

You Deserved Courage

A Novel



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

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To Akua
You know who you are.



CHAPTER 1

The Gravel in Tema

The heat of Tema in mid-December did not rise from the ground in gentle waves. It sat heavily upon the coastal plain, dense with salt air from the Gulf of Guinea and the exhaust of passing tro tros. The afternoon sun flattened colours and deepened shadows. Dust drifted lazily across the road whenever a vehicle passed.

Adjoa stood outside her family's compound gate with her arms folded across a mustard-yellow cardigan she did not need. The wool was absurd in the heat. She knew it. That wasn't the point. Some habits travelled across continents. The cardigan had crossed Berlin with her. It felt like armour.

Six paces away stood Kwesi.

Not far. Not nearly far enough.

Twenty-two years had reduced themselves to six paces.

Neither moved.

Behind the compound wall, a radio played highlife music somewhere in the distance. A dog barked. A coconut seller pushed his cart down the road. Ordinary life continued around them, yet neither trusted themselves to join it.

Kwesi looked older than she remembered. Not merely older. Smaller. The silver at his temples was no surprise. The deep lines around his eyes were. Exhaustion clung to him, and his shoulders seemed burdened by something invisible.

For months she had imagined this meeting. She had rehearsed speeches, questions and accusations. Yet standing here beneath the Tema sun, she found herself feeling something entirely different.

Not anger.

Recognition.

At last, recognition.

"You blocked me."

The words emerged quietly. No raised voice. No drama. Just fact.

Kwesi swallowed. His eyes dropped briefly toward the gravel before returning to hers.

"Adjoa..."

"You blocked me."

The second accusation was no louder than the first. Somehow it was worse.

He opened his mouth, closed it, and started again.

"I had to."

A hollow laugh escaped her. One short breath. No humour. No joy. Just disappointment.

"I know."

The answer surprised him.

"You know?"

"I know."

For several seconds the only sound came from palm fronds rustling somewhere beyond the compound wall. Kwesi shifted his weight. Gravel crunched beneath his shoes.

"You don't understand."

"I understand perfectly."

Her voice remained calm, steady and controlled. That calm unsettled him far more than anger would have. If she shouted, he could defend himself. If she insulted him, he could apologise.

But this was something else.

"I spent three months hoping I was wrong," she said.

His chest tightened.

"Wrong about what?"

For the first time, her eyes softened. Not with affection. With sadness.

"I kept telling myself twenty years had changed you. I kept telling myself that the man in Virginia wasn't the boy from Tema."

Silence stretched between them.

"And now?" he asked quietly.

Adjoa looked at him. Really looked at him. The expensive jacket. The tired eyes. The carefully maintained dignity. The fear hidden beneath all of it.

Suddenly she felt exhausted.

Not by this moment.

By twenty years.

By all of it.

"Now?" she said, a faint smile touching her lips before vanishing again. "Now I'm annoyed with myself."

Kwesi frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I ignored everything I already knew."

The words hung heavily between them.

Across the road, a child chased a football while a woman carrying groceries walked past without breaking stride. The world remained stubbornly indifferent.

Inside the compound gate, beneath the shade of the mango tree, Ama watched silently. She made no attempt to intervene. She had watched this story unfold for months. Perhaps for years. Unlike either of them, she seemed entirely unsurprised by the ending.

Kwesi noticed her standing there. For a moment he considered appealing to her, seeking an ally. He abandoned the idea instantly. Ama's expression offered none. Instead, she looked like someone witnessing the inevitable.

That frightened him.

He turned back to Adjoa.

"Please believe me." His voice cracked slightly, and the sound embarrassed him. "I never wanted to hurt you."

The statement lingered in the heat.

Adjoa closed her eyes briefly. He still didn't understand. After everything, he still didn't understand.

When she opened them again, she looked almost gentle.

"I know you loved me."

The words struck him like sunlight breaking through cloud. Hope flickered. Tiny. Instantaneous. Fatal.

Then she continued.

"And that's the problem."

The hope vanished.

"You think people who hurt others are easy to identify. You think they're villains."

Kwesi stared at her, unable to look away.

"People who don't love you can hurt you once."

She paused.

"The people who love you?"

Another pause.

"They teach you who they really are."

The sentence landed with devastating certainty.

For the first time since arriving in Ghana, Kwesi found himself without an answer. No defence. No explanation. No sermon. Nothing.

Only silence.

His entire life had been built on language, persuasion, interpretation and meaning. Yet standing here in the red dust of Tema, language abandoned him.

"Adjoa..." he whispered.

She shook her head. Not cruelly. Simply done.

"You know the saddest part?"

He didn't answer.

She didn't wait.

"I warned you."

A faint breeze moved through the road. Neither noticed.

"From the beginning. I told you I didn't know how to handle your return. I told you I thought you'd hurt me again."

Kwesi felt something hollow open inside his chest because he remembered. Every word. Every warning. Every opportunity to prove her wrong.

And the terrible thing was that she had been right.

Not once.

Twice.

The realisation settled upon him with crushing weight. For twenty years he had carried guilt. Now he carried something worse.

Confirmation.

Adjoa looked at him for several long seconds. Then she nodded to herself, almost imperceptibly, as if a final question had finally received its answer.

"I should go."

The statement wasn't angry. It sounded like closure.

She turned and walked toward the compound gate. Her cardigan swayed gently around her knees. Dust shifted beneath her shoes.

No hesitation.

No backward glance.

Nothing.

Kwesi stood frozen.

For years he had imagined this meeting. Hundreds of versions. Thousands. In every one of them she eventually turned around. One last look. One last chance. One last opening.

She didn't.

The gate closed behind her. The metal latch clicked softly into place.

Standing alone on the gravel shoulder outside the compound wall, Kwesi experienced something he had spent most of his life avoiding.

Not guilt.

Not shame.

Not regret.

Finality.

For the first time, he wasn't standing at the beginning of a story.

He was standing at the end of one.