“You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming.”

Pablo Neruda

**CHAPTER ONE**

The night my sister was thrown out, the city didn’t pause. It coughed diesel and neon like always, unbothered by the violence crackling inside our living room. No goodbyes. Just a slammed door behind like it was trying to erase something with wood and metal

 “*Get out ! I don’t want to see your filth again!”*

 *“You hear me, girl? A whiff of you near me and I’ll strangle you with my bare hands!”*

My father’s voice was a curse hurled across skin and memory. He wasn’t a man of patience. He was fury with a beer belly and callused fists. That night, he didn’t hesitate. One shout, one shove, one slammed door—and my sister was gone.

She didn’t scream. She didn’t run after her. She sat with her fingers jammed into her mouth, shivering against the couch cushions, eyes burning but silent. Because in that moment, silence was safety.

He didn’t touch her, not that night. But she saw it in his eyes—another raised voice, another perceived betrayal, and she’d be next. So she folded herself into corners. she became careful.

Her brothers were out playing. In that moment, she was glad they didn’t witness the fury. But the weight of telling them what happened to their sister, her sister, weighed heavily on her shoulders. A weight she didn’t want to carry. But now she had no choice.

The night Mama left, Sheryl was there. She knew how to handle the boys. With so much poise and strength. She held us close and tight. Protected us from storms that we didn’t know about. Mama’s absence was seen but never felt. And now she wondered, will she be able to fill this space with warmth even in the absence of firewood?

With Sheryl gone, Betsy thought it might be over after that. The shouting. The threats. But peace never came—only a deeper kind of war.

Two weeks later, he disappeared too. That night, she tucked in her two little brothers, warmed leftovers on the charcoal stove, and waited.

Dad never came home….. he never came back. Just two uniforms to iron, two stomachs to feed and one girl who’d never worked a day in her life suddenly crowned queen of responsibility.

No warning. No goodbye. Just a greasy plate in the sink, a bottle tipped over on the floor, and emptiness that echoed when they whispered his name. They waited. A day. Then another. But he never came back.

Turns out a man can walk away from his own blood like it’s a tab he doesn’t feel like settling.

That morning she woke up a daughter. By sunset, she was a parent. Fifteen. And a mother to two boys who still believed in superheroes and soft-boiled eggs. There was no manual for what came next.

Our house felt too big and too small all at once. Too quiet in the places where her sister’s singing used to fill the air. Too loud with responsibility. Brad, the youngest, asked if we’d still have Christmas. Kip just stared out the window like he was trying to remember how to be eight.

Betsy had no job. No plan. Just one week before school resumed and a pantry whispering its hunger.

She tried to think of options. Her mind chased wild things—washing clothes, knocking on doors, selling what little they had. She was still finishing Form Four, still trying to earn a certificate that might mean something. But even dreams need feeding, and this one was starving.

Then, in a stroke of strange grace,she found money. A stash hidden deep in Mum’s old kitenge skirt—neatly folded, wrapped in the faint scent of lavender and loss. Not much, but enough to make her feel less useless for a moment.she never told the boys where it came from. Just said they’d be okay. But deep down, she knew it was only for a while until the walls came falling down.

She made a list not because she knew how to budget but because she didn’t know what else to do. The market smelled like onions, dust and someone’s bad decisions. She bought dry goods. School supplies. A bit of soap. The bare essentials to stretch them across the next few weeks.

*That evening, she got home early before the boys. she cried her heart out. Then cleaned. Then cooked. And she kept going.*

The week flashed by. Sunday arrived earlier than expected. The last day before school. Anxiety was hitting the roof. Truth be told, she didn’t know how to handle life and all it had thrown at her without warning. Managing schedules without school was easier. Yet, exhausting. But now, she had two souls depending on her and her soul relying on her already exhausted body and mind. She wanted to disappear . Run. wanted to quit. Maybe say goodbye to school?

 Kip walked in while she was in a stormy argument with her thoughts, “hey, you seem deep in thoughts.” Just wondering on how we will maneuver things. “We will figure things out together “ Kip replied in a soft voice but full of doubt. Will we?

Anyways I made breakfast, pancakes with sweet tea. Call Brad so we can eat together. We also need to discuss on how to move forward. We have to run this ground like we were born carrying it in our hands….. huh.

On most days, she woke up at 4 a.m, prepping meals, ironing shirts with no electricity, braiding Kip’s wild curls by flashlight. By the time she got to school, her body had already lived an entire day.

She slept through lessons. Missed homework. Got called to the principal’s office with tired apologies stitched behind her eyelids.

 “You’re falling behind,” they said.

 “You need to consider stepping away and figure things out,” they advised. “*if you knew how many times I have thought of quitting, running away to a place where I am still allowed to be, you wouldn’t echo it out aloud. Maybe you all should have considered asking how I was doing and how you can help “. she* wanted to voice those thoughts out aloud, but instead, the words that she would scramble were ‘ I will do better and get working on missing assignment and deadlines’

“Stepping away felt like collapsing. And i had boys to raise. And a promise to myself—to finish school. To earn that piece of paper that might unlock a future not soaked in scarcity. Walking away when I was so close wasn’t an option for me. Quitting would have meant letting doubts and fear win --- it meant silence. Letting my pops win for walking away. Crashing the dreams of a generation yet to be born. Silently sucking life out of Kip and Brad. But this, this was a fight I am determined to win. The city may have broken me, but I still had the pieces. And as long as I had them, ugly as they were, I was going to create a mosaic. *I have lived with too many ghosts to stop fighting now .“*

Some nights she cried when the boys were asleep. Some nights she just stared at the ceiling and imagined being anywhere else—another life, another body, another burden. But every morning, she rose. Because they needed her to.

*Because I needed me too.*

Because sometimes survival isn’t a plan—it’s a heartbeat that refuses to quit.

**CHAPTER TWO**

It didn’t hit all at once.

Grief didn’t throw itself against her chest or scream through the walls when her father didn’t come home. It crept in sideways. One cold morning, a half-empty packet of flour. An unpaid bills tucked behind a broken clock. Brad asking when Dad would be back, and Kip not asking at all.

And then it hit. All of it. Hunger, dread, dread’s louder cousin: uncertainty.

Her arms were cold. Her heart heavy. her world had shrunk. And her beliefs, she was questioning everything.

 She stood in the kitchen one morning, staring at almost bare pantry. The tin of grain and half a packet of ugali flour like they might offer an answer if she stared hard enough. No salt. No sugar. No options

That day, she let the boys sleep in a little longer, just so they wouldn’t see her crying into a tea mug she had no leaves to fill.

Rent was due in four days. The last of the emergency cash was gone. And even if they turned the house inside out again,she knew she wouldn’t find another miracle folded in fabric. The city wasn’t handing out grace anymore.

For a minute, she stared at the door. And whispered a silent prayer. Hung on to hope. That her sister would walk through the door. Or their mother. Or someone who remembered how to love them.

Her stomach twisted, not from hunger, from clarity. Nothing was coming to them. Not help. Not a miracle. Even hope now seemed to heavy to carry

At school, her thoughts wandered through every lesson. The words on the board blurred. She wasn’t thinking about exams or notes. she was measuring time—how long until the shop closed, how many minutes she could stretch one meal, how many hours she had before someone asked what was wrong and had no language to explain.

That afternoon, she made a choice. Not noble. Not brave. Just necessary. For the sake of survival.

she remembered the girls at lunch. Not their names, but the way they wore sharpness like perfume. she remembered the rumors, the whispers about how they always had new gloss, fresh braids, fare without ever asking.

*“I don’t want their life. I just want three months. A buffer. A chance to finish school, get my certificate, and then breathe.”*

When she walked up to them that lunch break, she felt like her ribs might snap from the effort of holding myself upright.

 “Hi. May I speak with you for a moment?”

 “About?” one of them asked, raising a brow.

 “I need help.”

Laughter. Snorts. Silence.

The conversation wasn’t smooth. They laughed at first. They tested her. One girl even mocked her outright. They looked at her like she was a broken mirror.

But she didn’t flinch. She kept her voice level. told them her name. Told them about her sister—Sheryl. And in that moment, everything that had felt like loss started becoming currency.

She didn’t wait for them to invite me in. she showed them who she was.

By the time she returned Tess’s gold hairpin and Andrea’s watch—items she’d lifted mid-conversation and replaced without them noticing—there was no denying what she’d brought to the table.

 “You’re good,” Tess said, eyes like steel and smoke.

 “No,” she replied, swallowing pride. “I’m desperate.”

That evening, she bought groceries with borrowed cash and prepared a full dinner. She didn’t look the boys in the eyes when they asked how we could afford rice and tomatoes.

Kip gave me that look.

Not loud, not angry—just that sideways glance, that tightened jaw.

 I don’t believe you, Betsy. Words weren’t necessary. But she heard it in the way he didn’t reach for his food. In how he pushed rice around with a fork like it had secrets. Secrets he didn’t want to be part of.

Her chest squeezed. She tried to mask the heat crawling up my neck with forced ease.

 “So… how was school?” she asked, her voice too light. “Homework, any new friends? Anything I can help with?”

 Brad shrugged and said he had a math worksheet. Kip maintained silence. He didn’t shroud. A fixed gaze in his full plate.

 she didn’t push.

 Because in our house, silence had weight. And that night, he was letting it speak for him.

*And I let it.*

*I just sat there, eating around the questions he hadn’t asked—like maybe they wouldn’t rise tomorrow.*

**CHAPTER THREE**

*“I told myself it was temporary.*

*Just until the final exam.*

*Just until the bills were settled.*

*Just until I could breathe again.”*

But it’s funny how quickly survival turns into skill—how you blink, and suddenly, you’re good at things you never wanted to learn.

The first trade was a wallet.

Brown leather. A little cracked at the corners. Wedged tight in the back pocket of a Form Five boy too busy trying to impress his girl to notice his edges were bleeding.

She watched him for three days—studied his gait, his timing, the way he let his guard slip when he leaned in to whisper something sweet. On the fourth day, I pulled. Quick. Clean.

Inside: three crisp notes, a half-used bus card, and a photo of someone’s mother in faded lipstick. She pocketed the notes and slid the wallet onto the windowsill near the canteen entrance before anyone could notice it missing.

Tess witnessed the trade. Of course she did.

 “First pull?” she asked, eyebrow raised.

 “Yeah,” she said, keeping my tone even. Clean?

“Too clean,” she muttered, like it offended her.

On her way home, rain hit the streets like loose change from heaven. Neon signs smeared into watercolors. A cat curled beneath a boda boda, blinking slowly, like it knew something she didn’t know.

*That night, Betsy didn’t sleep. She lay beside her brothers and listened to the rain, wondering how much longer she could keep the roof from collapsing.*

After that, something shifted.

They still let me sit at the lunch tree. Still shared intel and scraps. But they stopped explaining things. They started testing me instead—with harder marks, riskier situations, silence where there used to be nods.

And her? she just got better.

No talk back. No show off. She moved like wind. Eyes up. Hands fast. Presence small.

Tess was still the queen—but queens can feel the ground changing beneath their thrones.

Within weeks, I had built my own map.

Solo jobs. Digital sleight of hand. Phone grabs no one saw coming. A whisper-light lift of a flash drive that turned into five thousand shillings overnight.

She stopped splitting everything. Stopped reporting every win.

They noticed.

Andrea started cracking jokes with teeth in them. Called me “The Bishop”—because she moved diagonally and didn’t play fair.

Lulu once spilled Coke on my sweater “by accident.”

And Tess? Tess didn’t say much at all. Just watched.

She wanted quiet. So she stepped back.

Started declining crew hits. Focused on my own path. Cleaner. Quieter.

The gossip swirled like smoke.

“She thinks she’s above us.”

“Miss Perfect got what she needed, now she's bouncing.”

“She’ll flip. Watch.”

 Never flinched. Let the whispers curl behind me like bad weather that never touched my skin.

Because even when they didn’t say it out loud, they knew.

She was the one.

With the money flowing, life softened. Rent got paid. The boys had lunch every day. Even paid an older girl to help with chores so she could study longer.

Hope crept in like light under a locked door.

But not everyone could let go of the dark.

Exams were getting near. She needed to focus on my goal which meant a sudden change.

 My withdrawal wasn’t dramatic. She just stopped showing up.

Tess didn't text. But the silence was its own message. And when she passed the crew in the hallways, Andrea’s laughter bit like broken glass.

 “Nice shoes, Bishop,” she sneered once.

 “Guess being quiet pays.”

No answer. Just walked past.

Let them speak in spite. She was already speaking in results.

And then—finals.

She had enough saved for three weeks’ worth of groceries. She stocked the house like a soldier preparing for siege. Told the boys this was the stretch. The big push. She needed to focus.

They listened.

She withdrew even further. Books. Tea. Sleep when she could. No lunch meetups. No visits to the plaza.

 Tess didn’t ask why.

 She already knew.

When the final paper ended, I walked out of that hall lighter. Not clean. But intact. “Goodbye, high school,” I whispered.

 “And goodbye to the girl who bled in silence so she could cross the finish line.”

That night, she made tea. Stared at the wall.

And let the weight lift.

Because she wasn’t proud of what she had done.

But she was damn proud she was still standing.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

The quiet after exams felt wrong. Louder than all the sirens the city had ever coughed up.

 There were no alarms to beat, no uniforms to press, no timed escape from home to classroom and back again. Just mornings that stretched long and thin like porridge made for too many mouths.

 “What now?” she asked the ceiling one morning, lying in the be she suddenly had too much time to sleep in.

*“I’d made it through high school. I wasn’t dead. I wasn’t expelled. And the crew hadn’t burned my name—at least, not publicly.”*

But the in-between was loud.

She didn’t go to the class celebration. No pictures in school colors. No screaming over playlists.

Instead, she went searching.

With time pressing against her ribs like silence too thick to swallow, she dug through the bottom drawer of Mama’s old dresser until she found it: her recipe book. Dog-eared, grease-stained, full of scribbles and smudged ink that smelled faintly of nutmeg and past joy.

That afternoon, she baked.

Vanilla cake—dense and sweet. she whipped the batter by hand, measured everything twice, and poured it into a dented tin like it was some kind of offering. When the oven hissed to life, so did something in her.

The boys came running when the smell reached the hallway. We ate it warm, in silence, with perfectly brewed tea. No candles, no cheering. Just crumbs and quiet and something close to peace.

 Our mouths were full—not with worry, but with something made from love and legacy

Books were closed, the uniforms folded. But the hustle? The hustle was still in session. But maybe, a different kind.

Her dream was in science. Analytical chemistry. To understand mixtures, balance equations, speak the silent language of atoms and reactions. It wasn’t just fascination- it was the first dream, she’d ever chosen for herself.

*While other girls pinned wedding gowns to their walls, I hung a periodic table above my bed.*

And dreams, like chemical reactions, needed the right conditions. And hers needed money- fast.

She sat by the window with a cup of porridge and a note pad titled ***100k strategy.***

Clean living didn’t just mean walking away from the crew. It meant learning how to trade joy again—differently.

The boys were old enough now to notice. They didn’t ask where the shoes came from or how the fridge refilled. But when Betsy sat them down, she didn’t sugarcoat anything.

 *“I need your help.” she said. “ not just with cleaning or cooking- but building something. Something that lasts”*

She had three ideas. Farming. Urban farming , Baking and scholarships. Yes, you heard her, scholarships.

The boys didn’t laugh at her ideas. They rolled up their sleeves and asked what to plant. They dug trenches with spoons. Repurposed basins as water catchers. Planted kale and tomatoes in empty paint buckets.

It wasn’t much. But for the first time, soil held something other than hunger.

And she started baking for neighbors. Cupcakes for nursery graduations. Spiced loaves for mamas who wanted softness with their tea but couldn’t stretch supermarket prices.

“Luxury without the lie,” she wrote on a scrap of brown paper and taped it to the side of my bucket oven.

she used margarine when butter was a myth, orange zest to mask the flatness of plain flour. She sweet-talked flavors from almost nothing.

Word spread. Slowly. But it spread. Orders trickled in. Not enough to save me—but enough to remind me she was still worth saving.

Still, survival doesn’t scrub the past from your skin.

When she bumped into Tess at the chemist, we both froze.

“Still doing lunch at the plaza?” She asked, pretending my voice wasn’t shaking.

“Wouldn’t know,” she said coolly, scanning the shelf in front of her. “Thought you were done with us.”

 “Trying something else,” she said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Right. Farming sukuma and baking for aunties. That’s gonna change the world.”

It didn’t sting the way it once would’ve. Maybe because deep down, she knew Tess didn’t hate her. She hated what she reminded her was possible.

Tess had been watching from the shadows. Her girls kept murmuring about Betsy’s withdrawal.

*“She thinks she is too good for us now?” “ said it was temporary------ now she’s acting all brand new.”*

Betsy stayed quiet. Pride and shame pulsed like twin heartbeats. She didn’t owe them forever. But she owed them something.

That night, she wrote three scholarship essays between cupcake batches. Watered tomatoes. Read Kip’s story draft.

*“I am trying.” she whispered*

Trying to be the girl who didn’t need sleight-of-hand anymore.

The next Tuesday, she returned one last time to the alley behind the supermarket. Not for money. For closure.

She dropped off a handwritten envelope addressed to *THE CREW .*

Inside:

*- A breakdown of the jobs she’d pulled*

*- A thank you note scribbled like a bruise*

*- And an apology I didn’t know how to say out loud*

*“You were my parachute, and my lifeline when the tide came in. I will never forgot that.” I wrote. “But I have to build a plane now.”*

And still, despite everything, doubt didn’t fully leave.

Some nights, when she caught Kip watching her while she wrapped baked goods in cheap foil, she saw it—that old look.

*Don’t lie to me again the look echoed in silence but loud enough to make me tremble.*

Even when she wasn’t.

So she spoke less. Worked more. Planted hope in flour , soil and ink.

We sat under the window that week, sharing tea and silence.

No celebrations. No promises. Just the three of us—and a city that hadn’t cracked us yet.

 And for the first time, the quiet didn’t ache. It waited.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

Ambition had no curtsy. It slipped in between the cupcakes and the unpaid bills. Cracking over the city.

I didn’t wait for some thunderclap of purpose. I just woke up one morning, filled my lungs with the smell of overripe bananas and cheap vanilla essence, and thought—

We keep going.

I checked on the seedlings. Sprouts. Real ones. “ *hope doesn’t always arrive like a rescue. Sometimes it grows in silence, in soil, in sweat*

Later, she cleaned the house, took a bath and brewed tea. She pulled out her notepad and made a list for the day.

A plan. Not perfect. Not tidy. Just real.

1. Scholarships – National, international, even the weird ones that asked for poetry about chlorophyll.

2. Side work – Baking. Proofreading. Hustles stitched with calloused hands, Farming

3. Visibility – Let someone, anyone, know I existed. That I had stayed alive. That I was ready to mean something.

She kept it all in a blue notebook now a war map, with oil-stained pages and a spine nearly broken in half.

At the library, she searched everything.

 “Analytical chemistry scholarships Kenya”

“Best science degrees with full funding”

 “What happens if your dreams outrun your background?”

She applied to 27 programs with borrowed time and burning eyes. Her essays dripped with defiance and heart.

 ***Dear board members,***

***My name is Betsy M. I am not the student with the best record,nor the most trophies. But I have learned to balance equations….. the kind where survival equals instinct and a future requires fire.***

***I am not a perfect candidate,“But I am a necessary one."***

***Regards, Betsy M.***

*I don’t hide hide my circumstances. I refine them into resilience. Forge pain into purpose.* A quite strength she carried.

And through all of it, she baked.

Scones that crumbled just right. Loaves that tasted like warmth. Cupcakes with cracked tops and hearts that rose anyway.

Neighbors started saying things like “She’s serious, that girl.”

And Kip—he started calling it a “brand.”

He printed fliers at the cybercafe:

**Sweet Hope Bakery.**

 **Affordable. Fresh. Baked with dreams.**

He made me a logo that looked like steam rising from a book.

I didn’t thank him out loudly. But he knew.

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Then, one Wednesday afternoon, just as a batch of cinnamon bread was cooling on the windowsill, she opened her email.

Subject Line:

**Congratulations – Full Scholarship Recipient University of Nairobi. Department of Chemistry.**

**Full tuition. Living stipend. Access to national labs**.

She didn’t cry. Not immediately. She held the phone close to her chest and breathed in the moment like it might float away.

She blinked three times.

Stared at the screen until Kip walked in and asked, “Did we burn the bread?”

“No,” she whispered. “We made it.”

That night, she met with Tess,s crew, at a distance- not to participate, but to remind herself who she was, who she wasn’t anymore.

“ *still scared of getting bored?” Tess teases*

*“ still scared of stopping?” Betsy answers.*

That night, she updated the brown paper taped to their old oven:

Sweet Hope Bakery. Luxury. Proof. Science

Because this dream—analytical chemistry—it wasn’t just about lab coats or pipettes. It was about truth.

she wanted to study how things broke down.

How to test for iron in water and poison in soil.

How to trace every molecule that whispered harm before it screamed.

She remembered the day Brad got sick after they drank from the school tap.

How no one tested the water. How no one cared.

That’s when she first wondered if science could be a weapon for the vulnerable—not against them.

 “I don’t want to wear a white coat to impress anyone,” she told Kip later. “I want to wear it so the next girl like me knows there’s nothing wrong with needing answers.”

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We didn’t buy a cake to celebrate. But Brad made sweet tea and Kip played music low from his cracked phone.

And when the bread was finally cool, we broke it apart with our hands and ate every crumb like communion.

 Not to celebrate an ending—

 But because something sacred had begun