UNBROKEN

She ran, ran from the pain embedded deep inside her. A burdensome and unbearable pain. She screamed into the thick darkness of the midnight hours. The sound of her voice urging her to run faster.

Her tears mixed with the sweat that trickled down her face. The pounding in her chest rhymed with every time one foot hit the ground after the other.

And then she collapsed to the floor, she couldn't run anymore. Right there on the tarred road of the estate, at 3.30 am, she hugged her knees to her chest, willing it to be all over. She was freezing cold on the inside, but sweat poured out on the outside and dripped to the floor.

Tara looked at the vintage clock on her dresser. It was 6.45 am, if she stayed a minute longer, she was sure to miss her 7.30am appointment. *Tara* had a reputation for sticking to time.

Getting this deal was important, but creating the perfect first impression was more important. She believed that if a deal didn't come through at the first meeting, creating the right impression can earn you a second meeting.

She grabbed her bag, and made her way to the car. Her driver was waiting, he already had the brief and knew where he was taking her.

Sitting at the back seat of her *Toyota 2020 Forerunner*, *Tara* ran through the details of the man she was meeting, she checked her notes to be sure she didn't miss anything. It was *Dekunle* who made the referral and he had given her all the information she'd need.

Dekunle, she smiled at the thought of him and looked down at the rock on her finger, she couldn't believe she was married. If anyone had told her a year ago she would be , she would have laughed in their face.

Tara looked ahead at the traffic that stretched in front of them and sighed, she hated living in *Lagos*. She rested her head on the back of her seat and let her mind travel back in time.

"I think I like you"

She read the note on the piece of paper and looked around the lecture hall, wondering how it got into her notebook. The professor was rounding up the class and as soon as he walked out of the door, everyone scrambled to their feet making their way out after him. She had been in two consecutive 2hour lectures and was very hungry.

Contemplating where to have lunch, she heard the voice behind her.

"Now I'm sure I like you Tara, I'd like to be your friend"

Startled, she looked back to see who it was. She recognized him from another elective course she was taking. Not sure what her response should be, she waited for him to continue.

"My name is Adekunle Fagbohun, 500 Level Building." He held out his hand.

"You already know my name, nice to meet you Adekunle" She took his hand politely.

It had been a long day and asides from the fact that she was hungry, she needed to take a shower before going to the library. She had no time to entertain *Dekunle*, not at that moment.

"I'd love to stay back and chat with you, but I don't have that much time, how about you give me your number and I'd call you." She said, looking into her bag for a notepad and pen.

He didn't seem pleased, but he scribbled his phone number on the notepad, they exchanged goodbyes and he watched her walk away.

"Madam, we are here already." She heard her driver say.

She opened her eyes, she had drifted off to sleep in the middle of her reverie. She opened her bag and brought out her makeup purse for a quick touch up. It was exactly 7.25 AM, she was just in time.

"Thank you Akin. I won't be long". She said as she got down from the car, handing him a ~~₦~~1, 000 note

"Get something to eat and please leave your phone on" She added.

On the second ring of the door bell, a man dressed like a chef answered the door. ***"Good morning ma'am"*** He said.

"***Good morning, I am here to see*** *Mr. Andrew Okoli*, ***my name is*** *Omotara Fagbohun****".*** She replied.

"Please come in, he's expecting you" He stepped aside for her to go in.

She took in the details of the interior décor. It was tastefully designed and the choice of artwork was impeccable.

"Please sit here and wait for** Mr. Okoli**, he'd be with you shortly." The man said and left the room.

She nodded her thank you and sat down, then she remembered she had not spoken to *Dekunle*. She brought out her phone and saw a text notification. She opened it.

***"Good morning Foxy, I'm just about to step into my 7.00 am meeting. Break a leg with Okoli*, okay? I *love you*."** She smiled and sent her reply.

"Love you too Dee. I'm here now and would let you know how it goes." She hit the send button***.***

"You must be** Mrs. Fagbohun**", Mr Okoli said as he came in and held out his hand to her.

"And you must be** Mr. Okoli**", she replied, as she stood up and took his hand.

"You may call me** Andrew**, please sit."

The meeting went on for 2 hours. He gave her the brief. It was a Multi-million Naira Housing project, to design and develop an estate with 50 fully serviced, semi-detached terrace houses of two, three, and four-bedroom units.

She was to come back with a building design of the proposed estate and a floor plan of each unit in 2 weeks.

Tara took pride in her work and since she got her Master's Degree in Architecture from the *University of Witwatersrand, South Africa*, she had made a mark and created an impressive profile for herself.

As soon as she got into the car, she sent a message to *Dekunle* letting him know she was done. They agreed to have dinner together when he got in from his *Enugu* trip. She was keen on getting the job and was going to give it her best shot as she worked on the design.

"Omotara, please marry me, I want to do my life journey with you " There was a note of desire in his tone.

Tara stared at him intently. She was weak and frail from her most recent chemotherapy session. She was tired , but only physically. Her mind was active and strong in faith. Faith that she could and would beat the cancer cells threatening her life.

In his eyes, all she saw was the love he had for her, the strong hope he had that she'd come out of it all, alive. There was no iota of doubt or fear and it was from *Dekunle* she drew her strength, it was with him her faith was strengthened.

Her faith didn't come from the numerous night vigils her mother arranged with an array of pastors, it didn't come from the prayer chain her church organized twice a week on the hospital premises.

Tara believed in God and the power of prayers, and she appreciated every prayer session that was arranged for her to get her healing. But in those sessions, she could sense the deep fear and doubt in the hearts of the people praying for her.

Cancer is assumed to be a death sentence and it is only a matter of time before it takes your soul. She could see in their eyes they feared she wouldn't survive it.

With *Dekunle*, it was different. If he had any doubts, he did a great job of hiding it. He acknowledged her pain and empathized with her as much as he could, but he never treated her as though she would die. Praying with him was different, *Dekunle* focused on gratitude for the present moments, and expressed even more gratitude for the future ahead.

And when he asked her again that morning, to marry him, she considered it a seal of their faith and a sign that God would indeed get her out of her ailment. She got a conviction and a sense of peace that her healing had come.

"What if I don't make it out…." He didn't let her finish.

"Babe, we've made it out already, marry me, Tara. Let's do tomorrow together. Let's do happily ever after together. Foxy, you're the only person I see a future with. You're …"

"I will marry you Dee " She said with a tired smile.

He brought out the ring he carried around in his pocket every day, for almost two years, waiting for the day she'd say yes to him. He took it out of its case and slipped it into her finger. It was loose, understandably so, she had lost a lot of weight in the past 4 months.

The ring was a *spinel*, a very rare gemstone, set in the center of a *platinum* band with three tiny *diamonds* encrusted on either side of it. It was absolutely beautiful and it made him want to cry just looking at it on her finger. Tara was going to be his wife.

" Dee, don't tell me this fancy table set up, these gorgeous flowers, and the mini-orchestra is for us to eat amala, ewedu and gbegiri?" She threw her head back as she laughed.

"It's called romance with a touch of trenches babe. I hope you know it is Iya Oyo that made it." He replied heartily.

" I don't know what I'd do with you and your crazy ass. I love you so much Dee." She said, her eyes filled with love, gratitude, and admiration for this man who had been with her through thick and thin for the past 10 years of her life.

It was their second wedding anniversary. They got married 8 months after he proposed to her. He wanted the wedding to happen immediately, but she insisted that he wait till she was well. That was when the healing began.

Every appointment with her oncologist showed the cancer cells were dying off, it was divine. After six months she was declared cancer free, but she was still under scrutiny. She tried to convince *Dekunle* to wait another year to be sure she won't relapse, but he wasn't having it.

In an intimate ceremony with a few close friends and family, they tied the knots of their love. The first year was tough on them, *Tara* experienced severe panic attacks and depression. She lived in fear of a relapse.

Dekunle was there to keep her going. He took her on vacations and she went to therapy. One year after she was still cancer free and she began to relax.

Life became worth living again, she went back to work and they agreed they would wait before having children. They wanted two, a boy and a girl. *Dekunle*, while they waited, had started to decorate a room and buy baby items. His child-like faith always amused *Tara*, and she loved him for it.

It was the same child-like faith that caused *Dekunle* to trust people easily. He took risks and the more situations worked in his favor, the more he opened himself up to more risks. His philosophy was that, if his decisions were going to harm him, God will not make them work. It was difficult not to agree with him and because of that, Tara took everything to God in prayer.

The lump in her throat had become so heavy, she struggled to fight the tears. She had promised herself she would make it through her speech without betraying her emotions. It didn't look like she could fulfill that promise.

She looked at the crowd seated before her, in the front row were her five-year-old twins, a boy, and a girl, her mother, her siblings, and the church pastor. She closed her eyes and let the tears fall freely. She was allowed to express her deep pain and her deep gratitude, her confusion about the irony of her life.

With her eyes shut, her mind flashed back to all the events leading to this moment.

She had made a dinner reservation at their favorite local restaurant. *Dekunle* was on a flight back to *Lagos* from *Enugu* and the plan was for *him* to meet her at the restaurant to catch up on details of her meeting with Mr. *Okoli* and his trip to *Enugu*. He called her as soon as he landed so she could get ready.

They texted each other, until his last message asking her to head out to the restaurant as he was approaching the *3rd mainland bridge*.

She got to the restaurant before him and waited. Thirty minutes, forty-five minutes, there was still no sign of him and no communication. His phone line had become unreachable. She was unable to get through to his driver too and that was when she began to panic. She called his best friend and his brother and the search began.

There was no sign of his car nor any record of any accidents on or off the bridge. She called her closest friend, *Chidinma,* and their church pastor, who advised that she went home while the guys tried to solve the mystery of a missing *Dekunle*.

It was about 11 pm, her mind was in turmoil. She prayed with her friend, they cried together, and they hoped together, that nothing bad had happened. Deep down in her guts, *Tara* knew something was wrong and wished very hard it wasn't death.

The call came at 12.10 am, *Dekunle's* brother called her to give them access into the estate, they had news for her. The three minutes it took them to get to her house from the gate was the longest wait of her life.

As the pastor spoke, the only thing she heard was ***"…Dekunle died on the spot from the gunshot to his head"***. It echoed repeatedly in her head as she made her way to their bedroom. Her entire being shut down on her. She went into the shower and took a long hot bath as if that will wash away the bad news. Afterwards , she lay in bed and closed her eyes.

When *Tara* opened her eyes, it was 3.00 am. She got out of bed as quietly as she could and got dressed up in her exercise clothes, and running shoes. She was going for a run.

She was still hugging her knees tight, curled up in a ball on the floor, when *Chidinma* and the estate security found her soaked in her sweat, along the tarred road in the estate.

Everything after that night happened in a haze. From all the investigations carried out, he was murdered. One of the guys hired to do the job was caught which led to other arrests. He had been dealing with the wrong set of people.

At the meeting in *Enugu*, *Dekunle* had hinted how he didn't do shady business and how in the past he'd call in the authorities if he perceived a business was shady.

They considered him a threat, and because he knew too much about the deal, they decided it was better to get him out of the way.

It had taken an entire village to keep Tara through the insane moments, the days she was close to taking her life and the nights she lost her mind.

It had taken the grace of God to go through 41 weeks of pregnancy, carrying *Dekunle's seeds* , a set of twins, the boy, and girl they desired. The children he had given names even before they were conceived.

She opened her eyes, her face wet with tears. It has been five years of doing life without *Dekunle*, raising and caring for their children, pursuing her career as an architect and property developer, struggling with her faith in God, and taking life one day at a time.

Her faith in God was gravely shaken, she was confused by His ways. She looked into the crowd.

She was torn between being deeply grateful for the love and support she had enjoyed for five years from her family, her friends and the blessing of her children, and being angry at God for the deep pain she felt from the loss of the only man she ever truly loved.