

Chapter Five

Daddy called me into the sitting room one Saturday evening.

Panic came but went quickly; it was a Saturday and I had cleaned and mopped, scrubbed and dusted. I even got Ikenna to take a nap, an increasingly difficult task. He was now playing ncho, a game I had taught him, while I prepared supper.

'How was your exam?' Daddy wanted to know. He was drinking water from the dry glass I had given him only moments before. Mummy was sitting beside him. She smiled at me. They looked peaceful together in that moment.

'It was fine, sir,' I said, wondering what was wrong.

'You think you will pass?'

'Yes, sir.'

We, Chidinma and I, were waiting for the results of our First School Leaving Certificate Exams. I was confident I would pass; Chidinma was sure she would fail. Pass or fail, the release of the results would mean taking the next step into our future.

'That is good. We will send you to the commercial school on Dhamija Avenue. We have told Mr Hyacinth to tell your mother.'

'Thank you very much, sir.' Although that had always been my hope, nothing definite had been said before now.

'We like your work here. Keep working hard, do you hear?'

'Yes, sir.'

Daddy seemed content, unusually expansive. It was no surprise that Mummy was happy too. I allowed their benevolence to envelop me. I felt relief, even though the results of the exams were yet to be released. Now I knew what I was doing for sure. In 1978, I would be learning typing and shorthand, getting ready to be a secretary.

Chidinma would be happy for me. I would tell her when we walked to church tomorrow.

There was only one more thing that I waited for. Urenna. Waiting for him to say yes or no. To go forwards or back. An uncertainty had settled into our relationship after Mr Nzom's revelation. His

words seemed to have poured cold water over Urenna's love for me, I thought sometimes, chilling its fervour like hot spicy pepper soup that had been diluted with too much water. He made little effort to see me, certainly not as often as he had done in the past. When we did see each other, he was in no hurry to touch me. True conversation – that rubbing of hearts that had so delighted me and made me happier than the rubbing of bodies – had moved house. When I tried to probe, Urenna said that I worried too much. He said that I was no longer in school and that meeting as we had been doing was dangerous; that he was concerned not to get me in trouble. This was why he no longer dropped in at mid-day. He stopped bringing me books and did not talk about how well he thought I would do at school.

There was an unfamiliar dishonesty in him. I think it was this, more than anything, that I disliked – this obstinate refusal to acknowledge that something was wrong, this determination to speak less than truth. And yet, I pined for him, longed for those notes that came so rarely these days. Chidinma had told me that lately a girl from university had been paying him regular visits. Jealousy threatened to eat me, swallow me whole. Was this what kept him away, his eyes averted from me?

Perhaps I should have been more concerned with my body, with the changes that forced themselves on my consciousness as vigorously as I tried to push them away. I had no symptoms, just a knowingness that something was different. I had never kept track of my periods, but I knew that I had missed at least one. I knew that I was in trouble.

I kept this knowledge inside of me as much as I could. It would become real as soon as I said it out loud. And I did not want it to become real, for then fearful things would happen. I kept it inside, stuffed like clothes in a too-small bag, until I no longer could. One day, when Chidinma came over to the house, I took her to my room and told her.

'Chidinma, I think I am pregnant.' My eyes welled up with tears. She was stunned. I saw shock and disbelief and anger and a

myriad other emotions come upon her face.

‘Mbanu, no, are you sure?’

Now that I had said it, I was even surer of it. She held me while I cried. ‘I knew this was trouble; I knew this was dangerous,’ she said, looking ready to cry too. ‘I thought you said he was being careful.’

‘Yes,’ I said simply. I could not bear to remember. I just cried, and Chidinma cried with me.

‘You will tell Urenna, won’t you?’ she said finally.

Neither of us had any faith in what would happen when I told him, but there was nothing else to do. I wrote a note and gave it to Chidinma. For the first time, I was the one requesting a meeting. I even suggested a day and time. Perhaps this surprised him, for he did not reply with silence or empty notes saying he was very busy, as he had to my other notes in which I’d asked how he was and given him snippets of news. He sent a note with my friend. It said that he would see me on the day planned.

That day, he hugged me and immediately began to caress me.

Even though my heart was not in it – I had far too much on my mind – I obliged him. Afterwards, we lay on the floor, on top of the newspapers he had brought for the hard cement. His eyes were closed and his breathing even, but I knew he was not sleeping. I blurted it out. The news came out differently from the speech I had rehearsed so many times to myself.

‘I am pregnant.’

His eyes flew open, and I could read shock in them before they turned opaque. A lustre left his face and never came back after that.

‘Are you sure?’ He sounded frightened. And this made me more afraid.

I thought over his question. That was what I had asked myself too at first. He had always ejaculated outside me. Always, without exception. He had told me he did this to protect me from this very situation, in my mind at least until we got married.

‘Yes, I think so,’ I said, a little timidly. His voice was cold, distant, as if he were far away and not on the same hard, uncomfortable floor as me. ‘I have not had a period for two months.’

'Hmm,' was his reply. By this time, he was sitting up, looking away from where I was still lying, half-naked and awkward. The conversation was not going as it had gone in my imagination. 'Don't worry, I will take you to a doctor.' His eyes stared at me, but I could tell he was not really looking at me; he was thinking. 'A doctor?' I asked. I almost heaved a sigh of relief; he was taking me to a doctor to make sure I and the baby would be all right. 'No, no, no,' he said, a little harassed, almost angrily. 'No, not a doctor. Em, I know this woman who some of my friends have used. She will give you something to drink that will remove it quickly and no one will know.' He tapped his fingers on his lap now as if in thought. 'Yes, no one will know.'

A current like an electric shock ran through me. Did he say he would take me to a woman to remove the baby? Our baby? 'But ...' I began, sitting up.

'But what?' he asked, frowning.

'Am I not keeping the baby?'

'Do you want to keep the baby?' he asked. Now he was putting on his clothes as if in a hurry, looking everywhere but at me.

'Yes,' I said, wondering if I could relax now. Perhaps he was testing me. He must know that was wrong, so utterly wrong. And it was our baby, the baby we had made together. I knew it would be difficult; Mummy and Daddy would send me away. Urenna's parents would not be happy, but there must be something we could do.

'You cannot keep the baby. What will you tell Mrs Obidiegwu?' he said quietly and patiently, as if lecturing a three-year-old who was demanding a sharp knife for a toy.

Confused, I stared at him.

'What will you tell your stepmother?' His face now wore a sneer. He did not wait for an answer. 'Get dressed,' he told me brusquely. 'I will talk to someone this evening, and I will find out about that woman. You must remove that thing as quickly as possible.'

After my meeting with Urenna, I repented from my stupidity. Of course, I would have to remove the baby. Urenna was still a student;

he had no money. Besides, his parents would never allow him, their only son, to marry a housemaid. I told Chidinma, but she had no solution for me. She said I had to be careful. We agreed that it was best that I did as Urenna said. If I insisted on keeping the baby, Mummy and Daddy would find out. They would send me home. I had nothing to give a baby. And I could not imagine the shame Mama Nkemdilim would pour on me.

I cried myself to sleep each night. It felt to me that death itself could not be as hard as the life I was forced to endure, knowing what I had to do.