

ELAINA

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Book Sample Excerpt

Chapter 1: The Child Left in the Shadows

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Chapter 1: The Child Left in the Shadows

The air was alive with sound—drums in the distance or calypso music drifting from a radio. Children ran down the lane, their laughter following behind them. The women on the corner babbled, their voices strong like the peppers they sold. The men played dominoes at the rum shop and slammed the tiles so hard the sound reached our house.

To me, the city was both wide and small. Wide, because there was always more noise, more colors, more things happening beyond the gate. Small, because most of the time I only watched. I stood at the edge of our yard, clutching the fence, wishing I could follow the children down the street, wishing someone would call me to join them.

Because I knew, deep inside, that I could not have a childhood like kids my age were getting all around me...

I felt like an outsider, like I didn't belong and was mistakenly brought into this world. I felt it again one night, as I sat in the doorway, knees pulled to my chest, watching Ryan and Jezzy, my half-brother and half-sister, getting ready to go to a party I was not allowed to attend. My eyes followed the way Jezzy was shining with excitement, the way Ryan kept doing a little dance as he got ready.

Ryan stood in front of the small, cracked mirror, his hands smoothing his shirt collar over and over again. He looked at his reflection with a deep focus, as if a single wrong fold might keep him from being let inside the party.

“Jezzy, give me the comb!” he said, tilting his chin toward the dresser.

Jezzy, already in her new dress, spun once in a little circle before she handed it to him. The fabric of her dress swished around her legs. “You always brush your hair too much,” she teased, her voice sweet and light, but with a sharp little edge at the end.

“No, I don't!” Ryan protested, running the comb through his short curls. “I just want it to be flat.”

Jezzy laughed. Her laughter was a bright, clear sound that filled the small room. I watched her from my corner as she slid her feet into her new shoes. She gently patted the shiny black leather, as if it were the most precious treasure in the world. Then she groaned.

“These hurt.”

“Then don’t wear them,” Ryan said simply, still looking at his reflection.

“I want to.” Jezzy pouted. “They’re pretty.”

“Pretty silly,” Ryan said.

Jezzy made a face at him. “You’re silly.”

As the two talked, I stayed quiet, just watching them. I loved these moments, when they were so wrapped up in their own little world that they forgot I was there. Their easy laughter and quick back-and-forth jokes felt like a secret language I didn’t know. I just tried to catch the little pieces of their joy that floated through the air, hold them for myself, and pretend I was part of it all.

I wanted to ask what the party would be like. Would the music sound like the drums I sometimes heard drifting from the streets? Would the food taste as sweet as the fried dumplings that filled the mornings? But the words stayed inside me. I already knew the answer. The party was not mine to imagine.

Jezzy leaned close to the mirror and smeared a bit of her mama’s lip balm on her mouth. “Do you think Mama will come with us?” she asked, watching Ryan through the mirror.

“She has to,” Ryan said, tugging at his sleeves. “I’m not getting my new shoes all dirty in the mud.”

For them, it meant Viv, the woman I called stepmother. For me, it meant someone else, someone gone too soon. I hugged my knees tighter, pressing my chin down, letting their voices roll past me.

I stayed that way, silent, watching, wishing, knowing.

At some point, Jezzy’s eyes lifted from the mirror and found my curled-up form. She stopped brushing her hair for a moment, the bristles hanging in the air. She tilted her head slightly, and the playful teasing on her face softened into something different. She set the brush down and walked over to me, her new dress rustling with every step she took.

“Elaina,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. She crouched down so we were eye to eye. “I’m so sorry you can’t come with us tonight.”

I didn’t say anything. Just stared at my feet.

Jezy bit down on her lip, her expression caught somewhere between worry and kindness. Her fingers worked at something bright in her hand, turning it carefully as if it might slip away. She leaned closer and extended her hand. A ribbon appeared between us, pale pink and soft, lined with the most delicate flowers stitched along its edge.

“Here. You can wear this,” she said kindly, her eyes darting here and there. “It’s not much, but it’s pretty, isn’t it?” Her gesture surprised me, because she was always mean to me.

My chest felt like it was fluttering with a million tiny butterflies. I reached out with both hands, taking the ribbon as if it were a priceless jewel. It seemed to glow in the dim lamplight, softer and more beautiful than anything I had ever owned. For a second, I completely forgot about the loud music outside, the fancy dresses I couldn’t have, and the doors always closed. For that moment, I felt like I belonged in their world.

I pressed the ribbon against my cheek. “Thank you, Jezy. It’s so beautiful,” I whispered, my eyes almost welling up from the emotions in my throat.

But before I could even try to tie it in my hair, another hand—larger, stronger, colder—swooped down and snatched the ribbon right out of my grasp.

“Mama...” Jezy pleaded, but it was too late.

My stepmother was standing over us, her tall shadow falling over us. Her eyes darted from Jezy’s guilty face to my own, which I knew was filled with a childish hope that she hated. A smile that didn’t reach her eyes appeared on her lips.

“That girl needs no ribbons in her life,” she said, her voice sweet but sharp like a knife. She yanked Jezy up to her side and turned on her heel. “Come. You’ll ruin your dress fussing over her.”

The ribbon dangled in Viv’s hand as she pulled my sister away, and I watched until they disappeared down the hall.

I stayed where I was, my palms still open, still warm from holding the gift that was no longer mine.

It wasn’t the first time Viv had taken something from me. She had long ago decided I was not to go where her children went. I had no dresses, because she refused to buy me any. I had no shoes for dancing, no books for learning. When Ryan and Jezy went to school, I stayed behind and was left to sweep the floors or fetch water.

Viv never tried to do even the simplest things for me. She didn't wash my clothes, so I wore them until they were stiff and rough against my skin. She didn't comb my hair, letting it tangle into knots that hurt when I tried to pull them out with my fingers. Sometimes, I would watch her fuss over Jezzy's curls, smoothing them with sweet-smelling oil, and I would wonder what it might feel like to have someone's gentle hands touch my head like that.

But I never asked. I already knew the answer.

In Viv's house, I was always the one left behind.

Ryan and Jezzy stood by the front door, their faces bright with excitement. They were now dressed and ready to go. They talked over each other, a rush of words about who they hoped to see at the party. Ryan insisted some of his school friends, including a few guys from his football team, would be there. Jezzy just laughed and quickly listed the names of the girls she hoped to see, detailing what each one would probably be wearing.

My stepmother stepped forward and knelt, her eyes focused only on Jezzy. She carefully smoothed the fabric of Jezzy's dress, her hands moving with a gentleness that only a mother could carry. She adjusted the bow at her back, making sure it sat perfectly. She reached up and gently brushed a stray strand of hair from Jezzy's face, tucking it behind her ear.

All the while, she smiled, nodding along as Jezzy chattered on, though I knew she wasn't truly listening. Her hands stayed busy, checking every tiny detail of the dress and her hair before she finally stepped back.

"You look absolutely lovely," Viv said to Jezzy, a wide, proud smile stretching across her face.

Then, almost as an afterthought, she glanced at Ryan. She straightened his collar and then waved them both toward the door. "Go on now. Don't be late."

The children rushed out, a burst of energy, their voices and laughter spilling into the street. They ran toward the party just two blocks away, a place I couldn't go. I watched them go, two bright figures getting smaller and smaller until they turned a corner and were gone.

An immeasurable silence filled the house.

I stood in my corner, hoping to be forgotten, to melt back into the shadows where I belonged. But my stepmother, Viv, turned from the door. Her eyes, which had been so soft and full of pride as she watched Jezzy, became hard and sharp when they landed on me. The smile

she had worn just a moment ago vanished completely.

“What are you looking at?” she snapped, her voice cutting through the stillness like a knife. “Go and clean the kitchen now.”

She didn’t wait for me to move. She just turned her back and walked away, her footsteps disappearing down the hall until the door to her own room clicked shut. That small sound sealed me into the silence. I knew I couldn’t waste a second. If she came back and found me still standing there, she would punish me.

That was how it always worked. I had no one to speak up for me, no one to tell her to stop. I was just a child, too small and too scared to fight against her rules.

The rag slipped into my hand slowly, as though even my body resisted the task. My thoughts stayed on the party, the music that pulsed, the bright lights that burned, and the children’s laughter that excluded me. A deep sadness filled my chest, heavy and unspoken. I sank to my knees beside the pots and scrubbed them clean, but my thoughts strayed far away. Still, the sounds traveled to me—the echo of laughter, the hum of a song drifting down the street. It felt close enough to touch, but I could not reach it. I caught myself longing for silence, if only to free my mind from what it could not have.

I thought about my real mother, the woman I only remembered in bits and pieces. Would she have combed my hair like Viv did for Jezzy? Would she have smiled at me the way she smiled at her own children? I did not know, and it hurt to think about it. I often wondered where my place in the world was. It never felt like it was here, in this house where I was seen but never cared for, where I was told what to do but never asked what I wanted. I was a girl in a home full of people, but no one to stand with me.

The kitchen floor was cold under my knees, and the water grew colder as I worked. I scrubbed harder, trying to wash away the lonely feeling inside me. I wished I could find a place where I truly belonged, where my laughter could be as bright as Jezzy’s, and someone could be proud of me. I kept scrubbing, watching the water turn gray with dirt, wishing the dirt could take away the emptiness in my heart.

When the house was empty and I was left with my own thoughts, I tried to hold on to the faces I thought were my own. My father, Robert. And my mother, Ruth.

Chapter 2: Faith in the Unfaithful

10 years ago, something special happened.

Robert first saw Ruth on a warm Sunday afternoon in Kingston. The market was noisy, and the stalls were crowded with people selling mangoes, plantains, and yams. Women called out their prices while children weaved through the crowd carrying baskets. The air was teeming with the smell of roasted corn and fresh bread.

Robert had come with his older cousin to help carry home goods, but his eyes kept moving across the busy square—eyes that never seemed to rest.

That was when he noticed Ruth, standing by a stall of ripe oranges.

She wore a simple blue dress, her hair tied back neatly, and her hands moved gently as she picked through the fruit. Something about her quiet grace caught his attention.

Robert's cousin nudged him. "Why're you staring so hard, man?" he teased.

Robert laughed but could not look away. "I've never seen someone like her before," he said softly.

As Ruth turned to pay the vendor, her eyes lifted and met his. It was only for a moment, but she offered a small smile before turning back to her basket. Robert felt his heart beat faster, and before he could stop himself, he walked toward her.

"Good afternoon," he said, his voice polite but nervous.

Ruth looked at him with surprise, then nodded. "Afternoon."

He pointed to the oranges in her basket. "You choose the sweetest ones," he said. "My mother always says the ones with the brightest skin taste best."

Ruth's lips curved into a smile. "Then your mother is right," she replied. "These are for her?"

"No," Robert said quickly, shaking his head. "She sent me here to help my cousin. But I think I came for something else too."

Ruth tilted her head. "And what is that?"

Robert hesitated, then spoke with a boldness that surprised even him. "To meet you."

Ruth held back her words, choosing instead to look directly at him, her eyes restless and probing. The market continued in its bustle, yet the noise seemed to lose its edge, fading until it no longer reached them. A low, musical laugh rose from her, not loud, but filled with the uneasy charm of a feeling she could not hide.

“You are very sure of yourself.”

Robert grinned. “Not sure. Just hopeful.”

Robert had asked Ruth if she would walk with him the following Sunday after church. She agreed with a shy nod, and all week, Robert could not think of anything else.

That Sunday, the streets were quieter than on the weekday market. The sun was warm but gentle, and the sea breeze carried the smell of salt through the air. Ruth wore a white dress with small flowers stitched near the collar. Robert wore his best shirt, freshly ironed, though he kept pulling at the sleeves to make sure it sat right.

They walked side by side down a narrow lane that led toward the water. Children played marbles in the dust, and an old man strummed a guitar under a tree. Robert glanced at Ruth every few steps, still amazed she had agreed to meet him.

“You walk fast,” Robert said with a small laugh, trying to hide his nerves.

Ruth smiled. “You just walk slow.”

Her voice was playful, and Robert relaxed. “Maybe I walk slow because I want the day to last longer,” he replied.

She looked at him then, her eyes bright in the sunlight. “You have many words, don’t you?”

“Not many,” Robert said. “Only the ones I mean.”

They reached the shore where the waves touched the sand in soft curls. The water sparkled, and a group of fishermen pulled in their nets while shouting to one another. Robert and Ruth sat on a large rock, their shoulders almost touching. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the sound of the sea filling the silence.

Ruth was the first to break it. “Why did you really come to me that day at the market?”

Robert took a breath. “Because I felt something,” he said simply. “I cannot explain it. I just knew I should not let you walk away without a word.”

Ruth lowered her gaze, her fingers tracing the hem of her dress. "I thought you were too forward," she admitted, then smiled. "But maybe that is what I liked."

The sun dipped lower, painting the sky in soft gold. Robert wished time could stop, that the day could stay frozen with Ruth beside him and the sea stretching out forever. As they rose to leave, he dared to reach for her hand. She did not pull away.

A week later, Ruth noticed small changes in her body. One morning, she woke up before the rooster like she always did, but this time her stomach lurched the moment she stepped outside. She clutched the basin, her body trembling as a bitter taste rose in her throat.

The sickness returned the next day, and the day after, until she could no longer pretend it was nothing. When her monthly time failed to come, she realized what was really happening. She was carrying a child.

As soon as she found out, she hid herself in her room, thinking over and over about this unexpected discovery. She was confused, for she both felt nervous and excited. Nervous because she was young and unmarried and knew the whispers that followed women of this kind. Excited, because the child was Robert's.

Ruth rested her hand on her belly and smiled to herself. For all her fears, she was glad it was his child she carried. Robert had been nothing but sweet with her, always attentive, always lifting her spirit. In his presence, she felt safe and cherished, as if she were the most beautiful woman in the whole of Jamaica.

Little did she know Robert was only half the man she believed him to be.

She spotted him near the fruit stall. He looked much the same, but something felt different. His eyes wandered, his smile faint and hollow. When he noticed her, he gave only a small nod instead of the warm greeting she had hoped for. Ruth's chest tightened, but she forced a smile and went to him.

"Good morning, Robert," she said softly.

"Morning," he replied, his tone flat. His gaze drifted past her, toward the crowd, as if he were searching for someone else.

Ruth tried to speak of small things, the mangoes, the price of bread, the smell of roasted corn in the air, yet every word seemed to fall against a wall. Robert answered politely, but there was no spark in his voice, none of the laughter that once came so easily.

Her palms grew damp around the basket handle. She had pictured this moment many times, imagined the joy in his eyes, the way he might take her hand and promise they would face everything together. Instead, doubt began to gnaw at her.

Ruth stood before him, gathering her courage. She had to tell him.

“Robert,” she began, her voice trembling, “there is something I need to tell you.”

His eyes found hers at last, and the suddenness of it struck her with a force she had not expected. Her fingers clung to the basket, turning and twisting the edge as though by that small act she might keep from falling apart.

“I am pregnant,” she whispered. “It is yours.”

For a moment, something dark crossed Robert’s eyes. It was quick but strong enough to make Ruth’s skin prickle. She almost stepped back, certain she had seen fear or anger flicker there. Then it was gone, hidden as if it had never been. His mouth curved into a smile, his voice gentle, calm, and full of false warmth.

“That is wonderful news, Ruth,” he said, stepping closer. His hands touched her shoulders before drawing her into his arms. His cheek rested against her hair as if nothing had unsettled him at all.

Closing her eyes, Ruth released a slow breath. “I was so nervous to tell you,” she whispered. “But I knew you would be happy.”

“I am happy,” Robert murmured, his hand sliding across her back. “Everything will be all right.”

Her lips lifted into a smile as she leaned against him. All her worry seemed to fall away in that embrace. She believed every word, and the secret she had carried with such fear now felt like a promise of joy.

What she didn’t know was that, on the same day, another woman had come to tell him that he had impregnated her.

Ruth lived in a dream that was never real, and her faith in Robert only grew when he asked her to move in with him. She was overjoyed, certain he wanted to build a home with her, make her his wife, and raise the child she carried. To her, it was proof of his love and devotion.

In truth, Robert was hiding from his other problem, or the other woman he had gotten pregnant. Moving in with Ruth gave him the perfect cover. He wore the mask of loving partner while quietly pushing aside the life he had created elsewhere, all while Ruth remained blind to the betrayal unfolding beside her.

Robert was not the partner she had imagined. He spent long hours sunk in silence, his gaze fixed on some distance only he could see. When Ruth prepared meals with care, he ate without comment, sometimes pushing his food aside untouched. She brought flowers to the table, smoothed the sheets, and folded their clothes neatly into the wooden chest, but nothing seemed to stir warmth from him. The house echoed with the sounds of her effort, while Robert glided like a shadow through the rooms, torn with the guilt that another woman was also carrying his child.

She suspected that there might have been another woman, but forced it away if a sliver of doubt touched her, clinging harder to the story she wanted to believe. Her heart needed him to be the man she had dreamed of, because she was carrying his child and could not bear the thought of facing the truth alone.

Ruth had been in labor through the night, her cries filling the small house. The midwife repeatedly wiped her brow, whispering encouragement, urging her to push. Robert walked the floor outside, his hands clenching and unclenching, his face pale.

When the first cry pierced the air, Robert froze. The sharp, raw voice of new life rang in his ears, and his chest tightened. He stepped into the doorway just as the midwife placed the small, wriggling body on Ruth's chest.

Ruth lay spent, her hair damp, her face glowing with relief. Tears slid down her cheeks as she whispered, "She is beautiful." Her voice trembled with awe.

Moving with hesitation and care, Robert approached the bed. He looked at the tiny face, the clenched fists, the fragile body pressed against Ruth, and forced a smile onto his lips. He touched the baby's hand, and his breath caught when her fingers closed around his.

"Our daughter," he said softly, as though the words might anchor him in the moment.

"Yes, Robert. Our daughter." Ruth's eyes shone as she gazed at him.

The midwife wrapped the child and returned her to Ruth's arms. Robert pulled a chair beside the bed and sat close, his eyes fixed on the baby. To Ruth, his silence might have seemed

full of meaning, but it was the silence of a man holding back more than he revealed.

He reached for the blanket and smoothed it over the infant. His smile stayed a tad bit longer than it could be deemed natural.

Chapter 4: My Saving Grace

The days in that house never seemed to end. Every morning, my stomach hurt, the hunger gnawing at me like a monster. Every night I went to sleep, the pain made me wheeze. I was only four years old. But I already understood. Understood what it felt like when nobody wanted you. No one was kind to me at all. No one ever smiled at me. They told me to be quiet. To make myself small. To never ask for food.

I sat by myself on the cold floor. Thinking about the woman Viv called Ruth. She was my real mother. Viv always said her name as if it were something dirty. Like a word you shouldn't say out loud. She told me Ruth ran away. She left me here. I was too little to remember what actually happened. I couldn't figure out why she didn't want me now.

Sometimes I tried to picture her face. I imagined someone with my own face. Someone who would scoop me up. Who would hold me tight. When I thought about her for too long, something in my chest started aching badly. My eyes would fill up with tears. I kept thinking: if she had only stayed. Maybe things would be different now. Maybe I would have food to eat. Maybe someone would love me finally.

When nighttime came, and the house got quiet, I would whisper to her. Whisper in the darkness. I asked her why she left me alone. I asked her if she ever thought about me at all. I cried so much that my pillow got soaking wet. I told her I hated her for going away. I hated her for not picking me.

The things Viv said cut deep inside me. She kept saying Ruth left because she didn't want me. After hearing it enough times, I started believing it must be the truth. Maybe I really was a mistake. Everyone in that house treated me like I was a mistake. Viv treated me that way. Even her family, who tossed me bits of food like I was a dog, and told me I should be grateful for it.

Everything felt too big around me. And I felt too small always. I just wanted to vanish completely. I wanted my stomach to stop hurting all the time. I wanted all the sad feelings to go away forever. I wanted to stop feeling bad about being born. I didn't understand much about anything else. But I understood this one thing clearly:

If my mother really loved me at all, she would have come back for me.

She never came back. So, I figured nobody ever would.

Rose was my grandmother and Robert's mother. She moved with quiet grace. Her presence was gentle but strong, like a soft breeze that lingers. She was the only person in that house who truly cared for me. I didn't understand it then. Her care showed in small ways. Simple questions. Small acts that seemed normal.

She knew what I didn't. She knew Viv hated me. The signs were clear to her. Viv's words were sharp. Even when she smiled, her eyes showed anger. Whenever I entered a room, or when she had to touch me at all, her hands would shake.

Rose saw it all clearly. But she couldn't stop it.

All she could do was watch quietly. Her kind eyes followed me always, like a guardian who couldn't step in to help.

"Are you eating enough, dear?" she would ask in her soft voice. Her hands were working on the yarn as she knitted a sweater.

"Yes, Grandma," I would answer back. Not knowing why, she asked that question constantly.

She would nod slowly. Then glance at Viv. Viv was always nearby, pretending to smile for her.

"Oh yes," Viv would say with fake cheer. "She's eating fine. Just being a little troublemaker, as always!"

Rose would nod again. But the worry never left her kind face. For a while, she believed Viv's words. Maybe she wanted to believe them. Because it was easier than facing the hard truth, but when Viv turned away, Rose would look at me. Her eyes spoke what she could not say out loud.

They said: I see you. I know what they do to you. I am here for you, even if I cannot help you now.

As a child, that was enough for me entirely. I didn't understand the words. But I felt her deep warmth—warmth which was quiet and gentle. In a house with fake smiles, hers felt like home to me.

When I was sent away, Rose's worry turned to deep fear. The thought of sending a small child, only two years old, to live with strangers broke her heart completely. She had always tried

to respect the boundaries set. But this was too far now. It made her chest tighten hard. It made her hands shake.

One afternoon, she finally spoke up about it. Her voice trembled with anger and pain.

“Robert, why are you sending her away?” she asked him. She held the edge of the kitchen table for strength. “She’s only two years old! She doesn’t understand any of this. She shouldn’t have to go through that kind of pain.”

Robert sighed heavily. His shoulders sagged. “Viv says she should leave. She can’t take care of two children at once. The new baby is coming soon.”

Rose’s heart sank completely. She had seen that fake kindness in Viv’s eyes too many times to be fooled. This wasn’t about the new baby coming. Viv wanted me gone. Out of her sight. Forgotten forever.

“You’re saying it’s for her own good?” Rose said, her voice shaking badly. “Sending her away to complete strangers? At this age? Don’t you see what that will do to her inside?”

Robert didn’t answer her at all. His silence said everything clearly.

Rose’s worry only grew heavier. She paced quietly in her small sitting room, hands clasped together, muttering under her breath. Every shadow felt darker now, and every laugh that wasn’t mine seemed sharper to her. Her mind raced with plans, wondering how she could protect me, especially from the people who were supposed to care the most.

The whole time I was away, Rose never stopped asking about me. She would constantly ask Viv and Robert about me. Her concern was woven into every question. Gentle, but persistent.

“Elaina,” she would ask softly, “how is she doing there now? Is she eating well? Is she happy there? Are they treating her kindly at all?”

Viv always flashed that strained, forced smile. Tilting her head just so. “Yes, yes, don’t worry, Rose,” she would say. Her voice was too bright. Too rehearsed now. “My folks are taking care of her well enough. She’s happier there than she was here, truly.”

But this time, Rose did not believe a single word. Her eyes, sharp despite their age, betrayed her deep disbelief. She knew Viv too well. Knew the quiet bitterness she held for my mother. Knew how that hatred colored every decision. Viv couldn’t have sent me to a place where I was treated like a princess. She must have left instructions that I was not to be pampered. Not to be

loved. Nor to be cared.

Rose's heart ached with worry. A gnawing, constant ache that would not fade away. Every unanswered letter. Every too-bright smile from Viv—it all confirmed her deep suspicion. I was not being treated as I should have been treated.

She sat quietly in her armchair, knitting needles idly tapping as her eyes stared into the distance. "My poor little Elaina," she whispered one evening, her voice trembling. "I hope she knows... I hope she feels... that I am with her, even if only in my heart."

One afternoon, while I was wallowing in my room back at the farm, Rose spoke to her son with a determination that was rare for her. Her voice was gentle, but it carried a hard edge of resolve.

"I'm going to visit Elaina," she said clearly, looking Robert directly in his eyes. "I need to see how she's doing for myself now."

At first, Robert's heart leaped. The idea of finally knowing how I was, of seeing me again, thrilled and terrified him. But he knew better than to act on impulse. Viv had made it very clear: he was never to visit me. She repeated it constantly, her voice sharp. "She's with her relatives now. Let her be and do not look back."

Robert obeyed her, but he stayed in contact through letters. Letters Viv always claimed were sent to me, even though it was a blatant lie, since I never replied.

Hearing his mother's plan, his heart raced hard. He almost blurted out that he wanted to go with her, to see me too, but he thought better of it fast. His daughter with Viv was almost three now, and he knew mentioning a visit would send Viv into a furious rage. So, he swallowed his longing whole and simply nodded slowly, forcing calm onto his face.

"Okay, Mother," he said quietly. "Do what you must do."

Rose reached across the table. She placed her hand on his arm gently. "Robert," she said softly, "you must promise me something now. Don't tell Viv I'm going. She must not know this."

He met her gaze steadily, feeling the weight of her words. The truth behind them was heavy.

"I promise," he said. He meant it deeply. He was hoping with all his heart. Hoping I was safe. Hoping I was okay. That this visit would reassure them. That I was still a little girl. A girl

who deserved love and care.

Soon, the day arrived. Rose set off, taking the same train and following the same winding path Robert had taken almost three years ago, when he dropped me off at that farm.