

# HELL TO PAY

a novella by

DAISY OZOUWAIN

## PROLOGUE

I am about to recount the stories that brought me to this part of the world. The recollection of my trip might help me understand why I am here. And most importantly, it might help me understand who would want to frame me for murder. Yes, I did say *murder*. I'll lay everything bare in this diary, but I'll do so as an external participant. This way, I will be impartial and likely to remember details that I deemed unimportant before.

Are you ready to hear my story?

## Chapter 1

I was not born in New Orleans, but in the Kingdom of Oyuda to King Tomparo and his wife, Queen Amina.

They had three girls. Kenya was the oldest. She was old enough to get married.

Zainabu was the middle child. She was hitting puberty and hated it. Her father would often tease her to help her overcome her discomfort.

Hola, the youngest, loved to spend time with her father, and would follow him everywhere.

Each of the girls had a gift.

Zainabu played the flute. Kenya danced like no other. And Hola sang like a nightingale.

They were their parents' joy.

Some people didn't share their opinion. King Tomparo's own brother, Kapueo, would often ask. "Who will go hunt for you, or defend you if we have to face the other clans? My sons on the other hand—"

Tomparo would cut him off by laughing the matter away.

"Why would I send my women hunting when you and your boys can do that for me? As for the other tribes, they cannot wait long enough for my daughters to be of age to wed."

"Hmm. What will happen to me and my family?" Kapueo would reply.

"Brother, you are my blood," Tomparo would retort. "Do you think I will not take care of you?"

Kapueo always seemed happy enough with Tomparo's answer. They'd move on to discuss the kingdom's day-to-day matters.

Kapueo's wife, Sita, doubted Tomparo. "He's lying," she would tell her husband. "I spoke with Afia the other day. She said King Ade had banished his brother and his family. Now they are

vagrants who go from clan to clan for shelter. One of these days, they'll end up here. Mark my words.”

“Sita, you talk too much. Go get my brew.”

The Kingdom of Oyuda was a peninsula settled between an ocean and a river. Beyond the river, a monstrous forest spread along the coast. Wildlife prevented any construction on that side of the kingdom. For some reason, only the royal cemetery escaped the curse.

Many believed the forest to be haunted. The king alone was safe to venture in there. That was why all the inhabitants lived on the oceanside.

The royal family would remain on land end, while the commoners would stay further in the lands. The capital was commonly known as Kizandjo, and was renowned for its excellent quality of life, and it showed.

King Tomparo and his brother were next door neighbors. Their wives took the opportunity for this living arrangement to prepare meals together in the communal courtyard.

The three girls enjoyed that time of the day. Their mother, Queen Amina, would recount their family's history.

The girls would learn about the wars with the other clans. And how their father, and his father before him, Sampa the Great, expanded the kingdom to what it is now.

“King Ade, from the Adepoyo clan, was one of my many suitors,” Queen Amina said. “He was happy that my father – your grandfather – King Khari, didn't have a son.” She'd often pause during the stories to stare at the ocean, as if it helped her remember. “Even though I was old enough to rule over Khariland, it wouldn't have been possible. I'm only a woman, after all,” she added with contempt. “When I married, my father surprised everyone, first by the choice of my husband, and

then with my dowry. Usually, you'd give chicken, cows and loincloths. The higher the rank, the larger the dowry."

"So what did he do?" Hola asked, hopping up and down with impatience.

Amina chuckled. "He gave me a piece of land. The very thing Ade was eyeing." She took a stick and started drawing in the sand. "You see, Khariland is here, north of Oyuda which is in the West, and Adepoyo is on the East. The Goyero River crosses your father's land and ends in Khariland, at the estuary. My dad used to ask Oyuda for extra goods as tax whenever they wanted to go through. The piece of land that was in the dowry is here." Amina circled a wide area that surrounded the river and the place where it ran into the ocean. "Of course, at that time, I wasn't aware of the importance of the land. All I cared about was Ade. I was in awe of his bravery. He'd tell me all the heroic stories of his travels to these foreign kingdoms. But deep down, he never loved me. All he wanted was that piece of land. It would make his kingdom twice as big, and give him an advantage over your father.

"Luckily, my father saw through him. What I didn't know is that these tales were not Ade's but your father's. They were friends, or at least that's what your father believed. But the truth is that Ade hated him because he was braver, more trustworthy. And let me add this: more handsome."

The girls giggled.

"When I finally met your father, I knew. I knew I couldn't marry Ade. And that's what I told my father. He was ecstatic. He told me he would have waited indefinitely until I changed my mind."

"Really?" Hola asked.

"You should have met her father," Sita chimed in. "He was strongheaded. Your mother takes after him."

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Amina replied.

Sita continued. “If you must know, your mother was determined to marry your father. She made it very clear. She chased the poor man—”

“I didn’t,” Amina interrupted. “Why would you tell them that?”

“Aye! Ask your uncle if you don’t believe me.”