WHEN DAUGHTERS ARE NEGLECTED

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Also, by the author:
My War with Fibroids*: A Wombful of Scars, Silence, and Survival*

Dedication

For my parents and siblings — with love and gratitude.

PROLOGUE

Nelly's story begins in a village where the fields stretched wide and the sky felt endless, yet her world was small and heavy. Her mother's death came too early, leaving her in the hands of a stepmother whose words cut deeper than any blade, and a father who drowned his sorrow in drink.

Each day was a cycle of labor. Bare feet pressed into red earth. Hands blistered from hoes and water pots. Silence became her only shield, though inside her heart whispered of a life beyond the farm, beyond the scorn, beyond the weight of neglect.

For a long time, she thought dreams were dangerous things. Safer to bury them. Safer not to hope.

But hope has a way of surviving even in the harshest soil. It flickered in stolen moments by the river, in lullabies remembered, in the quiet fire that refused to die within her. And one day, when a stranger's eyes looked past her rags and saw the girl beneath, that fragile ember began to glow.

This is not only the story of a love that fought to exist. It is the story of a daughter denied, a child overlooked, and a young woman who dared to claim her place in a world determined to silence her.

This is Nelly's story: of neglect and endurance, of scars and survival, and of the light that still managed to break through.

Chapter One

David made an unusual entry that night.

It was almost three in the morning when the lock clicked softly and the door creaked open. He moved like a man trying to erase the sound of his footsteps. In his hand was the spare key Mary had given him years ago, back when trust was still easy.

The house was dark. Mary had waited for hours, eyes fixed on the wall clock until midnight blurred into one, then two, before sleep finally dragged her under. Nelly had long been tucked into bed. The dinner on the table had gone cold hours ago.

David slipped inside, closed the door quietly, and disappeared into the bedroom without switching on a light. At dawn, before the rooster crowed, he was gone again — no breakfast, no goodbye, no explanation.

That evening, when he came home, Mary was waiting. She stood in the center of the living room, her arms folded, her voice steady.

"Where were you last night?" She expected an answer. What she got instead was silence — and then a flicker of something dangerous in his eyes. Without warning, David reached for the wooden rod.

The first blow landed hard enough to steal her breath. The second sent her collapsing to the floor.

From the doorway, Nelly's small scream split the air. Neighbors came running, their slippers slapping against the dirt. David stepped back, breathing heavily, as Mary's body was lifted and carried to the waiting motorbike.

By the time they reached the hospital, she was barely conscious. Minutes after admission, Mary's chest rose once… twice… then stilled forever.

By evening, word raced through the village like wildfire. By the time David stepped outside, the air was already thick with shouts. Dozens had gathered, men with fists clenched, women wailing, children pressed against their mothers' skirts, eyes wide.

Torches flickered in the darkness, throwing wild shadows across furious faces. Voices clashed over one another; some demanded his blood, others spat curses so sharp they felt like stones.

"You killed her!" a woman screamed from the back, her voice breaking. "Bring him out! Let us finish him here!" another man roared.

Someone hurled a handful of soil at his face; another spat at his feet. The gate rattled under the weight of bodies pressing forward.

From her grandmother's arms, Nelly could barely see past the wall of people. She heard the shouting but didn't understand all the words, only that they were all aimed at her father.

David's eyes darted from one angry face to another. His breathing quickened. For the first time that night, fear flickered across his expression.

Then, through the crush of the crowd, the harsh beam of a flashlight cut through the darkness. The police were coming; two uniformed officers pushing their way forward, batons raised to keep the mob back.

"Step aside! Step aside!" one barked. "Move!" the other shouted, shoving shoulders and elbows out of the way.

They reached David, gripping his arms and twisting them behind his back. The metallic snap of the handcuffs made Nelly flinch. She buried her face into her grandmother's shoulder, wishing it would block out the sound.

The crowd surged again, some trying to grab at him, others shouting insults inches from his face. The officers forced him through the sea of people, their boots kicking up dust. The mob followed, the noise swelling like a storm; cries of "Murderer!" and "Justice for Mary!" ringing through the night.

Nelly lifted her head just in time to see the police shove her father into the back of a police Toyota Land Cruiser. For a brief second, he glanced her way — not long enough to smile, not long enough to explain. Then the door slammed shut, and with it, she felt as though the last piece of her family had been locked away.

The vehicle drove off into the darkness, swallowed by flashing lights and the raw, furious voices of a village that would never forgive him.

Nelly was only four years old, too young to fully understand the chain of events that had torn her world apart. She only knew that her mother was gone, and that the days felt quieter, heavier. She would wake in the middle of the night expecting to hear her mother's voice in the kitchen or feel her warm arms around her, only to be met with silence.

After her father's arrest, she was taken in by her maternal grandmother, a woman with kind eyes and a quiet strength, who quickly became the only anchor in Nelly's small, drifting life. Adjusting to the absence of her mother was slow and confusing. Some days, she asked questions no one wanted to answer. Other days, she stayed silent, clutching the hem of her grandmother's dress as if it were the last piece of safety she had.

Not everyone in the household was kind. Her uncles — grown men with quick tempers and careless words — didn't bother to hide their irritation when she cried or asked for things they didn't want to give. But her grandmother shielded her like a lioness would her cubs, standing between her and their sharp tongues, pulling her close when the air in the room grew tense.

She braided Nelly's hair in the mornings, told her stories by the fireside, and prayed over her at night. Even then, grief found a way to settle inside Nelly's small chest, curling up there like an unwelcome guest that refused to leave.

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Three years later, another loss came knocking.

It began on a quiet morning. The smell of porridge drifted through the air. Nelly sat cross-legged on the floor, dressing her ragged doll in scraps of cloth, when she heard a strange, uneven gasp from the bedroom.

She hurried to the doorway. Her grandmother was sitting on the edge of the bed, one hand pressed hard to her chest, her breathing shallow.

"Grandma?" Nelly's voice trembled.

Her grandmother glanced at her but didn't speak. A deep crease of pain lined her face.

One of the uncles, hearing the commotion, stepped into the room. His usual sharpness vanished as he took in the sight before him. Without a word, he bent down, lifted his mother gently into his arms, and carried her outside. Nelly followed to the door, watching as he placed her on the back seat of a waiting motorbike. He climbed on behind her, holding her steady as the bike sped away toward the hospital, leaving a trail of dust hanging in the morning air.

The hospital became a strange, cold place where days blurred together. Nelly visited with her uncles, sitting quietly in the corner of the ward, her feet dangling above the floor. She didn't understand the hushed tones of the doctors or why they always looked serious when they spoke to her grandmother.

Her grandmother, on the other hand, understood all too well. The diagnosis was clear; her days were short. At night, she lay awake, staring at the white ceiling, her mind filled with prayers and questions. She could only imagine how little Nelly would survive alone in this world; a child already marked by loss.

Every time Nelly visited, she would reach for her, smoothing her hair and memorizing her face. She wanted to leave her with enough love to last a lifetime, though she knew love alone could not shield her from what was coming.

When the end came, it was quiet.

One afternoon, the doctor stepped out of the ward, his eyes heavy. The family didn't need to hear the words; the look was enough.

Nelly stood at another graveside, the earth fresh and raw. She was still too young to understand why the people she loved kept disappearing, but old enough to feel the heavy ache of being left behind.

She was only seven, but already she knew: life could take everything from you and still expect you to keep breathing.

That night, as the village lights faded, Nelly realized she was no one's child anymore.

Chapter Two

The rooster crowed before dawn, but Nelly was already outside, sweeping the compound in the faint glow of moonlight. When the moon was bright, she could see the outline of every leaf and stone. On nights when the sky was dark, she had to trust her imagination to guide the broom, for she was never allowed to light the lantern. A lantern, her stepmother said, would disturb Princess Olivia's sleep.

Her thin hands gripped the broom tightly, her bare feet cold against the damp earth. She moved quickly, afraid of being caught idle. The last time she had slept past dawn, her stepmother had poured a jug of cold water over her head and slapped her until her ears rang. Nelly had learned that waking early was safer than punishment.

When the compound was clean, she slipped into her faded dress. It smelled of smoke and sweat, a dress she wore every single day. She had begged once to wash it, but her stepmother had laughed in her face. The soap, she said, was too precious to waste on a nobody when it was needed to keep Olivia's uniform clean and her dolls spotless.

Inside the house, Olivia slept peacefully. She was a year older than Nelly, her mother's pride and joy. Her toys sat neatly arranged in a wooden box by the wall: dolls with painted faces, little cups, and shiny plates. Nelly had once reached for a doll out of curiosity. She had been caught, dragged outside, and beaten so badly that her back burned for days. From then on, she never dared to touch Olivia's treasures.

Life in that house was a story told with two very different scripts. Olivia was the princess, loved and pampered. Nelly was the servant, scolded and ignored. At mealtimes, Olivia was served the juiciest pieces of meat, warm bread, and sweet tea. Nelly sat silently in the corner, waiting to see if anything was left for her. Most days, she received nothing until nightfall, when her father returned and insisted she at least eat dinner. On rare mornings, when her stepmother woke in a good mood, Nelly was given cold porridge or scraps of yesterday's food. She ate quickly, afraid it would be snatched away.

Her days were heavy with endless chores. At sunrise, she carried water from the stream, the metal pail heavy on her head and the path long and winding. She watered the goats, scrubbed their pens,

and milked the cow. One day, the cow kicked over the bucket, spilling the frothy milk into the dust. Her stepmother stormed into the shed, eyes blazing.

"You careless girl," she shouted, grabbing Nelly by the neck. "Do you think milk runs like streams?"

She shoved Nelly to the ground and pointed at the white puddle seeping into the earth. "Lick it. If you waste it like a dog, then lick it like one."

Nelly bent down, her tears falling into the mud, and licked at the dirt until her mouth filled with the taste of soil and sour milk. Olivia stood at the doorway, clutching her doll, watching in silence.

There were other chores too, carrying firewood, scrubbing clothes by the river, grinding maize at the mill. The maize mill was the only task Nelly almost enjoyed, for there she could listen to the women laugh and talk as they waited their turn. Planting season was harder, but Nelly had mastered it. She could read the sky better than most adults. At the first hint of gathering clouds, she knew it was time to till the soil. Sometimes, even her stepmother was startled at how quickly Nelly moved to the fields with her hoe.

School, however, had been stolen from her. When she returned from her aunt's house after her grandmother's death, she thought she would go back to class. But her stepmother declared that schooling was a waste for her. Olivia, meanwhile, wore her clean uniform and satchel every morning, waiting proudly for the school bus at the gate. Nelly stood by the fence and watched the dust rise as the yellow bus carried her sister away.

Sometimes, on her way to fetch water, she met her old classmates. They waved at her, laughing and chatting about lessons she no longer understood. Once, desperate to learn, she borrowed a book from a friend. At night, she hid under her mat and tried to read by the dim glow of the fire, but she could not remember how to. Her stepmother found it, slapped her across the face, and tore the pages into pieces. "You will never bring such nonsense here again," she warned.

It had been ten years since her mother died. Nelly remembered her face in fragments: the softness of her hands, the lullabies she used to hum, the way her laughter would fill the little house like sunlight. That light had gone out when she was seven, and it never came back.

Her father had remarried. At first, she tried to be hopeful, thinking maybe this new woman would love her too. But she learned quickly. The stepmother's eyes were sharp and cold, her smile thin and quick to vanish. She spoke to Nelly as if she were an unwanted guest in her own home.

By the time she turned ten, Nelly was no longer a child. She had become the house girl, the farm help, and sometimes the scapegoat. The smallest mistakes, spilling water or forgetting to close the chicken coop, brought punishments that left her in tears.

Her father, once strong and proud, had taken to drinking after her mother's death. Most nights, he stumbled home reeking of cheap liquor, muttering to himself, too lost in his grief and weakness to notice how his new wife treated his daughter. If Nelly cried, he did not hear. If she pleaded, he did not answer.

Life hardened her in ways she never imagined. When her teeth began to rot and loosen from years of poor diet and no care, there was no money and no mercy for a dentist. Her stepmother shoved her into a chair, reached for an old pair of pliers, and yanked the tooth out herself. Nelly remembered the blood filling her mouth, the metallic taste, the way Olivia clutched her doll in silence, and how no one in the house even noticed her pain.

That morning, as she walked the narrow path to the stream, the sky still bruised with night, she thought of how much of her life had been spent carrying water and firewood, planting seeds she would never harvest for herself, cooking meals she would only eat last if anything was left.

She bent to fill the pail, watching the cold stream water swirl. Her reflection looked back at her, older than her years, with eyes too tired for a girl of seventeen. She wondered if her mother would even recognize her now.

A bird called from the acacia tree above, breaking the stillness. Nelly lifted the pail onto her head and began the long walk back, the weight of it pressing into her neck. She thought of school and how she had once loved it, but the stepmother had decided that her place was at home, "helping the family."

By the time she reached the gate, she could already hear the stepmother's voice inside, sharp and cutting.

"You're slow, girl! Do you think I have all day to wait for you?"

Nelly lowered her eyes and stepped into the yard. She had learned long ago that speaking back only made things worse. The stepmother snatched the pail from her and banged it down, sending water sloshing over the edge.

"Now go milk the cow. And hurry. Your father will be wanting tea before he goes to town."

Nelly walked away toward the cowshed, her throat tight. She had long stopped expecting kindness. The only comfort she found was in the quiet moments, the wind in the maize stalks, the orange glow of the sun setting over the hills, and the secret dreams she kept locked deep inside her heart. Dreams of a life far from here.

Somewhere beyond these fields, she believed, there had to be a place where love was gentle, where words did not wound, and where a girl like her could finally be seen.

Chapter Three

The morning sun had not yet burned away the mist when Nelly's hoe struck the hard earth. Her hands were blistered, raw from days of endless work. Every time she paused to catch her breath, her stepmother's voice cut through the fields.

"Keep going, girl. Why should I waste money on a tractor when I have you? Your bones are strong, use them."

Nelly bent lower, sweat dripping into the soil. A laugh rose from the edge of the field. Olivia, in her clean dress, stood there, watching as if learning from her mother.

"Mama, look," she called brightly, smiling. "Nelly digs like a donkey." Her mother laughed, and Olivia laughed with her, their mockery riding the morning air. But when a neighbor walked by the fence, Olivia's tone turned sugary.

"Be careful, Nelly," she said in a sweet, gentle voice. "You will get tired. Let me bring you some water."

The neighbor nodded with approval. "What a kind child you've raised." Her stepmother smiled proudly. Nelly kept her eyes down, the lie pressing heavily on her chest.

Market days brought fresh humiliations. Nelly trudged barefoot, balancing baskets so heavy the strap bit into her skin. Her dress was thin, patched, and faded. At the market, children in neat uniforms spotted her.

"Eh, look at her rags!" one shouted. "She smells like the goats she feeds," another added. Their laughter cut through her like thorns. She clutched the basket tighter, praying her tears would not fall.

When they returned home, Olivia ran to their father. "Baba, the children at the market laughed at Nelly's clothes. I told them she is my sister and I love her no matter what."

Her father, his words thick with liquor, patted her cheek. "You have a good heart, Olivia."

Nelly bit her lip until it bled. Olivia turned toward her, eyes glinting, and gave a secret wink.

One afternoon, the chief himself came to the homestead, his stick striking the ground. "Why is this girl not in school?"

Nelly's heart leapt. Maybe, finally, someone had seen her.

Her stepmother rushed forward. "She is stubborn, Chief. She prefers the fields. Why waste money on her?"

Olivia clasped her hands and tilted her head. "I always ask her to come with me, Chief, but she says she doesn't like books. What can I do? I wish she would join us."

The chief frowned at Nelly. "A girl who rejects education rejects her future. She will regret this one day."

Nelly's lips parted. "But I—"

Her father's hand silenced her. "Enough. She is fine here. She helps the family." The spark of hope went dark. Olivia lowered her lashes, hiding the sly smile tugging at her lips.

As if cruelty were not enough, Olivia learned to frame her. One evening, the crash of a cup breaking rang through the house. Nelly rushed in to see shards on the floor, Olivia standing above them with wide, innocent eyes.

"Mama! Nelly broke your good cup," she cried.

Before Nelly could protest, her stepmother's hand landed on her cheek. "How many times must I tell you to be careful?"

"But Mama, I didn't..."

"Silence!" Another blow followed. Olivia sniffled and clung to her mother's skirt, pretending to be frightened. Later, when no one was looking, she stuck out her tongue at Nelly, her triumph sharp as glass.

Her father offered no shield. When Nelly dared to ask for his help one night, he glared at her, his words slurred. "If your mother had not died, I would never have gone to prison. Do you hear? You are the reason."

The sting of betrayal was sharper than any slap. She shrank into herself, carrying the weight of his blame like an invisible chain.

Yet even chains could not crush every part of her. At the river, she whispered words she remembered from school, letting the current carry them. In the fields, she hummed the lullabies her mother once sang, each note a fragile shield.

But one night, lying on her mat, she overheard her stepmother's voice through the wall. "This girl is a burden. We should send her away. Let her work in another house until she breaks."

Her father grunted. "Do as you wish."

Olivia's soft, honeyed tone joined in. "But Mama, who will fetch water for me? Who will plough the fields? If she goes, I will suffer."

Her mother laughed. "You are clever, my daughter."

Nelly bit her blanket to keep from crying out. Sent away. Used up. Forgotten.

And yet, as the night deepened, she felt the faintest whisper in her soul, like her late mother's voice brushing her ear. *Hold on, my child. Hold on.*

By now, Nelly was no longer the small girl who swept the compound in silence. She was taller, her limbs lean and strong from endless labor. Her face, once round with childhood softness, had sharpened into the edges of a young woman. But inside, she was still caged. She longed for freedom, for learning, for love. And though no one could see it, deep in her eyes, a quiet fire had begun to burn.

Chapter Four

The dry season sat on the village like a stone. Dust floated in the light and settled in the lungs. The ground split into tired lines, and the maize stalks rattled like empty shells. Every morning, Nelly rose before the sun, moving through the compound with a quiet that felt like a second skin. She milked the cow, lifted the pail to her head, swept the yard, and coaxed fire from damp charcoal. Work was simple to understand; it was the only thing that did not argue with her heart. What she could not carry as easily was the loneliness. Some days, when the air did not move and the goats bleated without reason, the thought returned to her with the stubbornness of a thorn. She wished she had gone with her mother or with her grandmother. Living had become a long road without shade.

It was not only the chores that tired her. It was the way her stepmother shaped suspicion into a net and cast it over every step Nelly took. Any attempt at a human voice was punished. If Nelly greeted women old enough to be her mother, she was accused of being coached into eloping with their sons. If a man so much as asked for the time, the stepmother declared that Nelly was opening a brothel in her compound. If girls her age lingered to ask about eggs or beans, the stepmother laughed loudly so everyone could hear, then announced that Nelly was an illiterate servant who had nothing to say to educated girls. The words stuck like burrs. They followed Nelly home. They followed her into sleep.

At the river, the women worked in a rhythm that soothed the mind. Their hands slapped cloth on wet stones, their hips swayed, their voices rose and fell in simple songs. Nelly longed to stand in the circle and borrow that warmth. She approached once with her basin, and the older women smiled the way mothers smile when they see a tired child. One of them shifted her wrapper and made space beside her. Nelly's heart lifted, then the stepmother's voice cut the air.

"Do not crowd my girl. I know your tricks. You want her to run away with your lazy sons."

The women stared back, not angry, only tired of being accused. Nelly lowered her eyes and stepped away. She washed alone, further down the bank where the water ran shallow and warm. A small fish flashed silver near her fingers, then vanished. She wanted to ask the women about anything at all, the price of soap, the secret to soft chapati, and the best way to remove soot from pots. She kept her mouth closed because a closed mouth did not cause trouble.

Market day should have been different. Color lived there. Fresh tomatoes spilled from baskets, sun on their skins, and the smell of ripe mangoes sweetened the dust. She kept to the shade and watched the ribbon stall from a small distance. Girls her age tried on glass bracelets and laughed when they could not pull them past their knuckles. Nelly wanted to tell them a trick she had learned from her grandmother. Soap first, then a slow turn, then the bracelet would slide with a gentle surrender. She pressed the thought back against her tongue and remained with the baskets. When one of them caught Nelly's eye and offered a shy smile, Nelly smiled back. A warmth rose in her chest, thin but real. Before she could move closer, the stepmother barked from behind the banana pile.

"Do not waste time with girls who will sit exams you cannot even read. Keep to your work."

The girls looked away in a hurry. One of them bit her lip with pity, then turned to her friends. The moment had passed. Nelly lifted the basket again. The strap bit into her shoulder, and she welcomed the bite; it was simpler than shame.

A fruit seller with kind eyes placed an extra banana on Nelly's pile. His beard was dusted white, and he had a way of speaking that made everything sound like a soft rain.

"For your supper," he said.

The stepmother was there before Nelly could answer. She clicked her tongue and pushed the banana back.

"She does not need gifts from men. This is not a house for your secret dealings. Try your nonsense elsewhere."

The man's mouth closed. His eyes shifted to the ground, embarrassed. Nelly wanted to thank him, even with only a glance, but the stepmother stood between them like a wall. On the way home, she told Nelly that men offered kindness only when they wanted to buy a soul. Nelly carried the basket and said nothing.

The church did not save her either. On Sundays, the singing rose like birds, and for a little while, the village breathed together. After the service, the pastor's wife took Nelly's hands and held them the way mothers do when they want to pass strength into another body. She asked about chores, school, and how the rains had treated the maize. Nelly found herself answering in a voice that sounded almost like her own. The stepmother arrived and peeled their hands apart with a smile that did not touch her eyes.

“Thank you for your concern,” she told the pastor’s wife. “We are fine. We do not need advice on how to guard our daughters.”

The pastor’s wife tried to speak again. The stepmother began to praise Olivia in a loud voice. She spoke of Olivia’s clean uniform, her careful handwriting, her clever answers in class. She drew a picture of a girl who deserved the world, bright and pure, the kind who should stand in front when there was a crown to be placed on someone’s head. Nelly stood beside them, as quiet as a shadow thrown by the sun.

At the maize mill, laughter softened the air. Women traded stories while the stones turned and groaned. The smell of ground maize brought back a memory of her grandmother scooping flour into a calabash with a patient hand. Nelly found a chair and waited for her turn. A girl she had known in early school came to sit near her. They had once traced letters with the same stick in the same patch of dust. The girl asked Nelly whether she still remembered the head teacher’s stiff walk and how he always coughed before he could cane anyone. Nelly laughed, a real laugh that surprised her. She began to reply. The stepmother appeared at the doorway with flour on her cheek and a scowl carved into her face.

“You like foolish talk because you have no books to open,” she said. “Leave that flour and come help. These educated girls have exams to pass. You have goats to feed.”

The girl looked away and folded her hands on her knees. Nelly stood and carried the sack. The weight settled against her collarbone. A fine cloud of flour rose and whitened her lashes. It felt like snow on a face that had never seen winter.

Evening brought a quieter kind of ache. Olivia sat under the mango tree and told stories about school, about group work, teachers, and the new student whose shoes clicked on the floor with the confidence of a town child. She spoke loudly when their father was near so he could hear her cleverness. Nelly listened while sorting beans. When she dared to ask about a math puzzle, Olivia tilted her head and smiled the smile she used for neighbors.

“You would not understand,” she said, gentle enough for others to think she meant no harm. “It is for people who can read.”

Their father nodded and told Olivia she would go far. He told Nelly to fetch firewood. Later, when he drank, he said that misfortune had walked into his house the day Mary died and that it had worn

Nelly's face. He was a man drowning in his shadows. Nelly could not save him; she could barely keep her own head above water.

Night pressed itself against the windows. On her mat, Nelly counted the small sounds that proved the world was still turning. The crickets sang. The cow shifted her weight. A gourd tapped against another gourd in the corner where they stored grain. Nelly whispered to the roof, not quite a prayer, not quite a question.

If there is a place where a voice like mine is allowed to grow, let me find it before I become as brittle as these stalks.

Days turned and turned again. The stepmother guarded the gate with her eyes. She guarded the path to the river with rumors. She guarded Nelly's mouth with humiliation and her legs with threats. Yet the girl inside Nelly kept breathing. It was a small breath, but it did not stop. When she walked to the field at dawn, she let the sky talk to her. Pink spread slowly in the east, and the first birds tested their notes. She answered in a hum so quiet that even she could barely hear it. The hum said that a life could be more than a list of chores. The hum said that silence was not the same as emptiness.

On a morning when the sun rose without mercy and the goats complained more than usual, the stepmother called from the gate. The sound of her voice did not carry anger. It carried that familiar suspicion that made Nelly's stomach grow tight. Nelly wiped her hands on her kanga and walked over, ready to be sent for water or for a forgotten basket.

A stranger stood on the path. He was tall, with a wide-brimmed hat that threw a calm shade over his face. A leather satchel crossed his chest. The glint of a lens shone for a breath, then hid. His smile was polite and steady. He greeted them, then asked about the river. His words came with an accent that did not belong to the village, yet the tone was gentle, like someone placing a cup carefully on a table.

Nelly felt her mouth open. A single direction rose to her lips like a small bird flying up from the grass. The stepmother's hand reached first. Fingers closed on Nelly's arm. The stranger did not argue. He thanked them, lifted his hand in farewell, and walked on. Dust rose around his ankles, then fell back. The path swallowed him.

For a heartbeat, there had been a meeting of eyes. There had been no mockery in his, and no fear. Only the simple recognition that another human stood before him. The stepmother noticed that too. She clicked her tongue and muttered that some people liked to tempt trouble. She told Nelly that the world is a trap for foolish girls. On her way back to the kitchen, she began to praise Olivia in a bright, carrying voice. She called her graceful and clever, and ready for any visitor who respected decent families. She said it in a way that turned Nelly into the shadow of her name.

That night, Nelly lay still on her mat. The house breathed around her. Somewhere, a dog barked twice and was quiet. She thought of the river. She thought of the women singing, of the kindness of the fruit seller, of the girl at the mill who had once shared a stick to write letters in dust. Then she thought of the stranger at the gate, and something shifted inside her, not a shout, not a cry, only a small turning toward light.

She closed her eyes. One word rested on her tongue like a seed on dry ground, small enough to lose, strong enough to wait.

Charles.

Chapter Five

The village beat its drum in the same old rhythm. At dawn, hoes bit into earth still holding last night's cold. By afternoon, the narrow paths filled with the sound of jerricans dragging against stone, women balancing water with easy grace. Evening pulled everything back into the compounds: the hiss of pots, the crackle of firewood, voices pitched low under the dim light of lanterns. Day after day, the rhythm repeated.

For Nelly, that rhythm had long been her prison. Yet lately, something inside her shifted like water testing new banks. Her silence, once pressed flat, had begun to stretch. She lingered a little longer at the well, her fingers brushing the surface to watch the circles spread. She hummed as she swept the yard, not loudly, but loud enough that she could hear herself again. They were small acts, yet they filled her chest with a feeling she barely recognized: her own pulse, steady and present.

At the edge of the compound stood the jacaranda.

It had always been there, but Nelly had never stopped to see it. Now the branches hung heavy with purple flowers, each one a soft defiance against the season's dust. When the wind stirred, blossoms drifted down like pieces of sky that had come loose. One landed on her shoulder. She held it in her palm and turned it between her fingers. Its softness startled her, like a secret no one had thought to keep. She found herself smiling, and for once she did not hide it.

It was beneath that tree that Ruth appeared.

Her laughter carried before her body came into view, quick and ringing, the sound of someone unafraid to take up space. A basket of spinach and tomatoes balanced against her hip. When she spotted Nelly, she stopped, the basket tilting as if she had forgotten its weight.

"Nelly," Ruth said, and the name broke into a smile.

Nelly's lips parted. For a moment she could only stare, memory and present colliding. "Ruth," she whispered, the word as fragile as a bird perched on her tongue.

Ruth lowered her basket and brushed petals from her wrapper. "Eh, where do you hide yourself these days? Do you even pass the market?"

"I pass," Nelly said softly. "But I do not stay."

Ruth studied her, eyes warm but searching. "You are still quiet. But even your silence looks different."

The words slipped under Nelly's ribs like light. For years, she had been told she was a shadow, a burden, misfortune itself. Yet here was Ruth, seeing her as something else. They spoke of ordinary things: beans that refused to climb poles, goats too lean for slaughter, the price of paraffin, but beneath it all lay the recognition of two girls who had once drawn letters in dust with the same stick.

When Ruth lifted her basket again, her smile lingered. Nelly felt it press against her like warmth carried in a pocket. As she walked away, petals clung to her kanga, and she left them there.

But not every eye was kind.

Olivia sat on the veranda with her schoolbook open, her gaze darting over the top of the page. She noticed Ruth's laugh spilling too freely toward Nelly. She noticed the way some men's eyes, once fixed on her polished shoes and clever tongue, slid toward the sister who carried herself with a new stillness. Olivia smiled the smile that fooled neighbors, but beneath it lay a sharp thought: Nelly was no longer invisible. In the world of men, where admiration turned into crowns and proposals, Olivia felt her ground shifting.

That night, Nelly crouched in the courtyard, tending the fire for porridge. Sparks flew upward and died against the dark sky. Jackals cried from the ridge, their voices rising like unanswered questions. She held her hands over the glow, as though she could warm not only her skin but also the small flame that had begun to burn inside her. It was not rebellion in her mind. It was simply breathing, but breathing without permission. That alone felt daring.

She stayed there longer than she needed, letting the fire talk in crackles. In that stillness, she realized the silence was no longer empty. It carried her heartbeat, firm and stubborn.

When she rose to carry the pot, she turned once more toward the jacaranda. The blossoms glimmered pale in moonlight, drifting to earth without a sound. Beyond the tree, a figure passed on the path. The brim of his hat shadowed his face, his stride unhurried, his presence blending with the quiet.

Nelly froze, breath caught. She did not move, did not call out. He did not turn, yet the night seemed to tilt slightly as he went by, as though the air itself had recognized him.

She stood still until he disappeared into the dark. Petals continued to fall, laying soft purple on the dust.

When she finally stepped inside, the smoke of suspicion and watchful eyes closed around her again. But in her mind, she carried the tree that bloomed when no one expected it, scattering color where only dust had been.

Chapter Six

Morning still came with the same work, yet Nelly felt the day sit on her shoulders in a new way. The hoe lifted and fell, and her back knew the old ache, but something inside no longer bowed. She carried water, and the jerrican knocked her knee, yet the sound did not scold her as it used to; it beat softly like a drum that kept time for her steps. The rhythm of the place had not changed, only the way it moved through her.

When she could, she stood beneath the jacaranda. The blossoms were not a surprise anymore; they were a welcome. Bees worked inside the flowers. Petals rested in the curl of her toes where her slipper had worn thin. Here she let her breath lengthen. Here she allowed herself to be unhurried. The tree felt like a roof that belonged to her alone, a quiet room in the open air.

Ruth began to come by with small pieces of elsewhere. One afternoon, she held up a torn reader, the spine tired, the cover faded to a pale blue. She set it in Nelly's hands with a grin.

"From the market stall," Ruth said. "The shopkeeper gave it to me because half the pages are missing. He said it is for wrapping onions. I told him it has better work to do."

They sat on a low stone at the edge of the shade. Ruth opened the book and pointed to shapes that stood in tall lines.

"These are letters," she said. "They are like seeds. You plant them in your mind and they sprout into words."

Nelly traced an **A** with the tip of her finger. The paper was soft from many hands. She did not know the sound yet, only the feel of the slope and the crossbar, the way it sat proud on the line.

"Ruth," she asked, and the word trembled inside her chest, "do you think I could learn to read if I started now?"

Ruth looked at her for a long moment, and the laughter that usually lived in her eyes softened into care. "You are asking the right way," she said. "You are asking with your whole face. That means yes."

They smoothed a patch of dust, and Ruth drew letters with a stick. N, then E, then two lines that wanted to become L and Y. Nelly followed with the stick, and her hand shook, but when she

stepped back, the ground held a name that could be hers. She covered it with her palm for a moment, as if it might blow away.

"Keep the reader," Ruth said. "Hide it well. I will come tomorrow and we will find the sounds."

Nelly nodded. The promise sat warm in her mouth.

From the veranda, Olivia watched, a book open on her lap that no longer had her attention. She saw Ruth lean too close; she saw Nelly's fingers linger over the torn paper. A pair of young men passed the gate and nodded; one of them glanced twice. Olivia's smile stayed soft, the way it always did when other eyes were near, but her thoughts sharpened like a blade on stone.

Later, when Ruth had gone and the sun had tilted west, Olivia stepped into the shade of the jacaranda where Nelly stood with the book pressed against her chest.

"Whose book is that?" Olivia asked, light as if asking about the weather.

"A reader," Nelly said. "Ruth left it with me."

"Ruth left it with you," Olivia repeated, and her hand lifted a petal from Nelly's shoulder, slow and precise. "Work does not read itself. Be sure it is finished before Ruth's stories finish you."

She said it with a smile that would please the stepmother, then walked away. Nelly watched her go. The words had teeth, yet they did not sink as deeply as they once would have. The book in her hands felt heavier than the insult.

Their father came home long after the sun had dropped. The gate scraped, his steps scuffed the yard, and the smell of drink walked in ahead of him. He asked for food without looking up. Nelly set a plate on the table, and he did not thank her. She waited for the old sting, the small hope that he would ask how the day had been, that he would notice the way she held something new in her arms. The hope did not come. There was only a steady acceptance and a quiet that belonged to her. She cleared the plate and did not feel robbed.

In the days that followed, she let her rebellions rise, small and careful, yet certain. She hummed as she washed the pots and did not swallow the sound when the stepmother passed. She turned the reader's pages in open daylight, not hiding it, though she kept it close to her body as if it were a warm loaf. She asked Ruth questions that had been in her mouth for years. What is the shape of

this sound? How do you know where a sentence ends? What lives past the last page? Ruth answered in patient pieces, and sometimes in stories. She told Nelly how letters make roads between people who have never met, how a person can travel with eyes alone.

One evening, two boys came to the gate with a broken bicycle. They asked for a spanner and stood talking while Olivia fetched one. The taller boy looked toward the jacaranda where Nelly and Ruth sat with their heads bent over the reader. He spoke softly to his friend, and both of them laughed. Nelly did not raise her face, yet she felt the glance brush her skin. Olivia saw it too. When she returned, she placed the spanner in the taller boy's hand with a charm that had always won her small favors. The boy thanked her, but his eyes strayed again, quick and guilty. Olivia's mouth tightened before the smile returned.

That night, Nelly kept the fire. The embers breathed, and the smoke travelled in a thin river into the dark. She listened to the wood's soft sighs and, for the first time in a long time, her mind did not circle the same closed yard. It stepped beyond the gate. It walked the market paths Ruth had described. It followed a line of letters across a page and felt how a word could open inside her like a door.

She lifted the reader and held it close to the glow. The missing pages did not trouble her. There was enough left to begin. She mouthed the small sounds Ruth had taught, and though they were clumsy on her tongue, they tasted like clean water.

On Sunday, she walked with Ruth to the church compound. Women in bright kangas stood in clusters, greeting and teasing, children chased each other in the dust, and a choir's last notes hung in the shade like birds unwilling to land. Near the far wall, a man knelt with a camera, quiet, as if the ground itself had asked him to listen. He waited for a child to lift his head, then he pressed the button. The click was soft, a note under the noise.

Nelly felt the air pull tight in her chest. She had seen him once in passing, a figure folded into the night. Here he stood in clear light, not a visitor who hurried through, but a watcher who saw. He lowered the camera, and the corner of his mouth moved, not quite a smile, more like an answer to a question only he had heard. He turned to frame the jacaranda that curved beyond the compound, then he lifted the lens again.

Ruth tugged Nelly's hand and led her toward the women. Nelly went, though a part of her stayed behind with the quiet click of the camera and the way the man's calm presence widened the place. She did not search for his eyes. He did not look her way. The moment did not need more.

By evening, the yard had its usual voices. The stepmother scraped a pot. Olivia oiled her hair and watched her reflection in the metal lid. Their father slept in his chair. Nelly sat where the light from the kitchen and the last light from the sky met. The reader lay open on her knees. The jacaranda dropped one slow petal, and it landed near her heel. She did not pick it up. She let it rest, and she rested too, with a beginning in her hands that no one could take.

Chapter Seven

The rains arrived before anyone expected them. They began as a fine mist that softened the dust, then grew into long silver ropes that stitched the roof to the ground. The path to the gate turned slick and red, chicken tracks filled with water, and the jacaranda shook its blossoms free. Petals pressed to the mud and made small islands the color of bruised sky. Nelly felt the season settle over the homestead like a new skin. Work did not lessen, yet it moved differently through her. She was not bowing to it. She was meeting it.

She rose in the dark and lit the fire. Smoke curled under the eaves and hung in a sweet, damp way. She set porridge to boil and listened to the drum on the roof. The sound did not scold. It kept time for her thoughts. When the pot thickened, she carried it inside, and Olivia, wrapped in a bright shawl, stirred her cup without looking up.

“Your feet are muddy,” Olivia said.

“The whole compound is muddy,” Nelly answered. She wiped the threshold with an old cloth, and the clay marked her fingers like paint.

When Ruth came, she was wet at the edges. Her skirt clung at the knees, and her hair held small beads of water that had not yet found a way down. She shook herself like a bird at the veranda, laughed, and pulled a small pencil from the knot of her kanga.

“I stole this from my cousin, and I am not sorry,” she said. “He uses it to draw flowers on the back of newspapers. You will use it to write your name.”

They sat on the low stone where the jacaranda made a doorway of rain. Ruth tore a clean half sheet from the tired reader and smoothed it on her lap. The paper had a soft give, the way old things learn to carry more than they were made for. Ruth wrote slowly, each letter standing clear. N, then E, then L, then Y. She passed the pencil to Nelly.

Nelly pinched it carefully. Her hand shook at first. The rain’s noise was a crowd in her ears. She set the point down and drew the long line of N, the short slant, the climb, the fall. She breathed and found the E. She shaped the L and gave it a small tail because the pencil felt like a living thing and wanted to move. The Y took the longest. When she lifted the pencil, the word stared back at her, a small animal she had coaxed from the bush.

Ruth smiled in a way that warmed Nelly more than the fire ever could. “Say it,” she said.

“Nelly,” she said, and the sound felt new in her mouth. She copied it again, slower, less afraid that she would break something.

Olivia’s ladle paused at the corner of the kitchen opening. She watched the two girls under the dripping tree. She watched the pencil, the paper, the way Nelly’s shoulders had lifted as if a closed window had been opened behind her. Her smile settled on her face like a veil. She dipped the ladle back into the stew.

By afternoon, the rain gathered weight. The stepmother sent Nelly to fetch wood from the store at the far end of the farm. The store smelled of old smoke and maize husks. The roof let in a line of water that pattered into a broken basin on the floor. Nelly stacked small pieces under her arm, then paused. There, on an empty sack, lay the torn reader and the scrap with her name. She had hidden them here the last time the stepmother circled the kitchen, asking about misplaced things. Now she lifted both and tucked them inside her blouse. The paper warmed quickly against her skin.

When she reached the veranda, Olivia stood in the corner out of the rain, twisting oil through her hair.

“You are carrying more than wood,” Olivia said.

“I am carrying what belongs to me,” Nelly said. She did not lower her eyes. The words were quiet, and they did not wobble.

Olivia let out a small sound that could have been a laugh or a cough. “Scraps of paper,” she said. “Be careful that scraps do not blow your mind away. Work will not chase after it.”

“Work knows where to find me,” Nelly said. She set the wood by the door. Her blouse held the soft square near her heart, and she did not reach up to hide the small corner that showed.

When the stepmother saw the paper later, her lips thinned.

“Is this the craze now?” she asked. “When clothes wait and water waits, you sit to write your name.” She lifted the reader as if it were a fish that smelled wrong. “Who brought this nonsense?”

“Ruth,” Nelly said.

“Of course,” the stepmother said. “A girl who wanders brings wandering to those who sit. You will wash the piled clothes before evening. Do not let me see that book taking the place of work.”

Nelly nodded. She placed the reader on the shelf by the window and turned to the basins. She did not tuck it away. She left it where the light could touch it. As she worked, she hummed. The tune was small. When the stepmother passed, Nelly did not swallow the sound. The rain washed the yard, and the rhythm of her hands on cloth matched its fall.

The father came late, the way he had learned to come. His shirt was wet and clung to his shoulders. He walked straight to the stool near the fire and rubbed his hands as if he were thinking of heat for the first time. He asked what was there to eat. He did not look at faces. He did not smell the rain on their clothes or see the reader by the window. Nelly served him without speech. She waited for nothing. When he left the plate half full and stretched his legs to sleep, she did not feel the old ache begin. There was only a calm surface and a depth that belonged to her.

The days turned in this new rain. Ruth came whenever she could, and when she could not, Nelly practiced alone. The pencil grew shorter and burrowed deeper into her grip. She wrote her name on the backs of old envelopes, on brown paper from the shop, in the dust by the doorstep. She learned the small kindness of straight lines, the way a curve could hold a sound, the patience of the dot atop an I even when there was no I to dot. She made mistakes and crossed them out with a neat line, the way Ruth had shown her, not angry, only moving forward.

Olivia watched in a way that changed the flavor. Her charm for visitors did not reach Nelly. She began to speak of Nelly in rooms Nelly had just left. She told the stepmother that Nelly had begun to answer back. She said Nelly kept secret meetings with Ruth under the tree while the chores waited. She did not shout. She pressed small words into the stepmother’s ear until they took root.

The stepmother began to set heavier work. Nelly carried water twice when once would have done. She swept the cow shed after the rain, and the smell of dung mixed with wet earth rose in the air. She pounded maize until her arms trembled. When she paused for breath, the stepmother appeared as if she had been waiting behind the door.

“Bring the reader,” the stepmother said one evening. “I asked to see if letters can cook.” Her mouth had a thin smile that did not reach her eyes.

Nelly brought it and laid it on the table. The stepmother turned a few pages with the edge of her finger.

“Half is missing,” she said. “Like the mind of the one who reads it.”

“Half is enough to start,” Nelly said. Her voice was level. She did not reach out to take the book back. She let it lie. The stepmother looked at her for a long moment, then shut the book and left it where it had been.

That night, the rain broke open in a long, hard sheet. The gutter overflowed, and the water carved a thin channel past the granary. The jacaranda leaves caught the drops and let them go one by one. Nelly pulled a kanga around her shoulders and went to bring the goats under shelter. The air smelled of wet bark, smoke, and something clean. When she lifted her face, she saw him across the field, near the low hedge that marked the neighbor’s plot.

He stood with his camera wrapped in a clear bag that shone like fish skin when the lightning moved far away. He waited, still as a rock, for a woman to lift a water pot from her head. He did not hurry her. He did not call out. He watched the way a person watches when looking at his work. He lifted the camera and pressed the button. The sound was small under the rain, a soft click that reached her all the same. He turned his head slightly and looked toward the road, then toward the line of trees that hid the river. He did not see her.

Nelly stood under the eave and watched the shape of him waver in the fall of water. He did not have the rush of a visitor who takes and leaves. He had a steady patience that made the place feel wider than it had felt in years. She thought of the way he had knelt by the church wall, of the calm in his face. She did not speak his name. The rain spoke enough.

When she went back inside, the stepmother was folding dry clothes into a basket. Olivia sat on the stool with a needle and thread, sewing a loose hem. Nelly placed the goatskin rope behind the door and took the reader from the shelf. She sat by the window where a little light still lived. She opened to the clean half sheet.

She wrote her name three times. The first was careful, the second was firm, the third had a small joy in it that made the tail of the Y longer than it needed to be. She laughed once, under her breath. The stepmother glanced up and said nothing. Olivia pushed her needle through and pulled it out again, slow as a thought.

Ruth came the next day with a paper bag. Inside were a few more pages, torn from a schoolbook that had lost its cover.

“From the market man,” she said. “He thinks I wrap tomatoes with these. He thinks paper belongs to onions and fish. I told him nothing.”

Nelly touched the sheets as if they might bruise. “I saw him again,” she said after a while. “The man with the camera.”

Ruth’s eyes were bright and unafraid. “People talk,” she said. “They say he is making a record of the season. They say he is counting how rain sits on different roofs. They say many things. I say he looks and listens. There is work in that.”

Nelly nodded. She did not try to catch the meaning with long words. It was enough to feel how the village had grown a new corner that she had not visited before, a corner that did not belong to fear.

The week stretched and folded. The rain taught new paths through the yard. The jacaranda gave and gave. Nelly worked, and when work ended, she read the small lines with her lips moving, and when the words did not come, she traced shapes until they began to open. She left the reader where it could be seen. She let her humming fill the gaps between jobs. She met the stepmother’s eye and did not flinch. She stopped looking for her father’s face to soften. She carried her name inside her like a lit coal.

On a late afternoon, the clouds lifted and left a tender light on the ridges. Nelly stood at the door with her basin and looked toward the road. Far off, near the stand of blue gum, a figure paused and lifted a camera again. The click did not reach her this time. She felt it all the same. She turned back to the basin and dipped her hands.

That night, she sat at the meeting of the kitchen glow and the last of the sky. The reader lay open on her knees. The damp air had curled its edges. The jacaranda dropped a few tired petals at the doorstep, and they settled without sound. She wrote her name once more, then she wrote the letters of Ruth’s name beside it. She touched both with the tip of her finger, not to hide them, but to claim them. The rain began again, gentle at first, like a promise that knew its own patience. She did not hurry it. She did not hurry herself. The season had turned, and she had turned with it.

Chapter Eight

The rains eased, leaving the earth dark and glistening. Smoke lifted in thin spirals from kitchen fires and clung to the morning like shawls on women's shoulders. Nelly stepped into the yard with a basin balanced on her hip. The sky was pale after days of heavy cloud, and for the first time, she felt her name inside her, written clear on a scrap of paper folded in her pocket. She touched it through the cloth, and the secret steadied her steps.

Ruth came at midmorning with her usual laugh, though today there was a quickness in her eyes. She carried a small parcel wrapped in brown paper, and inside were more pages — lined sheets torn from a schoolbook.

"I told the man at the market they were for wrapping fish," Ruth said, her grin tilting. "But they are for you."

They sat under the jacaranda. The tree still dripped from last night's rain, and petals scattered across their laps as if marking the pages. Ruth guided her hand again, shaping letters, building words. When Nelly stumbled, Ruth leaned close and whispered, "Even roads stumble before they become paths."

After a while, Ruth's voice grew thoughtful. "My cousin wrote from town. She says there is work in a shop. I might go, Nelly. Maybe soon."

Nelly felt the ground tip under her, though she kept her face calm. She traced her name again on the page, pressing harder than she needed to. "Town is far," she said softly.

"Far is where things change," Ruth answered. Her hand closed over Nelly's for a moment, and then she stood to go.

Olivia was at the veranda, polishing her nails against her skirt. She had watched the two girls, her mouth tight, her eyes bright. When Ruth left, Olivia stepped into the shade where Nelly sat with the pages.

"So this is what keeps you busy," Olivia said, voice sweet enough for honey. She plucked one of the sheets from Nelly's lap and read the uneven letters. "N-E-L-L-Y. You think writing your name will cook supper?"

Nelly reached for the page and took it back. “It will not cook,” she said, “but it belongs to me.”

Olivia’s smile thinned. “Names belong to the ones who are remembered. Be careful you don’t waste yours on scraps.” She turned and walked away, hips swaying, but her words hung like smoke.

That evening, the stepmother found the reader by the window. She flipped through its torn pages, her mouth curling. “This thing again. Do you think half a book will make you clever? Do you think work will wait while you play?”

She raised it toward the fire. For a moment, Nelly’s breath caught. Then, with a steadiness she did not know she owned, she stepped forward.

“Do not burn it,” she said. Her voice was quiet, but held no tremor. “It is mine.”

The stepmother lowered her hand slowly, eyes narrowing. “Yours? Nothing here is yours.” But she set the reader back on the shelf and left the room.

Nelly stood still, her chest beating fast. She had spoken, and the world had not fallen.

Her father came home late, staggering in with the smell of alcohol heavy on him. He knocked over a stool and laughed at his own stumble before sinking into his chair. He asked for food but fell asleep before it reached his lips. The snore that followed was deep, careless, a wall between him and the rest of them. Nelly looked at him once, then turned away. She felt no ache, no small hope. She expected nothing, and that emptiness was lighter than longing.

In the days that followed, whispers of the stranger grew louder. Women at the market spoke of him — a man who knelt in mud to catch the way children splashed, who waited long minutes for the light to change on the church roof. Some said he came from far away, others that he was counting rain. His name passed between their lips, strange and new: Charles.

One afternoon, Nelly saw him again. The rain had cleared. He was by the blue gums near the ridge, camera raised, body still. He framed the tree as if it were a cathedral. The click was soft, carried by the wind. He did not look toward her, yet she felt as though she had been caught in the same frame.

She went back inside, lifted her pencil stub, and wrote her name once more, then Ruth’s beside it. The letters wavered but did not fall apart. Olivia’s needle clinked, the stepmother scraped at a pot,

and their father slept with his head against the wall. But Nelly sat in the glow of the lamp, her page open, her name a coal she would not let go out.

The season had turned. The house had not yet shifted, but she had, and there was no going back.

Chapter Nine

The rains thinned, leaving the earth streaked with cracks where puddles had stood. The air smelled of damp clay and smoke, and the jacaranda no longer burst with blossoms. Its branches were heavy with green, and the ground beneath it was littered with fading petals, pale and bruised. Nelly stood there one morning with the basin, her bare feet pressing the soft mulch. She felt the season turn again, slow but certain, and in her pocket the folded sheet with her name reminded her that she, too, had turned.

Ruth came in the afternoon, carrying a bundle of maize cobs and, tucked beneath, another pencil stub. "It is almost gone," she said, showing the wood worn short. "But it can still teach."

They sat together under the tree. Ruth wrote a word on the back of a torn calendar page: **HOME**. The lines were straight and sure.

"This one you must know," Ruth said. "It is where you begin, and where you might return."

Nelly traced each letter slowly. Her hand was less afraid now, more certain in its grip. She whispered the word as she wrote it again, and though the letters leaned unevenly, they stood.

"Good," Ruth said. She looked away toward the ridge, her face thoughtful. "My cousin writes again. The shop in town needs another girl. I think I will go soon."

The pencil paused in Nelly's hand. A bird shifted, shaking a small shower of petals over them. "When?" she asked, her voice low.

"Perhaps after harvest. Perhaps before. I cannot stay here forever, Nelly. You should not either."

Nelly looked down at the word HOME. The letters blurred for a moment. "If you go, who will teach me?"

Ruth touched her hand. "The letters will teach you once you begin. And you have already begun."

Olivia's laugh came sharply from the veranda. She had been sitting there with two neighbor girls, her shawl bright, her words bright too. "See her," she said, not even lowering her voice. "Still scratching like a child in dust. At her age. Imagine." The girls giggled, glancing sideways at Nelly.

Heat rose in Nelly's face, but she did not close the page. She looked at Olivia and said quietly, "Better to scratch for myself than to borrow shine from others."

The girls' laughter broke off, uncertain. Olivia's smile froze, then hardened, though she quickly turned it into a new story, her voice too loud, too sweet.

That evening, the stepmother found the calendar page. She held it up between two fingers. "HOME," she read aloud, her mouth curling. "And who will build this home for you? Letters?"

She stepped toward the hearth, and the flames licked higher. "I should burn these scraps before they burn your head."

Nelly's throat tightened, but she stepped forward. "Do not burn them," she said. "They are mine."

The stepmother's eyes narrowed. "Mine, mine, always mine. Nothing here is yours." She lowered the page slowly, then shoved it into a jar with maize husks. "You will stay away from Ruth if this nonsense does not stop. Do you hear?"

"I hear," Nelly said. She held the stepmother's gaze longer than she ever had before.

Her father came home staggering, a cracked gourd of alcohol swinging from his hand. He stumbled on the step, nearly falling. Olivia rushed forward with a laugh, steadying him, fussing over his sleeve. He pushed her hand away and dropped onto the stool. His eyes were bloodshot, his breath thick. Nelly set food in front of him, but he waved it aside. "Later," he muttered, already drifting into sleep. The food cooled, untouched. Nelly watched once, then turned her face away. Expecting nothing felt lighter now than waiting for what would never come.

In the market days that followed, whispers travelled about the stranger. Some said his name was **Charles**. They spoke of how he waited for hours, his eye pressed to the black box, his patience like a farmer's. One woman said he had captured the way raindrops clung to banana leaves, another how he had photographed an elder's wrinkled hands grinding grain. Children followed him, laughing, eager to be caught by his click.

Nelly listened from the shade where Ruth haggled for onions. The name curled on her tongue, though she did not say it aloud. Charles. A word that opened a door in her mind.

That evening, she sat under the shade with her pencil stub. The word HOME lay before her. Beside it, she wrote her name, and then, slowly, Ruth's. The letters tilted and wavered, but they did not fall. She traced them with her finger, not to hide them, but to hold them close. The tree dropped a petal on the page, and she left it there, a soft seal.

The walls around her life had not broken, but cracks were there now, thin lines where light could enter. She looked at her words, uneven but hers, and felt how even small marks could make space in stone.

Chapter Ten

The market woke slowly after the rains. Stalls rose like small ribs along the lane, woven baskets spread with mangoes and pawpaw, paraffin tins shining in the soft light. Smoke from roasting maize lifted and folded back, and the air smelled of charcoal and ripe fruit. Nelly walked beside Ruth, holding a basket with onions wrapped in newspaper and a few tomatoes that still carried beads of water. Olivia came too, bright shawl neat at the edge, bangles chiming when she moved.

Charles was there before they reached the first row. He stood near the tailor's doorway, a quiet shape with a camera held close, his face tilted toward the world as if listening. He watched the line for sugar, then the cross-current of children tugging at each other, a woman counting coins in her palm. He waited for a breath to settle, then pressed the button. The click was soft under the market noise.

Nelly felt the sound reach her, a small touch at the ribs. She kept her eyes low and stepped with care around a puddle that still held a thin skin of sky. The lens turned, not toward her, not quite, yet it brushed past and left the feeling of a hand that had almost found her shoulder. She set the basket down at a stall where a woman with a head wrap was selling groundnuts. Ruth bargained, voice light, mouth quick. Olivia drifted near a group of girls from the next ridge, laughter already polished for display.

They walked the line of stalls and bought salt and a measure of beans. Ruth kept glancing toward the end of the lane where the sun struck a tin roof and pooled there. When they reached the edge of the market, she touched Nelly's elbow.

"Come," she said. "Help me count these coins in the quiet."

They stepped into the shade behind a stack of woven mats. Ruth counted slowly, pressing the coins into Nelly's palm one by one, then she closed Nelly's fingers over them and smiled. There was a quickness in her breath that did not come from walking.

"When I go to town, I will write," she said. "You will read my words, and I will bring you something small, a ribbon, or a small book if I can find one. You will know it is yours alone."

Nelly nodded. The promise sat warm in her chest. "I will keep them safe," she said. "I will hide them where light can still find them."

Ruth hesitated, then leaned closer. “There is something else.” She looked past Nelly’s shoulder, then back to her face. “The man with the camera asked me your name.”

The coins went still in Nelly’s hand. The market sounds grew thin at the edges. “When?” she asked.

“Last Sunday at the church compound,” Ruth said. “He spoke only a few words. He said he had seen you by the jacaranda. He asked who you were. I told him your name.” She searched Nelly’s eyes. “He did not smile. He nodded, as if the name was a piece he had been missing.”

Nelly felt the ground lift and settle under her feet. She stood the basket upright and smoothed the paper that covered the onions. She did not know what to say, so she breathed once, deep, and held the breath a moment before letting it go. A light had moved inside a room that had long been dark. It was not a blaze. It was a lamp turned up by a careful hand.

When they returned to the main path, Olivia was with the girls from the other ridge. She looked up as Nelly passed, and her smile sharpened.

“Are you still playing with scraps of paper?” Olivia asked, sweet voice pitched to share. “Does it feel clever to draw crooked lines and call them words?”

Two of the girls laughed. One looked away, uneasy.

Nelly kept her step and set the basket down on the ground. She met Olivia’s eyes and spoke calmly. “It feels like the beginning,” she said. “That is enough for me.”

The laughter faltered. Olivia lifted her chin and turned her back, gathering the girls into a new story that did not need Nelly. Ruth stood beside Nelly, not speaking, her shoulder almost touching. The market noise washed over them and carried the moment away, but the taste of it remained.

They started for home before the sun edged past noon. At the last bend, Nelly looked back. Charles stood near the tailor again, body still, camera lowered. He looked across the market as if measuring its breath, then lifted the camera and framed the lane where she had just walked. He did not follow. He did not hurry. The click came softly, and she felt it run along the skin of her arm.

At home, the stepmother was scouring pots with ash and a rag. Olivia put the basket on the table and began to talk at once, voice well shaped for the room.

“She carried the whole day like it was a secret,” Olivia said. “She keeps papers in her pocket and looks like a person who swallowed a stone. Ask her what she hides.”

The stepmother’s eyes moved to Nelly’s blouse, then to Ruth, then back. “No secrets here,” she said. “Secrets rot a house. If you carry what is not work, you will leave it at the door.”

Nelly lifted the basket and set it near the water pot. She could feel the small folded sheet where she had written her name, tucked deep and warm near her skin. She felt the shape of it, the thin edges, the strength it carried that no one else could see. She washed her hands and said, “There is nothing here that belongs to you,” but she did not say it out loud. She chose her quiet and kept it.

Her father wandered in at dusk with a loose step and a dull laugh. He asked for food, then forgot the question and sat with his head tipped back. The stepmother clanged the lid on the pot. Olivia spoke of a neighbor’s new dress, bright words stacked like beads. Ruth helped Nelly lay plates, then stood very straight and told them that her cousin had written again. The shop in town had space for a girl who could count, who could keep a stall in order.

“It is not a place for feet that do not know town dust,” the stepmother said. “You will be lost before you cross the first street.”

“I will learn,” Ruth said. Her voice was plain. “And I will write to those who cannot come yet.”

The stepmother made a sound that was not quite a laugh. “Write to the ones who have time to waste,” she said, and turned her face to the fire.

Night settled gently, the way smoke settles. Nelly walked Ruth to the door before leaving.

“When I go, your homestead will be my address,” she said. “I will send letters here, and small things inside. You will find them before anyone else does.”

“How?” Nelly asked in a whisper.

“Look in the folds of the flour sacks,” Ruth said. “Or under the basin lip. I will find ways.”

They smiled, and Ruth slipped into the dark.

Nelly sat by the window where the last of the sky met the lamp glow. She took the reader from the shelf and opened to the clean sheet. The pencil stub lay in the small dish where she kept it. She

wrote her name once, then again. She wrote Ruth's name beside it and touched both with the tip of her finger. Her hand shook a little, so she rested it on the table and waited for her breath to even.

She thought of the market, of the quiet behind the mat stacks, of Ruth's voice saying he had asked. She shaped the letters slowly, careful with each stroke. C, then H, then A that stood like a ladder, then R, then L, then E, then S. The word looked unfamiliar and familiar at once, as if she had known it before she could write it. She did not say it aloud. She let it sit on the page and become part of the air.

The stepmother moved to the other room. Olivia hummed a thin tune while she sorted bangles by size. Their father snored softly, head tipped back, mouth open. Nelly bent over the page and traced the three names with the lightest touch, not to hide them, only to own them. The jacaranda gave one tired petal, and it slid across the sill and came to rest near her wrist. She did not brush it away.

Rain began again, soft and unhurried, a sound like someone speaking far away in a language she was beginning to understand. She closed the reader, held it to her chest for a single heartbeat, then set it back where the lamp could see it. The names warmed the room in a way that fire could not. She did not hurry to sleep. She let the night fill with the weight of eyes and the promise of letters, and she sat where the two met, firm, awake, beginning.

Chapter Eleven

Nelly woke before the rooster, washed her face at the tin basin, and listened to the house breathe. The stepmother snored lightly in her room. Olivia turned in her sleep and sighed the way she did when dreams pleased her. Ruth stood in the doorway with her bag already on her back and her church sweater folded over her arm.

They did not say much. Ruth pressed a quick kiss to Nelly's cheek, then let her palm linger a moment as if warming something there. At the gate, she took a ribbon from her pocket, small as a bookmark, blue as the sky. Her thumb hid it in Nelly's hand. On a torn slip of paper, she had written an address in careful letters and the name of a shop that never closed.

"First letter soon," she whispered. "Wait under the tree. He asked again."

Nelly nodded. The road held a film of last night's damp, and it kept Ruth's footprints whole for a few steps. Nelly watched until the bend took her. She wanted to run after her and did not. She tucked the ribbon into the seam of her dress and returned to the morning as if nothing had shifted. The water boiled. The hoe leaned by the door. The day began.

She drew the lines in the farm straight and let the earth answer the heel of her hand. When she carried the jerrican home, the knock against her knee sounded like a drum that knew her name. In every task, a small new hush waited, the space where Ruth's leaving had opened. Nelly kept that hush for the tree.

The first letter did not come with the post. It arrived folded into a square and kept dry under the lip of the outside basin. A neighbor brought it with a question about ash for her stove and left without a cup of tea, which meant the errand was real. When Nelly reached under the basin, she felt a smooth edge and a binding tape, the kind the shopkeeper used when he wrapped notebooks. Her breath narrowed. She wiped her hands on her skirt and carried the parcel to the jacaranda.

The shade moved in a slow oval on the ground. Bees worked. The petals lay scattered like small tongues that had said everything and now rested. Nelly sat with her back to the trunk, opened the first knot: a tiny notebook slid into her palm, as light as a new egg. The paper had no lines. There was a slip of paper inside, only one sentence in Ruth's hand.

He asked again about you. He returns to the jacaranda.

Nelly read the line twice. She ran her finger over each word and felt how firm they were. She smelled the notebook and found the faint chemical scent that reminded her of schoolbooks and the days she had counted as hers. Her throat filled. She kept her eyes on the page until the feeling settled into a place she could hold. It was not Ruth's words she felt most strongly, but the shadow of him moving behind them.

That same evening, the stepmother watched her for too long. It was a narrow watching, the way a person studies a wall for a crack. Nelly kept her face smooth and her answers plain. The notebook waited in the fold of her skirt, pressed to the side of her thigh. In the kitchen, the stepmother moved the pots as if the lids could talk.

"New secrets can grow like rot," she said. "I will not have rot in this house."

Nelly stirred the ugali and kept her hands slow. "There is no rot," she said. "Only food and work."

"That is what people say when rot has already begun," the woman said. She opened the corner cupboard for no reason and stared into the shadows. "I can search if I wish."

Nelly looked at the cooking smoke and not at the woman. "You always find what is yours," she said.

The cupboard door shut. The threat stayed thin and bright as a wire Nelly could not see but felt along the skin of her neck. After supper, she took the clothes to the line and left a small space between the sheets, where air could pass. In that space, she slipped the notebook into a cloth bag that once held sugar. She pushed the bag up into the rafters through a loosened reed. When she came back in, the stepmother was poking at the fire with a stick that was already ash.

In the days that followed, work moved, and the secret moved with it. The ribbon lay cool against her collarbone, where she had sewn it into the facing of her dress. Olivia noticed. She always noticed when a thing did not belong to her. It was a Sunday afternoon when cousins came to visit, and laughter crowded the yard. Olivia pointed at the neat edge that peeped when Nelly bent to pour tea.

"What is that pretty thing, sister?" she said, loud enough for the cousins to turn.

Nelly straightened slowly. She wanted her voice to be plain as a wall. "A hem I stitched myself," she said. "The old one was split."

Olivia smiled with a wide mouth. “Since when do torn hems wear church blue?”

“Since I had a thread of it,” Nelly said, and passed her the cup. The cousins asked about the price of maize and whether the shop would buy eggs this week. Olivia held the cup too long and then drank, with no more talk. The ribbon lay quiet where it was.

The next letter came folded inside a grain sack that had once held flour. The sack came back from the mill, and the mouth had been tied with a knot she did not tie. When she loosened it alone at the shade, she found a small square wrapped in paper from a bread shop. The note inside named a time. It told her to listen for the bell of the bicycle vendor who sold sugar and soap. The words were simple. At the bottom of the page, there was a single name in capital letters. CHARLES.

Nelly touched the letters. They were like stones set into a path. She felt how they held and how they made her feet sure. She closed the notebook and held it to her chest until her breath eased. It was him now, not Ruth, who filled her thoughts.

She began to write back in the notebook with the pencil nub Ruth had squeezed into the binding. The lead scratched and then flowed. Her hand moved slowly, as if language had to find its way through scrub before it could open into a clearing. She wrote her name. She wrote HOME as if it were something she could hand to him and he would not drop it. She wrote that she was well and that work kept her upright. She wrote that the tree made the air kind. She did not ask questions. She did not need to. Between the lines she placed a petal, not pressed flat yet, still soft. She wanted it to carry the tree’s cool with it.

Village talk widened like a ripple after a stone. Market women said the photographer had been seen down by the river after the short rains. He waited where the water caught the sky and made a thin mirror. Children dared each other to run close and then squealed when the lens turned. Some said he asked no one to pose. Some said he waited for reflections to find their own faces. The men at the shop door argued about whether photographs stole time or saved it. Nelly listened with her head down and her ears open.

She saw him once in the distance. She had taken the goats out along the path that passed the far field. He stood on the other side of the boundary where the tall grass hid his shoes. The camera hung at his chest. He lifted it as if he might look. Then he lowered it and let the strap hold the weight. He did not call. She felt the air change the way it does when a bird hangs its wings and

chose not to land. She walked on and didn't hurry. The goats found a patch of green and became quiet.

In the house, the stepmother's eyes quickened. She moved the stools and opened the linen box for no reason. The thin wire feeling returned. Nelly kept small things near and visible so that nothing looked hidden. She cleaned with more care and kept the yard swept to a plain shine. At night, she rose once and stood at the door to breathe. The stars were hard and near. The jacaranda made its small rain of blossoms. She felt the notebook above her head in the rafters as if it made its own light. She went back to bed and slept as if the mattress knew she needed it.

Another letter carried a different kind of breath. It smelled faintly of perfume, but what struck Nelly most was not the scent. It was the line: He had stood by the jacaranda until the shadow reached his shoes. Then he had turned and walked away. He had been waiting. He had said nothing. Ruth had only seen and written. The message was his silence.

Nelly closed her eyes and pictured the shoes at the edge of the shadow. She did not fight the picture. She let it come and go like breath.

She wrote back with a little more courage. She asked about the shop and the price of sugar. She asked if the sisters sang when they closed at night. At the bottom, she wrote that the jacaranda had new growth. She did not write his name. The petal she pressed this time had a small bruise on one edge. It made the purple look deeper.

Secrecy tightened once more. The stepmother said there would be a search on Saturday. She spoke of a lost spoon and a missing bar of soap as if a thief lived in the roof. Nelly made her face quiet. She went to the yard and shook the rugs with even hands. When the house emptied for the afternoon, she climbed the stool and pulled the sugar bag down. She slipped the notebook out and took it under the jacaranda tree. There she dug a narrow place near the roots with a broken spoon. The earth gave easily where the ants had loosened it. She laid the notebook on a cloth and set it there. She covered it with soil and pressed her palm to the mound. It felt like a held breath that would not show.

The search found nothing. The stepmother clicked her tongue. Olivia grew bored and went to the mirror to pinch her cheeks into a color they did not have. The house settled again.

That evening at dusk, she sealed her first real letter. She wrote clearly and folded carefully. She used the brown paper and ran a line of paste along the edge with a matchstick. The paper held. She breathed on it to be sure. The trusted neighbor would pass by at dawn with milk for the babies in town. Nelly hid the letter inside the rolled edge of a bag that hung by the door. She tied the strap with a knot only she knew.

The house quieted. Olivia yawned and complained about her shoes. The stepmother muttered about a loose hinge that was not loose. When their doors shut, Nelly stepped out. The tree waited. She sat on the root that made a small bench and drew her knees up until the night touched them. The notebook lay back under the earth, safe and near. The letter waited in the basket for morning feet. The lens was somewhere beyond the fields, and maybe by the river where the stars had already begun to fall in the water. Nelly felt the line between tree and letter and lens grow taut. It did not frighten her. It made her feel held.

She stayed until the moon came. Then she rose and went inside, and the door closed without a sound.

Chapter Twelve

The village had a way of tightening around a secret until it could hardly breathe. By the end of the week, whispers about the photographer hung in the air like smoke. At the well, women paused mid-pour when Nelly arrived; at the shopfront, men lowered their voices when she passed. His name, Charles, began to ride their tongues. They said he lingered by the river. They said he had spoken with the chief about pictures for the community work so that his presence would carry a reason. They said his eyes followed what others overlooked.

At home, the stepmother sharpened her suspicion. She circled Nelly like a hawk, waiting for the small mistake that would make the strike certain. Olivia, emboldened by gossip, whispered loud enough for cousins to hear. "The white man's eyes are on you," she said. "Careful, they do not burn." Laughter fluttered and fell, but Nelly kept her face still. What frightened Olivia most was not denial or shame. It was Nelly's quiet spine, the way she no longer bowed.

Silence followed for several days, and it pressed heavily. Yet in that silence his presence grew sharper, not duller. She felt it in the rhythm of her work.

Then she saw him. In broad daylight, no cover but the sky. She was returning from the field with the goats when she found him on the path ahead, nearer than before. The camera hung at his chest, but his hands did not lift it. His gaze met hers, steady and unflinching. The world narrowed to that look, a look that did not strip her and did not demean. It simply held. It told her he had not come to disappear.

The next day at the market, he made himself visible. He shouldered sacks with the old men, their laughter blessing him as gossip softened on their tongues. Children followed him and dared each other to touch the strap of his camera, squealing when he turned and grinned. Elders leaned close and measured him in the weight of his silences. From across the crowd, Nelly saw him bend to greet an old woman, dust on his back as if it were nothing. The sight caught in her throat. He was not drifting through their world. He was entering it.

That night, Nelly opened the hidden notebook. The pages smelled faintly of earth where she had buried it. She did not write to Ruth. She wrote to him. The pencil scratched: I saw you today. You carried their weight. You stood still. You did not vanish. She pressed two petals between the sheets, one bruised and one whole, a message only the tree would understand.

When she returned to the veranda with the clothes, the sky bruised with dusk, the stepmother was waiting with the bean bowl in her lap. The woman stirred her hand through the beans and stopped. On her fingertip lay a single purple petal, crushed and clinging.

"The latrine grows flowers now?" she asked, voice soft as a trap.

Nelly kept her gaze low. "I will finish the shelling," she said. Her voice did not shake.

The woman studied her for a long moment. What frightened her was not the stranger, not even the village tongues. It was this new thing in Nelly, this steadiness that offered no purchase for cruelty. At last, she rose.

"Finish," she said. "Tomorrow we visit the elders."

Inside, her father coughed and laughed at something the drink had found for him.

Chapter Thirteen

When the stepmother first learned of Charles's intention toward Nelly, her fury took a new shape. She began to polish Olivia like a coin, pressing her forward at every chance. Olivia wore brighter dresses, carried water pots when Charles passed, and smiled. But Charles's eyes never strayed. They found Nelly in the quiet, in the shadow of the jacaranda, in the stillness of her gaze. Olivia's laughter rattled the air, but it was Nelly's silence he heard.

The morning of the elders' gathering broke heavily. The stepmother woke Nelly early, forcing her to grind maize and scrub pots. "Work shows obedience," she said, though her mouth curled with triumph. Their father sat slumped in his chair, eyes cloudy, muttering, "The elders will speak. Their word is law." Olivia drifted about in her best dress, adjusting her sash, smirking at Nelly's plain hemline.

When they set out, the stepmother marched ahead, skirts swishing like threats, Nelly trailing with a low stool. The path cut through fields humming with gossip. Villagers stood openly, no longer whispering. They had heard. They had judged. At the edge of the clearing, Charles was already there, his back straight, his arms full of a bundle he had helped carry for the old men. He greeted them, his voice calm, his posture steady. His presence was no accident now — it was a declaration.

The elders sat beneath the wide acacia, their faces furrowed with years and authority. The stepmother wasted no time. "This stranger hovers around my house," she said, words sharp as thorns. "He unsettles my daughter. We bring him before you."

Charles bowed low, greeting them in careful Kiswahili, each word measured, respectful. A ripple moved through the elders; some leaned forward, surprised. Others watched him without expression.

"Why do you linger here?" one elder asked. "This is not your land."

Charles lifted his head, eyes fixed. "I am here to work, to take photographs that tell of your people's strength. And I am here for her." His gaze turned toward Nelly. "I will not hide it."

Murmurs stirred like wind through grass. Some chuckled, some frowned. Another elder cleared his throat. "Your skin speaks before your mouth. Do you know what it means to stand for her here?"

“I will not take her in secret,” Charles answered. “I will stand as you require. I will meet your ways with respect.”

All eyes turned to Nelly. The stepmother waited for her to shrink, for her to lower her gaze. Instead, Nelly lifted her chin. Her silence was strong, not weak. At her hem clung a fallen jacaranda petal, its purple stain catching the light. The old women noticed first, their eyes narrowing, whispers swelling.

At last, the eldest among them spoke. “This is no small matter. If you are true, you must return. With words. With an offering. With proof that your shadow is not passing.”

The stepmother stiffened, lips pressed tight. She had hoped for rejection. Instead, she received a delay. The door was neither open nor closed.

On the walk home, villagers did not hide their stares. Olivia walked ahead, throwing glances over her shoulder, certain that her beauty would outshine Nelly’s plainness. But Charles’s eyes did not follow her. They searched only for Nelly. The stepmother seethed, feeling her plans fray like old cloth.

At the far end of the lane, he paused. He did not come closer. He lifted his hand once, and across the distance, Nelly felt the answering rise in her fingers before she gave it. The elders had demanded proof, and he had asked for patience and it was offered. The house would harden its walls. But one truth had already declared itself: he was here for her, and for her alone. And now both the village and the elders knew it.

Chapter Fourteen

Months had passed since the elders first weighed Charles. Months of questions that were tests. Months of the stepmother sharpening her tongue and pushing Olivia forward as if a ribbon and a smile could bend a man's gaze. Through it all, Charles returned. He learned greetings that felt true in the mouth. He stood where work was needed. He carried sacks for old men and listened when they told him where the river ran deep in flood. He kept his word as if it were a small fire he would not let go out.

On a clear morning, he came back with kin. Not many. A quiet older man from town who was known for straight dealings and a younger cousin who walked with the careful pride of someone trusted with a task. They brought small gifts that were not loud. Cloth folded into neat squares. Sugar in paper. Tea leaves that smelled like rain. A photograph print wrapped in brown, the kind that held a story without stealing any part of it. The village gathered, and the elders took their place in the half-circle. Dust rose and fell around ankles. Goats nosed the acacia roots and found nothing there.

The stepmother arrived with Olivia at her side, her bright dress catching every eye, bracelets firm on her wrist. Nelly walked behind with steady steps. Her father came last, sober enough to find his chair and lift his chin, not sober enough to meet a gaze for long.

The older man who stood with Charles spoke first. His words were modest. He did not speak of fortune. He spoke of intention. He said a man proved himself by returning and by staying when the ground turned to mud. He said Charles had returned and that he would stay. He said a vow was a house only if the posts were set in the soil of respect. He laid the small gifts at the elders' feet. The tea let its scent rise and settle.

Questions came the way they should. Do you know the weight of this girl's life? Do you know the patience that women teach men? Do you know that our ways are not for display? Charles answered in the voice Nelly now knew. Plain. Without rush. He said he would do nothing in secret. He said he would not call a promise a bridge until both sides could cross and not fall. He said he would learn what he had to. He said he would not disappear.

The stepmother cut in with a laugh that showed no joy. She tipped her chin toward Olivia and spoke of brightness and quiet talk and girls who knew how to please a house. Olivia kept her eyes

on Charles with a look she had practiced for weeks. He did not look back. The elders watched the look fall to the dust and went still.

They asked Nelly then. Not for a speech. Only for truth. She kept her hands folded and lifted her face so the wind could pass across it and clear what trembled there. She said she did not want to escape dressed as love. She said she wanted a man who would be where he said he would be when evening came. Her voice held. The old women saw how it held and exchanged a glance that meant they had measured her again and found the measure did not change.

The elders spoke among themselves while everyone stood and pretended to wait without listening. At last, the eldest spoke aloud. He said beginnings must be witnessed. He said a bond had to be fed on patience, or it would eat itself. He said there would be a day for agreement and a day for blessing, and only after that a day for vows. He did not say the word wedding. He did not have to.

The stepmother went home hard-faced and quiet, which was its own kind of danger. She counted pots and beans and breaths as if numbers could change a river's course. She pressed Olivia toward Charles again whenever the road allowed, but the man's eyes passed over Olivia the way wind passes over a field without bending a single stalk. It was Nelly's stillness he saw. It was the way she stood at the jacaranda and made silence feel like courage.

Meetings followed. There was bride price talk and laughter that eased it when it grew tight. There were small stumbles. There were moments when the stepmother's stories tried to trip the line that ran between the two families. Each time the line held. Each time Charles's older kinsman steadied it with a word that did not bruise. The father signed where he was told and nodded when he was thanked and kept his bottle capped for the length of a morning, which everyone said was something.

When the day for vows finally found them, the drums began before dawn. Their sound rolled over the hills and woke goats and babies and men who had promised to carry chairs. Women tied bright kangas around their waists and pounded cassava to a rhythm that made the sun feel near. Children ran until they had breath enough to start again. The road wore a ribbon of people who wanted to say they had been there the day the jacaranda watched a woman step into her life.

Nelly walked from her father's house in a dress sewn by Ruth's aunt. It was white the way morning is white when clouds have not yet made up their mind. The veil tugged once on the small gold earrings Charles had given her in a quiet visit that had needed no words. Her father took her arm.

His hand shook and then did not. He walked like a man carrying something he had not earned but would protect for as long as it stayed in his reach.

Charles waited under the shade. The suit he wore held the light like calm water. When his eyes found hers, the crowd fell away. The branches held still. Even the bees moved more slowly as if they understood the kind of attention that cannot be broken and still be true.

The words came in two languages. First, in his careful and clear words, so his kin could hear how he meant them. Then in hers, shaped by the elders' mouths, strong enough to carry across fields and years. Vows sat between them like posts sunk deep. When the blessing ended and the verdict was spoken, the cheer rose so fast that birds took wing from the branches and left petals drifting in their place. Some of the petals landed in Nelly's hair and stayed.

People would talk about the wedding for a long time. They would tell how the stranger's voice did not tremble. They would tell how the village itself seemed to exhale. They would tell how the stepmother stood with lips pressed thin and could not stop what moved past her and out into the day. They would tell how Olivia's dress was very bright and how no one remembered its pattern.

Work followed joy because that is the way of things. With friends and patient hands, Charles bought a small piece of land just beyond the village. They built a house there that learned its shape slowly, a veranda wide enough for story and rest, beams that made shade behave, a roof that sang when the first real rain came. A garden opened under Nelly's touch. It lifted color after color until the path looked like praise. Inside, a small silver stove changed the way bread met heat, and the smell of it drifted to the road, which made children come running with no plan at all.

People who once crossed the path to avoid Nelly found reasons to visit. Women asked about the kitchen as if pots knew secrets if placed on the right shelf. Men tested the door once and then again to feel how it shut smoothly with a turn. They sat on the veranda and let their eyes rest. They spoke of the weather first and then of other things. The stepmother did not come to visit. Cruelty has a hunger that joy does not feed. It thinned itself at the edge of their yard and did not step over.

Ruth came sometimes when the road allowed. She brought small things. A coil of ribbon. A page torn from a magazine with a picture of a dress that would not suit the village roads at all. They laughed and said it would suit the veranda at sunset, and that was enough. Letters had become footsteps now. The notebook stayed wrapped and safe in a cloth at the back of a drawer. It held a

few pressed petals that had kept their color. Nelly touched it once in a while and then left it to its quiet.

Evenings settled into a kind of peace that felt earned. Nelly and Charles sat on the veranda with their chairs tilted back just enough to tell the body it could rest. Sometimes he held her hand with its garden roughness and turned it palm up as if to read what the days had written there. He would look out at the path and say in that voice that had learned how to belong, "This is home now." She would smile as if those three words filled something that had been empty since girlhood.

The village did not stop watching. Eyes will always watch when a life stands up straight and calls itself by its right name. But what they saw changed. They saw a woman who had been pressed down and now walked with the ground rising to meet her steps. They saw a man whose gaze had learned patience and who kept his promises in the small hours when there was no one to clap for him. They saw a house that gathered people and sent them away lighter.

When Nelly visited home, she would sit under the jacaranda, and the petals would fall on her feet. They made a soft path to the door that no one swept away. Nelly watched them sometimes and thought of all the ways a tree could be patient. She thought of beans counted and lies told and the thin wire feeling on the back of her neck that had been fear. She thought of chains and how rust begins as a quiet thing.

She did not think of survival anymore. She lived. And the whole village could see it

Epilogue

Nelly no longer woke to the sting of her stepmother's voice, the silence of a father, or the weight of a sister who treated her like a rug. Her days were no longer measured by how much she could endure but rather by the love her husband poured.

The home she lived in was hers and Charles's. Their very own. The laughter and tenderness within its walls were real. The trees and animals outside no longer reminded her of pain. They now belonged to a life filled with joy, and that was enough.

When Charles placed a cup of tea beside her, she smiled. It was not the smile of a girl trying to survive, but the smile of a woman who had made it through and fallen deeply in love.

Her past would always be part of her, but it no longer held her down. She had stepped into something new. Something greater. A power only they could know. The power of love.

About the Author

Carolle Ruto is the author of *My War with Fibroids*, a memoir of courage and survival. Her fiction gives voice to silenced struggles, exploring resilience, injustice, and the human spirit's ability to endure even in the harshest conditions. In *When Daughters Are Neglected*, she turns her pen toward the hidden scars of girlhood, capturing the ache of abandonment alongside the quiet flame of hope.

Whether writing about a young woman's fight for dignity or a love that defies boundaries, Carolle weaves raw emotion into every page. When she is not writing, she observes the world quietly, gathering small moments and whispered stories that become the heartbeat of her books.