

“Babe, how far? Business dey,” my roommate, Jane, had said to me as she strode into the room.

“Is it in Lekki or here again? The last man that you linked me up with didn’t pay me even after beating me,” I reminded.

“It is on the island or rather on the water,” she supplied enthusiastically. “A contact needs twenty girls for some guys on a ship. It is for a week, and we are earning nothing less than three hundred and fifty thousand Naira. If whom you are with is nice and likes you, you get extra tip,” she trilled.

“You cannot be serious!” I shouted in disbelief. I have never made that in a month. It is unbelievable that I would be able to make that in a week.

“Are you in?” Jane questioned.

“Yes! If e sure,” I responded gleefully.

If I could make that, I would save it for processing my visa to Italy. The main reason I ran to Lagos was to go to Italy. I had been saving since I got here three years ago, yet I am nowhere near especially with endless rise in exchange rate.

We went for screening and medical checkup, and they promised to get back to us. We waited in anticipation; then, we were called to report to the marina two days later.

We got there earlier because we were excited. I had never been on ship, so I was eager and exhilarated. At past six pm, we were told to get on boats that would take us to the ship. The ship looked so tiny as it was far from where we were; then, came in apprehension.

“Jane, I am scared,” I stuttered.

“Do not be,” a girl responded cheerfully, “This is my third visit.”

“Really?” Jane quizzed.

“Time to get on the boats,” a guy barked as all the girls rushed towards the boats.

As I struggled to get on the boat, I handed my bag to Jane who decided to get into the other boat with the new girl because they chatted. The cold air combined with my fear made me shiver.

The boat that Jane was on left and ours followed. The waves lifting our boat up and down and the saltwater splashing occasionally were thrilling. Thinking the new experience was as bad as I had thought, I saw a girl suddenly fall into the ocean.

“What happened?” I questioned the girl beside me amidst the shouts that rented the air.

“She slipped out of his hand,” she pointed to the men that continued lifting other girls without giving the drowning girl a second glance.

The girl struggled to keep her head above water as we all watched and shouted helplessly. I watched the girl struggle and soon the water was calm and at that moment, I knew I was not going.

What if I fall in that same way? Would that be the end of me?

“Are you not going?” the guy who was lifting the girls asked as I was the only girl left.

Because I was too stunned to talk, I shook my head vehemently.

“You want to go back?” he sneered, and I nodded my head.

I went back with the empty boats and before we got to the shore, I turned back, but the ship was out of sight. It had gone and so had hopes of making more money. It was too late to overturn my decision. I made the choice – good or bad - I would live with it like I was living with the choice of running away from home because I wanted freedom and I wanted to travel abroad, but all I did was stand on streets and let different men travel between my legs.

I was at the gate out of the port when I realized that my bags that had my belongings were not with me, so I was stranded, alone and perplexed. It would be dark soon and I had neither money nor means of communication. I didn't know what to do as I removed my heels and walked slowly and aimlessly along the sandy road that we had come through earlier.

Since my luck had run out, I hoped to see someone who would give me transportation fare. Few cars passed, but I had no confidence to stop any. They probably would not stop for me. Then white Lexus GS 2008 drove past me, stopped few metres away and reversed.

"Hey," the driver peeped to my side.

"Good evening," I greeted as I moved close to the car.

"Were you not one of the girls that was supposed to be on the ship?" he observed.

"Yes, but I could not," I sounded defeated.

"Why... You know what? Get in let me give you a ride because you will not see any bus for another ten minutes," he offered.

“Oh, thank you,” I thanked as I hurriedly opened the door of the car and got in before he could change his mind. I could ask him for money when we get to the bus stop. I sighed with relief as he drove off. I assessed him as he was focused on the road. He was dressed in blue jeans and red T-shirt. He had a low cut, his beards were cleanly trimmed, and his nails were neat, so I concluded that he looked like a responsible guy because I have met different men; therefore, I can tell.

“My name is Josh. What’s yours?” He asked as he glanced at me briskly.

“Sandra. Thanks for the help.”

“You are welcome. Why did you not go?” he questioned as I fiddled with the seat belt across my chest.

“I was scared when I saw the incident. That might have been me,” I replied.

“Ehn,” he sounded sarcastic, “It could have been anybody. To make money, you must take the risk and the girls took risks to get what they want.”

“I cannot take such risk. I guess I am not bold enough,” I admitted.

“Things people do for money. Money is not easy to make. It is what it is,” he confessed.

“I am sure one of you can swim, why didn’t anyone of you save her?” I interrogated.

He glanced at me again and started laughing.

“Who wants to go through the pain of saving her when the ship had only few minutes stop for the girls? Most of the girls aren’t missed; they knew what they were getting themselves into,” he disclosed, and he was right.

If anything happened, no one in my family would know where to find me because they did not know where I am – my father had disowned me. I will not be missed either.

“Where do you stay?” He asked as I was brought back to my present reality.

“I stay at Ishaga,” I disclosed.

“Where is that?”

“It is close to Ogba, but the problem is that I gave my bag to my friend, so I do not have cash or phone to make transfer or call,” I told him.

“Ogba is far. I stay alone, would you want to spend a night at my place, and leave tomorrow?” he volunteered.

“I would not want to impose,” I quickly said. Deep down, I was elated at the offer because I was already tired and hungry, and I didn’t think I had the strength to shuttle buses or face the heavy Lagos traffic at that time of the day. What could possibly go wrong?

“No, you are not,” he responded as he sped past the bus stop.

“Are we going there now?” I asked.

“Yes. If you are uncomfortable, I could drop you, but I do not have cash,” he announced.

After several minutes driving into a street, we reached the quiet end, and he drove into a dark compound.

I was not scared because I have been to strange places for ‘jobs’.

He parked the car and led me into his apartment. It was already dark, so he turned on torchlight to illuminate the room, but I couldn't see the room clearly.

"Make yourself at home," he pointed to a well laid bed as he locked the door and the iron gate inside with padlocks. I did not think much of it as I knew Lagos wasn't the safest place to live because of robbers although the probability of been kidnapped is same as been robbed.

"Thank you," I sat down on the bed as I looked around, but I couldn't see much as the light was not bright.

He told me to wash up as he pointed me to the bathroom after he tossed a shirt to me. I walked into the bathroom, and it was small, yet so neat. The shower was functioning unlike that in my apartment and after a satisfying bath, I slipped into his big shirt and washed my clothes. I came into the room to see the table set close to the bed.

After we ate, he cleared the dishes and we talked with bottles of beer in hands.

"What do you do?"

"I work in a boutique," I lied. "You?"

"I work for a company with a bit of side hustles here and there," he shrugged.

We talked into the night before bed, and he volunteered to sleep on the couch which was very strange to me because he was so nice. I felt safe, but I stayed awake until I heard him snore before I drifted off.

I woke to a slightly dark room, but I knew it was already daybreak. Remembering the ordeal yesterday, I sighed deeply and from my sleeping position, I scanned the room, but Josh was not there.

“Josh! Josh” I called but there was no response.

I staggered to the restroom, but he was not in there either, but the restroom was brighter than the living room as the window was open, so there was light coming through.

*Maybe he went out.*

I walked back to the room and to see the room clearly, I opened the curtains by the side of the bed, and I was met with a giant window facing the fence, but the room became brighter. I saw the digital wall clock and it was eight am. I could see that it was a big studio apartment with built-in kitchen at the far left. It looked better than my face-me-I-slap-you room. The room and its furniture had neutral colours that looked as though they were straight out of a magazine and there were different artworks hanging around. At the far right of the room, there was a place demarcated with curtains and out of curiosity, I walked over and opened the curtain. I was fear-stricken as I scuffled backward and my legs became weak, so they gave way, and I sat on the floor with great force. I was trembling.

There were five huge glass show cases sitting side by side on a big table and in each of the cases were about five to six slithering snakes of different types and colours. They were creepy and scary looking. I hated snakes and seeing many of them made my skin crawl. There was a lid on each of them, but what if they slither out of the cases or break

out of the glass or the table's legs give way and the cases broke? The movies, Snakes in the Plane and Anaconda, were fictional, what if that became my reality?

Why was he keeping snakes in his room? What did he do with them? Visibly shaken, I managed to stand and I hurriedly closed the curtain. I moved to the door to get out of the room and away from the snakes, but the gate was locked with padlocks.

I ran to the side stools, but there were no keys. I looked for the trousers he had worn because I had seen him put the keys in his pocket, but there was no key there either. I looked at the kitchen section of the room, but nothing. As I walked to the fridge, I saw a note on it, and it read, *'I had to run to work. There is food in the fridge, so you can warm it. I will be back by noon.'*

I did not want food, but out of the room because it was spine-chilling. I crawled into bed as I sat hugging my knees as I waited for him to come. Eternity later, he came back at five minutes past two.

"What happened?" he inquired as he locked the gate.

"Snakes... there... are... snakes," I stammered as I got out of bed and moved towards him.

"Oh, they are secured and you are safe," he hissed in a harmless yet dangerous tone.

"Why do you have snakes in your house?" I stuttered.

"You have your hobbies and I have mine," he smirked. "Do not be scared as long as we get along, you are safe."

"What does that mean? Anyways, I must go now," I announced.

“To?”

“To my house,” I fumed and at this time I was agitated.

“You are not going anywhere. You think feeding and accommodating you is free? You owe me and I own you. Nothing is free,” he thundered and at that moment, it was obvious that I was in trouble. What does he want from me? Sex? Kill me? Harvest my organs?

Judy was never seen after she went with someone. What if that was my fate? I ran from frying pan to a massive fire.

“Please, let me go,” I begged hysterically, and he strode to close the space between us.

“No matter how loud you shout, no one will hear you and if you do not want the snakes, or my deadly anger, you will be a good girl,” he growled. I ran towards the door; he grabbed me by the elbow and swung me to the floor.

“God help me,” I sobbed.

“God is too busy,” he mocked.

I knew I could not fight him because he was burlier, so he would overpower me. I knew I had to please him until my escape, if I wanted to escape. I had myself to blame.

Days slowly went as I was held captive. He made sure I was locked in. The key was always in his pocket; he was a light sleeper as he woke at the slightest sound. I avoided the snakes’ area as much as I could, but I often dream that one would escape any day and bite me or wrap itself around me, but I stayed calm because I wanted to live.

I played sex slave and homemaker with a smile I practiced in front of the mirror daily.

Fortunately, I discovered sleeping pills in one of his trousers I washed. With a brilliant idea, I crushed four pills, poured it in a paper and kept it under the bed. I knew my escape was soon, so I observed him and waited...

Then the night came.

He returned drunk and still drinking. I knew my time had come; I watched as he kept the keys in his shorts. Immediately he staggered into the restroom, I picked the crushed pills, poured the powder into his opened drink and prayed he didn't notice while drinking; he didn't as he downed it; then, I waited patiently as he fell fast asleep. After taping him severally to make sure, I took the keys out of his pocket and the money in his wallet. Dressed in his big top, I made for the door as quietly as I could.

I knew if he woke up, I would die. With a sweaty palm, I tiptoed to the door, unlocked padlocks as quietly as possible while looking at the bed to see if he stirred. I gently opened the gate I had greased daily, unlocked the door in no time, opened it and I closed the gate and locked it behind me and locked the door too.

I ran.

I reached the gate and discovered it was locked. I was trapped, but I couldn't give up; fortunately, I saw a low part of the fence and I climbed over jumping to the other side landing on my knees, I ran. It was a dark, lonely environment. I didn't look back, but continued running as fast as my legs could carry me until I saw an express road.

I am safe.