

Chapter Eight

The school stood as a quiet refuge in the middle of hardship. Though it was government-aided and often overlooked by those who could afford private education, it carried a dignity that could not be measured by paint on its walls or the age of its desks. It welcomed children the private sector had quietly rejected.

It embraced those who arrived with torn uniforms, unpaid fees, and stories too heavy for their age. Its uniqueness lay not in luxury but in humanity.

The staff knew their learners—not just by name, but by circumstance. They understood which child had eaten and which had not. They knew whose silence meant concentration and whose silence meant pain.

At the center of it all stood the head teacher.

He was a man everyone admired, regardless of gender or background. Students called him by three names—Sir, Teacher, and Master—and none of the titles felt exaggerated.

He had earned “Sir” through respect. His involvement in orphanages, monthly community give-outs, and outreach programs had made his name known beyond the school gates. He asked for no praise, yet society granted him honor.

He had earned “Teacher” because he believed education was not about knowing everything. “It is not about possessing all knowledge,” he once said during assembly.

“It is about sharing what you already carry.”

And he had earned “Master” because of the way he commanded a room—not with fear, but with posture and presence. His shoulders were always straight, his voice steady, his words clean and deliberate. When he spoke, students did not merely listen—they absorbed. He had a way of explaining lessons as though they were living things.

Literature became a mystery unfolding before their eyes.

History felt like a battlefield where one must learn the art of holding a sword—not to harm, but to lead wisely. He described strategy as if he could read the mind of an unseen opponent. He painted images with words, capturing the soul of mountains, rivers, and revolutions.

There had once been a girl who joined the school after losing both parents in a car accident. She struggled with grief and with understanding the different titles students used for him. Some said “Sir,” others “Master,” others simply “Teacher.” Confused at first, she eventually solved it in her own way—she called him all three.

He smiled and allowed it.

That was the kind of man he was.

That morning, however, while the school prepared to organize itself for the day,

Robert remained at home.

He lay under his thin blanket, curled tightly, as if hiding from the cold—and from something else. The warmth around him felt safer than the world outside.

“Are you still going to school?” Doza asked from the doorway.

Robert turned his face toward the wall. “No... I’m not feeling well. I don’t know how. I don’t know why.”

Doza studied him carefully. “If you have a solid reason, rest. you will handle the store today so you don’t leave things pending.”

Robert nodded faintly.

Doza left to run her errands. The house grew quiet again. Robert pulled the blanket over his head, trying to sink back into sleep.

Then—

“Help! Help! Please—help!”

The voice tore through the silence.

Robert’s eyes snapped open.

The cry came again—older, strained, desperate. He threw the blanket aside and ran outside.

In the small compound, chaos unfolded. Winny —his mother—was stumbling backward, bruised and scratched, as Jaben advanced toward her with raised fists. She had clearly tried to shield herself, but there was only so much protection bare arms could provide.

“Stop!” Robert shouted instinctively.

Jaben turned sharply, eyes blazing. He attempted another strike, but Doza, who had rushed back upon hearing the screams, caught his arm mid-air.

“What kind of picture are you putting in front of these children?” Doza demanded angrily.

Jaben jerked his arm free. “How could she refuse to answer me in my own house? I asked her a question, and all she does is shake her head!”

“That is no reason to beat her,” Robert shot back.

Jaben’s face twisted with rage. “I hate her! Your children are a total mess to me. I like none of them. If it were possible, I would beat them until they were dead. I hate seeing them living off my energy when they are homeless and have a hopeless mother like you!”

His voice rose louder with each sentence.

“I even curse the day I found you,” he spat at Winny

The words fell heavier than the blows. Robert felt something dark surge inside him. For a brief second, a dangerous thought crossed his mind—to pick up a stone, to strike Jabin, to end it. The image flashed vividly before him.

But it was useless.

He was still a boy.

He watched as his mother, bruised and trembling, was guided out of the house and made to sit on the veranda steps.

No woman nearby dared to intervene. They had seen such scenes before. They knew that questioning Jaben might invite the same violence upon themselves.

Jaben—silent until now—sat down on a chair, stunned. Doza and Robert helped Winnie settle carefully onto the stairs.

Robert looked at her face—swollen, marked, bleeding slightly at the lip.

That was why he had not wanted to go to school. His intuition had done it.

Even before the screams, something inside him had sensed it. A heaviness. A warning.

He swallowed hard.

No one had saved her.

Not really.

And as he stood there, fists clenched at his sides, Robert felt something shift within him—not just anger, but a quiet fracture.

The refuge of school felt far away now.

And the morning had only just begun.

For a long time, Winny sat without moving. Her body ached from the blows, but her thoughts hurt even more. They ran in endless circles, searching for a place she could go—a door she could knock on, a name she could call.

But she had none.

No mother.

No father.

Not even a single relative who could offer refuge.

Her elder brother had once promised to help her start a small business—but only on one condition: she must leave her children behind and come alone.

As if they were objects.

As if they were burdens to be discarded.

She remembered the words clearly.

“If you want help, leave them. I cannot carry another man’s children.”

The memory stung. She lowered her head and whispered to herself, When my mother was alive, none of my aunts threw me away. They stood by me. I will not do differently.

“If God gave me these children,” she murmured inwardly, “and gave me the courage to raise them from their childhood, I shall not abandon them into the hands of strangers. They are my children. I must always put them first.”

That decision, though painful, was unshakable. Her elder sister was no better option. She rented a single small room in the city and struggled to survive herself. The scorching heat of the day and the biting cold of the night showed no mercy. She worked endlessly just to pay rent and eat.

Fate had been merciless to them all.

Winnie’s eyes were swollen and bruised. Her eldest son had witnessed everything. Shame pressed down on her chest like a stone.

Slowly, she knelt on the veranda.

“Please... forgive me,” she whispered—not to Jaben, not to the neighbors—but to God.

“Forgive me for my weakness.”

She remained there for a moment before standing again, wiping her tears with trembling hands.

Robert had seen everything. He had stood there, helpless, watching his mother treated like a child. The humiliation replayed in his mind over and over again. Each replay cut deeper than the last.

He bowed his head and wept silently.

A storm of thoughts attacked him.

If my father had never left her...

If I had not been born...

If I were stronger...

The man in the house was not his real father. He was their stepfather—a man whose careless behavior had grown into cruelty.

Was it because I came into this house? Robert wondered. If I had not come, would happiness have stayed here?

The questions had no answers.

He felt powerless—not strong enough to fight back, not old enough to protect her. All he could do was watch.

After some time, silence settled heavily over the compound. Jaben had left the scene.

Robert stood and walked slowly to where his mother sat.

“I have faith in God,” Winnie said softly, almost at the same moment he approached.

She looked at him, eyes red but steady.

“Son, I am not asking why you are quiet,” she continued gently. “But I will keep my faith in God. One day, He will bring someone—or something—that will give me happiness again.”

She wiped her face with a towel.

“I know how shameful it must feel for you to have a mother who cannot defend herself,” she said.

“No, Mom,” Robert interrupted quickly. “I understand everything. God sees it all. I will also have faith.”

His voice trembled despite his effort to sound strong.

She forced a small smile. “Thank God at least He left something on the table today. We shall plan according to what we have. Calm yourself.”

“Okay, Mom,” he replied softly. “Please... stop crying.”

She looked at him carefully. “Aren’t you going to school?”

“For real, I’m not going,” he admitted. “I want to look for some small jobs I can do today.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “All right. Be careful.”

With a heavy heart, Robert wandered down the dusty road, unsure where he was going. His mind was still trapped in the morning’s chaos. Lost in thought, he suddenly bumped into someone.

“Robert!” a familiar voice exclaimed.

He looked up quickly. It was Mr. Ayaatu.

The teacher adjusted his spectacles—something he did only when examining someone closely.

“Robert,” he repeated, studying his face. “Why are you not at school? And what is the matter?”

Robert forced a weak smile. “It’s nothing, sir. I wasn’t looking where I was going. Forgive me.”

Mr. Ayaatu did not look convinced.

“You are usually punctual,” he said calmly. “Today, you are different.”

Robert swallowed. The images of the morning rushed back—his mother’s tears, her bruised face, her trembling silence.

“It’s my mother,” he said finally, his voice shaking. “Something happened today. I keep thinking about it. I wasn’t able to help her.”

Mr. Ayato’s expression softened.

“You feel guilty,” he said quietly.

Robert nodded. “Yes, sir. I should have done something. I just stood there... wishing I could turn back time.”

The teacher placed a firm but gentle hand on his shoulder.

“When a heavy burden teaches you a lesson,” he said, “do not let it break you. What has happened is already in the past. But what you do now—that is your power. Stand by your mother. Show her she is not alone.”

Robert looked down, absorbing the words.

“And if I can be of help,” Mr. Ayaatu continued, “you may inform me.”

For the first time that day, Robert felt a small spark of courage. “Sir... could you help my mother find a job?” he asked hesitantly.

“What kind of job?” Mr. Ayaatu replied.

“I think... she would be the best person to answer that,” Robert said.

Mr. Ayato nodded. “Very well. Let her come and speak to me. We shall see what can be done.”

“Thank you, sir,” Robert said sincerely.

As Mr. Ayaatu walked away, it was clear he understood more than Robert had spoken aloud. He had already guessed why the boy had missed school.

Robert stood there for a moment longer.

The morning had broken something inside him—but it had also planted something new.

Hope. Small, fragile... but alive

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To be continued.