

JUNGLE JUSTICE

POWER CORRUPTS.
VENGEANCE CONSUMES.

FAITH IJIGA



JUNGLE JUSTICE

Book 1 of the Never Forget series

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Jungle Justice is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

classified as:

Political—Fiction. . Military)—Fiction. | Nigerian—Fiction. Jungle Justice—Fiction. Terrorists & Terrorism—Fiction. Christian fiction. | Thriller & Suspense Fiction.

DEDICATION

To every Nigerian who has lost their lives in the hands of terrorists: both military and civilian. We will never forget you.

To Jesus who has paid the ultimate price so that I will be free. I love you beyond words.

And finally, to our brave and patriotic Nigerian soldiers. You put your lives on the line everyday for the motherland. Keep fighting the good fight. God bless you, and God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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PREFACE

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for choosing my book. I am glad that you have decided to go on this adventure with me. It promises to be a thrilling ride, and I hope, one that would leave you asking for more. Your support means a lot to me.

A terrible and a horrifying event happened on May 12th, 2022. An event I heard about three days later. An event that would birth this book that you are holding 2 years later in your hands. You might be wondering; why did I hear this news a couple of days later? Did it not fly fast? The answer is yes, it started going viral the very day it happened but I wasn't following the news because I was working on my previous book. But when I finally heard it, I couldn't help but acknowledge to myself that this might be one of those tragic events that Nigerians are going to scream out their outrage but it would be forgotten with time. But it shouldn't be like that. Till today, America has not forgotten the 9/11 attacks even though it has been over 20 years. They have continued to enact stringent measures to ensure no terrorist attack on such a large scale would ever repeat itself on American soil. I believe that Nigeria is not supposed to forget, but learn from its history. That is the reason why I titled this series "Never Forget."

And there is no denying the effect the Boko Haram insurgency has had on Nigeria and neighboring West African countries. Thousands of lives have been lost; both military and civilians, many more have been permanently disabled in parts of their body. Jobs that were a major source of income have been lost, properties have been destroyed and thousands more have been displaced from their home. Oh, and let's not even talk about wives who became and are becoming widows. Children who have been orphaned. Families who have lost brothers and sisters.

While this book is a work of fiction, it draws inspiration from real-life events and experiences. Since the past two years, I have done several rigorous researches to be as factual as possible. I watched several videos, browsed internet sites, listened to newscasters, read non-fiction books about Boko Haram, interviewed some Nigerian soldiers whose names I can't mention and some of them were very helpful, and finally spoke with some Nigerian civilians. I did this and more with the intention of getting an in-depth understanding of the terrorist activities going on in the country and how it has affected Nigerian society.

Because this is a fictional retelling of the horrors that is going on in Nigeria and West Africa by the Boko Haram insurgency, I will be separating facts from fiction on my author's notes which you will see at the end of the last chapter. I encourage you to refer to this section to gain deeper insights into the background of the story and the real events that inspired it when you are done reading.

Due to obvious reasons, I have also intentionally made some of the scenes in my book vague. To some civilians, this would go unnoticed as you read the story but not in the eyes of "The Professionals." But I can assure you that the vague information is to preserve secrets that are too sensitive even for this political and military thriller.

Writing this book was very important for me because I also have a personal interest. I am a Nigerian. And I pray constantly for my country. A country I love with all my heart. But also a country that has caused my family its own measure of heartache, more on that later. I believe that if you are a fan of political and military thrillers, this story will resonate with you.

Thanks once again for choosing this book. I hope you enjoy reading it as I have also enjoyed the pleasure of writing it. Please feel free to share your thoughts with me after reading, I am eager to hear from you.

Best,
Faith Ijiga

CHAPTER ONE

Borno State, Nigeria.

The checklist was complete. RPGs, AK-47s, knives, and extra supplies were all accounted for. The mission was a go.

The radical jihadists had meticulously planned this event, and now that the moment had come, they were bursting with anticipation. Their bodies exuded energy, each man electrifying the next in the unending wave of its surge. It was not bloodlust, it was righteous fervor revealing their eagerness to set their plan in motion.

The long-awaited day had finally arrived, and the men were filled with excitement for the adventure ahead. Anticipation was evident from the grins on their faces and the sparkle in their dark eyes.

This thrilling mission ignited a level of excitement they had never experienced before, tapping into something primal they didn't know they possessed. The zeal of soldiers gone before them egged them on, to fight the Almighty's war, and to wrought his victories with their hands.

And why wouldn't they feel exalted? This was not their first time executing an operation of this scale but something greater was about to go down. Their first large-scale terrorist act was the one they did during Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's administration. The second was towards the end of the first tenure of Muhammadu Buhari. They had done it with the intention of striking a ferocious blow to the heart of the infidels, to steal sleep from their eyes and to leave them wondering what their lives had come to, and they were about to do it again, bigger and better than the previous ones. History was about to be made, and the radicals felt deeply honored to have this destiny, to walk this path.

In a couple of hours, towards midnight, the Boko Haram members would step out. But for now, inside Imam Abdulaziz Bin-Khalid's spacious compound, some of them gathered in small clusters laughing, conversations were going on in Hausa and some other native dialects.

Others moved around with AK-47s slung over their shoulders, whistling and nodding in apparent satisfaction and some others seemed to mope about in single minded focus barely reacting to their environment; their minds were clouded with visions of the mission.

The Islamic cleric's residence was a blue-gray duplex surrounded by a tall white fence and a massive gold and black gate. The exterior of the duplex was adorned with vibrant phyllocactus ornaments and blooming flowers in rich crimson, rose pink, and creamy white. It was one of the most elite compounds in the suburbs of Maiduguri.

Abdulaziz Bin Khalid served as the official Imam of the Nigerian terrorist group known as Boko Haram. He was also the father-in-law of the current leader, Abdallah El-Badawi .

The time had come for El-Badawi and Bin Khalid to address their followers; and as they emerged from the duplex, the once noisy gathering fell silent, but only for a while, before it erupted into shouts of "Allahu akbar". This further raised the excitement levels as the men gave out ground shaking cries. The noise level began to die down as the Imam raised his hands to signal silence amongst the troops.

Those farther from the entrance rushed towards the cleric and his son-in-law, while those closer stood at attention, giving them their full focus.

Without a preamble, El-Badawi began giving instructions, and Bin Khalid listened, occasionally nodding in approval.

The mission was Bin Khalid's brainchild, which came as no surprise to El-Badawi, considering his father-in-law's radical nature.

"I don't need to emphasize how important today is," El-Badawi stated, stressing the significance of the mission.

The goal was to expand their territories under Sharia law, not only in Nigeria but also across West Africa. They were ready to wage jihad against Christians, those who practiced Judaism, traditional and idol worshippers, and apostate Muslims who aligned with the perceived infidels.

El-Badawi's voice was filled with palpable emotions as he continued admonishing the jihadists. The crowd was mesmerized; no one dared to disrupt the sanctity of the moment.

After a brief pause to catch his breath, El-Badawi scanned the faces before him, then resumed speaking.

"Today marks a turning point... Tonight, in the name of Allah, most merciful, most beneficent, we will thrust our cause to the forefront of this country. We shall instill terror, not only in the hearts of Nigerians, but also in the hearts of her neighbors and the world."

"Take note, this is just the beginning. When we are done, what ISIS and Al-Qaeda do will be child's play compared to what we shall achieve in this country."

El-Badawi spoke with the conviction of a prophet who had glimpsed the future.

"When we are finished, Al-Qaeda, the Islamic brotherhood, Hezbollah, Hamas, and our fellow jihadist brothers will align themselves with us."

"That's why today's mission is as important as it is deadly. But fear not, oh great servants and warriors of Allah, for He is with us. If He has given us the go-ahead, then we must proceed. We must be prepared to become martyrs for Allah when the need arises. Indeed, dying for Allah should be our highest aspiration."

"Inshallah!" The crowd replied for the first time since the speech began.

"Today, we send you forth to honor your God... You must not fail."

"We will do what is necessary in this country to bring glory to Allah."

With El-Badawi's speech concluded, one of the members tasked with leading the operation shouted "Allahu Akbar" at the top of his lungs, fist raised in the air.

His fellow jihadists echoed the chant with equal fervor.

As the crescendo died down, El-Badawi issued a final charge before Bin Khalid took over, leading them in prayers.

The cleric and the radicals knelt, facing Mecca, as they sought Allah's guidance and success for their mission. Once the prayers were complete, the crowd dispersed like mice to attend to last-minute preparations before boarding their vehicles while those who didn't have anything to do again went straight to their trucks.

El-Badawi observed as his men scattered, feeling a surge of excitement as he locked eyes with his father-in-law. Both men smiled, knowing that the success of this operation would elevate them and Boko Haram to the global stage.

After today, their name would instill fear in the hearts of many, both in Nigeria and beyond.

"I am proud of you, my son," Bin Khalid said, a rare display of approval.

El-Badawi was taken aback by his father-in-law's praise. From a man usually filled with criticism, this acknowledgment meant a lot. He had never heard his father-in-law express pride in anyone, not even his own children. Although it wasn't the warmth he desired, he accepted it for what it was.

"Thank you, Father," El-Badawi replied, suppressing the mix of excitement within him. "But do not forget that this was your brain child, I can never take the glory for myself." El-Badawi tried to sound humble and polite even though he was inwardly feeling the exact opposite.

"Of course it was my brainchild." Bin Khalid said smugly, clearly welcoming the acknowledgement. "You do not have the wisdom and the brain to come up with something as brilliant as this... But each time I gave you wonderful and most excellent ideas, you always executed it with passion, just as you're doing today."

El-Badawi's excitement turned into anger and disdain for his father-in-law at his last remark but as usual, he bottled it, he knew his place. To the world, El-Badawi might be seen as the leader of this group but Imam Bin Khalid was the real deal controlling the stage from behind the scene, El-Badawi was just the on-screen guy.

"Thank you, father." This time around, he said with a much lesser quantity of excitement but it was enough for his father-in-law not to notice that anything was awry.

Bin Khalid welcomed the appreciation before turning back toward the house. But just as he was about to step inside, El-Badawi spoke up again.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Father?" he asked as bin Khalid's back faced him.

Without asking what he meant, Bin Khalid turned back around, smiling knowingly. He retrieved his phone from under his jalabiya and dialed a particular number from memory.

It rang once, twice, and on the fourth ring, the call was answered. Placing the phone to his ear, the cleric uttered the next sentence.

"Hello, Mr. President."

He had just called the President of Nigeria. The president would pass instructions down the chain of command, ultimately leading to the commander of the army base where the operation was to take place, ordering him to stand down.

CHAPTER TWO

GOVERNMENT GIRLS SECONDARY SCHOOL, CHIBOK, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

It was 5 minutes before midnight, and most of the students in this all-girls secondary school were well done with their activities for the day, with the last activity being to study at the school library.

All the senior prefects had gone around each hostel 55 minutes ago, checking and ensuring that all the boarders were in their pajamas instead of casual wear. The students, including the ones that had slept, and the ones that still had a long night had complied; it was part of the school rules and regulations, and there was a steep strike for anyone that rebelled.

Now that it was almost 12 midnight, the prefects were done with the activities that were required of them by the school and joined the others. Some of the students were already sleeping; almost half of those who were already sleeping snored away like a bad engine motor car. Around each hostel, a few lights were still turned on by the late-night and all-night readers.

A few students, the majority of them being senior students, stayed awake, not actually reading but whispering and trading gossip.

Then, all of a sudden, there was an abrupt silence... There was an eerie silence as though something dark and ominous had just appeared.

Even the shuffling paper sounds, from the readers as they flipped several pages, stopped, having been replaced by entirely unfamiliar ones.

Then came the loud boom...

All the students who were sleeping joined the ones who were already awake in a state of heightened alertness.

The teenage girls gathered closely, as if seeking solace in each other's presence, as the tension outside their hostel intensified. Their body language betrayed their confusion and fear, mirroring the unfolding events beyond the interior walls.

The students whose sleep was interrupted began throwing a barrage of questions to the ones who had been awake, hoping they could get an explanation of what was happening, but nothing was coming forth... Nobody was making sense, although some of the students were already coming up with dangerous theories.

After the deafening booms subsided, there was a loud crackling of guns that, not surprisingly, was familiar to the girls... Not just them, but everyone living in the northern part of Nigeria was familiar with that sound as well. AK-47, no doubt about that.

Unable to remain still in confusion, some of the students who were brave enough or stupid enough slowly crept towards the window on their hands and knees, raised up their heads, and began to peep through the window to see exactly what was happening for themselves as the other students simultaneously started ducking under their bunk beds to avoid being hit by a stray bullet. What the students who were brave enough to inquire saw sent terror into their young hearts.

The students could see the muscle flashes from not less than 3 AK-47s, beyond all reasonable doubt, they knew who were doing the shooting. It was none other, but, the nightmare of the North, the entire Nigeria and her neighboring countries... The number one terrorist group in Nigeria and one of the top Islamic terrorist groups in the world that branded itself as "Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah

li-Da'awati wal-Jihad" (JASDJ) which invariably translated to; "Group of the Sunni People for the Calling and Jihad" popularly known as "Boko Haram" and recently tagged the, "Nigerian Taliban."

The terrorists had lined up the school's security personnel and were shooting each of them at the back of the head, execution-style.

A mounted tripod was facing the security officials that were being gunned down to be uploaded on YouTube and broadcasted to the world later. The students' blood ran cold as they remained frozen in their spots, what they feared the most had just befallen them... Somehow, their school had just appeared in the Boko Haram radar, and just like a shark follows the trail of blood to its victims, that's how the terrorists had come for them.

For the first time, the students felt and understood real terror as they began to imagine all sorts of negative scenarios and what the jihadists would do to them when, or if they eventually got captured by the radicals. No! The students would not allow themselves to be captured, at least, not without a fight.

The once brave but now terror-filled students immediately snapped to action as they joined the other students who had been cowering under their bunk beds and behind their cupboards.

The students were a mixture of the two major religions in the country, with 80% of the students being Christians, thus, since this horror show began, some of the students who were able, started praying in their own beliefs... Some were violently quaking, unable to mumble coherent words, the rest had already gone into hysteria. All these reactions from the girls were a glaring proof that they were not prepared for what was about to happen that night.

The gunfire ceased, and the students didn't need any soothsayer to tell them that their security personnel were all lying dead in the pool of their own blood.

Just as expected, the students began hearing the voice of a man speaking in Hausa language, via a PA system, instructing all the students to come out of their hostel. His tone of voice was menacing as he gave the final blow, by telling them that they had been surrounded and there was no escape for them.

None of the students did as instructed. Instead, they shut their eyes tightly, covered their ears with their hands, crawled into a ball and shrunk deeper and deeper under their bunk beds desperate and frantically hoping for a rescue, willing the jihadists to go away, willing that they should just disappear, or anything, just anything but to end up in the hands of these terrorists before the night was over.

When the students were not pouring out of their hostel doors as instructed after a 60-second countdown, the terrorists began breaking down the doors and window glasses and the students began screaming simultaneously.

But no one would come to their rescue as the terrorists succeeded in breaking in and started rounding up the students.

Some of the students were overwhelmed with fear and horror upon seeing the hooded men who were dressed in all black and as a result, they fainted. The evil that was swarming around these terrorists was palpable.

The terrorists succeeded in getting the ones who were able to walk together and marched them off to one of their trucks where they were packed together like sardines in a can. The rest of the terrorists hefted the students who had fainted on their shoulders in a fireman's carry and dropped them in a different truck.

At this point, many of the students were crying at the top of their voices, screaming for help and equally begging the terrorists to let go of them. But the terrorists did not listen. It wasn't part of their plan to let go of any of the students, nor was it what they bargained for. They didn't come here to

carry out a show of power on a bunch of teenage girls and just walk away. No, they came for the real thing.

After all the students had been successfully tucked away in their trucks, the drivers climbed the front seats and revved their engines. Obviously, it was time to go; but the leader who was in charge of this operation did not want to go just yet, he wanted to carry out one last act of defiance. Thus, he took out three rocket-propelled grenade launchers and distributed them between himself and two other guys and ordered them to start loading the RPGs.

"I go first and on my count you follow... After today, no one would ever be able to study here again."

The men shouted praises to Allah as the leader and the other two guys hefted the launcher on their shoulders.

One after the other, the men pressed the triggers of the grenade launchers, what followed next was a bright light.

The terrorists cheered as the contrails of the RPGs sliced through the air and scored a direct hit on their targets.

All around that area, there was a burning wreckage where the school buildings and hostels stood one minute ago. Indeed, no one would be studying there anytime soon.

To the terrorists, that was a very big win, but it was the exact opposite for the Nigerian educational sector.

Mission completed, all the terrorists climbed into their trucks as their drivers sped off with them and their prizes.

CHAPTER THREE

The terrorists went away, believing that no one had seen them. All the soldiers in and around that community had obeyed the instruction from above to stand down, all the potential witnesses were shot at the back of the head. Thus, apparently no one had seen what they did. But no, someone saw them.

Captain Hassan Lawal was a well-known and revered sniper soldier with the Nigerian army. Hailing from an Islamic and polygamous background, he was the tenth child of sixteen children, his mother the third of four wives.

Currently at the age of thirty-three, he had spent fourteen years with the Nigerian army, having been recruited at the age of eighteen. Hassan had succeeded in fulfilling his childhood dream which was to join the military with the primary purpose of eradicating terrorism and any other form of insurgency that would want to destroy the sovereignty of his beloved nation.

During his recruitment process, he'd believed that he was doing the right thing, the Nigerian army were the good guys and he was happy to be part of them. But little did he know that things were not quite as they seemed. The past 18 years had unveiled a lot of horrible mysteries that could only be known by an insider. The kind of mystery that he could never tell any outsider, not even his lovely wife of fifteen years to avoid being court-martialed.

Indeed, his perception wasn't all wrong. Majority of his counterparts were truly good guys who had also joined the Nigerian army because of honest purposes, but just like with every twelve, there were several Judases among them, and some of these Judases came in the form of their superiors... including the current president of the country.

But Captain Hassan Lawal wasn't a traitor to his country. And thus, when the order came for him and his colleagues to stand down, the good captain did not.

After he finished his daytime patrol in this northern region that had been riddled with terrorism and insecurity, and handed over to those who were on night duty, he sprinted with the speed of a cheetah out of his barracks and began making his way to his home where he rushed up to his army trained hound dog, unchained him, and with a few instructions, he and the hound dog took off; leaving his wife's confused questions that she had thrown at him upon seeing him, unanswered.

Because he didn't have the coordinates of the exact location the terrorist attack would be taking place, that was why his hound dog whom he'd named Warrior was following him, so that he could help detect any such activities. And the hound dog did. After a long time of darting around the community searching, all of a sudden, the hound dog started reacting uncomfortably as he furiously wagged his tail, tugged on his leash and began barking up a storm.

Still holding the leash in a tight grip, Hassan took off to the direction his hound dog was leading him, desperately praying to beat the terrorists to the punch, and rescue the girls... He didn't make it.

Much to his utter dismay, he realized that the problem was already under way, he had come too late. Hassan could see the terrorists shooting the security officials at the back of the head after commanding them to kneel down. He turned around, bent over and began to vomit at the side of the bush. The faithful dog, upon seeing what was happening to his master, resumed barking, but the hullabaloo was drowned out by the sound from the gunshots as they blasted off the brains of their victims.

The army captain immediately reached out and gave the dog a scratch on his ears, a sign that he was all right and also to calm the dog.

Warrior stopped barking and sat down peacefully at his master's feet.

When he had finished hurling off all the contents in his stomach into the bush, Hassan realized that he'd just created another problem for himself. He had no water to rinse his mouth. His gaze moved around searching for water, that was a pitiful attempt. The only place he would find water would be inside the school, close to the hostels, but it had been inundated by the jihadists.

He tried as much as he could to wipe his mouth with his handkerchief, making a mental note of washing it immediately when he got back home. When he finished, his gaze darted about again but this time around, for a different purpose. As soon as he saw what he was looking for, he directed his dog as they began moving towards the direction. He'd spotted a nearby plateau, it would give him a clear view of what was happening in the school and also keep him away from the evil eyes of the terrorists.

Hassan and the hound settled down at a sitting position at the top of the plateau, there, they watched helplessly as the terrorists extracted the teenagers from their boarding house into their trucks.

His mind was scrambling with different ideas and scenarios of how he could engage these guys in a firefight without some of the girls dropping as casualties, but all the scenarios he came up with showed him that it would be almost impossible. Sure, he had his sniper rifle, a bolt-action Alex 338 Les Baer. Worst case scenario, the jihadists might even start shooting and killing the girls so that they won't be rescued. He couldn't let that happen.

A voice in his head argued back that death would be a better fate to what was about to befall these girls. No... He should engage these radicals now. But before he could finish locking and loading, the terrorists had finished decimating the school compound and hostels and were currently on the move as the distance between them and the burning wreckage they left behind grew wider.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hassan watched in dismay as the rear lights of the terrorists truck's got to the end of the school road and began to turn, one after the other, and disappeared from his view.

He had failed. His initial plan was to get to the school girls and save them before the terrorists did. He'd planned to not just save them from the terrorists but to get them to a safe place, out of the reach of the terrorists. He knew he risked being court-martialed for disobeying a direct order from above, that was why he had wanted to carry out the mission out on his own with his hound dog as his only company... That was why he didn't want to get anyone involved, and that was why he intentionally rushed out of his house with his dog, avoiding his wife's confused questions. But now, he wished he'd taken a different tact. He wished he'd engaged the terrorists in a firefight, not minding the outcome of the impact it would have on him and his career as a military officer.

Hassan cursed in frustration.

Blast it all... Blast all the stupid hesitations and second-guessing... Blast it all. His frustration was now mixed with a new feeling, anger. It was an appealing Molotov cocktail and he swallowed it whole.

Hassan was a devout Muslim but he utterly and vehemently detested the terror the Boko Haram were unleashing on Nigeria and her neighboring countries in the name of his religion. Indeed, he denounced them and all that they stood for, and he wasn't the only Nigerian Muslim with this

sentiment. For such people, terrorism as a means to force people into their religion was an anathema.

For a while, Hassan was silent as he remained seated at the top of the plateau with his hound dog, but his imagination was running wild with several terrible things the terrorists could do to the girls.

The torture, sexual and physical abuse, the sex trafficking and, oh no...

All the scenarios his imagination showed him agitated him all the more. It enraged the emotional storm that was already brewing within him. Resentment, vengeance, and several other overwhelming emotions he couldn't put to words at that moment sprung up like a busted dam and quadrupled... And right there and then, Hassan swore to make Boko Haram his personal enemies. This was no longer just about the Nigerian army and Boko Haram. The game has just changed significantly for Hassan, it was now personal. And he would not bother quenching the raging flame inside him, if anything, he would fan it until it either consumed him or the Boko Haram. If only he knew what was coming.

Hassan got up abruptly with such great force that made his highly trained hound dog jump.

He spun around and began to make his way down from the plateau, and without a word or command, his dog followed close behind on his heels.

Hassan went to where the security officials of the school were all lying dead in the pool of their blood, up close, the gory scene looked even more horrendous.

He thought of burying the dead security officials but quickly decided against it, it wasn't his place to carry out such rites. Plus, it was better to leave them there so that they would be easily found by the people who would alert their family members about what had become of them. That is, if they weren't found first by their family members.

And with those gory images of the school's security personnel chiseling itself in his imagination, he spun around, jerked his dog's leash so hard it almost hurt, the dog obediently followed and the night swallowed them both.

As the day broke, it did so with the terrible news of the missing Chibok girls.

It was barely 7 in the morning, but several Media outlets were having a field day with the latest highly repulsive report from the North about the missing girls.

The media news report could no longer suffice as those who had already heard the news began informing others. Word of mouth was really proving to be one of the most effective tools as it made the news fly faster like wildfire.

As the news continued to cut across the streets, bus stations, companies and enterprises, schools, market and other social places, the people began to hastily abandon what they were doing and scamper to the nearest television so as to not just hear the news, but also to see the images as it was being displayed on the television screen with their eyes.

Most of the people who did not have televisions around began browsing the internet with their mobile devices and computers while the rest went to the nearest newspaper stands.

It didn't take long for a lot of international media to be in the loop about the nightmare unfolding in Nigeria.

In short, some of the international media outlets were giving the breaking news at the same time as the local media. These were the ones whose correspondents were fortunately in the country at the time, the ones who used their satellite drone, and the ones who connected to a live feed from local affiliate media outlets in the country. .

There was a brewing uproar in the country in reaction to the news that was coming from the local media, which ended up being extended to the global stage by the international media.

Though the reactions that were pouring in nationwide and all over the world were obnoxious, it was nothing compared to what was happening to the family of the affected students and the deceased security officials who had plunged into a state of trauma, shock, despair and a lot more of these variations.

Some of the fathers, mothers, or both parents of the students were panting out of shock, developing heart attacks and cardiac arrest, and outrightly dropping dead. The thought of their children in the hands of terrorists was apparently too much for them to bear.

All thanks to the media, the masses were receiving updates about the families of the victims. This, on its own, sent a fresh tumult of agitation from the masses.

It was indeed a horrible day in Nigeria... And the people, including those not in the same affected regions, were deeply moved by the event that took place in the early hours of that day. Except for a few heartless ones, the terrorist attack on the Chibok girls felt personal to a lot of Nigerians as though it was their loved ones who were victimized.

The Nigerian president, as usual, was slow in his response as regards the unfolding nightmare. The Nigerian army also wasn't putting out any statement at the moment as to why the last terrorist acts and several others would continue unabated under their noses.

The events that will take place in the next few days would expose a lot about Nigeria and its government.

But it wouldn't be the end as most Nigerians would be hoping, instead, this would be the prelude to more horrifying events.

CHAPTER FIVE

ASO VILLA, ABUJA, NIGERIA.

The president of Nigeria, Ahmed Mustafa sat down on his leather couch in his living room which was situated at the presidential quarters, chain-smoking at this time of the day, as he watched what was unfolding on the news with other Nigerians.

Unlike the masses, the news wasn't shocking to Mustafa, indeed, this was an operation he personally authorized and the sheer joy of watching his handiwork on television with the masses was something he couldn't explain or put appropriate words to right now.

As the president of the country, he had already been called and informed personally about the terrorist attack. Even at this moment, he knew that the file containing every detail about the attack would be waiting for him on his office table. The file would be there, alongside every other detail and happenings in the country that he needed to be privy to as the president of the country.

He knew that his security advisors and the citizens would be expecting him to be in his office by now, going through the files with a look of horror on his face. He knew that they would be expecting him to be preparing to give his speech, but no, Mustafa would not be rushed. He was, after all, still the president and their commander in chief, so they didn't have the right to rush him and because of this, Mustafa would take his sweet time.

As he continued to watch the television, there was something electrifying -exhilarating even, about the display of hopelessness and despair that was coming out from the masses. Such reactions were intoxicating and it was that kind of feeling that Mustafa would want to get over, and over again.

Unable to keep his excitement to himself alone, the president picked up one of his secured phones and dialed the direct number of Imam Bin Khalid, the cleric of the Boko Haram terrorist group.

Bin Khalid picked up the call just before it would go unanswered.

"Are you watching the mayhem that is currently going on in the country?" He asked, his voice barely concealing his excitement.

"Good morning to you, too," Bin Khalid quipped, apparently everyone was in high spirits today. Okay, maybe not everyone, just the bad guys.

"Of course, I am. I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world." The president and Bin Khalid laughed out loud simultaneously. "This is so wonderful, Mr. President. Once again, my men have pulled through."

"Such a commendable job by your men, I must say."

"That's right, Mr. President. My men and I have been celebrating all night long."

"I just wish I was there with all of you as you celebrate."

"We wish so, too. You have really played a huge role in the success of what we do in this country by making it easier for us... But we know you can't join us now because you need to perform the so-called civil duty to pacify all the infidel dogs of this country but don't worry, I will send you a bottle of our red wine via our usual carrier."

"I very much appreciate that, it would be a wonderful addition to the fine collections in my wine bar." Mustafa replied with a contented smile. "Before I go, I wanted to ask if you've read the speech that I am planning to present today?"

"Oh yes, you mean the one you prepared in reaction to last night's operation?"

Before Mustafa could get the chance to reply, Bin Khalid continued. "I read it as soon as one of my stooges brought it to me. Not bad, Mr. President, not bad... Have you also read mine?"

Yes, I have and I must say, you really do know how to stick it to them."

"Allahu Akbar!" Bin Khalid shouted, laughing.

Mustafa replied in kind. The line went dead.

Mustafa got up from his couch and with the heavy scent of cigarettes trailing behind him, he made for his office. One of his aides entered just after he left and cleared the ashtray that was overflowing with cigarette butts.

CHIBOK, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

After all he saw last night, Hassan could not sleep all through the night, having been haunted by all he'd seen and heard. With a moan, he kept tossing and turning beside his wife in his bed.

As soon as he returned from his failed mission, he'd forced himself, against his will, to go straight to bed after washing himself from the smoke and soot, hoping to catch some sleep before waking up early for work. Another reason he went to bed was because his wife was going to ask him about it if she noticed that he didn't sleep beside her.

But all these eventually became a fertile effort as his constant moaning and thrashing woke his wife who hurriedly held him in her arms all through the night as she consoled and inquired the reason for his distress. But he couldn't tell her. How was he supposed to do that? How was he going to tell her that the same government that was supposed to protect them was now killing them?

During the last campaign, Hassan could not vote, not just because he and his fellow military counterparts had been saddled with the responsibility to maintain law and order during the election time, but because of his military status. He had never been able to vote for his preferred candidate during election periods but his wife, Nefisa, who was a civilian could vote... And she had voted for Mustafa.

She'd liked Mustafa, she had believed every lie that came out of his mouth in the form of campaign promises, and she and her little group of friends had even campaigned for him, believing that he was just the right person for the presidency, the anointed one.

Although he wasn't saying anything, his wife and a lot of Nigerian citizens had been seeing what was happening. They had been seeing all the opposite of what president Mustafa promised prior to being elected into his current office as the president of the country. But he wondered how she would feel if he told her that it was much worse than whatever she was seeing now.

He had often seen the look of regret on her face, and that was why he had resolved not to discuss sensitive matters of this high magnitude -like what happened last night- with her, because he knew it would make her feel more guilty, and the last thing he wanted to do was to make his wife unhappy.

The hardship in the country was already doing its fair share to his wife and other citizens in the country, there was no need for more.

CHAPTER SIX

"You are shivering, let me get you a cup of tea to see if it can warm you up a little." Hassan's wife, Nefisa said, cutting into his thoughts.

Unable to get out any coherent words, he just nodded.

Knowing Hassan all too well as someone who loved watching the morning news whenever he could before going to work, she turned on the television to keep him occupied with something.

"I will soon be back." Nefisa said as she covered him with a thick blanket, patted his back affectionately, looked at him with concern and left the bedroom.

After his wife left the room, Hassan's gaze was riveted to the television screen as it displayed the horrific site where the terrorist attack had taken place last night. The scene was no longer as gruesome as it was last night, somebody must have gone through great lengths to cover up certain things. As he continued to watch, he heard the anchor, a lady of average height who was in her mid-thirties, announcing that the president would be giving his remark on the latest happenings at the top of the hour.

Hassan could not wait to hear what the president had to say, and he knew it would be the same for most, if not all the faithful citizens of Nigeria... He wondered if the president would say something different for a change even though he was having his doubts.

ASO VILLA, ABUJA, NIGERIA.

With a phalanx of security accompanying him, Mustafa entered the press conference room that was only used by the president and the members of his cabinet when they wanted to address the nation, after the media crew had finished setting up the place. He'd also applied some makeup to his face, thus, he was ready when the media crew were good to go.

He took his place behind the teleprompter as the national anthem began playing and his face began to appear on the several TV monitors that were strategically hung on the wall of the conference room.

"Arise o compatriots, Nigeria's call obey."

When the national anthem was recited, president Mustafa started speaking, slowly.

"Fellow Nigerians."

"Today, a tragedy of immense proportions rocked our nation, though the affected were only the people of the little town of Chibok in Borno state. The ripple of shock has spread across the entire country as we watched in utter horror the extent of evil some men's hearts have conceived and perpetrated on the innocent members of that community." Mustafa stopped for a while, adjusted his eye glass that was almost sliding down his nose and continued.

"I want to begin by officially confirming the kidnapping of two hundred and seventy-six students, all girls, from the Government Girls Secondary School. This incident is believed to have occurred at midnight, precisely 12:15 to 12:45 a.m."

"This act of terror was carried out by the proscribed Boko Haram sect, whose involvement was confirmed by military intelligence gathered after the action."

CHIBOK, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

Hassan had been listening to the president's speech while simultaneously wondering if the man even had a conscience at all. He wondered how the man could sleep at night, and how he could

boldly lie to over two hundred million Nigerians as he was doing right now, without feeling a pang of guilt.

Unable to continue lying on his side, Hassan sat upright and continued to listen to the so-called president's speech. Gone was the sickness and nausea, having been replaced by disdain for the president.

"My deep regrets and sincere apologies goes to the families, friends and well wishers of the abducted girls, and I assure them of the full concern and support of the nation in these perilous times"

"As the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of Nigeria, I will spare no resources, this act will not go without a proper and high priority investigation. This government will not rest, we will not give sleep to our eyes until we bring back our girls and this barbaric sect is completely wiped out of our beloved nation, though some are considered to be freedom fighters seeking religious liberation."

Hassan was visibly shocked... What was the meaning of his last sentence? He had just used the guise of rendering a speech to the nation and pledged his allegiance to Boko Haram. Hassan hoped that every Nigerian who was currently listening to the ongoing remark was not too busy to get the message of his last statement?

No, Nigerians were brilliant and he knew they got everything verbatim. If they didn't get it, the media would definitely show them.

"Further information will be released to the public about the committee that will be instituted to carry out investigations of this kidnap." The president continued after a brief pause.

"Finally, I admonish that this is a time that we all should put our hands together, we should not become divisive and play sectarian politics, I mean we should not politicize the tragedy for personal or party gains. The war against terror can only be won together."

"I cannot end this speech without again extending my heartfelt consolation to the affected families. We will not let your daughters rot in captivity, although you defied the commands of the sect by giving them Western education."

All the wind was knocked out of Hassan at that last statement, but Mustafa continued as though he had not just thrown a bombshell on everyone who was currently listening to him.

"But that topic is not up for debate right now... Let me reiterate my pledge to bring back our girls as soon as possible."

"Fellow Nigerians, I can assure you that you shall be apprised of every unclassified detail of the extreme measures that we are taking to facilitate the return of our girls. God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria."

The national anthem started again as the president and his phalanx of security walked out of the conference room without answering any of the many questions that were hurled at him by the press corps.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ASO VILLA, ABUJA, NIGERIA.

The president unceremoniously walked into his office, but before he could sit down, one of his secretaries began calling out to him.

"Yes, what is it?" He snapped at the secretary with an impatience that wasn't unfamiliar to his members of staff as he simultaneously spun around and was now face-to-face with his secretary. The secretary was the first to look away. "The chief of army staff is on the line, he says he wants to speak with you," the secretary said, handing over the phone with an outstretched arm to Mustafa. Mustafa snatched up the phone from the man and ordered everyone to leave his office. Only until everywhere was cleared, was he able to take the call.

He exchanged a few words of greeting with the caller, then, the chief of army staff decided to go straight to why he was calling Mustafa.

"Mr. President, I just received information that I believe you might be interested to know... It is about last night's operation."

"What about it? You know I don't like taking sensitive calls of such magnitude via my official phone." He said, finally plopping down heavily on his seat. But not without scanning his office one more time for unwanted intruders.

The office was a grand space adorned with rich Nigerian cultural artifacts and elegant furniture. Mahogany desks were complemented by traditional Nigerian art, symbolizing the nation's diverse heritage. The Nigerian national flag stood proudly in a corner, and the room exuded an air of authority, combining modern functionality with a nod to the country's history and culture. The president's seal and the Nigerian coat of arms were prominently displayed on the wall behind the president desks, reinforcing the official nature of the space. The room was well-lit, creating an atmosphere befitting the leader of Africa's most populous nation.

Assured that he was alone in his office, the president exhaled and ordered the chief of army staff to speak.

"I believe someone went against the orders you asked me to give my men last night."

"How come? What happened?" Mustafa asked astonishingly, sitting up in his seat.

"I did everything you told me. I ordered my men to stand down, but it didn't suffice because I wanted to make sure that my orders would be followed to the letter. So I called some of them who are loyal to me to become my surveillance team. I asked them to do it discreetly, of course. I wasn't expecting them to come back with negative results. As a security officer, I just had to play it safe... But I couldn't believe my ears when they reported back to me this morning."

When the chief of army staff, Jamal Rashidi, finished talking, there was a long silence, so long that the chief of army staff wondered if the line had been disconnected.

"Hello, are you still there, Mr. President?"

"I'm still here, Rashidi".

Silence. Then Mustafa started speaking. "I'm just wondering who could be foolish enough to go against an instruction coming from a high authority?"

Or who could be brave enough to defile the order that goes against his conscience? Rashidi thought, but didn't say anything.

"I can't believe this!" The president muttered with a hint of bemusement and something else Rashidi couldn't decipher at that moment.

Another pause... But now, without warning, the bemusement completely transcended into anger.

"Who is this fool that dared to go against instructions?" asked Mustafa through gritted teeth.

The chief of army staff began to reply but the president cut him off with another question.

"Was he not afraid of being caught and killed by Boko Haram? Was he not afraid of being court-martialed?"

"To your last two questions, I'd say apparently not. I mean, he knows the drill, he has been with the army for over a decade, it is obvious that in this case, he is not considering the repercussions of his actions. And that's more of the reason why I said I should get you apprised of this."

"Unless?"

"Unless what, Mr. President?"

"Unless he has an ulterior motive or he has cover from a foreign enemy government, the latter is most likely."

The president and the army chief of staff were quiet for a long time, each of them swallowed by their own thoughts. After a couple minutes more, the president spoke up.

"Hope you realize that this changes everything, yes?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"You realize that this changes everything significantly?" The president asked in a more serious, menacing tone of voice.

"I do, and that's why I'm calling to ask what you think we should do about him. We can't afford for this guy to go to the media or our enemies and tell them what he knows."

"But do you have anything in mind that you can do to him?" asked the president.

"Yes, you just have to say the word and we will take care of the rest. We can make him drop off the radar and make his history disappear."

President Mustafa contemplated for a while and finally decided.

"Hello, sir, are you still there?"

The question from the chief of army staff made him realize that he had taken longer than he should.

"Of course, I was contemplating what you just told me."

"So... Have you decided?"

President Mustafa replied to the chief of army staff with a question of his own.

"Do you have the details of the soldier who has blatantly committed this atrocity?"

Blatantly? Yes. Atrocity? Rashidi wasn't so sure about that. But he however gave Mustafa the answer to his question.

"Yes, I have all his details here on my table."

"Read it out to me now."

"Yes, Mr. President. His name is Hassan Lawal, a captain and a sniper in the Nigerian army. Islam is his religious affiliation. He was recruited at the age of eighteen, currently in his early thirties, he has spent fourteen years with the Nigerian army. He is married to only one wife whose name is Nefisa, for fifteen years, but no children because of her medical condition."

At that point, the president jumped in. "So why is he still married to only one wife when she didn't give him a child?"

The report I have here shows that the couple dote on each other, and his wife's name frequently on his lips attests to the fact that he loves her, plenty, if I might add... That's why he won't get married to another woman."

"So he's a Muslim and a fool?"

A Muslim? Yes... A fool? Again, Rashidi wasn't so sure, but he had to continue his duty.

"Well, I guess that's the right way to put it."

"Do you think he secretly has a child with any woman outside his marriage?"

None that I know of, Mr. President."

President Mustafa muttered, "fool Muslim."

"What? I didn't get that, Mr. President?"

"Nevermind, I wasn't actually talking to you. So you are certain that the evidence you have gathered against this your man is conclusive?"

"Absolutely, I can bet my salary on it. As a matter of fact, if dogs could speak in the language that you and I can understand, that's what his hound dog would say because he went with his master."

Mustafa didn't have any reason to doubt his chief of army staff. "This person is now an apostate Muslim, a betrayer of the cause, hope you realize that?" The president asked, emphasizing every word.

"Well, you're correct."

From the way the chief of army staff answered, the president could detect a hint of doubt, or was it something else? Either way, his tone wasn't as convincing as Mustafa expected it to be. He just hoped the Chief of army staff would not also go rogue on him? That would be hellish. But at the moment, Rashidi was requesting for his permission to kill someone who had not followed orders... That was a good sign, he surmised.

"What do you want us to do? My men are on standby." Asked Rashidi.

"You have done a good job by keeping an eye on him. Don't kill him yet, let's wait for a more perfect opportunity to come when I will use him as a scapegoat."

The hesitation in Rashidi's voice showed that he didn't necessarily agree with the president but he wouldn't put up a fight about it.

"Very well, sir... And while we are at it, I will organize a round-the-clock surveillance on him that will help us discover if he is working for any foreign agency or if there is any other ulterior motive."

"Alright, do that, and keep me in the loop when there's any new developments. We need any leverage that we can get over him and we need it fast.."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Just then, the president's gaze moved to one of the 42 inches plasma television that was hung on the wall of his office to see the current leader of the Boko Haram, El-Badawi , appearing on national TV to address Nigeria and any other foreigner who cared to listen about the events that took place last night.

As his eyes remained pinned on the television, he wondered if he should inform Bin Khalid of the recent developments but finally thought better of it. He didn't need any cleric to tell him what to do, this would be solely under his control.

President Mustafa almost forgot that he was still on call with the chief of army staff, but his attention was drawn back however briefly, to the ongoing call.

"I have to go now. The president said to the caller on the other side of the phone. El-Badawi is about to speak on television, make sure you turn on your TV and watch it." The president said and with that, the call was disconnected.

He picked up the remote control to the television that was showing the recorded video from the jihadist and cranked up the volume so that he could listen to the speech.

El-Badawi started with the Islamic standard of salutation in Arabic, the holy language of the prophet Muhammad. Then, he switched to hausa language, but as he spoke, there was a subtitle that was displayed on the screen in English.

"I bring great greetings to every faithful Muslim all over the world..." El-Badawi cried with no small measure of excitement. Behind him, on the screen, were several men who stood with sophisticated AK-47s, their faces shrouded in black hoodies, but El-Badawi's face was exposed.

"Rejoice, all faithful servants of Allah because today is a great day that Allah has bestowed upon us his favor, kindness and graciousness."

At this, president Mustafa applauded ecstatically. "Allahu Akbar!" He shouted, laughing.

CHIBOK, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

Uh-oh, here they come again, about to brag like they were the devil themselves." Captain Hassan said to himself, his attention was glued to the television as he saw the leader of the Boko Haram giving his speech. "Well, anyone who does not believe that the devil exists will definitely do so after listening to people like these."

El-Badawi continued his remark. "Allah has given another victory to the Boko Haram as we have successfully decimated one of the centers that the infidels introduced to lure away those that were supposed to be faithful to Allah by teaching them the perverted ways of the West."

"Yep, definitely convincing, this is the devil speaking." Hassan quipped.

"Children who are supposed to be learning the ways of Allah as taught by the prophet (PBUH) are being corrupted and the seeds of promiscuity are sown in their hearts and it is breeding unbelief within a region that is an Islamic caliphate."

"Well, no more, no more will we let the enemies of Allah prosper." The terrorist smacked his chest hard several times as he proclaimed the next sentence. "I, Abdullah El-Badawi and every member and sympathizer of the Boko Haram will wage war; against the Christians, Jews, the so-called pagans or traditional worshippers, atheists and agnostics, shi'ite, every hypocrite Sunni Muslim until

they convert and leave the corrupting ways of the West and embrace Sharia, or they will be completely wiped out of the land."

"And those who think to stop us by fighting us should know now that they cannot stop one who fights for the Almighty; injuries do not deter us, martyrdom does not hurt our heart because it is the shortest path to the bliss of paradise and we all faithfully look forward to it, we win by merely being at war because God's army knows no defeat."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, is that why you have to put up such a spectacle?" Hassan replied to the terrorist on television.

"The leaders of Nigeria have never been able to stop our campaigns and every form of tactic they have come up with have failed because of the grace of Allah and we do not fear them at all."

"Let me inform everyone who cares to listen, from the president to the least person that it is just a matter of time before this nation called Nigeria would be decimated, destroyed, annihilated, pulverized, and in its stead will be an Islamic caliphate completely governed by Sharia law."

El-Badawi leaned forward as though he was trying to whisper a great secret to an invincible person sitting adjacent to him. What you have just experienced is but a tip of the iceberg, a child's play compared to what we will do in this country. I want you all to note this down in the deep recesses of your heart that Boko Haram is here to stay."

"Peace be upon every member of Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad,"-El-Badawi waved out his hands like a cleric or monarch who was declaring blessings over his subjects,-"rejoice because we have seen the beneficence of Allah and will continue to."

He concluded his speech, then his face disappeared from the screen as the abducted girls were paraded in front of the camera for the whole world to see. When the last of the shivering girls whose faces were contorted into horror finished walking in front of the camera that was mounted on a tripod, the recorded video was cut off.

Hassan helplessly watched in horror and regretted not acting faster for the umpteenth time that morning. Still in his state of helpless devastation, he looked back on all his years with the Nigerian army and was filled with shame and guilt for every part that he might have knowingly or unknowingly played to abet these terrorist groups.

ASO VILLA, ABUJA, NIGERIA.

President Mustafa was ecstatic about El-Badawi's speech. At different intervals, he found himself clapping, and even cheering the Boko Haram leader after every punchline.

El-Badawi was correct, he told himself. This was indeed just the beginning.

NIGERIAN DEFENCE HEADQUARTERS, ABUJA, NIGERIA.

Unlike president Mustafa and Captain Hassan, the chief of army staff, Lieutenant-general Jamal Rashidi did not express any emotion when the speech was going on. He sat down stoically on his office leather chair, never twitching or blinking even once.

Rashid was an avid poker player and his current poker face testified as much.

With his unreadable expression, anybody could tell what president Mustafa and captain Hassan was feeling when the speech from the terrorist was being rendered, but not Rashidi.

But one thing is sure, and that is the fact that whatever emotions these three men were displaying mirrored the swirling emotions coursing through the hearts and body of a lot of Nigerians, friends and foe alike... Enemies and allies.

CHAPTER NINE

ONE WEEK LATER.

DIVINE HOSPITAL, AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA.

"Congratulations, Mr. Azubuike Enyioma, your wife has successfully given birth to a beautiful bouncing baby girl."

The five-year-old Osita Enyioma heard his daddy's friend and family doctor cheerfully announcing this to his dad.

Osita had often heard his daddy referring to the doctor with the name, Tobe. Osita liked the doctor because each time he came to the house, he always brought gifts. But Osita did not like coming to the doctor's hospital anytime he was sick because the doctor used to give him that painful injection and plenty of bitter medicine.

The reaction his daddy was currently displaying showed that he was excited about the news that was delivered to him. Osita didn't understand what the doctor meant by his news, but all he knew was that it was something that made his father very joyful because at that moment, daddy started jumping for joy as several "congratulations" began flying through the air.

His daddy was also his best friend, and so, seeing daddy happy also made him happy as well.

He looked around to see nurses who were in hospital scrubs and other people who were dressed normally, milling around the waiting area. All of them were smiling, and some were laughing at his daddy's display of joy. Osita decided not to be left out. Then, he started mimicking his daddy's shouts of excitement.

"God, you are good oo! God, you are good o o o o o o o!"

The way he shouted made everyone around them turn towards him, and they resumed another fresh round of laughter, and this time around, even those who had been smiling joined in.

He didn't know why they were happy with his display, but all he knew was it gave him joy to make them happy, and so he wanted to do more.

But before he could take his fans on another round, the excitement began to taper down.

"And what is all this "Mister" you are calling me? Are we not friends anymore?" Osita heard his daddy asking the man who had delivered the good news

"Of course, we are best friends for life. I know you've been itching to hear those words for long, so I said I should present it to you just the way I will say to any of my clients that deserves such salutations."

"You are correct. It's been so long since I've been waiting to hear it indeed... Especially after the last two miscarriages, we were really afraid that this one wasn't going to pull through."

"You see why I had to present the news to you the way I did, huh? Don't worry, you and I will still meet outside the hospital to celebrate with a few bottles of cold beer."

Then it was as if Doctor Tobe finally noticed Osita because he spun around, crouched until he was eye-level with him and playfully tapped him on his cheek as he started talking. "Congratulations, you now have a beautiful baby sister, I bet you have also been itching to hear that for a long time, right?"

The little boy just smiled shyly because of the sudden attention he was getting.

"Awww, I can see your excitement from that big smile on your face."

Then Osita watched as his daddy's friend put his right hand in one of his trouser side pockets and brought out a brown envelope and gave it to him. "This is my little gift to congratulate you for having a new baby sister."

His gaze moved to his father, who was smiling at him as though seeking his permission, and returned to the brown envelope his daddy's friend was holding. He finally stretched out his hands and collected the brown envelope which his parents would later tell him contained money, precisely ten thousand Naira.

"That's my good boy." His daddy's friend patted him lightly on the head before he straightened from his crouched posture and returned his attention to his daddy.

"So I guess it's time to go settle the bill?" His daddy asked.

"Oh, yes, it's time indeed," daddy's friend replied, the beaming smile never leaving his face. "But not so soon."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm saying that you should go and see your wife and newborn baby first and after that, you and I shall be splitting the bills."

"What bills?"

"The hospital bills of course, do you have another?"

"No way, you can't do that"... daddy cried, gasping.

"Yes, way, I can." Daddy's best friend and doctor grinned.

"But you're my doctor, and I came to you as such, and this is a hospital, your hospital and not a charity organization."

"Yeah, yeah. But you seem to have forgotten that I am not just your doctor but I am your best friend. Erica and I have been seriously praying for you since we knew how much you have been struggling medically. God has finally answered our prayers, and I love your baby girl like she was mine. Now I have finished doing the duty of a doctor, allowing me to also carry out the duty of a best friend and a brother who is from another mother. I have informed Erica of your wife's safe delivery; she squealed in excitement, I'm sure she is currently on her way as we speak with a truckload of amazing gifts."

"But you have played a huge friendly role by safely birthing my child and giving that brown envelope to my son. I don't even know what is inside it, but I know that whatever it is, it won't be what I would take for granted."

"He is also like a son to me so what I just did was a father-son celebration." The doctor began to push Osita and his daddy towards the direction his mother had earlier been taken when they arrived at the hospital a couple of hours ago.

"Oya, go and see your wife and that beautiful doll of yours."

His Daddy thanked the doctor again; Osita mimicked his daddy, and they both began to walk towards the direction of his mother and new sister doll when the doctor called out to them and hurried to catch up.

"While you are at it, let me go and start preparing the birth certificate. So I'd like to ask if you and your wife have decided on the name to christen your child, or would you like to discuss it with her now?"

"No, we had already decided even before she got pregnant. Uchechi is a unisex name, so we decided that whether we give birth to a boy or girl, we would name the child Uchechi."

"What a beautiful name. And with a beautiful girl like that, God truly has a mind of his own."

"You can say that again," his daddy laughed. "Now be gone with you, let me go and see my wife and my beautiful 'doll'." His daddy replied to the doctor, held Osita by the hand, and began to walk away.

The first thing he did when he entered the place where his mother and his little sister were, was to confirm with his eyes if his mother had truly given birth to a doll, as his daddy's best friend was saying.

He went closer to where the tiny bundle was and confirmed that his sister was truly a doll. She was a pink doll, or maybe brown; he wasn't exactly sure, but he was sure of one thing, and that was the fact that he wanted to play with her now. And that was what he told his parents who didn't notice that he was there with them as they kept embracing each other with tears of joy.

Osita observed the look on their faces as he sought their permission. It resembled the expression they gave him when they disapproved of something he did. Instead of grasping the hint, he remained perplexed by their reactions. Weren't dolls meant for playing? So, why were his parents refusing him the chance to play with the beautiful pink baby doll who was going to be his sister?

"You can't play with her," his daddy finally said.

"But is she not a doll? Why can't I play with her?" Osita inquired.

His mother smiled as she drew him closer and held him affectionately. "That, my dear, is because she is not ready to be played with."

And that was how the matter was put to rest.

CHAPTER TEN

THREE YEARS LATER.

SOKOTO STATE, NIGERIA.

Mahmoud Ali knelt down on his prayer mat as he bowed towards Mecca and prayed.

The prayer he was currently offering had been the one he had been praying since the age of seven. Now he is nineteen years old and a 200 level student of Home Economics in Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto state, Nigeria.

The interior of the modest size mosque was designed with geometric patterns. The walls were painted in warm earthy tones. A mihrab, intricately designed, stood as the focal point, indicating the qibla – the direction of Mecca. Narrow windows were strategically created around the walls for ventilation and soft light during the day. The prayer-mat covered floor was a tapestry of muted colors. Around the periphery, shelves held copies of the Quran and other religious texts.

All around him were his fellow lower ranked, radical jihadists that desired to be noticed by El-Badawi and all the top guns at the highest level of Boko Haram, kneeling down, bowing towards Mecca as they performed the Fajr in Arabic, the language of the prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him). All dressed in a loose-fitting, ankle-length jalamia, paired with a kufi, there were over twenty-eight of them in the mosque and they were all men.

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful."

Mahmood affirmed the next sentence in his prayers with vigor. "There is no God but Allah. I declare that Allah is one and Muhammad is his faithful slave and prophet."

"O, Allah, I declare that you are the only true God and that you have given prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), your true word which is written in the holy Quran via angel Jibreel to guide us." As Mahmoud kept praying, he continued to draw strength from the words that were coming out of his mouth and he kept feeling more excited.

"Yes, Allah, grant me grace to do your will, and give me the strength to fight against Satan, the accursed, and his evil works."

"The holy Quran tells us in Sura 4:52. 'Jews and Christians are the ones whom God has cursed, and he whom God excludes from His mercy, you shall never find one to help and save him.'"

"Make me strong and let my hands be the sword that you would use to destroy all infidels in this country and all over the world. This is my fervent desire because I know it is your will."

As Mahmoud prayed, faster and faster the words came tumbling, accompanied with more surah.

"The holy Quran, in Sura 5:51 says: 'O you who believe, take not the Jews and the Christians as Auliya' (friends, protectors, helpers, etc.), they are but Auliya' to one another. And if any amongst you takes them as Auliya', then surely he is one of them. Verily, Allah guides not those people who are the Zalimun (polytheists and wrongdoers and unjust)."

"I pray that you will rain down quick judgment and death to all the apostate Muslims in this country and all over the world, and let them go down to hell which they are already condemned to."

"Help us and every jihadist group all over the world that is trying to overthrow all the apostate and infidel governments in their different countries to establish an Islamic caliphate that would be totally governed by Sharia law."

Then, Mahmoud began listing out several terrorist groups and praying specially for each of them and their needs.

"Help my brethren who are faithfully carrying out jihad in "Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad (Boko Haram), with all the resources that they need, both human and deadly weapons to finally undo the abominations that the British has done. Help them to overthrow the evil, blasphemous, nefarious structure of governance that they have dumped on us, destroy every form of Westernization. and convert it to a pure Islamic government that would be guided by Sharia law."

"Help my brothers who are in Hezbollah and Hamas to fulfill their highest hope and desires of driving all those apes and pigs calling themselves Israel from Palestine. Let all the Zionists be driven into the Caspian Sea!"

"Help the Muslim brotherhood to achieve their goals of toppling all the apostate regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. Especially the dogs that are currently at the helm of affairs in Egypt and all the traitors in the United Arab Emirates and the Saudis that have gone to bed with the West to enrich their pockets. They are a disgrace to Islam, punish them, Allah!"

And so Mahmood continued taking out his precious time to call as many groups as he could remember and pray specially for them.

"And finally, I ask that you help all the molaris and ayatollahs in Iran, especially the supreme leader, to acquire and fulfill his desire of finally having nuclear weapons attached with the most destructive warheads that he would use to annihilate, extinguish, vaporize the small satan (Israel) and the big satan the (United States of America) from the world map. Regardless of our differences, at least, we agree on this one thing, annihilation of the dirty Jews and America."

"Bless everyone who has become Shahid (martyr) for Islam. Indeed, my desire is to be like them when my time comes."

Mahmoud finished praying, got up from his prayer mat and stepped out with a huge smile on his face, believing that Allah would indeed grant him his wish. It was just a matter of time and he would patiently wait for it. And when it came, he would be as brave as Osama bin Laden, Shekau, Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini, and every other of his heroes that had passed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PORT HARCOURT INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, OMAGWA, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

"Home, sweet home!" David King exclaimed excitedly as his foot touched the tarmac after his flight from Lagos landed at the Port Harcourt International Airport.

Feeling jet lag from a long direct flight from the United States of America to Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, he had now completed the final leg of his journey home from the economic capital of the country to the South-South region. Well, his patience had finally paid off, he told himself, and he began making his way to the baggage claim area.

Talking about home, this was not his only home though, but at least, Nigeria was his first home.

Born to Nigerian parents and bred in the United States of America, the 6 ft 2 inches twenty-one-year-old microengineering student at Florida state University, Tallahassee, and the linebacker of the university's basketball team, was actually a citizen of these two countries with full citizen rights.

David's parents, Israel and Nicole King, both first generation children of Nigerian immigrants, had met each other and gotten married in the United States of America.

David had been told several times about the story surrounding his birth that he could narrate it even in his dreams.

His mother, who apparently couldn't get enough after her first pilgrimage to Israel, wanted to go again, despite the depression that was caused by her health challenge that prevented her from getting pregnant when she and her husband wanted to start having kids.

There was something special about those sites in Jerusalem and all those biblical places in Israel, she'd insisted after her husband and family persuaded her to at least wait until the time was right -after she had finished her sessions with the family's gynecologist. She wanted to go to Israel, and she wanted to go right then, it didn't matter that her medical sessions would improve her chances of getting what she wanted the most in the world.

"An inexplicable desire to travel to Israel when I was almost due with my program with our gynecologist welled up in me," Nicole had recounted to David in her tales. "I couldn't explain it but I was sure of one thing, it was the fact that I needed to be in Israel."

Thus, with her relentless pressure on her family, they finally gave their blessings as she and her husband began making their way to Jerusalem.

While on their way to Ben Gurion Airport, Nicole had remarked to her husband at different intervals that she was so excited that they were going to see the country that he was named after.

"Each time I said those words to him, it drew out the kind of shy smile of a high school student going on his first date from your father." She would always say to David as she giggled like a high school student who was trying to regale her girlfriends about her date with her first crush.

The thought made him smile, although it was tight-lipped and almost imperceptible, lest people think he was crazy.

Loving the feeling she got after visiting every biblical site that she could go to, she always took a return trip. This wasn't a result of dopamine; it was something higher and serene... Glorious even... A lot of people called it "The Jerusalem syndrome."

Nicole became pregnant during that particular pilgrimage to Israel. Nine months later, her child labor started on one of her visits to her parent's house. She had been rushed to the nearest hospital where she had remarkably handled her first pregnancy like an experienced pro. She didn't experience much labor pain; she had given birth like the Hebrew women in the Bible.

"I told your father that we will call you David after a revelation I had about you the previous night."

"He'd looked at me pointedly as if to say, 'these Jerusalem syndromes are really hitting you hard, you need to get a grip'." Nicole had replied when David asked what his father's response was.

But after her unwavering stance, she had told David, her husband finally backed down and agreed that David would be his name but on one condition; she would never mention the revelation to him until he was at least 18 years or above. This would avoid them influencing his career in life, he'd argued, insisting that if the vision was real, it would come to pass regardless of whether they told him or not.

Nicole vehemently disagreed with her husband's sentiments but finally acquiesced, however reluctantly, after her husband, Israel, put his foot on the ground.

And that was how such matters were put to rest until three years ago, during his eighteenth birthday when his parents decided that it was time for him to know.

After pondering over it multiple times, even today, David still didn't know what to make of his mother's dream or vision. He wasn't really religious, he was an agnostic. His mother was religious, a devout Catholic to be precise. His father was teetering on the precipices of religion and agnosticism. Although it wasn't his intention, his mother had seen the questioning expression on his face, mixed with a hint of doubt. And knowing his mother very well, he knew that at that point, Nicole must be mentally chiding herself for agreeing with her husband.

And even though David still hasn't decided if he believed his mother's fictitious dream or vision, he wouldn't deny the fact that it was becoming one of the foremost thoughts in his heart in recent times. And not surprisingly, he caught himself going down that train of thought as he stepped away from the tarmac and widened the distance between him and the airplane.

And just as he had always done when such thoughts came to mind, he shoved the thought to the back recesses of his heart.

He wheeled his gaze forward and saw the most beautiful woman in the world just outside the airport terminal, holding up a placard that had his name boldly written on it. She also saw him the same time he did her. Then they began running towards each other.

As they got within a few inches of each other, David dropped his luggage which he had been rolling and the woman dropped her placard as she embraced him with all her motherly love. David returned his mother's gesture, engulfing her small frame in his arms.

"Here comes the most beautiful woman in the world!" David exclaimed, lifting his mother's petite frame from the ground, turning her around and drawing the eyes of the people around the airport toward them with such an uncommon display that wasn't abnormal.

Embarrassed at such a spectacle making a public scene, his mother protested for him to drop her back to the ground, but David didn't relent until he was satisfied.

"Oh dear, don't you know that I'm not a little child? Why did you have to spin me around like that?" She flushed, playfully slapping him on his back.

"I didn't spin you around because you were a child; I did it because you are special to me, and that's what you do for a special one."

Nicole was thrilled. David was her first and only child, but he gave her the joy of 10 children. It goes without saying that he wasn't perfect, but she wasn't complaining; on the contrary, she was happy and grateful.

"Why didn't you send one of the drivers to come and pick me instead of going through all the stress?" David asked after his mother insisted on carrying one of his luggages as they made their way to where a 2019 model of a black limousine was parked, with a driver wearing sunglasses standing beside it.

"That's because I missed you, and... I couldn't wait to see you. But don't worry, I am not driving; the driver brought me here." She said, now panting from the exhaustion of carrying one of her son's loads. Still, she wouldn't relinquish it to David even when he requested, saying that she needed the exercise. David just shook his head and smiled at his sweaty mother.

As David and his mother stepped outside the terminal of the International airport, a scene of organized chaos unfolds. The bustling activity of passengers, airport staff, and taxis created a dynamic atmosphere. The air was filled with a symphony of sounds – the chatter of travelers, the hum of engines, and the occasional announcements over the public address system.

The exterior of the terminal, with its modern architectural design, stood as a gateway to the city. The sprawling parking lot accommodated a fleet of vehicles, from taxi to private cars, in constant motion. The tropical climate of Port Harcourt made its presence known through the warmth in the air and the occasional breeze that carried a hint of humidity.

Large signage, displaying the airport's name and relevant information, welcomed visitors and guided them through the outdoor spaces. Uniformed airport personnel moved purposefully, ensuring the smooth flow of traffic and assisting passengers with their belongings.

The landscape surrounding the airport was lush and green, with palm trees swaying in the breeze.

Nicole and David finally arrived at the car where the lanky driver was dutifully waiting for his employers. Upon seeing them, the driver snatched up David's luggages and stowed them in the trunk of his car as he encouraged mother and son to make themselves comfortable at the rear seats. After his employers and their luggages were secured in the confines of their limousine, only then did he climb the driver's seat, crank up the car engine, and zoomed off into the busy city of Port Harcourt.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SOKOTO STATE, NIGERIA.

"You remember that it's your turn to come to my house?" Deborah Zira asked her best friend, Farida, over the phone.

This question arose a couple of minutes into the conversation when Deborah felt it was time to shift to another topic.

Her friend on the other end let out a long and frustrating groan, making Deborah burst into laughter. She was clearly relishing the discomfort her question was causing her best friend. Deborah wouldn't show mercy; it was time for Farida to experience her own dose of misery, and Deborah was determined to see it through.

"Oh, Deborah! Deborah! So, you're laughing at my misery, huh? Just wait until I catch you."

Deborah's laughter echoed, "Isn't that what friends do for each other? Laugh at each other in times of misery?"

Before Farida could respond, Deborah continued, "And, oh, you don't have to thank me, honey. You're welcome. Just remember, you can always count on me." Imagining the funny, horrified expression on her friend's face, Deborah was intoxicated with more laughter.

"I think I need to get a new friend. It's over between you and me!" Farida shouted almost hysterically, followed by another frustrating groan that sounded like she was going through birth pangs.

"You want to roll over and die? You can groan all you want; just don't expect me to look for you tomorrow in my house, Farida."

As Deborah spoke, she could imagine the funny, horrifying expression on her friend's face, it left her drunk with more laughter.

"I think I'll see you in court instead," Farida replied, not without another groan.

"You're such a silly girl! You'll never give birth to those children you want with all these groans."

Deborah retorted with another high-pitched laughter, reciprocated by Farida in a way that sounded almost painful.

Both friends exchanged laughs and groans as if performing for an imaginary over-excited crowd.

Having met during their second year in basic school, the two friends had been inseparable. Currently studying Home Economics at Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto, they faithfully visited each other's houses during holidays, a tradition their families anticipated eagerly.

However, there was a glitch in this perfect union.

Farida was Muslim, and Deborah was Christian. Born and bred in Christian and Muslim families respectively, this little but significant fact never succeeded in separating the two friends, as it had done with some Nigerians.

The problem in their relationship was just that each time either of the two friends visited the other, the host family always wanted to convert the visitor. Anticipating such events, the two friends always planned accordingly. They had decided and agreed that whenever the host family would start "preaching" to "convert" the other guest, they'd humor them, pretending to listen attentively while the end result was that they would be unshaken in their beliefs.

With this, it was a win-win for everyone.

But somewhere deep down in their hearts, and even in their place of prayers, both friends prayed and hoped for the day they would be of one religion. What kind of friends would they be if they didn't look out for the well-being of the other? The question now was, who was right? And who would finally convert and join the other?

"I just don't want to hear another 'Jesus is Lord' or 'Jesus is the true son of God' or 'Jesus is the way, the truth, and the light.'" Farida scoffed.

"I don't care; it's your turn. You must come, or else I will make my way as far as your bedroom myself and drag your sorry butt to my house."

Farida released another round of groaning that was reciprocated with another high-pitched laughter before the conversation was switched to another direction.

"So how is Ibrahim?" asked Deborah.

Deborah could not see Farida, but from the tone of her voice, Deborah could tell that this was a pleasant point of discussion for her friend.

"We are doing fine. He took me out yesterday, and we discussed the possibility of marriage."

Deborah exclaimed gleefully. "I'm so excited for you, girl, you must tell me everything when you come over, you must!"

"Ah, why are you so excited? He hasn't given me an engagement ring."

"We both know that this is as serious as it can get. I don't care what you say or think, you must tell me all the juicy details when you come over."

"Alright, alright, before you bite my head off." Farida was suddenly eager to shift the spotlight from herself.

"What about that crazy guy, Mahmoud? Is he still disturbing you?" She asked out of the blues, smoothly altering the trajectory of the conversation to another topic.

The change of topic made Deborah frown with a very troubled face. Thank God her friend was not here to see her; if not, she would probe deeper, and Deborah would have no choice than to tell her the whole thing. She exhaled in relief and began to give a reply. "He doesn't want to take no for an answer. It's almost like he's trying to force me into going out with him."

This little information was only a tip of the iceberg, but Farida's angry tone made her feel like she had done the right thing by not divulging the whole ordeal. "He is an idiot, he cannot pressure you into doing what you don't want!" Farida shouted. "Do you want me or Ibro to talk some sense into that raving skull of his?"

"No, I don't want you to do that; it will look as if I am noticing his antics, and it would look like I am being affected by it, which is definitely the desired effect that I'm sure he would like to see. So maybe if I just act oblivious to the whole thing, he would just get tired and back off."

There was a moment of brief hesitation, and Deborah knew that her friend was seriously mulling over what she just said. After almost a minute of silence, Farida's voice came back clear on the airwaves, capitulating to her friend's words but not without some admonishment. "Alright. But do not hesitate to call me whenever you need me."

"I'll remember that, thank you." Deborah said sincerely.

The two friends talked for a while longer before the call finally came to an end. Deborah had barely dropped the call when a pair of hands grabbed her waist from behind. She jumped, realizing too late that the hands holding her in a vice-like grip were those of her mischievous nine-year-old brother and the family's last born, confirming her earlier suspicion.

"Samuel Ayuba Zira." She shouted.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

"Please, drive faster. Can't you drive any faster than this?" Nicole King said with a grave urgency in her voice.

Sitting on the edge of her car seat at the owner's corner, she looked as though with her willpower alone, she could make the car fly supernaturally.

"I'm trying, ma'am," the driver replied as he threw her a brief look of apology over his shoulders. "I can do better than this, but I'm just trying to avoid collisions and this traffic." He finished with another look of apology as he maneuvered past several other cars, but not without getting some insults and curses from the impatient drivers.

Six minutes later and after doing different maneuvers, the traffic was finally cleared. The driver gunned his engine and increased from seventy miles per hour to a hundred and ten miles.

At last, they got to their destination, but Nicole was almost ten minutes late for the first time to the meeting that she was always punctual to.

As soon as the driver parked the 2019 black Range Rover, without waiting for the driver to kill the engine, Nicole immediately pushed the car door open and rushed out, not even bothering to heed her driver's warning that she should move carefully and lady-like.

The driver, Chika Nnadozie was his name, forgot about tending to the car for a while and watched with rapt attention as his employer ran past several flower plants and leaped over little barrier as she tried to cut corners to reduce the time it would have taken her to get to the entrance door if she had used the direct route. At the moment, she was carrying those types of big handbags that looked as though it was twice her size. She looked like the perfect definition of what Nigerians called 'small girl, big God'. Yet she was running as though she was being propelled forward by a gust of wind.

"She might as well be floating on air." Chika shook his head with a smile and returned his attention to his task.

Upon recognizing her as a familiar face, the doorman opened the door with a smile and a quick bow. Greeting the doorman with only a wave of her hand and a tight-lipped smile, Nicole hurried forward, her high-heeled shoes announcing her arrival with a loud clack-clack with every step she took on the sparkling tiled floor.

The other attendees were all present and comfortably seated on the leather strap seats that had been placed around a long rectangular table for today's meeting. Nicole was the last to arrive at the venue that had been designated for this meeting.

"I'm so sorry I came late; my son just returned from the United States, and I had to accompany the driver to pick him up from the airport. I have missed that boy so much." Nicole said hurriedly as she comfortably sat on the seat that was reserved for her at the long rectangular table, panting from the exhaustion of running.

The woman gave her a smile and a knowing nod.

This was a gathering of the elite women of high society, and everyone in attendance was dressed as such.

They adorned graceful evening gowns that flowed with a symphony of vibrant colors and intricate patterns. Their ears sparkled with delicate yet statement earrings, exquisite earrings that showcased the craftsmanship of intricate gold filigree and vibrant gemstones. Some opted for dangling chandelier earrings, while others preferred the understated elegance of pearl or coral studs. On

some of their wrists, their bracelets were intricately beaded designs intermingled with finely crafted gold or silver bangles, creating a symphony of textures and colors while others embraced the simplicity of a well-chosen designer wristwatch. They completed their outfits with elegant handbags that complemented their ensembles and embellished their necklines with tasteful necklaces.

"My, my, my, is that why you had to run? I'm sure we would have all understood your reasons for coming late, dear. Sit down and don't talk for a while, you are perspiring. Let the air conditioner cool you a bit." The current host for this meeting, Mrs. Anjola Adeyemi, said from across the table where she sat, motioning with her eyes for Nicole to drink from the cold bottle of water in front of her as she simultaneously asked one of the servers to get Nicole a cup of iced tea.

Nicole graciously accepted the offer as she poured herself a tall glass from the bottle which contained the cold water.

All the ladies in this little Club Hall had come together to form an association when they realized that they had a lot in common.

First, these women all belonged to an elite society. All in their middle ages and happily married to their dream husbands, these women were the wives of politicians, business tycoons, oil well owners, and the CEO's of high-ranking multinational companies.

Another thing they also had in common was, their husbands didn't let them work in their companies in spite of their persistent pleas. Their women should be content with traveling anywhere they wanted in the world with their private jets; feel free to buy any designer clothes, shoes, and handbags they wanted; organize endless tea or dinner parties, showing off their latest treasures; and just enjoy the many wealth at their disposal while the men would continue to be hard at work to keep the cash flow.

To top it off, no one would employ the women in the country to come work for their enterprises because of their husbands' image, regardless of their great qualifications. The women were just too qualified to work for anyone, that was it.

It was for these reasons plus a few more, coupled with the determination not to remain as housewives, that they founded their enterprises. With dedication and diligence, in no time, the success of these enterprises skyrocketed. The women built their companies from the scratch with fewer than twenty employees, but now had employees in their hundreds and in their thousands; much to the chagrin of their husbands who thought their trophy wives were only good for eating their acquired wealth and following them to business and political parties.

The end result was now that, their husbands' money combined with their own, they had more money than they could ever imagine and the problem was how to spend it.

After several deliberations on Christ's commandment to his faithful followers, the women came to the conclusion that their wealth must have been entrusted into their hands for a purpose. And that was why and how the association, "Christ Sisters Club," was formed. The name of the club was not for the purpose of sounding pious, but these were the women who understood that God had called anyone who believed in Jesus Christ his sons and daughters. So they decided to earnestly take their place as Christ sisters.

Thus, the association had been formed to reach out first and foremost to Christ, their love, and finally, their finances to the less privileged. It didn't always happen in this sequence, but the women knew it within themselves that this was their intention.

The women had been doing just that for more than 5 years, but today, a new agenda was on the table.

"So how is your son?" Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson, the only senator's wife in the group, asked.

Nicole looked up at the smiling face of the senator's wife. She knew that Elizabeth had good intentions, but there was also an ulterior motive attached to her careful and kind inquiries.

"He is as handsome as ever," she replied with a smile of her own, expecting the response that was sure to come from Mrs. Johnson. This conversation has happened several times. By now, it was like a movie script, and everyone was expected to flawlessly say their part.

"I know, right?" the senator's wife chortled in a way that made her plump cheek more apparent. "I shall inform my daughter Jessica that David is back." Elizabeth Johnson liked the way she mentioned the two names in one sentence, and she liked the way the two names sounded in her ears, so perfect. She could almost see the two names standing on the. . . She stopped her train of thought from moving further.

"You know both of them have been good friends." Elizabeth added quickly, but everyone at the table knew that Jessica had a huge crush on David, and Elizabeth had encouraged her daughter's feelings because she had come to acknowledge that David was a good, handsome, and focused young man with a prospective future.

Nicole winked at her friend. "Please do, and sure, you can tell her to drop by when she's less busy to say hi."

All the women who also wanted David King for their daughters eagerly engaged in the conversation. The medium-sized club hall became very animated as these women tried to stake a claim for their daughters who had a crush on one good guy, David.

Seriously not wanting the women to deviate from the main purpose for which they had gathered, Nicole discreetly steered the conversation to the main agenda of the meeting.

"Welcome back to earth," Nicole muttered under her breath when she knew she had succeeded in her purpose. She carefully observed the expressions on the faces of the women around her. They looked like they had just come from the moon. Or planet Mars.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

****SOKOTO STATE, NIGERIA.****

"How dare you say my name in such an uncivilized manner, eh?" Deborah's little brother, Samuel, chided in consternation, chest puffed out, eyes wide, his whole body quivering. "So barbaric, hideous, asinine..."

Haha, asinine. That was his most recent addition to his vocabulary. The word sounded nice in his ears with the way it rolled off his tongue, but there was no time for self-congratulations.

"Samuel Ayuba Zira!" Deborah shouted again.

"Deborah Hadiza Zira!" Her brother shouted back.

Although Deborah was his older sister, why couldn't she accord him the respect that he deserved as a man? What was so difficult about that?

Well, he didn't blame her, at least not completely.

It was the fault of his parents for giving birth to four girls before him, a male child, as the last born. He should have been the first child; Deborah should have come after him.

Having gotten used to taking care of female children, his parents were also treating him like they would a girl child even though he'd been their anticipated miracle boy-child. How annoying! This was very annoying. To even buttress his point, he was currently wearing a pink t-shirt that had a flowery design on Jean trousers. Most of his clothes had a touch of pink and looked feminine.

Well, he would show them. He'd show them all what it meant to be a man. And he would ensure that they treat him as such.

As the only male child of the family, his parents never encouraged him to play most times with other boys his age. Whenever he insisted on playing with his peers, his parents would be forced to acquiesce. But Samuel would always hear something like "be careful" and "make sure you don't injure yourself."

Huh, injure himself? Surely that instruction must be the biggest joke of the century. How could he not injure himself when it was the norm among his peers? If he didn't injure himself by climbing trees, rocks, high walls, and constantly risking his life, which bodily injury marks would he carry as a souvenir from his childhood to adulthood to show his unborn children for the purpose of bragging to them about the kind of rebel that he was in his infancy?

He had seen some of his classmates always bragging about their fathers, whom they had come to acknowledge as their heroes because of the injury marks that they had gotten from childhood. His classmates admired their fathers for the exciting stories behind those injury marks.

Thus, Samuel decided that no matter what, he was going to be a hero to his unborn children by doing what his fellow boys were doing, and getting those crucial injury marks. Don't forget the injury marks.

Samuel had reassured himself that before his adulthood, all the stories about his childhood would be super exciting. Anyone that didn't sound exciting enough would have to be embellished. The most important thing was that he must be a hero to his children, end of story. He was going to be that rebel father that would produce rebel children.

"How long have you been home from school, Samuel?" Deborah asked after a few seconds of silence passed between them.

Instead of giving an accurate answer to his sister's question, Samuel decided to use the opportunity to show his brilliance. He had been learning some new things; now was the time to use his newly-acquired knowledge to intimidate his sister as usual.

"I went to my school library today to browse through some books. You know what?" Before his sister could ask "what does that have to do with my question?" Samuel continued.

"I discovered a great mystery."

"What great mystery is that?" Deborah inquired cautiously.

"Did you know that the nickname for America, I mean the United States of America, and not the continents of North and South America," Samuel spoke with a look that read "I know that you don't know this, so let me educate you."

"Anyway, as I was saying, did you know that the United States of America is also known as Uncle Sam?"

The expression on Deborah's face showed that she indeed didn't know this, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of admitting to not knowing.

Little Samuel responded with his own look that read, 'I know that you don't know it, whether you admit it or not.'

"I've made up my mind that from today, I want everybody in this house to start addressing me as Uncle Sam."

She watched him in silence for a while as though trying to comprehend the in-depth absurdity of his words, then she burst out laughing.

"Well, everyone should start addressing me as Judge Deborah. There is also a great mystery attached to my name, you know." Deborah spoke with a voice filled with derision.

He glared angrily at his sister. With his pride wounded, he concluded that his sister was mean and rude.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SAMBISA FOREST, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

Sambisa forest. Was there ever a name that sounded more dangerous in Nigeria? Captain Hassan Lawal wondered to himself.

Was there ever a place that sounded more ominous in Nigeria? This was the name that put fear in the hearts of many Nigerian citizens. Sambisa forest. The battleground of the Nigerian army and Boko Haram, a.k.a the Nigerian Taliban.

Sambisa forest. A place that had ended so many lives; civilian, military and terrorists alike.

Still in a state of deep meditation over the military and the terrorists, Hassan subconsciously cradled a geopolitical thriller that he had been reading prior to his wonderment. The thriller novel was bought and paid for by his wife. It was one of the many gifts that he had received from her.

Whenever the time came for Captain Hassan Lawal and his regiment to be sent off to the Sambisa forest to fight against Boko Haram insurgency -a mission that usually took months before he returned, his wife, Nefisa, would always send him off with books to keep his mind busy whenever he wasn't working.

She had apparently known that her husband was a worry wart and she knew how wild his thoughts could take him. Thus, one of the best ways of helping him was to distract him from those demons whispering in his head with books. And it had been working, obviously.

Captain Hassan didn't grow up a reader. Back in his basic high school, and even his days in the Nigerian Defense Academy, he had never been one of the students you could refer to as "brilliant". He was just average; often earning enough points to get him to the next level. But all that had changed when he married Nefisa who was a bookworm.

In the first decade of their marriage, Nefisa had encouraged him to read books, books, and more books. That was all she could mostly talk about, and sing about.

At the time, Hassan thought she was becoming a nuisance to his simple life. Then she started talking about the books she had read. He was captivated with the way she spoke about books with so much animation and enthusiasm. Soon after, he became intrigued. It resulted in tentatively trying out some of her book recommendations for himself. And today, he had discovered his favorite genre and he was as much a bookworm as his wife.

He didn't know what he would do without books. And having known his preference -political and military thriller, his wife always prepared his reading list accordingly.

Even now, Hassan Lawal could swear by the Quran that even though it was still a couple of months before he would be released, he knew that his wife was already shopping for the next set of books that he would return with in his next mission.

What a great wife, and a wonderful woman! The captain wondered in amazement. He didn't know what he would have done without his beloved Nefisa. She was a sunshine in his dark world. A very good spice in his otherwise boring and monotonous life. He didn't know what he did to deserve such a good and virtuous woman. Captain Hassan Lawal always thanked Allah for blessing him with a woman as precious as Nefisa.

Hassan looked down at the book he was currently holding as he tried to distract himself from the smiling face of his wife that appeared in his mind's eye. His gaze was fixated on the book's title as though he was just seeing it for the first time. He read the title as if he was trying to comprehend how the book got into his hand.

"The Libyan Diversion." It was a geopolitical and military thriller by Joel C. Rosenberg, who was one of his favorite authors. Before reading this one, he'd recently finished a book by Jack Carr, another favorite author of his.

The similarities with both author's was, apart from the fact that they wrote the same genre, they were also Americans. In short, eight out of Hassan's top 10 favorite authors were Americans.

One thing that had drawn him to the books written by these authors from the beginning was their high moral regard and their unflinching sense of duty, patriotism and dedication to their country.

What he mostly appreciated was the willingness of the characters in the Books to lay down their life if it ever came to that, to sustain the sovereignty of their nation and to protect its image as the sole world power nation.

These books were not just filled with unrealistic fiction or film tricks. This was fiction drawn from facts that portrayed the true lifestyle of these brothers and sisters in arms. It inspired Captain Hassan.

Also, having read the biography of these authors, he knew that Jack Carr used to be a sniper like him in the American navy SEAL.

Joel C. Rosenberg had once worked with Benjamin Netanyahu, the current prime minister of Israel, had developed an amazing relationship with former and current presidents, vice presidents, kings and crown princes of different countries in the Middle East and other parts of the world; interacted with many other muckety-mucks in the world of politics. He'd also interacted severally with spy chiefs, directors of intelligence agencies and terrorists.

Then there was the United States former Marine who had authored several awesome books, Oliver North. And so many others like him.

With the geopolitical and military thriller still in his hands, he couldn't help his curiosity about what his fellow comrades in arms who had been posted to places like the Middle East and North Africa were currently doing.

Were any of them currently relaxing and reading novels as he was doing? Playing cards and having mundane but interesting discussions just like some of his colleagues were doing right now? Or were they firing RPGs, artillery shells and mortar rounds at some group of radical jihadists?

Were they dislodging the bullets from their AK-47s, riddling the bodies of the terrorists with it? Was an intense firefight under way?

As much as he admired what the American government was doing by deploying its military to mostly the Middle East and North Africa, he wished they could also deploy some of them to Nigeria. Nigeria needed to be invaded like Iraq and Afghanistan, he'd argued this with himself and some of his colleagues severally.

Boko Haram was also a global terrorist group like al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and ISIS. And just like ISIS was no more, Hassan wanted badly to see the annihilation of Boko Haram.

Why did it look as though all eyes were on the Middle East and North Africa when there was an equally serious problem brewing on the sub-saharan side of the African continent? Apart from the terrorism, why had the leaders in the West overlooked what China was doing in the continent of Africa?

Yes, China. The sleeping giant had woken up and was now on the move.

The thought of the Chinese mission and intention towards Africa often churned something in Hassan's gut, so he decided to switch a trajectory of his thoughts back to the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and neighboring countries. It was safer and a more comfortable ground for him.

What happened? Where and how did Boko Haram originate? Why was the Nigerian army currently in this forest, fighting this group of radical jihadists?

More importantly, how had the Nigerian government allowed Boko Haram to grow so big that it had raised its standards to that of a global terrorist group and was also acknowledged as such by the United Nations, the United States and the Nigerian government?

As these multiple questions swarmed in his heart, the captain began to research his mental archives where he stored up the knowledge he gained from reading books about the origin and history of Boko Haram.

The terrorist group had first started as a group of Islamic Northern bikers. The more popular name for bikes or motorcycles in Nigeria is “Okada”. Formerly a brand name for an airline, as time went on, the country's citizens adopted that word for motorcycles in the Nigerian colloquial pidgin English. Today, many Nigerians did not know about the okada airline. Even most of those who knew about it had forgotten.

In the early 20th century, a small group of “okada men” or “okada riders” had been agitating and protesting the treatment they were getting from the government. What had started as a small group of protesters had morphed into an organization of global terrorists.

But captain Hassan knew that just like there was no smoke without fire, so it was with these okada riders, thus he decided to dig deeper into the archives of his brain. And it led him directly to one man. The one man who was the fire that was the reason behind this smoke. The smoke that was now known as Boko Haram.

It was none other than a young Nigerian who went by the name 'Muhammad Ali' at the time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Many people might think or believe that the founder of Boko Haram was Mohammed Yusuf, but no. While he was seen as the founder and leader of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf was just the on-screen guy who had been radicalized by Muhammad Ali.

In 1999, a promising teenager named Muhammad Ali lived in north-east Nigeria. His brilliance and maturity made him a natural leader. He was the head of his class in school, and his teachers thought that he had a bright future ahead of him as a medical doctor.

Unfortunately, those teachers turned out to be wrong. Ali would go on to establish Boko Haram - one of the most brutal terrorist groups in history. Two decades after his death in 2004, at the hands of vigilantes, the conflict between Boko Haram and Nigeria's security forces had killed an estimated forty thousand people in North-east Nigeria. The violence had devastated communities, leading to the displacement of over three million people, and had plunged millions more into extreme poverty.

Today, two different factions of Boko Haram continued to target security forces, civil servants, humanitarian workers, and civilians in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad, in their bid to establish their version of a puritanical Islamic state.

How in the world did this happen? How did Ali establish Boko Haram, and why?

Over the years, there had been so many theories about the mysterious Muhammad Ali, and some of them were contradictory.

Many write-ups about the biography of Ali and the history of Boko Haram claimed that Ali was recruited and radicalized by Al-Qaeda, before being given a buttload of money to come back to Nigeria and start a radicalized jihadi movement in the northern part of the country.

A number of scholars of radical Islamism disagreed with the theory, maintaining that by portraying Boko Haram as a franchise of al-Qaeda that was set up using a direct grant from Osama bin Laden, the theory downplayed the local agency and motivations that birthed Boko Haram, as well as the group's localized strategies and objectives.

Another theory which professors of radical Islamism believed was more accurate and factual revealed that Ali studied and became radicalized in Nigeria by reading extremist literature, some of it from the Middle East. His genius was in taking these ideas and relating them to local issues and grievances. Ali was inspired by the Taliban and al-Qaeda — whom he tried to mimic — but he never had personal contacts with the Taliban or al-Qaeda members in Nigeria or abroad.

However, there had been some unfounded claims about Muhammad Ali's transnational links.

In 2014, a report from the International Crisis Group emphasized the importance of Ali's time outside Nigeria to his radicalization. According to this account, Ali studied in Sudan, converted to jihadism there, and then trained and fought in Afghanistan or Algeria before returning to Nigeria to found Boko Haram. Accounts differ and contradict each other about whether he studied and became radicalized in Sudan or Saudi Arabia and whether he fought in Afghanistan or Algeria. However, this was not supported by strong evidence.

Other researchers have referred to a "high-level security report" that claimed that Ali and his followers were first conscripted to fight in Algeria in the wake of the annulment of the country's 1992 election. However, these authors did not say which intelligence report, by whom, and from where. Instead, they cited an academic report that does not reference such a security report either.

An article in Nigeria's Tell magazine reported that it was one Ahmed — not Ali — that had "strong links with Saudi Arabia" where he grew up and that his "possible link" with the Taliban and al-Qaeda was being investigated.

Another document claimed that it was two Algerians that came to Nigeria to recruit members — including Ali — not the other way round. Excetera, excetera, excetera.

The more captain Hassan Lawal dug into this matter, the messier reports of Ali's transnational link got.

But the most accurate report, which included writings from Boko Haram and interviews from Ali's classmates indicated that Ali would have been in the last year of his primary school at the same time that he was allegedly in North Africa, which meant that he would have been too young to be given a passport and visa to travel on his own..

Truly, Ali was born to Nigerian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s and returned to his family's home in Maiduguri at the age of ten. He went to the University of Maiduguri Staff Primary school, and received top grades in his secondary school final exams at Federal Government College, Maiduguri.

According to the reports captain Hassan Lawal believed was accurate, Ali specialized in the natural sciences. In 1999, he sat for the Nigerian universities' joint entrance examination and applied to the University of Maiduguri.

It was said that Ali scored the highest marks in Borno State that year and was admitted to study medicine at the University of Maiduguri.

However, Ali declined to enroll because he had by this time become involved with radical Islamic circles in Maiduguri. In the eyes of the members of these circles, Western-style schooling was forbidden, which became a major theme for Boko Haram. Ali rejected repeated advice from his classmates and teachers to start his university education and opted instead to self-study and promote an extreme interpretation of Islam.

Learning the Qur'an was not in any way synonymous with radicalization to violent extremism, otherwise the majority of the almost two billion Muslims in the world — including Captain Lawal — would be violent extremists.

Ali lived a normal life in Nigeria after his return until his graduation from high school in 1998, a crucial piece of evidence that Ali did not leave Saudi Arabia a violent extremist.

Following the re-introduction of a Sharia system by 12 of the 19 governors in Northern Nigeria in 2000, Ali, Yusuf, and their cohorts became disappointed by its "poor implementation." They argued that a proper Sharia justice system required the backing of an Islamic state; not secular, democratic institutions.

Consequently, they felt the need for a group that would establish an Islamic government in Northern Nigeria that would implement Sharia law as the panacea to the region's social problems.

Before his death in 2004, Ali had always seen the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as a war on Islam and Muslims globally. Many Muslims across the world viewed the "Global War on Terror" as the United States picking on Muslim countries in an attempt to control the world. But Ali and several in his circle took these grievances much further and deeper.

They closely followed events in the Middle East and were transfixed by the speeches of al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders.

Ali and his follower, Yusuf, incessantly listened to the recordings and read the writings of bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and Ayman al Zawahiri that they memorized and cited large portions of these speeches in their own preaching.

From there, they read and translated jihadi publications into local Kanuri and Hausa languages.

Before recruiting and radicalizing Mohammad Yusuf, having converted to jihadism, Ali and Abu Umar went on recruitment visits to Salafi clerics in different towns and cities across Northern Nigeria in search of a credible leader for their cause. All of their targets — including prominent Salafi clerics in

the town of Gombe — rejected the invitation, except Yusuf. Consequently, Yusuf publicly rejected western-style education and secular institutions, and advocated for violence in order to replace this system.

Ali and Yusuf's readings and views reinforced each other, and they went on to lay the foundations for the group that would become Boko Haram in 2003. Since Yusuf was older and had a higher public profile, it was agreed that he would lead the group and serve as its public face.

It was a perfect storm. A multitude of local factors provided a huge market for Boko Haram's ideas. Poverty, illiteracy, and inequality had alienated millions of young people in Nigeria. Political corruption and police brutality had severely damaged the social contract, which had always been fragile.

Ethno-religious tensions and violence from the 1980s, unaddressed through the justice system of reconciliation, had led to a huge inter-faith mistrust between Muslims and Christians, and sectarian tensions among Muslim groups had sharpened.

Ali and his associates exploited all of these factors. They translated Arabic literature from the Middle East and infused this with locally relevant materials to roll out a massive grassroots campaign of radicalization.

They spoke to local populations in their own language about the problems bedeviling them.

Today, both Ali and Yusuf were dead, killed by local vigilantes and the Nigerian government respectively, and currently replaced by El Badawi and his father-in-law who had taken over from the now late Shekau who had assumed power upon the death of Yusuf in 2009.

The account of Muhammad Ali's life and the history of Boko Haram was a testament of a true fact that a great and brilliant mind that was not put to good use, could be disastrous for the society.

Hassan was still in his brain archives, analyzing Boko Haram when his radio and the radio of all his colleagues around him squawked.

"Attention, all men. Report immediately to base. I repeat, report immediately to base."

Captain Hassan Lawal snapped to combat mode as he and his colleagues who had just been relaxing, chatting away like some bunch of lazy civilians, made their way to the base.

The scout team,—captain Hassan was sure— had returned with their solid Intel. It was time for another fire fight between the Nigerian Army versus Boko Haram.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

Still in the grand mansion of Anjola Adeyemi, and the current location for the Christ Sister's meeting. The sisters were all gathered in the reception hall. The large, opulent room was adorned with expensive chandeliers and luxurious furnishings, a testament to the wealth and status of the women seated around the table.

After exchanging pleasantries and a few words, Anjola, —the chair lady of the organization— called the meeting to order.

"Amen." The women echoed when the opening prayers were said.

Anjola took center stage again. "The agenda for today's meeting is a new proposal from our sister, Nicole. In a few minutes she would be taking over from me and telling us what she has in mind. "

"You all know how we do things in this club." She said, looking each of the women in the eye before continuing. "We will listen to her first, before opening the floor for contributions, suggestions and objections, then the final vote will follow."

As the women nodded encouragingly, the chair lady called out to Nicole.

"Alright, Nicole, you have the stage. Tell us what you have."

"Thank you." Nicole King said, rising up from her seat. Her charismatic presence commanded attention, and the women fell silent in anticipation of her words.

"Ladies, I'm delighted to see you all today. Our charity has accomplished incredible things in all these years. We have dedicated ourselves to uplifting the underprivileged in the southern parts of Nigeria. We have provided scholarships, built schools, and supported various community projects and I for one, am proud to be here among you, doing what we are doing. However I believe the time has come for us to extend our charity work to a new frontier. It is time to reach out to the Northern region of this country"

As Nicole made her points, her voice brimmed with palpable determination. "There are vast regions in Northern Nigeria that still suffer from high poverty rates and illiteracy. It's time we expand our efforts and offer our support to these communities."

"Indeed, the disparities between the Northern and Southern regions are staggering. We have witnessed the impact of our charity work here in the South, providing education and healthcare to those in need. By extending our reach, we can make a significant difference in the lives of the less privileged in the North."

All around the table, there was a low hum and nods of agreement.

"I've been studying the statistics, and the numbers are truly alarming." Nicole gestured to a large screen that had been mounted earlier for the purpose of this meeting, displaying statistics and images depicting the stark reality of life in the northern region. The women's eyes followed the slides, their hearts heavy with empathy. Illiteracy rates, malnutrition, and lack of access to basic healthcare were among the many challenges faced by the people of the north.

"We have the resources and the influence to bring positive change to these communities. It's our responsibility as privileged women to help those who have been neglected for far too long."

She concluded her presentation and the floor was opened for contributions.

Seated around a polished mahogany table, the atmosphere in the room was a blend of determination and thoughtful contemplation. The air crackled with anticipation as each woman prepared to share her insights and concerns.

Mrs. Adesua Akinrata, the wife of an influential oil tycoon, took the lead. Her regal poise commanded attention as she addressed the group. "Ladies, as Nicole pointed in her presentation, we have accomplished remarkable feats in the south. Our efforts have transformed lives and bestowed hope upon countless individuals. But we cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering in the north. It is our duty to extend our reach and bring about change where it is needed most."

Mrs. Amarachi Ozoigbo, the wife of an international businessman, leaned forward, her voice infused with genuine concern. "We must devise a comprehensive plan to address these issues. Education, healthcare, and economic empowerment should be at the core of our efforts. We need to collaborate with local organizations and leverage our resources to effect lasting change."

Nods of agreement rippled through the room as the women recognized the gravity of the task before them. They understood that their collective power and wealth could be harnessed to uplift an entire region, to bring light to the lives shrouded in darkness.

However, there were some objections and concerns.

Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson, the only Senator's wife in the group and the treasurer, spoke up, her voice tinged with concern. "But we must also recognize the risks involved. The security situation in the north is volatile. Our safety could be compromised. Is there any way we can do this differently?"

"What do you mean?" Nicole asked.

"I'm only saying if we could have a go-between that we can provide the funds and resources for them instead of doing this on our own as we usually do here in the south?"

Mrs. Simisola Adesanya nodded in acknowledgment. "You raise a valid point, Elizabeth. Safety has to be our utmost priority."

The atmosphere that was filled with determination, moments ago, had just morphed into apprehension.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SAMBISA FOREST, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

Captain Hassan Lawal felt a bead of sweat trickle down his brow as he adjusted his scope, peering through the dense undergrowth of the Sambisa forest in Borno State. His finger curled delicately around the trigger of his sniper rifle, —A REMINGTON 770— anticipation coursing through his veins. His unit had received their marching orders.

Just as he predicted, the scout team had returned with a solid intel about another Boko Haram's hideout in the forest.

The mission for Captain Hassan and his regiment was simple yet perilous – to neutralize key Boko Haram targets hidden within the heart of this unforgiving labyrinth.

Hassan's unit had been meticulously trained for this very moment. Each step they took was a calculated risk; any misstep could mean walking into a trap set by the terrorists. They moved like phantoms, shadows amid the chaos that plagued this region for far too long.

So far, the soldiers had been successfully inching closer and closer to the terrorists' fortress. The element of surprise was still on their side. Clouded in their forest tree camouflage, they blended perfectly with the trees and bushes.

The weather was clear but the sun was scorching. Having mastered how to work under these high, almost unbearable intense solar rays that was the norm in Northern Nigeria, the soldiers were not complaining.

The mission was very much afoot.

Suddenly, the forest erupted in a deafening blast, catching the soldiers who thought that they had been strategic and meticulous, off guard.

The first blast was followed by a procession of countless others. The dreaded Boko Haram had sensed their presence and retaliated with a barrage of explosive fury.

"What just happened? How did we give away our advantage?" Hassan's heart raced as he dived for cover, seeking solace behind a fallen tree trunk.

With the swiftness that was honed through several years of training, the army immediately plunged into a bombardment of retaliatory strikes. Mortar rounds whistled through the air, followed by the booming thunder of artillery shells.

The terrorist fighters who were unfazed with the heavy fire power of the military, replied with their own barrage of RPGs. Grenades erupted like twisted flowers, spewing shrapnel and smoke into the air. The Nigerian Army fighters scattered, fighting for their lives as they returned fire.

A baptism of fire was taking place on both sides of the proceeding war. The thick, acrid smoke filled the battlefield, making it difficult to distinguish friend from foe. The very air seemed to crackle with tension and the eerie symphony of gunfire.

Still hiding behind a fallen tree trunk, Hassan could see the overview of the ongoing battle. His colleagues needed some desperate help 'quickly', or they would start having casualties. These soldiers were skillful, trained fighters. And at the moment, the effectiveness of their training was saving their lives.

But not for long, Hassan knew. These men were taking more than they could handle.

He took note of his current advantage and began capitalizing on it. The tree trunk had concealed his location, and he could see his colleagues and the terrorists but none of them could see him. He had a silencer which he couldn't wait to attach to his sniper rifle.

Perfectly lining up the terrorists in the scope of his rifle, Hassan was locked and loaded. His fingers pushed the trigger repeatedly with a deadly accuracy that was unrivaled. He could see the results of his efficiency as the terrorists began dropping dead on the forest ground.

Hassan's sniper had taken almost twenty-nine terrorists in less than twenty seconds when they realized what was happening.

The terrorists were shocked to see their comrades dropping dead from a sniper rifle. Chaos erupted from the side of the Boko Haram as they tried to uncover where the sniper was shooting from.

Seeing the confusion in the Boko Haram camp, Hassan decided to change tactics.

He unclenched his grip on the rifle and reached for a fragmentation grenade, the edges gnarled from countless conflicts. With a swift, practiced motion, he hurled the explosive into a cluster of Boko Haram fighters, skillfully taking advantage of the chaos. The strike was decisive, the effect was enormous. The deafening detonation momentarily silenced the cacophony of war, sending a shockwave through the undergrowth.

Hassan's colleagues stood still for a while, watching in amazement the misfortune that had befallen the terrorists.

If anyone was watching them now, he or she would have seen the questioning look on their faces. The wide eyes, their opened mouths.

'What just happened'? They seemed to ask. 'Did the Angels just fight for us? 'Did God send fire from heaven to consume these guys '?

Just then, someone was able to break his eyes away from the inferno that had engulfed the terrorists and called out to his colleagues.

"Hey, everybody, look over there."

The men looked up to the direction he was pointing and saw captain Hassan standing up from the fallen tree trunk that he had hidden himself, giving them a thumbs up. He had his familiar mischievous smile on his face.

Upon realizing what the captain had done, the soldiers began to cheer, congratulating themselves and singing victory songs.

Hassan wanted to move over to his friends and join in the celebration when his instinct warned him to remain where he stood. His men were hailing him, chanting his name, still he remained rooted where he was, unable to exactly explain why.

Instead, he found himself doing exactly the opposite of what his friends wanted. All his attention was pulling him towards the Boko Haram camp.

He didn't know why his gaze kept returning back to the inferno and the billowing smoke. But as the smoke cleared, he saw why.

His instincts had, —once again— steered him right.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As the smoke cleared, Hassan realized that more insurgent fighters with fresh sophisticated ammunition had emerged from previously unnoticed hideouts. Their faces were shrouded with black hoodies and they were all heavily armed with AK-47s and submachine guns.

He could see the vengeance in their eyes as they bolted towards the soldiers, whom in their moment of jubilation, had not noticed the rapidly advancing danger. And their sheer determination to eradicate the Nigerian army from their domain.

Besides the black hoodies, the terrorists were dressed in all black, which was a standard color and attire for their fraction. They looked like the perfect definition of what one might call the black devils. The Boko Haram faction known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad (JAS), led by El-Badawi, was famous for killing both civilians and military.

The terrorist commandos were rapidly approaching, his men needed to return to the fight immediately or get killed from bullets dislodged from the terrorists' kalashnikovs.

He tried to get them through their radios, but the men were speaking too loudly to hear him.

There was no time, Hassan knew what he must do.

The ear splitting shriek that came out of his mouth, there was none like it.

It worked, it finally got the attention of his colleagues.

Hassan made a quick motion with his hands. The soldiers spun around, their look of jubilation transcending into horror as they saw a fresh set of terrorists almost upon them.

As the soldiers reached for their weapons, Hassan realized that they needed a few seconds which they did not have, so he decided to provide himself as a decoy to draw the enemy's fire to himself.

Locked and loaded, he unleashed an entire round at the terrorists, killing and maiming almost a third of them. The terrorists trained their rifles on him, firing wildly.

Hassan immediately ducked out of the line of fire, lowering himself on the forest floor as the fallen tree trunk provided a good cover.

All around him, bullets ricocheted and wheezed past. Majority of the bullets slammed against the tree trunks, sending large chunks and particles of the splintered tree flying, raining down on him like dominos.

He used his hand to cover his head, praying desperately that no shrapnel would find his skin.

Just then, the staccato sound of gunfire increased exponentially as Hassan's colleagues began shooting at the terrorists, drawing the fire back to themselves.

When it was safe, Hassan switched to a crouching position, and picked up his rifle. His guys had just saved his hide, it was time to get back into the fight and shut this thing down for good.

With his excellent marksmanship motivated to go to work, his gaze flickered from one target to another, his finger finding the trigger once again. With each pull, a Boko Haram fighter would transcend into the next life, falling into the arms of seventy-two virgins, sending ripples of uncertainty through their ranks.

The terrorists who seemed to have an endless supply of rocket propelled grenades decided to put them to more use. RPGs whizzed past, exploding against trees and creating curtains of fire that bathed the forest in an otherworldly glow. Splintered wood and debris rained down, forcing Hassan and the soldiers to evade with lightning reflexes. They knew that every second counted. It was not just a fight for survival, but a quest to liberate an entire nation from the grips of fear and despair.

In the midst of the hullabaloo, Hassan's comrades rallied around him, their collective resolve refusing to waver in the face of adversity. Their unity became their strength, as they advanced through the

smoldering battlefield. Amidst the chaos, they coordinated their movements, providing cover fire for one another and neutralizing threats with lethal precision.

Explosions rocked the earth beneath their boots, as mortars crashed down from the sky, tearing through foliage and tearing the earth asunder. The forest seemed to vibrate with a frenzy of violence, but Hassan and his men pressed on, determined to dismantle the heart of Boko Haram's operation in this forest.

The cries of fallen comrades in the previous war and the haunting echoes of battle fueled their fury. They were the sons of Nigeria, sworn to protect their homeland against all odds. Their feet pounded the leaf-strewn ground with purpose, their eyes focused on the goal ahead – to eradicate the terrorists and restore peace to their troubled nation.

With each step, the intensity of the firefight grew. The air reverberated with the constant chatter of automatic weapons, drowning out even the cries of the forest. Artillery shells shrieked past, exploding in wicked pyrotechnic displays. Yet, nothing could sway Hassan and his squad from their path, their resolve as firm as the bedrock beneath them.

As the battle raged on, Hassan felt the weight of his rifle in his hands and the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. The fate of countless lives rested in his grip as he continued to engage Boko Haram fighters, one by one. And it was not just the life of his fellow soldiers that had been placed under his command, but also the precious lives of the innocent civilian citizens of Nigeria.

Thus, he fought the terrorist with all his might. Every target eliminated was a step closer to victory, a stride towards peace. Hassan was ready to give his life for his country if it ever came to that.

In the chaos and madness, Captain Hassan Lawal emerged as a beacon of unwavering conviction took his colleagues. As artillery shells exploded across enemy lines, the Sambisa forest trembled, the echoes of gunfire resounding through its dense, ancient canopy. Through the smoke and fire, Hassan and his comrades fought on, forging an unrelenting path toward victory, fueled by the desire to protect their homeland and end the tyranny that plagued their beloved Nigeria.

Almost three hours later, the terrorists were finally neutralized. But the soldiers didn't celebrate because they wanted to be sure that the battle was truly over. Still on their guard, they quickly did a head count and discovered that while the mangled bodies of dead terrorists were scattered all over the place, no single soldier had died.

Yes, some of the soldiers sustained injuries but it was just a graze. Considering what they had just gone through, none of them looked the worse for wear. And it was all thanks to God, and their skillful captain Hassan Lawal.

Still, they would not celebrate until they were certain of their victory.

When Captain Hassan gave them the all-clear sign, the soldiers let out a loud roar, slapping each other on the back and giving each other a high-five. They had just fought a battle, and they had lived to fight another day.

The brave soldiers returned to base, gave a detailed report of their heroic experience.

None of the soldiers, or captain Hassan Lawal saw the surprised look on one of the faces of their superiors.

● CHAPTER TWENTY

● THE OVAL OFFICE, WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON DC

President Blake Harrison sat in the Oval Office, a stern expression etched on his face as he listened intently to the voices coming through the speakerphone. On the large screen in front of him, displayed the faces of the United States ambassadors to Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, their expressions mirroring the gravity of the situation unfolding in West Africa. Around the table were Harrison's top advisors on foreign policy.

"Thank you for joining me, gentlemen," President Harrison began, his voice commanding attention. "I'm sure you're all aware of the escalating crisis in the region. Ambassador Mitchell, I'll start with you. What's the latest from Nigeria?"

Todd Mitchell, a seasoned diplomat with a steely demeanor, wasted no time in providing his report. "Mr. President, the situation in Nigeria is dire. Boko Haram activity has surged in recent weeks, with a series of coordinated attacks targeting civilian populations and military outposts. The Nigerian government is struggling to contain the violence, and there are reports of widespread displacement and humanitarian crisis."

Harrison nodded grimly, his brow furrowing. "And what about our efforts to support the Nigerian military?"

"We've been providing logistical and intelligence support, Mr. President," Mitchell replied. "But the insurgents' tactics have become increasingly sophisticated, making it difficult for Nigerian forces to gain the upper hand. Recently, Boko Haram published a video online showing one of their training sections. They were practicing on how to effectively use surface to air missiles."

"And what is President Mustafa's reaction to this development?" Harrison asked.

"I hesitate to speak so bluntly for diplomatic purposes, Mr. President."

"It's okay, you can speak freely."

"Well, let's just say he is not as positively cooperative as one would expect in a situation of this magnitude."

The oval office was quiet as the president tried to absorb Mitchell's report. Then, without preamble, Harrison turned his attention to the United States' Ambassador to Chad, Jordan O'Brien, and asked.

"What's the situation in Chad, Jordan?"

The ambassador, who was a tall man with a no-nonsense demeanor, cleared his throat before responding. "Mr. President, Chad is facing its own security challenges as Boko Haram continues to be more formidable. The recent incursions by militant groups from several regions in the country is not also helping matters as it has contributed to straining the Chadian military's resources. We're working closely with President Deby's government to bolster their defenses and counter the threat."

President Harrison nodded thoughtfully, soaking in the information. "And what about our diplomatic efforts in the region? Have we been able to engage with regional partners to address the root causes of instability?"

"We have been trying our best but some of them to no avail. The problem in Chad is all about a particular group needing something the others are not willing to give, and so, they start killing for it."

"And you, David. What is the situation in Niger?" Harrison asked the United States ambassador to Niger, David McKinney.

The ambassador, a seasoned diplomat with a calm demeanor, spoke up. "Mr. President, we've been in close contact with our counterparts in Niger and other neighboring countries. There's a consensus

among regional leaders that a coordinated approach is needed to tackle the underlying issues driving the conflict. We're exploring avenues for enhanced cooperation and support."

"Mr. President, I must also report that the situation in Niger remains precarious since the recent coup. The transitional government is struggling to maintain stability, and there are concerns about the resurgence of militant groups in the region. The French ambassador to Niger and other diplomats from France were recently recalled by Emmanuel Macron. The Russians and some North African countries are pledging their support to the military that has taken over and simultaneously sending in troops. We are closely monitoring the situation and noting down new developments, Ambassador McKinney added.

"What about Cameroon, ambassador Fletcher?" Harrison asked.

"Besides the terrorist attack by Boko Haram in the anglophone regions of Cameroon, there is also the issue of the militias. These groups are agitating for succession from Cameroon. The problem is, they are not only killing the military, but civilians as well."

After getting the report from the four ambassadors, deliberations began in earnest.

The voices of Harrison's advisors filled the room, each one offering insights and recommendations on how to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape.

After a moment, President Harrison had to conclude the meeting.

"Alright, I have heard all your advice and suggestions. Mitchell, as you and everyone else in this meeting know, Nigeria is Africa's largest economy, we are not best friends but having Nigeria as one of our partners on the African continent is very crucial. This is one of the reasons why we do not have a single boot in Nigeria regardless of the fact that Boko Haram has been declared a global terrorist organization by our counter terrorist division. And I believe you know why, regardless of what the official report says."

"You and your team should continue doing what you are doing but do not fail to reach out if the situation starts going out of hand."

Yes, Mr. President." Mitchell said.

"And McKinney, your suggestion to reach out to other regional leaders is great so I will buy it. But do not stop there. Also reach out to all our ambassadors in West Africa and ambassadors from other countries to the West African region and take their temperatures."

"Will do, Mr President." David McKinney nodded.

"You should coordinate with Mitchell, O'Brien and Fletcher."

"Very well, Mr. President."

"In absence of any more issues to talk about, I'll be drawing this meeting to a close. You all should report periodically to me about the situation in West Africa."

Just as the conference call was about to be disconnected, Ambassador Mitchell interjected, his voice solemn. "Mr. President, if I may"...

"Yes, what is it?" President Harrison asked, slightly exasperated that something new was coming up when he was concluding the meeting.

"I would like to take this opportunity to inform you and my esteemed colleagues that I will be resigning from my position as ambassador."

President Harrison's brow furrowed in surprise. "Resigning? Todd, you're one of our best. Are you sure about this?"

Mitchell nodded, a sense of resolve in his eyes. "Yes, Mr. President. It's time for me to retire and return to the States, where I can be surrounded by my children and grandchildren. I've served my country to the best of my ability, and now it's time for another person to take the reins."

President Harrison sighed, reluctantly accepting Ambassador Mitchell's decision. "Very well, Todd. Your service has been invaluable, and you will be sorely missed. We'll begin the search for your replacement immediately."

With that, the conference call came to an end, his advisors walked out one after the other, leaving President Harrison alone in the Oval Office, his mind already turning to the difficult decisions that lay ahead. As he pondered the path forward, he knew that finding a successor to Todd Mitchell would be no easy task, but he was determined to meet it head-on.

The president leaned back in his chair, deep in thought. The resignation of Ambassador Mitchell would leave a significant void in his administration's foreign policy team. Todd had been his trusted advisor and confidant for years, and the prospect of replacing him seemed daunting.

In a matter of days, the news of Ambassador Mitchell's resignation would spread quickly, sparking speculation and rumors among political circles. Some would see it as a sign of instability within the administration, while others would view it as an opportunity for fresh leadership, it just depended on which side of the aisle you were on.

Republican or Democrat? Conservative or liberal? America also had its headache.

In the days that followed, President Harrison convened meetings with his top advisors to discuss potential candidates to fill the vacant ambassadorial position. Names were floated, resumes reviewed, and background checks conducted as the search for Todd Mitchell's successor intensified. As the search for a new ambassador to Nigeria continued, President Harrison remained hopeful that he would find someone capable of filling Todd's shoes. But deep down, he knew that finding another diplomat of Todd's caliber would be no easy task.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MAIDUGURI, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

"It is time, my son, to step up our reign of terror in Chad," Bin Khalid declared firmly.

In the duplex compound of Bin Khalid in the Eastern suburb of Maiduguri, El-Badawi, the leader of Boko Haram, and his father-in-law, Bin Khalid, were seated in the private study. The room was where they used to have crucial meetings, plan, and strategize how to inflict more terror in the hearts of Nigerians. The air was tense, and both men were engrossed in serious discussion.

"Father, you know I highly respect your opinions and ideas, but I still insist that we hold on a little."

"For what? Mahamat Déby is an infidel, and so the government of Chad must be decapitated."

"I couldn't agree more, but what I am saying is..."

But his father-in-law cut him off. "His predecessor went to bed with the criminal Zionists who are currently occupying Palestine and as the incumbent president, he has not given an expected response. Were you not with me in this study when we watched it live on television in 2018?"

"I watched it live with you, father, but..."

Besides, do you even know that you are opposing me?"

El-Badawi was furious at his father-in-law, but he tried not to show it. Once again, Bin Khalid was questioning his reasoning abilities.

"When did you upgrade from merely strategizing on the plans I give you to objecting to them?" the old cleric asked.

Well, he would have to show his father-in-law someday. He would show the man that the young also grew. And what happened to the old ones? They died.

As they immersed themselves in their dark thoughts, the heavy oak door to the private study swung open, and a thin man rushed inside, his breath ragged. Displeased at the intrusion, El-Badawi and Bin Khalid stared at him icily, their eyes filled with menace.

El-Badawi and Bin Khalid were furious at this blatant intrusion. They had always valued discipline and obedience among their ranks, and this breach of protocol was unacceptable.

Bin Khalid gave the boy a look-over. The man looked gaunt. He must be a new recruit, Bin Khalid thought. None of the old members of the organization could look like that because they were all well-fed.

"You dare to barge in here without permission?" El-Badawi thundered, his eyes ablaze with anger.

"Have you lost all sense of respect?"

The boy, trembling with fear, fell to his knees, begging for forgiveness. "I-I'm sorry, sir! Forgive me, please! I-I didn't mean to interrupt, but I bring urgent news!"

"Urgent news?" Bin Khalid's stern voice joined in. "It better be of utmost importance to risk your life for this interruption!" He pointed to a nearby sword that was leaning against the wall and motioned his hand across his throat. The boy got the threat.

Fear etched across his face, the intruder knelt, trembling uncontrollably. "Forgive me, O leader, holy one," he stammered. "I bring grave news that demands immediate attention."

Curiosity piqued, the leader and his father-in-law exchanged wary glances. "Speak," Bin Khalid finally commanded.

The man took deep breaths, gathering his thoughts. Then he told them of the daring raid by the Nigerian army in one of their strongholds in Sambisa Forest.

"It turned out that we were no match for their firefight and skillful tactics. They killed everyone, except one who escaped before the fight was over to come and tell us." The boy said, his voice quivering.

The messenger was too much in hysteria to understand if his message got across to the two men, so he decided to repeat the message more clearly.

"This afternoon, a group of Nigerian soldiers infiltrated our stronghold with terrifying precision," the man hurriedly explained. "They subdued our fighters, engaged us in a fierce battle, and... killed them all, Sir. We did not stand a chance against their training and resilience. We did not stand a chance!"

"We heard and understood you the first time, you moron!" Bin Khalid hissed through clenched teeth.

"I'm so sorry, holy one! I was only"...

"One more word from you, and that would be the last you would ever say in this life."

El-Badawi and Bin Khalid were taken aback by this shocking revelation. The private study was silent as they absorbed the implications of this unexpected defeat. The particular Boko Haram station in Sambisa forest that was overrun by the Nigerian army was considered a fortress for their operations. Would they still get it back? Of course, Boko Haram was connected to a lot of people in the three arms of the government.

It was only a matter of time before they got back their territory, but the fact that it had fallen to the Nigerian army was a significant blow to their organization.

El-Badawi clenched his fists, trying to control the anger surging within him. This news was a direct threat to their plans and existence. Losing such a stronghold meant losing power and control over a vital territory.

"If this is true, we need to act swiftly," El-Badawi said, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

"We cannot allow our enemies to gain an upper hand. Gather our leaders immediately. We must discuss a counter-strategy."

"Wait!" Bin Khalid said. "Let's get to the bottom of this first. I need to make some calls to some important people to verify this."

El-Badawi nodded in agreement while the trembling stooge remained kneeling on the floor.

Bin Khalid retrieved his phone from a mahogany table that was situated between him and his son-in-law. He got to the number he was looking for and did not hesitate to dial it.

"General, I need you to confirm what I just heard," he said without preamble.

"What you heard is true, I'm afraid."

For several minutes, Bin Khalid released a long string of obscenities. With his legendary anger triggered by the most recent events, he moved around the office, breaking and smashing things.

"Tell me what happened?" Bin Khalid asked when he had considerably calmed down enough to speak coherently.

"Uh, I am not in a place where I can speak freely, if you understand. But one thing I can quickly tell you is that what happened today wouldn't have been possible without the brilliance and tactics of one man."

"Are you saying that the ambush we laid for the soldiers would have been done perfectly if not for a single MP?" Bin Khalid asked, his voice brimming with palpable shock.

"Yes... I can't go into details now. Captain Hassan Lawal, he was the one who led the raid today. He is your man"

"I have to go now." The person on the other line said before disconnecting the call.

As the call ended, Bin Khalid kept repeating the name of Captain Hassan Lawal over and over again like a mantra, wondering if he had ever heard the name before. Whoever this soldier was, Bin Khalid wasn't getting a good feeling about him.

It was time to call the president again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

Nicole King's excitement lingered in the air as she basked in the success of the Sisters Club meeting. The women had, after several hours of deliberation, wholeheartedly embraced her proposal to extend their charity work to the troubled northern part of Nigeria. The impact of their efforts reverberated through the room, leaving Nicole elated and motivated to achieve even more.

"Oh, wonderful! This is so wonderful," Nicole couldn't help but exclaim, her spirits soaring. The joy and peace she saw on Zainab's face when the meeting concluded in favor of her agenda were priceless to Nicole.

With her heart filled with hope and determination, she couldn't wait to share the news with her son, David, who had just returned home for the holidays from the United States. Their reunion brought a warmth that resonated through the house.

Upon entering the living room, Nicole immediately spotted David sitting engrossed in his laptop, a glass of orange juice close by. She rushed toward him, unable to contain her joy, and enveloped him in a tight embrace. Surprised by his mother's exuberance, David returned the hug, smiling at her infectious enthusiasm.

"Woah, mom, what has got you so fired up?" David asked after his mother released him from the embrace.

"It is amazing. You can't believe it, I haven't finished digesting it myself."

"Well, try me first." He said, slightly pulling away from his monitor.

That was when she truly articulated what David was doing before she rushed in.

"Uh-oh!"

David groaned. "Please, mum, don't do this."

"And what am I doing?" Nicole questioned.

"I know what you are thinking, so do not 'uh-oh' me."

"What are you doing on your laptop instead of sleeping in your room after your long flight from America?"

"I just thought I should check a few things, nothing serious, really." He said sheepishly.

"You should be sleeping in your room by now."

"And I did, have you forgotten that your meeting usually lasts for hours?"

"So how long did you sleep? I mean, really close your eyes and fall asleep?"

"Mum, please!"

But Nicole's questioning look did not waver.

Unable to endure his mother's accusing expression, David threw both hands in the air as a gesture of surrender. "Alright, alright... I slept for one hour, but I promise I will sleep all through the night."

Nicole gave him a 'do not make promises that you can't keep' look.

"Should I be worried?" She asked.

"For what? I am fine, really." David replied reassuringly.

"Do you have insomnia?"

"What? Of course not. You and Dad would be the first to hear about it if I did."

He laughed. Insomnia? Now that is ridiculous!

Why was he trying so hard to reassure his mother?

"So your alarm woke you up!"

David stopped laughing, he should have anticipated this follow-up question from his mother. The woman had a great IQ and was not easily deceived after all. She knew how to tactically pry information out of people when she was determined.

"Yes... But I could have woken up on my own if it didn't." He said sheepishly.

Nicole knew that he wasn't being entirely honest, but she decided not to press it.

David could clearly see that his mother didn't believe him, but he was more relieved to realize—from her facial expression—that she wasn't going to continue that line of questioning.

Thank God. He thought. Now, time to divert attention from himself.

"So, mum, you remember you were about to tell me what has got you fired up!" David asked after a few moments of silence between them.

The happy smile she had shown earlier reappeared on her face.

Taking her seat beside David, Nicole began recounting the details of the meeting. David listened intently, his eyes fixed on his mother, occasionally interjecting with questions to further understand the magnitude of the decision.

As he watched and listened to her speak, he couldn't help but admire her passion for making a difference and was genuinely proud of her accomplishments.

As Nicole finished relaying the success of the meeting, she turned her attention to her son. It was time for the other shoe to drop, David knew all too well.

"Honey, would you like to accompany me on this mission? I promise it will be fun." Nicole asked with a hopeful glimmer in her eyes.

David's reaction was one of concern and apprehension. He knew all too well about the volatile security situation in that region and the risks it posed to both locals and visitors. It wasn't like the southern part of Nigeria was completely secure, but at least it wasn't plagued with terrorism and religious tension.

"Mom, are you sure it's safe?" David asked, his brows furrowing with worry. "The northeast region of Nigeria has been plagued by insurgencies and violence. I'm not sure it's the best idea."

"Nowhere in the world is entirely safe, my son," Nicole replied thoughtfully.

"I know, but some places are safer than others."

Nicole understood her son's concerns. The news was rife with stories of conflict and danger in the northern region. Yet, she had always believed that in the face of adversity, it was essential to stand up and make a difference.

"I understand, but we would be having a lot of fun."

"You keep using that word."

"Okay, it would be quite an adventure." She smiled, David did not.

"What would be adventurous about playing hide and seek with terrorists who kill just for sports?"

"David, I know it won't be easy, and there are risks involved," she responded, her voice filled with determination. "But we cannot let fear paralyze us from helping those in need. Many of our brothers and sisters in the north have suffered for far too long, and they deserve a chance at a better life. If we don't step up, who will?"

David didn't answer, so she decided that it was time to add a teaser.

"Besides, think of it this way. You and I will both get the opportunity to spend ample time with each other before you return to the States." Nicole spoke as though she had just given him the world's most brilliant idea.

"You are really determined to go on this mission, aren't you?"

"I am."

David contemplated his mother's words, his worry warring with admiration for her unwavering commitment. He realized that her conviction stemmed from a deep sense of empathy and a desire to bring about positive change. He couldn't bear to deny her request, knowing how much this opportunity meant to her. How could he ever say no to his mother? He couldn't do that. Not now.

Finally, he nodded and offered a soft smile. "Alright, Mom," he acquiesced. "I'll go with you. But promise me that we'll prioritize our safety and take every precaution necessary."

Nicole's eyes gleamed with gratitude as she embraced her son once again. "Thank you, David. I promise we'll be careful. We'll have each other's backs, and together, we'll make a difference. Plus, I promise it will be worth your while."

"You mean if we are not seen beheaded on YouTube?"

"Will you stop being negative?" Nicole playfully punched David's arm. "We are all coming back with all our bodies intact."

David just gave a shrug.

"I'm going to call Zainab and Anjola to inform them that you have agreed to come with us."

"Okie dokie."

"I need you to do something for us."

"Name it."

"While we are making preparations, I need you to start researching the northeast region and write down the names of the communities that you believe we should visit, and how we could liaise with other charitable organizations already operating in the area."

David agreed and went to work with his computer.

Little did they know their decision to travel to the northeast region of Nigeria would be more significant than they ever imagined.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Inside the opulent private study of Bin Khalid's gigantic duplex compound, tension and anger hung heavily in the air. Bin Khalid and El-Badawi were seated in plush armchairs, their expressions stern and serious, as they discussed the recent events that had unfolded in the Sambisa forest of Borno state.

El-badawi, the leader of Boko Haram, stood up and paced back and forth while his father-in-law, Bin Khalid, sat at his desk, a scowl etched on his face. The news they had just received from one of their stooges about the defeated firefight that Boko Haram suffered in the Nigerian army had left them seething with the plot for revenge.

El-badawi slammed his fist on a nearby table, causing a lamp to waver precariously. "This is unacceptable! How can we be losing ground to those infidels?" he seethed, his eyes ablaze with fury.

He sharply turned to his father-in-law. "Father, we cannot let this setback deter us. Our cause is righteous, and we shall not be defeated so easily."

"Of course. Those soldiers do not know the magnitude of what they have done. They have played with fire and it would consume them. Bin Khalid's stern gaze fell on his son-in-law, his voice steady. "It seems like we underestimated their strength and resolve. The Nigerian army is growing more formidable, trying to make us lose our grip on power."

"No, father... Do not forget what the general said. This was the job of one man, Captain Hassan Lawal."

El-Badawi and Bin Khalid exchanged a grave look, both realizing the gravity of the situation. Their reign of terror had faced challenges before, but this defeat in Sambisa forest struck at the core of their authority and show of force.

"That's right. I need you to send for the other leaders while I make an important call." Bin Khalid said. El-Badawi darted his gaze away from his father-in-law to the boy who was still kneeling on the floor shivering, and thundered. "I am sure you heard him! What are you waiting for? Come on, get!"

The young stooge, relieved that they were not beheading him on the spot, hurriedly left the room to relay the orders to the other members of the organization.

For a couple of minutes, there was a heated conversation between El-Badawi and Bin Khalid. But at that moment, Bin Khalid's phone rang, interrupting their conversation. "I need to take this."

"Who is that?"

Any other day, Bin Khalid would have resented that question from his son-in-law, but this wasn't any other day.

"It's the president." His eyes widened. "Do you think he must have heard?"

"I believe so, he doesn't call without any serious purpose."

"I was hoping we could get a jump on him. He has obviously been informed, and this would give him the edge in this conversation that we are about to have. Now that he has called me first, he would make it look like I have been hiding the latest defeat because of shame."

El-Badawi just shrugged his shoulders and plopped down on his formal seat, waiting for Bin Khalid to answer the call.

"Ahmed, my dear friend, it's good to hear from you," Bin Khalid greeted the president, his tone almost friendly, but there was an underlying tension in his voice.

The president's response was grave, "Khalid, I've just received news about the defeated firefight in Sambisa forest. This is concerning."

"Yes, Mr. President. We are aware of the situation."

"This was not the outcome I expected. We need to ensure that our operations are flawless, especially with the elections approaching." The president's displeasure was evident as he sighed heavily.

Bin Khalid rolled his eyes as he simultaneously looked at his son-in-law as if to say, 'told you!'.

For several minutes, president Ahmed Mustafa kept talking as though he wanted to prove to Bin Khalid and El-badawi their high level of incompetence.

"Stupid old fool." Bin Khalid hissed harshly under his breath. He was getting angrier by the minute, but this was not the right time to start throwing a temper tantrum.

His brain scrambled for a better option, he needed to do something to turn the tide away from himself and Boko Haram.

"Mr. President, I can assure you that our plan was flawless," Bin Khalid said, cutting off the President's rambling.

"From what I am hearing, I don't think so."

Bin Khalid was sure that he was burning with rage. If a kettle of water had been placed on him at that moment, it would have boiled over in a few seconds.

Abdallah El-Badawi observed his father-in-law from his sitting position and the other side of the ornate table. It felt like he was being held back by an invisible restraint. The man looked like he was about to get up from his seat and start smashing things around again.

"Please, listen to me, Mr. President." El-Badawi was taken aback by the measured calm and control in Bin Khalid's voice as he spoke. He looked like he was trying to placate President Mustafa.

Slack jawed, El-Badawi listened as Bin Khalid wasted no time in shifting the blame away from himself and Boko Haram. He gave every detail with a high quality that can only be attributed to a good story teller.

But there was a very gigantic lull in the conversation when Bin Khalid mentioned the nemesis of the day.

"According to my sources, the failure we experienced in the hands of the soldiers was the doing of one wretched Captain Hassan Lawal. He led the raid, and he is responsible for this."

"Captain Hassan Lawal, again!" Mustafa exclaimed loudly.

"What!!!" Bin Khalid and El-badawi replied with a louder exclamation that must have made the president jump.

"What are you not telling us, Ahmed?" Both father-in-law and son-in-law were now on their feet.

They both stared hard at the phone like they were challenging the President face-to-face.

"Uh, nothing!" President Mustafa stammered.

"It is not nothing and you know it, Ahmed. Tell us what you are hiding, I can feel it in my bones."

President Mustafa decided to quickly press the offense. "I can't believe this! Are you calling me a liar? What do you want me to tell you?"

"Why did you say, Captain Hassan Lawal, again?" when I mentioned his name?"

"That's because I thought it was someone I knew but I just realized that I was mistaking him for someone else."

At this reply from President Mustafa, there was a long silence. A silence that spoke louder than any words Bin Khalid might have conveyed.

"Alright, Ahmed," Bin Khalid said at last. "But are you sure you do not know this Captain Hassan fellow?"

"You know I will tell you if I did. Why would I want to keep such crucial information from you?"

"Oh, I don't know. You tell me."

"You talk like you are doubting me. You know I don't like it when you speak that way?"

There was another palpable silence that spoke louder than volumes.

President Mustafa's voice came through the phone speaker again, disrupting the silence. Now that you have brought Captain Hassan Lawal to my attention, I shall assign those who shall be watching him like a hawk, and when the time comes, I will use him as a scapegoat."

A sinister grin spread across Bin Khalid's face, hidden from the President on the other end of the call. "Thank you, my friend. Your support for Boko Haram is invaluable," he said, his voice dripping with false gratitude.

As the call ended, El-Badawi looked at Bin Khalid with admiration. "You truly are a master manipulator, father-in-law. "

Bin Khalid chuckled darkly. "Indeed, my son. Our path to victory is through deception and cunning. Boko Haram will rise stronger than ever, and the Nigerian army will crumble like a pack of badly arranged cards."

"Why are you smiling like that, father?"

Bin Khalid's wicked and creepy smile was currently plastered on his face and his eyes had turned dark as though an evil being had overtaken him.

"Gather everybody now. It is time to go for blood." .

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE, ASO VILLA, ABUJA, NIGERIA.

President Ahmed Mustafa sat in his office at Aso Villa, his mind swirling with tumultuous thoughts after the unsettling conversation with Imam Bin Khalid. He was deeply shaken up with the change of the trajectory of the call towards the end. At the beginning of the call, he never expected that the situation would change swiftly and he would move from offensive to defensive.

The weight of the lies he had spun weighed heavily on him, and he couldn't shake the feeling his dishonesty had not gone unnoticed to the cleric. If Bin Khalid was the same man he knew very well, then there was no doubt that his lies had fallen on deaf ears, notwithstanding the fact that he claimed to be understanding towards the end.

Bin Khalid was an evil and cunning man, thus no one could ever buy a single word from his mouth.

President Mustafa's discontentment towards Captain Hassan Lawal was steadily growing.

The first time he heard the Captain's name was 3 years ago when Captain Lawal brazenly defied his order to stand down in the community of Chibok, the same night the Boko Haram terrorists had planned to invade the all-girls secondary school and abduct them. Captain Lawal had gone out that night with his hound dog in an attempt to rescue the girls but his valiant attempt had failed as the terrorists beat him to the chase.

When the Chief of Army staff told him about Captain Lawal, he couldn't deny his shock that one lone soldier had dared to disobey. It amused and bemused him at the same time that he spent several nights just pondering about it.

It's not every day you see people, much less a soldier who was trained to receive orders without asking questions, going against the government without fear of what they could do to them. Or even being court-martialed, in a soldier's case.

President Mustafa had not told Bin Khalid about the event that took place three years ago because he didn't want to appear like an incapable weakling. He was the president, after all, and he had the constitutional power at his disposal to handle things on his own.

He'd even assigned a watch team that would keep a steady eye on Captain Lawal, waiting for the perfect time to strike hard. But the foolish Captain had gone and made himself appear in the radar of Imam Bin Khalid and Abdallah El-Badawi's radar. And he was afraid that this wouldn't be the last time.

Captain Hassan Lawal's relentless pursuit against Boko Haram would be his undoing, the president knew.

Was this the right time to deal with the Captain? Something in him said no. Not yet.

SOKOTO STATE, NIGERIA.

As the sun's fiery orb gradually sank below the horizon, casting a warm, golden radiance that illuminated the vast expanse of Sokoto State, Mahmood Ali became utterly absorbed in his thoughts, his mind wandering through a labyrinth of reflections, memories, and emotions, as the fading light of day gave way to the soft, serene glow of twilight.

With only one week left until school resumed, he couldn't shake the persistent feeling of longing for Deborah Hadiza Zira. It had been months of trying to win her heart, but she had remained elusive, turning down every attempt to be her boyfriend.

In the comfort of his room, surrounded by religious books that contained rhetoric from different previous and present terrorist group, and a few textbooks and notes from his home economics studies at the College of Education, Mahmood's mind wandered to Deborah's captivating smile, her

laughter that could light up the darkest of days, and the way she carried herself with grace and confidence. He had fallen hard for her, and his heart yearned for her acceptance.

He remembered clearly his first attempt of reaching out to her. Long before that day, he had been a secret admirer of Deborah. But unable to bear the weight of his emotions any longer, Mahmood decided to take action. Enough of being a secret crush, it was time to update his status. He was determined to show Deborah the depth of his feelings.

Instead of calling, texting or even taking her out on a date, he opted instead for the old school letter writing.

He'd picked up a pen and paper, his heart guiding his words as he began to pour his thoughts onto the page.

Through heartfelt words, Mahmood penned a letter to Deborah, baring his soul and expressing the love that had blossomed in his heart. Then remembering all the times that he had been close to her in lecture halls and when he was in the same assignment group with her, all the words that expressed how he felt during those moments came tumbling like a tumbleweed. He spoke of the moments they had shared as course mates, the laughter they had exchanged, and the joy he found in her presence.

With each stroke of the pen, he hoped that his sincerity and vulnerability would touch her heart.

The following morning, Mahmood had set out to find Deborah, clutching the letter close to his chest. The journey to her hostel felt like an eternity, every step filled with anticipation and nervousness. As he finally arrived at her doorstep, he took a moment to compose himself before knocking on the door.

Deborah's face lit up with surprise and curiosity as she opened the door to find Mahmood standing there, holding the letter. Mahmood's heart raced as he handed her the note, hoping she would read it and understand the depth of his emotions.

"I wrote this for you," Mahmood said, his voice trembling slightly. "Please take the time to read it."

His whole body was shaking with all his pent-up emotions and he was ashamed of the way he was melting before her. Because instead of giving her the letter, all he just wanted was to grab her so tightly in his embrace and release all his emotions on her. He wanted to hold her, he wanted to cover her from the eyes of other men, he wanted to kiss her, and he wanted to carry out the other several things that had been in his imagination to do with her.

That was the only way—he surmised—that he could stop shaking all over.

He hoped she didn't notice his agitation, she might mistake it for being under the influence of methamphetamine.

Deborah took the letter, and with a small smile, promised to read it later. Mahmood's heart skipped a beat. He had just taken his chances and laid his feelings bare and he expected that the reaction would be nothing less than positive.

As the days progressed, Mahmood's anticipation and excitement that Deborah was going to accept him grew. He tried his best to focus on preparing for the school exams, but his thoughts kept wandering back to the girl who had stolen his heart and captivated his focus.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

After several days of silence, Deborah finally sent him a text message containing the time and location where she wanted to meet. Mahmood's heart raced as he approached the destination, all but certain that being Deborah's boyfriend was already a done deal. As he walked through the familiar halls, he spotted Deborah sitting under a tree, her handbag and textbooks comfortably beside her.

Taking a deep breath, Mahmood approached her, trying to gauge her reaction. Deborah looked up, her eyes meeting his, and a soft smile graced her lips. Mahmood's heart soared at the sight, accepting that her smile was a confirmation to what he had been believing all this time.

"I read your letter," she said, her voice gentle. "It took me by surprise, but I appreciate your honesty." Mahmood felt even more at ease, and he smiled back at her. "I just wanted you to know how I feel," he replied. "I couldn't keep it to myself any longer."

Deborah's smile grew warmer, and she reached out to hold his hand. He would later understand that her smile had been that of a smile of helpless pity as she tried to let him down gently.

"Thank you for being brave enough to tell me," she'd said. "But I can't date you, I'm sorry."

It took a while for her words to sink in and change all he had been telling himself all those times he had been waiting for her reply, and when it finally did, it was the greatest shock of his life. Nothing had remained the same since that day.

Initially not wanting to accept the rejection, he had asked her to give him specific reasons why she wouldn't date him.

Deborah started by letting him know that the feeling he had for her wasn't mutual and she couldn't date any guy that she wasn't in love with. When she mentioned their religious differences, Mahmood countered by telling her that it happened all the time.

"That will not happen for me," she had insisted. "I try my best to follow what my Bible says. It strictly forbids me from getting intimate with someone who is not of the same belief as I do."

As a male Muslim, Mahmud wasn't forbidden from getting married or dating someone from another religion, thus he tried to persuade her to convert to Islam.

He let her know that he was madly in love with her despite the fact that she was an infidel. He actually used the word infidel. But that would be corrected when she converted and accepted him as her boyfriend, he had insisted.

But Deborah would not convert no matter what he said. And he failed. So was every other attempt that he had been making since then.

From that time, his feelings for Deborah had become a mixture of what he called love and hatred. For him, it was already too late to let go of her, he was already obsessed with her.

Another reason he wasn't giving up on her was his wounded pride that refused to accept defeat. And it was pushing, pushing, pushing him over the edge.

"Deborah, if I can't have you"... He didn't want to sound violent. "Deborah, if I can't have you, I don't know."

But deep down in his heart, in those dark crevices, he knew. He knew alright, even though he was saying the contrary.

Thus he began to scheme and plot. His desperate determination took his mind to dangerous places that he wouldn't go for a girl on a normal day.

Somehow, he felt sure that the forthcoming semester would be the semester that he would remember for the rest of his life.

The crescendo of his nefarious plot died down, soon after he proceeded to carry out the next agenda on his mind.

He took up his phone, turned on his data, quickly entered WhatsApp, and began typing.

"...all those who refuse Allah will burn on the day of judgment. Dying in the way of jihad should be the highest hope of every true Muslims on earth. Infidels, turn away from your evil ways and come to Allah. For the apostate Muslims, you are doomed!"

After proofreading the little write up that looked more like rhetoric, and feeling satisfied, he hit the send button and watched as the message was delivered into his class WhatsApp group. A WhatsApp group that had been specifically created for educational purposes.

For several minutes he watched as reactions from his fellow students came pouring in. Some were supporting him while some of the students were protesting that this was not a religious group. None of their reactions fazed him.

As a faithful messenger of Allah, he had delivered his message. If they like, they should accept it or shove it in the place where the sun did not shine.

But there was somebody's reaction that he anxiously waited for. Hers was the only reaction that could affect him. It was only her reaction that mattered.

Deborah Hadiza Zira came to the group and reacted with a rolling eyes emoji.

Mahmood Ali felt like a molten lava had just been placed on him. All he could think of was how to get his hand on that infidel whore, Deborah, at that instant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA.

Eight-year-old Osita Kingsley Enyioma found himself wrestling with a complicated mix of emotions. His once serene world had been disrupted by the arrival of his three-year-old baby sister, Uchechi. The joy and excitement that had initially filled his heart at her birth had slowly given way to a growing discontent.

Osita couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy as he observed his parents showering their undivided attention on his baby sister. It seemed as though Uchechi had stolen the spotlight, leaving Osita longing for the days when he was the sole recipient of their love and care. He yearned for the days when he didn't have to share everything, including his parent's time.

What bothered Osita even more was the fact that Uchechi had started attending the same school as him. While she was in nursery two, he was in basic three.

As her responsible older brother, he was entrusted with the task of taking her to school and bringing her back home safely. However, this newfound responsibility limited his freedom to spend time with his friends after school, as he had done in the past. The burden of being Uchechi's caretaker was beginning to weigh heavily on him, and he resented the encroachment it caused in his social life.

Usually, after school periods were his favorite time of the day. Because it was time to divert to several places on his way back home with his friends. It was a time when he could climb trees, pluck fruits, even though it was illegal to do so on private property. Carrying out dangerous stunts like throwing stones into people's houses and running off laughing before the owner could come out and catch them. They could walk up to those houses that had a doorbell outside the gates and pressed the button incessantly while they prepared to flee as soon as the owner opened the gate, angry and cursing at them. Sometimes, chasing after them.

But all that was before his sister started attending the same school with him. He couldn't do that anymore with his friends after school because his sister would always go home and tell his parents about it, making him end up in their bad book.

Uchechi had a knack for tattling on her brother. Whenever Osita thought he had escaped her watchful eyes, she would return home and recount every detail of his day to their parents. Even when he categorically instructed her never to say anything about his school life to them.

She would always start with something like, "Mommy, I saw what happened with Osita today in school but he said that I should not say anything to you." When she was done giving her accurate details, she would act very relieved as though keeping that secret had been a huge burden on her.

This invasion of his privacy made him feel exposed and frustrated. He longed for the days when he could confide in his friends without fear of Uchechi barging in, interrupting his conversations, and revealing his secrets.

At school, her mouth was always ready to spill all the details about her elder brother's home life to any ear that would be willing to listen, while at home, she was always revealing his life at school, not just to their parents but to extended families that visited, even when they didn't solicit the information. In conclusion, she was a chatterbox.

"Why couldn't I have been the last child?" Osita mused, his frustration bubbling to the surface. "If only I were younger than Uchechi, she would have the big sister status and would be so busy with her squad of friends, then I wouldn't have to deal with her childish behavior all the time. I wish things could go back to the way they used to be."

Back to when he was the first and only child.

At the top of this precarious situation, there was a huge problem that no one seemed to notice, only Osita did. Maybe it was because he was the one who was directly affected by it.

The big problem was that everyone loved his constantly cheerful sister. She was always smiling and she knew how to make everyone smile. Plus, she was very beautiful like a doll and had an angel's voice. She didn't look like she could hurt a fly and wherever she went she made more friends than foes. It felt like she had the ultimate magical power to easily win over the hearts of people wherever she went. Even the hearts of his friends had been won over by her.

This made it difficult for him to convince others about her dislikable attitudes. For him, that was a big problem indeed.

People liked him too, but that realization didn't take away the fact that his younger sister was a nuisance in his perfect world.

It was only him that her spells seemed not to be working on. Whenever someone called her "sweet innocent baby", Osita would always scoff. Because in his opinion, there was nothing sweet or innocent about Uchechi. Of all three words, only one was true for him, she was always acting babyish.

As Osita grappled with his conflicting emotions, deep down in his heart, he couldn't help but recognize the love and innocence that seemed to radiate from his younger sister. Maybe he felt that way because he was Uchechi's big brother. After all, brothers were supposed to love their sisters and vice versa, right?

Or it could be his guilty conscience about his discontentment that was trying to make him think these good thoughts about his sister.

His parents always told him that Uchechi didn't mean to annoy him or disrupt his life when he complained or reported her to them. She was simply a curious and eager toddler, seeking attention and validation from her big brother. "You'd do the same if you were in her shoes", his parents would admonish.

But he wasn't in her shoes. And even if he was, he didn't think he'd be so childish. Again somewhere deep in his heart, a voice reminded him to think of his actions when he was that same age, but Osita ignored it.

It was time to wash her school uniform. Taking a deep breath, Osita approached Uchechi, who was playing with her toys in the living room.

She smiled one of those charming smiles as she looked up from her toys and saw him coming towards her.

It almost got him. Almost.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MAIDUGURI, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

Karim Bin Khalid still had that sinister smile on his face as the other leaders whom he had sent the young boy to fetch began to arrive in his private study.

There was not enough space for everyone to sit down so they remained standing except the cleric and his son-in-law, of course.

The last person that sauntered was a pudgy man who had a toothpick in his mouth signaling that he had just finished eating or he was interrupted from his meal. His shirts were stained with oil and there were the crumbs of the food he had just finished eating all over his chin and nose, a sure sign that he wasn't an organized eater.

As soon as he stepped into the private study, the men all seemed to give him a wide berth as they moved to create space for his overweight body frame.

After taking a comfortable place beside the leaders who had come ahead of him, the door to the private study was sealed shut like a drum.

The clerics' private study was silent as everyone focused their gazes on the one who had summoned them all.

Without saying anything, Bin Khalid stood up, and with his hands folded behind him, he began to walk around the small confinement of his private studies. Any man who saw him approaching immediately made way for him to continue unhindered. This went on for several minutes but the men were not bothered.

They knew that whenever he moved around this way without a word, it was best to let him ride it out. Something big was about to drop. All they had to do was to wait. Silently. And patiently.

Finally, after pacing around the private study, the cleric quietly walked back to his seat and plopped down.

When he spoke the next sentence, there was no warmth at all in his voice. Everyone could feel the cold steel that rolled off his tongue.

"My people, I'm sure you have all heard what happened this afternoon between the Nigerian army and our brave fighters who had just been martyred in our quest for jihad? I don't want to go over it again even though you may not all have the complete details of what happened and how it went down. You all know the basics and that would suffice, for now..."

Without being asked, the men began to contribute their angry voices. Bin Khalid quieted them down.

"They think they have stopped us?" He shouted. "They think we would cower in fear?" Then, he started to laugh maniacally.

"Never! Except we are not children of Allah."

"They think that with this minor defeat, they have been able to slow us down but no, they have only succeeded in lighting the fire under us. Instead of slowing down, we would accelerate. We will accelerate our activities in the country and her neighbors."

Even though the men in the room knew that the cleric was going to say something ominous, all the same, his words still dropped like a bomb. There was a pin drop silence that preceded his words as though his last statement needed to sink in deeply.

"Did you remember when I summoned you all for a significant meeting of a high magnitude in the same private study a few months back?"

The cleric was on his feet again.

"I don't have to remind you of all the strategies and plans we made waiting for the right time to execute them. I called you here today to let you know that it is time. It is time to accelerate. It is time

for heads to roll and blood to flow. It is time to stain their lands and their highways with their own blood. It is time to not just do this in the North but to extend the same benevolence to the Southern part of Nigeria."

He darted back to his drawer and retrieved some manila files. Without a word, he started distributing it amongst the leaders. Each man received two files each as against the one file that they were expecting to get.

Although no one said anything, they were confused about the second file. They were all familiar with the details in the first file. It contained details of the clandestine plans they made a couple months back. But no one, except the cleric and his son-in-law seemed to possess the knowledge of what was in the second document.

No one was voicing out but Bin Khalid could see the questioning look on their faces as plain as day. Earlier, when the messenger was asked to call the other leaders, Bin Khalid had called another general in the Nigerian army who sympathized with Boko Haram and requested for every possible information he could get on captain Hassan Lawal. With the help of his son-in-law, he'd printed out several copies that would be enough to distribute among his men.

As their faces screamed their unspoken questions, he proceeded to answer them.

"Gentlemen, the second file you are holding in your hands contains the photograph and the biography of the man who has the blood of our courageous fighters in his hands. He alone is responsible for shedding the blood of our brave sons of Boko Haram."

There were angry protests all around the small room. Bin Khalid raised his right hand to quiet them down and resumed talking again.

"Captain Hassan Lawal is an apostate Muslim and so he has become a high value target. Continue to look at his face until it chisels in your memory. Read his biography repeatedly until you know it as well as you know your name because he is now the enemy of Allah that must be eliminated."

He finished talking and dismissed the men. They stepped out, one after the other, very much eager to carry out their own parts in these evil plots. The mission was now a go, and nothing would stop them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WASHINGTON D.C. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Jason Reid had just been assigned the ambassador to Nigeria, and saying that he wasn't happy about it would be putting it mildly.

Presently in his modest townhouse that was located a few blocks away from the Capitol building, he paced back and forth, brooding over his current situation. He was surrounded by boxes that he'd packed for his journey to Nigeria.

The news of his recent assignment as the ambassador to Nigeria had settled in, but discontent lingered in the air. Three months ago, his predecessor, Ambassador Todd Mitchell, had given his notice. Ambassador Mitchell was in his ripe old age of seventies, and he was ready to retire, thus opening the unsolicited vacancy for Jason Reid. And now, he was expected to take the 7 a.m. flight the next day from Washington Dulles International Airport to Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, Nigeria, for an official hand-over ceremony before Ambassador Harrison would return to the United States and retire.

But try as he might, Ambassador Reid couldn't shake off the awareness of Nigeria's intricate web of political insecurity, and economic instability, something that was peculiar with many third-world nations.

What bothered him the most was the insecurity. Time and time again, over the years, the world has seen American embassies and United Nations offices being bombed in third-world countries. In 2009, the United Nations building in Abuja was bombed to kingdom come by the Boko Haram terrorist group. The American embassy had never been bombed or attacked in Nigeria.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria and America were certainly not best of friends, but they had a good and modest diplomatic relationship.

But there was a first time for everything, right? The attack on the American embassy in Tehran; 1979 revolution, the bombing of the American embassy in Tanzania, Kenya and . . . "No, stop that! Stop with all the negativities!" Jason Reid shouted to himself.

As he struggled with his emotions, a call interrupted his thoughts. The screen displayed "President Blake Harrison." Jason took a deep breath and answered. "Good day, Mr. President."

"Mr. Ambassador, how are you preparing to settle into your new role?" President Harrison's warm voice resonated through the phone.

Jason forced a polite smile in his voice, "well, I can't complain. Mr. President, it's a unique challenge, but I'm preparing for the journey ahead."

President Harrison chuckled, "Ambassador Reid, I know Nigeria presents its share of complexities, but your expertise and dedication are exactly what we need in this critical diplomatic post. You'll do great things."

Despite his reservations, Jason appreciated the encouragement. "Thank you, Mr. President. I understand the importance of the role, and I'm committed to representing our interests effectively."

Harrison's tone turned serious, "Nigeria is a key partner, and your role goes beyond traditional diplomacy. We need stability in the region for various reasons, and I have full confidence in your abilities to represent me and the American government."

"Understood, Mr. President. I appreciate your vote of confidence. I'll work tirelessly to fulfill the responsibilities of this assignment."

"Good to hear, Ambassador. Remember, your success is our success. And if you ever need advice or support, my door is always open. Safe travels, and I look forward to your updates."

As the call ended, Jason contemplated the weight of the President's words. Relocating to Nigeria would be a huge test of his diplomatic skills. The challenges ahead were substantial, but with the President's confidence and support, Jason found a renewed determination to carry out his task and live up to his expectations.

And with that, the sixty-four-year-old ambassador who had lost his wife seven years ago to pancreatic cancer started to make his way to his home office to put out a goodbye conference call to his two dearest daughters, their husbands, and his three grandchildren.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

After spending long hours on the internet, David King had made his list of the communities Nicole and her Christ sisters club could take their charity work to. He had done it, just as he promised his mother that he would do.

But it wasn't an easy task. After browsing through the internet, David had come up with several hundreds of places that desperately needed medical help, if not financial. These were the places that desperately needed the kind of aid his mother's charity club was willing to offer. But his mother and the association couldn't attend to all the villages he discovered. Plus, his search led him to believe that the four hundred villages he discovered was a tip of the iceberg. David did not, and would not bother arguing with that statistics. He knew that if he'd dug deeper, he would have found over a thousand villages.

Over the years, there was something he and many Nigerians had come to discover about the northerners, —call it a stereotypical discovery if you will— and that was the fact that there was something peculiar about the economic situation of the northerners.

Anyone who was a Northern Nigerian, was either extremely rich or ridiculously poor; there seemed to be no middle class amongst them.

That might be stretching it out a bit and probably wrongly stereotyping, but there was no denying the fact that this was the reality in most cases with the northerners.

A good example of David's stereotype conclusion was, the richest man in Africa whose name was Alhaji Aliko Dangote, a northerner who hailed from Kano state to be precise. Apart from holding this position for over twelve consecutive years, he was also on the list of the richest men in the world with several billions of dollars worth.

There were also other rich men like the popular Alhaji (Dr.) Abdulkadir S. A. Dantata (CON), Abdulsamad Rabi'u, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma, Atiku Abubakar, Dahiru Barau Mangal, and the list went on. These men and others like them were all successful billionaire businessmen who were doing well for themselves.

But it was also among these Northerners that one could find the largest number of people in extreme poverty that were living as refugees or in internally displaced people's camps as it was popularly called in Nigeria, because they were unable to afford a roof over their heads.

The northern part of Nigeria also had an overwhelming number of illiterates and an equally large number of well educated people.

The situation with the north was volatile at best. There was indeed a wide gap, a large disparity between the rich and the poor in Northern Nigeria, unlike the south that had the rich, the middle class and lower class. It was no wonder that the terrorist group, Boko Haram, was recruiting members as many as they wanted with the promise of giving them a better life from the life of struggles and hardships that they had known in all their existence.

This was one of the reasons he was glad that his mother and her friends had decided to bridge the gap between these two classes up north as much as they could, but it still wasn't enough to shake off his apprehension about going there in person.

"But it is for a good cause," David told himself as he stood up, picked up the printed paper that contained the list of the villages that had made it to the final selection and trudged out of his mother's home office to her bedroom where she was having an afternoon siesta.

He knocked softly and waited until Nicole called out before turning the doorknob and entering.

"I've got your list ready for you, mom." He said as he made his way to the chair opposite her bedside.

Nicole was lying face down on her bed, but upon hearing those words, she perked up.

"Oh, thank you... thank you..." She stretched out her hands and collected the list.

"You can't believe I found over four hundred villages that could use some urgent financial and medical help right now."

"Trust me, David, I can believe anything. With all I have seen for the past forty-three years of my life, I can believe anything." Nicole said, fixing her gaze on her son.

But this is too much, mom! There are even some communities where everyone is either blind or visually impaired. According to what I saw on the internet, those villages of not less than nineteen hundred adults all require surgery for their eyes. In some of the communities, most of the annual high death rates are caused by lack of medical care. Most of these would have been avoidable if they had the necessary amenities. The situation is just appalling, Mom."

"Honestly, it broke my heart to take out those other villages and narrow it down to these ones, but you and your friends can only do so much."

"Yes!" Nicole replied with sadness in her voice. "I wish we could do more."

"I know, right? But as humans, you have your limited strengths and abilities." David said with the intention of encouraging Nicole.

"Yes... And that's why we are taking it one step at a time. God help us!"

There was a great silence before Nicole spoke up again, unable to stop herself from expressing what was eating her heart. "Most times I lie down on my comfortable bed at night, and all I can think of are those people that are sleeping on the ground, and under the bridges. The people who are sleeping on the cement bags, empty sack bags. They don't even have a single duvet to keep them warm on rainy and cold nights. The lack of clothes, shoes and medical care. Sometimes it breaks me down and I begin to cry."

Even as she said these words her body began to shake as her eyes glistened with tears.

"Life can be so unfair," she said, sniffing.

David stood up from the sofa that he was sitting on and moved to comfort his mother. With his arms around her as a comforting gesture, he pleaded with her to stop crying.

"I can understand your heart for the less privileged, but please, mom, I need you to take it easy. I don't want you developing health issues as a result of much worrying. Please! For the sake of God, daddy and myself. We love you so much and we can't afford to lose you."

David handed Nicole a box of tissue from her table which she accepted gratefully. After wiping her running nose and eyes, she started to speak up.

"I know. Don't worry, nothing will happen to me. I will try my best not to worry, knowing that even though I have limitations as a human being, there is someone up there who is unlimited. I will hand over my worries to him and ask him to take control."

"That's the spirit, mom."

"But it is not easy."

"It's no biggie, mom. We will tell God and he will make it easy, right? Won't he make it easy if you talk to him?"

For what seemed like the longest time, Nicole just looked at her son in silence, making him uncomfortable.

"What?" David asked Nicole, confused.

But she just kept staring at him without a word.

David must have asked the same question more than three times before she finally replied.

"Oh, Nothing! I just like the way you have been mentioning God. Like a true believer." She finished with a happy smile on her face.

Becoming even more uncomfortable with Nicole's answer, David rushed out of his mother's room, mumbling something about going to watch a football match.

Before he was completely out of the threshold, he heard Nicole mumbling a thanksgiving prayer to Jesus and asking the holy Virgin Mary to take care of her son.

David didn't say Amen to her prayers and thanksgiving...

CHAPTER THIRTY

SOKOTO STATE, NIGERIA.

The day had finally arrived for Deborah and her best friend Farida to return to school. And it was not just the two friends but it was time for every student of the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, to return for the school resumption.

As the two friends made final preparations to travel that afternoon to college, Deborah's younger brother, Samuel, was not too happy about it although he was trying to deny it to himself.

Since the previous day, he had been thinking a lot about all the time spent with his eldest sister and subsequently her best friend who came visiting during the holiday. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't help but think about those times because they were among the best times that he enjoyed. And he didn't know how much he was going to miss that until the news of his sister's return to college sank in the previous day.

Of all his siblings, Deborah was the only one who had given him the time of the day, though he had made her pay for it in his own way by teasing and making fun of her endlessly.

Yes, she was his senior, the eldest daughter and child of the family, but Samuel never failed to utilize every opportunity he had to remind her that he was a man and try to intimidate her into believing that by default, he was more brilliant than her.

Instead of getting angry and punishing him for his impertinence, she and her best friend had accepted his attitude as one of his little quirks. Deborah and Farida easily knew how to turn everything he did into a joke and start laughing about it.

He could remember when he teased his elder sister about her name being antiquated.

"You do know that your name is antiquated, right?" Samuel had asked his sister one hot afternoon.

To the two friends, the question came out of the blues because prior to that, they had been sitting down on the floor and peeling melon, discussing mundane girly issues.

But upon hearing someone's voice, they'd both stopped their conversation and looked towards his direction in shock. When and how did he sneak upon them?

Then, trying to maintain her composure, Deborah returned her gaze to her melon and looked up, shooting a mock glare at Samuel. "Oh, come on, Samuel! My name has character. It's classic."

"Deborah, Deborah, why do you have a name that sounds like an old book?" he'd said, his voice carrying a hint of apprehension and something else Deborah couldn't decipher.

Seated on the floor beside Deborah, Farida was trying hard to contain her laughter at the siblings' squabble. It was no easy effort. One of the things she had come to enjoy whenever she spent the holiday in her best friend's house was the constant bickering. She only had one role to play, that was the role of a spectator. And she had come to enjoy it quite alright, but today, she decided to be a participant instead of just a spectator.

With her eyes sparkling with mirth, she jumped into the fray. "Honestly, Samuel has a point, Deborah. It does sound like something from a historical novel," she chimed in, her laughter bubbling over.

Deborah rolled her eyes at Farida the same time Samuel laughed out loud in glee because his sister's best friend was taking his side. "You are supposed to be taking my side as my best friend."

"She has to stand for the truth," little Samuel retorted.

"And what is the truth, Samuel?" Deborah asked.

"I've told you that it is Uncle Sam. The truth is that your name is antiquated."

"Yes," Farida intoned.

Deborah rolled her eyes at both Samuel and Farida. "Deborah is a good name, classic, and there is nothing antiquated about it. Deborah is a girl's name of Hebrew origins that means "bee," and is the name of a prophetess in the Jewish Bible and Christian Old Testament. Deborah was a poet and a judge, too, who led a revolt that helped the Israelites win their freedom from the Canaanites."

"That's just the point we have been trying to make." Samuel said.

"What point is that?"

"The name has been existing for over forty-five hundred years. Don't you think it is time to move on?"

Farida roared with laughter.

"What about you? Is Samuel not also a Hebrew name from the Old testament?" Deborah shot back, trying to get the upper hand in the ongoing banter.

"That is why it is Uncle Sam now." Samuel hissed, his voice barely concealing his exasperation at his sister for refusing to acknowledge or call him by his new name.

"I must say quite honestly that I like your new name, Uncle Sam." Farida said supportingly. "Isn't that America's nickname?"

"That's right."

"So you want to be named after the world power nation?"

Samuel let out a smug smile. "It goes without saying"...

But before he could complete that sentence, a call to prayers from a nearby mosque was heard.

"Call me Judge Deborah." Samuel's elder sister had said as Farida stood up and started to make her way towards where she had placed her hijab.

"Judge Deborah, keh? Why don't we call you ancient mother Deborah since you are so determined to let the world know that you have an ancient name?"

"Maybe we could start calling her Debby or Deb or Dee." Farida said, making her way to the exit door of the modest family compound with her flowery designed hijab almost covering her whole body and her prayer materials in her right hand. "Don't worry, when I return from prayers, we will sort that out, it's a piece of cake." She finished and slammed the door after her.

And Samuel could also remember several more occasions like this.

As the two college students kept preparing for school, Samuel looked at his big sister's best friend with approval and camaraderie in his eyes. He really liked her. He had always liked her and it wasn't just because of the goodies she brought each time she came visiting.

But it pained and hurt his ego, Farida and Deborah would be going back to school. And he would miss them dearly.

It pained him to admit it as he realized the truth, he would miss them.

Of all his four sisters, he was closest to Deborah. And she was the one he argued all the time with because he felt comfortable to do that with her.

Even now, his other three sisters, Abigail, Rejoice and Divine had all gone to the stream to fetch water. They hardly had the time of day to chat with him, not to talk of starting a contretemps, seeing that they were always going on errands or out with their friends and classmates. Deborah was the only introvert of the family who didn't mind staying indoors while the rest loved the outdoors.

He didn't know why but a part of him was feeling sadder than usual about Deborah's returning to school, and he couldn't exactly say the reason why.

There was a strange heaviness in his heart, a deep ache that wouldn't go away. It kept nagging and nagging at his subconscious, but no matter how much he tried, Samuel couldn't make this feeling go away.

A voice from somewhere inside his heart desperately asked him to beg Deborah not to go to school this semester but he quickly pushed that thought away. He was just getting emotional about his sister's return to school. He would get over it, he told himself. He was determined to show that he was a real man. And real men did not display all such nonsense emotions.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Captain Hassan Lawal woke up this morning with a terrible stomach flu, thanks to his colleagues, and he was cursing them for it.

It had been several months since they were assigned to this godforsaken Sambisa forest.

It had been a month since the Nigerian army raided one of the strong hideouts of Boko Haram in Sambisa. Since then, the Nigerian army had engaged in several firefights with Boko Haram insurgency fighters in this evil forest, gaining the upper hand and ultimately, victory over them. None of it had taken place in any of their hideouts. Instead, the Boko Haram fighters had been taking the fight to the Nigerian army since they were all killed in their own camp. The barrage of attacks that followed showed that forgiveness was not coming anytime soon, and the terrorists were out for blood—the blood of the Nigerian army.

The Nigerian army, led by Captain Hassan Lawal, had also been resilient, giving the terrorists a run for their money. But last night, the time of Captain Hassan's squad in this devil's playground came to a much-anticipated end.

With their assignment time concluded, all squad members decided to celebrate their last night on camp. Even though it wasn't mandatory, having a last-night party celebration was like a ritual the soldiers carried out before leaving for their houses the next day. It was also a time for remembering their fallen comrades.

But last night's celebration party was special because the soldiers made many victories, and no one from the regiment had died during any gunfire exchanges.

As expected, some squad members were designated to go and hunt for animals to prepare delicious pepper soup. Overjoyed, the soldiers obliged, and after about an hour or so, they all returned with a big catch. There was more than enough for everyone.

By 9 p.m., the party was in full swing.

The Nigerian army had made it a rule that every soldier assigned to the Sambisa forest would not be allowed to go with their phones, not even a satellite phone, to avoid giving situational awareness either intentionally or unintentionally to the enemy. But this rule was constantly violated by soldiers who knew how to smuggle their phones. Thus, when the party started, the soldiers brought out their phones and began to play music, dancing to the tune.

There were no alcoholic drinks due to the no-alcohol rules on the mission field, so the soldiers had to make do with water and energy drinks.

Last night's party was becoming the blast it was expected to be, and Captain Hassan was enjoying the party until it took a different trajectory. And not for the better.

He was enjoying the party until one of his good friends, a captain who was also a sniper in the Nigerian army called him and two other colleagues out for a challenge.

The Yoruba soldier, Bolaji Balogun, issued a challenge to Captain Hassan, Nonso Nnadozie from the East, and Edikan Umo from the South South. He proposed they add six extra spoons of Cameroon pepper to their soup and attempt to finish it without water.

"You are mad," Captain Hassan replied. "You want to use us to test the theory of the story of the tortoise that we were told when we were all little children, right? Come on, that story is very much outdated. Even children nowadays are too smart to be told such stories."

"Awwww, I can see you're trying to stylishly chicken out. I can assure you that I didn't even think about the story of the tortoise. So do you want to put up, or forever shut up?"

"Put up or forever shut up? Is this the latest phrase that you have added to your repertoire or something?"

"Ahhh, Hassan, you are really a scared little old goat?" Bolaji replied with a belly roar that drew the attention of the other soldiers to the challenge.

"On the contrary, I think those attributions suit you perfectly."

The other soldiers laughed out loud as they began to huddle around the bantering duo.

Captain Hassan continued. Besides, we all know that this would not be a fair fight. Among all of us that you have called out for this challenge, you are the only Yoruba person amongst us. Captain Hassan said, hoping to solicit the support of his colleagues who were spectators for himself, Nonso, and Edikan. Your ancestors have been practically chewing pepper generations before you were born. I guess they probably laced your breast milk with pepper, so you see why you are not calling for a fair challenge. Call me when there is an equal playing ground and I will sign up."

The other soldiers clapped and cheered for Captain Hassan. But, Captain Hassan watched, to his dismay, how his colleagues began to lean towards Bolaji as he made his point in a passionate salesman way. With all their colleagues now throwing their support behind Bolaji, Captain Hassan and the other two soldiers had no choice but to take the bait. It was either they accepted the challenge or faced the embarrassment that would follow for a very long time. They would not hear the end of it for the rest of their career. Who wanted such a reputation to precede them?

Noticing that Captain Hassan and the other contestants had capitulated, all the other soldiers cheered and clapped louder.

A few moments later, all four men were eating from their plates of soup that had been laced with 5 tsp of Cameroon pepper each.

Now the pepper soup looked and tasted like its name.

After taking a few bites from the bushmeat, all the participants looked like they were going to be sick. Except Bolaji, of course, who was beaming with a wicked smile.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Captain Hassan took his first bite from his pepper soup. As soon as it touched his tongue, the effect was instantaneous. It felt like he had just taken a deadly, concentrated acid, but he swallowed hard, willing himself not to scream bloody murder, trying not to give his friends and colleagues the satisfaction of the discomfort they were expecting from him.

Beside him, Hassan could see his other colleagues trying to do the same but they were not doing a good job. Except Bolaji who was evidently enjoying his meal with the smile spread across his face. And his smile was genuine, he wasn't putting any effort to maintain his cool like them.

"Ahh, Bolaji, na God wey go punish you o!" He exclaimed under his breath as he took another bite from the meal that tasted as though the devil himself had prepared it.

Hassan looked at Edikan and Nonso with the intention of encouraging them, but try as he might, his facial expression wasn't helping at all. Instead, it seemed to do the opposite. Prominently displaying the travesty of the suicide mission that they had embarked on.

After a couple bites from the meat and a few sips from the pepper soup, Nonso and Edikan gave up and fell to the ground, choking and gasping for water. Most of the spectators began to jeer and call them names. Only a small number of the concerned ones came to their rescue.

Captain Hassan and Bolaji were the only ones standing.

The remaining two soldiers continued eating for the next 5 minutes without water. Some of the spectators called out their encouragement while the rest mocked, telling them to surrender before they would go and meet their maker and start explaining how they died because of pepper. Bolaji joined the spectators who were calling out their discouragement to ask Hassan to go down the same route Nonso and Edikan had gone. But even though he was already dying, Hassan refused to stop. He would see this challenge till the end even if it killed him. He would do this for himself and for his colleagues who had just been embarrassed. He would finish this race for himself and for them, come hell or high water.

Captain Hassan decided to see the ongoing challenge like another war with Boko Haram. It helped him kick in his survival instinct. He resisted giving up and surrendering to defeat with all his might.

Finally, both he and captain Bolaji finished their meals. Then the crowd roared as Bolaji was the first to rush for water and red oil. Captain Hassan emerged the winner and Bolaji got the runner-up position.

He'd ended up winning the prize money his colleagues donated. Now he was paying a steep price and there was no one to blame but his fellow captain and sniper, Bolaji.

A familiar voice was speaking outside his tent and the sniper was able to attach a name to it. It was none other than Bolaji, talking in his usual carefree manner.

"I see the fulani cow is talking at the top of his voice at this time of the day." Captain Hassan let out a string of diatribes. "Well, what was I expecting? That is how he shouts at the top of his voice when talking to someone sitting next to him as if he was speaking from several miles away." Hassan released a few more choice words at his colleague.

"What is the purpose of winning thirty-four thousand when you'd end up using it to treat the same sickness that particular victory had brought to you! The captain groaned and curled up into a ball.

Just then, a medic that he had sent a Lance corporal to fetch entered the tent and rolled him over as he began to examine his swollen belly.

"This Bolaji is not a human being at all." The doctor said as he assessed captain Hassan's stomach..

"The understatement of the year." The captain replied.

"You shouldn't have accepted that challenge. You should have stood your ground no matter what."

"Story of My Life. You know how it works in our profession. If I had not done it, I would never have heard the end of it."

"Are you telling me? I saw Nonso and Edikan, and both of them were not looking good."

This piqued Hassan's interest. Momentarily oblivious and distracted from his pains, he tried to turn towards the doctor to look him squarely in the face but the effort was too much of a task for the current state of his health.

"Easy," the doctor chided after Hassan let out a sharp cry.

"When did you see them?" Hassan asked.

"On my way coming to you. I decided to approach them and offer them a morale booster by telling them to cheer up and the whole thing has been forgotten. You know stuff like this is just part of our inside joke. Most if not all our wives would not even hear of this."

"So what was their response?" The Captain asked.

"They both smiled and gave me a slap of appreciation on my back and thanked me. And they looked very relieved."

"That Bolaji is such a son of a blankety-blank... He got me sick as a dog, shamed two innocent soldiers. I should have known better that somebody with such a track record would not let the night go by in peace without pulling off something so crazy."

For a while, there was silence as the doctor examined Hassan.

"Maybe you should consider not going with your regiment today again." The doctor finally said after the examination was over.

"I don't think so, I really don't want to stay another day in this place."

"But you must. Trust me, you can't make it in this condition."

"But I already told my wife that I will be returning today."

"Call her and explain the reason why you have to postpone it. I am sure that she would understand." The doctor said,

"After all these months of not seeing her? Our wives are really having their own share of the fight against insurgency I swear." As soon as those words dropped from the Captain's mouth, Bolaji entered his tent, speaking at the top of his voice.

"Hey, Hassan, my man!" Bolaji said as he approached his bedside.

Please don't touch him. He is in too much pain.

"Is it true? Are you in pain? Bolaji asked, defying the doctor's orders and deliberately touching him on delicate parts of his stomach.

Captain Hassan winced in pain.

"Does it hurt?"

"What kind of stupid question is that? No, it is very sweet!

Bolaji laughed out loud. "I know, right?" Then he leaned towards the captain and whispered something into his ear.

With eyes flashing in anger, Hassan pushed his friend and colleague away from himself with all the strength he could muster.

"I don't do such dirty things to my wife. I love and respect her a lot."

"Alright." Bolaji began to laugh as the doctor held him by the arm and began to direct him out of the tent to avoid discomforting captain Hassan. "Call it dirty or not, my wife and I enjoyed it a lot when I did it with her. You should spice up your marriage and not be boring." He finished as the doctor succeeded in sending him out of the tent and closed the flap behind him.

"A real piece of work." The doctor said as he began to make his way back to Hassan's bed. "Don't get me wrong, the man is a good guy but he can be a jerk sometimes."

"You can say that again, doctor. I totally agree."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

The Boko Haram terrorist group was on the move. As earlier planned in a clandestine meeting several months prior, the terrorists were finally navigating and penetrating strategic parts of Southern Nigeria.

The midday sun beat down mercilessly on the vibrant and bustling metropolitan city of Awka, the capital of Anambra state. Its oppressive heat was well capable of driving even the most resilient soul indoors, but the brave people of Awka who knew and acknowledged that there would be no food if they did not work did not give in to the intense high temperature.

Amidst the stifling heat, a low rumble echoed through the old Onitsha Awka Express road—a sound that signaled the approach of something ominous but the people did not know what they were welcoming into their town and in the entire Southern Nigeria.

People thought they were just your everyday travelers in the iconic luxurious bus that was a common sight on Nigerian federal highways and interstate bus stations.

For the occupants of the bus, some of them wore colorful traditional attire, while others donned simple robes, but all shared the same sense of purpose and determination as they set out on their mission.

Osita trudged wearily along the paved old onitsha expressway road, his school bag slung over his shoulder as he made his way home. Sweat dripped down his brow, and his parched throat begged for relief, and he couldn't wait to get home. He had drunk all the water in his water bottle after enjoying some game time with his friends during the school recess. His sister did not come with him to school today. "That little girl!"

Their parents had let her stay at home because she claimed she was sick. Osita didn't believe her, but their parents had bought it hook, line and sinker. He believed she was faking her sickness so that she'd stay at home whenever she didn't want to go to school. He was sure that as soon as he got home, he would see her playing with her toys and running around as though a miracle had just happened. But Osita knew it was no miracle. He didn't believe she was sick in the first place and when he had called her out for it, she started crying and ran to her mother who didn't hesitate to reprimand Osita.

One advantage Osita enjoyed when Uchechi did not go to school was, he wouldn't be washing her school uniform. This was indeed a huge bonus because her school uniforms were usually soiled with food stains and dirt after she finished playing on the school's playground designated for preschoolers. And the stains were difficult to wash out, "ugh!"

While he was glad and grateful for the respite, he still wouldn't support what his sister was doing. He felt like he would be a party to her crime and he didn't want that on his conscience. Thus he decided to think and plan the best way to expose his sister to their parents but his attention was suddenly captured by the distant sound of engines.

Osita squinted against the glare of the sun, his curiosity piqued as he spotted the approaching convoy. The vehicles were sleek and black, their windows tinted to conceal their occupants from prying eyes. But Osita could not sense the tension in the air, a palpable sense of urgency that hung heavy over the convoy like a dark cloud.

"You son of an infidel," Osita did not hear the voice that called him names from the luxurious bus, the tone cold and menacing, upon noticing that he was intently watching the vehicles with a mixture of admiration and awe.

Osita tried to look inside the vehicle through the windows but all he could see were shadowy figures, their faces hidden beneath the brim of their hats.

The figures remained silent, their eyes fixed on the road ahead as they navigated the old Express road with ease.

As the convoy disappeared into the distance, Osita nodded in excitement, oblivious to what he had just witnessed. At that moment, all he wanted was to go home and enjoy some playtime with his friends since he would not be washing his sister's uniform today.

His plans to expose his sister's schemes would have to continue another time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Many men didn't do well with rejections from the ladies they were interested in, and that apparently included Ali Mahmood.

It had been over a month since the school resumption of the Shehu Shagari College of Education and Mahmood's patience was beginning to wane. He didn't know how long he would continue to hold out the candle for Deborah before he would finally snap.

He would soon snap, what with all the attitude she had been giving him this semester. It felt like she had taken it to a whole new level.

What kind of girl was she? He wondered. Why was she making it hard for him? Why was she rejecting him? Didn't she know how much he loved her? Why did she reject his love and incessant advances towards her? Why was she making him feel like a worthless piece of garbage? The whole thing wasn't sitting well with him at all.

Even as he stepped up his advancement towards her, it seemed she also stepped up her rejection of him as well because even the casual friendship they had was now practically non-existent.

Since the school's resumption, she had been avoiding him like a plague. Unfazed by her cold attitude, sometimes, when he saw her discussing with a group of friends and classmates, he would start to approach the group for the sole purpose of getting the opportunity to talk to Deborah and hearing her sonorous voice. The conversation, sparsely though it was, wouldn't be taking place in the intimate settings he craved, he was willing to manage what he got. But as soon as he approached the group, she would make an excuse about keeping an appointment and rush off, leaving him with no choice but to stay back and chat with the people he wanted to have nothing to do with at that moment in order to keep up with the pretense of wanting to talk to them while his main target had gone far away from him.

Sometimes it was her crazy best friend, Farida, that helped her escape. "The witch!" Well, he would have to teach her a lesson that she would not soon forget in her life one day. But for now, Deborah was his one and only objective. She was all he could dream and think about every night and day. It seemed like his own punishment for a grievous sin he must have committed in his previous life.

No, he was being dishonest to himself. It wasn't any blasted punishment for any stupid sin. If he was truthful to himself, he'd admit that he was at a point of obsession with Deborah. Obsession? What was the meaning of obsession, anyway?

No, he wouldn't see it that way either. He wouldn't accept that he was obsessed. Instead he would see it as protectiveness... and jealousy. Yes, this was normal for every healthy and progressive relationship. He didn't see anything wrong with it.

Except his relationship with Deborah was anything but healthy or progressive. And his protectiveness and jealousy was turning into blind rage.

Before this whole ordeal with Deborah started, Mahmood was an average student, but since then, he'd plummeted by another forty percent, all those carryovers weren't a welcome development.

It wasn't just his education that had plummeted, his whole life, as well. Except his religious radical life, of course. That, he would never give up for anything in the world. Not if he wanted Allah to throw him into the fires of judgment where he would burn forever. He couldn't afford that. He had so much to lose if he didn't make it to Paradise, not even counting the seventy-two virgins he'd learnt that Allah will reward him with if he died in the way of jihad. And that was his highest hope.

About that, he was a low-level, jihadist fighter who desired so much to be noticed by the top brass at Boko Haram. But he had never been sent on a mission of great significance that would achieve his objective of being noticed.

So what was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to do? His life was precipitously sinking and all he could do was watch. Deborah was rejecting all his passionate advances no matter how much he was trying. Try as he might, he wasn't doing any high profile assignment that would get him to climb up the ladder with Boko Haram. His education wasn't rewarding, his friends were dwindling because each time he was among them, he always destroyed the light atmosphere with his negative mood.

He was fast becoming alone in the world. Alone and frustrated and something had to be done.

But each time he contemplated taking his life since there was nothing in this world for him anymore, a voice would persuade him to the contrary. The voice would tell him that he should wait patiently for the time to come when his life would become of great significance. He had been groomed and selected and designated for a special time and when the special time came, he would emerge from his current darkness to the spotlight that had been prepared for him. The time was coming when the younger ones would look up to him as their hero and the older ones would admire him. He was being groomed for something.

Mahmoud had no idea of what the voice was saying but he always listened, even though he was at times in doubt and incredulous. "But to doubt is sin." The voice constantly admonished him for his unbelief and lack of faith.

He often asked for forgiveness and the grace to be patient as he waited for the right time.

But it wasn't easy.

"How soon will it be?" He found himself constantly asking this question.

Little did he know how soon the time would come. And when it came, it was above and beyond what he expected.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

This fateful morning, Farida woke up in a bad mood. But her boyfriend, Ibrahim, who was gravitating towards being a fiance succeeded in changing that before the evening was over.

When he made his customary call this morning, he'd immediately become concerned about the way she sounded over the phone. He had tried to coax the reason for her negative mood but the effort was like making a camel's eyes go through a nail. At the end, though, Ibrahim resigned as he and Farida both concluded that it was probably hormonal imbalance.

Upon that acknowledgement, he decided to cheer his girlfriend up by asking her out for a date in the evening. He'd taken her to her favorite restaurant and every other thing worked like a charm. Not too long after, her moodiness was positively forgotten and she returned to her happy, cheery self.

Now, a couple minutes close to 7 P.M, Ibrahim and Farida were on their way back to college from the restaurant. They were holding each other's hands, Farida was laughing at every joke Ibrahim made. One thing was glaringly certain, and that was the fact that the couple were so much in love with each other. Anyone looking at them would attest to that fact.

They both knew it in their hearts that they loved each other. And anyone watching them right now would ultimately come to the same conclusion.

As the couple got to the college gate, Farida let out one of her bright smiles as she and Ibrahim waved at the security guards that they had become friends with. The security men did likewise but not without tossing a few sentences at the two lovebirds.

"You didn't bring anything for the boys today?" One of the security men asked Ibrahim the standard question that they had always asked him each time he was returning to the school campus.

"Sorry, not today. This one was special for my girlfriend." Ibrahim replied with a wink to the security personnel who had asked the question as he continued to hold hands with his girlfriend, progressing further inside the college.

"You love birds should just get out of our sight." Another security man said and his colleagues supported him with a laugh.

Just before going out of earshot, another security personnel called out to them, to Farida in particular, "Please tell your beautiful friend, Deborah, that I am interested in being her man o. I don't know why such a beautiful girl like her would still be alone in this campus when she obviously has several options, including myself."

"Sorry, that would never work. My friend deserves someone better." Farida replied in mock horror that made the rest of the security personnel start up another round of laughter.

After walking for several more minutes on the paved college road, the couple turned left to another road that led to the hostels.

The college campus was a harmonious blend of modern education facilities and traditional architectural charm. The buildings, adorned with elements inspired by the region's culture, stood amidst well-maintained greenery and landscaped gardens. Open courtyards and inviting spaces provided students with a serene environment for both academic pursuits and social interactions.

Tall trees provided pockets of shade, offering students comfortable spaces to gather and engage in light-hearted conversations. The walkways were usually bustling with activity as students moved between classes and various campus facilities, but this evening, the movement had reduced to a trickle. A warm breeze carried the essence of the approaching rainy season. The golden hues of the setting sun cast a gentle glow, creating a serene atmosphere. The evening air was dry, hinting at the season's transition from harmattan, yet the temperature remained pleasantly mild, mirroring the warmth shared between Ibrahim and Farida.

"About your friend Deborah, how is she doing?" Ibrahim asked as soon as they turned into the single lane road.

"As well as can be under the circumstances. She got an unpleasant news the day before yesterday that her only brother's very sick."

"Has he been diagnosed yet?"

"Yes."

"With what?"

"They said malaria and typhoid. Since the day it started, he's been delirious. Sometimes he'd be heard calling out his sister Deborah and saying all sorts of gibberish. She is very worried and she would have loved to go home and take care of him if not because of the back-to-back tests that are coming up, next tomorrow and next week. Even her parents are asking her not to come. They are telling her to concentrate on her ongoing texts and they will take care of little Uncle Sam."

"Why did you call him Uncle Sam?"

"Because that's the name he says that his sister and I should call him henceforth."

"Uncle Sam. America's nickname?"

"Yes."

"The boy must be very brilliant for his age to know another name for the United States of America."

"Very brilliant. He is a bookworm."

"How many foreigners, especially Africans or Nigerians know that America's nickname is Uncle Sam?"

"Not much," she replied with a smile. "As a matter of fact, the first time I knew about this was the day you told me the name and the history behind it. You can imagine how startled I was when he said the same thing. I was surprised that a boy of nine years already knew what I knew at the age of eighteen."

"A real bookworm." Ibrahim said.

"Little Samuel constantly visits the school library during school break and after school hours to read. That's where he spends most of his time."

"He enjoys using his knowledge and brilliance to intimidate his sister and I, but he ends up getting frustrated when he doesn't succeed in ruffling our feathers."

"That boy must be something." Ibrahim said, grinning. Farida joined him.

"Yes! He is very proud, just like you." She said and reached up to pinch his nose in a loving gesture. After a few more minutes of talking about little Samuels quirks, Ibrahim decided to deviate a little.

"So how is Deborah doing?"

"But I just"...

"I know, I know. I wanted to ask how she is coping with school. Is Mahmoud still disturbing her?"

"Oh, that one. Now more than ever, I'm afraid. I can't even begin to tell you how many times I have rescued her from him. He apparently doesn't know how to handle rejection and doesn't know when to back off when he has been repeatedly turned down."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

"Ouch, that hurts. To be turned down by a lady you are in love with hurts but enough is enough already, the guy should back down like the gentleman that he is."

Farida scoffed. "He is no gentleman, not according to my and Deborah's dictionary, he is not."

"At this point, I would have to agree with you there."

"He is a nuisance." She said,

"Yes, he is. But talking about nuisances, I'm so happy that you gave me a chance. If not, I wouldn't know how to handle a heartbreak from the most beautiful girl in the world that I have given my heart to." Ibrahim said, swinging her hand back and forth, back and forth.

"Is that why you want to pull my arm from its socket?" She asked, eyes twinkling.

Then, without warning Ibrahim stopped walking as soon as they reached the side of a mango tree and also jerked Farida to a halt.

Confused, Farida began to ask what he was doing but he shushed her as he directed her under the canopy of the tree. "Romantic discussions and activities are best carried out under a mango tree, don't you agree?" He asked and Farida wondered where he was going with his line of question.

Receiving no verbal answer from her, Ibrahim continued. Isn't that the reason for the love song that says "meet me later under the mango tree?"

Now Farida smiled.

Suddenly Ibrahim's face turned serious as he confessed what was in his heart.

"I am madly in love with you, Farida and there is no denying that. I want to spend my whole life with you. I have already told you this several times. I love you and I don't ever want anything to change about that between us. I don't want to ever lose you. I don't know what I would do if I lost you."

Ibrahim cupped her face in his hands and tilted it upwards so that she could see the depth of the honesty of his words in his eyes.

Farida looked into his eyes and she could see it sparkling with overwhelming love for her. She was so happy and grateful for such genuine love. Not all her friends were as fortunate as her, including Deborah. At that point she knew she would follow this gentle, kind, most loving and caring man to the ends of the earth if he asked her.

"Oh, Ibrahim! I love you too. You know I love you, right? I always will."

Ibrahim made sure to soak into every precious word that came out of the mouth of Farida.

"This is my final semester in school and next year will be yours." Ibrahim said. "I am already making plans for my future. I don't want to leave the school this semester not knowing that I didn't include you in my future plans."

"What are you saying, Ibrahim?" She asked, her chin quivering.

Ibrahim went down on one knee, brought out a small box from his trouser pocket and unwrapped it. What she saw as soon as it was opened was a stunningly beautiful two carat diamond ring.

"Farida, from the moment our paths intertwined, my life has been brighter and more meaningful. Today, as I kneel before you, holding this symbol of commitment and love, I can't help but feel the immense joy you bring into my world. Will you make me the happiest person alive and embark on a lifetime journey together as my wife? Farida, will you marry me?"

Her eyes begin to glisten with tears. "Yes, I will marry you." She said,

Ibrahim jumped up, wiped her off her feet and began to spin her around. "She said yes, she said yes to me!"

Then, students began to come out from behind the other surrounding trees, bushes and rows of flowers that they had been hiding in as they witnessed the marriage proposal. Farida was surprised

to see her friends and students from her's and Ibrahim's department coming out to congratulate her. Ibrahim had planned the whole thing and it went perfectly. Farida couldn't be happier.

Farida's best friend, Deborah, jumped on her and both ladies embraced, laughing and shedding tears of joy at the same time.

A few inches away, Ibrahim's friends were slapping his back and congratulating him.

With their happy vibe, the students immediately turned the place into an atmosphere for a party as one of the students who was a disk jockey immediately set up his equipment for some good party music. The entertaining music that boomed from the speakers got everyone dancing.

As a way of congratulating and celebrating with the newly engaged couple, most of the students present for the engagement party paid for the supply of drinks and snacks. Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages were available in surplus quantities.

Even though he had not been initially invited to the party, Mahmoud Ali invited himself anyway as soon as he heard that it was Farida's engagement party. Deborah was surely going to be there, he could never pass up a chance to be with her even in an unwanted public setting like a noisy engagement party.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

He tried, as usual, to approach her and talk to her, maybe even seize the opportunity to make a brazen open proposal. What a spectacle it would be. It'd be a double engagement party. Surely if he made an open proposal to Deborah, she would be unable to say no. She wouldn't disgrace him by rejecting his proposal in front of their school friends

Thus, he made his attempt. But, she avoided him like he was carrying a communicable disease, as always.

When it became apparent that he was beginning to make a fool of himself in the eyes of the other students, he angrily stormed out of the party, fuming all the way to his hostel room.

He hurriedly entered his hostel room and dropped down on his bed, still fuming with rage. Deborah had dealt him a huge blow, he would never forgive her. Or forget the open show of shame that she put him through that night.

Ali Mahmood's legendary temper was at a boiling point, he needed to calm down. One of the things that always helped him to mellow down was reading The holy Quran or carrying out any religious activities. But right now, he didn't feel like reading the Quran, so he settled for another alternative.

He took out his android phone from his pocket, turned on his data, went to his school department's WhatsApp group and sent in one religious rhetoric after another.

Typically, students' parties often closed around 2 or 3 a.m. but because of the forthcoming school test, Farida's engagement party was shut down by 10:30pm and by 11:00pm, everyone was back to their hostel.

As was usual with the students, they picked up their iPhones and android phones and started checking for messages on social media. The home economics students of Shagari college of education were not surprised to see another rhetoric from Mahmood. But Deborah was very angry, enough was enough for him already. She and the excited Farida had just returned into their hostel room and changed into their nightwears when they both got the WhatsApp notification. If everyone was afraid to talk to Mahmood, she would talk to him herself.

She wouldn't go physically and talk to him because she knew that it was what he was expecting her to do. Deborah wouldn't give him the satisfaction of drawing one inch closer to him with words.

She took out her phone and started to send a voice message in English but canceled it. "The illiterate wouldn't understand my English anyway so let me come down to his level," she muttered and began to record another voice message into the group in Hausa language.

"Holy Ghost Fire, nothing's going to happen to us. You should know what to be sending to this group. It's not that the group was created to be sending nonsense. The group was created for posting things like, test, assignment e.t.c. not the nonsense you are posting."

Both Farida and one other female student who were roommates with Deborah listened as she poured out angry words at him. They both called out to her to stop.

Seated on his single bed in his hostel room, Mahmood Ali exclaimed in shock when he heard what she said.

Did Deborah just call his religion nonsense? And did she just blaspheme against the holy prophet Muhammad?

And before he could properly analyze the gravity of what he was about to do, he picked up his phone and sent his own voice message.

His words were menacing as he accused Deborah of blaspheming against the prophet Muhammad.

The more he said it the more he believed that this was, in fact, the truth. She had in fact blasphemed against the last and final prophet of Islam.

Mahmood's words incited and riled up so many students. Then, one after the other, many radicalized Muslim students in the group began to align and agree with him.

Deborah had indeed blasphemed against the prophet and such sin was unpardonable. She was condemned to the fires of judgment where she would burn forever. And the students saw it as their religious responsibility to make it happen sooner than later.

And that's how Mahmood Ali led the outrage against Deborah Hadiza Zira.

An outrage that would change the trajectory of her life forever..

That familiar voice came back to him again but this time around, he now understood what the voice had been trying to tell him all the while. The voice was telling him that the time had come. It was time for him to rise and do what he was destined for. It was time to step into the limelight as he had been promised.

That was when he realized that this was truly the moment that he had been told to wait patiently for. And he would take full advantage of it.

Just then, it also dawned on him how much he hated Deborah with great passion.

He never loved her. Or maybe he did... at the beginning. He didn't know anymore. He hated her now with passion... And that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Bin Khalid sat in his private study that had become his den of evil machinations, when he received a call.

"Holy one, I just want to tell you that we are now in position."

"Very good. And it is clear to you what you will do, right?"

The caller replied, "The blueprint was extensive."

Still, it didn't stop Bin Khalid from repeating the instructions. The most crucial anyway.

"Good, good! Remember to take them all down, but you remember our main target? Bring his head back to me. I will use it to make a video that we would upload on the internet. Did you hear me?."

"Yes, holy one."

Bin Khalid didn't like the tone of the caller's voice. It sounded like he was disguising his exasperation at Bin Khalid's repeated instructions.

How dare he? Bin Khalid would say what he wanted to say, whenever he wanted to say it, however he wanted to say it, and as many times as he wanted to say it. Nobody, nobody would dare to confront him or express dissatisfaction in the way he was running his organization.

Not even his son-in-law. And if anybody, including this caller did not like it, that was his business.

And so, Bin Khalid intentionally repeated his instruction again and carefully observed the caller's tone of voice.

Perhaps sensing that something was amiss, the caller replied with the tone of a willing and loyal follower.

The call ended without so much as a goodbye.

A few hours later, the ambush the Boko Haram fighters had set up for the Nigerian army personnel who were returning from their assignment in the Sambisa forest had taken its intended effect.

After the terrorists had brought down the soldiers, they moved around those who were still alive but with multiple bullet entries on their bodies and asked who amongst them was Captain Hassan Lawal.

The soldiers were defiant.

But the terrorist came prepared. For every negative response they got, they put a single bullet in the soldier's skull, making sure that they would never see this captain Hassan Lawal with their physical eyes again.

Before they would finish them off, Captain Bolaji Balogun had somehow managed to relay the entire event back to the nearest command base via his radio before breathing his last.

After making sure that all the soldiers were dead, the terrorist moved away from the site in anger. They had failed in their most crucial objective.

They were not returning with Captain Hassan Lawal's head on a platter.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Captain Hassan Lawal didn't take the news of the death of his friends and colleagues in the hands of the Boko Haram fighters well.

When the report came to them, Hassan felt like going crazy. For a while, he was frozen in one spot as though someone had just paused his life for several minutes. Then he felt like he would start going crazy; he felt like taking off his shirt and running naked to no particular direction or location, he felt like running and running until the adrenaline gave way and he would just collapse into nothingness, or to keep running until he got to the middle of a highway where a truck would come bearing down on him at a fast speed and knock him down into oblivion.

He felt like taking his AK-47, fully loaded with bullets, running into the bush and shooting wildly at everything and anything. He felt like screaming and screaming and pulling out his small hairs.

Standing up from his lying position, he put on his footwear and began to hastily make his way out of his tent. Some of his colleagues started calling out to him but he didn't answer them, as he kept walking away into the bush at a fast pace. They could all see the anger in his eyes and so they let him go.

Settling for an alternative, the captain went to the bush where he picked up stones and began to target a nearby tree trunk as he vented his anger and rage.

"Kingsley, Awalu, Ola, Tunde, Emmanuel, Victor, Innocent, Destiny, Mohammed, Abubakar, Ali, Danjuma, Danladi, Damien, Greg, Ume, Nonso, Amiche, Andino, Manuchi!"

He continued throwing stones after each name he mentioned as if the stone represented everyone of them.

"It was just yesterday. Yesterday, you all gave me 1000 naira each. And Bolaji, it was this morning that you were throwing those wicked jokes at me, you old goat!" This time he threw more than three stones at the tree trunk.

"Where are you all? You guys should come and let these blasted terrorists taste their own medicine," he shouted, hurling multiple stones at the tree trunk that had taken the brunt of his rage silently.

For several minutes, he continued that way, as every stone he drew punctuated every line until one of his colleagues who came with another regiment came from behind and restrained him. He didn't do it by any small efforts.

"Let go of me!" Hassan shouted while struggling to wriggle out of his restrainer. "Let go of me, you son of a blankety-blank, and allow me to vent."

"That's enough, I can't let you do that no matter the unholy names you call me. His restrainer replied, still hog-tying him strongly from the back.

"If you don't let go, I swear, you will hate me for life!"

"I won't take what you said to heart because I know it's not you talking, it is the anger in you that is talking."

"If you don't let go, I will stone you. "

"Come on, stop being a child."

"I'm serious!"

"Do your worst, then, but I'm not letting you go."

The man replied as he kept holding and restraining the captain with all his might while captain Hassan kept fighting to get free.

They both struggled that way for some time until Hassan's strength gave out and they both fell on the ground with the soldier on top of Captain Hassan.

Then, Captain Hassan decided to change tact and started hitting his head at the root of a nearby tree as he chided himself, regretting why he didn't go and die with his friends.

"I won't let you do that either." His colleague said as he struggled to put his arm between the head of Captain Hassan and the tree.

"But didn't you hear what the general said? The Boko Haram fighters were looking for me! They asked for me by name."

"And that is why you should be thanking Allah and not regretting."

"I hate you, you know." Captain Hassan said with boiling disdain to his colleague who was preventing his emotions from going wild.

"I know you don't mean that, my brother."

"Please, remember something one of our generals told us in one of our training sessions. He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city. He said it was a scriptural passage from the Bible. Proverbs 16:32 to be precise."

The general who was taking them on one of their combat training had taught them how to put their emotions in check. The Muslim general had heard the scriptural passage from his superiors during one of his own training almost two decades ago, and had continued to repeat the same scriptural passage to the younger soldiers that he trained.

"As you all know, I am a devout Muslim. I have never thought of being a Christian nor do I intend to convert to Christianity for the rest of my life so this place in the Bible is not for religious purposes but it is a very important lesson that we all must learn and keep in mind in our line of work". The general had said in no uncertain terms.

"Beyond being skilled military fighters, we must also know how to conquer our emotions as well, we must. Because that's when we can truly see ourselves as soldiers".

Upon hearing those words repeated to his ears by his colleague, Captain Hassan immediately became still as all the fight left him.

After a couple minutes of observing the captain and noticing that he wouldn't bang his head anymore in regret, and that the Captain was now emotionally calm, the other officer let go of his sniper colleague and sat down beside him as they both quietly mourned the death of their friends and brothers-in-arms.

AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

That night, Osita watched as his parents heard and saw the news about the soldiers who were ambushed on the 9:00 news. He could see the sadness in their eyes. It was another sad night in Nigeria.

MAIDUGURI, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

While the world was fixated on their television and news outlets as they shook their heads in sadness about the news of the dead soldiers, Bin Khalid was not among them. He and his son-in-law were in his private studies, fuming over a separate news that they got.

Earlier that evening, as soon as they received the news in his private study that Captain Hassan was not among the killed soldiers, the cleric's legendary anger had once more gone out of control as he moved about his living room, smashing things.

When he was on a tyrannical rampage, no one dared to stop him, no one!

Over the last couple of hours, Bin Khalid and his son-in-law were found sitting down, quietly steaming with the kind of anger that could consume an entire continent, before the cleric spoke up with a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"Maybe you have nine lives, Captain Hassan Lawal, or maybe not. But if you do, I just want to let you know that you would eventually exhaust all nine. You have already exhausted one, make that two if you add the firefight in Sambisa forest. It won't be long again, and the other seven would also eventually give way."

The cleric did not smile as he said this. Instead, he looked tired as though all the strength had gone out of him.

CHAPTER FORTY

President Mustafa watched the news about the dead soldiers on the NTA 9:00 news. He never knew about this operation. As much as he encouraged the Boko Haram terrorist activities in the country, he never knew about most of their operations before it happened. Except when they needed him to use the power that came with the office that he was currently occupying to carry out their dirty job, they never let him in on operational details.

After seeing the news about the slain soldiers, he reached for his phone and called one of his secret informants who was both a military personnel and a sympathizer of Boko Haram and asked for more details about what happened. The kind of information he was asking for was the kind that would never be revealed to the media.

When his informant finished explaining, he knew that the death of the other soldiers in the hands of the terrorists might have been commendable but it wasn't rewarding. He knew that they lost out big-time. The major kill they were going for was Captain Hassan Lawal. And he knew that the cleric and his son-in-law would not be celebrating this night.

"Uh-oh, I thought I was the only one the apostate Captain knows how to give nightmares." Mustafa let out a maniacal laugh. Now I see I am not alone. You are welcome, Bin Khalid. Come join the train."

The president finished off with a flourished smile. He quickly took out a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his robe. He leaned back on his executive office swivel chair, took out a Cuban cigar, lit it and began to puff away. He relaxed back as the nicotine smell washed over him with every drag.

Mahmood Ali watched the devastating news about the Nigerian soldiers with both a mixture of pride and envy. He wished he was one of the brave jihadist that ambushed and killed the soldiers. He would have been honored to be there, taking pleasure in eliminating the lives of those infidels. And he needed to do something, something that would truly help him to be part of them next time.

But unlike before, he didn't worry again about what to do and when an opportunity to prove himself would appear. For in front of him laid the moment that he had been waiting for. A once in a lifetime opportunity. He dared not miss it. He dared not. Or else, there was no telling if something significant that would give him the visibility he desperately craved would happen again in his lifetime.

As he contemplated further on his evil quest, it became clearer in his mind's eyes. Surely, Allah had answered his prayers. If this did not become the leading news on every news outlet and get him noticed by the top brass at the Boko Haram... No, it just had to work. It must, and Mahmood would see to that. He would not give sleep to his eyes until it happened.

A few weeks later, a rumor began to spread like wildfire in not just the Shagari College of Education, but in the community as well, about a female student who had blasphemed against the last prophet of Islam. Everybody who heard about it was either angry, sad, worried, or nonchalant.

Those who got angry about the news came out openly to condemn the action of the said student. Those Muslims who just felt sad about it decided not to take vengeance into their hands but leave it for the just hands of their God. Those who were nonchalant either didn't believe the story or didn't want to get involved.

One fateful morning, the morning everything changed, Deborah and her best friend were on their way for their first lecture of the day when they noticed an oddity. Everywhere they went, they heard some buzzing. People were speaking like a chatterbox and often pointed at Deborah in particular, while occasionally pointed at her best friend, Farida. The duo didn't understand why.

When Deborah approached some of the students to know why they were pointing at her, they would suddenly keep quiet or run away as soon as she came close. It soon became apparent that people didn't want to talk to the condemned girl.

"What is the meaning of all this?" Farida asked angrily but Deborah just replied to her with a confused look. "Wait here, I am going to find out what the problem is with everyone."

Farida told her friend to wait under a mango tree, the same mango tree where her fiancé had proposed to her several weeks ago and stepped away alone to find out what happened as Deborah remained standing in both apprehension and annoyance at the attitude some of the students were giving her.

But just before she could go too far, her phone started ringing. Taking out the phone from her handbag, she looked at the color ID. It was her fiancé, Ibrahim.

"Hey, babe, how are you?" The words were the same, but the tone of voice was different. Ibrahim's voice sounded worried as well.

Upon noticing his disturbed tone of voice, she ran back towards her friend and put the phone on loudspeaker so that they could both listen in on the call, hoping that he'd be able to give them answers.

"I am not happy, Ibrahim. What is going on? Since this morning, people have been looking at the both of us with weird looks but they seem to be looking at Deborah most of the time."

Ibrahim hesitated to speak but Deborah encouraged him to go ahead, not hold anything back.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

"Okay, so this is what I've been able to find out since I started hearing the news this morning. Apparently some aggravated students in your WhatsApp group have been spreading some rumors that you insulted the prophet Muhammad and you are going to pay for your unpardonable crimes." Ibrahim told them the exact words that people have been spreading.

"What?" Farida and Deborah asked in shock.

"It gets worse I'm afraid. As a matter of fact, they have also been spreading the supposed voice note to several student WhatsApp groups, and outside the school campus, to the entire community as well."

As Ibrahim continued talking, the two friends could not believe their ears.

"Since Farida is using her phone for this ongoing call, let me send that particular voice note to you, Deborah, instead."

Deborah agreed then he forwarded the voice message to her WhatsApp so that they could listen to it. No words could describe the shocked expression on their faces as they listened to the voice message.

"But this was over 3 weeks ago, why is it coming up now?" Deborah was grateful that Farida asked the question because the voice message had totally knocked the wind out of her sails. The words were lodged in her throat but she couldn't find the voice to say them out.

"I don't know. Maybe they started circulating it since that very night Deborah sent this message because from what I have heard, even the people in the community have heard the voice note. And the fact that you said it in Hausa language somehow complicated matters all the more as it made the news fly faster than usual."

"Isn't this all the more reason it should be contained? As native speakers of the Hausa language, shouldn't they comprehensively grasp her meaning?"

"People won't hear what you want them to hear when it is something that concerns religion", Ibrahim said. "It goes without saying."

"This is not good." Farida said as Deborah looked on in apprehension.

"Yes, not good at all. Right now, a few of my friends and I have been trying to talk to students hoping that we would reduce the ongoing tension amongst the Muslim and Christian students. We have been telling them not to listen to the person who has been sharing this message but as it stands right now..."his voice trailed off.

"Yes?" Farida said, urging him to finish his sentence.

"I don't..."his voice trailed off again.

"Yes, you don't know what, Ibrahim?"

"I don't know if we are making progress," he said worriedly, "but we are still believing that we can de-escalate this thing before the end of the day."

"Who is doing this?" Farida asked and without waiting for an answer from her best friend who had remained mute for the past several minutes and her fiancé, she continued. "This person has to be insane."

"I quite agree with your sentiment, my dear. The person or people behind this are definitely lunatics." For almost a full minute, there was silence over the airwaves except an occasional crackle as the two friends and Ibrahim were swallowed by their individual thoughts and worries.

Then Ibrahim interrupted the silence.

"Hey, babe!" Ibrahim called out softly with a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"Yes?" Farida was worried about her fiancé's tone of voice.

"I love you, you know that, right?"

"I do."

"I just want you to know that I will always love you."

Apparently her fiancé felt like saying more because that was what he did. "I just want you to know that no matter what, I will always love you. I have never felt this way about another and I don't think I would ever love anyone the way I love you!"

"Why are you saying all this? I know you love me with all your heart but why are you suddenly sounding this way?"

For a couple of seconds there was another silence over the airwaves.

"Nothing." Ibrahim finally said. "I just felt like saying those words to you."

"Don't worry, nothing will happen to the both of us. Very soon this will all die down as usual and we will all move on with our happy lives." Farida reassured both her friend and her fiancé.

She didn't know how far she could have been from the truth.

Just then, the sound of a loud and violent banging on a door began to fill the airwaves. Even over the phone, it was so menacing that it made the best friends a little frightful.

"What is that sound that we are hearing, Ibrahim?" Farida asked.

Ibrahim didn't answer.

Now more worried than ever, she repeated her question.

The loud banging persisted. Then it was followed by a violent crash.

"Don't worry about it, babe, I will call you back soon."

"But what are you?"

Before she could finish that question, the line went dead, leaving her and Deborah deeply shaken.

Still quaking all over, the two ladies finally gave up their plans of attending lectures for the day and began to make their way back to their hostel. With the ongoing tension in the school, they both doubted if any student would show up for lectures. Would any lecturer even be foolhardy enough to appear for lecture amidst the ongoing religious tension in the college campus?

They both entered their hostel room and sat down on one of the bunk beds. Unbeknownst to them, this was the last time they would both be sitting down on that bed.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

"Oh! What is happening? How did everything spiral out of control? How did it get to this?" Deborah asked herself, troubled at the ongoing tension that seemed to crackle the air like gunfire. She looked at the worried face of her friend and wished somehow that Farida and Ibrahim hadn't gotten involved with her.

She had always admired the couple, and she loved them dearly. Farida had been her best friend from childhood. Even as Ibrahim eventually came into the picture, he encouraged and supported their friendship. Unlike some men who would get jealous and stop their spouses from having friends who were also of the same gender, Ibrahim took and treated her like a sister. He valued her opinion and often asked for her suggestions when he wanted to take Farida on a special treat.

Deborah had always admired and envied what her best friend and Ibrahim shared. She had always longed for something like that. A man who would helplessly fall in love with her and treat her like she was the best thing that ever happened to him. But she had been having rotten luck in that department of her life, especially with Mahmood Ali that had been pestering her life.

Deborah was the kind of girl you could call extremely beautiful. Male admirers approached her on a daily basis. But so far, none of them had what she was looking for in the "man of her dreams". Her expectations were not irrational. She was not looking for a completely perfect man. All she wanted was to see that man of vision, dreams, and high hopes in life, but everyone that had come her way in the long run were either going another direction from where she was going in life and destiny, or had no plans and purpose for themselves. Those set of male admirers wanted to live their days as it came, but that wouldn't work for Deborah.

Enough of that, now was not the time to worry about admirers and their shenanigans. Her gaze, filled with worry, aimlessly wandered around the hostel room that was currently shielding them from the brewing trouble outside.

The hostel room was a modest space designed for student accommodation. It was relatively small, housing basic necessities for student living. There were three twin-sized bunk beds with simple metal frames draped in colorful fabrics. The study desk that was beside the bunk beds were cluttered with textbooks and notebooks. Posters, a collage of afro-culture and personal memories adorned the walls.

A wardrobe in the left corner held the traces of their individuality – a juxtaposition of personal styles and tastes and the floor was adorned with a threadbare rug. A fan overhead whirled with the pulsating tension in the students' heart.

Yes, this was where Deborah and her best friend had made memories that were forever chiseled in their psyches.

The nightly rituals of academic endeavors and heartfelt conversations. Their intellectual pursuits. The shared dreams and late-night study sessions. The ebb and flow of daily life.

Their hostel room was not merely a space, but a haven.

As Deborah mused over her worries, her best friend, Farida, was also worried but not for herself. Rather it was for her fiancé. What was the reason for the loud banging on his door? And why was his voice sounding somber as he preconized his love and affections for her?

Finding it hard to remain still, she rummaged through her purse. Finding her phone, she took it out, and with shaky hands, dialed his number. It was switched off. No, this was not possible. Her fiancé's phone number was never, ever, switched off. Even when the electric power was out, he had a strong power bank which he always carried with him. So she knew he wasn't having a flat battery. And it

wasn't a network issue either because there was enough network coverage. Unable to restrain her emotions, Farida burst into tears.

Upon seeing this, Deborah immediately forgot her own problems and wrapped her arms around Farida. Leaning into Deborah's embrace, Farida placed her face on her best friend's shoulders and cried.

"Please help me, Deborah! I'm so worried about Ibrahim. I do not feel comfortable about the way his call ended and now the network providers are saying that his number is switched off. Please help me. I don't want to lose him. I love him so much, I don't think I could live without him!" Farida wailed harder.

"I'm so sorry that this is happening to you and Ibrahim. I got the both of you into this." Deborah said apologetically, her voice thick with regret. "This is all my fault."

At that, Farida pulled back sharply from her friend and looked straight into her eyes. "Where is that coming from?"

Deborah was taken aback by the vehemence of her friend's question.

"Now, I don't want to ever hear you say those words again!" Her voice was stern as she spoke. "All three of us are in this together and if you think that Ibrahim and I would waltz away, then you better have a rethink because we are already neck-deep. We are together in this, all the way."

Now it was Deborah who started crying. Her eyes glistened with tears of gratitude for her friend's support.

Farida wiped the tears from her eyes and instructed Deborah to do the same as she provided a clean white handkerchief from her handbag and offered it to her.

"Instead of sitting here and crying in uncertainty, what I would do is to go to Ibrahim's hostel and find out if all is well with him for myself." Farida's face suddenly looked determined as she said the next words. "My man needs me and I am going to be there for him." She stood up, picked up her phone and began to make her way out of her hostel.

"Hold on, I want to come along with you." Deborah said, trailing behind her friend.

Just as they got to the door and touched the door handle, the same violent banging they heard during the phone call with Ibrahim repeated at their hostel door and without waiting to be invited, the intruder pushed open the door, nearly hitting and injuring Farida and her friend but they jerked back sharply just in time.

The intruder was a student, one of Ibrahim's closest friends and from the way he was panting from the exhaustion of running into their hostel, they both knew that whatever tidings he came with was not good.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The student, his name was Jika Kabiru, looked at both friends and said his first words to them with a sense of urgency.

"A mob is coming for you both and they have been chanting death to Deborah. I have come to ask you to leave the school right away. Your lives are both at risk. Leave now. Run away as far as you can and never return to the school for the sake of your lives!" He finished hastily hoping that the girls would immediately spring into action. But they didn't do as he expected.

Farida and Deborah didn't move as they absorbed his terrible news. They didn't think he was joking or playing pranks on them judging by the frantic look on his face, the sweat that had soaked his shirt and the alarm that was apparent in his tone of voice. Then something dawned on Farida.

"You were the one who knocked on Ibrahim's door the time we were on the phone with him." It wasn't a question. And that was evident by the accusing finger she pointed at Jika. "Don't deny it. I heard it when I was with him on the phone when a violent banging similar to the one you just did on our door was heard."

Jika drew back sharply in shock as though she had just struck him with a 2-by-4. He was silent for a while, contemplating if he should deny or admit the accusation hurled at him. Then composing himself, he opened his mouth and began to give a reply.

"Yes, I was the one. I was among those who followed Ibrahim to calm the ongoing tension instead of carrying out our intended purpose. It seems to aggravate the students all the more because many people started calling Ibrahim a heretic and an apostate Muslim.

"Oh, no! Please tell me you are joking?"

"I really wish I was, but this is not the time for that. I swear on my life and my grandmother's grave that this is not a joke. Many of our friends have gone into hiding and that's why I came to warn you to do the same as well."

"So why are you also not on the run? Is your life not also at risk?"

"I am the son of a prominent cleric, they all know my father and because of that fact alone, they won't touch me. Even so, I will be going to my parents house until this whole thing dies down. Please, enough of the questions, you have to go now. This is what Ibrahim requested that I should say to you. I have to honor my friend's words."

But Farida wouldn't stop asking more questions. "What about Ibrahim?"

At this question, Jika had a sad look on his face. His shoulders sagged and he looked deflated as though all the air had gone out of him. Resigning to the inevitable, he started to give a reply.

"There is no easy way of saying this so I will just say it. Ibrahim is dead."

The news came as a shocking slap to both friends as Farida collapsed in an unquenchable grief.

For the second time that day, Deborah wrapped her arms around her best friend as she cried about her fresh loss.

"Tell me what happened?" Farida asked.

"Someone told me about the planned attacks a couple minutes before it started. I left my hostel room to Ibrahim, hoping to Allah that I would get to him first before the mob. Tried saving him by telling him of the planned attacks. Then he started to hurriedly pack up his things to exit the school. I also helped when he insisted that there were some important things that he couldn't leave behind. But all of a sudden he stopped, walked towards his reading table, tore out a sheet of paper and began to write on it. At that point, it was as if he knew."

"Knew what?" Farida asked, every word coming out of Jika's mouth sinking her deeper into a thickly dark and bottomless pit.

"I think he knew that he wouldn't make it out of the school alive. So he instructed me to carry out one last favor on his behalf. He asked me to come and give you the same warning and tell you that if you loved him, you should leave the school immediately." He stretched out his arms and gave her the letter. "He requested that I should give this letter and journal to you. I had already made it a few miles out of his hostel room when I started hearing some violent sounds. I looked back and saw that the mob had overtaken Ibrahim just as he was coming out of his hostel room. I watched as they beat him to death. That was when I ran."

Unable to take more, Farida fainted. After being revived by her best friend and her fiance's friend, she regained consciousness and started crying. "So after all these years! All these years. And all the promises Ibrahim made to me for a life with him, he left me with just this journal and letter."

Deborah pleaded with her friend. "Ibrahim has already died for us, let's honor his last wish." It probably sounded like the most heartless thing to say to a bereaved person but this was the only thing Deborah could think of saying to her friend whose sense of judgment had been clouded with emotional grief and pain.

Just then, they both started hearing the voice of the mob chanting death to Deborah. Their voices seemed to be getting closer with every second. They were coming, and they were coming fast.

Jika's eyes widened. "I can't afford to be seen with you both, son of a cleric or not. I'm so sorry. But if you both truly loved Ibrahim then I urge you to honor his memories and his last wish by leaving now. We have contacted the security guys. Ibrahim called them on the phone just before leaving his hostel. Go to the security post as soon as you get to the gate, those security personnel are waiting for you. They'll whisk both of you to safety."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Jika finished off and without sparing another pleading look at the girls, turned on his heels and took off. Unwilling to make the same mistakes that Ibrahim made, both Farida and Deborah did not bother about packing anything as they ran out of their hostel, hoping to follow Jika to safety. But with his fast and athletic legs, he was already several miles ahead of them.

No problems, the girls were willing to make it on their own. Farida and Deborah kept running; the mob kept approaching faster. Just as the two friends got towards the end of the hostel block, the mob arrived at the hostel door. Just when the two friends were about turning and leaping out of sight, someone from the crowd spotted them and called the mob's attention to the fleeing students at the same time some people from the crowd were trying to break down the door.

"Hey, everybody, look at them over there. They are trying to escape!"

"Oh, no," both girls exclaimed at the same time.

"We have been spotted, and they are now running towards us." Farida said.

At the sound of the familiar voice that called the attention of the mob, Deborah looked back and confirmed her fears. Mahmood Ali was the one who had spotted her and informed the mob. And how ironic. She remembered that she was putting on the same clothes she wore the day she outrightly rejected his advances.

Both girls kept running for all they were worth. Deborah, who was the fast runner kept running for her life, she dragged her friend who was always several steps behind.

Not long after, Deborah had to assess the situation. With the pace they were going, she only knew that it was just a matter of time before the raging crowd would catch up to them.

But they couldn't stop now. They had to keep on running as fast as their legs, strength and determination could carry them. The mob kept getting closer. 150 yd, 130 yards, 120 yds, 100 yd, 80 yds, 70 yds, when the mob got as close as 65 yards, Deborah instantly knew that it was time to make the call. Her friend might not like it but she would do it because it was the right thing to do and it just might save Farida's life. Anybody seeing the determination on Farida's face would instantly acknowledge that she was truly determined to honor the last words of her fiancé by surviving from the horrible ongoing event.

It was time to stop running and make the sacrifice, Deborah told herself.

Deborah abruptly stopped running and pushed her friend forward, asking her to run. "Run, Farida and never look back."

Farida made a few steps ahead of her friend before the realization of what Deborah wanted to do to her. She also stopped running.

"And what do you think you are doing??" Farida shouted.

"You have been the best friend I have ever had."

"What rubbish are you spitting out of your mouth? First it was Ibrahim and now you? Let the three of us just die today."

"Please, I am the one they are looking for. At this pace you and I are going, I have no doubt that this mob would eventually catch up to us. But if I can stall them... Before they realize that they didn't get us both, you would have made it successfully to the security post."

"But I don't want to escape, Deborah. I am not a fast runner so let me stall them while you go. I want to even go and join Ibrahim."

"Trust me, Ibrahim would not want you to join him, I'm sure. You remember his last wish was for you to move on with your life? You know that if they catch you first, they'd not stop until they get me? Not

for as long as Mahmood Ali is the one leading the crowd. There is no sense in the three of us dying if one of us can be saved by every possible means."

Farida's eyes were blurry with tears as she started to comprehend her friend's words. She could not accept the thought of the loss of her best friend and fiancé in just one day. But she would honor the last wish of her best friend and her fiancé.

The crowd was almost upon them both as they continued to run, but this time with Farida ahead. Deborah slowed down her pace again and the gap between both friends widened more.

With both arms stretched out, Farida tried to go towards her friend and give her one last hug on this side of heaven but Deborah put out her hand, stopping her.

"Stop, if I hug you now, I won't be able to let go."

Farida stopped at the vehemence in her friend's words and gestured uselessly with her outstretched arms. "Please. For this last time."

But Deborah shook her head no.

As Farida turned a way to start running towards the security men that were now calling out to her and her best friend, Deborah called out to her for the last time.

"Farida?"

"Yes, Deborah."

"I want you to never forget me, okay? I want to continue to live on in your heart. Never forget Ibrahim and me."

"I will never forget you, I promise!" Farida was sobbing hard now.

"Greater love has no one than this that a man should lay down his life for his friends." A great man said this, "I need you to find out who."

"I promise to find out who said it." Farida nodded vigorously, hanging on every word that came out of her friend's mouth.

"That was what Ibrahim did for us. That's what I'm about to do for us. And That's what someone great did for us. Never forget, okay?"

Another vigorous nod.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

And with one last encouragement to move on by Deborah, Farida turned away from her best friend for the last time and started running towards the security station just as the mob came upon Deborah and violently started beating and hitting her with everything that they had. The frenzied crowd made sure that Deborah felt the might of their hatred as some went as far as spitting on her body. As if that was not enough, the mob started picking up stones from the surrounding environment and throwing them at her.

Deborah's plan to stall the mob had worked because by the time they noticed that their second quarry was missing, Farida had almost made it to the security post.

In a malevolent bid to stop her from making a successful escape, some students from the crowd tore away and gave chase. They didn't make it. In a couple of seconds, Farida propitiously got to the security men who immediately rushed her into the security building.

There, the concerned security personnel who had been good friends with her and her fiancé immediately helped her to make an escape via the back of the building.

"Some people are waiting for you outside. They are a non-governmental organization from the south who have come to rescue you." One of the security men said, dragging Farida by the hand towards the back of the building.

David King revved his car engine as he and his mother and her friends from the Christ Sisters Association anxiously waited for the students that they had been asked to come and extricate. They waited... and waited... But no one came out of the back of the security post. Upon hearing a loud noise, they all exchanged fearful looks at each other, praying that they were not too late.

But suddenly, the exit door to the security building burst open. They were shocked when the security men came out with just one student instead of the two female students that they were asked to come and rescue.

"What about the other student? We were told that they were two of them." A worried Nicole asked.

"It is too late for the other one. She could not be rescued. Now please run to safety with this one." The security personnel said. He hastily shoved Farida into the open car door, slapped it shut and ordered David, the driver, to take off immediately.

David took off the same time the mob busted out of the back of the security building and started running towards the car. When the crazed students realized that they would not be able to capture the car and its passengers, they started stoning the vehicle.

Nicole and her friends started screaming as stones pelted their rear window.

With an unmatched proficiency in driving, David did some impromptu adroit maneuvering, dodging most of the stones that were thrown at them.

Just before they could drive out of the site and range of the students, Nicole chanced a fine glance at the school security building through the rearview mirror and saw the mob turning their wrath against the security officers who had rescued the student from their murderous hands.

She wondered what would become their fate. Could anyone survive such a mob? She said a short but urgent prayer for the security men. And the other female student who had fallen victim today.

Back in the school campus, the other half of the mob had already beaten Deborah to a pulp. She had stopped protecting her delicate body parts from the brutality of the students with her hands as her strength slowly drifted away. She knew she wasn't going to make it. It could happen any moment

from now, she could feel it. Her final thought before she gave up the ghost was her little brother. "I will miss you so much, Uncle Sam! I wish you were here to hear me finally call you Uncle Sam."

From the little that was left of her peripheral vision, she saw Mahmoud Ali hefting a menacing stone that he would use to finish her off. There was a strange look on his face. Calling it evil would be putting it mildly.

"What do you hope to achieve with this?" She mouthed with all the strength that she could muster. But she never lived long enough to hear his reply, for the heavy stone landed on her skull with a sickening thud. Deborah stopped breathing as her spirit left her body.

Rising up in spirit, and seeing what was being done on her body, Deborah wasn't happy about the way she left this world, but upon seeing the heavenly angels that had come to escort her to her eternal home, her face started glowing, her lips broke out with radiant smiles. "You can kill my body but you cannot kill my soul." Mahmoud Ali had done his worst; he could never touch or harm her anymore.

She watched as the crowd noticed that she was dead. They dropped a car tire on her body and doused her with a gallon of fuel. Mahmoud used the matches he always carried around with him for smoking cigarette and set her dead body on fire. Deborah's spirit watched as her physical body was immediately consumed. Hot flames and billowing smoke shot up like an animal being let out of its cage.

She could hear and see the students, her fellow course mates, the people she once called friends, shouting "Allahu Akbar" over and over again as they watched in drunken pleasure as her body burnt to ashes. She didn't feel angry at the students, only pain. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

Then Deborah Hadiza Zira graciously got into the arms of the angels who had come to carry her to her eternal home and usher her into the presence of her Lord and Savior, the One she had followed since childhood.

Still in the mood of celebration, they took out their phones and started live streaming on various social networks including YouTube. For the websites that weren't available for live stream, they would make sure to upload the video later on.

Seeing that the phone camera's of most of the students were already rolling as they celebrated, Mahmoud knew that the time had come. Thus he seized the opportunity of a lifetime that had been presented to him to distinguish himself from the crowd. After all, he was the one who precipitated this whole thing and he was the one who did the major damage. So it was only proper that he should take all the glory.

He made himself appear bold and confident in front of the live videos the students were making and uploading online and shouted "Allahu Akbar," at the top of his lungs.

Still in front of the camera of the students who were filming the ongoing event, he started telling the whole world that today, he had killed Deborah Hadiza Zira. The crowd cheered and clapped for him as he smacked his chest with his palm several times screaming, "I was the one who killed her, I killed her. Here, here is the matchstick that I use in setting her body on fire!" He shouted and shoved the matchstick in front of the camera.

The crowd went wild.

All the spectacle he made had the intended effect on everyone who watched it. The aftermath was that it yielded the desired result as the video continued to circulate all over the internet sites. It was eventually picked up by someone who forwarded it to Imam Bin Khalid and his son-in-law.

For the past several weeks, the cleric had been in a sour mood but upon seeing the video, his face broke out in a sinister smile. "This boy has potential," he told his son-in-law who agreed with him.

"Send some of our men to go and get him before the police get to him first."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

SOKOTO STATE, NIGERIA

That same night, the family of Deborah learnt about the death of their daughter and sister for the first time when they saw the video like everyone else. The people who have been tasked with delivering the news to the family could not come fast enough to beat the video.

Sleep did not come to Samuel's eyes as he cried all through the night as a result of the barbaric act that was carried out on his sister. He blamed himself. He should have stopped her from going to school those times he felt the urge to do so. Now his sister had died and they couldn't even get her dead body for burial because she had been burnt to ashes.

The next day, the entire country was totally hooked up with the terrible news of the Jungle Justice that was carried out on Deborah Hadiza Zira.

The people who knew the family of Deborah, upon watching the video, visited them to extend their condolences.

While Deborah's parents and sisters had remained in the living room to welcome their visitors who had come to mourn with them, Samuel was missing among them. After watching the video that carried the news of his sister's death the previous night, he had run out of the house to the nearby tree in the backyard. This was where he stayed silently. His parents were touched at the depth of the sorrow their son was feeling. He had refused all his parents and sisters' attempts to make him eat, talk to them or even go inside the house to sleep.

Even when visitors came, he did not move to greet them. Not even the ones that came around to the back of the house to attempt starting a conversation with him. This made his mother burst into tears as her heart was seriously tearing apart at the death of her daughter and the deep sorrow her only boy was going through.

No child, no child should experience such depth of pain and loss.

"Oh, God, why?" Deborah's mother, Esther, would always find herself asking with tears streaming down her face. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, blessed be his name." She would finish after she had been consoled by her husband, remaining daughters and visitors.

On one of those occasions, Samuel heard Esther's lamentations and it made his blood boil. He wanted right there and then to tell her that it wasn't the Lord, instead, it was some extremely wicked, savage, and barbaric animals who took the life of his sister. It wasn't theirs to take but they took it.

"Oh, God, why?"

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, blessed be his name!"

Samuel gritted his teeth tightly from saying something that would make the visitors think that he was rude.

Then his mother began to sing one of her favorite hymns.

[On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
the emblem of suffering and shame;
and I love that old cross where the dearest and best
for a world of lost sinners was slain.]

[So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
and exchange it someday for a crown.]

"That is what Deborah has done!" Esther said with the intention of consoling herself and her family.

"My baby girl has exchanged her cross for a crown!"

"Oh, so soon. It was too soon. Oh, oh, oh! Now I will never see the man that should have become her husband and my son-in-law. I will never see the beautiful grandchildren that she would have given me!"

"Oh, God, why?"

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, blessed be his name."

She continued singing, oblivious to the agitation her words were causing her son..

[In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,

a wondrous beauty I see,

for 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,

to pardon and sanctify me.]

[To that old rugged cross I will ever be true,

its shame and reproach gladly bear;

then he'll call me some day to my home far away,

where his glory forever I'll share.]

"She is now sharing in His glory," Esther shouted, more to convince herself than the actual reality of the words. But it was too soon, too soon!"

"Oh, God, why?"

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh."

Samuel did not give anyone the satisfaction of seeing him react. But one more ...

In the evening of that same day, there was a lull as visitors started dwindling and eventually fizzled out. That was when an unexpected attack was launched against the remaining household of Deborah Hadiza Zira.

Unknown gunmen who were dressed and shrouded in black hoodies violently burst into the family modest building after breaking down the doors. They made their way into the living room unrestricted and saw a man whom they presumed to be Deborah's father and three young girls who were all teenagers. The men didn't hesitate. They unleashed several bursts from their ak-47s, killing all of them instantly.

Then, they darted around the house, scattering, overturning and destroying beyond recognition electronics, furniture, picture frames and everything they got their hands on.

The terrorists moved around the house, looking for anyone who was still alive. They knew that they had yet to kill the wife of the man and the only son of the family. The Intel they received to carry out this assignment had contained everything that they needed to know about the Zira family.

Esther, who had been in the kitchen when the attack on her family started, had frozen in shock, unable to believe what was happening to her family. Upon seeing that the unknown gunmen were moving around the house, looking for her and Samuel so that they could finish them off, she immediately shook herself off from her shocked state and began to run with the intention of escaping through the back door. She was going to take Samuel and run away with him.

But she was not fast enough. One of the terrorists rushed in and shot her at the back, twice, and immediately retracted from the kitchen to rejoin his men who were scouring the other rooms for Samuel. Esther dropped to the ground. She was fast losing blood as they pulled around her. It was already too late. She knew she could not make it but she wouldn't let these men, whomever they were, to have a 100% success on this evil mission that they had been sent. With the desire and

determination not to allow the terrorist to kill them off, she used all her strength and shouted for her son to run.

Samuel heard his mother's voice and the last command that she was giving him but he hesitated. He had seen what was happening to his family. And how his mother had gone down with multiple bullets to her back. And he wanted to die with them. After all, he lost all essence of living after his sister whom he loved so much, but never had the opportunity to tell her, died.

So he shook his head no at his mother who was seeing him through the open back door as he waited, even anticipating the end to come for him as well. Finally, the entire family would be reunited in heaven.

But there was a desperate plea on his mother's face. "If you have any love for me, your mother, and your sister Deborah, then run now!"

That got him. He knew he had been given a second chance to do something right. He would do this for his family and Deborah. He didn't know how he would go about it, he was just a young boy of nine years but he would trust the God of his parents to take care of him.

He was about to give one last wave to his mother, his father and sisters whom he was now sure were lying in the pool of their own blood, his family house and all the memories it held, when one of the terrorists who had returned to the kitchen spotted him and pointed the others towards him. The terrorist began to give chase as Samuel spun around and took flight for all he was worth.

He never witnessed the peaceful expression on his mother's face as she breathed her last, assured that her intelligent son would endure. Now, he fulfilled her final wish, unafraid, for she believed God would accompany him in their absence. She faced the future with confidence, knowing that, guided by God, Samuel would surpass any accomplishments they could have achieved had they lived. Though acknowledging the challenges ahead, she trusted God to navigate the arduous path for their beloved son.

She had always known that her son had a great place in destiny and that was why she had named him Samuel. She somehow related her story to the story of Hannah in the Bible.

Hannah desperately wanted a child but she could not until God gave her Samuel. In her own case, she had always wanted a male child but he finally came after she'd given birth to four girls. That was why she named him Samuel.

Hannah gave up her son at the age of three and he went on to become one of the greatest prophets and judges of Israel. She was giving up her own son at the age of nine and she knew that he would do fine.

"I love you, my baby, Samuel. My pride, my joy." And with those last thoughts, she transited from this life to eternity where she happily reunited with her first daughter, Deborah, her other children and her husband who had gone a few minutes ahead of her. Their joy was completed when they saw the face of their Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

TRINITY HOSPITAL, WOJI, PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

Farida lay in a hospital bed, hooked to all sorts of IV. The room was quiet but its silence was punctuated by the beeping sound from one of the machines in the hospital room.

She was not the only one in the hospital room. Beside her bed sat two figures, Zainab and Nicole, who had hardly left her side since she was admitted into the hospital 3 days ago.

The air in the hospital room hung heavy with the lingering scent of antiseptic, a futile attempt to cleanse the atmosphere from the wounds that transcended the physical. Outside, the rhythmic hum of the hospital's generators underscored the underlying tension.

The southern path of Nigeria, despite its geographical distance from Sokoto State, had not been able to fully shield Farida from the haunting memories of the violent mob.

Since the past 3 days that she was rescued, she had woken up several times screaming hysterically. She'd also been heard subconsciously calling out to her late fiancé and best friend.

Nicole and Zainab had determined to be the guardians of her healing. They constantly disregarded their own comfort and a much needed rest, standing vigilant by her side, offering, to the best of their abilities, solace to the young girl's broken spirit.

The hospital room seemed almost soundproof, muffling the distant city noises and the whispers of the medical staff outside. But Zainab and Nicole knew that this cocoon presented a temporary respite for Farida. They couldn't remain in this hospital for long. They would have to move her, soon. But they didn't want to bother about that now. They figured that they would cross the bridge when they got to it.

Farida opened her eyes and requested for water. It came out more like a croak.

Nicole reached for water while Zainab helped to roll her bed to an upright position so that she could drink.

"Do you need anything now?" "Should I ring for the nurses?" Zainab fussed over Farida as Nicole returned the liquid drink to its previous position.

Before she could give a coherent reply, David burst into the hospital room, eyes wide and intensified. What came out of his mouth next was not good news.

"Mom! Aunt Zainab! Some people are coming for Farida, they've discovered where she is, we have to get her out now!"

Upon seeing the disapproving look his mother and her friend gave him, and the distress his words had caused Farida, David became remorseful.

"Don't worry my dear, everything is still under control and nothing will happen to you." Nicole tried to comfort Farida but it was having little effect.

A moment later, she and Zainab left the hospital room with David. This conversation was definitely not the kind to be had in front of Farida.

"Farida," David began, his voice low and urgent, "they're coming for her. The people who are supporting that Mahmood Ali guy who orchestrated the horror in Sokoto State. They've tracked her here."

"Wait, wait, wait! Nicole placed both hands on her waist in a typical African mother's stern gesture.

"And how did you know this, David?"

"I first saw it on YouTube, and while I was preparing to come tell you, the television station I was tuned to broke their regular program to play the video that is now going viral."

David brought out his phone and began to play the video to his mother and her friend. The shocked expression on their faces showed that they did not know this latest development. The television in Farida's hospital room was turned off. They were not browsing the internet or social media at that time for the latest.

When the video finished playing, Nicole asked her son to replay it.

The message was clear. Heavily armed hooded men who claimed to be members of Boko Haram were in front of a rolling video that was mounted on a tripod from the look of things.

"We know where she is staying in the south and we are coming for her." One of the men in the video said. "She can never escape the wrath of Allah. Our Imam has declared a fatwa on Farida Madaki. We have decided to be the ones to carry it out."

The man in the video continued talking but Nicole was no longer listening.

"What's a fatwa?" She asked Zainab, who was once a Muslim.

"A fatwa is a religious ruling or opinion issued by an Islamic scholar or mufti. It is usually in response to a question posed by a Muslim concerning Islamic law or doctrine and is not legally binding. The word "fatwa" comes from the Arabic root f-t-y, which means "to decide" or "to give an opinion. But extremists use it as a declaration of death sentence."

"How did they find her? We took every precaution." Nicole asked David.

"I'm afraid I don't know." His eyes mirrored the confusion on her face.

Nicole's mind raced as she assessed the gravity of the situation. The stark reality of danger closing in on Farida sent shivers down her spine. She exchanged a glance with Zainab, a silent understanding passing between them.

Then, Zainab's nostrils flared, "we can't let them get their hands on her. We have to do something now!"

"I agree with you, Zainab. Our best option is to get her out of the country because even the South is no longer safe for her but she doesn't have an international passport. We would have taken her to any country here in West Africa without a visa." Nicole said. "Not having a passport complicates everything immensely."

"No, if we have to move her again, Nicole, then we have to do it right," Zainab said, her tone steady despite the underlying tension. "To a safer location, somewhere they won't think to look."

"What are you saying exactly?" Nicole asked, Finally comprehending.

Zainab placed an arm on Nicole's. "I have a way out, trust me."

Nicole nodded and Zainab proceeded to lay out her plan.

"I can get her a forged passport with a South African identity. She would leave Nigeria as a South African. And when she gets to Cape Town, she would catch another flight to Australia where she would settle down with another identity, this time Australian. South Africa has good diplomatic ties with Australia that allows them to enter the country without visas."

As the gravity of the plan sank in, Nicole hesitated, "Forging a passport? That's risky business, Zainab."

With her eyes betraying a hint of a secret life, Zainab placed a reassuring hand on Nicole's shoulder.

"This is our best option, trust me."

"But Farida could go to jail for that. And we, as accomplices."

"That's if we don't do it right. But we can pull this thing off without a hitch and no one would be the wiser."

David's voice was filled with concern as he spoke up, "But what if something goes wrong?"

Zainab met his gaze, responding calmly, "I've faced worse odds. This plan has a high chance of success. We just need everyone on board."

For what looked like an eternity, Nicole regarded Zainab with a probing gaze. "This isn't your first rodeo, is it?" she finally queried, attempting to unravel the layers of mystery that surrounded her enigmatic friend.

A wistful smile played on Zainab's lips. "One day, I'll share my story with you and the rest of our sisters. For now, let's focus on getting Farida to safety."

And without a shadow of doubt, Nicole knew that her friend had been running an underground railroad that she used to rescue people who were experiencing religious persecution. She wanted to tell Zainab that she was proud of her. It was indeed a pleasure to be friends with a beautiful soul like Zainab who had been risking her life daily to save others.

"But we seem to be forgetting something here." David cut in, interrupting his mother's admiration for her friend. .

"What's that?" Zainab asked.

"Farida is too sick to travel on her own."

And again, that knowing look from Zainab. The lady was indeed a genius. Nicole told herself that after Farida's rescue operation, she would make a personal request to Zainab to join her underground rare road.

"Yes, she won't be traveling alone. I will ask my husband to make two forged passports, the second will be for you David."

David was flabbergasted. "Are you saying?"

"That you will accompany her in this journey before you return to the States." Zainab finished.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

NNAMDI AZIKIWE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, ABUJA, NIGERIA

Six hours after the plan to get Farida out of the country was put in motion, Farida and David were in time for their flight to South Africa from the Nnamdi Azikiwe International airport, Abuja.

Careful not to leave any paper trail to Zainab's underground work of rescuing people out of the country, the duo had, in agreement with Nicole and Zainab, not boarded a flight from the Port Harcourt International airport which was located at Omagwa. Instead, a private chopper, one of David's mother and her friends' many resources, had ferried them to Abuja where they landed and hunkered in a private strip as they waited for the time of their scheduled flight. They totally avoided lodging in a hotel or dining in a restaurant. Meticulous efforts were being made to keep their movements as secret as possible. They hoped it was bearing the desired results. So far, they had not been discovered by their pursuers, thus, they guessed it was a good thing.

After clearing the airport security, they made it to the passport check and joined the queue. The line was a serpentine mass of humanity that snaked through the terminal. Although he wasn't sure of his standing with the God of his mother, David found himself sending up silent prayers for help. For several moments, the prayer reverberated within him. It was a desperate plea for an uneventful passage through the critical checkpoint.

Both he and Farida were carrying a forged passport with South African identities. They were playing the role of brother and sister from Northern Sotho who lived in Pretoria, South Africa. David's name was Lethabo Shawn Segudla while Farida was going by the name Keneilwe Jacqueline Segudla. They'd even learnt some common phrases like, Come - etla, Go - tsamya, and How are you - o kae, and a bunch of other phrases that David was struggling to remember. He didn't know how this would come in handy should they be put to the test by a real South African who was fluent in the language. Both he and Farida looked nothing like South Africans. That's why he was praying that they wouldn't see through the ruse.

All their rigorous planning and efforts had boiled down to this. The moment had arrived. And the next few minutes would prove how much they could withstand the test of the toughest times either of them had ever faced in their entire life.

The line inched forward. It was slow. Agonizingly slow. But no problems at all, David told himself. They were determined to make it. They would make it. Just seven people in front of him.

Why was that lady in the passport control appearing to be flirting with that rich man that was dressed in a pink striped designer suit? Why won't she stamp the darn thing and move on to the next person? Finally, the rich dude, probably old money from the look of things, moved on. Six more people. Five more. Four. Three. Just three more people. Two middle aged identical ladies, probably twins, and one guy who wasn't much older than David. They were so close. So close to leaving the country. But David would not breathe until he and Farida successfully crossed over.

Two more people to go. Farida was in front of David so there were technically three people. But he didn't mind because he had made it intentionally so. He wanted her passport to be stamped first and hopefully before they were exposed. If their true identity was discovered, he had planned for every contingency. And that included taking the fall and exonerating Farida. He figured that with his father's financial status and connection in the country, it would only be a matter of time before they'd let him go with only a slap on his wrist. Or nothing. It all depended on how many strings his father could pull.

One more person before Farida. Great. But David was still holding his breath. It wasn't yet over until it was over. In front of David, Farida was quaking like a leaf in autumn. At first, it was inconspicuous but as each second ticked by, it started becoming more obvious. The excitement of coming so close to the biggest test of her life must have been getting to her. David placed an arm on Farida's shoulder to steady her. Good, the quaking was reducing. David wanted it to vanish altogether. It would be of no help for the both of them should the passport control decipher her palpable fear.

David looked past Farida and didn't like what he was seeing. This lady had no shame. Now she was flirting with a young man that was the same age as David. "Business or pleasure?" David saw and heard her ask the young man with a smile that had an undertone. What kind of stupid question was that? "doggone it!" He wanted to let out more colorful words at the lady but he remembered that it would contrast with the humble heart that he was using to pray at the moment.

David didn't catch the guy's reply as he leaned forward and spoke to the lady. He seemed to be soaking in the attention that he was getting from the beautiful lady who should be at least ten years older than him. He was ashamed that this young man had let his teenage testosterone trail him to his early twenties.

Just as the lady was about to stamp the young man's passport, a disquieting murmur echoed through the air. The ambient hum of the airport turned into an ominous symphony, drowning out the mundane sounds of travel. Heads turned collectively as the buzzing grew louder.

Towards one of the security checkpoints, there was a disturbance growing in intensity.

"What's happening, David?" Farida asked, confused.

"Farida, something's not right. Stay close." David whispered calmly so that the people around them wouldn't panic, but in his heart, he feared he knew what this already was.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Suddenly, six hooded figures materialized, they looked like a nightmare silhouette against the airport lights. AK-47s slung over their shoulders, they advanced with purposeful menace. The realization hit David and Farida like a shockwave. David was horrified to see his biggest nightmare coming to pass. After all their meticulous efforts, the terrorists had found them. He didn't know how but they had been found.

***"David, what do we do?" Farida asked, wide-eyed.

**David needed to take control of the situation immediately.

"We need to move, now!"

He took her by the hand as they began to shuffle their way around the travelers who had frozen in one spot upon seeing the unknown gunmen.

A palpable tension seized the air. David's prayer shifted from silent supplication to a desperate plea for providence.

The first gunshot shattered the airport's façade of normalcy as the terrorists noticed their targets slipping away from their reach.

Chaos erupted.

The six hooded men started shooting at the airport security personnel with deadly accuracy.

There was pandemonium as the loud sounds of the gunshots unfroze both airport staff workers and passengers.

David could see the airport security returning fire but they never stood a chance.

Adrenaline surging through their veins, Farida and David broke into a full-blown run, their survival instincts propelling them away from the encroaching danger.

With some of the airport security now lying dead in the pool of their own blood, the hooded men turned their sights to the fleeing couple. Deafening echoes of gunfire reverberated through the terminal.

Immersed in the cacophony of panic, David and Farida zigzagged through the tumult, their pursuers hot on their heels. Bullets dislodged from AK-47s ricocheted and slammed around them, pouring down like a Nigerian August rain. They both counted it a miracle that none had blown out their skull or any part of their exposed bodies. Not yet.

"Why are they after us? What did I do to them that they want to kill me?" Farida asked.

"We don't have time to figure that out now. Just keep running!"

As the airport security and immigration officers called for backup, David and Farida weaved through the chaos with a singular focus—to escape the clutches of those determined to thwart their flight to freedom.

They both continued to dodge obstacles that were both informed of humans and equipment, eluding the relentless pursuit.

"You can never find a darn exit when you desperately need one." David said under his breath.

Finally he gave up on using the visitors exit. Who needed it when they could use the ones for airport staff in a pandemonium like this and no one would be the wiser.

And with that, David surprised his pursuers by turning Farida around and running back inside the airport.

Before they could figure out what he was doing, it was already too late. David and Farida had escaped via an exit tagged "staff only".

CHAPTER FIFTY

Bursting out into the night air from one of the entrances that was only used by the airport staff, Farida and David ran towards the nearest taxi stand. It was deserted by humans, the drivers and nearby hawkers had taken flight as soon as the gunfire started.

But several cars were at the taxi stand, temporarily abandoned by the owners who could not escape with them due to the urgency of the moment. David was grateful to see so many rides, it was all for their taking, it was what he wanted and he was grateful for that.

"Stay close to me, Farida, no matter what, okay?" David whispered.

Farida nodded, her eyes reflecting a mix of fear and trust in David's guidance.

Just then, their pursuers came out from the airport through the same side entrance and left after the duo. David, a dual American citizen who carried a concealed permit back in the United States, wished that it was currently the same for him in Nigeria. He would have been able to hold off the unknown gunmen with a return fire. He knew he was no match against six burly hooded men armed with AK-47 machine guns. All he wanted to do was to stall them long enough until he escaped with Farida.

Due to the urgency of finding what they were looking for, David briefly let go of Farida's hand and instructed her to look for an unlocked vehicle. Without any single word of protest, Farida immediately set out to carry out her task.

Amid the deserted taxis, both Farida and David scanned for an escape vehicle as the hooded men were almost upon them. Finally they struck pay dirt when David opened a 2022 model Iridium Silver Metallic Mercedes with ease. Here was a beacon of opportunity for escape. For the first time since the gunmen started pursuing, David felt hopeful that they would both come out of the situation alive and unscathed.

Farida noticed a problem with their miracle car and she called David to it. The key to the unlocked Mercedes was nowhere to be found.

"Get in. I'll hotwire it." David said.

Farida was nervous but hopeful. "Can you do that?"

David smiled grimly. "You'd be surprised what skills come in handy in situations like this."

As David worked his magic on the hotwiring process, the pursuers, undeterred, closed the distance and opened the back door of the Mercedes, determined not to let their prey out of their sight. But just as the first of the hooded men was entering the vehicle, the Mercedes roared to life and zoomed off, the force of such quick action knocking off the first assailant who was halfway into the vehicle, off balance. Unable to quickly regain his balance, the man fell off to the ground as the back door of the Mercedes closed with the force of gravity.

Because of David's fast driving, in a matter of seconds, the armed men were no longer in sight, nor were they within an arm's reach of the terrorists.

"Where are we headed?" Farida inquired breathlessly after they had put a great distance between themselves and their pursuers.

"Obviously our plan of getting you out of the country with a forged passport has been botched."

"So, all hope is lost for me?" Farida's eyes were downcast as she said this.

"Not yet. I have something else off my sleeve."

"What is it?"

"The American embassy. That's our next stop. You'll seek asylum there." David said as he turned into the highway that led to the American embassy located at 1075 Diplomatic Drive, Central District Area, Abuja and accelerated.

Farida was relieved and grateful for David's quick thinking. Seeking asylum never occurred to her. "The embassy? Okay, let's go!"

"What's the plan at the embassy?" She asked after a few moments of silence passed between them.

"We'll explain the situation. You have a justifiable reason for seeking asylum."

David inconspicuously eyed the rearview mirror as he had done multiple times since he started driving the Mercedes. Farida was asking another question for clarification but he cut her off. "Hold on. We might have company."

For the past couple of minutes or thereabout, David had noticed a black SUV trailing behind them. If he was in the United States, he'd think that the FBI were onto them. That thought made him smile, however briefly. Somehow, their pursuers had found them, again. He didn't know if the special utility vehicle was their own or if they had stolen and hot wired it like he did to the Mercedes that he was currently driving.

"Oh, no! What do we do?" Farida asked. The nervousness that she felt in the beginning had returned with full force.

David was resolute. "I'll do my best to lose them. Just be ready for anything."

The pursuit intensified as David increased the speed to 240 miles per hour. "Let's see how fast this baby can go."

Farida was screaming that the speed was too much and at this rate, they were sure to have an accident while simultaneously worried that they'd be apprehended by the unknown gunmen if David slowed down even a little. Afraid for her life and David's, she burst into tears.

Farida's screaming and now her crying, was becoming a huge distraction that David didn't want. He wished he could stuff her mouth with something to keep her quiet. Someone should tell this girl to watch Formula 1. With the way he kept dodging cars as he overtook them at the speed of lightning, David believed that Louis Hamilton would have been proud of him if he could see him right now. But, everything turned for the worst.

Due to the fast speed he was driving the Mercedes, when he did get to 270, the Mercedes became lightweight as it was lifted a few inches from the ground. Farida became dizzy and fainted. For almost a minute, the Mercedes continued flying like that in the air. Calling on the God of his mother that he had promised to thank if they came out of this action movie alive, David used the best skill that he had learned for situations like this to get the car under control. Finally all four tires landed on the paved highway with a bang that jolted Farida awake.

"Where are we?" She asked in a daze.

"All I can say for now is that you are not in heaven yet." David shouted over the roar of the engine.

There was a brief lull and David used the opportunity to scan his rear view mirror again. He was shocked to see that in spite of his maneuverings, he had not been able to shake off the SUV from his trail. Whoever was driving the vehicle must be very good.

Farida saw the grim expression on his face no matter how much he tried to hide it and looked at the rear view mirror for herself.

"David, they are almost upon us!"

It was true. The SUV was almost touching the back bumper of the Mercedes. They were about to be rammed, there was no doubt about that now.

They were almost at the American embassy but David didn't think that they would make it. He would have to take another route to the American embassy. And that was what he did.

As soon as he got to the nearest intersection, he did a U-turn that his pursuers were apparently not expecting because they drove past that intersection at a high speed. Before the SUV could catch up, David had given them at least a mile gap.

Both he and his only companion in the Mercedes seemed to be holding their breath as he careened into another route that led to the embassy.

This was the last one.

"Hold tight. We're almost there."

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

Adrenaline fueling his body, David did not slow down until he was a few yards away from the American embassy.

At the 1st opportunity to stop, David maneuvered the stolen Mercedes within a stone's throw of the American embassy. Fifty yards away, he brought the car to an abrupt halt, urgency pulsating through his veins. With a swift command, he motioned for Farida to exit the car from the passenger's side door as he did the same with the driver's door.

They had both taken a few steps closer to their safe haven when David's eyes darted towards the pursuing vehicle. He watched as the car parked behind the stolen Mercedes that he and Farida had driven in. Five hooded men spilled out from the vehicle before its engine growled to a stop. The sixth man must be the driver, David thought. It didn't take long for his thoughts to be proven accurate as the sixth hooded man jumped out of the driver's side and joined the other assailants.

With an occasional glance to his back, David was horrified to see that their pursuers were fast closing the distance with chilling determination. It was time to run faster, David knew. But that was not possible with Farida's limited speed. David took her hand as he continued to run ahead of her, hoping to give her a much needed boost. And if it didn't suffice, he was willing to carry her should their pursuers get too close for comfort.

It was working. Well, not as David wanted but Farida's speed had increased. "Stay close. We're almost there." He urged her when it looked as though her steps had slowed down a notch or two.

"I can't do better than this, I'm so sorry. I'm on my last strength." The fear in her eyes since this escape operation started launched into another level. "I have never been a fast runner all my life and my best friend died because of it."

Regardless of the urgent situation that they were currently in, David was still able to carefully observe Farida. She looked like she was going to stop running and throw in the towel. David couldn't let that happen. He wanted to tell her that it wasn't her fault that her friend died but he didn't have the time for a back and forth should she insist that she was complacent. So he opted, instead, for what he thought was the ideal alternative. "Don't worry, you are doing great. You can do this. Don't give up." He continued his pep talk as each step they took brought them nearer to their objective.

As the armed pursuers closed in, David and Farida raised their voices in a desperate plea.

"Asylum! We seek asylum!" David shouted.

"Help us! Please!" Farida called out in distress at the U.S. Marines guarding the embassy gate.

Their cries reached the vigilant ears of the U.S. Marines guarding the embassy gates. In an instant, the trained soldiers shifted into action, their eyes narrowing on the seemingly approaching threat.

"Hold your fire!" A Marine officer yelled at his colleagues. Then to Farida and David he said, "Identify yourselves!"

David and Farida, breathless and desperate, pointed towards the hooded men gaining ground.

"We're fleeing from them! Seeking asylum!" David pleaded. Actually Farida was the only one seeking asylum. David was a dual American citizen, but this was not the right place and time to start explaining the entire circumstance from ground to top.

"Secure the gate!" Another U.S. Marine Officer instructed his team while the first Marine Officer who had spoken earlier asked the rest to move towards the asylum seeking duo.

With a seamless coordination of military precision, the Marines sprinted towards the desperate duo. David tightened his grip on Farida's hand, determination etched across his face as the six hooded men were now almost upon them.

The hooded men, realizing their prey slipping away into the saving arms of the U.S. Marines, stopped running and opened fire with the intention of winning the battle by all means. The sound and flashes of the gunfire was like thunder in the night sky. Bullets whizzed dangerously close as the Marines shielded David and Farida as the unknown gunmen sprayed them with everything they had.

"Get them inside! Now!" The same first Marine Officer continued barking orders to his men.

In a burst of controlled chaos, the Marines practically lifted Farida, carrying her towards the safety of the embassy. David, running alongside, felt the adrenaline surge, a mixture of relief and renewed hope for this girl that his mother and her friends had sacrificed and risked so much to save.

As they entered inside the gate, the steel barriers began to close, sealing off the encroaching pursuers. The emboldened terrorists, realizing their failed pursuit, intensified their gunfire in a final act of desperation.

"Seal the gate! Hold the line!" The second Marine Officer yelled above the loud crackling of gunfire.

The embassy gates swung shut with a resounding thud. The hooded men, now realizing their failure in spite of all their efforts, screamed in frustration as the Marines secured the perimeter.

Inside the embassy compound, a surreal calm replaced the chaos outside the walls of the embassy.

Farida, still in the arms of the Marines, looked back at David, gratitude and fear mingling in her eyes.

"Thank you." She mouthed.

David nodded. "You're safe now."

The Marine officers, still vigilant even in the aftermath, scanned the surroundings for any lingering threats.

Farida and David were both taken into one of the secured rooms at the embassy.

"You'll be safe here. We'll take it from here." The first Marine Officer whose name David did not yet know said. He appeared to be the commander of his team.

David stretched out his hand. "Thank you!"

"Boatwright. Austin Boatwright, but you can call me Austin." The Marine Officer accepted his outstretched arm for a handshake.

"I am David King, and this is Farida Madaki. Thank you, Austin. I'm sure I speak on behalf of both of us when I say that we are very grateful for rescuing us from the hands of those terrorists."

The Marine officer nodded. "And now, it's time to hear your true story and what you are really doing here because being a Florida native myself, I can recognize that accent anywhere I hear it." As he spoke, David noted that he remained unruffled.

"You are correct, Austin. I'm from Tampa. A quarterback at Florida State University ... Tallahassee. But from her accent," David pointed towards Farida, - "you know she is a Northern Nigerian. She is the only one seeking asylum and the reason for that is a long story. You and your colleagues would have to settle down for this one."

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

Bin Khalid's impatience was at a boiling point as he awaited news on the fate of the six hooded men dispatched after Farida. Besides him was his equally impatient son-in-law, Abdallah El-Badawi but he was much too cool about it. As usual, they were both seated in the dimly lit private study of his sprawling duplex compound.

"Why have these stupid boys, children of the South, yet to call with the news they very well know that I am expecting?" Bin Khalid asked the only other occupant in the private study.

"I don't know, father. But surely they have a good reason."

El-Badawi, as always, silently observed his father-in-law, mentally making notes of all his angry moves, gestures and muttering. El-Badawi concluded that if the man was a movie, he would definitely be an entertaining one. The man was a volcano, that's for sure; ready to erupt at the slightest provocation. It was also a good thing that his father-in-law was not a white man, his whole body and not just his face, would have become the color of tomatoes.

In response to his son-in-law's reply, Bin Khalid scoffed, "Good reason indeed!" Before he could go further, unleashing his bitterness on El-Badawi, the phone rang; the much anticipated phone call had finally arrived.

Eyes gleaming, and hands trembling in excitement, Bin Khalid answered the phone call and as was customary with him, he skipped all the preambles and dove straight into the main thing.

The caller's voice sounded uneasy as he spoke. "Some people made arrangements for her escape, we are suspecting that it is the same people who ran away with her from the north. She and one unidentifiable guy tried to leave the country with a forged passport, but they managed to make it successfully out of the airport as they saw us approaching. We pursued them for a while but the person who was aiding her did something that we never anticipated. He drove her to the American embassy. She's now seeking asylum in the American embassy as we speak."

For what looked like a couple of minutes although it was much shorter, the words hung in the air untouched. Unattended to. Then without warning, rage, like a dormant volcano, erupted within Bin Khalid. In a flurry of unrestrained fury, he rose from his seat, sending objects flying around before crashing to the floor.

"Incompetence! How could you have let this happen?" Bin Khalid roared. You are the professionals, you are the skilled ones. So how could you not be able to anticipate every move these infidels would make?

The caller started to give an explanatory response but Bin Khalid was not listening. All he knew was these stupid boys had failed in one simple task that he gave them.

The phone call was abruptly terminated, the caller left hanging without a farewell.

Bin Khalid was still seething but he calmly faced his son-in-law and told him that they must rectify this immediately. Farida must not escape the wrath of judgment that had been placed upon her by Allah. And he knew what to do to ensure that it didn't happen.

Bin Khalid dialed a number that held the power to bend the course of events – President Mustafa.

"Hello." The person on the other side said as soon as the call was answered.

But Bin Khalid didn't bother with the pleasantries. "Mustafa, this is Bin Khalid. Farida must not leave the country. I need you to take immediate action." He said it with an authoritative, no nonsense voice.

President Mustafa didn't have to ask who he was trying to prevent from leaving the country. He had also been following the news for the past few days. He had seen the videos of the hooded men that vowed to finish what Mahmood Ali had started.

"What do you want me to do?" asked the resigned voice.

This made the cleric believe that the president was showing signs of weakness. He would have to light the fire under the man to compel him to do his bidding.

"My men just called and told me that Farida Madaki is trying to leave the country via an asylum permit from the American embassy. What I want you to do is to call the American ambassador, using your executive office to demand that she not be granted an asylum permit."

"Bin Khalid, my good friend, it doesn't work like that." The president's tone sounded patronizing, this only infuriated the cleric all the more.

"I couldn't give a world of dancing canaries how it works! I want you to listen and listen well. Call ambassador, uh, uh"...

"Jason Reed," his son-in-law who was seeing his struggles supplied.

"Yes, call ambassador Jason Reed, using your executive office to request that he not grant the asylum request. Tell him that as the president of Nigeria, you insist on solving the ongoing conundrum between Farida and the people who are after her life internally. Tell him that the reason you have to do this is to make sure that the media and the rest of the world would not see one more thing to add to the negative image that is trailing behind Nigeria at the world stage. Tell him that you would ensure maximum protection for the girl. Then, if you notice that he is hesitating to give you a positive response, bring out your ace card in the form of a veiled threat. Make him understand that it would be in his best interest to honor your executive order to ensure a continuous good international relations with the United States."

Hesitant yet aware of the consequences of defying Bin Khalid, Mustafa listened as instructions were laid out. He tried to oppose the cleric's directive but with an open threat to bury his political career, he agreed to be a player in the ongoing game.

"It is good that you have agreed to serve Allah with the capacity of your office if not, you know"...

"If nothing! You don't have to threaten me. I told you that I'll handle it, Bin Khalid."

With a smile of satisfaction since the whole ordeal started, the cleric ended the call. Bin Khalid did not have to be a fly on the president's wall to know that he was doing as instructed. Once again, the unassailable chess master had made another significant move that everyone else would struggle to catch up. The smile remained on his face as he leaned back on his seat. His son-in-law, El-Badawi, continued to inconspicuously observe his body language.

Inside the American embassy, Farida and David had been successfully taken to a secured room where they were surrounded by some US Marines.

Farida was apprehensive. Unable to hold back the only question on her mind, she leaned towards David making sure to keep her voice low so that the marine officers with them would not overhear the question she was about to ask.

"What if they don't grant me asylum?"

David looked at her and could see the worry written all over her face and the stiffness of her body. There, he became solidly resolute to help this girl no matter what. "We'll find a way to get you out of this country. We can't let those terrorists capture you."

Farida, in spite of David's reassurance, still had her reservations although she didn't voice it out. But in her heart, she thought, what else would David be able to do for her if she was denied the asylum request? After the failure of trying to leave the country with a forged passport, the American asylum

permit was her safest bet. So why did David seem so determined to get her out of the country? And why was he so sure that they would be able to pull this thing off come hell or high water?

Still deep in her contemplations, she came to a decisive conclusion of what she must do.

As the daughter of a skilled Hunter, although she had never hunted with a gun before, she had gone with her father countless times to his hunting adventures. It was in one of those hunting missions that her father had taught her a lesson of capturing an unsuspecting prey.

Farida had decided that if she was denied an asylum permit, she would calmly walk towards the marine officers and before anyone would suspect what she was about to do, she'd take one of their guns, click off the safety and turn it on herself. In case that one, too, failed, she would beg them to mercifully take her life because death would be better than what she would face in the hands of the terrorist who were after her life.

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

AMERICAN EMBASSY, ABUJA, NIGERIA

Despite having gone home earlier, ambassador Jason Reed found himself urgently recalled to the embassy. The weight of an unconventional asylum permit demanded his signature that very night, a document that would pave the way for a nineteen year old girl whose name was Farida to leave the clutches of those who sought to take her life.

Moving towards his office in long strides, he was currently dressed in a tailored navy blue suit, the crisp lines accentuating his authoritative presence. His black shoes were polished and shiny as though he was just coming to work, even though he was dressed in casual attire fifteen minutes ago in his house. Jason was the kind who put meticulous efforts to his appearance because for him, it complimented and defined his role as an ambassador. Even his height, standing at a commanding 6 feet, exuded an air of authority befitting his diplomatic position.

"The urgency of this asylum... how deep does this evil go?" Jason muttered to himself as he got to an archway that led to his office and turned to the right.

As he entered his office, a hushed urgency pervaded the atmosphere. His assistant, an average-height brunette with freckles, entered with news that the Nigerian president was on the line. His capable assistant was equally attired in a professional manner, a charcoal gray pantsuit and blazer, low-heeled polished shoes., The only difference between her and ambassador Jason was that she had not gone home yet.

As Jason and his secretary looked at each other, there was immediately an agreement that passed between them both. The silent acknowledgment between them spoke volumes—this call was no routine diplomatic affair.

"Stall the call for a few minutes, please." Jason said calmly, and without another word, the secretary spun around and made her way out of his office with the intention of doing as her boss instructed.

Without hesitation, Jason sat down on his executive office swivel leather chair and faced the asylum request. The name he saw on the document however, baffled and bemused him. He had been told that the name of the girl that he was supposed to grant an asylum to the United States was Farida Madaki, but the name he was currently seeing on the document was Florida Madaky. Of course, this was a mistake. Or a deliberate move by the person who prepared this document. Regardless of what it was, Jason wouldn't bother asking them to prepare another document with an accurate spelling of the name. That would take another time that they did not have to get Farida safely out of the country. And when she got to the United States, she would still have the option of officially changing her name to Farida or choose to remain with Florida.

Just like every Nigerian and most foreigners who lived in Nigeria and followed the news, Jason had heard about the death of Deborah Hadiza Zira. Thus he knew that the young girl waiting for an asylum permit just outside his office was the one who had escaped the student mob. And even the document he was currently holding said as much.

At that point, it became clear to Jason what he must do. He would do what he was morally obligated to do and it did not only end with his diplomatic duty of signing the asylum document. Determination etched his features as he signed it, a decisive move that would affect all the lives involved.

When he was done signing all the necessary documents, he stood up, ready to start playing his own role in the unfolding drama. "No more delays. We need to act now!" Jason Reed said, firmly.

Stepping out of his office, he summoned the Marines who had been with Farida and David in one of the secured rooms and commanded them to bring them to him immediately.

He laid out his plans to the Marine officers and did not wait for their reaction before setting it into motion.

Leading the way, Jason guided them through secret escape passages only known by American ambassadors and staff workers. Designed to avoid the reputation of what happened in the Iran 1979 revolution, every American embassy and consulate had escape routes like this. Jason got to the back of the building and opened a hidden door, revealing a boat tethered to a river bank, awaiting them. Now, this perfect structure for escape in the time of peril for American ambassadors and staff workers who were working in foreign countries would become a lifeline for David and Farida.

"Help them climb on board. We're taking them to my residence." Ambassador Reed told the Marines who accompanied him and the two Nigerians.

Less than 60 seconds later saw the boat navigating towards Jason's house. As soon as they got to the residence, Reed again took the lead as he directed everyone towards a nearby hangar where an airplane had been fueled up and was ready to move.

"Alright, gentleman, I'll be taking over from here. You can return to the embassy." Reed shook the hands of the Marines before watching them return to the boat. Now it was him, the pilot and co-pilot that he had called before leaving his office after signing the asylum document, and the two Nigerians.

The steps were lowered for everybody to climb on board. For Farida, this was her second time getting on an airplane today and the third time in her entire life, the first one being her rescue from the northern part of Nigeria. As David helped her exhausted and broken body to climb up the stairs, she didn't feel the thrilling excitement or apprehension of a first timer. If only she was getting on an airplane in a better circumstance. Instead, she felt numb as though it was someone else that was going through all the motions.

Ambassador Reed slapped the door shut as soon as he and everyone was successfully inside the airplane. "Take this bird off the ground immediately," he ordered the pilot.

Both Farida and David wheeled around in surprise to look at the ambassador. Then David asked the question that was on both of their minds. "But what about you?"

"Don't worry, this bird will be making it to America with me on board. I am your perfect cover. In the morning, the news my secretary will spread to everyone and even the media will be that I traveled back to the United States at the summoning of the United States president. Nobody except my secretary, and those loyal Marines that accompanied us and my pilots would be the wiser."

"But the president didn't send for you?"

"No, he didn't. But my secretary and I have laid out a plan that would make everything turn out well in the end. I see you are worried about me but you don't have to. Let's successfully get your friend," he gestured towards Farida, "away from this country first. Everything else is secondary."

But would this not get you into trouble?"

"Not the type to easily let something be, eh? Reed regarded David for a while in amusement. "Of course, the repercussions of this mission would resonate in the corridors of power," he shrugged. But I'm not going to give myself a headache about it."

"Thank you... for everything." David finally said after a few seconds of silence.

"Don't thank me yet until the mission is successfully over."

The voices were quiet, having been replaced with the sound of the airplane engines. After pulling out from the hangar, the airplane taxied down the private air strip for a while before going airborne.

As the airplane soared into the night sky, leaving Nigeria behind, Farida cast a final gaze upon Nigeria, a country that had inflicted immeasurable heartache. She vowed never to return, a promise forged in the crucible of loss and pain.

"This is goodbye!" Farida whispered to herself with a great measure of determination.

David, upon seeing her emotional struggles, took her hands and squeezed them gently, offering a silent assurance. "You are free, no one can touch you anymore", His touch seemed to say.

"I'm free now." Farida said softly, tentatively, as though she was trying to taste the reality of those words.

As the plane continued to fly towards the United States, ambassador Jason Reed was also swallowed in his own thoughts. He had just orchestrated a covert departure for the first time in his life. Without intending to, he'd landed himself in the tangled web of diplomacy and personal sacrifice.

"Sometimes, the diplomatic game requires unconventional moves." He said, still deep in his contemplations. "It was a necessary sacrifice."

In addition to the vow that she made never to return to Nigeria, Farida also promised never to forget her now deceased fiance Ibrahim, and her best friend Deborah. In the chambers of her heart, she etched a solemn promise that they would both live on in her memories, an enduring tribute to the love and friendship that had been torn away.

"I carry you both with me, always!"

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

Captain Hassan Lawal, having returned from his military assignment in Sambisa a few weeks ago, still grappled with the haunting sorrow of losing friends in the Boko Haram ambush.

Unlike the previous assignment he'd returned from, he had opened up to Nefisa about the ambushment that took the lives of his colleagues in his platoon. For several days, she had tried to help him get over the depression he'd precipitously sunk into for losing his friends but none of it worked. That was when she suggested a change of environment.

Nefisa had proposed that they visit her family in Sokoto. It might help ease the pain, even if just a little, she insisted. At first, Hassan was reluctant but after several persuasion from his wife, he eventually acquiesced. The reason he gave himself was that a bit of solitude might do him good.

The joy of being surrounded by family became a welcomed distraction, a therapeutic balm for the wounds of loss.

"The healing comes slowly, but it comes," he said to himself.

Coming to Sokoto state had given him a moment a very much needed respite. Even Nefisa had been giving him several alone time that he craved for.

This evening, she surprised Hassan by giving him her late father's hunting rifle and shooed him out of the compound to go carry out one of his hobbies.

Hassan was grateful for his wife's persistent nature. Hunting was one of his favorite pastimes. Making his way into the bush, Hassan hoped that his hunting expedition would go well and not just with returning with a big catch.

As the army captain ventured into the bush for a hunt, tall grasses surrounded him as he navigated the terrain, enjoying the feeling of returning to "The Bush." Each step taken widened the smile on his face. And before he knew it, he started humming in harmony with sounds of the chirping of different species of birds and other animal sounds, the snap-snap of the twigs he stepped upon adding to the rhythm. Hassan was having a good time and he didn't want it to stop anytime soon but unfortunately, it did.

Hassan nearly stumbled upon a body... the body of a child... Not much older than nine to eleven years. He jerked back immediately and with only the kind of reflexes honed by a military personnel who was familiar with the ever-present threat of terrorist activities, he raised his weapon, clicked off its safety, ready to engage the terrorists that he was sure were lurking behind the tall bushes that surrounded him.

He wasn't sure if the people who had killed his friends had found him here or if these were other terrorists who killed innocent people by putting a little child as a trap. When no one jumped at him, Hassan settled on another possibility that crossed his mind at that moment. The small boy who was behaving as though he was unconscious must have been strapped to a bomb; this wouldn't be the first time terrorists would send a little child on a suicide mission like this. Hassan decided that he would not take the bait nor would he walk away until he came to a satisfying conclusion that the little boy wasn't wired with the kind of explosives that would blast them both to kingdom come.

With his weapon still trained on the unconscious boy, he moved closer to have a better view. "No bombs. Thank God."

He went closer and turned the child around and instantly became concerned about the welts and bruises on his body.. "What's this?"

He also noticed something familiar with the little boy. He searched the archives of his brain for any event that he must have seen the boy, maybe when he visited Nefisa's family house but could not

recall any of such occasions. Then Hassan decided to focus on the face of the little lad, believing that he must come up with something.

After what looked like several minutes, he gasped. The shock that seized him was palpable for if his suspicions were correct, this was Samuel Ayuba Zira, Deborah Hadiza Zira's little brother.

How could he have forgotten so soon where he saw this face? The horrific ordeal of Deborah's tragic end, stoned to death by a student mob, reverberated in his memory. The media had paraded images of her grieving family on television as though they wanted to etch the faces of her loved ones into the collective consciousness of their viewers.

"Samuel?" Hassan whispered, careful not to add to the trauma this little one was already going through.

No answer.

Then, with a determination that he never knew he possessed, Hassan decided that he wouldn't let this child suffer alone. But first things first, he should carefully examine the area for Deborah's other family members who were also in the same state as Samuel. He didn't know what brought the young one into this thick forest but his working theory was that there could be other family members with him. Surveying the surroundings for any sign of Samuel's family, Hassan found none.

It puzzled him but he wouldn't give it too much thought. He hoped that wherever the remaining family members were, they were safe.

It is much later that he would learn from the media that the family of Deborah Hadiza Zira had been killed by some unknown assailants. That's when he would be able to piece the puzzle.

Putting aside his hunting game, Captain Lawal gently lifted the unconscious Samuel. As he carried the boy out of the bush, his mind raced with the implications of this unexpected encounter.

"Deborah's family... How did Samuel end up here?" He asked, his brain searching for answers that he couldn't provide accurately to himself at that moment. He'd have to surf the internet, radio or television news channels. Hopefully they would be able to explain why.

The weight of responsibility settled on his shoulders as he considered the possibilities. If this was indeed Samuel, the baby brother of Deborah Zira whose tragic demise and the events surrounding it had been broadcasted by several media outlets, Hassan couldn't turn a blind eye. Could he now? He couldn't imagine doing such a thing. But then, how would he go about this?

CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE

Returning to his wife's family house, Hassan carried the still-unconscious form into one of the back rooms. He was careful to make sure that absolutely no one saw him. He dropped the boy gently on the bed and without administering first aid, he made his way out of the drafty room. It was time to get a crucial third party involved. Fortunately for him, he found his wife in the hallway leading to the family's massive living room. She was just coming out of one of the bedrooms and was making her way to the living room where some of her friends who had come visiting were waiting for her. Hassan called out to her before she would go any farther from him.

He was careful to keep his voice as low as possible but not so low that she wouldn't be able to hear him call out to her. She spun around with a smile in reply to her familiar husband's voice but upon seeing the troubled look on his face, she instantly became alarmed.

"What happened? Why do you look so troubled?" Nefisa asked worriedly.

Hassan didn't say anything. Instead, he held her by her right arm and began to lead her to the room at the back of the family building.

As they both entered the room, what Nefisa saw took her breath away. "Is this?" She started to ask but she could not bring herself to complete the question.

She didn't need to, Hassan knew very well what she meant to say. "I found Samuel, Deborah's little brother, unconscious in the bush. Something's not right."

Nefisa's eyes widened, she was familiar with the history of Deborah's tragic end. Most, if not all Nigerians were, at this time, familiar with it. And for Nefisa, seeing a family member of the tragic story of the young girl that they had been watching on television in real life, her father's compound no less, casted a shadow over the room. "Obviously, something is wrong," she agreed.

"Is he okay?" Nefisa asked anxiously. Without waiting for her husband's reply, she started to move to where the unconscious Samuel lay to see clearly for herself.

"He needs urgent medical attention." Hassan said.

Upon closer inspection, Nefisa observed Samuel clearly. That was when she saw several cuts, contusions, scratches and a huge gash on his forehead. That gash must have been caused by where he had fallen and became unconscious.

She straightened and turned towards her husband. "It's time to go home, don't you think so?" There was no mistaking the point she was trying to make.

"Yes, let's go home." Then as an afterthought, Hassan assed, "you know that this changes so many things significantly for us, right?"

"I understand that the stakes are higher but this is simply not a responsibility that we can shift to anybody right now. We don't know who we can trust or who would be willing to take him. It falls back to you and I."

"What lies ahead for this child and us?" Hassan wondered aloud.

Nefisa calmly darted clothes to her husband and placed a reassuring arm on his shoulder. "Let's not worry about that, okay? We'll take it one step at a time. And right now, what we have to concentrate on is getting this little boy to our home where we will help him recuperate."

Her face was determined as she said those last words. At that, Hassan knew his wife was determined to not let Samuel out of her sight anytime soon. He knew that it was her motherly nature that had awoken with the desire to nurture the little boy back to health as though he was her son. He could see all the signs in the way she spoke and in her body language, it was a true sign of a mama bear, if only Allah had given her children...

He looked into her eyes and silently vowed he would do everything to get Samuel to Borno state even if it was the last thing he did. He would do it because it was what Nefisa wanted.

"Alright, we'll take him home. But first, I need to start mapping out a plan of how we can sneak him out. We need to find a way of saying goodbye to your people without them seeing Samuel go with us." Hassan said.

"You seem to be forgetting something."

"What's that?"

"This is my father's house. This was where I lived all my life before we got married. This was where I played hide and seek when I was just a child. I literally know where all the dead bodies of family members were buried.

"So what are...?"

But she hushed him. "I know you are a good soldier. One of the best this country has ever produced but this is my territory. Let me take charge of this, I already have a plan."

Without any doubt, he knew that Nefisa could pull this thing off without a hitch. "I trust you." Hassan said.

Those words made Nefisa smile. A billion dollar smile.

"Now let's go say our farewell to my people."

And so it happened that seventy minutes later saw the couple driving back to Borno state with Samuel safely lying at the back seat.

Not the end; Just the beginning.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Jungle Justice*, the first installment in the never forget series. It would not be proper of me to end this book without distinguishing fact from fiction.

The book you are holding in your hands was published on May 12th, 2024. On this day in 2022, a nineteen year old student of Home Economics in the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, was killed by a student mob and her corpse was burnt to ashes. She was known as Deborah Yakubu or Deborah Samuel. Most, if not all Nigerians, are familiar with her tragic demise.

She had sent a voice message into her class WhatsApp group, condemning a religious rhetoric sent by a student into the WhatsApp group. I wrote most of what she said verbatim in the story; you can check the internet for more information about what Deborah Samuel said that got her killed.

After she died, her grieving mother vowed never to allow any of her children to go to school. We heard some reports and updates about the family as time went on. A pastor took commendable action by relocating them to Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State. We've heard other conflicting reports that I cannot put on this author's note because I do not know how accurate they are.

The video of Deborah's killing went viral with the face of one of her coursemates prominently displayed. He was bragging about how he had killed Deborah Samuel and lit her body on fire. One of the statements he made in that footage was, "I was the one who killed her, I killed her, here is the matchstick that I used in setting her body on fire." We also heard news that the male student had a huge crush on Deborah but she rejected his advances when he had asked her out. Till today, all the students who were responsible one way or the other in the killing of Deborah have not been apprehended by the police. Mahmood Ali is the student's fictional name for the sole purpose of this book.

The day Deborah Samuel was killed, it was reported that Christian students fled the school.

Again, you can check the internet to watch videos and listen to what every party that was involved said.

There was an outrage in the country against the unjust killing of Deborah Samuel.

I watched many YouTube videos and write ups of people that came out to condemn such barbaric acts. Many Muslims came out and denounced the perpetrators of this crime as Muslims, saying that this is not what Islam is about. Some Muslims in the country applauded what they did.

What else is fact and what is fiction?

The ambushment of the Nigerian soldiers on their way returning from their place of assignment in chapter thirty-eight is the fictionalized representation of the Nigerian soldiers who had fallen victim to the hands of Boko Haram when they were ambushed. I also saw several reports about some bad eggs in the Nigerian army that I cannot elaborate more on due to time and space.

Is Captain Hassan Lawal a factual or a fictional character? Well, we shall find out more about him in the second installment.

The abduction of female students from an all girls secondary school as you saw in chapter two is real.

On April 14, 2014, 276 girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram from an all-girls secondary school in Chibok, Borno State. Another kidnapping of 110 female students took place in another secondary school in Dapchi, Yobe State, on February 19, 2018. A third kidnapping occurred on March 7, 2024, in a remote school in Kuriga, Kaduna State. We have been hearing conflicting figures of the actual count of the kidnapped students. Some say it's over 300, others say it's 287, and the last one, 137.

Based on the report we have been getting over the years, some of these girls have been released by Boko Haram and a few more escaped. Some did not survive, and some are currently married with kids to some Boko Haram members.

This website, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/01/revisiting-the-beginning-of-boko-haram/>, was very resourceful with providing most of the information in chapter sixteen.

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David King, his mother and her charity organization are also fictional representations of the good people of Nigeria who have created charity organizations to help the poor and the downtrodden.

Farida, Ibrahim, and all their friends with the exception of Deborah are all fictional representations of Muslims who are good friends with Christians.

In real life, Deborah Samuel was the one who made it to the security outpost with the help of some concerned students, hoping to be protected from the student mob, but the security personnel were overpowered as they retrieved Deborah from their hands and killed her.

What is most sad about this, besides the loss of Deborah Samuel, is the wide gulf it continues to create between Christians and Muslims. Just like the 9/11 attack by Al-Qaeda, Muslims and Islam came under serious verbal attack. No one cares that the people who carried out this terrible crime are just a small fraction of radical Muslims as against the millions of Muslims we have in the country. Many people do not care that a good percentage of the Nigerian army comprises of Muslims who are constantly laying their lives on the line and killing Boko Haram fighters on a daily basis, and they hate what the terrorists are doing as much as the Christians. Many people don't care that the terrorist group known as Boko Haram has killed both Christians and Muslims, attacked and burnt down mosques and churches respectively.

Most of all, many people don't care that we are all under one umbrella known as Nigeria. Our religious differences are one of our greatest weaknesses in this country. It has made us sentimental and clouded our good sense of judgment.

Why can't we all come together as Nigerians? Why can't we work together for the good and the betterment of Nigeria? The economical, political and social problems we are facing in the country are affecting us all. No Muslim or Christian is exempted.

Am I playing the devil's advocate and making excuses for this madness? No! I am not. This is just the reality we find ourselves in.

When do we stop pointing fingers? When would we stop saying it's the fault of the Muslims or it's the fault of the Christians?

Nigeria, known as "The Giant of Africa;" home to two hundred and thirty million Nigerians, making it the most populated black nation on earth.

The country that produced the current Director-General of the World Trade Organization.

Five hundred and twenty-five languages, thirty-six states and a federal capital territory, seven hundred and seventy-four local government areas. Green-white-green is the flag.

May we never forget that line in our national anthem that says;

"The labor of
our heroes past
shall never be in vain
To serve with heart
And might
One Nation
Bound in freedom

Peace and unity." .

Once again, "PEACE AND UNITY!"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to have successfully completed the first installment of this political and military thriller, Never Forget series. But while my name is written on this book as the author, I didn't do it alone. There are many people that supported and held my hands in this journey. And I will be the biggest ingrate on Earth if I close this book without thanking them.

Firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to an individual whose inspiration played a pivotal role in the creation of this book.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Joel C. Rosenberg. I have never seen or had any contact with this amazing author, but his works have been a constant source of inspiration and motivation throughout the writing process of Jungle Justice. Writing a thriller novel is not easy, and I know that this book wouldn't have been possible without his storytelling prowess and captivating narratives to guide me since the past four years that I came across his books.

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To my good South African friend, Lethabo Shawn Segudla:

Thank you for lending David King your identity and teaching him a few words from your language. Although he didn't succeed in the purpose of borrowing your identity and struggled to remember some of the words you taught him. It has been a pleasure being friends with you. Thank you, and I hope you would be willing to help when any of my characters would like to borrow a South African identity.

And my cousin, Sunday Ijiga, who championed this book in the best way that he could. I am blessed to have a cousin like you.

To The Christian Writers and Readers Club. Thank you for being a loving and United community of writers and readers. Let's continue to hold each other's hands and grow together.

To my wonderful parents, Samson and Felicia Ijiga. Your unflinching support for what I do amazes me. Always quick to encourage me, hold my hands reassuringly, and let me know that even as parents, you might be limited in certain ways but I should look up to the unlimited God that you had taught me to follow since childhood. Saying that you are a blessing to me would be the understatement of the year; I don't know the right word that would suffice. But all I can say for now is, God bless you, Sir and Ma.

To you the reader, thank you for choosing my book: let's do this again!

To the God who sees me, knows me, cares for me, helps me, loves me, knows the number of hairs on my head, knew my name when I was in my mother's womb. None of this would be possible without you. Not even my very existence.

Oh, glorious God,

I bless Your name,

I lay my crown,

And worship You.

All the credits are theirs, all the mistakes are mine.

Faith Ijiga

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faith Ijiga is a multifaceted creative force, serving as both a podcaster and an accomplished author. With a passion for storytelling that spans genres, Faith's literary journey is characterized by gripping crime, thriller, and suspense novels.

A bachelor's degree holder from the National Open University of Nigeria, Faith's fascination with politics began to take root during her days in the university where she read Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution. Today, she channels this interest into crafting compelling narratives within the realm of political, military and crime thrillers.

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A NOTE TO THE READER

Thank you for reading Jungle Justice. Would you consider posting a review on Amazon and or the platform you bought this book? Reviews and word of mouth gives credibility to a book and thus, they are an author's best friend.

It doesn't have to be anything long and fancy, a line or two would suffice.

Also, telling a fellow reader about my book and posting about it on social media would keep me writing for a long time.

-

Would you like to be updated when I release a new book?

Click on the link below to join my mailing list and be among the first to be notified when I have a new book coming out:

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Kind regards,

Faith Ijiga