

Prologue

Every campus has a season it is remembered by, and for those who lived it, that season was the first week.

Long before the buses arrived at the gates of the University of Education, Winneba, the road that carried them there had already seen a hundred years of the same journey — young people leaving one version of themselves behind in a town they knew by heart, carrying the other version, still unfinished, toward a place they had only imagined. Some came with admission letters folded soft from handling. Some came with a parent's warning still ringing in their ears. All of them came with the same quiet, stubborn belief that this was the place where the story of their life would finally begin to make sense.

It rarely announces itself as a test. It arrives instead as heat on a bus window, as a suitcase too heavy for one person to carry alone, as a name called out across a forecourt by a stranger who will, by the end of the week, no longer be a stranger at all. Nobody steps off that bus already knowing which parts of themselves campus will keep, and which parts it will quietly ask them to leave behind.

This is the story of five who stepped down together — Esi, Kojo, Abena, Yaw, and Nana — and of the week that unmade and remade each of them in its own particular way. It is a story about money that was never really about money, love that was never really about love, and a fear of being left behind that turned out, in the end, to be the most ordinary fear in the world, and the easiest one to overcome, once someone said it out loud.

There was a woman waiting for them before they even arrived — not with the answers, because no one who has lived long enough gives those away for free, but with a single word that would follow them through everything that came after. She would say it first as a joke to break the tension of five strangers standing in the heat. She would say it again, and mean it completely, before the week was through.

Akwaaba.

Welcome.

What that word would come to cost, and what it would come to mean, is the story that follows.

CHAPTER ONE

Suitcases and Big Grammar

The bus groaned to a stop at the gates of the University of Education, Winneba, and released its cargo of dreams into the afternoon heat.

They came down the steps one after another, blinking against the sun, dragging suitcases that had been packed with more hope than sense — a hundred silent promises folded between the shirts and the shoes. Behind them, North Campus rose in its low, sprawling calm: hostels with their washing lines strung like bunting, a forecourt already loud with returning students, and somewhere beyond the administration block, the sea, close enough that you could taste the salt in the wind if you knew to look for it.

None of them were looking for it yet. They were looking at each other, and at themselves, trying to work out who they were about to become.

North Campus did not announce itself the way a city did. It settled into you slowly — the low red roofs of the hostels catching the afternoon sun, the paths worn smooth and pale by four decades of students who had walked them before, the notice boards layered thick with old announcements no one had bothered to take down. Somewhere a generator coughed to life and settled into a hum. Somewhere else, further off, a group of returning students had already found their reunion and were shouting each other's names across the forecourt as though a single semester apart had been a small forever. To a stranger, it might have looked like chaos. To anyone who had survived even one week of it, it would come to look, eventually, like home — though none of the five who stepped down from that bus knew that yet, and some of them would learn it the hard way before they learned it any other way at all.

The heat had a texture to it, thick and unhurried, the kind that made you understand immediately why every conversation on campus moved a little slower than it might have anywhere else. Even the freshers' excitement had to fight its way through it.

A single spotlight found the woman standing at the centre of it all before the freshers had even arrived, as though the campus itself had cleared a small stage for her. Her name was Ama, a final-year student, and she wore her kente the way some people wear an argument — with total conviction. The cloth caught the light and threw it back gold and green and deep red, and when she spoke, her voice had the unhurried certainty of someone who had already survived what was about to happen to everyone else.

"University of Education, Winneba," she said, to no one and to everyone. "Where dreams arrive with suitcases... and big grammar."

She let the words settle before she went on.