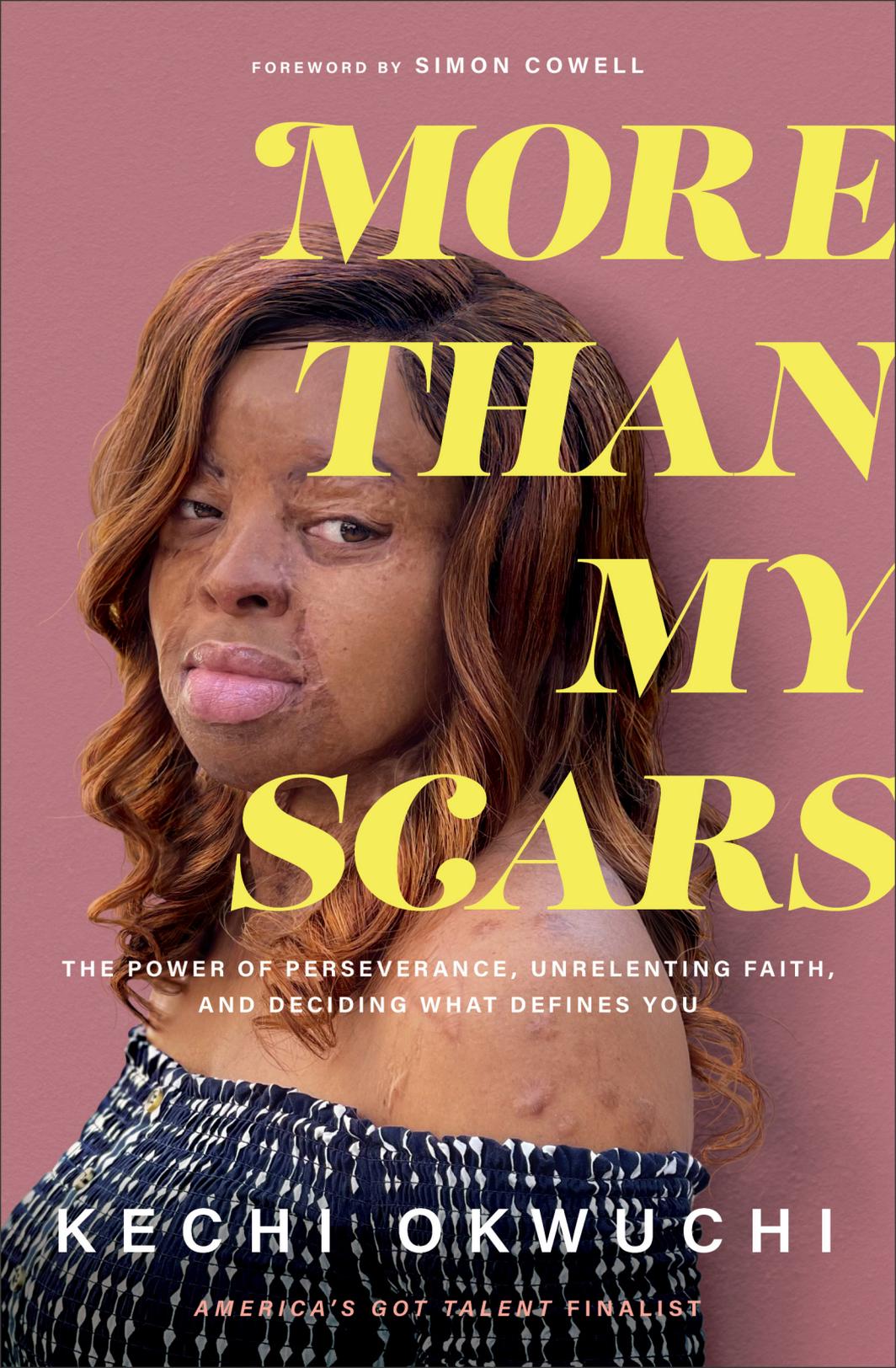


FOREWORD BY SIMON COWELL

MORE THAN MY SCARS



THE POWER OF PERSEVERANCE, UNRELENTING FAITH,
AND DECIDING WHAT DEFINES YOU

KECHI OKWUCHI

AMERICA'S GOT TALENT FINALIST

“This is a story that needs to be read—a testament of what it means to not only deal with challenges in life that very few can imagine but to face them head-on and use them to bring hope to others.”

from the foreword by **Simon Cowell**,
executive producer and judge of *America’s Got Talent*

“I was deeply moved by *More Than My Scars*. My dearest friend Okoloma died in the Sosoliso plane crash, and it was difficult to read Kechi’s personal account of the crash, as it was to encounter the unutterable grief of those whose children died.

“Still, this is a book about more than just a plane crash. It is about a mother’s fierce and unending love, the bond between mother and child, the kindness of strangers, and the power of the human will. It is about hope, as Kechi writes of hope ‘calling out to her.’ It is about faith in God, a journey she documents with honesty and wit. And it is about her immense courage, which she does not even seem fully aware of.

“Kechi’s courage enables her to be realistic about her situation, and that realism—with accounts of her ups and downs, her expectations, and her irritations—is more inspiring than any cloying alternative ever could be. Her humor is refreshing, and one smiles—such as when she playfully likens her skin to a patchwork quilt—but with a kind of respectful hesitancy, all the while feeling grateful to her for her gorgeous humanity, her uncommon wisdom, and her grace. May all the readers of this lovely book feel the same gratitude.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, award-winning and bestselling
author of *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*

MORE THAN MY SCARS

**THE POWER OF PERSEVERANCE,
UNRELENTING FAITH,
AND DECIDING WHAT DEFINES YOU**

KECHI OKWUCHI



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If this book helps even one person,
it was well worth writing.



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Foreword

Kechi Okwuchi defines the word *champion*. And *courage*. Since meeting her on the set of *America's Got Talent* in 2017, I have loved everything about her. She isn't just a singer, she's an inspiration. She's made a big difference in my life, showing me the true meaning of courage and what it means to rise above adversity. When things are tough, she rises above it all. Never thinking about giving up. She's truly one of the bravest women I have ever met.

When I first heard that she was writing this memoir, I was thrilled. This is a story that needs to be read—a testament of what it means to not only deal with challenges in life that very few can imagine but to face them head-on and use them to bring hope to others. I've had the privilege of watching her grow over the past few years from a shy and timid girl to a confident woman ready to take on the world.

I've not only witnessed Kechi deliver many magical moments on stage but I've also been inspired by the work she's been doing behind the scenes. It's every bit as magical as her singing. From speaking to troubled youth to visiting hospitals around the world, she's brought hope to many just when they needed it the most. It's wonderful to know that her incredible story will continue to reach even more people with the publication of this memoir.

I can't wait to read it!

Simon Cowell

Introduction

Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom, not a guide by which to live.

ROBERT KENNEDY

I'd like to say I picked up that quote from some article or book, but I actually first heard it at the end of an episode of *Criminal Minds*. Regardless, I was struck by its sheer profundity.

Tragedy: A tool to gain wisdom, not a guide by which to live.

My name is Kechi Okwuchi. I was twenty-five years old when I first came up with the idea of writing this memoir, and twenty-eight when I actually started to put that idea into action. I will be in my thirties by the time it is published.

I would like to believe that I, Kechi, am the sort of person who is actively trying to live her life by Robert Kennedy's wise words.

For years, I have been told by many that my story is inspiring. While it brings me great joy to hear this, all I have really done, and all I try to do each day, is to simply live my life. I do not think I have done anything particularly fantastic or worthy of high praise. So, I have decided to tell my story in its entirety, to hopefully give you, dear readers, the chance to decide for yourself what to make of it.

I was born into an average, middle-class family in Lagos, Nigeria, on October 29, 1989. I was the cutest baby. I'm not even bragging; I've seen the pictures. I was adorable.

Growing up, my family didn't have a lot, but I still remember being an absolutely happy and cheerful child. I was an only child for ten years, and my mom and dad were, and still are, fantastic. They fought and made up a lot, but I didn't mind that so much because it made them human in my eyes, real people. Because of them, I knew from early on that a marriage wasn't all good times, but they never once made me feel like they didn't love and care for each other. Together, they managed to find the fine balance between spoiling and disciplining me, and they did their best to make my childhood wonderful and fun. I believe they succeeded, because the good memories by far eclipse the bad.

My dad's great and I love him dearly. I'm a lot like him in many ways: super relaxed about most things and flexible, going with the flow and not taking life too seriously. My mom is the parent I grew more attached to. I remember relatives and other adults would joke around and say that I was her handbag, seeing as she carried me almost everywhere with her. When I was in elementary school, she would actually pull me from school in the middle of classes to accompany her on some trip. I loved that.

My little sister was born when I was ten, right before I started high school.¹ I was so thrilled to have a sibling, and considering the significant age difference, I had a feeling I was going to be something of a second mom to her.

I spent the majority of my childhood and teenage years with my cousins from both sides of the family, so a giant portion of my fond memories involve my extended family as well.

Then came high school, a boarding school system. Boarding school gave me my first taste of independence—within a controlled environment, of course. It took a while to adapt to this new type of life. My boarding high school, Loyola Jesuit College, was a mini world to us students, and it would be my world for the next six years.

1. In Nigeria, middle school, junior high, and high school are grouped together as high school.

I enjoyed my time at LJC. I had my first crush, my first boyfriend (not necessarily in that order), my first bad grade, and my first kiss all within the four walls of that huge campus. Most importantly, I made many lifelong friends during those six precious years and formed relationships without which I would not be where I am today.

I give this extensive backstory to emphasize how exceptionally normal my life was up until the day of my accident. Also, everything I have discussed so far plays a very critical role in what came after.

I was a high school senior at sixteen—Nigerian kids tend to start school early—and by then, I had been on multiple airplanes. Too many to count. For many in Nigeria, flying was a necessary part of life growing up. I've always loved flying. I still do. More precisely, I'm awed by the concept of it.

I was sixteen years old when the plane crash happened.

Sixteen years old when I was brutally ripped out of a comfortable reality with an admittedly predictable future and thrust into a brand-new one where not even the next hour was guaranteed.

Sixteen years old when my life went from choosing among multiple universities in the UK to wavering between pain, grief, and the incessant itching borne from third-degree burn injuries.

I do not share this story to garner pity. Rather, I write this because as painful and difficult as many parts of my journey have been, it was those very parts that have shaped the core elements of my identity today. The ways in which I, a burn survivor, chose to deal with physical and emotional pain borne from my severe injuries, grief and depression borne from loss, judgment from the world, and many other experiences that all human beings undoubtedly face in varying degrees. These experiences redefined me—body, mind, and soul. It is this redefinition that I feel compelled to share with you, readers, in the hopes that my words will serve as a guide to at least one person who encounters my story.

So here we go.

Prologue

I feel so much pressure, please make the pressure stop! My fingers feel like they're about to explode!

I drifted in and out of consciousness on the gurney, pain exploding through my body in enormous bolts, my scorched and swollen flesh oozing a steady stream of something that resembled neither sweat nor blood. My arms were swollen to more than twice their normal size. My flesh was charred, eaten away by something I did not understand at the moment. This couldn't be me. This couldn't be my own body betraying me this way, trapping me in this prison of pain.

I screamed and screamed again.

Darkness came and went, and I dived for it whenever it appeared, not caring if it meant death instead of unconsciousness. *Anything but this. Just . . . no more pain, please. No more pain. No more of this horrible pressure.*

But there was more of both. An overwhelming combination I would have never thought possible. It was so consuming that in those seconds and minutes and hours, it scorched my mind hollow, where nothing existed but its fury. Did I have a name? I didn't know and didn't care. Was someone yelling in the distance, telling me to try to stay still? It didn't matter. I'd been thrown into a propane-fueled oven and left to burn until I exploded.

Darkness came again. Then voices I did not recognize and occasional flashes of understanding that were like the setting sun, blinding me with their radiance but disappearing before I could get more than a glimpse of what they were trying to show me. I was lost and alone, unable to find myself.

Then the blackness came for good.

And I welcomed it.



Eyes slowly open to a reality I didn't recognize. A blitzkrieg of voices, noises.

I could barely move. Every inch of my body was stiff and numb, as if someone had pumped it with a gallon of Novocain before drilling into my bones.

Where was I? A hospital. But why? Had something terrible happened?

My head was foggy, as was my memory.

How long had I been gone? Hours? Days? *Weeks*? And where had I been?

Somewhere fantastic.

Away from this world.

But now I was back, in this rigid shell of a body.

Then an unfamiliar voice called my name: "Kechi? Kechi, can you hear me?"

Kechi. That's me. I peered at the figure in the corner. Then I squinted. Everything in the room seemed part of everything else, the walls and the bed and the woman calling my name. I squeezed my eyes closed and opened them again. And at last I could make out a nurse's face.

"Nod for yes and shake your head for no," she said.

I nodded.

"That's good. Okay, and do you know this woman? Do you recognize her face?"

I squeezed my eyes closed then opened them once more, and another figure leaned forward, close to my face. And even though

she was wearing a face mask that covered everything but her eyes, even through my filmy gaze, I knew who she was before she spoke.

“Kechi, love? My darling, can you see me? It’s Mommy.”

I nodded as tears began to fill my eyes. My heart pounded with joy and relief.

My skin was shriveled and black and still oozing, but everything was going to be all right.

My mother was there, and that’s all that mattered.

“Do you know where you are?” the nurse asked.

I nodded.

“Do you know what happened?”

Again, I nodded. Somehow, I remembered that I was in a hospital called Milpark in Johannesburg. I must have heard of it while I was in the coma. I’d seen TV shows where people wake from a coma in violent states, because they are confused and scared. But while I was in my coma, God had been working through my mother to prepare me for what was to come.

“Are you in any pain?” the nurse asked.

I shook my head.

The morphine in my system had made my body numb for the time being. And it would continue to do so for the immediate future. But I would know pain again. In the months and years to follow, I would learn the true definition of suffering.

Chapter One

The Day

DECEMBER 10, 2005

The dormitory bell rang loudly on the Saturday that would change my life forever.

I got up from bed, grabbed my towel and toilet bag, and headed wearily for the dorm's public showers. I was not alone, of course. Several other students and friends who would be traveling the same route as me that day were also making their way to the bathroom, all of us blearily blinking sleep away as we shuffled like sheep in the narrow hallway.

It was the last day of the 2005 fall semester at Loyola Jesuit College, Abuja, Nigeria, the day we would all be heading home for the Christmas holidays. The last exams for the semester had ended on Tuesday, and the remainder of the week had been used to clean up the classrooms, hang out with friends, and pack up for the holidays. We would all be back on campus in less than three weeks. But it didn't matter; those last few days right before we headed home were always so much fun, not only because they were exam-free but also because we got to hang out with each other without the usual pressures of constant studying and strict schedules to keep to.

Freshly showered, I got dressed in my red checkered school uniform. I threw the remainder of my things into my open suitcase, including my self-written novel to show my mom when I got home, then headed out of the dorm toward the dining hall, luggage in tow.

Toke Badru, one of my closest friends and favorite travel companions, walked next to me, offering nothing but her silent company as we entered the dining hall and sat down for an early breakfast. I'm not a morning person so it wasn't unusual that I was a bit standoffish, but seeing as Toke and I were close, perhaps she could sense that the reason for my silence went beyond that.

"How do you manage to look so good in this stupid uniform?" she said, pulling at the waist of my dress.

I chuckled a little and batted her hand away. "You're an idiot."

"I'm just saying." She shrugged her dainty shoulders. "If not for my butt, I'd be a shapeless piece of string in this dumb dress."

I couldn't help but chuckle again, and she laughed her adorable laugh. I loved her sense of humor.

As I thought, she'd sensed something was on my mind but didn't want to pry. She was trying to cheer me up instead. Typical of her, really.

"Are you okay though?" The concern in her voice was palpable. "You're never this quiet, Kechi."

True. I'm not a quiet person, especially not on the last day of school, a day that every boarding school student looks forward to more than any other kind of secondary school student. After three long months away from home, in a few hours we'd be with our families, eating home-cooked food, sleeping in much more comfortable beds. Normally I'd be ecstatic and chattering nonstop.

But I was not going home under normal circumstances that day.

Before I could respond to her, the teacher on duty suddenly spoke. "Okay everyone," he said loudly, "as I call out your names, come up to get your ticket."

Later, we all stepped outside and started loading our luggage on the school buses that would be taking us to the airport.

I said goodbye to friends who had woken up early just to see

us off: Womiye Ojo, Jude Igboanugo (Womiye’s boyfriend at the time and also my good friend), and even Atuora Erokoro, who I usually said goodbye to in the dorms. They, like many others, were students who either lived right there in Abuja or had later flights and thus didn’t need to be up as early as we did.

We all knew we would see each other again in less than a month—some of us maybe even during the course of the Christmas holidays—so there wasn’t a lot of hugging. We never really said things like “have a safe flight” to one another. Obviously, everyone would get to their homes safely, not because plane crashes were rare in Nigeria—they unfortunately weren’t—but because at sixteen, death is typically nothing but an abstract concept.

I learned a very big lesson that day: appreciate every single moment like it’s your last. Hug your friends, wish them well. Tell loved ones you love them while you can.

I got on one of the buses and made my way to the first available window seat I spotted (my consistent preference on any mode of transport). Soon enough, the buses drove out of the LJC campus in single file.

I looked back, like I always did, to watch the school gates shut.

It always brought a smile to my face to see those gates close behind my bus with me on the outside. I was finally free, if only for a few short weeks.

Who could’ve known that the next time I’d set eyes on those gates would be at a reunion a decade later?



The airport terminal was packed. Girls in dresses, girls in uniforms, boys in suits, boys in flannel shirts. Many people in African print clothing. Folks in T-shirts and jeans scattered in. It was loud too. Way too loud. People shouted all over the place, as though haggling for ticket prices, which weren’t exactly negotiable.

My schoolmates and I shuffled after our teacher in one large group of sixty-one. We were easily identifiable in our red, blue, green, and yellow checkered uniforms. We headed to the lounge

area, only to discover our flight had been delayed. Typical. The students whose buses had left campus earlier than ours were still here as well, waiting for their own Lagos-bound flight.

We all filed into the lounge and immediately spread out. Our teacher disappeared, but I'd occasionally spot him scanning the room, most likely doing a head count. God forbid any of us go missing on his watch.

Toke and I found a couple seats together and sat, setting our backpacks down on the ground next to us.

My mood had improved significantly since leaving campus. It was only when I got a chance to step outside the confines of LJC that I was reminded just how much pressure that environment put on me, even more so now that I was in my final year.

"God, every single time," Toke grumbled. She was referring to the flight delay. "We might as well go home by bus!"

I laughed at her exaggeration. A three-hour flight delay followed by a two-and-a-half-hour flight didn't even come close to the twelve hours it would take to get home from school by bus.

Still, I understood her frustration. "It's so messed up that we spend pretty much one whole day traveling," I said. "Christmas holidays are already so short."

"I know! And this one won't even be fun 'cause I'll be studying throughout."

"Same here."

As seniors, the only things on our mind were the SATs, the WAEC¹, and of course, college applications.

"Are you gonna apply to any of the schools we saw at the college fair?" I asked Toke. Earlier that semester, the entire senior class had been taken into the city to attend a college fair that hosted more than twenty different foreign colleges.

"Yeah, mostly the UK ones," she replied.

"Me too. I really liked London School of Economics." I sighed,

1. The WAEC is a national exit exam that all students graduating from Nigerian high schools must take in order to qualify for entry into Nigerian colleges.

trying not to fall back into the slump I'd barely just come out of. That college fair had been the beginning of all my worries. I had no business aiming for a school of that caliber. I'd gotten a chance to look at LSE's academic requirements, and my grades were definitely not up to par.

"Will you talk about what's bothering you now?" Toke asked gently.

I looked at her patient expression and decided I would this time. But where to even begin? So much was on my mind, so many anxieties to unpack . . . "I just feel like my whole future depends on my SAT scores," I told her.

Toke nodded in understanding. "I know what you mean. It's so scary. It's the only way to get into schools outside Nigeria. And there's this vibe, like, if you don't get accepted into a college outside Nigeria—"

"You're a failure," I said, finishing the sentence.

"Exactly!" Toke made a sound of disgust. "What *is* that? I hate that mentality, like you're not 'cool' if you don't study abroad."

I hated that mentality too, so much. I hated myself more for buying into it.

Relief suddenly washed over me. "Oh my God, it feels so good to finally say all this stuff out loud!" I exclaimed.

"I know, right?" Toke said with a small laugh. "No one likes talking about grades, *sha*."²

She was right. It wasn't normal, even between close friends, to talk about academic grievances in depth, but I wished it was. It felt good to voice these thoughts to someone who not only understood but could also relate.

"But Kechi," Toke continued, "schools look at everything, not just SATs."

"I know, that's the problem." I shook my head. "My grades are nothing to write home about."

"What about me?"

2. *Sha* is a Nigerian expression for "anyway" or "though," depending on context.

“No, but you’ve been improving since last year, Toke. Steadily. The schools you apply to will take note of the improvement. They like that kind of thing, like when a student shows progress. Me, I’m just so . . . average. My grades are not the kind that a school like LSE would look twice at.”

“Calm down, Kechi, it’s not that bad *jor*.”³

“I swear it actually is. Math alone is so horrible.” I shook my head again. “My parents spent so much money, sacrificed so much to put me through this expensive secondary school, and for what? I’m such an average student. There’re a few semesters where I excelled, but for the rest, I just never bothered applying myself more than I needed to in order to pass from one year into the next.” I laughed self-deprecatingly. Now I was paying the price for doing the barest minimum.

“Kechi . . .” Toke leaned over and grabbed my hand. “Listen, we’ll get home and study like crazy. We’ll do our best with the time we have. I mean, what else is there to do?”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, huffing out a breath. “My mom is ready for me. She said she hired an SAT coach for me.”

“You’re not even home yet and they’ve already gotten you a lesson teacher?” Toke let go of my hand to pat my back in pity, making me laugh. “I hope they let you eat and sleep at least.” She laughed with me.

“At this point, who knows,” I said, still chuckling.

I felt so much better again. Toke had made me feel better. She didn’t pressure me into talking, but in the natural way she had about her, she’d made it easy to open up about the stuff that had been bothering me pretty much all semester. And it turned out we were worrying about the same things.

“LSE, so you’re thinking of doing economics?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“But what about your writing?” she asked. “You have a whole book. That’s, like, a big deal.”

3. *Jor* is the Nigerian slang equivalent of “oh please.”

Toke was right. I did love writing. So much so that I actually spent more of my time in school writing fiction than studying (sorry, Mom and Dad). Plus, my book got pretty popular among my peers.

“Yeah, but it’s not like I can say I want to study writing in college. Economics is more practical.” It certainly was the most conventional of all my interests, which, to me, made it the most suitable college major.

“I get you,” Toke said. “Getting paid to dance would be so amazing.” Her tone was wistful.

It really sucked that we both didn’t feel like we could study what we were truly passionate about in college. Toke loved to dance, and she was good at it. She had charisma on stage, and she was so sassy with her moves. She’d be a great dancer if she chose to pursue that path. But I guess, like me, she felt she had to stick to something more societally acceptable.

Toke and I kept *gisting*⁴, and there was lots of laughter and good-natured jabs, the kind only people who’ve been friends for years could throw at one another.

And Toke and I were nothing if not great friends.

“Is your brother gonna be picking you up from the airport?” I asked her.

“Yeah, why?”

“I’m just wondering.” I shrugged innocently, humor dancing in my eyes.

Toke eyed me suspiciously. “Mm-hmm, and why’re you asking?”

I laughed hard at her protective tone. “Is it now a crime to want to say hi to your brother?”

“Did I say it was a crime?”

“It’s not my fault he’s so fine.”

“Ew, stop!”

I laughed again. It was so easy to tease her when it came to her big brother.

4. *Gisting* is Nigerian slang for conversing with a friend.

At some point the Lagos-bound students finally left. Meanwhile, Toke laid her head across my lap and tried to sleep a little, but she spent more time slipping and sliding on the perforated metal surface of the awkward lounge seats. It was hilarious.

Some time passed and she got up to use the restroom. As she stretched, she glanced at the Nora Roberts book in my hand and huffed out a laugh.

“You and this Nora Roberts.”

“What?” I protested. “She’s an awesome writer!”

“Whatever.” Toke turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Another hour passed, but it seemed like only minutes as I got lost in the pages of *Homeport*. Toke returned with snacks to share, everything from meat pies to sodas to *chin chin*⁵ and candy bars.

Then, at last, the arrival of our aircraft was announced over the speakers, and a collective groan of relief and exhaustion echoed all around the lounge. I put my book and foodstuff into my backpack and stood up to stretch, already so exhausted. My body ached from sitting for so long. Problem was, the plane seats weren’t going to be any more comfortable than these god-awful lounge seats.

A uniformed woman opened the terminal gate, and the sound of the planes’ engines echoed into the lounge.

I glanced at our aircraft through the windows. SOSOLISO AIRLINES was written in bold blue-and-red lettering across its huge, shiny body.

Home. It represented home. Soon I’d be hugging my mom and sleeping in my own bed.

Or so I thought.

I walked with Toke to join the already forming line of fellow passengers.

“I’m so tired of sitting,” Toke mumbled in front of me, and I groaned, sharing her sentiments.

5. *Chin chin* is a beloved Nigerian snack made from fried pieces of sweetened dough.

“At least it’s a short flight,” I said exhaustedly, rolling my stiff neck and trying to get the kinks out.

Toke rolled her eyes. “Since when is two hours short, Kechi?”

I huffed out a laugh. She was right, it wasn’t. But it was better for me to think that it was, for the sake of my sanity. I just prayed I’d sleep for most of it.

It was finally my turn in line. I handed my ticket to the uniformed woman standing at the gate’s border, who scanned it briefly before handing it back to me. I walked through the gate and was immediately assaulted by the excessive heat from the unrelenting Abuja sun.

My seat was close to the front of the aircraft, one of the first aisle seats in coach. *Why didn’t Mom book me a window seat like usual?* I thought. *I’m definitely gonna complain when I see her. After hugging her.*

Another big lesson I learned from that day: God moves as He pleases, and He doesn’t make mistakes.

Toke sat in the aisle seat next to mine, and we continued talking as the plane taxied, then picked up speed on the runway.

Then we were in the air.

This hour-and-twenty-minute-long flight had become a norm in my life by that time. A routine journey I made at least six times a year, for three consecutive years. There was absolutely nothing strange about that particular flight, nothing odd that had happened prior to boarding the plane that could possibly have hinted at what was about to happen while we were in the air. The flight itself was more or less normal. Right before things spiraled into chaos, nothing happened that would cause any passenger aboard to believe his or her life was in any danger.

I slept a little, rousing when the descent started. And I could always tell when that part of the flight began because it typically caused a lurching sensation in my stomach that left me feeling slightly nauseous.

I strained to see what I could through the window without imposing on my seat neighbor, but all I could see was the deep, dull

gray of the skies. The pilot soon announced that we would be arriving at Port Harcourt Airport in about fifteen or twenty minutes.

Then the turbulence started.

At first it was nothing of note, just the usual jerking that happens when planes descend. But then it started to get increasingly forceful. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat because that kind of persistent, almost exaggerated shaking was definitely new. But even then, my mind hadn't gone to the worst possible scenario. Maybe it was just a particularly windy day in PH.⁶

Not a big deal.

Still the turbulence continued.

Tension started to grow in the air, but no one uttered a single word. No one wanted to be the first to admit out loud what we were all thinking.

The cabin lights flickered. The plane creaked and groaned. The jerking continued, then worsened, and tension was swiftly replaced by a thick, dark sense of foreboding.

This was the *exact* moment when *every single person* on board that aircraft realized, *Ab. Something is wrong with this plane.*

Then suddenly, from the back of the cabin, a lady screamed, "IS THIS PLANE TRYING TO LAND?"

Utter chaos.

Screams of terror.

"Jesus! Jesus! Blood of Jesus!"

"What is happening?! Oh God, what is happening?"

Frozen in my seat, everything slowed down around me. I was in a state of complete shock and awe. No one boards a plane consciously preparing for the worst to happen, even in a country like Nigeria where plane crashes were unfortunately not as rare as they should be. I had no idea what my thought process should be in that moment. I just stared at the back of the seat in front of me. I couldn't register the fact that this was my reality. I felt removed from the situation, as though I were watching it happen

6. PH is the local acronym for Port Harcourt.

in third person. In retrospect, I suspect that was the definition of an out-of-body experience.

Is this for real? Is this actually happening? What is happening?

I started remembering random stuff for no reason.

Singing with my best friend Womiye Ojo during our last school trip with the HIV Awareness club.

Traveling by bus with my entire family three summers ago from Lagos to Abuja.

Singing Christmas carols on campus with the entire school during the candlelight service in the campus chapel just the night before . . . and what about my family? All the great times we'd had together? All the wonderful times that were no longer to be?

What did I even say to them that last time we spoke?

Sometime in the future, assuming I survived whatever this was, I would look back on this very day as the last day of my "normal" life. And I'd spent most of it worrying about grades.

What did grades matter now that everything was ending?

How would my mom survive without me?

It was like my brain was trying to focus on anything but the reality that I was currently suspended midair, trapped inside a crumbling airplane.

The plane just kept lurching, shaking, jerking up and down—all three hundred tons of metal reduced to a flimsy rattling box, at the mercy of natural forces that reigned outside. I sometimes wonder how it must have looked from the outside. Was the wind really tossing it left and right as it came down? Or did it just take a nosedive straight for the ground? It's a disturbing image either way.

I don't remember if any oxygen masks dropped down from the ceiling or if there were any other announcements over the plane intercom. I turned my head sideways and looked at Toke. Her eyes were two wide orbs of confusion.

I reached out as if in a trance and took her hand in mine.

Her fingers were ice-cold and stiffened immediately at my touch. Next instant, they were clamped around mine.

“What’s happening? What should we do?” she asked, her grip tightening in desperation.

“I don’t know.” My voice sounded so far away to my ears, so foreign. “Maybe we should pray.”

Those were the last words we ever said to each other.

One second, I was holding Toke’s hand, then a loud, scraping, metallic sound filled the cabin, frying my brain. My whole body lurched forward as the world around me exploded into nothingness.

There was screaming.

So much screaming.

And then . . .

Darkness.