

## PROLOGUE

“YOU WHAT?!” Samantha Barigha stared astounded into her best friend's face, or rather, what used to be her best friend, the incredulity evident in her tone.

Gracie made a pout. “Please be happy for me. This means so much to me.”

Obviously, Samantha thought, making efforts to keep her expression neutral.

Gracie wasn't one to take discouragement. She didn't think anything mattered as long as her mind was set on something. And this was one something.

She pouted good-natured, one of her strong winning points. “I thought you'd understand. You know how important this is to me. I just want you to be happy for me.”

Sighing more out of exasperation than comprehension, Samantha darted a look at the figure sitting strangely ramrod straight in her living room. “What can I say, you already brought him to my house.” Taking Gracie's hand, she studied the huge diamond spotted on her middle finger, and forced a smile she wasn't quite feeling. “You really want this, don't you?”

“But I want your blessing first.”

Not wanting to be the spoilsport, Samantha gave her friend a hug. “Congratulations, Gracie. I'm really happy for you. I just wish you'd told me earlier. Two years feels like a betrayal.”

Gracie drew back from the hug. “I'm sorry. I just didn't want you talking me out of it. And he's so cute and funny, and...”

Holding up a hand, Samantha laughed. “Okay, I get the gist.” Though truthfully, she didn't. “I suppose I have to be a friend and support your decision. But are you sure, Gracie? I mean, marriage is such a big step and you two have been apart for two whole years. A lot could have happened. Who's to say he doesn't have a wife with children hidden away somewhere? Or maybe he's a criminal or a psychopath looking for a rich, single and vulnerable woman to dupe. Or worse.”

Gracie stepped back with a frown cringing her brows, making her look older than her thirty-five years. “And you are supposed to be my friend. I thought you'd be happy for me. I guess not.”

Samantha mentally rewound and reached for her friend's hand. This wasn't what she'd expected on returning from work. She prayed this was just a joke. "I'm sorry. I'm still a little stupefied, that's all. I hope it works out for you, Gracie. Really." She hugged her friend, not wanting to dampen the excitement of her friend.

"Come, let's go back before he thinks we're conniving how best to chop off his head for dinner."

Gracie gasped. "Samantha!"

But Samantha was already laughing, holding off the nibbling fear that this could well be a big problem for both of them. Eventually.

## CHAPTER ONE

THE JOG ought to have helped. It didn't. Rather, she'd spent the last hour ruminating on what Gracie had told her. *I'm getting married*. She could have laughed it off as a joke except Gracie went after what she wanted with unapologetic vigor, including picking a random guy to marry. How had she allowed her friend to become so obsessed with marriage?

Okay, so maybe it wasn't her fault. After all, Gracie had a mind of her own and a strong will that none could match.

*Pick a random guy to marry*, Samantha scoffed out loud. *Who did that in this part of our world?* Then shrugged when her companions turned to stare at her, even attempted a smile.

The exercise was supposed to help. Who was she kidding? Gracie was getting married and that was that. Her means may not be neat or applause-worthy, but she'd achieved her ultimate goal; landing a husband. That had been all she thought about the past five years. Congratulations should be in order except she knew if it didn't work out as she knew it wouldn't, it was definitely going to blow up in her own face. Gracie tended to be misguided sometimes, and she always had to step in to clean the mess.

But as far as Samantha Barigha was concerned, this was the highest form of careless. How could she stoop so low to pick up some guy she didn't know, invest so much in him because she wanted to marry him? Sending him abroad to study was a risk too high. What if he never returned to Nigeria? Or even decided to renege on their agreement?

For Gracie, it wasn't about the marriage, it was about the trend of being termed as 'married'. That was all she cared about.

Samantha Barigha was not impulsive. As much as she was well into spinsterhood, according to her mother, marriage was not a solution to her. If she had to get married, it wasn't going to be her doing the propositioning. Gracie hadn't felt any qualms about doing that herself. A lady of her status shouldn't be chasing for companion like it were a career goal.

*Samantha Barigha, propose marriage to a man.* The thought was sickening. She paused to catch her breath, waving at her companions to continue without her. But they stopped also and not wanting to hold them up, she raced them instead. No need kidding herself on this morning's jog, she concluded. It had been a complete waste of time that had only pumped her adrenaline into action mode. And by the time they got to her house, she thanked her companions, hoping to be ready for her mother's visit.



SAMANTHA UNCORKED the bottle of water and drank straight from the bottle, enjoying the feel of the cool trickle down her throat. It was an indulgence she allowed herself; a bottle of chilled water at 7am every day. It was something her mother would frown at but that was if she was around to throttle her, right? Right this moment, she was permitted to indulge.

She felt the weight on her before she could react and ended up choking back on the water when her eyes cleared enough to register it was her little sister, Rita.

“Good morning...”

She glanced down at her outfit and did not groan, to her credit when Mrs Aisha entered through the kitchen.

So much for wanting to be ready to face her mother.

“Good morning, Mother.” She managed to smile at and stroke Rita's head, not at all ready for what was sure to come. She recognized the pattern like a second skin. “You're very early, Mother.”

Rita cautiously climbed down, already sensing the all-too-familiar dance that was bound to take place. “How was your exercise, Ms. Samantha?”

“Very healthy.” She responded hesitantly.

“Mother has a meeting this morning, and she didn't want to be late.”

Before Samantha could respond, she felt the bottle yanked from her grasp and a piece of cloth thrown at her.

“Wipe that look off your face, Samantha Barigha. You look like you just saw your worst enemy.”

If only that wasn't how she felt!

Samantha pasted on a false smile and succeeded in holding back a grimace. It wouldn't do to give her mother any more ammunition than she already had. She also did not roll her eyes, much as she would have liked and closed them instead.

“You give birth to a child and the gratitude you get is resilience and indifference in attitude. This child won't be the death of me.”

When she didn't hear any further sound, she chanced opening her eyes and groaned inwardly. Her mother stared down at her with an all-too-familiar expression that never failed to inspire fear in her as a child. What Aisha Barigha didn't realize was that she was an adult now, and she'd become immune to it. She repressed the urge to wince, not at the impact of the look but to avoid sticking out her tongue and making silly noises.

“I'm sorry, Mother.” Samantha handed the rag back to her mother. “Thank you for helping with the cleaning.”

Aisha turned her back, going towards the kitchen and threw over her shoulder, “Gracie came by the Villa and introduced her fiancé to me. Very handsome boy he is too.”

Samantha covered her face with her hands. No matter what she did, it always came down to her state of unmarried. All Gracie had to do was get engaged and her mother picked on that. She knew where this was leading. But she chose to ignore the in-between notes underlying the announcement. “Yes, she brought him here.”

“Well, she doesn't have to worry about marriage anymore. The daughter I get is the one who can't even be bothered.” Her mother continued from the kitchen.

She knew she would never hear the end of it. She should have gone to pick Rita from the Villa yesterday. This scene could well have been avoided. For a time, at least.

Yesterday's case went on way longer than expected and on returning home, she'd found Gracie waiting at home with her fiancé. That news alone. Yeah, she couldn't go to the Villa in that state. Perhaps, she should have managed it after all.

Her mother appeared a short while later and shoved a glass of something greenish at her, ordering her to drink. All of it.

Knowing Aisha Barigha, she didn't bother questioning the contents and held her breath, gulping down the entire contents in the glass. And grimaced at the taste.

"Mother, what was that?" Holding the glass away from herself due to its vile smell.

Mrs. Aisha yanked the glass from her,

"It's merely pawpaw leaves and the barks of mango tree cooked in dogoyaro." She went back to the kitchen, muttering, "You'd think I poisoned her from the look on her face,"

Samantha knew it was futile to say anything and although she knew what the medicine was for, she didn't care to educate her mother that there were modern drugs that could replace it. A wave of nausea passed quickly enough before she even felt it.

She rested her head against the couch and closed her eyes. Only a little more time, a few more minutes before her mother would leave, Samantha thought. She could afford to endure a few minutes.

"... always working and forgetting that a woman's place is at her husband's side," Mrs. Aisha stood facing her daughter, arms akimbo.

Samantha opened her eyes to look at her mother out of polite compulsion than personal desire to do so.

"Even Gracie is getting married and you don't seem to care." Mrs. Aisha continued and moved off to adjust a throw pillow and dust invisible dirt off the television. "It's a wonder the media have not taken up the story that George Barigha's first daughter is still single."

Samantha forced her head up and managed not to roll her eyes. It wouldn't do to remind her mother that Gracie was three years older than her. No good came from arguing, especially with Aisha Barigha. Smart thing to do was let her rave on.

Aisha picked up her purse and slung it at the crook of her arm. “You look very thin. I just wish food was your problem, then we’d know there’s a solution.”

Barely holding from laughing out loud, Samantha got up. “Thank you, Mother.”

Taking her cue, Aisha walked to the door with her daughter beside her. “Professor Okon’s son just got back to Nigeria. Perhaps, it’s a blessing. I have been invited to the welcome party next weekend. You’re coming with me, so I can introduce you. A good that will be. I hear he’s already taking over his father’s school.”

Putting on the required smile, nodded and opened the door for her mother. Aisha touched her daughter’s head, checking her temperature. Ensure you bring Rita home early so I can get her ready Monday morning.’

The sigh escaped before she realized it was logged there, “Yes, Mother. I’ll ensure she doesn’t watch more than one episode of Game Shakers, and she will finish her homework today.”

Aisha hesitated briefly, “Think carefully about your life, Samantha. You are no longer as young as you think.” She nodded as though affirming something to herself and stepped out.

Propriety demanded she waits till her mother’s car drove out of the gate before she closed the door, heaving a huge sigh of relief as she rested her back against the door. The scene was over, and she felt depleted much more than when shed been jogging earlier. One encounter with Aisha Barigha always did that.

“Are you okay?”

Samantha opened her eyes and stared at her sister. The smile came naturally. This was one face she loved seeing. “Yes, yes I am.” Pushing away from the door, she took Rita’s hand, “What do you suppose we do today, hmm? I wonder, maybe we could go to the park and pick every single dirt there. What say you?” Looking down to see her sister’s reaction.

Rita giggled. “Okay. Can we get ice cream and burger for the grasses too?”

Feigning pleasant shock, Samantha placed a dramatic hand on her chest. “Why, yes! We wouldn’t want them to starve.”

A good read. It helped. A little. But its Monday and all shed tried to ignore before came flooding back. It was a hot morning and even with her AC turned on, she could feel tingles now and then from the heat outside her window. The heat wave did nothing to alleviate the feelings of confusion she felt.

Samantha stared absentminded at the construction work going on, barely noting the fast-forward pace hurrying images moved in a disorganized chaos, masons artistically creating a structure from concrete and brain work, hands hefting things from blocks to bags of cement. Her mind was miles away from her present location. All she could think about was the look of pure excitement both on her friends face and her voice as she announced her engagement. Worse was that gleeful expression of triumph as she recounted how they'd met and the circumstances leading to the engagement.

Maybe it was ill of her, but she couldn't imagine her friend being happy in that marriage. Marry someone you have to pay to accept you; how low was that! Even for Gracie, it was a shock. And wishing it didn't work out was just her looking out for her best friend.

Okay, maybe it was very selfish thought.

Her mother had gone on and on the entire weekend whenever she called about Gracie's engagement and how Samantha was determined not to settle down. At least, shed managed to evade another meeting today by dropping off Rita at school instead of taking her to the Villa. But you can only evade Aisha that long. Just thinking about her mother projected her on her phone. There, on the caller ID was her mother's photo.

Until her mother came to terms with her decision, she planned to avoid any confrontation. More of that had been going on lately. Perhaps, that was the reason she was putting off getting to the office. She knew the loads of messages waiting for her, not to say the whispers by her staff. Yeah. It promised to be a very long and busy Monday.

It wasn't such a bad idea though, Samantha thought. Instead of waiting around for you to get a ring, wouldn't it be more logical to do it yourself? White people did it all the time. And this was the twenty first century. It would be so nice to be the one to set the tone of the marriage contract.

Samantha shook her head. What was she thinking? She was not a desperate woman: She was a wealthy, successful young woman. She had a job that kept her busy and passions that demanded her time. Of course, she was happy. She didn't need a man. When one comes along, fine, but she was not about to go seek out one.

She jumped before realizing the sound was coming from outside her window. Struggling to calm herself over the blaring of a car horn from behind, Samantha wound down her window slightly to peer at the cement coated face at her window, the source of the knocking sound she heard.

“Excuse me, ma'am, but you have to move your vehicle.” The man said in perfectly articulate English.

She blinked once to clear her mind and heard the blasted horn again. This time, embarrassment had her stuttering an incomprehensible reply, whatever it was as she glanced at her side mirror and saw the truck behind her. The driver was yelling abuses and insults at her.

Before she could fumble with her keys, the man at her window gave her a polite smile, I'm sorry about his language. Referring to the driver of the truck, but you really are blocking the entrance. Perhaps, if you could just move your car a bit forward. He glanced at the truck as the driver muttered obscene curses at people with no conscience.

Feeling shyly chastised by the driver of the truck, she turned the key in the ignition and realized for the first time she was parked in front of the gate of an ongoing construction work. She put the car to park just a few yards in front and glanced at her side mirror as the cement coated man guided the truck full of cement into the compound while chastising the driver to stop shouting and heaping insults, sounding almost annoyed and irritated.

Samantha glanced more fascinated at this stranger who was more than his physical appearance. Intrigued, she watched him take a step to follow the truck as it disappeared into the gate, then hesitated. Glancing towards her car, hesitated again and almost decisively, he ambled towards her car.

In an unconscious gesture, she glanced at her rear view mirror to ensure she looked presentable, then paused to wonder why she was going to all that trouble over a total stranger, someone whose job was only dependent on how much an employer was willing to pay for a hard day's work under hot blazing weather.

She was more than fairly attractive, had realized that when she was growing up. She had a mass of surprisingly soft hair which she kept hidden all the time under wigs. At 5feet, 7inches, she was very comfortable with her height and never got into trouble even as a teenager. At least not willingly. She couldn't be accused of being thin, rather, she filled out perfectly in all the right places. She maintained the body by avoiding skipping meals and two hours' weekly jog around the estate area. Definitely, she presented a healthy, happy and successful front.

She sat up straight becoming self-conscious of her appearance. Even though her clothes were designer, they made her look more serious and businesslike than the impression she wanted to give to this stranger.

The stranger stopped by her window and asked in a concerned voice, "Are you lost, ma'am? Perhaps, if you need direction to someplace..."

She shook her head more at herself. What did she expect? He must have misinterpreted her action because he leaned slightly away from the window with a frown furrowing his brows. What a banged up job she was doing!

"I mean, I'm not lost, she started to explain "I just..." Then shook her head. What was she supposed to say as her reason for being there? "Never mind."

His frown deepened, "Are you sure?" He asked again, then glanced back towards the gate, "I will be going back to work then." Turning away.

"Wait." She called, not at all certain why but then, she wasn't deaf to not have heard clearly how meticulous his speech was. He clearly had a certain level of education? And ma'am? She wasn't that old!

He paused and turned back at her.

"What's your name?"

He contemplated, and she could see it on his face. "Mark."

"What time will you get off work?"

This time, she watched uncertainty and unease flicker across his face. "5pm?" His gaze darted back to the gate, "But I really do have to go. My job is on the line here." Sounding almost annoyed.

At whom, she wondered and didn't delude herself she didn't know the answer to that.

She got out a business card from her purse and handed it over to him with a smile, "Call me when you get off work. I would like to speak with you, if you don't mind."

He took the card gingerly as if it burned and shoved it into the pocket. With all that dirt on his grubs!

"I really have to go, ma'am." Already rocking on his heels.

She tossed a smile at him "Okay. I'll be expecting your call."

Not sure if she was imaging it, but she thought she saw him smirk in derision as if to say *not on your life* and with a brief incline of his head, hurried away.

She hoped he'd really call. Telling herself she was just curious about him, how he spoke so well yet did an odd job wasn't to fool herself in the least.

It was just as well he had not called. She wasn't quite sure yet what kind of person he was, and she'd had her mind set on getting him a job. She scoffed. Anyone could learn to speak good English perfectly these days. Why did she think his case could be any different?



She retrieved her debit card the attendant at the petrol station and got back into her car. So much work had been piled up at work, she couldn't tell what exactly made her leave them all. Her sole thought had been going home. It was Monday. That feeling had never been this strong before. Not that she was ditching her work, after all, she had tomorrow with just an appointment and enough time to report in the cases that were closed.

Gracie had told her she was stopping by to give her some news. Exactly what she didn't want, another reminder that her best friend was getting married. Who knew, Gracie might end up talking her into dating one of the groom's friends. And have her mother look goey with satisfaction, no doubt.

She noticed him just as she was about to pull out. He was coming towards her with a keg half-full with diesel and although he looked immaculately dressed in gray slacks and sharply pressed blue shirt with just a hint of ruffle here and there, her thought went straight to her purse. What cash was left was no more than was enough to buy a child a snack bar. Maybe she could just hand that over to him, she thought, reaching into her purse already.

She turned at the knock on her window and wound down the glass just slightly.

“Good evening, ma'am.”

She blinked and completely wound down the rest of the window. He smiled shyly and looked uncomfortable as she continued to stare at him in open-mouthed flab. He scratched his head and looked away from side to side.

She recovered enough to stutter, “Uh, you are, ... oh my, how did you...?” Then waved her hand as if to clear her mind and asked more coherently, “You are the one who helped me earlier today, aren't you?”

He chuckled nervously and scratched his ear. "Yes."

She swallowed. Definitely more handsome than she'd thought. Without the half a bag of cement coating him head to toe, he was more than good-looking. His face had an arrogance about it, which didn't intimidate her, rather, made her want to be around him, to see how much of that arrogance could hurt and how much was false.

"Are you...? Do you...?" Making a vague wave of her hand, she focused her senses on the more important question. "What exactly do you do?"

Obviously embarrassed now, she watched him scratch his head and nod. "I work as the opportunity presents itself."

Not a very forth-coming person, she thought. And they were holding someone up. She realized when there was a loud blast of horn, accompanied by a man's voice yelling for her to move her car, or he would move it for her. It was with her fender in mind she drove forward a little and gestured for the stranger to enter. He lifted the can he held, and she pushed the button to open her trunk. After he'd settled inside the car, she pulled out of the gas station.

"Just so you know, she began, I don't make a habit of picking up strangers, especially men."

He nodded, "I don't make a habit of entering pretty women's cars either." Not without a smile.

She chuckled and relaxed some. Maybe she should have stopped to question if the voice that told her to pick him up was friend or foe. "I didn't get your full name."

Looking a little relaxed himself, he leaned backwards "Mark Grinder." Of course, she held herself from bursting out in laughter. And he noticed the half smile hovering on the side of her lips. It was him laughing that did it. She couldn't hold back anymore.

When she regained enough equilibrium, she glanced at him and caught his gaze on her. Suddenly, her palm gripped the wheel and successfully hid her discomfort, her heart beating faster.

There was an uncomfortable silence up until she got to the T-junction and glanced at him for direction. He pointed to the left, and changing gear, swung too forcefully, causing a lot of blasting of car horns and screeching of tires against asphalt.

He must think she was always this reckless. If only he knew!

“Left.”

She was quick to spot the U-turn and this time, slowed enough to glance sideways before making the turn.

They came to a part of Abuja she'd heard of but never been to. Okay, truth be told, they'd left Abuja and we're now in the outskirts. She drove through a road under construction and finally entered into Jabo village. He directed her to a smaller route with cramped buildings on either sides, stores, hawkers, half-naked children running across the road like it was normal, too many people which did not fit into one's description of life in the capital city. This was inner-city right before her. Several of the houses were made of local wood or zinc. If she had been told this place existed in Abuja, she wouldn't have believed.

“Take the second road on your right.” His voice, barely audible.

*I must be kidding, she thought. I know nothing about this person.*

After the turn, he pointed to a spot just ahead. “That's my stop.”

Parking the car at the designated spot, she didn't turn off the engine and took a breath, not allowing herself to think, “What other jobs do you do?”

Taken aback by the question, he answered without meeting her gaze, “I'm a private school teacher.”

“Are you married? In a relationship?” Ridiculously, she shook off the feeling of shock she felt at her own question.

His expression was more revealing. After a while, he reluctantly supplied. “Neither.”

“Okay, good.” And not stopping to allow herself to think, she started. “I'm going to make you a proposition.” She shook off the voice of reason.

“I'm rich and you obviously could do with the allowance. I'll make you an offer for a small favor in return. I want you to marry me. Ignoring the shocked look on his face. I'll pay you an allowance monthly and you can choose what model of car you want. I'll buy you a house and establish the business of your choice for you. All you have to do is agree to the terms I'll draft out and we could be married in a week.”

Then she looked at him.

He sat there with his mouth agape, staring at her in stunned disbelief, then began to laugh. She frowned and wondered why he was laughing. Maybe he thought she was joking.

Realization dawned on him that she wasn't sharing a joke and the mirth disappeared, replaced by a dark rage that made her wince, the full impact of her blab catching up with her. Oh, God, what had she just done?!

“Explain.” He growled low.

She cringed back in her seat. He looked like he was about to wring her neck. She didn't know this person or how far he'd go when angry. Make that furious. How far...

“Well, go on.” With barely restrained urge, his eyes glued her to the seat, the fire and ember in his eyes more intimidating than his physique.

Samantha opened her mouth to speak and found her lungs cramped. Her phone rang at the that moment, and she made a strangled sound when he reached for it before she could. He turned it off and threw it to the back seat.

“You don't want to mess with me, *lady*.” His voice low but no less menacing. “I demand an explanation and I want it now!” The note of finality jeering her to a stutter.

“I am... I...” She swallowed and seeing his eyes, turned to stare out the window and for the first time, she noticed the number of people whose gazes were fixated on them. When she turned in shock to his side, more people were beginning to gather closer to the car than polite and staring curiously at them.

She didn't think her embarrassment could get any worse. Well, it just did.

His gaze followed her, and he seemed to notice it also. More people were stepping closer, and she turned a pleading look at him. It took the whole of three minutes before he nodded jerkily.

“There's a place just ahead.”

This wasn't what she'd expected. She'd hoped he'd let her go, but she did owe him an apology, not quite sure what to tell him that would qualify as an explanation without really going into the details of the why.

With not quite steady hands, she pulled into the road and drove forward with his direction.

## CHAPTER TWO

HE WATCHED her out of the corner of his eye as she parked the car, her hands still shaking and her pupils slightly glassy as she gazed ahead into nothing. From looks, you'd think she was the victim of his ferocious needs. You only had to know the full story to understand it was the other way round.

He shook his head. He'd tried to think of what could have prompted her to open her mouth and offer such insult to someone she didn't know. Enough sense had been pounded into him by his mother not to be stupid. It clearly failed to keep him from entering this mess. If he had declined her offer, right now, he'd be home resting and planning his tomorrow.

"I'm listening, *Lady*." Some edge had crept back into his voice despite schooling himself he needed to calm down to assess the situation.

She tried and failed to keep her hands steady and folded them on her lap.

One other thing his mother had taught him was to treat a lady right. Maybe this one fell short but a lady all the same.

Bringing his full attention on her, he ignored the way she squirmed in her seat. He might as well keep his gaze scorching to gain the upper hand.

Alright, He began "We'll do it this way; I'll ask you a question and you answer straight to the point. Agreed?"

She nodded jerkily.

"Let's start with your name; what is your name?"

Her voice croaked, and she cleared it, then supplied, 'Samantha. He didn't notice her pause before she added reluctantly, "Barigha."

He nodded. Progress. "How old are you?"

She turned to him sharply and seeing his own gaze, simply fell back to the seat and with a resigned sigh, she told him simply, "32."

He did a mental trek backwards. That could be a motivating reason, but he shook it off. He meant to be stern and kept his gaze burning. "What do you do?"

Relaxing a bit now, she waved her hand absentmindedly. "You have my business card."

Irritated, he bared his teeth in a show of anger. "Answer the question."

The tone of his voice set her on edge again. She cleared her throat before answering. "I'm a lawyer."

Interesting, He thought. He's yet to look at the card shed given to him. "Who do you work for?"

She swallowed slowly, "I own a firm."

"Living with the family?"

"No," shaking her head. "I own a bungalow at Wuse II."

Real money. Anyone who lived there either was a millionaire or a call girl. Her car was just a statement. He should have known. A young, attractive and wealthy woman always posed a challenge to the opposite sex. Not a wonder she was single.

An important question. "Are you a Christian?"

She smiled to herself. "Yes."

He doubted that, "You obviously were not listening to *Wisdom*, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

She scoffed, "Don't I know that!" Sounding miffed.

He raised a brow. A backbone on. Definitely a fire cracker when you can find the right buttons to push.

Taking in a deep breath, she released it and turned to face him. "Look, I'm sorry for what I asked of you. I hope you will forgive and forget this scene ever happened."

He began to laugh and he noticed she had stiffened. What she didn't know was that his laughter was not one of amusement but incredulity and unbelief. Forgive and forget. Just like that. Act as though it never happened. Very cushy.

“I’m serious, Mr. Grinder,” Frowning, “I apologize for putting you in a difficult position as we don’t know each other, but I would appreciate it if you didn’t mention it to anyone. Are we clear?”

He simply stared at her. She must really be dumb, but he didn’t voice it out, rather, he gave her a hard look, which although she didn’t flinch as he’d expected, he saw the uncertainty clearly etched in the depths of her eyes.

“You, pointing a finger at her, “... are obviously not very smart.”

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With the way Gracie stared at her, Samantha felt they were about to go into a long chat. This, she was not going to do. It was too early after that embarrassing scene to want to talk to her nosy friend. For Gracie was nosy indeed. Too much rode on her sanity to avoid a confrontation.

The sigh of relief was unconscious when her phone rang. She didn’t even pause enough to find out who the caller was first.

“Good evening, ma’am. There’s a Mark Grinder on the line to speak with you.” Stacy, her secretary said.

Surprise made her pause but catching the look of inquiry on Gracie’s face, she forced herself to sound cheerful, “Okay,” Later, she’d berate herself for agreeing.

There was a short static noise and his voice came up, none too pleased, “Hello?”

Forcing a smile not to encourage Gracie’s look, “Samantha Barigha here.”

There was a short pause. “I’d hoped never to speak to you again but I forgot my diesel in your car.” He sounded miserable.

She bit her lower lip as the insult stung, “I’m sorry, but I’m busy right now. Tomorrow, perhaps. Can I give it to you on my way to work?”

“No!” He said, not at all pleased with her answer.

Shock and despair cloaked her face and Gracie caught it well enough, jumping up from the couch. What had she gotten herself into? ‘I can’t come now...’

“...you’d better find a way because I’m not about to let my phone stay switched off until Her Majesty decides when it’s convenient for her.”

Now, she felt the full impact of what she'd done. How had she put herself in such a fix? How had it happened? She placed a hand on her forehead "Mr. Grinder, please. Listen, ..."

"I did and I regret it now." A pause, "Thirty minutes." And the line went dead.

Samantha felt like crying. And she never cried, at least not so easily. She fell back onto the couch and Gracie placed a sympathetic hand on her arm. When did things get so irrational with her?

"Work issue?" Gracie asked concerned.

She shook her head. Only if it was! That was her turf. She knew how to handle her turf.

At Gracie's prompting, she told her of how they'd met, leaving out the embarrassing scene of her proposal completely.

Gracie frowned. 'If you gave him a lift, why is he so angry for forgetting his property in your car?'

Gracie was not stupid; many non-flattering things but certainly not stupid.

"You know what? Give me his address, I'll take it to him."

But even as Samantha gladly did, she knew it was a huge mistake.

∞ ∞ ∞

She knew it was him when she spotted him. How, he could not tell, but she knew because she waved at him and packed the car. She was out of the car before he crossed the road to meet her. The trunk door opened, and he went first to retrieve his diesel before she came face to face with him.

This one was flashier. Taller by a few inches too. She looked like a model on a run way with her black slit skirt and pink designer chiffon top neatly tucked in. The hair she made could probably pay for his mother's medical bill. Her shoes screamed a thousand dollars. And dollar lately was expensive!

This was awkward. He felt strangely assessed and managed not to fall on his face. "Good evening. Gracie, right?"

She nodded and looked around, not at all surprised at the environment, like she'd expected it. She gave him a smile that clearly said, 'You'll do.'

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