

HIS
ONLY
WIFE



a novel by
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from Chapter Four

ELI CAME AT 1:36 P.M. I knew the exact time because I was sitting and staring at the analog clock on my phone when the doorbell rang. The sound startled me and I dropped the phone; I hadn't heard the lift stop and open on my floor. My mother rushed out of her room and mouthed "Go" while point-ing to the door. I hesitated; for some silly reason I wanted to fish my phone from under the chair before I answered the door.

"Ah, open the door," she said with sound this time.

I stood up and smoothed my dress over my hips. My armpits were moist; it was a good thing that the fabric was light and patterned so that my sweat stains would not be visible. My feet felt heavy so that I needed extra effort to lift them. I imagined that I looked like a marching soldier. The frown on my mother's face

told me that she was displeased. The bell rang a second time. She flashed her eyes as if they had the power to physically push me toward the door. My hand was so damp with sweat that it slipped off the round doorknob when I tried to turn it. I wiped my hands on my dress and tried again. This time I was successful.

ELI BROKE INTO a smile that reached his eyes when he saw me. He was leaning against the doorframe like someone who had been waiting for a long time to be let in.

“Please, good afternoon,” I managed to say in a near whisper. Should I shake his hand, should I hug him, a kiss on the cheek? Last night I had imagined hugging him but now no greeting seemed right for this almost-stranger who was also my husband. It didn’t help that he was jauntily leaning against the doorframe and openly staring at me, his smile intact.

“Afternoon, Afi,” he said, his eyes never leaving my face. I lowered my eyes to look at my hands, and then my feet. Anything to avoid the intensity of his gaze.

“Please come in, *Fo* Eli,” I heard my mother say from somewhere behind me. Only then did he look past me into the flat. I breathed a soft sigh of relief and stepped aside to let him in.

HE WAS SEATED in one of the armchairs, his feet splayed, his arms resting on the armrests, and his lips slightly curved in a smile. In his hand were two large cellphones. He had a beard; I didn’t remember him having a beard before. It was so neat that it looked as if it had been trimmed by someone using a measuring tool for accuracy. I assumed that the same person had trimmed his hairline. He had on a white shirt folded up to

his elbows and tucked into black trousers. The brown leather belt at his waist matched his shoes.

“Let us bring you some water,” my mother said. I was thankful for her words because I would have otherwise just sat and stared at him like a fool. I followed her into the kitchen as though we both needed to carry a glass of water. I decided at that moment that I hated the open floor plan of the flat because I really wanted to say something about the situation to her but Eli could see and hear me from the sitting room. So instead I took a jug of water out of the fridge and she a glass out of the cupboard, all without speaking to each other. I set the two items on a small silver tray and carefully walked back to the sitting room with my mother behind me. I placed the tray on the side table closet to Eli and poured the water into his glass. He lifted it to his lips and I went back to sit on the edge of the couch with my arms folded in my lap.

“*Woezor*,” my mother said when Eli set the glass down.

“*Yoo*.”

“How was the journey?” she asked him in Eve.

“It went well.”

“Your siblings?” she continued.

“They are well.”

“*Woezor*,” my mother said.

“*Yoo*.”

“You are the ones looking after people,” she said, nodding her head.

“You as well.”

“You are the ones who have worked so, so, so, hard,” she said, still nodding, as though agreeing with herself.

“You as well.”

“Are you well?” he asked. He looked at my mother, then at me, as he said this.

“We are well,” she replied. I remained quiet like a child in the presence of two adults having a conversation. “Well, I brought your wife and decided to stay with her as she waited for you,” my mother continued.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Are you well?” he asked again, this time looking directly at me. I nodded and managed a weak smile. He nodded as though satisfied.

“Your wife cooked something small for you,” my mother said.

“Oh, thank you,” he said, his eyes on me.

“Please, you are welcome,” I said.

A moment later I felt a sharp pinch on my back. It was my mother. She swiveled her eyes in the direction of the kitchen when I turned to look at her. I shot to my feet.

“Please, I’m going for the food,” I mumbled and hurried to the kitchen. He chatted with my mother as I heated the stews, but twice when I looked over at them he was staring at me. I lowered my head and only looked at him again when I went to announce that the food was ready. I noticed how tall he was when he stood up. I had been too flustered when he first walked in to note this. He was taller than six feet, which when compared to my five-feet two-inches was a lot. He seemed bigger than when I last saw him, his chest and shoulders broader, but unlike Richard he did not have a paunch. He moved easily, like a much smaller man, but when he sat at the table, he was imposing. Maybe it was because he was sitting at the head of the table.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” he asked me when I remained standing.

“Please, I’ve already eaten,” I lied.

“But I can’t eat alone so come and sit with me,” he said, pointing to the chair nearest him.

“Yes, sit with your husband; I’m going to my room,” my mother called from the sitting room. When I turned to look at her she was standing out of Eli’s view and was blinking rapidly. I knew that she was warning me not to do anything that would displease him, or her, or Aunty, or everyone in Ho who had chosen me as the solution to the problem. The sweat from my armpits began to drip down my sides.

I sat on the edge of the dining chair and began to take slices of yam out of the Pyrex bowl and place them onto his plate as I had seen my mother do for my father when he would come back from work.

“That’s okay,” he said after I had placed the fourth slice on his plate.

“Please, do you want garden egg or *kontomire*?” I asked in a small voice, suddenly worried that he would not like either.

“I will start with the *kontomire*,” he said.

I quickly began to scoop the greens onto his plate, careful to drain the excess palm oil out of the spoon before serving him. I hoped that my fast movements would prevent him from noticing my shaking hand. He began to eat as soon as I finished. He smiled after swallowing the first mouthful.

“Very good,” he said and dug in again.

I beamed, pleased with myself. I wished my mother had been there to hear him, and Aunty as well.

“So how are you liking it here?” he said to me in English.

“Please, it’s fine.”

“It’s quiet, ehn, not like Ho?”

I nodded and then smiled, but my smile faded as I began to believe that he would take offense at what I had said. I didn't want him to think that I was complaining about Accra.

"But I like it very much," I said quickly.

He looked up, his eyebrows arched. I think he was surprised by the force with which I spoke because I had been whispering and mumbling since he came in.

"What have you been doing?"

"Please, walking around the area, going to the market, housework."

He was quiet for a while and then asked me, "Isn't there anything else that you want to do?"

"Anything else?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes, to keep busy."

I paused as I remembered my mother's rapidly blinking eyes and her suggestion that I wait a year before starting my training. But I really wanted to start, and Richard hadn't discouraged me when I told this to him. In fact he had said that it was a "great idea." Why would his brother react any differently?

"Please, I want to go to design school . . . sewing school."

"That's good. Which one?"

"Emm . . . please, I'm still thinking about that."

"Okay. I will ask Yaya to help you look."

"Thank you," I said, relieved. It was only after this that I realized that we, as husband and wife, had just had a conversation.