

Chiké Frankie Edozien

Krifé

Story

As Akosua blew out the flickering flames of the thirty candles on the large lemon merengue cake her friends had organized, it seemed the entire dining room at Bistro 22 was applauding. All the waiters had trooped behind the one who brought the cake, singing their version of the “Happy Birthday” song.

Happy Birthday, to you, to you.

Happy Birthday, to you, to you.

Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday to you.

They must have done this often. Without the need to learn the person’s name, they just drummed and clapped and caused a happy stir. This was a warm night on a holiday weekend and the restaurant was filled with well-heeled and nattily dressed diners. It was the cream of the crop of Accra society here tonight, the folks who are often chronicled in the society blogs. At one corner sat the socialite daughter of the president of Ghana with the oil magnate she was rumored to be secretly married to. An ice bucket holding a chilled bottle of Taittinger by their side.

Across the room was the handsome former Chelsea Football Club midfielder. Now retired, he still traveled with an entourage of excited women and fawning men. He held court at a round table for twelve. And not far from them was the superstar architect of the National Cathedral complex, who had once been given a knighthood by the British monarch. Sir and his Lady were dining together, giggling at each other and oblivious to the world around them. The *Vogue* editor

who popped into town from London every so often was in another corner with a lover and some hip bespectacled and tattooed photographer types. All were chatting quietly but animatedly, and seemed like they were celebrating something. Maybe they had just completed a successful photo shoot in Accra.

But at the drumming and singing of “Happy Birthday” all the diners paused their chewing and sipping, and joined in. And as they were clapping, Akosua stood up and demurely clasped her hands above her breasts, smiling shyly, keeping her head down. Akosua turned to look at her best friend, Lizzie, and her smile got bigger. It was she who had really organized the dinner and it was sophisticated Lizzie who was now ordering crème brûlée for the gaggle of four ladies at their table.

Akosua had never celebrated birthdays before she met Lizzie. For the last four years, Lizzie had made a fuss about celebrating and this year was no exception. But this time it wasn't drinks at some pub somewhere. It was a high-heeled, slinky short dress and expensive perfume kind of night. So much so that Akosua wondered if Lizzie had something else up her sleeve. Perhaps one of the diners here was a man she was soon to reel in? Akosua looked around the room. The men eating and drinking this Saturday night out were definitely all in Lizzie's target demographic. Rich and married. And at the moment, they were all being super attentive to the wives or women they were out with. Which one of them would end up at Lizzie's East Legon flat later? Which one of them, Akosua wondered, would after dinner go home and say to his wife that he had some business emergency that had to be handled that Saturday night, only to end up frolicking at Lizzie's for hours on end?

Lizzie was beautiful in a classic way that a certain kind of Ghanaian man loved. And she knew it. Lizzie was tall, lithe, fair skinned with long hair. Hair imported from India that she had

paid a good sum for. Tonight, Lizzie was ravishing in her form-fitting sundress bursting with yellow flowers. Her gold necklace shone bright, and the bold pendant that rested just between her full breasts dazzled. The way this woman squealed and radiated joy, one would think it was her own birthday. She oozed of jasmine. A fragrance that she had recently picked up from her new boss.

Many of these men here found her irresistible. And they never seemed to understand how calculating and cold Lizzie could be. How she could easily discard them once she'd had her fill. Lizzie could have any man she wanted at Bistro 22 tonight and their women would not be able to do anything about it. The only question was, which one?

Some of the wives smiled at her in a brief greeting. Giving her the kind of smile that ends at the lips, and is devoid of warmth. Some hissed and gave her a side-eye. Many didn't acknowledge her, even though their husbands looked, as Lizzie came in, and some of said husbands gave a quick hello. Many of these married women here tonight wanted to be like Lizzie, statuesque and sexy. And many more hated her for reasons they couldn't articulate. That she lived a life they wanted perhaps? Maybe it was that she took risks and was in control of her sexuality and her body. Maybe it was the idea that she could take their husbands and discard them so easily that irked the so-called Christian girls who hissed at her antics.

It wasn't that long ago after all, when the king of spare parts himself, Nana Dankwa, moved out of his marital home, leaving his wife and four children in pursuit of Lizzie. Nana Dankwa is also a pastor at the Synagogue church and lives the life of a beneficiary of the prosperity gospel. Well, the rumor was that after he moved into a house in Cantonments, Lizzie declined to move in. Lizzie supposedly told some of her pals something about how happy she was to be a guest star in Pastor Nana's world, but not a series regular. And just like that, she broke it off with him.

Pastor Nana has since moved back in with his wife and kids. And everyone at the Synagogue pretends like nothing extraordinary happened.

It was these same wives who routinely tried, unsuccessfully, to shame Lizzie. They deemed her skirts were too short and her face too painted.

Ghana has been this way forever. Men like adventurous, sexy women to frolic with, but want to marry only religious, pious-presenting women. Some of these women had played the game in their dating days and had gotten the husband, but were now trapped in forced piousness as “married women.” It seemed grating that their hard-fought-for husbands were smitten by the likes of the sexually adventurous Lizzie, who didn’t seem to care about getting married. Lizzie wasn’t even a husband snatcher. When she wanted someone, she got him. She often said, “A wife is not a mountain.” Lizzie then discarded the men once she’d had enough. She was free and they resented her for it.

Once upon a time, Akosua herself had been one of those women. A judgmental hater. When she and Lizzie first roomed together at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, she was a different person. Today, Akosua barely recognized that version of herself.

Back then, she had been one of those Bible-thumping virgins who were saving it all for marriage. Marriage to a man whom her church elders had introduced her to and approved of. A good man. A kind man. A God-fearing man she would make a family with. Akosua never really had a family of her own. Sure, there were the aunts who came to take her from the Motherless Babies’ Home when she aged out, but they dumped her on some church elders and rarely

checked in on her. She was born of sin, as far as they were concerned, and then abandoned. No one adopted her.

Akosua never knew her parents, and she went from one church elder's house to another, going to school and performing domestic work in each home. She remembers a clutch of women, aunts or maybe a grandmother, who visited her once and looked at her with pity. If only her parents had not been sinners who brought shame on them. That's all she remembered. Fragments of a conversation about her mother, a child herself but "grown enough to bring shame" and who then disappeared.

For most of her teens, she was essentially a house girl who was paid primarily in clothes and meals and shelter. She still doesn't even know when her real birthday falls and so her age is a guesstimate. She could be thirty, the age of her schoolmates, or she could be twenty-seven. It was anyone's guess. But she remembered a primary school teacher registering her for junior high school on a very hot Monday and writing the nation's birthday as hers, since he had no records. "When we celebrate Mother Ghana, we will sing 'Happy Birthday' for you, too," Mr. Frimpong said. He said, like her classmates, she would be twelve years old. That was how March 6, Ghana's Independence Day, became her answer whenever she had to write down a date of birth on a form.

As a teenager, all she did was study the Bible and focus on her classwork. Her only ambitions were to go to school and find a good Christian husband. The kind of man that came to church with his wife and sat up front. The kind of man that made his wife look to sit under the ceiling fans in church so her husband stayed cool. The kind of man who boldly stood up to give his offerings and tithes each week without fail. Careers were dreams for others, those kids who had parents. All she ever wanted was to be in a home where she wasn't the house girl. She

couldn't wait to be a madam. She wanted the husband who went out and worked to provide for her and their children. The church guardians would have found someone sooner, but she got admitted to university and so they let her attend. It wasn't like there were suitors lining up for her, as there were for the other young women in church.

But it wasn't too long after when Nana Osei, a member she had not really noticed at services, began talking to her after worship. He was nice, into computers, and had big dreams. He came from a family of fisherfolk and had grown up on the shores of Lake Bosomtwe. He was short with a big head of hair. The church elders approved of the match as he was a good man, a working man who was ready to settle down.

Fellow congregants told Akosua she had hit the jackpot to have a man like that interested in courting her. Yet it seemed to her that no one who said that was actually envious. He wasn't the type to make any of them swoon. But the elders said he had prospects.

When they started spending time together, Nana Osei and Akosua just talked and read the Good Book together. On weekends, she cooked for him. Meals that lasted him all week. She packed the food in plastic containers and put them in his fridge, which had very little in it. Her time as a house girl had honed her cooking skills. The first time she spent alone time with him in his home, she brought ingredients with her and made palm nut soup with cassava and plantain fufu for him. Nana Osei kept licking his fingers and praising God. She laughed and he smiled more. He told her then and there that they were meant to be, that she was his gift from God. One Sunday in church, after praying for a wife, he looked up and she was the first person he saw. It was a sign, he said, as was her delicious fufu.

She liked that he listened to her, but mostly Akosua imagined what her life with him would be. She could see his vision for the future and bought into it wholeheartedly. Akosua believed

she would be a good wife for him. Nana Osei liked that she was plump. He loved that she wore her hair short or plaited, and that she adorned her dark round face only with shea butter. Nana Osei called her a “natural beauty.” No one had ever associated her with beauty. She believed that he meant it, and also that he was going to be quite prosperous one day. After all, his name was also Prosper.

Maybe he would even propose before she finished school, and she wondered if she would even need to complete her degree once he did. What would be the point of finishing school, if she was to be married?

After her first year at KNUST, she had to move into off-campus housing. There was no guaranteed housing for second-year students, as there was for first-years. Akosua opted for the cheapest place she could find in Ayeduase, just outside the university grounds and where all the hostels were. It was still too expensive, and she couldn't ask the church elders for any more funds at this stage. The old men had made it clear they owed her nothing and, if she was married, she would not be their problem anymore. So, while they gave her allowance for school, it was tough for her to ask for more than they gave. Which was the barest minimum. She would need roommates with a similar budget. As the semester was coming to an end, and quite out of the blue, Lizzie announced that they would continue living together as she didn't want to get a new roommate or live alone. Lizzie liked her company and didn't want the hassle of new people.

Akosua had mainly been quiet about her roomie's short skirts and painted lips, but she disapproved, like all the other Christian 'year one' girls. She once invited Lizzie to Bible study but after Lizzie laughed so hard, she didn't bother anymore. “People are judgmental, and you are, too,” Lizzie told her one evening after accepting Akosua's invitation to eat some rice and stew she had prepared. “But you don't say much and are very quiet. Plus, you can cook!”

Akosua laughed. She did judge her roommate, but she still found her warm and neat. When they moved in together off-campus, she found that Lizzie had so much more money that she handled the rent and took only what Akosua could afford. Akosua had been so busy with her studies that she never paid much attention to Lizzie's spending before. But now, Lizzie often didn't even bother to take Akosua's share of the rent. They ended up living together without other roommates, which was a rarity. Lizzie laughed at the idea of the fiancé Akosua was so proud of. One who didn't touch her, and hadn't yet bought a ring, but who needed Akosua's cooking every week. When Nana Osei got a scholarship to go to London for graduate school, Lizzie just smiled and declared: "You're free now."

Akosua thought of "freedom" and asked herself, *What does it even mean anyway?* Lizzie had had options in her life, parents, friends. And now Lizzie had Ashanti men who gave her things just because she pouted.

Their lives couldn't have been more different growing up. Akosua had grown up tolerated. She knew that ultimately a good marriage would be the key to her success in life. And after all the suffering of her youth, God had smiled on her and sent her Nana Osei. The man who promised that from afar he would look after her and that, in three years, they would be man and wife.

As soon as he was settled in London, he did. Each month, they FaceTimed and then he sent her funds to her mobile money account for her upkeep. Nana Osei was a very frugal person, and that didn't change, but the money he sent came regularly.

Akosua studied hard but, to indulge Lizzie, and also quell her boredom, she began accompanying her friend to places in Kumasi she'd never been before or even knew existed.

Lizzie always seemed to be happy, carefree, and unbothered. “Come and hang out for once,” she would say. “All this praying, you’ll probably still go to heaven if you came out with me.”

So, she did go out with her. Akosua enjoyed watching as men sent them cocktails and fell over themselves for her roomie. She knew nothing about alcohol but, to fit in, she would ask for a virgin piña colada.

Soon, she began to emulate Lizzie in all things. It started with Lizzie lending her a small clutch with matching low heels the first time they went out. The next time, it was a dress that seemed demure but clung to her body as she moved.

Then she went on a run, and later to the gym with her. And slowly the evening sprints and gym sessions replaced Akosua’s Bible study groups. And some of her Nana Osei allowance went to things that Lizzie helped her pick out, like new not-so-sensible shoes, ones with small heels. Then she began to buy more dresses and skirts. Akosua started to use imported apricot face scrubs and she got to experience her first manicures and pedicures. A truly luxurious indulgence that her friends in Revelation Mountain Church would disapprove of. It would never even cross their minds. Lizzie encouraged her to wear makeup on their nights out.

“Just let me put a little eye shadow on you and let’s go. Don’t be too Krifé tonight,” she would say, mocking what she called Akosua’s severe Christian faith practices. Practices that began to wane as their undergrad years went on.

It started slowly, and as Lizzie took Akosua everywhere she went. Akosua’s skirts got shorter, and her dresses got tighter. She started routinely working out, the pounds dropped, and a svelte figure emerged. One that was accentuated by a pair of skinny jeans Lizzie gave her when she returned from Dubai.

As these small changes happened, Akosua was moving from sidekick to equally desirable babe for a certain kind of generous man. With Akosua's hair braided long, and her body skinnier, and her heels higher, and her firm breasts out, the sophisticates who fawned over Lizzie and showered her with gifts began to notice her, too.

Her plump self. The one with the short hair and downcast eyes that oozed modesty. The self that was marriage material in her church and village circle had disappeared.

Akosua knew Nana Osei loved the old version of her, so during their video calls she always wore head ties and no makeup. He often railed against how the African women he attended school with in the United Kingdom were all painted ladies and didn't go to church. How he would have befriended them if they were not so in the ways of the flesh. How he missed her and her fear of God.

Akosua studied and passed her exams in tourism and culture, but her dream to end up as Nana Osei's wife was evolving. What if she got an opportunity to manage hotels? What if she could travel all over the world like Lizzie had?

She realized that Lizzie used her as a security blanket when they were out with her high-end friends, but Akosua couldn't figure out why. Lizzie was worldly. She'd been to London and Cape Town, not just the Arab Emirates. She capitalized on her looks and wasn't shy about taking whatever was offered to her. She barely looked at folks on campus. Her "dating" life was on a whole other level. She was an okay student, but she didn't spend more time on things than she needed to. She never went to French class, but always got As. It turned out she had picked enough of it up on her forays to Geneva.

Akosua realized her life was changed forever when Lizzie asked her to go away with her and some friends for some beach time. "You'll be able to show off your nice body in a bikini."

Akosua had never even been on a plane at this point in her young life, so an all-expense paid weekend trip was tough to resist.

On the plane she could barely control her excitement and kept taking selfies as the plane rose up into the clouds. When they landed, two men, both American, picked them up. The men said they worked in “oil and gas,” and all four were to join some more friends for a weekend of laughter and frivolity at the Blue Moon private island, a luxury resort almost two hours’ drive from the Takoradi Airport and very near to Axim. They stayed in an elegant villa with stunning views of the private bay and sea and with a gigantic heart-shaped pool. Akosua had never seen or experienced anything so luxurious and was wide-eyed the whole time. Even the fresh air felt opulent. All this was here in the Ghana she had lived in her whole life, and she never knew of it.

Lizzie was at home in this crowd and in this environment. Akosua met the two other ladies and two other guys on the trip with them once they got to the resort. The man in charge was Lizzie’s “date” and benefactor, it appeared. He had organized the break. It was a weekend filled with decadent meals, boat trips on the ocean, pool parties at the villa and massages in between. The women danced in their bikinis and the men admired them, chomped on cigars and talked business. One of the American men, Ben, took an immediate liking to Akosua and, with trepidation but serious encouragement from Lizzie, she agreed to go to his room after dinner that first night.

“He could be your ticket to this life. Don’t be difficult and get all ‘krifé’ on him,” Lizzie warned her as they downed even more champagne.

Ben, the muscular engineer, was soft spoken and had showered her with compliments since they arrived. He was even more charming when they were alone. Ben shared more bubbly with Akosua, and she kept sipping from the tall glass that everyone called a flute. She kept trying to

be as classy as Lizzie and act like she belonged. Before long, she and Ben had clambered onto the king-size bed.

She didn't always understand him—his accent and the champagne kept her wondering if she was hearing him right—but she looked up at him wide-eyed and pretended she did. She pretended he was fascinating while her mind thought about how wonderful the room was. She lost herself in the fluffy pillows and soft sheets and thought it was probably the nicest bed she had ever been in. Akosua wondered what it would be like to have a bed this large and this comfortable to sleep in all day. She wondered what she would do with all the pillows if she did indeed have a bed like this. This is what Lizzie meant by the “suite life.”

The moonlight softly lit the entire place, and she could see clearly even though the room's lights were off. Akosua could hear the waves crashing down on the beach below. Once Ben began to caress her, all she felt were sensations shooting up all over her. She seemed to feel his hands and fingers everywhere and found herself moaning when his tongue found her nipple.

“Ssssh, just relax,” Ben whispered as he pulled her closer, his muscular arms enveloping her, his whole body now on top of hers. There was something about his scent that was intoxicating, that coupled with his accent and the way he slowly gave her instructions made her just submit to him.

She did as he told her to, raising her arms, spreading her legs, opening her mouth. All she felt were electric sensations when he touched her. She had never felt that good from a touch.

It was only when Ben rolled over after emptying himself into her that they noticed the line of a crimson stain on the sheets, and he realized just how new she was to womanhood. He had broken her hymen. Ben, who had been in Ghana for just a few months, then took a tender approach to her all weekend and allowed her to cling to him like Gorilla Glue. The days went by

quickly, and before the end of the long weekend he nonchalantly mentioned his kids and his woman back in Louisiana.

Akosua returned to Kumasi a woman, walking on air. She'd left a naive college girl on an adventure. She felt no unease about Ben's marital status, just a huge desire to see him again and again. To feel him on that large fluffy bed again and again. To have his tongue make her go crazy, and his sizable manhood inside her again. To be taken care of by him. Her "thank you for coming" envelope from Ben was more money than she'd ever had before. He promised to stay in touch but warned that life on the oil rigs gave him limited opportunity to have weekend breaks.

Lizzie laughed at the prospect of Akosua falling for him. "There are many more engineers in the sea," she said. "Keep his number. He will call again and maybe next time we will all go to Dubai, but don't wait for him to call. He might not." Akosua's heart sank. And so it began. With Lizzie's tutelage, Akosua said the right things and provided excellent company to a certain kind of businessman who passed through Kumasi. The men provided fun weekends out and generously thanked her for the pleasure of her company. And her body. Akosua learned from her friend about birth control and safer sex practices, and she realized how little of the world she actually knew.

Slowly, Akosua disengaged from her former life while creating a well of savings for her future. After graduation, with the connection of one of the men in her rotation, she secured a spot at the reservations desk of the Golden Tulip Hotel Kumasi and she did her mandatory national service there. Lizzie relocated to Accra to do her service year. She had wanted to break up with Nana Osei, but had learned from Lizzie to keep her options open—and the allowance coming—so each week she took his calls, updated him like all was well, even prayed with him. Like

clockwork, he sent her monthly allowance. Of course, when he returned, she went over to his place and broke up with him citing the need for a career and not wanting to rush things.

Nana Osei looked good from his years in the United Kingdom, but he was still the same devout churchgoing fisherman who'd left Kumasi. He came back with an advanced degree and a nicer haircut. But he was still the same. A traditional Ashanti man in all senses. His patriarchy was on display. What would she need a career for if he was ready to marry her, he wondered. He was also confused and broken by the Akosua he found. In the years he'd been abroad, he had fallen even harder for her, or at least for the version of her that he knew. Nana Osei fumed about what had happened to her: her transformation from a girl who loved Bible study, cooking, worshipping, and hoping to start a godly family with him to a wannabe slay queen. Just like those African girls in London who lived for makeup and passing men around.

Akosua knew it wouldn't work with Nana Osei, who wondered incredulously how on earth she had become a painted lady with little modesty. When did she start wearing heels? Why did she have two mobile phones? And why did he have only one of the numbers? He hurled so many questions her way, but she kept her cool and never got agitated.

Even though she was a changed woman, Nana Osei was willing to make things work. He still wanted Akosua to move in with him and for them to get married while he set up his technology business. He still saw her as a good woman. One who had just gone wayward because he had been gone so long. But once Akosua wrapped up her national service, she relocated to Accra and cut off ties with Nana Osei and everyone else in her church. Finally, she was in control of her life.

Lizzie was happy to have her in town and they picked up where they left off. Akosua got work as a front desk associate at one of those boutique hotels that expatriate businessmen love in

Osu, Accra's pricey and noshing district. The rest of the time she ran with Lizzie's slay queen posse. She was popular with Lizzie's businessman circle because she never had a business plan or project to push. She was just "Akosua" and there for the fun. So far, she was loving Accra. There were weekend trips to other places she'd otherwise never have gone to.

One weekend, she could be dancing up a storm with Lizzie and others during one of the nighttime jam sessions at the exclusive Sandbox Beach Club. The next, they would be sailing on the Volta Lake and chilling out in a bungalow at the Royal Senchi resort in Akosombo. On another she could be found paragliding over the Odweanoma Mountains and then relaxing poolside at the Rock City resort in Kwahu.

Her bikini collection was growing, as was her collection of lingerie from Victoria's Secret. Soon enough, just as Lizzie predicted, they were invited on weekend jaunts to Dubai, where they shopped. They were invited to London, where they shopped more. They were invited to Lisbon, to Marbella, and to Luanda. On each trip they provided their good company to benefactors busy inking oil deals during the day. Ben, the engineer whom Akosua had pined for after losing her virginity to him, was a distant memory. Nana Osei, whom she once hoped to marry, never even crossed her mind anymore.

For Lizzie, providing a girlfriend experience was something she had made work for her, and Akosua was not only reveling in it but taking notes. She realized that Lizzie's "it" factor wasn't something that came as naturally to her as it did to Lizzie. Akosua had to work at looking great and being super-easygoing. But what she no longer wanted right now was to be someone's wife and someone's mother.

Soon, she thought. Just not yet. After she had set up her own concierge traveling service, she could get married. Lizzie agreed that Akosua could have organized some of the trips they had

taken, just as well as any other travel agent. So they set about to come up with a small travel concierge consultancy in Ghana.

Lizzie, who had all the wealthy admirers, would casually mention that “Akosua’s company can organize a long weekend for us in Lagos or Abidjan,” and it would manifest. Lizzie began to think of cultivating a small select stable of girls who could come along and provide company if there were a few more men than she and Akosua could handle. When the money came, they split it all down the middle.

After Akosua’s birthday dinner at Bistro 22, Lizzie disappeared, leaving the gaggle of girls to continue celebrating while she reeled in a big fish. It turned out just as Akosua suspected. An expatriate beer manufacturer ditched his date—his wife, really—for the evening and ended up with Lizzie for the rest of the night and into the early morning. “We were talking Bitcoin” was all Lizzie would say the next day. The relative success of their little travel business had given both Lizzie and Akosua ideas about their future. Akosua knew she was not as desirable as Lizzie, so her own shelf life giving the girlfriend experience to wealthy men would be shorter than Lizzie’s. Akosua had always felt she was just not as pretty. Akosua had to work at looking good and being super-easygoing. Her skin didn’t glimmer like Lizzie’s always did, and she didn’t have half of Lizzie’s femininity, which made every man swoon. And she was okay with that.

She wanted to grow the business, yes—being a concierge travel expert who owned her own business was far more desirable than going up the ranks in the hotel she worked in now—but she began to think seriously about reeling in a wealthy man as a husband. Once, she had dreamed of being a reservations manager. Now she had seen a bit of the world and would gladly stay where she was with the right husband.

Lizzie had other ideas. She wanted to be a mogul. She was seriously fangirling her new boss. In all these years, Lizzie had a blasé attitude about everyone and everything. Until now.

She had, for some time now, started working with a Nigerian businesswoman peddling high-end sex toys to Ghana's fetish obsessed. Everyone seemed to be a prayer warrior in Accra, but behind closed doors, people were freaky. Her boss satisfied those cravings at a steep price. Akosua had seen the price tags of some of those CynthiaJele boxes that came wrapped like jewels. They were big boy toys.

“I've been talking to Amina about you. I think you can be a new brand ambassador for the CynthiaJele line.”

Lizzie explained that her boss, Amina, was very private, and that very few knew of the line because it was so expensive and for men with discretion. And big wallets. “You could make so much more money just by being a rep here. She's conquered the Nigerian elite and the wealthy Ghanaians are salivating over the fact that she is spending more time here.”

Lizzie told her of a luxury cruise Amina was planning on the Ankobra River in a couple of months. Amina and her brand ambassadors would unveil new products that her high-end customers could sample and play with. The trip would be on Amina with food and beverage covered, but the customers would buy and buy. This would be a chance for Akosua, Lizzie said, to lock in a profitable cruise, and maybe snag that husband she'd been going on about of late. Akosua nodded as Lizzie told her that Amina had been spotted several times at dinner at the Gonja Kitchen, the most expensive and exclusive restaurant in Ghana. Tables there were booked months in advance and the place never seemed to have a lull. Even getting a reservation for lunch was tough.

Lizzie had already secured an invitation to Amina's Airport Hills home for an interview. Apparently, Amina had already looked her up and the interview would not be conventional. Amina would be hosting an exclusive soiree by her pool. Cocktails, dinner, and drinks would be followed by a screening of a new Netflix film produced and directed by the Nigerian wunderkind, Makuochi.

The movie's director would be on hand to mingle with the select few who could finance the next Makuochi production and raise the profile of the film in Ghana. Makuochi had already given hints that he would love to shoot a film in Ghana, so this would be a good opportunity for him to meet some financiers. But in the end, it would be a party, and Amina would be able to watch and see how Akosua conversed and dressed and mingled with the *crème de la crème* of Accra society: the potbellied moneymen and the dainty madams dripping in diamonds who formed the base of her clientele. And then they would take it from there. It was Thursday, and Lizzie was just dropping this on her now. "She just finally asked to see you," Lizzie explained. "This is your chance. Win Amina over, and you could be an ambassador. Besides the money, she opens doors, so let's make this happen."

Akosua was ready. She would get a mani-pedi and a facial, bring out one of the minidresses she bought in Dubai, and throw on her special occasion Manolo Blahnik heels for Saturday. She knew she needed to glam it up, but not so much that she upstaged anyone. Lizzie would do her makeup, and they would go together like they belonged. She needed to land the gig. And to meet Makuochi.

The man used just one name. The blogs always showed pictures of him with a neatly trimmed beard and wide smile, and depicted him as fit as a fiddle. He was young, sexy, and photogenic. A filmmaker with an upward-trending profile and movie star looks. Maybe she

could show him Accra. She could even take him to some hidden beaches past Kokrobite where the monied went surfing. She knew from his Instagram posts that he had a thing for the beach and open-water swimming. Maybe she could show him other places, too. They could take an afternoon to see the baboon families in the Shai Hills. She could show him an even better time than he expected in Ghana. From her experience, Nigerians were not that hard to please.

Fortunately, Makuochi wasn't married so Lizzie probably wouldn't have her eye on him, except maybe to party and take pictures for her Instagram followers. And if Makuochi was involved with someone—well, that's just an obstacle she would have to climb over. Akosua smiled and thought, what if she aced Amina's test and left that party with not just a job, but a cute Nigerian boyfriend? Yes, that would be her goal for the weekend.

From the outside there was nothing remarkable about the Airport Hills home they were going into. But once Akosua and Lizzie got past the gun-toting guards, it was breathtaking. The huge brown gate opened up to a wide driveway shaded by large trees on each side. As the guards directed Lizzie to where she could park, Akosua gasped.

Akosua knew houses in this estate were nice, but this was something special. There were flowers and towering hedges everywhere, and a large villa-style main house in the distance. Meandering stone paths in the middle of well-tended lawns led to even more artfully crafted hedges that shielded a gigantic oval swimming pool from view. They were led around the corner and followed the music coming from one end of the large pool with deep blue tiles to find a full bar at the end. At one corner, a group of about ten musicians, the Chorkor Symphony Orchestra, was playing Ghanaian highlife music with classical instruments.

Hunky muscled waiters and reed-thin waitresses were passing out avocado and salmon hors d'oeuvres. There was already a large pavilion screen set up at one end of the garden to screen the film once the time was right. They had been told to arrive early, and they had, but others were already on hand. Lizzie pointed out several starry-eyed, very conservative members of Parliament. She winked at two in particular who were always in the news for opposing Ghana's LGBTQ population and women they considered immoral. Lizzie told Akosua they were good clients of Amina's. They were the morality police in public, but privately they engaged in all manner of sex play. They all seemed to be equally gobsmacked at the opulence of the topiary. Lizzie spotted a tall guy in a white kaftan, took Akosua straight to the hunk and excitedly air-kissed with the man, whom she introduced as "Abba."

"This is the chef and mastermind behind the Gonja Kitchen," Lizzie said. Abba gave Akosua the once-over and winked at her. "Nice Blahniks," he said with a big smile.

Soon, more people were coming in. Ambassadors, tech industry folk, and the like. Akosua and Lizzie mingled, smiling and relaxed. The bubbly was flowing.

Then Akosua spotted Makuochi and made a beeline for him. She introduced herself and they got to talking. He was a bit shy but genuinely interesting and receptive to her flirtations. He asked her why she wasn't an actress, and said he'd be happy if she could show him around Ghana. Lizzie found them, and he asked her where she'd been hiding Akosua. They exchanged cards, and Makuochi confessed he wasn't good at public speaking but that their hosts had told him it would be an easy crowd. "That reminds me, I promised I would make a proper Nigerian Chapman for them. Come with me, please."

They made their way to the pool bar, where he moved past the bartender on duty, grabbed two jugs, and mixed the drinks. He measured the Angostura bitters, the grenadine, and the lemon

juices as intently as he did the Fanta and Sprite. Then he finished them off with large slices of cucumber. “I’m a bartender in my spare time,” he said to Akosua as she flashed him a genuine smile.

Makuochi was more beautiful in person than in any image on social media. No photo out there did him justice. Makuochi also had no airs about him for someone who was a major deal in film and the guest of honor at this shindig. Akosua liked this guy and no matter how long it took she would end up with him, she thought.

Makuochi grabbed a tray in one hand and took the finished drinks and Akosua to a corner hedge where a small cluster of folks were chatting.

Akosua felt great. She could already envision herself as Makuochi’s lady and one day his wife. She was comfortable with him, which was hard for her to fathom since she had just met him, but he could definitely be *the* one.

“Prosper. Your Chapman is here,” Makuochi bellowed when they reached the group of men. Prosper turned around and grabbed it. As he said thanks, his eyes locked with Akosua’s.

They both stared at each other. Speechless. Akosua couldn’t believe she was seeing Nana Osei. It had been a few years. He looked the same and yet he looked so different, and utterly amazing. His skin shone bright. His hair was neatly trimmed, as was his mustache. He was trim in his designer clothes. He’d even had a manicure. He seemed so at ease. This Nana Osei who looked back at her was sophisticated and sporting a gold Cartier watch. And this was his home? What had happened? What was he doing here in Accra? In this mansion?

“You two know each other?” Makuochi asked.

“Yes,” Akosua mumbled. “We dated when I was in the university.”

Prosper found his tongue and added, “It seems like a million years ago, but we were actually engaged.” He looked at her intently for a bit and then back at Makuochi, before settling his eyes on her again. “You look well.”

Just then, Lizzie appeared with a very stunning lady sporting matching diamond earrings and a choker. She wore a flowery sleeveless sundress and a big smile. Her Louboutins clacked on the stone pathway, and her jasmine scent punctured the awkwardness. Makuochi handed her a Chapman and give her a kiss on both cheeks. Amina smiled at Akosua and said, “Lizzie has told me so much about you. I’m happy to meet you. And I see you’ve met my husband.”

Makuochi, with a twinkle in his eye, jumped in with, “They used to be engaged!”

Prosper slid his hands into his wife’s and whispered something into Amina’s ears. She smiled warmly.

“Thanks so much for having me,” Akosua mumbled, feeling even more ill at ease. She was totally intimidated and yet captivated by Amina. “Your home is exquisite,” she said.

“Oh, it’s all Prosper’s doing,” Amina responded. “We were happy living in Nigeria, but he had to come home to Ghana so here we are.” Amina then asked—well, really, told—Akosua: “Go mingle.” She wanted her to meet some of the other guests before the dinner was served and the film screened.

Akosua wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. She had just been sweetly dismissed by the woman she meant to impress. She knew mingling was to be part of the interview, yet she didn’t really want to move. It seemed Prosper, Amina, Makuochi, and even Lizzie were just staring at her as she turned and slowly walked away trying to look and feel confident. Any confidence she had was now shattered. Makuochi told her he’d catch up with her, but he remained with his hosts. As she turned and went to go mingle, she looked around at all the

elegant, high-powered, and wealthy guests who had come to pay homage to Amina . . . and Nana Osei.

She looked at the immaculate surroundings and admired the care taken with the simple things, like the place settings on the poolside dinner table. Akosua wondered what might have been if she had never let Nana Osei go. She could be sitting on tech millions with him.

Akosua grabbed a champagne-filled flute from a hunky waiter in a muscle T-shirt and downed it all at once.

She wondered to herself, *What if I could get him back? What if I could have this life with him? After all, Lizzie always said, "A wife is not a mountain."*