

SOME ARE BORN INTO COMFORT.
OTHERS PAY THE PRICE JUST TO SURVIVE.

COST --- OF THE CRACKED EARTH

A STORY
OF SURVIVAL,
INJUSTICE,
AND THE PRICE
OF HOPE.

SARAH COLLINS

AI BOOK MAKER

Cost of the Cracked Earth

by

Sarah Collins

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Cost of the Cracked Earth

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CHAPTER ONE

Dust-Veiled Beginnings



The sun rose over the cracked plain like a bruised fist, its light spilling across fissures that stretched farther than the eye could follow. Dust rose in thin, wavering columns, catching the early light and turning the air itself a muted gold. In the heart of the village, a single mud-walled house clung to the slope, its roof sagging under the weight of time and neglect. Inside, the smell of dry earth mixed with the faint, sour tang of sour milk left to sour in a cracked clay pot.

Samuel lay on a thin mat, his small body curled against the cold floorboards. His stomach growled, a low rumble that seemed louder than the wind that whistled through the cracked walls. Mara, his mother, shuffled in, her hands roughened by years of pulling weeds from parched soil and hauling firewood for a hearth that rarely caught flame. She carried a thin slice of flatbread, its crust hardened at the edges.

“Eat,” she said, voice hoarse but steady, placing the bread on a worn wooden plank. “It will keep you from the ache.”

Samuel took the piece, the grain gritty between his teeth. He looked up at his mother, noticing the thin lines that mapped her face like rivers across a desert. “Will there be more tomorrow?” he asked,

the question hanging in the dust-filled air.

Mara's eyes flickered to the doorway, where Elder Kofi stood, his back bent with the weight of years and authority. The elder's presence was a quiet storm; his gaze swept the village, measuring each exchange as if the cracked earth itself kept a ledger.

"The rain did not come," Mara answered, her tone a blend of resignation and resolve. "We must give what we have to the well-keepers."

Samuel watched as Mara placed the bread on a low table, then turned to the elder. "We have two hands and a child's hunger," she said, "but the well asks for firewood and a day's labor."

Elder Kofi nodded, his voice low and measured. "The earth does not give freely. It takes what it needs in return. Bring the firewood by sunset, and the water will flow for the night."

The words were simple, yet each syllable carried the weight of a system that turned survival into a ledger of debts. Samuel watched the firewood being stacked—dry, cracked branches that snapped under his small hands—while the elder's gaze never wavered from the horizon, where the sky seemed to swallow the cracked land.

Later, as the sun dipped low and painted the sky in bruised purples, Samuel slipped outside, his bare feet sinking into the powdery dust. He found Jabari, his friend, crouched beside a broken wall, his eyes fixed on a small, half-buried stone. The

two boys shared a silence that spoke of hunger, of cracked walls, of a world that demanded a price for every breath.

“What do you think the price is, Sam?” Jabari asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Samuel stared at the horizon, where the sun’s last rays turned the cracks into glowing veins. “I think it’s everything we have left,” he said, the words forming a promise and a warning.

That night, the house trembled as the wind howled through the gaps in the roof. Mara wrapped a thin blanket around Samuel’s shoulders, her fingers lingering on his cheek. “One day,” she murmured, “you will see why the earth cracks and why we must learn to mend it.”

Samuel closed his eyes, the creak of the house and the distant chant of the villagers bartering for water echoing in his mind. In the darkness, a seed of curiosity took root—a question that would grow louder with each sunrise: what cost lay hidden behind every need, and who decided that price?

The night settled, dust settling like ash over the village, and Samuel dreamed of a world where the cracked earth could yield without demand, where a child’s stomach would not echo with hunger, and where the walls of his home would stand firm against the wind. In the dim glow of the moon, the promise of hope flickered, fragile yet unextinguished, waiting for a mind brave enough to uncover its price.

CHAPTER TWO

The Barter of Knowledge



The schoolroom stood at the edge of the village, a modest structure of mud bricks and a thatched roof that sagged under the weight of dust. Inside, a single wooden bench stretched across the floor, its surface scarred by countless feet. A lone blackboard, half-eroded by the wind, bore the faint chalk traces of lessons long forgotten. At the front, Amina, the village teacher, arranged a stack of weather-worn books, each cover cracked like the soil outside.

Samuel entered, his eyes scanning the room like a film camera, capturing each detail: the way the light filtered through the cracked shutters, the scent of dry paper mingling with the ever-present dust, the faint hum of insects outside. He took his seat beside Jabari, who offered a half-smile, a silent acknowledgement of their shared struggle.

Amina began the lesson, her voice steady, her tone carrying the weight of knowledge that had survived generations. "Today, we read about the river that once ran through our land," she said, turning a page that whispered as it moved. "It fed the fields, gave life to the people, and shaped our stories."

Samuel's gaze drifted to the doorway, where Elder Kofi stood, his silhouette framed by the setting sun. The elder's presence was a reminder that even in this sanctuary of learning, the world outside still demanded its dues.

After the lesson, Amina called the children to the front. "Who will fetch water for the class?" she asked, eyes scanning the room. "Who will tend the garden?" The questions were not merely about chores; they were the village's way of balancing the scales, of exchanging labor for the privilege of a book, a lesson, a chance to see beyond the cracked horizon.

Jabari's hand shot up. "I will," he said, his voice firm despite the tremor of exhaustion that lay beneath.

Samuel felt a knot tighten in his chest. He knew the cost of each lesson—hours spent hauling water, repairing walls, gathering firewood—all in exchange for a sliver of knowledge. He watched as Amina nodded, a faint smile curving her lips, and then turned to Mara, who had arrived with a sack of dry corn.

"Mara," Amina said, "the children need a new set of chalk. Can you spare a few kernels to trade for it?"

Mara hesitated, the weight of her own hunger pressing against her resolve. She placed a handful of corn on the table, the grains slipping through her fingers like tiny suns. "Take it," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the

wind's sigh.

The transaction was swift, the exchange of grain for chalk a silent agreement that echoed the larger barter that ruled their lives. Samuel observed the scene, his mind cataloguing the pattern: every need—food, water, shelter—was a thread woven into a tapestry of exchange, each thread tugging at the others.

After the chores, Samuel lingered near the blackboard, tracing the faint chalk lines with his fingertip. The lesson lingered in his thoughts, the river that once flowed, now a memory etched into the village's collective consciousness. He wondered how a river could disappear, how a land could become a desert, and who held the power to decide its fate.

Later, as the children dispersed, Amina approached Samuel, her eyes soft yet probing. "You have questions, Samuel," she said. "Curiosity is a fire; it can warm or burn. What burns in you?"

Samuel hesitated, the words forming like dust in his throat. "Why do we have to give so much to learn?" he asked, his voice barely rising above the rustle of the wind.

Amina sighed, the sound carrying the weight of years. "Because the world outside does not give freely," she replied. "The soil is cracked, the water scarce. The elders have built a system where each must pay a price for what they take. It keeps the balance, or so they say."

Samuel's eyes narrowed. "What if the balance is wrong?" he asked, the question hanging like a stone in the still air.

Amina studied him, the lines on her face deepening. "Then perhaps it is time for someone to look deeper," she said quietly. "To understand why the river vanished, why the earth cracked, and who decides the price of a book."

The words ignited something within Samuel—a spark that refused to be smothered by the dust. He felt the first tremor of rebellion, not against the elder's authority alone, but against the invisible ledger that measured worth in scarcity. He realized that to change the price, he needed to understand its origin.

That night, under a sky littered with stars that seemed to pierce the cracked earth, Samuel sat beside his mother on the porch. The wind whispered through the cracks in the walls, carrying with it the distant chant of the villagers bartering for water.

"Mother," Samuel began, his voice steady despite the tremor in his hands, "why does the elder demand so much?"

Mara looked at him, her eyes reflecting both weariness and a glimmer of hope. "Because the village has learned to survive on the backs of trade," she said. "But perhaps... perhaps there is a way to change the rules."

Samuel felt the weight of his mother's words settle into his chest, a promise that the barter of knowledge could become the barter of change. He stared at the horizon, where the cracked earth met the night sky, and imagined a river flowing once more, its water carrying away the dust of oppression, leaving behind fertile ground for new possibilities.

In the silence that followed, Samuel made a silent vow: to uncover the hidden cost of every need, to question the system that kept his people in shadows, and to seek a new dawn where the price of hope would be measured not in sacrifice, but in shared dignity.

CHAPTER THREE

Echoes of a New Dawn



The sun had not yet risen, but the cracked earth already glowed with a pale amber, each fissure catching the first light like a vein of fire. Samuel slipped out of the thin-walled house before Mara could hear the creak of the door. The night air was cool, carrying the scent of dust and distant sage. He pressed his palm to the cold stone of the well's rim, feeling the roughness of the ancient mortar beneath his fingertips.

For weeks he had watched the villagers gather at the well each dawn, a procession of empty bowls and hollow eyes. Elder Kofi stood at its mouth, his staff tapping a slow rhythm, as if measuring the flow of water against the weight of the village's needs. Samuel had heard the whispers—how the water was rationed, how a handful of families received a larger share in exchange for “service” to the council. He had also heard the stories his mother told in the hush of night: before the drought, the river had run past the village, spilling its bounty into the fields. Then a man in a dark suit had arrived, promising “development,” and the river had been diverted.

He tightened his grip on the rope that dangled from the well's bucket, a rope he had stolen from the schoolyard during a lunch break, when the

teachers' eyes were on the chalkboard and not on the children. The bucket clanged against the stone, a metallic echo that seemed to reverberate through the empty streets. He lowered himself, the rope biting into his shoulders, and let his feet find the slippery stones at the bottom.

The water was a thin, brackish film, barely enough to wet a hand. Samuel cupped it, tasting the iron of the earth. He could feel the pulse of the village in that small pool—hunger, fear, the unspoken contracts that bound every family to the ground.

He heard a rustle behind him. A thin silhouette emerged from the darkness: Jabari, his friend, eyes wide with the same restless curiosity that had driven Samuel out of his home.

"Thought you'd be hiding in the shadows," Jabari whispered, his voice hoarse from the dry air.

"Someone has to see what they're hiding from us," Samuel replied, pulling the bucket up. The water sloshed over the rim, spilling onto the stone floor. "We need proof, Jabari. Proof that the well isn't the problem, but the people who control it."

Jabari nodded, his hands trembling. "My brother says Elder Kofi meets with the traders at night. He says they trade water for... for labor. For children."

Samuel felt a surge of anger, hot and sharp as the sunrise that was now cresting over the cracked horizon. "Then we find where they meet."

The two boys slipped back into the dim alleys, their footsteps muffled by the dust. The village was a labyrinth of mud-brick houses, each with a sagging roof that threatened to collapse at any moment. Lanterns flickered in a few windows, casting amber pools of light onto the cracked streets. As they passed, mothers stirred pots over open fires, the aroma of burnt millet mingling with the sour tang of sweat.

At the edge of the village, where the cracked earth gave way to a shallow depression, a narrow path led to a cluster of stone huts that housed the traders. The air grew colder, and the wind carried a faint metallic scent—oil and iron. Samuel's heart hammered in his chest; each step felt like a rebellion against the invisible chains that bound his people.

They crouched behind a low wall of stacked stones, peering through a gap. Elder Kofi stood under a canvas awning, his back straight, his white beard catching the first light. Beside him, a man in a crisp, dark coat—one of the traders from the distant town—unfolded a rolled map, its edges frayed by countless hands.

Samuel strained to hear, the words barely rising above the rustle of sand.

"The diversion is complete," the trader said. "The canal from the upper plateau now feeds the market town. The village will have enough to survive the next season if they give us the labor they promised. The boys will work in the quarry,

the women will tend the livestock for us.”

Elder Kofi’s voice was low, measured. “The agreement was for a share of the water. The children’s labor is... a necessary exchange. The village cannot afford to starve.”

A shiver ran down Samuel’s spine. The trade was not for water alone; it was for the very bodies of his people, a barter that stripped them of dignity.

Jabari’s hand tightened around Samuel’s arm. “We can’t let them take the boys,” he whispered.

Samuel’s mind raced. “We need to expose this. If the whole village knows, they’ll demand—”

A sudden clatter snapped the boys upright. A child’s toy—a wooden top—had rolled across the stone, its bright colors a stark contrast to the muted earth. A voice, low and familiar, called out from the shadows.

“Samuel?”

Amina stepped forward, her teacher’s coat fluttering in the breeze. She had been watching the boys from a distance, her eyes reflecting the same fire Samuel felt burning within him. “You’re out here at dawn. What are you doing?”

Samuel swallowed, the words spilling out raw. “I heard Elder Kofi trading our water for labor. The boys are being sent to the quarry. We can’t—”

Amina cut him off, her tone calm but urgent. “If you speak of this now, you’ll be silenced. Not just you, but the whole family. You need a plan, not a whisper in the wind.”

She glanced toward the canvas where the trader's map was spread. "We have to gather evidence that the water was diverted, that the canal is real. And we need to show the villagers that the cost of their survival is being paid with their children's futures."

Samuel's gaze flicked to the cracked ground, to the fissures that seemed to mirror the fractures in his community. "How?"

Amina smiled faintly, a gesture that seemed to lift the dust from the air. "We start with the source. The canal—if we can find where the water now flows, we can prove the promise was broken. I know a path through the old quarry that leads to the ridge. From there, we can see the river's new course."

Jabari's eyes widened. "The quarry is guarded. The men there are loyal to Kofi."

Amina's expression hardened. "Then we bring the truth to them. The men work for the traders; they know the water's path. They will listen if we give them something they need—food. We can trade the school's leftover grain for their silence."

Samuel felt a strange calm settle over him, as if the cracked earth beneath his feet were aligning with his resolve. "I'll gather the grain. I'll ask the children to bring what they can spare. We'll meet at the old well at dusk."

The boys nodded, the weight of the night lifting slightly as a plan formed. They retreated, moving through the village with the quiet efficiency of

those who have learned to survive in silence.

Later, as the sun slipped lower, casting long shadows across the cracked earth, Samuel stood at the well once more, this time with a sack of grain slung over his shoulder. He could see the faint outline of the quarry in the distance, a jagged silhouette against the reddening sky.

Amina arrived, her coat now dusted with sand, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Remember, Samuel, the cost of truth is high. We must be ready to pay it, but we must also be ready to give it back."

He looked into her eyes, seeing the same fire that had ignited his own curiosity. "We'll show them that a cracked earth can still bear a seed, and that seed can break the surface."

The night fell, and the village settled into a uneasy hush. Somewhere beyond the walls, the river—once a promise—flowed toward another town, its waters glinting like silver threads in the moonlight. Samuel stared at the distant glow, feeling the echo of a new dawn reverberate through the fissures of his world. The cost of the cracked earth would be measured not just in hunger or labor, but in the willingness of a boy to uncover the hidden price and demand a different future.

Bartered Lessons and Fractured Roofs



The heat of noon pressed against the mud-brick walls like a hand that would not let go. Inside the single-room house, the thatch above Samuel's head sagged in uneven folds, each ripple a silent promise of collapse. Small gaps had begun to appear where the woven reeds met the wooden beams, and the occasional puff of dry dust fell like ash when the wind slipped through. Mara stood at the cracked doorway, her hands smeared with the blackened ash of the fire she had tended for hours, eyes flickering between the widening fissure in the roof and the empty bucket that should have been full of water. "Samuel, the wood-pile is low," she said, voice rough as the ground outside, "and the roof... if it falls while you're inside, it will take more than the ceiling with it."

Samuel lingered by the cracked wall, the weight of his schoolbook pressing against his chest. He had learned to read the way a thirsty man learns the taste of rain—slowly, with reverence, and always aware that the next drop might be the one that saves him. Amina's voice drifted from the schoolroom, a thin line of sound that cut through the village's dust: "The field work for today is the north ridge. Bring back enough firewood for three families, and you may sit for the

lesson on fractions.” The teacher’s eyes, sharp behind her spectacles, scanned the children as they gathered, a ledger of names and owed hours clutched in her hands. “Knowledge comes cheap,” she had said once, “but the cost is the labor you give to the earth.”

Mara’s gaze hardened. She knew the unspoken contract that bound them: a child’s attendance at school was a luxury purchased with sweat and splintered wood. “Samuel,” she whispered, pulling the hem of his shirt, “the roof is leaking again. If we wait for the rain, the ceiling will cave in. I need you to fetch firewood. The school can wait.” The boy’s stomach clenched, not from hunger but from the familiar ache of being torn between two necessities. He glanced toward the schoolyard, where Amina knelt beside a cracked blackboard, chalk dust settling like snow on her shoulders. “If I stay,” he thought, “the roof might fall; if I go, I lose the chance to learn how to count the cracks in it.” The decision hung in the dry air, heavy as the dust that settled on their throats.

Across the square, Elder Kofi stood on the raised stone platform, his voice low but carrying over the murmurs of the crowd. “Effective today,” he announced, “the water share shall be reduced by one bucket per household. The drought has taken its toll, and we must all tighten our belts.” A murmur rippled through the villagers; some heads bowed, others clenched fists. Samuel felt the sting of the words as if they were a physical blow. He remembered the ledger Amina kept—a weathered

notebook tucked beneath the teacher's desk, its pages filled with the names of families, the amount of firewood they owed, the water allocations they had been granted, and the hidden debts that never seemed to disappear. He had seen the ledger once, a quick glance while delivering a bundle of twigs, and the numbers had etched themselves into his mind like the cracks in the earth.

That night, under the thin glow of a lantern made from an overturned tin can, Samuel and Jabari crouched behind the school's cracked wall, the ledger spread between them on a piece of salvaged parchment. Their fingers traced the columns of water shares, the tally of firewood debts, the extra "service fees" that Elder Kofi imposed when a family fell behind. "Look," Jabari whispered, pointing to a line where Mara's name was followed by a series of negative marks, "they're adding a charge for every bucket we lose to the drought. It's a loop—no one can pay it off." Samuel's eyes widened as he realized the pattern: each time a roof gave way, the family was forced to work more, accruing more debt, and the elder's tax grew thicker, binding them tighter to the soil that refused to yield. "If we can't break this cycle," Samuel said, voice hoarse, "the roofs will keep falling, the children will keep missing school, and the village will die under its own weight."

A decision formed in the boy's chest, steadier than the tremor of the cracked roof above. He would not let the ledger remain a secret. The next morning, as the sun rose like a bruised fist over

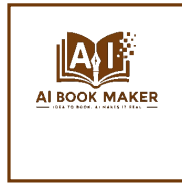
the cracked plain, Samuel approached Amina with a resolve that surprised even his own reflection in the cracked mud wall. "Teacher," he said, placing the ledger on the desk, "the village is paying for our lessons with their roofs. If we teach the children how to read these numbers, maybe they can see the cost and demand a change." Amina looked up, eyes softening, and for the first time allowed a flicker of hope to rise above the dust. "Then we will teach them not only fractions, but also how to count the weight of oppression," she replied, her voice steady. The classroom door creaked open, and the children, including a weary Mara clutching a bundle of firewood, filed in. The roof above them groaned, a low warning, but the sound seemed to blend with the rustle of pages turning—a symphony of broken structures being rebuilt, one lesson at a time.

FINISH

The End



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Independent author and storyteller drawn to fiction, family stories, and the quieter moments of everyday life. Her writing is character-driven and reflective, with a focus on creating stories that feel familiar, honest, and emotionally grounded.

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