

CHAPTER ONE

OCTOBER 1, 1884

The sun had almost gone down and no game caught. It wasn't a very good day for hunting, Hayah thought. He had been lying in wait all day long to kill something but still no luck.

"Those *Bororo* again!" He cursed under his breath. "They must have driven the animals further away." He had noticed their temporary settlements the previous day and instantly knew they were going to be trouble. It was the beginning of the dry season, and the open savannah grassland of Adamawa region was a known haven for cattle grazing. The *Bororo* nomads usually come around once in every two or three years to graze in the area and each time they do, they upset the natural balance and order of the wildlife found there.

The dry season was not only favourable for pasturing in that part of the savannah; it was also, a very good time for game hunting, a sport, which he loved very much. Hayah was a soldier in his early forties and still very much physically fit with the relentless enthusiasm of an adolescent. During the brief periods of calm experienced in the conflict between the *Fulani* and the indigenous *Musgum* people, he liked to go inland into the lush grassland for some solitude and game hunting. It gave him the peace and quiet, he needed to rest, to reflect and recuperate.

As he moved silently through the grass, he heard a sound which he mistook for some wild animal, so he crouched toward the sound with caution. But as he approached the area, he saw a cow, and the another. He parted the tall grass; he was hiding behind and saw more cows grazing peacefully in an open area. Annoyed, he thought of going to meet the cattle rearer to give him a piece of his mind. But just as he was about to do that, he noticed a figure, not among the cows, but under a tree, away from the animals. It was that of atypical *Bororo* girl. She was tall, slim and had a light but brownish complexion common to the *Fulbe* tribe. Her face was turned away from him, toward the cows. She had a wrapper that was tied low around her waist and held together in place by lots of beads, also known as *Jigida*. Her blouse was tiny, barely covering her upper torso, and was decorated with beads of different colours and little colourful pieces of cloth were sewn onto it. Her hair was braided in cornrows of different sizes, decorated with beads of different colours.

When she turned her face towards him, he held his breath. She had the most beautiful face, he had ever seen. It was oval in shape, enriched with big eyes and acute, pointed nose. Her lips were tattooed black and her eyes were also lined with dark kohl. Her cheeks were lined with three dots on each side. And on her ears, were large round earrings. He put her age at around fourteen or fifteen.

She was so beautiful that for a moment he doubted whether she was human or *jinn*.

Suddenly, there was an uneasy, but familiar calm around the place. With the eye of an expert hunter, he quickly scanned through the long dry savannah grass that was swaying slowly in the wind. And there it was, almost unnoticeable and blended into the brown grass was a lion making its way towards the herd of cattle, moving slowly and stealthily without being noticed. The girl was obviously unaware of what was about to happen. She was so engrossed with her surveillance duty, that from a distance, her face radiated a calm and peaceful demeanour. He almost felt sorry for her, as she was about to be terrified beyond her imagination.

Silently, but quickly, he drew out his bow and arrow and aimed straight at the beast. To his horror, he noticed that the lion wasn't going towards the animals, but towards the girl.

"A man-eater!" He thought as he quickly dipped his arrow in poison and primed it on the bow, aiming at the beast. "How could this be? There are only a few people living in this area except for the Bororo who must have arrived in the past few days." But there was no time to ruminative, he had to act fast or else the girl would be dead.

Suddenly from its squatting position, the lion sprang towards the girl, just as he fired an arrow towards it. The cows started to run for their lives in different directions. The girl turned and saw the beast and let out a shrieking scream. Everything happened very fast and at the end of it all. The beast lay dead at her feet. He then came out of the grasses and ran towards her. She was frozen stiff with fear.

"Are you alright?" He asked gasping for air. But she didn't answer. She was still frozen with fear and her eyes were fixed on the carcass. "It's alright. It's dead now." He added as she lifted her eyes to meet his, with a terrified look still on her face. It then dawned on him that she couldn't understand him, as he was speaking *Hausa* to her, so he switched to *Fulfulde* language and asked her again if she was alright, while trying to calm her down.

She must have suddenly come back to her senses because she immediately untied the veil from around her waist and covered her head, turning her back shyly, away from him.

"It's Ok." He said again. The *Bororo* are known to be very coy, especially their women and he didn't want to upset her. "You shouldn't be coming out here alone to graze, you know! These parts are swarming with wild animals. Perhaps you should have come in groups; better yet, let the men do it." She still didn't say anything. So, he continued. "This is a man-eater which makes it even more dangerous to be

out here alone. I haven't seen one in a long time, you know." He kept on talking for about two minutes without her saying anything in reply. Then, just as he was about to stop talking, from the corner of his eyes, he noticed that she quickly stole a glance at him before running away. "Great!" He exclaimed. "She ran away and left her cows. Well, she will have to come back for them." So, sat down under the tree to wait for her return.

Later that day, a young *Bororo* girl, dressed in a typical *Fulani* outfit was walking down a path with a stylishly decorated calabash filled with milk, balanced firmly on her head. She moved gracefully without upsetting it.

"*Hey pullo, waddu kosam!*" She heard a familiar girl's voice beckoning and she turned towards the sound to see who it was.

"Fantah! What are you doing here?" she asked, walking towards her and placing the calabash on the ground. "Where did you leave the cows? It is your turn to watch over them."

"Oh, they are fine." Fantah replied, nonchalantly.

"You abandoned them again? *Baba* will be angry."

"Don't worry about them." She opened the calabash and took some of its content and started drinking. "Wow, you didn't make any sales today!"

“Fantah! Stop drinking the milk. *Dada* will know.” She snatched the ladle from her and used the woven raffia to cover the calabash again. “Where did you leave the cows? What if something happens to them?”

“Common Diddi, you know that those cows are smarter than most of the boys in this village... Believe me, they are!”

“What’s wrong Fantah?” she asked her, knowing her sister was hiding something from her.

“I met a man.”

“You did?” Diddi gasped; they got up and started walking towards home.

“Yes. Oh, he was so wonderful.”

“I thought you said all boys were stupid?”

“Oh yes. But he is not a boy. He is a man.” She said, with a dreamy look.

“Oh, wow!” Her sister said in surprise, and Fantah told her about the handsome stranger who saved her life.

CHAPTER TWO

The evening sun casts its long shadow on the village of Ndokula, a quiet settlement of semi-nomadic *Bororo*, with less than five hundred inhabitants situated 150km west of Maroua in the lush savannah grassland of Fombina.

The *Bororo* are a very close-knit clan and are usually related by blood and marriage. They are sometimes hunters, but mainly cattle herders who move once every three years in search of greener pastures for their livestock, to survive and thrive. Whenever they move, they take everything with them and completely re-settle. They hardly ever spend more than three years in a particular place and almost never go back to any place they had left. They are believed to have originated from North Africa and kept going westward until they found themselves in the land of Fombina.

A typical *Bororo* village consists of groups of thatched huts made of grass, sticks and mud, and shaped like domes. Each *Ruga* is a cluster of domes surrounded by a fence made up of tree branches beautifully woven together to provide privacy and protection from wild animals. There is usually one very large dome for the head of the house and a semi-large one for his wife and daughters. There may be one more for the boys in the family and finally a small round one made of mud called *rumbu*, for storing of grains.

The family tree is made up of a father, mother and children. Even though they practiced polygamy, it was very rare except in special situations. Also, marriage between cousins was common amongst them, as it was believed to foster family ties and keep their wealth within the family. They also hardly ever intermarry with other tribes. For that reason, every Bororo resembles the other as they share (a) common gene.

They have a very loose system of government. Although they have a chief, referred to as *Ardo*, selected by the elders of the village, decisions on matters affecting the village are usually made by the elders. The *Ardo* is just a ceremonial head.

Malam Buba was standing in front of his house just before sunset, waiting for his wife to bring supper, when his cows appeared from nowhere and started going towards their barn without anybody directing them. To his surprise, his daughter Fantah was not with them. Just as he was wondering where she was, a middle-aged man who appeared to be nudging them, walked towards him and greeted him.

“Are these your cows?” The man asked.

“They look like my cows.” He answered him.

“They led me here; can you believe it? Smart animals!”

“You don’t say”

“Well... the girl that was with them left andso I brought them back”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“You mean my daughter left my cows unattended?” He retorted angrily.

“Yes...no.” He stammered. She was frightened. There was a lion. Do you know that these parts are dangerous? There are wild beasts everywhere. You shouldn’t let your daughter wander off alone.”

Malam Buba gave him a quizzical look before yelling...
“Fantah!”

“*Na'am Baba*” a female voice answered from inside the compound. She came out and stopped at the doorway, surprised to see Hayah - It was the same girl that left him with the cows – and then, she came and knelt down beside her father.

“Did you leave my cows in the forest by themselves and wander off?” She didn’t answer.

“Go inside, I will deal with you later.”

“It’s not really her fault. She was frightened... There was a lion...” Hayah tried to defend her.

“A lion?” Malam Buba feigned surprise, as if he didn’t hear him the first time.

“Yes, a man-eater.”

“That is serious.”

“Yes. But I ... “You Know, Sir, you should not allow young girls to go out into the forest by themselves to rear cows. It is very dangerous out there. It is crawling with wild animals.”

“Don’t worry about that. We have hunters roaming about and they will take care of the beasts. Rearing of cows is a task for children and girls.”

At that moment, another girl, much younger, but equally as beautiful came out with several small calabashes containing food stacked on each other. She knelt, greeted them and then started to arrange the calabashes on a mat.

“Okay.” Hayah said. He knew there was no point in trying to convince him anymore. “Now that your cows are safe, I will take my leave.”

“No, my friend, food is ready. Please stay and eat with me.” Malam Buba offered.

“Oh no, I must go. But thank you for the offer.”

"No, My good Sir. In our culture, it is considered unfriendly for a visitor to leave a man's house at sunset without having Supper with him first."

"Okay." He didn't want to offend him. "I will stay for supper."

"Thank you."

Hayah advised Buba again about the danger of wild animals out there, as they ate *nyiri marori be hako mbokko* from the same bowl. There was also *chobbal* by the side.

"Rearing cows is for children and women, young man. Our men are hunters and warriors. Believe me; we can take care of our women. No wild animal would dare harm any of them."

"Very well, then." Hayah said, seeing that it was pointless to try to convince him. He didn't want to tell him about the incident that happened earlier on for the fear of upsetting him.

While they were still eating, Buba called out for more water and to Hayah's surprise, it was Fantah that brought it to them. As she knelt to give them the water, she stole a

glance at him and then shyly looked away and smiled. Malam Buba saw what happened and told her something in *Fulfulde* that made her cringe, got up and went into the house in a hurry. She didn't look very happy.

“So, my stranger, what brought you to these parts? You don’t look like you are from around here.” Malam Buba asked.

“My name is Hayah Ibn Sa’id Ibn Abdullah Ibn Usman. I am the great grandson of the Sheik Usman the great. I migrated from Sokoto to Fombina on my way to Macca for pilgrimage, but along the way I was appointed the Chief Imam of Balda by *Lamdo Gerei* where I currently reside. I only go into the forest once in a while to be alone for some soul-searching and also to hunt for game, as it is a sport that I really love.”

“Hunting is not a royal sport.”

“I know.”

“What am I doing?” It suddenly dawned on him that Hayah was a very important man. “*Allah Rene Barkama.*” Buba said.

“Oh no Malam, You don’t have to bother. I am a guest in your house and you have treated me very kindly. I appreciate that and I will never forget it.”

“Thank you.”

“No. Thank you and I shall be leaving now.”

“No, *Allah rene*, It is already dark and if I know Balda, it is almost a full day’s journey from here. Why don’t you spend the night here and then leave in the light of day?”

“I do not want to inconvenience you.”

"No you won't. I will be honored to host you." And after a lot of persuasion, he finally convinced him to spend the night. Buba showed him to his own hut and instructed his wife to prepare the best delicacy for breakfast.

At first light, the next day, Malam Buba killed two fowls and gave his wife to prepare food for their guest to take along with him on his journey back to Balda, and he was outside getting ready when Fantah came from the back of the hut to meet him.

"Good morning stranger." She squatted and greeted him while avoiding eye contact.

"Good morning Fantah." He replied.

"You know my name?" she asked

"Yes."

"I believe you slept well." She said, without looking at him.

"Yes, I did. Your father was very kind." She didn't say anything. "I shall soon be on my way."

"To where?" She seems curious.

"Home."

"Home?"

“Yes Home, Balda. That is where I live.”

“What do you do?”

“I am a soldier, and I live in the Palace.” She glanced at him as if in disbelief, and he continued. “I occasionally go out hunting for fun.”

“Oh.” She said.

“Well, I shall be off now.”

“Will you come back again?”

“Do you want me to come again?” He asked, but she said nothing. Instead, she got up and ran out of the hut from the back and into her mother’s hut and at that very moment Malam Buba came into the hut.

“*Allah rene*, everything is ready.”

“Yes Malam Buba and you don’t have to address me so formally.” Hayah replied, smiling.

“If you permit it, I will arrange an escort for you to ensure your safety.”

“My safety is in the hands of Allah and I am glad He made me a warrior. Thank you for your concern, but that is not necessary.”

“Do come to visit us again.”

"Insha Allah." With that, he left. Fantah peeked from an opening in the wall of her mother's room with her sister giggling beside her.

