

NICK NWAOGU



THE ALMOST KISS

Dear Reader,

Romance suspense novels account for only seven percent of the romance novels in the market. That's a lacking figure, and I hope many writers in the near future, decide to write more romance suspense. In *The Almost Kiss*, together, Femi and Chioma solves Emeka's Valentine-day murder, and on doing so, Chioma is exposed to Femi's heroic personality, which makes her eventually fall for him. This is a novel on how crime brings two love birds together.

I have always enjoyed reading romance suspense, partly because it intrigues me, but mostly because I'm always anxious on how the protagonists will solve the mystery at the end, so I thought it was time to write a romance suspense myself. Exactly a year ago, I wrote a contemporary romance short-story of same title. At that time, it was a standalone story that ended when Chioma found out that her crush Emeka was expecting a baby with his girlfriend Amara. Ever since, I knew that someday I would write the complete story, and here it is.

The Almost Kiss is a story of true love, which begins and ends at a single site. Chioma and Emeka meets at a restaurant on Saint Valentine's Day and instantly fall in love. Unfortunately, before the end of that very day, Emeka is killed by Chioma's boyfriend Uche, and Chioma never gets to see him again. This should be an author's note and not a spoiler, so I'll leave you to read the story yourself. Nevertheless, I want to thank you for purchasing this book. I'm optimistic that you'll enjoy reading it just as much as I enjoyed writing it.

With love,
Nick

Appreciation



Many writers have failed to become published authors, not because they couldn't get a decent publisher willing to print their work, but because they ran out of steam before they could type out the last word of their book.

Without further ado, I would like to thank everyone who supported me in one way or another to get to the final word of this book.

For *Amara*, my one and only sister: You have always been my backbone. Thank you for always being there when nobody else was, and for lifting me up whenever I fall, especially when I had nothing more to give back but my gratitude. Your ever-encouraging words made me never stop trying harder each day. A million and one thanks to you!

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For *Clara*, my insanity: Talking to you is easily the best part of my day. I want to thank you for always laughing at my bad jokes, and for constantly reminding me that I'm one of the finest writers you have ever met. Thanks for energizing me with brimming breaths of fresh air each time I experienced *writer's block*. I promise to continue writing until I'm perfect!

For *Mezie, Vera, Abiel, Whitney* and the rest: Thank you all for taking some quality time out of your busy schedules to read my story, and for your very kind words afterwards.

Most sentimentally, for *John* and *Rosalina*, my lovely parents: Thanks for the countless times you two were always there for me even when I sometimes acted like a complete idiot and didn't deserve it. I would have been utterly lost in this world without both of you so I want to say thanks for the sacrificial love.

For *Createspace*: Thanks for your first-class step-by-step publishing service. Thank you for putting my book before the eyes of thousands of readers. I'm indeed grateful for your consistent and excellent publishing solution that has persistently grown through the last fourteen years.

Thank you!

E dupe!

Na gode!

Daalu!

Nick Nwaogu
January 2017

1



Prologue

It was early in a chilly Monday morning with spotless white ominous clouds of fog wrapping every inch of nature. Long trains of soothing dry *Harmattan* wind receded hurriedly towards Femi as breaths of warm packs of air broke free from under his wide nostrils into oblivion.

The often vibrant tropical sun appeared to be lethargic as it slept comfortably in the blue sky. Life in the populous and poorly sanitized city of Lagos seemed to be panning out faster than the day before.

It was February 15, 2016, a day after Saint Valentine's Day—*Christmas* for the hopeless romantics, but for folks like Femi, it was just a typical day of work.

Femi restlessly sat in a yellow ramshackle commercial bus prying along the unforgettable Catholic Mission Street. With his fingers and chin numb with cold, his hands found refuge in his trouser pockets. He peeped through the shattered window beside him at the busy and familiar city that stretched to infinity. He was neatly presented in an essentially decorated Nigeria Police uniform, looking smart as always. The three red 'V's on his blue, short sleeves indicated that the dashing handsome officer was a Sergeant. Waking up in the morning knowing fully well that it could be your very last day, meeting and dealing with hardened and unrepentant criminals, chasing hoodlums down the street and getting shot at—that was as close to prudence as it got when you're an itinerant 30-something-year-old police officer in an environment where many craved for fast money and illegal activities.

His bus rode pass the ever-busy Lagos City Hall, the famous King's College with students in sparkling white uniform loitering along the corridors before assembly was due to start, and the French gothic style architecture of the Holy Cross Cathedral with a few worshippers praying before the grotto.

Though born in Lagos, this was the first time the young officer had been to this part of town.

Like every other day in a chaotic city, a tourist could see and appreciate the daily and routinely hustle of hardworking and '*fast-walking*' locals reporting to their workplaces, even before the sun rose.

They could easily take photographs of derelict public buses prying speedily and dangerously along poorly maintained highways, leaving a trail of thick poisonous fumes in their tracks, thus awakening self-destruction.

One could even catch a sight of a stampede, as determined and desperate *Lagosians* aggressively struggle to board already-moving buses that are jam-packed with noisy citizens, and fearless young men literally hanging on the edge of bus' entrances with their eyebrows kneaded in slight worry.

Every living thing that drew breath, even the roosters, were busy, crowing and roaming around every edge of emptiness, ducking to the filthy grounds beneath their feet, perpetually in search of food.

The well-enjoyed and long-overstayed weekend break was over, and the daily monotonous routine of the chief commercial city of its nation, unfolded all over again.

Femi finally arrived at Saint Nicholas House, a white fourteen-storey mixed-use building. 'Saint Nicholas dey?' the shabby bus conductor dressed in slippers and a smelly undershirt, barked in *Pidgin English*. 'Saint Nicholas dey,' Femi hurled back.

He disembarked as soon as the dilapidated vehicle came to a halt. The moment his well-polished black *Valentino* leather shoes hit the tarred road, the bus sped off, recklessly hugging the road again.

Femi stood tall before the high-rise building.

Slowly, he raised his head, training his sight at the skyscraper rooted before him, while private vehicles and commercial tricycles pried along the expensive Campbell road behind him. Beside him was an empty white ambulance, completely buried in the faint shadow of the tall building. After a momentary admiration of the elite landscape, he inched behind two female nurses in clean white uniform, headed for the entrance of the building, chitchatting to one another in high-pitched voices and laughing. There was a large blue signboard just above the entrance, which read '*St. Nicholas Hospital*'. Femi was welcomed to a neat, orderly and somewhat quiet king-size room. His orbs bright with anticipation, flicked across every square foot of the reception hall diffused with inaudible sounds. There was an old lady, finely wrinkled, completely grey-haired, wearing an old-fashion reading glasses, probably in her mid-70s, been pushed on a wheel chair by a young female nurse dressed in neat uniform.

The room was mainly crammed with five rows of posh iron benches where families of patients impatiently waited. Some were in grief, others were in tears, but many were overwhelmed with anxiety without any verbal interaction with anyone. Seated on one of the benches was a young gentleman on blue shirt and a plain grey trouser, swiping the screen of a sleek tablet, with his eyes glued on it. Next to him was an exhausted lady dressed in a native purple attire, dozing off without a snore. Behind them was a robust woman dressed in an uncommon *ankara* fabric, discreetly talking to herself in despair.

There was a vending machine at one corner of the room filled with attractively wrapped foods and bottled drinks. Next to the machine was the bronze sculpture of the Late Nigerian gynecologist and obstetrician, *Moses Majekodunmi* who founded the hospital. In front of everyone was a beautifully-lit mini-grocery store with an equally beautiful female store-attendant wearing an enchanting smile as she read Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook*. Femi swaggered further into the hall-like room, towards the stunning receptionist who comfortably sat behind a busy desk, chewing gum, and routinely stroking the keys of a keyboard, while perpetually staring at a bright computer monitor mounted in front of her.

'Hello,' Femi politely drew her attention.

'What can I do for you, sir?'

'I am here to see one of your patients.'

Her fingers and jaw froze as she looked away from the blinding monitor and took a sharp glance at Femi who stood straight across the desk. 'What's the patient's name, sir?' She radiated a welcoming

smile. 'I don't know but she was brought here early this morning after a motor accident last night.'

Femi said thoughtfully. She swiftly typed through a long database of patients.

'Okay, Chioma Okafor,' she read out.

'You may need to come back later, sir.'

'Why?'

'The patient is stable and responding to treatment, but she isn't awake yet.'

'Don't worry I will wait.'

'It may take several hours.'

'It's alright, I've got all day. Just don't forget to let me know when she's awake.'

'Okay, sir. Please have a seat.' She pointed.

Femi turned around and boorishly paced away towards the identical benches. He sank at the edge of an empty bench just behind the woman in ankara. Instantly, he inhaled the sweet fragrance that romanced the African wax swathing around her curves.

Meanwhile, at the notorious *Ikoyi police station* along Awolowo Road, a one-storey building with blue, yellow and green stripes, valiant police officers in uniform were littered all over the premises, geared with bulletproofs, dressed in camouflages, and armed with semi-automatic rifles in one arm. They walked gallantly in groups, chatting to one another, or stood put nonchalantly, dialoguing with civilians.

A blue metro patrol van was parked in front of the station and along the neatly tarred road, with its engine still running. Two fearsome officers were seated in the van.

One was seated on the driver's seat, while the other rested on one of the two long benches in the back of the van, dressed in black shirt and green khaki trouser, with an AK-47 rifle in his possession. They seemed to be maliciously waiting for someone to arrive or for something to happen. Just behind the police van was a private truck with impounded motorcycles jam-packed in its carriage. There was a signboard that strictly prohibited loitering, hawking and parking.

In the incident room, mini-sized, with a small desk at one corner, two junior officers neatly dressed in complete black uniform stood behind a counter.

The chair behind the desk was vacant, with rough dusty piles of brown paperback files defacing the top of the desk. One of the officers was a Corporal with two red 'V's attached to his sleeves, while the other was a Sergeant.

A white plastic name-tag pinned to the uniform of the Corporal, just above his left breast pocket, read *Kunle Adeyemo*, while that of the Sergeant read *Tega Ogbegbo*. Tega, in his mid-30s, was physically unimpressive, rugged, not handsome, not ugly—just plain. He was rebellious, rude, and out-spoken. Kunle was gentle-faced, and in his late-20s.

Far behind the officers was a ratty detention cell with half-naked men standing barefooted, oozing foul odour, and futilely squeezing their faces through the narrow spaces between the vertical rusty bars that jailed them. 'How long will I be here for?' A prisoner bleated. 'Until someone bails you out,' Tega barked without turning to the prisoner. 'Meanwhile I don't want to hear any further complains from you. Criminal!' Tega channeled his attention to Kunle who scribbled on an A4 paper, lifting words from another document. Kunle was left-handed.

'Where's Femi?' Tega inquired. 'I don't know,' Kunle babbled coldly without lifting his pen. 'Chief assigned good partners to everyone except me,' Tega murmured as Kunle continued to scribble. 'Do you have call unit on your phone?' Tega began. 'I want to call Femi and I'm low on airtime,' he continued. 'I don't,' Kunle responded abruptly. 'You'll never have,' Tega cursed under his breath. Kunle paused, slowly abandoned the paper before his eyes, and burned Tega with a squint of disapproval. 'You asked me a question and I answered. Why are you cursing me?' he protested defiantly.

‘I will smack you if you talk again,’ Tega barked icily, sending shockwaves of fright through Kunle’s spine. Kunle quickly reverted to his routine without any further utterance, while Tega dipped his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out an old-fashion phone. He fiddled with the stiff keypads for a bit before raising the phone to his ear.

Femi’s phone was indistinctly ringing. The name-tag on his uniform read *Femi Kolawole*. He seemed distracted, looking ahead at the straight face of the receptionist, with his face wrinkled by a frown. He was mutely praying for Chioma’s awakening. Time passed slowly like grains of sand moseying through the funnel of an hourglass.

The receptionist failed to make any visual contact with him. ‘Who gave this sort of woman a job at a hospital? How can someone chew gum during working hours? I’m certain she didn’t attend a good university,’ Femi whined feebly, ‘Nepotism prevails in this country.’ He shook his head disapprovingly.

Tega was achingly listening to Femi’s caller-tune, vexingly waiting for him to answer the call. ‘Pick up!’ His patience ran out.

Femi was busy working his way through a crossword puzzle in a *Vanguard* newspaper he found lying on the empty bench he sat on. Finally, his attention was brought to his ringing phone as he felt mild vibrations within his right trouser pocket. ‘Who shares my phone with me? Why will someone continue to reduce the volume of my ringtone?’ Femi nagged within himself.

He shoved his right hand into his pocket and revealed a *Samsung* smartphone. ‘This troublemaker again,’ he sighed wearily as soon as his eyes hit the screen. ‘Why won’t you leave me alone?’

It was Tega calling.

Femi pushed down the green answer button with his thumb and steadily raised the phone to his ear. ‘Bawo ni,’ he greeted in *Yoruba*. His attention was utterly drawn away from the receptionist who glanced at him briskly.

‘A couple came to the station today looking for you. Something about their landlord threatening to evict them,’ streamed Tega’s voice from Femi’s phone. ‘Don’t mind them. They never speak the truth. Their landlord gave them six good months to pay their rent or vacant the property. They are simply looking for free accommodation in Lagos,’ Femi aggressively vented into his phone, thoroughly soaked in the conversation.

‘If that’s the case, we should go and force them out.’

‘No problem. When I get to the station, you and Kunle will accompany me there. We will throw their things out the window. They should relocate to their village.’

Femi was prepared to bring war upon their walls.

Tega lifted his left hand to his eyes, and gazed sharply at the face of the brown leather wristwatch tightly fastened around his wrist.

It was 12:03pm.

‘Where are you right now? It’s past twelve already.’

‘I am at the hospital.’

‘Yes, yes, yes! I remember now. Have you seen the accident victim yet?’

Femi’s attention was reversed to the receptionist seated before him. His eyes were locked on her every move. ‘They said she is fine but she isn’t awake yet,’ Femi hissed. ‘I am here waiting for her to wake, and hopefully she will tell me everything she remembers from last night.’ He hushed for a while, listening to Tega. ‘Later,’ he bided farewell.

Tega was now buried in the shadow of someone standing before him, across the counter. ‘Later,’ he sunk his phone into his pocket before looking on to Kunle. ‘God pass you,’ he declared, rolling his eyes at him with a loud sigh. ‘I have used my bonus airtime to call.’ He bragged. Kunle was still scribbling. He didn’t make any visual contact with Tega.

Femi sighed heavily as he dropped his head down in exhaustion. He stared without blinking, at the nicely-finished floor of the hall, with his phone still in the firm grip of his right hand.

Tega looked ahead at the person who stood before him. 'What can I do for you, sir?' He grinned cheerfully at a huge, good-looking man dressed in a lavish Yoruba attire.

'I was just robbed and the robbers carted away with my car and my money. One of them had dreadlocks.' Tega's smile was instantaneously washed-out. 'How much are you talking about, and what model is your car, sir?' Tega queried in a serious tone. 'Two point five million naira and a twenty fifteen Range Rover...' His voice trailed away. 'Oghene!' Tega exclaimed in *Urhobo*.

2



'He Didn't Make It Alive'

Femi's phone beeped twice with a *'low battery'* warning, shaking him awake.
It was 12:43pm.

He had dozed off through the last half-hour. 'I thought I fully charged this phone last night. What's low battery again?' Femi hissed, rubbing his eyes half-asleep, as he shoved his phone into his trouser pocket.

'You can now go in, sir. Wing C, room number seven. That's the seventh door on your left,' the receptionist informed Femi who looked around glumly. 'The patient is now awake. Please no interrogation,' she continued.

Femi lifted himself gracefully without eyeing the receptionist. 'Please no interrogation,' he mimicked her. 'Who the hell does she think she's talking to?' he murmured as he carefully adjusted his neatly ironed uniform to perfection. 'She hasn't heard of Femo,' he praised himself as he gallantly made his way to the hallway.

Femi stall danced as he walked through the long and somewhat empty hallway with his eyes locked on the labels of every room door. His face was crafted in delight as his fancy dress shoes moved in fine rhythmical African dance patterns.

Infected with undiluted joy, he sang loudly to Wizkid's *'Jaiye Jaiye'* afrobeat song, replacing the artiste's lyrics with his own words.

♪ *'Femi, bad policeman. I dey catch corny man.
You already know. I crack every case...'* ♪

He lifted his tightly fistted hands up, close to his face, throwing them back and forth, like a professional boxer guarding his face in a boxing ring from the punches of a deadly opponent, while patiently waiting for the perfect opportunity to sling a winning punch.

'Femi you're too much,' he celebrated himself before continuing his cheerful song of self-praise.

♪ *'...You for become musician.'* ♪

Femi was happily in oblivion that he failed to notice two young female nurses walking behind him, laughing loudly at the cracked voice of the officer.

*He was tone-deaf.
And it was dreadful.*
It seemed like his throat was dry, cracked and patched.



In a neat medium-size room, *Chioma*, a hapless, young, beautiful lady with small healing facial scars, sobbed in confusion. Her wandering eyes circled around every inch of the room, trying to forcefully embrace her new environment, as a thin needle ran partly into her vein.

The room was dead silent.

One could literally hear the soundless *dripping* of clear fluids draining into Chioma's vein. There was a two-layer cabinet beside her. On the cabinet was a basket of red flowers and a desk telephone planted next to it. On the other side of the bed was a black luxury leather armchair. Hanged on the wall behind her were two charming oil paintings of nursing African mothers.

With a scattered hair that fell across her shoulders, and worn-off makeup, she tried to call out to someone, but the words steaming on her tongue failed to break free through her gritted teeth. Bitter tears trickled down freely as she groaned in pain.

A surge of tormenting flashback hit her in one gigantic wave. She tried to get up from the bed in defense against the hazy and torturing images lurking around her. It was too much for her to handle.

Femi scurried into the room through the doorway. 'Oh no, don't get up. You will reopen your stitches,' he strutted further into the room, straight towards the bed and helped her to lay on her back again. 'Where am I?' she muttered, laying back flat. 'You're at Saint Nicholas Hospital,' Femi replied with same softness. 'You were brought here early this morning after a motor accident last night. You lost a lot of blood before getting here, so you're indeed lucky to be alive.'

He froze for a moment too long before speaking again, using the time to appreciate the natural beauty of the agonizing lady.

'You are very beauti...'

He didn't complete the sentence, instead he swallowed the rest of his unprofessional comment. 'What?' She half-frowned at him. Speedily, he hid his face in embarrassment. 'I meant to say that you're very lucky to be alive,' he moped.

Chioma stared hard at him for a while, saying nothing. She broke into a subtle smile after observing the discomfort the officer had been casted into. 'What day is it?' she muttered, dispelling the embarrassment enveloping the gentleman. In relief, he repositioned his head to catch a pleasing sight of the breathing beauty. 'It's February fifteen. You have been in coma for hours.' His face brightened.

Along the hallway, a doctor headed smartly towards Chioma's room for a quick check-up.

How to describe him?

Healthy-looking would come to mind, which in fact, he was. A *Caucasian* with scanty white-hair growth, average-heighted, bald-headed, possibly in his late-50s, in a glistening white overall, unbuttoned completely, uncovering his yellow shirt and a stethoscope hung around his neck.

Femi raised his left hand to his eyes and peeked sharply at the face of his gold wristwatch loosely wrapped around his wrist and dangling. 'It is well past one o'clock in the afternoon,' he continued. 'Wait a minute, where's Uche?' Chioma was no longer at ease. Though she acted calmly, she really didn't know where she was, or if she could trust Femi.

The doctor marched in.

‘Hello!’ he greeted in a fancy *British* accent. Chioma could smell it all over the sterile air—her boyfriend didn’t make it alive. ‘I asked you, where is Uche?’ she yelled, trying to get up again. ‘Please don’t, madam,’ the doctor pleaded. ‘I won’t advice you to do that. You need rest. A lot of it. That is the only way we would be able to discharge you tomorrow morning.’

He grabbed her hand, squeezed it a little, and shook his head. ‘You need to calm down. Take a deep breath and calm yourself down.’

A tear trailed down her face.

‘I can’t be calm until I know where Uche is.’

He released her hand.

‘Mister Femi here will answer all of your questions. That’s why he is here.’ He smiled at Femi before listening to her heartbeat with his stethoscope plugged into his ears.

Chioma’s eyes were locked on Femi who could feel the orbs on her face piercing through his skin, but he averted his own gaze. ‘Like the doctor said, you need to rest. I promise to answer any question you have as long as you promise to stay calm.’ Femi refused to meet her gaze and this made her restless.

Instead, he stepped away from her burning glare and quietly sat on the edge of the bed. Mildly, he towed her left hand in between his coarse palms. Her eyes were quickly latched on the sight of Femi’s hands caressing hers.

Back at the station, Kunle was upright, in front of the detention cell, with a long, red, hardcover notebook in his hands. He flicked the cover open and flipped rapidly through the pages until he was at the middle of the leaves. He stopped flipping shortly and browsed through the content of the page before his eyes.

His eyes froze before he began calling out the names of detainees. ‘Dare!’ he began.

‘Present!’

‘Segun!’

‘Present!’

‘Where are you? Let me see you.’

His eyes wandered for a fleeting moment in search of Segun. After holding sight of the prisoner, he looked down into the notebook again. ‘Hassan!’ There was no answer. ‘Hassan!’ he woofed again. Still no response. ‘Where’s that *abokè*?’ he demanded. ‘He’s sleeping,’ a voice streamed from deep inside the cell. ‘I hope he is not dead,’ Kunle slurred.

‘Kunle, if the Chief ask after me, tell him I’ve gone to join Femi at the hospital,’ rolled off Tega’s tongue before marching out of the station. ‘Obinna!’ he barked. ‘Present’ Kunle’s call continued.

Back at the hospital, Chioma quickly yanked her hand from Femi’s caress. In an attempt to dodge the embarrassment drifting his way, Femi snaked his hands into his trouser pockets regretfully. He rose up to his feet, and swaggered towards the doctor. ‘How’s she doing, doctor?’ he politely asked in hushed tones. ‘She is miraculously recovering. Within the next twenty four hours or less, with the necessary rest needed, she should be out of here and back to her normal life.’

‘But I need to talk to her right now. I need to know everything she remembers from last night.’ Femi worried. ‘Sure, go ahead, but don’t push her too hard to remember everything. These things take time. You know, she’s still fragile.’

They smiled and shook hands before the doctor slipped out the doorway, shutting the door behind him, and leaving the two alone in silence.

Growing tension filled the room as Femi and Chioma stared hard at each other. ‘You said you will answer any question I have, so where’s Uche?’

Chioma broke the awkward long silence.

Femi inched closer to the bed before initiating a brief hush-hush talk. 'I'm so sorry,' he apologized almost in a whisper.

'It's alright,' Chioma cooed.

'It's alright?' Femi inquired in shock.

'You held my hand to comfort me. It's okay. I understand,' Chioma agitated Femi. 'No, I'm not apologizing for holding your hand,' he clarified, and Chioma's face was instantly baked with wrinkles. 'Of course I'm apologizing for that too, but... but, but, I'm also apologizing because he didn't make it alive,' Femi stuttered, endorsing Chioma's suspicion.

The phrase *'he didn't make it alive'* dropped on her heart like a foreign missile on enemy soil. She wrapped herself up in her arms and shed a few quiet tears.

Elsewhere, Tega arrived at the rowdy *Obalende* Bus Park. He was greeted by a sight of sweaty pedestrians breezing through the chaotic park crammed with neglected yellow buses, which had two black stripes painted across their entire length. *The symbol for commercial vehicles in Lagos.* The park was disturbingly noisy with unkempt bus conductors calling out the destinations of their various buses.

Petty traders, mostly women, both young and old, carried large bowls of soft drinks, table waters and *'pure'* water sachets. Some roamed around the park hawking, while others stood in front of bus' entrances, yelling out the names of the item they sold. Young men carrying cartons of sausage or locally-made showcases of cheap candy and mint gum, gathered in groups, lost in chitter-chatter and singing laughter. One of the bus conductors yelled repeatedly:

*'Mile 2! Cele Ijesha! Mile 2!
Four hundred Naira bus! Mile 2!
Hol' your change oh, I no get change!'*

Tega strolled into one of the buses headed for *Mile 2* and claimed a seat by the edge of the entrance. 'Pilot, bus don full. Fire down!' The bus conductor informed the driver that his bus had reached full capacity. He hopped on the already moving bus, dangerously hanging by the bus' entrance as the wrecking bus inched away from the park, leaving a trail of air pollution in its path.

Femi dipped his hand into his pocket. He pulled out his phone and navigated to a saved photograph in its gallery. 'Careful observations of the tire marks left at the accident scene indicate that your vehicle didn't sway, so this wasn't a mechanical failure.' Femi passed his phone to Chioma, stretching his hand completely. She didn't receive it.

Her eyelids were swollen, cheeks puffy and eyes filled with tears. 'It seems like Uche deliberately stirred his vehicle off the road and straight through a building. Is this true?' he continued, but she was already blown away by whirlwinds of thoughts.

Femi retreated his phone and put it away into his pocket. 'Did you hear what I just said?' He tapped her lightly on the shoulder, interrupting her thoughts. This propelled a shiver down her spine as she jerked back to her senses.

She turned her face to him and eyed him in an awfully rude way. 'Was there an argument between you and the deceased?' He didn't seem to care. 'I need you to assist me here,' he pleaded for her cooperation, but she didn't break her silence. 'Do you remember everything from last night, or anything at all?' He moped, but she still didn't break her silence.

Tega's bus sped roughly into a sandy bus park, raising dust in its wake. The bus conductor jumped down from the bus to the filthy ground as the bus slowly came to a halt, making way for his passengers to disembark to the wild park.

'Everybody come down. Everybody come down here,' the conductor yelled. 'Na last bus stop be this,' he shouted in Pidgin English. Tega was the first to disembark. He emerged from the bus to discover a cool dry wind blowing. He was greeted by a familiar sight of weary petty traders

under colorful umbrellas. For a moment, he stood and glanced around, listening to near sounds of traders and distant noises of buses prying along the main road. ‘Fun mi owo mi,’ a tatty park boy with a pile of ragged banknotes in one hand, harassed the bus conductor in *Yoruba*.

‘Can’t you see that I carried an officer?’ The bus conductor pointed his forefinger at Tega. ‘That isn’t my concern,’ the park boy mumbled indifferently, discarding his claim. ‘Fun mi owo mi jo,’ he taxed again, while Tega stomped sand from his boot before swaggering further away from the park as civilians made way for him.



‘We could talk some other time when you’re ready,’ Femi was frustrated. It was time to release Chioma. ‘Take some rest now,’ he forced a slice of smile upon his lips. He spun around and headed for the exit.

‘I. Never. Loved. Him,’ Chioma hissed, each word separated by her gritted teeth and angered tone, halting him in his tracks. He turned as soon as he heard her mutter those four words. Almost at the door, he paced back into the room until he stood few inches shy from her. ‘Hold on, I need to record your statement for future references. Is that okay?’ he asked in anxiety.

She nodded stiffly in affirmation.

He stepped to the other side of the bed and sat comfortably on the black leather armchair, leg crossed, flashing a winning smile. Simultaneously, he pulled out a mobile tape recorder from his left trouser pocket and pushed down the record button.

‘This is Sergeant Kolawole, NP Three Seven Six Eight. I’m at Saint Nicholas Hospital where a victim from last night’s motor accident along Lekki-Epe expressway is currently receiving medical treatment. This is her account of the event.’ He lifted the recorder closer to his lips. ‘The next voice you will hear is hers.’ Femi shoved the recorder to Chioma who sat up, leaning back against the pillows. ‘If there were two people meant for each other but fated to be apart, it was Emeka and I...’ Chioma started delicately, diving into a pool of thoughts as she recounted an event from the day before.

‘...We met, or more accurately first saw each other at Exquisite Restaurant on Fola Osibo Street. We sat at different tables in line with each other and we were both there with our significant others. It was Saint Valentine’s Day...’

‘...We were both bored even though we were committed to the one who sat before us. They both had big surprises for us that night. Uche’d planned a marriage proposal to me, and Amara had decided it was time to let Emeka know he was going to be a father, but neither one of us were pleased with what awaited us...’

‘...However, catching sight of Emeka made me escape my worries into a dream that rescued me. Though it was but for a fleeting moment and I had to focus on the reality I was to live with, my heart was forever grateful...’ Femi spent an awful long time listening to Chioma recount her Valentine dilemma.

3



Recounting Valentine

Let's rewind to the day before.

The restaurant that stood in the center of the estate was full, mostly with couples celebrating love. The dining room was diffused with a fine blend of soft, soothing jazz music and laughter.

Celebrations were in full swing.

Everyone was nicely dressed with a touch of red. Couples sat around small tables, holding hands and smiling as they whispered across the table to each other. Some dug into the delicious meal in front of them, while others toasted to the love they shared with half-filled champagne glasses.

It was February 14, 2016.

Saint Valentine's Day.

Waitresses were all over the place.

One carried a tray of well-covered meals on one hand, another with a bucket of expensive champagne, and the third stood put in front of a table, jotting on a piece of blank paper the order of the couple seated before her. They were all attired in white long-sleeve blouses, black monkey-jackets, and tight thought-provoking mini-skirts that revealed flawlessly the curves of their hips and buttocks. Chioma and Uche sat around a table under a beautiful chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

Someone was yet to attend to them.

Chioma was tall, skinny, model-like, dreamy-eyed and very likeable. She had dimples when she smiled. Her red leather purse glittered as it reflected bright blinding lights from above. She definitely looked dazzling in her necklace, dangling gold earrings and long, red dinner gown that flew elegantly from her waist to the ground like a waterfall, and she wore an artificial red lips to match. Her natural long glossy hair covered her left eye and temple in the right proportion that abandoned her right eye to spell out all the beauty that rained down upon her face that night.

Uche, really conservative, round and large eyed, was dressed in a stylish white three-piece suit that fitted him just right, and a gold Rolex wristwatch that made mouths clamp shut. His tie had a perfect knot and his unpretentious and comfy Chukkas suggested that he was a bloke of taste, class and sophistication. The tables where Chioma and Emeka sat with their lover were in line with each other, separated by a table, in a manner that neither Chioma nor Emeka could see the face of each other's partner.

Uche stared on and hard at Chioma like a lottery ticket with all five winning numbers. 'You look beautiful tonight,' he purred with a smile, expecting her to accept the marriage proposal he'd

planned for the night. ‘What the fu...?’ Chioma quickly glanced away in disgust from the sight of a couple kissing at the next table. ‘What an eyesore? Must you kiss in public to tell everyone that you’re happily in love?’ she added in irritation without apology. ‘Gosh, I hate PDAs.’

Uche was vexed.

‘I just told you that you look beautiful and you’re giving me a lecture on public display of affection?’ he vented with his eyes shut and his hands held up as if he was about to bang on the empty table across them. *Good Lord, he didn’t.* ‘Oh my... I’m so sorry darling. Thank you,’ she said in a soft, pretty, friendly voice, not sounding sorry at all. Remembering that she should look over-the-top happy tonight, she painfully forced faint traces of smile to her artificial red lips. Again, her eyes wandered across the room. Both Emeka and Chioma were bored though committed to the ones who sat before them.

The extremely-handsome, freakishly-tall and perfectly-slender Emeka was dressed in a red beach shirt, a white khaki short, and a faded-brown loafers, much like a foreigner. From his strange accent and often use of western slangs, you can tell that he’d spent a handful of his life on foreign soil. His curly and well-moisturized hair slicked back nicely, and his big, brown eyes shined with adventure. His shirt was undone straight down, revealing his untainted white singlet and his 18-karat *bling-bling*—a gold necklace with a pendant that hung down to his navel.

Emeka’s girlfriend Amara was dressed in a strapless white body-fitted gown that bared her cleavage and terminated far above her knees. She was curvy and stylish in high-heels. The orange bead necklace that hung around her neck almost made its way in between her protruding breasts. She wore a short black wig and a mighty reflective lip-gloss that made her lips practically irresistible to kiss. Her champagne glass was still filled with wine, while she tapped her fingers on the table that separated her from Emeka.

She was certainly nervous.

‘Guess what baby,’ Amara purred in excitement, rubbing her hands. Emeka’s face was masked with boredom. He wasn’t in the best mood for a guessing game. ‘You know I’m not good at guessing.’ Emeka dragged a sip from his glass. ‘So tell me what you’re so excited about,’ he continued. Amara grinned sheepishly. ‘I’m pregnant!’ she burst out excitingly. Emeka’s glass dropped from his right hand down to the table, spilling the content, and creating a sharp disturbing noise that drew the attention of some couples seated around.

The Valentine date was going on so well before she went on to spoil it by saying she was pregnant. Though his face was wide in grins and chuckles, his insides were shouting ‘kill me!’

It was then Chioma and Emeka caught sight of each other.

Realities dissipated.

Bright sparks slung from their eyes.

Instantly, the voices of their partners became distant whispers. Her long, artificial eyelashes fluttered under his firm gaze. His black-brown eyes reflected the lights of the room, and they were so glossy and perfect that Chioma knew that if she was any closer to him, she could see herself in them. Their eyes were locked for a moment too long, but the moment was short-lived as Chioma had to attend to a waitress standing before her.

‘What do you care for, madam?’

Chioma struggled to remove her eyes slowly enough, while his lingered on her exquisite, unfamiliar beauty for a while longer. ‘Have you ordered?’ Chioma asked Uche absently, oblivious to her partner’s presence for the last half-minute. Her attention was still tied around Emeka and Amara, and lurking around. Eyebrows puckered in concentration, trying to pick up any conversation going on between the pair.

‘Are you kidding me? Where’s your mind tonight?’ Uche throttled her. ‘I guess I left it at home,’ she smirked, flaunting her snow-white dentition, but he wasn’t gullible enough to be enticed

by her unconvincing smile or to buy her jittery half-joke. She sounded rather silly to him. She lifted the menu off the table, and browsed slowly through its content. 'I will have... simple baked chicken drumsticks and some Mexican rice,' she read out, tracing the words on the menu with her forefinger.

Meanwhile, Amara had broken the news to Emeka that he would soon be a father, and his heart thumped and sank instead. He sat there sinking slowly into the depths of his own subconscious. 'Will you say something?' Amara throttled him, but he had already fled this world into a dream. 'I think it is perfect timing. We have discussed the prospect of marriage and we have been dating for almost five years now,' she sought to persuade Emeka who was still lost in love at first sight that he didn't even hear a word been set free from her mouth.

'I love you and I know you love me too, so why don't we get married before the baby comes?' Amara finally won Emeka's attention with those last six words. He looked away from Chioma and burned Amara with a squint. 'But we were careful. I made sure I was very careful anytime we were intimate,' he lamented with a wrinkled forehead. 'For the love of God, what does that even mean?'

Amara grew mad.

'I... I'm...' Emeka sighed under his breath. 'We did not plan this, and that's why I'm in shock.'

'Shock? What nonsense!'

She had a harsh expression on her face as she glared at him in astonishment. Her hands were both fisted like she was about to fling a few punches. 'We have been careful. That's why I'm... shocked.' He whispered the last word out of the corner of his mouth like he was afraid of someone else hearing him.

Tensed moments as Amara and Emeka stared hard at each other.



Chioma and Uche were now having dinner. 'The food here taste bad tonight,' voiced Chioma after navigating a fork heavy with rice into her mouth. She stared at the table where Amara and Emeka were seated raising their voices at each other. She tried to catch up with what the pair were arguing about, but nothing.

'Don't even say that.'

Amara was infuriated.

'You talk about it like it's such a terrible thing to carry your baby.' She was about to throttle Emeka but opted for a calmer approach, which was silence, and she stayed mute for the rest of the dinner date, and Emeka knew he was in deep waters.

'I'm certainly not ready in any way to be a father,' Emeka explained. 'You know this already. My career had just started and financial stability is a long way coming. I've told you this countless times.' Amara was mute, chewing her food stridently and irritatingly, in a bid to infuriate Emeka. 'Say something,' he breathed heavily, but Amara didn't break her silence. She lifted her glass of wine to drag a sip, but dropped it gently. 'Dammit, she really is pregnant,' Emeka thought to himself as she painfully ingested the food in her mouth. He didn't dare say a word. He wanted some peace and quiet, and that was what he was going to get.

It was an unpleasant night.

Neither couple were having a great time.



'This is your favorite restaurant. You never complain about the food here. You even introduced me to this place,' Uche fussed. 'Is there something bothering you that I should know about? You don't seem yourself tonight. Is there anything you are not telling me that I ought to know about? You know you can always talk to me about anything.'

Chioma was mute.

'Will you look at me when I'm talking to you?' Uche flew into one of his wicked rages. 'I think it's just the stress at work. My boss has been too demanding. The pressure is getting too much, that's all,' she broke her silence with blatant lies, imposing a smile on her unnaturally red lips. 'But... I will be fine when I get some rest tonight.' She stabbed a flesh of chicken. 'You will be alright, darling,' Uche purred, stirring the dinner towards a lighter mood for the marriage proposal.

Amara was unsettled.

She hadn't swallowed the food in her mouth. She bent over to vomit, but locked her lips tightly with her right hand, fighting not to throw up. 'Morning sickness already?' Emeka whimpered with alarm. 'How long into this pregnancy are you?'

'You are asking how long into this pregnancy am I?' Amara furiously managed to swallow the food in her mouth. 'Am I in this alone?' she blubbered, feeling queasy. 'Lower your voice,' Emeka commanded furtively. 'What was I to say?' he mumbled. 'You should have asked how long into this pregnancy are we? Retard!' Amara vented with insult.

Emeka murmured lamely.

'What did you say?'

'Nothing!' he responded primly.

'Are you worried that we won't be able to have an abortion because the baby is already too developed?'

'You know that is not what I meant.'

'No I don't. What did you mean? Enlighten me.'

'I was just wondering how long you've known about the pregnancy without sharing it with me.'

'Then keep wondering.' She cocked her head to one side. Her eyes dawdled across the room, scanning for a waitress nearby. It froze shortly.

'Excuse me!' she called out to a waitress standing a few tables away. 'Just a minute, madam. I'll be with you shortly,' a voice streamed into her ears. 'Who has a minute?' Amara sniveled before taking a deep breath.

'What do you care for, madam?'

'Where's the ladies' room?!' she blared.

'Are you alright, madam? You look unwell.'

Amara shut her eyes loosely, both hands fisted, breathing erratically like she was in labour. 'For the love of God, will you just tell me where the ladies' room is?' Amara bawled, panicking the waitress. 'You see that passageway?' The Waitress pointed with her shaky forefinger.

'Yes!' Amara wailed.

'Walk straight in. The door on your right. I'm so sorry madam.' She spun around and flurried away. Amara reached for a tissue pack on the center of the table, and tugged off a tissue paper. She wiped her mouth clean, shoved her chair backwards, and lifted herself gracefully.

With poise, she sauntered to the ladies' room. Emeka seized her right hand as she paced pass him. She immediately stopped dead in her tracks. She glared at her wrist and trained sight of his loose grip. She yanked her hand out forcefully and dashed off.

Emeka stalked her shadow.

Amara strained her eyes as she painfully watched the pair varnish into the passageway.

A tug of jealousy peddled in her heart.

Her expression changed.

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