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CHAPTER 1

LAGOS, NIGERIA

Survivors

Sade is slipping her English book into her schoolbag when Mama screams. Two sharp cracks splinter the air. She hears her father's fierce cry, rising, falling.

'No! No!'

The revving of a car and skidding of tyres smother his voice.

Her bag topples from the bed, spilling books, pen and pencil on to the floor. She races to the verandah, pushing past Femi in the doorway. His body is wooden with fright.

'Mama mi?' she whispers.

Papa is kneeling in the driveway, Mama partly curled up against him. One bare leg stretches out in front of her. His strong hands grip her, trying to halt the growing scarlet monster. But it has already spread down her bright white nurse's uniform. It stains the earth around them.

A few seconds, that is all. Later, it will always seem much longer.

A small gathering began to swell the house, tense and hushed. Sade stared numbly out of the sitting-room window to where Joseph stood nervously on guard. At

each new bang, rattle or hoot, he peered anxiously through the crack between the metal gates. His head moved painfully forwards and backwards like that of an old tortoise. His fingers floundered and fumbled each time he had to wrench back the bolt. He had been a witness. One second he had been casually pushing back one of the gates so his master could drive off to work. The next second, his madame lay slumped on the ground and a white car was screeching away through the wide avenue of palm trees.

Uncle Tunde, Papa's eldest brother, arrived with the doctor. Sade and Femi huddled close to their father as he steered the doctor to the sofa where Mama now lay. Her face stared upwards to the ceiling fan, with lips slightly parted and a tiny frown, as if there was only some small disturbance in a dream. But the flowers on the embroidered bedspread wrapped around her were drenched in crimson and told a different story. Sade clutched her brother's hand, waiting.

'I am very sorry, Mr Solaja. Your wife had no chance. Straight into the heart.' The doctor pronounced the verdict in a low purr. 'I shall inform the authorities – and, if you wish, New Era Hospital? For the post-mortem.'

Papa, usually brimming over with words, simply nodded. His arms drew the children in tightly as a high trembling voice quivered next to them. Mama Buki's cry wailed like a lonely seabird.

'Sista mi! Sista mi!'

Sade's own voice was lost somewhere deep inside her. She wanted to rush across, grab hold of Mama, squeeze breath back into her – before it was too late – but she could not move. Kneeling beside her sister,

Mama Buki's tears swept over her broad cheeks as she covered Mama's face with the corner of the embroidered bedspread. Sade watched in horror, her own silent tears trapped within her, like in a stone.

Grief burst around them like a pierced boil. All about her, Sade heard people repeat fragments of the story. Mr Falana, one of their neighbours and also Papa's editor-in-chief, had heard both the gunshots and the getaway car. In the deathly hush that followed, he had peeped out from his own gate on the other side of the road. Seeing the entrance to the Solaja house wide open, he feared the worst and rushed across, followed by his wife still in her dressing gown. It was he who had helped Papa carry Mama inside. Now he had to hurry away to warn his other staff. Papa was the most outspoken journalist on *Speak*, one of the weekly newspapers in English, but he might not be the only target. Even before any newspaper headlines, the news would be darting by word and mouth along the pavements, highways and cables of Lagos. When the news reached Mama's friends at the hospital where she worked, there would be no end of visitors. Suffocated by arms and voices and with the echo of the gunshots still in her head, Sade felt the urge to escape.

'Please . . .'

The effort was great and her voice was small. But it worked and Sade manoeuvred her way out. Papa's study would be quiet.

As she entered the study, the telephone rang. Automatically she picked it up, covering one ear to hear more easily.

'Is that the home of Mr Folarin Solaja who writes for *Speak*?'

The man's voice was soft but perfectly clear.

'Yes.'

'Don't trouble him. Just give him a message. Tell him: if we get the family first, what does it matter?'

The voice wrung the breath out of her, like a snake secretly squeezing her throat. Frantically she signalled to Uncle Tunde, who had come to the study door. He strode across to Papa's desk, but as he reached for the receiver, there was a click. Sade struggled to repeat the horrible words. Her uncle's thick greying eyebrows lurched up over his gold-rimmed spectacles. He looked very grave.

A little later, Joseph unlocked the gates for a sleek white ambulance. The small crowd of mourners stood aside to make a pathway for the two men with a stretcher. Mama Buki led the hymn-singing. Barely two minutes later, pressed between Mama Buki's heaving, swaying body and her father who was silent and almost perfectly still, Sade watched them carry Mama away under a blinding-white sheet. The ambulance door clicked shut. The windows were darkened glass and Sade could no longer even see the sheet. Everyone fell quiet. The only sound was of the ambulance's motor and of Joseph grappling once again with the gates. His old body pulled to attention as the vehicle backed out, as if in a final salute. That was all. Mama was gone.

Uncle Tunde led Papa gently away. The plum-coloured swirls on Papa's tunic were splattered with gashes of a deeper scarlet – their mother's blood.

'Take care of the children, please,' Papa murmured

to Mama Buki. 'I need to -'

He gestured with both hands towards his clothes. Mama Buki, her eyes red and watery, shepherded Sade and Femi towards the kitchen. But as she turned to share her grief with a friend, Sade and Femi exchanged glances and wove their way back through the cluster of mourners. Sade caught snatches of phrases, Yoruba mingled with English.

'*O ma se o!* What a pity!'

'... such a good good woman'

'... evil people'

'... he was their target'

'... bread of sorrow'

'... saved him'

Sade studied her own clothes. Not a speck, not a stain on her grey school skirt and blue blouse to show what terrible thing had happened. She ran to her room, feeling impelled to strip away the uniform. If only by putting on something fresh and new, they could begin the day again. She brushed her fingers along a line of clothes. Colours of sea, forests, flowers and birds. Her fingers, however, came to rest on a soft, black velvet dress with a white lace collar that Mama had made for her when Papa's father died. She wanted to lie down and make everything stop. But Femi was outside, calling her name, his voice urgent.

'Come,' he insisted, when she opened the door.

Grabbing her hand, he led her to Papa's study, ignoring the room with visitors.

Sade fully expected Uncle Tunde would tell them to leave when they crept into the study. He was leaning against Papa's desk, in his sober black suit, the one he

wore on days he was meant to be in court. Papa often used to tease him. 'Be free like me! I wear what I like to work!' Uncle Tunde paused to acknowledge the children. His grey-flecked beard made his face look square and solid. It was a family joke that his hair was becoming the colour of a judge's wig. Papa, seated beside the desk in a full-length ink-black *agbada*, hardly seemed to notice as they settled themselves by the untidy side table stacked with books and papers.

It was usually their father whose arms, hands, even fingers, danced liked furious gymnasts whenever he argued or talked about things that fired him up. It was usually their uncle who folded his arms as he listened. If you are a lawyer, Uncle Tunde had told Sade, you need to keep cool and listen very carefully. But today their father's arms hung without life. It was his older brother whose hands pleaded along with his voice.

'They're not finished with you, Folarin! They won't stop until they've shut you up. You know what that means! You've gone too far with them now.'

Their father always took chances with what he wrote. He said nothing now, but Sade knew his words.

The truth is the truth. How can I write what's untrue?

Sade knew how worried Mama had been about his latest article. But Sade had never heard Mama try to stop him, like Uncle Tunde did.

Their uncle stretched across the desk to pick up a newspaper. One hand resting on their father's shoulder, he began to read aloud: 'Why do the Brass Buttons who rule over us spend millions of naira sending their children to the most expensive schools and colleges in England and America? How does a soldier – even a general – acquire so much money?

And what about our own schools and colleges here in Nigeria? Our Brass Button generals shut them down when teachers complain they have not been paid and when students complain they have no books. It seems they can still sleep easily in their beds even though hundreds of thousands of our own children are not being taught. What a disgrace for a country that held some of the finest universities and schools in Africa! But then our Commander-in-Chief believes more in buttons than brains.'

Normally Papa would have flared up.

Every word of that is true.

But today he was mute. His face was turned to the window that overlooked the front gate where the car had stopped. Their uncle slid the newspaper back on to the desk.

'You call your article "Our Children's Future". What do you imagine will happen now to your own, Folarin?'

Uncle Tunde stared across at the two children. Femi chewed on his thumb. Sade sensed the tightness of his body, small for a ten-year-old but tough as wire Mama used to say. Sade felt riveted to her chair. In all her twelve years she had never heard her uncle, or any grown-up, talk quite like this. Normally she and Femi would have been sent outside or to another room. Nor had she ever seen Papa like this before, as if his spirit had flown out from him. Uncle Tunde still did not hold back.

'Look, Folarin, we all know how brave you are. Braver than most of us. But are you wise? You say our country must have writers to tell the truth. But, tell me, what can you write from the grave?'

Scent from the pink magnolia beyond the window bars drifted inside and Papa continued to gaze quietly at the window.

'For goodness sake, Folarin, look at what they've just done to Ken! The whole world was shouting "Saro-Wiwa must not hang!" But did His Excellency Commander-in-Chief, General Abacha, and his soldiers care? Of course not! So what will hold them back with an unknown writer called Solaja? To them you are just another trouble-making pen-pusher. Look, if you get out of here – join Dele in London – at least you can go on writing. Let the outside world know what's happening to Nigeria. What good is the truth on the lips of a dead journalist? And in that state, you wouldn't be much good to your children either.'

Femi couldn't take any more. Pushing back his chair, he ran to their father. Sade followed, as if to protect him from further attack. From the government's secret bullets or from Uncle Tunde's razor-sharp words? She was not quite sure.

Papa's arms, a moment ago so listless, enclosed them both firmly. Nestling in the folds of his tunic, Sade curled her fingers through Papa's and was relieved to feel him responding. Uncle Tunde stood watching. He had said enough.

'Your uncle is right,' their father said finally. 'We need to get away for a while.'

'Grandma will hide us! We can go to Family House!' Femi cried.

Papa shook his head.

'Even Family House won't be safe. These people mean business. They know our village and I don't want them coming near Grandma.' Grandma was

Mama's mother. Papa paused after her name.

'I should have listened to your mother.'

So Mama had tried to warn Papa after all. Privately, out of the children's hearing. Yes, that would have been her way. And suddenly great awful sobs rose up inside Sade, shaking her, making her tremble. She heard her own strange sounds as she desperately sucked in gasps of air, feeling Femi stiff and silent beside her. Uncle Tunde slipped from the room, closing the door behind him on three figures clasped together like survivors on a tiny raft.

CHAPTER 2

'Say nothing!'

'Say nothing!' said Uncle Tunde. 'It's safer for everyone that way.'

They needed passports – quickly – and Uncle Tunde was setting out that very day to find how they could get them. In secret. Sade and Femi did not have passports and the police had seized Papa's only a month ago. Just a few hours before Papa had been due to leave for the airport, six strapping policemen had stormed into their house. They had pushed their way into their parents' bedroom. Sade had been helping Papa pack his bag. He had been telling her about the conference. People from many different countries were

going to discuss human rights and whether their governments treated people fairly. The uninvited policemen had surrounded them like a swarm of giant locusts. One had tipped all the contents of the carefully packed suitcase on to the bed, including the shirts Sade had helped to fold. Another had snatched papers from a bedside table. Another had demanded her father's passport.

Uncle Tunde insisted on going by himself. Under no circumstances was Papa to leave the house. Papa and the children were also to keep away from the front yard. It was unlikely the gunmen would return with so many people around, but who could be sure? Everything was so unreal, including Uncle Tunde – always the cautious lawyer – setting out on a mission to acquire false passports that could take them out of the country.

'But I have to tell Kole. He's my best friend,' Femi complained to Sade after Uncle Tunde had driven off. They were alone in the back compound, standing between the lofty pawpaw trees that Femi used for one of his goals. At the far end of the yard, two flaming forest trees formed the opposite goal under an umbrella of fiery-red flowers. Kicking a pebble towards a clump of lemon grass, Femi raised a small spray of dust.

'You can't! Don't you understand what Uncle Tunde said?'

'But Kole can keep a secret!'

'Look, even Mama Buki doesn't know yet. If Uncle Tunde gets caught he's in big trouble. You heard him.'

'I don't want to go to London,' Femi whined.

Sade sighed. She was trying hard not to let herself

think too much. After those great sobs had subsided earlier, her mind had become almost numb. Everything was happening too quickly. She did not want to hear Femi's complaints because she did not dare let herself think about everyone and everything she would have to leave. It was too much. She ached to hear Mama's voice calling them, to see Mama appear at the back door with her warm smile and welcoming eyes. Mama who would reassure them when they were sad or frightened. Mama who would remain calm and upright even that time when the police took Papa away.

'Come to the kitchen,' Sade said abruptly although she did not feel like eating. 'I'm sure Mama Buki is making something.'

Femi scowled and shrugged his shoulders.

'Leave me alone.'

When Uncle Tunde returned some hours later in the afternoon, he headed straight for the study with their father. A few minutes later, he invited in the children.

'I've told your father that it's going to take a little time to get him a good passport. It will also be safer if he travels on his own.' Uncle Tunde gazed down at his gold-rimmed spectacles dangling from his right thumb and finger. He seemed to be thinking about how to continue.

'However, by God's grace, there is a lady going to London who is prepared to take you as her children.'

Sade and Femi stared, not understanding.

'Her name is Mrs Bankole. She has a British passport with a girl and boy on it – just the right ages for you both – but they aren't travelling with her. She has

agreed to say you are her children – and also to take you to your Uncle Dele.'

Uncle Tunde was expecting them to go along with a lie! Both children turned anxiously to Papa.

'But she's not our mother!' Femi's face was contorted.

Their father closed his eyes. When they opened, they wavered unsteadily, as if hurt by the light.

'Of course I want us to travel together,' he began. 'But these people your uncle met know much more than I do about this –' he hesitated, looking from Femi to Sade – 'this business of getting out of the country. And the main thing – the most important thing – is that we all end up safely together in London. We can't afford to miss this chance to get you out safely.'

'We don't have much choice – and we certainly don't have much time.' Uncle Tunde no longer hid his agitation. 'I was told it is usually very hard to get the right passport for a child – and here we have the chance to get the two of you out together! You must realize that we are only doing this because those people who killed your dear Mama will stop at nothing!'

Sade bit her lip. She and Femi were already swinging as loosely as Uncle Tunde's glasses.

'So when do we have to go?'

Uncle Tunde and Papa glanced at each other to see who would answer.

'Tonight,' their father said very quietly.