

## ~PROLOGUE~

### *Nigeria, 1825~ Village of the Akintunde Tribe...*

"He...would not do this."

"It is proven, sister."

"Lies."

"What reason would they have? What reason would *I* have? Especially at this time in your life?" Adisa Akintunde smoothed her palms across her sister's distended belly and pressed her lips together in a smile that was encouraging in spite of its solemnness.

"These are our people," Alaba Akintunde's delicate chin raised defiantly in her younger sister's direction.

"These *are* our people. Not his." Adisa lightly squeezed her sister's belly, defiance shining in her brilliant coppery stare.

"*These* are *his* people," Alaba brushed away her sister's hands, replacing them with her own as she caressed the place where her babies slumbered inside her body.

"He was seen-"

"No-"

"Overheard as he accepted money from the soulless ones-"

"He's not one of them-"

"Sister..." Adisa shook her head and produced a wan smile. "It is fortunate that Papa commanded us to learn their tongue."

Adisa's smile eventually faded away to nothing. "As smart as we are- our enemies grow smarter. They now use our own people against us."

"Not him," Alaba shook her head, persisting in her defense of the man she loved- the father of her children.

"Dearest!" Adisa clutched her sister's hand knowing her grip was painful given the wince she spied on Alaba's face. "He is leading our people to their doom," she cast a foreboding look about the bamboo hut they occupied.

"The darkness he's brought with him- it aids him somehow and he- he's used it and his other devices to deceive us."

"I won't hear it!" Alaba squeezed her eyes closed as if the gesture would silence her sister's voice.

"Not even that he grows weak?" Adisa waited for her sister's expressive dark eyes to return to her face. "Some of father's advisors believe the babies are draining him- the dim he brought with him- it's beginning to lift."

Alaba's eyes narrowed yet remained on her sister's face. "What are you saying?"

"The advisors are hopeful that we'll soon be rid of your...male but they are also concerned."

"Concerned?"

"If the babies are- affecting him, then what does that make them? What does that mean for us?"

Alaba Akintunde's chest heaved for a deep intake of air. Adisa stilled when the girl seemed to freeze in that position.

“Lala?” Adisa slowly scooted to her knees, gathering the colorful fabric of her cloak while inching closer to her sister.

Alaba, at first, seemed suspended by surprise and then shock and finally fear. The emotions seemed to rapidly exchange places across her plump lovely face.

“Dearest?” Adisa came to envelope her sister in a cradling embrace.

“They...they are coming,” Alaba’s voice was a moan. She pressed her hand against the lower side of her belly as it contracted painfully.

Outside the hut, the overcast morning grew dark as midnight.

## ~ONE~

### *Lake Eternity, New York~*

Fystian Akintunde rarely did double takes. No...That wasn’t right. He *never* did double takes. Hell, he hadn’t done a double take in over a century... it had seemed. At least not over a woman-a...girl.

Yet there he was- standing there like some idiot. Her gaze was averted. He guessed that was a good thing. Even still...he thought if she’d just look at him... Surely if she looked his way, he’d be able to remember what his feet were for and get the hell out of there.

Lilia Avery resisted the urge to even glance at her watch. The meeting was nearing its end and the two men she’d spoken with had yet to laugh her out of their office. It was more than she’d been able to say for her cabinet. Every member of the student council thought she was a raving lunatic for even thinking of booking the exclusive Eternity Lodge for its senior class trip.

The running joke in the quiet upstate New York town; where Lilia and her classmates resided, was that Eternity Lodge was so named because it took about that long to save enough to pay for a night to stay there. Lilia realized the validity in that train of thought shortly after passing the towering brass gates on her way into the estate.

The place displayed the elements of money and status but in an appealingly understated manner. The locale intrigued instead of intimidated. Not so, for the co-owners of the resort Lilia thought. Those two were another matter entirely, she’d decided. Stephan Barber and Gregory Craft were both intriguing as well as intimidating.

In all fairness however, Lilia knew that was mostly her nerves talking. The forty-something gentlemen had welcomed her warmly and treated her like she was their most important guest. Still, there was something about them... Her mother would say- provocative. Of course that’s what most every woman over the age of twenty-five said about the two former archaeologists turned hotel owners.

The men were handsome and mysterious and... provocative? Yes, Lilia decided. Provocative. Dangerously so. On cue, it seemed, the duo chose that moment to return to the room.

“Apologies, Miss Avery,” Stephan Barber’s dark eyes sparkled with an amusement that seemed to illuminate his handsome licorice dark face. “Whenever there’s a *crisis*, the staff feels the need to have us both on the scene.”

“Is everything okay?” Lilia straightened in the deep, leather armchair she occupied. She curved her hands about the oversized black mug that had been filled with a fantastic smelling tea.

“Ha! Yes, yes, fine,” Gregory Craft waved off her concern. “A spot of soup boiled over into a stove burner is cause for staff concern around here.”

Lilia smiled while looking around the warm, yet distinctly male office. The place was proof of the adventurous lifestyle the extraordinary friends must have enjoyed before settling into a life as entrepreneurs. Huge broadswords and exotic masks adorned the maple paneled walls. Tall intricately carved vases filled various corners of the expansive room along with massive globes which occupied a few corners of the impressive study/ office. In addition to the swords and masks, large framed maps and the mounted heads of beasts also owned space upon the walls. Lilia knew those animals weren’t indigenous to the local area or to the country for that matter.

“Guess you have a very dedicated staff,” she told the men before her staring got the better of her.

Lilia’s attempt at conversation however, didn’t mask how impressed she was by her surroundings.

Gregory Craft’s blue-gray eyes narrowed when he gave a playful nudge to his partner’s arm. “I think we’re about to make a sale, Step.”

Lilia’s laughter sparked a faint dimple to the right of her mouth. “I still have to discuss it again with my cabinet, but they were all very excited when I suggested we spend our class trip here.”

“Well, we’d be honored to have the business,” Greg pressed a hand to the middle of the gray vest showing beneath his open suitcoat. “What is it, love?” His honey blonde head tilted at a curious angle when he spied the look that crept into her wide, walnut-brown stare.

“Um,” suddenly embarrassed, Lila felt her cheeks burn. “Some of us- our students don’t come from... from money. A lot of parents might not be cool with forking over money for their kids to stay here when *they* haven’t and probably won’t ever have the chance to.”

Stephan was already nodding and stroking the goatee about his mouth. “Well said and understood, Miss Avery,” he settled his tall frame to the corner of one of the two massive oak desks inside the room. “What do you say to a return trip? A second visit with your cabinet? We’ll arrange for the group to tour the place, see it for themselves and decide if it’s really the sort of place that’d work for a senior getaway. Then we’ll talk dollars.”

“Excellent idea,” Gregory clapped once. “I’m pretty sure we can come up with an amount that’ll work for everybody.”

“They’d love that,” Lilia cautioned herself against putting too much excitement on display. Inside, she beamed with delight and anticipation of her class officers’ reactions to spending an afternoon at the exclusive resort. Her delight though, took a sudden exit toward uncertainty.

“There’s that look again,” Gregory noted.

Lilia produced a smile. “Most of us are only free on weekends, but I’m guessing that’s a pretty busy time for you. I know this meeting’s taken several hours out of your Saturday already...”

“I can promise you we’re looking forward to it.” Gregory’s clasped hands lent greater sincerity to the declaration.

“And don’t breathe a word of this to our other guests,” Stephan urged, “but the idea of having younger folk around to liven up the place, sounds like a nice change of pace.”

Honest laughter burst from the back of Lilia's throat. Silently, she admitted how great it felt to give in to the gesture. "I hope you guys won't regret saying that," she thumbed a tear from the corner of her eye.

"No way," Gregory clapped once again. "Just give us a call when it's convenient to return with your group."

Stephan pushed off the desk then and extended a hand toward Lilia. "Thanks for thinking of us, Miss Avery."

Lilia set aside her mug and stood to accept Stephan Barber's outstretched hand. "Thank you both for taking the meeting."

"It was our pleasure," Gregory Craft was next to shake hands with Lilia. "Our son Fystian will show you out," he smiled.

Lilia returned Gregory Craft's smile even as she risked a quick glance around the room. Aside from herself and the two lodge proprietors, she saw no one.

"We'll get started on some pricing," Stephan Barber shrugged on a dark suit coat he'd taken from the back of his desk chair. "We should have the numbers ready before your next visit."

"Sounds good," Lilia nodded, falling in step with the two men as they made their way toward the archway leading out of the large office. They had just cleared the threshold when Lilia jumped just slightly at the sight of a tall boy leaning against the wall outside the room.

"He won't bite," Gregory chuckled, giving a casual wave to draw the young man closer.

"Lilia Avery. Fystian Akintunde," Stephan took the liberty of making the introductions.

Somehow, Stephan Barber's words penetrated the haze of Lilia's brain while she was busy ordering herself to stop stretching her eyes. She could feel them growing larger to take in every feature of the guy's face. She could only hope that... Fystian couldn't see her trying to swallow past the lump in her throat.

"Nice to meet you," Fystian was extending his hand towards her.

Lilia swallowed again and accepted the offered hand. Fystian Akintunde's voice was unusually deep and accented, though she couldn't pinpoint its origin. The sound seemed to vibrate through her body the second it reached her ears.

Fystian let go of Lilia's hand mere seconds after she'd taken his to shake. The cool expression he wore suddenly appeared strained.

Stephan had moved close to clap Fystian's shoulder. "Show Miss Avery to her car, will you Fy?"

Lilia glanced toward her hosts when Fystian waved a hand to urge her to precede him down the lengthy corridor. She gave the men a nod and then followed Fystian's silent instruction.

Stephan's dark eyes followed the couple until they had rounded the corner. "Did you see that?" he asked his partner.

Gregory nodded, his gray blue stare still fixed down the corridor. "I'd be willing to bet he sensed the moment she drove past the gates."

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The stunning artwork that had captured Lilia's attention; when she'd first arrived at the lodge, held none of it then. The devastating creations were competing with Fystian Akintunde for dominance in her mind. The gorgeous sculptures and beautiful, painstakingly detailed paintings were fighting an unwinnable battle.

He kept his distance behind her and Lilia could not hear his footsteps. She needed no proof of him there. She could practically feel his presence like she would the heat of the sun. They were nearing the massive carved maple doors of the lodge's main entrance. Lilia decided that thanking him for the escort would be the perfect excuse to talk with him and take in more of his incredible face. He seemed to read her mind though and was speaking just as she turned.

"Did you bring a jacket or anything?" Fystian was asking.

"I-" The simple inquiry was enough to stop her cold as it threatened to wipe her mind. "Um..."

A faint smile added more curve to Fystian's mouth. He rested on the door, patiently awaiting her response.

"No," Lilia managed to speak up then. Proud of her ability to do so, the word carried a triumphant tone which made her feel even more stupid. She shook her head. "No," the word carried on a cooler chord then.

Fystian maintained his smile. The slight squint evident as his probing ebony stare studied Lilia's face however, seemed to intensify.

Softly, Lilia cleared her throat beneath his obvious scrutiny. She waited while his deep-set eyes took their journey from her wedge-heeled boots and over her jeans and emerald green Henley sweater before returning to her face.

Without another word, he pushed off the door and held it open for her exit.

"Thank you," her voice was barely audible when she passed him and Lilia chanted a prayer while sprinting down the wide porch steps. Her old red Jeep Cherokee was parked a few yards off.

The urge to pray may have been taking things a bit far. Still, Lilia felt she needed every advantage in order to make it off the property before proving herself to be even more of a stammering idiot to her stunning dark escort.

She slung her purse onto the back seat and eased behind the wheel gracefully enough, but it was there that her blessings ran out. The ignition sputtered when she turned the key but Lilia didn't panic until a second twist of the key and then a third produced the same results.

"Dammit..." she sighed with barely a move of her lips. She tried to sneak a look up at the porch to see if her escort had gone. He hadn't- perfect.

Drawing on any bits of calm she could muster, Lilia popped the hood and eased from beneath the wheel. She saw that Fystian was on his way down the porch steps at a slow stroll. She had to wonder whether the guy ever saw fit to hurry.

"It's just a loose cap," she explained in a manner she hoped sounded flip enough.

Fystian didn't interfere, only silently watched as she worked on the car. "You have to do this often?" he asked.

"It only happens about once a week," she shared while working to press the cap back in place.

"That's once a week too often. What's taking you so long to get it fixed?"

*Money.* Lilia kept the truthful reply silent and decided on another. "I just haven't had time to get around to it."

"Why don't you let your father handle it?"

A shiver chased her spine at the lower octave in which the question was delivered. Hurrying around the hood, she dipped back behind the wheel. She kept a leg dangling along the step rail in case her usual trick with the cap proved unsuccessful and she'd have to return to the hood.

The engine turned over. "Thank you, Jesus," she blurted in a rush of relief.

Fystian slammed down the hood and moved to the driver's side window when Lilia had pulled the door closed. "Get it fixed," the order held an almost hypnotic quality.

"Thank you," Lilia nodded once and then launched back into prayer-mode, hoping she could leave without further drama.

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"Heard you played tour guide today?" Prime Akintunde slapped the back of his brother's head when he walked past the sofa where Fystian sat thumbing through a sports magazine.

"Heard she was somethin' to see," Mathias Akintunde followed in behind his older brother and gave Fystian's head a nudge as opposed to slapping it.

Caspian Akintunde had already chosen his spot on the sofa where Fystian lounged. "Don't clam up on us now, Fy. Spill," he grabbed the remote and proceeded to surf channels swiftly.

Fystian kept his focus on the magazine's glossy interior. "Sounds like you already know it all."

"Aw Fy, don't be that way," Prime urged his big brother. "All Step and Greg told us was that she was here scoping out the place for her senior class trip."

Fystian tossed the periodical to the magazine cluttered coffee table, closed his eyes and rested his head back on the sofa. "Like I said, 'you know it all'."

"Not all," Caspian used his trademark, taunting manner that rarely failed to lower a person's defenses. "Step and Greg think you had some kind of serious reaction to her."

Prime's dark eyes narrowed in suspicion. Out of habit, he began to stroke the whiskers smattered across the lower half of his mocha brown face. "They didn't say anything about that."

Caspian's hazel stare remained on the TV. "They didn't have to."

Mathias shrugged. "So what gives, Fy?"

At last, Fystian opened his eyes and looked at nothing in particular across the den. "I don't know," he admitted.

"They said she was a real beauty," Mathias added.

"Hmph," Fystian felt the urge to close his eyes again and conjure up her image. "A real beauty," he quietly confirmed.

"That settles it," Prime made himself comfortable, settling his broad muscular frame behind the roll top desk in the rear of the room. "Time I start sitting in some of Greg's and Step's meetings. Maybe I'll make a move next time she visits." He threw a sly wink towards Caspian and Mathias, hoping to get a rise out of their brother.

"I'll make you suffer," Fystian kept his eyes closed while making the promise.

Soon after, the room came alive with the unmistakable roar of male laughter.