



A wave of relief washed over Raha as she realized Mr. Jashal's stamina defied his years and lack of exercise. The decision to trade her boyfriend for her boss was monumental, a betrayal of her own former principles. I was never one of those women, she thought with a jolt. But now, she was seeing reality through different eyes, quite literally.

She was over her boyfriend already and although she knew it would hurt him, couples broke up all the time after changing their physical appearances these days. Hell, how can you expect to be the same when every square inch of you looks different? Not to talk about the inner changes she had gone through-

The social cost, however, loomed large. The shame of being labeled a trophy girlfriend, the silent judgment from her colleagues her friends, her family... it was a price she would have to pay.

The compensation, she soon found, would be more than fair: a respectable share of the company's shares, a fancy mansion and a life of luxury.

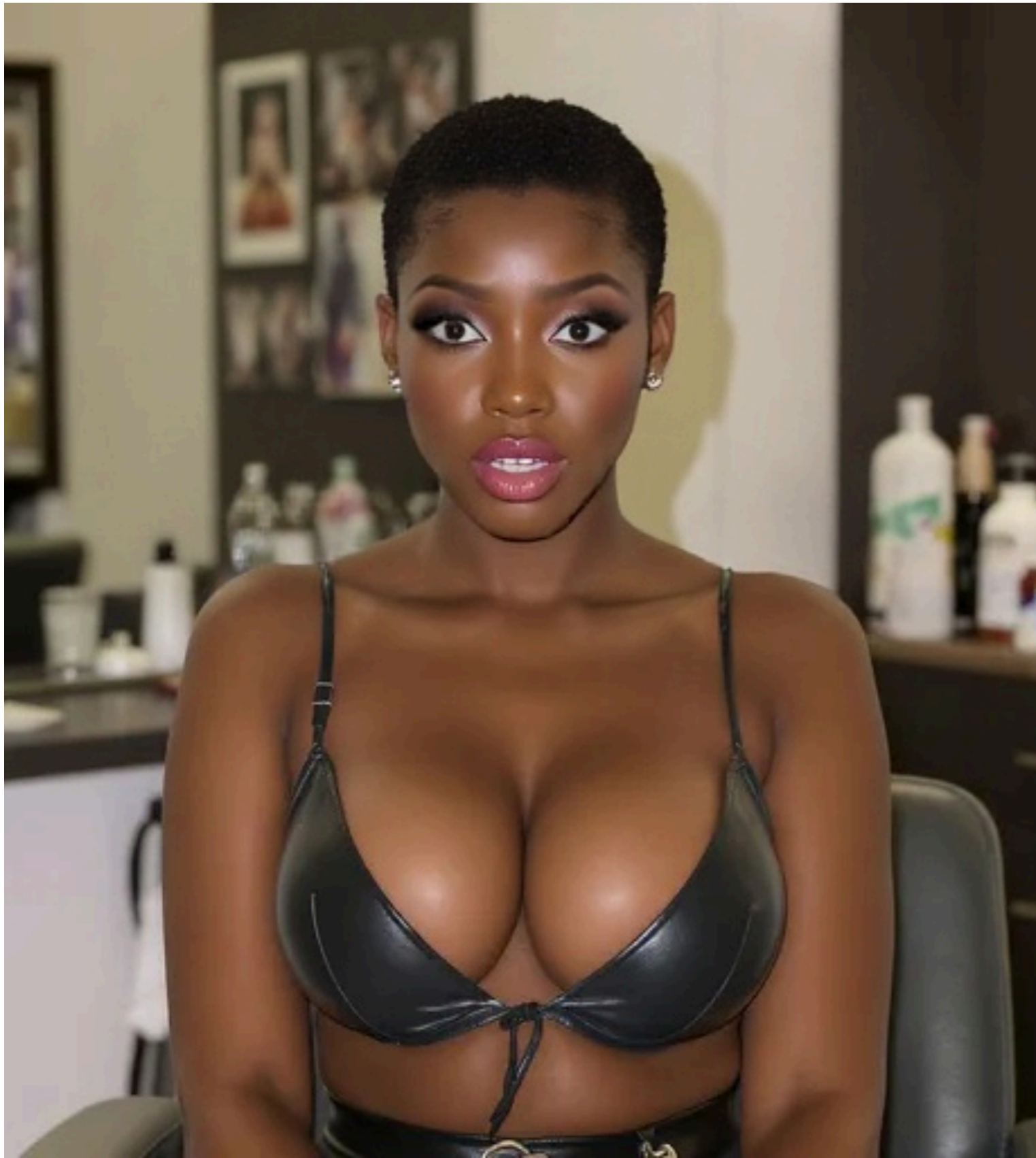


Raha's career was over, in a way, her existence now pared down to the passive role of attending shareholder meetings. Seated beside Mr. Jashal, she listened as the chairman welcomed her with a genial smile at the end of the quarterly shareholders' meeting.

"And before we adjourn," he said, his voice oozing warmth, "I would be remiss not to officially welcome our newest stakeholder, and a wonderful fresh face for our company—Mrs. Raha Jashal."

This was the final payoff. The mansion, the luxury, the proposal she had accepted with thrill—it all distilled into this: becoming a "fresh face." A "modern, Indian face of success and beauty" to be trotted out for the company's image.

Sometimes the shame would flicker. But it was always chased by a colder, more durable truth: she was lucky. She was now part of an elite, both economically and socially, insulated from the struggles that defined most lives. She had improved her life's conditions immeasurably, even if it meant occupying a different, smaller role.



Lucy's story took a final turn with a simple, practical decision. She never got used to the braids, and attempts to return it to its former afro look failed as her hair had become a nest of snarls, too matted to comb through. Tired of the fight, she felt a surge of impatience.

Sitting in the stylist's chair, she didn't hesitate. "Just cut it off" she instructed. "Mi tired of it."

Her boyfriend had been the first to suggest it, almost in passing. Now, seeing her follow through, he seemed pleased. "It's ok, babe," he reassured her. "Wigs will do." She'd just surrendered what he teasingly called her "girl crown."

When the buzzing stopped and the mirror turned, she stared.

Her scalp felt strange, exposed. The reflection staring back looked raw, unfinished – still her, but less soft, less feminine.

She reached up, touched the short bristle of hair, and let out a shaky laugh.

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Eventually, she began experimenting with loud wigs – sometimes jet-black, sometimes bleached blonde, now absolutely ad odds with her dark complexion – and tight, glossy bodysuits that clung to her newly developed curves. It was a brash mix, almost defiant, as if she were trying to reclaim control by exaggerating everything she'd once tried to hide: her curves, her new body language.

Jamal had been right, with no more racial or cultural differences, their relationship had reached new heights. She was now a lot closer to him in sensitivity and personality. She was no longer the upper-class British girl with a doctorate in medieval literature and a closet full of wool coats. No longer she had to worry about managing family hedge funds. She lead a simpler, more fulfilling existence though.

Looking around herself in her daily life, she felt deeply at peace. She had stopped observing multicultural London from the outside. She was part of it now. Part of the change. And it was beautiful.