



Saving
HER GUARD
a royal house of saene spinoff
KIRU TAYE

Saving Her Guard

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Kiru Taye

Dedication

To my readers,
Without you there is no Kiru Taye.

Saving Her Guard



THE PROTECTORS SERIES

Healing His Medic by Nana Prah

Unravelling his Mark by Zee Monodee

Saving Her Guard by Kiru Taye

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Blurb

Upstanding royal bodyguard Kojo's primary job is to protect the prime princess of Bagumi from danger. So, when his charge vanishes from her star-studded party at a Lagos hotel, he knows his life won't be worth living if he doesn't find her in one piece. Unfortunately, with inept local law enforcement and dead-end leads, time is running out fast.

Until a chance encounter with a mysterious woman sets his instincts on alert and his heart into overdrive. He's sure the seductive and lethal Latifah holds the answers to his quest. But, how low is he ready to fall to rescue the princess and redeem himself?

This is a Royal House of Saene spinoff and should be read after His Captive Princess (Royal House of Saene #3) to avoid spoilers and for maximum enjoyment.

Chapter 1

Kojo Hamadou walked through the ballroom of the luxury Goldcrest Hotel Suites in Lagos. The scent of exotic flowers filled the air. White and red blossoms sat in thin white vases atop brocade covered tables. His shoes thudded on the shiny hard marble floor. Overhead, chandeliers and spotlights glimmered, making everything dazzle and glow.

The party planners had done well with the classy decorations in preparation for the celebrations this evening. Not that he had an eye for such things except where they hindered or enhanced his job.

In this case, the expensive linens flowing to the floor obscured his line of vision, turning the array of tables into potential hideaways for trouble. He moved through the rows of furniture, checking each table to ensure nothing unexpected lurked beneath the coverings—weapon-toting stowaways or explosive devices.

A little extreme for an engagement party. However, the guests included the *crème de la crème* of Nigerian high society. Not to mention that the celebrant was a high-born princess and the daughter of the ruler of an African nation.

Added to the mix was the current state of Nigeria as a security hot spot, and he wasn't about to take any chances.

Another man worked the space alongside him from the opposite direction, methodically lifting the brocade cloths and

peering underneath as he moved towards Kojo.

Discrete temporary cameras for the closed-circuit security monitors had been installed and checked by Cruz Security Solutions, a firm he collaborated with in Nigeria. In addition, the team had a command base already set up in one of the hotel's conference suites, so they had eyes into the ballroom already.

However, none of the camera angles picked up what lay under the white brocades. Hence the need for this final sweep after the party planners finished decorating and before the event started.

Once they were done, security personnel would stand guard until the doors were officially opened for the party. The guests would have their bags and bodies checked and scanned before being given

entry. Each cleared invitee would be given a tagged wristband, which would track their whereabouts during the event if someone had to leave the venue and return.

A mild headache made Kojo's temples throb and his jaw tense. It had been a long hectic week—five straight days of being constantly alert except for the five hours he slept each night.

As the primary protection officer for Her Royal Highness, First Princess Isha Saene of the Kingdom of Bagumi, his job included ensuring all arrangements had been made to secure the venue.

The party was in honour of her recent engagement and organised by her Nigerian best friend Princess Amara Onoh, hence the location.

During international trips, guarding the prime princess required extra effort

because he didn't have his usual team alongside. HRH liked to travel without a large entourage. Therefore, creating the need to collaborate with outfits like the Cruz team responsible for Princess Amara's safety.

Still, he would be glad when the trip ended, and they returned to their home country in two days.

He had some R&R downtime coming up.

During the last phone conversation with his mother, she'd complained he hadn't visited for a long while.

Although he was entitled to a week off every quarter, excluding the two-days-a-week rest days, he hadn't taken a holiday in about six months.

Princess Isha's calendar had been filled for the same period. And most of the

engagements had been abroad. Since he was Primary, he didn't like delegating her international trips' security to anyone else. So, he tended to take his breaks when she was in Bagumi and on lowkey or palace-based duties.

According to HRH's calendar, she had no more international visits after this Nigerian trip for the next month or so. She would be at home on personal time, finalising her upcoming wedding arrangements.

So, he'd booked to take some time off then. The plan was to spend the long Easter weekend with his parents, brothers, and their families—if his middle sibling wasn't on an active mission. Then, the Tuesday after, he would travel with his friends to Cape Verde for a week before returning to the palace to resume his duties.

A smile curled his lips as he imagined what three bachelors with no obligations could get up for a few days abroad.

“Work hard, play hard,” Prince Zik, Isha’s second brother, liked to say often. The prince lived the motto.

Kojo worked damned hard, ethos drummed into him by a family of patriotic overachievers. But he rarely had the opportunity to party like the prince did.

So, when his friend suggested the upcoming lads’ island trip, Kojo signed up for it. He only had one life, and he might as well enjoy it. Everything shouldn’t be about work.

“All clear,” the Cruz security personnel said when they completed the checks.

“Good,” Kojo replied, satisfied nothing lurked inside that shouldn’t be here. “Stay here until Kenny sends the replacements to

man the doors. I'm going to walk the perimeter before heading upstairs to check on HRH."

"Sure." The man nodded.

Kojo left him on sentry duty and stepped through the open double glass doors leading to the patio and gardens. The sun was low, casting long shadows in the dusk light.

There were teams upstairs now, guarding the suites where the princesses prepared for the event. So, he could afford to be down here while she was in the safety of the hotel suite surrounded by other bodyguards.

However, the minute Princess Isha left the privacy of her room for the party venue, Kojo would be by her side. When all else failed, it was his job to stand between her and any threats. The danger increased

exponentially when she was in public spaces.

But while she was indoors, in her private suite, he could undertake other activities to minimise the risks, like checking the immediate surroundings of the ballroom for any potential hazards.

Taking a deep breath of evening breeze scented with hibiscus, he raised his hands and massaged his temples. Although he wasn't a fan of pills, he would have to take painkillers to ward off the looming migraine and stay focused tonight.

He glanced at his wristwatch, a gift from HRH on his last birthday. The iconic expensive water-resistant timepiece had a stainless-steel case, black rubber strap, a personalised dial, a GPS tracker, and an integral touchscreen. The thing even predicted the weather. He loved it.

A smile curled his lips as he registered the analogue and digital displays on the round dial—Time: eight minutes past six o'clock. Steps: 12,654. Weather: 25°C and clear skies. Next calendar item: 19:00.

He'd been up for over twelve hours, but his workday wasn't done yet. The party would start in less than an hour.

Turning a corner, he pulled his phone out to call the security suite and let them know he was heading upstairs.

A laundry cart barrelled into his midriff, knocking him back. *Oomph.*

"Oh!" the female cleaner gasped behind a mountain of iron-pressed, folded linen.

"Watch where you're going!" he snapped, his irritability rising as he wondered if he would have to change his whole attire before the event. He was already in formal trousers and shoes. Just

needed the dress white shirt and tuxedo jacket to complete the outfit for the occasion.

He looked down, checking himself. He wasn't injured, and his clothes were not damaged. There was a scuff on the hip of black trousers. He rubbed, and it came off quickly. No harm done.

"You can go." He waved a hand for the woman to carry on past him.

"I'm sorry," the husky voice sizzled down his spine, made him stop and pay attention when he would've continued walking.

At first glance, she wasn't remarkable. She was tiny. Her head didn't reach his shoulders. Her midi-length blue-checked pinafore with a company logo hugged abundant curves top and bottom. On her feet were white trainers. Her hair was long,

blue-black, with a fringe obscuring half of her chocolate-brown face.

She swiped her cheek with the back of her hand, keeping her face averted, full lips downturned.

Had he upset her? He wasn't usually cranky, but the headache made him snappy. His belly knotted with regret for shouting at her, and he sighed. "I'm sorry for shouting."

Considering her height, how could she even see above the pile of clean laundry? That she had the strength to push the heavy, overloaded trolley astounded him.

"No, it's not your fault." She shook her head, making the hair fly in the wind for a moment, mesmerising him. "I should've been careful. But I was upset."

Their gazes collided. The woman had the most intriguing clear amber eyes he'd

ever seen. They caught the light from the outdoor lamps and gleamed with curiosity. Just perfection.

He wanted to get lost in them. But her words prodded him, putting him in protective mode. He glanced in the direction she'd come to see if there was someone there. "Are you okay? Did someone do something to you?"

"No." She paused. "It's just my boss being an asshole. It should be my weekend off work. But he insisted that I come to work and threatened to sack me if I didn't."

"Oh, that's definitely an asshole move," he tried making a joke.

He was rewarded with a smile, the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. And he'd been hanging around stunning princesses and elite personalities for over a decade.

None of them compared to this cleaner lady.

“Thank you. You’re sweet.” She was well-spoken too. Her tone lacked any regional inflexions, making it difficult to place her accent. She sounded well-educated and over-qualified to be a cleaner.

Then again, unlike the Bagumian economy, which was thriving, Nigeria’s was heading in the opposite direction. The country had a high unemployment rate for young people. So, a university graduate could end up as a cleaner to make ends meet.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “If it makes you feel better, I’m also working this weekend.”

Okay. Now he was flirting. But he couldn’t help himself. Everything else was suspended for these few minutes. He would

like to extend the time with her and get to know her better.

“Oh, I thought you were a guest. Do you work at the hotel? I haven’t seen you before.” Her gaze swept over his body and left a trail of heat.

Did she like what she saw?

“I’m not hotel staff.” He left it at that, not wanting to divulge confidential information. He couldn’t forget his job.

“Oh, okay. I better get back to work.” She pushed the trolley, a smile curling her lips. “Nice to meet you, Mr Stranger.”

He grinned. He liked her. “It’s Kojo, by the way.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you, Mr Kojo By-The-Way.” She winked and carried on down the path towards the service entrance.

He laughed and chased after her. “Hold up. You haven’t told me your name.”

“Why do you want to know?” She kept walking.

He wanted to know for personal as well as professional reasons. Since she was working around the party venue, he needed to make sure she was security cleared. And he couldn’t do that without knowing her name.

The safety of the princess ranked above his personal life.

But he didn’t want her to know he was security yet, so he told her the personal reason. “I would like to know, so I know who to ask for when I come to ask you out on a date.”

A smile lit her face as she halted. “You’d like to ask me out on a date?”

“Well, yes. I would like to take you out to a meal, the movies. But we’re both working this weekend, and I’ll be gone by Sunday night.”

“I’d like that.” Abandoning the trolley, she stepped up to him. “But how about I come up to your room later when I finish? We can order room service and Netflix and chill.”

She trailed her hand down his chest until it rested on his tenting trousers and cupped his dick.

Eyes widening, he sucked in a sharp breath. Even through the fabrics, the feel of her touch was a brand—bold, possessive, erotic. He’d felt nothing like it. Not that he had many sexual encounters with women.

Regardless, one thing was apparent. He craved this woman. Wanted to spend time

with her in whatever form it entailed— watching movies or getting laid.

Did she really want him, or was she teasing? He wasn't used to women as brazen as her. He'd been propositioned a few times. Wealthy women seemed to think bodyguards were fair game. Or escorts. But he never entertained them. He didn't want to do anything to taint his family or employer's name.

However, this woman didn't know him or his employer. So, if she wanted him, she wanted Kojo, not the bodyguard for her bed notch.

"You sure?" He sucked in a deep breath. She smelled so sweet. So sexy.

"Yes. What's your room number?" She caressed him.

His breath hitched, and his dick thickened.

“4-1-8.” The number came out in a low growl as he fought for some control.

He seemed to be turning into putty in her hands. Or rather, turning into stone. He’d never been so turned on.

“I’ll be there around midnight,” she said in a sultry voice before stepping away. She shoved the trolley through an open doorway.

He missed her touch immediately. “I still don’t know your name.”

“It’s Grace. Grace Bello.” She said but didn’t look back.

He watched her walk down the corridor as he raised the phone in his hand. Then he turned away and dialed a number. “Dapo, please check this name in the system for me. Grace Bello.”

He waited a few seconds for the other man to do his thing on the computer and get back to him.

“Grace Bello, female, 35, works in hotel support services, employed for three years. No criminal records. No alerts on the system. Is there a problem?” Dapo replied.

“No problem. Thanks.” Kojo exhaled in relief.

Grace had cleared security, which meant he could look forward to spending the night with her. He couldn't wait.

Chapter 2

Latifah Kamto slowed her steps along the wide service corridor. White fluorescent bulbs lit the worn, charcoal-painted concrete floor and scuffed grey walls. Empty trolleys lined the right side.

She tilted her head and glanced at the man she'd been talking to seconds ago.

Although he hadn't mentioned his full name or identity, she knew many things about him.

He was born Kojo Andre Hamadou, raised in a family of three male children. His father was currently serving in the armed forces, and his mother was a nurse.

He lived in Darusa, the capital city of Bagumi Kingdom, where he worked as Head Royal Guard to the First Princess of the kingdom.

The main reason Latifah had an interest in him? She needed him to achieve the objectives of the current mission.

A mission that would see her executed if caught. Or at the very least imprisoned for life.

But she had been on risky missions before. And the cause was more than worthwhile.

Anyway, she'd become good at evading capture from various authorities. So perhaps her luck would hold out this time too. Although, she strived not to depend on luck and made her own.

Hence, the reason she was watching Kojo now.

His back was turned to her, and his phone lifted to his ear. She wasn't close enough to hear his low voice from this distance. Yet it rumbled in her left ear through the black earpiece hidden behind the stresses of long hair.

“Dapo, please check this name in the system for me. Grace Bello.”

The tiny audio transmitter she'd planted inside Kojo's front, right, trouser pocket was working fine then.

Of course, she couldn't hear what the person on the other side of the conversation said. The bug could only pick up sounds around Kojo. If she'd planted it on the collar of his shirt, then she would be able to hear two-way phone chatter.

Her heart raced and sweat popped along her hairline.

She had suspected that he would try to verify her identity. Any bodyguard who knew his job would security-clear their potential love interests. Because anyone who had direct access to him would indirectly have access to his client.

After about a minute, the Dapo on the phone must have verified Latifah's fake name because Kojo said, "No problem. Thanks." And puffed out what sounded like a relieved breath.

"Gotcha," she murmured, a smirk curling her lips at a job well done so far.

It had been a challenging operation to plan, considering there were many factors out of their control. But one of her strengths was the ability to improvise and adapt according to the situation.

She shoved the laundry cart in the direction of the linen room where all the sanitised laundry were kept.

The real Grace Bello had given her the floor map and directions so nothing would go wrong.

With her cover, Latifah had to act like the laundry service employee she was impersonating to avoid suspicion.

First, she pulled the burner phone from her pocket and sent a quick coded message: TB. ST.

Translation: *Target bugged. Stay tuned.*

Returning the phone to her pocket, she unloaded the linen from the trolley and stacked them onto the shelves. A glance around showed that bed sheets were on a different side to the towels. So, she kept the same arrangements. She worked slowly,

bidding her time until she got an opening to get to her actual work.

The party for the princess would not start for another twenty minutes even if she didn't account for 'African time'. Then the target needed to come downstairs and mingle before Latifah might get direct access to her. She had hours to kill.

But one thing she'd learned in her previous life as a covert agent was patience. She could spend weeks, even months, waiting for the right—the perfect—opportunity to strike.

Her phone pinged, and she pulled it out of her pocket and read the reply. RT.

Translation: *Roger that.*

Satisfied the rest of the team were on standby, Latifah listened to Kojo make his way upstairs. She could hear everything he did—the rustle of fabric with his

movement, the beep of the elevator before he exited it. His greetings to people, probably the bodyguards outside the princesses' suites.

There was the click of a door lock.

"Good evening, My Princess," Kojo said

Latifah pictured him bowing as he greeted the royal.

"Oh, Kojo. There you are."

Latifah recognised Princess Isha's cheery voice.

"Now, we're talking," Latifah muttered under her breath as her pulse rate spiked. She'd known it would be a great idea to bug the bodyguard. He was literally the key to unlocking the kingdom or, in this case, opening the princess's gilded cage so she could be stolen.

"What do you think about these shoes?"

Princess Isha's said.

“They both look lovely,” Kojo replied.

“That’s no help at all,” Isha said in an amused voice. “The stylist thinks I should wear this one. But I like this one.”

“I’m really not the best person to ask,” Kojo replied.

“You don’t say.” Latifah shook her head as she chuckled.

Men. They had no clue. If a woman asked a man’s opinion, it was generally to confirm what she already wanted.

“But I think you should go with the shoe you preferred as you’re the one wearing them, not the stylist,” Kojo continued speaking.

Latifah gasped, and warmth crept across her chest.

Kojo surprised her with that bit of insight. Perhaps the man understood women just a little.

“Thank you, Kojo.” The princess sounded satisfied with his response, same as Latifah.

“You’re welcome, Your Highness. If you will excuse me, I need to get ready too.”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

Fabric rustled as Kojo moved. Then Latifah heard a door open and close. His room must be attached to the princess’s suite by a connecting door as he didn’t go back into the corridor from the sounds of it.

He opened something and closed it. Then poured liquid into a glass. Water? The sound of shrink-wrap popped, the way tablet popped from a foil wrapper. A gulping sound followed. He was drinking the liquid.

She froze, hand on the shelf, unease worming into her belly.

Did he take a pill? Was he feeling unwell?

There was nothing in his dossier about an underlying health condition. He was a healthy, fit male in his 30s. In his prime.

So, whatever he took would be for something temporary, perhaps some physical ache. A headache?

The royal's schedule for the week had been hectic, which meant Kojo's schedule would be twice as busy.

“Poor darling,” she whispered, feeling sympathy for him.

He was just an ordinary person doing his job. Of course, she felt some sympathy for him, especially considering the shitstorm she was about to rain down on him.

Darling? Really, Latifah? Admit it. You're attracted to him.

Latifah puffed a sigh at the little voice in her head.

One of the side effects of being a lone wolf and working a lot by herself. She had whole-ass conversations with herself. Some would call that insanity. She would say it kept her sane.

But maybe, she was losing her damn mind if she referred to her target as ‘darling’.

Yes, she was attracted to Kojo. Had been pleasantly surprised at the heat of arousal that swarmed her body when she’d seen him face-to-face. The way he’d looked at her had confirmed he felt the same way.

There was nothing sexier than knowing that the person you craved also craved you.

She smiled now, remembering the way he’d chased after her to find out her name.

So yes, she would admit to having a thing for Kojo Hamadou. There was no shame in it. Two consenting adults and all that jazz.

Kojo was an attractive man. Not in a conventional way. He wasn't a pretty boy like some of the princes in the Royal House of Saene. His nose was a touch too broad, too flat and with a pointy tip for his face to ever be considered pretty.

She wasn't into pretty men, anyway.

No, Kojo seemed to be precisely what she liked. He was a big, brawling man with skin the colour of ebony, about two shades darker than her skin tone. Legs like tree trunks. Body like a brick wall. Observant eyes that watched her as if no one else existed for the few minutes she'd spoken to him. And full lips she wanted to taste.

Shame that wasn't going to happen.

The sound of running water caught her attention. Sounded like a tap pouring into a sink. She'd head the tinkle into the WC, and now he was washing his hands.

A hygienic man. She liked that. Her smile widened.

She'd tailed enough men to know that many of them didn't wash their hands after using the toilet. Disgusting, the lot of them.

Exactly the reason she never shook strangers' or acquaintances' hands when she could help it.

Kojo hadn't extended his hand for a shake earlier. She would have refused, although she'd wanted the contact. But she'd compensated by caressing his body and the hard bulge in his trousers.

Damn, he was loaded.

Desire flared in her gut, making her nipples harden. She really could use a good

tumble between the sheets. Or out of it. She didn't really care too much about having sex in bed. Any flat surface would do—wall, table, floor. As long as it involved pleasure and her favourite brand of...

More fabric rustling in her ear distracted her from the lustful thoughts.

Kojo was changing his clothes.

Shit.

Would he remove the trousers with the bug attached? If he did, then she wouldn't be able to track his movements. This meant she wouldn't be able to track the royal either.

The reason she'd planted the device on him was to keep tabs on Princess Isha's whereabouts through Kojo. Wherever Kojo was tonight, the royal would not be far from him.

Latifah had a spare device in case she needed to bug him again. She'd planned for the eventuality when she'd pretended to accidentally bump into him outside the ballroom.

When she'd seen that he was wearing formal black trousers, she'd hoped it would be the same attire he wore for the party, although his shirt had been pink, not the white required for the event.

However, it was more important that he didn't discover the transmitter. If he did, he would become suspicious, and she might not get the opportunity to get close enough to plant a second device on him.

Now, heart racing, she listened as he dressed.

The sounds from the mic didn't change in relation to his body. So, he must still have the trousers on, although he'd

changed his shirt. She heard the soft sighs of the buttons slipping into place. A swish indicated he'd shrugged on a jacket, perhaps.

Beeping like fingers on an electronic keypad, then a pop. The hotel safe?

A slid of metal and a click.

Latifah would recognise that sound anywhere.

Kojo was checking his handgun—the chamber and the magazine. Followed by a soft, whispery slid. He'd just holstered the weapon.

Okay. He would be armed. Good to know.

There had been no weapons on him earlier when they'd interacted. She'd patted him down surreptitiously while she'd groped him as a distraction.

The squeak of a door made Latifah look up and straighten.

A young, dark-skinned man in a busboy uniform walked into the linen room.

She recognised him. Bem. They met when she arrived at the hotel, posing as an employee of the laundry service company the hotel used. She'd told Bem she was covering for a staff member who was off sick. The same staff member whose name she'd given Kojo.

Kojo didn't know Latifah or the Grace woman. And as she'd expected, using the 'Grace' name meant she could be security-verified for the upcoming event a lot quicker than giving a random fake name with no hotel service history.

As long as none of the staff mentioned her fake name in Kojo's presence, everything would be fine.

“All these people that do nonsense. Oh...” Bem trailed off when he saw her, eyes going wide. “It’s Aisha, right?”

“Yes,” Latifah said, not volunteering anything else. The less information she gave, the less likely her cover would be blown. She focused on him instead and asked in a concerned voice. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. Well, not really. Front desk called. Apparently, there are blood stains on the bed sheets in room 4-0-7. I swear that was changed already today. Now, I have to go and change them again.”

The room he mentioned gave her an idea. She’d already surveyed the hotel layout months ago after they’d found out it would be the party venue. But there was no harm in checking out the floor where the princesses and their entourages were

booked. Whoever was in room 4-0-7 was probably one of them. Who knew what she would find out?

“I can imagine the hassle,” she said sympathetically. “I can help you change the sheets if you like.”

If she went walking around the rooms by herself, someone might stop her and ask questions. But if she was with Bem, who had clearance, it should be easier. Plus, he had a master key which she needed.

“Oh. You want to help.” He smiled at her.

“Sure. I don’t mind.” She touched the linen. “What do you need?”

“Great. Thank you.” He glanced down at the digital device in his hand. “I need queen size bottom sheet and top sheet. Quilt cover and pillowcases.”

He grabbed a small trolley with cleaning equipment already loaded.

She stacked the linen on top and pushed the trolley. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“Okay.” He led the way out, down the corridor and into the service lift.

She held onto the trolley. It provided a cover and meant people didn’t really get a proper look at her. All they would see was a cleaner pushing a trolley.

When they entered the lift, Latifah asked Bem about how long he’d been working here. He seemed happy to oblige.

While nodding to his nonstop chatter, she half-listened to the earpiece.

Kojo was now back in Isha’s suite. From the buzz of conversations, other people were there, including Princess Amara, Isha’s friend. It seemed they were

waiting for the ballroom to fill with guests before heading downstairs.

Latifah and Bem exited the lift on the fourth floor. She allowed the tresses of hair and pile of sheets to obstruct her face.

4-0-7 was closer to the lift than 4-1-8, but she could see down the corridor.

Two beefy men with puffed out chests in black suits and white shirts stood at attention outside what she assumed was Princess Isha's suite. They seemed to be having a conversation and glanced in her direction. She didn't stare directly at them, keeping her gaze averted as Bem knocked on the door to 4-0-7. When there was no reply, he slotted his electronic key in the lock and popped the door open.

He took a plastic wedge from the trolley and propped the door so it stayed open.

Latifah went inside and started stripping the bed with Bem, who continued chatting nonstop. She tuned out of his chatter and listened to the earpiece. She needed to know when Kojo and co would be coming out.

All of a sudden, there was a burst of activity and conversation in the hallway. Kojo and the entourage were heading downstairs.

Latifah straightened just as the first group went past the room door.

The bodyguards that had been outside the doors went past first. Then an elegantly glamorous woman in a cream cocktail dress. Princess Amara.

Latifah used the distraction to slip her hand into Bem jacket pocket and withdrew the master key while his attention was focused on the hallway.

Then two more bodyguards followed by Kojo and Princess Isha in a red ballgown.

As they went past, Kojo glanced into room 4-0-7. His gaze collided with Latifah's. He didn't falter or halt.

Her breath caught as his dark eyes widened with recognition.

Then he was gone.

Only a brief sighting, yet excitement sizzled down her spine, and her heart pounded against her chest. Adrenaline surged inside her.

Seeing him again like this could be dangerous. Yet the possibility was a thrilling aphrodisiac in her veins. It was an awful shame she would not get to fuck the man. Such a damned shame.

But she had a job to do and a princess to kidnap.

She glanced at Bem, who still seemed awestruck. “I’m going to leave you to finish off. I still have work to do downstairs. Is that okay?”

She didn’t really care if it was okay with him. But she had to make as little wave as possible. People tended to remember someone who annoyed them. And she didn’t want to be remembered. Not by Bem or any member of the hotel staff. Nothing beyond what she projected, at least.

“Ehm. Of course. I will finish here. Thank you.” Bem replied.

“Good.” Latifah pushed the trolley and hurried towards the service lift.

The real fun and games were about to begin.

Chapter 3

Standing perfectly still was one of the most natural things for Kojo to do.

Like he was doing this very moment, arms at his back to the beige wall of the glittering ballroom of an exclusive hotel in Lagos.

Around him, the place bustled with merriment at the pre-bachelorette party for First Princess Isha Saene, who was his principal assignment.

His eyes scanned the space in perpetual motion to ensure that nothing was out of place, nobody misbehaving.

The ballroom was full of foreign and local high society. Business moguls and movie stars. Afrobeat artists and international athletes. Celebrities and the *crème de la crème*. Everything glittered. Women in beautiful expensive gowns and diamond-encrusted jewellery. Men in tuxedos and gold watches.

Kojo was also in a suit—a specially tailored black two-piece with enough space in the jacket to conceal the shoulder holster for the handgun and hidden pockets for the tools of his trade.

One of the perks of being the primary protection officer of the First Princess of Bagumi Kingdom was that he received a clothing allowance as part of his generous benefits package. It translated to having his work clothes—suits mostly—made to

be functional and classy by the royal tailors.

So, he generally blended into any crowd where the princess was present because he dressed the part. However, the fact that he was six-foot-five and built like a rugby prop—a position he played for the royal guards’ team—meant he stood out in most crowds.

Still, the elite, invitation-only guest list warranted significant security, which was why he was here along with the team from Cruz Security Solutions. The Cruz team oversaw Princess Amara’s protection. She was Princess Isha’s friend and the host of the event.

Cold air blasted from the air conditioners. The vast, open windows showed the spotlighted green grassy lawn

vista, starry cobalt skies, and indigo waves crashing against white sands.

“Kenny, how’s it going at your end?” Kojo spoke into the mouthpiece of the thin headset attached to his left ear.

“All quiet on this end,” Kenny Cruz’s deep voice came through the earpiece. He was the owner of the security firm. Kojo had known him for over nine years since he started working as Princess Isha’s bodyguard. The two men collaborated for occasions like this when their two principals were together or away from home.

“Quiet is exactly how I like it,” Kojo replied in a light tone.

Although quiet wasn’t referring to the sounds of the party. Instead, it was about everyone behaving themselves, at least no more than what people did at parties.

“Kojo,” another voice said in his ear. Luke, another bodyguard, and a Cruz employee. “A server is coming your way to refresh the drinks.”

A woman in a black shirt and skirt approached, carrying a magnum of champagne. The blue tagged wristband on her left arm showed she was one of the approved servers for the princesses. They couldn’t afford to have the drinks tampered with.

Kojo pulled the small electronic notepad from his pocket, waved the camera and barcode reader over her wrist. A low beep and green LED flashed while her photo and name showed on the screen.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Nodding, she walked past, curtsied, and spoke to the ladies clustered around the

celebrant and poured the light gold liquid into their crystal flutes.

Kojo hadn't tasted any of the champagne, although it had been flowing readily all evening. He never drank while on duty. Even off duty, he wasn't a heavy drinker.

He came from a long line of royal bodyguards and military people. His father had been head of palace security and was now chief of national security. His first brother, Lumo, was a captain in the air force. His middle sibling, Razi, was a covert agent. The only person in his nuclear family who hadn't been in the security services was his mother. She was the director of nursing at Bagumi Teaching Hospital.

But one thing they all had in common was the service to their nation. As the last offspring, Kojo had grown, knowing he

would serve the country in some capacity. However, he hadn't been keen about being in the military when he'd been signed up for army cadets as a teenager. He would have rather just played sports, like other teenagers.

As the last child of successful, patriotic parents, he had an easy middle-class life. He'd attended some of the country's best schools, and his family life had been without many problems. He hadn't been about disrupting the status quo, though.

So, he'd eventually signed up for military service, did the mandatory two years and then requested to be reassigned. Luckily having a father who was top gun in the military service meant he had privileges not accorded others. So, he'd been reassigned to the Royal Guards Division and had landed the relatively cushy role as

Princess Isha's personal guard. Nine years later, here he was.

He loved his job. Loved his life. Okay, there was risk involved. Putting his life in jeopardy to guard a VIP. Still, the perks outweighed the inconveniences. He travelled the world and met different people. Although he found it amusing that some of the celebrities tried to seduce him.

The phone in his pocket vibrated. He pulled it out and saw the ID.

Nah, this was one aspect of his job that he didn't enjoy, talking to the person on the other end. With a twist to his mouth, he lifted the phone to his ear.

"Kojo speaking," he answered, keeping emotion out of his voice, and hiding his disdain for the caller.

"I want to speak to Isha," Kweku Doona's arrogant tone came through.

Sometimes Kojo wanted to tell the SOB to eff-off. But he swallowed the words like he'd always done.

“Her Royal Highness Princess Isha is currently indisposed. May I pass on a message,” Kojo replied in a snooty tone. He could barely tolerate the man. Mr Doona was uncouth, and Kojo never missed an opportunity to take him down a peg or two, respectfully, of course.

The pompous man was unsuitable for the noble-born eldest daughter of King Ibrahim Saene. However, Kojo understood that sometimes traditions and duty to the kingdom surpassed personal taste.

Still, he was protective over his principal, whom he regarded as more than a job.

“Indisposed? Are you fucking kidding me? I'm her fiancé. Give her the phone

immediately, or I will make your life miserable.”

“Oh, it’s you, Mr Doona. You should have said so from the beginning,” Kojo’s drawled in an unruffled voice. He was glad his smirk didn’t translate into the phone. “If you’ll hold on.”

He put the phone on mute and strode to the bank of chairs where Princess Isha sat chatting with her friends.

He leaned forward, phone in hand. “Excuse me, Princess.”

Princess Isha tilted her head and glanced at him. “Yes?”

“You have a call.” He passed the phone over to her. “It’s Mr Doona.”

She smiled as she took the muted gadget. “Excuse me, ladies. I need to find a quiet space to take this call.”

“Sure.” Her friends waved her on.

The Bagumian royal got up and sashayed across the lobby, stiletto heels clicking against the marble tiles.

“HRH on the move,” Kojo spoke into the mike as he cleared a path to the exit, keeping those who wanted to approach her at bay.

“Roger that. We have eyes on you,” Kenny spoke in his ear, indicating the cameras and other security personnel on patrol around the venue.

In the courtyard, the princess walked to a quiet corner amongst the trimmed hibiscus hedges.

The tide lapped against the concrete barrier, and the sea breeze fluttered the hem of his jacket.

Kojo stayed by the double patio doors, posture straight and alert, preventing anyone from coming out so HRH could

take the call in relative seclusion. He kept his gaze scanning the view, although he picked up part of the conversation—something about her fiancé running late for the party.

She puffed out a breath. “I’ll see you soon.”

Puffing out another heavy breath, she lowered the phone and stared at the inky waves only a few meters away. She appeared lost in thought for a few seconds before she swivelled and headed in his direction.

She paused a couple of paces away, her curious expression fixed on him like something worried her.

“Kojo, why do I feel as if you don’t like my fiancé?” she asked.

Kojo's face puckered in a frown before it smoothed out. "I have no opinions either way about Mr Doona."

He was her chief of security, which brought a level of familiarity. He was always truthful, albeit mindful where her security might be concerned. In return, she allowed him to do his job without restraint.

"I've never known you to be a liar. Why are you doing so now?" her voice was tart.

Kojo grimaced. "I'm sorry, My Princess. But it is not my place to share my opinions with you." Where her fiancé was concerned, especially.

"Perhaps not. But can you tell me why you always call him Mr Doona?"

"Is that not his name?"

“You know exactly what I mean. He is the president’s son. You don’t seem to have any respect about that.”

Kojo stiffened. “Beyond being the president’s son, he is nothing else. Just a man.”

Not even a good man at that.

Kojo’s spine stiffened, and he tried not to ball his hands into fists when he remembered the reports of Kweku’s dishonourable actions. But he would not bring them up now. He would not sully the princess’s celebration with ugly truths.

Her eyes glimmered as she seemed to bristle. She’d given him permission to speak freely. Nothing he could do if she didn’t like what he said.

“Do you have the same contempt for me? Do you see me as nothing more than the king’s daughter?”

Far from it.

He softened his tone. “No, My Princess. You are a princess of Bagumi, a highly placed member of our royal family. Beyond that, you are a much-esteemed ambassador and an advocate. I see your dedication and how you work tirelessly to improve things in Bagumi. I am immensely proud of you and honoured to have the position of being your chief bodyguard.”

He was fond of the princess, and in the nine years he’d worked with her, he’d come to regard her more as a kid sister than a job. She was one of the best people he knew—intelligent, compassionate, and determined.

“Thank you, Kojo. However, are you saying that Kweku does not care about his people?”

“I cannot speak for the people of Wanai. I only speak as a Bagumian.”

“But?” she prodded.

He hid his smile. She was also highly intuitive. He couldn't forget that.

“But, I have heard rumours about things going on in Wanai and in the Ganuri region, especially.”

“What kind of rumours?”

“About ethnic cleansing.”

“Lies. Just lies. Think about it. If there was ethnic cleansing going on, why isn't it in the news? Why isn't the African Union or the United Nations stepping in? Tell me.”

“It could be because there's been a blockade and blackout. The government blocked Internet access for the region, and journalists have been banned from going there.”

“That’s just to stop fake news being spread on the Internet.” She shifted uncomfortably. “And a journalist got abducted and killed by the Ganuri militants months ago. The government doesn’t want to see anyone else dead.”

“The rebels say that the government army was responsible for the killing,” Kojo interjected.

Couldn’t she see there was more going on than her fiancé was telling her?

“And do you believe the rebels?”

“I don’t know. But it seems that if the government doesn’t want to be accused of maltreating its citizens, it must be seen to be fair. One way of doing so would be to allow journalists, of course with army protection if necessary, to visit the region and record what is going on. If the rebels

are terrorising the locals, then it will become obvious.”

The Wanaian government needed to show some good faith to the protestors. Otherwise, the international community should intervene before matters escalated into worse scenarios.

“Thank you, Kojo. I appreciate you speaking your mind with me.”

“You’re welcome, My Princess,” he replied as he held the door for her.

“I will re-join my friends shortly, but first, the ladies’ room.” She went down the hallway and waited at the threshold while he did a security check of the facilities.

The place was empty and clean. Soft music from hidden speakers piped into the perfumed air. A bouquet of white flowers sat in a lilac vase on the shiny black counter.

He came out and spoke. “All clear.”

Princess Isha went inside, and the door swung shut.

Kojo stood outside, arms crossed in front of him.

The squeak of rolling wheels made him glance to the left. A cleaner pushed a large linen trolley down the corridor towards him.

His heart skipped a beat, and his senses heightened in recognition.

“Grace,” Kojo said in an unexpectedly husky voice and swallowed to clear the lump in his throat. “What are you doing here?”

“Mr Kojo By-The-Way.” She looked up, lips curled in a beguiling smile. “I work here, remember?”

He hadn’t thought he would see her again until later. But he’d seen her twice

already tonight—in the courtyard and upstairs while he'd escorted the princesses to the party. She'd been in one of the rooms on his floor, changing the bed linen.

If he didn't know better, he'd think she was following him. But her ID had checked out, and Grace Bello was entitled to be around the hotel. The only place she wasn't cleared to enter was the ballroom while the party was underway.

“Of course.” He tracked her movement as she headed for the door to the ladies. “You can't go in there.”

“I was ordered to clean the toilet because of the event. Unfortunately, there are no fresh towels in there. That's why I brought some.” She lifted the stack of towels on the trolley. “Anyway, why are you standing outside the female toilets?”

Of course, she didn't know who he was or his job. He hadn't told her earlier. Then he hadn't been officially on duty. Now he was and had to be all about business.

Grace didn't have the blue tagged wristband, which would automatically grant her access to be in the same vicinity as HRH. So, she couldn't go in without further checks.

"I'm part of the security team for the event. I must clear you before you can go in there. Let me see your badge," Kojo said and examined the trolley—cleaning products and more towels in a compartment with a large empty laundry bag.

If she was going into the same space as the princess, then he had to do his job.

"Oh." Her smile disappeared, her lips pressed tight.

She lifted the lanyard around her neck and pulled the white plastic ID card from the breast pocket. Her fingernails were short, clean and without varnish.

His gut knotted that he'd upset her. Perhaps he should have told her earlier that he was a bodyguard. But his job involved discretion, and he needed to focus on that right now.

He read the name on the tag 'Grace Bello', and the picture was a woman with long black hair fringed to her eyes. She looked like the woman standing before him.

Ignoring his accelerated pulse rate invoked by her presence, he stared at her face, urging his brain to focus on the details he needed to verify ID.

Aside from the fringe that covered almost half of her face, her skin was

makeup-free. Freckles dotted her cheeks and around her nose.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Look up. I need to take a photo of your face.”

Her body stiffened, the first sign that she was ruffled. Interesting.

She raised her gaze and glared at him. “You don’t have permission to take my photograph. That’s an invasion of privacy.”

“That’s the only way I’m going to let you go in there,” he replied, keeping his tone matter-of-fact.

Since she hadn’t undergone the facial recognition scan required to receive the blue tag, taking her photograph was the next best thing.

But, for a moment, he thought she wouldn’t obey.

“Fine. Get on with it.” The flirty woman from earlier this evening was gone, replaced by a super annoyed one.

He wanted the flirty woman back. Still, the cautious part of him couldn’t just let her through regardless of how attracted he was to her.

He raised the phone, clicked the camera a few times.

She stood still, not fidgeting. Surprising, considering most people were intimidated by his size.

“Do you want to search me as well?” Her tone was half-challenge and half-invitation.

She tilted her determined chin. Her luscious lips were full and curved. The gleam in her eyes seemed to dare him to put his hands on her. Her blue-black hair shimmered in the light.

For a few seconds, he was transfixed, unable to look away. His breath caught in his throat.

His brain seemed to be malfunctioning and couldn't process thoughts coherently. The question he wanted to ask disintegrated, and he couldn't remember the words. The blood pulsed hot and hard in his arteries, heading south, making him throb.

Her eyes, brown with specks of amber, were unwavering, observant, and unafraid.

If he believed in witchcraft, he would think she'd used juju on him. Like she could get him to cater to her every whim.

“Are you done?” Her snarky voice cut through the spell.

Kojo blinked, surprised at his response as his cheeks heated. How could he let himself be distracted?

“You can go in,” he said through gritted teeth, pushing the door open so she could disappear and he could get his mind back.

Her lips curled slowly upwards in one corner. Was she smirking? Did she know how much she had affected him?

Grace shoved the trolley past him, and the door swung close.

Damn!

He scrubbed a palm over his head.

“What in the juju hell was that?” he muttered as he exhaled.

He who never mixed work with fun was getting distracted by the promise of pleasure. On the job!

“Come again,” Kenny said in his ears, sounding amused.

Shit. Kojo must have depressed the button to turn the headphone on.

“It’s nothing. Just getting tired, I guess,” he replied.

“It’s probably time to take a break. I’ll send Luke to cover for you.”

Kojo sighed. He did need a break. He’d been on his feet for hours. Maybe that was why he’d been distracted by the woman. Why he’d been thinking of tangling in bedsheets with her instead of focusing on the job.

“Okay. Just wait another ten minutes for HRH to return to the party, then I’ll swap with Luke.”

“Roger that,” came the reply as the door to the bathroom swung open and the trolley rattled out, pushed by Grace.

She stepped around the trolley and into his personal space boldly, her gaze locked on him. The demure woman was gone.

Just like that, their dynamic changed. He was suddenly the one on the defensive.

Flabbergasted, he stepped back, body hitting the wall.

“What are you doing?” his voice came out low, almost a whisper.

She’d groped him earlier. Was she going to do it again? His pulse skyrocketed as he caught her scent—jasmine and something else uniquely her.

Damn. He wanted to bury himself inside her and bask in her warmth.

She wasn’t deterred. She pressed her body against his and stood on tiptoes, so her mouth was inches from his.

“I look forward to hanging out later. I’m going to make you feel so good, big guy. Would you like that?” Her voice was sultry. Such a temptation.

He wanted to scream, “yes!” but he clamped his mouth shut, which meant he took huge gulps of air, and her scent permeated him.

Before he could think better of it, his fingers were on her nape, gripping it, and he kissed her. She didn’t hesitate or struggle. Instead, she opened for him, tongue invading his mouth, which surprised and thrilled him at the same time.

He gripped her tighter, kissing her harder as his body responded.

The sound of approaching footsteps made him stiffen. He released her, arms raised, ready to shove Grace, but she stepped back, giving him space to breathe.

Annoyance rolled through him. What was wrong with him? He’d just kissed someone while he was on duty. Something he’d never done or even thought about

doing. This woman was messing with his head.

“By the way, the princess doesn’t want anyone coming in for another ten minutes. You know what I mean.”

“What? Is she okay?” He shoved the door open and was hit by a horrible stench.

“She has an upset stomach. You don’t want her embarrassed now, do you?” Grace said.

“Of course not.” He grumbled and closed the door.

Grace pushed the trolley and called out as she went. “I’ll see you later.”

His cheeks heated. He’d given his room number, and he *was* looking forward to seeing her again, damn it.

Get your head straight, man.

A woman came round the corner, one of the party guests.

“I’m sorry, madam. This toilet is not in use. Please use the one across the lobby,” he said.

He hadn’t planned on letting anyone in there anyway until Princess Isha was done. But he hadn’t thought she would take this long.

He waited another five minutes, knocked, and walked into the toilet.

“Princess, are you okay?” he asked when he heard nothing. The nasty smell seemed to have dissipated.

No answer. A cold finger slithered down his spine.

One of the cubicles was closed. He knocked on the door. “Your Highness, it’s me. Kojo.”

Still no answer. Dread curled his stomach.

Had she fainted or something?

He shoved the door, and it gave way, slamming against the partition.

No princess.

What?

He glanced around, shoving the doors to the other cubicles. All empty.

There was no other exit. The ventilation shaft was bolted shut. And she couldn't have vanished into thin air.

Which meant she went out the door. The same door he'd been standing outside.

The trolley. The woman—Grace.

Shit!

He bolted out of the toilet, feet pounding the hard floor of the corridor towards the service staff room.

“Have you seen Grace Bello?” he asked every staff he met.

Nobody had seen her.

“Kenny, can you find the cleaner I was talking to a few minutes ago on the CCTV? It’s urgent,” he said into the mouthpiece with panting breath.

“What’s the matter?” Kenny asked.

“Just find her!” he said in a harsh voice, unwilling to voice the problem for fear of making it real.

“She was last seen heading towards the goods loading bay with a trolley of dirty linen.

“Send backup to the loading bay,” Kojo said as he rushed outside, running as fast as he could.

The loading bay was empty, so he ran towards the gates.

“Has anyone left the premises in the last five to ten minutes?” he asked the security men.

“Yes. The laundry van just left.” One of them said.

“Did you check it? Who was in it?”

“Just a man and a woman.”

“Did you check the back?”

“No. It’s normally just towels and linen.”

Shit. Kojo growled and turned away as he balled his hands instead of choking the idiot.

Kenny jogged up to him, his expression concerned. “What’s going?”

Kojo scrubbed both hands over his face, tugged Kenny away from the security men and voiced his greatest fear in a whisper. “Princess Isha is missing.”

And he was a dead man walking.

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