



Save my Heart

Ndwaru Road Series

Book Two

Elly Kamari

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By

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Chapter One

Leila Karani shifted the bag of shopping from one hand to the other as she crossed the busy street outside the Lifestyle Mall in Nairobi. She power walked along the sidewalk, headed to Biashara Street. Stealing a glance at her cell phone, she grimaced when she saw the time. She was running late for her next appointment. Hoping her client hadn't arrived yet; she adjusted her grip on the bag and concentrated on getting to her shop.

At twenty-eight, Leila was the proud owner of a successful fashion business. Her store named, Leila Fashions, sold design clothes and fabrics. She enjoyed a steady flow of clients, managing to pay her bills and afford a comfortable life for her daughter and mother. The shopping she carried was for her daughter's eighth birthday party scheduled on Saturday at her house.

Sonya remained her unexpected gift, she thought as she adjusted the weight of the shopping bag in her hand.

She had been twenty, in college studying to be a teacher, when she got pregnant. She didn't like to think about Sonya's father. She preferred to imagine he didn't exist. Leila pulled her thoughts back from that angry pit and concentrated on the good things. Despite how she got pregnant, keeping Sonya was the best decision of her life. Her daughter filled her days with joy and excitement. Leila couldn't wait to see Sonya's face on Saturday when she saw all her birthday gifts.

A smile gracing her lips, Leila walked into her shop, happy to see the two sales assistants hard at work.

"Did you manage?" Terry Lenku, her best friend and business manager, asked from the fabric section.

"The supermarket line was long, I almost left. Am I late?"

"She hasn't come in yet," Terry said, knowing Leila was talking about her client. "A delivery guy dropped off an envelope for you. Have you ordered anything?"

Leila took the envelope Terry held out with a frown. She hadn't made any orders that required such a small envelope, unless it was an order from a client. Taking the envelope, she read her name neatly printed on the top along with her shop's name.

"Miriam's here," Terry interrupted.

Turning around, Leila smiled at the tall elegant woman who walked into her shop. Miriam Nderitu, soon to become Miriam Mwangi, worked at a bank doing finance management. Leila liked her style, which consisted of tailored tidy skirts, dresses and blouses that fit her figure to perfection. She liked designing clothes with Miriam in mind especially since she had the height, and the looks. In another lifetime, Miriam would have made a perfect model. Instead, Miriam used her dark classic looks and brilliant mind to conquer the corporate world.

"I hope I'm not late," Miriam said, glancing at a delicate gold watch on her left wrist. "I'm needed for a meeting in exactly thirty minutes."

Leila nodded in understanding and led the way to the back of the shop where she'd set up an elegant sitting area with a dressing room she used for fittings. Dumping her shopping bag on a table by the window, she concentrated on fitting the delicate white organza dress she had carefully designed for Miriam's wedding. She spent the next thirty minutes concentrating on

making changes and listening to Miriam's suggestions. After the fitting was over, and Miriam was gone, Leila spent her afternoon finishing the dress. She liked fixing changes on dresses right away in order to keep up with the orders. She was busy adjusting the side zipper on the dress when Terry walked in.

"It's five o'clock," Terry said her tone full of unbridled pleasure. She'd obviously been looking forward to the end of the day.

Leila glanced up to look at her and poked her finger with her needle. She sighed and sucked on the painful prick giving up on the dress for today.

"Are the girls done with cleanup out there?"

"Yeah, I've closed down the till. How's it going?" Terry asked, coming to her workstation.

"Miriam looked pleased with your work."

"We made an adjustment at her waist, and the zipper," Leila said standing up. She placed the dress on a hanger and carried it to a rack behind her. "I can't believe we're almost done."

Stretching her hands over her head, she groaned when her shoulder muscles complained.

"Do you need a ride?" she asked Terry as she switched off her sewing machine and removed the apron she wore over her neat blue blouse and matching skirt. She cleared her workstation with quick practiced movements and folded the apron.

"Not today," Terry said, a wide grin appearing on her pretty face. "I have a date."

Ah, that's why the grin, Leila thought in amusement, she headed for the table where she'd dumped her shopping.

"Who is it?"

"Remember Tim from the Co-op bank down the street?" Terry asked.

"You mean the one who wanted to open saving accounts for us by force?" Leila asked with a chuckle.

"He was trying to get customers." Terry defended Tim. "Anyway, he asked me out. Nothing fancy, we'll probably eat some chips and chicken then go home."

"That sounds like fun," Leila said in approval. She then remembered that it was Friday and Terry's habit of being carried away, "don't leave your drink unattended."

"Yes, Mom," Terry teased with a shake of her head. "How come you don't go on dates?"

Leila tied the shopping bag and lifted it with a sigh.

"I have a kid, Terry, there's no time for dates in my life. Besides, once the date finds out I have a child, he runs off."

"Come on, Leila. No sane man will walk away from a hardworking and pretty woman. You're just not giving them the time of day."

"I don't need to," Leila said, her gaze on the letter she'd forgotten.

She put her shopping bag back on the table and picked up the white envelope. She used her nail to rip it open and gasped when an invitation card and letter fell out.

Leila picked up the letter and read it with barely restrained excitement.

"What is it?" Terry moved closer to read the invitation.

Leila held the letter with trembling hands as Terry read aloud.

“The National Fashion Association invites you to participate in the Fashion Competition to be held in two months. Your participation is sponsored by Afri-Fabrics and if you win, you and your business will get a chance to showcase your work at an international level.”

Terry gripped her shoulder tight and shook her head.

“Is this for real?”

Leila held out the formal letter attached to the invitation. It was as real as it was going to get, she could barely believe it.

“Do you know what this means for us?” Terry shook her head barely able to keep standing; she was on the verge of jumping up and down. “House of Leila, that’s what that means. You’ll become a household name. Fashion designer, Leila Karani, I can see it right now.”

Leila laughed.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself. We haven’t even confirmed if this is true.”

“The National Fashion Association is real, Leila. It’s not that easy to get into their competition unless you’re a bona-fide fashion house or you’re oozing with money. What we should worry about is why Afri-Fabrics chose us.” Terry shook her head and brought the invitation card to her lips. She pressed a kiss on the expensive paper and shrugged. “On the other hand, I don’t care. The mysterious Afri-Fabrics is a godsend. It’s about time someone recognized Leila Fashions.”

Leila reread the letter again.

A national competition would mean a larger platform, a better chance to get her business name out there. She glanced at the wedding dress she designed for Miriam on the rack. Unable to keep the excitement at bay, she hugged the letter and turned to Terry.

“This could be real,” Leila whispered happily.

“It is real,” Terry said hugging her. “This is the best news for a Friday evening. We should go out to celebrate.”

“I can’t. I promised mom I’d go home to help prepare for Sonya’s birthday party tomorrow. You’re coming right?”

Terry sighed and dropped her arms.

“See, there is a reason to believe this is real. Your dear Sonya will definitely have an assured future when you win this competition. And yes, I’ll come to the party.”

Leila took the invitation and stared at the elegant embossed words on the white paper.

Terry’s words sounded like a dream come true. Problem was, Leila had given up on dreams eight years ago.

Leila drove home with dreams of winning the competition swirling in her head. Crazy thoughts that she squelched as fast as they formed in her brain. She didn’t have time to take on such an intensive competition. She would have to dedicate time to creating new designs, finding the perfect fabric, not to mention the cutthroat atmosphere of a competition.

She shuddered at the idea of getting into a competition with designers from House of Serengeti or even the vivacious Victoria Langat from House of Langat.

Driving into her estate road at Dagoretti corner, Leila decided that maybe she didn't need to think about that competition. Leila Fashions was doing fine without the ridiculous billboards in Nairobi. She didn't need the fame, just the fortune to educate her daughter. She drove past a line of pine trees and turned into a short driveway with a closed green gate ahead.

She had barely turned off the engine when a skinny brown girl came dashing out of the house. Opening her door, she swung her feet out of the car and laughed when Sonya threw herself into her arms.

Leila hugged her daughter tight and buried her nose into the soft pink cotton blouse Sonya wore. "Hi, Kiddo," she said, rubbing her daughter's back gently, taking in the scent of bubblegum shampoo. "Have you been good?"

"The best," Sonya declared stepping back slightly to allow Leila to get out of the car. Leila took her purse and the shopping bag from the passenger seat.

"What's in the bag? Did you buy me goodies?" Sonya asked.

Leila laughed as she closed the door and took Sonya's hand.

"Maybe, tell me what you learned in school today."

"We have a new boy in our class called Shem." Sonya gripped her hand tightly as they walked toward the front door. "He came in late. The headmaster brought him."

"That's exciting. Were you nice to Shem?" Leila asked, opening the door carefully. She allowed her daughter to enter first before she followed and closed the door. Removing her shoes, she led the way to the kitchen.

"I didn't get to talk to him today. All the boys were playing with him and they kept pushing the girls away." Sonya complained. "What's in the bag?"

"Many things," Leila said, heading to the kitchen.

The scent of beef stew teased her appetite reminding her she hadn't eaten much for lunch. She found her mother making tea in the kitchen.

"Hi, Mum," Leila said, placing the bag of shopping on a kitchen counter. "How was your day?"

"Quiet," Julie Karani said giving her a welcoming smile. "You look tired."

Leila sighed and shook her head.

"Long day," she said leaning on the counter. The food smelled so good, her stomach growled.

Sonya exclaimed and pointed at her.

"Mum's stomach is making noise."

Julie laughed and Leila reached down to tickle her daughter. A series of happy little girl laughs filled her ears and suddenly all the day's troubles floated away. Hugging Sonya against her stomach, she looked up to find Julie watching her.

"Are you hungry?" Julie asked with a gentle tone.

Leila nodded.

"Sit, I'll get you food, kiddo."

Leila spent the next two hours helping Sonya with her homework. After homework, Leila helped Sonya take a bath and brush her teeth. Then it was bedtime. Tucking her daughter into bed, she lay beside her.

“Mum,” Sonya said, looking at her with bright clear eyes.

“Hmm,” she answered with a small smile, her head propped up on her hand.

“How come I don’t have a daddy?”

Leila absorbed the little punch with a short sigh. She wasn’t ready to sit down and explain to her daughter why her father wasn’t around. Over the years, she had contemplated telling Sonya that the bastard was dead, but that wouldn’t be fair. Leila had loved her own father, had loved having him around and mourned him terribly when he passed away. She shuddered and touched Sonya’s jaw gently.

“Why do you ask about your daddy, Sonya?”

“My friends keep making fun of me because I don’t have one. They talk about their daddies all the time and I don’t have any stories to share.”

Leila closed her eyes and prayed for strength.

“I’m sorry, honey. Do you want me to talk to the teacher for you? I can do that.”

Sonya shook her head and asked, “Did my daddy die? Like Celine’s daddy?”

Celine was Sonya’s best friend and schoolmate. Celine’s mother, Annette, was Leila’s best friend and they spent a lot of time together. Annette lost her husband two years ago in a traffic accident.

Leila remembered watching Annette try to explain to Celine that her father was gone. The pain in Annette’s eyes, the tears in Celine’s eyes. She took in a deep breath and decided she couldn’t lie to her daughter about her father. Shaking her head, Leila pressed a kiss on Sonya’s forehead.

“Your daddy is not dead, honey.”

“Then why isn’t he here with us?” Sonya asked confused.

“Because—,”

Leila stopped, lost. What could she say?

Sorry, your daddy didn’t want us. Or your daddy was too young to care about us.

She cursed silently and forced a smile on her face.

“Your daddy is not with us because he’s living far away from us. He can’t be with us for now.”

Sonya’s face brightened and the weight on Leila’s shoulders increased.

“Will he come back so I can see him? I want to meet him, Mum.”

Leila nodded and patted Sonya’s chest over the covers.

“One day, Sonya. Now close your eyes and sleep. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Sonya nodded and closed her eyes. Leila got off the bed, turned down the lights and left her daughter’s bedroom. She hurried down the hall to her own bedroom and closed the door.

Leaning on it, she slid down to the floor with a deep sigh.

She tried not to think of Sonya’s father too often. She’d put to rest her anger toward him the moment Sonya was born. Getting angry at him and worrying about raising her child, that had

taken too much energy. She would have gotten sick splitting herself into two like that. Wiping a hand down her face, she allowed the image of Nathan Njeru into her thoughts.

Nathan, handsome and vibrant, he had been a star scholar in university. He played rugby, been part of the student council and he swept her off her feet with a simple smile. Nathan had been two years ahead of her. They started dating during her second year at the University of Nairobi.

She was the fool who imagined he cared, Leila thought shaking her head.

Leila got pregnant right before Nathan graduated. Caught between anxiety and excitement, Leila went to see Nathan to tell him and found another woman at his apartment. Closing her eyes, she tried to suppress the anger at the memory of that woman.

How mean the other woman was to her when Leila insisted on waiting for Nathan to get home.

Leila sat on a couch in Nathan's living room, watching that woman move around his house as if she owned it. Five hours later, Nathan walked in, stared at her in shock and asked her what she was doing there.

Leila scoffed.

He acted as though she was intruding in his life, as though they didn't know each other, which had hurt. It had hurt so much she felt like she was dying.

When she finally told him she was expecting his child, Nathan asked her if the baby was his. The bastard, as though she was the one sleeping around instead of him.

They argued.

Leila leaned her head back on the door and stared at her bed.

They argued for months.

Arguments so hateful, she'd started to despise the baby growing inside her. Going to school had gotten difficult, so she quit university for her own health. Her father hadn't been too happy about that decision. The neighbors looked at her as though she were a failure. And Nathan, the one person who should have been on her side, left her alone. Broken, Leila went to Nathan's apartment one day hoping to change his mind and found he had moved.

That moment totaled her.

Eight years later, her daughter wanted to know who her father was, what a joke.

As far as Leila was concerned, Sonya was never going to meet him. She had taken care of her child alone, planned her future alone. Nathan had no right to her. He made his choice and when Leila gave birth to Sonya, she decided she didn't need Nathan.

Leila got to her feet and shrugged off her unsettling past.

She would find a way to deal with Sonya's questions that didn't involve actually talking about Nathan Njeru. That man was dead to her.

Leila woke up early on Saturday morning. She had spent the night dreaming about the fashion competition and Nathan Njeru appearing to take her daughter away. Dressing up in faded jeans and a nice green top made from kanga fabric, she found the envelope and card from the National Fashion Association and left her bedroom.

She found her mom in the kitchen talking to Dianne Waweru, a neighbor across the street. Dianne lived with her husband and all her children were abroad studying. Most mornings, Dianne ended up at their house gossiping with her mom.

“Morning, Leila,” Dianne greeted with a bright smile. “Are you ready for a house full of kids today?”

Leila chuckled.

“As ready as I’m going to get. Mum, I have to run an errand in town. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Julie frowned, studying her.

“Did you sleep? You’re usually the last to wake up on Saturday. It’s seven o’clock you know; you don’t open the shop today.”

Leila shrugged.

“I’m fine. I’ll get the juice and snacks from the supermarket okay. Give me two hours, I’ll be back.”

“Okay,” Julie said, still wearing a concerned look.

Leila went to her car happy that the weather was cooperating. She loved the warm September weather because she didn’t need a jacket. Getting into her car, she drove out of the compound and headed toward town. Saturday was great in the morning, barely any traffic. It took her thirty minutes to get to the central business district.

She parked her car in an underground parking lot close to a church. Studying the address given on the letter, she decided to search on foot. The offices were in the Lonrho House building, it took her ten minutes to find it, but when she found the building, the offices were easy to locate. She walked in with jitters in her stomach. She hadn’t thought much about it being a weekend, but now that she was here, she paused at the door to read their office hours.

It was a small relief to see they opened from eight to twelve on Saturdays. The receptionist smiled at her in welcome.

“How can I help you?”

Leila held out the letter she received the day before.

“I wanted to confirm this letter and also ask if there’s more information about the competition.”

The receptionist took the letter, read it over and smiled.

“Congratulations! You’re one of the ten designers chosen for the competition.” She pulled out a blue folder from a drawer under the desk and handed it to her. “This is your package, I’m glad you came in early. There is a briefing in the conference room in thirty minutes. You’ll get to meet the other competitors in a few minutes.”

Leila took the folder with trembling hands. She followed the receptionist who took her to an elegant conference room with a long mahogany oval table that gleamed. It looked like it could sit twenty people.

“I’ll get you a cup of coffee while you wait.”

The pleasant woman left. Leila pulled out a chair and sat feeling as if she’d just dipped her feet into a great big ocean.

Opening her folder, she read the National Fashion Association brochure. The rules of the competition were simple, the designer had to create original designs and provide her own models for the runway show. The material needed would come from the Kenyan companies sponsoring the competition and a panel of judges chosen by the National Fashion Association would choose the winner.

Reading the previous winner's profile, she couldn't help but feel envious. Mary Kangethe now worked for the House of Langat as chief designer. She'd opted to join a prosperous fashion house instead of start her own after her competition win. Her designs had transformed the company and gotten them recognition internationally.

Leila wondered if she could give up her own name. If she were to win, she imagined she'd keep her company and make it as big as House of Langat. That was her dream, to prosper and give the best to her daughter.

The door opened behind her and the receptionist led in the rest of the competitors. A tea service attendant followed, who proceeded to pass around tea and coffee.

Leila smiled at the lady who sat beside her hoping to make friends, but then two men and a woman walked into the conference room.

"Good morning, I'm glad you've made it to this short briefing. My name is Peter Olani, project manager at the National Fashion Association, NFA for short. Beside me is Eve Chebet, the chief secretary and Mark Kimani, the C.E.O of the association. Let me take this moment to congratulate you on this achievement. We're happy to see you all here and hope that you're as excited as we are about this competition."

Leila clapped with everyone. She couldn't help the wide smile as excitement fought through the nervous clamp in her chest. A sense of awe filled her at the three NFA officials standing at the front. She wanted to ask how they'd found her and why she sat here in this room with designers from prestigious fashion houses.

"This is the fourth time we're running this competition. Three winners, three successful fashion houses, we're so encouraged by the success of our winners we decided to include smaller designers and see what they can achieve. Those of you joining us for the first time, welcome to the competition. It is hectic, full of challenges but at the end, what you gain from it is priceless. I'll now ask Mrs. Chebet to talk about the competition rules and what is expected of you as of this moment."

Leila grabbed a notepad from her bag and started writing. She hadn't decided whether she would end up competing, but it didn't hurt to be prepared.

"Good morning," Eve said in fine English. She was soft spoken, but her appearance demanded attention. Leila loved the confidence Eve showed as she looked at each of them. "You have a brochure outlining the competition's rules. I'll remind you of two most important ones that have destroyed careers in the previous competitions. One, we only allow original designs. Original sketches verified by the NFA when you submit them. You'll have three weeks from today to design your sketches, you'll submit them confidentially, and will give us two days to verify they're original."

"Original means no copying a design you saw from a magazine, someone else's company, or someone wearing out there." Peter reiterated with a frown. "Believe me when we say that we've had horrendous plagiarism cases that ended in legal battles. We don't want sagas, we've

put measures in place to verify your designs and we'll know if you've stolen a design. So, work those creative muscles."

A quiet round of chuckles filled the room and Leila smiled.

Eve shook a slender finger at them.

"Giggle now, but when we're doing verification, some of you will cry tears insisting your design is original when we've found it online. Be very careful with your work, don't submit a design you've previously used and for goodness sakes, don't share it on Facebook."

Everyone laughed.

Eve raised her left hand to stop them. Leila couldn't help noticing the gorgeous rock on her finger. Her husband was obviously of some means if she was hauling such a huge ring on her finger.

"I hope you understand what we mean by original and why we require it," Eve said. "We assign an NFA official to each of you. She or he will make sure you keep your deadlines. You submit your designs to these officials and plan your final show through them. Your production is confidential; don't share it with another team. If there are glaring similarities, disqualification is automatic on both parties. So, be vigilant and make friends with your NFA official. He or she is invaluable to your success."

Eve took the envelope she had tucked under her arm and removed a stack of papers. She handed it to the lady seated close to her.

"Take one and pass it on. The papers coming your way outline the three concepts you will interpret with your designs. We find it better to work within a set of concepts to better understand and evaluate your talent. Use your creativity to make designs that people will love to wear. Be original, and you'll have a great experience in this competition. There are three rounds of elimination. We drop four people the first round and that means there are six people competing for the second and third round elimination. Don't take the first elimination for granted and pay close attention to your designs. The shows are run through the day, so prepare for a long day and we hope that you make it to the final three in the evening."

Leila felt her anxiety return. There was so much to know and remember. Shuddering, she gave up writing and instead read the paper Eve had passed. There were three concepts; the first concept focused on an open interpretation of the Savannah. The second elimination concept was broad and read 'vibrant color', but the third she figured was the hardest.

The final judgment would focus on the designer's own creativity.

Eve continued, "The second rule that brings problems is bullying and special privileges. Please listen carefully. You're sitting here in this conference room as individuals, whether you represent a Fashion house, a small business or are independent, you're here as an individual. Think of that as your equal footing, there are no special privileges. The rules apply to you as an individual, meet your deadlines because there are no special considerations. Missed deadlines lead to disqualifications, no exceptions. We don't tolerate bullying. Bullying charges lead to automatic disqualification. Please, pay attention to these rules because once the competition starts, no one wants to spend time investigating allegations. Let's treat each other with respect and have fun."

Eve turned to the C.E.O who shook his head. She nodded and turned to them.

“Well, that’s all for now, the receptionist has a list you need to sign. Once you do that, we’ll assign you an NFA official who’ll come to your place of business on Monday and help you get started. I wish you the best in this competition.”

The three officials left as fast as they appeared. Leila gathered her folder and stood, following everyone out of the conference room. She signed her name on the list, which assured an NFA official would show up at her shop on Monday. That done, she turned to leave the office and bumped into a man who had just walked in.

“Sorry—,”

She stepped back already apologizing, but when she glanced up, she choked on her words when she recognized Nathan Njeru.

Chapter Two

Shock was a small word to describe the feelings that flooded her. Added on to the anxiety from the NFA briefing, she was afraid she might break into tiny pieces. She brought the folder to her chest and hugged it tight.

“Leila,” Nathan said, the deep timbre of his voice cutting through her defenses just like old times.

He was taller, lean and dressed in an elegant tailored dark suit. His hair cut close to his head, his handsome face clean-shaven. He looked at her with surprised dark-chocolate eyes.

“It’s you,” he said, touching her elbow.

Leila fought the urge to shrug off his touch like a child and instead plastered on a smile.

“Good to see you too, Nathan Njeru.”

“It’s been so long. How are you?” Nathan asked, shifting her out of the way to clear the entrance for the others.

Leila shook her head unable to keep up the polite talk.

“I’m fine. I really have to go.”

“Wait,” Nathan said touching her elbow again. “I’d really like to know—”

Leila stepped away from him again.

“I’m sorry; I don’t have the time, Nathan. Have a nice day.”

She grabbed the door and swung it open abruptly. Walking with long strides, she headed for the stairs determined to escape him before he caught up with her. She made it as far as the third floor staircase landing.

“Leila, wait,” Nathan said, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder. “How can you run off like that? We need to talk.”

“What do we have to talk about?” Leila asked, keeping her voice carefully low. She didn’t want to make a scene here, not when she was contemplating a competition that could determine her career. “Nathan, please go about your business, pretend you didn’t see me.”

“But I did,” Nathan said, taking her hand. He held it tight not willing to let go. “Come have coffee with me.”

“I don’t have time. I need to go back home there’s a—,”

She stopped before she could mention her daughter. The last time she and Nathan talked, he asked her to abort the baby or give it away. The way he’d called their baby ‘it’ still stung. She tugged at her hand.

“I don’t have the time.”

“You don’t have the time or you won’t make the time?” Nathan asked his gaze narrowed.

Leila tugged her hand out of his hold and met his gaze.

“Whatever you want to think, Nathan, I don’t know what we’d talk about. Please don’t follow me.”

“Leila,” Nathan started, but she didn’t stop to hear what he would say.

Instead, she took off at a run, taking the stairs two at a time until she was outside. She hurried into the crowd on the street and ran until she got to the underground parking.

Getting into her car, she sat for a full minute before the dam of tears broke. Nathan had looked so good. The tears kept coming and turned into nerve-wrecking sobs.

What was wrong with her?

That bastard had left her to fend for herself and their baby. It took ten minutes before she could take in a full breath.

She hadn’t changed, Nathan thought as he walked back upstairs.

He had not expected to run into her so soon, not expected her to look so beautiful. Entering the National Fashion Association office, he wondered why he was surprised she’d run off so quickly.

“Nathan,” Eve Chebet said, drawing his attention. “You missed the briefing.”

“I’m sorry. I was caught up in traffic.” He greeted her and followed her to a large corner office. “Did they all make it?”

“Yes, including the young woman from Leila Fashions. She looks a bit shy. Are you sure she can handle the stiff competition and the pressure to perform?”

Nathan frowned.

Leila had looked very confident in the stairwell. Her brown eyes flashing with determination, he had no doubt she would claw her way out of trouble if needed. She’d always been the strong type, that’s why he’d liked her so much.

“I’m sure. I’m happy to hear the contestants have checked in,” he said with a short nod. “I brought the documents you requested. Afri-Fabrics have signed on to support Leila Fashions through the competition. When it’s time, just send us her list of requirements.”

Eve took the folder he held out to her and sat down behind her desk.

“Do you know her? This Leila Karani, do you know her personally?”

Nathan looked at her and shrugged.

“Why do you ask?”

Eve opened the folder to check the signatures and stamps on the documents.

“I’ve never heard of a company C.E.O. such as Afri-Fabrics bring me these documents in person. The fact that you’re here means you hoped to meet her.”

Nathan frowned.

“Eve, what are you trying to say?”

“Nothing,” Eve said with a small smile. “The documents look good. Thank you for bringing them so soon.”

Nathan nodded and turned to leave.

“Well, call if you need anything.”

“Call you or your executive assistant?” Eve asked when he reached her door. “You do have a program manager for this small job, don’t you?”

Nathan flashed a startling smile.

“I like getting involved in all aspects of my company, Eve. Whether you call my assistant, program manager, it’s all the same because they report to me.”

Eve laughed and he left her office with a small grin. On his way downstairs, his thoughts returned to Leila and their shared past. The last time he saw Leila, she had been sick for weeks and he had tried to get her to see a doctor.

She went to visit her mother and not returned to campus. A month later, he tried to see her at the address she gave her roommate, and a scowling woman turned Nathan away. He assumed Leila had asked the woman to turn him away. He wished he had gotten a chance to confront her about her rejection.

His pride, however, hadn’t allowed him to look for her again.

Leila’s rejection hurt and he’d hated her for a while. When his father fell ill soon after, Nathan ended up having to go home to deal with the family’s business. Two weeks on Ndwaru road, and a clear head had prevailed.

He called his twin brother and asked him to tell him if Leila showed up at their apartment. He waited in vain. Nathan never got a call from his twin brother, or Leila. When he hadn’t gotten that call, Nathan decided Leila didn’t want him.

Eight years later, he wished he could turn back time. He would have liked to see Leila grow into the woman she was today: businesswoman and wife to some lucky stranger.

He sighed in envy.

The moment he’d discovered that Leila Fashions belonged to her, he was unable to resist offering her the opportunity to compete. He had wanted to see her again. Find out how happy she was and if she wasn’t, God help him, but he could commit adultery with open eyes.

Shaking his head, he prayed for redemption as he got into his car. He didn’t know how Leila’s life was doing, but he hoped this opportunity would help him put her to rest in his heart forever.

Leila was late getting back home for the party. The lines in the supermarket were impossible, and when she finally escaped the supermarket, the traffic had been choke full. Carrying two five-liter bottles of juice into the kitchen, she smiled when she found Terry and Annette arguing over the best time to serve the cake.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” Leila asked in greeting. She dumped the bottles of juice on the kitchen table. “You two never change.”

“Cake should be eaten right before lunch. The kids can have fun; smear it on their faces, and all that happy stuff.”

Terry declared taking the bottles of juice to put them in the refrigerator.

“She has no experience with kids, this one,” Annette said, shaking her head. “Show kids a cake and they will not eat food. You know that, right. We should wait ‘til an hour after lunch to even hint at the presence of a cake.”

Leila sighed.

“Annette’s right. Sonya has an incurable sweet tooth. There’s more shopping in the car.”

“Where did you go?” Terry asked, as they followed her outside. “Your mom said you went to run an errand. Did you go to find the NFA offices? Did you find out if the invitation is real?”

“It’s real.” Leila confirmed with a shudder. “I have all the information in the car.”

“Yes!” Terry exclaimed jumping up. She pulled Annette into a hug. “Look out for the House of Leila.”

“What’s going on? NFA, are you joining a soccer team or something?” Annette asked with a laugh.

“NFA, National Fashion Association,” Terry explained. “You know the fashion competition they have every year. The winner gets a chance to work with international fashion houses and participate in Fashion Week abroad. We have been invited.”

“You’re kidding,” Annette glanced at Leila for confirmation. When she nodded, Annette clapped with a shout. “That is great; I’ve always wondered how those contestants got chosen. Do you know House of Serengeti was created by a winner of that competition?”

“Yeah,” Leila said with a sigh. “I met them all this morning. Top designers from House of Langat, Serengeti, and all those others and I can tell you right now, I’m a bit skeptic. I keep thinking we should quit before we start.”

“No way,” Terry and Annette protested at the same time.

Leila stared at them in shock.

“You have to participate,” Annette insisted.

“But—,” Leila started.

“No buts, please, I’ve seen the clothes you’ve designed for our clients. You’re good enough to compete with House of Serengeti.” Terry pointed out. “We’re so joining this competition.”

“What if we get eliminated in the first round?” Leila asked, unable to imagine that they’d ever make it to the last part of the competition. Terry’s confidence in her designs was commendable, but being realistic was important. She didn’t have the same resources her competitors had.

Annette pulled her into a hug.

“At least you’ll know you tried.”

“Oh, I’m so excited. I can’t wait to see what you come up with.” Terry opened the back passenger doors of the car to get the bags of shopping Leila had placed there. “Do you have an idea on what you’re going to design?”

“There are rules,” Leila said as Annette let her go. “I’ll have to read through them before I even get started.”

“You’ll be great,” Annette said.

Leila grinned and for the first time she felt happy since she’d left Lonrho house. She smiled when Terry and Annette kept talking excitedly about the coming competition. Their animated discussion carried them to lunch. When the kids arrived, they gravitated to the backyard where Leila and her mom had gotten a bouncing castle set up. They served lunch, the kids ate, played, Leila mingled with their parents, catching up with neighbors and friends.

She tried to forget meeting Nathan at the NFA offices. How his hands on her arm had felt. She could still feel the touch of his cool fingers on her skin. Rubbing her arms, she sat down on a plastic chair and watched Sonya jump in the bouncing castle while she held on to Celine.

What kind of trick was fate playing now?

Last night, her daughter asks about her father, this morning, the father shows up before her.

“Talk to me,” Annette said, coming to sit next to her. Annette held out a cool glass of pineapple juice. “You’ve looked shaken since you walked in.”

Leila took the glass and glanced at Annette.

“I met Nathan.”

“What?” Annette exclaimed, her eyes wide. “Wait, you mean Nathan Njeru, Sonya’s father, the bastard himself?”

“Shh,” Leila said looking around, terrified her mother would overhear them. “Will you keep it down?”

“*Ngai!* Oh My God,” Annette said shaking her head. “Where did you meet him?”

“I ran into him at the NFA offices. I don’t know what he was doing there, but—,”

“He’s not working there, is he?” Annette asked. “That would mean you get to see him every day, Leila.”

She sighed and wiped her hand down her face.

“I don’t know what he was doing there. I didn’t stop to ask him. I ran off, like a coward.”

“Oh, Leila,” Annette said taking her hand. “That must have been a shock.”

Thinking about it now, the shock she’d received had nothing to do with Nathan but with herself. How she reacted when he touched her, she closed her eyes and sighed.

“How does he look?” Annette asked. “Is he fat, with a mole on his face he can’t get rid of?”

Leila chuckled.

She wished.

“He looks like the bastard he’s always been.”

“Hmm...” Annette said with a sigh.

“What does that mean?”

“You’d only say that if he were more good looking than he used to be.”

“I don’t think so,” Leila protested.

“Is he rich?”

“I don’t know.” Leila scowled at Annette. “Whose side are you on? We’re supposed to hate on Nathan.”

Sonya and Celine fell out of the bouncing castle laughing.

Leila stared at her daughter rolling on the grass happy as ever.

“Sonya asked me about him last night. She thought he died like Celine’s daddy.”

“Are you telling me your daughter asked you where her daddy is, and then you met Nathan today? I think your God is trying to tell you something.” Annette decided her gaze on their daughters. “Leila, a couple of years ago, I’d have told you to steer away from him if you met him again. But now—,”

Annette paused.

“What?” Leila asked looking at her best friend.

Annette shrugged and met her gaze.

“Life is too short, hon. Sonya should get a chance to meet her father.”

Leila shook her head.

“He never wanted to meet her when I was pregnant, Annette. Nathan is not your husband. He’s not noble like your John.”

“Don’t do it for Nathan.” Annette nodded to their daughters. “Do it for Sonya. She might carry a grudge when she discovers you didn’t tell her father that you kept her.”

Leila sighed and stared into her glass of juice.

“I’ll think about it. I won’t go searching for him, Annette.”

“If you meet him again,” Annette said. “Don’t run away. Stop and talk, even if it’s for you to put to rest your anger.”

“I’m not angry.” Leila protested as she sipped her juice.

“Oh, yes you are,” Annette said with a knowing smile. “You’ve had to fend for yourself and his child without him. Any sane woman would be angry.”

“Leila,” Terry called making her turn around. “Time for the cake, it’s almost three o’clock.”

Annette jumped to her feet.

“Get the girls. I’ll help Terry with the cake. Promise you’ll think about Nathan.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Leila said, as she got up and went to Sonya and Celine. When Sonya jumped to her feet to hug her, Leila sighed and decided she could ignore the Nathan issue a while longer.

Nathan drove into his family home in Ndwaru road that Saturday afternoon feeling exhausted. He had stayed longer at the Afri-Fabrics offices than he intended. Problems appeared out of

nowhere when you were trying to escape the office. He parked the four-wheel drive truck on a grassy patch outside the house and jumped out.

“*Karibu*, boss,” Waweru, the caretaker, said appearing from a wooden gate dividing the lawn from the main farm. Waweru was in a blue overall, dusty from working in the *shamba*. A dark cap rested on his head.

“Waweru,” Nathan said, with a wide grin shaking his hand. “How’s everything?”

“Very good, boss,” Waweru said. “The place has been quiet. It rained yesterday which is good; I put down a few seeds that need the rain.”

Nathan nodded and looked around the green compound. He loved coming home to this place. Despite the hot September weather, the tall trees growing around the house kept the compound cool and shaded. The two-story house made of stone was as old as he was. His parents had built it when they first bought the *shamba*; he and his twin brother had been three years old. In the course of twenty-seven years, the house had undergone various stages of rebuilding and redecorating, but it was still the same.

The front door opened and he smiled when he saw his mother appear.

“I brought twenty bags of cement. We’ll use them to fix the goat house floor. Mom said it needed redoing.” Nathan held out the keys to Waweru. “Will you take care of it?”

“Of course,” Waweru said, taking the keys. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to be here,” Nathan said, heading to greet his mother.

“Njeru,” his mother said when he met her. “What took you so long?”

He smiled and gave her a hug.

“I’m sorry, Mum. There were too many things to do at the office this morning. How are you?”

“I’m fine now that my other son has decided to come home and see me. Your brother calls me every day and he’s in Nyeri, but you don’t. Come in, your cousin has been cooking all day.”

Nathan sighed and followed his mother into the house. He paused at the door to remove his shoes and walked on the hardwood floors on socked feet. Going through the small hall, he entered the living room to find his mother settling in an armchair where she’d been sitting.

“Nate,” his cousin called him from the kitchen.

He paused at the door to look through the short corridor at the young woman standing in the kitchen.

“Christina, *kwani* it’s you?” he asked, gazing at her.

The last time he saw his cousin she looked like a chubby kid with a shy smile. The skinny tall girl watching him from the kitchen in tight blue jeans and a gray fitted top seemed a stranger.

“Are they starving you at home?”

“Come here and greet me first,” Christina ordered ignoring his comment. “You have to explain why you’re so late. Auntie Susan called to tell me you were coming. So, I ran here and spent the whole morning making *chapati* and *samosas*. The least you could do was call.”

His stomach growled as the scent of cooked food hit him. Pulling Christina into a tight hug, he looked around the kitchen.

“Wow, now that you talk about *chapos*, I’m starving, bring them on, I’ll eat. How are you doing? Are you almost done with university?”

“Almost, next year, can I call you for a job?” she asked, as she moved to serve him a plate of food. “I’m sure you need sales marketing people.”

“I’m sure,” he said grinning at her. Stealing a slice of *chapati* from a chopping board, he leaned on the counter and took a healthy bite of the thin round bread. “Drop me your CV in my email.”

“Don’t forget to check it,” she said glancing at him hopefully. “Don’t be like the other cousins I send CVs to and then never get a call.”

Nathan laughed.

“Don’t worry, I don’t mind practicing nepotism, kiddo. These are good. Mm...it’s been a while since I had a home cooked meal.”

“Not married yet?” Christina asked, holding out a delicious plate of beef stew. He scowled at her for that remark but she only laughed.

“*Married*,” she quoted with her fingers, “you know, a chick moving into your house and cooking for you. What’s wrong with your girlfriends?”

“Are you sure you’re old enough to be talking about this?” he demanded, taking a *chapati* and dipping it into the beef stew. He didn’t really expect the women he went out for drinks with to cook for him. They’d probably stake him with their sharp nails if he asked.

“You must not be talking the right language,” Christina wiggled her eyes at him.

“Is this what you’re learning at CUEA?” he asked. “How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-three, old enough to know I want a romantic boyfriend. Step up your game, Nate. Being thirty doesn’t mean you can’t do romance.”

“Who told you I’m thirty?” he demanded.

“Your mom, she worries about you,” Christina said, leaning on the counter. Mimicking his mother, she continued, “When is Njeru going to get married? He’s never going to settle down. He’s not like Chris who’s married and happy.”

Nathan laughed and shook his head. His twin brother had two marriages under his belt as far as he could tell. Chris was a player and didn’t understand what commitment meant. Nathan was somewhat happy his brother now lived in Nyeri.

Too far to cause trouble, he thought. Smiling at Christina, he informed her. “I’m settled down.”

“You’re living in an expensive apartment on Ngong road, settling down means not wasting money and moving here. You have a whole suite upstairs made just for you and whoever you marry.”

“Yeah well,” Nathan shrugged.

His mother had the notion since he was inheriting the family business; it was his duty to take over this Ndwaru road property. He had promised her he would move up there when he got married. Since the only woman he’d ever loved was gone, he shrugged and flashed Christina a small smile.

“I’m enjoying my freedom right now.”

Christina laughed and pointed to the living room. They joined his mother in the living room and he spent the rest of the afternoon talking with the two women. He relaxed on the couch after he ate, watching his mother knit while his cousin surfed the television channels. His mother updated him on the town gossip.

Marriages, deaths, scandals, he wondered if all other families went through this rundown when one of their own came home.

“I saw you brought cement for the goat house,” his mother said.

“Yes, a friend got me the cement at a cheap price.”

“I was thinking of calling the builder who did the tenants’ houses. He’ll do a good job and make sure we won’t have to fix those floors again.”

“That’s a good idea,” Nathan nodded.

They had ten milk goats and two cows that Waweru took care of for his mother. His mother used the income from the milk they sold to the neighborhood as pocket money. Beyond the compound, there was also a one-acre piece of land that Waweru planted vegetables in three green houses. Waweru worked hard to make sure the green houses worked right. Whenever the vegetables were ready, Nathan helped his mother transport the produce to the various markets for sale. This year they’d planted broccoli and cauliflower.

His phone rang and he glanced at the caller ID. Answering the call, he smiled. “What’s up Kim?”

“I heard you’re around.”

Nathan laughed.

“The rumor mill is still quite reliable,” he said into the phone. “Where are you?”

“At the Dhali Estate, want to join us for a few drinks?”

He sighed. Dhali Estate belonged to Ndwaru road’s most well to do family. His friend, Kim, and Charles Dhali had been best friends before Nathan met Kim.

Nathan had never gotten a chance to meet Charlie. But he’d heard that Charlie was now back and married to Kim’s girl, Koya. Rumors, of course since Nathan had never met Koya Kalahari.

“Are you having drinks with Charles Dhali?”

“Yeah,” Kim answered happily. “You have to come over, Nate. I wanted to catch up with you before you head back to your place.”

Nathan glanced at Christina and his mother then shrugged.

“Sure I’ll come over.”

“Great, we’ll be waiting.”

Nathan hung up and smiled at his mother.

“Kim’s calling.”

She nodded and stood.

“Will you make it back here?”

“Probably not,” he said moving to hug her. “Call me if you need more materials for the goat house. You can send Waweru to pick up the truck and get them from the hardware.”

“Alright,” she said patting his back and waved him goodbye.

Christina followed him outside. She wrapped an arm around his waist as he watched Waweru drive the car to the gate.

“Where are you going?”

“Why do you want to know?” Nathan asked, tagging on her long braids.

“No reason,” she answered.

Waweru left the car running for him and came over.

“We’re all set to build the goat house. Thanks for the materials,” Waweru said.

“Take care of the place, and help Mum.” Nathan urged him. Reaching into his back pocket, he removed an envelope, which he handed to Waweru. “That’s for you.”

Waweru smiled wide.

“Thank you so much, boss, *asante sana*.”

Nathan nodded and turned to Christina.

“When are you going back to school?”

“Monday,” she said sadly. “Don’t forget to check your email. I’m sending that C.V. today.”

“I promise to check,” he said, squeezing her shoulders. She walked him to the car and once he settled in the driver’s seat, he rolled down the window and scowled at her. “Better hit the books and stop thinking about your romantic boyfriend.”

She laughed and shook her head.

“You’re the one who needs to start thinking of getting a wife to cook for you.”

Nathan grinned and held out his hand to her. She took it and her eyes went wide when he passed her a one thousand shilling note. She jumped happily, he honked goodbye and drove out of the compound on to Ndwaru road. Turning right, he started up the hill headed to the Dhali estate.

Chapter Three

Nathan drove in to the Dhali estate, a bit awed by the size of the place. He drove to the front of the house and parked beside Kim’s white truck. He got out of the car and looked up at the three-story white mansion.

“Nate,” Kim called and he turned to find his best friend waving at him from a cabana in the middle of the garden.

Nathan returned the wave and took the small cobbled path that led to the cabana.

“What’s up my man,” Kim greeted, taking his hand and pulling him into a quick hug. “You’re looking good. The corporate world must be treating you well.”

“Must be, since they haven’t fired me yet,” Nathan answered turning to the man who stood beside Kim.

“Nathan, this is Charles Dhali. Charlie, this is Nate.” Kim introduced them. “Nate and I own a hardware together. He’s an old buddy from college.”

Charlie greeted him with a wide smile.

“Welcome to my home. I’ve heard a lot about you from Kim.”

“I hope all good things,” Nathan said with a laugh.

“Good things,” Charlie said, inviting him to take a seat. “Want a beer?”

“I would love a beer,” Nathan said, sinking into a wicker chair. He turned to Kim. “Haven’t seen you since last week at the Kalaha club, did you go see the rugby game?”

“No, didn’t get a chance.” Kim sat down beside Charlie and shook his head.

“He ran into trouble,” Charlie said sipping his beer.

Kim sighed. “More like crashed into trouble.”

“Are we talking about a woman?” Nathan asked, thinking about his own run in with Leila in the morning. It had felt so surreal, he still couldn’t figure out how he felt about it.

Charlie glanced at Kim before he answered.

“He ran into my wife’s cousin, Hana, at the club. She was in a situation and when Kim tried to help, she punched him in the gut.”

“Unexpectedly, I would have stopped her if I’d seen it coming.” Kim defended himself.

Charlie laughed and Nathan asked, “Were you standing when she did this? Was the room lighted?”

“I was occupied with holding off the two guys she’d pissed off before I came in.” Kim sipped his beer. “Speaking of the devil, here she comes.”

Nathan watched Charlie stand up to meet his wife who was carrying cold beer bottles. She was gorgeous, her hair in long braids that fell down her back. Dressed in a denim short skirt, a white shirt, and sandals, she barely reached Charlie’s shoulder. Charlie took the bottles from her and kissed her cheek. She said something to him that made him laugh and she slipped a hand around Charlie’s waist as they came over to the cabana. Behind them followed a tall woman, her long black hair held in a ponytail.

“Nathan, this is Koya, my wife,” Charlie said. “Koya, this is Nathan.”

“I know him,” Koya said as she held out a slender hand to him. “We met briefly when your mom was transporting goats to her place.”

He shook her hand and stood.

“Oh yes, you look different now. I didn’t recognize you.”

Koya laughed, a short musical sound.

“That’s because I don’t have mud on my face.”

Charlie pulled her to his side and nodded to Hana who gave Nathan a cold tusker.

“This is Hana. Koya’s cousin.”

He shook Hana’s hand and bit his lip when Kim stood to make room for Hana on the three-sitter wicker couch. Kim had it bad for the tall ebony beauty.

“How’s your mum?” Koya asked, as she settled beside Charlie. She held on to Charlie’s free hand as her husband sipped his beer.

“She’s good, I just came from there. We’re rebuilding the goat house.”

“How many does she have now?” Koya asked.

“Ten of them,” Nathan said with pride.

“Milk goats?” Charlie asked in surprise.

“Yes,” Koya said. “Those things make money, if you take care of them. Nate’s mum sells the milk.”

“Are we keeping some?” Charlie asked her.

“No because you won’t go to milk them.” Koya pointed out. “He barely goes to see the cows.”

Kim laughed and Nathan grinned.

“Do you milk your goats?” Charlie asked him.

“Of course,” Nathan said biting his lip. Not that he’d tried lately, although, he had when he’d been staying at his mother’s place years ago.

Charlie scowled at him and sighed.

“I guess I have to learn now. Kim is so industrious in the *shamba*. He’s always down there cutting Napier grass or digging with my wife. He’s making me look bad.”

“Poor city man,” Koya teased tugging her husband’s finger.

He liked the easy way she teased Charlie, their connection so obvious.

Kim shook his head.

“Ignore those two; they’re still in the honeymoon period. So, Nate, how is Afri-fabrics? You are still sponsoring that fashion competition, aren’t you?”

Nathan nodded.

“Yes, in fact that’s what I was dealing with this morning before I drove over.”

“Planning on creating another House of Serengeti?” Hana asked.

“That’s the plan,” he said thinking of Leila. “It will depend on the contestants though. The NFA has scheduled the event at Dhal Corp’s great hall by the way.”

“Ah, yes,” Charlie said nodding. “They called the property manager yesterday. He’s working very hard preparing the second floor. Construction is underway for the runway and the dressing rooms.”

They launched into a discussion on the competition and Nathan found himself relaxing. Despite the rumors, Kim and Charlie seemed to have made up. Their friendship was stronger than ever. The women disappeared on them and only returned to bring dinner when it hit seven o’clock. They talked about rugby, football and politics. They were debating the merits of a four-wheel drive truck on Ndwaru road when Koya appeared from the house.

Charlie tried to stand but he sat right back, so he held out his hand to her. She laughed and shook her head.

“Can’t hold his liquor this one,” she said, running her fingers over Charlie’s head. “I came to ask if Nate is sleeping over.”

Checking the time on his watch, Nathan sighed when he realized it was almost twelve o'clock at night.

"Wow, didn't realize it was that late."

"No need to worry about driving home," Charlie told him. "We have spare bedrooms, stay over."

"You're about to sleep on this chair," Koya told Charlie. She glanced at Kim and asked, "Will you help him into the house?"

"Yeah," Kim said, standing up. "Nate, let's go inside."

Nathan helped Kim support Charlie into the house. Koya followed them making sure to lock the doors behind them. They spent a few minutes helping Charlie upstairs to the bedroom, and then Koya showed Nathan to a neat guest room.

Left alone, he lay back on the bed envying Charlie's good fortune. The man seemed to have married for love. Would he and Leila have been that happy if they'd married eight years ago? He couldn't tell.

Sunday morning after a quiet breakfast with the Dhalis, Nathan decided to drive back to his apartment on Ngong road. He stopped at the junction mall to pick up groceries. Parking his car as close to the entrance as he could manage, he walked into the mall biting back a yawn.

Heading to the supermarket, he moved out of the way when he saw a family pushing two supermarket carts toward the exit. In his haste to get away, he bumped into a little girl who dropped a bag of sweets that scattered on the floor. Grabbing her elbow, he stopped her fall, but she was more concerned for her precious sweets now littering the floor.

"Look what you did," she accused with glittering eyes, clearly on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry, kid." Nathan apologized as she lifted her clear bag to show him that it was now empty.

Her eyes, he sighed, made him feel guilty as hell. Brown clear orbs that made him feel worse than dirt. Looking around the hall, he saw the sweet trolley a few feet away.

Holding out his hand to her, he said, "I can replace them for you."

She stared at his hand, skeptical. Frowning, he looked at his hand wondering if there was dirt, and then realized she was wary of him.

"I won't hurt you," he promised.

She looked towards the supermarket with a frown and then looked at him. Shaking her head, she held out her hand.

"What?" he asked.

"Give me the money, I'll buy the sweets," she said.

He scoffed.

"You don't trust me, but I should trust you to buy candy and bring me back change."

"You can wait here," she said. "I'll buy and bring you back the change."

“What’s your name, kid?” he asked, liking her spunk.

The tears that had shimmered in her eyes were gone, replaced by determination. She was a little thing, her hair brushed neatly and held in a ponytail. Dressed in a pink dress and white tights, her feet in white shoes, she looked as though she’d come from church.

“Sonya.”

“Sonya, pretty name, how much do you need?” he asked reaching for his wallet.

She narrowed her gaze at him, probably gauging how much she could get out of him.

“One hundred shillings,” she said.

“That’s a lot for candy, young Missy,” he said shaking his head.

“Mum gave me two hundred,” she declared.

He sighed and hoped the mother had actually done so. Giving her a two hundred note, he watched as she ran to the trolley and made another selection. She ran back and handed him a one hundred note with a big smile. She was missing two front teeth, but it didn’t stop her smile.

“Thank you mister,” she said.

“Where’s your mom?”

“In the supermarket,” she said starting toward the entrance.

“If it’s alright with you, I’ll make sure you find her,” he said following her in. He paused to get a shopping basket for his groceries and then followed her. “Where did she say to meet you?”

“The magazine place,” she said.

What kind of mother was this who let her child wander around a supermarket alone?

They found the stationery aisle with ease, since it was so early, the supermarket wasn’t crowded yet. Sonya broke into a short run when she saw a woman in a red fitted dress leaning on a cart at the end of the aisle. The woman straightened up when Sonya wrapped an arm around her waist and leaned down to press a kiss on top of the girl’s head.

“Did you get your sweets?” the woman asked, her hand on Sonya’s shoulders.

“Yes, Mum,” Sonya said in a shy voice. “I dropped them and this man helped me.”

Sonya had barely finished her sentence when her mother grabbed the bag of sweets out of her hand. The woman turned to look at him, eyes blazing with fire.

Nathan froze where he stood when he realized Sonya’s mother was Leila Karani.

Chapter Four

“You,” Leila said in quiet shock. She recovered quickly, her gaze studying the bag of sweets; she shook her head and met his gaze again. “What did you do to my daughter’s sweets?”

“Mum,” Sonya said in surprise. “He did nothing. I bought the sweets myself. I promise.”

“Are you sure, baby?” Leila demanded. “I told you to let me buy you sweets from the supermarket.”

“She bought them herself,” Nathan said, staring at the little girl with new eyes.

He should have seen the resemblance, he thought.

The brown eyes, the shape of Sonya’s face and even her coloring, there was no doubt she was Leila’s child.

“I promise,” he murmured.

Leila looked at the sweets again, just to make sure, before she handed the bag back to her daughter. She ran a hand down her dress and he followed the motion helplessly. She’d been skinny when they’d been together. She’d gained a full figure since then; her dress clung to her curves drawing his eyes to her hips and tiny waist. She cleared her throat and took Sonya’s hand.

“Well, we’ll go now,” she started.

“Wait,” Nathan said quickly, hoping to stop her quick exit. She was good at running. “Can we talk? I can buy you lunch at Art Caffe.”

“We have somewhere we’re going,” Leila said quickly.

“But we’re only going home,” Sonya said looking at her mother with a frown. “You said so when we walked in. You said because grandma will be at church all day, you’ll buy sandwiches and we can eat them at home.”

Leila winced and Nathan immediately latched on to Sonya for help.

“Sonya can have sandwiches here. We can get her some tasty coffee.”

“She is a child and doesn’t drink coffee.”

Leila frowned at him as though he had two heads.

Nathan crouched down to Sonya’s height.

“Do you drink juice? Which one is your favorite?”

“Passion juice,” Sonya answered with another sweet smile.

“Passion, me too,” Nathan answered. “I’ll buy you passion juice then. What do you say we convince your mum?”

“Please mum,” Sonya pleaded, looking at her mother with those wide brown eyes. They were so hard to say no to, he doubted Leila could resist them. “Please.”

“Sonya,” Leila complained with a scowl.

Nathan straightened up and grinned when Leila sighed.

“Fine, but only for thirty minutes,” Leila said in irritation.

“Are you in a hurry to go back home and eat cold sandwiches?” he asked her moving closer to look into her cart. Before she could respond to his comment, he picked up Sonya. “Wow, you’re a big girl, Sonya, as pretty as your mum.”

Leila picked up her handbag and grimaced at the contents in the cart. She hadn’t done any shopping at all; there was only a fashion magazine in the cart. She abandoned it and followed him and Sonya to the supermarket exit.

“Sonya is beautiful.” Nathan commented as he watched the little girl play on the veranda at the Art Caffe. She looked happy, carefree. He envied her innocent perspective. Turning to look at

Leila, he wasn't surprised to find her studying him with suspicion. "You should eat your sandwich. I promise I didn't ask the cook to poison it."

She scowled at him and sat back in her seat.

"I've been in this mall a million times. How is it possible to run into you when I've never before?"

"I live right down the street, Eden Villas, the apartments next to the bistro. I shop here for my groceries."

Leila scoffed and shook her head.

"Unbelievable," she said in wonder.

"What about you? Where do you stay?" he asked, wanting to know everything about her.

"Not too far," she answered with a shrug. Her gaze straying to Sonya, she continued, "What were you doing at the NFA offices yesterday?"

"I had business with one of the officials." He stared into his coffee. "You look good Leila. How have you been?"

"Fine," she answered. "Busy."

"Are you married?" he asked, looking at Sonya.

She had to be married. He couldn't imagine a woman like Leila being single. It pained him to imagine her happy with the unknown husband, *lucky bastard*.

"No."

Her answer brought his gaze back to hers in surprise. Hope flared and he glanced at her daughter.

"What about Sonya's father?"

"I'm looking at him."

Her voice was so clear there couldn't be any mistake.

Sonya was his daughter.

He had a daughter.

Nathan sat back in his chair shaken.

"What are you talking about?"

"Am I the only one who remembers our last conversation?" Leila asked in disbelief. "You were a bastard, Nathan. You treated me like crap then asked me to abort our daughter. I thought about it, let me tell you, the things I was losing then..."

Leila looked at their daughter and smiled.

"But, I'm glad I didn't because I got to meet the most important person in my life. Can't say the same for you, Nate. You've missed a lot."

He could barely breathe. They were in a public place, and she was unloading on him anger he didn't understand. All he could process was that Sonya was his daughter.

Sonya.

She was so beautiful. He'd have loved to see her grow up. Then he realized Leila had robbed him terribly.

"I'm her father. It was your duty as her mother to make sure I got to meet her, Leila." Nathan accused glaring at her. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Wah, you really have the nerve to ask me that?" Leila gaped at him. "Are you going to sit there and ask me that question? How do you expect me to come looking for you after what you told me that last day."

"What last day, Leila?" he asked, confused. How could she allow anger to rob him of eight years with their daughter?

A child, he shook his head in grief. *Why would she punish him like this?*

"Leila."

"Don't, there is nothing you can say that will make this situation easier." Leila pushed her chair back. "This was a mistake. Please, forget we met."

"No," he said, reaching for her hand before she could get up.

"Sit." Nathan ordered through gritted teeth trying to keep his cool. They were drawing attention and he didn't want to make a scene. "Come on, Leila, please."

"Mum," Sonya came running toward Leila as though she sensed something was wrong.

Nathan let go of her hand and watched as she hugged Sonya.

"Time to go, baby, *Cucu* will be home soon and she'll be worried if we're not there."

Leila stood, holding Sonya's hand, gathered her purse and led her daughter out of the coffee house. He couldn't believe she was just going to walk away peacefully after dropping a bomb on his life. What did she mean by *'forget we met'*?

Standing, Nathan dropped money on the table, not caring about change and hurried after Leila Karani.

She wanted to run. A big part of her wanted to pick up Sonya and take off running to her car. But she didn't want to panic her daughter. Leila tightened her hold on Sonya's hand and walked faster.

"Why are we walking so fast?" Sonya complained. The sun was high, and there were more people arriving at the mall.

Leila hoped that Nathan wasn't following too closely so that they could disappear in the crowd. Why had she parked her car so far? Jeez, she was an idiot. Why was she so afraid of Nathan?

"Mum," Sonya said in distress. "You're hurting me."

Leila loosened her grip on her daughter.

"I'm sorry." She was glad to see her car a few spaces away. She was unlocking the doors when Nathan reached them.

"Get in the car," she ordered Sonya.

For once, her daughter didn't protest about sitting in the back. Turning to Nathan, she shook her head in disbelief.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not moving from here until you explain yourself." He braced his palms on her car. "You can't tell a man he has a daughter, then walk away. That's not right, Leila."

Leila scoffed and placed her hands at her waist.

"What game are you playing? Did you get a memory ailment? Or insomnia, did someone hit your head with a rock? Nathan, you walked away first."

"When did I walk away?" Nathan demanded. "How could I have walked away from you when you never gave me the chance to fight our breakup? God, Leila, I'd never leave my child."

"I've heard enough." Leila turned to open the driver's side. "If you don't move, I'm running you over."

Nathan moved faster than she could have anticipated. He grabbed the door and stopped her before she could enter the driver's side. Pressing her against her car, he braced his palms on either side of her head.

"You're giving me a headache, woman. You're not leaving without explaining a few things."

"Nathan." She tried to keep calm. He was so close, his breath mingling with hers as he caged her against the car. "Did you live at Gitanga road, Peachtree apartments, House no. 9?"

He nodded remembering the apartment he'd shared with his twin like the back of his hand.

"What about it?"

"Go talk to the guard they call Kevo. He let me into those apartments more than once when I was pregnant with Sonya. Now, get out of my way. You're scaring my daughter."

Nathan's gaze shifted to Sonya who was leaning on the car door in the backseat looking at them with a worried expression. He stepped back and Leila slid into the driver's seat as fast as she could. Without another glance at him, she started the car, drove out of the Junction mall, and headed straight home and safety.

"Mum, who was that man?" Sonya asked when they reached home. "Why was he chasing us?"

"He was no one." Leila let her out of the car and locked the car looking down the street with a frown. She'd driven like a maniac, worried Nathan might follow her. Shaking her head, she took Sonya's hand. "Were you scared?"

"A little bit," Sonya said looking at her. "I thought he was going to beat you."

"No," Leila assured her stopping at the front door. She crouched so that she could look into Sonya's worried eyes. "I was perfectly safe."

"Did he want to hurt me?" Sonya asked still frowning.

"No, honey, he just wanted to ask some questions. Sonya, I'll never let anyone hurt you." She pulled her daughter into a hug. "We're home, hmm, don't worry anymore. Do you want some ice cream? I think we still have strawberry ice cream left from the party."

Leila pulled back and was happy to see a wide smile on Sonya's face. She shelved the incident at the mall, led Sonya into the house and concentrated on making her daughter happy the rest of the afternoon. Later that night, with her daughter and mother asleep in their rooms, Leila sat on her bed and thought about Nathan's reaction. He had looked surprised, hurt, gutted—, She shook her head. He didn't make sense.

How dare he accuse her of lying, and keeping him away from his daughter?

She pleaded with him to accept her. She begged him to meet her parents and take responsibility for Sonya, and instead he kicked her out and told her to abort.

How could he then play the victim now?

Monday morning was hectic at the shop. Leila barely slept, plagued by dreams of Nathan coming to claim his rights with Sonya. She'd woken up with bleary eyes and a terrible mood. Leila dealt with customers collecting orders, adjusting seams and taking measurements for new orders. She buried her thoughts in work, carefully keeping Nathan out of her mind. She was helping one of the shop assistants cut material when a young man in a neat black suit walked in carrying a briefcase.

"I'm looking for Ms. Karani," he told Terry. "I'm from the NFA."

Terry smiled and came to exchange places with Leila so that she could talk to the new comer.

"I'm Leila Karani," she said, smiling at the young man.

"Elliot Kabui," he said. "Are you ready to get started?"

Leila met Terry's excited gaze and smiled. "As ready as I'll ever get."

She showed Elliot into the back of the shop where she had a small office. She urged him to take a seat on one of the guest chairs.

"First, we're going to sign an agreement," Elliot said as she took her seat behind the desk. He opened his briefcase and removed documents that he sorted into a neat pile. "I promise to protect your designs and work with you honestly in this competition. What you'll sign is an agreement that you're now part of the NFA competition."

"I'm so nervous." Leila said when Elliot pushed the documents across the desk to her.

"That is normal." Elliot assured. "We're going to focus on designs first. Afri-fabrics sponsored you, so we're going to write out your needs when you finish your ten designs."

Leila took the documents from him, read them and let out a nervous breath as she signed.

This was it, she thought.

It was time to test her creativity.

The next two weeks passed in a blur of activity.

Leila tried not to think of Nathan as she worked to create her designs for the competition, but it was hard. His expression when she told him he was Sonya's father haunted her. He'd seemed...too shaken.

Why he would be shocked, she had no clue.

Pushing Nathan's reaction out of her mind, she stared at the sketch on her desk. Standing up, she took the design and propped it on the window in her study. Taking a few steps back, she studied the sketch critically. The concept was an interpretation of the Savannah Desert. She'd chosen to work with light fabrics. Cotton was her favorite because it worked well with the heat. Light colors and pastel hues that would deflect the heat, and simple lines that allowed freedom of movement. Shifting on one leg, she sighed as she gave her design another critical glance. She liked the look of the dress she'd drawn; the design was solid, off shoulder, toga-style like a Masai wrap. The detail she'd put on the shoulder pin and the seams would take work.

A soft knock on the door interrupted her thoughts and she glanced up when her mother walked in.

Julia smiled and came to stand beside her.

"Hey, kiddo, how's it going?"

"Okay, what do you think?" she asked, when her mother slipped an arm around her waist. "Too overdone?"

"I like the scrunched up seam at the hips down to the hem. Looks chic, it's perfect."

Leila sighed and leaned against her mother.

"I'm so nervous. Tomorrow is the deadline. Elliot is going to pick this last design in the morning. Once the NFA verify authenticity, I have to start making them."

"You're doing 2great," Julia said squeezing her waist. "I can't wait to see your models on the runway."

Leila chuckled.

"Can you imagine that? Who would have thought I'd ever have a fashion show?"

"Me," Julia said with conviction. "Leila, you've managed to raise a daughter alone, take care of us, and create a thriving business—"

"I wanted to quit those first five years." Leila pointed out with a short laugh. "Remember me begging Uncle Mwaura for money just to buy fabric? You were so annoyed with me for asking him. I didn't think you'd ever speak to me again."

Julia sighed.

"Well, I survived the embarrassment, and you ended up paying him back so things are fine. I'm proud of you. Now, if you'd only get married to a nice young man."

"Oh, stop." Leila said with a small laugh. "Let's just enjoy this moment without talking about men and weddings."

"Don't you think every mother wants to see her daughter settled and living a good life, with a caring husband?"

"Well, not all women are fated to that, don't you think? Look at what happened to me and Nathan."

“He was young and naive,” Julia said, her voice ringing with wisdom. “I’m sure wherever he is he’s regretting his choices. As for you, my dear, I’m very positive you’ll find the guy who’ll love you and Sonya. I worry you know. I’m not going to be here forever.”

“Jeez, don’t say that,” Leila pulled her mother into a tight hug. “You’re going to live forever and ever. I believe that, so stop worrying.”

Julia patted her back and Leila could tell she was shaking her head at Leila’s words. But it didn’t matter that she seemed to believe in a fantasy. Her mother was the one person who’d stood by her all her life. She had every right to believe her mother would be there forever.

Chapter Five

Nathan drove along Ngami Street, a Dagoretti corner estate that had once belonged to the city council of Nairobi. The city council had used the houses for their officials in the eighties. Lately however, the owners of the houses had gotten a chance to own the property. He wondered if Leila’s parents had bought the house they lived in. The address he had for her parents was nine years old; he hoped they were still living there.

Parking his car on the side of the street, he stared at the green gate with a frown. Tall trees and a live fence protected the property from prying eyes. He sat in his car for a full minute preparing himself.

This was going to be a battle, he thought.

One that wouldn’t stop until he got what he lost so easily nine years ago. Just thinking about the reason why he and Leila were apart had him opening his door abruptly and stepping out. His twin brother, Chris, owed him a deep debt, he thought painfully.

He walked up to the gate and knocked. When there was no answer, he slipped his hand in the hole on the metal gate and opened the latch. He stepped into the quiet compound, pausing to close the latch before his gaze swept over the pretty compound. There were flowers growing everywhere.

A riot of color, he thought as he headed for a path that led him to the front door of the house. Knocking on the glass part of the door, he took a step back and waited to meet Leila’s formidable mother.

The door opened a few minutes later and he smiled when he saw Sonya standing at the door. His heart squeezed tight at the sight of her. She was lovely in a royal blue dress and blue tights, her hair in short braids decorated with colorful rubber bands.

“Mummy,” she called out, her bright eyes staring at him suspiciously.

He heard footsteps follow her call, a second later, Leila appeared and he was at a loss. He hadn’t imagined that she’d be staying with her parents. He had imagined she would have an apartment closer to town.

God, she was beautiful.

That hadn’t changed at all through the years, in fact time had only added to her. A sleeveless green dress emphasized her full figure stopping just above her knee. Her soft skin inviting a

caress, but he doubted she'd appreciate that. Moving his gaze up to her face, he studied luscious full lips. Her skin reminded him of warm caramel, meeting brown inquisitive eyes; he swallowed when he noted the frown forming on her smooth forehead.

"Hi," he said quietly.

"Sonya, go to the kitchen and help *Cucu* make lunch." Leila ordered their daughter. Sonya gave him one last curious glance before she did as ordered.

Leila stepped out of the house and closed the door.

"What are you doing here? I told you to leave us alone."

"We need to talk," he said quietly. "There are things I need to explain."

"What do you have to explain?" Leila narrowed her gaze. "We have nothing to talk about. Jeez, Nathan, why are you doing this to me?"

Nathan couldn't help the impatient sigh he gave.

"Leila, please, just two minutes. Give me two minutes and you'll understand why I'm here." When she gave him a mutinous expression, he added, "I'm not leaving until we talk. So you either invite me in or I camp at your front door."

Leila cursed under her breath and glared at him. He stood his ground despite the hostility in her eyes. When it was obvious he meant what he said, she gave a dramatic sigh.

"Fine, but we're not going inside. Follow me," she said taking a path on his right he hadn't noticed near the house. She stepped onto the grass behind the flower garden and led him to a wooden bench under a tree.

He smiled as he watched her sit as far away from him as she could manage. She sat stiff, keeping her gaze straight ahead. He wanted to reach out and cajole her into relaxing by rubbing her tense shoulders but he doubted she'd appreciate that either.

"How have you been?" he asked, shifting on the bench so that he could look at her.

"Just fine," she said grudgingly.

"You're staying with your parents?" he asked, looking around the neat compound.

She shrugged and dropped her gaze to her lap.

"Just my mum, dad died six years ago."

Nathan absorbed that with a wince. Sonya would have been two years old at the time. He doubted things had been easy for Leila or even her mother. Guilt threatened to choke him; he should have been there for them. Shaking his head, he pushed on.

"I'm sorry to hear about your dad. He was a good man."

Leila nodded and clasped her fingers on her lap.

"What do you want, Nathan?"

There was no easy way to broach the subject, so he just jumped in.

"I wanted to see you and Sonya."

"See us?" Leila looked at him with a frown. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly that," he said quietly. "Ever since we met in the supermarket, I haven't been able to think of anything else. I want to get to know my daughter, Leila."

She scoffed.

“Did you suddenly grow paternal instincts?”

“That’s not fair,” Nathan said, unable to avoid the stab of anger that passed through him.

He hadn’t known he was a father, but now that he knew, he wanted to know everything about Sonya. What was her favorite food? How she was doing in school. What interested her—?

Nathan sighed and shifted on the bench.

“Leila, there is something I have to explain to you. Something I should have told you when we were dating.”

His phone buzzed making him pause. Taking his phone from his pocket, he glanced at the caller ID. *Chris*. He glanced at Leila and smiled.

“One minute and all of this will be settled.”

“Settled?” Leila frowned when he stood up and ran back the way they’d come.

What a maniac, she thought standing, her hands at her hips.

Time had obviously been unkind to Nathan’s brain. Every time they met, he turned more incoherent than before. She stared after him for a few more minutes. Deciding he was playing a game on her, she gave up waiting and started heading to the house.

“Wait,” Nathan said, rushing toward her. He took her arm and stopped her. “There’s someone I need you to meet.”

“Nathan, please, I’ve had enough for—,”

Leila stopped when a second man stepped on to the grass. Her heart slammed in her chest and she clutched Nathan’s arm.

“Nathan?” she asked.

He turned to look at her.

“This is my twin brother, Christopher. He is the man you met at my apartment.”

Leila tightened her hold on his arm. A series of emotions tumbling through her: anger, shock, despair...she pushed Nathan’s hand away and stepped back.

“What’s going on here?”

Nathan cursed and tried to reach for her again but she held out a hand to stop him.

“Chris should have told me that you came looking for me,” Nathan said. “But, he didn’t, instead—,”

“What are you saying?” Leila cut him off staring at the man Nathan was calling Chris.

The only thing that allowed her to tell the difference between them was their different clothes.

An identical twin, Nathan was an identical twin.

A laugh bubbled out, pressing a hand to her mouth to stop it. She stared at Chris, then at Nathan. The laugh came again, only this time; it turned into a hard sob. She turned away from them and walked back to the bench because her legs felt like jelly.

“Leila,” Nathan followed her crouching close when her sobs came harder. “I’m sorry, honey, you need to take deep breaths.”

“Please don’t call me honey and don’t tell me what to do,” she sobbed, fat tears sliding down her cheeks.

She couldn’t think, let at all comprehend what Nathan was trying to tell her here. Her tear ducts kept leaking, hard sobs escaping every time she looked at Chris.

“Leila,” Nathan said, gently patting her back. “I’m so sorry. Chris told me what he said to you when you were pregnant with Sonya.”

Her memories returned in full force and she sat up staring at Chris. His eyes were hard, no softness there. She recalled that look very well. This man had treated her like dirt, worse than dirt. He made her contemplate the idea of aborting Sonya. Made her helpless and stupid in the eyes of her father. She stood up. She closed the distance between her and Chris and started punching his chest as hard as she could while screaming all the insults she knew.

Her mother’s raised voice was the only thing that penetrated the haze in her head.

“Leila Wanjiku Karani, what are you doing?” Julie demanded.

Strong arms tightened around her waist and lifted her away from Chris. She took in a deep breath and wiped tears away from her face.

“Bastards!” she said pointing at both Nathan and Chris. “Both of you are bastards, how could you do this to me?”

“Leila, please calm down,” Nathan said trying reason. “Sonya is watching you, honey. Please.” She sucked in air and clung to control. Julie hurried to her side, and glared at Nathan until he let go of her.

“What is going on here?” Julie asked. “One minute I’m in the kitchen feeding Sonya, the next, my daughter is screaming. Why are you always causing trouble, Nathan? The last time you showed up, you and I quarreled on this same garden.”

“I’m sorry for coming unannounced, but,” Nathan glanced at his brother. “I needed to clear something up with Leila.”

“Clear what up?” Julie demanded handing Leila the *leso* wrapped around her waist. “Wipe away your tears, you’re scaring Sonya.”

Leila took the *leso* and wiped her face. She hurried to her daughter’s side and knelt down to hug her.

“Mummy, why are you crying?” Sonya asked, touching her face with sweaty palms, her cheeks wet with tears too. “Don’t cry, Mum.”

Leila took in a shaky breath and buried her face into her daughter’s shoulder. Breathing in the sweet scent of baby shampoo, she allowed her daughter to hug and comfort her. She wasn’t ready to deal with this situation just yet. It was too bizarre, the anger she’d carried around for all these years was misplaced. She shook her head not ready to acknowledge that.

“Leila, go inside with Sonya.” Julie ordered. “I left food on the gas cooker. Make sure it doesn’t burn.”

Leila picked up Sonya and hurried into the house.

Nathan watched Leila and Sonya until they disappeared inside the house. His heart ached wanting to comfort both of them and explain that he wasn't going to abandon them.

"Now," Julie interrupted his thoughts. "Tell me what's going on here. I've never seen Leila react that way. What did you two do to her?"

Nathan sighed and looked at Chris.

"This is your fault. If you'd made that call, we'd probably be happily married right now."

"What call?" Julie asked in irritation. "I'm not standing here for half stories, Nathan Njeru. Start talking."

Nathan looked at Julie and hoped she'd accept his explanation. Before he could speak, his twin brother jumped in.

"This is my fault, as he says," Christopher said quietly. "I didn't realize what your daughter meant to Nathan. Eight years ago when she came to our apartment, I thought she was playing games and sent her away."

Julie narrowed her gaze.

"You sent her away? What do you mean by that?"

"He didn't tell me that Leila came looking for me," Nathan said painfully. "I'd moved back home to take care of our father while he was sick, and the family business. After you sent me away from here, I thought Leila and I were through. So when she showed up at the apartment to talk to Chris, he—,"

"Treated her like a gold digger, abused her, made her the fool," Julie finished for him. She looked at Chris and shook her head. "Do you realize the pain you caused her? She almost got an abortion because of what you told her."

"I'm sorry," Chris said his gaze dropping to the ground.

"Why would you do this to your brother?" Julie demanded.

Nathan shifted and glanced toward the house.

"Can I talk to Leila, please?"

Julie's frown deepened and she turned her glare to him.

"Why did you come today?"

"I want to meet my daughter," Nathan said. "I want to make things right for Leila."

"What can you make right?" Julie asked. "She's lived for years without you. Sonya is happy; she doesn't need you to complicate her life."

"Please, Mrs. Karani," Nathan begged. "Let me talk to her and I promise I'll follow whatever Leila says."

Julie shook her head and let out an aggravated sigh.

"Ten minutes, Nathan. I give you ten minutes and if Leila wants you out, I'll get men to carry you out."

Nathan nodded in understanding and started toward the front door. Julie stopped him and pointed to the back of the house.

"She'll be in the kitchen," she said abruptly.

“Mum, why are you crying?” Sonya asked, from her perch on the kitchen counter. “Did that man make you cry?”

Leila turned on the water at the sink and washed her face.

“Mum is okay, honey.”

“But you are crying,” Sonya insisted.

Leila used her mother’s *leso* to wipe her face and turned back to her daughter.

“I’m sorry you saw mum like that.”

“Is *Cucu* going to make them go away?” Sonya asked, staring at the door with a frown. She was worried, her fingers bunched in her dress.

Leila crossed to the counter and Sonya. She hugged her and patted her back.

“Don’t worry about those men.”

“Mum, something is burning,” Sonya said after a while.

The scent of burning food filled Leila’s nostrils and she let go of Sonya quickly. Her gaze flying to the cooking range on her left, she groaned and hurried to the pot. Grabbing a dishcloth on the counter, she turned off the fire and used the cloth to open the lid. Her mother’s beef stew had burned. Taking a spoon from a plate on the counter, she used it to turn the meat and vegetables. Most of which was charred and stuck to the bottom of the pot, *damn Nathan*. Every time he showed up, things crashed and burned.

She glanced up when the kitchen door suddenly opened and froze when Nathan walked in.

“Leila,” he said.

“What are you doing here? The gate is on the other side,” she said, dropping the spoon into the pot. There was nothing to do about the stew, but she could get rid of Nathan. “I don’t want anything to do with you.”

But Nathan wasn’t listening to her. His gaze was on Sonya who watched him curiously from her perch on the counter.

Throwing the dishcloth on the pot, Leila hurried to her daughter.

“Please Nathan—,”

She looked at Nathan’s face and stopped at his expression. He had that same gutted look he’d given her when she told him he was Sonya’s father. Thinking about his twin brother out there, she sighed, what was she supposed to do?

What was the right thing to do, she wondered.

“Leila,” Nathan said helplessly.

Leila looked at her daughter. Touching Sonya’s hair, she made a decision. She wrapped an arm around her daughter and lifted her off the counter. Sonya wrapped her slender arms around her neck and asked, “Where are we going?”

“The living room,” she said quietly. “Nathan, you too, please follow me.”

He blinked and met her gaze for a moment.

Leila nodded and headed to the corridor that would lead them to the living room. She settled Sonya on the couch in the spacious room and knelt before her. Swallowing hard, she took her daughter's hand and squeezed it gently.

"Sonya," she said gently. "Remember when you asked me about your dad?"

Sonya's face brightened and she smiled showing off her two missing teeth. Leila felt her heart squeeze and she prayed for strength.

"Is he here to see me?"

Glancing at Nathan, Leila nodded and turned back to Sonya.

"Yes, he came to see you, honey. His name is Nathan Njeru. Do you want to meet him?"

Sonya nodded happily and Leila stood. Turning to Nathan, she urged him closer. He looked like a lost child himself, so she ended up taking his hand and pulling him around the couch.

"Nathan, meet your daughter. Sonya, this is your dad."

Sonya looked up at Nathan, a frown creasing her forehead. Leila took a step back to give Nathan room. She watched as Nathan knelt before Sonya and gave her a tentative smile. Sonya glanced at her for confirmation and Leila nodded in approval.

"Greet your daddy, Sonya," Leila urged.

"Hello," Sonya said shyly looking at Nathan. "I'm Sonya Wairimu. Are you really my dad?"

Nathan took her hand, his large hand engulfing her little one.

"Yes, I am."

Sonya grinned.

"Did you bring me a present? Are you going to stay with us from now on? Where were you? Can you come to my school?"

Leila took a step back as the questions piled and Sonya clung to Nathan's hand. When he moved to sit on the couch and put Sonya's on his knee, love shining on his face, Leila turned away and went into the corridor. Every part of her trembled. She'd had dreams of this day, but each time the blame had always been on Nathan's shoulders. She imagined elaborate scenes where she threw the fact that Nathan had abandoned her in his face. Now that he was also a victim, she had no reason for her anger and it all seemed futile. All her tears and anxiety, the choices she had made.

She leaned on the wall suddenly tired.

She went back into the kitchen in a daze and found her mother dealing with the burnt stew. She headed straight for the fridge, wishing they kept drinks stronger than sangria.

"Where is Nathan?" Julie asked, as she discarded the burnt stew into the trashcan.

"Talking to Sonya in the living room," Leila answered as she poured a healthy potion of sangria into a glass. She took a gulp and swallowed with a wince. "What else can I do mum?"

Julie placed the pot in the sink.

"It's the right thing," Julie answered after a minute of silence. "He should meet his daughter."

Leila returned the carton back in the fridge and shook her head.

"Still, I can't forgive them. I can't, Mum."

“No one is asking you to,” Julie said. “Nathan has a right to know his daughter, but it stops there. You’re not obligated to do anything else.”

Leila finished her drink and took the glass to the sink. The problem wasn’t whether she was obligated, she thought as she turned on the water.

No, the issue was how easy it would be to forgive Nathan and jump back into his arms. In the living room, she’d almost seen a future that included Nathan: a family.

Leila dropped the glass in the dirty *sufuria* and squelched that thought.

Foolish dreams, she decided as she reached for soap. It was better to be firmly rooted in reality.

Chapter Six

“I’m going to lose my mind,” Leila told Annette and Terry a week later.

They were at the back of the store sorting the fabric that had arrived for her NFA competition designs. Elliot had gone out of his way to make sure she got everything she requested. She just needed to sew and turn the designs into reality. Leila touched the light pale blue linen fabric on the cutting table and sighed.

“Why, because of Nathan?” Terry asked. “I still can’t believe that story. His twin brother is worse than the villains in the movies.”

Leila laughed at that comment. She’d thought the same thing every time Nathan walked into her house this past week. She wanted to know why Chris would do that to Nathan, but she still didn’t have the courage to listen to the entire story. It was enough that Nathan was making an effort with Sonya.

“I imagine it’s hard to watch Sonya get along with Nathan,” Annette said quietly.

“You have no idea.” Leila leaned on the cutting table and toyed with the pins stuck on a bud on her wrist. “Sonya gets so excited every time he walks in. All I hear when he’s not visiting is, ‘Daddy this, Daddy that’, this weekend Nathan wants to take her to Splash for swimming. I just want to grit my teeth and scream.”

“Aww, you’re jealous,” Terry said clapping her hands. “Sonya and Nathan have a thing that’s excluding you.”

Leila scowled at her.

“I am not jealous. He’s spoiling my daughter to earn points with her.”

Annette chuckled and came to lean on the table beside her.

“Gal, you’re so jealous.”

Leila shrugged.

“Whatever, just because he is being good to my daughter, doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Have you noticed how you keep saying *my* instead of *our* daughter?” Annette asked her.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Leila countered.

She pushed off the cutting table and turned to inspect the pale blue material.

“I’m only pointing it out,” Annette said gently. “Leila, you know my door’s open if you need to talk. We can trash talk him all you want.”

Leila nodded and picked up a pair of scissors.

“Thanks Annette. Let’s focus on the fashion show. I’ve barely started sewing and we still need to design the hair and make-up concept. We have four weeks to go before this competition. I actually want to win.”

“You will, we’ve got your back,” Annette said. “I have the perfect hairstyle for your models. When we meet them later, I’ll have a talk with them. Terry, let’s go check out the rest of the fabric in the store.”

Leila watched them leave. She stood staring at the fabric thinking about Annette’s words. *Maybe they were right.* She was jealous and that’s why she couldn’t stop getting angry every time Sonya talked about Nathan. He never interfered with Sonya’s school time. He showed up after work, spent time playing with Sonya in the backyard. Julie had taken to inviting him for dinner, which was extremely hard to go through.

Leila closed her eyes remembering him seated across her at the dining table. It seemed so right to have him there that it annoyed her.

Giving an impatient sigh, Leila shrugged off those thoughts and concentrated on cutting her material. She had work to do that didn’t include Nathan Njeru.

“Goodnight, daddy,” Sonya said hugging him tight.

Nathan smiled.

“Goodnight, Sonya.”

He buried his nose into her shoulder, breathing in her sweet scent. His heart squeezed tight in his chest. She was so precious. He let her go and watched Julie lead her away to her bedroom.

Left alone in the small sitting room, just off the kitchen, Nathan picked up the storybook he’d been reading and took it to the bookshelves lining the room. Leila had packed them with kids’ storybooks. Tonight, they’d been reading *Tales of a Mamba Girl*. He returned the book on the shelf and touched the leather-bound books on the higher shelves. He smiled when he saw a familiar title. It was a poetry book called *Song of Lawino*. The book belonged to Leila. Taking the book off the shelf, he opened the cover and paused when he saw the words he’d scribbled nine years ago.

Follow your heart, even when it hurts.

Touching the faded ink, Nathan remembered the first time he met Leila. She’d been in the campus library seated at a table near the window. Long dark braids pulled to one side, Leila had been engrossed in her reading. He’d felt compelled to talk to her, find out more about her. So, he took the seat across her. She ignored him when he tried to talk to her. Nathan smiled remembering her irritated expression when he tagged her braids in retaliation.

Girls didn’t like their hair tagged, he thought with a chuckle.

He couldn’t believe she’d kept the book. He returned it on the shelf and turned to head to the kitchen where Leila’s mother was.

Leila was late, he thought with a quick glance at his watch.

It was almost nine o'clock at night. She usually made it home in time for dinner at seven. Julie looked up when he entered the kitchen and smiled.

"Want some coffee?" she asked.

She took out two mugs from the cupboard, making the decision for him.

Nathan sat at the kitchen table and watched Julie pour coffee. He liked spending time with her. She was patient, and didn't dwell on the past. She encouraged his relationship with Sonya, making sure Sonya called him Daddy. Except when it came to Leila, he thought. Julie kept her silence on anything about Leila. He wondered if Julie had noticed that Leila was avoiding him like the plague.

"Sonya is looking forward to tomorrow," Julie said with a smile.

She brought the mugs to the table and handed him one. Thanking her with a nod, he sipped the fragrant liquid and nodded.

"She deserves it, and it will give me a chance to connect with her. I'm hoping Leila will join us."

Julie shook her head and stared into her coffee.

"Leila's having a rough time with the competition. She's sewing her designs this week. We'll have to see."

"Mum," Nathan said quietly. "Do you think she'll ever forgive me?"

Julie looked up in surprise.

"Nathan, do you need to be forgiven? Your brother was at fault here. There is nothing to forgive."

"Leila won't even look at me." Nathan frowned, guilt stabbing through him. "I mean, I should have fought harder for her. I gave up when I didn't hear from her, and now to find out what my brother did to her." He shook his head and stared into his cup. "I'm surprised she lets me near our daughter."

Julie reached out to touch his hand.

"Sonya has asked about you ever since she started school. Leila did the right thing by introducing you two. As for Leila, she's been through a lot. My husband got sick after she got pregnant. We were struggling, what with him in hospital, a baby to take care of, and Leila finding a new course of life. She quit university, and decided to train in fashion and design. The transition wasn't easy. She changed a lot, got hard, harder still when my husband died. Responsibilities have a way of doing that to a woman. You let go of dreams, and firmly entrench yourself in reality. The woman you knew when you two were together is long gone."

Nathan sipped his coffee and shook his head.

"I still love her."

"She let you go," Julie countered.

"Then I'll hold on until she returns to me," Nathan said meeting Julie's gaze. "I want them both in my life. Sonya and Leila, Mum. They're my family."

Julie chuckled after a moment.

“You always were stubborn. I hope you don’t give up, Nathan. I really hope you can change my daughter’s mind. I’d be honored to call you a son.”

The kitchen door opened and Leila walked in with a loud sigh, her arms laden with shopping bags. She dumped them on the floor and removed her shoes.

“Oh, Mummy, the day I’ve had. My feet are killing me,” Leila said closing the door. “My fingers are hurting with pin pricks. And my bra is making me itchy...argh.”

“Leila,” Julie said getting her attention.

Nathan noted the moment Leila saw him. Her back stiffened and the smile on her face disappeared. She looked beautiful in a white dress that stopped just above her knee, her hair in long black braids that fell down her back.

“Nathan,” she said staring at him. “What are you still doing here? It’s nine o’clock.”

“He was talking to me,” Julie said winking at him. “I’m glad you’re home. I’m tired, I’m going to bed.”

“Mum,” Leila frowned at Julie who stood up from the table.

“It’s been a long day,” Julie said, taking her cup to the sink. “Goodnight dear. Nathan, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Julie left with a small wave, leaving them alone.

Leila sighed and pushed her braids out of her face. She picked up the shopping bags she’d dropped on the floor and put them on the counter.

“How was Sonya? Did she eat her dinner?” Leila asked grudgingly.

Her questions made him happy. She was talking to him.

“Sonya was good, had fun in school. Your mum made *mukimo* and greens. Sonya ate the *mukimo* but refused the greens. She’s looking forward to tomorrow.”

Leila nodded and leaned on the counter.

“Thank you for staying with her tonight. I’m sure you have things to do, you don’t have to stay.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Nathan asked, not moving from his seat. He sipped his coffee and sat back to watch her.

“No,” Leila shook her head. “It’s been a long day for me too. I might have to go in to the shop tomorrow.”

“Won’t you come swimming with Sonya?” Nathan asked. “She’s been asking if you were coming too.”

Leila sighed. “Nathan—,”

“Leila,” he said cutting in. “You’re avoiding me.”

Leila scoffed and pointed at him.

“How am I avoiding you? You’re in my house practically every day.”

“You are, Leila. I’m in your house, but you don’t talk to me, you don’t look at me. Sonya is starting to notice.”

Leila scowled at him.

“What do you want me to do? Jump on you like my daughter?”

“Our,” Nathan corrected her. He’d noticed that she called Sonya her daughter and not their daughter. “She’s our daughter.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Leila asked, pushing off the counter. She went to the fridge and removed the bowl of leftovers. Nathan watched her prepare a plate and put it in the microwave to heat.

He sipped his coffee again and waited. She got a spoon from a drawer and leaned on the counter when she got her food. It hurt that she wouldn’t even sit across him. She took a bite of her food and he noted the band-aid on her left index finger. He remembered her comment about pinpricks.

“How far along are you with your designs?” he asked.

“One more dress to sew,” she said with a shrug. “Terry and Annette were at the shop with me today. They helped me cut and sew the other four. So, I’m almost finished.”

Terry and Annette were her friends: he’d met them last weekend when he came over on Sunday afternoon. They were a loyal bunch; they’d watched him warily through the afternoon.

“And the fabric?” he asked.

He still had to tell her about Afri-Fabrics and him.

“The fabric is perfect,” she said, shifting on her feet.

“Leila,” he said, standing up. “I’m not going to bite. You’ve had a long day, sit down.”

He pulled out a chair for her and waited until she sat down before he took one beside her. She placed her plate on the table and took a bite. He couldn’t help watching her. Sitting too close to her, her flowery perfume assaulting his nostrils, he wanted to touch her. Hold her, take away this guarded air she had whenever she was around him.

“What time are you picking Sonya up?” she asked.

“Around one o’clock, I have to go to the office. Are you really not coming along?”

She put her spoon down and turned to meet his gaze.

“Sonya is a big girl. She doesn’t need me there.”

“It would be nice to have both her parents on an outing.” Nathan smiled. “She can brag about it in school.”

Leila chuckled.

“She’s been bragging about you lately. She doesn’t need me there.”

Nathan sighed.

“We need to talk, Lei.”

She gasped when he used her nickname. He’d given it to her when they were dating. He doubted anyone had used it since then. She met his gaze and he scowled when he saw the invisible wall she raised to keep him at a distance. He wanted to break through that wall and find the woman he loved and missed.

“What’s left to say?” she asked.

“You and me, what my brother did to you, my family, your mum, this situation we’re in,” Nathan answered. “We have a boat load of things to discuss. I think we should do it over dinner tomorrow night.”

“I don’t need dinner to discuss—,”

“Well, I do,” he said.

He went a step further and leaned to kiss her cheek. His lips lingering on her smooth skin, before she could move away, he took her lips in a short, sweet kiss that ended too soon. Sitting back, he smiled.

“I’ve wanted to do that since I saw you at Lonrho house. You were so shocked to see me.”

“Nathan,” she said in shock. “Why—?”

He stood up and took his empty coffee cup to the sink.

“I’m not listening to your complaints. If you have any protests against my kisses or me caring about Sonya, you’re going to have to tell me tomorrow. I’ll pick you up at one with Sonya. If you’re not home, I’ll drive all the way to town and make a scene at your shop. Goodnight.”

With a hidden smile, Nathan pressed a kiss on top of her head and left without another word. He was going to get her back, even if it meant bulldozing her back into his arms, he decided. He was not going to lose her again.

Chapter Seven

“Ow!” Leila moaned then stuck the tip of her finger into her mouth. This was the fifth time in the last five minutes; she was going to bleed to death at this rate. Putting the dress on the worktable in her study, she studied her finger with a sigh.

Stupid Nathan, she couldn’t concentrate on anything. Her brain occupied with his kiss last night. How dare he threaten her? She couldn’t believe him. What right did he have to say they needed to talk?

“Leila,” Julie walked into the study. “Nathan is here. Sonya is ready, but you’re not. Come on, we don’t want to keep him waiting.”

“I’m not going,” she said picking up the dress she was working on. “I don’t have time to play family. I have real work waiting for me.”

“Stop sulking like a child,” Julie said, moving into the study. She came and took the dress out of her hands. “Your daughter is excited. Don’t ruin it for her.”

“Mum, give me back that dress.”

“I’ll finish hemming it for you. Now get up, wear something nice and go out with your daughter and her father. She’s waited a lifetime for this. Don’t disappoint her.”

“It’s swimming,” Leila scoffed shaking her head.

“It’s a family day out.” Julie countered. “Don’t forget that. Now, go on, or I’m going to get Nathan. He’s pretty determined to get you out today.”

Leila grumbled under her breath. Glaring at her mother, she left the study and went to her bedroom feeling put upon. She’d contemplated driving to town this morning when she woken up, but Nathan wasn’t one to test. He could cause trouble if he put his mind to it. Besides, a small part of her wanted to join the outing.

Nathan's kiss last night; she frowned and shook her head. No, she wouldn't think of that. She had to think of Sonya now. She and Nathan were parents nothing more. She dressed in a denim skirt, a sleeveless white top and sandals. Grabbing her swimming costume, towel, and lotion, she dumped them in a huge bag.

Sonya came running into her bedroom, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Mum, let's go, let's go."

Sonya was holding a ladybug water ball. Julie had dressed her in a white sleeveless dress, her feet in pink sandals, she raced to Leila's vanity table and took Leila's sunglasses.

"Daddy says it's going to be very hot. You should wear your sunglasses."

Leila took the glasses from her daughter.

"Sonya, are you happy?"

Sonya grinned wide, gracing her with her two missing front teeth.

Yep, she was happy, Leila thought with a sigh.

"Daddy said they have a water slide. Will you go with me?" Sonya took her hand and tugged.

"I've never been on a water slide."

Leila allowed her daughter to drag her down the corridor to the living room. She found Nathan pacing the length of the couch like a caged animal. His energy filled the living room; she noted he'd also dressed casually. Khaki shorts, white t-shirt and open-toe leather sandals. She ignored his wide smile and instead watched Sonya run to him. Nathan swept her into his arms. They made such a handsome pair; her heart ached just looking at them.

"Alright, my girls are ready." Nathan grinned and carried Sonya to the door. He opened it and stepped back. "Ladies first," he said.

Leila shook her head in amusement and led the way out. He'd parked outside the gate. She was surprised to find a black Mercedes. She suddenly realized she'd never actually asked what he did for a living.

Nathan unlocked the doors and settled their daughter in the back seat while Leila slid onto the front passenger side. He closed her door and she watched him hurry around to the driver's side.

"Are you ready?" he asked, when he started the car. He waited for Leila to put her seatbelt on before he pulled out.

"As ready as I'm ever going to be," she said with a slight smile.

The drive to Splash Water World was surreal. Leila sat listening to Nathan and her daughter talk. Sonya asked questions, Nathan answered patiently. He never once got impatient with Sonya's endless inquisition. He made jokes that had Leila laughing despite her determination not to engage. She could see how he'd charmed her mother and Sonya.

When they got to Splash, Nathan let them go change into their swimming costumes. Sonya could hardly wait to get into the pool she was vibrating with excitement. Leila packed away their clothes in her bag and followed her daughter out of the changing rooms. She put on her glasses when she saw Nathan running to the shallow pool with Sonya in his arms.

In black swimming shorts, Nathan was tall and handsome, barely an ounce of fat on his flat stomach. He entered the pool with Sonya held above his head. She squealed with delight when he made a show of dropping her in the water, only to gently lay her on the surface.

Walking to the lounge chairs set near the shallow end, Leila chose two and laid her bag on one and a towel on the other. She perched on the edge and watched Nathan play with Sonya.

She got mesmerized watching them. Nathan gave Sonya a ride on his shoulders in the water; they played with the ladybug ball. Nathan threw it at Leila at some point and she laughed when he insisted she had to bring it to the water. When she threw it at him, he threw it back and insisted she had to be in the water. Removing her sunglasses, she joined them in the pool and Sonya clapped happily. They played tag, Nathan tending to Sonya, making sure she was safe in the water. When they got tired of playing tag, Leila decided to swim. The water was refreshing and cool; she swam laps while Nathan taught Sonya how to float in the water.

When Sonya got tired, they left the pool and headed to the restaurant for a late lunch.

“You raised her well.” Nathan complimented, when Sonya ran off to play at the swings.

Leila watched her daughter talking to another girl.

“She’s a good girl and makes friends easy.”

“Was it hard?” Nathan asked quietly and she turned to look at him confused.

“What?” Leila asked.

“When you got her,” Nathan said, his gaze way too intent. “Were you alone in the hospital?”

She blushed and dropped her gaze to the table.

“Mum came with me. Five hours of labor,” Leila said with a chuckle. “She came out screaming like a banshee.”

“Why did you name her Sonya?” Nathan asked and she lifted her gaze to find him watching her.

“Don’t you think it’s a pretty name?” Leila asked him.

“It’s a beautiful name.”

“Well, my list of names was short. I wanted to name her Julie, like my mum, but she told me a child needs her own identity. So, I chose Sonya.”

“And her last name?” Nathan asked quietly.

Leila sipped her mango juice and refused to meet his gaze. She’d struggled with the name of the father in the hospital. Her parents had left her the decision.

“Her last name is Njeru. We might not be together, but she is your daughter. I wanted to give her the chance to know you.” She watched her daughter swing for a few minutes. “I didn’t want to be the kind of mother that hides that kind of thing from her child.”

Nathan moved his plate aside and reached for her hand. He squeezed it tight.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” she asked.

“For Sonya,” he said. She tried to remove her hand from his but he tightened his hold. “I’m glad you came along today.”

Leila stared at their clasped hands. His fingers were strong, his nails clean and manicured, he rubbed her skin with the pad of his thumb and little thrills of attraction ran through her.

“Why would your twin brother treat us this way?” she asked suddenly. “I’ve thought about it these past weeks and it just doesn’t make sense, Nathan.”

Nathan sighed and leaned his elbows on the table.

“Leila,” he said quietly. “That day at the junction mall when you told me about Sonya, I thought the world was ending. I was so angry with you because I thought you were punishing me. When you told me about the apartment I lived in, I knew you had met Chris. So, I went to find my brother.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you had a twin brother?”

“We have a difficult relationship,” Nathan confessed. “Chris got a girl pregnant when we were in high school. Our father got angry with him and almost disowned him. In order to escape the responsibility, Chris forced the girl to have an abortion. I couldn’t forgive him for doing that to an innocent child and to that girl. When you and I had that fight that last year—,”

“When I went home because I was sick?”

“Yeah,” Nathan gave her a small smile. “I came looking for you at your parent’s house. Your mum must have not known about the baby yet, because she chased me away like I was a rabid dog.”

Leila remembered that day. Her mother had been afraid she and Nathan were getting too involved. Leila had been so in love with Nathan, she hadn’t imagined a life without him. When they fought, she had gone home to clear her head and spent a whole day crying in her mother’s arms. When Nathan showed up, Leila had been asleep. Unknown to her, she’d already been pregnant with their child.

Now that she thought about, no wonder she’d been so emotional.

“You were graduating,” Leila said. “I was scared that you’d dump me after you left university. Your parents are wealthy, so I couldn’t see how they’d accept a girl like me.”

“I figured as much, that’s why I came looking for you. When your mother chased me away, I figured you told her to, so I left. When I got back to the apartment, I found my brother waiting. Our father was sick and I had to move back to Ndwaru Road to help with the family business. Chris didn’t want the responsibility, so I had him stay at my apartment. He was supposed to call me if you showed up.”

Nathan squeezed her fingers and shook his head.

“I shouldn’t have trusted him. Can you forgive me, Leila?”

She stared at his bent head and found herself stroking fingers over his short hair before she could stop herself.

“You still haven’t told me why Chris would do that to you? All he had to do was tell me where you were, why did he tell me to abort our child?”

Nathan sighed and lifted his head.

“Chris thought he was saving me. He’s terrified of responsibility and—,”

“That’s not good enough,” Leila cut in, shaking her head.

“I know,” Nathan said. “I know, Leila, because I understand what you must have gone through after he treated you that way.”

She felt tears prick the back of her eyes and looked away from him.

“I was scared. My dad,” she swallowed down the lump that lodged in her throat. “He was so disappointed in me. He died thinking I’d failed him. I quit university. After that last fight with Chris, I actually booked an appointment with a doctor. I was going to—,”

She broke off when she saw Sonya laughing. Taking in a deep breath, she shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What changed your mind?” Nathan asked.

“I don’t know,” she said unclasping their hands.

She picked up her glass of mango juice and sat back in her chair.

Nathan watched her with a skeptical glance.

“I think you know and just don’t want to tell me.”

Leila shrugged. When she didn’t comment further, he sat back in his seat.

“Well, whatever the reason, I’m grateful.”

Sonya came running to their table. She thrust her fist at Leila.

“Look what I found.”

Leila put her glass on the table and took her daughter’s hand. She’d caught a red ladybug, the little creature nestled on her palm.

“Wow, that’s pretty. Where did you find it?”

“On a flower outside,” Sonya said happily.

Leila smiled and closed the tiny fingers over the bug.

“Why don’t you take her back to the flowers? She was probably looking for food so she can grow bigger.”

Sonya nodded in understanding and started to leave the restaurant. Leila watched as her daughter paused on the way out then ran around the table to show Nathan too. Watching them, Leila felt her heart settle.

Nathan drove them back home an hour later. Sonya fell asleep in the backseat and when he parked at their gate, Leila turned to study their daughter.

“She’s had a great day,” Leila commented. “I’m sure she’ll talk about it all week to her friends.”

Nathan shifted in his seat and suddenly they were too close. She held her breath as her eyes flew to his. She started to move away from him, but he stopped her with a hand on her elbow. Heat swept through her, and she couldn’t break their gaze. Nathan caressed her cheek with a finger.

“You have this huge wall erected up against the world and me,” he said softly. “I’d like to bring it down but, I can see you won’t let it go easily.”

“Nathan—,”

“Shh…” Nathan said leaning closer. “Sonya’s asleep and I really want to kiss you.”

She didn’t get a chance to protest because he pressed his lips to hers. Her eyes drifted closed as he kissed her. Sipping at her lips without demanding until she returned the kiss. Her heart skipped at his tender caress and her breath hitched when he ran his tongue over her lips.

Moaning, she opened her lips and he kissed her fully. Deepening the kiss, exploring her mouth sweetly, his fingers caressed her jaw, and moved to hold her head possessively as he claimed her.

It had been so long, she thought.

So long since anyone had touched her this way. His kiss awoke a part of her she'd forgotten existed. A dormant feminine side that clamored for him, clinging to Nathan, she sighed as he pulled her into his arms.

A car passing by pulled them apart.

She was glad for the tinted windows because no one could see them. Nathan kept holding her, so she buried her face into his chest. He smelled of chlorine and his spicy cologne. The scent filled her nostrils and she wondered if her heart would ever stop beating so hard. It was amazing how alive she felt. He rubbed a hand down her back and dropped a kiss on her shoulder.

"I don't want to let you go," Nathan said into her ear. "I'm afraid you'll enter the house and change your mind about going to dinner with me."

Leila stared at his white t-shirt then sighed. She was afraid of the same thing. Having him hold her this way, made her want to hold on to him for life.

"I'll go for dinner, but I can't promise anything else. We need to keep a clear head, Nathan."

"I want to spend time with you," Nathan said against her neck making her shiver.

"Dinner is plenty of time," she said shakily.

It would be so easy to let him sweep her away. But, how much could she expect of him, she wondered. Eight years ago, she'd wanted him to be a father to their child, now he was here, being that father Sonya needed.

Was he wooing her because he wanted to keep seeing their daughter?

Pulling away, she opened the door on her side. He followed suit and opened the back passenger door to get Sonya. Leila followed him into the house, feeling like a nervous wreck. Watching Nathan's strong capable shoulders, hope she'd long forgotten returned and her heart squeezed tight in fear.

That evening, Nathan picked her up at seven o'clock. Leila wrung her fingers on her lap and shifted in her seat as Nathan pulled in to the Talisman restaurant. He parked the car and she reached for the door.

"Wait," he said, getting out of the car.

She watched him hurry around to her side and open the door. She took his offered hand and allowed him to help her.

"What are you up to?" she asked, when he locked the car and offered her his elbow. "Opening doors, escort service, Nathan, are you trying to be charming?"

"If I'm only trying, I'm failing," Nathan said. "Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?"

She ran a hand down her wine-red dress. Her mother had helped pick out the dress. She loved its fitted bodice that morphed into a layered skirt that stopped right above her knee. Her two-inch strappy heels completed the look. She had worked hard for elegance.

"You look dashing yourself," she replied.

Nathan wore black trousers, matching jacket and a pale blue shirt. He smiled at her and her stupid heart skipped a beat, she looked away quickly.

“So, what’s good to eat here?”

“You’ll see,” he said leading her into the restaurant.

A smiling young woman met them at the door. Nathan told her his name and she led them to a secluded table for two. Nathan pulled out her chair for her before he sat down across her. She removed her wrap and placed it on the back of her chair while Nathan talked to their waiter. She liked the warm ambiance in the restaurant; it had an alfresco feel to it, with some of the tables out in the open. The gardens were beautiful and seemed to flow into the room. She felt like they were in an oasis, about to eat exotic foods. Their waiter was friendly, and unobtrusive. She understood why Nathan had brought her here. They could talk without disturbance.

“What’s on your mind?” Nathan asked when their waiter left.

She smiled. “You always did know the best places in town.”

He chuckled. “Those days you were easy to impress. I have to work harder now. You’re so hard to read.”

“Really,” Leila laughed. “What’s hard?”

“You don’t smile readily,” Nathan noted. “Before, it was so easy to find you smiling, now, unless Sonya is around, you don’t smile.”

“Too much work,” she said accepting her glass of wine from their waiter. “What do you do for work? I realized today that I haven’t asked.”

“I run the family business, Afri-Fabrics,” he said quietly.

She stared at him in shock. “Do you mean the Afri-Fabrics that are sponsoring my shop for the competition?” Her gaze widened as she realized why he’d been at the NFA offices that day.

“That’s impressive, Nathan. I never realized your family was doing so well.”

“It was hard work getting there,” Nathan said with a shrug, “especially after my father died. Most people find it hard to trust a young guy with business.”

Leila understood the pain of losing a parent. Her father’s death had made her feel like the world was ending. “I’m sorry about your dad.”

“Yours too,” Nathan replied.

“How’s your mum?” Leila asked.

“Still worrying about her unsettled sons,” Nathan said. “She lives on Ndwaru Road. I told you once I’d take you there but we never got the chance.”

“Ah, yes, the farm,” Leila said remembering that he’d grown up there. “Are you farming?”

“Of course,” he said. “I have three green houses, and a couple of milk goats. Mum sells the milk around the area.”

“I’ve never had a chance to see a working farm. Annette’s family has one but her parents just plant the basic maize and beans on the seasons.”

“You can visit our farm,” Nathan suggested. “My mum would love to meet you and Sonya.”

Leila frowned. “Would she?”

“I told her about you,” Nathan said his tone turning serious. “The moment I realized what Chris had done to us, she was the first person I visited. She wanted to come meet you right away, but I stopped her.”

Leila shook her head. “What did she say?”

Nathan picked up his wine glass and would have spoken, but their waiter appeared with their food. He’d ordered fish, her favorite. He waited for the waiter to finish before he continued.

“She was angry with Chris. He robbed me of eight years with you. We both wanted to kill him, but what can I do, Leila?” Nathan sighed and picked up his fork and knife. “He’s my twin brother.”

“*Eight*, you’re talking as though we would still be together,” Leila said with a scoff.

“You’ve always known how I feel about you,” Nathan said quietly. “I’d have never let you raise Sonya alone.”

“So you would have married me for the sake of our child?” Leila asked cutting into her fish.

“Yes,” Nathan answered without hesitation.

“That’s very noble.” Leila took a bite of her fish.

“Why does that sound like an insult?” Nathan asked studying her. “You don’t think we would have married?”

“I can’t dwell on the past,” Leila answered meeting his gaze. “I was a different person then. A lot of things changed between then and now.”

Nathan nodded. “You’re right. Things have changed. You got to see Sonya grow, while I didn’t.”

“I’d change that for you if I could,” Leila said quietly. “She was a series of firsts for me.”

“Would you tell me about them?” Nathan asked.

Sonya was an easy topic; she could talk about her daughter for hours. Nathan listened to her raptly, asking questions, laughing when she told him about Sonya losing her front teeth. They finished dinner and moved on to dessert.

“I’m jealous of Sonya,” Nathan said. “It used to be I was the only one who could make you smile and talk for hours.”

Leila laughed.

“See, woman, you take my breath away.”

“I blame the wine,” Leila said happy for the coffee.

“Date me,” he said surprising her.

“What?”

“Let’s date, Leila.” Nathan reached over and tugged her braids. The gesture reminding her of the first time they’d met.

It had been in a library at university. He’d joined her at her table, tried to ask her name, when she hadn’t responded, he’d tugged her hair. She’d picked up her poetry book and smacked his arm with it. Meeting his gaze, he grinned and she realized he was remembering the same moment.

“We can’t date,” she said with a scoff. “I don’t have time to go out, Nathan. I have a competition to win these coming weeks, and Sonya.”

“When you were in school, you had homework, CATS, finals, and we still managed to date.”

“Well, those were school things, this is life and business.” Leila shook her head. “I don’t have time-,”

“I’ll help you make time,” Nathan interrupted her. She stared at him in surprise. He reached for her hand and held it tightly. “I want to get to know this woman you’ve become in my absence. The Leila that’s so in love with our daughter she glows when she talks about her, I want to get to know her better.”

Leila dropped her gaze to their clasped hands. “Nathan.”

“Don’t you want to know the Nathan who’s falling in love with the woman he thought he’d lost years ago?” Nathan asked her. “Come on, Leila.”

“What if it doesn’t work out?” Leila asked him. “Do you think it will be easy to see you walk in and out of my house to visit Sonya? I don’t think it would be fair to her.”

“It’s not fair to Sonya now,” Nathan replied. “Or me, you have no idea what it’s like to leave you two behind every evening. Most days, all I can think about all day, is coming over to see you, Sonya and eat your mum’s cooking.”

Leila smiled. “Nathan-,”

“Please say yes,” he said, his dark eyes imploring her.

His eyes were her weakness, just like their daughter. When he talked, his words so sincere, he made her want the same thing he wanted. Both of them together, that dream rekindled as though eight years hadn’t passed between them. *Maybe not erase that period of absence, but embrace it?* She could live with that. He was a different man. The Nathan she’d known in school had been reckless, a bit pushy, well, that part hadn’t changed. He was still pushy. He’d practically pushed her around all day, to the pool, to this dinner and he was still pushing now. Her head wanted her to walk away, decline and tell him this was a bad idea. But her heart, she dropped her gaze to their clasped hands, oh her foolish heart wanted to dive right in and be with him.

He squeezed her fingers prompting her answer. Her heart hammering in her chest, she looked up and met his gaze. When he gave her a questioning look, she smiled and nodded. To her surprise, he leaned over the table and kissed her lips, a sweet soft kiss that made her heart shift in her chest.

Chapter Eight

He was unexpected. He made dreams she’d thrown away eight years ago return. When he walked into her shop during lunch, and took the time to talk to her staff. She remembered his kindness when he made her staff and Terry laugh, and then ordered lunch for them. She remembered his thoughtful nature when he picked her up after work with Sonya in the back seat. He’d take them out for dinner in order to give her mother a break from cooking. Three weeks and it felt as though they’d never been apart.

He made her laugh. He listened to her. She had started to hope, her heart opening a crack in the door, letting him in.

Leila shifted in her seat and watched Nathan navigate the huge pickup truck. They were going to Ndwaru Road to visit Nathan's mother. She was a bit nervous, but he'd assured her his mother was excited about their visit. Sonya sat in the back seat of the truck her gaze glued to the passing scenery.

When Nathan reached Kawangware, she touched Nathan's knee.

"We should stop here," she said. "I can't go visit your mum empty handed."

"You're not going empty handed, you have Sonya." Nathan teased with a small grin.

She scowled at him and he slowed down. "We'll go in together."

"I can rush in," she said as he parked the car off the road in front of a hardware store. She reached for the door and he followed suit.

"We'll all go," he said opening the back passenger door for Sonya. She jumped into his arms and he carried her. Locking the car, he said when she scowled at her. "This too is a family outing."

She laughed. "I don't think a market can be considered an outing."

Matatus whizzed by on the road and they stopped waiting for the perfect moment to cross. She hugged her handbag and turned to him when he touched her elbow. He handed her his phone and wallet. She put them in her handbag. The Kawangware market was great for fresh groceries but if you weren't careful, pickpockets would get your valuables in minutes. When the cars cleared, Nathan took her right hand in his and they crossed the road together.

Shopping through the busy market with Nathan was a new experience. He held Sonya's hand and answered all her questions as they moved from vendor to vendor. When the vendors tried to pull him into negotiations, he took a step back and directed them to her. She bought cabbage, onions and potatoes, enough to feed an army.

"We're going to need superman to get these back to the car," she said when their loot was packed.

Nathan laughed. He gave her Sonya's hand.

"Wait here," he said with a wink.

She watched him disappear in the crowd with a frown.

"Your husband is very handsome," the lady who'd packed their groceries said. "Is he getting the car?"

"He's not—,"

Leila stopped when the lady gave her a confused look. It was difficult to define her relationship with Nathan to strangers. Squeezing Sonya's hand, she smiled.

"Yes, he'll be back soon."

"Are you having a party?" the lady asked.

"No, we're the guests," she said with a sigh. "We're going to visit his mother."

"Ah, she'll like you," the lady said, with an approving nod. "I wish I had a daughter-in-law like you."

Leila thanked the lady but an uneasy feeling flooded her. She had heard stories of mothers-in-law. Nathan's mother would expect her son to marry a cultured and educated woman. Leila was

a businesswoman, working in fashion design, and she'd gotten a daughter outside of marriage. She shuddered. Her scorecard was well below average.

Goodness, what was she thinking? Nathan's mother was never going to like her.

"Mummy," Sonya tugged her hand and pointed.

Leila followed the little finger in time to see Nathan return followed by two men.

"Did you miss me?" Nathan asked, when he reached them. "Guys, this is Leila Karani. Leila, meet Kim and Charlie."

She held out a hand to greet them both.

"Where did he get you guys?"

"We were in the market," Kim said studying her a bit too intently. "So, you're the one."

She blushed. "What?"

"Concentrate on carrying the cabbages," Nathan said before Kim could explain. "Lei, you take care of Sonya."

Kim and Charlie laughed as they picked up the packages around her. They walked back to the car navigating through the busy market. When they finally made it back to the pickup, Kim and Charlie put the packages in the truck bed and waited for Nathan to cross the road.

Kim knelt before Sonya and took her hand. He tickled her palm and she giggled. Picking her up, Kim leaned on the car.

"You're one cute little girl," Kim praised. "What class are you in?"

"Standard one," she said, showing him by holding up her right index finger.

"Which school?" Kim asked with an impressed gaze.

"Nairobi Primary," she said, giving him her famous toothless smile. "Are you daddy's friend?"

"Yes," Kim said with a wide smile.

"She's very beautiful," Charlie said to Leila moving to stand beside her.

She felt a bit overwhelmed as she suddenly recognized Charlie. His face was constantly on television, the face of Dhal Corporation. He smiled at her and she wondered how he and Nathan knew each other.

Nathan reached them.

"Your daughter just stole my heart," Kim declared as Nathan placed his package in the truck bed.

"Are you going to bring them over to the house tonight? Koya and Hana would love to meet Leila."

"We'll see," Nathan said, glancing at Leila with an unreadable expression. "You know my mum, it will depend what time we finish with her."

"We'll wait for you," Charlie insisted and held out his hand to her. "Leila, it's good to meet you. And make sure he brings you to visit us."

She smiled and shook his hand.

Kim put Sonya in the car and turned to greet her too. "I'm so happy to meet you, Leila."

She shook his hand too and climbed into the passenger seat when he opened the door for her. Nathan paused to talk to them for a few minutes and then hurried around the car to the driver's side. When he climbed in, she looked at him expectantly.

"Was that Charles Dhali?" she asked when he started the car.

He nodded. "Yes, he and Kim are good friends. Kim and I own a hardware together."

"Wow," she sighed. "Nathan."

"What?" he asked as he got back on the road.

"Are you sure about us meeting your mum, and your friends," she started.

"Of course," Nathan said. "I figure if I show you off to everyone I know, you'll cave in and let me call you my girlfriend."

She laughed because he'd started this campaign a week ago. She'd gone out with him on Saturday evening and met his work friends. When he'd tried to introduce her as his girlfriend, she'd interrupted him and given them her name. She'd labeled him a friend, and it was bothering the hell out of him.

"Don't start," she said watching as he navigated around the mess of *matatus* filling the road. She envied his calm as he drove through the traffic without stopping. "I need all my strength to get through a visit with your mother."

"Are you nervous?"

She placed a hand over her chest. "My heart is pounding hard."

They reached Ndwaru road faster than she'd anticipated. He turned on to the tarmac road and slowed down.

"Leila," he said. "Don't let anything hurt you. You're my choice."

She looked at him then. "If she doesn't like me, things will get hard, Nathan."

"My opinion is the only thing that matters," he said firmly.

They drove in three minutes on Ndwaru road, then Nathan turned onto a dirt road on his right. Tall trees grew along the road, green everywhere, bushes, flowers, grass; it was hard not to fall in love with the scenery. He drove up to a tall gate, stopping the car, he honked and a man in muddy overalls came to open the gate. Nathan waved at him when he passed through into a gorgeous compound that was three times larger than the one Leila had at home.

"This is where I grew up," Nathan said proudly parking the car on the grass. He shut off the engine, and turned to look at her. "Do you like it?"

She loved it!

The two-story stone house stood hidden in a riot of flowers and trees. The building melding into nature, it seemed as though it had always stood there. The glass front door opened and a woman in her late fifties walked out a *leso* tied around her waist.

She looked a lot like her own mother, Leila thought. Soft round figure, a wide smile and that expectant air, this woman knew what she wanted.

Nathan came out of the car, and went to get Sonya. Leila came out more slowly, her anxiety taking over, as she closed the passenger door. She ran a hand down her blue jeans and pale

yellow top. Her braids held in a tight ponytail, she was certain she looked presentable. Nathan waved her closer as they walked to the steps leading to the house.

Nathan's mother came to meet them with a wide smile.

"Njeru," she greeted happily. "You're on time."

Nathan laughed and stopped before his mother. "Well, that's because I was bringing you important guests."

"I see," she said, her sharp gaze falling on Leila.

"Mum, this is Leila Karani," Nathan said with pride, "the mother of my daughter. Leila, this is my mum, Susan Njeru."

Leila held out her hand to the smiling woman. When Susan didn't take her hand, she froze and dropped her hand. She started to take a step back but then Susan pulled her into a tight hug. Leila let out the air she'd been holding in and relaxed.

"Thank you for coming," Susan said quietly. "I was afraid you'd refuse."

Leila sighed and her arms went around Susan. Her anxiety eased. "I would have come sooner if it was possible."

Susan let her go and patted her cheek. "Welcome home, my child."

Tears filled Leila's eyes at the simple acceptance and she blinked them back hard. Nathan held out Sonya to Susan. Susan took Sonya with a laugh and lifted her up even though she was eight years old and too big.

"That is Sonya Wairimu," Nathan said proudly, "my daughter."

Susan kissed Sonya's forehead and held her close.

"She looks just like you," she noted. "She has her mother's eyes, but her face is yours."

Leila smiled. "I keep telling him that, but he says she has my face."

"She got your beauty," Susan said. "Sonya, I'm your grandmother. Do you like bananas?"

Sonya glanced at Leila and when she nodded in approval, Sonya grinned. "Yes, mummy is always buying them for me."

"Well, you've come to the right place. I have them growing in the garden. Why don't we go see if we can get you some in the kitchen? Leila, come in, this is your home too."

Susan disappeared into the house with Sonya and Nathan placed an arm around her shoulders. She glanced at him and he grinned.

"Now, you're really my girlfriend," he said with a laugh.

She pinched his arm and shook her head. "Who says?"

"I've never introduced another girl to my mother. You have to take responsibility for me."

"Goodness, you're such a mummy's boy."

Nathan laughed and led her into the house. The visit was easier than she'd imagined. Susan's home was warm. She'd cooked a lot of food for them and Leila felt guilty when they couldn't manage to eat it all. Watching Nathan relaxed on the couch, talking to his mother with casual grace. It was easy to imagine him growing up here, running around in the muddy farm, and getting into mischief with his twin brother. It was such a perfect childhood home.

Nathan stood beside his mother near a patch of cabbages, watching Sonya and Leila walk through his farm. Sonya had a white daisy in her hand that she kept holding out for Leila to smell.

“Has she forgiven you?” Susan asked him.

Nathan smiled when Leila bent to show Sonya a blooming flower on a zucchini plant. “I’m working on it. I’m hoping she’ll cave in and marry me.”

Susan smiled in approval.

“She’s raised a good child. Sonya is inquisitive and not spoiled. How is her business?”

Nathan glanced at her for a moment. “It’s a stable business. Afri-Fabric is sponsoring her in the NFA competition this year.”

“Did you know about her before you offered the recommendation?” Susan asked.

Nathan shrugged. “I thought she was married. I wanted to meet her again, talk to her—,”

“Oh, Nathan,” Susan touched his arm. “I’m happy because I suspect I know what you’d have done if Leila was married.”

Nathan shook his head. “I’d have let her be.”

Leila laughed when Sonya whispered something in her ear. Wanting to join them, Nathan smiled at his mother and walked over to them. Leila held a beetle on the palm of her hand and was holding it out for Sonya to see.

“What do we have here?” He crouched beside Leila and touched the beetle. Sonya squealed and gripped his arm tightly. Leila laughed, the musical sound making him grin. “Sonya, I think that beetle likes mum.”

Sonya nodded and leaned against him. “Is it biting you, mum?”

Leila shook her head. “It doesn’t bite my little scared-cat. Do you want to hold it?”

Sonya bit her lip, a frown creasing her smooth forehead. “No. Can we take it home?”

Leila shifted and put the beetle on the grass. “No, this is its home.”

“I’ve gone to tell *Cucu* to take care of it,” Sonya said and rushed off.

Leila dusted off her hands and moved to get up. She lost her balance, and Nathan wrapped an arm around her waist to help her up.

“Lei,” he said quietly, tightening his hold around her waist. Before he could pull her closer, she removed his hand with a sweep of hers and gave him a small smile.

“You have a neat farm,” she said taking a step away from him. “Too bad the zucchinis are not ready yet. I’d have carried some for mum.”

He frowned. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” she asked pausing to study peas as though she was on a field trip.

“Push me away,” he asked.

“I’m not pushing you away.”

“Yes you are,” he insisted. “You’ve been keeping me at arm’s length even though we’re practically dating. Leila, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Yeah,” she said, abandoning the pea plant she was studying. “I’ve heard that before. I ended up raising a child alone the last time.”

He winced. “Leila.”

“I’m sorry,” she said sadly. “You don’t deserve that, it’s just-,” she sighed. “Seeing those pictures your mother just showed me. You and Chris growing up together, here in this place, I wanted that for Sonya. For her to have a father she can hold on to. Instead-,”

“Marry me,” Nathan said the words slipping out before he could stop them. Once they were out, he wanted to repeat them.

Leila stared at him with wide eyes. “Is that the remedy to all my problems? Do you think marrying you will solve all our issues?”

“It will be a start,” he said firmly.

“For you,” she said, “not for me. I’ve no problem surviving without you.”

Leila turned and started walking back to the house.

He ran after her and stopped her before she reached the green houses. His mother and Sonya had walked back into the inner compound; they were alone in the farm.

“I’m sorry for leaving you, for what my brother did,” he said in a low tone turning her to face him. “I’ll apologize a million times if you want me to, Leila.”

“I don’t want apologies,” she said her eyes filling with tears. Meeting his gaze, she sighed. “I-, uh—,”

“I love you.”

Her brown eyes widened in surprise, “What?”

“I said I love you,” he repeated and watched the surprise fade from her eyes. Those brown eyes turned warm, happy. He smiled. “I love you, Lei. I’ve loved you since you glared at me that day in the library because I pulled your hair. I’ve missed you every day these past eight years.”

“Nathan,” she said in a whisper.

“Please give me a chance to make it up to you and Sonya,” he said pulling her into his arms.

She stood stiff against him for a moment and he held his breath afraid she’d push him away again. He closed his eyes in relief when she wrapped her arms around his waist. Though she didn’t answer his first question, he tightened his hold around her and promised himself never to let go for as long as he lived.

Chapter Nine

Leila tugged the zipper closed on the centerpiece of her collection, and adjusted the back on her model. She ran her hands over the clinging bodice and took a step back to study the dress. It was an evening dress, made of delicate emerald silk fabric: the finest silk produced by Afri-Fabrics. She had embroidered the bodice with flowers using shining silver thread that sparkled in the light. The bodice cinched in the waist and then floated down to the floor in a sea of fabric. Her model shifted on one leg, and the fabric shimmered, like water flowing down a river.

Leila had left the centerpiece for last because it reflected her creativity.

Nodding her head in satisfaction, Leila patted the tall young woman's arm and watched her walk to Annette and the make-up stylist Elliot had brought with him.

Leila hurried to the runway entrance and took in a deep breath. This was the final round, she thought, her heart hammering in her chest. She had spent the last two days bent over the clothes the five models were wearing, it was a wonder she wasn't cross-eyed.

Today was surreal.

The competition started at ten o'clock in the morning and she'd felt like she was walking through a daze as the judges went through their drawn designs first. The first evaluation eliminated ten designers. Leila was amazed to be part of the six remaining designers.

The second round of eliminations happened in the afternoon. Eliot had called it the casual dress round. Leila's models had worn five of her casual wear designs, competing against five other designers. At four o'clock in the afternoon, when the judges finished seeing their collections, Leila once again gasped when she qualified as one of the three final designers.

Now, it was eight o'clock in the evening.

Her five models wore her eveningwear designs. The audience out there was intimidating. Elite fashion critics, magazine editors, celebrities, the judges, her mother and Nathan.

Leila leaned on the wall and took in a deep breath. This wouldn't be possible without him. Strange, but showing up at the NFA offices that morning almost two months ago had given her so much.

"Where is your fifth model?" Eliot, her NFA official, asked as he checked her models. "Your designs are on next."

Leila shook off her anxiety and pushed off the wall just as Annette appeared with the last model in tow.

"We're here," Annette said, taking Leila's hand. "I can't believe we've made it this far. Terry says Sonya, Nathan and your mother are on the front row. They're shaking with excitement."

Leila closed her eyes and tried not to tremble as Elliot guided the first of her models to the runway entrance.

"Cross your fingers," Leila said. "The House of Serengeti designer is really good."

The first dress Leila sent out was the solid toga-style pale yellow dress. She used silk for the fabric; the detail on the seams had taken her hours to finish. The result was a scrunched up seam that clung to the body, molding to the body in an elegant line. Annette and the make-up artist had designed the eveningwear make-up. Choosing to emphasize the models eyes with shimmering eye shadow that matched the color of the dress. The hair held back in tight slick ponytails garnished with shining feathers.

Leila gripped Annette's hands as she watched her second model walk the runway. Her red dress long to her feet, it was off shoulder, the neckline shone with red and gold beads. The fabric clung to the body, emphasizing elegance and grace. The hem of the dress danced with each step. The third model followed in a short black sleeveless dress. Leila had gone for a simple cut with this dress. The silk fabric gave it a light feeling; one could wear it on a hot tropical day and not feel stifled.

The fourth dress was an ocean blue, her second favorite. It was form fitting, she, Terry and Annette had spent hours sticking sparkling stones on the bodice. The hem turned into a long tail that her model slipped on to her finger to make sure she didn't trip.

The final model gave Leila a wide smile before she stepped out. Her emerald dress shimmering under the lights on the runway. Leila watched in a bit of awe as the ebony beauty strutted down the aisle with breathtaking confidence. The woman made that dress look like armor. It was inspiring.

"Your turn," Elliot said, when the models returned backstage. "The presenter will introduce you, and then you'll stand beside her and the other designers for the judges' decision. Good luck, Leila."

When they called her name five minutes later, Leila walked out on to the runway wearing a self-conscious smile. She felt inadequately dressed in a simple green blouse and blue jeans. Her feet in flat leather sandals she'd worn to withstand the mad rush of preparation she faced during the day. She stood beside a designer from the House of Serengeti. Her gaze blinded by the lights. She searched the crowd anyway, passing over the serious judges to the seats behind them. Her heart jumped happily when she saw Nathan holding Sonya on his lap. He shifted and suddenly she was looking into his eyes.

How lucky she was, she thought.

She winked at him and watched his lips curve into a slow smile. Last weekend, he had asked her to marry him. He also told her he loved her. Two things she thought she would never hear, especially from him. That he had not demanded the same response from her made her love him even more.

"What a competition," Eve, the NFA Secretary said, when she got on the stage. "So much talent, so many beautiful designs. I can't believe we're down to three designers. The judges have had a difficult time making decisions tonight."

Leila breathed out and held Nathan's gaze, anxiety filling her. She was hot and cold, trembling, clutching her fingers behind her, she drew strength from Nathan's steady gaze.

Eve took a card from the judges' panel.

"I will not drag this out. We're eager to know the winner."

The audience clapped enthusiastically. Eve ripped open the envelope and with a wide smile, she said, "And the winner of this year's National Fashion Association Competition is, Leila Karani of Leila Fashions."

Leila gaped in shock.

She glanced at the House of Serengeti designer in confusion. How she managed to get to this place, she had no idea. Shaking, she shook the hands of the two formidable designers standing next to her. They praised her work and congratulated her. She nodded blindly.

Eve presented her with a bouquet of roses and a golden folder. Her models returned from backstage, still in her designs, they hugged her and congratulated her. Leila stood at the end of the runway in a daze until strong arms pulled her into a tight hug.

"Congratulations," Nathan whispered into her ear. "You did well, love."

Tears sprung in her eyes and Leila held on to Nathan, still clinging to the flowers and the golden folder that held her victory.

“Thank you, Nathan,” she managed.

“What for?” he asked into her shoulder.

“For making this happen,” she said, leaning back to look at him. “I love you,” she touched his chin and smiled, “and my answer is yes.”

“Yes,” he said, at first in confusion and then he let out a happy laugh.

Twirling her around, oblivious to the audience clapping around them wanting to talk to her, he kissed her jaw and said, “About time woman.”

The End

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