

WEB OF DECEPTION



A Heart-Pounding Romantic Thriller

ANDRE HOSPIDALES

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BY
ANDRE HOSPIDALES

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1

FEARLESS HEART

'Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.'

—MARK TWAIN

After giving himself a final once-over, Zubby felt confident in his appearance and decided he was ready to head out. No other outfit he owned was more appropriate for his rendezvous with Shell Oil than the navy-blue suit, crisp white shirt and black brogues gleaming with a polished sheen. Recognizing the value of a compelling first impression, Zubby paid meticulous attention to his appearance.

A two-year stint in a warehouse after graduating from university wasn't the life he had envisioned for himself at 25. As far as he was concerned, he was a master strategist. No way was he about to let life catch him off-guard. Therefore, he planned.

The habit of planning ahead had been ingrained in him since childhood, so he meticulously planned every aspect of his life, approaching it like a skilled architect. He took charge and designed the life he lived.

So, why was he working in a warehouse two hours from home? There was no denying that the Nigerian job market was ultra-tight and fiercely competitive. Nevertheless, graduating with a Second-Class Upper degree in Economics should have given him some kind of edge. However, it seemed almost inconsequential, with the way people constantly droned in his ear about how it didn't matter. There was just

something about being a Nigerian. He always seemed to be fighting a losing battle against the system. It seemed the country was determined to push him back ten steps for every step forward he took.

Gazing into the mirror, he drew a deep breath, allowing for a fleeting moment of introspection. His deep, dark brown eyes held an enigmatic depth, suggesting a reservoir of resilience and inner strength. As usual, his expression remained steadfast and straight, a demeanour often criticized for its unyielding seriousness. His height, a detail he often downplayed, held little significance to him:

‘I’m above average,’ he’d nonchalantly declare, or ‘five foot nine,’ if pressed.

It was unfortunate that he was constantly at odds with the system. Everyone who knew Zubby recognized the enduring beam of hope he carried within. That was why, despite the endless bills, the struggle to find a job that matched his qualifications, and the frustration he had to endure every day as a Lagosian, he still awoke each morning with fuel coursing through his veins.

He was determined to push back with everything he had. He was driven by the need to hustle and grind. He comforted himself with the thought that, despite all the setbacks he’d experienced in life, a relentless flame of hope and optimism blazed within him, undying and insatiable.

Heaving a sigh, Zubby tugged at his left lapel, ensuring every detail of his appearance was in place. A messenger bag swung over his shoulder, containing the tools of his imminent battle—a well-crafted CV, an interview letter, and professional letters of reference from lecturers and previous employers - documents that could potentially alter the course of his life.

Slowly, carefully, Zubby closed the creaking door of the house so that the catch made a barely audible click. He didn’t want to disturb his

peacefully sleeping housemate, Chidi, who still had an hour before he needed to wake up.

Dawn was close to breaking when Zubby stepped outside, with hues of orange, blue, pink, purple, and red painting the sky in a symphony of colours. There wasn't even a breath of wind on the calm Tuesday morning in May. Despite his interview being at 11:00 AM, Zubby knew not to wait until dawn to set out considering Lagos' notorious traffic congestion.

A comedian once said most Lagosians would miss God's trumpet call because they would be stuck in traffic. As he remembered the joke, Zubby chuckled to himself, even though some uptight Christians didn't find it funny. He also found that to be hilarious in and of itself. People really need to lighten up, he thought. It seemed like people had forgotten how to laugh, and every joke today was taken as offensive.

Outside the gate, the Uber ride he had booked the previous day was already waiting for him. 'Right on time,' he muttered to himself. 'Good morning, and thank you for arriving on time,' he said to the driver. 'Good morning sir,' the driver replied cheerfully.

Zubby settled into the car and began rehearsing the elevator pitch he had diligently crafted. He had devoted the past few days to punctilious groundwork and thorough readiness in preparation for the interview.

Research had become his ally, unveiling details about the hiring manager. Twitter had become a window into her personality, and Zubby planned a strategy for a conversation with her that transcended the mundane.

He sighed: *You can do this, Zubby. You can.*

Taking out his phone, he began to scroll through it looking for news that might be of interest.

Suddenly, he paused:

Nigerian chess team beats China to become world champions.

Almost unconsciously, a smile began to spread on his lips, and warmth bloomed in his chest. Tapping the link, he read the full story and again smiled. It was a moment of pride, a reminder of the indomitable spirit that defined Nigerians. If his lips could tear from grinning, they would've split into a million pieces. This was what Nigerians embodied: personality, grit, and resilience.

Even when faced with a terrible government, they managed to push back, every single time. They raised their heads above the water, fully committing themselves to the game with unwavering determination. Having to deal with the challenges of being a Nigerian was no easy task.

As the Uber whisked him through the waking streets of Lagos mainland, Zubby sat back and observed people go about their daily lives. He wondered what kind of life they led.

Every morning, they set off to work to make their lives meaningful with a resilience that no one could match. Zubby's mind danced with visions of a Nigeria harnessed to its full potential: a world power with unassailable influence.

A short laugh escaped him, echoing his heart's joyous rhythm. 'One day, Nigeria will be a world-class country,' he mused, carrying the pulse of hope as he ventured towards a pivotal job interview.

A couple of hours later, Zubby emerged from the air-conditioned Uber and instantly felt the searing heat of the scorching sun on his skin. Taking a quick glance at his watch, he smiled. Shell Oil was now only a short walk away. With the stakes at hand, he recognised that being a tad too early outweighed the risk of arriving a mere minute late, even if it meant having a few idle hours to kill before the interview.

He planned to manage his time by hanging out at a local café he had discovered when he scouted out the area a couple of days ago. In addition to practicing his elevator pitch, he could enjoy his favourite beverage, black tea, which would keep him focused and alert. Having checked, he found that it was available at the café.

As Zubby made his way, he pushed through hordes of people, taking in the different scents and colours as they blended together. Human bodies *en masse*, each moving to a different destination. As he trudged on, he clutched his bag tighter to his body. His ears were perked, his back was rigid, and his eyes flickered intermittently.

He opted to cut through the Lekki shopping mall's parking lot, a shortcut that promised to shave off a solid 10 minutes from his journey. Walking in a suit, especially in such extreme heat, was excruciating.

As he walked through the parking lot, Zubby noticed it was nearly empty except for a couple engaged in a heated exchange beside a stationary grey Lexus. The young man, clad in a black tracksuit, gripped a walking stick with a gleaming gold handle.

He appeared no taller than 5ft 7 inches, and vented his rage towards his companion, a petite female who appeared to be around 5 feet 3 or 4 inches tall. She donned a neat navy-blue suit that accentuated her professional demeanour. There was no obvious connection between the two. Zubby thought they couldn't have looked any more different. In fact, they seemed like they belonged to different worlds.

He chuckled at the spectacle of a couple of rich, young brats clashing on an ordinary Tuesday morning, deeming it none of his concern.

However, the situation soon took a sinister turn. The man's verbal abuse escalated into a brutal assault — a slap across the woman's face that echoed across the empty carpark with a sickening resonance. Harrowing

memories from a troubled childhood gripped Zubby, igniting an instinctive reaction. With a determined resolve to intervene, Zubby sprinted towards the feuding couple.

Following the slap, the young lady backed off, but the man wasn't done with her. As she retreated, he callously grabbed her by the hair, and subjected her to a barrage of additional slaps.

In a desperate bid to shield herself, the female raised her arms, but couldn't avoid the slaps. A torrent of tears streamed down her face, as she wailed in agony. Fortunately, Zubby had reached the couple. With the man poised for yet another vicious strike, Zubby swiftly stepped in. He seized the man's wrist and forcefully pulled him away from the female, who crumpled to the ground, her sobs echoing in the aftermath of the harrowing encounter.

Zubby turned his attention away from the lady and toward the enraged bully behind him.

'What is wrong with you, man?' Zubby demanded.

Sparks exploded from the aggressor's eyes as he raged. 'How dare you lay your filthy hands on me,' he roared, baring teeth like a dog with rabies. 'Do you know who the hell I am?'

'Who cares? You don't hit women.'

'Fuck you!' The man snarled, his voice quavering with rage.

With explosive force, he lunged violently at Zubby, intending to hit him. However, Zubby, who was in tremendous physical shape, was too fast and strong for him. Evading the incoming punch with a dancer's grace, Zubby effortlessly pushed the man away with a controlled force.

The assailant stumbled backward, a clumsy retreat ending in an undignified collapse onto his backside. Zubby redirected his attention to the young lady.

Seated on the ground, her face obscured by dishevelled locks, the young lady bore the aftermath of the traumatic encounter. Zubby gracefully squatted in front of her, a reassuring presence in the midst of chaos, attempting to comfort her.

‘Are you alright?’

She was still crying, and didn’t look up at Zubby. It was evident from her sobs that she had been badly hurt by the brutal assault she had just endured.

When Zubby heard footsteps shuffle behind him, he quickly looked back to see the assailant poised to hit him with his walking stick.

In the blink of an eye, Zubby sprang to his feet, a symphony of precision in motion. His left hand seized the assailant's right arm with the instinctive grace of a seasoned warrior, intercepting the impending strike. His right hook connected with the assailant's face with an impact that reverberated through the stillness of the encounter.

A brief dance ensued as the aggressor teetered on the edge of equilibrium, his body swaying with a vulnerable uncertainty as he tried to maintain his balance.

Upon steadying himself, the aggressor gingerly felt his lip and realized it was bleeding from a cut. With a dark scowl on his face, he growled: ‘Oh, you’ve messed with the wrong man, boy.’ Pointing at Zubby, his index finger wagging in ominous rhythm, he declared, ‘I’m going to teach you a lesson you will never forget.’

‘Come on then, give me your best shot,’ replied Zubby, loosening his tie.

Angrily pulling out his phone from his pocket, the man turned his back on Zubby. He dialled a number, waited for it to ring, and then yelled into it as soon as the person answered:

‘Musa! Where are you guys right now?’

‘We’re still at the restaurant, sir.’

‘Good. Can you believe, some punk just attacked me.’

‘Attacked you keh?’

‘Yeah! Can you believe that shit?’

‘Where are you right now, sir?’

‘I’m at Lekki mall. The parking lot.’

‘We’ll be there in less than five minutes!’

Having concluded the call, the aggressor’s menacing declaration sliced through the air like a blade: ‘I’m going to fuckin’ deal with you today,’ he proclaimed again, punctuating his words with a jab of his walking stick directed squarely at Zubby. The menacing choreography of his gesture underscored the gravity of his intent, casting a shadow of impending confrontation that lingered in the charged atmosphere.

Zubby heard the female make a sound, and rushed over to her.

‘Hey, are you okay?’ He asked. She had struggled to her feet, and looked up at Zubby. When he saw her face for the first time, his heart skipped a beat. Despite her dishevelled appearance and tears cascading down her bruised cheeks, Zubby thought she was the most strikingly beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Something about the fragility and vulnerability that was etched into her face somehow added to the attractiveness, creating a haunting and flawless beauty that transcended the mere surface, disregarding the apparent, superficial scars she bore from the brutal assault she'd just endured.

Zubby was captivated, feeling a profound urge to shield her from any potential harm, with no regard for his own well-being.

With a trembling voice and trepidation flickering in her almond-shaped brown eyes, she begged, 'please, you need to leave right now. I appreciate what you did for me, but this guy is dangerous. He really is. Please, go now!'

Prowling up and down the car park with calculated steps, the aggressor kept an eye out for the thugs he'd just called. Each measured stride he took seemed to echo the mounting tension in the air, as if the very atmosphere bore witness to the impending confrontation.

His predatory demeanour added an unsettling energy to the surroundings, amplifying the palpable sense of anticipation that hung like a charged current in the air.

'There's no way I'm leaving you alone with this guy. I need to get you to a hospital—.'

'No...no, you don't understand,' she countered, vigorously shaking her head to underscore the intensity of her disagreement. 'I'll be fine but you won't be if you don't leave now. Please. You have to go now.'

Somewhat taken aback by her genuine concern, Zubby tried to reassure her that he could take care of himself. He made it clear—there was no chance he would leave her alone and vulnerable to the mercy of this vicious bully.

'I don't care. I'm not leaving you—'

Suddenly, there was a screeching sound as a Mercedes Benz SUV skidded to a halt. Two thugs with bulging muscles, who looked like they were built for violence jumped out.

“That's him,” the assailant declared, punctuating his words with a jab of his walking stick directed squarely at Zubby.

The charged atmosphere crackled with an unspoken tension, a palpable prelude to an impending confrontation. The rhythmic pulse of uncertainty hung heavy in the air, foreshadowing the clash about to unfold.

‘This punk had the guts to lay his filthy hands on me. I want you to teach him a lesson he will never forget in his life.’

The young lady swiftly took up a protective stance, positioning herself in front of Zubby as a shield against the impending threat.

‘Jim, I beg you. Let him go. Please, don’t let them hurt him, please,’ she implored with a mix of urgency and desperation, her plea hanging in the air like a fragile hope.

He scoffed at her. ‘Let him go? After what he did to me? You must be out of your fucking mind. Musa, Jimoh. What are you waiting for? Oya, teach this punk a lesson he will never forget in his life.’

Advancing menacingly toward Zubby, the men sneered at him, emphasizing their menace by rhythmically slamming their fists into their palms. Undeterred, the girl stood resolute in her protective stance before Zubby, her unwavering commitment evident. ‘Leave him alone. Jim, please,’ she pleaded, her voice carrying a mix of desperation and defiance. In a brutal display of disregard, one of the men seized the girl's arm and roughly shoved her aside, a harsh testament to the escalating tension in the confrontation.

Now, it was just them versus Zubby.

As the thugs closed in around him, Zubby realized the gravity of the situation. These guys could kill me, he muttered to himself, a stark acknowledgment of the gravity of the threat. His heart sank at the thought that he was never going to make his interview with Shell, but a deeper conviction whispered that he had made the right choice by intervening, especially given his personal history. The moral imperative outweighed the personal cost.

Despite the impending storm, Zubby clung to the belief that standing up for what was right was non-negotiable. The inner turmoil, however, manifested in beads of perspiration trickling down his spine. The daunting prospect of the impending confrontation threatened to unravel him, but he was resolute — he refused to give the thugs the satisfaction of witnessing his fear.

With an air of defiance, he addressed the impending clash, mustering the courage to say, 'I see you boys want to play. Okay, let's play.' His words, though spoken with conviction, masked the internal turmoil and rising panic that continued to churn beneath the surface.

He shed his jacket and shirt, baring his determination along with his physique. Turning to the female, he calmly asked, 'Would you mind holding onto these for me?' She took the clothes from him, her grip betraying a subtle tension as she sensed what was about to happen.

Left only in his white vest and trousers, Zubby assumed a defensive stance, fists raised in anticipation. A glimmer of fear danced in the woman's eyes, foreshadowing the imminent clash about to unfold.

As the first thug lunged at him, Zubby skilfully sidestepped, delivering a punishing blow by ramming his right knee into his belly. The thug crumbled to the ground in pain, but this defensive manoeuvre left Zubby vulnerable. The unexpected assault from the second thug caught him off guard, the attacker targeting Zubby's legs with precision.

In an instant, Zubby's valiant resistance crumbled under the force of the assailants' blows, violently propelling him to the unforgiving ground. Faced with an onslaught of merciless attacks, he had no recourse but to assume a foetal position, in an attempt to mitigate the impact of the vicious blows raining down upon him.

As Zubby lay defenceless, the girl's screams pierced the air, a desperate plea to Jim for mercy and intervention.

‘Yeah, right,’ Jim retorted dismissively, before cruelly joining the assault. The merciless onslaught persisted unabated, with Zubby absorbing brutal punches and kicks while sprawled defenceless on the ground. It continued until he succumbed to unconsciousness, his face marred by the splatter of blood from a gash above his right eye—a grim testament to the brutality he endured.

As Zubby lay passed out on the ground, Jim aimed one last kick at his rib cage. 'That'll teach you to mess with me, punk! Now you,' he pointed at the girl with his walking stick, 'get into the fucking car. NOW!'

A fierce look of defiance set in the young lady's face. 'I'm not going anywhere with you.' She hurried over to Zubby and knelt down beside him, crying. 'Look at what you've done to him, you wicked monsters.' 'Enter this car right now before I do something drastic,' Jim snarled through gritted teeth.

‘What? You’re going to beat me again? Go ahead. Beat me again, show everyone what kind of monster you are.’

Jim surveyed his surroundings, his keen eyes taking in the small gathering that had assembled to witness the unfolding drama. The air was charged with tension as onlookers, positioned by their parked cars, cast disdainful glances in his direction. The spectacle of the altercation had drawn their attention like moths to a flame.

Caught in the crosshairs of scrutiny, Jim's mind danced through the options before him. A pregnant pause enveloped him as he considered the consequences of his next move.

With a measured resolve, he lifted his hand in a subtle signal to his thugs as he uttered the words, 'let's go.' The words carried a quiet authority, cutting through the tension like a knife through silk.

Opening the door of his car, Jim slipped into the driver's seat and turned the ignition.

The thugs did the same. As the engines roared in unison, the scene soon dissolved into the rear-view mirror, leaving behind a tableau of lingering glares and unanswered questions.

After Jim and the goons had left, a handful of onlookers rushed to offer assistance. Among them, a formally attired young man, his voice marked by a tinge of concern, remarked, 'Goodness gracious, he looks awful. What in heaven's name happened?'

'Please, help me get him to a hospital,' the young lady pleaded, desperation etching lines on her face. 'They attacked us, and he tried to protect me. They wanted to kill him.'

A moment of shared understanding passed between them as the gravity of the situation sank in. The urgency of the plea hung in the air, pressing the good Samaritan into swift action.

'I believe there's a clinic nearby, the Etta Atlantic,' he offered, his voice steady and reassuring. 'Let's get him into my car.' The suggestion carried a practical resolve, a beacon of hope amid the chaos.

Feeling as though he had been dragged into a deep, dense fog, Zubby slipped in and out of consciousness. He winced as they helped him to his feet. He felt as though his bones were filled with pins, and his vest was crimson with his blood.

With a collective effort, they lifted him into the sanctuary of the benevolent stranger's backseat.

The young woman, her demeanour a mix of compassion and determination, cradled a handkerchief in her delicate hands, and carefully applied it to Zubby's wounded right eyebrow.

'I'm Frederick.'

'Genevieve. It's a pleasure to meet you, Frederick. Thank you ever so much for choosing to help us. You look like you were on your way to work.'

'Yes, I was, but that's not a big deal. Good thing I stopped by the mall. This guy needs help right now. Is he your boyfriend, husband...'

'No, I don't even know who he is,' she said in a voice thick with emotion. 'I was being assaulted, and he stepped in to help me. He put his life on the line for me. I feel so bad about what just happened to him. There was nothing I could do. I begged them to stop, but they just carried on beating him.'

Her voice trembled with anger as she replayed the harrowing incident in her mind.

'Eh yah, I'm sorry to hear that.'

It was about half a mile to the hospital. Fortunately, there was little traffic on the road that morning, and Genevieve breathed a huge sigh of relief when, at last, the Etta Atlantic came into view.

At the clinic's front desk, Genevieve was asked to make a deposit of 50,000 naira to secure a treatment bed, which she paid without hesitation.

As the young woman behind the counter efficiently processed the payment, she asked to see Zubby's ID, explaining that it was required by law for anyone with severe injuries. 'We can't treat him unless we see his ID,' she insisted.

At that point, Genevieve realized that Zubby's ID might be in his wallet or his messenger bag, which she had brought along. She looked through the bag and found the requested identification, discovering in the process that his name was Zubby Johnson, and he was 25 years old.

Beyond the formalities, the bag held the unexpected weight of a life unfolding—Zubby's CV and an interview letter lay within, which she read. A poignant realization washed over her as she absorbed the cruel twist of fate: Zubby had sacrificed a potential opportunity with a world-class company like Shell Oil to protect her.

The weight of his sacrifice resonated as Genevieve grappled with the profound implications of his selfless act. The clinic, a stage for healing, became an inadvertent arena of revelation, exposing the collateral damage borne by a man who had placed his aspirations on hold to safeguard another's well-being.

As the hospital staff ushered Zubby on a gurney through to the treatment room, Genevieve retraced her steps to re-join Frederick.

'So, what have you decided to do?' Frederick asked.

Her response carried the weight of her newfound understanding. 'I will remain by his side until he wakes up. I've just discovered how much he sacrificed for me. The least I can do is ensure he's okay.'

Frederick, acknowledging the gravity of the situation, spoke with a pragmatic reassurance. 'I understand. Well, my guess is that he'll be fine because he looks like a very fit and strong young man. I'm afraid I'll have to shoot off now; I'm already pretty late for work.'

‘I understand, Frederick. Thank you ever so much for your help. I’m very grateful,’ she expressed, a sense of gratitude infusing her farewell.

After Zubby had been examined, Genevieve found herself seated in the doctor's office, the weight of the recent events pressing on her. The doctor, upon inspecting Zubby's battered state, voiced his concern, ‘My goodness, what a beating this guy took. What happened?’

She recounted the harrowing encounter with a heavy heart. ‘Yes, he was attacked by three savages. They wanted to kill him.’

The doctor, still reeling from the account, sought clarity. ‘You saw the whole thing?’

‘Yes,’ she nodded. ‘Doctor, I did.’

Concern etched the doctor's voice as he shifted focus to her well-being. ‘Jesus, are you okay? I can see some finger marks across your cheeks. Why don’t you let me check you out?’

‘Oh no, doctor, I’m fine, and I have him to thank for that. It could have been much worse,’ she reassured, her gratitude evident.

The doctor, with a mix of empathy and professionalism, detailed Zubby's injuries. Despite the severity, he offered solace: ‘He is in excellent physical condition. I am confident he will make a full recovery; there is nothing to worry about. It may take him a few weeks to get back to normal, but he’ll be as good as new in 4 to 6 weeks, maybe even sooner.’

Relief washed over Genevieve; her eyes welled with tears. ‘I’m so happy to hear that, Doctor. I beg of you, please do everything you can for him. Money is not an issue. This guy saved my life in so many ways, and I will pay the bill, no matter the cost. I just want him to be okay.’

‘You don’t have to worry. His wounds are somewhat severe, but they are mainly superficial. The really good news is that there is no

damage to his internal organs. As a result, he won't require any surgery,' the doctor reassured, addressing her concerns.

He also assured her that the deposit she had paid covered the full cost of treatment and provided a comforting outlook. 'For now, I've given him a sedative so that he can get a complete rest. However, you will be able to speak with him tomorrow. You can come back around midday. By then, he should be fully awake. However, he will still be a little weak, with a few aches and pains.'

Genevieve again declined the doctor's offer to examine her, expressing, 'no, doctor. Honestly, I'm fine. I just need to rest for a little while. I'll be back tomorrow. Thank you so much for everything, Doctor.'

'I'm glad to help. I look forward to seeing you again tomorrow,' the doctor concluded, sealing their exchange with a sense of hope and healing.

The sense of relief Genevieve felt was palpable. She was naturally inclined to fear the worst. But even though Zubby's injuries sounded quite serious, she was relieved to hear that he would make a complete recovery.

She returned to Zubby's room, hung his jacket on a rack, and placed his other belongings on a table. Suddenly, she was interrupted by the sound of a ringing phone. It seemed to be coming from Zubby's jacket pocket.

She fished out the phone and answered it: 'Hello, this is Zubby's phone, who's this please?'

This is Chidi. Can I speak to Zubby?'

'Hi, I'm Genevieve. I'm a friend of Zubby's. I'm afraid there's been a little accident and Zubby cannot answer the phone right now. He's been admitted to hospital.'

'Accident? Hospital? Is he okay?'

'Yes, he is perfectly fine,' Genevieve said reassuringly. 'He's just resting. The doctor says he'll be free to leave in a day or so.'

'Oh, thank God. You had me worried for a minute,' Chidi said with a sigh of relief.

'Are you his brother, friend...'

'Well, I'm a close friend, I'm also his housemate, Chidi.'

'Oh, I see. Well, as I said, there's nothing to worry about...He's going to be fine.'

'And you are...?'

'I'm Genevieve. We haven't met. I look forward to meeting you soon.'

'Likewise. But I thought I knew all of Zubby's friends. He's never mentioned you.'

'We only met today. It's a long story...'

'Oh, okay. Well, please tell Zubby I called. I was hoping to find out how... never mind. I'll speak to him tomorrow anyway. Thanks.'

'Thank you. See you soon,' she said and hung up. She then tucked Zubby's phone back into his jacket pocket.

A few minutes later, Genevieve pulled out her phone, ordered an Uber, and left the clinic.

For a brief moment, Zubby wondered if he had died as he struggled to sit up. Even though he was awake, he was unable to move or speak.

He could feel his ragged breathing and his heart beating a little fast.

No, he wasn't dead. But he seemed to be lost.

He tried to pull his thoughts together.

As it turned out, he was in fact experiencing sleep paralysis and awoke shortly afterwards. There was, however, an air of confusion around him.

He tried to make sense of where he was.

Where am I?...

What was I doing before I got here?

As he struggled to a sitting position in bed, he felt the heaviest, most pounding migraine of his entire life. His head felt as if someone was banging it with a hammer. He lifted his hand to feel his forehead, then saw...

His hand.

It was covered in bandages and had an IV sticking out of it.

With a shudder of revulsion, Zubby impulsively tried to sit up again, but this time he triggered pain in his torso, particularly his ribs. His horror mounted. He couldn't move.

'What in God's name happened to me?'

He glanced around and forced himself to focus on his surroundings... the plain white walls... the sounds of ET machines.

He was in a hospital!?!

He frantically tried to get up again, but the more he tried to move, the worse the pain became. There was nothing he could do.

A flood of painful memories came rushing back to him as he remembered the fight. A sigh of despair escaped his lips. It felt like his head was splitting and he was nauseous. Obviously, he had been given too many painkillers.

In vain, he attempted to get up once more. It was at this point that he decided it would be best to simply lie still. Within minutes, he was dead to the world and sleeping peacefully.

Just after 10 AM the following morning, Genevieve arrived at the hospital with a change of clothes and toiletries for Zubby.

Upon entering his room, Genevieve was taken aback to find Zubby already up. At the sight of him, Genevieve felt a current of electricity run through her, as if she'd just touched a live wire.

He was a startling sight after his overnight medical treatment — two swollen black eyes that looked horrible, a head wrapped in an enormous bandage, a plaster cast shielding his fractured nose, and a large dressing covering the cut above his right eye. He also had a bandage lightly wound around his rib cage.

Seeing the extent of his injuries, Genevieve couldn't hold back the tears. In the midst of his suffering, the feeling of guilt she felt as a result of what he had endured on her behalf overwhelmed her. She said tearfully, 'Zubby, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.'

Upon seeing Genevieve again, Zubby felt an almost joyous surge of adrenaline and excitement inside him. Yet her distress troubled him. 'Stop

crying, please,' he urged. 'Nothing that has happened was your fault, okay?' She was so beautiful, he thought.

At a charming 5 feet 4 inches, Genevieve exuded an innate radiance that captivated Zubby's senses. Her expressive almond-shaped eyes, adorned with perfectly arched eyebrows, conveyed a myriad of emotions, offering glimpses into her kind and sensitive nature. The flawless mocha-toned complexion added an exquisite touch of elegance to her overall appearance, enhancing her allure.

'How do you feel, Zubby?' She asked softly.

He forced a smile that looked more like a grimace: 'I'm not feeling too bad, apart from a few aches and pains,' he groaned. 'I'm sure I look terrible.'

'No, you don't, you look fine. The doctor said you're very strong and healthy, and that your wounds will heal quickly because you're in such tremendous physical shape.'

'Yeah. I feel almost ready to go back home. To be honest, I have always hated the smell of hospitals. As a result, I try to avoid them as much as I can,' he shared, wincing as though talking was a painful exercise.

'Not so fast, Zubby. The doctor said you'll have to be here for a couple of days.'

'A couple of days?' He glanced nervously around the room. 'I can't afford to be here for a couple of days,' he said, a worried expression crossing his face. 'I—'

'Relax, Zubby,' she reassured. 'Don't worry about the hospital bill. It's all taken care of. You just need to focus on getting better.'

‘Really? Wow, thanks so much. That’s so kind of you.’ Zubby breathed a sigh of relief but grimaced as he felt a sharp pain in his chest.

‘You’re welcome. It’s the least I could do after everything you went through for me.’

Concerned about his family, Genevieve asked, ‘what about your siblings, parents, Zubby? Is there someone I can call?’

Genevieve sensed his discomfort at the mention of his parents, regretting the question immediately. ‘I’m sorry, I...’

‘No, it’s okay, I’m an only child. I just can’t talk about my parents right now. What about you? Have you told your parents what happened to you?’

‘No, not yet. I am going to tell them, but not just yet. I will have to take you to meet them. They will want to thank you personally for what you did for me.’

‘How about you? Are you okay? You took quite a beating from that creep,’ Zubby remarked with disdain, flinching instinctively as he recalled the incident.

‘My friend, I completely understand your perspective. There are moments in life when we make regrettable choices. You’ve been a lifesaver in numerous ways, and I’ll forever appreciate that. Can I give you a hug? Don’t worry, I’ll be extra-gentle.’

‘Of course, you can,’ he replied.

Mindful of his pain, Genevieve enveloped Zubby in a calming, gentle embrace. Careful not to exert any pressure, she smiled as she held him, expressing her gratitude.

As they broke the hug ever so gently, Zubby said, 'I don't even know your name.'

'I'm Genevieve. Genevieve Asabia.'

'Zubby Johnson. 5ft 9 inches tall, Virgo.'

'Do you always introduce yourself like that?' A radiant smile graced her face, revealing a set of pearly white teeth that added a touch of class to her natural elegance.

'Nice to meet you, Zubby.' *Even with the bruising and swelling on his face, he was quite good looking,* she thought. 'I honestly didn't know there were still guys like you around.'

'I really had no choice. There was no way I was going to stand back and let something like that happen. I would do it again,' he said defiantly.

'Your housemate called,' Genevieve suddenly remembered. 'I answered the phone. I didn't tell him what happened, I just told him you had been in a little accident but will be back home very soon.'

'Oh, okay.'

'I also know about the interview you had with Shell. I found the letter in your bag when I was looking for your ID. I feel so terrible.'

Zubby looked at her and said, 'Please don't start blaming yourself. Stuff happens. What matters most is you're okay. I also have the interviewer's phone number. When I get better, I'll reach out to her and explain what happened. We'll see what she says.'

Would you mind if I called her to explain what happened? I'm sure she's wondering why you never turned up.'

'That's a good idea. Her phone number is on the interview letter.'

‘Yes, I know. I’ll give her a call later today. I’ll just get the letter.’

Taking the letter out of Zubby's bag, Genevieve copied the interviewer's name and number into her phone.

‘Ok, I’m going to leave now,’ Genevieve said, smiling at the look of disappointment on Zubby's face. ‘I can stop by later after work, if you want.’

‘I would love that,’ he said with a little more enthusiasm than he meant. ‘I’m missing you already right now, and you haven’t even left.’

‘Well, you need to rest, and I need to get back to the office. I’ll be back later.’

True to her word, Genevieve returned just after 7 PM to spend some time with Zubby.

The simple act of being together brought a sense of comfort, even though words were sparse.

In the early days of their connection, Genevieve felt a growing bond with Zubby. She respected his privacy but sensed they were on the brink of something extraordinary. The thought excited her, promising a journey they would embark on together.

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In the ensuing weeks, Genevieve dedicated herself to the gradual restoration of Zubby's well-being until he returned to normal. His remarkable physical fitness defied the initial prognosis, allowing him to rebound with an agility that left the medical predictions trailing in his swift recovery.

Even after Zubby's triumphant return to full health, their companionship persisted, unveiling subtleties that went beyond the ordeal they had endured together.

During one of their routine outings, Genevieve resolved to broach the delicate subject of Zubby's parents. She sensed a palpable sensitivity in him regarding this topic, and a profound curiosity drove her to unravel the mystery shrouding his reticence.

‘What about your parents?’ she asked quietly, choosing her words with care. ‘Could you please tell me what happened that makes you so sensitive to talking about them?’

Zubby's gaze fell to his hands, fingers intertwined as if wrestling with the weight of uncomfortable memories.

‘Zubby?’

Genevieve pressed gently, recognizing that beneath the surface lay a narrative that had profoundly shaped him, a story he had been guarding.

After a contemplative pause, Zubby decided to share the untold chapters of his past with Genevieve. His voice carried a sombre weight as he began to unravel the painful tapestry of his childhood: ‘I watched my father beat my mother to death when I was a child.’

‘Holy Mary, Mother of God!’ Genevieve instinctively crossed herself, a reflexive gesture triggered by the gravity of Zubby's revelation. A wave of horror swept over her as she listened intently to the heart-wrenching account. The unfolding story laid bare the haunting roots from which Zubby had grown, offering Genevieve a profound understanding of the man he had become.

As the echoes of Zubby's words lingered in the air, Genevieve's heart swelled with empathy and sorrow. In that moment, their connection deepened, tethered by shared vulnerability and an unspoken acknowledgment of the resilience it took for Zubby to transcend the scars of his past.

The weight of the past bore heavily on Zubby's shoulders as he recounted the haunting details of his traumatic childhood. 'I was 12 years old,' he began, his voice tinged with a mixture of pain and vulnerability. 'When my father was made redundant, he practically changed overnight. He drank heavily and subjected my mother to relentless physical and emotional abuse, as if unleashing his rage over losing his job on her.'

Each time I tried to intervene, he unleashed a torrent of kicks, slaps, punches, on me. The pain became unbearable, so I backed off, terrified of the repercussions that followed my attempts to fight for my mum.'

Zubby's gaze turned distant as he revisited the nightmarish memories. 'I got sick of hearing my mother cry almost every night, begging him to stop. Instead of doing something, I just cried. I covered my ears and cried, my heart aching as I pleaded with him to stop.'

The weight of guilt pressed heavily on him. 'There was nowhere she could go, no one who could help her. I feel that my mother died because I was a coward. I feel I let her down by not standing up for her.'

As she absorbed his heart-wrenching tale with tears welling in her eyes, Genevieve clasped his hands firmly in hers, mirroring the profound sorrow etched on his face.

'In the wake of her passing, I experienced vivid flashbacks of my mother's tearful moments every time I tried to sleep. I vowed to never let any woman down as I did my mother. When I saw that guy assault you, I felt an overpowering force take over.'

In that raw moment, Genevieve tightened her grip on Zubby's hands. Her eyes held an intensity that mirrored the depth of her empathy.

'Zubby, I'm so sorry for the horrific experience you suffered through, but it's not your fault that your mother died. You weren't a coward. You were still only a child, and the situation was beyond your

control. Your father is totally responsible for what you are blaming yourself for.'

She continued with quiet but firm resolve,

'I appreciate what you did for me, really, I do. However, those guys who attacked you could've killed you. You cannot continue to put your life at risk because you feel guilty for something you were not even responsible for in the first place. You aren't being fair to yourself at all. Your mother wouldn't like that.'

Zubby absorbed her words, his gaze meeting hers in a silent exchange of understanding that transcended the spoken. 'I hear what you're saying Genevieve, but I just can't help feeling the way I do,' he said tearfully.

'What eventually happened to your dad?'

'He got life at Kiri Kiri prison. My only satisfaction is that what he's going through right now, is much worse than what my mother had to endure from him because he is living with hardened criminals who are surely making his life a living hell.'

'And I remember you mentioned you're an only child?'

'Actually, I have a sister who's lived in the US her entire life. She left Nigeria when I was 5 years old, and hasn't been back since. I don't even remember what she looks like. If I saw her today, I wouldn't recognize her. But enough about me, what about you?'

'Well, I am currently doing my youth service. I graduated from the University of Lagos with a first in law. Right now, I work for a big law firm in Victoria Island.'

'So, how did you end up entangled with that creep? I just can't understand the connection between you both.'

'The law firm I work for had him as a client. I handled all of the legalities for his purchase of an apartment in Eko Atlantic City. One day, I was in a store, and the guy surprised me by paying for everything I wanted. It seemed so thoughtful and gracious at the time, but he believed I owed him something after that. He constantly tried to get me to go out with him, but I wasn't interested in the slightest.

That day, we were on our way to a business meeting and decided to make a quick stop at the mall at Lekki. It was then that he brandished first-class tickets to Dubai. He wanted to fly me there for my birthday weekend.

However, I politely declined his gift. He became really angry, and that's when all that drama unfolded. Anyway, I really don't want to talk about that guy ever again. That chapter is closed forever.'

Their eyes locked, a silent conversation flowing between them. It was not just any silence but a comfortable one, an unspoken understanding that wrapped them in a cocoon of tranquillity. Hours had slipped away unnoticed in the midst of their animated conversation, a testament to the ease with which they connected.

'Goodness gracious, is that the time?'

'It's true what they say: time flies when you're having fun. It's so much fun just to spend time with you, Genevieve.'

She placed her hand on Zubby's, a tender smile playing on her lips as she gazed into his eyes. 'I'm glad to hear that because that's exactly how I feel.'

In the soft glow of the evening, with an air laden with unspoken emotions, the world outside seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them immersed in the magic of a shared moment.

Genevieve's parents were accomplished chartered accountants who ran a thriving private practice. Their residence was a pearly white, architecturally exquisite 5-bedroom haven framed by meticulously manicured grounds, nestled within a gated and secure community on Victoria Island.

In a gesture of gratitude, they extended an invitation to Zubby for a Sunday afternoon luncheon. Genevieve, sporting her trademark smile, picked him up at 2:00 PM in her vibrant yellow Volkswagen Beetle.

During their journey to Victoria Island, the sky transformed into a sombre grey-blue, foreshadowing the imminent deluge of monsoon rains that typically plunged Lagos drivers into a tumult of utter panic. Fortunately, traffic was light, and their journey remained unhindered by the impending weather.

A cheerful gateman welcomed Genevieve and Zubby as they entered the compound. Following the driveway flanked by dense bushes, trees, and shrubs, they reached a courtyard where they parked. Genevieve's bungalow, separated from the main house by a luxuriant garden adorned with stone fountains, exuded an air of tranquillity and elegance.

Genevieve's family included a younger brother who was currently studying business at Buckingham University in the UK. Her father, Olu Asabia, stood over six feet tall, a distinguished yet youthful-looking man of 61, impeccably dressed and effortlessly dapper. A full but tidy and well-groomed beard, almost fully grey, adorned his face.

The moment he spotted them entering the lobby, he hurried over to Zubby and enveloped him in a hearty bear hug. A wide grin illuminated his face as he said, 'Zubby, thank you so much for coming. Genevieve told us everything you did for her. I genuinely can't thank you enough.'

Zubby humbly replied, 'Thank you, sir, it was my pleasure.'

Genevieve's mother, a clear reflection of her daughter, exuded beauty and grace. Adorned in horn-rimmed glasses and a meticulously crafted kaftan gown made of guinea brocade, she welcomed Zubby with a warm hug and a radiant smile.

There was a softness and probing in the brown, almond-shaped eyes that mirrored her daughter's. It was evident that Genevieve had inherited more than just physical traits from her mother; the warmth and curiosity in those eyes spoke of a shared depth that transcended mere resemblance.

The Asabias graciously ushered Zubby into their plush and inviting home. Clearly fond of African art, they adorned their home with an assortment of masterpieces by renowned African artists. The hallway and lounge boasted an array of elegant murals and woodcarvings.

'Lunch will be ready soon,' Genevieve's mother announced. As she hurried to the kitchen to complete the meal preparations, she invited Genevieve to join her. This left the two men alone in the living room, providing an opportunity for them to acquaint themselves.

'I have something for you,' said Mr Asabia. Taking out an envelope from his shirt pocket, he passed it to Zubby. 'Go ahead, open it.' Zubby obliged and found a stack of bank notes inside, which he later learned was ₦500,000. 'This is just a small token of appreciation for what you did for my precious daughter.'

Zubby was pleasantly surprised and humbled. 'Thank you very much sir, I'm truly grateful, but I would have done the same for any woman I encountered in a similar situation,' he replied politely.

'What a refreshing thing to hear,' Olu remarked. It's an honour to meet you, young man. Not enough people think like that. I can't thank you enough for what you did.'

'I am more than grateful for your gift, sir,' he replied.

‘Can I get you something to drink? We have beer, whiskey, brandy, champagne, soft drinks... What would you like?’

‘A glass of cold water would be fine sir, thank you sir.’

‘Water?’ ‘No guest has ever asked for just water among the many I have entertained.’

‘Well sir, I lost two people I held in the highest regard because of alcohol. As a result, I steer clear of any alcoholic beverages. It may sound unusual, but that's just how it is for me.

‘How interesting,’ Olu said thoughtfully. I respect how you feel, Zubby. Water it is.’

He asked a servant to bring Zubby a glass of iced water. ‘So, tell me about yourself, Zubby. What’s your background?’

‘I’m an Economics graduate. I studied at the University of Maiduguri.’

‘Up North? It’s become quite dangerous on that side.’

‘Yes, it has. Fortunately, I left just before the terrorists began their reign of terror.’

‘Thank goodness you were not caught up in that situation and were able to complete your education. Our government seems helpless in the face of these terrible circumstances.’ His voice was full of regret as he shook his head and said, ‘I have no idea where we’re headed as a nation.’

Olu continued to uncover Zubby’s true nature as a man. He was careful not to ask any questions about his parents because Genevieve had mentioned that he was very sensitive about them.

Genevieve re-entered the room after a few minutes and announced that lunch was ready. They ate in the large dining room, with sunlight glowing from the sinking sun illuminating the room. It was a cheerful meal, gay and full of laughter.

With the meal over, Genevieve and her mother cleared the table with the help of a servant. Though Zubby offered to assist, he was instead ushered into the living room to join Olu in watching an English Premier League football. Olu shared Zubby's passion for football, making the prospect of the match a delightful shared experience.

Soon after the game ended, Zubby thought it was time to head home. Genevieve's parents said their goodbyes, and once again expressed their heartfelt appreciation for what he did for their daughter. In response, he thanked them again for their kind gift, delicious lunch, and wonderful evening.

They then arranged for Zubby to be driven home. Genevieve saw him off. 'Thank you for a wonderful evening,' he said. 'Your parents are lovely.'

'Yes, they are, and they loved you. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself.'

Zubby and Genevieve exchanged a brief hug before he boarded the car, swiftly being whisked away to his home on the Lagos mainland.

2

CYCLES OF RESCUE

'Endings bring new beginnings. Love has many truths. And knights come in all colours.' —DIANNA HARDY

Zainab Balogun casually strolled into the Leventis grocery store on Lagos Island, her shopping list neatly cradled between two impeccably manicured fingers. Car keys dangled from her pinky, while her free hand scrolled through messages on her phone.

With an athletic and finely tuned physique, her smooth, caramel complexion was bathed in the artificial glow of the fluorescent-lit aisles of the supermarket, radiating a rich, ethereal beauty. Exquisite cascading curls framed her face, adding a touch of glamour to her overall allure, creating a captivating presence.

Once a month, Zainab embarked on her grocery shopping on a Sunday night, strategically dodging the relentless Lagos heat. The sun in Lagos seemed to harbour a grudge, scorching everyone in its path. It was a stark contrast to the temperate climate of the UK where she spent her formative years.

Despite her long-standing dream of returning to Nigeria, she hadn't anticipated the intensity of the sun's scorching rays. She would rather endure hunger than shop during the day, unwilling to subject her skin, which she invested so much in caring for, to the unforgiving wrath of the sun.

Her well-intentioned parents suggested the practicality of hiring a maid for handling chores like this, but she adamantly refused. Entrusting her personal matters to a maid in this city unsettled her, given the disconcerting tales frequently featured in the news — whether it was about theft or even child abduction. The prospect drained her energy, and she held her privacy in high regard.

Her disdain deepened as another message filtered through. ‘What’s his problem?’ she muttered. Ramsey informed her that he couldn’t provide the inventory records she had requested. She pursed her lips, annoyed. Zainab wondered why she was even concerned about this in the first place. After all, as the HR manager, checking on inventory wasn’t her primary responsibility.

Maybe it was her perfectionist side coming to play. She refused to function in an environment where standards were compromised, and she took it upon herself to ensure just that. As a result, she found herself delving into details that extended beyond her designated role.

Zainab: ‘But, I gave you a lot of time to deliver. What’s the matter this time?’

Ramsey: ‘I’m sorry, something personal came up.’

Zainab: ‘Not good enough, Ramsey.’

She sighed as she reached a platform where the shopping trolleys were. Grabbing a trolley, she freed her hands of her bag and car keys, placing them neatly in the trolley’s tray.

There was a time she had been into this guy, Ramsey. Tall, good-looking – he seemed to check all the boxes. However, there was a significant catch; he was under her, and she was his boss.

Navigating a relationship with a co-worker was already tricky, but being in a position of authority added another layer of complexity. The thought of dealing with office gossip and the attention that would

accompany such an intricate dynamic deterred her. She simply had no time for that kind of distraction.

She began loading her purchases. Glancing at the time, it was already a few minutes past 8 PM. Consulting her shopping list, she roamed the aisles, meticulously checking labels and filling the trolley. Buying in bulk meant it would be brimming in no time.

It had been an exceptionally lucrative week for Jim. In just five days, he raked in over \$50,000 without lifting a finger. Beyond his remarkable success as an online Forex trader, Jim exploited budding entrepreneurs with his investment scam, strategically marketed on social media platforms.

His scheme enticed victims with the promise of a 1000% return within 72 hours after a mere \$499 initial investment fee. Jim enticed his victims, predominantly young males in their 20s and 30s, with promises to trade Bitcoin and Forex on their behalf using his advanced AI trading robots.

Thousands of ambitious young men worldwide, longing for rapid wealth, fell prey to the scam by pictures and videos of Jim in exotic locations across the globe. Each day, he shared authentic videos showcasing his robots engaged in live trading on trading platforms.

Complementing these were captivating images of his substantial trading accounts, flaunting multimillion-dollar balances. The allure of his charismatic social media profiles, coupled with persuasive video testimonials prompted a multitude of young men to invest in the scheme.

Unfortunately, the promised returns materialized only for investors with substantial social media followings capable of promoting the scheme through video testimonials. The rest received little or nothing in return.

That evening, Jim, basking in the purported triumph of the scheme, made his way to the Leventis grocery store to buy some champagne, gearing up for a night of celebratory revelry.

Jim arrived at the store just as Zainab was completing her grocery shopping. He was on the phone bragging to his friend, Michael, about how well the scam was working.

‘I swear, it's just like taking candy from a baby, dude. By the way, what time are you coming over tonight?’

‘Around 11:30. Quilox is open tonight, so I’m thinking we can probably turn up around 1 AM.’

‘That’s fine with me.’

Jim placed two bottles of Dom Perignon and three bottles of Hennessy into his trolley. While heading towards the counter, he caught a glimpse of Zainab, who was in the process of paying for her groceries. Sensing a trace of distress in her demeanour, he opted to conclude the call with Michael and focus on attending to her.

‘Dude, I’ve got to go. I’ve just spotted a lovely damsel in distress that looks like she needs my immediate assistance. I’ll talk to you later.’

Ending the call with Michael, Jim approached a visibly frantic Zainab to understand the cause of her distress.

‘Would that be cash or credit, ma'am?’ The store clerk asked.

‘Card,’ she replied as she reached into her shoulder bag to grab her purse. Suddenly, she froze. There was no sign of her purse! Her heart leapt to her throat as she frantically emptied the contents of her bag on the counter. She had lost her purse, and with it her ID, bankcards, credit cards, and everything else in it.

Her mind racing, she tried to recall all the places she had visited earlier. She had made a brief stop at the petrol station on her way to the supermarket. After paying for petrol, she had left the bag in the passenger seat for a brief moment to check on the spare tyre in the boot of her car.

‘I guess that's when I got robbed’, she muttered to herself.

Frustration etched across her face, she exclaimed, ‘My purse has been stolen,’ in her thick, distinctive British accent.

She wasn't concerned about money being stolen from her bank accounts - just irritated. A thief would need her pin number to access any of the cards in her purse, and she never carried cash. Right now, her immediate concern was that she would not be able to pay for her shopping.

‘Well, I’m sorry to hear that, ma’am,’ the store cashier said sourly, ‘but there are customers waiting behind you.’

The growing impatience of the people behind her intensified, and their piercing glares burned holes in her back. Zainab, usually unfazed by attention, found this different — it was both embarrassing and inconvenient. Angry tears pricked the corner of her eyes.

Jim decided to step in at this point. ‘I will pay for all of her shopping. The least you could do is show some sympathy, instead of making the poor lady feel worse than she already is,’ he said with a smile directed at Zainab. ‘Put everything on my tab, including my drinks.’

All eyes shifted to Jim as he wheeled his trolley to the front, loaded his purchases onto the counter, and handed his credit card to the cashier.

Zainab, still in disbelief, found her voice when he finished and looked at him with a grateful smile. ‘I’m ever so grateful,’ she said. ‘I’ll need your contact details so I can pay you back, Mr...’

'I'm Jim,' he interrupted, smiling back at her. 'Don't worry about paying me back; it's been my pleasure. Whenever you're free, let's have dinner or something. And you're...'

'I'm 'Zainab. Nice to meet you Jim,' she smiled as she raised her hand to shake his.

With his outlandish mohawk and over-the-top attire, Jim was a stark contrast to Zainab's preferences in a partner. Under ordinary circumstances, she wouldn't have given him a second glance. But the least she could do was be courteous to him. After all, the guy just saved her from one almighty headache.

'Likewise,' he said as his eyes crudely swept her shapely body. He slipped something into her palm.

'Here's my card. I'll be expecting your call.'

They loaded their shopping back into their trollies and exited the store together.

Outside the store, Zainab watched Jim drive away in his exquisite Range Rover Sport. She then loaded her groceries into the trunk of her car. Settling inside, she inserted the key into the ignition and attempted to start the car. However, the engine refused to cooperate, roaring briefly before sputtering out like a diseased animal. She twisted and twisted until she thought the car would explode if she continued.

'What is it this time?' she exclaimed aloud, clearly irritated. Her day had already been marred by the theft of her purse, and the subsequent supermarket scene, and now this. 'It's just not my day,' she cried, slamming the steering wheel in frustration with both hands.

Ominous thoughts ravaged her mind as she stood stranded outside a grocery store on a Sunday night with a non-functional car. It was overwhelming. Sighing, she stepped out of the car and leaned against it, closing her eyes. She was so overcome by her emotions that she didn't notice the Mazda MX-5 Convertible that had pulled up beside her.

As Zainab opened her eyes, she found herself met with a warm gaze from the man in the car. He glanced at her briefly and then shifted his attention to the car. Caught off guard by the unexpected audience, she straightened up and stared awkwardly.

In the next instant, he stepped out of his car. At 5 feet 7 inches, Godson wasn't tall, yet he exuded a commanding aura that seemed to lock her in place.

Besides his striking handsomeness, he was fair-skinned and impeccably groomed. His gaze was sharp, pinning her on the spot. He wore a black polo shirt that clung to finely sculpted muscles and his shorts revealed strong, muscular legs. His angular jaw was clean-shaven, and his hair was cut into a sleek crew cut.

There was a gleam in his eyes that made her want to know what he was thinking. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, a distinctive feature that stood out as one of his most prominent attributes.

He gave her a small smile and shifted his attention to her car. 'You look like you're having a bit of a problem here.'

'Y-y-yeah,' she cleared her throat. Why was she suddenly so flustered? Heat spread through her neck to her face and she became more conscious of herself.

'Mind if I take a look?' He asked.

'Sure,' she nodded and stepped aside as he moved towards her car.

Godson popped open the bonnet and tinkered with a few components inside. Climbing into the car, he tried to start the engine, but all it produced was a metallic clicking sound. After the unsuccessful attempt, he peered under the bonnet once more. When he eventually looked at her, there was a smile on his face, offering a glimmer of hope that the issue might not be too serious.

‘You have a flat battery, that’s all.’

She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized it wasn't anything more serious.

‘Not to worry, I can jumpstart your car with mine.’

She didn't understand what he meant. ‘Sorry, I don’t know anything about cars. How are you going to handle that?’

‘Give me a minute,’ he said and disappeared into his car. After switching off his car’s engine, he pulled out a jumper cable. Next, he opened the bonnet, searched for the negative and positive terminals, and plugged the cable into his car’s battery. He then connected the other ends to her car’s battery.

When he was done, he instructed her to get into the car and start the engine. It roared back to life, leaving her overwhelmed with relief. Expressing her gratitude, she began, ‘Thank you so much, Mr...’

‘I’m Godson,’ He stretched out his hand and took her palm in a handshake. She loved the feel of his skin against hers. It was surprisingly soft compared to his tough-looking outer exterior.

‘I’m Zainab,’ she said. A thought was forming in her mind. She couldn't just let this man that made her feel butterflies disappear without a trace. He intrigued her, drew her to him. She decided to do something she'd never done before. ‘Um... can we exchange numbers, if you don’t mind.’

He grinned. 'Actually, I wanted to ask the same thing but I wasn't sure how you would take it.' They exchanged numbers, exchanged smiles as they settled into their respective cars, and drove off in different directions. Each found themselves contemplating the encounter with the other.

Expressing her gratitude, Zainab had sent Jim a polite text, thanking him for standing up for her at the supermarket. However, he now wanted to pursue a romantic relationship with her, and she was not at all interested. But Jim wasn't taking no for an answer. Despite her clear and explicit refusals, Jim persistently showered her with lavish gifts, hoping to influence her feelings towards him through material gestures.

Unmoved, she flatly refused to go out with him, but instead of getting the message, he continued to inundate her with more gifts. His persistent advances and relentless gift-giving began to drive her to frustration. She started rejecting the gifts, becoming increasingly exasperated with his persistence. She no longer wanted any association with him.

One day during her lunch break, she decided she would spend it at her 2-bedroom flat in the 1004 estate in Victoria Island, a convenient less-than-20-minute drive from her workplace.

As she prepared to leave work, a familiar face appeared in front of her as she grabbed the handle of the store's entrance. Her heart did somersaults in her chest: Godson was standing in front of her with his usual easy smile in place.

'Hey, Zainab,' he said as he pushed the door open.

She took her time to inhale his cologne. She almost lost her guard. If she could, she would melt into his embrace and stay like that for more

than normal. But aware she was at work, she pulled away from hugging, smiling instead and shaking his hand.

Godson held on to her palm, caressing it with his thumb. It looked like he was doing it absentmindedly.

Delightful spikes of nerves rushed up her arm. She bit back the smile threatening to grow.

‘I’ve not heard from you in a while,’ he said, studying her face.

Her eyes shifted elsewhere as she became self-conscious. ‘Oh, well. I’ve been busy, sort of.’

He pinched his lips and nodded in acknowledgement. ‘So where are you off to?’

‘I’m on my lunch break actually, and I was considering spending it at home.’ She tucked her hair behind her ears.

‘Oh,’ he turned to the car in the corner. ‘That’s your car, I remember. It’s working fine now, right?’

‘Actuallyyyy... it stopped working this morning. So, I was going to call a Uber to take me home.’

He briefly looked at the car. ‘That’s tough.’ He stroked his chin and fixed his gaze on her. ‘Listen, how about I take you somewhere nice for lunch? You’ll love the food.’

The statement caused her heart to trip. She bit back the gasp that threatened to escape from her throat and the shock made her take steps backwards. Her shocked expression must have surprised him. He grabbed her palms and moved an inch closer.

‘I mean, if you don’t want to, I’ll mind my business,’ he said and then chuckled nervously.

‘Oh no. I’m sorry if I surprised you. I just wasn’t expecting that. But you were going in to get something weren’t you?’

‘Yeah, but that can wait. You’re more important right now.’

She cleared her throat and turned her face so her hair covered the smile blooming on her lips.

‘Okay, thank you.’ All the while, she was highly aware of his palms covering hers as he continued drawing circles with his thumb. He moved from the entrance, giving her way to pass through. But as they were walking towards his car, the delivery courier suddenly appeared. Her expression soured. Not again, she groaned. What will it take to get this guy to stop? Jim's relentless pursuit had evolved from a mild irritation to a troubling nuisance.

Quickly, the courier, who recognized Zainab, walked over and handed her a red bag brimming with ribbons and coloured paper. She refused to accept the delivery, telling him to return it to the sender. Her smile was taut and a sheen of sweat had appeared on her forehead. Godson was definitely going to ask about it and she wasn’t prepared to go into details right now.

‘Was that from your boyfriend?’ He said with a laugh. But it sounded empty.

‘No, I don’t have a boyfriend. It’s not what you think. Let’s not talk about this right now, please. Some other time,’ she promised.

For the longest time, Zainab's parents had been pressuring her to settle down, urging her to at least have someone in her life. However, Zainab's standards were sky-high; she wouldn't entertain just any man

for the sake of it. She was a complete catch in every sense, and her partner had to match her level, at the very least.

In retrospect, Zainab was relieved she didn't have a boyfriend. As Godson nodded and grinned, suggesting they go, she felt a sense of gratitude for her single status.

When he opened the car door for her, Zainab felt like a princess. Ensuring she was safely settled inside, he closed the door and hurried to the other side.

'I'm your driver for today,' he declared, 'enjoy the ride, ma'am.' Her lips were bitten, heat flooded her cheeks, and she couldn't help but smile. His words had a profound effect on her, stirring emotions she hadn't felt in a long time—her toes curled, and her heart fluttered in response to the unexpected thrill.

The ride was quiet at first. They zoomed past market stalls, restaurants and malls. She was deep in her thoughts when she felt something on her palm. She looked down at Godson slipping his hands into hers while the other one controlled the steering wheel.

He had on a small smile on his lips and he briefly looked at her as his smile widened.

Godson struggled to keep his eye on the road and then look at her but when he did look at her, his gaze swarmed with an emotion she couldn't decipher. His smile was almost dreamy and his eyes twinkled.

'You're cute,' he said.

He didn't give her time to let his words sink in. He swerved immediately, pulling into the parking space of the next restaurant.

Zainab blinked at the building in front of her.

Suddenly, her stomach rumbled. The look in her eyes was one of pure horror. Her mouth dropped open and she shut her eyes. The universe must surely be looking for ways to embarrass her. Why was it in his car with him of all people? She bit her lips, opening her eye slowly.

She put her face in her palms and shook her head. 'Oh my God, I'm so embarrassed.' Her face was probably beet-red by now. Godson laughed and opened his door, walked over to her side and opened hers. She was still blushing in the car, so he grabbed her arm and pulled her up, laughing.

Her breath hitched in her throat as her feet stumbled over the door.

Before she could descend into another well of embarrassment, Godson wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her towards him, causing her to collide with his frame. Her chest was flush against his, and their lips hovered mere inches apart as the world around them seemed to fade into the background. She peered deep into his eyes that had darkened considerably.

She keenly felt the pressure of his fingers against the softness of her waist. As if snapping out of a trance, they separated in a flash, looking everywhere but at themselves.

'Let's go,' Godson said.

'Yeah, let's do that,' she agreed.

They entered the restaurant hand in hand, a silent testament to the connection that had grown between them. The soft lighting within the establishment cast a warm glow on their entwined fingers, and the subtle intimacy of their gesture added a touch of romance to the air.

The restaurant exuded a cosy ambiance with warm, dim lighting that accentuated the rich, mahogany décor. Soft jazz music played in the background, creating an intimate atmosphere that complemented the

elegant dining experience. Tables adorned with flickering candles and fresh flowers were strategically spaced to afford each diner a sense of privacy.

As Godson and Zainab settled into their seats, a friendly waitress, clad in a crisp uniform, approached with a genuine smile. She expertly took their orders, her pen dancing across the notepad as they made their selections from the carefully curated menu.

Godson and Zainab engaged in easy small talk, their laughter harmonizing with the soft jazz melody. Each dish arrived as a culinary masterpiece, served with precision by attentive waitstaff.

Between bites and sips of wine, they delved into topics that ranged from their favourite cuisines to childhood anecdotes. Their connection deepened with every shared story and exchanged smile, creating an enchanting symphony of connection in the refined ambiance of the restaurant.

Throughout the meal, the clinking of cutlery and muted conversations of other diners created a subtle backdrop, enhancing the sense of intimacy surrounding their shared experience. The air buzzed with an unspoken connection, encapsulating the magic of the moment.

Zainab had experienced crushes in the past, but this man had a unique ability to disarm her, causing her well-built defences to crumble. In his company, she found herself smiling more freely, a departure from her usual tendency to conceal her emotions.

Around him, she felt liberated to express herself in ways she hadn't before.

Unlike others, he didn't seem to harbour hidden agendas or tricks up his broad shoulders. His transparency was akin to clear water, and she appreciated the honesty in his demeanour. Every moment spent in his presence felt special, and she yearned for more.

Choosing to head home instead of going back to work, Zainab giggled, 'I couldn't possibly go back to work right now, not with all the wine I've had.' They now stood together outside her house, right in front of his car, the sinking sun holding a certain enchantment that mirrored the connection they were discovering.

'I had an amazing day with you. How about we do this again sometime? Maybe on a proper date?'

'I'd really like that, Godson.'

'Nice! I'll text you the details, and I'll come pick you up.'

'Sure.'

Godson leaned in for a kiss. Zainab turned her face and pointed to her cheek.

'As he gave her a peck on the cheek, he murmured sweet nothings in her ear.'

'Goodbye, Godson.'

Godson walked towards his car, got in, and drove off.