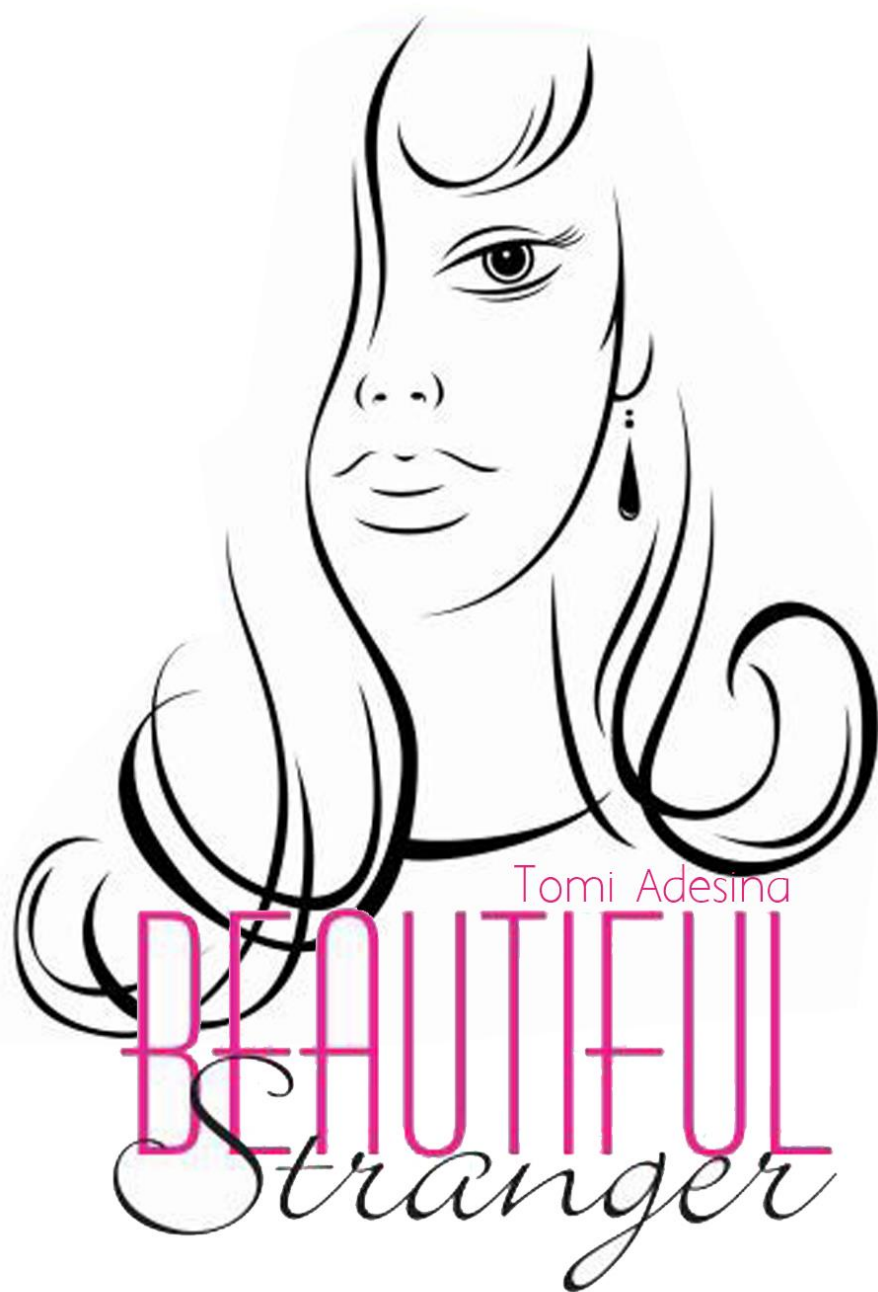


From the Blog Series



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Cover Photo by **Tolu Adesina (Ellipzes)**

...an Adaptation of the widely read blog series; **Beautiful Stranger**

CHAPTER 1

“Another shot...please...”

The barman stared at him critically. “Another shot? Look at you...you are practically stoned.”

Jerry slid his Identity card on the table. “By the new law, this ID permits me to be served alcohol up until any limit as I am old enough to decide these things...Another shot!” he growled with some anger in his tone.

The barman had no choice than to pour him another glass...besides, he was going to collect his money in full from Jerry. He stared at his most frequent but not favourite customer as Jerry had grown leaner than when he came to town two years ago.

Jerry had come into town two years ago and had instantly made friends with Tunji's bar. He walked into the bar in the rain with his bags in his hand on a night when the Champions League final was being played. He had cursed his former boss for sending him off on that exact day as he felt he would miss the opportunity of watching Arsenal lift the Champions League for the first time in their history. He thanked the heavens as he made it in time to see the 'gooners' lift the famous UCL trophy. It was a remarkable day for every fan of the team and he was no exception. Like every other man at the bar, he turned to Tunji's corner and ordered a drink. That was the beginning of their union at the bar. Tunji had helped him settle down with a room nearby before he got himself a proper home to live in. Tunji had grown fond of his customer who always came into the bar in the dead of the night and drank away his sorrows. Jerry always left the bar with a smile as he staggered into the night.

Tunji stared at the clock which showed 2:00 and turned towards Jerry. “It's late. Man, you have to go.”

Jerry looked up at the signage near the door and drooled. “24/7 bar. Always open.”

Tunji hated himself for naming his bar 24/7 as an alias...nonetheless, he couldn't care. Jerry had overstayed his welcome now and he needed to leave. The other customers had taken their leave and he was running on generator supply. Fuel was a scarce commodity these days and prices of drinks won't just go up overnight because a man had refused to go to his house. He dragged Jerry by the collar as he pulled him up to his feet. Jerry struggled with leery eyes to see what was going on around him.

“You have to go now.” Tunji said.

Jerry gathered his wallet from the table and tucked it into his jacket. "Fine...Fine...I'll be gone and you'll never see me again." He retorted as he struggled to rise to his feet. "I mean it this time."

Tunji smiled to himself. "Remind me to remind you of these words that you never live by."

Jerry nodded. "See you tomorrow." He called as he pushed the door open and walked out into the chilly night.

He reached for his inner pockets and tried to find the cigarette pack that he had collected from Emeka back at work. He was tired of seeing Emeka smoke like a chimney just as Emeka thought he drank like a fish and so he seized the pack from him. In Emeka's defence, he had said to Jerry that, "Cigarettes keep you warm at night." Jerry needed to test that theory now. He was freezing cold and was needing to hide himself from the night. The cigarette pack was nowhere to be found. He hated himself. It was not a weird feeling for him to dislike himself...he had never liked who he was. He slid into a drainage slab as he grew tired of walking. He would sleep there until morning came. This was the life he lived.

"CODE BLUE!!!" Jerry's pager buzzed him back to life. He had not slept for ten minutes. He hated this life. He dragged himself up and started the journey back to the hospital.

Toni loved her life. There were no worries. She knew what was going to happen and when it was going to happen...at least, that bit she was glad she knew. She swayed from left to right in the shower as she washed in the shower.

Nora was just in the room listening to her sister sing in the shower and she shrugged. Toni loved to be happy. She needed to be happy. This was her life. She loved every passing minute of it. Nora didn't understand what was so new about a new day that made Toni surge with a lot of expectancy. Nothing was new! Toni was odd...weird...queer!

"Nora..." Toni called from the shower.

Nora hurried to the door. "What do you want?"

"Nothing..." she replied with a laugh.

Nora took a deep breath and returned to her seat. "It's not funny, Toni and you know it."

"I know." Toni replied from the shower.

Nora was the big sister and always played the role of the babysitter to Toni. She couldn't give up on that role now. Their parents had left Nora with the task of taking care of Toni right from their childhood and she had never failed for once...Toni never made it easy to take care of her. She was stubborn, strong-willed and full of life. Nora, on the other hand,

was reserved, easy-going and always careful...afraid of almost every and anything. Toni was a direct opposite. She was as bold as her heart would let her be. She took control of her situation and tried to be in charge of everything around her. She was doing fine with that. Toni always rubbed off some of her goodness on everyone and this lit up the lives of people that she met. One would be blessed to know Toni. Nora knew that.

"You can leave the shower now... I have to go to work." Nora said as she fixed her wristwatch.

Toni shut the bathroom door as she walked into the room. "You don't have to babysit me...you know?"

"Yes, you always say that. But, I am not convinced." Nora replied as she wore her jacket.

Toni adjusted her sister's blazers. "Drive safely, Sis. It is still very early. I wonder why you can't wait till day breaks"

"I wait till daybreak and my boss will have my head on a plate for breakfast." Nora said with a smile.

Toni chuckled. "The human-head-eating-boss, right?"

"True story. I have made your breakfast, lunch and dinner...just in case I am late from work. I have instructed the maids to have them warmed for you as you like it and you will be served in due time." Nora said as she grabbed her bag.

"What about the juice?" Toni asked.

Nora smiled. "All freshly made."

"Thank you, Mommy." Toni replied with a smirk

Nora smiled and drew her sister close for a peck on the cheek. "Now you take care darling and don't forget to call me if you need anything. I'll be here for you."

Toni nodded cynically. "Even when I want to use the toilet?"

"You idiot!" Nora replied and smiled at her. "Take care." She added and left the room.

Toni drew the curtains back as she watched her sister step into her car and drive off. She adjusted the curtains and laid back on the bed as she resumed her sleep that was cut short because Nora needed to ensure she took a bath.

Nora drove as fast as she could. There were lots of hurdles to cross when moving across the city, traffic was one of them and pretty important too. Also was the danger of bumping into thugs who needed to make a few bucks off unsuspecting motorists. She had once been trapped by them and had to part away with some of her possessions. One would wonder

what a lady was doing driving around town by two in the morning, but for Toni, there was almost nothing that Nora would not do. It wasn't two am today but she still needed to hurry up and make it to the office in good time.

She pushed her horn violently as she spotted traffic forming ahead from two motorists who must have crashed into themselves. She won't be stopped by them, as she drove past, she realised that it was only a scratch on the car of the man with the jeep but he had started screaming as though his car took a huge dent. She hissed at this and drove on.

"Hey, Nora! Good morning."

She smiled back at her colleagues as she settled in her cubicle.

"Hey, Nora..."

The tone was different. It was James. She turned her swivel chair in his direction with a smile. "Morning."

"How are you doing?"

Nora shrugged. "Apart from the fact that I don't like morning shifts. I am fine."

"I hate night shifts." James cooed with a smile. "Keeps me away from you." He added with a smile.

Nora turned her face away as she blushed faintly. She had a huge thing for James but he had no idea...or maybe he did? But he did flirt with her carelessly. (Flirt with words) She cherished every lazy word he said as it made her feel they might be true someday. Nora had a large heart. That heart was occupied by only two persons - Toni and James.

"So..." Nora started as she raised her head turning in James' direction. She paused as what she saw was his blazer hanging off his back as he walked away. His shift was over. She took a deep breath as she turned on her computer.

Nora pushed her seat back for some relief from the last set of calls she had. Work as a customer care representative for a telecommunication outfit could be really frustrating, especially when you have to deal with piles of 'I can't browse'... Some of the callers made her day less tedious when they didn't shout but once they did...she got unnerved. This was her break time and she was going to escape to the kitchen for a quick snack.

"Nora!" A colleague called as she zipped her bag. *"Where you dey na? I don dey find you since morning."* Ehis rolled in pidgin.

Nora leaned against the sink. "I am sorry. Been busy. So many calls to take."

"Me sef I get problem with my internet bundle."

Nora eyeballed her. "Are you a complainant?"

“Ehn nau...she I no dey use the network?” Ehis retorted as she unzipped the bag. *“I have bought those hair extensions again oooo...These ones are Brazilian made. Correct type!”*

“Where are the wigs? Nora asked as she started to look through the hair extensions. “I think I like this one...” she said as she lifted one of the products.

“No o! Look at this one!” Ehis said as she handed her another product. *“Na Rhi Rhi style.”*

“Rhi Rhi???”

Ehis smiled. “Rihanna.”

Nora took a deep breath. “Okay...I should take this one too.”

Ehis smiled delightfully as she packed the hair extensions. Nora was her best customer in the office. *“I hope you like the one wey I give you last month?”* she asked, continuing the conversation.

Nora poured herself some water. “Yeah.”

“Ehen! Coz I never see am for your head, I just dey wonder say maybe you no like am.”

Nora smiled. “I love it. Trust me.”

“Correct babe.” Ehis said as she gathered her bag. *“I wan reach downstairs and see if I fit sell before my break go end.”*

Nora watched Ehis leave the room and then she started to fix herself a sandwich.

Jerry ran some water over his forehead. “You can do this.” He said. He tapped his forehead. “Be motivated. Be you.” He added with a snide look and then poured more water on his face. His vision was still blurred. “Damn!” he said as he took a deep breath. He heard voices in a distance and immediately dashed behind the door. The door opened and Emeka walked in. Jerry sighed.

“Guy! What...what are you doing there?” Emeka asked in a fright

Jerry hissed and helped himself to a sink.

“The Director has been looking for you. Didn’t your pager beep?”

Jerry ignored.

“Or you ran out of batteries again like the last time?”

“I am having a terrible headache. Can you not shout?” Jerry asked as he turned on the tap.

Emeka smiled. "You are drunk...again."

"I am not drunk."

Emeka shook his head. "I am still in control when I smoke. You had better hide before the Director sees you."

"Will you cover for me?"

Emeka nodded. "Sure. Go home before anyone sees you like this and makes another report. I hope you do remember that you are walking on a thin rope here."

Jerry nodded. "Thanks man."

"But you will have my night shift." Emeka added quickly. "I have a date."

Jerry smiled. "Good."

"Get a woman in your life, you will feel better." Emeka added as he opened the door. He poked his head out slightly to view the corridor. "It's empty. Hurry. Go through the fire exit."

Jerry hurried out of the room immediately.

"There are no songs." Toni said as she turned off the stereo as she prepared to sleep again. She had her breakfast and took the first nap. Lunch was over now and another nap was due to follow. She was not sleepy and so she decided to occupy herself till sleep came.

She pulled a novel from underneath the pillow and started to read. No sooner had she started than her phone rang. It could only be one person...Nora. She didn't understand why her sister still cared for her like when she was five. She was twenty three.

"Hey, Sis."

Toni relaxed in the bed. "I have had breakfast and lunch. Not time for dinner yet."

"I am glad you are eating well."

Toni smiled. "You should take good care of yourself some more."

There was silence at the other end of the line.

"How is James?" Toni asked with an eyebrow raised.

Nora smiled faintly. "He is fine. I saw him this morning before he left."

"That's great. So...when are you coming home?"

"I...err...erm...I am waiting for James to return for the night shift. I usually get five minutes with him before he starts work. He doesn't come so early."

"Man...your life is messed up."

Nora smiled. "I know."

"I don't know why you can't man up and allow a discussion happen between you and this dude. You like him."

Nora looked around. "I don't know what he feels for me. He is too lazy with words. It hurts."

"Yeah...I guess." Toni replied.

Nora adjusted her jacket. "My tea break is over. I have to return to my station. I'll call you when I am about leaving the office."

"Okay."

Nora hung up and leaned against the door.

*

Toni strolled out into the street for her evening walk. She stopped by a side bench and allowed her thoughts travel. It was a lonely journey for her. No one ever really understood how she felt inside. They thought she was as happy as she did portray. She was really afraid...there was a lot beneath the beautiful.

The clouds soon started to change. She looked up to the heavens and it was all coming down. She was far from home so she hurried to the nearby pub. She pulled off her jacket and allowed the water trickle from it as she closed the door of the pub. She walked over to the barman and took a seat. "Water."

Tunji stared at her. "Water?"

She nodded. "Yeah...you have water here, don't you?"

He nodded and turned away to get her some water.

"Damn it!" Jerry said as he took his seat beside Toni. "Tunji, a shot of whisky."

Tunji turned at him with a smile. "You are here...again?"

"Of course." Jerry replied.

Tunji dropped the water before Toni. "Here you go...ma'am."

Jerry stared at her and cooed. "Why the deceit? You want a beer...you know you want it."

Toni smiled faintly and focused on drinking her water.

“You shouldn’t ignore a gentleman at the bar, you know.” Jerry said.

She smiled as she drank on.

“Let the lady be...Jerry.” Tunji said as he set Jerry’s drink before him.

Jerry shot at Tunji coldly and then stared at Toni with a smile. “Want to go home with me? I...I have never really done this, but I don’t think I will have to pay too much. Would I?”

“Jerry...right?” Toni asked as she flipped her head in an instant.

Jerry nodded with a smile. “That’s the name, baby.”

Tunji started to chuckle.

“Get a life!” Toni replied with a smile. “While you are at it, you might want to drink more water.” She said as she passed her bottle to him.

Jerry smiled. “My name is Jerry.”

“Poor way to start a conversation.” She replied. “You came off wrong.”

“I am always wrong...I don’t know how to be right.” He replied.

She smiled as she folded her arms. “That’s an interesting deduction about yourself.”

“Man, know thyself and be true to who you are.” Jerry replied with a grin. “Who said that?”

Toni shrugged. “You tell me.”

“My name is Jerry.”

“You said that earlier.” She replied as she picked up her jacket.

Jerry smiled. “Don’t I get a name?”

“Not with a bad start. Some other day.” Toni replied as she slid some money on the table.

Jerry watched her as she approached the door. “Tomorrow never comes!” he shouted.

Toni turned back with a smile. “I’ll take my chances.”

“See you around.” Jerry said as he returned to the table.

Tunji stared at him curiously. “Who was that guy?”

“What guy? Are you so blind that you didn’t notice her gender?”

Tunji shrugged. “Never seen you act like that in all your entirety.”

“Never seen me do that too.” He replied as he took his seat.

Tunji smiled. “Good sign. What happened at work today?”

“Oh...nothing!” Jerry replied in an instant. “More.” He ordered as he dropped the glass on the table.

“Hi, James.” Nora said as she clutched her handbag to her arm.

James stared at her with a smile. “Nora. Your shift was over thirty minutes ago...why are you still here?”

She shrugged. “I like to take a few minutes to relax before I head out.”

“Interesting how those few minutes always coincide with my arrival here.”

Nora smiled. “You flatter yourself, James.”

“What can a man do?” he replied with a smile as he took a seat.

Nora took few steps forward to leave. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You...you want to go out with me sometime? Tomorrow night?” James asked as he turned in her direction. “It is my off day...was thinking you might want to hang out. You know...make this stalking a little more official.”

Nora smiled. “Stalking?”

“I am making a conversation.”

She shrugged. “Tomorrow night is fine.” She replied and turned away from him. Tomorrow night was not fine...but how could she say ‘No’ when she might never get another chance.

Nora battled with herself on why she was too quick to give an answer. She should have thought it over and well too...she drove home with lots of worries and thoughts in her head and mind.

Toni jumped out on her sister’s arrival. “Hey!”

“You should be in your room, you know?”

Toni rolled her eyes. “Why so serious? What’s up?”

“James asked me out.”

Toni smiled widely. “Wow! That’s so cool. You should be excited.”

“It’s tomorrow night.” She replied.

Toni rubbed her forehead. "Oh...that's...that's cool."

"You? Home alone?"

"Are you home with me in the day?" Toni retorted as she grabbed the bag in the car. "You got me something?"

"Of course. The usual."

Toni smiled. "I am thinking of the Amber style."

"Amber?" Nora asked.

"She rocks it well...you know?"

Nora smiled as her sister walked into the house with a smile and with no worries as usual...she wondered how everything went wrong for them. It wasn't meant to be this way...it never was. They all used to be happy.

"I gave a Code Blue! I needed all hands on deck! Where-were-you???"

Jerry stuttered as he stared in Emeka's direction. "Sir...Sir, I was unavoidably absent."

"Could it be because of your regular habits?"

Jerry shook his head in disagreement.

"You will have an alcohol test now, God help you if you fail it. I will ensure that your license to practise is taken away from you for as long as possible." The Director shouted as he walked away angrily.

Jerry turned in Emeka's direction. "What happened?"

"You have lost your second patient in a day."

CHAPTER 2

Jerry knew he would fail the alcohol test, but, that didn't bother him. His bad luck had intensified in the last weeks and this was leading the other Doctors to doubt his competence. Patients transferred to him always had a ten percent chance of survival and that was putting it mildly. He never actually did succeed in any case he really handled and he almost always made a howler of cases that he had to assist on. His life was really a mess and he needed a break from all the drama. He watched the lab scientists from outside as they worked on the samples he had presented for his alcohol test. One thing was evident, the Director of the Hospital was ready to suspend him for the second time in two years if he failed the test.

Being a Doctor was his lifelong dream. He loved tending to people and saving lives, above all. He also loved the prestige that came with being called a Doctor. His parents loved that too. He had been guided by following his passion so that he won't have to see his job as tedious for a day but Medicine was never like that. He had graduated with straight A's in school and seemed like the perfect Doctor but everything changed when he started practising. Series of deaths rolled under his watch and this didn't boost his morale. It couldn't boost anyone's morale to be a failing Doctor.

Emeka popped his head out of the Laboratory and signalled to Jerry to join him in a corner. "Hey, Bro...you shouldn't be here."

"And I am guessing that you have become a lab scientist?" Jerry asked as he folded his arms.

Emeka smiled. "I switched the bottles."

"Your urine and mine?"

Emeka nodded with a smile. He expected Jerry to wrap his arms around him in appreciation of this but Jerry stared at him coldly. "Say something...something good."

"What is good about your urine? For all we know, you might have syphilis."

Emeka scoffed at Jerry's ingratitude. "A thank you would suffice."

"I am not grateful. I am worried about what the Director would say when a comprehensive test is done."

Emeka smiled. "Thank me later."

The door opened and the Director joined them with a sheet of paper in his hand. He stared accusingly at the duo and handed the sheet to Jerry. "I don't know what you did to make your alcohol drinking mess go away...but you are still suspended."

Jerry watched the Director as he disappeared down the hall and turned to Emeka. "Do you still want the thank you?"

Emeka shook his head. "I am so sorry, man."

"Look, I don't think I'll do any better here than I did in the East. Maybe I should just go back home. Maybe this profession isn't for me after all. What is the point of going to the surgical wards when everything I touch is a no? This is tiring. Very exhausting."

Emeka nodded. "You have a point there and it might sound wrong for the moment but I sincerely do think that this suspension might give you some time to bounce back."

"Bounce back? Did you even ever see my glory days?"

Emeka paused to think.

"I have never had any." Jerry replied and adjusted his coat. "I'll be on my way home."

"How many weeks are you to be suspended for?" Emeka asked.

Jerry checked the sheet. "Two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Toni asked with a frown.

Nora nodded as she took off her slippers. "Am I not deserving of it?"

Her sister was silent.

"I worked hard to get that leave."

Toni shrugged. "I am not disputing that, but I am just saying that if the service provider is naturally that horrible, what happens when more people such as you get leaves from work?"

"We are a competent network."

Toni nodded. "Sounds like your motto, right?" she asked with a grin. "Nora, I really don't want you in this house with me for two whole weeks. You will bore me to death with your principles." Toni continued. Nora ignored her and started to change into her underwear. "Where are you going with James?" She asked, trying to change the topic.

"He ought to call me in the next hour to let me know. We leave by seven."

"That should be to the movies then..." Toni replied. "I should step out tonight too."

Nora shot at her. "Where to? It rained last night. It might rain today too."

"It's just for a walk." Toni replied. "Besides, I might just go with a car."

Nora nodded. "I think it is safer if you go with a car. You have to be careful."

"Nora, I am fine."

Nora picked her phone. "Toni, I know you are. I am just playing my role."

"I think it is a little too much."

The land phone rung. Toni lifted the receiver. "Hello!"

"Ma'am, there is a man named James here to see Ms Nora."

Toni shrieked as she replaced the receiver with a smile. "James is here. I have to go and see him." She replied as she leaped off the bed.

"Why is he here so early? Oh my...I have to fix myself up. Go...go and keep him company." Nora said as she turned towards the mirror.

Toni hurried out of the room.

James stood in the living room in his black suit with a smile. Toni folded her arms as she smiled at him. "I meet the famous James."

He smiled. "Err...I...I am here to see Nora."

"Obviously she hasn't told you about me?" she asked as she took a seat. "Take a seat."

James obliged. "You are Toni, right?"

She smiled. "Oh...she did mention me?"

"No...and now I know why she didn't." James replied as he undid the lower button of his jacket.

Toni ran her hand across her hair and took a deep breath with her eyes closed. She thought she was missing something. She shrugged. "Why do you think my sister never mentioned me?"

"It's obvious. You are a lot prettier than she is. Very stunning and she is very sure that if I had just one glimpse at your photo before coming here, you would be going out with me on this date."

Toni smiled. "You flatter yourself."

"I try. Where is Nora?"

“She has to dress up. I think you arrived earlier than scheduled and I think you are seriously dressed.”

James stared at his jacket. “I like to look nice. First impressions count, you know?”

“You won’t go far with me. I like to wait for second impressions.” She replied as she rose to her feet. “I have to check in with Nora. I’ll be right back.”

James nodded as he relaxed in his seat.

“How does he look?” Nora asked as Toni shut the door.

Toni smiled. “He is cute, you have nice eyes.”

“I hope he likes me too...so tell me the important thing.”

Toni nodded. “He is wearing a suit. He is taking you to a classy restaurant, so you can pour your hair down for a start.”

“I can help myself. Go and talk with him. He is really interesting.”

Toni smiled. “He is. You always find the douchebags.”

“Stop. James is different. Nothing like the other guys I have met.” She said with a smile as she poured her hair down. “What gown do I wear?”

“I like that black one you wore for a fundraiser last month.”

Nora took a seat. “I already wore it once. I want a fresh slate with James.”

“You are a clown. It is just a date. It is not your marriage.”

Nora hissed. “You are very helpful, Toni. Thanks.”

Toni nodded. “You are welcome.”

“I think you should go and occupy James.”

Her sister grinned. “Of course...”

Nora grabbed her gown as soon as Toni shut the door after her.

“I see I am not very popular around here. You have left for me for like err...” James pulled up his sleeve to check the time. “Fifteen minutes.”

“Thirteen minutes.” Toni corrected with a smile.

James smiled. “Did you check the time or are you just trying to wow me with your intelligence?”

She shrugged. “I don’t wow people...it comes effortlessly.”

“Have lunch with me sometime.” James replied with a grin.

“Hitting on two sisters. Touché!”

He smiled. “It’s just lunch, I would like to know you better...maybe hook you up with one of my single buddies.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Why? You are beautiful, smart. Any guy’s catch.”

Toni nodded with a smile. “Did I mention I like football too? I hear you guys are into ladies that love football too...”

“My God! Where have you been all my life?” he asked with a smile.

She took a deep breath. “Stuck in between rooms.”

“Humour too...you are a real catch.” He continued. “Nora is taking forever.”

Toni smiled. “Don’t you guys just love a pretty lady?”

“We do.” He replied. “I am cute, right?”

She smiled. “Obviously.”

“Ah! Finally!” James exclaimed as he watched Nora descend the stairs.

“She is so beautiful.” Toni said with a smile and flashed her camera. “Souvenir for me. You are having her full beauty. I rarely ever get to see my sister dressed like this, so cherish the moment, James.” Toni said as she nudged him.

Nora smiled at Toni. “Thanks darling. Do take care of yourself.”

“What could possibly happen to her, guardian angel?” James asked as he gave Nora his hand.

Toni grinned. “Yeah...what could possibly happen to me?”

Nora shot a face at her sister and smiled at James. “Shall we?”

“Sure.” He replied.

Toni smiled as she stepped out of the house that evening. There was no way she was going to drive any of the cars when she could walk. She had only walked past two streets when she spotted the jerk from the bar sitting alone in a corner. She grinned to herself as she walked up to him. “Jerk!” she said.

Jerry stared at her and turned his face away.

She took her seat beside him with a smile. “I take it as you were drunk last night.”

Jerry ignored her.

“So...do you talk at all? Oh wait! You do talk so much...almost as though you don’t have a lid on it...so, why are you unusually quiet tonight?” Toni asked with a smile.

Jerry took a deep breath and clenched his fists together. He had been doing some self-evaluation until this lady appeared from nowhere to bug him. His fists were hungry to feast on her face...but then...it was not his style.

Toni smiled waiting for a response from him. She had expected a response to follow since he took a deep breath. Nothing followed. She poked her head before him with a smile. “You are ignoring me?”

“Look here, woman!” Jerry growled in a loud tone. “If you don’t have anything good to do with your life other than disturb others, just bloody leave me alone.”

Toni sat back with a smile. “That was supposed to hurt me, right?”

Jerry sighed.

“Look man, we all have problems...no, I call them challenges, and we can’t overcome all of them truthfully. But, we are bigger than life and its challenges, we just have to find a way around them.” She said, standing up.

Jerry took a glance at her and then turned his face away remorsefully. “I am sorry.” He muttered.

Toni smiled. “I can’t hear you.”

Jerry stared at her and nodded. “Okay, I am sorry.”

“A little louder?” she asked with a grin.

Jerry smiled faintly. “I am sorry.”

“Take care.” She said and walked away.

Jerry took a deep breath as he watched her walk away. He’d be a fool not to get her name this time. He knew it. He hurried after her. “Hey!” he said catching up. “You walk fast, you know?”

Toni turned at him with a smile. “Apart from the fact that you walk faster or slower when you walk alone, I also left that spot before you so it is logical that I am a few steps ahead of you, don’t you think?”

Jerry smiled. “That’s interesting.”

“I am interesting.”

He laughed. “You are cocky.”

She raised an eyebrow. "I thought that term was more familiar with the male folks." She replied as she started to walk.

"Oh well...eh, are you naturally this cool with everyone?"

Toni stopped. "I love people."

"I mean, we should love our brothers as ourselves, but, you are so...so welcoming."

Toni shrugged and continued to walk. "It is a way of life. Life is beautiful, it should be enjoyed with people. Why can't we all just love each other?"

"You are clearly from another planet. People will mess you up if you trust them too much." Jerry replied.

"Then you forgive, give people room to make mistakes."

Jerry stopped. "Do you live by this ideology?"

She smiled.

"Of course, you do. I was nasty with you and you were amazing. It's rare." He replied. "Do you mind if we continue this conversation at Tunji's Bar? It is just right around the corner. You could have water." He said with a smile.

"Okay."

Jerry pushed the door open and let Toni in. Tunji smiled as they took their seats at his table. "Interesting combo tonight."

"Evening man. I would have a glass of-"

"-Water. He would have water and same with mine." Toni interrupted.

Jerry stared at her. "Me? Water?"

Tunji smiled. "Yeah. Him? Water?" He asked, staring at Toni.

"Yeah. Water." She replied.

Jerry rubbed his forehead. "Okay, water it is."

"Smitten fool." Tunji said with a smile as he turned to get the water.

Jerry stared at Toni. "I...I didn't see that coming."

"We don't always see everything coming. Take for instance, eighty percent of girls that go out on dates with guys expect to get kissed at the end of the date but when the kiss eventually comes, they never see it coming." She replied.

Jerry smiled. "Is that a tested theory?"

“Technically, it is my theory.” She replied.

He folded her arms. “How come I have never seen you around before?”

“You saw me yesterday.” She replied with a chuckle.

He nodded. “I know. I mean, like, I have not seen you around really...”

“I am stuck in between rooms.”

He stroked his beard. “What does that mean?”

“I am always indoors.”

James smiled. “Are you telling me that I am the first guy that you would be out with?”

Toni laughed. “Of course, not.”

“Tell me about you.” Jerry said.

Tunji dropped bottles of water on their table with a smile. “Enjoy...” he said and walked away.

“Now that I think of it, water will be saving us a lot of money.” He said.

Toni nodded. “You are doing better with your sense of humour.”

“Back to you, so, tell me about you.” He said.

Toni folded her hand. “What’s there to know? Nothing....Actually, nothing.”

“Are you from Mars? Are your siblings aliens? Do you speak Mandarin?” Jerry asked.

She sipped her water. “Boring details. I live with my big sister and our parents are long dead.”

“I am so sorry.” Jerry said.

She finished her water. “It’s fine. I wish I knew them...anyway, let’s talk about you. What do you do?”

Jerry blinked. “What do I do?”

She nodded. “Yeah... for work.”

“Erm...I work in an investment bank.” He replied as he drank some water.

She sat back with a grin. “Investment banking? The last time I heard that, the guy turned out to be talking about a sperm bank...is that where you work?” she asked raising an eyebrow.

Jerry laughed. “Come on, can you be serious for like five seconds?”

Toni closed her eyes and counted one to five aloud. “Okay, serious moment is over. But really, what bank is that?”

“It’s a small microfinance bank. I am sure you won’t know it.” He said as he drank some more water.

Toni stared at him. “Do you really like water or do you drink water every time you tell a lie?”

“You are a mind reader too? Psychic?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Instincts.”

“Well, I work at a bank and that is that.” He replied defensively.

She sat up. “Bank jobs can be frustrating so I think I understand your mood earlier on.”

“I thought you said you love people, why would you see it frustrating?” James asked with a smile.

She drummed her fingers on the table. “Listen to this...A father loves his daughter, right?” James nodded. She nodded and continued “Good. If the father sees his child with sand in her mouth, does he like that? Obviously not. So, what does he do? He cleans her up. This doesn’t mean he didn’t love her even when the sand was in her mouth. It is just an ideology, man. People will hurt you, you just have to find your way around everything.” She concluded.

“You are something,” Jerry replied.

Toni took a deep breath and checked her wristwatch. “I’ll be on my way.”

“Wait, I didn’t get a name.”

She smiled and took steps away from him. “You never asked.”

Jerry sighed. “Please, what is your name?”

“Stranger.” She replied.

His shoulder fell. “Are you serious? I am Jerry. Tell me your name.”

“Stranger.” She replied.

He blinked. “Remember you love people, we should be friends.”

“We might as well be strangers.” She replied with a smile and walked out.

Jerry sighed as he sank into his seat. Tunji joined him immediately. “Still didn’t get a name?”

“Shut up, man.”

Tunji smiled. "Ladies like persistent guys, you should try harder...that is if you have a next time."

Jerry frowned. "Give me another glass of water."

"Excuse me?" Tunji said as he looked around. "She is no longer here, Jerry."

Jerry stared at him. "I just want some more water."

Tunji laughed. "No man, you are kidding me."

"Are you going to give me or not?"

Tunji nodded with a smile. "Of course."

Toni rushed downstairs as soon as she heard the dogs bark. Nora was back. She wouldn't miss a detail of her sister's date. "Nora." She said with a smile.

Nora closed the door and approached the stairs with a sad face. "Good evening."

Toni swirled as she watched her sister ascend the stairs. "Good evening? What happened to you? Did the police bust you?"

"That would have been better." Nora replied as she stopped to stare at Toni coldly.

Toni blinked. "How...How is James?"

Nora smiled cynically. "James? Of course, you had to ask."

Toni nodded. "Yeah. Why are you looking like this?"

"Don't you get it, Toni?" Nora shouted. "It is always about you! When James is not talking about how I happen to live in a mansion when I work as a customer care representative, he is talking about you."

Toni swallowed as she stepped back.

Nora pushed forward. "Oh...your sister is so gorgeous, she is so cute. Damn attractive...she is a stunner...every guy's lady and blah blah blah...Does it always have to be about you, Toni?"

"Take it easy, Nora." Toni replied.

Nora scowled. "Oh really??? Easy? Why would I take it easy when I don't have anything...you have everything!" she said panting heavily.

Toni raised her eyebrow. "Everything?"

Nora wiped her tears. “For once, Toni, can you not always turn the guy I like from me? Please.” She said and walked away.

Toni took a deep breath.

CHAPTER 3

Toni pushed her weight against the leather seat and focused on the Television. Nora was going to be fast asleep by now. Nora never took long once she hit the sheets. Toni took a deep breath as she reflected on her sister's words. She had never seen herself as selfish, she had only seen the men in her sister's life as the wrong men. James was new though and it might seem too quick to judge him, but he already got off on the wrong foot with his admiration for her. This was never going to please Nora.

Nora couldn't sleep. She didn't feel right after yelling at Toni. Toni had never been responsible for anything that happened to her but it was just convenient to blame it all on Toni. Toni was happy. She wasn't. Toni's happiness came from within, it was so beautiful that it confused everyone around her. Nora knew there was no sleep for her this time, on a good day, once she hit the sheets, she was gone. But today, it isn't one of those good days. She prayed that the door would open and Toni would come in to apologize as usual so as to make it easier for her, but the door wasn't going to open. She stared hard at the door and eventually forced it open.

"How long are you going to keep staring at that thing?" Nora asked as she descended the stairs.

Toni grinned as she heard her sister's voice. She then straightened her head with a frown.

"We both know that you don't like Fashion Police." Nora added as she joined Toni in the living room. "You think it is a waste of time, the clothes have been worn and awards have been..." Nora paused with a smile waiting for Toni to pounce on their mantra.

Toni stared at Nora coldly. "Every girl loves Fashion Police...and I am no exception."

"Really? Since when did my sister fit into the majority? I mean, that is so not Toni. Did you lose some nuts in your head when you went for your evening walk?" Nora asked.

Toni ignored her.

Nora took a deep breath and drew close to her sister. "I think we should watch football, I know you like to watch it. There should be a match tonight, right?"

Toni ignored her.

"Cristiano has the biggest abs, right?" Nora continued.

Toni sighed. "Quit trying. It just takes five letters. One word. I don't need the full three words."

“Sorry.” Nora said with a frown.

Toni smiled. “I can’t hear you.”

Nora nudged her sister. “I am sorry, Toni.”

“I need you to be a little more audible.” Toni said as she stuck her tongue out.

Nora smiled. “I am sorry.”

Toni nodded and hugged her. “The good guys will come. Always remember that.”

“It’s just that I really like James.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “And you really liked Nathaniel too...and what is the name of that other douchebag?”

“Ude.”

Toni laughed. “Yeah...you liked him too. You liked them all, but eventually, you let them go. The heart will eventually forget unrequited love, Nora. It doesn’t matter how long it takes.”

“Why do I always have to be the one giving out all the love and not getting any?” Nora asked.

Toni shrugged. “Probably you think you have been giving out love...maybe it is lust.”

Nora hissed. “Are you saying that I don’t know the difference between love and lust?”

“There is a thin line between.” Toni replied. “Anyway, just so I am not a spoiler, I actually think that James might like you, so you can be optimistic about it, but I’d advise you not to get your hopes up.” She added immediately.

Nora sighed. “Just one question...why do guys like you?”

“Isn’t it evident? I am alive.” Toni replied as she rose to her feet.

Nora frowned. “And I am dead?”

“Technically, you are dead...and to think I am the walking corpse.” Toni replied with a smile. “Live life a little, Sis. Let down your hair, play in the sun...maybe the rain, I won’t totally advise the rain because it is not as romantic as the movies make it, but Nora, you are beautiful and you have the right and ability to be happy. Don’t waste it.”

Nora stared at Toni. “You know I don’t like it when you talk like this.”

Toni smiled. “You know better, Sis.”

Nora nodded slowly. “We should go to bed now, I am tired of this day, I need a new one.”

“You will always need a new day, Nora. You don’t do anything with the one you have.”

Nora groaned. "Enough! I am tired. Is that better?"

Toni smiled. "Yeah. Let's go to bed."

"Where did you go to today?" Nora asked as they ascended the stairs.

Toni smiled to herself. "The bar,"

"No way!" Nora replied. "I don't even believe you."

Toni grinned. "Okay."

"Really, you want a job at my bar?" Tunji asked as he cleaned a glass.

Jerry hissed. "Don't flatter yourself, bro. I just need to be here more often, I need to see that girl again. Tell me, what have you gathered about her?"

"Nothing."

Jerry frowned. "Nothing? How is it possible that no one knows anything about a lady that I like?"

"You like her?" Tunji asked as he arranged some glasses.

Jerry shook his head disapprovingly. "No."

"I heard you well. No shame in liking a girl, brother." Tunji replied. "She is a stunner. Can take anyone at first glance."

Jerry sighed. "I need to see her...again."

"You have a name?" Tunji asked.

He nodded. "Yeah...very helpful name. Stranger."

Tunji laughed. "Bro, you just got zoned."

"Zoned?"

Tunji nodded. "The friend zone. Never a friendly zone to be in, when...no, if you get out, you are a Legend."

Jerry turned his face away.

"So, how come you have run away from the Hospital to get a job at the Bar? Very interesting change of job if you ask me." Tunji started as he stared at Jerry with keen interest.

Jerry nodded. "That is why I am not asking you."

“So, why don’t you like anyone knowing where you work? Being a Doctor is a very honourable profession, My Dad would have killed to see me hang a stethoscope around my neck.” Tunji replied.

Jerry grinned. “You can have my life. I certainly don’t want it.”

Tunji gaped. “Seriously? You don’t like it?”

“It is overrated.”

Tunji shrugged. “Says the Doctor...From where I am standing, you are living the life. Handsome wages, only that this is your life.” He said, staring at the liquor bottles. “Find a girl. Settle down. Stop drinking.”

“You will be out of business.” Jerry replied. “It is strange to find a barman tell his customer to quit. What is wrong with you?” he asked, laughing.

Tunji smiled. “That’s the first and last time I will tell you about it, I might not be interested in dissuading you tomorrow.”

Jerry nodded. “I like it here and now. Don’t bother trying again.”

“So...about your mystery girl, any plans to find her?”

Jerry scratched his hair lightly. “I don’t have any plans, but I will visit all the points at which I have met her until I find her.”

“This is the only meeting point.” Tunji said laughing.

Jerry smiled as he got up. “No. I have another spot.”

“And I guess you are going there?” Tunji asked.

Jerry shrugged with a smile. “It’s all the gold I have got.”

“All the best, bro.”

Jerry nodded and walked out of the bar and down the road. He took his seat at the spot where he had met ‘Stranger’. He stared at his wristwatch tensely as he hoped that she might just walk past.

Three long hours had passed and she was nowhere in sight. It was 9pm and she didn’t seem to him like the type who might stray at that hour. He tucked his hand in his jacket and walked away.

“Toni, are you sure about this?” Nora asked as she applied her lip gloss.

Toni smiled. “The night is still young.”

“I know, but then, Viber? I don’t like that club.” Nora replied.

Toni nodded. “I know, you met all the boys you have loved there, but then we have never seen James at Viber, so maybe this is a good sign...the dude won’t be there, you are in luck for the right man, finally.”

Nora sighed. “Toni, you don’t like that place either, why are you making us go there?”

“Nora, we don’t necessarily have to go to Viber, I just want you to go out. Shake up a little.” Toni said as she wore her wig. “By the way, I don’t like this wig, get me a new one, else, I’ll be rocking Amber style soon.”

Nora stared at her. “I think you are perfect with the wigs.”

“Let’s face the reality.” Toni replied.

Nora drank some water. “So...it’s been six months here, do you like it at all?”

“Do I like it? Nora, I don’t do anything...except but wait for the day I get another appointment.” Toni replied. “So, I love it.”

Nora nodded. “That’s good.”

“So, Nora, tell me, do you think you will get a second date with James, or should I hook you up?”

Nora scoffed. “Hook me up? I sure can take care of me, baby sis.”

“Yeah...right.” Toni replied as she slipped into her shoes. “Let’s go, baby.”

Nora nodded and picked up her phone. Her phone buzzed and James popped up as the Caller ID. “James is calling. What do I do?” she asked.

Toni grinned. “I thought you could take care of you.”

“Come on, Toni. Just help me, would you?”

Toni stared at her with a smile. “Ignore it.”

“Ignore what? This dude will never call me again in his life. He already thinks he is a diva.” Nora replied.

Toni shrugged. “Then why did you ask for my help?”

Nora stared at the missed call. “Missed call. Are you happy now?”

“Yeah. Let’s go party.” Toni replied.

“Remember you can’t be out too long, we would be back as soon as possible.” Nora started.

Toni stared at the clock. "It is 9pm and we are just heading out, how soon would we return, Nora dear?" she asked, cynically.

Nora's phone rang for a second time and she stared helplessly at Toni who rolled her eyes in disgust. "I have to take this, Toni."

"Make yourself happy." Toni replied and sank into the bed as she started to take off her shoes.

Nora walked away from her sister as she took the call. Toni watched her with a grimace as Nora blushed into the phone. Toni slowly started to take off her clothes. She knew better than to think she and her sister still had a date.

Nora returned to her with so much hope in her eyes.

"Don't bother telling me, go and meet him." Toni said as she changed into a pair of trousers.

Nora took her seat beside her. "It is just that James said he booked us two tickets to see this new movie."

"Movie?" Toni asked as she raised her eyebrow. "Can't we go together?"

Nora's face sank. "Toni..."

Toni smiled. "Of course, you know I was kidding."

"Can I go dressed like this?" Nora asked.

Toni stared at her. "I think you are slightly overdressed for the movies."

"So maybe I can wear that lemon top you got me last summer?" Nora asked as she hurried to the wardrobe. She was already pulling out the lemon top before waiting for any response from her sister.

Toni smiled as she watched her sister agitate. Nora was in love. The boys loved Toni effortlessly, she just didn't find herself loving anyone. She didn't bother to love anyone and her heart seemingly did cooperate with her and didn't fall for anyone too. *Talk about cooperation!*

Nora turned to her. "Toni, I don't think you should go anywhere tonight."

"So you can have fun and I can't?" Toni asked as she picked up her phone.

Nora sighed. "You know we don't have any friends here and the time is quite unholy."

"And I suppose you are going out at the holy hour?" Toni asked with a smile.

Nora frowned. "James is coming to get me. I am safe."

“Trust no man.” Toni cooed as she sprawled on the bed. “Don’t worry about me, I will go to bed.”

Nora nodded with a smile and pecked her sister. “I love you, darling.”

“You love James more.” Toni replied.

Nora rolled her eyes. “Don’t keep me here, I need to meet him downstairs.” She said, staring at her phone.

“*Na wa o!* He must have parked his car outside the house when he called.” Toni replied as she drew the blanket over her.

Nora smiled. “Do I look good?”

“You are beautiful, Nora. Always know that.”

Nora nodded, blew her sister a kiss and hurried out.

“You look beautiful.” James whispered to Nora.

Nora turned to him with a smile. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “So...how is Toni?”

“Toni is good.”

James nodded. “She didn’t want to come to the movies with us?”

“She was too tired.” Nora replied as she focused on the movie. “We should focus on the movie, you know.”

James nodded as he faced the screen. “I think your sister is really so much fun, she should rub off some happiness on you.”

“Really?” Nora asked as she nudged him. “Am I that boring?”

He nodded with a smile. “And stoic too...”

“Come on, James.”

He grinned as he focused on the screen. “What is the most spontaneous thing you have ever done?”

“I have been to Viber.”

James gaped as he stared at Nora. “Viber? You?”

Nora nodded confidently. “Yeah.”

“I can bet on anything that Toni took you there.” He said.

She smiled. “I can do some wild things too.”

“Are you trying to impress me?” James asked.

She scoffed. “Impress? I don’t need to...I am impressive.”

James smiled. “That sounds like a line Toni would use.”

Nora sighed heavily.

James wrapped his hand around Nora and drew her closer. “I think you are beautiful as you are and you really don’t need to bring a Toni swag to impress anyone.”

Nora pulled herself away from him. “You think I was not being me?”

He nodded. “That was Toni.”

“You don’t even know Toni.” She replied.

He shrugged. “Maybe not as well as you do know her, but, I have spent some minutes with her to guess how she talks and I see you every day at work to know how well you talk.”

“You notice me?”

He smiled. “From Day one that you stepped into our office.”

The man sitting beside James cleared his throat. “I am trying to see a movie.” He grunted.

James chuckled as he stared at Nora. “Do you want to go to someplace quiet?”

She nodded.

James took her hand and led her outside. Their exit was greeted with howls and throwing of popcorns at them.

Nora laughed as they stepped outside. “I thought that only happened in movies.”

“That was the movies.” James replied as he picked popcorns out of her hair.

She smiled as though her face was going to crack. It was just her and James and it seemed like something real was happening.

“Come on, let’s go.” James said as he walked ahead. “We would walk till we can walk no more.”

Nora smiled. “Now that is a real movie line.”

He nodded. “I am glad you know that. So, tell me Nora, you just joined us say six months ago and rumour has it that you might be leaving us soon, I am not surprised because you have a lot of money from your house and car, but, why so soon?”

“And I am guessing that Ehis is the one that started the rumour?” Nora asked.

He nodded. “The whole office is thinking you are leaving soon.”

“Do you think I am?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I am asking you right now, are you?”

“I...I don't think so. It all depends on Toni.” She replied.

James stared at her. “Toni? How does she come to play in all this?”

Nora rubbed her forehead. “Toni...Toni is a bit of a traveller. We spend our inheritance travelling round the world...and touching lives too.”

“A lot of money your parents must have left for you guys.” James said as they walked.

Nora shrugged.

“So, you must be the serious sister who can't do without a job that you decided to get a job to keep yourself busy...hmmm...and to think the guys at work don't know how loaded you are...I should start blowing your trumpet.”

“And risk my house being burgled?” Nora asked.

He shrugged. “With the kind of security you have, that shouldn't be a problem.”

She smiled. “Interesting observation.”

“I take notice of everything...every little thing.” He replied.

She raised an eyebrow. “Security isn't tiny detail, you know?”

“I know...but really, I think you should get your sister to work, staying in all day can be really depressing.”

Nora shrugged. “Toni doesn't mind, besides, nothing brings her down.”

“You think so?” He asked.

She nodded, “I know so.”

Toni stared at herself in the mirror and let the tears stream down her eyes. She didn't have the right or reason to dream...to expect....to want. She just lived. Sometimes, she hoped. Other times, she prayed.

She took off the wig slowly. Her hair had started to grow again, she smiled as she touched the roots. She took a deep breath as she thought about the call that she had been expecting

for six months in a corner of her heart. In the other part of her mind, she didn't want to receive the call. She just wanted to live.

She pulled out her 'sober coin' from the drawer as tossed it on the table. It had been almost five years since she last touched a bottle. Moments like this took her back to her life before the bad news came. She was the official party rocker. Booze...Late nights, she lived what her friends would have termed "the life".

She however realised that what others called the life was nothing close to what a real life was. Every day that passed only drew her closer to a day she wasn't sure she really wanted to see.

Staring at the mirror was always a moment for her to reflect. She wondered if one day she would actually wake up and realise that the last five years in her life had never happened and that the days that she lived now might just be struck by a miracle. She hoped and prayed that it might happen. She had been told several times that God does answer prayers, she believes in God. She knows that he does answer prayers and that her last five years on earth was proof that God did answer prayers.

She took a deep breath and lay on the bed. She would try to sleep.

Jerry turned off the alarm as it buzzed violently. "I don't have to obey you for the next two weeks." He shouted as he drew the blanket over himself. He had forgotten to change the timer from three am, he usually had his morning shift as early as five in the morning.

No sooner had he settled in the second round of his sleep than his phone buzzed him back to life. "I should have turned off the vibration." He said as he drew the phone to himself. "Tunji? Why is he calling me?" He said to himself as he picked the call. "What's up, man?"

"Guy! I think I just saw your girl."

Jerry stared at the clock. "Dude? Have you been drinking?"

"No. She has been drinking." Tunji replied.

CHAPTER 4

“Hey, Stranger.”

Toni turned and stared at him with a smile. “Stranger.”

He smiled as he stared at her bottle. “Water?”

“Yeah.” She replied.

Jerry scoffed. “Do you mind if I term this hypocrisy?” he asked as he took a seat. “I mean, you can get water from the comfort of your home.”

She smiled at him. “Do you mind if I term this stalking?” she asked. “Why would you be here at this exact moment?”

“I came to get a drink.” He replied as he ordered for a scotch.

She nodded cynically. “Alcoholics usually have a bottle in their fridge at home and really won’t have the need to come out at this time to get a drink.”

“Probably.” He replied.

She smiled at him. “Why are you here, Jerry?”

“You do know my name? And I don’t get the privilege to know yours? Amazing” he replied as he focused on his drink. Stranger was silent. He then turned to her. “I came to get a drink. Really.”

She stared at his footwear. “Your fluffy slippers have given you away, my dear.”

Jerry gaped as he stared at his slippers. He had hurried out of the bedroom desperately with his bathrobe on and his pyjamas when he heard she was drinking, but he didn’t think he went on with the fluffy slippers too. He sighed as she grinned at him.

“Let me guess, Tunji alias I-won’t-keep-my-mouth-shut, alerted you of my presence here and you dashed down without even worrying about your slippers?” she suggested with a smile.

Jerry frowned.

“I think I just got myself a new fan, right?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Jerry shrugged. “Really....why are you here at this time? It is really early in the morning.”

“I just needed some respite for my soul.”

He stared at her. "Respite?"

She nodded. "Sounds funny?"

"No. Sounds interesting." He responded as he collected the glass from Tunji.

She seized the glass. "It is too early to booze, don't you think?" she asked.

"Well...I really don't know about the timing. I have never really worried about it. I need to be in the right frame for official duties." He replied.

"And you need alcohol to be in the right frame of mind?" she asked. "You have a serious drinking problem, Jerry."

He nodded. "I know."

"I know this help support group that help people with drinking issues. You should reach out to them."

He sighed. "My liver isn't complaining yet."

"How would you know?" she asked.

"I just know." He replied.

She took a deep breath and slid some money on the table. "I think I am done here." She said as she handed Tunji the glass of scotch. "Help him a little."

Tunji shrugged. "I just sell drinks."

"Yeah. He is just selling, Stranger." Jerry echoed. "What do you care?"

She smiled and walked out. Jerry dashed after her. "Why won't I get a name? This is not cool, you know?"

"Stranger is a nice name." she said as she walked.

Jerry walked beside her. "I guess I just have to stick with the anonymity?"

She smiled. "Take your chances, friend."

"So...why not just have a glass of water in the comfort of your home?" Jerry asked.

She stared at him. "Sometimes, the home is not as comfortable as it seems."

"But the bar is empty at that time too...you could have just stayed in. It is unsafe to be on the street at this time." He replied.

"Unsafe? Do I look like I am worried about a thing?" she asked as she started to walk along.

Jerry pulled her back. "Stranger."

Toni stopped as she stared at him. "What is it?"

"How are you so fearless?" he asked.

She sighed. "It is always never as it seems."

"Are you trying to tell me that you are frail? Weak?"

She smiled. "I am not weak."

He nodded. "That is obvious."

"I am heading home now." She replied as she turned away.

Jerry joined her. "I will walk you home...and you can't protest. Sorry."

She smiled. "I didn't plan to." She replied as they walked. "Tell me about your work at the bank."

Jerry sighed. "What is there to tell? It is boring, unadventurous and just about saving money for a couple of old folks."

"Where is the bank located?" she asked.

He pointed out the direction. "It is the obsolete microfinance bank down the lane."

She smiled. "Of course, I know where the bank is. It is depressing enough to work in a bank that no one goes to. How did you ever get a job there in the first place?" she asked with a soft chuckle as they walked on.

"I have an Old pal there, so he set me up." He replied.

She nodded. "Fair enough. But I don't think you earn enough from such a place, you shouldn't be spending so much time in a bar."

"Do you think I am broke?" He asked.

She smiled. "Are you?"

"No. I am living off some old stashed away money. Drug money." He added with a smile.

She hissed. "Not impressed."

"Are we still far from your home?" he asked.

She shook her head in disagreement. "No." she replied as they turned into the next street. "My house is just here." She added as they stopped in front of the house.

Jerry stared at the house. "Really? You live here?"

She nodded. "Yes."

“Funny enough I have never been to this part of the hood...and I have never seen you.” He said as he stared at the building.

“Thank you for walking me home.” She said.

Jerry nodded. “My pleasure, Stranger. My pleasure.”

Toni stared at her wristwatch. “Do you want to come in for coffee?”

“Coffee?”

She nodded. “Black. Low Fat. It tastes better than alcohol. Trust me.”

Jerry took a deep breath. “I’ll take you by your word.”

“Good.” She replied and opened the gate.

Nora stood before her with a stern frown. James was standing behind her.

“Hi, Sis.” Toni greeted quickly.

Nora stared at James. “Where are you coming from?”

“Went out.” Toni replied. She stared at Jerry. “Meet Jerry.”

Jerry stretched his hand out to Nora. Nora stared at Jerry from head to toe and then took his hand. “Nice outfit.”

Jerry smiled faintly. He then turned towards Toni. “I guess the coffee might come some other day.”

Toni nodded. “Sure.”

“Alright. Goodbye.” Jerry said as he turned to leave,

“Goodbye.” Nora replied firmly.

Jerry nodded and started to walk away.

“Toni!” Toni called.

Jerry turned towards her with a smile.

Toni nodded. “Toni is the name.”

He smiled and walked on.

“Do you mind telling me what that was about?” Nora asked as she stared at Toni.

James joined them. “Hi, Toni.”

“Hello. Did you guys have a nice time?” Toni asked.

Nora interrupted. “I am talking to you, Toni.”

Toni sighed. "I went out, Nora. Simple."

"Strange to see that you decided to have fun, why did you turn down my invite to the movie?" James asked.

Toni stared at Nora. "I did?"

"Yeah...your sister said you weren't coming." James replied.

Toni nodded. "Yes. I needed to rest."

"Oh...Okay...then, why did you go out with Mr. Nice outfit?" James asked.

Toni scoffed as she stared at Nora. "Nora, can you tell him that I am twenty-three and I make my own decisions?" she shouted as she walked inside.

James felt heat flush across his face as he turned towards Nora. "I...I am sorry. I didn't mean to upset her."

Nora nodded. "It's okay. Just ignore it."

"Okay...I should be on my way now." He said as he pecked Nora. "Bye." He added and walked away.

Nora joined Toni in the living room. "I demand an explanation for that, Toni." Nora started.

Toni rolled her eyes. "Is there a part where you apologise for lying about James not wanting me to join you guys?"

"Toni..." Nora stressed. "We are not going there."

Toni sank into a seat laughing. "Why do you always do this, Nora?"

"Do what?" Nora started. "I didn't tell you and that is that...now you should tell me why you went out without any good notice."

Toni smiled. "Nora, do you actually think I would let that slide?" she asked.

Nora took a seat opposite her. "James likes me."

"Good for you." Toni replied without any smile.

Nora swallowed. This wasn't typical of her sister. "Toni, what is going on?"

Toni groaned. "You are the problem. You are your own competition, Nora. Look in the mirror, who do you see? It is you. I am not chasing you, I can't chase even if I wanted to. You know this. I don't have the strength. I am not your problem, you are your own problem. Do you think I care if James wants me out with you guys or not? I don't. I only care that you think I am a competition! Since when did a corpse become your competition, Nora?"

Tears started to stream down Nora's eyes.

Toni sighed and pulled off her hair wig. "Look at me, anytime from now, the doctor will call and I will be in chemo. Is this what you are scared of? I might not even live through the next six months, Nora." She shouted.

Nora swallowed painfully as the tears flowed uncontrollably. "Stop it, Toni."

"Nora, you have lived all your life for me and I love you for it. You are a beautiful and strong woman. You are alive, Nora. Live a little." Toni concluded as she wiped her eyes.

Nora drew closer to her sister. "Stop it, Toni. Just stop it."

"Look, Nora, I can't save you from yourself. You deserve the best in life, don't let anyone take that away from you." Toni added as she kissed her sister's forehead. "Goodnight."

Nora broke down in tears as Toni left for the bedroom. She had seen the side of Toni that she last saw many years ago when she first heard that she had Cancer. Toni had locked herself up in her room and cried for days. Nora had prior knowledge of her sister's medical condition but a surgery had been done when Toni was very little and they had all thought it was over, but five years ago, Toni was diagnosed with a Malignant Brain Tumour. The then cerebrovascular disease had turned out to be a tumour years after.

Toni had gone through a horrible stage of denial and after a while, she slowly started to come to terms with the fact that she might be gone soon. A year passed and she survived. This was her fifth year living with Cancer. She lived as though she didn't have any worries, truly, she didn't. She was doing a countdown with her days.

Toni had been in and out of surgical wards going under the knife as she struggled to live with the tumour. It was as though the tumour was never going to be suppressed. The last oncologist they had seen had suggested that she started chemotherapy as she suffered epileptic seizures after the surgeries. Toni didn't want to have to watch her hair fall off effortlessly so she shaved it off herself in preparation for when she would eventually start her sessions.

Six months ago, they had changed cities. Toni wanted a new air. She chose Lagos. Nora wondered why Lagos would be an option with the chaos in the city, but for Toni, she didn't mind. They could move anywhere. The first thing Nora did on their arrival was register Toni in the Hospital, she had not visited the Hospital since her registration. There was no need to. The drugs were working just fine.

Nora hated herself for making Toni cry. Toni had stopped caring about her condition, she never referred to it. She had learned to live above it, but the argument about James had sparked Toni up. Nora felt ashamed of herself. She had always seen Toni as the threat right from when they were little. Toni was the class clown, always had everyone laughing. Toni was the kid who came home with B's and C's, but still had her parents smile. Nora made straight A's, but she was the serious child. She didn't see Toni's life as responsible back then. Nora would lock herself up and study while Toni would play with friends. They were

totally different. Toni was always happy. She wasn't. She wished she could be like her sister a little, but she always found herself 'too serious' for fun.

The first news that got Toni depressed was when she learnt about her Cancer. Toni was depressed for months and she would not speak to anyone. She spent her days in the room and nights in the church. The first statement Toni uttered when she got out of her depression was, "I would live this life I have."

Nora wondered how her sister could wake up with a smile every day and still appear as radiant as she always did. Toni's joy confused her. Nora convinced herself that God made Toni happy.

Nora let the thoughts continue to flow her mind as she cried herself to sleep.

The sun rays came into Toni's eyes. She touched her scalp as she yawned. "What do you want Nora?" she asked.

"It is nine am, you have to use your drugs now." Nora replied as she pulled off the blanket from Toni's body. "Good morning."

Toni crawled up together. "This is why I didn't want you getting that leave."

Nora smiled. Her sister was coming around again. "You are stuck with me."

"I don't have to be." Toni said as she jumped up. "I can poison you."

Nora smiled. "Seriously?"

Toni nodded. "Yeah. Where is my toothbrush?"

"In the bathroom." Nora replied.

Toni flashed a horrid grin at Nora and left for the bathroom. Nora took a deep breath and smiled. All was forgiven! She started to clear the bed...then, Toni's diary dropped. Nora gasped as she stared at the diary. She picked it up slowly and opened it as she took a seat. (*You don't want to ready a girl's diary standing*) Toni had never kept her diary where it could be seen. "She must have written an awful lot last night before falling asleep." Nora thought to herself as she turned the first page. She smiled as she saw the hazard drawing on it. "BEWARE...I AM NOT WHAT I WRITE"

The tap stopped flowing in the bathroom and Nora shut the diary hastily and replaced it on the bed. Toni came out with a smile. "Can you help administer my injection?" she asked. Toni knew Nora dreaded doing it, she was always scared of sending the dose in wrongly. They had a Nurse come over to the house to do this daily.

"But Toni, you know that..." Nora started.

Toni hissed. "I was messing with you." She replied as she picked up her diary. Nora threw her face away as though she didn't see the diary. Toni took one glance at Nora. "Be careful what you seek...you might just find it." Toni cooed with a smile.

Nora smiled back at her sister. Toni smiled so beautifully that Nora could hardly believe that her sister was sick. "Can I have your smile, Toni?" Nora asked.

"I only smile for you." Toni replied as she started to slip into her bathrobe.

Nora raised an eyebrow. "So, who was that cutie you brought at night?"

"Jerry?" Toni asked.

Nora nodded.

"He is a friend." Toni replied.

Nora pulled her sister back to the bed. "A friend?"

Toni nodded slowly. "Don't worry...there is nothing going on."

"You think so?" Nora asked as she started to tickle her sister. "A boy likes you."

Toni scoffed. "Boys like me."

"Do you like him?" Nora asked.

Toni grinned. "I like people...but, you know I am not selfish."

"Falling in love is selfish?" Nora asked.

"On my part, yes. Why would I get anyone's hope up and dash it the next minute?" Toni asked. "I don't do that to people. I don't fall in love."

"You have no control over the heart, you know?" Nora replied.

Toni nodded. "I already wielded this heart to do my will."

"Liar! Liar!" Nora replied.

Toni hissed. "Believe whatever you want to...Have you ever wondered why I haven't dated anyone? I am not going to hurt anyone. Also, once I make a male friend, like a good male friend, I immediately tell him that I have Cancer and I keep my distance. Case closed."

Nora started to smile sheepishly.

"What is it?" Toni asked, sounding upset.

Nora shrugged. "It is just that you are slightly defensive. Hmmm...am I missing something about Mr-Jerry-nice-outfit?"

Toni scowled. "Really, Nora? Really?"

“I am just saying, Toni. You should tell me these things. I am your mommy.”

Toni smiled. “You are stupid.”

“I know.” Nora replied as she smiled.

Toni frowned. “I am going to the bathroom.”

“Apparently.” Nora replied. “You know, I think Jerry is really cute.”

Toni’s shoulders fell. “Are you going to continue with this? I am not bothered.”

“Why did you bring him home, Toni?” Nora asked, smiling.

“I am not like you, Nora. I am not thinking in the direction you are going.”

Nora grinned. “Why did you even think I was going there, Toni? Hmmm...The heart of man.”

Toni picked up her pillow and slammed it on Nora. “I hate you.”

“I love you.” Nora replied.

Toni slammed the pillow on her for a second time. “Stop it, Nora.”

Nora chuckled as she picked up a pillow and slammed it on Toni. They laughed as they started a pillow fight. They laughed as they hit each other with pillows. Toni enjoyed every bit of it...she saw her sister having some fun.

Emeka wiped his mouth. “You cook well, man. Thanks.”

“Guy, wash the plate.” Jerry replied as he ate some rice. “Before we know it, you are out of here.”

Emeka grinned as he placed the plate in the sink. “Blessed is the man who gives his brother some food.”

“What part of the beatitudes is that? Also, quick reminder, you are not my brother. You only want my food.” Jerry added.

Emeka smiled. “I miss you at the Hospital.”

“Lies! I am sure that survival rate at the Hospital has gone up by a hundred percent since I got suspended.”

Emeka nodded with a smile as he started to wash the plate. “Strange...but true. Guy, are they following from your village?”

“I have never been to my village.” Jerry replied.

Emeka clapped his hand. “Ah! You need to go and beg those women there! You must have been married off to one babe who is tying down your success.”

Jerry stared at him looking infuriated. “What sort of nonsense is that?”

“Dude, these things might sound fetish, but, e dey happen o! You will be surprised that one girl is waiting for you to come and marry her in the village.”

“Well, she will wait forever.” Jerry replied as he dug his fork into the food.

Emeka grinned. “Why na? It’s not as if you have found a girl here.”

Jerry was silent. He just smiled.

Emeka hurried to him. “Bad guy! Who is she?”

“Man, I don’t even know how to describe her...she...she just has my heart in her hand.” Jerry said with a smile.

Emeka clasped his hands on his head. “Guy, your own don finish be that o! Na your mumu button she don press o!”

“I don’t care what she pressed, bro. I just want to be with her.” Jerry replied.

Emeka drew a seat near Jerry. “Tell me, where did you meet her? Tell me everything.” He said as he picked Jerry’s meat and tossed it into his mouth.

“You dey mad?” Jerry said as he grabbed his throat.

Emeka freed himself. “Be a friend!”

“My food! My meat! You can have head too!” Jerry stuttered.

Emeka smiled. “Oya talk...where did you meet this babe? Let me see, is she is a stunner, where is her picture?”

“Stunner? Shocker nko?” Jerry joked. “I met her at the bar.”

Emeka frowned. “Bar? Call girl? Guy!”

Jerry charged at him. “She is not!”

Emeka calmed him. “Sorry, bro. It’s just that meeting a girl at a bar is not good...she will drain your pocket.”

“Really? And I suppose your girlfriend that you met in the Church is a saint? I remember how she makes you give her money every time o, yet, she doesn’t stop using Jehovah Jireh as her personal message on BBM.” Jerry replied.

Emeka laughed. “Okay...you win. What is her name? Tell me something interesting.”

“Toni. Her name is Toni. She is beautiful, she is smart, and I think I am in love with her.” Jerry concluded.

CHAPTER 5

Emeka took a seat, taken aback by Jerry's words. Jerry looked serious. This, in part, delighted Emeka and also worried him. "Love is a strong word, Jerry." He said.

Jerry nodded. "You have never heard me say it before. This time it is real." Emeka sighed. Jerry drew close to him. "You should meet this lady, she is amazing. I was struck from day one. She is so beautiful, and I am not just talking about her face, she has a beautiful personality too...you should see her when she smiles, Dude, she is-"

"-Abeg jare! Have I met the girl?" Emeka said, cutting him off.

Jerry hissed. "You are just jealous."

"I think I am...I don't talk about my babe with this much excitement." Emeka replied. Jerry started to smile at this. "But then, she is not your woman." Emeka chipped in immediately, cutting off Jerry's excitement.

Jerry frowned. "You don't have to rub it in. I am thinking of taking her to the movies with me. The cinema is a nice place to take a lady, right?" he asked.

Emeka started to whistle.

"Emeka, I am not used to these things. Be nice."

Emeka turned to him with a smile. "So, you need me to tell you where to take her?"

Jerry nodded. "Obviously. What kind of place do you take a lady...I mean, fun stuff. So that she might want to go out with me another day."

Emeka took a deep breath. "What if she turns you down?"

"I am not looking at that possibility. She won't turn me down." He replied.

Emeka stroked his beard. "The Movies is a good start. When your friendship progresses and you think she might have subtle feelings for you, you should introduce the beach, it gives you guys the avenue to walk and trust me, a lady would love to take a walk with a man she loves. Key word, a man she loves. So, I am sorry for you if this lady doesn't love you."

Jerry swallowed at this.

Emeka smiled as he continued. "You can also take her to a fancy restaurant on a dinner date, another good option is to take her to Jazz night or see a Rock band, but be careful, ladies love rockers and you may not come back with her."

Jerry frowned. "You can stop with the advice."

"But I am not through. We are yet to get to the part where you start having dates at Shopping Plazas, bro, your life is over when that starts. I know you are well endowed with money from the Hospital, but once you start visiting boutiques for clothes, jewelleries, you can start counting your loss." Emeka said.

Jerry smiled.

Emeka stared at him. "You think it is funny?"

"No. I now know why you are always so bitter. I mean, that babe you are about to marry will make you pensive. No offence, bro." Jerry replied.

Emeka hissed. "And you think this girl you like won't drain you?"

"I am ready to be drained for her." Jerry replied with a smile.

Emeka smiled cynically. "*Ode!*"

"Now that I think of it, you should thank the Director on my behalf for this two weeks suspension. I am going to use it to the peak." Jerry said as he picked up his phone. "I should pay her a visit this afternoon. I don't have her number, but I have her address" Jerry rambled on.

Emeka nodded. "You can be rest assured that I will tell that to the Director. So, what would you tell her about your job when she asks why you have so much free time?"

"Hmmm...I am on leave." Jerry replied. "Besides, I told her I work in a bank."

Emeka stared at him. "Why?"

"I...I don't know. I am not proud about being a failing Doctor."

Emeka laughed. "Failing Doctor? Man, you don't lie to people you love."

"Are you preaching to me? Don't you lie to your fiancée?" Jerry asked.

Emeka smiled. "I am not proud of it. And I just think that if you love her as much as you claim, you should tell her the truth about your profession."

"She already knows I drink. How is she going to like me? A Doctor that drinks? A custodian of life that is careless? That is how she would see me." Jerry replied. "I can't let her know that I am a Doctor. I am also a failure in the field, what is there to talk about?"

Emeka sighed. "I get your point, but, I am sure that if she is as amazing as you say, she would relate with you, you might even gain her sympathy."

“I don’t want her sympathy. I won’t let her feel sorry for me. I just don’t want her to see me in that light. It is totally ridiculous.” Jerry replied.

Emeka nodded slowly. “Quick question, Jerry. What if this lady falls in love with you, do you think you can keep up with the lie forever? The truth will eventually come out and trust me, you won’t like it when a woman finds out that you have been keeping things from her.”

Jerry wiped some perspiration off his forehead. “I don’t know what will happen when...if that eventually happens.”

“No, Jerry. When the truth eventually comes out. I promise you, the truth is something that would eventually come out, you can be rest assured that I got your back on this, but I just want you to know what you might be getting yourself into.” Emeka said.

Jerry nodded. “Thanks a lot.”

“So, when is the first date going to be?” Emeka asked, standing up.

Jerry shrugged. “I will ask her today when I go to her place. If all goes well, Friday night.”

“Good choice. Jerry, just one pointer, you might want to keep a good track of all the lies you tell her.” Emeka said. “Maybe write it down in a diary.” He added quickly.

Jerry raised an eyebrow. “I don’t get.”

“Ladies don’t forget a thing. I don’t know how they do it, but, they remember every tiny detail. And I hope you know that you would have to tell many lies to cover up the little lie you have started with, so, I would advise that you get your brain ready to remember every little lie you tell, because, they will be your undoing in the end.” Emeka concluded with a smile.

Jerry swallowed. “I don’t know why you are being very negative.”

“I am only being honest, bro. I wish you the best, man. I would be glad if you can tell her the truth about your profession before she finds out though.” He said grinning.

Jerry opened his door. “Thanks.”

Emeka smiled. “See you later, Doctor Jerry.”

Jerry frowned as he pushed Emeka out of the house.

Toni brushed Nora’s hair backward. “You should feed your hair more.” She started. “The hair needs to be healthy and to be healthy, it needs food.”

“Rice and Beans?” Nora asked.

Toni pulled a grimace. "Is that you being funny?"

Nora nodded with a smile. "I try."

"No. Failed effort." Toni retorted. "Anyway, how much do you pay Ehis for the wigs she supplies you?"

Nora turned her head over her shoulder quickly. "Are the wigs of low quality?"

Toni smiled. Her sister might just have Ehis' head for dinner if she had even pulled a joke at the moment. "Chill, babe, I just think you are spending too much on buying me wigs. I want to leave my scalp."

Nora swallowed painfully. "No, Toni. You can't do that."

"Why not, Nora? Eventually the whole world will see the scalp." Toni replied as she continued with Nora's hair. "I just think the money could be channelled into other things."

Nora scoffed. "Toni, stop being modest. I am not buying wigs of fifty grand, you pump enough money into your charity organization monthly, and we don't need to donate the money for your beautification too."

Toni giggled.

"What is funny?" Nora asked.

Toni smiled. "Beautification is funny. The context I mean." She replied.

Nora sighed. "I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy. You should sing that hymn in reverse." Toni replied.

Nora nodded. "I am trying to be happy."

Toni smiled as she packed the hair. "Your hair is looking lovely. You should pay me for this." She said as she stepped away and took her seat on the edge of the bed. "Nora..."

"Yeah..." Nora replied sloppily as she checked the hair in the mirror.

Toni stroked her eyebrow gently, at least, she still had that. "Do you think that I...I might live?"

Nora's face fell as she turned to her sister. "I know you would live. People get through Cancer every time. You are a fighter and I know that you would."

Toni nodded slowly. "Why then do you stare at me every night? Why do you waste your time keeping vigils over me every night?"

Nora took her seat beside Toni. "I...I just love watching you sleep."

Toni's eyes started to get wet. "You don't have to lie to me. You think I might just go."

Nora cleaned her sister's eyes. "You are not going anywhere...I have to go first, remember? I am older than you, it should be turn by turn." she said with a soft chuckle.

Toni smiled. "Death is not a respecter of anyone."

"God gives life." Nora replied as she kissed her sister's forehead. "I love you, Toni."

Toni pulled herself away from Nora. "Don't get all mushy on me."

Nora chuckled. "So... What do you want for breakfast?"

"Your head." Toni replied as she crawled up on the bed.

Nora frowned. "Babe, I don't have time for your jokes this morning. I need to get your food ready now, so, tell me what you want to eat."

"I really don't know. I would have whatever you decide to cook." Toni replied.

Nora nodded as she approached the door. "I'll be back then." She said and walked out.

Toni pulled out her diary and started to scribble.

"New Guy: His name is Jerry and yes...I really like this one."

She shut the diary and left the bedroom.

"What are you doing here?" Nora asked as soon as she saw her sister.

Toni took a seat. "Watching you cook."

"You know that you don't have to be here." She replied.

Toni nodded. "I know I don't have to be here, but, I want to be."

Nora sighed. "Fine. Have it your way."

The doorbell went. Toni stared at the wall clock. "Early visitor. Hmmm...doesn't James sleep at night?" Toni asked with a grin as she strolled out of the kitchen to the door.

Jerry stood before her with a smile as soon as she opened the door. "Good morning."

Toni closed the door after her as she shoved Jerry outside. "Morning, Jerry."

"I see you don't want me inside." He replied.

She folded her arms. "Why won't I want you inside? I am just surprised that you are here this early instead of being at work. Don't they miss you there?"

"I...I don't think I can lie about what I want to say." He started.

Toni smiled faintly. "Don't worry, Jerry. It is a thing of the mind."

“Can...Can you just quit with the...the sarcasm...I am trying to say something serious here.” Jerry said as he stuttered. He placed his hand behind his back as he crossed his fingers.

“Okay, I am listening.” She replied.

The door opened and Nora joined them. “Look who we have here.” She said as she stared keenly at Jerry. “Mr Nice Outfit!”

“The name is Jerry.” He said, stretching out a hand.

Nora took the hand calmly and turned to Toni. “Why did you leave your guest standing outside?”

Toni gaped. “We were-”

“-No. I was just leaving.” Jerry said hastily.

Nora gripped him by the arm. “No way, you just got here. Please, come in with us. Breakfast is ready.”

Toni sighed.

Nora smiled at her. “Let the gentleman come in, won’t you?”

Toni flashed an awkward grin at her. “Of course, I will.” She said and turned in Jerry’s direction. “Please, eat with us.”

“I already had breakfast.” He replied.

Toni smiled. “You would love this one.”

“Besides, you can’t turn two ladies down. It’s so ungentlemanly.” Nora added quickly.

Jerry nodded. “Okay, then.”

Nora smiled and led the way into the house.

“So, tell me, what do you do?” Nora started as she stared at Jerry.

Jerry cleared his throat as he prepped himself to continue his lie. “I am a Banker. I work in the Microfinance bank down the lane, the sort of investment bank that we have here.”

Nora nodded. “I know that bank. Does anybody still visit there? I think you should consider a switch of jobs.”

Jerry smiled. “I am happy to help there. I am doing someone a favour by being there.”

“Oh...that’s noble. But, I am more concerned about what the bank does for you than what you do for the bank.” She replied.

Toni watched her sister interrogate Jerry as though she was her mother. She didn't contribute to their discussion and continued to eat her meal.

"I work in the Customer Care Unit of the leading service provider in this nation." Nora bragged.

Toni hissed.

Nora flinched at her. "It is..."

Toni nodded cynically and reached for her phone. She dialled her sister's number on it. Nora's phone rang to Toni's delight.

Nora smiled as she saw her phone ring. "Private Caller. I have to take this, guys." She said and picked the call. "Hello...Hello...Hello..."

"Talk about leading service provider." Toni said with a grin. "That is a traditional network problem with them, you can call endlessly and not hear anything from the other end." Toni concluded.

Nora dropped the phone on the table. "This is just a slight hitch, Jerry. It doesn't always happen like that, I can assure you."

Jerry nodded with a smile. "I quite agree with you."

Nora smiled at Toni. "In your face, Toni. In your face." She said and then turned towards Jerry. "Just so you know, banking is a good profession and I have nothing against it, but I just think you should consider a change of jobs."

"Mom, he has heard you." Toni interrupted.

Nora nodded. "So, off to the main question. What are your intentions for my sister?"

Toni spilled her drink from her mouth. "Nora!"

Jerry smiled. "It's okay. I want to take her out this Friday, if you don't mind."

Nora nodded. "I don't mind. Toni, you are going out this Friday."

Toni rolled her eyes. "This is just amazing." She muttered.

Jerry smiled at Toni. "Do we have a date?"

"Of course, you have a date." Nora replied. "Ensure you bring her back home by midnight."

Toni shook her head. "I have my own mouth, you know?"

"Yeah...and I also know that you have a way of making the wrong decisions when I don't wave my magic wand in your direction." Nora replied.

Jerry sighed. "You are really cool together."

Nora smiled. "We try."

Toni stared at Nora. Her sister was unnecessarily excited and this worried her. She had always wanted to rub off some goodness on Nora, but something seemed to have gone wrong somewhere, Nora was overjoyed and jumping in and out of every conversation that she would naturally not want to have.

"Quit staring at me." Nora said to Toni.

Toni smiled. "Done."

FRIDAY NIGHT

Emeka handed Jerry a blue tie. "I think this should go."

"It is just the movies, right? I think I am overdoing it." Jerry replied as he stared at the tie.

Emeka shrugged. "I don't know, but you might get to her house and see her in a dinner gown, so, you better at least match up."

Jerry sighed. "I should have told her that we were going to the movies. Do you think I should call her and tell her that now?" he asked.

Emeka hissed. "Guy, wear something jare. First impressions matter."

"But...But it's not like I am proposing to her, right?" Jerry asked.

Emeka nodded. "Either way, you might want to be prepared, she might propose to you."

Jerry stared at him with a grimace.

"Haha...I was trying to be funny." Emeka replied.

Jerry nodded. "I observed."

Emeka took a seat as he watched Jerry fumble with the tie. "So, which new lie have you told to her?"

"Still on the same." He replied.

Emeka nodded. "That's good. Remember to keep the lies simple, and beware, she will ask a lot of questions about your family when you guys go to eat, try not to lie about that. I don't think she would forgive any of that."

Jerry took a deep breath and sank into a chair. "Man, I am scared. I don't want to hurt her."

“Bro, you have already started the lie trend, try to see it out to the end...and maybe you can just come up with you have decided to switch jobs, you know?” Emeka suggested. Jerry laughed. “You don’t just switch to being a surgeon.” Emeka nodded. “You are in soup, bro.”

“Nora, I think I am okay.” Toni protested as Nora stared at her makeup box. Nora ignored her as she picked up a brush. “We are going to apply a little more powder here and there.” Toni jumped up. “Okay, baby, I am fine. I am not going to let you turn me into a Chinese dragon.” She replied as she slipped into her jean trousers. “I was thinking you would wear a gown.” Nora said as she stared at the gowns on the bed. “I already picked out that black gown for you.” Toni stared at the gown. “Hmmm...I’ll pass. Besides, I know it is just the movies and I can bet that he won’t be doing more than a top and denims. I am not going to show up like someone who is about to get proposed to.”

“Oh, come on, Toni!” Nora said. Toni smiled. “Don’t worry, I am wearing that top you have been dying to see me wear for ages.” Nora didn’t smile. Toni shrugged. “Whatever, man.” The doorbell went. Nora stood up. “I would go and see Jerry in.”

“I am going to tell him.” Toni said as she picked up her purse. Nora stared at her. “Are you sure?” “It’s better not to let them get close and get hurt later on. He would know about my condition tonight.” She replied. “Let’s go.” Nora nodded and opened the door as they walked downstairs. Jerry was already standing in the hallway after being let in by a maid. Nora stared at Toni with an evil grin as they stared at Jerry’s suit. Jerry swallowed painfully as he stared at Nora’s simple wear. “Emeka, you devil!” he cursed in his heart.

“Good evening, ladies.” Jerry greeted.

Nora smiled. "Good evening to you, Jerry. You look dashing."

Jerry smiled at Nora. "Thank you." He then walked up to Toni. "You are beautiful."

"Everybody knows." Nora cooed. She then shoved both of them out. "Now be on your way, avoid the late night traffic."

"Do I look seriously dressed?" Jerry asked as they walked into the mall.

Toni smiled. "Do you think you look seriously dressed?"

"Yes, I do." He replied

She nodded. "Then, you do."

"I...I hope this doesn't embarrass you." He said.

She paused and stared at him seriously. "Why would it?"

Jerry smiled. "I don't want people thinking I am your Daddy."

Toni smiled. "In that case, I have one cute daddy."

He smiled. "That's...that's a compliment?"

She stared at him. "What century are you from, Jerry?"

"Alien world." He replied.

"Is that a century?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, that's the movie we are going to be see. It is amazing! I mean, you need to see the aliens and their tricks at getting humans to submit to their will." He said with a glow.

"So we are going to see sci-fi?" she asked.

He nodded. "It is one of the coolest things you would ever see."

"I think we should see Cars." She replied.

He stared at her. "Cars? That's a cartoon. It should be for kids"

She nodded. "And young adults. Did you see your face when you were talking about Alien world?"

He shrugged. "I was kidding though, you get to choose the movie."

“Of course. No way am I going to let you torture me with alien world.” She replied as they stepped on the escalator.

Toni looked around the movie section while Jerry got the popcorns. He returned to her as she flashed two tickets before him. “I got us a good movie.”

“Is there any part where you get to cry on my shoulder?” he asked with a smile.

She paused to think. “Erm...”

“Doctor Jerry!” A man with a young boy called out as he joined them. “I didn’t know it was you, but my son kept on telling me that it was you. Children” He said as he ruffled his son’s hair with a smile.

Toni stared at them and then at Jerry who managed a smile at the man.

CHAPTER 6

JERRY

God can be funny. If he was going to let nemesis catch up with me, he should have at least given me some time. Why today? Why now? First date? Mr. Azeez's son was my patient. The lad had to remember me. For the next split second, I had arranged all the lies in my head and I couldn't go wrong. If I did, Toni would have questions to ask me. Emeka's bad mouth had caught up with me too early. I smiled at Mr. Azeez and then at his son. "Rasheed, how are you?"

"I am fine, Doctor!" The kid replied. 'Did he have to include 'Doctor' again?' I thought with a stern frown.

"Rasheed!" A woman called.

Mr. Azeez turned to his left as he wife beckoned. I thanked the heavens as Rasheed dashed off to meet his mother, it could only mean that the discussion was over. Mr. Azeez stretched out his hand to Toni. "Good evening."

I frowned. He ought to take his leave and not make acquaintance.

Toni took his hand calmly. "Good evening, sir."

I cleared my throat. "Nice to see you, Sir."

Mr. Azeez nodded. "Have a nice evening, you two." He said and walked away.

Toni stared at me with a smile, but I knew there was a lot of questions beneath the smile. "Shall we?" she asked.

No way! There was no way I was going to let her off without any explanation. That would just give her the opportunity to start investigating and then, I would be damned.

I smiled back. "They call me Doctor because I helped out with his cut some weeks back. He is a neighbour. I thought you might want to know that." I said confidently.

She shrugged. "That's good, Doctor."

"A lot of kids in my compound call me that, I volunteered in paramedical jobs as a youngster so I have a good knowledge of these things."

She nodded with enthusiasm. "Paramedic?"

“Yeah.” I said as we approached the door to the cinema.

“You should switch jobs.” She said as she nudged me.

I stared at her. “Really?”

She pulled my hand. “The movie is about to start. Let’s go, man.”

NORA

I picked up Toni’s diary. It might not be right, but experience has taught me (actually, I have had no experience. But it is a cliché saying, right?) that you might want to sneak up on a diary. You might actually be saving someone from depression. (True story).

I took a deep breath as I prepped myself to read from Toni’s diary. I turned to the first page of her memoirs and her picture from her first surgery fell out. I wasn’t sure that I wanted to see more of it if it pertained to her operations, it might just make me sad and I wasn’t ready for it. I braced myself and flipped through a number of pages and then something interesting caught my eye.

CANCER HAS A BROTHER...his name is Jerry

So I just met this guy named Jerry...and yes, I like him. But then, who am I to like him? He is smart, but also so dumb (why would anyone waste their time in a bar?). Not like I didn’t do it in the past, but it is not just right. I am not sure I can stick around Jerry for too long, he is worse than my Cancer. I might just be in love with him too. I liked him from day one and it doesn’t happen with me like this! Okay, I have got to go.

I took a deep breath as I dropped her diary. She didn’t have eyes for James. Good. That unsurprisingly brought relief to my soul. Now, I would focus on James and his feelings. But then, back to Toni, could she really be in love? Or maybe she was infatuated by Jerry. The guy has got good looks, but I really didn’t want Toni to be in that stage of falling hopelessly in love and hoping that life would allow her enjoy those moments. I relaxed in my seat as I prayed that Toni would tell Jerry about the cancer so that she would work on getting over him and it would help Jerry stay away from her too.

My phone buzzed and I reached for it. James was the caller. I ignored his call. I smiled gallantly as I did this and prayed silently that my little theatrics won’t bore him.

Jerry and Toni walked out of the movies looking sober. All other viewers had the same look. The protagonist had died. It was a good movie, but a sad one too.

“Take my advice, we should see Alien world next time. This movie was too depressing.” Jerry said as they walked into the car park.

Toni took a deep breath. “I didn’t want him to die either.”

There was a momentary silence between them.

“There is something I would love to tell you.” Toni said.

“Cancer is a bitch!” Jerry said angrily.

Toni swallowed painfully as her heart skipped a beat. “Oh!”

Jerry nodded. “Yeah...” he then sighed. “What did you want to tell me?”

Toni stuttered. “Err...Cancer is a bitch!” she said with a very unconvincing grin.

“Do you think I believe you?” he asked.

She shrugged. “You know me. I have no reason to lie...although, those were not going to be my exact terms, but Cancer sure had something to do with it...and of course, Cancer being a bane! I think that was my term.” She added hastily.

Jerry nodded with a smile as he got to the car.

“Do...do you want to walk?” Toni asked.

Jerry smiled. “Of course. But, what about the car?”

“The park is never closed.” She replied. “Let’s go.”

He nodded and walked with her. “So, tell me, what really do you do?”

“I run my own NGO. Just something for the kids.” She replied. “Just keep people off the streets and reduce the menace in the society. More like contributing my own quota to development.”

Jerry smiled. “That’s really noble.”

“So, how was being a paramedic for you?” she asked.

Jerry shrugged. “Nothing serious, I wasn’t going to pass as a good doctor anyway, so I just enjoyed the brief stint then.”

“Why did you think you won’t do well as a doctor?”

He stared at her. “Do I look like a good doctor to you?”

“I think you are a good person and that could be translated into any field you find yourself.” She replied. “Anyway, how is your family?”

“Family? Err...they are fine. They live in Abuja.” He replied. “What about yours?”

She shrugged. "Nora is the only family I have and I think you know that part. Folks died and I have only had my sister and their money."

"I am sorry." He said.

She smiled. "It's okay. It's a long time ago, we have passed that stage now. So, what plans do you have for yourself?"

Jerry slipped his hands into his pockets. "Plans? Hmm...I might want to quit the bank job someday, it is not really forthcoming. I want to raise a family too, if I find the right conditions."

"What do you mean by right conditions?" She asked with a soft chuckle.

He shrugged. "You know how it is around here, there is a lot of drama and marriage is a big deal. Kids are a big deal. They tend to play around a lot and get injured, so many responsibilities."

Toni smiled. "I think you are just being evasive of the point that these things are bound to happen, and good thing is you have the paramedic experience, so that should cover up for the kids and their injuries, don't you think?"

Jerry nodded, "Yeah."

"I think a family is beautiful. You should really look forward to it." She added.

He smiled. "And what about you? How many kids do you want to have?"

Toni threw her face away as she walked on. "Err...I think we have sort of walked too far from the car."

"Really? How many kids?" Jerry insisted.

Toni had never thought about having children, they were not in her plans. Men were not either. Until Jerry happened.

"I really don't know. I just want to be happy." She replied.

Jerry smiled, surprised at her statement. "But you are happy. Right?"

She nodded. "I am. I meant a happy mother."

Jerry nodded. "If a woman marries the right man, and I mean in me in this context, all will be well." He said with a smile.

"Are you trying to sell yourself?" she asked with a smile.

"It won't be such a bad idea right now, would it?" he asked.

Toni shook her head with a smile. "It is a terrible idea."

"But I will make a good husband, won't I?" he asked.

She shrugged and walked along. Jerry stopped and watched her walk on. He had built another lie to cover up his lie. He knew his life was all messed up now Emeka had predicted. He knew he had to find a way to be honest with her before the lies caught up with him.

Toni battled with how she would tell Jerry about her condition in her mind, she had painted different scenarios and had finally chosen the best one. She would just turn to her left and say it to him and run. That seemed easy. It was always easy to run. She turned to her right, no one was there. She looked back and Jerry stood away from her. She swallowed as he had ruined her perfect moment.

Jerry started to walk towards her. She watched him and thought of another way of telling him. She didn't see it forthcoming. She would just keep quiet.

"Hi." Jerry said.

Toni smiled. "Why did you stop walking?"

"Are you in love with someone else? Like, do you have someone waiting on you?" he asked.

Toni smiled. "This...this is the first time someone has asked me a question like this."

"I don't want to lie to you for a minute. I...I have...I..." Jerry stuttered.

Toni raised an eyebrow. "Chill...this is not a professional exam. What do you want to say?"

"I know we have not known each other for long and I know that I am terribly jumping the gun by saying what I am saying, but I don't want to leave here today without telling you how much I like you." Jerry started.

Toni folded her arms and pulled a face.

He smiled.

"Can you please be less tensed up?" she asked.

He took a deep breath. "I am struck by you. I guess that is the best way to put it."

"No. That is not the best way." She replied.

He rubbed his forehead.

"It's getting late, Jerry. I want to go home." She said.

He nodded and took her hand. "Let's go."

"Tell me about your childhood." Toni said breaking the silence between her and Jerry as he drove. She was tired of wishing she had told him she had Cancer and she was now afraid of losing him to the silence.

Jerry stared at her with a smile. "What is there to tell?"

"I had a lovely childhood." Toni started. "I never got the best grades from my high grade, but I was the school diva. I had this group of girls, we went everywhere and terrorized other girls in school."

Jerry stared at her. "Seriously? You don't seem that type of girl to me."

"Everything is never as it seems and oh, that was high school. It was crazy, man. I had fun! We bullied girls. Pitch girls of a sort." She replied. "What kind of guy were you in high school?"

"Regular guy. The nerd." He replied. "Guys called me a freak. I knew the multiplication time table off by heart."

"You are a freak!" she replied laughing.

He nodded. "I enjoyed it, I must say. I got a lot of awards and teachers definitely loved me. I carried on the feat to my university. Class guru! Top of the class...straight A's." he sighed.

"Wow! So, what happened?" she asked.

Jerry stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"Microfinance Bank?" she asked.

He smiled. "Life happened."

"I think you should quit." She replied. "Try to chase a better future, Jerry. I am not saying that microfinance banks are not good, but this one in our hood is really obsolete. No one patronizes them." She added.

He sighed. "I would work on it."

"You should." She replied.

Nora read from a novel as she watched the time. She had given Jerry up until midnight to return her sister and she wasn't kidding. She had the phone number of the Estate Police on speed dial. If she didn't see Toni at midnight, she was going to create a scene in the neighbourhood. She had also hoped that Toni would have cleared up her emotions with Jerry by now and that her sister could now face a new life and possibly, a relocation.

She heard a car drive in. Toni was back. She smiled and closed her eyes as she pretended to be asleep. She was in the mood to play with her sister.

The door opened and Toni walked in with Jerry. Toni sighted Nora on the chair and bent over her. She then stared at Jerry. "You are lucky you made it here before twelve."

“I am fifteen minutes early.” He replied.

Toni nodded with a smile. “I have the herculean task of carrying her upstairs, but, never mind, I am capable.”

“I could help you.” He replied.

Toni smiled. “No. Thank you. You should be on your way home now. Thank you for today.”

“We would see Alien world next time.” He replied. “You made us see that depressing movie.” He said with a smile.

Toni shrugged. “Maybe next time, we don’t see a movie.”

“Hmmm...good idea. We should do something spontaneous. Something more fun than the movies. Horseback riding?” he suggested.

Toni stepped away from Nora. “I don’t want us to wake her, you should go now. Horseback riding sounds like fun anyway, I might consider it.”

He nodded and walked away. He stopped at the door and stared at her. “You were right.”

“About?” she asked.

“I didn’t say it the right way.” He replied.

Toni stared at him. “Say what?”

He blinked and clenched his fists together. “I love you.”

Toni’s shoulder fell. Nora’s eyes popped out.

“Yes, Toni. I love you.” He affirmed. “That’s it. Goodnight.”

Toni watched him as he closed the door and she took a deep breath.

“Would it have killed you to tell him that you loved him too?” Nora asked.

Toni stared at her sister. “I thought you were faking sleep.”

“Well, now you know.” Nora replied. “Why didn’t you tell him how you feel?”

Toni stared at her. “How would you know how I feel?”

Nora shrugged.

“Did you go through my diary, Nora?”

Nora nodded. “I don’t have to lie. So, what are you going to do about this? You possibly can’t fight it.”

Toni took a deep breath and took a seat. “I don’t know.”

“Did you tell him?” Nora asked.

Toni shook her head.

“Come on, Toni. You were supposed to. That would have created the gap.” Nora replied.

Toni shrugged. “I...I just couldn’t.”

“Well, you have to find a way to.” Nora replied.

Toni relaxed in her seat. “He is a really good guy. He used to be a paramedic, he used to be your type of person in high school and university.”

“What do you mean by my type of person?” Nora asked.

Toni smiled. “Class guru.”

“Then what is he doing at the microfinance bank?” Nora asked as she rose to her feet. “He should be in some prestigious place.”

“What are you doing as a customer care representative?” Toni retorted.

Nora smiled. “Service to humanity. I am charitable like that.”

Toni laughed at this.

Nora smiled faintly. “Let’s go to bed, darling. I am tired.”

Toni nodded. “Thanks for waiting up for me.”

“You are all I have.” Nora replied as she took Toni’s hand.

“So you are telling me that she wore something simple?” Emeka asked with a smile.

Jerry frowned. “That was the least of my problems last night.”

Emeka grinned. “What could be worse than you showing up like her father?”

“I ran into a patient at the mall. His son called me Doctor!”

Emeka gaped. “Wow!”

“That is not wow! That is trouble!” Jerry replied as he poured himself some tea. “I had to come up with something.”

“Dude! You should have just told the truth!” Emeka yelled.

Jerry stared at him. “You dey mad? How would I tell her? Is that even the right avenue to tell her something I have been hiding?”

“That was your best opportunity to throw the can open and forget it. She would either forgive you or not, and it is not something that can’t be forgiven.” Emeka retorted. Jerry shrugged as he took a seat. “Well, I didn’t and that is that about that.”

“Man, I don’t know if I am comfortable with this. I am beginning to feel sorry for you already.” Emeka replied.

“Why?” Jerry asked as he sipped his tea.

Emeka took his seat. “You love this girl. She might just like you back and when we keep a lie for too long, it always has a way of hurting the ones we love when they realise. She would feel she was not worthy of the truth.”

“I am protecting her.” Jerry replied.

Emeka hissed. “From what? From who? Look, that is just a silly line to use, she doesn’t need you to protect her from anything. It is not like you are an assassin and you need to really protect her so she is not killed by a gang. You are a doctor. You save lives.”

“How many have I saved? It’s like I am carrying a curse. Ever since my first case, it has always been like this. I can’t get over it.” Jerry replied.

Emeka nodded. “I know how you feel.”

“You don’t! I was just a surgical intern and they placed a woman’s life in my hand. She had kids! They were crying for their mommy and she died in my hands.”

“You are a doctor. You might have been an intern then, but still, lives will go. You just have to let it go.” Emeka replied.

Jerry shook his head. “I don’t know about that.”

“How long are you going to carry this cross around? Liquor has been your friend since then and it is pointless that you continue like this. People lose their first patients.” Emeka replied.

“You never forget your first, Emeka. You never.” Jerry replied.

Emeka sighed. “So, do you think running away will save you from it? I was not the best student in the university, but I know that it has always been my passion to save lives and I am doing it the best way I can. You are a good man, Jerry. Find that joy in you and rekindle your passion for the profession.”

Jerry took deep breath. “You know I am just glad I am out of the hospital for now. I am just happy I can sleep and not worry about killing someone’s son, daughter, wife, husband, brother, or sister.”

Emeka smiled faintly. “And to think that the director has cut your suspension off...”

“What?!” Jerry shouted.

Emeka nodded. “You are to return to the hospital tomorrow.”

Nora stirred her coffee as she read from the dailies. She had left Toni in the room, it was her guess that Toni must have stayed up for a very long time as she didn't wake up when Nora did. Honestly, she couldn't sleep much either. She had been thinking about this new step in Toni's life. Toni was in love. Jerry was in love (at least she had heard him say it). It should have been simple if the circumstances were a lot different.

She sipped some coffee. Toni had been stable for a while so she didn't see the need to check her into the hospital anytime soon. She however, did pray that Toni wasn't ruminating on her new emotions and discarding their plans for her to go into chemotherapy. Surgery was also an escape route but it did come with a lot of negatives for her sister. Nora knew she didn't want Toni to go through another near-death experience for a brief period of normalcy.

She turned her heart away from the thoughts and focused on the newspaper, but then, the dailies too could be really depressing...from rape cases to strike actions by the working class and disappointment in the sporting world. What really could make one smile? She thought as she folded the paper and rose to her feet.

She turned in fright as she stared at Toni. Toni was standing before her motionless and without the wig. She looked frail. Her eyes were sunken. Her sister had been crying. She knew it. “What is it, Toni?” Nora asked.

“I want a surgery.” Toni replied.

CHAPTER 7

Nora feared it would come to this. Toni stared at her. Nora swallowed painfully as she watched Toni wipe her own tears. “We have talked about this before.” Nora said quietly.

“About me dying peacefully, right?” Toni asked as she approached her sister slowly. “I am afraid, Nora. I want to live.”

Nora firmed up as she tried to fight back her tears. “Stop it, Toni.”

Toni wanted to stop the tears but she couldn’t. “Nor...Nora.” She stuttered amidst her tears. “Nora...Nora.” Toni cried and broke down into her arms.

Nora shut her eyes as she hugged her sister close. “We can do this, Toni. We would.” She said and kissed her scalp. “Let’s do chemo, Toni.” She whispered to her.

Toni broke away from Nora. “NO! I don’t want it. I can’t afford to fade away before my own eyes.”

“Toni, listen, we can survive chemo. I know this. You are a fighter. You will survive it, you can’t take another surgery. You are too weak for it.” Nora replied.

Toni sniffed. “I want to love Jerry. I can’t do that in chemo.”

Nora sighed. “So, you are willing to risk everything for him? What about me, Toni? Toni, you can do this chemotherapy once and for all, and come back and love your man. You do the surgery now, you have seizures, and you get weak, then stronger...then weaker again. Is that what you want?”

“That way I won’t have to fade away before his eyes.” Toni replied.

“That way you get to kill him inside. You would break everything that is left of him. Is that what you want and...and most importantly, he would never forgive you for doing this to him. Let’s live through this and never look back.” Nora pleaded.

Toni smiled faintly. “Let’s? There is only one person in this room with Cancer, Nora, and it isn’t you.”

Nora nodded. “Yes, it isn’t me and yes, most times, I wish it were me. I can’t watch you lose your spirit. I can’t watch you fade away.”

“Let me have the surgery.” Toni replied.

Nora shook her head. “No, Toni. I can’t.”

Toni sank into a chair. “What do you want, Nora?”

“Let’s go in for chemo. I will be with you every step of the way, I would never leave your side.” Nora said.

Toni smiled. “Is there a part where you get to share in my pain? Because sitting and watching my pain can be pretty useless, don’t you think?” she asked with a soft chuckle.

Nora didn’t understand how Toni did it. She had changed the whole situation in a flash with a laugh. Little wonder Jerry was enchanted by her, who wouldn’t be? Toni was a beauty. She radiated from the inside such that what people saw on the outside as beautiful was only a compliment. With thought in her heart, she snuggled up on Toni’s lap. For a split moment, she wondered who needed comforting...it should be Toni, but then, she knew she did too.

“Hi, Doctor Jerry.” A nurse greeted as Jerry walked in with Emeka. “We have missed you around here.” She added as she turned into one of the private wards.

“I don’t get it.” Jerry started.

Emeka stared at him. “What?”

“How can people look into your eyes and lie?” Jerry asked.

Emeka chuckled. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

Jerry stopped. “Dude, that nurse just lied that she missed me. Clearly no one did. Survival rates have gone up, how could I be missed?”

Emeka smiled. “You are not the only problem that the hospital has, besides, mentality is very important in saving a patient. Both from you and the patient, so sometimes, you might be doing your best and the patient isn’t. And most importantly, it is God who saves lives. We are just the tools.”

“I am such a faulty tool then.” Jerry said as he pushed his office door open. “So, the director wanted me back because the patients have increased here at the hospital or because you put in a good word for me?”

“Me? I had nothing to do with it. Why would I want to ruin your honeymoon?” Emeka asked as he took a seat. “Patients have increased. With all the happenings in town, casualty rate has gone up and as such, the tendency for mortality rate too is upped. This is where we, as Doctors, come in, we try to reduce the mortality rate.”

Jerry nodded. “Toni thinks I should join a help support group for my drinking issue.”

Emeka smiled. “Interesting. The fact that you think it is an issue means it is an issue. I am happy to learn that you are going to stop.”

“I just want to make her happy. I don’t want to do anything that would hurt her.” Jerry said.

Emeka shook his head. “You just missed a vital step in redemption.”

“And that would be?” Jerry asked.

Emeka sat up. “You are doing this because it is best for you. It is obviously going to be good for her too, but first, you are doing it because it is the right thing to do.”

Jerry sighed. “I guess you have a point.”

“I always have a point.” Emeka replied as he relaxed in his seat. “So, what is your plan for the new girl? When do I get to meet her?”

“Which of the questions should I answer first?” Jerry retorted.

Emeka grinned. “You would make a very jealous lover. So, when do I get to meet Miss?”

Jerry cleared his throat. “I don’t know. I am not ready to have you tell me that you saw her in dream in a wedding gown and that you know she is for you.”

“Guy! I am not that kind of guy. I won’t do that to you, but if she is for me, you can’t put asunder.” Emeka replied with a smile.

“You are not her type.” Jerry replied as he hung his stethoscope around his neck.

Emeka smiled. “You are not a very good judge of character.”

“Case closed. You are not meeting her. About my plans? I really do want to be with her and I’d do everything to be the perfect man for her.”

“Jerry, you are a good guy. That I know. And I think you have found someone special but I must remind you, you are walking on a thin line with the little lies you have started building, you might want to break it all down, you still have the time.” Emeka said, standing up. “When I eventually meet her, I would introduce myself as a Doctor, at least that way, you won’t have told too many lies.” He said and gave Jerry a light tap.

Jerry swallowed at Emeka’s words. Emeka’s words had a way of turning into a nightmare for him from the little he had seen.

“Let’s go do some rounds, bro.” Emeka called as he walked out of the office.

Jerry took a deep breath and followed him.

Nora shot a wicked glance at Toni. "Are we really watching this?"

Toni chuckled. "We just finished the first half. In a few minutes after the break they will be up and running for the second forty-five."

"I don't like football." Nora replied angrily.

Toni nodded. "But Mommy, you said I can watch whatever I want and that you would be by my side all the way. Did you forget?"

Nora groaned. "This is cheap blackmail, Toni. It is ridiculously cheap."

"Wrong. It isn't cheap. If it was, it won't be costing you this much discomfort." She replied with a smile.

Nora frowned.

"I think you should learn to like football. I bet James likes football and if you want to warm your way into the heart of that guy, you should know a little more about the sport. Start by picking a team." Toni advised.

Nora hissed.

Toni nudged her in the waist. "Dear Nora, this advice is priceless. I can assure you that most ladies that lose their guys to the sport don't understand that they could actually enjoy the sport together. If she is so unwilling to love the game, she can love the boys."

Nora stared at her with a raised eyebrow.

"I am being honest here. There are a lot of cute guys that play football." Toni replied. "So, let me bring you up to speed with football. To start with, the team in the red jersey is Arsenal and the team in blue is Everton."

"Not interested." Nora replied.

The doorbell went. Nora sprang to her feet in delight. "I'll get it."

"Why do you hate football so much?" Toni asked, laughing.

Nora ignored her and hurried to the door. Toni focused on the television as the players from both teams returned to the field.

"Hello, Toni."

Toni turned round and smiled. "Hey, James! How are you?"

James smiled. "I made it in time for the second half, so I am great." He said taking a seat.

"What do I offer you?" Nora asked.

James shook his head. "Nothing. I just need to focus on my boys."

"Arsenal!." Toni asked

James nodded with a smile. "We are the best."

Toni hissed.

"Let me guess, Chelsea?" he asked.

Toni smiled. "Atta boy! Jose's Army. The Roman empire!"

Nora fumed as she watched her sister bond with James. "I think Arsenal will win." She said, jumping into the discussion.

Toni turned her head at Nora with a cynical smile. "I see..."

Nora nodded and took her seat beside James. "You know, the best thing about football is the passion. I think they put a lot of passion into it."

Toni sneezed.

James stared at Nora and then at Toni. "That was awkward."

"Was it?" Toni asked.

James nodded and turned back to the Television.

"Goal!" Nora shouted as she watched the ball roll into the net.

James stared at her. "I thought you were in support of Arsenal?"

"They scored, right?" she asked, dumbly. "They are wearing the blue jersey, right?"

Toni stared at James with a smile. "Now that is Nora's sense of humour. She knows that Everton scored, but she just wants to troll you."

James stares at Nora. "You are mean."

Nora nodded with a smile. "I know."

Toni winked at her and walked away.

Nora watched the rest of the game in silence. Toni had just covered up for her. Once again, she found herself competing needlessly with Toni who was in no competition with her.

James was enjoying the game, but Nora's silence was worrisome, so he turned to her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah...sure." She replied.

He shook his head. "You are lying to me."

"No. I am fine." She replied.

James stared at her. "I don't care if you don't know jack about football."

"Really?" she asked.

James smiled. "For now...after a while, you can start supporting Arsenal, so we can tease Toni together."

She smiled back. "It sounds like a good idea."

"I want you to go out with me." James said. He stared at Nora. "Officially, I want to be your boyfriend."

Nora stared at him. "I don't know about officially."

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I think so."

James smiled.

Jerry replaced his stethoscope around his neck as he took his seat beside a patient. "I heard you haven't been taking your medications, ma'am."

Mrs. Aiyenugba turned away from him. "Where have you been?"

Jerry smiled faintly at Emeka and then back at the woman. "I had to go away for a while. I am surprised you are still in the hospital."

"I like it here." She replied and then turned towards Jerry. "I really do."

Emeka gestured to Jerry and walked out. Jerry stared at her. "Why would you love it here? You should be with your kids and grandkids."

Mrs. Aiyenugba scoffed. "They don't care about me."

"Why not? Your daughter brought you here, remember?" he asked.

She nodded. "I do, but, they don't want me at home. I caught them saying they have booked me in at Victoria's Homes. They are just waiting for me to feel better, so I would just stay here till I die. You would let me, right?"

Jerry hesitated. "I...I don't think so."

"Why not? I have my own room here, there is a television too and I am sure you would visit me every day, right? Well...when you are not spending time with that cute girl."

Jerry stared at her. "What girl?"

"Don't think I haven't noticed the smile on your face since you walked in here, you hardly smile like that. Who is she?" she asked with a smile.

Jerry smiled at one of his favourite patients. She was a comic relief and was known for pulling silly jokes, but then she was right about his smile. The thought of Toni made him happy. He was going to go home to see her no matter the time he closed from work. She really did light up his world.

"So, who is she?" she asked again.

Jerry drew closer to her. "Toni. And yes, she is amazing."

Mrs. Aiyenugba nodded with a smile. "I know she is. My husband thought I was the most amazing woman in the world too...and I thought he was, until he left me. I then knew he was the most selfish man. He decided to cheat me by dying first."

Jerry chuckled. "Come on..."

"I am serious, why would you leave anyone you love to suffer? The one who hurts is not the person who dies, it is the one they live behind." She said.

Jerry nodded. "But won't it be selfish of you if you had died first and left him behind?" he asked.

"I am the woman." She replied with a smile.

Jerry smiled. "Seriously?"

She nodded. "Yes. Ladies first, it is."

Jerry laughed. "You are unbelievable, Mrs. Aiyenugba."

"Betty."

Jerry smiled. "I would never call you by your first name."

"Why not? It is my name and I am giving you the right to call me by it." She replied.

Jerry shrugged. "I choose not to. You could be my Mom."

She nodded. "Speaking of families, how is your family?"

“They should be fine.” He replied.

She stared at him in a puzzling manner. “They should? When last did you phone them?”

He sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Your mom is going to end up in Victoria’s Homes too.” She cooed as she picked up a newspaper. “Mothers are a gift from God. They are your first defence. She is the mother Lion, she is ready to tear apart the Hyenas for her Cub. Why won’t the Cub love her when he should?” she asked.

Jerry swallowed. “I...I love my mom.”

“Show it.” She replied.

He nodded. “I would call my family.” He said, standing up.

“You won’t. I know that look.” She replied.

He bit his lower lip, “I will prove you wrong.”

“This is not about me. This is about you, Jerry. It is about you. Just you and you alone, no one else.” She replied and dropped the newspaper by her bed. “Tell the doctors I am not going home. I have no place to call my home. I will just stay here till I die. At least, I will have a casket to call my home when I am gone.” She said sliding down to rest.

Jerry took a deep breath and walked out. He was lost in his thoughts about what Mrs. Aiyenugba had said that he didn’t see Emeka approaching him.

“Guy!” Emeka said as Jerry walked past him.

Jerry stopped and apologized. “I am sorry.

“This Toni girl will be the death of you.” He said with a smile.

Jerry smiled faintly. “When last did you call your parents?”

Emeka shrugged. “I don’t know. My sister keeps in touch with them, so that should cover for both of us, right?” he asked with a grin.

“Love your parents when they are alive.” Jerry said.

“Oshey, Aristotle!” Emeka mocked. “You shouldn’t spend too much time with Mrs. Aiyenugba, that woman pollutes the mind.”

Jerry frowned. “She is a good woman. She made me realise how unfair I have been to my parents.”

“We are busy, Jerry. We have a lot to do. Even our parents know that.” Emeka replied. “Please, ignore that woman. Besides, the hospital is tired of her consuming space. I think they are calling her family in tomorrow.”

Jerry blinked. "Her children don't want her."

"That's understandable. Look at how quickly she has poisoned your mood. She is a venom." Emeka said with a smile.

Jerry ignored him and turned to walk away. Emeka hurried up to him. "What do you want, Emeka?" Jerry asked.

"Why are you so serious, Jerry?" Emeka retorted. "I think you are paying her too much attention."

Jerry pushed his office door open. "Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't know. She is just a patient." He replied. "You don't owe her anything, do you?" Emeka asked.

"I know I don't, but she has given me a reason to think about my family and myself too." He replied.

"I think you should think more about the surgical cases that we have this night. From what I heard, you are leading a surgery."

Jerry's face fell. "No."

"Look, man, I want you to believe in yourself. You have to save a life today. Save another tomorrow. And then, next tomorrow...and then, you won't have to worry no more." Emeka said with a smile.

Jerry swallowed. He had a lot to worry about. The nurses always looked defeated before any of his cases. The mere sight of Jerry made them believe they were fighting a lost battle, he had never proven them wrong. They talked in groups in the hospital and he was sure he had a role to play in it. Emeka always inspired him, but then, he still felt defeated. The nightmare of his first case never let him be.

Toni struck the keys of her laptop as she typed. Nora stared at her. Toni had not said a word to her since James left.

"Are you not going to talk to me?" Nora asked. Toni had her headphones on, but Nora knew she could hear her. "Toni, Please."

Toni turned at her. "How much longer?" she asked.

Nora swallowed. "I don't know what came over me. I...I was jealous."

Toni smiled. "Nora, I can never hurt you. I hope you know that."

"I do. But what about James? He can hurt me." She replied.

Toni shook her head. "No, he can't hurt you. You have control over your heart, you decide what comes and what goes and in this situation, it is hard to decide because of the emotions, but still, you decide."

Nora drew closer to her. "Forgive me."

"I hold no grudge against you." Toni replied. "I wish I knew how to, but I don't."

Nora grinned. "Thank God,"

"Yeah." Toni replied. "I am going to church tomorrow. Are you coming?"

Nora stared at her. "Oh...no. I will just stay here."

"Why? Still fighting with yourself?" Toni asked with a smile. "Because if you think you are fighting with God because we don't have our parents with us, you are wasting your time. Job lost everyone and everything, yet, he trusted God and He didn't fail. He never does."

Nora turned her face away. She had avoided Church ever since their parents died. She was angry. Toni's diagnosis gave her more reason to be angry, she didn't understand why all these were happening to her. Toni never stopped praying. Nora quit.

Toni continued typing on her laptop. Nora stared at her. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Writing." Toni replied.

"Writing? When did you become a writer? I know you have always been one at heart, but when did you start putting it to some use?" Nora asked.

Toni smiled. "A week ago."

"That's recent. So, what are you writing?" Nora asked.

Toni stared at her. "My novel."

"Novel?"

Toni nodded. "My life is too much excitement to stay bottled in...I want the world to read."

Nora smiled. "That's lovely."

"Thank you." Toni replied and closed her laptop.

Nora stared at her. "James asked me out."

"And you said yes?" Toni asked.

Nora nodded. "That's what I want."

Toni smiled. "I know."

“Do you think I am right?” Nora asked.

Toni shrugged. “I really don’t know, but, I just think that you should be happy. If he makes you happy and you make him happy, then, it is fine.”

“You are not so convinced about James, are you? He is a great guy. He even sensed that I didn’t know jack about football.” She replied.

Toni smiled. “Still you should know.”

“Whatever.”

Toni took a deep breath. “Nora?”

“What is it, Toni?” she asked.

Toni stared at her. “I phoned the Hospital. I am starting Chemo.”

CHAPTER 8

Jerry pushed the door open as he put the bags in. "It is not too large, but, you are going to like staying here."

Mrs. Aiyenugba looked round. "Petite. I like it."

"Thank you. So, you can stay here while I talk to your children on your behalf." He replied as he closed the door.

She smiled as she took a seat. "I don't need you to talk to them on my behalf. If they don't think I am needed there, it would be unfair of you to force me on them."

Jerry nodded. "Fair enough. I have enough room for two here."

"Does she stay with you?" Mrs. Aiyenugba asked.

Jerry smiled. "No. She won't...at least, not yet."

She nodded. "Good. When do I get to meet her?"

"Ah...I don't know. I am going over to her place in an hour." He replied.

"Don't worry, this old woman won't be here to bore you for too long. I might kiss my grave soon or maybe I would just check into the home and make new friends there. Come to think of it, I don't think there would be boring women there. They would all have tales to tell."

"And men too...Old men too! Who knows...you might fall in love." Jerry said with a sneer.

Mrs. Aiyenugba smiled. "I love the fact that you know there are no boundaries to love."

"Of course, there are no boundaries to love." Jerry echoed.

She chuckled. "I know. I just said that." She replied with a smirk.

"I like your sense of humour." He said.

She smiled. "I try. But sometimes, my jokes get really flat and maybe that's why my children and grandkids don't want me around. But who cares? I am a person first before I am their family."

He stared at her. He was in awe of her. She had a full depth of knowledge about life. She knew she was a person before having a family, hence, she owed it to herself to be happy.

She took his mind to Toni. Toni amazed him. She lived one step at a time, full of life and beauty. He'd be damned if he didn't spend the rest of his life with Toni.

"Have you called your Mother?" Mrs. Aiyenugba asked.

He shook his head. "No. I...I should call her today."

"No, you are not going to call her anytime soon. Hmm...what happened?"

Jerry relaxed in his seat. "I haven't saved a life yet."

"I don't understand." She said as she sat up.

He took a deep breath. "My career has been a huge mess."

She smiled. "They dread you at the Hospital."

"I am the worst. No one gets to live when assigned to me." He replied.

She shook her head. "I am alive."

Jerry chuckled. "Well, you know what I mean. Critical conditions."

She nodded. "You always have a special relationship with your patients."

"But I always let them down in the end, the patients that need me always get disappointed in the end." He replied.

"Do you believe in yourself?" she asked.

"No." he replied, bluntly.

She smiled. "That's honest."

"And trust me, there is nothing to believe in. This is a bare case of a man who has failed in everything that he thought he had loved." He blurted.

"I beg to disagree, I am a happy woman because of you...and that girl is lucky to have you." She replied.

Jerry smiled. "No. I am lucky to have her."

"Do you think you are handsome?" she asked.

He shrugged. "People say so."

"Do you own a mirror?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I do. Where are you going with this?"

"I would like you to check the mirror and answer that question again." She said.

Jerry walked in and returned almost immediately. "I have checked it."

“Now, are you handsome?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“You don’t always need everyone to make you feel good about you. If you don’t love you for who you are, no one can make you feel loved.” She replied. “So, I think that lady is lucky to have you and you have to learn to understand that.”

Jerry took a deep breath and then smiled. “Thank you.”

“One more thing, you are going to save a life. Then, you would save lives. You just have to believe in yourself and trust God. He gives life.” She said and yawned. “Now, you have made me talk much more than I bargained. I am tired.” She said with a smile.

Jerry smiled. “I have to get ready to go out now and prepare for my evening shift. What would you have for dinner?”

“Are you going to cook for me?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes.” He replied, standing up.

“I am coming with you.” She replied.

“So, what’s the plan? The Doctor wants to see you this evening, right?” Nora asked.

Toni smiled. “Yeah...I should head out to the hospital for some examination. He has the results from my last scans so I guess I won’t be out for long.”

“You know what I mean, Toni. When are you telling Jerry?”

Toni took a deep breath. “I don’t think I ever want to.”

“What! That’s wickedness, Toni.” Nora protested.

Toni relaxed in her seat. “You don’t understand. It won’t change anything.”

“It changes everything.” Nora retorted. “Besides, I thought you didn’t like getting attached to people. This seems to be overdoing it.”

Toni was silent.

“Don’t go quiet on me, Toni. We have to face this now or never. You are going into Chemo and you can’t be quiet about it to him.”

“I want to be quiet about it. Please, respect it.” Toni replied.

Nora hissed. “Toni, I don’t like this.”

“Well, you are my sister and you owe it to me.” Toni replied. “Besides, the Doctor said I have to see him today so we can know the stage that the cancer is in before chemo starts.”

Nora nodded. “That is normal. But, I am not in support of you hiding this from Jerry.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Toni replied. “Have you thought of the possibility that I might just survive it and he doesn’t need to even know that I once had cancer?” She asked with a smile. “Let’s see the positivity in everything.”

“I am trying to see that with you. You just have to stay alive...for me.” Nora said, quietly.

Toni grinned. “I am not going anywhere.”

Nora smiled as she hugged her sister.

“Enough!” Toni said, wriggling out of the hug.

Nora sighed. “You can be really boring, Toni,”

Toni nodded. “So, James, right?”

“Yeah. He asked me out, I told you, remember?” Nora said with a smile as she sprawled out on the couch.

Toni crawled up to her sister. “And you are really cool with him, right?”

Nora popped her eyes at Toni. “Get on with it, Toni. What is it?”

“I don’t know. I...I just have my reservations.” Toni replied and took a seat.

Nora stared at her. “I know how you feel, someone is coming in between the both of us, but I think-”

Toni started to chuckle and eventually burst into a horrid laugh.

“You think it is funny?” Nora asked.

Toni nodded. “Yes. You are sounding as though you were my single mother.”

“I am your mother, Toni, Deal with it. Now, as I was saying, I know you are jealous of James’ presence in our life, but I want you to understand that nothing and no one would ever come in between us.” Nora concluded with a smile.

“Except Death.” Toni chipped in quickly

Nora frowned. “Do you always have to ruin the moment? That was the closest thing I had to being romantic and you just had to ruin it.”

“I chipped in reality.” Toni said with a smile.

Nora stared at her with a grimace. "I don't like reality."

"Who does?" Toni asked, standing up. As she rose to her feet, she slumped to the floor.

Nora hurried over her. "Toni!"

Toni took a deep breath. "I am fine. I...I must have hit the table or something."

"There is no table here! Oh my God! Toni!" Nora gaped as she helped her up to a seat. She stared at Toni hands. "Oh my God! I have to get the Doctor. Have you stopped your drugs?"

Toni rolled her eyes. "How can I stop the drugs that you feed me with every day?"

"You are looking pale." Nora said.

Toni shrugged. "I will see the Doctor this evening. Nothing to worry about."

Nora sighed as she watched Toni sit up. "What time is your appointment?"

"7pm. Besides, it might have just been a spasm. Nothing to worry about." She said with a smile.

The doorbell went. Nora rose to her feet. "I'll get it." She said and hurried to the door.

Toni looked over her shoulder as she watched Nora usher Jerry in. She immediately faked a smile. "Hey!!!"

Jerry smiled. "Hi, how are you doing?"

"Amazing!" she replied.

Jerry took a seat. "That's smooth."

"I would be in the kitchen." Nora said as she walked away.

Jerry took a seat beside Toni. "You don't look as good as you sound today."

Toni raised an eyebrow. "Really? I am fine."

Jerry lifted his hand to her forehead and she immediately gripped his hand. "Hey...I...I am just checking."

"You are not a Doctor...and please, don't tell me that service as a paramedic passes for that." She said with a smile.

He nodded as he returned his hand to his lap. "Fever?"

Toni nodded. "Yeah. But it would pass. I already have some drugs for it."

"That's good. So, I have a new housemate." He started. "She is very lovely."

Toni smiled. "She? That's something."

He nodded. "Yeah, she was kicked out of the Hospital with no place to go."

"Oh? What about her family?" Toni asked.

"They don't want her home. Her children are sending her to Victoria's Homes. She doesn't want to go there."

Toni tried not to smile. She was glad he was talking about an elderly female. She cleared her throat. "So...so, is she comfortable at your place?"

"Sure. It's not as big as this place, but, it is very spacious." He replied. "Do you want to take a walk?"

She checked her wristwatch. "I have to be back before 6:30pm."

He nodded. "I got you." He said as he stretched out his hand.

She smiled as she took the hand. "Nora!" she called. "I will be back in about an hour."

"Be careful!" Nora called back from the kitchen.

"Okay, Mom." Toni said with a grin as she pushed the door open.

Nora couldn't take her mind off Toni and what she had called a spasm. She knew it wasn't. It was a good thing that they had to see a Doctor soon. Nora knew it would be unfair of Toni not to tell Jerry what was going on. She had to tell him even though it would hurt her sister...or maybe she would just keep quiet and honour her sister? She sighed as she battled with her thoughts. She wanted to cry. She needed their parents now. When their parents had died, she didn't think she was alone because she had Toni with her. But now, Toni seemed to be fading away. She didn't want to let her go. It was not right to let Toni go. But then, how was she going to keep Toni alive? Who would fight for Toni?

Tears started to roll down her cheeks as she sliced the onions. It had to be the onions that brought the tears. But then her heart ached as she tried not to cry out. The onions couldn't have touched her heart. She couldn't hold it in anymore as she broke down in tears. The maid in the kitchen stared at her boss as she cried freely. She wasn't shocked. Nora cried almost every time. She walked over to Nora and put her hands around her.

"Chocolate flavour for me." Jerry said as he handed Toni her ice-cream.

Toni took a seat as she started to scoop. Jerry joined her almost immediately. "So, what do you want to talk about?"

"You." She said, quietly.

He smiled. "Okay...here I am."

"Is there a difference between lying and not telling someone what they ought to know?" she asked.

Jerry choked on his Ice-cream. Could she have found out about him already? He knew he'd be damned if she found out before he told her. He coughed.

"I am so sorry. What happened?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "I guess the ice-cream went wrong. Anyway, what were you trying to say?"

"I want to know if there is a difference between lying to someone and not telling them what you think they ought to know." She said.

Jerry took a deep breath. He didn't know what his next word should be.

"I don't know really, that's why I want to know. Would be right if I was to tell you something and I didn't?" she asked.

Jerry sighed. This question made it easier for him. "Erm...I think it would better if you did, that way, no one holds something against the other."

"No. This is not about holding something against you or me, let's say more like hiding important information. If the information was going to hurt you, would you want to know?"

Jerry took a deep breath. "I am not sure. It sort of depends on the kind of information, you know?"

Toni smiled. "Just forget it. Been enjoying quizzing you."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I like seeing a serious mood sometimes...you fared fine."

He smiled. "So, what if I was hiding something from you? Or...what if I have lied to you?"

"All is forgiven." She replied.

He stared at her. "Really?"

"As long as you have not lied about your name." she said with a smile.

He nodded. "I am Jerry."

"Good." She stared at her wristwatch. "I have to head home." She said.

Jerry mouthed.

"What is it?" she asked.

“Toni, I...I like you so much and I...I want to know if you would go out with me.” He asked, squinting his eyes.

Toni smiled. “Is that a rehearsed speech?”

“No. But...I can try again.” He said.

She smiled. “I like you too...so...that’s life made easy.”

“Is that a yes?” he asked.

“Don’t make it sound like a proposal. You are too formal.”

Jerry smiled. “Wow! Cool! So, we are official.”

“Now, that’s formal.” She said with a smile.

Jerry knew that he couldn’t do anything to jeopardize their relationship. He watched her as she checked her wristwatch again and rose to her feet. “Toni, I have something to tell you.”

“Now? I am very late.” She replied, without looking at him. “We could attend to it later...if you don’t mind.” She said as she gathered her bag. She was feeling weak and didn’t want to have to pass out before him.

He nodded. “Let me take you home.”

“So you lied to her?” Mrs. Aiyenugba asked as she sipped her drink. “What were you thinking?”

Jerry sighed. “I didn’t feel proud about it, it was pointless to tell her the sort of Doctor I am.”

Emeka laughed. “Still she would find out...and when that happens, your life would be over. This new thing you think you have going on would be cut short.”

“Don’t be such a killjoy.” Mrs. Aiyenugba shot in Emeka’s direction. She then turned towards Jerry. “If I had known when you came in last night, I would have tossed you back to go and tell the truth.”

“It is not too late.” Emeka cooed.

Mrs. Aiyenugba stared at Emeka. “You are such a good friend.”

“I really did try to tell him the truth, ma. Jerry is just a born liar.”

She nodded. “And he has a worthy accomplice in you.”

“Well, I try to be a friend.” Emeka replied.

Jerry smiled at him. “I love you, bro.”

“Mutual feeling.” Emeka replied, coldly.

Jerry grinned. “Would it kill you to say you love me too?”

“No. It might just hurt my ego a little bit.” Emeka replied.

Mrs. Aiyenugba smiled. “Don’t you guys go to church?”

“I am going to the Hospital.” Jerry replied, standing up.

Emeka nodded. “Me too.”

“What is wrong with you both?”

Jerry smiled as he approached the door. “Later, ma’am. There is enough food.”

Nora stared at Toni. “We can leave now.”

Toni shook her head. “The choir is about to minister.”

“I should have forced you to see the Doctor yesterday, I don’t know what made me weak.” Nora said angrily as she stared at Toni’s face.

An Usher walked past them.

“Service in session.” Toni said as she turned to Nora with a smile.

Nora frowned. Toni had returned from her outing with Jerry yesterday and gone straight to bed, so she missed the appointment with the Doctor. Nora had to accompany her to the church because of her sister’s frail look.

The choir rose as it was time for their ministration. Nora watched Toni as she smiled. She loved God. Nora didn’t understand why everything bad was happening to Toni. She had seen herself as the perfect alternative if anyone was meant to suffer. She was the one angry at life and at herself. Toni on the other hand, loved life. She lived every moment of it.

The church rose to sing and dance. Nora was the only one sitting. Toni was dancing, swaying from left to right. Nora swallowed painfully as she stared at the Altar. She didn’t understand where Toni got her joy from. Nora was angry. All she wanted was for her sister to live, was that too hard? Tears started to stream down her eyes as she thought hard.

Nora lifted her head up as she watched Toni. She was no more dancing, her eyes were shut. Toni dropped to the floor.

“Emergency Unit!” The announcement went off in the Hospital.

The doors flew open as the paramedics rushed Toni in on a stretcher. Nora cried as she ran after them.

Jerry and Emeka ran towards the Hospital entrance.

“Toni! Stay with me!” Nora cried as they wheeled her in.

“Out of the way, people.” A paramedic shouted.

Jerry paused in his tracks as he watched Toni being rushed in. “Toni?”

Nora cast a glance at him and then ran on with the paramedics.

CHAPTER 9

Emeka pulled Jerry. "Come on, man. Emergency."

Jerry stood stoned. "That is Toni."

"Toni?"

Jerry nodded. "My Toni."

Emeka blinked. "Oh my God! Busted."

"What could be wrong with her?" Jerry asked.

Emeka swallowed. "I don't know, man. Let's go find out."

"Oh God."

A Nurse approached them. "The Director is asking for you both."

"What's going on?" Emeka asked.

The Nurse stared at them. "We are trying to stabilize the patient."

Emeka nodded and pulled Jerry along. "I know you are scared of going in there right now, but, you have to know what's going on."

"No, man. I will wait here. You can tell me." Jerry said, backing out.

Emeka nodded and hurried into the theatre. Jerry took a deep breath as he buried his head in his hands.

"Jerry?"

He looked up as Nora stood before him. She was in tears. He took a deep breath and allowed her crash into his arms. "She-just-crashed." She struggled to say. "She was singing and then I didn't hear it anything anymore. She just went down."

Jerry gasped as he felt Nora's heartbeat pound heavily. It seemed serious. He looked at Nora. "It's going to be alright."

She shook her head. "It won't be. Toni is sick."

"She is here with us now. She is going to be fine. We would take care of her. I promise you." He assured.

She took a seat. "You don't have an idea, do you?"

"What?" he asked.

Nora sniffled. "Toni would kill me if I told you, but, what the heck? You are going to find out anyway." She said as she cried.

Jerry knelt before her as he wiped her eyes. "What is going on, Nora?"

Nora stared at the stethoscope on his white overall. "You are a Doctor?"

Jerry took a deep breath. "Nora...I...I can explain."

"You lied to her...to us." She said.

He nodded. "I...I just wanted to protect her."

"Protect? From what? From who?" she asked.

He swallowed. "The other part of me that I didn't want her to see. It is a long story, I swear and I can't start explaining it now. But, what is wrong with Toni?"

Nora sighed. "You think changing the topic will change things?"

"No, it won't. I would come back to the issue. I would explain it to you...to her. But, what is wrong with her?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Why don't you go in and find out for yourself?"

"Nora, I can't show up there. I...I can't let her find out this way. I swear that I would come down to the house and explain everything to you and to her when she is better. But, I need you to tell me what the problem is."

Nora shook her head. "It might take a while before you visit both of us in the house, we actually would be your visitor here."

"What do you mean? Stop it!" He cut in, feeling offended.

Nora stood up. "Don't raise your voice at me."

He took a deep breath. "I am sorry, but, please tell me what is wrong with her. I can't go in there and you know it, it might upset things. She can't find out about me like this. You have to help me."

"It is all about you, right?" she asked.

Jerry sighed. "I just don't want to upset her right now. She didn't look good and since Emeka is not here to brief me on the happenings, I just want you to."

Nora forced back her tears. "I...I can't."

"Please, I care about Toni. You can't lock me out."

Emeka approached them. Jerry hurried to him. "What's up?"

Emeka took his hand. "Let's talk inside."

"What is going on?" Jerry shouted.

"Dude, you have to calm down." Emeka replied.

Jerry yanked out of his grip. "I don't want to calm down. Tell me. Now!"

Emeka took a deep breath. "Jerry, you don't want to do this here. Let's go inside and I will tell you all you need to know."

"I don't want to go inside! Just spill it!" He shouted back at Emeka.

"She has cancer." Emeka replied.

JERRY

Cancer? Cancer? Right? Not sure I heard it right but it sounded like Cancer. Cancer at this moment seemed like a zodiac sign not the disease I knew it to be. I am not sure why my trousers are wet but think I have been laying on the grass outside the Hospital for over three hours now. Now I know why the grass is wet, it should have been sprinkled. I have been here staring into the sky. It is really blue.

Emeka said she has Cancer. Nah...Toni can't have Cancer. Sleeping on the left side of your bed can give you bad dreams. I would sleep again and by the time I wake up, this would all be a bad dream. Emeka would run out to me from the ward and say, she has Malaria. Yeah. Malaria. That's more like it.

All my life, my wits and guts have been put to test...for the larger part of it, I have failed. As far as this field is concerned, I have tried and failed. I have never counted those failures as one that might pierce through my heart even though it did prick it. But when you face a test that is bigger than you...when you see someone you love on that surgical table and you fail, then, you have really failed. This is Toni. My life. She had come into my life and changed everything for me.

Call me 'deep' as the society might want to term it, but her smile and laughter were artistic. It had a pure reflection, one that took me forever to fathom. I was enchanted from the first day I set my eyes on her. Maybe Magic. Maybe Love. Maybe Life. All I know is that I felt something pure and true, and it was Toni.

I had every reason not to show up before Toni. One, my lies had found me out. It would be a total shame for her to find out about me under the circumstance and two, I have nothing to offer her. Of what use would it be if I showed up before her and still didn't save her life?

Pointless. It is time to go home...maybe travel...maybe run away...maybe nothing. Maybe I would just watch her from the side-line.

Why did she never tell me? Or had she tried to tell me? It must be the day we went to the movies...that day, we had seen a movie on Cancer. It had to be that day. Yeah, Cancer is a bitch. She wasn't wrong. It is a bitch!

"Sir, he has been here like this for the past three hours. He won't let anyone come near him." Emeka complained to the Director.

The Director stared at a lukewarm Jerry and then back at Emeka. "I can't have him like this. Get security to bring him in."

"He has rebuffed them, Sir." Emeka replied.

The Director stared at him. "Why do we pay them if they can't bring one man inside?"

"Sir, he is related to Toni. Our patient." Emeka replied.

The Director sighed. "Well, if we don't get him out of this state, we are going to be treating a depressed Surgeon soon. Tell them to use whatever force in the universe that they can to bring him in." he said and returned into the Hospital.

Emeka approached Jerry. "Hey."

Jerry ignored him.

"Dude, I...I know this is all like a shock for you, but, Toni doesn't need this from you." Emeka said.

Jerry didn't say a word. He just stared.

"I am not going to lie by saying I know how you feel because no one knows how you feel right now, but, I am going to tell you the same thing that you are going to tell any man who is torn right now. You can't afford to pull away."

Jerry stared at him and sighed.

"Look, Jerry, I know you are breaking up inside. I know everything about now seems senseless, but trust me, man, you would pull through. Toni needs you. We have stabilized her and she might start Chemo soon. Are you going to be the guy who runs away when she needs you most or the guy who sits her through this one?" Emeka asked.

Jerry took a deep breath.

"Bro, I love you...and I would be here for you every step of the way...we would fight for Toni. We won't let her go. Are you with me?" Emeka asked.

Jerry wiped his tears and rose to his feet.

Emeka stretched out his hand to him. "Let's go in."

"I can't." Jerry replied and walked away into the streets.

Nora hurried to Emeka as he approached her from Toni's room. "How is she?"

"Stable."

Nora sighed. "Don't you have another term? This is all you have been saying the last hours. Can I see her? Talk to her? Just say hi?"

Emeka nodded. "She is..."

"Please. I beg you. She is all I have. There must be something you can do." Nora begged.

He nodded. "You can't be there for a long time."

She nodded. "Thank you." She said and hurried into Toni's room.

Toni turned as Nora took a seat. "You've been crying." She said as she managed a chuckle.

Nora burst into tears as she kissed Toni's forehead. "Toni..."

"Don't cry on me." She replied.

Nora sniffled as she stared at her. "I am sorry."

"About what?" Toni asked. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

Nora drew her chair closer. "Toni...I...I don't know what to do or what to say."

"Say nothing, Sis. You panic too much." Toni replied. "I am going to be fine."

Nora took a deep breath

"Has Jerry called?" Toni asked.

"Uh?" Nora asked.

Toni smiled faintly. "Jerry...Mr. Nice Outfit. Have you suddenly forgotten who he is?"

Nora shook her head. "No, I haven't. There is a lot of work at the Bank. He has been busy."

"Okay. Don't tell him anything." Toni said.

Nora blinked. "Oh."

"Have you?" Toni asked, looking concerned. "I...I want to be the one to tell him."

Nora nodded. "I didn't tell him anything, Toni. I swear I didn't."

Toni swallowed. "Thank you."

"Do you want me to call him?" Nora asked.

Toni shook her head. "Chemo starts tomorrow. I am going to look really horrible. Just tell him I travelled or something. What's the time now?"

Nora checked her wristwatch. "Ten pm."

"It's late. You should go home." Toni said.

Nora shook her head. "No. I am staying right here."

"Come on, Nora. What could possibly happen to me?" Toni asked. "Nora, go home and rest."

Nora sighed. "You know I am not going. Quit trying."

Toni nodded. "I know. I just thought I could try harder. So, what are you going to eat?"

"James is on his way. He would bring me some food and a change of clothes." Nora replied.

Toni smiled. "That's good."

"Are you sure you don't want Jerry around here?" Nora asked.

Toni blinked. "I can't deny I want to see him, but not here, and certainly not like this. So, just stop bugging me about it."

"I don't want to bug you about it. I...I just want to do the right thing." Nora replied.

Toni stared at her. "Right thing? What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything in particular. I am just concerned about keeping Jerry in the loop on this matter." Nora replied.

Toni sighed. "Look, Nora, I know this seems wrong but, I...I can't let him know that I am sick. If he finds out, he would be broken. I can't do that to him."

Nora nodded. "I know how you feel and if that is what you want, I respect it."

"Thank you." Toni replied. "I want to rest."

Nora nodded. "Take care. I would be outside." She replied and walked out.

Jerry smashed another bottle at the wall. "Let me see if you can top that."

Mrs. Aiyenugba hurled her bottle at the wall. "I did fine." She said with a chuckle.

“Tell me...what’s the point if you are going to lose the one you love? Nothing.” He said and laughed. “I deserve another bottle.” He said and opened his drink.

Mrs. Aiyenugba watched him drink another bottle of alcohol. “You have had too many to drink, Jerry.”

“Too many? She made me quit...and what for? She has Cancer, she didn’t even tell me a word. She let me fall in love with her. She is selfish. Just like every woman, self-centred and -”

Mrs. Aiyenugba silenced him with a slap.

“What did you do that for?” he asked as he nursed his cheek.

She stared at him. “One, Feminist. I can’t watch you talk about the female gender like that. And two, how dare you say she is selfish? She loves you.”

“I am hurting here. Where is she? She is there. Sick. Tired. I can’t even look at her!” he yelled.

She sighed. “Jerry, you left her in the Hospital. She needs you. You can’t run away right now.”

“But I don’t know what to do. She is dying. I can’t help her. What use am I to her?” he shouted amidst tears. “I want her to stand up from there and not be sick. I want her to be fine.”

She nodded. “Jerry, do you think she wants to be there?”

Jerry drank more from the bottle and threw it to the wall. “I want to drink more.”

“Come on, Jerry. It’s late into the midnight and we have been drinking forever. I think you should rest so that you can go to the Hospital tomorrow to see her.” She replied.

Jerry stared at the door as the keyhole rattled and the door knob turned. “Emeka is here.”

Emeka walked in. “Dude.”

Jerry wiped his tears. “Hey, man.”

“How are you?” he asked as he collected the bottle from him.

Jerry stared at him. “I want to die, Emeka. I want to die.”

Emeka sighed and hugged him. “It’s going to be alright. It is going to be.”

Mrs. Aiyenugba smiled. “There are no drinks for you, Emeka.”

“I know ma’am.” Emeka replied and then focused on Jerry. “Toni is stable. I think you should come and see her.”

Jerry sniffled. “You know I can’t. I am just useless to her.”

“Jerry, you are not useless to her. You are the man she loves. She would always want to be with you.” He replied.

Jerry shook his head. “How do I tell her? I can’t look her in the face and say, I have been lying about being a Banker.”

“Jerry, right now what matters is not that you are a Surgeon, what matters is that you do what is right and love this woman.”

“I love her. Are you blind?” Jerry shouted.

Emeka nodded. “I know...but love is not shown when you are here tearing apart. You have to be by her side. Fighting. Working. You can’t be here doing this to yourself, Jerry.”

Jerry nodded. “Fine. How do I talk to her?”

“Just talk. You don’t have to worry about anything right now. You just have to be there for her. Fight for her. Let her know that you won’t leave her.” Emeka replied.

Jerry sighed. “I am so tired. I just want it all to go away. It’s just like a nightmare. I love her so much, I don’t want to lose her.”

“You won’t lose her.” Emeka replied.

Jerry shrugged. “I don’t know about that, Emeka. I am scared.”

“She is a fighter. I met her. She is lovely. Go to her, don’t leave her alone.” Emeka replied.

Jerry nodded. “I’ll go there tomorrow.”

“I still can’t believe that someone like Toni could have Cancer.” James said as he stroked Nora’s hair.

“We don’t choose these things, James.” She replied.

James nodded. “Yeah. I...I just don’t understand. She is so beautiful, so special, and so kind. Why her?”

“I ask myself that question every time. But, I have never found the answer to it. I just want to see her okay.” She replied.

He nodded. “Maybe Chemo would do fine.”

“She believes in surgeries, but the problem with the surgery is the seizures she gets. She had a relapse yesterday in Church. I never saw it coming, the drugs had been working well.” She replied.

“Nora, I want you to know that I would be here with you forever, okay?” James said. “And we are going to be strong for Toni too, because she needs us right now.”

Nora nodded. “I don’t know how to tell her that Jerry is not who she thinks he is.”

“Jerry? The guy with the Pyjamas?” he asked.

She sighed. “He is a Doctor here at the Hospital, but he has made us believe that he is a Banker.”

“Really? Why would anyone lie about their profession? Especially being a Doctor? It’s a noble profession...anyone would be proud of it.” He replied.

Nora nodded. “My sentiments exactly. I am shocked he deceived us all. I can’t get my head around why he would do such a thing. I am too tired thinking about my sister to worry about him.”

“It’s okay. We’ll get through this...all of us.” James replied.

Nora nodded.

“Good morning, Toni.” Nora said as she drew the curtains back.

Toni smiled. “How are you doing?”

“Fine. Did you sleep well?” Nora asked.

Toni nodded. “Yes. I didn’t have you staring at me all night. That made my life a lot easier.” She said with a smile.

Nora chuckled. “Interesting observation.”

“You do know that you can be really boring, Nora?” Toni said as she rolled over. “The Nurses will soon be here to prep me for my first session.”

“How do you feel about it?” Nora asked.

Toni sighed. “Enthusiastic.”

“You don’t sound it.” Nora replied.

Toni nodded. “Correct. How can you ask such a question?” she asked with a chuckle. “How does anyone feel about Chemo? Hair loss? It’s a good thing I have prepped myself for it by cutting this hair.”

Nora smiled. “How many hours to go?”

“I don’t know.” Toni replied.

The door opened and Jerry walked in.

“What are you doing here?” Nora asked staring at him in his overall.

Jerry swallowed. “I want to see Toni.”

Toni stared at him confusingly. “Nice outfit, Jerry.”

He smiled. “Hi.”

“Hey...” she said.

Nora clenched her teeth as Jerry came closer. “What are you doing?”

Jerry stopped as he got to her. “I want to make things right.” He replied.

Nora shook her head. “I’ll excuse you both.” She said and walked out.

Jerry walked over to Toni and took her hand. “Hi,”

“So...Nora told you?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. My friend did.”

“Your friend?” she asked.

Jerry nodded. “Doctor Emeka is my best friend.”

“Oh? He is a really nice man.” She replied. “I am guessing he gave you his overall so you could feel like a Doctor?”

“I am a Doctor.” Jerry replied.

Toni smiled. “Nice try, Jerry.”

“I lied to you all this while about being a Banker.” He replied.

She sat up. “Jerry...what are you saying?”

He took a deep breath. “Toni, I am sorry. When that kid saw us at the mall and called me Doctor, it was because he had been my patient here at the Hospital. I...”

“Go on.” She said as she stared at him.

Jerry nodded. “Being a Doctor has been a nightmare for me. I would do anything to avoid being called Doctor Jerry. I am a failure in this field, a lot of people die under my watch. I...I don’t get to keep people alive. I am scared, I am nervous and I fail a lot. I also drink badly and I...I know I would have sounded irresponsible if that day when you met me at the bar, I said I am a Doctor. I would have disappointed from the start.”

“But you did disappoint me from the start.” She said with a smile. “But, it doesn’t matter, Jerry. You are a good person, you don’t have to lie about who you are or what you do.”

“Or that you have cancer?” Jerry said as tears rolled down his eyes.

Toni smiled. “I never lied. You never asked.”

“Was I supposed to ask you, do you have cancer?” he asked.

Toni shrugged. “I just didn’t tell you and yes Jerry, I am sorry.”

“Toni, you don’t understand. This is too much for me, why you? You are so...so...beautiful, so full of life, so nice, everything right. Why you?”

Toni smiled. “Why not me?”

“Just stop it.” He said as he took his seat beside her on the bed. “My record of success here is zero. I don’t do well. I have never done well.” He said.

“What happened?”

Jerry cleared his throat. “I...I lost my first patient. I just came off fresh into the theatre and they placed a dying woman in my hands. I was scared, I didn’t know what to do. I lost her. I disappointed her family and...and I never made it through it. I don’t think I ever will.”

Toni took his hand. Jerry took a deep breath and released himself from her grip as he rose to his feet. “I don’t want you to feel sorry for me, Toni. Forget it.” He said.

She took his hand again. “I don’t care if you are a Doctor or a Banker. I don’t care if you have tried hard and failed in the past. All I want you to know is that I love you so much and I would be there for you until our dying day. And I also want you to know that this lady on this bed is desperate to live and afraid to die and so, I want you to get me on my feet, Doctor Jerry.”

CHAPTER 10

“Come on, man, think like a surgeon. Let’s cut!” Jerry said as dropped an envelope on the table. He bent over and flipped a Surgical Textbook open.

Emeka took a deep breath. He had never seen Jerry so enthusiastic about something and maybe that was a good sign but at the same time, someone had to be reasonable here. Jerry had just stepped out of Toni’s room with the ‘get me on my feet’ rule and he didn’t seem to be thinking straight here. All he wanted was to get her on her feet in its literary context, but that was not going to give a lasting solution. He sighed as he watched Jerry look through a book. “Bro, I think we should talk about this” Emeka said.

Jerry was engrossed in the textbook he was looking through. “Not now.”

“Jerry, I know you feel you can go all Ben Carson on her right now, but we have to be logical here. She has had epileptic seizures from her history and I don’t think we should take that chance again.” Emeka started.

Jerry closed the book. “You are not getting the point. We can cut through and remove the mass of the tumour, do you know what that will do for her?”

“That will buy her more time and in the end, you will still lose her.” Emeka replied. “I think she should start the treatment as soon as possible, besides, it is the patient and her sister’s wish that she does Chemo and since we know it is the brain we are focusing on, we can switch to Radiotherapy for effectiveness, don’t start putting your emotions into this thing.”

“You and I know how Radiotherapy works...I can’t watch her go through it. It is so much pain.” Jerry retorted.

“You don’t have to watch. You just have to be there for her, man. I think we shouldn’t waste any more time with these decisions. It is obvious the tumour is escalating into other parts of the system and if we keep dilly-dallying about it, we would get nothing done.” Emeka replied.

Jerry shook his head. “The Director asked me what I think we should do and I think surgery is fine. I would go over to him and tell him about my decision and I would try to make Toni and Nora see reason. Besides, AEDs can be given for the seizures.”

“Jerry, you and I know that cytoreduction of the tumour is the best we would get out of this. You have seen the neoplasm, it is better to let her do radiotherapy. Besides, I think we are going to have problem gaining access to the tumour because of the size and

location. It is at the skull base, man. Think. There are many possible outcomes of the surgery, we could tamper with her brain tissues, and she could suffer memory loss or something worse. Are you willing to take that chance?" Emeka asked.

Jerry took a deep breath and leaned against the table. Emeka was right, but he still believed he could remove as many tumour cells as possible, but he had a very slim chance because of the size and location of the tumour. He fumed as he sank into a chair. His eyes were soon wet. "I am out of ideas, bro."

"Look, Jerry, radiation therapy will kill the tumours and won't harm her brain tissues. Let's take a chance on this." Emeka replied as he took a seat beside him. "Toni is trusting you to get her back on her feet, but not for a month or two. She wants it to be forever."

Jerry nodded. "This isn't going to be easy for her."

"Well, we both know it is not going to be, but she is a fighter. Let's believe." Emeka replied.

The door opened and the Director walked in. "What would it be?" he asked as he picked up a copy of the scan that was lying on the table. "Hmm...this is big." He said and replaced the scan on the table. "Jerry, do you think we can cut?"

Jerry blinked. "Err...Sir, I...I was thinking-"

"-We are thinking that radiotherapy would work." Emeka said, staring at Jerry. "We can't cut this." He said through clenched teeth.

The Director nodded as he stared at Jerry. "I hope you know that you would be off most of her treatment."

"No way!" Jerry objected.

Emeka took Jerry's hand. "Man."

Jerry blinked. "Sir, I can't afford to be kicked off her case. You know what she means to me."

"And it is exactly for that reason that you have to sit out this one. I would get you tonnes of cases-"

"-I don't want anything. I just want her." Jerry replied, cutting in.

Emeka cleared his throat. "Sir, I think Jerry can be on the team for the Radiotherapy since we won't be doing surgery."

"No. I won't bend the rule even a bit. There is a surgery in about an hour. He is the lead surgeon."

Jerry fumed. "Sir! Don't do this."

“I can’t have you mixing emotions with this.” The Director replied.

Jerry clasped his hands together. “Sir, I have put my emotions aside. I am just a surgeon and her Doctor.”

“It is not so easy, Son. Sit out this one, we’ve got it.” The Director replied and stared at Emeka. “Come with me, we need to go and prep the patient.” He said and walked out.

Jerry pulled Emeka back. “He can’t do this to me. Please, beg him. Toni wants me to do this.”

Emeka blinked. “Jerry, you know how it is. You can’t. You need a right frame of mind.”

“Don’t give me that crap! You can convince him. It is not surgery.” Jerry replied angrily.

“This is why he won’t let you in on it. Cool off, man.” Emeka said and walked out. Jerry fumed as he kicked the door.

Toni brushed Nora’s hair. “So, I want to draw up my will.”

Nora flipped her head over her shoulder. “What is that?”

“A will. Legal statement showing who I give my share of our family’s fortune to.” Toni replied with a smug smile.

Nora frowned. “I know what a will is, I just don’t know what you need it for right now.”

“Oh come on, Nora. You and I know that it is only necessary I do this now, besides, amendments can be carried out in the nearest future should events change.” Toni replied.

Nora took a seat opposite her. “Are we being less optimistic now? Jerry is doing everything he can and you are here throwing it all away with wanting to draw up a will.”

Toni sighed. “Nora, why are you talking like this? I want to live, but in case I don’t, I want to leave something behind for my foundation and stuff.”

“Are you saying I am going to collapse your foundation in event of your death? Give me some credit, Toni.” Nora said, standing up.

Toni sighed. “I didn’t mean it that way, Sis.”

“I don’t care how you meant it, it hurts.” Nora replied.

Toni nodded. “I am sorry.”

“Yeah. I have got to take a walk.” Nora replied.

Toni sighed. “Are you for real? I said I am sorry.”

“I know you are. I just didn’t expect you to have that sort of opinion of me.” Nora replied.

Toni smiled. “Are you trying to pick up a fight with me? I promise I will be dead before you are back from your walk and you are going to carry the feeling that you fought with your sister before her death to your grave.” She concluded with a wide grin.

Nora rolled her eyes. “Don’t start guilt tripping me.”

“Oh yeah...it worked. I am sorry.” Toni said with a smile.

Nora sighed and took her seat. “Don’t start scaring me, Toni. You have to be in the right frame of mind for any treatment to be effective on you.”

“Trust me, I am motivated to live.” Toni replied.

Nora smiled. “James would be here to see you in the evening. He left early this morning.”

Toni nodded. “Hmm...that’s cool. I need to have a talk with him anyway.”

“What talk could that be?” Nora asked.

Toni shrugged. “It’s personal.”

Nora folded her arms. “Personal?”

Toni nodded. “It is important I talk to him, that’s all. Don’t be scared.”

The door opened and the Director walked in with Emeka. “Good morning, ladies.”

“Good morning, Director.” Nora greeted.

Toni stared at the door expecting it to open but it didn’t. She stared at Emeka looking for an answer.

Emeka cleared his throat. “Jerry is not coming.”

The Director stared at her. “As you understand, Doctor Jerry can’t be let in on this due to his emotional attachment to the patient.

Nora nodded and took Toni’s hand. “Okay, so, what’s going to happen now?”

“We are going to start the radiotherapy by tomorrow. We can’t have any more surgeries as the tumour is in a delicate position of the brain. So, are you ready?” The Director asked.

Nora stared at Toni. “You ready?”

Toni nodded. “Yes. I have always been.”

Emeka smiled. “Okay. So, we would move you into a new room tonight and we can start off from there.”

“Can I see Jerry?” Toni asked.

Emeka nodded. “I’ll tell him to come.”

“No. I want to go to him.” Toni said.

The Director shrugged. “We’ll get a chair for you.” He said and walked out.

“I’ll go with him.” Nora said and walked out.

Emeka took a deep breath as he sat beside her. “I have heard a lot about you and I... I am honoured to finally meet you.”

Toni smiled. “Trust me, I am more beautiful than this. I am just allergic to Hospitals.” She said with a smile.

“Of course, you are.” Emeka said with a soft chuckle.

Toni stared at him. “Jerry is a good guy.”

Emeka nodded. “I know. He is one of the best men around. I am glad he found you.”

“Me too...”

Emeka took her hand. “Would you please, not leave him?” he asked as a teardrop rolled down his eyes.

Toni gasped. “Oh...I think you are also emotional. You can’t be on this case too.” She said as she laughed.

Emeka laughed as he wiped his eyes. “You have a good laugh.”

“I know. I can’t help being a Diva.” She replied.

He nodded. “You stay alive, okay?”

“I am alive.” She replied.

Nora returned with the wheelchair. “Let’s go, baby.”

Toni smiled as she got on the wheelchair.

Jerry sipped his cup of coffee as he stared at his wristwatch. He had a surgery in about thirty minutes. “Make this count, Jerry.”

The door opened and Toni wheeled in.

“Toni?” he gaped as he went over to her. “How did you?”

Toni smiled. “Never mind...not like you don’t know how I got here.”

“Emeka.” He replied.

She nodded. “So...you won’t be my Doctor?”

He nodded. “Yes. I... I am sorry. I wanted to be there, but the Director won’t let me.”

“Neither would I.” she replied.

He knelt before her. “The session starts tomorrow. I will be by your side every step of the way. I promise to hold your hand throughout.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “Don’t get all mushy, okay. Besides, it means you would hold one hand while Nora holds the other. How am I going to cope with two of you professing love?” she asked with a smile.

“I love you.” Jerry said.

She shrugged. “The question is, who doesn’t love me?”

“Are you going to class me with the majority?” Jerry asked with a smile.

She shook her head. “No. You make up the vast minority.”

“Vast? Minority?” Jerry asked.

She grinned. “You are everything...and much more than I wanted.”

“Oh my...I am honoured.” Jerry said as he kissed her hand.

She nodded. “You should be.”

“I have a patient who is due for surgery now.” He said, staring at his wristwatch.

She smiled. “Oh really?”

He nodded.

“Come here.” She said as she kissed his forehead. “Go save a life.”

Jerry smiled. “You got it.” He said and walked out with a smile.

Tears rolled down Toni’s eyes as the door closed after him. “God please...allow me love this man.”

JERRY

Who knew surgery could be fun? Tearing...sewing...tearing...sewing...fixing...smiling. I didn’t understand that it could bring me so much joy...until today. Being a surgeon is everything I have always wanted and I forgot what it was to have that dream until today.

They say love can do a lot for you...much more than a lot for you. It gives life. It gives light. It gives hope. It gives much more than you have ever expected.

As I walked into the theatre with optimism, my team lit up. I had never seen them smile. It was as though I was ready to lead an army to battle and they were willing to fight with me...for the first time. Toni. It all came from her. Maybe Magic...maybe a fairy tale, but Toni is pure and true. I couldn't ask for anything more, the gift of Toni to my life was something I couldn't question.

And yes, my patient lived.

“Hey...”

Toni rolled over to see Jerry. “Hi. How was it?” she asked.

He smiled as he took his seat beside her on the bed. “Patient is fine. I am fine.”

“That’s good to know.” She replied. “I am nervous about radiotherapy. At first, I thought it was going to be chemo...but now it has a different name.” she said with a soft chuckle.

Jerry nodded. “Yeah. Radiotherapy is more effective and it is a better option.”

“So I heard.” Toni replied. “I pray I survive this.”

“You will survive it. I know that you are strong and you can go through this. I am here for you...every step of the way.”

Toni stared at him. “Would you?”

He nodded. “I am not going anywhere...you just have to promise me that you will stay.”

“That is not in my power, is it?” she asked.

He looked away.

“Do you love God, Jerry?”

Jerry shrugged. “He created us, right?”

“That’s not the question. Do you love God?” she asked.

He turned in her direction. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” she asked.

He nodded. “He doesn’t have much love for me either.”

“Why would you say so?” Toni asked as she sat up.

He stared at her. "Frankly, I have never had the best things of life except for good grades."

"Good grades are something." She said, cutting in.

"They didn't save my first patient." He replied.

She smiled. "You lose some, you win some."

"Not your first. It is unforgivable." He replied.

"By who?" she asked.

He stared at her. "I don't understand."

"By whose standard is losing your first patient unforgivable?" she asked.

He was silent.

"I know the pain hurts so much, but we tend to take ourselves too serious and important that we forget the essence of being human." She started. "Would saving your first patient have mattered if you went on a failure streak afterwards?"

He stared at her. "You don't understand."

"Make me." She said with a smile. "Look, Jerry, we are allowed to lose, but the only thing you are not allowed to do is give up. You saved a life today because God was with you."

"Why didn't he save my first patient? Why did he let you have Cancer? Isn't he God?" Jerry asked. "You talk so much about him, and it is obvious you love him...why did he let that happen to you? Why?"

Toni sniffled. "I am writing a novel. I don't know if I would have all the time in the world to tell you who Toni was before I got Cancer...but I want you to know that there isn't so much of a difference. I am still happy. I am still alive. I just have Cancer...and oh, I quit drinking."

"You used to drink?" he asked.

Toni smiled. "Heavy boozer!"

He smiled faintly. "Toni, I want to understand God the way you have come to understand him, but he has to keep you alive for me to like him." He said.

"Giving God conditions, are we?" she asked with a smile.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Let him keep you alive, then, we have a deal."

"Ever heard of Job in the Bible?" she asked.

He nodded. "Sort of."

“Try to read the Book of Job in the Bible. I am in no way comparing this situation to his, but that is a man that never stopped loving God. I am living proof that God cares about you and I. Talk to him. He listens, Jerry.”

Jerry blinked. “I don’t know about that...what am I going say to him?”

“First, you ask him to forgive you of your sins and give him your life. Let him be in charge of it all.” She said.

He smiled. “I think you should rest, Toni.” He said as he rose to his feet. “I have to go home to get a change of clothes and then I would be back for the night. Nora is outside. I would tell her to come in.”

Toni smiled. “You can run, but you can’t hide.”

He blew her a kiss and walked out.

“So, you ran away because she was telling you about God?” Mrs. Aiyenugba asked as they ate.

Jerry shrugged. “Not exactly. But, I don’t understand why she is so passionate about Him when clearly He isn’t about her.”

Mrs. Aiyenugba dropped her spoon. “Jerry???”

“Yes! You don’t let Cancer come near someone you love...I know He is God and He can do everything, why can’t He take it away?” he shouted.

She sat back as she watched Jerry rant.

“All I want is for her to be fine...He should know that.” He shouted as tears rolled down his face. “He doesn’t have to take her away from me. I thank him for bringing her my way, but I want to have her.” He shouted as he broke down in tears.

Mrs. Aiyenugba nodded and walked over to him. “When I lost my husband, I felt God was unfair too...he knew I loved him, but God loves him more and I had to understand that.”

“Just like that? No disrespect, but you have had the best days with your husband, but God isn’t even giving me a chance with her...” He protested.

She smiled. “The best days are yet to come. As long as you live, you make the most of each day and every moment and who told you that Toni has not had the best of her days with you already?”

“Don’t try to patronize me.” He replied.

She nodded. “Not my plan to do that, but I feel you should give yourself some credit already. Every man has his purpose and duty to fulfil, and when we are done, we are done.”

“Toni can’t be done.” He replied.

She stared at him. “Jerry, talk to God. He listens.” She said and dug her spoon into the food.

“So, James, what are your plans for Nora?” Toni asked.

James stared at her. “I like her a lot. I know we can make it work.”

“Really?” she asked.

He nodded with a smile. “Am I on the hot seat here?”

She nodded. “Yes. I love my sister and I want to be sure that I am leaving her in the right hands.”

“You are not suggesting that you are going to die, are you?” he asked.

She shrugged. “We would all die someday...or face rapture.”

“Look, Toni, I know it seems I hit on you the first day we met, but-

She raised a finger. “I don’t care about that. I want to know your intents.”

“I want to be there for Nora. I want to love her, protect her, and take care of her. I know I can do it and I want you to trust me to be able to.” He said.

“James, I have nothing against you...Nora would do this to Jerry if she were in my shoes. I wish you guys the best.” She said.

“Are you saying goodbye already?” he asked.

She sighed. “I don’t know...but for as long as I am here, I am here.”

“God, I know I am not a good guy. I have not come to church in a long time. I have been drinking too much and maybe a little more than too much. But, I have found a good girl and I can’t let you take her away from me. The Director already said I won’t be treating her, but I don’t believe we even treat anyone, I think you do. Please, God, can you treat Toni for me? God, I...I won’t be able to go on without her...If you knew that you wouldn’t keep her alive, why did you bring her my way? Were you trying to tease me? God, please...I can’t do this on my own...Teach me your ways, help me to understand you and everything that happens around me. Let me love you and help me to be a better man.” Jerry said as he knelt down in his room.

“God, forgive me for all the wrong things I have said to you, but I am hurting so much and I want you to fix me. I want you to take care of Toni. I can’t do this on my own...God please.” He cried as he slid onto the floor.

CHAPTER 11

“It’s two a.m. Your shift has been over since the last three hours.” Emeka said as he dropped a coffee cup on the table. “You might want to have some of that if you are going to be stuck in here all night.”

Jerry stared at him. “Man, I just need one more hour.”

“You said that an hour ago and I am sure you would say it when I return. Look, man, you have been having a success streak in the theatres in the past one week and I think it is great that you are this enthusiastic about work and reading and applying more, but don’t push your luck.” He replied.

Jerry closed his book and stared at him. “What are you trying to say?”

“Late nights. Tiring surgeries. Reading into the dead of the night. Where is your medical sense? You need to rest.”

Jerry nodded cynically. “Yeah. I have been successful in the past week and I am thankful to God for that, but there is one person I am still here for and until I find a solution for Toni, there is no way I am leaving this place.”

Emeka sighed as he leaned on the table. “I get it. You love her. She loves you but she is in radiotherapy session and getting a lot of attention from a team of able doctors, but who is taking care of you? Look at you.”

Jerry smiled. “You are beginning to sound like a woman, man.” He said with a soft chuckle. He was expecting a smile from Emeka but none came. “Look, Emeka, I understand that you are concerned for me, but nothing is going to make sense to me until the woman I love is on her feet.”

“Food too?” Emeka asked.

Jerry sighed. “What do you want me to do?”

“You have to take care of yourself. Eat. Sleep. Then you can come back to work.” He replied.

Jerry looked away. “Emeka, she is not doing well with radiotherapy. You have seen the way the tumour multiplied...I don’t understand anything happening in that room anymore.”

“I spoke to the Director and we are thinking of merging Chemo because of the-”

“Just stop there. I thought the whole idea of this radiation thing was to shrink the tumours formed from the cancer cells that had spread in the brain. Why are you thinking of Chemo now?” he asked, angrily.

“Jerry, you know the possibility of complications can’t be undermined in any treatment.” Emeka replied.

“You should have thought of that when you pushed for it.” Jerry replied.

Emeka sighed.

“I am sorry, man.” Jerry said. “I...I just feel so helpless right now.” Jerry replied. “I am sorry for coming at you like that.”

Emeka smiled faintly. “Well, maybe I can give you a light tilt of your new faith, Trust God.”

Jerry nodded. “I know. Thank you.”

Emeka took a seat. “Jerry, what we know is we are doing everything we can and Toni is fighting hard too...don’t worry about it, man. It’ll all be alright.” He replied.

Jerry nodded. “I am fighting too...and if this is my way of fighting, please, allow me fight for her.” He replied and focused on his book.

“I won’t let you fall apart, bro.” Emeka said as he hugged Jerry.

Jerry couldn’t hold back his tears and he let them flow freely.

“Good morning, Toni.” Emeka greeted as he drew the curtains back.

Toni turned her face away from the light. “I don’t want the light.” She muttered.

Emeka nodded and drew them back. “How are you feeling today?”

“Not too good. I am getting closer, right?” she asked.

Emeka took a deep breath. “I have to keep you optimistic. That has been going well for you for a long time now and you can’t give up.”

Toni sighed. “Optimism is tiring.” She said with a soft chuckle.

“It means you should still hang on.” He replied. “I saw Nora on my way here. She is down the hallway.”

Toni smiled faintly. “This would be hard on her...but then, she has got James.”

“...what about Jerry?” Emeka asked.

Toni struggled to breathe. “I don’t know. He has been doing well with surgeries, I am happy for him.”

“Who is going to take care of him?” he asked.

Toni smiled. “Are you also terminally ill?” she asked as she managed a smile. “Daily doses are killing me, when would this treatment be over?” she asked with leery eyes.

“I need you to put more effort into this, Toni. Don’t go giving up now.” He replied.

She nodded. “I am fighting for as long as I can, but when my time is up, Emeka, my time is up.” She replied as she gripped his hand.

He took a deep breath. “How is the book coming?”

She reached for a journal which fell carelessly from her hand. “I am sorry.”

Emeka picked it up. “It’s okay. You’ll be fine, I know it.”

“I am almost done with the novel.” She replied. “Coming slowly but surely, but eventually, I’ll be done.”

“It’s an autobiography of you.” He said as he opened the book.

Toni winked. “I thought I’d hype myself a little. I mean, if I don’t do that...who will?”

“Jerry.”

Toni smiled. “I love that man.”

“He loves you too.”

The door opened and Nora walked in with James. “Hello, everyone.” She greeted as she walked over to give Toni a kiss. “How are you, darling?”

“I am fine.” Toni replied.

Emeka rose to his feet. “I’ll leave you all alone. And guys, you have just fifteen minutes with her. I need her to rest.” He said and walked out.

Nora took her seat beside Toni. “You look tired.”

“I am tired.” Toni replied.

James sighed. “This should be the last week of the dosage right?”

“Yeah. I can’t wait for it to be over.” She replied.

Nora took her hand with a smile. “I thinking we should travel when you leave this place. We could go to some resort. Enjoy a new air, you know?”

Toni smiled faintly. “You know what I want to do when I get out of here?”

“What?” Nora asked.

“Be with Jerry.”

James and Nora cooed with a smile. "Now, I am jealous." Nora said.

Toni smiled. "You don't have to be...James is here with you."

"Yeah, babe...smile." James said as he kissed Nora's cheek.

Toni cleared her throat. "You haven't asked about my book."

"Oh come on, Toni...I was going to. Nora replied as she picked the journal. "How's it coming?"

Toni smiled. "Almost over. "I don't have the strength to write with much gusto as before, but I still try."

"You can leave the book for now while you concentrate on your treatment." Nora replied.

Toni smiled. "The book is doing a lot for me."

Nora stared at it and then at Toni. "I spoke to the lawyer."

Toni cleared her throat. "What did he say?"

"He is coming in tomorrow."

Toni nodded with a faint smile. "That's sounds nice."

James stared at Toni. "Toni?"

"Yeah..." she replied tiredly.

"Can I have a moment with you in private?" he asked.

Nora looked at him with some concern. "Uh?"

Toni nodded. "Please, excuse us."

Nora stepped out.

"How is she?" Toni asked.

James shook his head. "Bad. She doesn't sleep at night and she is always crying."

"I thought you said you would move in with her?" Toni asked, with some concern.

He nodded. "I already did. Not helping matters. All she does is talk about how God already has your parents and that He doesn't need to take you too."

Toni smiled. "Oh well...I see she has started saying the same things to you too...honestly, Nora is the best sister in the world. She is strong. She is a fighter and a lover. She is a woman I look up to a lot and she might not know it now, but, she is phenomenal and I tell you, you are getting a goldmine for a woman. Don't mess it up."

James exhaled as he took her hand. "Are...Are you not scared?"

She chuckled. "Of what? What's the worst that could happen?"

"Come here." James said as he hugged her tight.

"Good job, Doctor Jerry." A Nurse said as they came out of the theatre.

He nodded as he dismissed her. Emeka approached him. "How was the surgery?"

"Fine. The Nurses are taking care of the rest." He replied as they started to walk. "How is Toni? Has she had her dose for today?"

Emeka nodded. "Yes. I was wondering why you haven't been to see her in days."

"Did she talk about it?" Jerry asked.

Emeka shook his head. "No. But, it is a little disturbing, don't you think?"

"I want to show up when I have good news for her. All you guys have done is give her a reason to know it is over, I want to go there when there is some hope." Jerry replied.

Emeka sighed. "Jerry, don't be silly. You have to go and see her today."

"I just want to have good news for her. Is that too much to ask?" Jerry asked.

Emeka blinked. "Do you know Toni at all?"

Jerry looked away.

"Man, this is not the time to play the hero. Go and meet her." Emeka replied and walked away.

Nora approached Jerry. "Hey!"

"Hi. How are you?" Jerry asked with a smile.

Nora shrugged. "I don't know. How are you?"

He smiled faintly. "I don't know too."

"I guess you have been really swamped." She said.

He nodded. "I am trying to find some answers somewhere."

"Toni is not doing better. I can feel it. Her spirit is down." Nora started as she took a seat. Jerry sat beside her. "She is giving up, Jerry...and there are tonnes of things we haven't done together, you know?"

Jerry blinked.

Nora sniffled as she continued. "Our weddings. Baby showers. Vacations. I mean, real vacations without any worries or fears. Mountain climbing. Bungee jumping. Sky diving. Surfing. We haven't done these things, Jerry. We may never do them,"

"You don't look like an adventurous person to me." Jerry said with a smile.

Nora nudged him in the waist. "You sounded like Toni just now."

Jerry chuckled. "She does have that effect on us all, right?"

"Yeah...I love her so much. She is my strength." She replied as she wiped her eyes.

Jerry exhaled. "I think we should do something lovely for her."

"Such as?" Nora asked.

He stared at her. "Throw a party?"

"Oh please! Toni would call it a farewell party." Nora said smiling. "And trust me, she is going to ruin that party." She added.

Jerry nodded slowly. "Or, we could actually go on a vacation. South Africa?" he suggested.

"Nah. We've combed that country...well, not on a vacation." She replied.

He shrugged. "Or we could go to Calabar. Obudu."

"Now that's an option." She replied with a smile. "We should tell Toni about it. She would love it." Nora said as she rose to her feet.

He nodded. "I'll join you there." He said

"Okay." Nora replied and walked away.

"He still won't come?" Toni asked as Nora read through a magazine.

Nora closed it. "I think he is really busy."

"You guys need to pull Jerry together." Toni replied.

Nora sighed. "I think he is fine. He is just occupied with a lot of work. Besides, what did you discuss with James?"

Toni smiled. "Personal."

"Really?" Nora asked. "You know we are sisters."

Toni nodded. "It's not working for me. Sorry."

Nora sighed. "So...what do you think about a vacation after the last session?"

Toni shrugged. "Like I told you earlier, I really don't care about it."

"Yeah...yeah...because you want to be with Jerry...but, what if Jerry would go with us on the vacation?" Nora asked.

Toni smiled. "You would do that for me?"

"It's his idea." Nora replied.

Toni folded her arms. "Jerry's idea? Really? He did say something about a vacation?"

"Why are you finding it so hard to believe?" Nora asked.

Toni giggled. "I didn't think you all were that exciting."

"We could make it a vacation for the four of us. You, me, Jerry and James. We would spend a lot of money and have a lot of fun too."

Toni nodded with a smile. "That works for me."

"Great! We have a date then. I would start scheduling everything for the trip." She said with excitement. "Where would you love to go to?"

Toni stared at Nora. "I don't know really."

The door opened and Jerry walked in with a smile. "Hi."

"Hey!" Toni replied. "Come and give me a hug!" she ordered. "Who is 'Hi'?" she said with a grin.

Jerry smiled as he hugged her.

"You can let go now." Toni said with a chuckle.

Jerry stared at her. "I am guessing Nora has told you about the vacation..."

Toni nodded with a smile. "Really? Are we going to have the vacation?"

"Yes, where do you want to go?" he asked.

Toni stared at them. "Guys, we have to do everything fun on that vacation. From Bungee jumping to sky diving. It has to rock!"

Nora stared at her. "Err...I guess you are forgetting something."

"And what could that be?" Toni asked.

Nora pointed to the bed. "We can't have you jumping up and down."

Jerry nodded. "She is right."

"But we still go on the vacation, right?" Toni asked.

“Sure!” Jerry and Nora replied at once and then laughed.

There was a light tap on the door and the Director walked in. “Everyone is all smiles here. That’s impressive.”

Toni smiled. “We could all be happy.”

The Director nodded. “Exactly.” He then turned towards Jerry. “Could I please steal Doctor Jerry for a couple of minutes?”

Jerry rose to his feet as he smiled at Toni. “I’ll be right back.”

“Have him for as long as you want.” Toni replied.

Jerry pecked her on the forehead and walked out with the Director.

“Now what trouble has he gotten himself into?” Toni asked.

Nora folded her arm. “Come on, he is a Doctor and that is his Director and this is their hospital...it has to be work related.”

“My instincts tell me that he is in trouble.” Toni replied.

Nora sighed. “Oh come on...no one ever admits that their instincts could be wrong.”

“Well, mine isn’t.” Toni replied.

Nora sighed as she took a seat

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“So what do you think, sir?” Jerry asked with a smile.

The Director greeted his smile with a stern frown. “What do you think you are doing, Jerry?”

Jerry looked in the direction of Toni’s room. “I remember staying off her case. What have I done?”

“I am not talking about her. I am talking about Mrs. Aiyenugba. What do you think you are doing?” he asked.

Jerry took a deep breath. “Mrs. Aiyenugba is my friend.”

“She is someone’s daughter and grandmother and our patient before being your friend.” He shouted.

Jerry exhaled. “What is the matter?”

“The matter is Mrs. Aiyenugba’s SAN of a son is threatening to sue my hospital if you don’t produce his mother.” The Director replied.

Jerry sighed. “That...that is not my decision to make.”

“Excuse me?” The Director probed.

Jerry nodded in defiance. “Mrs. Aiyenugba happens to enjoy where she is living at the moment, it is of no use to send her to a family that doesn’t want her.”

“That would be for her and her family to decide. We have done our part and that is treating her so you are going to let her family do the rest which again I say is not our duty.” The Director replied.

Jerry nodded. “Okay.”

“I want you to take care of this matter today.” He said and walked away.

Jerry sighed and returned into Toni’s room.

“So, what did you do?” Toni asked as he walked in.

Nora hissed. “Leave the man alone, Toni. Do we all have to do wrong?” she asked.

“It’s about my housemate.” He replied.

Toni grinned at Nora. “Told you.”

“The hospital wants me to get her out of my house, but her family doesn’t want her so it seems pointless.” He replied.

“You have a housemate?” Toni asked.

He nodded. “Mrs. Aiyenugba. She is an elderly woman.”

Toni sighed. “Thank God.”

Jerry chuckled as he took his seat. “I should tell you all about her.”

“Yes, you should.” Toni replied.

Nora picked up her purse. “I want to take a walk. I’ll be right back guys.”

Toni blinked. “I’ll be here.”

Nora nodded and walked out.

“She wants to go and cry.” Toni said.

Jerry stared at her. “No. It’s a walk.”

“No. she is going to shed some tears.” She replied.

Jerry raised an eyebrow. "How can you be so sure?"

"I am sure." She replied.

Jerry rose to his feet. "In that case, I think I should go and check on her."

"No. She will be fine." Toni replied. "And let's look on the brighter side, shedding tears actually washes microorganisms from the eyes." She said with a smile.

Jerry nodded with a smile. "I love you, Toni."

She smiled back. "And I love you, Jerry."

Nora wanted the vacation more than anyone. She wanted a new air...some respite for her soul. As she sat in the garden, she watched as Nurses or family members wheeled patients around for some air. She wanted someone to wheel her around. She didn't want to think about Toni for a minute. She just wanted to be happy...she didn't want to expect the worst. She wanted to live in denial for a day...maybe a day was pushing her luck. She thought. An hour seemed just fine. If she could just live the next hour without thinking about Toni, maybe she would be fine.

She knew she wasn't going to be fine. These things don't just go away. She raised her head to the sky as she fought back tears, the more she tried, the more her throat hurt. She felt pain. Maybe no one really knew how she felt. She cried.

"It is pointless, guys, I am not having this conversation." Jerry said as he knotted his neck tie.

Emeka stared at Mrs. Aiyenugba. "I have told you he won't listen."

"Jerry, I understand you don't want to see me go, but if they are threatening to sue the Hospital, you should understand. It could also cost you your job."

"I'll get another." Jerry replied.

Emeka sighed. "Bull-headed cock!"

Jerry laughed. "Bull? Cock? Dude?"

Emeka blinked as he looked away. He was so angry that he didn't know that he had not put the words out rightly. However tacky Jerry thought it sounded, he had made his point clear. Jerry was being adamant.

"Jerry, I know how much you care about me, but my son can be a real pain. I know that first hand." Mrs. Aiyenugba said. "You don't want him throwing his legal weights around."

Jerry shrugged. "I can't be bothered. No one will take you to that facility against your will."

"But I hear it is a fine place. Just that I would be surrounded with old people...and I am old too." She said with a smile. "Let me go."

Emeka swallowed. "Come on, man. The Director expects you to have sorted this out yesterday, we shouldn't go to work today with a negative answer for him."

"At least, let her meet Toni before she leaves. We would take her in the evening." Jerry said with a frown.

Mrs. Aiyenugba smiled. "Thank you. I can't wait to meet her."

"It's okay." Jerry said as he took a deep breath. "I would be back to pick you at lunch time."

The doorbell chimed. Emeka opened it. He was forced back by Police officers.

"Doctor Jerry?"

Jerry stepped forward. "What is it?"

"You are under arrest." The officer said flashing a warrant before him.

CHAPTER 12

Nora shut the door after the lawyer and turned in Toni's direction. Toni smiled faintly at her and slipped into the bed.

"How do you feel?" Nora asked as she took her seat beside her sister.

Toni sighed. "Tired, but I am optimistic. What about you?"

"I am okay, I just think that calling the lawyer today speaks a lot about your optimism, Toni. How optimistic is drawing up a will?" Nora asked, feeling sad.

Toni shrugged. "I am being realistic here, Nora. We have gone over this before...I don't think we need to do it again."

Nora nodded. "Sure."

"I haven't seen Emeka or Jerry around here today. Have you?" Toni asked.

Nora shook her head. "Neither have I."

"That's strange." Toni said. "Anyway, let's talk about my book and the big plans I have for it." She said.

Nora stared at her. "Can we go on holidays first? We would discuss the massive book launch during the holiday." She replied.

"You are still offended because of the will, right?"

Nora shrugged. "Why would I be offended?"

"Why won't you be offended? You think I am throwing everything away by drafting that will, right? You think I don't have the zeal to live and all I want to do is disappoint everyone?" Toni asked.

Nora sighed. "I don't think you aren't fighting hard enough."

"What do you see when you look at me, Nora?" Toni asked.

Nora took a deep breath. "Don't start asking questions like this, Toni. I love you and that's all that counts."

"Nora, what do you see when you look at me?" Toni asked as she swallowed.

Nora stared at her. "A beautiful strong woman."

“Then give me some credit. I am making efforts to live, and I am fighting with everything in me to make sure that you don’t come in here and realise that I am gone. I am afraid to die, I am not feeling better, but yet, I want to be here for you...and I will keep fighting. So, Nora, don’t you dare give up on me...because, I am not giving up on myself.” Toni blurted and then wiped her eyes.

Nora took a deep breath. “I am sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.” Toni replied.

Nora exhaled. “It’s been tense for me. You...you don’t understand how it feels to be in my shoes.”

Toni chuckled. “Trust me, Nora. It feels better to be you.”

Nora smiled faintly. Her sister had made a joke out of it and it made her feel better.

“Life is precious, Nora. You have to enjoy it while you have it. There are a lot of people who would rather have these days. Don’t waste it.” Toni said.

Nora blinked as she took Toni’s hand. “Save the pep talk for later.” She said with a smile.

Toni laughed. “You have a crooked sense of humour, you have got to work on it.”

“Was I trying to be funny?” Nora asked.

Toni nodded with a grin. “And you suck at it.”

Nora exhaled with a smile. “Stay with me, Toni.”

“Have you booked our flight tickets? I’ll soon be out of here, you know? That vacation has to rock.” Toni replied as she smiled.

Nora nodded. “It’s going to be a perfect holiday.”

“Yeah...I know it will be.” Toni replied. “Now, where is Jerry?”

Nora smiled. “You are missing him already, aren’t you?”

Toni nodded. “I don’t know, it’s unlike him or Emeka not to have at least dropped in by now. That has me worried.”

“I suggest you get your mind off it. I will go and ask the Nurses if they have seen any of them this morning.” Nora replied.

Toni shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. Maybe, they are busy with surgery or something. I don’t want you bothering yourself about it. I am just paranoid.”

“Paranoid? You miss a guy you love and you call it being paranoid? That’s not paranoia, lady. I will go out and find anything I can regarding his whereabouts.” Nora replied.

Toni smiled. "Thank you."

Emeka and Mrs. Aiyenugba rose to receive Jerry as he walked out of the Police station.

"Thank you." Jerry said to Mrs. Aiyenugba.

She smiled. "It's okay, dear. I am sorry for everything I put you through. I didn't know Shola would do this."

"It's okay. It's nothing serious."

Emeka grinned. "How was it?"

"Did I go there to eat food?" Jerry replied harshly.

Mrs. Aiyenugba smiled. "It's okay, boys. I have to go now, my son is waiting." She said staring in the direction of her son.

Jerry nodded and walked over to meet Mrs. Aiyenugba's son. "Hey!"

"You do know who you are talking to, right?" Mr. Aiyenugba replied.

Jerry nodded. "A stupid and ungrateful man."

Mr. Aiyenugba stared at him. "Are you sane?" he asked.

"Yes. But to me, you are quite insane." Jerry replied.

Emeka and Mrs. Aiyenugba rushed over to them. "Jerry, stop this." Emeka said.

"No." Jerry replied. "Let me teach this man how to respect his mother."

Mrs. Aiyenugba took Jerry's hand. "It's okay. You don't have to tell him anything."

"Kini gbogbo radarada yi? (What is all this rubbish?)" Mr. Aiyenugba voiced in Yoruba (A Nigerian local dialect.)

"You have suddenly lost your ability to speak English?" Jerry asked. "You don't care enough about your own mother and when another man cares about her, you want to punish him for it?" Jerry asked angrily as he drew closer to him.

Emeka pulled his friend back to avoid another detention. "Dude! Think about Toni. Do you want them to lock you up again?"

"On what grounds?! Have I even assaulted him yet?" Jerry shouted.

"You won't dare touch me." Shola retorted. "I will have them lock you and your family up for good."

“Shut up!” Mrs. Aiyenugba yelled at her son. “Who are you? What power do you have to lock up anyone and his family? I am under the impression that you have completely lost it.”

Mr. Aiyenugba took a deep breath and stared at his Mother. “Mum, let’s go.”

“I am not going with you, Shola...at least, not yet. If I am going to be put away in that facility permanently, I want to make a quick stop at the Hospital to see someone.” She replied.

Mr. Aiyenugba nodded. “Fine, I’ll drive you down there.”

“I heard what happened to you.” The Director said as Jerry walked into his office. “I told you to give up that woman, but you wouldn’t.”

Jerry sighed. “It was worth it.”

The Director nodded. “Toni had her session an hour ago. She is resting at the moment.”

“I know. I saw her sister outside.” He replied as he took a seat.

“We would have to stop the treatment.” The Director said.

Jerry stared at him. “Why? What is going on?”

“I have been consulting with the specialist here all day and he thinks she has to go home now.”

“What do you mean?” Jerry said as he jumped at the Director.

The Director sighed. “The cancer is competing with her brain mass.”

“Let me cut it!” Jerry shouted.

“This is not about cutting anymore, you can’t even get in if you tried to cut, but, we can only hope that the effect of the radiation melts it away. If we put her under more radiation, you know the adverse of that.” The Director replied as he placed his hand on Jerry’s shoulder. “Son, I am sorry, but this time, you have done so much.”

“I have not done anything and I am going to come back with something on this case. I am not pulling away.” Jerry replied.

“Listen to me, Jerry. I know how you feel-”

“-You don’t! You don’t know what it is like to love someone and not be able to help her. I won’t let her down, I swear I won’t.”

The Director sighed. "Jerry, you might need some time off from here to go and take care of her, she has medications which she needs to take every time. These drugs will be very useful to her and from time to time, she has to come here for other treatments."

Jerry buried his head in his hands. "This can't be happening to me."

"Listen to me, Jerry. There is a slight chance."

Jerry stared at him. "I understand. I...this, this is just not right."

"All that is left for us is to pray. We would discharge her tomorrow." The Director said and returned to his seat. "You should go and be with her."

Jerry nodded. "Does she know about this?"

"Not yet, we would talk to her in the evening."

Jerry exhaled. "Let me do it."

"Jerry? Are you sure about this?" The Director asked.

Jerry nodded. "I am, Sir. I can handle this one." He replied.

"But you do know that you can't lie to the patient, Jerry? You have to tell her everything, we have reached the stage where we prepare her mind." He said.

Jerry nodded. "I'll do just that." He replied and approached the door.

"And about the leave...take two weeks off from here, please." The Director said. "I need you in good condition."

Jerry sighed and walked out.

"What's up, man?" Emeka asked as Jerry walked into the office.

Jerry stared at him. "It's time to prepare Toni."

"I am sorry. I also spoke to the oncologist and he didn't sound too positive about her chances." Emeka replied.

Jerry took a seat. "How do I start? Where do I go from here? This is too much for me, Emeka."

"Jerry, I know this is hard for you and I wish I could say something or do something to make it all go away-"

Jerry stared at him. "-but you can't. There is nothing you can do or say to me right now, it's just sour."

"Do you want me to be there when you break the news to her?" Emeka asked.

Jerry shrugged. "I don't know. I think I want to do this alone."

"I don't think you should let Nora know about it yet. Toni seems more prepared than she is." Emeka replied. "Maybe Nora can learn about this later, after she is discharged? Just not to bring it to her as it is, this would hurt her more." Emeka said.

Jerry nodded. "You have a point, but we can't exactly keep it away from her. Maybe, she should know about it first, before we talk to Toni. We owe it to her as Toni's relation." Jerry replied.

"True. Nora was talking to me about taking Toni on a vacation, you think I can come with you guys?"

Jerry stared at him. "You want to come?"

Emeka nodded. "I have grown attached to her in these last days and I think you are going to need me there."

Jerry sighed. "Thanks a lot for the help, man."

"It's nothing, bro." Emeka replied as they hugged. Jerry's grip was firm and his chest pounded hard. Emeka knew he was scared. "It'll be fine, Jerry. God's got this."

Jerry stared at him. "I am losing her."

"Trust me, man. You'll be fine, pull it together." Emeka said. "You want something to eat?"

Jerry shook his head sadly. "I can't eat anything, man. I don't know what to do without her. I just need to breathe right now. "

"Take it easy, okay? Please, man." Emeka said.

Jerry nodded. "I would do everything I can. Anyway, where's Mrs. Aiyenugba? I haven't checked on her since she came down here with us. Has her son taken her away?"

"No. She is waiting to see Toni, but since Toni is asleep, she is somewhere at the reception." Emeka replied.

Jerry nodded. "I'll go and see her now. If the Director asks for me, just page me, okay?"

"Okay." Emeka replied and watched his friend leave the room a downcast man. He swallowed painfully as he took a seat. He had not known Toni for a very long time, but he couldn't imagine losing her.

"How are you, Jerry?" Mrs. Aiyenugba asked as he approached her.

"I am not doing fine." He confessed. "It's time to prepare Toni."

Mrs. Aiyenugba swallowed as she held her chest. “Oh God.”

“I don’t know why this has to happen to her. If I could at least find some answers... why would I have her for such a short time and it seems like I have known her all my life? She came and made everything that didn’t make sense to me, make sense. How can I come to terms with losing such a woman? I can’t.”

She nodded. “Jerry, in this life, we are always going to meet people like that. Maybe for a short moment, or maybe for a lifetime, but the truth is, we have to learn to cherish every moment we have with them, don’t ever forget to tell them that you love them and in the end, you won’t have to regret anything.” She said.

Jerry sighed. “She’ll be glad to meet you too.”

Mrs. Aiyenugba nodded. “Of course.” She replied. “Jerry, make every moment count.”

“I will.” He replied.

“Have you called your mother? Else, you would have been throwing the wrong stones at Shola.”

Jerry sighed and pulled out his phone. “I am calling her now.”

“Good boy. Love your parents now that you can.” She replied.

Jerry dialled. “Hello, Mom...”

James handed Nora a paper. “Receipts from the bookings. Flight leaves tomorrow evening.”

Nora nodded as she stared at it. “I hope Toni enjoys this vacation.”

“I bet she will. We all will make it the best for her.” He replied and took Nora’s hand. “How are you doing?”

“I am not fine, but I guess I have to look the part of the sister that is doing fine.” Nora replied. “The Doctor says they are discharging her tomorrow morning.”

James nodded. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“Seems more like a bad thing to me. Toni doesn’t look like she is doing better, yet, they want to discharge her. It can only mean one thing.”

James waved it off. “No, babe, don’t see it that way. It could also be a better avenue for her to go home and complete the recovery. You know sometimes, the doctors think it is better to have the patient go home for a better atmosphere.”

Nora chuckled. “Do I look like I am five? Even five-year-olds don’t believe that crap.”

James sighed. “I don’t know what else to say to you.”

“Say nothing, James. Let’s just sit and watch it all pass by.” She replied.

He nodded. “Fine. I can do that with you.” He replied as he sipped his drink. “Is Toni awake?”

“Yes. She has a guest. Jerry’s friend is with her.” She replied.

James smiled. “She can make do with all the family necessary right now.”

“I know...she needs us now more than ever...and, I need her too.” Nora said as tears rolled down her eyes.

James went over to her and hugged her.

“You are as amazing as Jerry says you are.” Mrs. Aiyenugba said as she laughed.

Toni smiled. “I think I can be a little more amazing than I am right now.” She replied.

“Yes, I think you are.” Mrs. Aiyenugba said with a smile. “I hear you are going home tomorrow.”

Toni nodded. “I am happy about it. I get to finally finish my book and go on a vacation. I am quite excited.”

Mrs. Aiyenugba smiled. “You should be. You need to have fun.”

“I always do have fun...in my own little way. Jerry told me about Victoria’s Homes, are you ready for it?” Toni asked.

Mrs. Aiyenugba rose to her feet. “I am not ready for it. But, I don’t have any choice, besides, I don’t think it would be so bad in there, who knows, I might pick up a new profession from there?”

“New profession?” Toni asked with a smile.

Mrs. Aiyenugba nodded with a smile. “I bet there would be lots of bitter women there, I could get close to them.”

“Oh! And touch their lives? That’s noble.” Toni said with a smile.

Mrs. Aiyenugba scoffed. “Not that. I would find out who they are and who their children are and why they were put in there, then, I would pass scoops to journalists and help get mud on those that have important children.”

Toni gaped as she laughed. “Seriously?”

Mrs. Aiyenugba nodded. “Why not? It would act as a stress reliever for me and also earn me a few bucks.”

Toni smiled. “This is interesting...and good too.”

“See...good thing you understand.” Mrs. Aiyenugba replied as she returned to her seat. “Are you planning towards a book launch?”

“I will ask Nora to help me with it.” She replied as she relaxed in her bed. “I am glad I met you.”

Mrs. Aiyenugba took her hand. “Same here. I have to go now, my son is waiting to take me to the facility.”

Toni nodded as she hugged Mrs. Aiyenugba. “Do take care.”

“Be strong, Toni.” She replied and walked out.

Jerry walked in almost immediately. “Hey there.” He said as he pecked her forehead. “How are you?”

Toni stared at him. “Prepared.”

“Prepared?” he asked.

She nodded. “I am getting discharged tomorrow and I still feel like this, don’t I know what it means?” she asked.

Jerry swallowed. “Toni, I...I want you to know that I am doing everything I can to-”

Toni sighed. “-Babe, let it be already. What did the Doctor say?”

He blinked. “You want me to tell you?”

She nodded. “Why not? I would like to know.”

“Erm...”

“You have to tell me the truth, you know?” she said.

He nodded. “Toni, this is hard for me, but, I won’t want anyone else to let you know this, we have tried so hard and I swear I want to try harder, I am going to do everything I can and I promise you, I am not giving up on you yet, I-”

“-Stop it. Just talk.”

He blinked as he took her hand. “They have to stop the radiotherapy because the cancer is well spread into the brain and now, we actually can’t cut it, also, further therapy is quite dangerous as we have implemented the regular dose required for this treatment and we can’t go overboard with it.” He said as he squeezed her hands. “Toni, I want you to know that there is a slight chance that the medications that you are going to be placed on from tomorrow are going to help melt the tumours and you can survive.”

She nodded. “Okay, how long do I have? Medically?”

Jerry swallowed and closed his eyes. “One week.”

“Wow!” Toni said. “Wow! Wow!” she reiterated as her eyes were wet. “One week, Jerry. Man, this is so fast.” Toni said as she looked away. Her heart raced fast. It was like a ticking bomb was tied around her waist. “Oh my God.”

Jerry took her hand. “Look at me, babe. Don’t care about what they say, okay? Babe, look here.”

Toni swallowed and stared at him. “I thought I’d have more time. I thought we’d be able to have a nice vacation and stuff, I really thought we’d enjoy the holidays.”

“Toni, it is okay to be vulnerable. Don’t hold it all in, just let it go.” Jerry said as he lifted her face to his. “You have held it in for me, for Nora, for your foundation, for everyone. Just let it go now.” He said.

Toni couldn’t hold back her tears. “I don’t want to die, Jerry. Please.” She said as she cried and wrapped her arms around him. “I am so scared, I don’t want to go.”

Jerry closed his eyes tight. This couldn’t be happening to him. He had asked Toni to let it all out and her tears frightened him. He was scared as it loomed that he was going to let her down. “I am sorry.” He said.

“Jerry, please.” She cried.

He stroked her hair. “It’s okay, Toni. It’s going to be alright. Don’t do this, please.”

She stared at him with tears. “This will pass, right?”

He nodded. “Yes, it will. It is just a phase, everything will pass.” He replied as he wiped her tears. “Don’t cry anymore, please.”

“Jerry...” she called.

“Yeah?!” he asked.

She blinked. “One week is too close, but I am going to buy me more time...because I am not going to give up easily on us, we might not have a month left, but we are going to make it memorable and special.”

Jerry stared at her looking confused.

Toni smiled. “This is it, Jerry. Nora has the tickets we need for our flight, we are going to leave tomorrow evening.”

“Are you serious?” he asked, still feeling off the place. A moment ago, she was in tears and now, she had worn another personality. “Are you okay, Toni?”

Toni nodded with a faint smile. “Right now, I just want to live the rest of these desperate days in the best way, and that’s what we are going to do. So, would you come with me?”

Jerry stared at her and nodded. “Let’s make it count.”

CHAPTER 13

Jerry pushed the door open as he walked into the bar. He had not set his feet there in a long time. He didn't know if he would be in the right frame of mind to help her live the desperate days and he was sure that he needed some encouragement. What better friend than alcohol at this moment? He had said to himself as he stepped into the bar.

"Jerry!" Tunji called as he saw. "Where have you been?"

Jerry smiled faintly. "I have been everywhere but here."

"That's good. Working on your addiction, right? That's good." Tunji remarked as he cleaned a glass. "How's that pretty girl?"

Jerry sighed. Toni was dying. How best could he respond to Tunji? Traditionally, it was almost 'Nigerian' to say 'fine' or 'I am fine' regardless of your situation. Maybe it was optimism, maybe hope, maybe faith...our words oozed more positives than our actions.

"Are you so struck by her?" Tunji asked, noticing Jerry's silence. "Say something, this place opens in about an hour."

"Yeah...words are not enough. Toni-is-is the complete package." Jerry said as his voice broke.

Tunji stared at him. "What is it, man? What happened?"

"I am just scared."

"About what? Did Toni break up with you?"

Jerry sighed. "Honestly, I am not here to talk. I just want a drink. Can you at least do that for me?"

Tunji took a deep breath. "No."

"Really? There are a thousand and one competitors and you refuse me a drink?" Jerry asked.

Tunji nodded as he took a seat beside Jerry. "The other guys, yes, they want to sell liquor to you. I want to sell too, make no mistake, but not when you can do the right thing...if you are running away from something and you think this place is going to shelter you, bro, you are wrong. You have got to face it."

Jerry clenched his fist. "I am not running, Tunji. I just need the courage to face it."

“Trust me, courage isn’t in the bottle. It’s in you.” Tunji replied and returned to his desk. He poured a glass and placed it before Jerry. “Have some courage.” He said and continued cleaning the glasses.

Jerry stared hard at the glass. He swallowed painfully as he fought his inner desire to just drink his pains away. He abandoned the drink and rose to his feet.

“Good choice.” Tunji said.

Jerry stared at him. “Toni is not doing fine. We are going away for a while.”

“What is it?” Jerry asked.

Jerry blinked. “Cancer.”

Tunji cringed. “I am sorry, man.”

“Yeah...I know.” Jerry replied.

Tunji sighed. “You know I would be here for you, right?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Jerry replied. “I’ve got to get going.”

Tunji stretched out his hand to him. “Jerry?”

Jerry stared at him. “Yeah?”

“Make it count.” Tunji said.

Jerry took his hand firmly. “We will.”

Toni pushed Nora out of the way as they walked into the suite. “No way!!! Seriously, Nora?” Toni said as she surveyed the room in one glance. “This is a presidential suite.”

“Only the best for you, my darling, only the best.” Jerry said as he pushed the boxes into the room with Emeka. “Why are you complaining? You want a vacation and we are here to give it to you.” He added immediately.

Toni stared at him. “And that includes bringing us here? We can save a lot of money with some other regular suite. How much is this place per night?” she asked.

Jerry and Nora started to whistle.

Toni gaped. “Seriously guys!”

“Oh Toni, you whine too much! The money is nothing. If you have got it, you spend it.” Nora replied.

“Or you invest it!” Toni retorted.

“Would it make you happy if I told you that Jerry is paying for all these?” Nora asked.

Toni widened her eyeballs as she stared at Jerry. “What?!”

“Are you going to spank me for spending my own money?” he asked with a smirk.

Emeka nodded. “Ladies take these things too personal. I mean, it’s a brother’s money.” He replied with a smile.

“He should learn to invest in his future.” She retorted at Emeka.

“I am spending some of my dividends too...don’t be worried.” Jerry replied with a smile.

Toni sighed. “You should save that...argh...men! Anyway, where is James anyway?”

James walked into the room carrying a box of pizza and a pack of juice. “Food is here!” he announced with a grin.

“Food? But we ate on the plane.” Toni protested.

Jerry stared at Emeka. “She is going mummy on us all. Duck!” he said and they hurried out.

Toni turned to James. “Why do we have to eat Pizza now? We had something to eat about thirty minutes ago.”

“Err...I thought we could make do with in-between meals.” He replied with a smile.

Toni turned to Nora. “In-between meals? Since when did we start in-between meals?” she asked.

“You don’t remember? We absolutely love to eat as many times as possible.” Nora replied as she picked up her purse. “James, we should go and see the landscape.”

Toni stared at them. “And what about me?” she asked.

Nora stuttered. “Erm...you can stay here and have some pizza and juice while James and I make a quick look of the environment.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you all are trying to push me away?” she asked.

James gaped. “No...Not at all. We just want you to get some rest, you know. Jet-lagged.”

“And you all aren’t jet-lagged from Lagos to Calabar? I won’t get any rest if you all keeping flipping on me. First, Jerry and Emeka and now, you and Nora. Am I such a bad habit?”

“When you start whining like this, you could be a real pain.” Nora replied as she took James’ hand. “For once, Toni, enjoy your money.”

“Well, this is Jerry’s money and I am allergic to spending his money.” Toni replied as she sprawled on the bed. “But damn...this is the real life.”

“See...it didn’t take long to bring out the hidden you which is the real you. We’ll be right back. Take care, love.” Nora replied and walked out with James.

Toni took a deep breath and pulled the Pizza close. “The only reason why I am having you is to prevent wastage, I am not a fan of people wasting money or resources, so here we go...” she said and took a bite.

“Good thing you guys were able to escape from her.” Jerry said as Nora and James joined them in the restaurant. “So, what’s the next plan?” he asked.

Nora pulled out her journal. “I was thinking we could do a road trip round the town, we would camp wherever night falls.”

“I have the sketch books for the photos and other important documentation.” James said. “There is also a map just in case we get lost.”

“I was thinking we should rent a space bus.” Emeka said. “Big enough for all of us.” He added.

“I was thinking a convertible. I mean, it is so much fun when you go on road trips with convertibles. That way we can get to spread our hands and head into the sun.” Nora replied.

“That’s the effect of seeing too many movies. Hollywood.” James cut in.

“Are you kidding me, James? It would be fun!” she echoed.

“We are five in number. It won’t be very comfortable.” Jerry replied. “Maybe the space bus isn’t such a bad idea after all.”

Nora frowned. “It is a terrible idea. Who goes on road trips in a space bus?” she stressed as she sulked.

James kissed her forehead. “Get used to this one, babe.”

“I think I agree with Nora.” Emeka said cutting in. “We could actually use the convertible.”

Jerry turned at him as he widened his eyes. “Dude!”

Nora smiled. “See...even Emeka agrees with me.”

Jerry stared at his friend. “We are taking a space bus whether you like it or not.”

“What have I done wrong? I only think it is right that we make the lady happy.” Emeka added.

James nodded. "True, we could get an Audi or BMW, there might be some space at the back."

Nora smiled at James. "Now you are talking."

"Or we could just take the Space bus." Emeka said, staring at Nora and James.

Nora frowned. "Why are you teasing me?"

Jerry smiled. "That's who Emeka is...very funny guy. A tease."

Emeka nodded. "Yeah...my friends say I am Kevin Hart." He said laughing. Jerry frowned and so did James and Nora. Emeka stopped laughing. "I know...I know."

Jerry rose to his feet. "I am going to the bar, please come with me, Emeka."

Emeka stared at him. "Oh really?"

"Yes!" Jerry said pulling him along.

"I thought you quit alcohol." Emeka said as they got to the bar. "It didn't take long for you to backslide." Emeka chuckled.

Jerry nodded. "Sure I did quit booze, but I couldn't help but notice how you were hitting on Nora there."

"Me? No o...I...I was just making a conversation." Emeka replied defensively.

Jerry hissed. "I don't even believe you! Emeka, you have a fiancée, respect yourself so James doesn't beat you up. He is fit, you know?"

"But you are also fit. Won't you defend your man?" he asked.

Jerry nodded. "If you were right, fine. But you are scoping another guy's babe, my hand no dey there o."

"I...I just like her. That's all." Emeka replied. "Just like."

Jerry nodded. "Put a leash on it, else, I am calling your babe."

"Guy, you can't do a brother like that na." Emeka protested.

Jerry scoffed. "Watch me." He replied and returned to the others.

TONI

"I am racing against time. Officially, the Doctors think I would be here for more than five more days, but I don't see myself leaving anytime soon. I mean...that soon. My book would be done before I leave this place, that, I am sure of. My whole life has been one huge fairy tale. Finding love in the strangest places and wishes for more than I could get. To be fair, I

have done my part here, so, I don't feel nervous about going away...it's just that I am allowed to be human sometimes and let fear creep in as I think of my loved ones.

Nora is the best sister in the world, she is my father, my mother, my sister and my brother. I couldn't have wished for a better sister. She had fewer nights than myself as she would sit and watch me sleep, keeping silent and lonely vigils while I enjoyed my sleep. Honestly, I had fun putting Nora through all that. Family is everything and even though my own family was Nora, there were no boundaries for us. With family, you have no idea how much you can do.

I have come across tonnes of guys in my journey in life, but I had never really given anyone a second thought until I met Doctor Jerry. Jerry was the first person to make me dread my situation. Every battle I fought from the day I met him was all about survival. The thought of seeing him, talking to him made the difference. I always thought I was the only one with that special effect on people, but then, Jerry held me spell-bound. I might not have been smitten outwardly, but thanks to him, I knew what it was to be more beautiful on the inside."

I shut my laptop as I took a deep breath and took another bite from the Pizza. It had kept me company since the last hour. I didn't want to bother them with my calls, so I just turned on the Television and fed my eyes. What could a girl do?

The door opened and Jerry walked in with a smile. "Hey, Stranger."

"Hi, Stranger." I replied with the warmest smile I could produce. "I love that name, you know?"

Jerry nodded as he joined me on the bed. "What are you watching?"

"Documentary channel. Amazing how these Giraffes neck." I said.

He nodded. "It is lovely." He replied. "It's a sign of strength."

"They are necking to prove strength, most of us depict it as love...who knows what else we misinterpret in animals?" I asked with a smile.

Jerry shrugged. "I am sure that we are not mistaken about the peacock's pride."

I chuckled. "Jerry...what are you guys planning?"

"Planning? What do you mean?" he asked.

I smiled. "I am not stupid. You all disappearing in groups can only mean there is a plan in the offing. Come on, tell me."

Jerry shook his head. "There is nothing other than the ordinary."

“Go on...you can tell me everything. I promise not to tell Nora.” I said as I blinked my eyes playfully.

Jerry tripped. “Fine. We are doing a road trip.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed.

“B...But you can’t tell the others I told you, else, they’ll just think I am fickle.” He replied.

I nodded. “But then you are fickle. It didn’t take you a minute to tell me the truth.”

He scoffed. “Seriously? Is that what I get?”

“For betraying your team, that is what you get.” I replied.

Jerry sprawled on the bed. “So, are you now teaching me life lessons?” he asked.

I smiled. “Not exactly, but, teams should come first. I might even rat you out to them.”

“No, you won’t.” he replied. “I should come first.”

I grinned. “The truth comes first for me.”

“You are such a kill joy, Toni.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“How is the novel coming?” he asked as he tried to pick my laptop. I immediately shielded it from him. “Are you not going to let me see it?” he asked. “I should read it before everyone else.”

“That’s after my editor has read it and the publishers have it ready for sale.” I replied. “Trust me, it would be soon, besides, I am not yet done with the novel.” I concluded.

Jerry nodded. “Fine. Mrs. Aiyenugba called while I was on my way up here.”

“How is she doing?” I asked.

He smiled. “She has made very important friends. She told me to lay emphasis on ‘important’ that you’ll understand.”

I nodded. “Of course, I understand.”

“So...what did she mean by important friends?” he asked.

I sighed and pecked his forehead. “You really don’t get it, do you? I don’t tell on friends.” I said and grabbed my towel. “I am off to the bathroom...be gone before I am back...and don’t think about touching my laptop, it is password protected.” I concluded and shut the door to the bathroom.

“What do you want to talk about?” James asked as he strolled with Nora.

Nora sighed. “Nothing. When is the car coming so we can get on with the road trip?”

“In about an hour or so. Jerry and Emeka went to get it.” He replied.

She nodded. “That’s good. I should go to Toni.”

“She wants to be left alone, I checked on her earlier.” He replied. “Now, about Emeka.”

Nora stared at him. “What about him?”

“I think he likes you.” James said.

“Is it wrong?” She replied.

James smiled. “Nice touch with the humour there, but, I think you know what I mean.”

“I do?” Nora asked. “Are you getting touchy here, James?”

James stopped walking. “I am not getting touchy. I just think that he is showing too much interest in you...and you are taken.”

Nora stared at her finger. “I am not engaged.”

“But we have something, right?” he asked.

Nora grinned. “My sarcasm has definitely improved.”

James sighed. “For once, I thought you were for real.”

“James, if another guy hits on your girl, you should be happy.” She started. “It can only mean that she is really attractive.”

James scoffed. “How attractive is that? That is scary. What if you fall in love with him?”

“Then something is actually boring about you.” She replied with a smirk.

“Is that a joke too?” He asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “Does it sound like one?”

“I am not joking, Nora.” James said.

She nodded. “I know.”

“So?” James asked.

Nora smiled. “You are making a big deal out of it. The fact that he likes me in the direction you feel doesn’t mean I am on the same lane as he is.”

“That’s very comforting.” James replied.

Nora smiled. “Now let’s go find the others.”

TONI

“I knew it, we should have taken the convertible!” Nora groaned as we all got off the space bus for the third time. “This bus isn’t in its right frame of mind.” She added.

I fetched my camera and started making a video coverage of everyone as they reacted to the event.

Nora wasn’t going to stop grumbling. Ever since the space bus arrived at the hotel, she thought it was a bad idea. She was dreaming of cruising in a convertible as we travelled across the beautiful town and its landscape. “This is a terrible idea. I knew it. We are so not going to pay them in full.”

James chuckled at her last statement.

Nora flipped at him. “What’s funny?”

“Apart from the fact that you are acting like Toni was when we initially got here, you pay in full to rental services and even an increase for guarantee.”

Nora cringed. “No!!! They have robbed us of our money.”

For Jerry and Emeka, it was more of who has got the cleaner abs contest. There was a clear winner though. Jerry. Tada!!! But seriously, did they need to take off their shirts to check the car’s radiator and some other things I don’t know that a car has? I can make a case for Jerry. He is putting on a white t-shirt, so it is understandable that he wants to take it off and also, if you have got it...you are permitted to show the world. Besides, he is my Jerry. Now, about Emeka, I don’t know why anyone who is still in the process of denial regarding differentiating between fat and crops would take off his shirt? That has me confused and slightly sorry too.

Can I blame him for efforts? No. Nora and I have countless numbers of push-up bras and many ladies too. I am not making an excuse for the female gender, but we have got to look ‘it’.

Back to the matter....the car is now fixed and we are ready to go...and guess who takes over the wheels? Yours truly.

Jerry took his seat beside Toni in front as she fixed the keys into the ignition. “Are you sure about this?” he asked.

Toni smiled. “I am not redundant, babe. I can drive a car.”

He nodded and focused on her as though she was the road. "Toni..." he muttered. "Let me drive."

"No!" she replied sharply and stepped on the pedal. "Here we go people! Hold your breath, ladies and gentlemen...it is Toni time." She echoed and wheeled off.

Jerry watched her every turn and every step on any of the pedals.

"You are starting to freak me out." Toni said.

He sighed. "I can't help it."

"Well, I am not going to kill all of us, so you can relax." She said with a smile. "We are here everybody!" she announced as she pulled.

Jerry looked into the car. "It's camp fire time."

They all carried their bags as they walked into the woods. Finding a spot for their camp fire wasn't hard, they were all well-equipped.

Jerry wrapped his arm around me as we passed cards. Emeka was the only without anyone to cuddle. I felt guilty having Jerry around me, after all, Emeka was here for us too. He didn't need to feel alone, besides, Jerry says he has a fiancée, I am wondering why Emeka didn't ask her to tag along, but then, I couldn't feel sorry for Emeka...Jerry was going to miss me. That would be more devastating than this.

"So, you all know the rules, as we pass the cards, we fulfil the command of the game. If the card stops with you, you answer whatever question it presents you." He said. "Are we clear? As the moderator, you all know I am not allowed to participate in this game, so, I would just watch from the side-lines. After the first turn, we change the cards." He said and passed the first card.

As soon as the card got to Nora, Emeka called. "What says your card?"

Nora flipped it open and stared at it and then at James before reading. "Do you really love the person you are with?"

James clenched his teeth. "What is this?"

"Hey, bro...it's just a question, it could have fallen on anyone, no offense intended." Emeka said.

Jerry stared at Emeka and then at James. "Yeah man, it's just a question for the lady."

"I think Emeka is hitting on Nora." James said. "I don't like it."

I chuckled. This seemed to be more interesting than I had envisaged. Emeka was really causing a rift. "Guys, I think we should chill. I don't think it is a big deal. It is just a

question and I think that dragging it longer than necessary is actually going to mean something else.” I said, cutting in.

Jerry nodded. “Toni is right. Let Nora answer the question and we all could just move on from here.”

All eyes were now on Nora. “Nora?” I called. “Answer your question.”

Nora smiled as she read through the card again. “Yes, I do love James.”

James smiled victoriously.

Emeka scoffed. “Pass the next card.”

“What’s in your card?” Emeka asked as I held the passing card for too long on the second time of passing.

I stared at it. “What would you love to do before you die?” I read with a smile.

Jerry’s face went stone as he stared at Emeka. I took Jerry’s hand before he could make any statement.

“What I want to do before I die?” I said. “I have accomplished a lot of things I want to do before my dying day. I have lived, I have laughed, I have loved.” I said and stared at Jerry. “I am glad to have met you, Jerry. You are everything and much more than I wanted and you may think that life hasn’t given us enough time, but I think it is just perfect, every step of the way with you has been worth it. Jerry, I wish you love, peace, happiness and most importantly that you find yourself in God and be true to who you are. Jerry, I would always love you and I am happy for every love you have for me.”

Jerry looked away.

“I hope not to break your heart in the end, I hope to leave a stronger man with a braver heart behind, should I have to...and trust me, you deserve to read my novel first, and you would.” I said as I drew his face closer. “I love you, Jerry.”

“I love you too.” He replied.

Emeka, Nora and James stared at us quietly.

“And to what I want to do before I die? I damn right want to kiss you, Jerry.” I said and we kissed.

CHAPTER 14

JERRY

I turned off the engine as I pulled up under a big tree. I took a deep breath and stepped out of the car to take a walk. The vacation had turned out to be longer than forever. We had lived more than a week. I know I am supposed to be excited about Toni seeing a month since the proposed one week, and I am, but I am also worried. I don't know if getting my hopes up would be appropriate. I have spent the last one month watching Toni sleep and wake up. I have also spent it on my knees praying that she should see the next day and not just leave me. We have all kept vigils around her bed hoping that she didn't give up anytime soon, and she really is giving it a fight. It looks like she'll be staying. I can't help but smile at the thought that she might actually be here with me.

"Hey, man!"

It took a tap from Emeka to bring me back to reality. I turned at him with a frown from the effect of the slap. "What is it?" I asked.

"I saw you pull up and I decided to join you, and now I find you smiling to yourself. Is everything okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "It couldn't be any better."

"Great." He replied and walked by my side.

I stared at him. "Emeka, it's a month today. Toni is still alive."

Emeka smiled. "Man, I understand your joy."

"I don't think you do, this is beyond joy. This is like a miracle." I said. "One month and counting. She is still here."

He nodded as he stared at me. "I know."

Emeka was silent. I sighed as I stared at him. "Am I wrong to get my hopes up?"

"No, I think it is fine. I think we are right to stay optimistic." Emeka replied.

I smiled. "I am going to ask her to marry me."

"Jerry?"

I nodded. "I think it's the right thing to do. When two people love each other, they should be together."

Emeka took a deep breath. "Jerry, I don't think you should do this right now. Do you have an idea what the proposal might do?"

"She would accept it. I know." I replied.

Emeka took a deep breath. "Toni won't want to marry you."

"Why are you so sure?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I am not sure. But, I just know she won't want to do that to you."

"What are you trying to say?" I asked.

Emeka stared at him. "Jerry, you know better. Don't do this to you...and to her."

"Do what?!" I shouted.

"What hopes are you trying to give her? Toni is living every day so positively that we can't see the traces, but they are there, don't weigh her down by presenting a ring now. She doesn't need it." He replied.

I swallowed painfully.

"I am sorry if I came off harsh." He said. "You don't need this now, enjoy the days." He added.

"Well, you just ruined my day." I replied and walked away.

NORA

I don't know what I am doing in a very unfamiliar environment. I am at the back pew in a church and staring at the altar. Toni thinks I should talk to God and she wants me to do it for me. I don't even know where to start or what to say to Him. All I know is I am really thankful for this last one month. I just thought I had a week more to spend with my sister, but I have enjoyed a lengthier period and I am thankful to God for it. Toni might not know this, but I am glad God has given her more to write about in her book.

I took a deep breath and approached the altar. I have nothing else to do than to give thanks to God for what I had, what I have and what I hope to still have. Toni has been more than a sister to me, she has been a gift. One I'd forever be thankful to have had.

"We have to go." James called from the back.

I turned and stared at him. "Why?"

"Toni is alone." He replied. "She shouldn't be left alone for a minute."

I nodded. "Give me one minute." I replied.

James walked out.

"Thank you, Lord, for sending James my way." I said.

TONI

What would I love to do before I die? I guess I have done a lot of that already. Most of all, I have only cared about one thing after my purpose on earth is fulfilled, and that is, making Heaven. What would life be if I didn't get to meet God after all? Meeting God would be amazing, I would like to ask him what I am still doing in Obudu three weeks after the Doctors say I would be gone? Isn't it just amazing? One week was the set time and I am still here. It is true that God is not a respecter of any man.

I loved being here. It was fun while it lasted.

Till we meet again,

Toni.

With that, I slipped into the bed and drew the blanket over me. A lot seemed to have changed in the last one month. I felt the necessary strength and courage to go through each day.

'They say you know when your day comes' I don't know why, but every passing day in the last one month seemed like a date with Heaven, but yet, it didn't come. Maybe today seemed more like the day.

I took a deep breath and rolled over to my right. I stared into my mirror. Surely, I have seen a lovelier Toni than who I see now, but then, I have never seen a more ready Toni than the one I see today. It has to be today.

The door opened and Nora walked in. "Hey."

"Hi." She replied and joined me on the bed. "How are you feeling?"

I took a deep breath. "I don't feel at home anymore."

Nora nodded. "I understand." She said. "I went to Church today." She added.

I smiled. "Thank God."

"Toni, I love you so much and there is nothing that could ever change that." She said.

I chuckled. "Of course, it's not like you have a choice."

Nora blinked. "Toni, when you see Jesus, tell Him I am grateful."

"Of course." I replied and pulled her close for a hug. "I'll tell him just that."

Nora smiled. "What about Jerry?"

"You'll take care of him for me." I replied. "I am sure he would find someone beautiful too."

Nora broke down in tears. "Toni." She muffled amidst tears. "Toni."

The door opened and Jerry stood by the door.

She nodded as she pulled away. "I love you." She said and kissed my forehead. She turned in Jerry's direction. "Hello."

"Hey." Jerry replied with a faint smile.

Nora hugged Jerry and shut the door after him.

Jerry took a deep breath as he walked over to me. "Hey, Stranger."

"Hello." I replied with a faint smile.

He took his seat beside me. "How did it go?"

"I am done."

He took a deep breath. "So, what's next?"

"I have sent it to the editor and from there, they'll take care of the rest." I replied.

He drew me close and hugged me. "How are you?" Jerry asked.

I stared at him. "Ready."

"Are...Are you saying-"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

Jerry blinked as tear rolled down his eyes. "Don't do this."

I raised a finger and wiped the tear from his eyes. "I love you, Jerry."

"And I love you, Toni." He replied and hugged me tight...till I knew I was truly done.

6 MONTHS LATER

JERRY

“Toni was a really special woman and we are here to celebrate her. Her lovely and only novel titled “I WAS HERE” is officially launched today.” Nora announced over the microphone. “As earlier announced, Doctor Jerry and I would be signing the autographs on behalf of the late Toni in the next forty-five minutes down the hall. Thank you all for coming.” Nora said and descended the podium.

The hall roared with applause.

I smiled from a corner of the room as I watched Nora leave the podium.

James joined me from the right with a drink. “Isn’t she lovely?” he asked.

“She is. Nora is my sister, you can’t mess with her.” I replied.

Emeka joined us. “Are you set for the interview? The press is here.”

“Almost ready.” I said

He nodded and hurried back to meet the press. James tapped me. “I’ll go and help him out. Later, man.”

Yes, I assumed the role of being Nora’s brother and friend, just as Toni wanted it. James was really going to make her happy and I knew it. They were in love.

Toni was everything for me and the last six months have been painful for me. It’s as though I have had a portion of my life taken from me, but every little moment we had together was enough for me to hang on to. The last months have all been about thinking, shedding a tear for the pain but I hang on to the hope that someday I’ll wake up and it won’t have to hurt so much. That, I know.

Toni came into my life and gave meaning to everything that had no meaning. It was all in the little things she did. My gift from God was Toni and I could not question that.

I know I’d find love in another woman someday, maybe not today or tomorrow or the next, but I know I will.

I turned to the wall and stared at the giant portrait of Toni that stood there and smiled.

I love her.

“To live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die” – Thomas Campbell



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She is the writer of the popular blog series, “Dear Future Husband”, “Fola King”, “Clandestine”. She also wrote the cancer themed series “Two weeks to go” and other blog series.

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