

FOR KEEPS

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

“I’m getting married,” said Dola. We were sitting on a picnic blanket under the shade of a tree. I smiled and looked down shyly, waiting for him to ask me for the details of the people he would talk to about my bride price, but he did not ask for them. I raised my head to look at him.

“My fiancée and I will get married in three months, but it’s you I love,” he said.

“Your fiancée?” I echoed, certain I had not heard right.

“The woman I’m going to marry.”

“What about me?” I demanded, shocked that he was talking that way.

“You’ll always be the love of my life.”

“What are you saying? Are you going to marry us both?”

“No!”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I’ll be married to my fiancée because my parents like her, but I’ll continue to see you, we’ll carry on as before.”

“No!” I shouted, outraged.

“Don’t say that.”

“I will not be a home wrecker.”

“You won’t be wrecking anything, Sanda. The marriage will be in name only. I feel nothing for her.”

“Then don’t marry her! Marry me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with me? What makes your parents not like me?”

“You know how parents are.”

“I don’t know how your parents are. You’ve never introduced me to them as your girlfriend.”

“It wasn’t appropriate.”

“When did you introduce them to this other woman?”

“What does that matter?”

“When?”

“Six months ago.”

“While you were dating me?”

“I...” I slapped him hard. We looked at each other in shock. I picked up my handbag and left, tears running down my cheeks. The pain in my heart was unlike any I had ever felt. It was even worse than child birth and I know, because I have a child, with the man who had just told me he was betraying me.

“Sanda. Sanda. Sanda, stop. Sanda!” he kept saying as he drove beside me. I made myself stop crying and continued to walk. He kept calling my name while I pretended not to hear.

“Sanda, it’s getting dark, let me take you home at least,” he said. I looked about, he was right. There was no chance of getting public transport there.

I stopped, he stopped the car, climbed out and opened the passenger door for me. He only did that when I was mad at him. I climbed into the car, he joined me and drove off.

We were silent most of the way to my home.

“You’ll have to talk to me sometime,” he said. I did not respond.

“You can’t ignore me forever.” Still, I was silent.

“The baby needs me, I’ll come and see him sometimes, you have to talk to me then, and when you tell me what he needs,” he continued. I frowned and decided there and then that I would never ask him for anything.

He stopped outside my block of flats. I climbed out in silence and went into my flat. Amasu, my neighbour and best friend had been babysitting Dami, my son, over the weekend. She and I had met after I had moved into the flat and had become friends quickly. I thanked her and asked her to leave. She could see I didn’t want to talk and left.

I held my boy in my arms and wept. I don’t know how long I did that, then I stopped and looked at him. He was watching me. I kissed him and apologised for my display. He smiled, I smiled back.

“We’ll be fine, my boy. We’ll be just fine. The first thing we have to do is get out of your father’s house. He’s done with us, so we’re done with him.”

Three days later, I woke up and didn’t cry, unlike on the previous days when I had woken in tears and spent parts of the days wracked by sobs.

I looked up at the ceiling and decided to start looking for flats. I knew I would not afford a flat as upmarket as the one I was in, but we would be fine.

Over the following fortnight, I saw several flats, but they were in unsafe looking neighbourhoods. I decided to save for the flat until and unless Dami’s father evicted me.

I returned home from work one evening, and my housekeeper, Misa, had let him in. He was holding my son. I had a hard time not snatching Dami from him.

I greeted my housekeeper, she offered to leave. I asked her to make tea and told her I'd pay for her to take a cab home. She started to look concerned, I phoned her husband to let him know, he gave permission reluctantly. Misa then went to make tea.

"Can I hold Dami?" I asked. Dola handed him to me, making a production of tangling our arms round the baby. I pretended not to notice and took Dami, then I sat down as I greeted him.

He watched me then he turned his eyes to his father. I was annoyed with him for doing that. He started fretting, I tried to calm him, but he would have none of it.

"I gave him to his father when he did that," said Misa. I looked at her as if I wanted to stab her, because I did.

"I'll take him," said Dola. I asked Misa to take Dami to his father. She looked at me oddly, then she took Dami. When he was with Dola, I asked her to sit down. Dola gave me a questioning look.

"How can I help you, father-of-Dami?" I asked. He smiled the smile that would make me do anything he wanted, but not today.

"I've come to see our child. He's growing very well. You're doing a great job with him," he replied.

"Does your future wife know you're here?" I asked bitterly. Misa gasped.

"Would you excuse us?" Dola asked her.

"She stays," I said firmly. He gave me a shocked look because I had never taken a stand against him.

"What brings you here?" I repeated.

"I thought we could talk about the future."

"What future? You're marrying another woman, we have no future, and if you think you can take my son, you have another think coming."

"Why are you so confrontational? I didn't come here to fight."

"You shouldn't have come at all."

"My son needs me, and I need you. I thought you needed me too."

"I did, until you told me you're getting married."

"Would you rather I hadn't told you?"

“I’d rather you’d told me you were marrying me and Dami.”

“I told you I can’t do that.”

“Do your parents know about Dami?”

“What difference does that make?”

“Do you prefer my people to tell them?”

“No!”

“Then what are you doing here since you clearly want nothing to do with either of us?”

“It’s not that I want nothing to do with you.”

“It’s just that you want us to be dirty secrets.”

“No!”

“Then tell your people about us, or about Dami, at least.”

“No!”

“You should go.”

“I’m doing you a favour!”

“The only favour I want from you is marriage, but since I won’t get that, I want nothing else from you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Misa, please get me my child.” Misa stood and approached Dola cautiously, uncertain that he would hand the baby over. He did, she brought him to me. He protested by fretting, then he started crying.

“Don’t cry my child, your father will never be in your life, get used to living without him,” I said as I rocked him.

“Don’t say that,” said Dola.

“Misa, call a cab,” I said. She left the room. I stood and paced up and down. Dami quieted as he looked at a corner behind me. He did that sometimes, focused on certain spots as if he was seeing something or someone.

Misa returned to say the cab would fetch her in ten minutes. I asked her to bring me my purse, I handed Dami to her while I found money for her in my purse, then I gave her the money and took Dami back.

“I’ll wait outside,” she said.

“Thank you. Don’t let this man in here unless I’m here,” I said. Dola gasped.

“Don’t let anyone in here when I’m not here. I don’t want my baby stolen, and I don’t want people coming in here with evil intentions and making my baby sick,” I continued.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Please thank your husband for letting you stay longer than usual. I hope this won’t cause you problems.”

“I’ll be fine. Bye Dami, goodnight ma’am, goodnight sir,” she said as she left.

“You didn’t tell me about her.” I had terminated the services of the maid Dola had hired for me, and hired Misa just before I gave birth because she knew something about pregnancy and childbirth, the first maid had known nothing about either of those things.

I had not discussed it with Dola, afraid to make him feel bad, fortunately he had never brought it up.

“When would I have told you? Between you choosing your wedding outfit and paying the bride price for another woman?”

“Don’t be bitter, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Not much suits me these days. Leave, Dola.”

“Fine, but I’ll be back.” He stood and approached me. I drew back and used my body to deny him access to my child.

“I have rights to my son,” he said. I snorted. He left, I closed and locked the door, then I screamed. The baby started crying in fright. I hugged, kissed and talked to him, then I heard banging on my door.

“Sanda, Sanda, Sanda,” called Amasu. I opened the door and she flew in like an avenging spirit.

“Where is he? Tell me now and I’ll fix him,” she said.

“Where is who?”

“The one making you scream.”

“He just left. It was Dami’s father.”

“I haven’t seen him in some time.”

“He’s preparing to get married.”

“You never told me you were getting married. How could you not tell me?”

“He’s marrying someone else.”

“What about you and Dami?”

“He won’t tell his people about either of us, I figure we’re out of his life.”

“Then what was he doing here?”

“He wanted to talk about the future.”

“What future?”

“That’s what I asked him. Can we not talk about him? I need to bath Dami and get him to sleep because I have a lot of work to get through.”

“Can I help?”

“I’m not sure. Misa cooked already.”

“Can I eat with you?”

“That will be great.”

“I’ll go and get my work, then we can work together later.”

Dami was tired and slept quickly. Amasu and I ate and started working.

Towards midnight, we were startled by the ringing doorbell. We looked at each other, it rang again.

“I’ll get it,” said Amasu. She had a karate black belt, she was almost six foot tall while I’m five foot five, and she was bigger built than me. I felt better about her investigating. I walked a few paces behind her as she peeped through the peephole. She kissed her teeth and threw the door open.

“Can we help you?” she demanded of Dola.

“I’m here to see Sanda,” he replied, making to step into the flat. Amasu put a hand on either side of the door blocking his way.

“Sanda?” he said to me.

“You have nothing to say that I want to hear,” I said.

“We can fix this.”

“With a ring on my finger?”

“No!”

“Close the door,” I said to Amasu. She nodded, looking forward to doing it.

“No! We need to talk about this,” said Dola. Amasu threw the door closed and dusted off her hands proudly, then she turned to look at me. Dola rang the doorbell again. We returned to

our seats, determined to get back to work. The doorbell continued to ring with Dola calling my name.

I could feel myself getting more and more upset by what I saw as his harassment.

“Can I get a protection order against him?” I asked.

“Not unless he’s hurt you physically.”

“He’ll wake the baby,” I said, as I charged at the door. I threw it open.

“Are you trying to wake Dami?” I demanded.

“I need to talk to you.”

“Make an appointment with my lawyer.”

“What?”

“You heard. Fortunately for you, my lawyer’s right here. Should I call her to book you an appointment?”

“What is wrong with you?”

“I was lovesick, but I have you to thank for curing me. I have nothing to say to you, and you have nothing to say I want to hear. Go away,” I said clearly. He looked deep into my eyes, looked behind me, and left. I closed the door and leaned on it, wondering if I was doing the right thing.

“Stop doubting yourself,” said Amasu. I opened my eyes and looked at her.

“He’s doing what’s best for him, you need to do what’s best for you. Do you want me to be your lawyer if this needs to go to court?”

“Yes, please, but I’ll have to pay in kind.”

“Cook for me. We’ll work out how many meals. You have my details, call me if you need anything. I have to sleep otherwise I’ll be useless at work.”

“Thank you for being here.”

“No problem. Go to sleep. Kiss my nephew for me.” I held her tight. She was surprised as I’m not a demonstrative person, but just then, I needed to be held. She put her arms round me and held me.

“Thank you,” I said after some time.

“Go to sleep,” she said as we released each other. She opened the door and left. I locked it, gathered my work things and went to sleep.

I was groggy when Dami woke me for his two o'clock feed. I wished I'd not stopped breast feeding. I had to climb out of bed as he hollered and make the milk, then I had to hold him as he drank, and burp him afterwards.

It was one of my worst nights because he would not go back to sleep, and I had to stay awake with him. When my alarm clock rang, I wanted to cry. Misa arrived and I started getting ready for work.

I was useless at work and had to drink many cups of coffee. The day ended, I returned home. Dami was sleeping. I dismissed Misa and joined him.

I was woken by his happy sounds. I climbed off the bed and approached the cot. He looked at me and smiled. I smiled back and picked him up.

After his bath, he was very playful and I had the energy to play with him. When he slept, I slept too and decided to work after his early morning feed while he played.

That set the routine for us, with me working in the early hours of the day while he played. That way, I rested, and I was productive at work.

CHAPTER TWO

Amasu came to my home early one Saturday morning as she did not want to be alone. We went shopping at midmorning and stopped at an open air restaurant for a late lunch.

"Hi, ladies, can I join you?" asked a man. I looked up at him, he was a total stranger. Amasu stood and hugged him, then she introduced him as Alec, her eldest brother.

He and I greeted each other and he sat down. I picked Dami up from his push chair when he woke up and talked to him while Amasu and her brother caught up. They stopped talking. I looked up, they were both watching me.

"Who's that?" asked Alec. I introduced him to Dami, he asked to hold him. I didn't usually let strangers hold my baby as we were taught not to let strangers hold babies because you never knew what spiritual problems they carried that could cause the child to be ill or to die.

I did not feel uneasy about his request and handed Dami over. I was concerned Alec would not know how to hold a baby, but he did. I relaxed and finished my meal as he ordered his.

Amasu excused herself as she answered a call. I smiled, watching her a few steps from us as she smiled at what her caller was saying. I assumed it was her latest lover.

"How old is Dami?" asked Alec. I looked at him.

"Four months."

“You’re not wearing a ring, are you marrying his father?” I laughed bitterly.

“No, he’s marrying another woman in a few weeks,” I replied.

“He’s a fool.”

“He’s doing what he feels is best for him.”

“What about what’s best for you and Dami?”

“I have to figure that out alone.”

“You needn’t, if you marry.”

“Who am I going to marry? And what will happen to Dami if I marry? I don’t want custody battles on my hands.”

“Your husband could adopt Dami, with Dami’s father’s permission.” I looked at him as if he had opened up a possibility for me. I mulled on it, then I shook my head as I dismissed it.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Why? What man wants to raise another man’s child?”

“If he adopts Dami, Dami will be his child, not his biological father’s child.”

“It’s a nice idea, but I’m done with men.”

“They might not be done with you.”

“That’s immaterial. You hold Dami as if you’ve had practise. How many children do you have?”

“None.”

“How come you know how to handle a baby?”

“I’m a paediatrician.”

“Oh. Is that a good business to be in?”

“For me, yes. I love kids, and I love to make them feel better. It’s my dream job.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“What work do you do?”

“I’m a copy writer.”

“Oh, you’re good with words?”

“I love words, almost as much as I love him,” I said, looking at Dami. He looked very comfortable in Alec’s arms.

“He’s lucky to have your love. Can I have your number?”

“Excuse me?” I asked, shocked. I was convinced no one would want me, now that I had had a child out of wedlock.

“I’d like to call you so we could meet sometime,” he continued. I stared at him, speechless. He took his phone out of his pocket and handed it to me. I took it, looked at it and returned it.

“You don’t want to meet me?” he asked.

“What will your wife think of that?”

“I don’t have a wife.”

“Your fiancée then.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“I don’t have one at present, I’m hoping you’ll fill that role.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because!” I said, feeling cornered.

“Because what?”

“Because I’m involved with someone.”

“Dami’s father?”

“No!”

“Are you still in love with him?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Are you?” I looked away from him.

“You need to get over him,” he said.

“That’s none of your business.”

“He’s not coming back.”

“I know that!” I said as I looked at him again.

“So go out with another man.”

“What good will that do?” Dami started crying. I stretched my arms out for him. Alec ignored me as he checked Dami’s diaper.

“He doesn’t need changing, maybe he needs milk,” he said. I took the milk out of the milk warmer as Alec settled Dami, then reached for it. I gave it to him, he put the bottle into his mouth. Dami started suckling as if he and Alec had done that many times before.

I felt as if he was betraying me, just like his father, giving his trust and affection to someone else. Amasu returned.

“You and Dami look good together,” she said, as she sat down. I gave her a dirty look. She shrugged.

“We need to go,” I said curtly.

“Alec and I...” said Amasu.

“You and Alec can stay, Dami and I have to go,” I said, reaching for Dami.

“Let him finish his meal,” said Amasu. I glared at her.

“Take a walk,” she said.

“I want my baby.”

“He’s eating, he’ll cry if you interrupt him.” I felt like crying.

“I’ll take care of Dami, you’ll find us here when you return.” I stood and hurried away with tears running down my cheeks.

How dare Alec speak to me like that! Who the hell does he think he is, I fumed, wiping the tears away angrily.

“Sanda?” said Dola.

“What do you want?” I returned rudely as I turned to him. He was standing with a beautiful woman who was wondering what was wrong with me.

“Is this your wife?” I asked.

“Who is this?” demanded the woman.

“Some slut he’s been banging,” I replied. He gasped and the woman puffed up.

“Did he tell you he has a child with me?” I asked.

“What?”

“He’s all of four months, and his father’s marrying you. Good luck with him, I hope he’ll be faithful to you, because he sure wasn’t to me,” I said, then I ran off, sobbing stupidly. I could not believe how painful seeing him with another woman had been.

In the bathrooms I bent over the sink, crying for Dami and me and all the hopes that would never be realised.

“Sanda?” said a voice. I stopped crying, startled to hear my name. I raised my head and looked in the mirror in front of me. The beautiful woman who had been with Dola was beside me.

“Don’t rub it in my face. You won, you got the guy, could you just leave me in peace?” I said, turning away from her and cleaning my face. I sniffed and felt a hand on my shoulder. I shook it off and turned to the woman.

“Are you going to call me names? He cheated on *me* to be with *you*, not the other way round,” I said.

“I’m his sister.”

“Oh!”

“You can’t let his fiancée know about this.”

“I don’t even know her name, there’s absolutely no chance that I’ll tell her anything.”

“That knowledge would ruin his life.”

“What about mine and that of his son?” She shrugged helplessly.

“Please leave,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she said and left. I washed my face then I gave myself a pep-talk. I straightened my shoulders and returned to my son.

“Are you alright?” asked Amasu as I sat down. I nodded. Dami was sleeping in Alec’s arms.

“We need to go now,” I said.

“Yes. Alec, it was nice seeing you. We should keep better contact. Here are my details,” said Amasu, handing Alec her card, he took it and gave her one.

“I want to see my son,” said Dola. I looked up, he was standing beside us looking at me, then he looked at Dami.

“Who’s this man holding my child?” he demanded.

“I’m Sanda’s future husband and the man who’ll be raising Dami, *our* son, not yours,” Alec said aggressively. I was too stunned to speak or do anything else.

He and Dola shared a long look, then Dola looked at me.

“Our lawyer will contact you about you signing away all claims to my son,” continued Alec. I gaped at him.

“Sanda would never agree to that,” said Dola.

“My child needs a hands-on father,” I said.

“You can’t deny me my rights.”

“What rights? No one in your family has claimed him. Of course that could be because my people haven’t announced him to your people. Do you want me to do that?”

“No!”

“Then you don’t want Dami. I can take him to the moon and you’ll have no rights to him. You even refused to come and register his birth with me. If I say his father’s the man in the moon, he will have more rights to him than you ever will. Get out of here,” I said curtly.

“You love me.”

“I’m getting over you since you long got over me.”

“I will never get over you.”

“Your actions have shown otherwise. Go.”

“You can’t do this.”

“I can, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“I can get my lawyer to...”

“Amasu, can I have your card?” I said. She gave me a card and I held it out to Dola.

“These are my lawyer’s details. Feel free to have your lawyer contact her.” We glared at each other, but he did not take the card.

“No rights, in this life or any other,” I said.

“He’s my son,” he said.

“A biological connection doesn’t make you a parent. Do you want Dami and I to move out of your flat?”

“No! Where will you go?”

“Does it matter? We’re nothing to you,” I said, as I stood to take Dami from Alec. He wouldn’t release him. I looked at him.

“I love you,” he said. Dola gasped, as did I, then I realised that Alec was pretending, for Dola. I smiled at him, he handed the baby to me and I straightened.

Dola made to take him, Alec stood and got between him and me, stunning us both. I put Dami in his pushchair and started walking away.

“I want to see my son,” insisted Dola, keeping up with me.

“He’s *my* son, and he sees no one without my sanction,” said Alec, who was on the other side of Dola.

“You have no right to deny me access to...” said Dola. He and Alec stopped and exchanged words as I continued to walk. I reached Amasu’s car. She was right beside me. We put Dami and his things and our things in the car and left.

I expected Amasu to say something, she always had an opinion about things, but she said nothing the whole way home. She helped Dami and I into our home and left. I stared after her, wondering what had rendered her speechless.

Dami and I spent some time together, then he slept. I searched the internet for flats and phoned about them, then Dami woke up. In the evening when he was asleep, I looked at my savings. I did not have enough money to move out and still look after my son.

Dola had never helped me with anything related to Dami. We had continued to date after I got pregnant, but he had never paid for any prenatal care, he did not pay anything for Dami’s birth, and he had never paid for a diaper or even a bottle of milk.

I sat back when that occurred to me. He seemed to have been interested in me, but he had never even wanted to feel the baby kicking in my stomach. I wondered if he was child phobic.

Thinking back to the way I had told him about the baby, I realised I had been excited and assumed he had been excited too, but in my mind, I realised he had drawn back in shock when I had told him.

I had talked on and on about our home and a nursery and our parents visiting our child, he had not said a word. He had left shortly after that, instead of leaving after our date. I had overlooked that as fatherly shock during my pregnancy, hoping he would warm to the idea of being a father, but he never talked about the child or the pregnancy.

When I had brought up the fact that my people needed to tell his people to expect an addition to the family, he had always had a story. His father was sick, or his parents were out of town, or his uncle had had an accident and couldn’t meet my people.

That had made me feel cold on nights I lay alone in my bed, but whenever he had appeared, kissing me and holding my hand, I had put the unease at the back of my mind.

Now, I saw it for what it was, he never wanted Dami, and he had been toying with me. I had been his mistress, whereas he had been my everything. I wondered how many other women he had cheated on me with.

Get over it, I told myself. I might have to move back in with my parents, I thought.

It would stop Dola from thinking he had rights to me or Dami, and I had to stop myself from being in love with him. Living in his home would make me remember all our times together and keep me hoping he would come back to me. That was never going to happen, and for Dami's sake, if not mine, I had to get over him

I was not looking forward to moving in with my parents. They are very conservative people who had wanted to send a delegation to Dola's people to tell them about my pregnancy. They had told me the first time I had given them Dola's excuse that he was playing with me. I had vouched for his sincerity, but they had never had a good opinion of him since then.

When Dami had been born, Father had asked where the baby's father was. I had not had a reply for him because I had not known.

When I had returned to the flat a few days after the birth, Dola had come to visit me and seen the baby then. He had not held him, claiming to be afraid to drop him.

I had asked when my people could visit his, and he had said he would tell me when he could get everyone together. I had continued to be hopeful. Dola had put me in a very nice flat for over three years, I was sure he would do right by me and his child.

When Dami had been three months old, Dola had taken me out to a nature reserve for the weekend and told me late on Sunday afternoon, after spending Friday night, the whole of Saturday, and Sunday morning with me, that he was getting married in three months. Thinking about that incident still brought tears to my eyes. I wiped them away and prepared the speech I would have to give my parents.

I felt cold in the pit of my stomach knowing I would be lectured for stupidity, and that Dami would be called nasty names because of his father. It could not be helped, I'd have to be a big girl about it and take it on the chin.

CHAPTER THREE

Three days later, I phoned Father and asked if I could move back into his home.

"Have you been sent away from where you live?" he asked.

"No, Father."

"Then why are you leaving?"

"Dami's father's marrying another woman."

"What?"

“I said...”

“We told you he was playing with you, didn’t we?”

“Yes, Father.”

“What did you say?”

“That he was serious about me.”

“He’s serious alright, he’s serious about making a fool of you. We told you not to move into his property without a ring on your finger.”

“Yes, Father.”

“And you thought we were stupid.”

“I was wrong, I’m sorry.”

“Hmm. When do you want to move in?”

“This weekend.”

“Fine, it’s not as if we’d disown you. It’s a good thing you’re the youngest. If you were the eldest, we’d disown you to prevent the others from following in your foolish footsteps. Your mother and I have plans. Fetch the key from your mother on Friday before one, we leave from her office at half past one.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Maybe next time you’ll listen when we tell you about a man.”

“Yes, Father.” I was relieved when the call was over, and also determined to get my own place. My parents love being right. I could foresee Mother waking in the night when Dami cried, asking me what I had been thinking when I had brought a child into the world with no father in the picture. I could not survive more than three months of that without killing one or both of my parents.

On Thursday, I asked for the following morning off. On Friday morning, I went to Mother’s office. She kept me waiting an hour before seeing me, and she didn’t even have a client in her office, nor was she on a call.

“Sit down, Sanda,” she said. I wanted to groan. She was in the mood to lecture.

“Your father tells me you’re moving in with us,” she continued.

“Yes, Mother.”

“We told you that that boy was playing with you.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“And now he’s left you high and dry, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“He’s marrying another woman?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why?” I frowned.

“No,” I replied.

“Because she kept her legs closed.”

“Mother!”

“Didn’t your father and I teach you to keep your legs closed?”

“Yes, you did.”

“All your sisters are married today because they did what we told them to.” I resisted telling her that none of my sisters had been virgins when they married.

“What’s your plan about that boy?” she asked.

“Which one?”

“The one you gave birth to.”

“I’ll bring him up.”

“What about his father?”

“He wants nothing to do with him.”

“Who would want anything to do with the child of a strumpet?” I drew a shocked and offended breath, and almost stood to leave, then I thought of Dami. He needed a home, I could live on the street if necessary, but not him.

I closed my eyes and visualised him, that calmed me and stopped me from telling Mother to go to hell. I opened my eyes. Mother was talking on the phone, I had not heard the phone ringing.

Her call ended, she put the phone down and looked at me, really looked at me. I became uneasy.

“What are we going to do with you? How will we look people in the eye when we have a daughter who has a fatherless child?” she asked.

“I…”

“Did you ever stop to think about how this would affect us?”

“Mother...”

“If you didn’t work, we’d send you to the rural areas to avoid being tainted by your shame.”

“I...”

“Unfortunately, all your grandparents are late so no one would chaperone you. We’re not happy to send you there to look after our homestead because you’d have men lining up to have intimate relations with you.”

“I would not!” I gasped.

“Your behaviour shows otherwise, Sanda. Here are the keys. Move in if you must, but leave soon, I don’t want to be associated with a woman who behaves as if her parents didn’t teach her how to behave herself. We taught you right, Sanda,” she shouted.

“Yes, you did,” I said.

“Then why, Sanda? Why did you shame us?”

“Being a single mother is no longer shameful.”

“It is to us! Give that child to his father and we’ll pretend he was never born. You can get married if you don’t have a child, but with that child in tow, you’ll never marry, you’ll be a blight in our home, our shame and sorrow that we can never be rid of.”

“Mother...”

“Shut up!” I stopped talking. My heart was thundering in my chest with affront. I had made a mistake, but I did not deserve to be called names.

“In our home, you’ll live by our rules. You won’t have men calling on you, and you’ll conduct your immoral acts elsewhere. Do I make myself clear?” she demanded.

“Yes, Mother.”

“Here are the keys, take them and get out,” she said dismissively.

“Thank you,” I said as I stood, grabbed the keys off the desk and left the office. I went to the bathroom and paced up and down, thinking of alternative accommodation. Nothing came to mind. I thought of moving in with Amasu and changed my mind, she and her man were working on a serious relationship, I didn’t want to watch that when I would never have it.

I asked myself why I was going to live with my parents, I was doing it for Dami. That calmed me, and I was able to leave.

Work kept my mind busy, then I returned home. My things were packed and Amasu looked after Dami while I supervised the moving people.

It was midnight before I was able to sleep in my parents' home. Amasu had come with me, she and Dami had been asleep for hours. I had stayed up to pack my things so that when my parents returned, they'd see as little of my presence as possible.

I had more things than could fit in my room, but I packed things on top of each other and made everything fit. There was not much room for moving about, but it was just enough for me, and I made sure to put Dami's cot where nothing would fall on him.

I fetched him from the lounge where he was sleeping with Amasu. She did not even stir when I took him from her arms. I smiled at how deeply she could sleep. I had slept that way too, until pregnancy. From then on, I had been aware of Dami and woke at the slightest sound to check on him before and after his birth.

I put him in his cot, then I went to cover Amasu with a blanket. She did not stir even then. I slept for a short while before Dami woke me. After dawn, Amasu came to check on Dami and me, then she took Dami, who was awake, and told me to get some sleep. I kissed her, thankful to have another two hours of sleep at least.

When I woke up, the house was quiet. I looked about and found Amasu watching TV while Dami slept beside her. I smiled at her, she smiled back, then I went to freshen up. Afterwards, she went out, promising to be back for dinner.

Dami and I spent time together, he slept, I enquired about accommodation. I even asked the neighbours if they were renting their back rooms. Some of them had vacant rooms, but said they would have to talk to my parents before letting me rent their back rooms. I decided to rent my parents' back room.

I phoned some people and asked them to help me move in. The place had more room, but it was cold. I would have to get a heater to prevent Dami from breathing in cold air.

When Amasu returned, she was horrified to find me in the back room.

"Why?" she asked.

"It will keep space between me and my parents, otherwise they'll kill me, or I'll kill them."

"What are you talking about?" I told her what my parents had said, she stared at me.

"What is the big deal? Lots of people have children out of wedlock," she said.

"True, but my parents have this image of themselves, and in none of their images do they have a bastard grandchild."

"Dami's not a bastard."

"Not to me, but his grandparents see him that way. They'll never accept him and they'll always say nasty things about his father. I have to get him out of here before he understands what they are saying."

“Move in with me, it has to be better than this.”

“I can’t watch you and your man, I’ll be jealous.”

“Oh, Sanda.”

“I should have listened to my parents, now, I must live with my actions. I’ve cooked, are you ready to eat, or do you want to freshen up?”

“I’ll freshen up. Are you sure you want to live here?”

“It’s better than being in the house.”

“If Dola seeks custody, he’ll get it if you’re living here with Dami.”

“He’d rather die than do that. You saw how he didn’t take your card, he’ll deny my son to all the ancestors. He never wanted him, I realised that a few days ago.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be, I’m happy to have Dami. Get cleaned up, I’m hungry.”

“You don’t have to wait up for me.”

“I want to. Go.” In the morning, Amasu took Dami again, and I had time to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Who are you and how did you get in here?” demanded Father. I jumped out of bed as if I’d been electrified and went to see why my child was crying.

The front door was open, Father was in the lounge, Mother was a few steps behind him. Amasu was standing with Dami on her shoulder as she tried to calm him, and a man was standing beside her.

“Father, it’s alright,” I said, as I went round the man to be visible to my parents.

“Sanda? What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“I moved in, we talked about this.”

“We expected you in the house!”

“This is fine. I’ll pay rent.”

“When did you make that arrangement?”

“When I realised how I had shamed you. Charge me as you would any other tenant.” My parents looked from me to each other.

“I won’t eat your food, I won’t ask you for anything,” I said.

“You’re our child, you can ask us for anything,” said Father.

“I’m a woman who behaved as if she was badly brought up, I have no right to ask anything of you.”

“You are not!” said Amasu and the man beside her, who I now realised was Alec. I took Dami and calmed him, then I looked at my parents, they were looking at Alec.

“Who are you?” asked Father.

“This is my friend Amasu, and this is her brother Alec. Amasu was keeping me company while I moved into my new home,” I said.

“Hello,” said Amasu, my parents did not even hear her.

“What do you want, young man?” demanded Father.

“He’s here to visit his sister,” I replied.

“Young man?” I looked at him, he was looking at me.

“I’ve seen a flower in this home, and I wish to plant it in my home, Sir,” he replied. I gasped. He looked at Father, I looked at my parents, their mouths were gaping.

“Please accept my apologies for coming here this way. I hoped to be gone before you returned. Your daughter is everything I want in a wife, and I want to adopt her son and make him mine. I can’t have children and he’s my chance to be a father,” continued Alec. I opened my mouth to contradict him.

“Why didn’t you tell us about him, Sanda? Come young man, who are your people?” asked Father as he backed out of the house. Alec followed him and they disappeared from my sight.

Mother entered the house and looked at me and Dami.

“You didn’t tell us about him,” she said.

“I…” I began.

“When did you meet him?”

“A while ago,” replied Amasu. Mother looked at her.

“You say he’s your brother?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s your name?”

“Amasu.”

“Amasu. Is your brother married?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Is he serious about Sanda?”

“It looks that way.”

“Sanda, what are you standing there for? Go and get cleaned up then come and cook for him.”

“But...”

“Give me Dami. Come, child, come and spend time with your granny,” said Mother as she took Dami and left with him. I looked at Amasu.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Your parents like Alec.”

“Yes, but I didn’t say I’d marry him.”

“Don’t you think it’s better for them to think good thoughts about him than for your father to bring out his gun?”

“You’re right. I’ll get cleaned up.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

“You need to tell your brother to stop smoking pot and find himself a nice woman to marry.”

“He has found a nice woman, he found you.”

“I have a child!”

“He’s happy about that.”

“But...”

“Get cleaned up. Dami might get hungry soon.”

“You’re right. Thanks for looking after him so I could sleep.”

“Thank Alec, he wouldn’t let me touch him, you’d think he was Dami’s biological father.”

After my shower, I dressed, locked the back room and hurried to my parents’ front door. I rang the doorbell, Mother opened the door.

“What are you doing ringing the doorbell? Get in here and get a meal together,” she said, drawing me into the house.

“Where’s Dami?”

“With his father.”

“Dola?” I asked, horrified.

“No! That nice boy you’re marrying.”

“Mother...”

“Go and work your magic. You know you’re the best cook in this family.” I was stunned by those words and went to the kitchen.

Amasu was there, washing her hands at the sink.

“I’m taking them a snack, do what you have to do,” she said, then she dried her hands, picked up a tray of food and left.

I looked at the ingredients and started chopping and doing all that needed doing.

Almost three hours later, I took the food to the dining room, then I went to kneel at the lounge door to announce the meal. Father stood first.

“Come, son-in-law, let’s go and eat. No doubt you’ve tasted this girl’s delicious food,” he said, as he led the way to the dining room. As Alec walked past me, I held my hands out for Dami and he gave him to me.

I took him to the kitchen and sat down to give him milk. I looked up when I heard footsteps, Amasu entered the room.

“Your mother said I must come and call you,” she said.

“I’m feeding Dami.”

“You’re not breastfeeding him, come.” I stood and went to the dining room. Alec stood and pulled a chair out for me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome.” I sat down and focused on Dami. When he was done, I burped him.

“I’ll take him so you can eat,” said Alec. I looked at him, surprised, then I opened my mouth to decline his offer.

“What a wonderful man, men never did that in my day. Sanda, hand the child over and say thank you,” said Mother. I looked from Alec to her, then I looked at Dami and handed him to Alec. The two of them looked natural together.

“Eat, you cooked great food,” said Mother. I started eating. I cleared the dishes after the meal. I had just started to wash up when Father called out to me. I dropped what I was doing and joined everyone in the lounge.

I sat down, Alec stood and brought me Dami, then he sat beside me.

“Thank you for being kind to my sister and I. We have to go now,” he said.

“You’re welcome, son-in-law,” said Father. There was a short silence. I was looking at Dami because I did not think I could look anyone in the eye since I had absolutely no intention of marrying Alec. I looked up to see what everyone was doing, they were all watching me.

“Thank you for helping me settle in,” I said, looking at Amasu.

“You’re welcome,” she said, watching me intently, then she looked at her brother. I looked at him, he was looking at me as if he was in love with me. I looked away quickly, certain I was hallucinating.

“We have to go,” said Amasu.

“Yes, thank you for being with Sanda. We hope to see more of you, both of you,” said Mother, looking at Alec. I wanted to roll my eyes. Amasu stood, we all followed suit and went outside. Alec thanked my parents again, and they told him to go well. I thanked him and told him the same thing. We were all standing beside what I assumed was his car as I had never seen it.

“This is a nice car,” I said.

“Thank you. How’s work?”

“Fine, and for you?”

“Great. Dami looks bigger.”

“He should be, he has the appetite of an elephant,” I said proudly, looking at Dami.

“Can I have your number?” I looked at him, surprised.

“Can I have your number?” he repeated. I looked about, shocked that he would ask for it in front of my parents. They were standing some distance from us with Amasu, as they all pretended, very badly, not to be watching us. I smiled at their pathetic attempts.

“You’ll give it to me this time?” asked Alec. I looked at him.

“There’s no point. I’m not looking for a man.”

“I’m glad, because you already have me.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Please give it to me before your father comes to beat me.”

“Why don’t you ask Amasu?”

“I want it from you.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m a patient man, I’ll wait.”

“Don’t Alec! We’ll never be together.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have to go now. Look after yourself and our son.”

“You don’t have to call him that.”

“Here’s my number, call me if you need anything. Call *me*, not that man who wanted rights to Dami,” he said, handing me his card. I could see no harm in knowing a paediatrician, so I took his card.

“Thank you, look after yourself too,” I said.

“I will. Bye Dami,” he said, kissing Dami’s cheek, then he looked at me. My heart skipped a beat. He wanted me. I’d have fallen if I hadn’t leaned against his car.

“Are you alright?” he asked, gripping me by the elbow. I nodded, speechless, then I straightened and moved away from the car.

“Bye,” he said.

“Bye,” I returned. He climbed into the car and waved as he drove off. I stared after the car, wondering why I had reacted that strongly to his desire.

It’s craziness I thought, as I turned to the house.

“How long have you known him?” demanded Mother. She was directly in my path and had startled me into a gasp.

“Tell me everything,” she pressed.

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said.

“I’m off, Sanda,” called Amasu. I was glad to leave Mother and go and attend to her.

“Thanks again. Drive safely, and let me know when you get home,” I said.

“You’re such a little mother,” she said, hugging Dami and I. She kissed Dami’s cheek, made her goodbyes to my parents and left.

I turned to the house, my parents were standing in front of me, interrogatory looks in their eyes. Dami started fretting, I kissed him and excused myself as I took him to my new home.

I was glad to close and lock the door, and be alone with Dami. In a short while, he was asleep. I looked for more accommodation, then he woke up. I bathed him, fed him and then we sat watching TV.

CHAPTER FIVE

Someone knocked on the door, I felt my heart sink. It was my parents come to interrogate me. The knock came again, louder. I went to open the door.

“How’s Dami?” asked Mother as she entered the house.

“Fine.”

“I brought you dinner.”

“Thank you, but there was no need,” I said, surprised.

“You’re my child. How can I cook and not count you when you’re on the premises? Are you eating well enough to breast feed this boy?”

“I stopped when I went back to work.”

“But...”

“I took medication to stop the milk. I couldn’t concentrate with all the milk in me. I had a lot of milk.”

“How old was he when you stopped?”

“One month.”

“That was too soon.”

“I needed to go back to work to provide for him.”

“Yes. It was a pity to stop it. I had a lot of milk too.”

“Would you like to sit down?” I offered tentatively.

“Thank you,” she said, and sat down. I sat down too, we both looked at Dami.

“Can I hold him?” asked Mother. I looked at her, stunned, then I stood, fetched him from his chair and handed him to her.

She talked to him animatedly, he studied her.

“He’s big for his age. He’ll be a strong young man,” she said.

“Thank you. Can I dish up for you?”

“I’ve eaten, thanks. Go ahead and eat, I’ll hold him.” I went to dish up for myself and brought my food to the lounge. I could not eat as I waited for Mother to start interrogating me.

“Do you want to talk about Alec?” she asked. I looked at her, shocked that she was giving me a choice. She was looking at Dami.

“I’m sorry, I don’t want to talk about him,” I said.

“Your sisters will be here over the weekend for our anniversary celebration.”

“It will be great to see them. Mother?”

“Sanda?”

“I have someone who looks after Dami while I’m at work, is it okay for her to come and look after him here?”

“How else would she do the job?”

“I could take Dami to her.”

“Don’t be silly. She’ll come here. Does she know how to get here?”

“I gave her directions.”

“I could collect her before taking you to work.”

“There’s no need for that.”

“I want to do it, Sanda.”

“Oh.”

“What time should we leave to fetch her?”

“I’ll have to talk to her first. Her husband might see a car and think she’s having an affair.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. Phone her then.” I phoned Misa and offered to fetch her to work. She paused.

“How will you fetch me, ma’am?” she asked. I told her that I’d fetch her with Mother, and that it would have to be early as we had to bring her home, before both going to work. She said she had to consult her husband. We ended the call.

“Did she say yes?” asked Mother.

“She had to talk to her husband. We’ll probably have to get out of the car so he can see that we’re women.”

“Oh. I’m glad your father’s not that paranoid.” A few minutes later I phoned Misa again, she said we could fetch her. I told Mother and she nodded as if things had gone exactly as planned.

“Well, you and Dami need to sleep, I’ll leave you to it,” she said as she stood, then she put Dami in my arms.

“I’ll see myself out,” she said.

“Thank you, Mother.” She went to the door, stopped, and looked at me.

“Move into the house with us,” she said.

“Uh...no, thank you, Mother. Dami and I need space, and I don’t want to crowd you and Father. You’ve gotten used to your own space and...”

“That’s all nonsense and you know it.”

“I...”

“It’s fine. Goodnight, Sanda.”

“Goodnight, Mother,” I said, and she left.

Dami and I were ready outside the garage when Mother joined us the following morning. I greeted her, she returned my greeting and kissed Dami.

“You should have come into the house,” she said.

“We were enjoying the fresh air.”

“Here’s a key to the front door, use it any time you want or need to come into the house.”

“Thank you,” I said, touched deeply as I took the key. She fetched the car out of the garage, and we drove off.

As I had suspected, we both had to present ourselves in Misa’s house for her husband to look us over and see that we were female. He said that seeing Dami was a bonus as he had often wondered if Misa was really looking after a baby. We made our goodbyes to him and left.

I showed Misa our new home, she was shocked by the different standard of living. I told her and Dami to have a good day, then I joined Mother in the car.

We were silent all the way there. I had been uneasy at first, then I forced myself to relax and be grateful to be travelling in ease.

“This is where you work now?” she asked when we arrived at my job.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t tell us you’d changed employers.”

“It happened recently. Thank you, Mother.”

“You’re welcome. What time should I fetch you?”

“I’ll make my own way, Mother, thank you.”

“Is your young man fetching you?”

“No!”

“There’s no shame in admitting it. Your father and I are grateful to have met him. We never met Dami’s father.”

“No,” I said, feeling ashamed.

“Don’t take too long getting to the altar, he might find someone else.” I closed my eyes, embarrassed deeply.

“Thank you Mother, have a great day,” I said, as I opened my eyes and climbed out of the car. Mother hooted as she drove away.

Work went well. During lunch, I phoned Misa to find out how she was doing. She said a strange man claiming to be my father had come to the front door asking to see Dami. She had refused. He had laughed and left. I commended her for doing the right thing.

I wondered why Father had gone to seek Dami out. I hoped that there would be no trouble. I was in enough trouble with my parents and I did not want any more.

When I returned home, I rushed to my house and entered quickly.

“Dami. Dami,” I called. There was no sound in the house. Misa was not there, neither was Dami. Panicked, I ran to my parents’ door and knocked on it desperately. It opened.

“Father, I can’t find Dami or Misa, the woman who looks after him. Have you seen them?” I asked.

“Your mother took your housekeeper home, and they took Dami with them.”

“Oh!”

“Come in, make dinner, your mother will be tired when she returns.” I did not want to be in that house, but since Mother was doing something nice for me, I figured I could cook for her.

She and Dami returned just as I finished cooking. They walked into the kitchen as if they had always gone out together. Dami seemed to have bonded with Mother.

She and I greeted each other then she held him out to me. I took him and held him tight. I had been worried sick that he would cry while driving with Mother without me or Misa.

“He was a good boy weren’t you, Dami?” said Mother.

“He needs his bath. We have to go home. Thank you for everything, Mother,” I said.

“Won’t you stay for dinner?”

“Misa will have prepared something for me. Thank you. Goodnight.”

“Misa is expecting us in the morning.”

“She can make her own way, she told me.”

“I told her and her husband that while you live with us, she’ll be fetched to and from work.”

“Oh!” I said, wondering why Mother would promise something that neither of us could deliver. She travelled often, and since I had no car, I could not fetch Misa while Mother was away.

“When I go away, your father will drive you to fetch her.”

“Her husband...”

“I spoke to him, I even showed him a picture of your father. He’s fine with it.”

“Oh, thank you.” Dami was now irritable and crying.

“I have to take him home, thank you, again,” I said.

“Goodnight, Sanda.”

“Goodnight, Mother,” I said as I hurried out of the kitchen.

“Goodnight Father,” I called as I was about to reach the front door.

“Goodnight,” he said, opening the front door for me. I stopped, stunned.

“Thank you, Father,” I said, and hurried to our home.

Dami screamed through his bath and dressing and would not drink his milk, or eat the solid food we had started him on. I walked him up and down sang to him, and tried every other thing I could think of, but he did not calm down.

A knock on the front door prompted him to scream louder. I opened it to Mother.

“What is the matter, Dami? Why are you screaming that way?” she asked. Of course Dami did not reply. She went to leave the food she had brought in the kitchen and took Dami in her arms. She talked to him, sang to him, called him by my father’s ancestors, but nothing worked.

I suddenly remembered that I had a paediatrician’s card and sought it in my handbag. I grabbed it as if it was a lifeline and dialled Alec’s cell phone number.

“This is Sanda,” I said, instead of returning his greeting.

“Sanda? What’s wrong with Dami?” he asked. Dami was screaming as if his intestines were being drawn slowly out of his belly.

“I don’t know. He’s been like this for over an hour.”

“Where are you?”

“At home.”

“I’ll be there in an hour, if traffic is free flowing. Don’t worry, just keep trying to calm him.”

“Thank you,” I said, glad that I would soon have another baby expert at hand. Mother was having no luck calming my son, but I was glad not to be alone, and I was glad she was calm, because I was not.

“Alec will be here soon,” I said. She looked at me as if she was wondering why I had called him, then she shrugged.

“It’s right for the child’s father to be called when a child has problems. It could be his father’s ancestors wondering why he hasn’t been introduced to them for them to protect him,” she said.

“Alec’s a paediatrician.”

“Western medicine can’t fix this, it’s spiritual.”

“What should I do?”

“Call the baby’s father and ask him to name his ancestors and call this child by them. They will realise that they are not forgotten, his temperature will go down, he’ll sleep and be fine.” I balked at doing that.

“Call him, Sanda.” I started dialling and a woman picked up the phone. I did not talk.

“What happened?” asked Mother.

“His wife answered.”

“Oh! Oh, well, call again, and tell her it’s urgent. She must know about this child.”

“Dola was adamant that she never find out about Dami.”

“Phone again, for your child.” I phoned again, and again, a female voice answered. I asked to speak to Dola, and identified myself when the woman demanded to know who I was. I told her my name, she asked what I wanted to talk about, I said it was work related. Fortunately, I knew something about his work, and could bluff my way quite well.

“You should deal with him during office hours,” she said, then there was silence, followed by kissing noises, then Dola was greeting me sleepily.

“Hi, Dola, this is Sanda. Dami’s crying and I need...” I said.

“Who is this?” I identified myself again.

“I know no one by that name. Never, ever, call me,” he shouted, and cut the call. I looked at the phone, stunned.

“Well?” prompted Mother. I told her what had happened. She phoned Dola from her number and threatened him with job loss, saying she was home girls with his boss’s wife, which she was.

After the call, she started calling Dami by Dola’s totems, that seemed to agitate him even further. A knock on the door startled Mother and I. I opened the door to Alec, who was in a suit, and carrying his medical bag.

“He’s very upset, aren’t you, Dami?” he asked, taking him from Mother. Mother relinquished him easily. Alec laid him down and examined him, all while Dami screamed and kicked and punched the air angrily.

Alec then picked him up, paced the floor, and talked to him, about football. Dami started to calm down. I warmed his milk bottle and gave it to Alec. He sat down and continued to talk as he fed Dami. Dami latched onto the bottle and finished the whole thing in one sitting. Alec burped him, then Dami started fretting again. Alec checked his diaper, he was fine. I made another bottle and Dami finished that off too. He fell asleep as Alec burped him.

Afterwards, he held him. Mother sat down, I fetched Dami’s blanket and handed it to Alec. He put it on Dami, and continued to hold him.

“Was all that because of hunger?” I asked.

“He’s started teething,” said Mother.

“I didn’t see anything,” I said.

“The signs are there,” concurred Alec.

“What was the fuss about? We have solids we’ve started feeding him,” I said.

“He was missing his father,” said Mother. Alec smiled from her to me, then he looked at Dami. He was sleeping peacefully and did not look as if he had almost killed his mother with stress.

“I’ll put him down,” I said.

“Let me do it,” said Alec. I led the way to the bedroom I shared with Dami, Alec put him in his cot and covered him properly. I was impressed. When he was done, I kissed Dami, told him goodnight, and led the way back to the lounge.

“Feed your guest, Sanda,” said Mother.

“I can’t stay, I have to meet my parents, I’m late as it is,” said Alec.

“Thank you for coming,” I said.

“You’re welcome. Goodnight, ma’am,” he said to Mother.

“Goodnight, son-in-law. Sanda, see your guest off,” said Mother. I saw Alec to his car, thanked him again and he drove off.

“Was that the father of your child?” asked Father from his front door.

“Yes, Father,” I replied. He nodded, returned to the house and closed the door.

I returned to my home.

“Thank goodness your child’s father came. I was starting to lose hope when his other father’s totems were not helping. If Dami causes you anymore problems, call me, no matter the time,” said Mother.

“Thank you,” I said, then I put my arms round her. That took us both by surprise as we were not a demonstrative family. She returned the embrace gingerly, released me quickly and hurried to the door.

“Goodnight, Sanda,” she said as she left.

I was too tired to eat and went to sleep. I woke up at the time Dami had accustomed me to waking up, but he slept right through.

CHAPTER SIX

In the morning when I arrived at my parents’ garage, Mother’s car had gone. I cursed, certain she had forgotten to fetch Misa. I returned to my home and waited for business hours to start, then I would call in sick at work.

Someone knocked on the front door. I opened it.

“Misa!” I gasped.

“Morning, ma’am, your mother’s waiting for you, she says you both woke up late,” she said, breezing into the house.

“Oh! Thank you. If Dami gives you problems, call me. I left the paediatrician’s number on the fridge door,” I said, then I kissed Dami and left.

“Thank you for fetching Misa,” I said to Mother.

“Why wouldn’t I? I said I would. I told Misa to let your father see Dami, I hope that was alright.”

“Yes, it was,” I said, delighted that I was being consulted, not told.

“I told her that they should always be outside where the gardener can see them. I don’t want rumours starting that the two of them are having an affair.” I nodded.

I phoned home several times worried about Dami. Misa said he was his normal self, showing nothing unusual, then she said he and his grandfather looked great together.

I hurried home and found that Mother had taken Misa to her home and left Dami with Father.

“I hope Dami behaved,” I said.

“He was no trouble at all,” said Father. He had looked after one of my nieces before a nanny had been found for her. I knew Dami had been fine with him.

I thanked Father and took Dami home. We went through the evening routine without a hitch. I was feeding him his last bottle for the night when someone knocked on the door.

I opened it to Alec and Father.

“Oh!” I said.

“The baby’s father wanted to check on him, I decided to escort him,” said Father. I almost laughed at the fact that he thought Alec and I needed chaperoning.

I greeted Alec and invited both men to sit down. Father sat down, Alec asked if he could hold Dami. I handed him over.

“How was he through the day?” asked Alec.

“Fine, not a peep out of him. You’d think he and the monster his grandmother described were two different people,” said Father. Alec sat down and looked Dami over.

“He’s fine,” he said to me.

“I’m glad. I’ll get you both something to drink,” I said, as I went to the kitchen. I fetched drinks and dinner and took them to the lounge. I sat down and invited the men to eat.

“I’ve eaten. Give me the boy, son-in-law, and you and his mother can eat,” said Father. We were about to start eating, when there was a knock on the door. I opened it.

“Is your father here? Ah, son-in-law, I thought that was your car,” said Mother as she joined everyone else in the lounge. I joined her and invited her to eat. She ate the food I had dished up for Father.

As soon as we were all done eating, I took the dishes to the kitchen and returned to my guests.

“You should go, son-in-law, Dami has to sleep and so does his mother,” said Father. I rolled my eyes. He was behaving as if I was sixteen years old and Alec was my sweetheart.

“Thank you all for coming,” I said. They all stood, Alec gave me Dami, then he and my parents left. Dami and I slept and again, he slept the whole night.

On Thursday, I phoned each of my sisters to find out the plan for our parents’ anniversary, they said there wasn’t one. I told them Mother had told me they would be in her home, they were all surprised to hear that.

We decided to discuss the subject the following day and on Saturday, as the anniversary was that Sunday.

Amasu visited me on Saturday evening and spent the night. On Sunday morning, after my parents left for church, she and I went to my parent’s house and cleaned it. Midmorning, my sisters and their families arrived and we cooked and wrapped gifts.

My parents returned after three that afternoon, I filmed the delight on their faces when they were met by their grandchildren.

Another car arrived, Alec climbed out of it with two other men.

“Those are my brothers,” said Amasu as she went to greet them. My parents turned to see who had arrived.

“Son-in-law, you are here too?” greeted Father.

“I...” said Alec.

“Who are these? Are they your brothers? You all look alike.” Alec introduced his brothers, Faro and Goma. One of my sisters then ushered everyone into the house. Father was in his element, surrounded by young men who had to respect him.

He told my sisters’ husbands that Alec was joining them as his son-in-law as he was marrying me. Resigned to that kind of talk, I did not contradict him.

The party was great and ended three hours later as we all had school and work the following day.

After everyone had gone, Dami and I spent a while with my parents.

“Your sisters tell me you organised this,” said Mother.

“We did it together.”

“They insist you did it alone. Thank you, Sanda.”

“You’re welcome.”

I had just put Dami to sleep after my parents’ anniversary party when my phone rang. The number looked familiar, but I could not remember where I had seen it.

I answered the phone.

“Hi, Sanda,” said a man.

“Alec?”

“Yes,” he replied, sounding as if he was smiling.

“Hi.”

“Hi, how are you?”

“Fine, you saw me not too long ago.”

“How’s Dami?”

“Fine, I just put him to bed.”

“Your party was nice.”

“It was my parents’ party.”

“Amasu told me you organised it.”

“With my sisters.”

“It was nice.”

“Thank you. Did someone invite you over?”

“No, I didn’t know you were having a party, I just wanted my brothers to meet you.”

“Why?”

“They like you.”

“Even with a baby?”

“They thought Dami a handsome fellow and a good addition to the family.”

“You’re just saying that. I don’t remember giving you my number.”

“You phoned me the night Dami was...”

“Oh, yes.”

“I think we should meet.”

“I think not.”

“My family’s met you, I’ve met your family, we need to get to know each other better before we marry.”

“I don’t want to marry.”

“Don’t worry. When can I pick you and Dami up for an outing?”

“Never!”

“I actually called to invite you both to a party on Saturday.”

“No, thanks.”

“We’ll talk later in the week. Goodnight, Sanda.”

“Goodnight, Alec.” After the call, I wondered what Alec wanted. That was forgotten when I saw the date of Dola’s wedding ringed on my calendar, it was that Wednesday morning. I fell asleep as I debated the pros and cons of going.

On Tuesday, I applied for a half day the following day. It occurred to me that I was stupid to take leave to go to Dola’s wedding, but something seemed to be calling me there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Mother dropped me off at work on Wednesday, I waited on the pavement till she left, then I went to the venue of Dola’s wedding. Knowing that his family did not know me, I did not hide my face.

I caught a glimpse of Dola as he and several men climbed out of a car at the home affairs building, then they hastened in. I followed slowly, and joined the people waiting for his wedding ceremony. I spotted Dola’s family members by their resemblance to Dola. I was glad Dami did not look like them, though they were a god looking bunch.

We all filed into the marriage office for the ceremony. The place was packed, I joined the bride’s family, no one asked me who I was.

My heart started pounding when Dola and his groomsmen took their places. A short while later, the bride and her attendants joined them. The bride’s face was covered.

She was a voluptuous creature. I wondered why Dola had left me, who was medium sized, for her. The ceremony began. When they asked who objected to the marriage, I sat wondering if I would say anything, but I didn’t.

The ceremony ended, Dola kissed his bride. I burst into tears feeling as if he had thrust a spear into my chest. Fortunately for me, other people were crying too and I did not draw attention to myself.

Everyone gathered in the car park to see the bridal couple off. Dola caught my eye and did a double take. We shared a long look then he looked away. I closed my eyes, wanting to die.

“Let’s go,” said a voice. I opened my eyes, Alec was standing in front of me, blocking my view of Dola.

“Go?” I said.

“Away from here. Come,” he said, taking my hand. I was feeling too despondent to refuse as he led me to his car. He opened the passenger door, I looked up, Dola was watching me over the roof of the car. Alec drew on my arm. I looked at him, he put his hands on my cheeks and kissed me.

I stilled, shocked, then I kissed him back. Dola’s kiss to his bride had hurt me deeply, I kissed Alec with all that pain and he matched me kiss for kiss. When we stopped kissing, we panted, watching each other.

“Get in,” he said. I turned to climb into his car and noticed Dola watching us. He looked as if he had tasted something awful. I felt Alec all along my back. He nuzzled my nape, bit my earlobe lightly and told me to get into the car. I looked away from Dola and climbed into the car.

We drove off in silence.

“How did you know where I work?” I asked as he parked his car outside my employer’s offices.

“Amasu told me.”

“How did you come to be at home affairs?”

“Amasu phoned you and getting no response, she assumed you’d be at that man’s wedding. She couldn’t fetch you so she asked me to do it.”

“Oh. Thanks for the ride.” Alec took my hand in his, I looked at him.

“Marry me,” he said.

“No.”

“I know you’re in love with another man, I’ll wait until you’re ready to move on.”

“I might never get over him.”

“I’ll take the chance.”

“That’s not fair to you.”

“Let me worry about that. Will you marry me?”

“No.”

“That man’s not coming back.”

“I know.”

“Then why did you go to his wedding?”

“I was curious to see who he dumped me for.”

“He’s a fool, regardless of who he left you for.”

“That’s a nice thing to say, thank you.”

“Marry me.”

“I just said no.”

“I won’t stop asking until you say yes.”

“That won’t happen.”

“I’m fetching you and Dami to a party on Saturday.”

“I didn’t say yes.”

“I’ll be at your place at eleven. If you’re not ready, I’ll wait till you are.”

“Alec...”

“I have a patient waiting.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to keep you,” I said, putting a hand on the door handle. I felt a hand on my forearm and looked at Alec. He kissed me gently and released me. I looked from his lips to his eyes, then I thanked him and climbed out of the car.

When I arrived home, Amasu was with Father and Dami. I greeted them all, then Amasu said she and I needed to put Dami to bed. She bathed him, I fed him as we sat in the lounge.

“You went to Dola’s wedding,” she said.

“How did you know?”

“I’ve seen the event marked on your calendar. Why did you pen it in?”

“To remind myself never to hope Dola’s coming back. You know what an optimist I am.”

“Yes, I do. What did you get out of going?”

“Pain, deep pain. When he kissed his wife, it felt like something died inside me, but I also realised that I definitely don’t want to be his sex stop.”

“Sanda!”

“That’s all I was to him, and I didn’t realise. I thought we had love, he knew we had sex. As I told you, he didn’t even want Dami. He only held him after telling me about his marriage. If I was sane I’d get over him, but I’m still waist deep in love with him.”

“Alec loves you, take a chance with him.”

“It’s tempting.”

“But?”

“He’ll get hurt.”

“You don’t know that.”

“My heart’s not receptive to love other than from Dola, I don’t want to hurt my best friend’s brother.”

“He’s willing to take the chance.”

“I’ve told him not to bother.”

“He never listens when he wants something or someone. He wants you, and he’s going to get you.”

“You mustn’t give him false hopes.”

“They aren’t false.”

“We’re getting nowhere with this. How are you and Adamo doing?”

“Alright.”

“And?”

“His people are meeting my people the week after next.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, then I burst into tears. Amasu took Dami while I went to cry in the bathroom as I wanted Dami to sleep and not be disturbed by my loud wailing.

When I was done, I returned to the lounge, it was empty. I found Amasu putting Dami in his cot. She covered him up, I kissed him, we returned to the lounge.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Why did you cry?”

“Because Dola didn’t do for me what Adamo’s doing for you. I’m sorry for being jealous.”

“You don’t have to be, Alec is willing to have our people meet your people.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Okay. I just wanted to be sure you’re fine. Will you be alright?”

“Yes.”

“Will you go to work tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“I won’t phone and be told you hung yourself?”

“No!”

“Okay. I love you, and I’ll talk to you later in the week,” she said as she held me tight then she left.

I did not sleep at all, wondering what Dola and his bride were doing. Valerie. That was her name. Plain Valerie is how I’d describe her. I couldn’t see what Dola had seen in her that had been missing in me.

I was prettier, in better shape, I had given him a child, and we’d been together for six years, with me giving him everything he wanted.

Were they having sex? They had obviously consummated their union before the wedding night because she was pregnant, about seven months along. He married her when she got pregnant, but not me. That got me crying again.

Just after midnight, my crying was interrupted by my ringing phone. I answered it before it woke the baby.

“Are you crying? You sound odd,” said Alec. I closed my eyes without replying.

“You’re torturing yourself, aren’t you, wondering what they’re doing? Am I right?” he asked.

“Yes,” I sobbed.

“Don’t, Sanda, he’s not worth your time.”

“Why? Why did he leave me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I must be ugly, or lousy in bed, or boring. I’m boring, aren’t I?”

“His leaving had nothing to do with you and everything to do with him.”

“Then why am I the one who feels bad when he’s having the time of his life? No one will ever make love to me, I’ll never give another blowjob and the only orgasms I’ll have from now one will be induced by my fingers.” Alec made strange sounds without speaking.

We were silent as I pulled myself together.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

“Subjecting you to my self-pity. Go to sleep. Goodnight,” I said, then I cut the call and switched off my phone.

I paced up and down the lounge, sinking lower and lower into misery as I thought about Dola touching Valerie the way he touched me. Those moves he’d sprung on me weeks before we parted, he must have learned them from her.

He had new underwear that I didn’t get him, and he never got himself underwear. It must all have been Valerie.

What a fool I had been to be cheated on with my cooperation. Tears of self-pity turned to tears of anger, then I decided I’d have to destroy the marriage. I’d tell his precious Valerie about Dami.

I was startled by a knock on my front door. I looked at the time, it was going on two in the morning.

“Sanda?” called Father. I opened the door.

“Son-in-law’s worried about you. Here he is. I’m trusting you both not to do anything you couldn’t tell me about. Goodnight,” he said, then he left.

“What are you doing here?” I asked Alec.

“I couldn’t sleep for worrying about you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Good, then go to sleep so I can sleep too. I have a sleeping bag and anything else I might need,” he said, indicating his armful of things. He entered the house uninvited, closed the door and put his things down. He straightened and looked at me.

“Can you sleep?” he asked.

“I doubt it.”

“I’ll make tea.”

“Go to sleep, there’s nothing you can do for me.”

“Sit down, or stand, whichever makes you feel good,” he said, as he went to the kitchen. I followed him.

“I’ll do it,” I said. He put the kettle on, while I got the cups, teaspoons and other tea things. We were quiet, waiting for the water to boil. I was looking at the kettle. I could feel Alec watching me. I poured the tea, put everything on a tray and led the way to the lounge.

“Help yourself,” I said. He waited for me to sit down then he sat down.

“What do you want to do?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to talk about the thoughts going through your head?”

“No, they hurt too much.”

“Can I tell you what’s going through my head?”

“Yes.”

“A clinic, a free clinic, for pregnant women and children up to the age of six. It’s not just a building with a few facilities, it’s got state of the art facilities and the staff volunteer so that it’s open twenty four hours a day. They’re the best in their professions, and work at the clinic part time,” he said.

“That sounds fantastic.”

“A friend and I have been spending the last few weekends looking for sites for the clinic.”

“Have you found the ideal place?”

“No, we’re still looking. We want to between two townships at least, so people can walk there, or at least only use one public transport means to get to the clinic.

“It will also have a free dispensary. We’ll have tight security so nothing, and I mean not even a staple, gets stolen.”

“Do you have funding?”

“We’re working on it, we’ve also been saving and investing for three years for the clinic.”

“That’s great. Good luck, I hope it succeeds.”

“One of my patients died yesterday.”

“I’m so sorry!” I gasped, horrified.

“She left a four month old baby.”

“Oh!”

“If she’d had access to prenatal care and proper birthing procedures had been followed, she’d live to see her child grow, but now, her child is in government care.”

“Oh.”

“So many illnesses and deaths are preventable with knowledge. The clinic will also dispense knowledge, we don’t want to be the only ones who know how to take care of bodies.”

“Oh!”

“Maybe we can also remind people to eat their indigenous foods. People in the city eat junk and wonder why they get sick so often. With a little knowledge, there’ll be a lot more health, and a lot less need for hospitals.”

“Should you be saying that, when you benefit by illness?”

“Yes, I should. I shouldn’t treat illness every day, I should attend to other things and open my surgery maybe once a week.”

“Really? I thought doctors were all about the money.”

“Not all of them. I’m one of those who are about the healing.” I nodded, all my problems forgotten. Alec yawned.

“Come, I’ll show you where to sleep,” I said.

“What about you?”

“I’ll go and sleep too.”

“If you can’t sleep, wake me,” he said, as I led him to the smaller bedroom. The only thing it had was curtains.

“Sorry, there’s no bed yet,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I have a sleeping bag.”

“Goodnight,” I said, as I left the room.

“Goodnight,” he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I slept after a long time, and woke up exhausted. I turned to Dami, afraid he’d cried himself to exhaustion as I had not attended to him. He was not in his cot.

“Dami!” I screamed.

“He’s here,” called Alec. I raced out of my room and found him and Dami lying beside each other on Alec’s sleeping bag.

“Oh,” I said.

“He’s been awake a long time, I was afraid he’d wake you.”

“Oh, thank you, but that means he interrupted your sleep.”

“That’s parenting. Aren’t you going to work?”

“Yes.”

“Does he stay with his grandfather?”

“His nanny will come and take care of him. Are you going to work?”

“Later. Can I sleep here and leave for work later?”

“Oh! Okay. I’ll make the bed then you can sleep.”

“There’s no need, I know how to make a bed.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, returning to my room. I changed the bedding, opened the windows to let in fresh air and swept, then I freshened up and dressed for work.

I found Dami with Alec and Misa in the lounge. I introduced the adults to each other, then I told Misa that Alec would sleep in my bed for a while and leave later. I left after thanking her and Alec and kissing Dami.

When I returned in the evening, Misa was still in my home.

“Shouldn’t you have left by now?” I asked.

“Dami’s father said he’d take me home with you.”

“Won’t your husband give you problems?”

“I don’t care, I don’t want to catch a lift at this hour.”

“Let me phone him and speak to him.” Misa dialled the number on her phone and handed it to me.

“Where the hell are you, bitch?” he demanded.

“This not Misa, I’m her boss,” I said.

“Where’s my wife?”

“That’s what I’m calling about. I had to work late so I’ll bring her home. I’m sorry not to have spoken sooner, but my boss took me by surprise.”

“Is that right?”

“I’m sorry Misa will be late, but she’s at my house.”

“Is there a man there?”

“There’s Dami’s father and his grandfather.”

“I don’t want her working where there are men!”

“Please speak to her about that,” I said, then I cut the call.

“Do you love him?” I asked Misa. She did not respond. I stopped myself from advising her to leave him. He did not deserve someone as sweet as her.

“He said he doesn’t want you working where there are men,” I said.

“If it were up to him, he’d be the only man around and all women would pray to him as their god and service him sexually all day.”

“Misa!”

“He makes me sick!”

“Why do you stay with him?”

“I need accommodation.”

“Stay here.” Misa looked at me as if she wanted to see the truth in my eyes.

“You mean it,” she said.

“I do. You shouldn’t be going home to someone who calls you a bitch.”

“That’s his pet name for me.”

“You deserve better.”

“I guess you can talk.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, not sure I liked her tone.

“You’ve found a better man than the one who sired Dami.”

“Alec isn’t…”

“He’s a better fit as Dami’s father. He cares about the boy, the other one didn’t care about anyone but himself.”

“He got married yesterday.”

“Good riddance.”

“I love him.”

“He doesn’t deserve you.”

“Neither does your husband.” We shared a long look.

“Give this new man a chance, you could have a happy life with him,” she said.

“I’ll give him a chance if you leave your husband.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Do you love him?”

“I stopped a long time ago.”

“Are you staying for the children?” She took a while to answer.

“I’m staying because I’m scared to be alone,” she said.

“Oh!” I said, shocked by her honesty.

“Did you love Dami’s other father?”

“Yes.”

“Did you, or were you just afraid to be alone?”

“I...”

“The only thing he did right by you was set you up in that great flat, otherwise he was a dog.”

“You never said any of this before.”

“You never say that to your boss. Are you going to take a chance with the new one?”

“I have to stop loving the other one first.”

“Lead with your head, your heart will have to follow.” There was a knock on the door, Misa opened it as I was with Dami. Alec greeted her, then he smiled at Dami and me. I greeted him, he returned the greeting and kissed Dami as he stroked his cheek.

“Are you all ready to take Misa back home?” he asked.

“Yes, we are. Thank you for doing this,” I said.

“No problem. I’ll take him,” he said, taking Dami. Misa gave me a speaking look as they left.

“I’ll lock up,” I said. She picked up her handbag and followed them. The front passenger door was open for me. I climbed into the car and looked into the back as I wanted to offer to take Dami from Misa, but she did not have him.

“Where’s...” I began. Dami made a sound and I noticed him behind me, in a car seat.

“Oh!” I said.

“Close the door,” said Alec. I closed the door and we drove off. I offered to walk Misa to her door, she refused, a determined expression on her face as she climbed out of the car.

Alec drove off.

“I thought we could have dinner out,” he said.

“Dami has a routine.”

“He has a bath and eats and sleeps. I asked Misa to bath him, he’s ready to eat and sleep. Where he does that is immaterial. Will you have dinner with me?” I gave him a searching look as he drove, and remembered saying I’d take a chance with him.

“That would be nice, thank you,” I said. He smiled the most beautiful smile I had ever seen.

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard all day. How was your day?” he asked.

“Fine, how was yours?”

“Okay. Did you think bad thoughts?”

“No, I had too much work.”

“That’s good.” He mentioned the place where he had booked us dinner and I smiled. I had always heard that it was a great place, but I had never been there.

Dinner was great, Alec was attentive to me and Dami. He fed Dami his bottle, burped him, and put him to sleep in his chair. After dinner, he drove Dami and I home.

“Thank you,” I said, after he had put Dami in his cot, and we were standing at the front door.

“It was a pleasure. Remember that we’re going out Saturday. I’ll be here at eleven.”

“We’ll be here. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” he said, then he left.

When Misa arrived on my doorstep the following morning, she had a blue eye, a swollen cheek, and her suitcases.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You said I could live and work here?” she returned.

“Of course, come in,” I said as Mother and I helped to bring her bags in.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” I asked.

“No, I know how to deal with this kind of bruise.”

“You need to report whoever did this to the police.”

“No, I don’t. I left him, that’s enough.”

“You need to report him to establish his history of violence.”

“But...”

“Amasu told me, you know she’s a lawyer. If you don’t establish history, he can get away with killing you. If there’s a pattern of him hurting you and you die, he’ll be the first suspect and will probably pay for killing you.” Misa did not look as if she was sure about what I was saying.

“There’s a police station nearby, go and report him, I’ll go to work late,” I continued.

“No, I’ll report him someplace else, I don’t want to make it easy for him to find me. He thinks you still live at your flat.”

“That’s good thinking. I’ll call in sick.”

“Ma’am...”

“You convinced me to take a chance, now you take a chance at freedom.”

“I’ll drop you off,” said Mother, and they left.

I called in sick, then I phoned a furniture shop to order a bed. It would be delivered later that day. Once Dami took his morning nap, I was able to work. When I was done in the late afternoon, I emailed my work through.

The bed was delivered, I had it put in the empty bedroom, then I made it for Misa. She returned at the end of the day, exhausted.

“Your mother took me to a lawyer when I was done with the police, and he questioned me till I couldn’t speak anymore,” she said.

“Are you married to that man?”

“Yes, we have twenty years together.”

“Did you have children?”

“I had one before I married him, and none with him. He always called me barren and justified beating me by saying I was denying him an heir. Last night, I told him he was the one who couldn’t have kids, and you see the result of his handiwork,” she said, indicating her bruised body.

“Take a bath and go to sleep,” I said. She nodded and went to the bathroom. After dinner, she went to sleep. I sat beside her, wishing I could make things better for her. When I tired, I went to sleep.

When Dami woke after two and would not go back to sleep, Misa looked after him while I slept. I felt great in the morning, and thanked her. She told me to stop making a fuss and go to work.

Mother had left for an out of town trip the evening before, I made my own way to work, though Father had offered to drive me.

I rushed home after work, worried about Misa. She said she was fine. I lay awake, worrying about her and me. We'd both left trifling men, but could we maintain separation from them? I had Alec to keep me occupied. What would Misa do? Would she cave if her husband appeared, or would she go crawling back to him? I fell asleep as the questions ran through my mind.

CHAPTER NINE

When Alec arrived to fetch Dami and me that Saturday, we were ready. I was concerned about leaving Misa alone but she said the time alone would do her good.

"Where are we going?" I asked Alec.

"To a party."

"Can we stop somewhere so I can get a gift? What kind of party is it? Birthday, anniversary, bachelor, baby shower, divorce or what?"

"An anniversary."

"How long has the couple been together?"

"Forty one years."

"That is admirable."

"Just a little longer than your parents."

"Yes. Can we stop for a gift?"

"Sure." We stopped at a mall, and Alec carried Dami as we went from shop to shop, as I sought the perfect gift. I found it, paid for it, and wrapped it, certain that the couple would like it, even though I did not know them.

We arrived at the party venue, it was a hotel, a very smart hotel. We joined other guests, and were given drinks after putting our gifts down as Alec had also brought a gift.

His brothers, Faro and Goma were there, I remembered them from my parents' anniversary. They had their wives and children with them and I was introduced to all of them. Amasu

arrived with her man, Adamo, and showed me her engagement ring. I held her tight, happy for her.

Something occurred to me, and I turned to Alec.

“This is your parents’ anniversary, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? They’ll think I’m badly raised since I’m in trousers and I have this tight fitting top on.”

“You’re dressed the same as Amasu.”

“I’m a potential daughter-in-law, it’s different.” He smiled.

“I’m glad you see yourself that way. Don’t worry. I’ll tell them I ambushed you. I think you know those people,” he said, nodding behind me. I turned and gasped to see my parents. They were talking to another couple in their age group.

“What are they doing here?” I asked Alec.

“My parents invited them. They want to meet their future in-laws.” I opened my mouth to say I was not marrying him, but a small part of me liked his words too much to contradict him.

“Come, my parents want to meet you and Dami,” he said, leading us to my parents and the couple they were talking to.

He excused himself, greeted my parents, then he introduced me and Dami to his parents. I felt nervous enough meeting his parents, meeting them in front of my parents rendered me a statue.

I could not respond when spoken to and Mother had to prompt me to speak. I could not offer Dami to Alec’s mother when she asked to hold him. Alec had to take him and give him to his mother. I looked from him to my parents, then his, then I excused myself and hastened away.

I hid behind a huge pillar, closed my eyes and cursed roundly.

“I never knew you knew such big words,” said a voice. I opened my eyes, Dola was standing before me. I straightened.

“Excuse me,” I said, and turned away. I felt a hand on my forearm and turned to look at him.

“You came to my wedding. I don’t remember inviting you,” he said. I made to walk away.

“Did my telling your mother my totems help your baby?” he asked.

“No.”

“That proves he’s not my child.” I stepped back from him in horror.

“How can you say that?” I gasped.

“It’s the truth. You’re nothing but a whore.” I drew in an offended breath, then I moved close to him and looked from one eye to the other.

“It takes one whore to know another,” I said loudly. Several people turned to look at us. I knew Dola wanted to die. He was very audience conscious.

“Is the old woman you service paying you well?” I continued. If he had been able, he would have changed colour in his rage. I noticed a woman approaching us, it was Valerie.

“Who is this?” she demanded, looking at me disdainfully. I opened my mouth to reply.

“He’s someone my wife was foolish enough to date. Fortunately for her, she left him before he could get up to his old tricks,” said Alec. I looked at him. He and Dami were beside us.

“He’s so big now,” said Dola.

“You know this child?” asked Valerie.

“Excuse us,” said Alec as he put a hand on my lower back and ushered me away.

“What were you doing with him?” he asked curtly.

“You could ask him what he was doing with me.”

“How did you arrange to meet him when you didn’t even know we were coming here?”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“I’m hurt that you still want him.” I stopped and turned to look at him.

“I didn’t arrange to meet him, how would I? His phone no longer takes my calls.”

“You phoned him?”

“The day Dami was crying endlessly. Mother thought calling him by Dola’s totems would calm him, it didn’t.”

“Do you want to go back to Dola?”

“I don’t know.”

“If he became available, would you go to him if he asked?”

“I don’t know.” We shared a long look, then he gave me Dami.

“Join the party, I need time alone,” he said.

“I’m sorry I can’t tell you what you need to hear.”

“I know. Go in, join Amasu,” he said, then he left. I stared after him, then I turned to go to the party.

“Stay away from my husband,” hissed a woman before me. It was Valerie.

“Don’t worry, I have my own husband.”

“He’s not satisfying you, that’s why you’re chasing my Dola.”

“Dola doesn’t know good sex, but my husband...Dola should ask him for lessons.”

“How dare you speak that way!” said Dola.

“It’s true. You fumble, my baby daddy caresses and wakens all my nerve endings. We can’t keep our hands off each other, I might already be pregnant with our second child,” I said.

“No!” said Dola.

“Yes. He’s the original red hot lover. If I was into sharing, I’d let you spend a night with him, Valerie,” I said. She and Dola gasped.

“But I’ve become possessive since a man I was committed to decided to marry another woman.”

“That’s terrible,” said Valerie.

“I thought so before, but I wonder if he’ll be faithful to his wife. I doubt it. That poor woman will be heartbroken in no time. Excuse me, I need to attend to my son,” I said, then I hurried away.

“I heard that,” said a voice. I looked up, Alec was smiling at me.

“I hope you don’t mind,” I said.

“What man minds being touted as the greatest lover on earth? Tell that story the world over if you like, and when we do consummate our relationship, I *will* rock your world.” I looked away, hot and bothered. He kissed my cheek, took Dami, and I followed him to the party.

After the cutting of the cake, I went to Alec’s mother.

“I’m sorry I was so rude earlier. I was nervous because I hadn’t been warned that I’d be meeting you,” I said.

“Alec explained that. Do you love him?” I stammered incoherently.

“Be honest with him,” said his mother.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You have a beautiful son.”

“Thank you,” I smiled.

“Where’s his father?”

“He married someone else a few days ago.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, thank you,” I said, surprised that she would express concern for me, instead of thinking something must be wrong with me. She looked behind me, and her pleasant expression changed to a forbidding one.

“Can I help you?” she asked. I turned, Valerie and Dola were looking at me.

“We need to talk to Sanda,” said Valerie. Alec’s mother put a hand on my shoulder and drew me closer to her.

“Anything you have to say to her, you can say in my presence,” she said.

“You’re not her mother,” said Dola.

“I am,” said Mother, standing on the other side of me.

“We just want to talk to Sanda, then we’ll leave,” insisted Valerie, as her eyes darted from one mother to the other nervously.

“Talk,” said Alec’s mother. Valerie was rethinking talking to me.

“Talk or leave. I don’t know you and I didn’t invite you here,” continued Alec’s mother.

“I just wanted to know who the father of her child is,” Valerie said in a small voice.

“Did she accuse anyone of being the father?”

“No, but...”

“Then why make a big deal of it? Do you have something to say, young man?”

“No, ma’am,” Dola said hastily.

“Off you go, before I have security throw you out.” Valerie and Dola looked at me and turned away. I felt weak with relief.

“Thank you,” I said to Alec’s mother and Mother.

“Is he Dami’s biological father?” asked Alec’s mother.

“Yes.”

“What did you ever see in him?” asked Mother, watching Valerie and Dola.

“He gave me attention,” I replied.

“That man has self-centred written all over his face. I don’t know how you could have missed it.”

“I guess I wasn’t looking for it.”

“Yes. Get over him, he’s not worth your time. You have a real man now,” said Mother, then she nodded at Alec’s mother and left.

“I’ll go and find Dami,” I said to her.

“Wait,” she said, looking behind me. I followed her gaze. Valerie was glaring daggers at me, while Dola talked animatedly and pointed in my direction.

“I’ll go and get rid of them,” I said.

“No.” Valerie hastened to me.

“Is Dola the father of your baby?” she demanded.

“What did he say?” I returned.

“He says you accused him of being the father.”

“Does he say he’s the father?”

“No.”

“Then what’s your problem?”

“My problem is women who...”

“Will you believe me over your husband?”

“No!”

“Then why are you here?” We glared at each other, then Alec came to stand beside me.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“No, we’re leaving,” said Dola as security approached him. He took Valerie’s hand and hurried her out.

“What did they want?” demanded Alec.

“She wanted to know if Dola was Dami’s father,” I replied.

“What did you say?”

“That she should believe whatever her husband said.”

“In your eyes, is he the father?”

“He was never the father, he never wanted Dami, never acknowledged the pregnancy, never...I may as well have laid an egg and hatched Dami alone. Where is Dami?”

“With Amasu.”

“I’ll go and get him.”

“We need to talk,” he said, taking my hand and hastening me out of the party venue.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To stop those two from harassing you,” replied Alec. He was striding so fast I had to trot to keep up with him.

We found Dola and Valerie arguing outside Dola’s car.

“Excuse us,” said Alec.

“What do you want?” demanded Valerie, her eyes on me.

“We want to clear up the issue of Dami’s paternity.”

“Dami?”

“My son,” I said.

“If you think you can get money from Dola for a child that isn’t his...”

“Dami doesn’t need money from a man who isn’t his father when his father provides very well for him.”

“I thought Dola was the father.”

“He said he wasn’t.”

“Who do you say is his father?”

“Alec is Dami’s father. Alec is this man beside me,” I said. Dola looked as if he wanted to dispute that.

“Do you need paternity tests done before you’ll leave Sanda alone?” asked Alec.

“No! No, we don’t need paternity tests. Sanda knows who she slept with,” Dola said bitterly.

“Yes, I do,” I said challengingly.

“This nonsense must stop now, or I’ll sue you both for harassing my wife,” said Alec.

“We did not harass her,” said Valerie.

“Did she ask you or your husband to support her child?”

“No.”

“Did she accuse either of you of being the parent?”

“No.”

“Then how did you get to talking about Dami’s paternity?”

“Dola said...”

“Stay away from us unless you want me to get protection orders and publicise that I took them out on you.”

“You have no right to threaten us. My father’s a minister of government and he can...”

“Your father works for my uncle, the President. Do you want your father to take my uncle on?”

“The President is not your uncle.”

“Do you want to put that to the test?”

“Let’s go Valerie, there’s nothing for us here,” said Dola as he climbed into the car. Valerie gave me a nasty look.

“It’s not other women you should be worried about, it’s the man you married that you should be keeping an eye on,” said Alec.

“Dola is a fine man.”

“Then why are you harassing Sanda? You have doubts about him, but you don’t want to face them.”

“Shut up!” said a tearful Valerie.

“Get in here,” shouted Dola. Valerie climbed into the car and they drove off.

“You’d be just as miserable if he’d married you,” Alec said, his eyes on their car.

“I know.”

“Then get over him!”

“I’m trying!”

“You’re not trying hard enough.”

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

“And you’re wishing you were with him.” We glared at each other.

“I’m wishing I was with Dami,” I said, then I turned to go back to the party. A few paces away, I stopped and returned to the spot where I had left Alec. He was no longer there.

I phoned him.

“Yes?” he said.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“You’re not my enemy, and I shouldn’t have spoken to you as if you are.”

“Thank you.”

“Do I need to make my own way home?”

“No! What kind of man do you take me for? I’ll take you and Dami home.”

“I’ll talk to you later.” I went to sit with Amasu and Adamo and took Dami.

“Dami’s the first grandson in the family,” she said.

“I don’t understand.”

“All my brothers have daughters, Dami’s the first boy.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Don’t let Ma spoil him, she loves to spoil her grandchildren.” I smiled because Mother suffered from the same disease.

The party ended and Alec appeared from nowhere.

“Let’s say goodbye and go,” he said, taking Dami. I followed him as he said goodbye to his parents and siblings, then we drove off.

CHAPTER TEN

“That was a great party,” I said.

“Yes. I hope you and I have a marriage that lasts at least that long.” I was speechless with surprise.

“Have you nothing to say?” asked Alec.

“Sometimes I accept that I’ll marry you, and at others, it feels like something that will never happen.”

“It will happen. Waiting until it does is going to test my patience, but you’re worth it, and I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

“How can you know I’m worth it?”

“Amasu always talks about you and tells us all how great you are. Having met you and seen you with Dami, I know you’re worth it. Let yourself heal because you and I won’t be separating. We’ll work through our problems, just like our parents, and celebrate forty, fifty, sixty years together, or even more.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m forty, how old are you?”

“Twenty seven. Why have you never married?”

“Who says I never married?”

“Oh! I just assumed...”

“I was married for five years. We had a good marriage, but not having children was killing her. We agreed to separate so she could have a chance at being a parent.”

“How do you know the problem was with you?”

“We went for tests. She can have thirty children if she wants, I have a low sperm count.”

“Oh! I’m sorry.”

“Crying about it doesn’t change it.”

“Did you want children?”

“Yes! I’m a paediatrician because I adore children. I wanted six at least. How many do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you want us to adopt more, or get a sperm donor, or get a surrogate to have our baby using the sperm of a donor?”

“I don’t know, Alec! Dami’s all I can handle right now.”

“Before him, did you want children?”

“I was ambivalent.”

“Why?”

“My parents were very strict, too strict, and I didn’t know that I’d know how to parent in such a way that my children were well behaved and still able to talk to me about everything, with

respect of course. I was afraid I'd be a disciplinarian, but I knew that my sisters and I were wild because of the discipline at home."

"You don't look like you were wild."

"That's because we all learnt to pretend so we gave our parents what they wanted, and sneaked out to get what we wanted. I don't want Dami or any child I have to find themselves pulling the wool over my eyes."

"Think about children, I'd like us to have more. Dami will be lonely without siblings."

"I don't promise anything."

"I want to adopt that girl whose mother died."

"Oh!"

"She needs a home, we have a home and love we can share. We're a great match."

"Ah!" I gasped. I had heard of out of clan adoptions, but I had never come across it because it was not done. What was the point of taking in a child whose ancestry you did not know, and could not address?

"We'd be a great family. She and Dami could grow up as twins," continued Alec.

"One child is hard work, two..."

"Right now, you're alone, when we marry, there'll be two of us, we'll manage. How do you think other parents manage? Your parents raised four children, mine raised five, just the two of them, with help of course."

"Yes," I said doubtfully.

"Don't worry," he said, taking my hand in his, putting it above his knee and keeping it there with his. I tried to take my hand back.

"Are you embarrassed?" he asked.

"I...don't know you."

"Do you want to take your hand back?"

"I..."

"Can I keep it here? I like it. I'm a very tactile man, I like to touch and be touched."

"I didn't grow up in a demonstrative family."

"Don't worry, I'll teach you to be demonstrative."

"Public displays of affection are embarrassing."

“Only if they’re inappropriate. If we had an audience we’d never do this, or kiss, but I’d hold your hand, there’s nothing wrong with that between married people.”

“Hmm,” I said doubtfully.

“People who aren’t married hold hands and no one has a fit. Married people have the right to hold hands so why do people think it’s disgusting if they do it? The ancestors and gods and goddesses give them the right to do that, why shouldn’t they?”

“I don’t know.”

“I expect to hold my wife’s hand whenever I feel like it, and I expect her to hold my hand whenever she feels like it.”

“Alec…”

“Don’t worry about it now. Do you like ice cream?”

“Ice cream?”

“Do you like it?”

“I prefer lollies.”

“Let’s stop somewhere and get some.”

“Okay.”

“My parents invited you, your parents and Dami to lunch tomorrow.”

“No!”

“I thought you liked my mother.”

“She’s great.”

“So why don’t you want to see her?”

“I’m not ready!”

“For what?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve told me several times that you’re not ready. What are you not ready for?”

“Why are you putting me on the spot?”

“Because I want to know where you’re at mentally and emotionally, then I can help you get to where I’m at.”

“You mean ready to settle down.”

“I’m ready to settle down with you, specifically. I’d like you to be ready to settle down with me, specifically.”

“Are you the eldest in your family?”

“Yes.”

“When did you get divorced?”

“Three years ago.”

“Do you still talk to her?”

“To say what? We tried, it didn’t work, we both moved on. That’s why I don’t understand why you and that man are still talking to each other. It’s over, there’s nothing else to discuss.”

“If you and I break up, will you never speak to me again?”

“We won’t break up,” he smiled.

“How do you know?”

“I just do. Call it marital intuition.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“There is now that I’ve invented it.” He took his hand off mine to change gears, I did not take mine back. I liked the feel of his muscles as he changed gears.

“Do you plan to always be a copywriter?” he asked.

“My dream is to write a great book that gets made into a blockbuster movie, with me writing the screenplay as well.”

“That’s a big dream. Do you have an idea of what kind of book it will be?”

“A who dunnit. I love mysteries.”

“Good luck.”

“Thank you. Do you plan to always be a paediatrician?”

“Yes, but I’ll own a bunch of paediatric clinics the world over.”

“Oh! So you’ll travel a lot?”

“We’ll travel a lot. You can write anywhere so we’ll go together.”

“What about Dami?”

“We’ll take the children with us.”

“They need stability.”

“We’ll make a plan. Here’s the ice cream place.”

We returned to my home just after dark.

“Is everything alright?” asked Mother, as I unlocked the front door.

“Yes, thank you. We went of ice cream,” I replied.

“Yes,” said Mother, studying Alec. He greeted her, she returned his greeting, and looked at me as if to ask what was keeping me from opening the door. I unlocked it, we all went into my lounge. Dami was starting to fret as he needed a bath.

“Your family’s great,” Mother said to Alec.

“Thank you.”

“What should I bring to lunch tomorrow?”

“Nothing! You can’t invite someone to a meal and expect them to bring their own food. My mother will be offended if you bring anything.”

“It’s not polite to arrive at someone’s home empty handed.”

“Perhaps we can take some flowers, Mother, you know you’re the flower queen,” I said, as I took Dami from Alec.

“Yes, you could be right. I’ll go and start on dinner. Good night, son-in-law,” said Mother, then she left.

“I’m off,” said Alec.

“Thank you for inviting us to your parents’ anniversary and for everything else. I never noticed the car seat before.”

“I never had it before, I bought it for Dami.”

“Oh!”

“You have to get used to having someone other than you doing things for him,” said Alec. He kissed Dami’s cheek, kissed mine and left.

After I put Dami to sleep, I looked for Misa, she had left a note to say that she had gone to visit her sister. I found myself bored. I phoned Amasu, she was on a date. I phoned my sister Ethel, she was busy. On the off-chance, I phoned Alec.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Sanda?” he said.

“Hi,” I said with a pounding heart.

“Is Dami alright?”

“Yes, he’s fast asleep.”

“Are you alright? Sanda?”

“I’m lonely,” I said in a low voice.

“It’s not a crime. You sound so ashamed.”

“It’s embarrassing to admit it. I’ll let you get back to your plans.”

“Don’t. Talk to me.”

“I don’t actually have anything to say.”

“Have you eaten?”

“I’m not hungry. Have you eaten?”

“I’m not hungry either. Tomorrow I’m going to see the little girl I want us to adopt.”

“Oh!”

“We should go together sometime so we can all get used to each other.”

“I’m not sure, Alec.”

“I know. What do you have planned for the weekend?”

“Sleep is the only thing on my agenda for the next few years.”

“You should have someone look after Dami over weekends so you can sleep.”

“I can’t afford it. Do you live in a house or a flat?”

“I never lived in a flat, I can’t do that squashed-ness. I’ve always lived in a house.”

“Is it semi-detached?”

“No! It’s stand alone, it’s big and has a garden and space for children to run around and be free without going onto the street.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I got it from my parents. They always had plenty of space for us to play. Come and see my home next Saturday.”

“I...”

“I won’t try anything, you’ll see the place, we’ll talk and I’ll take you home.”

“Okay,” I said, thinking about the food I’d cook to impress him. I frowned, wondering why I wanted to impress him at all. We were silent a while.

“This is silly, goodnight,” I said.

“Are you uncomfortable with silence?”

“Over the phone we sound like heavy breathers.”

“We aren’t and you know it.”

“Sleep well.”

“You too, and thank you for calling me.”

I was still bored, I thought of cooking and decided against it. What I needed was a girls’ night out. I hadn’t been on one of those in years. How would I organise Dami and I so that I got what I needed?

My phone rang, I answered it.

“Are you sleeping?” asked Alec.

“No, are you?”

“No. Shall we try talking again?”

“Yes.”

“What were you doing?”

“Thinking about how I haven’t been on a girls’ night out in a long time.”

“When do you want to go? Dami could stay with me.”

“Oh!”

“When do you want to meet the girls? I need to meet them too, and I’ll introduce you to my boys.”

“Er...yeah.”

“Do you have a day in mind?”

“I’ll call the girls then give you the day.”

“Great. I was fixing Dami’s room.”

“Dami’s room?”

“He’s not sleeping with us.”

“He’s a baby!”

“He has his own room, I can’t wait to hear what you think of it.”

“Why wouldn’t he sleep with us?”

“Because we won’t be sleeping, we’ll be doing adult things. I don’t think he should be in the room for that.”

“Oh!”

“Are you embarrassed to talk about sex?”

“No!” I denied hotly.

“Then why did you groan?”

“It never occurred to me that I’d ever have sex again.”

“Why?”

“I swore off men.”

“That’s a good vow, keep it, with me as the exception.”

“What’s in Dami’s room?”

“Toys, a cot...”

“He already has a cot.”

“He can have two.”

“Oh!”

“There are also clothes and other things babies need.”

“I see.”

“Sanda? Are you crying?”

“What do you think?”

“Why?”

“You’re so wonderful to Dami.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Never.”

“That’s good, because I don’t intend to stop being good to him or you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, as I yawned.

“No problem. Sweet dreams.”

“Thank you, you too.”

I was nervous next morning as I climbed into Father’s car, and he drove Dami, Mother and me to lunch with Alec’s parents.

“Try to relax,” said Mother.

“I’m fine.”

“You acted like a headless chicken when you were introduced to your in-laws.”

“I was nervous.”

“That’s why I’m saying try to relax. Find something to do, help in the kitchen, or do some gardening so you don’t feel like you’re under a microscope.”

“I can’t just touch their things uninvited.”

“It will look like you’re a diligent woman who knows what’s expected of her, and doesn’t even have to be told what to do.”

“The flowers look great, Mother.”

“Yes, they do,” Mother smiled proudly.

I took several deep breaths when the car stopped outside the home of my future in-laws. It was a splendid place, I could well believe that Alec was the President’s nephew.

Alec’s parents met us at the front door, and since I felt dressed for meeting the in-laws, I was more composed. Alec’s mother loved the flowers that Mother presented to her, Mother was delighted.

As the four parents went to a lounge, I let my nose lead me to the kitchen.

“Can I help with anything?” I offered.

“Great, I need another pair of hands,” said a woman, then she told me what to do. I washed my hands and got to work.

In a short time, everything was ready.

“Who are you?” asked the woman.

“My name’s Sanda.”

“Oh! So you’re the latest addition to the family. Where’s your son?”

“With his grandparents.”

The woman looked me over. I smiled at her scrutiny and struck several poses. She laughed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know who you are,” I said.

“I’m Menta, I looked after all the children from the time Alec was ten. If he gives you problems, bring him to me, I’ll give him a good hiding,” she said.

“Don’t believe a word she says. She’s so tender-hearted she won’t let me discipline any of my girls,” said one of Alec’s brothers, Faro, as he joined us.

“You were lazy today, weren’t you? You think having a new sister-in-law gives you licence not to help me? It doesn’t. I don’t know her and I haven’t taught her how I like things done.”

“You see, she thinks she runs this place.”

“I do. Go and announce the meal since you’re so late.”

“Everyone will think I’m effeminate.”

“That’ll teach you to come late when I have guests.” He rolled his eyes and left.

“He loves to cook. Amasu would rather have her hair pulled out one by one than cook, he took to it as if he was cooking in his mother’s belly,” said Menta as she picked up her handbag.

“I’m done for the day. I’m sure we’ll meet soon. Bye,” she said, leaving through the back door.

“But...” I said, wondering what I would tell the in-laws if they asked for her.

“There you are! Hi,” said Alec. I turned to him.

“Hi. You look great!” I said, looking him over in his expensive suit that made him look as if he was a god.

“Thank you, I want to impress my in-laws.”

“You did that the day you met them.”

“It never hurts to keep scoring points. I’d like to say you look good too, but that daughter-in-law-being-punished is not a good look for you.”

“I was going for the respectful look to counter how I looked yesterday.”

“We’ll have to work together on your daughter-in-law outfits. You look great at any other time, but that...” he said, looking me over with disdain.

“Is it time to eat?” I asked, to change the subject.

“Yes, I came to call you. Come,” he said, holding a hand out to me. I put my hand in his and followed him to the dining room. We were the last ones in. I tried to withdraw my hand, he would not release it.

He helped me into a seat, and I gave a general greeting to his siblings and their wives. The children were absent.

Alec’s father asked the ancestors to bless us and our food, then we started eating.

The family loved to tell jokes and the laughter helped us all to relax. Father-in-law’s phone rang, he spoke into it, the call ended then he stood.

“Your uncle will be here any minute,” he said.

“Why?” asked Alec.

“He wants to vet your bride.”

“Me?” I said.

“Alec swore off marriage. If he’s marrying, everyone wants to see the woman who changed his mind,” said his mother.

“Go and open the gate before his guards destroy it,” said his father. Alec left the house.

“We can’t eat with him here, someone would have to taste the food and it’s more trouble than it’s worth. Do you mind helping me clear up, Sanda?” asked Amasu. I stood and we got to work with the help of her sisters-in-law.

Policemen and women burst into the kitchen and started searching the place. Amasu and the other women gave them room to work. I mimicked them, watching as the place was searched from top to bottom, then the policewomen told us they had to frisk us and look into our handbags.

We were then herded into the lounge to join the rest of the family. Alec and his brothers were being searched so thoroughly, I thought a cavity search would follow.

Dami cried and screamed as he was stripped and searched. When I protested, Alec told me Dami would be safer if I said nothing.

The sense of outrage grew in me as I watched the police search the rest of the house, and search Alec’s parents and my parents as if they were common criminals when they had done nothing.

Finally, the President walked into the lounge as if the people in there had not been humiliated and dehumanised because of his presence.

Dami was still in a rage, I took him out of the room and out of the house. The police outside the house who saw me pointed their guns at me, until they saw something behind me. I turned, two policewomen were following me as if I was their prisoner.

I wanted to scream, but Dami was screaming enough for both of us. I found a gazebo and sat down. The policewomen kept a close eye on me. I talked to Dami as I dressed him as he was still naked. I tried to feed him, he was too impatient for solid food, I ended up giving him milk. He finished two bottles and started to fall asleep.

“I’m sorry, my boy. I’ll try to keep you from going through that again,” I said as I kissed him.

“The President wants to see you,” said a policewoman.

“I have to put this child to sleep otherwise he’ll scream and annoy the President.”

“Give the child to someone else.”

“Kill me if you must, but I’m not leaving this child with anyone,” I raged. Dami was frightened by my raised voice and started crying again.

“Tell the President to call my people about an appointment, my son needs me right now,” I said sarcastically.

“It looks like I might have to,” said the President. I watched him as he smiled at me. I felt sullied by his smile.

“Next time, I’ll tell him to stop being so demanding,” I said crossly. The President came to sit beside me and his policemen tried to get me off the seat.

“It’s fine, you can see she’s carrying a child,” he said.

“We can give the child to someone else,” one of them said. I clutched Dami closer to me.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” said the President. I relaxed and talked to Dami. He stopped being sleepy and looked about, then he focused on the President. The President greeted him. Dami reached out to him, the policemen moved as a unit to push me and Dami away. We fell onto the ground. I had to think fast and move fast to avoid falling on Dami. I manoeuvred us so I landed on my side with Dami in my arms. Stunned and furious, I sat up and checked on my child. He was stunned, but fine. I stood and turned to walk away.

“I came all the way here to see you,” said the President.

“Perhaps you should have told your people. I’m trying to impress my future in-laws, how will I do that when your people have dumped me in the mud, made my baby scream his lungs out and almost broken his bones?” I shouted. I was aware of several people approaching me, ready to inflict violence on me.

“Are you going to have me killed right here? Is my baby going to be orphaned or will he be killed too?” I demanded. The President held a hand up, his guards stopped where they were.

“I’ve never met a President so I don’t know what the protocol is, your Excellency, but I do know that it’s not respectful to strike at a woman as your guards just did, and I hated being searched. I think next time you should have your people phone me so we don’t have all this unpleasantness. There probably won’t be a next time,” I said, as I turned away.

“Why not?” asked the President as he walked beside me.

“I’ve annoyed you, disimpressed my would-have-been in-laws, and Alec has no choice but to dump me.”

“He won’t dump you.”

“I’ve shamed him and his family by shouting at you, and your guards will probably find me later and finish what they started.”

“No one will hurt you.”

“Your mind is on big things, you have no time to be concerned about whether or not I get murdered. Why did you want to see me?” I asked.

“If you break Alec’s heart, I’ll make you sorry.”

“I don’t think that’s a reasonable thing to say to anyone.” Guards approached me. The President held up his hand, they stopped.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“People in relationships have more chance of hurting each other than those who are not in relationships with each other. I will hurt him, he will hurt me. The difference is that neither of us wants to hurt the other, and we will apologise when we do it, and forgive when we are apologised to.”

“I don’t want him hurt.”

“Then he and I have to break up.”

“He wants you, he gets you.”

“I’m not a toy you’re buying in a shop. If I want to break things off with him, I’ll do it.”

“No,” said Alec. He was suddenly beside us. Dami cheered up and stretched his arms at him. Alec took him and looked at me.

“I don’t want you breaking up with me,” he said.

“Your uncle threatened me with death if I hurt you, I have to live to look after Dami, so I’ll have to...”

“Please don’t interfere,” he said to his uncle.

“You’re my son, I have a right to meddle if I think it’s necessary,” said the President. I stared from one man to the other, wondering why the words ‘my son’ had sounded as if they had more meaning than the extended family son.

“My parents are the ones who raised me and they are not interfering, don’t you interfere.”

“You are my only child and I don’t want you hurt.”

“Hurt is a fact of life, we all have to live with it. Excuse us,” said Alec as he took my hand and led me away.”

“When’s the big day?” asked the President, keeping up with us.

“We’ll send you the pictures, you are not coming to our wedding with your search-and-humiliate team.”

“I’m your father.”

“Come as my father, and you’re more than welcome. The President is not welcome to our wedding.”

“Wouldn’t you like to say you had the President at your wedding?” the President asked me.

“No, thank you,” I replied.

“Ingrates, both of you. People would kill to have me at their wedding,” he said, then he walked past us with his posse and left the house.

“If I never meet him again, that will be just fine with me,” I said feelingly.

“I understand.”

“Is he your father?”

“By biology. My father’s the man who raised me.”

“Are your father and uncle related?” I asked.

“My father’s older than uncle by ten years.”

“Why didn’t your uncle raise you?”

“Same reason Dami’s biological father won’t be raising him. Other priorities. For him, it was politics and power.”

“Your family loves you.”

“That’s why I appreciate them. Can I take you home?”

“If it won’t inconvenience you.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

“Then thank you.”

We joined everyone else in the lounge.

“I take it he’s gone?” said Alec’s father.

“Yes. He threatened Sanda and I told him to stop interfering.”

“I don’t imagine he liked that.”

“That’s why he left. He’s not coming to our wedding, not as the President.”

“That’s good thinking. How did you like meeting the President, Sanda?”

“I’ve never wanted to because I despise politicians, having met him, I know I was right not to want to meet him. No offence to the family,” I said.

“None taken. Can we get something else to eat? I’m still hungry.”

The wives of the other brothers entered the room with cold drinks and sandwiches and we all ate them hungrily. Dami fell asleep.

“I need to take Dami home,” said Alec. I thanked his family and told my parents I’d meet them at home, and we left.

“This isn’t the way to my home,” I said, as we passed places I had never seen before.

“It’s the way to our home.”

“You mean your house.”

“It will be ours when we marry.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“What do you think?” he asked of the nursery after putting Dami down in a cot.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s great.”

“Do you mind that I bought Dami a cot?”

“No.”

“Is there anything you want to change?”

“No, it’s great. You have great taste.”

“Thank you. Come and see the rest of the house.”

It was a four bedroom house, big, spacious and as he had said, there was space for children to play.

“It’s perfect for raising a child,” I said.

“I think so too. Come, we need to talk.”

“Should I be nervous?”

“No! Come,” he said, taking my hand. We sat in the kitchen with the baby monitor beside us.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I have two fathers,” he said.

“We’re still getting to know each other.”

“Each time I mention it to a woman, she starts being more interested in what I can get her as the President’s son than as myself.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t expect anything from you.”

“I don’t like that. When you have a man, you have certain expectations, and when you have a woman, you have certain expectations. I want you to have expectations of me, not of the President’s son.”

“If you had a better relationship with him, I’d have broken things off with you.”

“Really?”

“Rich men think of women as toys, not people. My toy must be available now, my son’s toy must be brought to him, never mind that she’s at her father’s funeral or at work. I had two dates with a guy whose parents thought like that, then I moved cities so they wouldn’t have access to me. His parents behaved as if it was my job to fill in where they had failed.”

“I’ve never had that experience before.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone. Don’t worry about not telling me about the President.”

“Thank you. I told you I wanted to adopt a girl?”

“Yes.”

“Have you thought about adopting her with me?”

“No, sorry, I haven’t had time.”

“I’m adopting her. She’s coming for her first visit with me in two Saturday’s time.”

“Oh!”

“I’d wanted it to be next weekend, but Amasu’s marriage talks are happening then.”

“Yes.”

“I’d like you and Dami here when she comes so we can all get used to each other. Will you come?”

“I...okay,” I said, seeing the expectant look on his face.

“Great. Her name’s Zora, and she’s seven months old now.”

“I see.”

“How old is Dami?”

“Seven months too.”

“You look concerned.”

“I don’t know if I’m coming or going with you. I know where you stand, but I don’t know what I want.”

“You want Dami, me, and Zora.”

“I don’t know that.”

“I’ll wait, I told you that before.”

“I might never be ready.”

“I’ll take that chance. I’ll involve you in my plans until such time as you tell me you don’t want to be involved. I’m optimistic that those words will never come out of your mouth.”

“I can’t make any promises.”

“I know. When should my people meet your people?”

“Alec!” I gasped.

“I want to marry you, you’re not averse to me so let’s get married and see what happens.”

“That’s not a good basis for marriage.”

“We like each other, that’s basis enough for me.”

“I’m not ready!”

“For what?”

“To live with a man, to have two children, to be a daughter-in-law.”

“You’re not unready.”

“What?”

“You think you’re not ready, I put it to you that you’re not unready.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means if you find yourself in the situation, you’ll cope.”

“I don’t want the little girl...”

“Zora.”

“...Zora to feel like I love Dami more than her.”

“Then love them equally.”

“I don’t know her!”

“Spend time with her and you will.” I opened my mouth to protest and realised he was talking sense.

“No promises,” I said.

“When should our people meet?”

“In the future, when we know each other better! Aren’t you afraid I’ll run off with someone else?”

“I try not to think about that.”

“Who would I run off with?” I asked incredulously.

“Dola.” We shared a long look, then I looked down.

“I’d never run off to him,” I said.

“You’d wait for him to come to you?”

“No, not anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I deserve better.”

“Yes, you do, but maybe you’re not ready to see that yet.”

“I’m ready. I don’t want to be insecure like Valerie, I want to spend my days and nights in peace with someone who’s faithful to me, and who I’m faithful to. Being cheated on hurt, but at least I didn’t even suspect I was being cheated on. It must be worse to think it, or feel it, and hope it’s not true and not believe your hope. I don’t want Dola anymore.”

“Do you want someone else?”

“I’m working on it.” Alec drew back looking so hurt I wanted to hold him tight.

“He’s being a father to my son and behaves as if he’s proud to be seen with me,” I continued. Alec relaxed.

“If he’s as patient as he says he is, I’m sure I’ll want him on a short leash and love him to pieces,” I said.

“I will never have a problem with that,” smiled Alec.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“Doing all that you do to make me feel like I matter.”

“You matter very much to me.” I leaned across the table and kissed his cheek.

“That was nice,” he said as I returned to my seat.

“How do you want your home run?” I asked.

“How is any home run? Anyway, it will be our home, not just my home.”

“Are you a maniacal germo-phobe who won’t want to see a single speck of dust, or do you throw your things all over the place?”

“Do you see scattered clothing and dirty dishes?”

“You knew I was coming so you cleaned up, if I pitch unexpectedly, will I be shocked?”

“No. I like a clean home, but I’m not a neat freak. Are you a neat freak?”

“I used to be, till Dami arrived. Now, I’m the biggest slob around. After attending to him, I have no energy to clean the mess the two of us make.”

“Your house is always clean.”

“I have help. If I didn’t, I don’t know what would become of us. If we marry, will Zora have her own nanny?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Misa has her hands full with Dami and the house. Should we have two nannies or a nanny and a housekeeper? Misa won’t manage the children and the house.”

“Let’s have Misa meet Zora, then we’ll talk to her about getting another nanny or a housekeeper, or having her as the housekeeper and getting a nanny or two for the children.”

“Okay. Are your furniture arrangements set in stone?”

“Why?”

“Depending on the time of the month, furniture arrangements get to irritate me and I have to change them. Will we get into a fight every time I move something?”

“No.”

“Are you a strict disciplinarian?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think so.”

“I have the makings of one. I like things just so, and when I say something should be done, it should be done there and then, not in twenty minutes or an hour later. We need to have the same rules for the children otherwise they’ll play us off against each other.”

“I see that a lot at work.”

“I don’t want to be one of those mothers whose children throw tantrums and run on the spot as they scream at the top of their voices. I believe in getting that out of the child before it even develops.”

“I get the feeling you’re trying to tell me something.”

“I don’t spare the rod. If you’re one of these new-age-time-out parents, we’ll never work as a couple.”

“Are you open to compromising?”

“As long as the compromise keeps the children well behaved, I’ll listen.”

“I have a way with children, I can make them do anything just by telling them to.”

“What are you saying?”

“Let’s have ground rules that allow and disallow certain things. You can use the belt or whatever, as long as you don’t kill my children, and I’ll talk to them.”

“I don’t do tantrums, if there’s one thing guaranteed to drive me insane, it’s tantrums and demanding children. My nieces and nephews know if I have to babysit them, they have to be on their best behaviour. Even Dami knows that when I take a certain tone with him, it’s time to stop whatever he’s doing.”

“Our children won’t throw tantrums or drive their mother crazy.”

“What’s your pet peeve?”

“Nagging.”

“Nagging?”

“If you tell me something and I say I heard you, I heard you. Don’t repeat the request endlessly. Nothing makes me not want to do something as quickly as being asked more than once.”

“Rumour has it you have to tell a man something more than once before he does it.”

“I hate repetition. Once is enough for me. And don’t demand things of me as if I should have known and done what you expected, ask me nicely.”

“Ask me nicely too. You might have to ask me more than once sometimes because I got a little forgetful during pregnancy, and that sometimes comes back.”

“Okay. Do you like kisses?” I looked at him oddly, never having been asked that question.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Good,” he said as he swooped in and gave me a long leisurely kiss. When I opened my eyes, he was watching me and caressing my cheek. I returned his look.

“You look dazed,” he said.

“I *am* dazed. You and your tongue practise lethal witchcraft.”

“Is it the kind of witchcraft you’d like to experience again?”

“Another time, otherwise I’ll never leave.”

“I’d like that.”

“One step at a time.”

“Okay. Do you want to eat something?”

“No, thanks.”

“That’s too bad, I was hoping you’d cook. Your father warned me that he’d charge me hefty for taking the best cook in the world from his home.”

“That’s the only thing about me my parents haven’t had cause to complain about. That and you. They think you’re the best thing that ever lived.”

“Do you think that too?”

“I’ll get to it. What do you want to eat?”

“Whatever you want to cook. I have a housekeeper who looks after all the kitchen purchases. Meet her and we’ll keep her if you like her, or I could ask her to work for one of my brothers.”

“Do you mind if we keep Misa?”

“I like her, she stays.” Alec talked about his childhood as I cooked. We heard Dami talking to himself after he woke up, then Alec went to him. I smiled as he told Dami that I was making a great meal, and he should grow more teeth to eat the delicious food.

He returned to the kitchen pushing Dami in a new chair.

“You bought that too?” I asked.

“When you both come here, you should just bring yourselves,” said Alec.

“Dami, are you ready to eat something solid now?” I asked, as I sat beside him and lifted him from his seat.

I was glad that he ate his solid food. I looked up when I heard a sound, Alec was taking a picture of us. Dami finished the portion I had made for him and even had milk.

“He’s got a healthy appetite,” said Alec.

“Yes.”

“Between him and Zora, we’ll have to buy plenty of food. She eats as if she’ll never eat again.”

“Was she that traumatised by her mother’s passing?”

“I don’t know, but I know she has a good appetite.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a good appetite.”

“Do you have a good appetite?”

“I have an average one.”

“For food only, or for sex as well?”

“Alec!”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“For food.”

“So you have a big sexual appetite?”

“No!”

“You just said...”

“I have an average appetite all round.”

“That will have to change.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d like my wife to keep up with me sexually. I have a big sexual appetite and I want to have all my needs met by my wife only.”

“I see.”

“Will that be a problem?”

“I don’t know. No use worrying about it now, it’s not as if we’re getting married tomorrow.”

“I like knowing that you accept that we’ll get married.”

“It might not work.”

“That’s not an option, it has to work, for all of us. You know it’s more than just you and me.”

“Yes.” Dami started crying. I went to change his diaper then I returned to the kitchen. Alec had dished up food for him and me.

I sat down, we ate, then he drove Dami and I home. He saw us into the house and left.

Misa had returned and talked about her weekend with her sister, and all the men she had met who had asked her out on dates. I smiled at her, happy that she was opening herself up to other options.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alec and I were walking to a picnic spot on one of our dates when he took my hand. I tried to withdraw it.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?”

“Why don’t you want me holding your hand?”

“It’s unnecessary.”

“It’s necessary to me.”

“People are looking at us.”

“They’d look even if we weren’t holding hands.”

“It looks...”

“Beautiful, just like you. Stop struggling unless you want us to end up wrestling. I’m not letting your hand go.”

“Why?” I asked, distressed.

“I like you and this is the best way to hold you in public. Do you prefer me to kiss you?”

“No!”

“Then relax. I thought we could sit here. Do you like it, or do you want us to sit somewhere else?” he asked, as he indicated a place. I looked about, it was scenic.

“It’s beautiful, let’s sit,” I said. He released my hand and laid down the blanket. We sat down and I fumbled for my phone and dialed a number.

“Sanda, are you alright?” asked Mother.

“I’m fine, I just called to find out how Dami’s doing.”

“He’s fine. Don’t be making calls to me when you should be persuading that boy to get to the altar. Bye,” said Mother, then she cut the call. I looked at Alec. He was watching me.

“How’s our son?” he asked.

“Fine.”

“Don’t worry, trust the people looking after him and trust us.”

“Us?”

“We’ll make things work between us and have a happy marriage.”

“How can you be sure? I was with Dola for six years and I didn’t see his defection coming. You don’t even know me, and you want to spend your life with me. How does that work? We don’t even know if we’re personally compatible, let alone sexually compatible.”

“It’s a feeling I have deep in my gut that makes me certain we’ll be fine.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

“Let the past go and give us a chance. I’m not Dola and it’s not right to look at me as if I am.”

“I don’t look at you that way.”

“Yes, you do. You expect me to leave you and Dami.”

“Of course I do. You have nothing to bind you to us. Dola had every reason to stay with us and he left, what chance can we possibly have with you?”

“The chance given by love. I love Dami, and I’m in love with you. That’s what will keep me in your lives. With time, we’ll come to love each other and that will cement our commitment to each other.”

“Love isn’t enough, I know.”

“The love you had for that man was one sided. The love between us will be mutual.” I looked away from him, no longer interested in the subject.

“Do you come here often?” I asked.

“I’ve been a few times. We had an anniversary party here for my parents a few years ago.”

“It must have been wonderful.”

“It was. I hope our children will hold anniversary parties for us,” said Alec. I looked at him. He was searching the picnic basket. He brought out two drink cans and gave one to me.

“Thank you,” I said, suddenly realising how hot it was. I opened the can and drank thirstily.

“Have you ever thought about being married?” asked Alec. I looked at him, taken by surprise, and lowered my drink to my lap.

“I used to, a lot.”

“What did you used to think about?”

“Do you really want to know, since it wasn’t you I had in mind?”

“I want to know.” I put my drink down and looked at my hands, smiling.

“We had this huge, beautiful house, and we had help so when we each got home from work, we could both relax as we were served food, and then we’d sit and talk about our days, and plan our holidays, and our visits to our parents.

“We’d have date nights to keep the love going and do things together.”

“Things like what?”

“Have a garden patch, or go to games, or play board games together. Something to keep us enjoying being together.”

“Was Dola always the man you saw in your mind in your vision?”

“Only after I met him. Before that, I had no face, but I did have an outline.”

“Tell me about the outline.”

“This guy was tall, dark in complexion like me, with broad shoulders, and his own money so he was independent of his parents or anyone else who’d make problems for us.

“He was acceptable to my parents and I was acceptable to his, and we got on well with most if not all of our in-laws.”

I looked at Alec when he had been silent for some time. He was watching me. I looked him over and drew in a shocked breath.

“Sounds like you were visualising me,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, stunned.

“Well, you have me now. What’s the next item on the agenda?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You have the man, he and his family like you, and your family likes him. What happens now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you have a vision for your wedding day?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I want to know about it.”

“Fine! It was big, with a thousand guests or more. My groom and I would invite everyone we knew, as would our parents, and our cousins, and their cousins and their cousins’ cousins’ cousins would be there too.

“We’d have everything at one venue. The part organised by my family would be on one side of the hotel, the part organised by my in-laws would be on the other side. That way, both families would be happy with their contribution to the wedding.

“Afterwards, we’d have gone on honeymoon to Nigeria.”

“Nigeria? Why Nigeria?”

“I find it fascinating.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“When we came back, we moved into our home, and started living our fabulous life. Happy?”

“No.”

“What now?”

“I want to talk about my vision for our wedding.”

“Oh! Okay. Go ahead.”

“It’s big, about a thousand people, we start off in your home, we get married there, party, and then go to my parents’ home. When everything is over, we go to our home and spend a few days alone before the children join us.”

“I see.”

“I have investments that are maturing soon and can go into the bride price and the wedding.”

“I see. I have no money. All my savings have gone to keeping Dami alive.”

“That’s understandable.”

“We’d have to wait a while so I can contribute to our wedding.”

“How long is a while?”

“A year or two.”

“That’s too long for me to wait.”

“When would you want to get married?”

“Next month.”

“Alec!”

“But I’ll wait, for you. If you want to wait a year or two for the big ceremony, we could have a legal ceremony so we can move in together, and then we can have our big wedding later.”

“I thought of the big wedding before I had a child out of wedlock.”

“I want a big wedding with you, children or no children.”

“It’s not appropriate for me.”

“Are you saying you want me to be ashamed of you? That will never happen, and it’s unfair of you to expect me to sink into shame when you’re the best person for me.”

“I don’t expect you to be ashamed.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I shouldn’t have had Dami when I wasn’t married.”

“Are you saying you don’t want him?”

“No!”

“Then what are you saying?”

“A woman like me has no right to a big wedding. She forfeits the right to marry when she has a child who has no father.”

“That is the biggest load of rubbish I’ve ever heard! Do you know the implications of what you’re saying?”

“I’m soiled goods. You can’t display soiled goods where everyone can see them, you keep them behind the house and bring them out in the dark.”

“That is craziness! I’m not ashamed of you, my family’s not ashamed of you. Stop expecting us to treat you the way Dola treated you. My mother’s preparing a gift for you, her daughter-in-law. She always gives her daughters-in-law gifts. Does that sound like she’s ashamed of you?”

“No.”

“Why are you ashamed of yourself? There is nothing to be ashamed of. Dami is wonderful, are you ashamed of him?”

“Of course not.”

“You made him someone to be proud of. You can only do that if you are someone to be proud of. There is no shame in being you, or being seen with you.” I looked away from him. We were silent for a short while.

“Do you want to eat?” I asked, preparing to take the food out of the basket.

“No. I want you to stop being ashamed.” We were both tense. When Alec took the food out of the basket, neither of us could eat. He packed the food and suggested taking me home. I agreed and we went to the car.

He drove me home in silence, dropped me off and left. I was sure I would never hear from him again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“What do you think you’re doing?” demanded Amasu as she walked into my house uninvited a few days later.

“I’m spending the day with Dami,” I replied.

“You’re letting Dola win.”

“Dola?” I frowned.

“You’re letting Alec go because of something a pig did to you. Did Alec mistreat you in anyway?”

“No.”

“Then why are you mistreating him?”

“I am not mistreating him!”

“He’s miserable, because of you!”

“I haven’t done anything!”

“That’s the problem!”

“What are you talking about?” Dami started crying, frightened by our raised voices.

“Come here, my nephew. Don’t let your mad mother frighten you,” said Amasu as she picked Dami up from his chair. I made to take him from her, she shielded him from me with her body.

“You’re mistreating his father, how can I be sure you won’t mistreat him?” she asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous! How would I mistreat him and what would it get me?”

“You’re denying him his father.”

“No one is stopping Alec from seeing Dami.”

“How can he come here to see Dami when his mother’s being unreasonable?”

“I’m not being unreasonable!”

“You’re refusing my brother the wedding of his dreams.”

“I have not denied him anything!”

“So our people can arrange to meet your people?”

“No!”

“See! You’re denying this boy his father and my brother his wedding.”

“That’s not the way it is.” Amasu quieted Dami, then she looked at me. It was a long, searching look that made me feel guilty.

“Why are you letting Dola win?” she asked.

“What does he have to do with anything?”

“If you don’t marry Alec, Dami has no father, the way Dola intended, and you live alone, lonely and miserable, just as Dola wanted. He wins, you, Dami and Alec lose. Is that what you want?”

“You know it isn’t.”

“Then get over the shame Alec talks about. Are you ashamed of him?”

“No! How can anyone be ashamed of him?”

“And how can anyone be ashamed of you?”

“Because I do shameful things.”

“Such as?”

“Having Dami when I had no husband.”

“You have a potential husband, that must count for something.”

“It’s too late.”

“No, it isn’t! He likes you, his family likes you, you like him and your family and child like him. Why are you making problems when there aren’t any?”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, make me. I want to, so does Alec.” Misa came into the house from running her errand and greeted us, then she went to her room.

“I have to go, but this is not over, Sanda. I came here to ask you to be one of my bridesmaids.”

“Oh! Thank you, I’m honoured.”

“Will you do it?”

“Of course.”

“Bye, Dami. I’ll see you soon. Try and talk sense into your mother. Your father misses you both terribly,” said Amasu, then she kissed Dami, handed him to me and left.

One evening some weeks later, just after I had put Dami to bed, there was a knock on my front door. Misa and I were watching TV and looked at each other. I was annoyed as the movie we were watching was great, Misa had an anxious expression on her face.

“Sanda? Are you awake?” called Father.

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

“Open the door, I want to talk to you.” I went to open the door and Father walked into my home. I closed the door and led the way to the seats. Misa had disappeared. Father sat down and declined when I offered him refreshments. I sat down, wondering why he was there.

“What happened to that boy you were going to marry?” he asked.

“Alec? Nothing happened to him.”

“Then why haven’t we seen him in some time? Did you send him away?”

“No, Father.”

“Then where is he? Why haven’t his people contacted us about marrying you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does he still want to marry you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What does that mean?”

“We haven’t talked in some time.”

“That’s not the way to maintain a relationship, surely you know that.”

“Yes.”

“Do you need me to speak to him?”

“No! No, thank you, Father.”

“This concerns me, child. I hoped you were finally going to put that foolishness behind you, but you seem to be clinging to it.”

“What foolishness?”

“The foolishness that resulted in Dami.”

“I’m not with Dola anymore.”

“Dami’s first father?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother met him and didn’t think much of him.”

“I know.”

“So why are you holding onto a man we don’t approve of and shunning the one we approve of?”

“I haven’t shunned Alec.”

“Then why isn’t he here?”

“I don’t know, Father.”

“You know, Sanda. Fix whatever the problem is and marry him. I don’t want to go to the grave before you’re settled.”

“I’m settled, Father.”

“Settled means having a man who looks after you, and who you look after. You don’t have that. Are you going to fix things with that boy?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see,” said Father sounding so disappointed, I wanted to phone Alec there and then and have him arrange bride price talk dates with Father. We were silent for a short while, then he said goodnight and left.

I couldn’t sleep, wondering how to keep Dami and Alec together without doing something I didn’t want to do. When I woke up in the morning, I still had no answer.

Days later, Amasu phoned me to go and meet her dress maker for measurements. I met her, two of her cousins and one of her sisters-in-law at the dress maker's. We were measured, then Amasu offered me a lift. I was reluctant to accept as I feared a continuation of our last conversation.

"Have you spoken to Alec?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

"If you want him, talk to him."

"I don't know what I want."

"You do, Sanda. You always know what you want. You just have to decide whether or not you're ready to acknowledge it. You want Alec."

"I..." I said, then I paused.

"Have you spoken to Dola?"

"No! Why would I?"

"He phoned me about meeting you."

"Meeting me? For what?"

"He wants to see Dami."

"Are you kidding me?"

"That's not something I'd kid you about."

"Was he drunk when he called you?"

"No. He wants to meet us tomorrow."

"No."

"I said we would."

"Are you insane?"

"Alec wants him to sign adoption papers."

"Oh!"

"Are you going to let Alec adopt Dami?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to let him marry you?"

“I...”

“Come to the meeting tomorrow. It concerns your son.”

“Tell Dola to go to hell.”

“He has rights.”

“He doesn’t deserve them.”

“He has them, regardless. Come, Sanda, then he won’t be given rights without your say-so.”

“Fine!”

“He might want a paternity test.” I felt tears smarting in my eyes. Of all the things he had said, the accusation that Dami was not his child hurt me the most.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After work the following day, I went to Amasu’s office. Alec was there with her. I greeted them, then Dola, Valerie and another person joined us. Amasu greeted them and introduced us all to each other. The third person in Dola’s group was his lawyer, Cordon. Amasu invited us all to sit down.

I tried to look at Amasu but my eyes would not leave Alec. He did not even try to look at anyone else, focusing his gaze exclusively on me.

Amasu called the meeting to order and asked Cordon what he wanted. Cordon said Dola was suing for paternal rights to my child as I had left his home without telling him and stolen his child.

I gasped in outrage and looked at Dola, ready to deny everything. I felt a hand on mine and looked at Alec, who was beside me and holding my hand. He shook his head slightly. I made to argue, he shook his head.

I turned to Cordon to hear what he was saying. Dola accused me of denying him rights to his son when he tried to get in touch with me, and said I lived in a hovel with the boy. He therefore wanted to take Dami and raise him with his wife.

I looked at Valerie. She looked sick to her stomach. She obviously did not want Dami. I wondered how Dola had got her to agree to come to the meeting with him. I looked at Dola, he was looking at my hand, the one Alec was holding. He raised his eyes to Alec, Alec was looking at me. Dola then looked at me. I was looking at him. He looked at my hand and Alec’s and frowned as he looked at me.

I turned my hand and held Alec's hand. Dola frowned more. Alec drew on my hand. I looked at him. He moved his head to mine and gave me a long, gentle kiss. When it ended, I was dazed. I panted as I looked into his eyes. He wanted me, very much. I also realised the room was silent.

I looked about, everyone was looking at Alec and me. I looked at Amasu enquiringly. She was looking at Dola. I looked at him, he was looking at Alec as if he wanted to kill him. I opened my mouth to say something, Amasu cleared her throat. I looked at her. She shook her head. I frowned. She asked Cordon to continue.

He asked her to ask her clients to keep their bedroom antics in the bedroom. I sat up straighter, feeling offended, then I felt naughty. I looked at Alec, leaned into him and kissed him. He kissed me as if he had starved for me. I heard a throat cleared and broke the kiss. Amasu was looking at us, she shook her head. I looked at Alec. He was dazed. I smiled, feeling smug, then I sat back in my seat keeping a hold on one of his hands.

"Sorry," I said, smiling at Amasu. She frowned like a disapproving parent. I looked at Alec conspiratorially. He was frowning at Dola. I looked at Dola, he and Valerie were arguing in whispers.

"Is there a problem?" asked Amasu. Dola and Valerie looked at her, then they looked at me and Alec and shook their heads.

"My client wants to take his son home," said Cordon. I snorted in disbelief. Alec tightened his hand on mine, I looked at our joined hands, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm down.

"Why now? Why not earlier?" asked Amasu.

"My client was not ready then," replied Cordon.

"What makes him think he's ready now?"

"He and his wife just lost a child."

"And they think my client's child can be a replacement?"

"My client wants his son, that's all."

"My client will never allow her child to be taken from her."

"We'll give her money."

"She doesn't want it."

"She lives in servant's quarters, she must want money."

"Her son is more important to her than money."

"She'll be paid every month, she'll be allowed to return to the flat she lived in, and she'll be given reports about the child every three months if she wants them." I looked at Dola in

shock. How could he think things would equal my child? I looked at Valerie. She was watching me curiously.

“Why?” I asked her. She started as she did not expect me to say anything.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Let the lawyers talk, Sanda,” said Alec.

“Why do you want my child?” I continued.

“I don’t want your child,” replied Valerie.

“But you’re here, wanting to take him away from me.”

“I want nothing to do with him!”

“Valerie!” shouted Dola.

“I don’t want this woman’s child. If you take him in, you’ll be getting divorce papers from me,” said Valerie, then she stood and left. Everyone looked at Dola. He looked at Cordon.

“I want my child,” he said. Cordon looked embarrassed and started packing his things.

“I want my child. I have a right to my child,” shouted Dola.

“You and your wife need to talk, then you can tell me what you want,” said Cordon, then he left. Dola glared after him, then he looked at me.

“I want my child,” he said. I did not respond.

“I want my son!” he shouted, getting to his feet. Still, I was silent.

“Let’s go,” said Alec, getting to his feet. I stood too and turned to follow him as he was still holding my hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I was aware of Dola reaching for me. I moved out of reach and turned cold eyes on him.

“I’m talking to you,” he said.

“You have nothing to say that I want to hear,” I returned.

“I have a right to my child,” he said.

“Why?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“You have a right to my child, why? You’ve never wanted him before. Why now?”

“Because he’s my son!”

“He was never yours.”

“So you did cheat on me?”

“Didn’t the maid you planted to spy on me tell you I had a different man in your flat every night?”

“Don’t try to be clever.”

“Because I was too stupid to see you were playing me?”

“I never played you.”

“When did you and Valerie lose a child?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“If you’re stealing my child, it’s my business.”

“I can’t steal my own child.”

“When did you lose a child?”

“A month ago.”

“And you’re done mourning and ready for a replacement child?”

“That’s not what it’s about.”

“Then what is it about?”

“A father wanting his son. How could you kiss him in front of me? Do you know how badly you hurt me when you did that?”

“I hurt you? You moved on. You’re married, how can anything I do hurt you?”

“I told you that you’re the love of my life.”

“Then you should have married me. When you married someone else, you told me to move on and I have. I can kiss Alec and the national soccer team and you’ll have no say whatsoever in that matter. I’m leaving now. Leave me and my son alone,” I said, then I walked off.

Alec offered me a lift, I declined and called a cab. He waited for it with me. We were quiet the whole time, then I thanked him when the cab arrived.

I was glad to get home and see that Dami was safe with Misa.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A few days later, I returned home from running errands and Father called me into his home. I frowned, wondering why he was calling me.

He led me to the lounge and I gasped.

“Dola? What are you doing here? Get out. Get out!” I shouted.

“Calm down, child,” said Father.

“Dola, I told you to get out,” I said, grabbing Dola by the forearm and trying to get him to his feet.

“Leave him alone,” said Valerie.

“Get him out of here and I will,” I returned.

“Sit down, Sanda,” said Father.

“Send these people away. They have no right to be here,” I said, trying to get Dola to his feet. I felt hands on my waist and turned to tell the person behind me to leave me alone.

“Alec?” I said. He was the man with the hands on my waist.

“Come and sit down,” he said.

“But...”

“Come,” he insisted, guiding me to a seat.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Your father invited me.” I looked at Father. He was seated and looking at me sternly. I subsided.

“Thank you for coming, everyone. Thima clan, this is the Mopha clan. Mopha, these are the Thima, and we are the Nkolo. I called you all here because there’s a situation I want resolved. I have a grandson on the premises, and two men are claiming him. I called both men and told them to come and talk about the child. The Thima came as a clan, Mopha came alone with his wife.

“Who am I supposed to think is serious about my grandchild, the man who came with his clan, or the man who came alone? In my day, when a person was serious, he involved his family in an affair. The man who acted alone was considered to want options,” said Father.

“I don’t want options. I have rights to my son,” said Dola.

“Did Sanda not tell you that we wanted to meet your people during her pregnancy to tell them about it?”

“No, she didn’t.” I gasped, then I wondered why I was shocked when Dola had been lying to me for a long time. Why wouldn’t he lie about me? Furious, I left the room, went to my home, printed some emails, photocopied them, then I took several copies back to my parents’ lounge and handed them out.

“What is this?” asked Dola.

“Read!” I said curtly as I returned to my seat.

“Tell me, Mopha, what do these emails say?” asked Father.

“They’re made up,” said Dola.

“What do they say?”

“That I stalled about your people telling my people about Sanda’s pregnancy. But these are forged emails.”

“So my child is a liar?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Father drew an offended breath. I moved closer to Alec, afraid for Dola. He had offended Father in a way he should never be offended.

“Have some respect, boy,” said one of Alec’s people.

“Sanda’s a liar, that’s a fact.”

“Enough!” thundered Father. Dola started as he had not expected that.

“What proof do you have that my grandson is your son?” asked Father.

“Sanda told me.”

“And you believed her?”

“I had no reason not to.”

“You just said she’s a liar.”

“Sometimes, not all the time.”

“How do you know when she lies and when she tells the truth?”

“I just know!”

“I see. So your people haven’t seen the child to confirm that it’s yours?”

“No.”

“Have you had a paternity test done?”

“No, I didn’t think I needed to.”

“I heard you told Sanda that she lied about you being the father.”

“I made a mistake.”

“You recently told Sanda that you want to take her child.”

“Yes, I did. He is my son after all, and I have rights to him.”

“Suppose you get him...” I gasped, horrified.

“...what will you do with him?”

“Raise him, of course,” replied Dola.

“Will Sanda be allowed to see him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“She’ll be paid to stay away.”

“Your wife doesn’t want the boy. Who will raise him?”

“I will.”

“As a single father?”

“Yes, what’s wrong with that?”

“Have you bought a diaper for this child?”

“I...”

“Have you bought a bottle or milk, or anything for him?”

“Sanda never told me what he needed.”

“How do you plan to raise him when you know nothing about children?”

“I’ll make a plan!”

“Do your people know about Dami? Young man, I’m talking to you.”

“No, they don’t.”

“Why not? Is he not one of them?”

“I’m the father, my family has nothing to do with this!”

“I see. Thima, what are your plans for my grandson?”

“I want to adopt him after marrying his mother, and I want us to raise him together as a Thima. My family’s already met him and his mother, and we’ll have their help if we need it,” said Alec.

“Mrs Mopha, do you want to raise my grandson?” asked Father. Valerie looked trapped.

“Mrs Mopha?” prompted Father.

“I...” said Valerie.

“She’ll raise him with me,” said Dola.

“Mrs Mopha?”

“I’m not raising a child I didn’t give birth to. That boy has a mother. Why should I do her job for her?” asked Valerie.

“You’ll raise him with me, and that’s final!” shouted Dola.

“Take that boy from his mother, and I’ll divorce you,” vowed Valerie.

“He’s my son!”

“You never told me about him, and you expect me to love him? You must be crazy.”

“I made a mistake.”

“Why haven’t you told your people about him if he’s yours?”

“I...I didn’t want them to meet Sanda.”

“Why not?”

“Have you seen the way she dresses? She dresses like a hooker.” I gasped.

“I tried to get her to dress right, but she wouldn’t listen,” continued Dola.

“I dress like her. I’m dressed like her right now. Do I look like a whore too?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Do you want Sanda’s child or do you want her?”

“What?”

“You call out to her in your sleep.”

“I do not!”

“I’m the one who has to listen to you calling her and telling her you love her. You never tell me that anymore.”

“I do not want Sanda. Who can want someone like her?”

“Someone like her?”

“She doesn’t have a proper job, she dresses cheap, and she sleeps with men she’s not married to.”

“I slept with you before I married you.”

“You’re not a whore!”

“What makes Sanda a whore when I did what she did?”

“I don’t know.”

“What makes her a whore?”

“She’s too happy!” My jaw dropped. Valerie looked at me as if she was trying to see the truth of Dola’s words.

“What’s wrong with being happy?” she asked.

“My parents wouldn’t have liked her.”

“Because she’s happy?”

“Yes.”

“So they liked me for what?”

“You’re serious about life.”

“I see. Why do you still want her if she’s unsuitable?”

“I don’t want her.”

“You hate children.”

“I do not!”

“You can’t stand your nieces and nephews, you wouldn’t shop for our baby with me, you never told me about Dami and you told me while we dated that you didn’t want children. Why do you want Dami now?”

“I want my son.”

“Why? What’s made you decide to take him when we both know you’ll have absolutely nothing to do with him?”

“Child-raising is for women.”

“Which woman will you leave him with since I won’t be around to raise him?”

“Must we discuss this now?”

“Sanda, if you give him your son, you’ll be guilty of abuse because Dola won’t even care if your baby’s abused. He didn’t tell me we were coming here, if he had, I wouldn’t have come. When did he start cheating on you?”

“This is not appropriate.”

“I don’t know. I only found out about you three months before your wedding,” I replied.

“He’s already cheating on me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not cheating!” said Dola. Valerie took pictures out of her bag and threw them at him. They were A4 size, and fell all over the place. They showed Dola having sex with different women at different times.

“We aren’t even married three months, and you’re cheating. I was pregnant with our child, and you were still seeing Sanda. You’re a worthless piece of trash, Dola. I hope you have your CV ready because now that I’m divorcing you, Daddy’s going to fire you. Sanda, don’t be stupid enough to go back to him. I’ll send you the divorce papers, Dola. You’ll find your stuff outside the house. You won’t get in because I’ll have the locks changed,” said Valerie, then she left.

We all looked at Dola as he hurried to pick up the pictures that Valerie had thrown.

“You should go, Mopha,” said Father.

“I want my son,” said Dola, as he grabbed the last picture.

“That boy is not going to be raised by an immoral person.”

“His mother’s not moral.”

“She’s looked after him since before, during and after his birth. Have you?”

“I didn’t know how.”

“Get out of my house before I throw you out.”

“I’ll take this to court.”

“Do that. With your wife’s pretty pictures and your lack of enthusiasm in taking care of my grandson, do you think the court will look kindly on you? If I heard right, you don’t have a job. Will you be able to take us to court?”

“Yes!”

“Then we’ll see you in court. Stay away from here, and from my daughter and her child.” Dola glared at me and left.

“Thima, are you going to marry my child, or are you also playing with her?” asked Father. I was so embarrassed, I wanted to be invisible.

“I want to marry her, Sir, but I’m not sure she wants to marry me.”

“She told me something similar.” There was a long silence.

“Well, thank you for coming, Thima clan. Son-in-law, that child must miss you. Won’t you at least see him, even if you and his mother are having challenges?” continued Father.

“I’ll talk to Sanda,” said Alec.

“Sanda, a boy needs his father. Don’t deny your son a father.”

“I never said Alec couldn’t see Dami,” I said.

“He must have assumed if you didn’t want him around you, you wouldn’t want him around your child.”

“That’s not the case.”

“Talk to Thima.”

“Yes, Father.” The Thimas stood and left.

“What’s your problem?” demanded Father.

“Nothing,” I replied.

“Then why are you messing that boy about? Do you want him to find someone else? He’s the cream of the crop. You’re lucky he even looked in your direction, and what do you do? You play hard to get. It’s too late for that, Sanda. That worthless cheating boy already got you. Now, let a real man get you.”

“I...”

“What’s stopping you from saying yes?”

“I’m not worthy, Father. You know that. I shamed you and I shamed myself.”

“That’s over now.”

“How can it ever be over when Dami will always be there to remind me of how I shamed us all?”

“Are you blaming him for ...”

“No! I’m just saying he’s a reminder of...”

“He had nothing to do with your behaviour.”

“I know, Father.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“Maybe Alec can have Dami, but not me. I don’t deserve a man like him.”

“Yes, you do.”

“We all know I’m worthless, Father. He should find a nice, virginal woman.” Father shook his head, then he said I should leave.

I went home. Misa and Dami were fine. Misa then left for a date with her friends, while Dami and I went for a walk. I needed fresh air, unless I wanted to lie down and cry.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Alec contacted me and came to fetch Dami a few days later. I had packed some things for Dami, but Alec said he had a bag for him. I insisted on seeing it. It had everything I would have packed myself.

“Have a good time,” I said to them.

“We will,” said Alec, looking at me intently.

“What time will you be back?”

“Early evening. I want to bath him before bringing him so you can have the whole day to yourself.”

“Thank you,” I said, touched and frowning hard to avoid crying.

“Is that alright?” asked Alec. I nodded, too choked up to talk.

“We’ll be off,” he said, as he turned away and put Dami in his car seat. He climbed into his car and hooted as he left. I had made no plans and felt at a loose end.

I went to a mall, though I had nothing to do. I window shopped, then I watched a movie. I was coming out of the movie house when someone called my name.

My heart pounded as I turned to Dola.

“You look great,” he said.

“I look like a whore.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“That’s not important now.”

“I guess not.” We were silent for a short while.

“Do you still have a job? I know how important that is to you,” I said.

“I was able to get another job.”

“That’s good.”

“Where’s Dami?”

“With his father.”

“Thami?”

“Yes.”

“Why not me?”

“You’ve never behaved like a father to him. Let’s not talk about him. I want to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Why did you ask me out? Did you see an easy lay?”

“No!”

“Then why did you treat me as if that’s all I was?”

“I made a mistake. I’ll never treat you that way again.”

“I know you won’t, because I won’t give you the chance.”

“I like a woman who stands up for herself.” A woman joined us and asked who I was. Dola said we worked together. I wondered why I had never noticed that I was a dirty secret to him.

I had just arrived at home when he phoned me asking when I was moving back into his flat.

“Why would I do that?” I asked.

“So we can pick up where we left off.”

“Why? I want nothing from you.”

“You looked at me as if you wanted me.”

“I wanted answers, I don’t want you.”

“I want you, that must mean something.”

“It means nothing. Bye, Dola,” I said, then I hung up. I showered and cooked, then I waited for Alec.

He and Dami arrived. Dami was asleep. Alec carried him to his cot, then we went to the lounge. I thought he was leaving, he sat down.

“How was your day?” I asked.

“Great, but tiring. We spent the day with Amasu and Zora,” he replied.

“The little girl you want to adopt?”

“Yes.”

“How did it go?”

“Alright.”

“I made dinner, do you want to eat?”

“Yes, please.” We ate in silence, then he thanked me, said he’d call about visits to Dami and left.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I arrived home from work one evening, and heard someone crying. I rushed to my home, Misa and Dami were fine, the crying was coming from my parents’ house.

I tried to resist going, but the crying did not stop. I went to knock on the front door. It opened, Father looked relieved to see me.

“Come in, get into the lounge,” he said. I went to the lounge, my sisters and Mother were there with a man who looked like Mother, but could not have been her brother as she was an only child.

Mother was crying, my sisters were looking at her as if she had betrayed them. The man looked as if he wanted to comfort Mother, but was restraining himself.

“Mother?” I said. My sisters, who had not yet noticed me, turned to look at me.

“Do you know who this is?” demanded Ellen, pointing at the man.

“No,” I said, going to put an arm round Mother. She clung to me, startling me into falling into the seat beside her.

“That’s Mother’s first child,” said Loma.

“What?” I said.

“Mother told us to keep our legs closed, and all the time, she had a child out of wedlock,” said Onka.

“Oh!” I gasped.

“I made a mistake,” Mother said through her tears.

“Yes, and that’s okay,” I said, giving my sisters warning looks.

“How could you betray us like this, Mother?” demanded Onka.

“You weren’t even born, how could Mother have betrayed you?” I asked.

“She should have told us!” said Ellen.

“She’s told us now,” I said.

“She didn’t tell us. He turned up at my work and said he wanted to see his mother. When I asked who she was, he gave me Mother’s full name.”

“Oh!” I said, releasing Mother to look at her. She was calming down and cleaning her face.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” demanded Ellen.

“I didn’t want you to having children out of wedlock.”

“You should have told us. You’re a hypocrite.”

“Stop that!” I said.

“You would side with Mother since you did exactly what she did,” said Onka.

“We owe Mother respect and the words and tones you are using now are not respectful.”

“Shut up! You’re the youngest, you don’t get to tell us how to behave,” said Ellen.

“Shut up, all of you!” bellowed Father. Everyone looked at him.

“How dare you children use that tone on your mother!” he continued.

“She...” said Onka.

“I’m not finished!”

“Are you sending Mother away?”

“That is between me and her. I want you all to leave, now.”

“But...” said Ellen.

“Now! And when you return, you better all have remembered the respect you owe your mother.” My sisters, me and our brother stood and left the house.

“Hi, I’m Josefa,” he said, holding a hand out to me.

“Hi, I’m Sanda,” I said, shaking his hand.

“What number are you?”

“I’m the youngest. Where did you grow up?”

“With my father.”

“Did you know Mother was your mother?”

“Yes. The woman who raised me would always say terrible things about her and the fact that she was not raising me.”

“I’m sorry, that must have been hard.”

“It was.”

“How did you come to approach my sister about your mother?”

“She looks just like Mother.”

“Did you have a picture of her?”

“No, she’s a prominent business woman, I’ve seen her picture many times.”

“What brings you to Mother now? Why didn’t you come sooner?” demanded Ellen.

“My father died, I wanted to meet my mother before she died too.”

“What do you want from her? An inheritance?” Josefa looked at Ellen so hard, we all felt ashamed for her.

“I want my mother, that’s all. You’ve all had her all your lives, I want my turn with her,” replied Josefa.

“We don’t even know if you’re really her child. We didn’t actually ask Mother if she had a child before she married Father,” said Onka.

“She as good as admitted it,” said Ellen. I looked at Loma, she had not said much, and was watching Josefa.

“I can give you Mother’s number, then you can call her to see her,” I said.

“She gave me her card, thanks. And thank you for not siding with your sisters against our mother. She was in shock. I should have arranged things better instead of just turning up unannounced. I have to go now. I hope we can have a good relationship. My father’s children made my life hell, I hope my mother’s children will be better behaved,” said Josefa, then he left in his car.

“I don’t believe him, how dare he speak to us that way. He’s not the eldest in this family, he doesn’t get to lay down the law,” said Ellen, who was the eldest and liked us all to know it.

My sisters talked among themselves as they went to their cars, then they left.

I returned home. Misa and Dami were asleep. I kissed Dami, then I ate, and tried to sleep, but my mind was full of questions. I needed to talk to someone, even if they didn’t give me the answers I sought.

I started dialling Amasu, then I changed my mind and dialled Alec.

“Sanda, are you alright? Is Dami alright?” he asked.

“Hi, we’re both fine. I need to talk to someone, and I thought of you.”

“Oh! Okay, I’m listening.”

“My sisters and I just found out we have an older brother.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mother had a child before she married Father.”

“Oh!”

“We didn’t know. He met one of my sisters and asked to meet Mother. My sisters are being so rude and unreasonable, I’m ashamed of them.”

“I can’t imagine how that must feel. Do you need me to come over?”

“No, thanks, I just need to talk.”

“What happens now?”

“I don’t know. Father sent us out of the house so he could talk to Mother, I don’t know if he knew about her son.”

“How old is he?”

“Almost ten years older than Ellen. Mother must have been a teenager when she had him. How are you?” He did not respond.

“Alec?” I prompted.

“Do you care how I am, or are you being polite?”

“I’m interested. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“You know I want to. I’m fine, thank you. My uncle phoned to find out when we’re getting married.”

“Oh! What did you say?”

“That we’d let him know.”

“Oh!”

“You sound surprised.”

“I’d have thought you’d have said we’re broken up.”

“We’re not.”

“We’re not?”

“You’re working on figuring out that you want me and our children.”

“Alec...”

“I’m not pressuring you. Have I pressured you?”

“No.”

“I’ll wait until you want us as much as I want us. For keeps.”

We talked about work, then I thanked him for listening and ended the call.

My sisters arrived on my doorstep first thing the following morning.

“Is everything alright?” I asked groggily.

“How can anything be alright when Mother has just shaken our world so horribly?” returned Onka as she entered my home uninvited, with our two sisters in tow.

“What are we going to do?” asked Ellen as she sat down.

“About what?” I asked, tying my robe over my negligee.

“Mother and her son.”

“What can we do? It’s not like we can return him to her belly.”

“We can complain to Father.”

“What does he have to do with anything?”

“He should get rid of her.”

“For what?”

“Keeping secrets.”

“That’s not our call to make.”

“You have nothing helpful to say. Sisters, what should we do?” asked Ellen.

“We need to find out exactly what happened, and if Father knew about that boy,” said Loma.

“What good will a history lesson do us? What do we do now about this boy who’s come to share our inheritance?”

“I say we let Mother tell her side of the story, then we’ll understand what frame of mind made her not tell us.”

“I agree,” I said.

“That’s nonsense. We need to show her how much we disapprove, and maybe stop talking to her,” said Onka.

“Mother got you out of a lot of scrapes, Onka. You are the last person to turn your back on her.”

“Don’t tell me how to relate with my mother.”

“We need to be understanding.”

“Of what? Two-faced-ness? I will never be understanding of that.”

“She had her reasons for not telling us.”

“I don’t care what they were. She made fools of us.”

“How? If anyone’s the victim here, it’s Father, unless Mother told him about her son. Did anyone find out if he knew?” No one knew whether or not Father had known.

“Father’s the only one who can claim to have been made a fool of,” continued Loma.

“I can never look at Mother the same way. ‘Keep your clothes on, keep your legs closed’ she said over and over again, and threatened us with disownment if we slept with men, and all the time, she was the first and last word in whoring,” said Onka.

“Don’t talk like that. Let’s stop skulking and go and talk to Mother. I said talk, girls, not insult,” said Loma.

“You’re the third in the group, you can’t lay down the law for me and Ellen,” said Onka.

“We owe Mother respect for birthing us and raising us.”

“She’s lost all the respect I had for her.”

“I’ll join you later, I still have to bath and dress up,” I said.

“We’ll wait,” said Loma.

“I want to go now,” said Onka.

“I said we’ll wait,” Loma said firmly. I went to freshen up. When I was ready, I told Misa we had to talk to our parents, she offered to look after Dami until midmorning. I kissed Dami, thanked Misa, and joined my sisters.

We found our parents in the lounge, wearing the clothes they had worn the night before. Neither of them looked as if they had slept, and they both looked as if they had been crying.

Ellen and Onka, who had been set on teaching Mother a lesson, were suddenly quiet.

Loma greeted our parents, I followed suit, then I told them to freshen up while I made them something to eat. They left the lounge in silence. Loma and I went to cook. Minutes later, our sisters joined us. They talked on their phones apologising to their husbands for leaving their homes early without saying where they were going.

Our parents joined us in the kitchen and sat down.

“Sit down, children,” said Father. We all joined them at the table.

“Yesterday, we all got a shock when we found out about your mother’s son,” said Father. We all looked at Mother, she was looking at Father.

“I don’t like the way you girls spoke to your mother last night, and if any of you use that kind of tone or language again, I’ll disown you. Do I make myself clear?” asked Father.

“Yes, Father,” we all said.

“Your mother and I talked. I spent the night awake and decided that she’s more than the fact that she decided not to tell me. She’s been a great wife and mother, and I don’t see any reason for me to end our marriage just because she kept something from me. She and I will continue to be a unit, and I will not tolerate anyone who disrespects my wife.”

“Yes, Father,” we all said.

“I’ll let your mother tell you what happened. You’ll speak when I give you permission, and not before.” We all nodded. Mother looked at her hands.

“I was fourteen when I had Josefa,” she said. My sisters and I gasped in horror.

“I was raised by my uncle because my mother died when I was born. One of our neighbours overpowered me as I was fetching firewood and touched me up in the bushes. A few months later, I was pregnant.” My sisters and I sat gaping at Mother.

“When the baby was born, uncle took him to his father and left him there, and told me never to talk about having had a baby as talking about it would prevent me from marrying.

“I never talked about it. Every now and then, I’d remember him on his birthday, which is the third of September, or hear things about the way he was being treated, otherwise I made myself not think about him.

“Seeing him yesterday was a shock. Your girls’ reaction added to my shock, and of course, I was afraid your father would leave me. I never meant to hide it, I just never thought it would come up. I’m sorry you felt betrayed when you found out about Josefa, but I’m not sorry I raised you strictly. None of you were teen mothers, and most of you married before having a child, and have been a blessing to me and your father,” concluded Mother.

There was a silence.

“Didn’t it hurt when the man had sex with you?” asked Ellen.

“It did, he told me not to be a baby and to keep it secret unless I wanted his wife to kill me.”

“He had a wife?” gasped Onka.

“And several children.”

“Did you keep the pregnancy a secret?”

“I was sent to my maternal grandmother’s home until the baby was born, then my uncle fetched me and the child and took the child to his father.”

“Did he tell you he was going to do that?”

“He told me when he returned without the child.”

“Did you want the child?”

“I was too shocked to want it. I was relieved to not have to worry about it, and to return to school.” There was a silence, then Father asked if the food was ready. Loma and I brought it to the table, and most of us played with our food.

After the meal, Mother told Ellen and Onka to wash up. They were not happy, but they did it, then we all made our goodbyes and left.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Later that day, Mother came to visit me in my home. We sat in silence for a while.

“Dami’s a great boy,” she said.

“Thank you,” I returned.

“Are you ashamed of him?”

“No, Mother.”

“But you’re ashamed of yourself because of how you got him?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think you don’t deserve the man who wants to marry you?” My heart pounded as I wondered when Mother had seen and understood my fears.

“Yes,” I said.

“You deserve him.”

“I shamed you.”

“You did, but now it’s over. I used to feel worthless too.”

“You did?”

“I had Josefa out of wedlock.”

“Yes, but you didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Your father came along and I wanted him and decided to be with him. I spent the first year of our marriage trying to be perfect for him, but he told me to be myself.

“When I tired of pretending, I behaved like myself, and you know what? He didn’t leave me or send me away. He seemed to like me being me.

“As time passed and he seemed happy with me, I started to relax and believe I deserved to be with him. You deserve your young man. Be with him and be honest, with yourself and with him,” concluded Mother.

“Yes, Mother,” I said.

“Do you want him?”

“I...”

“Do you want him, Sanda?”

“Yes.”

“Then be with him. Life is short, you don’t want to wait until something happens to him or you before you admit what you want.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being kind when you found out about Josefa.”

“Oh, it was nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing. In your shoes, I’d have reacted like Ellen and Onka, but you and Loma showed me understanding, just like your father. You’ll never know how much that means to me.” I nodded.

“Let Dami have a relationship with the father who wants him.”

“Yes, Mother. Were you scared when you had Josefa?”

“I was sure uncle would disown me.”

“Did you tell him yourself?”

“It was best to, before his children told him and told him to disown me.”

“What did he say?”

“That he should have expected it since my mother had not raised me, and had not taught me how to behave. He felt it was the child reflecting the mother because she had me out of wedlock.”

“Oh.”

“Your father accepted that I had Josefa before I met him and showed me what true and accepting love is when he didn’t send me away. I hope you and your young man have love such as ours.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

I was leaving work one evening, when someone called my name.

“What do you want, Dola?” I asked. I’d had a long day, I didn’t need problems.

“Hi, Sanda.”

“What is it?”

“Can I give you a lift home?”

“Excuse me?” I said, turning to look at him fully.

“I’ll take you home.”

“Why?”

“We need to talk.”

“No, we’re done. We’re beyond done. I told you to stay away from me.”

“Please, Sanda, I really need to talk to you.”

“Talk, here.”

“There are too many people.”

“That’s what you always said during our relationship. Now, I get to choose where we talk, and I choose here. Talk, or leave.”

“Can we move to the side and not stand in the middle of the pavement?”

“You can talk here, or go away.” He moved closer to me.

“I need you,” he said.

“You need me to do what?”

“I need you to be my woman.”

“You never needed me. You needed me to do or say things. What do you need now?”

“You and your love.”

“I’m going.”

“No! I need you to tell my parents that I never cheated on Valerie with you.” I looked at him, amazed at his audacity.

“If I do that, what do I get?”

“What?”

“I do something for you, what will you do for me?”

“Why should I do anything for you? You’re nothing but a...” I raised my eyebrow enquiringly. He did not continue. I moved close to him and looked deep into his eyes.

“Dola, I will never, ever do anything for you. Stay away from me and my son. If I see you anywhere near either of us, I’ll punch your face hard and scratch it with a coat hanger. Do I make myself clear?” I said. He nodded. I nodded and turned to leave.

“Hi, Sanda,” said a voice.

“Hi!” I said, as I turned to look at Alec.

“Can I take you home?”

“Yes, please,” I said. Alec looked from me to Dola, then he took my hand and led me away.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes, thanks. I had a long day, that’s all. How do you come to be here?”

“I missed you and decided to come and take you home.”

“Thank you, I need that today.”

“What were you doing with Dola?”

“Laying down the law.”

“What law?”

“If he comes near me or Dami, I’ll deface him. His face is his greatest asset, he won’t want to go near anyone who’ll make it look less than it does now.”

“Does that mean you’re done with him?”

“Very, very done,” I said, turning to look at Alec after he opened the car door for me.

“I’m glad. Can I help you in?” he offered, making to take my hand. I put a hand on his chest, he looked at me.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so indecisive about being with you,” I said.

“Have you decided what you want?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want?”

“If you’ll have me, I want you.”

“Of course I’ll have you, but it has to be for keeps.”

“I want that too.” Alec gave me a long look and nodded. I climbed into the car.

We were silent as he drove off. I put my hand above his knee, he put his on mine. He dropped me off at home, I thanked him, he left.

“Was that Dami’s father?” asked Father from his front door.

“Yes, Father,” I replied.

“That’s good.” Misa was cooking with Dami on her back, I took him from her and spent time with him before going to bath him. After dinner, I did some work, then I slept.

I woke up sweating, having dreamt that Alec had been all over me, kissing, caressing, sexing me till I was sweating and crying out with pleasure. My body felt deprived to wake up to an Alec-less bed.

I looked at the time, it was just after three in the morning. I could not go back to sleep after that.

After five, I phoned Alec.

“I’m sorry to wake you,” I said.

“You didn’t wake me. I’ve been awake for over an hour, thinking about you.”

“What were you thinking?”

“I was wondering if you’re ready for my people to talk to your people.”

“I see. I thought we could date, and then...”

“I want to meet your people, can I?”

“Yes,” I said with a pounding heart.

“Good.”

“Is there anything else you were thinking?”

“That it’s time you and Zora met.”

“Yes. When next do you see her?”

“This Saturday. Can you and Dami join us?”

“Yes.”

“I want to meet your people in two or three weeks, depending on when they can meet my people.”

“Yes.”

“Once that’s done, we should register to marry legally and get on with it, then move in together. We’ll have our big feast when you feel you have enough money to contribute to it.”

“That sounds good.”

“You must move your things in before we do things legally. After the legal ceremony, I want you and Dami here without you worrying about furniture or anything else. Move in with your parents or one of your sisters a week before we marry, then come here after work to arrange things to your liking.”

“Oh.”

“Does that sound good to you?”

“Yes.”

“Great. When did you wake up?”

“Just after three.”

“Why?”

“A dream.”

“A nightmare?”

“No.”

“A good dream?”

“Yes.”

“Then why couldn’t you go back to sleep.”

“I was frustrated.”

“By what?”

“The dream not being real.”

“What was the dream about? Sanda? Was it a sex dream?”

“Yes.”

“Was I in it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad. All my sex dreams have you as the main feature and I hope all yours have me as the main feature. I’ve even made my fantasies about you. I hope you’ll do the same so even if you fantasize about superman, you make me superman.”

“Oh.”

“Can you do that?”

“I’m sure I can. I haven’t thought much about sex since...”

“He’s gone, I’m here. Are you into one lover at a time?”

“Of course.”

“I believe in one man one woman and vice versa.”

“So do I. Dami just woke up, I have to see to him.”

“Is he sleeping all night?”

“For the most part.”

“Can I have him over one night? Sanda?”

“I don’t know.”

“You let Amasu keep him overnight.”

“I haven’t done that in some time.”

“I’m his father, don’t you trust me with him?”

“Of course I do, you’ve been taking him out for months.”

“I want him overnight so I can get used to his ways and know how much of your night will be mine and how much his.”

“I see. Let’s talk later.”

“Okay. Give our son a kiss for me, and tell him his father said he mustn’t harass his mother,” said as Dami screamed his displeasure at not having someone attend to him immediately he woke up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Father phoned me at work a few days later and told me to see him before going home. I knocked on his front door.

“Come in,” he called. I let myself into the house and found him in the lounge. We greeted each other and I sat down.

“Your man’s people have been in touch with me,” he said.

“Oh?”

“They want to come and talk about the bride price.”

“Yes.”

“Did you know they’d be in touch?”

“Alec mentioned it.”

“Did you say it was fine for them to do it?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Fabulous!” said Father with glee. He took his phone out of his pocket and started fiddling with it.

“You can go now. I’ll let you know when we’ll meet them,” he said.

“Yes, Father.”

Once Dami was in bed, I phoned Alec.

“Your people have already been in touch with my people,” I said.

“Yes.”

“We only discussed it two nights ago.”

“I want us married in two months on the outside, sooner if possible. There’s no time to waste. Are you having second thoughts?”

“No, I was just surprised at the speed.”

“Don’t worry, in bed, I like to take my time.”

“Oh!” I choked, feeling hot and cold at the same time.

“Can Dami spend the night with me?”

“Oh!”

“You said we could talk about it.”

“I’d want to be there for the first time.”

“Because you don’t trust me?”

“Because it will be easier on all of us that way. I’ll feel better seeing everything, then I won’t bug you with calls every three minutes, and Dami will know it’s okay because I’ll be there.”

“Dami knows he’s okay with me.”

“Okay, it’s not about him or you, it’s about me. I need to be there the first night you have him.”

“Okay. When will you come?”

“We need a chaperone.”

“I’ll have Amasu come too.”

“Okay, let me know when.”

“Is tomorrow night okay?”

“Er...okay.”

“I’ll call you back,” he said, and cut the call.

He phoned back a while later to say he would pick me up from work, we’d pick Dami up and go to his home, where Amasu would join us.

Next morning as Mother drove me to work, I told her that Dami and I were spending the night with Alec.

“Don’t sleep with him,” said Mother.

“Mother!”

“Why should he marry you if you’re already sleeping with him?”

“I…”

“Don’t sleep with him. He’s talking of meeting your father about marrying you, don’t spoil it by sleeping with him,” she said, then she changed the subject.

Alec fetched me home, I was quiet because I was nervous. He did not say much either. We fetched Dami. Misa gave me an encouraging wink before we left.

When we arrived at Alec’s home, Amasu’s car was parked at the front door. Alec parked his car in the garage, and we went into the house that way, which we had never done before.

I hugged Amasu, then she greeted Alec as she took Dami from him. He seemed to recognise her and that pleased her greatly.

“I’m starving,” she said, then she and Alec looked at me.

“You’re the lady of the house,” she said.

“Oh! Oh, yes,” I said, then I went to the kitchen. Food had been prepared. I dished it up for the adults, and made Dami’s food quickly. I called to everyone as I took the food to the dining room.

They all joined me shortly, and we sat down. Alec insisted on feeding Dami as it was his night with him. After the meal, I watched as he bathed Dami, then I sat with him in the nursery as he put Dami to sleep. Dami slept easily. I kissed him then Alec put him in his cot.

“That’s Zora’s cot,” whispered Alec, pointing to another cot as we left the room.

“Did you cook?” I asked as we went to join Amasu.

“No, I told my housekeeper to cook. She comes in every two days. If you like her, we’ll have her come in every day while Misa looks after the children, or we can get a second person to look after Zora.”

“Okay.” Amasu was lying on a couch watching a cartoon.

“Is this how the greatest lawyer in the land spends her spare time?” I teased.

“Come and watch. You have two kids, you need to get used to all these characters,” she said, making room for me to sit beside her.

I made to sit down, Alec drew on my hand and led me to sit beside him on a two-seater.

“You’ve had her for years, she’s mine now,” he said. I smiled, never having had the experience of people fighting to be with me.

“What am I here for if you’re saying things like that? Should I leave?” returned Amasu.

“I have no problem with that.”

“I have a problem with it,” I said.

“Don’t you trust me?” asked Alec.

“Should I?”

“I wouldn’t,” said Amasu.

“What kind of sister are you? How will she trust me with you talking like that?”

“You’re a man, none of you are trustworthy.”

“Does that apply to Adamo?”

“Leave him out of this.”

“Go get us drinks and popcorn.”

“I…”

“Go, unless you want me to tell Papa not to accept Adamo’s bride price. You know it’s less than Papa demanded. If I get the boys together, we can tell Papa Adamo’s useless, Papa will never let his precious egg marry a useless man.”

“I hate you,” said Amasu as she left the room. Alec told me to stand. I stood, he put a leg on the couch, then he told me to sit between his legs. He drew on my hand and I landed on my bottom on the couch, sitting between his legs.

“Amasu will catch us,” I said, struggling to get up as Alec put his arms round me and nuzzled the side of my neck.

“She’s a big girl, it won’t traumatise her,” he said, as he nibbled on my earlobe. I felt my body heat. I hadn’t been nuzzled and nibbled on in some time.

“Must you carry on like teenagers?” asked Amasu as she returned. I stiffened, embarrassed.

“Yes, we must. Do you think I enjoy watching you and Adamo having sex with your clothes on when I visit you?” returned Alec.

“You’re just a prude.”

“Sanda, relax,” Alec said, as he drew me closer to him. I could feel his front down my back. The doorbell rang.

“Get that,” said Alec. Amasu rolled her eyes and left the room. Alec turned my head to make me look at him.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you like me touching you?” he asked.

“I don’t like having an audience.”

“If Amasu wasn’t here, would you let me touch you this way?”

“Probably.”

“So you don’t object to me?”

“No.” He looked up.

“Now who’s being a teenager?” he asked. I looked up, Adamo and Amasu were kissing, Amasu’s legs were wrapped round Adamo’s waist. They broke the kiss, panting. Amasu hid her face against Adamo’s throat.

“Hi, Alec, hi, Sanda,” he panted.

“Hi, Adamo,” Alec and I said.

“Could you get off him now? The man’s probably had a long day at work. Get him something to eat,” said Alec. Amasu unwrapped her legs from Adamo, landing on her feet then she turned to the door on wobbly feet. Adamo put a hand on her forearm to support her, she turned to kiss him.

“Hey!” said Alec. Amasu turned to leave. Adamo made to follow.

“Sit down, Adamo, she’ll be back. If you follow her, the two of you will never come back,” said Alec. Adamo watched Amasu lustfully as she left, then he sat down. There was a silence.

“How’s your family? Last time I heard, your mother was in hospital,” I said.

“She’s fine now and harvesting her latest crop as if she was never ill,” replied Adamo.

“I’m glad.”

“Thank you for asking. How’s Dami?”

“Fine, thanks. He’s asleep. How are your boys?”

“Fine. They moved to Atlanta Georgia with their mother and her new husband.”

“Oh! How are you about that? Do you miss them?”

“Sometimes, but I worked long hours so I never spent much time with them.”

“Did you want to?”

“They’re not mine biologically.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was pregnant when we met, I wanted her, not them, she wouldn’t be parted from them, so I took them all in, but I couldn’t stand having another man’s children in the house.”

“Oh!”

“So we divorced. It was best all round.”

“Don’t go getting Amasu pregnant before you’ve married her unless you want me and my brothers to beat you to death,” said Alec.

“I don’t know that you can give advice like that when you’re holding your fiancée as if you’ll never let her go. Sanda, you’ll give Dami a sibling soon if you let Alec have his way,” said Adamo. I was embarrassed, but the men did not seem to notice as they continued to rib each other.

Amasu returned while Adamo was saying something, but he forgot all about it as he watched her as if a spell had been cast on him.

She sat down beside him and gave him his plate of food. He took the plate in one hand, using the other hand to take her hand and kiss it.

“Just eat the food,” said Alec. Adamo looked at him, then he looked at me.

“You must keep him in bed when you marry him. He’s so jealous because he hasn’t been laid in years,” he said.

“Adamo!” I gasped.

“It takes one deprived man to know another. Amasu, I hope you take your vitamin tablets and have lots of condoms. Once this man gets you into bed, he’s keeping you there for three years before he lets you out,” said Alec. Amasu looked at Adamo and giggled like a school girl. I smiled. She always came across as serious, seeing her that way was a revelation.

“Sanda, I hope you’re taking notes, that man’s rabid with frustration, you need vitamins too, and condoms unless you’re ready to make Dami a big brother.”

“Will you just eat your food!” said Alec. Adamo looked at Amasu.

“Thank you for the food,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” she said shyly.

“You do know that she can’t cook?” asked Alec.

“I know, and I’m still wild about her,” said Adamo.

“Don’t go divorcing her and citing her lack of cooking skills as your reason.”

“I’m never divorcing her.”

“I hope that’s true. Amasu, stop looking like a love sick puppy and put on an adult orientated movie.” Amasu pulled a tongue at Alec and went to the DVD player. I smiled as Adamo ate ravenously, his eyes on her behind. I gasped as Alec nipped the side of my throat. Adamo looked at us. I felt heat on my face. Adamo looked at Amasu again. She was returning to her seat. He put his plate on the table, sat like Alec, and had her sit between his legs. She did it as if they did it often, and she was not self-conscious about me and Alec being there. I decided to relax and follow her example.

“What are we watching?” I asked. She waved a hand vaguely at the TV as Adamo turned her face to his and kissed her. I smiled and looked at the TV. The remote was on the table, I reached for it, Alec held onto me. I looked at him.

“I want to get the remote,” I said.

“Why? You won’t be watching that film.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” he said, nuzzling my nape. I reached across for the remote and focused on the TV.

“I thought you didn’t mind me touching you,” said Alec. I looked at him, he looked like a sulky little boy.

“I’m premenstrual and that makes me want sex like a rabbit. I promised myself that the next person I slept with would be a man who’d signed a marriage certificate with me. I’m not going back on that vow.”

“I see.”

“Do you want me to sit somewhere else?”

“That might be best.” I moved to sit alone, and focused on the TV. I started watching the movie in an effort to not watch Amasu and her man almost get it on.

“Move over,” said Alec.

“There’s no room.”

“Then stand.” I stood, he sat and helped me onto his lap.

“Oh!” I said.

“I won’t do anything, I just want to be close to you,” said Alec. I looked into his eyes, he meant it. I settled comfortably and refocused on the movie.

I was woken by a kiss. I opened my eyes, Alec was watching me.

“Time to go to sleep,” he said. I looked about. Adamo and Amasu were sitting beside each other, arms round each other, watching me.

“Did Dami wake up?” I asked, getting off Alec.

“No. Come, I’ll show you to your room.” I said goodnight to Amasu and Adamo and followed Alec out of the room. I was too sleepy to see it and just lay on the bed, fully clothed.

I woke up when Dami cried. The room I was in was unfamiliar and I felt panic.

“Dami,” I called as I jumped off the bed.

“He’s fine,” called Alec. I opened the door and followed Dami’s cries. Alec was attending to him. In a short while, he was holding Dami and rocking in a rocking chair as he fed him a bottle of milk. Dami was asleep soon, Alec put him down and he and I left the room.

“Thank you,” I said.

“It’s my night with him, you’re supposed to rest. You’re not coming with him next time he comes for a sleepover. Not until you and he move in.”

“Okay.” Next morning, I was dressing when someone knocked on the door. I opened it to Alec. He greeted me and went to open the cupboard.

“When I bought things for Dami, I bought things for you too,” he said, showing me clothes in here.

“Oh. They’re beautiful,” I said.

“They’re yours. Use them. When you come next time, you can just bring yourself, the way Dami does.”

“Thank you.” Alec nodded and left.

We took Dami home for Misa to look after, then Alec drove me to work. I thanked him and climbed out of the car.

After I put Dami to bed that night, Mother visited me.

“How was your night out?” she asked.

“Fine, thank you.”

“Did you sleep with Dami’s father?”

“No,” I squirmed.

“Good.”

I went to spend the weekend with Amasu while Alec spent the weekend with Dami. I thought it was very trusting of me to phone only twice a day to find out how they were doing.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Alec fetched Dami and me one Saturday morning, then we went to fetch Zora from the home she lived in. She was irritable with a cold, and screamed when Alec put her in her car seat.

“Can you drive?” he asked me.

“Sure,” I said. He gave me the car keys and climbed into the front passenger seat as there was no room for him in the back, since there were two car seats.

I drove to his home. When we arrived Zora was asleep. Alec carried her into the house while I took Dami in. He insisted on being put on the floor. I put him down and he crawled about as if he owned the place.

Alec joined us.

“She’s asleep, she’ll be fine,” he said. I gave him a troubled look.

“It will be fine, we’ll make it fine. Can I have a kiss?” I watched him as he approached me, then I put my arms round him and kissed him. We broke the kiss when I felt someone touching my leg. We looked down.

Dami was at our feet, looking at Alec as if he had neglected him. Alec bent, picked him up, kissed his cheek and kissed mine.

Dami put his arms round Alec’s neck and looked at me challengingly.

“Teach that boy to share,” I told Alec firmly.

“You heard your mother. You have to learn to share,” said Alec. I went to prepare food for the children, then I prepared food for the adults. When Zora woke, I heard her crying. Alec and Dami were outside the house, I went to attend to Zora.

I was concerned she would be upset to see a stranger, but she stopped crying when she saw me, and studied me as I changed her and talked to her.

Afterwards, I picked her up and turned to leave the nursery. Alec was standing at the door with Dami in one arm, his phone in the other hand, focused on me and Zora.

“I see you ladies have met,” he said, as he entered the room. He kissed Zora’s forehead and looked at her.

“Zora, that’s yours mother and Dami’s mother. You remember Dami,” he said, showing Dami to Zora. The children each stretched a hand out to touch the other.

“I’m glad to see you remember each other. Zora, you and your mother have to get used to each other, and you have to get used to sharing me and Dami with her,” continued Alec. Zora looked from Dami to Alec to me.

“I was going to feed her,” I said.

“Dami’s probably hungry too. Let’s go,” said Alec. Zora had no problem being held and fed by me, though at times, she would give me long assessing looks before eating the food I was feeding her.

When the children finished eating, Alec put them both in a play pen and helped me with the dishes.

“Thank you,” I said, when we were done.

“No problem.” His phone rang and he answered it. After the call, he said he had to go to hospital as one of his patients was in a critical condition. I felt cold in my stomach at the thought of being left with two small children.

“Will you be alright?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said with false bravado. He kissed each child on the forehead and left. The children looked at me expectantly.

“Let’s all go to the lounge,” I said. I picked Dami up and tried to pick Zora up, but they were both heavy and needed both my hands to hold them.

I put Dami down, went to get a towel in the nursery and returned quickly. I was glad to see that the children were fine. I put Dami on my back and secured him with the towel, then I picked Zora up and we went to the lounge.

There was a corner box with toys, I took them out after putting the children down, then I sat down and played with them. In a short time, they were fighting over a toy.

I found another toy like it and they stopped fighting as they each had one of their own. They were bored soon after that. I found a two child pushchair, put them in it, and we walked outside the house.

The children slept after that, and I went to cook.

The children woke, I fed them and watched them play. In the early evening, I bathed them one after the other, keeping the one that I was not bathing in a play pen in the same room as the one I was bathing. When they were dressed, they played awhile, then I laid them down, one on each side of me on a day bed, and gave them milk.

They held their own bottles and drank themselves to sleep. I burped them in turn, then I put them each in their cots. I sighed afterwards, glad everything had gone well.

Alec returned exhausted. He bathed, but refused to eat.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“My patient died.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s been coming for some time, but his parents are very upset. Being a parent now, I know exactly how they feel. I hated not being able to make them feel better.” Not knowing what to say, I went to put my arms round him and held him tight.

He was still at first, then he put his arms round me.

We were woken by a crying child, and realised we had fallen asleep in the lounge, with our arms round each other. I released Alec and raced to the nursery.

Zora was crying. I picked her up quickly and left the room with her. In another room, I changed her diaper and rocked her to sleep as she drank her milk. When she was asleep, I returned her to her cot.

I found Alec asleep in the lounge, I woke him and led him to his room, I stripped him to his underwear and helped him into bed.

I went to sleep, but not long afterwards, Dami woke me up. I changed him and gave him milk, but he wanted to play. We sat in the lounge with me falling asleep and waking up every so often.

“Sanda?” called Alec. I could see the sun shining through the curtains.

“In the lounge,” I returned. He entered the room with a bright and happy Zora.

“She’s feeling better?” I asked.

“She’s doing great. You look exhausted.”

“Dami woke up after two and hasn’t wanted to sleep since.”

“Go and sleep, I’ll look after the children.”

“Thank you. Dami and I have to go and meet Mother and Josefa.”

“Can Zora and I come?”

“I’ll ask Mother. Thanks for letting me sleep,” I said, kissing Alec and each of the children, then I went to fall on my bed.

When I woke up, I asked Mother if I could bring Alec to the meeting and she said yes. I freshened up and found Alec and the children in the lounge, ready to leave.

Mother and Josefa were in a restaurant. I greeted them and introduced Josefa to the people I was with. We all sat down and ordered drinks.

Mother could not take her eyes off Zora.

“Would you like to hold her?” I asked.

“She’s not related to either of you!” said Mother.

“We know.”

“What are you doing with her?”

“We plan to raise her.”

“She’s a stranger!” insisted Mother.

“You’ll get used to her, mother-in-law,” said Alec.

“Where did you even find her?”

“Her mother died, I decided to raise her, Sanda agreed to do it with me.”

“But why? She has no blood ties to either of you. What will you do when her ancestors bother you?”

“We’ll announce her to our ancestors and ask them to look after her, though she doesn’t have their blood in her.”

“She’s foreign to both families.”

“It’s alright, Mother. Do you want to hold her?” asked Josefa.

“No! I’ll hold Dami,” said Mother, reaching for Dami. Alec handed him to her. Mother kept her eyes on Zora, who was in my arms.

“How will you introduce her to people?” she asked.

“As our daughter,” I replied.

“She isn’t.”

“She will be, once we adopt her.” Mother shook her head slowly.

“Don’t worry, Mother. Today, we’re here about Josefa, not Zora,” I said. Mother looked at me, then she looked at Josefa. A waiter arrived with our drinks, and we sipped on them, with the children trying to get their hands on Mother’s and my drinks. Denied access, they both started fretting. Alec took Zora from me and calmed her. I made to take Dami, Mother would not release him and calmed him herself.

I asked Josefa several questions about himself. He was divorced, with three young adult children, two sons and a daughter, he was an engineer, and his father’s children had sent him away.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“It was bound to happen at some stage. Once my father died, his children felt no need to humour him by keeping contact with me.”

“What about their mother or mothers?”

“She hates me worse than her children do. She said my mother had been trying to destroy her marriage and failed.”

“I never even wanted the man who touched me and...” said Mother.

“I’m glad to know my mother’s not a home wrecker. Hearing her called that all my life hurt.”

“I’m sorry, I had no means to keep you and raise you,” said Mother.

“I know that now, and I’m glad you didn’t dump me because you didn’t want me.”

“I’m glad you survived childhood. I used to hear terrible stories about what was being done to you.”

“Why didn’t you come to fetch me?”

“Your father paid my uncle for you since he had no other sons, I had no right to you.”

“Other sons were born many years later, their mother often told us all that I was trying to steal their inheritance, and that they should never let me succeed at it. I have to go now, but I want to get to know you better, Mother, and I hope to get to know my sisters. I’m glad you brought Sanda to meet me.” He took Mother’s hand, kissed it, made his goodbyes to Alec and me and left.

Mother stared after him, then she looked down, tears in her eyes. I took Dami from her.

“I never meant for him to be abused and mistreated,” she said.

“He knows that,” said Alec.

“What kind of mother...”

“You were a child, Mother, and you can’t control what other people did to him. He doesn’t blame you, neither does Father, the past is in the past, get to know him now. Mother him now.” Mother nodded and cleaned her face. We had to get the children home, and left for my home.

The children ate and slept, one in the cot, the other on the bed, with pillows to stop her from rolling off the bed onto the floor.

“Is your mother going to be alright?” asked Alec.

“Yes, with Father on her side, she’ll be fine. Are you alright?”

“Yes. My people meet your people next Saturday.”

“Yes.”

“I won’t be able to take Dami at all this week.”

“That’s fine.”

“Once Zora wakens, she and I have to go.”

“When will she live with us?”

“Once we marry, we’ll have a stronger case, she’ll live with us within twelve months on the outside.”

“She must come live with us soon so she gets to understand our way of life, and we don’t have to uproot habits she’s grown to replace them with ours. It’s easier to grow a habit from scratch than to uproot one to replace it with another.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I was nervous when Alec’s people arrived to meet my people. I only caught a glimpse of the delegation when they arrived.

Father was in a good mood afterwards, I assumed things had gone well. I phoned Alec.

“You and I can register to marry, then once we marry, you and Dami are coming home. Are you free to register on Monday? I’m thinking we take the first available date.”

“I’ll be free on Tuesday. Did the talks go well?”

“Everything was fabulous. I don’t know what your father told his team about us, but if we’d said we couldn’t afford what they asked for, they’d have volunteered to pay for us.”

“They liked you that much?”

“My team members commented on it and said they’d never heard of anyone who’d ever received such a warm reception from his in-laws.”

We registered to marry that Tuesday, and were booked to marry three Fridays after that.

When I told my parents, Mother danced and ululated. Father smiled as if everything was going according to his plans.

Alec took to taking Dami over the weekend, I went with Dami twice, both times, Amasu was there to chaperone. I prepared for my wedding by cooking, baking and having my dress made. We had decided to have the ceremony at my parent’s home, there were people there cooking and cleaning. After that, we’d go to Alec’s parents’ home before going to our own home.

Alec and I had ourselves tested for STIs. We were both free of them and decided not to use condoms as we were not going to infect each other and as there would be no pregnancies.

The wedding went well. The mothers cried, Father looked tearful. My sisters and Amasu were my bridesmaids. Alec had his two brothers, Adamo and a cousin as his best men. I had also invited Josefa to the wedding, he had brought his children who were all the spitting image of him. Mother cried when she met them, they hugged her warmly.

Alec's family received the bridal group very warmly, and the festivities continued until ten in the night. After that, marital advice was given to us, then after midnight, we were freed to go home.

The children were asleep. Alec and I showered and slept.

We both woke up in the morning, without attending to the children in the night. Feeling guilty, I went to check on them. They were with Amasu, who said Misa had attended to them in the night, and she had taken over in the morning. I thanked her, went to freshen up, then I joined her looking after them.

She looked up behind me. I turned and smiled at Alec. He looked cute in his jeans, T-shirt and sleepy eyes.

"Look who's here, children, Papa," I said. The children seemed to understand as they looked at him and squealed with excitement. I smiled as he bent to kiss and hug each of them, then he greeted Amasu. She returned his greeting, he turned to me and studied me, then he leaned in close and kissed me soundly.

"Get a room," said Amasu. We broke the kiss and looked at each other, panting.

"Do Misa and I need to take the children out so you two can have privacy?" she asked.

"That would be nice, but it's Misa's day off," said Alec.

"I could take the children to Adamo."

"Would he be okay with that? I doubt it. There'll be no time for hanky-panky with them around."

"I want to see how serious he is about children. If he can handle these two, I'll think about having children, otherwise we're not having any. I'll call and see if he'll have us."

"Don't do that, he may decide against paying your bride price."

"I want to do this," said Amasu, getting her phone out. Alec and I watched each other, then we attended to the children while she talked on the phone.

"Help me pack the children into the car," she said afterwards.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I don't want you blaming me and Sanda if you going with the children makes him dump you."

“I won’t blame you.” I packed things for the children while Alec put the car seats in Amasus’s car, then she and the children left. Alec and I turned to each other and shared a frantic kiss.

When we broke the kiss, he took my hand and rushed me to the bedroom. As soon as I closed the door, he kissed me and started taking off my clothes. I followed suit, frantic to feel his skin under my hands.

He broke the kiss and stepped away from me to look me over. I stepped out of the skirt and panty at my feet, and did a pirouette, then I looked at him.

“Your turn to let me examine what I got,” I panted. He stepped out of his trousers and did a pirouette.

“Very nice, I’m never returning what I got,” I said.

“That makes two of us. Come here, Mrs Thima,” he said, putting his arms round me and kissing me again. We ended up on the bed, rolling as we kissed and caressed each other.

I gasped as he put a hand between my legs and caressed my clit. He put a finger in me as he continued to caress my clit and my excitement hit the roof.

“No,” I gasped, panicked when he stopped touching me. He lay between my legs. I raised my hips, then I felt him opening me up with his thumbs, before sliding slowly into my body.

I gasped and panted with great excitement, then I shuddered as I came. I opened my eyes to see Alec above me, watching me, a tortured expression on his face. I raised my head to kiss him, then I squeezed him intimately. He broke the kiss, panting loudly. I squeezed again and he started thrusting frantically in and out of my body.

I could feel my body get excited again. In a short time, I closed my eyes as I came, then I became aware of Alec shuddering as he came. He collapsed on me. I put my arms round him. He rolled to my side and we disconnected. He kissed my temple, I looked at him. We watched each other as we caught our breaths.

“Are you alright?” asked Alec.

“You can see I am, thanks to you.”

“Yes,” he said smugly. I kissed him and sat up.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To get cleaned up.”

“Hmm.”

I was crawling away from him when I felt his hands on my waist.

“Alec?” I said.

“Hot-stuff, that’s what I want you to call me,” he said, as he felt between my legs.

“I can’t call you that,” I gasped.

“Call me that in private, and use that as my name on your phone. Whoever looks through it will think you have a hot lover, and you do, you’re married to him.”

“What are you doing?” I asked, as his exploratory touches between my legs excited me. I gasped as he pressed his hardness into my wetness.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yeah.” He nipped my nape and started caressing my clit as he thrust slowly in and out of me. In a short while we were both excited and I was holding onto the bedding tight as he thrust furiously in and out of me. I threw my head back and came, then I felt him shuddering on my back.

I collapsed onto my belly and felt him covering my back with his body. He disconnected from me, rolled me onto my side and gave me a long kiss.

“Now you can go get cleaned up,” he said. I staggered to the bathroom on wobbly legs, and took a long shower. When I finished, the bed was made and the bedroom was empty.

I dressed and went to find Alec. He was in the lounge, working on a document.

“Hi,” I said. He looked up and gave me an absent smile.

“Hi,” he said, returning his eyes to the document before him.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I sat beside him.

“Looking at plans for the clinic.”

“You found a location?”

“Yes.”

“That’s great.”

“I’ll take our parents and you to see it and bless it. I want it to succeed.”

“It will. Do you want to eat?”

“If you’re cooking, then yes.” I kissed his cheek and went to the kitchen. I was half way through cooking when the back door opened and Misa walked in.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Hi, why are you whispering?”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“I heard you screaming and came to check on you, then I heard him and knew what was going on.” I felt my face heat.

“Everyone needs a stallion to exhaust her with pleasure,” continued Misa.

“Misa!” I gasped.

“Being married to one is better than having one occasionally. Now that you’ve caught him, keep him home by keeping him satisfied.” I was too embarrassed to say anything.

“He seems open minded, you should be able to initiate sex and different positions, he doesn’t look like the insecure type who’d mind. He’ll find it and you exciting, and keep his stallion machine exclusively for you.”

“Misa!”

“Are you alright?” called Alec.

“Yes, thanks,” I called, looking at the kitchen door. When I turned to the back door, Misa had disappeared as if she had never been there. I smiled and finished cooking.

I called Alec to eat in the kitchen, he seemed to have remembered me, and fed me tidbits between kisses and caresses. He brought his work to the kitchen after the meal and worked while I cleaned up.

The doorbell rang, Alec went to see who it was. In a short while, I heard a car leaving, but Alec did not return to the kitchen. Curious, I went to see what was keeping him.

He was frowning at a card he was reading.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. He handed me the card, it was congratulating us on our marriage, and it had a cheque, a big cheque, from his uncle.

“I’m returning it,” he said.

“Use it for the clinic.”

“That man has no right to try and buy my love.”

“I agree, but the money would help with the clinic, wouldn’t it?”

“You know it would.”

“Then don’t return it.”

“I…”

“Think of all the children you can help.”

“I’m not comfortable taking...” I kissed him. He broke the kiss trying to talk, I kissed him until I dropped the card and cheque as he kissed me until I couldn’t see straight.

“Use the money for the children,” I panted.

“Okay,” he panted back.

Later in the day, Amasu returned with the children. Alec took them both, saying he would bath them.

“Did you two have time to do what you needed to do?” asked Amasu.

“Amasu!” I gasped.

“Alec looks like the cat that caught the biggest canary.”

“Amasu!”

“That’s my name.”

“How did it go with Adamo and the children?”

“He’s useless.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say.”

“It’s true. Even when I showed him how to do things, he did them wrong. He’s a smart guy, but babies just unman him. I told him we’re not having kids, and if I get pregnant, I’m aborting.”

“Amasu!”

“He’s not made to have children. He says he divorced his wife because he couldn’t stand another man’s kids. He wouldn’t be able to stand his own.”

“Did you tell him you plan to abort?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He said I should do what I thought best because he can’t abide children.”

“Do you want children?”

“Not really, but if Adamo wanted them and was capable of being a hands-on parent, I’d give him one or two. As it is, I wouldn’t have a child with him if I were paid a billion dollars. How did it feel to have an orgasm not induced by your fingers?”

“Amasu!”

“Did he give you an orgasm? You weren’t forced to fake one were you?”

“Mind your own business!”

“I’ll let you get away with not giving me details now, but once Adamo and I marry, I want all the details because I’ll be dishing details too.”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Learn.”

Alec brought the children to eat, then they slept and we took them to bed. We then had dinner with Amasu, thanked her for having the children, then she left.

Next morning, Alec said he’d never understood why I’d had a big bed in my home, but now he knew, because I’d tried to shove him off the bed in the night.

“I’m so sorry,” I said remorsefully.

“I never knew anyone as territorial as you. I had to climb over you to sleep on your side of the bed because you were all over mine,” he said.

“I can sleep in another bed.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll learn to sleep with me and I’ll learn to sleep with you.”

I’d met Alec’s housekeeper and liked her, Misa had insisted on looking after both children, saying if she couldn’t manage, she would say. Dami and Zora behaved as if they had always been together. Zora took to me easily, and I found loving her easy.

A few days later, Alec and I drove to the site of his clinic and met our four parents there. Alec thanked them and told us all his plans. He was very passionate and knowledgeable about it. Afterwards, Father blessed him and me and foretold of our success, the success of our children, and generations to come. Alec’s father blessed us too, and asked the gods, goddesses and ancestors to bless and prosper us and everything that we touched. Afterwards, we went to have lunch at Ellen’s restaurant.

I couldn’t sleep most nights as I felt terrible about trying to get Alec off his own bed. I returned home from work one day and found a huge bed in our room.

“Where did this bed come from?” I asked.

“I got tired of being pushed off the bed, and of you feeling guilty about it, so I commissioned a double-double bed. This way, you can spread as much as you like and still leave room for me on the bed,” said Alec.

“Oh, Alec,” I said guiltily.

“Get over that guilt. We’ll be fine,” he said. Exhausted by lack of sleep, I slept. When I woke up, Alec was watching me and smiling at me.

“You didn’t try to push me off the bed,” he said.

“I’m so glad. Thank you for getting this bed.”

“You’re welcome,” he said as he kissed me.

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