOU DID WHAT?! ...by La-Pimpette featuring F

There he was. The man who had refused to call. The man who had made her feel ridiculously foolish and yet made her want to try again. Iphey was shocked to see him after so many weeks! She had to blink to be sure that this was not a trick her eyes were playing.

“Chinedu, what on earth are you doing here?”

As the words left Iphey’s lips, realisation hit her hard. MAMA! She had been right all along. The woman HAD been expecting someone else when Otunba appeared on the scene. She glanced back and the look of ultimate satisfaction on Mama’s face said it all. Right in the middle of this storm in Ngozi’s living room, Mama was grinning from ear to ear. The smile of a woman whose mission had been accomplished. Unbelievable. Iphey tried to caution herself from jumping to conclusions but Mama’s voice sealed her suspicions.

“Oh Chinedu. I have been expecting you! How are...”

“Wait, you were expecting him?” Iphey turned to her mother. She knew Mama was a match-maker but did not believe she would go that far. So all that delay asking for details about James was just to buy her some time so that Chinedu would meet her here? As Iphey extricated herself from the confused web of emotions that her mind had become, she realised Chinedu was explaining.

“Yes your mother called me here... she said she wanted me to come help her with something.”

“So you're not here to see me?”

“Yes...Erm...No... Your mother said...” Chinedu stuttered.

The funny thing about shock or stress is the disconnect between thought and speech. His words were as eloquent as those of a teenager asking for a first date.

What Chinedu was thinking was, “How dare you? I am the one who should be demanding explanations here. YOU made up your mind without hearing my side!”

These thoughts flitted through his mind, yet, the exasperation he felt was far outweighed by something else he couldn't explain. Like why he could not erase her from his thoughts like he did with his phone. She had a hold on him and he didn't like it. He realized that she had also gripped his arm literally.

“If you would excuse us,” Iphey said to everyone. All eyes were fixed on them by now. “We need to talk,” she whispered to him.

Chinedu was as surprised to see Iphey as she was. He did not know her mother was playing one of her tricks again! The woman had called him earlier to come and help her out with “something”. She said it was an emergency and something she could not talk about on the phone. God he had so NOT planned on seeing Iphey! It was the middle of the afternoon and she was supposed to be at work. Now all the emotions that had seemingly been buried were rising from nowhere. His thoughts were paused by the sound of her voice... he had almost forgotten what listening to her was like.

“I'm talking to you Chinedu! Did you know I'll be here when you agreed to Mama's request to come?”

He pretended nonchalance. “I came to see your mother; I honestly did not plan on seeing you.”

Her next words came out of nowhere. “That's not even the issue! How dare you ignore me since? After that episode with Bisi, you did not even think of calling me to explain. You completely blanked me and acted like we shared nothing.... like I did not mean anything to you! How could you let me go? Why?”

First, it was his past. Now she wanted an explanation for Bisi. Iphey wasn't even his woman so why was she angry at all? How could she be so worked up when they were not even together? He wanted to tell her he was sick of her excuses. Instead, Chinedu remained calm...

“They say if you love something you should let it go and if it comes back then its meant for you.”

Iphey hissed, “Oh don't give me that! You did not even act like you were hoping I'd come back! Aisha said you never brought up the subject after that day.”

“I was giving you space, you needed to sort out your feelings.”

“I don't blame you.” Iphey rolled her eyes. “Am I not the one that drove all the way to your house to tell you how I really felt but you happened to be with SOMEONE ELSE?”

At her rankled tone, he began getting worked up too. “Iphey, I'm trying to be as civil as possible but you are not making it easy! For Pete's sake I'm the one meant to be pissed here. I do not deserve this interrogatory process that's going on here! In fact, I did not deserve the show you put up that night. YOU came to

my house and I had a visitor, SO WHAT? YOU chose to walk out without giving me a chance and YOU chose not to pick the calls I made to you that night!"

Iphey piped down quickly. He was saying the obvious. And after her confrontation with Bisi earlier, she knew what she had to do. "OK OK... I'm sorry," Iphey said. "I really did not mean to raise my voice."

"Is that all you're sorry for?" Chinedu snarled. After putting him through all that heartache? Making him wonder if he had done anything wrong? Not trusting him? Ruining his relationship with his workers because he had been terribly grumpy since then? And she was just sorry for raised voices?

"I'm sorry for everything! I should have trusted you! Something else happened that night with my family but still I shouldn't have flown off the handle so easily. I'm truly sorry."

Chinedu felt peace flood his heart. He wanted to hug her. He smiled and moved closer. Just then her phone beeped.

Iphey quickly read the message from Jane.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry, I have to run to work now. I'm late and my boss will fire me if I'm not there this minute! Can you call me later so we can make plans and sort this thing out?"

Chinedu stepped back. With a heavy sigh he said, "Sure I will. What's your number again?"

Iphey fumbled in her handbag for her car keys. "What?"

"I don't have your details any more. I deleted them..."

"YOU DID WHAT?!"

28: I just want a chance with you...by F

After her outburst, the silence lengthened between them.

“Ifeoma!” Her mother's scolding voice cut through the charged atmosphere.

“Is that how to greet your mother's guest, eh? With confrontation?” Letting out a loud hiss, Mama came to Chinedu's aide, stopping what was about to turn into a train wreck.

“Don't mind her, my son. How are you?”

If she was a meddling mother, he was gladly an enabler. At least, she came through for him. Guy! You fuck up. Why did you have to go telling Iphey you deleted her numbers? Dear God... Smiling sheepishly, he could have kicked himself for the nearly perfect impression of the awkward teenager he was putting on show. Cupid was surely having another laugh at him.

Highly irritated, Iphey cut Mama's bonding session with her perceived potential son-in-law short. “OK... I really don't have time for this. I have to get back to work.” She stormed off, leaving Chinedu with Mama. At the door, she hurriedly mumbled some awkward but polite goodbyes and “nice to see you” to Ngozi and Otunba. In truth, she wasn't totally thinking about her job after that last tidbit about deleting her details. She would have agreed to jump on to a bed of hot coals if it meant avoiding Chinedu.

The man might have been shaky with his words in the beginning, but he definitely wasn't playing at the end. Even when caught off guard he exuded a natural confidence that couldn't be taken away from him. He had just told her he had been ready to throw her over and here she was still salivating. The fact that he was just as gorgeous as the last time she saw him wasn't helping either.

“Iphey...”

She looked up and Chinedu was in front of her. His eyes looked straight into hers unflinchingly. This was not the right time to be gazing into the eyes of an alluringly attractive man. Sanity had to be preserved. Brushing past him, Iphey dashed into her car.

Let him stew in it. Leaving him like this made her heart ache, but she was too proud. The high of their reconciliation had been dented by finding out that it had been so easy for him to forget her. And it seemed that the pride of her car had been dented as well, her engine spluttered and died when she turned it on. She couldn't believe what was happening right when she needed to escape the most.

Again and again, the car refused to start. When she turned the ignition, the uncooperative engine made a sound that seemed to be laughing at her futile attempts to get it to work. Iphey felt herself on the verge of explosion. Surely, this much exasperation couldn't be contained in one body... She was one second away from bursting into a torrential flood of tears when a deep soothing voice came through her window.

"I'll take you."

Iphey decided to play the hand fate had dealt her. Whatever her beef with him, the fuming Funmi still waited in the office. She didn't even want to fight him off any longer. She was in Chinedu's car with all her stuff before she knew it. As they drove in silence, she noticed he was smiling. Out of amusement this time, not awkwardness.

"What is so funny?"

Chinedu let out a quiet laugh. It was that of a confident and mildly amused man. "So you sabi Igbo like that?" Iphey hadn't realised she had been cursing in Igbo at her choppy day, her manager and her car. They both burst into laughter. The tension brewed by all the day's previous events melted into oblivion. There was something about him that always put her at ease. It was the same calm she felt when he comforted her during Obi's hospitalisation. Her mind drifted, envisioning being held in his arms, totally at peace without a care in the world.

"You always know exactly what to say or do. When you aren't having strange women over or robbing people at gunpoint, of course."

The laughter died at once. A feeling of intense stupidity enveloped Iphey. She had no idea why she had said that. Before she could take it back, Chinedu had veered off the road, stopping sharply by some roadside stalls. He was visibly angry.

"Who do you think you are? You no get secret? You no get past? The fact that you know mine does not give you the right to throw it in my face all the time."

He threw his hands up. "Women! You say you want honesty, then you run when you hear the truth. You say you are not interested in me, then you freak out at the sight of another woman. What the hell do you want from me?"

Iphey was dumbfounded. He was irate. She couldn't bring herself to look at him, reverting to a childhood habit of playing with her fingers when nervous. She now looked down at them.

“Answer me! Answer me now!”

“A chance?” she whispered.

Chinedu thought he was hallucinating. He could feel everything inside him softening, turning to mush. “What?”

“I said...a chance. I’m sorry for joking about that. It sounded funny in my head.”

She laughed awkwardly in an attempt to minimise the gravity of what she was saying, and looked down at her fingers again. “I was scared. I still am. You know how they say, ‘Be careful what you wish for’? Well, I wished for someone who made me feel safe. And you do. The violence of your past scares me. But I could work through that. I just want a chance with you...”

Chinedu felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. In their place, an army of butterflies suffused his stomach. Gently, he lifted her chin so he could see her eyes. They were sincere. Afraid, but sincere.

“Iphey, I swear I’m not that person anymore. I promise you. The confusion that led me to that life is not part of me anymore. In fact, I am far from confused. I have never been as sure of anything as I am of us. So if you still want that chance, I can give it to you wholeheartedly. I am serious about you and I need you to understand that.”

Iphey finally found herself submerged in the eyes she had been trying to avoid. Relief and happiness overwhelmed her. Something else did as well. It was lust. She found herself wanting to be lost in more than his eyes. Before either of them could finish their train of thought, they were lost in an intense and passionate kiss. They didn’t even notice the petty traders outside the window until the knocking came.

“Oga, if u go use your enjoyment block customer for me, make you buy something now!”

Chinedu couldn’t care less. He would buy the entire stall if he had to. Finally kissing Iphey had been bliss. He wanted to do kiss her again and keep doing it.

Iphey smiled widely. The kiss had felt so natural; so right. Chinedu was the man of her dreams. Literally. Those eyes...they smiled into each other's eyes and drew closer again.

Her phone beeped. “Oh no...Chinedu please, let's get to my office.”

## 29: A Dangerous Invitation ...By Atala Wala Wala

The car pulled up just outside the bank, and Iphey stepped out, anxiously glancing at her watch again.

The window on her side slid down, and Chinedu peered through it. "Are you sure you'll be OK? I hope your boss won't eat you alive for this," he asked.

"I will be a few minutes late, but I should be fine; I'll find an excuse that will work. At least, as far as I know, there's no meeting that I need to be present at."

Iphey still wondered whether Funmi had a nasty shock waiting for her when she got back, but that was something she could worry about later. Right now, she felt so happy at the prospect of starting something really solid with Chinedu that everything else paled in comparison.

"OK. Oh - before I forget - can I get your number? You can be sure that I have no intention of deleting it this time - but I'll make up a song with the numbers in it, just in case I lose the phone," he joked.

Iphey laughed as she gave it to him. "Please call me, and let's set something up."

Chinedu smiled back. "Yes, let's see if we can start afresh. Actually, I just remembered that you don't have your own transport to get back. How about we kill two birds with one stone? I can pick you up this evening, we can go somewhere nice and then I can drop you off at home."

"That sounds like a great idea."

“Yes, I thought so too. OK, I’ll see you later.” He waved at her, and watched admiringly as she walked towards the bank entrance. Then the window slid back up, the engine revved and the car took off towards his office.

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As he drove, Chinedu was lost in thought. He really wanted to make things work with Iphey, and he was glad that he had this chance... but he recalled her unease about his history as an armed robber.

“Sometimes, I wonder why I had to go and say that. Perhaps things would have been better if I had kept this close to my chest,” he mused.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt it would be better to make a clean breast of things and tell her what had happened in his earlier years...

Chinedu and his four younger siblings were had grown up in Ajegunle, where their father worked as a clerk in an office and their mum sold provisions in a small store. But it was not a happy marriage; the money both their parents brought in was rarely ever enough to feed them all, so there were always rows over why the children did not have school uniforms and books, or when the rent was going to be paid so that the landlord would stop harassing them.

Chinedu remembered those rows with a shudder; they were violent, searing affairs that left him with ugly memories. He also remembered his father often saying to him and his siblings in a bitter voice: “See the suffering that being poor can bring. If you know what is good for you, make sure you study well so that you can get a good job and live in a big house, not this..” gesturing around their cramped one-bedroom apartment. So he coped in his own way by immersing himself in his studies; perhaps he could spirit them away from this miserable existence if he became a doctor, or an engineer. Fortunately for him, his ability matched his desire, and he excelled at school, so it looked like his hopes might become reality.

Unfortunately, at the end of his second to last year in secondary school, his parents separated. His father was tired of being belittled by his wife and left to stay with another woman he had been having an affair with; his mother was only too glad to see him go, as it would mean an end to the endless beatings and abuse. But that meant that the burden of looking after the five of them weighed even more heavily on her, and in the end, this meant that Chinedu had to help to augment the family income by acting as an Alabaru, a load porter at the local market. Needless to say, this meant an end to his studies.

Chinedu recalled his time at the market with mixed feelings. He missed going to school; in addition, the work was hard and competition for customers was fierce. However, he soon realised that the place was alive in a way that he had never experienced as an ordinary market-goer. There was always something going on; in addition, there was a whole underside to life in the area that he had never realised existed until he started hearing stories from the sellers and other regulars who frequented the place.

He soon made two friends, Polycarp and Gbenro. Polycarp was a friendly, rather quiet boy who had also been working at the market as a porter for two

years. But Chinedu was more more drawn to Gbenro, a much livelier person who always seemed to have a ready jest on his lips. One of the area boys, Gbenro was his nickname, no one seemed to know his real names. Chinedu also noticed that although Gbenro was not much older than him and did not always do any specific job with the area boys, he always seemed to have a good deal to spend. His curiosity pestered him to find out more; he still longed to return to school, but the meagre tips he got from his work meant that this would be a long time coming.

“So Gbenro, how you come get all dis money wey you dey spend yanfu-yanfu for here, now? No be only this area boy work you dey do here?” he asked one day, after his curiosity would give him peace no longer.

“Ah, bro... dat one na special ting...” Gbenro looked shifty all of a sudden. “I fit tell you, but...”

“But wetin?” Impatience joined curiosity in prodding him.

Chinedu gave a deep sigh. This was the moment he often replayed in his head; the moment his life took a dramatic turn, as a sequence of events began to unfold. It turned out that Gbenro, who ran errands for a gang of armed robbers in the area, had actually been waiting for an opportunity to recruit him to be a part of the gang. So Chinedu started out as an errand boy, passing along information; due to his popularity and having grown up in the area, he knew almost everyone. With time, he graduated to being a participant in the actual robberies, either as a lookout or driver. It had all been part of the excitement of being a teenager, he played cops and robbers and saved some money for his GCE exam. He assuaged any lingering doubts by thinking that no one was being hurt. Until the day everything went horribly, horribly wrong.

### 30: Operation gone wrong...by Atala Wala Wala.

It was the evening of what had been a dull and rainy day. Chinedu was waiting in a room with two other men; he had been asked to 'report for duty', as an operation was scheduled for this night. He was nervous, because unlike the past few operations, he had not been given any details. While he waited, he tried to pry information from the other two men. Serubawon, tough and surly, ignored him altogether; Chancer, quiet and tense, told him to wait for their leader, Dabaru, to come - he would tell him everything. Chinedu was edgy because the people he was more familiar with, Gbenro and a few others, were not there.

About an hour later, the door opened, and Dabaru entered, followed by Okey, another member of the gang. Dabaru was a tall, rangy man who had the air of someone scenting for danger around him. He had been involved in armed robbery for over five years; more than once, his sharp instincts had helped him evade capture. He called them all to gather round so that he could explain the night's operation.

"We are going to this address in Lekki tonight. I hear that someone there is keeping some money there this night." He stared fiercely at one of the other boys, "Okey, you know the place, right? The place I showed you when we were driving in the area the other day."

Chinedu was puzzled. "Is Okey driving tonight?" he asked.

Dabaru turned to him and smiled. "Yes, Okey is driving instead of you. I think it's time that you took part in a actual operation." He turned back to the

others and continued explaining details of the operation, but Chinedu's mind was elsewhere. He knew that this day would come one day, but he hadn't thought that it would come so soon. His heart beat faster as he thought of what would happen. He had gone on shooting practice sessions with the gang before, but practice was one thing; real life was something else.

Eventually, Dabaru finished with the explanations and told them all to get into the car waiting outside; the guns they needed were already in the boot. As Chinedu passed him, he put his hand on his shoulder and said "We will make six million naira from this operation; I know you will not disappoint. Just be strong like you were in the last operation." Then he followed them out and entered the car, which promptly revved and sped off towards Lekki.

Chinedu shook his head as he recalled how horribly wrong the operation had gone. His role had been to climb over the wall of the compound at the address, then threaten to shoot the compound guard if he did not open the gate for the rest of his colleagues. Unfortunately, the guard had panicked and run towards the house, raising the alarm. Chinedu had him in his sights; but he found that he could not bring himself to pull the trigger. He stood there, sweating and trembling, as the rest of the gang shouted at him to let them in. Suddenly, there was a gunshot, and he felt a sharp pain in his leg. The robbers heard the shot, and that was their cue to flee. Chinedu collapsed and as he lay on the ground, blood seeping through his jeans, he heard the wail of sirens in the distance growing louder.

He woke up the next day at Apongbon. Five days later, the police doctor had bandaged the flesh wound on his leg inflicted by the house owner's pistol but the pain in his heart went deeper. While his answers to the interrogations had saved him some beating, he had been charged for armed robbery. His mother had visited once but there was nothing she or anyone could do. He was not up for bail and the police were almost ready to transfer him to Kirikiri. He was sitting quietly while the other inmates raved and ranted, when a couple of prison guards approached his cell and unlocked it.

The prisoners began to chant at the guards, but they glared fiercely back and pointed to Chinedu.

"You... come with us. Oga wants to see you."

Which oga, and why does he want to see me? Chinedu wondered, as they walked down the dark corridors that led to the prison's chief superintendent's office.

The guards knocked and entered. Two men were sitting at the table; one was dressed in uniform - Chinedu guessed that he was the superintendent - and the other was tall, dark and wore an expensive babanriga.

"Is that the boy?" the tall man asked, pointing at Chinedu.

"Yes, sah," one of the guards replied.

"Hmm..." The man stroked his chin for a while, and then he spoke. "You... you were brought in from an armed robbery, right?"

Chinedu, staring in astonishment could only nod his head.

“I am Alhaji Galadima,” the man continued. “I am here to talk about the gang that you were part of..”

It turned out that the Alhaji, who was a police officer, was looking for information that would help him end the operations of Chinedu’s former gang, who were still active in the area. On inquiring, he learnt of Chinedu who had been part of the gang, but was now in custody. Galadima realised after talking at length with Chinedu that he had no great loyalty to the gang members, as they had abandoned him the moment he had been caught, and had not contacted or been to see him since. Chinedu said he would co-operate with the police in supplying information. Galadima also saw from the conversation that Chinedu was quite an intelligent person, and soon teased out the circumstances that led to him joining the gang.

His co-operation led to two members of the gang, Serubawon and Okey, being caught. It also meant that the Alhaji was able to arrange for him to be released sooner, and in addition, he volunteered to fund Chinedu’s education to university level “because it would be a shame for such a fine young mind to go to waste.” Chinedu’s eyes misted over as he remembered the Alhaji’s benevolence, but he quickly wiped the wetness away, as he slowed down his car to park at his office.

### 31: Office Politics: The plans of mice and men...by Afronuts

He sat behind his mahogany desk starrng into space, his chin nestled in his palms. His eyes were wide open but his vision was nil; he was lost in dreamland.

He could see her; young, beautiful and promising. Everything about her enchanted him. Her smile was unique and different from what he'd ever seen on the other women around him. Yet with all the appeal she exuded, she seemed more innocent than a catholic nun. And like the sugar ant, he was trapped by this alluring innocent sweetness.

He was a man imprisoned by the unholy passion that reeked of lust and desire for a woman he had no right to own.

But in his world, the story was different. He had some degree of power and since power could corrupt, he was a very willing candidate

The Intercom on Ayo's desk suddenly buzzed sharply startling him out of his reverie. The dreamy image of Iphey he had beheld suddenly faded into the obscurity of his subconscious.

He tapped at the intercom button, more out of anger than of urgency.

'Yes?'

'Sir, you have a visitor, a Miss Giwa from Abuja.'

Ayo's mind did a brain check. He couldn't recollect anybody by that name. His mind raced with suspicion. As a man of many escapades, he had to be careful with visits from females. Not every woman that romped with him should get to visit him at work.

He got up and strolled to his door and peeped through the pigeon hole. There was a gorgeously dressed woman standing at the secretary's desk but he could only see her back view.

'Sir? Are you there?' The secretary's voice came through the intercom again.

He hurried back to the table and tapped the intercom button.

'Let her in.'

He couldn't tell who she was but from the 'good look' of things through his pigeon hole, he was willing to take the risk.

The door swung open and Ayo was awed as he beheld the feminine spectacle that waltzed into his office.

Her svelte figure bore a body fitting red dress with rosy frills at the edges which stopped at her knees, exposing a set of long caramel tanned legs.

She wore a long hair that sat gracefully on her shoulders; her face looked spotless and fresher than a baby's butt.

She wore no make-up except lip gloss. From the look of it, she didn't even need make-up. That would be an overstatement.

She smiled, closed the door, walked up slowly to his desk and peered down at him through her sparkling eyes, well enhanced by contact lenses.

'Hello Ayo.'

'Umm...hello?' he muttered, standing up to receive her hand shake, while trying hard to recollect where on earth he had met her.

'It's me, Jennifer.'

Jennifer Giwa.

Her name suddenly triggered something in Ayo's head as memories came flooding his mind like a tsunami; the day he met her through a friend at a conference organized by the CBN two years ago at Abuja, how she had seduced him at the after party only to leave him hanging at the table because of some important call she got that required her to go to the ladies; how he had waited till the party was over and she never came back.

The mind update finished and he came back to the real world.

'Ha! Jennifer. What a pleasant surprise. How did you find me?'

He had every reason to be angry about how he was ditched two years ago but her smile and bewitching eyes had an effect too powerful to neither ignore nor allow any other sentiment.

'I'll always find you. I have connections. And you gave me your card, remember?'

She came round his table and stood very close to his chair. An exotic perfume assailed his nostrils. Her hand went to his chin and caressed it softly.

Ayo felt his armpits go wet as he totally lost his composure.

'I missed you.' Her soft voice was taunting the hormonal noises in him.

'You left me behind...'

'Shhh...I know and I'm sorry'

She sat on his lap while still holding onto his chin.

Ayo's heart skipped several times. A woman's acceptance of fault and apology coupled with this smooshy drama was like sweet wine to his soul.

'So what brings you here?' He was still able to summon up the common sense to find out why she came. His brain was trying hard to be rational against the building rage of sensual adrenalin.

'I need your help with a loan. Can I count on you?'

By this time she had drawn her face so close to his, he felt himself beginning to lose control. She leaned closer, her breath fanned gently against his face, her lips almost brushing against his...when the intercom buzzed.

Ayo's fist slammed at the button, heavily pissed at the interruption.

'What?' He half yelled at the intercom.

'Sir! The operations manager is on her way to your office!' his secretary's voice came whispering through the speaker. Thanks to the regular tipping he gave her to serve as his lookout for trouble.

Like a jackrabbit smoked out of its hole, Ayo came to his senses, pushed Jennifer off his lap and quickly ushered her into the toilet.

'What's going on?' she asked taken aback by his sudden reaction.

'I promise you dear. I'll get you the loan. But I need to settle some matters with people that might be a pain in the neck. Just hide here for a few minutes and keep quiet. Trust me, okay?'

She wasn't sure she understood all he had just said but she very well understood the part about getting the loan.

'Okay. If you say so.' She walked gracefully into the restroom.

Ayo closed the door just as Funmi came into the office.

She was already halfway into the office when she stopped dead in her tracks, her nose twitched.

'What's that smell?'

'Excuse me?'

'Is that a woman's perfume I perceive?'

'So? Are you the only female staff that wears a perfume?'

'Are you sure that girl is not in here?'

'What girl?'

Funmi waved her hand in annoyance.

'You know who I'm talking about. I actually came to complain about her...'

‘Iphey?’

‘Yes, Iphey. I’m getting tired of that girl. She’s so incompetent. She doesn’t perform up to expectation...’

‘Would that be...your own expectation?’

‘Are you saying my own opinion doesn’t count? Do you know that she took off for lunch over an hour ago and is not back yet?’

Trust Funmi to always answer a question with a question, two in this instance. Ayo smiled and looked at her, he had to think of a way to distract her. He looked her over from the nicely weaved hair that stopped at her ears atop a set of cute gold earrings to the well dry cleaned trouser suit and finally to the shiny black high heels on her feet.

‘You look lovely today.’

Funmi was cut off balance by the remark. It was the last thing she expected.

‘Why...thank you.’

Ayo moved closer and stroked his hand down her arm. When she leaned towards him, he straightened and adjusted his tie.

‘You know I like you Funmi but on this one, I’m sorry. Your opinion doesn’t count. Besides you and Bisi, others seem to think otherwise of Iphey. They find her indispensable.’

Funmi drew back and sighed heavily. She looked at the floor, then looked back at him, hurt shone on her face.

‘Ayo, why are you doing this to me?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You used to be so loving and compassionate...’

‘And you used to be single.’

‘So? Are you not married too?’

‘It doesn’t work the same way.’

‘Why should it be...’ She suddenly stopped. She thought she heard something in the bathroom.

‘Funmi, this convo is over. Now if you’ll excuse me...’ Ayo began but she cut him off.

‘Is there someone in there?’ She was already walking towards the restroom.

Ayo maintained his calm but his mind raced. He had to stop her from going any further.

But it was too late as Funmi’s hand rested on the door knob and turned it.

Ayo closed his eyes tightly as if it would shield him from the impending fireworks.

When he opened them, she was still at the door turning the knob. It was locked.

‘The door is locked’, she said in a tone that demanded an explanation.

‘It’s under repairs and fumigation, you probably heard the rat in there.’

Her hand quickly left the door. She hated rats and the mere mention of it.

‘I thought you were hiding Iphey in there.’

Ayo burst into laughter.

‘Stop it. It’s not funny.’

The intercom buzzed. Ayo hit the button.

‘Yes?’

‘Sir, Iphey’s coming! She’s looking for Oga Funmi’ The secretary’s whisper came loud and clear.

‘Did she say Iphey?’ Funmi asked.

‘Yep. She did.’

She gave a flustered look, refusing to meet his eyes. She now felt embarrassed that she might have overreacted. She turned and walked to the door.

‘Good thing she watches out for us.’ She said.

‘Us?’ Ayo questioned but she was out the door before he could get a reply. He heard her dialogue briefly in her usual nastiness with Iphey outside the door. Then they were gone.

He suddenly realized there were beads of sweat on his forehead and mopped them rapidly.

For a brief moment, the thought of Iphey came to his mind again. Funmi wanted her out of the picture, out of this branch or sacked for some flimsy reason but he wasn’t going to let that happen. Funmi had served her purpose and was married now. He needed a replacement and Iphey was the perfect and even better fit.

He would handle all this later. For now he had other pressing matters.

He knocked on the restroom door.

‘You can come out now.’

He heard the lock turn and Jennifer came out.

She was smiling. She had heard all the drama.

‘You’re a bad boy. Is that how you trick women?’

‘Come on. Not all women, like fingers, are equal.’

‘By the way, thanks for locking the door. I never thought of it’, he said placing himself back in his chair.

‘I might look gentle but I’m not a stupid chick’, she replied stroking his face with her well manicured fingers.

‘Now, where were we?’

### 32: Office Politics: The Plans of Mice and Men 2...by Myne and Tisha

“So where were you?” Funmi bit out striding angrily out of Ayo's office. I left a file on your desk earlier this morning and now I cannot find it!”

After the discovery of Funmi and Bisi's alliance this morning, it was easy to guess how the missing file and all the other ones in the past including other different things that should have gotten her into trouble happened.

“I did not see any file on my desk,” Iphey replied as she fell into step behind.

“How will you? Going out for lunch and staying two hours!” Funmi turned around and glared at her. She felt like throttling the other girl's neck. Bisi had given her the lowdown on their confrontation and she was mad as hell. Imagine the small girl, after displacing her friend, she had the guts to stand up to her! Well Bisi could blame herself for trying to befriend her in the first place. See where that had gotten her.

“It wasn't like...” Iphey began.

“Pschewwwww,” Funmi hissed. By now they were standing in front of her office. “Just find that file!” She snapped testily and then left Iphey standing there. She stalked in and slammed the door behind her.

Iphey walked to the water dispenser and pressed out some water in a white plastic cup and headed to her desk. She walked gingerly since it seemed even her steps annoyed some people to no end. Iphey laughed inside, her time in the ladies before searching for Funmi showed that she was still looking great. But more than that she felt great inside. After the last few hours, she was in no mood for more drama today.

It was like the day had flown by, so many things had happened, one revelation after another. After Bisi, she had shrugged it off to focus on better things and something beautiful had really come her way. She sashayed as behind her mind's eye she could see Chinedu, tall, dark and handsome. Such men were a dime a dozen, but Chinedu stood out from the rest, his features were imprinted in her head so even if she closed her eyes, she could still see him and it was weird but it seemed like they were connected.

Iphey smiled. She was working alright, but only just managing to concentrate. Half of her mind was on Chinedu. She could not even remember what the reasons for her not wanting to go out with him in the first place were. Yes, he had a shady history but he had showed himself to be an honorable man so far and those were the qualities that really mattered to her.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Tunde from marketing teased her, you are grinning like the cat that got the cream.”

Iphey laughed. Tunde thought it a contagious laughter that demanded for all who heard it to laugh also. He grinned widely at her.

“Are you sure you are not getting it somewhere?” he finally asked a quizzical look on his face.

“I don't do premarital sex if that's what you are asking?” Iphey laughed again, “I just don't see why you can't be happy and in love in a relationship without premarital sex?”

“You look like someone has given you some good loving,” he insisted with a wink.

“Actually I am just happy o, no particular reason, God's been good.”

“Uh hmm...tell me...”

Funmi was passing by and gave them a dirty look. “Tunde, Ayo wants you, now!”

Tunde stood to attention, blinked at Iphey and marched off.

Funmi did not pause in her tracks. She was walking with Bisi, who kept her face strictly ahead. A few paces behind them, Tola for Master Card section gave Iphey a smile and a wave. Iphey smiled back and went back to the files before her.

Iphey smiled to herself as she relived the kiss with Chinedu in the car. Her toes curled in her pumps and began to tingle. She considered whether to call him or wait for him to call first. She didn't want to make any hasty decision but it was not as if she was planning to marry him in the next month, she was just going to give him a chance to see if they could make it work between themselves.

She remembered what she discussed with Aisha a couple of weeks ago. After they had discussed finding Bisi in his apartment, the conversation had diverged to general talk.

“Aisha, most girls are hasty to get into serious or permanent relationships. For me, I have now decided that I'll give the guy a test-drive...”

Aisha's eyes went wide, "Do you mean...?"

Iphey grinned mischievously, "No, not the way people usually mean a test-drive. I mean a time frame in which I check out the guy and see if I like him on all levels and can check if we are on the same levels when it comes to values and compatibility of personalities."

Aisha smiled and said, "That's what most people do but they define it with different terms." They both laughed before Aisha continued. "As long as you don't end up in a marriage of convenience."

Iphey sighed and said, "I could never do a marriage of convenience, I would drive someone crazy."

She smiled again and set her pen down. If she did end up with Chinedu, it would be nothing like that. She was already halfway in love with him. Something moved beside her and when she focused her vision, she watched her boss, Ayo seeing off a slinky lady. On his way back, he caught her eye and leered. When he saw that he had got her full attention, he stopped, rubbed his hands and licked his lips. Iphey turned away quickly. Did he think she found those gestures attractive? They were a disgusting turn-off. She hissed quietly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Iphey spied Funmi striding towards him. Let them sort themselves out and leave her out of it, she prayed. At least her adversaries will be reduced at the office when Bisi got sent forth on Friday. Now that she knew Funmi was out to get her sacked, she just had to be more careful with her work, keep her head down.

She worked steadily, yet before long her mind was on Chinedu again. She was tired of doing the battle of not thinking about Chinedu, so she let her mind linger on him, she had better do something about this. She day dreamed about the kiss all over again. His lips on hers, their tongues meshing, his hands on her waist, holding her tightly. Iphey sighed.

And to think she had been dreaming about him without knowing until this morning. That should have told her she would meet him. It was a course-mate in college who said that "when you start dreaming about a guy, love is either setting the wheels rolling or about to blot him from your horizon". The first was possible, the first had proved impossible so far. It looked like Chinedu had come to stay. She was happy it was no more all in her mind, where he'd been loitering all day and night for the past couple of weeks. She looked forward to seeing him later in the evening when he came to pick her up.

She asked herself whether she had time to call and tell Aisha about Chinedu, and that they were finally going to give it a go. She also wanted them to talk so she would have all the back ground information she needed. She needed advice about the way to proceed with this guy since she believed he was something special. Her mom was going to be so happy but she herself had to be sure that was not making a mistake. The case of James was still pending.

"Here you go."

Iphey snapped out of her reverie and looked up. Jane stood before her, hand outstretched. She was holding a file.

“The shark didn't know that I saw her hiding it in the bulk counter room. No mind her, you hear?” Jane smiled as she handed the file over.

“Thank you so much.” Iphey clapped quietly as the receptionist walked away.

God was on her side sha, all her enemies will be scattered for sure! He had guided her every step so definitely. His hand was evident on every part of her life. It would all work out fine with Chinedu too, all she needed to do was put one step in front of the other and commit it into His hands...

### 33: The Charmer and Danger! ...by Happy BBB

Ngozi whisked the eggs steadily, slowly adding butter and sugar, swiftly turning them in, it was a very calming process, her mind wandered...

Since Iphey told her about James she hadn't been able to sleep well, had become easily distracted, even though she had also felt a bit relieved, a sense of closure because not knowing what happened to James had been tearing her apart. She had barely managed to fight off his relatives who had been adamant about declaring him dead.

Ngozi sighed again, she really needed someone to confide in. Iphey had been so busy lately, since she had gotten back with Chinedu two weeks ago so there really wasn't a good time to talk to her about it. She couldn't speak to her mum because she knew it would just escalate things, her mum was still with her throwing a spanner in the works for Otunba. But the truth was that who she really needed to speak to was James, to ask him why he left, explain to her why she didn't have a choice in the matter, how he could just walk out and leave his son without a father. It had been a quick knee-jerk reaction to draw closer to Otunba but she had changed her mind since then. His proposal had clouded her mind coupled with James's continued aloofness.

She remembered the way they had met, back in Port Harcourt. Then her baking was truly a hobby. She baked for her mother's friends usually and only charged money if the job was really big to earn some spare cash. That day she had been baking a cake for a customer who she had never met. He had called three days before, said he'd gotten a referral from one of her usual customers and he wanted a cake for his mums birthday. Usually she didn't take orders without at least a week's notice, but there had been something about that voice, so warm and friendly, the way he gently pleaded and nudged her to do his will, she wondered what type of face would go with that voice.

The birthday was later that day and as she completed the icing on the cake, she smiled in anticipation of finally meeting him. They had spoken twice more on the phone after his first call and he had confirmed that he would pick it up himself. She was expecting him in four hours so she had just about enough time to finish with the cake and get herself ready.

At exactly 5pm her doorbell rang, an hour earlier than planned, the icing was all on but not ready to go but she was in even worse shape. She caught a glance at herself at the mirror on the corridor, she looked a mess, she always looked scattered when baking. Her heart hammered in her chest but she didn't want to keep him waiting.

James was at the door, he hoped she had been able to bake the cake in three days. He had been really desperate and had pulled out all his charms in getting her to assist him. She had sounded stern on the phone but at the end of the phone call, she was laughing really hard. He remembered her laugh now, it had sounded like a happy song, it made him smile thinking about it.

Ngozi opened the door to a striking face, he looked just as he had sounded -a charmer- he was tall dark and handsome -a cliché- but that was all that came to mind looking at him, his smile completed the whole look and she felt her heart skip a beat.

*Wow, she thought, that hadn't happened in a while.*

"Hi," he said, "I am James, we've spoken on the phone, about the cake?"

"Yes, yes" Ngozi replied, "please come in."

"I am so sorry for the inconvenience, it was a last minute thought," James said.

"Oh no worries, you are definitely paying for it," she replied jokingly. "The cake is just about finished. I'll put it in a box for you soon as I return to the kitchen. I am sure your mum will be pleasantly surprised, wish I could see her face when you give her, I love surprises."

"You could, you know, she is having a small get-together, you could come if you wanted to."

Ngozi smiled, "it's so nice of you to offer, but I couldn't possibly go. I am not even dressed and I have to clean up, I can't impose."

James insisted "You wouldn't be, and I could help clean up while you dress. After all it's my fault, I gave an order on short notice and now I'm here earlier than we scheduled." He smiled at this point sending her heart to skipping, "Also you would find that I'm a domesticated man."

Ngozi refused, "thanks for the offer but I wouldn't want to crash your mother's party."

"I insist, she wouldn't mind. In fact I am sure she would want to meet you after tasting this cake, and it'd be great for your business." James added.

“OK, but this is just a hobby.” Ngozi had smiled, admitting defeat, “I’d go, let me just freshen up,” she had left him in the kitchen after showing him where the utensils are kept.

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James washed up after his simple meal, a scowl staining his face. He forced himself to smile by thinking of Ngozi and his son Obi. His hope of seeing them again soon was being boosted by his new friend Habib. He had confided in him about his woes of the past and the young man had promised to help. He said he had friends in the police who would soon be on the case. James rinsed his plate reminded of the day he met Ngozi. He smiled to himself, just like that day, he had a feeling that something was about to change in his life.

He couldn't remember all he had said that day seven years ago but there had something about the lady he'd first seen at the door that appealed to him, she looked so adorable in her stained apron and tussled hair. With the facade of a cake, their mothers had schemed for them to meet each other and he had fallen for it without knowing. By the time they both found out about the match-making, it had been a moot point. They were in love with each other. They got married six months after that day and it had been bliss all the way till he had spoiled it with his own hands. He cursed the day he decided to try his hand at gambling. Thank God he had learnt his lesson before it was too late. Or was it? His family was still out there...

A knock broke through his consciousness.

“Oga James,” the little boy that lived in the room opposite said, “one man say make I give you this.” The prepubescent chap handed him a thin envelope and scampered off.

James closed the door and opened the enveloped. Dread washed over him even before he knew what was inside. He had never received parcels since he moved into this area of Ajegunle. Did this mean they had found him again? Just as he was about to hope again?

The five pictures sliding out of their cage, missed his waiting hands and scattered across the floor. There were pictures of him in his borrowed taxi, him and Iphey in the taxi, him and Iphey at the entrance to her house and then a couple of just Iphey, at work and at home.

James staggered back till he collapsed on the only furniture in the room apart from the thin mattress on the floor. The chair creaked underneath his slight weight as he leaned his head between his knees. The envelope was now also on the floor. It was only then he noticed the writing paper peeping out. He pulled at it quickly. Scrawled in pencil were the following words.

**YOU AND YOUR NEW GIRLFRIEND WILL BE IN TROUBLE IF YOU DON'T GET OUR MONEY IMMEDIATELY!**

34: Iphey will you marry me? ...by Tisha and Myne

Chinedu picked Iphey up at seven after work on a Friday evening. Iphey wore black pants, a burgundy camisole and black short sleeved classy jacket. Today was special and so it deserved special attention. It was three months since she had got together with Chinedu and everyday was a revelation of how good they were together. She smiled to herself as she went to the ladies and slipped on silver filigree earrings, slid on some gloss and did her eye makeup sprinkling loose powder sparsely on her face.

Chinedu waited for her downstairs and she traipsed down in her heels and got into his car, smiling a hello and buckling her seatbelt as they headed for Surulere to one of the tasteful fast food places on Adeniran Ogunsanya way. They ordered and began chatting idly about their families, careers, hobbies and values, Iphey chatted on with no guile and Chinedu listened enraptured.

He murmured and added words that showed he was focused on the conversation as opposed to some of the other guys and rich wannabes she had been out with. He was not like most guys; he did not pretend to hear what she was saying and then launch into his own project and he actually listened to her. He must have a lot of practice she thought and then she stopped talking as she noticed he was watching her intently, different emotions moving across his face, too fast for her to decipher.

She stopped talking and laughed at Chinedu.

“What’s up? You are staring at me like...” she shook her head then waved her hand in front of her face “...I can’t explain the look.”

Chinedu glanced at her his gaze open and his look sincere.

“I am looking at you because...” he pausing swallowing, an Adam apple she hardly saw bobbing at his throat “I am humbled because I know that I could never have met you in twenty lifetimes if God did not lead you to me”.

Iphey looked her Chinedu, blinked, looked at him again, she couldn't stop the tears that came to her eyes. She wanted to laugh but instead she just said, "you know you drive me crazy right?"

He just stroked the hand she laid on his thigh.

She smiled through the tears and blubbered, "when I think I have you figured, you find a way to break my defenses however small they are..."

"Iphey..."

"Wait, let me finish..." she blinked to clear her eyes. "I wanted to give you a chance but I needed to do it on my own terms..." she looked away like he caught her in a lie or something, "...with barriers so I could maintain a resemblance of safety. But every time I think I am safe, secure, you slam through my defenses like they're a pack of cards, disarming me with simple gestures, simple words."

"Listen to me..."

"No let me finish." Iphey shook her head. "I can't but reveal all of me to you..." she sighed in exasperation "...you make it impossible for me to hold anything back from you".

"Iphey..."

"Please, let me get it all off my chest, I have feelings for you. I fought it with all I had like I do everything else, I looked for everything, every reason why I couldn't be with you, I counseled me, gave me all the logical equations that should make sense but it all failed and I am afraid..." she shook visibly "...I am in love with you."

Chinedu could not keep quiet after that declaration. "Iphey, I love you too. Sometimes I feel it so much it scares me. That was what kept me coming back to you even at those early stages you were so busy pushing me away. I am in love with you too and I promise to do everything within my power to keep your heart safe."

Iphey wiped away the tears that had started dripping again. "Every passion I feel is reserved for you alone," she murmured her eyes glittering, her gaze was trapped in Chinedu's.

Chinedu laughed and said, "Iphey, I want to grow old with you, I may not be perfect but be reassured that I love you more than my life."

Iphey laughed and then she murmured "I can be so silly and fussy sometimes..." she muttered looking down and then she gazed into his eyes. "I am not usually like this, you bring out the unusual in me."

"No Iphey..." Chinedu protested as he gazed into her eyes reassuring her "I love you cheerful or crying, it's an adventure getting to know you and love all the different parts of you."

"Chinedu..."

"Iphey"

Iphey turned her gaze on Chinedu and he froze in place, her heart slammed in her chest as she noticed the effect she had on him; and she wondered at the power he had over her. There was this great upheaval inside her and she knew that come what may, she would always be connected to Chinedu. There was no stopping this and no running away any longer; it was time she faced up to it.

“Chinedu, everyday with you is an adventure and it’s the ride of my life, I don’t know what tomorrow holds but I know this, God has got us...”

“Iphey, the first day I saw you, I knew you were meant for me...” He paused as he saw Iphey frozen in fear, visibly shaking, he drew in a sharp breath and “...I know it has taken a while, me getting you to believe in me and what I am about...” he gazed steadily into her eyes, “...but even though I am not certain what the future holds, I know great things are in store for us, there is so much promise and so much greatness ahead of us, all we need to do is take each day as it comes trusting ourselves and trusting in God.”

Iphey smiled and seemed about to speak and then thought to herself, ‘This man is the man of my dreams, I am in such a wealthy place, my fears still speak, they tell me if I ever lost him, but would fall; my faith though speaks louder, it tells me this man was created just for me and that if I can just take God’s hands and trust him, we are in for the greatest adventure ever lived’

Iphey smiled and hugged Chinedu with everything she had in her slight frame.

He pulled away slightly after a short kiss and looked into her face. Iphey noticed he was avoiding looking into her eyes.

“What is it?” She asked.

“Nothing.” He hedged.

“Nedu spit it out,” she laughed. “I know you too well. What are you trying to hide from me?”

He laughed and finally met her gaze. Chinedu took a deep breath and took both her hands. “I did not plan to say this today or here or even this way...”

Iphey was confused. Was this the end? After the happy declarations of a few minutes ago? “Chinedu, what is it? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, no, of course not!” He moved closer. “You said and did everything right...” His phone began to ring. He did not even look at it before switching it off. He paused again.

“Chinedu, please tell me. Whatever it is, just say it!”

“OK, OK.” Chinedu took another deep breath. “I want to marry you Iphey, I want you to be my wife...”

Her lips were rounding open by this time. Iphey's breath came quick and fast, and she pressed both their hands under her breast as if to stop her racing heart.

“Iphey will you marry me?”

35: Would she spend the rest of her life with him? ...by Tisha

Iphey looked up briefly in shock to see Chinedu waiting on her answer, half in anticipation, the other half as vulnerable as a child. His eyes glittered like lightning but held Iphey's gaze and waited for her to do something, anything to show that this was what she wanted too. Iphey gazed into Chinedu's eyes for a second or so and then she fluttered her own eyes shut to hide her confusion. Nothing had prepared her for this. Being with him was everything she had ever dreamed of; in the short time they had been together, she had come to depend on him so much. She had tried to hold back many times in case it was not that serious and things did not work out, but Chinedu had a lust for life that was contagious and what he wanted he got. He did all he did with passion, a quality sometimes alien to her except where work and family were concerned.

When they went out together, he was always the center of attention wherever they ended up. His full throaty laughter made her heart soar and then made her smile every time. She had tried to maintain her routine so that he could be a part of her life and not take over her world but many times she would find herself listening for the sound of his car, the distinct slapping sound of his Joe Bloggs shoes and the jingle of his keys. He invaded her space slowly and consequently her life. She could not deny how his eyes lit up and her heart jumped in her chest every time he turned up at her doorsteps and she looked forward to his warm embrace, she could hug him forever. Why could she not spend the rest of her life with him?

She weighed her options. It was true they had only been seriously dating for three months but their first date had been in November last year, six months ago. From that day, he had been making inroads into her emotions, her mind and her family. The fact was that if every thing worked out as planned, she would be gloriously happy and content but if not, she would never ever forget him. She would be torn and having her heart broken would be an understatement. She

would forever miss his presence like a part of her; her soul most likely would be fragmented, forever lost to her. Her family, friends and her work would suffer because she would be unable to ignore the loss.

She glanced up at him and wondered if she was willing to risk her life with him like that. Who was she fooling? It had long been out of her hands, only the decision she would make was in her hands. Her lashes flirted with the silken texture of her face and her eyes widened with complete openness, not caring who could see the naked emotions on her face. She saw the possibilities for all the good that could come and she saw the dangers flash before her eyes and she knew this was the moment she had been waiting for all her life.

“Babe?” he called. “Please don't keep me waiting too long.”

She looked into Chinedu's eyes, hers solemn and quiet, stretched her hand across the table and grasped his own. She looked into his eyes steady and sure, his features beautiful. They could be hard edges one moment and then suddenly soft and compassionate. She looked at his build, he was well toned all over with not a layer of fat, all pure muscle or at least that is what all the ladies say. He carried his brown slacks and neutral colored shirt like a work of art; he wore his hair short and simple brown leather strapped Calvin Klein watch.

She searched his face, her mind wandering, praying to see the future, to see if he would hurt her, how much he would hurt her. What gave her the courage to go ahead was this: he was a man of integrity with strength of character and a heart full of courage, she looked at him from the corners of her eyes the way only a woman could watch, and she knew that this was the only man for her, a man comparable to her; they fit like a perfect waltz in all things. She turned limpid pools of her brown colored eyes at him and knew exactly what her answer would be. Yet when she spoke, her voice little more than a whisper.

“Yes.”

Chinedu met her soft gaze then but his face was hard, as if ready for battle prepared for whatever came, even a negative answer.

“What did you say?” he asked in a strong voice.

“Nedu,” her voice lifted an octave higher, “I love you and I'll marry you,” she ended smiling.

She saw relief in his eyes and barely glimpsed his lips descend towards hers, she did not wait for him to land but met him halfway as their tongues dueled and clashed with the force of the attraction they felt one for another, absolutely unimaginable.

She was a bit taken aback and gasped as she felt like he consume her whole, she was vibrating from head to foot at the power behind the kiss they shared and could feel the desire pumping through her veins, she felt Chinedu deepen the kiss again and she made a move quickly as she placed her hand on his chest to stop him.

“Nedu...” she groaned in half surrender “We are in a restaurant...”

She tried to glance around but her gaze was caught in his. He kissed her a little slower, nibbling here and there and then he withdrew, removed a black object from his pocket then knelt in front of her, opened the box gingerly to reveal a simple silver band, nothing setting it apart, except for the fact that he was the one giving it to her.

“This is my mother’s...” he smiled “I have been carrying it around for the last few weeks hoping for a perfect time to give it to you.” He smiled simply “This is not an engagement ring, I didn’t know I would propose today. But it is a gift to show you that you’re the only one for me. As it is, I don’t think there will be a better time than this,” his voice was a whisper by this time.

Her passion-darkened eyes had filled with surprise he talked and now as slipped the ring he held in his hands to her already outstretched hand and unto her finger inch by inch, a strange calm came over her. Then the enormity of responsibility the ring on her finger placed on Iphey’s shoulders hit almost immediately. She had entrusted her heart, soul and mind to him with seven words, to the one man who had a chance at breaking her heart and she, though her logic tried to point her in another direction, refused to pick another, how difficult was it anyway?

“Nedu...” she whispered in fear and awe, “your mother’s?”

“Yes and I want you to have it. You will be the mother of my children and mine too.” His smile spread joy over her heart and she wrapped her fingers over the simple ring.

“I love you Nedu, thank you for this.”

“I love you too.” He punctuated this with a kiss.

Her phone began to ring almost immediately.

“I should have switched this off ...” she muttered apologetically as she glanced down at her Nokia BlackBerry “...Oh, it’s James my sister’s husband and I need to take it.”

“Go on,” Chinedu waved her ahead. “I’ll go settle the bill.”

Iphey smiled at him and admired his backside as he walked away. And then she focused on the phone and what James was saying.

“You want to see me? Can I come with Ngozi? No? OK, where? Alright, I’ll soon be there.”

She hung up just as Chinedu returned. “I have to go home now. James wants us to meet.”

“No problem, I’ll take you there if you want?”

Iphey was grateful for all his help so far in locating James but now she felt she should do this on her own. She had to speak sense to James to return to his family and best if he wasn’t defensive already that she came with someone.

“No thanks,” Iphey finally replied. “If you can just take me home?”

“Sure.”

### 36: Iphey will be Kidnapped! ...by His DarLyn

Did all that really happen, Chinedu thought as he drove away from Iphey's place, who would have thought I could get so lucky today, all thanks to Iphey herself though. He loved her with all his heart and right at this moment, considered himself the luckiest man alive. That woman is really the best for me, he grinned to himself as he drove. The strains of Celine Dion's have you ever been in love filled the car as he switched on the radio, could not have imagined a better suited song for the moment, cupid is really up to something.

He started thinking, where can I take her to for a real proposal? It was great that she had accepted his mother's ring in a small eatery but he wanted to do more for her. She deserved the best of him and more. Just as this thought was playing in his head he heard his phone ring. He ignored it till he got to his street, then he quickly pulled over to pick the call thinking it might be Iphey. It turned out to be an unknown number, but since he had parked the car he picked it anyway.

"Hello," he said into the phone as he set up his brakes.

"My guy where you dey?"

It was Habib at the other end. "Oh Habib, this dude you no go kill me o. This is not the number

you talk say I fit reach you on now?"

"Nedu wait, just listen to me. Where are you? Are you sitting down?"

"Habib you are scaring me now, what is it?"

"Iphey is in danger," Habib said, "I know you've said I should leave you out of this one but..."

“Dude forget that, tell me what is happening, what's wrong? I just dropped her at her place now I'm even not yet home,” he had subconsciously headed home based on the plans he was trying to make for another evening with Iphey.

“You remember the contact person I told you about sometime ago,” Habib asked.

“One James person,” Chinedu interjected.

“Yes him,” Habib confirmed. “So it turns out he was at Iphey's place some months ago...”

Chinedu swore under his breath, “to do what, does Iphey know him?” All these Chinedu asked all at once. His mind was already joining the dots together but he did not want to see it. This was the woman who owned his heart dammit!

“Damn, damn, damn!”

“Calm down,” that was all Habib could get into the conversation as Chinedu was on an overdrive worked up about danger to Iphey.

“I swear Habib, if anything happens to Iphey I will kill that guy, who is he by the way?”

“Will you just hear me out,” Habib shouted. “My James is the same as her brother-in-law,” Chinedu heard faintly as he put on his ear piece.

“Iphey's brother-in-law is the same as your informant?” he asked Habib to be sure.

“Yes he is. I only found out the other day when he mentioned his family for the first time. His wife is Ngozi and he is scared for them. Things are beginning to get ugly.”

“Hey dude, back up one second please, so you are telling me that this James fellow you have been working with is Iphey's brother-in-law so why are you just finding out now?”

At this point, Chinedu finished plugging in his hands-free set and did a U-turn to head back to Iphey's place. She was not going to be out of his sight from now on. If her life was in danger then he would protect her, with his own life if need be.

“Habib you can do better than this!” Chinedu pulled into traffic and checked his mirrors. “You usually would have found out everything about anybody you were working with seconds after they join your team!”

“But that is it Nedu, he is not on my team!” Habib tried to defend himself.

“What is happening?” Chinedu demanded, “So he is not also working for EFCC or what.”

“That's exactly what I'm saying. He didn't have as much information as I thought and I preferred to leave him at the peripherals while concentrating on the bigger fish...”

Chinedu began to mutter, “This cannot be happening, I don't believe this...”

At this outburst, Habib who was already upset with Chinedu began to shout at him. "Will you just shut up? If you listen to me maybe we can still smoothen things out before it really gets bad."

That seemed to really shut Chinedu up so Habib went on, "Nedu, this is not like you at all. How can you be panicking like this? Some weeks ago, you were the one who told me not to involve you anymore in this case! What was your reason? You were in love and did not want the distraction..."

"OK, OK... I am sorry, let's cut to the meat of the matter, shall we?" Chinedu did not regret his earlier action. It had been to protect Iphey that he had begged off Habib's current mission. How was he to know she would be involved through another person?

"Maybe if you had not been out of the loop, you would already know everything," Habib muttered. "Anyway, James is in a lot of trouble with the Gang. He ran into hard times financially and made the error of gambling with the Gang in hope that he would be able to settle the gambling debt already incurred. In the process, he went into business with T-shark, you remember the guy we found burnt to death some years ago."

Chinedu nodded as he recalled the events of about three years ago.

"Well it turns out that T-shark also had loads of gambling debt which he claimed his partner would pay off, the partner being James. Apparently T-shark double crossed both James and the Gang and made the Gang believe James had more of their money than he actually did. So the Gang has been after him since then. He abandoned his family after T-shark's death and went hiding so they don't get caught in the web..."

"OK OK OK, Habib so how does this concern Iphey now?"

"Chill my guy," Habib said, "If you remember some months ago, Aisha kept going on about Iphey's car not being good, well she took a cab and it turned out to be the our James was driving, his way to make a living of some sort. And Iphey recognized him. He went to see her in a bid to allay her fears and keep her from looking for him or telling Ngozi. Wrong move...it seems he was being tailed. Now they've got pictures of Iphey at her house, office, and in the car at various places. They have been sending threats to James that if he does not provide their money by the end of this month he won't see Iphey again."

"Oh my God!"

"Indeed..." Habib agreed. "The plan is to kidnap Iphey. I think they know Ngozi too but for some reason think Iphey is his current girlfriend and knows where the money since she works in a bank and all. So she is in great danger at the moment..."

Chinedu could not bear what he was hearing, "Look Habib, I'm heading back to Iphey's place. What type of danger is she in? I know she is about to meet her brother-in-law James this evening..."

"I know and that is why I called. You have to keep her away from him!" Habib shouted. "We are planning a safe house for all of James' family. I'm

guessing that is what he wants to tell Iphey. I told him we would do the job but amateur that he is, he had to do it himself. And it's likely that they will be following him and will take the opportunity to take Iphey!"

"No way! I won't allow that." Chinedu's mind whirled. He sorted through his memory for the right people to involve in this, he would do anything to keep Iphey safe from harm.

"Listen Nedu, as of now I need you to take Iphey away to where ever you are sure she will be safe. If anything happens to her Aisha will kill me..."

"I will kill you first," Chinedu interjected, "why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"Well, you said to leave you out, remember?" Habib reminded. "But seriously, I didn't know the two James were the same until this evening. My James had told me his family was in danger and we were making plans. I put some officers to follow him and they came back today with the information that allowed me to put two and two together. You like that girl don't you?"

"No my guy that one was before. Now I know that I really love Iphey and I have proposed..."

"Oh wow..."

"Yes, I was planning another date for the whole shebang with friends before you called me. I should be in her place in a few minutes. Iphey knows my background but she thinks it's all in the past. How do I make her understand how well I still know the Gang and how deadly they are?" Chinedu asked.

"No o," Habib shouted, "you can't tell her the whole story yet. You know this case is not over. You could let her more deeply into what you do now and that you help us, that will help her understand the danger. Depending on the turn of things, then we'll let her into the rest. Iphey is a really level headed girl. Just help her understand. I suggest you get her out of her place as fast as possible."

"Ok Habib call me in 30 minutes. I think that gives me enough time to get Iphey out of her place..."

37: Dabaru! His nightmare was back ....by Aedeeace

“Shit,” Chinedu said when the conversation with Habib ended. If his hands were not on the steering wheel, they'd be clenched at this point.

Why now? Now that everything was fine and somewhat dandy. Why now? Now that he was irrevocably hooked on her. Now that he had pledged to love her. Now that he had asked her to marry him. Now that she had accepted. Why?

Poor Iphey. He couldn't even warn her of the danger that was brewing...Oh God. How he loved her and wanted to protect her. They couldn't run away. No! he wasn't just going to up and run like some chicken. Run from who? He didn't even know who they were up against.

That's the question that should be on your mind, Chinedu.

This thing reeked of cat pee. Acidic. Could it be just a gambling debt? Or was there something James wasn't telling even the EFCC?

He had to do something... and real fast too...

Bob Marley's Stir it up was playing in the background...Damn. Bob used to help him think straight...and...OH! A Plan began to form in his head.

“Why didn't I think of that...” said Chinedu, as he dialed a number.

A part of him admonished him...begged him not to call the number...told him to think hard before...it was too late...

“Ehen??” said the voice on the other side, “who be dis?”

“Ahn ahn! Gbenro, ta lo ji pata re? Who don go vex you today?”

“Tani yii? Who dey talk...who's this?”

“Chinedu ni...”

“Ah ah! Tuale!. How you dey na? Na wa o! E don tey oh...”

Chinedu and Gbenro had remained friends. Their friendship had remained a secret. They were never seen together when they did have to meet. Gbenro had come to Chinedu at a low point in his life and so had started their unlikely alliance. Chinedu helped him in cash and Gbenro became Chinedu's eyes and ears in the underworld. Just as Alhaji Galadima recruited him for the police, Chinedu began to funnel information from Gbenro to the authorities when necessary. Gbenro knew people who knew people and it was Chinedu who needed Gbenro's expertise now.

*“I need answers and answers I will get by hook or crook.”* Chinedu thought to himself.

“Gbenro, abeg...Meet me for that place now now...Abeg...E get wetin I want make you help me do...abeg...” Chinedu said.

“Na wa o! Ogbeni. This one way you don talk abeg like three times so...”

“Wo, dey come, Quick quick!” Chinedu was becoming more agitated now.

“Make I discharge some people. I go dey there sharp sharp!”

“Ok now. See you there. Thank you my brother...”

He had another call to make.

Iphey, Pick up. Pick up...

There was music in the background when he got through.

“Hello...Iphey? Err...are you with James yet?”

“No. I'm still at home,” she said.

“OK. Listen. Call him and tell him you'll meet him at the Galleria.”

“What? “ There was a tinge of irritation in her voice.

“Look, Iphey, We still are not sure of this guy. He's your sister's husband but he's been away for a while...Remember the circumstances surrounding his disappearance...”

“Look Nedu, you don't know him like I do. Sure I told you the later bits...”

Chinedu was too wired to let her continue. “Trust me Iphey...I'll come pick you up in about an hour....Please promise you'll do as I've said...”

“You're talking weird, Nedu, James is still my sister's husband...”

“Please, just do it, ok?”

“Do what exactly?”

“Call James and tell him you'll only see him at the Galleria in an hour.”

“OK.”

“Phew! I must “gist” our children o! Kai! This your stubbornness is legendary.” Chinedu was happy she had accepted to do as he wanted.

“Go joo.” Iphey replied.

“See you in an hour honey...”

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Ten minutes later, Chinedu was at the assigned place and left the engine running as Gbenro slid into the car.

“Tuale! Ore mi, kilon popping na? You just shari your guy sha...”

“Haba Gbenro! You know everything na...” Chinedu glanced into all the mirrors as he drove of. He had to be sure no one was following them.

“Anyway sha, wetin you dey hurry hurry me make I come do?” His passenger asked.

“Ehen, Gbenro, e get one guy like this wey I want make you tell guys make them torchlight am for me...I wan know who him be...”

“Wetin the guy do? Im dey disturb you? Make I organize boys make them go arrange the guy neat...”

Satisfied that they were not under observation, Chinedu stepped on the accelerator and pulled away. “No. No be like that...the story long small but I will explain quick...See e get one girl...”

“Ha Sinedu! Woman matter...Naa...I no dey that one.”

“Guy, hear wetin I dey talk na! This na my woman o.” They were both silent for a while and then Gbenro nodded.

Chinedu continued, “My girl get one sister when e marry one guy like this...The guy come leave them run...The man come back this year say people wen im owe money dey chase am...the thing be say, the people wey dey chase am come dey think say my girlfriend na the guy partner who hold their money...”

“So wetin come happen. She take the money?”

“Haba now Gbenro, she no take am. She doesn't even know anything.”

“OK na...so wetin you want make I do?”

By now, they were parked not too far from where Iphey lived. The engine idled because the air conditioners were on. Chinedu slung his hands over the steering. “Some people wan kidnap my girl be that Gbenro. It fit even happen tonight!”

“HmMMM...” Gbenro started thoughtfully...

“Which one is hmMMM?” Chinedu said.

“I hear some kidnap rumors sha, na the big Ogas, the ones for Island, na them get that one sha.”

Chinedu sat up straight. This must be it, it must be the same people Habib was after, the reason he had picked an interest in James in the first place. The

ones who ran gambling rings in Lekki and environs and used low gangs in Ajegunle to do their dirty business. He cursed himself for demanding to be out of the loop. Well it was too late for regrets. Hopefully Gbenro knew the lackeys who would do the actual job and would be able to help foil it.

“Gbenro, I think it is the same deal, what do you know?”

“You get the girl picture? “

“Wetin you wan carry am do?”

“Ogbeni, answer me O jare...”

“E dey my phone sha...” Chinedu began to scroll through his BlackBerry, “Ok..Ehen this one clear..see am...”

Gbenro took the phone from Chinedu and looked at the picture. His features suddenly registered his shock.

“Na she be this?”

“Yes that's her...Na wetin happen?” Chinedu asked a visibly disturbed Gbenro.

Gbenro, shaking his head vigorously said...”Guy, wahala dey o...”

“What do you mean?” He wa confused now..Very confused...He was convinced that there was no way Gbenro could have met Iphey...Absolutely no way... but Gbenro's next words put paid to his thoughts...

“Sinedu, this ghel wey you see so, na Dabaru personal project tonight...”

“Dabaru???”

His nightmare was back.

### 38: HOPE...KIND OF...by AeedeeAee

Oh God...This was turning into the worst nightmare ever...The situation was getting uglier by every spoken word...Every gesture...

Dear God, I said I was sorry...you promised me you'd forgiven me...I turned a new leaf, I did everything ...I ...Why is this happening..? Chinedu had to think hard and fast.

Gbenro, assimilating the situation and fully understanding the gravity of what had just transpired, was clearly at a loss as to what to do or where to attack the matter from. He was reduced to babbling.

“Kai...You know say I no fit go meet Dabaru...I no fit...him no go wan know....Sinedu, if him hear kperem say you know the girl, the girl own do pari o! Ogbeni, you dey think of your mama so?”

Chinedu sat up, a plan forming in his head. Living in the dredges a long time ago made him an authority at thinking on his feet...he knew what he had to do. The time had come.

The thug in him...the thug that Alhaji hadn't succeeded in taming had been set loose. The thought of losing Iphey to Dabaru. He shivered. He wouldn't go without a fight.

He looked at his wristwatch...9pm. He was supposed to pick Iphey in half an hour. That wouldn't b possible anymore.

“Where Dabaru dey?” Chinedu said.

“Hein?? Wetin you dey talk?” Gbenro asked.

“Where im dey? I wan see am.”

“This madness has to end.” Chinedu said out loud. He couldn’t continue to run from his shadow. Or Dabaru as the case was. What better time to face the music than now.

A very discombobulated Gbenro was saying “No be me go carry you go where dem go kill you o!”

By now Gbenro was looking left and right as if Dabaru would materialize if just by calling his name. He had learnt quite early that the fear of Dabaru was the beginning of wisdom.

“Gbenro????” Chinedu called.

Gbenro guessed Chinedu’s badgering wasn’t going to stop. Ah, how he wished that Chinedu wouldn’t do this, however he knew his friend. It would stop only when Chinedu had gotten the information he needed.

“Ha, Sinedu...Ok, I no go follow you go meet am o! I go show you where im go dey...No call my name o! I dey beg you...”

“Gbenro, I be small pikin? You go go show me the place now but I gat to make some calls first...” Chinedu said while scrolling through his phone...He dialed.

The call was to his very handy cabby...Supo had run many an errand for him in the past.

“Supo, Hello...Can you hear me? Where you dey? The place is very noisy....Abeg, Abeg, Comot for there then flash me.”

One minute later, Supo flashed Chinedu’s phone and Chinedu called back.

“Oga mi! I been dey watch Nigeria friendly match o... those boys just dey...” Supo had a knack for giving unsolicited information.

“Supo, where you dey? “ said Chinedu said cutting him off.

“Oga mi. I dey one place like that near city mall...”

“Great! You get reach 10k?”

“Erm...No sir...”

“Ok. Erm...Come for Shoprite com meet me now now...I dey wait o!”

He turned to Gbenro. “Ogbeni, pade mi ni No 2. (Meet me at No 2.) Make I reach Shoprite. I wan sharply buy somethings.”

No 2 was a code for one of their meeting places. All because the gang must not get wind of their association. Chinedu sighed audibly but his resolve was strengthened.

The next call he made was to Iphey. Thank God for GSM...What would he have done?? he thought.

“Sweetheart, are you still at home? Has James called you? Not yet...OK. See I won't be able to come take you to Galleria. No..no. Just stay there... Yes, I'll send Supo. I love you.” he hung up after her muttered “love you too.”

#####

9.45PM

“Dude, Listen to me na...I need a favour...” He had just left Shoprite and was driving to his assignment with Gbenro at No 2.

“Do I need to leave where I am?” Habib asked quietly, “I'm embedded somewhere already...”

“Yes...No. OK, you don't need to move. I would have wanted you too involved but I can manage with back up...and protection.” Chinedu said.

“Chinedu, what are you getting into? These guys have proofing. I think they may have some insider backers. We aren't sure who you're up against, I suggest you stay out of it my friend.”

“Habib, one thing I know is that Dabaru is part of this project and Iphey will be kidnapped. If it ever gets to the point where he finds out that Iphey is connected to me...HE WON'T THINK. She'll die. Because of me. I won't let it happen.”

“Chinedu...if you let us do our jobs it may not get to that point.” Habib started, a hint of irritation in his voice...

“Look, I'm not prepared to take that chance.” Chinedu cut him off. He tried to breathe. “Habib, I figured since you're in on this whole mission, you're the best person to ask for help. Will you help me or not?”

“Send me the co-ordinates when you get them from your source...and Chinedu? Keep me posted, OK?”

“No wahala...” Chinedu said, what he actually meant was, “Not a chance.”

The caller waiting tone was beeping while he was on the call to Habib. So immediately he got off the phone, he checked his missed calls.

Iphey.

Supo had probably gotten her to Galleria by now and handed over their shopping. He called back.

“Hey babe...”

“Chinedu, Err...Supo just gave me a few things.”

“Yeah..Good...”

“He gave me a bag of some kind of...paraphernalia...”

“Iphey, clothes, a hand bag and a...blonde wig hardly qualify as paraphernalia...” Chinedu said trying to make light the situation.

“Chinedu!” Iphey said in her “Cut the crap” voice.

“Look babe, some people are watching you. Some very bad people...I thought I wouldn't have to tell you but...there.” He listened for a while.

“You said you have to meet James but they mustn't know it's you, that's what the different clothes are for...Is James there, yes? OK...make sure you stay in the restaurant. Don't go home and don't follow him anywhere. Discharge him

soon...tell him clients or something. You must change before you leave. Go out through the side door...Iphey, trust me, ok?"

"Go to double Four....Stay there. Supo will come to pick you again. Do as he says..Go with him to wherever he takes you. You'll be safe there."

The phone line went silent for a while. Chinedu could almost hear her thinking.

"Iphey...are you there?"

"Yes.." Iphey said in a voice that even he did not recognize. He could tell she was not happy with the whole cloak and dagger affair.

"Sweetheart...This too shall pass...We'll get through this...Be strong for me. Please go and change. Call me when you're safe with Supo."

She remained silent. "Iphey. I love you..." He had a terrible feeling that she would not see him in a long while.

"I love you too honey. Promise you'll tell me what this is about later." Her voice faded.

"I promise, and please act normal...not like anything's up. Call me if you have any hiccups..."

#####

10.30pm

The night seemed to be on never-ending mode. Chinedu sat at a darkened corner in the bar nursing a drink. Gbenro should be crouched outside somewhere, phone in hand and ready to squeal to the number Habib had provided if need be. He'd relayed all the necessary information to Chinedu earlier before they parted. Now Chinedu waited for Dabaru and his top shot to come in.

Opposite him, Dabaru's boys sat drinking and making merry. He wondered which one of them told Dabaru that Iphey was James's girlfriend so he could deal with him. He called his mind to order. He was here to see Dabaru. He was here to bury the hatchet. At whatever cost...He hadn't seen any cars by the way...Dabaru was still not in sight...Oh there he was. He'd aged some since Chinedu last saw him. He even had a limp now. The years he's spent in Kirikiri wouldn't have helped and maybe he'd got shot in the line of "DUTY".

Chinedu sighed. What was he doing here? Oh yeah. He knew. To die. Oh Lord, what have I gotten my self into. What was I thinking? What...

He heard a voice...a very familiar voice. He heard the voice long before he saw the face. The voice that was now greeting Dabaru in the most familiar tone. This voice that he'd grown to know so well. The face he'd grown to look up to. The voice that now faded as it followed Dabaru into what seemed to be the VIP Lounge of the bar.

It was Alhaji Galadima.

### 39: The feel of Cold, Hard Steel....by Myne

10.00pm

Iphey closed the phone and glanced around her. It was a bit dark and smoky in the bar as most of the guys in the room had a cigarette. It was either hanging from their lips or wedged between index and middle finger. A number of the ladies were smoking too. She sighed deeply and looked across at her brother-in-law.

“You were late.” She blurted the first thing that came to mind.

“I have apologized for that, haven't I? I just had to make sure all was well.” He glanced around again, eyes darting into the corners and jabbing at the door.

“Are you expecting anyone?” Iphey asked. She couldn't deny the suspiciousness that clouded his every move.

“Not really.” He replied.

James had on dark clothes and it began to dawn on her that what Chinedu said might be true after all. Maybe she should not have come out here to meet James.

“Who was that on the phone?” he asked.

Iphey thought fast as the words began to leave her lips. “Oh, just a friend. She wants to talk and I promised to meet her after this. I said I'll be around in a few...”

“You mean you have to leave?” He interrupted, “but you barely got here.”

“I know,” Iphey sighed again. She was acting for her life here and didn't care how good or bad she was. “But you gave me such short notice, and then...”

“Anyway,” he cut her off again, “maybe it's even better that we have just a short time together. I'll go ahead and explain why I called...”

“Yes I would like to hear that.” Iphey interjected.

“Well the thing is this. I told you the last time that I left Ngozi and Obi because of issues I was having?”

“Yes, you did...”

“Well, those issues are being untangled as we speak. See, I met this guy. He lives in a room at the place I'm staying at. We became friendly and began to talk. Along the line, when he mentioned the gang and their activities on the Island, I opened up to him.” James raised pleading eyes to her.

“Go on,” Iphey encouraged. She wished she could cut it short. Chinedu's warnings sounded in her ears. “Look babe, some people are watching you. Some very bad people...I thought I wouldn't have to tell you but...there.” She shook her head as if in sympathy to what James was saying and he continued.

“I had been keeping to myself so much and after my run in with you, I became even lonelier. So it was a relief to be able to unburden myself to this guy. But things have become more complicated now...”

“Don't tell me the guy turned out to be a criminal too?” Iphey cringed in her mind. That would explain the urgency with which Chinedu had warned her to leave. Her heart began a slow pound as she her gaze involuntarily went round the small space.

“Nothing like that at all,” James said. He moved his chair closer. “He actually works for the EFCC and they happen to be on the trail of the guys that want me dead. The gang has been threatening my life till now but the police are on to them.”

Iphey mulled his words in her head. When he had told her this six months ago, she had not believed it but now, with the aura of danger all around, she had no other choice than to.

James was still speaking. “The guy I met was a mole, sent to penetrate a group they had in Ajegunle. I didn't even know they were so close to me but I managed to keep out of their way. However it seems I was not careful enough. They have found me...”

“What!?” Under the table, Iphey squeezed her suddenly sweaty hands. This was beginning to sound like a movie. She didn't think before now that such things happened in real life. Men on the run, undercover moles and criminal gangs...those were so not a part of what she was used to.

“James, I have to go,” she declared. Iphey clutched at the package Supo had given her from Chinedu and began to get to her feet.

“OK, OK...” James was trying to pacify her. “But you have to pass this message to Ngozi for me. It involves you too.”

Iphey paused, half on and half off her seat.

“The EFCC are ready to put all of you in a safe house pending when all this is sorted out...”

Iphey sat down abruptly. “Why do we have to do that?” she asked in a harsh whisper. Sweat was gathering under her arms, she shivered as a tickle made its way down her side. “Do these people know us? We have been living peacefully all this while.” Her voice rose in the hysteria that swirled around her but she was powerless to stop it. “What have you done?!”

“Iphey calm down, breathe...”

She realized she was panting in short bursts and tried to get her breath back. She exhaled through her mouth and dragged in air through her nose. You are a strong woman, she repeated to herself.

James continued. Let’s not throw blame around here. Not now.” He stared into her eyes. “However it happened, they found me, they found you and it’s clear they will make a move sooner or late...”

Iphey jerked to her feet. This was just too much for her to sit and listen. She didn’t care how Chinedu had found out about all this. She was just glad he had.

“I have to go to the ladies,” she muttered. She picked up the Shoprite bag and fled.

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10.15pm

Iphey cracked open the door of the ladies and peered out. It appeared clear. James was still seated at the table, his back to her. She shook her head. She wasn’t going through the front door. She would take the side door out like Chinedu suggested. James would leave when he got tired of waiting.

She opened the door wider and stepped out. She felt stronger and just bolder. She had recovered her poise while she had changed and given herself a pep talk too. Or maybe it was just the full face of make up. She laughed under her breath. The high heels made her feel funny though and she couldn’t see too well behind the fringe of the wig. She blinked to clear her vision and closed the door behind her.

“Hello, babe.”

Iphey swiveled to meet the strange voice by her right. A man dressed in dark clothes was leaning against the wall. His avid gaze reminded her of what she wore, a miniskirt and shiny tube top. He brushed away her fringe and smiled into her eyes. All Iphey could see was a gap where a tooth must have fallen out, she hissed and moved away quickly.

“Dont you touch me!” She whispered and watched as all mirth left his eyes. The bones of his face hardened. 'Thug', she thought as she turned away with another hiss and began to walk in the other direction.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” The deep voice was right behind her, all business this time. His breath set the chandelier earring on her right ear to fluttering. The man was crowded against her back in a very uncomfortable way. As she made to turn and warn him off, she felt it. The touch of cold steel on the bare flesh between her top and the skirt, pressing into her spine.

#### 40: Shootout at Midnight ...by Atala Wala Wala + Myne

11:00PM

Chinedu's mind was in confusion. Alhaji was the last person he had expected to be involved with Dabaru and his gang. What was his benefactor doing here? He pressed back further into his corner while still keeping his ears alert for any information that might help him prevent a move on Iphey. He shifted in his seat till he was facing away from them.

“So Dabaru, when is your oga coming? I don't know why he needs me to be present; I've given you the information you need already,” he heard Alhaji Galadima say.

“I don't know, but he said you should be here if you want to receive your pay. When he comes, you can ask him yourself.” Dabaru sounded curt and abrupt. Chinedu was left to wonder if they had a mutual benefactor, but he was sure that Dabaru would have no love for any human being in a police uniform.

The door opened, and two portly, affluent looking men walked in accompanied by a couple of large young men in street wear. Chinedu watched from the corner of his eyes as they made their way to the section of the bar where Galadima and Dabaru were sitting.

Something struck him about one of the men standing to the left of Dabaru. The man turned away but the niggling familiarity remained as the gang all took turns to bow or prostrate to the newcomers.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” One of the affluent men, he was dressed in a pale blue agbada, greeted them back, as he ordered for a round of drinks for them all.

“Chief! Chief!” They hailed him. Chinedu ignored the noise and rather tried to get a good look at the Chief and the other man who was dressed in a Safari suit and carried a suitcase.

“So Chief, what's the problem? Why have you asked me to come here, now?” Alhaji Galadima asked.

Chief laughed. “I will explain. We are waiting for a few more guests, all will soon be clear.”

Just then, there was a minor commotion outside the bar. Chinedu looked up and his heart stopped for a second as he saw Iphey being hauled in by a thug. Before he could think about how she had been captured, another thug dragged in James who had a bruise to his head and a swollen lip; it looked like he had just received a good beating.

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11:25PM

Iphey stifled the cry of pain that came to her lips when the man who was holding her pushed her along. He was still slightly behind her, the gun in his other hand as he increased pressure on her arm.

“Move!” He whispered harshly, directing her towards a group to the right. This bar was just as smoky if a lot seedier than Silverbird. She shuddered as thoughts flooded her mind. Her kidnapper had laughed at her as he prodded her to the car outside Galleria. He leered at her skimpy clothes and said he preferred them to what she had been wearing earlier. He told her not to be surprised because they had been following her for weeks, he and his partner, and knew her very well. She had almost fooled him with the sultry outfit but once she spoke, she had betrayed herself.

Iphey had wished then she had kept her mouth shut and walked away instead of giving in to her haughty outrage at his touch. He told her that they had accosted James when he had tried to leave while she was away. His partner forced James, at gun point, to remain at the table and he, Stalin, had come to watch the door to the ladies.

Iphey looked over at James now as he limped along beside her. He had tried to be heroic when they had disembarked outside. After signalling her to run, he'd jumped on the guy who held him. His captor and their driver had vented their spleen on him with more blows than necessary. Stalin hadn't even released her for a second. Her head sunk to her chest as her eyes shut in a deep sigh.

“Aha!” said a voice before her, and her eyes sprang open. A fat man was rubbing his large hands with satisfaction. He resembled the fat frog on the threading in front of his blue Agbada. “Now we begin.”

He turned to James with a menacing look. “We have been very good to you. You have eluded us several times now, each time failing to produce the money that you owe us.”

James spoke in a low voice. “I don't have the money, where do you want me to get 20 million...”

“Chief, it is now over 100million Naira, including T-shark’s dues and all the interest...” The man that spoke had an open suitcase before him.

“T-shark betrayed us all!” James shouted.

“Enough!” Chief banged the table, making everyone jump. “James, do you want what happened to T-shark to happen to you too? Maybe we should work on your girlfriend.” he said, gesturing to Iphey.

“I am not his girlfriend!” Iphey blurted out and then kept talking. Wasn’t that what one was supposed to do in this kind of situation? “You have got the wrong person...”

Chief slashed the air and her captor placed a meaty palm over her mouth and nudged her with the gun. As she struggled for air, Iphey wondered if she would survive this. She glanced around, searching the bar for any means of help or escape. Apart from the large group before her, there were just two or so other patrons scattered around the other empty tables.

Chief continued, “Well, I know that both of you are co-operating to hide the money. Today we will find out where it is.”

He turned to the man beside him. “Galadima, if one of my boys kills someone who owes me 100 million, will it be murder? The man shook his head.

Chief motioned to the tall and rangy man who sat close to where Iphey stood. “Oya Dabaru, do what you have to do.”

The ugly scarred man needed little prompting. He grabbed Iphey’s arm and twisted a finger backwards, causing her to gasp in pain.

“Talk!” he spat out in a guttural tone. “Where is the money?”

James begin to stammer entreaties even as his eyes pleaded with hers. “Abeg... p-please, she knows nothing about this... it's just me...”

The bar was filled with Iphey's shrieks of agony as her torturer applied even more force to ratchet up the pain.

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11:55PM

Hearing the sound of Iphey in pain was more than Chinedu could bear. He had earlier sent a text to Gbenro; in it, he had asked him to forward another message to the number Habib had provided, asking for back-up policemen. With Iphey already here, there was no need to wait. It was time for action. A well aimed throw of his glass tumbler shattered the lone light bulb in the bar, plunging the place into darkness.

There were shouts of surprise and outrage, with Chief yelling, “Stalin! Odo! Hold the girl! Hold James! Make sure they do not escape!”

Soon the bar was lit with a ghostly pale light as the Chief's men waved their mobile phones around, trying identify the intruder.

Chinedu had joined the shadows closer to the group. He could just make out the outline of the man holding Iphey in front of him. He raised his arm high, and hit.

“Yeeeeeh!” At the scream, everyone scattered.

As Chinedu nimbly crouched to the ground, he stabbed another man in the leg with the jagged edge of the bottle he’d broken over Stalin’s head. Then, he scrambled in the direction of the back door as a cacophony of shots rang out. Chinedu prayed that Iphey had not been hit. He wished that he had been able to call out a warning to her, to get to her, but that would give him away.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw Iphey under a table, her arms wrapped around her side. His heart sped up as he imagined all sorts. Had she been shot? Was that why... he breathed again when she began to move. She crawled on the floor, heading to the front door, inching closer and closer... and then a powerful beam of light swung round the bar and alighted on her. Chinedu cursed and froze.

Dabaru smiled cruelly, at the other end of the torch. In his other hand was a gun. Chinedu watched him walk towards Iphey.

“Get up.” When she hesitated, Dabaru dragged her up roughly and held her close as he shouted out, “Whoever is trying to cause wahala, we are holding the girl. If you know what is good for you, you will come forward now, or else I will enjoy killing her!”

Chinedu groaned in despair. There was nothing else for it... he would have to give himself up.

Before he could get to his feet, he heard a shout; someone had jumped on Dabaru. Chinedu scooted deeper into the shadows and watched as Dabaru and a man he could now identify as James struggled together, lit up by torchlight. Iphey was nowhere in sight. Chinedu moved closer to the back door as more shots were fired around the dark room.

“Stop shooting!” Dabaru screamed. Two final shots echoed in the room, and there was James sprawled out on the floor groaning in a pool of his blood.

The sound of police sirens outside brought fresh confusion. One man shot through a glass window and attempted to climb out.

“Hold it!” A familiar voice rung out. It was Habib. Gaunt and with a fully bearded face, it was him Chinedu had almost recognized earlier. It seemed that in the melee, he and his undercover colleagues had taken out some of the men. As the back-up police men barged into the room with torchlights, Chinedu noticed the lifeless bodies on the ground. The rest of the men had their hands in the air.

Dabaru began shooting wildly as he backed away from the front door. A click sounded when his gun emptied of bullets. He turned and ran towards the back door.

Chinedu stood up and faced him with a smile. "Ol' boy, which ones now?" He enjoyed the look of dismay and surprise on Dabaru's face before his jaw connected with Chinedu's fist.

"That was for my girlfriend," he said to the passed out thug.

Habib arrived at his side and they exchanged a tight handshake and shoulder bump.

"Galadima?" Chinedu whispered?

"High level, deep, double agent." Habib panted. "He is for us."

Chinedu breathed easier at the news. The police were already handcuffing Alhaji Galadima, the Chief and the others who had been in the bar. He walked outside ignoring the beckons of the police and Gbenro. There was only one person he was interested in answering to, and he was yet to see her.

"Chinedu?" she called from behind a car.

"Iphey!" he cried, running towards her.

## EPILOGUE...

Several of our most consistent contributors and Riskers sent in what they thought could be how our story ends. Check them out.

Blowing Blessings Your Way says:

James...Thanks to Chinedu's efforts he has finally been freed to the ghost of his messy past. He finally worked up the courage to return to his family. He pleads for his wife's Ngozi's forgiveness and promises to never let her down again.

Ngozi...Her husband finally returns home after 3 long years and she doesn't know what to do or think. After going through a whirlwind of emotions, some advice from her sister Iphey and her mending mom she finally agrees to take him back; especially for her son Obi's sake.

Obi...After being reunited with his father James, Obi suffers another illness and is admitted to the hospital for treatment. Unfortunately he loses his life after a week of relentless efforts of the medical staff.

Iphey...After various events (the run in with the gang, Obi's death, etc)and confirmations in which Chinedu has proven his love for her, Iphey agrees to spend the rest of her life with Chinedu. They go on to set up a foundation in the memory of her nephew and a job development/scholarship program to keep young men off the streets and aid them in building solid foundations.

E says:

Iphey and Chinedu: After the dramatic events of the kidnapping, our love birds decide to postpone the wedding, in order to get their bearings. They are still together and even more in love than ever before.

Ngozi and Otunba: Following James' death, Otunba is of great comfort to Ngozi. A relationship bloomed and they are currently engaged. Otunba is currently trying to beat Obi on their new Nintendo Wii. :)

Mama Iphey still wants more grand children, especially from Iphey. :)

Aisha and Habib remain good friends of the family.

Ayo and Funmi: Both are implicated in the mass-sacking of bank officials by the Nigerian Central Bank. They are currently unemployed but working through their relationship issues together, trying to see where it takes them.

Alhaji Galadima and Gbenro continue to work with the authorities to uncover criminal activity in and around Lagos.

isha says:

Gbenro: gets a get-out-of-bondage free card for helping Chinedu, and since his greatest fear is facing eternal jail time. He is able to get his act together; he gets polished and lands a job as Alhaji Galadima's high-class chauffeur and personal assistant. It's only the beginning of his great life.

Bisi: proves herself to be a conniving bitch and steals Otunba from Ngozi. By the time Ngozi finds out that Otunba has been stepping out on her, Bisi is 4-months pregnant with Otunba's child. Ngozi is heartbroken (Mama Iphey is not), but she finds solace in the unlikely arms of Habib.

James: gets his debt forgiven, and is able to live a normal life again. He decides that he has put his family through enough, and gives Ngozi space to live her life as she pleases. He and his son, Obi develop the best father-son relationship he could have dreamed of.

2cute4u says:

James, does not die but is gravely injured, is hospitalized and from there reunites with his family after apologising and explaining himself

Chinedu- gets to marry the girl of his dreams, Iphey

Iphey- marries Chinedu but stops hiding her feelings..

Alhaji Galadima- it is seen though a policeman is actually a kingpin of another gang and wants to centralize the hierarchy so that he becomes the one and only kingpin with eyes and ears also in the police force, he is exposed by Dabaru and is arrested and confesses. Saving Chinedu was just his only good deed.

Habib- is promoted for his outstanding job for the EFCC.

gretel said...

Iphey-she's later taken to the hospital for medical check ups and after a week marries Nedu.

Chinedu-later marries Iphey,his well-desired wife.

Ngozi-she finds out the truth and is so sad she can't think.

James-dies in the hospital after apologizing to Iphey,Ngozi and his mother in-law and making Ngozi promise him that she'll re-marry.

CerebrallyBusy said...

BISI: stabs Funmi in the back by sleeping with Ayo; and then gets fired.

James: wakes up after a lot of surgeries and a six-week coma and reunites with his family.

Alhaji Galadima picks up another boy like Chinedu and helps him

Chinedu and Iphey get married at last, and live happily ever after.

Oh Habib needs a babe!!! yes please give him a babe

and of course Dabaru gets to go to prison forever!

shorty said...

EPILOGUE. James- Returns back home and asks for forgiveness from his family. Iphey- Seeing as Chinedu proves his love for her accepts him as the one she wants to spend her life with. Bisi- Regrets what she has done to Iphey and asks for forgiveness. Dabaru- Rot in prison.lol.