
EVERY SMILE
HAS A SECRET.
EVERY LIE
HAS A PRICE.
HER
PERFECT
LIES
A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER OF
LOVE, DECEPTION AND BETRAYAL
OLAJIDE A. SMITH

HER PERFECT LIES
A Psychological Thriller of Love, Deception and Betrayal

Olajide A. Smith

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

HER PERFECT LIES

First edition. October 24, 2026.

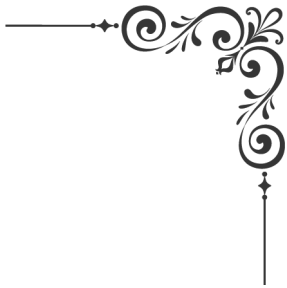
Copyright © 2026 Olajide A. Smith.

Written by Olajide A. Smith.

Table of Contents

1 | FEARLESS HEART 1
2 | BENEATH THE SCARS 21
3 | PERFECT TIMING 41
4 | SMOULDERING EMBERS 56
5 | A LOVELY DAY 80
6 | THE MISSION 96
7 | JUST THE TWO OF US 100
8 | GAMES WITHOUT FRONTIERS 117
9 | A CAN OF WORMS 131
10 | WHISPERS IN THE DARK 139
11 | A TALENT UNCOVERED 143
12 | THE FACE IN THE WINDOW 150
13 | INNOCENCE SHATTERED 158
14 | JUSTICE PAID IN FULL 202
15 | BIRTH OF A PREDATOR 232
16 | RIDE OR DIE 249
17 | THE WOUNDS THAT REMAIN 258
18 | A KIND STRANGER 262
19 | THE CLIENT FROM NOWHERE 267
20 | ALL EYES ON ME 272
21 | THE CRACK IN THE GAME 282
22 | A FRESH PLAY 288
23 | BEHIND THE SMILE 295
24 | A PROBLEM SHARED 305
25 | IN PLAIN SIGHT 310
26 | DESPERATELY SEEKING ZAINAB 315
27 | WHEN LOVE TURNS TO TERROR 318
28 | KIDNAPPER'S LAIR 321
29 | PATHWAY TO FREEDOM 331
30 | FRACTURED TIES 344
31 | WEB OF DECEPTION 347

32 | CLOSURE 364
33 | QUIET STORM 369
34 | COLD DISCOVERY 387
35 | ENTANGLED IN SILK 394
36 | SPIRAL INTO DARKNESS 399
37 | SHATTERED ILLUSIONS 408
38 | HEARTSTRINGS IN PERIL 421
39 | FLAWS IN THE LAW 426
40 | WHEN TRUST RETURNS 428
41 | BAD INTENTIONS 444
42 | DIAL 'M' FOR MURDER 447
43 | THE RECKONING 454
44 | RITA'S DILEMMA 458
45 | A SISTER'S TEARS 463
46 | MURDER WAS THE CASE 467



1
FEARLESS HEART

After giving himself a final once-over, Zubby felt confident in his appearance and decided he was ready to head out. Of all the outfits he owned, none seemed more fitting for his rendezvous with Shell Oil than the navy-blue suit, crisp white shirt and black wingtips polished to a mirror shine. Fully aware of the power of a first impression, he paid meticulous attention to every detail.

A two-year stint in a warehouse after graduating from university wasn't the life Zubby 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 control and designed the life he believed he was meant to live.

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



There was something uniquely exhausting about being Nigerian: 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 criticised for its unyielding seriousness.

It was unfortunate that Zubby was constantly at odds with the system. Everyone who knew him recognized the enduring spark of hope he carried within. Despite the mounting bills, the struggle to find work worthy of his qualifications, and the daily frustrations of life in Lagos, he still woke each morning with a sense of purpose and determination coursing through his veins.

He was determined to push back with everything he had. He was driven by the need to hustle, grind and keep moving forward. No matter how many setbacks life threw his way, an unwavering flame of hope burned within him. A stubborn optimism that refused to die.

Heaving a sigh, he tugged at his left lapel, ensuring every detail of his appearance was in place. A briefcase hung at his side, loaded with the tools for the battle that lay ahead: a neatly prepared CV, an interview letter, and professional references from lecturers and former employers. Documents that could, if all went well, alter the course of his life.

Slowly and carefully, he closed the creaking door behind him, easing it shut until the latch clicked softly into place. He didn't want to disturb his housemate, Chidi, who still had an hour of sleep 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 10:00, he 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, the thought made Zubby chuckle under his breath, even though some uptight Christians hadn't found the joke funny. People really needed to lighten up, he thought. It seemed like people had forgotten how to laugh, and every harmless joke today was taken as offensive.

Outside the gate, the Uber 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 back seat and began rehearsing the elevator pitch he had painstakingly crafted. He had spent the past few days preparing for the interview with almost obsessive attention to detail, determined to leave as little as possible to chance.

He had researched the hiring manager extensively, uncovering valuable insights into her personality, interests and opinions. Her Twitter feed, in particular, had offered revealing glimpses into the woman behind the professional façade. Zubby intended to use what he had learned to steer their conversation beyond the predictable questions and rehearsed answers and leave a lasting impression.

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



HISTORIC VICTORY!

NIGERIAN CHESS TEAM BEATS CHINA TO BECOME WORLD CHAMPIONS!

NIGERIA MAKES HISTORY. THE WORLD TAKES NOTICE.

NIGERIA VS CHINA

DEDICATION. DISCIPLINE.

TEAMWORK. EXCELLENCE.

A NEW ERA FOR AFRICAN CHESS.

story and again smiled. It was a moment of pride, a reminder of the indomitable spirit that defined Nigerians. This was what they embodied: intelligence, grit, and resilience. Even when faced with a terrible government, they managed to push back, every single time.

As the Uber whisked him through the waking streets of Lagos Mainland, Zubby sat back and watched the city come alive. Commuters hurried along crowded streets, traders arranged their wares, and buses honked impatiently as the morning unfolded around them.

He found himself wondering about the lives of the people he passed. Every morning, they stepped into the chaos with remarkable grit and resilience, determined to carve out a living and, somehow, a measure of dignity and meaning from circumstances that often seemed determined to deny them both.

Life in Nigeria was rarely easy. Yet millions faced its challenges every day. Adapting, enduring, and finding the strength to keep moving forward.

JUST OVER AN HOUR AND fifteen minutes later, Zubby emerged from the air-conditioned Uber and instantly felt the searing heat of the scorching sun on his skin.

He glanced at his watch: 7:44. Shell Oil was only a short walk away, yet his interview wasn't until 10:00. He had more than enough time to spare before making his way into the building. He planned to manage his time by hanging out at a local café he'd discovered when he scouted out the area a couple of days ago.

As he made his way along the broad sidewalks of Lekki's business district, Zubby walked with quiet purpose, the polished leather briefcase swinging gently at his side. Office workers streamed past him in every direction, some deep in conversation, others hurrying to meetings or waiting for ride-hailing cars. The morning air carried


SPACES
PALM
LEKKI
LAGOS

a blend of freshly brewed coffee, traffic fumes, and the salty breeze drifting in from the Atlantic.

Though his heart beat a little faster with every step toward the interview, his posture remained upright and composed. Today wasn't about fear. It was about opportunity. After everything he'd endured, this was his chance to begin again.

He decided to cut through the Lekki shopping mall car park on his way to the café, a shortcut that would shave a few minutes off the journey. It was a welcome trade-off. Walking through Lagos in a tailored suit beneath the relentless afternoon sun was punishing, the heat clinging to him like a second skin.

As he crossed the shopping mall car park, he was struck by how unusually quiet it was. Only one corner showed any sign of life: a young couple embroiled in a fierce argument beside a gleaming yellow Lamborghini Aventador. The man's bright yellow Nike tracksuit was almost the exact shade of the supercar, as though he'd deliberately dressed to match his own ego. In one hand, he held a walking stick topped with a polished gold handle, catching the light each time he shifted his grip.

He vented his rage towards his companion, a petite woman in a neat navy-blue suit that sharpened her professional air. She was small, contained, polished. There was no visible connection between them, no shared rhythm. Zubby couldn't imagine how they had ended up together. They looked like they belonged to entirely different worlds.

Zubby felt heat bloom in his chest.

Something in the way she avoided eye contact, the way her weight shifted subtly away from the man sent a cold knot through his stomach.

His instincts stirred. Whatever story was playing out here, he knew it wasn't going to end well unless someone stepped in.

The situation escalated in seconds.

The man's shouting exploded into violence—a brutal punch to the girl's stomach, followed by a slap that echoed across the empty car park with a sickening resonance.

The sound ripped straight through Zubby.

For a split second, he was ten years old again. Frozen, helpless, listening to fists meet flesh.

Instinct took over. His body moved first, he was already running.

His shoes slapped against the concrete, breath tearing from his lungs as he closed the distance.

The girl staggered back, folding over with a strangled cry. The man surged after her, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and yanked her upright, his other hand coming down again and again.

She raised her arms, shaking, trying to shield her face. It didn't help. Tears streamed freely now, her sobs echoing off the walls of the deserted car park.

Zubby felt heat rush through his veins. His jaw clenched so hard it hurt.

He reached them just as the man drew back for another strike. Zubby caught his wrist mid-swing and twisted hard, forcing him away. The girl crumbled to the ground; her body wracked with sobs. Zubby's body was still buzzing, adrenaline roaring through him.

He planted himself between the man and the girl, widening his stance instinctively.

'What is wrong with you, man?' he said, staring him square in the face. 'You can't do that to a woman! What the fuck's your problem?'

Sparks exploded from the man's eyes as he raged.

'Are you crazy? How dare you lay your filthy hands on me and tell me how to deal with my woman! Do you know who you're fucking with?'

'I don't give a damn who the fuck you are. You don't put your hands on a woman like that.'

'Fuck You' the man snarled, his voice quavering with rage. With explosive force, he lunged violently at Zubby, intending to hit him. However, Zubby was too fast and strong for him. Evading the incoming punch with a dancer's grace, he effortlessly pushed the man away with a controlled force.

The man stumbled backward, tripped over his feet and collapsed onto the concrete.

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, attempting to comfort her.

'Are you alright?'

She was still crying, and didn't look up at him. It was evident from her sobs that she had been badly hurt.

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

In an instant, Zubby sprang to his feet, his left hand seizing the man's right arm mid-strike as his right fist slammed into his jaw.

A brief dance ensued as the man teetered on the edge of equilibrium, his body swaying with a vulnerable uncertainty as he tried to maintain his balance. Upon steadying himself, he 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, motherfucker.'

'Man? I don't see a man. All I see is a low-life coward who thinks he can brutalize women and get away with it.'

Jabbing his walking stick at Zubby, in ominous rhythm, he declared, 'I'm going to teach you a lesson you will never forget in your miserable life.'

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:

'Ice! Where are you? Where's Doom?'

'We're still at Mama Calabar. We've just finished eating.'

'Good. Some punk just attacked me.'

'Attacked you keh?'

'Can you believe that shit?'

'Where are you right now, sir?'

'Lekki Mall. Parking lot.'

'We'll be there in less than five minutes!'

Having ended the call, the man's menacing declaration sliced through the air like a blade.

'I'm going to fuckin' deal with you today,' he snarled, punctuating the threat with a vicious jab of his walking stick aimed squarely at Zubby.

Zubby heard the woman make a distressed sound and immediately rushed to her side.

'Hey, are you okay?' he asked.

She had managed to struggle to her feet. Slowly, she lifted her tear-streaked face and looked up at him.

The instant their eyes met, Zubby's heart skipped a beat. Despite her dishevelled appearance, the tears streaking her bruised cheeks and the visible signs of the brutal assault she had just endured, he found himself captivated by her.

There was something hauntingly beautiful about her. The fear and vulnerability etched across her face did little to diminish her beauty; if anything, they made her all the more striking. But it wasn't her pain that drew him in. It was the quiet strength beneath it, the resilience in her eyes, as though some part of her remained unbroken despite everything she had been through.

For a fleeting moment, the world around him seemed to disappear. There was only her.

He felt an inexplicable pull toward her, accompanied by a

powerful instinct to protect her from whatever danger came next,

even if doing so meant putting himself directly in harm's way.

He barely knew her.

Yet something inside him had already decided that he could not leave her to face the danger alone.

With a trembling voice and fear flickering in her eyes, she pleaded, 'Please, you need to leave. Right now.'

She was still bent over in pain and gasping for breath, but somehow, she had found her voice.

'This man is dangerous,' she gasped. 'Please... just go.'

A short distance away, the man prowled up and down the car park, his movements slow and deliberate. Every few seconds, he glanced towards the entrance, waiting for the thugs he had summoned.

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

'No!'

The desperation in her voice stopped him.

'You don't understand,' she said, shaking her head vigorously. 'I'll be fine. Just go before it's too late.'

'I'm not going anywhere.'

'Please!' she begged. 'I appreciate what you did for me, but you have to go now. If you stay, they'll hurt you.'

Zubby gave her a reassuring smile.

'Let them come.'

She stared at him in disbelief.

'You think this is a joke?'

'No.'

'Then why won't you leave?'

His expression hardened as he glanced towards Jim.

'Because I'm not going to walk away and leave you at the mercy

of a man like that.'

For a moment, Genevieve simply stared at him. She had expected indifference from a stranger. Not this.

Her large, almond-shaped brown eyes moved slowly over his face, as though trying to understand the man who had willingly stepped into danger for her.

When she finally spoke, her voice was barely a whisper.

'I don't think you know what you're getting yourself into.'

Zubby looked directly into her eyes.

'Maybe I don't.'

He paused.

'But I know one thing. There's no way I'm leaving you alone with this guy.'

Before she could respond, the shriek of screeching tyres tore through the car park.

A black Mercedes-Benz SUV came skidding to a halt.

The doors flew open.

Two heavily built men stepped out, their muscular frames and grim expressions instantly transforming the atmosphere.

Genevieve's face drained of colour.

Zubby slowly turned towards them.

Jim smiled.

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

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

'No! Jim, stop this! Please let him go,' the girl begged.

She planted herself firmly in front of Zubby, shielding him with her body despite the danger staring her in the face.

'Leave him alone, Jim. Please,' she pleaded.

Her voice trembled with desperation, but beneath it was a quiet, unwavering defiance.

He scoffed at her. 'Let him go? After what he did to me? You must be out of your fucking mind. Ice, Doom. What are you waiting for? Oya, teach this punk a lesson he will never forget.'

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. 'Leave him alone. Jim, please,' she pleaded, her voice carrying a mix of desperation and defiance.

In a brutal display of contempt, one of the men seized her by the arm and roughly shoved her aside, sending her stumbling backwards as the confrontation took a menacing turn.

Now, it was just them versus Zubby.

As the thugs closed in around him, Zubby suddenly realized the gravity of the situation. *These guys could kill me*, he muttered to himself. His heart sank at the thought that he was never going to make his interview, but a deeper conviction whispered that he had made the right choice by stepping in.

Around them, doors creaked open. Footsteps approached. A few heads appeared at the edges of the car park, drawn by the noise.

Someone whispered.

Someone else lifted a phone.

No one stepped in.

The silence pressed in, heavy and uncomfortable.

With an air of defiance, Zubby 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 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.

As the first thug lunged at him, Zubby skilfully sidestepped, delivering a punishing blow by ramming his right knee into his belly. He 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.

As they grappled on the ground, the other thug shook off the pain and rushed in. Zubby ended up on his back. Exposed, out-matched. The two men descended on him, fists crashing down without mercy. Overwhelmed, Zubby curled into a foetal position, instinctively shielding his head and torso as the blows kept coming.

Despite the girl's desperate screams for them to stop, the attackers rained down punch after punch and kick after kick on Zubby's helpless body as he lay sprawled on the ground, unable to defend himself. It continued until he succumbed to unconsciousness, his face marred by the splatter of blood from a gash above his right eye.

As he lay passed out on the ground, Jim aimed one last kick at Zubby's 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 evil 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. Do your worst, Jim. Show everyone what a shameless coward you are.'

Jim slowly surveyed his surroundings, his sharp eyes taking in the growing crowd that had gathered around the unfolding drama.

What had begun as a handful of curious onlookers had quickly swelled into a restless audience, drawn to the violence like moths to a flame.

For a fleeting moment, he considered ordering his thugs to drag the girl into the SUV.

He dismissed the idea almost as quickly as it came.

The atmosphere had shifted.

The bystanders were no longer passive spectators. They were glaring at him, pointing openly in his direction, their faces hardening with anger and disgust. Voices were rising. People were edging closer, emboldened by the growing numbers around them.

He knew the crowd was on the verge of taking matters into its own hands. If he made one wrong move, the increasingly hostile crowd would rush to the girl's defence, and the situation would explode into chaos within seconds.

More shoppers were emerging from the mall, stopping to see what the commotion was about.

Someone had almost certainly called the police.

Every passing second brought new witnesses. The longer they remained, the greater the risk. It just wasn't worth it.

Jim raised a hand in a subtle signal.

'Let's go.'

Without another glance at Zubby or the girl, he strode calmly towards his car. Though people instinctively stepped aside to let him pass, their hostile stares followed him all the way to his gleaming yellow Lamborghini Aventador. He slipped a finger beneath the driver's-side door sill and pressed the concealed rubber release. With a muted click, the scissor door sprang upward.

Jim slid into the driver's seat, lowered the door, and pressed the start button. He stabbed the accelerator several times in quick

succession, deliberately provoking the Lamborghini's V12 into a series of deafening roars.

The thunderous blasts echoed across the car park, silencing the crowd and forcing several onlookers to flinch.

Satisfied he'd made his point, he buried the throttle, and the Lamborghini lunged forward before sweeping towards the exit.

Behind him, the black SUV fell into formation, his thugs climbing aboard before following their boss out of the shopping mall, leaving behind only the stunned crowd, the battered young man lying on the ground, and the chaos they had created.

After Jim and his 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. 'One of those thugs attacked me, and he tried to protect me.

They wanted to kill him.'

'I believe there's a clinic nearby, the Etta Atlantic. Let's get him into my car.'

Feeling as though he had been dragged into a deep, impenetrable fog, Zubby slipped in and out of consciousness. He winced as several people helped him to his feet. Every bone in his body seemed to ache, and a sharp, prickling sensation coursed through him. His vest was soaked crimson with blood.

With the help of several bystanders, they carefully eased him into the back seat of the stranger's car, finally removing him from the chaos around him. The young woman, her expression a mixture of compassion and determination, gently pressed a handkerChief to the wound above Zubby's right eyebrow, doing her best to stem the bleeding.

'I'm Frederick.'

'Genevieve. It's a pleasure to meet you, Frederick. Thank you 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 light 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 75,000 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.

At that point, Genevieve realised that Zubby's ID might be in his wallet or briefcase, both of which she had brought with her. She quickly searched through them and found the requested identification. His name was Zubby Johnson, and he was twenty-five 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 potentially life-changing opportunity with a world-class company like Shell Oil to protect her.

The full weight of his sacrifice struck Genevieve as she struggled to comprehend the depth of his selflessness. The clinic, meant to be a place of healing, had instead become a setting for painful revelations, exposing the devastating consequences endured by a man who had willingly put his own dreams on hold to protect someone else.

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 fighter.'

'I really hope so. The poor guy didn't deserve any of this bullshit.'

'I'll have to shoot off now; I'm already pretty late for work.'

'I understand, Frederick. Thank you so much for your help. I'm very grateful.'

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 wellbeing. 'Jesus, are you okay? That's a nasty little bruise on your face. Let me take a closer look and make sure you're okay.'

'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 need to worry. His injuries are fairly severe, but thankfully, they're mostly superficial. There's no damage to his internal organs, so he won't need surgery. For now, I've given him a sedative so that he can get a complete rest. You'll be able to speak with him tomorrow. Come back around midday. He should be awake then. But he'll still be a little weak, with a few aches and pains.'

Genevieve again declined the doctor's offer to examine her, saying, '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 SENSE OF RELIEF Genevieve felt was palpable. She was naturally inclined to fear the worst. But even though Zubby's injuries


THE MUSCULAR SYSTEM

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 there,' 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.'

'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 had been experiencing sleep paralysis and regained consciousness shortly afterwards. Even then, he remained disoriented, a lingering confusion clouding his expression.

He struggled to make sense of where he was.

Where am I?

What was I doing before I got here?

As he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position, a crushing migraine exploded through his skull. The most intense, relentless pain he had ever experienced. Every movement sent fresh waves of agony pulsing through his head, forcing him to stop and brace himself against the bed.

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?

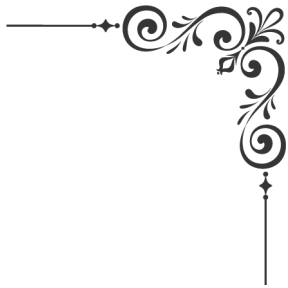
He glanced around and forced himself to focus on his surroundings... the plain white walls... the sounds of ET machines.

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.



2

BENEATH THE SCARS

A little after ten the following morning, Genevieve stepped into Zubby's room, carrying a small bag of fruit and toiletries. But the moment she saw him, she froze. A sudden jolt went through her, as though she had touched a live wire.

The sight undid her. Her composure shattered.

'Jesus Christ...' she whispered.

Her hand flew to her mouth as tears instantly filled her eyes. Zubby managed a weak smile. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Don't joke, Zubby,' she said shakily. 'Look at you.'

'They did a pretty good job, didn't they?'

She glared at him.

'Zubby, please stop!'

'Sorry.'

She broke down crying.

Zubby winced slightly as she carefully held his hand. 'Hey... hey...' he murmured softly. 'I'm still alive.'

'You almost died because of me!' she cried. 'They could've killed you.'

'They tried,' Zubby said with a faint chuckle, before groaning from the pain in his ribs.

'Please don't laugh,' she said through tears. 'You're badly hurt.'

She was so beautiful, he thought, even now.

At five foot four, Genevieve possessed a quiet, captivating radiance. Her almond-shaped eyes, framed by perfectly arched brows, seemed to hold an entire world of emotion. Her smooth, mocha-toned complexion complemented her graceful features, giving her an effortless elegance that made it almost impossible for him to look away.

And in that moment, despite the pain, Zubby felt something unmistakable stir inside him. Soft, rhythmic beeps from the machines punctuated the silence of the room.

Beyond the window, Lagos carried on as usual. Cars streamed along the roads, voices drifted through the air, and life continued with indifference, as though nothing had happened.

'How are you feeling?' she asked, her voice low.

Zubby considered it for a moment. 'Like I lost a fight with a truck,' he said at last. Then, almost apologetically, he added, 'But I've had worse days.'

A small smile touched her lips. Quick, involuntary. For a moment, silence filled the room.

'I'm glad you're awake,' she said. 'The doctor said you might still be asleep.

'So did my body,' he replied with a faint smile. 'It keeps trying to drag me back under. We're still negotiating.'

Genevieve looked down at him, guilt written all over her face, then pressed her lips together.

Concerned about his family, Genevieve asked, 'what about your sibling, parents, Zubby? Is there someone I can call?'

She sensed his discomfort at the mention of his parents, regretting the question immediately. 'I'm sorry, I...'

'No, it's okay, 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.'

The words settled between them, warm and charged. 'I never even got your name yesterday,' he said.

'Genevieve.'

'Then we're even,' he replied. 'You already know who I am.' 'Yes,' she said. 'I found your ID.'

A pause.

'And your bag.'

His expression changed. Not defensive, just thoughtful. 'My interview,' he said quietly.

She nodded. 'Shell Oil.'

He let out a slow breath. 'Yeah.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'If I hadn't—'

'Hey.' He lifted his hand slightly, stopping her. 'Don't.'

She met his eyes, surprised by the gentleness in his voice.

'I don't regret it,' he said. 'That animal was hurting you. I couldn't just do nothing and walk away.'

A lump rose in her throat as she struggled to hold back her tears. 'You gave up something big... for someone you didn't even know.'

Zubby gave a weak shrug. 'For someone who needed help.' Then, softer, 'I didn't need to know you.'

She looked at him for a long moment. 'Why?' she asked.

He hesitated. Just enough.

'Because I know what it feels like,' he said, 'when no one steps in.'

Then he added, almost under his breath, 'And because I couldn't stand the thought of you being hurt.'

Genevieve's lips trembled. 'Thank you,' she said quietly. 'For saving me. You're too good for this world, Zubby.'

He looked away, suddenly self-conscious. He smiled faintly. 'Trust me... I'm not as good as you think.'

'I'm so sorry,' she whispered again.

'Stop apologizing.'

Silence returned, but it was different now.

Softer.

Intimate.

She reached for his hand, careful not to disturb the IV.

'I owe you.'

'No.'

Genevieve frowned. 'What do you mean, no?'

'You don't owe me anything.'

'But—'

'No debts. No obligations. No repayment.'

She fell silent.

'Would you mind if I called Shell Oil and explained what happened?' she asked gently. 'They might be willing to reschedule your interview. It's certainly worth a try.'

'Would you?' Zubby said, surprised. 'That's a great idea. The HR manager's number is on the interview letter.'

'I know,' Genevieve said. 'I'll get it.'

She reached into Zubby's bag, took out the letter, and carefully copied the interviewer's name and number into her phone.

She shifted in her chair. 'I should let you rest.'

He glanced at her, unsure. 'You don't have to go.'

Her eyes searched his face. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' he said. 'It's... easier when you're here.'

A faint smile curved her lips.

'Okay,' she said. 'Then I'll stay. For a bit.'

Their gazes held a second too long this time, something unspoken passing between them.

She squeezed his hand.

'I was so afraid for you.'

Zubby held her gaze.

'I was afraid for you too.' He gave her a faint smile. 'Mostly that you'd blame yourself.'

A tear slipped down her cheek.

He smiled.

Zubby leaned back against the pillows, pain still there, but quieter now.

'Next time,' he murmured, wincing as he managed a crooked grin, 'I'll ask the thugs to go easy on my face. It's my best feature.'

Genevieve let out a watery laugh, shaking her head.

'You're impossible.'

'I prefer 'heroically stubborn.' It sounds more flattering.'

'It sounds like someone with a serious concussion.'

'And yet,' he said softly, squeezing her hand with what little strength he had, 'the first thing I saw when I woke up... was you.'

Her eyes glistened. 'Of course I came.'

'So... does this mean you'll visit me again?'

She rolled her eyes, smiling despite herself.

'Only if you promise to stop collecting injuries just to get my attention.'

He gave her a faint, satisfied smile.

'No promises.'

For the first time since she'd stepped into the room, Genevieve smiled without the tears winning.

IN THE ENSUING WEEKS, Genevieve devoted herself to helping Zubby recover, patiently nursing him back to health until, little by little, he returned to his old self.

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.

Although Shell Oil had been extremely sympathetic to what had

happened to Zubby, they were unable to reschedule the interview as

the position needed to be filled immediately.

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 decided to

broach the delicate subject of Zubby's parents. She had sensed a deep

sensitivity whenever the subject arose, and her growing curiosity made her determined to understand the mystery behind his reluctance to talk about them.

'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 just a child.'

'Holy Mary, Mother of God!' Genevieve instinctively crossed

herself. A wave of horror swept over her as she listened intently to



the heart-wrenching account. The story that unfolded revealed the

haunting roots from which Zubby had emerged, giving Genevieve a deeper understanding of the experiences that had shaped the man he had become.

The weight of the past bore heavily on his shoulders as he recounted the haunting details of his traumatic childhood.

'I was 10 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 abuse every single day, as if she were the punching bag for all his rage over losing his job.'

As the echoes of Zubby's words lingered, Genevieve's heart filled with empathy and sorrow. In that moment, something between them deepened, a bond forged through shared vulnerability and an unspoken recognition of the extraordinary resilience it had taken for Zubby to rise above the scars of his past.

'Each time I stepped in, he lashed out at me too. Eventually, I backed off. I felt powerless.'

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. But instead of doing something, I just cried. I covered my ears and I cried.'

The weight of guilt bore down on him. 'I did nothing to help her. I didn't fight for her. Sometimes I feel my mother died because I was a coward because I was too afraid to stand up for her when she needed me most. I failed her, and that's something I'll have to live with for the rest of my life.'

For a brief moment, his composure slipped, his jaw falling slightly before he collected himself.

'In the days that followed her death, I experienced vivid flash-backs of my mother's painful 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 assaulting you, something took over me. I couldn't have walked away, no matter what. Every instinct in me demanded that I protect you.'

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 for Christ sakes and the situation was beyond your control. Your father is totally responsible for what you are blaming yourself for.'

She continued with a firm resolve: 'I appreciate what you did for me, really, I do. However, those thugs 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 change 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. The only comfort I have is knowing that whatever he's going through now is far worse than what my mother endured from him, because he's locked up with hardened criminals who are surely making his life a living hell.'

'And your siblings?'

'I have an older sister who left Nigeria when I was five years old. She only came back for our mother's funeral, and she hasn't been back since. Still, she made sure I was well taken care of when I was growing up.' He paused, then gave a small shrug. '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 represented him, and I handled all the paperwork for his apartment purchase in Eko Atlantic City. Then, one day, I ran into him at a store. He insisted on paying for everything I picked out. At the time, I naively assumed he was simply being generous. I really had no reason to suspect there was anything more to it. But afterward, he started acting like I owed him something. He kept pushing for dates, wouldn't take no for an answer. And I wasn't interested in the least.

That day, we were on our way to a business meeting and decided to stop briefly at a mall in Lekki. That's when he pulled out first-class tickets to Dubai. He wanted to fly me there for my birthday weekend.'

She exhaled.

'I said no. Politely. That's when he got really angry, and everything spiralled.'

A pause.

'I don't want to talk about him anymore,' she said quietly. 'That chapter is closed.'

Their eyes met, and something unspoken passed between them. It wasn't an awkward silence, but an easy, comfortable one. A quiet understanding that settled between them, wrapping them in its warmth.

They didn't notice how much time had slipped away. Hours dissolved into conversation and soft laughter, carried by the rare comfort of two people discovering how naturally they fit together.

'Goodness gracious... is that the time?'

Zubby chuckled softly. 'I guess it's true. Time really does disappear when you're having fun.' His voice dropped, just a little. 'And when I'm with you, Genevieve, it doesn't just disappear. It slips away.'

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she reached for his hand, her fingers threading gently through his. Her touch was deliberate, intimate. She looked up at him, eyes warm, searching his face.

'I'm glad you feel that way,' she said, her voice low, sincere. 'Because being here with you... it feels easy. Right. Like I don't want the night to end.'

She squeezed his hand softly, holding his gaze a moment longer than necessary. 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.

As a gesture of gratitude, they invited Zubby to Sunday lunch. Genevieve arrived at precisely 2:00 p.m. to pick him up, her trademark smile brightening her face as she pulled up 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. Her family was small. She had a younger brother studying business at Buckingham University in the UK.

Her father, Olu Asabia, was a tall, commanding presence, well over six feet, yet there was an easy warmth about him. At sixty-one, he looked remarkably youthful, impeccably dressed and effortlessly dapper. A full, neatly groomed beard, almost entirely grey, framed his face, lending him an air of distinction.

The moment he saw them enter the lobby, he crossed the room and pulled Zubby into a powerful bear hug, laughing as he did.

'Zubby, thank you for coming.' He said, his grin wide and genuine as he pulled Zubby into a warm embrace. 'Genevieve told us everything you did for her. I really can't thank you enough.'

Zubby smiled, slightly overwhelmed. 'It was my pleasure, sir.' Genevieve's mother stepped forward next, elegance radiating from her. She wore horn-rimmed glasses and a guinea brocade kaftan, her embrace warm as she welcomed Zubby into their home.

Her brown, almond-shaped eyes, so strikingly similar to Genevieve's, held both softness and quiet scrutiny. It was clear Genevieve had inherited more than her mother's features; the warmth, the curiosity, the depth behind that gaze spoke of a shared spirit, not just shared blood.

The Asabias graciously ushered Zubby into their luxurious and inviting home. It was plush without being ostentatious, refined in a way that spoke of long earned comfort rather than display.

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.

Zubby took it all in carefully, conscious of the faint scuff on his shoe against the marble floor. This was a world he had only ever observed from a distance.

'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 Genevieve's father. 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 naira. '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 honor 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.'

'Alcohol changed my life in ways I can't undo, sir. I lost someone really precious to me. So I never drink anything except water. It may sound unusual, but that's 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 sir, 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.'

Zubby listened, aware of the contrast between them, not just in wealth, but in insulation. Olu spoke of national uncertainty from a place of security. Zubby had lived it from the inside.

Still, the conversation flowed easily. Olu asked about Zubby's ambitions, his plans, his outlook. He was careful to avoid any mention of family, as Genevieve had quietly requested.

Genevieve re-entered the room after a few minutes and announced that lunch was ready. They ate in the large dining room, with sunlight from the sinking sun illuminating the room. The table was long, polished, immaculate. The food was abundant, beautifully presented.

Laughter flowed as freely as the conversation, drifting effortlessly from childhood stories to football, from Lagos traffic to the strange habits people picked up as adults. It was the kind of easy laughter that made time slip unnoticed, punctuated by the clinking of cutlery and the occasional burst of amusement that left everyone smiling.

Genevieve's father was in his element, happily recounting one embarrassing story after another, most of them involving Genevieve as a stubborn child. Her protests only encouraged him.

'Dad, that happened once.'

'It happened enough for me to remember it.'

Her mother chuckled as she passed another serving dish around the table.

'More jollof, Zubby?'

'Oh... thank you, ma'am.'

He accepted the serving spoon politely and placed only a very modest helping onto his plate before passing it along. Genevieve's mother paused.

'Is that all?'

'Yes, ma'am. That's perfect.'

She blinked at his plate, then at the mountain of food spread across the dining table.

'My dear,' she said with mock concern, 'did you misunderstand? This isn't a tasting ceremony. You're actually allowed to eat.'

Everyone laughed.

Zubby smiled sheepishly. 'I don't usually eat very much.' She looked at her husband.

'I hope he isn't just being polite.'

Genevieve's father laughed. 'My dear, that's nothing.'

His wife frowned. 'Nothing?'

'You haven't seen anything yet.'

She folded her arms with amused curiosity.

'What do you mean?'

He pointed his fork toward Zubby.

'Tell her what you drink.'

Zubby looked mildly embarrassed.

'It's... not that interesting.'

'Oh, it is interesting,' her father insisted. 'Go on.'

Zubby rubbed the back of his neck.

'Just... water.'

Silence.

Genevieve's mother stared at him.

'Water?'

'Yes, ma.'

She leaned back in disbelief.

'What kind of twenty-something-year-old are you?'

The table erupted into laughter.

'I just... prefer water,' Zubby admitted with a sheepish grin. Her father chuckled.

'I offered him everything earlier,' he said, chuckling. 'I said, Zubby, you can have whatever you want. Beer, whisky, champagne, wine, soft drinks, orange juice... we've got it all. He turns around and says 'a glass of water please sir.'

The table burst into laughter.

She turned to Genevieve. 'Is he for real?'

'Come to think of it, I've never seen him drink anything else,' Genevieve said, laughing.

Her mother looked back at Zubby, studying him for a moment before smiling warmly.

'Well... I have to say, that's impressive.' Zubby looked surprised.

'It is?'

'Absolutely.' She gestured toward the bottles arranged neatly on the sideboard. 'Most people can't resist one or two little indulgences. Yet here you are, happy with plain water.'

She smiled approvingly. 'That tells me you're a very disciplined young man.'

'Oh, I don't know about that...'

'No, I think it does.' She pointed playfully at him. 'People think discipline shows up in grand gestures. Most of the time, it shows up in little everyday choices that nobody notices.'

Genevieve caught Zubby's eye.

He looked genuinely uncomfortable with the praise.

'I just never got into sugary drinks.'

Her father laughed. 'Listen to him. He's making it sound accidental.'

Somehow, despite all the teasing, Zubby had become the centre of the conversation without ever trying to be. And judging by the warmth in her parents' smiles, they weren't merely enjoying his company anymore. They were beginning to admire the quiet, unassuming young man sitting at their table.

When the meal ended, Genevieve and her mother cleared the table with the help of a servant. Though Zubby offered to assist, he was gently ushered into the living room, where Olu had already settled in to watch an English Premier League match.

Olu shared Zubby's passion for football, and the game quickly became a pleasant, easy distraction.

Not long after the match ended, Zubby decided it was time to leave. Genevieve's parents bid him farewell, once again expressing their heartfelt gratitude for what he had done for their daughter.

He thanked them in return for their generosity, the delicious lunch, and the lovely evening.

Arrangements were made for him to be driven home. As the driver went to bring the car around, Genevieve walked him outside.

'Thank you for a wonderful evening, your parents are lovely.'

'They are,' she replied with a smile. 'And they loved you. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself.'

The late afternoon sun had softened, and a gentle breeze rustled the hedges lining the driveway. For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Genevieve folded her arms and glanced sideways at him. 'So...'

Zubby smiled.

'So?'

'What was that all about?'

He frowned.

'What?'

'The water.'

'Oh.'

'You seriously don't drink anything else?'

He shrugged.

'Not really.'

She nudged him lightly with her elbow.

'Come on, Zubby. Everyone was looking at you like you were an exhibit in a museum.' He laughed softly.

'I noticed.'

'So... why?'

His smile faded.

For several seconds, he said nothing. Genevieve immediately regretted asking.

'You don't have to answer if it's personal.'

'No...' he said quietly. 'It's okay.'

He looked out toward the gate instead of at her.

'It's just... not a story I tell very often.'

She waited.

'When I was little,' he began, 'my mum used to spoil me.'

A faint smile appeared on his face.

'Every day after school she'd have something waiting for me.'

'Sweets?'

'Sweets.' He nodded.

'Chocolate. Soft drinks. Biscuits. Sometimes she'd surprise me with ice cream or cake.'

He chuckled under his breath.

'I thought she had magical powers. Somehow she always knew exactly what I was craving.'

Genevieve smiled, picturing the sweet little boy he must have been.

'She sounds wonderful.'

'She was.'

His voice softened.

'Those little treats became... our thing.'

The smile lingered for a moment. Then disappeared.
'When she died...'
His words caught in his throat. '...it was strange.'
He swallowed hard. 'I kept expecting to want those things.'
Genevieve remained silent.
'But I didn't.'
He looked down at his hands. 'It wasn't a decision.'
'It just... stopped.'
'I'd walk past the shelves in shops and feel nothing.'
'No cravings.'
'No excitement.'
'Nothing.'
He gave a small, almost apologetic shrug.
'It was like something inside me had gone quiet.'
Genevieve's chest tightened.
'I lost more than my mum.'
He took a slow breath.
'I lost my appetite.'
He smiled sadly.
'Not just for sweets.'
'For a lot of things.'
'I started eating because I needed to.'
'Not because I wanted to.'
Genevieve searched his face.
'So that's why you eat so little?'
He nodded.
'I've been like this ever since.'
'And the water?'
He looked at the bottle in his hand.
'Water never reminded me of anything.'
She frowned slightly. 'The soft drinks did.'
He nodded. 'They reminded me of her.'

He laughed softly, though there was no joy in it.

'Every bottle of Fanta or Coke reminded me of coming home from school and hearing her call my name.'

His eyes glistened 'I suppose... after she was gone...'

He paused. '...I couldn't enjoy them anymore.'

Genevieve felt tears prick the corners of her eyes.

'Oh, Zubby...'

He looked at her and offered the same gentle smile she'd come to know.

'It's been years.'

'I know.'

'It doesn't hurt every day anymore.'

He looked toward the sky.

'But every now and then...'

'...you discover that grief has been hiding in places you never thought to look.'

She reached for his hand without thinking.

He looked down, surprised.

'I thought,' she whispered, 'it was about discipline.'

He smiled sadly.

'No.'

He squeezed her hand gently.

'I was just heartbroken.'

The words hung between them.

Simple.

Honest.

Devastating.

Genevieve felt her throat tighten.

For the first time since she'd met him, she understood that Zubby's quietness wasn't shyness.

It was the silence left behind by someone whose happiest memories had become the hardest to revisit.

The sound of the approaching car broke the moment.

The driver pulled into the driveway and stepped out to open the rear door.

Neither of them moved immediately.

Genevieve looked at him, her eyes shimmering.

'I'm really glad you told me.'

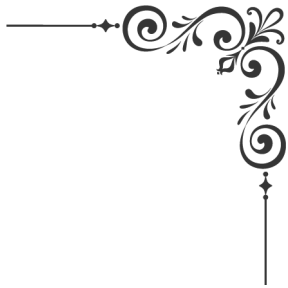
'So am I,' he said softly.

He wasn't entirely sure why.

Perhaps because, for the first time in a very long while, sharing the memory hadn't made him feel alone.

As he climbed into the car, Genevieve remained standing in the driveway, watching him leave.

She no longer saw the polite, reserved young man who drank nothing but water. She saw the little boy who had lost the person who made the world taste sweet.



3
PERFECT TIMING

Zainab 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.

Athletic and finely tuned, her body moved with quiet confidence as the fluorescent lights of the supermarket washed over her smooth, caramel complexion. The artificial glow softened her features, lending her an almost ethereal radiance. A baseball cap sat low on her head, but it did little to contain the cascade of curls framing her face. Effortlessly glamorous, unmistakably arresting.

She carried herself in a way that drew the eye without demanding it. Once a month, Zainab reserved her grocery shopping for Sunday nights, deliberately avoiding the punishing Lagos heat. The sun here felt personal, bearing down with an intensity she had never fully prepared for. It was nothing like the temperate calm of the UK, where she had spent her formative years.

Returning to Nigeria had always been her dream, but she hadn't anticipated how relentless the heat would be. She would sooner tolerate hunger than shop during the day, unwilling to expose skin she carefully nurtured to the sun's unforgiving glare.

Her well-meaning parents had suggested hiring a maid to handle chores like these, but she adamantly refused. The thought of



entrusting her personal affairs to a stranger unsettled her, especially in a city where the news seemed to carry a steady stream of stories about theft, betrayal and even child abduction. She valued her privacy too highly to take the risk, and the very idea left her uneasy. In this city, trust was a luxury. Privacy, a necessity. Guarding it took effort, but she considered the cost worth paying.

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 in irritation, wondering why she 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 one, 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, confident, he checked every box. But there was one significant complication: he worked under her, and she was his boss.

That was a line she refused to cross.

Office relationships were complicated enough without adding a power imbalance to the mix. She had no interest in the inevitable gossip, whispered speculation, awkward scrutiny, or workplace distractions. Some boundaries, she believed, were simply better left untouched.

She began loading her purchases.

She glanced at her watch. It was already a few minutes past eight. Pulling out her shopping list, she made her way methodically through the aisles, comparing labels and placing item after item into the trolley. Buying in bulk meant it would be brimming in no time.

IT HAD BEEN AN EXCEPTIONALLY profitable week for Jim. In just three days, he'd pulled in over fifty thousand dollars, without lifting a finger.

Publicly, Jim was a highly skilled Crypto and Forex trader. Privately, he ran a carefully engineered, ruthless investment scam, aggressively marketed across social media platforms. His pitch was simple and seductive: a one-thousand-percent return within seventy-two hours, for a modest initial fee of $995.

He targeted young men, mostly in their twenties and thirties, hungry for fast money. Jim promised to trade Futures, Crypto and Forex on their behalf using his advanced trading robots.

The illusion was convincing.

His social media pages overflowed with videos of him in exotic locations, flaunting luxury cars, private jets, five-star resorts. Daily uploads showed videos of his AI robots trading live, balances swelling into the millions. Carefully curated testimonials sealed the deal.

He smiled inwardly.

They came willingly. Begging, sometimes. Sending money with hope clenched in their fists.

Only a handful ever made money. Those with followers. Amplifiers. The rest were noise.

Expendable.

He headed for the champagne aisle.


AVENTADOR

ZAINAB CHECKED HER LIST again.

She liked efficiency.

Predictability.

Control.

Her trolley was half-full now. Fruits. Olive oil. Cleaning supplies. Protein bars. Everything accounted for.

Another buzz.

She ignored it this time.

Somewhere behind her, a trolley wheel squeaked. She slowed. Then continued.

JIM SELECTED THREE BOTTLES of Dom Pérignon and two bottles of Hennessy without so much as glancing at the prices. He turned each bottle slowly in his hand, inspecting it with quiet satisfaction. Celebration was part of the ritual. It reminded him why he did this. Power was best enjoyed quietly.

As he turned, his gaze lifted and landed on Zainab.

He paused.

Not because she was beautiful, though she was. Something about the way she carried herself caught his attention. She had the composure of someone who did not bend easily.

Controlled posture. Alert eyes. A woman who noticed details.

Jim's smile remained unchanged, but something colder settled behind it.

Interesting.

'WOULD THAT BE CASH or credit, ma'am?' The store clerk asked.

'Card,' Zainab 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.

Frustration etched across her face, she exclaimed, 'My purse has been stolen,' she said aloud, her thick British accent sharpening with irritation.

She wasn't worried about the money, she never carried cash in her bag, and her credit cards were PIN-protected, but the timing was infuriating. Right now, she couldn't even pay for her groceries.

'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 felt the heat rise to her face. She was rarely rattled, but this was different. Public. Uncomfortable. Humiliating. Angry tears burned at the corners 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 sir,' she said. 'I'll need your contact details so I can pay you back, Mr...'

'I'm Jim,' he cut in, smiling back. 'Don't worry about paying me back, it was my pleasure. When you're free, we should have dinner or something. And you are...?'

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

With his protruding belly, heavy gold chains, and flamboyant tracksuit, Jim was the polar opposite of what Zainab looked for in a partner. Still, the least she could do was be courteous. After all, the man had 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. With a weary sigh, she climbed out of the car, lifted the bonnet, and leaned against it, burying her face in her hands in frustration. 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.

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?'

'Sure,' she said with a grateful nod, stepping aside as he climbed out of his convertible and walked over to inspect the open bonnet.

Besides his striking handsomeness, the man was impeccably groomed. His gaze was sharp, pinning her on the spot. He wore a polo shirt that clung to finely sculpted muscles and his shorts revealed strong, muscular legs.

He walked up to 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 jump start your car with mine. 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 asked her to 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.

'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.

AFTER THE INCIDENT at the supermarket, Zainab sent Jim a brief, polite message thanking him for coming to her aid. That should have been the end of it.

It wasn't.

Jim took her gratitude as an invitation to pursue her. He wanted a relationship, and despite her clear and repeated refusals, he refused to take no for an answer.

Using her social media, he discovered where she worked. Soon, lavish gifts began arriving at The Cool Guys: flowers, perfume, expensive trinkets, each one accompanied by the unspoken expectation that persistence and money would eventually win her over.

But Zainab wasn't interested.

The more she rejected his advances, the more determined he became.

She said no. Firmly. Repeatedly.

Jim didn't listen.

The gifts kept coming.

What had started as mild irritation quickly hardened into frustration. Eventually, she wanted nothing to do with him at all.



THE ENTRANCE TO THE Cool Guys was unusually busy that afternoon. Customers drifted in and out, sales assistants hurried between the aisles, and the constant hum of conversation competed with the electronic beeps from the tills.

Zainab glanced at her watch and sighed.

Lunch.

All she wanted was lunch.

She decided to head home, remembering the leftovers from dinner the night before. Her two-bedroom maisonette in 1004 Estate was less than a ten-minute drive from The Cool Guys—close enough for a quick, quiet lunch before returning to work.

She stepped through the revolving doors, juggling a tablet in one hand and her handbag in the other, and nearly walked straight into someone.

'Whoa.'

She stopped abruptly.

'Sorry,' she said, looking up.

Then she smiled.

'Godson?'

He grinned.

'Well, well, well. Look who finally remembered I exist.'

Zainab laughed, though a hint of embarrassment crept into her expression.

'I haven't heard from you in a while,' he said, studying her face.

Her eyes shifted away. 'Oh... I've been busy. Sort of.'

'I see.' He nodded.

She looked back at him. 'Did you come to pick up something?'

'Actually, I stopped by to take you out to lunch. I figured food might be a good way to get your attention.'

She laughed. 'I was just heading out for lunch myself.'

Godson raised his eyebrows.

'Well, now that's what I call perfect timing. Maybe the universe is trying to tell us something.'

She laughed. 'Maybe.'

'And who are we to argue with the universe?'

'You seem very willing to let the universe make your decisions for you.'

'Only when it aligns with my instincts.'

She shook her head, smiling.

'And what are your instincts telling you right now?'

'That taking you to lunch is a good idea.'

She laughed.

They had barely taken a few steps when a courier approached, carrying a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a large, beautifully wrapped package in the other.

It was the courier's fifth delivery to Zainab, so he already recognised her.

'Delivery for you, ma'am.'

Her expression fell.

Not again.

How many times could she reject his gifts before the man finally got the message?

'I don't want them,' she said firmly. 'Please return them to the sender.'

The courier nodded. He had already delivered and collected three unwanted packages from her, so her reaction hardly surprised him.

'All of them?'

'Every single one.'

'Okay, ma'am.'

He turned and walked away, the flowers and package still in his hands.

Godson watched him go, then looked back at Zainab.

'Should I be asking questions?'

Nothing worth worrying about. Just someone who doesn't understand the meaning of the word "no".'

'Good to know. Because I was beginning to think I'd walked into a very complicated lunch.'

She laughed.

THE RESTAURANT WAS ELEGANT without being intimidating, with soft music playing in the background and enough distance between the tables to make conversation easy.

Godson had ordered a bottle of wine. When the waiter walked away, Zainab raised an eyebrow.

'Wine?'

'You don't like wine?'

'I do, but...' She glanced at her watch. 'It's the middle of the day. I still have to go back to work.'

Godson smiled. 'It's one glass, Zainab. I promise it won't turn you into a different person.'

'You don't know that.'

'Then make it half a glass.'

She laughed. 'That defeats the purpose.'

'I'm only asking you to relax and enjoy your lunch.'

She glanced at the bottle again, then at him.

'One glass.'

'Deal.'

'And I'm going straight back to work afterwards.'

Godson raised his glass.

'To responsible decisions.'

She laughed and clinked her glass against his.

'You're already a bad influence.'

'I prefer to think of myself as a positive influence with questionable methods.'

Zainab laughed.

Lunch turned out to be nothing like the polite meal she had expected.

They talked.

They teased each other.

They argued playfully about whether pineapple belonged on pizza, whether expensive cars were worth the money, and whether anyone actually enjoyed business meetings.

At some point, Zainab realised she had been laughing so much that her cheeks hurt.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had such an easy afternoon.

By the time the waiter cleared the plates, Zainab had already finished her second glass of wine.

She glanced at her phone.

Three missed calls from work.

'Oh no.'

'What?'

'I'm supposed to be back at work.'

Godson glanced at the nearly empty wine bottle.

'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

She looked at the bottle.

Then at him.

Then laughed.

'Probably not.'

'Good decision. Because I think your employees deserve a boss who can at least stand upright.'

She leaned back in her chair, shaking her head at Godson with an accusing smile.

'You know,' she said, 'I had a perfectly respectable plan for today.'

Godson raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

'Yes. I was going to have lunch, go back to my office, finish my work, and behave like a responsible adult.'

'And instead?'

She lifted her wineglass and gave him a pointed look. 'Instead, I ran into you.'

Godson laughed. 'So now I'm responsible for your poor decisions?'

'Absolutely.' She took another sip. 'You showed up at my workplace, kidnapped me at lunchtime, fed me, made me laugh all afternoon, and now you've got me drinking wine.'

'I prefer to call it an intervention.'

'An intervention?'

'Yes. You looked like a woman who desperately needed to escape her office.'

Zainab laughed. 'Well, congratulations. You've successfully ruined my afternoon.'

'I'm beginning to think you enjoyed being ruined.'

She gave him a playful glare. 'Careful. This is exactly what I mean. You're a bad influence.'

Godson leaned back, grinning. 'If one lunch has already turned me into a bad influence, imagine what could happen if I took you out on a proper date.'

Zainab paused, pretending to consider the proposal.

'A proper date?'

'Exactly. No workplace ambush. No pretending we're just going for lunch. I pick you up. We have dinner somewhere nice. Maybe a little wine, although clearly I'll have to supervise you.'

She laughed. 'Supervise me?'

'Absolutely. Someone has to make sure you don't get yourself into trouble.'

'Godson, you are the one who got me into trouble in the first place.'

'Then I suppose I should take responsibility.'

Zainab shook her head, smiling. 'You really don't give up, do you?'

'Not when I'm interested.'

For a moment, her teasing expression softened. She looked at him, then down at her wineglass before meeting his eyes again.

'All right,' she said. 'I'll go on a proper date with you.'

'Just like that?'

'Don't look so shocked.'

'I'm not shocked. I'm trying to determine whether the wine is still talking.'

'It isn't.'

Godson smiled. 'Really?'

'Yes. But there's one condition.'

He leaned forward. 'What?'

'No turning up at my office and kidnapping me again.'

'Kidnapped you? You came willingly.'

'Under the influence of your bad influence.'

Godson grinned. 'I make no promises.'

She burst out laughing. 'See? Bad influence.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'But at least now you know what you're agreeing to.'

Zainab smiled across the table. 'I have a feeling I'm going to regret this.'

Godson raised his glass. 'Probably.'

She clinked hers against his.

'To bad decisions?'

'To our first proper date.'

'And to you behaving yourself.'

Godson took a slow, thoughtful sip of wine, his eyes never leaving hers.

'I'll behave,' he said. 'But I'm not sure you're making it particularly easy.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Oh? And how exactly am I doing that?'

He smiled. 'Looking at me like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like you're already regretting telling me to behave.'

She laughed, but the faint colour rising in her cheeks betrayed her.

'And Godson?'

'Yes?'

'Next time, let me choose the wine.'

He glanced at his glass. 'Deal. Although, judging by this conversation, I suspect the wine was never the dangerous part.'

She smiled. 'Perhaps you're finally catching on.'

He leaned back, his grin widening.

'Good. I was beginning to worry I was the only one misbehaving.'





About the Author

Olajide A. Smith is a digital entrepreneur, storyteller, and lifelong student of human nature. His life between the United States and Nigeria has given him a distinctive perspective on people, relationships, ambition, deception, and the secrets people keep behind carefully constructed lives.

He studied law at the **University of Jos, Nigeria**, but his fascination with storytelling began long before his legal education. As a teenager, he became captivated by the crime novels of **James Hadley Chase**, whose gripping plots, complex characters, and relentless suspense sparked a lifelong love of intrigue. His literary influences also include **Michael Connelly, Jeffrey Archer, Agatha Christie and John Grisham**.

He is particularly drawn to psychological thrillers that blend romance, betrayal, deception, suspense, and unexpected twists—stories that keep readers questioning what is true until the final revelation.

His writing is shaped by the diverse cultures, experiences, and observations that have influenced his life. He is fascinated by the contradictions within human nature: the gap between appearance and reality, the choices people make under pressure, and the lengths to which they will go to protect their ambitions, relationships, reputations, and secrets.

His stories explore survival, power, trauma, ambition, deception, and the complicated nature of human relationships, often asking one unsettling question: **How well do we really know the people closest to us?**

Read more at www.herperfectlies.com.