

# AN HONOURABLE FAKE

Terry Morgan

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## **About the author**

Terry Morgan started writing stories and poetry while travelling worldwide with his own exporting company. He writes serious novels, satire and humour. He has worked in over seventy countries and now lives in rural Thailand. Not surprisingly his writing has a strong international flavour. An 'Honourable Fake' is his fourth full length novel.

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## **Author's acknowledgements**

I try to write fiction that is not far-fetched and could, in reality, happen. Research is important and I try to be as accurate as I can but any mistakes in understanding the roles of various government bodies, especially those involved in defence and security, are mine. It's a novel, don't forget.

I've also scattered Nigerian slang around in a lot of the dialogue but, like fashion, slang never stays the same for long. Nigerians who read it might scratch their heads at times. If so, I'm sorry, but I hope you'll get the gist and understand it's a while since I was in Nigeria.

I'm also grateful to writers of many other e-books I've read during the writing of An Honourable Fake, but I'd like to mention two in particular. Tim Watkin's "The Consciousness of Sheep" was a good read for me. I'd already drawn many of his conclusions about the state of the world economy, the direction of Western society and the unsustainability of the world's population, but he puts it together very concisely. It's worth a read. And Teju Cole's book "Every Day is for the Thief" is such a good illustration of modern Nigeria seen from the eyes of a returnee and resurrected many memories for me.

## CHAPTER 1

They thought there'd been a power failure.

A thousand of them, young and old. Excited black faces and a sprinkling of white, all crowded into the south London arena as Nigerian Reverend Samuel Christopher Smith danced, waved and whipped them into joining the Brixton Girls' Choir singing along to thumping Afro-beat tracks from Fela Kuti's 'The Black President'.

This good, light-hearted, community spirit had reached its climax when the music stopped and the lights went out. In the total darkness, a silence fell.

Perhaps they knew, perhaps they didn't, but this was pure theatre, planned and choreographed to last just ten seconds because, as the lights came on again, there, standing centre stage, bathed in a single spotlight was the man they'd come to see and hear: Pastor Gabriel Joshua - black suit, bow tie, crisp white shirt, short black hair shining with gel.

Backstage, Gabriel had been waiting for this moment - timing it, feeling it, moving with it, tossing the microphone and catching it. At times like that Gabriel became his childhood hero, Mohamed Ali, preparing for battle. With the passion and energy building, he was skipping, punching the air, dancing like a butterfly and ready to sting like a bee with words and catch phrases gifted to him from somewhere as if by magic.

When the single spotlight picked him out, Gabriel was looking up, right hand raised in a fist, the voice loud, clear, baritone with its hint of a Lagos accent. "You have heard it said, a long time ago....."

He waited just a few seconds for the cheering. the female screams and the shouting to die down and then, in a quieter voice, "You have heard it said..... thou shall not kill."

He paused again. "And yet," he said slowly, lowering his head and whispering into the microphone, "What have we just witnessed? In my home country. Schoolchildren. Girls aged six. Innocent young lives, murdered. In cold blood. So, I'm asking why? In who's name? In the name of someone's God? So, whose God? What God approves of such slaughter? What sort of God is that?"

Then, quietly, still whispering into the microphone. "Or....or is this not religion?" Now he was shaking his finger, instilling doubt, looking for something, someone, out there in the darkness. "If this is not religion, what is it? Is this something else? Something to stir a response? To start a reaction? To shock a nation?"

Then in the louder voice: "If there is but one supreme God, one who sees all, reigns supreme, watches over all of us irrespective of who we are or where we come from, would that God approve of the slaughter of poor, innocent children?"

Gabriel, microphone in one hand, placed the other hand to his forehead, closed his eyes and looked up. as if receiving guidance on what next to say. Then he put his forefinger to his lips to hush the audience that was stirring.

"It was just another atrocity," he said quietly pointing his finger. "Only one. It always starts with just one. And we forgive. But then there are two atrocities. And we are patient. And then there are four atrocities and we become angry. And then..... "

The audience joined in. "Eight atrocities."

Gabriel closed his eyes and raised his hand. "Too many atrocities." He stopped, hushing his audience into silence again.

His voice gradually became louder and stronger. "And the atrocities become bigger atrocities. And then there are abductions. And the atrocities and the abductions move to our villages and become mass atrocities. And the mass atrocities become massacres. And the massacres move to our hospitals and to our schools. Ordinary, innocent people. Poor people, old people, young people, sick people. Surely, surely that is wrong in the name of everyone's God "

He paused, his eyes still closed. "But why?" Softer, quieter now. "Do we understand why? Might this not be religion? Might this be something else?"

His booming voice was now softer but his eyes were open, scanning the faces before him. "Do we understand? Do we fully understand what motivates such evil?"

"No," murmured some in the audience.

"Do our leaders understand? Do they understand the causes, the motivations, the reasons that lead to such atrocities?"

"No."

"So, what do our leaders do?" A pause. Wide eyes, waving and pointing his finger.

"My friends, I'll tell you what they do. They sit and they watch, and they shake their heads, and they denounce and they say 'this must stop'. And then? And then, what do they do?" Another short pause. "That's right. They do nothing. As the divide between rich and poor grows wider, they do nothing because they *are* the rich. They can afford their protection. They are the elite. So, they continue to sit and to watch and to wring their hands pretending to care while millions of the poor they are supposed to represent struggle and the world runs out of food and water and even the space to live. But we can no longer wait. I say we cannot sit and watch."

Gabriel was walking slowly now, a few steps one way, a few the other, facing the audience. the spotlight still following him.

"And we especially cannot sit and watch in horror as those who do not understand the meaning of peace and tolerance allow others to come to our homes, our villages, our schools and our places of worship to massacre us. Is it any wonder that millions of poor people are on the move? Lost souls but real people. Good people desperate for jobs, for opportunities. Poor people living in hope but moving out, moving on, trying to move up."

Gabriel walked a few more steps, then stopped, eyes open, scanning faces, pointing first at them and then at himself.

"Yeh. See? I'm an African. I'm talking African poverty, African migration, African mass movement across borders, across continents. Millions of poor people looking for a better life. And I'm asking why. Why has it come to this? I'm asking for an explanation. What have we done wrong? What are we doing to put things right? I'm asking for understanding. I'm asking for answers. And..... I'm demanding a solution."

Silently, he moved back to the centre. "You know," he said quietly. "We are taught peace, tolerance, forgiveness and understanding. Yes? But there is a limit to our tolerance, our forgiveness and our understanding. We have already tried tolerance. We have already tried patience. We have already tried forgiving. We have already tried understanding and we have already tried trusting our leaders. But it has failed. So, we are saying now, as one united voice, enough is enough."

Gabriel lowered the microphone and then raised it again, pointing his finger, angry. "Enough is enough," he roared.

This was just the start of a Gabriel performance. He'd been doing this for years now, criss-crossing continents, holding these events in crowded halls in overcrowded towns and cities. It was south London today but next up was Los Angeles.

The Fela Kuti theme was new, the words varied, but the message was always the same. And once he'd got their rapt attention, that's when Gabriel started to rack things up.

That dark, rainy night, in the crowded, multi coloured, ethnically diverse south London venue, Pastor Gabriel Joshua was the only man standing in a light that shone from above. This was never going to be a religious event for the praising of a God

This was about poverty, the lack of opportunity, the theft of the assets of ordinary people by big business, the pillaging of Africa's natural resources, the lack of education, environmental destruction and the terrorism and conflict that arose from the pressures of overpopulation, ethnic tension and interference in another country's affairs.

For Pastor Gabriel Joshua events like this in a densely-populated part of a big city had evolved into a common theme. It was what was separating him, marking him out, from politicians and religious leaders and academics. Right then self-styled Pastor Gabriel Joshua was aiming for a mass display of collective decision-making based on simple common sense. But the strategy, written clearly in his mind, required him to draw that final picture of impending disaster, to create an ultimate tension that would lead to a commitment to demand action.

For twenty years, Gabriel had been performing like this. The words and music had changed over the years but the message had become clearer over the passage of time.

At the end, he would always fall silent, and walk slowly around the stage deep in thought. That night, in South London, the ending was no different.

"You understand," he said softly, shaking his head. "I don't need to tell you. I don't need to spell it out. It's just plain, common sense. There has to be a limit to our patience. Alone, we are powerless but together we have boundless strength. We have tried being patient, to forgive and to trust and we have even tried to understand the limitations of our leaders. They are only human we say. But that is an excuse. Power to change is there. We see it every day. But it is in the hands of the selfish and our patience has finally expired. With one united voice, what we are saying is enough is enough."

And then Gabriel knelt on the stage, placed his hands together and closed his eyes. Speaking quietly, lips touching the microphone.

"In the name of whatever Great Power there is, please grant us some of that power, that strength and that wisdom to face up to our future, to defend ourselves against the forces of evil and, for the sake of our children, to challenge our leaders to change direction before it is too late."

That night the cheers inside the south London Conference Hall were still dying down to another Fela Kuti recording when, back stage, a mobile phone rang.

Solomon, Gabriel's most loyal friend, adviser and follower since boyhood days in the Makoko slum of Lagos, answered it. He listened, nodded, switched the phone off and went to look for Gabriel.

He found him in a side room, drinking water from a bottle and surrounded by a small group of journalists. By then Gabriel had discarded the black tie and had opened the top button of his white shirt. The flamboyancy, the stage act, was gone. It had become calm one-to-one politics - the rich-poor divide, education, opportunities, jobs, healthcare. Solomon listened for a while from the narrow doorway but then pushed inside and whispered in his ear: "Phone call, Femi."

And Gabriel, seeing the concern on Solomon's face, excused himself and followed him outside.

"There's a warrant for your arrest, Femi," Solomon whispered.

## CHAPTER 2

"Mr Mark Dobson."

It was a statement not a question.

"Yes," the man himself replied. He was definitely Mark Dobson, travelling on a British passport, although he'd wondered before leaving London whether a passport in a different name might be safer this time.

The Nigerian Immigration Officer sitting solemnly behind the screen looked at him as if she recognised him. Sod's law. Dobson certainly recognised her. It was the same

one who'd dealt with him a month ago - the same beige uniform and beret, the same badge and the same ill-fitting spectacles. The only additions were the blue latex gloves and matching face mask as if she thought Dobson might be bringing Ebola or Yellow Fever into the country.

His passport was opened and the pages flipped through until the last Nigerian stamp appeared.

"Mr Mark Dobson, you come again." It was the same voice as well.

"Yes." Dobson raked a hand through his unruly mop of short, sandy hair. Explaining why he'd returned so soon would only cause a delay.

"Business again?"

"Yes."

And saying he'd abandoned his last visit because he'd been assaulted and robbed by a taxi driver within minutes of his arrival would have delayed things even further.

"What business?"

"I'm a business consultant."

"Mmm.....but what do you do?"

Dobson almost smiled. It was such a good question. "I advise businesses." He replied vaguely. He could have elaborated by saying he specialised in commercial fraud, corruption and associated misdemeanours like money laundering, but offering the short version was always best at points of entry into a country, especially one where such misdemeanours were commonplace.

Black eyes beneath thick black eyebrows peered over the spectacles. "Nigerian businesses need your advice, Mr Dobson?"

Dobson nodded and smiled in case it was a Nigerian Immigration officer's idea of a sarcastic joke. Perhaps also it was because he wasn't wearing a proper businessman's suit and tie but a pair of creased grey chinos and a black Polo shirt like someone starting their holiday - not that many people took vacations in Lagos.

"What is the name of the company you are advising, Mr Dobson?" the husky voice with the Lagos accent continued.

He'd hoped he wouldn't be asked this. "A company called Solomon Trading."

There was a shrug suggesting she'd never heard of Solomon Trading and an ink stamp like all others was selected from a small pile, his passport was stamped with a flourish, a signature added and his passport held aloft but out of reaching distance. Was there one last issue?

"So.....Mr Dobson. You like Nigeria?"

"Love it," Dobson smiled. "I can hardly wait to find a taxi and be on my way."

"Have a nice stay."

And so, Dobson took his passport and walked off with his laptop bag slung across his shoulder to retrieve his new black case on wheels, a replacement that contained a change of underwear, a crumpled suit to enhance his status if the need arose, a few shirts that mostly matched his grey chinos and a shaving kit. If this bag was stolen, then they'd be sorely disappointed with the contents.

But he wasn't robbed this time. He made it, unscathed, in the back seat of a Toyota driven by a middle-aged Nigerian from Enugu who called himself Edwin and who talked all the way. "Airport Hotel, Ikeja sah? Why not better hotel? Smart man like you deserve five stah, up-makkit. Where you come from, sah?"

"London."

"Arsenal, sah." Edwin said triumphantly, showing his enthusiasm for English football but pronouncing Arsenal like arsehole.

Dobson, slumped in the back seat and listened but found himself holding tightly onto his laptop just in case Edwin turned out to be another, albeit older, con merchant with a nice way with words.

For someone who spent half his time travelling Dobson was not unused to African airports. His mistake last time had been to trust an ordinary looking youth with a pleasant smile and wearing a bright blue Chelsea FC tee shirt. He remembered it all to well.

"Where to, sah?..... Ikeja sah?.....Good price sah.....I carry case sah."

That's how it had started and Dobson, far too relaxed for his own good, had followed the blue Chelsea tee shirt and his own case through the teeming crowds, friends and families of travellers, past all shades of shyster looking for quick ways to fleece the tired and culture-shocked and out into the chaos, the smell and the sticky, humid air of early evening Lagos. He'd been led towards an ageing Peugeot. that may once have been a uniform yellow but now offered glimpses of many shades of yellow and orange mottled with red rust and mud. It was ideally suited for abductions and robbery and Dobson should have known better.

The journey had begun with an unusual detour around some ramshackle back streets of Ikeja and Dobson, wedged into the sagging and painful springs of the back seat, had seen his hope that this might be just a clever short cut fade when the car ground to a halt in the rubble strewn remains of an old, roofless building. A second wreck of a car then appeared and from it sprang two more youths wielding long sticks. Shouts, waving of the sticks and a lot of pushing and pulling had followed but, overpowered by numbers, Dobson had yielded and his case and belongings were tipped and sorted amongst a pile of smashed concrete and corrugated roofing. It had been admirably efficient - short, sharp and over and done with in less than three minutes.

But it had been an odd sort of assault and robbery in that Dobson had been handed back his passport and wallet - short perhaps of five hundred dollars or so in cash. They had taken his laptop, but that was empty of anything confidential because everything of any use was, as always, on a memory stick stuffed into the elastic waist band of Dobson's boxer shorts. Mark Dobson, international private investigator

of commercial fraud and corruption was slightly battered and bruised but his client's data was still intact.

And it was what the smiling wearer of the Chelsea FC tee shirt had called out as he drove off that Dobson still remembered. Amidst the cloud of choking blue smoke as the Peugeot rattled away, he heard: "Sorry, Mr Dobson, sah."

Mr Dobson? Yes, that was easy to read from his passport. But 'sorry'?

This wasn't the hallmark of a career robber. Chelsea tee shirt had showed a decent side that could only have come from upbringing. Someone, somewhere, Dobson had concluded, was warning him off, trying to stop him doing his job, encouraging him to go back home and never return. And there was only one possible reason for that. Someone somewhere had a problem of sorts with Dobson's clients, Pastor Gabriel Joshua, his partner Solomon and their jointly owned company, Solomon Trading.

"Can you pick me up in the morning?" Mark Dobson asked Edwin from Enugu when they arrived at the Airport Hotel and Dobson was settling the fare.

"Where to, sah?"

"Back to the airport."

"Yessah."

"Early," said Dobson. "Five o'clock."

"Yessah."

### CHAPTER 3

As Mark Dobson checked in at the low-end Airport Hotel in Lagos, Pastor Gabriel Joshua and Solomon were staying in the higher-end luxury of the California State Governor's mansion on Benedict Canyon Drive in Beverley Hills. "Free, gratis," Governor Frank Jameson had told them. "It'll save you some dollars. Enjoy."

Gabriel was relaxing with coffee. He'd already enjoyed the freshly squeezed orange juice and warm croissants served by a Filipino maid who, he'd discovered, came with the rest of the package of benefits.

While Dobson slept in a room smelling of stale sweat above a badly soiled carpet and cooled insufficiently by a reluctant AC unit, Gabriel lounged comfortably in a pure white bathrobe.

This short interlude of luxury was, though, unusual. No, it was extremely rare. It was, in fact, almost unheard of. One- and two-star hotels and motels were far more typical overnight stays because Solomon organised all travel arrangements. Solomon also took care of expenses and Solomon's job description, if he had one, would have said that economising and saving money was his top priority. Once in a blue moon,



though, luxury came free and even Solomon agreed there was no harm in making the most of it.

So, having just sprayed himself with the Dior for Men aftershave he'd found in the bathroom, Gabriel had one bare foot resting on the soft fabric of the Governor's sofa, the other on the thick Chinese carpet. An hour earlier he'd even been the beneficiary of some energetic sex with Florence - another unexpected part of the free deal - and a few minutes of entertainment watching Florence stroll around the bedroom naked. A dark skinned and buxom girl from Alabama, Florence had then stood on the balcony in full view of anyone with a decent pair of binoculars. Gabriel hadn't enquired where she fitted into the Governor's daily life.

Gabriel stroked his freshly shaved face and nodded to himself. The previous night's rousing event at the Beverly Hilton to a crowd of mostly black devotees seemed to have reaped a very reasonable profit even after their airfares and other expenses. As he wiped croissant crumbs from around his moustache the door opened and Solomon appeared. Solomon was already dressed for the day in a dark suit and white shirt. No tie yet, but then Solomon was also relaxing a little.

"Our host, the Bishop, Femi." Solomon handed him a mobile phone.

Gabriel put it to his ear as Solomon sat and listened, long, slim legs crossed, in an arm chair. "Good morning, sir. So how much did we take?"

There was a short pause as State Governor Frank Jameson, the man Solomon called the Bishop, passed the information.

"Nine hundred and eighty-six thousand dollars after expenses is, sir, the sign of a speaker with a reputation. I performed particularly well last night, yes? The Fela Kuti music went down especially well I thought."

He stood up, the remaining crumbs of croissant tumbling to the carpet and, in bare feet, walked past Solomon towards the sliding French windows and the dazzling blue reflection off the swimming pool. Reaching into a side pocket he pulled out the pair of Ray Bans he had discovered there, put them on and turned his head with a grin for Solomon to admire.

"Yes sir. Today we fly to Washington and then back to London. Our followers like the message we bring direct from our Lord, don't you think?" He said it with a smile because the message hadn't really come from anyone but himself and the Governor knew that.

He sauntered out onto the sunlit terrace where Florence lay on a sun lounger in partial shade. She was lying on her back in a small, white bikini with her own glass of freshly squeezed orange juice standing on a small glass-topped table. Gabriel had no idea if Florence was her real name but it suited her. As he walked towards her, still listening to the Governor, she took off her sunglasses, beckoned him with her little finger and pushed her entire hand into the fold of Gabriel's bathrobe pulling him roughly towards her.

"Hey, not so rough, Flo.....no not you, sir..... but, listen, you're still new to my shows if you'll excuse me for saying so Governor and I reckon you Americans still got a lot

to learn about the modern preaching business and the way they link to the troubles of the world."

Solomon came out onto the patio to listen. The Governor spoke again and Gabriel nodded.

"Sure. But you know what I mean. In religious terms, I preach prosperity gospel. Prosperity gospel flavoured with a call to action. Why? Because the times they are a'changing, I've said it before but you and your friends up there need to catch up, understand it and get your thinking and forward planning straight. Think strategy, think opportunity, think different, think more like businessmen, OK?"

He paused briefly, giving the Governor a few seconds to talk but also to reflect on his own manner of speech to certain people.

Gabriel didn't actually like the way he was speaking right now. It was unnatural but it was deliberate. It was like acting. Preaching was an act as well. He would often change his tone, his accent, his style, to reflect who he was speaking to and why. Right now, he was talking to a high flying, rich, American politician who he knew would not bother listening to soft words, sensitive phrases and politeness. This man wanted to be impressed. It was a time for rough talk some American slang and a tone that suggested impatience, over confidence and brashness. Delivered like that, this man would be far more likely to buy into it. Preaching about prosperity gospel was, after all, pure salesmanship.

"The preaching business has changed since the Lord Jesus walked amongst us," Gabriel went on. "He may not be happy with what some of the customers of his competitor Mohamed get up to, but I don't blame Mohamed for that. It's his preachers and the millions of disaffected youths who follow them who have a lot to answer for. It must hurt him lots. Mohamed was an OK guy. It's his new brand of messengers that hurt him.

He paused again to let the Governor speak.

"So, you'll be getting to know what that message is now, right sir?" he continued. "It's that material and financial betterment now meets with God's full approval. Even he couldn't hold back the tide you see - it's human nature. It's not like it once was. For many black Americans and their African cousins, materialism fits neatly into their lives. The spiritual world still manifests itself in their everyday lives but nowadays it's all about creating wealth. But that's damned hard if your livelihood and personal safety is at risk, if all your hard work is exploited by the rich and the powerful and you've got no confidence in the future.

"So, you and your friends in Congress need to get with it man. The old Christianity brought to Africa in the 19th Century was Western. As someone once said, the old view was concerned with dualism - the dualism between the mind and the spirit, between this world and the next, between God and the Devil, between the simple matter of day to day living and surviving and the soul.

"Africa's where the missionaries went but they didn't finish their job and it's too late now because the world moved on. It ain't as simple as it was. America is stuck. Europe is stuck. They're so stuck they can't change any more. They can't even deal

with their own problems because they've bound themselves up in red tape, social support they can't afford and all that human rights shit."

"But did you hear the cheering last night, Governor? Did you listen deep? I never hide my message. If it makes for uncomfortable listening, then so be it. But if you want to stop this rot, this plague of terrorism, this economic sickness, this epidemic of uncontrolled population growth and unemployment you gotta understand that in African minds that old simple dualism I mentioned is gone. It's gone forever, my friend. It ain't there anymore.

"They now worship wealth and money like it's the Lord himself. It's why they like my Italian suit, my silk tie and my silky way with words. For me the suits are my uniform. It's what's necessary in modern show business, but they can't get anything for themselves without freedom and they won't get freedom until they get real leadership. They need a different sort of leadership, one that accepts the reality that the world faces genuine threats to its survival without some serious action.

"You can't fight a plague or a cancer without money to buy a treatment and you need to stop fucking about with all that 18th and 19th century lecturing about soft charity, good deeds and Samaritans and start some fresh listening. Life's tough, man, but no amount of soft talk works. You gotta get tough to deal with it. You gotta give them hope, sir, give them new opportunities to better themselves, protection from economic disaster and terrorism, so they can build their lives with a new sense of optimism.

"Spiritual leadership works, Governor. It stirs folk into greater optimism. It makes them get up on a morning and go to work because they see a reason. They even work harder. Christian leadership, maybe even Christianity itself, is not cool enough anymore. You gotta make it cool. You gotta match them others - them others who think their way is so fucking cool, they even believe the earth is flat, that the sun rotates around the earth and that God provides virgins for their fulfilment after death. Their only objective is to sow seeds of discord, but that's become so cool they leave home, go pick up a gun and fix a grenade to their underwear. Sowing seeds of discord is now more cool than sowing seeds of liberalism and freedom.

"You understand my direction, Governor? While you argue about your economy, your jobs, your healthcare, your education, your own local problem over lack of water and while your government reluctantly sends a few US Marines to help stick pins in what remains of Al Qaida and the rest of Bin Laden's legacy, you know what's going on under your noses?

"Where I come from five years have gone by since they said they'd halted the expansion of terrorist groups like Boko Haram. 'They are defeated' was the call five years ago. Two years later it was 'we are driving them back'. Last year it was 'there are only a few pockets left'. Whoever said all that, sir, was only after one thing - reelection to cloud cuckoo land. Because while they were dreaming up fresh words to pacify the masses, fresh wild fires of terrorism and social unrest were breaking out everywhere - the Middle East, Africa the Far East. It was a mess then and it's a worse mess now and all the West does is hand out aid to make them feel better or pretend that bombing targets works when it really knows that only boots on the ground will be effective. And meanwhile economies stagnate and the poor get poorer.

"Globalisation is what we've got here, Governor. Globalisation of the economy has led to globalisation of terrorism because globalisation has failed the poor. And you know what the poor do when they got nothing better to do, Governor? They fuck, they breed, they reproduce. And what happens when you fuck and breed and you run out of food and water and you no longer have the means to support yourself? You migrate or you join those that offer jobs with guns. Or you do both - you migrate en masse and take up guns.

"You and your friends up there in Congress need to start to understand why we're where we are and you can then move to the second question of how to deal with it.

"And why am I here again - my sincere thanks for the bed, breakfast and other services, by the way, Governor - why? Because my plans for dealing with the how are nearing completion. On my own, Governor. Got it? If I can get this far alone think what the US, the EU or the UN could do if it really put its mind to it. I know you already heard some but it's getting scary now sir 'cause I'm now ready. But Gabriel don't scare too easy.

"So, Governor, you want part of my scary plan or not? Are you now convinced enough to take the President aside, whisper in his ear and tell him that Africans have no wish to go back five hundred years but that they, too, want to head towards that bright light of the future he keeps on about.

"Tell him that the world's economic system is failing, sir. Tell him that social unrest, fundamentalism, terrorism and corruption is like a parasite, sir. It's like a tapeworm that grows longer and longer inside and sucks the blood of the wealth created by the innocent poor. Tell him that the only way to kill this parasite is to change the system that widens the gap between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have nots and provide the protection for people to build their own lives in their own way. That's real freedom, sir, and I once thought the US understood that word."

Gabriel paused, took an audible, deep breath. Was he going on too long? Probably. But you only ever got one chance. Make an impact or don't bother. He couldn't change because he'd lived like that since he was eleven.

"Tell him what you learned last night, sir." He went on. "That when Pastor Gabriel speaks, they see something out there. It's called optimism. They know they've got a fight on their hands. They know life's a struggle, but they have no wish to go back five hundred years. They wanna go forward. They wanna go there so desperately they'll help do the fighting. But they need the power and the resources to take them there. And for that they need the leadership."

"But then, Governor, we come back to the same old problem. There ain't any leadership. But I'll leave it to you whether you whisper that in his ear.

"Instead, you might like to shout loudly in his ear and remind him what happens to the innocent in places where the two parasites of terrorism and economic failure have already spread? If they're not murdered in cold blood, they run away, sir. They run with whatever they can carry in a bundle. As well as the millions of African migrants that head for the promised lands of Europe and America, just look at what was once Syria. You've still got thirty million destitute Syrians who didn't want any part of the carnage spread as far as Canada and still spreading.

"The Caliphate of California? Now there's a humorous thought that'll cheer your day."

Solomon had listened throughout. Mostly he admired Gabriel but recently he had felt increasingly embarrassed by Gabriel's rants. The longer Gabriel continued the more uncomfortable he felt. He was sure the Governor wanted to say something but Gabriel was giving him no chance.

Solomon frowned and waved at him to stop and, finally, Gabriel saw."Yes, Governor. My apologies. It's the adrenaline."

"All the same, an interesting speech, Gabriel. Nice to hear you're in such fine spirits. I'll do what I can, of course, but if it was me with an arrest warrant hanging over my head, I'm not so sure I'd be feeling quite so breezy."

## CHAPTER 4

Mark Dobson's decision to make a second trip to Lagos in six weeks had begun at an early morning meeting in a cemetery in south London. West Norwood Cemetery and Crematorium had been Gabriel's suggestion.

Dobson already knew a good deal about Solomon Trading. Solomon was its 'managing director', Pastor Gabriel Joshua its 'chairman'. Solomon was a tall, lanky figure but Gabriel was even taller – a six feet, straight backed, handsome Nigerian who had, since he was about fourteen, styled himself on Mohamed Ali, the old boxer Cassius Clay. That Ali had become a Moslem and Gabriel a Christian of sorts made no difference to Gabriel.

"Beliefs are a man's free choice," he'd often said, a phrase that seemed at odds with the Christian-sounding 'Household of God's Miracles Church' Gabriel had also founded thirty years before.

Gabriel and Solomon had both been born somewhere inside the thousands of rotting timber shacks that stood on stilts above the dark, polluted waters of the Makoko slum in Lagos lagoon. Surrounded by the stench of smoke rising from rotting waste, they had been area boys, agberos, street boys, who mostly lived off petty crime - extortion from passers-by, theft, small scale protection rackets and drugs. But that phase hadn't lasted long because at around twelve years old they'd progressed from street crime to doing jobs - honest ones like cleaning cars, sweeping and painting walls.

By then Solomon had become Gabriel's fetcher and doer while Gabriel went out, talking, selling, reading old discarded newspapers and all the time looking for opportunities.

It was Solomon who'd told Dobson how, one rainy day, he had followed Gabriel into the back of a Presbyterian church to escape the flooded streets to sit and listen to a sermon by the local preacher, Matthew Joshua, and how Gabriel announced he would now be known as Pastor Gabriel Joshua instead of Femi Akindele. Until then,

Solomon had always called him Femi - he still did. That same night thirteen-year old Tunde Oyedepo became Solomon.

A week later, Gabriel had, with a bible 'borrowed' from another church, run his own service in the back of a car parking lot near Makoko so that if anyone hadn't liked what Gabriel was shouting about they could disband their 'service' and run off back into the slum.

But people had liked what that fifteen-year old boy with his way with words and remarkable vocabulary was saying. And he hadn't just been talking about religion and Christianity. Gabriel had already started to get political.

Gabriel was now known to many thousands, perhaps it was millions. He had girlfriends scattered here and there. Solomon, too, had one special one, but Solomon still preferred his backroom, supporting role whether it was driver, secretary, head of security or travel agent. The partnership that had started in the Makoko slum was still going strong.

In short, Pastor Gabriel Joshua had become one of Nigeria's notorious fake preachers and self-made millionaires. But none of the others were quite like Gabriel.

"There are trees by the chimney," he'd told Dobson when they'd arranged the cemetery meeting. "You'll find me, unless there's a funeral taking place."

And so, Dobson had arrived at the cemetery gates and aimed for the concrete building in the distance, the chimney rising over a clump of trees. It was five minutes to nine.

A sign post: 'Parking.' An arrow: 'Crematorium'. A notice board: 'Borough of Lambeth'. This was south London, an area Dobson knew well - residential, densely populated, bordering on lively, multi-cultural suburbs like Brixton. He'd parked the car near Lambeth Household Waste Disposal and Recycling Centre but assumed its proximity to the cemetery was mere co-incidence.

And there was Gabriel Joshua, strolling around under the trees talking on a mobile phone. It was the usual, animated, Gabriel and the usual baritone voice that carried on the still morning air, in a conference hall or an auditorium. It was the usual dark suit, no tie today but pristine for all that. The neat moustache and the shiny studs in both ears that looked like diamonds but that Dobson knew weren't. A Gabriel joke: "Cut glass is a man's best friend."

Gabriel was a smart man, so smart he'd become a household name in Nigeria up to and beyond its northern borders with Niger, Cameroon and elsewhere. It was his preaching or, as he preferred to call them, his inspirational speeches and motivational lectures. He was known by politicians in the UK and the USA especially those with interests in African affairs although they were probably more envious of his ability to rouse an audience to cheering and fist raising. Gabriel had become an unelected politician more than a fake preacher. He could get as mad as hell with elected politicians, about what they did to become elected, about corruption, the growing gulf between rich and poor, especially in Africa with its poverty and ever growing population.

Dobson knew all this. He also knew that Gabriel and Solomon ran their business honestly, corruption free. but had increasingly found themselves on the wrong side of big time fraudsters, the mega corrupt and those who used wielded the political clout.

Eventually Gabriel stuffed the phone in his pocket, turned, nodded, offered a faint smile and walked over. "Mark, how de body, mon. You looking good. Fine and dandy. Nice suit. Off the peg? Still making good in your line."

They bantered for a while

"Got a woman yet, Mark? Feeling lonesome?"

"Too busy. You?"

"A few tucked away. I just can't be fucked with them, mon. Women is too much like trouble. Talk too much. Hanging around. Criticising. Spending money. They all alike, you know? Anyway, like you, I'm too busy. I just got back from the USA, Mark. But no-one listens." A pause. "And there was another abduction this week. Schoolgirls again. You heard?"

"I heard something," Dobson had said. "The COK again."

The COK, the so-called Caliphate of Kanuri, was the new name for a terror group that had started as Boko Haram and plagued the Nigeria for years. Boko Haram had been partially defeated but then resurrected itself by spreading north, east and west and linking up with better organised groups like AQIM - al-Qaida in the Maghreb - that deliberately triggered ethnic disputes to gain support, especially in Mali where French forces had failed. Al-Qaida had never really died. It was still influential and still the most powerful jihadist movement in Africa not caring about using different names, titles or acronyms like the COK.

The COK had been re-enforced by disaffected Nigerians, Somalis, Eritreans and gangs of desperate, stateless, poverty-stricken migrants from all over Africa.

"Bastards." Gabriel muttered.

COK raids on northern Nigerian villages, bordering Niger and Cameroon had restarted some while back. Trouble was brewing in Burkina Faso. There were murders, abductions and burning of schools and clinics that had only just been rebuilt. Livelihoods were being wrecked again. School age boys from poor families were being carried off to join the fight. But it was the abduction of groups of schoolgirls that were really prized for the publicity they generated. And if the girls could be used to carry out atrocities so much the better.

"Schoolgirls, Mark. Can you believe that?"

Mark Dobson and Pastor Gabriel Joshua, a black Nigerian and a white Englishman, carrying on where they'd left off just a few weeks back.

"So why the call?" Dobson asked. "Why are we meeting under a tree in a cemetery? And how are Sol and Kenneth?"

Dobson had met Solomon before Gabriel - a problem with a government contract that was never resolved. It was the murky world of bribery and corruption again with

Solomon Trading the innocent victim. And Dobson had half expected Solomon to be there or, if not Sol, then another of Gabriel's small team - Kenneth Eju.

Kenneth Eju ran Gabriel's UK business operation from a low overheads establishment above a Polish food shop in a side street in Croydon, South London. It had a sign, 'Household of God's Miracles Church', in the upstairs window but was, in fact, the UK headquarters of Solomon Trading, their main source of money and funding for Gabriel's so-called 'Project'.

Mark Dobson had never been very clear about Gabriel's 'Project' except that it was some sort of charitable work funded by Solomon Trading. It seemed off limits as far as their commercial dealings were concerned and Dobson had never delved too deeply. So: "How are Sol and Kenneth?"

Gabriel's smile faded. "We walk, mon."

The banter was finished and Gabriel took off across the wet grass for fifty metres or so then stopped. He looked up. He looked down. He just wouldn't look at Dobson. Then he took a deep breath.

"Kenneth's dead," he said. "He was shot dead. He was found on a derelict industrial estate in Essex." Then he'd walked away again leaving Dobson standing there, questions falling over themselves for answers but with his mobile phone buzzing and vibrating in his pocket.

"Yes, Colin."

This was Colin Asher of Asher & Asher, the uninspiring name for a miniature equivalent of MI5. MI6, the CIA and FBI that Dobson and Asher ran with a few lady assistants. Its headquarters were rented rooms above the 'Red Sea' frozen fish shop and Ali's Egyptian barber's shop on Edgware Road in West London.

Asher & Asher may have sounded like a divorce solicitor or a struggling accountant, but it was, in fact, a high-tech operation with computers, servers, winking lights and other wizardry beyond Dobson but played with like toys by Colin Asher. Everything they did had been learned from a few years working together for the Fraud Squad.

"There's an arrest warrant out for Gabriel - fraud, corruption, money laundering," Colin Asher announced.

"For Christ's sake! He's just told me Kenneth Eju's dead - murdered."

There had been a few seconds of thoughtful silence before Colin Asher broke another piece of news. "And I've had the Household of God's Miracles Church on the blower. A Nigerian. Someone called Osman Olande. Mean anything?"

"Nothing. What did he want?"

"To know when you're going back to Nigeria. He seemed to know you. He's phoned twice today saying he works for Kenneth."



"Not true." Dobson said, smelling trouble. "Let me talk to Gabriel and I'll phone you back."

Gabriel had, meanwhile, stopped at a stone cross that was higher than his head and Dobson thought he was going to lean on it. Instead, he folded his arms across his chest and stared at the inscription. 'Sir Joseph Barnby. hymn writer, conductor and church organist, died 28th January 1896.'

That was OK, Dobson decided. Sir Joseph wouldn't have minded if a big black guy from Nigeria called Pastor Gabriel Joshua had leaned on him. They clearly had some common interests.

Holding back on the arrest warrant news for a moment, Dobson asked more about Kenneth Eju but Gabriel didn't know much. He' and Solomon had been in the US. The police were investigating. He'd know more later. He went quiet again.

Dobson, well aware of how Kenneth's death would affect both Gabriel and Solomon, changed the subject. "How's Michael?"

While Kenneth Eju ran the London office of Solomon Trading, Michael Fayinka ran the Lagos office.

"Michael phoned me this morning," he said, moving away from Sir Joseph. "He's upset. He smells trouble. He has his family to think of. He's thinking of moving out. Sol knows about Kenneth but he's back to Lagos. We'll watch developments. I feel I should go back but there are other problems."

That was when Dobson realised Gabriel already knew. "So, you already know about the arrest warrant?"

Gabriel nodded, "Oh, sure." He strolled away again and Dobson followed.

It was quieter now - the traffic more distant. Perhaps the days' funerals hadn't yet started but Dobson didn't really understand what went on in Norwood Cemetery. It looked more like one big outdoor museum, the sort of place that hosted organised tours of famous headstones for the morbid. Gabriel did just that. He stopped at another tomb: "Charles Haddon Spurgeon, religious leader. Baptist who drew huge crowds, b.1834 d. 1892."

"You wanna keep working for us, Mark?"

Dobson was grateful for the question. Business with Solomon Trading had been looking murkier by the minute. Gabriel's lifestyle was complicated enough and Dobson had struggled to know if it was worth the hassle. But: "Your account's in credit, Gabriel. I still owe you. What do you want?"

"A few jobs done. To get to the bottom of the arrest warrant. To carry on where we left off. Keep the Project on track, move it forward."

The Project. There it was again. Gabriel's Project. All Mark Dobson knew was that it used up most of Solomon Trading's profits and seemed consumed by politics and controversy.

"But you're upsetting people, Gabriel," Dobson said. "Stepping on the toes of presidents, prime ministers, foreign governments, aid agencies, army chiefs, corrupt businessmen, foreigners and fellow pastors guarantees a few headaches coming your way."

"Yeh. I know," Gabriel said.

Acknowledgement was something but trying to change the world just because you believed everyone was on the wrong track and utterly corrupt was hardly a way to win friends and influence people.

"You know what I'd do?" Dobson said.

"You're the fucking consultant. Advise me."

"Wind up Solomon Trading. Re-launch it as something else. Assume a low profile for a while. Get Sol over here out of the way. Ensure Michael is in a safe place. Stop and think. I've got a million questions that need answers but I'll head to Lagos again to start some digging."

Gabriel had rested an arm across Dobson's shoulder and nodded. Charles Haddon Spurgeon would have been quite touched by the scene if he could see.

"You know what Nelson Mandela once said?" Gabriel asked and Dobson had shaken his head. Nelson Mandela hadn't been on his mind just at that moment.

"The greatest glory of living is rising every time you fall. You like that?"

"Mmm - very profound."

While Gabriel wandered away again, Mark Dobson stood and returned Colin Asher's call.

"This guy Osman Olande," Asher said, "Something's not right."

"You sure he phoned from Kenneth's office?"

"I got a fix on the mobile he was using. If he wasn't in Kenneth's office, then he was very close by."

They'd discussed it for a few minutes longer and agreed that Gabriel was now upsetting people big time. It was a conclusion re-enforced by a long night Dobson had recently spent in his flat in Paddington watching You Tube clips of Gabriel's 'inspirational speeches'.

It had been like watching Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson and Nelson Mandela rolled into one except that Gabriel didn't mince his words so much. There was everything there - Islamic terrorism, fraud, corruption, poverty, overpopulation, African despots, disastrous African economies, the mass migration of Africans looking for a better life.

Dobson made a decision.

"OK. This is what we do. Try phoning Olande back. Tell him that the heroic Mr Dobson is intending to return to Lagos to continue where he left off. Tell Olande I'm booked on the Virgin flight on Saturday but I'll actually take the KLM flight on Friday. If someone's waiting at the airport a second time, they'll be disappointed."

## CHAPTER 5

Edwin from Enugu was of course quite right. The Airport Hotel wasn't the best place to stay in Lagos but it suited Dobson.

Two hours before he'd been woken by the sudden silence from the rattling air-conditioner. The power was off again, but some sort of emergency system was bound to kick in sooner or later. While he waited and as the heat grew by the minute, Dobson's mind went back to London and a meeting two days before with Gabriel and Solomon. The venue that time had been a mid-terrace house obscured by scaffolding in a traffic congested side street of Hammersmith.

There had been no doorbell so Dobson had knocked, loudly. Solomon, just back from Nigeria, had opened it and led him up a flight of bare, wooden stairs to a room that featured peeling blue paint, bare floor boards and nothing to sit on except a sagging, black, plastic sofa and two upright wooden chairs. It had smelled damp and unused, but a Dell laptop stood open on a small table that, judged by the stains, had once been a coffee-table. A dusty-looking Ethiopian Airlines flight bag lay on the floor and Gabriel appeared in red boxer shorts, a tee shirt and a damp, threadbare pink towel on his head, his hair dripping.

It was straight down to business. Sol said: "The insurance company paid up."

He'd been referring to a medicines contract that had turned sour - the reason for his trip back to Lagos - and had been the usual Nigerian shenanigans over paperwork and a bunch of Letters of Credit. There had been no need for Dobson's involvement.

"But still a big loss for you," Dobson had said.

"Live and learn. We become better people by learning from the bad nature of others." It was not a saying Dobson had often heard in commercial circles, especially from a Nigerian.

Solomon pointed to the dilapidated sofa. "Please....sit."

Dobson thought his own flat in Queensway was dismal enough but this place was worse. Gabriel and Solomon ignored surroundings. It was something to do with being brought up in a slum, Dobson had previously concluded.

Then they'd started but, as always, it was a news item that distracted Gabriel. He rubbed the pink towel through his hair and dropped it on the floor. It was another abduction by the COK. Mali this time. Gabriel's chair creaked and rocked.

"Who cares a fuck about ordinary African folk?" he'd said. "You get thirty wealthy white tourists shot as they lie sunbathing with Martini cocktails on a Tunisian beach and the whole world knows. Next day you get a hundred African children massacred and no-one ever hears about it. Even if they know, they quickly forget. They don't really care. They shrug. Fucking black Africans.

Poor beggars. It's as if they deserve it. Then they carry on loading food carts sky high at the fucking supermarket. It's nothing to do with them. It's far away. Black lives are less important than white. You know that?"

Dobson agreed, but Gabriel had just made him feel sorry he'd spent all night watching more of Gabriel's You Tube clips and not the news.

They'd moved on.

"That arrest warrant. It's to do with a perfectly legitimate commercial contract to supply security equipment for the Federal Airports Authority," Sol said.

Dobson already knew that.

"They say it was awarded to Solomon Trading because of bribes, that it is all to do with money laundering and that we'll never deliver on our obligations."

Dobson knew that, too. The Asher & Asher system was very efficient with that sort of enquiry.

"If there is one thing to be said for Solomon Trading," Solomon went on, "it's that we go out of our way to make our business open, transparent, fair and legitimate."

Gabriel chipped in: "You'd be hard pressed to find another company with that sort of record in Nigeria.....no, in Africa. How much time do you have? There's a lot to discuss."

Just as before they'd hardly started when Dobson's phone buzzed. "There's been a fire above a Polish and African grocery shop in Croydon," said Colin Asher.

It only took Dobson a second. "God's office?"

"Heaven's been fire bombed."

"Anyone injured?"

"Apparently not. Someone saw smoke but it looks like another warning shot to me. Where are you?"

"With God himself."

So, Dobson had broken this latest piece of bad news, waited for things to settle and then mentioned the man called Osman Olande and tried linking Olande to the office fire. He took a deep breath and ended: "Things aren't looking good but, as your appointed consultant, I'm going to be frank. OK?"

Gabriel and Solomon had fallen silent like a couple of patients waiting for a diagnosis from a surgeon. "I feel I'm being short changed on information," Dobson said. Then his phone had gone again. "Bloody hell."

"The arrest warrant has found its way to Interpol but I've got a copy. It's on its way."

Dobson had opened his laptop and fired it up.

"It's total shit, man," Gabriel had said as they waited. "Am I the only person not to have seen the fucking warrant? Look out the window, Sol. Are the police outside? See any blue flashing lights?"

When Gabriel finished, Dobson was looking at a colour scan of a single sheet with an official looking spread eagle at the top: A warrant issued by a court in Abuja for the arrest of one Femi Akintola on charges of bribery, corruption, money laundering and false representation linked to a government contract with the Federal Aviation Authority, the FAA. To Dobson it looked like someone had typed in gaps on a blank form, liberally covered it in stamps and then finished it off at the bottom with a scrawl of a signature. But it looked official enough to have made its way to the UK Home Office and then into the police network because that was where Colin Asher had found it.

Dobson read it three times, Solomon twice and Gabriel once before lying on his back, head almost in the kitchen, feet against the sofa. "What is this fucking nonsense?"

"They spelled your name wrong, Femi." Solomon pointed out. "It's Akindele not Akintola."

Gabriel sprang up. "That ain't all they got wrong, Sol. This is crazy. This is a put up. This is a product of someone's desperation, a frightened mouse, a pygmy."

Somehow, Gabriel's accent had changed to slightly American, as if he was performing on a stage somewhere. "This don't scare Gabriel Joshua. This, my man, is a piece of shit. It is an invention, a forgery, a piece of paper found in a trash bin in a corrupt lawyers' office and they filled in the blank spaces."

Gabriel had then started jiggling about, a man clearly blessed with many talents worthy of a stage career. One talent was for dreaming up outrageous, attention-getting speeches about world problems that never failed to drive home blunt, indisputable and often unpopular truths that many people didn't like. Another talent was an inability to recognise danger.

He'd looked down at Solomon and Dobson on the floor. "You think your British Home Office will take a blind bit of notice of this piece of crap, man? Will the US Department of Homeland Security arrest me at Dulles on the basis of this piece of stupidity?"

Trying to solve a client's problems meant trying to understand the client.

With Gabriel, Solomon and Solomon Trading there were huge chunks of mystery to be unravelled. It had taken most of the day at the Hammersmith house.

"This is a copy of your contract with the Federal Airports Authority, the FAA," Mark Dobson had said pointing to the screen of his laptop. "It poses a few questions."

He got answers to the simple ones first. Then:

"OK, I understand your partner on this FAA contract was Scantex Technologie from Germany. No problems. A good company. Owned by Fischer Investments in the USA. Richard Fischer is a multibillionaire and on a list of candidates for Governor of Massachusetts."

A few more clicks on his laptop and up came many more names of people with connections to Gabriel: big business owners, New York lawyers, a State governor and a few Senators including a black Senator, Daniel Bakare, currently on the US Committee on Armed Service, a member of the UK House of Lords with strong opinions on military strategy and defence spending and links to big business in Germany, France, Italy, Australia.

"You know all these guys, personally, Gabriel? Is any of this relevant?"

Gabriel said nothing, just stared up from the floor as Dobson continued clicking away.

"You see, at first I thought this was yet another commercial deal gone wrong. I thought to myself: Jesus, Solomon Trading needs to learn a few tricks of the trade. They're either too naive or too bloody inept. Getting caught twice, three times, it's happening too often. But, business is business, so I carry on. And, anyway, despite everything, I still like Nigeria so it gets personal.

"So, I delved a bit more and things looked even more complicated. than at first sight. But perseverance is a characteristic of mine as you've noticed and so I go to Nigeria hoping to ask the questions I'm asking right now. But someone was tipped off. They knew I was coming and a few thugs turned up to warn me off. Frankly, I thought I had had my chips, that the game was up and it was time to meet my maker. But why was I being warned off?

"I've decided it was because I was coming to see you. Perseverance nearly got me killed."

"Sorry," said Solomon.

"This is not just about a single deal gone wrong," Dobson had continued. "You've been around a few years now. You, Gabriel, are a man led by Christian beliefs, an understanding of right and wrong. You're a natural orator. I've heard you speak. Watched the videos. It's stirring stuff. But to me you look and sound more like a rich international politician than a parish priest. And now, here you are sitting in this fucking, dismal flat in Hammersmith owned by a friend of yours who's just been murdered and with an arrest warrant hanging over your head.

"So, what the hell's going on, man? What the fuck are you up to that makes you and probably Sol and me a target for annihilation? If you think I can help, then loosen up and tell me more. Otherwise we'll forget about it, I'll return your cheque and start another job.

This lucid flow of Dobson's was spoiled again by his phone. "Bloody hell..... Colin. What now?"

"TV breaking news," he said. "Burkina Faso. Reports of hundreds of dead beside the roads. The airport at Ouagadougou closed due to an 'incident'. Terrorists belonging to the COK said to have moved in under cover of a night lit only by headlights from brand new Toyota trucks....."

Colin Asher's description lasted a minute or so and Dobson had switched his phone to loudspeaker so Gabriel and Solomon could hear.

When he'd finished, Gabriel stood up.

"It was expected," he said, prowling around the room. "And where were the French? Where were the Pan African joint action troops? Where were the Americans, the British, the Chinese, the Russians who go there to dig for whatever precious commodity lies beneath African soil? Where was the protection for ordinary people?"

Gabriel, Dobson knew, didn't expect a reply. When he was in a mood like that he could speak for hours. This time, however, he stopped and sat down.

"We've never properly described the Project to you, Mark," he said quietly.

Dobson nodded. "True." Then he looked at Gabriel. No longer the bouncing, confident, firebrand speaker he'd watched on videos. The tall, black man with the smart suit, white shirt, bow tie and sparkling ear studs was gone, replaced by an unshaven man leaning in the doorway of a dirty kitchen in crumpled trousers, a dirty shirt, bare feet and the pink towel now hanging around his neck.

"What exactly are you up to, Gabriel? What's going on?"

Gabriel looked at Solomon as if asking for permission to explain something. Dobson didn't give him a chance. "'One minute you're a hell raising preacher, next minute a fucking politician," he said. "Which is it, Gabriel? Why not become a bone fide Presbyterian preacher?"

Gabriel smiled. "Only God is sufficiently qualified to hand out that sort of diploma. And if you were to ask him, I suspect he'd say he hates titles."

Dobson liked that. Gabriel had just proved one of his own long held opinions about it being impossible to train someone to become a good, free-lance international commercial crime investigator. It was so good a reply Dobson decided that's how he'd reply to Colin Asher next time he was accused of being a self-taught, eavesdropping dickhead. "But you exploit the title of Pastor Gabriel Joshua," he said.

"It has marketing advantages."

"And you call your organisation the Household of God's Miracles Church?"

"Blame Sol. He invented it. The name stuck. It was a thirteen-year olds' joke. He said it was a miracle anyone turned up to our meetings."

"It's a trade name," Solomon added.

"Do you believe in miracles?"

"Only one," Gabriel replied.

"And what's that?"

"That we got where we are with a name like 'Household of God's Miracles Church'."

"So, are you a businessman, a man of God or a politician?"

Gabriel gave his loud, Nigerian laugh and pointed his finger as if awarding Dobson first prize for something.

"I like your questions, Mark. I suppose I'm all three. Mostly I'm a man who wants to change things so perhaps I'm mostly a politician. But change costs money and being a politician costs money and money requires a source. So, I'm a businessman. And I read the Bible which says many things about right and wrong, about the rich and poor. But then so do other religions."

"But you charge people to listen to you."

"The income, less the overheads, go towards the Project. You need to understand the business model, Mark. But you are suggesting I am a preacher. I am not a preacher. A preacher only delivers sermons on religious topics. I am a motivational speaker."

"But you imply you are a devout Christian."

"That is because I talk about fairness, rights, respect, opportunities for all and compliance with basic laws - laws that are best encapsulated in the Christian ten commandments. I could probably perform just as well as a Buddhist. But it's the Christian West that has the problem. Buddhists still believe in something. Moslems still believe in something. The West has lost its belief in anything."

"So, for the sake of simplicity, I'll put you down as a Christian. That leads to..... "

Gabriel interrupted: "It's what I'm not that you need to understand."

"So, what are you not?"

"I am not a man who will use violence to achieve his aims. I will defend vigorously but if I cannot persuade by word of mouth it means I have not yet found the right words. Terrorists like the ones you just watched on TV, do not even try to engage in rational debate because they know they will lose the argument. That is why they hide away and only emerge with guns to terrorise. They are inhuman. They are criminals who exploit the biggest problem facing mankind - the anger and envy caused by lack of opportunity, joblessness, overpopulation and the disparity between rich and poor - problems that are still growing. But where is the leadership?"

"So, you are a politician - an unelected one."

"True. But with millions who would vote for me if I ever stood."

"So why not stand?"



"The system needs to change but it can only be changed by pressure from outside. Once you are inside it is hard not to become like the others. Power is like a drug, like alcohol, like smoking. Once you have tasted it, you struggle to give it up. African politicians are amongst the worst. They love themselves more than the people they rule. It is a remnant of the days when the tribal chief was the one with the best feathers and sat in a big chair covered in a tiger skin while the plebs sat on the ground looking up at him, awestruck." Gabriel laughed at his joke "Have you finished your questions?"

"No," Dobson had said because he wanted to change tack, to draw out the reasons for the arrest warrant and the commercial problems. Then he'd come back to the politics. "I still don't understand the Project," he said. "What the fuck is it? Fact is you both come from poor backgrounds and you're now wealthy. Some might say rich. To get there have you ever had to use criminal methods? Bribery for instance? Is not bribery, fraud and corruption a way of life in Nigeria and the only way to become rich?"

"On the scale that you refer to, it has been necessary twice," Gabriel replied. "A sincere regret."

"Do you ever tell lies, Gabriel?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Do you tell lies during your.... your motivational speeches?"

"I talk in order to open minds, to stimulate deeper thoughts, to pose questions, to highlight wrongdoing and suggest ways to put them right. I admit I sometimes exaggerate things to make a point. But exaggeration is not lying."

Gabriel stood up, stroked his neat moustache. "The world has been devoid of inspirational leaders for too long," he went on using the back of the chair like a lectern. "And I'm not talking about all those business gurus who talk bullshit to crowds of would be salesmen. I'm talking about inspiring ordinary people by building optimism, painting a realistic picture of how their lives could and should be and then driving them to achieving that. The lack of spiritual leadership explains many problems in the West. Americans and Europeans are lost in a vacuum of uncertainty and consumerism. They lack the spiritual leadership necessary for the modern world they have created. They do not question life itself other than to demand a long life free of sickness. They are trapped in ambiguity and mixed messages and ruined further by political correctness and fear of speaking the truth.

"Political correctness is destroying frankness and honesty. It encourages dishonesty. Despite TV and the internet, they remain ignorant of what life is really like for most of their fellow humans because to understand properly they need to experience it for themselves. So, all the while, we see a growing gulf between those that have everything and those that have nothing.

"That is why I speak of the reasons behind the conflicts that plague Africa and the Middle East and are spread through terrorism. And I talk about the weakness of modern leadership that could plunge the whole of the world into a major catastrophe. I talk about too much democracy stifling radical decision-making and how dictatorships can sometimes be far better at changing society for the good."

Gabriel paused. "I am not always popular. But I talk about unemployment, underemployment, the destruction of the natural environment and the problems of uncontrolled population growth. And, being African, of course I talk about corruption and the increasing economic desperation that leads to mass migration, not just of Africans.

"But I do not lie, Mark. I offer opinion backed up by fact, but such is modern scepticism that one person's fact is another person's untruth. What I try to offer are sensible opinions straight from my heart. That they are rarely disputed suggests they are widely shared although It's a pity that politicians are too frightened to acknowledge them. That my audiences have grown year by year suggests that what I say is seen as plain, common sense. They understand me."

It had been interesting stuff but Dobson was still wondering where all this was going, what he was doing in that rundown house and whether or not he could achieve anything by staying.

And the Project itself? Still there was nothing.

"You speak extremely well, Gabriel," Dobson had said. "Your accent gives you away as Lagos born and bred although I notice you add in a bit of American from somewhere. But, and forgive me for saying this, it is as if you had a far better education than a boy from the slums. Can you explain that?"

"You think I'm also lying about my background? Let me tell you. From age ten Sol and I worked the streets close to the Holiday Inn Hotel. The cleaners would give me old English and American newspapers from hotel guests in return for cigarettes that I rolled from what the English call dog ends. When Sol got to read the papers, they were in tatters because I read every damned page from front to back and tore out sections I found interesting. That was my education." He had paused and grinned. "It also explains why I don't smoke."

They laughed for a moment until Dobson decided he'd had enough of skirting the big question. "So," he said. "Explain the Project."

Mark Dobson, still waiting for the power to return at the Airport Hotel, went to the window, opened it and stared out into the darkness. There was another hour to go before Edwin from Enugu turned up.

"Explain the Project."

Well, there was this area of land in the north east that crossed the border into Niger, that Solomon Trading owned it. It was about twenty miles across with scattered small villages and one small town thirty miles away.

That had been the start, but then he'd got another long lecture about the world economic model - the one based on constant growth, about it not working for ordinary people, about Nigeria and Niger being good examples of how it didn't work, about wealth not flowing down to ordinary folk like it should, why continued growth had limits and why some in the West were starting to realise this.

"So, the Project is about a new economic system - in the area you own?" Dobson had asked.

"That's why we need funds."

"Why not ask charities? There are hundreds of them."

They'd tried. No success. Compassion fatigue. Niger was out of bounds. Aid workers were shit scared to go there.

"What about the land? You got permission for all that? From the State Governor? The Government?"

They had papers. Certificates of Occupancy.

Were they sound papers? Would they stand up in Court? Might someone tear them up as worthless? After all, Nigeria's land ownership laws were somewhat vague.

"I got to know the President of Niger, Mark. Hausa man, Hama Dosso. French speaker. We get on well."

"Christ almighty," Dobson had said because Gabriel had made it sound like his land was some sort of small, independent country. "What sort of new economic system have you got in mind?"

And that's when he'd started to learn about the Spanish Co-Operativa Integral Catalana, the CIC. It had taken a while. "A co-operative where everyone has a stake," Gabriel had explained. "Self-sufficiency, everyone self-employed."

Dobson had tried to imagine how it might work. Yes, a few small places in Europe or America might give it a try it but Africa? Either way, it was mind boggling, although Solomon provided a touch of reality. "It won't be easy," he'd said.

What about the timescale?

They'd already started and had a man in charge of the economic side.

"His name is Benjamin Simisola. He's black, Ghanaian, with a post graduate degree in tropical agriculture with a special interest in peanuts, sesame, chillies, small scale manufacturing and solar energy."

"OK."

"But because it's in an area where the COK operates we have a man in charge of defending it."

"Jesus. Go on."

"His name's Bill Larsen, an ex, British soldier, SAS. Bill Larsen runs a private defence force called Specialised Tasks Africa, STA. We allow him to use our land."

"A private, bloody army?"

"We allow him to lose our land and contribute to his expenses. We can't rely on the Nigerian government or anyone else."

Dobson's scepticism had reached its peak.

"It's long term," Sol had added to Dobson's eternal gratitude. "Bill's building up STA to operate in other areas where there is trouble."

And who employs Benjamin?

"We do."

To Dobson it sounded like Benjamin was head of the civil service, like the Mayor of London or New York.

"Let me get it clear," he'd said. "All your profits are going towards creating some sort of co-operative economy in an area of land you own."

Gabriel had nodded. "You think we're mad?"

"Yes. But my admiration is tempered with a feeling you won't get away with it. That someone will take offence and try to stop it. Maybe they've already started. Arrest warrants. Shootings. That sort of thing. You share my feelings?"

Gabriel and Solomon had both shrugged. "Yes," they said in unison.

"But there's no way your business profits can cover those sorts of expenses," Dobson had pointed out. "How do you cover it?"

"Donations, Mark. Like-minded entrepreneurs, friends."

"Well, as your adviser, and if it's not so confidential give me an example. Who is willing to stump up millions for a project like that."

Gabriel had smiled. "You think it's impossible? That they think I'm crazy?"

"I also think you're crazy so give me an example just to prove I'm wrong."

"Albatross."

"Albatross? Steve Kendrick? Yachts to airlines? Shoes to electronics?"

"That Steve."

For Dobson that really was an eye opener. Everyone knew Steve Kendrick and Dobson had met him once in Nairobi. Kendrick was a self-made billionaire who'd started out selling counterfeit perfumes from a suitcase in Oxford Street in London. Albatross was his corporate name, the image of an albatross on everything from his designer clothing to the fleet of Boeings belonging to Albatross Pacific. Kendrick now ran his empire from a yacht called Albatross moored off Monaco.

"Albatross who've just opened a route to Abuja?"

"That Albatross."

"Any other crazy donors?"

"Yes, but they don't all like the publicity. Steve's an exception."

Dobson thought for a moment. "So, is there anything in particular you want funds for at present?" He'd made it sound like he had a few friends tucked away with spare cash but the answer made him wish he'd never asked.

"Yeh," Gabriel had said pushing lunch, now just an empty pizza box, towards Sol. "We lack certain pieces of technology - one in particular."

"And what's that?"

"An MQ-9 Aerial Surveillance drone. We could purchase one from the US for about five million dollars. We're working on a deal to buy one."

At that point, Solomon had stood up with all the empty pizza boxes and was carrying them to the kitchen. Dobson had watched him go, but as Gabriel mentioned the drone a look of dismay had spread across Solomon's face.

"Does the US know about this?" Dobson asked.

"We're not the ones negotiating the purchase."

"I see. Who is?"

"A Russian partner, Aron Kaplan, through their Paris office."

Dobson knew the name. Kaplan was one of the older oligarchs - Kaplan Oil, Kaplan Gas, Kaplan Properties.

Solomon was shoving the empty boxes into a plastic bag but stopped, momentarily and Dobson's eye instantly logged a problem, a difference of opinion. He ignored it for the moment.

"Aron Kaplan. And the French connection?"

"Uranium. Niger is a big producer of Uranium. The French depend on it. They would run out of electricity if they couldn't get it. It's a political quagmire."

Fifteen years in the international investigation business and Dobson often realised how little he knew or understood. But then he'd been subjected to another Gabriel lecture.

"It's why Africans stay poor, Mark. Why Nigerians stay poor even with vast oil reserves. It's the multinationals like Aviva, the French mining company supported by foreign governments, it's big bribes. big corruption. Wealth should filter down to the people but it doesn't. Instead, a few get rich and foreign politician do nothing because they'd lose votes if they intervened. It's wrong. A nation's resources should belong to the nation's people."

"And your so-called Project is all about showing there's a way to change this?"

Gabriel nodded.

"How many people know about the Project?"

Solomon this time. "Very few. And it's behind schedule because we needed to solve security problems. With Bill Larsen in place we can start to move forward again."

Dobson changed tack.

"Let me get this clear," he said. "Solomon Trading has grown from a small local trading business trading honestly and corruption free because honesty is right and honesty pays. Right?"

They both nodded.

"But in the last few years it has taken on distributorships and agencies for big international companies - like Albatross and Scantex Technologie but still by trading honestly."

"Albatross and Scantex chose us for that very reason," said Solomon.

"And you've worked with Albatross and Scantex for several years."

"Albatross for five years. Scantex for four."

"So why, after all that time, is someone trying to put you out of business?"

Gabriel shrugged. Solomon shook his head.

"Is it something to do with the Project. With Bill Larsen?"

Solomon looked at Gabriel and Gabriel sniffed loudly. "Maybe," he said.

"Why?" Dobson asked and Gabriel sniffed again. For a man with Gabriel's self-confidence sniffing nervously was unusual. Had Dobson hit a nerve? He watched Gabriel.

"It could be that the COK is not what it seems, that it....." Gabriel stalled. Solomon looked at him and Dobson waited. ".....that the COK is not like Boko Haram."

"What do you mean?" Dobson asked.

"It seems more organised."

"How do you know?"

"Steve Kendrick, Albatross. He met President Azazi soon after he was elected. The President likes Steve's approach to business. He also likes ours. I know that because we met him once before he was elected. Right, Sol?"

Solomon nodded. "A good man."

"The President asked Steve if he'd considered long term security and stability," Gabriel went on.

"Nothing unusual in a warning like that is there?"

"Except that the President took Steve aside and said to him that he thought the COK was not being taken seriously enough by the outside world. That the US and others still thought it was small scale terrorism under a new name and that it wouldn't last long."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know," Gabriel had admitted. "But when you asked if our problems might be linked to Bill Larsen, you got me thinking."

## CHAPTER 6

'Edwin from Enugu' was as good as his word.

Before daybreak, Mark Dobson was back at the airport before the London Virgin flight landed. Things happened quickly.

Edwin's Toyota had just driven away when, in the pre-dawn darkness, Dobson saw the same rusting yellow Peugeot. With the Virgin flight due to land in fifteen minutes, Dobson watched it stop close to where it had been the last time. He then went into the arrivals hall, bought a newspaper and waited.

Minutes later, the same young taxi driver strolled in wearing the same blue Chelsea FC tee shirt. He was carrying a small, brown canvas bag and took a seat at the end of a row, putting the bag on the ground. He pulled out a phone, said something then picked up the bag and sauntered off towards a closed coffee shop.

Minutes later a Nigerian man in a shabby-looking suit passed by and stopped. They talked, briefly, the bag was handed over and the suit strolled away. Chelsea tee shirt lingered, bit his fingernails, checked his footwear and tried to look cool as Dobson made a strategy decision of the sort he called a whim.

Sometimes whims worked and sometimes they didn't. Generally, whims ran in parallel with another strategy called 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'.

Outside it was still night-time but brightly lit. He walked towards the darker area where the yellow taxi was parked. Parked was a misnomer. It had been left, abandoned, half on the kerb, its front wheels pointing into the road. But the window was open and a plastic figure of a Nordic troll, long hair and wide eyes, dangled in the ignition. On another whim, Dobson leaned in the window and pulled on the troll's long blonde hair. With it came the key. Then he moved into the shadow behind a small van to watch.

A minute later Chelsea tee shirt was sauntering towards his car, playing with his phone. Dobson made a quick assessment - late teens, the swagger of someone lacking the self-confidence of maturity but definitely his abductor. He was stocky but shorter than Dobson and he reckoned he could deal with him given an initial advantage. Dobson's fitness was mostly down to eating carry out pizzas, hotel, cafe and airline food and drinking chlorinated London tap water that has already passed through the bodies of thousands of Londoners. It had nothing to do with work-outs but he was now holding an advantage in the form of a length of frayed tow rope he found tied to the rear of the van.

Chelsea tee shirt arrived, stuck his phone in his pocket, pulled on the reluctant car door, got in, slumped into the sagging driver's seat and pulled the door shut with a bang.

Dobson, creeping closer, watching him grappling on the floor for his keys, opened the rear door, climbed in and fell into the rear seat. "Taxi?"

Tee shirt glanced up from the floor and, as he did so, Dobson wrapped the tow rope around his neck and pulled on it, hard. Then he tightened it until tee shirt was squirming to grab at whatever was strangling the life out of him.

"Keep still," Dobson spat into his hot right ear and pulled the rope tighter still until Chelsea tee shirt's face turned from smooth and dry to puffed up, bloated and sweaty.

Tears formed in his red eyes as he tried looking behind and his hands tried grabbing the rope at his neck but it was too tight and hurting too much. His struggling, Dobson decided, was pathetic so he twisted the rope, wound it around the head rest, tugged the frayed end down to where the seat was bolted to the floor. tied it off and stuck his foot on it in case the knot came undone. Then he pulled it tight again. Chelsea tee shirt was caught like a fly in a spider's web.

"Keep still and listen smart arse. First, why don't you scrap this pile of fucking rust and buy yourself a nice new yellow taxi?"

Chelsea man gurgled, "Yes, sahaaarggh," but even as he stopped struggling to concentrate on sucking in air, Dobson pulled again. But now what?

Only a short while ago this man and two friends had robbed Dobson but, even as the crime was being committed, Dobson had realised something wasn't right. Chelsea tee shirt had actually sounded polite. His expression towards the end had been almost apologetic as if he was not at all happy seeing a white man left with nothing but his passport and an empty wallet. Chelsea boy, Dobson had decided, was doing a job for someone else. Chelsea boy had not enjoyed doing it. That's why he'd decided it was pre-planned, a job sub-contracted out by someone else as a warning to go back to London and forget about anything to do with Pastor Gabriel Joshua, Solomon Trading or the Household of God's Miracles Church. Mark Dobson needed to know who and what was behind it.

"Remember me? I'm Mr Dobson. Remember now?"

"Yessaaaargh."

There was an oily spanner and wheel wrench on the floor and Dobson picked it up and dug it into Chelsea's ribs. If he thought he was about to be shot, so be it. "Speak. Is someone waiting to meet me off the plane right now?"

There was far too long a pause so Dobson dug the spanner into Chelsea's sweaty neck, tugged on the rope and heard him try sucking air through a gap that wasn't there. "Speak. Is someone waiting for me?"

"Wotsaaargh. Yesaaargh.."

"Who?"



"Dunnosaaaagh."

Dobson pulled again and there was a gasp of air coming out, not going in.

"What was in the bag?"

"Gunsaaaargh."

"A gun, huh? Someone wants to kill me?"

"Maybesaaaargh."

"Why attack a nice Englishman here to do his business?"

"Jobsaaargh."

"Job? What job? Who do you work for? Who pays to get nice Englishmen shot?"

He was still holding and twisting the rope, still poking the spanner deep into the boy's neck when he noticed the cheap gold cross hanging on a chain around his neck.

Was Chelsea a churchgoer, someone with good Christian parents and an upbringing that ran counter to what he had been up to in this stinking old car? Why had he looked so apologetic? Was he, like thousands of other young Nigerian men, a no-hoper, just trying to look cool and make ends meet? With just one long pull on the rope Dobson could have put him out of his misery by strangling him, but was Chelsea boy a route to those out to get Gabriel? To whoever had shot Kenneth?

"Where were you going before I got into your stinking car, you piece of sweaty shit?"

"Homesaaargh."

"Home, huh? But you don't have a key to your shitty car."

"Nossaaaargh. Stop, sah. Pleeasesaaargh. No shoot, sah. I tock."

"Talk then, you snivelling little upstart. Who was the man you gave the bag to?"

Dobson stuck the spanner into the rope like a tourniquet and twisted until Chelsea's eyes nearly popped, then slackened it a fraction. The boy looked genuinely frightened. He couldn't see Dobson but Dobson could see he was dribbling down his chin like a baby. A thread of spittle hung from his lower lip and there was an acrid smell of fear and hot, fresh sweat. "You want to die, Chelsea boy?"

"Nosaaaargh."

"And go to hell?"

"Nosaaaargh."

With his free hand, Dobson pulled on the little gold cross. "Are you a good Christian or a bad one?"

"Good, sah."

"You ever hear about Pastor Gabriel Joshua, Chelsea boy?"

"Yessaaaargh"

"What do you know?"

"Church, sah."

"You like him?" It was a pure guess that Gabriel might well be some Nigerian teenage boys' view of a hero.

"Yessah."

"Why?"

"Why sah?"

"You heard me. Why do you like him?"

"Good man sah."

"So, you decided to kill him as well as me?"

"No, no, nosaaaargh."

"Then why give a gun to that man?"

"Waaaaaaaargh!"

It was a word Dobson had never heard of before and he loosened the rope just a fraction. "Do you know they want to kill Pastor Gabriel?"

"Hoosah?"

"The man you gave the gun to."

"I dunno sah.. Gabriel good mon, fine fella. Believe me sah I dunno. Stop sah. Please sah, I die."

He was not yet dying but Dobson felt sure he was telling the truth. That didn't stop him pursuing the torture. "Believe you, Scumbag? Why should I believe someone who robbed me and stole my computer, my best grey suit and my favourite Citizen watch? Why?"

"Get paid, saaaargh."

"How old are you, Scumbag?"

"Nine, aaaargh,"

"Nine? Only nine? Don't lie to me."

"Nineteen saaaargh."

It was enough. It proved Dobson's suspicion. Someone somewhere had not wanted him in Nigeria because of his link to Gabriel. But now what? Dobson needed a new strategy, a plan and he chose another one from the consultant's armoury: Bullshit.

With his free hand, he took out his mobile phone and pressed a few random buttons, then waited. "Lagos State Police, Commander Samuel please. Yes, I'll hold....."

A gurgling sound came from Scumbag's throat. "Sah, sah. Please sah. No sah," and Dobson removed the silent phone from his ear. "Listen, Scumbag. Pastor Gabriel asked me to come to Lagos. Why do you think he did that?"

"You is not so bad fella sah."

"Correct. I'm a very nice fella until someone upsets me and my friend Gabriel. So, what the fuck were you doing making life so bloody difficult for me and the good Pastor? Answer me."

"Money, sah."

Dobson returned to his phone. "Commander Samuel? Mark Dobson. Yes, sir. I have him. Leave him with me for the time being. Let's see if he'll help us. Thank you, Commander. I'll phone you back. Are you a hired killer, Scumbag?"

"Nosaaaagh not meesaaaagh."

"But someone just hired you."

"Yessah."

"Then what the fuck are you? Freelance?"

"Wozzat saaagh?"

"Freelance, self-employed, work for yourself? Which is it man?"

"Wurr mysell saaaagh"

"Right. You work for me now, OK?"

The wide eyes peered at him from their corners. "Saaah?"

"I'm offering you a job Scumbag. A paid job. You interested?"

"Howmuchsaaagh?"

"Jesus!" Dobson decided he'd clearly loosened things too much so he pulled again.

"I want to know who paid you."

"Pink Lips sah."

Pink Lips. The Pink Lips Club was a meeting place for all sorts of illegal transactions. Dobson had been there once himself. "Pink Lips huh? Is this a local club you frequent regularly, Scumbag? I've heard it's a venue for fine upstanding gentlemen. The pillars of Lagos society? Is that you?"

"Yessah."

Still holding tightly on the rope, Dobson made another call, this time to a real person.

"Vigo?"

Most of the time, Dobson's team of international helpers went about their own business whether in Istanbul, Hong Kong, Beirut, Johannesburg, Bangkok or Lagos. Dobson paid for their time, local knowledge and skills. In Lagos there were two in the team. Loosely speaking Vigo and Mazda were in the motor trade but were well connected in many other circles. They called Dobson 'Mercedes' because they thought he was an 'up-makkit man'.

"Hey, Mercedes mon. Where the fuck you bin?"

"Back to London, but I'm here in Lagos and sat in a car belonging to the bastard who tried to kill me."

"Jesus, Mercedes. You so vital?"

"The top most vital one is Gabriel, Mazda."

"Last time you never got to see him."

"I saw him in London instead. He has big problems. That's why I'm back. You want to help?"

"How much you paying, Mercedes?"

"I thought I was still in credit. What happened?"

"Yeh, well. What you want?"

"My skin colour's wrong. You know what I mean. I need you to take this piece of shit under your wing for a few days. I pay you, you pay him. Come out here and I'll introduce you."

"Where park jalopy?"

"The airport. A rusty yellow Peugeot. My assassin can't go far. He's fastened with rope and I've got his car keys."

"On our way."

## CHAPTER 7

Mark Dobson had first met Craig Donovan in the bar of the Bristol Hotel in Beirut.

It was exactly the right sort of place to throw up a budding friendship between two men with similar interests. Donovan had proffered a card with not much on it except a phone number. They'd kept in touch and even met for a drink in London when Donovan passed through

Donovan had served in the US Marines, moved to the US Foreign Service and then into jobs with US Embassies in the Middle East and Africa. Nigeria had been his last posting and, although he'd never fully admitted it, Dobson knew he was ex CIA. He was now sixty something, recently retired, living mostly in Washington with his English wife Zoe, and Dobson knew he still craved some action. Donovan was exactly the sort of person to fit into the Asher & Asher team whenever a suitable opportunity arose.

With that in mind, Dobson had phoned Donovan before leaving London to ask if he'd help on a case involving a Nigerian fake pastor.

"Jesus, man. You got one of those money-making bastards as a client?"

"This one's different, Craig," Dobson had replied and then briefed him on the case starting from when he'd been robbed at the airport.

Now, as Dobson sat waiting for Vigo in the stifling heat and increasingly sweaty stench of the Peugeot with Chelsea tee shirt, his phone rang. It was an American accent.

"Where are you?" asked Donovan

"Sitting in a car with the guy who robbed me last time."

"Jesus, he caught you again?"

"I caught him. I'm now waiting for back up. What's up?"

"A catch up, Mark. Gabriel and Solomon just arrived in Washington. I'm seeing them later. Meanwhile, I've been asking around like you suggested. Nothing untoward but one of Gabriel's buddies is US Senator Daniel Bakare."

Chelsea tee shirt moved so Dobson yanked on the rope. Movement stopped.

"Bakare passed through Nigeria a few times when I was there. Back then he ran a security equipment company. It might be co-incidence but I called him. Old times' sake. He remembered me and I'm seeing him in the morning. He said he's scheduled to see Gabriel later today."

"Good man. Listen, I can't talk right now. You remember I told you about Vigo and Mazda? They've just shown up. Call me later Craig."

"Hold it, Mark. I've got something else. Another contact says there's an enquiry running around for a second-hand Predator B Drone for west Africa. It's a French security company operating in West Africa protecting French mining interests."

Dobson's ears perked up but were distracted by another sound - the car horn of an old V6 Honda right next to where he was sitting.

Donovan was still talking. "I thought it was a joke when you told me Gabriel wanted to buy a military drone. It might not be connected, but Washington suspect a Russian link."

"I tell you Craig, this is one quagmire of big politics and big business Gabriel's involved in. I think he's out of his depth. The security for his Project up on the border with Niger is more like a private army. How legal's that? Meanwhile, who'd have the final say on selling a second-hand US military drone?"

"The President?" Donovan surmised as a head with a fetching brown cowboy hat appeared at the rear window next to Dobson.

"Listen, Craig. Friends have arrived. I need to go. Good stuff. Keep it coming."

Cowboy hats had recently become a popular item for Lagos street vendors as if a container load might have washed up somewhere along the coast. Vigo clearly liked his. He was on top form. "Hey Mercedes man, welcome to Lagos. This the basstad?"

A second head, Mazda's, then appeared at the open front window and a hand was pushed past Chelsea's left ear towards Dobson in the back. Dobson grabbed it and shook it with his spare hand. "You tie basstad like sack of yams, Mercedes."

Mazda pinched Chelsea's neck just above the rope. "He moved, Mercedes. He's alive."

"Just. We need to get him to your car, take him to your garage and decide what to do with him."

"What's his label, Mercedes?"

"I call him Chelsea Scumbag. He's a God-fearing Christian who visits the Pink Lips Club, don't you Scumbag?" Dobson yanked on the rope.

"Yessaaargh."

"That's one big co-incidental, Mercedes." Vigo sniffed at Chelsea and wrinkled his nose. "I just renewed my membership. Never seen him there, though. Looks a bit young for business. How old are you Mr Scum?" He prodded Chelsea's left cheek.

"Nineaaaargh,"

"Only nine?"

They bundled Chelsea into the back of Vigo's Honda as a group of Chinese businessmen pulling cases stopped to watch. "Police," Vigo said flashing the business card he hung around his neck for occasions like that. "Drunk basstad."

Dobson threw Mazda the troll key to drive the Peugeot and off they went.

Vigo's business was a concrete block construction in a side street off the Lagos Ibadan Highway. The front was an oily garage, cars with bonnets open, engines hanging on pulleys and it echoed to the sound of compressed air, spanners being dropped, shouting and Nigerian music on a radio perched on a pile of bald tyres. To the rear was a sweltering, unlit and mostly empty warehouse with a corner partitioned by more concrete blocks and a plastic door. This was Vigo's office and where they dragged the prisoner. Vigo pushed the door shut with his foot.

The flickering strip light showed a desk piled high with paper, boxes, newspapers and empty Heineken cans. There was a refrigerator covered in oily finger marks and two dilapidated swivel chairs permanently tilted backwards. They tied Chelsea's hands behind his back with one end of the rope, the other end to a wooden pallet. Then they sat him on the pallet. If Chelsea wanted to run he'd have to drag a pallet with him. Vigo then went outside "Some calls. Back soon."

Mazda, relaxing in Vigo's chair behind the desk, produced a packet of cigarettes. "Smokes, Mercedes?"

Dobson didn't smoke so he sat in the other chair and examined Chelsea's dejected looking face. "Now then Mr Chelsea FC. What's your real name?"

Chelsea turned his head and felt his neck. The rope was gone but the dents and pink marks were still there. "Zak - Zakarias, sah."

"As in Zakarias the ancient prophet?"

"Yessah"

"Nice. But can we call you Chelsea?"

"Yessah."

"You follow Chelsea football club?"

"Yessah."

"Where do you live, Chelsea?"

"Ikeja, sah."

"Big place. Where in Ikeja?"

"Red Cross Pharmacy, sah."

"You live in a pharmacy?"

"My father, sah. He is the pharmacist."

Dobson looked at Mazda. Mazda shrugged and blew some smoke. "Does your father know you're a hired killer?"

Chelsea panicked, jumped, his ankle catching in the pallet and he fell back down. "I'm no high killa sah. Just do job."

"You want me to tell your father?"

"No, no, no, sah. Just do job, sah."

"A job to kill Pastor Gabriel Joshua."

"I didn't know sah. Gabriel good man, sah. My father knows him sah."

Breakthrough.

In a room at the Holiday Inn Express in Washington, Gabriel, lay on the bed, hands behind his head. Solomon was working on a laptop.

"Try Bill again, Sol."

"There's no reply."

"You checked the bank? The money from Steve Kendrick?"

"It's in. Two million dollars."

"Good man. What about Temple?"

"Temple wants money before he'll ship the mobile clinic. You know that."

"What about the convention in Birmingham. We still on?"

"I'm organising it right now. You still want to use the Fela theme?"

"Yeh. Give me the phone, Sol. Let me try Bill again."

Solomon tossed the phone over without looking. Gabriel pressed the number he'd already tried until his fingers were sore. Yet again it went dead. "Fuck."

"Told you so. Why don't you go out, Femi? You driving me crazy. Leave me in peace. You're meeting that friend of Mark's in half an hour. Fuck off."

Gabriel grinned at the back of Solomon's head, stood up from the bed, pulled shoes on and passed a hand across his hair. "Have a nice day, Sol" he said going out the door.

He'd arranged to meet Craig Donovan at a Starbucks and was already there when Donovan arrived. Donovan easily picked him out - the tall black guy in the corner with the neat moustache, blue, open-necked shirt, arms stretched across two chairs. And Gabriel knew it was Donovan - a big, burly guy with a confident, military stride and a baseball cap fixed with a tuft of grey hair protruding at the back. They shook hands and organised coffees.

"So, a friend of Mark Dobson," Gabriel said as Donovan removed the baseball cap and somehow fixed it across his knee.

"We met in Beirut. But I know Nigeria. I was at the US Embassy in Abuja a while back."

"Paper pusher?" Gabriel's mood was still not good.

"Everything's paperwork, Gabriel. Even the CIA."

Gabriel sat up straighter. "So, time to serve the arrest warrant and deportation papers?"

"I'm retired, OK? And I hate fucking paperwork."



"Good news. Mark brief you?"

"Yep."

"So, what can you do?"

"I know how some things work." Donovan took a sip of his latte. "Sounds like you got some bright ideas, Gabriel. Christ knows, we need them. I watched one of your videos - the World War Three one - the one that got you some attention in the LA Daily News and the London Daily Telegraph. I noticed the Washington Times didn't pick it up."

"You think World War Three is inevitable?"

"Not inevitable but we sure gotta deal with the problems you talk about: Poverty, unemployment, resource depletion, food, water, mass migration, population growth, living space, the conflict and terrorism that arises from all of that. Jesus, there's no space even to stand up in places."

They talked on for a while, Gabriel slowly beginning to like the burly, grey-haired American whose baseball cap kept falling off his knee. But he still couldn't see where Donovan fitted in.

"Mark's looking at the legal and commercial side," Donovan said at last. "I'm more of a military man. Daniel Bakare's an old buddy of mine."

"The bastard. I've been waiting for him all fucking day."

"I know. He told me. But he's also been sat around waiting. Waiting for his boss, the Defence Secretary, Douglas Martin. Martin got diverted from Saudi Arabia to Johannesburg after the bombing at the Crown Plaza hotel,"

"Fucking voyeur," said Gabriel with a distorted smile. "Thirty killed and a hundred injured. What did Martin do? Watch the last of the smoke rising? Denounce the atrocity? Very useful."

Donovan nodded, smiled.

"It's a sign of trouble ready to erupt, Craig. The softening up phase."

"Funny. Bakare used the same expression. Softening up."

"Bakare steals all my fucking phrases because he hasn't got any of his own. By the time he gets here we might be gone."

"What do you want him to do?"

"Help the Project along. Endorse it."

"Does he understand it?" Donovan certainly didn't, but he waited for a reply. When he got nothing, he went on. "Even if he did he's limited to what he can do."

"Limited by what?"

"His political masters."

"A plausible excuse. But what the fuck can you do? Even less."

"I can pull a few strings. Find out stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Did you know they've spotted a British flag painted on the roof of a building in what looks to the Americans like a military camp somewhere over the Nigerian border?"

Gabriel looked up. That was news. "Bill must have been feeling patriotic or homesick. What else?"

"Explain why politicians aren't decisive like you."

"Go on, then. Explain."

"They're shit scared."

"I've noticed."

"Scared of making mistakes. Getting it wrong. Upsetting the electorate. Losing face. Going down in history as failures."

"That's what Mark said."

"What was his solution?"

"To use consultants. I thought he was joking. Politicians and bureaucrats love consultants, he said. They like the jargon and the use of ten words when one will do. They like the cut and paste charts and tables, the references and the recommendations. Mark was cynical, called most of it crap and said most of the shit was to win more consultancy work."

"But Mark's right. Politicians like someone else making recommendations. If things go wrong they've got someone to blame. But they particularly like it if someone goes ahead and tries something first. Proves it works. They'll sneer and point fingers if it fails, but they'll jump on the train if they see it leaving the station."

"And politicians see problems coming down the line, problems the consultant doesn't always see because he's not a politician. Right?"

"It's not more politicians we need, Gabriel. It's leadership."

"OK, but what the fuck are you getting at, Craig?"

"Listen. There are senior military guys out there who would agree with using private defence forces if they had good reasons for them. Maybe they don't understand why you need a private army. Maybe you need to explain it better. If they understood it, and were convinced, they might help. But they're usually hamstrung by the system and by politicians. If you agree, let me talk to a few of them. Start the persuasion job."

"You're only talking about the defence side of the Project, yes?"

"Sure," Donovan admitted. Frankly, he was still struggling to understand the Project. The social and economic argument that Mark Dobson had tried describing had left far too many questions unanswered.

"Because you're an army man, right?"

"Yup."

"But it's not just military support I'm after, Craig. Are you sure Mark explained everything?"

"I understand it's some sort of alternative economic idea, community based, but one that needs security to encourage investment. Am I right?"

"A reasonable summary."

"Then why not let me have a word with a few guys I know."

"You mean start again? I started years ago. Bakare and others said they'd do it. I'm still waiting."

"Daniel Bakare wants to keep his job. He'd like someone of influence to make a recommendation - a strategy - that imitates yours, but he can't even find the support to appoint someone. It's blocked. Support for what you want would require a massive policy shift. That's dangerous for a politician. What if it fails? It would tarnish reputations. Mistakes get written into history.

"And, anyway, even if a strategy document was produced that recommended a massive shift away from conventional defence thinking can you imagine how much discussion would start? The controversy? The disagreements? It could take years. How many public leaks would there be? How many anti-interventionists, make love not war sympathisers would stifle progress? Politicians would stumble from one indecision to the next indecision. It's the world we live in."

As he was speaking, Donovan knew he was still looking on this as a defence project. That was wrong. It was not just defence. Gabriel was really after a radical shift towards a new style of economy - for Africa, for Christ's sake - an experiment. Jesus, it was complicated. He blew some air out of frustration.

"You know, Gabriel, I just got back from England. They just sent three jets in to help bomb some terrorist targets. You should have heard the objections, the public outcry. Why? Because the UK Parliament hadn't ratified that sort of air strike. Jesus, man, do they want a fucking referendum every time someone has to make a decision?"

Gabriel nodded. "Democracy is OK until you need a decision."

"Elected politicians do not always make good leaders," Donovan said. "Dictators are far better at it but the West then calls them despots. Why do we have Islamic terrorism, mass migration, unemployment, refugees, economic failure? Many argue it's because we got rid of a couple of hard men, decision-makers - the dictators."

Gabriel nodded but looked at his watch. "I know. Where do we take this, Craig?"

"Let me talk to some folks I know. I'm asking for your permission. They are not politicians and one or two can pull very long strings. But they will, I'm sure, ask for evidence. Yes, they know all about multinationals needing defence rings for vast oil and gas and minerals extraction, but doing it for poor, subsistence farmers just to prove that small, self-sustaining local economies work? How long would that take?"

"It works, Craig. I'm not going to blow any victorious trumpets just yet but who the fuck do you think helped drive that bunch of COK fanatics out of Burkina Faso three days ago? You hear about that? And Burkina Faso's nowhere near our patch of land."

Donovan's eyes widened. "That was STA - Specialised Tasks Africa? Bill Larsen's group? Operating out of your land?"

Gabriel nodded. "Yep. Bill's got an unwritten arrangement with Burkina." he said. "Vital support, specialised ops, and no risk to Americans, Brits, French, Australians, Canadians or anyone else with an aversion to dying in combat. Bill's team consists of Africans, hand-picked, trained by him. Africans defending their own way of life and freedom in the same way that US citizens once helped defeat Nazism. We could match the COK man for man if we recruited as many as they do.

"The difference is, Crag, that we won't kill innocents, we won't abduct, we won't try to instil our beliefs other than the one that says people can chose. And we won't rob, rape, steal, bribe or corrupt. Neither will we invade and take over assets. All we'll do is defend innocent, hard-working Africans in numbers and encourage the investment needed to provide them with jobs and a brighter future. The Project is a testing ground for a completely new strategy. Got it? But we still need money. The COK are flush with money from crime and corruption. Meanwhile, I struggle to persuade the US, UK and other governments to contribute a single dollar. Bill Larsen is far too busy running STA and hasn't got the credentials or patience to spend half his time crisscrossing the world trying to convince politicians. So, if nothing's forthcoming, we'll move on."

Watching Gabriel's increasingly angry face, Donovan picked up on that last remark. It looked like a threat.

"What do you mean, move on?"

"We'll move to Plan B. And this lot won't fuck about with Parliaments and Senates and referendums. You really want to see sparks fly?"

There was a pause before Donovan muttered, "Mmm. I see. And you told Mark that the US and others were not taking the COK seriously. That it was not just a lingering faction of Abubakar Shekau's Boko Haram, that it....."

Gabriel interrupted. "It's not just me saying that, but I'm not close enough to state security. Your CIA guys should know. Ask them."

Donovan nodded thoughtfully.

"Meanwhile," Gabriel went on. "I'm being falsely accused of fraud, corruption, money laundering and God knows what else on a fucking Interpol notice. So, you Craig, you'd better be quick as well. Politicians and bureaucrats sit around talking while

their pension pots grow. So, in fact, do retired soldiers. Leaders don't. They just get on with it. This one can't wait much longer."

## CHAPTER 8

Whether Chelsea liked the idea or not Dobson decided that meeting his father was a good move.

The rest of the plan was also simple enough. Vigo would take on Chelsea as an 'apprentice', paid for by Dobson. Chelsea's first job was to help empty the Solomon Trading warehouse, which Dobson knew contained sellable merchandise - medicines, car parts, books. The money raised would easily cover expenses that might start racking up and, anyway, if they didn't empty it soon, someone else would.

Vigo put the proposal to Chelsea. "OK here's the deal., Mr Scum. You work for me. Learn da business, OK?"

"What business, sah?"

"Insurance business," said Vigo uncertainly. "Money business, buy 'n sell business, garage business. Work now and again with Mr Dobson. You interested?"

"How much, sah?"

Vigo walked towards him, shook his first finger, then slapped him on the nose with it. "You gotta lot to learn, Mr Scum. Never ask a prospective employer how much till you got the job. OK?"

"Yessah."

"OK. Listen up. Mr Dobson has a very important client. Pastor Gabriel Joshua. You know about him?"

"Yessah."

"Right then. Me and Mazda help Mr Dobson. If you help us we pay you. You even get expenses - new phone, fresh SIM, top ups, fuel for car."

"You can fix my jalopy, sah?"

Vigo looked at Mazda. "I like this fella. You like him, Maz?"

Mazda took a swig from his can. "He seems promising."

"Who you know at Pink Lips then, Mr Scum?"

"Benji, sah."

"Big Benji? Top man. Wah!"

Dobson chipped in. "But I need to clear things with your father, Chelsea boy."

"No, no no, sah. Don't tell about Pink Lips sah."

"Listen. Here's the deal. You work for us and I won't tell your father. One small mistake and Chelsea senior gets to know everything. OK? Deal?"

"Yessah,"

"But I still want to speak to your father because he knows Pastor Gabriel right?"

"Yessah."

"Right. Let's go to the Red Cross Pharmacy."

The Red Cross Pharmacy was a red and orange painted concrete structure with a blue corrugated roof, yellow bars at the windows and two signs, one sporting a Red Cross, the other a green cross and Rx written across it. It was very colourful.

To one side, a power generator roared inside a concrete box sporting a matching blue roof. The road outside was crammed with cars, vans and motorcycles caked in dried, red mud but a clean and shiny Mercedes was parked right up to the front door.

Inside, George Obodi was watching a Nigerian soap opera on TV but jumped up and switched it off with a look of embarrassment when Chelsea, with Mark Dobson standing right behind him, knocked on his door.

Obodi senior was a smart, quietly spoken, middle aged man with a touch of grey in hair that was receding from his forehead. He had the look of a cosy family man who would have found it hard to believe his son capable of violence and daylight robbery. Much the same could be said of many parents with teenage sons who found it hard to find a role in society, Dobson supposed.

Surprised by the sudden appearance of his son with a white man, Obodi hurriedly pushed bare feet into black lace-up shoes, stood, shook hands. and proudly presented a business card as Chelsea falteringly explained that Dobson was his new boss.

"Ah, that is good. You live in Lagos, sir?"

"Just passing through."

"And what is your business, sir?"

"I'm an international investigative consultant."

"Ah. That is a very good profession. Do you have a business card?"

"Sorry, they're out of print."

"My son needs a good career, Mr Dobson, but he dislikes the smell of medicines since he spent a week in hospital with amoebic dysentery."

Dobson said nothing about nearly putting him back in hospital with strangulation. Instead he listened as Obodi senior described his business and apologised for the bars at the windows. "It is not like England, sir. Here, people come at night."

"They come at night in England, too, Mr Obodi. Criminals are not unique to Nigeria."

As Obodi senior talked, Dobson glanced around. Between the filing cabinets, catalogues and stacks of boxes of sanitary towels, hung a number of photos showing that George Obodi was a graduate of somewhere and an enthusiastic church goer.

"So, Zak is your assistant. I am pleased. I have two daughters at University, you know and Zak has been - I am an honest man, Mr Dobson - a problem. He won't mind me telling you this....."

Chelsea squirmed. "Pops, not now."

"Quiet! And what is that mark on your neck? Zak is not as academically minded as his sisters. Zak is a man of action who would live dangerously, facing the troubles of the world. He wants to be a racing driver, Mr Dobson. Do you know anyone in Formula One?"

"Sorry. No. Call me Mark."

"I'm George."

"Are you married, Mr Mark?"

"No."

For Dobson that was enough about family matters. He changed the subject. "Zak says you know Pastor Gabriel Joshua, George?"

"Ah, Pastor Gabriel. A good Christian. He is very popular in America now so we don't see him so much but...." he nodded enthusiastically. "One of the best. But he has no church. We see him in the street, in the Church of the Good Disciple and in the Community hall. I have spoken to him. An honest man. A good man. He is not like the others. There are too many fakes and frauds."

"In the future, you might see him in prison," Dobson said.

George's mouth and eyes opened wide.

"He's in a spot of trouble," Dobson added. "He's my client."

And Dobson went on to mention the arrest warrant, the FAA contract and Solomon Trading. When he stopped, George Obodi's mouth was still wide open, but he was soon talking again, about losing a pharmaceutical supply contract for dubious reasons. George was clearly angry about fraud and corruption being the way of life in Nigeria,

While he ranted, Dobson pulled out his laptop and switched it on. "I need some help," he said turning the screen around. "Do you know any of these people?"

Obodi's eyes widened again. "God's bones!"

It was an expression Dobson had not heard before but, encouraged, he clicked up another photo, pointing at someone Colin Asher had labelled Pastor Lazarus.

"Waaah. Yah. Fat man, run the Church of Our Lord of Mercy and Forgiveness. Crazy man. Cry like baby. Talks of confessing sins or go to hell. Like Catholic man. Church look like Chinese jewellery shop, Mr Dobson."

Dobson continued to click

"Waaah. Church of Our Lord of Mercy and Forgiveness. Father Adebola."

Then: "Waaah, Bishop William of the Disciples of Jesus School of Ibadan. And there, Pastor Ayo. All no good, all bad, Mr Mark. Not good, honest Christian, more like businessmen. You wanna know about Lazarus and Ayo and Adebola?"

Dobson nodded and listened for another five minutes. It was scam after scam. They had probably netted millions. Bishop William ran a business that guaranteed, for a large fee, boy babies if you wanted a boy or girl ones if not. If his guarantee turned out wrong, he'd blame the couple for getting the conception process wrong. If they took his advice for a second time then it was a good two to one chance he'd get it right, but it was still down to them to perform right on the night. Since reading about Bishop William on the internet, Dobson wished he'd thought of it. "If business drops off," he'd told Colin Asher. "We could run it on the side as a pension fund,"

But Obodi wasn't finished. "Lazarus's brother is one big shot in the Ministry of Aviation. His cousin is State Governor in Warri. His brother's wife is in the Federal Airports Authority."

Solomon, Dobson recalled, had once related a story about how Gabriel had upset Lazarus and Ayo. In a population of 180 million was linking all this with the failed FAA contract significant or not? Dobson parked the thought for the moment and moved to a list of people connected with the FAA itself.

"That," George pointed, "Is the wife of Kenneth Balogun."

"Janet Balogun. Kenneth being the brother of Pastor Lazarus who works in the Ministry of Aviation?"

"Yaaah. It is like family. Like the mafia. Kenneth is something big, I don't know what. There are others..... shhh, Mr Mark, don't say but this is big, big corrupt."

There were other photos with names like Abubakar, Omole, Ibrahim, Onu. It took a while to work through the list because George Obodi had put his glasses on and started clicking himself. "Waaah, waaah," at every photo.

"Yaah. This is some big list. You know....waaah."

But then he sat back, removed his glasses, looked at Mark Dobson and grasped his arm. "You want to know the bigger bigger names?"

"Are they bigger than the big names?"



"Sure sure." And Obodi started counting them off on his fingers - Samuel Tami, Abdul Hakim, Precious Johnson, Festus Fulani - and Mark Dobson wrote them all down with George Obodi's comments about each one.

Finally: "Well, I must thank you George. This has been very useful."

"Good, good. I am pleased that Zak has found a good career.....You must learn by listening and watching Zak. Watch, listen and learn from an expert then one day you will also be a...."

"An international investigative consultant," Dobson prompted.

"That is it. Zak doesn't talk much but he is a good listener."

"He'd make a good taxi driver, George," Dobson added. "He knows the back streets of Ikeja like the back of his hand."

As Chelsea drove away Dobson phoned Colin Asher in London. "Names for checking out, Colin. I'll put them on the site tonight."

All incoming and outgoing messages between Dobson and Asher were encrypted and read through another password protected site. What it needed was a reasonable internet access. But, right now, Dobson turned his attention to the road and Chelsea's driving. "If you want to be a F1 driver perhaps you should consider taking lessons, Chelsea."

"Lessons, sah? But I already know."

"OK," Dobson said. "In that case, while you drive, let's discuss strategy, where we're going and why. Listen up. Pay attention to me as well as the road."

Chelsea turned his heard to pay attention.

"Listen. There's no need to look at me. Understand?.....Now, Michael Fayinka is the boss at Solomon Trading. Remember that."

"Yessah."

"Your job is to go in and talk to Michael. But Michael is not there."

Chelsea, confused, turned his head and narrowly missed a motorcycle.

"What did I just say?"

"Listen not look, sah. But how will I talk to someone who is not there?"

"Pretend you don't know he's not there. In the trade, we call it bullshit. Many consultants earn fortunes from bullshit. But overdoing bullshit can be fatal. Here's the plan."

And then they hit a go slow - another Lagos traffic jam. Bedlam on all sides with the risks to life and limb of selling a single disposable lighter, a stick of barbequed sweet corn or another brown leather cowboy hat there to see. But Mark Dobson had seen it all before so he closed his eyes recalling another incident from his meeting with Gabriel and Solomon in Hammersmith.

He'd finally left the Hammersmith house after twelve hours of talking.

At the front door, Gabriel had shaken his hand. "I have probably become a persona non-grata," he admitted. "I'm someone with no mandate. People in power hate being undermined by someone without authority. At best, they'll try to ruin me. At worst, they might want to kill me, or both of us." Then he'd laughed. "Perhaps all three of us."

And with those happy thoughts Dobson had left, determined to walk back to his flat in Queensway for some fresh air. He'd headed towards Shepherd's Bush and only got as far as the Dry Cleaner's on Hammersmith Grove when his phone rang. He'd assumed it was Colin Asher.

"It's not Colin, it's Sol. Where are you?"

"Right now, Trussley Dry Cleaners and Launderette."

"You brought dirty clothes with you?"

"No, just passing. What's up?"

"Can we talk?"

"Christ, Sol. Wasn't twelve hours enough? Where are you?"

"Outside the house. Can we meet?"

"Where?"

"Hammersmith Station. There's a pizza place. Hasty Tasty."

"I've already had one pizza today."

A few minutes later Dobson found Solomon standing, shivering in a cold wind swirling around the corner. "I need to get some food, Mark, otherwise Femi will ask where I've been." Like a man escaping his wife for five minutes.

"King Street," Dobson had said. "Plenty still open this time of night."

"It's Aron Kaplan," said Solomon.

"Oh yes." And Dobson remembered what he'd witnessed earlier.

"They're stitching us up."

"Tell me."

Solomon had then talked non-stop, slowing them down, dragging on Dobson's sleeve. When they'd got to TK Maxx Dobson understood exactly why Solomon had looked like he did a few hours back.

Aron Kaplan, whose trade mark was a silver topped walking stick and a full but neatly trimmed white beard was sixty something, maybe seventy, a billionaire from

plastics, security, oil, gas and aluminium with a history of massive takeovers and liquidations behind him and property in New York, Paris and London.

Solomon described their last meeting to discuss funding for the Project in Kaplan's isolated Cotswold stone mansion somewhere on the border of Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. "Femi had met him several times without me," he said. "He was always full of promises but we never saw anything. But when we got there someone else was already waiting."

It had been a much younger man, tall, upright, blonde hair, casually dressed in a tee shirt that Solomon remembered said 'Glock' on the front. This was Aron Kaplan's son, David.

"David will take over from me," Aron Kaplan had explained.

"David is fully briefed?" Gabriel had asked.

"Of course, it is time for action. We have talked too much."

A good sign it seemed until David Kaplan took over the discussion. "My father says that today you will confirm the contribution from your side. What is it you call it? The Miracle Church?"

Solomon had corrected him. "The Household of God's Miracles Church. The funds come from Solomon Trading."

"My apologies. But it seems your contribution is not nearly enough to provide the guarantees we need. And do your private donors - people like Richard Fischer of Atlantic Gas - know how their money will be spent?"

That had been the first shock.

Names of private donors were supposed to be confidential. Yes, Richard Fischer was one, but it sounded as if the Kaplans had been checking things out, asking questions, getting answers and perhaps some freely given opinion.

"We have talked to Richard," Gabriel had said as calmly as he could. "His investment plans in Africa have been on hold for years due to security. A cement plant was closed after theft of explosives and a construction business finished after the 2015 incursion."

Aron Kaplan had then spoken. "That'd be Mitch McCain's venture, right?"

Another shock. McCain was another donor. Three billionaires, two American and one Russian, close enough to be sharing secrets. So, who else knew?

Gabriel, Solomon said, had tried to brave face it. "Mitch hates losing. When he sees progress, he might stump up more. But there are interests in agricultural projects and infrastructure investment from other organisations. Africa should be far more able to look after itself with better security."

"And better infrastructure, better transport links and better management." David Kaplan had interrupted. "Your contribution is small. My father said it would be at least eighteen million."

"There are always unknowns," Gabriel had replied. "But if we include the profit we make from the Federal Aviation Authority FAA Security equipment contract that I mentioned to Aron for instance....."

"Ah yes, the FAA contract " David Kaplan interrupted. "But it is still small. You're heavily reliant on your business interests."

"Of course," Gabriel replied. "Aron will remember me using the expression 'honest, legitimate and ethical' when we first met. He told me then it would be a miracle to achieve that in Africa, but I've always believed in miracles."

Gabriel, Solomon said, had tried to encourage some laughter but failed. "Business was always the preferred route to deliver on our promises," he'd then said.

"What promises?"

"You should listen to my talks, David." Gabriel had been desperately trying to avoid confrontation.

"OK. Seems I'd better start listening. So, explain this X Ray equipment contract."

Solomon had seen a look pass between the two Kaplans as if they already knew about that contract.

"It's for airport security, all body scanners. Things take time," Gabriel had said.

"Yeh. Five years, I heard. And you expect the profit to be around ten million dollars?"

By then Solomon and Dobson were passing banks - HSBC, Lloyds, Nat West. but they stopped walking because Solomon had been getting madder by the second. He'd grabbed Dobson's arm again. "What I saw in David Kaplan's face didn't show any understanding of honesty, or legitimacy and all the time he was playing with his fucking phone."

The conversation with the Kaplans had then moved onto funding for the Project. "But we need to provide security," Gabriel had said. "COK attacks are a big problem in the area."

"The Project, huh? Are you saying you've got a team in place?" David Kaplan had asked as if he also knew something about that.

Gabriel had hesitated. "Some."

"So, where are they? We need to know."

"Why?"

"We need to know."

"In training."

"Where? What equipment?"

"That's why we need the funds."

"What exactly do you want?"

Gabriel had then deliberately turned away from David Kaplan to his father, to Aron Kaplan. "Basic arms, ongoing equipment and material to support a team of specialists who can train and lead others. And we'd like to buy one piece of very sophisticated equipment."

"Such as?" David Kaplan had leaned forward as if demanding Gabriel address him directly.

Dobson and Solomon were now standing outside Marks and Spencer, London night traffic still roaring past and Solomon again grabbed Mark Dobson's arm. "Gabriel looked at me, Mark. I should have stopped him but I didn't. Kaplan was a fucking bastard but, I thought, let him hear it."

"What did Gabriel say?" Dobson had asked. "What piece of equipment did he need?"

"The Predator B drone. You can imagine the response from the Kaplans. They looked at one another. Laughed. 'How much?' Kaplan asked, and Femi looked at me again. 'We could purchase one for a few million dollars,' he said. 'How many do you need?' Kaplan said. He was laughing now. We should have left right then. Got up and left."

"Did Gabriel answer his question about how many drones?" Dobson had asked.

"One to start,' Femi said. 'Only one? Why do you need even one?' 'Surveillance.' Femi said 'To track enemy positions. To pinpoint them.' 'Can't the fucking Americans do that?' Kaplan asked. 'And do you know how to fly them - remotely?'

Solomon stopped walking. It had also started to rain.

"Christ," was all Dobson could think to say.

"Gabriel knew he was being dragged into giving information he had no wish to give, Mark, but he still wasn't finished."

"What else did he say?"

"That we wouldn't be firing rockets indiscriminately from them. We'd use them to track terrorist movements. That would give us an advantage."

"Is Gabriel serious about wanting one of those bloody great drones the US military use, then?" Dobson had asked.

Solomon had paused before replying. "No, I don't think so. Femi always says if you don't ask you don't get. Bill Larsen finds it preposterous. All Bill wants is something to carry out low level surveillance and map the area. But Femi just goes on talking about it like that's what we want. Aim high, he says. Sometimes I think he's right. But you don't go around talking about things like that to people you don't trust."

Sitting in the slow-moving traffic jam, breathing dust and fumes, Dobson could remember feeling thankful for Solomon's touch of reality.

"Explain to me again, Sol," he'd said. "In your own words. What exactly is the point of your private army?"

Solomon had been in no doubt about that.

"We want to provide a ring of security, a barrier of defence against outside interference and terrorism so that investors feel confident about investing. When we first approached Aron Kaplan, it was for agricultural and water projects. But there was always one proviso. That investors brought jobs, new ideas for businesses, employed locals, introduced new skills, trained them and built a culture of wealth creation, dynamism and optimism amongst the poorest who have, for far too long, been left behind."

Dobson remembered Solomon had coughed as if he'd upset himself talking like that. He'd brushed rain drops from his face.

"And who would get all the infrastructure problems sorted, the infrastructure, health, education. What did you tell the Kaplans?"

"Femi would do it. Femi would change everything. Femi would change the world starting with African politics."

"And how did that go down with the Kaplans?"

"They laughed. And the laughing really shook Femi. I remember, he stood up and went off on one of his rants as if he was speaking at a rally. 'Did Al Qaida seek legitimacy? Did ISIL seek it when they invaded Iraq and Syria? Did Al Shebaab? Did Boko Haram seek legitimacy for their murderous attacks? Has the COK ever sought permission before attacking villages? Before abducting schoolgirls?'"

Solomon had done a very good imitation of Gabriel. "So how did it all end with the Kaplans?"

"David Kaplan laughed and Aron Kaplan went to look out the window."

As they walked on, now in silence with the rain falling and the cold wind gusting around Hammersmith, Mark Dobson had done what he often did in situations like that: Deliberately ask a short, direct question to force a quick self-analysis and put a stop to the beating about the bush. More often than not it would neatly define the problem. From the answer, he usually got a much clearer sense of direction. Right then had been one of those moments.

"So, what conclusion did you draw from seeing Aron Kaplan looking out the window Sol?" he'd asked

"That we were about to be screwed." Solomon had replied.

## CHAPTER 9

"I think we'll check out, Sol. Daniel Bakare's too busy to see us."

Gabriel was back at the Holiday Inn Express after meeting Craig Donovan. Solomon was still busy on the laptop, "You're too impatient, Femi."

"I know."

"What's troubling you?"

"Delay troubles me, Sol. Slow decision-making doesn't suit me. And I'm feeling something else."

"What?"

"A feeling people are ganging up on us, telling us lies, stringing us along, doing things behind our backs."

Gabriel lay on the bed, head on the pillow, arms behind his head, shoes on, staring at the ceiling. From the table in the corner, Solomon watched and waited. "You worried about the guys down the road using the arrest warrant, Femi?"

"Nope. But they might if they thought not acting would cause a diplomatic upset with Nigeria," He was silent for a few minutes. Then: "Are we scaring the shit out of them, Sol? I reckon they know everything about Bill Larsen. I reckon they're watching us with their own fucking Predator drone circling around. That would explain them seeing Bill's British flag on the roof. If the Americans know then the Brits sure as hell know. Everyone knows. But why the hell don't they just come clean and support us? We're doing their work for them." Gabriel sighed deeply.

"What are you doing, Sol? You been on that fucking computer all day."

"Organising Birmingham. Checking things. Replying to emails and stuff like I always do. Sorting venues....."

"What emails?"

"Like this one from a Kenyan journalist writing about African poverty. Like the one before from a guy in Cape Town who follows everything you do and say. He's a big fan, Femi. He's a Catholic priest for fuck's sake but he wants you to go and see him in Cape Town. He wants to know when you're planning on going there. You got thousands like him out there. You've got an African Women's Rights group that want you to speak at a conference in Cairo Then there's the Pan African Education for All Forum. They want an article written. You want to write it or shall I? You want me to stop replying to these people?"

"No, keep going, Sol."

Gabriel shut his eyes but they were moved behind their lids. "Can you keep going, Sol?"

"Sure."

"What about Carla? She still bothering you to marry her? Settle down?"

Carla was Solomon's girlfriend of ten years or more, a teacher, now working in Ghana. "I'm too fucking busy dealing with your fan mail."

"But is it all worth it, Sol?"

Solomon swung around. "Fuck sake, man. Shut the fuck up will you. Snap out of it. Just because Daniel fucking Bakare is busy today. We got a lot more we can do. Jesus, I just got the names of the guys who will fly over to discuss Plan B. You don't get much higher than that. If the US keeps dragging its feet, then we go for Plan B. Isn't that what we agreed?" Then he swung back to the laptop,

Gabriel sat up, eyes wide open and grinned at the back of Solomon's head. "We could always bring some women with us, Sol. You and Carla in one bed, me and someone else in the other."

"Very funny."

"Maybe I'll call that one from LA. What was her name?"

"Florence."

"That's it. Why do you remember things like that and I don't, Sol?"

"Because I manage the administration. Anyway, she had too big an arse."

"How do you know, Sol?"

"I saw her standing on the fucking balcony."

"And how do you know that, Sol?"

"Because I also manage security. I'm the eyes and ears."

"If you've got all that responsibility then what am I, Sol?"

"You're only the fucking salesman."

"Calm down, Sol. Don't get mad."

Gabriel stood up, pulled off his shoes and threw them into the corner.

"Let's check out, Sol. I want to go to London now. If Bakare decides he wants to meet tonight, then fuck him. If he's serious, he can come and see us. We could be in London in the morning."

He went to stand by the window. It was raining, street lights were coming on reflecting off the wet road. Traffic was passing by, people rushing to and fro. Behind him he heard Solomon talking. "And why do you feel someone is telling lies, stringing us along, doing things behind our backs? Who you got in mind?"

"David Kaplan," Gabriel said still looking down into the street.

"Any others you don't trust?"

"Probably."



Solomon suddenly shut down the lap top and turned around. "Your meeting with Craig Donovan go OK? You haven't told me. Why the fuck do I need to ask?"

"Sorry, Sol. He's ex-CIA. Retired. Interesting guy. He's still connected with some top military guys. We're trusting Mark Dobson so I suppose we trust Donovan."

"So, what'll he do for us?"

"Pull strings."

"Meanwhile, do we check out?"

Solomon never got an answer because the phone lying next to him buzzed. "Yes?"

"It's Daniel, That you, Solomon?"

"Yeh, you want Gabriel?"

"Is he mad as hell with me?"

"He's mad with me, too." Solomon handed the phone over.

"Hey, Gabriel, Sorry, man. One of those days. You free now?"

"I'd given up, Daniel. We're moving out."

"But we need to talk. I was with Douglas Martin, the Defence Secretary all afternoon."

"Any music for my ears?"

"Not on the phone, Gabriel."

"You want us to come over to the White House?"

"Ha. Where are you?"

"Holiday Inn Express. It's cheap."

"Can we meet in half an hour?"

"Any later and we'll be gone."

They'd been sitting, edging forward in the jam for over an hour before things slowly cleared.

"Right, Chelsea. We are now close to the Solomon Trading office. What will you do when we arrive?"

"Work with Vigo, sah. We take the stock."

"So Vigo should be somewhere around here, yes?"

"Yessah."

"What are you going to do?"

"Stop the car, sah."

"Good idea. Then what?"

"Sah?"

"What will you do after stopping?"

"Me sah?"

"You sah. What are you going to do? Do you think it a good idea to phone Vigo to check if he's close by?"

"Yessah."

"Go ahead."

Chelsea phoned Vigo. Mazda answered. Yes, they were coming. Perhaps twenty minutes. Perhaps an hour. Chelsea reported this information.

"OK, now listen again, Scumbag. You're on duty. No-one sleeps on duty. Have I been asleep? No. Eyes closed? Yes. But all the time thinking, planning, assessing. Understand?"

"Yessah."

"All the time you were asleep at the wheel I was quietly planning our next move and my plan is to go for a walk because, while you wait for Vigo, I need to find an internet cafe. Any idea where I might find one?"

Chelsea sat forward, rubbed his neck, then leaned out of the window and looked around. "This not my area, sah. Maybe Vigo knows."

"Can you see Vigo? Is he close by?"

Chelsea looked up and down the crowded side street still clogged with traffic, food vendors, cars, trucks and yet another guy selling cowboy hats. "No sah."

"Jesus. Stay here. Don't move and don't sleep. If you sleep you're fired. Understand? When Vigo arrives phone me."

Dobson got out, stretched and took a stroll past the Solomon Trading Office. A single policeman was on duty outside - sitting, tapping his foot with his stick. Right next door was Jimmy's Cybernet Cafe.

Dobson took a look inside. It was brightly lit, air-conditioned and almost every computer was occupied by silent young men in short sleeved shirts and close-cropped hair, probably engrossed, Dobson decided, in sending 419 scam emails right underneath the notice that said "BE WARNED. Any customer caught with 419 job will be handed to the police.":

Dobson paid the attendant and found the last remaining seat. Then he logged on, accessed Colin's dark site and sent a coded message and the list of names given by Chelsea's father. It took thirty minutes. Then he returned to Chelsea.

"No see Vigo, sah."

"So, we wait."

"Are we eating, sah?"

"You ate yesterday. OK, go. And bring some water."

Truth told Dobson's mouth was as dry as an old carpet and his stomach was groaning.

But, while he waited, Dobson sat, looking out of the car window. People were brushing by on all sides of the car, so many that the wing mirror had already bent the wrong way. The air was thick with dust and fumes as hundreds, thousands, of serious, sweating faces passed by. Coming from where? Going to where?

"You ever just sit and watch crowds on Lagos streets, Mark?" Gabriel once asked him. Well, he was now.

This was sub-Saharan Africa where the number of poor people had increased during the past three decades. The percentage was lower but population growth meant numbers had doubled. The West handed out aid but never a solution because the solution, as Gabriel was so fond of saying, was in the hands of the people themselves.

"Look at Nigeria," he'd said. "Job creation will never match the growing demand. A global economy means jobs are lost not created. So, what does the future hold? You'll see more tension over living space and resources, more terrorism, more poverty, more unemployment and even bigger mass migration."

Chelsea returned, eating as he walked.

He flopped into the driver's seat and handed Dobson a paper-wrapped portion of whatever it was he'd just bought with Dobson's money. And he sat there in his tee shirt and old trainers, licking greasy fingers, drinking from a plastic water bottle, penniless other than what he scrounged - one of millions of young men with no hopes, no plans, no future.

Gabriel had talked to him about Nigeria for a long time. He'd talked about the history of the far north east of Nigeria along its border with Niger and Cameroon. He'd talked of murders, shootings, bombings, imprisonment, ill-fated army involvements and about characters who had come, then gone, and whose only contribution was to intensify tension and conflict.

He'd mentioned names like Mohammed Yusuf and a Salafist group at Maiduguri's Alhaji Muhammadu Ndimi mosque, about things from even further back in time about tribal wars long before borders were set up by foreign invaders and colonialists.

And Dobson had tried to follow it but it was, like so many pieces of history complicated and impossible to fully understand unless you'd lived through it and

were part of it or studied it in great depth. Even if you'd lived amongst it Dobson doubted if there had been anyone who understood it or could explain it.

Since then he'd read a good deal, but it still made little sense other than to re-enforce the fact that human behaviour often stemmed from some sort of inbuilt desperation to impose beliefs and ways of life on others and to hate those who did not share their ways enough to kill them. A human life in Africa was still very cheap.

And Gabriel had moved onto discussing other parts of Africa.

"Look at South Africa, Mark. You know the country. Tell me, is South Africa a better place since apartheid? Are black South Africans happier? More optimistic? More confident? More affluent? Are they really freer? You know that twenty six percent of South Africans are out of work? If you add in the number of utterly demoralised people who no longer look for work, it's thirty six percent. And how many more are out of work since they were last promised jobs and security by the President? One point six million more, that's how many.

"Their economy is stagnant, Mark, but it needs to expand by five percent every year if poverty and unemployment is to fall. It's impossible. It's not achievable. Does that explain the rising crime levels? Of course. Does it explain why vast shanty towns still surround every city? Of course. Does it explain economic migration? Yes.

"The same people who used to demonstrate against apartheid now demonstrate against corruption, inadequate public services and brown outs. But governments can't create jobs. Only the private sector can do that, but how many jobs could they create even if the country was run differently?"

Dobson remembered nodding his head throughout all of that. Most of it was indisputable.

"Unlike Nigeria, and the Middle East, South Africa has not yet been broken by religious tension," Gabriel went on, "But I do not hold out much hope of it not being broken by economic tension. Better not to have a religion at all, Mark. Better still not to have so many humans living in such a small world."

And Dobson had nodded because he'd felt exactly the same for years although he'd never been brave enough or lucid enough to shout it from the rooftops like Gabriel had been for thirty years.

"So, what can I do?" he'd asked. And so, here he was, sitting, waiting in a stiflingly hot car in Lagos with a list of crooks and fraudsters in his pocket.

Vigo turned up shortly after that with a high sided truck. After bribing the policeman who was still tapping his foot with his stick outside the Solomon Trading office he, Mazda and Chelsea went to work.

By nightfall the truck was full and Vigo sat in the back seat of the car behind Dobson writing numbers on the back of his hand. "Nearly two million Naira profit, Mercedes."

Dobson returned Chelsea's car key to him. "Collect your car Chelsea and go home but be at Vigo's office by eight in the morning. If you're late, the apprenticeship is terminated and Pops Obodi will know everything."

"Yessah."

And then Dobson's phone beeped - a text message from Colin Asher: "Your list's ready."

By ten Dobson was back at the Airport Hotel where the management claimed that "relationships are nurtured, no cosmetics to our services, all is real and natural to make guests feel desired, value and pampered."

That might have been so, but the WiFi was too unreliable for Dobson's purposes. He took off again and found another internet cafe called Chummy's.

At eleven he was told to leave as they were closing. But it was all there - a spread sheet with names, dates of birth, short CV's, links to press cuttings and an 'other information' column. Dobson copied it to the memory stick he kept in his boxer shorts, returned to the Airport Hotel and re-read it on his laptop.

George Obodi had come up trumps. The names on George's short list were the ones with the longest columns:

Kenneth Balogun, Samuel Tami, Abdul Hakim, Precious Johnson, Festus Fulani. All of them had high level government links into oil, gas, transport, shipping, healthcare, telecommunications. Each of them were linked to each other and with past and present links to the FAA with positions of responsibility for technical specifications, budgets, contracts. Then there were the names of characters who hung Christianity around their necks to suggest honesty and legitimacy - names like Pastor Ayo, Pastor Lazarus, Father Adebola and Bishop William.

But one name stood out above all others. Festus Fulani's column was in red and given a large red asterisk and at the bottom, Colin had added in:

"Festus Fulani owns a lot of property in UK - we're still checking this. He also entered Cairo three times in the last year on a Saudi Arabian passport, done up in smart Arab dress. Name of Mohamed Fouad. He left for Riyadh on another passport in the name Mohammad Fawwaz. He then met with a Libyan called Ali Najib who is currently under surveillance by security including SIS and CIA. Mohammad Fawwaz disappeared but is thought to have left Saudi Arabia via Jeddah. There is a suspicion he flew to Abuja. Why? What is he up to? That is the question. Now, please check your usual email."

Dobson then checked his normal email. There was only one.

"Your bedtime Google reading for tonight is ancient Fulani Jihad & Kanuri history. Food for thought. Have a nice day. Colin."

## CHAPTER 10

Gabriel was watching from the upstairs window as the big, black car pulled up outside the Holiday Inn Express. A burly white security man got out, opened the rear door and, even though it was night-time, Gabriel saw him put on a pair of dark glasses. Daniel Bakare climbed out holding a phone to his ear. Simultaneously, Gabriel's phone rang.

"Sorry I'm late. I'm downstairs."

"Yeh, I see." Gabriel said. "Leave the big boy downstairs. We don't bite and we're unarmed and if the moon's too bright for him tonight tell him to go see an eye specialist." He went to the door, opened it and waited until Bakare arrived outside. "Come in," he said. "Take the weight off your feet. The bed's very comfortable."

Solomon, understanding Gabriel's mood offered Bakare the chair and stood by the window. Gabriel lay on the bed, hands behind his head, shoes and socks scattered on the floor.

"Shit, Gabriel, what's got with you? You ain't normally like this."

"No? Maybe I feel I'm being fucked about, Daniel."

"And who the hell's fucking you about?"

"Everyone. You included. How long we been talking now? Years. We've tried your recommended route - lobbying through people like your friend Governor Frank Jameson and a hundred others. Meanwhile, we just get on with things. On our own." He pointed a finger directly at Bakare's face. "When's everyone going to realise that Gabriel Joshua ain't no fool and what's more he'll deliver - if necessary without any help from the US Government. Why do we waste time talking to you?"

"Things take time, Gabriel."

"Yes, meantime more people fall into poverty, more people get killed, murdered, beheaded, raped, abducted. Not too many Americans amongst them I've noticed but a lot of Africans. Who told you South Africa was a time bomb?"

"You did, Gabriel. You were right."

"So? What's your plan? Made any decisions?"

There was a silence of a few seconds although, looking on, Solomon decided it was only an awkward one for Bakare. Gabriel just edged further back on the bed. head on the pillow, bare ankles and toes twitching impatiently. "Come on, Daniel. Spill. The plans? The decisions? What are they?"

"You jumped the gun, Gabriel."

"Who? Me?" Gabriel said pointing a finger at himself.

"We've seen it. Very strategic, right on the border."

"Was it a good satellite picture, Daniel? Did you like the British flag? I'd stick some stars and stripes on the roof if you'd help."

"The Brits knew nothing till we told them."

"Why should they know? They're as fucking long-winded as you. You talk to Taj Harding recently?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Last I heard he was talking to the UK Defence Secretary."

"Fucking hell. He did that two years ago, Daniel. And you talked to yours two years ago. You said you liked my ideas, but. I asked why the 'but'? You said it didn't fit US strategy. So, I said 'but what exactly is US strategy?' You seemed vague. Any clearer today?"

"We're moving closer, Gabriel."

Another silence. Solomon turned, stared out at the growing darkness. Bakare stood up and walked a few paces. "So, who gave you permission to set up something in that nice, strategically placed corner on the border? You want to tell me?"

"No. Why the fuck should I? It's private property and even if I did would it make any difference to US strategy to deal with the spread of the COK etcetera, etcetera?"

"It might."

"So, if I told you we got permission from the President would you believe me?"

"Which President? Hama Dosso from Niamey or your own President Azazi from Abuja?"

Gabriel shrugged. "Does it matter? We own the land and can do what the fuck we like without Uncle Sam interfering?"

"Jesus, Gabriel. Calm it."

"I'm calm. Because it's none of your fucking business." He shrugged sarcastically. "It's a matter of national security. It's foreign policy. It'll form part of our next strategic defence review. Recognise the phrases? And I'd need to consult my managing director."

Bakare tried smiling. "We can always find out."

"Feel free. Go ahead. Do all the fucking checking you want. Checking's easy. But while you're checking make a fucking decision for Christ's sake. Decisions ain't as easy. But I need a decision. Will you help or not? Simple question. Yes or no?"

"So, what's behind the wall, under the roof, inside the tents?"

"Go check. March in all five of your highly-trained military advisers and go see for yourself. But beware of our tight security. They'll fire on anything that looks unfriendly."

There was a longer pause, both men looking at one another.

"Listen Gabriel. I don't have to sit here and listen to all this shit. You know we've been asked to arrest you? By your own officials in Nigeria."

Gabriel held out his wrists to be cuffed. "Go ahead. But did you check the background to that? Surely with your need to be thorough before making decisions affecting foreign nationals or national security or drawing conclusions based on satellite images or before upsetting the wishes of the electorate or other foreign governments you'll have checked."

"Last I heard it looked like you're being screwed, Gabriel."

Gabriel nodded. "One hundred percent correct. I'm being thoroughly screwed and fucked about."

At last he sat up, swung his legs around, bare feet on the ground. "Listen, Daniel, I hate sitting around, OK? I need to be doing something. I sat here all day waiting for you. So, tell me, where do we stand? Seems to me we have three options going here. You want me to list them? Make it nice and simple for you?"

Solomon turned to watch. He actually liked it when Gabriel got like this.

"Three options. One: The US will support both the defence strategy and our economic community plan without going too public.

"Two: The US will support both strategies and splash the decisions across the pages of the Washington Post and every other national and international newspaper and TV channel.

"Three: You can't make up your minds, we are no further forward than before, we stop talking, and call the whole thing off. Forget we ever met.

"Which is it, Daniel? Option one, two or three? Because if it's option three we'll go straight to our Plan B."

"And what the hell is Plan B?"

Gabriel exploded. "You see?" Then he exploded even more. Solomon, sitting right against the window, thought he felt the glass move. "Answer my fucking question first, will you?"

But then the phone rang.

Solomon answered it and handed it to Gabriel. "Bill."

Gabriel replaced Solomon by the window and looked out. It was dark and all he saw was his own reflection. "Bill. Been trying to get you all day. I'm in a meeting with Mr Bakare.....Yes, that Mr Bakare. What's up?"



Gabriel listened for several minutes as Solomon distracted Bakare by opening the mini bar and gesturing to Daniel Bakare. Bakare declined.

"OK, Bill, understood. I might get an answer right now but I won't put a bet on it.....yeh, OK man, I'll phone you later. Brilliant stuff, Bill. Fantastic.....What? Who?"

There was more silence as Gabriel listened.

"What's her name?..... Why didn't you tell me before?.....Sure, I know, you're busy and the fucking phone link's crap..... Where's she from?.....Kinawa.....near Magumeri, right?.....She was one of them? Jesus, Bill, what you planning to do with her right now?.....If she wants to stay then let her stay. I agree..... Halima, you say? Nice name. And she wants to see me?..... Is that what she said? No prompting?.....So I got yet another female fan.....Sixteen years old.....Sure, Bill, just find her things to do and take good care of her. Keep her occupied. Tell her everything and tell her I'll come to see her as soon as I can. And tell her we're fighting for her family and her friends, OK? Fantastic, Bill. Good news."

Gabriel switched off, smiled and turned to face Bakare.

"Have the clever US satellites and drones that spotted the UK flag painted on a roof also spotted the COK headquarters?"

"Perhaps."

Gabriel took a breath and walked around the room.

"OK, I'd like it bombed because that's where they took five Nigerian girls who were then driven two hundred miles back to a school in Nigeria with bombs tied to their bodies. You remember that atrocity of a few weeks ago?"

"I remember. How do you know where the girls were taken?"

"From my local Commander. That was him on the phone. Can't the US keep pace with us?"

"What is this, Gabriel? Are you conducting your own war from Room 36 at the Holiday Inn Express?"

"Yeh." Gabriel liked that. "At the moment, it's my Oval Office. I don't need no fancy Cabinet Room or a vote in Congress or Parliament or a referendum. So, answer my question again. If I tell you where the COK are hanging out will you bomb it?"

Daniel Bakare sighed. He fully understood Gabriel's frustration. It got to him as well - too often these days. But what could he do? He had no ultimate power, no final authority. All he could do was try to influence decisions that were mostly collective ones. That was how things worked.

"You got a definite fix on a COK camp?"

"Looks like it. It's big and it might be just one of several, but my Commander's convinced enough."

"How?"

"One of the girls."

"I thought they all died."

"Seems not. She escaped. Now she's with us. Sixteen years old. Her name's Halima. I've not asked for co-ordinates yet but I could. But, even if you bombed it right now, there's still a problem, Daniel. You know what that is? It's that the fucking COK and their associates don't operate like in the days of the USA cavalry with Winchester rifles and walled forts. The COK and their brothers mostly hide amongst you.

"In case you've not noticed, cowboys with six shooters no longer fight Indians wearing war paint and feathers. It's more like the days when Hitler rose to prominence. Enemies creeping forwards until - BANG - they start the next world war. For fuck's sake, ninety nine percent of Americans couldn't even point to Nigeria on a fucking map. That's how good your country's understanding of geography is"

Gabriel walked almost menacingly towards Bakare but pointed towards the window.

"Imagine you had a thousand Islamic terrorist recruits out there right now who are hell bent on destruction of the American way of life. They're riding on your metro, driving around in cars, drinking dry Martinis in bars, eating sushi in restaurants, shopping for Gucci shoes in the malls and mixing with the tourists staring at the White House. What you gonna do? Shoot the one in the Gucci shop because he shouted 'Allah Akbar' on his way out and let the others off the hook? Because, let me tell you, Daniel. that's what it's like where we come from – less the Gucci ship, of course. But if we bombed the COK camp we've spotted. COK and others like them are like nothing on earth, man. They are living amongst you but slowly changing society from within through occupation and terrorism. Europe's watching, shit scared, unable or unwilling to do anything as the mosques spring up and their society changes overnight with just a few shots fired and a few bombs exploded.

"But, you know, I don't entirely blame these poor bastards. Their desperation is pitiful to watch. All they're doing is running away, trying to escape the inevitable self-destruction of mankind." He paused just briefly.

"Which is, of course, exactly what I'm trying to avoid with our Project - a small scale experiment with an alternative way of running things that needs just a small amount of support which no-one, least of all the USA, seems to fucking understand."

He walked to the window he'd just been pointing to.

"Listen, Daniel. You've been a good friend. I'm grateful for that and I don't want to lose your friendship. But you operate in a system that is now too rigid for its own good. I can't wait. My people can't wait. So, either you give me an answer to the three questions I posed just now or Solomon and I move out right now and go and implement Plan B. Which is it?"

Bakare paused, took a deep breath.

"I think we're edging towards some sort of support. The President knows, but so he fucking well should - I've discussed it enough."

"So, can I expect some sort of contribution that I can see and feel? Funds? Or is it some other sort of support where the US still runs the show and Pastor Gabriel Joshua is told not to bother his sweet little arse anymore as Uncle Sam's taking over because Uncle Sam knows best?"

"Jesus, Gabriel. If we had some proof that your plans worked it'd help."

"The economic strategy will take time. I've always said that. All I need is encouragement to try it. Give us expertise, advice."

"And your private army?"

"My private army?" shouted Gabriel, exasperated once more. "Who the fucking hell do you think moved in and helped re-open Ouagadougou airport this week? A dance group of bloody fairies? A junior school basketball team?"

"That was your men?" Bakare looked shocked. Gabriel said nothing. "Was it? We asked the French. They did their usual Gallic shrug like they'd done it with Special Forces but didn't want to brag. You're saying you did it?"

Gabriel mimicked a French Gallic shrug. "I'm not saying. I don't like to brag. But how could so few men retake an airport from terrorists in a day?"

"Who is this guy, Bill?"

"Bill? Bill is just better than most. Every country, every village, every community needs some sort of protection from enemies. Every fucking caveman from the stone age onwards kept a club to strike another caveman coming to steal his wife and his family's lunch. That's all it amounts to."

"It's more sophisticated than that, Gabriel, and you know that."

"Sure, it's more sophisticated. Those that come to steal our lunch are more sophisticated because the West taught them and equipped them. But the principle's exactly the same."

"And your army is financed by the private sector?" Bakare added.

"Dear me, Daniel," Gabriel said as if he pitied Bakare's outlook on life. "I'm truly sorry you feel that way, Daniel. Please explain why you and your paymasters have such a problem with that? The land of free enterprise? The centre of world capitalism? But what other choice have I got when the US Government vows to fight insurgency but then fucks about and tells me it is prohibited under law from sending weapons to anywhere with ongoing human rights issues. What the hell are human rights, Daniel? Is it not a human right to defend yourself against murder and atrocity?"

"But involving the private sector clouds the issue, Gabriel."

"Clouds the fucking issue?" Gabriel's voice boomed again. "Listen, Daniel. You still got a hang up about the involvement of private individuals offering money to help fight rapes, beheadings, abductions, pillaging, the stealing of assets whether publicly or privately owned and putting bombs around the necks of school girls?"

"You think companies who lost their entire assets in Libya, Iraq and Syria and elsewhere were happy with that? You blew some of them sky high with your own fucking bombs for God's sake. Why should the US government object then if these companies decide to contribute to something whose sole objective is defence against further destruction or pillaging of their assets?"

Bakare listened but then decided to say something he knew would disturb Gabriel.

"Is that why people like Aron Kaplan are sniffing around asking questions about US foreign policy in Africa? About defending his African investments?"

Gabriel shot a glance at Solomon then said, "So is the fact that the Kaplans are Russian clouding the issue?"

"It doesn't help," replied Bakare.

"Ah well," Gabriel said after a short pause and with a forced look of resignation. "If the issue is that cloudy then we'd better move to Plan B. Are we ready to go, Sol?"

Solomon checked his watch. "Could be out in ten minutes, Femi."

## CHAPTER 11

"Thirsty work, Mercedes."

Vigo, Mazda and Chelsea had just finished moving the Solomon Trading stock from the truck to Vigo's warehouse when Mark Dobson arrived next morning. They moved to the office, cracked open four cans from the fridge and sat down. Vigo had thrown his cowboy hat onto the top of the fridge and was swinging in his chair. Mazda sat on the other chair and Chelsea on the pallet. Dobson stood.

The discussion was Gabriel and Solomon.

"That Pastor Gabriel's a genius," Mazda said. "You hear him talk, Vigo? He should be President. He something truly big. He got genuine style. You know he plays Fela music at sermons?"

Mazda was on a roll. Adulation was the theme and they all listened until Dobson decided he'd heard enough and related some more - the arrest warrant, the murder of Kenneth Eju, the FAA contract. Then he dropped in some names.

"Waaah," said Chelsea.

"Jesus," said Mazda.

"Fuck," said Vigo pulling on the solitary ring hanging off his left ear.

Dobson let them scratch, chat, swear and shake heads for a while, allowing matters to sink in and emotions to bubble. Meantime he looked around Vigo's office.

Vigo was not poor. Dobson had been with him when he'd worn smart suits, colourful silk shirts and studs in his ears that reflected rainbows far brighter than Gabriel's. There was even a new BMW hiding somewhere that he'd once used to carry off a bunch of giggling girls after dropping Dobson at his hotel. Quality surroundings was something many Nigerians like Vigo ignored. If they could make a million Naira a day sitting like this then why go to the expense of a high-rise office suite overlooking the Bay? It had a certain logic.

Vigo was blowing blue smoke towards the thick mat of dirty cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. "That fucking guy Festus Fulani looks the man."

"Why?" Dobson asked, flapping at the smoke.

"Let me tell you sumptin' big and vital, Mercedes." Vigo shut his eyes. "It's like one of them fairy tales," he said. "Like Cinderella and the seven pigmies that begins with once upon a time." A short but dramatic pause followed.

"Once upon a time the Ministry of Aviation wanted to sell three Ministry cars. One was a big black BMW the Minister used on official business. Festus negotiated the deal with my man, Civic, in Abuja. We got to buy them all at a low, low price on one condition: that we gave the BMW to Festus. But he wanted to disguise the car so the Minister didn't recognise his own car, so we repainted it dark green. He also wanted help to move some dollars so we also organised that."

"How?" Dobson asked.

"Festus gave us three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash to buy and ship furniture from UK. Festus told us we had to open letters of credit but use his UK supplier, his forwarding agent and his bank. We'd get ten percent once the deal was complete. But one mistake and our arses would be beaten with sticks and we would never run a business again - he'd personally see to it."

Vigo blew more smoke, flicked ash onto the black, oily floor. "Small change for a guy like Festus. His supplier got the funds from our letter of credit but there was no furniture in the containers. The containers were delivered to somewhere in Essex. After that.....".

Dobson had heard similar stories before. "Don't tell me," he said. "It was stolen cars inside. Festus got his dollars laundered and made another three hundred and fifty selling the cars."

Vigo nodded. "Toyotas, stolen to order. Just like the time you discovered those Mercedes, Mercedes. But I don't touch imported stolen cars, only Nigerian stolen ones - you know that."

Dobson nodded. "I know you're an honest man, Vigo."

Mazda's shoulders shook with quiet mirth and Chelsea joined in with a look that suggested he didn't know why.

But Vigo then shook his head. "I hate fucking Festus."

"Anything specific?"

"We didn't get our ten percent."

"But Festus got his cars because he's a basstad," added Mazda.

Dobson perched on the edge of Vigo's desk. "So, you still want your ten percent and Solomon Trading want to know what happened to their FAA contract. Right?"

Vigo lit another cigarette, blew more smoke. The ring didn't appear but he still made it look cool. Mazda strolled the office. Chelsea stayed sitting on the pallet looking thoughtful. "How much time does Festus spend in Abuja?" Dobson asked.

"He travels."

That was true. Dobson visualised Colin's spreadsheet. Festus Fulani 'floated' and used different names. Festus, like others on the list, somehow made money, lots of it, and kept it out of reach by investing in properties worth millions of pounds.

"Waaah." Chelsea undid a crick in his neck. Perhaps a bone had resettled.

"You think he's behind Pastor Gabriel's problems?" Vigo asked

"Yes. Amongst others. Solomon's discussions with the FAA went on for years - politics, budgets, disagreements, you know the scene. Festus Fulani chaired meetings and was just one of several who expected big bribes."

"That's Nigeria," said Vigo.

'Scantex Technologie were expecting to be awarded the contract with Solomon Trading as their agents. Tests, trials, technical details, servicing arrangements and prices were all complete but Solomon refused to give bribes saying it was not the way Solomon Trading or Scantex did business. Now we have the arrest warrant for Gabriel. I'd like to know if the contract is cancelled or gone to someone else. Any chance, Vigo?"

"I'll ask Civic to check."

Dobson's phone then buzzed with a timely coincidence.

"I just spoke to Wolfgang Muller, the international sales manager of Scantex Technologie," Colin Asher said. "He led negotiations for the FAA contract for four years and knows Solomon and Michael Fayinka. I asked if he knew there was an arrest warrant out in connection with the deal. He didn't. He panicked until I told him it was for Gabriel. To cut a long story short, he remembers several Nigerians involved. I mentioned a few names. He picked out Festus Fulani and two more on our list. Does that add to our equation?"

"Enough," Dobson replied. "We've just been discussing him. What did Muller say about bribes and commissions and so on."

"That it was Solomon Trading policy not to pay bribes to government officials."

"So where was the profit for Solomon Trading?"

"Scantex quoted a full contract price to Solomon Trading. Everything included - supply, installation, service. Solomon added a margin for the work they'd do and

submitted it. That was the way the FAA officially wanted it. They probably knew that to ask a German multinational to quote direct and hold back bribes and kickbacks was not going to work but hoped some other incentive would come out of Solomon's profit. It wasn't. That's what upset them."

It was exactly how Dobson had seen it and confirmed by Gabriel and Solomon.

"Where's Mr F at present?"

"Perhaps I can flush him out. The murder case on Kenneth Eju is still open. I'll drop Festus Fulani's name into someone's ear."

Craig Donovan made two decisions.

He'd watched Republican Senator James McAllister on a late-night TV news programme. McAllister was another man he'd known at one time - a right winger, an ardent supporter of Israel and a strong advocate of cutting corners if things were going nowhere. For all his arrogance, Donovan liked him so he phoned McAllister's office.

An hour later they called him back. "Senator McAllister will meet you at seven at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel."

Then Donovan phoned the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) HQ in Stuttgart, Germany.

Ignoring his retired status, he pulled rank and asked to speak to Commander David Fernandez. Fernandez, he was told, was away. "Any idea where or when he'll be back?". Donovan asked. The reply was vague. "Sorry, sir, he's in the US at present. I cannot divulge detail."

"I understand. In that case, any chance I could speak to my old buddy from Kuwait days, Steven Benyon?"

Donovan knew that Benyon was now AFRICOM's Command Sergeant Major under Commander David Fernandez. If the Commander himself wasn't around, the Command Sergeant would be good enough. "Can I say what it's about, sir?"

"West Africa, Nigeria, the COK."

"Hold the line, sir. I'll see if he's available."

"Hey, is that you, Craig?" The Alabama accent was unmistakable.

"How're you doing, Steve?"

"Just great. I thought you retired."

"Yeh, kind of. I'm running an intelligence gathering operation."

"You don't say? Still keeping your hand in then Craig."

Craig let the conversation run a while. Then: "I understand David Fernandez is in Washington right now."

"Sure. A summons from the Secretary for Defence. Even if I knew what it was about I'm not at liberty to.....you know how it is, Craig."

"Sure. Can you get a message to him?"

"It depends how important."

"I've got a fix on a COK camp - the one used to abduct some girls recently."

"Christ. How the hell? A good fix?"

"It's good enough. Any chance you could check if Fernandez would see me? I'm in Washington right now. I could probably track him down but a few words from you.....you understand?"

Donovan left it like that and went for a coffee in the same Starbucks he'd met with Gabriel. He'd just taken his first bite of a muffin when his phone rang. "I have Commander David Fernandez - AFRICOM, sir. Can you take the call?"

"Sure." Donovan stood up, an unbreakable habit when speaking to superiors. "Good afternoon, sir."

"Major Donovan. I don't think we've met. I had a message to call you. It sounded interesting. What's your background, Major?"

He knew Fernandez would have already checked. Nevertheless, he gave a quick resume, ending with: "Africa, sir. It bothers me. After retiring I joined an investigation company. Some interesting facts have come my way."

"You ended your career at the US Embassy in Abuja, right?"

"Yes sir."

"You mentioned something about the COK to CSM Steven Benyon."

"Yes, sir."

"How strong is your evidence?"

"It comes from one of the abducted girls, sir."

There was a pause as Fernandez digested this. "How? She that good?"

"I believe so, sir. She escaped. A very bright girl and the only survivor."

"You've spoken to her?"

"Not me, sir - an associate."

"You're in Washington right now?"

"Yes sir."



"You'll be familiar with the Pentagon, of course. Meet me at eleven thirty. I'll organise some clearance."

Craig Donovan returned to his blueberry muffin.

## CHAPTER 12

Perhaps it was nerves or perhaps his tight-fitting black suit, blue silk shirt and wide tie but, despite the air-conditioning, Bishop William of the Disciples of Jesus School of Ibadan was perspiring heavily, his broad forehead shiny with beads of sweat.

"He is a dangerous man, sir. We have heard, first hand, the things he says. To our faces, he has accused us."

At the Presidential villa at Aso Rock in Abuja, newly elected Nigerian President, Hamed Massoud Azazi sat with his hands together in the folds of a grey, wide-sleeved babariga decorated with intricate gold thread.

Azazi was a tall, gaunt and serious man. Elected on the usual promises of dealing with corruption, poverty, education, healthcare and the constant threat of Islamic terrorism, Azazi held an enormous weight of responsibility on his ageing shoulders. But he listened, patiently, looking at and thinking about each of the four Pastors arranged in a line of gilt-edged arm chairs before him.

There was Bishop William in his suit and Pastors Lazarus and Ayo and Father Adebola, the Director of the Church of Our Lord of Mercy and Forgiveness. Unlike William the other three had chosen smart, national dress for their audience rather than their usual Armani suits and ties.

Father Adebola took over. "One minute he is in Lagos, sir. The next he is in South Africa or Europe or America. His private opinions should remain private, sir. But he repeats them wherever he goes. At a time like this we cannot have such a man claiming to speak for all Nigerians. The man will stop at nothing to destroy the state's security and the Church."

"Or the mosques," added Pastor Ayo knowing that Azazi himself was Moslem.

But Azazi was no fool even though he knew the meeting had been arranged for the Pastors by his own brother Zainab Azazi.

And brother Zainab had, in turn, had his arm twisted by a State Governor, known for his enthusiasm for being the bringer of any sort of news related to state security. Delivering bad news to a President was a sign you were his friend and forever on the look-out for risks that might endanger his position and power.

That the State Governor had found a good seat on the Board of the State Security Organisation under the previous President was proof that this creeping strategy worked. What he or brother Zainab didn't know was that the existence of the entire

Board was one that President Azazi wanted to do away with completely once he'd found a way.

The President had remained silent throughout, allowing each of them to speak one at a time. But he'd now heard enough and raised his hand.

"I thank you for bringing this to my attention," he said slowly, checking his fingernails and stroking the greying stubble on his chin. "I have two questions."

He paused again, removed his spectacles and directed his intense brown eyes at each of the Pastors in turn. "This man," he said slowly. "Pastor Gabriel Joshua. He is known to me. We have met. I found him to be - what shall I say? - well meaning, enthusiastic, a good talker. Are you saying his enthusiasm is getting the better of him?"

"Oh yes, sir," chimed the squat figure of Pastor Lazarus, red eyes glistening, cheeks blown with distaste. "The man is a fake, sir. Give the devil an inch and he'll be your ruler."

There was a flicker of Presidential amusement at this well-worn joke. "And would you say he has influence over the people he meets during his travels?"

The Pastors looked at one another, unsure who should answer. It was Ayo, but Ayo had forgotten the President's question.

"And there is the arrest warrant, sir."

"Ah yes. I have heard," the President said wearily.

Ayo, encouraged, went on: "And, sir, you should watch his videos. He brings shame on us all. He talks of poverty and corruption. He blames politicians - like you, sir. In fact, sir, I.....I think he may be trying to unseat you - from outside."

President Azazi sat forward, stifling another smile that was trying to break through the leathery texture of his seventy-year old face. "Hmm. Is this not some sort of - what shall I say - professional jealousy? A Pastor with an international following making big dollars? More dollars than you, perhaps?"

"No, no sir," Ayo continued. "He has many square kilometres of land in the north, sir."

"It is not illegal to own land."

"But he also has a private army," Bishop William chipped in.

The President raised an eyebrow but remained relaxed. It was as if he already knew, but none of the visiting Pastors saw this.

"Yes, sir," said Bishop William. "He meets the UK and US governments and talks to many others."

The President decided he'd heard enough. "Thank you, gentlemen. The meeting is over. Thank you for coming. I note your information. We will deal with it accordingly."

One by one the Pastors filed out with nods, bows and curtsies, but a few minutes later when the door had closed and he was alone the President took a mobile phone from his pocket, rang a number, waited and then spoke just five words.

"Martin. We need to talk."

## CHAPTER 13

"Who do we talk to if we're looking for someone to rob a good, honest Englishman or kill a God-fearing Christian?" Dobson had asked Chelsea earlier.

"Benji at Pink Lips sah. Maybe Casper, sah."

"Do peace loving, innocent white men go to the Pink Lips Club?"

"Yes, sah. Especially if they want nice black lady."

"What time does Pink Lips open?"

"All day and all night, sah. Especially at night."

"Right, let's go. But I'm no longer Mark Dobson. I'm now Simon Smith. Got it? Security reasons you understand. Meanwhile phone Benji on your nice new Samsung and fix an appointment."

Yessah."

"Do it now, Chelsea. Not next week."

"Yessah."

Dobson listened in.

"Yeh, mon. How de body? It's Zak mon. Zak. You 'member? You wanna chill at Pink Lips? Like now. Why? Cus' I got a fresh job. Akata. His label? Mr Smith. He like needs jobs done. Big dash. Yeh, he rich fella."

"So?" Dobson asked at the end.

"Two o'clock but any time. He says deposit to listen, cash in advance, balance to follow."

At two o'clock a thunderstorm was at its peak. Water was washing around Mark Dobson's feet as Chelsea stopped the leaking yellow Peugeot in a side street. Alongside them was a six-foot high wall of steel decorated with a row of intricately forged rusty spikes across the top. The fence may once have sported a powder blue coat of paint but it was now faded and splashed with red mud from puddles that lined the road.

"Pink Lips," Chelsea announced. "Disco downstairs, casino upstairs, bar ground floor."

Dobson was in no mood for either dancing, gambling or drinking. What he wanted was a fresh look at a meeting place famous for dubious deals, exchanging stolen goods and other, mostly nocturnal, activities. If it looked good, he might order a job to be done.

They waded in. It wasn't quite how Dobson remembered from a few years ago, but it had been night time and combined with a power failure. He could now see that, given an electrical supply, it would have advertised its presence by pink neon lights in the shape of pouting lips, dancing legs and high-heeled shoes. It had once been a large and expensive countryside villa before being overtaken by the mess of urban growth but big money was clearly being made somehow for two new Mercedes cars and three Toyota mini buses were parked at the side and a group of men in open necked shirts stood beneath an awning as water cascaded in front of them.

One of them stood out - a big man in a damp looking suit and a bright pink shirt. His eyes blinked rapidly and his nose twitched as if he'd just surfaced from a short underwater swim. A gaggle of girls in high heels, short, tight skirts and complicated hair styles stood beside him holding onto one another and giggling. Pink, Dobson noticed, was the dominant colour - pink shoes, pink ribbons and big pink lips. Cigarette smoke wafted upwards.

Chelsea did introductions. "Hey, Benji, This akata with the job? Him rich, rich, Benji. Got big sense."

The girls stopped giggling but didn't stop holding onto each other.

"Need full pocket at Pink Lips," Benji said with what Dobson assumed was a sense of humour. The other men joined in the humour, the girls giggled again and a brave one piped up with, "Woss your label, honey?", which was so funny that they giggled some more and rolled big black eyes in Dobson's direction.

Dobson had no problem ignoring this but held out his hand towards the one he assumed was Benji. "Simon Smith," he said. The other men came closer, checking him out - big suits, colourful shirts.

"Yeh, sure. I heard about Mr Smith," Benji said. "I met some others. Big family. You got any other pseudonyms man?"

"Can you make do with Simon Smith?"

"Sure, sure. Enta, come on in. We tock. Simple Simon met a pie-man. You heard that song?"

"Yes," Dobson confirmed. "When I was in nursery."

The other suits stayed by the door - four men, four different sizes, four shirt colours, the biggest one in florescent pink who still blinked. But it was only one eye, winking not blinking. Dobson glanced back thankful to see he was winking at everyone, an affliction of some sort, but disturbing nevertheless.

The music got louder when Benji opened the front door and beckoned them inside. "Enta, enta."

Florescent pink shirt winked again and stepped forward as if he would be joining in. But then he withdrew as if he'd smelled something not to his taste.

"Nice music," Dobson lied, hoping he sounded convincing.

"Soul train on steroids," laughed Benji, "You wanna come Sattaday night. Like blazing fiya. More bubble as well." It sounded like a sales pitch.

"This your place?" was Dobson's next piece of small talk.

"Me and another rich fella."

"Like the one outside?"

"Pink Panta?" Benji said. "Nah. Pink he organizes da ladies. I can call him. You wanna flex your stick?"

"Not right now," Dobson said.

The place smelled of beer, cigarette smoke and sweat. There was a stage where two girls in black underwear and pink belts were dancing with no-one watching. Perhaps they were practicing. Tables were set around and, in one corner, was a bar surrounded by coloured lights. But the place was empty and the barman was reading a newspaper.

"Seedan," Benji pointed to a vacant table. "You want sumtin' fizzy?"

Dobson would have been fine with a glass of water but: "I'll have whatever you and Zak drink," he said. Benji beckoned the barman and ordered three Star Lites.

"They have food also, Mr Dob.....Mr Smith. Tasty fish and fries."

"So, what kind of business, Mr, uh, Smith?" Benji loosened his collar, smoothed his unevenly shaved, flabby cheeks, sniffed and wiped his nose between finger and thumb. Perhaps it was rainwater.

Benji was older and fatter than Dobson had imagined. He sported a touch of grey in his hair, but the part that fitted his imagination was the gold cross on a chain around his neck. It dangled outside the open top buttons of a red striped shirt. Rainwater had darkened the shoulders of his ill-fitting suit jacket.

"Information business," Dobson shouted over the music. "When we get information, we act."

"If I see blood, mean plenty ego, man. You pay Naira or dollah?"

"Naira to start but let's see how we get on."

"One hundred thousand for open ear, OK?"

Dobson deliberately raised an eyebrow though he'd already ring-fenced Solomon's upfront payment for occasions like this and money from the warehouse stock would

help. Just yet, money didn't matter too much. He sat forward, felt in his back pocket, pulled out a bundle of notes, counted a few and put them on the table. "Seventy. If I like answers I find more."

Benji picked it up and counted it, slowly, eyeing Dobson as if the notes might be forged. Dobson sat back, waited and reflected on what he was about to do. The reflection was longer than expected because Benji miscounted the notes and started again, licking his fingers for better grip. Finally, he looked up. "OK, my ear open. Smoke?"

"No, thanks."

"Marry J?"

Dobson declined the marijuana. His eyes were already smarting. Instead, he leaned across the table. Chelsea copied and their heads almost collided.

"An English friend of mine was abducted and robbed at the airport here a few weeks ago," he shouted into Benji's face. The wide, faintly pink eyes stared back at him from six inches away. "The guy was on his way to do business with a company called Solomon Trading - you heard of them? But he never got there. He went back home because he was too fucking nervous to come again. I've taken over."

Benji sat back, blew smoke from the corner of his mouth. "Too bad. Big shame."

"I want to know who was behind it."

Arms outstretched. "How the fuck do I.....?"

"It was organised from here - Pink Lips."

"Is that so?" Benji's arms came together again, his eyes widened and he took a suck on his cigarette, blowing smoke over Dobson's head.

"You know how I know?" Dobson shouted as the music unexpectedly stopped.

"Go ahead, feel easy."

"Zak did it."

Benji's stare moved to Chelsea. "Is that so?"

"And an excellent abduction and robbery job it was, too, if I may say so."

Chelsea rose visibly in his seat but then looked at Dobson, perhaps shocked at the way things were going. "Right, Zak?" Dobson said.

Chelsea nodded, swirling a mouthful of Star Lite inside his mouth.

"Is that so?"

"But Zak doesn't know who ordered the job. He got instructions from Danny. Who ordered the job, Benji? And why. That's what I need to know. By the way....." He fished in his pocket and pulled out another wad. "Here's another fifty because I like the way you're listening."

Benji picked it up. Tested the thickness of the wad but didn't bother counting it this time. Maybe he'd remembered he couldn't count too well.

"Danny's in Abuja," he said. "He runs Pink Lips Abuja, but he was down this way some time back. Anyway, what's with Solomon Trading. Is that Pastor Gabriel?"

Dobson grinned. "I knew I'd come to the right place, Benji. Correct. Gabriel's the chairman. He's the brains, and my friend who got robbed was here to help him do some business. Gabriel's a big celebrity, a friend of the President of the USA and the British Prime Minister. He knew Nelson Mandela and Tony Blair. He doesn't deserve this. So why the fuck would someone stop my friend coming to Lagos to see him?"

Benji shook his head, puffed smoke, but he was definitely listening.

"Zak only did what he was asked," Dobson went on, rubbing things in further. "But he wouldn't have robbed my English friend if he'd known Pastor Gabriel was involved. You like Pastor Gabriel, right Zak?"

Chelsea choked on his beer but nodded.

"So, what I want to know is who is behind all this. Who paid for my friend to be robbed and nearly killed and who made him so scared shitless he went home to rest and get treatment for his concussion?"

"That your question, Mr Smith?" Benji shouted.

"Names. Then we decide what to do."

Benji leaned back and hauled a gold-coloured I-Phone from his pocket. He flipped open the cover, swiped it and pressed a number as Chelsea looked at it in awe.

"Danny boy. Benji. How's it hanging? You hear me? Fuck, hang on. I'll go outside." He beckoned to Dobson to stay seated and disappeared. The coloured shirts were still there, lurking. Florescent pink was still winking as if he'd been winking so long to attract customers he couldn't stop.

"Comfortable so far, Chelsea boy?" Dobson checked.

Chelsea nodded, peering over his Star Lite bottle.

"It's looking expensive," Dobson added.

"So how do I work out my commission, Mr Dob.....Smith?"

"You don't work it out, Scumbag. I do. What's my name?"

"Simon Smith sah."

"Until further notice. Got it?"

"Yessah."

Benji returned amongst a gang of young Nigerian boys no older than fifteen. They went straight to the bar, crowded around it, shouting above the music. To Dobson it

looked like they'd just struck rich in the street somehow and were now ready to spend it before anyone came looking for it. Benji sat down.

"Danny remembers. But he wants a share."

"What does he remember?"

"You need to talk man to man. He's in Abuja."

"Can't we talk on the phone? I pay you, you pay him."

"You gotta phone?"

"Yes, but Zak's phone's better."

Danny, it turned out, didn't know who'd issued the instruction, it could have been anyone, but he had names, some familiar, others not. The names he didn't recognise, Dobson mentally added to the Obodi list.

"And Godwin, sah." Danny had added at the end like an afterthought.

"Godwin? Who's Godwin?"

Danny seemed vague. "Godwin is Godwin."

Dobson logged it, but so far it meant nothing.

## CHAPTER 14

Craig Donovan knew the Mandarin Oriental set standards so he put on his best suit, straightened his tie and checked his hair. It was longer and greyer than it had ever been and he'd wondered if he should get it cut before meeting Commander Fernandez. But then he'd thought about Zoe. She'd never liked the crew cut. "Makes you look like a retired US marine, my dear."

He'd barely finished reporting at the hotel's reception when McAllister emerged through a lift door. "Craig. Your hair's longer. How're you doing? Come. I got a room upstairs and half an hour before I move again. You well? Retired, huh? Missing the action?"

McAllister's meeting room was on the third floor, an early evening view of lights reflecting off the water of the Tidal Basin. "What'll it be, Craig? We got everything here." But he didn't wait for an answer before pouring two Jack Daniels.

"I watched you on TV last night, Senator. Very entertaining," said Donovan. "It made sense."

McAllister handed him a glass. "Good. Because I'll never forget something you said in Abuja. It's why I agreed to see you."

"Remind me."



"We were talking about Boko Haram - what is now the COK. 'Fine words will never succeed,' you said. There was more like that, but it sounded like an attack on US foreign policy."

"Frustration I suppose."

"You'd seen action, right? Before the CIA?"

"Sure - Afghanistan, Kuwait, Cairo, Beirut....."

"So why phone me?"

"US military strategy bothers me. So, does NATO, the EU. My wife's English for Christ's sake. They almost need a referendum before they deploy a few SAS troops and....."

"Call me Jim, go on."

"I agree with most everything you said last night but let's not beat about the bush, as the Brits say. If a different strategy is needed and someone has one, has tried it and it works, why the hell isn't the Government listening?"

McAllister wandered around with his glass. "OK, Craig," he said, pointing a finger and nearly slopping the whisky on the Mandarin Oriental's Chinese carpet. "I'll answer in a minute. Let me ask a few questions first. You been speaking to Daniel Bakare?"

"Yes, I first met him in Abuja too."

"You know Frank Jameson - California?"

"No."

"But you know Gabriel Joshua."

"Yes."

"I often meet Gabe when he's in the States. Great guy. Great passion. Great energy. But I don't mention him to many folks around here. You know why?"

"Tell me."

"I'll answer that by answering your first question. Why isn't the US Government listening? It's because defence policy, military strategy, call it what you like, comes from Secretaries of Defence. The current incumbent inherited some policy but instead of building on it he ditched it. He listens to advice or, in his case, reads reports at bedtime, but then he mostly ignores it. He thinks he knows what's best, you see." McAllister paused, very briefly. "You ever check that creep's fucking website, Craig?"

Craig shook his head.

"Take my advice. Don't. Dougie Martin's fucking website makes me want to throw up. Dougie Martin's been floating around Washington for so long, he no longer relies on advice from others but on the fragile assumption that he rose to power because he

knows every God damned thing there is to know about defence and the military and every other God damned thing besides.

"And yes, he's darned good on finance and budgets and he remembers the names of every fucking soldier, navy rating or trainee fighter pilot in the academies right through to the Commanders of our front-line operations He's fucking brilliant at remembering names - Charlie this, Steve that. And if you ask him about memorandums of understanding and the detail in paragraph six clause 37 or human rights or employment law or US policy towards supplying arms or equipment to places he's never been to - like Nigeria - he's a fucking walking, talking encyclopaedia.

"And what's more he seems to think that people are, at heart, kind, forgiving and tolerant and want nothing more than to live a long life of love, peace and goodwill with their neighbours. And that, for Christ's sake, includes every jihadist that's hiding in a cave between Kabul and the Sahara. He's like a fucking hippie. Make love not war. I could fucking kill him - that's a joke by the way.

"But, yeh, he sits and counts beans, reads his reports and listens to the President and the Secretary of State, but stifles discussion with anyone with experience who tries to engage on policy or says Western military operations have shortcomings.

"If someone says we need feet on the ground he'll turn around and say the US citizens don't like watching coffins draped with flags getting offloaded. If someone says we need to supply arms to poor but friendly countries, he'll say we can't because of their human rights record and, anyway, there's no need because the US is developing super high technology that'll do the job from a laptop and so save American lives.

"You heard what I said on TV, Craig. We need a new strategy, a total rethink and we need to ditch what I call the oh-so-careful, mustn't-upset-anyone approach."

McAllister had finished both his whisky and his stroll about and sank into a chair. "There's your answer. Part of it, anyway,"

Donovan wasn't entirely shocked. It was just the way McAllister explained it. He was just like Gabriel. No wonder they got on well.

McAllister waved his empty glass at him. "You met Gabriel." It wasn't a question.

Craig raised an eyebrow. "Yes."

"Starbucks."

"You know, huh?"

"Gabriel's tracked. Mostly he's ignored but there are enough concerns floating around that bring out the men in black."

"There's also an arrest warrant." Donovan added.

McAllister nodded. "The FBI are ignoring it. They suspect it's a forgery."

"So, he's allowed to come and go?"

"You'd need to ask the FBI or Homelands Security but I guess so. But everyone knows Gabriel is pushing boundaries and pushing his luck. It'll run out sooner or later."

McAllister glanced at his watch.

"So, why did you agree to see me?" Donovan asked. "I can't believe it's a catch up with a vague acquaintance."

McAllister nodded. "Listen. I spoke to Gabriel a few weeks back. There are a few of us - like Daniel Bakare - who listen to him and think he has ideas worth listening to. Gabriel was losing patience. Fuck's sake. I understand that. But then he told me he'd already made some moves. Gabriel wouldn't say that without reason. Then I hear we spotted something on surveillance. A British flag on a roof top for Christ's sake - on the border near Niger or somewhere. I asked Gabriel but he laughed. The Brits knew nothing but they do now. Bakare knows something, maybe more than me, but he and I are a party apart. He keeps things close. Where is Gabriel now?"

"Probably on his way to London."

"I know he's fund raising from anyone he can find but what's he got going?"

Craig wondered if the Senator's show of ignorance was feigned. Was he fishing?

"Ask Daniel Bakare," Craig replied, unsure how reluctance to divulge things might go down. Undeterred, he went on: "But Gabriel's creating something else out there - some kind of new community based on new economics. education, healthcare, small businesses. "

"I heard. Can't see it working myself."

"Whatever, it's getting forgotten amongst the hoo-ha over the defence side, but that's Gabriel's real, long term baby. And it needs far better understanding. It's a massive undertaking and could take years. But given what's going on in the area, it needs defending otherwise it'll never get going."

"Yeh," McAllister said as if he'd heard nothing really new.

"He's losing patience," Donovan added. "Now he's talking about a Plan B."

McAllister sat forward. "Plan B? I don't even understand Plan A. I've always liked the idea of helping people to defend themselves but what the hell is Plan B?"

"He's probably just looking for more willing partners."

McAllister's expression changed. "Like who for Christ's sake?"

"One might hazard a guess."

"And your guess?"

Donovan shrugged. His guess was too hazardous to mention.

"Mmm," McAllister pondered. "What's your next move, Craig? What exactly is he paying you for?"

Donovan had expected that question at the beginning, not the end. "I'm working with a UK colleague on the corruption and fraud charges. That's what he's paying for, but one thing leads to another."

"Yeh. One thing always leads to another." McAllister was definitely fishing.

Donovan paused, gathering his thoughts. "Gabriel's no fool, you know. He knows his ideas cost money. He admits he's being distracted by the defence need. But he won't stop looking for support - financial or otherwise. But he needs government help, government understanding. US, UK or EU support would drive everything forward. Whether his Project would work remains to be seen but surely there's no harm in understanding it better, giving it a try. But if he's finally lost patience then...."

Donovan left the sentence hanging there knowing Jim McAllister would finish it.

"He'll move to Plan B. Is that what you're saying?"

Craig Donovan nodded. "What would you do?"

Mark Dobson had returned to the Airport Hotel and was struggling with the chef's chicken and rice 'dish of the day' when Vigo phoned.

"Civic and I had dialogue," he said breathlessly as if he'd been running.

"Go on."

"Civic's been looking for Festus Fulani for long time about our ten percent. Anyway, I tell Civic about Pastor Gabriel and his problems and I mention a few names like you told me, and Civic says he knows Gabriel and goes to his sermons when he's in town and Civic says Gabriel should be President and gets mad like crazy when I tell him some more. You still there, Mercedes, 'cus I got a funny sound on my phone? And there's no power....black here like Whitney Houston and I just learn something so, so big I nearly shit myself. Festus is big eye, big trouble now. He done run from London on murder charge."

"I heard," Dobson said, throwing down his spoon and fork.

"But Civic say he knows where he lives. Someone give info and Civic track him tonight. I never see fella like Civic when mad. He get so fucking crazy he look to slap one on Festus. Tonight, Civic go to smart house in Utako. Knock on door. You want more, Mercedes?"

"Go on."

"OK, right now, Civic inside house with two big size fren. One have gun, maybe not to shoot but to put shit up Festus. Festus all talk. You still hear me, Mercedes?"

"Carry on."

Dobson stood up from the table, took a last look at what he'd been told was chicken and made his way to his room. Half way there he began to think this thing with Festus was too quick, too easy, too.....too something.

"Civic says, any questions you want to ask Festus?"

Dobson was halfway down the corridor when the lights went off. There was total darkness except for the weak light from his phone. He stopped walking, searching for his room key and some questions. "Ask him who issued the arrest warrant for Pastor Gabriel."

"Hold on, Mercedes, I got two phones running here and they are the only lights left on in Lagos. You got power where you are, Mercedes?"

"No, total power out. Black like Whitney Houston."

Dobson heard Vigo repeating his question as he groped along the wall trying to find number 28 with his phone. Directing the light on the key hole he let himself in.

"OK, Mercedes, let's see what Festus says. His nerves are frayed big time. There's a Hausa woman there as well but Civic said she's in the bathroom. But we already got a promise he'll sort out our any problems like our ten percent. You there?..... OK, Festus says.... ah, wait.....you there Merc? This fucking guy now says he's not Festus."

"Jesus," Dobson said aloud. He'd sensed something was wrong. He waited, his phone charge low. Would it last? Would his patience last? If this wasn't Festus Fulani then who the hell was it?

"OK we're getting something.....Civic says the guy works for Festus but not Festus. Festus away some place. This guy say his name Kenneth."

"Kenneth what?"

"I'll ask."

"Balogun. This guy's on your list and Civic say this good enough. Fuck Festus. We'll get Festus later. Wait.....This guy now start to shake, sweat drip like tap. He pleading not to get shot. Is like top TV comedy show, Mercedes. You should listen.....wait..... OK, he says they borrowed official looking stamps..... someone signed warrant..... someone in the Ministry sent it out. It's a scam, Mercedes. We Nigerians fucking good at scams."

"Get him to write it all down like an admission - names, anything = you know what I mean?"

"OK. This guy no strong head. His hand shaking like a leaf in the wind. You still there, Mercedes?"

"Still here."

"Wait.....Things happening again, mon.....You using up credit big time like one of them big limo taxis where you see clock tick tick .....here's Civic again.....OK, you getting what you want - names, big names including.....including a fucking High Court Judge. Fuck me.....And I really need a shit, Mercedes. I needed one for hours but too dark. And now you got.....wait....you got a signature on paper.....Kenneth Balogun trembling hand but pen it work.....Civic ask what his job and shit piece of jelly say work for FAA.....That good, Mercedes. We got proof."

"Another request, Vigo," Dobson interrupted. "Take his photo or video him. I really need to see this bastard as he signs it. But no guns or other weapons showing, OK? Nothing to show he's signing under duress, OK?"

"Wait.....wait.....it's done, Mercedes. Civic make short video, send on phone. Anything else?"

"That'll do, Vigo. But what about the ten percent they owe you?"

"Civic starting work on him now. He's got help, Mercedes. Another guy called Danny. Your job took top priority."

"Danny? Danny of Red Lips?"

"Danny tell where Festus live."

"But it isn't Festus, Vigo. Never mind. Go and have a shit before it's too late."

Dobson's phone battery then went dead. In total darkness, he lay back on the bed.

Five minutes later the room lights flickered and came on again. What's more the WiFi was working as if the power break had reset something. It was a weak signal but enough to send Colin Asher a short update.

Half an hour later came the reply.

"G & S are flying to London. Craig is also booked to return. I suggest you also come back. Let's meet and decide where we take all this. Colin."

Mark Dobson slept but woke a few hours later to another call from Vigo

"Civic still not see sun, Mercedes. He and Danny put slap on Balogun until just now. Maybe we get our ten percent today. He one shit scared man. He even more shit scared when Civic asked about the FAA deal. Danny slap some more and find Mr Putin's friend got the job."

"Russians?" Dobson checked.

"Yah. Mr Putin. Big fella, no shirt, rides a horse."

"It's all show, Vigo. He's not as big as he looks."

"But look real strong and cool, Mercedes. Big man, big politics, big deal."

"But did you get the name of Putin's friend?"

"You want me to check?"

While Vigo checked Mark Dobson phoned Chelsea to tell him he was going to London. "I'll be back soon. Say thanks to Pops, OK?"

Then, as Dobson checked out of the hotel, Vigo called with the answer. "Putin's Russian friend is Protek, Mercedes. They won the FAA contract."

## CHAPTER 15

At the Pentagon Craig Donovan was met by an Army Sergeant and taken on a tortuous route via lifts and corridors that ended at a door that was already open. AFRICOM's Commander David Fernandez, tall, upright, serious-looking with short grey hair combed to one side stood waiting inside. He was in full uniform, white shirt, black tie, the left side of his chest covered in medals.

Fernandez had commanded at every level. His decorations included the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, the Distinguished Service Medal, the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star Medal and numerous foreign awards from combat experience. Most of that had been in Afghanistan. Fernandez was highly respected in army ranks.

Donovan saluted. "Sir."

"OK if I call you Craig?"

"Most people do, nowadays, sir."

"Take a seat." Fernandez gestured to a chair set against a wide, wooden desk bare except for a phone. Fernandez sat in the high-backed swivel chair behind and put his hands, palms down, on the desk top. He looked at Donovan for perhaps five seconds. Then:

"Last night," he said, "I delivered an update on Africa Command to the Senate Committee. My message was we've got our hands full. I gave them a list of thirty terrorist groups across Africa from the Libyan groups in the north to Al Shebaab in the east to the COK in the west - what some Senators still call Boko Haram. I even surprised them with the name of an unknown group in South Africa. Most Senators have never heard of any of them. That surprise you?"

"No, sir."

"Point is, not only are our hands full, Craig, but our hands are tied. They're tied by law, by US foreign policy and by budgets."

Fernandez stood up, went to the window, looked up into the sky, saw nothing and turned. "You said something to CSM Steve Benyon in Stuttgart that got me interested. That's why I suggested we meet." He returned to his seat. "You know Gabriel Joshua."

"Yes, sir."

"Is that how you got the fix on the COK camp?"

"Yes sir."

"So how can he do it but the Joint Force can't?"

"Because he's running his own operation. The place you know about with the British flag on the roof, sir."

"He got permission to set that up?"

"It was enough permission for Gabriel, sir."

"We could easily flatten it of course." Fernandez's thin lipped and serious mouth twisted itself into what might have been a smile.

"But action inside sovereign territory would not be permissible, sir."

Fernandez nodded. "And who hit the airport in Ouagadougou?"

"The same guy who runs Gabriel's operation, sir. Was the US Government pleased with that?"

"It pleased the French but did nothing for their embarrassment." Fernandez paused, examining his hands and a wedding ring. "How well you know Gabriel?"

"Still learning. I know he's as frustrated as hell that the US chooses to ignore him. If I was him, I'd feel the same."

"You got a problem with US defence policy in Africa?"

Donovan thought about that. "Yes, sir," he said honestly. "I think there's a problem with a lot of long-term Western defence policy. It's hard to detect anything clear-cut. React to this, react to that. We muddle through with no real plan because public opinion drags back incisive action. We sit and we watch. We get angry for a few days if a few white tourists get hit and then continue sitting on our arses. Meanwhile, displaced refugees from Africa and everywhere else on God's earth join up with the thousands of others who've already decided that a fresh start sounds the best option and migrate in their hundreds of thousands.

"And no-one has a viable solution for stopping the spread of Islamic style fundamentalism because it breeds on poverty and lack of opportunity. Gabriel's been saying that for years and years and I agree.

"Someone once wrote about Osama Bin Laden that killing al-Qaeda commanders was not enough. The US could chase fanatics to the gates of hell, he said, but to win it needed to destroy terrorist sanctuaries and defeat the insidious ideology.

"But Gabriel goes much further than that. He says you've got to stop these guys signing up in the first place. You got to provide opportunities for them, a chance in life. It's what he talks about in every darned speech he makes.

"And there's something else he's right about. The West is too damned scared to engage in case they die in combat. Not so the enemies. They actually rejoice in it. Gabriel's right when he says that the West talks about protecting its way of life but is no longer prepared to die for it. What sort of way of life is that?

"That weakness in the West's psyche is precisely what Gabriel's strategy is trying to address. The West has gone soft and lacks leadership. That's what he says. And I agree.



"Gabriel's not a military man, sir," he concluded. "His only aim is to find a way to address deep seated African problems. 'Shine a light ' he says. 'Point to the sunrise'. Did you ever watch any of his videos, sir?"

Fernandez shook his head.

"Watch them, sir, because Gabriel always starts with a list of causes and effects. The causes and effects list is long: Conflict, unemployment, underemployment, poor education, environmental destruction, overcrowding, resource depletion, increasing food and water shortages, civil conflict, ethnic tension, economic migration, mass migration, climate change."

"So, what's on his list of solutions?"

"Better education, especially for girls, and investment in new ways of running an economy. That's why he wants US support. And that's about as much as I know, sir. That's Gabriel's plan A."

Fernandez had been sitting calmly, listening, nodding, both hands lying together on the desk. "Is there a Plan B?"

To Craig Donovan it sounded like Fernandez had already heard something. "Seems like it, sir,"

"What is it?"

"The same as Plan A, sir, but he'll give up on the USA and try somewhere else. Meanwhile he's flying back to London with a whole pile of other problems to deal with, not least an arrest warrant."

"I heard."

There was silence for a while, both men eying each other, thinking. It was Donovan who broke it. "So, what's to be done about the COK camp, sir? Gabriel wants it obliterated."

Fernandez sighed. "Frankly, Craig, nothing."

"Even with the precise location?"

"The answer's the same. We do nothing."

"So, tell me, sir. Is the US unwilling to do anything at all for Gabriel?"

Fernandez rose, stood behind his desk and glanced at his watch.

"Listen, Craig, I got another meeting soon. All I'll say is this. We're watching and listening. There are some - what shall I say? - complicated security issues at stake here. Issues that Gabriel will not be aware of. Issues such as how best to destroy a group like the COK by means other than militarily."

Fernandez, Donovan decided, was telling him something without actually spelling it out. Unsure what it was Donovan merely nodded. "I see, sir. Meanwhile, sir?"

"Meanwhile, I'm not saying we're all against Gabriel's views. Some of us", he paused meaningfully, "Would like to see a radical change of strategy on the agenda. A lot of what Gabriel says makes sense although I think he grossly underestimates costs. But change is easier said than done. Politics gets in the way, funding costs the tax payer and the law is the law. But there are some very strong opinions emerging. That do you for now?"

Donovan shrugged. "Can I tell, Gabriel?"

"Sure, but make sure he understands there's no time scale."

"That might not be good enough, sir."

## CHAPTER 16

Pastor Ayo of Christ's Centre of Holy Visions had taken a liking to his hat. He'd seen people wearing a trilby at a horse race meeting in England once and with his winnings that day had bought six. Today he was wearing the brown felt one with gold ribbon around the crown. Ayo liked changing his style though he stuck with the Armani suits - unless, of course, something really special was called for, in which case he'd go for an Ermenegildo Zegna. Light grey fabric with a faint sparkle was a favourite. Today it was just an Armani.

Sitting opposite Ayo was the squat form of Pastor Lazarus of the Good Tidings Christian Peoples Church.

It was mid-morning on the day Mark Dobson flew back to London and the two Pastors were sitting with a tray of tea and biscuits in the plush Wellington Lounge at London's Hyde Park Intercontinental Hotel.

The overweight Lazarus was clad in a tight-looking black Italian suit. With his arms stretched over the back of the sofa facing the window and the iconic Wellington Arch, Lazarus was in full flow, his cheeks rippling with distaste. He mostly wore dark glasses outside, but took them off indoors so people could judge his emotional state through his eyes. Lazarus could turn salty tears into liquid gold just by squeezing his eyelids.

Ayo was emptying the last drops of the pot of tea into his own cup.

"It is no place for us, Ayo," Lazarus hissed, waving the glasses." They are like animals. I have been there before. It is the Nigerian High Commission for God's sake not some dirty office for issuing visas. It is run by imbeciles. It is like the hell without Jesus. I will not be treated like that."

Tears formed in the red corners of his eyes as he stared at Ayo. A waitress came to ask if they'd like more tea. Ayo pushed the tray towards her. She sniffed at the smell of aftershave, gathered the tray and walked away.

"Patience, Lazarus. It is, I agree, a zoo," Ayo said waving an arm. "To wear a boubou in London is out of place. We business people should not need to change our dress."

"And it is such a mess, Ayo," Lazarus continued, turning the gold ring with the ruby on his middle finger. "Did you ever visit the Commissioner's office? It is so cluttered it reminds me of the kitchen of Abela's house in Calabar. You remember that day when we met the bastard Gabriel Joshua and his assistant?"

"No need to remind me," It was Ayo's turn to rotate a gold ring - one with a huge blue stone. Then he glanced at his Rolex. "Our visitor is late."

"They are always late," Lazarus giggled. The tears had evaporated. "They like to create an impression. An important man must always be late. Ah, but wait, this might be him now."

Lazarus and Ayo rose to their feet in unison as a big, tall Nigerian wearing the sort of garment they had just denounced as impractical appeared at the entrance. He strode over in shiny black lace up shoes with his long white gown embroidered with black and gold. The matching hat seemed to add another six inches to his height.

Ex Major General Zainab Azazi, the President's brother, swept towards them across the lounge peering through a pair of heavy rimmed spectacles and holding out a hand that was bigger and far stronger than the hands of Lazarus and Ayo. Ayo beckoned him to sit. Lazarus checked the bones of his hand.

"I do not have long," Azazi said, pulling up the sleeve of his boubou and looking at his watch. "You have another visitor."

"Another visitor, sir? Who sir?" Ayo didn't like surprises. Things outside his control.

"Be careful what you say to him. Do you understand?" A worried look had spread across Azazi's big round face. Ayo and Lazarus glanced at one another.

"He is. ah, close to the President," Azazi said hesitantly, glancing behind him as if he thought the other visitor might already be right behind. "So," he said more quietly, leaning forward. "Where is the bastard Pastor Gabriel fucking Joshua?"

"We don't know, sir." Ayo said.

"Why? You are in the same business." He licked his big lips with a fat, pink tongue. "You were instructed to find him."

Lazarus stared. Ayo sniffed.

Azazi was not just a big man in size but a big man of influence. Azazi was not only the President's brother but knew people - politicians, chiefs, governors, judges, those in charge. Azazi fixed things, sorted relationships, oiled wheels of financial transactions and, most importantly, handed out favours.

So why, Ayo in particular observed, did he seem so nervous? A man like Zainab Azazi should be able to relax because he was untouchable which meant his friends were also untouchable. Ayo had always thought he was one of those untouchable friends but, right now, he was making Ayo feel nervous.

Lazarus, though, seemed totally oblivious.

Azazi leaned forward, removed the spectacles and made them disappear amongst the swathes of cotton. "Listen to me. An arrest warrant has been issued. But it is not enough. He must be found, do you understand?"

"So, it is important, sir?" Lazarus asked timidly.

Azazi shot him an angry look, an arm flew up and the spectacles slid from a fold onto the floor. He bent to retrieve them. "Of course, it's fucking important," he spat. "If that bastard's not stopped we are all finished."

Lazarus shrank back. "I see, sir."

"We have dealt with his London office, sir," Ayo said. "His local manager is, uh, gone. It is, uh, progress, sah." Ayo hoped that was enough. It wasn't.

"What else?"

"And we went to his office but he wasn't there." It was a lie but Azazi wasn't to know. "We will try again, sir."

Zainab Azazi leaned forward, beckoning the two Pastors to do likewise.

"Listen to me," he said in a loud whisper. "I don't care about his fucking business. What I care about is who runs the fucking country. Presidents decide what is important and what is not. Presidents decide who runs the army. Presidents choose their friends. Presidents meet other Presidents. Presidents, my God-fearing friends, don't like their plans upset by unelected fucking actors and stage performers. Got it?"

He returned the spectacles to their rightful place and stared at them through the lenses.

Ayo fingered his lips, thinking. It was as if Azazi was now the President not his older brother. As usual, Lazarus ruined Ayo's train of thought.

"It is why we met the President, sir," Lazarus piped up. "That man Gabriel Joshua is like a politician."

Azazi winced as if he had no wish to hear those precise words. He wrapped his hands over his face and ears. "So, fucking well find him," he growled. "We need him out of the way. Understand?"

Lazarus nodded and opened the front of his tight jacket to scratch an armpit that felt damp. "Tea?" he asked.

Azazi's face swelled in size as he took a huge breath. He turned towards the entrance and checked his watch. Ayo was still trying to figure out what to say next when Azazi pointed a fat finger at him.

"Do you know about Mr Balogun?"

"Kenneth?" Ayo checked. "He was in England, sah, but returned to Nigeria and....."

Azazi interrupted. "I mean do you know what happened to him yesterday?"

"Mr Balogun advised us on how to deal with the bastard's business. He recommended Osman Olande to...."

"Yah, yah, yah. That was weeks ago. Listen to my fucking question. You know what happened to Mr Balogun yesterday?"

"Yesterday, sah? No sah."

"He was assaulted. Almost killed."

Lazarus put a hand to his mouth. "Such a nice man, sah."

"That is not good," said Ayo. "But his advice on Osman was useful. Osman came to deal with the basstad Gabriel."

"And helped you to fail."

"Well, yes, sah," Ayo said. "But he dealt with the Englishman, Dobson, who went to Lagos to help the basstad Gabriel"

Azazi sat back, puzzled. "Who is this Englishman?"

"Dobson, sah. He works for Ashah and Ashah, sah. Osman says they are private investigators."

"Who is Ashah? How many Ashahs? .....No, I do not want to know." Azazi looked at his watch yet again. "I will return to Nigeria but you will find the basstad Gabriel and his fucking assistant and the bloody man Ashah Dobson. Do you hear?"

And then he stood, turned and, without another word, walked away, his boubou swishing and his shoes scuffing on the floor of the Wellington Lounge.

When he'd gone, Lazarus touched Ayo's arm. "I've seen those markings on someone else," he whispered.

Ayo closed his eyes in utter disbelief. "Facial markings? You've seen them before? My God. You've seen them on President Azazi, Pastor."

Lazarus's mouth opened. "Ayya! So they are related?"

"Brothers you fool. They are brothers."

"Ah." Lazarus nodded and settled back into his chair. "More tea?"

"My stomach is distended with tea."

"So, who do you think is now coming to see us, Ayo? And with no proper appointment. I want to return home to where people wait to see me, Ayo. I would like to see my wife."

Ayo could hardly believe his ears. "Your wife, Lazarus? Your wife left you years ago for a Catholic fucking priest."

"But she still lives inside my head, Ayo."

"If you are still living inside her head, Lazarus, I'd be very surprised. She'd tried out several Catholic priests before settling on the one from Cape Town."

Lazarus nodded sadly. "God demands a man take the rough with the smooth."

Ayo was tempted to say that Lazarus's ex-wife was, indeed, very rough but held his tongue. Nevertheless, his patience with Lazarus was at its limit. He stood up, holding his head but then sat down again because the Polish waitress was watching them. Instead, he leaned towards Lazarus.

"Do you ever use your fucking brain, Pastor?" he hissed. "Do you ever think? Do you know what you are doing? Do you understand that you are up to your ears in things outside your control?"

Lazarus looked bemused at the anger. "It is God's doing, Ayo. We are in his hands."

Ayo's hiss almost became a scream. "Does your God never talk to you at night Lazarus? Does he never whisper into your ear: 'Lazarus, Lazarus, my son, you are in deep, fucking shit.' Does he?"

The Polish waitress glanced over.

"No, never," Lazarus said apparently unaware of the anger bubbling opposite Ayo. "He only tells me to live a good life so when I die even the undertaker will feel sorry." He paused, remembering something else. "And he says God gives and forgives. It is people who get and forget."

"So, did your God with his infinite wisdom and deep understanding of the way of the world never advise you to get out while the going was good? To cash in your fucking chips, Lazarus?"

"No."

"Then your fucking God's a different fucking God than mine, Pastor. Because mine's been telling me for a year we're in such deep shit that he's saying: Ayo, you're on my own. Sink or fucking swim, my son. Go with the tide or go to.....go to fucking prison. Got it now, Lazarus? Got it?"

Lazarus was twisting his big lower lip with his fingers. "I see. You mean it's no longer just business, Ayo? Is it politics?"

"Congratulations, Pastor. Perhaps you should try talking to my God sometime."

Lazarus was still pulling on his lower lip when he saw another Nigerian speaking to the Polish waitress by the door. This man was slimmer and more athletic looking than Azazi. Lazarus kicked Ayo beneath the table and nodded in the direction of the door.

"What suit is that?" Lazarus whispered as the man walked purposely towards their corner.

This new, Nigerian visitor looked as if he might have just endured an overnight flight from somewhere far away. He wore a drab, grey suit and a crumpled white shirt with a florescent green tie that hung below the unfastened top button of his shirt. He strode over holding out a bony but strong looking hand.

"Martin Abisola," he said softly. "You must be Pastors Ayo and Lazarus."

They didn't get up but nodded in unison, Lazarus noticing a strap fastened around his waist and a bulge from something concealed behind his jacket.

Abisola ignored their apparent indifference. "You met Zainab Azazi?" he asked in a quiet voice tainted with an English, educated accent.

"Tea?" asked Lazarus.

"No thank you. But I have some questions."

Ayo sniffed and Lazarus settled back. Then the questions started.

"Tell me about Pastor Gabriel Joshua. Do you know the one called Solomon? Who is this Englishman called Dobson?"

Ayo provided short answers followed by more sniffs and Abisola listened, nodding, sitting quietly and confidently, legs crossed, hands together unmoving in his lap. "We know very little," Ayo concluded. "What we know we've already told General Zainab Azazi."

Abisola nodded. "Where is Osman Olande?"

"Ah," said Ayo to give time to think.

"Living quietly, sah," said Lazarus. "The police are looking for him."

Ayo squirmed.

"Is that so? Why are the police looking for him?"

"Olande knows something about the death of Mr Kenneth Eju," Lazarus said proudly as if he was the only one who knew.

"And who is Mr Kenneth Eju?"

Lazarus, trying to be helpful to a man who listened and didn't show such frightening aggression, spoke about Solomon Trading. "It is in Croydon, sah. Do you know Croydon?" He ended with: "Are you sure you won't take tea?"

It was mid-afternoon when Abisola sat back, smiled and said he'd finished his questions. Ayo said he had a question of his own. It was one that had whirled around in his head since Abisola arrived. "Excuse me sah. We've not met before. Who do you work for?"

"The Nigerian SSS - the State Security Service."

Lazarus chewed a finger nail and looked from the corner of a slightly damp eye. Ayo sniffed. "Ah, I see. And your position in the, uh, SSS, sir?"

"I am its head." Abisola waited for that to sink in, then added: "This is a most unpleasant business. One arrest warrant has already been issued."

Ayo relaxed. "Good. Arrest warrants for the basstad Gabriel must be acted upon and made to stick."

Abisola nodded. "Indeed," he said. "Arrest warrants are useful and very necessary sometimes. Perhaps we will issue more warrants soon."

Lazarus smiled and nodded. Ayo just nodded. Abisola continued.

"Warrants can be used to arrest anyone - including both of you."

The words had been spoken without blinking and Ayo and Lazarus looked at one another. This time, the tears in Lazarus's eyes weren't forced. "Oh, my Lord Jesus," he whimpered.

Ayo, feeling utterly betrayed tried composure but felt his voice breaking. "That seems very harsh for men of God. like us..... May I ask on what grounds."

Abisola took a deep breath and stood up. He then looked down at them, loosened his green tie so much he might just as well have removed it entirely. "On what grounds?" he said, and then he held up his fingers to count them off. "Bribery, corruption, extortion, false representation, fraud, deception, money laundering, theft of church funds, plotting against the government, telling lies to the President. Don't worry. I'll think of something."

When he'd finished, Martin Abisola, the head of the Nigerian SSS, had used up all ten digits.

## CHAPTER 17

Whilst waiting for his bag to appear on the conveyor at Heathrow, Mark Dobson phoned Colin Asher. "I'm back," he announced. Then: "Festus Fulani?" he asked.

"Yes," said Asher. "Wanted for questioning in relation to Kenneth Eju's murder."

"Is that something you did?"

"I dropped his name into conversation, suggested a dispute with the Household of God's Miracles Church and spread a few rumours about unaccounted wealth and multiple property ownership."

"Where is Mr F right now?"

"No idea. Back in Nigeria? Any particular reason?"

"Only that he was one of several behind my abduction and robbery."

"Do they know it failed to deter you?"



"Not yet. What about Llc-Protek?"

"It's part of Aron Kaplan's group."

"So, no surprise again. Have you told Gabriel and Solomon?"

"Yes. They arrived earlier."

"Are they surprised?"

"No."

"What do they want to do?"

"To see you. You feel like a late night?"

"Duty calls. Where are they?"

"A hotel called Blossoms somewhere off Cromwell Road."

"I didn't know there was plant life in Cromwell Road let alone any blossoms."

"And there's another job for you. Fancy South Korea and Hong Kong?"

"One thing at a time, Colin. I fear this one's still got a long way to run."

Blossoms Hotel turned out to be little more than a bed and breakfast joint in a dimly lit street of terraced properties running roughly parallel to Cromwell Road. Next to the illuminated 'Rooms Available' sign in the window was a bunch of dead flowers, presumably the blossoms. It was just after midnight when Dobson rang the bell and for a while nothing happened. He tried again. Then he heard the shuffling of bare feet and the door was opened by a tall black man wearing white boxer shorts and a blue vest. Clothing apart, it could have been Solomon but it wasn't. A smell, of curry, wafted through the door as he looked down from the top step, yawned and scratched his crotch. "Yessah."

He was Nigerian.

"I'm meeting a couple of guys who checked in earlier."

"Pastor Gabriel, sah. Very famous sah. Very pleased he comes to stay here, sah. You need a room as well? We have one room with en-suite facilities."

"No thanks."

"Second floor, sah. Room three. You just got back from Lagos?"

"How did you guess?"

"Label on the bag, sah. My name's Sammy. Sammy from Sokoto. "

"Can I leave the bag here, Sammy. I won't be long."

"Of course, sah. Leave by the mop and bucket."

Dobson mounted the stairs carrying just his laptop. The door to Room 3 was opened by Solomon in bare chest and black trousers. He pulled Dobson inside and the strong curry smell hit his nose. Gabriel, wearing red striped shorts and a big smile sprang from one of the two single beds and grabbed his hand. "You hungry, Mark? Sol bought some goat curry from a Jamaican take-away around the corner. There's some left."

Dobson put his laptop on a chair. "Thanks. I ate on the plane."

"We've got a few issues," Gabriel announced.

"Only a few?"

"Three difficult ones. Kaplan, the US Government and the UK Government."

"Not much to choose between them." Dobson said. He found some space on one of the beds. "I thought my job was finished."

"You wanna give up just as it's getting interesting?"

"I'm OK on Russian commercial intrigue but I don't normally list terrorism and international defence amongst my areas of expertise."

"It's easy, man. Sol and I learned it from newspapers. Start on the Kaplan empire."

"What should I look for?"

"Their military interests."

"Colin's already started. Anything else?"

"Their African investments."

"Colin."

"Links with the US Government, the UK Government and the Nigerian Government."

"Colin."

"Then help us decide what to do next."

Mark Dobson left Blossoms at one, none the wiser except he knew that Plan B, whatever that was, was to be pursued and he was still engaged. To do what remained unclear.

## CHAPTER 18

"Halima?"

In her sleep, Halima heard her mother calling her name, but Halima's mother was dead. So was her father and so were her three sisters.

Halima, sixteen years old, wearing a black tee shirt and long desert camouflage pants sat up on the flimsy, creaking, camp bed.

The man calling her name was Peter Moosa, the black South African soldier who had found her in shock, disorientated, dirty, temporarily deaf and surrounded by blood, body parts and her younger sister's headless body. It was Moosa who had, by chance, been passing the school when the bombs fastened to the girls' bodies exploded just as a hundred other children poured from the school. It was Moosa who had found her hiding in a generator shed and driven her two hundred miles across country to Bill Larsen's camp.

"Were you dreaming, Halima?"

"I think so."

"When you're free, Bill says he'd like to talk to you."

"But I must help Ali in the kitchen. It is my duty."

Halima's first language was Hausa but Moosa had quickly grown used to her husky voice and good, polite English. But it was her sense of duty and responsibility that was so striking. "OK. When you've finished preparing breakfast, go to Bill's tent."

"Yes sir."

Moosa turned to go, then: "I almost forgot. Benjamin says there's a problem with the computer. Would you look at it?"

"Yes sir."

It was almost a month since Halima had arrived at the camp and for Bill Larsen, the tough, no nonsense career soldier, the effect she was having on himself, Benjamin Simisola and the rest of the men in the camp had been increasing by the day.

Larsen was tired and was lying on his back, smoking a cigarette, a mug of coffee on the floor. The last few days had been the longest but most stressful since he'd set up the operation on Gabriel's land. In the last few days two teams had been in action. Another team was still out tracking a group of suspected COK activists. Right now, though, it was the Halima effect he was thinking about.

"It was the COK, sir," she'd told him the day after Peter brought her in. "They hid their faces behind masks. They drank and smoked. One man was very tall. Long hair, sir, down to here."

She'd pointed to her shoulders and the description matched perfectly with a known terrorist known as Yan or Yan Tatsine though the man was also Mohamed Idris, Mahmud Amadu, Mahmud Yusuf or Allah Marwa and he moved around like a tall, dark shadow seen only on YouTube clips.

To his ragbag of followers, though, he was a hero, the bringer of money and gifts. Gifts like the hand rolled cigarettes filled with narcotics that he called Holy Smokes

which he carried in plastic bags ready to throw to the men to fight for like starving dogs in the dust.

In return for their total loyalty Yan Tatsine not only offered money, food and shelter but individual responsibilities such as they'd never had before. Yan Tatsine granted them the right to kill anyone who got in their way and the freedom to inflict as much violence, suffering and horror as YouTube clips could depict. With work benefits like that, recruitment of boys and men who had had nothing before and expected nothing in future was easy.

Tatsine now boasted on video that his territory was bigger than France, and Larsen was sure it had been Yan Tatsine who led the recent raid on Burkina Faso, assembling his rabble outside the towns of Dori and Sebba before moving on to Ouagadougou and the airport.

There had only ever been one drawback for Yan Tatsine: money.

But even that had been resolved once he'd met with a mysterious Nigerian man in Cairo. The agreement was simple. "Money for chaos."

"That is very good, sir," Tatsine had replied with enthusiasm. "Chaos is our speciality. With money, we can expand rapidly through Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso."

And, because he was known for his great humour he had added: "It will be easy, sir. Do you know that fifty percent of the people of Burkina Faso are Moslem, fifty percent Christian and one hundred percent Animist?"

The big man had smiled but then issued a stern caution: "Not so fast, my friend. Step by step. And never lose sight of our ultimate target - Nigeria."

Larsen had offered to take Halima home, back to her village but she had been in no doubt about that. "But, sir. I have no home now. I have no mother or father. I have no sisters."

"So, what do you want to do?"

"To stay here, sir. To help you."

"But we are soldiers."

"Yes, sir but I can help. I can cook. I can clean."

And Larsen had quickly discovered that Halima, despite her humble background, had many other natural skills besides cooking breakfast for thirty men. Bill Larsen wasn't experienced with kids, particular girls, but she'd always looked comfortable enough in the black tee shirt and cargoes although she'd quickly given up on the boots and now went barefoot. There was a slight swelling of breasts beneath the tee shirt but with her hair tied with an elastic band she could have easily have been mistaken for a boy. The men treated her like a young man.

And her English, strongly accented though it was, was impressive.

Larsen closed his eyes, remembering what Peter Moosa had said when Halima had asked to see him the first time. "She works hard, sir. The kitchen is spotless. Ali thinks he'll be out of a job soon."

"Then Ali better pull his socks up."

"His socks, sir?"

"Nothing like a woman to organise a kitchen."

"She asked at breakfast if she could meet Pastor Gabriel."

Larsen had wiped sweat. "But she's Moslem, from a Moslem village. What have you told her?"

"That we're here to defend the land from the COK and anyone else who tries to upset Gabriel's Project. Enough for her to understand we don't belong to any one government - and that Pastor Gabriel is involved."

"What did she say?"

"That she'd seen him on TV though I don't know where because she didn't have a TV at home. She knows he isn't Moslem but it didn't matter. Religion's not important, she told me. It's what is in the heart. She's bright."

Larsen had capitulated "OK, bring her in."

And in she'd come in bare feet, the cargoes folded above her ankles.

"Good morning, Halima," he'd said.

"Good morning, sir."

She had stood straight, hands behind her back, looking up at him with intense black eyes, her pink lips moving as if wanting to say something but unsure. Larsen had stepped in. "You're busy in the kitchen. Ali says you're better than he is."

"No sir," her eyes dropped to the floor. "Just doing my job, sir."

"So, what do you want to talk about."

"Master Gabriel, sir."

"OK, sit down." Larsen had beckoned Moosa to bring chairs but Halima had taken charge, grabbing three chairs, setting them in a triangle and they'd sat down, Halima with her hands together in her lap, relaxed, confident, expectant.

"What do you know about Pastor Gabriel?"

"I have read, sir. Some people in my village are suspicious of him. When we went to Maiduguri, I heard some bad things. That he is a Christian, that he is only interested in money, that he hates Moslems. But I don't think so, sir. I think he has no religion. I think he wants everyone to live in peace, to make lives better. His words, sir, are good. I believe he speaks for all poor people whatever their religion. He is tired of the

old ways that don't work and of old politicians who only look after themselves. He wants to change things. I cannot think badly of him. Will he visit us here, sir?"

Larsen glanced at Peter Moosa as if the South African might want to say something. In truth, it was to give himself time to think. He was, after all, a man more used to decision-making and issuing instructions to grown men not listening to the thoughts and private opinions of sixteen-year old girls. This one seemed to have already made up her mind about a thing or two and her summary was about as accurate as any he'd heard.

"Perhaps he will visit soon," he said, although in truth he had no idea.

"Then might I speak to him, sir?"

"Would you like me to tell him about you?"

"I would like to help him."

Larsen had nodded, slowly. "And you want to stay here? Amongst all the men?"

"There are women outside, sir."

"They work in the fields. Do you want to help them?"

"Perhaps, sir."

"Is there anything else you want? To while away your time."

"While away, sir?"

"Something else to do to keep you busy?"

"I have seen the computer. Do you have the internet, sir?"

"It is not good but yes, we do."

"May I learn about it, sir? Like school?"

Why not, Larsen had thought. "Good idea. I'll ask Benjamin to show you. Benjamin, can also help you contact Pastor Gabriel."

"Thank you, sir." Halima had then smiled broadly and ran outside like an excited eight-year old.

Benjamin had been next. "You asked me to call in, Bill."

"I'm about to leave to meet the men from Ouaga," he'd said. "We've got a casualty."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Yeh." He paused. Then: "Our new lady guest, Ben."

"Halima, Bill. Brave girl. Bright girl."

"Braver than anything the COK have got I reckon. Cool as a cucumber."

"Cucumber, sir?"

"Cool, unpressured, sensible, risked a lot. As bright as a button."

"Button sir?"

"So bright she wants to add to her set of skills. Cooking and cleaning the kitchen isn't enough for our Halima. She wants to learn computers, the internet."

"Games, sir?"

"Shouldn't think so. More like studying medicine or nuclear physics online. I wondered if you might like to take her under your wing?"

"My wing sir?"

"You've got teaching diplomas as well as a degree in botany haven't you, Ben?"

"It's tropical agriculture, sir, but I'd be happy to teach her about the internet. She'll self teach in no time."

"How's the connection?"

"Off and on. Power-outs are the problem. We need more capacity."

"I'm working on it."

"Any news from Gabriel, sir?"

"Not a fucking dicky bird. You heard anything?"

"Not a dicky sir."

Larsen had drained his coffee, put the mug back on the floor, stubbed his cigarette out between his thumb and first finger and fallen asleep.

## CHAPTER 19

"There's an email from Michael," Solomon said.

They were on an early train from Victoria to Croydon to check the office after the fire and take away anything that was useful. Gabriel was reading newspapers, Solomon on the laptop.

"A group from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is arriving in Abuja. The national arms manufacturing company set up because the US refused to supply arms is looking to buy high tech equipment."

Gabriel, engrossed in the Guardian, looked up. "What can we do? Nothing. How's Michael?"

"Worried."

Gabriel lowered his newspaper. "I've been thinking, Sol. Maybe we should look at moving to the UK. Bring Michael and his family over." He looked at Solomon out of the corner of his eye. "You could bring Carla over. Settle down. Run things from here."

Solomon continued his tapping on the keyboard but Gabriel knew he was thinking.

Solomon had known Carla for years. He rarely mentioned her, but Gabriel knew he thought about her. Probably a lot. Fleeting liaisons suited Gabriel's style better.

He returned to the paper and nothing more was said until the announcement: 'Next stop, West Croydon.'

Ten minutes later they were talking to Anton Sobanski their landlord and owner of the Polish foods shop. Above the shop, the 'Household of God's Miracles Church' sign still hung in the front window.

"Yah, it was late, nearly nine o'clock but we still open," Anton explained. "This car, he stop outside and two black men get out. I thought, ah, friends of Kenneth. But we not see Kenneth for few days. He very nice man, Kenneth. Always buy yams and red chillies. They have key to side door. They go inside. Then they come down and drive away. Then someone pass by see smoke in the window. I run with fire extinguisher. Lucky not spread otherwise whole building, shop as well, in danger. Then I call police."

They went upstairs, took a look at the charred remains, the plastic of Kenneth's chair melted, the ceiling black with soot. Unburned files and boxes lay strewn around, desk drawers and filing cabinet doors hung open.

"I hate fires," Gabriel muttered. "I hate the smell, the blackness."

Solomon looked at him knowing it had something to do with Gabriel's childhood. A fire in the hut when he was very young, he suspected, though Gabriel had never talked about it. Neither did he ever talk about his mother, but Solomon knew she'd died in a fire.

Solomon was sifting through unburned papers and putting them in a box when Mark Dobson phoned. He'd been up half the night looking into the Kaplan empire and gave Gabriel a quick summary.

"Llc-Protech are based in Paris," he said. "They supply Russian made military equipment. Did you know that?"

Gabriel didn't.

"You told me the Kaplans had French connections, Gabriel. Well, it's more than a connection. They have a French company, Societe Protechnologie - SPT. It's into uranium mining in Kazakhstan and Mongolia but not, as far as I can tell, in Niger. Then there's some sort of connection between SPT and the French Ministry responsible for energy. I've asked Colin to check that. Point is, Gabriel, this is big corporate business mixed with high politics and national self-interest. You're like a sardine swimming amongst a shoal of sharks. Do you want to know more?"



"No."

For the first time, Dobson felt sorry for Gabriel. He sounded deflated and Dobson understood why. Gabriel was starting to look not just like a sardine but like a self-taught driver of a big truck who'd done well at the beginning but the road was now rougher and steeper, the fuel was running low and he still didn't understand what all the controls did.

Solomon had opened the office window to let fresh air in and Gabriel was peering through the sign that dangled on a wire. Dobson heard him sigh, audibly.

"No," he repeated. "I know enough. I know we can't trust the Kaplans. I've never trusted the French and I can't rely on the US or the UK government. I don't trust Nigerians because they don't trust me and if Sol and I go back they'll probably arrest us both."

He was silent for a moment but breathing heavily. "And yet.....and yet we have support from so many. They all expect us to deliver."

Dobson waited for Gabriel to say more but there was only the sound of traffic passing by. "I assume you're at the Croydon office," he said.

"Sol's packing files that weren't fire damaged. But....." he stopped then started again. "I'm not sure how much longer we can keep going."

"Christ, Gabriel. What's up? Where's the spark?"

"And if we go for Plan B problems could double."

"Depends on what the hell Plan B is, I suppose," Dobson said, "You've never explained it."

"Yeh....." Gabriel said, hesitantly. "I'm watching something."

"Good man. Keep watching your back, Gabriel."

"Not my fucking back, Mark. I'm watching something down in the street."

He'd been leaning on the window ledge covered in dirt and pigeon shit, but watching a black car on the road below. It had driven past twice, maybe three times. The main road outside was painted with double yellow lines meaning no parking. That meant the one-way side street alongside the shop was, as most everywhere else in London, jammed with parked cars on both sides. The car, a Mazda 6, turned into the side street.

Inside were three black men, a driver and two passengers - one in the front seat next to the driver and one in the rear. The man in the rear seat looked up at the open window where Gabriel was looking out and Gabriel ducked down. Still holding the phone with Dobson hanging on he went to the side window to see what happened as the car drove around the corner. With no space to stop it slowly drove past.

"I'll call you later, Mark."

Gabriel turned to Solomon. "Sol, we need to get out of here, right now."

"I've not finished packing these...."

"Now, Sol. Big trouble. I just saw someone."

Solomon abandoned the packing and in less than a minute they were outside, standing in the doorway of a Help the Aged charity shop on the other side of the main road. It was pouring with rain.

"Who did you see, Femi?"

"Remember the rally in Brixton? Remember Dele telling you there were Nigerians in the crowd who watched but never cheered. I also saw them from the stage. And I saw them get up and go before the end. I sometimes close my eyes on stage, but when I open them, I always scan the crowd. If it's not too dark I make eye contact. Women love it."

"Who were they?"

"Pastor Lazarus in a suit and, two rows back, Pastor Ayo. wearing a fucking hat,"

"You insulted them once, Femi."

"I meant to insult them."

"Why didn't you tell me you saw them?"

"I just did."

"And Ayo and Lazarus were in the car?"

"And someone else driving. It passed twice.....there it is again. It's circling round."

"You think they saw us go in?"

"Maybe they saw the window open. Take the car number, Sol."

They backed further into the doorway of the shop and watched as the car indicated right to turn, once more, into the side street. This time it pulled up on the double yellow line behind the first parked car. The engine died, the wipers stopped and the driver got out, leaving the passengers inside. The driver - tall, heavily built and dressed in black jeans and a black leather jacket - paused to look up at the window. Then he went to the side door, pushed it, found it unlocked and disappeared inside.

On the wet, busy main street, shoppers with umbrellas continued to walk past Anton Sobanski's shop. An elderly black woman picked over red peppers amongst a stack of boxes of fruit and vegetables.

"Give me the phone, Sol."

"You calling the police, Femi?"

"No, Mr Sobanski. What's his number?"

"It's painted above his front window, Femi."

"Anton? Yeh, it's Gabriel. Listen, we're outside, in the street, opposite the shop.....Why? We got scared, Anton. There's a black car parked round the side. One guy's just gone through our side door entrance. You want to check if it's the same car as last time? Don't get involved. Just check."

They watched as Anton Sobanski came running out of his shop doorway, still carrying the phone. He stopped running, looked cautiously around the corner and put the phone to his ear, "Ya, same bloody car. Two black men inside, one with a hat."

"A third man has gone upstairs, Anton."

"Holy Mary, they gonna fire it again. I call police."

As Anton Sobanski ran back to his shop, the side door opened again and the big man in jeans came out. In no apparent hurry, he opened the front kerbside door of the car, bent down, said something to the occupant of the front seat and shook his head. The rain was falling heavily, bouncing off the pavement, streams of water running in the gutter. The man turned and glanced up at the office window just as a local council refuse truck appeared on the main road, orange lights flashing on its roof. It indicated to turn into the side road but the Mazda was blocking the way so it blew a warning on a loud horn that made the lady sorting peppers jump. It also confused the big man in the leather jacket. If he was getting instructions from inside the car, he was also getting sworn at by the co-driver of the trash truck and was now in far more of a hurry. In his confusion, his black leather jacket swung open and something fell onto the sodden pavement. It then slid into the gutter almost underneath the car.

"He's just dropped a fucking gun," Solomon said. "See? He's picking it up."

No-one who hadn't been watching the man would have noticed him grab the small but dripping handgun from the gutter and stuff it back inside his jacket. He stood up, raised his hand to the truck driver as if apologising for the inconvenience, went quickly around the front of the car and got in. A few seconds later the car moved off, the refuse truck completed its turn and followed the car up the narrow road, its orange lights still flashing.

Gabriel and Solomon ran across the road towards Anton.

"I phone police," Anton said.

"They've gone," said Gabriel.

"They from your bloody country?"

"Sorry about Nigerians."

"They your friends?"

"No. But we have no need of the office anymore. Sorry Anton, but if you email an invoice to Solomon, we'll settle it."

Gabriel phoned Mark Dobson from the train back to Victoria.

"Can Colin trace car numbers?" he asked after describing what had happened.

"He has his ways. But the list of those you can't trust just gets longer and longer, Gabriel."

"I've never trusted Pastor Ayo. Pastor Lazarus is like a spoiled child, a cry baby. There's a third - Bishop William of the Disciples of Jesus School of Ibadan. They work together. Lazarus follows them like a pet poodle but they are comen, top of their league, multi-millionaires. I didn't know they were in London."

"And the other man, the driver, the one with the gun?"

"Never seen him before. Big guy."

"Could they be behind Kenneth's murder?"

"Maybe."

"And the FAA contract?"

"Probably."

"And would they know the Kaplans?"

"They might."

"Do they know where you're staying?"

"Blossom's? Unlikely. Anyway, Sol and I are flying to Nice."

"Nice? France?"

"Yeh. A day trip. To see a donor."

## CHAPTER 20

Benjamin Simisola always assumed that adapting to change would be easy but nothing had prepared him for working in forty degrees of heat and a wind filled with thick dust trying to build the tiny school. Was it worth it? Should places like this be just abandoned as unfit for human life? Such thoughts increasingly consumed his day to day thoughts.

An orange sun was sinking towards the flat horizon as he sat alone on the hard, red earth. Today he had had only two helpers, an old man with grey flecked hair called Mohamed and a woman he assumed was his wife. The couple had arrived at midday when it was even hotter and they'd sat in the shade before carrying a few concrete blocks to where Benjamin wanted them. Now they were gone, back along the dirt track towards the few trees that clung to life and the cluster of mud and straw huts, the tiny vegetable plot and the few cows they called home.

It was Solomon who had convinced him that education, especially for the girls, was as important as water supplies and electricity. And it was Solomon who had sent the money. "Over one hundred children will walk to school every day," he'd said. "It will be a big success."

"Yes," Benjamin thought as the sun sank further. "I suppose one day we might finish it. Then we'll need a teacher, books, pencils - and it'll need protecting or it'll be burned to the ground in an hour."

He struggled to his feet, fell into the dusty seat of his old Toyota truck and drove away still thinking about Solomon. "There are charities that help with building schools in Africa, Ben. But first we must show them what we can do with our own resources."

So, it was Benjamin who had made six journeys to Zinder in this old truck that sometimes failed to start to buy and bring back the concrete building blocks, the timber and the sheets of corrugated roofing. So far, all Benjamin had to show for his work were the foundations - a shallow rectangular trench dug into the hard earth, a concrete base and one layer of blocks.

When he arrived back at the compound, he was exhausted, coughing and barely able to breath because of the dust. He went straight to the drinking-water station, used a cupful to wipe his dirty face and turned to one of the men, a Kenyan, fixing a water pipe. "Where's Bill?" he asked.

"They'll be back later."

"And Halima?"

"On the computer."

The camp's computer sat on a rickety plastic table with an uncomfortable wooden chair and a noisy fan that blew warm air at knee level. Halima, Benjamin noticed was engrossed in something, leaning towards the screen, fingers hovering over the keyboard. "Something interesting, Halima?"

"So much is happening in the world, sir."

"We can all know everything that happens by the click of a mouse, Halima. Sometimes it is best not to know but whatever you see and read, think about it, learn from it but treat it with caution."

"Will Mr Gabriel and Mr Solomon visit us soon?"

"I hope so."

"Do you want to use the computer now?"

"I'm too tired. Perhaps tomorrow I will have more than two old helpers who only hide from the sun."

"Do you want me to help?"

Benjamin didn't answer. Every day Halima looked taller, older, more mature. Her eyes looked brighter, more intelligent and her growing confidence in speaking English was obvious. Desperately in need of a shower he turned to go.

"Mr Benjamin, sir. Today I found many web sites of charities. They help to build schools, find teachers, help with energy from the sun and find water."

Benjamin stopped. "There are many but most are very small and, like us, they all need more money."

"Why can't your Government help?"

"Why indeed."

"Do Mr Solomon and Mr Gabriel ask for help?"

"All the time but it is not easy persuading others to part with money."

"Is that why they are so busy?"

Whether Halima saw him nod his head Benjamin didn't know, for he was standing in the entrance, just a dark silhouette against a deep red evening sky, feeling even more deflated.

"Delicious, Halima. Spicy, just as I like it. Where did you learn to cook suya like that?"

"My mother, sir." Halima smiled, bowing her head shyly but proudly "Tomorrow maybe I will cook miyan kuka. It is soup, sir, made from baobab leaves and okra. A man called Abu comes past the gate every day to sell meat and peanuts. I talk to him. If Ali agrees, tomorrow I will make tuwo shinkafa, sir from rice."

Breakfast was later than usual. Bill Larsen had only returned to the camp an hour before and it was now mid-morning, hot and dry with a stiff wind again swirling dust. For several days, the only way to breathe had been to wind a cloth around your mouth and nose. Outside, a group of his men worked, scarves over faces, fixing a truck with its engine running. Inside, Halima was clearing dishes, lingering, taking her time, looking at Bill Larsen. "You want to say something?"

"No sir."

"You sure? Ben tells me you spend a lot of time on the computer."

"Yes sir."

"Tell me."

"I am learning about charities, sir. I have sent emails to ask them for help."

Larsen, being almost computer illiterate, was unsure what to say.

"I have watched Pastor Gabriel's videos, sir, and I have read news." A look of worry spread across Halima's face. "He has many problems, sir."

"Why do you say that?"

Halima shuffled her bare feet and put the pile of plastic dishes back down. "Pastor Gabriel is a good man, sir, but I am afraid for him and Mr Solomon."

Bill Larsen wiped dirty beads of sweat from his face, put a desert-booted foot across the opposite knee, leaned back, bare, sun-burned arms behind his head. "Sit down, Halima," and she sat, nervously, on the edge of the vacant chair.

"What do you know?"

What Bill Larsen heard was a short but accurate description of Gabriel's problems.

"I do not understand, sir. What has Gabriel done wrong?"

Larsen got up, strolled around the tent and returned to his chair. Halima's eyes followed him. "In my opinion, he has done nothing wrong. But it is not my opinion that matters. It is the opinion of others."

"I think Gabriel needs to listen to young people, sir."

"Doesn't he already?"

"He is too busy, sir. I think the world is in danger. But it is not our fault."

"Do you think he doesn't understand that?"

"Maybe he does."

"What would you say to him if you saw him?"

A short pause. "I would say to him that he should be President, sir."

"You think he wants that?"

"Maybe not, sir."

Bill Larsen prided himself on sleeping anytime, anywhere. He'd slept undisturbed in the open on the cold, wet windy mountains of Wales, in hammocks in jungles and on hard wooden boards in Afghanistan. Normally he slept well on the canvas bunk but right now he tossed, turned and sweated even with the fan wafting air.

Larsen rarely gave thought to emotions and private matters. He'd been a professional soldier since he was eighteen years old, committed to it, travelled, got into scrapes, but survived. Leading other men was what Larsen did best. He'd never done family stuff, relationships, domesticity, the nine to five and, anyway, one minute he'd been in Germany, next minute Afghanistan, then Iraq. Then it was the SAS, Libya, Somalia, Kenya, Sierra Leone. Starting 'Specialised Tasks Africa' had been a new challenge and exciting. Opportunities for STA had come thick and fast, so fast he knew he wouldn't cope unless he focussed on one thing at a time. Then he'd met Gabriel.

The trouble now was he felt increasingly unsure whether his decision to commit STA to working with Gabriel had been a good one. Yes, building the camp on Gabriel's land had been the attraction, the relationship with the Niger President and Prime Minister had been vital and, with his increasingly skilful team and growing confidence he'd ventured further afield to deal with problems like Ouagadougou.

But Gabriel's plans seemed to be increasingly in turmoil, contact with him and Solomon was difficult and information vague. Benjamin was feeling the same way and he'd suspected problems even before Halima's information.

And Halima? Talking to her was like talking to a fellow officer, an intelligence officer who provided a new and perhaps more accurate perspective on things. He had just watched her on the computer, searching the internet, reading news, checking things on Wikipedia, cutting and pasting snippets into a Word file. And all that after she'd helped Ali prepare a meal for thirty men, serve it, clear dishes and wash up. Bill was a one finger typist who had never come to terms with computers, but he'd watched Halima using eight fingers, even her thumbs. And all that skill acquired in such a short time.

"You see, sir? This is a report in an English newspaper of a man who was found shot dead. The man's name is Kenneth Eju. Mr Eju worked for Pastor Gabriel and Mr Solomon. And this, sir, is a website showing many Nigerian newspapers. The Daily Post has a report on an arrest warrant for Pastor Gabriel and about the police closing down Mr Solomon's business."

She was right. Larsen could see it.

"But I do not understand, sir. Why do they hate him?"

And Halima's eyes filled with tears so quickly it was as much as he could do to stop himself putting fatherly arms around her to comfort her. Bill's emotions, hidden from view and pushed out of sight because strict army training and self discipline ran through his veins, were all over the place.

His thoughts wandered back to his divorce, ten years ago, another subject he avoided thinking about because he'd hated the arguments, the irrationality, the rancour, the accusations. He'd signed papers that arrived with his eyes closed, posted them off and then forced it all from his mind. Forgetting had been easy because he'd been busy and preoccupied with other things.

He'd not seen his own son and daughter for years because he'd felt they were better off in England, even with a history teacher as a stepfather. But since Halima had arrived, he'd thought about them a lot. Karl, eighteen, a young man and Emma about the same age as Halima.

It was Halima's energy he liked. It was her spirit, her interest in what was happening and her natural commitment to whatever she put her mind to. He wondered if Emma was like that and, somehow, he doubted it. English teenage girls from what he knew seemed to grow up too quickly into modern Western women, demanding and getting everything without ever experiencing the hard times.

He wondered what Emma would think about Halima for demanding nothing but answers to questions about what was happening to the world. About Halima from a



family of poor subsistence farmers living in a mud brick house with a straw roof in a bleak, flat landscape whose first duty at daybreak was to check the cows and help her mother pound millet before walking a mile to a school - a school that had been burned to the ground by terrorists and then shoddily rebuilt with whatever materials still lay around. About Halima, comfortable in her oversized army uniform, her hair tied with an elastic band and bare feet.

Over breakfast one morning he'd asked Halima about her school.

"Well, sir. It is on a hill. I wake up to help my mother light the fire, sir. It is always dark but it is a good time because it is cool. I wake my sister, Lara, and we take dried grass to the cows. Then I help my mother until it is time for school."

"Where is your school?"

"It is one hour away, sir. We walk with other girls - Kemba and Chiamaka. It is a Moslem school, sir, far away along the stony road but we see other houses, other people. the cows, the fields where we grow the crops when it rains."

"How many teachers do you have? How many books?" Larsen who'd lived around villages like this for years knew the answer but he asked it anyway.

"One, sir. Her name is Nabila."

"And how many children go to your school?"

"Sometimes fifty, sir. Sometimes none. Sometimes they are sick, sometimes they are working. But I go every day. sir. Education is important if I want to go to university one day."

Yes, Larsen decided, Emma and her teenage friends should definitely meet Halima.

## CHAPTER 21

"The orange juice is warm when it should be cold. The toast is cold when it should be warm," Lazarus was saying. "And they speak bad English, Ayo. They use cheap foreign immigrants."

Already wearing his trilby, Ayo had long finished the Intercontinental Hotel's room-service breakfast. He'd forgotten the white napkin still tucked between the top buttons of his blue silk shirt and as he stood it fell out.

"My problem is not the breakfast, Lazarus. It is you. You seem to forget why we are here. You have the look of someone who is losing his grip on reality, Pastor."

Toast crumbs clung to Lazarus's lower lip. "It is because I am nervous," he said, spitting clumps of wet toast. "I did not like that secret service man. I do not like Azazi. I do not like guns."

"So, do you want to run away and hide?" Ayo asked, the tone bitter enough to suggest he'd be happy if Lazarus left right now. Lazarus shook his head and more toast fell out. Then the room phone rang and he jumped in alarm.

Ayo answered it. "Yes? Come up."

Osman Olande, in jeans and black leather jacket, sat heavily on the sofa, legs apart, hands on knees, staring, saying nothing but grinning. Lazarus stood as far away as possible, nodding nervously and trying to see what was inside Olande's black jacket.

"So where is the basstad?"

"The basstad Gabriel, Oz? Well, we know he wasn't at his office yesterday....."

Olande shook his head impatiently. "Not that basstad. The Dobson basstad."

Ayo wasted a glance at Lazarus for help so looked back at Olande. "We do not know this Dobson basstad, Oz. The only basstad we know is Pastor Gabriel and his pet dog Solomon."

"Festus says Dobson. You say the Pastor. Who is first?"

In the far corner, Lazarus bit a finger nail. "All are first," he whimpered.

Olande stood, his eyes wide and, or so it seemed to Lazarus, checked his gun was in place. Ayo, six inches shorter than Olande, looked up, blinked and felt his trilby shift backwards. "Let us sit and analyse this as sensible men," he suggested.

Olande sat down, thighs filling the jeans to stretching point, "Go ahead. Be sensible."

Ayo remained standing, wondering where he'd put his hat. He touched his head, found it was still in place and said, "I have two good ideas. We check his office again. Maybe he has now arrived."

"And your second good idea?"

"My second idea is better." He turned to Lazarus. "You remember when we were with Bishop William for the conference at the Miami Beach Convention Centre?"

Lazarus shook his head.

"We stayed for a week at the Carillon - where William explained his baby business. Do you not remember? We stayed a week but the basstads Gabriel and Solomon only stayed two nights. While we were relaxed in the spa, they stayed at a cheap self-catering place....."

Lazarus, light dawning. "Yah. The Stardust. I remember we discussed appearances being essential in our business. The basstad Gabriel said they always stayed in cheap hotels."

Ayo nodded and looked at Olande. "That's where you'll find him, Oz. Cheap hotels in London run by Nigerians."

Craig Donovan was collecting his bags at Gatwick Airport when Mark Dobson phoned him

"We've got an appointment," Dobson said, "But let's first meet at Colin's place for a catch up and get our thinking straight."

"Asher's GCHQ? SIS? Langley? You bet. Show me how he does it on a shoestring."

Dobson had barely finished talking to Donovan when his phone rang again. It popped and squeaked with echoes for a few seconds until he recognised Vigo's voice. "Sore news for your ear, Mercedes."

"What's up?"

"Mr Balogun."

"Is he dead?"

"Civic let him go after he went to the bank and withdrew our ten percent. But Balogun he got big, powerful friends, Mercedes. Someone just picked up Civic in Abuja."

Dobson's heart missed a beat but he'd half expected some sort of reaction. Even in Abuja you can't just go into someone's house, assault the wrong person and expect to get away with it even if they thoroughly deserved it. "Who picked him up?"

"Ekay in disguise."

Vigo meant special police or, more likely, someone's protection gang.

"Ekay who work for big fat guys with deep pockets and fancy suits," Vigo went on but then paused. Amongst the pops, squeaks and echoes he sounded out of breath.

"Listen, Mercedes, I'm short term fucked here. I gotta move. Short term fuck story is this: Civic got forced to say things. Don't ask me details 'cus I don't know. Civic mentioned that Danny helped with the squeezing of Balogun so Danny then got pulled in and somehow things got around to mentioning Pastor Gabriel. Then.....I'm not sure you want to know this, but a connection was made to the Pink Lips Club and then to Chelsea Scumbag and....."

By then Dobson was walking in small circles around his flat.

He'd been in the business long enough to know what they were up against now. In his mind, Dobson could see these guys because he'd seen them in real life before. Big guys wearing jeans and leather jackets with hand guns tucked in their belts - men like Osman Olande in fact. He knew they'd been sailing close to the wind but hoped it wouldn't come to this. A sweat formed and he opened the window to let fresh air in but only got heavy west London traffic, noise and fumes. He shut it again. "Where's Chelsea?"

"I don't know."

"And Civic?"

"Still in Abuja. They're asking about Pastor Gabriel and Solomon."

"How do you know all this?"

"Civic was allowed a phone call. He called Mazda, pretending Mazda was his Pops. Mazda thought he was crazy until I slapped him to remind him that calling him Pops was our secret call sign when things got fussy. They was definitely fussy."

Fussy was an apt description. Osman Olande types didn't allow phone calls without good reason. Tracing calls was easy and it sounded to Dobson that Vigo's call was being listened in to. In which case.....

"And I don't know what Danny told them," Vigo went on, breathing and wheezing like he'd just run a marathon. "They already closed Gabriel's business down, now this. Looks to me like they're after him big time. Why? Gabriel decide to run for President or something? Someone needs to tell him he don't stand a chance. He wasted twenty years being nice and sensible and making people nod their heads when he should have been one big bastard and smacked them or paid dash if they shook their heads. What the fuck's he doing to upset them?"

"Doing things in his own style," Dobson replied.

"I don't do politics, Mercedes, but, listen, I gotta go. I'll phone you."

Dobson was about to switch off when he heard Vigo shouting. "Mercedes? You still there? I forgot something."

"Still here."

"You wondering why Balogun took money out to pay us with no gun stuck in his back?"

"Why?"

"It's 'cus Danny stayed behind with Balogun's wife. Her name's Janet, Mercedes. Janet Balogun. She was on your list. Remember? And another thing. Balogun got so shit scared he said the big man was not him but Festus Fulani. And Festus he have a boss too, but Balogun say he don't know name."

Then the phone cut.

Two hours later, Mark Dobson was pointing at a small, nondescript upstairs window in a nondescript block on Edgware Road.

"Asher & Asher HQ," he told Craig Donovan as he rang the bell on the door that sat between the 'Red Sea' frozen fish shop and the red and white striped pole that marked Ali's Barber Shop. "And that's where Colin gets his haircut. He's hardly got any hair left but he still visits once a week because, he says, the Islamic reading material's useful for business. He sits and makes notes of names and websites."

Over tea and chocolate chip cookies Colin Asher went through his updated spread sheet. "It's Festus Fulani who intrigues me," he said pointing at the screen "He's a

phantom. Fulani's not just an average, corrupt Nigerian who took advantage of a job at the FAA. Just look at his more recent interests - oil, gas, transport, shipping, healthcare, telecommunications. It explains why he can afford properties around London. But what else is he doing with his money? And is he the top guy or is there someone even higher?"

"Today's information from Vigo suggests Festus may not be the one sat on the top of the tree," Dobson added.

"What do the official security forces think?" Donovan asked.

"He's one name on a list of thousands," Dobson replied.

"So, no-one's focussed on him?"

"Not as far as I can tell," Asher said. "But gut instinct tells me we should."

"And is this just big-time corruption or is there more to it?" Asher asked.

"I reckon it's politics," Dobson said. "Something's going on. Otherwise why bother with Gabriel? Simple commercial competition is easy to kill off without going to extremes of arrest warrants "

"Which reminds me of something Fernandez said," Craig Donovan added. "He said there were 'complicated security issues' at stake. Issues that Gabriel would not be aware of. It sounded to me like political security not military." He paused for a moment. "I'm wondering if a call to my successor at the US Embassy, Steve Barnett, might be useful."

They sat back.

"Decision time," Colin Asher said. "You know Gabriel better than me. Do you want to leave him and Solomon to face their own predicament or.....?"

"I respect him too much," Donovan said. "His intentions are perfectly honourable. His only sin is underestimating what he's up against."

Dobson agreed.

"But neither of you know what Plan B is."

"No idea."

"And the personal risks?"

"Yours is greater than mine, Mark," Donovan said.

"I'll risk it," Dobson said.

"So, what do I tell our new client in South Korea, Mark?"

"Stall him for a while" said Dobson. "This job's not finished yet."

Not a mile away as a London pigeon might fly, Gabriel and Solomon were emerging from the Underground station into grey skies and rain when Solomon's phone rang. It was a bad line, crackly and echoing. They moved into the shelter of a shop.

"I think it's Bill, Femi but it's a bad line. He's talking but I can't hear." He passed the phone to Gabriel to listen but there was nothing but static.

"Try phoning him back, Sol."

Crowds of wet pedestrians pushed past with dripping umbrellas and sodden coats and jackets as Solomon pressed numbers. Nothing. Then Gabriel's phone rang. It was Mark Dobson. "Craig's here," he said. "We'll see you at Blossoms."

Solomon was already nudging Gabriel, holding out the other phone. "It's Bill, Femi."

"Bill?" Gabriel shouted, dodging the spike of someone's umbrella.

"Don't shout man, I hear you. Listen. Where the hell are you?"

"London."

"You seen the news?"

"Tell me."

"Mali. The COK went in today. Another town gone down. Black flags everywhere. Locals shot. A hundred locked up inside a football stadium. But you know why I think they chose this place? There's a gold mine close to the Burkina Faso border. It only opened a year ago. They'll keep it open and ship stuff up to Chad and Libya. Nice little earner."

"Doesn't the mine have security?"

"It won't be good enough, Vicar"

Gabriel listened, rain bouncing off his uncovered head, cold water trickling inside his suit jacket. "What town?"

"Banfola. Check the map. I could move men in if we had the transport and....."

"I know, Bill. I know. Just gotta be patient man." Gabriel wiped running water from his face.

"You telling me to be patient, Vicar? Where's my mobile clinic? Where's my fucking drone with its neat digital camera? I don't need much - just something we can send up to scout the area from above. And I got three Ethiopian medical guys trained in Tel Aviv waiting to join. And what's happened about the COK camp we found? Will the USA knock it out? You want me to meet you in Nairobi next week like we discussed? You made any progress with Ghana? What about the USA funding? How's our friend from California doing with his lobbying? Did you talk to the UK Ministry of Defence?"

Gabriel was getting colder and wetter. Larsen, probably sitting in 40-degree dry heat, was still talking.

"Listen, Vicar, I'm starting to feel isolated out here. I need to get over to Addis to sort these medical guys. It's not like London here, Vicar. It was forty-two degrees a few hours ago, no-one's seen decent rain for three years and the water supply was running low. I sorted it but..... Christ. You understand my bloody problem? We need to meet."

Gabriel blew air and watched the steam disappear on the wind. Then a red bus passed and sprayed a gallon of frigid water on his legs. "I know, Bill. I know. We're up to our eyes in problems here."

"I heard."

"You know?"

"For sure I know. We've got our own intelligence officer here. She's only sixteen but Christ she's good."

"Give me a day or so, OK?"

"OK, OK. You go careful, Vicar. And go and watch the news right now. I hate watching those murderous bastards swinging weapons and waving black, bloody flags. And I fear for those folks locked up in that stadium. Mark my words something evil's about to happen there. I sense it. And you know why I sense it, Vicar? They're mostly Christians. Persecuted for years but brave enough to try and organise a meeting in Banfola just this week."

"So where are the French?"

"You got time for another of my opinions? The French were deliberately distracted by false intelligence reports and an incursion up north. They sent a whole force up there to counter it. By the time, they got there they'd mostly fled back to Algeria. Meanwhile the COK moved into Banfola. We're up against clever tacticians, but I don't expect any of my devious opinions to be listened to."

By the time, they arrived at Blossoms and rang the bell, they were dripping water but Sammy from Sokoto answered the door in a pair of Bermuda shorts. "Two guys called here just now," he said.

"What colour?"

"White."

"They give their names?"

"Craig and Mark. I sent them to your room."

"OK, but if any Nigerians turn up tell them we already checked out."

Inside the cramped room 3 it was as hot and humid as a tropical rain forest. Mark Dobson's umbrella that he'd shared with Craig Donovan was still dripping. Gabriel and Solomon stripped off, hanging wet suits up to dry off.

Solomon then announced he'd go out for four takeaways - goat curry. Gabriel settled on one of the beds, hurling wet socks onto the floor as Dobson and Donovan sat side by side on the other bed.

"We just heard there was a COK incursion in Mali," Gabriel said. "A hundred Christians rounded up in a football stadium, but there'll be nothing on TV. They're more interested in tonight's football match....."

"Gabriel, we know," Dobson said deliberately interrupting another Gabriel lecture in its early stages. "Listen. The car, the Mazda 6 that visited your office. It's a rental car taken out by someone called Osman Mohammed Olande. Olande organised my abduction and assault in Lagos a few weeks back. Olande also organised a second attempt a few days ago, this time with a gun.

"Olande's address given to the rental company is a house in Essex owned by Festus Fulani. What did the driver of the Mazda look like?"

"Big, jeans, leather jacket."

"This him?" Dobson pulled up a photo on his phone.

Gabriel looked. "We didn't see his face."

"This him?" Another photo, a big man standing, leaning on the open door of another car chatting to a smaller black man in a suit.

"Festus Fulani," Gabriel said. "And....."

"Osman Olande, talking to Festus Fulani," Dobson interrupted again. "This is a police photo from Colin's friends in the financial irregularities team. They were checking out Festus not Olande. Festus knew he was being watched which is why he's disappeared.

"The picture is also interesting because it was taken on a derelict industrial estate in Dagenham, Essex where Kenneth Eju's body was found. Colin spoke to his police friends and they've also made the connection. Trouble is, Festus Fulani's disappeared. There's no trace of anyone leaving the UK on a Nigerian passport in the name Festus Fulani. But Festus has other IDs, other passports. He might be in Nigeria or somewhere else. Wherever he is I think he's used influence to undermine my own local team in Lagos. Some of them were pulled in by a bunch of heavies earlier today. I'm worried for them. And the London police can't find Olande. He's also disappeared."

Dobson stopped and looked hard at Gabriel trying to convince him of the severity of what was going on.

"But he was in Croydon with two con men who....."

Again, Dobson gave him no time. "Pastors Ayo and Lazarus," he said.

Gabriel nodded. "Yeh. I upset them once. They deserved upsetting. Sol believes they were involved in the FAA deal."



He'd not mentioned either Ayo or Lazarus before or anything about insulting them and a bunch of other fake preachers.

Solomon returned with the carry-out Jamaican goat curry. He lay the food out on the floor and they all sat to eat alongside Dobson's phone with the photos still on the screen. Solomon saw it, picked it up and with no further explanation said. "I've lost my appetite."

Mark Dobson took a spoonful of curry but then put it down. "Listen," he said. "Let's summarise."

It was a phrase he always used when he felt he'd done about as much as he could for a client and was winding things down.

He began with the commercial side - the FAA contract. The Kaplans with financial muscle and few ethics working amongst the politics of mining, uranium supplies for French power stations and ready to cut murky deals with anyone for money. There were the people not respecting confidences, people expecting bribes as a way of life and just as many not wanting to see things cleaned up.

"All fairly normal," Dobson said. "But then there's the politics. You're being made out to be an extremist, Gabriel. Whilst many people cheer your views, others regard you as an intolerable nuisance hell bent on undermining their status, their authority and their ability to make big money - best ignored but, the longer you carry on, best destroyed. So, let me ask you something," Dobson paused to make an impact. "Why do they want to destroy you? Why?"

"It's power," Solomon answered.

Dobson nodded. "Exactly. But these people are common criminals, conmen, money launderers, frauds, murderers."

"Like everyone in Nigeria," muttered Gabriel.

"But they're afraid of losing power," Solomon said.

"Exactly" Dobson repeated. "So why do they think you are becoming too powerful?"

"Because Femi could win a Presidential election," said Solomon.

Solomon, the quiet one, the thoughtful and rational one, the one who could put things into perspective, the perfect counterweight to Gabriel, then stood with his lanky form towering above Gabriel, Mark Dobson and Craig Donovan who were still sitting on the floor. He pointed at Gabriel.

"They're scared, Femi. Don't you see that? They watch you talking common sense. They hear people cheering you. They think you're powerful enough now to force radical changes.

"For thirty years, you've done nothing but talk about a new sort of society, one that offers a brighter future, more jobs, less corruption and better security for ordinary Africans."

Solomon walked to the window, looked through the rain spattered glass and out into the growing darkness. Then he turned and pointed two fingers like a gun at Gabriel.

"You remember something else Femi? Something you seem too scared to tell Mark or Craig or anyone else?"

Gabriel shook his head and so Solomon looked at Dobson, then at Donovan.

"Femi is a fucking idiot," he said with just a faint sign of a smile.

"I thought so. Tell us," Dobson encouraged him. "Let the fucking idiot listen to you for once."

"We met President Azazi six months ago," he said calmly. "Our own Nigerian President Hamed Massoud Azazi. It was just after he was elected. You remember, Femi?"

Gabriel nodded almost shyly as if he knew what was coming next.

"You know what he told Femi? 'You're still young,' he said. You remember his words, Femi? 'It takes time to change things.' he said. 'Old men like me do not have enough time. Change will take a generation, maybe longer. So, stand up. Be brave.'"

Solomon paused for just a few seconds. "President Azazi's a fine man," he said. "Problem is he struggles because he feels so alone. But he sees Gabriel as an ally, as a friend, maybe even a successor."

Dobson couldn't help himself. He stood, punched Solomon lightly on the shoulder and nodded. That was it. It went some way to explain both Gabriel's and Solomon's sheer bloody mindedness. But Solomon still hadn't finished.

"You remember something else, Femi?"

"You remember once when we flew back into Lagos from USA or somewhere? We went to fetch the car. We stopped at Ogba to buy bread and there was an old man standing at the shop door. He saluted us and clicked his heels like an old soldier. Then he held the door open for us and when we left the shop, he followed us to the car. Then he asked for his tip. He was kind, he was gentle, he was quiet and polite. But he wanted a tip. For opening the door and saluting. And we gave him something, not much, but he thanked us, smiled and walked away to start again. You remember, Femi?"

Gabriel nodded.

"And do you remember that old lady, Femi? The one in the dirty buba and iro who asked for money to go home. Tears in her eyes. Weak. Almost falling down. And you gave her a hundred Naira and she bowed to you, Femi. Like you the king or something. This little old lady with no name who came from nowhere, just appeared beside us and then disappeared again. You remember, Femi? You remember what you said as we drove away? 'This is Nigeria, Sol,' you said to me. 'Quiet little people who come from nowhere and go back to nowhere, living off small gifts of kindness'"

Gabriel turned his face away.

"That's it Femi," Solomon said. "Sometimes you need to cry to understand what the fuck we're doing here? You want to carry on or you want to give up?"

And Gabriel stood, walked over, put both his arms around Sol and lay his head on his shoulder. "We carry on, Sol."

It took them all a minute or so to recover their wits and Gabriel was still trying to control his sniffing when Craig asked the question that really bothered him. "So, what's Plan B?" he asked.

"Plan B?" Gabriel replied after one final sniff. "We're meeting the Chinese tomorrow morning."

Craig Donovan was still dragging his flight bag with him when they left Blossom's around midnight. It was still raining and he was easily persuaded to stay at Dobson's flat overnight. The taxi dropped them outside the Turkish restaurant in Queensway.

"The Dobson residence," Dobson announced pointing to a small, darkened window above. "Entrance is round the side, up the fire escape by the trash bins. It's secluded."

They clattered up the iron stairway and at the top Dobson's phone rang. He fumbled for the key and opened the door. "Flick the light switch on the left," he told Donovan. "This'll be Colin, it's his time of night."

"I've had a familiar voice on my phone," Colin Asher said.

"Not your ex-wife, was it?"

"Worse than that. It was Osman Olande, asking after you. I said you'd had a productive few days, thank you very much, and had flown on somewhere on other business. Then the phone went dead."

"So, he's in London?"

"We traced it to Oxford Street but it's now disappeared. He probably removes the battery between calls. What happened tonight?"

Dobson gave a brief summary. "Nearly had us all in tears," he ended. "And Plan B is the Chinese. They've got a meeting tomorrow."

While Mark Dobson made coffee, Craig Donovan took a shower, returning in a fresh shirt with wet hair hanging like an old grey dog. He'd obviously been thinking. "You think the Nigerian SSS are in town?"

"You'd know them of course," Dobson said. "But if you're thinking Olande's SSS I don't believe it."

"Nor me, but it'd only take a phone call to Steve Barnett to find out, and get a view on what Fernandez hinted at."

Sipping coffee, Donovan pressed some numbers on his phone and checked his watch. It was the middle of the night in Abuja, Nigeria. "Steve won't mind," he said as he waited. "If he's like I was he waits up for calls from Washington.

"Steve? Craig Donovan.....Yeh, how you doing buddy?.....Long time.....Listen, I need some information.....Sure you can for an old pal.....Doing some private investigation work.....The SS cropped up."

Donovan switched the speaker on so Dobson could listen in.

Craig paused, laughed. "Just a name or two. Osman Olande mean anything to you?..... No? So, who's flavour of the month right now?.....Martin Abisola. Christ, yeh, I remember him. He back in favour?.....Six months huh? Christ, time flies when you're retired. You know where Abisola is right now?....Jesus, you're following movements that close?.....Why would he be in London?.....Something to do with Gabriel? Sure, I knew him. You can't miss him. He's still shouting from the rooftops."

What followed were a few irrelevant reminiscences and the usual America style offers to return favours that were usually forgotten. That was until Donovan finally asked his other question. "One last thing, Steve. Where's COK funding coming from?.....Sure you can for the guy who warmed the seat for you.....Is it that problematic?.....So what's the COK up to?.....Yeh, well, they're all bastards. I wish you luck, Steve. Thanks for the help."

Donovan switched off. "Martin Abisola," he said. "Now there's an interesting guy. He was a Colonel in the Nigerian Army. He's a close friend of the current President. He had officer training in England but disappeared while I was there. He turned up again after the election."

"And recently in London?"

"Probably gone back now but it's something to do with Gabriel. And Steve mentioned Gabriel probably because he's tasked to check Gabriel out."

"Tasked by the US Government?"

"By the CIA. That's where his orders come from. But Gabriel's not in Nigeria as we know."

"I thought the CIA were not that interested."

"Maybe they just got interested."

"And you got nothing fresh on the COK," Dobson said. "Or maybe he just didn't like talking to you on an insecure line."

They fell silent for a moment until Donovan said, thoughtfully. "I reckon we know more than they do."

"We certainly know about Osman Olande and Festus Fulani and friends in high places."

"And we're sure Kenneth was shot by Olande."

"And Olande visited God's office with a gun and a couple of fake pastors with a grudge against Gabriel."

"And Olande was behind two attempts to eliminate you."

"And Olande just phoned Colin asking about me."

They looked at one another. "You lock the door, Mark?"

"No but if someone stands on the mat outside, that light comes on." Dobson pointed to a small black box on a shelf.

"Snug as a bug in a rug then, Mark."

## CHAPTER 22

It was eight next morning when Mark Dobson phoned Gabriel at Blossoms.

"Colin phoned earlier," Gabriel said. "He says we should move out, go abroad, let the dust settle."

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea, but you've got Plan B today."

"Yeh, and Taj Harding just phoned Sol. He's resigned from the government."

"I don't know Taj Harding."

"Too late now anyway but a pity in a way, Taj was our best inroad to the UK government. But, like Daniel Bakare, he struggled to get any support for us." He paused and Dobson felt something else coming that hadn't been there the night before. He was right.

"You won't be keen to go back to Lagos for a while I suppose?"

Bloody hell, Dobson thought. You hardly had time to digest one thing before he was throwing something else at you. Go back to Lagos? So soon? Again? "Why?" he asked.

"There's a job needs doing. What's Craig doing right now?"

"Right now, Craig's eating a cheese burger. He was hungry. Last night's goat curry passed right through - very rapidly."

"Yeh, they're very tasty. Craig been paid yet?"

"Being retired he only does pro bono." Dobson grinned over his shoulder at Donovan.

"Let me speak to him."

Dobson handed Donovan the phone.

"How de body, Craig? Stomach talk loud this morning?"

"Not just my stomach, Gabriel. It was Jamaican goat not Nigerian."

"Fucking West Indian goats. You fancy eating a thoroughbred Nigerian goat instead? I need someone to go to Nigeria to deal with a few things for Bill Larsen."

Donovan looked at Dobson. Dobson shrugged. "But I've got a wife, Gabriel. She'd complain louder than my stomach."

"She'd understand. Think about it. Let me know. Sol and I have the Chinese Plan at eleven. If you're both free around two, we could meet."

That was fixed and then the phone buzzed again. Colin Asher.

"The Chinese Foreign Minister," Asher said. "His name's Yang Daebing. He's accompanied by about twenty others including the Director General of the Chinese Department of African Affairs. His name is, let me see, Lin Zhou. They've just been to West Africa. Some were at Downing Street last night. The Minister has meetings at the Chinese Embassy today, then he's attending a dinner this evening with the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. That's all I can get. Security details are under wraps. "

Taj Harding had been expecting the call.

"Taj. Where the hell are you?" Defence Secretary Michael Hawkin's voice came loud and clear on Harding's mobile phone.

"On the train to London."

"Good man. I assume that email of earlier was made in the heat of the moment. I'm flying back to London now. Let's talk this through this afternoon. All else put aside for a few minutes. Meanwhile, I've deleted it from my in-box. Your resignation didn't happen. OK?"

"I'm busy this afternoon."

"Cancel it, Taj. Let's talk."

Harding pulled out his ear plug and switched off.

As Harding stepped off the train at Paddington Osman Olande stepped out of the lift into the Intercontinental Hotel lobby.

He found a seat in as noisy a corner as he could - a chattering contingent of Saudi Arabians checking in and out, their women dressed head-to-toe in black and their curly-haired children clutching cuddly toys and pulling personalised kiddie's carry-on flight bags. The chaos suited Olande fine. He phoned the Nigerian High Commission and asked to speak to Mary. Then he sat to wait as the Arabs disappeared into black limousines outside to be replaced by a coach load of Chinese.

That was when Lazarus and Ayo emerged from the lift wearing dark suits, Ayo accessorised with a trilby with gold ribbon, Lazarus in dark glasses and a black leather case. Neither noticed Olande as they passed through the lobby and took a taxi outside.

Olande's phone then rang. He listened, scribbled on a scrap of paper, stood up and went outside.

Chelsea had been gone for three nights, three nights of not sleeping on a hard-wooden board in a windowless room that smelled of sweat and piss. Suddenly, with no explanation, he was told he could leave and so he made his way to the Red Cross Pharmacy and fell asleep on his own bed. But the sleep was short, interrupted by a dream about his father shouting. When he opened his eyes, it was not a dream.

"Ah, working Pops. With Mister Dobson, Mister Vigo and Mister Mazda. Very busy, Pops."

It was fortunate that someone then called George Obodi from downstairs - someone needing to know if Playboy condoms were as reliable as Durex - but Chelsea didn't wait for his father to return. He went out, found his car and drove to Vigo's garage. But Vigo wasn't there and Sunny, the tyre fitter said he had no idea where he was. So, Chelsea returned to his car. He pulled on the driver's door for somewhere to lean but the handle came off in his hand. He kicked the door and tried the passenger side instead. This one opened so he leaned on that instead. Then he dug in his pocket for his phone, found it was still in credit thanks to Mr Dobson and decided to call him. He'd never phoned England before.

"Mr Dobson, sah,"

"Chelsea? Where are you?"

"Leaning on jalopy, sah."

"What happened to you?"

"Ewon, sah.

"Jail?"

"Maybe sah."

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"Maybe ekay, sah. Maybe not ekay. Wozam slap. Some place in Akilo Road. Asking questions about Gabriel, about you, sah, about Vigo and Mazda and Civic. Many questions, sah."

"Where are Vigo and Mazda?"

"I don't know, sah."

Chelsea's phone was bleeping. Perhaps it was the battery but Dobson cut the call short in case the phone was being tapped. "Thanks for phoning, Chelsea. Go home.

Stay out of sight for a while. Keep the phone close by but take the battery out when you're not using it, OK? Better still buy a new SIM with your money but text Mr Asher with your new number. Understand?"

"Yessah."

Then an afterthought. "You eaten yet, Chelsea boy?"

"Jollof, sah. Chinchin. Ogbono soup. One Star-Lite."

"We need Solomon Trading business cards, Femi. Good suit, tie, clean shirt, polished shoes. You remember how it is with Chinese? Give the card with two hands, not one. Don't forget to bow like they are a big chief. Not so low but they must see. You must not talk so much, Femi. Be brief. They will translate. It is like a presentation, Femi. Professional."

Still in Room 3 at Blossoms, Solomon was going through the meticulous plan he'd prepared for the Chinese meeting.

"I will describe the farming, that it is our third year, how we are more productive now, how we provide the water, the solar electricity. I have photos on the laptop of women working and Benjamin.

"You will explain our good relations with other governments - Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali - friendly, constructive. That they like what we're doing, especially Niger. That our contacts go up to the President. That they understand we'll provide security against terrorism. That it is in the interests of the government, especially Niger, that they leave us alone and don't ask questions. We will talk about the recent COK attacks. We might mention Halima. It depends how it's going but it might make them listen harder. Tell them about Bill, a British army man, but don't make it sound like too big deal.

"Then we talk about our future plans, Femi. The other land we will buy for millet and peanuts, for tomatoes and onions and the small research laboratory for Benjamin. How we want to be more sustainable but need funds for Chinese solar energy equipment and the clinic and the school. We must make them think it will be good for their influence, Femi."

"Remind me, Sol. What's his name? The Director General of African Affairs."

"Lin Zhou. "

"And the Foreign Minister?"

"Mr Daebing."

Now, smartly dressed in their suits and ties and shoes shined by Sammy from Sokoto they were in a taxi heading to the Chinese Embassy on Portland Place. It was slow going, heavy morning traffic all through Knightsbridge and Gabriel was already impatient.

"Afterwards, we're meeting Mark and Craig, Sol. I'll phone to check now."



"Concentrate on this meeting, Femi. One thing at a time. I thought we'd agreed to drop everything and go for Plan B. This is Plan B. In an hour, we're meeting top, top men. It's taken six months to organise. This could be a bigger and more important meeting than all the meetings in the last six years."

"You're right, Sol. I'm focussed. But I'll phone Mark anyway to check if he's OK for Lagos."

And so, he phoned Dobson.

They were heading to the Chinese Embassy right now, he told him. No problems. Blossoms hadn't been set alight in the night and Osman Olande hadn't been seen. Starbucks on Baker Street was an OK meeting place for later and, yes, he still wanted someone to go to Nigeria to sort a problem. What were Dobson's thoughts?

They were pulling up outside the Chinese Embassy when Gabriel's phone rang again. Solomon got out, paid the taxi driver and waited as Gabriel answered the phone. Solomon, increasingly frustrated, looked at his watch. They had ten minutes before the meeting and, before that, security to go through.

At last Gabriel finished. "That was Taj Harding," he said, but Solomon was already at the main entrance. "He's talking to the press today to explain why he's resigned. But it'll go nowhere. Let him carry on. He said there were some Americans caught up in the fighting in Mali last night. The US President's been told."

"We've got five minutes, Femi."

"Of course, he didn't know how many Africans were killed."

"So why ask?" Solomon stopped, pointing his finger at Gabriel. "For fucks sake forget it, Femi. Turn the phone off or I'll throw the fucking thing away."

Osman Olande's list of Nigerians who owned or managed cheap rate hotels or bed and breakfast joints around London was longer than he thought. He'd found a seat in Hyde Park, struck off half of them and looked at what was left. It was then that he recalled something the late Kenneth Eju had said just before he'd shot him in the corner of the old Essex warehouse.

As Eju screamed for his life with the gun pressed against his forehead, Olande had looked into his terrified eyes over the short barrel of the gun. "Your last chance, you fat little basstad. Where the fuck is he?"

Eju, red eyes crossed as he watched the tip of the gun just an inch away waiting for the explosion that would blow his head apart, had groaned, "I don't know." But as Olande pressed harder he'd closed his eyes and said, "Maybe in Cromwell Road - Sammy's."

His groan became a scream when Olande smiled and finally pulled the trigger. He smiled again at the memory and checked his list again.

That narrowed it considerably. He walked to Hyde Park Corner Tube Station and took a short, two-stop ride to Gloucester Road. Then, with his black leather jacket buttoned to the neck because it was cold and spitting with rain, he started walking.

Starbucks on Baker Street wasn't far from Mark Dobson's flat so he and Craig Donovan walked. It was raining and as they walked, they talked, shared an umbrella and continued where they'd left off the night before.

"It's just what Sol said, Craig. It's about power. There are too many vested interests in corruption continuing. If some see Gabriel as an electable President then, however unlikely that might be, there are those who'll want to make damn sure it never happens."

They'd expected to be early but when they arrived at Starbucks Gabriel and Solomon were already there, in a corner, smartly dressed, laptop closed on the table. The tension was obvious.

"Why so early?" Dobson asked as they sat down.

"We had an hour. Sol's presentation was good." Gabriel glanced at Sol but Sol looked away. "They thanked us. We left."

Then there was silence.

"That it?" Mark Dobson asked. "Forgive me, but I thought Plan B was the fallback solution having exhausted all others."

"We should have dropped Plan A and Plan B months, perhaps years, ago." Solomon said. "We should have done things ourselves. But....." he tailed off.

"So why?"

"Why?" There was a deep, impatient sigh from Solomon "You want the long explanation or the short one? Look at Nigeria and Niger - different countries, different problems. Take uranium for instance. Uranium in Niger is like oil in Nigeria but it generates only five percent of Niger's budget. Five percent - understand that? It's wrong but France would have to put French power prices up if they paid a decent price. It's the same with every other African raw material from oil to cocoa and coffee. Africans get a bad deal; corruption makes it worse and the West doesn't care. They talk about fucking trade deals. But fair-trade deals for Africans?"

Solomon made a sound like spitting. Then he continued:

"So, places like Niger look for other partners to replace the French. How easy is that do you think? The Chinese, flush with cash, are the only option. And they already own around 40% of one mine. For the Chinese, it's big politics, buying influence and far more important than us asking for help with small scale solar energy." He stopped, looked at Gabriel and then back at Mark Dobson. "They were just being polite, Mark."

So, it was all very predictable, Dobson thought as the four of them sat in silence once again. Solomon Trading, the small sardine surrounded by sharks. Sometimes, reality takes too long time to sink in.

It was Craig Donovan who broke the silence. "So where to now?"

"We go alone," said Solomon. "We'll re launch Solomon Trading, perhaps in Niamey, Accra or Freetown. Maybe even London. We'll re-assess things, focus on the project, meet with Benjamin, keep Bill's operation small scale, manageable. There's no harm in continuing to find private funding - so long as we carry out proper due diligence."

"Like I fucked up with the Kaplans," Gabriel said.

"Yeh. Salesmen can be very gullible," replied Solomon.

Next on Osman Olande's shortened list was a place called Blossoms but, as he arrived outside his phone rang. It was a call he'd been expecting for two days.

"It's the Cumberland Hotel," the Nigerian voice said.

"You double-checked everything with the boss?" Olande asked.

"Festus say go ahead. I watch dem. One have crazy hat. One wear shades."

Olande smiled. He decided he'd visit Blossoms later because this was pay day. He walked back onto Cromwell Road, flagged a taxi and within minutes was standing on the crowded pavement between Marble Arch Underground Station and the entrance to the Cumberland Hotel.

They moved to a pub a few yards further down Baker Street, a bar that Sherlock Holmes was said to have frequented for deep reflections with Doctor Watson but their own reflections went nowhere.

The only clarification was the job that needed to be done in Lagos: There were two containers containing military field kitchens soon to arrive at Apapa port. They'd been donated by the owner of the American manufacturer and were for Bill Larsen but needed to be cleared through customs, one moved to northern Nigeria for Larsen, the other stored for the future.

"Vigo could do it" Mark Dobson suggested. "It's his speciality. But I'm not sure where he is."

The pub was not crowded but busy for all that - tourists mostly, Sherlock Holmes addicts, mixing facts with fiction, chatting noisily about prints on the wall. Japanese, Americans, Aussies, leaning over them with phones and taking selfies. Dobson hated the place and wanted out.

"Gabriel, Sol," he said. "I admire you both. You never cease to amaze me. But listen. Frankly speaking, you need to think of yourselves for a minute. Nothing will happen if one or both of you gets gunned down this afternoon by a Nigerian secret service

agent or a hit man like Olande. You understand me? Everything you've done will fall apart....."

Gabriel held his hand up. Dobson was being ordered to stop right there.

"Listen Mark." He spoke in a voice that caused two Aussies to stop taking photos and listen. "Sol and I are poor soldiers risen from the Lagos slums. If we die trying to protect our land and improving the lives of others, then so be it. Meanwhile, while we live, we will continue to teach others that life is a battle for survival. We are not afraid to die. We aim to leave just a small impression on people's minds that determination wins. If they learn some new ideas for resolving problems and if they realise that some willingly make sacrifices for others, then there is hope. Believe me, good will eventually overcome evil. Yes, there is danger out there. We are not unaware. Meanwhile, we carry on."

The Aussies may have thought about applauding. Instead, they looked at one another and moved away. Dobson sniffed, duly admonished but Gabriel began again. "The military field kitchens. Can you do anything?"

And so, Dobson caved in. "I'll try to track down Vigo."

Then they all stood up and shook hands - two black men, two white - and for some unknown reason they laughed. Then they pushed their way to the door, out on to Baker Street and began walking south towards Oxford Street. The rain had stopped but the sky was grey and the pavement and road still wet.

"Check out of Blossoms," Dobson told Gabriel as they walked.

"I'll phone you." Gabriel replied as if it wasn't urgent.

"So, what do I do?" Donovan asked as if feeling discarded. But then he made his own decision. "I know, I'll take a train down to Kingston and share a few beers with an old army colleague. Mitch will like that. Zoe won't mind. I'll stick around a few days in case anything crops up."

Looking back Mark Dobson was glad he did.

"We'll walk to Marble Arch and take the Tube to Blossoms," Sol said.

Dobson's flat in Queensway was off Bayswater Road and, thinking Donovan and he could call in on Colin Asher they all headed down Baker Street, around Portman Square, into Seymour Street and on to Edgware Road.

They were standing waiting for the red light at the crossing by the Cumberland Hotel entrance when Solomon saw him - a big black man in black jeans and a black leather jacket rounding the corner towards the hotel from the Oxford Street side. He grabbed Dobson's arm. "Olande," he said.

The plan had been for Dobson and Craig Donovan to cross the road, leaving Gabriel and Solomon to continue on to Marble Arch. Instead, Dobson pushed Gabriel and Solomon forward so they all crossed together on the green light. On the other side, amongst a crowd of pedestrians, they looked back.

Olande had stopped outside the Cumberland hotel entrance. He stood feeling for something inside his jacket. Then he made his way into the side entrance of the hotel where taxis made pick-ups and drop-downs. A black hotel porter in a uniform nodded at him and he disappeared inside.

"Are we sure that's Olande?" Dobson asked Solomon.

"Very sure."

"Wait here, on this side, Stay out of sight. Don't cross the road."

As the light changed to green again Dobson joined the crowd and walked across.

The Cumberland Hotel has been there, on the corner, for many years. It was close enough to both Colin Asher's office and Dobson's flat to have become known to both of them. From the outside, it had not changed but the management had tried all sorts of ideas to modernise the interior even trying strange sculptures that Colin Asher once claimed had spoiled his lunch.

As Olande disappeared into the dark interior, Dobson followed.

If Olande had asked Dobson for directions he could have helped but, instead, he spoke to a bellboy who pointed to the place where they served buffet breakfasts, a big space lined with chairs and tables like a school canteen.

Olande then took out a phone and put it to his ear. His mouth moved and in the distance Mark Dobson saw someone else, a white man with fair hair, phone to his ear, raise an arm and wave it. Olande wended his way between tables towards him as Dobson found an empty table to sit and watch behind a large menu card.

Olande took a seat opposite the fair-haired one but seconds later stood, stuffed something into the inside pocket of his leather jacket and took what looked like a large, folded bag from the other man. Then he walked away with the bag under his arm. Dobson replaced the menu and followed him to the side door where, once again, Olande took out his phone.

Playing with phones was, in Dobson's opinion, a bad modern habit, a sign of nerves or a lack of confidence, of having a spare hand with nothing to do, for avoiding eye contact or showing how busy and important you were. But Olande fell into none of those categories. Olande was using it not to be noticed, to blend in. He was waiting, playing for time.

Dobson moved closer and recognised the bag as one of Selfridges oversized ones, the sort used for bulky purchases.

Five minutes passed before Dobson spotted two other smartly dressed black men enter from the other, Oxford Street entrance.

There was no need to guess who they were. It was the neatly pressed suits, the trilby perched on the head of one and the dark glasses of the shorter, fatter one. The rings on both Ayo's and Lazarus's fingers glinted in the artificial light from thirty metres away.

They went to the cafe, Ayo leading the way to the far table where the white man was still sitting. He stood up and they all shook hands. Lazarus took off his dark glasses as if he needed a better look at the man. But none of them sat down. Instead the white one pushed a large black, carry-on airline bag that had been hidden on the floor at his feet towards them with his foot. It looked heavy.

The two fake pastors nodded nervously, Ayo said something, perhaps thank you, and pointed to the bag for Lazarus to pick up. Lazarus wobbled as if it was far heavier than he'd expected. Then they left, Lazarus transferring the bag from his right hand to his left as they headed back to the Oxford Street exit. They walked so close to Dobson that he caught a strong whiff of aftershave, but he was, by then, phoning Solomon to watch the other, Edgware Road exit and keep an eye on Olande.

Ayo and Lazarus exited, turned left passed the entrance to Marble Arch underground station and mingled with the usual dense crowds of Oxford Street shoppers. Dobson followed.

But then suddenly, from nowhere, and in a split second, there was a scuffle amongst the crowd and Dobson saw the black case snatched from Lazarus. Lazarus fell in a clumsy heap. His dark glasses skidded between people's feet across the wet pavement as a young black man in jeans and a hooded anorak ran past, scattering walkers and carrying the black case. He then disappeared around the corner into Edgware Road.

Dobson was still on the phone to Solomon. "Young black guy running your way. With a black bag."

"I see him," answered Solomon. "Nigerian bag snatch."

"Couldn't have done it better ourselves, Sol." Dobson heard Gabriel say. "It needs to change hands immediately."

And it did.

"There, Femi. Olande's taken it."

And the black case just disappeared, deep inside the Selfridges bag.

"Efficient, Sol. Like a genuine Lagos agbero."

"Enough," Dobson said into the phone. "Don't for Christ's sake follow him or get seen. Stay where you are. I'm going back inside."

He returned to the cafe where the white guy with the fair hair was paying his bill to a waitress. A credit card was returned from a hand-held, a receipt was given and he got up, patted the pocket of his jacket where he'd put his wallet and came towards Dobson. The man was young, blonde hair, sun-tanned, blue jeans, brown shoes, tee shirt beneath the navy-blue jacket and he took a lift, pressing the third-floor button. Dobson took the next lift, third floor, and saw the door of room 318 closing. Then he took the lift back down to reception.

"Can I leave a message for Mr Osborne. Room 318," he said.

"Of course, sir..... Ah. Sorry sir, but that's not Mr Osborne's room."

"Sorry, he told me 318. Maybe he's in the meeting in 318?"

"You want me to check, sir?"

"Thanks so much."

"Your name, sir?"

"Smith, Simon Smith."

She did something on the computer, then picked the phone. "There's a Mr Smith here with a message for Mr Osborne, Mr Kaplan."

"Sorry," Dobson interrupted. "I meant 418 not 318." Then he left, hurriedly.

Back on Edgware Road, Solomon described what they'd just seen: Olande taking the black case, stuffing it inside the Selfridges bag and then ambling off towards Park Lane. "It looked heavy," said Sol.

Craig Donovan was still shaking his head in amazement. "I managed to video parts of it," he said. "I think I got a good shot of Olande."

That was good news. It was something that was to come in very useful later on, but Dobson said nothing for the moment. Instead, they walked together past Marble Arch into Hyde Park, found a bench seat and sat down.

Then Dobson explained what he'd just witnessed. That he'd seen David Kaplan. That it was Kaplan who had handed Ayo and Lazarus the case. That the case was heavy enough to have been stuffed with cash. Cash for what? For help, for influence? For the FAA contract or some other service? It was impossible to say.

Gabriel sat holding his head in his hands. Solomon nodded. Donovan shook his head.

"So, there we have it," Dobson said. "Osman Olande has, in the twinkling of an eye, stolen a case probably containing a lot of cash that had just been given to Ayo and Lazarus. They lost it almost as soon as they'd been given it."

This was no ordinary bag snatch. The speed, the planning and execution had been perfect "That was a set up," Dobson said. "A set up that directly involved David Kaplan."

He let it sink in for a moment. "But I've known it before," he went on. "Appear to honour an agreement then use a trick to win it all back in seconds. No-one will ever know. This time two fake pastors are the losers. Serve them right, I suppose, but others must have known what was going on."

But who? Someone on Colin's spreadsheet? Someone like Festus Fulani? But how to prove any of it?

"What you're involved in is a web of criminality, corruption and double dealing so complicated it would be almost impossible to unravel," Dobson told them. "Not only that but you are the ones accused of corruption and criminality. How does that make you feel?"

It was Gabriel who at last said the word that Dobson had been tempted to use for the last few weeks. "Naive," he said.

Solomon nodded. "This ain't our world, Femi. I told you before."

"Yeh, but look what we've already done, Sol. We can't stop now."

And then the rain started again. Heavily.

"So, what now?" Dobson asked as they hurried back onto Edgware Road.

"I need to think," said Gabriel.

"We both need to think," said Solomon. "You want my fucking opinion or not?"

"You know what I mean, Sol."

"Just don't go back to Blossoms," Dobson said. "Go and think somewhere else."

It was agreed. Craig would stick around the UK for a few weeks because Zoe had said she'd come over from Washington.

If Dobson could track down Vigo or Mazda he'd get them to sort out the containers sitting at Apapa docks.

Gabriel would lie low for a bit, maybe in the Hammersmith house. If he got bored, which was likely, he'd head to Nairobi to sort out some overdue matters.

Solomon would head for Accra, Ghana for a few days, then to Abuja to see Michael Fayinka and Bill Larsen.

"Why Ghana?" Dobson asked him.

"I need to see Carla," was all Solomon said

It was three days after the bag snatch in Oxford Street.

Colin Asher had tried to persuade Dobson to forget Gabriel for a while and go to Seoul in South Korea and they'd spent time together discussing a new client, a Korean guy with a London partner. Dobson was in his flat devising some sort of strategy before heading to Korea when Gabriel rang.

"Where are you?" Dobson asked.

"Nairobi. And Sol's in Accra, Carla's mammy's just died."

Another death, and old father time reminding Dobson, if not Gabriel, that our allocation of time on earth was his decision, not ours.



Dobson could have reflected for a bit longer but Gabriel's reflections on life and death were shorter than his. Perhaps Gabriel just didn't like dwelling on death at all for he completely changed the subject.

"Do you see why Boko Haram became the COK?" he asked as if it was relevant to the moment. "And do you see how the COK may soon become something else with a new name and ideas just as ill thought out and unfair as the system they seek to replace?"

It was a bad, echoing call and Dobson looked out of the window to distract himself. He didn't do Skype or video calls, believing they were a visual distraction. Gabriel had tried Skype on him once but after Dobson told him the picture did nothing for his looks. he'd used voice calls ever since. So, Gabriel couldn't see Dobson also shaking his head in frustration.

Far away in Nairobi though Gabriel was, Dobson knew he had something to ask, probably a favour, but was going about it in a roundabout way starting with a history of Islamic terrorism in Africa. It was a Gabriel speech, by echoing phone, but delivered as if Gabriel was lecturing a group of university students.

"It goes back years," he was saying. "Back to the days of Mohammed Yusuf's hard-line Islamist sect in Maiduguri. You see, Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism is like a weed, a weed that still grows even if you cut off its leaves. To destroy it you need to destroy its roots. But even then, you may be too late because weeds also scatter seeds far and wide.

"Mohammed Yusuf scattered seeds long before he was killed. The seeds were Abubakar Shekau and his team. They got angry. They wanted revenge, revenge against the state, revenge against a system they saw as more and more westernised and morally and economically corrupt. In a way, they were right but mostly they were bored fanatics, murderers looking for excuses to kill. But all they've ever done is replicate the old faults and damage society further. It shows how little anyone ever learns."

Dobson heard Gabriel sigh. Was he finished yet?

"The COK needs to be tamed, softened, humanised but I do not see how anyone can do that. And all the time, the population grows, the numbers of poor people increase and worthwhile jobs disappear."

He took another deep breath and fell silent like a man who'd just lost his lecture notes. Dobson decided to help him out.

"But groups like the COK never seem short of money, Gabriel. Who's funding them?"

"Who funded ISIS, Al Qaida?"

"Criminality," Dobson said. "But I asked you who's funding the COK?"

Gabriel didn't know the answer, but it was a question that had been bothering Mark Dobson. It kept coming back to him, lurking there like a missing link that might

explain everything to do with Gabriel's problems. Instead he asked: "Why have you phoned, Gabriel?"

"Sol often says you should join us, Mark. He says you've become indispensable. You should become a director of Solomon International. Run the UK operation."

"I'm honoured," Dobson said. "But what the bloody hell do I do that's so indispensable?"

"Ask the right questions."

"Anything else?"

"Advise, sort problems, act like a friend and like a genuine private investigator. You got useful stuff at your fingertips. You take the pressure off, like by getting mugged instead of me. You generally fuck around making yourself useful."

Strangely, Dobson still felt honoured.

"You want to know something vital?" Gabriel asked.

"I can hardly wait."

"You remember telling me about Vigo and Mazda and the Pink Lips Club?"

"My clients always get full explanations."

"It's why I think you're honest and genuine, Mark. It's why I think you got magic tricks up your sleeve. Why you're good at taking the pressure off. Why I think all the fucking about you do works. It's like it triggers fresh ideas."

"It's years of practice, Gabriel."

"So, my fresh idea was that Michael talked to your friend Vigo."

"Did he?"

"Yep. And Vigo talked to others."

"Like who?"

"Like Benji, Casper and Danny at the Pink Lips Club."

"They free now?"

"Seems so."

"And?"

"They got themselves a close-knit."

"A what?"

"A gang. Vigo, Mazda, Civic, Benji, Casper, Danny and your young friend Chelsea. They got themselves a close-knit."

Dobson, previously slumped by the window, sat up. Alarm bells were ringing. "With precisely what purpose in mind?"

"To fuck Festus and his friends, to clear the ground for a purge."

Dobson now stood up. This all sounded very Nigerian.

"What do you think?" Gabriel asked.

"Well," he said, "Numbers of feet on the ground sometimes make a difference."

"That's it, Mark. An army of foot soldiers. Like Bill says."

Dobson didn't say but by his reckoning that was an army - a close-knit - of about seven. With Michael, it made eight. All pitted against a system of corruption that percolated right into the heart of government, involving tens of thousands of people and billions of dollars. "What exactly do you want to achieve?" he asked.

"See? That's why you're so useful, Mark. You ask the right questions."

"Like Solomon does." Dobson answered.

"Yeh. But you know what else you taught me, Mark?"

"Remind me."

"Small businesses run faster than big ones because they don't carry as much baggage."

"That sounds like me. So why have you phoned?"

"Would you go to Nigeria again?"

Ah, so that was it.

Truth was Dobson had already spent the last few days reflecting on the possibility. He hated unfinished business. And he much preferred Nigeria to the glitzy IT world of South Korea. Despite the chaos and the rough edges, he actually liked the damned place. It was - he struggled for a word - lively. And he liked Nigerians, most of them anyway. They were - he struggled for another understated word - interesting.

"I'd need an alias," he said. "For security, you understand."

"No problem. But there's something else that's been bothering me, Mark."

Gabriel, Dobson decided, ran a lot faster than he did. If life was one long cross-country road race Gabriel would use starting blocks for a sprint start and just keep on sprinting. The only way to catch him was to wait for him to trip up or take a wrong turning somewhere along the way. "What's that?"

"It's the collapse of world order, Mark. Another worldwide recession. It's all unsustainable I want to....."

And off he went leaving Dobson at the starting blocks still thinking about world order and recession. But, as always, Gabriel had a point. His long list also worried Dobson from time to time but he normally shrugged things off and got on with it. If we blew

ourselves up or died of hunger and starvation or World War Three started then, yes, tough cookie. Dobson often wondered if he'd see his fiftieth birthday.

Gabriel eventually slowed and stopped somewhere around the subject of communities and social democracy.

"We need a system where democracy means decision-making by the people, community organising to general assemblies, local decision making, participation in budgets for spending taxes to self-management. How can anyone manage a country of over a hundred million?"

Dobson had agreed about all that several weeks before. Right now, impatience kicked in again. "So, come on, Gabriel, what's the plan."

"The close-knit needs professional leadership."

So, that was it. Mark Dobson was to be the leader of a gang of eight tasked with fucking the Festus Fulani gang, the COK and the deeply entrenched fraud and corruption of Nigeria.

## CHAPTER 23

Mr Richard Hicks?"

Mark Dobson had deliberately chosen a different queue at Lagos Immigration this time. It was the same beige uniform and beret and the same badge, blue face mask and blue latex gloves but, this time, it was a male Immigration Officer.

Hopefully CCTV cameras didn't do automatic comparisons with previous ones, but in any case, Dobson's normally sandy hair was now dark brown to match the passport photo - the colour courtesy of a pack that had said 'sultry, healthy and strong' which he hoped would easily wash out.

"Mr Richard Kenneth Hicks," repeated the man with the ink stamps behind the glass. "Business. How long Mr Hicks?"

"Two weeks should be enough." In truth, he had no idea how long it would take. It could take forever. But his Richard Hicks passport was stamped and held aloft. "Have a nice stay."

The passport had been Colin Asher's doing. Asher's other doing was to book him at the five-star Southern Sun Hotel. "Ignore your usual cheap lodgings, Mr Hicks, and lose yourself amongst more discerning guests. It might also be safer."

It was early evening but already dark when he arrived at the Southern Sun.

He checked in as Richard Hicks but then headed to the bar where he'd heard familiar laughter - Vigo, Mazda and Chelsea, probably waiting for him, but meanwhile lowering the tone of the place, drinking beer and talking loudly.

None of them recognised the man in the suit with brown hair until Dobson tapped Vigo on the shoulder. "Waah, Mercedes, man. Nice, cool....." He was ruffling Dobson's already unkempt head of hair, feeling the quality texture of his M & S suit.

"For Christ's sake, Vigo. Be quiet. Just get me a beer, will you? I'm Richard Hicks, OK? Dobson's still in London."

Huddled in a corner of the bar Dobson spelled out the action plan he'd devised, one that included an early night. He then watched them file out of the hotel looking as if they were already under suspicion by the management. But he called Chelsea back. "What's my name, Chelsea boy?" he whispered, holding Chelsea's shoulder.

"Mr Dobson, sah, but today you are Mr Hicks. Sometimes you are Mr Simon Smith and sometimes Mercedes, sah."

Dobson was impressed, right down to admiring his new pair of florescent yellow Nike trainers - until he saw they weren't Nike but Nuke. "Correct," he said. "But don't talk so loudly, OK?"

"Yessah."

"And how's Pops?"

"Good sah."

Then he went to his room to make calls on a new phone. First up was Bill Larsen on a number Gabriel had given him, a short update on what was going on but a call that would have been longer had Larsen's battery not faded. They arranged to meet in Kano in a few days.

Then he phoned Michael Fayinka in Abuja and agreed to meet during a stopover en route to Kano.

After that he lay back on his bed, stared at the ceiling and tried to calculate the likelihood of achieving anything positive. It didn't look good. Sometimes, though, he concluded, it was not measurable success but positive, lasting influence that really mattered. Then his phone buzzed. Colin Asher.

"Gabriel's been arrested. In Nairobi. He was allowed one phone call so he chose to call me saying Asher & Asher was his lawyer. Someone recognised him in the hotel he's staying at. There's confusion over the name on the warrant and the name in his passport so they've detained him to check with Nigeria."

Asher let that sink in for a moment before landing another one. "I'm told Festus Fulani's back in Nigeria. Someone with that name flew from Cairo two days ago."

Pastor Ayo was adjusting the angle of his brown and gold trilby before the full-length mirror in the hallway of his six-bedroom villa when his phone rang. The Ghanaian maid who had been holding two other trilbies until he'd decided which was best was ushered away and she scuttled towards the kitchen. Ayo didn't recognise the number but soon recognised the voice. His heart missed several beats.

"Ah, yes, sah," he stuttered. "Can I help you sir?"

The voice of General Zainab Azazi, the head of 'Special Tasks' growled in Ayo's ear. "I do not want help, Pastor, I want information."

Ayo removed his trilby and used the rim to scratch his nose. "Of course, sah. Information. What information, sir?"

"Have matters been dealt with yet?"

"Maybe, sir."

To Ayo, his own voice sounded unusually timid. Inside his Good Tidings Christian Peoples Church his voice sounded as if it came direct from heaven. It echoed like the voice of God off the walls, the wood and the plastered ceiling. Now, he coughed to clear the stickiness in his throat.

The fact was Ayo had no idea what to say. Everything had gone quiet since he and Lazarus had returned from London. Empty handed he reminded himself. The main distraction, the biggest worry, had been coming to terms with the theft. People in Oxford street had stopped, gathered around, offered to call the police and an ambulance as Lazarus had fallen and seemed ready to die. They had declined all offers of help, of course, and returned to the Intercontinental Hotel. Then they'd flown back to Abuja.

Ayo flopped onto the gilt-edged chair beside the gilt-edged telephone table.

Two million dollars had gone in the blink of an eye, snatched only two minutes after collecting it. Lazarus had barely spoken for three days afterwards. He'd jumped at every sound and whimpered like a child. And there was clearly no point in involving the police. What was gone was gone. But who had known? Who had been watching? Questions still begged for answers.

As far as Ayo saw it, he'd done his part by ensuring that the fucking Solomon Trading company stopped trading and stopped interfering in plans to ensure government contracts benefitted the right people. The multi-million dollar FAA contract had always been the big one and many people were due to benefit if the contract went to the right organisation.

It had been the job of Pastors Ayo and Lazarus, two innocent religious men who could come and go through UK Boarder Control sometimes with dog collars over their shirts and no questions asked. It should have been easy. Sort out two million dollars in cash for smaller beneficiaries of the deal.

Or, at least, that was the plan until Ayo had received new instructions just before they'd left - instructions which had come from Festus that the small beneficiaries would now only get half and the balance would go into a special numbered account at Credit Suisse. None of the small people believed their money had been stolen and Festus was said to be very angry in case Pastor Gabriel and the Englishman Dobson exposed what was going on and embarrassed important people.

The sweat on Ayo's forehead trickled onto his nose distracting him enough to return to the here and now and Azazi's growling voice.

"Maybe is not enough, Pastor," the voice growled. "Fucking Abisola has said he wants to see you."

"But I am on my way to my Church sir," he said.

"Cancel it."

Ayo, sweat oozing from every pore, decided an arrest warrant was the least he could expect.

Taj Harding's few days as a resigned Minister had been spent on mundane local constituency matters and listening to Parliamentary debates from the backbenches. It was not enough and Harding was already bored and now having trouble sleeping.

It was three in the morning when Daniel Bakare phoned him. "I'm going to Nigeria," Bakare announced. "Some Ministerial meetings, a meeting with the US Ambassador, a debrief from Steve Barnett and a fresh look at the terrorism threat, maybe even a meeting with the President. What are you doing?"

"Right now, trying to sleep."

"What are you doing in the next few days?"

"Nothing important," he said rather sadly.

"Why not meet me in Abuja? Meanwhile, while you think about it, some news for your ears. Gabriel's been arrested."

"Christ almighty. When? How?"

"Nairobi. Whilst we've ignored the arrest warrant, the Kenyans haven't, won't or can't for political reasons. We'll have a word in Kenyan ears. You might like to do the same."

"I'm not sure I've got any influence left. Perhaps I shouldn't have resigned."

"Never harbour regrets, Taj. But it's a pity you resigned just when things were getting interesting."

"But I could join you, I suppose" Harding said switching on a light. "I could use the time for something else I've been thinking about."

The first meeting of Vigo's close-knit was at Pink Lips. Benji organised the shaking of hands and the sorting out of who was who. "So, so. Fine, fine. We tock business."

Casper organised the wiping of the meeting table bringing a dripping cloth which he used with one quick swipe. They pulled up chairs and sat in a tight circle around the table, wet from Casper's cloth and the soggy remains of someone's rice from last night. Chelsea sniffed the air and nodded as if the smell that lingered was exactly what was needed for a top level gathering.

Vigo lay back and stared at the ceiling, Mazda took out his phone, checked it and shook his head as if it proved the total incompetence of others.

Benji flicked his thumb again at Casper. "Star Lite for our guests."

Cigarettes were handed around as if smoke was vital for positive thinking. Then it began.

"Good you come," Benji began with enthusiasm, sweat glistening on his wide forehead. "Danny, he arrive from Abuja last night."

Danny, a short, stocky, middle-aged man wearing a scarlet shirt matched with black trousers held up his hand. "Not so fast, Benji. This no time for bein' flippant."

Benji, realising his status, shrank back.

"So," Danny said. He took a gulp of Star Lite, wiped the drips and then rubbed the back of his neck. "So....let's start. Balogun and Festus. These guys they so full of jazz. We give Balogun slap and get results. Then some suits get upset and send their security round. Seem our slap not enough. Agree?"

Nodding of heads and murmurs of agreement ensued. Chelsea choked on his beer but nodded on time.

"Dat man Festus he bounce too much, shakara. Tock plenty, too much pose, travel too much, here and there, fancy houses, fucks girl friends with big cow bells. You see her, Benji?"

"I see." Benji held his hands up as if he was holding two footballs.

"But Balogun gave full report to Festus then Festus team come out from under stone and put pressure on me and Civic. But, hey, no problem 'cus me and Civic stay strong. We shake head, say nuttin and stay cool. Right Civic?"

Civic nodded, grinned, looked around.

"When I say I got evidence of plan to assassinate Pastor Gabriel they back off, yes Civic? Festus team they look to one another, ask questions. Tock small in ears. Get too scared to make big trouble 'cus I said Gabriel talk with President Azazi. Right Civic?"

Civic nodded and grinned. Chelsea nodded but looked confused.

Danny was still talking. "No way dat man Festus can walk tall now for worry we plan total deletion. So, Festus team back away. Seem shit scared of somtin. And Festus he arrive in Abuja yesterday. Go someplace by car but look behind him now since I put 007 on his tail. You see 007, Benji?"

"I see him, Danny. Big fella, soji."

"So," Danny looked around. He'd finished his chairman's summary and the mood was serious. Much thinking was going on.



Hearing about the meeting later from Vigo, Dobson knew if he'd been there he'd have been worried, especially about mentioning the President. He'd also have asked for a hundred other clarifications, but this was a Nigerian close-knit and close-knits did things differently.

They were sitting on a pile of bald tyres in Vigo's garage. "So, who's side are they all on?" he'd asked Vigo.

"No confusions, Mercedes. Everyone on Gabriel's side."

Indeed, they were all, Dobson concluded, as mad as hell about the treatment being dished out to Pastor Gabriel. They knew about the forged arrest warrant and that Gabriel was one of the very few trying to break the tradition of large scale bribery and corruption.

"Well," Dobson said. "Oiling a few small cogs might be OK, but...."

"Yeh, I know," Vigo interrupted. "We need more than that. Nigeria needs a full, fucking service and an oil change."

He was right. Lubrication and corrosion, working side by side through the tips and dash that were the daily inducements to get things done, to make things happen. It was like a tax and every member of this close-knit lived by tips and dash because, rightly or wrongly, that was how things worked. But they were, it seemed, acknowledging the system was at fault, blaming it for the growing gulf between rich and poor and pointing fingers of blame at the big, fat men in suits, ones like Festus Fulani who sat at the very top taking the really big money. Stop it at the top and the culture might slowly change further down. That, at any rate, had always been Gabriel's view and they seemed to agree.

"So, what happened next, Vigo?"

Danny had asked who the spokesman was. "Wettin dey. Wot the current plan? Who the spokesman?"

Vigo had leaned forward. "I am." he'd said as if about to break news of global importance. "Mr Simon Smith is our partner, our client. We only do half the job so far. Balogun and Festus are two, but we need to slap some other fat men in fancy suits who sit in big office with AC. We got names. Big shots who cosy up to President. But not the President himself."

"How did that go down?" Dobson asked.

"Casper, he ask why not we shoot the President quick quick, but I say, 'Stop stop. Mr Simon Smith, he be like say, done do. We need President for have use later in plan."

"Good, Vigo. Then what?"

"Danny then say: 'Your Mr Smith know something critical?' And I say, 'Sure, sure. Very critical.' And Danny then say, 'Simon Smith, he got connections with limitless funds?' And I say, 'Sure he have. My man Simon, he rich guy but he's English. He expects value for money. He wants action sham-sham, he demand first class strategy, a war plan like Winston Churchill. Then he give go ahead with money up front, cash flow guaranteed, bonus at the end.'"

Dobson, fidgeting on the pile of tyres cringed. "Mmm, what next?"

"We put heads together."

"Like a secret conspiracy?" Dobson suggested trying to imagine this gathering.

"That's it Mercedes. And Danny was the first to move his head. 'Why this akata so mad about Festus and these other suits?' he asked. And that, Mercedes was when I gave my big speech. The one I learned from you."

"From me?"

"Sure. Last night in the Southern Sun."

"Remind me. What did I say, Vigo?" Dobson asked as Mazda arrived with four cans of Star Lite.

"I remember word for word, Mercedes. Cheers. You talk like a real Winston Churchill last night. When the time is right, you told me, go ahead. Tell them everything. Tell them about Kenneth Eju, that no-one, not just Gabriel and Sol is safe. That these are big powerful suits hell bent on destroying everything just for themselves. Get them to ask around about who shot Kenneth, you said. That we think it was this guy Osman Olande, the guy who Festus pays to do all his dirty work. Rub it in, you said. Make them feel mad about all the fucking bureaucrats, the corrupt suits and the politicians who rake off billions while businesses like Pink Lips and Solomon Trading struggle to make ends meet.

"What else did I say?" asked Dobson

"You said leave out one person, Vigo. Leave out the President himself. You said you felt, and so did Gabriel, that the President is a good man who's doing his best, but he's got a tough job. He's walking what you called a political tightrope not just on corruption but on everything else - the economy, healthcare, education, defence and terrorism. You talk like genuine professor from the University. Did I miss anything, Mercedes?"

"Not a thing," said Dobson.

Ayo's stress level after Azazi's call was at such a pitch that he decided unless he spread it around, shared it or diluted it somehow, his health was in serious danger. He picked the phone up from the floor where he'd dropped it.

"Lazarus? We must meet, urgently. I fear big problems."

"But I'm dining with the Chairman of Ministries TV, Ayo. Do you know the Blu Cabana? Have you met Chairman Jacob? I will introduce you. We are eating steak and....."

"This is no time for eating, Lazarus."

"But we are discussing important things like Christian education and entertainment."

Ayo's breathing was erratic, uncontrolled, and he heard himself snort like a pig. "You want to die, Lazarus?"

"But I am not sick, Ayo. We are discussing the revival of apostolic signs, the Holy Ghost, fireworks and the unlimited demonstration of the power of God. And Jacob has offered the Good Tidings Christian Peoples Church some advertising space in return for gifts. Perhaps, if I beg his kindness, he may also look kindly on Christ's Centre of Holy Visions. The pepper steaks here are very....."

Whether or not it was Lazarus's irritating voice but Ayo's voice suddenly found volume. "General Zainan Azazi," he shouted into the phone. "Do the scars on his face still make you tremble? Does the memory of being threatened with arrest by Martin Abisola from the SS still bring sweat to your brow? Do you want to die of indigestion, Lazarus?"

There was a clattering sound as if the Blu Cabana's dining table had met with catastrophe. Things rattled, something smashed.

"Excuse me, sah," Ayo heard Lazarus say, presumably to his honoured guest. "One moment while I deal with this matter." A short silence followed. "Is it true, Ayo? They have returned?"

"They never went away, Pastor. They are here with more threats and they asked for you," he lied. "We must attend a meeting now."

Despite the air conditioning in his white BMW, Ayo's heart was still beating wildly and he was sweating profusely. He had been instructed to be in the Protea Hotel car park at 2pm but had become utterly lost. To compound that, the fuel was running out.

Lazarus, meanwhile, was biting each of his finger nails in turn and gibbering away in the passenger seat beside him. "What can I do, Ayo?" he whimpered. "I am just an innocent Pastor proclaiming the love of God, seeking forgiveness for my small sins and trying to make ends meet."

"If you are innocent, Lazarus then I cannot imagine how much praise the Lord will hand to me when I follow you to his glorious Kingdom. Where the fuck are we?"

A dribble of saliva ran from Lazarus's finger onto the cuff of his white shirt. "But he phoned you, Ayo, not me. They know I have nothing to give but prayers."

Ayo swung the BMW off Shehu Shagari Way into a Total filling station. "You frighten yourself without realising that it is you who frightens others with your ability to feign such false innocence."

Lazarus removed his dark glasses, stared, looked puzzled but said nothing. The tank was filled, the windscreen washed for a tip and they set off again in silence.

Then: "I do not know where we are, Lazarus. This is Dikko Street and we are late because while I was eating watery fish soup you were eating peppered steak to fill the overweight sack you call your belly."

"It is the wrong way, Ayo. You must turn around."

"You did not think to tell me before?"

They were thirty minutes late arriving. Ayo drove around, saw no-one and stopped. Lazarus tugged on his sleeve "We're too late, Ayo. We're safe. They've gone."

But there was a tap on the window on Lazarus's side. He turned and the face that gave him nightmares loomed large, grinning, white teeth in a round face, the faint scars on Major General Zainab Azazi's cheeks enhanced by the tinted glass. Lazarus stared back, one finger still in his mouth. Ayo, on the other side, got out and Azazi shouted over the top of the car at him. "You're late. But I see you brought your fat friend. Follow me."

They followed the Mercedes out of the hotel car park, Ayo struggling to keep up as it headed for the outskirts of Abuja, taking turnings, right and left. It finally stopped at a high iron gate built into a concrete wall capped with razor wire. The gate opened automatically onto a driveway leading to a large but dilapidated villa that might once have been painted pink. Azazi stopped his Mercedes at the bottom of some steps and got out, beckoning Ayo to stop alongside.

That was when they saw Martin Abisola.

The SSS man was standing at the top of the steps like a soldier, legs apart, arms folded across his chest. He was wearing khaki trousers, an open-necked green shirt and a red tie that dangled sideways and he beckoned them to come up the steps. They followed him through the door, along a dark corridor, turned left and found themselves entering an even darker room at the end.

Abisola kicked a door stop, flicked a light switch, then a remote control and air conditioning hummed. Apart from a wooden table and six hard plastic chairs, the room was bare and windowless with pale pink walls and an uneven and unpainted concrete floor. This was not someone's home, a place of comfort but more like a place for questions to be asked, under duress.

"Sit," Azazi commanded and he nodded at Abisola.

The pastors sat, side by side, on one side of the table. Azazi and Abisola took up positions opposite and Azazi grinned confidently. Abisola stared. Ayo looked down at his lap. Lazarus bit his nails.

"Now then. Long time. How dem body? Dem Christian church go good?" It was Azazi speaking in his usual throaty growl.

Ayo and Lazarus nodded.

"Martin will speak," Azazi said with a wave of his hand as if announcing an honoured guest.

The ex-Nigerian Army Colonel Martin Abisola stood and calmly and slowly walked around the table. He stopped behind Lazarus, bending so close that Lazarus smelled sweat and something fishy on his breath. "Do you remember my promises, Pastor?" he whispered.

"Your promise, sah?"

"Not one promise, Pastor. Many promises. Promises to find you guilty of bribery, corruption, extortion, false representation, fraud, deception, money laundering, theft of church funds and other misdemeanours if things become problematic. You remember?"

"Oh, yes sah."

Abisola moved behind Ayo. "Do you know where Pastor Gabriel Joshua is?"

"No sah. Maybe in London, sah?"

"For your information, Pastor Gabriel is in prison. In Nairobi. What do think about that?"

Ayo tried smiling. "That is good, sah."

"And do you know where Mr Dobson is?"

"Also in prison, sah?" Ayo suggested, hopefully.

"No, no. He is in Nigeria."

"Then catch him, sah. Put him in prison also."

A short pause as Abisola strolled around. Ayo followed his progress but his view was restricted by the rim of his trilby that had slipped over his forehead. He tried a touch of bravery. "Excuse me, sah, why do you want to find the akata?"

Abisola was a man of simple needs whose only adornment was the stained shred of red polyester that hung loosely around his neck. He could smarten himself up with uniform when absolutely necessary but, otherwise, saw no point in wasting time on outward appearances. Patience was Abisola's strong point but even that had its limits. And the limits of his patience had already been stretched by these two religious conmen with their rings, jewels and ridiculous hats who wafted aftershave and deodorant. He looked at Azazi and shook his head. Azazi still smiled.

"Remind me," Abisola said. "Who was it sought a meeting with the President to warn him of a plot to undermine his authority?"

"It was us, sah," admitted Lazarus proudly.

"So, was the President wise to believe you?"

"Of course, sah. The President is very wise."

"And how many of your friends had evidence of Pastor Gabriel's many frauds and corrupt dealings with the government?"

Lazarus again: "Well sah, there was me, sah, and Ayo, sah and Father Adebola of the Church of Our Lord of Mercy and Forgiveness and Bishop William of the Disciples of Jesus School of Ibadan. We met in Calabar, sah at the home of Governor Fashola, sah....."

Azazi suddenly moved in his seat, the swathes of the cotton Boubou that wrapped his large frame rustled and he held up his hand to his face as if he'd just heard

something, he had no wish to hear. The fixed smile vanished and a dark cloud spread across his face. Abisola, though, was hearing and seeing everything even though his eyes were fixed on the back of Ayo's hat.

Ayo took out a handkerchief, sniffed, wiped his face and examined the piece of cloth as Lazarus continued: "Governor Fashola organised the meeting, sah. He was very pleased to help the President, He said he'd speak to a friend who had the good ear of the President."

Azazi sniffed and stood up. "That is enough," he boomed, but Abisola ignored him.

"Who was the man who had the good ear of the President?" he asked.

Lazarus looked uncertainly at Ayo who was now picking his nose with the handkerchief but Abisola persisted. "I ask you again. Who was the man who spoke to the President?"

"That is enough I think," repeated Azazi. "I think he might die of stress."

Abisola continued to ignore him. "Who did Governor Fashola talk to?"

"We don't know, sah." It was Ayo this time, looking across at Azazi as if aware of embarrassment. But Lazarus still hadn't finished putting his foot in it.

"Governor Fashola is on the Board of the State Security Organisation. Maybe you can ask him." he said.

There was a pause as Abisola looked at Zainab Azazi, the man who held the ill-defined job of Special Tasks. It was a job Abisola didn't understand the need for, nor did he know what Azazi did or how. Azazi, the President's younger brother was ex army and Abisola had known of him for several years but nowadays Azazi floated around, attending dinners and gathering friends like a self-important politician in the making.

Abisiola knew that even the President, who he admired, would consciously succumb to family pressures to avoid worse problems elsewhere. He also knew that, being the Head of the SSS - the State Security Service, put him way above Azazi. It was the President himself who had reminded him of that. "Ignore the fat men, Martin. They strut and pose because they believe they are above the law."

Calmly walking around the table, he watched Azazi nervously adjusting his gown, repositioning his hat, wiping his face and sitting down again.

"It seems no-one knows where the fucking akata Dobson is," Azazi seemingly desperate to change the subject. Abisola looked at him so hard that Azazi glanced away.

As he did so, Abisola withdrew something from his pocket, sat down next to him and continued talking as if nothing had happened.

"The background is interesting. I'll need to reflect on it," he said. "Unfortunately, due to the late arrival of these two I am now late for my next meeting. Would you excuse me?"

Then he withdrew the hand that had fixed something beneath the table, nodded towards Lazarus and Ayo and walked from the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

For a while there was silence.

"A busy man, " Azazi muttered waving a hand at the door.

Lazarus nodded. Ayo shrugged, removed his trilby and scratched his head thinking about Dobson. He hated that fucking Englishman. The bastard kept coming back, shaking off assaults like water running off a duck's back. Now, according to Abisola, the bastard was back again. And then there was that other piece of shit, Osman Olande. So many bastards.

The silence continued, but Ayo's head was throbbing. He looked across the table at Azazi, another man he hated and his lips curled with bitterness. Ayo sometimes preached against hatred, taking a storyline from something he'd found on the internet, but the reality was different. Hatred and mistrust was everywhere. In this society, it was natural. He looked at Lazarus with his fat belly, his sorrowful eyes, his bitten nails and sweat. Lazarus was pathetic but at least he could be manipulated. Ayo took a deep breath and broke the silence.

"Excuse me, sah. Does Osman Olande work for you?"

Azazi gave a faint nod that Ayo decided meant nothing other than that Olande was probably a freelancer, answerable to anyone who paid. Nervously he rotated the rim of his trilby and saw Azazi raise a hand that looked like the paw of a bear.

"You ask who he works for?" Azazi said baring his big white teeth. "You want names, Pastor? Names that'll scare the fucking shit out of you?"

And Ayo watched the thick fingers of the brown paw count off names, one by one, as if tossing them across the table for inspection.

"First there are your God-fearing fellow preachers. How many of those hundreds of fucking amateurs do you count as your friends, Lazarus?"

Lazarus shrank into his chair, twisting his lower lip. shocked by the insult of amateurs. "Ten sah? Twelve sah?"

"That's a start," Azazi said. "What about family members? Kenneth and Kenneth's wife Janet? You know Sammy? Matty? Tami?"

Lazarus scratched his cheek and Ayo watched as Azazi started on the next paw. "Then we have Abdul Hakim and Precious Johnson. You know Happy, Pastor Lazarus? Happy Jacob, the Chairman of Ministries TV? He says he knows you well. How about Sandy, Misty and Cozi who ensure your jewellery business doesn't suffer from criminals?"

Ayo stared. He'd never heard of Sandy, Misty and Cozi. But Lazarus's eyes watered as Azazi started on the fingers of the first paw again.

"Then you got the big, big names. Your friends, Ayo. Top names like Festus and all of Festus's group - how many? Six? Seven? Eight? Big men, big style, big budgets, big power."

Azazi's voice grew from a bear's growl to a lion's roar. "You want me to go on. Pastors? You ask who runs Osman? All of them run Osman and all of them expect their share. Yet you.....YOU." The roar increased. "YOU FAILED. Everyone else worked hard to ensure the contract was awarded to the right company but YOU have STOLEN two million dollars. WHAT DO YOU SAY?"

There was another silence as Lazarus screwed his face, bit his finger nails and looked at Ayo.

"WELL? WHAT DO YOU SAY?"

"Yes, sah. " Lazarus whined. "Very sorry, sah."

It was thirty minutes before Ayo and Lazarus left the house inside the razor-wire protected wall.

Ayo stopped the car on the side of the road because of a tightness in his chest and his breathing that felt erratic. It was probably stress but he had heard about heart attacks that started with chest pains and heavy breathing. He took a deep breath, felt his chest through the sweaty dampness of his silk shirt and looked at Lazarus. "You tremble like a fat little mouse, Lazarus."

"It is because Azazi is like a big, fat cat, Ayo. I hate him."

Ayo's heart rate was slowing but, just to be sure, he drew another deeper breath that stopped when his chest wall met the steering wheel. He adjusted his trilby. "I often wonder how you ever made it as a man of God with his own church."

"My father left money when he died."

"Your father was a preacher?"

"No. A God-fearing man who owned a jewellery shop."

"How did he die, Lazarus? Please tell me."

"By a bullet from a gun, Ayo."

"Thieves? Armed men with guns?"

"He shot himself."

Lazarus then paused, apparently thinking. "No, no, no," he went on. "That is not true. I must be honest, Ayo, because that is what my dear, dead Pops taught me. Do not lie my son, he told me. A little lie is like a little pregnancy. People soon find out."

Ayo looked at him. "So how did he die, Lazarus?"

"He tried to shoot himself but missed so he cut his wrists."



Ayo wanted to laugh but found he couldn't. Things were far too serious. Two million dollars had to be found quickly or, according to Azazi, their days were numbered. But an idea was forming so he slipped the car into drive and, at the speed of a snail, moved off onto the highway. Then he turned to Lazarus.

"How much cash do you have, Lazarus?" he asked

## CHAPTER 24

Dobson was sipping Coca-Cola in the bar at the Southern Sun. It was early evening but Vigo was late and there was nothing to do but wait.

Colin Asher had phoned. "That Korean job's a snake pit."

"So, you need a snake charmer, Colin, but I'm out here. Did you find Steve Kendrick?"

It had been Dobson's idea to check if Steve Kendrick could put up bail for Gabriel.

"He was at Albatross headquarters in Monaco," Asher said. "Bobbing up and down on the Mediterranean as the gentle waves lapped against the marina. I could hear the seagulls. But, yes, he's willing to put up bail. It was a good idea of yours. I've since told Gabriel and we're now waiting to hear from the Court Judge about a decision."

It was another hour before Dobson first heard and then saw Vigo, Mazda and Chelsea. They were grinning, jigging about, Vigo in his cowboy hat and swinging a bunch of keys on a long chain, trainers squeaking on the polished floor of the Southern Sun. A fourth man with a knitted teapot cosy hat was amongst them.

"Hey, Mercedes," Vigo's voice called across the open space. "We got progress."

Dobson got up. "Already? Who's this?"

"This big Civic man, the one who..." he lowered his voice, whispered with breath that mixed cigarette smoke with spicy jollof rice into Dobson's face, "The one who slapped Balogun."

"Nice work."

Civic nodded, Chelsea grinned and Mazda glanced around the hotel lobby. He took Vigo's arm. "Too many akata. We scare them like this."

Mazda was right. A serious, suited American looked up from a laptop. "Why don't you take your noisy friends somewhere else, buddy. Looks like Chicago's just dropped in."

Dobson nodded at him. "Sorry, mate. I'll take them outside where they belong."

Outside, Vigo explained. "We made calls, Mercedes, spoke to others who felt the grief and we got more names - big long list of Festus's friends. Fat men in suits, work in Government in church, some other Pastors not like Gabriel."

They sat on a low wall that surrounded the hotel car park as Dobson listened and wandered around, a few yards this way, a few that, his feet ankle deep in garbage that had been swept or blown into a heap. He was hearing names he'd found from online research and names he'd never heard of - ministers, governors, heads, directors. But no-one mentioned the President. President Azazi himself seemed clean or maybe they were just too scared to mention his name.

As Dobson listened a dense cloud of moths, insects and a few bats flew in circles around a light over their heads, mingling with rising cigarette smoke, but when he started to hear repeats, he knew he'd heard enough. It was time to show his mean streak.

"But what now? I'm not paying money for names I already know."

Vigo held up his hand. "Slow down, Mercedes. You wanna say, Civic?"

Civic jumped off the wall, whipped off his knitted hat and stood looking up at Dobson, the whites of his eyes shining big in the overhead light. "After we smack Balogun, I get taken by some hard boys with no names. They ask questions, serious and no laughing and show gun to my face. I stay cool. But then someone come and whisper in their ear and they leave, sudden like, as if they scared to make more trouble.

"So, I start to find my way home but then some other car follow me, stop and push me inside - big car like bus with telephones and equipment. No fancy uniform but smart, smart. Good talking. Driver he sits and do nothing but other guy pose more questions, polite, like real police. Then dey also open door and let me pass."

Civic paused a moment to drag on his cigarette. Dobson waited.

"You know my thinking?" Civic said eventually. "I got one good friend in the genuine SSS," he smiled. "I knew him long time in the army. I think maybe he was the one who got me released. He top man in SSS the State Security Service. I not see for long time but he good man, clean and clever man."

"What's his name?" Dobson asked.

"Colonel Martin Abisola. I not see for long time but he good man, top, top."

Just then Dobson's phone bleeped - a rare text from Colin: "Bail granted but passport not returned."

It was almost midnight when Dobson returned to his room. He showered, lay on the bed and then the room phone rang. He looked at it for a second or two, then picked it up.

"Mr Richard Hicks." It was a statement not a question and the man's accent was what Dobson called cultured Lagos.

"Yes?"

"Please come down to reception. I'll be waiting."

"I see. Who will I be meeting?"

"Come down, Mr Hicks and I'll introduce myself."

Dobson replaced the phone, pulled on some clothes and took the lift down.

The hotel lobby was quiet but the bar still busy. He wandered towards reception but saw the visitor before he got there - an ordinary looking Nigerian man of about his own age, pleasant enough looking but with no special features except a relaxed but sweaty, street look. He wore an open-necked green shirt and a red tie that hung loose. He was looking straight at Dobson from a chair in the corner next to an empty table, legs apart, muscular thighs filling grey-green trousers, hands resting on the arms of the chair. He looked untidy but wide awake and physically fit.

Dobson knew who it was. Colin Asher had dug out a photo from somewhere together with a brief CV. In the photo, he'd been wearing an army uniform but Dobson still recognised him.

This was Colonel Martin Abisola, ex Deputy Director of the Presidential Communication, Command and Control Centre at the Presidential Villa, now head of the State Security Service, the SSS, Nigeria's primary intelligence gathering agency tasked with protecting the President and state governors. According to Asher he was supposed to report to the National Security Advisor, but there wasn't one - the last incumbent had been charged with corruption and possession of firearms.

And Asher had come up with more interesting stories about that last incumbent - a man at the centre of a row over arms intended for the fight against the COK. It was a murky deal. No arms had ever arrived but suitcases packed with millions of dollars had been found at the airport in Johannesburg.

Mark Dobson enjoyed stories like that and normally enjoyed meeting guys like Abisola. This time he wasn't so sure. Nevertheless, he walked towards him.

Abisola stood up. "Mr Hicks." A hand was offered and Dobson grasped it. It was hot and greasy.

"Yes, how can I help?"

"Take a seat please. A cup of coffee?" It was an accent with a touch of educated English: Cup of not 'cuppa' or anything similarly abbreviated.

"No thanks."

Abisola tugged on his tie and might as well have removed it completely for all the decorative good it was doing. He leaned forward. "You are also Mr Mark Dobson."

It was nicely said, like a polite accusation.

"Sometimes," Dobson admitted truthfully. There was no point in denial. "But you are always Martin Abisola."

Dobson received a faint smile and a nod that he assumed was confirmation.

"You take great pride in your hair, Mr Dobson."

"Dark chocolate suits my complexion, but washing it makes me nervous."

"And you enjoy your work?"

"Never a dull moment. How's yours?"

"Challenging." Another faint, lopsided smile. "I have found that anything to do with Pastor Gabriel Joshua is challenging. Do you share my opinion?"

"I do."

"Mmm." Thoughtful. as if assessing which direction to take. "You feeling tired, Mr Dobson?"

"Not any longer. What have you got in mind?"

"A late night."

"Suits me, I've had an easy day."

Abisola sat back, crossing his legs, exaggerating the many creases in his khaki trousers as if he'd slept in them for days. Stains showed at the knees as if he'd recently crawled beneath a car. "So, where's Gabriel?"

Mark Dobson leaned forward. "You know where he is as well as I do"

Abisola looked at Dobson, hard. "I could arrest you."

"Why don't you?"

Abisola leaned forward again, their faces so close that Dobson could almost count the three-day stubble on his cheeks. There were the makings of a moustache and more unpleasant looking stains on the twisted tie.

"I checked you out," Abisola said.

"Of course."

"You've been around."

"Here and there."

"Perhaps we should co-operate."

Dobson said nothing but it sounded interesting.

"But never underestimate Nigerian Intelligence, Mr Dobson. We are very, what shall I say - intelligent."

"I've never doubted it,"

"So why are you here?"

There were a hundred reasons why Dobson was there. He chose the generic one. "I like Gabriel."

Abisola nodded. Perhaps he did too.

"His business was shut," Dobson added trying to add substance. "There are accusations of fraudulent trading by Solomon Trading. As an investigator of commercial fraud, I don't believe it. I still don't. Then there was a warrant issued for Gabriel's arrest....."

"Forged." interrupted Abisola. "Carry on. Why are you here?"

"Because Gabriel is a good man with honourable intentions. He's highly respected in many places, feared in some, detested in others. Some would say he holds extreme views, others that his views are so good they should be acted upon. None of that is reason to destroy him or his business or his good friend Solomon or Michael Fayinka or murder his UK business manager Kenneth Eju."

Dobson stopped, wondering what Abisola's reaction would be, but if he'd been intent on arresting him, he'd have done it by now in the old-fashioned way - breaking into his room, dragging him out in cuffs. If Abisola had brought re-enforcements, they weren't visible. And he seemed an interesting sort of guy, likeable, in fact. He certainly didn't have the look of someone who lived for money.

"So why have a private army?"

"To defend his patch of land while he attempts to create something in keeping with his beliefs. If you've ever listened to his speeches, you might understand."

Abisola nodded. Encouraged, Dobson padded out his answer with more detail.

"He wants to create some sort of self-sufficient community, a new type of economic system because he thinks the old system is failing the poor. Debateable, controversial, feasible, impractical - we could discuss it all night. But his land is in an area popular for COK raids and abductions. Maybe that's why it was cheap. But he has no confidence in government defences. My opinion, for what it's worth, is that the defence thing has got out of proportion but Gabriel's views on how to defeat modern terrorism and create an economy more suited to modern Africa is another very long story. How long a night did you envisage?"

Abisola shrugged. "And who runs his security operation?"

"I'm surprised with your intelligence you don't already know."

"Confirm it for me."

"A British guy called Bill Larsen."

Abisola nodded again.

"You have a problem with that?" Dobson asked.

"I don't," Abisola said it as if it was only a problem for others. But something else seemed to bother him. "His land stretches over the Nigerian border into Niger, right?"

"Yes."

"So how does he deal with Niger?"

"There are good relations with their President and Prime Minister."

"They turn a blind eye?"

"And they probably appreciate the extra military expertise he's put at their disposal. It costs them nothing and it's far better than having to kowtow to the French, the Americans or the UN. Larsen is a highly-respected pro."

"Interesting," Abisola said and they both sat back eyeing one another.

"Any more questions? You want to arrest me?"

"Not immediately. Your passport looks convincing. Who did it? Asher and Asher?"

Dobson said nothing but, feeling safer for the moment, decided to mention a name in the form of a question. "Osman Olande,"

It was one o'clock, private laughter still coming from the bar area but otherwise the hotel was quiet. "Go on," said Abisola.

"The name keeps cropping up. It seems to me he is, for want of a better word, a hit man."

"Worried he'll hit you?"

"Someone already tried." This was obviously news to Abisola because he raised both eyebrows. "Why do you think I'm calling myself Richard Hicks? Who does Olande work for?"

"Whoever pays him."

"So why not arrest him? The UK police might also like a word. You know where he is right now?"

"Nope," Abisola replied like an American and as if it was a genuine problem for him. Then he suddenly dragged his tie off completely, dropped the screwed-up shred of red fabric on the table and sat forward, deliberately closing the space between them. "I like your set up," he said quietly. "You help me and I'll help you."

"Mmm. So, what can you do about Gabriel's arrest warrant?"

"The problem is it's stamped and signed by a Judge," Abisola replied. "Nigerian society is riddled with cults - mysterious, feudal systems like your Freemasons. What is it you say? You scratch my back I'll scratch yours? That is how it works. You also say things about turning a blind eye. This Judge gets his back scratched and turns blind eyes whenever it suits him."

"What if I had evidence of it being forged in the shape of a signed piece of paper by one of the forgers?"

"Do you?"

"It was signed under some duress but it's available. You want to see it?"

"You got it with you?"

"No. It's too sensitive to carry, but I can ask Colin Asher to send it."

"Do it," Abisola replied. "Can he send it to my phone?" He gave Dobson a number and Dobson gave Colin Asher a quick call. It was way past midnight in London but matters like that never bothered either of them. Wherever he was, whatever the time, Asher could access the data.

They waited and chatted until Abisola felt his phone doing something in the pocket of his crumpled trousers. He leaned back, fished around, extracted an iPhone, pressed a few buttons, swiped and fell silent.

"Enough?" Dobson asked when he looked up.

"You know the guy?"

"Kenneth Balogun, I believe."

Abisola seemed impressed. "How much duress?"

"A few slaps."

"Inflicted by who?"

"My close-knit."

"Is that the crowd that were here earlier."

"Some of them." There was no point in denying it.

"I'll deal with it later," Abisola said, which Dobson took to mean he'd deal with the warrant and the video evidence, not members of the close-knit.

"How'll you do that?" Dobson thought he might be pushing his luck but he had a professional interest in persuasion techniques.

"Sometimes a Judge can be made to feel so embarrassed that, rather than fall foul of the law they are supposed to uphold, they'll admit to an administrative oversight, a typing error. The embarrassment can produce surprisingly quick solutions."

Confidence rising, Dobson pushed his luck further. "Another name that keeps cropping up is Festus Fulani," he said. "My team produced a list of friends of his that's as long as my arm."

"My list would be longer than yours."

"And he travels a lot."

"He likes money."

Dobson dangled some more bait. "And a man with ambitions."

Abisola merely nodded so Dobson decided to hold back on his own theories for a while. Should he mention Kenneth Eju's murder? No. But should he try linking Olande to Festus? Yes.

"You mentioned Osman Olande works for whoever pays the most."

"He's Nigerian," Abisola said as if that explained it.

"I've got video evidence of Olande running a bag snatch in London."

Eyebrows rose again above Abisola's dark and stubbly face. "You got full time cameramen in your team?"

"Just struck lucky," Dobson replied. "We watched the live performance. Cumberland Hotel, Marble Arch. A couple of Nigerian Pastors not known for their admiration of Gabriel got stung. One minute they were receiving a case full of cash, next minute they'd lost it to a couple of Nigerian shysters who quickly transferred the bag to Mr Olande. Blink of an eye. Brilliant performance."

For the first time, Martin Abisola smiled.

"Want some more?" Dobson asked.

"Go on"

"The FAA contract. Solomon Trading tried to win that contract fairly, openly, corruption free, because that's their company's philosophy. It took years but still failed. It was awarded to a Russian company - part of Aron Kaplan's group" Dobson got a faint nod that suggested he already knew. "It was Aron Kaplan's son who handed the cash to the two pastors."

Abisola scratched at the stubble. He'd already been helped to add two and two together to make four and now he was being urged to add four and four together.

"So, in the blink of an eye the pastors lost it to Olande, Is that what you're saying?"

"But Olande didn't do this alone. This was a well-planned set up, a payoff involving several individuals, including the Russian."

Dobson sat back, happy to wait for as long as it took for a reaction. The silence that followed lasted almost a full minute.

Untroubled silences were another reason Dobson was beginning to like Martin Abisola. Men who sat comfortably together in silence whilst digesting facts or contemplating the right way to pose a question or answer one were all too rare. It was all too common these days for non-stop blathering of bullshit out of some sort of need to impress. Quick fire repartee had never been Dobson's style. It wasn't Abisola's either. Abisola's silences were like an art form behind which probably lay a fatal bite if he felt so inclined.

Dobson wasn't yet immune to the bite but felt confident to be the first to break the silence. It wasn't often he sat with the head of a State Security Service.

"The COK," he said. "Who finances it?"

"Good question." Abisola replied but there was nothing that followed.

"Does Nigeria have the resources to deal with the COK? To mount an effective response?"



There was a shorter pause this time. "Defence is not my job. Securing the Presidency and allowing government to operate freely, unaffected by private agendas, corruption and manipulation is."

"Is Nigerian corruption helping the COK?"

Abisola nodded and Dobson sensed he'd hit a nerve. Nothing was yet confirmed but he felt he was getting closer. Abisola's next comment re-enforced it. "No one country can fight fraud and corruption on this scale. It has to be a combined international effort."

"And how do you rate the effort from the international community?"

"Inadequate."

"And militarily?"

"Inadequate. Militarily, it is manpower, feet on the ground, feet belonging to men motivated by a clear understanding of what is right and fair. And yet Africa has millions of youths desperate for work, for action and for a purpose in their lives. What's lacking is the leadership."

"That's exactly Gabriel's opinion," Dobson said.

"Yes. I know," Abisola said. "Gabriel and I probably see eye to eye on many matters."

By three o'clock Dobson knew it was one of Abisola's men who had grabbed Civic off the street, interviewed him and let him go. And Dobson's own information had so galvanised Martin Abisola that he knew he could expect action. Whether it would come to anything was anyone's guess but he also knew that President Azazi himself would be told a few things before the day was out.

At last Abisola stood up. They walked to the door and stood outside in the humid stillness of the Lagos night: "Should I call you Mr Hicks, Mr Dobson or Mark?"

"Mark sounds friendly."

"And what are your immediate plans?"

"I came to sort out a shipment for Solomon Trading because there's no-one available to deal with it. It'll be straightforward. Then I'll go up to Abuja to meet Michael Fayinka. After that.....?"

"Then I'll see you in Abuja. Meanwhile, watch your back, Mark. Any friend of Gabriel's is as much of a marked man as Gabriel himself. And you stick out like a sore thumb despite the change of hair colour. If you want my opinion, I prefer your natural look. Go careful with emails and phone calls. Online scams are not the only thing Nigerians are good at. And don't believe what you sometimes read or hear said about President Azazi. He is a good man with an almost impossible job."

He paused and looked at Dobson. Eye to eye, they were exactly the same height. "Even members of his own family cause him sleepless nights," he added. Then he walked away, presumably to find his car. But, after only a few steps, turned. "And he gets on well with Hama Dosso, the President of Niger - another good man with a tough job." Then he waved his hand, the one holding his screwed up red tie, and disappeared into the night.

Martin Abisola's description about sticking out like a sore thumb was running through Dobson's mind next morning as he left Colin Asher an update on the secure site. He then called Vigo to discuss Solomon's containers sitting at Apapa port. They agreed a price for the job that included likely inducements for port officials and then he left for Abuja to meet Michael Fayinka.

They'd agreed to meet at the Grand Ibro Hotel at eleven but both were late. By the time they'd found each other they were both hungry

"There's a Mr Biggs." Fayinka suggested.

Dobson normally avoided burger joints but they walked there and then talked - about Michael's family, his time spent managing Solomon Trading, about the many contracts they'd won and lost because Solomon insisted on corruption-free trade.

"Like fighting with an arm tied behind my back," he explained. "Like walking with legs in shackles."

"But you proved that corruption is not necessary for success, Michael."

"But now look at us," he replied despondently and Dobson had to admit he had a point.

"So, what do you want to do now?"

"Re-open the business as soon as possible."

"Not giving up entirely?"

"Sol says we become better people by learning from the bad nature of others." Dobson nodded. He'd heard that one, too.

Later that day, Dobson moved northwards to Kano

## CHAPTER 25

Daniel Bakare's visit to Abuja had been billed as an official but low key catch up on West African affairs for a small team from the US Defence Department that included a newcomer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for African Affairs, Sharon Hughes, on her first visit to Africa.

Taj Harding had flown in from London the night before and, as Michael Fayinka and Mark Dobson lunched at Mr Biggs, Harding and Bakare were lunching in greater splendour at the Sheraton Hotel, at a corner table in Obudu's Grill House. They had ordered South African T bone steaks and new Beaujolais.

"You heard the latest about Gabriel?" Bakare asked as they sat down. "Someone put up bail. He's out. We'd told the Kenyans the warrant looked dubious."

"And Solomon?"

"In Ghana at a private funeral I understand."

"And Plan B?" asked Harding.

"Turned out it was the Chinese," Bakare replied. "They met the Foreign Minister and a few others. I'm surprised you didn't know,"

"I'd just resigned," Harding excused himself. "What more do we know?"

"Nothing. But we know the Chinese party had just returned from West Africa and are throwing aid around Africa in the billions. They'll use any influence they can muster."

"Did they offer Gabriel anything?"

Bakare didn't know so they chewed on steaks for a while.

"So why resign Taj? I thought you'd stay in there, fight the system."

"The Gabriel effect I suppose. I still count him as a friend and agree with most things he says. I even understand him wanting to defend his patch of land. No-one invests without some certainty you'll get a return." Harding paused, taking a mouthful of the red wine. "I reckon we could get significant aid to Gabriel. International aid needs to become more inventive. We need some new ideas to invest in viable projects not keep handing out food and blankets and propping up failures."

"Like trusting a local entrepreneur with a track record instead of handing it to NGOs, and governments without any accountability?" Bakare suggested.

"We just shovel cash out the door," Harding agreed. "Blowing vast amounts of tax payers money on daft schemes and to nations with corrupt and dysfunctional governments."

Harding sat forward waving his steak knife menacingly at Bakare. "For fuck's sake," he said. "Did you know the UK is budgeted to hand out around twelve billion pounds in aid - that's point seven percent of GDP, Daniel. It's a massive commitment and much of it is utterly wasted. We've given to Somalia, for Christ's sake, the most corrupt nation in the world. We've given hundreds of millions to Afghanistan, third on the list of corrupt nations, we've handed over millions that have fallen into the hands of Al Qaida and probably Boko Haram and the COK. We pay aid consultants millions. For what? We channel money through charities and agencies to avoid it lining the pockets of corrupt government officials but do we check the charities, the agencies?"

He stopped momentarily. "Christ, I sound like Gabriel but when he says it people cheer the bloody roof off. Whenever I say it I get slapped down."

But then he was off again. "We say we use aid money to fight terrorism, money laundering and tax evasion and that fighting poverty and corruption will end the dependency on aid, It's crap, man. Total crap. The gap between rich and poor just grows wider.

"Just look at where we're sitting now, Daniel. Look around you. All this fucking golden glitter is the bloody Sheraton hotel in Abuja, the political capital of Nigeria and the seat of government. We were both born not so far from here and now we're sat here in our western fucking suits eating steaks imported from South Africa and drinking wine from France. But there's nearly two hundred million Nigerians out there and only ten percent of the kids attend secondary school. And sixty eight percent live below the poverty line. And over the border in Niger it's even worse. How does that make you feel, Daniel?"

Harding threw his knife onto his plate with a clatter and Bakare looked at him.

"You're right. If I closed my eyes, I'd swear I was sitting right next to Gabriel. It happens every time I sit with that bastard and you've just had exactly the same effect. You've just ruined my fucking appetite."

"Good," said Harding.? "So, what the fuck are we going to do about it."

Kano calls itself the commercial nerve centre of northern Nigeria. Hausa is the main language and Islam the main religion. It's warm but less humid than Lagos, not that Mark Dobson took much notice of the weather unless it got in the way.

He'd decided on an 'overnight limousine service' up to Kano thinking he'd catch up on some sleep in the car. The US and UK Foreign Offices constantly warned against that sort of thing with comforting words like: 'We continue to recommend against all but essential travel to the following states due to the risk of kidnappings, robberies, and other armed attacks.'

But Dobson tended to ignore warnings like that. If you had to go you had to go and, anyway, that's where he'd agreed to meet Bill Larsen. The overnight SUV service rolled into Kano at six in the morning and dropped him at the Ocean View Hotel where he'd expected Bill Larsen to be waiting. He wasn't.

He checked in anyway and, once in his room, dragged the curtain aside but with no expectation of glimpsing an ocean. The nearest sea to the Ocean View Hotel was a thousand miles away but there was a good view of a shanty town and clouds of black smoke rising from something burning in its midst. Then he lay on the bed.

Travelling like that sometimes made him forget where he was. He'd been known to wake from a short, deep sleep in a panic trying to work out where the hell he was. As a tourist, you'd be there to watch people, see the sites, smell the smells, hear the sounds. Dobson did that as well but much of it passed him by because he spent too much time strategizing, trying to work out what the hell was going on, calculating reactions, judging people.

Out there, beyond the window, one hundred and eighty million Nigerians were scraping a living, working in fields, carrying stuff, eating, sleeping and burning stuff that smelled like old tyres. And over the smoky horizon to the north-east Gabriel's plans for a new self-sustaining community were either taking shape or collapsing. This world of struggling billions needed some fresh ideas. Gabriel might be controversial but there was no denying his determination to try something different.

He sat up and phoned Colin Asher on a new phone with a new SIM to see if Asher had heard from Bill Larsen.

"No," Asher said abruptly. Dobson sensed his mood and that he was busy. "But Gabriel's phoned. He expects to have his passport returned tomorrow."

"Good news. Any idea where he'll move next?"

"No."

"OK, I'll leave you to whatever problem you've got right now."

"Just you go careful, Mr Hicks. I sense something - call it danger."

"And I sense you're busy. But if you're so concerned what's your advice?"

"Come home."

"Option two?"

"Keep your bloody head down."

"Option three?"

"Make sure Asher & Asher is the main beneficiary of your bloody life insurance."

Dobson changed the subject. "I enjoyed your recommended bedtime story from Google, Colin."

"Good. So now you're an expert on ancient Fulanis and their jihad, Mr Hicks, you should begin to understand the modern Fulanis. The ancient Fulanis were peanut farmers. Modern Fulanis think two million dollars is peanuts. Upsetting the peanut harvest is likely to upset the big chief."

"Ah," Dobson said, reading between clear lines.

"In my humble opinion and going on what little evidence we've gathered, upsetting Mr F and his friends is like tickling a tiger."

"I'll check my insurance," Dobson said carrying the phone to the window and looking out. The smoke had become a thick, black mushroom cloud rising into the Kano sky. It looked like an omen. "So, what you're saying is, if I spot a tiger, I should walk the other way."

"I'm suggesting you should run, Mr Hicks." Asher said calmly. "Let me explain why."

"Last night, I took all the figures, added a few spoons of facts from MI6, sprinkled in some views from Craig Donovan and then poured in a good measure of my well-

known imagination. I mixed it all together, left it to rise and then stuck it in the oven overnight."

"What did it look like this morning?" Dobson asked.

"It was burned to a cinder, Mr Hicks. A horrible sight and it tasted even worse"

"I see. What's your conclusion?"

"My previous conclusion still stands but it's become a conviction. That Mr F is not only a common crook and a corrupt bastard but also something big in the COK. Maybe he's not the top boss but he's someone very close."

"And your consultants' advice?"

"Some serious forward planning on your part, Mr Hicks. Got it?"

Yes, he'd got it.

It had already struck Dobson, not during the night but at the airport in Lagos where he'd been sitting trying to fathom out who might think Gabriel was a hindrance to their ambitions - political or military or both.

At the time, he'd been sitting amongst a group of Nigerian businessmen laughing and joking about the terrible state of the Nigerian army. It was the old joke about Nigerian army soldiers checking their grenades when one old soldier holds up a spare pin and asks if anyone has seen his grenade. The joke had lightened Dobson's increasingly sinister thoughts about Festus Fulani for a minute or two. The Nigerians, on the other hand, had continued to laugh and tell jokes all the way to Abuja.

But Dobson was still left wondering what had happened to Bill Larsen. An hour later, the explanation came in a call from Solomon in Ghana.

"Benjamin didn't arrive back at camp two nights ago," he said. "Bill waited until morning then went out with some men."

On the phone from Ghana, Dobson heard Solomon choke. "Yesterday they found his body."

"He was working on the school," Solomon went on, struggling to explain. "An old man and woman were also killed. His truck was taken. Bill found them yesterday afternoon. It was the COK, a small group checking the camp out Bill thinks."

Forcing the shock aside, Mark Dobson's mind now raced on the upshot of this. Benjamin was a British citizen, a graduate doing good work though not for a recognised charity or aid organisation. People would learn what he'd been doing and where. Ben's family also needed to be told. and there was no British Embassy in Niamey the capital of Niger.

"Does Gabriel know?" Dobson asked.

"I thought Femi's phone was confiscated."

"It's been returned. But you know something, Sol?" Dobson said, trying to calm Solomon. "This is tragic but, sometimes, good comes from evil."

"Maybe," Solomon replied. "You want to know how Ben and the two, old people died?"

"How?"

"Their throats were cut. Ben was beheaded."

The driver of Mark Dobson's taxi from Abuja to Kano had left him a business card. "For next time, sah."

Dobson had not expected to see him again, but found him sleeping off the effects of the overnight drive. Within an hour, they were on the road heading south once again. Within ten minutes Colin Asher phoned. "Call Bill Larsen."

"We followed truck tracks for thirty miles," Larsen said after apologising for not being in Kano. "But we lost the bastards in the hills."

Dobson asked where Ben's body was and at first couldn't hear what Larsen said. There were clicks on the line and a sudden break, the sort that worried Dobson.

"Repeat that Bill, I didn't hear."

"Ben's body is here at the camp. But fuck's sake, Mark. No amount of army training prepares you for something like that. Cruelty means nothing to those uncivilised bastards. And I've got no facilities here for holding a body for long."

"And the old couple?"

"At their village. But someone needs to contact Ben's family. There's no Embassy representation here."

"I'll deal with it, Bill. Do you have his passport details?"

"Right here."

"Send me a copy."

Next, he found the phone number for the British High Commission in Abuja and phoned them. "We are sorry but the Commission will reopen on Monday morning." He'd forgotten it was Sunday.

Sunday or not, Martin Abisola would be working so he phoned him and told him about Benjamin

Bill Larsen, meanwhile, was talking to his men. There were twenty of them, subdued and angry, "The COK are too close," said Amos from Ethiopia.

"They live amongst the people we try to protect," Peter Moosa said.

"And only two old people were helping Benjamin," said Afram from Ghana. "Why was no-one else helping?"

"Where is the clinic you promised?" asked Kwami who had trained as a nurse with the Kenyan army.

"And my kitchen?" asked Ali the cook.

With Ben's body lying covered in plastic sheeting just twenty yards away, Larsen was, for the first time, seeing signs of anger and frustration mixed with grief in his men's faces. Utterly devastated himself, he struggled not to admit that he, too, was becoming increasingly frustrated. That was when he saw Halima.

She was standing at the entrance in her baggy trousers and tee shirt, a silhouette against the evening sunlight. He saw her come further inside to stand at the back hidden from view behind the taller men.

"Together we must finish Ben's job of building the school," Larsen said. "We must have a school because we have a teacher already. Mr Solomon says he will bring her from Ghana in the next few days. Her name is Carla. And we will soon have our clinics and....."

"Sir," Larsen heard Halima's voice and saw her raised hand. "Sir?"

"Yes, Halima."

"We must go on, sir," she said. "We cannot let these people win. I will go to the school and help." All of the men turned. "My family are dead, sir. They were killed, just like Mr Benjamin. Now I have no-one, but we must not stop. We must go on. Insha'allah, we will win."

Despite his mind pre-occupied by the case, Mark Dobson enjoyed the six-hour drive back to Abuja. The driver, Saleh, was good - quiet, attentive, focussed, chewing gum, sipping from a water bottle every few minutes and keeping a steady speed.

The A2 dual carriage expressway ran through mosque country, through Kura and Zaria into the greener, open, more scenic parts of Kaduna state. Driving through small towns and seeing fewer people, space and horizons was refreshing from the frenetic, crowded streets of Lagos.

Passing scenery at ground level always felt more relaxing than air travel. It was a chance to think and to get things into perspective. But even as darkness began to fall and they entered the outskirts of Abuja he was still unsure where this investigation was heading. From a normal, business perspective there was no end point, nothing specific to aim for other than, perhaps, to help Solomon Trading start trading again. But for what? For it to be hindered once again for refusing to use bribery to win business? For a foreigner, a complete outsider, Nigeria, with its inbuilt culture of fraud and corruption, felt beyond influence. If Gabriel wanted to carry on with his fight then so be it, but what could he do?

Saleh, the driver spoke for the first time for two hours. "Is it the Grand Ibro sah?"



Yes, Dobson confirmed. The Grand Ibro was good enough for however long he was likely to be staying. In the morning, the British High Commission would be open again after the weekend break.

By morning Dobson was standing outside the Commission before it opened.

"My name's Mark Dobson," he said to the Nigerian girl seated behind the high security window when, at last, it opened for business. "I'd like to report the death of a British citizen."

"Is it a family member, sir?"

"No, and the death occurred over the border in Niger where the British do not have representation."

"You'll need to speak to the Embassy in Dakar, Mr....."

They went around in circles for a minute or so until: "Listen," Dobson said. "The guy was murdered. I need to speak to someone in person."

"Have the police been.....?"

"I'd like to speak to someone, OK?"

"Your passport, Mr Dobson?"

He handed it over. "This passport is in the name of Hicks, sir."

He was eventually allowed inside and found someone who produced forms to fill out. By mid-morning he'd dealt with the paperwork, shown a copy of Benjamin Simisola's passport on his phone and they'd agreed they had enough to be getting on with.

But then he mentioned the COK link and the officer, with a look of alarm, disappeared, returning with the Deputy High Commissioner himself.

Graham Parker-Stanley was a family man with a wife and two children in Abuja, he was keen to tell Dobson. It sounded very cosy. Then he started on his curriculum vita and Dobson half listened until he mentioned he'd once worked on counter terrorism though his six-month stint hadn't taught him much about the practical side of things as far as Dobson could tell.

Nevertheless, by midday they were getting on well enough for Dobson to feel he could announce that he wasn't Kenneth Hicks at all but Mark Dobson, international investigator of commercial crime etcetera and that he was in Nigeria once again as he found local matters kept him constantly busy. Parker-Stanley's eyes widened slightly and he gripped the side of his chair, but Dobson knew his Mark Dobson passport number from memory. After more clicks on his computer Parker-Stanley calmed down and Dobson was even invited for lunch.

"Bribery and corruption is a major concern for us, Mr Dobson. It affects development aid, terrorism and only makes illegal immigration to the UK worse. I'm surprised our

paths have not crossed before but you must have some stories to tell. I'd be very interested in your experiences."

Mark Dobson declined lunch. "Thanks, but I've got a lot on," he said. "But if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to be kept informed about Benjamin and what help the Commission can offer to transport his headless body back home."

"Headless? Oh, my God!"

"Yes. I hadn't got around to telling you that but that's what the COK do these days," Dobson said. "It's dangerous out there. In fact, there were two others who had their throats cut at the same time as Benjamin, but they were locals so of no concern to the British High Commission other than perhaps offering some official words of condolence etcetera."

Dobson was then invited to sit a while longer.

## CHAPTER 26

Colonel Martin Abisola had become very familiar with the drive along the palm lined route to the Presidential Villa at Aso Rock in Abuja. He had an office somewhere inside the complex but had declined the offer of a bigger one and more staff, believing that if he was to perform to his own standards it was best if he did most of the important field work himself.

Yes, he could call upon data and intelligence and receive any other information he needed but those tasks were best suited to administrators, pen pushers and computer experts, men and women who he could rely on to spend most of their time doing what they were paid to do rather than looking for perks outside the nine to five routine. And there was, now, a newly appointed and like-minded Inspector General of Nigerian Police who he trusted and could call on when necessary.

As the red topped dome with the backdrop of Aso Rock came into view, he slowed down and parked his usual run-around - the black, Toyota Commuter mini bus with its heavily tinted glass windows and thought, once more, about President Azazi's recent words:

"Ignore the fat men, Martin. They strut and pose because they believe they are above the law." And, in another quietly spoken moment: "We have many brightly coloured peacocks who display on the lawns, Martin, but you are a quiet man who has no need for extravagance. Be your own man and run things in your own style. God knows this country is in need of men who can force change by example."

Abisola had certainly been doing things his way. As soon as the President had asked him to head up the State Security Service, his first move was to expose the only man who came between himself and the President - the National Security Advisor - the man at the centre of the corrupt deal over arms intended for the fight against the COK.

Abisola was popular with the President but he still needed to watch his back.

Meanwhile, he kept on doing things his own way, his mind firmly set on ensuring that President Azazi's promises made during his inaugural speech would be delivered and that the forty Ministers in the President's team took notice, kept themselves clean and gave total and unstinting support to a President with one of the toughest jobs in the world.

That morning, Abisola was wearing beige cargo pants, a green shirt, a heavily patterned, royal blue tie and was carrying an overfilled, brown leather bum bag that had clearly seen better days. He checked his watch. His meeting with the President was at ten thirty. He had asked for privacy, was right on time and the President never kept him waiting.

He was escorted to a room with a panoramic view towards Aso Rock. Around the walls sat a line of gilded chairs with white and gold shiny fabric. In the centre was a wide, ornate desk made of dark wood, empty but for a Nigerian flag, a white, fixed telephone and a green shaded lamp that cast a yellow light on its polished surface.

He didn't have to wait long before the door was opened and President Azazi entered wearing a pure-white boubou, his tall, lean form enhanced by his other trademark, the elaborately embroidered chechia on his head. The door was closed behind him and he strode over, hand outstretched. He had tired-looking eyes but he walked straight and firm. A leathery smile appeared through the nutty brown lines of his face.

Abisola bowed his head and took the hand. Neither said a word as Azazi walked around the desk to a cream coloured leather-clad chair. Only when he was seated did the President beckon to the armless, upright chair in front of the desk. "Please, Martin, take a seat."

Abisola unzipped the bum bag, relieving it of some of the bulging pressure inside and sat down.

"You are well, Martin?"

"Thank you, sir."

"What have you got?"

"This, sir," Abisola stood up again and placed a small voice recorder on the desk before the President. He switched it on, adjusted the volume switch and sat down. It started with a few seconds of silence, but then a voice:

".....it seems no-one knows where the fucking akata Dobson is." There was a rustling sound, then Abisola's own voice: "Unfortunately due to the late arrival of these two I am now late for my other meeting. Would you excuse me."

There was the sound of a door closing followed by another short silence. Then the voices began again, getting louder, then shouting, the words clear, the voices recognisable. It lasted fifteen minutes until there was more rustling and the door banged shut.

Abisola got up and switched the recorder off.

The President shook his head. "Mmm. My young brother," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes sir."

"And two well-known pastors."

"Yes, sir."

"Play it again from the middle, Martin."

Abisola rewound and they listened again.

"That is a long list of rogues, Martin. But some very familiar names."

"Yes, sir."

The President leaned back in the leather chair and sighed. "You have a copy somewhere?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Leave the matter with me," he said. "I need to think."

"Of course, sir."

Abisola then reached into the bum bag again. This time he brought out his iPad. He switched it on, swiped, touched and handed the sticky instrument to the President. "Watch, sir."

The President picked it up, squinted at the small screen and produced a pair of heavy rimmed glasses from a pocket. He put them on and peered at the screen again.

"Ah. It is our well-known friend Mr Kenneth Balogun. Signing something. Looking nervous. Looking dishevelled. You did this, Martin?"

"No sir."

"So, who did?"

"Some private individuals with a grudge."

"What is he signing?"

"This, sir."

And Abisola produced from his bag a folded sheet of paper, a printed copy of what Balogun had signed. "It refers to the arrest warrant for Pastor Gabriel Joshua, sir," he said as he laid a photocopy of the warrant on the desk next to the iPad.

The President picked it up and scanned it, holding the paper close to his face. He turned it over in case there was something on the reverse.

"I recognise the signature and the official stamp," he said putting it down on his desk. "Do all Nigerian judges live in such dire poverty that they feel the need to enrich themselves further? I despair."

The President then stood up, removed his chechia and placed it on the desk in front of him. To Abisola, this was another gesture of trust, appreciation and respect so he, too, stood.

"I have told the Kenyan Government to release Pastor Gabriel and to return his passport. No charges." the President said. "I would be happy to meet him sometime soon. That is not to say I agree with everything he says but we should listen and be tolerant of fresh views. God knows we need them."

There was a longer pause now as the President wandered around, thinking. Then he returned, sat down and put his hands together on the desk. Abisola also sat down, the bum bag on his lap, waiting.

"Do you understand Gabriel Joshua, Martin?"

It was a very broad question that Abisola knew was meant to cover everything that Gabriel stood for.

"Yes sir. I agree we should show tolerance. It is also my view that, for the good of Nigeria, we should not ignore him but involve him."

The President nodded to show he fully understood what Abisola's last sentence meant.

"Meanwhile, sir....."

"Go on."

"I think I should tell you that my main source for this recent information comes from an Englishman whom I've met. This is the man, Dobson, mentioned on the tape. He phoned me earlier today. There has been another COK attack over the border in Niger, sir. A man working for Pastor Gabriel was beheaded along with two local people. The man was British with Ghanaian parents. Black. He was also a scientist with a PhD, Doctor Benjamin Simisola. The UK government will soon become aware and so, I suppose, will the press and international media, sir. The murder took place in Niger but I think we should prepare ourselves for any developments and repercussions.

"And another matter sir. I now know that one of the Nigerian girls in the Maiduguri school massacre escaped. She is a very brave girl from what I understand. She has been staying at Pastor Gabriel's camp since she escaped. She knew Doctor Simisola."

Azazi stood up once more. "And this information comes from who?"

"Mark Dobson, sir."

"What does this man Dobson do?"

"He is a private investigator specialising in commercial crime, sir - fraud, corruption, money laundering. Gabriel is his client."

"Interesting. Do you trust him?"

"Yes sir. And frankly I now believe he's in as much danger as Gabriel. I would hate something to happen to him either here or back in the UK."

They finished soon after that. But what Abisola hadn't told the President yet was what was on a listening device he'd placed inside a shiny white BMW car. Martin Abisola preferred evidence, not rumour.

Mark Dobson's meeting with Mr Graham Parker-Stanley at the British High Commission went on far longer than either had expected perhaps because Dobson had plunged in by naming his client - Pastor Gabriel Joshua.

Had Mr Parker-Stanley heard of him? Yes, although he'd not long been in post in Abuja. Did he know there was an arrest warrant for Gabriel? Vaguely. The Foreign Office had sought some clarifications which staff had dealt with. Did he know Gabriel had been detained in Kenya? That was the responsibility of the Nairobi post. Did he know the arrest warrant was a forgery?

"Oh, dear me, no."

Did he know about an unresolved murder on British soil of a Nigerian, another employee of Gabriel's?

"Good Lord! Another?"

And so it went on, Dobson slowly building interest in a subject that had been hidden in the dust beneath the Commission's carpets because the UK Foreign Office set its policies and priorities.

Parker-Stanley listened patiently throughout although Dobson felt increasingly guilty about him missing his lunch. Then, at one thirty, someone poked their head around his door, mouthed something and Parker-Stanley stood up.

"Excuse me a moment."

Dobson thought he might have slipped out for a quick sandwich, but he returned after a few minutes.

"We've got a Member of Parliament here - an unannounced visit," he said. "Taj Harding, ex Ministry of Defence. Know him?"

"Yes," Dobson said. "He's a friend of Gabriel's."

"What a coincidence."

That evening Mark Dobson tracked down Taj Harding to the Sheraton Hotel. The ex-Minister was sitting alone, in a corner of the Pool bar as if waiting for a friend. Dobson knew he was a lawyer of Ghanaian descent and had been expected to get much higher in UK politics. The first black Prime Minister? Exactly why he'd resigned Dobson didn't fully understand other than Gabriel's explanation. "Taj Harding. A good man overtaken by the system."

How strange, therefore. that Harding's description of Gabriel just a few minutes after Dobson introduced himself was: "Gabriel. A good man overtaken by expectations."

But he'd then added: "I'm here because of Gabriel and I'm not alone in my knowledge of him. Do you know Senator Daniel Bakare from the USA?"

Dobson played it down. "I know the name."

"Are you free to meet him?" We're hoping to do something."

Something was better than nothing, Dobson thought, but what?

"I understand from the High Commission we have a British casualty in Niger?" Harding went on.

The language was too diplomatic for Mark Dobson so he elaborated by saying who Benjamin was, what he'd been doing for Gabriel's project and, after just a short pause, that it was the COK who had first cut his throat and then beheaded him.

Harding almost retched.

"More coffee?" Dobson asked after he'd recovered slightly.

They had moved from the Pool bar to a corner table in the lobby, a plusher spot with comfortable arm chairs and contemporary artwork when another smartly suited black man with an American accent arrived.

"You're working for Craig Donovan I believe," Daniel Bakare said after introductions.

Dobson nodded not wanting to mention that it was he, a Brit, who was employing Donovan, an American.

"Specialising in fraud and corruption, I understand," Bakare went on.

"Investigator of rather than perpetrator of," Dobson said and let it stand there because Harding already knew and was looking visibly keen to break the more sordid news about Benjamin. For a while he let them discuss the atrocity as they sat in their neatly pressed dark suits.

"There's bound to be international reaction," Harding was saying as Dobson completed his silent but in-depth analysis of the two black politicians. He continued to listen and watch but learned nothing until Bakare suddenly mentioned the word 'Aid'.

"Gabriel's been too hung up on defence," Bakare was saying. "It's a minefield for the USA. Aid's a different matter. I reckon if he'd spent the last few years lobbying for economic aid instead of military support we might have got somewhere. Perhaps we've been guilty of paying too much attention to the military support and not enough to what it is he's trying to defend."

"I totally agree," said Harding, "But Gabriel has a hang up about aid. He thinks economic aid is a total waste. He refused to discuss it with me more than once telling me that he had no need for economic help. I think it stems from a childhood spent surviving, standing on his own two feet."

Mark Dobson broke his silence.

"That's it," he said. "Gabriel's view is that defence is what governments should provide for security and stability. Business ideas should come from individuals granted the freedom to express themselves. Economic development, Gabriel says, should come from profits. Kick start funding is something else, but Gabriel feels he's already kick-started something. What dismays him is that the west only talks of resources and the fear of interference. Why not help the millions of unemployed people out there who could be put to better use in defending themselves?"

"Then Nigeria says it can't afford large armies," Bakare replied.

"I'm not surprised," Dobson replied. "If you don't collect enough tax and the country is bleeding to death through fraud and corruption, what do you expect."

"Which is, of course, another of Gabriel's arguments." Harding said.

"To which Gabriel adds that until Africa gets fraud and corruption under control why doesn't the West step in and fund defence forces that use the hundreds of thousands of unemployed Africans," said Dobson. "And so, we go full circle."

They fell quiet for a moment until Taj Harding asked something else that made Mark Dobson sit up.

"What do you know about the girl called Halima?"

"Why do you ask?" Dobson said.

"Because every time I've mentioned Nigeria or Niger in the last few days to people in the charity and aid business, they all mention getting emails from her. She's caught the imagination. Who is she?"

"A Nigerian girl who escaped the school bombing by untying the vest she'd been fitted with," said Dobson. "She'd been abducted with other girls by the COK from her village in Borno State but was picked up by one of Bill Larsen's guys. She's lost all her family and asked to stay at Larsen's camp. According to Bill Larsen, she's become almost indispensable around the camp and desperately wants to meet Gabriel. And she would have known Benjamin Simisola of course."

Mark Dobson stopped right there as a sort of realisation hit him. What Gabriel had needed all these years was publicity without the infamy. And the modern world loved a good human story.

The same realisation clearly hit Bakare and Harding at the same time. "Could we get her down here?" said Bakare excitedly.

"Gabriel could meet her here." Harding added.

"Get the press and TV in." Bakare said.

And with that, ideas began to flow. Enthusiasm began to replace the pessimism that Gabriel normally associated with these two guys. If he'd been there, Dobson decided to himself, there was a chance Gabriel might even have been encouraged. It was Dobson who decided to throw in some caution.



"What about.....?"

He was going to mention security but didn't get as far as that for his phone buzzed with a text. Few people ever texted Dobson and only about three people in the world knew this number.

"Go to reception, Mr Hicks. There's a message."

"Excuse me," Dobson said and stood up. Slightly apprehensively, he went to reception. "My name's Hicks. I believe there's a message for me."

"Just a moment, sir.....Yes sir. The phone in the lobby."

"Dump your phone. Mark. It's already being tracked," said Martin Abisola. "If I know you're in the Sheraton so do others."

"How?"

"Don't ask. Just leave right now."

The phone went dead and Dobson glanced around. There was no sign of Abisola, just black men and a few white men in suits, some smartly dressed Nigerian ladies at a women's convention, a few big men in boubous sitting and fingering beads, a couple of Indians, two Chinese and a scattering of other nationalities in varying shades of black, white and brown. He hadn't sensed being watched, followed or tracked but perhaps he'd not been cautious enough.

He returned to Harding and Bakare. "Something's cropped up," he said, still looking around. "I'm being advised to leave right now and go somewhere more secure."

"You're kidding, Mark." Bakare said.

"I'm not kidding. And when you were discussing bringing Halima here a few minutes ago, I was about to mention security. Think about it. There's more going on here than I think you realise."

Dobson picked up his precious laptop bag ready to go but lingered for a moment longer and looked at Bakare. "What's Steve Barnett's take on Gabriel?"

He was looking at Daniel Bakare but realised Harding may not know who Barnett was. "Barnett runs US intelligence here," he said for Harding's benefit.

Bakare looked surprised. "You know Steve?"

"No, but Craig Donovan does. Craig had Barnett's job once. So, what's the US intelligence take on Gabriel and, for that matter, the COK?"

"Trying not to interfere unless it affects US security," Bakare said. "Watching briefs. Gabriel doesn't bother us and we track COK movements to get a better understanding of them."

"What about COK links with corruption, fraud and money laundering?"

"That too," he said even less convincingly. "We always trying to track money flows."

Dobson knew he should be going but sat down and looked at both of them. "Does the US Embassy and the UK High Commission exchange intelligence? Is Gabriel's name ever mentioned in discussions on security?"

Bakare shrugged and Harding seemed not to know what he was talking about. "What about the COK leadership?" Dobson continued.

"The guy with many names?" said Bakare.

"That's him. Where do his funds come from?"

"All over," Bakare said vaguely. "Steve would probably know."

Dobson was not at all sure Steve Barnett would know and Harding would know even less. "Who's your equivalent to Steve Barnett, Taj?"

"We tend to use private consultancies."

Dobson nodded. He knew all about outsourcing of intelligence gathering. "Undercover work, is it? Infiltration. Murky."

He knew he might be saying things that weren't entirely welcome. He was, after all, just a small-time consultant who worked for the private sector. He should mind his own damned business. But he felt it had become his business to know and he also wanted to make a point. That the Gabriel matter was far bigger than these two seemed to realise. Again, he checked his watch.

"So," he said. "The US and UK see clear connections between terrorism and Nigerian corruption."

"Sure," said Bakare vaguely as if he knew he could get away with false claim to a small time English management consultant. Dobson ignored him.

"What about the possibility the COK is hell bent on causing chaos, the total breakdown in law and order, civil unrest, the creation of no go areas, even more poverty and mass starvation. What if their ultimate ambition is control through a military coup and to challenge the legitimate government and the President?"

"Jesus, what is this?"

"What about the possibility the COK leadership sees, rightly or wrongly, that Gabriel's widespread popularity and his views on defence are a far greater obstacle to its plans than anything the international community or the elected Government or the President could do to stop them?"

"Fuck's sake, Mark. Hold on there. You think Gabriel's that important?"

"I don't know," Dobson said, "It's what Colin Asher and I call grey sky thinking. Thinking the worst. So, you think about and let me know because I've been advised to leave right now for my own safety."

And with that he slung the laptop bag across his shoulder and walked away.

There was a new looking white Toyota waiting outside in the bright night-time lights of the Sheraton's main entrance and a respectable-looking middle aged man wearing a white shirt and grey trousers stood alongside it, an ear plug cable dangling over his shoulder.

"Mr Hicks? My name's Dickson. Martin Abisola sent me." he said opening the rear door.

Dobson nodded and jumped in. "Grand Ibro, please."

The Grand Ibro Hotel was somewhere off Herbert Macaulay Way and the taxi headed in that direction. It went up Sani Abacha Way and then turned down Ibrahim Babarigida and then speeded up. That was when Dobson saw bright headlights from a car following directly behind. They lit up the taxi's interior and shone directly into the driver's eyes through the mirror.

Dobson's driver braked hard and turned right. There was a screech of brakes from the car behind and the lights danced from side to side as it swerved, but it was still right behind, full beam onto the back of Dickson's head. Then a brighter flash, a loud bang and the rear windscreen behind Dobson shattered, glass showered onto the back seat as Dobson instinctively slid to the floor, still holding the laptop.

Dickson swerved across the road again, cutting the corner into another side road but still the car behind followed. This was now the dark but more modern backstreets of Abuja, not Naples where Dobson had once had a similar experience of a car chase with guns and him sitting inside. On that occasion, a bullet had pierced the driver's headrest, missing his neck but exiting through a neat hole in the front windscreen. This time, more shots sounded from behind and nothing hit but maybe that was because there was no rear windscreen left. Neither were there any street lights here, just pale lights from unseen buildings flashing by, a few cars going the other way and the ghostly figures of people in white gowns on the sidewalk stopping to watch two cars racing by.

Dickson braked again, skidded sideways into another right turn and put some distance from the chasing car. Then it was right again and they were back on Ibrahim Babarigida Way. Immediately he went right again.

Sliding from side to side on the floor behind the front seats Dobson chanced a look out of the side window - a road called Cape Town. Behind them he saw the chasing car brake too late this time and race by still on Ibrahim.

On Cape Town, Dickson turned immediately left into a dark side road, accelerated down it and then stopped, lights off, engine still running.

Dobson looked up. "Are we nearly there yet?"

Dickson, Dobson noticed, now had the earpiece stuck in his right ear. In the darkness, he raised his hand. "One moment, sir," he said calmly and continued to check his mirror, the road in front, behind and to the sides. It was very dark but for a dim light from a building to the left.

"I think you'll find the Ibro Hotel is somewhere off Herbert Macaulay Way," Dobson said from the glass covered rear seat.

"One moment sir." A radio bleeped from somewhere. "Kampala," Dickson said presumably to the radio.

"Uganda already?" Dobson said. "I must have fallen asleep."

More headlights shone again from behind and Dobson prepared himself for another wheel spinning start, but the driver pulled his ear piece out and let it fall around the gear stick "Sir," he said, "Get out please."

"Christ," Dobson thought to himself. "Colin will never believe this."

He wrapped the strap of his laptop bag over his head and got out to see a man strolling towards him from the car behind, a silhouette against bright headlights.

"I told you not to waste any time."

Martin Abisola didn't say anything else but spoke to Dickson instead and the Toyota drove off with more glass falling from the rear window. Abisola walked back and opened the front passenger door of the vehicle behind. "Get in."

It was a sliding door and he slid it shut behind Dobson who found himself in the front passenger seat of a dark coloured Toyota Commuter with heavily tinted windows. Some seats behind had been taken out. The two that were left were littered with gadgets and a small TV monitor.

"The Ibro is not a good place for you to stay tonight." Abisola said as he climbed into the driver's seat and restarted the engine. "There's a small welcoming committee waiting there for you. Someone else was at the Sheraton. Do you have anything at the hotel?"

In the almost total darkness, Dobson pointed at the laptop bag strung around his neck. "Everything is here. I can manage without my toothbrush."

"You should stay somewhere else tonight."

"I didn't want to sleep there anyway," Dobson replied.

Abisola pushed the automatic into drive. "There are other problems with the Ibro?"

"Perhaps," Dobson said. "This morning I overheard a guest complaining the bed sheets were covered in hair and semen stains."

"Was that before or after he'd slept there?"

"He'd only just checked in."

Abisola was staring ahead at the road. "Would Gabriel stay at the Ibro?" he asked doing a U-turn.

"No," Dobson replied. "It's too expensive for him."

Dobson's inbuilt compass usually told him if he was heading north, south, east or west but Martin Abisola drove fast and he was lost by the time they'd turned off the

highway, made turns left and right and stopped in a side road next to a solid iron gate. Dobson, peering into the darkness, saw a high concrete wall capped with razor wire.

The heavy gate slowly slid to one side and they entered a driveway marked by builder's rubble on both sides - sand, cement, stone chippings, a cement mixer. But the headlights picked out a rose-coloured house complete with a pair of incongruous Romanesque concrete pillars.

"Your hotel," Abisola said climbing out.

"Nice razor wire," Dobson replied.

"Come and check in. Bring your bag."

Abisola climbed out holding an overfull, brown bum bag. He remotely double locked the mini bus, walked up the steps, hit some buttons on a metal box on one side and the door opened onto a faintly lit tiled corridor. Dobson followed. It was hot inside and smelled of dusty building work but more wall lights came on automatically as they walked towards a door at the end. Abisola pushed the door open with his foot, flicked a light switch, pressed a remote control and a standing air-conditioner unit hummed. The room was windowless and bare except for a long wooden table, six hard, plastic chairs, a small table with a kettle, a few mugs and a refrigerator in one corner.

"How did you know my phone number?" Dobson asked, needing an answer to something that had bothered him even while shots were being fired at the taxi.

"You used it to call Bill Larsen. Larsen's number is known by certain people."

And then Dobson remembered the clicks and the echoes. "So, they listen in to Bill Larsen?"

"Probably. We certainly do, not that he uses it much. Take a seat. I want to show you something."

Abisola, in a yellow shirt, the same or another skewed red tie and more black stubble than last time, placed his bulging bum bag on the table. He unzipped it, pulled out a mini voice recorder, placed it next to the bag and sat back.

"Now then, Mr Hicks – Mark. What I'm about to tell you is only known to a small handful of people, one of whom is President Azazi. First, I'm going to play this recording. For your information, it was recorded right here. Secretly I might add."

Then he played the tape. When it finished, he switched it off and sat back.

"The one with the loud voice," he said, "Is Zainab Azazi, President Azazi's younger brother." He waited a moment to let that sink in. Then:

"The other two are the self-styled pastors you saw in London - Ayo and Lazarus. They are members of a group of similar self-styled preachers who have, out of greed, become entangled in something far bigger than they understand. You already know most of the other names Zainab mentions."

Dobson nodded grimly.

"We are faced with a very serious situation, Mark," Martin Abisola said standing up. He wandered a few paces away, then stopped and looked back. "I understand the COK killed one of Gabriel's guys."

"Doctor Benjamin Simisola. He was, for want of a better description, Gabriel's Project manager. "

Abisola nodded grimly, strolled the length of the table and returned. Then he sat down.

"The COK have learned many things from the mistakes of Boko Haram, Al Qaida, Daesh and others," he said.

"And the COK is not just another Islamic terrorist group led by a fanatic like Abubakar Shekau although the COK has a military leader just as cruel as Shekau. This guy operates like a military commander with at least ten names - Mohamed Idris, Mahmud Amadu, Mahmud Yusuf, Allah Marwa and Yan Tatsine, but you already know that. But he has a boss, a Minister or a Defence Secretary if you like. That man then reports to what we might call a Prime Minister or a President."

He took a deep breath. "The COK is a front for a political machine whose objective is the break-up of Nigeria and the breaking down of its borders with Niger and Benin and anywhere else that falls into their hands - Burkina Faso, Mali, southern Chad, northern Cameroon. Their plans seem to stretch as far west as Ghana."

Another short pause.

"No-one is denying that Nigeria is difficult to manage. So are the other countries I just listed. But progress is being made. What no-one wants is for Nigeria, the biggest, to be destroyed using terrorism as the driving force."

"So, who are the people behind this?" Dobson asked.

"You've just heard one - the President's younger brother, Zainab. That is how high this goes. But Zainab Azazi is only part of it. The real power sits with individuals with huge wealth acquired through criminality and corruption. So....."

Abisola paused.

He was playing with the voice recorder, watching his own hands and not looking at Mark Dobson. Right now, in this bare room deep inside a secure building somewhere in Abuja, Martin Abisola, the head of the Nigerian SSS was trusting Dobson with highly sensitive information and Dobson started to wonder whether even the US's own intelligence man, Steve Barnett, ever got this close. Somehow, he doubted it.

"So" Abisola went on. He was still not looking directly at Dobson, "So, anyone who talks about fairer distribution of wealth and against corruption is their enemy. Normally that wouldn't worry them because they know, from history, that such people come and they go all the time. In politics, fine words and big promises are short lived because people usually get dragged into their corrupt world."

He stopped and looked up.

"And they think President Azazi will soon give up and go the way of others?" Dobson suggested.

"That's right," Abisola said. "But then along comes Pastor Gabriel Joshua." He let that hang there for a moment, got up and walked to the end of the table and back again.

"For most Africans," he continued, "Life's a daily struggle and corruption is a way of life. So, if someone from a poor background suddenly turns up and shows it's possible to drag yourself out of poverty and become rich by openly rejecting dishonesty and corruption and is a brilliant motivational speaker and a hell raiser who talks about bright futures and opportunities, about suns rising and broad horizons and is utterly convincing.....you get the point?"

Dobson did.

Abisola sat down.

"Africans love magic, Mark, and Gabriel is like a magician. If he spent more time here instead of criss-crossing the globe more and more people would watch him, listen to him, follow him, believe in him. And the COK don't want that The COK need compliant people and that means poor people, people with no hope, no jobs and no future. The more the better because compliant people will ensure they keep their power."

Abisola then stared at the table, thinking, silent. Dobson did the same.

"So, which of the names on your list is Mr Big?" Dobson eventually asked.

"Festus Fulani might be," Abisola replied, "But there might also be others not on your list or mine."

"Why not arrest Festus?"

"Insufficient sound evidence and the President's view, and mine, is that his arrest would stir others into more precipitate action. Someone else would step up and things would escalate rapidly and uncontrollably, just as it would if they killed the President."

"Is Festus a devout Moslem?"

"Not noticeably."

"So, what motivates him?"

"Power."

"Who would make an arrest?"

"The police, the army and the judiciary are going through big shake ups. It's a task the President set himself but, again, until the shake ups are complete, I'm not sure we could guarantee a good outcome."

"Because judges, army people, police are involved?"

Abisola nodded. "Exactly."

"You're a great admirer of the President, yes?"

Abisola nodded and took his time over his next words. "You know something, Mark?" his voice became almost a whisper. "President Azazi would like to see Gabriel as the next President."

That did not shake Dobson as much as Abisola may have hoped.

"Yes, Solomon told me as much."

Abisola smiled. "So, he's talked to the President?"

"Only once, I think. But Gabriel says he's not qualified, that he doesn't have the right friends and doesn't rub shoulders with the right people. He then says the right people are as corrupt as everyone else."

"And he's right of course. Nigeria's like a pyramid with those at the top having got there because they play the game. But the man at the top of the pyramid right now is a man who has proved it is possible to rise through the system by doing exactly what Gabriel has done - work hard and be honest."

"The President's chief strength, though, is his military career. That makes Mr Big and others feel nervous. They hesitate because they're not exactly sure which of the President's old military friends would stick by him and bring the whole of the military with them. So, they play for time, wearing the President down, hoping he won't last. Then along comes Pastor Gabriel Joshua."

"So, what's your preferred option?" Dobson asked after another pause.

It was a weak question but Abisola was ready. "To arrest thirty or more key names in one strike and create fear in another hundred that their status, their wealth and their lifestyles were about to be shattered. We'd need to provoke a sense of panic in the hope they'd show themselves. Then more arrests."

To Dobson it sounded reasonable, but was it feasible? It was, at least, a plan, a statement of intent, a strategy. Was it workable? "The President agrees with that strategy?" he asked.

"It's his strategy. Hence the moves to clean up the judiciary, the police, the army. The judge who signed the forged arrest warrant for Gabriel is a good example."

"Do you have any evidence of financial irregularities around Festus Fulani?"

"Rumour and speculation such as the FAA deal but never enough proof."

"Asher & Asher are experts" Dobson said. "Colin Asher calls it breaking into the PLI. I've always told Colin he could make far more money lecturing on PLI, but Colin says lecturing is too fucking boring."

Abisola smiled. "What's PLI?"



"PLI is about breaking into the three stages of laundering - placement, layering and integration. Placing is the arrival of the dirty cash; layering is the hiding of the dirty cash from its source and integration is the process whereby the dirty money gets returned to the criminal."

Abisola sniffed. "But how do you get action?"

"By breaking into the PLI process, particularly the layering. Layering is the clever part. We get action by proving to banks that we have information showing they are party to illegal laundering of proceeds of crime."

"Does it work?"

"It depends. Laundering often uses banks you've never heard of. Their reputations are not at stake as much as the big banks."

"What would you need?"

"Names - we've already got those - some bank account details to start us off and away we go."

He'd made it sound easy and Martin Abisola was not convinced. "We'd still need to make arrests in one, co-ordinated strike."

"But no harm in trying."

"Mmm," Abisola murmured. "Interesting idea." He switched on the voice recorder again, fast forwarded and pressed play.

"This is Pastor Ayo's voice," he said. "He's sitting in his BMW with Lazarus. Listen."

*"How much cash do you have, Lazarus?"*

*"Maybe a quarter of a million dollars."*

*"We need two million."*

*"How much do you have, Ayo?"*

*"It was you who was carrying the cash in London."*

*"You are blaming me, Ayo?"*

The argument continued for a minute or so until Ayo spoke again:

*"Do you think it was chance, Lazarus? That a couple of street boys saw two Nigerians with a case and decided it might contain a laptop or a mobile phone? That when they opened it and found it stuffed with hundred-dollar bills they were surprised? Or do you think they already knew it contained two million dollars?"*

*"It is a good question, Ayo."*

*"It is not just a good question. Lazarus. It is an observation coming from a man with brain that is, unlike yours, neither a jelly nor a shrivelled old yam. Is it not too much of a coincidence that the bag was stolen as we emerged from the Cumberland hotel?"*

*Is it possible that the theft was planned and then carried out by someone who knew everything?"*

*"By who, Ayo? By the bastard, Gabriel?"*

*"A foolish suggestion."*

*"You think the Kaplan boy knows something, Ayo?"*

There was a pause at this point as if Ayo had not thought of that.

*"A stupid idea."*

*"Then who, Ayo?"*

*"Osman Olande could do it."*

*"And he was in London and we did not see him afterwards and he is a friend of Festus and....."*

There was a break in the recording, rustling, fumbling, the car engine, a door slamming.

"Nothing much happens at this point," Abisola said, fast forwarding a little. "It is as if Lazarus has got out of the car. But then, the car engine stops and Ayo phones Zainab Azazi.

"The call lasts several minutes but Ayo agrees they could pay around a million dollars in cash. Lazarus, Ayo says, has an account at the Baroda Bank in London. That's a very unusual bank for a Nigerian. He also reminds Zainab that Lazarus's cousin is State Governor in Warri and owes Lazarus a lot of money. He is trying to persuade Zainab to be patient. That when the money is sorted, they will pay it into any bank account in London."

"Is Lazarus aware of all this?" Dobson asked.

"Probably not," Abisola said. "But now listen again. This is a separate recording of Azazi. He's in his car after talking to Ayo and is now speaking to Festus Fulani."

*"They are nervous, Babban. It is good." Azazi laughed. "They say they have about one million in London, Babban....., yes, I know it is not enough but we will squeeze them again later. One million is a deposit."*

Abisola stopped the recorder. "You know 'babban' in Hausa, Mark? It means big. Mr Babban. Mr Big."

Abisola restarted the recording. "This is Azazi again."

*"I'll fix it with one of Osman's fellas, Babban, maybe Osman himself if he can get to London.....yessah.....which bank?.....Islamic Bank, so I'll need the number by text..... They leave tomorrow."*

Abisola switched it off again. "We then hacked the text," he said.

"How long ago was that?" Dobson asked.

"Two days ago."

## CHAPTER 27

Ayo and Lazarus were half way to London in comfortable first-class seats with visas kindly issued by the British High Commission enabling them to come and go whenever they felt like it.

Mark Dobson, meanwhile, had slept on a thin mattress beneath the table inside Abisola's windowless room. He woke to the smell of coffee.

"Room service," Martin Abisola announced putting a mug on the floor. "I've got to go. Dickson will call here in an hour or so. Feel free to use the Wi-Fi. The password is the barcode on a bottle of water in the 'fridge. Go to the Sheraton. It's as secure as anywhere. Stay in a public place. Buy another phone and SIM and give Dickson the number. Trust him. I'm meeting the President at eight."

Dobson took his coffee to the table, found the water bottle with its bar code number and logged on to the internet. Then he wrote a long, encrypted message for Colin Asher.

Around nine, Dickson arrived. "Boss says to take you to the Sheraton."

Dobson nodded. "Via somewhere where I can buy another phone please, Dickson."

He followed Dickson to the outside door. The morning sunlight hurt his eyes but he looked around. The sheet metal gate was shut, the razor wire on the top of the concrete wall glinted in the sun. Tyre marks in dried mud showed that traffic also went around the side of the building. Dickson's Toyota was parked by the steps, a blue one this morning with two aerials on the roof.

Stepping inside it was clear the car belonged to a law enforcement agency. It had all the paraphernalia of a police vehicle with a purpose-built central console box with fixed phone, a satnav screen, wires, headphones and loose cables. On the back seat lay a black leather, multi-pocketed vest along with a tangle of other stuff.

"We're using the other exit," Dickson said as he drove around the side of the building.

Looking up, Dobson could see that windows had been bricked up turning the building into one big concrete cube enclosed by a concrete wall. Two large aerials and a satellite dish rose from the roof and, at the rear, sat more parked Toyotas and two high powered BMW motorbikes. The second exit was just another plate steel gateway set in the concrete wall. It slid open automatically as they approached.

An hour later Dobson found Taj Harding and Daniel Bakare eating late breakfast at the Sheraton.

"Still in one piece, then?" Bakare said as if he thought last night's discussion about security had been exaggerated. Dobson nodded and helped himself to coffee as Bakare set about a pile of pancakes.

"We'd like to talk to Gabriel," Harding said as if Dobson was Gabriel's minder.

"But I don't know where he is."

"Solomon?"

"Ghana. But I'm entirely reliant on Colin Asher in London for communications."

Bakare wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"Jesus," he said as if he felt surrounded by inefficiency. "Then let me update you. I've spoken to our Embassy people in Niamey. They, too, have had an email from this girl - Halima isn't it? She's asking for funds but it's vague because, well let's be frank, not many sixteen-year-old American kids could find the right words for a funding application let alone a Hausa speaking Nigerian teenager. Anyways, they passed the emails around and they ended up with the USAID contact in Niamey - Liz Abraham's her name. I spoke to Liz this morning. Seed money for viable projects is available but they need information, facts, figures, you know the way it is. They've replied to Halima but got nothing back. How do we contact her?"

"Can't your friend Liz drive over there?" Dobson knew he was being facetious. Travel safety for US staff was paramount.

Taj Harding joined in.

"I also spoke to the UK DfED and got through to someone involved in West Africa. Niger is not on their list so no-one recalls anything from Halima. But, an hour ago, I managed to speak to the Under Secretary of State. I gave a brief summary, not long enough but I'm waiting a call back."

"I'd like to get Halima down here," Bakare said. "Let's get her to meet Gabriel here. Get the media in. Stir some action."

And then they continued where they'd left off the night before. Dobson listened, sipped orange juice and drank coffee.

Then Bakare's phone rang.

He answered it and listened saying yes or no. When he'd finished, he tapped out a message and then sat back looking serious.

"Problem?" Harding asked.

Bakare nodded. "There were two Americans in the group of Christians rounded up by the COK in that football stadium in Banfola. Remember that? "

Dobson did.

"They were injured during the siege," Bakare went on. "The Joint Force broke it up but one of the Americans just died - a black Pastor from Florida." He paused and checked his phone again. "Excuse me. Something else."

Dobson feeling this was interesting but not for his ears spotted a vacant seat in the lobby where he could sit with his back to the wall. He picked up his laptop bag, moved there and logged on to the secure site.

Earlier that morning he'd briefed Colin Asher on his overnight discussion with Martin Abisola and, with Abisola's permission, given Asher the account details at the Islamic Bank. By co-incidence it was the Edgware Road Branch not a hundred metres from the Asher & Asher office. He'd also suggested it was a good time to bring Craig Donovan back into action.

On the screen now was a new message.

"Morning Mark. Really impressed by Colin's homemade encryption stuff. How can I help?" It was Craig Donovan.

Dobson typed back: "Surveillance op, Craig. Ayo and Lazarus are due in shortly. BA from Abuja." Then he hit the 'encrypt' button and 'send'.

He then phoned Dickson with a request. "I'll check with the boss," Dickson said.

Within twenty minutes he had a scanned list of names and addresses and some bank details - all Nigerians and many on George Obod's original list. Within thirty minutes the list was with Colin Asher.

When Dobson glanced up from the screen for the first time in an hour, he saw Daniel Bakare, ear to his phone, in another corner of the hotel lobby. Call finished, Bakare walked over. "Where's Gabriel?" he asked.

Dobson had already told him he didn't know. Undeterred, Bakare took the chair opposite. "Gabriel's getting his wish," he said leaning forward. "We're investing fifty million dollars in an old airbase in Agadez in Niger to deploy anti-terrorism surveillance drones."

It was Ayo's trilby that Craig Donovan saw first.

Lazarus was trailing behind dragging a case on wheels. Both were wearing big thick overcoats as if expecting snow.

Donovan was expecting them to take a taxi or possibly a train into central London but, instead, they stopped in the concourse. Ayo, trilby now in his hand, stared up at a directions board, pointed and then led Lazarus outside to the hotel courtesy bus stops. They dropped the bags and mingled with other newly arrived passengers.

Donovan stood back and watched. When the Radisson Blu Edwardian bus pulled up, Ayo pointed at it to Lazarus and picked up his bag. So, they weren't heading for central London but the Radisson close by.

Donovan, carrying just a simple back pack, jumped on board, sat by the window and saw another Nigerian with no luggage standing amongst the passengers and bags. Lazarus, puffing and blowing in his oversized coat clambered up into the bus, but Ayo hung back and Donovan watched the unknown Nigerian sidle up to him. In less

than a second, Ayo had passed him an envelope and something else. The unknown Nigerian then walked away.

Lazarus was seated near the front of the bus, struggling to remove his vast overcoat when Ayo boarded and took a seat directly behind him. As the overheated bus moved off, Ayo's trilby tumbled to the floor as he, too, struggled to remove his coat. Fifteen minutes later they had arrived outside the Raddison Blu.

Donovan got off quickly and watched the two Pastors fuss again with bags and discarded coats and summon a bellboy to help. They checked in, two rooms next to one another, and walked to the lifts. Donovan then booked himself in: single room, one night only.

"I need to sleep, Ayo. Maybe an hour. And I will pray. In a stressful world, the safest place is close to Jesus. Air travel is so tiring."

Ayo was grateful for any break from the man he'd already been with for twelve hours. Anyway, he had other matters to organise that started with a phone call.

Blessing was a distant cousin who managed a small newsagent's business in Slough and supplemented his meagre wage with night-time taxi driving and other nocturnal activities. Blessing now had Lazarus's passport and an envelope rifled by Ayo from the side pocket of Lazarus's bag.

"Lazarus Bola Lyabo," said Blessing as he sat in his Ford Mondeo in a back street of Slough examining the passport. "Is that he?"

"That is he," Ayo replied, copying Blessing's unusual English. "It is the passport for bank accounts."

"Which bank is he?"

"Why ask Blessing? Read the damned papers. You will see he is the Baroda Bank. And Lazarus will soon see he has lost everything. He will panic. But you will visit the bank first thing in the morning, you will withdraw the cash by copying the signature and showing the passport. You do not need anything else because I have already checked. You must ask for Mister Joshi. Only Mister Joshi, OK? Mister Joshi will receive his tip."

"This man Lyabo he look like me," Blessing said pointing and smiling at the passport photo, not that Ayo could see him.

"It is no bloody co-incidence, Blessing. But if you think you look like Lazarus I advise you to lose some weight. To look like Lazarus is not good." Ayo paused. "Now listen very carefully, Blessing. This is important. Tonight, I will ask you again to repeat what I am about to say."

"I understand. He is very important."

"At the Baroda Bank you will say 'I am Mr Lazarus Lyabo and I wish to speak to Mr Joshi.' Do you understand?"

"Mr Joshi."

"You will take out two hundred thousand pounds in cash which you will ask to be put into two envelopes. Understand? Then you will say to Mr Joshi that you want to close the account and transfer the balance to the Islamic Bank in Edgware. I will give you the account details this evening. Do you understand?"

"The Islamic Bank."

"You will show the passport to Mr Joshi, give him the Islamic bank account details and sign the papers. You will check the amount that is in the account before it is closed and write it down. Understand?"

"Write it down. How much is it, Ayo?"

"Maybe eight hundred thousand pounds."

"Waah! He is a lot, Ayo."

"There is just one problem. Mister Joshi will need to see a plastic card. I will obtain this from Lazarus this evening. Understand?"

"He is understood, Ayo. So, what is my present?"

"Your present will come when you have finished your job, Blessing. From the Indian Bank, you will go to Edgware Road. That is where I will meet you. You will give me the two envelopes with the two hundred thousand pounds. That is when your job is finished."

"So, what is my present?"

"Between nothing and five percent. If you fuck up it's nothing."

As Lazarus slept and Ayo phoned Blessing, Colin Asher's contact at Heathrow Airport passport control called Craig Donovan.

"That BA flight from Abuja this morning," he said. "Colin asked me to phone you. We spotted two other Nigerians, a Moslem man and a woman who come and go regularly, always overweight on their way out. They're on a watch list. You want names?"

And Craig Donovan ticked two more off the list given to Mark Dobson by Abisola. He messaged Mark Dobson just as Dobson was digesting the US drone information from Daniel Bakare.

"I can't track them all," Donovan added. "And Colin's busy. He's with a guy from South Korea all day today. What do you suggest?"

Dobson thought for a moment. Colin was obviously dealing with the Korean client that should have been his job. Never mind. Somewhere on his laptop was a coded phone number. Five minutes later he replied to Donovan: "Call this number. Freddie Paterson is a buddy of Colin's at the Metropolitan Police. Tell Freddie what's going on and ask for help. Once Colin's free, update him."

Mark Dobson logged off and looked up to see Martin Abisola coming towards him carrying the small case he'd left at the Ibro. It mostly contained dirty washing. After several days, Dobson was beginning to feel as unkempt as Abisola looked. A toothbrush and shave would go down well, though. "Very kind of you, Martin."

"Thank Dickson. You wouldn't have enjoyed the Ibro anyway. The two guys in the size 12 trainers are still there." He then sat down where Bakare had just been. Something else was on his mind.

"Today's BA flight to London had some interesting passengers on board," he said.

"I know," replied Dobson. "Besides Ayo and Lazarus there were two others from your list - Alhaji Ahmed and a woman, Nabila Alhassan. They married or something?"

"They're partners," Abisola replied in a way suggesting the partnership was in crime.

"How do they fit it?"

"What do you say? Kingpins? They are regular visitors to London. They run businesses - freight forwarding, import-export, second hand cars, a clothing business and a suspected passport forgery business with a couple of Vietnamese. Getting enough evidence for a conviction in the UK is like nailing a jellyfish to the wall, but they are multi-millionaires with property in London and Paris. They also have a friend called Festus Fulani."

Reunited with his toothbrush and razor Dobson checked himself into the Sheraton, showered, left a bagful of laundry with the domestic staff and wandered downstairs again where Taj Harding was playing with his phone.

"Daniel has left for a meeting in Jo'burg," he said. "And, according to the High Commission, Benjamin Simisola's body was taken to Agadez. The US picked it up from there and are organising an airlift to London."

"I should phone Graham Parker-Stanley to thank him for organising that," Dobson said. "Can I borrow your phone?"

Dobson called him and thanked him, but Parker-Stanley, it seemed, wanted to talk some more. Business was obviously slow.

"I'm hearing good things about Pastor Gabriel," he said. "And his project over the northern border.....interesting work It was Taj who told me.....then there's this young Hausa girl, Halima.....seems a good story there.....I've told Taj we'll liaise with Daniel Bakare and get her down to Abuja and if we could find Gabriel.....well, you know, we might be able to plant some seeds of progress at last.....do our bit to bloody the noses of the COK etcetera, you know what I mean?"

"Taj is at a loose end at present," Parker-Stanley went on, "I wondered if you'd like to join us for dinner tonight..... talk security issues.....expound on life in the private sector..... my wife cooks a mean sage and onion stuffed chicken, potatoes, gravy, the works. Are you free?.....Good man, look forward to it. Seven thirty. Taj knows where. He joined us for cottage pie and processed peas last night."



Dobson handed back Taj Harding's phone. "I'm joining you for dinner tonight. Perhaps I'll try speeding up my laundry."

Craig Donovan was sitting in the lobby of the Radisson when Lazarus and Ayo appeared from the lifts. He could sense immediately that something was wrong. They passed right by him, the shorter, fatter Lazarus hanging on the sleeve of Ayo's dark blue suit.

"It was there, I tell you, Ayo. In my bag. How could I come through immigration without my passport? Maybe it was that bus driver. We should check with the reception, maybe it dropped out, maybe....."

They headed to reception, Lazarus leading the way, almost running on his short legs. But then he stopped, suddenly, Ayo colliding with him. "Yaaah," he screeched. "My bank papers. They were in an envelope." And he ran back to the lifts as Ayo, seemingly unconcerned, wandered along the corridor in his trilby, past the disabled toilet and stood looking into the gift shops.

Donovan watched as Ayo found a seat, checked his nails and his Rolex, removed his trilby, placed it next to him and leaned back to stare at the ceiling and the crystal chandelier.

A porter walked over, nodded and spoke to Donovan. "Nice weather, sir."

"Very pleasant."

"Where you from, sir?"

"Washington, USA."

"Enjoying your stay, sir?"

"Quiet so far."

But the quietness was broken by a shout from the lifts area.

"Bloody hell," whispered the porter. "It's one of the Nigerians. What's his problem?"

Lazarus was running in circles in the reception area. "It's gone, it's gone."

The porter went up to him. "Sir, sir. Please. What's the problem?"

Genuine tears ran down Lazarus's fat cheeks. "My passport is gone. My bank letters are gone."

"Please sit sir, take a moment, relax."

The porter's patience, Donovan decided, was worthy of the 'employee of the month' award. "Let us go through what happened.....where did you last see it?.....did you use it at the airport?.....yes, of course, you must have.....the bus driver?.....I can check sir.....Is this your friend coming?"

Ayo appeared, looked at the tears on Lazarus's cheeks but felt nothing as Lazarus started again. "We are finished, Ayo. We will die. We cannot fall further when we are already on our knees. It is the bastard Azazi, the bastard Osman, the bastard Gabriel - a conspiracy."

It took twenty minutes to calm him. Eventually Ayo suggested they return to Lazarus's room and search the contents of the bags.

"Yah, yah, maybe that is it," Lazarus said running to the lift. "My father always told me: "Whenever things are dark, follow the Son."

Twenty minutes later, as Lazarus lay on his bed sniffing and trembling, Ayo left the room with Lazarus's plastic debit card concealed in his pocket.

Craig Donovan was halfway through a John Le Carre novel when Ayo appeared once more. He followed him outside to the car park and saw him get into a parked Ford Mondeo.

"Can you get me a taxi?" Donovan asked the friendly porter.

"It might take a few minutes, sir."

"Just as quick as you can."

Twenty minutes later, Donovan's taxi had arrived but Ayo was still sitting in the Mondeo, talking to the driver. But then the door opened, Ayo got out and walked back to the hotel. Donovan decided to use his waiting taxi.

"Follow the Mondeo."

"The 06 registered one?"

"That's the one."

The Mondeo took the M4 motorway and headed west. It was now dark, heavy M4 commuter traffic almost at a standstill but the Mondeo was only a few cars ahead. "Just keep following it."

"How far he's going, mate?"

"I've no idea."

"Christ, mate, we could end up in bloody Wales."

"It's OK, I speak Welsh."

"Yeh, right, mate. Pull the other one. Americans can't even speak English proper."

But the Mondeo turned off at the Slough central turn, headed for the town centre and then into a maze of roads in a low-cost housing estate. "You still want me to follow him?"

"Sure. Keep on his tail."

"You fucking CIA or something, mate? Now he's stopping and getting out. See?"

"OK. Drive past, stop and wait for me."

Donovan walked back to the Mondeo, checked the registration number and the house number and returned to the taxi. Half an hour later he was back at the Radisson. Then, hoping Colin Asher was now free of the Korean client, he phoned in.

Mark Dobson had chosen a freshly laundered blue shirt and red tie to wear with his suit for dinner with the Deputy High Commissioner, his wife Jane and Taj Harding.

It was his first proper meal for days. The chicken wasn't bad, he decided, the apple tart average and the squirt of whipped cream like any other.

Over coffee, Harding began a discussion about Halima. "The camp is not suitable for a sixteen-year old girl," he said. "But she's very bright and talks well. If we got her down here, we could probably find her a school place. She could make a huge difference to PR and funding."

Dobson listened and by eleven o'clock when a Commission car was summoned to return them to the Sheraton, Mark Dobson had roughly caught up with their plans. Two of the main characters who had so frustrated Gabriel for years were, it seemed, now running the show.

By midnight, Dobson discovered that whilst he'd been eating roast chicken, the Asher & Asher secure site had been busy. Colin Asher had also spoken to Martin Abisola.

"The Mondeo is registered to a Nigerian called Blessing Akami of 67 Thompson Road, Slough," Colin Asher's message read. "He runs a corner shop and a night taxi service. No prison record but here's a photo."

"Most likely theory is Ayo will use Blessing to take money from Lazarus's bank and deposit it at the Islamic Bank on Edgware Road.

"Proposed action is this: Craig will watch the Indian Bank in Southall. If we get movement there, Craig will follow. Meanwhile, I'll take a walk down Edgware Road and sip tea at Zabiollah's opposite the Islamic bank in case Craig loses them or they go somewhere else. The only problem is how much mint tea I can drink in one morning."

"And any news of Gabriel?" Dobson asked in his reply message.

"None."

At eight next morning, Ayo hammered on the door of Lazarus's room. From inside came a moaning sound accompanied by the shuffling of feet and a chain being drawn. The door opened an inch and a red eye appeared.

"I am leaving for my bank Lazarus."

In response, the red eye blinked.

"As you were careless and lost your passport and bank cards, I now have to take full responsibility for resolving our financial problems. Do you understand?"

The red eye moved up and then down.

"Do you want to debate serious financial matters through the crack of a door, Lazarus?"

The red eye moved from side to side.

Ayo sighed. "I will withdraw half of what we owe. Then I will go to the bank of our friend. Do you understand, Lazarus?"

There was a wet sniffing sound as if Lazarus's nose lay flat against the other side of the door. "Something happened, Ayo," he sniffed. "Someone stole everything."

"Nonsense. It is your stupidity, your carelessness."

"I am fastidious in my ways, Ayo. My father always said a clear conscience makes a soft pillow. Something happened. Someone stole it, Ayo. Someone close to me. Someone who I thought was my friend."

"Do you have any friends, Lazarus?"

"A rich man without compassion is a poor man with money, Ayo," Lazarus whispered. Then the door closed and the bolt was slid back.

Ayo spoke to the closed door. "Another fine saying, Lazarus, but do you know the real meaning of the cross?" He paused. "The cross is God's way of turning a minus into a plus." Then he laughed and wandered away down the corridor.

Southall, just a few miles from Heathrow, has a historic reputation for being the largest Asian community in the UK. Nigerians are not uncommon but are far outnumbered by Indians. Craig Donovan had asked Colin Asher why a Nigerian like Lazarus might have an account at the Bank of Baroda.

"It might be linked to jewellery or gold deposits." Asher said. "Lazarus's father owned a jewellery shop."

It was a clear, sunny morning when Donovan arrived in Southall Broadway. He was early and hoped to find a decent coffee shop but made do with a can of iced coffee from an Indian mini supermarket. Being on a dual carriageway, it was also a poor place for a stakeout so Donovan waited outside the supermarket.

He was on his third can when he saw the Nigerian, almost hidden inside a black, hooded anorak. He was carrying a brown envelope and, as he stopped to look up at the Bank of Baroda sign, Donovan moved. The bank had just opened but an orderly line of customers was already waiting inside - long beards, brightly coloured saris and white turbans dominated.

"Can I help, sir?" An Indian girl in red uniform asked Donovan.

"I'd like some information on mortgages for a friend," Donovan said. "Do you have a leaflet or something."

"Just one moment sir." and she pulled a leaflet from a bundle on a table. "If you need more help, sir, please ask."

"Thank you. I'll read it here if you don't mind."

"Of course, sir. Please take a seat." And she went straight to the next customer who had come through the door, the Nigerian. Donovan was the only white person in the bank. He rang Colin Asher, said "He's arrived" and switched off.

Blessing Akami of 67 Thompson Road, Slough stood for a moment and then joined the queue. He pulled his hood back a fraction, scratched his face and the girl in red saw the uncertainty. "Yes sir?"

"I forgot," Donovan heard him say. "I have an appointment. He is Mr Joshi."

"Ah yes, sir. Your name sir?"

"My name? He is, uh....." Blessing fumbled in the envelope, pulled out the passport, opened it, went to the name page and the envelope fell on the floor. He retrieved it, then read, far too slowly: "He is Lazarus Bola Iyabo. I want to see Mr, ah, Mr Joshi."

The girl looked at him perhaps suspiciously. To all intents and purposes Blessing Akami possessed all the classic looks of an opportunist bank robber. "Please wait a moment, sir." She went to the counter said a few words to another girl and pointed towards Blessing.

And Blessing came to sit beside Donovan, his unnecessary anorak rustling as he rested one trainer-clad foot on his opposite knee, almost rubbing its street dirt onto Donovan's clean and pressed trousers.

Donovan, watching him stuff the passport back in the envelope, said: "Good Morning," and continued reading his mortgages leaflet.

Blessing nodded and waited perhaps five minutes until the girl in red came over and spoke to him "Mr Joshi will see you now. Counter five."

Donovan watched the transaction - quiet, muttered words, a dark green passport handed over, a letter from the bank on headed paper, a plastic card and a signature that Blessing struggled with. Another piece of paper that Mr Joshi struggled to read. Then another signature and a wait as Joshi typed things into a computer and stared at the screen. The electronic transfer that would empty and then close the account? Then another wait. Blessing looking around. Donovan looking away. Then two envelopes were passed over, thick white ones held together with wide rubber bands and Blessing with no sign of a thank you walked out of the bank with the envelopes inside his anorak.

Donovan followed him west along the Broadway, turning right, then right again. At a corner, Blessing walked into Habib's Tyres and Exhausts Centre and there was the Ford Mondeo. As Blessing drove away, Donovan phoned Colin Asher.

"Right, I'm on the case," Asher said. "Mr Joshi, did you say? OK leave it with me. Get down to Edgware Road. I'll be in Zabiollah's."

Colin Asher then phoned a friend, the Director of Organised Crime at the UK National Crime Agency. Within an hour two men from the NCA had called at the Bank of Baroda, flashed a card and asked to see the manager.

By then Craig Donovan had arrived at Zabiolla's Iranian tea, coffee and pastries shop in Edgware Road. He found Colin Asher sitting in the window drinking mint tea and watching the bank opposite.

"Anything yet?" Donovan asked settling onto the stool next to him.

"Nothing. Listen I need to get back. The transaction at the Baroda bank is already being looked into. If things happen as expected, we'll then deal with the bank opposite."

"You can do all that Colin?"

"Not me personally but someone from the National Crime Agency. We feed in evidence, add it to what Martin Abisola has supplied, throw in evidence of other misdemeanours and watch events. Try the kataifi - it's very good."

Donovan ordered tea, took out his John Le Carre, opened it at the curled-up corner and was taking his first bite of the kataifi when he saw the heavy overcoat and trilby of Pastor Ayo.

He was standing in a shop doorway next to the bank, one hand grasping the handle of a bag on wheels at his feet. Seconds later, the hooded anorak of Blessing rounded the corner and the two white envelopes were handed over. Ayo flipped the rubber band off one of them, withdrew a bundle and, hidden between his own overcoat and Blessing's anorak, passed it over. Blessing nodded and scurried away. Ayo bent to his case, stuffed both envelopes inside, glanced around and waved down a passing black cab. It had all taken less than a minute.

Donovan dropped a twenty-pound note by his mint tea, ran outside and hailed another passing cab. Ayo's taxi was already stuck in traffic further up Edgware Road

"Where to sir?"

"Follow that cab. Just don't lose him. OK?"

"Got it. You American, sir?"

"How did you guess?"

The driver grinned through the partition. "Don't tell me. FBI."

"National Crime Agency," Donovan said and immediately liked the sound of it.

"Bloody hell."

Ayo's taxi turned into Sussex Gardens, then onto Bayswater Road, then travelled west through Holland Park and, within twenty minutes, they were on the A4, Hammersmith Flyover and heading towards the M4 motorway.

Donovan phoned Asher with another update, adding that he assumed Ayo was returning to the Radisson. He was wrong. Ayo's taxi turned off and headed for the Heathrow airport tunnel. Ten minutes later Ayo checked in at the Air France counter and headed straight to Departures. Donovan phoned Asher again.

"Christ. OK. Stand by, Craig. I'll see if I can find out where he's heading."

Twenty minutes later Asher phoned back. "Sorry Craig. We've lost him. My suspicion is he's used a different passport to check in but I can't get anyone in security to respond. But where the fuck is Lazarus?"

"Last time I saw him he was at the Radisson. What can I do now?"

"Stick around while I do some more checks. Go and read your book."

"I can't. I left it at Zabiollah's."

"Buy another. But an interesting morning's work, Craig. Ayo has emptied Lazarus's bank account, taken a huge amount of cash for himself and moved the balance to the Islamic bank. We're now checking how much was moved."

Craig Donovan bought a newspaper and sat down to wait, but after an hour and nothing fresh from Asher he phoned to say he was returning to the Radisson. For some reason, he felt worried about Lazarus.

He asked at reception. "No sir," he was told. "Neither of the two Nigerian gentlemen has checked out yet."

Deciding it was not his business to tell them he'd just watched one of them take a flight out, probably back to Nigeria, he took a walk along the corridor outside their rooms. A 'Do Not Disturb' notice hung on one door so he returned to reception. "Would you mind checking if there is anyone in Room 218."

"Of course, one minute, sir.....Sorry sir, there is no response."

"I'm worried about the occupant," Donovan said.

"That is the Nigerian gentleman who lost his passport, sir?"

"That's the one."

"Is there cause for concern, sir? He seemed very upset yesterday."

"His partner has already flown back to Nigeria - alone," said Donovan.

"Mmm..... without checking out it seems. I'll get someone to check."

Donovan was there when the Portuguese maid knocked on the door of 218 with its 'Do Not Disturb' notice. She called but got no response so opened it with her universal key. Donovan followed her inside and was right behind her when she pushed open the bathroom door and screamed. She turned, collided with Donovan and rushed out, her hand over her mouth.

Lazarus's naked body was lying face down in a pool of blood that had spread across the tiled floor to the door.

The Radisson called the police.

Craig Donovan called Colin Asher. Asher phoned a contact in the police and, at last, Heathrow security did something. The London police called the French police, but no-one called Ayoola Eniate was on the passenger list of any Air France connecting flights even to Abuja. They were now checking CCTV. Colin Asher then phoned Martin Abisola. Abisola spoke to his man in London and then phoned Mark Dobson at the Sheraton.

"No-one resembling Ayo boarded the Abuja flight or any other flight this afternoon," Abisola said. "I think he's gone to ground in Paris or taken a train somewhere. And Lazarus was alive after Ayo left because the maid saw him."

Mark Dobson logged onto the Asher & Asher site to find another long list of updates.

"Blessing Akami's been arrested over the bank fraud but we know where he's been all day so he's not a suspect in Lazarus's killing."

The next message said: The ICC Commercial Crime Services (CCS) is now acting on something we've given them that they've been following for years. CIA, FBI, Interpol involved."

Then: "FraudNet, the global network of law firms that specialise in tackling business crime is back on a string of cases just through one single piece of evidence we gave them."

And then there was the less formal message: "It's pack of cards time, Mark. I never thought I'd live to see things happen so quickly. Police arrested a guy called Alhaji Ahmed and a woman, Nabila Alhassan who were on the same flight in as Ayo and Lazarus. Since then, one name led to another. They're going down like flies."

As Mark Dobson lay on his bed at the Sheraton waiting for more updates there was a light knock on his door. He logged off, shoved the laptop into its case and squinted through the security hole in the door. Looking back at him was the distorted image of Taj Harding.

"Mark? You there?"

Dobson slid the bolt. "What's up?"

"You heard from Gabriel?"

"No. Come in. Make yourself at home."

"He's in Washington. I just spoke to Daniel in Jo'burg. Gabriel flew to Washington straight from Nairobi."

"What's he up to?"

"He's being led around by Senator James McAllister. You know him?"



"Gabriel's mentioned him." Dobson said.

"McAlister's had him on TV, interviews with the press, a long interview with The African magazine, off the cuff remarks to anyone who listens about the COK, corruption, African politics, education, health, the economy. He's also got wind of the Halima story. 'Heroic Nigerian girl outwits COK' says one headline. They're buzzing for details. Halima and Bill Larsen are arriving Friday so I've booked Ballroom 2 for a press conference."

"The ballroom? Jesus."

Dobson was flabbergasted. How many people were they expecting for God's sake? This was not his scene at all. He just didn't do press gatherings, promotional events and public demonstrations directed at entertaining the masses at peak viewing times. Neither did Colin Asher who would be scared witless if he knew he was on the periphery of these sorts of shenanigans. Asher & Asher operated behind the scenes, deliberately keeping their heads down and for damned good reasons. Look what had happened to him when someone heard he was visiting Lagos for a client they didn't approve of.

"I hope ballroom two will be big enough," Harding said.

"Bloody hell."

And Dobson's mind reverted to Gabriel in Washington. And Solomon. Did Solomon know what Gabriel was doing? Did Bill Larsen know? Did Martin Abisola know?

"So, what've you been up to today, Mark?" Harding asked as if it nothing was likely to have been as important as his and Bakare's achievements.

"Looking into ways the COK benefits from money laundering, organising a watch on someone's UK bank account being emptied, the transfer of that money to an account run by the COK, theft of some of that money in cash by someone who then disappeared back to Nigeria and the death of the guy whose account was emptied. Watching the Nigerian criminal fraternity's banking arrangements break down. All in a day's work."

"I see. So, nothing to do with Gabriel today."

Mark Dobson hadn't yet sat down but if he'd been sitting, he'd have stood up now. He looked at Taj Harding, tried hard not to shake his head in disbelief and tried even harder not to punch the guy. Instead:

"Fuck me, Taj. Everything's to do with Gabriel. One bloody thing leads to another bloody thing. We've just got Gabriel released from detention in Nairobi based on a forged arrest warrant. Why? Because people are either trying to take advantage of him or destroy him.

"If you're running a press conference you might like a session on why and how the COK runs its campaign of atrocities like the abduction of schoolgirls, like the beheading of Benjamin, the shooting of Kennet Eju and this afternoon the killing of another Nigerian pastor. You and Bakare might like to know what the fuck really is going on here. How long's your bloody press conference scheduled to last?"

Dobson was getting so worked up with Harding that he was pleased when the room phone rang. He turned to look at it. He really didn't like hotel room phones these days. They struck a strange fear in him, but he picked it up.

"Mark. Dickson's outside. Five minutes. Bring your toothbrush."

He replaced the phone and looked at Taj Harding. "I have to go out," he said. "A meeting with the Secret Service."

Harding looked at his watch. "I see. But it's almost midnight."

"Good and evil work side by side, Taj. Twenty-four seven."

He saw Harding to the door, reluctantly wished him good night, stuck his toothbrush inside the laptop bag and went downstairs.

Martin Abisola was sat with his feet on the table, phone clamped to his ear when Dickson ushered Dobson into the room. He beckoned Dobson to sit but continued his conversation.

"You're in charge, Musa. You decide but don't expect more resources." He looked over at Dobson. "It's what the English call running a tight ship.....that's it..... efficiency. Call me when you've made the arrests."

He switched off, dropped the phone into the top pocket of his ruby red shirt and put his hands behind his head. "Guns, semi-automatics, found at the back of a shop belonging to the brother of a State Governor. They were easy to find but why are they there. That is the question."

Dobson shrugged. How would he know?

"Great operation by Colin Asher today, Mark. A pity Pastor Ayo disappeared but we're on the case. An even greater pity about Lazarus. He was never suited to this business. He should have stuck with his church."

"So, what happened at the Islamic Bank?" Dobson asked.

"It's why you're here," Abisola said taking his feet off the table. "Colin Asher phoned me. He's seriously concerned for your safety."

"I'm touched."

"That single transaction at the Bank of Baroda triggered a whole chain of events. Several arrests were made during the day for money laundering linked to criminal activity. Alhaji Ahmed and the woman Nabila Alhassa were among those detained."

"Might there be an unwanted chain reaction from elsewhere?"

"Not if we move fast enough. The UK police are raiding properties across London and Essex in the next few hours. One raid will be on a house in Essex used by Osman Olande and owned by Festus Fulani."

"So, what can I do? Why am I here? I'm starting to feel left out."

"OK. Listen. Colin Asher is still, fortunately, a mystery to people like Osman Olande, Festus Fulani and Zainab Azazi. They do not understand who he is, what he is or where he is, though I understand Olande once phoned him on Kenneth Eju's old phone to try to trace him. On the other hand, you, Mr Hicks, Mark, are not such a mystery. I think you are as much of a target as Gabriel would be if he suddenly turned up here. That's why you're sitting here now."

"I'm doubly touched."

"But first," Abisola stood up. "Can you tell me where Gabriel is?"

"He's in Washington," Dobson said, "I learned that forty minutes ago."

"Washington!"

"He's doing press interviews and appearing on TV."

"Is he spreading good news or bad news?"

"One man's good news is another man's bad news, but Gabriel prides himself on not telling lies. He says he only offers opinions though he'll admit they're strong ones."

"My opinion is if he comes back here, we'll see an attempt on his life."

"But Gabriel ignores the opinions of others."

"I've noticed. And where's Solomon?"

"Probably still in Accra."

Abisola took a short stroll around the table. "Staying at the Sheraton is not good for you, Mark. You need to get out more."

"It was you told me to stay there."

"I thought you'd ignore me."

"I would normally but I've been busy directing matters remotely and I'm as much in awe of the Nigerian SSS as you are with Asher & Asher."

Martin Abisola gave a lop-sided smile.

"Staying at the Sheraton has other advantages," Dobson added. "I hear things. For instance, I hear a big media event is being organised starring Halima. Bill Larsen's bringing her to Abuja. She's being billed as a bright young heroine and a reason why terrorism never wins. The Sheraton's ballroom has been booked." He let that sink in for a moment.

"How long have you known this?"

Dobson checked his watch. "Forty-two minutes."

"Whose idea is that?"

"Primarily Bakare's with the US Embassy. Americans like that sort of thing, especially black Americans. Right now, though, Bakare's in Johannesburg."

"Why don't we know? The President should be told. And what about security? Who's invited? Do they think this is just some friendly get together with the world's press?"

"I think they intend to use Halima to focus on Gabriel's Project - for funding. I can see the attraction. The problem is they don't understand the security risk. Talking to Taj Harding I don't they understand anything at all."

The knot on Abisola's tie had slipped so far down that he pulled it off, screwed it up and dropped it on the table. Dobson continued. "Do you know about the US decision for a military surveillance operation out of Agadez?"

"This morning. A note via Steve Barnett. The President then spoke to Hama Dosso. It's welcomed."

"Do you know that Gabriel probably influenced that decision? That he lobbied for funds for surveillance drones for his Project?"

"No. But why doesn't that surprise me?"

"If you want my cynical opinion on why they made the decision I'd say it was because a couple of Americans died in Burkina Faso."

"Of course - Banfola "

"So, there you have it, Martin. America must defend its own and America must also show it's the reason for all good news stories."

Right then the phone that had been lying next to Abisola's crumpled tie vibrated and turned a full circle. He picked it up. "Yes, he's here. It's Colin Asher."

"Have you finished in Nigeria yet?"

"It'll never ever finish, Colin."

"Then for fucks sake get out."

"Don't worry so much," Dobson said.

"Well, while you may not be too concerned, Pastor Lazarus certainly was. It wasn't murder. He cut his own wrists. He took a nice picture of garden flowers off the wall and used the broken glass. Suicide."

## CHAPTER 28

"Where are you, Sol?"

"In Accra. More to the point, Femi, where are you? I've been trying to phone you all day."

"Right now, Sol, I'm in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Washington in a room that Jim McAllister uses for meetings. Craig Donovan was here once. Jim's expecting Governor Frank Jameson here in an hour. I've not seen him since Los Angeles. Remember that? A lot's happening, Sol. We need to catch up."

"Definitely we need to catch up. I've already cancelled two events. Why didn't you tell me you were flying to Washington from Nairobi?"

"You were at a funeral. I've not even had time to call Mark. Well, I tried Mark once but his phone was off. Bill Larsen's was off too. Anyway, I got a free flight out here so don't worry about the expenses. Listen I gotta go. Why don't you call me later?"

"Where are you staying?"

"Hampton Inn, Chinatown area."

"What's wrong with the Holiday Inn Express?"

"Jim McAllister wanted me to stay at the Mandarin. Imagine that?"

"So how much is the Hampton Inn?"

"McAllister's paying, Sol. Stop worrying. Listen, I'll call you later."

"Who paid for your flight?"

Gabriel laughed. "Steve Kendrick. He'd already paid for my bail and, by chance, he was in Nairobi. We flew to Washington together in Albatross One. I'll phone you, Sol, Jim McAllister's just arrived." Then the phone went dead.

"Femi?" It was Solomon's third time of trying since the phone died on him. This time the ring tone stopped, there were voice noises off as if someone had picked it up and was holding it. "Femi?" he shouted.

"Sol. Yes. I'm in the middle of....."

"Listen to me for fuck's sake, will you?"

"Phone me back in....."

"For God's sake, Femi, listen to me. Benjamin's dead."

There was a rustling sound in Solomon's ear then silence. "Femi?"

"I heard you, Sol..... Benjamin? Dead? When? What happened?"

"COK, Femi. They also killed two village people."

There was a longer silence this time. "How, Sol?"

"You really want details, Femi? I'm surprised no-one's told you or is it because no-one's interested where you are? His body's being flown back to UK. His family already know. The British press have already picked it up - *'Aid worker killed in COK*

*attack in Niger*'. That's it. And Mark's in trouble, Sol. That's why he's not using a phone. He's with Martin Abisola?"

"The SS? Why? I thought....."

"Listen Femi. I can talk to Colin Asher but not Mark. Mark's co-operating with the SS. Someone tried to shoot him again. He's playing it down - all in a day's work. Point is Femi, Mark works for us. I feel as responsible for him as I do for Kenneth and Benjamin. And Halima, remember her?"

"Of course,"

"Daniel Bakare is organising for her to go to Abuja for a press conference, a PR stunt according to Colin Asher, but Bakare and Taj Harding think it might pay off with aid money. Are you really saying you're too fucking busy to know what's going on in your name?"

There was a quiet pause. All Sol could hear was talking and laughter in the background but Gabriel, if he was still on the phone, was silent.

"But we got our drone surveillance, Sol. You hear about that?"

"I heard. Did you clinch that or did Craig Donovan have something to do with it?"

"OK, OK. I'll fly back, Sol."

"Fly back to where, Femi? To Nigeria? To London? And what will you do when you get there?"

Solomon could no longer wait for Gabriel to respond. "And Craig and Colin Asher have been busy organising your bail, getting arrests for money laundering and bank fraud - Nigerians with COK connections. Are you starting to understand me? Most of this is Mark's work but he's putting his own life on the line. This is our doing. We started it. So, do you want to talk about things over a fucking phone and carry on with your party or what?"

"OK, OK. What do you suggest, Sol?"

"I suggest you finish what you're doing right now and meet me in Accra. And while you're in the air, Femi, give some thought to what you're going to do about the Project, about Halima, about Bill Larsen and about what Mark's uncovered. Then start updating your plans to change the world."

"I hear you. Sol, I hear you. What happened to Ben?"

"Why do you want to know? Do you, like me, feel some responsibility?"

"Of course, Sol."

"Then do you remember what you always say at conventions about more and more atrocities and that they move closer and closer to home? If so then I'll tell you. Ben's throat was cut and then he was beheaded."

## CHAPTER 29

"What is this place?"

Mark Dobson was trying for an answer to the question he'd asked before. It was past one in the morning and utterly quiet in this austere building with its concrete wall and razor wire. "Why the pink colour?"

"It needs repainting."

"And the cars and BMW motorbikes out the back?"

"Staff." Abisola appeared to think about something for a moment then stood up "OK. Come with me."

Dobson followed him back along the corridor, through a side door that lead onto another, shorter, corridor. To the left and right were bare metal doors. Bullet proof? "Any trouble and we move in there." He was pointing to the door on the left but pressed buttons to the side of the one on the right. Then he opened it.

Inside was an open plan office, eight desks in pairs facing each other with computer screens, phones, electronic gear, police type radios, cables and coloured lights that flashed. There were no windows and just two people - men, in white, short sleeved shirts wearing headphones, peering at screens and typing.

"In deference to your own GCHQ I call this NCHQ. We have other official intelligence gathering centres and the HQ but this one is confidential. The two staff are on night duty. During the day, we have five. We equipped it ourselves but stayed within the budget allocation. It is a little like I imagine Asher and Asher to be. Am I right?"

"Colin Asher would be envious."

"It's new. The only other visitor so far was the new Inspector General of Nigerian Police - someone we trust and someone who's part of the President's plan to shake things up."

"What's the purpose?"

"Monitoring financial irregularities, fraud and corruption, and COK activity."

"Timely."

"Which is why I thought you'd like to see it."

Abisola walked towards one of the men. "This is Sunday. I've borrowed Sunday from your National Crime Agency. He spent a while at GCHQ."

Sunday looked up and nodded.

"Do other people ask what goes on here?" Dobson asked.

"We say it's for interrogation but no-one has seen the operations room except the IGNP and now yourself. Zainab Azazi felt honoured to accept my invitation to interrogate Ayo and Lazarus here. You've heard the tape!"

When they returned to the interrogation room a light was flashing on Dobson's laptop. Colin Asher's short message said: "Lazarus - suicide note – copy attached."

Dobson opened the scanned document and read as Abisola stood peering over his shoulder.

*"Dear Lord,*

*I am Lazarus, Lord, Lazarus of Warri Nigeria not Lazarus of Bethany who was resurrected. I am Lazarus of the Church of Our Lord of Mercy and Forgiveness and of Lazarus Gold and Jewellery Limited. Lazarus of Bethany was resurrected, Lord, but I do not want to be resurrected. Be merciful to me, O Lord.*

*Because of your constant love, because of your great mercy wipe away my sins and wash away my evil for I know I have sinned, many times, Lord. I have done evil, Lord and the world has turned against me and I feel lost in your world Lord. You can condemn me but please forgive me Lord for I have been evil since the gold bracelet my father gave me at my Christening was stolen by my brother and I saw it on his wife's wrist, Lord."*

"Kenneth Balogun," said Mark Dobson

*"I am the son of my father, Lord, who taught me the jewellery business and how to give thanks in Church for food and for the shoes on my feet. But I am not happy, Lord. I am sad. My many suits are like me, Lord. They hang empty and lifeless in my closet waiting for a heart, a soul and a body to fill them. To see them makes me cry, Lord.*

*"But it is anger that makes my tears to flow like rain. So, I come to you, Lord, empty and guilty and to confess. I am a poor man in my heart. Perhaps I am now also a poor man in my pocket.*

*"My words are not enough Lord. I cannot write now. I cannot think, I cannot see, I only remember bad things because there are no good things to remember. I have lived a life that is not true to my heart, Lord. And I speak in strange tongues, with foul language full of bitterness and hatred, Lord.*

*"Pastor Gabriel is not a bastard, Lord. I confess that Pastor Gabriel taught me many things. I have all his videos. I watch them at night and when I feel lonely. Pastor Gabriel did not have a rich gold merchant for a father but a poor mother who died in the fire in Makoko, Lord. Pastor Gabriel is your true follower because he tells the truth and sees the future. I tell lies. Lord and I see no future, only my past mistakes.*

*"Forgive me Lord but I have been led astray by real bastards because I am too weak to stand before them and say what is true to my heart. Today the big bastard is Pastor Ayo, Lord. Today he will break my bank just like Daisy broke my heart with a*



*Catholic priest and my brother Kenneth broke my trust and broke the rules. They are the real bastards.*

*"But there are many others, Lord. These people must be stopped so that Pastor Gabriel can continue to shine a light in my heart and the hearts of others. That is my honesty, Lord.*

*"So, my most merciful God, I confess that I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what I have done, and by what I have left undone. I have not loved you with my whole heart. I am truly sorry and humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on me and forgive me that I may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name.*

Beneath was a scrawled signature: 'Lazarus' And beneath that, like a post script, as if he'd had yet one more last thought, he'd written:

*"Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers."*

"Hmm," Abisola muttered. "He was like a small dog on a leash. Sad."

The note had been written in red ink in an unusual backward slanting style. A neat fold showed across the middle of the lined note paper. But it was what was written on a separate sheet that Dobson and Abisola now stared at - a long list of names written in black ink on different paper and in capital letters as if Lazarus had written it before but hidden it somewhere.

Forty-six names. There was nothing to say they were those he accused but a quick scan was enough. They were familiar names. Festus Fulani was at the top. Next was Zainab Azazi and at the bottom in red ink, as if it had been filled in last, was Osman Olande. And in the middle, one name had been underlined several times in red with a question mark: "Godwin."

Abisola sat down. "Lazarus has confirmed my own list. All except one."

"Which one is that?"

"That one," he replied pointing to the one underlined in red.

"Godwin," Dobson said aloud. "That name has cropped up before. Allegedly one of the guys who ordered my abduction. Coin's been trying to identify him. You've no idea who he is?"

"I've no idea," Abisola admitted.

"Daniel returns tomorrow afternoon," said Taj Harding when Dobson found him at the Sheraton hotel next morning. "He's left instructions with staff at the US Embassy to organise the press conference. It's Saturday evening."

"It's Thursday already," said Dobson.

"Yes," Harding replied. "But I'll miss it. There's a Parliamentary vote on Friday. I've been told I must be there. I'm flying back tonight."

"What about the plans for Halima and Bill Larsen?"

"The US are flying them to Abuja on Saturday morning."

"And who's chairing the event?"

"Daniel, but the US Ambassador or the Deputy Head of Mission are also hoping to attend so....."

"And security?"

"Ah yes. I'll mention it."

"Is Steve Barnett involved?"

"Steve Barnett? Oh, Defence Co-operation. I understand he's in Germany. But the USAID Mission Director has said he'll attend."

Dobson almost laughed to himself. He glanced around the Sheraton's lobby and wondered if he was being watched. Perhaps he was being unnecessarily cautious but his gut feeling kept suggesting a pending disaster.

He went in search of Dickson and found him sitting inside the hotel car park attendant's cabin, as good a place as any to while away time and check people in and out. Dickson's Toyota with its two aerials was parked right alongside.

Precisely who he was being protected from Dobson had no idea. But it was unlikely to make much difference. Anonymous hit men could be recruited from the streets for a few dollars. Just give them a weapon, a photo of the target and a good stake out point and that was it. Dickson stood up as Dobson approached.

"Can I get a message to your boss?"

"He's with the President sah."

"When he's free, tell him the event is now on Saturday evening."

"Yessah."

Dobson returned inside and took the lift to his barely used room. He went to the bathroom and checked himself in the mirror. He needed a shave and Abisola was right about the hair colour. He could, of course, forget about everything and simply fly back to London, assuming he didn't get shot at on the way to the airport. What good was he doing now anyway? The problem was that he hated loose-ends. Then again with a client like Gabriel the loose-ends would probably never go away.

He lay on the bed to think and had almost fallen asleep when a noise outside the door woke him. It was locked but someone had definitely tried the handle. He crept to the door and peered through the spy hole. A big man in a dark suit was standing with his back to the door casually looking up and down the corridor as if he hadn't expected anyone to be in the room anyway. For eighteen hours or more that had been true but why try the door?

The domestic staff didn't wear suits. The management then? Dobson had another bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. The man turned, looked back at the door for a few moments and then walked away. But it was what he did during the look back that increased Dobson's bad feeling.

He hadn't see the colour of the man's shirt and the distorted image through the spy hole didn't help, but the man clearly had a problem with his eye - it winked, uncontrollably. And Dobson cast his mind back to the Pink Lips Club, to Benji and to the man wearing the pink shirt who had lingered at the door like someone whose job it was to keep checks on comings and goings.

"Pink Panta?" Benji had said in his Lagos accent. "Pink organises ladies. You wanna flex your stick?"

Mark Dobson still felt no need to flex his stick. Instead he lay on the bed wondering if Pink Panther had more than one job.

Arrangements for taking Benjamin's body home had been made by Bill Larsen directly with the US Embassy in Niamey.

Mano Dayak International Airport in Agadez had been the first suggestion and Larsen had recently learned why. Agadez had suddenly, overnight almost, become a focal point for US surveillance operations.

"Totally inappropriate," Larsen had told them when they suggested Agadez. "Bloody hell. You know how far Agadez is from here? Last time I drove there it took two days and a herd of bloody camels bent the front wing of the truck. And have you forgotten what I'll be carrying? Why can't we meet at Zinder? It's still a full day's drive."

It was eventually agreed and Larsen set out with Peter Moosa and Kwami, the Kenyan. An hour from the camp, Larsen's phone had rung.

"Change of plan, sir." said an American accent. "Instructions are to meet you at Gouré with a local army back-up. We'll take over from there. You a close buddy of the President or something?"

"Not me, Lieutenant, but my man sitting next to me is and he's also the one who rescued Halima."

"This the girl we're hearing about?"

The first thing Bill Larsen did on returning to the camp after handing over Benjamin's body was to look for Halima. He found her sweeping in a cloud of dust, behind one of the tents. "Halima?"

She looked up. "Yessah."

Larsen had learned many things from Halima recently. One was not to expect her to start another job until she'd finished the first. "When you've finished can we have a word?"

"A word, sah?"

"Talk."

"Yessah."

Larsen took a shower while he waited. In just two days, his growing pessimism, made worse by Benjamin's death and no news from Gabriel, had been replaced by what? A touch of optimism?

Tipping a bucket of water over his head to clear soap mixed with two days' grime, Bill Larsen smiled for the first time for weeks.

It had started with the change of plan to hand over Benjamin's body at Gouré rather than Zinder. Someone, Larsen felt, and not just President Hama Dosso, was going out of their way to be helpful.

Gouré was close enough to the camp for Larsen to know the town quite well. It had a small airport but wasn't an entirely innocent town, Larsen knew that. In fact, the truck tracks they'd followed after Benjamin's murder led towards Gouré. The area was dry grassy Sahel dotted with acacia trees, green patches formed by kouris, seasonal watercourses with underground water, oases and cuvettes. It was a Hausa area, the east populated by Kanuri ethnic groups and Toubou.

For the COK it had been a good recruiting area. With Benjamin's body in a makeshift wooden box, they'd been given coordinates for the tiny airport and arrived to a welcoming group of local soldiers, six armoured vehicles and an emergency evacuation vehicle with a red cross.

It was a big black American soldier who had saluted Bill Larsen as they climbed out of their Toyota truck. "Major Larsen? Major Sam Collins. Good to see you."

One minute later a white soldier jumped from one of the armoured vehicles and came across. "Morning Bill. Remember me?"

"Christ almighty, if it's not young Kevin. Captain, SAS G Squad if I'm not mistaken. Never forget a face or a name. Kevin 'Dandy' Dando, right? What the blazes?"

"Not so loud, sir. And show some respect. I'm a Major now."

"What the bloody hell is my old SAS doing here?"

"You wouldn't expect me to answer that, surely, sir."

It was three hours before they started to head back. By then Bill Larsen had learned a lot, not only about the aerial surveillance operation but the plan that involved Halima.

"Our orders come right from the top, Bill," Sam Collins said.

"AFRICOM?" Larsen checked.

Collins had nodded. "Commander Fernandez passed through a few days ago."

"The Halima part has the fingerprints of politicians all over it," Kevin Dando added. He pointed to the local soldiers helping Peter Moosa and Kwami transfer Benjamin's wooden coffin to the red cross truck. "And we wouldn't have got these guys without Hama Dosso's agreement."

Larsen was drying his hair when Halima arrived carrying a pot of something and an empty plastic mug. "It is fura da nono, sah. Millet and cow's milk. I hope you like it." She poured some into the mug and put it on the table.

"Would you like to visit Abuja, Halima?"

"Abuja?"

"You've stirred interest, Halima."

"Stirred, sah?"

"You've got people talking about you, about Pastor Gabriel, about the Project, about the school, about Benjamin. It's a good story."

"Story, sah?"

"The world likes someone who is not afraid. Escaping from the COK makes you worth knowing. They want to meet you, talk to you."

"But how will I go there. It is a long way."

"They're sending a helicopter Halima. You will arrive out of the sky. Like an angel."

"An angel, sah?"

"Don't worry, I'll come with you. One angel and one grey-haired old guy in army boots. But you'll also need to wear something on your feet, Halima. Abuja's a long way to go in bare feet. Be an angel and try your boots on again."

Mark Dobson only realised he'd fallen into a short, deep sleep when he woke up wondering where he was. It often happened like that after days of little or no sleep at all. A quick glance around the room sorted the confusion: the Sheraton Hotel, Abuja, Nigeria, still on the Gabriel case.

But something had woken him. And there it was again - voices outside and a knock on the door. He sprung up and peered through the spy hole. A large black eye peered back at him, but didn't blink. It just stared.

"Sumtin's definitely in der." The muffled voice from lips pressed firmly against the outside of the door was unmistakable. He silently slid the safety bolt, suddenly opened the door and Vigo fell into the room, his cowboy hat rolling across the floor.

"Waah! Mercedes. my mon. You trying to kill your favourite Nigerian?" he said, picking himself up.

In the corridor, Chelsea was holding a plastic dish of something that he was eating with his fingers.

"You brought anyone else with you?" Dobson asked.

"Just Scumbag, Mercedes. Learning the business day. What you call it? Go right direction, quiet footsteps."

"Surveillance, navigation, self-reliance and initiative. Like tracking down jollof rice by the smell and not asking if anyone else wants to share it."

Vigo laughed, punched Dobson's shoulder, picked up his hat, put it back where it began and wandered further into the room. Chelsea followed, shutting the door with greasy fingers he'd just licked.

"Hey, nice place," Vigo said looking around. "You park well." He took a look in the bathroom. "No hiding fancy piece o' turkey?"

"Chance would be a fine thing. What're you doing here, Vigo?"

Vigo was checking the springs on the bed, Chelsea sitting on the chair facing the wall mirror watching himself eat.

"Still dealing with Bill Larsen's shipment," Vigo replied. "Truck, he go kaput in Benin City. No find space for container but no problem. Sorted. So, I phoned Colin 'cus you gone quiet like gone die or sumtin."

"Very thoughtful, Vigo. So, you drove up here? How long you staying?"

"You want us go already?"

"No problem. Colin say much?"

"Say body dey inside cloth and sumtin to do with money washing. Busy, like he do too much. Then say big buddy resting at Sheraton. So, we call by."

Dobson was still standing by the open door. He shut it and tapped Chelsea on the shoulder. "You finish chop? Go sit on the floor."

"Yessah."

He took over Chelsea's chair and sat with his back to the mirror. "Listen, Vigo. I'm glad you called by. I can't use my phone too often because someone doesn't like my face so I'm sleeping outside."

"In the street, Mercedes?"

"They already tried shooting me in the street. And do you remember Pink Panther Chelsea?" Chelsea, suddenly faced with a question, looked blank. "Pink Panther, Chelsea. Stop eating and try remembering something. At Pink Lips. Benji said he was in charge of the floozies."

"Floozies, sah?"

"The giggling girls with their complicated hair."

"Ah yes, sah."

"Well? Do you remember him?"

"Panta, sah. "

"I know that. Was he called Pink Panther at birth for reasons best known to his mother? Or is Pink Panther a better name, like Chelsea Scumbag is a better name than Zakarius Obodi?"

Vigo stepped in. "Pink Panta. Him with pink shirt, pink necktie and pink socks?"

"That's him, Vigo."

"But no tail, Mercedes. I see no pink tail."

"But you've seen him before? Where?"

"Pink Lips, Mercedes. Top man. Big connections."

"And he likes pink?"

"I once saw him in full, white boubou but maybe he also have pink one. Man like you should know about marketing."

"Pink is the corporate colour?"

"And pink make the man wink. You never hear that before?"

"But winking is what Pink Panther does" Dobson replied. "He's got a twitch, a nervous tic in his right eye. He was here. He tried to open the door. He stood outside winking at me through the spy hole. Who the hell is he?"

"That's Godwin, sah," said Chelsea.

Before Dobson could react, the room phone rang. It was Taj Harding.

"I've just spoken to Daniel in Johannesburg. He asked if you've tracked Gabriel down yet."

"Why?" Dobson asked abruptly because his mind was on Godwin.

"We'd like him to meet Halima. It would make a good visual."

"A good visual?"

"You know, good PR. We're pushing for aid funds, Mark. Anything that raises public awareness must be a good thing."

Dobson drew a breath. No doubt about it there were some well-meaning ideas here but no-one seemed to understand the COK link, the fraud, the corruption, the politics, the threat to Nigeria itself. Harding, Bakare and the US delegation currently in Abuja were supposed to be informed, influential and fully aware of West African

politics. Presumably they had access to intelligence but did they know what had been happening in London? "Have you discussed security?" he asked.

"We've discussed it with the hotel."

Dobson held his head. If the hotel was so good, why did they allow strangers to roam corridors trying to open doors? "What about the Nigerian police?"

"The US Embassy is dealing with it. We've also involved the French Embassy because of Niger."

"Has anyone discussed it directly with the Nigerian government, the State Governor, the SSS, the President?"

"You think it's that important?"

"Listen, Taj. With anything related to Gabriel you only ever see the tip of the iceberg. Have you spoken to Parker-Stanley or the High Commissioner?"

"The High Commissioner, Peter Thomas, is in London."

"So why not delay it. Why the urgency?"

Harding's response sounded reasonable enough. "Gabriel always accused us of not doing anything so we're doing something."

Correct. But to Dobson it smacked more of the short term, quick-fix, opportunistic politics he abhorred. He decided to leave it right there but he'd share his opinions with Martin Abisola.

Vigo and Chelsea had switched on the TV during this conversation. Dobson switched it off. "So," he said with only one thing on his mind. "Who is Pink Panther? Who is Godwin?"

"Top man. Big connections," said Vigo.

"Top man where? Connections with who? What's his real name?"

Chelsea looked blank. Vigo shrugged but said "Mazda knows one of the girls."

"What would she know?"

"She belongs to Pink. She's his floo."

Chelsea grinned and corrected him. "Floozy."

"Yeh, OK.," Vigo said, unusually embarrassed. "So, what the fuck's a floozy?"

Dobson had no problem there. A wealthy German client in Bangkok, fleeced by his Thai wife had once given him a list of a floozy characteristics: "Bloody promiscuous, fucking hussy and schlampe, bloody tart, ungrateful whore and slut," he explained to Vigo.

"Yah," Vigo said, "That's Marina. I'll phone Maz."



As Vigo went about trying to find Mazda, Dobson logged onto the Asher & Asher secure site. There was another string of messages, but Vigo interrupted.

"Mazda's just delivered a BMW we painted in sparkling purple for Babe Sophie," he announced.

Dobson looked up. "Do I know Babe Sophie?"

"You watch Flowers?" Vigo asked

"Growing?"

"TV show mon. Babe Sophie is the starlet with the big eyes and cowbells."

"What's it about?"

"Never watch it, mon."

"So, where's Mazda now?"

"Having his photo taken with Babe lying on the car. Then he'll go to Pink Lips. He'll keep his receipts for you."

"Good, I was worried about that. Where are you staying tonight? Only you look very comfortable on my bed."

"We'll sleep here, Mark. No rush. Protection, advice, errands and watch the spy hole."

Dobson went outside to speak to Dickson in the car park hut. "Can I use your phone, Dickson?"

"Who you call, sah?"

"One of my partners in London - Craig Donovan."

"What's the number, sah?"

Dobson gave him the number and they went to sit in the Toyota.

"Where's the boss?" Dobson asked as Dickson untangled the phone.

"In his office, sah."

"Razor wire hotel?"

"Yessah."

"Can he listen to the call I'm about to make?"

"Yessah."

"Can I speak to him first?"

"One minute, sah." Dickson pressed some numbers on the console, then handed Dobson a set of headphones.

"Mark."

"I'm about to call Craig Donovan in the UK," Dobson told Martin Abisola. "I'd like you to listen in."

Five minutes later, Donovan picked up the call. "Yeh."

"Craig? It's Mark.....Abuja.....It's a safe phone.....Yes, thanks, Martin Abisola is listening in.....Listen. I'm getting updates from Colin on all the financial stuff. Good work, Craig. But what I need is your opinion.....Cast your mind back to how things were when you worked at the US Embassy here.....Give me the Steve Barnett perspective." He listened for a while. Then: "Barnett's in Stuttgart? Would that mean AFRICOM to you?.....Now then, you've read my reports to Colin about what Martin Abisola's told me.....Correct.....we're party to some top intelligence here, I realise that. What I need to know is whether what we know about the COK, the guys behind COK funding and the suspicions of a terrorism-led plot to overthrow the government has reached the ears of US and UK Intelligence?"

Craig Donovan spoke longer this time.

"So," Dobson concluded. "They're sceptical, are not necessarily believing it, might be putting it down to Presidential nerves and paranoia, they're playing things down, treading carefully as always."

That seemed to concur with Donovan's view.

"So, why's Steve Barnett with AFRICOM right now? Are they changing their minds? Are they getting concerned? Is your friend Commander David Fernandez behind a change of tactics, starting with improving surveillance ops?"

"I'd say Fernandez is finding it a good time to force through some decisions he's wanted for some time," Donovan replied.

"But it also looks like the US are making moves without fully involving the Nigerians."

"That wouldn't be the first time."

"So, if you were Steve Barnett right now, what would you do? Advise Daniel Bakare to cancel his PR stunt here tomorrow evening?"

"Tough one," said Donovan. "Don't forget Gabriel's involvement here. Gabriel's been in the US lobbying for attention and might like the idea of a PR stunt. You've also got Gabriel's buddy, Senator James McAllister, pushing everyone for action. And then you've got Defence Secretary Douglas Martin who, also don't forget, McAllister detests. Martin will bend in any wind if he thinks he might end up on the losing side. If you ask me, I reckon he's already bending. Meanwhile Bakare thinks his time for fame has come."

"So, what you're saying is Bakare won't be encouraged to abandon his plans."

"Dead right. And he definitely won't welcome advice coming from an English private investigator."

Dobson thanked Dickson and handed the headphones back.

"Noted," came the single word reply from Abisola and Dickson switched off.

"Have you seen anything suspicious today?" Dobson asked Dickson as they still sat in the Toyota.

"No sah. We check all cars."

"What about people already inside the hotel?"

"Hotel responsibility, sah."

"You see anyone who blinks like this? Dobson winked rapidly at Dickson in demonstration. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Dickson smiled. "No sah."

"Big guy, suit, maybe pink colour?"

"Maybe staff, through back door, sah."

"Are they checked?"

"By hotel, sah."

"Deliveries?"

"Back door sah."

"Thanks. Please tell the boss I've got my own security team here now. He'll know who I mean."

"Yessah."

Dobson returned to his hotel room to find Vigo asleep on the bed and Chelsea watching TV, something loud that might well have starred Babe Sophie for all Dobson knew. Chelsea didn't even look up as the door opened.

"Turn that down," Dobson said. "And next time I'm out put the security lock on and don't let anyone in who you don't recognise through the spy hole, OK?"

"Sorry sah."

Vigo was snoring. He snored even as the room phone rang again.

"Yes Dickson."

"I just think, sah. The only cars we don't check are the police."

"Have any come? Yesterday or today?"

"One car yesterday. I was away having shit, but Mohamed said they had ID."

"Mohamed's one of the car park security guards, yes?"

"Sidney until chop time, then Mohamed, sah."

"How long did the police stay?"

"Mohamed say maybe ten minutes. I still shit."

"You take copies of IDs?"

"Not police, just look."

"How many police were in the car?"

"Wait, sah. I ask Mohamed.....three sah. Two in the front, one in the back."

"How many came out?"

"I ask Mohamed.....Mohamed says only two. He now very scared."

"Did Mohamed know them? See them clearly?"

"I ask Mohamed, sah.....no sah. Sorry."

"Do you trust the police, Dickson?"

"No sah."

## CHAPTER 30

It was very early on Friday morning.

Mark Dobson had slept on one side of the bed, Vigo on the other but it was not Vigo's gentle snoring that woke him but Vigo's phone. Vigo stirred, dragged the phone from his back pocket, put it to his ear, grunted something and handed it to Dobson. "Maz."

Dobson took the phone, heard loud pop music and a shuffling sound. "Pink Lips rocking tonight?" he asked.

"Wah. You wanna know sumtin big?"

"Only if my money's been well spent."

"I take piss. Wait," Mazda said and Dobson waited, wondering if Mazda was having a piss or about to take the piss. The music faded as if a door had shut. Then: "Mmmm." As if he'd definitely been having a piss. "You there, Merc?"

"Here."

"Party time Merc. Some big shot organize a lot of fizz. Then two hour ago, big trouble. Someone take gun. Someone outside get shot. Police come. Blue light mix with pink light. Everyone run inside. All like normal now."

"Go on."

"It's like this. I go have cozy with one smallie in fah corner and....."

"Slow down, OK? Speak English."

"Yah. This smallie, she come on very....."

"Smallie?"

"Flooz, Merc. You told me to find a flooz."

"Did I say that?"

"So, I find flooz. Slim, slim. Nice titties, tight arse. Listen well, Merc, 'cus this vital, OK?"

"I'm listening."

"Florence say she prefer Flo because....."

"Flo's the flooz, yes?"

"Yessah. Today only, sah. So, I get talking, drinking, smoking. You know Pink Lips, Merc. Very cultural. Eye make water, brain make clear view and then must sleep."

"Understand. What happened?"

"Cut story, Merc. Flo say there one big oga, Merc."

"Oga?"

"Big man, boss man. Listen well, Merc. Pink Panta, he one big atutu."

"You see Pink Panther tonight?"

"No sah, Pink, he big man, no time. Flo laugh like hyena when I ask about Pink, say Pink not his genuine label, Pink called Godwin, sah."

"Yes, Chelsea Scumbag said that. I need more."

"Plenty more, sah. I tell you. Listen well. I say to Flo the flooz why Pink is also Godwin and she say that Pink and Godwin same ting but not same ting. Godwin explain, say God always wins. That's Naija comedy, Merc. You on same wavelength?"

"I'm not sure."

"So, Flo ask another flooz about Godwin. Ansa come back is Pink works for someone called Godwin and Godwin is one big shot in insurance."

"Insurance."

"Protection, Merc. Pink Lips pay insurance to Pink who pays to Godwin who is a big shot called Abubakar Aliyu."

"So, Godwin is Abubakar Aliyu?"

"Yessah. Do I get expenses?"

"I think so. And the problem with the police tonight?"

"Benji do something Godwin not like so Benji was shot dead, sah. Very sorry, sah."

Dobson called Martin Abisola on Vigo's phone but it went straight to an anonymous messaging centre. Thinking that was because Vigo's number was unrecognised, Dobson risked his own phone. It was only four thirty but Abisola picked it up immediately. "What's the urgency?"

"The one called Godwin on Lazarus's list," Dobson said. "I've got a name - Abubakar Aliyu."

There was an unusually long silence from Abisola. "You sure?"

"Sure. He runs a protection business. And something else. A guy was shot dead at Pink Lips an hour ago. It was Benji who helped my team deal with Balogun."

Vigo and Chelsea heard that and woke up completely.

Dobson heard Vigo muttering "Fuck," under his breath while he waited for Abisola to say something.

"Benji. Benny Fashola?" Abisola asked.

"Benny Fashola?" Dobson checked with Vigo.

Vigo nodded. "Fuck."

"It's been a bad night, Abisola went on. "We've also had shootings here in Abuja. Two hours ago, it was Danny Idamo and Casper Daramola. You know them?"

"Danny? Casper? Dead?"

"Fuck," said Vigo and Chelsea in unison.

"Multiple gunshot wounds. You want my opinion on what this is about?" Abisola said. "The big guys have heard about warrants and arrests for banking fraud, corruption and money laundering and they're thinking things are getting too close to home - just like I warned. So, they're firing warning shots saying, 'Don't mess with us' and they're saying it to anyone showing enthusiasm for Pastor Gabriel, to those who help unwelcome foreigners and to the unwelcome foreigners themselves. As for Gabriel. I reckon he'll need all the help God can give if he returns right now.

"But I now understand what Lazarus's suicide note meant," Abisola continued. "Abubakar runs several companies including one called Golden Churches. It's an insurance company with an advertising strap line 'God Wins'. Lazarus probably knew it as Godwin.

"And Abubakar owns other businesses - Golden Opportunities, Golden Finance - but dig down and it's drugs, prostitution and protection. What's more, Abubakar is a friend of Festus Fulani and Zainab Azazi. This is Nigeria, Mark - organised crime,

gangsters on a par with Chinese Triads and Italian Mafia. You see what a nightmare we face trying to eradicate corruption? Turn over a few stones and all sorts crawl out. Unravelling it is almost impossible. That's why prosecutions fail."

Mark Dobson understood. He'd spent the best part of fifteen years tangling with what Colin Asher called snake pits.

"So, let me get this straight," Dobson said. "Pink, known as Pink Panther to most of Pink Lips, actually works for Abubakar's Golden businesses and calls himself Godwin. Lazarus, confused as always, paid protection money to someone he knew as Godwin but that money went to Abubakar."

"That's probably it, although if Lazarus paid cash I wouldn't guarantee it went to where it was supposed to. Abubakar is an international criminal, a con man and a multimillionaire who mostly lives outside Nigeria - last time I heard he was in Los Angeles."

There was the usual pause for reflection and, suddenly, a few clicks on the line.

Then Abisola said. "Stop using this phone, Mark. Move now." And then the phone went dead.

Dobson stared at his silent phone. Had someone logged it. Traced it? He stood up.

"Vigo, Listen. I'm leaving right now. Chelsea. I need your phone. Hand it over - right now! Get up for Christ's sake and go downstairs, anywhere. Just stay out of sight for a few hours then check in like you've just arrived in Abuja. Get a room together and keep your heads down. Understand?"

Vigo jumped up, eyes wide. Chelsea wasn't sure, but eventually, seeing Vigo already moving fast, stood.

"I'm going now. Do as I say. I'll contact you somehow later. Move."

Dobson picked up his laptop, took the fire escape at the end of the corridor, ran down the stairs, pushed the fire door and found himself in a service area at the rear of the hotel. It was still dark, dark enough to move between parked cars and out onto the main road. Five minutes later he was standing behind a tree watching the still brightly lit hotel entrance

Within seconds a Mercedes arrived, the driver waved a card at the night-time attendant but barely stopped and drove straight to the hotel entrance. Three men got out. One stayed by the car, two disappeared inside.

Two minutes later there was a knock on the door of Dobson's room but inside it was empty. Vigo and Chelsea had fled, following Dobson down the fire exit and out into the car park.

From behind the tree, Dobson watched and worried. It was not five o'clock but there was already movement in the hotel lobby. He took out Chelsea's phone and rang Dickson's number. Dickson answered. "Can you transfer this call to the boss, Dickson?"

"Yes, Mr Dobson. Is everything OK?"

"No. Where are you?"

"Boss called me to go to the Sheraton."

"Don't go there, Dickson. It's too late. Pick me up on Benghazi street. You know where?"

"Sure. You want to speak to boss?"

But Martin Abisola's voice immediately came on the line. "Bring Mr Hicks to NCHQ, Dickson."

It was 4am UK time when Colin Asher took a call from the French private investigator, Maurice, who held an unpaid debt to Asher & Asher.

"Zis homme Nigérian," Maurice said. "Someone with manteau d'hiver et chapeau mou just check out of Radisson Blu in Marseille Vieux Port."

Asher, trying to sleep on a camp bed in his office jumped up. "Chapeau mou? Qu'est-ce mot, Maurice?"

"It eez hat, Colin. Chapeau mou. Like Inspector Cluseau."

"A trilby sur un homme noir?" Colin interpreted. "Pas commun. And manteau d'hiver? Winter coat, right? What time did he check out, Maurice?"

"Twenty minutes, Colin. He sit and wait in hotel bus for Marseilles Provence airport. I go fast by car. Bus not arrive yet. What to do, Colin?"

"Find out where the hell he's going and call me back. Good work Maurice."

"Boss will come soon," Dickson told Dobson as he escorted him to the interrogation room at Abisola's NCHQ.

Dickson left and Dobson logged onto the Asher site to find a message marked URGENT.

"Ayo has bought a ticket for Cairo from Marseilles, south of France. Flight details to follow. Rather than wait to be shot in Abuja why not meet Ayo in Cairo? Craig's on standby. RSVP."

Dobson sat back. It took less than a minute to decide. "I'll fly to Cairo."

Back came a reply: "Ayo is flying Turkish Airlines via Istanbul. ETD midday, ETA 2030. There's an Egypt Air flight from Abuja to Cairo that could get you to Cairo just before Ayo. Your move."

Martin Abisola then arrived. "So, you're still in one piece."



"Thanks for the warning. Five minutes later would have been too late. I've decided to go to Cairo."

"Cairo." Abisola repeated after Dobson had explained. "A co-incidence. Monday's just unscrambled a message from Ahmad Sherat, an Egyptian Homelands Security guy I spoke to when I was in London. EHS want ID details and any other names that Fulani uses. Colin Asher found links between the Islamic Bank in London and the Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank in Cairo and there are accounts at the ADIB Cairo opened with forged Nigerian passports. Colin Asher found six aliases he uses. These went to the NCA and the NCA contacted the EHS."

"But I'll follow Ayo and see where that leads us."

"Ahmad Sherat's team at EHS might be useful."

Dobson thought about that. "Agreed, but right now, I'm going to Cairo as part of my duty for Gabriel and Solomon," he said. "I'll soon know if it's time to call in the EHS."

Abisola nodded and they sat for a moment, thinking until another message from Asher appeared. "Gabriel has arrived in Accra. He's with Solomon."

"Christ," said Dobson. "Why do I think he's planning on returning here just as I'm leaving."

## CHAPTER 31

Bill Larsen couldn't sleep.

He'd felt positive and optimistic when he'd finished talking to Halima at nine o'clock the night before but, since then, Colin Asher had phoned him twice. The second call had been long. "Mark asked me to call you, Bill. We're very concerned about security."

What followed had been a summary of the last few days - arrests in London for money laundering and bank fraud, the suicide of another pastor, shootings in Lagos and Abuja and evidence that the COK was not so much a terrorist organisation but the front for a sophisticated crime led organisation with political aims. Gabriel was last heard of in Washington, Sol was in Accra and Mark Dobson was working with the SSS but holed up in the Abuja Sheraton after escaping one shooting attempt.

"Jesus Christ," was the most appropriate thing Larsen could think of saying after ten minutes of this. That was until Asher had added another:

"And phones calls are being hacked and smart phones tracked – yours included."

Larsen made himself some tea and lay on his back, thinking, staring into darkness, breathing Saharan dust whipped up by a wind that had swirled through the camp for several days.

It had been the black American Major Sam Collins who'd broken the news of the media event in Abuja. "She's a fucking hero. We can use her to show the COK are a bunch of fucking failures," he'd said.

Larsen had put the language down to US military hard talk but it didn't mean he liked the tone. "Cocking a snoop," he'd replied in his own style.

"Cockin' a fucking what?"

"Throwing insults, poking fun, deliberately ignoring."

Orders for the cocking of the snoop had, it appeared, come from way up the command structure so what could he do? Already feeling isolated, he'd gone along with it. After all, Halima couldn't stay at the camp for ever and, with all the other problems, it seemed the camp itself might not survive long anyway.

And what sort of bloody press conference was this? Larsen hated public meetings. Colin Asher had made it sound like a mega event for the international media whereas he'd imagined a small gathering, questions from a few press people, perhaps a few photos and then some private discussions with Halima about her future.

"It's also bothering Mark," Colin Asher had said.

"So, what should I do?" he'd replied.

Asher's reply hadn't helped at all. "Tough call."

The passengers on the Turkish Airlines flight from Istanbul to Cairo were mostly Turks and Egyptians but amongst the group pulling cabin bags towards Immigration Control was a neatly dressed Nigerian. On spotting the 'Visa Here' sign he peeled away from the crowd, waited in a short queue and looked around. Security seemed high this evening but he'd been through Cairo airport before. It wasn't unusual, but he'd had this nervous feeling in his chest ever since leaving London.

When it was his turn he gave his Nigerian passport to the clerk, handed over \$20 dollars in cash and waited as she stuck a visa on the first blank page of his passport. Then, after nodding his thanks, he made for the Immigration desk queue and chewed on his fingernails until it was his turn. Chewing reminded him of Lazarus.

"Reason for your visit, Mr Onu?"

"Holiday with my brother."

"Your brother's name?"

"Mr Christopher Onu."

"He lives in Cairo?"

"Yes."

Two minutes later Ayo was collecting his bag off the conveyor. Still no problems. Next up, customs control and nerves again, but he took the green, nothing to declare, channel and made his way outside to find a taxi and another queue. He waited until his turn came and then watched his case being loaded into the back of the taxi. "The Nile Ritz Carlton, please."

The European man who'd joined the queue right after him heard the instruction. Mark Dobson, fresh off the Abuja flight, took the next taxi but quickly lost Ayo's in heavy traffic.

It did not matter as he still arrived at the skyscraper Nile Ritz Carlton overlooking the Nile as Ayo's bag was being lifted out again. He watched Ayo pay the driver and then stand, looking for help. It was too bad. A coach full of Chinese had just arrived. Help was in short supply.

In Abuja, Monday called Abisola. "Cairo just sent a list of Nigerians arriving in Cairo today. One arrived from Istanbul using a passport in the name of Abraham Onu. That's one of the names we have for Pastor Ayo, sir."

It was hot, clear and starry night, noisy with Cairo traffic and Ayo waited, moving his weight from one foot to the other. Dobson went inside with just the laptop bag he'd brought with him on the Egypt Air flight. Travelling with anything bigger posed all sorts of problems when following someone, so he'd planned on buying a change of clothing when he found the time. From inside the entrance he watched Ayo bend to his flight bag, zip his passport into a side pocket and retrieve something else. Out came the brown felt trilby. He put it on and adjusted it in the reflection in the glass. Dobson tapped out a short text and sent it to Monday at at Abisola's NCHQ.

Monday called Abisola. "Dobson confirms Ayo's staying at the Nile Ritz Carlton, room 302. Dobson has also checked in."

In room 302 Ayo unpacked, hung up his suits and silk shirts in the closet, took a shower and came out wearing pale yellow silk pyjamas with the name of his church - 'Christ's Centre of Holy Visions emblazoned across the chest. Around his neck, hung a large golden cross on a chain. He un-zipped his smaller bag and withdrew a mobile phone, a Bible and a note book of sermons that he always carried in case he was asked to prove his occupation. He then checked an address book and made sure he had the Cairo number Zainab Azazi had told him to call. In the morning, he would call the number, deal with the problem of the stolen money and then go home a richer man.

As Ayo slept fitfully Mark Dobson went midnight shopping, returning with a new set of boxer shorts, a fresh white shirt and a pair of light chinos. He cut a short slot in the elastic waist band of the new shorts, inserted the memory stick for his laptop, rinsed out his only pair of socks, set his mobile for a wake-up call at 5am and put it next to his pillow. Then he closed his eyes. Minutes later the phone rang.

"How de body man? Fightin' fit?"

“Gabriel.”

“Why are you in Cairo just as I decide to visit you in Nigeria?”

“You must have phoned Colin to get this number. Didn’t he tell you?”

“Someone fired a gun at your arse.”

“Not my arse, Gabriel. My head. Did Colin say anything else?”

“That Pastor Lazarus had gone to his maker, that Ayo had taken his money, that all hell was breaking out with Nigerians with overseas bank accounts and that you’d gone to Cairo.”

Dobson, having already decided this would not be a quick five-minute call sat up and put his feet on the ground. “Listen,” he said. “Ayo’s here and so, probably, is Festus and billions of laundered dollars, most of it stolen from ordinary Nigerians. Some of it is probably what we saw being handed over by David Kaplan to Ayo and Lazarus in London. How much did Colin tell you about what’s been happening since you got arrested in Nairobi?”

“He called it a short summary and told me to call you. He was in the middle of a meeting with the police.”

“Then you’ve got a lot of catching up to do, Gabriel. Did Colin have time to tell you that Bill Larsen and Halima are heading to Abuja tomorrow?” Dobson checked his watch. “Correction. Later today. For some sort of media event with a worldwide audience?”

“Yeh. Sol got an email from Daniel Bakare and a phone call from Bill Larsen.

“And Benjamin?”

“Deeply saddened, Mark.....it’s why I left Washington.”

It took almost an hour for Mark Dobson to update Gabriel. He ended with, “So where are you now?”

“The airport in Accra, waiting for the first flight to Abuja,” Gabriel replied. “We should be there midday. Where’s Ayo?”

“Probably asleep a few floors beneath me.”

There was a long pause. “You’re living dangerously Mark. What is it you say? Going beyond the call of duty?”

“My choice, Gabriel. Just don’t you, or Sol, spoil it for me by getting killed.”

Dobson’s phone woke him at 5am and he felt cold. He switched off the AC, pulled the curtains and looked down on night-time Cairo. It was a far cry from his view over Kano of a few days before. Street lights and headlights from cars, taxis and trucks heading along the Corniche and across the 6<sup>th</sup> October Bridge, sparkled off the Nile. With nothing to do but wait for Ayo to make a move he watched the view for a while

but then checked his watch. Gut feeling told him the Nigerian would move early and he needed to know where. He shaved and showered, pulled on his new chinos and shirt, dragged on the damp socks he'd washed the night before, then squeezed his feet into his dusty black loafers. He put the laptop in the room safe, picked up his room key and mobile phone and went down to the lobby. It was 5.45.

Three floors above, Ayo was lying awake, restless and apprehensive. He had not slept at all well and had a headache throbbing across his forehead. He felt the pulse in his neck. It was racing. Time, on the other hand was going too slowly so he dragged himself out of bed and fished out his 'Pastor's Mega Pack' from his flight bag. Then he began to read a pre-prepared sermon on the Good Samaritan that he'd once downloaded and printed. But he couldn't concentrate. He thought about Lazarus and wondered if he was still sitting and crying at the Radisson Blu at Heathrow Airport. The fool was not suited to this sort of business. He should have stayed with the jewellery shop he'd inherited from his father, not tried playing serious games with big players or even running a small church. His high-pitched, whimpering voice had never attracted big congregations and big income. Ayo wanted to laugh but felt too nervous. His nerves were then further shattered by his mobile phone ringing.

But it is night time, he thought to himself and wondered if it was Lazarus in London. He picked it up. "Ah. Yes?"

There was silence but Ayo felt sure someone was there. "Ah, who is this please?" He heard someone breathing.

"Pastor Ayo. Come all de way from London to Cairo to see me. How de body, pastor?"

It was the voice that gave Ayo nightmares. A fresh rush of nerves ran through his entire body cramping the muscles of his stomach.

"How friendly, Pastor, to come all de way to Cairo to see me," Zainab Azazi said, laughing. The laugh stopped. "A car is waiting outside."

Ayo's muscle cramps spread to his chest. Beads of sweat oozed from his forehead. Ayo liked a tidy, orderly life not things sprung on him unexpectedly. Zainab Azazi was supposed to be in Abuja not waiting outside his hotel in Cairo. Holding onto the table top, Ayo stood as dizziness now added to the growing pain in his chest. Wiping his forehead, he looked in the mirror and saw a much older man than he imagined. "Oh, my Lord Jesus," he said to himself.

"Are you there, Ayo?"

"Yes," Ayo stammered, "But I thought....."

"Do not think, Ayo. It is a waste of time. Come down."

"But I am not dressed..."

"Then dress. Five minutes." And the phone went dead in Ayo's hand.

Ayo staggered around in circles. Washing and dressing were art forms, not things to be hurried. Instead of washing he splashed aftershave, grabbed his blue silk shirt and grey suit with the silvery thread from the closet. He dressed hurriedly, looking at his watch every few seconds. Then he picked up his small leather bag containing everything that was important, put his hat on his head and hurried out of the door.

Mark Dobson had ordered coffee and was relaxing with the latest copy of Al-Ahram when the lift opened.

Ayo squeezed out almost before the door opened. His trilby fell to the floor, he bent to pick it up and almost ran to the hotel entrance.

Dobson stood up, dropped his paper on the table and followed him outside. It was 6.15 with a few pink clouds in a light blue early morning sky, and Ayo was nervously walking up and down, checking his watch, clutching a bag. A taxi turned up and dropped off two men with briefcases but Ayo ignored it and continued to nervously scan the approach road.

It was Dobson who made a move for the vacant taxi. "You free?"

"Yes sir. Where to sir?"

"Pay by the hour OK? If it only takes five minutes I pay for an hour."

"Yes sir."

They agreed a generous package, Dobson prepaid and then went to sit in the rear seat.

"Yes sir?"

"Just wait down there," he pointed. "We'll be following a car or another taxi."

Behind them on the approach road, a shiny new Mercedes drew up, Ayo got in and Dobson texted Abisola. Back came a reply from Monday.

"EHS traced a short phone call to Ayo's mobile at 05.56. The caller was close-by but not yet recognised."

"OK," Dobson acknowledged. "Ayo was picked up in a Mercedes. I'm on his tail heading west but I've no idea where we're going."

Carrying his small, leather bag, Ayo had tumbled into the rear seat of the Mercedes. Looking at him over the front seat was a big, smiling face with large white teeth.

"Welcome to Cairo, pastor," Zainab Azazi said. "How's Lazarus?"

Ayo, still struggling with cramp in his stomach and chest took a deep breath. Sweat trickled down his cheeks as the car moved off merging into heavy, early morning Cairo traffic - horns were blowing and people were walking in the street.

"You look sick, Ayo," Azazi was still grinning. "Need a doctor?"

"Yes," Ayo said weakly now feeling a numbness in his arms. He sat, resting his head back, his heart beating or trying to.

"You must wait. Business first."

Ayo, holding his bag hard against his pounding chest saw nothing of the bridge over the Nile or the Nile itself but they were heading west on Al Haram and then off into a maze of side streets. Azazi and the driver were silent. Ayo closed his eyes as, on all sides, millions of Egyptians began their day.

After thirty minutes or so, the Mercedes finally stopped, blocking the middle of a narrow street of tall, grey, stone block buildings with overhanging balconies. Ayo opened an eye. Leaving the engine running, the driver got out, opened the rear door and Ayo, breathing heavily, struggled out. Azazi was waiting. "Already too hot, pastor?" he laughed. "It's going to get hotter."

The driver got back in and drove away.

Dobson's taxi was not far behind. "OK drop me off here. You have a phone?"

"Yes sir."

"Pick me up here when I call."

Dobson got out, looked around and saw Ayo being half carried, half dragged through an open doorway by a big Nigerian. It was as if Ayo was sick or drugged.

When he casually walked past and looked inside, Dobson saw a bare, dusty entrance with stone stairs that wound upwards. There was no lift so Ayo was being forced up, a deep Lagos-accented voice urging him on.

Brass name-plates fixed to the wall outside caught Dobson's eye. One in particular read: 'Thahab Enterprises: Third Floor.'

Beneath it, others - 'Doctor Mustapha Tawfik, Urologist, Floor 4, 6pm to 11pm' and two in flowing Arabic script that Dobson couldn't read, except for opening hours, 10am to 4pm.

He looked up. The four-floor building, was a typical old style Cairo home now used for small business, but it was only 7.15am. Nothing much would be happening just yet. Certainly, Doctor Mustapha Tawfik's private urology clinic on the fourth floor would be empty.

And then a thought struck him. It was the name: Thahab. After several years of working around the Middle East Dobson knew the word. 'thahab'. It meant gold. Thahab Enterprises meant Golden Enterprises just like Golden Churches, Golden Opportunities and Golden Finance.

And then thoughts of Mazda's night-time work at Pink Lips and Martin Abisola's explanation of Godwin, Pink and Abubakar. "Abubakar Aliu owns other businesses called Golden," Abisola had explained. "Pink, known as Pink Panther to most of Pink Lips, actually works for Abubakar's Golden Opportunities and calls himself Godwin.

But it's drugs, prostitution and protection. Abubakar is a friend of Festus Fulani and Zainab Azazi."

And Dobson was now sure that the man he'd seen pushing Ayo into the building was Azazi.

Upstairs, he heard a door slam, echoing down the stairwell.

"This is Nigeria, Mark," Abisola had said. "Organised crime, gangsters on a par with Chinese Triads and Italian Mafia."

Dobson's taxi had driven off, hidden amongst a mass of slow moving traffic, parked cars and people. Standing there he wondered if he'd see the taxi again and also whether he was being tracked through his own phone by someone at Egyptian Homelands Security. He hoped, in a way, he was but could not be certain. The Nigerian SS and the EHS struck fear in the hearts of many Nigerians and Egyptians, but Dobson had a high regard for Abisola and Abisola seemed to respect Sherat. And the EHS had become involved through Colin Asher and the National Crime Agency. And all of this had stemmed from trying to help Solomon Trading. Meanwhile, he was just a small-time private investigator operating on foreign soil. Whatever he did next, he needed to be careful.

He texted Abisola. "Send me photos of Zainab Azazi and Abubakar Aliu to my phone."

While he waited, Dobson mounted the stairs to the third-floor landing. There was only one door off but with no sign on it. He put his ear to the door but could hear nothing.

Ayo had been pushed by Zainab Azazi up dirty steps that never seemed to end. By the third floor he was ready to collapse but Azazi opened a door with a key and pushed him inside to a small room that smelled of cigarettes and dust. He was told to sit and wait on a shiny, black plastic sofa as Azazi disappeared through another door.

Ayo looked around. Despite the cheap, disagreeable plastic texture of the sofa Ayo wanted to lie on it not sit. He wiped beads of sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and sensed something was missing. His hat. It was gone, left in the car, on the back seat, maybe on the floor. Panicking, Ayo tried to stand but his chest pounded with exertion and he flopped back down.

Outside the door, Dobson heard Ayo mumble something but then two, much louder, Nigerian accented voices sounded from downstairs. He slipped quietly up to the fourth floor to stand outside Doctor Mustapha Tawfik's urology clinic.

Ayo also heard more voices and, at the same time, Zainab Azazi reappeared.



"Water," said Azazi handing him a chipped cup. Ayo looked at it in disgust but then grasped it, turned it to the unchipped side and was gulping it down when the door opened.

"Ayo, my friend," said the first man who entered. "I'm told you're sick. But not too sick to fly to Cairo to collect your commission. No?"

It was Festus Fulani in black trousers and open necked white shirt and, beside him another Nigerian Ayo didn't recognize. This one looked down at him, shaking his head as Zainab Azazi stood grinning, now holding the empty cup.

"Ah, Pastor Ayo. Long time," the second Nigerian said, shaking his head.

Ayo couldn't stand. He only had enough energy to nod, but his memory still worked and, for the first time he looked up, past Festus's head to a red and yellow poster on the wall. 'Golden Finance' it said and Ayo now remembered this other man's name.

Abubakar Aliu's growl was as menacing as Azazi's. "Fucked everything up didn't you, Pastor?" he said.

Ayo, wide eyed, mouth open, had no idea what he was talking about. He thought he'd done everything. He'd used Lazarus to find the money they'd said was owed, transferred it to where they'd wanted it, kept a bit back for himself and now he was here to.....

"You fucked it up. Because of you, international money transfers were stopped because police were crawling over everything. You're a wanted man, Ayo. Money laundering, fraud, corruption. And another problem for you is no funds means no commission. Understand?"

"Sah," was all Ayo managed to mutter so Azazi kicked Ayo's foot.

"Stand up, pastor. Show some respect. Bow your head. Kneel. You once told me you wanted to meet Babban before you died."

'Big' himself? Ayo, his life shattering around him, struggled to his feet, felt his chest again and stood, unsteadily. "Babban?" he said weakly.

Abubakar nodded. "Welcome to the COK headquarters, Pastor."

Outside the door of Doctor Mustapha Tawfik's clinic, Dobson's phone sounded with a short message from Martin Abisola. The photos were attached. Dobson sat on the dusty top step, tapped out a quick 'thanks', hit 'send' and then began a message to Colin Asher. But then he stopped and deleted it. It was probably time to call for some help, for re-enforcements. The problem was who?

Dobson had spent most of the flight from Abuja to Cairo pondering on that one and now, if this nondescript building in a back street of Cairo was, indeed, the headquarters of a Nigerian fraud operation and maybe even the COK, then he needed the right sort of help.

He'd discussed it with Colin Asher but then, just a day ago, it had all been hypothetical – if we find this, if that, then what, who, how? But they'd faced dilemmas like that before.

Once, under a different name, Dobson had uncovered a plot to make money by spreading a lethal virus created by a scientist who believed the world was overpopulated. Crazy? But true. By the time governments had been convinced enough to act it was almost too late. For Asher & Asher, operating internationally, uncovering crime that crossed borders, in places where priorities, laws and policing varied and where things were sometimes ignored or even encouraged for political reasons, had always been a challenge towards the end. This time it looked like crime, politics and security in one country was being run from another.

So, right now, Mark Dobson was alone, sitting in semi darkness on a dusty stone step somewhere in Cairo and in a dilemma.

Martin Abisola had suggested help from his Egyptian equivalent, the EHS but Dobson wasn't sure if this fell under their remit which was counter intelligence, internal and border security and surveillance. It was not money laundering or plotting against another country

Then there was the General Intelligence Directorate and the Egyptian Interpol National Central Bureau (the NCB) run by the Public Security Sector of the Egyptian Police. All of them were bureaucratic organisations with processes and procedures who took instructions from government. All of them would ignore a foreign private investigator's plea for urgent help even if it was backed up by the Nigerian SS. It could take hours at best. Days or weeks at worst. And neither did he want this opportunity to be lost.

Whatever was happening right this minute on the third floor, a few steps down, might not be happening in an hour or later in the day if they got wind of something and cleared out.

Dobson, still keeping an ear on what was happening down below and thinking that at any moment they might leave, phoned Colin Asher. "It's Interpol, Colin. A raid looking for one or more of the names on the list. Can you do something? How soon?"

"I'll start now but you know what it's like, Mark."

"Sure, but listen. Would you phone Martin Abisola? Discuss it. Give him a longer explanation and do what you can because I have a feeling something might happen here any minute. Meanwhile, I need to get inside their office."

"Bloody hell," said Asher.

"And there's always Adel. When in need call a friend."

"Adel? Is he still going?"

"I spoke to him only a few months ago."

Adel Helmy was Dobson's Egyptian equivalent of Vigo but without the garage. Adel was a rarity in Cairo - a full time private investigator."

“Give him a call would you, Colin? Tell him I’m in Cairo and might need some help. When I’m free I’ll call him myself. And don’t forget, he knows me as Simon Smith.”

“Bloody hell,” Asher said again.

Dobson was still sitting in semi darkness in the dust.

## CHAPTER 32

If Bill Larsen thought that a helicopter ride to the capital of Nigeria would unnerve Halima, he was wrong. Wearing her black tee shirt, desert camouflage cargo pants and desert boots, she'd followed him to the waiting helicopter after it landed at the camp, climbed in with the helping hand of the co-pilot, fastened herself in, smiled and held onto her seat as the craft took off. She'd then spent the entire journey looking down at the ground. Answers to questions were given with smiles and 'yes sah' or 'no sah.'.

They landed on a H mark at Abuja airport, waited for an official car that took them to the US Embassy. Daniel Bakare was waiting. He introduced himself first to Bill Larsen and then to Halima.

"Come, we'll have lunch and discuss this evening's press conference."

Dobson had an idea.

He texted Abisola knowing that he'd be sitting alongside Monday. “You reported someone called Ayo at 05.56. Have you got the number?”

Monday’s reply took less than a minute. “Yes. We now believe it was a phone used by Zainab Azazi.”

“OK - please call the number. Do it anonymously with a good Nigerian accent. Tell him that police working for Egyptian security arrested several Nigerians in Cairo this morning Tell him it’s to do with London bank fraud and Interpol notices. Tell him you’ve heard that Thahab Enterprises are on their list. Suggest to him that they might like to stay away from the office for a day or so until the dust settles. Got it?”

Back came the reply. “Dickson will do it in pure Naija.”

Ayo had been left alone on the sofa. He was still breathing heavily and the painful cramps had moved to his arm and his neck. He was sure it was a heart attack and the thought just made matters worse. He was sure that, at any moment, an agonising pain would erupt and he would collapse and die instantly. He needed an ambulance. Urgently.

Lying on a dirty plastic sofa was not what he'd planned for his passing. He'd imagined a private hospital with a view over verdant lawns where nurses and doctors

hovered, offering soothing words and holding his hand clasped over the Bible opened at Psalm 119 verse 105, a photocopy of which he kept in his Pastor's Mega Pack. What were the words? Ah yes,

"Nun. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path...."

But it was not the voices of nuns and doctors he could hear coming from the adjoining room but the deep voices of men he hated: Zainab Azazi, Festus Fulani and the one they called Babban. What were they discussing? His murder? Or would he die before that anyway?

He looked up at the 'Golden Finance' poster. Even in his semi delirious state, it explained a lot. He, Pastor Ayoola Eniate, had been helping a terrorist group, the COK, an organisation he often denounced in church as evil.

A phone rang in the next room and Ayo opened his eyes. Was it a doctor? An emergency medical service, an ambulance checking the address? He listened to the voice of Zainab Azazi, answering the call, but understood nothing.

"Who is this?" Azazi asked.

"A friend, sah," replied the unknown male voice with the Lagos accent. "I cannot talk long but if you are in your office, I advise you to move out as soon as you can. They have addresses, sah. This morning they arrested two of my best friends. Bank problems in London, sah. You know what I mean?"

"I need to know who this is?"

"My phone is tapped, sah. I cannot speak more. Take my good advice sah, leave your office urgently."

Dickson had performed brilliantly.

It was another ten minutes before Dobson heard the door opening below. There was a general mumbling of voices around the doorway, a shuffling of feet as if one or more were walking down the steps. Then the louder voice of Zainab Azazi said, "You look too sick, Ayo, but you can't stay here. Get up."

There was more shuffling as if Ayo was being pulled to his feet. "Walk man, walk." Ayo might have stumbled for Dobson then heard. "Fuck, move your legs man." The door was shut, a key was turned and Ayo was dragged down the three flights of stairs. Dobson stood up, crept half way down the steps and stopped to look around the bend on the third-floor landing. They were all standing at the entrance, discussing something, Ayo being held upright by Azazi. Dobson then heard Azazi ask "Where's Ali?"

"Coming." Another voice said, probably Festus Fulani's. "We wait."

Dobson assumed this was their transport.

“So, what about this basstad?”

“Take him to the Ritz. Let them sort it.”

From outside the recently vacated Golden Enterprises office door, Dobson phoned Adel.

“Adel, my friend. Sabah el kheer? Kayf halak?”

“Simon! Ahlan sadiqui. Colin just phoned. Maljadeed? You got trouble?”

“Just need help. You free?”

“For you, my friend, Simon, of course. But I just told Colin, I’m not in Cairo but in Alexandria.”

“Ah. Mmm. What about.....?”

“Farouk?”

“Farouk. Is he free to follow some Nigerians around town?”

“Farouk, he is waiting your call. That I also told Colin. You speak too soft Simon. You sure you not in trouble.”

“Not yet. Ask Farouk to call me now. OK?”

Two minutes later, Dobson’s phone vibrated. “Farouk?.....Yes, good man. Listen, go to the Nile Ritz Carlton. A black Mercedes with four Nigerians will call there You might see a very sick Nigerian being dropped off. If so, leave him for the hotel to deal with and follow the Mercedes. Stay tuned, OK?”

“Yes, Mr Simon.

Despite his hatred of Zainab Azazi Ayo was so weak he found himself holding onto his arm for support as they waited for what Ayo hoped was his transport to hospital. That was when his bag slipped from his shoulder onto the pavement. Festus Fulani picked it up, unzipped it and pulled out Ayo’s belongings – passport, wallet, a bottle of white tablets, a small Bible and then an envelope. “What is this?”

Ayo watched, wide eyed, fearful, but too weak to object.

“A bank draft for one hundred and ninety thousand dollars to be drawn on the International Arab Bank, Cairo,” said Festus Fulani. “Very nice. Were you planning to go there after receiving your commission, Ayo?”

Ayo trembled and tried to grab everything back. It was futile.

“I don’t think you’ll need that. Also, everything’s in here for bank ID purposes.” He handed it to Abubakar who glanced at it and then handed it back to Fulani. Fulani slung the bag over his own shoulder. “Shame it’s not more.”

Then the Mercedes arrived.

Dobson heard the movement at the entrance and crept down to the first landing. Looking around the corner he saw Ayo being manhandled again, this time into the back of the car. Azazi climbed in after him. Festus Fulani went to the other door. And Abubakar took the front passenger seat.

As soon as the car drove away, Dobson went back to the third floor. He checked the door. It was a surprisingly simple lock but he had no gear with him. He checked it thoroughly, went down into the street, bought a can of Pepsi, some wire and a pair of scissors, drank the Pepsi and returned to the door.

Sitting on the step again he cut a decent shape, re-enforced it with the wire and tried the lock. In less than a minute he was inside and standing in a small cream-painted room with only a black plastic sofa as furniture and a door off. On one wall was a poster in English, 'Golden Finance'. On the other wall, another poster, 'Golden Insurance' and on the wall above the door 'Golden Enterprises.

Dobson went through the other door – an ordinary looking office with a single window offering a view of the backs of other dismal grey buildings with washing hanging and flocks of pigeons on flat roofs. There was a single medium sized desk with a flat screen computer, a well-worn black swivel chair behind and four hard backed chairs propped around the wall. There were files on a small bookshelf alongside leaflets advertising life insurance, vehicle insurance and business start-up finance. He opened some of the files and flipped through the contents: customer files with Nigerian names, papers held together with paper clips and staples. But the customers had addresses in Lagos, Ibadan and Kano and, to Dobson, looked as if they'd been brought to Cairo for effect only. He checked the dates – none were recent, some were five years old. He'd seen it before - a simple and easy diversion for quick, superficial investigations.

He turned to the computer, checked cable attachments and switched it on. Surprisingly, it was unlocked. It had Windows 7 with Word 2013 and the usual set of standard icons. He pressed Explorer and got an internet connection but with nothing in a favourites box or the browsing history. He went back to Word, opened Documents and Excel and found nothing. Then he called Colin Asher.

"I need a hack," he said to Colin Asher.

"Where are you?"

"Inside the office. It's set up as a cheap but pathetic cover as an insurance company, that might just be enough to deter a quick inspection."

"Are you on a PC now?"

"Yes. It's got a well-thumbed keyboard but nothing's showing. I'm suspicious."

"Can you find an IP address."

Dobson found it, read it out and waited.

"So where are the occupants?" Colin Asher asked as he pressed keys and waited for wheels to grind on a computer back in the Edgware Road office.

“Dumping a very sick Ayo back at the Ritz Carlton. From there I’m hoping Farouk can track them to wherever they.....”

“Right I’m in. What are we looking for?”

“Usual stuff. Files, browsing history, you know.”

Colin hummed an unrecognisable tune. Dobson waited and wondered what he’d do if Festus and the others returned unexpectedly. He put it out of his mind by reading an ancient file on one Joseph Akami from Calabar and a handwritten letter from Mr Akami to Golden Insurance in Abuja complaining with dark words about a delay in settling his claim. It looked like someone had spat on his letter and screwed it up before replacing it back in Mr Akami’s file.

“Christ,” Asher said after a while. “There’s a link to another computer somewhere and..... and files crammed with stuff. This’ll take me hours. There are hundreds of memos, spread sheets and names – names, names, names. Bank details. Jesus, Mark, this is serious. And some of it’ll need decoding. What the fuck have you uncovered?”

“So, can I leave you to it?” Dobson asked. “How long?”

“Six months or so should do,” Asher replied, clearly enjoying himself. “You off now?”

“Yep. Over to you. Can I shut this thing down and make it look like no-one came in?”

“Sure, go ahead. Tidy up.....Fuck me.....look at that. Martin Abisola will love this. Who the hell is Tatsine?”

“The COK, Colin. Looks like we’ve found their HQ. I always said we’re better than the CIA or SIS.”

Dobson tidied up, relocked the door and left the cool, quiet darkness and went out onto the hot and brightly sunlit street. Amongst the bustle of passers-by and the noise of city traffic, he checked his watch. It was midday. As often happened he realised he’d not eaten since yesterday and only drunk coffee at the hotel and a can of Pepsi. Then his phone rang.

“Mr Smith?”

“Yes Farouk.”

“Those Nigerians went to an apartment in Heliopolis.”

“You followed the Mercedes?”

“Yes, Mr Smith.”

“What happened to the sick one?”

“They come to Ritz and sick one get out. He stood alone, nearly fall. Door man take him inside. But I follow the Mercedes. Follow to Heliopolis, close by is Saint Markos Coptic Church. You know?”

“Not well.”

“Two of them go into apartment, but one man and driver go to Arab African International Bank, also not so far.”

“Did you get a good look at the driver? Is he Egyptian or Nigerian?”

“Nigerian. Too black and different shape for Egyptian.”

“What happened next?”

“I waited outside the bank. After twenty minutes the man came out and I followed the Mercedes to the apartment.”

“Very good, Farouk. Do you have the full address of the apartment?”

“Yes, sir. It is Kafir El-Dawar sir, opposite the tall trees. You know?”

“Not well, but I’ll deal with it from now on. Good work, Farouk.”

It was 2pm when Dobson arrived back at the Ritz Carlton. He phoned Martin Abisola and Colin Asher with short updates, then Adel Helmy to say Farouk had been so good he’d use him again. He checked flights to Abuja thinking there was little point in staying in Cairo with his job mostly done. Loose ends, that was what it amounted to now. A catch up with Gabriel and Solomon to say he’d done as much as he could and it was over to them to decide their future plans. And there was the Sheraton press gathering with Bill Larsen and Halima, of course. Would he make it?

As he checked flights it seemed unlikely. Then it became impossible. There were no direct flights until the morning unless he took a twelve-hour flight with a stop-over in Addis Ababa. Dobson booked the first Egypt Air flight next morning.

## CHAPTER 33

It was the US Ambassador who arrived to welcome the press contingent as they completed the setting up of their microphones and cameras. He sat at the top table, said a few words of welcome and then handed over to Daniel Bakare to chair it.

Bill Larsen and Halima sat together on Bakare’s left. The room was full. Cameras flashed, Bakare smiled and Bill Larsen looked serious, but it was Halima with her hair tied in a simple band and wearing her black tee shirt, cargo pants and desert boots that got the attention.

“Can you tell us how you managed to escape, Halima?”

“How did you know it was the COK?”

“You think it was Yan Tatsine?”

“Who rescued you?”

“Can you describe the terrorist camp?”



“And how did you cope living in the army camp with Major Larsen and so many men?”

Halima answered each question in turn, speaking softly and clearly in her husky voice.

A few questions were then directed at Bill Larsen:

“Major Larsen. You run a private army?”

“Yes sir. STA. Special Tasks Africa. It’s my company.”

“And you have permission to operate from right on the border?”

“It’s private land.”

“Pastor Gabriel’s involved here, yes?”

“Yes sir. It’s his land and he helps to fund the operation.”

“Can you explain exactly what’s going on there, Major? Private armies are controversial. And we hear that.....”

It was Halima who raised her hand as if to stop the line of questions.

“Please,” she said as all eyes moved back to her. “Pastor Gabriel wants to help poor African people to help themselves, sir. He wants to try new ways. It is his project. It is very important because the world has many problems, sir. It is the poor people who suffer. The rich get richer by making the poor work hard and then take all their wealth away. They dig for the oil and the gas and the precious metals they need in the West. We have seen it in Nigeria, sir. Nigeria should be very rich from its oil but there are many more poor people now. Too many poor people do not have good health or good education. There are too many people, sir. There is too much corruption sir and it is the rich who are the most corrupt, but it is the poor who suffer from their greed. And there are no jobs for young men sir. That is why they join the COK or travel to find a better life in your country.”

Questions suddenly stalled.

Bakare, surprised by the sniffing going on around him, the nodding of heads, the smiles and the silence, took over.

“Halima is right,” he said nodding his head. “That is why we have been saying that we must support new ways, new ideas, new opportunities. That is why we, in the US, have been fighting for a different approach to development aid. It is not.....”

But Halima interrupted Bakare this time. “Sir, sir, but you do not listen. You do not listen to Pastor Gabriel. He has been saying this for many years. I am a Moslem and I agree with Pastor Gabriel. He is a very good man, sir, with good ideas but bad people are trying to hurt him, sir. All he wants is to be understood and be free to try a new way.”

Bakare nodded, looked at his notes and smiled, but there was more silence around the room until a hand was raised from the front.

“Halima, I think I speak for all of us here,” said an African woman journalist. “What you say is absolutely right. I have followed Pastor Gabriel Joshua’s work for many years. I was in the US just a few days ago, and he was on TV saying exactly what you’ve just said He has been saying it for many years. It is the system he is fighting against. Do you understand that?”

From the high, top table Halima looked at whoever it was sitting in front and below her and nodded. “Yes, I understand. But if the system is wrong and things are not working then we must change the system or try another way. That is what Pastor Gabriel says. He says change is difficult but change is possible. “

Bakare was nodding and smiling again and then the US Ambassador touched his arm. “Can I say something?”

“Sure, sir. Go ahead.”

“I think few would disagree with Halima on this. She is a brave girl with an incredible insight. She deserves our support and our encouragement. That’s why we spent this afternoon discussing how we can best help. I have asked USAID to look into this, perhaps by being a bit more flexible and open minded about funding and the types of projects the US government supports. It’s also why the US Government just announced a major aerial surveillance operation to ensure we stamp out the remains of the COK. And for Halima, who suffered the atrocities of the COK and is now without any family, we’ve offered to fund a place at school and University to.....”

At the back of the room, unseen by the media but watched by Bakare, the Ambassador, Halima and Bill Larsen a door opened and two tall Nigerians came in.

Bakare touched the arm of the Ambassador who had noticed movement but was clearly intent on winding up proceedings without any last-minute interruptions.

“Education,” the Ambassador was saying in conclusion. “Education is what will make the difference.....”

Bill Larsen touched Halima’s arm and she followed his eyes to the back of the room. “Gabriel,” he whispered. “And Solomon.”

Larsen had never seen Halima smile but she now reminded him of Emma’s smile in the only photograph he had of his young daughter. He looked at her again, nodded and found himself smiling at her.

The Ambassador had finished his summing up. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” and he moved ready to stand up. But then he sat down again because Daniel Bakare was whispering something. “Gabriel’s just arrived. He’s sat at the back. You might like to welcome him and ask if he has anything to say? What do you think sir?”

“That’s the tall guy at the back?”

“Two guys, sir. The other one is Solomon.”

“Ah yes.”

The Ambassador held his hand up to stall the noise of packing up that had already started. "One last thing," he said loudly to regain their attention. "I understand Pastor Gabriel Joshua has just arrived."

Heads turned and Gabriel, having only just sat down, stood again and raised his hand.

"I'm sorry you missed the start Pastor," the Ambassador continued. "Your ears must have been burning. Is there anything you'd like to say before we finish?"

Gabriel looked at Solomon. Solomon shrugged. "No harm, Femi. We can meet Halima and talk to Bill afterwards."

Gabriel, wearing a dark suit, open-necked white shirt and two days of stubble, rose to his feet, resting his hand across Sol's shoulders. Everyone in the room turned to face him. For a moment, he said nothing. It was classic Gabriel, waiting for the moment, getting them to guess what he might say, dreaming up the right opening words. Then, in the commanding voice he usually reserved for the stage, he said: "Halima, I'm so pleased to see you at last. Bill has told me such a lot about you."

He paused as everyone now turned to look at Halima again. She was still smiling.

"I'm sorry it took so long to get here." He said. Then he looked at Bill Larsen. "Bill, my friend. Sorry, but I got detained. And I'm truly sorry about Benjamin."

He paused briefly, this time looking down at Solomon. Then he stood up straight. "Halima. I know you've said you'd like to go to University. That is good. We need many more young women like you. We need leaders with fresh ideas. So, I admire your courage, your ambition and your determination. But you know what, Halima? Look around you."

He waved his hand slowly, purposefully, indicating the people in the room and perhaps the world that lay beyond the four walls.

"You know what, Halima? This is university. It's right here. It's all around us. You were at university when you milked the cows at home, when you helped your mother in the fields, when you were abducted and when you escaped. You learned many things in your short time at Bill's camp. I know, because Bill told me what you were doing. And Bill learned many things from you because he was watching you and listening to you. You are already a good teacher, Halima."

He paused again.

"And you know something else, Halima? Money helps but you can manage without it. Money rarely brings happiness or self-contentment or understanding of life. All you need is a dream, a plan and the self determination to make your dream come true.

"Did you know that Sol and I went to the University of Makoko?"

He tapped Solomon's shoulder. "Right, Sol?"

Solomon looked up and nodded.

"Yeh. We lived on the University campus with black, smelly water slopping beneath the rotting floor boards. If we slipped, we fell in and if we swallowed too much, we got dysentery. We had no pens; no pencils and we didn't have any lights.

"You know how we paid for our education? By making cigarettes out of dog ends for rich guests at the Holiday Inn. It's called living off your wits, Halima. It's called entrepreneurship: dreaming up ideas that produced a few Naira each day for a dish of jollof rice to keep us going until tomorrow. You know that?"

"I learned everything from reading discarded old newspapers and I can tell you the only light after the sun went down was the glimmer of light from Sol's cigarettes - he used to chain smoke to produce enough light for me to get to the end of an editorial in the Sunday Times. Hear him, Halima? He's still coughing now."

Indeed, Solomon was coughing, but mostly out of self-consciousness.

"But you know why I'm telling you this, Halima? Because you've seen a bit of what Sol and I are trying to do with our Project. The Project - an idea that came with no formal education and no money. But we needed start-up funds so we set about making money with a business – a business run on a strict basis of honesty, because honesty was another thing I learned from reading newspapers. But you know how hard that is in Nigeria? But even if you fail to earn yourself a single Naira or a dollar, the return from a business based on honesty is contentment and a feeling of achievement. What more do you need than that?"

Gabriel was on a roll but he knew he was being listened to. There was utter silence when he paused for a moment.

"People think I'm a Christian, Halima. You know that? But frankly I don't know what I am. I'm just me - Femi Akindele from the Makoko slum. Sometimes I wonder if it'd be better off admitting I was a Buddhist. When you've got a minute, read what the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, says about happiness and you will understand. And read what another great hero of mine, Mohamed Ali, used to say. Ali was the greatest boxer, the greatest fighter, the greatest poet and inventor of unforgettable phrases the world has ever known. You're too young to know Mohamed Ali, Halima. But you know what he once said about study, learning and training? 'Never quit,' he said. 'Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.'"

Solomon knew Gabriel would now take some stopping. He was speeding up. And not only that but he was only talking to one person in the room – a conversation across the heads of others that the others listened to because it seemed so private. It was a style he'd perfected. 'Yeh, I know, Sol,' he'd explained once. 'But for everyone to get up and walk out when I'm talking like that to just one of them is the ultimate rudeness. I'll stop when I'm good and ready.'

This evening, Gabriel was stopped far earlier than Solomon expected because suddenly the door behind them opened.

This was the door that was supposed to have been secured by Sheraton staff checking that everyone had a US Embassy ID badge hung on red white and blue ribbon around their necks - the door through which Gabriel and Solomon had just entered without being stopped or checked or handed a badge.

The long arm and hand pointing the gun that appeared around the door was spotted by everyone except Gabriel and Solomon who were facing the other way. There was a scream from somewhere and a shot was fired, then another and the arm withdrew. When Solomon realised what had happened, Gabriel was lying on the floor beside him in a pool of blood that was already soaking into the Sheraton carpet.

Solomon leaned over him, shouted something and commotion spread. Daniel Bakare pushed the Ambassador out through a back door behind the top table. Bill Larsen dragged Halima through the same door as she stood, transfixed by the noise and seemed tempted to run towards Gabriel. Everyone then pushed towards the door and out into the back corridor.

Solomon, bending over Gabriel to see where he'd been hit, then heard more shouting, a scuffle and three more shots from behind the door where the gun had appeared. He ran to the door, flung it open and almost fell over the body of a young Nigerian in a blue tee shirt. Another, older man with a brown cowboy hat hanging from a cord around his neck was slumped against the wall, holding his arm. Along the corridor and out into the main concourse of the hotel, guests and staff looked on in shock and horror but the man with the gun was already gone.

## CHAPTER 34

When Mark Dobson's phone rang, he was in the middle of the deepest sleep he'd had in days. He answered the phone with his head on the pillow.

"Mark?" It was Martin Abisola. "Gabriel's been shot."

Dobson was wide awake. "Christ almighty.....is he....?"

"He's in hospital. He was hit twice, once in the head."

"Oh Jesus. And Sol?"

"Sol's OK. He's with him right now."

Abisola explained what they knew. It was very little. Security had been lapse, even Gabriel and Solomon had got in without any checks. "What time are you due back?"

"Around midday," Dobson said. "Will he be OK?"

"I'm not sure. It's not looking good."

"Is he talking?"

"He wasn't when I last heard." He paused for a moment and Dobson knew there was something else. "Two others were also hit. They arrived outside the door when the gunman first fired. They were part of your team, Mark. The two I said I'd keep an eye on."

"Vigo? Chelsea?"

“Chelsea’s dead. I’m sorry, Mark. Vigo’s in hospital.”

“Oh, my God,” Dobson heard himself saying, though his mind had gone numb. “They were right there?”

“Doing their job, Mark.”

Chelsea Scumbag, Dobson thought – Zak. Zakarias Obodi. Dead. Just as he’d found something to do with his young life that might have led somewhere, even if it was only with Vigo and Mazda. Despite how they’d met, Dobson had grown fond of Chelsea.

“Can you call, his father, Martin? George Obodi. Red Cross Pharmacy, Ikeja. Tell him something positive about his son. Tell him that he was there trying to protect Gabriel when he was shot. Tell him....tell him I’m so sorry and I’ll call to see him soon. Tell him....you know.”

“Sure.”

“But who’s the bloody killer? Where is he?”

“Witness descriptions suggest it was the guy you called Pink, Mark. He’d taken a room at the Sheraton to keep an eye on things, mostly you. He’s not gone far. We’ll get him.”

There were three hours to go before Mark Dobson needed to check out of the Ritz, so he phoned Colin Asher who had taken to the camp bed in the office for a few hours’ rest.

They commiserated for a while until Asher said: “But you certainly hit the bloody bullseye with that PC.”

Dobson was already convinced he’d found the target by following Ayo. Asher had done the rest. “So, what have we got?”

“Is your phone safe?”

“Safe enough and I’m checking out of here in a minute.”

“Abubakar Aliu, called “Babban” or B, in some emails is the top man, though there are dozens of email addresses and I don’t think we’ve got them all yet. Cairo is the HQ but there are emails originating from people in Ouagadougou, Niamey, Accra, Tripoli, Casablanca, Algiers, Lebanon – we’re building a structure by tracking things backwards, forwards and sideways. It’ll take a while. I discussed it with a MI6 friend and GCHQ will have a look. Meanwhile, Festus Fulani looks like number two although he’s also using other names. Zainab Azazi, the President’s brother, is a loose cannon. He signs things off as ‘Z’, but it’s a minefield of other names, some linked to false passports. We’ve found minutes of meetings, written instructions and targets that include names of Ministers. It’s the COK, Mark, and enough to prove what Martin Abisola’s been saying about a slow softening up, driving people out, weakening the state, a build up to an overthrow or a coup.

“Oh, and Osman Olande’s been arrested and charged with murder,” Colin Asher added.

“And Ayo suffered a massive heart attack when he got to hospital today,” Dobson said. “Last I heard he was in a bad way. I found his trilby on a chair in the lobby.”

They paused for thought, both of them realising at the same time that this was about as much as they could do now.

It always happened in the end. There weren’t any loose ends left they could deal with. The job was done. It was time to step back and let officialdom take over. The only part left was to ensure the main client was satisfied with the result.

But would they ever know?

Vigo was sitting on the edge of his bed, his back to the door and speaking on the phone when Dobson arrived at the hospital in the early afternoon. He stood and watched him for a while. His left arm was dangling and wrapped in a bandage from elbow to armpit, but there were no other signs of injury and it was clearly Mazda who was getting the health update and instructions by phone. Vigo’s voice was OK, which meant his brain was also OK.

He’d obviously finished taking about Gabriel so Dobson moved outside, leaned on the wall in the corridor and strained to translate the Lagos speak.

“Wetin dey sub.....misyen, mon, no problem.....but Chelsea Scum got hit, mon, he kaput.....yeh, mon, I crash bad and tear flow for one minute..... sniper den he do run.....just a bullet mon, no yawa, no problem.....eke he check my mind, doc he check my body but no free me. Maybe tomorrow. But my ear hear you swagger to Mercedes too much Maz. Result of swagger was Mercedes get up and fly to Egypt and.....”

Dobson decided he’d heard enough. “I’m back,” he said, stepping into the room.

In another part of the same hospital in a private room, Gabriel lay with his head shrouded in white bandage. Tubes led to drips and wires led to a machine that beeped. Solomon had barely moved from his bedside. Michael Fayinka had just been and then left, deeply upset. Occasionally Gabriel’s eyes flickered and the fingers or his hand and left leg twitched. His mouth, too, had opened and shut but, until now, he’d not spoken.

After Michael had left, Solomon had wandered to the window as a nurse attended to something. He heard her go outside but continued to stare, unseeing, towards Aso Rock and the Presidential palace. The President had been one of the first to be told. “Tell him my prayers are for his speedy recovery,” he’d told Martin Abisola.

Abisola had not told him how serious he thought the head injury was but in twelve hours the news had spread across Nigeria and abroad.

“Assassination?” read a local paper. “Nigeria’s Martin Luther King shot!” said the New York Times. “Pastor Gabriel Joshua shot by unknown gunman in Nigeria,” reported the London Daily Telegraph.

From behind him, Solomon heard a faint voice. “Sol? Sol?”

He walked over, pulled the white sheet away from Gabriel’s hand. His eyes were still shut. “Femi? Can you hear me?”

“Fffff,” mumbled the faint voice, “Wha....?”

“Lie still Femi.”

Gabriel murmured something else that was undecipherable, then his eyes flickered behind the lids. “Sol?”

“Yeh. I’m here.”

“You fixed the Birmingham event?”

“Plenty of time, Femi.”

“Any emails today?”

“Not looked yet.”

“I saw Bakare last night, Sol. He was at the Holiday Inn.”

Solomon looked at him, He still had his eyes closed but, behind the lids, they moved, backwards and forwards. “We both met him, Femi. It was at the Sheraton.”

“I think he’s still fucking us about, Sol. You agree?”

“Hard to tell, Femi. Different culture. He’s not African any more. He’s been away too long.”

“That’s it, Sol. Good analysis...just like Mark. Where’s Mark? You’d make a good partnership. Solomon and Dobson Limited....Where’s Halima, Sol?”

“You want to see her?”

“I promised her, Sol. What the fuck are you doing? Organise it.”

Solomon walked to the window and called Bill Larsen.

“Bill?.....He’s talking and wants to see Halima.....Sure, you can.....Can you bring her here?”

Mark Dobson had now arrived and, again, he stopped outside, looked in and then went to lean on the wall. There was something about hospitals that stopped him behaving normally. He seemed to lose his directness and purpose. It was as if he’d wandered into a situation without a proper plan of action or objective. He didn’t normally mind watching things, observing them, checking them out. That was, after all, his job. But looking at a sick patient, especially a friend, in a hospital bed left him feeling useless and powerless.



While he stood there, he called Craig Donovan.

“Yeh, I heard, Mark. It’s tragic but we all warned him, didn’t we? The news has spread. David Fernandez phoned me from Stuttgart - genuinely upset to hear. And it reminded me of what he told me about the COK when we met in Washington. There were complicated security issues at stake, he said, issues such as how best to destroy a group like the COK by means other than militarily. Looks like you’ve proved it and then done their job for them, Mark.”

Right then, Solomon came out into the corridor and beckoned Dobson to come inside. Dobson closed down his phone and went inside where Solomon was leaning over Gabriel, talking to him.

“Bill will bring Halima here, Femi. And Mark’s arrived.”

Dobson approached the bed and looked down at Gabriel lying there, helpless, eyes closed, covered to his neck in a white sheet, stark against his dark brown head, tubes hanging everywhere. The man should be standing up, walking around, talking, moving his arms around, lecturing.

As he stared down, an eye opened.

“Mark?”

“How’re you doing, Gabriel?”

“You just flew from London?”

“Cairo, Gabriel. I followed Ayo to see where he went, who he met.”

“Ayo,” he muttered. “He still wearing a hat?”

“Yes,” Dobson replied. “No taste at all.” He decided not to say that Ayo had had a heart attack. “But we found the COK HQ, Gabriel. Big success. Well worth going. Colin’s dealing with it now. We should see some action.”

“Bastards.”

Dobson watched. Gabriel’s eye had already closed. There was a smudge of fresh blood on the bandage wrapped around his head. The machines beeped, the drip bag dripped and he looked at Solomon. “What can I do, Sol?” Dobson asked.

Solomon took a deep breath and shrugged, so they sat, one on either side of the bed and looked at Gabriel and then each other until Solomon said. “Not much we can do right now, Mark. The doctor and nurse will be here again soon. You want to tell me what you’ve been up to?”

“Outside,” Dobson said. “I don’t feel comfortable right here. And he might start asking questions or giving me a lecture.”

They moved to some chairs in the corridor and Dobson delivered his update – a sort of brief client’s report with conclusions and a recommendation that further action be left to the agencies. It was much too formal but Solomon nodded and said nothing.

Bill Larsen then arrived, walking along the corridor, a girl in army fatigues and boots following right behind. She then stopped as Larsen continued walking.

It was the first time that Dobson and Larsen had met so they shook hands, exchanged a few apologies about not meeting in Kano and looked towards the room where Gabriel lay. "How is he?"

"Talking, but not as much as usual," Solomon said and tried to smile. "Where's Halima?"

"Back there, waiting to know if she can see him."

"Sure, she can see him. Bring her over."

Halima was shorter than Dobson had imagined. She was very dark, almost black skinned, her short curly hair tied back with some sort of band. Her eyes were wide and bright, her lips pink around a serious mouth that looked ready to say something. She was dressed exactly like Larsen in a black tee shirt and desert camouflage trousers rolled up at bare ankles. She wore oversized desert boots that squeaked like Larsen's on the shiny corridor floor and she walked beside him, looking up at him as if she was his daughter, Larsen with a hand across her shoulders.

"Come," Solomon said as Halima now looked towards the door.

Dobson watched from the corridor.

"Femi? Halima's here with Bill."

The eyes moved behind the lids and then both of them opened.

Halima held back but Bill Larsen went forward and touched Gabriel's hand. "Gabriel. For fuck's sake man. This is no way to greet your military commander. A bit late as well if I'm honest. Where the fuck have you been, Vicar? I was ready to give up."

Perhaps Gabriel tried to smile up at him. "You speak to Mark, Bill?"

"We only just met."

"The COK are finished, Bill."

Larsen looked at Solomon. "Good news then, Vicar. I'll need to sign on the dole. Join the long ranks of unemployed ex-servicemen."

"Where's Halima?"

Solomon beckoned her forward and she stood looking down at Gabriel. His eyes were still open and this time they focussed.

"I'm pleased to meet you, sah." Halima said bending a little closer towards him.

"Did you hear me, Halima? Did you hear me speak?"

"Yes sah."

"Did you hear what I said about Mohamed Ali?"

“Yes, sah.”

“You want to know another of his quotes?”

“Yes sah.”

“He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing. You believe that Halima.”

“It is very true, sah.”

Gabriel shut his eyes. “I feel tired, Halima,” he said behind the closed lids. “But we’ve got so much to do.” There was a long pause. “You want to help me?”

“Yes sah.”

Gabriel’s eyes opened once more. “Too many young Africans want to be the next Bill Gates,” he said quietly. “You want that?”

“I’m not sure sah.”

“Do you know that eighty percent of the food consumed in the developing world is produced by small farmers?”

“No sah.”

“Are you a farmer, Halima?”

“In my heart, sah.”

“Small farmers feed the world, Halima, so tell me why are they the ones who suffer hunger and poverty?”

“Yes sah.”

“You know what to do, Halima? Go out into the world, Halima. Float like a beautiful butterfly and sting like the biggest and fanciest bee you ever saw.”

Halima looked at Solomon.

“It means he wants you to help with the Project, Halima.”

“But, I am just a poor girl, sah.”

“Was Gabriel not a poor boy once?”

Mark Dobson, still standing by the doorway, finally found the courage from somewhere to join Halima, Solomon and Bill Larsen around the bed.

“I hear you Sol,” Gabriel said weakly. “Now listen to me..... Marry Carla for God’s sake. And you, Mark...”

“I’m here,” Mark Dobson said quietly.

“You did well, Mark. You got good tricks. Like a magician.”

“Thanks,” said Dobson. “The only bad news is your account with Asher & Asher is no longer in credit.”

“That’s a shame.”

“But the good news is we’ve agreed to write it off as useful experience.”

“OK. Go tell Sol. Sol runs everything. I’m only the fucking salesman”

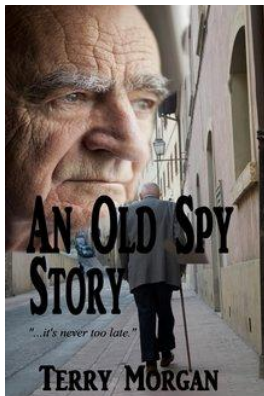
Gabriel’s eyes then closed and he took a deep breath. “But not a bad performance for a fake Preacher, was it?”

## THE END

### Other books by Terry Morgan

Website: [www.tjmbooks.com](http://www.tjmbooks.com)

### An Old Spy Story



The old spy in “An Old Spy Story” is octagenarian, Oliver (“Ollie”) Thomas. During a long career spent trying to earn an honest living with his own export business, Ollie was also, reluctantly, carrying out parallel assignments in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere only loosely connected to British Intelligence. But, by using threats and blackmail, his controller, Major Alex Donaldson, was forcing Ollie to help run his own secret money making schemes that included arms shipments to the IRA through Gadaffi and Libya, money laundering in Africa and assassination.

Now aged eighty six, recently widowed and alone Ollie still struggles with guilt and anger over his past and decides to make one last attempt to track down and deal with Donaldson.

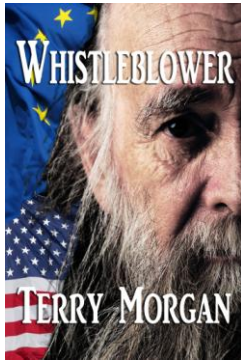
*“A masterful tale by someone who knows exactly what he is writing about.”*

*“A wonderful and moving love story from an elderly man’s perspective is beautifully woven into it and the ending is masterful.”*

*"I enjoyed it – exciting, endlessly beguiling and fun."*

*"Thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish. A remarkable book from a writer who has clearly been there and done it. Easy reading."*

## **Whistleblower**



Huge amounts of international aid money are being stolen by those at the heart of the political establishment. Ex politician, Jim Smith, threatened and harassed into fleeing abroad for accusations of fraud secretly returns to renew his campaign. A realistic thriller covering events in the USA, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia and a sensitive study of a stubborn and talented man who steadfastly refuses to fit into the stereotype of a successful businessman and a modern politician.

*"Highly convincing.....This could all be happening right now. Another realistic and highly entertaining story...."*

*"This book has the sort of political intrigue that captivates viewers of shows like "House of Cards," but the main man is actually a decent person in "Whistle blower." As someone who prefers protagonists on the correct moral side of the spectrum, it made the book that much more enjoyable. (AMAZON).*

*."Whistleblower", by Terry Morgan, is an international thriller that stretches from England to Thailand with many stops in between.*

*"The plot centers around the timely topic of international aid money and the criminals who feed on it. The hero, the story's whistleblower, is British ex-politician Jim Smith, and the story follows him around the globe as he seeks to put a stop to the corruption.*

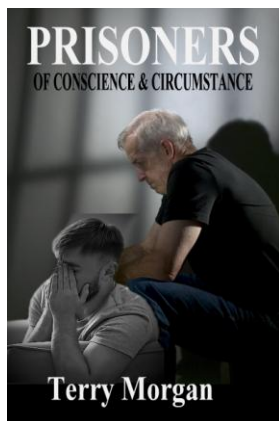
*"Morgan, a world traveller who now resides in Thailand, knows his locations well. Cities in Italy and Africa come alive, and Jim Smith's home in off-the-beaten-path Thailand is wonderfully described, allowing readers to feel like they're there--this is no easy thing to do, and the authenticity of the various settings is a real strength of the book.*

*"Another strength includes the protagonist. Smith is not a typical hero. He's older and lacks the suaveness and action-hero credentials of a James Bond or Jason Bourne,*

*but he more than makes up for it with his intelligence and depth--a big pleasure in the book is being invited into this man's life as he tries to pick up the pieces after an underhanded campaign aimed at ruining him.*

*"The plot moves along briskly, and the technology, players (politicians, intelligence agencies, criminals), and small details about the finance industry all add up to a novel that's rich in credibility and intrigue. Anyone interested in seeing the world from the comfort of a good armchair should read Morgan's book." (AMAZON)*

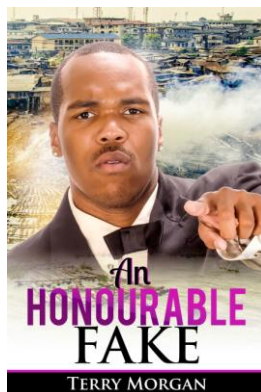
### **Prisoners (of Conscience & Circumstance)**



The year is 2050 and human population has reached 10 billion. In a densely populated mega city, blighted by social problems, unemployment and declining living standards, a young man desperately seeks advice from his imprisoned uncle, an ex-politician and Professor of Biology and a man many still regard as an extremist for his views on human population control. Prisoners is a hard-hitting, illustrated, well-researched and controversial short novel.

*"Not for the faint hearted."*

### **An Honourable Fake**



At age fourteen, Femi Akindele, an orphaned street boy from the Makoko slum in Lagos, Nigeria, decided to call himself Pastor Gabriel Joshua. Unqualified and self-taught and now in his mid-forties, Gabriel has become a flamboyant, popular and highly acclaimed international speaker on African affairs, economics, terrorism, corruption and the widespread poverty and economic migration that results.

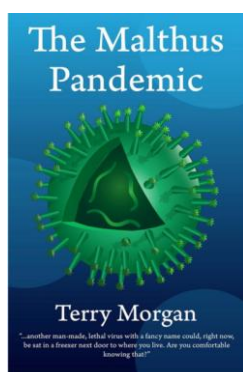
Gabriel wants changes but, in his way, lie big corporations, international politics and a group of wealthy but corrupt Nigerians financing a terrorist organisation, the COK, with one purpose in mind – the overthrow of the democratically elected Nigerian President and the establishment of a vast new West African state.

On Gabriel's side, though, are his loyal boyhood friend Solomon, a private investigator of international corporate fraud and the newly appointed head of the Nigerian State Security Service Colonel Martin Abisola.

*"A rare sort of political thriller – a black African hero."*

*"Accomplished and knowledgeable – a class follow up to Whistleblower."*

## The Malthus Pandemic



Daniel Capelli is a private investigator of international commercial crime.

Armed with an unusually vague remit from a new client, an American biotechnology company, to investigate the theft of valuable research material but motivated largely by a private desire to see a Thai girlfriend, Anna, he travels to Bangkok for an infectious diseases conference. Here, he discovers that several virologists have also disappeared. One of them, David Solomon, is known for extreme views on the need for direct action to reduce the world's population.

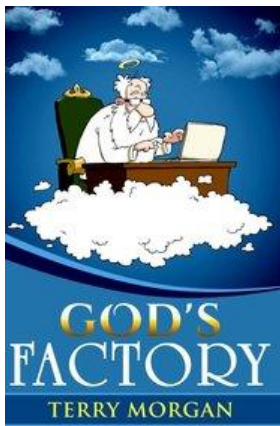
As the investigation deepens he rapidly uncovers a sinister plot to deliberately spread a deadly new virus, the Malthus A virus, specifically created by Solomon. But Solomon needs funds and help to spread it. With sporadic outbreaks of the disease already in Thailand, Nigeria and Kenya, Capelli finds two other characters - Doctor Larry Brown, an American doctor working at the USA Embassy in Nigeria, and Kevin Parker, an academic and expert on the history and economics of population control - have also arrived at similar conclusions but from different angles.

Calling on help from another close friend, Colin Asher - a London based private investigator - it soon becomes clear that Solomon is being supported by a rich American with a history of fraud, embezzlement and murder and a secretive Arab healthcare company with a ready-made international distribution network. Their plan: To help spread the Malthus A virus and make huge profits by marketing ineffective or counterfeit drugs.

But with his cover blown by the murder of another colleague, the charismatic Kenyan detective Jimmy Banda, and with increasing fears that the virus is about to be released Capelli, Anna and his colleagues face another problem - persuading UK and USA politicians and the international agencies responsible for bioterrorism and commercial crime, to believe them and respond in time.

*"Anchored firmly in the present, no high-tech Bond style gadgets, just good old-fashioned detective work. Gritty descriptions of the international locations, compelling plot and poignant rants about the inadequacy of democratic institutions and persuasive insight on the inner workings of the global establishment. Easy reading and difficult to put down once started. Enjoyable read."*

### **God's Factory**



Terry Morgan writes mainly serious novels with a strong international background but intersperses it with less serious satire and humour like '**God's Factory**'.