

Double Your Money

Whenever I'm in a city, I gravitate towards its main market. I enjoy browsing through craft shops, finding enthusiastic traders who exhibit a genuine love of their merchandise. I like the colours and the smells, the sense of vibrancy. I even like the crowds. Some people dislike being hemmed in on all sides by distracted shoppers, noisy hawkers, the ubiquitous urchins to whom the stalls and aisles are home and playground rolled into one... It may seem like a contradiction, but for a loner, I don't mind being in a crowd. Surrounded by lots of people, I become anonymous. In a bustling market, I'm just another face to ignore, not the barefoot weirdo in white who looks like a cross between an aged, dreadlocked hippy and a beggar up on his luck.

Markets are a double-edged sword for me. With so many people drawn to them, there's always a risk that I'll bump into someone I know, like the time I reacquainted myself with Joker, a man I knew from my university days. Joker had spent a year living in my hall of residence, having conned people into believing he was a mature student waiting for his grant to come through. At the time, we all thought of him as the laziest student one could ever meet. It was only when he'd done a moonlight flit with the cafeteria takings that we found out he was a conman on the run from the law.

Despite his dishonesty, I had a soft spot for Joker, whose wicked sense of humour explained his nickname. He was a thief, but he'd always been generous towards me with his ill-gotten gains. Most of the young men in our hall had eaten suya and drunk beer that Joker had paid for.

The first time I bumped into Joker after university was in Dugbe market, in Ibadan, where he was exploiting his skill with playing cards. His scam was Find the Lady, where punters bet small stakes that they can spot the queen from a shuffled deck of three. What I knew, and the punters didn't, was that they could never win. I had played a hundred hands of Find the Lady with Joker and never won. Not once! He confessed to me that I'd occasionally picked the right card, but when I did, he'd do something called a Mexican Turnover, where he'd put a card that he'd palmed in the place of the card he was flipping over. He was so good at it, I could never tell.

In Dugbe, Joker was working his con with a young man named Ladi, who I believe is what is called a shill. Joker once explained the role to me to see if I could be persuaded to be his shill. I'm no saint, but I'm not that dishonest. It's the shill's job to pretend not to know the cardsharp, to play against him, and to win sometimes. The winning gives a casual observer the impression that it's a genuine, if difficult, gamble. When he wins, the shill celebrates. When he loses, he bemoans his luck loudly enough to attract observers to the game. The shill reads the body language of the observers, looking for someone who is irritated at his obvious mistakes. Sometimes there are two shills, one to point out the other's mistakes, effectively goading a bystander to step in. If it looks like the bait is working, the cardsharp increases the number of genuine shuffles, the shill continues to get it wrong, and the luckless punter starts twitching on the sidelines, eager to play and win. To quote Joker – *'Once you tink you can win, you don loss your money.'*

More than two decades later, I was back in Ibadan and soon made my way to Dugbe market. I'd been wandering around for a while when my attention was drawn to a portly fellow sitting on an

upturned crate, fanning himself in the shade. I couldn't be sure he was the man I knew, so I watched a while. Though he hadn't looked it at the time, Joker was several years older than I was. If this was him, he was starting to show his age. I would have walked away, but he turned as if he sensed he was being watched, and when our eyes met, I knew at once it was him.

'Jo-kah!' I said, and he gave a smile that made me very glad I'd not done the cowardly thing and slunk away.

'Cosimo? Co-si-mo! Na you be dis?'

Joker had given me the nickname Cosimo because he liked to tease me for my middle-class mannerisms and mastery of the English language. I had once made the mistake of using the word cosmopolitan in front of him. The name had stuck, and for the next two years, Cosimo was the name I had gone by. It was nice to be reminded of those times. I looked at him with feigned suspicion.

'Wetin you dey do here? Do these people know your sordid history?'

He recognised the joke in my switch from pidgin to proper English and my use of the word sordid, which I knew he'd regard as posh. He laughed and pointed to a kiosk.

'Those days don pass my friend. Dat na my shop.'

'Youdonmeanit, you've gone legit? Joker! Wharrapen?'

He shrugged. 'I found love. That's my wife running the place.' He put his hand in his pocket, brought out a wad of notes, and handed one to me. 'Abeg, buy yourself a beer. I'm not allowed to buy drinks for my friends without getting into a big argument about drinking away our profit.'

I took the money, bought myself a beer, and very deliberately pocketed the change.

'You remember I owe you money, eh?' said Joker.

'Be thankful I don't need money, or I'd rip your trousers off for what's in your pocket.'

I couldn't remember if Joker owed me a bean. If he did, I'd written off the debt long ago.

'So, you've gone straight,' I said, pleased to find he'd given up the old ways. 'Good for you. What about your pal? What was his name? Ladi?'

I could see straight away that I'd raised an uncomfortable subject. Joker wiped his face and patted the upturned crate beside him. He ignored the shout from his wife, who knew he was buying drinks for his friend because she'd seen him hand over money, but he responded with a thumbs up when she asked if he would want akara. I could tell there was a story here. At Uni, Joker and I would often tell each other stories; some real, some made up. When Joker raised a finger to indicate that we should wait until the akara arrived and his wife had departed, I guessed this one would be real.

A few minutes later, Joker popped a piece of akara in his mouth, chewed thoughtfully, and began.

'Ladi. Now there was a boy who turned bad. We kicked about this place for a while before the police got to know us. After that, they wanted a bigger and bigger cut of the takings, and if we

didn't pay up... Well, let's just say they could be unpleasant. I wanted to go to Lagos, but Ladi had made new friends here who were teaching him new tricks. Find the Lady had become small time for him; he wanted to get into big stuff.'

Joker paused to pop some more Akara into his mouth.

'What big stuff?' I said, since a good story needs an attentive listener. It turned out to be very big stuff, and not just because Joker said it quietly.

'Money-Doubling.'

My eyebrows shot up.

'Oh! That *is* big stuff.'

Find the Lady is dishonest; Money Doubling is evil. It relies on the target's belief in juju, and exploits people's fear, superstition, and ignorance. Joker described Ladi's new friends as the kind of people who robbed graves for body parts and kidnapped children for ransom.

Joker told me Ladi's tale in his own unique way, which is not suitable for consumption by anyone of a sensitive disposition. He used a lot of swear words, and his tale was riddled with sexism, tribalism, incomprehensible idiom, and exaggeration. I'll give you my version of Ladi's tale because a lot of what follows comes from my own research. I couldn't take Joker's word for what happened (since I knew him as a thief and a liar), so I read newspaper accounts from the time and transcripts of court proceedings. In some parts, I've taken artistic license to make this more readable, but I had met Ladi; Joker wasn't telling me a tale about a stranger. I may have embellished things and filled gaps in the story with harmless conjecture, but in essence, what follows is sadly true.

...Ladi Lawson took an emery board from his pocket and made sure there were no rough edges on the nails of his little fingers. They were nails that took a lot of grooming; two inches long and perfectly curved. One flaw in nails like that and they could catch and split, upending months of careful manicuring. His perfect pinkies were a sign (for those who needed such signals) that here was a man who didn't toil for a living. Ladi wanted people to look at him and ask themselves - *na which kind work pesson can do and still maintain fine nails like dat?* A market trader he'd haggled with had taken one look at his hands and tried to insult him by describing him as a miser who didn't know what it meant to have to wipe one's own bottom. Ladi had taken the intended slur as a compliment and paid the full asking price.

Ladi's goal was to look like he was made of money, some of which he carried around in his head. Eight molars, four top and bottom, one premolar, and one incisor, were highest quality dental gold. His shoes were artificial Prada. His belt buckle was a Dubai Airport gold and diamond fake that he'd borrowed from a cousin and forgotten to return. His shirts looked good so long as they stayed under a jacket. Exposed, they revealed brown sweat stains under the arms. The knuckle-duster ring he wore on his right hand could be bought for ten bucks in Shanghai, and twenty in Vegas, though the four letters across his knuckles spelt 'GOLD'.

Like a Vegas showman, Ladi knew he only had to look the part for the benefit of his target audience. Not everyone was impressed with or taken by his bling, but those who looked on in awe at the chunky gold chains around his neck and wanted to touch the large bejewelled cross resting on his hairy chest were his people. His father had told him the story of how he'd once sat

next to a well-known millionaire and remarked on the man's Rolex. The millionaire told Ladi's father it was a fake - he didn't get rich wasting his money on wristwatch frippery - but because of who he was, everyone assumed it was a genuine timepiece and worth a fortune. Ladi had never forgotten that story, and he lived by its meaning. If a man looks wealthy, people will assume he's wealthy. Ladi had proved this adage enough times to want it carved on his gravestone.

One Saturday afternoon, Ladi cruised to the workplace of his latest project, the young, impressionable Rosa. He slowed to a crawl as he passed the house where Rosa worked as a maid. The two big Range Rovers were gone from the carport, which meant that the owner of the house and his wife were out. Ladi was relieved. He'd learnt that you can't don a lion suit and waltz into the den thinking the lions won't sniff you out. He'd tried mixing with the rich more than once and bore the mental and physical bruises of coming up against their wall of bouncers, bodyguards, and sharp-tongued, haughty secretaries. Not all his gold teeth had been voluntary replacements, and he'd always walk with a slight limp that was the by-product of being flung down the stairs of an upmarket casino. Ladi's people weren't the next level down from Rosa's employers, or even the level below them; his people were those sinking in the mud, straining to keep their heads above water while the rich used them as stepping stones to keep their feet dry.

He pulled over and dialled Rosa's number. Going to the house and ringing the doorbell would have reduced him to a fifty-fifty chance that Rosa's mother, the housekeeper, would intercept him. The last time Rosa's mother had spotted him, she'd pretended not to notice he was on the premises and casually let the dogs out. He'd only spoken to the woman through the bars of a gate, but it was enough to know that she was a more formidable barrier to any man trying to woo her daughter than steel bars and vicious dogs. If Mama Rosa got an inkling he was about, she'd find a dozen chores for her daughter to do.

Rosa came on the line, and Ladi switched on the charm.

'Rosie baby, you done working?'

A pause, and Ladi guessed that Rosa had slipped into a room where she could speak freely.

'I've finished cleaning, I'm just making the beds, and then I think I'll be free. It's my half-day.'

'I know, I know. I remembered. I remember everything you tell me. I remember everything about you. Do you know, I've just closed my eyes, and in my imagination, I can smell your skin. Ummmm...'

Rosa giggled.

'Oh, Ladi! Stop! I know what you're after.'

'Well, if you know what I'm after, get those beds done and come outside to meet me. I'm parked outside, almost opposite the gates. The red merc.'

'Red? Have you gone and got another car?'

'Never mind about my car collection. I saw your mother making a note of the blue Audi, so I thought I'd better arrive incognito. Good idea, don't you think?'

'Probably.'

‘Good. Come out when you can. I have a meeting this afternoon, but I must see you before then. I cannot think of business when every bit of space in my head is taken up with thoughts of you.’

Ladi took Rosa to Badagri beach for a picnic lunch, where he demonstrated his understanding that a return on investment first requires investment. Food and drinks for the picnic cost more than twenty times his normal lunch. He regarded the price for a table with a palm frond sunshade as daylight robbery. Rosa didn’t know it, but his cars were sourced from a contact at a long-stay parking garage. It was the most expensive part of the project, but number plates had to be changed, and the mileage rewound after use. If he had a crash and the police got involved, Ladi knew he’d have to take the rap and go down for theft. He could only ‘hire’ available vehicles, and they had to be older cars that could have their odometers reversed. The car’s age wasn’t a problem. Ladi had found that claiming to be a lover of older models was just the kind of reverse snobbery people responded to.

After lunch, they walked hand in hand by the water’s edge. It was hot, but Ladi wouldn’t take his suit off. He put his arm around Rosa and pulled her close to whisper in her ear - ‘Rosa, will you marry me?’

He’d said it to put Rosa off balance. They hardly knew each other; there was no way she’d be expecting a proposal of marriage. He used the shock and hesitancy in her eyes to back out of the offer and make her feel the need to compensate him for the rejection. He gave a broad grin.

‘I’m sorry, it’s premature. You don’t know anything about me, so how can you marry me? It’s just that I find you so... captivating.’

Ladi was a student of his art, and like every expert, he’d coined his own terminology for the stages his work required. This was the Hook, Line, and Sinker. Asking Rosa to marry him was the Hook. It created the need for a deep level of trust between them, and she couldn’t trust someone she didn’t know. Reminding Rosa that she knew nothing about him was The Line, the nudge that reinforced the need for her to ask him about himself. The Sinker was still a little way off. The Line had been cast, and all he needed to do was wait to reel her in. He’d prepared himself to field any question Rosa asked, but the only important thing he needed her to know was how he made his money.

Over the next thirty minutes, Ladi spun a web of deceit about a family he didn’t have and a place he came from that neither of them had ever been to. He could tell that Rosa was itching to find out where he got his money from, and it amused him that she should try to do so in a subtle way, not knowing that he would provide the means to segue to the all-important question. He pulled the trigger by looking at his watch.

‘Aren’t you going to be late for your business meeting?’ she asked.

Sinker Time! Ladi sang in his head.

‘No, I won’t be late. I’m not a businessman in the usual sense of the word. I don’t buy and sell things.’

Ladi knew Rosa wouldn’t demand to know about his work life because that would make her appear materialistic, but he could see in her eyes that the sinker had done its work. Now she’d have to know how he made his money. He met Rosa’s expected polite query about what he did for a living with a small shake of the head and abruptly brought their afternoon together to a

close. He looked at his watch again and confirmed that he didn't have a business meeting, but there was someone he had to see, and he was running late.

Two days later, Rosa climbed out of her bedroom window to meet him, and they went to a popular nightspot. As he flashed the cash, Ladi watched Rosa tying herself in knots over her need to know how he made a living. When a waitress walked off with a tip that was the equivalent of half of Rosa's daily wages, it became too much to bear. She played the trump card Ladi had handed her and used marriage for leverage.

'Ladi, I can't marry you unless I know what you do.'

He pretended not to understand.

'Do?'

'Yes, do. I need to know how my husband earns the money that puts shoes on my children's feet.'

'Rosie, babe, it's not that important, is it? We're here to have a good time, so let's have a drink and a dance...'

Rosa interrupted him.

'No! Ever since you said you're not the usual kind of businessman, it has troubled me. How do I know you don't rob banks?'

'Rob banks? C'mon. Do I look like I rob banks? I'm not even properly rich.'

Ladi always took care to lay down multiple layers to a lie. He'd found a succession of little lies to be much more robust than a big one. These little lies allowed him to measure scepticism and to manage objections before they arose. If one lie fell, it rarely blew the whole caper. He didn't feel bad about lying to Rosa because he knew she was far from intent on marrying him. She didn't love him; she was just consumed by the curiosity he'd nurtured. The seemingly innocuous term 'properly rich' was a layer of the lie that he'd come to rely on later. As expected, Rosa homed in on the meaning of 'not properly rich'.

'You look wealthy enough to me. You drive flash cars, you eat nice food, and you pay for everything we do. Ladi, I don't need you to be rich, I need to know that these things aren't the proceeds of some... You know, some dodgy endeavour.'

Ladi laughed.

'Like robbing banks.'

Rosa pretended to be offended, but Ladi wasn't fooled.

'Stop teasing, Ladi. You always make a joke of things you don't want to talk about. This is important. I know you don't rob banks, but I couldn't be your wife without knowing what you do. What will I tell my mother when she asks? That you're an international man of mystery?'

Ladi let an uncomfortable silence fall and stared into his drink to discourage conversation. He let the tension build, and then he let a little air out of the bubble. Speaking so softly that Rosa had to put her head to his, he drew her into his circle of confidence.

'If I tell you, you can't tell anyone, not even your mother.'

He let that sink in. He didn't think it would be a deal breaker. If it was, then he'd misjudged Rosa, and he needed to move on. Ladi didn't believe in chasing bad business, so Rosa was one misstep from never seeing him again.

'Not even my mum?'

Ladi shook his head. It was the signal for Rosa to spend a good minute in silence, trying to will him to change his mind. This was the moment when all Ladi's painstaking groundwork paid off because she broke before he did.

'Okay. Oya Ladi, what is it you do that is so secret that I can't share it with my mother?'

Ladi pretended to be sorely conflicted. In an earlier guise, when he'd been a fake priest, he would often pretend to seek divine intervention as he flicked through the bible looking for a phrase he'd memorised. He adopted the same pained upwards gaze, and when he looked Rosa in the face, it was with the strained expression of one searching for the right words.

'I can't tell you, it's too difficult. I must show you.'

Rosa's nervousness was written on her face. Something that could only be shown could be anything.

'Is it dangerous?'

Ladi shrugged. He wouldn't say. He didn't need to say; she was already caught in his trap. Now he was building the level of trust that he needed. It could take days, or it could be all over in a minute. In Rosa's case, it was the latter. After some nervous lip chewing, she agreed.

'Okay. Show me.'

Ladi downed his drink and offered Rosa his hand. She thought he wanted to dance, but they were leaving. It was time to treat Rosa as the puppet she was, so she'd stop asking questions.

'Let's go. Meet me outside the house when you finish work tomorrow evening, and I'll show you. Make an excuse for your mother; you'll be home late.'

Ladi let Rosa kiss him on the lips, but he didn't kiss her back. When the gate shut and she'd gone inside, he punched the air in delight.

Yes! Get in, Ladi!

The following evening, Ladi picked Rosa up, and they drove in the direction of Ibadan. They made small talk, but Ladi could see Rosa was worried, and he didn't go out of his way to be reassuring.

'You're with me, you'll be fine,' was all he'd say about where they were going and what awaited them when they got there.

Before they'd reached the outskirts of the city, Ladi peeled off the main highway. Soon they were making their way down pothole-riddled narrow roads, each with less tarmac than the previous one, until they were on a deserted dirt track that wound its way up a hill. At the top stood a decrepit house that looked like a strong gust of wind could knock it over. Ladi opened the boot

and took out a bulky sack which he slung over his shoulder. He walked confidently up to the house and unlocked the front door. With his hand on the handle, he paused and turned to Rosa.

‘Don’t be afraid of what’s inside, and whatever you do, don’t try to leave without me. We go in and come out as one. Okay?’

Rosa’s arms were wrapped over her chest as if she were cold on this balmy evening. She cast about her for signs of life other than this deserted, spooky old house, but there were none. This was as remote as it was possible to be. Her eyes were on stalks as she said a quiet ‘okay’.

The floor was made of compacted earth, so they walked through the front room of the deserted house in silence.

‘Stand here,’ Ladi said, placing his hands on Rosa’s shoulders to position her on the spot. He struck a match and lit a candle. Rosa screamed when Ladi lifted the candle and its glow reached the corners of the room. She had spotted the mummified corpse seated in a high-backed wooden chair. Ladi clamped a hand over her mouth

‘Shush! It’s okay, there’s nothing to be afraid of. He’s long dead, and there’s no one else here.’

Rosa trembled with fear.

‘Who, who is he?’

Ladi put his sack on the floor, and from it he took a wooden chest about eighteen inches wide and ten inches high. It looked old, just as the people who’d made it had intended.

‘He’s the former keeper of this chest,’ Ladi said, handing it to Rosa to hold.

Ladi opened the lid of the chest and proceeded to take bundles of banknotes from the sack. The notes were cheap counterfeits, but good enough to fool Rosa in bad light. When Ladi had covered the base of the chest in a layer of money, he closed the lid.

‘Oya, Rosa, now we give the chest to our friend over there.’

‘We what?’

‘We give the chest to our friend over there. C’mon, let’s do it together. He’s dead, there’s nothing to fear.’

Rosa inched her way over to the dead man. Ladi’s hand in the small of her back propelled her forward. Rosa’s voice was strained, pleading. She was so terrified she wanted to cry.

‘Ladi, why do we have to give him the chest?’

Ladi was stern with her. He could not afford to let her think for herself.

‘It is the way. The former keeper of the chest cannot rest until the new keeper dies. Until that time, his spirit must remain on earth to do what the new keeper wants.’

‘But Ladi, I don’t want to.’

‘Don’t want to what?’

‘I don’t want to give him anything. You do it.’

‘Rosa, you must trust me. All you have to do is place the chest on his lap. I’m right here.’

Rosa stretched her back and arms as far as she could, so she didn't have to get close to the mummy. With squinting eyes and shaking hands, she placed the chest on his lap and stepped away. When she looked at Ladi for reassurance, he stiffened and held a hand up to his ear as if he'd heard a noise. Rosa began bouncing on her heels as her instinct towards flight began to take over. Ladi said in a loud voice – 'Spirits of the chest, spirits of the chest, double my money, double it now!'

Suddenly, the wind whipped up, and the candle went out. Ladi grabbed the chest and handed it to Rosa.

'Take it! We must go! We must go! There shouldn't be two of us in here.'

They hurried out of the door. Ladi shut and locked it. For a few seconds, he leaned his back against it and made his chest heave. Rosa was beside herself with fear.

'Ladi, let's go! Please, let's go!'

They rushed to the car. Ladi grabbed the chest from Rosa and laid it on the back seat. He gunned the engine into life, and they drove away from the hut at high speed. Soon, the track gave way to potholed roads, which gave way to a big road, and shortly afterwards, they joined the highway. Ladi suppressed a smile when he noticed that Rosa was still trembling. He waited for her to speak first.

'Ladi, what happened back there?'

'Don't ask, just look in the chest.'

'What?'

'Look in the chest.'

Rosa reached back and warily lifted the lid. Her jaw dropped. Where there had been one layer of money, there were now two.

'Ladi, there's more money in here than you put in!'

'Close it. Close it!'

Ladi made sure that Rosa closed the lid without taking out the money.

'Ladi? How? Ladi!'

He explained while appearing reluctant.

'I told you, I'm not properly rich.' He paused to lend weight to what he was about to say next.
'Rosie babe, I'm a money-doubler.'

'You're what?'

Ladi would say no more on the subject. Everyone in Nigeria had heard of money-doublers. While the method is unknown, most people know that money-doublers are con artists who take money, offer to double it with juju, and then vanish when handed real cash. Ladi had already judged that Rosa, who displayed clear signs of being both superstitious and easily led, occupied that part of the Venn diagram reserved for those who thought there was no smoke without fire, and money-doubling was possible. Now she had her proof. She'd held the chest. She'd seen the money lying in one layer. She'd placed the chest on the dead man's lap, and she'd carried the

same chest out. As far as she was concerned, sitting on the back seat of the car was proof of the money doubler's art.

For Ladi, the rest of the con was easy, if time-consuming. He only had to wait until payday, when Rosa would want to double her wages. In the meantime, he fielded petty questions – the position of the house on a sacred hill allowed a spirit to reside there; there was no optionality, the spirit had to double what was put in the chest; the chest had to be half empty or there'd be nowhere for the doubled money to go; he didn't know how or where the chests were made; the chest in his possession had been handed down from his great grandfather who had stolen it from the court of a Yoruba king; if it ever got out that he had a money-doubler's chest, he would be hunted down and killed for it.

‘So how come the body doesn't decompose?’

‘It's been drained of blood and had its innards removed.’

Ladi saw the expression on Rosa's face and quickly reassured her.

‘...I didn't do it; it was done by a babalawo who knows about these things.’

‘Really, you can pay a babalawo to do things like that?’

‘You can pay a mortuary assistant. People who work with the dead aren't squeamish about such things. In this country, you can buy a pauper's body after death and pretty much do what you like with it. The Yoruba have no tradition of reverence for a corpse. It's all changed now, but by tradition, on the death of the king, the iyala she cuts his heart out and gives it to the next king to eat.’

Rosa looked like she was about to be ill, but she overcame her squeamishness when she remembered that Ladi hadn't yet agreed to what she was hoping for. She pleaded that her wages fit into a small envelope; surely it would be a small thing for them to go back to the house and double her money. Ladi reluctantly agreed to the doubling but insisted on doing it alone. He had a ready excuse - they'd had to flee the last time because the spirits were angered by the presence of more than one person in the room.

‘The power is for the bearer of the chest, not the bearer of the chest and his fiancée.’

‘Bearer?’ Rosa didn't understand the word. Ladi had used it unthinkingly but now wasn't the time for minor corrections. He was doing well talking about things that Rosa, with her limited education, did not understand.

‘Bearer means the person who hands the chest to the spirit's dead body.’

‘Oh, I see.’

Two days after she'd handed over her wages, Ladi handed Rosa an envelope containing exactly double the amount in the same denomination banknotes. As he did so, he played the ace in his pack - Rosa couldn't fail to see that he now wore identical knuckle rings on both hands.

‘I see you've got two of those,’ she said.

Ladi smiled. ‘I put it in the box with your money; I honestly wasn't sure if the spirit would give me two of them back. I've only ever doubled money before.’

For the rest of the day, Ladi waited for the idea he'd planted to flourish in Rosa's mind. He backed off the subject of the magic chest and money doubling, saying he didn't want to talk about it, and warned of the danger in becoming too reckless in its use.

'I shouldn't use it unless I have to,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'Rosie babe, I'm fine. I'm not properly rich, but I don't want to be properly rich. I have all I need, and when I need more, I shall...' He let his voice tail off. He wanted to shake Rosa and tell her to work things out quicker because it was boring having a stupid girlfriend, even one he planned to dump as soon as she'd given him what he wanted. He nudged her towards his goal.

'You know what, Rosie darling, when the time is right, I'm going to give you two engagement rings.'

Ladi felt like banging his head on a wall. It took an hour before Rosa's eyes suddenly brightened, and she had her epiphany.

'Ladi! I've got it.'

'Hmmm. Got it? Got what?'

'Madam has jewellery in the house, lots of it.'

Ladi pretended to be bored.

'I'm not surprised,' he said.

'No, you don't get it. If I got you her jewellery, you could double it.'

'If you get me her...' Ladi paused and pretended to be angry. 'That would be stealing.'

Rosa's eyes were large with excitement.

'No, that's the thing. It wouldn't be stealing. As soon as you've doubled the jewellery, I'll put it back. She'll never know. We wouldn't be stealing it; we'd only be borrowing it.'

'I don't know,' said Ladi uncertainly, and he stared into his drink like he didn't want to talk about the subject. Rosa gently lifted his chin.

'Look, I'm going to marry you, and you don't want to be money doubling forever. We'll need money for our life together, and this is a perfect way to get it. Madam's jewellery is worth a fortune. She has gold and diamonds, and all kinds of stuff. I heard her tell a friend that one piece, *one piece*, could buy a house.'

'Babe, I don't know, I don't feel comfortable with this. Maybe we could just do a necklace?'

Rosa shook her head. Ladi could see she'd begun to fantasise about owning things she'd only ever been allowed to look at, and clean.

'No! You don't want to double money, and I don't want to risk taking madam's jewellery. It's not stealing, but she wouldn't see it that way.'

'You're right, I suppose. But how are you going to get your hands on her jewellery? Doesn't she keep it in a safe?'

‘Yes, but my mum knows the combination.’

‘Your mum?’

‘Yes, madam trusts her. She often asks Mum to get something from the safe for her, or to put something away.’

‘But that means she has to be brought into this.’

Rosa shrugged.

‘I trust you; she trusts me; you trust her. Mum’s alright, and she knows about money doubling. She’s growing old, and I know it troubles her that she’s got nothing put by. If I tell her she won’t have to be a housemaid anymore, and she’ll be able to retire with something put aside... I can persuade her.’

Ladi hadn’t expected it to be this easy to get his hand on a small fortune in jewellery. He pretended to have misgivings, but he was secretly delighted, even more so when Rosa told him that her employers were leaving the country that night and they could do the doubling as soon as the flight had departed.

Ladi was sitting in his car when the gate swung open. Rosa appeared and beckoned for him to drive in. He took a deep breath. He didn’t want to appear overly anxious, especially since he had to deal with Rosa’s mother. He parked under the carport and got out to meet Rosa, who ran over to him. She was trembling with excitement.

‘We’re ready,’ she said. ‘Did you bring the chest? My mother says she needs to see that it looks like the genuine article.’

Ladi popped the boot open and took out the chest.

‘It’s here. You’re sure you want to do this?’ he asked, knowing it was too late to back out now.

Rosa’s eyes were eager. She licked dry lips in anticipation.

‘Yes, yes, it’s all arranged. Come on in and meet my mother, she’s dying to meet you.’

Ladi didn’t tell Rosa he’d already come across her mother, and she’d set the dogs on him. If Rosa’s mother was ignoring the incident, then so would he. He smoothed down his tie and followed Rosa in. Ladi swallowed nervously at the sight of marble floors, gilt-edged mirrors, life-sized sculptures, and huge paintings.

‘Nice place,’ he said, and hoped he’d sounded blasé though his ears detected a catch in his throat. Rosa didn’t notice; she was too caught up in her own excitement.

‘We’re in the kitchen. Mum’s getting the jewellery.’

Ladi sat down, and Rosa offered him a drink. He declined, but she was insistent. ‘It’ll look better when Mum comes in if she sees that you’re relaxed. Go on, have some tea.’

‘Okay, just a cup of tea then.’

Ladi drank his tea, and it did relax him. He was so relaxed that he fell off his seat and had trouble getting up. His mouth was dry, which he thought was strange since he’d just drunk a cup of tea.

Then he realised the dryness was extending from his mouth into his throat. He was parched! His heart began to race, and cold sweat beaded his brow. Something was very wrong. He tried to move an arm, but it was too heavy. He peered at a fuzzy image of Rosa standing above him and wondered why she didn't ask him what was wrong or offer to help him up. Only when she gently kicked his arm to ensure he was immobile did he realise that he'd been drugged.

She put something in the tea. What has she done to me? Why...?

'Roothaaaa...' His attempt at speech emerged as a slurred lisp. His tongue had got in the way of his teeth, and he'd lost control of it.

'Baba!' Rosa called out.

A strong, squat, bald man appeared, and Ladi's first thought was that Rosa had summoned someone to help him to his feet, but the man picked him up and laid him on the kitchen island. Rosa's mother's face hovered above his. She looked deep into his eyes. She spoke, and Ladi heard her voice as if it came from far away.

'Oya o Baba, make we quick with this one. Rosa!'

'Ma!'

'Where are the buckets?'

Ladi's mind was a muddled mess. He wanted to tell the people around him that he was uncomfortable. His eyes rolled around the room as he tried to order his thoughts. It finally registered that his body had been placed on the kitchen island, but it was too small for him! His legs were hanging over the edge, and his head was dangling in the sink.

Before he could explain his discomfort, which was largely down to the strain on his neck, Rosa's mother was back in his face again.

'Rosa has told us what we need to know. You see, my daughter doesn't travel without her phone, and her phone has tracking, so I always know where she is. We know where the house is. We have the chest, thank you. Shebi na *bearer* who the spirit doubles for. All we need to make it work *for us* is the body of the previous owner, which means we need to replace the man in the house with you.'

She turned to her male companion. Rosa covered her face with her hands. Ladi went cross-eyed trying to lock onto the blade that had been pressed against his neck. Rosa's mother gave the command.

'Oya Baba, drain his blood, remove his innards, and wrap him in plastic for transport. No leaking o! I don't want to see any mess in the house for me to clean.'