

# **EVERYTHING IS NOT ENOUGH**

**LOLÁ ÁKÍN MÁDÉ ÅKERSTRÖM**



*An Apollo Book*



UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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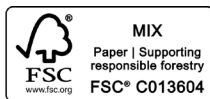
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For the strong looking for safe spaces to be weak.

Trigger warnings

Please be advised, this novel discusses issues of infidelity, sexual assault, infant loss, and suicide.

# PART ONE



# ONE

YASMIIN

*Yasmiin watches the police officer's thin lips. They're still moving,* spewing words which are making no sense. The room plunges into ear-popping silence as the loud ringing in her ears drowns out the officer's words.

The last time Yasmiin sat in a police station was years ago in Rome, Italy. The body of a Togolese girl—late teens, early twenties maybe—had been pulled from the Tiber, which flows through the city. The police didn't share details of how she'd been murdered. They simply wanted to talk to her “friends.” The pack of girls who had strolled the same block.

Yasmiin had turned eighteen just a few days earlier and was scared shitless. She sat wearing a faux leather miniskirt which covered nothing and required strategically placed hands for modesty. She recalls an Italian officer screaming in her face, demanding answers he knew she didn't have. Intimidating her. When he finally took what he wanted from her in a backroom of the station in exchange for the freedom she already had, her fear had already taken her choice and reason with it.

Now the officer in front of her, a blonde woman with clear eyes, is staring her down, watching for signs of evasion. The air around them suddenly shifts and Yasmiin swallows.

“So, you haven't seen Muna Saheed in over a year, is that correct?”

“That is correct.”

The officer scribbles words in a notebook. Yasmiin watches her write.

“But your husband,” the officer keeps writing, not looking up at her. “He had contact with Muna Saheed, is that correct?”

Yasmiin hesitates for a few seconds, then nods. The officer asks again, forcing the words out of her.

“Yes, he told me Muna used to come see him at the kebab shop,” Yasmiin explains. Pen moves over paper some more.

“And how often did your husband say Muna used to come see him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Every day? Once a week?”

“I don’t know.” More scribbling. “Maybe once a month? Two months? I don’t know.”

“But you haven’t seen Muna in over a year, is that right?”

“I told you already. Yes.”

“So why would your husband be meeting her without telling you?”

Yasmiin swallows. She knows where the officer is heading. Why had Yagiz been meeting Muna at the kebab shop? She knows it couldn’t have been an affair. Maybe he pitied her?

“He told me he didn’t want me and Muna hanging around together because she was a troubled woman.”

“So, you let him pick your friends?”

“No! He said he was protecting me from her.”

“Why would he need to protect you from her? Was she dangerous?”

“No.”

“Did she have radical leanings?” the officer asks. Yasmiin frowns at her. “Is that why your husband kept her away from you?”

“No!”

“Why do you think Muna Saheed would do this? When you were friends, did she mention these thoughts to you?”

“No. She never mentioned anything. Yes, she was sad and



depressed because she had no family. But to do this to herself? *La Samah Allah!*”

“Was Muna ever violent?”

“Never,” she exclaims.

“Do you know that minutes before she jumped she attacked a young man, fracturing his skull?”

Yasmiin’s hand flies to her mouth. None of this is making sense.

“The man will survive, but his injuries are severe,” the officer continues. “His family decided to temporarily withdraw their charges against Muna when they found out what she tried to do to herself.” The officer takes a sharp intake of air. “They are waiting for her to recover before deciding whether to proceed.”

Yasmiin sits back in her chair. Muna? Attack a man? He must have provoked her in some way. Yasmiin is sure he must have said or done something vile for little Muna to have fought him and broken his head.

“Here is what I think, Mrs. Çelik.” The officer drops her pen and links her fingers, resting them on her notebook. “I think your husband was having an affair with Muna Saheed.”

“How dare you say that?” Yasmiin sits on the edge of her seat. “Yagiz would never touch her. He called her a little girl. He pitied her and said he only gave her food whenever she came to the shop.” Yasmiin continues breathlessly. “She worked for him. His cleaning company. Maybe that was also why they had contact.”

The officer relaxes into her own chair, listening as Yasmiin rails on.

“And how many times did you say your husband saw Muna Saheed again?”

“Maybe once a month? I don’t know!”

The officer leans forward again. “Mrs. Çelik, you know I spoke to your husband before you?”

“Yes, I know. He’s waiting for me in the lobby.”

“According to him, he hasn’t seen Muna in over a year.”

Yasmiin's heart sinks. "Now, why would he lie? What more isn't he telling me about the nature of their relationship?"

After ten more minutes with the officer, Yasmiin shuffles to her feet. Muna had survived. A few broken ribs and limbs, but lying in a medically induced coma at Karolinska Hospital.

*Alive. Korttåg. Short train.*

It had been slowing to a stop when Muna jumped, a fact that had saved her life, the officer explained. Yasmiin's heaves come in fits and starts, a mix of elation and relief at the news.

When Yasmiin rushes back to the lobby, Yagiz springs to his feet.

"*Aşkım?*" *My love.* "How did it go? He scans her face, trying to get a read on what had transpired between her and the officer. Yasmiin stands frozen, her gaze to the ground, her mind racing. "*Aşkım?*"

She peers into his dark eyes before wrapping her arms around his neck, jerking him down for a suffocating hug. He lets her take what she needs until she eases out of their embrace.

A few more moments of silence.

"She made me her next of kin." The words make their way out of Yasmiin. "Before this, before all of this happened," she continues. "She made me her next of kin."

"So, what does that mean?" Yagiz isn't so much asking a question, but pondering how much more he needs to be involved, Yasmiin's sure of it. He was never going to shake Muna Saheed off, he once told her. Yasmiin now wonders if Muna kept coming to his stall because he was the only certainty in her life. The only person who didn't go away.

Yasmiin hiccups a few sobs, before responding. "It means I am her family now." She sucks in a deep breath. "Once she wakes up, I am all she has."

## BRITTANY-RAE

*Three forty-two a.m.*

Brittany leans against the jamb of her daughter Maya's fairytale-unicorned room, a slender hand cupping her mouth to muffle tears.

A light waft of alcohol reaches her as her toddler snuggles into the familiar grip of a man she no longer recognizes. The man she shares this child with, shares her life with. One she finally realizes she really doesn't know after all.

*Jonny.*

His mother Astrid had sent her a photo yesterday. One she'd never seen before. A picture of a teenage Jonny with an arm wrapped around his girlfriend, his first love, taken in front of Big Ben in London over twenty years ago.

*That face.*

A replica of Brittany's.

*That name.*

Maya.

Jonny shuffles from foot to foot, rocking gently, cooing to their daughter. "*Kära Maya*," he whispers softly, before breaking into a grin. "*Min söta Maya*." *My sweet Maya*. He swivels toward Brittany and flashes that smile of a thousand small teeth.

*That grin.*

Jonny barged into her life over two years ago. She knew deep down why she let this stranger in. She wanted to taste what it would feel like to be wrapped in a class above all others, where race no longer mattered. So, Brittany welcomed his advances. She wanted his privilege cloaked around her shoulders.

And Jonny had chased her meticulously. He memorized her body like topography and used it against her. A man so besotted she couldn't help but bask in this knowledge. It cost her freedom instead. A heftier price to pay.

He inches closer now, Maya drowsily clinging to his neck. His

eyes roam Brittany's face, scanning like they always do, learning to read emotions better so he doesn't have to ask.

She knows his quirks. He stares intensely. Often blankly. For the receiver, it borders on hair-raising—her best friend Tanesha calls it his “*resting serial killer face*.” She's grown to love him, yet his intensity still bothers her; the way he fixates on things, situations, people.

*Like Maya Daniels.*

Brittany heaves a breath. She feels a suffocating squeeze on her chest. “Give her to me.” The words barely leave her quivering lips. “Please.”

He pivots toward her with his asphyxiating gray-blue glare. “Why?”

“Please,” Brittany cries, her hands reaching, grasping air, wishing the child was in her arms instead. “Stop saying her name like that.” Her daughter's name. A name she now loathes.

Jonny was so attentive while they were dating. He always wanted to know how to please her. To fix anything he might have done wrong or said to upset her.

Now she knows why. He and his bevy of assistants were grooming her to be a dead woman's replacement. Because Jonny can't handle loose ends, abruptly broken conversations, and sudden breaks, he will never stop trying to make up for Maya Daniels's death.

Perhaps his only love.

He convinced her to name their daughter Maya before she ever knew of his obsession.

Now that ghost name will haunt her forever.

Fear grips Brittany once more. “Please,” her mouth crumbles into an ugly pout. “Give her to me.”

“She's mine,” Jonny's voice turns harsh. “You can't take her away from me.”

She inches toward him, but halts when he tightens his grip on Maya, his brows dipping inwards.

“You know I'll never hurt her, right?” He's asking, not stating.

“Right?” She knows he doesn’t like unanswered questions. “You know I’ll never hurt her?”

She’d always thought he was a terrible liar. Another quirk. So, when he lied brazenly about knowing who Maya Daniels was when she’d confronted him, deep terror had welled up within her. What else does he keep from her?

Brittany presses her lips together, shuts her eyes tightly, and nods, switching into survival mode. She lifts her eyelids in time to catch him spin once more, Maya exhausted in his arms, Jonny reeking of drink.

“*Pappa älskar dig, gumman,*” he mutters low beneath his breath, touching his forehead to their child’s.

*Daddy loves you, sweetie.*

## KEMI

### ***Mirrors are cruel.***

They cut with truth. No sugar coating with compliments. They run honesty like blades across your skin. Slashing with each glance you cast their way. Each gaze revealing what you’ve let yourself become.

In the dark orange of dawn, while Stockholm quietly wakes one opaque winter morning, Kemi stands in front of her mirror. Her eyes travel her bare shoulders, still strong even though they haven’t seen weights in years. They roam over full breasts, across a soft stomach that never knew flatness. They move across wide hips and sturdy thighs. They journey her length, and return to rest on eyes beginning to lose their luster.

It had taken years to train those eyes to move lovingly over the curves they own. To smile with upturned lips at the space they take up with pride.

But this morning, those eyes are drowning as she stares at her reflection. A gasp of exasperation escapes her mouth. Her eyelids flutter shut at what she doesn’t want to face. That she nearly

crossed the line with Ragnar, a married man. A man whose wife mirrors adore because society holds her up as its ideal.

“*Heeijj*.” Tobias stirs in bed. He finds her standing in front of the room’s narrow mirror, running her palms over her naked skin. “What are you doing? Bring that beautiful body back to bed.”

“What I asked you,” Kemi starts. “Have you thought about it?”

“About what?” His question is punctuated by a yawn. “I need to sleep, *you* need to sleep.”

“What I asked you when I got home from the office Christmas party.”

“Seriously?”

She remains quiet. He curses under his breath.

“I can’t stay here anymore, Tobias.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Will you move back to the States with me or not?” She turns to him, locking eyes.

He meets her with a frown. “I thought you were joking.”

“I’m not.”

“I can’t deal with this right now. It’s too early.” Tobias repositions himself, dragging the covers over his head, wishing for sleep to claim him once more.

“I can’t stay in Sweden anymore.”

“*Men herregud!* Good God! “Did something happen at that party? With your weird boss?”

Kemi shuts her eyes and shakes her head. No, not Jonny. Someone worse. She opens them to wipe away a few rogue tears.

“Just come back to bed, okay?” he begs her.

She shakes her head, violently this time, holding back tears. She had let Ragnar, her boss’s best friend, back her up against the elevator wall at the company Christmas party and consume her. They had desperately grabbed at each other then. She had allowed his tongue to devour hers.

And in that moment, she had wanted no one else. Not even her dear Tobias who now narrows his eyes at her in confusion.

“Move back with me!” she demands, her tears finally bursting through. “I’m not staying.”

She watches his eyebrows dip, replacing concern with anger, his brown eyes glaring at her. Then a slow shaking of his head.

“God, Kemi. I knew you were driven,” he starts. “I just never knew you were so selfish.”

Tobias rips off the covers, dresses and leaves.

Kemi pulls her coat tighter as she strolls up Birger Jarlsgatan toward work on Monday morning, her head bent low against the heavy snow shower. She isn’t sure why she’s going to work today. She should have called in sick. Made up an excuse. Anything to avoid going in to face them all, to face him.

Snowflakes settle on her plum-colored lips. Kemi blows them off, taking a deep breath once she gets to the building. Another long breath as an anchor, then she pushes that hefty historic wooden door belonging to von Lundin Marknadsfööring AB.

The elevator doors open to silence. Colleagues mill around quietly, grabbing coffee, looking through documents, no one glancing her way. Even the receptionist who normally gives her a forced smile busies himself flipping through papers. She draws her coat in tighter, her head held high, and struts past him, her heart beating faster.

As she strides past cubicles, heads duck away. Eyes, which often hold contact, divert themselves. They all know. One source has contaminated them all like a virus. She wonders if they look past him too. She walks past his cubicle, though she doesn’t really expect him to be there. Clever of him. She’s beginning to settle into the fact that she makes the dumbest moves for a smart girl.

Once at her desk, she closes her eyes for more strength before taking off her coat.

“Kemi.” She stops mid-task and turns to Ingrid’s voice. Head of Human Resources. Kemi remains silent. “Jonny has called off our morning meeting,” Ingrid continues before stepping into her space. Kemi nods. “He isn’t coming into the office today.” Kemi bobs her head once more.

“Thanks for the intel.” Kemi meets her gaze. Ingrid holds hers. Kemi swallows. “Is that all?”

“Once you get settled, can I have a word with you?”

“Is it important?” Kemi asks. Ingrid’s silence confirms its gravity. “Umm, sure. We can have it now if you want.”

A few minutes later, they sit in the boardroom where Ingrid first introduced her to her senior management colleagues over two years ago. Ingrid cradles a mug of coffee. Kemi opts for water, her mouth dry.

“I like you, Kemi. I really do.” Ingrid links her fingers and leans forward.

Kemi sinks deeper into her chair. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“He’s married. He has a daughter. His wife is pregnant.” Ingrid’s glare remains trained on her.

“I’m not having an affair with Ragnar.” Kemi muffles out the words.

“So what happened? What did I see?” Ingrid leans back and rests her linked fingers on her stomach.

“We were both drunk. It was a stupid mistake. It will never happen again.” Kemi’s voice hovers above a whisper. “I swear to you.”

“It can’t happen again, Kemi. You both work together on one of our biggest accounts. It’s unethical and could jeopardize it.”

“I know, I know.”

“Now everyone thinks you’re both having an affair,” Ingrid says with a shrug.

“Because of you.” Kemi’s voice pitches with irritation. Clearly, Ingrid must have started the rumors after catching them.

“Me?” Ingrid’s eyes widen at her accusation.

“Yes! You could have asked me first before spreading rumors about—”

“I saw you kissing a married man,” Ingrid cuts her off firmly. “Louise saw you leave with him in a taxi. She saw you holding hands.” She sharply sucks in air. “The picture fits.”



“I swear to you, Ingrid,” Kemi’s voice sinks lower, “we’re not having an affair.”

“Maybe you should work from home this week,” Ingrid says, lowering her voice too.

“I’m not going to hide away. I made one mistake. I’m not going to be judged by it forever.” Kemi can feel herself begin to unravel.

“I think it’s best if you work from home this week,” Ingrid repeats.

Ingrid holds her gaze before lifting the scalding mug to her lips. Kemi bites her own lips instead. Arrogance isn’t going to get her anywhere.

“Fine.” Kemi admits defeat, rising to her feet. “Fine.” She turns to go.

“Kemi,” Ingrid calls out once more. Kemi looks back in wordless angst. “Jonny wants you both in London next week.”

“London?”

Her skin heats up. She catches Ingrid’s eyes scanning her face for a reaction. A business trip with Ragnar. Kemi switches into neutral. “What’s happening in London?”

“He’s buying a design startup and wants you there,” Ingrid explains. “You know, for diversity and inclusion.”

“Diversity and inclusion?” Kemi repeats, her eyebrows arching upwards. “You mean just show my Black face there?”

“To assess the startup from that angle,” Ingrid clarifies. “The owner is a young intelligent Black woman like yourself.” Kemi purses her lips in response. “Jonny thinks you two might connect.”

“So let me get this straight,” Kemi starts. “Jonny is buying a company next week. I am being summoned to just appear in person because the owner is Black when I wasn’t involved at any stage of the acquisition process. Am I getting this right?”

The air shifts and she reads Ingrid’s agitation. “The other directors and I didn’t think you needed to be involved until now,” she says. “Especially since Ragnar is leading the acquisition on Jonny’s behalf.”

“I see.” With no more words for Ingrid, she spins on her heels and heads toward the door.

“No one has told Jonny yet,” Ingrid calls out to her before she pushes the door open. “About you and Ragnar,” she adds. “I’m not sure he can handle it.”

“I appreciate your concern, but the world doesn’t revolve around him. I’m tired of being schooled,” Kemi says in exasperation. “Plus, there is no me and Ragnar—”

“They’re best friends,” Ingrid interrupts. Kemi peers at her. “Stay away from Ragnar. For your own sake.”

## TWO

YASMIIN

*Yasmiin dices pieces of tripe on a Sunday morning to make tuzlama*—tripe soup—for the beguiling Turk, her dear husband. Yagiz grunts with each bicep curl in their modest living room out in the suburb of Hässelby, northwest of town. Their one-year-old son, Mehmet, with his mass of jet-black wispy curls and matching long lashes, naps in his cot.

The sharp shrill of one of Yagiz's three phones cuts through his grunting in the living room. He curses. He runs multiple businesses and has a phone for each.

Yagiz's Städning och Rengöring (YSR)—Yagiz's Tidying and Cleaning—which supplies cleaners and janitors to some of the city's most expensive office buildings. Where Muna had worked.

Çelik Kebab—his family-run kebab stall within Kungshallen basement food court at Hötorget in the heart of town. Yagiz spends his days here, managing the stall in person where, according to him, Muna often came to pester him.

And his other business, the one he'd initially roped her into. Selling khat leaves. A stimulant drug when chewed. After Mehmet's birth, Yagiz had sold that business off to a friend, an ox of a man named Özel. He now sells low-key steroid pills to bodybuilders and health fanatics instead.

Normally lean, Yagiz now uses his own body as a testbed for those steroids with each grunt.

She hears him cursing at someone in Swedish over the phone.

He drops a weight and tramps toward the kitchen, phone to his ear, switching to shooting off words in rapid Turkish. She senses him by the door and turns to find him leaning against its jamb.

His handlebar moustache and goatee are damp. Beads of sweat race down his topless torso, tattoos etched all over it, down to his deep v-cut, which disappears into well-worn sweatpants. His hair is hair shaved off on both sides with a lush black patch running through the middle—his “rooster” as Muna used to call it.

As she grabs a handful of tripe and tosses it into the bubbling broth, she breaks into sobs, tears overcoming her. She drops the knife, covering her mouth with the back of her palm.

*Muna.*

Yasmiin still hasn't seen her and isn't sure when she'll be allowed to visit. But, *Alhamdulillah*, she's alive.

Yagiz swallows when he scans her face, his Adam's apple jumping with the movement.

“Yasmiin? What's wrong?” He stares at her, brows dipped, phone still at his ear.

She shakes her head violently, muffling each cry with her hand, shoulders shaking. Yagiz disconnects his call abruptly, closes the distance between them, and gathers her into his arms.

“*Ilaahayow!*” *My God!* Yasmiin wails in Somali as Yagiz cradles her against his sweaty torso. “Muna,” she cries.

“*Aşkim.*” Yagiz runs a palm over her back. “It will be alright. Allah is in control.”

“Why didn't I check on her?” Yasmiin cries. “Why?” She sniffs back runny mucus. “She called me her sister, but I left her alone.”

“Muna had many troubles,” Yagiz says. “She was always coming to the kebab shop every week. No friends. No man to fuck her. She was a sad woman.”

Yasmiin pushes out of his hug and peers at him. He lifts his shoulders in question. *Vad? What?*

“Every week? Muna was coming to the shop every week?” Her voice begins to shake. “And you didn't tell me?”

“That girl was trouble. So negative. Like a little witch. I didn't

want her around you.” Yasmiin bursts into tears once more. Yagiz continues. “I mean, I thought you didn’t want to be her friend anymore? You left that place. You left her.”

*That place.*

The modest government-subsidized apartment she’d shared with Muna. Strangers in a foreign land. The space in which Muna became the only person on earth who knows her secrets from Rome and what she’d done to survive.

Family for Yasmiin remains a nebulous entity on a continent she hasn’t been back to in years. Memories of Somalia are buried in the foggiest trenches of her mind. She isn’t sure if her family members are dead or alive, wealthy or struggling, reveling in freedom or fighting. She doesn’t remember how she made it to Italy. Her brain refuses to remember that journey. They lie buried in the deepest recesses of her memory as if years of her life never happened. Never existed. All Yasmiin can dredge up is that one day she was happy, laughing underneath the hot sun in Mogadishu. The next, she was fleeing from something she couldn’t quite explain or understand.

She wandered the streets of Rome in a perpetual daze, wondering how she’d landed in this ragtag family—a Togolese girl, three Nigerian girls, one Slovakian girl, and one Ukrainian girl—with their middle-aged Libyan pimp as their pappa. Even those days are logged in creases. She isn’t ready to pry them out and confront them.

She ended up in Sweden five years ago because a client helped her escape from the claws of her pimp. Foreign affairs, the man had told her, when she asked him as he undressed, why he was in Rome. He’d left his socks on. He was Swedish and much older. Late fifties maybe, with greasy light brown curls and leathery sun-beaten skin that suggested long stretches of time in the tropics. His laughing cerulean-blue eyes were framed by wrinkles. He was going to help her, he said. After all, his country opened its arms wide to refugees and asylum seekers like her. She didn’t need to be walking the streets. “*Trust me.*” Those were his last words as he

shuddered, letting out an otherworldly growl, before collapsing onto her back.

Her Swedish diplomat kept his promise. Within three weeks, she became his girlfriend on paper. In reality, she loathed his proximity, love handles, and breath. She didn't care to know his name. With a tourist visa secured and fastened into an emergency Somali passport, they walked hand-in-hand through security as lovers, boarded a flight to Stockholm's Arlanda Airport, and strolled into his country on a frigid winter day, his grip on her tightening once they touched land.

Yasmiin finally did learn his name. *Bosse*. The beginning embers of her disdain for middle-aged white men. Because he forced her to scream it in gratitude every day for two full weeks as payment for her freedom from Italy. Considering she didn't understand a lick of his language and knew no one in this land coated with powdered sugar snow, she reckoned screaming his name was a small price for never having to feel his vileness again after a fortnight.

Once thoroughly satisfied, he dropped her off at the nearest asylum center for safekeeping. Not without kissing the back of her palm, thanking her for the ride, and informing her he was returning to his post in Rome.

Six months later, she was assigned to that government-funded apartment with Muna.

*That place.*

Yasmiin keeps sobbing, her hands flying up to cover her face. Sobbing because Muna is alive and breathing, albeit clutching tightly to Yasmiin's past, all dug out and covered in dirt. Yasmiin isn't sure what her friend would have done with all that dirt, had they remained close. Maybe that was why she kept her distance too.

The steel bubble she'd been crafting around her new life with Yagiz and Mehmet has now morphed into brittle glass with the news that her former roommate has survived a suicide attempt.

One tap, a single word from Muna once she comes to, and

Yasmiin's glass paradise will come crashing down. The life she is currently weaving around her shoulders in protection to erase the scars of Rome's streets and Bosse's scent is proving to be more fragile than she had anticipated.

Yagiz pries her hands off her face and cups her head between his palms. He kisses her, his lips moving featherlight over her clenched mouth, before resting his forehead on hers in comfort.

What isn't Yagiz telling her? Why did he keep seeing Muna so often?

She teeters on the edge of losing it all, of losing him, so Yasmiin's tears refuse to stop when thoughts of an affair surface again.

## BRITTANY-RAE

*Brittany stirs her coffee, her silver teaspoon scraping exquisite porcelain with each revolution, her eyes on Jonny.*

Her swirling motion hooks him like a homing device. Soon it begins to grate. She watches him unfurl and furl his fingers, unable to control himself. She revs up her motion instead, her gaze still on him. He shifts in his seat, his eyes drawn by the cup, his fingers reacting to the scraping noise.

His assistant Louise walks into their dining room, ending his misery. Louise's shoulders jump when she sees Brittany. She composes herself.

"*God morgon*, Brittany," she greets. "Hope you're doing well?"

Brittany stops racing her teaspoon inside her cup. She lifts lukewarm coffee to her lips, assessing Louise over its rim.

"It's Monday morning." Brittany leaves Louise's greeting hanging.

The petite brunette clears her throat before turning to her boss and launching into a barrage of Swedish. Two years and Brittany still can't keep up with their Swedish. She blames herself for not making more progress with the language. She still has a private tutor at her disposal. One she disposes of weekly, dipping into her

bag of excuses. She ponders if her subconscious is rejecting him by refusing to learn his tongue.

She listens to Louise talk. Observes her gestures and how Jonny listens to her intently. He can't multitask. Eating and listening concurrently remains impossible. He has to choose. This time, he listens to Louise, his brows furrowed. He lets her interrupt his breakfast instead. What she is saying chooses for him. She pulls out a folder, listing out appointments and deadlines. She repeats them once more. Brittany knows he's mentally hitting *save*. He remembers minute details, dates, numbers, fine print with frightening precision.

Five minutes later, Louise quiets down, closing the folder, holding it in front of her with both hands. She flashes Brittany a quick glance, unsure if she should continue talking.

“*Vad?*” Jonny prods her back.

She starts again, her voice falling lower, clearly trying to avoid Brittany's ears. Brittany sets down her cup and grabs a piece of cold toast. She nibbles, busying herself, her ears perking up. She hears names.

*Kemi. Ragnar. Ingrid.*

Ragnar. Jonny's best friend. A man who sees her as nothing more than a gold digger. His eyes tell her this every time Jonny forces them to be in each other's vicinity.

She notices Jonny's brow arch upwards. “*Vad.*” Not a question. His voice dips.

Louise nods and Jonny pushes to his feet. Gearing up to leave, he notices Brittany still there. She gawks at him, realizing where she stands on his list. Ragnar takes higher priority.

Right after Maya Daniels. The woman their daughter is named after.

“We need to talk,” Brittany says as he stands. He remains silent. “So I suggest Louise reschedule whatever appointment it is you're rushing off to.” She turns to his assistant. Louise avoids her gaze and excuses herself, leaving them. The dining room falls into a hush.



“I need to go,” Jonny says.

“I said we need to talk.” Anger begins brewing within her. “I can’t do this anymore.” A loud clunk. Someone drops something metallic in the kitchen, their housekeeper Sylvia eavesdropping.

Brittany gets to her feet too, pulling her bathrobe tighter. He rounds the table toward her. She takes a couple of steps backward, halting his advance.

“Don’t touch me,” she says between clenched teeth. “Don’t you dare touch me.” He stands with his fists by his sides, glaring at her intensely. She reads it in his eyes as his brain works furiously to find the right words.

“I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“No, Jonny. You’re not sorry. You’re delusional and you need help,” Brittany says. “Your family failed you. Your sisters. Your father. Your witch of a mother!”

“Leave Astrid out of this.” He clenches his jaw and tightens his fists at the mention of his mother.

“Leave Astrid out of this?” she parrots him in disbelief. He tenses once more. Brittany knows the name *Astrid* always invokes this physical reaction from him. She needs to know why. Beyond the reveal of his past. Beyond this rigid adult version in front of her. What else has Astrid done?

“How can I fix this? How can I make it right?” Jonny asks, his body relaxing once more.

She wrinkles her brows. “Don’t you get it, Jonny? This isn’t real—” Her voice breaks.

“I love you.”

“You love a ghost,” she says. “I need answers right now. I need to know everything about her,” she cries. “Right now.”

Jonny stands frozen as he takes her in, hands still in fists.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay. Follow me.” He turns and slowly strides out of their dining room.

Brittany sits on the chaise longue in Jonny’s sparse study, legs

crossed, arms folded across her chest, lips biting back tears as he tells her all about Maya Daniels in painstaking detail. He wears the widest boyish grin she has ever seen him wear.

He is perched on his desk, staring at the wall, as if the girl with the “most beautiful name” has materialized right in front of him. His lips curve into occasional smiles with each memory flooding his brain. He met Maya when he was sixteen years old at an international school in London. A Black British girl. She walked into his class and he was smitten upon sight. He chased her for weeks until she finally returned his kiss, saying she admired his energy.

He describes in agonizing detail how he lost his virginity to this Maya, where and when.

How he felt. How he learned everything about her and what she liked. How beautiful she was and how her smile could brighten his darkest thoughts. He remembers exactly when he told Maya he loved her. Beneath Big Ben’s glow, she repeated those same words. A stranger had helped capture that moment for them in the photo Astrid had sent Brittany.

Brittany sits through it all because she is tired of not knowing and because Jonny is tactless when it comes to reading emotional situations.

“I wanted us to be together forever. I wanted to marry her.” He smiles at the wall once more. He looks at his fingers, starts toying with them. “I wanted our baby so much. I wrote a letter to my parents, telling them how happy I was. That I had found my soulmate. That I was going to walk away from everything, from this life, to be with her. Astrid wasn’t happy. She told me to come back home immediately.”

He falls silent, his fingers doing their dance.

“One day, Maya was sharing news of our baby with me in a letter she wrote. The next day, she was dead.” She sees him grit his teeth. “And I blame them. I blame them for everything.” His eyes turn serious. His study descends into charged silence once more. Brittany’s heart pounds so hard it threatens to burst through her

ribcage. Jonny swivels around to stare at her. She pulls her robe tighter around her shoulders. His eyes wash over her torso before settling like lasers back on her face.

“You look just like her.”

A tiny gasp escapes Brittany. This, she already knows. After all, she is the dead woman’s doppelgänger. But hearing those words from his mouth for the first time confirms what she always suspected. Johan von Lundin never loved her.

He pushes off the desk and trudges to where she sits on the chaise longue. He plants himself next to her. She inches away. A new type of fear wells up within her because she doesn’t know him. Not anymore. A man who she assumed could never lie to her face because of his transparent mannerisms had done so boldly. With that core of their marriage gone, Jonny might as well be dead to her too. His inability to lie to her had been the main thing that drew her to him.

He moves closer. She shuffles until the edge stops her.

“Brittany.” He reaches for her cheek, tracing it with his fingertips. She closes her eyes against his caress, sniffing back tears. She lets him feel her. How had she missed all the signs? Had she been so blinded by the idea of him that she’d given him pass after pass?

“Do you forgive me now?”

Brittany spins away from his gaze. He reaches for her hand. She yanks it back and shoots to her feet.

“Please leave.” She swallows her tears, hands resting on her hips. He slowly rises, planting himself inches from her face. His favorite spot.

“Why?”

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what?”

She lets out a gasp of despair. “Just go to work.” He stands rooted, as if a robot. “Now, Jonny. Just go.” She prods him along. He gives her a half-smile before leaving her in the study.

Once out of earshot, Brittany lets out a cry, rebooting her lungs

once again. Who can she trust enough to share the fact that her husband has a fetish for her very image?

She's desperate for outlets. Someone, anyone, who can make her feel less alone. Over two years in Sweden, she so deeply cocooned herself in Jonny's world she barely has other friends of color. She did meet that arrogant Nigerian American who works for Jonny and had helped bring his company back from the brink of diversity death in the media.

But that woman—*Kemi*—she will never befriend. Every time they meet, or rather collide, at functions Jonny organizes, there's always an abrasion Brittany has grown to anticipate.

So it takes every ounce of humility for Brittany to call Kemi when Jonny finally leaves the house, realizing she has indeed sunk to such depths of desperation.

"Brittany?" Kemi calls out on the other end. Brittany hesitates before responding.

"*Hej*, Kemi. How are you?"

Kemi finds her voice. "I'm fine. Hope everything is okay?"

"I know. It's weird that I'm calling you, right?"

"Well, not weird. Just unexpected."

More silence from Brittany before she continues. "Kemi, I need to talk to you about something. Something important."

"Of course. Anything."

Yeah, Brittany can't talk to her about anything, but she'll take the invitation for now. She needs that divorce from Jonny and fast. She can't go to his sisters. Their allegiance is squarely to their baby brother. Antonia, the eldest, had eventually told her about Maya Daniels but only once their mother Astrid had sent Brittany that photo. And even then Antonia tried to excuse Jonny. Svea deals with it by distancing herself. She rarely even picks up Brittany's calls.

"I was wondering if we could meet for brunch on Sunday."

"Yes, I think I can make it work. I'm flying back to the States for the holidays soon."

This information irritates Brittany. She responds with a weak “Good for you.”

Kemi stays silent on the other end. Brittany knows she has picked up on her sarcasm. *The smarty pants.*

“Well, I haven’t seen my family in over two years so I’m desperate to give them hugs,” Kemi says.

“So...Can we meet for brunch then?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Meet me at Cadierbaren at the Grand Hôtel. Twelve p.m. Sunday. My treat.”

## KEMI

***Kemi watches Brittany eat. The other woman cuts into her Eggs Benedict so daintily it feels cartoonish. They never would have been friends back in the States yet this place, it seems, is forcing them into each other’s arms.***

Now she sits in arguably the most expensive gilded property in all of Sweden—the Grand Hôtel—which regularly hosts heads of state and royalty. The panorama from the restaurant’s window consists of direct views of the yellow ocher-colored Royal Palace on the island of Gamla stan.

She turns her gaze back to Brittany who’s wearing a tight-fitting red dress which hugs her lithe frame topped with a long-sleeved black fur bolero. Quite festive. Her lips are dyed her signature cherry red. Her dark brooding eyes look even moodier under thick black lashes and black eyeliner.

Kemi clears her throat. “Thanks for inviting me here. I’ve never been.”

“Really?”

“Well, I have no reason to come here,” Kemi adds.

“So Tobias doesn’t treat you to fancy places once in a while?”

“Tobias doesn’t have von Lundin money,” Kemi chuckles. When

she sees the look on Brittany's face, she knows she's treading on dangerous territory. She clears her throat once more.

"So," Brittany grabs a napkin, dabs delicately at her lips, "I'm sure you're dying to know why I asked you to brunch."

"Well, considering I'm still packing for my trip back to the States soon, I'm hoping it's a super-important reason."

Brittany clasps her fingers together and rests her elbows on the table. "I was wondering if you knew any lawyers in your circles," she asks.

"Lawyers? Is everything okay?" Kemi is surprised. When Brittany holds her gaze, she knows everything isn't okay.

"I just need to talk to a lawyer, that's all."

"Okay, what type of lawyer? Is it about your US taxes?" Brittany shakes her head, then takes a sip of her Tarte Tatin cocktail. "Is it Jonny?" Kemi asks.

Brittany presses her lips together before setting the drink down. "I need a *relationship* lawyer."

"What do you mean? Do you need a divorce lawyer?" Trouble in the von Lundin kingdom? This isn't making sense to Kemi. Not after the way she has witnessed Jonny behave around his wife. This is a man so in love it borders on obsession.

"Yes," Brittany responds after a few seconds. "I'm looking into divorce. I don't trust anyone else here. Not his family. Not his assistants."

"Oh my goodness, Brittany. I'm so sorry." Kemi's voice sinks to a whisper. "Did he cheat on you?"

Brittany lets out a pained laugh before angling her face away. "If only it were that simple," she sniffs.

"Is there anything else I can do to help you?"

"I need to find a divorce lawyer, that's all."

Kemi watches as Brittany dabs her eyes and composes herself, slipping back into that facade of a reminder that they aren't buddies. Maybe this is the opening they both need to connect with each other in deeper ways beyond the social events Jonny pulls them to. Kemi has always been curious about Brittany's story.

How she ended up in Sweden. How she crossed paths with one of its wealthiest men. How she's adjusting, integrating, and finding her place within its upper echelons.

"I'll ask around for you," Kemi says.

"Thank you." Then silence envelops the ladies until Kemi speaks.

"I want you to know you can trust me, Brittany," she says. "Are you willing to share? Maybe tell me more?"

Brittany glares at her for a few more seconds before replying, "No."

They finish brunch in awkward silence.

When Monday rolls around, Kemi decides to work from home, as Ingrid suggested, hoping the rumors rapidly spreading about her and Ragnar will simmer down.

Kemi isn't sure what she's feeling these days. Shame for sure. Coupled with something deeper. She carries the impossible. A deep-seated responsibility to show the world she's a Black woman making it in Sweden to inspire others. That unbearable weight is currently being stripped off and replaced with the fact that she is indeed human.

When they'd shared that ill-fated taxi ride after their elevator encounter, Ragnar promised her he would quit their joint Bachmann project and find something else. He understood the gravity of what had transpired between them.

Alas, Ragnar Pettersen led a conference call that same morning as if nothing had happened, his promise of leaving seemingly forgotten once the weekend was over. She joined in that work call, quiet as a fly. Nothing in his voice suggested he had heard the rumors as well. If he had, the calmness of his tone suggested she was getting the rougher end of the gossip mill.

After all, wasn't he the one who was dutifully married, and she, the society-cast slut chasing a married man? The thought of her upcoming business trip to London with him scorches her from within.

She flips shut her laptop and promptly dials her twin sister, Kehinde.

“Kemi?” Kehinde answers.

“How are you?”

“Counting the days till I see your face! The kids are excited,” Kehinde adds.

“Me too! Can’t wait,” Kemi declares.

Since Kemi’s move to Sweden to take on the role of Director of Diversity and Inclusion, she hadn’t been back home to the States. The job had been the ultimate ego boost. A chance to show von Lundin Marketing why she won National Marketing Executive twice in a row in the US and to help dig them out of their diversity marketing scandal.

She did that successfully with their Bachmann campaign, marketing luxury German high top sneakers. Now her days are spent twiddling her thumbs while softly rocking that one client. She craves more challenges but is promptly realizing work runs at a different pace here, punctuated by six-week vacations, sick leave, and parental leave spanning over a year. She has settled into a box of work-life balanced boredom, while witnessing her skills blunt around the edges.

Heading back to the US for two weeks over Christmas and New Year will be a much-needed break from a place forcing her to choose flatlined comfort in a corner with no prospects for growth.

She’s sitting at her kitchen table in her pint-sized Nacka apartment. Tobias hasn’t dropped by since their rift. Is he that skittish about commitment? Kemi ponders. She isn’t sure why she’d asked him to move back to the States with her. To uproot all he’d ever known on a whim and follow her to prove his love. She has found the man she wants to invest in the long term with, yet her thoughts keep floating to the dead end that is Ragnar.

“Kehinde,” Kemi starts again. “I’m not okay.” There’s a quiescence on the other end absorbing her words. “I’ve done something stupid.”

“Stupid *ke*? What did you do? Is it you and your mouth? Did you curse someone out?”

“If only.”



“If only? What did you do? Will it jeopardize your job?” Kehinde asks.

Kemi clears her throat. “There are rumors being spread about me.”

“Rumors?”

“Yes, about me and a colleague.” More silence as Kehinde processes her words.

“What colleague? Your boss?”

“No, no, it’s someone else.”

“Kemi, what is going on? What are you doing? Does Tobias know what’s going on?”

“The rumors are not true. They say I’m having an affair with this man, but I swear it’s not true.”

“So, why are they spreading it? This doesn’t make sense.”

Kemi closes her eyes, dragging in air for strength. She has never faced anything like this. A defamation of character she added fuel to. What will happen when she goes in to work for her final week before the holidays? Working remotely this week isn’t going to mask the fact that whatever reputation she confidently built at work is being chipped away in chunks by her sordid encounter with Ragnar, which others witnessed.

“I kissed a married man and someone saw us,” Kemi shares. Silence on the other end. “I kissed him, Kehinde, and at that moment, I wanted him more than anyone else. More than Tobias. That is what I’m struggling with right now.”

Still more silence from Kehinde. Kemi knows her twin. She’s probably flipping through her mental Rolodex of Bible verses to quote something on adultery.

“A married man, Kemi?”

“I know, I know. I’m ashamed of myself. The HR director told me to work remotely this week. To avoid the office. Hopefully the rumor dies down a little by the time I’m back next week.”

“Why would you do this with a married man?” Kehinde’s tone is razor sharp.

Kemi winces at those words. “It was a harmless kiss.”

“A harmless kiss that’s forcing you not to show your face in the office, *ehn?*”

“I’m scared. I can’t stop thinking about this man. I love Tobias with everything I have, but—”

“But what? But what? Another woman’s husband?” Kehinde’s words burn.

“Please stop it!” Kemi raises her voice. She hates being cornered. And she hates the fact that she still can’t emotionally handle being cornered either.

“Oh, is that too real for you? When I actually mention his wife?”

“I don’t want to hurt her,” Kemi says, her brows dipping, contemplating.

“What do you mean ‘don’t want to’? Are you planning on repeating your stupid kiss?” When Kemi doesn’t answer, Kehinde continues.

“Look, Kemi. Don’t lose yourself in that country and forget who you are and your values. You’re already living in sin with Tobias. But add on top of that, you’re now kissing married men as well.”

“Yes, Kehinde,” Kemi replies, exasperated. “I know. I’m an Old Testament harlot. I’ll see you in two weeks.”

*Tap.*