

Chapter One

She looked at the mirror again, wondering if she looked good enough. She had never been a makeup freak; preferring to look as close to natural as possible. This was why she never bothered to patronize the numerous makeup artists who beckoned on her daily. They would have a fit if she began to refuse all their many products. There was only one person who understood her, her sweet Ada. She listened and brought out her inner glow without using too many products. But the girl had gone to school for her final exams, and she couldn't trust anyone else. She could easily achieve what she wanted. Just that, it might not go down well with Soji.

She remembered one time when she didn't feel up to it and went out without makeup. Her husband claimed she had disgraced him by deliberately looking like a housegirl. It didn't matter that her hair was pure human hair of the best quality, or that her clothes sent glitters flying around the room as her Prada heels clicked confidently. Soji still thought she looked like a house girl because she'd worn only lip gloss.

Men said they liked their women natural, but frowned when she came just as she was, without makeup. She sighed. The path to pleasing a man was as rocky as ever.

She looked at the mirror and smiled at the figure before her eyes. Having drawn her perfect eyebrows, lined her eyes and lashes with mascara, defined her round lips with her favourite nude lipstick, and topped it with brown powder, hopefully, she looked good enough for Soji. Not that she was willing to alter this natural look she had created.

Stepping into the sitting room where Soji was waiting for her, she carefully observed his face, as he looked at her from top to bottom.

"You could have applied a bit more makeup, you know. Maybe use a red lipstick. I don't want people thinking I'm not taking good care of you."

She clenched her teeth. It was always about what people said, never about him, or what mattered to her. It seemed he lived to please people and their unrealistic imaginations. The same way he had ordered her the latest Zara evening dresses in all available colours the previous year, as if that would satisfy her. God knows where he got his crazy ideas from.

She knew they were struggling. Truthfully, they had been for a while. The marriage was gradually taking its toll on them, and she could feel the weight on her shoulders. But not today, she wouldn't let Soji ruin her mood. She had put in so much effort to appear happy for Soji's boisterous friends, that the least he could do was to appreciate her. But of course, that was asking too much of him.

"Let's just go please, I doubt your friends will even notice I am there".

His eyes flashed for a minute, but he made the wise decision to keep shut and march out of the house, much to her relief.

Wearing her most elegant smile and hoping that it masked the hurt in her heart, she stepped out of the car, to the impatient arms of Bode.

Chapter Two

The rapid clicks of cameras as soon as they stepped out of their latest car nearly blinded her. She didn't know which was more, the glints from her dress, or those from the cameras. She winced, but not wanting to look unpresentable in the photos, forced a smile. She and Soji were regular faces on the pages of the newspapers, and she knew the host of gossipmongers would have a field day if they got any unappealing pictures of her.

The last time, unknown to her, a photographer took a shot as she'd wrestled with an insect in her eye. The next morning, Soji was hysterical! Banging the phones and explaining irritably. She woke up amid all that chaos to her face on all the biggest news sites. Some bold headlines read:

"Trouble in paradise, Remi Martins caught in tears."

"The rich also cry, see Remi Martins choking on her tears."

"Unguarded moment when Remi Martins wept uncontrollably!"

Remi trembled to her bones! One gossip blog even claimed to have first-hand info from her "friend" as to why the exquisite lady lost her cool at the exclusive party.

"Remi and I go way back, right from Primary school, we grew up together. Even before she married this her husband, I was the first to know. But for some time now, I know she's not happy. Her husband beats her and has another family in Canada. So, Remi is heartbroken."

Her blood ran cold immediately! Who was the non-existent friend who had fed blogs with the most ludicrous falsehood about her marriage? She was prepared to sue the life out of them. But Soji had vehemently refused, not with the elections around the corner.

Instead, he blamed her for letting herself be "caught unfresh." After that incident, their PR team insisted the couple posted more loved-up pictures and painted a strong happy front for the media, to eliminate any doubts. Not like she had a say, all they wanted was the obedient wife, cheering beside her husband as he made great strides.

Funny how she had been reduced to just a pretty face. Her architectural degree was buried so deep under layers of fake life the same day Soji got into politics. He needed a supportive wife by his side, to convince the people that he was

capable of ruling them. Renowned Architect Remi had died that day, and First Lady Remi was being groomed.

They had since won the elections and Soji had turned 360 degrees from what she knew him to be. Perhaps this is what they say power does to a person. It made them forget their names, discard their values, and wield money as a weapon for their bidding. Soji was on an insatiable quest for power, and he was prepared to sell his soul to get it.

Watching him beam with smiles as he spoke proudly with his friends, Remi couldn't believe this was the same man who had rolled in the mud, begging her to go out with him. What had happened to them? The distance between them grew wider by the day, and she couldn't seem to bridge the gap. Her husband was slipping right through her fingers, and she couldn't hold on to him. There was so little intimacy between them, except brisk and staged kisses for the camera. This was a man who kissed away her senses and made her weak with desire. Now, she struggled to remember how his hands felt against hers.

To everyone else, they were the perfect couple. Soji with his huge frame, and handsome features, armed with his beautiful wife for a price. He had always admired how she kept her slim figure, even after two children, and was so proud to show her off, more like a trophy than a life partner. She often felt like an expensive figurine, polished and shined daily, for the amusement and pleasure of others.

Remi couldn't care less whether she added weight or not, at least, that would surely grab his attention. Where had their love gone? After five years of a blissful marriage, the last two years have almost been a nightmare. Soji was so driven by his political ambitions that he gave up on everything else. Their lives had turned upside down and she didn't even know where to start.

"You know that I'm planning to get a transformer for those people," Soji said in his animated voice. For someone who wanted a prim and proper wife, he surely gave no thought to table etiquette. Particles of food flew in all directions as he spoke.

"My brother, don't bother. That town is cursed. It's like the witches of this city convene there every night to hold meetings."

There was a round of laughter from the men on the big table. Their wives like her, felt left out and smiled politely at a joke they didn't understand.

“I agree with Akin. The last two chairmen donated transformers too, but it’s like the witches come to eat the wires because they never last. I’ve given up on them. Some people are not destined to enjoy power. Besides, my generator business is booming in that region, don’t spoil business for me oh!”

The man winked and Remi scoffed loudly. Such were the kinds of conversations she’d been reduced to hearing. Selfish lowlifes, vomiting rubbish from their mouths, and using money to clean it up. They did everything in the interest of their pockets and didn’t care about anyone else.

For the umpteenth time, she wondered why she couldn’t just stay back from these frivolous parties. All they did was splash money on expensive drinks, and paparazzi. She called it “the struggle to stay relevant”. These politicians needed people to keep talking about them so they could feel important.

She would have chosen the company of her warm bed and children over any such silly party. Unfortunately, Soji would have none of it. They had to make an appearance as the power couple, to strengthen the people’s love for him. That was all he cared about. What the people thought of him.

“What of people’s businesses that are solely dependent on electricity, and they have no money for such expensive generators? Are they doomed to an impoverished life too?”

A thick cloud of silence hung in the thin air, afraid to drop and burst. Nobody moved or even blinked. Everyone held their breaths as she hurled the bomb. She felt Soji’s glare rest on her, but it made no difference since that was all he ever did.

“Come now, Remi. Not like that, leave these important talks for men in power. You women just keep us happy and let us do our jobs.” The bulbous Akin Akintomide responded derogatorily.

Remi was livid! Her Oxford and MIT education burned to be let out so she could teach the man a few lessons. But she caught Soji’s eyes, and let it go. The men were laughing loudly, while their wives/concubines forced laughter. Every woman at the table had just been insulted, but they sat there like fools. Before she would erupt in flames that would consume them all, she pulled out her seat.

“Excuse me, everyone. I just need to touch up my makeup.” She forced a bright smile and walked gracefully to the ladies’ room.

Chapter Three

“Wow! This your woman is ravishing! What an ass!!” she heard one of the men exclaim and whistle.

“Emeka please leave my wife for me oh! She’s my eyes and everything! Focus on your girlfriend of today, please.” Her husband responded. The pride in his voice was unmistakable.

“What can a man do? Eyes are meant to see, and women are meant to be appreciated.”

She hissed as she walked into the ladies and shut the door firmly behind her. Not that she was pressed, she really just needed a moment to catch her breath. Her life looked so glamorous from the outside, but she wanted to escape it most times. Living with Soji had suddenly become a nightmare. Her only succour was her two adorable boys, Ade and Tola. Unfortunately, they were growing up without a father since he was hardly on the scene.

Everyone asked her to be thankful that he lavished his wealth on her and didn’t hit her. Perhaps it would have been better if he did hit her, at least then she would have evidence of the scars she wore. Unfortunately, no one else saw the deep emotional scars she carried with her. They had cut in so deep and blended easily in her heart that she could hardly remember who she was without them. How it felt to be Architect Oluremi Martins, instead of just the wife of Soji Martins.

She sucked in the tears. She couldn’t afford to let them fall. Not because Ada was unavailable to expertly seal her face against a hurricane and coat her eyelashes with waterproof mascara; Remi knew if she started, she wouldn’t stop. So, she did her breathing exercises like her therapist had advised and stepped out of the loo like the queen she was. She took time to admire herself in the huge mirrors at the hotel, one of the finest in town.

She heard a soft gasp and caught a shadow fleeing, just as she turned to leave. Taking some steps out, she collided head-on with a smaller person. She stepped back to see a shy little girl.

“Sorry!” The little girl said under her rasped breath.

“Simi! I told you to stay away from the mirrors!” The worried voice came from a woman cleaning nearby.

“I’m so sorry ma'am! Please forgive me.” Her head was bowed and fingers clasped tightly.

Remi rushed to unclasp her hands. “It’s okay, please. It was an accident”.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t leave her alone and she likes to run around.” The woman said, giving her daughter a stern look.

Seeing the little girl hiding behind her mother reminded her of herself, hiding from her shadows.

“How are you, Simi? You like to run hey!”

“You’re so pretty, like an angel!” Remi couldn’t help it, she blushed hard. It had been a century since Soji complimented her.

“Aww. Thank you, my darling.”

“I saw you in the mirror... and ran away.”

“Well, you don’t have to run away. I’m human like you.” She smiled at the pretty little girl, much to the joy of the worried mother.

“Tell me, how old are you?”

“I’m six!”.

“You’re a big girl! And smart too.”

“Thank you, Ma’am!” was the excited reply.

Her mother said she couldn’t find someone to watch her, so she brought her along. She worked day and night jobs to keep body and soul together. This was her last task for the day, and she was honoured to have met her. Remi gave the woman her card, and some money, then said her goodbyes before Soji sent an army to find her.

She felt hope, and alive. It had taken a little girl to remind her of who she was and what she could do. Many people like Simi and her mother needed access to a good life. Instead of the gluttony of such greedy politicians, she knew what she would do. She had to do something even if it killed her. If she was going to be Remi Martins and be thrown into politics, then she had to make her impact felt. She wouldn’t relegate herself to following Soji around like a faithful dog. She would do something of her own, even if it meant going to war with Soji.

A different Remi Martins rejoined the table of guests.

“Honey, I was about to come find you,” Soji said playfully, and she nearly rolled her eyes. The man didn’t give a hoot if she vanished from the ladies; he just didn’t want to be left high and dry.

When they left the party shortly after, she caught a glimpse of Simi calling and waved.

“What’s that about?” Soji asked in a gruff voice.

“I’ll tell you later”, she said.

Epilogue

That was the birth of the Remi Martins Foundation for women and children. It had taken all that she had to build it, and now, it was changing the lives of hundreds of families. Finally, she had a place in society, more than just a pretty wife. She was affecting people positively and found so much joy she was delirious. Soji had also warmed up to her, happy to partner with her in helping others. It was still a gradual process, but they were on the road to fixing their marriage and she was thrilled.