WHERE IS DEE?

There are some places you'd never expect to see an ambulance parked in front of.

Dee's house was one of them.

I remember saying that to myself as I stood across Agbado Road that Friday evening, staring at the old weather-beaten building at the far end of the streets.

"Mmm... mmm," I hummed absentmindedly as I walked towards it, adjusting the strap of my tote bag on my left shoulder.

The building looked exactly as it always had. Its once-colourful walls were now faded and stained from years of rain. The loose iron sheets on the roof rose and fell with the chilly breeze. The five floors of peeling paint, rusted railings, and narrow staircases stood stubbornly against the sunny sky.

I've always hated the place.

Dee had always hated that I hated it.

"It's not ugly," she'd once protested stubbornly.

"It's practically on the verge of collapsing."

"Stop exaggerating."

"I'm serious. One day, this thing will collapse on you."

She'd laughed. Quite too hysterically, like she'd always done whenever I said something that made her uncomfortable, as though warning me to cease my talking. I continued regardless.

"Dee, you've been staying here for too long. For far too long..."

Fourteen years, actually.

She had lived here alone since her parents died. She ignored my words and pulled rather aggressively at the blue yarn she'd been knitting before I had even come. I persisted still.

"Dee, you need to move out of this house. I understand that this place is the only memory you've had with Papa and Mama, but maybe it's high time you released yourself from this prison..." I reached to pull her into a hug.

She pushed me away.

Hard.

"Dee..." I reached out again.

She avoided my hand and looked away, wiping angrily at the tears that had started pooling at her eyes.

"Please, take your leave, Ifedayo."

"Dee, c'mon—"

"Leave me alone to dwell and die in my prison and just go. That's all it is to you, isn't it? Just a prison that I've willingly walked into, right?"

"No. No, that's not what I meant—"

But she'd already moved towards the door and pointed to it to suggest I leave.

I remember her avoiding my calls and texts for the next few weeks. I remember getting tired and leaving her to come around. Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months.

But it didn't matter because she'd come around. She'd always come around. The longest she'd gone without speaking to me, as the only friend she's ever had, had been 4 months and 20 days (yes, I counted), but then, she'd eventually come around.

I guess she just really took things to heart. It's normal...

Or at least, that's what I told myself.

My phone vibrated in my pockets.

I pulled it out to check the notification that had come in when a chubby woman walking past suddenly knocked it off my hands.

"Ma'am, you just—"

I stopped.

She wasn't looking at me.

She was staring down the street, one hand pressed against her chest, tears rolling down her chubby cheeks.

"Ikunle abiyamo ooo..."

Her voice trembled.

Something must have happened. Silently, I bent to retrieve my phone.

Just then, a police vehicle sped past. I watched it disappear around the bend.

A few seconds later, an ambulance followed.

I frowned.

Then I noticed the crowd.

It was gathering at the far end of the street, growing thicker by the second.

My steps slowed.

The ambulance was there. So was the police van. And they were both parked in front of Dee's building.

Something bad had happened.

I could feel it in my guts.

But what?

I unlocked my phone immediately and scrolled to Dee's contact. I stared at the five calls from her I had received. All between 3:00 a.m. and 3:15 a.m. I had missed all, not because I was sleeping, but because... I was binging the last episode of *Stranger Things* on Netflix, and picking up the call might have messed with my MTN network. But in my defence, I had planned to call her immediately after I finished watching it, if only I hadn't slept off. But not to worry, I'd gotten her favourite snack, and I'm on my way to surprising her with it.

Smiling to myself, I called her.

It rang.

And rang.

Then stopped.

I called again.

Nothing.

Knowing Dee, she's probably mad at me again. Jeez. Angry bird.

Pulling my tote bag tighter against my side, I quickened my pace.

Within fifteen minutes, I was there.

The crowd had multiplied. People stood on tiptoe, craning their necks for a better view. Some whispered. Others spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear.

I shoved my way through, muttering, "Excuse me, please," to people I barely saw.

Eventually, I caught a glimpse of the scene.

Apparently, someone had jumped from the roof.

A young lady, they said.

My heart lurched.

No.

I tried to push further.

I just want to get to Dee.

A policeman stretched his hands in front of me.

"Ma'am, you can't enter. This is a suicide scene. Please go back."

"I know. I just want to enter the building. My friend is inside and—"

He wasn't listening.

He gently shoved me backwards into the crowd.

I pulled out my phone.

Called Dee.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Why the heck isn't she picking up?

Is she that mad at me? Over that?

My head began to pound.

Then the voices around me started to reach me.

"And she was such a quiet girl oo. Barely speaks to anyone."

"Ahh. She's just an orphan, and now she's gone too."

"She probably hasn't fully healed from the trauma of her parents' death. Poor child."

"Omolomo... I can't believe Dee would kill herself. She has—"

The woman didn't finish. She couldn't. Because somehow, I had found my way in front of her, grabbing onto the edge of her bubu gown.

"Who did you say killed herself?"

She stared at me.

"Who? Who are you talking about? My own Dee?"

Mama Fati gently pulled her cloth from my fist and took two steps back.

Then she burst into new tears.

"It's your Dee oo. Dee is dead oo. She *was* found *with her* dead body at the... the..."

I stopped hearing her.

No.

No.

No.

It can't be my Dee, right?

I ran.

I don't remember pushing through the crowd.

I don't remember who shouted at me.

I remember the white-covered body being conveyed on a stretcher into the ambulance.

The policeman from earlier reached out to stop me.

I remember slapping his hand away.

"Dee!"

I don't know why I called her name.

Perhaps some part of me still believed she would answer.

I reached the body.

My hands were shaking.

I shouldn't have looked.

But I did.

And the moment I saw her, something inside me broke.

A scream tore out of my throat.

It didn't sound like my voice.

Hands grabbed me from every direction, trying to pull me away.

I fought them.

I screamed.

I cried.

I thrashed.

I called Dee's name until my voice disappeared beneath my sobs.

And then everything went black.

Beep... beep... beep.

A piercing sound dragged me back to consciousness.

My eyes flew open in a hurry, and I was met with a white ceiling, white walls, and the smell of antiseptic and medicines.

For a few seconds, I didn't remember where I was.

Then it came back.

The building.

The crowd.

The ambulance.

Dee.

An image flashed through my mind.

Dee lying unmoving and lifeless on the stretcher.

I broke down again.

Nurses and well-wishers rushed into the room.

Someone held my hand.

Someone told me to be strong.

But I couldn't care less.

I don't want to be strong.

I wanted Dee.

One week later.

It was Friday.

Dee had been buried two days ago.

I had cried all through the ceremony, until I had to be carried out.

Now, I stood across the street, staring at the old building where Dee had lived for fourteen years.

The same faded walls.

The same rusted railings.

The same roof.

Only that Dee wasn't inside anymore.

My eyes wandered to the narrow staircase visible through one of the open windows.

I remembered the first time we'd counted the steps together.

I'd complained about how tired I was halfway up.

Dee had laughed at me.

"You're the one that said you wanted to know how many there were."

"I was curious, not suicidal."

She'd laughed even harder.

We'd continued counting.

One.

Two.

Three.

Until we reached the top.

410.

"Four hundred and ten steps just to get to this terrible place?" I'd complained.

"It's not terrible," she'd said.

"You're the only person who thinks so."

She'd smiled.

"Maybe."

I smiled now.

But it didn't last.

Somewhere up there were 410 steps.

I'd once joked about counting them.

Now I couldn't bear the thought of doing so.

Tears welled up in my eyes.

I pulled out my phone.

Scrolled to her contact.

There it was.

Five missed calls.

Her last attempts at reaching me before making that cruel decision.

I stared at her contact name.

My chest tightened.

Could I have changed something?

Could I have just picked up at the second or third call or, hell, at the fifth call?

Could I have paused the darned movie and answered her call?

Maybe I wouldn't have magically known what to say.

Maybe I wouldn't have been able to fix anything.

But I could have listened.

I could have told her that whatever she was going through, she didn't have to go through it alone.

I could have reminded her that she had me.

Maybe I could have encouraged her to talk to someone.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

I would never know.

And that was what hurt the most.

Because I knew she'd struggled with losing her parents.

I knew she'd spent fourteen years in that house, holding on to memories she couldn't bear to leave behind.

I knew she'd always liked to shut down and withdraw into isolation for weeks and even months whenever I hit a little close to home.

But what did I do?

I allowed her to continue.

I normalized her strange behaviour over and over.

I discarded the thought of allowing her to see a psychologist, knowing fully well her behaviours weren't normal at all.

I told myself she'd come around.

She always did.

I refused to... pick up her calls.

Ding... ding... ding.

My phone vibrated.

I reached for it immediately.

Without checking the caller, I picked up.

"Hello. Dee?" I said.

Silence.

Then—

"Ifedayo, Dee is gone. You need to stop dialing and calling her number. Come back home, please..."

I didn't hear the rest.

I couldn't.

I lowered the phone slowly from my ear.

For a moment, I just stood there.

Across the street, the old building remained exactly where it had always been.

Five floors.

410 steps.

And no Dee.

I looked at her name on my screen one last time.

Then I pressed the phone against my chest.

And cried.

Where is Dee?