

LOTANNA



W R I T T E N B Y

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DEDICATION

This ebook is dedicated to all who have been scorned, shamed and stigmatized, irrespective of your health status.

Chapter 1

It was on a Sunday, after their parents thanksgiving service of fourteen years of marriage. Normally, children were not allowed in the main church auditorium but because it was their parent's special day, an exception was made.

Lotanna who was panting for air after all the dancing was seated by the door, he felt tired and weak. His father; a man of an athletic physique, black onyx eyes, chocolate-colored skin, adorning a beautiful Ankara shirt and trousers, was talking to a deacon and two other men. His mom, a perfect figure eight after two hefty boys, melanin skin, a gorgeous dimple forming an abyss in her plump cheeks, was in front of the church with women gathered around her.

"Fourteen years have gone by already," one of the women said.

"The journey has started; very soon it would be half of a golden Jubilee celebration"

Happy comments and remarks came from different mouths until one of the women asked an unneeded question.

"By the way, how is Lotanna?"

"He is fine" Mrs Ogo, Lotanna's mother answered.

"It has been four years and there has been no form of improvement;" the woman who asked earlier remarked.

"More than four years *na*" another chipped in. "Is it not the Lotanna we see every day?"

"I have seen cases like Lotanna; the parents are often the cause. It is punishment for their evil deeds meted out on the child," another woman spoke up.

"I watched a similar film like that two weeks ago; the woman was already pregnant before she married her husband. The child grew up sickly and a pastor was involved who later revealed the truth."

Each of the women chimed in their careless hurtful words. "I've had this nagging question; why hasn't he been healed? Remember your last testimony? It's been over four years and he is not any better, is there something you are not saying?" The leader of the women fellowship asked.

"Your wedding was shifted by three months after your dowry was paid, is it true it was because your would-be mother-in-law accused you of being an immoral woman?"

An answer wasn't yet to be given when a Deaconess remarked. "It's not fair to Lotanna; the pains, endless hospital trips, drugs. It's just not fair" Deaconess Umukoro spoke with a disdainfully look.

"Is it only that one?" Mrs Uche questioned maliciously. "Can't you see Lotanna cannot stand for five minutes? His weak physique, his slow learning behavior, his lean body"

"He has thin hands, a large diamond-shaped mass on the lower back of his leg and how he walks on his toes" another woman listed with contempt.

"Lotanna can't breathe properly" a Deaconess peered at her. "Calcium deficiency don't do all these"

Mrs Ogo stared at them in bewilderment, she wanted to walk away but her legs were too numb to heed orders from her brain.

"You and your husband are dark skin; Ifeancho is dark skin too but one look at Lotanna; light-skinned, his eyes a shade of brown, quiet, reserved than the rest of you," Mrs Julia said with a scowl.

"We know the world we live in. Mistake happen in the slightest when you let down your guard but covering it up...." The assistant president of the Igbo group of the church spoke; "Mrs Ogo, you can't rule out the possibility of God punishing him for his parent's evil deeds"

"Or his own" another woman chimed in.

"Gone are the day's sins are hidden. God is angry, and letting such an innocent child bear the consequences is wrong. If your husband isn't his father, it will be better if you speak up before Lotanna dies" The secretary of the women fellowship spoke up.

Mrs Ogo was aghast. It was one thing to say it was his parents' fault but to say a thirteen-year-old committed a heinous crime to result in health crisis...or her evil deeds.... her thoughts were interrupted as the Prayer coordinator lady spoke up; "If you have done anything behind your husband's back, confess now, before God's altar so that an innocent child won't die."

Mrs Ogo didn't know if it was the intense hateful glares or the dazed state that made her forget to blink because tears stung her eyes. A small child's fingers clasped her, tugging her.

"Come, mommy," Ifeancho told her putting a handkerchief in her palm; he didn't wait for her to use it because he pulled her along. He didn't want to be there any second longer, he didn't want to hear horrible words about brother and mother.

His mother was too dazed to refuse or pull away, she let herself follow him whilst his father who was by the door was surprised to see his wife in tears and his son visibly scared. He didn't have time to inquire as Ifeancho called out to him.

"Daddy, Lotanna come" was all Ifeancho said walking by them.

Mr Ogo excused himself and ran after them. When he caught up with them, he bombarded them with questions but they kept quiet. They settled into the car and so did he. The drive home was uneventful, immediately he pulled up mother and son duo jumped out of the car at once. His wife opened the house door and ran to her bathroom to cry her eyes out.

Before he could catch up, the bathroom door was locked with painful sobs echoing, he knocked severally on the door with no response and after several minutes of knocking he left and returned shortly with spare the keys. Mr Ogo's heart cringed at his wife's state; he sat down beside her on the floor and scooped her into his arms. He rubbed her back, whispering comforting words, though he had no idea of the accusations heaped on her.

Ifeancho hurriedly got to his room he shared with his brother; Lotanna, he sat at his reading table, brought out his vocabulary book and his dictionary from the top drawer. He wrote down the words the women at the church had told his mother and searched for it. He had gone to meet his mother earlier, to whine about his tiredness but what he didn't expect were the bad words they spoke. He knew all the women around his mother; they were women he had seen around her from a tender age. He felt too hurt to pronounce the words, so he wrote it down and searched. He spent the next hour searching every synonym under each word, after his ceaseless search, his mind drifted back to the one-sided conversation earlier; he was able to understand the message sent across, it was a simple message that was too obvious to be hidden. They had accused his mother of being indecent and covered it up with a holy behavior and they had claimed Lotanna was not his brother. They had openly shamed his mother and he did nothing.

Tears ran down his cheeks, he loved his brother so much. His brother was more than a best friend to him; it didn't matter if his father and mother disappointed him he was certain Lotanna would never.

"Ifee" Lotanna called out, kneeling beside his chair. "Why are you crying?" He wiped his tears with his kisses. "I can't bear to see you cry"

Ifeancho was too grieved to ask his usual question *why* whenever his brother told him he loved him or couldn't bear to see his tears.

Lotanna sensed it wasn't one of these dramatic antics so he continued. "I can't bear to see you cry, 'cause it breaks my heart. I feel like I failed as your brother"

Ifeancho shook his head and threw his arms around his neck causing Lotanna to feel uncomfortable thereby asking they lay on the bed and they did, Lotanna hugged his brother tightly letting him know how much he meant the words he spoke earlier.

Mr Ogo was seated alone in the living room, staring at the blank screen television; he couldn't grasp the situation earlier. What could have prompted his wife to such a state? No matter how hard he pondered, he couldn't get anything. He was able to put his wife to sleep on the bed before he left their room. He didn't know how long he sat there moping until his son's gentle tap on his shoulder drew his attention.

"It's time for the family moment," Lotanna said.

"Is it?" He asked. He sighed; he had been too occupied to realize the time.

"Have you eaten?"

"I am not hungry" his son replied in a small voice, immediately, his stomach loudly rumbled contrary to his reply.

His father chuckled. "Let's get something to eat first," His father said and stood up. "Come on" he stretched out his hand to his son.

Lotanna sheepishly held his father's hand; it felt strange in his grip. Mr Ogo narrowed his eyes at his son's hand, he felt heavy as he weighed it.

"Why is your hand heavy?"

"My parents feed me well" Lotanna answered.

Mr Ogo chuckled, he gestured him to the direction of the kitchen. Lotanna struggled with himself, he didn't know if he should let his father know about the new words his eleven years old brother; Ifeancho searched for.

He could rule it off as his curiosity for new words but what about his tears? Ifeancho was akin to dramas, not waterworks, he could get sad and with a promise of an outing, chocolate bars, ice cream, cake, and sweet treats, he would be his happy self again.

Lotanna took a deep breath; "Ifeancho cried"

Mr Ogo froze momentarily; he placed a plate of Banga rice in the microwave before he turned to him. "Did you ask why?"

He shook his head, "He wouldn't say" he answered. "He searched for an unusual set of words too"

"Don't worry about it. I'll handle it" Mr Ogo assured him.

He nodded, "Thank you, daddy"

He smiled profoundly at his son.

They spoke about church service until the microwave beeped; his father carefully brought out the pack of food and dished out for both of them.

"Our family moment topic will be Faith" his father announced.

"We have studied faith already. It is Ifeancho's turn to pick a topic, you exhort and mommy pray"

"The last time your mommy cried, she was worried about giving you and your brother a sibling. She needs to be reminded of her faith"

"I am fine without another sibling and Ifeancho is happy with his last child status"

Mr Ogo laughed, "He sure is"

"Don't ever forget this Lotanna." Mr Ogo paused, for a dramatic moment of time; "A time will come in our lives when we can't believe in God, trust him or have a simple faith in him. If things go wrong it doesn't mean there is not a loving God. His thoughts are not ours. We can't forget to thank him, he knows best, even though your mommy thinks two children are not enough"

Lotanna laughed.

"I haven't found out why your mother cried from church and your brother too but it will be fine." Mr Ogo assured his son.

Chapter 2

Monday Morning, 7:15 am.

"Ifee" Lotanna called sweetly. Ifeancho humped and turned away, his arms crossed over his chest, "I will give you my chocolate bars" he tried to cajole his eleven years old brother.

"I'm not a baby" Ifeancho clicked his tongue and pouted his lips.

Lotanna quickly turned his face so his dramatic brother wouldn't see him struggling to stiffen his laughter. He let out a breath, shook his head, shaking away the silliness, "You're not a baby, you are a big boy and big boys don't skip school"

His brother gave him a knowing look. "No" he yelled and jumped off the bed, he had barely taken three steps to the bathroom when he heard Lotanna's loud gasp.

He quickly rushed to his side and knelt down beside him. "Lota" he called.

"I'll go to school, please stop, Lota" he caved in.

It was scary for him to see his brother gasping for air, and it hurt too. It was a heart twitching sight. He didn't want to go to school in hopes of cajoling Lota to stay with him because of the talks of the church women, but he changed his mind. Though it had nothing to do with his inability to breathe, it didn't matter anymore.

"Lota" a lone tear streaked his cute face.

Lotanna had a hand firmly over his heart, his teeth gritted to suppress the pain, his eyes rolling in its socket. His expression pained. Ifeancho held his hand tightly gripped on the bed duvet.

The pain subsided in time to hear his name, to which he hummed a reply. He managed a smile on a weak smile but his brother wasn't buying it.

Ifeancho wiped his face and stood up, grabbed his Moana towel and headed for the bathroom. "Don't hide your pain from me." He said over his shoulder. "I won't tell on you" he added before the door shut.

Ifeancho leaned against the door, his head bowed. He just gave his word to go to school but he wasn't ready to face the world after the church shameful scorn. Their mother hadn't checked in on him this morning except for their father who instructed Lota to ensure he was ready for school, no excuses allowed.

He hoped the day would be better than the previous. He shoved the thought aside and picked up his toothbrush, his brother's pained face flashed vividly in his mind and he subconsciously remembered the Deaconess words; "*Lotanna will die*"

His eyes almost popped off its socket; his beloved brother, he shook his head, closed his eyes and prayed.

Mrs Ogo took the women's words to heart. For the first time since her first child was born, she thoroughly analyzed every tiny bit of detail about him. It hit her hard. Every horrific words they viciously spoke was true, shocking her to the core, she was shown her son in a different light and the feeling instantly shattered her.

She cried at the mere thought of it, her eyes were now showing the aftermath of her drained out tears and her husband wouldn't let her continue drowning herself in grief. He had been bugging her to get her to talk and it had gotten under her skin.

"*Nwanyi oma*" he cooed her pet name.

"Oh...God, what is it? Can't I cry my sorrow out?" Mrs Ogo asked angrily.

"Which sorrow? You have a lovely home, a great job and-"

She cut him off, "Leave me"

Mr Ogo reached out to her on their king-sized plush bed but she slapped his hand away and stood up; "Leave me alone o"

"Why won't you tell me what happened yesterday? Why have you been crying?"

Mrs Ogo glared at him before she stormed out of the room but his resounding footsteps behind her told her he followed her; "Why won't you tell me?"

"What will you do about it?" She retorted.

Before her husband could reply, she added; "Nothing. So let it be"

She plopped onto the brown couch and picked up the television remote to switch it on; she caught a glimpse of Lotanna, stepping into the living room looking pale.

"Why are you pale like an ice cube?" She questioned.

Her husband mentally face palmed himself; "Not pale as an-"

"You're not going to school"

Lotanna who was in the process of sitting on the dining chair to eat his breakfast froze momentarily when he heard his mother's words.

His father frowned, "Why?"

"His mother said so" she retorted, flicking through the television channels.

Mr Ogo stood akimbo in front of his wife. She shifted to the other end of the couch, not ready to banter words with him. He sighed, shook his head and walked over to his son.

"Where is Ifee?" He asked, pouring Kellogg's cereals into his bowl.

"Bathing" Lotanna answered.

"I have told you not to send my son to school, if he doesn't go to school for one day or every day, the school will not shut down" Mrs Ogo shouted.

Husband and son turned to her direction but it was her better half that spoke, "You're not ready to talk and when you are, I will wholeheartedly listen, until then-" he turned to his son, "Eat and go to school"

"Ifeancho!" He yelled.

"Coming daddy" Ifeancho answered from within.

Mr Ogo hurried his sons as they were almost late for school. After sending them off to go to school, he returned his attention to his wife who didn't seem to have any interest in going to work.

"After you discarded my words and sent Lota to school, you inquire what happened yesterday in church. Ask Ifeancho" she growled.

Mr Ogo sighed, "You can rest today and tomorrow you go to work." He said dejectedly, "Perhaps, Karo is back, you can spend the day with her" he added and planted a kiss on her temple.

He grabbed his black bag, hung it on his shoulders and left the house.

"Let me carry your bag for you" Ifeancho offered to take his bag off him.

Lotanna shook his head, "It's not heavy"

"Are you okay? Your face isn't bright. You said don't have chest pain anymore but what happened earlier in the room?" He didn't relent in his questions and he also didn't want to think the church women were right about his Lota being in pain.

Lotanna knew he wouldn't hear the end of it, he decided to digress the conversation; "We should check on aunt Karo on our way back"

Ifeancho's eyes lit up, "Yes, we should." He said excitedly; he missed his aunt so much especially her pampering and sweet treats.

They spoke about their uncle and aunt until they got to school. Their school was five minutes away from their home, so if by chance missed the school bus like today, they could walk down to school.

They arrived late to school, as a result, pupils were on a mad rush to meet up, to avoid being punished or flogged. The sons of Ogo were in no rush and they ended up being stamped over in the mad rush, hurting both of them in the process.

"Lota" Ifeancho called, standing up quickly to help his brother but noticed his elbows were scraped.

Ifeancho helped his brother up, removed his bag and used his handkerchief to clean his wound. "Let's run water over it as mommy does"

Lotanna's eyes were fixated on him; he seemed different since they woke up but he brushed it off concluding that his brother genuinely cared for him. After one of the teachers attended to his wound, he refused the teacher's advice to get first aid and insisted on going to his class.

During recess, Ifeancho set out to his brother class; he couldn't help but feel conscious of every eye darting glances his way and every whisper hummed, every bit of action displayed caused his mind to revisit the incident that occurred in the church and his mind couldn't help but ask one of the most grueling questions; Could it be they knew and were talking about his brother?

"What am I doing?" Mrs Ogo asked herself out loud; "They said terrible things about my son and I am here crying, for what?" She sat up straight from her relaxed posture. "We did test the last time and he came out clean, what nonsense they spat and I stupidly believed it, I even cried all night and rudely spoke to my husband. My enemies will not see me in this life to catch"

She clapped her hands in disbelief of her behavior; "*Ehn, me Nwanyi oma cry over frivolous words.*" She stood up. "They are jobless and my family is their favorite topic of discussion *abi?* No problem. I will do another check-up and shove it in their faces"

Mrs Ogo headed for the kitchen, opened the fridge and took out a pack of Banga rice; she placed in it the microwave, waited a few minutes, ate and washed the dishes before she began to prepare for another hospital trip.

In the middle of selecting a cloth for Lotanna, she felt a strong sense of déjà vu and couldn't shake it off. She sat on her son's bed with her right hand over her throbbing chest. She couldn't understand what was going on.

"Deep breathes," she whispered and took in a lung full of air; "Calm down, It is a harmless check-up to shut up wagging tongues of so-called Christians. Lotanna is perfectly fine" she repeated like a mantra until she got a grip on herself.

When she was finally ready to go, she looked at her phone for the time, seeing it was 2 pm she whispered to her subconsciousness; "Perfect timing." She scrolled through her phone's contact, a huge smile on her face as the name *Dim Oma* came into view. Mrs. Ogo typed an apology message for her husband and sent it before she left the house. She picked up her sons from school, bought lunch for them and hired a taxi to drive them to the hospital.

Each passing moment increased her discomfort and uneasiness, her mind wasn't relenting either. She knew Lota was fine in her heart irrespective of their words but she just needed to silence them for a lifetime.

"Ifee" Mrs Ogo called to distract herself, "Why are you pressed against the car door? Shift closer to me" she said, pulling him close.

She tilted her head to her other son beside her and inquired. "Does your elbows still hurt Lota?"

Lotanna shook his head. "No mommy"

Mrs Ogo engaged both of them in small talks and in no time, they arrived at the hospital. She went through the procedures and sat in the waiting room, waiting eagerly. Her hands holding her sons soon became sweaty.

"Mommy" Lotanna drew her attention.

"Are you alright?" Ifeancho asked.

She nodded.

"Why are we in the hospital?" Lotanna inquired curiously.

Without waiting for her reply, Ifeancho inquired, "Are you sick?"

Mrs Ogo was almost at her ends wit and their questions weren't helping; "Quit questioning me both of you"

"Okay, mommy" they sadly chorus.

Feeling bad for her outburst, she wrapped her arms around them, pulled them close and kissed their forehead; "A quick check-up and -"

"Mrs Ogo"

Her name was called; she hurriedly pulled them up, maybe she pulled Lotanna too quick and his calves' muscles involuntarily twitched mildly in a painful muscle spasm, lasting longer than a minute.

She felt Lotanna stiffen in her grip and turned to him, her heart cringed in pain at the sight of her son's pain expression. She squatted in front of him, gently massaging the hard to feel visibly twitched muscles over his body-hugging yellow shorts.

He felt relieved, seeing his calm face, his mother asked; "Has it stopped?"

He nodded while he cast an askance glance at his brother, scared he might spill the beans on him. Ifeancho stared at his brother with a sad facial; it pained him to see his brother pained.

"I am fine," Lotanna said in a small voice.

"Don't worry, he is fine" Their mother assured him, "Stay here while I bring him to the doctor"

Ifeancho's face changed.

"We won't be long, we are in that office" she pointed to the door, a few steps away from them; "If you want something, you can come inside" though she hoped he wouldn't. It would seem rude and uncalled for.

"Okay" Ifeancho caved in.

Mrs Ogo smiled gratefully at the nurse who called her earlier, she saw Lotanna's pained expression, and she must have guessed right and allowed him to calm down before calling them again.

"Thank you," she told the nurse, walking into the office.

Chapter 3

Mrs Ogo listened intently to the doctor; she couldn't help but feel she was right about her déjà vu feeling earlier. Her despair was hitting her harder by the minute she wasn't sure she was listening to the doctor's words because every utterance he voiced out only confirmed the words that the women proclaimed in church. If she could leave, she would, damning all consequences but it was about Lotanna and proving his critics wrong, slapping them with the truth.

"Mrs Ogo" the cardiologist a man in his early forties, light-skinned, chiseled face, pointed nose, and almond eyes stared at her blankly; "Did you hear a word I said?" He asked, noticing her lost gaze.

She looked at her side, Lotanna wasn't there. She remembered asking him to go stay with his brother while she spoke with the doctor alone.

"Your son has a weak heart from the looks of it but the reason would be clear after the test results are out, however, you might need to see an Orthopedician for his limbs" He suggested.

She nodded.

"Let me put a call through so you can go over before the test results come out," The cardiologist said reaching for his table telephone.

"Thank you," she said in a small voice.

She diverted her attention by checking her phone for a reply from her husband. Indeed, he had replied to her. She opened the message; "If I am asked which I love the most, snow or rosy petals, I would say *Nwanyi oma*" she mumbled as she read the message. "Don't be so angry, you will age faster with wrinkles and I haven't gotten *asa nwa* from you. Let's talk tonight over strawberry cupcakes"

A cheerful smile lit up her face at the thought of having a fine daughter with her husband, giving her sons a sister. She loved it but her face darkened the next second. She hadn't been able to conceive after she had Ifeancho and a decade had elapsed. Her husband was hopeful but it was almost futile, after endless tests, supplements, trials, nothing worked.

"Mrs Ogo stay with me"

She jolted out of thoughts at the doctor's voice, humming a response, indicating she wasn't lost somewhere.

"The Orthopedician isn't around, maybe a neurologist can help," the cardiologist said softly.

"Okay"

The doctor stood up and gestured towards the door, they stepped out and her sons stood up immediately saw her. She held their hands as they walked over to the neurology ward.

The neurologist was a tall chubby dark-skinned woman of mid-thirties, black rim eyeglasses covering half of her face, a stethoscope around her neck on pink chiffon blouse behind a big mahogany table. Her interest was piqued at the sight of Lotanna.

"What's your name?" The neurologist asked her hand stretched out for a shake, her eyes glued on Lotanna.

"Ogo Lotanna" Lotanna replied, flaunting his pearl white dentition in a cheeky smile. No matter how hard he tried, he give her a firmhand shakeand it didn't go unnoticed by the doctor.

"How old are you?" The female doctor probed further.

"Thirteen in three months" he announced proudly.

The neurologist asked him a series of questions which he answered correctly and then the doctor asked him to get a cup of cold water from the water dispenser in a corner of the office.

Lotanna did as he was told. The neurologist asked him to do other things which he did beforehewas asked to step out with his brother.

The cardiologist watched on with keen interest, pondering where the diagnosis was headed and how his feeble heart entwined in it.

"Mrs...." The female doctor trailed off, looking down at the file newly opened in front of her for the new patient after the children stepped out. "Mrs Ogo"

"Yes?" She answered impatiently, leaning forward.

"Do you believe in God?" The neurologist inquired.

"Yes, I do" Mrs Ogo replied instantly.

"So you are a Believer?" The neurologist asked.

Mrs Ogo nodded.

"Do you believe in miracles?" The doctor probed further.

"Yes, I do" Mrs Ogo replied.

"Nothing is impossible with God" the doctor started. Mrs Ogo was getting uneasy in her seat, her heart thumping rapidly, about to burst from the cliffhanger. "Lotanna has Duchene Muscular Dystrophy; it is a degenerative muscle weakness disorder as a result of the body unable to produce a type of protein to build and strengthen the muscles. It is often hereditary and rarely other causes" the doctor paused for her words to sink in.

But instead, it was the cardiologist that spoke; "Can it be the reason for a weak heart?" He asked, without waiting for an answer, he stated the obvious. "He has a weak heart with irregular breathing"

The neurologist wasn't surprised; rather she was somewhat gloomy, "Muscular Dystrophy affects the entire body muscles, the heart and lungs affected makes it life-threatening and terminal"

Mrs Ogo was shell shocked; such an expensive joke on her, she darted her eyes around the room, searching for hidden cameras, fortunately, there was none.

How can it be?

Life-threatening.....

Terminal.....

How can Lotanna be dying?

Why so after they pronounced it?

They pronounced death and God sanctioned it.

Mrs Ogo found her voice; "A-are y-you s-saying my-my son...my son-" she stuttered, pointing at her chest repeatedly, a lone tear streaking. "M-my Lota is..." She couldn't utter the word.

"Yes," the neurologist started. "There are symptoms like body weakness, feeble grip, walking on toes, muscle spasms which can be painful, larger-than-normal calves that are sometimes painful too, learning disabilities or behavioral problems, a curvature of the spine in abnormal shapes which is lethal, breathing problems that may eventually require the use of a ventilator. There is sadly no cure, surgery, clinical trials...."

Mrs Ogo zoomed off at this point; she didn't hear the only precautionary measure to be taken. She suddenly flared up; "No!" She shouted. "Not my son, he isn't dying, mu-muscle..."

"Muscular Dystrophy" The neurologist completed her sentence. "Mrs Ogo calm down, he doesn't have much time left, I don't know how he is still walking when he is supposed to be in a wheelchair"

The words echoed loudly in her ears and brain, her mind went blank, she couldn't ingest any more bad news.

"His heart-" The cardiologist abruptly stopped when she tilted her head to him. He recognized the look, it was a look of a crushed and defeated person, who just lost the will to live.

"I will give you the test results and a terse summary after you pull yourself together, now is not the time to relent, you have to keep the faith and walk towards a goal of not allowing him to die" The cardiologist encouraged her.

"Are you married?" The neurologist asked as she noticed a simple silver ring on her left ring finger. "You're not alone, your husband and I will support you in every way possible, just don't give up now"

Mrs Ogo walked out of the room dazed, her children's grip on her hand didn't bulge her as she trotted out of the hospital. She found herself going to a hotel room late in the night due to the far distance of the hospital; she laid in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering who she wronged to incur such a horrible fate. She would do nothing while her son kicked the bucket before her eyes, was such a wrenched feeling she wouldn't wish on anyone. But who could have wished such on her?

Lotanna and Ifeancho noticed her dazed look, lifeless eyes, slouched shoulders and defeated aura. They barely got any reaction from her with their incessant bickering.

Luckily, they had snacks reserved and they munched on it while Lotanna sneakily took his mother's phone.

Mr Ogo drove his red Tundra car into the compound, parking in front of his three-bedroom flat, he was surprised to find his door locked. He wondered where his wife went, at such an hour; she wasn't prone to late night. He checked his phone, no message or call from her. He highlighted from the car with a fancy bag that contained his wife's favorite pastry, trotted to the door, opened it and went in. He walked into the kitchen, kept the cupcakes and took out a bottle of water from the fridge and leaned against the counter, gulping it.

He was worried as he tried her number again, she didn't pick. He ran his hand through his hair, while the other dialed his wife's cousin Karo.

"Is my wife with you?" He asked immediately the call connected after five rings.

"*Nwanyi oma?*" Karo questioned surprised. "I am not back in town" she added.

He groaned a reply, frustrated.

"She isn't at home? It is so unlike her, she didn't give any whereabouts?" She asked.

"Do you know any new spot in town where she could have gone?" Mr Ogo asked.

"No" Karo replied.

Mr Ogo mumbled a goodbye and hung up. He went to the living room, slumped on the sofa, and propped his legs on the table. He was about to close his eyes when his phone beeped, he quickly picked it up.

"Daddy, we are fine and in a hotel, we will return in the morning, bye Lota" he read the message out loud.

Several questions plagued his mind but most importantly, they were fine. He thought for a few minutes before he replied to his son's message.

"Take care of your mother and brother" he muttered as he typed.

Mr Ogo was somewhat relieved they were fine but what could have prompted her to leave? Where did she go? Why?

He could only wait till the next day when she would return, but the wait was killing him. The night was simply too long to see his family, he switched on the television to kill time. He idly flicked through the television channels when his phone rang, he quickly answered it.

"*Nwanyi oma,*" he said immediately the call connected.

"It's Efe"

Mr Ogo grunted. He obviously wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone who didn't have any information about his wife. He should have tracked her phone when he left the house in the morning and monitored her. His clasped his face with one hand.

"Karo tried calling her but she won't pick, did you guys have a fight?" Efe Karo's husband asked.

"Are you sure you are my friend? Or my wife's cousin's husband?"

He heard Efe snorted.

"When you have an update, then call me," Mr Ogo said and was about to hang up.

"Wait!" Efe yelled.

"What is it? My wife and children weren't home when I returned because a certain someone shifted workload to me now of all times and to answer your question, no we didn't have a fight." Mr Ogo spoke in exasperation. "You're occupying my phone time, my wife could call any minute" he added and hung up.

Mr Ogo threw his head back and closed his eyes, muttering a word of prayer for his wife, he didn't know what was wrong but he felt something was amiss, he could only wish it doesn't shred them to pieces.

Mrs Ogo couldn't sleep the entire night, the doctor's words echoed in her head over and over again, reminding her of the ticking clock of her son fading away each day. Perhaps, she stared too long at the ceiling and forgot to blink, because tears stung her eyes, flowing ceaselessly. She couldn't afford to sit idle, she sat up on the bed, adjusted the duvet over her sons and stared at Lotanna sadly, her son was dying and it was a bitter truth she refused to accept. She carefully got out of bed and went to the bathroom to relieve herself. When she returned she sat on the armchair just across the bed; staring at her sleeping sons, she shook her head and wiped her tears, "My son won't die" she mumbled in determination "I'll do whatever it takes; they won't see me cry neither will they see my son fade into oblivion. No one will question me about what evil deeds I committed to prompt this"

Mrs Ogo thought of several solutions to her problem until she remembered her mother once told her of a traditional home that was very good at impossible and hopeless cases. She had told her to go there when she was trying to conceive again after she had Ifeancho but she refused and chose to wait on God with her husband.

"You're awfully quiet dear God" Mrs Ogo chuckled bitterly, "Of course, you are, your loving followers has pronounced death on Lota and boom!" She laughed hysterically but covered her mouth, so her sons wouldn't be disturbed.

"You prove yourself true as you said in Numbers 14:28, even after you also said affliction will not rise up again the second time but look at Lota, you didn't fulfill your words" she shook her head.

"People have started talking, what to expect next? What will *Dim oma* do? Will he able to handle it? What if he rejects Lota?" Mrs Ogo asked. "Ah! My enemies will not shame me, *um...ba*" she did a *god forbid* sign. "I will do something, I must do something." She paused dramatically; "My son won't die, I will defy fate if I have to" she spoke, her eyes blazing with the will of a fighter.

Mrs Ogo searched for her phone and checked the time, it was almost 4 am. She checked her bag for the essential things she needed for her trip. It was a good thing she and her husband hadn't move too far from the East where her mother lived, in five to six hours, they would arrive and Lotanna would be a step away from defying the odds.

Chapter 4

Tuesday morning at 8 am,

Mr Ogo paced the living room to and fro, he was yet to contact his wife to know her whereabouts, his worry was about to blow the roof off. He tried her number for the nth time but she still wasn't answering his calls, he was fast losing his mind.

"Where are you?" He grunted.

The doorbell rang; he sprinted to open it, only to be disappointed. He frowned. It was his wife's colleague Mrs Okoro.

"Good Morning sir, how is your wife? I had called her this morning on my way to work and she told me she was sick, so I rushed here since it was on the same route" Mrs Okoro said in a breath.

He fumed angrily, his grip on the door tightened. He had been calling her since yesterday but she didn't answer, yet she answered her colleague, how convenient he snarled inwardly.

"Is she in?" Mrs Okoro asked. "How is she? Is it serious?"

Mr Ogo gritted his teeth, "She isn't home"

"Oh!" Mrs Okoro exclaimed, slightly disappointed.

"Did she mention where she was?" He asked.

She gave him a questioning look.

"My wife wasn't home after I stepped out of the bathroom, I don't know where she went in a hurry and I haven't been able to get through to her" Mr Ogo lied through his teeth effortlessly, which was close to the truth.

"She didn't say anything else," she replied to his question.

Of course, he snorted inwardly.

"I'll tell her you dropped by," he said dismissively.

Mrs Okoro got the message, turned on her heels and left. Mr Ogo banged the door and returned to his pacing. He looked at the oval-shaped wall clock hung on the wall; it was 8:45 am. He was caught between going to work or staying at home to wait for his wife. He chose the former as he bragged his laptop bag and walked out of the house, it would drive him nuts to sit idle, listening to the tick-tock of the clock.

"Grandma!" Lotanna and Ifeancho shrieked. Ifeancho ran to her, while Lotanna sauntered to her, along with his mother.

Mrs Nnamdi their maternal grandmother was surprised to see them, as she emerged out of her house late in the afternoon. They would have arrived earlier than this but the traffic was horrible and her phone hadn't stopped ringing all

day. Mrs Ogo was at loss on what to tell her husband if she answered his call, she thought it best to ignore. Her mother's cold voice jolted her out of thoughts.

"What are you doing here?" Mrs Nnamdi asked icily.

"Mom...." Mrs Ogo hesitated.

"What do you want? Why are you here? Speak, I don't have all day" she said, her voice a bit higher than usual.

Lotanna and Ifeancho look at their mother, wondering why they had visited their grandma without their father and her hesitation. Her mother also gave her a questioning look, feeling cornered by them, she bent to the level of her sons before she spoke.

"Go inside for a minute"

"You promised to explain when we arrived," Ifeancho said with pouty lips.

"You didn't tell us we were visiting grandma" Lotanna spoke in excitement

"Allow us to talk" Mrs Ogo spoke softly, her sons nodded and went inside the house. She pulled her mother to a corner afraid people would hear her even though there were none.

"I need the address of the traditional home you told me about-"

Mrs Nnamdi completed her daughter's sentence; "Six years ago"

Mrs Ogo nodded. "Please, mo-"

Mrs Nnamdi walked into the house and returned a minute later, with a piece of paper much to her delight. She gave her daughter the paper and walked off.

Mrs Ogo was elated about the scribbled address, she looked up and smiled; her son's ticket to life, she went inside to get her children and headed out for the traditional home.

Mr Ogo was disoriented at work. Time sluggishly went by, dragging slower than a snail, his anxiety had a tight grip on him and he had so many questions but no answer. He didn't know what else to do, so he drove around town, going to different spots they usually frequented as a family but no sign of her.

He resolved to have her phone tracked when his phone rang; he swiftly pulled over his car before answering the call.

"*Nwanyi oma*" he muttered stunned, staring at the screen. He pressed the green button happily but was greeted by Ifeancho's cries.

"Ifee" he spoke in an alarmed tone, "Why are you crying? Where is your mommy?"

"Da...daddy" Ifeancho cried out.

"Calm down and talk to me" Mr Ogo tried to sound as calm as possible; "Why are you crying?"

"Da...daddy"

"I can't do anything unless you talk to me Ifee, what happened? Where is your mommy? Where are you? What about Lota?"

"Da...daddy" Ifeancho increased his cries, causing his father's heart to ache.

"Ifee" he called softly. "Calm down, calm down, it's okay, stop crying" he tried to pacify him.

"Lo...Lota daddy" he sniffed.

Mr Ogo took a deep breath to calm his nervousness; he wouldn't be of much help if he panicked, "Ifee" his voice extremely gentle.

Ifeancho hummed a reply.

"Where is your mommy?"

"Please come quickly, please daddy"

His grip on the phone tightened, his teeth gritted and his free hand, hitting the steering wheel. "Tell me where you are first" he managed to say calmly.

"I-I don't know" Ifeancho cried. "I am scared, daddy"

"Listen to me. Calm down, stop crying. You have to help me to help...." He trailed off; afraid he would confuse his son. "I'll video call you, you won't feel so scared anymore"

"I want to be with you daddy, take me home, please, Lota is screaming and I am scared, a bad woman won't let me see him and mommy," Ifeancho said in a breathe.

It was important information except it wasn't complete but it was a start. His brows creased into three lines at his words...

a bad woman won't let me see Lota and mommy

Where exactly are they?

"Let me video call you, so I can see your location and come over, I am already in the car and I just need your location" Ifeancho's father explained.

"Come quickly daddy" Ifeancho mumbled.

Mr Ogo ended the phone call and video called him through WhatsApp immediately, Ifeancho answered the call on the first ring. He was heartbroken at his son's state, he must have been crying for a while before he decided to call him and not to mention he was scared too.

"Ifee, I need you to look around and tell me what you see," Mr Ogo said, though asking for his live location through WhatsApp was more efficient, he wasn't in the mood to do such processes.

"There are people," Ifeancho said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

"Turn the phone let me see, please," Mr Ogo said politely and his son obeyed.

From the view, it was easy to tell it was a traditional herbal medicine home for treatment of illnesses. Maybe it was his ears playing tricks on him but he could have sworn he heard a distant cry and couldn't shake it off.

"Go outside but do not walk too far, ask anyone for the name of your location if you can't see any signboard"

Ifeancho nodded and stood up from the ground he sat on, hanging his mother's brown bag over his shoulder. He sneakily stepped out of the fenced vicinity, it was better to be stealthily than be scolded again by the woman who refused to let him see his brother.

There was a hotel, an event center, church, school, and a big plaza, so it wasn't difficult to find a signboard as his father had instructed. He wasn't satisfied, so he went ahead and asked a passerby for a name, which the stranger said and his father heard it loud and clear.

Mr.Ogo was surprised, he knew the location, it wasn't very far from his mother in law's house. What was his wife doing in a traditional home and that too in her hometown?

"I'm on my way" Mr Ogo spoke, shoving the raging thoughts aside" Aunt Karo will talk with you while I focus on driving so I can arrive on time"

"No daddy" Ifeancho burst out crying again.

His father realized every sentence he made had his name in it, was it fright or a mere observation?

"I can't drive and talk to you at the same time" His father explained carefully not to unleash his fury. "Aunt Karo will talk to you on a video call until I arrive," he told his son, reaching for his other phone and dialed Karo's number.

"I'm calling her right now" Mr Ogo saw how his cute chubby face brightened a bit, "Karo, talk to Ifee until I arrive to get him" he ordered.

"Have you heard from her? Where is she? How is she? Ifee? What happened to him?"

"Video call Ifee through your cousin's phone until I arrive to get him" he repeated in an austere tone. "Please" he added, barely above a whisper but she heard it.

"Okay," Karo agreed, but wondered what happened.

Ifeancho's father returned his attention to him. "Aunt Karo will talk to you, don't be scared. You're my brave son" he cheered his son. "She will call you when I end the call, hold on tight son, I am coming," he said and hang up.

Mr Ogo slowly eased back into the road, before stepping hard on the accelerator. He needed to cover a five hour journey in the shortest time possible and it was almost evening, it would be dark soon, he couldn't leave Ifeancho out in the cold. His wife was of no help right now as she was with their first son.

Ifeancho relaxed a bit, speaking with his aunt, and uncle who joined in on their conversation. It was a nice distraction but it didn't last because he stopped hearing his brother's voice, he became alarmed, several thoughts popped up in his fragile mind, resuming his waterworks.

"Why can't I hear Lota's voice?"

"How is Lota?"

"Why hasn't mommy come out?"

"Why hasn't daddy arrive?"

"Will he come?"

"Will I sleep out here?"

Ifeancho's questions seemed endless but his aunt answered the best she could, comforting him. Uncle Efe came to his wife's aid and digressed the conversation to a lighter one.

"Ifeancho" he heard his name and froze momentarily; he raised his head to find his father in front of him, with a smile on his face and his arms wide open. Ifeancho didn't wait for an invitation; he jumped into his ever waiting wide arms, his safe haven and comfort, filled with warmth and love.

Mr Ogo hugged him tightly, he didn't know how he made the journey, he simply knew he had to come to his son who urgently needed him and he was glad he did.

"Are you okay?" Mr Ogo asked, inspecting the young adolescent in his arms.

Ifeancho nodded his head. "I am now, daddy" he replied relieved.

"Where is your mommy?" He probed further.

Ifeancho pointed to the direction of the room he had seen his mother and brother entered earlier.

"Wait for me in the car, while I get them," Ifeancho's father said, walking out of the compound. He wasn't allowed to drive into the vicinity, he had to park outside and it was pretty late too. The sooner he embarked on his way home the better before fatigue wore him out. He hadn't slept the previous night and had to drive for hours.

Ifeancho was properly strapped in a seat belt before his father retreated into the compound again; a huge shock awaited him as he barged into the room where his family was. His eyes instantly turned bloodlust at the sight of his thirteen-year-old son covered in blood, shuddering and barely conscious, on a wooly mat, his wife biting her lower lips, suppressing her sobs.

Mr Ogo sprinted to the middle of the room and picked up his son gently, jolting his wife back to her senses. She was astonished.

"How...how...D...Dim oma you..." Mrs Ogo spoke incoherently.

"Who are you? Where are you taking him? Can't you see he is undergoing treatment?" The man in charge of Lotanna's *supposed* treatment bombarded him with questions at the sudden intrusion.

Mr Ogo was long gone to answer any questions. Furious, he took long strides to the car, his jaw and fists clenched underneath his son's bloody body.

"Give me my son" an anguished voice cried out.

Ifeancho's heart skipped a beat at the sight of his brother, his mouth gapped; cold chills ran down his spine. He froze but his father livid tone shattered the ice around him.

"Ifee!"

He hummed a reply, lifting his eyes to meet his father's bloodshot ones.

"Scoot closer and hold her brother" their father ordered.

Ifeancho fiddle with his seatbelt when he saw his mother's crazed state behind his father, crying and pleading, even hitting him.

"Give me my son" she demanded, pulling his arm but he didn't bulge.

After Lotanna was laid, he got off the car and turned to face his wife. Mrs Ogo gulped at the fierce eyes of her husband subconsciously taking a step back but she wasn't fast enough as he gripped her so hard that it hurt her.

Mrs Ogo whimpered, breaking through to her husband who left her and got into the car. A mini crowd stood at a distance, watching them and murmuring.

Mr Ogo waited for her to enter the car but she didn't and because he was too upset to ask her to come with him he collected her bag from Ifeancho and gave it to her before he drove off. He didn't know what was done to his son; each second was too precious to cajole his wife who could find her way back home.

Mrs Ogo was somehow able to make it to her mother's house before she broke down. Her only ray of hope was snatched away by her husband, without giving her room for explanation of her actions. Luckily, she was able to forge a story for the people at the traditional home who believed her.

She banged the door loudly to wake her mother and allow her in because it was late at night, she waited for a few minutes before her mother opened, surprised to see her alone and dejected.

"Where is Lotanna?" Mrs Nnamdi asked.

Chapter 5

"Your son-in-law took him" Mrs Ogo replied in a doleful voice, expecting sympathy from her.

Mrs Nnamdi burst out laughing, she laughed so hard water stung her eyes, streaking down her cheeks. She wiped them off, retreating into the house and sat on an armchair and crossed her legs. She counted to fifty in her mind before her daughter entered her line of sight, perplexed by her action.

"Your husband took Lotanna and left you behind?" Mrs Nnamdi asked again, making sure she heard properly.

Mrs Ogo frowned at her. She had put a lot at stake to bring Lotanna here for a solution but her husband ruined her plans, so she wasn't in a mood for an interrogation. Two wrong didn't make a right and she had committed many wrongs, she had to think of a way to right them by her husband before it become too late.

Turning on her heels to go to one of the guest room to brainstorm her next line of action, she was stopped mid-way by her mother's words.

"*Asa nwa, asa mpete, omalicha nwa* we are now even."

Mrs Ogo swiveled, confused; "What are you talking about? How are we even?"

"You were absent when my sister, your aunt," She pointed at her daughter, "Karo's mother look me in the eye and said my misfortune daughter has corrupted her daughter. Of course, I asked why?" Mrs Nnamdi uncrossed her leg and leaned forward. "Do you want to hear her response?"

For some reason, it felt like a good response wasn't given, so Mrs. Ogo kept quiet.

"How can you bathe in a river and soap enters your eyes and then you scream for help" She spoke in a parable.

How does it relate to my aunt's reply? Mrs Ogo pondered.

"I know you are wondering how it is related and it is," she said icily. "You had the opportunity to silent wagging tongues six years ago when your son was gravely sick but what did you do?" Mrs Nnamdi's voice wasn't any better than before.

Mrs Ogo's mother stood up and continued. "I am a Christian" she shook her head. "No, it is a Believer. Eh, yes, I am a Believer, I trust God and I have faith in him. He will heal my son. My husband said" she paused to clear her throat.

"We're believers of God, we don't do such" she mimicked her daughter's voice, scorning her.

"How is it today eh?" Mrs Nnamdi asked, stepping forward. "You are the talk of the town as I am. When people point their fingers at me, cursing me for being a bad mother who allowed misfortune befall her daughter, they will also curse you for being a bad mother allowing misfortune befall her son because of her evil deeds whether it's true or not" she jeered at her.

Mrs Ogo finally understood why she had said they were even now. Her mother guessed the reason for the traditional home's address correctly. But she couldn't understand why she was being bitter about it, she eventually came around, why mock her?

Mrs Ogo didn't want to hear any more, she turned to leave but an arm pulled her back and shoved her roughly to a chair.

"Where are you going? Where?" Mrs Nnamdi asked coldly, while her daughter whined in pain from the push. "Today you will listen to my every word," her mother said and dragged a nearby stool to sit on.

"I told you to marry someone from our church, you refused, you said" she paused whilst staring daggers at her daughter "You have found God sent, Christian, handsome blah blah blah."

"Look at me now, I can't go anywhere without someone asking me if Lotanna has died or has stopped hopping while walking or if you have conceived again" Her tone hostile, her eyes shooting daggers at her coldly. "Let's try traditional methods, it's the same roots and herbs that were used to produce drugs that will be used, you refused. It has dawned on you that your English medicine cannot help you, you run to me for help. The same me that came to your house severally asking you and your husband to try roots and herbs, moreover it is the same God that heals but no!" Mrs Nnamdi flared up, taunting and making a mockery of her.

"I can't go to hell, *Nwanyi oma* is it not hell now? Fourteen years of marriage, only two sons and one is quarter to die then you remembered your mother who according to you is a Christian not a Believer to suggest herbs for her own grandson." She ridiculed, her mouth twisted, adding flavours to her words and her hands weren't left out too.

Mrs Ogo didn't realize her tears were flowing down her face, as she stared at her mother disheartened. Snorts and sneers were not left out either. For six long years, her mother had been harboring ill thoughts towards her and her husband. It was her mother for Christ's sake!

"The snake that wrapped you, use its tail to flog Karo, now she is trekking your path. Three years of marriage no child, not even miscarriage so we can at least hope, nothing. She and her husband is preaching Christian as you did, warn her o, you have seen what wagging tongue and husband did to you. If somebody talks, they will carry a name for the person as enemies of my household sent by my village people and the child is not improving, where is the Believer's authority you possess?" Mrs Nnamdi's taunting left nothing untouched.

Mrs Nnamdi returned to her stool and sat down, noticing her daughter's tears for the first time. She burst out laughing so hard that she almost fell off the stool. "So you can cry? Sorry o, *Nwanyi oma*" she spoke after suppressing her laughter; "The child who says the mother will not sleep, will also not sleep. For years, you have given me sleepless nights, Chukwu daalu, you have realized I was helping you back then. But you see *eh*, I will not follow you to beg your husband to bring his son for treatment, I won't." She bluntly refused to help.

Mrs Nnamdi stood up, eyed her daughter from head to toe and gave a long malicious hiss and a click of the tongue before she walked inside, laughing bitterly.

Mrs Ogo was in disbelief, hot tears couldn't warm up the cold chills that had enveloped her. She had a dazed look on her face, sitting alone in the modern sized living room.

Wednesday at 4 am,

"Daddy" Ifeancho drew his attention, "Lota has not stopped shaking" he cried out.

"He is cold and every store has closed; nowhere to get a blanket for him" Mr Ogo explained while glancing at his son through the rearview mirror. "We will get home soon" he added.

"I suggest you find the nearest hospital and have them take a look at him, he isn't getting any better. He might need medical care for his blood loss" Uncle Efe who was on a video call with Ifeancho chimed in.

"Please" Aunt Karo pleaded. "We don't know what exactly is wrong and going home won't resolve it"

Mr Ogo sighed. They were right but he just needed to get far away from his wife's action before he could think straight. His wife would never do anything without a reason and it baffled him to think there was something wrong with his son. She didn't follow him even though he waited a bit for her.

"Daddy" Ifeancho called again, at the sight of his father being seemingly lost in thoughts.

Mr Ogo's focus didn't waver from the road ahead; instead, he let out a breath before he spoke, "Okay"

He used one hand on the wheel while the other on his phone, opening his Google map. "The nearest hospital is three kilometres away" He announced it in the car letting his friends know, which was a relieve.

"Hold on Lota, we are almost at the hospital" Ifeancho muttered, hovering over his brother.

Uncle Efe and Aunt Karo spoke with Ifeancho over silly things, diverting his attention from time to time, until they arrived at the hospital and they ended the call.

Several minutes later, Mr Ogo found himself pacing the corridors of a hospital, with his eleven-year-old son in his arms, crying. He prayed in his heart his son was okay and his wife wasn't left out of his prayer too. Although he was enraged earlier, he saw an empty hollow in his wife's eyes, which was very unusual.

He patted his son's back, assuring him his brother was okay when a nurse approached him.

"Your son won't stop murmuring your name, the doctor asked me to bring you in"

"Daddy, let's go to him" Ifeancho spoke before his father could.

The nurse frowned upon hearing him, it wasn't a good sight for a young child to behold, and that too his brother.

"Hmm..." The female nurse started. "I don't think you should-"

"I came alone and he won't let me out of his sight" Mr Ogo interrupted her, explaining. He understood her concern, "He won't look" he assured the nurse.

The nurse wasn't very convinced but she nodded anyway, she led the way to Lotanna's room.

"I don't want you to see Lota in such bad shape," Mr Ogo said, following the nurse.

"Lota is my brother" Ifeancho argued, "I want to be with him"

"I know, promise me you won't look until I tell you to, " His father bargained.

"I don't want to close my eyes," he said puffing his plump cheeks.

"You can video call your uncle and aunt, to request their presence here in the hospital. You know they will never refuse you"

Ifeancho feigned a thinking expression. His father was right, it would be nice to have his uncle and aunt by his side in the hospital, with that thought in mind, he reluctantly agreed.

Mr Ogo settled Ifeancho in a chair in front of Lotanna's room and video called his friend again before he went inside. A huge chip was lifted off his shoulder at the realization that his son had small cuts on his body and not an illegal operation which caused him to bleed.

His heart ached for his son, who was groaning in pains. He held his hand, gently tapping it, assuring him of his presence. After his cuts were cleaned, the doctor spoke in a small voice, wary of Lotanna.

"From the looks of it, he was brought from a traditional herbal home and I won't advise any medication is given to him now"

Mr Ogo looked at his son sadly; he felt his chest tightened causing pains to rip through him. He managed a weak smile for his son, who just made eye contact with him.

"You'll be fine" His father assured him before he turned to the doctor and thanked him.

"He says he can't sleep, I will send ice packs for him, to cool the stinging sensation of his cuts," The doctor told him before he left.

Mr Ogo spent the night taking care of Lotanna and his other son who refused to sleep, claiming that he would hear his brother's cries. He didn't bother coaxing him to sleep, he assured himself Ifeancho would be exhausted soon and would fall asleep.

Mr Ogo underestimated Ifeancho. Ifeancho didn't sleep the entire night until his uncle and wife arrived during the day with food and clothes for three of them who coaxed him to he sleep.

Mr Ogo spent the next two days at the hospital before his son was discharged; in those forty-eight hours, he had called his mother in law several times to inquire about his wife who was yet to pick his calls. His sons had good people to take of care of them, he had free time to think things through and realized he was in the wrong to have acted coldly towards her. He hadn't fully grasped the issue with his son and was against the idea of doing another check up on him after his ordeal.

Lotanna had told him he couldn't get the images of the new razor blade used in cutting him out of his head and every time he closed his eyes he felt like he was back at the traditional home. He wasn't settled after he heard his words; he could only comfort him soothing away his fear.

Uncle Efe and aunt Karo insisted on staying with them rather than going to and fro even though their house was on the next street. They avoided talking about the children's mother and focused on taking care of them, pampering them to a fault, wrapping them in immense love and warmth.

Chapter 6

Friday at 6 pm,

"*Mine*, what are you doing in the kitchen?" Efe asked, pulling his wife to into his arms, trapping her with his legs, shamelessly flaunting their love.

"Is dinner ready?" She asked wrapping her arms around his neck.

"No" her husband replied.

"If it was my cousin, we won't have to eat at 9 pm" Karo taunted.

"Are you chopping the vegetables or corrupting the greens with love?" Mr Ogo growled at their PDA in the kitchen as he couldn't stand it any minute longer. He didn't even know why she came into the kitchen, if dinner was ready, wouldn't it be brought out?

"I am not playing" Efe retorted.

"If you do not want me here, just -" Mr Ogo interrupted Karo.

"Leave Karo" he spoke, glaring at her.

Karo laughed.

"When I was a bachelor, you didn't hesitate to flaunt your moves in my face. Why are you in a fit because my wife is in my arms and yours is not?" Efe said but quickly regretted it.

His wife Karo hit his arm and gave him a rebuffed look, it was such a low blow. Efe looked away, avoiding the steely glare of his friend, while the kitchen's atmosphere dropped drastically.

"Really," Mr Ogo said, fully turning to him, a mischievous smirk on his face, "You're right"

"I am?" Efe asked rhetorically.

Karo didn't get involved, it was a matter of two friends and it wasn't right to interfere, she thought. She simply sat on her husband legs and watched the event unfold.

"My wife isn't here like you duly noted" Mr Ogo spoke, his smirk growing bigger almost screaming wait for it, wait for it... "My children can't be left without a mother much longer, so I will go get her back but because I am so tired Karo your lovely wife will drive while I get my much-needed sleep"

"I thought you didn't....what!" He exclaimed as his words sank in. "If you take her, I will be left alone with Ifee"

Karo burst out laughing, her husband's weak point was babysitting Ifeancho. For some reason, the little guy loved to drive his uncle nuts and get under his skin.

Mr Ogo gave him a triumphant look, gloating in his win. He returned his attention to the pot in front of him.

"What is funny *Mine*?" Efe asked the laughing woman on his legs.

"You started it" she defended herself.

"Who came into the kitchen to poke-nose in the first place?" Efe probed further.

"I drew a line, you didn't, don't blame me for it" Karo wouldn't give up. "Let me go tell Ifee that he has his uncle all to himself for a day," she said standing up.

"Two days," Mr Ogo said nonchalantly, earning another fit of laughter from her as she walked out.

Efe contorted his face; his eyes peered at his friend, "Do you not like me?"

"Nope" he curtly replied.

Efe focused on chopping the vegetables in front of him silently scolding himself for teasing him.

Ifeancho sat on a cane-woven chair near his mother's vegetable garden on the side of his home, with a poker face. His alone time was interrupted by neighbours' children, asking questions about Lotanna and their absence from home and school. He wasn't in any mood to answer them, so he ignored them, just then, an image flashed in his head; his mother surrounded by church women, uttering hurtful words and asking harmful questions about his brother.

Does it make them bad people? He wondered. His parents had told him there were only two kinds of people in the world; good people who do good deeds and bad people who do bad and that was the only difference. His uncle Efe added; there was always a choice to make, his aunt Karo added, there was no reason or excuse for being bad.

"Lotanna is fine," Ifeancho said in a small voice.

"But my mommy said she saw your daddy carry him like a baby" one of the children argued. "Is he sick? Why didn't he walk?"

Ifeancho gave a bored look; do I have to repeat my answer? He asked himself inwardly.

"Where did you all go to?" An eleven-year-old Tare inquired.

"You were not in school all week?" Preye asked.

Ifeancho face palmed himself and sighed dramatically, he looked at his neighbours' children also known as his friend before he spoke; "My brother is fine, we will be in school Monday morning"

Deep down, he told himself he wouldn't go to school until Lota got better. There was no way he would go to school while his brother wouldn't.

The children finally got the message and diverted their attention except one; "Is it because Lotanna is weak? Has he gotten weaker? Was it the reason why your daddy carried him?" A girl of fifteen years rudely asked.

Ifeancho became angry; if he kept quiet will she says bad things about Lota which would hurt him? He pondered. Lota was in the house, he could step out any time leaping and then they would have more questions.

"Lotanna is fine, we will be in school Monday morning" he repeated.

The fifteen years old girl humped and walked away. He didn't bother with her action, he simply sat there, waiting, hoping his mother walked in through the red gate. He hadn't seen his mother since they left without her at the traditional home. He had asked his father severally, he said she would come but he never gave a specific time. He crossed his arms over his chest and pouted his lips at the thought.

Ifeancho had no idea aunt Karo had been watching him; she took a deep breath and broke into a smile then tiptoed to him. She made a loud scary noise beside him, causing him to startle. His aunt laughed at him while he glared at her.

"I am sorry" she apologized, lifting him up and sat down before setting him down on her legs. She wrapped her arms tightly around him and he appreciated her warmth because he held her arms and relaxed in it.

"Why are you here alone?" Aunt Karo asked.

"I am waiting for mommy" he replied with pouty lips.

"Mommy can't bear to be away from her cute cuddling babies, she will come soon, I called her"

"You did?" Ifeancho questioned, his eyes sparkling.

She nodded; "She will be here, with you, Lotanna and daddy. You will sleep with her and chase daddy out"

Ifeancho smiled mischievously, he liked his aunt's idea.

"What are you up to now?" Lotanna asked, leaping towards them. His legs had the most cuts and he had been in a lot of pain because his veins were acting crazy, contrasting on their own, which made walking a hard task.

"Nothing" Ifeancho answered, feigning an innocent look.

Lotanna narrowed his eyes at both of them; their pair was nothing but naughty and mischievous.

Ifeancho stood up from his aunt's thighs and reached for his brother, "Let's go inside Lota," he said with a genuine smile.

Lotanna smiled back.

"I am behind you okay," aunt Karo told them, watching them go inside after a curt reply. She wondered why their mother wasn't taking any of their calls. It was a good thing Ifeancho hadn't probed further when she told him she had called his mother. She didn't think anything was wrong with Lotanna, but why hadn't she returned was the pressing question. She entered the house just in time for dinner; she sat Lotanna and Ifeancho on both sides and fed them by her hands semovita and Uha soup.

Mr Ogo announced at the table that he was going to bring back their mother delighting his children.

"Can we come with you?" Ifeancho asked.

"Uncle Efe insisted you stay behind," Mr Ogo said with a straight face.

Uncle Efe choked on his food immediately he heard it, coughing furiously, his wife was trying to stiffen her laughter as he handed him a cup of water.

"When did uncle Efe say that?" Uncle Efe asked in disbelief.

"Aunt Karo will drive and Lota, please stay with Ifee," Mr Ogo told his son ignoring his friend and swallowed large chunks of semo.

Uncle Efe couldn't believe his ears. Was he actually begging Lota to stay when he was an adult?

"It's a long journey and it will be stressful for both of you, especially you Lota" Aunt Karo coaxed the child, bringing a piece of fish to his mouth. She knew Lota could eat himself but with his cuts in the healing process, she didn't want him to do anything strenuous.

Uncle Efe gapped at his wife, when did she become so unfilial?

"If you need anything, ask your uncle Efe," their father said, looking at him.

Ifeancho pouted his lips, refusing to open his mouth; he didn't want his father out of his sight again.

Lotanna had the same line of thought as his brother, his uncle and aunt loved them so much and took proper care of them but it wasn't the same without their father, especially with their mother's absence.

"Lota" Mr Ogo called.

"Do you want me to stay while uncle Efe goes with your daddy?" Aunt Karo asked, slightly leaning towards him.

"I want all of us to be together" Ifeancho spoke before his brother could.

"Me too" Lotanna concurred.

"That's why I want to go get your mommy" Mr Ogo explained.

"Uncle Efe will take you guys out and have fun" aunt Karo said in an astute voice, leaving no room for negotiations, looking at her husband.

"Uncle Efe can hear you both and didn't agree to-" he abruptly stopped when his friend leaned forward, glaring at him.

"Uncle Efe is honoured to babysit" he announced proudly, making every one of them amused. He still couldn't withstand the glare of his friend when it involved his children; it was like a wounded lion gaze with an intent to kill.

"Uncle Efe will take you boys to cinema and watch the movie Lion King," Mr Ogo said, glaring at their uncle.

Their aunt chimed in, "You can watch Moana when you return"

Ifeancho suddenly stood up from his seat and walked to his uncle's side of the table. He bowed his head, picking his fingernails, "Will you participate in the competition tomorrow at the ice cream parlour with me? Daddy and aunt Karo won't be around, mommy hasn't returned...."

Uncle Efe found him so cute and his puffed cheeks added to his cutesy, how could he resist such cuteness?

"Of course" his uncle agreed.

Ifeancho raised his head, his eyes shone brighter than the stars, "Really?"

"Yes," uncle Efe said and Ifeancho immediately jumped on him, inside of him doing somersaults.

"Thank you, my favourite uncle" He expressed his gratitude.

Uncle Efe froze, he had just earned his title of a favourite uncle from Ifeancho after seeking it for as long as he could remember, which was the reason why he fulfilled his every demand including buying him junk food and receiving a severe scolding from his mother. His wife wouldn't flaunt her title of being a favourite anymore.

"Some moments can indeed be captured by a camera," Mr Ogo said, taking a stealthy shot of his friend's dazed state.

"Let him enjoy the moment, he worked hard for it" Lotanna chided his father.

"Whose side are you on?" Aunt Karo feigned a pain expression and swallowed a lump of semo meant for him.

"I love you favourite aunt" Lotanna cooed, earning a big smile from his aunt.

Mr Ogo shook his head at them but deep down, he was thankful for the warm atmosphere in his home. He accompanied his children to do anything they wanted for the rest of the day, as he had the foresight to take a leave off work to tend to his family and now he had his eyes set on his wife.

Mrs Nnamdi walked into the room and stood in front of her daughter, giving her a thorough look, she was sure she hadn't moved an inch since she checked on her couple of hours ago. She didn't understand why she moped all day and night. Her husband took her son and she chose to remain with her rather than going after him to get her son treated. She was beginning to doubt if this was her daughter because no child of hers was a sore loser.

"You're still here," Mrs Nnamdi said and it sounded like a question.

"Do you want to kick me out?" Mrs Ogo spoke in a quiet voice, avoiding her eyes.

"I am already a bad mother, ousting you or keeping you won't change anything" Her mother grumbled. "I just thought by now, you would have gone to fight your battle, not allowing your mother to lie to your husband"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Mrs Ogo finally looked her in the eye.

"Tell you what?" She retorted. "That you would stink if you didn't bathe for two days? Or that starving yourself won't change a thing, which one?"

Tears ran down her cheeks as she continued to stare at her, Mrs Nnamdi was baffled. After two days of crying, she still had tears to shed.

"You left the living room when I had guests over and I didn't force you out nor asked you to stay locked up in this room" Mrs Nnamdi defended herself.

Mrs Ogo could only cry. She felt like life has won against her, those she called friends had wished her ill and she was having the bitter taste of it. Her heart ached for her husband and two children, she never stopped thinking about them for a second yet she didn't answer his calls. She was yearning for her family but didn't know how to face her husband, she was scared of his reaction and when he hadn't spoken to her that fateful day, she was shattered.

"So this is how you will end your marriage *eh?*" Her mother's voice jolted her out of thoughts. "You'll allow an innocent child to die of ridicule while you stay here, unkempt, doing nothing and you will conveniently live with yourself? I thought mothers are the craziest being ever, you can't harm her child and go escort free. A mother can go to any length to ensure the well-being of her child but look at you, just one blow by ill health and you have run away hiding in your mother's house. Don't make me call you a disgrace to motherhood"

"It wouldn't be new" Mrs Ogo countered.

Her mother laughed, "So you still have a sharp tongue after you refused to bathe for two days, refused to pick your husband's calls and hide away from your problems"

Yes, she was taunting her but her words were true. She was hiding away from the world, giving them a chance to pick on her son, questioning his faith. No mother should ever do it. She wouldn't be able to hide forever and her son didn't have much time left, she had stayed two days away from her Lota, how many days does he have left?

Mrs Ogo loudly gasped in realization; her mother rolled her eyes at her action. Her job was done; her daughter would return to her husband, she was so certain of it. No one quite psychs a person up like a mother. Mrs Nnamdi thought to herself flaunting a smirk.

Chapter 7

Saturday morning at 6 am,

Mr Ogo stared at his sleeping children; he didn't have the heart to wake them as they slept late and it was weekend, they were allowed to sleep to their heart content. Their uncle and aunt were available to take care of them for the day, he trusted them and it wouldn't be the first time he left his children with them. With that thought, he quietly entered the room and planted a kiss on his sons' temple. They stirred at the contact and he held his breath, he wouldn't be able to withstand their pleads to take them along, so he hoped they didn't wake up. Thankfully, they didn't. He quietly left the room before he could breathe again.

He had changed his mind and decided to go alone; he figured he could use the drive back to sort things out with his wife. So he began his journey after Efe saw him off, several thoughts occupied his mind but he chose to remain positive and believed all was well. He was also determined not to leave his mother in-law's house without his wife come what may but thinking about it now, he found it strange how his mother in law didn't say anything about his action from the other day. There was no way his wife would be with her mother for two days and not mention it. Was she waiting for him to arrive before trashing it out?

Mr Ogo gulped, his heart suddenly racing. Sweat beads formed on his forehead, and his palms on the wheel equally sweaty. He switched on the air conditioner of the car and he took several deep breathes to calm himself down.

"Uncle Efe, when will my parents return?" Ifeancho asked for the nth time.

Uncle Efe refused to be tired of giving an answer; he was his favourite uncle, after all, he lifted the eleven-year-old up from staring out the window and placed him on the couch where his brother was.

"If you can sit still for an hour without asking when your parents will return, I will give you my phone to call them" uncle Efe bargained.

"We have a phone" Lotanna chimed in.

His uncle glared at him. How could he steal his moment and make him the bad guy all at once?

"He is proving how great of a favourite uncle he is and you just stole his thunder," aunt Karo said, laughing, inspecting his cuts.

"Oh!" Lotanna exclaimed.

"Will you wait?" Uncle Efe returned his eyes to Ifeancho who nodded in response.

"Will the marks fade away after it's healed?" Lotanna asked, staring at his light-skinned thin hands sadly. He couldn't scrub his body properly without whining in pain or bleed out.

"I once heard that if a person has cuts and was showered lots of love by his favourite uncle and aunt, there won't be any scar left behind" his aunt Karo said with an indifferent look as she applied a cream to his cuts.

Lotanna saw right through her, she didn't think he was gullible like his brother who enjoyed all the attention on himself right?

He gave her a look.

"*Mine* is correct" Uncle Efe butt in obviously supporting his wife.

"Told you" aunt Karo grinned.

"And his brother too" Ifeancho chipped in his words.

Lotanna gave up. It was impossible to win an argument against all three of them. He sighed and looked down at his hands, he hadn't quite gotten himself after he left the traditional home and he felt it so strong something was amiss but he didn't know what. Perhaps, he had felt it before or maybe he hadn't recovered from the sight of his own blood gushing out.

"Am I different?" Lotanna blurted out before he could stop himself.

His uncle and aunt froze momentarily, they shared a look and darted his eyes to Lotanna who was intently staring at his body.

"Of course, you are different" his uncle Efe announced proudly, glints of sadness and pain flashed in Lotanna's eyes.

"You are different from your parents, your brother, your uncles and aunts, including us. You know why?"

"Why?" Ifeancho asked for his brother, intrigued and anticipating her answer.

"You're one of a kind" uncle Efe replied. "You and your brother" he added.

"You both are special and unique" aunt Karo touched the brothers' cheeks, her voice clear and her eyes spoke depth of her words. "Do you know why I agreed to marry your daddy friend here?" She asked, pointing at her husband. "I figured if I married him, I would be more closer to the boys I love the most and showing off to the world, not forgetting to tell them every day how much I love you"

"I decided to stay behind in the country after I held you in my arms for the first time in the hospital eleven years ago, and I am glad I did. Thanks to you, I met your aunt" uncle Efe said, lightly pulling his Ifeancho's cheeks.

"You are telling the truth right?" Ifeancho asked, not minding the pull on his cheeks.

Their uncle nodded.

Lotanna was so happy to hear their words; it instantly made him feel better and he was grateful for such a loving uncle and aunt.

"We love you" Lotanna cooed, his brother bobbed his head in agreement.

"We love you more" uncle Efe professed and hugged them, careful of Lotanna cuts.

"Okay, enough mushy moments, we need to eat breakfast and you Ogo Lota, don't move," aunt Karo said in a lax voice, poking his shoulder. She gathered the things from the floor used on his cuts and stood up.

"Be good, both of you" their uncle warned. "After breakfast, we will go out" he added.

Ifeancho had mixed feelings about it as his mind drifted back to the previous day when his neighbours' children asked him questions about his brother. He had been excited about an outing but he wasn't anymore. He didn't want anyone to ask him more questions.

"We can go out in the evening when it's not crowded because of Lota" Ifeancho reasoned.

The adults agreed without any issues and left to do their various tasks whilst Ifeancho sat crossed-legged on the sofa, staring at his brother's cuts on his arms.

"Do you want to touch it?" Lotanna asked, "It doesn't hurt a lot anymore"

Since he wore singlet and shorts, he didn't need to adjust any clothing for his brother to lightly touch his cuts and blow air on it. Ifeancho's action amused Lotanna.

"I'll pray and you will get better," Ifeancho said with a gloomy look.

"Thank you," Lotanna told him with a charming smile and his brother couldn't help but smile back.

Mr Ogo arrived at his mother-in-law's house and met his wife; it was a relief she was still there and hadn't disappeared the way she did last time. She was surprised and didn't try to conceal to it. He didn't think she would be surprised but thinking about how he parted, maybe she didn't think he would come here so quickly.

Why would he delay to get back his wife? He thought to himself.

The moment of truth arrived when his wife's mother stepped into the living room after about ten minutes wait, which seemed like ten years. He fidgeted in the single armchair he sat, his wife would have noticed if she was engrossed in her guilt.

"My son you are here" Mrs Nnamdi wasn't surprised.

Mr Ogo greeted her.

"You have come to take your wife" Mrs Nnamdi stated the obvious reason. She tilted her head towards her daughter.

"Go and get something for him to eat, it was a long journey"

Mrs Ogo was more than happy to leave her husband's presence for a short time. Mr Ogo couldn't take his eyes off her as she fled into the kitchen, he missed her so much.

"How are children?" His wife's mother asked when they were alone.

"They are fine" Mr Ogo answered.

"You must have left your house very early, who is looking after the children?" She asked again.

"Karo" He gave a terse reply.

"Karo" She repeated. "It is always Karo, I wonder when she has time for her husband"

Mr Ogo didn't know how to continue after he heard her, so he changed the topic and asked her light questions.

His wife returned with a can of cold Malt but he insisted on having water instead.

"I want to take my wife home with me" he announced after he emptied the bottle of cold water his wife gave him.

"No problem at all" Mrs Nnamdi said with a smile.

It felt too good to be true until he was on his way back home with his wife in his red Toyota Tundra car. That was easy, he thought.

Mr Ogo stole glances at her wife, whose eyes were staring out, clearly avoiding him; he didn't want them to continue with their fight so he apologized.

"I am sorry," he said.

His wife didn't respond but he was patient, he didn't rush her.

"I am sorry too," she said after about five minutes.

Mr Ogo smiled and reached for his wife's hand, intertwining their fingers. The drive home was quiet and he was content.

The silence was disrupted by her ringing phone, her husband stole a glance to know if she would answer her phone but she didn't. He decided to let her have her space before he bombarded her with questions.

Sunday Morning at 7:45 am,

Mr Ogo gapped at his wife's words; he couldn't believe his wife uttered such words, words he never imagined. He stared at her in disbelief. Was he dreaming?

"What did you say?" Mr Ogo asked, assuring himself his ears were playing a dirty trick on him, as he watched his wife literally roll on the sheets.

"I won't ever step foot into a church again" Mrs Ogo repeated nonchalantly.

"Why?" He asked, refusing to accept her outrageous declaration.

"It is what it is," Mrs Ogo said, pulling the duvet up her shoulders, turning her back on him on the bed.

"You don't have a reason for your declaration? You would never do anything without a reason behind it"

"You know me so well" his wife complimented.

"What happened last sunday?" He asked, sitting beside her on the bed. He had remembered he couldn't get to the bottom of last sunday's issue, "You made a prayer request and you are in the waiting period?"

"I won't step foot in a church again because-" She paused, raised her head to look at her husband, "I want Lota with me. If you give me my son, I will take back my statement. Will you give him to me?"

"Lota is our son" Mr Ogo corrected with a frown.

Mrs Ogo chuckled. Apparently, he hasn't heard the news making rounds; "If you think so"

"I said, I am sorry, I shouldn't have reacted the way I did. I was so worried-"

"I apologized too" his wife cut him off.

"Daddy" Mr Ogo heard his son voice and a knock. He sprinted to the door.

"Are you okay?" He asked alarmed.

"Yes," Lotanna answered.

His wife appeared behind him, "Lota," she said, worry etched on her face.

"I am fine" he replied. "You're not dressed," he noticed his mother was still in her pyjamas.

"Stay home with me please" Mrs Ogo squatted in front of her son who was smartly dressed in a red polo t-shirt, blue jeans, and black sneakers.

"We have the whole day to ourselves after we returned from the church" Lotanna tried to persuade her.

"Lota, please" Mrs Ogo pleaded, looking into her eyes. Lotanna didn't know what it was but he couldn't bring himself to refuse her.

Ifeancho refused to go to church when his brother told him he would stay home. Mr Ogo gave up and went to church alone. He had thought he was in a better place with his with but her refusal to answer his questions spoke volume. He reminded himself to be patient with her.

Sunday afternoon at 12 noon.

Mrs Ogo was certain they would come, she believed a bear wouldn't taste honey and not return or that a vulture wouldn't return to its carcass. She patiently waited for their arrival, after she strictly warned Lotanna not to step out of the house under any circumstances. Lotanna found it weird but agreed to it.

Mrs Ogo looked at the golden oval-shaped wall clock; it was barely five minutes gone and she wasn't in a hurry, she adjusted her green chiffon blouse ready for a fight.

Since their mother returned the previous day, there was something different in her aura around children. They dismissed it as her absence from home for days but after the doorbell rang and she sprinted to open it, they confirmed something was off.

Behind her husband were the vultures she had thought of minutes ago, she gave her former church members a sinister smile.

"Welcome home *Dim oma*" she spoke with clenched teeth, "You brought them too" she added.

"We were not in the church during the week and I showed up in church alone, so the visitation team followed me home" he explained, though he wasn't sure if he needed to especially with people behind him.

Mrs Ogo spotted Deaconess Umukoro and the assistant president of the Igbo group of the church, it was more than enough for her. She and Lotanna weren't in church, of course, they would find her to her home in the name of visitation while in actual fact they are seeking an update to fuel the existing gossip.

Mr Ogo didn't understand why his wife blocked the door. He gave her a meaningful look, she understood and stepped aside.

After her husband entered, she hurled an insult in Igbo; she knew they would get the message as the assistant president of the Igbo group instantly reacted.

"Mrs Ogo, what are you implying? If you don't want us at your house, be bold enough to say so"

Mrs Ogo didn't care who was closer to her, she pushed the person aside, banged the door and stood akimbo.

"For those of you who didn't understand my dialect or think that I am scared to throw you out, let me repeat." She spoke coldly, scanning their faces, "When you lay with trash, you eventually become trash" her voice attracted her husband who opened the door but she wasn't done yet. "I don't want any of you" she pointed at each of them, "in my house"

"*Nwanyi*-"

"Hold on, when I am done, I will answer you please" Mrs Ogo interrupted her husband, turning her attention back to them she continued; "I don't want any of you in my house for your own good. If you enter the house of an immoral woman, you will become immoral too. How will the church handle it?"

Mr Ogo was surprised at his wife's word for the second time in a day but she wasn't done.

"I am an immoral woman, a sinner, and a taint. I respected myself and stayed at my house so I wouldn't pollute anyone, especially the house of God. So why then did you all come here? Or haven't you heard the rumours? It's true. I am responsible for my son's illness, you know why?" She questioned.

Mrs Ogo didn't wait for an answer, "God punished me for meeting another man and bearing his child. You were right. Stay away from me before you become tainted too and your mother in law chases you out despite your dowry being paid."

He tried to calm her down but she wouldn't, he feared to be forceful like last time.

Mrs Ogo went on ranting, giving her husband a huge shock. He finally understood why she didn't want to go to church again.

"It's okay, calm down" her husband tried to coax her, gently pulling her inside.

"I'm so sorry" Mrs Runo apologized on behalf of those who had shamed and scorned her in the church. She had heard about it during the weekly activities in church and wasn't chanced to reach out to them until after church service. "They were concerned about your son but went about it the wrong way and I apologize on their behalf"

"Thank you," Mr Ogo said before he closed the door.

"Go to your room," He told Ifeancho who obeyed; he was out of sight before he asked, "What was that about?"

"That is the news around town; our son is a new gossip, making rounds. So, now you know why I will never enter a church again, I refuse to be scorned and shamed over again and I will do anything to make my son well and hearty with or without your permission. I won't sit idle while people call him cursed, forbidden fruit, faulty-"

Mr Ogo cut her off, "Nobody calls him that"

His wife laughed hysterically and sat down on a sofa, she patted the space next to her and he wondered why she was suddenly calm after such laughter spooked him but he sat anyways.

"*Nwanyi oma*" Mr Ogo cooed.

"*Dim oma*" Mrs Ogo cooed too. "Why did you barge into the traditional home and took Lota away, ignoring my pleas?" She asked with a straight face.

His son was in tears, which reasonable father wouldn't rush down immediately? He couldn't voice his thoughts.

"I am scared," Mrs Ogo said in a small voice.

"It's okay to be scared-" his wife cut him off.

"I will not allow Lotanna to die, God cannot give me a son only to take him away, I refuse and I will fight Him if I have to. Let me finish." She told her husband who was about to speak. "I went to the hospital for Lotanna's checkup and found out he is actually dying like they said, do you know how I felt?" Mrs Ogo questioned.

Mr Ogo gapped, his mouth wide open, for the third time within a couple of hours.

"Do you know what I felt? Anger, resentment, disgust, disdain for God, and hate for Christians. I dropped my faith at that moment. Without you, I will take my son away and he will be fine" Mrs Ogo assured him and went inside. Mr Ogo was stunned.

Chapter 8

Mr Ogo never got any peace of mind after her declaration. He didn't know what her next line of action would be and it scared him, she did not make talking to her easy and used every means possible to pick a fight with him. He was at his ends wit; he didn't know what else to do besides to have faith not just for himself but his family which seems to have been plunged into a dark tunnel and a ray of light was non-existent, how else would he explain Lotanna's illness, a terminal one at that.

He felt like his wife was waiting for him to step out of the house so she could begin her move. It was quite shocking she would give up her faith so easily, but could he really blame her? The scene he had witnessed was disheartening. Some people just don't know when and where to draw the line in making a mockery and shame of a person. He was quite relieved, however, that he had a reminder of life's purpose, hung and framed in his children's room. Every day, he would stopped by his children's room just to read it, hopeful he would get an explanation for their hurtful action. Gazing intensely at the frame on the wall, he didn't hear his youngest son come in.

"Daddy" Ifeancho called in a chirpy voice.

When is he never excited? His father inwardly asked himself. Maybe if he should learn to be like a child again, who don't have to worry about anything and be cheerful in everything, holding tightly unto God's Word. It would be nice if his wife trusted God again, especially now when they really had to, if for no other reason, then for Lotanna's sake.

"I can read that" his son's voice jolted him out of thoughts.

"Go ahead" Mr Ogo encouraged.

"Our prime purpose in this life is to help others and if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them" Ifeancho read it out meticulously.

Everyone needs to have this constant reminder, then maybe, hopefully, they would have a rethink before scorning and shaming a person. Mr Ogo thought.

"Where is your mommy?" He asked.

"Making breakfast" his son answered.

He hadn't gone to work since he had applied for leave and didn't intend to return until his family was whole again. Mr Ogo smiled at the thought; it would indeed be nice to have his cheerful wife back not this bitter and distraught person he couldn't recognize.

"Where is your brother?" Mr Ogo picking up his son into his arms.

"With mommy"

Of course, where else would she want him to be? He sighed at his thoughts and shoved it aside.

Mr Ogo stepped into the living room, his sight landed on his eldest son. He couldn't help but think he had a short time left with them and all the waves of changes had an impact, both in his home and church. He dropped Ifeancho and

mumbled something about his phone and went to his bedroom. He opened the third drawer on the left in the wardrobe where they kept their medicals. He took out the file and spread it out on the bed, searching for Lotanna's medical report.

Mr Ogo found it, knelt down and prayed over again. He couldn't accept the death sentence meted out on his son.

Mrs Ogo had it all planned out after tying loosed ends. She didn't need permission at this point, she just needed to move. She thought it bad preventing her son from stepping out of the house, but who could blame her? There were vultures everywhere, ready to pick on his vulnerability and she wouldn't allow it. Mrs Runo her church member visited her during the week. Mrs Ogo was wary and kept a close eye on her, if it were up to her, she wouldn't allow any of them into her home. But because she gave a speech that sunday, her husband let her in, upsetting her.

It wasn't just Mrs Runo who visited; her husband and three children also visited. Mrs Ogo felt like salt was rubbed on her wounds on seeing Mrs Runo flaunt her marriage and children in her face. Why wouldn't she? Mrs Ogo scoffed. Her first child isn't on a race against time, her second wasn't awfully quiet and she didn't have any problem conceiving.

Mrs Ogo was truly bitter. She didn't have anyone to turn to, her mother had written her off, her siblings were probably on their mother's side or too busy minding their marital affairs.

Just then, she sat on her bed, shaking her left foot, bewailing her misfortune, and her husband picked this moment to preach about a program in the church.

"Oh, God!" She lamented, "Was the church made for everybody?" She cussed.

Mr Ogo didn't see any harm in asking her to join him as she hadn't stepped out of the house since she returned but he knew in his heart, she had something up her sleeves.

"It will do you good to-" Mr Ogo was interrupted by his wife.

"Yes, it did me a hell lot of good after which, it brought me a fiery hell of pain. So no thank you" Mrs Ogo spoke icily.

"This is not the end of the road-"

"I can walk out that door and you won't see me or Lota again, I am sure your godly parents will get you a better wife to marry to bear you children, moreover, they never liked me. Before you start preaching about their agape love" Mrs Ogo did air quote on *agape love* and continued. "I worked hard to earn their trust and love but I was never accepted. You know you can't deny it"

Mr Ogo was beginning to think his mere words were her bottom belt, if it wasn't, she wouldn't lash out any time he spoke to her. The way she bent every word, pinning it on Lotanna's illness left him stunned. He could compliment her food and she would respond; Lota will have lots of nourishment to get better when she takes him away from treatment.

It didn't matter if they were alone or with the children or Efe and Karo, her seemingly found sharp tongue would lash out. It wasn't right for children to hear such words, so he restricted speaking to her in their presence but it didn't change anything. A bitter angry woman had no control over her voice or tone.

Mr Ogo sighed tiredly.

"When you get to church, pray my son doesn't die because of my evil deeds, let me bear the consequences myself" His wife's cold voice rang out, the back of her right palm slammed into her left palm, her mouth twitched in mockery.

"Moreover, everyone knows you are not his father but you will still go and be amidst them. Don't become like vultures too but it won't be shocking anyway, I have seen it already"

"The mind is such a devious weapon if you let it control you."

"Who doesn't know I am deranged?" His wife flared up from the bed, ready for a fight. "Didn't you see how I went performed in their presence that sunday? How can they plant okro and reap sweet potato?"

Mr Ogo smiled at her logic. If only she listened to herself just now, she would have gotten the answer to her ostensible burden called Lotanna.

"I am amusing right?" Mrs Ogo asked sheepishly.

He bobbed his head in a nod, "Very" he took the shot at her changed demeanour and hurled her to him. He wrapped his arms around his wife, staring down at his woman who was a head shorter than him, an epitome of beauty and a smartass, the mother of his children, whom he had spent the last fourteen years of his life with, he was truly blessed to have her. He wouldn't have it any other way.

"All this energy you invest in fighting with me, lashing out at me, could be used for something beneficial" Her husband teased, wriggling his brows, a mischievous smirk on his face.

Mrs Ogo wrapped her arms around his neck; she liked the new direction of their conversation; "Mmmm....beneficial like what?" A charming smile on her lips with a gorgeous dimple adorning her plump cheeks completing her oval face.

"Are you interested?" He asked, barely above a whisper, without breaking eye contact with her, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ears and caressed her smooth face.

Their moment was interrupted by a panting Ifeancho. "Lota can't breathe" he shrieked.

His father sprinted to the living room where he had left him, his wife hot on his trail, "Lota!" She yelled running towards him, fearing the worse.

Lotanna was gasping for air when his parents got to him, one of his hands clenching his chest area and scratching it, the other tightly on his shorts. It was such a heart-wrenching sight.

His father sat beside him and gently tapped his hand clenching his shorts, assuring him of his presence. Lotanna felt a faint source of warmth on his hand and quickly held onto it.

Mr And Mrs Ogo was helpless, they couldn't do anything to stop his pain, except be there for him. It broke their hearts, stinging his mother's eyes, prompting her tears.

Ifeancho saw his mother's tears and it made his eyes to water. Mr Ogo felt a sharp pain in his chest, his family was in pain and he couldn't do anything. What kind of a husband and father was he? He questioned himself.

At that moment, the pain stopped and Lotanna could breathe properly. He slumped back in the chair, with a pale look and after a while their father spoke.

"Ifeancho let's go to church"

"Which church *eh*?" Mrs Ogo barked, standing up, "Go to church but leave my son out of it. In his thirteen years of serving God, being faithful and committed, what did he have to show for it? Muscular Dystrophy, Pain and worse still death"

"*Nwanyi oma*" Mr Ogo roared irked.

"Shout all you want, it won't change anything"

"I know the God I serve; he will not allow anything happens to our son" Mr Ogo emphasized the word our.

He picked up his son and walked out of the house, with Ifeancho behind him.

"Go to church but make sure no one points a finger at him, accusing him of committing a taboo that resulted in his illness" she shouted after him.

Mr Ogo got into his red Toyota Tundra car after he safely strapped in his sons on the backseat with seat belts and drove off.

"Lota, are you okay?" Ifeancho asked his brother who was still pale.

"I just need fresh-" Lotanna didn't finish his sentence when three other children walked up to him.

"Let's go Lota," his brother said, reaching for his hand.

"Wait, I want to ask him why-" one of the children didn't finish speaking as he pulled Lotanna who wasn't expecting a pull, tripped and fell down the steps.

In a flash, Lotanna was on the floor, unmoving and Ifeancho was petrified. He squealed and ran to him on the floor, the first thing he saw blood. Images of his brother bloody from the traditional home immediately flashed vividly in his head.

"Lota!" He cried out, gently lifting his head. He saw his eyes opened, he was slightly relieved. He looked up to ask for help, only to find them gone.

"Please get up Lota" he gently tried to raise him, when a boy he recognized as Mrs Runo's first son Garen assisted him.

Lotanna was groaning in pains with each movement he made and it alarmed the two boys.

"Wait here; let me go call your daddy" Garen, a boy of fourteen years spoke.

"Hurry" Ifeancho spoke hastily.

Ifeancho dusted sands off his brother's body, checking out his injuries. His elbow was scratched, his knee and wrist weren't left out, and a cut on his left cheek.

"What happened?"

Ifeancho heard his father's voice behind them; he stood in front of Lotanna, inspecting him thoroughly. His wife's words rang in his head. Maybe he should not have brought him to church, especially after he had a severe gasp session before they left the house.

Mr Ogo didn't need to ask if he was hurt because his injuries were visible. He closed the small gap to his son and gently gave him a side hug.

"Lota, how did you fall?" Mrs Runo asked, rushing over to him. "So sorry dear, let's clean his injuries first," she told Mr Ogo who nodded.

Ifeancho who hadn't stopped crying followed after his brother, leaving his father behind. His son Lotanna was leaping before, now, he needed the support of two others just to move a step forward. He placed a hand on his waist, looked down and let out a breath. He was really very close to asking the popular question; God why? Why him?

He told himself he wouldn't question God, he won't go back on his word. He had come to church for a reason, he won't allow it to be in vain.

Mr Ogo sighed and walked in the direction he had seen Mrs Runo take his son. He didn't feel the need to ask what happened but he sure was going to tell God to make it stop because he was tired.

Mr Ogo arrived and saw their Pastor praying with Lotanna. It was obvious that he had gotten wind of the rumours in church. He swiveled and walked back into the church.

Ifeancho stayed with his brother at the back of the church with Mrs Runo and her son Garen. After the close of service, they followed them home, making sure Lotanna was fine. Lotanna wasn't quite himself anymore, aside from his aching body. He didn't think he would be pulled unexpectedly while having a breather outside of the church.

Lotanna was worried about how his mother would react, especially after being against his going to church. He was sad at the mere thought.

As expected, Mrs Ogo flared up at the sight of her bruised son. Her eyes were fierce, her voice cold and full of accusation, her aura murderous.

"Where were you when he was pushed down the steps Ifeancho?" She roared seethed in anger.

"Ifeancho didn't think he would push him" Garen explained.

Mrs Runo apologized on behalf of the child but Mrs Ogo wouldn't hear any of it, she scolded her youngest son.

"Thank you so much for everything" Mr Ogo spoke up.

It was her cue to leave. Mrs Runo and her son Garen took their leave promising to check on Lotanna the next day.

"I told not to take him to church, have you seen the result?" Mrs Ogo vented out her anger on her husband. She continued ranting but then she caught a glimpse of Ifeancho standing beside his brother who was resting on the couch.

"Are you too young to look after your brother? Lota does all the chores, what do you do?" she questioned. "Nothing. Look at your brother"

"I am sorry" Ifeancho mumbled.

"It wasn't his fault."

"Why is he crying and apologizing then?" Mrs. Ogo questioned her husband who sided with their second son.

"You are shouting at him, what do you want him to do? Rather than heaping blames on him, be thankful it wasn't serious and try praying for Lota not find any alternative. There is an option to do physiotherapy for him but you completely ignored it."

"Who is now barking?" His wife sneered.

"Just stop doing this please" Her husband pleaded.

"Go tell them to leave my son alone" she retorted.

"People will always talk; it's up to you to decide what you will listen to. Even Lota has told Ifee not every word is heeded to, why can't you do the same?" Mr Ogo asked, trying hard not to lose his cool.

Mr Ogo turned to Ifeancho, lifted his face up with his fingers and wiped his tears with his thumbs. "It's okay Ifee, you didn't do anything wrong"

"Spoil him!" She snorted.

"Don't listen to an angry adult, he or she spurts...." He trailed off as he glanced back at his wife.

"Complete it, spurt nonsense right?" she argued.

"You said it not me," he said, throwing his hands in the air. She gave him a deadly glare.

"Important thing is don't listen to an angry adult," he told his son. "Especially your mommy" he added in a whisper.

Mrs Ogo stared at her husband back, she had a feeling he was badmouthing her to their son. She ignored it and sat on the armrest of the couch, looking down at her son. Her blood boiled again.

"Let's get you changed," Mr Ogo told his son as they headed for his room, "Aunt Karo should have been here, will you call her?"

Ifeancho nodded his bowed head, he felt extremely terrible his brother was injured because of him. "I am sorry" he mumbled again once inside the room.

"It's alright." He told his son, squatting before him. "You stayed with him when he needed you, that's what matters" he patted his cheek. "Mommy is just angry Lota is hurt, she doesn't mean any of it"

Ifeancho wasn't very convinced, his brother was in pain and injured, he should have been more attentive to his brother. Mr. Ogo smiled at his son, whose face was scrunched up. "Lota is very lucky to have you. Don't be sad anymore, cheer up, your brother is fine." He spoke softly to him. "Do you want to call your favourite uncle and report to him?"

"Can I?" Ifeancho asked, with pursued lips, his fingers picking each other as he sat down on his bed.

His father fished out his phone from his pants and gave it to him, it was all the approval he needed.

Chapter 9

Saturday morning at 11 am,

Mr Ogo planned to take his children out for fun, despite his wife's ranting. He didn't believe locking themselves in their home would silence wagging tongues, they would continue to live their lives. He opened the door, to find his mother and his wife's mother, aunt Karo's mother, and other elderly relatives. He didn't need to be told what the unannounced unexpected visit was about.

His wife had given him a lot of headaches the past weeks and their fight seems far from over, the elders would simply add to it. He needed moral support and his wife was as good as unavailable, he quickly texted Karo a change of plan and to report to his house immediately. He was certain nothing good would come out of it and he hoped his wife would be able to defend herself without lashing out.

"We're waiting for you, ask us to sit sir" Mr Ogo's mother spat out coldly.

"Ple-please sit" Mr Ogo stuttered. They didn't come here to play, he thought to himself.

The elders sat down comfortably and at that moment, his ego received a soothing massage. The large living room was useful after all. His eyes met his wife, she signaled him to Lotanna.

He gulped, she wouldn't raise the issue of leaving right? He made a lost puppy look.

Their interaction didn't go unnoticed by the elders, and it irked his mother. She cleared her throat, drawing his attention. She eyed him in disdain and said.

"I didn't come here to watch your lovey-dovey moment, that's what my television is for"

"Is it true you left your husband's house to go back to your mother and refused-" Mrs Afam Karo's mother was speaking when her daughter barged in, her mother was stunned. "Ife, what are you doing here? Is this your husband's house? You will not mind your marital home, you are chasing after your cousin's children, babysitting for them. Are they the first couple to have just two that they can't take care of? Why don't you bear your children so she can babysit for you?"

"Mommy!" Karo grumbled. She proceeded to greet all the elders but they answered her the same way, nonchalantly. They came for a fight. She concluded.

"Come," aunt Karo told the children, she didn't want them to hear any of their stock up frustration and it was a good excuse to run away from her mother who had been on her neck for a grandchild.

"Ifeyinwa" Mrs Afam called her Igbo name, halting her daughter Karo. "Quick, go to your room" she muttered to the children before she turned 360 degrees to her.

"Have you lost your respect while washing your cousin's undies?" Mrs Afam barked.

"Mrs. Afam!" Mr Ogo's mother yelled. "Go to your daughter's home and teach her manners, not in my son's house" she reprimanded.

"This is her second home" Mrs Afam retorted.

"Should we intervene?" Karo asked Mr Ogo in a whisper.

"If they did come for good intentions, this is the result. I serve a living God" Mr Ogo replied, amused by the threatening brawl.

Mrs Ogo who stood beside them heard them and rolled her eyes. She knew why they had come, they came to demand answers. Was she ready? No. Will she back down? No.

"If you hadn't run away with Lota, they wouldn't be here nor hear your aunt call my middle name, my mother isn't smiling" Karo muttered and pinched her cousin's arm.

"Behave Karo" Mrs Ogo warned.

"You really won't stop them?" Karo asked concerned at the loud voices and hurling of words.

"Nope," Mr Ogo answered.

"I didn't come here for any of you," Mr Ogo mother told her inlaws before she turned to attention to her son's wife. "I heard you left your husband's house, why?"

"Lotanna is ill" Mrs Ogo replied in a calm voice.

"How are you so blunt?" Karo asked her cousin, sensing blooming trouble.

"So what I heard is true," Mrs Ogo's mother in law said as she leaned forward.

"I don't know what you heard," Mrs Ogo said quietly, throwing the living room into another round of whisper and murmurs.

"What is wrong with Lota?" One of the male elders asked.

Mrs Ogo recognized him as one of her husband's uncle but wasn't sure how to answer. Ifeancho heard the first gang up, will he also hear this now? She wondered.

"Have you forgotten how to talk?" Mrs Ogo's mother in law scolded.

"Why are you afraid? Tell them" Mrs Nnamdi her mother encouraged.

"We haven't finished the tests to-" Mr Ogo was interrupted.

"She didn't talk to you" one of his uncle rebuked him.

"She's my wife" Mr Ogo defended.

"When did you become husband wrapper *eh*?" His mother rebuffed. "That is why you are a laughing stock, a taunt used for a parable."

"So he should allow you to wash his wife and do nothing?" Mrs Nnamdi asked.

"We just want answers," another elder said.

"Just answers indeed" Karo snorted.

"Karo!" Mr Ogo mother's shouted.

"Don't interfere in what doesn't concern you" Mrs Afam scolded her daughter.

"Are you serious?" Karo countered her mother. "It doesn't concern me? First of, she's my cousin and you came with all of them, to do what? Confirm rumours, see with your eyes and boost up their faith, asking about their welfare or to scorn her and be among the long list of people who shamed her. Society scorned them, will you elders also scorn them? Is that why you are here? Do you want to accuse her of immoral acts again? Pour out your frustration of having only two grandchildren from your precious son? Wait, don't tell me you came to offer a solution. Nah, you can't, the sun has to shine at night"

"Are you sitting there while your daughter insults me?" Mr Ogo's mother asked Karo's mother.

"Where is the respect of young people?" One of the aunts asked with contempt.

"Young people will respect those who deserve it and the respect I had for all of you evaporated when you came here to scorn and shame a parent while you all are parents" Karo taunted.

Mr Ogo commended his wife's cousin for her bold stand. He would not have been able to say anything without getting in trouble. He had a lot to learn from this fiery woman.

Mrs Ogo watched on silently, she wouldn't get involved until she was spoken to, she didn't want any squabble with anyone and she would only get hurt.

"Is this how you train your daughter? To badmouth elders" Mr Ogo's mother spoke with clenched teeth. "I don't blame you, if you had your own children, you wouldn't be clinging to your cousin." She turned to Mrs Ogo. "What is wrong with Lotanna?"

"Give others a chance to speak mom" Mr Ogo chimed in.

"They came here for the reason; I wonder why they are delaying the evil deed" Mrs Nnamdi snorted.

Another altercation erupted, maybe it is wrong but fighting amongst themselves is much better. Mr Ogo smiled at his thought. If he spoke against them, hell would let loose.

"Lotanna has Duchene Muscular Dystrophy" Mrs Ogo snapped and yelled, silencing the room.

"*Nwanyi oma!*"

"Cousin!"

Mr Ogo and Karo exclaimed in unison.

"God forbid!" Mr Ogo's mother yelled. "Not in my family"

"You didn't come here to fight right?" Karo jeered.

The elders got angry and scolded her, asking her to be quiet or leave the house but didn't want to hear her voice again.

"Ifeyinwa, Ifeyinwa, Ifeyinwa" Mrs Afam her daughter Karo called three times, "Mind your business before they will say you are in cahoots with your cousin"

"Who doesn't know that?" An uncle scoffed.

"I left my husband's house to get him treated and I assure you, he will be fine" Mrs Ogo spoke again.

"Afunwaelotanna!" His parental grandmother called for him.

A minute later, Lotanna arrived with Ifeancho supporting him, he was pale. They didn't ask why he was pale, instead, they focused their attention on everything wrong about him.

Karo didn't understand why they had to accommodate those who were hurting them despite being family. It was because they were family, she refused to bridle her tongue.

"Karo it's enough" Mr Ogo spoke up. He didn't like the direction of the heated hurl of words, laced with contempt. It was not different from what he heard his wife say about the church members. He was disappointed in his family.

"No, it's not. Society can point a finger at us but not family" Karo insisted.

Mr Ogo's mother walked across to Karo with intent to hurt her and his son saw right through her, pulling her out of harm's way just in time to be slapped hard.

His mother and everyone were stunned.

"Why did you do that?" One of the uncles scolded.

"It's enough" Mr Ogo ignored his question, while his cheek ached. "I didn't want to speak but I will. There is a different way to approach us, if you all had used that method, Karo would lash out on any of you. We don't have answers for anyone as we don't have answers ourselves, so please just stop"

"Are you talking to me like that?" Mr Ogo's mother asked.

"Let's go Lota" Mrs Ogo held out her hand for her son.

"You're not going anywhere" Mr Ogo rebuffed.

"Do you realize we are the talk of the town? How do you think we heard the rumours whilst far away?" One of the aunts asked.

"You listened to gossip, what else?" Karo jeered.

Lotanna didn't like the scene before him. He had heard his parents fight because of him everyday, now it was his grandmother, uncles, and aunts. It pained him and his chest tightened, he couldn't breathe.

"Is he dying?" Mrs Afam asked, noticing Lotanna's struggle to breathe.

"Lota!" Mrs Ogo panicked.

Lotanna felt his calves muscle twitched at that point, his weak body couldn't support him nor could Ifeancho. His father was quick to hold him before he hit the ground.

"Lota, please" his aunt Karo pleaded, kneeling beside him.

Ifeancho was stunned. He had never had both pains at once.

Mrs Ogo stood there with a pained expression, a lone tear streak down her face.

"What is happening to him?" Mr Ogo's mother asked.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" Karo sneered.

Mr Ogo didn't spend a minute more; he picked his son and told Karo to bring his car keys. His wife stood transfixed in a spot. His uncles went outside, but couldn't catch him to inquire.

All eyes flung to Mrs Ogo's direction. Ifeancho noticed their gaze and stood in front of her to protect her. The house was in eerily silence, while their eyes did all the talking until Mrs Nnamdi spoke.

"There is nothing left to see, I am leaving"

"If only the others can do the same" Karo who was instructed to stay behind by Mr Ogo grumbled.

"Please stop" Ifeancho lamented. He had seen the church women confront his mother and she cried. Children confronted Lotanna and he fell down the stairs, sustaining injuries. He didn't want another confrontation, especially with all the fighting his parents had been doing.

One thing led to another and an elder strode to Ifeancho, Karo quickly stepped in but was pushed aside by Mr Ogo's mother. She didn't expect the push and couldn't stop herself from colliding with the dining table close to Mrs Ogo and Ifeancho.

"Aunt Karo" Ifeancho gapped at the loud impact.

He watched his aunt collide and fall to the ground. He rushed to her, calling out her name but she was too disoriented to hear.

Mrs Ogo stood there crying, without speaking. She had expected an outcome such as this and they couldn't prove her wrong.

Karo whined in pain but willed herself to get up, because Ifeancho wouldn't stop crying. The child had seen enough to scar him for life; she didn't want to add to it, sadly, it wasn't her choice to make.

The moment she stood up, a hand firmly gripping her midsection, the other wrapped around her elbow, she was surprised to see their shocked expression not hearing their taunting.

"Au-aunt Karo" Ifeancho stuttered. "Blo-blood"

Karo looked down at herself, only to find her yellow skirt stained with blood, dripping down her legs. Horror filled her.

Mrs Ogo noticed their gaze and looked at their direction. She knew immediately what it was. She quickly held her cousin, urging her to walk with her, but each step hurt her.

"Are you satisfied?" Mrs Afam spat coldly before she walked over to help her daughter.

"I told you to warn your cousin but you didn't listen" Mrs Ogo's mother who stopped by the door after Karo spoke earlier, nagged.

"If she loses her child, you are solely responsible," Mrs Ogo's mother in law told them as murmurs erupted.

Luckily, Karo had driven her husband's black Venza car; Mrs Ogo encouraged her cousin to walk further before she could rest, she could only prop an arm over her neck, while her mother held her arms, supporting her to walk. If she waited for help, it might be too late.

"Ifeancho go and bring her car keys" Mrs Ogo instructed.

Karo was in pains and she used her last reserved strength to step out of the house at snail's pace. She couldn't walk anymore, she slumped to the floor.

Ifeancho searched frantically for the car key until he found it inside the black Gucci purse his aunt brought along earlier.

The elders finally showed mercy and concern. Mrs Ogo drove close to the stoop of the house after her son gave her the car keys. Mrs Afam and Mrs Ogo helped Karo into the car with difficulties, with Mrs Nnamdi who helped, along with Ifeancho.

Mrs Ogo asked her mother in law if she would stay behind but was answered by a glare. She got into the car and drove her cousin to the hospital with Ifeancho and Mrs Afam.

Mr Ogo paced the waiting room, anxiously. He stared at the door separating him from the emergency room where his son was at intervals. Lotanna had felt suffocated on their way to the hospital and passed out. He prayed in his heart for his son to pull through. He couldn't handle another blow.

Efe who had called his friend earlier and was told what had transpired rushed down to the hospital. He watched him walk to and fro, equally anxious. In such a short period of time, things had happened and they almost couldn't keep up. He didn't want to believe Lotanna had relapsed; he bowed his head to pray.

He had just finished praying when his phone rang. Mr Ogo didn't bother to ask who it was, he trusted Karo to hold his home's front. He glanced at the white squared wall clock at the far end of the waiting room; it was 2:30 pm.

"We are at Light city hospital" Mr Ogo heard Efe speak. "Lota is-" he didn't get to finish his statement when the call ended.

"It was your wife," Efe told Mr Ogo.

"Is everything okay?" He inquired. He found it strange she could call Efe instead of her husband, except something happened after he left. His heart sank farther.

"She asked for the hospital address and hung up"

Mr Ogo didn't like the sound of his words; he hoped hell didn't let loosed after he left. He brought out his phone and dialed his wife's number, but she didn't pick. He told Efe to call her also, perhaps, she would answer his call.

"She isn't answering her phone," Efe said. "Maybe she left the house to accompany Lota rather than stay behind with your mother"

"There is a reason why I asked Karo to stay with her" Mr Ogo spoke with a frown. He tried calling his wife again but she didn't answer his call.

They hadn't waited up to ten minutes when Mrs Ogo called Efe, asking him to meet her at another waiting room in the Obstetrics and Gynecology ward.

"Your wife sounded distraught, I think you should meet her while I stay here behind to wait for an update on Lota" Efe suggested.

Mr Ogo agreed and went in search of his wife. He met her at the other waiting room; her clothes had traces of bloodstains, carrying their son on a chair. Both were in tears. He became alarmed.

"What happened?" He asked rushing to them.

"Your mother pushed Ifeyinwa who was pregnant after three years of marriage. If anything happens to her, I won't spare her" Mrs Afam threatened.

"Daddy" Ifeancho cried. He left his mother's arms and plunged himself to his father.

Ifeancho had to witness another gruesome incident. He thought to himself, tightening his arms around him.

"Your aunt will be fine" Mr Ogo assured. He sat beside her and held her hand. "They will be fine"

Mrs Ogo didn't say a word, she merely stared into space.

Mrs Afam couldn't contain herself; she lashed out at Mrs Ogo, accusing her of ill intentions when she invited her cousin to her house.

Mr Ogo felt guilty. He didn't think things would spiral out of control. He didn't stop the ranting woman, he allowed her vent, maybe when she's done she would feel better.

They waited a while longer and a doctor in his early forties, light-skinned, disposable gloves in one hand and a mask in the other entered to update them. The gloomy look on his face was enough to convey the news.

"Talk to me doctor, I am her mother. How is she? How is the child?" Mrs? Afam asked hastily.

"I am sorry, she lost the child but-" the doctor who spoke in a doleful voice was cut off.

"No!" Mrs Afam yelled. "It can't be, why does it have to be her?"

"I am sorry" the doctor repeated.

Mr and Mrs Ogo was saddened at the news.

"How is she?" Mr Ogo asked.

"She is fine, you can see her in a while," the doctor said. "Excuse me" he added taking his leave.

"You're responsible for this" Mrs Afam charged at Mrs Ogo and forgot her palm on her face in a hot slap.

Chapter 10

"With all due respect, my wife isn't to be blamed, she would never hurt anyone or wish anyone ill" Mr Ogo tried not to lose his cool.

There was so much tension in the air, trading blames wouldn't help anyone. Mr Ogo looked at his wife, she hadn't move despite being slapped. She stared into space. He shifted his eyes to his son in his arms, he was silently crying. He didn't want his family hurt anymore; he would do what he needed to, to protect them but first, they needed to recover from the whirlwinds of incidents and emotions. He believed this was a rainy period and rain helps things grow and they would grow stronger from everything.

Mrs Afam refused to calm down and he didn't try to persuade her either. She would feel better after a thorough vent or the nurses would throw her out before she even tries to, either way, it was his family's advantage.

"People have been making a mockery of her for three years, and it was so convenient for you to ask a pregnant woman to babysit. Her child is gone, can you compensate her?" Mrs Afam's vicious tongue wagged. "You got pregnant in your year of marriage but you brainwashed her not to seek help, how sister wise of you. How will you look her in eye now?"

"This is a hospital; can you do this when you get home?" Mr Ogo asked with a frown.

"You have two children so you won't know how it feels like" Mrs Afam snorted.

Mr Ogo set his son down and stood up before he helped his wife to her feet. He gave Mrs Afam a look before he walked out with his family. Karo's husband would handle her better and would be able to manage her tantrums.

"What's the update?" Mr Ogo asked Efe in the waiting room when he arrived.

"Nothing" Efe answered. "What happened?" he asked at Mrs Ogo's disheveled state.

"Your wife lost your child" Mr Ogo blurted out.

Efe was shocked.

"I am sorry; my mom pushed her after I left the house. I am so sorry" his friend apologized.

Mrs Ogo sat on a nearby chair. She was tired of everything and horrible words that were spoken about those she loved. If tears could fix everything, it would but sadly it didn't. If only she could take Lotanna far away from all this.

"Where is she?" Efe inquired.

Mr Ogo gave him directions and he ran off. The doctor came out shortly after he left; the look on his face was gloomy. It just had to be another bad news.

"We managed to stabilize him but his heart is very weak, we don't know when he will regain consciousness." The doctor a woman of mid-thirties told them.

Mr. Ogo clasped his face, groaning. His son didn't deserve any of his pains or scorns; he was just a child, an innocent one. What if he did not wake up? He shook his head, to dispel the negative thoughts.

The doctor asked them to follow him so they could see Lotanna. He helped his wife to her feet, held her with one hand and Ifeancho with the other, heading for Lotanna's room.

A few days later, Lotanna woke up, his parents were overjoyed. He was allowed to go home after a thorough check-up the next day, a much-needed relief to his family. But because the last couple of days stressed his already feeble body so much, he couldn't stand or walk, he was placed on a wheelchair. They didn't have any choice but the most important thing was that he was alive.

Mr Ogo took his family home, got Lotanna settled in bed to rest with Ifeancho beside him, watching over him while he went to his wife who was in the kitchen.

Mr Ogo hugged his wife from behind, inhaling her sweet scent. He hadn't had time alone with her for so long. His wife didn't mind his presence as she continued her cooking. When she was done, she turned to face him. She shrieked when he suddenly lifted her unto a countertop in the kitchen.

"Lota will be fine" Her husband assured her, looking into her eyes, while his hands cupped her face.

"He is in on a wheelchair; he can't stand upright because he just cannot"

"I trust God and I have faith in him"

"I can't believe" Mrs Ogo spoke in a small voice, avoiding her husband's eyes. "He shouldn't have allowed it to happen in the first place. This is his second round of endless trips and spending days in the hospital. This is too much, we will never be at ease with people talking so much and your parent hates me right now"

Mr Ogo stilled her face, making eye contact with her while he spoke; "I told you already that my mother got the message and left when I came home to get clothes for us. She did right by waiting until I returned home before she left, securing our house; we should commend her for that."

His words failed to lighten her mood, he didn't give up. "God has a plan for Lota, I don't know what it is yet but it is a good one. It's okay if you cannot trust Him right now after everything but I hope you know I won't stop trusting Him. I am so sure of Lota's recovery once he starts physiotherapy."

"It won't cure him" Mrs Ogo countered.

"God can," her husband said firmly. He let go of her face and held her hands, "I don't care what others say about our son, you shouldn't too. He needs our love, care, and support during this difficult time. Do you really want to bother about others opinions and neglect our son and family?"

Mrs Ogo bowed her head fill with remorse; a big drop of water fell on their entwined hands. He lifted a hand to her face, wiping her tears.

"I love our family so much and I don't want us fighting. Our son needs our undivided attention which he won't have if you leave, he won't have his father and brother to love him, his favourite uncle Efe and aunt Karo to pamper him. He wouldn't have a conducive environment to get better even if a cure was found right now. He has a better chance here surrounded by so much love and care"

"It won't be easy"

"I won't allow any of you to get hurt again, I promise" Mr Ogo reassured her and hugged her.

"Karo is upset" she mumbled, tightening her arms around his neck.

"Of course, she is. My mom refused to apologize to her, only my dad did. He didn't support her display the other day and...." He trailed off.

"And?"

He released her from his arms, "You forbade her from seeing Lota"

"She lost her child because she chose Lota and defended him"

"It's called selfless acts" Mr Ogo flicked her forehead with his finger, making her contort her face.

He chuckled. "I am sorry" he apologized and kissed her forehead, "Efe and Karo loves Lota and Ifee"

"I know" Mrs. Ogo said in a timid voice.

"Ifee missed his uncle and aunt"

"I know"

"I love you"

"I know"

"I want a daughter"

"I didn't know"

Mr Ogo laughed.

His laughter was a nice tone to hear, she hadn't seen him laugh in days and she missed it. She looked into her husband's eyes for traces of lie or deceit instead it was filled with love and hope.

She threw her arms around her husband, in a bear hug. She got the assurance she needed. Her son will be fine.

"Does it mean we are going to church?"

"Don't push it" Mrs Ogo growled.

Her husband laughed again, she hopped off the counter and checked the bubbling pot on the gas cooker.

"Let's move out of this neighbourhood and town, let's go to someplace far to start over. I will quit my job and take care of our children" she said, turning the content of the pot.

"You finally remembered you have a job" he nagged.

"Who didn't know?" She snickered.

"*Nwanyi oma*" He cooed.

She froze momentarily; she had forgotten how much she loved to hear that name.

"Don't get too comfy, once I get a daughter, forget about *Nwanyi oma* being your name" He teased her.

"I haven't decided to stay, you are just making it easier" she humphed.

"Fine, it's yours" he spoke with a smile.

"Are we relocating?" She asked over her shoulder.

"Yes, we need a change of environment" Mr Ogo replied after giving it a thought.

"Thank you," she said with a sweet smile.

He smiled back. Mr Ogo hoped to always see her smile from now on. "Let me check on Lota"

She nodded, covering the pot. "Call Karo while at it"

Mr Ogo halted in his steps, swiveled and gave her a questioning look. She walked to him, returned his questioning look before she walked out, leaving her husband chuckling.

At the dining table, Ifeancho, his father and uncle Efe took turns feeding Lotanna and having a quiet moment until Mrs Ogo cleared her throat, drawing their attention. All eyes flung to her direction immediately.

"I am sorry for everything I did over the last couple of days, I hope you forgive me if you can," Mrs Ogo said sheepishly.

"Do we forgive her?" Uncle Efe asked his wife, who turned to Lotanna.

"Afunwaelotanna" she cooed.

"I don't like that name, it reminds me of grandmother and makes me angry," Ifeancho said and puffed his cheeks, picking at his food.

"You're angry at grandmother?" Lotanna asked, raising a brow at him.

"Not just grandmother, our church members, and neighbours children and everyone who spoke badly about you" Ifeancho spoke in a small voice.

"They don't know Lota as we do if they did, they wouldn't say such words" Uncle Efe explained.

"I apologize on their behalf, please forgive them" aunt Karo pleaded.

"We were taught in Sunday school to forgive others" Lotanna chipped in.

"Okay" Ifeancho caved in.

"Are you angry at mommy?" Mr Ogo asked.

Ifeancho stole a glance at his mother, only to meet her eyes, staring back at him. He quickly lowered his eyes.

"Ifee" Mrs Ogo called.

"Yes, mommy"

"I am sorry" she apologized. "I was very angry and I hurt you, please forgive mommy"

"Forgive her on one condition" aunt Karo chipped in.

Ifeancho looked at his aunt, she beckoned on him and he hurriedly went to her. She whispered something in his ears, splitting his cute face into a mischievous smile.

"I know that look," Lotanna said, with a smile. "Mommy apologized already, forgive her"

Ifeancho turned to his mother who sat beside his aunt. "Mommy"

"Yes Ifee" his mother answered.

"Do you promise not to stop aunt Karo and my favourite uncle from being with me and my brother?" Ifeancho asked.

"Promise" his mother assured him.

"Do you promise to treat us all on a week-long fun outing?" Ifeancho probed further.

"Make it two weeks" uncle Efe chimed in.

Mr Ogo glared at his friend.

"What!" Uncle Efe retorted. "She didn't allow us to be with Lota when he needed us and wasn't here for us either"

"I am so sorry cousin, you are family, I shouldn't have turned my back on you" Mrs Ogo apologized. "I will try my best to make up for it to you and Efe"

"If you will be an aunt to my future children when I need alone time with my wife, then we are good," Efe said firmly.

"You have to treat us for two weeks fun outing first," Karo told her cousin.

"I have plans with my wife, she's not available" Mr Ogo growled.

"Mommy, when will you take us out?" Ifeancho asked.

"I said when I need alone time, not all the time" uncle Efe grumbled.

"If you have to wait until you are on holidays, you have missed school quite a lot," Mr Ogo told his son, who immediately pouted, and crossed his arms over his chest. He ignored his childish demeanour and turned to his friend, "My wife is not available"

Lotanna watched the bickering of his family, he felt happy. He had missed being together with his family. He had a wrong idea about what was going on with his body but he didn't let it bother him, he had a loving and caring family, supporting him and he also had God, he believed he would be fine.

Mrs Ogo smiled at the scene before her, she was reminded of how much she enjoyed being with her family. She wasn't alone and didn't need to worry about the future; her family was with her to share her burden.

She still believed Lotanna would get better at that traditional home but she didn't want to risk killing his fighting spirit by breaking her family apart. They had been through so much; she didn't have the heart to give them any more heartache. She was glad her cousin and her husband forgave her.

Later in that evening, after Mr and Mrs Ogo prayed with their children, and tucked them in. They waited till they fell asleep but Lotanna wasn't sleepy, he waited till his brother was asleep before he spoke to his parents who sat on the edge the bed.

"Daddy, mommy" his voice whispered.

"Do you need anything?" his father asked.

He shook his head, "I want to ask-" he hesitated.

"Is it about your health?" His mother asked.

Lotanna nodded.

"You are fine; you just have a weak heart. I don't want you to stress yourself that's why I told the doctor to give you a wheelchair" his father patiently explained.

"You don't like your wheelchair?"

"It's not only the wheelchair, but it's also everything mommy. I am too weak to do anything" He replied his mother.

Mr Ogo sighed, his fingers playing with his hair. He also didn't like his child stuck to a wheelchair. In a soft tone, he spoke. "I know you don't like the wheelchair, we don't either but please hang on until you recover, then we will work on getting you out of the wheelchair"

"Please" his mother pleaded.

Lotanna thought for a while before speaking; "If you both are not offended that I am very weak, then I think it's okay, I will focus on getting better so I can regain my strength"

"Why will we be offended?" Mr Ogo questioned. "You're my son, flesh and blood-"

"Our son" his wife corrected with a growl.

"Yes, our son," Mr Ogo said with a smile, "We love you so much, more than you could ever know"

"I love you both" Lotanna smiled back, flashing his pearl white dentition in a cheeky smile. "Does it mean I can't go to school or church yet?" He added.

His parents shared a look.

"You can Lota, just regain a little more strength and we will have a week-long fun outing or you can go to school if you want," Mrs Ogo said, adjusting his duvet on him, caressing his cheeks.

Mr Ogo nodded in confirmation. "Anywhere you want, but regain yourself first"

"Okay, sleep now, you have a long day of recovering tomorrow" Mrs Ogo coaxed.

His parents noticed he was having a hard time falling asleep, they assured him everything would be fine and not to worry because they were with him. Since the children's bed was one big bed, his parents got into bed with him, hugging him and his brother close which did the trick. Lotanna slept.

Chapter 11

Mrs Ogo spent her time nursing Lotanna back to health. She still remembered the terrible words about her son but she chose to help him get back on his feet rather than hurting herself and everyone who loved her. She could not forgive her mother immediately but with her husband's love and guidance, she came to terms with the fact that at times, the family could see you in the wrong light and hurt you unintentionally.

One day at a time, she told herself every day. There were people she knew who went for roots and herbs and got better but hers brought only heartaches. She feared to tread the path again. Her first trial had adverse effects on her child; she often asked herself if she hadn't gone to the traditional home, would he have ended up in a wheelchair? Mrs Ogo felt partially responsible for everything that went wrong, so she did everything within her limits to make up for it. Her family's well-being became her top priority again, to the delight of her husband.

"Mommy!" her second son's voice jolted her out of thoughts.

She hummed a reply.

"We have arrived" Her husband told her in a calm voice, "We can wait a while if you want" he added.

"Okay," Mrs Ogo muttered.

The large building in front of them had bold inscription spelling out Greenville hospital. Her nervousness resurfaced, fortunately, her husband was by her side and he held her hand. When she had visited the first time, she was alone and the outcome knocked her off her feet. This time around, her support system accompanied her, nothing could break them.

"Let's go" Mrs. Ogo said after a few minutes.

Mr Ogo highlighted the car and carried out Lotanna while his wife brought out his wheelchair from the car's boot. Ifeancho as usual, wheeled him, playing around with him. He didn't like the fact that his brother was bound to a wheelchair but it didn't affect his love for him. He still threw his tantrums and dramatic flair.

"Wait here," Mr Ogo told his sons, while he approached the reception desk of the physiotherapy ward.

"Okay" Lotanna obeyed. Immediately their father was out of sight, they resumed their play, happy and laughing.

"Your child has DMD?" The physiotherapist, a man in his late forties, tall, dark and handsome was piqued by the words he just heard. In his two decades since he obtained his medical license, he had never gotten any patient of muscular dystrophy. He had done it as a case study back then but with only details provided.

"It's a boy right?" The doctor probed further. "I am sorry if I sound rude, but most cases of muscular dystrophy affect boys"

This was a new fact they acquired.

"When can he begin his therapy?" Mr Ogo inquired.

The doctor studied the faces of his patients for some seconds before he spoke. "Immediately" he broke into a smile. "There is no use delaying for any reason, his heart is also weak and in a wheelchair, we need a miracle."

Mrs Ogo's face paled.

Mr Ogo maintained his cheerful look, nothing would steal his smile again and he had God with him.

"You're Christians?" The doctor asked.

"Yes," Mr Ogo answered for both of them.

Lotanna's therapist tilted his head to Mrs Ogo, looked her in the eyes and said, "Your son will be your miracle from heaven" with that, he stepped out to meet his patient, leaving them behind to catch up.

The physiotherapist had seen a crushed and hopeless woman during his conversation with them, he believed God would do something for their son, or perhaps, he needed to give them hope, boosting up their faith.

"I don't care what is an insult or not, you just have to apologize" Mr Ogo's father barked at his wife. "Despite being a mother yourself, you accused another mother, going as far as causing trouble in her husband's house. Who does that?"

Mr Ogo and his wife, Efe, and Karo watched the drama unfold. They didn't want to get involved with the situation again after last time, they simply sat back, curious about the outcome.

Mr Ogo and his family were at Efe's house when he received a call summon to return to his house and he wasn't surprised at their unexpected visit again. In fact, he knew they would be back; it was one of the reasons he hadn't relocated. He wanted closure but it wasn't easy.

"I came with good intentions, you don't have to rebuke me in the presence of my son" Mr Ogo's mother retorted.

"Good intention you say? You left the house under a pretext, gang up with your in-laws and brought a fight. Karo lost her child, Afunwaelotanna was rushed to the hospital and you still call it good intentions? Everyone showed their concerns the wrong way and you joined them, what did you expect them to do?" Mr Ogo's father pointed at the couples. "Welcome you with open arms? They were right to question your intention, family doesn't question family, instead they support unconditionally."

"Her mother and aunt were here too, why am I the only one who gets to bear this humiliation" Mr Ogo's mother lamented.

"None of you did the right thing, somebody could have died and not just a baby when they were rushed to the hospital, what would you have done? Would you have been able to resurrect the person?"

"I am not Jesus Christ!" Mr Ogo's mother retorted.

Mrs Ogo's father in law shook his head in pity. She didn't understand the gravity of her actions if their son decided he didn't want them at his house again, who would blame him? If he distances himself, would she fight him?

"I am sorry, what they did was wrong and uncalled for, find a place in your heart to forgive them." Mrs Ogo's father in law turned from his wife to the couple seated on the sofa opposite them. "I don't know if I can get the others to apologize but see this as a collective apologize on their behalf. They don't have any right to do that. Please forgive them"

"Maybe someday they will realize their wrong and then we can put this behind us and restore harmony, but thank you for this" Karo spoke.

"I appreciate your efforts dad," Mr Ogo said.

"Are you done?" Mr Ogo's mother asked and stood up.

"Ignore her," Mr Ogo's father said walking out.

Mrs Ogo was somewhat relieved that someone stepped forward to take responsibility for one of the numerous slanders she got.

Her husband wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close and pressed a kiss to her temple. "We will be fine" he mumbled.

"If only my parents and aunt can do the same" Karo thought out loud.

"Allow time to heal the wounds," Efe told her, copying his friend's action, pulling his wife close.

"Time heals a wound but it doesn't erase the scar or painful memory attached to it" Karo argued. Her husband had no come back after he heard her because she was right.

A few months later,

Mr Ogo could barely contain his excitement; he had a huge surprise for his wife, he drove his red Toyota Tundra car to the physiotherapy ward of the hospital. He greeted the receptionist, a woman of mid-twenties, black-rimmed glass covering her twinkling eyes and almost half of her pretty face.

"Welcome Mr Ogo" the receptionist greeted.

He nodded walking inside; he met his pregnant wife sitting on a big blue bouncy ball, watching their sons. His face broke into a smile, a proud and content smile. Indeed if there is a person to pray, there is a God to answer.

Lotanna defied the odds and improved, a fit never achieved ever. He was in his best shape, impossible to believe that he was once a feeble boy.

Mr Ogo leaned against the door frame, a cheeky smile on his lips. He waited quietly until Lotanna's session was over before he announced his presence. His sons sprinted to him.

"Where you watching us again?" Mrs Ogo asked her husband, hooking her arm around his.

"Always," Mr. Ogo said happily.

"Bye Miracle, see you next week" Lotanna's physiotherapist bade them farewell.

Since Lotanna tremendously improved in an impossible situation, the physiotherapist named him what he truly was, a Miracle. He also reduced Lotanna's therapy days to once a week, so as not to overexert his body.

During their trying time, Mrs Ogo was with a child but the chaotic situation hid the news. Her husband's joy was beyond this world. Mr Ogo led his family out, towards his car.

"Are we going home?" Lotanna asked.

"You left school for therapy and now you still want to go somewhere else?" His mother chided him.

"We are going somewhere," Mr Ogo said, helping his wife sit at the front passenger seat, a mischievous smile on his face.

"Where are we going daddy?" Ifeancho asked.

"Wait and see" Mr Ogo reminded lip sealed.

Mr Ogo drove his family to his church member house, Mrs Runo. She had been consistently checking up on his son and family, not just her, but other church members too. He simply grew comfortable with her presence and visited her occasionally. However, his visit this time around was to stall time.

"How are you?" Mrs Runo was elated to see the Ogos' at her house; "And the baby?" She asked ushering them in.

"Pregnancy suits you, you are glowing"

Lotanna and Ifeancho ran off with her children into the house, leaving the adults to talk.

Mrs Runo excused herself, went into the house and returned shortly; "You won't come back to church?" She asked, serving them drinks and snacks. "Pastor reprimand those who orchestrated the rumors and staged that shameful scorn in the church"

"I am not quite there yet" Mrs Ogo mumbled.

"You can attend an entirely different church with your family" Mrs Runo suggested.

"I suggested it to her but she thinks she needs a reason to approach God again" Mr Ogo chimed in.

"Have you forgiven them?" Mrs Runo inquired.

"I had to for my peace of mind" Mrs Ogo answered.

"Tyler Perry once wrote on his website; I want people to know that for every act of evil that a few people will throw at you, there are millions more who will do something kind for them. Good people are out there, around us and with us. Don't give up on good people" Mrs Runo advised.

"Are we here to see someone?" Lotanna asked, staring at the beautiful house in front of him after they left Mrs Runo's house. His brother joined him, standing beside him.

"Who lives here daddy?" Ifeancho asked.

"Don't go in yet" Mr Ogo warned, helping his wife out of the car.

The house, two apartments of three-bedroom flat, was painted in white and blue, making it a beautiful eye-catcher. Carpet grass floored the corners of the fence, adding beauty to the garden on the right side of the compound. Mrs Ogo and her sons swoon couldn't be concealed.

Mr Ogo placed his hand on the small of her back, guiding her towards the house with their sons behind them. The door of the first apartment opened on its accord before they could react,

"Happy Birthday" Uncle Efe and aunt Karo screamed.

Mrs Ogo was pleasantly surprised, it was her birthday but she obviously forgot; she had too many things on her mind including her excitement over her son's recovery.

"Happy Birthday *Nwanyi oma*" Mr Ogo pressed a kiss to her temple. "Welcome to our new home"

"We are neighbours" aunt Karo squealed.

"Come in," uncle Efe told the boys, opening the door wide.

"You did not forget my birthday, you wanted to surprise me?" Mrs Ogo asked, wandering around the house, her arms hooked with her husband's.

Her husband nodded, "Do you like the house?"

"Yes *Dim oma*. You used my choice that was why you asked me those questions about a house the other day" she suddenly realized he had asked her several questions about a house few months back.

"Let's cut the cake *Nwanyi oma*," uncle Efe said loudly.

"Hurry mommy" Ifeancho added.

"Coming" Mrs Ogo replied.

Mr Ogo was relieved his wife liked the new house; it was their fresh start of life, their safe haven away from prying eyes and wagging tongues. He wasn't hiding, he just wanted space from people who didn't know nor understood his family yet passed judgment on them.

Life was amazing in their new home; Efe and Karo were next doors, their family, a step away, was a thrilling feeling. They didn't have much contact with people but it didn't stop the wind of change from reaching them.

Lotanna woke up one morning, extremely weak. He couldn't move a finger without lots of effort. He was placed back in the wheelchair months later after his mother had delivered a healthy and hearty baby girl Kamsi.

Mrs Ogo extended her maternity leave to enable her care for Lotanna. She was worried about his fast deteriorating health and her daughter's future, she wondered if she would be sick like Lotanna.

Aunt Karo and her husband assisted her cousin's family in every way, reducing the burden on them, pampering Lotanna, giving him so much love it made his pains bearable.

"I am fine, I promise" Lotanna tried to persuade his family. "I am not in pains. It's gone, God took it away"

For the next three days, they saw his smile and heard his laughter. He was truly happy and revelled in the comfort and love of his family until the third night when he slept into oblivion at fourteen years and a few months.

His family was devastated but they found relieve in happy moments spent with him. He left them without pains and in an easy way free from hurt and he would forever remain in their heart.

Aunt Karo took in three months after Lotanna's demise. She was saddened for the first few months he couldn't see his new sibling before he left them but her family cheered her on. She gave birth to a healthy baby boy months later.

They learned from Lotanna that acts of love were capable of doing the impossible, like when he rose against the odds and lived longer than his cardiologist had expected for his heart to stop beating.

Mrs Ogo found herself standing in front of a new church several months later though hesitating; her family had gone in ahead of her, allowing her to take her time. She didn't know how long she stood but she felt a hand grip hers tightly. She traced the hand with her eyes to find him, smiling at her and encouraging her to take the next step.

"Let's go in," She said, putting aside her struggle to find peace and solace.

THE END

"Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless." – Mother Teresa.

Igbo endearment Translation

Nwanyi oma - a beautiful woman.

Dim oma - my dearest husband.

Asa nwa - fine girl.

Asa mpete - beauty.

Omalicha - beautiful.

Author's Note

M.J,

The theory of entertainment in Physics states that some specific sound increase the rate of heartbeat, for me, your laughter is one such sound.

I sincerely hope I hear your laughter again, after life's heavy blow on you and your family.

If only we can ride on my strength, sadly we can't, but the Lord strengthen you in ways no one else can.

Always in my heart,

Love

T.

Gere Ochuko blogs at <http://www.chukswrite.wordpress.com>