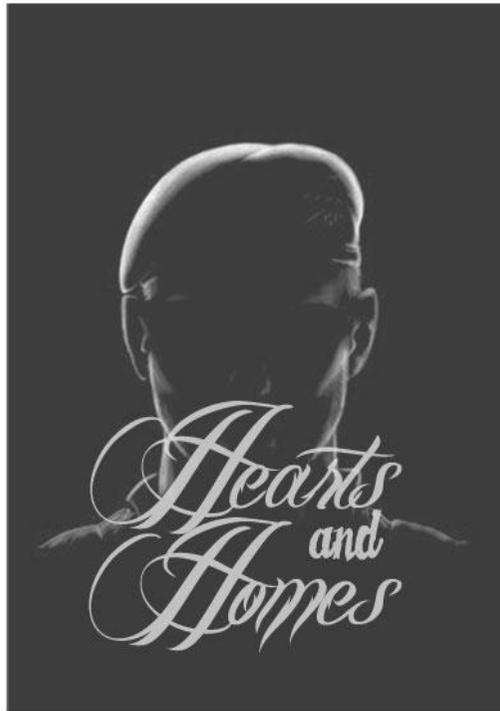


'tomi Adesina



*Hearts
and
Homes*



A Novella by Tomi Adesina





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One year gone and still missing.
CHIBOK girls

14th April, 2014 - 14th April, 2015

... and in memory of all men of the force
and civilians who lost their lives in this
battle against the Boko Haram.



Michael laid still. He was very much aware of his surroundings; the choppers flying above; the birds hovering around with their loud chirpings; the stench that came from the dead bodies littered about the land; even the rippling effect from the explosions metres away from him. Everything was so succinct. Yet, he lay still. He was sure he had seen a B61 nuclear bomb on its loading carriage before it all started.

How could the insurgents have been so well equipped?

How had they have outmanoeuvred him and the others so smoothly?

How many men had he lost?

These and many more questions came rushing through his head and unavoidably, his mind, all in need of immediate answers but when none was forthcoming and his mind couldn't take any more, he shut it all out. His mind, his thoughts, the questions, everything! They were giving him a headache anyway. He tried to hold still with his back still against the floor and groaned in pain as he wriggled his fingers and lifted them across his chest to feel for his small radio in his breast pocket. *It was there!* "Thank God for small miracles", he thought to himself. He pulled it out and struggled to get a signal

while he tried to fix his earphones to his ear. Even the slightest movement was an obvious strain on the wounded soldier. The earphones kept slipping from his ear, his literally bloody hands too unsteady but he wouldn't give up. He couldn't! He forced it in once more and this time, it did stick. He tapped on the radio's button continuously until he was found the right frequency. As soon as he got to his preferred station, static burst from the radio and he frowned. The regular station returned almost immediately. He managed a tiny smile as the voice he had been awaiting came up on the radio.

“Good morning, Nigeria! It's your girl, Diana on Radio 89.3 FM and it's another bright and sunny Monday here in the beautiful city of Lagos. How was your weekend? Mine was great. The rain was my ever trusted companion and I did have a swell time...alone. Yeah, that can be pretty annoying when your husband is miles away from home. Anyway, enough about me, hit me up on our lines and let me know how your weekend went. But, before we do that...spare a thought for the missing girls in the Chibok community, it's been three hundred days since they were kidnapped by the dreaded terrorist group, Boko Haram. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families and it is my earnest prayer that they do come back home alive and well”, Diana said, and then paused to take a deep breath. “Also, please pray for the soldiers out there fighting to bring these girls back home and their families as well.” She added and signalled to her producer. “I'll be playing you *Home by Michael Buble*. It's a personal favourite and a song of hope. When we return, I'll be taking your calls. Keep it locked.” She said and pushed the microphone.

“Diana!” her producer called.

She took off her headphones to listen to him.

“You have a call. It's an emergency.” He said in a definite tone.

She blinked. Her Producer was not one to allow personal calls come through for her when she was on air. It had to be something serious. She felt her heart pounding already even without knowing why. She was worried. She made out of the studio and yanked her phone from her assistant in a flash. “Hello.” She said, nervously into the phone. Her assistant turned away immediately.

“Diana!”

She heaved a sigh of relief as her mother-in-law's coarse voice drummed into her ears.

“Mama”, she replied.

“You left the iron on when you left the house this morning.” The older woman replied.

Diana exhaled. “Is that the emergency, Mama? I am on duty!”

“Yes. I know you are, darling, but your voice was *the* emergency. I had to call to salvage your show”, she replied.

Diana leaned against the wall. “Was I that obvious?”

“As if taking in-between deep breaths while talking were not enough, you had to make it worse by playing that song. Michael will be fine.” She said, sounding rather too confident for Diana's liking.

Diana wasn't so sure. She wiped at the tear drop that was welling up in her left eye. “I am so scared.”

“Don't be. I'll make you vegetables for dinner. Just the way you like it. Would you be home?”

Diana nodded. “Yes. I will.”

“Take care of yourself, child. Now go back and give a good show.” Mrs Silva concluded as she hung up.

“Diana!” Her producer called. “You are back on in five!”

She nodded and returned into the studio.

The images before Michael's eyes were blurry. He struggled to keep his eyes open but they were too heavy and kept shutting themselves back. He tried to move his body but it was stiff as a rock. His hands and legs were bound to a wooden bed but not very tight. He knew then that he had to force his eyes open to at least see what was going on, regardless of the pain it caused him. He swept the room in one gaze; it was a very small room made up of a tiny, dusty window, the bed he was in, a praying mat in a corner of the room, some Arabic inscriptions on a portion of the wall and a small door. It was quiet

except for the occasional creaking of the rusty fan working on the ceiling. He'd been stripped of his uniform and all he had on were his undergarments. He was quite sure his captors were not the insurgents. They wouldn't have tied him up so loosely, would they? He clenched his teeth as he tried unsuccessfully to remove his hands from the ropes that tied him to the bed. He tried again but he couldn't help himself up. He was very weak. He knew then that he needed to conserve what little strength he had left, so he stopped trying.

He focused intently on the door and sooner rather than later, it creaked. He shut his eyes immediately and feigned sleep.

“Allahu Akbar!” A voice cried over him.

Michael opened his eyes and screamed forcing the man to tumble onto the floor.

The man rubbed his back in pain before standing up to stare at the soldier he had rescued in surprise.

“Don't kill me!” Michael said.

The man stared at Michael carefully. “Kill.” He replied.

“Don't kill me.” Michael replied. “Please!”

The man ignored him and walked out of the room.

“Mister!” Michael called after him.

The door opened shortly and the man returned with a younger man, Michael could guess he was a boy, a teenager. The boy carried a gun across his chest and a machete in one hand. Michael's heart raced fast as he tried to clench his tied fist.

“Major General.” The boy said, reading from a card.

Michael knew the card was his. “What do you want?”

The boy whispered into the older man's ear and the older man spoke back in Hausa. The boy chuckled as he played with the machete. All these confused Michael as all he knew in Hausa language were the few words he spoke to his gateman back home in greeting.

“Listen to me, my men are going to find you and they will kill you.” Michael said, forcing himself up.

“Your men are dead.” The boy replied, pulling a small stool in the room. “All of them.” He added in a heavy Hausa accent.

Michael was dazed. “All of them?”

“The insurgents killed them all...except you.” He replied patiently “We saved you”, he added, staring at the older man. “My father and I.”

Michael dropped his head back onto the bed.

“My name is Ahmed.” The boy introduced. “And this is my father, Alhaji Shettima.”

Michael turned to them. “Major General Michael Silva.”

Alhaji Shettima spoke in Hausa to his son for a while. At times, he was calm, and at other times, he was shouting at the top of his voice. Ahmed focused on his father as he spoke to him. After a while, Alhaji Shettima stopped talking and started crying. Ahmed hugged his father.

Michael clenched his teeth. He wished he had learnt more Hausa at that moment.

Ahmed turned to him. “Aisha was taken away by the raiders when they went to her school. She is my sister and a very bright girl. She always topped her class and she told Father she was going to be a Doctor. She told him she was going to build a hospital in the community and she was going to name it after him. Now, we don’t have her anymore and your people are all dead...so now one can find her again. Some girls have returned, but not Aisha.” He said.

“I am sorry.” Michael said.

Ahmed shook his head. “That is not enough. We have to find my sister.”

“We? You said it yourself. My men are all dead.”

Ahmed stepped forward. “I can help you.”

Michael managed a laugh.

The older man spoke harshly in Hausa to his son. He was clearly dissatisfied with Michael's sense of humour. This wasn't funny to him. He wanted his daughter back.

"Is everything okay?" Michael asked Ahmed.

Ahmed cleared his throat. "My father thinks you are mocking us."

"I am not. I just think you are looking at this the wrong way. These insurgents are not after your cattle or food. They are making a statement and you can't fight them." he replied.

Ahmed cocked his gun. "Major General, I will fight them."

Michael nodded. "Okay, I'll need to call for back-up when you eventually let me go." He said glancing at the ropes around his wrist.

Ahmed cut the ropes off Michael's hand. "What next?"

"My clothes." Michael replied.

Mrs Silva watched as Diana moved her turkey around her plate. Her fork and knife were making all the noise but she was yet to have a slice of the turkey.

"You are missing out on a lot." Mrs Silva started.

Diana stared at her.

"The turkey of course. It's delicious." The older woman added with a smile.

Diana managed a soft chuckle.

"Eat something. Michael would not love to see you like this." She said, mouthful.

"He can't see me." Diana replied, with her voice almost breaking. "I want him back home."

Mrs Silva wiped her mouth with a napkin.

"Nothing good comes up on the radio or television. They are killing soldiers and families every day. I want my husband back." She said as she

wiped her tears. "He doesn't have to keep fighting. He could just come back home to me...to us." She added.

"Michael loves you." Mrs Silva said. "He really does love you."

Diana nodded. "I know. But, it hurts so much that he is not here. I don't know if he is fine. I don't know how he is doing...maybe he is scared...maybe he is hurting somewhere...maybe he just wants to come home and leave it all behind." She concluded as she wiped her tears.

Mrs Silva took a deep breath. "It will all be alright."

"No, it won't." Diana replied. "Not until Michael is back home."

Mrs Silva rose to her feet. "You do know I love my son, right?" She didn't wait for an answer before she continued. "You probably don't know this but I was never in support of his enlisting in the army many years ago. I fought against it tooth and nail. I wanted him home with me, but nothing was going to make him stay. He wanted this and he worked hard to get it. You met him as a soldier, fell in love with him as a soldier, and even married him as a soldier, Diana. You can either believe in him or you can sit about and be sad about it but there are a lot of people going through this too. Who knows? Maybe the children that were kidnapped have it worse. And I know this is not the time to try and determine who has got the worse fate but my darling girl, everyone is hurting...I am too." She concluded as she wiped her tears. "But I choose to be happy and I choose to eat my turkey, because it tastes good." She concluded and then chuckled.

Diana managed a smile and then burst into laughter.

Aisha couldn't sleep. Her nights had been marred with fears that were enough to haunt her for a lifetime. She couldn't afford a night's sleep as their nights were always short-lived. This was not the life she wanted. It had all started like a dream to her when the raiders stormed their school that night and captured a lot of them. She had seen Baba Koba who guarded the gate gunned down mercilessly when he had tried to get in their way. The frail old man wasn't man enough for that situation. She held on to Laila, her best friend as they joined the others in the truck screaming in fear of what was and was to come. Before that night, they'd heard the name Boko Haram and had dreaded it.

Now, it was their reality which they had to live with it. All she wanted was to be a Doctor but now she couldn't even think about her dreams. She just wanted to leave this horrible place that scared her every time. Since the time she had been captured, she had watched her friends cry, fall sick, even die. She had heard screams at night when the insurgents forcefully had their way with the girls. The sound of explosions she heard ever so often never ceased to frighten her. The men had also talked about the *'drill'*. She didn't know what it was but they took one of them, a classmate of hers whose name she couldn't quite remember, and she never came back. She knew they were not being raped, because she had been raped and she had come back but the girls that went never came back from the *'drill'*. She had hoped that the government would come to help them...that they would be back home in no time and forget that day when everything had changed. But, nothing had happened. It had been a long time since she heard Papa talk to her about the hospital she was going to build in the community or even had to listen to Ahmed's dry jokes. All these made her sad, it made her cry and kept her awake. She had hoped that she would fall sick and die like the other girls but it wasn't happening. They still had days and nights but she had stopped counting the days. She just let them come and go. She didn't know if her birthday had passed or was yet to come. There was nothing to celebrate. There was no peace or joy. Nothing like that for them anymore. A lot had changed for her...for them.

"Aisha."

She turned to Laila. "What is it?" she asked.

"Why are you not asleep again?" Laila asked, joining her.

Aisha wiped her tears. "I can't sleep."

"Aisha, you are the strongest of us. You can't cry. You promised us."
Laila replied.

Aisha nodded as she cleaned her eyes. "I am sorry."

"I am scared, Aisha. I want to die." Laila said.

Aisha swallowed. She wanted to die too but she couldn't tell her friend. "I'll get us help from this place. I promise you. I'll find my father and Ahmed...they will help us."

“I miss Ahmed.” Laila said, smiling. “He said he will marry me.”

Both girls laughed. “Ahmed says a lot of wrong things.” Aisha replied, yawning.

“You should sleep.” Laila replied.

Aisha nodded. “I should.” She said as Laila leaned against her shoulder. Aisha chuckled. “Laila, how am I supposed to get any sleep with you resting on me?”

“Just lean on me too...we have each other.” Laila replied as she snuggled closer to her best friend.

Gun shots rocked in the distance and the other girls started waking up. Aisha and Laila immediately stood in a corner. The door opened and the sun rays came into the room. It was only then that Aisha realised she had been up all night, brooding. Another day was here.

“Out!”, the command reverberated through the room exactly the way it usually did.

They all fell into a single file and marched out of the room onto the open field. They were joined by other girls from other huts into the open field. It was time to pick out the girls for today’s *drill*. Aisha’s heart raced as the men stared at them intensely as though they could see through their body into their souls. The men dispersed in groups among them and pushed some girls out front to the circle. Aisha felt a touch on her back. Her heart skipped a beat but as she turned it was Laila that was being pulled outside. Tears streamed down Aisha’s eyes. “Laila.” She called softly.

Laila turned to her and smiled with a wave. “I am going to die.” She mouthed with a smile.

Only the girls that were selected for drill knew what it was but they never came back to tell the others. They just left the camp in trucks and never returned. The men led the other girls to their dark room. Aisha crouched in a corner of the room and wept for her friend. Laila just got her wish...but Aisha wasn’t getting hers.

“Listen to me, Major General. I cannot undermine the fact that you have been through a lot in the past weeks and yes, you are lucky to be alive but

do you know how irresponsible the office would look if you embarked on combining forces with locals to search the forest?” The General asked.

Michael nodded. “These guys have a good knowledge of the community and they could make our work a lot easier. Besides, they have been going in with or without us and it isn’t going to change much.”

The General stared at him. “Have you taken a good look at yourself of recent?”

“I am fine.”

The General nodded. “You lost a lot of troops. You are lucky to be alive. You are in a hurry to go into the forest and find these girls. You really need a break.”

“No, Sir! What I need to do is find those girls.” Michael replied.

The General scribbled into a paper. “I agree with you. Take a week break, go home.”

“Sir?”

The General handed him a paper. “Go home for a week. Go to your family. When you return, the search continues.”

“No. We can’t stop searching.” Michael protested.

The General walked over to his door. “Michael, go home!”

Michael sighed.

Diana took off her headphones and grabbed her bag.

“Great show, Diana.” Her producer said as he joined her in the studio.

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“But do you really think that the girls are being used as suicide bombers?” he asked.

She shrugged. “It is not far-fetched. The girls have been missing for almost a year now and we have more female suicide bombers and of relative school age.

That is the case. This is the story.” She replied. “Innocent girls have been converted to suicide bombers and there is nothing anybody is doing anything about it.” She replied as she clutched her bag to her arm.

“Those girls would be going through a lot.” he asked. “These days whenever I look at my daughter, I am just thankful.”

She shrugged. “Yeah...I can’t imagine what those girls and their families are going through...I just hope they come back home.”

“But would there even be a home for them? A lot has changed.” He replied.

Diana knew he was right. Sometimes when it is time to come home...there might not be a home to come to.

“Goodnight, Diana.” He said as he stepped out of the studio.

Diana took her seat and stared at her headphones. She ran her fingers over it with a smile. It was home for her. It was where everything first made sense...even with Michael.

She had hosted a show which she tagged “*She is beautiful*” several years ago and had guests calling up on it and sending shout-outs to their loved ones and special people. She smiled at the number of callers that had called to appreciate their loved one but the best moment of her evening came when:

“Good evening, my name is Michael.”

She smiled. “Hello Michael! Who are you sending your shout-out to?”

“You. You are beautiful.” He replied.

She blinked. “Sorry? Michael, I didn’t get a name for your shout-out.”

“Diana, you are beautiful. I have been listening to you and you are the only reason why I still own a radio. You are beautiful and you are my special somebody...as I have none.” He replied.

Diana smiled. “Thank you, Michael.” She said.

“You are welcome.” He replied and hung up.

All she wanted to do was get off work and revel in the fact that someone had given meaning to her day by appreciating her for what she did.

She smiled to herself as the elevator took her to the ground floor after work. "You are beautiful, Diana." She grinned as she stepped out. "Bye, Paul." She called to the security guard and stepped out of the building.

As she stepped out, she met a man standing before a car as though he had been waiting for someone. She noticed him smiling. He then approached her. "Hi Diana."

She recognised the voice. "Michael."

He smiled.

The rest was history.

Diana sighed as she grabbed her bag to leave the studio. She had spent longer than she had envisaged thinking about the past with Michael. She missed him more and more with each passing day. She would worry more at home. She turned off the lights and walked out.

As she stepped out of the building, she stared at Michael standing before his car. She really needed to slow down, she was beginning to hallucinate! She blinked severally to clear her head as she kept walking but he wouldn't go away. "Could he really be here?", she thought to herself. Her eyes grew misty as she kept walking towards the 'image' before her. She tried to touch him and indeed she felt him. He was here! He had come back to her after all! And then tears of relief came pouring from her eyes. She almost couldn't believe her luck. Michael swept her off the floor and into his arms. "I missed you too." He said.

"I never said I missed you." She managed to reply through her tears.

He smiled as he wiped them away. "You don't have to say anything."

Diana ran her fingers over Michael's bruises. She could tell he had been through a great deal. She had been looking at his scars every day since he returned home. The more she stared at it...the more her soul hurt about what

Michael must have been through in the North. "Please don't go back." She said.

He turned to her. "Oh my Diana!" he said with a smile that usually eased her fears. But his smile wasn't doing the trick this time and he knew it.

"Please, Michael." She begged. "There has got to be a way."

He stared at her. "Diana, I have to go back in two days."

"Two days...That's all we have left?" she asked.

He smiled. "We will always have forever."

"Forever is a long time." She replied.

He nodded. "And I'll spend it with you."

She touched his face. "I hope so."

"It will be fine." He replied.

"Is there any hope for the girls?" she asked.

He blinked. "We are not giving up."

"They are the suicide bombers, right?"

Michael didn't know what to say. Her guess was as good as his and that of many others. The nation's database had not provided them with enough to match the bodies with that of the missing girls but the speculation seemed almost authentic...and that was enough for many people to draw their conclusions from.

"These girls wanted more from life and that's why they went to write examinations which could give them a future. They don't deserve this. No child should be made to live in fear." She said as she turned away.

He nodded. "We are fighting very hard every day to find them, Diana. I hope we do."

"I can't imagine how their families feel." She said.

He exhaled. "I met a family over there. They helped me after the failed rescue mission of the girls. Their daughter is missing and she has big dreams, Diana.

Beautiful dreams! She wants to be a Doctor. She wants to help her community. I don't know if she is still alive or if she still thinks about those dreams or if she is just another child in line to be blown up into nothing"

"What if we had a child...and what if it was our daughter?" she asked. "I just wish we had our own baby."

He pulled her close for a hug. "I am sorry."

"When will God remember us?" she asked.

He smiled. "Someday. One day. Maybe today?"

"Maybe?" she asked.

He nodded. "Definitely." He said as he kissed her.

"Aisha! Aisha!"

Aisha turned as she heard her name in whispers. She stared at one of the girls. "Hadiza? What is it?" she asked.

Hadiza crawled over to meet at by the door. "What are you doing?"

"I want to pee." Aisha replied.

Hadiza frowned. "Why are you lying?"

Aisha sighed. "I want to run."

"Why? They will catch you...and beat you." She protested. "Remember what happened to Nafisat?"

Nafisat had tried running away one day when some of girls went to pee. Hadiza had witnessed the whole event. One of the men latched onto her shoulder and hit her right in the belly which forced her to bleed through her mouth. The others joined in beating her until she was motionless. Some of the girls thought she was stupid to have risked her life like that. Others thought her brave. In the end, none mattered as Nafisat died shortly after from the injuries she sustained.

Aisha clenched her teeth as the thought of Nafisat crossed her mind. But she wouldn't be deterred. "I am going to try." She said and thumped against the door.

Hadiza gaped. "Aisha..."

"I'll find help." Aisha said with her voice trembling. "I will find help for us." She reiterated, sounding more confident this time.

Hadiza crawled back to her bed spot and buried her head. Aisha was scared but she had made up her mind to run and she would not look back. She stepped back from the door as she heard voices in a distance.

The door flew open and three men stepped in. "Who knocked?" One of them asked as he cocked his gun.

Aisha stood up as her heart pounded. "I."

"What do you want?" he asked, lifting the gun to her face.

She blinked as she stared at the gun as it glided across her face.

"Speak!" he barked.

She shivered. "I...I want to...to *shit*." She said.

The men stared at her with a snicker and then one of them shoved her back into the room before joining the others for a quick discussion

"*Who want to shit too?!*" A man asked as he looked into the dark room.

Hadiza rose her hand. "I." She shouted.

Aisha blinked.

"Oya come!" Another ordered. "Two of you. Come!"

Aisha's feet shook as she stepped out of the room with Hadiza and the men into the night. This was her decision...but she had now acquired an extra baggage in form of Hadiza. She had to worry for her too.

"Stay there! Do it there." One of the men ordered before turning to the others to have a smoke.

Hadiza and Aisha stood among the thicket. They stared at themselves and bent down.

Aisha turned slightly to survey the environment. She was no longer sure about her decision because of the darkness that engulfed the surrounding. Even though it was dark, the men would get them fast or even shoot them. It wasn't far from what she had wanted. She wanted to die too...but not in their camp. If she was going to die, she should have tried to leave at least. That way, she would have made an effort to get away from the men who had repeatedly assaulted them and demeaned their self-worth and confidence.

“Run!” Hadiza said, grabbing Aisha's hand as they made through the thicket.

“Come back here!” One man ordered as he heard their movements.

The Men cocked their guns and opened fire into the air and into the distance.

“The Mines will get them.” Another said halting his companions. “They will die before they know it.” He said and turned away.

The other two men released more bullets into the distance in anger. They were disappointed that they let two girls fool them...but then, they would not fool the mines. Many girls thought they escaped using their little female tricks, but they never escaped the implanted mines and they were sure these two would also fall prey to it.

Michael walked with his mother towards the car. “I'll miss you, Mom.”

She smiled. “I love you, son.”

“I am sorry.” He said. “I know you never forgave me for joining the army.”

Mrs Silva sighed. “I remember you were at a very dark place in your life at that time and you just wanted to get away from everything and everyone and you decided to join the army.” She said and sighed. “I told you son, if you are bored or depressed you find a hobby, not join the army.”

Michael chuckled. “I fell in love with it afterwards, mom.”

“And now I have lost my son to it.” She said. “I’ll miss you.”

He kissed her forehead. “I love you, Mom. Please take care of Diana for me.” He said and turned to Diana as she approached him with a small box.

“I made you cupcakes for the trip.” Diana said as she handed the box to him.

He smiled as he took them. “Thank you.” He said, dropping the box in the car.

“Michael, please come back.” She said.

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. “I’ll always love you.”

“Where is your radio?” she asked.

He fetched an old rusty radio from his pocket and showed it to her proudly. “I’ll always listen to your show.” He said. “I won’t miss it.”

She hugged him tightly. “Come back for me, for us.” She said.

“I will call you as often as I can.” He said.

She nodded. “I’ll miss you.” She said.

“You are always in my heart, darling.” He replied. “Please pray for me.” He added.

Diana kissed his forehead. “I will.”

“Major General, we have to go now, sir.” A corporal said.

Michael pulled Diana close and kissed her before joining the Corporal in the car.

“My Soldier!” Diana called.

He turned to her. “My Lady!”

“Bring back our girls!” she said.

He nodded with a smile and the car drove off.

Aisha pulled Hadiza across till they got to the road and dropped her on the floor. "Hadiza, you can't die. We are away from them."

Hadiza struggled to keep her eyes open. "I am tired, Aisha." She said. She was losing too much blood. Aisha had tied her leg with her hijab to help put pressure on the bullet wound but Hadiza wasn't looking better. She looked pale. Hadiza had been hit by a bullet as they tried to escape, the previous night.

Aisha stared down the road. It was completely deserted. On the other side of the road was another mass of forest. She wasn't sure she could locate the camp since they had escaped in no particular direction and were only lucky to have made it to the road without stepping on any mines. She was also sceptical as she couldn't trust anyone at this point, especially a man in a military uniform as that was what the insurgents wore when they came for them.

"Hadiza!" she called as she stood over her. "We have to keep moving."

Hadiza shook her head. "You go ahead. I am happy now."

"Happy?" Aisha asked.

She nodded. "I am pregnant, Aisha."

Aisha gaped. "Pregnant?"

"Yes. I have not seen my blood in a long time and...and I don't want any of them to be my baby's father."

Aisha panted. "We have to find help."

"I am okay...I am happy now." Hadiza said as she shut her eyes.

Aisha's eyes ached. "Hadiza! Hadiza!" she called as she shook her vigorously. She tried to check for a pulse but there was none. Hadiza was gone.

Michael stared at Ahmed. "So, how many volunteers do we have in all?"

"Fifty have signed up already and I'm expecting even more." Ahmed replied enthusiastically.

Michael cocked his gun. "We move out tonight. We have some military guys with us. But I am going to need your team who understand the terrain better. I want them all to be here for a briefing before we set out."

Alhaji Shettima walked into the room and rambled on in Hausa to his son.

"Fifty one." Ahmed said to Michael with a smile.

Michael stared at him. "Sir, you don't have to come with us. Frankly, we need agile and fast young men." He said. "Please tell your father what I said." He added.

Ahmed relayed the message back to the older man. He was clearly displeased as he shouted back.

"Ahmed, what is he saying?" Michael asked.

Ahmed turned to him. "It's my daughter. She went to school. She was going to do fine for us. I can't leave her."

Michael stared at the map on the table. "In that case, I better get to work with my coordinates." He replied. "If you don't mind." He added. Ahmed stepped out with Alhaji Shettima to give Michael some privacy.

Michael picked up his phone and dialled. "Diana?"

"Hey my love, how are you?"

He took a seat. "I am fine...I guess."

"You guess?" She queried.

He nodded. "We have a good lead. We head out tonight."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "How do you feel about it?"

He stared at his wristwatch. "Strongly! I believe we can make it happen." He replied.

"Go with God, my love" she said from the other end of the line. "I'll be praying for you."

Michael smiled. "I love you."

"I love you too." She replied.

He hung up and wiped the tears that were welling up in his eyes. "I love you, Diana." He echoed to himself.

Aisha couldn't tell how long she had been walking. All she knew was that many nights had fallen and she still had not found home. She must have been really far from home. Maybe she would never have home again. She needed good water...all she had done was drink from ponds and canals. Her stomach was irritated but she didn't mind. She wanted something to survive as she kept walking. She didn't know how much longer she had to walk or if the insurgents had started looking for her. She couldn't stop walking. She had to make it home for the other girls.

Michael inspected the body with a flashlight. "It's not fresh." He said to no one in particular as the other men looked around. "This is a good lead. The others girls have to be somewhere."

"Hadiza." Ahmed said as he stared at the body.

Michael turned to him. "You know her?"

"Yes. I know her." He replied.

Michael stared at his men. "We are leading three troops. Should we trigger any mine...that is a sign that we are close. Be on the watch out and be careful. Now go!"

The team dispersed into various sides of the forest.

Aisha stopped moving. She was tired of pushing on. She didn't seem to be getting closer to anywhere she knew. It wasn't long that she settled into the grass that she heard voices in the distance. She sprung to her feet and tried to listen. The men were speaking in Hausa and were talking about the insurgents. She immediately took cover in the nearby bush and waited for them to surface.

"Right!" A voice called.

She heard English. It had to be Ahmed.

“Ahmed!” she cried out with the little strength in her and waved her hand.

He turned in her direction and rushed over to her. “Aisha!”

“Allahu Akbar!!!” The other men chanted in delight as Ahmed pulled Aisha from the grass.

Aisha stared at him as she cried. “Laila is dead.”

“Laila?” Ahmed said as he cried. “Laila.”

She nodded. One of the men gave her a bottle of water as they awaited Michael.

Michael’s team arrived at the spot and Alhaji Shettima hurried over to meet his daughter. Michael smiled as he watched the family reunite. Aisha was helped into the backseat of truck by her father and brother.

Michael stepped out of the truck and turned to Aisha. “You are a survivor.”

“There are a lot of girls in there. You have to help them.” She struggled to say.

He nodded. “We will talk in the morning.” He replied and turned to the Corporal. “Get her to Medic. I’ll see you in the morning.” He ordered.

He watched the truck leave before turning to the other men. “We still have a lot of girls to find and we must bring them back home. We have found one. We must get ready for a clean sweep tomorrow. All day. We need all the information Aisha can provide us. Let’s return to camp now and get set.” He said and moved over to another truck.

Diana rolled over to the other side of her bed and picked up her ringing phone. “Hello.”

She paused for a second and then sat up. “Michael?”

“We found Aisha.”

Diana smiled. “That’s good.”

“She still spoke about being a Doctor.” He said with a chuckle. “She watched a lot of her friends die over there.” He added.

Diana took a deep breath. “It must have been hard on her.”

“She has been through a lot, Diana. She is a very brave girl.” He added.

“I’d love to meet her someday. Maybe have her on one of my shows that she might tell the world her story.” She replied.

“Yeah. That sounds good too. She has also told us a lot that would be really helpful and we are going into the forest in about an hour. Everything is set.” He said.

Diana checked her wristwatch by her bedside. “It’s five in the morning.”

“Yes. It’s all day. We are having combats on air and land and so if you don’t hear from me all day, you’ll understand why.” He said.

Diana sat up. “Michael, please take care of yourself.”

“I will. I have to go now.”

Diana didn’t want to let him go. “Wait!” she said as she got up from the bed. “Michael, would you come home after this?” She asked.

“Diana, I love you and I want to be with you and yes, I *will* come home after this.” He replied.

She smiled. “I would bake you a lovely cake *when* you do then.”

“Are you trying to bribe me?” he asked.

She nodded. “I think it’s a good place to start.”

“I have to go now.” He replied.

She nodded. “It’s okay if you don’t tune into my show this morning.”

“I know...I would try if I can.” He replied, chuckling.

She laughed. “We both know that is impossible.”

“It is possible.” He replied.

She exhaled. "I love you so much, Michael."

"And I love you forever and ever, Diana." He replied. "I'll see you later."

She nodded with a smile. "Yes. Later."

The line went dead and she smiled before falling back to sleep.

Michael returned to Aisha.

"Your wife, right?" Aisha asked.

He nodded. "She would love to have you on her show someday." He said showing Aisha a radio. "This is my radio. I listen to her on it every day."

Aisha smiled faintly. "That...that is beautiful."

He nodded. "Yes. Your family must be really happy to have you back...now you can go on with school and be that Doctor that you want to be." He said, returning the radio into his pocket.

She shook her head. "I don't know if this place is safe."

"Oh...it will be. We will get those guys and make Borno the home of peace once again." He said.

She exhaled. "I am afraid of this place. I can't sleep still at night...I am scared they'll come and take me away again. I am afraid of the things they will do to me at night...and the drill which our friends never come back from. Laila wanted to go on the drill and she went." She stopped as she sniffled. "Laila didn't ask them to take her on the drill...they chose her and they never brought her back." She stopped and wiped her tears. "Laila never came back."

Michael took a deep breath. "Did any of the other girls ever return from the drill?" he asked.

"No."

He nodded. "Thank you so much for your help, Aisha."

"Thank you, Sir." She replied.

He rose to his feet. "Please try to get some sleep."

"I can't sleep. I don't know how to." She replied. "Do you think I could leave this town? Maybe meet your wife?" she asked.

He nodded. "Of course, someday you will."

"Maybe I won't be so scared anymore." She added.

Michael stared at her. "When you are scared, you should confront your fears, I know this might be too much to face as it seems like your whole world took a new turn but trust me, you can fight to get back on your feet. Chase your dreams and do something for your community like you have always planned to. You have got to do what you always wanted to do when all this is over." He said.

She nodded as she stared at him. "When all this is over...what do you want to do?" she asked.

Michael rose to his feet. "I want to go home to be with my wife." He said. "She wants that more than anything else and I want the same thing too."

"Laila loved Ahmed. He loved her too. Maybe he could have had this beautiful thing you have with your wife with Laila in the future if she hadn't died." she replied.

Michael took a deep breath. "You will be safe here."

"Thank you." She replied.

He nodded and walked out.

Michael knelt down in his room and prayed in tears. He didn't know what the day held for him but he knew it was another day that he needed not to be afraid. He was scared but he couldn't show it. He had to go out there and fight for the girls and he couldn't be afraid. He needed courage and strength. He prayed earnestly that God would grant his request.

Michael and his remaining troops retreated as they fended off gunfire from the insurgent's camp. The battle had been going on for two long hours. They

had seeded the environment with grenades and were now taking cover. The gun shots continued in the distance. Michael watched Alhaji Shettima fall to the ground and cursed his luck. The insurgents had resorted to their sophisticated weapons which outmuscled their weapons in the combat. Still, the soldiers would not back down. Michael signalled to his troops as they reloaded their guns and returned into the battle field. The military was winning too. Some of the insurgents were falling to the ground while others were escaping. Those who were escaping ran into a military ambush and the battle continued. Michael was losing men and so were the insurgents. This was not a battle to go down without collateral damage.

Michael watched as the girls made for the truck set for them in a corner unguarded. They had not made the call for the girls to move, but the girls would not waste another minute in captivity, especially not when they could see their captors dropping to the floor. He tried to focus on the girls as well as the battle front.

Loud screams were heard as some girls dropped to the floor. Bullets from a machine gun was aimed at them and taking them out in numbers. Michael rushed in their direction and took out the insurgent from behind. He stood as their guard whilst fending off insurgents.

Diana stepped into the studio with a smile. "Good morning, everyone." She said.

"Who won the lottery?" Her producer asked as he set up the mixer.

She smiled. "I did."

"Really?" he started. "Fill me in."

She chuckled. "In due season. Are we ready to go on air?" she asked.

"We were born ready." He replied.

She nodded as she grabbed her headphones.

"You are up in five! Four! Three! Two! One!" He called. "Go!"

She smiled. "Good morning Nigeria..."

Michael shut the trunk as the girls settled into the truck. He called on the remaining few soldiers as they made to another truck.

He smiled at Ahmed. "Great job, Ahmed."

"Thank you." Ahmed replied. "I'll miss my fa-" Ahmed groaned as blood splattered through his back into Michael's face.

Michael looked around him as he clung on to Ahmed. Another soldier dropped down few metres from him.

"Sniper!!!" Michael screamed, urging the other soldiers to take cover.

He grabbed Ahmed and tried to run with him but he got hit. He gaped as the bullet penetrated his back. As he turned in the direction of the sniper, another bullet went through his stomach. He cried out and shot sporadically with the remaining strength in him until a man fell off the back of a mud thatched building. He had taken out the sniper.

He clutched his stomach in pain and stared at the blood on his hand. He struggled to breathe. He knew he wasn't going to make it. He groaned in pain as he wriggled his fingers and lifted them across his chest to his breast pocket. He pulled out his radio and fixed his earphones into his ear. He tapped on the button as he searched for his preferred frequency. He smiled as he heard Diana's voice and then shut his eyes for the last time.

"The last one year has been hard on us all as we searched and prayed for the kidnapped Chibok girls. Finally, the girls have been rescued...but not all of them and definitely not the way they were...a lot has changed for the girls and their families and the families of the heroes who went in search of the girls. Things will never be the same again but we hope and pray that the society makes the integration of these girls swift and hopefully we will finally say NEVER AGAIN to the insurgents that plagued our land. My name is Diana Silva and I lost a loved one in this war. Have a nice day." She dropped her headphones and picked up her purse.

"Diana, how are you feeling?" Her Producer asked as he stared at her baby bump. "You can't put that baby through all these daily stress, you know?"

She smiled faintly. "I'll be fine. I have to go now." She said and hurried out.

Diana hoped she wasn't too late as she stood by the rail tracks. She watched the train as it slowed to a stop and the passengers came off. She smiled as she saw the rusty radio dangling.

She then walked up to Aisha. "You brought his radio."

"He would have loved you to have it." Aisha replied as she handed Diana the radio.

Diana smiled. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Thank you." Aisha replied.

Diana turned away from the train. "Let's take you home."

Aisha smiled as she heard those words.

...remembering our missing girls from Chibok; that no child should live in fear.

-Tomi Adesina

#BringBackOurGirls



Tomi Adesina is a screenwriter and fiction series blogger.

She is the writer of the popular blog series, "Dear Future Husband".

She has other blog series including "Please Break My Heart", "Broken...or not?", "All fun and games", "Beautiful Stranger", "Clandestine" and "Two weeks to go" to her credit.

As a screenwriter, she wrote the first season of Ebony Life TV's drama series **DEADLINE**.

She was also on the writing team for the revitalized Ghanaian Family drama series, **BROADWAY**. She also co-wrote the Nollywood movie, **BEDLAM**.

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