

Everything and Nothing

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Chapter 1

Bibi felt the coolness of the gentle breeze through her Bottega Veneta ribbed polo top as she strolled down the high street. Her light pink cardigan made from pure wool was tied around her slender waist. She briefly contemplated putting it on but decided against it. She wanted to enjoy the brisk weather just a little longer. An absolute euphoric feeling raked through her body as she floated on cloud nine.

Bibi adored the spectrum of bright leaf colours, from green to vivid red, crimson, scarlet, or even orange. Autumn was definitely her favourite time of the year.

After a few minutes of walking, she arrived at her favourite café and chose a high stool by the large, floor to ceiling window. The view was perfect for what she liked to do best; people watch. She particularly enjoyed trying to tell the stories of people as they walked by, but today, everyone seemed to be in a rush or on their phones as they hurried past.

A hard read today. She gave up.

Bibi hummed softly and smiled to herself as she pulled her light pink cardigan tighter around her. Then she sipped her coffee and waited patiently for her friend, Naomi, to arrive.

Naomi was hardly ever on time for anything, within their circle of friends, she was often referred to as the perpetual latecomer.

"Hey, you!" Naomi squealed in her loud, bubbly voice as she came up behind Bibi. Bibi almost jumped out of her chair. Regaining her composure, she rose to hug her friend. Bibi was glad she didn't spill coffee on her expensive polo top. She kept that thought to herself, for fear of coming across too vain.

"You kept me waiting, again," Bibi said, trying to pull a mean face.

"I am so sorry. Believe it or not, I did set out early but got caught up in the rush hour traffic. I will make it up to you, I promise," Naomi answered with an amiable smile. Naomi had a big personality with a contagious smile and always seemed happy. This made her hard to resist. Bibi could hardly stay mad at Naomi because she could not resist Naomi's positivity.

"Apology accepted," Bibi said, "Would you like a drink?"

"Thank you, I am alright for now. We can grab a bite later if you are okay for time?"

Naomi took off her jumper, neck scarf, and set about making herself comfortable, even as she continued to study Bibi carefully. She couldn't place her finger on it, but Bibi seemed different. Pulling out a stool and just as she was about to sit on it, it struck her! Bibi was glowing with excitement.

"Spill it, girl, I can feel the excitement radiating off you, why do you look so happy?" Naomi asked.

"Make yourself comfortable girlfriend, you will be needing a drink for this part," Bibi replied in a sing-song voice, intentionally looking away while still grinning from ear to ear like a Cheshire cat.

She needed to milk every part of this!

"So, how's your mom doing?" Bibi asked Naomi.

"Don't you even think of distracting me," Naomi said to her sternly.

Bibi pretended to sulk. Naomi, never one to acquiesce easily, paused for a second then changed tactics.

Smiling sweetly, she said softly "Okay, please tell me why you sounded so excited on the phone. I will beg you if I must but don't make me though".

Bibi rolled her eyes before laying her left hand purposefully on the dark brown oak table. Naomi sighed and rolled her eyes too. Perhaps Bibi would tell her what was going on with her when she was ready. Glancing around briefly, Naomi thought she saw a glint of something sparkly out of the corner of her right eye. She looked away but instantly looked back.

Naomi yelped, leapt out of her seat, and did a little spinning dance. Then, suddenly aware of her surroundings, she calmed down and sat back down. "My friend just got engaged!" she said, beaming broadly at a passing waitress.

"Well, congratulations," the waitress said to Bibi.

"Thank you," Bibi replied, blushing with embarrassment. She wanted to crawl under the table and hide.

"Goodness gracious, he did it! That man finally did it!" Naomi said under her breath. She walked around the table and hugged Bibi.

"Well, let me see how good he did," Naomi said, reaching for Bibi's left hand to admire the stunning emerald cut halo engagement ring.

Simply exquisite.

It sat perfectly on Bibi's slender ring finger!

Bibi smiled. She still remembered the day Naomi had introduced her to Ken. It was at a house party Naomi was throwing to welcome Ken home from his time overseas working with a Christian missionary network. His homecoming just also happened to coincide with his 30th birthday, and Naomi had managed to rope Bibi in.

She was standing by the buffet table when her eyes met his mesmerising gaze from across the room for the very first time. He revealed a sparkling set of white teeth when he smiled at her, and his eyes drank in hers as their eyes locked. *"Man, this guy is fly,"* she thought to herself. She had already seen pictures of him that Naomi had shown her but seeing him in person was so much better. She thought his pictures did not even do him justice.

His long-sleeved white linen top and indigo blue jeans suited him to a tee. His toned arms were just the right size, not those oversized bulging biceps that every guy seemed to have these days. It just wasn't her taste.

The attraction she felt was intense. It had a magnetic pull, and Bibi's heart was racing rapidly as she felt a jittery sensation in the pit of her stomach. Across the room, Ken's palms were clammy, and he couldn't focus on anything else. Aware of what was happening, he quickly looked away, though he couldn't stop smiling. Bibi looked down and brushed the invisible crumbs from her dress. When she looked up, Ken was gone.

"I see you've met Ken," Naomi said, coming to stand beside Bibi.

"Um, not really, no."

"Girl, I was watching you drooling over him just minutes ago," Naomi teased.

"I was not drooling," Bibi whispered harshly.

"Yes, you were," Naomi replied, chuckling.

"So, should I introduce you to him?" Naomi asked Bibi, looking serious now.

"Yes, I would like that," Bibi said without hesitation.

But before Naomi could do her little victory dance, Bibi grabbed her by the elbow and led her out to the patio.

They stood side by side in silence for a little while. Bibi loved the feel of the gentle breeze against her face. "Tell me again, Naomi, who is this guy and how do you know him?"

"We practically grew up together, Bibi. Our moms have been best friends since I was eight years old. I would never introduce you to him if he were not a good guy. Trust me, he is all that and more."

Bibi was going to ask Naomi why she had not snagged him herself if he was that great of a guy, but then she remembered that he was not Naomi's cup of tea.

Bibi listened as Naomi went on to reiterate how her mother Shona and Ken's mother, Mabel, had met.

Mabel had knocked on Shona's door with a welcome hamper years ago, when Naomi and her family first moved into the neighbourhood, and the two women had hit it off at once. Naomi's family had moved next door to Ken and his family when they first arrived in the United Kingdom from Haiti. Ken and Naomi became close because of their mothers' friendship.

"I spoke little English at the time, so it was the perfect opportunity for us to hang out together, me and Ken. It was a match made in heaven. I needed to improve my English and Ken's grade in French was slipping."

Bibi nodded and nudged Naomi to continue. She had heard bits and pieces of the story of Ken and Naomi over the last year, but for some reason, seeing him in the flesh had triggered a need for her to get a refresher.

"I was enrolled at the same primary school that Ken attended. After we finished primary school, we ended up going to different high schools, but we stayed in touch and kept our relationship intact. Even after my mom and I moved twenty minutes away after she and my dad divorced, we stayed close to Ken and his family."

"What happened to your dad? I don't think I've ever heard this part of the story," Bibi said. Bibi turned to face Naomi this time and noticed Naomi's face wore a sombre expression.

Naomi sighed before she continued. "My dad moved back to Haiti. Over the years, Ken and I became close, he's like a brother to me. He was the first person I told at sixteen that I am a lesbian. He gently coaxed me to tell my parents and friends and supported me through that challenging time as I faced adversity and discrimination."

Bibi nodded as she took her hand in hers and gently squeezed it, to reassure her. Naomi smiled at Bibi before making her way back in.

Bibi leaned gently against the patio doors, lost in her thoughts. She herself had sometimes wondered if she would have been friends with Naomi had she known about her sexual orientation before they became friends. Honestly, it may have clouded her judgement, but she would never know now. Homosexuality is simply not an acceptable way of life in Nigeria. In Nigeria, it is an offence punishable with jail time. So, she had

struggled with her thoughts when she first realised that Naomi was gay. And even now, she sometimes finds herself mulling over it.

It helps that Naomi is a loyal and very selfless person. It made her easy to love, and Bibi had come to accept that this was just who her best friend was. Others didn't quite see things the same way. Even so, a few of Bibi's Nigerian friends on campus had been indifferent, some quite opposed to her friendship with Naomi, and were quite hostile about it. Bibi could not understand how they could claim to be Christians and be that judgemental. Particularly, when a young, married father, who was also a highly respected member of their church in Nigeria, now living with his girlfriend off-campus. Not only that, but he had also moved in with her only two months after arriving in the UK on a missionary scholarship. The last time he ran into her and Naomi at the library, he had glared at them so hard that she felt like his eyes were going to dig a hole right through her. Then he had hurled offensive words at them. Just thinking back on that incident made her shudder.

Hypocrisy in her books!

But it still did not stop her from questioning if she should be friends with Naomi. She and Naomi had first met months ago, on their first day of class. Bibi had just arrived in England two weeks prior, for her post-graduate degree at the Queen Mary University of London, which is one of England's prestigious universities. It was also where her mom and dad had studied many decades ago. On that first day of class, Naomi had scurried into class, running late, and hurried to occupy the vacant seat beside Bibi. Naomi had smiled nervously before settling down.

Bibi was astounded by Naomi's beauty. A black girl with blue eyes? She was instantly drawn to her. They had quickly become inseparable. As their friendship blossomed, Bibi would come to find out that Naomi was not wearing contact lenses on the day they had met.

The first time Naomi had mentioned Ken was when Bibi accompanied her to the post office, to send him his favourite goodies while he was abroad working with 'New Smiles,' a global Christian missionary network that provides free reconstructive surgery and dental care to children with cleft lips and cleft palate. He had been away for a while working across six countries.

The party was lively and fun. The food spread included Bibi's Nigerian jollof rice and coleslaw that everyone seemed to enjoy; Naomi's pork griot and her mom's homemade pikliz as perfect sides. K.J, another friend, manned the barbeque stand with an array of various delicacies; corn on the cob, burgers, sausages, and fish. The aroma that wafted from the sizzling spread was mouth-watering and tantalising. There was an endless flow of drinks as well, as were several delicious desserts to choose from. Ken's mom made the cake, her signature flavour, red velvet, and it tasted divine. Bibi especially had a weakness for cakes and that day, she had more slices than she should have had, she could not resist.

After her conversation with Naomi on the patio, Bibi was now even more intrigued by Ken. His was the first face she sought when she walked back into the party. She spotted him in the corner, chatting with a male and female friend. Their eyes met again, this time only briefly, as if he was acknowledging her presence before continuing his conversation.

Throughout the rest of the evening, she could sense Ken's glances now and then. Even when ladies were busy flirting with him, he paid them compliments smiling, yet respectfully maintained his distance.

Playing the hostess alongside Naomi, Bibi watched him through the corner of her eyes. They both smiled each time their eyes met, and she loved the feeling of butterflies in her stomach that came with each stolen glance. She felt giddy and smiled throughout the night. Bibi was glad she had paid extra attention to her outfit and makeup. She had worn one of her form-fitting floral maxi dresses that hugged her in the right places in a graceful and sexy way.

Eventually, when the party was winding down, Ken made his way across the room to the patio, where Bibi had finally retreated to rest her aching feet. She watched as he was stopped a few times by friends and cousins asking him about his trip and future. The last person to interrupt his journey towards her was Naomi, who was animatedly pointing in Bibi's direction. Bibi looked away, not wanting to seem eager. She knew Naomi was telling him to approach her, which he eventually did.

"Mimi has told me so much about you," he said when he finally got to her. His rich, baritone voice sounded so melodious that Bibi could hardly breathe. "I feel like I know you already. May I sit?" He asked, gesturing at the chair across the small patio table from her.

Bibi nodded. Normally, she would have berated herself for not saying something, but something told her that with Ken, she could be herself. It did not matter, and for some reason, she didn't feel silly, just a sense of thrill.

"I've been waiting to be alone with you all evening," he said, gazing into her eyes.

"Same here," she whispered, her eyes meeting his. His eyes were a hue of azure with a hint of grey, and she had never seen freckles suit anyone as much as they did Ken. It was the first time she was seeing his face clearly all evening, and she liked what she saw. Before her, sat a tall, good-looking man with a posture that screamed confidence.

Later that evening, Ken asked Bibi to dance with him. She stood up and felt a little rush go to her head. She shook off the lightheaded feeling because she was excited to finally be close to Ken. Close enough to him that she could smell his scent, it had a slight hint of musk and cedarwood. The scent was exhilarating and rousing! She could even feel the hairs on the back of her neck standing.

After everyone left, she and Naomi had to finish cleaning up. Ken stayed back to help. When they were done, Naomi retired to bed, leaving the two of them on her sofa, where they talked into the wee hours of the morning. Ken was easy to talk to and open-minded. They had quite a bit in common and she enjoyed listening to his stories from his work abroad. She loved that he listened to her stories and was interested in them too. Ken also loved music. They both had an affinity to jazz and contemporary gospel music. At one point during the night, he fetched a throw for her when she felt a little cold. He even went the extra mile and made her a cup of hot cocoa with marshmallows. Little, thoughtful things. Bibi felt right at home with him.

Chapter 2

“Mom, she said yes! Did you hear me? I am getting married to the most gorgeous girl on earth.” Ken was grinning so hard that his mother could not help but smile too. It warmed her heart to see him so happy.

“I still feel like I am dreaming and, sometimes, I feel like I am punching above my weight.”

“I heard you, son, and I am so happy for you. Congratulations! For the record, any lady will be lucky to have you. She comes across as down to earth regardless of the affluence and old money she was born into.”

“Mom, she is. Bibi really is!”

Ken’s mother, Mabel, walked around the kitchen island to hug her son. She held him so tightly that he felt he might choke.

Pulling away, he heard his mother’s snuffles.

“Don’t cry, mom, this is great news!”

“It is. These are happy tears,” she said, touching the side of his face.

Ken smiled and hugged his mother back. He sometimes marvelled at how women could cry over anything, even happy news. Even Bibi had cried when he proposed to her. The truth be told, he held back a tear or two that memorable day too. How could he not? It had meant the world to him that he asked her to marry him and that she said yes. He had planned every single detail. Everything had gone just the way he had imagined it would, how could he not get emotional over something like that?

He looked at his mother wiping the tears from her cheek and smiled.

She caught him watching her and chuckled.

“So, tell me all about it, Ken,” Mabel said, taking a seat on the kitchen stool.

Ken leaned his upper body on the island, his heart skipping a beat, as he thought back to the day he had proposed.

He had let himself into Bibi’s apartment that Friday evening, knowing she was at the school library, swotting for an upcoming exam paper. Thankfully, for the short window of time he had, he only had to put up the décor, order her favourite Thai meal and iced tea for delivery. They had shared their first kiss at her favourite Thai restaurant, so he knew this setting would be memorable.

Bibi had spoken endlessly about her dream of visiting all the ancient temples in Chiang Mai one day. Maybe, their honeymoon destination.

Before showing up at her apartment, Ken had spent hours practising his speech in front of a mirror at home. Even so, he was so nervous that his words tumbled out when the time came to spill them out to Bibi.

None of that mattered in the end because Bibi was hysterical with tears and laughter by the time he was done. He was sure she had not heard a word, and neither did she seem to care. It was the gesture that counted the most. Him, on his knee; ring in his hand, eyes locked, words coming out of his mouth. She said yes, over, and over. It was all so surreal, and intimate.

"So, how did you pick out the perfect ring?" Mabel asked.

Chuckling as he remembered how mortified he had been when the shop assistant asked for her ring size, he looked at his mother and admitted he did not know what he was doing at the time.

"I went looking at rings but completely forgot that I would need her ring size," Ken said.

Mabel smiled and shook her head.

"I had to get Mimi to help me."

"I'm surprised she was able to keep it a secret," Mabel said, laughing lightly.

"Well, me too," Ken admitted, "I was so nervous the entire time thinking, Mimi wouldn't be able to hold it and might spoil the surprise, but she did great!"

"That's good," Ken's mom replied.

"Deciding on the right engagement ring was an art all on its own. There were so many varied sizes, designs, and colours, that by the end of day one, my head was spinning. I didn't share too many details with Mimi though. She knew I was planning to propose at some point, but she did not know when or how I planned to do it."

"Any thoughts about the wedding yet or do you both want to enjoy being engaged for a while?" his mom asked cautiously.

"We haven't started talking about wedding plans yet, however, I am almost certain that there will be a ceremony in Nigeria," Ken said, a little hesitantly. He was not sure how his mother would respond to this latest information.

"That means grandbabies soon, right?" his mom replied.

Ken stood up and walked over to his mother. Then he gently took her hands in his. "How did we go from zero to one hundred mom? We only just got engaged."

His mother smirked.

"Bibi is coming over to meet the rest of the family for the first time and I want her to enjoy meeting everyone," Ken continued in a quiet but firm voice. "Please don't scare her off with baby talk."

His mother smiled and nodded. "I know, one step at a time. I just miss Jasmine and Ethan so much," she said, her voice shaking.

Ethan was Ken's five-year-old nephew, his older sister - Jasmine's son. There had been a big fallout between Jasmine and Mabel over some of Jasmine's lifestyle choices a couple of years ago. Since then, Jasmine had decided to stay away from her mom, which also meant that she stayed away from Ken. Ken had tried to reach her several times but had been unable to.

Before then, Ken's mom had been a constant presence in Ethan's life, looking after him three days a week while Jasmine worked. Now, Ken's mom would sometimes sit lost in thought for hours at a time holding Ethan's toy or clothing to her chest. Other times, she would move hurriedly towards the room she had set up for him saying he was awake and needed her. Ken missed his nephew too, but his heart bled for his mom more.

"Anyway, this weekend is all about you and Bibi, any plans at all?" Mabel asked as she dabbed at her tears.

"I want Bibi to see our hometown, my trophies, the schools I attended, and my teenage hangout spots. Seeing as you have decided to cook up a storm, I thought about inviting a few others for dinner tonight," Ken added.

"Well, I have invited your uncles, aunties, and a few friends. I hope you don't mind. I want to show off my son's beautiful fiancé, can you blame me? I am just so excited. I get to be the groom's mom and part of a wedding. I never got that with your sister because she decided to elope. Do you remember?"

Of course, he remembered. Like he could ever forget, even if he wanted to. His mom never failed to draw his attention to it whenever she could.

Ken decided not to dwell on that, and neither was he going to aid his mom.

"Do I have a choice mom? I already anticipated your plans and forewarned Bibi," Ken said, smiling. "You know we could have just gone out for a meal or ordered takeout."

“Not on my watch son, only the best for my daughter-in-law to be. I’m cooking everything from scratch.”

Ken smiled.

“So, what are your plans for Bibi when she arrives?” his mother asked.

Ken looked at his mom, puzzled. He had just given her a list of what they would be doing. Was she as nervous as he was?

Then it dawned on him that his mom was appearing more forgetful of late and somewhat distracted. She would stop mid-sentence and seem to lose her train of thought. She also seemed a little withdrawn, he just thought it was because his dad’s death anniversary was approaching. Should he be worried? Putting aside his niggles for now, he answered apprehensively.

“I will be picking her up at the train station this evening at about 4 p.m.,” Ken said. “Then tomorrow, I’m going to show her our hometown, my trophies, the schools I attended, and my teenage hangout spots.”

“Oh, I still have quite a bit to do before then. The guest room is not ready yet. Your aunty, Toni, will be arriving this afternoon to give me a hand,” Mabel said.

Ken smiled. He knew his mom enjoyed entertaining and loved everything to be near perfect, if not perfect.

And it showed later that evening. Dinner was delicious, engaging, and fun. His mom and Aunty Toni really put forth their best. Everyone got along and had great conversations. Ken’s godfather, Uncle Mark even invited everyone to hang out at his place the next day and then to church the morning after.

Bibi looked around the dinner table and smiled. These people would soon become her family. Something inside of her felt a slight sense of panic at the thought