

CHAPTER ONE

All the essential paraphernalia for utter serenity was present that night. At 2.00 a.m. in the morning, a gentle breeze, so cool it probably had its origins in the North Pole, caressed the house and its environs. The trees vibrated as if to a lilting waltz, softly rocking the denizen of birds and other smaller organisms that they housed, most of which were fast asleep. The monotonous squeaking of the night crickets went unnoticed as it blended perfectly into the irenic night.

It would have been absolute peace, if racking sobs emanating from the house hadn't interspersed the otherwise calm night. Tola was in pain again. This time it was a product of a tousled mind instead of the usual crisis in her body.

She was a sickler. As soon as she was old enough to understand, her parents explained to her what that meant. Her red blood cells that were supposed to deliver the oxygen she breathed in, to the numerous cells around her body were not normal. Instead of being circular like everybody else's they had a sickle shape and were therefore unable to work at full capacity. As a result, her bone marrow that produced the cells was painfully overworked in an attempt to meet up with the need to supply enough oxygen to the tissues and organs in her body. Many times she experienced crisis in her health that could be

triggered off by almost anything: infections, allergies and sometimes psychological depressions.

Tola was an intelligent girl and therefore understood all this very well. What continually rankled in her mind was why fate had to make this her portion. Understandably, both her parents were carriers of the disease but only one of her siblings Femi took after them and he, like them, had no health problems at all. Her sister Motunrayo was completely free from the disease; she had all the luck.

Her intelligence notwithstanding, she never did well in her exams, as she was almost always ill. Now at fifteen, she was spending her second year in form two. The even tenor of her primary education had been interrupted by the need to repeat those years during which she was too ill to achieve a satisfactory performance. Most of her peers were now either in form four or five.

Life was a big disappointment. Was this all there was to it for her? A disease bent on crippling her very existence was hindering her joy and progress. Self-pity welled up inside her and uncontrollably she continued to cry aloud. She wished she didn't have to make so much noise, as she really didn't want to be a nuisance to anybody. Her father was fed up with her constant ailment, she knew. Not that he had ever said anything of the sort but she could sense it in his attitude. Gone were the days that he was constantly at hand to comfort her. Now the only time she saw him during her illness was if there was a dire need for him to take her to the hospital. And once she was there, he would disappear until she was discharged and he had to fetch her home again. She wished for a closer relationship with him. She had read medical books and knew that, at present, there was no cure for her, even though a cure was what she craved for more than anything else. However a manageable substitute would be all the love and affection she could get. With that, the pain would be much easier to bear.

She could not fault her mother, she did the best she could, but Tola could sense in her also the beginning of

weariness. Tola wished despairingly that she had never been born. Yet it was ironic that now that she was alive, she was so fearsome of death. She felt that death would come very soon and the knowledge alone terrified her. Even now, the fear almost numbed her mind. Suddenly, she realised the time could be now and then she would be gone into nothingness. She sobbed even louder.

In the next room, Ada floated out from the depth of sleep and sat up suddenly. At first, she couldn't fathom why she had awakened but then she heard Tola weeping. Her initial reaction was one of regret. Why did one have children if they were to be so much of a burden? Each one of hers was a problem in one way or the other. Her first daughter, Motunrayo, was the greatest source of unhappiness to her. Apart from the anomalies in the girl's conduct, each time she set her eyes upon her, she became more conscious of the burden of the guilt she had been carrying for almost nineteen years now. The adage that "with time one forgets" was the very antithesis in her case. She had committed a great wrong against her husband in particular and also against her children. Her secret would always be safe, but she did not know which was easier to bear, the load of a guilty conscience or bearing the consequences of one's denuded misdeeds.

She stood up when again she heard Tola's cry. She opened the door and switched on the light. "Tola, what is wrong?" she asked as she sat on the bed beside her.

By now, the thought of death had reached unimaginable proportions in Tola's mind and all she could see was her apparent sudden demise into the unknown. Her mother's presence did more than they both realised to maintain her sanity. Tola sat up and clung to her passionately.

"Mummy, I am going to die."

Ada's senses reeled under the consternation in which those words were spoken. "Tola, what are you talking about?" She gently pushed Tola's head back from her shoulder if perchance she could read the meaning of that frightening statement from her face. But Tola reacted by burying her face

even deeper between her mother's breast as if that was the only source of her succour.

Her mother held her, knowing something must have triggered the thought in her mind; probably a bad dream. Tola quietened but continued to tremble in her arms.

"Tola, you are not going to die. You are my daughter and each time I pray, I tell God never to allow me see my children's grave. We will find a way, God will help us and you will soon be well. So, don't be afraid. Look at me," she prompted, moving Tola's head back by placing her hand on her forehead. This time, Tola met her mother's eyes. "Mummy, I was afraid and I thought I was going to die. The feeling was so strong, I don't understand."

"But how did that start?" Ada was perplexed.

"I woke up and the first thing that came to my mind was a book I read last week. It said that those who have the sickle cell disease would always die before they are twenty-one. And that is when it started."

"Whoever wrote that book has made a great mistake. Agreed, some sicklers die early, but there are many others that live long, get married and have children. That's why you should not have such negative thoughts. You are a very special child, and if we pray hard, God will not let you die. Do you believe that?"

Tola thought it over and it seemed to make sense. God could make her live long. "Yes," she said. "Mummy I love you very much."

"I love you too," Ada replied, suddenly overcome with deep affection. She drew her close, and above Tola's head, large teardrops fell from her eyes. After a while, she pulled herself together. "I think you should get some sleep now, there is school tomorrow."

"I don't want to go to school tomorrow. I'll follow you to the shop."

"I'm not going there tomorrow because I have some work to do at home."

"Then, I'll stay at home with you. *Pleeeeeease.*"

Ada thought it over. "In the light of this night's event, I will make a concession. Stay home tomorrow, but the day after, you must be in school."

"Thank you."

"Now it's time for you to sleep."

"Mummy... Please sleep here till morning." Tola had a feeling that if she were left alone, her fears would recur.

"Okay," Ada said indulgently. Tola moved in and she lay beside her. In no time, the girl was fast asleep. Ada couldn't seem to find such bliss. She tossed and turned and hoped she wouldn't wake Tola. Her eyes strayed to a framed picture of Motunrayo on the dressing table nearby. And again, she remembered the atrocity she had committed years ago of which existed a living testimony.

Alaba Okerinowo was in a relaxed mood as he lay back on the comfortable lounge set on one side of the living room, reading the day's papers. It was evening time and he had gone through another satisfying day's work. His job was one thing he enjoyed and lived for, these days.

The doorbell rang. He waited; expecting that someone would come out and open the door. Probably Ada or Tola or Irene, the housemaid who was in the kitchen. The bell sounded again. He looked up towards the adjoining doors, which all opened onto the living room, but no one came as he expected. He got up to let the caller in himself. It was Motunrayo, his daughter.

"What are you doing at home?" he asked genially. She was a third year architecture student at the University of Lagos where she lived most of the time, only coming home sometimes at weekends and at semester breaks.

"Daddy, hi. I came to pick up a book I need. I'm going back tomorrow morning." She closed the door behind her and bounced past him disappearing into her room. Alaba watched

her go. On reflection, he realised that she was the only source of steadfast happiness in his life apart from his job. And his work came way behind her because, at times, that degenerated into mere routine. He silently accorded her the title of his "Bundle of Joy."

Ada came out and walked past him into the kitchen. "Irene!" she called, shouting at the top of her voice. There was no reply and she screamed again, "I...rene!" This time, there was a faint answer from a distance. Alaba could hear the patter of running feet and then Irene's breathless voice in the kitchen, "Ma?"

"Where did you go?" Ada asked angrily. "Look at this soup I told you to watch. If I hadn't come in now, it would have burnt up completely."

"There was no water from the tap and I had to wash those plates in the sink," Irene explained, still breathless. "I went to fetch water from the pump outside."

"So, that is why you should burn up the whole house. You should have waited until the food is cooked and then you turn off the gas. Or, if you know you won't be long, then you go and come back in time. You hear me."

"Yes ma," Irene replied meekly.

"And you had better begin to improve fast or else I'll send you back to your parents in the village. I can't stand such sluggishness, I have to tell you everything before you know what to do. Don't you have any initiative?"

"I have ma," Irene affirmed fearfully.

Ada turned away humoured when she realised Irene couldn't possibly know what initiative meant.

She returned to the living room. "Alaba, who rang the bell just now?"

"Motunrayo," he informed her without looking up.

"And she couldn't even come to greet me. By the way, what is she doing at home on a Monday?" By now, her husband was concentrating on the papers and she knew she wouldn't get any answers from him.

“Motunrayo,” she called aloud.

“Yes, Mummy.” The reply was immediate. Ada switched on the television and sat down to see what it had to offer. As she watched, she realised that Motunrayo did not appear as expected.

“Motunrayo,” she called again.

This time she came out. “Mummy, good evening,” she greeted, standing before her mother.

“What’s the matter with you? You came into this house without even bothering to ask for anybody and then I have to call you ten times before you answer me,” she exaggerated angrily.

“I was looking for my friend’s book. He lent it to me last month and I can’t find it. I’ve looked for it everywhere in school and so I decided to check for it at home. I was very anxious about finding it, that’s why I didn’t come out in time.”

“Why must you borrow books from boys, don’t any of your girlfriends have books?” Ada believed her daughter was too free with the opposite sex. She didn’t have any concrete evidence to back up her theory but there were little telltale signs here and there. Once she was looking through Motunrayo’s collection of pictures and observed the very compromising postures she assumed with different men. On another occasion, while going through the girl’s handbag, she found two packets of contraceptive pills. She confronted Motunrayo, who denied that they belonged to her. Her explanation was that she lent her bag to a friend for a while, and hadn’t bothered to clean it out when returned.

With a mother’s keen sense, she knew Motunrayo was lying but she couldn’t prove it. When she discussed the issue with her husband, he didn’t seem to be bothered. She even sensed that he didn’t believe her. He was gullible to a fault where Motunrayo was concerned. In fact, she could do no wrong in his eyes.

Motunrayo was used to her mother’s suspicions and so kept quiet. Nevertheless, Ada gave yet another warning. “You had better be careful or else one of these days you’ll get into

serious trouble, and then I’m sure even your father will not be able to bail you out. All that those foolish boys you hang around with want are free favours and they’ll love you if you dish it out. But I bet they will desert you if you get into any trouble. I’m not saying you shouldn’t have friends, but you do not have to be a ‘yes’ woman to every man you meet.” Alaba was listening and he thought his wife was over reacting. Nevertheless, he decided to have a heart-to-heart talk with his daughter later, to find out if there was anything he didn’t know.

Motunrayo turned and went inside. She continued her search in desperation. Her friend needed the book for an assignment for which the submission date was getting close. Meanwhile, her mind was on her mother’s allegations. She alone knew her suspicions were rather warm. Motunrayo, as a person, had always preferred male friends to female. They were more straightforward in nature and didn’t have time for gossiping or petty jealousy. And, probably because of the natural attraction of the opposite sex, they were more friendly.

She had a steady boyfriend, but at times after a pronounced and close friendship with other male friends, she would find herself going to bed with them. The first time it happened, she felt bad but later she steeled herself to put the guilt feelings aside. According to her post-mortem analysis, the feelings were just hypocritical. She enjoyed herself, she came to no harm, she loved the attendant feeling of power and domination, so why feel bad. It was all part of life’s pleasures. Some of her friends smoked, some revelled in alcohol and partying, everybody had what they enjoyed doing, she had hers.

Another reason why she was comfortable with her amorous life was that she believed in equal rights for all, what was good for the goose was good for the gander. Her boyfriend liked her and respected her a lot, she didn’t doubt that, but he had other casual relationships that she had come to accept. So, what was the big deal about hers.

She resented her mother’s interference in her life. She resented more the fact that she wasn’t close enough to her to

bare her mind, to discuss her relationships, her goals and ambitions in life. She vaguely sensed that there was something that continually passed her by, due to the lack of friendship between them. She really desired an intimate familiarity with her mother, but instead, they hardly ever talked these days. Their communication had gradually been reduced to censorious nagging on her mother's part and either contumely retorts or silence on her part. Motunrayo suspected that there was something profoundly wrong between them but she couldn't put her finger on whatever it was.

She couldn't have discussions about her real self with her father either. He had such a high opinion of her, and had put her on a pedestal just because she was very intelligent. He often compared her with her older brother Femi, beleaguering him with the fact that, unlike him, she had made her father proud. She had passed her school certificate exams at once and with flying colours. She had immediately gained entry into the University and now, at 18, was in her third year, unlike her brother who, at 20, was still battling with his A /levels. She took a keen interest in current affairs and politics, just like her father. Many times when together, they would spend hours discussing issues and developments in and around the world. It was not surprising therefore that an easy camaraderie was established between them which they both recognised and appreciated.

Her father trusted her. She didn't know how much until one day she heard him discussing with a friend who had come to complain about his very wayward daughter. Her father had then informed him with pride that he was sure Motunrayo had not yet known a man, and that she didn't have time for any other thing outside her books.

Her father's words had bothered her. How could he be so naive? What would he do if he knew the truth? She didn't want anything to spoil what they had and so it was important that her father never found out.

She found the book inside her wardrobe. She didn't remember putting it there but was glad to find it. She put it in her bag and silently thanked God for his mercies.

She made as if to go back to the living room but changed her mind when she remembered her mother was there. It might be better to avoid her in the mood she was in. Instead, she went into Tola's room and found her lying down reading a book.

"Tola."

"When did you come?" Tola asked. She was pleased to see her sister.

"Just now. But what are you doing in bed? Are you all right?"

"I wasn't feeling well in the night. I thought I was going to die. Mummy had to come and sleep here with me."

Motunrayo was baffled. "What do you mean by that? What happened?"

"I don't know but I am all right now."

"Thank God oh." She picked up the booklet Tola was reading. It was on how to cope with the sickle cell disease. "Again!" Motunrayo exclaimed. "Is this all you ever find to read."

"Don't you think I should get to know more about myself? I read these books because it helps me to understand what is happening to me. If you too had a crippling disease, won't you...."

"Look at you!" Motunrayo interjected sharply. "Who says you have a crippling disease? You are not a cripple. Honestly Tola, you should start focusing on the positive side of life. This pessimism will not help your fight for survival. It has been proved that many sicklers can live normal lives. Why don't you determine to be of that group instead of classifying yourself as a cripple? You can't afford to lie down and keep pitying yourself like this."

Tola felt unjustifiably rebuked. "You are talking like that because you have everything going right for you. Your education, you don't have to keep on repeating classes like me. You can do anything, eat anything without recourse to your health..."

"It's not that...."

“And upon everything, you are the only one that Daddy loves. He always has time for you. Sometimes, he sits down with you talking rubbish, things that don’t matter. But, with me, he specialises in evasion. I know he is fed up with this sickness,” she ended wistfully.

“Tola, you are only imagining things, of course, Daddy loves you.”

“You are just making excuses for him and I’m not surprised. But see if you can explain this. This morning, Mummy must have told him what happened yesterday night, that is if he didn’t hear everything himself. Because of all that, I didn’t go to school today. And he hasn’t even come in to see me since he returned from work. Is that how to love? I’m sure he’ll be pleased when I’m dead.”

“Shut up there. You are just talking nonsense,” Motunrayo rebuked sharply. However, she knew Tola was probably right about their father being fed up with the illness and not showing enough affection. Normally, he couldn’t stand failures of any kind. But that was really unfair because Tola, as his child, deserved his support. “Lying back there and sulking won’t do you any good. If you feel so strongly about Daddy’s attitude, then why do you accommodate it? Go out there and talk to him. Make him change. If he doesn’t give you his attention, demand it. Can’t you see that if you allow people shirk their responsibilities to you, they will take you for granted.”

“What do you mean? Why should I beg my own father to love me?”

“For the one reason that it upsets you when he doesn’t show that he cares.” She pulled her sister up and almost dragged her into the living room. Alaba was still reading the papers while Ada was probably in the kitchen.

“Daddy,” Motunrayo called.

“Hun,” he said without looking up.

“Daddy, we want to talk to you.”

Motunrayo’s tone got his attention and he put the papers aside. “What is it?” he asked curiously as he sat up.

Motunrayo turned to her sister, prompting her to talk. Tola felt uncomfortable, she never could talk to her father freely these days. But she would do her best, this might just work.

“Daddy, I was sick yesterday night and you haven’t even bothered to check on me since.... Why?”

Alaba’s blood ran cold. He didn’t know the girl was that sensitive. It was true that he was fed up with her incapacity to stay healthy. Being hardly ever sick himself, he didn’t have the mental constitution to empathise with someone who was ill almost all the time. On the other hand, he was afraid of losing her. All the doctors they had seen concluded that it was just a matter of time. Often, Alaba reasoned that if he detached himself from her emotionally, he wouldn’t feel the loss too much, when the inevitable happened. And that was exactly what he had begun to do. But he never for one minute imagined that the girl would notice. Her innocent accusation immediately threw off his cloak of resolutions. Now he knew he was wrong.

“Come here,” he said gently.

Tola hesitated and then went to sit beside him. He took one of her hands between his palms.

“I don’t like seeing you sick, it hurts me very badly. But I didn’t have the right to avoid you.” He didn’t think he was saying what he meant to say properly, but well, he wasn’t prepared for this. He summed up his mind in one sentence. “You know I love you, don’t you?”

Tola felt a rush of emotion for her father. Even though they lived in the same house, she had missed him and was deeply glad about this re-union of sorts. She felt better already. She wanted to hug him but couldn’t bring herself to make the first move. She nodded in response to his question. He drew her close and she let herself go, cuddling him as if he was a long lost favourite large teddy bear.

Motunrayo felt her eyes smarting at the approaching tears.

Ada came out of the kitchen, silently rejoicing at what she could see. "What's happening here?" she asked. There was no reply.