

You Made
a Fool of
Death
with Your
Beauty

PROPERTY OF MESOBE BOOKS

ALSO BY AKWAEKE EMEZI

Content Warning: Everything

Dear Senthuran

The Death of Vivek Oji

Freshwater

Little Rot

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS
YOUNG ADULT

Bitter

Pet

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MASOBE

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*For my darling Kathleen
who is love itself in flesh*

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Chapter One

Milan was the first person Feyi had fucked since the accident.

They hooked up in a bathroom at a Memorial Day house party in Bushwick, with Feyi's glass of prosecco spilling into the sink and Milan's large hands sliding behind her thighs as he lifted her onto the bathroom counter. Speckled tiles stretched around them, washed bloody in the light of the red bulb someone had screwed into the ceiling, and a linen shower curtain hung around the bathtub, thick with monstera leaves. Feyi threw her head back, his mouth at her throat, and her long pink braids dripped over the faucet, the tips dragging against the draining bubbles of her drink.

"Tell me if you need to slow down," Milan said, his voice all tangled up, busy with want. "I know we just met or whatever."

He said it as if it could matter, or as if it was a reason to stop instead of a reason to go even faster. Feyi had first seen him back on the rooftop, when the party was in full

force around them. She'd liked the way his eyes followed her as she walked, how tall he was, how broad. Her best friend, Joy, had leaned in, linking her arm with Feyi's.

"Whew, check out those thighs!" she'd whispered. "He thick as *fuck*. I'ma need him to turn around so I can see that ass."

Feyi had rolled her eyes. "So glad you don't have a dick," she said. "You'd be a fucking menace."

"I'd be *particularly* interested in his ass if I had a dick," Joy replied.

"I take that back. You're already a menace." Feyi snuck another look at the thighs in question. "Besides, you can just use a strap, you know."

"Nah, it's not the same. I wanna feel him *squeeze* around me." Joy had flexed her fingers into a fist to illustrate the grip, and Feyi stifled a laugh, her braids sweeping across her collarbone. Milan glanced in their direction, catching Feyi's eye and smiling at her from across the roof.

Feyi had already decided who she wanted to be that night, so she stared right back at him, unabashed, drinking in his terra-cotta skin and dark copper beard. When he nodded to his boys and started walking toward her, Joy squealed and vanished, leaving the two of them alone. Feyi wanted to cut through any potential small talk—just slice it away neatly—so she touched the buttons of Milan's shirt as soon as he was close enough.

"You're hot," she'd said, before he could even open his mouth. "Are you seeing anyone?"

A flicker of surprise had crossed his face, but Milan recovered quickly. “Nah,” he replied, tipping his head to one side as he held her eyes. “You?”

For a moment, there was the scream of tires and the mad chime of broken glass, the soft petals of white lilies, and a clod of dirt breaking apart in Feyi’s hand, but she brushed it all aside like smoke.

“Single,” she’d said in return, stepping right into his personal space. He smelled of rain and bergamot. “And—how do they say it?—ready to mingle.”

It would have been a corny line if she wasn’t so beautiful, and Feyi knew it—knew how to part her lips in their full wine red, how to look up at him from under thick black lashes, how to inject a lifetime of suggestion into her voice. It was all a game, a simple formula, and there was nothing wrong with using these cards she’d been dealt. Besides, if she looked closely enough at the whole thing, none of it really mattered. He was a different kind of beautiful, and that was enough.

Although she and Joy had been drinking since brunch, Feyi wasn’t drunk yet, just tipsy enough to choose him, to dive back into the deep end with his body. From the way this terra-cotta stranger had placed his hand on her lower back, welcoming her against him, he seemed to be on board with her plan. Joy was somewhere by the bar, surely restraining her glee at seeing Feyi make such a blatant move.

“I’m Milan,” the stranger had said, his wide and delicious mouth curving into an amused smile.

Do we really need names? Feyi had thought, but she smiled back anyway, her hand splayed against his chest, his heart galloping steadily beneath her palm. “I’m Feyi.”

Milan had glanced around the roof. “Wanna get out of here?”

Nice. He was playing along perfectly, no hesitation, no coyness.

“Not too far. I came with my girl.”

He’d nodded and looked back at her. They were close enough for his breath to brush against her skin, for her to see the dark flecks in his brown eyes as he took in her face, his gaze lingering on her mouth. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped, low and rough. “Downstairs?”

Feyi had raised an eyebrow, hiding how his lust was like a match igniting hers. He *wanted* her, badly enough to ask only the important questions. “You’re solution-oriented. I like that.”

Milan took her hand, and they left the rooftop, squeezing past people on the stairs, then ducking around a corner as he led her into the bathroom. Feyi watched the muscles in his back move under his shirt as he closed and locked the door, then tracked the caution in his eyes as he turned back to her.

“So . . .” he said, giving her space, not assuming.

It was sweet. It was so unnecessary. Feyi did not need to think about this. She put her drink down on the counter and pulled her blouse off over her head, her pink braids getting briefly caught in the black cotton, leaving her breasts covered in nothing but a thin bralette, small gold rings pressing through the sheer mesh.

The stranger—*Milan*—inhaled sharply, the want in his eyes going aflame. “You’re fucking beautiful,” he growled, still holding himself back. “Your skin, it just . . . drinks up the light.”

Feyi smiled and said nothing. Instead, she stepped up to him, pulling his face down to hers, his mouth down to hers, his willing and ready tongue down to hers. He seized her greedily, his hands digging into her flesh, his hips pressing an iron length against her stomach. Feyi felt like a monster and a traitor, but it was fine, it had to happen.

It was precisely what she had come here for.

THE ACCIDENT HAD been five years ago, which felt like both forever and yesterday to Feyi. She’d been living up in Cambridge, near her parents’ house, but she couldn’t handle the roads afterward, couldn’t handle driving or the way her mother’s eyes were weighted with pain and pity every time they saw each other. So Feyi had moved down to New York, because if she was a monster, then so was the city, glorious and bright and everlasting, eating up time and hearts and lives as if they were nothing. She wanted to be consumed by the relentless volume of a place so much louder than she was, a place where her past and her pain could drown in the noise. Here, Feyi could keep her name and her unruined face, yet become someone else, someone starting over, someone who wasn’t haunted. No one in New York cared about the vintage of the sadness tucked behind her eyes and in the small corners of her smiles. She didn’t have to drive, and she could cry on the train and no one would look, no one would care, because

she didn't matter, and it was, honestly, such a relief to stop mattering.

Feyi moved into a brownstone apartment with Joy, her best friend from college, and paid for it with the life insurance money, trying to ignore how ghoulish that felt. Everyone said it's what he would've wanted, but she was fairly sure he would have wanted to live. Most people didn't get what they wanted. Feyi didn't want the money, but she needed it, that obscene check, and maybe she even needed the accompanying guilt. It was a punishment that felt necessary, like balance. He was dead, and what was she doing? Being alive, making art. How frivolous.

She and Joy lived on a green and sunny block, around the corner from Baba Yusuf's botanica and the Trini shop that sold doubles at inconsistent hours. They smoked joints on their fire escape, and Joy convinced Feyi to dye her hair pink. "You're in Brooklyn now," she'd said. "Try a different look. It's not a big deal."

There was something in the air that first summer that made Feyi play along. She rented out a studio on the next block and made her work there. Grotesque as it was, nothing she painted or stitched together could bruise her the way her own life had. Feyi began to hope that her past could fade, thinning out like an old song, turning her sadness into just a vague layer under her skin. All that would be left was its residue, giving her a certain spicy and inexplicable melancholy that some men could smell. It made them want to save her. Feyi knew it was already too late for all that, so she dipped and ducked away from their hands, their hungry mouths. She liked the city as an

entity better; it didn't care who you were or what your damage was, it ate everyone up indiscriminately.

Once the full summer heat hit in a wave of wet air, Feyi felt like she was being seduced into being a stranger, and she found that she wanted nothing more. She and Joy rented a car and drove down to Riis Beach, lying out topless in the sun under layers of coffee and coconut oil until their skin darkened into deep brown and gold. Joy shaved her head on a whim and tattooed a black dot on each lower eyelid. Feyi pierced her nipples and braided her bubblegum hair down to the small of her back. They turned off the news and ordered edibles instead, redecorated their apartment with plants instead, started making pizzas on Saturdays instead. There was nothing to stop them from being whatever they wanted.

"Do you think we're having a quarter-life crisis?" Joy had asked once, while rolling up a joint in their living room.

"First of all, we're a few years too old for that," Feyi had replied. "Second, I think we're just figuring out how to survive a world on fire . . . that it's okay to be alive."

Joy had looked over with a soft smile. "I'm proud of you," she said. "I know it isn't easy for you to say that."

She wasn't wrong. It wasn't easy for Feyi to do a lot of things, but now, with Milan kissing her against a bathroom mirror, Feyi found that it didn't quite catch in her chest the way she thought it would. She was a monster and a traitor, but only if someone else was alive, and he wasn't. She had to remind herself that he wasn't. Feyi still felt wrong, yes, but in an unfamiliar way, which made sense because she had become a stranger and it

takes time to turn into someone new. If she let go and existed only here and now, without a past, it was actually easy. It was fun, in fact.

"I'm serious," Milan gasped, seizing air in between their desperate kisses, his palms hot against her thighs. "We can stop at any point. Tell me."

Bass thumped through the walls, and Feyi unbuttoned his jeans, sliding her hand inside. Milan had small diamonds in his ears, and his breath was ragged as he looked down at her.

"Don't stop," she murmured into his mouth, and Milan hissed in a sharp breath as her fingers wrapped around him and pulled him out.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and Feyi tried not to roll her eyes.

"Such a gentleman," she mocked, keeping her tone soft, then she kissed him again, slipping her tongue between his teeth as she tightened her grip. God, he had *girth*.

Milan made a torn and rough sound, then shoved her skirt up to her waist, his hands eating her skin. Feyi heard a rip, and she laughed in delight as he tore off her lace thong. Her laugh melted into a soft gasp as he tossed the delicate scraps aside, sliding his fingers inside her.

"Let me make that up to you," Milan growled.

He curled his fingers forward and Feyi cried out, her back arching. Milan laughed into her mouth, still hard and pulsing in her hand. She had forgotten what this felt like—the frenzy, the way lust could almost hold a shape within her, something big and loud and so very demanding. It felt rushed, dangerous, exactly how she wanted it, too

quick to think, too fast, too hard, too wet to remember anything or anyone. She pushed away his hand and pulled the tip of him closer. Reckless.

“Hold up,” he said. “I have a—”

Feyi wrapped her legs around his hips. “It’s fine.”

Reckless. “But—”

“Shh. Here.” She brushed him against her slick self and Milan swore in the back of his throat as his common sense slid away.

“Oh, you’re *bad*,” he whispered, pushing into her slowly, committed to their mistake. It was something she was beginning to like about him, the way he made decisions, abandoning uncertainty once the choice was done.

Her mind spun off as he stretched his way in, floating away on sharp pleasure. Feyi bit down on his shoulder as he sank into her and whimpered as he started to pull back out, tortuously slow. Fuck, it had been so long, how had she even made it this far? No wonder Joy kept telling her to get laid.

“Faster,” she gasped, and Milan chuckled.

“Ask nicely.”

“Oh, you fucking bastard.”

He pulled all the way out and Feyi’s breath hitched, the ache suddenly roaring and furious. “Ask nicely,” he said, his smile wicked. “And I’ll give you everything you want.”

She needed him not to stop. He didn’t understand. There were so many things she was keeping at bay. “Please,” she said, giving in. “Please fuck me.”

Milan's smile left immediately, and something shadowed took its place, but he gave Feyi what she wanted, slipping back in and burying himself deep with one hard stroke. He slid his arms under her knees, lifting her legs and splaying her open, then pushed even deeper. Sound blossomed from Feyi's throat as he reached up to twist one of her nipple rings.

"Like this?" he asked, watching her cry out, not breaking his gaze. Feyi put a hand to his neck, circling it lightly, barely touching his skin. It was almost perfect.

"Harder," she ordered, her voice fracturing, and Milan obliged, his hands bruising her, her skirt bunched up with her waistbeads, his jeans caught around his ankles. They both still had their shoes on. Feyi's heels were trembling in the air over his shoulders, and she didn't care how loud she was being, if anyone could hear them above the bass and through the door—because there it was, that blessed blinding white space, that searing nothingness even as she was alive, so clearly alive and in his arms, strangers coming undone, and she was coming around him, begging him not to stop, and Milan kept going, his own voice twisting into low and uncontrolled sounds. When he gasped a warning and made to pull away, Feyi grabbed his hips, keeping him deep inside her and putting her lips by his ear. Men were easy; there were some keys you could use that unlocked them like a quick password.

"Come inside me," she whispered, her voice a silken filthy plea, making it sound like she was begging, desperate for him, and in some ways, she was. Since they were already mad and reckless and human, Milan cursed, his face contorting, his sense lost, and obliged her once