



## CHAPTER ONE

### ORLU

The moment Sunny walked into the schoolyard, people started pointing. Girls started snickering, too, including the girls she usually hung with, her so-called friends. *Idiots*, Sunny thought. Nevertheless, could she really blame any of them? Her woolly blonde hair, whose length so many had envied, was gone. Now she had a puffy medium-length Afro. She eyed at her friends and hissed loudly. She felt like punching them each in the mouth.

"What happened?" Chelu asked. She didn't even have the courtesy to keep the stupid grin off her face.

"I needed a change," Sunny said and walked away. Behind her, she still heard them laughing.

"Now she's really ugly," she heard Chelu say.

"She should wear some bigger earrings or something," Buchi added. Sunny's ex-friends laughed even harder. *If you only knew that your days were numbered*, she thought. She shivered, pushing away the images of what she'd seen in the candle.

Her day grew even worse when her literature and writing teacher handed back the latest class assignment. The instructions were to write a four-page narrative essay about a relative. Sunny had written about her arrogant oldest brother, Chukwu, who believed he was God's gift to women, though he wasn't. Of course, it didn't help that his name meant "Supreme Being."

"Sunny's essay received the highest mark," Miss Tate announced, ignoring the class's sneers and scoffs. Miss Tate was a volunteer from London through the Volunteer Service Overseas. She'd been teaching at Sunny's school for three years. She was the only white teacher in the school. "Not only was it nicely written, but it was engaging and humorous," Miss Tate added.

Sunny bit the inside of her cheek and gave a feeble smile. She

hadn't meant the essay to be funny at all. She'd been serious. Her brother truly was an arrogant *nyash*. To make things worse, her classmates had all scored terribly. Out of ten points, most received threes and fours.

"It's a waste of time trying to teach you all proper English," Miss Tate shouted at the rest of the class. She snatched an essay from the pile and read it aloud: "My sister always beg even though she make good money. Na true talk o. She have but she no dey give. She no go change." Miss Tate slammed the essay back onto the boy's desk.

"But Miss Tate, you said that we should write 'casually', as if we were having a conversation at home," her classmate Jibaku insisted. "Sunny is American. She doesn't—"

Miss Tate's eyes looked as if they would pop out. "When I said 'casual' I did NOT mean deteriorated! Do I need to explain every single detail to you people?" She paused as the class stared back at her. "And you were all so timid in what you wrote. Who wants to hear, 'My mother is very nice' or 'My auntie is poor'? And in Pidgin English, at that! This is why I had you write about a relative. This was supposed to be an easy exercise in narrative!"

As she spoke, she stomped and clomped about the classroom, her face growing redder and redder. She stepped in front of Sunny's desk. "Stand, please."

Sunny looked around at her classmates. Everyone just stared back at her, with slack faces and angry eyes. Slowly, she stood up and straightened her navy blue uniform skirt.

Miss Tate left her standing as she went to her desk in front of the class. She opened a drawer and brought out her yellow wooden koboko. Sunny's mouth dropped open. *I'm about to be flogged*, she thought. *Ah ah, what did I do?* She wondered if it was because she was twelve, the youngest in the class. "Come," Miss Tate said.

"But—"

"Now," she said more firmly.

Sunny slowly walked to the front of the class, aware of her classmates' eyes boring into her back. She let out a shallow breath as she stood before her teacher.

"Hold out your hand." Miss Tate, already bloated with anger, had the *koboko* ready. Sunny shut her eyes and braced herself for the stinging pain. But no sting came. Instead, she felt the koboko placed in her hand. She quickly opened her eyes.

Miss Tate looked to the class. “Each of you will come up and Sunny will give you three strikes on the left hand.” She smiled wryly. “Maybe she can beat some of her sense into you.”

Sunny’s stomach sank as her classmates lined up before her. They all looked so angry. And not the red kind of anger that burns out quickly—but the black kind, the kind that is carried outside of class.

Orlu was the first in line. He was the closest to her age, just a year older. They’d never spoken much, but he seemed nice. He liked to build things. She’d seen him during lunch hour—his friends would be blabbing away and he’d be to the side making towers and what looked like little people out of Coca-Cola and Fanta caps and candy wrappers. She certainly didn’t want to bruise his hands.

He stood there just looking at her, waiting. He didn’t seem angry, like everyone else, but he looked nervous. If he had spoken, Miss Tate would have boxed his head.

By this time, Sunny was crying. She felt a flare of hatred for Miss Tate, who up to this day had been her favorite teacher. *The woman’s lost her mind*, she thought miserably. *Maybe I should smack her instead.*

Sunny stood there carrying on the way she knew her mother hated her to do. It was pathetic and childish. She knew her pale face was flushed red. She sobbed hard and then threw the cane on the floor. This made Miss Tate even angrier. She pushed Sunny aside. “Sit,” Miss Tate shouted.

Sunny covered her face with her hands, but she cringed with each slap of the koboko. And then the person would hiss or squeak or gasp or whatever suited his or her pain. She could hear the desks around her filling up as people were punished and then sat down. Someone behind her kicked her chair. It was Jibaku, the girl who’d tried to explain to the teacher that many of them had misunderstood the assignment. “Stupid albeeno *akata* bitch!” she growled. “Your hours are numbered!” she added in Igbo.

Sunny shut her eyes tight and gulped down a sob. She hated the word “*akata*” more than the word “bitch”. It meant, “bush animal” but its implication was heavier than its meaning. The word was used to refer to and, more often, degrade black Americans or foreign-born blacks. It was a hurtful word.

After school, Sunny tried to escape the schoolyard. She made

it just far enough for no teachers to see her get jumped. Jibaku, the girl who'd threatened her, led the mob. Right there on the far side of the school schoolyard, three girls and four of the boys beat Sunny as they shouted taunts and insults. She wanted to fight back, but she knew better. There were too many of them.

It was a schoolyard thrashing and not one of her ex-friends came to her rescue. They just stood and watched. Even if they wanted to, they were no match for Jibaku, the richest, tallest, toughest, and most popular girl in school.

It was Orlu who finally put an end to it. He'd been yelling for everyone to stop since it started. "Why don't we let her speak?" Orlu shouted.

Maybe it was because they needed to catch their breath or maybe they truly were curious, but they all paused. Sunny was dirty and bruised, but what could she say? Jibaku spoke up instead—Jibaku, who had slapped Sunny in the face hard enough to make her lip bleed. Sunny glared at her.

"Why didn't you just do it yourself?" The sun bore down on Sunny, making her sensitive skin itch. All she wanted to do was get in the shade. "You could have pretended to be weak. It wouldn't have pained us!" Jibaku shouted. She switched to Igbo. "Or did you enjoy seeing that white woman flog us like that? Did it make you feel big because you're white, too?"

"I'm not white!" Sunny shouted back in English, finding her voice again.

"My eyes tell me different," a plump boy named Periwinkle said. He was called this because he liked the soup with the periwinkle snails in it.

Sunny wiped blood from her lip and said, "Shut up, snail-sucker! I'm albino!"

"Albino' is a synonym for 'ugly,'" he retorted.

"Oooh, big words now. Maybe you should have used some of those on your stupid essay! Ignorant idiot!" Some of the others laughed. Sunny could always make them laugh, even when she herself felt like crying. "You think I can go around flogging my own classmates?" she said, snatching up her black umbrella. She held it over herself and instantly felt better. "You wouldn't have done it, either." She hissed and switched to Igbo, "Or maybe you would have, Jibaku."

She watched them grumble to each other. Some of them even

turned and started walking home. Sunny clenched her umbrella handle. She'd had enough. If those who remained came at her again she decided that she'd swing at them with it.

There was a long pause. Jibaku hissed loudly, looking Sunny up and down with disgust. "Stupid *oyibo akata* witch," she spat. She motioned to the others. "Let's go."

Sunny and Orlu watched them leave. Their eyes met, and Sunny quickly looked away. When she turned back, Orlu was still watching her. She forced herself to keep her eyes on him, to really see him. He had slanted, almost catlike eyes and high cheekbones. He was kind of pretty, even if he didn't talk much. She bent down to pick up her books.

"Are...are you all right?" he asked, as he helped.

She frowned. "I'm fine. No thanks to you."

"Your face looks..."

"I don't care," she said, putting the last book in her satchel.

"Your mother will care," he said.

Sunny leapt over an open gutter, leaving the school grounds. Orlu followed. The road was clogged with *okada* and they stuck to the far side of the dirt path for safety. Sunny paused and looked back angrily at Orlu. "Why didn't you stop them?" she shouted over the noise of the *okadas* and cars. She slung the satchel over her shoulder and continued walking.

Orlu followed. "I tried!"

She laughed angrily, leaping over a large pothole as they quickly crossed a side street. "No you didn't," she said over her shoulder.

They passed a few shops, an unfinished house and a dilapidated office building and made the turn into their quiet neighborhood. Sunny ran a hand over the smooth trunk of the palm tree growing on the corner of the street. She did this every day.

"I did try to help, Sunny," Orlu insisted. "You didn't see Periwinkle and Calculus do this?" He turned his head so she could see his swollen cheek.

"Oh," she said, instantly ashamed. "I'm sorry."

"No shaking," he said, smiling. "Periwinkle's chin is probably even worse right now."

Sunny laughed. "Good."

By the time they got to the intersection where their paths home diverged, she felt a little better. It seemed she and Orlu had a lot in common. He agreed Miss Tate's actions were way out of line, he

liked reading books for fun, and he too noticed the weaver birds that lived in the tree beside the school.

"I live just down this road," Orlu said.

"I know," she said, looking up the paved road. Like hers, his house was white with a modest wall surrounding it. Her eye settled on the mud hut with the water-damaged walls next door. She'd always wondered about it. Such homes were never in neighborhoods like this and she wondered why anyone tolerated it. Whenever she asked her mother about it, her mother would get annoyed and tell her to stop being nosy. She didn't bother asking her father.

"Do you know the woman who lives there?" she asked Orlu.

There was smoke coming from the back. Probably from a cooking fire, she thought. She had only seen the woman who lived in it once, about two years ago. She'd had smooth brown skin tinted slightly red from the palm oil she rubbed into it. Some of her ex-friends believed the woman was some sort of witch, but they didn't really know anything concrete. *They think anyone who is different is a witch*, Sunny thought.

"That's Nimm's house," Orlu said. "She lives there with her daughter."

"Daughter?" she asked. She'd assumed the woman lived alone.

"Hey!" someone yelled from behind them. "Orlu! Who is this *onyocha*?"

"My God," Orlu groaned. "Will this drama never end?"

Sunny whirled around. "Don't call me that," she said before she got a good look at the girl. She switched to Igbo. "Do I look like a European?" She hissed. "You don't even know me!"

"I have seen you around here," the girl said, now speaking in Igbo, too. She was fine-boned, dark brown, and elfin, but her voice was loud and strong and arrogant. So was her smile. She wore an old-looking red, yellow, and blue dress and no shoes. She swaggered over to Sunny and they stood there, sizing each other up.

"Who are you?" Sunny finally asked.

"Who are *you*?" the girl retorted. She motioned to Sunny's dirty clothes. "Have you been rolling around in the dirt?"

Orlu sighed loudly, rolling his eyes. "Sunny, this is Chichi, my neighbor. Chichi, this is Sunny, my classmate."

"How come I've never seen you at school?" Sunny asked, still

irritated. She dusted off her hopelessly dirty clothes. “You look around our age, even if you are kind of...small.”

“I don’t need your silly school,” Chichi said.

She and Orlu exchanged a look. Sunny frowned. *What was that about?* she wondered.

“And I could be older or younger than you,” Chichi continued. “You’ll never know, even if you *are* a ghost.” She smirked, looking Sunny up and down, obviously itching for a fight. “Even when you speak Igbo you don’t sound Igbo.”

“That’s my accent. I’m American,” Sunny said through gritted teeth. “I spent most my life there. I can’t help the way I speak.”

Chichi put her hand up in mock defense. “Oh, did I offend you? Sorry o.” She laughed.

Sunny could have slapped her. At this point, another fight wouldn’t have made much difference.

“Come,” Orlu quickly said, stepping between them, “let’s take it easy.”

“You live there?” Sunny asked in English, leaning around Orlu and motioning toward the hut.

“Yes,” Chichi said in Igbo. “My mother and I don’t need much.”

“Why?” Sunny asked in Igbo.

Orlu stepped back, looking perplexed.

“I’ll never tell you,” Chichi said with a sly grin. She switched to English. “There’s more to the world than big houses, money and material nonsense.” She chuckled, turning away. “Have a nice evening, Orlu. See you around, Sunny.”

“Yeah, if I don’t step on you first,” Sunny replied in English.

“That’s if I can even see you coming, you ghost,” Chichi shot back over her shoulder.

Orlu only shook his head.

## HOME

Home will never be the same once you know what you are. Your whole life will change. Nigeria is already full of groups, circles, cultures. We have many ways. You are Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Fulani, Ogoni, Tiv, Nupe, Kanuri, Ijaw, Annang, and so on. You add being a Leopard person to that and your groups split into a thousand more groups. The world becomes much more complicated. Travel overseas and it's even more complex. Plus, you are a Leopard person living in a world of idiot Lambs, so that doesn't help. You are fortunate because being a free agent puts you (though uncomfortably) with the rest of us Leopard folk, and comfortably with Lambs. Your ignorance will smooth out the edges of your dealings with the world you used to be a part of.

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