

# *Amber-Lit Nights*



**OKUNOLA O. ZAINAB**

**This book is part of the Borderline series of Fiction,  
written and compiled by Okunola O. Zainab.**

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# PART ONE

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*Written by: Okunola O. Zainab*

***The Amber Lit Nights***  
**GRACE'S POV**

**Can you see me? I am right in front of you.**

*But he can't. Nobody can.*

The city lights are the brightest tonight and every other night I walk under the halogen and neon lights down the lonely road. It is funny how the road is named **togetherness** and the only persons who seem to ply it regularly are those who are walking by themselves - alone.

The street must be the loneliest in the world, I often thought as I strolled it regularly to and fro from work to my home.

It's like a road in my mind that leads to one place, yet to no place.

As I strolled under the amber-lit street lights, I wondered if the spotlights will shine on me one day. One day, maybe I'll get to walk on the stage of great people and

live the luxuries they dwell in. Maybe then, I won't be as invisible anymore as I am to him – to the world.

As I reached the bus station, the single bus that never gets filled stopped in front of me. I climbed in and paid the conductor almost immediately. I enter this bus every morning and night, and even the conductor doesn't recognize me. It's like my face shifts every second to look like a different stranger all the time.

"Where are you stopping?" His voice is husky today. He is wearing a tattered white vest that is tapered to filthy baggy jeans – the usual. I notice him like I notice everyone else but, nobody recognizes me.

"Happy Bus stop," I told him. He nodded mindlessly and the rest of the journey was silent. I looked out the window as I bid my farewell to the amber lights.

I'll see them tomorrow night.

As the bus stops at **Happy**, I got down and sighed. I wondered why this place was called **happy**. The dreary architecture had no colors, the trees looked dead, and the cawing of the crooks in the background only reminds me that **home was a place I didn't want to return to**.

As I pushed open my door, the warm smell of food filled my nose. It should feel nice to know someone was waiting for me, but it felt like a knot tied in my chest. I

practiced my smile at the door post thrice and when I was sure I looked pleasant enough, I walked in and cornered the old furniture to where he was, hunched over the kitchen counter, chopping and stirring.

“You are back.” He said without looking at me.  
“How was work?”

Work was painfully lonely.

“Fine.” I lied.

“I made your favorite food.” His voice reached me as I walked towards the inner room to shed my bag and clothes. I turned around and went to join him. His hopeful eyes made me nod in approval. How can I tell him I didn’t have any favorite things? How can I tell him that I hated the life we lived when he was hopelessly trying so hard?

“Any new things?” He asked. “Did you meet new people?” He leaned forth and poked me playfully in the cheeks. I managed a laugh because I knew how much it will hurt him if I didn’t reciprocate. I grabbed the dishes off the rack to help him set the table for the two of us. He was like a child, eager to know what I have been up to even though he was the one who gave birth to me.

“Huh, tell me.”

“Yes, yes.” I lied as we settled to eat. “I met a new movie star.” Even though I only worked behind scenes. “He is very talented.”

“Did you make friends with him?”

“Yes, father. I told him all about your cooking skills.” The way I lie so effortlessly these days was so commendable that I could get an award for it. If only I could tell father that I worked far away from the cameras. I could not show up to work for a year, and they will all move on like I didn’t exist. I persevered this hard because it was the only place I could get closer to the stage – to the blinding and flashing lights.

“You should pack some soup for him tomorrow,” Father said, but I was never going to do that because in a few seconds, all we had just said will disappear into nonexistence.

**In three, two, one!** Father looked up from his plate and narrowed his eyes. I could feel his gaze peering into my soul as he tried to recognize me. I was used to this, but anytime the switch came, it felt as excoriating as the first time.

“Who are you?” he asked me, finally finding the courage to confront his memories. I stopped eating the tasteless soup and stood from my seat. His other personality



had come to the surface – the personality where none of the reality existed. The personality that harbored emptiness. “Why am I here?” he queried as I carried the plates filled with water and curry to the sink and poured them all down the drain.

Why did I feel teary again? I should be used to this, but why does my heart feel so heavy every time? As I washed the dishes, I could hear him groaning incoherent sounds. I reached for the topmost drawer, retrieved a bottle of white pills, dissolved them in a glass of water, and went over to hand it to him.

“Water?” At least, he knew that much.

“Yes,” I told him. “It is just water.”

He took it from my hand, downed the cup of water, and was knocked out cold on the first gulp. I caught him from falling and my frail arms that had grown strong over the years lifted him and took him to bed.

The room fell silent; nothing broke the calm other than the cricket choir in the background, the heavy beating of my heart, and the silent snore of my father.

Suddenly, my phone rang in my pocket as I settled at the edge of his bed. It was from the hospital. “Hello,” The nurse spoke first.

“You didn’t come today?” I tried to steady my voice so it won’t sound like an attack, after all the special needs foundation was doing me a favor. Nobody will agree to take care of my father because of his mental condition. I thought it’ll get better, but he had only deteriorated.

“I am sorry, Grace.” Her voice was calm. “We have run out of funding. We wouldn’t be able to send delegates there anymore. Why don’t you call your mother to ask for help?”

I pressed the off button, cutting her short. I’d rather die than call my mother.

I clambered into bed beside my father and stared at him as hot tears fell from my face. **Every night, my home was a reminder that the spotlights I craved will forever be far away.** I made to touch his face but refrained. He was suffering just as much as I did. “Let’s go to the beach father...” I whispered through the tears and clogged throat. “You promised to take me to the ocean.”

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The morning came, and I only woke up when I felt the warm sun on my face. I felt the bed beside me to realize my father had risen. I stumbled to the kitchen where he stood, making another concoction of water and curry. “My dear daughter, you are awake.” He smiled.

“Can you stay home alone today?” I asked him.  
“Nurse Lara isn’t coming today. I’ll find another nurse to take care of you in the meantime. I need to be at work.”

“Come and eat.” He was in his world.

“I am talking to you.”

“I made your favorite. Did you have fun at work today...?”

“I am talking to you!” Something snapped within me like a bone snapping in two. I slapped the pot from his hands and I watched it clatter to the floor. It clanged loudly and the entire room went silent like someone pulled the plug. I waited for a sane reaction. I waited for him to scold me like a father will scold a child, but he only turned back to the fallen pots, picked them up, and started to fill them with water again.

Maybe, just maybe – I hated my father.

I went to clean up, dressed in clean clothes and left the house to continue my routinely thought of endless daydreams.

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# PART TWO

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*Behind Cut*  
MERCY'S POV

**Cut!**

The stage froze, and it suddenly became hard to breathe. Before I could form a coherent thought, I felt brush scampering around my face in my makeup artist's lame attempt to retouch my looks. Sometimes, I wished she didn't do that, but it was all part of the job. I need to stand still like a dummy yet fit into the shoes of every character.

That was the job.

"Water?" A quiet voice reached me. I turned towards the voice and the soulless eyes that chilled me to the bones stared at me. My eyes fell on her name tag, and it was Grace. Her face was devoid of emotions and her lips shifted like she was longing for something. A fresh smell of citrus filled my nose and I felt a rush of emotions in my head.

I took the bottle from her without saying a word, turned around, and walked toward the director. I felt my heart rise and fall heavily as I took each step. I wanted out of this life. I wanted to be done with it all. I struggled to undo

the buttons that tightened around my neck, and when I finally did, I felt my lungs fill with air.

**I just wanted to go home.**

The set finally closed for the day and far at a distance, I caught the shadow of Grace walking off towards the main roads away from us all. I thought to myself for a second that she was living my dream of quietness. Her bucket hat hugged her head tightly like her backpack hugged her back.

I suddenly excused myself from the brouhaha of work, grabbed my bag, and went after her. Something was drawing me to her and maybe it was because I wished so much to be free like her. She mindlessly walked the long road of togetherness underneath the amber streetlights. She hopped briefly, spreading her arms out like an eagle ready to fly.

I wished so much and longed so much to be like her. If only she could turn around to see her follower; if only she could give me some of the sunshine in her.

“Grace...” I mulled. She must be my saving Grace even though she confused me. She looked free, yet something hindered me from running to her because I fear the fame and popularity that followed me will taint her innocence.

Maybe it was better if I walked behind her like this. Maybe it was better that I kept my distance and watched her from afar.

Grace lived in her world and I envied her. As we reached the end of togetherness, I saw her cross to the other side of the major road mindlessly, and a speeding car stopped an inch away from crashing into her. Yet, she didn't see it.

It was like it never happened, and her eyes were fixed forward on where she was going. While I had my heart in my mouth in fear, she didn't seem to realize at all. I looked down at myself to realize that I was stretching out to her. Maybe keeping my distance will be harder than I thought.

Every night, I got on a bus with her. While I sat at the back, she sat in front. Her gestures were almost so monotonous that I had mastered them to heart. I liked it the most when she pressed her head against the window to say goodbye to the lights, and when she smiled at the reflection of the dying lights against its reflection on the window. I liked it when music (Riot-Banners) played in my head whenever I looked at her. I liked it when she got off the bus, and wave to the bus conductor that wondered if he was going

to ever be the last time he'll see the wide-eyed Grace of Happy Bus Stop.

I liked it when I got off the bus after her and watched her disappear down the street towards a small homey house that always had an **amber light** on for her.

Something within me felt the need to protect her, yet, be saved by her.

The ride to my home was the loneliest. All the background music died, and I can hear the heavy beating of my heart. My phone's notification becomes louder, reminding me constantly of the reason why I have to live up to the expectations of the people around me. I have to worry about everything I post and do. I have to wear a hoodie to cover my face all the time because cameras might be waiting to capture every moment and every reaction. Nothing in my life belonged to me, and I began to envy Grace for all the freedom she had away from the flashing lights, and away from the people that surrounded her.

I marveled at how she was able to be around so many people, yet live in her head.

When I got home, I could tell someone had come unannounced. It was not unusual for people to walk in and out of my home because they owned it just as much as I did.

It also didn't take the genius part of me to know who had come to check on me. It was my brother.

"Where have you been?" His commanding voice shook me to the bones. He was just like my father, condescending and all about the money, and he reminded me of my mother's helplessness. "You left set about three hours ago, and you didn't take the car ready for you. I was told you never took it for the past month."

"I just wanted to walk," I said, honestly. Ignoring most of his presence as I walked into my room. I felt him following me. "I am talking to you," but I didn't want to hear him. I wanted to take a long shower, crawl into bed and close my eyes shut.

"If you keep at this behavior, I am sending you back to England. You do realize that we have a reputation to keep."

"Can't you see I am tired?" I asked him. Could he see the heaviness in my eyes? Couldn't he hear how my heart pounded under the pressure as it threatened to burst? Couldn't he see that I had reduced from the happy person I was into a loop of dreariness and pain?

"I'll take it all away from you." He threatened and I felt tears pool in my eyes. Anytime I did something he didn't



like, he always resulted to threaten to take away everything I have worked for, and everything I own.

However, the pain disappeared as quickly as it came, and I felt a smile tilt at the corner of my lips because, despite the chaos, I could see Grace. I could see her lifting her arms towards the amber-lit streetlights in freedom and for a second, losing it all didn't seem as scary as my brother always made it sound.

“Are you daring me?!” His voice rose. “Have you forgotten that you are being kept on a leash? Have you forgotten that your last stunt almost soiled the name of the family?” The family that didn't care about me. A family that didn't know if I was still existing unless my privacy is being sabotaged on the internet.

What was so bad about my last stunt? Getting drugged and left on the side of the street to death? Was that my fault?”

“I just want to sleep,” I told him.

“I'll let you do that.” He didn't concede, “But, you have to follow the car tomorrow. I'll have your assistant take you to set, and bring you back. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” I said voicelessly, so peace could reign. Unlike him, I was weak.

I watched him leave the house, and silence fell upon me. I turned to the wall on my left and punched a firm blow. I heard my knuckles crack in pain and as I fell to my knees, writhing, **home felt like a place I never wanted to ever return to.**

# PART THREE

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## ***TWO HEARTS*** **MERCY'S POV**

### **Action!**

But as I swung my hand forward, I felt pain tear through my soul. One stupid decision of punching the wall instead of my brother left me numb with pain for a few minutes. Hot sweat broke through my forehead, but I couldn't show it. It'll ruin the family's reputation. I swallowed hard and forced a smile. I couldn't wait for the entire scene to end so I can rest.

The director, however, screamed atop his lungs. "Let's take it from the top."

I wanted to curse at him, but I held my feeling. I turned to my left, and Grace was standing there with an umbrella in her hand as she held it over the director's head. The sun licked down hard on her, and there was only little her bucket hat could do to protect her.

From where I stood, I thought to myself that her hands must be tired from holding the umbrella for so long. Everything started to irritate me. I wanted to dash forward to

grab the damn director and shove his face into the dirt, but the cameras were on me and my brother's words played fervently in my head – I have a reputation to keep.

I was only lying to myself.

The moment Grace faltered a bit, the director turned to her and spat his chewing gum into her face to keep her grounded. That was the breaking point for me. I dashed towards him and without thinking, swung him a clean blow in the face. Before I could think because I haven't been doing much of it lately, I grabbed Grace by the wrist and told her, "Run!"

Run.

We both ran.

Down the lane of togetherness, we held one another and just kept running. We didn't know what we were running from, but it felt good to run. It felt good to lift our arms towards the sun like free children. We ran into the street like maniacs who had been set loose, and not for once did I think of the set, of my brother, of work – all I thought about was how free I was.

We took the lonely bus and didn't stop at Happy. We kept moving.

For the first time, I saw Grace laugh like a child. She pressed her head against the window and said goodbye. She

turned to me and it was surreal that the first real interaction we ever had was like this – a spontaneous electric interaction that I will remember till the day I die.

The lonely bus took us to the ocean and when we got off, I watch Grace run toward the waves, pulling me along. The background music came back into my head, and it felt like the best scene I had ever been in – only this time, I wasn't acting. It was real. She was real.

We crashed into the tides, and her giggle filled the air. Tears poured down her face as she raised both hands to the sky. She felt free and I felt it too. I wished it will remain this way forever.

“My name is Mercy,” I told her amidst it all. She stopped and turned to me with the brightest smile that could melt my heart. “My name is Grace.” She said, extending a hand towards me.

I took it, and I knew I was never going to let it go.

**GOD'S MERCY****GRACE'S POV**

“Father!” I screamed as I fell to my knees beside him. “You promised! You promised to take me to the ocean – please, wake up.” Tears fell from my eyes onto his lifeless body.

Guiltily, I used to think that when father died, I will be free but now that he was lying still on the cold morgue bench with his eyes closed, I felt like I couldn't breathe. If only I hadn't left him at the house by himself. If only I had returned his pills to the high cabinet where he couldn't reach them in his deluded mind.

As I stood by his body, I wondered how long he had been gone before the nurse found him. She had come unannounced because she couldn't reach me on the phone, and had found him in a terrible state, but it was too late.

I sat coldly as I watched him being packed into a white wrap, to be buried. I thought to myself that I needed to tell my mother. At least, they were once in love. Maybe she will send her condolences so he can rest in peace.

I pressed the phone to my ears and sniffed. “He is dead.” I sounded as cold as ice.

“How much do you need?” Was her response. How could a mother be so cruel? All my life, I had worked hard so as not to take a cent from her. I didn't want her money, I

just wanted her to show that a part of her still had feelings for the family she left behind.

“Send him a prayer,” I said. “I also want to tell you I plan on burying him tomorrow at the town’s cemetery. I’ll send you an address. If you want to come, you are welcome.”

“I am not around at the moment. I’ll send you five hundred thousand to cover the expenses...’

“I don’t want it.” I held my breath, forcing myself not to sound as cold as she did. I wanted to be different in all retrospect.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s good money.”

“Take it and use it to fix your behavior mom. Use it to fix all the damages you caused in our lives. Maybe then, we can have a conversation.” I pressed the off button and wiped my eyes. I stood up and said a prayer for my father.

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Work will never be the same, and even though I owed it to myself to get ahead, even though I owed it to my father to be myself it was hard. As I stood under the scorching sun, I felt my heart build only to shatter again. There was no reason for me to do this anymore because the main reason I worked so hard was already dead and buried. **I looked ahead and asked God for mercy on my heart.** I told him to protect my heart from breaking so much.

I told God to give me a sign only to feel wet gum being spat into my face. That was my cue to leave and never look back. I looked into the eyes of my director and felt relief. I didn't have to do this anymore, and I'll finally say goodbye to the amber-lit nights, the lonely bus that took me to happy, and the little house I shared with my father.

My heart broke at the realization, and just when I thought my resolve will be strengthened, I saw him running towards me like a stallion on the race track. The sun glimmered on his boyish frame. Was this my sign that there was more to my story? Was this my sign that it wasn't over yet?

He threw his fist into the face of the bully, and just before I could form a coherent thought, he grabbed me by the wrist and said, "Run!"

Run.

So I did. I ran away from the pain, I ran away from the suffering, I ran away from the guilt, I ran away from the self-doubt and depression. We took the lonely bus, and for the first time, the bus conductor looked at me with a smile on his face. For the first time, I wasn't invisible. – **I was running towards the light, and I was happy.**

**He was God's mercy on me.**



OKUNOLA O. ZAINAB

**THE END**

**CREDITS**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Okunola O. Zainab (GreyGray) is the author of *Starry Nights*, *Scream*, *Indigo Loves You*, *To Live Again*, *Two Mothers*, and other several fictional books. She is a passionate and phenomenal writer with over ten years of experience.

She received her Bachelor of Technology in Chemistry from Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, where she successfully ran an NGO that donates free books to schools within the Ogbomosho community and provides a platform for writers and readers.

GreyGray is also passionate about Graphics design. She is responsible for all her book covers, and she runs a clothing store in Lagos, Nigeria. She's all shades of passion for art and design.

Her hobbies are, listening to music, dancing, writing, and engaging in creative arts projects.