

THE STREET HUSTLER



MARKANTHONY NZE

The Street Hustler

Book 1

MarkAnthony Nze

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Dedication

Dedicated to people of goodwill all over the world who are genuinely seeking a positive change for the betterment of their societies against all odds.

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Chapter 1

Parents

Obinna sat in the teacher's lounge, looking around at the hustle and bustle of the school. People were going this way and that, talking to each other, smiling, laughing, having a good time. Teachers scurried to the next class, their arms full of papers and other gimmicks that they had to share in the class. They were all hard-working people. Just like Obinna, they could have made something of themselves elsewhere. They could have been wealthy and famous, but they chose to work in the education sector because they wanted to do something worthwhile with their lives.

All around him, the sound of people hustling to their places of work surrounded him like a thick cloud of smoke, and Obinna felt glad to be a part of these people. Hard-working and

just, these people inspired him to be the best version of himself. In the past, Obinna had found it strange how a community could change and alter one's perception like this, but unlike his brothers, he welcomed the gentle, flinching change.

Like all the people that walked through and past him, brushing their bodies against his, Obinna felt a certain sense of companionship. Obinna was exactly the same way, an extension of the many limbs that made up his community. He had landed back in his village, around 500 acres of it. His village was as beautiful as it always was; in some ways, it unexpectedly beautiful. Obinna knew that every person who visited his village left with an elated feeling of bliss blossoming within them. They did not know what had caused the sudden fluttering of hope in their hearts and lovely ease in their dispositions, but they welcomed the pleasant change. Obinna, too, would bask in the air of loveliness, warmth, and hard work that surrounded him and strived himself, in small ways, to become a kind human

being.

So far, Obinna had worked on it hard enough to become a successful person, but in his mind, there was always the need to do something for the children of Africa. He wanted them to have a life that he himself couldn't. It was a life of pleasure, a life filled with a child's joys. This longing within him had caused him to choose a career in education, and it was why he had chosen to become a high school teacher. The long road he had embarked upon to get his degree had been long and difficult, but after striving so long, Obinna had secured in his mission and was doing what he loved the most. And now, here he was, sitting in the teacher's lounge, completely satisfied with himself and his life. He was marking papers, and he smiled at the cute little girl as she passed him by, flashing him a beautiful smile in return.

Obinna used to live in the village of Ivy Town, off the Black Coast in Africa. But that had been years ago. Now, he lived in the city. He did not remember much of his life in the

village where he spent his childhood, but he did not care for the past. His life was now in the city, and to the city, his heart belonged. It was in the city where Obinna had chosen to make his home, and it was a decision he respected greatly. He was not an only child. He had two brothers who he doted on. They were his life and soul, and he would do practically anything for his brothers. Obinna had raised them after their father had passed away, and ever since then, the fatherly bond that he had with them had only deepened and blossomed into a monumental love. On the other hand, their mother was ill and couldn't even look after herself, let alone the boys, which is why Obinna had to step up to the task in their childhood.

Obinna was the eldest of them all and stepped into his father's shoes and looked after them. He had tried his best to ensure that they got a good education, but neither Kalu nor Obumneme were inclined to do so. It was not as though Obinna had not tried enough with them; he had tried every possible way

that he knew of to bring his brothers close to studies, but they were just as unfazed as ever. Kalu and Obum would rather play around in the sand instead of listening to their brother tell them great fictional stories. As time elapsed, and Obinna found no use forcing education on his brother, he just let them be. Obinna focused more on his brotherly duties as they grew up since he wanted the best for his brothers. When he found out that it was no use educating them, he chose to help them economically find their footing in the world. Obinna had used the hard-earned money he made to help them build their own businesses from the ground up. As more and more time passed, Kalu and Obum now had thriving businesses of their own and were out of town mostly on some business deal or another. Unfortunately, however, as the brothers accumulated more and more success, they quickly forgot all about their big brother and deserted him the first chance they got. Both of them had become very successful, but they were not grateful. They had deserted Obinna, the first chance they got.

“Mr. Obinna?” came the low and guttural voice of Mr. Okandi, the Principal. “Don’t you have a class right about now?”

Mr. Okandi was a stickler for punctuality. If someone was even a minute late, and Mr. Okandi got to know about it, he would immediately call them to the Principal’s office and lecture them about the importance of time.

“You know Mr. Obinna, you have 30 students in class. If you lose one minute, that is one minute for each student. This means that you have just wasted 30 minutes.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir. I was just thinking about something and lost track of time.”

“Well, make sure it doesn’t happen again Mr. Obinna.” The Principal left. Although he was very strict and formal, everybody knew that he had a heart of gold, and he deeply cared about his teachers and other school employees. It was rumored that he used one-third of his salary to pay the school fees of

children whose parents could not pay it themselves.

Thinking about his lesson plan for the next class, Obinna got up and hurriedly left for the next class. Recently, he found himself thinking about his life again and again. It was as if there was a projector behind him, and the screen was showing his life as he made his way in the world. Once class was finished, he came back to the teacher's lounge and started checking some copies. He had to give them back today. But his mind started wandering again, and he found himself thinking of his brothers.

Kalu was a simple man. He did not have a cunning mind, and he liked to keep things uncomplicated. He did not get into any fights, and he did not have any grand plans for life. He had a real estate business that he had somehow spread to four different cities, and he was happy with it. He did not interfere with Obinna or Obumneme or with anything at all. Obum was a totally different story. Growing up, he had always been in the shadow of Obinna. He had always felt inferior to his elder

brother. Although Obinna had done everything for him, there was not an ounce of gratefulness in him.

“What do you want? A heartfelt thank you note brother?” he had asked one day. Obinna had only told him that he had paid for the business initially when Obum didn’t have any clients. Obinna had paid for all the expenses in the first few months.

“I am a self-made man, brother. Whatever I have now, I have got on my own. I got my own clients. I used my own intelligence and cunning to get ahead in the timber market. Nobody knew my name when I came here, and now everybody knows me. They know what a huge success I am. Please don’t pretend that you had something to do with it. Yes, you did help me out, but you backed out the first chance you got. And as an elder brother, you were just doing your duty to us. You weren’t doing me any favors.”

Obinna had never talked to him about their past again. He loved his brothers and didn’t want them estranged because

of a stupid fight. Obinna was a successful school teacher, but also he had cultivated his family land and now made quite a handsome amount from it. In fact, if it hadn't been for the land, he might not have survived on a teacher's salary. The fact that he had financial backup made him strong and independent. He could work for the school as much as he wanted, and he knew that his land was being taken care of. He would get profit from it. His lifestyle was not very high-maintenance, but it was not frugal either. He liked good clothes and good food, and since he had the money, he spent generously on both. Everybody who knew him knew that he was always one of the best-dressed people in any room.

“Not going home today, Mr. Obinna?” Mrs. Olawuwo’s voice cut through his daydreams and brought him out to the real world again. He looked up at the clock to find out that it was 20 minutes past school time. Most of the teachers had already left. “Sorry. I just don't know where my mind is today.”

“Yes. It happens to me too, sometimes. Especially when I look at what I’m doing and how much I’m making. I could have been a celebrity. Did I tell you about the time that a TV show wanted to cast me?”

“Yes, Mrs. Olawuwo. You have,” Obinna tried to end the discussion as quickly as he could, without sounding rude. Mrs. Olawuwo was famous for cornering anyone she could find and telling them about how she could have been a TV actress if her mother had allowed her to go.

“Well, sometimes I too wonder what my life would have been if I had taken the offer.”

“I’m sure we are exactly where we were supposed to be Mrs. Olawuwo,” Obinna smiled.

“Yes, who wouldn’t want to spend their time with a bunch of 13-year-olds who don’t know anything about anything?” Mrs. Olawuwo smiled too. “Well Good afternoon, Mr. Obinna. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes. Good afternoon.”

Obinna got up, packed all his stuff, and arranged it all neatly in his locker before exiting the building. It was an old building. There were cracks everywhere; the paint used to be white at some point, now it had become yellow all over. There were a thousand different types of stains on the walls, as well as some graffiti. He couldn't understand why someone would damage the school, the place where they were learning to become the best person they could be. These youngsters didn't know what it was like for Obinna and his age group. They would take everything very lightly.

Obinna's place was just a few blocks away from the school, so he always walked. It gave him the exercise that he needed and the time to think. He always loved walking to the school and back. He had made friends with a lot of shop owners on the way, and they always greeted him as he walked by. They knew that he was a teacher, and they all respected him. The

same was the case today. He kept receiving greetings of "Good afternoon, teacher" or "Good afternoon, Mr. Obinna" and would always graciously smile and return the greeting in kind.

As he was about to cross the street, he saw Nneka. She was going to the store, perhaps. She was wearing a flowery dress with a hat on top and looked absolutely stunning, even though he was sure she had not paid any attention to her looks as she came out of her house. The disheveled look of her hair only increased her beauty. Some celebrities paid hundreds of dollars to get that kind of look, but for Nneka, it was only natural. She gave him a small smile as they crossed paths and quickly went on her way. He was never one to shy away from someone, but whenever he got close to Nneka, he would get tongue-tied.

Nneka was the daughter of a shop owner in the neighborhood. Her father had a grocery store where she would help out whenever she could. Even if she couldn't help with the store, she would dutifully take her father's lunch to him every

day. That is when her path would cross with Obinna. Recently, he had started going to her father's shop for groceries. It was convenient, he told himself. But he knew it was much more than that. Whenever he saw her in the store, she would be helping someone with a smile and kind words. If not with someone, she would be reading a book. This was something that impressed Obinna very much as he had not seen too many people who were inclined to read.

Obinna walked on and, just for a moment, turned his head for a final glance and Nneka. She was marching past, her head held high, lost in her own world. He sighed and smiled, wondering if he would ever get the courage to talk to her and ask her out.

Chapter 2

Nneka and Obum

Obumneme made it a point to visit Nneka's father's shop whenever he saw her inside. He was completely fascinated by her and didn't miss any chances of looking at her, talking to her, or just walking in front of her shop, hoping that he would catch a glimpse of her.

This day was no different. He walked in front of the shop and saw that it was Nneka's father inside. He stopped for a minute and looked around. Nobody was paying him any mind. Although, in his head, he always thought that people would look at him when he was turned around. He was a big deal around here, wasn't he? He was a businessman who had the brains and the brawn. He was the complete package. That's why so many women tried to throw themselves at him, trying to woo him and

turn him into a husband. But Obum was always smarter than that. He would play with them, have a good time, and when things started getting serious, he would move on. He had done this multiple times and was very proud of the fact that there were a few broken hearts around town due to him.

But Nneka was different. She was not like the other girls that he had been with. She was always so composed and sure of herself. She didn't throw herself on him whenever he was around. In fact, it was the exact opposite. It felt like she never gave him the time of day. He knew that it was a trap. She was just playing hard to get, but it was working. He was developing feelings for her and in a strong way. He knew that she was the kind of woman he wanted to spend his life with.

Her hair was always flying every which way due to the wind, and she would have to constantly wear a hat. If she wasn't, she would constantly be putting her hair back in place and failing miserably. But this gesture was so cute, and Obum swore

he could watch her try to put her hair back in place for hours on end. Also, unlike the other girls, she was never one to overdo her makeup or wear garish clothes. The other girls would wear anything if they knew that it would attract Obum's attention. He didn't like it. Well, he did, but not for a long time. He only liked it until it fancied him. Nneka was far from it. She would wear simple clothes that would make her look elegant and a little bit aloof. Even if she were in a crowd, Obum would always find her because she was so different.

"Hi, Obum. What are you doing here?" Nneka's sweet, angelic voice brought him out of his reverie. He was startled at first but quickly regained his composure.

"Oh, hello, Nneka. Looking nice as always," he said with what he thought was a cheeky smirk. He always thought of himself as a ladies' man and knew that it would be no time before Nneka was in his arms. There was only so much she could do to keep him away. One of these days, his charm would

work on her, and then they would be together.

“Oh shut up, Obum. You always say things like that.”

Nneka visually blushed, and that was when Obum knew that his plan had worked. All the time spending in front of her shop or her house so he could see her was working. She was quickly becoming close to him.

“Well, its true, isn’t it? You are the most beautiful thing I have ever laid eyes on, and that’s the truth.”

“Obum! Stop! You can’t say things like that.” More blushing, and she flashed him a demure smile.

I’m getting close, he thought. "Who will stop me? There is no one in this town who can stand up to me. I am a successful, self-made businessman. I have seen the ups and downs of life, and I have survived."

"That's so true, Obum. I have seen you around, and you are always doing this or that. You are always busy. I only see

you when you pass in front of the shop. Otherwise, I don't see you at all."

Lucky me, she doesn't know how much time I spend loitering in front of the shop, he thought.

"Well, I have everything, you know? A successful business, a house, money, respect, fame. Have you seen the way some of these women try to throw themselves at me?"

"Yes! Urgh! They are so barbaric. They think that showing their bodies and laughing at everything you say will do the trick. How uneducated do you have to be to fall to cheap theatrics like these?"

"You are so right, my love. That's why I like you so much. You see the things that others don't. You see me like others don't."

"What are you saying, Obum?" there was a little hint of doubt in her eyes.

"I am saying that I have everything that I ever wanted, but one. I am still incomplete, and there's only one thing that can complete me."

"What is that?"

"Marriage to a beautiful and intelligent woman. I am lonely. I want companionship. But I don't want these idiots. I want something more. I want someone who is more."

"Oh! Do you have someone in mind?" Nneka batted her eyes at him. She had never told anyone, but she had always had a crush on him. He was so confident and sure of himself. Every time she saw him, her heart skipped a beat. She knew that there were many women who wanted to become his wife, and they would do anything that they could to get him. That's why she had never made her intentions clear to him. But now, here he was talking to her about marriage, showing interest in her, smiling at her in that roguish way that she liked so much.

Could it be?

Was he interested in her?

Did she actually have a chance with him?

She would have to play this close to the chest.

"I have someone very specific in mind, my love," he said again. He knew that his plan had worked, and now she was totally in his arms. He could do with her what he pleased, and she would say nothing. But he didn't have bad intentions for her. Those were for other women. Women who were beneath him. This one was different.

"Who is it? Is it someone in this town?" she couldn't help but show her curiosity.

"Yes. Of course. It's someone in this town. In fact, it's someone who works on this street."

"*On* this street? Who? I don't know any girl who works in these shops."

Obum pointed at her father's shop. "She works in that

shop with her father. I see her around, and she is the most beautiful thing I have ever laid eyes on. She is intelligent, hardworking, and drop-dead gorgeous. I can't stop thinking about her. I want to send her a marriage proposal. Do you think she will accept?" He got close to her - real close. She could feel his breath on her. Her insides had turned into a million butterflies. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Obum, the successful businessman, the dashing gentleman, was asking her for her hand in marriage. It must be a dream.

"Obum! Stop playing with me. You know I'm not that kind of a girl," she admonished him. She wanted to be certain of things before taking any further steps.

Obum immediately started acting like he was hurt. "Oh! Why don't you believe me? Should I cut out my heart and show it to you? Should I jump off a bridge into a river? How can I show my love for you? How can I make you see how much you mean to me?"

“Oh! Obum! I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it at all. Do you really want to marry me?” she felt like jumping up and down until her legs gave out, but she brought out the last bit of composure to stop herself.

“Yes! A hundred times yes.”

"I love you, Obum! I have never told this to anyone. Not even my best friend knows this, but I have been in love with you for a long time now. I always looked at you when you weren't looking. But I'm not like those fashionable girls who have expensive clothes, makeup, and jewelry. I knew I didn't stand a chance, so I didn't say anything. Oh! I can't tell you how excited I am!"

“You fighting those girls over me? That’s preposterous. They don’t stand a chance against you. You should have known that. You should have come to me earlier.”

"I didn't know you liked me so much, or I would have come to you. But here we are, expressing our love for each

other. It is alright in the end."

"Yes, it is, my love. Yes, it is. I am going to marry you and make you my wife. We are going to live in my mansion and have lots of children. You are going to be my perfect wife. I will buy you all the clothes, jewelry, and makeup that you want. Then you will have more stuff than all of these women combined."

Nneka squealed with excitement. She could not believe what she was hearing. It was like a movie; only it was real. It was all happening to her. These Hollywood movie endings weren't supposed to exist. They were only meant for the movies. She couldn't believe that it was all happening in reality. Her dream guy was standing in front of her and telling her about how he would make her his wife.

"So, what shall we do? Should we get married tomorrow?" Obum asked.

"You are in quite a hurry there, Obum. I think we should

wait a while." Her breath was returning, and she found that her brain had started working again. She could use its faculties once more to see the logic.

"Why wait? Who should we wait for? Everybody that we know is in this town. We can throw a big party and get married in front of everyone. I want to make everyone jealous. I want them to say, oh, he got the best of us. I want to rub their noses in it."

A little bell of warning started going off in Nneka's head, but she was on top of clouds right now. She shook her head, and the warning bell was silenced.

"Well, your brother is out of town, and also, I have family who would want to come and join my wedding. I have to call them here. Also, there are a lot of preparations to be done. I already know the wedding dress that I'm going to wear on our happiest day. We have to pick out a venue that can seat all the people, and we have to start working on the invitations." Yes,

her mind was working perfectly now. She had been planning her wedding since she was five. Almost every girl does that. Now that the time was near, she wanted it to be perfect.

Obum had other thoughts in his mind. He thought that he had wooed her enough to take her to court and marry her on the spot. He didn't want to waste his hard-earned money on the town, getting them drunk and feeding them. That was his money. He had earned it, and now it seemed that he would lose it all.

"Well, no need to make plans right away, my love. We can always do that later. All I wanted was to tell you how much I love you and to hear it back, and that's enough for now." He wanted to turn the conversation away from expenses that he would be incurring in the near future. But he thought, for someone like Nneka, he would be willing to part with his money. Not all of it, but some of it.

"Yes, you are totally right. Sorry, I got carried away. I

have been dreaming about this day since I was five, and now that it's here, I can't stop thinking about it. I have to go home and talk to my best friend, ChinyereChinyere. We have both been planning our weddings together. She will be so thrilled to find out who I'm going to marry."

Now the warning bells were ringing in Obum's ears. Chinyere was one of the women that he had slept with and then left. She had been easy to trick, and he had enjoyed her for a while, but soon he had grown bored of her and had gone with someone else. Chinyere was a vengeful person, and he knew that he would have to come up with something to appease her, or he would have to come up with a good enough lie to convince Nneka of his innocence. But there was nothing he could do right now.

"Of course, my love. Just look out for Chinyere. She is getting older and not getting any suitors. I'm not sure that she is the right person to talk to. She would be jealous that you have

found a successful, rich, and handsome man to marry, and she is not getting any proposals at all, not even from the old men in town.”

“Chinyere is not like that. She is sweet and kind. Also, she can never be jealous of me. We are sisters. We have been since we were five. That was when her mother died, and my mother kind of adopted her. She has spent more time in my house than in her own house. I'm sure she will be happy.”

“That's not what I've heard about her, my darling. I have heard insane stories about her. She has become so desperate that she will go to any lengths to capture a man. Even if it means telling lies about them and blackmailing them afterward.”

“Stop it, Obum! You don't have any right to say that. She is not like that. I know her better than anyone else, and I say she is not like that.”

“Sorry, my love. I just wanted to tell you what I heard about her. I'm sure you know better. Listen, I have to go and

meet a very important client. Why don't you head home and start preparing to be my wife?"

"Ooooooh! I'll do that. Bye, Obum. Come and visit me soon." She waved as he turned on his heels and walked away.

For a few days, things were quite pleasant. But as was his way, Obum couldn't keep himself away from other women. He saw a woman at a party that he was attending with Nneka.

"Nneka! Who is she?"

"Oh! She is a friend of mine. Her name is Ifechukwu. She is from out of town. She was having some trouble at home, so she has come to stay with me for a few days."

"She looks nice."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. I mean, she looks like a proper lady. Not like

the other women you see in front of you."

"Yes. You are right. Ifechukwu is not like the others, but please stop looking at her. You know how awkward it is."

"Of course, my love." But Obum had already started planning on how to get her in bed.

One day as Obum was just about to leave his home for work, he heard a knock at the door. This was unexpected. He wasn't expecting anybody this early in the morning. Also, he had made sure that he didn't have any plans for the day as he had spent last night with Ifechukwu, and he didn't want to be disturbed. She was upstairs, putting her clothes on. He had told her to hurry so he could drop her near Nneka's house and go on his way.

He opened the door and got the surprise of his life. Nneka was standing there, tears running down her face, her eyes red from crying all night.

“Where is she?”

“Where is who, my love?”

“If you ever call me that, I will pick up the nearest object and break your face with it.”

“What are you talking about? You are acting crazy. What is going on with you? Are you on your periods or something?”

“Do not try to put this on me, Obum. I know the truth now. Chinyere kept trying to tell me, but I wouldn’t listen. I thought you were better than that. I thought those were all lies that the other women had spread just to put a rift between us. I know that it was all true.”

“What the hell are you talking about, woman? What is this truth you are talking about? What did that lying, cheating, blackmailing woman tell you? I told you to steer clear of her. I told you she was crazy. And now she has made you crazy.”

At that moment, Ifechukwu stumbled out of the room.

Her hair was disheveled, her shoes in her hands, and there was a blank expression on her face. She knew she was caught and didn't know what to do about it.

“You,” Nneka said to Ifechukwu, “You have overstayed your welcome at my house. Take your stuff and leave right now.”

"And as for you," she pointed her finger at Obum, "I will never forgive you. You will realize one day what you have done to all the other women in this town and me. You will pay for it."

“But darling...”

"No buts, and don't you ever call me darling or my love ever again. Whatever we had was a hoax, a charade. It is over now. My eyes are open now. Don't ever come close to me again, or I will have you thrown in jail."

With that, Nneka stormed off.

Obum had had enough of her. How dare a woman try to

end her relationship with him? It was always the other way around. He immediately went to the bedroom, dressed in a hurry, and ran after her. He would show her who the boss was. He would show her that he was doing her a favor by marrying her. It was the best thing that would ever happen to her.

Obum reached Nneka just as she was crossing the street in front of her father's store. It was still closed as businesses had just started opening. He grabbed her arm and spun her around with brute force. She lost her balance and fell against him. With one hand around her, so she wouldn't run, he used the other one to strangle her neck.

"I'll show you what happens to women who walk away from me. I'll show you who the boss in this relationship is. You will do as I say, and you will be happy with what I give you. Do you understand me?"

Nneka could only make choking noises as her throat was in his powerful grip, and it was becoming tighter and tighter.

She clearly saw him for what he was, but it was too late. Soon, he would squeeze the last packet of air from her lungs, and she would be dead. *Better dead than to be his slave*, she thought.

But at that precise moment, Obinna rounded the corner and saw the spectacle. He could not believe what he was seeing. His brother and his soon-to-be bride were in the middle of the road, hugging. Couldn't they wait for the wedding? Did they have to do this in public, where everybody could see them?

Wait!

They weren't hugging. Her eyes were bulging, and her face was red. His one arm was around her, but the other one was on her neck. His veins were bulging as if he was putting a lot of pressure on them. In an instant, Obinna knew what was actually happening. He ran up to them and sent a punch flying in his brother's direction. It connected with his jaw with a resounding THUD! And he immediately loosened his grip on Nneka, toppling over. He was a big man only in his mind. He had never

been a fighter and always used his connections to scare other people into doing what he wanted.

Obinna held the trembling Nneka in his arms, allowing her to catch her breath. She was wheezing as if she had run two marathons back to back.

I'm safe, she thought. She looked up at Obinna, and it was as if she was seeing him for the first time.

Chapter 3

Marriage

Obinna couldn't believe what had happened. He was standing on top of his almost unconscious brother, who had a broken nose. Blood was trickling down his mouth, meaning he had bit his lip or tongue on the way down. The beautiful Nneka was standing right there, looking at him like she was seeing him for the first time. There was something in those eyes that he had always been dreaming about. Obinna had always liked Nneka. Well, 'liked' is not a strong enough word; he had always had affection for Nneka. However, he never told her or anybody else for that matter.

In those days, wrapped in the tumult that Obum and Nneka's toxic relationship brought him, Obinna would often wonder about the *why* of things. *Why was it that he felt the way*

that he did? Why was it that he could not talk to anyone about the bundle of anxious nerves in the pit of his stomach? In the midst of all of these ponderings, however, his wild and forbidden thoughts would reach a point where Obinna just knew that he had to stop thinking about the beautiful Nneka before things got out of hand.

Staring at the beautiful, delicate lady in front of him, however, Obinna was sure that his frenzied thoughts had finally gotten the better of him and that he had taken things out of hands- irredeemably so. In spite of the severity of the situation that they were stuck in, Obinna could not help staring at Nneka, who, even with her tear-streaked face, looked as beautiful as a gentle sea storm. Obinna did not know if he should laugh at how ridiculous his thoughts were or cry in front of the object of his desire. This feeling had not been new at all; ever since he had first gazed at that beautiful face and the loving eyes, Obinna knew that he was going to be lovestruck for a long time. He had

not expected that his thoughts would lead him *here*, and Obinna realized at that moment how utterly helpless he was. He needed Nneka, and the thought caused a sudden pang of pain to run through his anxious, beating heart.

In the past couple of weeks, Obinna would take up whatever opportunity he could find and sate his eyes by looking at Nneka. Obinna would gaze at Nneka through the window of her shop, and he would find her reading a novel, her delicate fingers tapping the rough edges of the page as she took in the words and phrases. Whenever his eyes found her face, Obinna would often be tempted and think about going in. In most of these cases, however, Obinna would never get the courage to do so. His feet would remain frozen in their place, as rigid as ever, and Obinna would inwardly curse himself. On the street, he would see her walking by; he would smell the lavender on her, and the butterflies in his stomach would start dancing in the worship of her. Obinna had always had the utmost respect for

Nneka, and maybe that was the reason why he was always so painfully shy in asking her out. Despite his shyness, however, Obinna would always look for her. In a massive crowd of unrecognizable faces, Obinna was sure that he would always be able to locate Nneka. The moment he entered his house, the search for Nneka's lovely face would begin. It was not something voluntary; instead, it was like his eyes had a mind of their own. Without ever meaning to, he would find himself searching for her eyes, her nose, and her lovely delicate mouth. He would look for her in the shop, on the street, and on the lucky days when his errands would take him towards her house, and he could admire and gaze at her loveliness all that he wanted.

After the events that had taken place recently, Obinna realized that he could not delay any further. He needed to ask Nneka to become his wife, and he needed to do it as soon as possible. Obinna had finally built up the courage to ask her out when he found out she was now going out with his brother.

When he had first heard the news, Obinna's first reaction had been to go numb. He had been so crestfallen that day. His own brother had once again taken something that was his. However, being a loyal brother, he never said anything. It was not in him to do so. He had stayed away, content with just watching her. At that moment, he knew how she would end up.

He had seen his brother do the same thing to a dozen different women, and that hurt him. He didn't want anyone to hurt Nneka like that; in fact, he didn't want anyone to hurt her in any way. He had talked to his brother once and had been rebuked sternly for meddling into his affairs. He remembered it like it was yesterday.

“Obum, I see that you are going out with Nneka. Congratulations brother. That is quite the catch.”

“Thanks, brother,” Obum replied curtly.

“Now, I hope you are not going to go down the same path with her as all the others.”

“What the hell do you mean by that? Are you insinuating that I am a womanizer?”

"No! No! Not at all, brother. I just want to see you happy. Nneka is a good girl, and you should be a good husband to her."

“And what makes you think I’m not?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to give you some brotherly advice. That’s all.”

"Well, you can keep your advice. I have done everyone without your help, and I will do this without it too. Don't worry about me. Worry about how you are going to live by on your teacher's salary." And with an evil chuckle, Obum left.

Now, here Obinna was, standing at an arm's length from the love of his life, and he couldn't believe it. He thought he saw something in her eyes that might have been love.

'No. It can't be. It must be gratitude. I just saved her life, and she wants to thank me,' he thought.

"Oh, Obinna! I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come to my rescue." These words were like music to his ears.

"Thank you. I saw that you were in trouble and came immediately."

"I'm sorry you had to see me like this; I'm not that kind of a girl." She said, embarrassed at the situation that she was caught in.

"It's okay, Nneka. He has put his spell on dozens of girls, and I never gave a damn. But when I heard that he was dating you and that he had promised to marry you, I was sorry. You are a good girl, and you deserve so much better."

"Thank you, Obinna. You are too kind. But I don't think I am a good girl. Good girls do not get caught up in this mess."

"I told you, Nneka. He could sweet talk the best of them. You are an innocent girl. You have never faced such a villainous

person. It was easy for him to cast his spell on you. But since you are a good girl, it was also hard for him to keep his true self from you. You saw through him easily."

"Thank you, Obinna, for the kind words. Will you please take me home? I am afraid of being alone right now."

"Yes. Of course, I will."

He gave her his hand, which she gratefully took, and they walked away, leaving Obum's limp body on the street. It was like a scene from a Hollywood movie. The hero and the heroine walk away into the sunset, while the villain lies on the ground, totally defeated.

'Maybe wishes do come true,' Obinna thought as he felt her small and dainty fingers on his arm. The heat emanating from her was almost unbearable. He so wanted to take her into his arms and tell her he will protect her. He wanted so bad to tell her that nothing more will ever hurt her now. He was here, but something kept him from doing so. He knew that she had just

gotten out of an attack, and this was not the right time to embrace her. He did the only thing he could do - he took off his jacket and put it on her shoulders as they walked. She looked at him gratefully and brought the jacket closer around her.

Nneka had never felt so protected as she felt in the moment. It was strange. Obinna had always been in front of her, but she had never looked at him like that. She was looking now, though, and she liked what she saw. She saw someone who was mature, serious, and thoughtful. Obinna was a school teacher, and she didn't know of any other profession that commanded more respect than that. She had seen him on the street as people would come and say hello to him. He was always kind and easy to smile. He would return the greeting and move on ahead. Now, he was her savior, protecting her from the harshness of the real world.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, her arm on his as she clutched it with her fingers. It was the only contact

she had, but somehow, it felt right to her. As they came to her gate, he turned towards her and said, “Nneka. May I call on you sometime?”

"Yes. I would like that." She said demurely with a faint smile. She was falling for him; she was sure of that. However, from her perspective, it wasn't that bad of a deal. In fact, it was a great deal

- so began the love story of Obinna and Nneka.

Obinna and Nneka would spend every free minute together. They loved to walk around the city or sit on the bench in the park and talk. They would talk about everything. Obinna was a very well-read man, and she loved that about him. He could talk on any subject with authority. He even took her to his friends' gatherings where they would discuss politics, economics, and more. She was amazed at how everyone respected him. When he started talking, everyone would shut up and listen to him intently. It was like he was a political or

religious leader, and these were his acolytes. Nneka's feelings for Obinna were getting stronger, and she thought that if he didn't propose to her, she would have to do it for him. That was necessary, though, as a few weeks after her rescue, he sprang the question himself.

The couple was sitting on their favorite bench in the park. It was evening, and the children were playing; some were throwing rocks in the pond, some were running and playing with each other, and this one kid was doing somersaults. At that moment, Obinna turned towards Nneka and asked her to marry him. She was delighted and immediately said yes without any hesitation. She knew she was doing the right thing this time. She knew him so well and knew his reputation around the city, and that's the kind of man she had always wanted.

Obinna came to her home and met her father, and he too was also very impressed with him. Both the households started preparing for the wedding. Nneka couldn't be happier. She was

finally getting her dream man. Obinna was the same; his crush on Nneka was not a crush anymore. It had blossomed into something better. He was going to make her his wife, and they would live happily ever after. At least that was the dream.

Obum was nowhere to be seen. He stopped coming into town for supplies. He used to hang out at the bar and drink with his buddies, but he had stopped showing up there too. It was like he had completely disappeared. And after being sucker-punched from his brother in front of his latest conquest, who would blame him.

The story had gone around town like wildfire. Nneka had told her friend, who had told her friend, and so it went. By the time it reached the ends of the town, it had morphed into a Greek mythology story with the hero, Obinna, wielding a flaming sword and riding a dragon. It was as if he flew down from the sky, bringing with him a rain of fire, attacking Obum the troll with his mighty sword. With just one stroke, he had cut out

Obum's tongue and made him a mute for life. And the story went on and on. Nneka and Obinna didn't care about the rumors or the news. They were lost in each other.

The day finally arrived when the two were going to get married. Nneka was wearing a glittery white dress with beautiful needlework work done on it. Her mother, aunts, and friends had spent hours making the dress. They were going to order it from a shop at first, but Nneka wanted something real, something that spoke about her, and she had requested her mother to make it. She was looking ravishing in that dress, wearing a white veil to complement it.

As soon as she exited the carriage, all eyes turned towards her. Everybody had eyes only for her, and Obinna was no exception. He couldn't believe how lovely she looked. Obinna, dressed in a handsome suit that was tailored to his body, knew he was making the best decision of his life. He was donning a jet-black three-piece suit and had matched it with a

flaming red tie.

The ceremony began, and Obinna and Nneka put rings on each other's fingers, beaming. Obinna looked deep in her eyes as he kissed her for the first time. He put his lips to her ears and whispered, "This is the first of many, my love."

Nneka blushed and smiled. She put her head on his shoulder as the music began, and they both started moving with the music gently. The couple sashayed on the stage, with every eye watching them, as they enjoyed their first dance ever. Soon, everyone else joined in. The music got a little faster, the drinks started flowing, and it became a proper party. It was done. Obinna and Nneka were married and would spend the rest of their lives together in peace and harmony.

The initial days of their marriage were a blessing. Obinna took some time off work, and they spent that time traveling the country and visiting their relatives in other cities. Everywhere they went, people welcomed them. A couple of

Nneka's relatives were so taken by Obinna that they started talking to him about a joint business venture. He was a solid, honest person, and everybody could see that. They wanted someone with his integrity to join them.

Obinna just smiled and told them he would think about it. He loved his job as a teacher and didn't want to change his profession at the moment. Nneka would beam with delight when she saw all the men looking up at her husband, listening to every word that he said and asking him for advice. She knew all the girls were so jealous of her. They all wanted a husband who would command such respect, but she was the one who got it.

Life was good.

Chapter 4

Parenthood

Time went on, as it does with every story, and soon Nneka found herself pregnant. She and Obinna had a great life together. He was everything that she wanted in a spouse. He loved her, took care of her, and told her, "I love you" multiple times a day. When she would be in the kitchen, cooking a warm meal for him, Obinna would creep up behind her and then pull her in for a tender hug. Falling into his arms, Nneka would laugh at how adorable her husband was, but in her mind, she would always whisper a silent prayer, thanking gods for sending this kindhearted man her way.

When they had been strangers, just passing each other on the street, she would have never believed she would end up spending the rest of her life with him. He had turned out to be more romantic than she had imagined. Obinna would

compliment her at the strangest times. A couple of days ago, Nneka had woken up to see him gazing at her face, almost as if it was the first time he had seen her, and the gesture had taken her aback.

"What are you looking at?" Nneka had asked, still disgruntled and weary from the poor sleep that she got because of her pregnancy.

"I am looking at my beautiful wife." Obinna replied as earnestly as ever and gently bent towards her and kissed her on the forehead.

"Oh come on, Obinna. I haven't even washed my face yet. I'm sure I don't look all that good."

"If you saw yourself the way that I see you, you would realize that despite of how you look, you are always the most beautiful woman in the room. Both inside and out."

Nneka smiled to herself and kissed her husband. Never

in her wildest dreams could she have expected her life to turn out as good as it has. *I could have ended up with Obum.* Nneka thought to herself and shuddered. He surprised her with a rose at the most random times and would cook for her and feed her. Whenever Obinna would get back from work, he would bring Nneka a single flower. It was that Nneka had asked for, and every single day, her husband delivered. As the days passed on, Nneka found herself utterly enchanted by Obinna, and she could feel herself falling in love with him with a passionate intensity as each day came to a close. All in all, Nneka was living a very good life with Obinna, and as far as she knew, that was understating it.

'And now look at me,' she smiled as she looked in the mirror. Obinna had just left for work, and Nneka was at home, left to her own devices. She rubbed her big belly and was rewarded with a kick. *I know it's a girl,* she thought. Her smile grew bigger. She could just imagine how their lives would

change once they had a little child of their own. She swore she would raise her to be just like her father - strong of values, well-meaning, and hard working. Unlike Obum, who had been so full of violence and hurt, Nneka was sure that her daughter would be a great father. He was kind, loving, sincere, and like Nneka, all too impatient to welcome a child of their own into the world.

Although Nneka thought of her life as paradise, little problems would arise now and then. Out of all these problems, the one that worried her the most was that of finances. But even then, Nneka had trust in her husband and knew that he would take care of them. Even though Obinna's job didn't pay so well, with some savings, the couple had enough to run the house and then have some in hand for other things. Nneka had once hinted to Obinna about changing his job, but she also knew how much he loved his job and didn't want to talk him out of it. He was doing something meaningful, and she also knew how much people respected him because of it.

Whenever Obinna would get home from work, the young couple would talk all about how his day at work had been and share their joys with each other over their future. For the first time in both of their lives, their future glimmered and shone with the promise of all the happiness that was to come their way, and they could not wait to get their new family life started.

Things were going great. Nneka was to give birth any day now, so Obinna had taken a couple of days off from school to stay with his wife and help her. He had everything ready. The bags containing all the baby's stuff were packed. They also contained extra clothes for Nneka and her necessary items. As Nneka was thinking all of this, she suddenly felt pain in her lower abdomen. It wasn't too bad, but she knew what it meant; it was her time. The baby was coming.

“Obinna! Obinna! Where are you?”

Obinna ran into the room, “What’s wrong, my darling?”

“Oh, nothing is wrong. In fact, everything is just right.

It's time to go to the hospital, Obinna."

"I can't believe it," he smiled. "Is it really time?"

"Ask me this one more time, and I will hit you with something. Hurry up and get the bags. We have to go now," she said with a slight smile.

They both ran outside, where Obinna had already called a friend of his. He owned a car, and he took them to the hospital. The hospital was not the best, but it was okay for now. The orderlies came and took Nneka inside the operation theatre. The doctor was already there.

Obinna stood outside, not knowing what he should do. So, he did the only thing that first-time fathers do at the hospital; he started pacing up and down the waiting room. He kept going back and forth diligently until the nurse came and told him the good news. It was a girl; Akunna had arrived. They had decided on the name almost the time they realized Nneka was pregnant. If it was a girl, it would be Akunna, and if it was a boy, they

would name her Ikenna.

Obinna couldn't control his joy. He started laughing with joy and relief. He was so scared about something happening to Nneka or the baby during the delivery. A feeling of calmness washed over him, and he sat down on the plastic seat of the waiting room for the first time since he came.

That had been so many years ago, Obinna thought, as he sat in his favorite chair in the house and looked around. Akunna was the firstborn, then came Ikenna Amanze (IK). Their family increased again when they had Chizitere, and finally, little Ngozika made an appearance to complete the happy family.

Out of all the four children, Ikenna's birth had been the toughest one. A complication arose in the sixth month of the pregnancy, causing Nneka to experience bleeding. They were so afraid for the child, and the doctors only aggravated that fear. They had prescribed strict bed rest for Nneka and frightened her

that if she moved at all, she might lose the baby. Also, Ikenna came two weeks before he was meant to. That was something that neither Nneka nor Obinna wished to experience ever again. Thankfully, Chizitere and Ngozika came easily enough.

As the family grew, Obinna's expenses started increasing while his salary remained the same. He asked the school for a special raise as they knew his family situation, but the principal said he couldn't do anything. They were already in a crunch and couldn't afford to pay the teachers any more than they already were.

Obinna took a second job just so he could ensure being a good provider for his family. He wanted to be sure that his family had everything it wanted, but that meant staying out of the house for the whole day. The family would miss him sorely, and he missed them. Nevertheless, sacrifices have to be made when it is about your family's safety and wellbeing, and Obinna was not one to shy away from a sacrifice. He loved his entire

family dearly and would do anything for them. He wanted to give them the world. He was still as madly in love with Nneka as he was in the early days. He still brought her a rose every now and then, but the frequency had gone down since he didn't have the budget for it. Nneka didn't mind. A rose is a rose, whether you got one every day or once a week - even once a month was okay.

The children were happy and healthy. They didn't have to worry about expenses, budgets, increasing prices, or anything like that. They were children and were free from all types of worries and anxiety. That was for the adults. Akunna was a big sister, and she made sure everybody knew it. It wasn't just that. She had actually taken over a lot of chores from her mother. She took care of her siblings as if they were her own children. She became a big sister the day Ikenna was born, and somehow, she knew what was expected of her.

Akunna always had a serious look on her face and was

the first to admonish the children if they ever got out of line. She loved her father and would wait for him to come home so that they could have dinner together. It didn't matter how late he was; she would never eat without him. The younger children were too young to care, though. They would eat when hungry, and if they did any funny business, Akunna was there to handle them.

Ikenna was the strongest one of all four siblings. It wasn't only the physical stuff that he was good at. He also had a will of steel, and once he set his mind to something, he wouldn't quit until he had accomplished his task. He was the one who could always be found trying to climb a tree or running after the chicken. Sometimes, his antics would become too much for Nneka, but most of the time, he kept himself in check.

Ikenna almost always brought a treat for his mother. Whenever he went outside to handle his chores and saw a tree with fruit, he would climb it to get some for his mother. He loved his father, too, but if anyone had asked him, he would say

that he was his mother's boy. He had her eyes, and just like her, he was interested in knowing everything about everything. His curiosity sometimes got him into trouble, like the time when he had tried to clean the cat by drowning him in water because that's what they did with clothes.

Chizitere was the one Nneka predicted would become a teacher just like his father. He could always be found with his nose buried in a book, trying to read it. Although he wasn't too big, his teachers told Nneka that he was far ahead of his classmates when it came to reading. Just like Obinna, he had a wiry and lanky frame and didn't have much muscle on his body. He didn't eat as much as he was supposed to. Nneka guessed he would rather eat a book instead of food if he had half a chance. Even at such an early age, she had seen him sneaking into his parents' bedroom and trying to read his father's books.

They had a small two-bedroom apartment, and it didn't have any room for a library or even a few shelves. That's why

Obinna kept all his books, his most prized possession, in a heap beside the bed. Although Nneka knew the reason why he kept them there, she still pretended to believe him when he said it was easier for him to reach, and he didn't have to move whenever he wanted to read.

Last but not any lesser than the rest was Ngozika. She was the baby of the family and knew her importance. She found out her importance in the family at an early age and used it to get what she wanted. She was unlike her elder sister, who was very serious and dutiful. Ngozika could be found in front of the only mirror in the house, combing her wavy hair again and again. She tried her best to sneak into her mother's makeup kit, but Nneka knew better and kept it on a shelf that was too high for Ngozika to reach this age.

Nevertheless, that didn't deter Ngozika at all. She would come into the room every day and look at the makeup kit high above her. *One of these days, I will be old enough and tall*

enough to reach it, and then I will look even prettier than I am now, she would think. Ngozika also knew the effect she had on her father. Obinna just couldn't refuse her anything. She had gotten away with a lot just because she was the doll of the family, and Obinna couldn't even imagine scolding her, much less punishing her. She had her father wrapped around her little finger, and she took full advantage of it.

Although the family was struggling, Obinna never came home with a tired face. He made sure that he put on a big smile when he entered the door. He always made sure that he brought them something every day. Obviously, he could do that, but he tried. Some day he would bring sweets for the children, sometimes a flower for Nneka, seasonal fruits, and when he had a bit of money left over, he would buy toys for them. He knew Chizitere loved reading books, and he wanted to develop the same skill in everybody else; he also bought books for them.

Obinna sat in his favorite chair and imagined what their

children would grow up to become. He saw Akunna as a doctor - may be a heart specialist or neurologist. Ikenna was a businessman through and through. He had the guts to take the risks that came with it. Chizitere was a teacher, and Ngozika was either a model or an actress. Lost in his thought, Obinna felt a hand on his shoulder. Even after so many years together, he could feel butterflies in his stomach whenever Nneka touched him. He put his hand over hers and gave it a squeeze. He still loved her more than ever. He tried to express his feelings with that squeeze, and he guessed that she got the message.

Nneka took his face in both her hands, tilted his head, and gave him a big kiss on the lips that had him reeling. If he wasn't already sitting on the chair, he would definitely have fallen to the floor. He was amazed at how the both of them could be discussing the expenses or something else and then instantly turn into teenagers at a single touch or a kiss. This was one of those moments. He playfully pulled her into his lap, and they

both stared at each other's eyes - his eyes, madly in love, hers dancing playfully. She took his hand in hers and put her other hand over his heart. She could feel his heartbeat quicken. She looked at him with a sly smile and said, "Mr. Obinna, we already have four children. Let's make sure we provide for them instead of thinking of a fifth one."

Obinna let out a howl of laughter. "Hey, when the fifth one comes, we will figure it out. Don't you worry about it."

"Seriously, Obinna, apart from the jokes, we really need to lower our expenses or increase our budget. The children are getting older, and their needs are increasing. Akunna and Ikenna are going to school, and soon the other two would be ready too. How will we pay the school fees? And that's not the only expense coming our way in the near future."

"Have we not figured it out every time, my love? Have we not persevered?"

"Yes, we have Obinna, but let's not push our luck."

"If we've done it multiple times, we can do it again. Don't worry about it. I have talked to a teacher at school. He works for the local newspaper. He says he might have an opening for me there. I will leave the other job I have and take up that one. It pays better, and it's closer to what I do, so I am interested in it. Between my school job and my newspaper job, I believe that we will manage."

"But this is not a one-time thing, darling. Every few months our expenses increase. Chizitere and Ngozika are growing up so fast. And there are only so many hand-me-down clothes that I can dress them up in."

Obinna put both of his arms around his wife and gave her a big bear hug. She melted into his arms. She knew that this was his one way of silencing any argument that she might have. And it always worked. Somehow, having his arms around her, having her ear next to his heart would always calm her down. The slow and steady beat of his heart would convince her that

he would take care of it all. The strong heart was made of steel, and it would never let anything happen to Nneka or any of the children. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of protection that she always got whenever he hugged her. Of course, he was right. Everything was going to turn out alright.

Chapter 5

Ik

Life was good - well, as good as it could be. Obinna was making a fair amount - enough to easily bring up two kids if they had that many. Obinna and Nneka had not two but four kids: Akunna, Ikenna, Chizitere, and baby Ngozika, which made life tough for them. It was still going good, though; what they didn't have in money, they made up for it in love and affection. Both Obinna and Nneka loved their children and did as much as they could for them. They made sure Akunna and Ikenna attended the best school that they could. Chizitere and Ngozika still had some time, so they were at home.

Ikenna was a very astute and observant young boy. He was growing up to be exactly like his father. He was soft-spoken, kept mostly to himself, but observed everything that

was going around him. He went to school, came back, and immediately started helping out his mother and sister Akunna in taking care of the little ones, doing chores around the house, and more. He saw how his mother and father pretended that everything was okay in front of the children and wondered why they didn't tell them the truth.

The one thing that Ikenna wanted most of all was a good education. He realized he was good at reading, and he wanted to read more. In school, though, he only had a limited amount of time in the library. And even if he did have the time, there wasn't much that the library could offer him. It was not a great school, and it was not a great library. Every time he went there, he came out wanting more. From the atlases and Encyclopedias, he had found out that there was a big world outside his town, and he desperately wanted to see it.

He would look at the pictures of the colorfully dressed men and women from around the world and used to think about

what life was for them. Did they have the same troubles that Ikenna's family had? Were they always short of money too? Or did they have everything that they wanted? They looked so happy. Ikenna wondered if he would ever be that happy all the time. What would it feel like? When would the time come when they weren't short of money?

Every now and then, Ikenna or one of his siblings would ask their father for something. Their dad would always smile at them and tell them that he would try to buy it when next month's salary came. It was always the same answer, and now they heard it more and more. It was like they didn't have money, even for basic things. Just a few days ago, Ikenna had asked his father for a new pen, and his father had given him the same smile and said the same words.

It wasn't like Ikenna was unhappy. He was happy that his family always stayed together. He was happy that his father always spent time with him and his siblings when he came

home. It didn't matter how tired he was; he would always spend time with his family. Lately, however, their dad felt more tired when he got home, but he chalked it up to the amount of work that he did at school.

Ikenna would get frustrated sometimes with his situation. He didn't understand why they were always short of things. Sometimes, even the rations would run out, and they would have to survive on meager meals. Things were not so bad at the moment, but if it continued like this, they were going to be in a lot of trouble soon. Ikenna could see it all. He was gifted like that.

He could see things and weigh out his options and come up with predictions. He had always been like that. His teachers all liked him. He would have mature conversations with them that others his age were not capable of. He would talk to his teachers about the drought, economics, and more. He would ask them questions like, 'why is everyone poor?' and 'why do only

some people have money but others don't?' and more like those. All his teachers knew that he would grow up to become something big.

Obinna was becoming more and more morose with each passing day. He knew that he only had his school salary to rely on and that it wasn't enough. If things continued like this, soon, they wouldn't have enough for groceries and school. He tried to keep a calm face in front of others. Nneka was the only one he confided in. She was the only one he trusted, and she was the only one who stood by him through tough times. It was like they were made for each other. No matter what the situation, she would cheerlead him and tell him he could do it, that he was enough, and that made him feel like he was Superman.

It was these little things that brought joy to Obinna's life - this and his children. The moment he stepped into the house, he would feel a change come over him. He wasn't the grumpy,

irritated man he would be during the day. He would smile, he would laugh, and he would sing and dance with his children. But that happiness and joy were short-lived. Almost every day, someone would come up to him and ask for something. He would put on a brave face and tell them he would buy the thing as soon as his salary came.

He knew his excuse - that one sentence he uttered always - wasn't working on Ikenna. He could see it in his eyes. The others were not as smart as him. They would accept his white lie and go on playing, but no Ikenna. No. Ikenna was a different breed altogether. Obinna could see it. He knew that Ikenna would do something great when he got older. The only thing that Obinna could do now was to make sure that his family survived until Ikenna went big.

The scarcity of money and the way he seemingly played with the sentiments of his children when they asked for things were unknowingly taking a toll on Obinna. Deep down, it all

hurt Obinna and was slowly making him lose all hope - so much so that he had begun to think even Ikenna would never be able to reach where Obinna thought he would and has the potential to. He felt tired and fatigued and lost his temper often. He hadn't lost his temper at home, but at school, he wasn't the same person anymore. The students who used to love him and throng around him had started evading him. They would see him walking down the corridor and would scamper out of his way. It was like they were the first ones to notice this change in him.

The teachers had caught on too.

When Obinna sat in the staff room, they would try their best to busy themselves with something so they wouldn't have to face him and talk to him. He was losing his temper at very little things. He thought it was all because of his meager salary and the fact that he couldn't run his house properly with that. In the beginning, he had done some odd jobs to make things work, and it had worked for a little while. But now, he felt that he

didn't have the energy to do that anymore.

By the time he came back from school, Obinna felt drained. He always felt thirsty, as if he hadn't seen a drop of water in days. Also, he felt the need to urinate a lot. Even at night, he couldn't get any sleep. He would have to wake up multiple times to go to the bathroom. It must be the heat that's making me do this, he would think to himself. Sometimes, he thought that there was something wrong with him - something that was stopping him from doing all that he could.

Obinna was the one who had supported his brothers as they made their way into the world. He had made sure that they got whatever help they needed. Whether it was financial, physical, or motivational, he had given it to them. Both his brothers now had booming businesses. They were both successful businessmen. He had stayed a teacher while he helped them become what they were today.

He had never tried to second-guess himself. He had

never thought twice before making a sacrifice for his brothers. He loved both of them, even after everything they had done to him and more. He knew of Obum's various girlfriends and his sexual escapades. He had tried several times to sit Obum down and talk some sense into him, but Obum had always hated that. He didn't like it when Obinna started acting like his father. Nevertheless, Obinna still loved his brother and did whatever he could for them.

Now that Obinna needed their help, he tried talking to both of them. He went to them both, and as expected, returned dismayed. They treated him like he wasn't their elder brother but a common beggar who stopped them on the street and asked for some money. Had they forgotten how he had never thought of himself but only did what he could for them? Didn't they know that he could have made a posh life for himself? He had sacrificed everything that he had so they could become someone. And now that they had big businesses, clout, fame,

and everything, they treated him like a common beggar. They had both refused to help him with his family situation. Obu, especially, still held a grudge against the punch that Obinna had served him with and made sure that he made it clear.

“You stopped being my brother when you decided to take up Nneka’s side instead of mine. Is that what brothers do? Do they leave their brothers lying on the street, bleeding to death, while they chatted up the love of their life?”

“You know it wasn’t like that, Obu. You were killing her. I had to do something. And don’t become so melodramatic. It was just a punch. You weren’t dying on the street.”

"That's easy for you to say, brother. You didn't have to face the town afterward. You didn't have to explain to your business partners why you had a black eye. You didn't have to walk around looking like a chump. I did that."

"I'm so sorry, Obu. If there was anything else I could have done, I would have done it. I swear."

"Keep your empty swears to yourself, Obinna. I have told you what I wanted to say. You are dead to me. You don't belong in the same room as me. I would not help you even if my life depended on it. Now go, and don't let me see your face again. And tell that bitch, I hope she is happy living the life of a beggar. I would have made her a queen."

"Yes, we all know what you would have made her Obu. Anyway, I guess I don't have to waste any more of my time here."

With that, Obinna left the office. The workers all looked at him. They all knew who he was, and they all respected him. Obu was another story. If it wasn't for the job, they wouldn't come close to Obu, but times were difficult.

"Obinna! You have to go to the hospital. I won't have it anymore." Nneka snarled at him. This was getting out of hand. First, there was the thirst, then came the fatigue, and now he said

that his vision was getting blurry. She had told him to go to the hospital before, but he had never listened. She knew why. They couldn't afford the fee. Hospitals were just waiting for patients to walk in, and they would suck them dry. Every time she told him to go to the hospital, he would tell her about some expenses that needed to be made. Every time, she would concur, but not this time. This had gone on long enough. One way or the other, she was taking him to the hospital to get properly checked.

Obinna knew when he should listen to Nneka. This was one of those times; he knew that she was right, but he just didn't have the money for it at the moment. He tried to promise her he would go the following month as soon as the salary came, but she would have none of it. Finally, he conceded to her, and they both went to the hospital. The children stayed back home with the neighbors keeping an eye on them. That wasn't necessary, though. Akunna and Ikenna were enough to handle the other two. They were both mature for their ages and helped out their

parents with everything.

Obinna and Nneka reached the hospital, took a number, and sat down to wait. Then an orderly came and gave them a five-page report to fill. It was so much nonsense, but they had to fill it if they wanted to be seen by the doctor. Obinna took the report and started writing. 'At least it will give me something to do while we wait,' he thought to himself. After filling the report and then waiting for another hour, they were finally ushered into a small consulting room. The doctor looked at the report and did some exams on Obinna. He told them to come the next day.

The next day, Obinna and Nneka reached the hospital on time. They were both curious to find out what the doctor had to say. Guessing what it might be, Obinna told Nneka it must be some vitamin deficiency that the doctor would tell them about.

“I’m telling you we have wasted this money. I could have gone down to the drug store and got some multivitamins for myself. Everything would have been fine.”

Nneka's fiery stare put an end to whatever he was going to say next. They entered the same consultancy room and waited for the doctor to arrive. When the doctor came, his somber tone and seriousness gave them a hint that maybe calcium was not the problem. He told them what Obinna's tests had revealed. Obinna had developed diabetes, and it was pretty severe, which was why he was experiencing so many symptoms. The doctor told him that he would have to immediately start a course of insulin and prescribed half a dozen more medications that he would have to take.

As they made their way back home, both Obinna and Nneka were thinking the same thing. How were they going to afford his treatment? Insulin itself was very expensive, and the doctor had added so many other tablets and capsules to the prescription. No matter what they did, they would not be able to support the treatment plan. And if they didn't, Obinna was looking at a painful and heart-wrenching death.

Chapter 6

Death

Nneka was worried. She had never seen Obinna like this. It was as if he had turned into another man, someone that she had never met. He was always angry now. The smallest thing would bring forward a fit of rage the likes of which the family had never seen. The other night, he had thrown the glass of water to the ground and shattered it just because it was not filled to the brim. He was thirsty so much these days.

The doctors had told Nneka about this. With diabetes comes thirst - unquenchable, always-there thirst. She had to make sure that he always had water with him, but even that wasn't enough. One day, he had gone to school, only to come back from halfway because he had drunk all his water and wanted more. On another occasion, Ikenna had given him a

glass of water and five minutes later he had yelled at Ikenna for not bringing him the water. He had forgotten that he had already had the water.

Things were tough all around. Now, Obinna was showing fatigue like never before. He would get tired of almost everything. He was only going to school, and even that was tiring him out. He had written an application to school about his medical condition and they had done everything that they can for him. They had given him classes on the ground floor, so he wouldn't have to climb the stairs multiple times a day. They made sure that he didn't get any extra duties so he could rest as much as he could. But still, his condition was getting worse by the minute.

If a teacher asked a student to go and give a message to Sir Obinna, the student would straight out refuse. They didn't want to be in the same room with him. They avoided him like the plague. And that's not all. The other teachers were doing the

same thing.

Also, he found himself sleeping all the time. After he got home, he would go to bed and wake up only in the late hours of the night to eat some food and take his medicine. The principal had also caught him in school, sleeping in the teacher's room, but hadn't said anything. He knew how tough things were for him. Also, he knew that Obinna wasn't like that. He was one of the star teachers of his school, and this was just because of the disease. Once, Obinna was able to take it under control, things would become much better. Everybody hoped that was the case. But things weren't turning out like that.

At home, the family that once loved Obinna now walked on eggshells around him. They knew that anytime his rage would come out and devour them. One time, he had yelled at the two little ones so hard that they had cried for hours. They were not used to this, and they didn't fully understand what was going on. They only knew that the father who played with them,

tickled them, told them jokes and stories had suddenly turned into the monster hiding in the cupboard.

Nneka, Akunna, and Ikenna made their best effort to keep him calm and happy. Ikenna had got a job at the local publisher and was working full time. He had stopped going to school. He now left early in the morning to distribute the papers then came back home for a quick breakfast. Then he left again to help the owner with the publishing and other stuff. He was not a grown man, but because of his family's condition, he was now shouldering the responsibility of a grown man. The salary that he made was meager to say the least, but it was something. It helped.

Obinna himself didn't know what was happening to him. His doctors had told him all about diabetes and its effects, but it was still surprising to him when he found himself yelling at his kids or his lovely wife. He had never thought it was possible. Raising his voice on his wife was the last thing that he thought

he would ever do, but here he was, doing it again and again.

It was their love for each other that made Nneka take it all and never say anything in return. But Obinna knew that everybody had a breaking point and hers was coming soon. He knew that the people at school hated him now. He could see it in their eyes. He wished he could tell them what was happening to him, but he knew they wouldn't understand. Diabetes was just a part of it. There was also matter of money, and that it was never there.

He was sitting down, trying to do his budget when Nneka walked into the house.

“Hey Obinna. Feeling better?”

“Not much, my love. It feels like I have just run a marathon. Every part of my body aches. I don't know how much more of this I can take.”

“Now don't talk like that darling. As long as we are

together, we can handle everything.”

The rage monster raised its ugly head.

“How? Tell me, how? Look at this budget. We are out of money. We have nothing left anymore. I sold everything that I could in the market and it still wasn’t enough. What more do you want me to do? Sell one of the kids?”

“Obinna! Don’t you ever talk like that. Don’t you say anything like that about the kids.” Nneka finally raised her voice. She had had enough.

“I’m sorry my love. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me, but it has been coming over me a lot these days.”

“I know darling. I know. I forgive you. Now let’s see what we can do about the budget.”

They both sat together, and looked at the sheet that Obinna had been working on.

Under the table, Obinna took Nneka’s hand into his own

and gave it a squeeze. Nneka allowed the hint of a smile to grace her lips. They were still much in love. But the smile disappeared as soon as it had come. She was looking at the budget and it was not a good thing.

“I told you Nneka. We don’t have any money left.”

“But how could that be? What about Ikenna’s salary?”

“You call that a salary? I wish he would stop working for that vampire. He is sucking my son dry. He treats him like a slave all day, and then gives him peanuts.”

“At least it is something, Obinna. What would we do without it?”

“We don’t have money for my medicine anymore, Nneka. If Ikenna quits his job, we would still be in the same position. I don’t see why I have to put him through all of this, knowing that it’s not making a damn difference.”

Nneka had nothing to say to this. She knew that he was

telling the truth. She knew that they didn't have any more hope. The money that they got from the school was barely enough to pay for the groceries and the bills. And some of it was left for the medicine, but not for the Insulin. That was too expensive. They would buy some of the other medicine and try to make do with it. Their regular hospital visits were costing them too much. They didn't have enough to pay the hospital every time. It seemed like every time they went to the hospital, the doctors would ask them for a new test. It was all becoming impossible to handle.

She just got up from the table, kissed Obinna on the head and said, "Let me make you a cup of tea. We will drink it together and then sit down and have a go at this again. There must be something that we can do."

Obinna just nodded his head weakly. He knew that she was just buying some time. He also knew that it wasn't going to work.

As she left for the kitchen, Obinna started thinking about his brothers—his goddamn brothers. He had raised them like his own children. He had sacrificed so much for them. He had always put them first, and put all of his wants and needs afterwards. And now, when he needed them, they were gone with the wind. He had gone to both of them multiple times, asking for help. They had turned him down. They didn't want anything to do with him.

Obum even had a bit of pleasure throwing him out of his office, knowing that he had punched him in the face and married his girl. This was a fitting revenge and Obum was reveling in it. Kalu hadn't been so vicious, but he had the same stone-face when Obinna had turned up to ask for help. He at least had the decency to make up excuses for Obinna. The business wasn't doing so well, his men had stolen his money and ran away, and the drought had taken whatever was left.

When the last time he had gone to meet with them, he

knew it was the last time. He wanted what was his. He had had enough of them acting like brats. He wanted his share of their father's properties so he could pay for his treatment. But when he reached Kalu's home, it was locked from the outside. He rang the bell again and again, but nobody came out. He had stayed there all afternoon, sweating like crazy, but not moving. It was a last resort. He had to give it his best shot.

Then a neighbor had been kind enough to call him to his house. He had given him water and food, and told him that Kalu had left a couple of days ago. Where could he have gone? No one had any ideas. All they knew was that he had told his manager to handle things for him while he was away on urgent business.

Obinna then went to Obum's place. He knew he ran the risk of being run out of the house again, but wanted to give it one more try. The same thing happened there. The house was locked, all the windows were boarded up, and there was no one

inside. Obum had done the same with his business. He had told his manager that he was leaving on an urgent business, and wouldn't be back soon. But the manager, like everyone else who worked for Obum, was tired of his antics and hated him.

He sat Obinna down and told him that Obum knew Obinna would come and try to get his share of their parents' properties. He had called Kalu over to his office and they had had a lengthy discussion. The manager had heard some parts of it while he went inside to get some invoices signed. Apparently, they were making plans of leaving the city and staying away until Obinna would no longer be able to come. They had seen his condition and knew that traveling wasn't something he would be able to do. They were waiting him out. Their hearts were black and unforgiving. They would rather see their brother die than part with the money that they owed him.

And that was that. Obinna now knew that he didn't have anybody he could trust apart from his family. They had not

helped him a bit with his treatment, even though they owed their careers to him. They had turned a blind eye towards his pain and suffering and only thought of their money. Obinna was all alone.

After a few days, Nneka got a call from the school. Obinna was taking a class and had fallen down, unconscious. They had called for the ambulance, they wanted her to come too. Thinking the worst, Nneka threw a dress on and ran for the school. When she reached the school, she saw the ambulance leaving. She couldn't see anyone inside. What was happening? As she approached the school, the principal walked out to receive her.

“Nneka. Good to see you. I wish we were meeting in other circumstances.”

“Yes sir. I wish that too. What happened?”

“They say that he wasn't hydrating enough and fell unconscious. They have put in a drip and told him to rest. He is in my office and he is conscious now. Don't worry.”

“Oh, that’s such a relief.” Nneka sat down on the bench by the door. Her legs were shaking. After five minutes, she composed herself and followed the principal to his office. Just as he had said, Obinna was lying on a bench inside the office. His complexion was completely white, as if he were a ghost. His eyes were half open and his lips looked so parched that he might have just come from the desert.

“Oh, Obinna. What happened?” She ran to his side.

“I’m okay. I’m fine.” He tried to sit up and then gave up after a little while.

“No you are not Obinna. It is obvious to everyone. You need some rest,” the principal said.

“I will rest here for some time and then I’ll go home. I’ll be right as rain tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Obinna.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry. I tried my best to keep you on as long as I could. But I have to answer to the school board, and they have been worried about your situation for days.”

“I don’t understand. What are you trying to say?”

“I...I...I’m afraid that I have to fire you Obinna. I don’t have any choice. My hands are tied. You can send your wife tomorrow to collect your salary.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not dead. I was just a little exhausted, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry, Obinna. That’s all I can say.”

The principal left the office. Obinna and Nneka looked at each other. They knew there was nothing they could do.

Now, they had no money at all. It was a month after Obinna had been fired. His salary had run out. The meager amount that Ikenna brought home had run out. There was nothing left. After spending a lot of time in agonizing pain,

Obinna left the world, surrounded by no one but his immediate family. His last words were incoherent and they just sounded like a scream for mercy.

Obinna was gone.

Chapter 7

Lands and Shares

Nneka had had it. It had been a few years since Obinna died, and here she was still going from one brother to another, asking for her legal share in their land. That share belonged to Obinna, but now that he was dead, it belonged to her and her children. They needed that money to live their lives.

After Obinna, Nneka had gone back to working in her father's shop. Ikenna was still working with the newspaper publisher. Between the two of them, they were barely making ends meet. Nneka was getting more and more desperate by the day. She needed that money so she could run her house and send her kids to school. Right now, they were just at home all the time or helping her with her father's shop. But even that wasn't enough as the shop wasn't doing very well. Her father had

allowed her to work, but he knew that he was barely making enough. He couldn't give some of that money to her, but in the end, a daughter's love won, and he allowed her in.

Ikenna was not feeling good either. His boss overworked him and then cut away his salary on false pretexts. Some days, he would allege that Ikenna wasn't on time. Others, he would say that he hadn't dropped the newspaper at a client's house, and the client was mad. It was as if the whole world was against them. Nobody cared whether they lived or died. Nobody tried to help them. It was as if they did not exist.

Kalu and Obum had made their plans not to share any of the lands with Nneka. They were both greedy and wanted it all for themselves. For them, Nneka was an outsider, and she didn't deserve the land or the money. But it wasn't that. If they really cared about Obinna, they would have helped with his medication and his treatment at the hospital, but they had never given him a single dollar. They had both forgotten about the

time when he had helped them and sacrificed his own life in order to make something out of them. They had both forgotten that he had raised them like a father and how much he loved them.

Now, Obinna's family were like enemies who were bent on taking away their lands. They had met several times to discuss their plan of action and were always of the same mind. Obum had filled Kalu's head with hatred for Nneka. He had never forgiven her for marrying his brother. It was an ego trip for him, actually. He was always the one who had rejected other girls. And here was this girl who had dared reject him. She had made him feel less of a man.

The story about Obinna punching Obu and taking Nneka away had been told again and again throughout the town, and Obum hated her for it. He hated her more than he hated his brother. She was the one who had started it all. She was the one who had come to his house even though he had told her not to.

She was the one who had stormed out of his house, thinking as if she meant anything.

Kalu hated her almost as much as Obum. Obum had slowly brainwashed him into believing that everything that happened to them was because of her. He didn't believe in the beginning that Obinna was sick. He just thought that it was Nneka, making Obi do all this drama to get the money out of Kalu's hands. How dare she? She was using her husband to get rich. How could Kalu let her do that? It wasn't her money. Kalu had worked hard to make it.

The lands were there for Kalu and Obu if they ever needed extra cash to grow their business. Not only that, he hated the children too. They reminded him of Obinna and how he had sacrificed everything to take care of his brothers. That would bring on a guilt trip that Kalu didn't care for. He was happy in his life. He had pushed those memories to the back of his mind and didn't need to be reminded of them.

He had only seen Akunna and Ikenna once when they were little. He had never come to Obinna's house to celebrate the birth of the other two children. He didn't even know their names. All he knew was that they were a family who wanted to take his lands away from him. Also, he believed Obum's side of the story of how Obinna and Nneka had plotted behind his back and trapped him on the street.

He knew that Obinna loved Nneka and figured that they wanted to be together, but only after they got Obum out of the way. If Obum hadn't found out about them, they would have killed him and then come after Kalu. No way in hell was he ever letting them do that. And now, his brother was dead, but the damn wife was still after him for the land. *'Let them come,'* he thought, *'let them try to take my land away from me. I will show them what I can do.'*

Obum sat in his office, waiting for Kalu. He had called him to talk to him about the land and what they should do with

Nneka. She was getting to be a real pain in their necks. She had even had the courage to go to the law, and now the police were taking an interest in the case. Kalu walked into the office and smiled at his brother.

“Hello, Obum! How is it going?”

“How is it going? Don’t you know what has been happening? Don’t you know what she is doing to us?”

“Ugh! What now? I am tired of this damn woman putting herself in places where she doesn’t belong.”

“She has gone to the law. She is going to file a case against us.”

“Hahaha. Is that all, brother? Is that what's been keeping you tense?”

“What do you mean is that all? Why aren’t you taking it seriously?”

“I’m not taking it seriously because I knew this day

would come. I have already made preparations.”

“What are you talking about? What preparations?”

“I have talked to the Mayor and the Police Chief. They are both good friends of mine, and I even helped the Mayor get a job for his brother when he needed it. They have assured me that Nneka will have no luck with the law. It will be like she is banging her head against a wall.”

"Oh, Kalu! Why didn't you tell me before? I have been sweating here for days. I thought the police were going to break down my door and take me to jail any day now."

"Nothing like that is going to happen, brother. Trust me. I just forgot to tell you about it."

“So, now that you have taken care of that mess, what are we going to do about the land?”

“What do you mean? Don’t you think we should sell it and get the hell out? It is a draught brother, and no one is doing

any good.”

“Yes, but we both have successful businesses. I think we can wait it out. Once the draught is gone, the prices will go up again. I think we should wait and then sell in good season.”

“Brother, the current crisis is gone, but we don’t know what she will do next. I think we should go while the going is good. So what if we don’t get the expected price? It is better to hand it over to her of all people.”

“Don’t you think we have what it takes to handle her?”

"Brother, from what you've told me, she is a willy one. She will put on a drama and get the people on her side. And even if she didn't, the people will only have to see a widow with her four children, and their hearts will melt for that conniving family. Then it might become a problem for us. The Mayor and the Police Chief can only take so much heat. If the matter gets worse, they might step away. They are my friends, but they love their jobs and don't want anything to happen to them.”

"Well, in that case, I think you are right. I will go and ask around if anybody is interested in the land. It is prime land; I'm sure someone will want to purchase it for investment purposes."

"I have sent word to other towns. If there is someone who wishes to buy land, I'll know about it. I can bring him here, and we can show them the land together."

"Yes, that is a good thing, brother."

"Okay. So now that you are relaxed, can I go now? I have a date that I don't want to miss."

"Oh, sure, brother. Just keep in touch with your friends and see what she is doing."

"Of course, Obum. Bye."

Kalu got up and walked out of the office. After so many days, Obum cracked a smile. He lay back on his chair and started whistling under his breath. Things were looking up.

He loved Kalu, but he also knew that he was naïve. He

had always believed any lie that Obum had told him, and it was true in this case too. Obum had filled him up with hatred for Nneka. He had spun a yarn about how much he loved Nneka and how he was about to have a grand wedding when he had got wind of Nneka, going behind his back to meet with Obum secretly. They were planning to kill him, dump his body, and then get married. With Obum gone, Kalu wouldn't be a problem, and soon the two of them would control all the land without sharing it with anyone. When Obum approached them and confronted them, Obinna had beaten him to an inch of death while Nneka stood to one side laughing maniacally. Their plan had gone to waste, but they had still disrespected Obum in the street and thrown his reputation in the mud.

Kalu had swallowed the story hook, line, and sinker. He did not go out in town much, and Obum was his only source of news. He had taken Obum's words to heart and had started hating Obinna for what he had done. After all these years,

Obinna had finally shown his true face. Well, two could play at that game. He had hated Obinna when he had showed up at his house, asking for charity.

Kalu knew that it was just a ruse to get into his house so that he could kill him and take over his shares of the land. Kalu was too intelligent to let Obinna go ahead with his plan. He had thrown Obinna out of his house and told him never to come back. When he had heard the news of Obinna's death, there had been a single pang of regret and sorrow, but he had hurriedly pushed it down. A bottle of whisky had helped him do the trick. And now, he was going to fight Nneka with everything that he had. The land was his and Obum's. Nobody else had any right to it, and he would die before he let anyone touch a single grain of soil.

After a couple of days, Kalu called Obum with good news.

"Hello, brother. I hope you are sitting down."

“Yes, I am. Why? What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought I would tell you that I have found a buyer for the land.”

“What? That is great. Where did you find someone who would buy land in this draught?”

“It’s a client of mine. He is loaded. I told him that this was the right time to invest in property as the prices were low. Once the draught started fading, the prices would skyrocket, and he would easily get four times the price that he is paying now. He took it all. He believes he is doing the right thing.”

“Oh, wow! That is great. So, what is the holdup?”

“No holdup, brother. I am bringing him around in a week. Make sure that you are there to greet us when we arrive.”

“Of course, brother. I will be here.”

“And he likes to drink, so make sure that you have your bar stocked with the best stuff. After all, he is purchasing our

land. We have to keep him happy until the time the deal is done."

"Of course. I will make sure that he doesn't spend a single day sober while he is here."

Both the brothers cackled over the phone.

In one week, Kalu brought the buyer. He liked the land that he saw and immediately called his lawyer to create the documentation for the transfer of the land. In another two weeks, the documentation was ready. The two parties met, exchanged the documents and the cheese, and the deal was done.

Nneka was sitting in her father's home. She was dead tired. She had come home from the shop and made food for the kids, then cleaned up after them as they fell asleep one by one. Ikenna was the last to go to sleep.

"Mother, do you think our situation will ever get better?"

"Yes, dear. One day it will be better. Now go to sleep.

We both have to get up early in the morning.”

She looked out the window, thinking about the land that was not hers anymore. She didn’t know what had happened.

Chapter 8

Mom and Children's Struggle

Nneka was crestfallen. She had just come to know about the land being sold. She knew that Obum and his brother didn't have any love for her and her children, but she didn't know that they would stoop to this level just to keep her out of what she deserved. They had sold the land to a wealthy businessman from another town and left. They had even sold their houses. They were operating their businesses from some other location, nobody knew of. Both the brothers were in the wind. She had even contacted the police, but it seemed that the law was on their side. She was told, in no uncertain terms, that she was harassing two respectable businessmen of the town and if she pursued this

line, she would get into a lot of trouble.

Now, here she was, with four children, no money, and nowhere to go. She was drained of all energy. Even waking up in the morning was a feat of terrible strength. She couldn't do it. Her friend had told her that she might be going into depression, and that she needed medicine to fight it. But where would she get the medicine from? It's not like she had a lot of money. All her plans depended on getting Obinna's share of the land, and now all her plans were laid to waste. Her children's future was at risk. Even her father had hinted that he could not afford to keep her on the job as the store wasn't doing well in the first place. It was making enough money to support her father and family, but the additional four children were not part of the plan.

She could understand her father's worries. He had enough to support himself and had never considered that he would be supporting his daughter and her four growing children. They had needs that had to be fulfilled. Akunna had gotten

pretty sick when they first arrived there, and somehow, they had managed to pay for her doctor's fees and the medicine. The two young ones were growing up fast. It seemed that they always needed new clothes and shoes. Their schooling was also being affected. Akunna and Ikenna were not going to school at all. It was Nneka's father who had convinced them to carry on with it. They were not at all willing, but they did it anyway. Nneka had also told them that if they wanted to do something with their lives, and not be poor always, they would need their education.

But Nneka could not see a way out of this predicament. They had no money, nobody to bank on, and the future looked as bleak as ever. Whatever money they were supposed to get from the land was gone. After taking care of Obinna and going through those tough times, Nneka was also feeling lost and losing her strength. Her hair was fast becoming white due to the worry and stress that she carried with her all day. It was like nothing could go right with them.

She had applied for a job as a teacher in the school that Obinna taught. The principal had not liked the idea at first, but then the other staff had convinced him. Nneka didn't have the necessary qualifications to become a teacher. The Principal had told her that while she did her job, he would require her to do some teaching courses and certificate programs so he could show them to the board. She had agreed. She didn't know when she would do those courses. She just didn't have the time for it. She was currently doing two full-time jobs. She would wake up early in the morning, prepare breakfast for the children, and then get ready for school. She would then wake up the children. The older two were responsible for getting the younger two ready. Then they would hurriedly wolf down the breakfast and leave for school. After school, the children would come home while Nneka would go to her other job.

She had joined a local real estate company as a receptionist. Even though that was her job, her employer would

ask her to do various other things too. She would get him coffee, keep track of his time table, take care of any and all documentations, and more. Some days she thought he would also ask her to sweep the floor and lock up at the end of the day. But things were tough, and the fact that she had two jobs was enough for now. But this also meant that she got home late at night.

By the time she came home, the children would be fast asleep. Only Ikenna would be awake. He would never go to sleep without seeing his mother. Usually, when she came home, he would have a cup of tea ready for her. As she sat down in a chair and drink tea, he would tell her about their day and what happened to all of them. He would rub her feet and her shoulders. Sometimes, she would put her head on his hands and fall asleep without even knowing it. He would gently wake her up, and walk her to her room where she would fall down on the bed and be asleep in five seconds. He would go back to the

kitchen, clean up after her, put all her things in place and then go to bed himself.

Due to the two jobs, money had started coming in, but it was still not enough. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't provide for her family the way Obinna did, or the way she wanted to. When they had married, Obinna's salary was enough for them, and they had not thought about Nneka getting a job. She was comfortable in her role as a housewife. Her responsibility was to keep the house in shape and make sure her family had everything they wanted. Then when they had four children, she had asked Obinna about getting a job, but he had rejected the idea. He was strong then, and had told her that if they were short of money, he could get another job. At the time, they also expected to receive their share of the land and that was like a security blanket that kept them safe. If anything happened, Obinna could always go to his brothers and get his share. But that dream went down the drain. Right now, she was working

two full-time jobs, and that was enough.

Ikenna didn't tell his mother, but he had gotten a job in the evening. He would work in a garage part-time, and be home before his mother. She never realized what was going on. There were a lot of things that needed repairing, or sometimes, the groceries would run out and Ikenna would go out and buy them from his own money. Nneka was so tired at the end of the day that she never realized it. If she ever asked, he would tell her that he had bought the things from the money that he and Akunna had saved earlier. But in fact, there was no money to save.

The problem was that both Akunna and he had asked their mother if they could get jobs and help her out with the finances, but she had outright rejected the idea. She had told them that it was their time to study. They should not concentrate on anything other than that. She knew that if they got jobs, they would pay less attention to their studies, and then they would be

stuck in the vicious cycle and never make something of themselves.

Obinna had dreamed of sending his children to university, and Nneka was going to follow that dream. For that purpose, she had never allowed them to get jobs even though they had tried to assure her several times that their education would not be affected. Despite her denial, Nneka knew that if they got jobs, things would become a little bit easier for her, and overall for the entire family. They could buy food, maybe get a better house, and have enough left for medicine and treatment if any of them ever got sick. But every time she thought about it, Obinna's image would come before her eyes. He was very proud of his children and he had always told her that he wanted them to follow their dreams and become experts in their own fields. He knew the importance of education and had always wanted them to complete their education before thinking about a job or anything.

Ikenna knew about his father's dreams for them and wanted to accomplish them. But he also saw his mother's condition every night when she came home. Her eyes would be red, her shoulders hunched from all the burden that she carried around. There were a few strands of white in her hair, when earlier her hair had been jet black. There were dark circles underneath her eyes and every time she smiled, which wasn't often, it would only increase the effect. She looked tired no matter what time of day it was.

Ikenna knew that she couldn't continue like this, but every time he went to her about getting a job, he would get the same answer from her. That is why he had taken a job in secret so she couldn't refuse him and had told Akunna about it. After school, they would bring the other two siblings home. Akunna would be responsible for making them take a bath, change clothes and get some rest. In the evening, they would do their homework with her.

Ikenna would go straight from school to his other job. His employer was an old man and he was kind. He would make sure Ikenna would get enough free time to do his homework. He also paid him a good salary. He could see that the youngster was struggling and wanted to help. He had known the family for a long time. Obinna had taught his son in the fifth grade, and he knew Obinna was such a good teacher.

Between the two and a half jobs, the family had to make do. They were not in a good place, but at least they were getting by. They were fighters and they would not give up as long as they had the strength to fight. But as Nneka became tired much easier, there was no way of telling just how long they could continue like this.

Chapter 9

IK's Struggles

Even though she often felt like giving up, Nneka kept working hard. She knew that it was the only option she had; she had to earn to make sure that her family survived. Sometimes, it would become too exhausting, and even IK's massages were not able to help. She was grateful to her son for everything, and sometimes she felt like IK was a reward given to them for their hardships. She had nothing but praise for her son, who had assumed the responsibility of all his younger siblings, even though he was just a kid himself.

Nneka often regretted that her eldest son did not get to be a child for long; he was forced to assume responsibilities much bigger than his size. She often wondered how he was not overwhelmed already. She knew that it must be terribly difficult

for him, seeing his friends enjoy their high school while he was forced to come home early to help his sister look after his younger siblings.

IK had no idea what he meant to his mother. He knew it was becoming very hard for her to continue with her job because she was getting old fast. She already looked at least fifteen years older than her actual age. Often, he would find himself comparing her to the mothers of his friends, who still looked young and fresh and healthy and seemed to enjoy their life. They had all these clubs they went to after their kids went off to school, and they would be at home to welcome their children home after school, but not his mother.

Nneka was forced to work two jobs, and often, days would pass by before she could get the chance to actually interact with her kids. This was why he made it a point to stay up each night, no matter how exhausted he was, so he could spend some time with her. He did not do it for himself alone; he

knew how much his mother valued their time together. He knew that because he would see his mother's eyes light up every time, she would come home after a long tiring day and see him sitting there waiting for her. Then, IK thought, his mother would look the most beautiful woman in the world, with shining eyes and a radiant smile on her worn, haggard face – even more beautiful than the mothers of his friends.

Life was difficult for IK. He found it hard to manage his part-time job with his studies, but he persisted. He was grateful to his manager for all the help because often, he felt like he would not have been able to manage if it was not for this kind man. Because of that, IK managed to pass high school with great grades, and he decided to look for a full-time job to help his mother. He would be pretty worn out by the time he would get home, but he would still find enough strength to prepare a cup of tea for his mother and smile for her when she came home. All because he knew that his mother needed him, and after his

father's death, he had vowed to stay by her side always.

When Nneka proposed to him to apply for colleges after high school, IK firmly refused. Nneka was devastated by his refusal and refused to accept it. She took off one day and decided to talk to her favorite son once and for all.

"IK," she asked that Friday morning after breakfast, "Do you have anywhere to go today?"

"Well, mother, I do, but I have some good news to share with you tonight," he replied.

"Where do you have to go?" she asked again. "Can't you go an hour late?"

"I can, mother, but don't you have to leave?" IK questioned, surprised yet completely ignoring the first question. He did not wish to answer the question because he did not want to tell his mother until later that night in detail that his manager had offered him a full-time position at his store now that his

education was over. The salary was good, and he had to go that very day to confirm his availability.

"I have taken an off today because there is something I want to talk to you about," she said. IK looked at her, surprised, a shadow of worry crossing over his young face. As far as he remembered, his mother had never taken an off.

"Everything alright, Mother?" he asked when he really wanted to ask if everything was alright with her. His mother's declining health was a constant source of his worry, and he was grateful that he finally had a job and his mother could finally spend more time at home, resting.

"Yes, yes," Nneka answered reassuringly. "It's just some other important stuff."

Reassured, IK continued helping her to make breakfast. When his siblings left for school, he prepared two cups of tea and sat down with his mother. She stared at him seriously and then began,

“My darling son, I cannot be more proud of you today. You have been my rock during all this hard time, but now it is your time to live for yourself. I want you to go to university to complete your education.”

"Mother," IK began, but Nneka cut him short.

“Listen to me,” she said sternly this time, “That is what your father wanted as well.”

“Times were different when father was alive,” IK said resentfully.

“Yes, but we have to make the best of what we have,” she answered.

"And we will, Mother, together. I wanted to save this news for tonight but since you have brought up the topic, let me tell you that I have been given a position at a store. I will now be working full-time, and my pay is pretty decent. You will not have to work two jobs anymore, Mother, and I ..." he stopped

because Nneka had covered her face and was now sobbing.

Thinking that she was relieved, IK put his hand gently on his mother's shoulders. "It is going to be alright now, Mother, finally...."

But he was clearly mistaken. The next second, Nneka was on her feet, staring furiously at her son as if he hurt her beyond measure.

"How dare you?" she shouted. "How dare you stand and tell me this when I have asked you, begged you, again and again not to think about working at all until you have finished college?"

Startled because he had never seen Nneka this angry, IK tried to reason with her.

"But I don't want to leave you for college. I want to help. I am older now."

"You are still my kid, and forever will be. You will go to

college and complete your education."

"But Mother..." IK tried again, but Nneka was not finished.

"You would make me and your father proud. Don't you know how hard it was for me to get a job at your father's school because I was not qualified enough? Do you want to spend the rest of your life earning a meager salary and working your ass off to put some food on the table?"

"I want to be with you," IK argues, "I want to help you."

"Son," Nneka said gently this time, "You would be helping by going to college. This is what I want as well. I will never be able to live with myself if you don't go."

Seeing his mother's tone getting softer, IK tried again.

"Mother, I don't want to leave you."

Almost at once, Nneka's face became grim.

"If you don't leave for college now, I promise I will

never see your face again.”

IK had rarely seen his mother like that. He knew that she meant business, so reluctantly, he finally nodded.

“I love you, son,” Nneka whispered, hugging him, her eyes brimming over while IK tried to stop his own tears from flowing down his face.

A couple of months later, IK found himself at a college library. The college was the most prestigious one in his country, but IK easily got a scholarship because of his academic record. However, instead of studying with his friends, IK was sitting alone at a table, his hands covering his face. Occasionally, he would massage his forehead that had started to hurt often now because of the constant stress. It wasn't his studies that were bothering him; IK was a brilliant student and had already

managed to create a reputation for himself amongst both his colleagues and teachers.

It was the same old problem: money. While he had been awarded a scholarship, he still had to pay for his books and lodgings, and they were very expensive. He was quickly running out of his savings. Even though he had started working part-time after classes at the local bar, he knew that the money was not enough to cover even half of his expenses. In less than a month, IK had become much thinner due to constantly skipping meals because he did not have enough money to pay for them.

IK knew that if he would go to his teachers, they would certainly help him out. But this was not what his father had taught him; he was too proud to beg. Going to his mother was, of course, out of the question; she barely had enough to look after his siblings. With food no longer appearing magically in her house and things no longer getting repaired by themselves,

it had become even more difficult for Nneka to continue. Akunna would have taken on a job, but she already had a lot of responsibilities, like looking after her younger siblings in her mother's absence and keeping the house.

Because he wanted to continue at his university, IK tried the only option he had; he went to his uncles, hoping to make them get some sense of justice. However, both his uncles adamantly refused. Kalu and Obum refused to relent, even though IK came close to begging them for help.

If truth be told, Obum was surprised the day he opened his front door and saw IK standing there. It took his breath away to see the young man who looked so like his father that for a few seconds, Obum thought his elder brother had come back to haunt him. It was when IK introduced himself that Obum realized how stupid he had been to think what he did. However, instead of feeling bad for his nephew, Obum did not even allow him into the house and mocked him for coming to him. IK tried

to argue, but his uncle was relentless.

IK tried his best to argue with him, but he was so aggrieved to see that Obum did not even invite him in to meet his family. He felt so embarrassed and ashamed when his own uncle made him feel like a beggar by mocking him for asking for some help.

'And it wasn't like I was asking for Obum's money,' IK told himself later that day. *"I was asking for my own share that he so cunningly took from my mother. I had a right to it, and he stole that right from me!"*

When he left his uncle's place that day, IK did not know whether he was angry or just sad. He was angry, of course, but his uncle's behavior grieved him deeply. *'Who treats their siblings' children like that?'* He asked himself. He knew Obum could have easily helped him had he wanted to because he lived in the city where IK's university was and had a lot of connections there. He could have gotten his nephew cheaper

lodgings and a better job, even if he did not want to part with his money - *although he could have easily parted with some, considering how much he had*, IK thought resentfully.

IK was amazed to see Obum's house as well. It was a huge house, with a front lawn which had a well-kept garden and even a swimming pool. Even though IK was not invited inside, he could tell just from the outside how extravagant everything would be - little could he guess that despite his wealth, Obum was jealous of IK when he saw him and had heard that he was studying at the best university in the country. He hated to see Obinna's child become so successful, and he deliberately refused all help so IK would be forced to abandon his education and go home. After IK left, Obum immediately called Kalu to warn him about IK's visit.

When IK visited Kalu, it was with some hope that his second uncle would not abandon him like the first one. From what his mother told him, Kalu was not bad; he was just foolish

with no mind of his own and easily got influenced by others. IK hoped Kalu would help him knowing his nephew's plight. Nneka was right; Kalu would have helped had not Obum approached him first. So when IK reached Kalu's house, his younger uncle refused to see him altogether. For days IK tried to approach Kalu until he finally realized that his uncle was deliberately avoiding him.

IK was shattered. He admonished himself for putting his hope on his uncles when they refused to even help save their older brother's life. Finally, he decided to go back to his hometown and continue his education at a local university to at least evade paying extra for lodgings. He went back and took up his previous job. While Nneka was somewhat pleased to see her son back home, she could see that IK was sad because he really missed his old university. However, she understood his reasons, and the family sadly settled back into their old routine.

Two weeks passed, and then one day, IK suddenly

received a call from one of his professors at the previous university. He listened with disbelief as the teacher told him that the university had agreed to give IK a stipend if he came back and join their institution again because he was one of their best students. The stipend was more than enough to not only cover his expenses but also send some money home. IK cried that day, and so did Nneka when he shared the news with his mother.

Two days later, the family hugged IK goodbye for the second time as he left for his old university. That evening, standing alone at the front door, Nneka allowed herself to shed a few tears. Akunna saw her and asked:

"Why are you crying, mother? You should be happy for our brother."

"I am dear," Nneka replied. "I am just so proud of my son. But I am going to miss him."

"It is only for a couple of years. And when he comes back, I am sure he would be able to find a great job and

everything would alright finally,” Akunna said hopefully.

“Yes,” Nneka said, echoing the hope in her daughter’s voice, “Just a few more years.”

The mother and daughter smiled, thinking of the future ahead, as they watched the sunset across the horizon.

Chapter 10

Akunna's Marriage

Miracles have a strange way about them; they never appear when you expect them to or *where* you expect them to. More often than not, when the dreary gray skies finally clear and a miraculous rainbow pops out of a corner of the clear, blue sky, you are too worn out to recognize the miracle that stands in front of you.

Akunna had spent twenty-one years of her life on the lookout for such miracles, for a rainbow to shine its wholesome light upon her and her family. So far, she had not been quite lucky. On the path to her rainbow, Akunna had hit several thorns along the way - thorns that stung and hurt her feet, but still, she carried on. She had to carry on, for how else would their household run?

Ever since her father had passed away, the struggle to stay afloat and make do with the most meager of resources became a challenge. Every single day that Akunna would wake up, she would pray for her rainbow - for it was *hers* - to shine on their kitchen and double everything that the little, cramped space held. There never was enough flour, grits, or lard to feed a family of five, let alone a family with growing teenagers in it, but somehow, Akunna managed.

On her quest to make the most out of nothing, Akunna would wake up early, pray to God, and with the strength that it afforded her, would embark on the battle that awaited her in the kitchen. Her mother, whose weary snores echoed in every corner of their little house, would be up in an hour and would need to be fed for a long day's work at her job. Akunna loved her mother dearly, and the deep lines of weariness and bone-deep tiredness on her face frightened her. She remembered how her father had passed – *what kind of daughter would she be if*

she ever forgot? And she trembled at the mere thought of something similar happening to her mother.

It was this gut-wrenching fear that had her sneaking away half of her portion into her mother's breakfast plate. She was young and strong and could muster the strength to fulfill all that was required of her without some grits. Her mother, on the other hand, could not. She was already working day and night, and this was the least that Akunna could do as her only daughter.

As more and more time passed in the slow and excruciating way that time passes when on an empty stomach, Akunna stopped wishing for miracles to happen. She did not know what had sparked this change that one day, she just woke up and decided to take a more hands-on and practical approach to the battle that awaited her in the kitchen.

The battle to feed hungry mouths was not a normal battle and could not be fought with normal weapons. Instead, the only weaponry that she could afford was anything that was related to

strategy. And so, instead of praying to God for the rainbow of miracles to shine its golden light inside her kitchen, Akunna started strategizing. She would chop ingredients as small as she possibly could, thin her soups down with as much water as possible, and reserve the buttermilk that separated from the butter to be used in other recipes.

Aside from strategy, Akunna would devote a lot of time to making her recipes as creative as she possibly could. She would replace ingredients with cheaper alternatives and cook in larger batches, which she would then preserve and package for later use.

Days passed, and Akunna, being quite caught up in the humdrum of her strategizing, cooking, and preserving, did not even acknowledge when she had used up her last miracle. It must have been after IK had left for college, and with one mouth less to feed, Akunna let herself slack off a little.

With her brother's departure to college, that too, at a

stipend that had magically appeared out of thin air, Akunna felt that the need for miracles had turned into a relic of the past. *'Things were finally starting to look up,'* Akunna thought to herself as she lay in bed, thinking about what was to come. In the immediate days after IK left, Akunna waited until her mother and brothers left for work and school. She would then lay down in the bed and think about the challenges that life was preparing to throw down her path in the future and the strategies that she could come up with to deal with them. There would be financial challenges, of course, but at this point, Akunna had more or less perfected the art of making *something* out of *nothing*.

In a couple of years – years that Akunna was sure would pass at a painfully slow rate – IK would come back home and find a job that would lift the entire family out of poverty. Despite this ray of sunshine, there were still several unanswered questions lingering at every corner of the house. As she got out

of her bed and made her way to the kitchen to prepare for lunch, the walls seemed to come alive and ask Akunna: *What about Mother? What kind of daughter lets her mother work like an animal?* Ignoring the pestering walls, she'd reach the kitchen, grab the matchsticks, and turn on the stove, only to be asked again: *what kind of terrible daughter are you?*

Out of all of these questions, the ones that terrified her the most were the ones that questioned her about being a good daughter. Akunna tried her best to become one, and she tried her best to take care of the house and her siblings when her mother wasn't around, but there were still whispers around the town. The neighbors would gossip about Akunna and how it was unladylike for a girl her age to be stuck in her parents' house, doing nothing. Akunna knew this wasn't true, but there was still a little part of her that believed that she was making things a lot harder than they had to be for her mother.

Nneka, however, assured her daughter that she was

nothing short of her own personal miracle. Upon hearing this, Akunna burst into pleasant giggles and stared at her mother fondly.

“It’s funny that you should talk about miracles, Mother. I think I’ve stopped believing in them anymore.”

Nneka, who was occupied with sewing a patch on her work dress, placed the needle aside and looked up at her wonderful daughter.

“Oh, my dear Akunna. Why do you say that? I remember when you were younger, your father and I used to love how imaginative you were. What has changed now?”

Akunna did not have the heart to tell her mother how much everything around them had changed, so she gave her mother a silly little reply and left her to her sewing.

The next day, Akunna woke into a world of havoc. For starters, she woke up quite late, and it had been ages since the sun had risen, which meant that her mothers and brothers had left without having any breakfast. As she made her way to the kitchen, a pang of disgust, dread, and guilt washed over her. Not only had her family left without eating a single crumb, but there was also no flour to make the bread for lunch.

In a state of panic, Akunna realized that she had forgotten to buy flour the day before, and there would be no money left to buy any now. Not letting her nerves get the best of her, Akunna decided to go outside and ask her neighbors for help. This would go against everything that her father had taught her, but Akunna could not see any way around this obstacle. At that moment, it seemed that no amount of strategizing could get her out of the mess, so instead, after ages, Akunna let herself hope for a miracle – not anything large or grand – just a small, little miracle that would get her some flour to make bread for

her family.

Stepping out of the house, the hot air flooded in Akunna's face, and guilt flooded through her body as she thought about how hard her mother worked in the scorching summer sun. She made her way to her neighbor's house, knocked for what seemed like an eternity, and left empty-handed. Most of her neighbors were at work and those who weren't thought it was best to ignore her knocks. As far as most of them were concerned, it was Akunna's fault, and it was up to her to fix her mistakes.

Feeling the weight of nerves and panic settling in, Akunna made her way back home, empty-handed and lost in thoughts about what she was going to feed her family for lunch. She could make a tomato stew, but there were no spices left anymore. She had used all of them up for the previous day's supper. Just as she was about to make a right turn to reach her house, Akunna was stopped by Pastor Addo. He was a well-

respected man and was kind in his ways. If there was anybody in the whole village who could help her out, it was Addo.

"Pastor." Akunna inched closer to the pastor, who held his head down and focused on the road ahead.

Upon hearing Akunna's sweet voice, the pastor turned to face her and speak.

"Akunna. Obinna's daughter. How may I help you?"

As soon as the words had left the pastor's mouth, Akunna felt at ease. It was a strange feeling made even stranger by the dread that had occupied her mind all day long. As soon as the pastor uttered those words, all of her worries dissipated and left in its wake a calm unlike any that Akunna had ever known before.

"Pastor. I need some flour. I would have bought some, but I ran out of money. Is there any way that you can help?" Even though Akunna was calm and at ease, her voice was shaky

and nervous. It seemed that underneath the calmness, there was a jittery school-girl feeling provoked by the pastor's presence.

The pastor's feelings were no different from Akunna's. As he gazed at the beautiful young woman, he too felt like a schoolboy who had stumbled upon something quite magical and surreal. As he stared into Akunna's eyes, which, as he noted, were a perfect mixture of honey and brown, he felt he was gazing directly into something sweet and radiant. It was unlike the sunlight that they got here; the sun in this little town was far too intrusive to capture perfectly the essence of Akunna's eyes. No, her eyes were alive - alive and sweet and enveloped in a glimmer that seemed to point towards something a lot larger than life.

'I could stare at these eyes forever,' Pastor Addo thought to himself, but he was far too shy to say the words out loud. He knew Akunna's kind father and her brothers were regular acquaintances. *What would they think if they knew about his*

treacherous thoughts?

“Of course I can help you, Akunna. If you would just follow me to my house, I can fetch some flour for you,” he said with a smile, and Akunna couldn’t help but follow him. If it were up to her, she would have followed him down the end of a five-story building. As they walked, Akunna smiled to herself and thought, “*Maybe my miracle was a person all along.*”

Their love blossomed as quickly and as sweetly as a flower. After the day that the pastor lent Akunna flour, she convinced her mother to invite him for lunch. This was the first of many meetings. Pastor Addo was benevolent in his praise and kind enough to bring the family a sweet pie.

Soon enough, after a couple more lunches in the family's humble abode, it was decided that the two would marry.

Contrary to what Pastor Addo had feared, the men in the family were elated to hear the news. It was a well-known fact that Pastor Addo was a kind, God-fearing man who worked hard and would make sure that their sister would be well provided for. As Akunna's brothers, what more could they want?

Akunna, on the other hand, was over the moon. She could not wait to begin her new life with Pastor Addo by her side. Yet, there was still a small part of her that was saddened to think that she would have to leave her mother.

The bond between a mother and her children is surely a strange thing. Nneka loved Akunna so much, and ever since her husband died, she had taken pride in knowing how kind her daughter had turned out to be. Her daughter had now decided to marry Pastor Addo, and from what she had heard about him, he was a kind-hearted man. To her, kindness was the most important quality to look for in a man. It was what differentiated the Obinnas of the world from the Obums.

If the world was a wish-granting factory, Nneka would have given her daughter everything for her wedding ceremony. However, as she worked ten times harder in preparation for her daughter's marriage, it became quite clear that the world was indeed cruel. Nneka decided to take up another job in the days leading up to Akunna's marriage, and after three months of immense hard work, she was finally able to have saved enough for a humble wedding ceremony.

On the big day, Akunna looked like a princess in her wedding dress. It was IK's gift to his little sister and an apology of sorts for not being able to be there to walk her down the aisle. Still, Akunna could not be more pleased with her brother, who helped her in every way possible. There was a tent set up outside their house, and guests from the entire neighborhood were invited.

Obum and Kalu had also been invited, but they declined the invite to attend any auspicious occasion tied to Obinna's kin.

It was good in a way because there would be no one to taunt Akunna or sneer at the newly-wedded couple on their wedding day. Pastor Addo had put on his best suit, and as he gazed at Akunna while she made her way to him, he thought to himself, *'I must be the luckiest man on the planet.'* When it was time for Akunna to say her vows, she felt the knot in her stomach settle down. She said as honestly as she ever could.

"I promise to love you till the end of times. I promise to be there by your side and support you against everyone, my dear husband. I will be a dutiful, obedient wife, and I will cherish for the rest of our days to come."

When it was Pastor Addo's turn, he smiled at his young wife and spoke.

"My dear Akunna. I will love you with every ounce of my being, and I will be true to you for all times to come. I will take care of you, protect you, and stand for you in all circumstances."

When the vows were finally spoken, there was not a single eye in the tent that was not wet. It was a beautiful ceremony, befitting the love the couple shared.

Chapter 11

Akunna and Pastor

The Pastor and Akunna were living life as if they were inhabiting a never-ending dream. As far as both of them were concerned, the outside world and the lives that they had lived before had faded somewhere, to a place that they no longer knew. There was a sweet haziness all around them, etched and carved into every little nook and cranny of their home. It was there in the plants that Akunna watered in the mornings, and it sat jittering in the corner of the sandy driveway, waiting for when the pastor's car would pull in.

It was this haziness that had distorted their senses, and with it, swept them away from the outside world. As far as Akunna and Addo were concerned, *this* was their world. Their little home, which the pastor remembered to be barren before

Akunna had stepped into it, was all that they needed. Their mornings together had a certain calmness that was foreign to both of them.

In the earliest days of her marriage, when Akunna still could not completely wrap her head around the fact that she was now living a life with the man who had enamored her heart so completely, she still felt a weight bear down on her shoulders. Lying next to Pastor Addo and shuffling in their bed sheets, it didn't take long for her to realize that this weight was the burden of her past life.

In her past life, Akunna had been responsible for her mother and brothers, and it was a responsibility that she had taken on wholeheartedly. She would wake up several hours earlier than everyone, and fight her battles in the kitchen, and try to conjure enough food to feed five hungry mouths with as little as possible. With Addo, there was no such need to wake up early and start strategizing about bread and grits. In the

kitchen, there was always more food than what was needed, so Akunna could sleep for as long as she pleased.

The second that they crossed paths, Akunna knew he would be her miracle, and with each passing minute, this realization only grew stronger. With her pastor, there was comfort and calm, and Akunna had to pinch herself every now and then to remind herself that *this* was her life - that good things could and did happen to women like her. She was living proof of it.

In her dream-like trance, Akunna had never, not even for a split second, tried to cut back on her responsibilities as a wife. Pastor Addo was a kind man, if not the kindest man that she had ever met, after her father. Akunna knew that the cruel world – which he had to return to every day to take care of his church – did not hesitate to take advantage of people like him. She remembered all too well what the world had made of her poor

father, and a shudder of fear would creep up her spine.

She tried to shove the fear back to that deep, dark tin box inside her that it crept out of and would even succeed for the most part.

If the world was cruel, she would stay true to the vows that she had taken on her wedding day and shower her husband with as much kindness and generosity as she could muster out of her tiny frame. When she had been a little girl, unscathed from the harshness of the world, Akunna had often imagined that the larger that a person was, the more kindness that they could store inside themselves. As a grown woman, she would scoff at her younger self and laugh at how terribly wrong she had been.

Addo was not a large man; he stood tall and lanky in comparison to her brothers (and from what she remembered) her father, but there was so much kindness and heart inside of him; that it seemed to spill out everywhere. To be married to such a

man was an honor. To be loved by him and to get to love him, in return, was an even greater honor.

One day, perhaps a week or two after their wedding – time was another thing that got distorted by the dream-induced haziness that they were trapped in – Akunna made another vow to herself. Her husband lay beside her and was still sleeping, unaware of the promises that his wife made to herself. As she counted all the freckles on the bridge of his nose, Akunna decided that the best way that she could devote herself to her husband, in all of her entirety, was to offer him her relentless support.

Lying in their bed of ruffled sheets and marital bliss, Akunna decided that she was never going to say 'no' to her husband. Peering another glance at him, she let out a small giggle. She didn't even need to decide; the decision had already been made many moons ago. *How could she ever say no to the pastor?*

As never-ending as dreams may seem at one point, there are times when reality manages to break through all the lovely man-made barriers and seep through. For Akunna, reality would creep back in, not from the outside but from the rusty tin box inside her. She would be baking a loaf of fresh bread and slicing up plums to make a jam out of when out of nowhere, there would be a pang at her heart. The first time that she had felt it was a couple of weeks after she'd been wedded to the pastor.

For a moment, Akunna stopped what she was doing, barely even registering the sound that the knife made as it hit the floor. There were a couple of sensations that came with the pang; one of those sensations pulled her in, and the other pushed her away. As a result of these conflicting forces, Akunna stayed glued in place, unable to move or act in any way whatsoever. The pang at her heart, the tearing away of some ghost filament that her beating heart was attached to, was familiar to the guilt that would wash over her when she would think about her

mother but was also quite different in the intensity that it now bore. There was nothing gentle about it; instead, it came with such an overwhelming force that it scared her.

Fortunately, the cruel pang did not last long. What did last long was guilt, dread, and disgust. Feelings that Akunna knew better than the love that her husband had to offer her. That night, as she lay in bed, Akunna understood what the pang had been about. It was forceful, cruel, and curt – the pang of the past, and she wondered how long it would be before it dragged her down back to where she came from. Then, Akunna would have to come face to face with all those who she had forgotten and pay the price for her happiness.

On days when reality would reel into their lives, slipping in through some back door that he might have forgotten to close that day, Pastor Addo would pray for his wife. He could see that she was hurt, but there was something underneath that. A feeling that he was not familiar with it, but it reminded him of longing.

The longing was foreign to Addo. When his mother left them, his father had longed for her, but the pastor was too young to make sense of the despair etched on to the wrinkles in his face. When his father had passed away, he had been a young man, and longing seemed not to be worth all the trouble that it caused. So, instead of letting his grief overwhelm him or get to him at all, Addo packed his bags, sold his house for whatever little money he could get, and left.

There was no use being in a place so empty as his childhood home, so Addo decided that he was going to make his home elsewhere. He had walked for miles, and miles, stopping only to drink water and eat the nuts that he had packed with him. After his legs could not take it anymore, Addo fell to his knees. Right in front of him, looming over all the other buildings in the vicinity, was the shadow of a church. Looking at the building filled the young man with an emotion that he could not describe, and with a mind of their own, his feet led him to the church.

Ever since that day, Addo had learned to fill the vacant spaces inside his heart with his Chirstain belief, and he devoted himself entirely to that religious belief for his life. There could be no other way around it. From the minute that he had stepped inside the church, Addo believed that there was a God somewhere who had a plan for him, and the thought of that alone filled his heart with joy and comfort. It was that same belief that had him transcend status within the church and become a pastor—a profession that he felt was his true calling in life.

It was because of his profession that the townspeople respected him and turned to him for all matters regarding faith. Pastor Addo understood, better than most men in his line of work, that faith was a two-way street. Most people expected God to love them regardless of what they did and the hurt that they caused everyone around them. He had seen firsthand how cruel people could be when he had heard his father being called names because his mother had run away. These people did not

understand that God's love had to be earned, and the cost of His love was a lot higher than what they were willing to pay.

God needed sacrifices, and he needed commitment. Pastor Addo tried to teach this to his people, but his words bounced right off them. Disappointed, he would wind up his sermon as quickly as possible and pray for his church-goers. Unlike him, they did not understand the importance of punishment and pain, but he could not blame them for it. As time passed and he got used to the comfortable monotony of his life as a pastor, cherishing his walks from the church to his house, Pastor Addo felt a longing take form inside the deepest pits of his heart. It was a longing for love, unlike anything he had ever felt before, and it sated the second that he laid his eyes on Akunna. *This, he thought, is love.*

In the blink of an eye, a couple of months had passed

right by the married couple. Akunna had paid her family a few visits, each of which would fill her heart with the familiar pang, the second that she would step home. Her mother, now burdened with the task of housekeeping too, was growing frailer with each passing day. Her brothers would help as much as they could, and both of them had taken on part-time jobs to bring some extra money to the household.

There was a part of Akunna that wanted to run back to her home and take off some of the burdens from her mother's shoulders. But she knew that once the words had left her mouth, she was Pastor Addo's and his alone. She would lie in bed and think about her situation. *Was a daughter supposed to stop being a daughter once she got married?* If this was the case, Akunna couldn't help but shake off the feeling that it was quite unfair. The pastor did not have any family, but he spent his time as he pleased, often without even telling her. *Why could she not do the same?*

Slowly, a wall erected itself between the two. Akunna knew that she loved the pastor with all her heart still and that he loved her too – this much she was absolutely certain of, but there was a distance between them, and she did not know what to do about it. She had first felt it two days ago when they had had their first argument. So far, Akunna had been keeping track of all of their firsts – the first times they held hands, the first time they kissed, the first time they went to the church together, but something in her gut told her that she was better off letting this one slide.

Akunna was in the kitchen, which is where she spent most of her time slicing carrots and humming a tune to herself. She heard the sound of the pastor's car pull into the driveway, and an involuntary smile appeared on her face. She was making his favorite stew, and she could not wait for him to taste it. As the sound of his steps drew nearer and nearer, Akunna turned around and greeted her husband.

Although there was nothing different about the way that he hugged her, Akunna saw a glimmer of anger in his face and wondered about the kind of day he might have had. Assuming that there would be more time to talk about it later, Akunna went on humming and returned her attention to the carrots.

“Akunna, when will dinner be ready? I’m starving.” The pastor’s voice came from their bedroom, where he would have been cleaning up.

“Just a little longer. I started off a little late today, so this might take an hour or so,” she said with complete honesty. She had made the mistake of gardening that day, which took up most of her day.

Pastor Addo made his way to the dining table and sighed. It was a sigh of disappointment aimed at her, and Akunna did not understand what she had done to deserve it.

“What’s the matter, darling?” she asked, taking a couple of steps towards her husband.

"Nothing is the matter, sweetheart. It's just that I was expecting dinner would be ready by the time that I got home. A good Christian wife would know that."

Akunna didn't know what to say. She was sure that the pastor hadn't meant to sound so cruel, but his words stung.

"Am I not a good Christian wife?" Once the words had left her mouth, there was no hiding the hurt that they carried.

"You try, my dear. But a good Christian wife knows her duties define her. She knows that her husband's love needs to be earned. She knows better than to keep her husband waiting for food."

The room went silent.

"Have I not earned your love then?" Akunna was on the verge of tears, but the pastor did not seem to notice. Instead of answering and clearing up the doubts that were raging inside his wife's head, Pastor Addo left her in the kitchen and went to lie

down in the bedroom for a short nap.

It soon turned out that the religion that the pastor practiced and preached was different than the religion that Akunna had grown up with. Regardless of the wall between them and their religious differences, Akunna learned how to mold herself into the perfect Christian wife. The pastor seemed pleased, and Akunna was happy to see him happy. Their days took on the same joy they had in the early days of their marriage, and Akunna was elated. One day, while she had been in the garden watering her plants, Akunna had heard Pastor Addo's footsteps making their way to her impatiently.

“Akunna.” His voice called out to her.

“In here.”

She was bent down, hoeing a patch of the earth below

her, and the pastor's eyes glimmered when he saw her.

"Oh, my dearest. Be careful, or you'll get your clothes muddy."

"Don't worry, pastor. I'm getting up."

The pastor helped her up, and she shook the wet dirt off her apron.

"You would not believe who came to visit me in the church today, Akunna," he said, with a wide smile on his face.

"Who?"

"Your uncle. Obum. I was pleasantly surprised to meet him."

"Oh."

"You don't seem too happy? He was a great man. Why wasn't he at our wedding?"

"He did not accept the invitation, husband. And I am more surprised than happy."

"Well, I find your reaction to be quite strange. I talked to him at length and found that we share the same beliefs about multiple things. Particularly about religion."

At the word religion, Akunna winced. The last time they had had their first proper argument had been about religion. Deciding to say nothing, Akunna gave her husband a look that would usually mean the conversation was over. The pastor ignored it and carried on.

"If I'm honest, Akunna, I didn't think your family had any good Christians in it. But Obum proved me wrong."

He laughed and said, "He's invited us for lunch tomorrow. We're going."

Akunna said nothing, for how could she?

In the following months, the strangest phenomenon

began to take place. With the pastor's first meeting with Obum, the seeds of venom were planted in the young couple's household. One meeting turned to another, and soon enough, they were having lunch or dinner with him every other day.

When Akunna saw how happy her uncle made her husband, she forgot all about his cruelty to her family in the past and let his venom seep into her too. The more time that she spent with her uncle, the less time she had for her mother and brothers, who she had not seen for over five months now. Once, while the couple was lunching with Obum, the topic of her family had been brought up.

"It is strange how evil Obinna's kin turned out to be," her uncle said, with mouthfuls of steak in his mouth. "Except dear Akunna, no one in that family is on the right path."

"I agree with you completely," Pastor Addo said and drank his wine.

"You two really ought to do something about *them*. As

evil as they are, they can't be left to their devices. You need to punish them," Obum said maliciously.

"Oh, yes. Punishment. You are right as always, Obum. What do you think, Akunna?"

Akunna, who was lathering her mashed potatoes with gravy, smiled at her husband.

"Of course, they deserved to be punished. Of course, they do," she said and turned back to her delicious meal. Her uncle was right. He was a good and kind man. If he wasn't one, why would he invite her and Addo so often to lunch with them? Right?

Chapter 12

Disown

In a matter of a few months, Akunna's life changed forever. Change had always been a funny thing to her. Just like the miracles that she had looked so forward to, there was no telling where change would come from. It must have crept up behind her back while she kneaded flour in the kitchen or watered her plants, settling into her life with astonishing ease. Change was everywhere, and there was simply no escaping it. It lay in between the pastor and Akunna when they slept and leaned against the invisible wall that had erected in between them. This change was ever-adaptable in its nature. One day, it would be stuck small and cold, in an abandoned corner in their house, shivering in the darkness. The next day, it would stand so tall and big that Akunna was sure that its presence had

morphed into something magnanimous. The promise of this change had loomed over their house ever since Pastor Addo had had that fateful meeting with Uncle Obum.

In this part of town, it was only the men who brought about change in any household - whether it be a more substantial change such as that of money or something more subtle such as the erection of an invisible couple between a couple- and this time was no different. The way that Akunna saw it, the fabric of her life had been pulled apart and was by now no longer recognizable, all because of three men in her life- Obum, Kalu, and her lovely husband, Pastor Addo.

When the change first knocked on their door, Akunna was suspicious of it. The way that it had slid into their lives, undetected and unbothered, made her a little wary. The pastor, however, had been more than welcoming. In the little conversations that they had during dinner, he would often throw around phrases like "welcoming change" and that "his eyes had

been opened now," which made Akunna believe that her husband, much like everything else in her life, was now a changed man. As Obum's visits grew increasingly frequent, Akunna found herself being changed too. In an atmosphere that is colored with the bright reds, and vivid purples of change, it is almost impossible to not let yourself give into temptation. As her uncles Obum and Kalu talked to them, fed them good food, and kept them engaged in the possibility of a better future, Akunna felt her initial wariness dissipate into thin air. Slowly, with each passing day, she felt herself opening up to the change that was now a permanent part of their lives. In a few months, she, too, had been colored the brightest shade of crimson and was now out for blood.

When Akunna was little, a child of barely twelve years old, her mother cautioned her about the words of men. She was sitting on the floor, with two straw baskets at her feet, and was occupied with the task of peeling peapods. Her father and

brothers had gone outside for a quick game of football and would be starving by the time they got home. Akunna was sitting beside her mother and was helping her with the peas. She had just told her mother about a boy who used to pull at her braids in school, and for a second, her mother's face went solemn and serious, which in those days, had been a rare occurrence. After a moment's pause, she looked up from her straw basket and stared at her daughter's adorable face.

"My dear Akunna. When you grow up, you will come across many different types of men. Some of them will look at you with kindness, while others will stare at you only with the intention to rip your precious soul apart." She let out a small, sad sigh and continued. "I am telling you this because you are my daughter, and I wish for you to lead a better life than I have. Until I met your father, that is. Don't trust the words that come out of the mouths of cruel men. They will only cause you harm and ache, my love. Remember that."

Akunna was too little to realize the meaning of these words spoken by her mother at the time. By the time she married the pastor, the words had all but left her completely. In her head, somewhere, there was the vacant space left by them, and Akunna often wondered what it was that her mother had told her to remember. Whatever it was, Akunna thought that she was better off forgetting it. Obum, Kalu, and Addo often talked about her mother, and from what she had eavesdropped on their conversation while serving them cups of green tea, was that her mother was not who Akunna thought she was. The things that she told her daughter were all but a farce to hide her true, cruel intentions, and the more that she heard, the more she realized how silly she had been to ever love her vile mother. *'I used to work myself into a frenzy whenever I thought about how hard she worked.'* Akunna would think to herself as she cooked a stew on the stove. *'How foolish I had been to let myself believe the farce that my mother was using to trick my feelings. How foolish I had been, how impure, to live under the same house as*

her. Nneka is a vile, and horrendous creature, and I am ashamed to call myself her daughter.'

As Akunna thought these thoughts, a rather strange thing started to happen. The beautiful bond that she had shared with her mother, one that she thought was meant to be eternal and withstand the toil of time, started to break. The invisible string that had attached Nneka to Akunna since she had been in the womb had started to crumble underneath the weight of all the evil that spewed out of her uncle's mouths, and soon enough, it had broken off completely. The damage had been done, and Akunna had changed entirely. The love for her mother and her family, which had been such an integral part of her life's fabric, had shredded into a million tiny filaments, damaged beyond repair. She did not understand she had fallen into the trap that her mother had warned her about so many years ago, and instead of trying to understand the rage that had been embedded into her, she turned a blind eye to her mother and her family.

The pastor, who believed every word that came out of Obum and Kalu's mouth to carry the richest essence of the truth, felt extremely joyous at the decision that his wife had taken and was proud of her. At dinner time, the usual silence that had settled between them seemed to undergo a change too, only this time, it was a positive one

e. Taking the plate of mashed potatoes that his wife had passed to him, pastor Addo held his wife's hand and spoke to her in a low voice. The gentle tones in his voice reminded Akunna of the time that they had first met when the sunlight glimmered on his face, and kindness radiated from his eyes.

"Oh, my lovely Akunna. How proud I am of you. A Christian man could not ask for a better wife than you are, my dearest. How happy you have made me." A flush of color rose in Akunna's face, and she realized she was blushing. How long had it been since Pastor Addo had complimented her? How long had it been since he had looked at her as a man ought to look at

his wife? Akunna gently pulled her hand out of his and settled into her chair, still blushing. Between bites of mutton stew, she started to talk in an acceptable, low voice to her husband.

"You don't have to be proud of me, my dear husband. I did what I had to do. I wanted to prove to you that I am a good Christian wife and that I will shun myself from anyone who sins, especially if those people happen to be my family members." If this had been six months ago, Akunna herself would have been disgusted by the words that were coming out of her mouth. But this was how change worked. It whispered vile things in her ear and made her oblivious to the truth of the situation.

"You are a good Christian wife, my dear. Granted, I had my doubts about *you* at first, but conversations with your uncles have enlightened me." He gulped down some water. "You are not bad and do not possess the soul of a sinner. It is your family that needs to be punished." Once he had finished talking, he smiled at his wife and continued eating his meal.

"You are right, husband. My family has always been sinful. I have just been too preoccupied with other things to see what was right in front of me. I have you to thank for opening up my eyes and making visible to me what I hadn't been able to see before."

"Oh, don't just thank me, Akunna. It would be silly to overlook the advice that your uncles have given us. It is astonishing how different they are from the rest of your family; so full of piety and holiness, even I feel as though I have a lot to learn from them." He let out a small laugh to signify his amusement at the idea. "They have helped us so much, dearest wife. They have fed us, offered us money, and opened our eyes to the truth. If that is not a commendable feat, I don't know what is."

"I am not denying how significant of a role my uncles have played in helping us get closer to the truth. But I am also thanking my husband, for if it wasn't for you, I would not have

been able to fulfill my wedding vows and be true to you as I am now."

"Sweetheart, you flatter me. You need to understand that there is no space in Christianity for false compliments. As good Christians, we need not waste any time on such frivolous activities. Be honest with me, and the Lord will be honest with you, Akunna. Is that really so hard to wrap your head around?"

Akunna was taken aback. She had just wanted to compliment her husband and pull him in closer to her. She remembered in the early days of her marriage when she and the pastor had been inseparable. In her heart of hearts, she had just wanted to go back to that since, except Pastor Addo, she had no one left to look out for her. Her uncles were there, of course, but they seemed to be more interested in conversing with the pastor than they did with her. Akunna knew to respect them and serve them dinner and tea, but she was never allowed into the room in which the men had their "secret meetings." Before she had the

chance to form a cohesive reply to her husband's question, which sounded more like the sound a gun makes after it has fired off a shot, she heard a bang on their front door. Akunna was about to get up to open it, but Addo glared at her and said in a rushed voice,

“Sit back down, Akunna. There could be anyone on the other side of that door, and I don’t want you to tempt any man.”

“But...”

Akunna understood that as a woman, she held a certain power over men. When she went to the local market to fetch groceries for the week, she could often feel the stares of men in her direction. It made her feel uncomfortable and uneasy in her own skin, but when she had talked to the pastor about it, he said that it was the devil inside her, seducing innocent men. While she had no tangible proof of this, nor had she ever felt this devil inside her, Akunna started to believe that her husband was right.

Focusing on her bowl of stew that had by now gone cold,

Akunna heard the sound of men talking and chattering amongst themselves. As she took a bite, the sound seemed to come closer and closer to the table, and finally, after a moment, or two, it sat itself at the table. Pastor Addo had come back with Uncle Obum and Kalu and appeared to be ecstatic with joy. Akunna greeted her uncles with the utmost respect, and stood up from her chair, and offered it to Obum.

“Oh, no, no, no. Akunna, please stay seated where you are. Kalu and I have come to discuss an important family matter, and it is of the utmost importance that you stay seated with us.”

Obum requested in a voice that was uncharacteristically gentle and mild. Kalu was seated beside him and was beaming with the maliciousness that they had planned for Obinna's family. Akunna and her naive husband were on their side, and both of the brothers had intended to make the most use out of them. They had been too easy to fool, and now all that was left was to do was to put their final plan into motion. The evil

brothers understood that the pastor was conservative in his religious beliefs, and with a little nudging from their side, they had been successful in distorting all of that religious fervor into pure hatred. It was easy to see that Akunna was deeply in love with the pastor and that she, too, had been easy to manipulate through Addo. Now, all of the pieces were in position. The only thing left to do was to let the game commence itself and lead to the destruction of Obinna's kin - the one thing that they had so far been unable to taint.

"Uncle, would you like to eat some stew?" Kalu's train of thought was disrupted by his niece's voice.

"No, no, my dear. Obum would like to talk to you about something that we have learned. It is quite horrendous, and I would like for you to focus on it instead of worrying about stew."

Obum, who had plastered on his face the sneer of a textbook villain, cleared his throat and began to speak to the

couple, who were curious to find out what had made the men travel all the way to their house.

"Akunna and Addo. What a blessed life you two have managed to make for yourselves. This is a sacred house that you share, and it breaks my heart to speak of such vile things over here, but it must be said."

If there was anything in the world that Obum had a fondness for, it was lying. In his adulthood, he had mastered the art of lying. He knew at what points to lower his tone and at what points to raise it. He stressed at all of the syllables that would make him sound honest and vulnerable as if he was sharing a part of his soul with the young couple.

"Kalu and I have discovered Nneka's horrid past. You might not know this, Akunna, but many, many years ago, before your father married her, I used to court your mother." Akunna had known of this fact, but it seemed to be a trivial thing to mention. She nodded at her uncle and heard attentively, curious

about where this would lead.

"When I was with her, I came across several things in her life that did not make any sense. She would set fire to things without any cause and bathe in the moonlight in the most suspicious manner. I did not think much of these incidents back then, but recently when I passed by her house, my nose filled with the most disgusting smell of rotting flesh. It brings me great pain to say this, but I am certain that your mother, Nneka, is a creature who has devoted her soul to Satan. She is a witch; I am certain of this."

Akunna was too disgruntled to speak. It was Addo who spoke and broke the eerie silence that had fallen in the room.

"I trust your judgment to be entirely true, Obum. If this is the case, then we must go to that wretched house and disown ourselves from them. We cannot be associated with such filthy people. Don't you agree, Akunna?"

After a moment, Akunna spoke, her voice low and small;

“I agree wholeheartedly, my dear husband. I don’t want anything to do with Nneka and her sons.”

The brothers smiled to themselves, their evil hearts bursting with malice, and thought to themselves, *This was far too easy.*

The next day, Akunna and Addo made their way to Nneka’s house. Nneka opened the door, her eyes beaming with love for her daughter and son-in-law, and let themselves into the house.

“It has been far too long since you two have been here. I have missed you so terribly, Akunna.” She took her daughter into her arms, but Akunna pushed Nneka away. Instead of warming up to her mother’s sweet voice, which she hadn’t heard in over six months, she said in a cold and calculating voice,

“I have heard that IK was back. Is he here right now?”

“Oh, yes. Let me fetch him for you, my lovely daughter.”

IK walked into the room and sensed that something was terribly amiss. His sister had a reproachful look on her face, and there was hatred on the pastor's face.

“Is everything alright, Akunna?” He asked his sister.

"No, IK. We have come to tell you that we can no longer be associated with such vile people as yourselves. You are filthy and sinful." She turned to face Nneka, with bitterness seeping from every pore in her body.

“I know what you are, *witch*. Stay away from my family. From this day onwards, you are no longer my mother.”

That was it. IK could not bear to see his mother humiliated like that.

“Get out of the house.” He shouted at the couple, and they stormed out, not even turning to look back at the havoc that they had wreaked. Nneka was in a state of shock, unable to believe the cruelty that her lovely daughter was capable of, and

IK could not imagine how Akunna had turned so cold.

Chapter 13

Job Search

Last week passed by in a blur. IK did not remember much. He could not recount what words Akunna had said to bring out such a horrified expression on his mother's face, nor could he remember what he was forced to say to his sister. It was as if time had sped up and slowed down, all at the same time, and all that he was left with was an unexplainable hollowness. A week later, IK did not know what that hollowness meant; and for the life of him, he could not explain what had led his sister and her husband to behave the way they did. From the sinister whispers around town, he knew that his sister and the pastor were "changed" people. Every time he passed by a group of people, he would be met with their accusatory stares as if to say, "*How could you let your sister go like that?*" IK would take

a couple more steps, bargaining with the vendors to get the inexpensive groceries his mother asked for and would be followed by some more whispers. *"I heard he was in college when his sister got married. Can you imagine that? What a careless brother and son; he's nothing like his father!"*

For the most part, IK had learned to ignore the never-ending whispers. From what he had learned in college, he knew that all this gossip was coming from people who didn't have anything better to do in their lives and that it meant nothing at all. When he was in college, it was easier to forget about the power that these sinister words could hold; it was even easy to forget about all the pain that his hometown was capable was causing. But now that he was back, the meanness that he forgotten and shed away, not much different from a snake shedding its old skin, was slowly creeping back into his life.

The more that IK interacted with the people in their small neighborhood, the more he understood that these were people

with "bad" hearts. When Akunna slammed the door shut behind her last week, it became the talk of the town. In the following days - days that were all tinged with the morose color of sorrow and grief - several people had visited their home. IK, who had a tendency to see, and hope for the good in everyone, believed that these people were visiting to inquire about his mother's health. Unfortunately, reality hit him with full force when he soon realized that these men and women were only gracing his home with their presence in an attempt to find out what had really happened.

Ever since Akunna's visit, their mother was bedridden with a strange ailment. She would not talk to anyone and would only get out of bed to cook breakfast and dinner for her children. She had also taken a week's leave from her places of work and spent all the extra time that she had on her hands lying in bed, staring at the walls. IK had also heard from his brothers that when he was not at home, they heard their mother apologizing

to someone. When they knocked and entered her room, they saw Nneka talking to herself as a steady stream of tears flowed from her eyes.

It broke IK's heart to think of the woman that his mother had turned into. Ever since Akunna had slammed that wretched door shut in their faces, something in their household had died. IK did not like to think about it much, but he knew that by leaving so cruelly, Akunna had killed the hope that blossomed and bloomed in all of their hearts. With her cruel words, she had shoved her hand into their mother's heart and plucked the flower of hope and love that bloomed in it. In a matter of minutes - for that was how long it had taken for Akunna and her husband to enter into their home and announce that they no longer wanted to do anything with them - his mother morphed and distorted into a stranger he no longer recognized. When she was in the kitchen, cooking, or standing idle over a pot of stew that she wanted to keep an eye on, she had in her eyes a strange, vacant

look. She would spend several minutes staring at nothing with that same empty look in her eyes. It was only after someone snapped her out of it that she would return back from that place and open her eyes to face her sons.

"I'm so sorry, my dear sons." After a moment's pause, Nneka mumbled an apology.

"It is okay, Mother. Are you sure you can handle making dinner tonight?" IK would ask her with genuine concern in his eyes

, but Nneka would not reply. Instead, she would just look down on the floor with a shameful expression on her face.

"You must think I'm the worst mother ever, IK," Nneka spoke after a stagnant silence settled into the house.

Upon hearing his mother's words, IK's heart broke even more. If there was one thing that he was certain of, it was that his mother could never - not even in a million years - be capable

of the kind of evil that Akunna and the pastor had accused her of. It did not make sense for those evil words to come out of Akunna's mouth, and that too, with such hatred, but despite how rootless those accusations had been, his mother was clearly impacted by them. IK took a couple of steps towards her and took her dainty and wrinkled hands in his.

"You can never be the worst mother. After Father's passing away, you are all that we have had." IK meant this. The family was still coping with the consequences of his father's death. IK knew that if anything were to happen to his mother, they would have nothing to live for anymore. His college degree and dreams of improving the lifestyle of his family would all have been for nothing.

Nneka looked up and stared into the face of her handsome and hardworking son.

"But IK... if I had been a good mother, she would not have left." A look of horror mixed with fear and sorrow

appeared on her face. Her voice broke, and tears splattered onto her cheeks.

"If I had been a good mother, she would not have left me. She would not have left us, IK. She would be here with her husband, eating the stew that I cooked for her. Oh, how she loved to eat the food that I cooked for her. *What have I done, IK? WHAT HAVE I DONE?*" Her face contorted to paint a vivid portrait of pain and horror, and for a brief second, IK did not know what to say to her. How could he possibly explain to her that what had happened was not her fault? How could he make her understand?

Not knowing what to do, IK pulled his mother close to him and hugged her. She was always a thin woman and had the habit of putting the needs of others before her. As he held her, however, IK felt the bones from her ribcage protruding, almost as if they were looking for an escape from her body. The thought made him shudder, and IK held on to his frail and breaking

mother even more tightly.

“Mother, have you not been eating anything?” After a moment’s silence, he whispered into her brittle hair.

Nneka pulled herself apart from her son. It took a moment for her to understand what was being said to her. Truth be told, she did not remember the last time that she had eaten a full plate of food. When the hunger got absolutely unbearable, she'd chuck a morsel, not a bite more, not a bite less, into her mouth. It would be enough to sate her tiny hunger for the time being and divert her attention from the growling of her stomach. She did not want IK to know this, however, so she smiled at him and said in a small voice,

"Of course, I am eating, son. Of course, I am."

IK stared blankly into his mother's smiling face. Her vacant eyes, paired with the hollow and gaunt face, made him feel like he was staring into the face of a stranger. He could not say anything to make it better for her- this much, he knew.

Instead of trying to fill the silence that had once again descended between them, he smiled a heart-achingly sad smile at Nneka and went outside the house.

The days that followed were all that brought disaster and sorrow with them. IK found that despite the cruel words that his neighbors had to say and spread about him and his family, he actually survived better in the outside world than he did inside his home. Ever since he had gotten back from college, IK could not shake the feeling that their house had changed forever. At first, it was a small, barely alive change. It wasn't something that you could see or feel; instead, it was a change that hid in the walls during the day and crept out only when the house was basked in darkness.

Slowly, without IK knowing how it even happened, the change was the only thing that he felt in his home. It lingered between his brothers and him and slid into any small crevice

that it could find. It haunted his home until, finally, the haunting was all that was left. IK could no longer live in the home he grew up in. His bedroom, which had once been a battlefield, a garden, and a castle for his siblings to play in, was now deserted. The smiles on everyone's faces had wiped off, and left in its place were wrinkles and lines. When Akunna slammed the door shut on that fateful day, she slammed shut all of their dreams, hopes, and happiness. On that day, *something* broke, or perhaps *it* died. Whatever *it* was, it was clear that it was this glue holding their family together for so long that was now wiping off. Without it, every single person in the household was lost. They did not know, nor did they understand the grief that had settled deep into their limbs, but they knew that they could not talk about it. As the days passed on and on, the house grew silent. Where once there had been the sound of laughter, now there was only the dreadful silence.

It pained IK to see his family grew silent and sorrowful

like that, but he soon realized that turning the perpetual frowns on their faces into smiles was a near-impossible task. IK wanted to see his mother happy again, he wanted to see his brothers joke with him again, but perhaps more than anything, he wanted to see Akunna knock on their door once again and give them the chance to settle their differences. Several months had passed since she had cut off all ties with them, but there was something about the accusations that she made that didn't sit right with IK. Instead of telling her daughter that all her claims had sprouted from absolute nonsense, Nneka had started to blame herself too. It made IK angry, but he understood that for his mother, the loss of Akunna was too much to bear after the loss of her husband. He tried to provide as much comfort as he could to his mother, but he knew that underneath her sorrowful exterior, she missed and longed for her daughter.

What didn't sit right with IK, however, was the manner in which Akunna had ended things with them. She was his sister

and the closest friend that he had at home. In the joyous days of their childhood, the pair had often played pranks on each other and would make each other laugh. He did not understand how it was possible for his kind and innocent sister to utter such cruel words. In his hearts of heart, IK knew that his sister was far too loving and caring to end up making such harsh remarks about anyone. If Akunna was left to her own devices, IK was sure that she wouldn't even hurt an insect, let alone a human being. She had a soft heart, and she loved her family with an intensity that was too strong and pure.

'There has to be someone behind all this mess,' the thought entered IK's mind, and it was impossible to get it out. When IK had first heard about Akunna's engagement to the pastor, he did not think much about it. From what he had heard, Pastor Addo was a good and God-fearing man. The community spoke highly of him, and from the get-go, it was pretty clear that the young couple was completely in love with each other. *Who*

was he to get in the way of such love? Moreover, from a practical viewpoint, the marriage seemed to be beneficial too. The pastor earned well, and he could provide a much better life for his sister. While this much might have been true, in retrospect, IK wished that he could have predicted what was to come next. It was clear that the pastor was a man of conservative beliefs and that his viewpoint of the world was one that did not align with the values that his family had grown up with.

Their father had always taught them to be kind before anything else, and from what he had heard about the pastor's sermons, he did not agree to such kindness. Moreover, Pastor Addo was an easily influenceable man. Oftentimes, Addo was seen around town with his uncles, and IK did not need any more proof. It was crystal clear then that his uncles were behind the harsh words that had come out of Akunna's mouth. *How could they not be?* When their father died, they quickly revealed their true colors. Obum and Kalu wanted to break up Obinna's family,

and with Akunna's gullible nature, the task had proven to be far too easy. From the few times that he had spoken to Akunna after her marriage, IK could tell that there was no one in her life that she loved more than her husband.

'It is clear now that Akunna behaved this way to please her husband,' IK thought to himself, and a single tear dropped from his eye. He could bear the loss of his sister, but he could not bear the cause to which he had lost her. It seemed that, despite everything that his father said, evil had and would always prevail in life. It did not matter the values which they were taught in their childhood. The only true thing in this cruel world was evil.

Once the dust settled, and IK realized the limits that his uncles were willing to go to in order to cause his family and him trouble, he understood that in order to make it big in his world, he had to give it all that he had. He wanted to see his mother, who, even in her old age, was working two jobs, smile. He

wanted to see his younger brothers well-educated, too. A couple of months had passed since he had returned from college with a degree in communication arts. IK gave his college education everything he had since he knew that a lot was riding on it. One of the main reasons why his mother had taken up two jobs was initially to facilitate his education. Moreover, he knew that his father wanted him to have a university degree and pull his family from the clutches of poverty. Now that IK was back home with a first-class honors degree, he decided that it was time to turn his dream into a reality. It was pretty obvious to him and his brothers that their mother needed a break. IK could not wait to give that to her and allow her some time to rest properly.

From when IK had been little, money in their household was scarce. He did not remember a time when there was ever enough to eat in the household or enough to feed four growing children. He knew his parents would often give up their portions to feed their children. Although he could not repay his father for

his kindness, IK wanted to give Nneka the best life that he could afford, but for that, he would need a job.

So far, IK's job search had pulled up nothing. IK had applied everywhere he could think of. He had ironed the only suit that he had numerous times, polished his shoes, and prayed desperately for a job. He would attend interviews all day long and would come back home to face his mother's hopeful eyes. Every time, however, he would have to disappoint her and tell her that he had been rejected. In the beginning, IK did not understand. He had graduated with flying colors and was class valedictorian. Not only that, but he also possessed certain skills that most candidates did not. It seemed that fortune and fate were not in his favor, since for five sorrowful years, IK's job search did not lead to fruition. Each place he went, it was always the same story. Some HR representative clad in an expensive suit would inform him with a blank expression on their face that he was either over-qualified or under-qualified. In those five

years, his mother grew frailer with each passing day, and the light in her eyes grew smaller and smaller—first the loss of her daughter and then her son's never-ending job search. One could not help but wonder *when Nneka's troubles would end*.

Chapter 14

Father's Guidance

IK's stomach was always rumbling with hunger. He was lying in his bed, staring at the flimsy fan on the ceiling of the room, in a pathetic attempt to distract himself from the noisy turns and violent contractions of his empty stomach. *Think. Try to think of something else, IK.* He turned to his side and tried to steer the train of his thoughts in a different direction. Pulling the covers over him, even though it was a sweltering day outside, IK probed and prodded the insides of his brain and looked for something- *anything*- that would distract him. He thought about all the things that he had lost- Akunna, his father, along with countless jobs- and for a moment, the hunger pangs turned into pangs of guilt. It was miraculous, really. How quickly the hunger turned into guilt, and how the guilt distorted itself further

and grew limbs out of its hairy back, metamorphosing into the monster of guilt and shame. Years had passed since Akunna had turned her petite back on their family, but with each passing day, the guilt only grew stronger and stronger. A couple of years ago, when hope still blossomed within each crevice and cut in IK's heart, he used to think that on the day that Akunna had left them, something had died in their house. He saw, now, that this wasn't true. On the day that Akunna had slammed that cursed door shut, something had been birthed into their homes. It had crawled its way into their lives, and had clutched each of their hearts with its spiny and cracked claws, and refused to let go. IK was sure now. On the day that Akunna had left, her place was taken by this newborn monster- a sickly creature with scales on its back that feasted on their hearts and their happiness and devoured all the hope that dwelled within the family until there was nothing left. As the years passed and dragged them into the uncertain future, IK realized that this monster was growing up and getting bigger with each passing day. Sometimes, when he least

expected it, this monster would crawl out of the dark corner in his room and run a long nail against his neck. IK would shiver, and then he would go back to that same day when he was foolish enough to let his sister go and bring all of this misery upon himself and his family. This monster did not show itself, but its presence was felt everywhere and by everyone, and slowly, the venom it spewed cast a dark shadow over their lives, silently suffocating all of them.

IK was jolted back into the present from a huge roar from his stomach. The past year, he had tried to steer his thoughts into a more "positive" direction. It was what he had learned in college. He remembered a wiry, old man who taught him for a semester and had taken a particular liking to him. IK remembered that whenever he would visit the professor at his office, they would often converse about the power that thoughts had. While IK did not believe in the notion that our thoughts could be reduced to obedience, his professor often reminded

him that our thoughts direct the course of our behavior, which is why it was so important to actively indulge our minds in positive thinking. During college, his positive thinking exercises had worked their magic on IK. Not only had these exercises gotten him to improve academically, but they had also made him hopeful about his future. It was only after IK had graduated that he was forced to realize the harsh realities of the world that he saw how idiotic these exercises had actually been. Instead of preparing him for the cruel, cruel ways in which the world would tease and taunt him, his professor had taught him the skill of being delusional. In moments like these, when IK's wandering mind was thrust back into reality with a sharp pang of hunger, he often wondered if his college degree had even been worth it. As a major in Communication Arts, IK had expected so much more out of his life. When he was in college, IK could foresee a stable job that would take some burden off his mother's shoulders. He had managed his expectations- which was another thing that his professor had preached about- and

had made sure to want things that he was certain that he could achieve. IK wasn't stupid. He knew how saturated the communications industry was and how difficult it could be for fresh graduates to get a serious job. Instead, IK had hoped for an entry-level job, something that would stabilize his family's financial condition and enable his mom to take a break for a little while. Despite all those positive thinking exercises, IK could not find a job. Hell, he couldn't even find a decent internship.

IK peeled the covers off his sweaty body, got up from his bed, and peeked a quick glance at the wall clock. The wall clock was almost as old as him; his parents had bought it a month after he was born, and IK could not help but wonder about all the events that the clock had seen. At twenty-six years of age, IK had seen far too much to bear, and he wondered if it was the same for an inanimate object that hung on his bedroom wall. Surprisingly, even after twenty-six years, it was almost as

if no time had passed for the clock since it was in a near-perfect condition. *At least something in this house is in perfect condition.* IK thought to himself and let out a dry laugh. Checking the time, IK saw that he still had an hour to go before his interview, and he made his way to the kitchen to quiet down his roaring and raging stomach. Nneka was at his first job, which meant that she hadn't made lunch yet. Usually, she would rush back to her house in the afternoon and cook up something quick, cheap and easy. On the days that she wasn't up to it, IK and his brothers would try to make something barely edible but usually ended up making a mess. As IK dragged himself to the kitchen, which was in a terrible state- with mud lining the floor and broken cabinets hanging on the upper corners of the walls- he checked to see if his brothers were at home. Chizitere and Ngozika shared a room, and after a couple of minutes of knocking, IK opened the door to find it empty and vacant. His brothers had recently taken up a part-time job that helped them to take a little stress off their mother's shoulders. The pay wasn't

a lot, but it was enough for the two young boys to take care of their personal expenses. Opening up a kitchen cabinet, IK was disappointed to find it completely empty. There was a jar of oats in one corner, but it contained such a little amount of food that IK thought it best to ignore it completely. He opened another cabinet and another one but encountered a similar result. The little amount of food that was stored in those cabinets was either too meager in quantity to satiate his hunger or something entirely inedible, such as a container of black pepper. Just to make sure that there wasn't anything that he was missing out on, IK double-checked all the cabinets and then checked the drawers as well. Unlike the cabinets, the drawers did not contain any food at all. Instead, they were full of bent spoons and stained forks. His stomach growled once more, and IK tried to think of a way to satisfy his hunger.

IK went back to his room and skimmed through his wallet, only to find it empty, except for a few coins that he

would need later to pay his fare. IK groaned in frustration. He had no idea of what to do, and the roaring of his stomach was growing louder and louder with each second. Devastated, he made his way back to the kitchen and made himself a thin porridge of whatever little oats there were available and some water from the tap. He had an interview to give later, and nothing would be more embarrassing than for his stomach to growl in such a professional setting. He was hungry, yes, but he realized that having his integrity unblemished was still far more important.

Once he was finished with the dreadful task of swallowing that tasteless porridge down his throat, IK drank as much water as he could to trick his brain into thinking that his stomach was full and returned to his room. He checked the old clock once again and saw that he did not have much time left. The interview was in half an hour, and he needed to get dressed. Opening his cupboard, IK did not waste more than a moment in

deciding what to wear. It wasn't as if he had a whole variety of clothes to choose from in the first place. The somewhat 'professional' looking shirts that he possessed were all remnants of his time in college. He had bought a pair of shirts on sale and had worn them several times during class presentations and debates. As he picked out a pale shirt that was in a somewhat acceptable condition, IK thought about the impression that he must make on employers. Suddenly, his situation became all too clear to him. He had on a shirt that was several sizes too small for him, and his trousers, which had once fit him perfectly, were too loose. Employers would probably see him for who he was - a poor graduate who had spent too much time unemployed and was desperate to make ends meet. In the past, IK had made up excuses for who he was. He remembered that not too long ago, the first thing that he had done when he walked into an interview room was apologize for the shabby briefcase that he carried. He knew, now, that it was of no use. At this point in time, the most that IK could do was simply accept his situation and try his best

to make something out of such horrible circumstances.

Time passed as time did, and IK made his way to the company's office, where he was shortlisted for a "Tertiary Interview." Two years ago, IK would have been ecstatic at the prospect, but he knew now how tiring this process could get. After applying to more jobs than he could count and being shortlisted for countless interviews, IK knew that this was a never-ending cycle of torment that he would have to endure. Only the faces of the interviewers changed, their questions and manners remained the same, and ultimately, his rejection remained the same. In such circumstances, IK was forced to believe that there really was nothing worthwhile to look forward to in his life. Still, as he stepped into the room, IK heard a strange sound emit from a place close to him. He looked down, and then around, and found that his shirt had split open from his elbows. Before he could do anything about it, he heard the professional voice of the interviewer greeting him. It was too

late to fix the rip or hide it somehow, so IK decided to face the interviewers as he normally would- with a practiced gait and manner of speaking. He answered all of their questions as quickly as he could and avoid giving away too many details about his past failures. Once the interview was over, IK leaned over the desk to shake their hands and was almost relieved that this was over. It was only when he turned around and began to walk towards the door that he heard chatter amongst the interviewers. IK said nothing. He knew what they were talking about, and he knew that there was nothing he could say to them. Rejected, he walked out of the building and made his way to the bus stop.

Nneka was washing the dishes when her oldest son walked into the house. His shoulders were defeated, and there were lines on his forehead. Right away, Nneka knew what had happened. She had seen the same posture on IK multiple times.

“What is the matter, son?” Nneka asked from the kitchen.

"Nothing much, mother. You don't need to worry about anything." IK said and tried to curve his lips into a smile.

“You know you’ve always been a terrible liar. Ever since you were a little child.” Nneka smiled at him, and IK instantly felt a little better.

"Nothing new happened, mother. It's just the same old rejection every time." He let out a sigh and then continued. "I sometimes feel as if I was cursed by someone. Whenever I walk into a room, I feel as though I will walk out of it rejected and defeated.”

"Oh, my dear son. These times are difficult, but we can make it through them. What you need is proper guidance. If only your father was here." IK looked at his mother and at the nostalgic look in her eyes. It was clear that even after so many years, she missed her husband terribly.

"You are right. Father always knew how to make ends meet. I wish I knew how to do the same." IK sighed yet again. Nneka dropped the sponge and looked at her son.

"You do know how to do the same, IK. All you have to do is trust your instinct. If your instinct is telling you to give up on this ludicrous process of job hunting, then do it. It's what your father always did. It is hard enough to feed five mouths on a teacher's salary, but by trusting his instinct and listening to what his heart told him- Obinna did it."

"But I am not... father. I could never be as good or as skilled as he was."

A single tear slipped out of Nneka's eyes, and she wiped it away. Composing herself, she picked up the sponge that she had dropped and said to her son,

"No, my dearest IK. You are not your father. In fact, you are better than him. If he had been alive, he would have told you the same thing. Oh, my dear son, how I wish you listened to

your heart instead of running from one place to the next." Nneka had a strange look in her eyes, and for some reason, IK found it increasingly difficult to make eye contact with her.

He excused himself from her company and returned to his room. As he changed into something more comfortable than his ill-fitting clothes, IK decided something for the first time in years. He decided that he was going to turn his fortune around and stop his mindless hunt for a new job. Instead, he would borrow a loan from the bank and invest in various different businesses, but mostly in the fertile land. He would do what his father had done and be smart about his financial decisions. After a couple of moments had passed, IK stepped out of the room, resolute and confident. He smiled at his mother, and Nneka smiled back at him. Chizitere had returned from work too, and the trio sat down for lunch. For the first time, they had passed down smiles, and Chizitere even made a few jokes. The air in the house had changed, and the monster of shame and guilt grew

small. It was obvious- *good things were to come ahead.*

Chapter 15

Decision

"Once you've hit rock bottom, the only place that you can go is up."

Obinna's words echoed and filled every crevice of IK's wandering mind as he lay in his bed, doing nothing. In the past years, he had lost everything and then, some more. It had all started on that wretched day, so many years ago now, when Akunna had walked into their homes with the pastor and destroyed the sacred blood bond that she had shared with all of them. Nneka had gotten the worst of it- IK was sure of that much-but Akunna's betrayal had broken all of them in smaller and subtle ways. While it was true that Nneka was the one who

had spent so many nights sobbing and longing for her daughter, the ache of losing Akunna had crept up into all of their lives and occupied a permanent space in it. It was this ache-this unbearable, ever-present, overwhelming little tug at all of their hearts-that had caused an invisible wall to erect itself between his brothers and mother. IK knew that if he ever sat his brothers down and asked them about their disappearances from home; or about how they would compulsively search for whatever work they could find, and later use it as an excuse to stay away from 'home,' they would shake their heads, and answer with a resounding 'no.' Despite what they would say, IK knew the real reason behind their disappearances-they could not deal with the vacant space that Akunna had left behind her. Even though several years had passed since she had married and left them, Nneka had insisted that Akunna's room remain untouched. As the years passed on, a thick layer of dust and dirt had accumulated on all of her belongings-miserably untouched, unused, and all together barren.

A few months after Akunna had cut off that sacred bond by shutting the door behind her, IK had knocked on Nneka's door and asked her (in the lowest tone that he could muster, for he did not want to startle his mother) if he could redecorate, and repurpose Akunna's old room. Nneka did not say anything. Instead, a single tear slipped from her eye, and she immediately wiped it off as if she was ashamed of it.

"Mother, what's wrong?" In the early days of their shared grief, IK had familiarized himself with the melancholy that wrapped and held Nneka's underfed frame at all times. He knew that he had to be tender and patient with his mother, for she was prone to sobbing at the smallest of things. Last week, she had dropped and broken a glass, which had made her weep in a way that scared IK. It wasn't a normal cry; it was something a lot more feral and wilder. For loss of that glass, Nneka had howled and sobbed like a madwoman. IK could not help but wonder at how she must have cried for the loss of her daughter. After a

moment, Nneka looked up from the ground and faced her son.

In a broken voice, she started to speak,

"IK. You will not touch Akunna's room. Do you understand me?" As she kept speaking, her voice started to gain confidence, and by the end of the sentence, her voice carried striking and strange confidence.

"Yes, mother. I understand." After a short pause, IK continued. "Mother, I understand that you don't want me to touch her things, but *she* made the decision to leave us." IK's voice took on a strange cadence. In all those months, IK had quieted and suppressed the part of him that wanted to rage. *How could she? How could she have left them? And that too, with such ease?* But now, as he spoke to his mother, he could feel all the rage and anger creeping into his words. He did not want to hurt his mother, for she had already been too hurt and was far too broken, but he could not control what he felt. "How could you cry for her? Weep for her?" He took a small pause then, and

when he continued, his voice was small and fragmented. “Mother, it is high time that you accept it-Akunna does not care if we live or die.”

The words had come out a lot more venomous than he had intended, but now that they had been said, he could not take them back. Seeing the look on his mother's face, he wished that he could. A silence descended on the small room, and IK suddenly had the urge to leave the room. After an awkward moment or two, where he had taken to pacing around the room, his mother's voice pierced the thick veil of silence and explained to IK that he could never have known before.

"IK, listen to me." His mother's voice did not sound broken or full of that strange confidence from before; it was full of tenderness and kindness. It reminded him of his childhood and all the family dinners that they had shared together. "I know that you blame Akunna for what happened. But I know your sister better than I know my backhand, and there is no way that

she could have said all that on her own."

There was some truth to what Nneka was saying. Ever since they had been little, Akunna had been the sweetest little girl that he had ever known. When she played with IK, Adekunle, and Ngozika, she would often give up her toys to them and would even lose if it meant making her brothers happy. It did not make sense for her to turn evil, and that too, so suddenly.

"If not Akunna, then who?" IK asked, the confusion apparent on his face.

"Who do you think, IK? Who has been casting a horrid shadow on everything that brought us joy all our lives?" There were tears in Nneka's eyes, but she would not let them fall. IK knew the answer.

"My uncles, Obum and Kalu."

Nneka did not respond to their names. Her features

grimaced.

"Now you know, IK, why I can't let you redecorate Akunna's room. She has been stolen by those awful men, and when the day comes that she returns to her senses-for I know in my heart of hearts that that day will come-Akunna will need a place to return to. She will need her home, and she will need us."

Ever since that conversation, it had dawned on IK how correct his mother had been. He had seen Obum and Kalu with the pastor several times, and he knew that they were behind his sister's so-called betrayal. In a twisted way, the knowledge that Akunna had been under the influence of the sinister thoughts and actions of his uncles brought him peace or at least some semblance of it. Nneka was also right in saying that Akunna was not to be blamed. Even when they were little, she had always been so naïve and gullible. When they were little, IK had played a prank on her and told her that if she flapped her arms hard

enough for a week, she would learn how to fly. During that week, not a single day had passed when Akunna had not flapped her arms and prayed to God to give her the ability to fly. Thinking about it now brought an involuntary smile to IK's face. His poor little sister was always too naïve for this world, and if anything, it had been his fault for not paying close attention to her. When Nneka had called, informing him of the 'relationship' that had blossomed between the Pastor and Akunna, IK had been all-too-eager in approving of their attachment. In retrospect, he realized that he had made a mistake. While it was true that the pastor was a good and well-respected man, there was just *something* about him. Now that IK had been in town for a good number of years, he understood that the pastor was a lot like Akunna. Akunna had fallen in love with the pastor, and the pastor had fallen in love with the influence of Obum and Kalu. Or maybe he had just fallen in love with all those fancy lunches and dinners that he now had the invite to. From the little gossip that IK had heard around town, the pastor was often seen

dining in the best, most expensive restaurants. *I guess that's the price of penance.* IK thought to himself and smiled slyly.

Lying in his bed, IK glanced at the wall clock and realized that it was time for him to get out of bed and get ready for his interview. Based on the last interview that he had gone to, IK knew that scouting for jobs was no use, but until he collected a substantial amount of capital to start investing in lands, he knew that it was the best option that was available to him- at least for now. Begrudgingly- which was how he did most things these days- he got up and dragged himself to the washroom to clean up. Selecting clothes was not going to be a headache since he knew what he was going to wear. Nneka had patched the shirt that he tore last time, and without so much as peeking a glance at the stitches, IK put it on. Once he was dressed, he ate whatever little crumbs he could find and left the house as quickly as he could. There was a bus to catch, and he didn't want to be late.

On the bus ride to the interview, IK had to give up his seat to an elderly woman and stand. He did not mind it much, except for the fact that he kept bumping into the other passengers each time that the bus would come to a halt. IK would mumble a half-apology each time, and the passenger would grumble and whisper an insult. It did not faze him much. After almost five years of job searching and rejection, IK was sure that he could handle whatever life had planned to throw in his path. It did, however, surprise him at times how life seemed to have a never-ending supply of misery and misfortune for people like him. It brought him a little solace to think that there were people like him-folks who were down on their luck and were frantically searching for a golden opportunity-in his town. The city was filled with frantic and frustrated individuals such as himself, and IK vowed to himself that if he ever got the chance, he would do whatever it takes to help such people. After all, he was one of them. On his several job searches, IK had often come across a man not unlike himself and with whom he

could share all the toil and troubles of trying to look for a decent source of income. On their first meeting, which had been in the waiting room for an IT and Communications company, Abel had introduced himself as a 'highly motivated individual. A couple of years later, and still, without a job, he would often talk to IK about how eager he was to just give up and quit. Either way, as time passed and they kept on meeting in hotel lobbies and waiting rooms, IK grew quite fond of the fellow. Since the past year, however, IK could not find him in any waiting rooms and assumed that he had found a job. *Good for him.* IK thought. *God knows that Abel needed a stable job to take care of his sick mother.* IK thrust him out of his thoughts and went inside a glass room when he heard his name being called on a nearby speaker.

Much to his surprise, the interview went a lot smoother than he expected. There were no awkward questions, and IK could sense that the employers hadn't been bought out by his uncles. *A silver lining.* I could barely even believe it. *Finally,*

just as he was about to make his way to the bus stop, IK heard a familiar voice calling out his name. Outside, the building was panting and heaving Abel.

"Abel, what are you doing here?" IK asked in a voice that was dripping with confusion.

"Oh, I saw you from a distance and came running," Abel said, in between large intakes and outtakes of breath. After taking a moment to collect himself, he looked at IK with warmth in his eyes and said,

"We meet after a year, and you're not going to hug me, brother?"

IK smiled, and the two men hugged each other. Pulling away, IK asked,

"So, what are you doing, Abel? I don't really get to see you in those terrible hotel lobbies anymore."

Abel's lips curled into a tight smile.

"Those lobbies really were terrible, weren't they?" He laughed for a moment and then continued, "Well, I found something better than that, you know. Something stable and safe."

"You found a job?"

"Yes, my man. I found a job."

IK's eyes widened with a mixture of emotions-shock mostly, but there was also a tinge of something perilously familiar to jealousy.

"Wow, that's very good to hear, Abel. I'm quite happy for you, I really am." IK shook Abel's hand as a way of congratulating him.

"Oh, you haven't heard the entire story yet, IK." The expression on IK's face was one of confusion. *There was more to the story, but what?*

"I don't live in this city anymore," Abel said, with a smug

expression on his face.

“Where do you live, then?”

“Lasgidi-... trust me when I say this to you, IK. That city, it’s got love for people like you and me. It’s *nothing* like this shithole, brother.”

“What do you mean by that?”

"Come on, IK. You've been searching for a job here for the past five years. So far, you've got nothing but rejections." Abel took a brief pause. It was clear that these words were coming from an authentic place. "In Lasgidi- you can start over. You can build a new life. You don't have to be someone who gets rejected. In Lasgidi, you could be anyone you want to be. Now, look me in the eye and tell me that doesn't make the hair on your arms stand up with joy."

Abel was right; even the mere prospect of moving to a new, welcoming city was one that had sent a jolt of electricity

through his arms and had brought the hair on his arms to life. At that moment, something deep inside IK changed and shifted; IK knew what had to be done. He had decided he was going to be a new man. He was going to move to a new city, and he was going to live life the way he wanted to. For once in his life, he was willing to do whatever it took, and the thought alone made him wild with euphoria.

After he had said goodbye to Abel, IK made his way home. Only he was an entirely different man than the one he had been when he had left home. In place of his nervousness, there was pleasure and confidence, and for once, he saw clearly what it was that he needed to do.

Nneka had been washing the dishes when she heard her son walk in.

"IK, what took you so long? The three of us have already eaten, but I could heat up your food for you." Nneka said while