

Chapter THREE

The journey through the narrow passages of Ayun village had not been easy. After several turns along dusty footpaths and between clustered huts, they finally stopped in front of a well-built house. Unlike most homes in the village, this one stood firm and orderly, with small single rooms built neatly beside the main structure.

“This is your new home,” Wini said gently. “You may enter whenever you are ready.”

Robert hesitated for a moment before stepping inside.

The sitting room was modest but comfortable. It held a worn yet tidy sofa set facing a new television that flickered with faint light. Seated on the sofa was a brown-skinned, stern-looking man whose attention was fixed on the television screen.

Robert’s heart pounded in his chest. He slowly approached and humbly knelt down, lowering his head in greeting.

The man turned as soon as he heard movement. His eyes, sharp yet calm, rested on Robert for a moment before he spoke.

“Hello,” he said. “It is good evening, not good afternoon. You seem nervous. It is already eight in the evening.” He paused briefly before adding, “Good evening, Robert.”

Robert stiffened in shock. His eyes widened as confusion filled his thoughts. How does he know my name? he wondered silently. Perhaps Mother had already spoken to Jaben about him. The name Jaben carried weight—it was not only his name but also his grandfather’s, a name that had followed him like a shadow through his life.

“As I told you,” Wini began, breaking the silence, “life in the village became difficult for my brother. So I brought him here to live with us.”

Jaben shifted slightly on the sofa, his expression unreadable. “I have no problem with that,” he replied in a low, faint tone. “After all, he is your son.”

Though the words sounded accepting, Robert could not ignore the distance hidden within them.

Soon after, a plate of food was placed before him. Unlike before, there were no harsh instructions or scolding voices trailing behind the meal. The simple act of being served quietly stirred something unfamiliar inside him.

Hunger took control. Robert ate quickly, almost desperately, as though someone might snatch the plate away at any moment. Within minutes, the plate was empty.

Realizing his haste, he stood up, carefully carried the plate to the kitchen area, and softly expressed his gratitude for the meal.

By the third hour of the night, exhaustion overcame him. His body felt heavy, and his eyelids struggled to remain open. Noticing this, Wini gently guided him outside toward one of the smaller rooms beside the main house.

The building served as a sleeping place for visiting relatives and children. The main house itself contained only the sitting room—which also served as the dining area during meals—and the parents' bedroom.

Inside the visitors' room, three other children were already fast asleep in their beds. Their breathing was calm and rhythmic, filling the quiet room with peaceful stillness. Winny pointed toward an empty bed.

“You can sleep there,” she whispered softly.

Robert nodded silently. He climbed onto the bed, pulled the bedsheets over himself, and sank into the unfamiliar comfort. The mattress felt softer than what he was used to, and the blanket carried the faint scent of fresh washing.

Outside, the village night wrapped itself in silence, broken only by distant sounds of insects and the whisper of wind brushing against the rooftops.

For the first time in many days, Robert allowed himself to relax. The warmth of food in his stomach and the quiet safety of the room slowly carried him away.

That night, sleep came to him gently—like a sweet, long-awaited gift.

The night had been more restful than any Robert could remember. He slept deeply, turning comfortably from side to side, as though his body was finally free from the tension it had carried for so long.

Outside, life in the village slowly stirred. Before dawn had fully lifted its veil, early traders and laborers were already rising. Their distant voices floated through the cool morning air as they prepared to step into the daily struggle of earning a living—men and women searching for the coins that would keep their families fed.

Soon, morning fully arrived.

Ayun awakened with its usual rhythm. Mothers gathered outside their homes, sitting under the bright, welcoming sunlight while holding their babies close to their chests. Many followed the advice given at the health clinic—to expose their infants to the gentle rays of the morning sun, protecting them from illnesses like rickets.

From one homestead to another, the rich aroma of spices drifted through the air. The scent of

boiling tea, roasting cassava, and frying bread blended together, creating the unmistakable fragrance of an African morning.

Winnie was already among the busy mothers, preparing breakfast for her children. She moved swiftly between the small charcoal stove and the kitchen table, humming quietly as she worked.

Inside the visitors' room lay a boy who had never experienced such peaceful sleep before. Robert remained curled beneath the bedsheets, wrapped in warmth and comfort he was not yet ready to abandon.

"Everyone wake up! It is already morning. Please wake up," Winnie called firmly from the doorway.

The other three children stirred immediately. Within moments, they jumped out of bed and hurried outside to wash their faces, giggling and shoving each other playfully as they went.

Robert, however, remained motionless, clinging to the comfort of sleep like it was something fragile that might disappear if he moved too quickly.

Winnie was a dark-skinned woman with a strong, commanding presence. She possessed a rare mixture of compassion and strict discipline. Though still young, she carried herself with the wisdom and authority of an elderly grandmother. She loved her children deeply and would defend them fiercely whenever necessary.

Yet she was also feared.

Winnie was widely known in the village for her harsh methods of discipline. No child admired the sight of her cane. Once she began punishing, she rarely stopped until she believed the lesson had been thoroughly delivered. Often, her scolding was accompanied by sharp, hurtful words that left emotional wounds deeper than the physical pain.

Because of her reputation, even the children of neighboring homes trembled at her presence. Some parents had even adopted her strict ways, believing it was the proper African method of raising obedient children.

Among her children, Take was the eldest. She was nine years old—two years younger than Robert. Take was observant and naturally curious. She carried herself neatly, always paying attention to her appearance. Her slim figure and calm composure made her appear older than her age.

Next was Noah, who was six years old. Unlike his sister, Noah had a round, chubby body that bounced slightly whenever he walked. He was cheerful and talkative, often sucking his tongue loudly—a habit he displayed without embarrassment wherever he went.

Then there was Licky, the youngest. At only three years old, she was short, playful, and full of restless energy. Her laughter could brighten even the dullest afternoon.

Slowly, Robert finally pushed the bedsheets aside and climbed out of bed. His body felt relaxed, yet unfamiliar in its lightness. He walked quietly toward the washing area to bathe.

As he removed his clothes, Winnie happened to pass nearby. Her eyes fell upon his bare back, and she froze.

Dark, brutal stripes covered his skin—old scars layered over newer wounds, stretching across his shoulders and ribs like painful memories carved into flesh.

Her breath caught in her throat.

How shameful... she thought, her heart tightening painfully.

For so long, she had believed her son had lived a normal, perhaps even happy life. She had imagined him laughing, growing strong, and being cared for. But the sight before her shattered those illusions.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she stared at the marks. Each scar told a silent story of cruelty, neglect, and suffering no child deserved to endure.

A deep wave of guilt and sorrow washed over her.

She turned her face away quickly before Robert could notice the tears beginning to form in her eyes.

This was a new life for Robert—a place filled with children of every age who played from sunrise until the last light of evening disappeared behind the hills. Their laughter echoed through Ayun paths, bouncing off mud walls and open compounds. To them, childhood was simple and free.

The only force strong enough to interrupt their endless games was sickness. They could endure their parents' shouting, harsh scoldings, and endless chores, but illness was the silent soldier that marched into homes and drained every coin from their parents' pockets.

It was feared more than discipline, more than hunger, and more than fatigue.

Because of this, joy always filled the parents' hearts whenever they heard their children shouting loudly outside—crying one moment, laughing the next, chasing one another through narrow paths, or proudly running small errands assigned by their families.

For Ayun children, life moved in a rhythm of noise, dust, sweat, and laughter. Yet, despite being surrounded by this lively world, Robert found it difficult to belong at first. The television often became his closest companion. He would sit quietly before it for hours, watching moving images while the sounds of playing children drifted in from outside. Occasionally, he spoke softly with his siblings or joined them in brief moments of play, but something inside him always held him back.

He longed to feel that he truly belonged in this new home, yet his heart struggled to accept it. He would sit among the others, forcing himself to smile, but the warmth he wished to feel never fully reached him.

Still, time began to work its gentle magic. Day by day, with the patience of his siblings and the natural kindness of the village children, Robert slowly allowed himself to open up.

The heavy sadness that once crowded his thoughts began to fade, replaced by small but meaningful moments of happiness.

Soon, he found himself running barefoot along dusty paths, shouting during games, laughing without hesitation, and arguing playfully with the other children. The village playgrounds, once foreign to him, became familiar territory filled with adventure and friendship.

Though there were still moments when he preferred to be alone, they became fewer as the days passed.

Gradually, Robert transformed.

He became a boy filled with growing happiness. The dark stripes that once marked his body slowly faded from sight with time, and the painful memories attached to them loosened their grip on his mind. The nightmares that once haunted his sleep were replaced by dreams shaped by laughter, games, and companionship.

For the first time in a long while, Robert began collecting memories that were not shaped by fear—but by warmth, belonging, and hope.

In the following months, life settled into a peaceful rhythm. Everything seemed to be working well. Days passed smoothly, and Robert slowly forgot the harshness of his past.

He embraced his new life with growing ease, allowing himself to experience moments of joy he had never known before.

One morning arrived like any other, filled with the familiar sounds of the village waking to its daily routine. Pots clattered softly in kitchens, footsteps echoed across compounds, and distant voices blended into the steady hum of morning activity. The noises were not overwhelming—only a gentle background to another ordinary day.

The school holiday, however, was coming to an end.

For many families, this meant preparation—washing uniforms, polishing shoes, and gathering books. Winnie was among the parents busy organizing such necessities, moving around the house with quiet determination.

Robert noticed something unusual that morning. He could not see any of his siblings playing around the compound. His eyes wandered from one child to another among the village homes until realization struck him.

They were preparing to return to school.

Robert felt no excitement. Instead, a cold discomfort settled deep inside him. The thought of school awakened memories he had tried to bury—memories tied to fear, punishment, and loneliness.

The bitterness from his past experiences had shaped his mind into associating school with suffering rather than learning.

He remained unconcerned outwardly, wandering aimlessly around the compound, pretending the situation did not involve him.

But Winny could not ignore it.

The question of her son's future pressed heavily against her thoughts. How could she allow him to watch other children attend school while he remained behind? How could one child, old enough to learn and grow, remain uneducated?

The questions battled inside her mind until she finally reached for her phone and made a call.

Before she could finish the conversation, Robert approached her. He noticed the troubled expression on her face—the mixture of worry and exhaustion. She leaned against the wall, blinking slowly as she tried to steady herself.

“Mom...” Robert began quietly. “It is not that I do not want to go to school... but I am afraid of going back to my father. I hate it. Even thinking about it makes my mind feel like it is breaking apart.”

Winny looked at him with softened eyes. She understood too well how pain could grow into hatred when left unattended.

“You are not going back to your father,” she said gently but firmly. “You will study from here. A few minutes ago, I called your father, but his response means nothing to me. I will take you to a nearby school. That is where you will begin again.”

Relief flickered across Robert's face, though it was mixed with uncertainty. Then Winnie hesitated, as though debating whether to speak further.

“There is something I have always wanted to ask you,” she said carefully.

“Yes, Mom. I am listening.”

“Where were you planning to go the day you ran away from Rona?”

Robert inhaled slowly, gathering courage. “To be honest,” he said quietly, “I was not sure anyone would help me. But I had always heard my father talk about a certain man. He used to praise him for his kindness. He would say he had never met a man as generous as him.”

Winny leaned closer, curiosity growing.

“I thought... if I could find that man, maybe my life would be saved,” Robert continued. “But I never knew where he lived. I never even knew what he looked like. I only knew his name.”

“Tell me the name,” Winny said softly. “Perhaps I might recognize it.”

"sp...Spake." Robert responded, "Spake is the name. Winny thought for a moment that this name was also familiar with her. "you said Spake." Before he could reply, Winny's phone rang sharply, cutting through the moment. She quickly answered.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hello, Winny,” a nervous voice replied from the other end.

“I thought you told me Jaben had gone on a business trip,” the voice continued.

“Yes... he did,” Winnie answered cautiously.

There was a brief pause before the voice spoke again, trembling.

“I cannot believe what I am seeing... I even pinched myself to be sure I am not imagining things.” Winnie straightened immediately, panic rising inside her chest.

“What are you seeing?” she asked urgently.

“Across the road from where I am standing,” the voice replied, “your husband is here... with another woman. They are holding each other... romantically.”

“What?” Winny gasped, her voice breaking with shock.

“I am completely sober,” the caller insisted. “I have not taken a single drink. I will send you photos right now.”

Within seconds, a message notification appeared on her phone.

Winnie stared at the screen, frozen.

Her heart refused to accept what her eyes were about to confirm. Yet, deep inside, memories of Jaben's recent behavior began resurfacing—his frequent business trips, his distant attitude, and the untouched bedsheets that remained neatly prepared long after he claimed to have spent nights away.

She had questioned it before, but every doubt had been pushed aside, buried beneath trust and hope.

Perhaps she had simply been afraid to face the truth.

Now, there was no escape from it. Her fingers trembled as she held the phone. She reminded herself of his words—that he was away on important work, The wind brushed softly against her face as she struggled to steady her breathing.

Slowly, with a heavy heart, she opened the message