

Chapter 10

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.—James 1:27

“*Tumeshiba*,” Jay said as he and Keeja finished their meal, proclaiming that their stomachs were full.

An East African cook feels highly complimented with a report of a full stomach. Foreigners often ramble on about the food’s taste, texture, or appearance, but those things aren’t critical for her family to sleep through the night. Too many nights, mothers send their children to bed hungry due to poverty.

To arrive back in Keeja’s village before dark, Jay knew it was time to say their goodbyes and thank you’s and to begin the three-hour bike ride home. Keeja and Jay asked around for little Penda, and a grandma brought the little girl out from among the women who had been sitting under one mango shade tree while the men sat under another. A few of the oldest residents sat on chairs, rocks, or logs while most of the adults and all of the children sat on the dirt, freshly swept that morning.

Penda, dressed in a traditional *kitenge* wrap of orange and yellow, held her grandma’s hand as the two walked slowly toward the bicycles. In her other hand, Penda gripped a small, blue plastic bag smudged with dirt.

Keeja walked toward the little girl. The grandma recognized him, so she ordered the girl to greet her Uncle. “*Mkie*,” the older woman commanded.

Penda obeyed with a respectful greeting and curtsy, her eyes looking to the ground.

Keeja greeted back and expressed his condolences with the traditional words of “So sorry.” Although the two words were expected to be spoken, they overflowed to his lips from a heart that felt true compassion. “*Pole sana*,” Keeja said, taking the little girl’s limp hand in his.

“*Asante*.” Penda knew the word of thanks expected to be spoken in times of grief. At four years old, she had already sat with the village women at too many funerals.

Jay went through all the greetings with the grandma. He gave his *pole sana* to her, too, receiving the obligatory *asante* from the lady who was Penda's biological grandma, mother-in-law to Keeja's sister. Her deeply wrinkled face and sagging shoulders expressed her loss—a son, a daughter-in-law, and now a granddaughter who had to leave. The empty corn bags in her storeroom and her weak body could not fulfill the dearest wish of her heart.

As Jay shook hands with both, he noticed the chilled, heavily calloused hand of the grandma and the tiny hand of her granddaughter. His eye focused on the little bag in Penda's hands.

"What is in your bag, Penda?" asked Jay.

Penda pulled out a small doll made of mud and sticks. Little bits of shredded red, plastic bag stood for hair.

"Nice. What is the name of your little doll?" asked Jay.

"*Amani*," replied Penda, "but I call her Ani."

Jay smiled and held back some emotion watching the little girl smooth down the plastic hair of her doll named Hope. "Dear God," he prayed silently, "please grant this little girl an extra portion of hope in this hard season."

"She has a baby. See?" continued Penda. Jay and Keeja looked more closely, and they oohed and aahed as Penda opened up a scrap of purple and yellow cloth draped around the doll's back. Inside was a tiny ball of mud. Penda made eye contact with her Uncle Keeja for the first time, waiting for affirmation that he had seen the baby.

"What is the baby's name?" asked Keeja.

"She doesn't have one. The baby likes to stay with her mama," answered the little girl.

Keeja and Jay exchanged a look of compassion for this child who wished that she, too, could be close to her mama.

Their quiet moment ended as another man approached to greet them. Earlier, Keeja had pointed him out to Jay—the local witch doctor who now owned Keeja's sister's last two chickens. Keeja gulped. He hoped that he and Jay could exit the village without conversing with the man, but it was not to be.

An icy breeze kicked up a little dust causing Keeja to shiver and Jay to sneeze.

Satan had just arrived at the Jaro village, his massive cream-colored wings folding in as he surveyed the funeral scene, content that the local witch doctor's work continued to build walls of fear and despair. Invisible to the humans nearby, Satan looked on as Keeja, Jay, and the witch doctor went through their greetings.

"A waste of time," muttered Satan, who was ready to fight to keep Penda under his reign.