

# A Heart to Mend

*a romance by*

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A Heart to Mend

To Akin

*You're my king without peer  
You'll be all I hold dear*

## A Heart to Mend

### **Forward**

It has been proved that the best romantic novels are the ones that go beyond the genre. What does this mean? It means that while the main narrative of a romance novel may be the story of love between the main characters, there has to be much more. Extra plot layers, a strong sense of place, three-dimensional antagonists, secondary characters with their own stories—all these are important. As are a hero and heroine whose worlds are large and who have other interests beyond just their love for each other. This story is told from the point of view of both major characters.

This story is set in Lagos, Nigeria at a time of turmoil in the country's financial environment as several institutions were overhauled. Edward is the chief Executive of a conglomerate listed on the stock exchange. Gladys finds a job in a foremost oil company. Other characters in the book include industrialists, bankers, stock brokers, and many more. Several themes run through the plot including illegitimacy, premarital sex, cross-cultural romance, and marrying socially upwards. On the business angle, share price manipulation, margin trading and high powered business acquisitions form the subplot of the book.

## A Heart to Mend

**CHAPTER ONE**

About an hour after she disembarked from the bus, Gladys stopped to check if she was on the right path. She'd trundled her box along the street engrossed by the spectacular architecture on all sides. Well designed residential houses and the more imposing offices sat way back from the road with painted aluminum roofs and high metal gates. She now stood before the enormous construction site of an almost complete church whose grandeur was not diminished by the swarming laborers or the wooden scaffolding. Stained glass windows depicting scenes from the bible reflected off the marble walls and a massive pillared gateway framed a paved court yard. The laughter and whistles of the laborers when they noticed her gawking reminded her of the otherwise deserted street.

Gladys walked a few more feet, took another peek at her journal and concluded she was truly lost. She held up the journal in confusion. She'd sketched the directions at a mobile phone kiosk during an earlier conversation to inform Aunt Isioma of her arrival. Then, the route looked clear enough, but now she knew the hazy map wouldn't be much help in locating the right way. She looked back at the construction site. A couple of the bare-chested men drew away from the group and moved closer to her. One called out something, probably in Yoruba, which she didn't understand; the other winked with a suggestive leer and a complex hand gesture.

She ignored them and instead walked rapidly to put some distance between them, and then studied her map more closely. She looked up the street again, then down at the map repeatedly, her brows furrowing as she tried to identify a landmark. She could not identify the street she was on the map. Her heart began to race, her underarms broke out in sweat and she felt like crying. The luggage she was pulling felt like a burden. She was afraid they were going to rob her or worse

## A Heart to Mend

rape her. As the laborers gained on her, she recalled her mother's question before they said goodbye at the Trans-Ekulu Motor Park not too far from their home.

"Can you find the address on your own? Perhaps you should wait to be picked up..."

Gladys had shrugged. "That will take too long. I'll call Aunt Isioma to get the directions and I'll be fine. I'm a big girl, Mama. I can get there without any problem."

She shook her head as she stared at the map again but was jerked out of her self-mockery when the gate of the house ahead of her opened with a loud clang. A black Mercedes S class model with tinted windows purred out. She stared at it in appreciation as it turned towards her, distracted from her quandary for the moment. She took a step back, startled, when the car stopped beside her. Her mouth almost gaped when the back passenger window rolled down. She couldn't help but note the looks of the man who stared back at her. He was very attractive, probably in his mid-thirties, with a certain stamp of authority all over him. His hair was bushier than she usually saw on men his age, but it was full and well-combed. The line between his deep set golden-brown eyes looked ingrained over the strong nose and pink lips accentuated by his dark skin.

"May I help you?"

"No... I'm OK." She stammered in uncertainty. His thick brows were raised and he must have known she was staring at him; he probably got that look from a lot of women.

"That doesn't seem to be case from where I'm sitting." His deep voice was mellow but his stare sharpened with suspicion as they went to her large box.

"Erm... I think I've lost my way," she burst out without much thought. She could have kicked herself. That sounded so lame and suspicious. Why couldn't she have thought of something that would make her not seem like a dim-witted character?

His eyebrows climbed his high forehead again. "Is that so?"

"Yes." She caught the sympathetic eye of the driver through the front window. She pulled the tatters of her almost non-existent dignity and began again. "My aunt lives at..." She looked down at her journal,

## A Heart to Mend

stumbled over the address and continued. "This is my first visit and I may have taken a wrong turn as I walked..."

He scrutinized her for a few seconds and gestured towards the car. She didn't understand at first and stared at him till he repeated the motion.

"What? You want me to..."

"Get in." He bent away and swung open the back passenger door on the far side.

"Why? Where do you want to take me?" Well no one could blame her for asking. She'd heard so many scary things about Lagos, including about rich men who kidnapped ladies for rituals.

"Where else but to the address you gave me?" His snap dragged her out of her scattered thoughts. His driver chuckled but gave her an encouraging nod with another smile.

Gladys was a little hesitant; there was no hint of softening on his face. She glanced up at the two laborers who were still standing a few feet away. What a dilemma.

"Well you can just get me to the end of the road and point out the right direction..." He cut her off.

"I said we'll drive you there. Get in." His terse voice ended the conversation. It was clear he had no time for chit-chat.

Another car honked behind his and the driver pulled over to make way, popping open the car trunk in the process. Gladys decided to trust him and stowed her luggage away. Rather him and the kind driver than those men who were still looking at her like bait to fish. She scrambled into the car with a mutter of reluctant thanks and the hope that it wasn't too far out of his way. She caught his gaze for a moment before she took in the total person. He was tall, and the suit he wore was impeccable. His cologne was light but musky still; it perfumed the interior of the car. It crept into her nostrils and raised images of both of them together, dressed for a night out.

Gladys forced her gaze away and glanced around. The large sports car was spacious and lavishly appointed. She admired the shiny fixtures and automatic controls between the front bucket seats. The whole interior was fitted with smooth tan leather. She could imagine her car-loving brother's envy when she told him about it later. A few minutes later, they drew up before another mansion.

## A Heart to Mend

“This is your aunt’s address.” He stared straight ahead.

“Thank you.” Gladys stepped out and hefted her box from the boot. She expected them to drive away without delay, but they were still there as she rang the bell at the gate.

“I’m here for Mrs. Dehinde-Ojo...” She tried to look confident as she gave the gateman who unlocked the gate her name and her details.

“Ah! Madam dey expects you. Come inside.” He grasped the luggage as he ushered her into the compound. When she looked back, the car and its occupants had vanished.

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Her Lagos adventure had started with a hand delivered letter from her father’s estranged sister last December. Aunt Isioma said she would be in the village for Christmas and wanted forgiveness for the damaged relationship between both families. She also wrote that Gladys could return to Lagos with her if her mother agreed. Gladys had been as surprised as her mother and brothers at the request, but also very excited. At twenty-six, and after one year steeped away in the far north of the country for national service, she was ready to move to the next step. Her mother disagreed, but went ahead to visit the village for the New Year, while Gladys and her brothers remained in the town for the holidays.

“Gladys,” her mother called a few hours after her return to Enugu a week later. “I’ve had a discussion with Isioma. She was still in Onicha-olona when I got there.”

They were together in the bedroom they both shared in their small flat. A fan whirred overhead, shifting threadbare curtains drawn across the louvered windows.

“She told me she is now a widow.”

“Oh no! When did her husband die?” This was not contained in the letter her aunt had sent.

“He passed away in September last year. She said he wanted a quiet burial so she didn’t bother to let anyone know. I also don’t know how those Yorubas do their tradition. Anyway, everyone was agog; it’s been almost twenty years since she was last seen in the village. I



## A Heart to Mend

couldn't help but feel sympathetic for her; I know how lonely widowhood can make one."

Gladys watched her mother clear her throat and fiddle with her necktie. "We spoke privately and she apologized again saying she wants us to put the past years behind us."

"What's your own opinion Mama?"

"I told her I didn't appreciate how she thought she could come back so easily without any explanation for what happened." Gladys bent her head as her mother continued, "Didn't I tell you I sent Isioma several letters when your father was sick and she never replied? It hurt me so badly when she didn't show up for the funeral and I thought I would never forgive her."

Gladys squeezed her mother's hands.

"When I married your father, I was happy he had a sister my age. She was already married and lived in Lagos but I hoped we would become like sisters. That never happened."

Gladys knew it was so painful for her mother because she lost most of her own relatives when her village fell during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war.

"Anyway, I decided to let bygones be and told her I had forgiven her. But I have my reservations; I'm not comfortable with her request for you to come and live with her in Lagos."

"I know this Mama. But I still have to go there for the Zenon Oil test." She'd received the invitation letter a couple of weeks ago, and it had since become the fulcrum of her attempts to get her mother to allow her to move permanently to Lagos.

"Yes, and that's the reason I told Isioma that I would accept her request."

"Oh, thank you Mama..." Her jump of joy was halted by her mother's next words.

"I could say we'll find a temporary place for you in Lagos, but I have to be realistic and think of your future too. If you succeed at the test, there'll be interviews, and I don't want you to have to travel back and forth or worry where to live. You all do very well in your studies, and I thank God for that, but it has not been easy. I still have to see your brothers through school."

## A Heart to Mend

“I think I’ll pass, that’s why I am so excited. Mama, thank you so much.”

Her mother looked at her and smiled with pride. “I know you will, even if not with Zenon. The truth is you stand a better chance of getting a job there in Lagos.”

Gladys nodded and her mother hugged her close.

“You understand that if not for God and our tight finances, you wouldn’t be going to stay at Isioma’s place in Lagos?”

“I know Mama, but things are getting better. You said so yourself.”

“Yes I did...”

As her mother spoke, the electricity was cut off. They both laughed because this was the second time in as many hours. Gladys opened the windows and turned up the kerosene lamp burning low in the corner. As she placed it on a table, shadows jumped across the faded walls. She sat back beside her mother on the low bed. It had a double mattress, one of which she threw on the floor when it was time to sleep.

Her mother continued speaking. “It may not be easy living with your aunt though. We don’t have much, but this is your home and you have the run of it. It could be a different situation in Lagos. Isioma is a very wealthy woman and we’re the poor relatives. It is possible she expects you to work around the place as some sort of house help.”

“I understand and won’t mind if that is the case. I am not afraid of hard work.”

“I know Ada’m. You’re my first and only daughter and I did my best to train you well. No matter what happens, please, be a good ambassador for me.”

“I will Mama, and trust me, it will all come out right.”

“I pray so. Your aunt might be amongst the rich people of this world, but I have taught you that true wealth is friendship with God. For reasons known best to her, Isioma kept away from us for over fifteen years. Do not give her grounds now to complain or call me bad names. Any time you want to come home, remember we’re here with open arms.”

Tears sprang to her eyes and she hugged her mother tight. “Thank you Mama.”

## A Heart to Mend

“It will be well Ada’m.” Her mother called her the pet name again, smoothing her hair.

Gladys travelled by the cheaper night bus two weeks later and arrived before dawn. She knew Lagos had about fifteen million people - over five times the size of Enugu - but it was an eye-opener seeing it herself. As she wandered out of the Peace Mass Transit bus station, the motor park just ahead was a noisy chaos with hundreds of battered yellow buses parked at random. The toots of vehicle horns, mobile phones, and loud shouts assaulted her ears. It was her first time in the crowded city, and she hoped to meet someone who would advise her on the best route to Victoria Island. Her wealthy aunt was not much help as she never used public transport.

She lugged her wheeled box down the road; there was no sense in dragging the flimsy rollers along the potholed sidewalk. The congestion was evident with people everywhere even though it was not yet fully light. Yoruba language bombarded her, from most of the people who thronged the streets and from the boys yelling through the open doors of moving yellow painted buses. Afro beat music blared from loudspeakers on top of parked vehicles.

She tuned out the noise and listened to the conductors barking out route and destinations to determine which of them was going to the area she wanted. She soon found a smaller *danfo* bus, clambered in and plopped down on the empty space on the middle bench. She wasn't surprised when the conductor said there was no timetable and the vehicle would only move when full. It was the same everywhere she had travelled. Gladys settled in, expecting they wouldn't wait too long to fill up. Passengers thronged the park and this bus was not one of the larger models. That would have meant a longer, sweatier delay on this humid morning.

The park also served as a market and narrow shops with colorful banners lined the edges. The air was thick with body odors, dust, and strange food smells. Gladys absorbed it; amused as she watched some of the other passengers buy various items from the hard discomfort of their seats. Hawkers came up to the bus to offer underpants, watches, popcorn, sausage rolls in worn wraps, and plastic bags of water. Gladys bought the water, not troubled about its purity,

## A Heart to Mend

and sucked the bag dry. She tossed it out of the window as the bus wheezed and shuddered its way out into the traffic.

A mother with a child on each knee blocked her view of the road ahead. Cramped next to the woman's wide hips was the brawny conductor. Gladys contented herself with looking out through the smudged windows on both sides of the rickety yellow bus. It took them over an hour to hurdle the Lagos lagoon via the Third Mainland Bridge. As the sun started its ascent over the sometimes inching, sometimes stationary bus, Gladys was riveted by the sights and sounds of her new city. She marveled at the contradictory panoramas that met her gaze.

Men, women and children paddled canoes on the murky black water beneath; oblivious to the stench Gladys could smell from the top of the bridge. The large numbers of wooden houses balanced on stilts above the lagoon had rusty tin roofs wreathed in coils of smoke from open cooking fires. A sawmill further down burnt sawdust and belched up even more clouds of smog. All this mixed with the exhaust plumes from the traffic to create a dense haze that tickled her nostrils. The late January sun outlined the façade of the Lagos Island skyline that towered in the distance. The many high-rise buildings may have been a different color in an earlier life, but all she saw now were structures blackened by decades in the fog.

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“Oh Gladys, thank God you arrived safely.”

She was inside the big house, wrapped in Aunt Isioma's arms.

Perplexed by the effusive welcome, Gladys hugged her back in a tentative manner. The underlying awkwardness was so real that she wondered if her aunt could not feel it.

Aunt Isioma was tall and light skinned like her. Her cotton nightgown skimmed her slim figure. Only her face showed she was a similar age with Gladys's mother. She didn't look too different from the pictures in the old black and white family albums back home. As they spoke, Gladys followed her through a wide hallway and into the living room.

## A Heart to Mend

“Sorry, it would have taken too long for Ade to get here on time to collect the car and then come pick you at the bus station. And there’s the traffic too.”

“I didn’t mind making my way here. It’s just that it took the bus a while to get over the bridge which was full of cars coming this way; the rush hour I guess.”

“You got here OK? You didn’t miss your way?”

“I did but it was fine in the end. I have to say the people here are more helpful than I was told. Lagos is not so bad.”

Her aunt smiled and indicated she should sit. Gladys sank in and relaxed against the soft cushion behind her. Her muscles relished the soft contours after the uncomfortable bus benches. She looked slowly around. The fabric sofa she sat on was close to the hallway and in earthy tones that matched the abstract watercolor to her right.

Large photographs of two good looking women dominated the nearest wall; those would be her aunt’s daughters, both whom were older than Gladys. They were now permanently living in America which was where they’d been born. The elder one was married, and her younger sister lived with her while she completed her postgraduate education.

Gladys looked up to the very high ceiling of the huge cream-colored room. It was made more so by the decorative white plaster which also highlighted the stairs leading to an upper level. There were two furniture collections in the expansive space. An oversized chocolate leather settee with identical armchairs faced the television flanking a heavy looking center table made of dark wood. A soft lavender scent filled her nostrils from the fresh flowers on the table. Magazines were arranged inside a cane basket on the lower rung.

“How was your trip? Have you let your family know you’ve arrived?”

“Yes, I left a message for them when we arrived at the bus station. The journey was smooth and the other passenger said it lasted the usual time.”

That was ten hours across rough and sometimes desolate roads. “The bus company lived up to their name; there were movies on board and an armed security officer. Thank God, the latter was not needed.”

## A Heart to Mend

That did not mean she caught more than a few winks of sleep; she'd been among the few who actually watched the movies.

"That's good to know. One often hears of overnight coaches that are ambushed and passengers robbed of their valuables at gunpoint. I don't do much road travel myself these days and can't remember the last time I boarded a night bus."

Gladys thought that sounded condescending, but let it go and only nodded. In the next moment, her lips stretched in an unexpected yawn.

Her aunt stood up right away. "Sorry my dear, I shouldn't keep you. You've just come off a very long journey and must be very tired. Come, I'll show you to the guest room."

Gladys took in more of the house as she followed her aunt to the steps. There was a large dining room off to her left behind an alcove with molded detailing and two sentry potted palms. These complemented the other plants dotted around and the center pieces on the tables. When they got to the upper level, her aunt called out to a girl in one of the bedrooms making the bed.

"Bunmi, come over here. Leave the beds for a minute."

"Yes madam," the girl replied as she joined them.

"Go and prepare some toast and tea for my niece. Please be fast, OK?"

They entered through into an airy, well furnished blue and white room which already held Gladys's bags. The heavy curtains were drawn and bright light poured onto the twin beds. Aunt Isioma crossed to the far one to tuck in and smooth a stray sheet. Her gaze swept over her niece for a quick minute. Gladys pretended to be absorbed in the small table pressed to the wall nearest the door. It was cluttered with small ceramic knick-knacks.

"This will be your room for as long as you wish to remain with me." Her aunt turned around the room. "I hope you like it."

"Aunt Isioma, this is great. Thank you very much."

The room was the size of the whole of the parlor area in their flat in Enugu. Gladys couldn't believe it was all hers. There was a built-in wardrobe paired with a dark wood dresser and the table near the door. The other objects were a mixture of lighter wood and stainless

## A Heart to Mend

steel and appeared to be new additions. The cotton sheets on the bed looked very fresh.

“Well, I want you to be comfortable here, so feel free to tell me whatever you need.”

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy my time here Aunt Isioma.”

“All right, Bunmi will bring the food when it is ready. You can freshen up in the adjoining bathroom.’ She pointed to a door on the other side of the bed. “It’s over there.”

“Thank you very much.” Gladys was bursting with happiness and couldn’t wait for her aunt to leave the room. A wide smile began to bloom on her face.

“You don’t have to thank me, my dear. Just eat, sleep and relax. I’ll see you later.”

Her aunt left the room and Gladys finally let rip a whoop of joy. She sang and danced on the spot as she took in the room again. She quieted as she rounded the room, touching everything - bedspreads, curtains, wardrobe, dresser, mirror, chairs. The wonderful house was made even better by Aunt Isioma’s positive attitude. This was different from what she and her mother assumed but also put her on her guard. And then there was that attractive man that drove her here. She knelt down and said a quick prayer of thanks.

**CHAPTER TWO**

“So do you have any plans for Valentine’s Day?”

“I’ll be all alone. A day is too short to get a new lady in the picture.”

Kanayo opened the door of the pristine but sparsely furnished office and Edward walked past him into the corridor outside. The friends walked together as they approached the stairs that led down to the banking hall; two tall, well-built young men in fitting almost similar charcoal striped dark suits set off by plain white shirts and colorful patterned ties. Kanayo was seeing him off after their usual Monday lunch hour business meeting in which they talked shop and caught up with events in their lives. Most of today had been about Kanayo’s recent promotion.

“Hasn’t Bisi been asking to be taken back? It’s been almost two months now.”

Bisi was his last girlfriend who had gone on to date someone else in his group on one of his long trips outside the country. She’d known about his busy lifestyle but still cried neglect when he found out. Now she wanted him and his travelling schedule back?

“I don’t think I still feel Bisi. She should remain as last year news.” Edward shook his head in finality.

Kanayo laughed as they got to the end of the corridor and began to descend the steps.

A quick look over the balustrade showed an almost empty banking hall. The tellers sat quietly in their cubicles, all concentration on the shiny new computers before them. Two clients sat at the front desk while the customer service lady fiddled with her mouse. As usual, the understated hum of the machines that made modern banking possible and the air conditioners that cooled them filled the space. On



## A Heart to Mend

the first floor landing which overlooked the entrance, he stopped and his eyes blinked in quick succession.

“Are you listening to me?” Kanayo nudged him.

“No... No. I’m not. Who is that?”

“Who are you talking about?” Kanayo scratched his head.

“Who is that girl?” Edward tipped his head in her direction.

The same girl who had taken him out of his usual route three weeks ago had just come in. He’d tried to take thoughts of her off his mind since then but she always returned. She was very beautiful, though he thrust that out of his mind as soon as she spoke that first day. The story of being lost had sounded too suspicious. It turned out to be the truth that she was indeed expected at the address she’d given him. Though he’d acted a bit boorishly towards her, he couldn’t have behaved any differently. That was the only way to ensure he didn’t ogle her then as he was doing now.

She walked further into the bank and to the front desk on the opposite side of the hall. She was met by a man he recognized as being from the personnel department; he’d met him a few times in Kanayo’s office. They were joined by another couple of people who had been seated in the waiting area before walking off to the lifts.

Edward filed away every detail. She was as tall and slim as he remembered, but she looked even better in the suit she wore. It didn’t look expensive but it fitted her well, and the sight of her long straight legs and slim ankles in high heels under the short skirt robbed him of breath. She had a slight sway in her step, and her hips moved in a hypnotic rhythm. He couldn’t tear his gaze away. His neck jerked his body to the right as she left his line of vision.

Kanayo looked at her and turned to Edward. The expression on his face was smug as he clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Hey! Easy, man! Cool it!”

“Who is she?” Edward asked again. He yanked his head back as they negotiated the last steps and walked towards the front doors. “Does she work here?”

“I don’t know; I can’t say I’ve seen her before. But you don’t expect me to know all the employees just because I’m now the manager, do you?”

“Of course not, I was just surprised.”

## A Heart to Mend

“What is it about her?” Kanayo asked as he got to his side in the cool hallway. “I didn’t see her properly but I think we’ve both dated better looking girls.”

They were now at an angle where he could see into the lift alcove. When he looked, the right lift was sliding shut. Their eyes might have met but he wasn’t certain. He released a sigh as he passed through the door held open by one of the bank’s security officers.

“I know, but that girl is different, I tell you.” Edward signaled for his official car. “I gave her a ride about three weeks ago and still remember her every detail.”

The way her nose turned up at the tip; her delicate eyelids over large dark eyes; the wonder in her gaze as she had admired the car; the way her skirt had ridden up just so to reveal smooth, round knees, and give a hint of other shapely curves too. His heart rate hiked up in a pulsing beat of urgency – a marker of his physical attraction.

“Well I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I’ve not been the same since I saw that girl for the first time. She is always in my thoughts, and seeing her here has just made it even worse.”

“Wow! You mean a girl is the reason you’re like this?”

“You’re right about that.” Sweat beaded his forehead as they stepped out into the burning hot sunshine. His driver soon drove around the corner from the car park.

“Edward, you are Mr. Ice. You have a heart of stone. I can’t believe it. This is impossible.”

“Impossible is nothing, Kanayo. I want that girl.”

Kanayo laughed easily and turned back towards his spanking new branch. “Now that sounds more like you. Know what you want and go for it. Valentine may be groovy after all.”

Edward folded his length into the cool interior of the Honda Accord, glad to get out of the heat. He must call Kanayo after his next meeting to get some information on that girl.

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Edward relaxed against the high-backed executive chair admiring a spectacular view of the sunset over the Five Cowries Creek

## A Heart to Mend

and Lagos Harbor from his twentieth storey office on the Marina. His gaze fixed on the wood paneled wall across the office, but it did not take in the large painting of dancing maidens on it.

Seeing that girl again was a strange coincidence; Lagos was a very large city. This could mean she stayed on with the aunt she mentioned when he'd dropped her off that first time. If Kanayo confirmed the address, he would plan to drive by the area again. Since it might take some time to run into her, should he go up to the house?

His secretary chose that moment to enter the office and drop some files on his desk. Edward feigned an interest in his computer, and refused to meet her curious eyes. They were not yet familiar with each other; she'd been with his company for less than a month.

"Sir, Mr. Odusote is here to see you."

"Let him in."

Edward was the chairman and managing director of Bestman Group Plc which was quoted on the Nigerian Stock Exchange. The relatively young company was formed by his Bestman Properties Limited doing a reverse take-over of Capital Investment Fund, a publicly listed business. On completion of the acquisition, he held fifty-one percent stock of the umbrella company. It had cost him all he owned but was worth it; a dream come true.

"Good day Edward." Mr. Odusote strode confidently into the room, arm outstretched.

"Good afternoon Mr. Odusote, how are you?" Edward stood up to shake the proffered hand.

During their brief first meeting, he'd accepted a business plan for the stock market transaction Mr. Odusote wanted them to partner on. Now he pulled out the detailed proposal from the top left drawer and placed it on his cluttered table top.

He'd met Mr. Odusote for the first time last Friday after his proposal had been lying around for a couple of weeks. Mr. Odusote had left a leading financial services institution to form his own stock broking firm, Top Assets Limited, a year ago. The firm was registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission as an issuing house. Mr. Odusote was the portfolio manager, and also dealt in asset management and corporate finance advisory services.

## A Heart to Mend

“All is fine with me.” The thickset stockbroker sat down and adjusted his bulk. “Did you study the last email I sent yesterday?”

“Not yet, but I have printed off some of the attachments.” To be honest, the over-zealous manner the broker forwarded mails to him reeked of desperation.

Mr. Odusote placed a sheaf of papers and a laptop on the desk, and fixed an intense stare on him. “Those contain a lot of current stock data that will interest you even more.”

Edward rarely dabbled in stocks and was yet to take full charge of the company investments arm. He would have called in the director of that division for this meeting if he weren't out of the country in pursuit of more business.

Mr. Odusote sat forward “It's like I said last Friday. Some say things will only be right with Nigeria when we get out of the Paris Club debt. But, it's already happening with the overhaul of the financial sector. The involvement of banks and pension funds place the capital market at a very attractive stage now, and I think you made one of the best decisions last year acquiring Capital Investment Fund. What you need to do now is to maximize profit and this here,” Mr. Odusote thumped on the file before him, “is the best you can do.”

Edward recalled that the proposal set out a series of ways he could change the operation of Capital Investment, some with which he didn't feel very comfortable. He had examined the books before he took over last year and was satisfied with the fund's business and results. However, Mr. Odusote was right in one important aspect. A lot was happening in the business sector and so Edward let him keep talking.

“Most Nigerian stocks are public equities which due to their relative illiquidity qualify as private in developed markets. You may have heard that foreign investors are descending en masse to start playing in our equities? A lot of portfolio managers miss what they see but I believe I have my eye on the ball. I also have a very reliable source at the CBN.”

Edward steepled his fingers and smirked at this point. Which businessman would admit otherwise? “So what is the attraction to the Nigerian business landscape?”

## A Heart to Mend

“The new Pension Fund scheme is in full play and you know that the Central Bank has declared a final deadline for banks to meet the new N25 billion capital base requirements.”

“Wasn’t that at the end of last year?”

“Not anymore. There will be a 90-day extension taking it to March this year.”

Edward swung in his seat and pushed forward. “Is that so? I didn’t hear about it.”

It was Mr. Odusote’s turn to snicker. “Not many people have. The Central Bank plans to issue bonds to cover the liabilities of any insolvent banks that don’t meet the deadline.”

“Is that all the CBN mole had to advise?” His tone started off cutting but he moderated it. It wasn’t the man’s fault that his own news channels were not as effective.

“The apex bank also wants the banks to source capital from the private sector. The best bit is access to IPOs and you know the Transcorp offering is coming up soon.”

The Transnational Corporation, or Transcorp as it was more widely referred to, was touted as the biggest thing to happen to Nigeria and indeed Africa. In less than a year of being established, the company already owned controlling interests in two massive government-sold businesses. They had completed an unprecedented private placement last December. Some people were waiting for the public offer with bated breath but Edward preferred to be more cautious. Transcorp had overwhelming political backing which wasn’t necessarily a good thing. They were also over-leveraged and owned corporations that could become embroiled in litigations.

“What I am proposing is a mutual fund that will be based on margin trading.”

Edward opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by Mr. Odusote. “It is not illegal contrary to what some fund managers and dealers believe.”

“I didn’t think it was but it is not something I might want to go into,” Edward smiled.

“You have to think of the leverage we’ll get. With the advantage of your seat on the council of NSE by virtue of being a listed company, we’ll have an insider position.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Those positions are not meant for such use.” Edward frowned; this wasn’t a line of thought that should first occur to any genuine businessman.

“Didn’t you notice in my proposal about buying back even your own company shares? That would be another insider advantage we can benefit from. I know several dealers right now who cross-buy and sell shares to achieve desirable prices for the stock they want...”

“So they can make a profit by creating a false market...” He would play along for now.

“Exactly and as long as we do not show our hand, no one will be the worse off. Instead we’ll be smiling to any bank we want. The foreign banks will be my primary choice.”

Edward’s intercom buzzed, and not a moment too soon. It was time to end this discussion.

“Well it has been great speaking with you.” Edward stood up. He never could bear people who thought they could play with the law, not with his experience.

“Same here Edward.” Mr. Odusote rose and tugged at his trouser seams. “You’ll call?”

“I have to discuss with my advisers and the managers at Capital Investment Fund. Leave the necessary documents and I’ll let you know in time.”

Edward would not allow himself to be rushed. Mr. Odusote had made some good points in the idea he was pushing, but his character rubbed him the wrong way.

“Don’t miss this chance, it may never come again.”

Edward said nothing but strolled to the door where they shook hands again.

“Anyway, I’ll be waiting.”

“I’ll certainly give you a call.”

Edward returned to the papers but by the end of the day, it wasn’t Mr. Odusote or his proposal on his mind. The pretty face and features of this morning’s girl vied for space. Like a dream in auto rewind, he put together all he could remember of her. His blood heated up and he felt a stirring in his groin. He picked up the phone. He wanted that girl and would get her.

## A Heart to Mend

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It was good to be out of the hot sun and Gladys stretched out on her bed enjoying the feel of the cool sheets. It was still a few weeks before the rainy season arrived and going around in the heat could be daunting. Still all things considered, things were going pretty well on the job front. While waiting for call back after attending Zenon Oil's recruitment aptitude tests, she still read the job ads and sent out applications. Being in Lagos was a big help; she could go in to the places she applied to which was an immense advantage. She was allowed any of the two drivers, whichever was free when she wanted to go out.

On the other hand, after three weeks she could count the times spent with her aunt on her fingers. Aunt Isioma was rarely home; either out on business or fulfilling engagements in her eventful social calendar. She'd made time to take Gladys for a visit to the family owned textile industry, an art show at Terra Kulture and the cinema. All were great and novel experiences but they presented no suitable time to talk about what weighed on her mind; the previous non-existent relationship. Her aunt's behavior was poles apart from what her mother had feared, but this only raised more questions than it answered. Since they were dining together tonight, she would take advantage of the time to raise the topic.

A knock on the bedroom door interrupted her thoughts. Bunmi came in at her reply, but remained just inside the door. "Good evening, auntie."

Gladys had tried to no avail to get the maid to call her by her own name. The shy girl stammered as she added, "Madam want to know when you go come down for dinner."

"Is the food ready?"

"Yes auntie."

"Then I'll follow you down right away."

At the dinner table, Gladys sat down with a resolute manner, though she trembled inside. She looked up at the movement in the corner of her view.

"How was your day?" Aunt Isioma asked, sitting down at the head of the table.

## A Heart to Mend

“It was good, thanks. I went out to submit some resumes.”

“Good, good.” Steam rose from the ceramic dishes as her aunt lifted the covers and began to scoop some rice into the flat plate before her. The aroma of fried chicken and spicy tomato sauce filled the room. Gladys filled her plate and they began to eat.

“I want to know how else I can help with your job hunt...”

“You’ve really done a lot by giving me the phone and offering the use of your cars.”

“What did you study?”

“I have a degree in business management. I attended some tests in the last couple of weeks and have an interview lined up soon.”

“Oh you have? That is very nice.”

“Yes, I did the test for Zenon Oil last week and Diamond Bank too.” Gladys wanted to impress her aunt and show she could get things done on her own too.

There was a dawning respect in Aunt Isioma’s contemplation. “You’re a very well composed girl; one of those jobs will probably work out. In the mean time I’ll give you a list of some other places I think will suit your qualifications. I also have some business calls next week, and will follow up some of my late husband’s connections to see what happens.”

“Thank you very much.”

Personal connections were one of the main ways to secure a job quicker, and she heard this was even more so in Lagos. Some of her university friends had already got positions with their relatives. In this case, Gladys didn’t want it to come down to that. She wished to complete the hunt herself and get a good job independent of any family networks. It was still a puzzle why Aunt Isioma was being so kind and she wouldn’t want to be more indebted than she could help in case things went awry. She looked up at her aunt’s voice.

“At least the phone I got for you will be useful. Have you put the number on your CV?” Gladys nodded and she continued, “And have you called your mother and brothers?”

“Yes, I really appreciate that. I was able to speak with my mother this morning.”

“How are they?”

“They’re all fine, and send their greetings.”



## A Heart to Mend

“I wish I could see your brothers; they must be all grown up now. I still sometimes remember you as the cute six-year old I last saw in Enugu.”

Gladys mused at her aunt’s observation as she slowly chewed her food. Those were the good days before her father’s death and her family’s financial struggles. For a woman who had not contacted them or made any effort to establish a healthy relationship, Aunt Isioma put up a good front of making amends. Gladys wouldn’t make it too difficult, but she would ask questions at the earliest opportunity, starting from now.

Aunt Isioma continued after a pause, “I have to remind myself that you’re now a big girl. What did you do for the rest of the day?”

“After I handed in the application, I asked Okon to take me for a quick drive across to Lagos mainland. It was an eye opener; you know this is my first time in Lagos.”

“Okon would be more useful than Ade for that because he lives in Surulere. Did you enjoy it? It wasn’t too stressful?”

“Not at all,” Gladys replied. This was as good way as any to introduce the topic that occupied most of her thoughts. Didn’t her aunt get the subtle message?

Gladys became more direct. “It would’ve been nice to visit Lagos earlier but it was beyond our means. It might have been possible but there were no friends or family here to stay with.” Her hands shook as she dished a little more rice onto her plate.

Aunt Isioma’s rebuttal was immediate. “I am your aunt.”

“Are you really? One would be forgiven if they thought otherwise.”

Her aunt’s tone was firm and she stopped eating. “Gladys, where is this going? If there’s something on your mind, please get straight to it. Do not insult my intelligence.”

Gladys sighed and dropped the cutlery in her hands. “I do have a few questions.”

Her aunt remained silent, so she went right ahead.

“For someone who seemed not to know that her brother’s family existed, your recent attitude towards me and the rest of my family is not very consistent.”

## A Heart to Mend

“You have to explain yourself better; I am just being the best aunt I can be.”

“I don’t know how else to explain it.” Gladys paused; it was very puzzling. She’d grown up mostly fatherless and it had been tough for her mother to cope with bringing up four children on her own. Prior to the letter last Christmas, they’d never heard from her aunt for over fifteen years. They knew they had an aunt from pictures and faint memories, but that was all. “It’s strange that despite your wealth, you never helped my mother in our time of need.”

Aunt Isioma clasped her hands and bowed her head.

She should be ashamed. Gladys forged on, but her voice wobbled. “Papa was very sick for a long time and all of my parent’s savings were spent on his treatments. That money ran out along the way and maybe that’s why he died. Even after he died, you never showed up. Did Mama tell you it was a distant male relative that made certain my father’s funeral went ahead because you were not there? You abandoned us all without compunction.”

A low tremor marked her aunt’s next words. “You don’t know how it hurts me to hear that. Of course I care about all of you...”

“I find that very difficult to believe. Until recently you couldn’t be bothered at all.”

Aunt Isioma’s tone was stronger when she spoke, “That can’t be further from the truth. I have mourned my brother’s passing and how I missed watching you all grow up...”

“So what is the truth? What kept you from keeping in touch? Did you oppose my parents’ marriage? Did you have a quarrel with my mother?”

“I had no problems with your mother.”

“So how come we never heard from you and you ignored her letters?”

“Gladys, you wouldn’t understand.”

The unease was heavy in the air and Gladys grimaced. She shifted in her chair and focused on the chicken wing on her plate. She didn’t know why but a lot of older people preferred to sweep issues under the carpet. People would better understand each other if they talked about things plainly.

“Believe me, I’ll try to.”

## A Heart to Mend

When her aunt remained silent, Gladys shrugged. “Before I arrived here, I only saw you twice in Enugu. My youngest brother doesn’t even know you. Do you know my education was delayed for a year each on two separate occasions for my mother to get her finances in order?”

Aunt Isioma dropped her cutlery. A rivulet of sweat ran down her face and she wiped it off with shaky hands. “Udoka wouldn’t know me; your mother was still pregnant with him during my last visit. Sometimes I wish I could turn back the time.”

Gladys allowed all she might have said to go unspoken.

Her aunt continued, “I’ve only been working at this for a few months but I’m glad I made the first step. I can’t tell you how pleased I was when I spoke to your mum while we were together in Onicha-Olona. It was a comfort to know that she bore no grudges.”

“My mother is not that type.” Why would her aunt even think otherwise?

“And I thank God for that. Think about it, I knew one of you would confront me sooner or later but I still reached out to you. That tells you that I truly want our family back together.”

She placed her hands on Gladys’s arm. “One thing I promise is to tell you more whenever the time is right. I will say again that the situation then was beyond my control. I have apologized to your mother Gladys and I hope you accept the apology too.”

Gladys shrugged. “That’s OK. At least we have begun this relationship with you now.”

“Your mother is a marvelous woman and you’re a compliment to her.”

Gladys looked down with a strained smile. “Thank you.”

The odd thing was she really felt better for getting those feelings off her chest. She did not have the full explanation but it was a start to know Aunt Isioma cared and was truly remorseful. The clink of cutlery resumed as they both returned to their now cold dinner.

**CHAPTER THREE**

Gladys left the room and returned to the balcony. The sun reflected off the water and she could hear the crash of waves on the shore. This was her best place in the house and it was especially soothing when she could feel the ocean breeze on her face. And boy, did she need some calm. She'd scaled through the Zenon Oil aptitude test and the next stage interview was in a couple of hours.

She was already dressed and wished the time would pass faster. She stalked back into the room to the opposite window with a view to the street. This was her first proper interview since she arrived, though she'd taken other tests. She had also met personnel people in the course of answering adverts for vacancies and submitting her resume to offices herself.

Her aunt knocked on the bedroom door and entered.

"Good morning." Gladys sank to the nearest bed and fastened the small buckles on her black sensible shoes with a tremble in her fingers.

"Good morning dear." Her aunt sat down on the other bed. "How are you?"

"I can't really say; I've been preparing for this interview but now I'm so nervous. I don't want to disappoint my lecturer who recommended me to them."

"You may not realize it but whatever impressed your lecturer will ensure you perform very well. Don't be too anxious; I know you'll do well. I came to wish you luck."

"Thanks." Gladys stood up and adjusted the front panel of the skirt suit she had decided on. Her hands rested on it for a moment as her tummy knotted in apprehension.

Aunt Isioma noticed. "Don't you worry; sometimes nerves bring out the best in us."

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys followed her out of the room and downstairs. “I do feel better now, thanks.”

“Do you need a driver to take you? Ade is not busy now.”

“No... the venue is not far. The short walk will enable me gather my thoughts.”

“OK, bye dear.” Her aunt turned into the kitchen while she continued to the front door.

Gladys soon left the house, walking towards Bar Beach by Akin Adesola Street. The trek wouldn't take more than ten minutes if she detoured off Ahmadu Bello Way to get to the interview venue at Zenon Oil and Gas corporate headquarters on Tihamiyu Savage Street. Her job search was progressing well, if not as fast as she would have wanted. But there were people who remained applicants for several years so she shouldn't complain of not finding a job in just over a month. She was startled out of her reverie when a black Mercedes zoomed close by her.

It was the car that had helped her to her aunt's place that first day. There was only one person in the car; maybe it was the owner driving the car now. Had he seen her? Her brother had gone crazy when she described that car. But she didn't tell him about the handsome owner who was more remarkable than his car. Nor how they'd first met. Perhaps she would meet him in better circumstances and they'd hit it off. By then, she would have a high powered job and her own place. Gladys laughed. She certainly had a very good imagination. The only sensible parts were about finding a job and getting a place soon as she could afford it. After more than a month at her aunt's house and that conversation they'd had, she still did not feel very comfortable.

The other wish about the guy was too fanciful. She didn't even know what she was hoping for if they met. That he would fall at her feet and declare everlasting love?

*Dreamer, her inner voice mocked, you've read too many romance novels. This guy drives the latest car models and lives in the posh part of town. He's not going to notice you.*

What she needed was to focus on the more important things in her life right now, like this interview for instance. She might be single but she would not allow thoughts of handsome men to distract her from her goal. Her mother and brothers were looking up to her. Gladys

## A Heart to Mend

continued on her way, her wishful thoughts buried in a corner of her mind.

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Edward had seen Gladys alright. How couldn't he have done so when he'd deliberately altered his route to pass through this street again? Thanks to Kanayo, he knew her name. Kanayo would not say anything else but confirmed the street. He almost stopped when he saw her, but a curious apprehension threw him off balance. He had planned to offer a ride to her destination and apologize for the first meeting. He expected to be excited, but the way his heart began to pound made him forget all that. So what happened? He spun the wheel expertly into a right turn and watched in the rear view mirror as Gladys turned the other way.

He was usually a smooth operator and never got nervous going after the women he wanted to date. According to most of the women he dated in the past, his heart was made of stone, and that was true. His close knit group of friends called him Mr. Ice. But none of them knew his full background. His life growing up in orphanages and foster homes had been so traumatic that he'd run away at the age of seventeen. But life on the street had been no kinder; some associates had cheated and betrayed him along the way.

Though he had got by and pulled himself up to where he was now, he still had difficulty relating to those around him. But he didn't want it any other way; he preferred being emotionally inaccessible. Otherwise he would be vulnerable, sensitive to others; and open to the kind of heartache which he vowed never to feel again. Life was much better this way; you wanted something, you went after it and you got it. If you became tired of it, or it became tired of you, you let it go. Yes, that was his modus operandi and he stuck to it.

So what was this feeling that made the hair on the back of his neck prickle so? He shook his head, he must be mistaken; there couldn't have been any feelings in his heart for Gladys. In fact there was no heart for that to be possible.

*Then why didn't you stop? You say you want her; you make elaborate plans by driving past her address daily for the next several weeks; and now you*

## A Heart to Mend

*see her what do you do? You deliberately speed past, instead of offering a ride like you planned.*

He didn't know how to rationalize it to himself. "Damn it!" he swore, silently. Nothing was happening to his heart, He wouldn't allow it. Edward was still in this frame of mind when he walked into his office suite.

"Sir, the others are waiting for you in the boardroom." His secretary looked up at him with a frown. Despite the time that had passed, they had not become at ease with each other like he'd been with his previous secretary. He relied more and more on his personal assistant, Ogbonna. He grunted a reply and marched into his office. On his way back out, he asked her to contact the PA and for both of them to join them immediately with the necessary files.

After a flurry of phone calls and unsolicited email from the broker, Edward had gone against his previous judgment and made this second appointment with Mr. Odusote. He wanted to go beyond his gut feel and see what his investment and accounts people had to say. He had sent them copies of the proposal and invited them to a round-table meeting.

Mr. Odusote was seated on the near side of the gleaming table. Edward pumped his hand before taking his place at the top. The company secretary, Mrs. Olayomi, and his lawyer, Benibo, were to his right. They'd been with him for five years each. Beside Mr. Odusote was the accountant, Odili. When they bought the quoted company and pulled his diverse interests under it, Odili had bought up a substantial share of the stock and became Chief Financial Officer. The director of finance, Mr. Ogunnaike, and Mr. Okereke, the manager of Capital Investment Fund were also in the room. Ogbonna and the secretary walked in and settled next to the lawyers.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, some of you have met Mr. Odusote before. He has a proposal for a trading collaboration he wishes to happen between his brokerage and our investment company." Edward looked at the financial experts in the room. "I met with him last month and decided his plan may be interesting enough for us to consider. I don't have the best head for finance, so I wanted the opinion of those of you whose day job it is. What do you think?"

## A Heart to Mend

Mr. Odusote stood up and Edward waved him on. “I’ll like to say a few words in summary and in addition to the points laid out in the proposal before we continue.”

“Stock trading is an upcoming business in Nigeria. I have been in the business for almost two decades and have more experience than most people. It is amazing to me the way investors are starting to include equity funds in their portfolio. However, many investors watch from the sidelines and are yet to take the plunge. A few small funds have emerged on the market but my product will rival the Discovery Fund which is the only one to have made any mark.”

“Now what I want to do is set up a mutual fund with a shorter than usual investment horizon. This quasi-hedge fund will be the most profitable vehicle ever traded in the history of the Nigeria Stock Exchange, in view of the openings in the market right now.”

“I’m interested in your proposal, but not in the way you may like,” Mr. Okereke chipped in. “I manage Capital Investment Funds and we’ve also observed the trends you mentioned. However, I disagree with your timelines.” The thin broker rolled his neck and a few joints popped in the process. “Our investment analysts have been tracking these things too. No broker will encourage their clients to buy new funds; remember that existing funds have a portfolio to ascertain the quality and the future prospects. We advise our new investors to begin with diversified funds based on a plan, but I can’t see any here...”

“It may be different from yours but I have my trading plan of course...”

“So how will you refine your buy list? What price are you willing to pay? When will you wait for a better price or move to the next stock? I don’t see any of that here...”

“I prefer more spontaneous trading. So most times I decide based on volume history. Shares with high volume mean high liquidity and are generally easier to sell. You guys may be happy making five hundred or five thousand naira per trade. My proposal set outs a minimum price goal of five thousand naira. I can assure you that if we



## A Heart to Mend

follow the rules and tactics I've proposed; we'll break even before you know it."

"Am I to assume that you'll use no stop-loss orders to reduce trade risks?" Mr. Okereke sneered. "After you buy the stock, what is the lowest price you are willing to sell at? How much are you willing to lose if this trade goes bad? Fifty percent, seventy percent or everything?"

"Let's look at it this way, why would I need to sell the stock if the price rises and continues to rise? It seems you're among the sedate traders that set a specific goal, once you get your peanuts gain, you automatically sell..." Mr. Odusote had stood up again.

"Gentlemen please," Edward tried to calm things down. "Mr. Odusote, let's look at this from another angle. What will you do if the stock price does not move at all after you buy? Sell it and move on, or hold it and wait for action? This may require more capital than we can spare."

"Some traders hold on to the stock until more activity and volume pick up." Mr. Odusote speared a glance to his adversary. "They feel safe waiting it out, hanging on to several non-moving stock just because they seem to have some good value. I will not do that. I'll sell any stock that does not move after very short timeframes; maybe minutes, hours, and at the most a couple days. I like to move my money to shift active and lucrative stocks to my portfolio. With this very short turnover, we'll reap very good returns. I know equity markets can be volatile over the short-term and thus increases business risk but I have a solution. We'll start a large credit line from the banks; buy stocks with these loans and also use them as collateral for more."

He paused and looked around and Edward realized how uncomfortable he was with this margin trading mantra. He knew hedge funds depended on no specific strategy but the ability of their managers to sniff out best opportunities while others were still unaware of them. What he didn't know was if the market was that diversified yet and whether Mr. Odusote was astute enough to succeed. Also, he usually

## A Heart to Mend

preferred to plan his business moves ahead and keep gambles to a minimum. He looked up when Mr. Ogunnaike spoke.

“Don’t you think we’ll get in trouble with this margin trading, if not with the Securities and Exchange Commission then with our shareholders? The haphazard approach you propose in trading the Fund can put their hard earned money at risk. Our current strategy utilizes screenings, news, research, technical indicators and fundamental analysis. It is essentially long term investment which is not meant to become rich overnight. I see that’s what you plan here.”

Mr. Odusote smiled. “Who says these investors and customers don’t want to become wealthy fast? These people understand that every investment carries some risk and the potential to earn is directly linked to the degree of risk. What is vital is to ensure that we earn positive real rate of returns in the face of inflation. What I propose has the potential to achieve this.”

“But at what cost? With a negative track record, the plan will crumble,” Odili rejoined.

Mr. Okereke jumped into the conversation again. “How do you intend to minimize risks? You write here...” he pointed to the proposal, “...that you’ll keep your total account value at a maximum and grow it? I’m not convinced by what you’ve told us so far.”

“Look, I’ve been doing this a long time...”

“You’ve never operated on this level before. Also I’ve been in this market even longer than you...”

“There are several money and trading risk management techniques I can use, but it depends on how much funds your company is willing to give me and autonomy to trade all or nothing. The credit line will ensure the extra cash is always available in the trading account...”

“You think this is enough to justify taking margin loans?” Mrs. Olayomi asked.

## A Heart to Mend

Edward noted the skepticism in her voice. Margins were a very useful tool for trading; they gave extra buying power and could be the edge that propelled a dealer to the top. However, they could be very risky if not used properly which meant that some traders did not use them at all. He also didn't want to lose sight of the fact that this was the Nigerian banking system they were talking about. With all the reforms going on, the banks were very undependable. Anything could happen and they would want their money back. He wasn't going to risk it.

"Mr. Odusote thanks for the opportunity to talk more about this proposal. We need more time to study all the points you've made before a final decision." He stood and moved forward.

The broker stood too and they shook hands. "Thanks for inviting me. I believe we have a potential partnership ahead of us but I've sent this proposal to some other firms and..."

"Of course..." Edward moved to the door with him.

After closing the door after Mr. Odusote, he came back into the room to discuss with his team further.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

Gladys paused beside the Landcruiser. The smell of clean and wet air filled her nose as she took a deep breath and closed the door. This was her second time at The Palms in Lekki, but she still took a moment to enjoy the view before walking in. The shopping mall had opened just before last Christmas and was built on land reclaimed from the swamps. The idea of reclamation amazed her because she was used to the rocky terrain of Enugu, and also the very well designed building covered a very large space. She'd been speechless the first time they came here for a movie; everything was so shiny and new. The driver parked the car and stepped out.

“Okon, I will give you a call when I am ready so you can come get the bags.”

The phone Aunt Isioma gave her soon after she arrived was very handy. The one her mother had scraped to buy for her when she was going off for her youth service had been stolen in the corper's lodge. With the new phone, employers contacted her more easily and she could call her mother when she wanted. Her aunt and the drivers also had phones on the same network and this made it possible to call each other at cheaper rates; useful at times like this.

“Okay Madam, I go wait here by the car.”

“No sleep or go far, you hear?”

“I dey here.”

Okon was the better spoken of the two drivers and whenever she could, she took him along for any errands. Ade was loud and garrulous and she couldn't understand his broken English or 'pidgin' as they called it in Lagos. She always explained to people in her singles group in Church that the slang-filled lingo was not used a lot in Enugu. But she was picking it up slowly and looked forward to using it when she went to the local markets alone. This was supposed to be a trial run

## A Heart to Mend

but she knew it would be a breeze compared to shopping at Ogbete, the major open-air market in Enugu that could make shopping for foodstuff almost traumatic.

On a similar day a few years ago, she'd gone to the market with her mother to purchase their monthly supply of yam and tomatoes. The heavy rain during the night had turned the walkways to wells of mud. The ankle-high muck had sucked her feet in and in the process of dodging a fleeing miscreant; she'd stumbled and fallen almost flat on her face. Her mother and some nearby shoppers had pulled her up but that was the end of that day's shopping. Her ankle was sprained and her clothes had become wet and the same color as the sludge.

Now she walked through the puddles left by the April rain onto the concrete forecourt of the mall. She glanced with interest into some of the shops fronting the high-ceilinged passage on her way to Shoprite which was her destination. The supermarket was large and cool with wide walkways and wheeled trolleys to help with large purchases. Gladys pushed one down the cold foods aisle, carefully selecting the items on her list. She quickly found the chicken breasts, minced beef and fresh vegetables, all frozen and packaged in very presentable plastic bags. They were very expensive compared to what she was used to; some by up to three times as much.

As she swerved into the dry goods section, she thought she saw the man who helped her to her aunt's place that first day in Lagos. In her head she often referred to him as 'her' guy when she thought of him, which was a lot. When she couldn't see him on a closer look, she continued into the bakery.

Why do I even think about him so much? It wasn't as if they'd spent much time together. He was handsome but she had met better looking men; counting her ex-boyfriend. It could be because he was so fit and possessed a certain charisma. His suit had set so well over his wide shoulders and around muscular thighs. She glanced around, fearing her thoughts were written boldly for all to see. She seriously had to stop thinking about this guy.

Edward saw her immediately he stood up from collecting a can of shaving foam from a low shelf. She was standing at the checkout counter and he felt a strong urge to drop everything and go after her. His heart picked up speed and his eyes refused to move away. He

## A Heart to Mend

forced himself to put the can into his shopping cart and start in the opposite direction. It was best to stick with the harmless liaisons that demanded little of him emotionally. The feelings which came over him any time he thought of her were not to be underrated.

After the episode on Ahmadu Bello Way, it was best if he stayed away from her. It had become clear that he didn't want to just date her. It seemed his emotions were involved in this need he felt for her. He didn't want to risk his heart in a relationship that could involve undue emotional attachment. It might not be easy to keep walking away if fate made a point of throwing them together but it was something he must do.

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Gladys romped on the beach; she pushed 'her' guy into the sea and ran off. He came out of the water, gave chase and soon caught up with her. Their laughter washed over the scene before he swung her up and around until she screamed with delight and joy.

"Gladys, Gladys!" The sound of her name wiped the wistful smile off her face and she sprang out of bed. It was late afternoon on Wednesday, and she was back in her bedroom after tramping the streets of Lagos in search of That Elusive Job. It was Aunt Isioma's raised voice that had jerked her out of the daydream. She left the room and took the stairs down, two at a time.

"Did you call me?" She entered the living room breathing quickly.

Her aunt was watching television but looked up when she walked in. "Yes, sit down Gladys. I have something for you." She gestured to the seat beside her.

"This was in my post office box today." She handed over an official envelope.

Gladys turned it over and stared at the back. The return address was Zenon Oil and Gas. Her breath stopped and then returned accompanied by a rapid heartbeat. Her palms began to sweat. This was the final communication with them and if this was a refusal, then that was the end. Her muscles spasmed and she felt sick to her stomach.

## A Heart to Mend

“It’s from Zenon, isn’t it? And about time too. Let’s see the letter, Gladys.”

Gladys fumbled over the flap and finally got it open. With shaking hands, she drew out the embossed sheet and spread it flat over her left palm. When she collapsed on the back of the seat, her aunt snatched the paper away from her hands.

“What is it Gladys? It’s not the end of the world even if you didn’t get the job with them. There are other opportu...” Aunt Isioma’s scanned the letter with a sharp gaze.

“YES!” She jumped to her feet and dragged Gladys up into her arms. “This is fantastic news, I’m so happy for you. Congratulations!”

Gladys couldn’t speak for a moment and could not even hug her back. Her heart pounded in her chest and incipient tears clogged her voice. Soon, the water flowed from her eyes.

“It is all right, don’t cry dear.” Her aunt sat her back on the seat and settled herself on the arm. “Wipe your tears. You have to call your mother, she’ll be thrilled.”

Gladys sniffled once more and inhaled deeply. She collected the letter from her aunt and reread it. It was still there. It was true. She had landed a very well paid job with an oil company. “Thank God,” She breathed as she raised her eyes. “Thank you too Aunt Isioma.”

Her aunt hugged her again. “Why thank me? You did well all by yourself.”

“I still want to thank you.” Gladys had a lot to be grateful to her aunt for in the past few months. Aunt Isioma had left her the run of the cars, arranged some interviews for her and made sure she was as comfortable as possible in the house and enjoyed living in Lagos.

“You’re welcome. Now call your mother.”

Gladys moved between the sentry palms into the dining room, taking her mobile phone from her jeans pocket at the same time and punching in her mother’s number.

“Mama, it is me, good evening.”

“E’hem, how are you?”

Gladys could almost see her mother settling into one of their seats back in their Enugu flat and her tears gushed again. Her mother had replied in Igbo. How she missed that language sometimes. Here in Lagos, one was forced to speak English most of the time. The locals

## A Heart to Mend

largely spoke Yoruba or the pidgin parlance though most of them understood English. Even Aunt Isioma spoke more Yoruba or English than their native Igbo.

“Ada’m, what is it? Why are you crying? Is it that job you went for last week?”

“No Mama, this is the Zenon position that my lecturer recommended me for.”

“Ehen, what happened? Have you finally heard from them?”

“I got the job Mama.” Gladys decided to keep it short and laughed through her tears when her mother screamed and began to sing her favorite Igbo praise song.

*“Daalu maka idi nma gi Chineke, maka ihe oma I na eme. Chineke daalu...Thank you Lord for your goodness, and all you have done. Thank you Lord...”*

Her mother continued to sing and Gladys danced to her voice over the phone. Finally they prayed together and said their goodbyes but not before she promised to keep her mother up to date with everything that happened. She turned to the door to see Aunt Isioma looking on.

“How is your mother?”

“She’s fine and the boys too.”

“You don’t have to tell me how she took the news. I watched you dancing.”

Gladys laughed. “It was very good speaking with her; I miss her so much sometimes.”

“I understand. Since my last daughter moved to start school in the States, I have to force myself not to move there. But no depressing thoughts, not today of all days.”

Aunt Isioma looked at her with such pride and joy on her face that Gladys forgot the restraint that usually marked their interactions. She walked across the room and allowed herself to be enfolded in the older woman’s arms.

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## A Heart to Mend

“It’s virtually the same thing. We’ve been giving your company large cap funds but gradually we want to start offering mid-cap, specialty and sector...”

Edward was in his office with Kanayo, Odili and Benibo discussing some issues with their current banking facilities.

“Could you speak in layman’s terms?” Benibo requested.

Edward nodded and laughed. “Yes please, we need to understand what you’re saying...”

His secretary cracked open the door. “Mr. Odusote is here for his appointment.”

He frowned and beckoned her in. He didn’t know he had an appointment with the broker. After the meeting in March, they’d sent him a letter that his proposal was under review. That was supposed to be it. She left the door ajar as she stepped in.

“When did I make this appointment?”

“I can’t remember exactly sir, but it was sometime last month. You asked me to give him a call to see when he can come in for another meeting...”

While she still spoke, Mr. Odusote pushed the door wider and marched in. He moved straight to where they were seated on the settee cluster in a corner of the office and started shaking hands. Edward stared at his secretary till she scurried out of the room.

“Good afternoon Edward, how are you?” He took Mr. Odusote’s sweaty palms without any smile. The hearty voice got on his nerves, just like the man himself. Not a week went by without the broker sending either a text message or email of the senseless forwarded variety.

“I’m sorry, my secretary says we have an appointment but I must have forgotten. We were having another meeting as you can see

## A Heart to Mend

but since you're here, you can join us for a while. This is my banker Mr. Kanayo Okafor. You met Odili and Benibo the last time."

"Yes, yes I have. I've also met Kanayo and knew he would be here today."

Edward looked up with a query in his eyes as his friend shook hands with the broker.

"Yes I remember we met a couple of days ago in the banking hall while I was with another customer." Kanayo faced Edward. "I happened to be taking your call at the time."

Edward nodded and they all sat back down. It was possible that there was no appointment with the broker after all and he'd crashed this meeting. Maybe his secretary had been cowed by the man's insistence. "So what may I do for you?" He asked.

Mr. Odusote loosened his tie and brought a file out of his briefcase. "I have a new proposal. This is something I'd mentioned earlier and is more tailored to your needs. In this one, the fund's major product will be your own stock, that is, Bestman Group PLC."

There was a moment of silence broken by the movement of paper on the desks as the broker handed files out.

"You want us to invest in a share buy back?" Odili sat forward as he continued to flip through the documents he'd just received.

Mr. Odusote bristled, "It seems you don't approve?"

"Well, to do what you suggest, we have to buy shares from our existing shareholders at a price higher than the current market price. It doesn't sound like a very good plan..."

Kanayo broke in, "I can see the advantages, of course. The outstanding shares Bestman Group has in the market are reduced and your market capitalization increases. Buy backs usually help a company post higher returns on equity."

## A Heart to Mend

“Exactly,” Mr. Odusote smirked. “I’ve read through the company’s past earnings reports and balance sheet, income and cash flow statements. You possess huge cash reserves but with no upcoming projects to invest into.” He slapped the file down on the table before him.

“You must’ve studied the wrong updates.” Edward shifted and his eyes narrowed. He may need to keep a closer eye on this broker. “There’ll be a huge outlay to set up our telecommunications arm soon. It’s not a great time for another investment drive.”

There was a beat of silence which Mr. Odusote ended. “Even with this information, I still think it is. Your company should use this opportunity to change your debt to equity ratio; increase your debt.” He passed some graph images to Edward and the others. “You pay interest on the debt before tax so it costs you less than the return on equity from investors.”

“Not so fast Mr. Odusote.” Odili scratched his bald head as he adjusted his glasses. “Share buyback reduces cash flow that could be used to generate revenue, increase earnings, and pay dividends. It affects operations and makes for a riskier balance sheet. In my experience, a company should only buy back its shares when they’re trading below the expected value and where there are no better investment opportunities or better use and allocation of capital...”

Edward nodded, “I agree with you Odili. Investors perceive buybacks as a sign of poor performance or that management has run out of ideas. At this stage we can’t afford the luxury of mixed signals to the market. Bestman Group is just over two years old. It would be detrimental if we had fewer growth opportunities owing to cash shortages from share buy back.”

“You won’t regret it if you do. This is because your stock gets greater value; you have fewer dividend payouts, better ratios, growth rates and return on investment. You also have better financials with higher earnings per share making it a dream investment option.”

## A Heart to Mend

Odili shook his head. “I’m afraid that if we go with your proposal to buy back and reissue shares, management energies will be diverted from our business to stock market games...”

“And that’s without mentioning the legality of the whole affair.” Benibo joined in the exchange for the first time. “Neither the Companies and Allied Matters Act nor the Investment and Securities Act have any provision for companies to buy back their shares...”

Odili was like a man renewed; this tied back to what they’d been discussing with the banker earlier. “That’s as it should be. When a company buys back its shares, such company would be reducing their capital. Therefore, I see why the SEC does not allow companies to do that under normal circumstances. If companies are allowed to buy back their shares, it means they would have to use the shareholders’ fund which is not acceptable.”

Kanayo took the bait. “It’s important for the SEC to differentiate the issue of companies’ capitalization from their solvency. Large capitalization does not translate to solvency of a company. SEC and investors should not be overly concerned about capitalization of PLCs’, but rather the emphasis should be placed on the fundamental strength of a company. Banks are the biggest players in the equity stock market and these restrictions do not favor us.”

Mr. Odusote picked up from there. “I also think that at this juncture, the SEC should not be concerned about the reduction of capitalization of banks in Nigeria, because the capitalization of all the current banks far exceed N25 billion, which the Central Bank set as the threshold last year. There is nothing illegal about share buyback especially as I propose to do.”

“Look at it from the gullible investor’s point of view.” Benibo interrupted. “The CEOs and dealers may, through collective trading and depressed prices; create anxiety in the market and tempt investors to sell the shares to the company by making apparently attractive offers.”

## A Heart to Mend

“You know, I’ve seen instances of where a company buys back their shares, by making bargain purchases that give an unfair edge to the continuing, non-selling shareholders. Guess who benefits in the end?” Odili looked around, “the same management...”

“But that’s the whole point. I will say this again, there’s nothing illegal about this.”

Edward tried to wrap things up. The conversation with Mr. Odusote had gone on longer than he intended. “Mr. Odusote, you can be sure that I don’t want to pay any fines for price manipulation or get tainted by the whiff of an investigation. Further, if the share price ever drifts down after the buy back, there would be complete erosion of our investor confidence...”

Kanayo’s phone buzzed and he stood up. “Sorry to interrupt but I have to go now. It’s been an interesting chat with you Mr. Odusote, good luck with your plan.”

Edward walked him to the door and halted. “I have to apologize for the derailed meeting...”

“No problem at all, we’ll set another date to continue the previous talk. But don’t forget about the Johnsons’ reception party. I know you’re travelling till just a few days before then.”

“Yeah, but I’ll try and remember.”

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It was the Saturday after her first full week of work and Gladys was relaxed in front of the television watching a home video when Aunt Isioma walked into the living room.

“Can you spare some time to go out now?”

Gladys sat up. “Yes, I can. Do you have any errands you want me to run for you?”

## A Heart to Mend

“Not really, but I was hoping that we might be able to go shopping together.”

“I can go alone if you want.” In the past few weeks, she’d often shopped alone for food and other stuff they needed both at the supermarket and the nearby local markets.

“No this would be for clothes for me. I’d like your opinion.”

Gladys smiled; her aunt could be so nice sometimes. “What’s the occasion?”

“It’s a cocktail party. My friend is organizing it for her eldest son. You have met Atinuke, haven’t you? You tied the bronze *gele* headscarf used during the Oba’s do for both of us.”

“Oh I remember her now. We didn’t actually meet but I remember that occasion. It was the golden jubilee of the Nigerian Navy, where they presented a plaque to the Oba?”

“That’s the one. You couldn’t go because an interview came up for you to attend.”

“Yes.” Gladys breathed a sigh a relief as she recalled that she no longer had to hunt through the job ads in newspapers or spend hours to adjust her resume for different positions. And no more fruitless interviews which also included some old managers being more interested in her clothes and her body than what she knew and could contribute to their organizations. She caught herself in time to hear the tail end of her aunt’s speech.

“...should enjoy this one.”

“Sorry, I didn’t get what you just said. My attention wandered for a moment.”

“Are you distracted by your new job already?” Her aunt looked at her fondly and continued. “Atinuke has invited both of us for the cocktail party, and it’s for the second Saturday in May. I said I was sure you would enjoy it.”

“Will there be young people there?” She asked because the last time she went out with her aunt and some of her friends was not a very happy memory. They either interrogated her and then got annoyed at her answers or ignored her totally; there’d been no common ground.

Aunt Isioma laughed, “You’re worried you’ll be bored like the last time. Like I said, it’s in honor of her son who just returned from

## A Heart to Mend

London after completing his doctorate. So I'm sure there'll be quite a few of his own friends there of similar age."

In her head Gladys began to sort the few clothes in her closet. "What's the dress code?"

"Atinuke is something of a stickler and it's at the Ocean View Restaurant, so probably classy." Her aunt began to move toward the stairs. "Do you have something suitable?"

"One of my dress suits should be just fine."

"Those will not do at all." She noticed the stony look on Gladys' face and back-pedaled. "I don't mean the suits are not good enough; but this party will need a different type of outfit."

Gladys relaxed and said, "Then I'll find something else to wear."

"But that's why I want us to go shopping." her aunt announced.

"I can't afford to pay for a good dress right now."

"Don't worry about the price." Her aunt adjusted her white lace wrapper and matching blue scarf as they got to the foot of the steps. "I can give my niece a congratulatory gift, can't I? Nothing will make me happier than paying for anything that you want."

"Thank you very much Aunt Isioma. I appreciate your gift."

Her aunt smiled and hurried her on. "You're welcome. Go on then, go get ready."

Gladys smiled and ran lightly up the steps.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

Edward arrived at the Ocean View Restaurant with Kanayo right on time. The celebrant was a classmate of Kanayo and also an acquaintance of his, but he was here as a courtesy to the celebrant's parents who were his valued business clients. In any other circumstances he wouldn't have attended the party; but he'd been feeling dangerously bored of late and ready for any type of distraction. He didn't like cocktail parties that much, especially those where there weren't any networking opportunities for business deals. Like this one. Now he couldn't wait to leave, and he calculated the earliest moment he could sneak off without giving offence.

He would have once relished the opportunity to rub shoulders with a room full of the movers-and-shakers, but at this point he was well past the stage where he needed to curry favor. Hopefully he'd miss the majority of the guests notorious for lateness to such parties. He remained where he was on the fringes and gazed out on the crowd. The women glittered in their new dresses while the men strutted around. Suddenly the wind picked up speed, chopping up the waters of the nearby ocean. It began to rain and waiters walked around closing some of the windows. Edward cursed out loud; he would have to stay for longer.

"What's your problem, man? You still don't have a girlfriend, do you? The year is halfway through you know, soon it will be a year you broke up with Bisi. There are a lot of babes here, so let's mingle. We could start from the bar." Kanayo tugged at his sleeve.

"I will still be leaving soon."

"How can you think of leaving in this weather and with all these beauties flitting around? And the best are yet to come, you know, the fashionably late..."

A third person joined their discussion. It was Mr. Odusote.



## A Heart to Mend

“Edward, how good to see you here.”

Edward cursed again, this time underneath his breath as Kanayo shook hands with the man and left them alone. Mr. Odusote was the last person he wished to see. The man was becoming a pest in his life; how did he always know where he would be at?

“How is business doing?” Mr. Odusote backed Edward into a spot in the corner.

“Fine,” Edward snapped.

“I understand that you’re not ready to work with me yet but I keep thinking of all the many opportunities we miss as time goes by.”

Since the last meeting he had had with Mr. Odusote, Edward had decided they couldn’t work together. His investment team did not feel Mr. Odusote would add any value to their work and were downright suspicious of his methods. Edward had explained this to Mr. Odusote, but the man still called to cajole him with more requests. How he managed to get his personal number Edward had no idea. He excused himself and stalked to another part of the room where Kanayo sat with the celebrant and some of their other acquaintances. As he settled his back against the wall, he scanned the room and stopped still at the door.

From his vantage point, he studied the latecomers on the elevated reception area. He recognized the rounded hostess but he didn’t know the tall and slim middle-aged woman in the group. All his attention was centered on the young lady who was with them. She stood out from the colorful crowd like a beacon, her red dress much more attractive for its modest lines. She faltered as the other women strolled off. Her teeth dug deep into her lower lip as her gaze resolutely turned away from the twinkling lights outside.

She was partly blocked by other party-goers but he noticed the tight-knuckled grip that clutched a folded umbrella to her chest. The long hair framing the smooth oval of her face hung to just below her stiff shoulders. Her eyes darted around the room. Tuning out his companions, he speculated on why she was upset. She couldn’t be a gatecrasher afraid of being caught; no one could get past the security at the doors without an invitation. Lightning flashed and her face paled in the wash of the overhead lights. As the thunder boomed over the

## A Heart to Mend

nearby Atlantic, she regarded the windows with ill-concealed dismay. She was afraid of the storm.

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“Mrs. Dehinde-Ojo, why are you late to my party?”

“Sorry Atinuke, this flash storm delayed us. The roads are already flooded.” Her aunt hugged the hostess and dragged Gladys forward. “This is my niece, Gladys. I told you...”

“Oh yes of course. Hello dear, how are you?” the plump old lady asked. Her face was a fixture on the tabloid pages as a doyen of fashion. In a society where a lot of women were judged on who their husbands were, Atinuke Johnson commanded respect for her business acumen in running several couture houses. “Your aunt told me your good news, congrats.”

“Thank you.” Maybe if she kept her replies short they would go away and leave her be.

“I hope you’re enjoying Lagos? Have you started the job?”

“I started last week.” The large umbrella dripped rain down on her shoes as the storm continued raging outside with alternate lightning streaks and loud thunder. It appeared so close through the large windows beside her that she flinched. She wanted to escape to the nearest small space; the restrooms would do. Aunt Isioma looked at her strangely but soon moved away with her friend.

One of the restaurant hostesses on cloakroom duty approached her, and she gladly surrendered the umbrella. After she got the necessary directions, Gladys walked jerkily towards the short flight of steps that led down to the fanned out tables. She tucked the beaded clutch bag into the crook of her elbow as she surveyed the glittering throng of guests with trepidation. As she did so, her gaze lighted on a face that stood above the others and her heart skipped a beat – ‘her’ guy was here. She continued on her way to the restrooms after almost missing her step.

Thirty minutes after she emerged, Gladys heard the deep voice behind her. She continued listening to the chatter around her, and pretended that she wasn’t the one being addressed. She knew who it was, because their eyes had met across the room when she came out a

## A Heart to Mend

few minutes ago. She took a little time to compose herself to face him but when he tapped her on the shoulder; the composure flew out of the window. An electric current ran through her body.

“Yes?” As she turned to face him, her heart leapt and she knew why thoughts of him inundated her mind. She was irresistibly, uncontrollably attracted to him.

“Can I have this dance with you?” He extended a large hand.

“Sure.” Gladys took the hand and they walked to the dance floor. The lyrics of the slow Michael Buble number, “Put your head on my shoulder” echoed every feeling coursing through her. As they moved close to the beat of the music, she could feel he was attracted to her too.

“So do you feel better now?” When their gaze met across the room on her way to the ladies, he had known he must approach her. The anxiety in her eyes had reminded him of why he’d helped her that first day even though he first felt suspicious. It didn’t matter what happened later but he couldn’t keep away anymore. He would have this chance to get to know her.

“What?” What was he talking about?

“I saw you by the windows when you arrived. You don’t like thunderstorms, do you?”

He must be very observant. Even her aunt hadn’t noticed. She sneaked a peek at him through her lashes and saw he was not mocking her. She relaxed.

“No I don’t. I’m glad the storm has passed.”

She could shelter in his arms anytime. He bit his tongue and smiled down at her. “We met before but I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Edward Bestman.”

She couldn’t resist smiling back. “My name is Gladys Eborah.”

“Gladys,” he repeated, rolling the word around in his mouth like sweet wine. “It’s a very beautiful name, just like the bearer. You’re a very beautiful woman, Gladys.”

“Thank you.” She looked down and Edward smiled inside.

As they continued to move to the music, he moved even closer so that it was hard not to feel the hard angles of his body. But Gladys didn’t move away, she liked how she was feeling. She’d dreamed about meeting him but this went beyond her fantasies. Her thoughts were all

## A Heart to Mend

jumbled up and nothing smart came to mind. All the muscles in her body felt tight except the ones in her tummy which felt liquid. The music came to an end too quickly.

Edward walked her to a secluded corner. The party was winding down.

“Here’s my business card. How may I see you again?”

“If you want, I’ll give you my phone number.”

“That will be great. And I do want. I want you.”

Warmth washed over her from his direct look. She collected the small slip of embossed paper, her fingers trembling as they brushed against his.

“Give me a brief call or send a text message and I’ll call you right back.”

Edward was elated at how they had hit it off right away. He didn’t care whether his heart was involved or not. His body had trumped and he would take each day as it came. Gladys was a beautiful lady and he was just the gentleman for her. He looked down at her again and smiled.

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Gladys glanced around in awe. She had been to Bar Beach a few times before and Alpha beach with her aunt once, but this was very different. The youth group at the church she attended had planned a boat ride to an isolated beach called Wreck Island. The beach had remnants of a ship on the shoreline. It was organized as a day at the beach for the youth with time for games and interaction. Gladys had joined the church a couple of months ago and needed to widen her social circle. Also, she’d decided to go since the first two friends she’d made were going too. Jennifer and Ayo had been there before and convinced her it was a great experience.

They all met at the church premises at eight in the morning so as to arrive at the Ikoyi dock at the agreed time. There were about fourteen people although Gladys only knew about half of them from church. The boat trip took about an hour to get to the drop off point, and from there they had to walk about one kilometre to get to the beach. She had wondered how they would get the cooler of food and

## A Heart to Mend

drinks across since most of them already carried backpacks. Luckily the villagers were happy to help them for a small token. When they got to the beach, it was low tide and the entire perimeter of the shipwreck was visible.

“What do you think?”

“I’ve never seen something like this before.”

“I said you shouldn’t miss it.”

The beach had clusters of tables with parasols and fitted chairs, and a few cushioned lounge chairs. Gladys joined the rest in setting up their stuff in one of the gazebos.

“This is a very nice beach; it’s even better than the Alpha Beach.”

“Yes, but because it’s so far out, most people don’t know about it. We heard it’s usually only used by the expatriates but a couple of them in our church told us about it and said it wasn’t to be missed.” said Bola, the coordinator of the youth group.

Soon after they finished setting up, all those who could swim were in the water. Some rode the waves on what Gladys learned was called a boogie board; it looked a lot like surfing.

Later some of the same guys showed off dance moves when the music began to play.

“That is one funny guy,” Ayo said, pointing at a tall skinny guy. She was a shy girl with a high pitched voice. They had become quick friends after Gladys joined the singles group in church. It turned out they had both attended the same university campus though they’d not known each other then. Ayo was already friends with Jennifer and so they became a threesome.

“Are you interested in him?” asked Jennifer, plump, livelier and already in a steady relationship. She was always on the lookout for ways to fix the other two up.

“I was just saying and in your mind we’re married already?”

An undaunted Jennifer turned to Gladys. “So do you think any of these guys attractive?”

“Some of them are but not for me...”

“Why not? I think that guy over there has an interest in you.” Jennifer pointed discretely.

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys looked and shook her head. “Actually, there’s another guy I’m interested in.”

Both girls were all ears and pulled closer to her. “Tell us all.”

Gladys laughed, “There’s nothing much to say. I met the guy at a party I attended with my aunt a week ago and he wanted my number. His name is Edward...”

“What exactly happened at the party?” Jennifer dragged her chair closer.

“It was a short party so we didn’t spend a lot of time together. We danced together for a while then he gave me his card and said he would love to see me again.”

“Wow, he sure goes straight to the point.” Ayo leaned back.

Jennifer nodded. “That’s my kind of guy. I guess he’s a bit older than our group here?”

“Maybe a bit, he’s in his mid-thirties.” Most of the people in the youth group were in their twenties and the few she had spoken within the last two months seemed more interested in having fun than settling down. A few had paired up but were still commitment-shy. “And to tell the truth, we’d met before the party.”

“That would explain it. Did you guys meet at work?”

“We met in January, the day I arrived here in Lagos. Mind you, nothing happened then but I can’t help thinking that’s why we clicked so well at the party.”

“That’s so sweet, he gave you his card. Did you call him?”

“I texted him and he called. We’ve spoken a few times since.”

“You’ve been hiding this from us all...” Jennifer began.

“What does he look like?” Ayo interrupted.

“He’s good looking, a lot taller than me.”

“Give me a taller guy any day.” Ayo was a very tall girl herself.

“Are you guys in a relationship then?”

“He hasn’t said anything but I’m already conflicted. I don’t know whether to pull out because he is out of my league. I think he may just want to toy with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s a big shot managing director.” Gladys brought out his card and passed it around.

“I recognize that name. I may have seen him in City People...”

## A Heart to Mend

“I’ve told you to stop reading that junk.”

“Leave me abeg. I get my news from there; you keep reading your Guardian and Newswatch.”

Ayo glared at Jennifer and turned to Gladys. “There’s nothing like he’s out of your league. You’re a fine person and if he wants to know you more, give him a chance.”

“We agree. Please I’m all for love, it conquers all, you know?”

Gladys laughed, how did I know you girls would say that?”

“Just keep us posted on what happens. And maybe Ayo can be introduced to his friends.”

As they all laughed, Bola beckoned them over. “Girls come on, food is ready!”

They joined the throng at the coolers for their share.

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The next week Gladys and Edward were at Chicken Republic opposite Zenon House on Ajose Adeogun Street where the subsidiary she worked with was situated. She’d finally accepted his oft repeated invitation and they’d agreed to meet for a quick lunch.

“So tell more about your family.”

“Well, I’m an only daughter and I have three younger brothers. Two are in the university while the youngest is in secondary school.” She smiled as she spoke of her family.

“I’m sure your mum would’ve loved to have another beautiful daughter like you.”

Gladys laughed and popped a potato chip in her mouth. Edward wolfed down his jollof rice as they talked. They’d been delayed by the long queue before ordering and now had less than half an hour to get back to their offices.

“And your father is no doubt very proud of the boys.”

Gladys sighed as she replied, “My father is dead...”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.” He picked up her hand and stroked it slowly.

She smiled at him. “It’s OK. He was really sick before he passed but it happened over fifteen years ago.” They were all used to it

## A Heart to Mend

now even though the years since her father died had been very emotional and trying for the whole family.

“Didn’t your mother remarry?”

“No... I think she preferred to take care of us on her own.”

“Your mother must be quite a strong woman...”

“Oh she is!” Gladys sat forward on the tall bench. “I respect her a lot for that.” Her mother was a very hardworking and enterprising woman but Gladys still thanked God that she was through with her degree and could help her in taking care of her brothers.

“What does she do?” Edward gulped down some bottled water and returned to the rice.

“She is a teacher but she does some private business by trading in textiles and jewelry for women.”

“That’s good to hear. Do you keep in touch with them?” Someone got into the seat next to them and they both shifted a little closer to the large windows.

“Oh yes. It’s been busy starting up a new job but I call them every chance I get. I remember I described your car to my brother and he was so jealous.”

Edward laughed. “I’ll love to meet him. How’s your new job?”

“This first month has been very hectic but I love it. It’s very challenging since my department is a start-up subsidiary, but it’s a great experience. I’m even happier that I’ll soon be able to find my own place and send money home to my family. The pay is very good.”

Gladys finished her chicken and chips and wiped her fingers. “But enough of me; let’s talk about you.” She’d seen him in the papers a few times but mostly about business.

“Everyone pretty much knows anything of importance. I run a business here in Lagos.”

“How about home life? Where did you grow up, parents? Are you the only child?”

“Oh that. I believe I’m from Rivers State. I grew up in an orphanage and foster homes in Kano. But why talk about such a depressing topic on such a beautiful day?” With that, Edward launched into an anecdote about his business day that had her holding her sides in laughter. She was surprised at the revelation about his background and made a note to ask again.



**CHAPTER SIX**

Gladys rushed around the room getting ready for an evening with Edward. This was their first dinner, and she felt as excited as she had felt on the night at the cocktail party. That night had been magical and made her smile each time she recalled it. Edward had been so attentive and courteous, it blew her away that he had noticed her fear of thunderstorms. They'd been dating for a while now and he continued to be caring and attentive. The wonderful feeling of mutual attraction still made her tipsy each time they spoke on the phone or met for a quick lunch or movie. She waltzed round the room happily but stopped short when Bunmi staggered in through the door.

The maid's arms were loaded with freshly washed and ironed clothes. "Madam is calling you," she said, moving towards the wardrobe to hang up the clothes.

"Is there anyone else downstairs?" Gladys asked, putting on her lipstick.

"Yes, there is a man with her in the parlor."

"Edward's here already? Oh my God, I'm late." Gladys groaned out loud.

"I can help you get ready, auntie," Bunmi suggested.

"Thanks... please bring out those high-heeled black shoes and polish them for me."

She was ready in the next five minutes, and looked back at the smiling face of Bunmi with gratitude as she walked downstairs.

When Gladys entered the room, Edward stood up immediately and walked to her side.

"Hello, beautiful." He stopped up close to her with a big smile on his face. She looked very pretty in a pink floral print wraparound

## A Heart to Mend

dress with a ruffled v-neck. He pulled his eyes away from the cleavage framed by the neckline and to her smile.

“Hi, Edward,” she whispered back.

“Shall we go?” He extended an arm. He would be the most envied guy in the restaurant to have her with him tonight looking the way she was.

Gladys addressed her aunt. “We’ll be leaving now.”

“Edward, it’s been nice talking with you again. Please take care of her for me, OK? Don’t be out too late.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. She’s in safe hands.”

“Then have a nice time, my dears.”

When they got outside, Edward settled her comfortably in the passenger seat of the car before he went over to his side, and they drove away. Edward preferred not to talk much while driving and so her thoughts drifted from the cool interior of the car. Gladys thought about a conversation she had with Aunt Isioma about Edward. Though they’d only met at the cocktail party, her aunt always looked forward to hearing about her dates with Edward and what was happening with them. His wealth and status made Aunt Isioma suspect his motives. She warned that because Edward was a very eligible bachelor, he might have playboy tendencies.

Gladys wasn’t sure what she expected from Edward. Her aunt said to be careful but still encouraged her to give him a chance. She explained that she had daughters of her own and knew young girls had to pair up sooner or later and get married. Gladys knew that but she would only think about marriage when she was sure they both loved each other. She was happy to be courted by Edward but she wouldn’t end up in a convenient marriage.

When they got to the restaurant, Edward stepped quickly out of the car while she was still gathering her accessories and came to open the door and help her out. As they walked into the restaurant with her hand on his arm, she admired his consistent courtesy. They were soon shown to their seats and asked for their orders. She ordered stewed fish with seasonal vegetables while Edward wanted curried chicken sauce with a side of fried rice.

When the waiter had gone after serving their bar choices, Gladys looked around.

## A Heart to Mend

“So what do you think of the Sky Restaurant? You said you’ve not been here before?”

“No I haven’t.” She replied still admiring the place.

Sky Restaurant was a new place situated at the penthouse of Eko Suites, one of the foremost hotels in Victoria Island according to her aunt. The location was fantastic; it was in the open air and looked over the Lagos skyline on one side and the Lagoon on the other.

“It’s a nice concept.” She just hoped they wouldn’t have rain.

“No thunderstorms today, I promise.”

Gladys laughed, “Did you read my mind?”

“That was a very telling look at the skies,” he replied. “But don’t worry; I have an agreement with the rain gods in my pocket.”

“What agreement? It’s the August break after all.”

They both laughed as a waiter brought their appetizers. Both had ordered spicy chicken pepper soup which arrived in tiny bowls. It was accompanied by kebabs made of colorful vegetables.

“Have you finished packing?” He was supposed to be travelling to Abuja tomorrow morning for some business deal she’d read about in the papers. Edward travelled often, either within the country or outside. It meant they didn’t see as often as she would have liked but the times he was around, they were usually together.

“Yeah, all ready to move with the first flight.”

“Congratulations again, I’m glad you got the Abuja deal. What does it involve?”

“I told you about Bestman’s property development arm? I still can’t believe my small renovation company was the beginning of all this. We were just lucky on this Public-Private partnership with the government. The contract runs into billions and will entail new property construction, management and servicing too. This is our biggest contract so far.”

“Did I tell you the press release by your company in the Guardian business section yesterday had a nice picture of you? City people had some pictures too.”

Edward smiled thinly “My life makes good copy, doesn’t it?”

“What does that mean? I read it because I was impressed by the details of the transaction.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Oh I’m sorry, just that a lot of people read about me in the tabloids and then take that as gospel.” There was surprise on Gladys’s face and he continued. “I’m sure you’ve seen the gossip columnists who list my wealth and all the women I’m seen with.”

“I’ve probably not lived here long enough to see any of that. So you’re wealthy?”

He missed the tone of light mockery in her voice. “Yes, I’m very wealthy Gladys. I’m not just the MD of Bestman Group PLC but chairman too. Apart from my business properties, I personally own three houses here in Lagos, one in Abuja and one in Kano. But that’s not all, there are other investments too. What else do you want to know?”

If not for the bitter inflection in his voice, Gladys would have thought what an arrogant sod he was. His voice was literally dripping with acid at the end of that sentence.

“Let’s leave that to the columnists Edward, I am actually more curious about your background. What was your experience growing up in an orphanage? And, Kano is so far away, are you still in contact with them or any of your foster families?”

“The orphanage is still there. I’ve never visited and I’m not planning to.” He snapped out before taking a deep swallow of his Chapman on the rocks.

She stared quietly at him but Edward could almost hear the cogs turning in her head. Edward felt like kicking himself; other girls were most times distracted by talk about his wealth. Otherwise, he still managed to avoid the topic of his upbringing without raising suspicion. Gladys was the last person he wanted to rub the wrong way.

“I’m sorry Gladys, this is a very sensitive issue for me and talking about it throws me off balance. Can we talk about it some other time?”

“You said that the last time too. If we’re to go forward and if I’m to feel comfortable with you, I need to know you better. But of course that is your choice.”

A waiter broke the heavy mood when he interrupted them to serve their entrees. They tucked in silently for a while and then Edward started again in a lighter tone.

“How’s your fish? This chicken is just the way I like it.”

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys followed his lead. "This is good too, but the portion is so big. I don't know if I can finish it."

"How come you girls have such small appetites?"

Gladys laughed with him, "You don't expect us to eat like men now do you?"

"Well some say that what a man can do, a woman can do better right?"

Their laughter rang out over the restaurant and some of their fellow diners looked over at them. They finished their dinner and left the restaurant without returning to the subject. They were still lightly debating gender issues when some minutes later, the car engine purred to a stop on the street in front of her aunt's house.

"Thanks for the wonderful evening. I really enjoyed it." She moved to open the door.

His voice stopped her. "I want to be with you Gladys. I want us to move forward. What do you say, will you be my girlfriend?"

Gladys sat back, her heart pounding. Their relationship was now official. "I love being with you too. I'll give us a chance Edward. But you have to too."

"I will. But I want you to know that I'm just a man not a saint. I know only the barest details of those who gave me life. I've done some wrongs, experienced a lot of hurts. In most ways I've risen above these setbacks, but I am still working on others."

Silence swirled around them for several more seconds before his voice tiptoed in. "I want to ask now that you please do not judge me harshly."

Gladys nodded. "See you next week?" she asked and watched him nod slowly.

They stared into each other's eyes for another beat and then he leaned across and kissed her on the lips. Their lips clung as electricity crackled and excitement mounted. Gladys drew away breathing disjointedly. She pecked him on the cheeks and stepped out of the Mercedes.

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## A Heart to Mend

Gladys couldn't wait to get home. Their third quarter training had started this morning and they were still at it almost to the end of the day. She yawned discreetly and looked around the rest of the people in the seminar room. Most had their eyes half open while the speaker droned on. The funniest man in the team, Mr. Odetu was sleeping while sitting upright. She stifled a giggle and began to scribble on her notepad to keep awake. When she looked down, she had copied lines from the Pirates of the Caribbean which she had seen some time ago with Edward.

"Will, why is this happening?"

"I don't know but you look beautiful."

Gladys muttered the next line from Elizabeth under her breath. "I think it is bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding." Why did she think of this part of the movie in particular? Her phone beeped. It was a text from Edward and read, "My schedule has just been changed; will call to explain new plans". What plans was he referring to? It had been over a month since their dinner date, and he had set up another one for Saturday for her to meet some of his friends. Was he about to cancel?

She breathed a sigh of relief when the seminar finished and packed her bags for home. She had just finished getting ready for bed when Edward called.

"Hey sweetie." His deep voice gave her the tingles.

She loved that he always used endearments but not knowing if he was about to cancel their date, she assumed a cool tone. "Hi," she replied.

"Did you get my text earlier?"

"Yes I did. What plans did you mean?"

"I'm afraid I've got some good and bad news. Which do you want first?" He usually played these guessing games with her.

Gladys smiled. "Good news, then."

"My property company got signed on for a development contract today."

"That's great news, congratulations."

"The bad news is that I have to travel to Bonny for some business this weekend."

## A Heart to Mend

“Oh no, that’s the Island in Rivers State?” Gladys replied flopping down on the bed. “Does that mean we have to cancel the dinner with your friends for Saturday right?”

“Yeah, and believe me babe, I wish it weren’t so too.”

“But that’s not too bad. I was already imagining the worst.” Though this wasn’t exactly fun to hear, she was going to put on a happy face. “So what’s this contract about?”

“We’re to build ten blocks of flats each with six uniquely designed flats for Shell. It’s a new development and the first of its kind so they’re going all out to make sure everything turns out right. That’s why they want me there personally.”

“That sounds interesting. How long will you be gone for?”

“I’m not sure yet; a couple of weeks to a month. I want us to finish all the contract details and that’s why I will most likely be working over the weekends too. I hear transport will involve speedboats and mobile network coverage is not the best over there.”

Gladys paused; was he trying to blow her off? “When do you have to leave?”

“That’s why I called. I leave on Thursday and would love to see you before then.”

She exhaled and turned on her side hugging the pillow close. “Really?”

“You didn’t think I’d just leave? I was looking forward to our date on Saturday.”

“Me too, but that’ll have to wait till you came back.”

“Well there’s this music launch. I didn’t plan to go but since we have to cancel Saturday, why not? Most of my friends will be there so if we can make it, you’ll still meet them.”

“When is the show? I already have a date with Jennifer and Ayo for tomorrow.”

“No problem at all, the show is on Wednesday. I only need to inform Bolaji; his girlfriend is the one launching her album. And then I’ll talk to the rest about Saturday.”

“That’s fine then, I’ll also let Aunt Isioma know.”

“Yes please, extend my greetings to your Aunt. Is it OK if I come into the house when I get there to pick you up?”

“Of course, my aunt’s looking forward to seeing you again.”

## A Heart to Mend

Edward laughed. "I hope she's not saving any major questions for me?"

Gladys wasn't amused; he often joked about the seriousness or not of their relationship and each time she never knew how to take it. "We'll see, won't we?"

"Goodnight then sweetie. Please dream of me?"

"Goodnight Edward." She dropped the phone and stared into space. However, she was so tired that she soon fell asleep.

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For the music album launch, Gladys wore a purple skirt that ended just above the knee with cowl-necked lavender print top. She'd bought them from a store opposite Silverbird Galleria on a shopping trip with Ayo and Jennifer. She had sprayed the Christian Lacroix perfume Edward gave her sometime ago on her wrists, neck and behind the ears. The outfit was set off by a pair of gold drop earrings, two trendy bangles, a large lilac plaid handbag and gold stilettos.

Edward sat beside her in the VIP lounge of Planet One sending out traces of musky aftershave. He looked more handsome the longer they dated. Right now, his well placed features and the thick dark brows were relaxed and fixed on the musician. His lips were curved in a smile, a lure to her senses. After the few light kisses they shared, she always fantasized about what more those chiseled lips could do. She blinked to clear her naughty thoughts.

Everybody in the hall clapped as the music came to an end. The crowd soon began to mill around and they strolled up the curving stairs to congratulate Edward's friend Bolaji and his girlfriend. Kanayo was there too and they chatted together in a cluster of settees. The tables and chairs on the lower level were pushed to the sides as some people began to dance.

"She was really good wasn't she?"



## A Heart to Mend

“Oh yes she was, I hear that Kennis Music are after her, she’ll be just the third female on their Label. And wait for it; she’ll be touring with Tuface and Sound Sultan next month.”

Gladys allowed the gossip to flow over her.

“Are you OK?” Edward’s whispered breath fanned her cheek with goose bumps.

She looked over at him and smiled. “The noise is getting to me I think.” The music was being handled by an upshot DJ whose hard beats pounded in her skull.

“Hold on,” Edward said and turned to Bolaji. She didn’t hear what they whispered together before he stood and held out his arm. She grabbed it and stood.

“There’s a quieter room meant for some close friends. We’re supposed to go up there later but since it’s already open we might as well. The rest will join us when they’re ready.”

They left the lounge and climbed some steps to the upper lounge. The room had a cozy ambience, the wide glass doors showing a relaxing view of the swimming pool and hotel grounds. African art adorned the walls and she admired the one of a village setting as they walked to a settee. She relaxed into the plush back and rolled the kinks out of her neck.

“Do you have a headache coming on? The DJ’s music was really edgy.” Edward walked to the unmanned bar and collected a bottle of champagne and two fluted glasses. She admired the fluid grace in his stride, the long legs and the tight buttocks above them.

“Yes, but it started from last week. I missed a Friday deadline to submit some processes efficiency analysis. But I’m happy we came out today to take my mind off it for a while.”

“I hope you enjoyed the music by Bolaji’s girlfriend though.”

## A Heart to Mend

“The performance was great and the event was very well planned. I also like this venue.” The place had matched its rep for being a trendy and well managed gathering place.

Edward’s smile was affectionate as he sat close up against her. She moved a few inches away, leaving a safe gap between them. The party seemed to be happening on another planet; no sounds penetrated into their little world.

The way he looked at her made her heart thump with expectation and hormones, but she also felt nervous. She was alone in a private room with a very sexy man to whom she was very attracted but she was also wary of allowing the relationship take a sexual turn so quickly. In spite of the space between them she could almost feel the heat of his desire for her. She smoothed the creases out of her skirt. Their eyes met and he smiled at her bashfulness.

“I don’t know what to do with my hands,” she murmured.

*Put them on me.* Edward quashed that thought before it could go further. “Do you want some champagne then?”

“Yes please.” They burst into laughter. It was almost comical. The sexual tension had been building for a while. During his last trip to America there had been a lot of late night phone calls and some tender exchanges had gone further than they would have.

Edward filled both glasses with the chilled champagne and gave one to her, lifting his in a toast. “To the beautiful lady in my life, Gladys you’re the only girl that I have ever wanted this badly. I just wish you wanted me half as much.”

If only he knew, she thought lowering her eyes to drink from her glass. She could feel him watching her with a hunger that echoed within her secret places. Her breasts felt heavier, the tips tingling against the fabric of her top. She wanted him to touch her right then and to kiss her, but she also didn’t want him to. She shifted on her seat and adjusted her neckline.

## A Heart to Mend

“To hell with it,” Edward muttered. He moved closer and put both arms around her. His mouth covered hers in a warm, wet kiss. The feel of those lips against hers was as thrilling as in her fantasies. She fell back on the cushions and tried to prop herself up by the elbows. He deepened the kiss, and her arms give way so that she fell on her back beneath his weight.

Gladys didn't know the last time she'd enjoyed a kiss so much. His lips were hard and soft at the same time and his mouth a warm haven. When she felt his hands around her waist, she placed her palms on his chest, felt the heavy pounding of his heart through his T-shirt. It aroused her deeply to know how much he wanted her. It thrilled her that he could desire her so much that his hands slightly shook as they caressed her bare arms.

“I want you.” He said in a whisper against her lips, his eyes darkened with passion as they held hers. “I've wanted you for months, since the first time I saw you.”

His words brought her back to where they were. She lifted her hands from him to run them through her braided hair. “Edward,” she sighed. “We can't do this now.”

“Maybe not here,” He lightly stroked her neck with his fingers, moving down to the cowl of her neckline. “But it's so hard not to go further. Having you alone here is torture.”

Gladys sat up and shifted a little. “Anyone can come in...”

As if on cue, footsteps sounded on the steps and in the next minute people were joining them in the room. Edward kept his arms around her and continued to send heated glances her way but she feigned ignorance and smiled as she chatted with Kanayo and the others. Still, he stole a long sweet kiss when he dropped her off at her aunt's place after the party.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

“Where are we going?” Gladys asked Edward as she stepped out of the office bathroom. He’d just come back after three weeks in China and though they’d spent most of the past few days together, he never mentioned they’d go out tonight. He only called this morning to ask her to take a change of clothes for an evening on the town with some friends.

“You’ll know when we get there. It’s a surprise.” He turned to smile at her before tidying up his papers and ushering her out of the office. “And you look good in that top.”

“Thanks, glad you like it. But don’t dodge the question. Why won’t you tell me now?”

“Not yet, wait till we get there. Or you can try guessing.”

“Oh Edward, you know I don’t like surprises.”

They took the elevator to the underground car park and were soon on their way. Unlike most of their dates, this wasn’t set in advance. He usually picked her up after work, either alone or with friends, to take her home or out for drinks. Sometimes, they went to her book club or similar literary events. Other times he introduced her to new places; some he’d discovered as a university student during his first years in the city.

They were caught in the perennial hold-up on Awolowo Road when she turned under the seatbelt. “OK, do you know what?”

## A Heart to Mend

“What is that?” Edward adjusted his side mirror as an okada bike sneaked in between the stationary cars.

“I got a query yesterday. My boss says I nod off at my desk.”

“So you are one of those people who sleep at work, eh? I have some of those in my office too.”

“I got you,” Gladys chuckled. “I actually enjoy my duties.”

“You’re sure you do not sleep on the job?”

“No I don’t.” Did he think she was serious?

“Is that your final answer or do you want to phone a friend?” Edward deadpanned as the traffic began to inch forward.

Caught unawares, Gladys laughed easily. It was clear she would have fun tonight. “Really, I was only trying to pull your leg. I’ve never received a query.”

“Well my legs are quite busy now, so please don’t pull any of them.” Their laughter blended into each other.

He looked at her when she stopped. “What did you receive?”

“That’s the deal. I’ll tell if you say where we’re headed.”

He guffawed. She put a hand on his thigh, “Edward please...”

“So you thought to make a stand? I didn’t think so.”

She pouted and looked away. They soon arrived at Reed’s Restaurant, which served Thai food. They had been here before, but Gladys was surprised to see her friend Ola walking up to the car. She opened the door and stepped out.

“What a coincidence!” She said as Ola came closer to them.

“I don’t think it is.” Ola pointed to the group of people near the

## A Heart to Mend

doors of the building.

Gladys looked up and gasped; she looked over to Edward who had just finished locking up.

“Happy birthday to you darling.” He smiled innocently at her and turned to Ola. “Allow me to use this opportunity to congratulate you on your confirmation too.”

“Don’t look at me, I didn’t tell him.” Gladys protested when Ola turned to her with an accusatory look.

Ola was a colleague whose cubicle was just down the hall from hers at the office. She had started out in the industry ten years ago as a lowly clerk but had risen to become a chartered accountant. They’d taken to each other, maybe because she was a fairly new employee herself when Gladys joined the firm. Ola was Gladys’s best friend even though she was older by some years. They shared more interests than she did with Jennifer or Ayo. Also, Ola was a Lagos girl and from her and Edward, Gladys had learnt all about living in and enjoying the hectic city.

“How did you find out then?” Ola turned back to Edward.

“Let’s just say I have an ear to the ground.” He replied striding around the car. Her eyes settled on him but she was speechless. Her birthday was last week but she wasn’t even a stickler for celebrations. Her family and a few friends had called with greetings and she was even happier when he’d made time from his busy schedule in China to do the same.

He took her arms and gave her a brief kiss on the lips.

“So this is your surprise?”

“Yes, a birthday party. Do you still not like surprises?”

“I love this one.” She gave him a big hug.

## A Heart to Mend

Ola laughed at them. “This was exactly what Azeez did to me when we arrived. I told him about the confirmation yesterday but I know this is not a day’s work.”

Gladys agreed. “They did a good job, and secretly too!”

“You can say that again.” Ola agreed coming over to give her a hug. “So I have to repeat my happy birthday wishes. Thanks for being a great colleague and friend.”

“Thanks Ola. You’re a wonderful friend. Congratulations to you too...”

Ola laughed and pulled Gladys along, “Gbenga, Onyinye and Akin from the office are here and your guess is as good as mine which of them helped the guys plan this.”

Gladys had her own suspicions but she just smiled as they joined the noisy set. There were over ten people including Ayo, Jennifer and her partner. Gladys good-naturedly accepted birthday wishes from them with Edward by her side.

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The party had ended on a very high note and now they were seated in his car outside her aunt’s house. None of them wanted to be the first to say goodbye.

“Did I tell you how good you look in that top?”

“I like it too, it’s a new one.” She straightened and smoothed it over her waist. It was a tank top with spaghetti straps and girly frills edging around the bottom. It hugged all the right places and accentuated her curvy shape. His eyes hooded in appreciation and he was glad he wore loose trousers rather than tight jeans. She’d said red was her favorite color; this was a deep wine and suited her glowing creamy skin to a tee. His gaze glommed to her as she sprawled back.

## A Heart to Mend

He opened a canned beer they'd taken from the restaurant and took a deep gulp.

"I watched the clips of get together for Bolaji's girlfriend, and you were by far the prettiest girl there."

"Don't you think you're biased?" She held his gaze as she sipped from her drink.

Edward shook his head and watched her swallow. It was a struggle not to follow her rippling throat down into the shadowed cleavage molded into a pout by her bodice.

"Maybe it's time I go in if you're ready; tomorrow is another work day. Thanks so much for the birthday celebration and inviting my friends from church too." She avoided his eyes and he guessed she was also feeling the heat of their mutual desire.

He only grunted, his hand reaching out to her of their volition. He snagged her waist and pulled her to him. He knew she would not want to start this but just couldn't stop himself. He was captivated by her shape and when he kissed her, he was lost. They couldn't do much here, but his whole body was practically aching for her and she kissed him back like he liked, passionately. She didn't turn her face away when he pulled away to look at her for a brief moment. When, he framed her features with his large palms, her eyelids drifted closed.

She met him halfway as he bent his head to kiss her again. Her lips parted in welcome, even as he moved his hand around her ears to her collarbone and then lower. He caressed the top of her heaving breasts for a while and then slid his fingers beneath the bodice of the top to touch her breast. Her chest rose and fell as her breath came faster and when she gripped his biceps; his lower body came fully to life. He just had to feel those breasts against him and as he pressed her back into the bucket seat, she moaned against his lips. So he was surprised when Gladys pushed him off and turned her face away. Her next words were a slap in the face.

"I really have to go in now."



## A Heart to Mend

Edward flopped back on his side, while his eyes said spoilsport. He replied after catching his breath. "I just don't understand you. How can you sit there so calmly?"

"Edward, please don't start..."

"Don't start what, you know I wanted you to come over to my place for a bit, but here we are in the car." He was frustrated and didn't mind showing it. "Couldn't a guy ever win?"

She glared at him and muttered, "It's been a wonderful day Edward, let's not spoil it."

"Gladys, I was away for three weeks, can't you imagine how much I missed you?" His voice was plaintive as he adjusted his trousers.

"I know and that's why I've practically spent all my available time these past few days with you. I also think it is time for me to go if that's all." Did she have to sleep with him to show she missed him too? She'd told him often enough how she felt about him.

"If that's all? Gladys I really need to understand this." Edward looked at her closed face while she remained silent. It was obvious she wasn't happy with him. "You say you love me and yet you won't accept all of me. Don't you want to know how that makes me feel? I'm not totally devoid of feelings you know."

"Edward, it's not easy for me too but I need more time. We've talked about this part of our relationship, if you cannot stand by what we agreed..."

"Even after all the money I spent putting together that party and inviting all your friends? He muttered.

"What did you say?"

"Well, you accepted and enjoyed the birthday. Do you know how much that cost? You'll take my money but not me?"

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys caught back a gasp and he immediately regretted the thoughtless words at the pained look in her eyes.

“Edward, you didn’t just say that?” She choked out. “You think I want your money?”

She couldn’t believe that the birthday party had been meant as a bribe? Well he could stuff his money and date it too. She wouldn’t care after this. She got out and slammed the car door. The same fate befell the gate as she marched into the house.

Edward sat without a word for a full minute staring hard at the quiet street in front of him. It took the gateman’s gestures close beside his window to remind him where he was. He gunned his engine into life and stepped on the accelerator.

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Gladys cried her eyes out that night. Her phone rang several times but she refused to pick it up. She knew it was Edward. She read the text messages he sent and hardened her heart. Let him stew in it, how could he accuse her of being with him for the finer things in life he could grant her? She was from a poor home but she wasn’t a greedy person. She was content with whatever she had and he should have known better.

After the soothing message in church that Sunday, she finally picked when he called that evening. Edward had just got back from a game of tennis and now sank on the nearest chair.

“Hello?” She murmured so that he barely heard her.

“Are you home...can you talk?”

“Yes I can.”

Her voice was quiet. “Sweetie, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to say what...”

“Do you think I’m in this for money Edward? You think I only pretend to love you to collect your gifts? Do you take me for a gold-digger?”

## A Heart to Mend

“I know you’re not. Did you not read all the text messages I sent to your phone? I said I am sorry and I mean it.” The disbelief and hurt in her voice lashed at him. In his frustration he’d wanted her to hurt so she would know how he felt. Now he wished he hadn’t allowed himself to get carried away. He should have kept his mouth shut instead of being in this situation of trying to shut the barn door after the horses had bolted.

“How could you say it in the first place?” Her voice faded for a moment.

“Hello...hello... Gladys, are you still there?”

“Yes I am. Edward I don’t give a hoot about your money. You know I couldn’t care less. If you were testing me with those gifts, I will return them to you. There are things that matter more to me like family, and friendship and love...”

“I know and I’m sorry I said that. I gave you the gifts because I wanted to.” Edward didn’t know where those hurtful words had come out from. He could only guess it was his deep-seated distrust rearing up. And frustration had been riding his back like mad for a while.

“And that is why I collected them, because they come from you. On the sex, I haven’t said no sex ever, I just asked for time to be more comfortable with this relationship...”

“Baby you don’t have to repeat yourself.” The problem was that he was so attracted to her that the more quality time they spent together, the more he hoped they could move farther in their relationship. The time with her friends at the restaurant was one of such times.

“Edward, I’m also attracted to you, so trying to prevent or put a stop on our lovemaking is also difficult for me. I will be unrealistic if I think or say nothing should happen but I don’t want us to be carried away when we’ve not planned for the outcome.”

“I understand Gladys. Trying to hurt you on something we’ve already discussed was stupid of me. Please forgive me and let’s forget about this. Deep down I believe you love me but sometimes I get lost in my past. When nobody wanted me...”

“I love you Edward, if nothing else please believe that. I try to bear your background in mind but you have to understand. I see these

## A Heart to Mend

rich boy-poor girl stories in the pages of newspapers and you say they don't matter. So to hear those words from you..."

"Darling, please forgive me. I never meant them."

She blew her nose. "OK I forgive you but I want to know how YOU feel."

"I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Apology accepted but that doesn't answer my question. I mean how do you feel about me?"

Edward knew the words she was expecting from him but he couldn't bring himself to say them. It was dangerous letting someone else know how much you cared about them. He tried to evade that track. "Baby... you know, for a long time, I've been putting your emotions and moods before mine. I travel and can't wait to come back to you. It used to be business took up all my energy but now I call you all the time. I see something you would love and I want to get it for you. Don't you think these count for something?"

"Yes they do, but we've been together now for several months. Is that all?"

Edward mulled her words in his mind. Did she just want him to say the words without meaning them? What if he was not sure of exactly what he felt? She knew his past relationships had not been based on love. The only thing he could say now was that it was increasingly difficult to keep his feelings for Gladys in control. Maybe that would have to do for now. He would go ahead and say it and hope for the best.

"I care for you like I've never done before. I swear to you that you're the only woman in my life and that's a new thing for me. In spite of these issues we have, I want to remain with you. I want us to be together because you make me happy. Can't you just accept that?"

The silence stretched and he wondered what she was thinking. Was she going to say that was not enough? She expelled an audible gust of air while his breath stopped.

"I will accept it Edward, for now. Thanks for being honest..."

"Please let's meet tomorrow so I can tell you more about my earlier life. I've realized that you won't understand me unless I'm more open to you."

## A Heart to Mend

She seemed to process that and sighed again. “OK, call me later so we can fix the time but I have to go now.” She cut the connection and left him staring at the phone.

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Edward reached out and grasped the slim fingers on the table. They were at a secluded table in his favorite bar. It was a small place with booths tucked against the wall and dim lighting. He knew he had to feel comfortable to share what he was about to. “Most people only know I’m an orphan from Kano and that’s all. I’ve not told this to a soul since I found out.”

He stared into her eyes and read the honesty there. She seemed to be interested in him for himself. He preferred to gloss over his life with most people; it was not their business. Now he found himself having to be more open and honest. His heart began to pound; maybe this was what he had foreseen when he’d earlier decided to keep away. The question was: could he walk away now? The longer he spent with her, the more difficult that became. He recalled his resolution when he had walked up to her at the cocktail party. He would give this his best shot and not try to undermine it. Hopefully he would not regret it.

“I’ll keep your confidence, Edward.” What was he about to confess?

“I was born in the year after the civil war to a teenage Hausa mother. According to the records she left, my father was Graham Bestman, a young Rivers guy who had come North after the war. Of course I didn’t know all this growing up; all I knew was that I had been born unexpectedly at the orphanage, my mother was dead and no one knew my family. I got this information from an orphanage official who I spoke with after I had left my last foster home.”

Gladys recalled he’d earlier mentioned growing up in an orphanage and nodded.

“My mother arrived at the orphanage sick and at the point of death. She sought refuge there when she felt the labor pains. Before then she lived on the streets after her parents sent her away for being a disgrace to the family. She died in the process of delivering me at the

## A Heart to Mend

orphanage. She left my father's name but not hers or her parent's, and she left no addresses too."

Edward paused and took a deep breath. Gladys gripped his hand tightly. She could feel his pulse racing and didn't want to break his flow of thought.

He continued after a while, "The orphanage is Nasarawa Children's Home and I was named Sani Jubril. The first was the name my mother had wanted me called and the surname was common to most of the children at the home whose parentage was obscure. Growing up was tough but it wasn't as bad as many people imagine."

Gladys tried to inject some humor into the thick atmosphere. "Funny, but Oliver Twist always comes to my mind when I think of orphanages and children that grow up in them."

Edward laughed heartily, "You've never been to one yourself then. For me it was more like growing up in a large family without the family history or connection. My twenty odd siblings weren't actually family and the person we called 'Mummy' wasn't really our mother. There were a lot of 'uncles' to play the father figure and 'aunts' who came to visit occasionally with their own children. Both Muslims and Christians are religiously compelled to help and they did. We got food, old clothes, toys, visits, cuddles and so on."

"I visited an orphanage once before but we didn't get to interact with the children a lot, just the caretakers."

"That happens too. But anyway, the home didn't lack too much and we had enough to get by. The cracks appeared when I became of school age and it was clear I wouldn't be adopted. I didn't start school at the usual age because the home couldn't afford it."

Gladys continued to stroke the back of his hand without saying anything. This was a new Edward she was seeing, one who had never opened up to her before now. She pictured him as a young and vulnerable boy and felt transported to the place and time he described. She also recalled her similar experience where her secondary and university admissions were postponed because her mother could not afford it. Her heart melted in sympathy.

"It still wasn't too bad. I finally started school and did very well. At ten, I got a foster home with a Muslim family. It was returning to the orphanage three years later that was the beginning of the

## A Heart to Mend

roughest patch in my life. I became wild and got into all sorts.”

“What happened? Why did you have to return to the orphanage?” Gladys asked as she drew closer.

“With my first foster parents, I felt at home and began to relax. I thought I’d finally found a family I could depend on. I skipped a couple of classes and was in Form three by thirteen. In those years I spent with them, my foster parents promised a lot for my future. Unfortunately, they got divorced and that was the end for me. I was returned to the orphanage and never heard from either of them again. I had trusted them but my young hopes were dashed to pieces.”

Gladys kept silent because she didn’t want to spoil his flow.

“Within a few months, I was taken into another foster home. That didn’t last. I was disruptive and disrespectful. They had brought me in to help but I proved more trouble than it was worth. I went back to the orphanage after just three months and it got worse. Like some of my older ‘brothers’, I began to sleep with the older girls, smoked and drank. In the next foster home I fared much better. My new father was the principal of the new school I enrolled in. Under him, I finished my form five at fifteen with my complete papers.”

“That was fast. You must have been a brilliant student.”

He looked at the mirror on the opposite wall and noticed the wry curve to his lips. “That principal whipped me into shape, Mr. Akintuyi. He was a good mentor and influence but had to take up another post in a different part of the country. I went back to the orphanage and with no visible future; I soon reverted to my wild ways. I got into another foster home, but a traumatic experience there when I was almost eighteen made me run away. I had just gotten into university then with my whole future mapped out...” The waiter interrupted to top up the wine glass before Gladys.

“Anyway, I got to Lagos soon after, luck smiled on me and here I am today. But let’s not dwell on the past, I don’t mean to make this a pity party.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Don’t say that Edward. It’s part of who you are and I’d like to hear more.”

“Still I’m sorry for burdening you with all that baggage about my background.”

“You forget that I grew up without a father myself and that has its own baggage.”

He looked at her with a new respect. Many girls he met often didn’t know how to take his being an orphan but she had taken even more in her stride. He squeezed the fingers in his one more time before draining the bottled beer in front of him.



**CHAPTER EIGHT**

Gladys had a line between her brows as she focused on the sheaf of papers before her. The bright sunlight flooding her office through the blinds did not help the tension headache still tapping at her temples. A voice broke her concentration.

Are you going straight home after work?" Ola asked from the doorway.

"Yes, I still have some analysis to finish up then I'll be ready. Can you drop me off today? I would have walked home but the heat will be a killer with this headache."

"Where's Edward? I thought he was back. Isn't he coming to pick you up?"

"No, he came back from Abuja but had to go to France."

"Yeah, the life of a hot-shot businessman is not easy." She perused the expression on her friend's face and added with a laugh, "Not for their girlfriends too."

Gladys exhaled on a sad smile. She'd seen Edward only twice since their meeting the day after they'd spoken on the phone to talk about the way forward for them. Their respective

## A Heart to Mend

busy work schedules meant they only saw once before his flight to Paris yesterday. Thank God for phones and emails.

She turned back to Ola, “Will you drive me?”

“Sure but only if you agree to look over my wedding colors later. We could go over to Tantalizers for a light dinner. I know you like their fried plantain.”

“Are you choosing your colors already?” Gladys was excited for her friend. “OK give me a few more minutes, I just have to finish this today.”

She was the one delaying the performance metrics analysis which her team was working on to help improve the subsidiaries’ service, enhance productivity and increase revenues. The team lead wanted her recommendations to be sent up to management tomorrow. She had those ready but had to sort them out across the appropriate groups, departments, and teams.

An hour later she was seated across a table with Ola, and dodo lay on a wide platter before them garnished with peppered snail cut in small pieces. The scent almost had her swooning and saliva flowed into her mouth. She licked her lips and picked up her fork.

Ola chuckled as she joined her, “Can’t resist, can you?”

“Just don’t tempt me with fried plantain.” Gladys savored the mouthful and swallowed. She took a sip of the orange juice beside her and continued eating. She looked up only at the hushed gasp. Ola had picked up and began to flip through the pages of the tabloid someone seemed to have forgotten on their table.

“Did you see *City People* today?”

“No, I was too busy. What’s the latest gossip?”

“What if I tell you that your star is rising?”

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys raised her eyebrows in disbelief and Ola nodded. She brought a copy of the magazine and opened it on the table to the page she wanted. Gladys craned her neck for a good look and almost choked.

“You are serious!”

Ola laughed at her. “Did you think I was joking?”

Gladys tried to cobble her thoughts together. She’d been dating Edward for several months now and though some smaller tabloids had alluded to her, this was the first time on the premier gossip magazine. The picture was of both of them arriving at the music album launch. She was glad it wasn’t taken in the upper room but cringed when Ola read out the accompanying text. It wasn’t different from all the others; they noted that she was an unknown compared to his former escorts. The reporter only stopped short of calling her a gold-digger. Gladys dropped her fork and fell back against her seat.

“Don’t be like that. Not many people read the paper or take them serious.”

“Ola, this is *City People*. And look at that caption.”

“I understand how you feel Gladys, but really what the paper and its journalists write doesn’t matter to the people that know you. The more important thing is how you both treat your relationship and each other.”

Gladys decided to confide in her. They’d gotten close in the past months. Also Ola had been in the same relationship for several years now and was getting married just after the New Year. “Ola, who is to say Edward won’t share the same sentiments with time?”

“You would’ve seen signs by now. What do you think?”

“We do have our misunderstandings.” Gladys didn’t give details of their last quarrel. She’d accepted his apology and their

## A Heart to Mend

relationship was better now compared to how it was before that day. But those unexpected words still rankled sometimes.

“No issue is too difficult if you’re willing to work at it.”

“The main problem is that I worry he doesn’t respect my wishes because he’s more wealthy. See, at the beginning of our relationship I insisted I didn’t want him to buy me anything. However, after a trip to the States, he gave me an expensive gold link watch plus a bottle of designer perfume. Please, I hope you understand that I don’t mean to boast.”

“Go on, I understand.”

Gladys continued, “It started with cheap ceramic figurines, I loved some we saw at Balogun Market and he got them. But he’s since been showering me with expensive gifts. There has also been an evening gown and a matching leather shoe and handbag set.”

“We all know the danger of accepting expensive gifts from men particularly when you can’t reciprocate. But you appreciate Edward may just be expressing himself?”

“Couldn’t he also see it as me breaking my word and being after his money?”

“I think he just wants to show how he feels and these are things he can easily afford.”

“That’s true but that doesn’t make me less worried.”

Ola shifted forward and pushed the almost empty platter to the side. “Gladys, you have to know who you’re dealing with. Some men don’t always have ulterior motives.”

“I am just confused. Edward always has a reason that means I can’t refuse his gifts without being churlish. Like the birthday party or the outfit and accessories for a meeting with his board members. My family is not rich but I don’t want to appear money hungry.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Gladys anyone who knows one jot about you will know that’s not possible. All I can add is that you may need to have a talk with him.”

“We actually just passed through that. But there’s another; I’m a devoted Christian, Edward attends church only on occasion. He is often jealous of time he wants us to spend together. He also disagrees with how I give. He prefers that I donate to charities.”

“That’s not a serious issue; you can each give in your different ways. Still I can understand where he’s coming from. It may be because he grew up in Kano; you know Muslims in the north just give alms.”

“I’ve thought of that and suggested I split my giving in parts with some of it, especially my tithe, going to the church.”

“You know I don’t believe in the concept of tithing. A lot of people also complain of the embezzlement that may be going on in churches.”

“You talk as if you were at the fierce debate we had on an outing with some of his friends, Edward and I were on opposite sides.” Gladys smiled as she replied. She should have known which side her friend would take. Ola wasn’t a very committed Christian and was going to convert to Islam before her marriage.

“I suspect that discussion was just for the sake of argument. I know Edward as the sort of person who likes debating issues. But you have to find out if he truly would stand in your way of doing your own stuff. What about the time to spend together?”

Gladys sighed. “Well our office can be demanding at times. He expects me to cut back on church and my other friends. But what of when like now that he’s not around? What of if we are no longer dating? I would have to rebuild all those relationships afresh.”

Ola nodded, “That’s a real concern but can you cut back?”

## A Heart to Mend

“I guess I can, but what of his trips? He’s travelled almost every month since we started dating, sometimes for a few days and up to a month at others. I don’t see him cutting back.”

“I would say when he’s here in Lagos he spends most of his time with you, don’t you think so? All the girls in the office envy you because he’s so attentive.”

Gladys nodded, that was true.

“So do your part and then persuade him to join you in church.”

“Thanks Ola. I’ll think about that idea of involving him, I’ve never tried that.”

“So you guys spend time together, and he gets to see why you are as devoted as you are. Hopefully your bond grows deeper too. Maybe having your own place will help too.”

Gladys let out her breath. “I still have to discuss with my aunt.”

“No worries, the flat is there. Anyway, I think good communication is the best way to sort through issues. It’s still early days yet for you guys so there’s enough time to smooth over the rough edges if you’ll be together for the long haul. You just have to care.”

Gladys cared a lot. But while Edward was the perfect partner now, she sometimes worried about the future. She wouldn’t tell Ola about the sexual minefield that was opening up between them. She was falling in love with Edward, yet he was equivocal about his feelings and made no comments to suggest a more permanent relationship. Ola brought out color samples from her bag and Gladys allowed herself to be pulled in by her friend’s excitement.

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## A Heart to Mend

Gladys was watching television with Aunt Isioma on one of those slow evenings. She'd been planning this time together for a while now. Her mother wasn't keen on the idea of finding her own place, probably worrying that it would give her avoidable privacy with Edward. When Gladys explained how she still didn't feel totally comfortable in her aunt's house, her mother had then directed her to discuss it with her first. Gladys had chosen today to broach the topic.

"Aunt Isioma, I'm thinking of moving to my own place next January."

"Where will you be moving to? You didn't tell me you were looking."

"Ola is getting married in January and she's willing to transfer the flat she is renting now to me when she moves to her husband's house."

Aunt Isioma nodded without saying anything and she continued.

"Also my friend Ayo has said she would share the flat with me." Ayo lived with her parents but felt it was time she ventured out on her own.

"So what is wrong with my house?"

"Nothing, it's just that with the new place..."

"It can't be closer to your office because you walk to work from here in just a few minutes? And if it is on the island, I can imagine the rent. You're probably getting a good deal by taking over Ola's tenancy but circumventing the two years advance deposit is not all."

Her aunt might be right about why she shouldn't move, but the fact was that even after months together, Gladys sometimes still felt like a distant relative just being tolerated in the house.

"It is me isn't it? You still don't feel completely comfortable staying here..."

"It's not that..."

Aunt Isioma sighed and looked away. "You don't have to deny it. I can sometimes see the questions in your gaze when you think I am not looking. I heard you talk with Toluwa my daughter the other day and noticed how bumpy the conversation was. I have tried to make you feel settled here as much as I can, but a lot of it depends on you too."

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys took a deep breath and exhaled. The emotions on her aunt's face as she talked could not have been faked, but she wanted some answers too. "Aunt Isioma, I came here not sure how I would be received, almost expecting to be some sort of house help. So sometimes I find your consideration very confusing. Like the large private bedroom, having the run of the house and your staff. You've been very generous but ..."

"Gladys, you're my niece and that is the way you should be treated."

"So why hasn't it always been like this? Even my mother won't tell me anything."

It was her aunt's turn to sigh. "I've discussed the subject with your mother but maybe she wants me to tell you in my own time. I respect her for that because the fact is I asked you all to forgive me when I'm yet to fully forgive myself." She stood up and paced the room. "What did your mother tell you and your siblings about the years I was absent from your lives?"

"She never said much on the subject; it was only in the very bad periods that Mama sometimes mentioned you. The only thing to believe then was that you never cared."

"I cared much more than you'll ever know!"

"Yes you said that earlier, but I find it hard to believe you. Back then I used to imagine that it was because you wanted to bid goodbye to your poor background after your marriage into the rich Dehinde-Ojo family." Gladys had told herself that her aunt was probably ashamed her brother was not as rich as the industrialist husband and his family and didn't want her children to mix with them.

Aunt Isioma stopped and sat down beside Gladys. "That is so far from the truth."

She turned to face her aunt and only then noticed her shiny eyes. Gladys looked away. "So tell me what the truth is. Please tell me what happened."

Her aunt gripped her hands. "I've told you more than I did before so for now, please take my word for it. I had no power over the past situation. Now that I do, I want both families to be as one."

Gladys considered her aunt's words before she tilted her head up. "But even if I accept the generosity which I'm not used to, have



## A Heart to Mend

you noticed that sometimes we do not see or speak to each other for weeks on end? I don't know what's happening..."

Tears trickled over her aunt's eyelids as her words spilled out in an earnest tone. "I know that and I apologize. It's just that I'm yet to get used to running most of the family business interests since my husband died which is more tasking than I thought."

"But you also seem so on edge and far away."

"Well, I admit to some guilt about the past and there are other issues too..." Her aunt's low voice trailed off and her hands fell back to her thighs.

Gladys stood up and walked to the back of the sofa. "You know, sometimes I worry that you will cut me off too without any explanation."

Aunt Isioma got to her feet too. "Please be assured that I'll never cut you off."

"It's just that I would hate to think that I'm making you uncomfortable in your own house. That makes me feel so..."

"That is definitely not the case Gladys. I love having you here and would like you to remain. I have spoken with your mother and I know she would also prefer that."

Gladys knew her mother and Aunt Isioma had gotten closer over the months. Her mother's protective instincts and cultural values now trumped the wish to remain aloof from her formerly estranged sister-in-law. "I wish you would say what happened in the past because until you do, it will be difficult for me to relax and relate with you as I should."

"Please bear with me. You have to believe me when I say you're not a burden at all..."

"Well Ola's flat is not available yet but I'll think about what we just discussed."

"Just remember that when together, we do get on well enough. We're also still getting to know each other; any discomfort will fade with time."

"I'll bear that in mind and let you know how I decide."

"This place is your home, Gladys, and I want you to take it as such."

## A Heart to Mend

“Thanks.” When her mother had insisted she discuss with Aunt Isioma, Gladys had wondered why. She now believed that her mother knew more of what her aunt only alluded to with her but just wasn’t saying. Well she still had a couple of months to make a final decision. But she would tell Ola to open up the flat to others too.

“So how is Edward? It’s been a while.”

“He was here the last Saturday but you were not around.”

“He’s a nice young man. You should invite him for dinner here sometime.”

Though she would not admit it, Edward was the other reason she wanted a place of her own. After the incident on her birthday, she appreciated that he’d said how he felt about her even though he’d not used those magic three words. They had certainly gotten closer after that and she wanted more room for the relationship to grow. But maybe it was all for the best that she remained with Aunt Isioma. Was Edward truly ready for the commitment she wanted?

**CHAPTER NINE**

A cool harmattan breeze whipped up small waves off Eleko beach and blew over Edward as he lay on a large and fluffy towel. His eyes were fixed on Gladys who frolicked inside the water. It was a hot day and she'd tried to get him to join her when she went in but he demurred. He'd explained sometime ago at a pool party they attended that he wasn't a water person right from childhood, and she left him alone ever since. It had been a long time since he told her bits about his life, and sometimes he saw questions in her eyes. But she hadn't brought it up again; it seemed she wanted him to take it at his pace.

He lowered his gaze as his mind wandered from the early years in Kano to when he settled in Lagos. Even before completing his engineering degree, he'd registered his first renovation company at twenty-two and set himself two goals in a twenty-year plan. The first was to get married and have all his children within ten years. Then by forty, acquire majority shares that would give him control of a company quoted on the stock exchange. He'd achieved the second earlier than planned, but he was still single at thirty-five. He'd thought to settle for his last girlfriend, but they'd broken up just before last Christmas.

He opened his eyes and watched Gladys playing at the edges of the sea. She really came into his life at an opportune time. His eyes

## A Heart to Mend

drifted closed again. A recurring dream he'd been having for a while now came back to him. He was the best man at a wedding and then suddenly he was the groom. In some episodes, his bride never could get to him no matter how long he waited with the priest. Other times, he couldn't find the edges of the veil to raise it up. He usually woke up frustrated. Today it was different. Without any effort, she got to him and on raising the veil; he saw the smiling face of Gladys.

"Edward," she whispered softly. Edward opened his eyes at the light touch on his chest and beheld the face of his dreams.

"You're awake, come and see." Gladys got to her feet and turned to go but he held onto one of her ankles. She smiled down at him. "Come on, sleepyhead, let's go."

"You are so beautiful." His voice was thick with desire.

"I've heard that too many times so come on and let's see something new." She towed him towards the water. Something new was a collection of shells buried at the edge of the water.

"I can't get them out, please help me." She muttered and knelt facing the sea.

Edward knelt down opposite her and started digging out the shells. "You weren't able to dig these out?" He pulled out the shells but his mocking smile changed to a grimace as a wave washed over him. The expression on Gladys face and the distance between them told him it had been intentional. She was a few paces away and now she ran off laughing.

Edward gave merry chase, the shells forgotten. When he caught up with her and picked her up, he recalled the dream. A line, "Out of my dreams and into my life", from one of his favorite songs by Michael Bolton came to mind. Maybe Gladys was the one for him.

She began to squirm on the way. "Please don't dunk me. I'll do anything..."

"You certainly have to pay." He moved closer still to the edge of the sea. Gladys closed her eyes thinking she would probably be dumped in the water but Edward set her down gently.

She opened her eyes and asked. "Is that all?"

"There is only one way for you to pay, a long way."

"Do you want a pound of flesh?"

## A Heart to Mend

“I want to marry you.”

Edward was fully woken by the splash of salty warm water on his face. Gladys danced around and flicked wet fingers at him. Edward growled and turned over, his daydream vivid in his memory. It had seemed so real and he had asked Gladys to marry him! What had he been thinking? Perhaps it was all that thought of unmet goals that had been on his mind before he drifted off. But they'd only been dating since May. He shook his head and groaned.

“Are you OK?” Gladys asked kneeling by his side. “It must have been a more hectic week than I knew. You seem very tired.”

“Yes it was and it didn't help that I had a nasty experience to top it all.”

“What happened? You didn't mention anything when we spoke a couple of days ago.”

“That was Thursday.” Edward sighed heavily thinking of his meeting yesterday with a friend who worked at the Securities and Exchange Commission. There were strange movements of the company shares in the stock market and prices were being affected. It was still subtle but his contact thought he should be aware. He had been grateful but that meant spending the bulk of last night poring over the financial reports. He had to remember to leave the file he'd pulled together with Mr. Odili, the company accountant before he traveled.

He decided to share with Gladys the irksome scene with Mr. Odusote before the meeting. He had done all he could to discourage the broker but the man had the obstinacy of a mule. Edward sat up on the towel pulling Gladys into his side and they looked at the breaking waves on the nearby shore. “You remember Mr. Odusote?”

“You've mentioned him a couple of times, but not since last month...”

“Well he came by my office yesterday and started on another proposal he had come up with. After the last misunderstanding, I had told my secretary never to give him an appointment but the man can't take no for an answer. This time, he waited in the reception downstairs till I came down on my way to an outside meeting and accosted me. To avoid a confrontation, I allowed him to accompany me in the car and looked over the new proposal.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Is it any better this time?” Gladys didn’t hold out much hope. The last proposal Mr. Odusote had come up with was a virtually illegal scheme to sell and resell company stocks.

“You wish.” Edward sighed again. “He was still going on about the stocks and buyback issue... I don’t know but the guy seems fixated on that. He pointed out that some of the new policies about the insurance recapitalization mean that some of the dynamics in his first proposal weren’t so bad. In the thirty minutes it took to get to my meeting, I still wasn’t convinced.”

“What did you tell him?” Gladys shifted; the heat was seeping through the towel.

“I wasn’t in a position to say much. I told him that I still couldn’t work with him, and gave him a name and number that he could call. Unfortunately, that seemed to put him in a bad mood, and he began to harangue me from the car to the entrance of the restaurant. I had to use the security personnel to get him off me.”

“That must have been trying. He should leave you after that I hope. I do wonder why some people cannot take no for an answer. His firm is still trading right?”

“I assume so. Mr. Odusote should be a case study for never-say-never.”

Gladys laughed. “Maybe we shouldn’t have come out today then.” She was really touched that he hadn’t called off their date which had been fixed at the beginning of the week.

“It’s no bother. I’ve actually enjoyed lying out here with the sound of the waves and the sun on my face. But yeah, it’s time to go now.”

She gathered up some their stuff, Edward picked the rest and they walked to the car.

Gladys got in and fastened her seatbelt. “Will you be going to church tomorrow?”

“There are some business books I have to look at before my trip to Port Harcourt. You know I will also be going to Paris soon after I return next week.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Yes I know, but church won’t be more than a couple of hours.” She was happy they shared the same faith but wished he would be more dedicated.

“OK, I’ll see if I can make it. I’ll give you a call later.”

She didn’t pursue it. “I’ll come by tomorrow to accompany you to the airport.”

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Gladys couldn’t do anything to stop the soft moans that were coming from her. The sound of her cries seemed to make Edward even bolder and he rested his full length alongside hers on the chaise in his sitting room. Arms wrapped about his neck, she kissed him again with an uncontrolled passion. His fingers played tenderly with her now tight nipple as their legs intertwined. Gasping with pleasure, she pushed her hips closer to his and then bit her lip before another groan escaped as Edward bent his head to nuzzle at her breasts.

Her head fell back in utter pleasure and she scratched her nails across his chest, which was exposed by his now unbuttoned shirt. She didn’t remember undoing the buttons, but she was sure she had done it, considering his hands were still busy ridding her of her outfit. One crept higher up her raised skirt to the zip; while the other pushed the top further off her shoulders to better reach the full, perky breasts. He drew one whole nipple into his mouth, raking it roughly with his teeth. She groaned and her hips bucked at the zap of electricity straight to her core.

She clutched at his broad shoulders as he moved back to her lips. Their tongues meshed, dueling in the warm cavern of their open mouths. His hand left her zip to push her skirt up her thighs and she lifted herself till it was bunched around her waist. Both hands moved once more to her aching breasts, lifting both together as he sought the pouting nipples. Gladys pulled him closer and ran her nails down his back. The deep suckling dragged the moans from her again. His hands moved to her hips and brought her closer to feel his hardness. The

## A Heart to Mend

ringing phone vibrated under her, they were lying on top of her purse. She pushed his hands away and scrambled up.

“Just ignore it.” Edward mumbled and tried to pull her back.

“We have to stop.” Gladys mumbled. She stood up and did up the buttons of her blouse.

“Baby we don’t have to, come here.” He lounged back with open arms. A quick glance around the room showed his jacket on a chair, his tie draped on the coffee table. Gladys smoothed down her skirt, picked up the fallen ruffle and began to put her hair in order.

“Don’t tell me you’re ending this here, now?” Edward ran a hand over his head and looked down at himself. His shirt buttons were all undone and his erection was throbbing.

He’d accompanied her to the employee end of year party by her firm and had loved her scarlet figure hugging blouse with the pencil skirt she wore. Comparing the sheer joy on his face when he joined her at the office with the disappointment on it now clouded her eyes.

Edward didn’t know what to do in the face of her tears. After the fallout a couple of months ago, the last thing he wanted was to make her unhappy again. They had resolved that problem and over the past month had grown even closer.

After the deep phone conversations and the way she’d run into his arms at the airport yesterday, he thought they were ready to move their relationship further. When she agreed to come home with him, he’d been hopeful but couldn’t have foreseen it would end like this. He’d wanted her to help him with his unpacking but one thing had led to another and now here they were. He jerked to his feet and started pacing the sitting room floor in front of her.

“Darling, you’ve said how much you care about me several times but it’s not enough. I’m sorry to bring this up again but frankly, we’re both adults. We should...” He stopped.



## A Heart to Mend

Gladys prompted him after a while. "What?"

He turned his back to her and continued, "These sexual episodes are really hard on me, Gladys. You only go as far as YOU want and then you leave me frustrated and wanting..."

"I'm not without feelings myself Edward. I want you too..."

"I know that and that is why I'm confused." If he were to be fair, it was obvious there was no pretense in her reaction to his caresses but it seemed she found it easy to switch off when she wished. "Don't you want to see how this ends? Can you just imagine the two of us together fully? I know I want to fill you, make love to you completely..."

The muscles in her stomach jumped but Gladys tamped them down. "I would like that a lot Edward, but we've not planned for it or any of the outcomes."

"Well there's a way to resolve this. I want us to get married."

"How do you mean?" They'd never talked about marriage in relation to themselves.

Edward said the first thing that came to mind. "Will you marry me?"

Gladys was confused at first. This evening that had started off so well had not worked out in any way she could have imagined. What he'd just said made no sense at all and then it sank.

"Is this a ploy to get me into bed or are calling my bluff?"

"No I am serious Gladys. It's time to take this relationship to the next level."

Gladys considered him in silence for several minutes. What kind of proposal was that? If she had fantasized about how this would go, this was no way near it. He still hadn't said how he felt about her.

## A Heart to Mend

“Based on what?” When he didn’t reply she added. “I love you Edward, how do you feel about me? I know you care about me and find me attractive but do you love me?”

Edward came to stand before her. He took her hands in his. “Doesn’t it matter that I’m attracted to you? I really care for you Gladys and want us to be together.”

“If we’re to think about marriage, it has to be more than that. For goodness sake we’ll be planning to spend the rest of our lives together.”

“Sweetie, we get along together so well. I’ll cherish and take care of you. And ...”

Why was he was rambling all over the place? You either loved someone or you didn’t. Gladys pulled her arms out of Edward’s grip and said shakily, “I don’t think you know me very well. I couldn’t think to marry someone who cannot say he loves me.”

Edward blamed the frustration that had made him blurt out the marriage topic. It was great that they struck sparks off each other, but he always had to go and spoil it. He took a step closer and took her hand, “Gladys, please listen to me...”

“No, you listen to me Edward. I thought I really knew and understood you but I must have been mistaken all along. I knew you kept back some things about yourself but you’ve been pretty open about others. I told myself you’ll get to the rest in your own time but I was wrong.”

“Baby you’re not wrong. It’s my fault...”

Gladys didn’t stop talking. “Edward, loving someone means being exposed to them, trusting them with your emotions.” She paused and considered his faltered words. “It’s not about blame games. Can you be sincere and give me an answer from your heart? Can you do that?”

## A Heart to Mend

That was crux of the matter, Edward wasn't sure if he could do that. He'd thought about marriage to Gladys; they got on very well and after the dream on the beach, it was like - why not? But he hadn't considered love. He still didn't know if he was ready to trust his heart to someone else. He cared deeply about Gladys but he didn't want to label it. He came to stand before her. "Let's not make this such a big deal. OK I admit I may have brought up the topic the wrong way but I mean it. Maybe you need to go away and think about it?"

Gladys stood up and picked up her bag. It was very plain that Edward did not love her. If he couldn't say it, marriage was out of the question. She would be deceiving herself to think seriously about his proposal, if one could even call it that. "I love you Edward, but it is now obvious that you don't feel the same way. Why didn't you just tell me while you were away? Or did you want to sleep with me first and that is what this is all about?"

Edward was taken aback by the way it seemed she had taken his words. He had assumed that she would accept his suggestion to go away and think about his proposal. How wrong he was. His thought processes ground to a stop and he couldn't think of what to say next.

"Tell me, did you mean any of the things you've been saying to me in the past weeks? Or were they to break down my defenses?"

When he didn't say anything, she threw up her hands. "You know what, I give up. I am too tired to think anymore. Could you please ask Bonny to take me home?"

He certainly agreed that they were at a stalemate and the best thing was to stop digging. How could she doubt him like that? "Can I call you later?"

She ignored him and walked towards the door.

"I'll give Bonny a call. He should be at the gate in a minute." His mind was in conflict as Gladys left the room and closed the door quietly. He sighed heavily and picked up his phone. He called the

## A Heart to Mend

driver as he walked to the window and looked out. Almost immediately, Bonny came running from behind the house and into the garage. When he backed out the car, Gladys walked into view and Edward noticed that she had begun to cry again. While he debated whether to run after her, she got into the car which then drove out of the compound. He allowed the curtain to drop and slammed his right fist into his left hand. Things had not gone well at all. Damn!

Gladys cried all the way home even after assuring Bonny that everything was alright. He kept glancing at her through the rearview mirror and murmuring “Madam sorry, e don do. E don do now.” For her no tears would ever be enough, at least not as far as she could see. What she had thought were a solid foundation had just proved to be only castles in the air. Her first major relationship had just crashed down around her ears. Edward had not even bothered to explain himself or follow her to the car.

**CHAPTER TEN**

Edward stepped out of the shower cubicle dripping water all over the shaggy white bathroom carpet. The water had been cold enough to jolt him out of the confusion of the heated exchange with Gladys. What had started as an erotic interlude had ended in tears and hurled accusations on both sides. Just thinking about it again got his thoughts in a spin.

He hung up the wet towel on its rack and padded into the dark toned bedroom. The unpacked luggage from his last trip almost tripped him up and he stared at it with baleful eyes. That was the reason Gladys had come back with him, but they'd become distracted and hadn't made it to the bedroom. Edward sighed again, betrayed by the train of his thoughts. He swore as he began to fold clothes into the tall wardrobe; the rest would have to be hung up in the closet.

He was still jet-lagged from his last trip and now he was worried about his relationship with Gladys. They'd been dating for over six months, so what exactly was her problem? He'd brought up marriage in their discussion but she wasn't impressed. In fact that had back-fired big time. She thought he was out to take advantage of her. He appreciated that she was a virgin, but maybe that wasn't such a good thing. He was really very frustrated. It was two weeks to Christmas and almost a year since he had last had sex. He picked up

## A Heart to Mend

his phone.

“Ole boy, why are you calling now? It’s almost midnight.” Kanayo’s voice was groggy.

“Sorry about that but I just had to speak to somebody.”

Edward heard him yawn. “OK shoot, I’m all ears. Hope you’re fine though?”

“Your pal is roasting from frustration, men. I just woke up from a bad dream.”

“Bad dream my foot,” Kanayo laughed. “But I know what you mean. So you guys are not doing the do yet? After a night out she should stop over at yours for some loving, no?”

“No,” Edward replied shortly and began to pace the width of the room. “We went to her Christmas party together and came back here. But I had my driver drop off Gladys a couple of hours ago, and went right to sleep. So I was in bed all by myself.” He decided not to share details. This wasn’t a topic he would’ve thought to discuss with someone else, but he and Kanayo had become closer in the past year, especially since he started dating Gladys.

“From what I know of Gladys, I’d say she’s a novice. As a rule, I personally avoid those but you’re both grown adults and can make your choices. That said, you may need an assistant girlfriend.” Kanayo laughed into the sudden uncomfortable silence.

Edward couldn’t imagine why it sounded so loathsome; it wasn’t as if he hadn’t done it before. But thinking about it now turned his stomach. Of course it had nothing to do with visualizing the pain on Gladys face if she ever found out. He wiped his palm over his face.

“I don’t think I want to do that. I guess I must be getting old.”

The laughter stopped. “You know it can very easy to get a girl. In fact they would be falling over each other to get to you. And Gladys

## A Heart to Mend

doesn't have to find out."

It seemed Kanayo had tapped into his deepest thoughts. Edward's heartbeat came faster and he could feel his pulse racing. Gladys had become very close and dear to him. She was as beautiful inside as she looked and he found that he never wanted to hurt her any way.

"Even if she doesn't, it wouldn't be fair on her." He went and sat on the wide bed.

"In the months you've been dating Gladys, you've changed a lot, Edward. We called you 'Mr. Ice' as a joke but it was very apt. I don't know any other person so much in control of their emotions, especially with women. You were with Bisi for almost two years and were about to consider marriage but you were never as sentimental as you are with Gladys."

The silence stretched again before Kanayo continued. "You spend every spare minute with her in person or on the phone. Could it be that you're falling in love with Gladys?"

Edward lay back against the headboard. "I have thought of it, but what exactly is love?"

Kanayo laughed. "That is the billion naira question! If I knew I would have solved most of the world's problems. But you can begin to tell by the way you feel about her."

Edward inhaled deeply and let out a rush of air. He stood up and began to pace again. The deep brown rug padded his footsteps as he marched from one end to the other. While he couldn't pinpoint the moment he'd begun to need her so much, he couldn't deny that he did.

"Gladys has asked me this same question. I don't know what love is, but it's clear to me that I have very strong feelings for her. The problem is this sexual frustration. I don't know whether it's clouding my judgment."

"But there are other issues on which you guys don't agree. I remember that heated argument we had about organized religion and how some pastors scam their members."

## A Heart to Mend

“For me, that was just a general debate. Still we’ve talked about and are working through our issues. Did I tell you I dreamt about asking her to marry me? I know I toyed with asking Bisi, but it would have been for convenience. With Gladys, it definitely won’t be settling.”

“You know, I often wondered why it took you till May to get together with her.”

“I made moves earlier on but it was clear from the first that she would be different from the other women. I backed out because I couldn’t handle it. You saw me the day at your branch.”

“Yeah, I remember. It was obvious you were very attracted to her. And it’s no different today; you still look at her that way.”

“Yeah, that was why I ended up pursuing her in spite of my misgivings. She moves me in ways no one else does. I wanted to experience that at least once. Now I’m hooked.”

“Another question is how does she feel? The rumors have been flying among our friends and in the papers; don’t you care?”

“You mean about her being after my money.” Edward stopped beside the heavy drapes at the netted windows and looked out on the pitch-dark night.

“You’re a very wealthy man Edward, and she’s not exactly rolling in it.”

“Gladys is not after my wealth. She loves me.”

Kanayo allowed the silence to go on for a while before he added. “If you are sure, then it may be time to ask yourself serious questions; to bail out or go forward.”

Edward rubbed a hand over his eyes. “I can’t bail out now, Kanayo. Maybe I should have made plans from the beginning when I anticipated the possibility of feeling this way. The signs were certainly there. Sometimes I actually think I’d ask ‘how high?’ if she said ‘jump’. Now I am confused and don’t know the next step.”

“Just be cautious my friend, take your time. Men like us don’t just get married. We have to measure how it would affect our professional future. A partner should be able to add value to your business, not take it away. I’m not saying this against Gladys, but think carefully before you make up your mind. Feeling so strongly about a wife may be harmful in the long run.”



## A Heart to Mend

Edward let the curtain drop. "I'll think about what you said. I really think I need time to sort out my thoughts. I'll get back to you. Sorry for disturbing your sleep."

"No problem at all, any time." They soon said their goodnights.

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"Gladys, aren't you going to work today?"

"No, I finally decided to take my annual leave so I got ten days off." Gladys came out of the adjoining bathroom to see Aunt Isioma sitting on one of the twin beds. It was late morning on the Monday after her stand-off with Edward, and he was yet to call.

"That was a sudden. I thought you said it was too soon to be entitled to vacation time."

"I was able to get my manager to agree. The team has a minimal workload." Gladys sat down opposite her aunt and began to fold the clothes beside her.

Aunt Isioma's gaze went to the suitcase sitting in the corner. "Oh I didn't notice that. Are you traveling too? You never told me. Where are you going?"

"I'm sorry, that was also a quick decision. I want to spend Christmas with my family, so I'll be going up to Enugu for a couple of weeks till the New Year."

"Bunmi left yesterday and now you. When do you leave?"

Bunmi's father was very sick and her family had asked her to return and help her old mother in their village. Gladys knew her aunt would miss both of them for the Christmas period. "I'll go and by a bus ticket later today. I'll be travelling tomorrow."

"That'll be fine. Ade will drive you to the bus station and pick up the new girl on your way back." Her aunt came over to sit beside

## A Heart to Mend

her. "But tell me Gladys, are you OK?"

"I'm fine; I just realized that I miss home, Mama and my brothers." After the blow up with Edward, she was really missing home and needed to recharge.

Her aunt stood up and moved to the window. She fingered her chin as she considered Gladys. "Is this something I've done? Have you finally decided to move out?"

"No, it's not that..."

"The last time we spoke, you never mentioned this. You were happy enough to spend Christmas here with me and Edward."

"Aunt Isioma, honestly it's nothing to do with you."

Her aunt came back to sit opposite her. "Is it Edward then? He has not come by in a while and even if he's out of Lagos, you're not on the phone as much as you used to be."

Gladys dropped the shirt in her hands. "Well, we're having some problems."

"You can confide in me, you know?" Aunt Isioma put her arm across her shoulders. "Are you pregnant?"

"No I'm not! I'm not a child and I'm not that naïve either."

"My dear girl, people make mistakes all the time. After all, it only takes you to sleep with a guy once and that's all."

Gladys could feel her face heat up. Her fingers went to her pajamas bottoms, twisting and smoothing the cotton fabric. This was definitely not a topic she wanted to discuss with her aunt. The first and only sex talk with her mother had been just as uncomfortable. "I wish I could say that was the problem but it's not. Edward and I are at a crossroads. And though it's about sex, it's rather that I wouldn't sleep with him."

## A Heart to Mend

“You’re not intimate with him yet?” Her aunt sounded a little surprised.

Gladys sighed. “No, we discussed it and he seemed to accept that I would prefer the relationship to be very well established before we made love.”

“Did you tell him you wanted to get married first?”

Gladys covered her face with both hands. “That would be ideal wouldn’t it? But no, I just want a commitment from him both in feelings and actions.”

“You’ve been dating a while. Did it only come up as a point of discussion? He never had any problems with it practically?”

“Well it cropped up a few times when I stopped things from going too far. This time, he was really annoyed and played the marriage card.”

“You mean that you had been holding out for marriage?”

“He didn’t say it in those words but I was still insulted by the way he raised it.”

“Edward should have known you would take it hard.”

Gladys sighed and rubbed her eyes. “I don’t know what got into him that night...”

“When did this happen? Let me guess, Friday night?” At her niece’s nod she continued with a small smile, “No wonder you’ve been so moody since then. But you should know that by now that sexual frustration can make men do strange things.”

“He actually asked me to marry him.”

Aunt Isioma sat up straight. “Did he now? This is more

## A Heart to Mend

serious than I thought.”

“I’m really confused. I love Edward but I want him to acknowledge he loves me too. In the past, he’s talked about how he’s wealthier than I am, asking if I was in the relationship for money. We got over that but I still worry what the future might hold if he cannot trust me enough to give his heart fully to me, to accept me as I am. I’m not ashamed that my family’s not rich; in fact I am proud of the values I learnt from my background.”

Aunt Isioma tapped her teeth for a moment then spoke. “Gladys, I’ve been holding off the reasons for our families’ previous estrangement but this may be the best time as any to tell you. Your relationship with Edward gives me echoes of how I met my husband.”

Gladys raised her eyes. She thought she was the only one who saw the similarity in their stories.

Aunt Isioma continued. “But that was only in the beginning and our early years. Before long my marriage was a mockery of the word. From what I see, you and Edward already have something better going on even now. You’re not a child anymore so I’ll be blunt. The only one reason I could invite you to come and stay with me last January was because my husband was dead. It was only as a widow that I could do most of the things I wanted to.”

“You were married for so long - what happened?” Gladys was completely blown away. One always assumed that most marriages that lasted were held together by love.

“I was restricted from doing several things by my late husband. Most of all, he didn’t want me to have anything to do with my earlier family. The times I visited Enugu when you were a child, my husband was out of the country. When I got your mother’s first letter about your father’s illness, I tried to come with the children but he found out about it. From then on, he forbade me to visit; I didn’t even know when your father died.”

“Are you serious about this?” Gladys asked open-mouthed.

“I am telling you the complete truth. We had a major quarrel that time and he said so many hurtful things. Prior to that, he’d always

## A Heart to Mend

claimed that I could only travel when he was on vacation with the children due to scheduling conflicts. That day, he told me that the fact that he had married me did not mean he had to accept my poor relations or waste his money on them or their wretched situations. He said even worse things which I won't repeat."

"I can't believe this!" Gladys felt as if someone was squeezing at her heart.

"I cried and railed at his words but when I calmed down I knew I was powerless. You see, he threatened me with separation and estrangement from my children if I went behind his back to do anything. I did not have anything to secure a living for myself and the children if I disobeyed him. I was very young when we got married so I had very little stability."

Gladys felt some wetness on her palm and only then noticed the tears that had trickled down her cheeks. She jerked to her feet and then dropped back again beside her aunt.

Aunt Isioma took her hands and gripped them. "I tried all I could to make him change his mind, but he was unwavering on the issue. I had to choose between him and the children and your family. There was nothing I could do even if I wanted to. I had no money I could have sent to your family or any way to send it. It was a very tense period; he monitored and even restricted my movements and calls. Of course there was no email or mobile phones in the eighties."

"Surely there was something you could have done?"

"I could have returned to Enugu empty handed but that wouldn't have benefitted anyone. So I remained; the hollow image of a perfect wife. My husband bought me everything and made sure I had no access to money. He'd gradually cut me off from the few friends I made before our marriage. He effectively buried my past, and even lied to some of his friends about my family background. I pretended that all was good and hoped that he would change."

Gladys took a deep breath and let it out. "But he never did."

Her aunt's smile was poignant. "No, he didn't. After a certain stage there was total breakdown. I just stayed on because I couldn't bear to lose my children."

"Did your children ever ask to see us?"

"Before your father's illness, the children knew I had a brother.

## A Heart to Mend

Afterwards, he told them their uncle was dead. He warned me never to let them know about your family; you and your brothers. He said he came from a large family, and his relations were enough for them.”

Heavy silence pervaded the room. “I guess you’ve told them now.” Gladys had spoken with her cousins several times in the past year. No wonder they always sounded very strange.

“I had to. I got the shock of my life after his death last year. He left me your mother’s letters including the one to inform me of your father’s death.”

“Oh my goodness! You never knew before then?”

“No I didn’t. I was devastated. I’d hoped all along that he recovered and you all were having a good life. I broke down and had to travel to the States to recover. I confessed everything to my daughters while I was there. They encouraged me to send a letter to your mother when I came back. I only hoped you still lived at the same address.”

Her head felt weighted in her hands “I’m so sorry but at the same time, I wish your husband were still alive. I would like to give him a piece of my mind.” Gladys paused and felt her legs tremble. “This is very shocking; one would think these things only happen in books or movies.”

Her aunt laughed without humor. “Let it go Gladys. At first I also thought he got off too lightly. Now I’ve come to terms with it especially since our families are back together.”

Gladys grimaced, “Apart from the bad twist, this is a classic tale of rich boy, poor girl. It does have some similarity with my situation with Edward, though I hope...”

“But it’s not the same, so don’t allow anyone say otherwise. Yes, even the tabloids. You are educated and have a proper job. Your mother is doing well and your brothers have their whole lives ahead of them. You also have me and my family in your corner.”

Gladys began to cry again. “Thanks for saying that, I really appreciate it. It’s not as if I doubt it but it would be easier to ignore all the rumors if I were sure of Edward’s love.”

“And that’s another way you’re different from me and the main reason I’m telling you this now. You’re making the effort to know your man which I didn’t. Everyone said I shouldn’t lose my husband so I grabbed on with both hands. I married for convenience and maybe that

## A Heart to Mend

was the root of the rift that later occurred. I regretted my choices when it was already too late.”

“So you didn’t know he would be this way when you got married to him?”

“I had no idea. I came to Lagos at eighteen to learn fashion and designing with a woman from our village. The apprenticeship didn’t work out and I started casual work at one of the factories owned by my husband’s family. That was where we met and a year later we were married. I never asked if my background was a problem and just believed that if he could marry a poor girl, he would accept my family as well. We both know it didn’t turn out that way.”

“I hear you.” Gladys paused and wiped her face. “And that is why I want to be totally sure of Edward’s motives for wanting marriage. I’m certainly not with him for the money and I don’t want to hook up for convenience’s sake. There is no guarantee for the future but at least I think we need to start off from a strong basis of trust, love and respect.”

“That is something that both of you have to talk through. And yes, he has to care deeply for you and what’s important to you. You have to be sure that he’s someone who can accept compromises too. I have found that one of the most important things in a partner.”

“I don’t know if Edward is willing to give us the chance. This may be the end. He hasn’t called in the past week...”

“Why don’t you call him?” Aunt Isioma raised both palms at the look Gladys gave her. “OK I know. The man must be the first to capitulate eh? Are you sure you didn’t say any damning things during the disagreement? Men and their egos can be so easily bruised.”

“I’m sure I didn’t. I only wanted him to spell out how he felt for me. I want a commitment deeper than him just wanting me.”

“Then don’t worry; if it is the same Edward I know, he’ll call you. One would have thought his eyes were clear enough on how he feels, but you young people. What can I say; you want to hear the words. Still I’m certain he’ll come back to you.”

“Do you think so? I’m beginning to fear...”

## A Heart to Mend

Aunt Isioma put one arm around her shoulders and wiped her tears with the other. “Cheer up dear. Don’t lose hope, he’ll surely call. He’s probably deciding on the next step. Give him as much time as he needs to sort his thoughts out, OK? It’s probably better you’re going to meet your family in Enugu. They’ll take your mind off things. And please do cheer up; Christmas day is next week you know?”

Gladys smiled and returned to her packing.



**CHAPTER ELEVEN**

Aunt Isioma shut the hot noon sun out when she closed the front door and walked into the cool interior of the house. At the top of the stairs, the open door on the right caught her eye. She walked over, her large purse trailing by her fingertips. What was Tolani, her new maid, doing with a mobile phone and in Gladys's room too?

The girl kept the phone at a safe distance from her ear as she stammered, "Oga, no one like that for here."

"Oga, nobody dey for house." Tolani repeated another couple of times.

"I no know who you ask for..." The girl put the phone down on the bedside table and only then noticed her standing by the door.

"Tolani, what are you doing with that phone?" Aunt Isioma asked. "Who gave you a phone and why are you here?" She trudged to the closest bed and sat down. Since Tolani arrived yesterday, she'd given her more headache than Bunmi had in several years. She kicked off her slippers and stretched out her legs. She didn't have time for this; Christmas was just a few days away and she had a party to plan.

"Madam, no be my phone be dat. When the phone ring, I come here to pick am."

## A Heart to Mend

“Give me the phone.” Tolani picked up the phone again and handed it to her. “Oh no, this phone belongs to Gladys. She must have forgotten it. Who was that calling?”

“One oga but I no know who him be.”

“It must have been a wrong number. Did he just call today?”

“Yes Madam, the oga don dey call here since morning.”

“He has been calling since morning? And who has he been asking for?”

“He say he wan speak to one Gladys. I tell am say the person no live for here...”

“What? But that is my niece’s name!” Isioma shouted and sat up. “Don’t you know that? You met her yesterday when you arrived and she just travelled this morning.”

“The small madam? Hey, I no know. You just say make I dey call her auntie...”

Aunt Isioma glared at her. “Did you get his name?”

“Him name na... hem...eh...”

“I’m sure it was Edward...”

“That’s it. Yes madam, him name na Edward...”

“God! Why didn’t you tell me this before now? I was in the house all morning.” Now this explained why Gladys hadn’t called her all day to say how her trip was going.

“I sorry madam, I forget. I not know who him be and you no dey house when he call. The man dey very angry today...”

“Why won’t he be very angry?” Aunt Isioma wasn’t speaking to Tolani anymore. She dashed to her feet and strode to her own

## A Heart to Mend

room. She'd strewn the whole contents of her handbag on the bed and was about to pick the phone when it began to ring. Gladys's mother's phone number flashed up on the screen.

She flipped it open. "Hello, Eunice..."

"Good afternoon Aunt Isioma. It's me Gladys..."

"Good afternoon my dear, I was just about to call your mother to make sure you arrived safely."

"Mama said she tried calling you earlier without any answer. I'm sorry I didn't call either of you. I think I misplaced my phone somewhere or I may have lost it on the way back to Enugu..."

"Your phone is in your room here. I just found out this evening when I got back. Tell your mother to accept my apologies, I was in a meeting and had to switch off my phone."

"I'll tell her. Oh and what a relief about the phone! When I tried calling, a strange voice replied and dropped it. I've been worried sick. You know I'm expecting to hear from Edward..."

"I don't know what to with this new girl."

Gladys was surprised. What had Tolani done this time? And why was her aunt even cutting in with a story about her?

"She doesn't know your name! Edward's been calling your phone since morning. She will go into your room, pick the call and inform him that there's no one here by that name. I was here all morning but she never bothered to tell me about it."

There was a long pause. "Gladys, are you there?"

"Aunt Isioma I am here. I am just so relieved. I'd made up my mind to call him with Mama's phone after calling you." It wouldn't be fair for her to still hold out for him to make the first move knowing that her phone was lost and he couldn't reach her. But it was good to know

## A Heart to Mend

that he was willing to talk to her.

“I suggest you do that right away.”

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“Gladys is that you?” Edward stood up from his chair and stalked over to the windows. He almost hadn’t answered the phone when he saw the strange number, but he was now glad he had. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“I’m sorry to be calling you at work.”

The unease in her voice must be because they had not spoken in over a week. “You know that has never been a problem Gladys. To tell you the truth, my mind wasn’t on the job. I’ve been calling you for the past several hours...”

“I have to apologize for that.

“The girl on the phone said you were not there. I was worried you had traveled...”

“Aunt Isioma has a new house help who was receiving your calls without telling anyone in the house. And I’ve travelled, I’m actually in Enugu right now...”

“I hope it’s not because of what happened last week?”

“That had a bit to do with it. I didn’t want to spend Christmas in Lagos when we were on such terms. But I’m glad I came back; I’m enjoying being with my family.”

“How is your mum and brothers?”

“They are fine. None of them is here though. I’ve probably not been very good company.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Gladys I know the stress I’ve put you through. I’m sorry about that. I was serious about the proposal but not the way it came out. That was thoughtless, please accept my apology.”

When she remained silent, he continued, “I’ve not been myself since that day. I felt terrible after you left and the only reason I didn’t call the next day was because I wanted us to calm down. After that I had many things to sort out. Then I couldn’t get through to...”

“I’m sorry too Edward, I guess I could have called you as well. I was about to confirm it when my aunt called.” As the days passed and he didn’t call, she’d assumed the worst.

“I’ve got to tell you this Gladys. I cherish you with all my heart, body and soul.” He couldn’t hold it back any longer. He was in love with her and had only been too afraid to acknowledge it.

He heard her gasp. “What are you saying Edward?”

He’d thought about it a lot both before and after the blunder last week. But each time he picked up the phone he put it down because he knew what pain those three little words can bring.

“Gladys, I’ve loved people who almost destroyed my life. I made up my mind from then to keep my emotions out of all my dealings with people.” When he’d left his last foster home, he swore never to care so much for anyone. What his foster parents did was doubly painful because he’d put so much stock by them. He’d realized that when he stopped caring, the sting of what happened had lessened.

“I’m so sorry Edward. I never knew about all this before now.”

“I’ll tell you all about it later.” Edward took a deep breath and continued. “I knew I’d fallen in love with you almost two months ago. I dreamt I asked you to marry me. I didn’t want to admit the reason even to myself; I only knew that I wanted you.”

“Edward, you mean most of all these problems we were having could’ve been avoided?”

## A Heart to Mend

He'd continued to deny it to himself even after that day at the beach. He should've told her but was already involuntarily shoring up his defenses. However, this week had taught him a lot. He looked her straight in the eye. "I have to learn to trust you and your love for me baby. For sure my life won't be the same without you. I prefer you in it so I've decided to give my heart a chance to love again."

"At least you believe that I love you." There were tears in her voice and it trembled as she spoke.

"Please don't cry Gladys. Forgive me for trying to sabotage the relationship. I'll try not to do that again."

"I can't bear a grudge against you. I now also understand part of why you did and said some of the things you did."

He couldn't hold it back any longer. "I love you Gladys."

He smiled at her laughing response. "I love you too."

"Have dinner with me on Boxing day so that I can tell you more. Please say yes darling."

"Aren't you in Lagos? I am in Enugu."

"Since when did distance stop me? Do we have a date?"

Gladys laughed. "Please have Christmas lunch with us?"

"It will be my pleasure darling. I'll see you soon." He flipped the phone shut and summoned his personal assistant immediately to book a flight ticket for him.

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Edward leaped out of the airport taxi before it got to a final stop. He swung his gaze over the row of similar-looking blocks of flats and

## A Heart to Mend

searched out the numbers on each till he found the one he wanted. He ran over to it and took the narrow stairs three at a time to the third floor. A middle-aged woman answered on his third knock.

“Good day and happy Christmas. I am looking for Gladys.”

“Happy Christmas dear, come in. You must be Edward...”

“Yes I am. Are you Gladys’s mother?” He entered the sitting room his gaze immediately searching the undersized space for Gladys.

The woman nodded her head. She was a shorter and older version of her daughter and with a much fuller figure. Deep wrinkles lined her eyes, balanced by deep grooves running from nose to mouth but her skin shone and the twinkle in her gaze got his attention. She gestured him to a hard faux leather armchair while she remained standing. “I thought Gladys was supposed to come and meet you at the airport?”

Edward shifted to the edge of the chair “Has she left already? Their flight was changed due to some unknown reasons.”

“Oh she is around.” Her mother replied smiling. “She told me of your misunderstanding. I’m glad you got over it. I will go and...”

She was still speaking when Gladys made her entrance, eyes radiant. She was dressed simply as always in jeans and a green shirt. Her skin glowed and she seemed to have fleshed out nicely.

“Edward, you’re here early!” She walked quickly to his side basking in the smile blooming on his lips. “Mama, I can see you’ve met. This is Edward...”

“Yes I have. He said his flight was shifted forward.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” Gladys murmured as her mother beamed. When the older woman turned and left the room, Edward stood up and opened his arms for Gladys to walk into. They were still in a hug when someone cleared their throat behind her.

## A Heart to Mend

“Excuse me...”

Edward shifted Gladys to one side and noticed a tall young man staring at them with raised eyebrows. The guy held his gaze and leaned back against the doorjamb.

“Edward this is Olisa, he’s the middle brother. The others will be out soon I guess.” True to her word, they were right behind. They were all very tall and only the youngest was the same height as him. “This is Ngozi, the oldest brother, and Udoka my baby brother.”

“Hello, good afternoon.” They all walked up and shook his hand. Olisa seemed to find particular pleasure in showing he was the taller one, walking up close and pumping his palm in a tight grip. Edward suppressed his smile and returned the greetings.

“How was your flight?” Olisa asked after everyone found places to seat in the small room. Gladys was perched on the arm of his chair with an arm draped over his shoulders.

“It was fine and left earlier than planned. I’m very glad I didn’t miss it so I get to spend more time here with you guys.”

“Yeah, I was to come pick you up at the airport with Gladys.”

Gladys nudged him. “Ngozi is the one that loves cars. My mum has a small car which he’s managed to keep on the road beyond all expectations.”

“Thanks Ngozi, I got an airport taxi...”

“Do you want us to go down and get your bags?” Udoka asked.

“There’ll be no need; I’ve rented the car for the day.”

Gladys whispered in his ear that she was going to join her mum in the kitchen to finish their lunch and then stood up and left the room. Edward hoped he wasn’t being left in a den of lions.



## A Heart to Mend

“Do you like what you’ve seen of the city?”

He didn’t say it seemed tiny and empty compared to Lagos. “Errr...I’ve not seen much. We drove straight here from the airport.” Her youngest brother had a boyish face but very earnest eyes. “It was a long drive through the expressway; the airport is quite far away.”

“Yeah it’s in Emene and closer to the industrial area. Trans-Ekulu here is on the opposite side from the central area of the city. We’ll take you to see some of the sights if you like.”

“That’ll be great...”

“I think you’ll feel right at home on Okpara Avenue where most of the bank main branches are located. Other main streets include Chime Avenue, Ogui Road, Zik Avenue, Agbani Road...”

“It’ll be nice to see them.” Edward felt himself warming to the young boy. “You can join us on the way back to the hotel.”

“How come you didn’t drive up with your car?” Ngozi asked. “After she talked about it earlier I looked forward to seeing it when Gladys said you were coming down for Christmas.”

“That would have been the last resort if I didn’t get a flight ticket. I’ve heard horror stories of the holiday traffic jams on the Onitsha Bridge crossing over to the east.”

They all laughed and Olisa began to describe his own public transport experience the day before Christmas Eve on his way back from the University of Benin. Edward was gladdened that her brothers took to him. He removed his outer jacket and relaxed back into his chair. Gladys and her mother soon called them over to the cramped dining room and served up a delicious onugbu soup and pounded yam. The discussion was fast as furious between all of them as they ate, making him feel like one of them. Edward was glad he’d made it down to Enugu. This was his best Christmas ever.

**CHAPTER TWELVE**

“I didn’t know I could sleep with a woman without having sex with them but you’ve shown me.” They were lying on his bed and he couldn’t remember the last time he felt so relaxed. The sheets were twisted around them and the air conditioner poured out cool air. The early dawn light peeped through the curtains. He’d returned to Lagos a couple of days after Christmas while Gladys had come straight to his place from her flight yesterday evening so they could spend New Year eve together. She’d been so tired they’d gone to bed early.

“Happy New Year to you darling, I love you.”

“I love you too.” He accompanied that with a kiss. They’d talked more openly and honestly than they ever had before and each knew where they stood with each other. It had been almost spiritual for him and now he wanted to share even more of himself with her.

Edward looked into her face. “I’ve not fully told you about my earlier years, have I?”

“Not really. I do know you were born in an orphanage and moved about a few foster homes till you left the last of them when you were about seventeen.” Gladys replied.

## A Heart to Mend

Many times the subject came up he glossed over all but the barest bones of it. He'd told her more about the years after he had arrived in Lagos and how he'd toiled to make something of his life. She must have concluded after a while that those were the years that made him what he was or that he would share when ready.

Edward sighed. "That is correct, but it misses out some of my most important experiences and how they affected me."

What happened was one thing, how he'd felt was another. He wished his childhood and early teenage years could remain in the past. Those were truly difficult years but they were part and parcel of him. A very big part now that he was going serious with Gladys.

"As a young orphan one thing I envied others was that sense of belonging somewhere. Before long, it was clear one needed not just personal merits but also the support of family to succeed in life."

Gladys looked on without saying a word. A few minutes passed but she remained silent. He could hear the gurgling of the air conditioner and some sounds from the kitchen of his houseboy moving around but they sounded so distant. They could as well have been in the house by themselves.

He sat up against the headboard with his mind made up. "I told you how I left the orphanage at ten for my first foster family and how I felt abandoned all over again when my foster parents divorced and I was returned to the orphanage." He paused.

Gladys shifted closer and wrapped her arm round his lean waist with her head on his chest. "I miss my dad sometimes too and I understand about being abandoned. I'm so sorry."

"You don't have to be, baby. Knowing you has gone a long way to heal me. As you know, I was returned a couple more times."

Gladys kept quiet and waited for him to continue.

"What I didn't tell you was how I ended up in my last foster

## A Heart to Mend

home. The ‘mother’ I had grown up in the orphanage with retired and the new one wasn’t enamored of the older boys. She made it clear we would leave by eighteen, I was fifteen then. She worked us like slaves and made money from our labor by hiring us out to factories around.”

“Was that allowed?” Gladys interjected when he paused.

“Sometimes, but not the way she did it. I was hopeless about my future. There was this drive within me but I didn’t know how to channel it, I wanted to attend university but there was no one to help. I acted out, got into drugs, and fought anyone at the drop of a hat..

“The administrator took all the money we earned and didn’t pay for our upkeep most of the time. She took in babies to get money from adoption while we slept outside on the verandas. Things had gotten harder in Nigeria; the austerity measures of the mid-eighties were pinching everyone and the home was even harder hit.”

He stopped and rubbed his hand over his shaved head.

“You don’t have to tell me everything today, Edward...”

“Gladys I want to. I want to get this all off my chest. I want you to know all of me. Nothing left out.” He tightened his grip on her hand and stared directly into her eyes as he got on with it.

“It was during this period that I met this Igbo couple. I was working at this groundnut oil factory and had gone to the admin office to get paid. This woman walked up to me and asked my name. She said I looked like someone she knew. I admitted I was an orphan and wasn’t sure of my parentage. She then asked me to wait to meet her husband who was the owner of the factory. Before the end of the week she and Chief expressed interest in taking me in.”

“They sound like a nice couple,” she murmured.

Edward shifted into a more comfortable position. “I jumped at the offer. They wanted to send me to university and pay me for working at the factory. I felt I’d found a home at last. They were

## A Heart to Mend

childless and seemed happy to have me. I got distracted from my wild friends and everything went according to plan.” Things could only get better, he’d reasoned. He had the Advanced Levels exams to prepare for, and also wanted to work and save as much as possible.

“The wife said you looked like someone she knew? Did you find out who it was; a relative maybe?”

“When I first moved in, I always asked but she evaded the question till I let it be. However she told me before I left.”

“So why leave? This was the home you ran away from?”

“Yes. It was a combination of several things. My foster mother began to resent me and the house wasn’t comfortable anymore so I got back with my gang. Chief wouldn’t take that and threatened to send me away. An incident served as a flashpoint and I decided to leave. However, before I could get free, they vengefully made me spend a month in prison.”

“They put you in prison because you left the house?”

“No. They said I took some of their property. This was money I’d earned legitimately at the factory. I was hard hit because I was innocent and I began to isolate myself after that.”

“That was merciless of them. They must’ve had strange motives for taking you in if they could turn on you that way.”

At the beginning, he’d loved his new foster parents. They were his saviors and he thought they could do no wrong. But yet again, it wasn’t difficult for them to grind his emotions in the dust. He’d dwelt on it the whole month in jail and became very bitter.

Edward shrugged. “The DPO took pity on me and persuaded Chief to have me released. I only stayed in Kano long enough to get a transfer from the university. I then moved to Lagos, changed my name and made a new life. As I left Kano, I swore never to trust or love another human being. I didn’t believe it was worth it.”

## A Heart to Mend

“By now you should know that not everyone is like that.”

“I have learnt to let that go but it still rankles sometimes...”

“You could contact them again to resolve the issue.”

“I used to imagine meeting them again but not for a peaceful resolution. As I matured, it was one of the things I put behind me.”

“Have I told you about my mother and aunt?” He nodded and she went on to update him on the recent explanations from her aunt.

“Your mother is an exemplary woman.” Edward shook his head. “Some people would never have forgiven your aunt.”

“I’ve learnt a lot from my mother; you can too, if you want.”

He smiled. “I want anything you want Gladys.” He pulled her up so their bodies meshed and ran his palms down her sides. He’d finally committed to waiting and knew he’d have to stop soon.

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Gladys turned over groggily on the bed as the door to her room opened. She looked up and broke into a weak smile when she recognized Jennifer and Ayo.

“And we thought you were invincible!” Jennifer exclaimed as she quickly took the only armchair in the spacious room.

Ayo came closer and perched on the bed. “I hope you’re not infectious? I can stand if that’s the case.”

Gladys laughed. Just last Sunday at their outing after the church service, she’d bragged of never being sick after a year in Lagos. Alas she spoke too soon! Around lunch time at work on Tuesday, she’d

## A Heart to Mend

started to feel ill, and it got worse to the point that she was miserable by afternoon. She had chills all over her body, a terrible headache, and felt faint. Ola took her home ahead of the usual time and waited until Aunt Isioma came back. The fever receded but in the evening; she had barely started a phone call with Edward before her stomach turned to liquid.

When she spent most of the night in the toilet, her aunt had brought her to Reddington Hospital for a checkup. She had ended up being admitted for observation because based on the blood tests; she had a very high white blood cell count. That was yesterday.

“Sorry we couldn’t come to see you earlier. We decided to come together after work.”

“No problem at all, thanks for coming.” Gladys had called them both this morning. She’d been too weak yesterday to think of even raising a finger.

“So what exactly is wrong? You look terrible.”

“I’m surprised to be alive. I puked out everything in me, and from both ends too.”

“Eewwww,” Ayo groaned. “Too much information; please enough of that.”

Gladys laughed, “But you asked. You should have seen me yesterday. I looked like death warmed over and I couldn’t eat a thing. Once I was admitted, they started me on IV antibiotics and fluids because of the fever and the chills, and I was dehydrated too.”

“So what caused all that?”

“The doctor said it is dehydration and food poisoning. I must have eaten something that did not agree with my stomach. As for the dehydration, the sun this January has been horrible.” Her hands kneaded her stomach as she sat up on the bed.

## A Heart to Mend

Ayo plumped the pillows behind her. “You can say that again. How do you feel now?”

“I feel better today; the treatments must be working.”

“And you have this cool room to get well in. How lucky!”

Gladys smiled. Jennifer had always been lively but she was even bouncier these days. “Yeah, that was fortunate. These rooms on the 6th floor are the Royal Suites and I get to stay here because the normal suites are full. As for the food, I’d rather be home eating Tolani’s spaghetti and chicken. That girl has her issues but cooking is definitely not one of them.”

Ayo laughed and scooted further up the bed. “Oh so you’re up to eating already?”

“Yes, in fact I was ravenous after I woke up this morning. It felt like my abdomen was stuck to my spine. There were eggs for breakfast and steamed rice for lunch; not the best but bearable. I’m still waiting on dinner which will soon be here.”

“How long will you be here?”

“Two nights. I’ll probably be discharged tomorrow evening.”

“Two nights is not so bad. It must be expensive, though.”

“Aunt Isioma already has a health plan with them; it’s not really that expensive. Also I don’t even think I need stay tonight as I have no problems drinking fluids.”

“It’s been a while since I last saw your aunt. How is she?”

“She’s fine. She was with me through out yesterday. She was the one that called my mother and brothers and Edward too. She was here this morning and will soon be back.”

“That’s very nice of her. Your aunt is always so gracious.”



## A Heart to Mend

Gladys nodded. In the year since she'd arrived in Lagos, her aunt had become like a second mother to her. They had grown even closer after she had confided about her late husband's lack of sympathy and the unhappy prison their marriage had become.

"You said last Sunday that Edward was out of the country and won't be back till the weekend. How did he take the news of you being admitted in hospital?"

"He called last night but I was still too weak to carry on a conversation. He did say he'd wrap up his business and return home as soon as possible."

"This love is really catching him..."

"At least you'll be looking better then."

"Oh, so you think I timed the illness for when he was away?"  
All three girls laughed.

"I hope you get well soon. I still need you for my planning, and we must all dance our legs off that night." Jennifer bounced on her chair and took out some cards from her purse.

"Great, the cards are out." Gladys reached out and collected one from her. Jennifer's engagement party had been fixed for the night of Valentine's Day in just about three weeks time.

"Yes, and you and Edward are the number one guests."

The girls hashed out a tentative agenda for the party after Gladys had admired the card in glowing terms. They remained with her through dinner until her aunt arrived.

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"He's here, hurry up." Her aunt called from downstairs.

## A Heart to Mend

“But I can’t see his car from here.” Gladys peeped through one of the landing windows.

She’d returned to her aunt’s from the hospital last week and was feeling much better now. Edward had come back from his trip a couple of days earlier than scheduled so he could take her home from hospital. He’d also been to see her every evening for the last week since she resumed work and had postponed all his planned travels in the meantime.

“He’s waiting outside the gate,” her aunt called back.

“But why would he do that?” Gladys queried as she joined her in the sitting room.

“I don’t know.” Aunt Isioma suddenly became busy with what was on the television.

Shrugging her shoulders, Gladys left the house. When she stepped out of the gate, she looked up and down the quiet street. A limousine was standing a few yards away from her. Her eyes alighted on it in admiration as it drove slowly to a stop before her. The window directly before her wound down automatically in a replay of their first meeting.

“May I help you?” Edward’s smile was like that of a Cheshire cat who’d got some cream.

“Edward! What is this?” She couldn’t help the exclamation.

Stepping out of the car, he put an arm around her waist and held the door open for her.

“Tonight is going to be one of the best memories we share. We own the night milady, and the limo is here for our exclusive delight.”

Edward bowed and gestured her to enter the luxury car. She did and he followed her in and closed the door, enfolding them in the cool leather interior. The driver carefully maneuvered away from the curb

## A Heart to Mend

and into the street. When they arrived at their table in the restaurant at Sheraton Hotel and Towers, Gladys told herself this was definitely going to be a night to remember. The dinner passed in a blur of slow conversation and tender looks but nothing more.

They soon finished their dinner and moved to a secluded alcove in the bar. Edward swirled the Bailey's Irish Cream in his cut glass tumbler while she sipped on a Chapman on the Rocks.

Gladys knew he was going to ask her to marry him or he wouldn't have gone to so much trouble. She knew what her answer would be this time but now wondered if she'd got it mixed up. Edward put back his drink down and took hers to deposit beside it. Her heart raced faster than usual and she found it difficult looking him full in the face. He spread both palms and she placed her hands in them. Their fingers linked as he started to speak in a solemn tone.

"Gladys, I've had mixed life experiences, more bad than good but I don't want the bad to influence my life going forward. I've become more willing to give people the benefit of the doubt since I met you. You're the best thing that has ever happened to me. I want to be with you, I don't want to run or hide anymore. Especially not from you Gladys, I love you."

She felt the tears come to her eyes. This was the best thing he'd ever said to her. "I love you too Edward." After what they'd been through, she cared about him so much more. She also loved how he got on with her family. All her brothers were his fans now.

Edward smiled at her, "I can't believe that I have you, baby. I didn't know it but I never had a full life before I met you."

He'd simply gone through the motions but was too wounded to make the most of all that came his way. She'd healed his heart and made him whole again. Her mother and brothers were just the cherry on top. He'd told them that he wanted to marry her. He'd almost let her go last week but the more he thought of it, the more he recognized the beginning of another phase of his life. He only had to accept it.

## A Heart to Mend

“I am not perfect Gladys. I’ve had some experiences in this life that have shaped me differently from your usual man. I smoked, drank, did drugs and women. I have forgiven myself of these things and asked God’s forgiveness too but I still bear some scars.”

He brought up her left hand and kissed the back of it and then each finger in turn. Gladys heart began to beat faster in her chest. It was as if everything was moving in slow motion.

He dropped her hands and dipped two fingers in his pocket. “I don’t know if I am worthy to ask you this but I have been blessed in meeting you. You shone light in my life and reminded me that it’s not all about work and money. You are a beautiful soul and I love you. I am willing to share my life with you if you’ll have me.”

Gladys closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened them when she felt Edward release her hand and move off the banquette. He was kneeling at the edge with an open jewelry box clasped in both hands. The small diamond solitaire winked at her in the dim light of the bar. People were laughing and clapping but she felt the tears return. During dinner she’d imagined the proposal with him down on his knees. She felt her heart melting inside her and she wished she could hug him forever.

“Give me your hand Gladys.” Edward said.

She stretched her left hand. “Edward, I love you so much. This is very beautiful.”

“Just like you’re beautiful inside and out. He raised her fingers with one hand. “I promise never to hurt you. I’ve asked you this in my mind several times before but now it’s for real. I love you Gladys. Will you marry me please?”

“Yes I will. I love you so much Edward.” Their gaze caught and held. His heart shone from his eyes.

“I promise to love you till I die.” He slipped the ring onto her third finger and kissed it.

## A Heart to Mend

“I’ll be good to you too. You’ll never regret loving me or placing your trust on me.” Gladys raised him up and stepped into his arms with a long kiss. Some people in the bar stood up too and clapped enthusiastically. Afterwards they both turned with a smile for everyone and then Edward led her to the dancing floor.

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

They danced to the slow beat of Tuface's "African Queen" as the party drew to a close. Her friend's party wasn't big by any standard, with just about thirty people in all from the church's singles group and other friends and family. But Jennifer and her fiancé had wanted it like that, with only people they knew personally in attendance. The party was at the Lagos Yacht Club which they had access to, courtesy of Edward who was a member. After getting out of hospital, Gladys had helped in the later part of planning the party. It reminded her of Ola's Nikkai last month and how she would soon start on her own wedding plans.

As they moved, he whispered smoky promises into her ears, and she tried not to giggle or allow her feelings show on her face. It had been smooth sailing since he asked her to marry him last week. Her profile had risen after the engagement leaked, and she had morphed from a 'wannabe' through to an 'Island Big Girl'. She wouldn't be surprised if celebrity magazines ran some pictures of tonight on their pages. They always called wanting to know when their wedding would be but she usually hung up on them. Now she relaxed in her fiancé's arms, basking in their love.

The music changed and Edward whispered another risqué comment to her. She laughed out loud but then she caught someone

## A Heart to Mend

staring at her. A middle-aged woman she had not noticed earlier stood at a far table with a strange expression on her face. Edward swung her around as Sunny Neji's "Oruka" continued to play and she felt him grow rigid in her arms. She looked up at his face and saw his eyes narrow and his mouth tighten. The sparkle of joy left his eyes and slowly, all expression was wiped from his face.

"Edward, what is it?" She asked in a low voice.

His reply was brusque. "My former foster parents are here."

"I thought they lived in Kano?"

"They must have moved to Lagos. I'll have to stop my club membership. I don't want to run into them again."

Even though the music had not ended, Edward took her hand stiffly and moved quickly to the other side of the room where the rest of their party clustered. They were only using a small part of the restaurant. After they took their seats, he rebuffed her suggestion to invite his foster parents over or go greet them and remained as tense as a coiled spring throughout the remainder of the festivities. She kept an eye on him but nobody else noticed because he put up a front, cordially replying to the conversation that swirled around them.

She soon came up with the excuse that she was tired so they could leave early. He did not object and before long they were waiting for the car near the front entrance while their chauffeur brought their car round. Ayo waited with them so they could drop her off at her parents' house on the way. The plans last November to move into Ola's former flat had fallen through, and Gladys still lived with her aunt. It didn't make sense to move when her wedding was planned for later this year.

Edward was tugging off his tie when they were interrupted by a loud female voice behind them. "So it is you Sani. Didn't you see us?"

A thick-set man came up and stood beside them. "Isn't it now

## A Heart to Mend

Edward Bestman?”

The woman Gladys had seen earlier moved forward to stand beside the man. “We meet again.”

No one said anything for a moment as the atmosphere congealed. Gladys had looped her arm through Edward’s and as she felt it tense, she squeezed his forearm. His eyes locked with that of the older couple. Gladys thought they looked vaguely familiar, and then it hit her. They were Chief and Mrs. Okrika, well known in business circles and sometimes fodder for soft-sell magazines.

The car drew up but when they made to walk to it, Chief barked, “We need to talk.”

Ayo entered the car but when Gladys tried to join her Edward gripped her fingers. He’d been shocked when he saw Chief and Mrs. Okrika, but now that they were out here without other guests looking on, he would hear them out. They all walked some paces away from the vehicle.

“Introduce us to your fiancée Sani, or should I say Edward?”

“Gladys, this Chief and Mrs. Okrika, I told you about them.”

“Indeed, Sani has become Mr. Bestman, corporate chief and a member of high society.”

Mrs. Okrika laughed again and added, “We saw you all over the papers last year and were shocked. Before that it seemed like you disappeared off the face of the earth.”

“Well here I am and I don’t have time to reminisce. Are you going to apologize to me or not?” Edward wouldn’t take their jabs lightly. These people had almost derailed his life. If not for the DPO’s kindness, he would be rotting in one of Kano’s jails. Bile rose in his throat but he felt Gladys pressing on his arm again and took a deep breath. He thought he had put that part of his life behind him. What a small world it was.



## A Heart to Mend

“Pah! Apologize for what? You lived off us for more than two years, caused my wife mental distress and stole from me. Did you tell your little fiancée all of this?”

Gladys was stung by the condescension and retorted quickly. “I didn’t know your names but Edward told me all about you. We share everything.”

“Of course you would say that, aren’t you marrying him for his money? What does an impressionable young girl like you know about anything? Gold-digger!”

As if just noticing Edward’s harsh glare, his former foster mother turned fully to him, “We hoped that by now, you would be repentant. It’s been almost twenty years and you should pay Chief back his money, and with interest too. You can afford it..”

Edward reiterated by pointing directly at her, “Don’t you dare insult my fiancée. And you must be joking! You know you set me up.”

Mrs. Okrika shook her head with a snicker but it was her husband who spoke. “My wife is right. The police persuaded me to let you go without ever going to court. Don’t aggravate me or I might be tempted to resurrect the charges. You owe me Edward.”

“I owe you nothing; do your worst. Gladys let’s go.”

She was relieved that Edward was ending the altercation. As the minutes ticked by, more and more people were trickling out of the venue. This was definitely not the best time to thrash out these issues. She would have to talk to Edward later for a way to seek a resolution with his foster parents.

“You will regret this. I will see that you do...”

“If you have anything further to say, speak with my lawyers. I’ll reply you then.”

“You’ll definitely hear from us, bastard.”

## A Heart to Mend

Two things prevented Edward from jumping on the older man there and then and pounding him into the ground. One, a time had been when he had called Chief Okrika “father”, when the man had done for him all a father would do for a son; and two, the love of his life was standing right beside him. He felt tempted to say something hurtful, but resisted. This was not how he had envisioned bumping into the people he had borne a grudge against for almost two decades. *They* should be apologizing, dammit!

The Okrikas were still standing where they left them when he got into the back seat with Gladys. As she leaned over to talk to her friend, he resolved to put it all out of his mind.

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They were in Edward’s office and she’d taken an extra hour for lunch so they could discuss their wedding plans. The tentative date for July meant they only had about five months to put everything together. When she’d tried talking about his foster parents, he insisted he wasn’t ready to talk about them.

“Let’s talk about your valentine gift. I also want to make up for not being here while you were sick. Tell me what you want and it’s yours.” He leaned back on the visitor chair.

“You’re always good to me Edward; you don’t need to make up for anything. I have you and want nothing else.”

He smiled back at her with that tender look she loved. “I mean this baby, I’m sorry I have to travel so much but it’s because I want to ground the business as much as possible. I promise to cut back on the trips before and after the wedding.”

“You don’t have to neglect your business.” Gladys took his hands in hers. “I appreciate your work and the commitment

## A Heart to Mend

you show to it. It means even more that you show the same to me as much as you can.”

“I want to be a better man for you Gladys.”

“I also want that but I don’t want you to change on my behalf.” She moved forward to caress his cheeks with her palms and then gave him a sweet kiss.

Edward broke it off but did not pull away. “I’ll do whatever you want...” He whispered against her lips.

“You mean what I want now?”

“And in the future too...”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“What about you? What will make you happy?”

“I want us to know and understand each other as much as we can, keep no secrets from each other and share everything. I want you to accept me for who I am and not punish me for the past experiences you had. Like I said earlier, I also want you to help me become a better woman without trying to change me. That is what I want.”

“You’re too good for me Gladys.” Edward finally said after a long period where they couldn’t seem to look away from each other’s eyes.

“I think we’re good together that’s all.”

Edward laughed as he got to his feet. Gladys admired his long stride in the pinstriped suit as he returned to his seat behind the desk. His trim shape would always get her attention.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh no, not again...” Gladys wailed playfully.

## A Heart to Mend

“But I won’t keep the suspense for long.” He reached out and pressed the buzzer.

Ogbonna his PA and the secretary came into the room carrying some papers which they laid out on the table surrounded by plush chairs in a corner of the office.

“Edward what’s this?” Gladys walked over and picked the paper on top. She read out loud, “Towards the transfer of twelve million, two hundred thousand... shares belonging to Bestman Group PLC...” She stopped as her brain scrambled to take it all in.

“I want to give you a gift that is worthy of you and what you mean to me.” There was a huge smile plastered on Edward’s face as he swung on his swivel chair.

“Edward...” She still couldn’t say anything meaningful.

He stopped swinging and turned serious. “Bestman used to be my *raison d’être*, my lifeblood and what made me who I was. Now that I have you in my life, I want to share it with you. I want you to be a part of me.”

Gladys blinked back the tears that pooled in her eyes. This gesture was beyond anything she knew, over ten million shares? It would be worth even more than she could imagine.

Edward leaned over to take her hands in his. “I love you baby, and I wanted to show it.” His people thought he should wait till they were married before transferring the shares to Gladys, but why should he? His feelings for her wouldn’t change just because they signed some dotted lines. He wanted to convince himself that he was over his paranoia that people would only take advantage of or hurt him. He had to learn to trust again someday and she was the perfect person.

“I love you too darling but this is too much.” Gladys walked over to where he still sat behind his desk and sat on his

## A Heart to Mend

lap. “Am I allowed to say thanks but no thanks?”

“No you’re not.”

“But this is too much Edward...”

“Nothing is too much to show the depth of my feeling for you.” He whispered into her ears. “You give me the kind of joy I never thought to have.”

“Thank you so much.” She hugged him tightly and didn’t want to let go even when a cough sounded behind her. Edward brought them to their feet and she turned to see Benibo standing just inside the door with an unrecognizable look.

“Benibo, we were waiting for you.” Edward walked to him and they exchanged a handshake before the lawyer followed him back to the settees.

Gladys moved closer and now smoothed the pleats of her trousers as everyone took their seats. Benibo sat stiffly and rifled through the papers.

Edward gestured to his staff, “Thanks for drawing up the papers so speedily, I really appreciate that. Benibo, I know you had some concerns; are they all sorted out?”

“Of course it is what you want that matters. The papers are as they should be, Gladys only needs to put down her signature to make it all official.”

Edward turned to her his face beaming, “I hereby transfer twenty percent of my stock holdings of this company to your name. I trust that we have become one now and what belongs to me belongs to you too. The shares are totally yours and you’re free to use them as you will. They will be transferred to your brokers immediately after this.”

Gladys spoke so only he could hear. “Edward I can’t

## A Heart to Mend

thank you enough for this. I don't know how to repay you except to say the shares will be there for you anytime you need them. I love you with all my heart, you know that." For her it was more symbolic than anything but it said more than a million words could portray.

"Thank you darling and now to the serious bit." He sat down beside his lawyer.

Gladys took another empty seat and picked up the pen. She signed the loads of papers put before her, thoughts fixed all the while on Edward. Only the scratching of pen on paper broke the silence and little murmurs from either Benibo or Ogbonna as they pushed papers aside. Edward and the lawyer also had to do some signing afterwards. She looked at him and he returned it with that grin she was so used to. She loved him so much then and knew she would do so till there was nothing left of her.

Benibo cleared his throat again, "Edward, I wish you all the best with Gladys and to you too Gladys." He stretched out his hand and she gave him a firm shake.

"Thank you Benibo." They'd got on well the few times they met in the past, so she wondered why he was not meeting her gaze as he stood up. He helped Ogbonna and the secretary pack up the documents and they all left the room soon after.

Edward leaped to his feet and pulled her up into his arms, his strong arms catching her waist to keep her mouth from crashing into his. She kissed him and he let her, widening his stance so that they were at the same height, his hips cradling hers. Eager breaths mingled as they tasted each other before he took over. His lips roved lightly over her face before he returned to her mouth for a deeper kiss.

Gladys broke away panting, "Wow, it just keeps getting better doesn't it?" She whispered.

## A Heart to Mend

Edward grinned again. "This is just the beginning, come I'll show you." He took her hand and strolled to his desk. One of the drawers was open and he picked up two colorful, long but narrow strips with his free hand. "Plane tickets for a two-week trip. We'll return Easter Monday."

Gladys couldn't help the tiny scream that left her mouth before she calmed down. He'd insisted she get visas for London and the United States earlier in January after their engagement but she thought it was for their honeymoon later in the year.

"But why now? OK, where are we going?"

He continued smiling, his hands hanging by the hooks of his belt. "I have some business meetings in London and New York but I'm hoping we'll be able to fit in a quick trip to Barbados in between. We can check out whether it will make a good place for our honeymoon..."

"But that will spoil it for then..."

"Then we'll go somewhere else when the time comes. I have to travel for those meetings but I don't want to be away from you for so long. I hope you don't mind?"

When he talked like this, it melted her heart and made her love him more. She knew that beneath was the young boy trying to overcome rejection. She shook her head. He surprised her by how he was willing to work at this relationship.

"Please don't say no. I want you to take a few days off. You've been sick and yet so busy planning the wedding too. I'm sure your aunt will be happy to take over for some days."

Gladys shone her love through her eyes "She will..."

"You can also do some wedding shopping while I'm absorbed with work." He seemed to notice then that she was again nodding happily. "I may have been too optimistic though,

## A Heart to Mend

what about your office? Can you get time off?"

She snatched her hand from his grip and jumped around the desk. She did her happy dance. "I'll try to get unpaid leave but if doesn't work, I'll resign. Don't laugh, this is serious."

Gladys fell back on the sofa as Edward strode towards her with an intent look in his eyes. That look always got her heated up and it was no different now.

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As their plane ascended from the John F. Kennedy airport Sunday evening, Gladys released a sigh of pure joy. The last two weeks had been the happiest time of her life. She looked down at the statue of liberty and recalled their trip to it the previous day. They'd taken Edward's meetings into account when booking the flexible three days ticket before leaving the London. He'd been a little disappointed that they were unable to book monument passes online but they'd managed to get one from the Battery Park kiosk on the morning of the outing by showing the pre printed online tickets.

For the first time in her life, she'd gotten on a ferry. She and Edward had left their hotel as early as eight in the morning in order to catch the first ferry out to Liberty Island. They got good seats on the upper deck and were able to get the best views of the Manhattan skyline as they moved out. On the chill of the water, she thanked God she'd brought a coat though the weather had not been too bad since they arrived. She wore sky-blue jeans and a knit maroon sweater under the red plaid jacket with a pair of comfortable heeled boots. They also packed a picnic to eat on Ellis Island after the tour of the monument.

Getting off the ferry, the statue of liberty was quite a sight and she'd thanked Edward profusely for the chance to see it up close. With their crown passes they headed straight for the queue into the



## A Heart to Mend

monument. Edward had a large backpack containing some documents he didn't want to leave in the hotel room so that had to put that into a locker before they could enter the monument. The security was intense, even more advanced than the one they'd gone through at the various airports they'd gone through in the past two weeks. The only thing they got to take inside was Edward's camera. He'd insisted because he said he intended to compare her beauty to Lady Liberty's.

After that, they got into yet another line to take an organized picture in front of the Statue of Liberty. They had been kissing in that one. Then they climbed a lot of steps to get to the monument viewing area and then walked in. Inside the statue, there were even more fantastic photo opportunities. There was the old torch that had been replaced by the newer model and they also got someone to take a picture of both of them with a close up of the lady liberty's face replica. The museum was equally interesting and there they got the audio tour and hit the stairs going up.

She'd been worried that she would be scared of the height, but it had been so tight that she'd never really looked down. Edward went ahead and before she could begin to fear, she'd felt the fresh air and he'd helped her to the top. The rangers at the top were very wonderful and informative, and they'd stayed as long as they wanted - moving from side to side, as the other tourists did, taking lots of pictures. They spent an hour on the observation deck absorbing the great views of the New York. The Lagos Island skyline that had bowled her over in the beginning paled in comparison. She looked over at Edward now, kissed him on the cheek and snuggled on his chest. She loved him so much.

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

It was a long flight back from New York with a layover in Paris and bad traffic on the way back from the airport. Once they put away most of the luggage, Gladys collapsed on the settee.

“Have you said that you love me today?”

“How can you ask that?” Edward queried. “After all I did in the car on the way back to show you.” He looked at her suggestively and waggled his eyebrows.

She giggled and threw a stuffed pillow at his head.

“Come over here.” He patted the seat next to him.

Gladys moved over and he lifted her into his lap and whispered something saucy in her ear.

She pushed him off, “Now that would be an idea,” she teased. As they fell over each other in laughter, the phone rang.

“Who knows we’re back?” Gladys mused as Edward went to answer it. As the conversation continued, her mind began to wander. She had some calls to make too.

## A Heart to Mend

“What! You can’t be serious!” As he listened further, his eyes narrowed into slits and the smile disappeared from his lips.

“Edward, what’s it?” Gladys moved closer to him.

“Damn!” He swore. “Why wasn’t I alerted earlier?”

“Darling, calm down.” Gladys said stroking his back.

Edward listened impatiently to the voice on the other end. In truth, he had received two official emails in his personal inbox in the last week of their travels. In spite of asking that there be no correspondence from his office, his PA and his personal lawyer sent two separate missives concerning some urgent business. He’d ignored both.

“I’ll be right over. No you don’t tell me what to do. I said I’d be right over so you all better wait for me.” Edward growled and banged the phone. Someone was messing with him, seriously. He stared into space till Gladys’ voice jerked him out of his reverie.

“What is the problem Edward?”

“I can’t talk now; I have to get to the office.”

“Can I come?” She placed a hand on his rigid forearm.

“I know you’re tired and God knows when I’ll be back...”

“I don’t mind waiting; give me a call when you can, tell me what’s happening. I love you.”

He turned back briefly. “Of course baby, I love you too.”

With that, he went out leaving Gladys to stare at the closed door. What a welcome! She wondered what had gone wrong. She hoped it could be resolved and picked up her mobile.

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## A Heart to Mend

Edward barged into his office and straight to the boardroom. He pressed the buzzer, and leaned back in the nearest swivel chair. Benibo and Mrs. Olayomi came in together; each carried a large sheaf of papers. It was Benibo who'd called him on the house phone.

"Welcome back Edward," Mrs. Olayomi greeted.

"Thanks." Edward closed his eyes again. The adrenaline rush seemed to subside all of a sudden and he felt lightheaded. It had actually been a long day. Damn these sharks.

Odili the accountant came in next, followed by his personal assistant Ogbonna and the secretary.

"You should all take your seats." Edward sat up, drawing on his last reserves of energy.

They all sat down silently while his personal assistant placed some folders before him.

"Ogbonna, I left my contacts with you. Why didn't you tell me about this takeover business as soon as it happened?"

"I sent an email, but when you remained incommunicado I didn't want to pursue it."

"So what were you saying?" Edward turned to Benibo.

"The Monday after you left, Ogbonna contacted me about an expression of interest for takeover in the mail. We all know how you feel about that so I contacted Mrs. Olayomi," he gestured at the company lawyer, "and we sent back a reply in the negative."

Edward steepled his fingers and nodded briefly.

Benibo continued, "Later the same week, we received another note informing us that they held fifteen percent of the company's

## A Heart to Mend

stock and wanted a place on the board. They noted that they had enough voting rights to make this demand and wanted to challenge the non- negotiation policy of the current directors to takeovers. That was when I sent you an email.”

“Dammit! Who are those people?” Edward burst out.

“They wrote through their lawyers, Agama, Fagbenu and Co.” Ogbonna replied.

“We sent back that we held controlling interest,” Mrs. Olayomi continued, “and they could not have a place on the board unless we agreed on it in a general meeting.”

The cogs whirled in his brain, but Edward remained silent.

The lawyer continued. “We were stunned to get another correspondence last week. They said they now hold over thirty percent of the stock and would apply for a takeover...”

“Impossible!” Edward exclaimed, “I can vouch for at least seventy percent in this room.”

None of them could meet his eyes and Mrs. Olayomi began to stammer. “Well...what happened...that is...”

“What?!” Edward barked, suddenly on his feet. Sweat beaded his forehead and his heart was racing as he imagined the worst.

Benibo was the one that spoke up, “The Registrar’s office records as of today show that the twenty percent stock in Gladys’s name has been transferred to another brokerage firm, sold.”

For the next several heartbeats, one could hear a pin drop.

“No... that cannot be possible. We were outside the country.”

“The transaction has been verified,” Benibo added.

Edward looked at the faces around him and recognized the

## A Heart to Mend

reserve that had not been there before. He sank back into his chair in silence. He heard the secretary picking away at her keyboard, the uneasy shuffling of papers and every other little sound.

“I was with her all the time we were travelling. There was no opportunity, she couldn’t have done it! She wouldn’t have sold those shares without my knowledge, dammit!”

Silence greeted his words.

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“This trip must have cost you guys a lot of money.”

“You can say that again.” After speaking with her mother, she was being grilled by Udoka her middle brother, the only one whom she hadn’t spoken with in the intervening month. He was a travel junkie and wanted to know every detail of their trip abroad. “Especially in America; the hotel in New York was so high priced and we only stayed at the Holiday Inn.”

“Is that supposed to be expensive?”

“Not really, they’re on the more affordable scale. Edward has his standards, otherwise I would’ve booked even cheaper motels; you know me now.”

They both laughed, “We rented a car to get around better in New York but we should have stuck to walking and public transport. It was expensive and we kept getting lost.”

## A Heart to Mend

Udoka laughed, “So how come you guys didn’t visit any place in Africa? I hear Tanzania or Kenya is also a great destination. You know, to take in a safari in the savannah.”

“Well we have a whole lifetime to have more holidays. Our honeymoon is even coming up shortly.”

“So which were the best sights, at least one for each city?”

“That’s hard; the cities were quite different. OK...I would say it was great going up the Statue of Liberty, the view from the London Eye was fantastic too, and all of the Island of Barbados.”

“I wondered why you traveled to so many places...”

“Edward had some business in New York and London and I wanted to do some shopping for the wedding. We only sneaked in the one week in between at Barbados.”

“I envy you. I can’t wait for when I’ll be able to travel out of Nigeria.” He had travelled to more states in the country than the rest of them in the family put together.

“I hear Ghana is not expensive; you might consider that.”

“I may but will you contribute to that?” He laughed. “I’m out of credit so have to go now. Take care of yourself and Edward.”

“You bet,” Gladys clicked off the phone and lay back on the settee. It had been relaxing speaking with her family and reliving memories of the wonderful vacation she and Edward had enjoyed. She tried calling his number again but he still wasn’t taking calls, she wondered if he had switched it off or the battery was flat. After a worried sigh, she pressed out Ola’s number.

“Iyawo. You’re back! How was the flight?” Are you home?”

## A Heart to Mend

“Slow your roll girl,” Gladys could feel her friend’s excitement chasing away her worry instantly.

“All right, but give me story please.”

“The flight was fine and we’re back home now, satisfied?”

“In your dreams! Abeg let’s have all the details since the last time. How was Barbados?”

It was difficult not to gush. “Honestly, it was magic. We had such a wonderful stay, it’s hard to express. We were a little tired after the long bus ride to the resort, but the scenery was so beautiful and our driver so informative that the time went by quickly. From the time we got off the bus on the first day to boarding it again on the last day, life was super relaxing.”

“Edward was right to insist you people went then. You wanted to use that for your honeymoon, remember?”

“Yes, I was thinking about flight plans, and the romantic factor. But I’m glad we took his advice. It was fantastic! The workers were the friendliest people you could ever meet; it took us less than 10 minutes to check in. They escorted us to our room and explained everything about the resort to us. After a quick nap and a snack at the BBQ place, we just walked around the resort. The flowers and trees were amazing! Everything was so nicely manicured and clean, and the beach...La Campagne could learn a thing or two.”

Ola laughed, “Their problem is the ‘big fish in a small pond’ syndrome. They’ll soon be left behind, Ghana is forging ahead.”

“Anyway, this resort just kept getting better. We were lucky with the weather, especially on days we booked countryside tours. Otherwise we stayed indoors or used the cool swimming pools. The food was great - not that I liked everything they served - but there was a variety to choose from. Some of them I had never seen or tasted before.



## A Heart to Mend

The drinks were all novelties. I mostly stuck to pina colada; Edward tried one called 'Bob Marley' and almost got drunk.”

“Drunk or not, I know you had your wicked way with him. You bad girl...” Ola laughed.

Gladys joined in. “Nothing happened...but Barbados was just fantastic. I can't shout. I dragged Edward to this one club, and it was really rocking. We danced most of the night away.”

“No guessing what you did for the rest of it.”

The conversation continued in the same tone, with loads of laughs as the girls updated each other on their lives. Edward's business problem was pushed to the back of Gladys mind.

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Edward stood up, “Benibo please join me in my office.”

He was pacing when the lawyer came in and closed the door softly. “Talk to me.”

“I visited the stockbroker that handled the sale of Gladys's shares and he told me he got instructions from her to that effect. I saw the mandate myself. Those forms are not very all-inclusive but it was definitely her signature. She instructed them to sell the Bestman Group PLC stock at the highest price. They did exactly that and transferred the payment to her account. The officer was very cooperative; they're the same brokers for Kanayo your friend.”

Edward knew that already. He had taken her there himself when she wanted to purchase some shares and begin trading in the stock market. His stock gift was shifted to the same brokers because he wanted to fully show there were no strings attached.

## A Heart to Mend

“And you’re quite sure that the mandate form is authentic?” He hated asking but had to.

“I would think so; there’s nothing out of the ordinary. I have a copy of it here.” He passed a piece of paper to Edward from his file.

While Edward looked through it, he continued. “The stockbroker’s office said it had been with them for over a month till the offer came to them last week and they made the sale.”

Edward released a heavy breath; he didn’t know what to think. The mandate he held was dated a week before they left on that fantasy vacation. Gladys had gone ahead to jet off with him around the world but had sold the shares without telling him? It was so unlike her; a major issue they agreed on even before they traveled was to not keep secrets from each other.

“As a lawyer, do you think this could have been forged?”

“It certainly looks like her signature; it will be difficult to prove otherwise. Nothing seemed tampered with in the original. You know her writing better - what do you think?”

“She doesn’t usually capitalize like it’s been done in the company name, but everything else fits.”

“Maybe you need to see this too.”

Edward studied another piece of paper. It was email exchanged between Gladys and the brokerage account officer. One printout detailed the sharp upward swing of the share price of Bestman Group among other market news with a request to sell to which she had replied yes and thanks. The other asked after her travels and received a fuller reply.

“The officer used that to buttress why they’d gone ahead with the sale; she knew about it. Again, I imagined if someone else schemed to have the shares sold, why would the money be transferred to her account? How many people know the number?”

## A Heart to Mend

“You’re sure the money went into her account?”

“Yes, and is still there. I pulled some strings and got a bank printout of balances that included hers with a mini transaction statement.”

Edward extended his hand and accepted the new sheets of paper stapled together. A patch further down was highlighted and he saw the deposit of millions of naira on the said date..

“Do you know who these withdrawals went to?” Benibo shook his head. They remained silent for a few minutes before Edward spoke again. “You warned me.”

The lawyer had used all sorts of legalese to convince him not to transfer those shares to Gladys but he hadn’t listened. He had forged ahead regardless.

“Yes I did, not that it matters now. We can pull through this takeover even without those shares.”

Edward pulled himself together and folded the papers in his hands into his jeans pocket. He would call Gladys but only to tell her not to expect him yet. For now he needed to find a way to secure his business.

“This is not easy for me to say but you guys did a thorough job. Thanks.” They shook hands and then Edward asked to be left alone. “I’ll join you shortly.”

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She was not paying any attention to the NTA network news that was just about to start on the bedroom television when her phone rang. Gladys answered it right away.

## A Heart to Mend

“Hello, Darling what’s happening?”

“I have to be here much longer,” Edward said. “Expect me around midnight.”

“Do you want me to come over? Have you eaten? Should I bring you some food?”

“No thank you. I’ll get them to send out for something here. And Gladys we need to talk, but not on the phone.” The stiffness was clear in his tone.

“Edward, please tell me what’s wrong.” It must be serious, so why was he keeping it to himself?

“I think you already have an idea Gladys.”

“I do?” Was she supposed to know? They did frequently talk about his business but her brain was still in vacation mode.

“I have to go, we’ll talk when I get back if you’re still awake.” The phone clicked.

Gladys tried to order her thoughts, to regain some control over a day that begun so well, but had gone awry. In the past hour since her call with Ola, she’d started on the unpacking. She’d earlier sent a text to Edward after two calls failed to go through. The message said she loved him and that he should call her.

Now wondering if he read the message, unbidden tears slowly made tracks down her cheeks. The way Edward just talked to her made that hard to believe. Was this the same man who had walked down the steps of that Air France plane with her this evening on their way back from their trip? Gladys looked across the room to where the luggage and some clothes were still strewn around and drew a deep breath. She decided to call Kanayo and pick his brains.

“Hi Gladys, how are you? It’s good to hear from you.”

## A Heart to Mend

“Nice to hear from you too, but that’s not why I called.”

“I can guess why you did. Actually, I’m driving right now and won’t be able to speak for much longer. I just got off the phone with Edward and I’m on my way to join them at the office. The call was brief; he said it was urgent and had to do with the insider trading of the company shares.”

“I was hoping you had more details. He was dragged off to the office by Benibo soon after we arrived and only called some minutes ago to say he’ll still be there for some hours yet.”

“I’ll get him to give you a proper call if possible. Anyway, I’m glad you guys got back OK. Too bad about the situation with the company, I’ll be there for Edward.”

“Thanks Kanayo, you’re the best.” Gladys dropped the phone. This was certainly not how she expected them to spend their first night back; Edward in the office and she alone at home.

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Edward walked back into the boardroom and this time sat at the head of the highly polished mahogany table. He breathed in deeply and then let it out. Those who played with the tail of the tiger had only themselves to blame if they ended in its belly. There was no more playing with kid gloves. All bets were off.

He looked at Mrs. Olayomi as he spoke, “You had a meeting this afternoon. Did you decide on the next line of action? What about those behind this takeover?”

His secretary passed the minutes file to him and they waited while he flipped through it. He looked up then, “There’s no bidder’s statement, so maybe the takeover isn’t hostile?”

## A Heart to Mend

Mrs. Olayomi spoke, "It must be a business rival because they told us to expect the public announcement this week. We have sent out our own target's statement."

"Still, we can't say for sure till we get their bid," Edward said with a grim smile as he studied a file. "Thanks, this statement is good. How much of the stock is still out there?"

"Twenty-nine percent..." Ogbonna said consulting a sheet in front of him.

"How can that be?" Edward asked, puzzled. "What's going on?" Something told him that there was more bad news. Still he was surprised when Odili who'd been silent all along spoke.

"I traded my five percent holding."

Edward jumped to his feet. "What! When and why are you here then? If you sold it in the last month then please leave this room immediately..." He felt like punching something.

"No Edward, I began trading almost a year ago when I had some personal problems." The man was on his feet too. "I didn't know what was going on and I promise you everything is open and above board. It's just that I didn't want you to know. I could try to buy them back but the market is too steep for me especially now."

Edward tried to calm himself down. Odili had been with him from the beginning, over ten years ago. Edward recalled the stock and share price movements almost a year before and how after studying them together, Odili asked to handle it while he was away in China.

"Odili, we have to talk later. You of all people know how I feel about this company." He stared at all of them and asked grimly, "Is there anything else I need to know about?"

They were quiet and he turned to Benibo and Mrs. Olayomi. "Can I depend on you?"

## A Heart to Mend

Both of them returned answers in the positive.

“So we have thirty-six percent counting my thirty-one and the five owned by you two.” They nodded. “The opposition has thirty-five, that leaves twenty-nine out there like you said.” He looked at each in turn to be sure he was getting it right this time. “So to forestall the takeover, we’re looking to buy at least fifteen percent shares or get their holders to remain on our side?”

“That’s correct.” Mrs. Olayomi replied, “The controlling interest is still fifty-one percent but the acquirers could ask to sit on the board. With this tender offer, they could even start a proxy fight. We have to come up with genuine reasons to reject the takeover bid.”

Edward regretted not buying up more shares in the years since he’d bought the company. He was lax to assume the sixty-one between him and his management was enough. And here he was about to lose what made him who he was. He got back to the present.

“We have to do all we can to prevent that from happening. You’ve listed all the major shareholder’s names here, have any of them replied our target’s statement?”

“The statements only went out last Friday. However, Mrs. Martin-Pepple has assured us we can count on her two percent, the same applies for the six percent owned by a staff group,” Benibo replied. “We also got one of the registrar’s staff pushing our stand against the takeover and why it is not for the benefit of our shareholders in case anyone calls them.”

“Thank God for such loyal people. What about the other stock owners?”

Mrs. Olayomi picked up, “We’ve contacted a couple in Enugu and Port-Harcourt each with two percent holdings and await feedback. There’s some ten percent split between several Funds and almost fifty shareholders which we may not be able to do much about.”

“Keep up the pressure even on the Mutual Fund owners. Most

## A Heart to Mend

of the initial twelve percent our rivals got must be from small holdings especially with the two-tier tender offer they're using. We may use that in our share repurchase. We also have to make individual calls to independent shareholders."

"Edward, I think it will be better if you call the non-executive directors yourself. We need to work on their loyalty because this fight may boil down to a vote." Benibo added.

"I'll do that as soon as possible. Who are the owners of the remaining seven percent? Is it owned by a single individual?"

"Yes, they're registered to some brokers so we're still trying to find out the actual owners." Ogbonna bent over his papers. "We think they may be critical if it comes to a vote."

"I agree, continue to do that. I'm sure our rivals will be doing the same." They nodded and he gave a tired smile before bending down to the papers strewn across his desk. "Well then, I'll take some time to familiarize myself with all these reports."



**CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

“Hello, this is Gladys. Yes I’m fine, thanks. How are you? Is Aunt Isioma there, I’d like to speak with her please.”

Her aunt was in the United States visiting with her older daughter. Gladys had sent a text earlier to her cousin’s phone to say they were back but now she needed someone to confide in. She was confused about the recent turn of events and wanted some mature insight. That ruled out any excess of questions from Ola, and her mother did not know Edward that well.

“Gladys hello, Funmi passed along your text message. Thank God you arrived safely. But it’s late over there, is everything OK?”

“Not really, something is wrong with Edward’s company and he had to rush over to the office almost as soon as we arrived. He’s still there as we speak.”

“That is serious. Do you know exactly what it is?”

“Edward has refused to tell me what’s going on. I’m very worried. He’s put this distance between us as if whatever happened was my fault.” Gladys was upset yet angry. She poured out her

## A Heart to Mend

heart and all the events as they had occurred.

“Calm down Gladys. No matter how difficult it is falling from the high of the trip, you have to pull yourself together. Bear in mind that Edward is feeling the same way too and more intensely since it's his business in jeopardy. The first few months of any serious relationship are sometimes tricky especially when a crisis is added to the equation.”

“I understand, but why won't he talk to me? I offered to go to the office to see what I can do but he rebuffed me.” She'd thought they built up a large measure of trust and respect during their travels and the time spent alone but that seemed wrong.

“Gladys it is not magic, these things take their time. Whatever is happening with Bestman Group must be very serious. You have to keep a cool head and be watchful.” Her aunt's reply was very measured and Gladys felt better by the end of the conversation.

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It was close to midnight when Edward exited the elevator of the twelve-storey modern office building flanked by Ogbonna and Mrs. Olayomi. As they walked along the underground car park, his mind roiled with conflicting thoughts. Did she or didn't she sell?

“See you tomorrow.” Mrs. Olayomi said as she moved away.

Edward was surprised to see they were already at his ride. It was the limousine; it picked them up from the airport and was still there when he tore out of the house after Benibo's phone call. At least the owners of the hire service would be happy campers in all this. The driver opened the back door with alacrity. Edward recalled the snarled traffic on the way from the airport and what had happened in

## A Heart to Mend

that back seat. He turned to Ogbonna.

“Do you know if the Mercedes is here?”

“I think so,” the PA replied. He turned to the pool driver and spoke quietly.

“Okay sir,” the hapless driver replied in confusion and ran quickly to the elevator doors.

Mrs. Olayomi slowed down her car as it approached but Edward waved her away. They’d all been great. Kanayo, Benibo and Odili only left about an hour ago.

“Did you check Odili’s story out?”

“Yes. It was verified at the Securities and Exchange Commission. He filed an insider statement about a year ago and started trading; all his activities were properly filed.”

“Funny thing is I knew when that happened. I didn’t dig that deep though; I just made sure the books were in order. Odili handled it after the initial tip off especially the SEC angle.”

“If he covered it up, do you think he’s behind the takeover?”

“I’ll have a private talk with him but I doubt that. He probably played in the market unwittingly. The share movements had been going on for a while before he started trading.”

“At least we can still work around the loss of his stock.”

Edward knew what Ogbonna was not saying. They wouldn’t be here if they were only talking about five percent stock. The loss of the twenty from Gladys was the major culprit.

The limo driver returned and walked them to the Mercedes.

“Give the keys to me, I’ll drive myself home.”

## A Heart to Mend

The man jingled them over and bid both of them goodnight.

Before he entered the car, a thought occurred to Edward, “Ogbonna, about this company bidding for a takeover. I want you to find out all about them, the owner, holding company, subsidiaries, transactions, where, when, how, you name it.”

“Like the others said earlier, they’re hiding behind a lot of intermediaries, corporate entities and...”

“We have to unmask them as fast as possible and don’t think that anything is too small. Dig up even the tiniest details. You’ve been with me long enough know that this is war.”

“Edward you don’t need to remind me,” Ogbonna protested. “I’m doing everything possible, trust me.”

Edward got into the Mercedes and closed the door, “Is there anything like that, trust?” he muttered to himself. Winding down the window he said, “Thanks a lot... for everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

Edward put the car in reverse and sped out of the car park.

The PA shook his head and went back into the building. He still had much work to do.

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“He knows what’s going on now.”

“He does?” The person at the other end laughed long and hard. “How did he react?”

“He took it hard, had to leave the room for a while.”

## A Heart to Mend

“I wish I could’ve seen the high and mighty Edward Bestman stewing in his juices. Did you find out the person behind that seven percent with the non-voting brokers?”

No we didn’t, but we’re on it. That may be the last stand of the takeover since most brokers with voting rights will likely go with you. Edward is hinging a lot of hope on buying up that seven percent shares as soon as he can. People who own Bestman shares are lucky in these times. Is your group on that too?”

“Yes we are. Let us know if anything turns up on your side. I hope they do not suspect you?”

“Don’t think so, I do my work too well. And you said I won’t do this much longer?”

“No, everything is in place now, just keep your head down. You’ll be settled once we get in.”

“I just wanted to be sure. I have to go now; I only called this late because you said to let you know.”

“Of course, thank you and keep us in the loop.” The phone clicked off.

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Edward slowed his speed once he got onto the open road. His feelings were so riotous; he didn’t want to risk driving off one of the bridges. He wondered whether to talk to Gladys once he got home or wait till morning. He didn’t think he could wait; he would wake her even if she was sleeping. With the roads free of traffic as they were at this hour of the night, he would be home in less than thirty minutes. He would use this time to gather his thoughts.

## A Heart to Mend

Could she have done it? He asked himself for the hundredth time. Before this incident, his answer would have been an emphatic no but now he wasn't so sure. It was difficult to imagine that the businessmen who were out to takeover Bestman from him would get involved in such a patently illegal transaction that could land them in jail. The evidence in his pocket pushed him to think the blame lay with Gladys.

That would mean she sold the stock he'd given her just two months ago. She knew of the takeover bid and kept it to herself and she sold the stock without discussing it with him. The question was why? Much as he hated to admit it, it had to be the money. But where was the love, the agreement to always be on the same page? Did it not occur to her he might have needed the stock to keep back his rivals? It seemed she had betrayed him so effortlessly. He wanted to keep a cool head for their coming talk but it wasn't easy.

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He came into the house to find Gladys sitting on one of the living room chairs. When he noticed she was sleeping, he slammed the door. She woke up immediately. "Oh thank God you're back." Gladys rushed over to give him a hug.

He stiffened the instant her arms went round him. He dropped his jacket and waited till she removed her arms from his neck. Stepping around her, he continued on his way into the house.

"Darling what is it?" He was behaving very strangely; even if he was exhausted. She was tired too and his aloof attitude stung.

Edward ignored her and climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

"Edward, I'm talking to you. Can I get you anything to eat, drink?" At least that was somewhere to start.

## A Heart to Mend

“Leave me alone Gladys, you’ve done enough.”

“What does that mean Edward? Don’t speak in parables.” Her frown deepened as she followed him up the stairs.

“Don’t you know already, or is it that you want to hear it from me?” Simmering anger roiled in his head but he shut it off.

“Maybe you told me earlier but I can’t remember. I know it’s something to do with your shares but that’s all. I care for you and maybe I can help.” To be honest she didn’t like the way he was handling this. It was a pity he was under this stress, but there was no need to take it out on her.

His laugh rang hollow, “Really? Well let’s sit down.”

He sat down on the bed but when she came to sit by him, he moved to an armchair. Gladys remained where she was but her mind was in turmoil. Something was certainly wrong.

“What happened to the twenty percent stock of my company which I gave you for an engagement gift?” Edward queried without preamble. He’d decided to get direct to the point.

Gladys was thrown off balance, “How do you mean?”

“Do you still own them?” He sat forward and his tension was obvious from the nervous shaking of his legs.

“Yes I do, the certificate should be with the stockbroker. You introduced them to me. What’s going on?”

“It is not with the brokers.” The statement was flat.

Gladys struggled to understand what he was saying. He couldn’t mean they were burgled. “What happened?”

Edward leaned back. “Don’t be facetious Gladys. Didn’t you instruct your account officer to sell off the shares for you?”

## A Heart to Mend

“Sell? Of course not! I can’t do that without telling you...”

Edward powered on over her words, “When did you hear of the takeover bid and why didn’t you tell me?”

“What takeover bid?” Gladys was totally lost. Kanayo had mentioned something about insider trading but no bids.

“You don’t have to pretend. I know about everything.”

Gladys was tired of the games. “Edward why don’t you tell me what you already know? I still don’t understand.” She felt like screaming out of frustration. After their long trip, she wasn’t in the most patient frame of mind.

“Stop this cat-and-mouse game!” Edward snarled as he got to his feet. “All I want to know is when you were contacted by the rival company that wants to buy me out.”

Gladys eyes widened before she could stop it. “Edward, I’m telling you the truth. I didn’t know of any takeover bid and I wasn’t contacted by anybody. Why won’t you listen to me?”

He looked at her and sighed, “Does this relationship mean anything to you at all? Those times you said you love me, the times we made love, for God’s sakes...” Edward slumped back into his seat. After all the conversations they’d had, sharing their visions and goals. They’d agreed to be on the same page always, to share everything and support each other.

“Darling listen...” she moved to get up but he waved her off.

“What are these?” Edward removed some sheets of paper from his pocket and unfolded them. He came up to her, thrust them into her hands and turned his back. Let her try to explain her way out.

Gladys looked carefully at the papers in her hands and the words died in her mouth. There was a photocopy of a mandate card with instructions to sell Bestman Group shares. It was



## A Heart to Mend

signed with her name and a date for a week before they left the country. There was a bank statement showing the week's activities on her account and also the printout of emails with her account officer.

She stood up resolutely and went to stand behind him with the mandate card extended, "This is a forgery, Edward. I have nothing to do with this. There's also no need to turn your back on me!"

Her thoughts were all over the place. How could this have happened? Someone must be trying to frame her and break up her marriage. But why would they also want to takeover Edward's company? She did not see the connection.

Edward snapped back. "So you deny that you signed that mandate and consented to them selling the shares last week?"

"Of course I didn't sign that mandate to sell the Bestman shares. She knew how much it meant to him, it meant even that much more to her that he'd gifted it. "Somebody somewhere must be lying but it is not me..."

"What about the email? Explain that to me."

"I hardly even looked at that first email; my account officer sends such updates regularly. When he asked about the trip, I simply replied. You can see I didn't once mention the shares."

"You didn't have to. They already had your mandate; just a yes was enough to go ahead with the transaction."

"A yes to sell some of the other shares I had with them, but definitely not your shares!" Gladys could feel her temper rising. Edward wasn't being fair to her at all. Did he even hear her at all?

"I find it difficult to believe that some people forged your signature and put your bank account number on the form?"

"But that's exactly what they did! They forged everything in a way to make it seem that I did so."

## A Heart to Mend

“And they did this just for the fun of it?” His back was still turned on her. He didn’t know what he would do if he were looking on her face. What he didn’t want to do was break down.

“I won’t claim to understand criminals and that’s what these people are.” She touched his arm, “Edward we have to find out...”

“Why would criminals put so much money in your account?” He shrugged her off and pointed to the rest of the papers in her hands. Her explanations were not convincing enough for him. The signature on that mandate card was too obviously not forged.

“Edward believe me, I had nothing to do with this. Nothing!” Gladys felt like knocking some sense into his head. His eyes stared into the middle distance like she was not there. He was possibly reverting to his hurt them before they get me mode, shutting himself off so he wouldn’t feel any pain in the event that something really happened.

“Well I am a business man and I’m pushed to believe the evidence before my eyes. The money is right there in your account. I don’t think any right thinking person will give up close to fifty million naira just like that.” His fists clenched at this thought.

Gladys gasped, this was even worse when spoken out loud. “Edward, we can work together to find those doing this. Doesn’t our love count for something?” It would be a year next month since they’d started dating. After their ups and downs and the month away together, one would have thought he knew her as well as anyone could.

“Don’t speak to me of love tonight, Gladys. Just explain to me how come you’re entangled with those who want my company.”

Tears of annoyance escaped from her eyes, “That signature looks real, but I promise you I did not make it knowing it would lead to the sale your shares. My account officer must have tricked me. Or it may be someone in your office, there were three people that day, don’t you remember? It could be one of them...”

“I was there too Gladys, why couldn’t it have been me? You

## A Heart to Mend

were also there yourself and the facts point to you...”

“I swear it wasn’t me Edward. I swear...”

“You don’t have to swear baby, it’s early days yet. My people are on to it and we’ll soon find out what happened.” A mist of exhaustion blocked his gaze for a moment and he swayed.

“Edward I love you.” The tears were a stream down her cheeks. “How can I do anything to hurt you? As for the shares, I had no intention of parting with them and certainly did not sell. There must be someone either in your office or the brokers...”

“You have to realize something Gladys. Like I told you that day I gave you the shares, it’s my lifeblood. Love is all good, but is it worth it?” It’d taken over ten years to build Bestman from scratch. Managing it made him who he was, gave him the purpose to continue in the face of his blank history. With Gladys, he’d become so distracted that he was now on the verge of losing everything.

“Edward, don’t cheapen our love this way. We have to talk things through.” Gladys folded her arms across her chest and tapped her feet on the floor. She was tired of his stubbornness.

“I don’t know why you seem to have it stuck in your head that I must be culpable. Please don’t equate me to the people that hurt you in the past. Listen, we can stop this takeover by showing that my shares were not obtained through the right means...”

“We have to prove that first.” His eyes narrowed at her tone.

Gladys moved to hold his arm and he backed up. She stepped away and gestured right at his face, “What’s wrong with you? If all I want is money then why haven’t I taken off with the fifty million?”

He moved to pick up one of his suitcases which she was yet to unpack and grabbed his toiletries on the way. With the mood he saw her in; he might just do something they’d both regret if he remained.

## A Heart to Mend

“What are you doing?” She asked in surprise.

“I am going to a hotel for the night...”

“You don’t mean that Edward! You’ve barely listened to me as it is and now you want to leave?” Her voice was shaky with the mixture of anger and disappointment she felt.

Edward read the sincere hurt in her tone but did not look at her. He needed to clear his thoughts and not allow mushy emotions take him over. “I know we agreed you’ll stay here till your aunt returned and you can remain. We’ll talk when I return tomorrow evening.”

“You think I’ll be waiting? You’ve disrespected me enough Edward, maybe I should have seen it coming. If I don’t hear from you by midday tomorrow, I’ll be moving back to my aunt’s house.”

“Maybe you should. The takeover will be going public this week. I don’t know if I’ll be back.” His heart slammed in his chest but he kept his voice short. He would be fully occupied with finding a way forward for Bestman and didn’t want to be distracted by any protracted quarrels with Gladys.

“Is that all you have to say?” She asked with finality.

“Yes, I’m done talking for now, I really need to rest.” He sidestepped her and left the room.

Gladys listened to him marching down the stairs and then to the door banging closed. She lay down drained of both tears and anger but full of fear. What was going to happen to them?

**CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

Mr. Odusote luxuriated in the soft leather of his tall black executive-style chair. He spun himself away from the desk and toward the window of his fifth floor office. They were housed in one of the state liaison buildings lining Ahmadu Bello Way, and so he watched the morning traffic snake alongside the beach. He still couldn't believe how things had worked out. He recalled how last year he tagged behind Edward Bestman for the longest time, taking all those brush-offs. Maybe if Edward had listened then and gone into business with him he wouldn't be facing a takeover bid. Mr. Odusote laughed; it was nice to be in the driving seat for a change.

He stood up when Chief Okrika walked in. "Good morning."

"Morning Mr. Odusote, how are things?"

Mr. Odusote joined him at the coffee table in a corner of the large room. He waited while the older man settled himself on a nearby couch before he spoke.

"Everything has been going as planned. My person called me last night to confirm that Edward Bestman is back in the country and knows about the takeover bid. He's very angry about it."

Chief Okrika laughed. "I'm not in the business of making

## A Heart to Mend

Edward happy. You never told me who your informant is?”

“I really don’t think you need to know...”

“You’re right. What matters is that we get correct information and use it to our advantage. And we’ve both always delivered.”

“Of course Chief, I can never forget that it was through your agents that we were able to obtain the twenty percent of Bestman stock last week. That was a master stroke of genius.”

“Always trust Chief. I had that ace card up my sleeve for over a month. I had to choose the best time to strike.”

“I’ll never doubt you.” Mr. Odusote replied

He’d been approached by people who worked for the industrialist about two months ago with an offer he couldn’t refuse. Chief Okrika had come across his proposal and said he wanted to know how far he’d gone in his discussions with Edward and Bestman Group. He’d gone for the initial meeting flattered that such a man would want to do business with him without putting him through hoops. He’d found out that Chief Okrika had intentions of taking over the company and wanted someone motivated to be his coordinator.

It had shocked him then the amount of information the businessman had about him and even more about Edward. When he’d let on that he could bring in even more personal information, Chief Okrika had sweetened the deal with a seat on the board and a lump sum payoff on their first major milestone. Sitting in his poky Surulere office afterwards, he’d realized the deal would get him everything he ever wanted to do if he’d had the funds available.

He was still trading in the Stock Exchange, but after two years, his meager fund hadn’t made the dent he wanted in the small companies sector of the market. His dream was to trade big time, the same reason he’d tried so hard to get Edward Bestman and a few other company owners interested. Chief Okrika did not own a listed company but he owned enough shares and sat on enough boards to make him the perfect

## A Heart to Mend

partner. This made him even better than all the people he had previously talked to.

“So what’s the plan of action?” Chief broke into his thoughts.

“Management will buy up as many shares as possible at all prices to prevent us from joining the board of directors. Edward Bestman doesn’t want his power challenged by a proxy fight.”

“I didn’t think he would. He always liked calling the shots, even as a young boy. He’ll come to see he can’t do that now.”

“You’re the first person to say they knew Edward as a boy. So he actually doesn’t come from money? I always imagined he did.”

“No, he certainly does not. He was a hungry orphan when I knew him, running around Kano with dangerous gangs and getting into trouble. Of course he wouldn’t want people to know this.”

“A lot of us did things as children which we regret as adults. But one thing I don’t like is his arrogance. He and his people treated me poorly and never gave me a chance. That was why I thought he was one of those types born with a golden spoon, the way he mingled with the high and mighty.”

“You’ll get revenge. If everything works out, you’ll be my representative on his board. That should keep him humble.”

“Thank you Chief, I’ll really appreciate that.”

Mr. Odusote smiled in satisfaction. To be honest, he wasn’t out for revenge. He only wanted to be a board member on a listed company so that he could push through some of his ideas on stock trading. He was sure that any company that plugged the gap he saw would stand to make a lot of money for their shareholders. He already had voting power on Bestman Group due to the eight percent of shares he owned through his hedge fund. When added to the twenty-seven percent held by Chief Okrika it definitely gave them more clout. He could only guess how much it took to amass those in such a short time. Money had its

## A Heart to Mend

uses.

“So tell me what we’re expecting for today.”

“The Stock Exchange will soon make a public announcement of our takeover bid. The bid statement will be published by the Commission and appear in two national dailies. We’ve sent out our off-market bid to the shareholders with a two-tier tender offer for cash or exchange of shares from some of your companies. From all indications it should be busy going forward.”

“That is very commendable. Do you have enough people here to work with?”

“Yes. When do you intend for us to send a formal letter of offer to Bestman’s lawyers?”

“I know they should all go out together but let’s hold on for a while yet. They’ll get some information from their shareholders who want confirmation. Other than that, let them sweat a little chasing their own tails while trying to find out whom exactly is after them.”

“We can’t delay it beyond Friday; they’ll soon find out about the fund I manage.”

“I can deal with that. How many more shares do you think we can acquire by then?”

“There’s over twenty percent up for grabs. With the premium we’re offering we can sponge up as much as fifteen. A few of the shareholders may reject us on loyalty grounds.”

“Like the former owner for instance.”

Mr. Odusote laughed. “She already called this morning with a scathing reply to our offer.”

“We can do better than her measly two percent.”



## A Heart to Mend

“Well the battle for the board of Bestman Group PLC is on, and I can see a victorious end. You know we can push for a place on the board with voting rights even now? Do you frankly believe that a tender offer would be cheaper and easier in the scheme of things?”

“Yes I do and I prefer taking my time rather than doing everything in one fell swoop. By the time I am ready, Edward will be the chairman no more. Also, get more information from the insider; we really need to have a look at their bylaws. I don’t want any surprises.”

“I will do that Chief. I will start calling the other executive directors this week. There are several options open to them that we need to plug in advance of a likely extraordinary general meeting. We must also impress on the rest of our staff here that they all have to be on their toes. “

“We definitely have to do that. I’ll even speak to them, there’s no room for mistakes here.” Chief Okrika stood up and moved to the desk. “And make sure we close that lump seven percent soon. Now show me the documents that require my signature.”

Mr. Odusote joined him and placed a bulky file on the desk. He didn’t understand everything the Chief planned but as long as it benefitted him at the end, he was happy.

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Edward came into the office very early and spent the first couple of hours going through all the accounting books of Bestman Group PLC. He wanted to be especially sure of the financial statements and annual reports since he had bought fifty one percent of the controlling rights to the shares of the listed company and merged all his assets under it. He spoke into the intercom;

“Could you tell Odili to meet me in the office please?”

## A Heart to Mend

“Sure.” Ogbonna replied.

“Good morning Edward,” the accountant said a few minutes later walking into the large corner office. The sunlight from the windows fell on Edward and the papers on his desk.

“Odili, please sit down. We do need to talk like I said yesterday,”

As soon as he sat, Odili began, “First off, I’d like to apologize for trading those shares.”

“They were yours to sell; I should have paid more attention to what was happening.”

“Still, it would have been useful if I had let you know then and not covered any tracks. Maybe we would have detected the signs of the acquirer’s activities. I always felt like bringing the shares’ performance to your notice would alert you to my activities. I always hoped to buy back.”

“Though you should have done that, it’s not your fault. It didn’t help that I was distracted by so much going on in my life. Travelling so many times to wrap up with our foreign partners, making all the wedding plans and going on this ill-advised jaunt...”

“It seems you think Gladys had a hand in this? She may be a pawn like me. I don’t know her as the type that’ll do that.”

“Unless you have some evidence you want to show me, I’ll prefer not to talk about her.” Edward looked away quickly, the memory of last night’s conversation fresh in his mind.

“Fair enough, but do give her the benefit of the doubt like you’re giving me now.”

Edward stood up and moved around to lean on the front corner of the table. “I confess that we had a difficult conversation yesterday but reached no firm conclusion. I had to move out because I’d rather keep

## A Heart to Mend

an open mind than feel like my reasoning is clouded or biased.”

“Just don’t make any rushed judgments. Sometime ago, I started an affair with a widow, and it is a mistake I’m still paying for. I am stuck and it is now too burdensome to manage two households, particularly with several children in foreign universities. My finances are quite stretched right now.”

“You don’t have to explain any further; your earlier apology is accepted. The only condition is that you will not be part of the takeover team I will constitute after this meeting.”

“You don’t trust me anymore then. Believe me...”

“No, you don’t understand. I think at least one senior executive should not take part. No one knows how long this takeover process will last or the outcome. If we’re all distracted by it then our operations could suffer and company results deteriorate.”

“Of course, I agree we have to be judicious in how we traverse this new development, but one would have thought that as the CFO, I would be in the team.”

“I’ll sometimes call on you, or borrow your assistant director of finance and operations. But otherwise, I’ll prefer you keep an eye on the business of the company. Apart from me, you know about it more than any other person. This has nothing to do with the shares.”

“This time, I’ll make sure we’re always on the same page.”

Edward went back to his chair settled himself. “So tell me what you think is the way forward from the current situation.”

“I called this a growth curve earlier and I mean it. We previously only valued Bestman based on net asset backing per share

## A Heart to Mend

and sometimes on net after-tax profit. We did not consider the extra value to acquirers or assess our strategic position in the marketplace.”

“But it’s just been three years. I thought we could start the analysis of the progressive value of the company, in terms of how outsiders saw us, after about five years of control.”

“I see your point. But with the plans to boost operations and earnings we should’ve been aware of that too. Luckily, this takeover is only boosting our share value now.”

“You’re right, if it goes on for much longer, it will hurt us. Though we have no direct offer from the acquirers yet, I want to know those behind this. It would also help us appraise its attractiveness in comparison with our own assessment or what is applicable in the market.”

“If it is favorable, are you willing to step down?”

“No, Bestman Group PLC will remain under my control.”

“Remember Edward, everyone loses if this becomes an ego trip. You have to carefully think things through before making such statements. Still there are ways to get your way.”

“I have thought about it. I didn’t sleep a wink last night.” He didn’t add that part of that time had also gone towards thinking about his relationship and the weeks away with Gladys.

“There are a couple of poison pills open to us through our bylaws. Benibo and Mrs. Olayomi can explain in detail and how to apply them. The best is the preferred stock option. We could tap some of those investors who have been after us and the Chinese partners.”

“You’re correct, we could put out some which have special voting rights that may possibly be used to approve the issuance of new

## A Heart to Mend

shares, the acquisition of the company or to elect new directors; stuff that will actually happen as this takeover goes forward.”

“Exactly, use one stone to kill various birds. Our statement already mentioned the flip-in defense in the by-laws. That gives us the leeway to come up with the associated provisions. But before them, get all the shareholders like the holder of the seven percent behind you.”

“We’re on their trail already. You did well, thanks.”

“You’re welcome; let me know if you need something else.”

“I will do that.” The intercom on his desk buzzed and Edward pressed the button. “That’s for my eleven o’clock with Mrs. Olayomi and her team. I’ll talk with you later.”

“When are you convening the entire takeover team?”

“That will be eleven tomorrow morning.” Edward stood and walked him to the door.

“Sure, let me know how it goes.”

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When they arrived at his compound in Lekki, the chauffeur opened the back door of his black SUV for Chief Okrika to step out. He’d bought the house a few years ago though it was rarely used; they spent most of their time in Kano. His wife’s Honda CRV was parked next to them. She was about to get into the driving seat and was dressed for a day out. Maybe she wanted to stopover and gossip with the few friends and relatives she had in the city.

## A Heart to Mend

“So who is the lucky person?” He wouldn’t be surprised if she used the opportunity to shop. She hardly did anything else since she cut back on her duties at the factories.

“I’m visiting some new friends, no one you know.” She walked towards him.

“So you’ve already made new friends in the few months we’ve been here?”

“We’ve been here six months and I make friends easily.”

“Now you explain it like that, of course.” He turned away.

“How did your meeting go?”

Chief Okrika stopped, “It was OK. Mr. Odusote is proving up to the task. He told me Edward returned with his fiancée yesterday from their trip and was surprised I already knew. There’s new information though, Edward has split with the girl and moved to a hotel.” He laughed uproariously and his wife joined in. “Edward has his hands full trying to keep his business away from me.”

“He deserves it,” Mrs. Okrika hissed. “It is good too for that gold-digger that he took his frustration out on her. I wonder how she snagged his attention in the first place.”

The chief laughed, but there was an edge this time. “You never cease to amaze me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing you can’t figure out on your own,” He smirked as he walked away. He hadn’t been ignorant of the feelings she had nurtured for Edward while he had lived with them. She had possibly brought what happened on herself the way she had made her attraction to the young boy so obvious. Now she was jealous of his woman. Well, they said hell hath no fury.

## A Heart to Mend

“Why are you being like this now, Chief? Aren’t you pleased that you’re getting back everything Edward ever took from you and with interest too?”

He didn’t look back but spoke in a louder voice. “It is quite gratifying, I guess.

“Now you’re talking like my Chief. See you later?”

“I may not be in the house then, but no problem. Have a good time.” He was planning to call that fiancée of Edward. That is if she still was. If she agreed, then he would plan for them both to meet somewhere this evening. He had a proposition for her that he knew was not to be sneezed at. He laughed as he went in.

**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Gladys had called her manager to take the day off and promised to be in the next day. She was to have resumed yesterday if not for the mixed-up flight plan. Today, she had a splitting headache and couldn't face work. She was in the kitchen tidying up after a late lunch when she heard a knock. It was her first meal of the day, but she still ended up not being able to eat anything. Already knowing it wasn't Edward; she slowly went to open the door. It took her a full minute of looking at the woman standing before her before recognition came. It was Edward's previous foster mother.

"Good morning." Suspicion threaded her words.

Mrs. Okrika ignored Gladys and without a reply to the greeting, marched straight into the house. Gladys was surprised but she quietly closed the door and followed her through the hallway. The older woman was standing in the middle of the living room looking around. When she removed her sunglasses and turned, there was so much open hatred and spite on her face that Gladys frowned in confusion. The woman bared her teeth in a predatory smile, moved to one of the settees and sat down with a tinkling of gold jewelry.



## A Heart to Mend

“Why don’t you join me my dear?” she asked, as if she owned the place. Gladys went and sat down on the opposite armchair.

“What of Edward, the caring fiancé?”

“He has gone into work...” Gladys began

“Gone to the office already? But you just returned from your trip around the world?”

“Something important came up and he had to go.” As Gladys said this, her mind began to race wondering how Mrs. Okrika knew about the trip or their schedule.

“Well no problem as I actually came to see you. Don’t be surprised,” she said at Gladys’ raised eyebrows, “I want to ask you something. How well do you know Edward?”

“How do you mean? Of course I know him very well.”

The woman laughed. “Yes, you said he told you about us and how he grew up in an orphanage. Did he tell you the reason he was sent out of several homes before we took him in?”

Gladys paused before answering. “He was not sent out; they just couldn’t keep him.”

Mrs. Okrika smirked. “No no, they all sent him away. Didn’t he tell you that? I can see that he didn’t.” She continued at Gladys’ silence. “Let me tell you; Edward - or Sani, as I knew him then - is an unrefined bastard and I’m sure he hasn’t changed. Once he became a teenager and knew he wouldn’t be adopted, he took to fighting at the drop of a hat. After he almost beat a boy to death once, the orphanage had to send him away. He began to live on the streets.”

“He did not tell me that. I don’t believe you.” Gladys whispered in denial.

Mrs. Okrika was not finished. “We took pity on him, this street

## A Heart to Mend

boy doing odd jobs around our factory and brought him into our home. We loved him but he kicked it in our face...”

“Look, Edward told me what happened. How you and your husband framed him up...”

“We framed him up?” Mrs. Okrika shook her head. “You better believe me. Even before I met him, Edward was an angry and wicked child beating up people and stealing when he could. While he lived with us, he still got into trouble, smoking, drinking and fighting. I treated him like my own, but he stole from my husband and violated me. Edward almost raped me...”

“That’s a lie!” Gladys jumped up shaking her head and covering her ears with her palms, but that couldn’t stop her from hearing every word the woman hurled at her.

The older woman also got to her feet, her loud voice riding over Gladys words, “Yes he did. When he lived with us, Edward attempted to rape me. He hit me when I wouldn’t give in.” She pulled up the sleeve to reveal a deep scar high on her left shoulder. “To defend myself, I picked up a knife but he turned it on me. That was when I got this scar...”

Gladys was in shock as the woman went on relentlessly. “It was only the entrance of our gatemen that saved me from death at his hands.”

“Stop lying,” Gladys shouted. “Why are you telling me all this, making up all these stories?” By this time, Mrs. Okrika was standing right in front of her.

“If I am lying, then I wonder why your loving Edward did not tell you the truth. Maybe he told you a few things, but did he tell you that he almost killed me before running away from the house? Did he tell you that he and his gang stole from my husband? Do you not wonder how he set himself up in business so easily?” Mrs. Okrika’s voice rose insistently.

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys sank down into her seat and blocked out the woman's words. Edward had not mentioned the rape. She would assume Mrs. Okrika was making up stuff till she spoke with him. After all he'd told her about the theft charge without prompting.

When she remained silent, Mrs. Okrika began to gloat. "Do you believe me now?"

"No I don't. Edward may not have told me every detail of what transpired with you but I'd rather believe him. He told me that you resented him and I can see that it is true. So much that you betrayed him and lied to your husband to get him sent to jail."

"Why should I do that? I tell you he almost raped me and stole from us and you think I resent him? All I know is that he has to pay back!" The woman began to pace the room.

"Is that really why you don't want to leave him be? I think it started even before he was born. You were the one that told him, about who his father might be, right?"

"Yes, I knew Edward's father. What has that got to do with it?" Mrs. Okrika stopped and looked back at Gladys with wide eyes.

Gladys decided to hazard a guess. "The sins of the father must be visited on the son right? Edward said you recognized him the first day because he resembled his father. Maybe the man rejected you and then Edward did the same too. That is the payback you want..."

"What rubbish! Utter nonsense." Mrs. Okrika stalked back to her chair and sat down.

"Then why are you here and not the police? Edward almost perished in a police cell, even though there was no evidence to press whatever charges you brought against him. You especially knew there was no proof because you framed him."

"You must be out of your mind." Mrs. Okrika rolled her eyes but her legs began to shake as a counterpoint to her speech. "Either

## A Heart to Mend

Edward has you completely fooled or you're allowing his money to blind you. But hear this very well. He will pay back, no matter what."

"Why won't you let him be? After his childhood surely he deserves some love..."

"And you actually imagine he has found love with you?" Mrs. Okrika shifted forward. "So why did he move out of the house to a hotel last night?"

Gladys felt her mouth fall open. "How did you know that?"

Her opponent smiled and relaxed. "You would like to know that wouldn't you? Well, it turns out that you are the betrayer now. You sold his shares to his rivals, didn't you?"

"That's a bare-faced lie!" Gladys jumped up and stood shaking.

"Get used to it, because that's the story Edward will tell the next woman." Mrs. Okrika stood up and shook out her dress. "What were you saying about your love now, eh?"

"You set me up." This realization echoed in Gladys's whisper as she walked forward.

Mrs. Okrika laughed and swerved away from her on her way out of the room. "That is another case that will be thrown out for lack of evidence. Edward will go down, and if what keeps you here is the foolish notion that he loves you, save yourself the heartbreak and get out now. He cannot love anyone, and he certainly doesn't love you."

She went out and closed the door softly. Gladys remained rooted to the spot.

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## A Heart to Mend

Gladys returned to her aunt's house after Mrs. Okrika left. Edward did not reply any of the messages she sent to tell him of the woman's visit and refused to pick any call. Now she sat in her bedroom, fingers tapping out a nervous rhythm. She wished she could talk to someone. She'd called her mother but her brothers had informed her that Mama traveled to the village and there was no network there. It was a bad time to call Aunt Isioma who could be asleep; she might have to open up to Ola after all.

It was obvious that Chief and Mrs. Okrika were not to be trusted. She had a good suspicion they might be the people behind the takeover bid. It had only started after the former foster parents came into the picture. They didn't want Edward to be happy and they were fighting on two fronts; his home and his business. What was clear from Mrs. Okrika's earlier visit was that they wished to poison her mind against Edward. Those stories were concocted to spoil their relationship and prevent them from working together. She made up her mind not to believe their words; one could only imagine what they had to gain by his misery and downfall.

She put her head in her hands in despair but then stood up in anger. She couldn't give up and allow them to defeat Edward. Edward had to get his company back. Edward might not like it, and her further association with them could alienate him even further but she had to do this.

Her phone rang inside her purse and she almost jumped out of her skin. She rushed to get it out and her fingers were still shaking when she picked the call. "Hello, Edward is that..."

"Chief Okrika on the line, Is that Gladys?"

Gladys took the phone away from her ear and looked at it before putting it back. She had hoped it would be Edward calling with another line. But Chief Okrika of all people, and just after his wife's visit? "Good afternoon, Chief. How may I help you?"

"There are several ways you can help me..."

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys interrupted, "First, how did you get my number?"

After the initial reaction of wondering if the call was from Edward, she was overtaken by anger. What had she done to these people? More important, was Edward really telling her the truth, could it be possible that the venom the Okrikas harbored against him was truly unfounded? She wasn't happy to be caught in the middle.

"My dear girl, you may not know it but details like that can be easily purchased in Lagos..."

"Is this the same way your wife knew to come and harass me at Edward's place today?"

"Did you say my wife came to see you?"

"Yes and I didn't appreciate it one bit," Gladys replied.

"I didn't know about that but Edward's address is not a secret, one can find it out if they want. You wouldn't know since you're a Johnny Just Come, JJC." He laughed at his own joke.

"Well your wife had so many things to tell me half of which I think she just made up..."

He interrupted with another noisy laugh. When he spoke, the laughter did not inflect his voice. "I can believe that, yes, I can believe that. But there were some truths too weren't they? I also heard that the shares Edward gave to you have been sold to his rivals and he left the house in anger when he found out. Is that not so?"

Gladys remained silent. It still baffled her how this couple knew all they did.

Chief Okrika continued, "Anyway I like you so I want us to talk about this problem you have with Edward. Let's see if there's a way to get your shares back from the possible acquirers of Edward's company. I hear he's about to lose even his place on the board."

## A Heart to Mend

“Have you spoken with him about it?” Gladys asked tongue in cheek. How dare this stranger toy with her like this?

“Not yet.” Chief Okrika replied, “I want to hear your own side of the story first and confirm some facts before I finally speak with him. I know you’re an intelligent girl who knows on which side her bread is buttered. You couldn’t have landed Edward otherwise.”

Could people be so two-faced? But she will play along till she got what she wanted. “Can we meet somewhere to discuss this?”

“Of course, I was about to suggest the very same thing.”

“Will your wife be there?”

“If you want her to be there, then she will. Let’s meet at the Federal Palace Hotel. I can book a room or reserve a table at the restaurant any day you want. I’m free this evening.”

“I’ll prefer the restaurant. Tomorrow afternoon by two will suit me better. Is that fine with both of you?”

“Any day and time you choose is OK. We want to find a solution to this problem Edward is having with his business, and if possible, find ways of saving your relationship.”

“Thank you,” Gladys replied with a curled lip. “I’ll be there.”

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When she went into the office the next morning, Gladys headed straight to see Ola. She was going to meet with Chief and Mrs. Okrika that afternoon and wanted to be sure of how to go about it. She couldn’t decide on whether to confront them with her suspicions or to take a different tack.

## A Heart to Mend

“You’re finally back at work!” Ola screamed as she stepped into her cubicle. The girls hugged tightly, almost falling on the desk. They laughed and straightened up.

Gladys sat down on one of the seats. “It’s nice to know that you missed me so much. How is Azeez? And ahem, I can see that the seed you guys planted is growing.”

Ola fell on her in mirth. “You’re so funny, Gladys. But yes we thank Allah for blessings.” She rubbed a hand over her growing belly.

“I thank God for you too. How’s the office?”

“You took your sweet time, I expected you yesterday. It’s as usual, but let’s not talk about that yet. I can see you’ve been doing some shopping. The new dress looks great on you.”

Gladys wore a black wraparound sheath she’d bought in one of the stores near their hotel in New York. Ola smoothed a hand on it and then settled back on her seat in the wide hipped posture typical of pregnant women.

“How is Edward, did you leave him at home?” She asked.

Gladys sat back on her own chair. “Edward is back to work...” her voice tailed off and Ola seemed to notice instantly that everything wasn’t as they should be.

“What’s the problem, Gladys? You don’t sound as happy as you did when we spoke on Monday.”

Gladys sighed heavily and slumped back in her seat staring at her hands. She’s been angry on Monday but now she was just hurt and confused. She’d stopped trying to contact Edward while one part of her mind kept hoping he would call at any moment.

Ola straightened up with a hand on her chair arm. “Gladys what’s wrong?” You don’t look as happy as you sounded...”



## A Heart to Mend

Gladys had known this would not be an easy discussion and tried to tread carefully. “Ola, it’s too early to say much but I need your advice.” Ola nodded encouragement. “Edward’s company is on the brink of a takeover and he blames me. He thinks I sold those shares he gave to me...”

“Impossible! You couldn’t have done that.”

Gladys raised her face in gratitude. “Thank you so much, you’re a wonderful person.” She’d needed to hear that. Thank God she came to Ola. She dragged her chair closer and continued in a lower tone, “Edward has all this evidence he thinks proves I must be involved in some way...”

“What is he thinking? He knows you...”

“I spoke with my aunt earlier yesterday evening and she says I should be patient with him. Honestly, I feel like breaking open his head and putting some sense in there.”

Ola laughed along with her. “I can see why we need to cut him some slack. I mean he must be under a lot of pressure. I hope his directors and shareholders are behind him? I’m guessing he doesn’t want to be acquired or sell his shares to the highest bidder.”

“Bestman Group is like his baby; he definitely won’t let go. And I don’t blame him. Especially now I think I know those who are behind it all. They must have framed me and are working overtime to undermine Edward and everything in his life.”

“What? Are you sure?” Ola exclaimed. “Have you told him?”

“The truth is that I haven’t spoken to Edward since Monday night when he raised the issue with me. I was supposed to stay with him till Friday but after our quarrel on Monday night, I threatened to return to my aunt’s house which I did. He moved to a hotel and hasn’t picked any of my calls since.”

“You had a quarrel...and it’s already Wednesday. Oh my...I

## A Heart to Mend

don't know what to say. You know I think couples should always leave their channels of communication open."

Gladys shook her head, "I don't want to dwell on it too much. I have decided to focus on a plan of action. My suspicions are that Chief and Mrs. Okrika are the ones weaving this web."

"Who are they and what do they have to do with this?"

"Chief Okrika is a rich industrialist based in Kano where Edward grew up. I never knew they were connected till last February. I think they're business rivals." Gladys glossed over the facts not wanting to break Edward's confidence. "Chief Okrika called yesterday and agreed to a meeting so we can discuss my involvement with Edward's business problems. But listen - the wife also visited me saying I should leave Edward because he's going down."

"She said that?" Ola's eyes were wide as plates. "How come they know about it?"

"That's the question."

"But how are you involved in all this?"

"I don't know, but that is what I intend to find out."

"How're you going to do that?" Gladys imagined Ola's mind already racing ahead.

"I have a date with the Okrikas this afternoon. Chief Okrika said he and his wife are willing to discuss not just the business problems but also address my involvement in it."

"Gladys if they're the ones behind the takeover, do you think that's wise? If they already framed you successfully, they'll want things to remain that way." Ola reasoned.

"I agree, I don't think they're sincere. You should hear the stories Mrs. Okrika told me. As for the takeover, I'm sure of it. The

## A Heart to Mend

process must have started since we met them in February; it only came to light after we travelled out of the country.”

“Wow, this is a lot to take in.”

“It is, and I’m sorry for burdening you with it, but I need some advice on what to do this evening. Should I confront Chief and Mrs. Okrika?”

Ola was silent for some moments and then she said slowly, “I don’t think that would work very well. If they are behind this as you suspect, they won’t be anybody’s fools.”

They were quiet then Ola asked, “Will Edward be there?”

Gladys shook her head in the negative.

“Chief Okrika called you, right?” Gladys nodded. “Are you sure his wife will be there?”

“He said she’ll be there if I want her to.” She replied.

A smile played on Ola’s lips, “If your suspicions are anything to go by, then something tells me that Chief Okrika may believe he has a joker up his sleeve.”

“What do you mean by that?” Ola moved closer and whispered into her ear.

“You don’t think he will do that!” Gladys jumped to her feet.

Ola laughed, “I think I know men more than you do.”

“I thought briefly about it but I said no...”

“Sit down, I’ll tell you what to do.” Gladys sat and listened.

**CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

The atmosphere in the boardroom was so tense it could be cut with a knife. Edward reviewed the agenda he'd prepared and waited for Ogonna to pass it out to the other ten people in the room. There were Benibo and Mrs. Olayomi; the group directors for Finance, Strategy, Operations and Communication as well as the managers of the four arms of the company. The non-executive directors were absent, but Edward planned to have them at the next meeting in a few days when more plans would have been drawn up. He called the meeting to order.

"How is everyone this morning?" He looked towards those who had stayed late with him last night, and they all nodded with the others. It was time to get down to the nitty-gritty.

"Good. We're going to stick with the agenda and get the updates first." He continued, "I sent out a request to the necessary people this morning. Communications, what is the plan?"

Sola Amana joined Bestman two years ago but had several years experience in business communication and came highly recommended. "We earlier had a couple of enquiries from the press, and we have more coming in. You would have noticed the public announcement of the takeover bid in today's business headlines,"

## A Heart to Mend

Everyone nodded and she continued, “Fortunately we have good public relations and accessibility. We’re in a position of strength.”

“Does that help if our rivals are sending out messages too?”

“Our acquirers, as things stand, are an unknown entity; they are only listed in the bid as a private consortium. My team already has contacts in the press. We can release some generic comments; I can make them up as this meeting goes along. We need a single spokesperson to ensure that a consistent message is conveyed, and I suggest Edward...”

“Not yet,” It was Benibo. “I think it may give a sense of panic if Edward comes out now. Maybe you or one of us lawyers could play the part of the public face. Only if it progresses further will Edward then need to come into the picture. Using him now may upset the market flow as shareholders bail out.”

“But don’t you think Edward as the front man would show shareholders that we take their interests seriously?” It was the Director of Strategy, Mr. Ajibola. Most of those present nodded.

Edward looked around the table and answered, “I’ll be the face of the process with you Sola and Benibo as back-ups. I must also sign off on any press statement. Is there anything else?”

“I have scheduled a press conference in a week followed by a couple of TV appearances. One will be on a breakfast show, and the other a business personality profile.”

“That sounds very good, thanks. My secretary will set up a meeting for tomorrow.” Edward turned to the finance director, “What are our options? If we want to buy back some shares; how will that affect our financial situation?”

“Bear in mind the acquirers won’t negotiate a sale.”

## A Heart to Mend

Mr. Ogunnaike replied, “That means if we go to the market, the shares out there will be at a premium. One only needs a good look at that crucial lump ownership of seven percent. Yet the alternatives are few. We’re currently stretched due to the recent investment in the entertainment arm last year. Only fifty million can be spared from operations and that’s the money intended for upgrading our technology. We may have to go to the banks for a loan...”

“No, no, I wouldn’t suggest that. We’ll only add debt with interest to our profile...”

“I’m listing the choices to pick or discard. Bank loans are also my last preference.”

Mr. Okereke the manager of Capital Investments continued. “I propose we go to the market with newly created stock or bonds. Like the offers we’ve been holding off committing to. The American Fund that wants preferred stock and the Chinese buy-in through new issue.”

Edward took over from him. “This brings me to the crux of the meeting. I know we are all aware of the regulatory background. You all got the brief on the takeover process?”

Most of them nodded; others looked down and flipped through their documents.

“Things are going to move very fast from here on. We’ll schedule an extra-ordinary general meeting for two weeks from now. All hands will be needed and nothing I say in this room gets out until then. You all signed confidentiality agreements when you joined the company, and it’s more important now than ever before that none of you fall foul of that policy.”

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## A Heart to Mend

Just before she entered the restaurant, Gladys checked her bag to make sure she was ready, and then she sauntered in. She was dressed casually in a white shirt and jeans with a matching clutch. Chief Okrika sat alone on the far side of the room, and as she walked towards him, she ruminated silently that Ola had been right. Before she got to the table, he stood with a beaming smile on his face and pulled out a chair for her.

“You are welcome my dear,” he crooned and pulled his chair closer to hers.

“Thank you Chief Okrika.” She smiled stiffly and sat down.

“No need to call me the full name. I prefer Chief; that’s what friends call me.” Chief Okrika wore a cream colored agbada and adjusted it between his legs as he sat down.

“No problem sir,” she assented, “but what of Mrs. Okrika?”

“Oh, she wasn’t able to make it. She had a previous engagement, which she couldn’t break. Hope you are not too disappointed? You don’t mind?”

“No... I believe we can still achieve something.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Chief remarked.

“I hope you’ll bear with me; I can only stay for drinks. I have somewhere else to go to after this...”

“Of course, that is OK. Let’s waste no time then. What do you want to order?”

“Orange juice will be fine.” Gladys nodded and the waiter soon came over at the wave of a hand from her companion. The drinks were served without delay including the side of grilled gizzards Chief Okrika had ordered. Gladys fiddled with her clutch; it had been sitting on her

## A Heart to Mend

lap but she placed it on the tabletop. “I don’t want it to be stained,” she explained in apology.

“I understand. You young girls love your fashion; you can be very fussy.” He laughed as he moved his seat even closer. He sipped his drink and popped a gizzard on a cocktail stick into his mouth. “Have you sorted out your problem with Edward?”

“Chief I’m still thinking of what to do. You already know that Edward moved out of the house and I have not spoken to him since.” Tears came to her eyes and added some sincerity. She was a better actress than she gave herself credit for.

“So what can I do for you?”

Gladys stared at him for a moment. Ola had predicted this quite correctly. After making her life complicated, he asked what he could do for her. Was he not the one that called? She struggled to bite off the words on her tongue as he placed an arm round her shoulders.

He smirked as he spoke. “My dear girl, I can help you out if you want. Did I not put over fifty million naira in your account?”

“You mean you schemed for me to lose my shares?” Gladys was amazed at the man’s unconcealed arrogance.

“That’s correct. Remember that I paid for it too. I’m also the only one who has the power to allow you to touch that money.”

Gladys narrowed her eyes at him. After the argument with Edward, she’d wondered about that. However, when she called the bank, they said she could access the funds after a few days.

“You’re wrong,” she replied. “It may take some days but I’ll withdraw the money and give it back to Bestman Group.”

Chief Okrika laughed. “Do you think I’ll give you money to help fight me? It’s obvious you don’t know how the banks work. The



## A Heart to Mend

three days required before you can access that money is for it to be cleared by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. Who knows how much longer that will take if I whisper into the right ears?"

"What do you mean?"

"If the Commission's operatives think you've committed fraud to get that money, you could even be cooling your feet in jail..."

"I did nothing dubious! The money came from you."

"Do you think you're wiser than I am?" He shook his head. "I was in business long before you were born. That payment is from an account that can only lead to money laundering sources if enquires are made. There's only one way to forestall such enquiries."

Gladys felt very frustrated. She was getting the information she wanted, but it seemed that Chief Okrika had thought of everything. "What have we done to you? What has Edward done to you?"

"Forget about Edward. I can tell you that he's on a sinking ship. I just heard he's planning to call an emergency meeting, but that won't help him. He won't be of any further help to you. For you, I have the perfect solution. I know you're from a poor background with three brothers to take care of. And one of them is diabetic..."

"How do you know all that?" Gladys was lost for words.

"It's easy to find out things with the right people."

"What kind of right people?" Gladys asked. This man went about hurting people and there were people to aid him?

"My dear, you're still so young. For instance, once I gave my agent your name and a picture, it took a week to get all the details I needed. I knew about your office, your broker and your family. Become mine, dear girl, and know what it means to have power. I also had detectives monitoring you and Edward everywhere."

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys couldn't believe all the information Chief Okrika was throwing at her. "You had people following us? What confuses me is this: how did you get my instruction mandate to sell the shares?"

He laughed, "Your account officer and someone else from my partner's side were very helpful."

He smiled at her look of amazement and dropped the cocktail stick he'd been flossing his teeth with. "Let's talk about why I called you. I liked what I saw of you in the magazines and also when we met at Ikoyi club. I want you to be my mistress. I know you're with Edward for the money, so I put the money in your account as a first step..."

Gladys was very shocked. Though she'd suspected that this had been his motive all along, it still roiled her stomach the way he'd come out with it. She felt like walking away, but she restrained herself. After all, the plan was going even better than she and Ola could have imagined.

"You're a very good looking girl and I want you. I want you very badly and will do anything..."

"What are you saying?" Gladys was furious. It would be a joke if this was the reason Chief Okrika was trying to takeover Bestman Group. "You're married! Your wife was even supposed to be here. And I'm engaged to Edward, as you know well enough!"

"That doesn't matter. What I do in my marriage is my business. My wife and I understand each other. As for your engagement, how long do you think that will last?"

"I won't stay here and listen to this." She made as if to stand up.

Chief Okrika held her hand and she allowed him to pull her back. "I know you might be thinking of what people will say but you're not a foolish girl. Think of what I can give you. I will release that money in your account after you've left Edward. You don't have to remain in this town; I'll settle you anywhere..."

## A Heart to Mend

“Why are you doing this?” Gladys whispered.

“Doing what?” He laughed. “You’re so naïve, but that makes me want you more. I’m saying you should forget Edward. I’ll be good to you.” He leaned closer to her, his hot breath on her cheek.

“Impossible!” Gladys snatched her clutch purse and stood up.

He seized her hand and raised his voice a note. “Edward is not going to take you back, I’m sure of that. You see, I made Edward what he is today and I’m going to break him. As for you, if you accept me, I’ll move your family abroad where your brother can get better treatment. I’ll do even much more for you.”

Gladys was incensed; all the emotions she’d been trying to repress came tumbling out. “You and your wife tried to destroy Edward, but even though he was still a child, you failed. This time you’re not going to succeed either, because he is older and he has me on his side. Edward loves me, and I love him too.”

Chief Okrika frowned then laughed at her vehemence.

She almost floundered and her voice shook as she ploughed on. “If you think you’re going to break Edward now by taking over his company, you are grossly mistaken. He is far stronger than that. But I guarantee you and your wife that you will both fall flat on your faces before you can bring Edward down. Do you know why? You will have to pass through me.”

At the end of the tirade, his grip, as well as his jaw had slackened. She pulled her hand away and didn’t look back as she stormed out of the restaurant.

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## A Heart to Mend

Chief Okrika fumed with rage all the way to the hotel room he'd booked in advance. Imagine the small girl threatening him; he, who was old enough to be her father. By the time he settled himself on the bed, he had simmered down. The audacity of her words was galling, but it was also admirable. He wanted Gladys even more now he'd sat and spoken with her, but maybe it wasn't to be. He'd lost that battle, but the most important thing was to win the war. Edward got away all those years ago only because he, Chief Okrika, played nicer then. Things had changed now. He would make sure that Edward paid for stealing from him.

One of his mobile phones rang and he plucked it from the depths of his agbada. The call connected but he couldn't hear over the noisy clicks. "Hello...hello, is that Mr. Odusote?"

"Yes Chief, it's me. Can you hear me now?" The voice at the other end asked.

"Yes, how is it going? Do you have any news for me?"

"Chief, who told... how did you find out?" Mr. Odusote asked in an excited voice.

"Find out what? What are you...nobody told me anything."

"Chief, the private seven percent shares are on the market!"

"This is fantastic news!" Chief Okrika got to his feet.

"Yes! The owner has been contacted by the brokers, and they've obtained permission to sell off the shares. In actual fact, I just got back to my office from their lawyers."

"That is very good of you. Well done. But I know you brokers; they will probably want us to go head to head with Bestman Group so as to get the maximum gain."

"They claim the other party doesn't know of this yet."

## A Heart to Mend

“You mean Edward isn’t aware? His people don’t know they shares are on the market?”

“That was what the brokers said. They decided to call us first because they feel we have the better no-strings-attached offer which their client may prefer.”

“This is great news. As soon as I drop, I’ll make sure I do all that needs to be done.”

“Chief, I hope the terms you promised me still apply?”

“Of course,” Chief Okrika assured immediately. “In addition, there’ll be a bonus for you after we’ve sealed the deal with the brokers. I reward those who are good to me.”

“Thanks, Chief. I hope things continue to go our way.”

Both men laughed and then Chief Okrika pushed a button to end the call.

He had pure satisfaction all over his face as he punched in his other broker’s number into the phone. He gave the man details on how to liaise with Mr. Oduote in the purchase of the shares. Next he called his lawyer to see to it that the takeover proceedings of Bestman Group continued and could be done in such a way that Edward would step down. With the new shares, he would hold over forty percent, and if he could buy more, then he would own more than Edward. Even without more shares, he could seize control of four seats on the board and become Chairman. He laughed gleefully and rubbed his hands together.

**CHAPTER NINETEEN**

The boardroom door banged open as if people were leaning on it and Mrs. Olayomi and Benibo rushed into the room talking simultaneously. This had become his office in the last couple of days, just as he had also converted his office to his bedroom. He hadn't been home for three days; he'd been swamped with work. Edward stared at their faces in fatigued confusion but smiled as their excitement flew in after them.

"We've made it!" Benibo crowed in victory. "We found the seven percent."

Edward jumped up; this was their first real lead. "That is great news. Forgive me but I was so swamped; there are so many decisions to be made. Sit down and tell me what's happening."

"The lawyers of the executor of the seven percent just called to say it's on the market. They want a meeting with us in the next couple of days. We set up one for noon tomorrow. After the brief phone conference, we offered to buy at five percent over the market price. The executor's broker was very negative; he made it clear that our acquirers were also interested, and he wanted it to end in an auction with them. We have to be able to beat their price." Mrs. Olayomi's brow was furrowed with worry.

## A Heart to Mend

Benibo added, "I can tell you the broker didn't find it funny at all. He begged out of the meeting halfway through the call. I'm sure he would have liked to sell it to our rivals and make a big killing. The lawyers seem more neutral, but we'll see tomorrow."

"Damn," Edward muttered. "My flight to New York is for seven this evening; you'll have to represent me at the meeting. That reminds me, did you find out more about the acquirers?"

"Yes we did." Mrs. Olayomi replied, "It took us this long because they hid behind a lot of corporations and subsidiaries. But there was no doubt on the information we got this afternoon after the meeting. They're a company based in Kano with big interests in agro-allied manufacturing whose shares are publicly traded on the stock market. The chairman is Chief Okrika. He lives in Kano with his wife but according to sources, he's been staying in Lagos for the past several months."

Benibo threw a question into the brief silence that enveloped the room at that piece of information, "Do you know the man? There isn't any reason that particular set of interests should intersect with our business. It may be a vendetta."

Edward leaned back on his seat and released a deep breath. "So it is Chief Okrika..."

"You do know him..." Benibo asked sitting forward.

"You can say that," Edward replied. "Before this February, the last time I saw him was almost twenty years ago. He and his wife raised me for about two years as foster parents."

The other two looked at each other and Mrs. Olayomi spoke their minds, "Your foster parents? You were raised by foster parents?"

"Yes. I am an orphan." Edward stood up and waved both hands as he took the opportunity to stretch his legs. "Yeah, yeah, you're not the only ones that don't know. I ran away from their house when I was seventeen and no one since then has heard my full story."

## A Heart to Mend

Well, except for one person, he added to himself. He still didn't know what to do about Gladys and he had to do a lot of travelling in the next few days.

"He's been looking for you since then?"

But why is he after you and your business?" Their questions were fired in quick succession.

"I don't know if he was looking for me. We did run into each other earlier this year and he made some threats that let me know he and his wife have not forgotten about some matters."

"Can I ask what those are?" Mrs. Olayomi sat forward.

"I want to say I don't think they make much a difference now but it may perhaps come out before all this is done. He put me in jail for attempted rape and theft but I was innocent and the police agreed. Whether that's all he wants satisfaction for, I don't know."

Mrs. Olayomi and Benibo looked at each other and back.

"There were no formal charges; there's nothing he can use to support anything he might say, so we'll deny everything. I'm just telling you so that you're not surprised if it comes out while I'm out of the country. You know what to do to avert any damage."

"That's fair enough. Did I tell you Mr. Odusote's Top Assets Limited manages some of our shares? He is one of their front men..."

Edward smiled and sat down. "Is he? I'm not surprised."

"So is Gladys in this with Chief Okrika?"

"I don't know about Gladys, I've not had the chance to speak with her. I'm actually trying not to think about that; I need all my wits about me if we're to pull off our plans in the ten days we have."

Mrs. Olayomi started to say something and then kept quiet.



## A Heart to Mend

“But proving that those shares were obtained in an irregular way could stop the takeover in its tracks ...”

“Benibo, this is now more than just the takeover, and you know that.” Edward sat forward forcefully. “No one is taking this company for any reason...”

“Edward, this could be a vendetta. It doesn’t matter what the bidder’s fine print says, it boils down to what the motives are for Chief Okrika. We can end it just by taking this matter up with the stock exchange and SEC.”

“I run this company as it should be run. We’ve grown and expanded and I’ll not have my managerial style and results questioned, least of all by Chief Okrika and his likes.”

Benibo tried to pacify him. “OK OK, if you think that’s the best way to go fine...”

“Yes I think so, and it’s quite late in the day for you to raise these objections to plans we already agreed on. I travel tonight as will three other directors and we’ll be travelling twice more in the next weeks. So don’t drag us back now because you think this may be just a vendetta...”

“That’s enough from both of you.” Mrs. Olayomi stood up and held up both hands. “Edward, you do what you have to do and we’ll manage affairs at this end. I’ll advise though, that you send out a message to your fiancée to let her know whatever you’re doing. It’s not a good thing for couples to be so disconnected. But we’ve said all we came to.” She gestured at Benibo and he stood too. “Get ready for your trip and we’ll talk when you get back.”

When they left the boardroom, Edward threw back his head and let out a gust of air. He picked up his phone and began to dial.

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## A Heart to Mend

Gladys paced the length of Aunt Isioma's living room biting her nails in worry. Since her meeting with Chief Okrika, she'd been calling Edward on both his mobile and office phone. The mobile was switched off, and he'd told his secretary not to transfer any calls to him. She was angry and contemplated going over to his office to make a scene when the phone rang. The caller ID said 'Call 1'; she hoped that Edward had relented and made a move. Her heart began to race.

"Hello?" She whispered tentatively after she picked the call.

"Gladys, how are you?" The faraway reply came after a few seconds. It was her aunt.

"I am fine, thank you..." Gladys let out a pent up breath.

"You don't sound fine. Did the situation with Edward become worse?"

Gladys sighed; she had put off calling Aunt Isioma after she had discussed with Ola and decided on a way forward. "Aunt Isioma, we're at a very bad place now. I was thinking of storming his office just before your call. I'm totally mad at him..."

"What happened? It wasn't like this when we spoke..."

"Edward came back that night and said so many hurtful things. A major misunderstanding led to a shouting match."

"Is this because he left you alone at home?"

"No, this was far from that. Edward's company faces a takeover and he thinks I caused it by selling my shares."

"You mean the gift of twenty percent stock he gave you last February? But why did you sell the shares, Gladys? I assume he's mad because you didn't tell him?"

## A Heart to Mend

“I didn’t tell him because I did not sell the shares. When he gave them to me, I promised I would keep them on trust. Why would I go selling them to the highest bidder?”

“So do you still own the shares?”

Gladys sighed again. This was the tricky bit. “I must have made a mistake on one of the visits to my stockbroker. While we were on our trip, the shares were sold on an instruction I earlier signed. I just found out in the meeting I had this afternoon with the people behind the takeover that my account officer had something to do with it.”

“Have you explained all this to Edward?”

“He isn’t answering my calls. That’s why I said I would go barge into his office and give him a piece of my mind...”

“Is that necessary? I thought you were to stay with him till I returned on Friday?”

“After the scene on Monday night, I moved back to your place. It’s been three days now and we’ve not exchanged a single word. I even left him a note before I left.”

“Edward seems to have this habit of wanting his space when he needs to think, but in these circumstances, I don’t think that’s wise. You need to work together.”

“That was what I told him.” It felt good to have some back-up. “I’ll definitely go over to his office or the house later today and try to have another talk, now that I have more information.”

“You should do that. It’s always better to resolve issues and not keep them hanging.”

“I have heard you and I will do that. How are you preparing for your return?”

“Oh, that. I’ve finished packing and I’m just counting the

## A Heart to Mend

hours till my flight. I decided to make a few phone calls to Nigeria because I just got off the phone with my lawyers.”

“Didn’t the lawyers know you were on vacation?”

“They knew, but something urgent came up. Speaking of shares, the broker was with them and they wanted my permission to sell some of my late husband’s stock. They have to inform me for any sale over five percent, and in this case we have seven percent. Normally I just concentrate on the industrial and fashion side and leave them to represent the corporate side. My lawyer mentioned there were problems with the company. He has some proxy forms for me to sign when I return so he can attend the general meeting and vote on my behalf. That is, if I do not sell. Come to think of it, this sounds similar to what Bestman is going through.”

“So you don’t know which company owns those shares?”

“No I don’t, the lawyers are never very specific...”

“Do you know if you have stock on Bestman Group?”

“I really don’t know. I only began to familiarize myself with these things not long ago...”

“Aunt Isioma, this is urgent. Is there a way for you to check?”

Her aunt caught on to the urgency in her voice, “Well, I believe Funmi has a file that contains all the business documents left to us by her late father...”

Gladys was growing anxious, “please check on that file...”

“But why do you think it’s so important to find out if I have these shares?”

“I think those are the ones your lawyers want to sell. In fact I’m sure of it,” Gladys insisted. “Those shares are hot on the market now.”

## A Heart to Mend

“There should be other shares selling well too, not so?” Her aunt tried to be rational.

“I think that’s only one reason why they were so hasty in calling you. They could have waited till you returned to the country in the next two days. They probably found out about how we’re related and concluded that you may be disposed to take Edward’s side.”

“You may be right but I doubt...”

“Aunt Isioma, the people I met earlier are serious about taking over Bestman Group. I’m sure they’re on the market to snap up any of the shares they can get. I’ve done some searches and talked to a few people. Edward may have to do some stock repurchase to hold them off. Either that, or at least get the owners on his side in a forthcoming general meeting which they also told me about...”

“This is more serious than I thought.” Her aunt replied after what seemed like eternity, “OK Gladys, I will do as you say. Give me a few minutes and I will call you back.”

True to her word, her call back came almost immediately, catching a pacing Gladys in mid-stride.

“Gladys you know, this girl has not touched this file since I brought it over...”

“Did you see anything?” Gladys cut in; the tension was wracking her insides. “Do you have Bestman shares?” She had been praying that her instincts were right. Over the line, she heard the rustle of stiff paper.

“I have in my hands the certificates for about four million Bestman Group shares.”

“Four million shares! That’s a good seven percent or so.” Gladys was overjoyed, “It will certainly go a long way in helping Edward’s cause. And you can vote on the shares?”

## A Heart to Mend

“Yes. Like most of the estate, my late husband bequeathed it in a trust to the children and grandchildren but we were able to change it in the courts so I’m the executioner in Nigeria.”

“Oh thank God! Aunt Isioma, you have to call your lawyer right away.” Gladys knew that time may be fast running out, “We have to call them now. It is crucial and urgent that you let them know that you do not want to sell, at least not till you come back.”

“I will do that later and then if there’s still time, I will call you afterwards.”

“Thank you so much Aunt Isioma. I’m so grateful...”

“You’re welcome. Now you go and see Edward and talk some sense into him. I’m sure if he knows half of what you’ve just done, he’ll be forced to have a rethink.”

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Edward opened the door and registered the absolute silence. It was almost dark when he arrived home for the first time since the quarrel. A part of him wished Gladys had not made good her threats to leave. He still wasn’t sure why her phone had been engaged for the past hour. It was his fault for not calling earlier, but he was up to his eyeballs with work. He flung his jacket on the chaise and walked upstairs. In the bedroom, it was more obvious she was gone.

Her boxes were not there, not even the usual things she had taken to leaving at his place in the last few months. He couldn’t define his feelings; a curious emptiness seemed to envelope him. The past two days had been hard; he’d either been working or agonizing over what to do about their relationship. A feeling of uncertainty warred with the love which he still felt for her. His heart told him now that it wasn’t possible that she’d betrayed him. Not Gladys,

## A Heart to Mend

she wouldn't sell his gift for money.

No, she didn't sell those shares; Chief Okrika must have got his hands on them in another way. His eyes caught sight of a sheet of paper arranged on the night table. He walked over to the bed, sat down and picked it up. It said simply, *I didn't do it, please call me*. He tried her number again but it was still busy.

He walked over to the closet and opened it. One item stood out, and that was the wedding gown Gladys had bought while they were in New York. It was still in its white polythene wrapper. Taking the hanger down from the rail, he returned to the bed and sat down heavily. He unzipped the carrier and buried his face in the gown, feeling as though the whole world rested on his shoulders.

The war for his company weighed heavy on him. He wished he hadn't lashed out at Gladys like he'd done. It would've been much easier if she'd been here to share this process with. He knew that with the plans his management team had come up with, resolving the takeover issue would lead to a bigger, stronger Bestman. However, it would be nothing without Gladys to celebrate it with.

His company was no longer the most important thing to him; maybe it had taken this trial to realize how much she meant to him. He had been a fool, a blind fool and as close-minded as they come. He fingered the white satin and lace. He wouldn't sabotage himself again. He picked up his phone and tried once more to call her. When he couldn't get her, he finished his packing and got Bonny to take him to the airport to catch his flight.

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Gladys called Edward's office after speaking with her aunt and learnt from Ogbonna he'd already left some time ago. She took the keys to her aunt's personal car and soon drove out of the compound. It was almost dark, but she was at Edward's house in less

## A Heart to Mend

than the usual fifteen minutes. Her heart pounded as she let herself in with the keys he'd given her at the beginning of the year.

Who would believe it was less than four months since he proposed? Even the time they spent in New York, Barbados, and London seemed like ages ago. She walked further in to see Edward's jacket spread on the chaise in the living room. She immediately blanked the memories that threatened to flood her mind and ran up the short steps to the bedroom. More clothes were scattered on the bed and one of his suitcases was gone.

The sateen and lace wedding gown she'd bought during their trip was half out of its carrier on the foot of the bed. She rushed into the bathroom and found none of his shaving and bathing gear there. Back in the bedroom, she noticed that the little note she'd left for him was missing too. She walked over and threw open the walk-in closet. A few of his suits were not on their hangers. She stood there for a few minutes, thoughts blank.

Her phone buzzed. It was a text from Edward. "I tried calling but your phone was engaged. At the airport now and may not be able to speak till I get back. See you then."

She walked backwards till she hit the bed and then sank down on it. What a relief.



**CHAPTER TWENTY**

Edward strode to the lectern and adjusted his papers. Benibo and Mr. Odili had just finished updating the hundred-odd audience at the emergency extraordinary general meeting. He tried to avoid the gaze of Chief Okrika and Mr. Odusote seated on the third row.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I’m delighted to be here in front of you again to share these exciting opportunities for Bestman Group PLC and our shareholders. I hope we’re now all experts on bonds and shares. Are there any questions?”

The crowd rumbled with pockets of laughter. A man wearing a red cap stood up at the back of the hall. “My name is Honorable Ishiekwene of the Shareholders Association. I read the annual report introduction and everybody including employees and suppliers received a word of thanks, except for the shareholders who have shown enormous loyalty to Bestman Group. I think the shareholders are not getting their fair share here.

“Regarding financial stability, I can see that there is no stability with acquirers wanting to take over the company. This is getting out of hand. The lawyer mentioned the shares issue, but this would lead to dilution due to the injected capital, which is not good for shareholders. I would like a better solution to these problems.”

## A Heart to Mend

“I would like to first apologize for the oversight in the report because we know our shareholders are loyal. In answer to your question, I want to summarize why we believe this is a great deal for Bestman and, over time, will create value for shareholders. If you remember when we met last September, I foresaw significant profitable growth opportunity in our business. Now we are moving from seeing to believing. The 40,000,000 new ordinary shares of fifty kobo each to be issued by our Capital Investment Fund at a price of five naira per share will raise gross proceeds of two hundred million naira. An application has been made to the Nigerian Stock Exchange to place this on the listed securities market, and it has already given its tentative approval.

“It is expected that admission of the shares if passed today will become effective and dealings commence on 30 April. This offer has already been oversubscribed as we speak, mainly by our potential telecommunication partners. Subject to final ratification, the shares will be issued credited as fully paid and will rank as the same with Bestman’s existing ordinary shares, including the right to receive dividends declared, made or paid in respect of such shares.”

The microphone whined and Edward tapped it gently as the hall seemed to come alive.

“On the next item, Capital Investment Fund has successfully put up subordinated bonds for issue in the United States capital market approximating two point five billion naira in aggregate principal amount, with a rate of 9% for ten years. The bonds are scheduled to mature ten years hence, although Bestman has the option to redeem them on any interest payment date hereafter. The bonds were rated BB- by Standard & Poor’s, and their value will be third only to the bonds issued by GTBank and First Bank in January and March of this year.”

A loud round of applause greeted this announcement but before Edward could breathe easier, a shareholder asked to speak. “My name is Stefan Brugman of Stivet Funds. Our shareholders have seen Bestman shares drop in value, but you and your team continue to

## A Heart to Mend

receive bonuses and will get more if this bond is passed. Also, the shareholder return is less than it should be. Our mutual fund holders are against any bonus to management. You mention predetermined financial targets and annual objectives, but these are not presented. So we have no idea what this is based on. We need to know this because we have seen several cases where companies take advantage of shareholders' ignorance."

Edward was irritated by this last speaker; he knew he was a broker and was on Mr. Odusote's side. He paused and looked around at the surprised faces that were turned attentively up to him.

"The greatest share of the net proceeds of this hybrid offer will go into working capital. According to the offer prospectus, which is being handed out now, and which will be made available to journalists at the completion of this meeting, the sum of a hundred and fifty million naira will be used to beef up the company's working capital on a continuous basis and deepen the telecommunications retail infrastructure in the country.

"We may also consider investing in a manufacturing plant in China to help cut our costs and support business growth. Using the proceeds in this way will enable the telecommunications arm contribute better to Bestman Group's bottom-line growth within the next two years. We'll invest fifty million in branches for Capital Investments in four cities. Our information technology infrastructure is already being upgraded, but it will require an extra ten million in order to give us a competitive edge in the market."

Another broker cut in. "I'm Etim Udoh and I represent the Nakanda Family. Regarding the prognosis for 2007 you mention a turnover of one billion five hundred million naira. Is this realistic? I support the other speaker in saying that there has to be a clear relation between shareholders returns and bonuses, and my group rejects all the bonuses that have been planned."

## A Heart to Mend

“Your opinions have been noted and you’ll have your chance to vote when the time comes. Now I will come to the major business of the day. You may have been approached with a tender offer by a company wishing to acquire Bestman Group shares. I want to state categorically that this offer is a farce. There’s no substantial premium to the average valuation, especially in light of our recent and expected upgrades. Expert opinion shows this as one of the lowest multiples ever offered for a fully trading company on the floor of the exchange. Our share price would fall if you accepted this offer. Take a look at our acquirers; in terms of a business entity, ‘nonentity’ would actually be a better way of describing them.”

Mr. Odusote had been sitting smirking and nodding at his backers, but at this statement he jumped up. “Mr. Chairman I don’t think such wording is needed or appropriate in these circumstances.”

Edward overrode him and continued. “Chief Okrika, who as he said owns a thirty-five percent stake in our company, says he wants to seize control so he can put it back on track...”

“Yes, we want to create a new vision because the company has not been performing...”

Edward did not allow him to finish. “Chief Okrika isn’t the only shareholder concerned about the company’s performance. We, the current directors, also are, as you have all seen from the preceding. We are working for the company and intend to continue doing so.”

Edward stepped out from behind the lectern and looked directly at his rival. “Can Chief Okrika speak for himself? We found that he has a record of pursuing companies with large cash reserves. Who is to say that he doesn’t simply want to raid Bestman Group’s hefty bank account?”

Mr. Odusote replied again. “We don’t want to do anything other than create shareholder value. There are no assets we plan to sell to the company. There’s no sort of hidden agenda.”

## A Heart to Mend

Edward walked to the edge of the small platform. “But I heard that despite Chief Okrika’s wishes, you, Mr. Odusote, have other plans. You seek to remove four Bestman Group PLC executive directors. In fact, you plan to convene another extraordinary general meeting to put it to shareholders and elect yourself on the board.”

Mr. Odusote strutted forward. “You heard wrong, Edward. Chief Okrika knows of the reshuffle and will become chairman. We’re respected corporate finance advisors, and only want to create strategic value. A look at the assets will tell why the market places so little value on the company. And it is time we move the meeting on to the right path. We’re not here for intrigue.”

Mr. Odusote turned to face the people in the hall who seemed to hang on his every word. “We’re here to discuss the future ownership of the company. Chief Okrika and associated interests have a total of thirty-five percent shares, more than needed according to the Investments and Securities Act 1999. Since we sent out our tender offer, we have received even more support. This shows that a lot of shareholders are on our side. We also have it on good authority that the owner of a further seven percent will be voting with our consortium today.”

“You vultures will not take over my late husband’s business; over my dead body.” The elderly Mrs. Martin-Pepple stood. “I am voting with Edward Bestman and his team.”

A loud murmur started in the room at this declaration.

Chief Okrika motioned at Mr. Odusote and the two men seated on his left, and then stood up in a huff. “I don’t know how you do it here, but I’m on the board of several companies and this is no way to vote on an agenda item at a general meeting.”

Edward stepped back to the lectern and took back control of the meeting. “Please I would like you all to sit back down and reduce the noise.” The hall was still abuzz from the mini-drama with Mrs. Martin

## A Heart to Mend

Pepple's outburst. Even he had been surprised; he knew she supported him, but he had no idea that she felt so strongly. "Quiet please..."

"There's something I feel we should all know before we start voting. "Most people haven't heard this, but by the end of the week, all capital market operators will be required to shore up their minimum paid up capital from seventy million naira to one billion naira with immediate effect. I want to ask the registered broker who represents our acquirer's consortium a question. Mr. Odusote, what are your plans to meet this capital base requirement?"

One could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed. Mr. Odusote remained quiet. When Chief Okrika bent towards him and whispered something in his ear, he snapped back in defense. Edward thanked God for his sources at the stock exchange and smiled. It was clear the news was a shock to both his rivals. Now he was sure of which way the wind was blowing.

"I see no plan and assume you're so inept that this comes as a surprise to you?"

Chief Okrika stood up with eyes blazing. "Edward, do not stretch this out. Our consortium owns almost forty percent shares in Bestman Group PLC. Call for the vote now."

Edward ignored his rant and walked over to stand beside his management team at the table. "Permit me, ladies and gentlemen, to make this formal. This extra-ordinary general meeting was convened through a convocation first published in the Stock Exchange Gazette dated 11 April together with the agenda and information regarding nominated members of the management and non-executive board."

"The half-year report was made available at the Bestman offices and is also available here. No requests were received from shareholders for inclusion as additional agenda items. Also all requirements regarding this meeting have been met, so legally valid resolutions can be adopted at this meeting."

## A Heart to Mend

Mrs. Olayomi stood too and took over. “Consistent with our procedure at last year’s AGM, voting will be conducted orally and by acclamation. I hope you are aware that voting by acclamation means that when you remain silent the proposal is adopted, so there is discretion in voting in that sense. You are not required to mention your name to vote. When the vote is called, only those that want to vote against or abstain will announce that by going to the microphone to say what they’re voting against. Please mention your name very clearly and slowly speak out the number of shares you represent, so we can put that in the minutes.”

Edward took over. “Yes, thank you Mrs. Olayomi. Before we proceed to item four proper, I want to inform you about the number of shareholders here today and how many votes they can jointly cast. According to the signed registration list, fifty-six million nine hundred and sixty thousand five hundred and thirty-seven shares are represented. This means that we have ninety-three percent votes. Our articles of association do not prescribe any quorum with respect to the agenda today. Finally, may I ask you to switch off your phones?”

Edward continued after a minute. “We can now proceed to item four on our agenda. This is to ratify the issuance of ordinary shares and grant rights to subscribe to placing shares. These shares are equal to fifty per cent of the aggregate nominal value of the outstanding ordinary shares at the time of issue. Are there any people entitled to vote who wish to abstain or vote against this agenda item?”

The red capped man stood. “Chairman, if this fifty percent happens, then the shareholders association will have nothing to say anymore. We’re against the proposal with one million, two hundred and seventy-four thousand seven hundred and twenty shares.”

Stefan Brugman stood up. “I represent a number of shareholders. Leventis is against with six hundred and one thousand eight hundred thirty-nine votes. Unity Bank is against with forty-three thousand thirteen. Pondstream is against with one thousand. Citibank is against with seventeen thousand two hundred fifty-three and finally FinBank is against with seven hundred and fifty-two thousand four hundred forty.”

## A Heart to Mend

The second broker, Mr. Etim Udoh spoke up. “One million, two hundred and seventy-one thousand one hundred twenty votes are against this proposal from the Nakanda Family of Port Harcourt.”

Mr. Odusote stood, “Okrika Consortium rejects this proposal with twenty-one million, eight hundred thousand shares.” By his side, Chief Okrika sat with a clenched jaw.

No one else was against and Edward breathed a sigh of relief. After a whispered exchange with Odili, he spoke. “I conclude that this item four has been approved by the meeting and we can move to the next item concerning the subordinated bonds.” This time only the two brokers and the Okrika contingent acclaimed. Edward loosened his tie as he called the vote. Yes!

“Agenda six calls for Bestman Group to accept the tender offer for acquisition by the Okrika Consortium.” The hall went up in a furor with several hands waving in the air.

“Fortify is against this proposal with thirty thousand and ninety-seven votes.”

“North Trust is against with sixty-seven thousand four hundred and eighty-eight shares.”

“The Bestman Employee Shareholders Meeting is against this proposal with three million, six hundred thousand, nine hundred and thirteen votes.” Ten of the representatives clapped for their speaker at this stage and Edward smiled at them in appreciation.

“Imagis of Enugu is against with one million, three hundred votes.”

“Mrs. Martin-Pepple votes against with one million shares.”

Edward smiled at her but his heart was in the grip of some tight machine. He bit his lip and searched the hall again. It seemed the chips were falling in favor of Chief Okrika who had forty-one percent on his side. He needed at least one percent more than that and so far only nine percent had voted. With his thirty-one, and his team yet to vote, that still wasn't enough. He was distracted from the internal calculations when people began murmuring.

“Mrs. Isioma Dehinde-Ojo rejects this proposal totally with four million shares.” A familiar voice said from the back of the room.

“This is not possible!” Chief Okrika shouted audibly.



## A Heart to Mend

All eyes in the room turned as one. Aunt Isioma stood up and adjusted her wrapper. Edward could have fallen on his knees and crawled to kiss her feet where she stood.

“Are you surprised, Chief Okrika? What did your fellow sharks tell you? You were all mistaken if you thought I would fall for your tricks and money offers. My family has owned Bestman Group shares for several years now and when I heard news of the takeover, I had to make up my mind which side to vote or sell to. A study of the accounts and reports show that the company has performed excellently especially in the last few years since Edward Bestman and his team took over. Why then should I shift my loyalty?”

Edward smiled down at her in total gratitude. His insides did back flips with the knowledge that he'd pull out of this more easily than he thought. He had no idea she owned Bestman shares or that she would be here. Once in the States, he'd sent Gladys a stilted email saying how sorry he was and that he would see her when he got back. His schedule the past two weeks had been so tight that he'd not had time follow up. Love for her swelled his heart now. It wasn't far-fetched to believe that she was behind this.

Edward called the meeting to order again. By the time Benibo, Mrs. Olayomi and Mr. Odili followed suit with their votes, he was smiling widely. He felt like thumping his chest in victory. He'd gotten close to sixty percent of the votes.

“We move on to the last item, item seven, for the management board to have Bestman Group acquire its own shares for a period of eighteen months from September 2008 until February 2010.” Edward looked straight at Mr. Odusote as he spoke and put on his meanest smile as the broker's jaw fell.

“The proposal is to acquire shares both at the stock exchange and from shareholders who directly hold Bestman shares. This would be up to a maximum of thirty percent of issued share capital and for a price of approximately the stock exchange price with no margin. The stock exchange price means the average of the closing price of shares

## A Heart to Mend

according to the Official Price List of NSE on the five consecutive trading days immediately preceding the date of purchase.”

“Mr. Odusote jumped up. “That is illegal!” He began to sputter. “My...I...idea...I...”

Edward cut him off. Of course he recalled the first time the broker had brought the proposal almost a year ago. It even made this more of a pleasure to rub it in his face. “The management is already working with the SEC on amendment of the law on share buy-back by public limited companies, and the enabling rules will be ready by the proposed date.”

Mr. Odusote sank to his seat and stared back at him. His eyes said he wasn't ready to admit failure. It was the others in their team that declined the vote on Chief Okrika's behalf.

Edward laughed inside as he rounded up. “Item seven has therefore been approved by the meeting. This means that we'll be mopping up Bestman shares in the coming months and I urge our would-be acquirers to take advantage of this opportunity.

“Thank you very much for your contributions and your cooperation. We have come to the close of the meeting. Normally I would invite you for drinks, but there are no drinks today. I wish you a good day and a safe journey home.”

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Chief Okrika was the first to leave the hall, followed close on his heels by Mr. Odusote and the contingent that had accompanied them to the meeting.

He stopped just outside the door. “What was that all about? What sort of humiliation did you bring me here to experience?”

“Chief, don't you think I was embarrassed as well? This wasn't our plan! Edward...”

“Of course this wasn't our plan. You were supposed to get me

## A Heart to Mend

inside information in exchange for the five percent shares I transferred to you and a seat on the board. What happened?”

“I’m sorry Chief but I’m as confused as you are...”

“You correctly informed me that Edward was travelling to the United States and some of his plans...”

“But how could I know he came back so successful?”

“And that Mrs. Dehinde-Ojo woman tricked us! I thought you had confirmed from her brokers that she was on our side?”

“She must have been playing all of us for fools. I sent a text to the broker while inside and he just replied. She is the aunt to Edward’s fiancée; it was a trap to disgrace us.”

“So it is that stupid girl again! She said she would frustrate my plans. Is she your informant?”

“You mean Edward’s fiancée? No...it was his secretary...”

“His secretary was your informant?”

“Yes, and has been for over a year now...”

“How were you so sure she was giving you the right information? I personally had my means to cross check the information you brought but still.”

“We’re from the same place, and I helped her get the job with Bestman Group even before I knew who Edward was. It was while we were talking on one occasion that it occurred to me that access to the MD of the company could be the push I needed for my proposal. She did her best to help but that never worked out. I had to agree to pay her for the sensitive information she gave towards the takeover. I also paid her a lump sum when you gave me the bonus for obtaining those shares.”

## A Heart to Mend

“So how come she was wrong about those shares? Did she abandon you and trick us too?”

“The fact is that we haven’t spoken for two weeks now. My informant disappointed me. I haven’t been able to contact her for the past few days ...”

“More fool me! I’m more disgraced than I’ve ever been in my entire life and it has cost me a lot of money too. I’m going to show Edward and that Mrs. Dehinde-Ojo.”

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Edward followed Aunt Isioma with his eyes as she left the meeting room. Someone pushed open the door for her, and he saw a gesticulating Chief Okrika forestalled from speaking any further when she arrived at his side. She whispered to him and then they both stared at something in her hands. From where he stood, he couldn’t make out what it was, but the industrialist looked humbled as he followed her through a narrow door opposite the hall.

Ogbonna met him halfway as he maneuvered his way to the door when the crowd began to disperse. He got stopped along the way for a lot of handshakes and back slapping because those present wanted to talk about their most dramatic meeting yet.

“Mrs. Dehinde-Ojo would like to see you. She’s in the ante-room with Chief Okrika.”

“What are they doing in there?”

“I have no idea.”

Edward had promised himself that he’d go straight to Gladys’s office once he was done with the meeting, but guessed he could spare a few minutes. He hoped Aunt Isioma didn’t have hopes of reconciling him with Chief Okrika. That wasn’t going to happen.

“You know what to do now; wait for me afterwards. By the way, where’s my secretary?”

## A Heart to Mend

“I have not seen her since last Friday. She sent me a text that she was hurt in the election violence and that was it. She never replied to my phone calls or texts. I sent a driver to check on her today who reported that her neighbors said she’d disappeared to parts unknown.”

“She’s disappeared? That’s very strange.” Edward mulled the information in his mind. Taken in the context of what had just transpired, he would hate to think she had a hand in it. He shook his head, he’ll think about that later.

He turned back to Ogbonna. “I’ll talk to you when we get back to the office. I don’t know what to say now but first things first...” He strode across the hallway.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

Aunt Isioma met him at the door. “Congratulations Edward. That was a great meeting.”

Edward prostrated on the floor and stayed down; he was beyond only vocal thanks.

“Edward, what is the meaning of this? Please stand up. I have accepted your greeting.”

He stood up but remained bowed. “Thank you so much Aunt Isioma, I couldn’t have done it without you. Your shares and vote tipped the balance. I’m very grateful.”

“You’re welcome, but there’s something else.”

Edward looked deeper into the room to see Chief Okrika seated quietly at the sole table with a twisted expression on his face. He did not or could not meet Edward’s gaze. Edward followed Aunt Isioma inside and sat opposite his archenemy. She sat next to him and placed a music player in front of her on the table. He glanced at her in question until it began to play.

Chief Okrika’s voice piped out from the tiny speakers. *“My dear girl, I can help you out if you want. Did I not put over fifty million naira in your account?”*

Edward found it hard to believe what he was hearing but Gladys small voice underscored the words. *“You mean you schemed for me to lose my shares?”*

## A Heart to Mend

The two men locked gazes as Aunt Isioma stopped the player after the response where Chief Okrika gloated, *“That is correct.”*

Aunt Isioma spoke. “Gladys recorded this conversation in a meeting she had with Chief Okrika two weeks ago.”

“You conniving thief! What did you think you would achieve? Take my company away from me?”

“Chief Okrika twisted his lips, “It seemed worth it at the time. You stole from me Edward. You took my money, business files and secrets when you left the house...”

“I stole nothing. Your wife framed me. If any of your money or business documents were stolen, she took them, not me.” Edward was panting. Deep emotions bubbled up and tried to suffocate him. How he loathed that woman.

The other man laughed in derision. “You must be joking.”

“Chief I’m serious. After spending a month in the police cell, don’t you think I would have confessed and returned whatever I took? I’m innocent, but your wife is not...”

Chief Okrika slapped his hand on the table and barked. “She couldn’t have. We’ve been married for so long.” He removed his cap and rubbed at his sweaty head and face with a white handkerchief from the pocket of his agbada. “We even worked together!”

Edward almost pitied him. “Maybe she didn’t, but she knows what happened. You should ask her.”

Chief’s voice was down to a mutter. “I can’t believe this. She couldn’t have...”

The room was wrapped in silence for the next few moments. Edward hardened his heart and waded back in. “Whether she could’ve done it is not the issue here. You tried to take my company!”

## A Heart to Mend

“I’m a businessman Edward, your company was ripe for the picking. I know that, you know that...”

“I doubt you go acquiring other companies in the manner you did here. What you did in obtaining your Bestman shares was illegal.” Aunt Isioma interjected tapping the music player. “You took my niece’s shares, and your wife told Gladys she had no facts to back her up. Well, how is this tape for proof?”

“They did what?” Edward was shocked. “You mean Mrs. Okrika has also been putting pressure on Gladys?” He rounded on Chief Okrika. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know about this too?”

Chief Okrika shrugged with a sullen face. “I found out about it after the fact. For me it was nothing personal...”

“Not personal?” Edward was almost shouting. “You steal shares from my fiancée in order to lay your greedy hands on my company and you say it’s nothing personal?”

“Mind your language; I paid good money for those shares...”

“But under what circumstances? You also tied up the money in the bank; tell me what you call that.” Aunt Isioma added.

“I call it business. I’m sorry but as you know, this is what I do.”

“Edward, there’s no need to quarrel further.” Aunt Isioma turned to him. “You have more than enough evidence to have him prosecuted for fraud. Do you want to go ahead?”

He thought about it. Chief Okrika had once been the only father he knew. He’d treated him better than any other person he’d known then except maybe Principal Akintuyi. When the Okrikas left him in that cell, he had wished all kinds of evil on them, but now that he had the chance to deal his own medicine to Chief Okrika, Edward hesitated.

Finally, he shook his head. They say revenge was a dinner best served cold, but cold food could be so unappetizing. “I won’t do it. I



## A Heart to Mend

don't want to."

"What? Are you serious?" Aunt Isioma looked surprised.

"Yes I won't report him to the police. I've decided to let it go." He turned to her fully. "Gladys told me about you, her mother and forgiveness. I never forgot that." He watched the tears suffuse her eyes and turned back to Chief Okrika to give her privacy to compose herself.

He pointed directly at the man's face. "You were my foster father once and I can't forget that. Your wife mistreated me and you were an unknowing tool in her hands but that is in the past. I doubt that without both of you I could have made it to where I am today. My only condition is that you sign an agreement here and now to sell back those shares to the company as agreed at the general meeting."

Chief Okrika exhaled a big gust of air. He adjusted his cap and the neckline of the dropping outfit. Aunt Isioma brought out a booklet from her tote and pushed it across the table to him. He nodded and withdrew a fountain pen from an inner pocket. He wrote up a page, signed with a flourish and returned it towards Edward with a flick of his wrist. "There you have it."

Edward read the agreement and nodded. "Thanks, this is acceptable." He looked up. "By the way, I know you were working with Mr. Oduote but who was your insider in my office?"

Chief Okrika snorted. "It was your secretary. He was paying her for information, but she jumped ship when she got a big payoff. That man is the most incompetent fool I ever met, a complete waste of the money and time I spent on him. I'm done with all this."

In his mind, Edward shrugged. *What did he expect? Those that played with pigs should be ready to get dirty. It served them both right.*

Chief Okrika stood up. "If that's all, I'll take my leave." He adjusted the agbada arm that kept sliding off one shoulder and walked to the door where he stopped. "Edward, I hope you and your fiancée work through this. She didn't deserve to be put in the middle." With that, he

## A Heart to Mend

left the room with a quiet click as the door closed after him.

Edward sat in silence with Aunt Isioma for a while. “I didn’t know any of this.”

“Have you spoken to Gladys since you left for the States?”

He shook his head. Aunt Isioma pressed a button on the player again. “Listen to this.”

The voice he heard was Gladys but it was more intense than he’d ever heard it. *“You and your wife tried to destroy Edward, but even though he was still a child, you failed. This time you’re not going to succeed either, because he is older and he has me on his side. Edward loves me, and I love him too.”*

“Aunt Isioma, I know Gladys must have told you what happened. Please, you have to believe that I’m sorry.” Edward pleaded rising to his feet.

She waved her hand indicating that he should sit down. “Yes she did tell me, and I was disappointed. Edward, how could you?” He remained silent, head bowed in mortification. “You proposed last January and your wedding is only three months away. Yet you almost threw all the love and trust you professed out of the window.”

“It wasn’t like that...” Edward wanted to bury his face in shame.

“It’s not like what? Then what is it? Gladys told me everything that happened when I returned two weeks ago. I’m surprised that you don’t even trust her enough to know what she’s capable of. Why would she sell your shares for money?”

“Not to exonerate myself, but there were reasons why I...”

Gladys aunt cut in an unfamiliar manner, “Reasons my foot! Look I know you might be aware of some of this but I want you to think about it. Gladys is from a poor home and I was not able to help

## A Heart to Mend

then, as I should have done. If reasons were enough, don't you think she had enough to make her not to be the kind of girl you met and fell in love with? Answer me!"

Edward squirmed in his chair, "Please understand, my own past... I was eaten up with worry about the company. Someone was trying to steal Bestman and had implicated Gladys in the process. Everything weighed on my neck at the same time..."

Gladys aunt interrupted impatiently, "Is that why you left her alone in your house? Even if she betrayed your trust by selling the stock you gifted her, is that enough to refuse her calls. In those three days she said you didn't talk to her or see her. Do you know how worried she was? For the future of your relationship, for Bestman, but most of all for you..."

"After that recording, you don't know how sorry I am."

"I know how angry I am!" Aunt Isioma retorted. "To tell the truth, if Gladys had given me a hint of the problem between the two of you before she convinced me over the phone to hold on to my stock, I would have refused. Sometimes you rich men are just too arrogant for your own good. You all think women are after your money."

"Excuse me, but what did you say about the stock?" Edward had wondered at the coincidence. Not that she owned shares, but most private owners did not attend general meetings.

"Oh, so you don't even know." Gladys' aunt laughed scornfully. "While you were busy simmering in your anger, my niece was looking for ways to save you. I mentioned some shares I owned that the lawyers wanted to sell. I had even given orders that that effect, and if not for my niece, it would have been lost to you. My broker would have sold to your rivals."

She'd returned to Lagos a couple of days after the phone conversation with Gladys. Instead of signing the proxy form like she usually did, she informed her lawyers to inform the acquirers that she

## A Heart to Mend

would attend the meeting and vote personally. It was a good thing Gladys had picked up on the sale or Edward would have been left with the short end of the stick.

“I only guessed she must’ve done that back in the hall when you voted.” Edward whispered. “Thank you so much again, my lawyers mentioned this just before I travelled but I was too busy to follow it up. I’m grateful for what you did. I wronged Gladys even more than I thought...”

“You’re right, Gladys is not very happy right now. These last few weeks have been hard on her. She hasn’t been eating well and neither has she been sleeping as she should.”

Edward put one hand to his head, “I’m so sorry,” he muttered. “Aunt Isioma, I promised myself I’d go to her once I finished the meeting. I have to leave now.”

Aunt Isioma’s voice was mellower. “Well I wish both of you good luck.”

Edward stood and moved to the door with hurried steps.

He told Bonny to drive him to Eleko Beach. That was where he had the dream last year that made him begin to understand what she meant to him. Once they got there, he sent Gladys a text to say he was sending the driver to come pick her up and where to meet him. He waited for her at the exact spot where he’d realized that she could be the woman for him. As he stared out at the surging sea, he marveled at how long it’d taken him to accept that fact. He knew he’d made her really angry and also hurt her but he wanted her back. He would do anything if only to convince her of that.

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## A Heart to Mend

Gladys sat beside Bonny as he sped to meet Edward. She hadn't been surprised when her phone buzzed a few minutes ago with a text from him saying he was finished with the Bestman Group's general meeting and would be waiting at Eleko Beach for her. She'd wondered why he chose to meet there though they'd been there a few times in the past and. He probably hoped the nice memories it evoked would put her in a better frame of mind to receive his apology.

A couple of weeks ago, she'd read the apologetic email from him with mixed feelings. He'd asked for understanding and promised to see her once he was back. She'd not bothered to reply the mail or use the phone number he included because she'd been so angry and disillusioned then. It had been a relief that he no longer blamed her for the attempt to take over his company or believed she was out to make money from him. At the same time she'd wondered if he really loved her as she said. That had been a very painful week for her.

However, she'd calmed down as time went on. Especially as she saw how the Bestman takeover was playing out in the media. She understood how busy and stressed he must have been and still was. That wouldn't have been the best time to talk about them. She'd decided to wait till he was back. When she received the text yesterday informing her of his return to the country and that he would see her after this afternoon, she knew how it would turn out.

The last two weeks had given her enough time to think about them and their future together. She'd started dating Edward because she liked the person he was and wanted to be with him. She'd not thought in terms of forever, but that it was working for them at the time. She'd fallen in love along the line as his deeper personality was revealed to her. She believed they'd both grown to become more compatible in the past year. This was the longest relationship for them both and she didn't ever want to stop being with him.

If their relationship was to have ended, it would have

## A Heart to Mend

done so last year after her birthday when he'd said she was with him for the money. They'd weathered that problem and though she'd been shaken in the aftermath, from what he'd said and done, she had known then that she was in this for the long haul. She was realistic enough, and from talks with her mother and aunt to know their different social standings may come up sometimes. It had not been easy for her and her family and life had taught her a few lessons. You had to pick your battles carefully or you ended up with a chip on the shoulder.

She didn't believe there was anything like perfect, fairytale love. Most people were flawed and prone to mistakes. She thought herself a romantic but treated love with the same practicality she did most things. They'd had fall-outs and misunderstandings but she'd never been free to be herself like she was with Edward. She couldn't imagine being with another person after him. She also believed they'd got most of their issues under control. Since he proposed, she caught herself fantasizing not about the wedding but about their marriage, being totally with him to experience life as one.

Edward was a basically good person. He always brought out the best side of her. He made her mad sometimes but also made her laugh. He challenged her to think outside the box, to open up to life outside her small world. The butterflies took flight in her tummy whenever he was around and she'd never been as happy as he made her. Most of all, she believed that he loved her. No one could say what the future held but she had a very good feeling that having gone through all these troubles now, they would be stronger for it.

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Edward heard someone calling his name from the direction of the road and turned.

## A Heart to Mend

Gladys stopped a couple of feet away and drank in the sight of him. He looked quite tired with a drawn face and puffy eyes. It seemed as if he'd not slept well since the last time she had seen him. His tie was skewed and the breeze off the sea blew his trousers against his lean frame. He'd taken off his jacket and a tentative smile tugged at his lips when he saw her.

"Hello, Edward."

"It's so good to see you Gladys." He opened his arms then allowed them to drop back. "Please let's sit." He spread his jacket on the sand, sat down on one corner and pulled his tie off completely.

Gladys sat. Her heart raced madly as she unbuttoned her suit and set her purse close to her feet. "Are you ready to talk now?"

Edward placed both hands on his face as though praying, and then rubbed his eyes. "I've been thinking a lot about you. I missed you Gladys. I don't know whether I made a mistake inviting you here. Maybe somewhere else would've been better for us to really talk. I want us to see how we can work through this situation." His voice sounded more hesitant than she'd ever heard it. Her heart slowed to its normal beat.

"I hope your general meeting went well?"

"Yes it went excellently. Your aunt was very helpful." He looked at her directly and she could see the trust he'd blanked out during their confrontation in his house the last time. He probably knew everything by now, but she needed some information too.

"Edward before we talk about Bestman and the shares, I'll like to know what happened with the Okrikas back in Kano before you left their house."

He straightened and his gaze sharpened. "Why do you ask?"

"Mrs. Okrika came to your house to see me the day after we returned from the trip. Please don't ask how she got the address or

## A Heart to Mend

knew I would be there because I don't know." Gladys shifted away so she could face him. "She told me a lot of things about you. It's not that I believe her but I want to know exactly what happened."

Edward sighed as his mind raced to the past. It had been almost twenty years but the incident was engraved in his memory and still as fresh as on the day it happened.

"I'm so sorry for keeping this past hidden from you. I can see now that those few days were at the bottom of what has happened in the last month. I hoped I would never have to reveal it to anybody but I realize that was wrong of me. They were two terrible days that I prefer not to think of."

"I want to know about it." She took his hand in hers.

"I had lived with the Okrikas for almost three years by the vacation of my first year in university. Chief was rarely home but Mrs. Okrika was always there. I felt settled, took her to heart and treated her like a real mother. It was a shock when I realized she was coming on to me. I began to stay away from home and soon fell in with my previous crowd. Drinks, drugs and women were a part of my life again. She blackmailed me when some friends who visited stole stuff from the house. I confessed to Chief about the theft but he only got angry and threatened to send me away."

"That must have been painful to hear from a man you called father." Having met and spoken with the man, she could imagine that he'd said that though. He was so arrogant and selfish.

"Yes it was. The next time he travelled on a business trip, my foster mother made her move. She started with my history revealing that my father was an Ikwerre man who lived near her family after the civil war. Rumors were he died that year, possibly at the hands of the family of the Hausa girl he got pregnant. She confessed that he'd rejected her for the girl and became maudlin, babbling that she loved Graham Bestman and I looked like him. She begged me to have sex with her. I refused and ran away from the house that same day."



## A Heart to Mend

Gladys wrapped an arm round his waist when he stopped. "That couldn't have been easy."

"No, but it didn't end there, I returned the next day." His voice was a deep sound against her chest as he held her close. "I had confirmed the circumstances of my birth and my biological father's name at the orphanage and came to explain things to Chief. He was not back yet but was expected soon so I waited in the kitchen with the house help. I don't know how Mrs. Okrika became aware of my visit or why I was there but she rushed into the kitchen shouting all kinds of accusations. She said I wanted to destroy her marriage to Chief, to disgrace her and make her a homeless bastard like myself. The next thing I knew, she had picked up the knife. I tried to wrestle it from her and the knife stabbed her shoulder."

Gladys had her hands over her mouth in shock.

Edward was lost in the events of the past. "The security man and driver, alerted by the house girl, came in then. She told them to detain me claiming I attacked her without provocation. Chief came back and I was arrested and charged with attempted rape, assault and theft. I insisted on my innocence but there was no help for it. My previous reputation and Mrs. Okrika had done the damage. The police took me away. I remained in their cell and was tortured for a month."

"No wonder this was so traumatic for you, I'm so sorry." She could barely stop the tears. The remembered pain was evident in his eyes. She stretched out an arm towards him and then dropped it.

Edward's voice was strained. "So that was what happened that day." He looked over at Gladys, "I swear that was how it all happened. I don't know what Mrs. Okrika said..."

"I don't believe her, I believe you. You don't have to swear on anything." She wished he'd believed her like this during their quarrel on the night of their return. It would have saved them all the heartache and loneliness of the past three weeks.

## A Heart to Mend

“Thank you.” he said simply. They both mused on their individual thoughts for some minutes.

Edward broke the silence. “Gladys, you don’t have to say it. I realized you couldn’t have known of the takeover bid on Bestman or instructed the broker to sell your shares even before I travelled. I was just too stubborn to admit it. I know that for a fact now. I listened to the whole recording on my way here.”

“I’m sorry for everything I did, please forgive me. It seems apologies are all I’m good for with you, but I promise you, I’ll try my best to banish these insecurities that undermine me.”

“I truly love you Edward, and I’m willing to remain by your side through everything. That’s why I agreed to your proposal...”

“I know that in my heart but my head still asks. Why is she still with me? I can’t be easy to be with. I’ve told you things about me and my past that make me cringe and I always steel myself to hear goodbye but in the end, we simply move on. I’m afraid.”

He’d found it hard to believe that he could offend her and she’d still love him. After the first quarrel on her birthday, he kept thinking that was the end, but somehow, she’d pulled them back on track. During his visit to Enugu, he’d felt so grateful that she took him back, if a little confused that she allowed him to meet her family.

“You know I haven’t been lucky in life. I’ve been in these terrible situations that every time we had a disagreement, I expected you to tell me it was over. I guess it had to take something like this for me to understand that you’re not leaving me. I now believe that.”

“Please understand that it’s not easy for me too. Loving you is a choice I have made. That means I can accept you with your warts, insecurities and all. You only have to promise to trust me.”

“Oh Gladys, I promise.” He whispered. “You’re the gift that keeps giving. You’ve taught me so much. I forgave Chief Okrika but we’ll get those shares and money back...”

## A Heart to Mend

“I’m so happy for you Edward. I know how much the company and those shares mean to you.”

“Not as much as you do,” Edward replied with sincerity. “I’ll never hurt you again; instead, I’ll love and cherish you so much that you’ll never regret this relationship again.”

“I never did,” Gladys reassured him.

“And that is why I love you so much.” Edward grinned pulling her down over him. He kissed her reverently. “I love you with all my heart, Gladys. We’ll be together always.”

“I love you too Edward, always and forever.”

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