

New Management

By

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In her tight blue dress, bone straight black weave and pale pink stilettos, B sashays out of the manager's office with an expression that Rukevwe can't read. Rukevwe gestures for her to come over as she rids her table of empty Panadol packets, orange peels and a wet Ginger Tea bag. B carefully perches her bottom at the corner of Rukevwe's desk.

"How did it go?" Rukevwe asks, wiping her desk down with a paper napkin.

B throws her hand in the air and kisses her teeth. "All these new branch managers they keep bringing eh. They're always trying to prove themselves."

"I'm guessing it didn't go well?"

B rolls her eyes. "What kind of question is that? Of course, it didn't go well. Tell me, why do we have to interview for our current roles? How does that even make sense?"

"What kind of questions did he ask?"

"That's my problem with the whole thing. He didn't ask any sensible question." B taps her index finger on the side of her head. "He asked me why I'm currently working in Warri when I attended University in the UK. Again, how does that even make sense and of what use is that information?"

Rukevwe scans the office and catches some of her coworkers in the open workspace, shamelessly loitering around her desk and eavesdropping on their conversation. She touches B's arm softly and lowers her voice.

"B, you need to reduce your voice. You know how these office people are. They're already starting to stare."

B pushes her hand away and raises her voice. "Let them stare. All they know how to do is gossip on company time anyway. At least I'm giving them something interesting to talk about." She flips her long hair and adjusts herself properly on Rukevwe's table. She takes a moment to look at Rukevwe's appearance. Rukevwe wears an Ankara shift dress and has her hair tied back with a matching scarf.

"Come o Rukevwe, hope nothing? This one you're looking like someone in mourning." B scoffs. "You didn't even put lip gloss on your lips or wear earrings." She leans in and playfully flicks Rukevwe's earlobes.

Rukevwe smacks her hand away. "I have serious cramps. I don't have strength for anything today, abeg."

"Please have strength for lip gloss at least; your lips are ashy."

Rukevwe groans. "I can't think about that right now B, I'm nervous about my own interview."

"Don't be nervous. Just be yourself. This new manager just wants to ruffle some feathers."

"Did he ask you anything else besides the UK school thing?"

B taps her acrylic nails on the desk. "Nothing serious; he just asked why he shouldn't fire me?"

"B! That's a serious question nau. What did you say?"

B throws her head back and laughs. "I told him that, if he likes, let him fire me. He'll see who can do the job better than me."

"Ah ah, you didn't really say that, did you?"

“My dear, you can’t afford to be passive about these things. I know you’re new here, but you need to learn how to take matters into your own hands or else, people will happily walk all over you.”

Rukevwe still looks worried.

“I promise you; you’ll be fine. These new managers are all bark and no bite.” B looks at the time on her gold watch. “I need to hurry and join the line at Mama Isaac’s Buka before it gets too crazy. I can’t stand too long in these shoes.” She points to her stilettos. “Do you want me to get you anything, *Ukodo*, maybe?”

“No I’m good. I brought my lunch.”

B stands up from Rukevwe’s desk. “Okay, I’ll see you after then.”

“Which of you is Rukevwe Ogharuke?” A voice booms suddenly.

With his imposing height, the new manager stands with his arms akimbo in front of his office. Rukevwe and B give each other a quick glance.

“That would be me, sir.” Rukevwe raises one hand sheepishly.

“Come into my office now.” Without waiting for her response, the new manager goes back into his office and shuts the door behind him.

“You’ll be fine. Remember, all bark and no bite.” B squeezes Rukevwe’s shoulders briefly, offers a stiff smile and walks away.

Rukevwe takes a deep breath and picks up a pink plastic folder from her desk. She adjusts her dress with one hand, scrutinizes her dirty white Converse and is momentarily unsure of her outfit. She reaches into the pocket of her dress and produces a tub of clear lip-gloss, which she hastily applies to her lips before walking briskly to the new manager’s office.

She knocks softly.

“Come in.” The manager says.

She gingerly enters the office.

“Take a seat.” He says without looking up from his laptop.

Rukevwe sits across him, clutching her pink plastic folder to her chest and rubbing her lips together to ensure her lip gloss is evenly applied.

“So, Rukevwe.” The manager pushes his laptop to the side and leans on the table with his elbows.

Rukevwe catches a whiff of his pepper soup-flavored breath. She tries to keep a neutral face but scrunches her nose and gags unintentionally.

The manager flares his nose. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Sorry sir, I just feel a little under the weather.”

He doesn’t say anything but carefully studies her. Rukevwe shifts in the chair, conscious of his gaze and unsure where to look. Reluctantly, she breaks the silence.

“Do you need my CV, sir? I have it here.” She opens the pink folder.

He raises one hand. “I didn’t ask for your CV.”

“Oh.” Rukevwe closes the file and looks at the floor.

“Where did you go to University?”

“Ilorin sir, banking and finance.”

The manager leans back in his chair, and it makes a creaking sound. “Nice, Nice. And how long have you been working here?”

“A little over five months, sir.”

“Hmmm.” He scratches his scanty beard and takes another long pause before speaking again. “Obviously, you know this branch is under new management and I will be doing some restructuring. What makes you think I shouldn’t fire you.”

Rukevwe blinks. She sits upright and clears her throat.

“Well, sir, I’m very competent at my job. Within a month I was already familiar with all the accounts handled by our branch. I was the one that created the spreadsheet that we now use to track and organize all our client information ...”

“Stop there, stop there.” The manager cuts her off abruptly.

“Sir?”

“Let me ask you the question another way.” He looks at Rukevwe squarely. “What can you offer me that others can’t?”

“I have a certificate in ...”

He cuts her off again. “Ah Ah Rukevwe. In fact, I’ll call you Rukky. Are you a baby? I said what can you offer me, not the company.”

“I’m not following, sir.”

He chuckles and scribbles something on a Post-it note.

“Rukky, I am the one that decides whether you remain at this company or not. So, you need to show me that you can add value.” He hands her a sticky note, and she collects it with unsteady hands. “That is my personal phone number. Give me a call before the end of tomorrow, and you can keep your job. You can leave now.”

“But sir, I don’t understand.”

“I said you can leave now.” He points to the door.

Rukevwe hurries out of the office on the brink of tears. Thankfully, the office is mostly empty; it's lunchtime and most of her coworkers are lined up at Mama Isaac's Buka. B, however, is eating rice and stew from a takeout plate on her desk. When she sees Rukevwe, she abandons her lunch, rushes to Rukevwe's side and slowly guides Rukevwe back to her desk. B gives a dirty look to the two Social Media interns, staring at the whole ordeal. Frightened, they turn their attention back to their monitors.

“What happened?”

Rukevwe sobs; her cheeks are wet and her hands tremble. “He wants me to sleep with him. B, he wants me to sleep with him.”

B claps her hand and shakes her head. “Eh, *uvwie akpo!* There is nothing we won't see in this life. That man has mind o!”

“Look, he gave me this.” Rukevwe gives B the Post-it note. “It's his phone number. He wants me to call him tomorrow, or I'll lose my job.” Rukevwe's sobbing increases as her body shakes violently.

“Calm down, we can fix this.”

“How can we possibly fix this B? I can't afford to be unemployed.”

“Listen to me and stop crying. We can fix this.”

Rukevwe wipes her eyes with her hands and takes a deep breath. “How can we fix it?”

B smiles cynically. “First of all, you need to trust me. This is not the first manager to come in here to try to shake things up.” She shimmies her shoulders. “So, believe me when I tell you I can handle him. Do you believe me?”

Rukevwe nods slowly. “What are you going to do to him?”

“You mean, what are we going to do to him?”

Rukevwe inhales. "What are we going to do to him B?"

"Poison him."

"Ah, B, you want to kill him?" Rukevwe looks around the office to ensure none of her coworkers are around. "I can't kill a man because of a job, nau, haba!"

B kisses her teeth and rolls her eyes. "Your blood is too hot my dear. Who said anything about killing him."

"You just said..."

"I said poison, not kill. Maybe the word poison was a bit dramatic." She taps a finger on her lips. "Let's just say we give him something to make him really sick, like uncontrollable diarrhea sick. Literally, shit his pants. He would be so embarrassed and too ashamed to harass anyone." B laughs.

"That's not funny B and I don't think that's a solid plan."

"Trust me, sometimes people must experience shame to stop misbehaving. Even if it doesn't work, at the very least, he can't bother you for a while. He'll be too busy trying to control his bowel. That'll give you enough time to come up with a more concrete plan."

Rukevwe doesn't say anything. She stares at the manager's closed door and toys with the hem of her dress.

"Tomorrow morning, we meet at Mama Isaac's at 8:30 a.m. We buy Akara and Pap. I've seen him eat that for breakfast ever since he started here. I'll mix some concoction into the pap. We come to the office and then you give it to him. Simple."

Rukevwe still doesn't speak, and B continues. "Tell him you have accepted his proposition, and he should tell you where to meet him. Then you give him the food."

"What if he sees through the whole thing and doesn't accept the food?"

“One thing I can guarantee is that he will take that Akara and Pap. For someone so lanky, he loves food. Have you seen how many wraps of starch that man consumes for lunch?”

“But it would be so obvious that I did something if I give him food and suddenly, he gets sick.”

B smirks. “You must think I'm JJC. The thing won't start working until maybe four or five hours later. By then, he would have had more things to eat.”

Rukevwe leans back on her chair and looks at B quizzically.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“What's this concoction you are even going to put in his food, and why do you even have such a thing in the first place?”

B smiles. “Meet me at Mama Isaac's at 8:30 a.m. if you want to go through with it. I'm going to finish eating my lunch before it gets too cold.” She pats Rukevwe's shoulders and walks away.

Rukevwe rests her head on her desk. Though she has stopped crying, her hands are still trembling. She remains in that position until the office overflows with the chatter of her coworkers returning from lunch.

At 8:30am, Rukevwe is at the front of Mama Isaac's Buka but B is nowhere in sight. She paces the front of the Buka, checks her watch, and cranes her neck to look down the street in search of B. After 10 minutes of waiting with no sight of B, Rukevwe purchases the Akara and Pap because the Buka is starting to get packed with the morning crowd.

As Rukevwe leaves the Buka, B is standing at the entrance.

“Rejoice, your redemption is here.” B flashes a smile.

“You’re late.”

“I’m here now.”

B collects the bowl of Pap from Rukevwe as they stroll towards the direction of their office. She brings out a small sachet containing a white powdery substance with one hand.

“Open it for me.” She stretches the bowl of pap to Rukevwe.

Rukevwe opens the bowl and B pours the entire content of the sachet into the pap. She gestures for Rukevwe to put the lid back on.

“That should do it.” She shakes the bowl carefully.

“I still don't think it's a good idea. Is this job worth all this stress?”

“Yet here you are.” B shoves the bowl into Rukevwe’s hands and kisses her teeth. “Do whatever you want.”

When they arrive at the office, B walks straight to her desk. Rukevwe sits gingerly on her chair and takes in deep breaths. She tries to make eye contact with B, but B is smiling at her phone. She knows she has to get up from her desk, but her legs feel like custard, and she can’t bring herself to her feet. She sits frozen, eyes locked on the manager’s door and her palms suddenly cold. Before she can move, Ovie from accounting appears seemingly out of nowhere and enters the manager’s office without knocking.

“Oh my God!” Ovie exclaims. He stands in front of the manager's office with both hands covering his mouth.

“What happened?” One of the interns asks.

Ovie’s body shakes and he points a finger in the manager’s office.

“Ovie, what is it?” Another voice asks.

Ovie stutters. "The manager, I think he's dead."

The entire office is thrown into pandemonium as everyone begins to talk at once and move about frantically.

Rukevwe looks in B's direction and they catch each other's eyes. Rukevwe widens her eyes. B shakes her head and mouths something Rukevwe cannot make out. Rukevwe tosses the bowl of pap into the dustbin beside her.

"Why is everyone just standing around? Can someone call 999 or whatever the number is?" B yells out to no one in particular.