

PART ONE**CHAPTER ONE****How it All Began**

It was about 2:30pm on a bright, sunny afternoon on August 13, 1999. The passengers on board flight 740 had just fastened their seat belts and the plane was about to take off from Barboura City International Airport in Boluaké, Central Africa. One passenger seemed in no haste to travel, but rather determined to settle scores with a flight attendant.

"This is unbelievable! Unbelievable! Who are you to prevent me from getting on this plane ? You're lucky that I happen to be in a good mood today."

The man looked at his sparkling silver watch and adjusted the red tie he was wearing with a white shirt, dark brown suit and a pair of shiny black shoes. Each of them seemed to blend in smoothly with his dark complexion.

"Once more I am deeply sorry," the flight attendant responded, shaken. "The plane will soon be taking off. We really can't let people walk around

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right now. All passengers must return to their seats."

He looked at her from head to toe and then shook his head.

The last thing I remember hearing him say was that he had a PhD dissertation to present in two weeks and that the last thing he wanted to do was argue with anyone. Fuming, he walked slowly toward his seat, pulling along a cart filled with huge text books. The passengers murmured.

The Boeing 767 increased its speed and I kept looking through my side window to refrain from making eye contact with the frail-looking, balding white male who had taken position next to me on seat 26B. Slouching forward on his seat, his eyes bulged out and were so wide open that they almost looked as if they would pop out. And his face looked pale and dry. I didn't recall him responding when one of the flight attendants walked by saying: "Hello sir, how are you doing?" and he seemed so oblivious to everything that occurred within the plane. He didn't turn. He didn't move. He didn't utter a word...let alone cough. He just

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sat there slouching forward with his eyes bulging out.

How great therefore was my surprise— and even more so my fear— when the plane slowly began taking off and this fellow's right hand suddenly trembled as he raised it up feebly toward me. That was the first time I looked at him directly, because it seemed as if he were aiming for my neck. It was then that I realized he was trying to fasten his seat belt. Whew! How relieved I felt when he did. But then I looked at him afterward with the corner of my eye and there he was again...slouching back to his original position.

The silence that ensued was broken a few minutes later:

"Mesdames et Messieurs, good afternoon. I'm Alphonse Jean-Baptiste, your pilot on this flight. Welcome onboard flight 740 from Barbours City to Philadelphia, United States of America. We'll make a brief stop in Paris and we estimate this flight to take at least eight hours and a half. Enjoy your flight and 'merci' for choosing Air La Colombe."

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Then the man sitting next to me suddenly began shivering. His right arm and shoulder shook uncontrollably and he quickly rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to scratch himself with a fierceness that I couldn't describe in words. Obviously, something was itching him— although I had no clue what it was— or why. He slouched forward even more, bending his back with both hands placed upon his shoulders as if he were suffering from a high fever. Turning around, I realized that the passengers behind us were all focusing on the area where we sat— some whispering to each other, others simply looking on with an air of speechlessness, probably wondering what the heck was going on.

"Are you all right, sir?" asked a flight attendant, darting to the scene.

The bulging eyes and the pale-looking, powdery white face. Yep, I noticed the sudden change in her facial expression when the flight attendant saw them.

"H-h-h-h-o-t-t-c-c-o-o-f-f-e-e," he stuttered, shaking.

Wow. So he could actually speak.

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"I'll get that for you in a minute sir, hold on," the flight attendant responded.

After the passenger had drunk his coffee, the idea of engaging him in conversation had briefly crossed my mind. But the thought of looking into his eyes was enough of a deterrent. Well, at least not until he pulled his shirt up toward his nostrils, blew his nose, cleared his throat and then spat on the floor in between our seats.

"You spat in the direction of my seat sir," I said.

"S-s-s-s-o-o-o-o-o-o-o?"

"Why didn't you go to the lavatory if you felt you needed to do that?"

Powdery face-if I may call him so, stared at me without saying a word, and this time his eyes seemed to look even bigger. His right shoulder suddenly began to tremble. What was I going to do? I had to quickly think of something that could make this fellow stop staring at me. It seemed as if he was prepared to do that until we got to our final destination and that would have made my entire

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journey uncomfortable. I had a great idea. I stopped looking at him, and then pressed my seat button so that it inclined a little bit backward. I lifted my head up as if I were looking at the sky and spread out my hands, shouting as loudly as I could:

"Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo! Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo!!"

The row of passengers seated in front of me as well as to my right, looked at me in utter disbelief.

I shouted again...louder.

"Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo! Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo!"

Powdery Face blushed. He frowned. It was then that I realized he had somehow managed to grab a newspaper from behind the seat in front of him. How in the world he was going to be composed enough to hold it with both hands...I had no clue. But this time around he wasn't the only one looking at me- everyone in the section where we sat was zooming in on us. I didn't care, I couldn't handle sitting next to that man for the next several hours.

With shivering and unstable hands, he squeezed the newspaper and tossed it to the ground, squashing it

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with his shoe. He drew close to me, and yelled furiously in my face:

"S-s-s-s-h-h-h-u-u-t-u-u-u-p-pp! L-u-u-n-n-a-a-t-ti-ic!"

"Spread your hands sir," I said.

"W-w-w-w-h-h-h-a-a-t-t-h-h-e-hell?" he responded, startled, with his mouth wide open.

"I said spread your hands. If we call on Zambo, the village ancestor in charge of travel, he will ensure that this plane gets to its destination safely."

Two angry-looking male and female flight attendants stopped at our seats. When the male flight attendant looked at me I saw that he was fuming with anger, for not only was he frowning, but his face looked red hot.

"Let me respectfully warn you two gentlemen," he emphasized with a deep breath, as if releasing fireballs of anger that had been mounting up inside of him- "unruly behaviour will not be tolerated on this flight. If this continues, you both shall be kicked off this plane and placed in police custody at the nearest airport. Have I made myself clear?"

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Powdery Face looked at me and then stuttering, asked if he could change his seat.

"I'm sorry Monsieur, but all our seats are currently filled," the female flight attendant responded.

With an air of resignation, the man sitting next to me bent his head and covered his face with both hands, speechless. This time the thought of turning around to look at me didn't even seem to cross his mind. I thought the drama had finally come to an end until the female flight attendant stretched her neck sideways and asked me:

"And you sir, what's your problem?"

A sense of panic got hold of me. I realized this had potential to become more serious than I thought. And even if I argued that Powdery Face was the reason for it all, the flight attendants would probably have felt more comfortable making me their scapegoat to avoid any further interaction with the strange fellow sitting beside me. I had to think of an explanation that would not only have been persuasive, but could

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have also helped defuse the situation. Bingo! I had a perfect idea.

"This is the first time I've had to travel on such an instrument that transports people high up in the sky at such a terrible speed," I pretended, emphatically. "How can you expect me to react normally when being taken so far away from my village on...on this kind of thing?"

The flight attendants looked at each other and I could see from their faces that they were trying so hard not to burst out laughing. Even Powdery Face turned around and looked at me for the first time in a while with a slight smile on his face, which enabled me to discover that he had lost a few of his front teeth.

"Don't be nervous, sir. You and your fellow passengers are in good hands. Our pilot and the entire crew have several years of experience. We want you to feel comfortable," said the male flight attendant, who in a suddenly soft-spoken tone, now seemed remarkably harmless.

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How shocking it was when his counterpart asked if she could get me some juice- as if drinking anything would have in reality helped make a person less nervous if he or she were travelling on a plane for their first time.

Proceeding with my strategy, I didn't respond for several seconds but rather sat still with my eyes and mouth wide open, spreading out both hands and looking up toward the luggage compartment.

"Orange...juice," I answered, as if having given it some thought.

The female flight attendant took a deep, audible breath of relief while her partner shook his head and said:

"We'll get that for you, sir." Then he added, "By the way, our apologies. We realize we didn't introduce ourselves to you both. I'm Christophe and this is Nadia."

After that, there was zero interaction between Powdery Face and me. He grabbed a set of headphones from the seat in front of him, put them on and pressed a button so that his seat inclined backward.

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He looked at me one last time, shook his head, crossed his feet and closed his eyes.

The following morning, our plane landed at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport. I woke up to the sight of flight attendants making rounds while picking up trays of leftover food. Wait a minute. Had I fallen into such a deep sleep that I didn't hear anyone asking me if I wanted a croissant for breakfast? But then I looked down and saw that my tray was empty, hence I must have eaten before I dozed off. Getting up hastily from his seat and grabbing a bag from the luggage compartment with his unstable right hand, Powdery Face scurried out of the plane without looking behind him.

"Excuse me, how long is the flight from Paris to Philadelphia?" I asked Nadia, who happened to walk by.

"Another nine to ten hours," she responded.

"My goodness! I would like to think Zambo has other things to do besides sitting around listening to me screaming his name for another nine hours!"

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"Please don't start, sir."

More passengers came in and took their seats. Several minutes later, the plane took off from Charles de Gaulle Airport.

We arrived at Philadelphia International Airport a few hours after midday (US time). As the plane drew closer to the runway area, the pilot, Alphonse Jean-Baptiste, said:

"Mesdames et Messieurs, we have begun our descent toward Philadelphia International Airport. Please remain seated and keep your seatbelts fastened. We hope you had a great flight and that you won't hesitate to fly with Air La Colombe next time."

The passengers fastened their seatbelts and my heart beat with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty as I looked through my window seat. A journey that started to seem endless had now come to an end. The screeching sound of the landing plane was almost drowned in a sea of applause.

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Moments later, at the interior of the airport, I waited in line behind several travelers to have my passport examined by Philadelphia immigration and customs officers dressed in black trousers, short-sleeved white shirts and golden pins attached to their shirt pockets. One of them stood in front of us and spoke from a microphone:

"All travelers coming in from Europe are immediately advised to take off their shoes. You may not wear your shoes until you reach the exterior of the airport. Thank you."

The travelers grumbled and murmured. Young and old, tall and short, slender and heavy-set, I saw people taking off their shoes, holding them in one hand and pulling their luggage with the other.

I tapped the gentleman standing in front of me on the shoulder to ask him why travelers coming in from certain parts of the world were being told to take off their shoes. From the way he spoke, he sounded like an English or Irish man:

"What world you live in, boy? These clowns think we might be carrying Mad Cow Disease in our shoes!"

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I then recalled how frequently I came across articles in some of my home country's local newspapers and watched reports on local TV stations about beef being banned from the United Kingdom on a consistent basis. But what did that have to do with anyone's shoes? Were the customs agents implying that anyone who had walked on European soil was potentially bringing Mad Cow Disease into Philadelphia or more specifically, into the United States?

"Your travel records state that you were on a transit flight from Paris to Philadelphia. Why didn't you take off your shoes?" asked the customs agent who examined my passport.

"I stayed within the plane throughout my flight, sir. I don't understand why you are asking me to take off my shoes," I explained.

"I don't care. Take off your shoes."

His unwillingness to consider my explanation bothered me.

"I said I didn't leave the plane, sir. Therefore with all due respect, I refuse to take off my shoes."

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"Listen, don't waste my time! I got bigger fish to fry, you got me? You wanna come into my country? You play by my rules! Got it?"

People around us had now begun noticing what was going on, so I thought it was best for me to stay out of trouble. I reluctantly took off my shoes and another customs agent examined the contents of my suitcase and pulled out two plastic packets of powdery spices that were tucked underneath my clothes. He held them up with both hands.

"What are these?"

"They are traditional spices from my country. The one in your left hand is called Egusi; the one on your right is called Njangsang."

The customs agent placed the spices on a wooden table and tore them up slightly with a pocket knife;

"Hum...hum...hum...Igwasan...njinseng..." he said, sniffing them.

"No, no, no. I said Egusi and Njangsang."

He paused for a minute, looking at me while placing both hands on his waist as if overwhelmed by the names of the spices.

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"Yeah, right. Who gives a damn anyway?" he continued.

The customs agent went through my suitcase again and pulled out something wrapped in brown paper that had been sealed with tape. He cut the tape off with his knife and opened up the brown paper.

"And what the hell," he said, holding out its contents before me, "is this?" "Some kinda beef jerky or something?"

"Yes. We call it soya."

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't let you bring that into the United States."

He returned the spices to me and confiscated the beef jerky. After that he retreated into a nearby office with a glass window, and a different customs agent came forward and proceeded with the inspection process.

I closed my suitcase and headed toward the exterior of the airport. How shocked I was to look through the glass window and notice the previous customs agent who had examined my personal belongings sitting comfortably and eating the beef jerky he had seized

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from me. On my way out of the control perimeter, I knocked on the glass window and put my face close to it, so that our eyes met with each other. The agent trembled and with my eyes wide open, I shouted:

"Mad Cow Disease! Mad Cow Disease!"

The agent spat out the beef jerky.

Outside the airport, I looked with much curiosity at the cars racing down the highway at incredible speed. I wasn't sure who could help me get to my destination, but I noticed there were at least three yellow cars parked at the front. I took out the little white sheet of paper that was inside my pocket and which read: "Rodeoville University." Just then, a short black male with a thick beard wearing a long, brown garment approached me. He had on a pair of low white shoes and a blue, oval-shaped hat over his head. He smiled but I was a bit shaken upon noticing that each of his front teeth were a mixture of sparkling silver and gold and that they shone underneath the rays of the sun.

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