

TONI SHILOH



TO WIN
A PRINCE

A NOVEL



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To the Author and Finisher of my faith.



Prologue

Your Majesty, do you have a recommendation on the sentencing of Prince Ekon Diallo of the Etikun tribe?” Brielle Eesuola Adebayo, queen of Ọlọrọ Ilé Ijọba of Africa, exhaled slowly, breathing out her nerves. For days she’d prayed about Ekon’s upcoming sentencing for crimes against the crown, specifically crimes of conspiracy to undermine the lawful line of succession. His half-sister, Dayo Layeni, Bri’s ex-secretary, had used him in her schemes in an attempt to overthrow Bri as rightful queen.

Ekon had come clean when he realized Dayo’s next step was kidnapping. Fortunately, it had not come to that, and he’d willingly shared the reasons Dayo wanted to wear the crown instead of Bri. Unfortunately, the Ọlọrọ Ilé Royal Council still found him guilty of conspiracy charges. Ekon had been willing to trick Bri into marriage. He’d knowingly colluded with Dayo to take Bri’s seat to rule the kingdom. His actions deserved punishment, but did they deserve imprisonment? Or even . . . *death*?

Ọlọrọ allowed for the death penalty in crimes against the crown if the offenses were severe. Bri had quickly ruled out death, however. She’d been in no physical danger, and Dayo had been arrested, circumventing the coup. Yet their conspiracy couldn’t be denied and had been confirmed by Ekon himself.

Bri had pored over the laws and judgments available in this

situation, but not one book gave a suggestion on the weight of mercy. As a Christian, didn't she owe Ekon a second chance, or was this merely a law-and-order situation? The constant questions piling up in her brain had her eating antacids in preparation for today.

“Your Majesty?”

Brielle blinked as Yemi Ladipo's raspy voice broke through her reverie. The previous council head, Jomi Oladele, had already been punished for his role in the coup attempt. He'd divulged council secrets to Dayo, among other crimes.

Bri resisted the urge to fidget and instead maintained her regal demeanor. Now was the time to decide if she'd speak on Ekon's behalf. “Yes, Mr. Ladipo. I have a recommendation.”

She directed her gaze to the man in question. He stood, chin tucked to his chest. It was the same posture he'd assumed since he'd walked into the council chambers, only looking up when someone directed a question his way. He wore the Etikun colors and an *amure*—a sash—denoting his princely status.

“Prince Ekon Diallo, *omoba* of the Etikun *tribu*,” she began.

His head lifted, and eyes full of contrition met hers. Her heart panged. *God would grant mercy, Brielle.*

Bri swallowed. “I have prayed over this moment. I have examined your actions and crimes against the crown of Ọlọṛọ Ilé. To say I'm disappointed by your complicity in Ms. Layeni's plans would be a gross understatement, Prince Diallo. Yet I do not feel your actions are punishable by death.”

His shoulders sagged.

“I also do not believe your actions warrant time in prison. Naturally, if the council decides otherwise, I will defer to their determination.” She licked her dry lips. “I believe your character could benefit from community service. To spend time in our country and see the true heart of the people and what it means to serve. You do not need a title or a crown to make you worthy of serving the people of Ọlọṛọ Ilé.”

Ekon's eyes widened at her pronouncement, but no other signs showed surprise or shock from her recommendation. She'd already spoken to the royal council ahead of time, so she knew the punishment they'd decided upon. Her guidance was for the court's purposes, since the actual high court had deferred this case to the care of the council because of the severity of the charges. It was also to give the council an opportunity to follow her lead in doling out a sentence.

All Bri could do was pray that Ekon truly had experienced a change of heart. That serving the people would remove the privileged attitude the title of omoba—*prince*—had given him. He wasn't a bad person, *per se*, but he could certainly improve.

The other council members whispered amongst themselves until the acting-head of council nodded, signaling an end to the discussion.

"Thank you for that recommendation, Your Majesty," Mr. Ladipo said. "Omoba Ekon Diallo, the Ọlọṛọ Ilé Royal Council has discussed the charges against you and taken the recommendation of Queen Adebayo under advisement. We are ready to give you our sentencing."

Ekon nodded, hands rigid at his sides as he met Mr. Ladipo's gaze head on.

"The council has decided to strip you of your title."

Brielle winced inwardly in sympathy. Such a harsh punishment, but she could understand the council's reasoning for the action. As much as she wanted mercy for Ekon, they could not ignore his crimes.

"You are no longer a prince within the Etikun tribe and will henceforth be forbidden to seek a seat on the royal council. You are ordered to one hundred and sixty-eight hours of community service, providing aid to the various tribes of Ọlọṛọ Ilé. You will also serve three hundred and twenty hours in the position of business consultant. Your father, Prince Iseoluwa Diallo, has informed us you will no longer be working for Diallo Enterprises.

Therefore, you have the time to assist Ms. Iris Blakely in her new endeavor to help the impoverished in our country and put Ọlọrọ Ilé on the map in the fashion textile industry. Despite your current misjudgment, we believe you have the business acumen to ensure her business is a success, making Ọlọrọ a success. You will assist her in any way deemed necessary.” Mr. Ladipo let silence fill the room for a moment before continuing. “Do you understand your judgment?”

“Yes, *alàgbà* tribu, I understand.” His eyes flicked to Brielle. “I thank you for your leniency—especially yours, Your Majesty.” He gave a bow, then stood straight.

“Then we have nothing more to say, *Mr. Diallo*. You are dismissed from council chambers.” Mr. Ladipo concluded the meeting.

Brielle watched as Ekon left. She had no idea what he would face going back to Etikun, stripped of his title. How would he deal with the disappointment his tribe members would feel? She knew from previous conversations that he did not have faith to see him through this.

Lord God, please reach his heart. May choosing mercy be the right choice and not one we'll come to regret later.



ONE

Ekon

I padded out of my bedroom, stopping in the hallway to peer through the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the hills of Etikun. For some reason, my alarm had sounded instead of the soft voice of my personal assistant to wake me. Nazum had worked for me since I turned eighteen, and my alarm had only been a backup in case I chose to sleep in. Where could he be?

I continued toward the living area. “Nazum?”

Nothing.

The only noise reaching my ears was my slippers on my feet. Not a single servant ran about. The place appeared to be empty. Had something happened? I checked my mobile for any missed messages and found none. The seventy-inch TV beckoned me.

My black leather couch was perfectly positioned in front of the entertainment center. Surely the local news would explain where my servants had disappeared to. With a press of a button, I had it up and running . . . and gaped. There stood Father in his princely dress, talking to a reporter. The headline read

Prince Iseoluwa Diallo denounces son's actions. I turned up the volume.

“His mother and I are deeply ashamed. We cannot express our regret enough for his involvement with Ms. Layeni. As far as we are aware, there was no intimate relationship between them.”

I shook my head. *Disgusting.* No one but the council and queen knew Ms. Layeni was my half-sister. To insinuate anything else was deplorable, but that was Father’s way. Keep all misdeeds secret so he could continue the façade of the humblest prince in Etikun. But I knew the truth, the stain of his infidelity against Mother.

“Prince Diallo, do you think the punishment should have been more severe?”

Father’s brow furrowed. “I do not go against my queen or the council’s decisions. However, I have seen fit to add my own form of penance to their sentencing.”

What? I slowly looked around my empty penthouse flat, stomach souring as realization came to me.

“What sort of reprimand will you enact?”

“I have removed all servants from Ekon’s employ, transferring them to other jobs within Diallo Enterprises. They should not suffer for his gross misjudgments. I have also removed his vehicles from his ownership in order to sell them and transfer the earnings to a charity of my wife’s choice.”

A primal roar tore from my lips as I flipped over the coffee table. How *dare* he remove my servants! Did he expect me to do everything myself like some commoner? Simply because the council stripped me of my title did not mean I had to live like the lower class.

How was I supposed to prepare for my first day of business consulting without breakfast and clothes to wear? How would I get there? *Public transportation?*

A shudder coursed through me, and I sank onto the sofa

cushions, head in my hands as I rocked. My breath came in spurts as the implications of Father's actions sank in. I was barely cognizant of the reporter asking more questions.

Until one stood out.

"Do you still consider Mr. Ekon Diallo your son?"

My gaze rose as I held my breath.

"If he can turn his wayward ways around."

Enough of that. I turned off the news, throwing the remote to the floor. The clatter of it hitting the marble tiles made me wince. I better not have chipped them. Who knew if I had the funds to replace them, considering I was no longer a Diallo employee. Would Father cancel my bank membership as well? Could he?

I paced back and forth, chest heaving. Part of me was not surprised Father did not have the decency to explain these repercussions to my face. Learning about them on the morning news like the rest of the country was par for the course. I could only imagine the comments filling social media right now. Something I had purposely ignored since I walked out of council chambers as a nobody.

"Ahhhh!" But shouting did not make me feel better. It only made the vein in my forehead pulse all the harder.

I stomped across the room and into the kitchen. Since I apparently no longer had a personal chef, I would have to make my own breakfast. A quick glance at the stove clock showed an hour before my report time. Normally, I would eat an omelet prepared by my chef. Now I would, what . . . make it *myself*?

Unfortunately, I had no time to voice my complaints. I could not show up late and have the council's opinion of me worsen—or Father's. I shook my head and pulled up a YouTube tutorial for making the perfect omelet. After watching the video a few times, I removed eggs, bacon, and cheese from my refrigerator. There were some *akara* balls left over from

the day before the sentencing. I could heat those up to make a complete meal. It should be simple enough.

I turned the knob to start the flame as shown on the video, then moved it to the middle setting as recommended. The fire lit the stove. I smiled. Clearly cooking was not as difficult as Chef had always made it seem. I grabbed an egg and tapped it on the counter like I had seen the cook do in the video. The insides splattered on the counter, making a slimy path down the cabinet before the yolk landed on the floor.

I bit back an oath.

A quick glance located the materials to clean up the mess. The feel of the snotty yolk in the paper towel made me want to retch. Relief filled me as I managed to place the mess in the trash.

At least I had more eggs. I would simply use less force than before. A small smile shifted something inside me as I successfully cracked the egg before pushing my thumbs inside to make a hole to open the shell.

The egg exploded, sending clear and yellow liquid down my nightshirt.

The oath left my mouth this time. I glanced at my watch. How had thirty minutes passed so quickly? If I was to meet Ms. Blakely on time, breakfast would have to be postponed. I put the ingredients back in the refrigerator, then removed my shirt and tossed it into the laundry room.

That chore ranked low on my priority list. As long as I had clean clothes, I would not have to worry about learning how to operate the washing machine. I flipped through the dress shirts hanging in my walk-in closet and opted for black. It matched my growing irritation as my stomach complained about not being fed.

No servants. No cars. No title of prince. Instead, I would now answer to *mister*. What more could happen to me? The hairs on the back of my neck rose at the question, and I shook

off the unnerving feeling. I needed to find a driver. My mouth curled. A taxi, even?

A few minutes later, I grabbed my wallet and stuffed it into my back pocket. A quick look in the mirror showed my smooth chocolate skin. My hair was close-cropped and freshly lined, thanks to a trip to the barber before the council sentencing. My shave this morning had maintained my clean look. The only thing I added was a black beaded necklace, interspersed with a few golden beads. I was now ready to meet Ms. Blakely and get my business consultant hours under way.

Three hundred and twenty hours!

The amount was pure ridiculousness. Yet if I worked an eight-hour day, then forty days later would see an end to my servitude. What if Ms. Blakely scheduled me for less than a full day's work? Then the torture would be endless. I had a jewelry business I was desperate to return to. But wait. Would Father allow me to return? Somehow, I needed to get back in his good graces.

Clearly, Father wanted to wash his hands of me. How could I remove the stain of conspiring against the queen from the Diallo name? Reversing such monumental damage seemed impossible.

I could still remember the rage on his face when he discovered I had been talking to my half-sister. But that was because my relationship to her was a taboo topic. No one in Etikun knew that Dayo and I shared a *màmá*, because the woman I called Mother was known as my biological mother. In reality, Dayo's mother was my biological mother, as Father had had an affair with her. I had not known this until my teens, when Dayo showed up unannounced at our house, wanting to meet me. Father forbade it, but when I turned eighteen, I reached out to her.

Now she was imprisoned. My biological mother deceased. All I had was the woman I had always known as Mother.

I shook the morose thoughts from my mind and headed toward the penthouse elevator. It led to the lobby, where everyone would see me step into a taxi instead of my chauffeured Porsche.

A taxi!

At least I would not have to drive myself around Ọ̀lọ̀rọ̀ Ilé.

Fortunately, the taxi waited at the curb when I arrived on the lobby floor. I kept my eyes straight ahead, avoiding any eye contact with my neighbors and the concierge at the front desk. I could not bear to see the looks of condemnation or pity I had been receiving since first becoming headline news. There was nothing like seeing your face plastered on the screen with the words *house arrest* scrolling underneath.

The moment I stepped outdoors, reporters swarmed me, yelling my name. I pushed through the throng, ignoring the questions regarding my feelings on my father's earlier interview. I opened the back door of the taxi, slamming it shut as I slid across the cloth seats.

"Drive now," I spat.

"Yes, ọ̀gbéni. Where to?"

I flinched inwardly at the title of *mister*, hearing the derisive tone of Alàgbà Ladipo instead.

"Uh." I peered at the note on my phone listing the address of Ms. Blakely's business. I relayed it to the driver.

"Got it, ọ̀gbéni. I will get you there quick as possible."

Thank goodness Ọ̀lọ̀rọ̀ was not prone to traffic jams like other parts of Africa. The island boasted a small population of less than a million.

I focused on the scenery passing by as the driver took me to Aṣọ, Ms. Blakely's business. Once I arrived, the first thing I wanted to ask was why she chose that name. Aṣọ meant *clothed* in Oninan and seemed a simplistic name for a fashion company. Granted, my experience was in the jewelry industry, but still.

Hopefully she had not submitted paperwork denoting the

name and a trademark for the logo. Certainly I could brainstorm much better options than Aşo. Business was in my blood and went along with the degree hanging on my home office wall. Another requirement from Father.

He had been grooming me to take over Diallo Enterprises one day, but with this setback, I wondered about my future there. Out of all the changes I had experienced this past month, not working at the family business made me the most nervous. I could not lose my position as COO of Diallo Enterprises. *I cannot.*

I would call Father this evening. Inform him how much of an asset I would be to Ms. Blakely. Father would have to reconsider stripping everything from me then. *Right?*

This was not my life, and the upsets had me shaken. Still, I had an image to protect regardless of my current infamy. I would become a prince once more, and this would all be relegated to a minor detour in my life.

“Are you okay, ògbéni? You are awfully quiet back there.”

I peered at the rearview mirror. “Simply thinking, *monsieur.*” *Mister* sounded better in French. Plus, speaking the language reminded me of my superiority over the taxi driver.

I was accomplished. Held an MBA, spoke six languages, and was heir to the Diallo empire. I was no *commoner*, despite the royal council’s pronouncement that I could no longer be titled. I had led a princely life, been raised in privilege from birth. I did not know how to be anything else.

Despite this, I was sure the royal council expected me to accept my new identity. The queen had even mentioned that I needed to learn what it was like to serve. Helping Ms. Blakely with all my business knowledge was a service in itself. Why must I demean myself in front of the community as well? At least that torture did not start until next week.

One thing at a time.

“I will leave you to think, then.” The driver turned on the radio and began bobbing his head to the rhythm of the music.

“I appreciate that, monsieur.” I glanced at my watch. I was due at Aṣọ in five minutes. “Will we arrive soon?”

“*Bèèni, bèèni, ògbéni.*”

His assured *yes* would not help me if he did not apply a little more pressure to the gas pedal. It would not look good if I showed up late on my first day. I sighed. This day was off to a horrible start.

The taxi driver stopped behind the vehicle in front of us and began shaking and singing at the top of his lungs.

“Ah, do you listen to this, ògbéni?” he yelled out.

“No, I have not heard this song before.” Despite my obvious disdain, the driver continued his serenade. Father had always played instrumental music. Back in my university days, I had been familiar with popular songs, but that style was not something I gravitated to.

I wanted to lower myself from view in case anyone saw me with the driver exuberantly singing at full volume. Why did he have to roll his window all the way down? He looked ridiculous. Did that make me so by association?

“Monsieur.” I pointed ahead when he turned to look at me. “The car has moved.”

“Ah, yes. I apologize. This is my jam!”

I glanced at my watch. Two minutes to arrival and a few more miles to drive.

I was going to be late.

Eleven minutes later, security escorted me to Ms. Blakely’s office. She stood behind her desk, a look of irritation on her very pretty face.

I blinked. I remembered her. She had been at the welcome ball for the queen during our Independence Day festivities. She had worn an emerald dress. I remembered because the matching jewelry had made her skin glow like a brown axinite.

“You’re late,” she snapped in an American accent similar to

the queen's but less cultured. No, that was not the right word. Less guarded.

I clenched my hands. If I had had my Porsche or even the Mercedes to drive, I would have been on time. Something told me the queen's best friend would not care about my plight. So I offered the truth. "My taxi driver got distracted dancing instead of driving."

Her mouth dropped open. "What?"

"It was quite embarrassing. He sang loudly—and *badly*, I might add. He would break out dancing at traffic lights only to realize traffic had commenced upon my reminder. He insisted that almost every single song that came on was *his jam*."

She folded her arms across her chest. I saw the slightest twitch of her lips.

"Fine. I'll make an allowance this time. But I expect you to be on time in the future, Mr. Diallo."

Ugh. I cannot bear that label. "That is my expectation as well, Ms. Blakely. It was my first time in a taxi, and I did not know what to expect."

Her mouth parted again, eyes wide with shock. It was quite obvious she had not been raised in a life of privilege if she thought taking a taxi a common practice. But that was none of my concern.

I slid my hands into my pockets. "I am ready to begin. Am I to work an eight-hour day?"

Her nose wrinkled as she pushed her curly mane away from her eyes. How did one woman have so much hair?

"We'll see. I'm in the early stages, but I've gotten a lot completed." She frowned, her ruby-red lips turning downward. "And unfortunately, still have too much on my plate."

"I am here to help in any way I can." And to prove to Father that I deserved the things life had afforded me, and maybe even to convince the council to rescind their decision and restore my title.

“Yes, well, have a seat.” She gestured to the white chair in front of her glass desk.

I sat down and held my breath. Whatever happened in this meeting would determine my future. I could only hope Ms. Blakely would put me on a path that led me back to the top.