



Koyoi's Choice

Ndwaru Road Series

Book One

Elly Kamari

Koya's Choice

By

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One

A broken sob caught his attention. Charles turned to his right to see his mother cry into a pristine white handkerchief. Her tears endless, her sobs heart wrenching. She cried for her first-born child, Tony.

The one she loved more, Charles thought.

His father stood beside his mother, an arm wrapped around her shoulders, grounding her lest she disappear. Dark sunglasses covered his father's face. Most assumed it was because of the blazing sun, the unrelenting sunrays found at the equator, but he knew his father cried too. The glasses hid swollen eyes, and tear stained cheeks. Charles looked away from his father and tagged on his suit jacket. He couldn't believe his mother had insisted he retain his suit in this blazing sun.

"We have to keep up appearances, Charlie," his mother insisted.

Her grief was hard to bear.

Damn, Charles Dhali let a sigh escape.

His world was over. He stared at his brother's casket and wondered at the rage brewing inside him. Instead of grief, burning anger grew with every minute.

Charles clenched his fists, closing his eyes as the priest recited the final rites and the funeral home attendants moved to remove flowers from the casket. The rage flamed inside him as he watched Tony's casket lowered to the ground.

Charles was angry with Tony. So angry, he wanted to scream but couldn't. He couldn't do much but stand with calm in this occasion. Not with his mother two feet away crying, her sobs tearing through him and his father. All their relatives and friends watched, waiting to see them crack as Tony was laid to rest.

Charles wanted to scream in anger at the injustice that had taken his brother. His parents would force him to take on more responsibility. All because Tony Dhali couldn't have the sense to stay away from trouble. Charles felt a tear slide down his cheek. Life wasn't fair.

A day after the funeral, Koya walked up Ndwaru Road heading to Charlie's house.

"Look, that's Hugh Kalahari's daughter."

The words drifted to her without trouble. Koya shook her head in amusement. Gossip was expected living in the Ndwaru rd Estate. The street was a mass of complicated relationships that supplied the gossipmongers with fresh fodder by the hour. Everyone knew everything about everyone.

"She must be back from college for the funeral. I heard she's friends with that Dhali boy."

"Well, it's nice she is in college, but let's hope it stays that way. Who knows what could happen if she pushes it with the Dhali boy."

Koya gave the three women at a vegetable stall a hard look. They smiled and waved at her and she sighed. It was no use scowling at them. The gossip would continue. She capitulated and offered a smile in return. The women lost interest and moved on to the next victim.

Koya increased her pace, and decided to forget about the gossipmongers.

Her boyfriend was having a hard time. She continued up the slight hill on the main estate road heading for the Dhali Estate at the top.

The Dhalis were the richest family on Ndwaru Road. Isaac Dhali had made his money through foreign investments and real estate. He built his precious wife a huge manor on the six acres of land he owned. The couple had two children, Tony and Charles Dhali.

Well, with Tony dead, the Dhalis had one son now, Koya thought.

Two weeks ago, the Dhalis had lost Tony at a club shooting at the Ndwaru Shopping Center. Nobody knew the reason why Tony was shot, but the rumor mills were working on overdrive. Word was that Tony sold drugs; others said that Tony joined a gang and had pissed off the big boss.

Koya frowned.

Well, the speculation aside, her boyfriend, Charles, was having a hard time dealing with Tony's death. Which made her depressed too because she truly loved Charles Dhali and hated to see him suffering.

Her cell phone buzzed and she answered with a small smile when she saw the caller ID.

"I'm coming up the hill," Koya said. "I needed to drop off documents at the chief's place for my father."

"You could let me pick you up," Charlie complained. "We're not fooling anyone, Koya. There is no point hiding our relationship."

"At college, you may pick me up all you want, but not here," Koya said. There was no need to give proof to the rumor mill.

Koya cleared the hill and took a right turn on to a tarmac road that would lead her to the Dhali estate main gate.

"I'm at the front, you can come out now."

"You're exasperating," Charlie said into his phone. "Give me two minutes to drive out. Don't talk to the guards. I get jealous."

"You're so bossy," Koya said with a laugh.

She ended the call, smiling to herself. She stopped right before she reached the gate. Putting her cell phone in her pocket, she hoped she was dressed appropriately for the evening. The plan was to hang out with friends before they all headed to university the day after tomorrow. At least there, she wouldn't have to worry about what people said about her and Charlie.

Koya decided she would make it up to Charlie. The gates opened and a black jeep appeared.

Charlie drove like a maniac. She took a cautious step back on the sidewalk as he stopped with a screech. Charlie leaned over to push open the passenger door. Koya held on to the door and stood taking in Charlie's welcoming smile.

Charlie was handsome. Dark skin, beautiful dark eyes, strong jaw and the sexiest mouth she'd ever seen. Of course, she would never tell him her thoughts. His ego would only inflate higher. Charlie was born with a golden spoon in his mouth. His mother had reared him as one would an egg. In return, Charlie had developed an ego that could piss off the entire world.

Despite this, Charlie had a good heart, and Koya loved him for it.

"Are you getting in, or are you going to stare at me all night?" Charlie asked. "Come on, woman."

Koya grinned and got in the passenger seat. Charlie started driving off as she closed the door. She reached for the seat belt, struggling to put it on. Charlie stopped at the turn to help her snap it on before he stepped on the gas pedal and took off down the main road.

"Consider a chill pill when driving, Charlie," Koya said, once they hit the first major road and had to slow down because of traffic. "Where are we headed?"

"Westlands," Charlie answered, his tone curt. "Kim and Ashi are waiting at the club."

"What's wrong with you?" Koya asked, hating the tense notes in his voice. "Is it your mum?"

"She won't get off my case," Charlie said, bitterness colored his voice.

"Is it me?" Koya asked.

Ashley Dhali had changed of late. Charlie's mother hated her now. Koya didn't know what she'd done to warrant the change of heart.

Koya frowned.

"She hasn't been very receptive to us being together."

"I don't care what she thinks," Charlie said. "It's my life and you're in it, period. God I can't wait to get back to CUEA. We can have peace and quiet."

Catholic University of Eastern Africa, known as CUEA for short, was the university they all attended: her, Charlie, Kim and Ashi. Charlie and Kim were two years ahead. She and Ashi were in their second year. Koya worried about Charlie graduating first. It felt like their relationship would end.

"What's really going on?" Koya asked after a while.

They were speeding along Waiyaki way headed to Westlands. One of their college friends had a club opening tonight. She knew asking questions before a night out was relationship suicide, but she couldn't take not knowing anymore. Charlie had an uncontrollable anger raging through him.

"It's nothing," Charlie said.

He started to turn on the radio but she turned it off.

“I’ve had it,” Koya said. “I know you’re sad because of Tony’s death, but we can’t go on this way. Tell me what’s wrong, or I’m going to make your mother happy by walking away.”

“You’re kidding right now,” Charlie said, his eyes wide when she finished her tirade.

“I’m not,” Koya snapped.

Charlie pulled off the highway with one abrupt jerk and parked the car on the curb across ABC Place. He switched off the engine and stared out the windshield with a glare.

“Charlie—

“My mother is sending me away,” Charlie said. “My father is going to Taipei and she wants me to go with him. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

Koya gaped.

Charlie was leaving.

Koya shifted in her seat to face him.

“Uhm...”

“Mum is afraid I’ll end up like Tony,” Charlie explained. “She asked my father to take me with him.”

“Turn out like Tony?” Koya frowned. “You’re not your big brother, Charlie.”

“Tell my mother that. I can’t fight her on this. She’s had it rough with my brother’s death.”

“So...when are you leaving?”

Charlie shrugged.

“I made a deal with her. She’ll let me graduate, so we have the rest of the year together, Koya. It will be okay.”

“You’re leaving me,” Koya said. “How is that okay?”

“I’m not leaving yet,” Charlie said.

He took her right hand, holding her gaze.

“I don’t want to leave, Koya, but it was this or leave next week with my dad.”

A year, Koya thought, she only had Charlie for a year.

“I hate your mother,” she said.

“Don’t,” Charlie soothed, lifting his free hand, he stroked her right cheek with his index finger. “She’s worried, you know that, right?”

Koya sighed because she understood Ashley Dhali’s fear.

“Koya, whether I’m here, or abroad, you matter to me. You’ll always be my girl no matter where I am.”

“I should record these lines,” Koya said on a laugh. “No one would believe you say them, bad boy.”

“Only for you, princess,” Charlie said.

He leaned over the console and gave her a soft kiss that left her heart fluttering in excitement.

She couldn't help wrapping her arms around him, drawing him into a tight hug. A year didn't seem enough.

“We should go,” she said against his shoulder.

“In a bit,” Charlie said holding her tight.

At the club, Koya allowed Charlie to open the passenger door for her and waited while he locked the car. He took her hand in his as they walked up to the club's entrance. Loud music filled the warm evening as they entered Club Klutz. A group of girls swept past them dressed in slinky dresses. Koya ran a hand down her hip hugging tight jeans and clingy blue blouse. Her hair was in a slick ponytail, she'd visited the salon that morning.

Charlie glanced at her with a grin.

“You look sexy, Kalahari. I'd let you know, otherwise.”

She smiled, her cheeks flaming.

Charlie slipped his arm around her waist, navigating through the crowded club. A few patrons called out to Charlie, and as he waved back, she found her thoughts preoccupied with the news of Charlie leaving.

He was taking it well. He smiled, and laughed as though their world wasn't about to rip in two.

“Hey,” a familiar voice said above. “Koya, Charlie, up here.”

Koya looked up to see Ashi Mwendu leaning on the railing upstairs. Koya waved at her, and allowed Charlie to lead the way upstairs.

Ashi, short and cute, her hair short and blown out, rushed Koya, engulfing her in a tight hug. Ashi let her go and hugged Charlie too.

Behind Ashi, Bernard 'Kim' Kimani strolled in a more leisurely pace. Kim was an inch taller than Charlie was. He wore his hair long, his body built for hard labor: beautifully sculpted in hard muscle. Dressed in a blue t-shirt and a pair of black jeans and boots, Koya imagined Kim would have a lucrative career in hip-hop if he chose. He had the look for it.

There was a time Koya had thought Ashi and Kim would make a great couple, but they were too alike. Ashi said they made good friends.

“What took you so long?” Kim asked in greeting. He kissed Koya's cheek and glanced at Charlie. “I thought you weren't coming.”

“Charlie was giving me a confession,” Koya said.

Her gaze slid to Charlie before she allowed Ashi to lead her to the lounge seats along the wall.

“You couldn’t wait,” Kim said to his best friend.

“She threatened to walk away from me,” Charlie said with a shrug.

Charlie sat across Koya at their table and reached for a bottle of Heineken. It looked like Ashi and Kim had made their usual orders. Charlie took a healthy swig straight from the bottle and winked at Koya.

“I can’t have that.”

Ashi sat next to Koya.

“I know Charlie leaving is sudden, but we have a year with him.”

“I can handle it,” Koya said, not wanting to be the one who took this news badly.

Charlie seemed relaxed. Ashi and Kim were not stressing either. Why would she be the one bent out of shape?

“He’ll be back anyway, right Charlie?”

“Right,” Charlie said, holding her gaze.

“Unless he goes and falls for a Taiwanese girl,” Kim teased with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Charlie might start talking Chinese, and then before you know it, he will love it there.”

“Stop being an ass,” Charlie said.

“Well, I hear they have the best seafood with the exception of snails,” Ashi said, ever the optimist.

“Snails are not seafood,” Kim pointed out.

“Did I say they were?” Ashi asked. “Don’t listen to him, Charlie. He’s jealous.”

“Guys, I’m not leaving yet,” Charlie said.

Koya listened to them bicker. She smiled when they made jokes, and laughed where appropriate, but inside she worried. She hoped her heart would be stronger by the time Charlie left. Charlie noticed her brooding and leaned over to hand her his drink. He winked at her when she took the bottle.

They stayed out all night.

Charlie dropped Koya and Kim at Ashi’s house the next morning at Six a.m. He drove home feeling lighter, his anger soothed. He could breathe without pain.

Charlie was grateful Koya had taken his news so well. She’d remained so calm, not a teardrop in sight. He loved that about her. Koya was level headed.

The night watchman opened the gates and he drove up the drive to the main house. Charlie parked the car behind the house, in case his mother had woken up already. He used the kitchen door to enter the house. Removing his shoes, he tiptoed down the corridor to the stairs that went up to the second floor.

“Where have you been?” Ashley Dhali asked as he took the first step.

Charlie looked up to see his mother standing at the living room entrance.

Charlie sighed, wishing he could escape her. He held on to the balustrade and turned to face her.

“Answer me, Charlie.”

“I’m not sure what you want me to say. You’ll scream at me no matter my excuse, so get it over with.”

“I don’t recognize you anymore,” Ashley said. “What has happened to you?”

“I’m still the same person,” Charlie said, exasperated. “You’re the one that’s changed, Mum. You keep seeing Tony when you look at me, but I’m Charlie, Mum. I’m not Tony.”

“I know who you are,” Ashley said. “I’m going to make sure you don’t end up like your brother. I allowed Tony too much freedom, and look where it got him. He’s in a grave. Do you think I’m enjoying this?”

“I know how you feel about Tony’s death, but I’m different,” Charlie said. “I won’t do the same things he did.”

“Really?” Ashley pointed at her cell phone. “Look at the time. It’s almost seven o’clock in the morning. You left last night. What do I know you’ve been doing out there? Were you with those friends of yours?”

Charlie winced.

His mother had developed a distinct dislike for Koya, Ashi and Kim.

“I’ve warned you everyday these past two weeks. You’ve refused to listen.”

“They are my friends, Mum. You’ve known them for years.”

“That girl is the cause of all this, you would never have disobeyed me before. Now you talk back at will. I forbid you to see her again.”

“Koya’s my girlfriend and I love her. You can’t forbid me from seeing her. Mum—

“You’re twenty years old, Charlie. You don’t know how you feel. Trust me, don’t see her again.”

“Try and stop me,” Charlie snarled in anger.

What was wrong with his mother?

“I will destroy them all,” Ashley warned. “Are you sure you want to keep pushing?”

“Mum,” Charlie said in shock.

Ashley Dhali’s threats were not light. She held power in her elegant palm. Her anger had crashed many in business, social circles, even in political circles.

“Test me, Charlie,” Ashley said, her eyes alight with an emotion that frightened him.

Charlie wished his father hadn’t left for the coast so soon after Tony’s funeral.

“Koya has a sponsor for her university, right? A few calls and it can be withdrawn. What about Kim? He’s a nice boy. His father’s construction company will develop loan problems. It’s very easy to make that happen. By the time the problems are cleared...well, business will be over. And Ashi, is it? She’s also on scholarship, isn’t she?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” Ashley warned.

Charlie stared at her for a moment, then knowing she wasn’t joking, he sighed.

“I’m already leaving, what more do you want from me?”

“I want you to stop seeing them,” Ashley said.

“But—

“If you insist so will I,” Ashley cut him off.

“This isn’t right,” Charlie protested, his voice weak even to his ears.

The thought of Koya unable to go to school shook him. Koya was doing Business Commerce; she had dreams, big dreams. He couldn’t allow his mother to trample them.

“It’s your call,” Ashley said. “We’ll go see your friends in a few minutes.”

Ashley moved to a table set by the wall and grabbed a bunch of keys. She entered the living room and came back wearing a light coat over her nightgown. Her skin was light brown, her eyes sharp and keen. Charlie had always thought his mother pretty, what with her trim figure always in elegant clothes and her hair done in the most elegant weave. She was the envy of the town, but right now, she was the one he hated most.

“Have you decided?” Ashley asked, in that sweet voice that had told him goodnight countless times.

That voice grated on his raw nerves now. He wondered what she would do if he hit her. Closing his eyes, Charlie forced his anger down. His mother wasn’t bluffing, that much he knew. This wasn’t about him anymore.

Charlie stepped down the few steps he’d taken and followed her defiantly to the front door.

Ashley led the way to her black car. He hadn’t seen it parked in the driveway. He would have known to avoid her. He cursed his muddled thoughts. Sliding into the front passenger seat, he watched his mother start the car with a determined look on her face.

Ten minutes later, they parked at Ashi’s house. A modest stone house, flowers grew around the property in a wild riot. Ashi’s parents had purchased the land and build a few years back. Charlie cursed under his breath as he walked the gravel path to the blue steel front door. His knock was soft; he took a step back from the door and looked back at the black car waiting at the entrance, the windows tinted. The door opened and Ashi stood there smiling at him in pink pajamas.

“Hey guys, Charlie is back,” Ashi said with a grin. “Did you miss Koya?”

The sound of hurried footsteps filled his ears, and the door widened to reveal Kim and Koya. There were in t-shirts and pajama bottoms. Their eyes bleary from lack of sleep, Charlie couldn't believe he was doing this.

"You missed me?" Koya asked, her smile wide as she pushed between Ashi and Kim to hug him.

"Lovesick, both of you are too much," Kim complained with a grin.

Ashi and Koya laughed. Charlie couldn't help the wince at their happiness. He cleared his throat.

"Actually, I came to—

Charlie broke off and took a step back from Koya, looking back at the black car. He didn't want to do this. Why couldn't his mother wait the year?

Koya's gaze followed his to the black car and she took a step forward. Her slender hand touched his and he glanced back at her. Her beautiful eyes were full of concern.

"Is everything okay?"

Her voice, the things it did to his heart, he couldn't imagine never hearing it again. But could he really convict her to a life without her dreams? She'd worked hard for the opportunity. She kept up her grades, and was planning an advertising business after college.

How could he take that away.

"I came to tell you that it's over," Charlie said, his voice raw even to his ears.

"What's over?" Koya asked, her gaze still on the black car.

"We're over," Charlie said.

Ashi gasped and Kim took a step forward, as though to protect Koya from him.

"Your mother is in the car, isn't she?" Koya asked.

"No. I'm doing this for both of us, Koya. I've thought about it—

"Cut the crap, Charlie. You're doing what your mother wants, aren't you? Is this what she said you do? Did she threaten you?" Koya reached for his arm.

"Listen to me," Charlie said, keeping his tone cold.

Koya wasn't one to take bullshit lying down. She wasn't going to make this easy. It was the reason why he loved her so much. If he didn't get serious, she would fight his mother, and that would leave her with no future. He had to protect her.

Placing his hands on her shoulders, Charlie met her gaze.

"I'm telling you these things, not my mother, Koya. I'm freeing you to love someone else while I'm gone. So do me a favor and listen. We're breaking up."

Koya shook her head in denial. Tears filled her dark eyes. Damn it, she was killing him.

"What about what you said last night?"

“Yeah, Charlie,” Ashi said. “Why are you being a jerk this morning?”

“I’ve always been a jerk,” Charlie said. “You’re just noticing now. This is the best thing for us. I won’t be seeing any of you again. I’ve decided to leave with my dad today, so goodbye and have fun in school. Koya, in time you’ll see I’m right.”

Charlie brushed his lips on her cheek, then let go of her shoulders. She fell back against Kim who stood behind her. Not wanting to see her tears, Charlie turned and hurried to the waiting car. Getting in, he wiped a hand down his face as his mother started the car.

“Very good, Charles,” Ashley said.

“You and I, we’re done,” Charlie said as she drove out of Ashi’s compound. “I won’t forgive you for this.”

Two

Ashi wrapped an arm around Koya’s waist. Koya was grateful as it rather felt like she’d fall on her face. Kim stood glaring after the black Mercedes, his fists clenched. All Koya could think was that Charlie needed help. He was hurting, she’d seen that in his eyes. There was no way he could do this on his own. He loved her.

“He doesn’t know what he’s saying,” Ashi said in agreement with her.

“His mother was in the car. I know it. Charlie would never say those things unless she threatened him. I’m going to see him at their house,” Koya said.

If their relationship was over, Koya needed him to say it again. She needed Charlie to confirm that he was letting her go, killing their relationship.

“Let’s go inside,” Kim said. “No one is thinking straight ‘coz you haven’t slept all night.”

He herded them back inside the house.

“I can’t sleep with Charlie this upset,” Koya said, rubbing her eyes, hoping to clear away sleep. She was so tired. “Imagine what this is doing to him. I need to talk to him.”

“You can’t go to his house right now,” Ashi said. “His mother—

“I’m going to fight her for him,” Koya said. “She can’t do this to us. I won’t let her.”

“You’re in no shape to fight anyone,” Kim said, placing an assuring hand on her shoulder. “Get some sleep first. When you wake up, and you still want to talk to Charlie, I will walk you to the house on the hill.”

Koya rubbed her eyes again. Kim was right. He was always right. A sigh escaped and she shook her head. Her brain hurt. The thought of not seeing Charlie again made her feel crazy. She turned toward the door but Ashi stepped in front of her and shook her head.

They were right.

She needed sleep.

Kim took advantage of her indecision. Taking her hand, he led her through the living room, to the short corridor and the room she was sharing with Ashi. He pushed her toward the bed. Once she was tucked in, he patted her shoulder.

“I promise I’ll take you to Dhali’s home later.”

Closing her eyes, Koya hoped that it would all make sense when she woke up. She hoped that her heart would quit trying to fly out of her chest, and that Charlie would smile at her when she got to his house. Tell her he was punking her or something.

Five hours later, her hopes turned to dust.

It was two o’clock, the sun high in the sky. Koya stood at the high black gates at the Dhali estate waiting for the guards to call Charlie. None of them moved from their post. Instead, they watched her with pity in their eyes.

“Come on, Wainaina,” Koya said, her tone pleading. “I just want to ask him one question.”

“I’m sorry, Koya,” Wainaina said. “I’ve been instructed not to let you in.”

“Koya, let’s go. You don’t need to do this to yourself,” Kim said.

He was leaning on the gate pillar, chewing on sugarcane; discarded sugarcane pieces decorated the ground around him.

She ignored his calm, untouched mood, and slammed her palm on the metal gate.

“Charles Dhali, you get out here and talk to me,” she called.

“Koya,” Kim sighed. “Really? This is what you want to do? He’s not coming out.”

“I can’t take it,” Koya said. “I can’t take this, Kim.”

Koya looked through the peephole and saw the groundskeeper rushing to the gates. He held a white envelope in his hand. She hoped it was a note to tell Wainaina to open the gates for her. She smiled. The groundskeeper reached the gate, and instead of handing the note to Wainaina, he slid it through the peephole to her.

The white envelope had her name on top. Glancing at Kim, she took the letter, afraid of the contents.

Kim dumped his sugarcane on the ground, moving fast...ready to take the letter away from her. She skipped away from him and ripped the envelope open. Straightening the leaflet, she read it:

My dearest Koya,

This is the last time you will hear from me. It’s over between us, and I hope you understand this because I never want to see or hear from you again. It’s taken me a while to realize you’re not good enough for me. You don’t have the status that a person like me deserves. It was fun having you, but now the fun is over and I need to focus on important things in my life. Those important things do not include you. Have a nice life.

Charlie.

Tears slid down her cheeks as she took in the harsh words. The knife stuck in her back was more than she could bear, and her knees were giving out. Kim wrapped strong arms around her, and she clung to him as he took the letter from her. He read it fast, then he ripped it apart and threw it into the wind.

“This is why I didn’t want you coming here,” he said. “They can be cruel, Koya. You didn’t need this.”

“I needed to know,” Koya said, sobs wrecking through her body. “I needed to hear him say it, but I guess reading it is even better.”

Kim cursed under his breath and turned her away from Charles Dhali’s gate.

“You don’t need him,” Kim said. “I’ll look after you.”

Three

Eight years later

Avenue Advertising was celebrating five years of business in style. The company now boasted spacious offices in Westlands, with a workforce of over fifty employees.

A young woman, in her early twenties walked with purpose along the main corridor. She carried a fresh mug of coffee in one hand, the other a black folder, her high heels silent on the blue-carpeted floor. She reached the end of the corridor, and pushed the glass doors open. She let the pressure doors close and headed passed the secretary desk to a solid wooden door.

She knocked once, and walked into the neat office with a nervous smile. She loved this office, wanted one of her own in the future. She loved every thing in it, from the neat navy blue carpet on the floor, to the large glass desk set by the tall windows. A computer screen was set on the right side, the keyboard hidden in a clever shelf under the table. Comfortable armchairs and a two-sitter couch made up a visiting area, with a glass coffee between them. She’d placed a blue glass vase filled with colorful daisies this morning on the coffee table. She paused to arrange the Avenue Advertising brochures beside the vase of flowers and took a sisal coaster from under the coffee table.

Her gaze shifted to the swiveling chair behind the glass desk. It moved from side to side.

The young woman placed the coaster on the desk, putting the mug on it. She placed the folder she held in the in-tray and took a step back.

Her gaze moved to the pictures that lined the walls. They were photos of past clients, employee parties, a painting of the ocean and a picture of Koya Kalahari. This was the most interesting one; it was large, but not enough to stick out in the collection. Koya was smiling into the camera; she seemed in a relaxed mood, and quite at ease.

The swiveling chair stopped and turned, drawing the young woman’s attention. She reached into her pocket and got a small notebook. Her gaze was on the woman sitting in the leather armchair staring at her cell phone.

This Koya Kalahari was not in a relaxed mood. She looked frustrated and ready to tear the head off someone.

“Trouble?”

Koya looked at her.

“The graphic designer is having trouble seeing the big picture. Our new client has issues with his work and he’s not fixing it. This client could sign a five-year contract with Ave Ad. We need to do this right. Damn it, I have to go over to their house before my lunch with Kim.”

“Anything I can do?”

Koya picked up the mug of coffee and took a sip. She gave a sigh of bliss and smiled.

“You’re doing great, Linda. Any calls?”

Linda returned the smile because it was impossible not to. She read her trusty notebook.

“Anthony from the club called, the accountant is going to stop by, and he wanted you there. Your dentist’s secretary says your appointment is on Friday morning. Also, an Ashi Mwendé called. She said to call her back.”

“Any calls from Ashi come straight through,” Koya advised, “no matter what.”

“Yes Madam,” Linda said, noting it in her book.

She was a week old on the job.

“Anything else?” Koya asked.

“Ms. Adele from PW says that your advice is needed on the posters for the gala. There’s also a package out there for you.”

“Any project Adele is on is purely for show,” Koya said under breath. “But don’t listen to me, Linda. It’s all for a good cause.”

Koya picked up a handful of folders from the out-tray and held them out to Linda.

“Give this to Creative. They will know what to do with them. Get Adele’s assistant on the line for me. Not Adele, Linda, her assistant, got it?”

“Got it,” Linda replied. “What would you like me to do with the package out there?”

“Bring it in,” Koya said with a frown.

Linda was sure Koya thought she was being ludicrous.

“But Madam, the package—,” Linda broke off. “Well, it’s really large. You’d have to see it.”

Koya studied her for a moment, then took her coffee mug and got up. She led the way out of the office to go check out the package. Koya looked polished in a tan pair of straight trousers, a matching j-crew blouse and her feet in tan wedges. Koya was always in long black beautiful braids.

Linda envied Koya her confidence. The woman commanded respect and loyalty with a single glance.

Out in the secretary's office, Koya stared at the large box filling one corner of the office. The brown box was wrapped with green tape, with a flower shop business stamp on the side.

"How did they get that in here?" Koya asked.

Koya sipped her coffee and placed the mug on Linda's desk. She placed her hands on her hips as she took in the massive box.

"Two men came in carrying it."

"I bet," Koya said. "Have we ordered anything from a flower shop?"

"No," Linda said. "Unless it's personal?"

She glanced at Koya.

Koya scoffed and shook her head.

"What if it's a bomb?"

"Who'd want to bomb an advertising agency?"

"The competition," Koya said. "Business is stiff out there, you know. Hell, it might be Adele. That woman hates me."

Linda laughed.

"It could be a gift. Maybe you won something."

Koya wrinkled her nose in doubt.

"Well, we won't find out until it's open. Pass me those scissors."

Linda grabbed a pink pair from her desk and helped Koya open the mysterious package. They worked together for two minutes, and when they finished, they both stood back from the package staring at it again.

Koya looked dumbstruck. The day was getting heavy with surprises.

"A tree," Linda said, amazed. "Someone send you a tree. Who sends a tree to an office? What happened to good old flowers?"

"The pot alone sure set the sender back cash wise," Koya noted.

"It's a freaking tree. What's up with men these days?" Linda asked.

Koya burst out laughing. It was too good. The tree was a fledgling white willow. She had them growing at her home. They made for great shade. The one in the pot looked four years old.

"What?" Linda asked, when Koya stopped laughing.

"How do you know it's a man?"

"It's a tree in the middle of an office. Only a man would think of that," Linda said.

Koya smiled.

"It could be one of our clients thanking us with a tree. The whole Wangari Maathai thing is going around. Or, maybe the florist made a mistake."

“We’re on the sixth floor. I doubt a florist would make such a mistake.”

Koya grinned.

“I don’t know what to say, Linda. Why don’t you call the number on the stamp? Figure it out for me. Whoever it is must be very interesting.”

Linda took out her notebook to jot down the numbers.

“I’m on it,” she said, her new job was going to be interesting.

Koya reclaimed her mug of coffee with a smile and went back to her office. She sat down behind her desk and a picture frame on the edge of her desk caught her attention. Three women smiled into the camera. Picking up her office phone, she punched a number from memory and waited a few minutes as it rang.

“Oasis Bookstore, how may I help you?” a cheerful voice answered.

“You’ll never guess what came in a package.”

“A man,” Ashi Mwendu guessed.

“Wrong,” Koya said, still smiling. “But, I do have a tree, a tall tree in an expensive pot. Can you imagine that?”

“I suppose that is thinking outside the box,” Ashi said with a laugh. “Flowers are so overrated.”

“Only you would say that. Anyway, forget the forestry in my office. What did you want to say to me?”

“I was hoping we could have lunch,” Ashi said, her tone hesitant.

“I’m having lunch with Kim. You could crash,” Koya said.

“You’re seeing Kim today?” Ashi asked. She sounded happy, almost hopeful.

“Yes.” Koya frowned. “Is there something going on?”

“No. Nothing is going on,” Ashi said. “You know what? How about we meet tonight at the club. Bring Hana with you. We can have a girl’s night out.”

“Sounds good,” Koya said, wondering what had Ashi so out of sorts. Her cell phone buzzed on her desk and she sighed. “The business is calling. Can I talk to you later?”

“Sure, don’t forget tonight.”

Koya ended the landline call and reached for her cell phone. She glanced at the caller ID and sat up in her seat.

“Musa,” she answered. “Our client is not happy. He wants to promote vacations. You’re making that difficult, why?”

“I’m not, Miss Koya,” Musa said. “We’re reworking the pictures as we speak. I did everything as you asked, and then your client changed everything last minute. We’re doing the best we can.”

“Excuses kill business, Musa,” Koya said. “I need those prints. I’ll pick them up myself.”

“They’ll be ready,” Musa said.

Koya ended the call after more assurances from Musa. She groaned when she saw the time on her phone. She needed to set out a bit earlier today. Jam on Nairobi streets could lead to insanity, especially during lunch hour. She was driving to the Chinese place on Valley Road. Kim had a construction project close by, so she was compromising today and braving the jungle.

Oh well, she’d see Musa after lunch.

Thirty minutes later, Koya sat at a table across Bernard ‘Kim’ Kimani at the China Plate, messing with her chicken fried rice. The restaurant was busy, though the atmosphere made it almost seem like she and Kim were alone. Taking her glass of water, she took a sip and her gaze collided with Kim’s dark one.

Kim had grown up. He was fit enough to play in the national rugby team. His eyes were a man’s eyes now: so keen, he seemed to see straight into her inner thoughts. Kim ran his father’s construction company. He’d grown into a force to contend with in business. She was proud of his accomplishments. All their school friends had opted to go for mainstream jobs, but Ashi, Kim and herself, they’d chosen to start businesses. Ashi owned two bookstores. Kim ran his father’s construction company, while she’d started the advertising agency.

“What’s on your mind?” Kim asked.

“Work,” Koya said, sitting back. “It’s been a busy morning.”

“Are you giving Musa a hard time again?”

“You bet,” she said, flashing a smile. “Why? Do I have wrinkles? Musa is driving me crazy.”

Kim laughed.

“No wrinkles, you look lovely as always. Good enough to eat.”

“You flatter me.” His words made her happy. She took a bite of her food. “What’s so urgent we had to meet today? Is Ashi driving you crazy with wedding plans?”

Kim seemed to sober up as he picked up the napkin on his lap and wiped his mouth.

“Is everything an appointment with you?”

“I’m a business woman. I don’t have time to waste,” Koya said, reaching for the bottle of soy sauce. She poured a healthy helping over her rice, turning it dark. Kim frowned when she took a blissful bite. “Talk fast. I need to go hassle Musa after this.”

“You can take a break, Koya,” Kim suggested. “You’re always working.”

“We won’t have much to talk about if you bring up my life.”

“Fine, be that way,” Kim said. “I guess I shouldn’t ask if you’re happy.”

“Let’s change the subject.”

“Jeez, Koya. I want the day to come when I can ask these things and not have you flinch and scowl.”

“Happiness is measured by an individual,” Koya said. “You refuse to listen when I tell you I’m happy. I’m happy. I’m so happy, I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Denial is not a state of happiness. When was the last time you went out on a date? Are you still holding on to the past?”

“I’m going to get up and leave you to lunch alone, Kim.” Koya placed her fork on the table and stared at Kim. “Why are you doing this?”

Kim studied her for a moment, then lifted his hands in surrender.

“Okay, I’ll stop. Eat Koya,” he said.

She picked up her fork and took another bite, as she chewed, Kim smiled.

“I have to tell you something,” Kim said, placing his napkin on the table. “This isn’t easy. Someone has to tell you before you meet.”

Koya stopped eating and met Kim’s gaze.

“You’re driving me crazy. What do you have to say?”

“Charlie is back in town.”

Koya stared at Kim. Suddenly the restaurant sounded so loud, her ears wouldn’t stop ringing. She shook her head, her gaze on the busy waiters tending to customers who ate without pause. Couldn’t they hear the deafening explosion?

“Koya,” Kim said in a gentle tone.

His voice drew her back from the edge. She grabbed her napkin and dumped it on top of her rice. Taking her handbag and cell phone, Koya pushed her chair back and got up.

“Come on, Koya,” Kim said.

She didn’t stop to see if he followed. Once outside, Koya headed to her car, holding on to control as it slid away fast. She tripped on a stone, her heels still too new and almost fell, managing to catch herself on her car’s bonnet. She gave in then, kicking the curb with the tip of her new grey heels. Damn it, she still needed to finish the payment on them, but...damn it, she kicked the curb again. A soft cough caught her attention and she looked up to find Kim standing a few feet away.

Koya pointed a finger at him.

“Jokes are the last thing I need today, and you’re playing one that is too cruel.”

Kim crossed his arms against his chest.

“I’m not joking. Charlie is in town. Will you stop taking it out on the curb and listen to me.”

“Move closer, so I can take it out on you,” she said, shaking a fist at him. “I need to calm down. I can’t drive like this. I’m so pissed, I might kill someone.”

“I’m sorry. This was a bad idea. I should have told you this evening.”

“You shouldn’t have told me at all, Kim. I don’t—I don’t care about him anymore. You telling me means you think I care and I don’t.”

Abandoning the curb, Koya turned to her car and unlocked it with a flourish. She threw her handbag and cell phone on the passenger seat.

“Then why are you so pissed off?” Kim asked, when she entered the driver’s side and opened the window.

Giving him a mean look, she started the car and put it into gear. She drove out of the restaurant parking lot at high speed. What did Kim mean, why was she pissed off? Koya scoffed. Who told him she needed to know about Charlie coming back to Nairobi? She was angry with Kim for thinking it mattered. Charles Dhali was old news. She’d let him go.

She drove back to Westlands in a daze. When she got to her office, she found Linda eating a sandwich at her desk.

“Hold my calls,” Koya said, when Linda started to stand up.

“Yes, Miss Koya.”

Koya slammed the door to her office closed. She dropped her handbag on the coffee table and went to her desk. Anger boiled inside her, like lava, pushing to erupt at the slightest pressure. She sank into her chair and stared out the windows. Letting out a breath, she turned around to face her desk and opened the bottom drawer on her right.

Koya reached under a stack of new envelopes and pulled out a picture frame. Placing it on her desk, she stared at the picture of a smiling man, his dark brown eyes shining with amusement.

“You don’t matter anymore,” Koya said in a whisper. “Stay away from me.”

Four

The Kalaha club along Naivasha road was Koya’s pride and joy. It had taken her two years to open it. Koya could still hear her father protesting against opening the club. She’d managed to convince him to accept the idea. Now the club was thriving and she loved visiting it after hours with Ashi and Hana.

Tonight was no different from any other night, she thought as she entered the main entrance. The big burly men at the door had the ruthless job of regulating who got in. Young high school kids could get the pope in trouble and she was not ready to face fines for selling to underage kids.

The main floor was packed with people, some on the dance floor, others having drinks at the tables. The D.J. was great.

He’d better be, she thought, thinking about the fee she paid per session.

She watched a young man speed to a table with a tray laden with drinks, maneuvering expertly, and she wondered if she could pull it off if she tried.

Shaking her head, Koya headed to a discreet staircase that took her upstairs to a second floor. This area was quiet, and offered a more relaxed atmosphere. The seating was sectioned off: there were comfortable red couches and glass tables. Koya smiled when she saw Hana Wangu and Ashi Mwendé seated at the couches by the window. They were laughing, enjoying coconut Malibu pineapple drinks.

Hana was her cousin; her uncle's daughter. She'd moved to Nairobi from Nyeri and now worked at Avenue Ad as a creative director. Hana should have been a model, Koya thought. The girl was blessed with a tall slender figure, currently wrapped in a beautiful navy blue dress. Her hair was naturally long. Hana wore it down today, that natural mass left to flow down to her shoulders. Hana's laugh was infectious, and her eyes sparkled in the warm light. Hana's tall elegance was the complete opposite of Ashi who was short, had lighter skin and a penchant for punk rock style. Ashi's hair was in a short cut, and dyed blond. She wore a short black dress, and her nails were painted black.

They both seemed to look up and spot her at the same time.

Ashi grinned and lifted her glass in greeting.

"Here's to trees in offices."

Koya laughed. "That's funny."

She sat beside Ashi, and accepted the drink they had ordered for her.

"Someone must be thinking about you," Hana said.

"If they really cared, they'd have sent me lilies," Koya said.

They all laughed and Ashi turned in her seat to touch Koya's arm. Her hand was warm against Koya's bare skin. Glancing down, Koya stared at the rock on Ashi's ring finger. Her best friend was engaged to a doctor with a flourishing private practice. Ashi's happiness seemed to glow out of her. Koya envied her for it.

"So, Koya, Kim called me," Ashi said.

Her expressive eyes trained on Koya, it was hard not to escape the unasked questions.

Koya sipped her drink, preparing her rehearsed speech of 'it-doesn't-matter'.

"I didn't want to be the one to tell you," Ashi confessed.

"How did you find out?" Koya asked.

"I heard gossip from mum. I went home to Ndwaru, and the rumor mills are working overtime. Charlie is home for good."

"Look," Hana said, leaning forward in concern. "It's hard to break such news to you. Considering—"

"Considering nothing," Koya said with a tight smile. "It doesn't matter anymore. Whether he's back or not, it has no effect on me. Stop acting like I'm going to pieces."

Ashi and Hana stared at her with sympathy in their eyes. Koya wondered what they saw. She'd made sure to make every effort to impress tonight. She'd chosen a short stunning red form-fitting dress. Her braids fell down her back in curly waves, and her make-up

was flawless. She looked good. She doubted anyone could see the cracks in her heart, but these were her best friends. They saw right through her.

“You’re right,” Ashi said after a moment, withdrawing her hand. “Let’s change the topic. Charles Dhali is old news. I received a shipment of those comics you like Koya. I will send them to your house.”

Koya was thankful for the change. “How’s the bookshop doing?”

“Very good, I should thank you two for your genius advertising.”

“Hana did it all, I’m just the decision pusher,” Koya said.

“I thank you still,” Ashi said. “Nic is free this weekend. We can do a barbecue, what do you think?”

“Is he still handsome as ever?” Hana asked.

Nic was Ashi’s fiancé. Their wedding was in three months. Ashi was driving them all mad with wedding plans and jitters.

Ashi glowed as she spoke about Nic.

“What do you expect? He is so hot.”

Koya laughed, taking Ashi’s left hand to sigh over the ridiculous ring shining there.

“You’re lucky. I give you props for making such a decision.”

Hana leaned closer to look at the diamond ring too.

“I doubt it was a hard one. Look at this ring. It’s as gorgeous as the hunk who gave it. He has good taste.”

“In women and jewelry,” Koya commented.

“I want to get married now,” Hana said with a sigh.

Letting go of Ashi’s hand, Koya sipped her drink and shook her head.

“Not me, I can’t imagine making such a commitment. I can barely keep a pet.”

“You say that now,” Ashi teased. “I’ll be hearing another story when you meet some guy.”

“She might fall for the tree guy,” Hana said.

“Hey, how come it’s now become a guy?” Koya asked.

Ashi laughed. “They can live in a tree house together.”

Koya poked Ashi with a finger. “Stop jinxing me.”

“They’ll have little tree children,” Hana continued.

“Okay, that’s weird,” Ashi said, still laughing.

Koya placed her glass on the table and got up. She took Ashi’s hand and Hana’s hand, pulling them to their feet.

“Enough with the teasing,” she said, leading the way out of the secluded area to the stairs. At least in the noisy dance floor there would be no teasing Koya.

“I love you gals. You get married. I’ll live vicariously through you. I’ll spoil your children senseless, meanwhile, let’s go dance. I need to unwind this day,” Koya said.

“Hear, hear,” Ashi answered.

Hana wrapped an arm around Koya’s shoulders as they reached the dance floor.

“I love you gals too,” Ashi said, as they joined in the fun on the dance floor.

Five

Nairobi had changed in eight years. The city had grown, expanding its wings to the surrounding towns, boasting bigger and better buildings. Charles Dhali found it exciting. He’d grown too.

Eight years in the outside world, learning business under his father, he’d had no choice but to grow and adapt. Isaac Dhali was his father, but when it came to making money, the man turned into an unrelenting tyrant. His father had once told him the only way he would inherit anything from him, was if Charles held a larger net worth than Isaac did.

Charles scoffed.

Who was he to take a challenge lying down?

He’d taken that challenge up with determination and built Dhal Corp. Dhal Corp dealt in real estate, tourism and owned two resorts. Sadly, he’d made a mistake with his first business decision when he chose to partner with his mother. Now, Ashley Dhali owned half of his company because she helped bring up the business when he had been abroad.

Doing business with his mother was dangerous. Ashley Dhali made enemies easily. The moment he’d arrived in Kenya, he offered to buy her out, but she was being stubborn. It made him suspicious.

Charles sighed and shook his head staring out the windows. He needed a driver these days. Traffic was insane and he still hadn’t acclimated yet. He was on his way to Westlands, his driver speeding along Waiyaki Way at seven in the morning. A starbus stopped abruptly ahead of them and his driver expertly navigated around. Yes, learning to drive around this town was going to take him a few weeks, probably months.

His thoughts returned to the company. It was taking him longer than he had expected to orient himself with the company’s employees. Today, he was meeting the managers of all the businesses owned under Dhal Corp. Glancing at his watch, he decided it would be good to see who was on time.

Dhal Corp’s headquarters was housed in a twelve-story building in Westlands that boasted ocean blue glass. His mother owned the land. Charlie had funded the building. It had taken him four years to finish the structure. They had been four years of struggling with building inspectors, sourcing building materials, and dealing with a meticulous

contractor. Dhal Corp used the top four floors as corporate offices. The rest were rented out to businesses, two of which belonged to Dhal Corporation.

Charles didn't have time to admire the building when the driver stopped at the main entrance. Six men in neat dark suits waited at the front. They hurried to him when he got out of the car. He greeted them with a nod, his gaze fixed on a short man with a beer belly who stood in the back, behind the eager managers.

"Everything is as you ordered," the man said when he lifted a brow in question.

"Are you sure it was delivered anonymously, Mr. Kimei?" Charles asked.

"Yes. I bought the tree myself, no names on the receipts. My people carried the package into the offices. Why a tree instead of flowers, sir?" Mr. Kimei asked.

Charles smiled imagining the reaction the tree would have gotten.

"That's for me to know," Charles said.

Mr. Kimei hurried away, and Charles started into the building followed by the remaining five men.

"Jack, how are we doing on the title deeds in Thika?"

"They were delivered yesterday. I had our lawyers check them and they are in order," Jack Mathuva answered.

Ashley considered Jack her right hand man. Charles was inclined to agree, as Jack was nothing but helpful in his transition to CEO, still it was too early.

"Then construction should be underway," Charles said. "The contractor has everything he needs."

"They have started work, sir," Jack replied.

They had reached the elevator and Jack pushed the button so that the doors slid open. Once they were in the elevator, Charles turned to a short, pudgy man in his late thirties, named Peter Kosgelle.

"How is property management working?"

"Our systems are running smoothly. We are at ninety-five percent on rent collection, and maintenance. I have hired a new team of agents for the new properties. They'll focus on sourcing new clients. Apart from a few incidents with particular renters, everything is fine," Peter said.

Charlie held Peter's gaze. He didn't sense deception in Peter's words. The man was relatively honest. Charlie had spent hours analyzing the financials on Dhal Properties and found no problems in their accounts. The business was making a satisfactory profit. For now, Peter was good enough for the job.

"I doubt it's as easy as you make it sound," Charlie said. "I would like it if you pushed that ninety-five percent to one hundred percent. We're a business after all. If someone hasn't paid their rent, handle it, Peter."

"Yes, Charlie," Peter said with a smile.

The elevator doors opened on the first floor to reveal a neat lobby with the words Dhal Properties on the wall ahead. Peter bid everyone goodbye and exited the elevator. Charlie watched the man greet his employees, his tone warm. The elevator doors closed and Charlie turned his attention to the man on his right.

This man was tall, and muscular, like an American football player. It seemed absurd to have him in a suit when he would be quite at home on the field playing a sport.

“Mahali Travel has too many problems, and is part of the reason I came back. What is going on, Stanford?” Charlie asked.

“We were undergoing massive staffing changes,” Stanford said.

“Staffing?” Charlie shook his head. “There are so many qualified travel agents out there. If you want, I will hold interviews for you.”

“The staff we have now is quite capable,” Stanford said.

Charlie sighed.

“Mahali Travel is getting an external audit. I’m telling you because it has already begun and I want your cooperation.”

Stanford’s jaw clenched and Charlie narrowed his gaze at that. So, there was something going on at the travel agency.

“No one is immune to investigations, Stanford. I have investors who want answers, and they want them now.”

The elevator doors opened on the third floor and Stanford got out. Charles couldn’t abide incompetence. The moment the auditors revealed that Stanford was useless, Charles would send him out the door.

Jack started to press the button to close the elevator. Charles’ gaze was on the different posters gracing the lobby at Mahali Travel. Each advertising a vacation spot. He wondered if it wasn’t too clinical...then he saw her.

She was walking toward the elevator. Her braids were in a ponytail, her body trim and shapely in a short pink skirt suit. Her skin the color of butterscotch, he remembered the feel of it against his fingers. She smiled at her companion, and his heart slammed in his chest. The elevator doors closed and he jammed his index finger on the open button, for the doors to open again.

It was her. He knew it. The doors took their time to open and by the time they slid wide, she was nowhere to be found. She must have taken the stairs.

“Something wrong, Charlie?” Jack asked from inside the elevator.

Charlie sighed, glancing at the closing stairway door, he shook his head and returned to the elevator. He didn’t offer an explanation to the three men in the elevator. The elevator resumed its way up and once they reached the twelfth floor, they all exited and headed to his new office at the end of the hallway.

Charlie opened the door, his gaze lingering over the new sign mounted on the door. It read Charles Dhali, C.E.O. Dhal Corporation, such simple elegance for so much responsibility.

He shrugged his jacket off and dumped it on a white armchair. Unlike his managers in their neat suits, he preferred more relaxed attire. Dressed in a grey polo shirt and dark slacks, he put his hands in his pockets and went to stand by the floor length windows.

Behind him, the three men settled themselves in the chairs around his mahogany desk. Charlie didn't move to take his seat behind that desk. He remained by the windows, staring at the city around him.

"I want to know what Stanford is hiding in the Travel Agency," he said.

"Our investigation is hitting road blocks. We can't find three of the four previous accountants. Money is flowing, witnesses are too absent," Jack explained.

Charlie turned away from the view and glanced at the man seated beside Jack. His name was Nyagah. Nyagah was a tall, thin man. He carried his height well, and wore glasses that were always perched on the tip of his nose. Charles liked him for his meticulous nature.

"Nyagah, document every bit of information you get out of that travel agency. Submit it to me first, even if you have to find me at the house on Ndwaru."

"I will be thorough," Nyagah promised.

"If there is anything untoward happening in that agency, Jack, I want those people finished."

"We'll get it done, Charlie," Jack said and stood up. He followed Nyagah out of the office, making sure to close the door behind him.

Charlie moved to his desk then, and took a seat on the imposing executive chair to face the remaining man.

Archer Weru, an average man with unremarkable features. He had an uncanny ability to remain unnoticed in a crowd. People tended to ignore him during important conversations. His services were immeasurable to Charlie.

"I hope you have good news for me," Charlie said with a sigh.

Archer gave him an odd smile.

"Well, she's a skilled businesswoman. She seems happy enough."

"I remember how pretty she was when she smiled. Does she smile?"

"She does," Archer said, placing an envelope on the desk.

Charlie took the envelope and opened it. He pulled out photographs.

"I took those last night at the club she owns with her friend. That's her cousin Hana and her best friend—

"Ashi," Charles said. "I remember. I want to see her. I thought I saw her downstairs at the travel agency."

"You could have," Archer said. "Her advertising agency is handling promotion for the travel agency. They are on the verge of signing a five-year contract."

"Really," Charlie said.

That was indeed good news. If she succeeded, he would have access to her, have a reason to visit her business.

Archer continued his report.

“She spends her daily hours working at Avenue Advertising, some evenings at the club. On weekends, she devotes her time to the property she inherited from her father on Ndwaru road. She’s purchased two parcels of land surrounding her father’s land and expanded the original house. That is where she stays.”

Koya Kalahari, Charles thought, *a woman after his heart.*

He smiled at the pictures of her hugging Ashi, toasting a drink with her cousin, and then of her dancing. He wondered if she still thought about him.

“What would you like me to do next?” Archer asked.

“Keep tabs on her for me,” Charles said.

Archer nodded in understanding and stood up. He paused as he turned to leave, glancing back at Charles.

“What?” Charles asked.

“There’s a man she spends a lot of time with,” Archer said. “They call him Kim. I thought that might be of interest.”

Archer pulled out a picture from his jacket pocket and handed it to Charles.

Charles stared at the picture of Koya and Kim at a restaurant. They seemed so homey together. He gritted his teeth and nodded his thanks to Archer. Archer left and once the door closed, Charles tossed the picture of Kim and Koya aside. He picked up the one with Koya smiling with her glass held up in a toast.

“Koya,” he said in a quiet tone. “Why did you never answer my letters?”

Six

Late Friday afternoon, Koya sat at her desk in her office reading the contract Mahali Travel had sent her. A soft knock came, and she glanced up to see Hana walk in carrying a rolled up poster. Koya smiled in greeting at her cousin. Hana came to her desk and unrolled the poster she held.

“This is the final Power to Women poster,” Hana said. “Adele finally sent over the rest of the details concerning the education project. Unfortunately, she also sent me the line up for the gala tomorrow. We all need to be present for the launch ceremony she’s planned.”

“I thought it was optional,” Koya said, her frown deepening.

She’d been looking forward to her first lazy weekend in months.

“We were going to have a barbecue,” Koya complained.

“Adele has pulled out all the stops,” Hana said with a sigh. “She’s invited too many important guests for us to ignore the gala. Instead of a barbecue, we can invite Nic and Ashi to the gala instead. It will be fun.”

“Adele is doing this on purpose,” Koya said.

She pushed her chair back and got up, walking around her desk to join Hana.

She helped Hana hold the poster, anchoring it with a glass rabbit paperweight. The words Power to Women Foundation were emblazoned across the glossy paper in vibrant green and yellow colors. The poster was simple, straight to the point, announcing the date and time of the fundraising gala. Koya was glad to have Hana working with her in the foundation. Otherwise, such simple things would become cause for war between her and Adele Kouga.

“The poster is pretty good, you’ve outdone yourself,” Koya praised her cousin.

“Don’t worry about Adele,” Hana said, when Koya returned to her chair. Hana rolled up the poster. “This aside, what are you reading?”

“The contract from Mahali Travel,” Koya said, picking up the documents as she sat in her chair. “Hana, do you remember the name Charlie’s family uses for their business?”

“Dhal,” Hana said. “I heard his mother started it. You should know this.”

“I have blocked out everything concerning that family,” Koya confessed. “But, this travel agency seems to be part of Dhal.”

Koya shook her head at the thought. She had grown Avenue Advertising with one purpose in mind, to prove the Dhali family wrong about her and her family. She’d done everything in her power to escape contact with the Dhali family in the business world. She wasn’t about to start working with them now.

Hana placed the rolled up poster on the edge of the desk and came around to stand beside Koya. She studied the documents, picking out the company details.

“Mahali Travel is renting space at the Dhal Tower. That doesn’t mean Dhal owns them,” Hana argued. “There are a bunch of businesses renting space there.”

“Either way, being housed at Dhal Tower means meeting the Dhali family,” Koya said. “Call me paranoid, but I prefer to stay millions of miles from them.”

“It’s business, Koya,” Hana advised, her tone gentle. “A five year contract for Ave Ad is worth anything. The revenue it will bring in is unmatched. Working with Mahali Travel will build our reputation. Who cares where Mahali is housed, they’re a huge account.”

Koya rubbed her forehead with a sigh.

“Gosh, when you put it that way, I sound like a child.” Koya smiled at her cousin.

“You’re right. I’m just being ridiculous.”

Maybe she was being too cautious. She’d spent the past eight years ignoring anything to do with Charles Dhali, and suddenly this week was full of him. She couldn’t turn without a mention of the Dhal Corporation. She’d been living in oblivion until Kim mentioned Charlie’s return.

Now, she couldn't escape him.

Hana squeezed her left shoulder.

"Sign the papers, Koya, for the sake of our company and not because of the past."

Koya nodded in understanding and reached for her pen. Hana was right. Life went on.

"Alright, I'll stop being paranoid," Koya said.

She signed the designated areas and stamped them with a flourish. Placing the contracts in an open briefcase to her right, she closed it with a snap and smiled. She stretched her arms up, relieving tired shoulder muscles with a small sigh.

"We should celebrate," Hana said. "Why don't we go out tomorrow after the gala?"

"We can have a party at the house," Koya suggested. "The day will be so tiring already. Let's chill out at home, nothing on our minds but drinking with friends and eating *nyamchom*."

"I'll call Ashi," Hana said, already excited. "So she plans Nic the doctor."

Koya loved her cousin's enthusiasm.

"I heard there will be local musicians at the gala, which should be exciting tomorrow."

"Yes, even if Adele is irritating, she does know how to get a crowd over to shindig," Hana said with grudging respect. "We can ignore the pomp and circumstance that comes from being an MP's wife and take the rest."

Koya laughed at that. Adele could be exhausting when it came to politics. The woman lived, breathed and slept in it. She couldn't be blamed.

"You know she wants your position," Hana pointed out.

"I know," Koya said. "Sometimes I want her to have it. Being chairlady of the foundation can be exhausting. But, imagine the direction the PW would take in Adele's hands. I like how we are right now. All our projects go through, and the members are enthusiastic. Dear Adele will have to chill out."

Hana went around the desk and sat in the visitor's chairs.

"Why do you do it, Koya? I mean if it gets hard, quit."

"Should I say I do it to empower women?" Koya asked with a small chuckle. "I don't know Hana. I just love what we do for the community."

"Such an iron woman," Hana teased.

Koya made a show of sitting with her shoulders squared, and winked.

"Why don't you tell me the program tomorrow?" Koya asked. "I'm sure Adele called everyone to come, but forgot there is actual planning to be done."

Hana got her Blackberry from her pocket and they started planning the gala activities.

Saturday morning dawned with bright sunshine streaming into the Dhal mansion. Charlie came down the stairs in a cheerful mood, a spring in every step he took.

No one could burst his happy bubble, he thought as he jumped down the last step.

Today was the day he would get to see her again. He felt as though he were busting at the seams with excitement. Charlie went to the dining room with a wide smile.

An older lady in a pink apron was setting up breakfast at the side table. He walked up to her and hugged her in greeting.

“Morning, Mama Nora.”

“Morning Charlie,” she said looking at him with a narrowed gaze. “You are about to burst in glee. Did something good happen this morning?”

“Can’t a guy be happy?” Charlie asked as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

He put two spoons of sugar and stirred with rushed impatience. Taking the cup, he took it with him to the chair at the head of the dining table.

“When are you going to wear a proper suit for work? I think abroad has spoiled you, son.” Mama Nora gave a small shake of her head.

She had been a part of the Dhali household for ages. Charlie could remember her chasing after him to wear his underwear when he was six years old. Those days, she’d been younger and quicker than him. Now, she was heavier, and the years had slowed her down. Time surely moved fast. Glancing at the white t-shirt and the navy blue jeans he wore, he grinned at her.

“It’s Saturday. Today is playtime; my minions are working for me instead.”

“What your father would say, Charlie,” Mama Nora said.

“I doubt am a concern at the moment. He’s at the coast trying to catch pirates for fun,” Charlie teased.

Not that he knew what his father was up to. Isaac Dhali was a mysterious man.

Mama Nora laughed and brought him a plate of toast and scrambled eggs. She brought a glass of orange juice as well, and he sipped coffee as she stepped back to the side table.

“When are you going to get married so that I can fuss on grandchildren?” she asked as he picked up a spoon to eat his eggs.

“You women, can’t a guy enjoy his bachelorhood? It’s good to enjoy life, have some fun, why add wives and children to the mix?”

“It’s the natural order of life, Charlie,” Mama Nora said, her tone matter of fact. “How else do you think the world goes on?”

“My refusing to get married hasn’t stopped the world from going on,” Charlie replied. “And don’t tell me about tradition, Mama Nora. That is a very lame excuse for things.”

“Are you telling me you don’t want a wife?” Mama Nora asked.

Charlie took a healthy bite of his eggs, his gaze on his nanny. She probably thought he was strange for saying this. In her world, children married when they were old enough.

She had two grandchildren from her daughter Nora. In his world, marriage felt like a huge commitment. One he wanted to make to only one woman in the world. Would Mama Nora understand that?

“I’m only saying that no one should marry for the sake of getting a wife. I want the right wife, the right woman so to speak.”

“You must have chosen then,” Mama Nora said with a smile. “Who is this right woman?”

Charlie smiled and shook his head.

“She doesn’t know it yet. Stop digging for gossip now. I had better not hear about this when I get to the end of Ndwaru Road. Gossip mongers around here should work for intelligence.”

Nora laughed, covering the dishes at the side table.

“Where’s mum?” Charlie asked.

“You know her. She’s lazy waking up in the morning. I’ll get the paper for you.”

Mama Nora left the dining room.

Charlie was thinking about the gala to be held at the Riruta Catholic Church grounds when his mother walked in.

Ashley was in her dressing gown, her hair tied back with a bandana. Her eyes were still bleary but her beauty shone through. Even in her late fifties, Ashley remained slight and held herself straight. She looked ten years younger than her actual fifty-six.

She let a delicate yawn escape and came toward him. She stopped by his chair, rubbing his head affectionately. She chose the chair to his right.

“You’re quite the woman, Mum,” Charlie said in greeting. “Had enough sleep?”

“No, and don’t tease,” Ashley said. She picked up his coffee cup and took a sip. She made a face as she swallowed his coffee. “That much sugar in anything will kill you, darling.”

“It’s down by a spoon,” Charlie said. “You should congratulate me.”

“Only when it’s no spoon at all,” Ashley said. “You’re looking handsome. Where are you going?”

Charlie grinned.

“On a hunt.”

Ashley gave him a comical expression she wouldn’t show anyone outside the house and he laughed.

“A hunt?” she asked.

“Yes,” Charlie replied. “Guess where.”

“Save me and tell me.”

“There’s a delightful thing called a PW Gala going on today at Riruta church. One Adele Kouga, wife of our county’s MP invited Dhal to attend. The foundation is courting sponsors.”

“Oh no,” Ashley widened her eyes. “I know you’re not going there out of the goodness of your heart, Charles Dhali. Tell your mother who you’re going to see.”

“Hey,” Charlie protested.

He’d never tell her, but honestly, was it so obvious he was going to see someone?

“I’m an investor,” Charlie said. “PW is a good foundation. A bunch of women campaigning for equality and education, just imagine all those gorgeous independent women. I thought you said you want to see me married?”

“To a nice girl,” Ashley said, still sipping his coffee.

Mama Nora walked in then carrying a newspaper. She placed it at Charlie’s left elbow and moved to pour Ashley coffee.

“Mama Nora, my son is going to hunt for women.”

Nora burst out in a laugh. “He just said he’s not getting married.”

“I think he’s going out to eat *nyama choma* and have drinks with the guys. Meanwhile, he’s putting his mother on.”

Charlie pushed his plate away and gulped down his orange juice. He stood up and took the newspaper.

“Mum, you know I love you.” He kissed her cheek.

“Yes,” Ashley said. “I love you too, but you’re still a player, Charlie. I pity the woman who marries you, dear.”

Tents were up, and chairs arranged in neat rows. The stage was built, and the DJ was setting up his equipment. Ushers were in place, the decorations and Power to Women banners were also in the hang up.

Koya ticked her list with a satisfied nod and headed for the buffet tents. Guests were already arriving; they mingled in the cool tents, dressed in fine summer wear.

Koya was glad she’d decided to go shopping the evening before. She’d found a pretty emerald dress that flowed in silky yards to her feet. A pair of comfortable, matching green kitten heels made sure that her dress didn’t sweep the ground. She’d let her braids down and chosen a green beaded necklace with a carved amulet for jewelry.

Koya pushed up her sunglasses and looked around the sunny green field in search of her friends. A frown danced on her forehead and she was just about to start making calls when she spotted them.

“I’m glad you guys made it,” she said in playful sarcasm when they reached her.

“It’s Saturday,” Ashi complained. “Have you seen traffic on Ngong Road, and then there is Kawangware. I thought we’d never get here. Those PSVs are really trying, be glad we made it at all.”

“So dramatic, alright, you’re forgiven,” Koya said, hugging Ashi. “You could have slept over my place.”

“Nic couldn’t, he had to work,” Ashi explained.

Koya turned to the handsome man standing beside Ashi.

“Hey Nic, good to see you.”

She accepted his hug and then Hana’s. When it came to Kim, she ignored him and instead turned to Nic.

“The place looks amazing,” Nic complimented.

“Thanks Nic, you’re such a gentleman. Ashi you’d better take care, I might steal him,” Koya teased.

Nic grinned and wrapped an arm around Ashi’s shoulders.

“I’d better take Hana and Ashi to get something to drink,” Nic said.

“Sure, sure, you’ll love the buffet tables. Hana, Wahu is performing later, you should make it over to the entertainment tent.”

Hana nodded as she followed Nic and Ashi.

Koya suspected they were running away so that she and Kim could talk. She hadn’t seen Kim since he told her about Charlie.

As if Kim was reading her mind, he said, “You’re not going to be angry with me your whole life.”

“I can try,” Koya said, turning to head to the walkway that led to the podium where the speeches would be held.

She made a show of arranging the flowers that were already set in pots.

Kim followed her.

“Talk to me, Koya. What are you really angry about?”

Koya couldn’t understand how Kim knew her so well. It was as if he had insight into her darkest parts. Of course, she wasn’t angry with Kim. Sighing, she shook her head and stared at the lilies before her.

“I’m angry with myself,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because,” Koya turned to look at Kim. “I can’t believe how scared I am right now.”

Kim placed a hand on her bare shoulder.

“Why are you scared?”

Koya met his gaze.

“Don’t ask that when you know. You saw how I reacted on Tuesday. I wanted to scream bloody murder when you told me Charlie is back. People aren’t allowed to do that. They can’t leave chaos behind and come right back years later. They should give warning to the people they left behind. Do you see what I am saying, Kim?”

“Who said you have to see him?” Kim asked. “You can stay in your corner of the world and pretend he’s not here.”

“That will only work so far,” Koya said.

Koya stared at her feet.

“It doesn’t matter where he is or what he is doing in the city. I can’t help wondering what he’s thinking, what he’s planning, why did he do that? It’s annoying because he’s so close and I’m tempted to drive by his house on the hill, call him...I’m pathetic and stupid.

“Hey,” Kim said, reaching out, he lifted her chin up with a finger. “Stop that. Don’t hate on Koya Kalahari. I’ll have you know she’s a great woman, strong, independent and very beautiful.”

Koya chuckled. “Wow, you’re a loyal friend. Where is this Koya Kalahari? I’d like to meet her.”

“Well,” Kim made a show of looking around the field. “She was around here a minute ago. Where did she go—?”

Koya punched Kim lightly on his chest.

“Ouch, so violent...Alright, Miss Koya Kalahari, chin up. It’s okay to be a little worried. Point is, you don’t have to suffer alone. I’m here, so is Ashi, Hana and even Nic. Hmm...so smile.”

Koya sighed and hugged him for the encouragement. Feeling a little lighter, she pulled back and took his hand as they walked to the closest tent. She leaned on one of the tables.

“I should be over him by now.”

Kim leaned on the table beside her.

“To tell you the truth, I think you won’t have the answer to that until you meet him face to face. Meanwhile, don’t think about it.”

Koya filed away that comment and leaned on Kim’s right arm. He was a rock she didn’t think she’d ever let go of.

“You’re a good friend, Kim. I owe you a lot.”

“Just your friendship, nothing else,” Kim replied.

Standing across the field at the registration tent, Charlie felt bile rise up his throat at the sight of the couple leaning on the table.

Did they have to stand so close? And what was with Koya mooning into that bastard's eyes?

Clenching his hands into tight fists, Charlie fought the urge to stalk across the field and separate them.

She was his, damn it, no one else could have her.

A woman in an elaborate *Kitenge* ensemble walked up to him, blocking his view. Her head dress momentarily distracting him from the annoying scene ahead. He wondered how it stayed on the woman's head. A bird could nest in it quite comfortably, but who was he to comment.

"Mr. Dhali, how nice of you to grace our gala," the woman said in greeting. "We are very honored you came personally. My name is Adele Kouga, at your service."

Charlie nodded, his gaze straying back to the couple still leaning on the table.

"It's a wonderful foundation, of course I had to come and show my support," he said in a distracted tone.

Adele turned to follow his gaze and gave a knowing smile. He groaned inward at what she must be thinking but he was beyond controlling his jealousies.

"Ah," Adele said. "Come, I must introduce you to the foundation's Chair. She'll be pleased to meet you, Mr. Dhali. Your corporation has done so much for us. I'm sure she'll want to thank you personally."

Charlie's eyes widened at the realization that the woman meant Koya.

Could it be this easy...? He smiled. The gods were on his side today. This woman didn't deserve the bird on her head dress, he adjusted. Taking her hand, he smiled with charm and calculation.

"Please, let's meet this Chairwoman," Charlie said. "Though, I'm sure she won't be as charming as you've been, Mrs. Kouga."

Adele glowed. "You flatter an old woman."

Charlie grinned as they walked toward Koya.

"Hardly old, Mrs. Kouga. You're absolutely lovely today."

"My, it is true," Adele said, her tone light. "You *are* charming, Mr. Dhali. Promise that you will come to dinner one of these days. My home is five minutes away, and my family would be delighted to meet you."

"I'm sure, Mrs. Kouga," Charlie said, without committing.

He knew what it meant to commit to Mrs. Kouga. His mother was living proof of such commitments. He doubted Ashley saw it. The numerous favors and liaisons for friends in high places, Charlie shuddered to think how deep it had gotten with his mother. He pushed thoughts of his troubles away and concentrated on the present. He'd been waiting ages to talk to Koya Kalahari.

Seven

Koya glanced up to see Adele and a man in a white t-shirt walking toward them.

“Oh no, here comes Addie,” she said with a groan.

Kim chuckled and bumped her arm with his shoulder.

“She’s harmless,” Kim teased.

Koya shook her head and would have responded but Kim held on to her hand and pushed off the table.

“Koya,” he said, his tone too quiet.

Frowning at his serious voice, she looked at him and found his gaze focused on the man with Adele. Returning her attention to the two approaching, she studied the man walking beside Adele.

He moved with assured confidence, his figure tall and confident. He laughed and she gripped Kim’s arm in recognition.

It couldn’t be.

Her chest filled with apprehension, it felt as though her heart was going to burst out of her chest. A sudden urge to run in the opposite direction had her shaking.

“Koya,” Adele greeted with excitement.

Adele’s eyes were shining in triumph. She’d finally found a weakness. Koya would have happily strangled her right then.

“Guess who has come to our little gala. Mr. Charles Dhali came in person. Can you imagine? I was just thanking him for his generous contribution today. I insisted that you would want to thank him too.”

Koya wasn’t sure Adele was human. It felt as though the woman was put in this world to torture her.

In which planet would she want to thank Charlie for anything?

Charlie, the bastard who chewed on her heart and spat it out like garbage. This Charlie with a smug smile on his ridiculously handsome face....

What would he do if she shoved the bunch of flowers on the stand beside him into his mouth?

“Hello, Koya Kalahari. How have you been?” Charlie greeted in a voice that seemed to travel through her entire body.

“Oh, you know each other,” Adele said, still smiling. “Mr. Dhali, I will leave you in Koya’s capable hands. We shall talk later.”

Adele patted Charlie’s arm and walked away with quick strides. Koya could barely breathe. She doubted she could keep standing if it weren’t for the tight grip she had on Kim’s arm. How was it possible that Charlie still had such power over her?

“Don’t I even get a hello?” Charlie asked.

“What are you doing here?” Koya heard herself ask.

Her anger was so strong; she feared she would break in half at the force of it.

“It’s a gala,” Charlie replied with that stupid smile that showed off perfect teeth. It seemed his love for sweet things hadn’t destroyed them yet.

Koya turned away from Charlie then. She needed to get a hold of the bubbling emotions inside her.

“At least call before you show,” Kim said, his arm going around Koya’s waist.

She was glad for his strength.

“Best friend, you won’t give me a hug either?” Charlie asked his tone full of sarcasm.

“It’s difficult. We haven’t been best friends for so long,” Kim said, his tone tinged with mild amusement.

Charlie’s gaze narrowed.

“Well, sorry to surprise you with my presence. But—, I really wanted to see you guys.”

“You chose the wrong time,” Kim said.

“It’s never the wrong time with friends,” Charlie countered.

“Strange,” Kim said. “How long has it been, Charlie, since you left—?”

“Leave, Charlie,” Koya interrupted Kim.

She couldn’t take the sight of him. She couldn’t listen to him, with that voice—so many memories returning.

“Go back to where you came from,” she said.

“Come on, Koya,” Charlie said with a smile. “I’m starting to have fun.”

“Please,” Koya heard herself beg.

Nausea rose and she took in deep breaths to control it. She’d be darned if she lost control in front of Charlie.

“You don’t have to contribute here. Your money is not needed, so leave.”

“Ask me anything else,” Charlie said.

“I don’t want anything else,” Koya said.

Koya was sure if she could physically carry Charlie out of this field, she would. But then there was the intense need to run into his arms and hug him. Oh how she’d missed him, seeing him...she squelched those thoughts and shook her head.

The best thing was for him to leave.

Did she need to keep holding on to Kim?

Charlie scowled.

It was taking all he had not to walk up to her and grab her hand away from Kim's bulging bicep. They made such a pretty picture, it annoyed him. The tall muscular man, supporting the graceful damsel in distress.

Charlie's gaze met Koya's angry eyes and he adjusted his thoughts. Damsel wasn't right; she looked more like a furious valkyrie with fire burning deep inside. God she was beautiful. Her skin so brown and warm in the sun, her braids falling down her back, the wind teased them gently. Her tantalizing figure wrapped in green fabric, made him think of mermaids in the deep sea, seducing men to their deaths.

The woman was driving him crazy.

What did she mean by leave?

He wasn't going anywhere when another man was staking a claim on his territory. Thinking of her in Kim's arms was going to drive him to murder.

Were they together, he wondered.

She looked comfortable by Kim's side. And the way Kim's arm wrapped around her waist, there was no awkwardness. Rage blew through him like a storm.

Charlie looked around the busy field and gave Koya a small smile.

"I'm not making this easy for you two. I'm staying all day, my love. You'd better practice your smile, you're going to have to flash it when I'm handing you a check."

Turning away before he punched Kim for his betrayal, Charlie headed for the drinks tent hoping they were selling something stronger than juice.

Koya let go of Kim's arm and stalked forward, intent on punching Charlie.

The bastard, how dare he—

"Hold it," Kim said, tightening his arm around her waist, he restrained her against him.

She struggled for a minute but then stopped when she realized people were watching them.

"Can I let go now?" Kim asked.

Tears filled her eyes. Koya nodded and turned to face Kim so that her face was hidden from the curious crowd.

"I hate him. He is such an arrogant idiot. How dare he?"

Kim gripped her upper arms and gave her a little shake.

"You don't get to break here," Kim said. "Suck it up, breathe in and take control."

Koya wiped tears from the corners of her eyes and took in a deep breath. Her stomach hurt. She wished she didn't have to be here at this gala, but she couldn't leave. It would be rude.

“Only with him,” she said, taking in several deep breaths. “He made me this way, Kim. How can I miss him at the same time hate him so much? Is that normal? I don’t think I’m normal.”

She pressed her right hand over her heart. Her heartbeat was racing faster than a bird’s, threatening to jump out and rush after that idiot.

“You’re doing fine,” Kim said, his tone gentle.

She looked up to meet his gaze.

“You’re fine,” he repeated.

Taking in a deep breath, she nodded.

“You’re right. I’m strong.”

“That’s right,” Kim assured her. “The strongest woman I’ve ever met.”

Koya stilled then, reading more in Kim’s gaze than she wanted. She wondered if it was alright to hold on to him, when she knew she couldn’t offer anything back. Kim was always so steady. Such a rock...

“Can you do this?” Kim asked her, he rubbed her arms, the motion familiar, meant to console her. “Why don’t you stay here, and I’ll get Ashi.”

Koya nodded and took a step back, away from Kim. Her gaze remained on Kim as he walked away in search of Ashi.

Ashi and Hana stayed by Koya’s side through the day as though she were an invalid that needed constant care. Whenever Ashi saw Charlie move close, she maneuvered Koya away from him: she and Hana worked well.

Koya couldn’t help laughing when Hana pressed pistachio ice cream into her hands.

“You guys are crazy,” Koya said, taking a small bite of her ice cream. “I’m not going to melt just coz he’s close by.”

“Could have fooled me,” Ashi teased.

Koya ate her ice cream, her gaze never straying from Charlie, though she pretended not to watch him. Their guests gravitated to him, as moths would to an open flame. No doubt wanting to get an in with the budding leader of the dark world, she scoffed.

She swallowed a huge bite of ice cream and almost got brain freeze. Jeez, she needed to find a solution about that darned check, there was no way she was going to receive it from Charlie.

As the gala came to a close, Koya stood at the dais giving a thank you speech. Her gaze settled on Adele who sat at the front, her headdress so huge, she couldn’t be missed in the crowd, and an idea struck.

Koya smiled.

“Your generosity has made this gala successful,” Koya continued. “On behalf of the members of Power to Women Foundation, I want to thank you for raising money enough

to fund our community centre for a year. The foundation gives the honor of receiving the largest donation of the day to a lady who has worked with tireless dedication. She made this gala possible today. Please welcome the Vice- Chairlady, Mrs. Adele Kouga.”

Adele beamed as she got up amid applause. She went up the dais, followed by the executives from Dhal Corp, led by Charlie. Koya took her seat beside Ashi and watched Adele receive the one million shillings dummy check from a grim Charlie.

After the simple ceremony ended, the gala guests left at their leisure. Charlie lingered, watching Koya work with the staff to undo tents, pack chairs and tables into a huge truck. She'd avoided him all day, instead sticking to Kim, Hana and Ashi, allowing them to corset her.

Charlie scowled. Koya's escapism annoyed him. He was not leaving until she talked to him.

“Charlie is still here,” Ashi said, when the field was clear and the last of the staff had left. “What do you want us to do?”

Koya gripped the folder she held and sneaked a glance behind her.

Charlie stood by the Zuri Events truck, talking to the driver. She sighed.

“Go get the car,” Koya said, handing the folder to Ashi.

She walked the few steps to Charlie and the truck driver with false determination.

“Thank you guys,” she said to the Zuri Events driver. “Drive safe.”

“You're welcome,” the driver smiled at her and started the truck with a final wave.

Then she was alone with Charlie once the truck drove off.

“I've avoided you all day,” she said.

“I noticed,” Charlie said, and then went silent for a moment. “I came because I wanted to see you, Koya. I've missed you. There isn't a day that passed I didn't wonder how you were. You've always been important to me.”

“How lucky for me,” Koya said. “I'm sure your dogs have the same consideration.”

Charlie winced. “You were always so very sarcastic. I missed that too.”

Koya sighed.

“What do you want from me, Charlie? A hug? A *‘Hey, welcome back, the world is still as you left it?’*”

“Any response is fine, Koya. You're giving me nothing here. And I see for myself that the world is different now. You and Kim seem close.”

“We've been through a lot together.”

“And we haven't?”

“You threw that away, Charlie. Not me,” Koya said.

“I’m back now.”

Koya lifted her hand.

“Stop right there. I don’t want to hear more.”

“Why?” Charlie asked. “Because you’re still angry at me? I made a mistake leaving, I admit that, but I’m telling you I’m here now to fix it. Fix us. I want us back together, Koya.”

“You’re about eight years too late,” Koya said with a soft scoff. “I don’t deny we were great. With you, I thought I’d be happy for the rest of my life. But, that was another time and place. That girl doesn’t exist anymore.”

Koya straightened her shoulders, stood a little taller, and stretched her hand out to Charlie. He took it, confusion on his face.

“Welcome back, Mr. Dhali,” she said. “Thank you for your donation. The foundation appreciates it. Good luck on all your other enterprises. Have a good evening.”

She let go of his hand, gave him a short nod and turned. She was glad Ashi had brought the car closer, so she didn’t have to walk too much. Reaching the green Sedan, she entered the back passenger seat with as much grace as she could master. She didn’t look back at Charlie.

Eight

Ashley Dhali swept her finger over the photos on her phone with reserved judgment. She was in her office at the Dhali estate. Her assistant a few feet away from Ashley’s desk clearly worried about her reaction. Ashley wished she could vent out her frustration, but her assistant didn’t deserve the storm brewing deep inside.

She shook her head.

No, she wasn’t angry, she adjusted. She settled back in the comfortable leather office chair. She wasn’t angry, she was surprised. She hadn’t thought about Koya Kalahari in years.

Ashley glanced at the picture on her phone again. Charlie stood too close to a beautiful woman in a long green dress. Koya had matured into an elegant creature. What worried Ashley was the expression on Charlie’s face. Such longing would not be erased easily.

She placed her phone on the desk and met her assistant’s gaze.

“Where was this?”

“The Power to Women gala held at Riruta church on Saturday.”

So that’s where Charlie had gone, Ashley frowned. He’d gone to check on his old flame. *Hunting*, she scoffed. “That punk.”

“Miss Kalahari is the foundation’s chairlady. Dhal Corporation has donated one million shillings to their community centre project. The foundation is building the centre on a plot close to Miss Kalahari’s home.”

Koya seemed to have found a foothold in the power jungle.

Ashley stared at her phone on the desk and made a snap decision.

“Call Adele Kouga,” Ashley said, remembering the M.P.’s wife was the vice- chairlady. “Make an appointment with her for tomorrow morning. Also, tell Nora to start preparations for a dinner party on Friday night. The guest list is as usual. Make sure you add Koya Kalahari to the list. Let’s see if she can swim with the sharks.”

“Yes, Madam.”

Her assistant left her office fast shutting the door.

Alone, Ashley stood and walked to a chest of drawers against the wall to her left. The top drawer was secured with a small keypad. She punched in the password and the lock system disengaged. Pulling open the top drawer, she removed a sizeable lacquered box, placing it on top of the chest.

Ashley removed a bunch of letters she’d kept hidden for eight years. Taking the oldest one, she stretched it open and stared at the familiar writing. Her gaze on the words written inside...

She wasn’t sorry for the decision she’d made eight years ago. She really couldn’t be sorry because it would mean undoing so much. Dhal Corp wouldn’t exist, Charlie wouldn’t have turned out the way he had, she might have even lost him. Folding the old letter, she stuck it with the rest and returned them into the box. She locked the box away in the drawer and strode out of her office.

Regrets were for weak minds, Ashley decided.

The best she could do now was get to know all about Koya Kalahari.

“Mahali travel would like us to create a campaign promoting their Diani, Malindi and Nyali packages,” Koya said, reading through the requirements Mahali had sent to her. “We need site visits, Hannah. I’m leaving that to you.”

“I’m in for a trip to the beach.” Hannah grinned as she took the pictures of the beach resort Mahali Travel used to host their clients. “I see myself here for a month.”

“Haha, there is a three-week limit on the project, cousin,” Koya said, sitting back in her seat. She swiveled it from side to side, twirling her pen. “Don’t get lost down there.”

Hannah met her gaze.

“This will be a fun campaign to create. I have a billion ideas already forming.”

“I’m sure,” Koya said with a small smile.

She stopped swiveling her chair, and leaned her elbows on her desk. She signed off on the budget the accountant had laid out and passed the file to Hannah.

Hannah stood to leave, and then paused, studying Koya.

Koya raised her eyebrow.

“What?”

“Are you alright?” Hannah asked. “You’ve been like a zombie since the gala on Saturday. You drank yourself to sleep that night. Yesterday, you agreed to wearing lime green at Ashi’s wedding without flinching. I’m worried.”

“She seemed so set on the lime green for the bridesmaids,” Koya said.

“I’m counting on you to change her mind. I refuse to look like a bright fruit in the name of a wedding.”

Koya laughed.

“Alright, I’ll take her out to lunch,” Koya said. “I’m fine, Hannah, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Hannah frowned and took her seat again.

“Koya, we all understand that things are a bit tough for you—.”

“Hey,” Koya protested. “This is exactly what I want to avoid. Nothing is hard, Hannah. Charlie can’t dictate how happy or sad I am, Hannah. Life goes on.”

“Sounds to me like you are trying to convince yourself, Koya.” Hannah stood and waved the file she held. “Thanks for this. I’m off to Diani tomorrow for some work and play, don’t lose your head while I’m gone, cousin.”

Alone in her office, Koya swung her chair around to stare out her office windows. She tried to get a hold of the anger rising up at odd times of the day: an old anger she’d never managed to purge. She kept busy to ignore it, but it was constant and ready to burst out these days.

She’d come in to the office this Monday morning ready to bury her head in work, but apparently work wasn’t helping her. Her cell phone buzzed on her desk and she reached for it.

“Kalahari,” she answered.

“Come out and play with me,” Kim said into her ear.

“I’m busy.”

“You’re staring out the windows brooding, come on, don’t be a bore. It’s Monday.”

“Most people would think you’re the crazy one. Mondays are serious business days.”

“Not for me,” Kim chuckled. “Change into jeans and a t-shirt. Let’s go glass shopping. I have a client who wants fancy designs. You’re good with that kind of thing...how about it?”

“Will you pay me commission?” Koya asked, although her blood was already singing at the thought of a road trip out of the city.

“A steak dinner,” Kim offered.

“Meat?” Koya laughed. “I guess I’m that kind of girl. Fine, let me change. Where do you want to pick me up?”

“I’m downstairs, hurry down,” Kim replied.

Koya got up from her seat and looked down at the parking lot below. She grinned when she saw Kim’s familiar black four-wheel drive pickup.

“Five minutes,” she promised, rushing into the bathroom attached to her office.

She kept a mini wardrobe on a shelf in the bathroom. She changed out of her white and red skirt suit into blue skinny jeans and blue t-shirt. Pulling on matching rubber shoes, she held her braids up in a ponytail and hurried out of the bathroom.

She made it downstairs in six minutes, but who was counting. Kim grinned at her as she got into the passenger side. He gave her a once over and pointed at her neck.

She touched the gold necklace she’d been wearing to match her elegant skirt and blouse.

“Oops,” she smiled and unsnapped it. She slipped it into her handbag and wore her seatbelt.

Kim gave her an approving wink and started the truck. He tuned the radio to a rock station, turning up the volume. Koya loved the drive out of the city, a sense of freedom always settled over her. Glancing at Kim, she smiled because he always knew how to lift her spirits.

Art in glass, Koya thought with a smile, trailing her finger over a delicate blue glass jar. Sculptures, mosaics...it was endless. She loved it all. Wished she could take each beautiful piece to her home in Ndwaru Road, but that was a crazy thought. She touched a glass wind chime and smiled at the resulting jingle of notes. Well, she could take the wind chime.

She glanced at Kim. He was busy talking to one of the Artisans about a mosaic at his client’s house. She took the wind chime to the assortment of glass products they had chosen for Kim’s client. Kim joined her a second later.

“Will you buy this for your wife?” the lady attending to them said with a smile. She held out a glass jewelry box. It was gorgeous.

Koya lifted her hand, already shaking her head.

“Oh no, he’s not—

“Yes,” Kim said with a wide smile.

He made the payment fast, grinning from ear to ear. Koya frowned and left the gallery first. She’d hoped to walk around the property more, but—she headed straight to Kim’s pickup truck.

Kim grabbed her left arm, stopping her a few feet from his car.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Koya snapped. “Let’s just go.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t do that,” Kim matched her tone. “You’re annoyed she mistook us for a couple and I went along with it. Don’t brush it off.”

Koya stared at him, then jerked her arm out of his hold.

“Yes, I’m annoyed. You didn’t have to play along. We’re not—

“What if I want us to be?” Kim asked, cutting her off.

She blinked.

Kim scoffed.

“Gosh, I don’t know whether to be insulted or amused. Koya, surely, you’ve noticed. I care about you.”

“As a friend,” Koya said, shocked to the core.

His gaze was different, softer somehow. Had he always seemed so...

She stared at Kim not sure why she hadn’t seen it before. She let out a soft breath, panic rising.

“Kim—

“Don’t,” Kim said this time. “Get in the car. I don’t want to hear another rejection.”

She closed her eyes and turned away because she was afraid of dealing with Kim. What the hell was she supposed to do now?

The ride back to the city was uncomfortable. By the time Kim pulled into her property on Ndwaru Road, she was ready to jump out of the cab and hide in the house for a month.

Kim circumvented her plan, locking her door when she would have opened it and escaped.

“Koya.”

“We don’t have to do this,” Koya said quickly. “You’re my friend, Kim. One of my oldest friends. I don’t want to lose that.”

“You won’t.” Kim took her right hand. “Listen to me. Now that Charlie’s back—

“What does he have to do with anything?”

“Everything,” Kim said. “Charlie is always the key to everything in your life. You haven’t dared look at anyone since he left. Tell me am wrong.”

Koya met his dark gaze then. His knowing gaze made her feel raw. She read love in his eyes, perhaps some pity, though that was fleeting. Kim knew her too well.

“He hurt me, Kim.”

“I know, and because of that,” Kim gave her a small smile. “I’ve waited, given you the chance to recover and heal. Don’t you think it’s time to try again? Discover if you can love again.”

Koya dropped her gaze to their intertwined fingers, her heart beating too fast.

“Incase I’m not being clear, Koya, I’m asking you to give me a chance.”

Koya let out a soft sigh.

“What if we ruin us?”

“We won’t,” Kim said. “I won’t let it happen.”

Koya closed her eyes and wondered if she wasn’t being too cautious. Kim was good to her, had always been. He was a good friend, maybe if she gave him a chance as he was asking...

Giving his fingers a squeeze, she opened her eyes and gave him a small nod.

His answering smile was blinding. She couldn’t help laughing because he looked like a kid getting his first soccer ball.

God, what was she thinking. This could go so wrong.

“Okay,” Kim said, with a satisfied nod.

“Now what?” she asked, staring at their clasped hands.

“Now we go on a date, Koya Kalahari. Our first,” Kim said with a grin. “I owe you meat.”

“Jeez, you are really hitting on my weaknesses. I love meat.”

“Go in,” Kim said, nodding to her house. “Get dressed, all nice and fancy. I’ll pick you up at seven o’clock. I’m taking you out tonight.”

“No one goes on dates on Monday,” Koya said, not that she had been on any date for a while.

“We do,” Kim said, leaning over to press a soft kiss on her cheek. “Thank you for making my day.”

Koya dug her fingers through her braids, wondering if she needed to change her hairstyle. The braids suited her, she liked them long. They were functional, and she could wash them at will. Plus her hairdresser got them looking so thin and pretty...the braids would stay for now.

Running her hand over the amber *kanga* dress she wore. The skirt of her dress stopped an inch above her knee. She looked colorful and fancy, thanks to her tailor. She’d gone through five horrendous try-and-errors to meet the tailor who had finally mastered her figure. Style in this city was meeting your soul mate in the form of a godsend tailor.

Koya smiled at the figure she cut in the mirror and decided she would do.

Taking a matching clutch bag from her bed, she left her bedroom and went downstairs. She entered the kitchen just as Hana came in carrying grocery bags from the supermarket.

“Wow, where are you going?” Hana asked, her eyes wide with drama as she dumped her loot on the kitchen table. “Who is the hot date?”

Koya opened the fridge and got a bottle of water. Cracking it open, she took a healthy sip then answered Hannah.

“I’m going to dinner with Kim.”

Hana gaped.

Koya finished her water, and dumped the bottle into the trashcan.

“Close your mouth, honey, flies will get in.”

“Like a date?” Hana asked. “As in, you and Kim?”

Koya shrugged.

“Uh...I think I should be recording this,” Hana said, getting her phone from her pocket. “Ashi won’t believe me, so we need to get this nicely documented.”

“Jeez, you’re making me sound like a shut in,” Koya said, checking Hana’s shopping bags. “Hey, remember to remind Auntie Shiro to make *githeri* on the *jiko*. I don’t want her bending over firewood back there.”

“You’re the only woman on earth who would talk about *githeri* at a time like this,” Hannah said, already dialing Ashi. “Ashi, you won’t believe this—

Kim chose that moment to stroll into her kitchen. Hana gave an appropriate gasp when she saw him. He was not in his usual casual clothing. Tonight, he’d chosen a dark blazer, pressed blue shirt and dark slacks. He’d exchanged his work boots for shining loafers. Dashing and handsome were words too simple.

“Ready?” Kim asked.

Koya picked up her clutch from the table.

“Yes.”

“You look beautiful,” Kim said, giving her a red rose.

Hana giggled behind her.

Koya took the rose and brought it to her nose. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d received a flower. Kim took her left hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow. Koya wondered why she’d never thought Kim a romantic as he led her out of her kitchen.

Nine

“Lift your arms,” Kim said, and Koya stepped back from the wooden table.

She smiled when Kim expertly wrapped an apron around her waist. He tied it at the back and kissed her cheek.

“Okay,” he said and she stepped back to the table. She smiled when Kim skip danced to the meat cooking on the grill. “Bet you didn’t expect to cook your own dinner.”

Koya laughed.

She popped a slice of salty tomato into her mouth and pointed her knife at him.

“You fooled me with the epic suit and red rose.”

“It’s not that bad,” Kim said, grinning at her. “Look, open skies, beautiful scenery, nothing but stars.”

Koya winked and finished slicing the tomatoes. She couldn’t deny it, Kim’s preferred venue was gorgeous. Kim had borrowed the place from a friend. A private property in Ngong undergoing the last stages of construction. The backyard was artfully landscaped: wooden benches and chairs on soft green grass. Her toes begged to sink into the green. The barbecuing pit was in the middle of the yard and came complete with a charcoal grill and work tables. Koya loved the setting. She envied the eventual owners.

The self-service dinner was very Kim. He loved barbeques. She watched him slice meat on a board, cutting it into pieces, then serving on two plates. She finished with the tomatoes, cilantro and cucumbers. Placing them on an oval plate, she took them to a table on the grassy patch. In minutes, dinner was ready, and Kim helped her remove the apron. He disappeared in the house, and she sat on one of the benches, staring at the starry sky.

Dinner was enjoyable. Kim was comfortable. She laughed and ate...way too much. She teased him as much as he teased her. When she removed her shoes to walk on the grass, he didn’t bat an eyelash and joined her. After a while, they sat on the grass staring at the stars. Her head on Kim’s lap, his hands braced back.

She studied him as he stared at the stars. A lifetime worth of memories filled her thoughts. Kim had seen her cry over spilt milk on the way from the shop when she’d been sixteen. He laughed at her then. Then the time Charlie left her...Kim had scolded her for crying too hard. Telling her it wasn’t the end of the world. Of course, there was two years ago, when she lost her father. That time, Kim held her tight and murmured soothing words, allowing her to cry as much as she wanted.

She saw it now. How deep his support had been, how faithful, how hard he stood by her. He was woven into her life.

“What are you thinking about?” Kim asked, and she blinked realizing he was watching her.

“Nothing,” she said, giving him a small smile. “Dinner was delicious. Thanks.”

“Now that you got your meat,” Kim said, touching her braids. “Are you ready to talk about us?”

Us, now there was a word.

Koya shifted so that she was on her left side, staring at the barbeque pit and the fire still burning there. Kim stroked his fingers through her braids. The touch was comforting.

“Kim,” she started.

“Don’t say no,” Kim said. “You have a bad habit of making abrupt decisions on personal issues.”

“Is that so?” Koya chuckled. “You know way too much about me.”

“Do I?” Kim smiled. “Isn’t that a plus for you?”

“Hard to tell,” Koya said. “I know too much about you too, Kim.”

“I consider that a plus,” Kim replied, his tone heavy with promise.

Thinking back, Koya could suddenly see Kim’s heart in all he had done for her...with her...She was terrified Kim cared a lot more than she did for him. She had power over him.

“You’re afraid,” Kim said, his tone a whisper.

“Can’t help it,” Koya said.

“Do you need time?” Kim asked.

“I always need time.”

“So you know,” Kim said, touching her chin with gentle fingers. He turned her head so that she was looking at him. “Don’t feel pressured. I can wait.”

That was it though, seeing him waiting for her...how long he had been waiting, she thought. She couldn’t help feeling a tad guilty.

She held his gaze.

“We’ll always be friends first,” Kim said, rubbing her lower lip, his thumb rough against her skin. “I know it won’t happen overnight. I just need you to promise to give us a chance. Will you?”

The deep hope in his gaze had her nodding. His delighted smile made her happy, and when he leaned down and kissed her, she closed her eyes, her heart beating hard.

Early the next morning, Koya stared at the back flat tire on her Mazda a sigh escaping. Of course, her day would start like this. It was six in the morning, the road quiet, with no one to ask for help this early in the morning. Shaking her head at the situation, she reached up and held her braids in a ponytail. Walking around to the boot of her car, she popped it open. She took off her heels and changed into white rubber shoes she kept in the boot, then reached in for the jack and spare tire. Thankfully, she always had her car serviced and the spare tire was good.

She was five minutes from home, but there was no need to trouble anyone there. It would only waste her time, and throw off her schedule.

Taking the jack, she placed it under her car and concentrated on lifting her back tire. Her father had shown her how to change a tire. Too worried she’d be helpless on the road, he had thought it a good skill to have. She was fitting the new tire when another car stopped behind hers, interrupting her concentration. Without looking up, she listened as the driver opened his door and she called out.

“*Niko sawa*,” she said. “Almost done.”

“You always liked the do-it-yourself policy,” Charles Dhali said behind her.

Koya looked up in surprise. Damn it, he was the last person she wanted to see.

Charlie stood a few feet away looking neat in a navy blue suit. His driver beside him.

“Isn’t it too early for you to be awake?” Koya asked, not stopping what she was doing.

She pushed the tire in tighter and reached for a bolt. She gasped when she was swiftly pulled up, and the bolt taken from her fingers.

“Koya,” Charlie said, moving her a few steps back. “I have missed your sarcasm.”

“What are you doing?” she demanded, when Charlie handed the bolt to his driver.

The man was already quickly fitting her tire and turning the bolts in quick motions.

“I was fixing that.”

“You were,” Charlie said. “Now you’re getting help. I don’t remember you being so annoyed all the time.”

“People change,” Koya said, pulling away from him.

Two women walked by, their gazes curious, Koya winced. A few more minutes and this incident would be the breakfast news on Ndwaru Road. She cursed under her breath.

“Why did you stop?”

“I’d never walk away from you when you need help,” Charlie said. “Koya, I need to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

Koya walked around the crouching driver and opened the front passenger seat. She rummaged in her bag, retrieving wet wipes after a second. Taking one towel, she used it to clean her hands.

“You don’t want to, or you’re afraid?” Charlie asked, coming to stand beside her. His proximity more than she could handle today.

She had spent last night working at giving her heart the chance to move on. Kim’s kiss while not earth-shattering, was warm and kind. She had promised to give him a try. So, she definitely shouldn’t be thinking about how intoxicating Charlie’s cologne was, or how he consistently refused to adhere to personal space rules.

Dumping the dirty wet wipe in a small plastic paper bag in the glove compartment, she closed her hand bag and reached up to let her braids down. She escaped Charlie again, walking around to the trunk to get her heels.

“Koya—,”

Charlie followed her.

“I’m done, Sir,” the driver said, saving her.

The man picked up the flat tire and jack. She moved away so that he could put them in her boot.

“What’s your name? she asked the man.

“Kuria.”

Koya smiled at Kuria.

“Thank you, Kuria. You’ve saved me.”

Kuria nodded, giving her a small grin before he headed back to the large black SUV Charlie used.

“Do you smile at every man you meet?” Charlie asked, as she wore her heels.

“Just the nice ones,” Koya answered.

Picking up her rubber shoes, she put them back in the boot and closed it.

“Thank you for stopping—,”

Charlie moved to stay her progress to the driver’s side.

“Koya, the more you push me away, the more I’m going to search you out. So, once again, meet me for lunch, dinner, hell even coffee.”

“I don’t want to,” Koya said. “I told you on Saturday. You and I are over. I don’t want to see you, or spend time with you. Leave me alone, Charlie.”

“Is that how you want to play this?” Charlie asked, when she shrugged his hold on her left arm off.

In answer to his question, she opened her door and slid in to the driver’s side. She waved at Kuria, and started the car. Seconds later, she pressed her foot down on the gas and sped off like the devil was chasing her.

Charlie watched the Mazda speed away and grimaced as Koya swerved to miss a bump on the road. She couldn’t even try to be careful. He was losing his mind worrying about her. Shaking his head, he went to his car and got in the back seat.

Getting his cell phone, he dialed Archer.

“Did the contract arrive?” he asked, when Archer answered.

“Yes. She signed the five year contract with Mahali Travel.”

“Good,” he smiled and ended the call.

Fine, if Koya wouldn’t give him time, he would simply have to take it from her.

At lunch, Koya found herself seated across Ashi upstairs at the Green Corner restaurant. Ashi’s wedding preparations continued: chaotic, endless and taxing. The joys of marriage so beautifully wrapped in a nutshell.

“I have settled the catering, flowers, and entertainment,” Ashi counted down on her list.

“Kim and Nic will deal with transportation.”

Koya got a receipt from her handbag and handed it over to Ashi. Four shopping bags rested on the floor at her feet. Ashi took the receipt, as she sipped her fresh mango juice.

“The receipt covers invitation cards, guest cards and all other printing you needed,” Koya said. “The delivery will be made tomorrow to your house. Looks like the wedding is ready.”

“Except the bridesmaid dresses,” Ashi complained. She stirred her juice with her straw. “You really won’t wear lime green?”

“Ashi, I love you, but we’re not wearing that color. Choose another one.”

“The wedding colors are forest green and white.” Ashi sat back in her seat. “White is obviously out of the question.”

“I can deal with forest green,” Koya said with an agreeable nod.

“Great, we’ll go talk to the tailor tomorrow morning,” Ashi said, marking it in the diary at her elbow. “So...now that my wedding is taking shape, how about you tell me what you decided about Kim?”

Koya reached for her orange juice and drank a healthy gulp. She stared out the windows at the busy parking lot behind the KCB bank and wondered if she could get a way with a lie.

Her date with Kim had ended at around ten in the night. Kim dropped her off at home, leaving her with a chaste kiss on her cheek. She had fun on their date. The cooking, the laughing, the stars. How easy it was for Kim to make her laugh.

Only one small fault, she thought.

She met Ashi’s gaze now, thinking about Kim’s kiss. Her heart had sped up, but not in excitement...*no*...it was in worry. It had scared her to feel nothing. To feel warmth instead of passion. Kisses weren’t meant to be so flat.

Not like it was with Charlie. She woke up to dreams of kissing him senseless. Hell, she was still obsessing over the scent of his cologne this morning. Koya shook her head at the insanity in her head.

“I can’t do it,” Koya confessed to Ashi in a whisper.

She didn’t want to hurt Kim.

“You don’t want to give him a chance.” Ashi adjusted, leaning her elbows on the table, moving closer so that she studied Koya. “You and Kim are perfect. I know you don’t see it, but I do. He’s been in love with you for a while. He’s a guy who does everything he can for you.”

“I like him as a friend,” Koya said.

Yes, his kiss had felt friendly, no tingles or exciting thrills. Kim was simply comfortable.

“He seemed so happy last night, I couldn’t say anything.”

Ashi stuck the receipt Koya had given her into her purse. She stood up and picked up her set of shopping bags and handbag.*

“I have something to say to you and this is not the place,” Ashi stated.

Koya reached for the bill, paid it and stood up, taking her own set of bags. She followed Ashi down the stairs and out the restaurant onto the busy street. Ashi led the way to the parking lot. They'd used Ashi's grey Toyota SUV today. Ashi unlocked the back and dumped their shopping bags on the backseat. She slammed the back passenger closed and turned to Koya.

"What do you want to tell me?" Koya asked, refusing to enter the car.

Ashi leaned on the driver's door.

"Koya, I've been your friend for as long as I can remember—,"

"Are you going to start a lecture in the middle of town?"

"You're living in a shell," Ashi said, glaring at her. "You don't let anyone in, you've decided what happened with Charlie will happen again. I'm worried about you. Quit acting like a nun and let go, for god's sake. Life is short."

"I'm no nun," Koya protested, looking around the busy parking lot. "Not all of us are lucky like you. We don't have incredible Nics waiting for us."

"Man bashing will get you nowhere with me, lady. You not dating is about you and the issues in your head. Kim has been super patient, and now that he's made a move, you're acting like tool."

"Are you done?" Koya asked.

"No." Ashi glared harder. "I wanted to tell you that you do like Kim. More than friends, otherwise you would never have let him kiss you. So stop lying to yourself. I'm done now. We can go."

Ashi pushed off the car and opened the driver's door. She got in and slammed the door closed. Koya stood staring at her, then laughed. There was nothing else to do when Ashi got this way.

Straightening her pale blue blouse over her jeans, she walked around to the other side and got into the front passenger side. Ashi was busy messing around with the radio.

"Do you still want to go back to the office?" Ashi asked, her tone more friendly.

"Yes. There are documents that need my attention. Hana left for Diani."

"That sounds like loads of fun," Ashi started the car. "You should have gone with her."

"Next time," Koya promised. "How are your parents taking the wedding arrangements?"

"The sagas continue. Nic's dad and mom are coming to visit on Saturday. I'm afraid my extended relatives will show up with more hidden demands."

"Like your uncle last time when he asked for a crate of booze?" Koya laughed.

"Everyone wants a piece of your dowry."

"You have no idea—," Ashi said.

Back at her office, Koya stopped in the reception area when Linda met her at the door.

“Another package, Miss Kalahari.”

Linda pointed to a large box in the corner.

Koya stared at the large box.

“What is it now?”

“The box was delivered ten minutes ago,” Linda said. “I haven’t had a chance to open it.”

“Who is doing this?” Koya gave the box a skeptical look.

“How is the tree doing?” Linda asked handing Koya her pair of scissors.

“I had it planted in the yard behind my house.”

Koya started undoing the package.

“This gets more exciting with each package,” Linda said.

Koya took a step back with her, and they stared at the five foot tall soapstone sculpture of a leopard perched on a rock.

“A leopard sculpture. What does that mean?” Linda asked.

Koya shook her head, a bit concerned by how expensive the gift was.

“Did the delivery guys have you sign anything?”

“No. They dropped off the package like last time.”

“Whoever is doing this has a lot of cash to burn.” Koya moved to touch the leopard’s muzzle. The stone cool to the touch. “However, the animal is gorgeous.”

“Where will you keep it?” Linda asked, moving to take a closer look.

“Take it home of course,” Koya said. She stepped away from the statue and picked up the documents Linda had placed in a neat pile on her desk. “Call the same guys who picked up the tree.”

“Yes Madam,” Linda reached for her phone. “By the way, you have a visitor in your office. He insisted on waiting for you.”

“Thanks.”

Koya walked into her office, her attention on the documents she held.

“I’m sorry I’m late. I hope you didn’t wait too long.”

“I don’t mind waiting for you.”

Koya’s head jerked up in surprise at the sound of Charlie’s familiar voice. She stopped, staring at the man on her couch. The documents she was holding fell to the floor.

“Hi,” he grinned. “I hope lunch was good.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Those words are getting too familiar.” Charlie got off the couch, unfolding his height in one elegant move. He came over and picked up the files. “It’s customary to say, ‘*Hi, good to see you.*’”

“Is there something you need?” Koya asked, trying to breath through her panic.

Charlie stood too close. He smiled and held out the documents. She took them fast and hurried to her desk, needing to put distance between them. His cologne filled her nostrils, crawling through her system, devious.

Charlie chuckled at her retreat and she glared at him.

He chose to sit in one of the armchairs across her desk, resting his right ankle on his left knee. He looked way too relaxed.

“I’ve told you before, I only want to talk to you, Koya. I miss that. We used to talk about everything, remember?”

“If you are not here on a business matter, I don’t know what you’re doing in my office.”

Koya folded her arms against her chest, and tried to ignore the fact that Charlie looked too handsome. He had shaved his face clean. His dark t-shirt clung to him, showing off a toned body. His long legs in blue jeans, black converse shoes on his feet. He looked like a rich, playboy, nerd. Or Will Smith in his Men in Black days...the older movies...jeez what was she thinking.

She needed to get this guy out of her office.

“I have urgent matters—

“You are free this afternoon,” Charlie cut her off. “I checked your calendar. Your assistant is not very discrete. The only reason you’re here is those documents she handed you.”

“Excuse me?”

Charlie placed a card on top of her desk.

“In case you are wondering,” Charlie said. “I own Mahali Travel Agency. I’m here for an update on the ad campaign we wanted.”

“You’re what?” Koya picked up the card and stared at Charlie’s name printed on expensive paper. “You own Mahali Travel?”

“The documents you received will answer any questions you might have. As of today, I’ll handle the campaign personally.”

Koya felt her knees go weak. She reached behind her for the chair and sank into it. Her gaze never once leaving Charlie’s card. Her business and Dhal, Dhal and her precious business...she shook her head in denial.

“The contract you sent—,”

She stopped and glanced at Charlie.

“Your name was not on any of those documents.”

“I have employees working at Mahali.” Charlie flashed a small smile. “They handle paperwork. I’m very interested in what your advertising will do for Mahali.”

“You’re really going to be working with us?”

Koya placed Charlie’s card on her desk and cursed her decision to sign the five year contract with Mahali. She should have trusted her gut.

“Closely,” Charlie said with a triumphant smile.

Koya gave that smile one glance then nodded.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll inform Hana. She’s in charge of your account. She’ll make sure to give you constant reports.”

Koya returned Charlie’s smile with a smug one of her own.

“Hana is currently in Diani though. She’s visiting the locations your agency gave us. As soon as she’s back, I’ll give her your number.”

“You’re not working on the ad?”

“Like you, I have people who are better at the job.” Koya sat back. “If that’s all, Mr. Dhali. Please have a good afternoon.”

Charlie scoffed.

“You’ve gotten meaner.”

“Have I?” Koya shrugged. “You taught me, Charlie.”

Charlie got up then.

Koya thought he was leaving, instead he reached into his pocket and produced a well-worn paper. He placed it on her desk.

“I rather thought you taught me,” Charlie said, his gaze narrowed. “Your parting note eight years ago certainly didn’t mince words. Koya, why would you break my heart so brutally?”

Koya gasped, staring at the old letter on her desk.

Ten

Mean. Horrible. Heart breaker.

These words described the woman who had written the letter sitting on the desk. Koya scowled. She didn’t have her own letter to prove her innocence. Kim was the only who had read the letter Charlie sent her.

Anger. Astonished. Bitter. Downright annoyed.

That was her after Charlie walked out of her office looking justified.

Bastard.

He wasn’t the only one who had a broken heart. Her heart was broken too. Staring at the letter on her desk, she wondered at her luck. Why did this have to go this way? She’d

never written a letter to Charlie. Which meant, the letter she'd read...she stared at the letter on her desk.

The letter that had broken her...

Koya got to her feet and grabbed her cell phone to call Kim. Her finger hovered over the dial button, but she couldn't call. She was someone who had been kissing Kim last night. Did it make sense to call him now to complain about her ex?

Was that fair?

Koya scowled.

She started pacing, looking for Ashi's number. Her finger, once again, stopped short of pressing the dial button. Ashi had spent fifteen minutes earlier in a parking lot railing at her over her indecision with Kim. If she called now about a bloody letter that was eight years old, Koya groaned and stopped pacing.

Hana was next.

Koya dialed Hana's number, but it went unanswered. She glanced at the time, it was two o'clock. Hana was probably busy with work.

Great, she needed a bigger circle of friends.

Grabbing the worn letter from her desk, Koya took her car keys and left her office, not even stopping to give Linda an explanation.

The red haze that clouded her mind didn't clear until she was driving along Ndwaru road heading to the Dhali Estate. She stopped her car before the imposing gate she had once pounded on for answers. The black gate, high and imposing. There was the pillar where Kim chewed on sugarcane and dropped the bits while she cried her heart out. The pain that day had never left her. Rejection, so coldly delivered.

How could she have hoped to forgive Charlie after reading that letter she got? How could she have imagined he received a similar letter from her?

She slammed her palm on the car horn. The sound splintered the relative calm in the neighborhood.

The guard appeared at the small entrance on the side of the gate. Giving her car a once over, he decided she was worthy of entering the estate, and went to open the large gates. She didn't wait for him to ask questions. Koya drove up the driveway determined to face Ashley Dhali.

The Dhali Estate was everything she'd imagined when she was younger and more. Koya marveled at the charm of the three story house Charlie called home. She suddenly realized she'd never entered this place. Those days long ago, Charlie would pick her from home, at Ashi's place or outside the gates.

She remembered being curious but never having an urge to delve deeper into this world. Ashley Dhali gave her the shivers. This hadn't changed through the years.

Pacing the elegant living room, Koya clutched Charlie's letter in her fists. Anger simmered, the memories of her broken cries at the gate filled her thoughts. While she'd cried over Charlie's harsh words that day, he'd been cursing her out over her own. Words she never wrote.

Charlie called her cold, heartless, mean. He had no idea the pain she'd felt learning to let him go. Young love, her father called it, the worst kind too as it broke your heart like nothing else could. She'd loved Charlie.

She stopped pacing, her heartbeat slamming in her chest. The truth hovering so close, it made her lose her breath.

Koya squelched her thoughts on love. That wasn't why she was here. Right now, she needed to be cold and calculating. Ashley Dhali deserved her anger. Hell, the woman deserved worse than her anger.

Koya resumed her pacing, revving for a war.

"Mama Charlie, Miss Koya looks angry." Mama Nora shook her head. "She keeps pacing and won't sit. I have offered her tea, juice, water, she refuses. She shakes her head and asks when you will meet her. Are you sure you don't want to wait for Charlie? I will call him for you."

Ashley stared at the box on her desk. It was filled with letters from Charlie, letters she kept because she wanted her son to concentrate on business, and not the woman waiting in her living room. Standing, Ashley took the box and moved around the desk. She patted Mama Nora's shoulder.

"Don't call Charlie. I will handle it," Ashley said. "And no more drink offers. I like this dress."

Ashley left her study, carrying the box of letters. She headed out to the living room, in a state of readiness. She had been waiting years for this moment. Ashley paused at the entrance into the living room.

Koya paced the length of her precious glass coffee table.

Tall and elegant, her braids a dark cloud around her shoulders. Her brown skin warm in the afternoon sunlight. She looked like a caged lioness, every step deliberate, poised for battle. Her fingers clenched into fists at her sides.

Ashley swallowed hard, and entered the living room.

Koya stopped her pacing and stood in the middle of the room staring at her. Her gaze hard to read, she hardly resembled the young woman Ashley remembered eight years ago. That girl had a ready smile, and her eyes were bright. This one looked ready to rip apart her prey with a single glance. A lesser woman might cower at the glare Koya gave her.

But Ashley was no weakling.

"Hello Koya," Ashley said in greeting, she smiled and went to sit in her favorite armchair. "You look well."

Koya held up a worn letter she had in her right hand and placed it on the coffee table.

“This belongs to you. Your son brought it to me asking for answers. I thought you should be the one to give them.”

Ashley stared at the worn letter on the coffee table. Though old, she recognized the stationary. The pink boundary on conqueror paper. She’d long changed that border to gold, but the pink one was memorable.

Charlie, Ashley sighed.

Ashley placed the box on the coffee table and picked up the letter, touching the faded words. Ashley recognized her attempt to match Charlie’s handwriting. It was the letter she handed Charlie right before he left with his father. Koya’s response to the heartfelt letter he wrote telling her to wait for him. She’d been so full of fear that Charlie would return home too quickly...reading the words now, Ashley knew what she had done would not be forgiven.

“I didn’t think Charlie would keep it this long,” she murmured.

“He doesn’t know you sent me one too,” Koya said, her tone dripping with disgust. “I tore mine up, so there’s no proof. You played us.”

“Perfectly,” Ashley answered, placing the letter on the box. She sat back in the armchair and met Koya’s gaze. “I would do it again.”

Koya stared at her in shock.

She then shook her head and pushed her braids back.

“You’re cold-hearted,” Koya said.

“I’m a mother,” Ashley answered. “I protect what’s mine.”

“You broke Charlie’s heart!”

“Look at him now,” Ashley countered. “He’s a strong businessman, doing what he wants. He has created a successful company. Had he stayed, I might have buried him next to his brother.”

“Charlie is not Tony,” Koya said. “You should have trusted him.”

“I had my reasons for sending Charlie away,” Ashley said, not wanting to think of them now. “I refuse to regret it. It’s done. What do you want?”

Koya chuckled, the sound of it bitter.

“What do I want?” Koya asked. “Nothing from you. Charlie though, he’s rearing for answers. The letters you wrote were so eloquent.” Koya gave her a cold smile. “Surely, it won’t be hard for you to craft an answer. Be sure to remind him to stop looking for me.”

Ashley nodded, noting the pain behind Koya’s tone.

“Do you still love him?” Ashley asked.

Koya stared at Ashley, shock clear on her face.

Ashley had learned to read people's faces at a young age. Living in the world she did, it was useful to know people's motives before they revealed them.

Koya Kalahari, she was tough to read, but the basics of a broken-hearted woman were apparent. After all, why would Koya find her after eight years over old letters?

Ashley smiled.

"It's alright to admit it, Koya. Charlie is handsome, rich, on his way to becoming one of the most powerful businessmen in the country—,"

"Stop," Koya scoffed. "You don't get to talk to me about love."

"Why not?" Ashley shrugged. "You're a woman I can accept for my son now. You understand what it takes to work and create something. To want to protect it. I was going to invite you to a party—"

"I decline," Koya snapped. "Talk to your son. Tell him everything or I will."

Koya turned to leave and Ashley picked up the box on the coffee table.

"This box belongs to you. If you want to understand Charlie's anger, you should take it."

Koya looked back at Ashley then the box in her hands. For a moment, Ashley thought the girl would take the box, but then—

Koya turned and left the house in fast steps.

Ashley let a sigh escape and sat back in her chair. She opened the box of letters and picked out the one Charlie had written first. The one he'd asked Koya to wait for him.

Charlie, Ashley wondered if he would forgive her for this one.

I would do it again.

Ashley's words replayed in Koya's head late into the night. She tossed and turned on her bed and when it was three o'clock and sleep escaped, Koya went downstairs in search of a drink. She poured herself a glass of wine, hoping it would sooth her to sleep.

Charlie's anger, Ashley's cold expression, she didn't know which one hurt more. Which expression she hated more. God, the Dhali family exhausted her.

And Ashley, how dare she ask if Koya still loved Charlie.

After all that woman had done—

Koya stared into her wine. She wasn't aware of the tears until one dropped on the placemat. Reaching for a napkin in a holder, she wiped her cheeks, but the tears wouldn't stop coming.

In minutes, she was sobbing hard, bawling like a baby...and infinitely glad that Hana was away. She was home alone, so no one would see these tears. The tears that answered Ashley's question even though she refused to voice the truth.

Seeing Charlie again, watching him rant over a letter she supposedly wrote eight years ago. She'd felt elated and hopeful. Happy even...because in truth, she still loved him.

She loved Charles Dhali. She loved him so much, it hurt not seeing him.

Koya cried harder...cried until there were no more tears to wipe off. She cried because that truth meant that she could never love Kim in the way he wanted. And that hurt more than anything else, because Kim was her best friend.

That week ended fast.

Koya received numerous invitations from Ashley Dhali to attend what she called a 'dinner party' on Friday at the Dhali home. She ignored them and ordered Linda to stop accepting calls from the woman's office.

Hana sent her amazing pictures from Diani the next week. Koya threw herself into preparing the Mahali Travel advertisements. Work was the best therapy she knew. So she immersed herself into the project heart and soul. She barely noticed the second week ending.

She was busy answering messages from potential clients when a knock came on her door. Lifting her head, she smiled when she saw Kim walk in and close the door.

"I've come to save you," Kim said, coming around her desk.

He leaned down and kissed her cheek in greeting.

Koya removed the reading glasses she wore and sat back in her chair with a smile.

"Hey," she said, when he leaned on her desk.

Kim looked good in a white t-shirt and jeans.

"Hana says you've buried your head in work again." Kim stroked a finger over her left cheek. "You haven't called me, Koya. I'm inclined to agree with your cousin."

"You were out of town."

"Two days ago," Kim pointed out. "You said you'd call me yesterday."

"Didn't I?" Koya reached for her cell phone and Kim took her right hand stopping the motion. "Kim—"

"Let's go out," Kim said, squeezing her fingers gently.

Koya sighed.

"I have—"

"Work?" Kim closed her laptop. "It won't run away from your desk. You'll find it here tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is Saturday," Koya said.

"I'm well aware," Kim urged her to her feet.

He took her handbag from a small table in the corner and her car keys.

"We're going to drive out of here and head to your place. You'll change into more comfortable clothes and we'll go out."

Koya chuckled.

“Dressing up and going some place is not relaxing,” Koya said.

“It is if you hang out with me.”

Kim held her hand tight and led her out of her office.

Kim squeezed Koya’s shoulders when they were in the hallway.

“You’re stressed. Going out is good for you.”

Koya smiled as they entered the elevator. Kim touched the corner of her lips.

“That’s more like it,” he said. “You need to smile more, Koya. You’re prettiest when you smile.”

At eight o’clock that evening, the stage was alight with drama at Alliance Française. The theater alive with laughter, as comedy unfolded. Kim laughed, the sound hearty, infectious...Koya smiled. He was having a good time. He always did. She returned her gaze to the stage and wondered if she shouldn’t visit a doctor. Something was wrong with her head, most especially her heart. Ashi was right. She was an idiot. A horrible mean one, as she should stop Kim getting closer to her before it got worse.

Dinner was quiet. Koya listened more than she spoke. Kim told her about his projects, which were many, it made her realize how big his contracting business was getting. Kim drove her home at around ten o’clock. He stopped the car in her drive and they sat in silence for a minute.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Kim asked.

“Yeah,” Koya said. “Thank you for pulling me out of the office.”

“Anytime,” Kim leaned over and kissed her right cheek. “You look tired. Go in and sleep. Don’t go to work tomorrow. Promise.”

“Promise,” Koya said, and opened the door.

“Koya.”

She paused and turned to look at Kim.

“Don’t forget I’m still waiting,” Kim said. “You promised to give us a chance.”

Kim’s words felt like a punch to the gut. She nodded, barely able to speak, and got out of his car. Closing the door, she waved him off, and he turned the car, heading out. She closed the gates, locking the padlocks.

Koya sighed and stared up at the starry night. The moon was bright tonight. Tired from a week of nonstop work, and warring emotions, Koya ignored the front door and instead headed to the back of the house. She liked using the kitchen door, it was convenient.

Making the turn around, a scream was wrenched from her lips when she saw a dark figure leaning on the wall. Pressing a hand to her chest, she reached for her cell phone.

The figure took a step forward into a strip of moonlight.

“Don’t freak out, it’s me.”

“Charlie!” She gasped.

“Did you go out with Kim?”

“My God, you almost gave me a heart attack. What are you doing here?”

“Your security is a mess, Koya. You don’t have anyone watching the gates. And why aren’t the security lights on this late?”

“I have dogs,” Koya said.

Charlie scoffed as the two traitors came running at her, then swiftly went to his side and sniffed him, licking his palms with joy.

“You gave them something,” Koya said, annoyed.

“I befriended them,” Charlie said, smiling he crouched to pet the two dogs. “You should keep thoroughbreds, mutts are useless.”

“Don’t pet them if you’re going to talk smack about them,” Koya snapped.

She got her keys and opened the kitchen door. She turned on the security light and the kitchen lights at the same time. Dropping her handbag on the kitchen counter, she turned to find Charlie had followed her in.

“What do you want?”

Charlie closed the kitchen door and locked it. He looked around her kitchen with a nod.

“Nice,” Charlie said after a moment. “Not the kitchen I remember.”

Koya scoffed and went to the fridge to get a bottle of water. She didn’t offer any to Charlie, and instead uncapped hers and took a healthy gulp.

“You didn’t answer my question earlier,” Charlie said, leaning on the wall opposite her. He crossed his arms against his chest. “Did you go out with Kim?”

“Yes.”

“You let him kiss you.”

“So?”

Koya placed the bottle on the counter behind her.

Charlie scoffed.

“Right, what else should I expect? You are hell bent on torturing me. Why did you come to my house last week?”

For a moment, Koya wondered if Ashley had told him about the letters.

“Last week,” Charlie said, studying her. “Mama Nora said you came to the house and talked to my Mum. Why?”

“Why didn’t you ask your Mum?” Koya asked.

“I wanted to hear it from you.”

So, Ashley had not said a word.

That woman...

Koya sighed.

“Do you miss me? Is that why you came?” Charlie asked. “Do you think about me?”

“Charlie—

“I’m curious, Koya.” Charlie dropped his hands and pushed off the wall. “Just now, I wanted to murder a man I still consider a best friend despite our issues. Do you know why?”

She did want to know.

“Because he dared to kiss you,” Charlie answered before she could ask. “Because he dared lean close to you and—

“I don’t belong to you.”

“Why did you come looking for me then?” Charlie asked. “Why? Wasn’t it because you missed me? You wanted to see me, didn’t you?”

Koya shook her head.

“That’s not why—

“Admit it, Koya. You’re going out with Kim to teach me a lesson. I’m sorry I left—

“That’s not why I came to your house,” Koya cut him off.

“Then tell me,” Charlie said. “I’m going crazy—

“I went to see your mother, Charlie.”

“My mother,” Charlie said, surprised. “*You*, wanted to see my mother?”

“Trust me, I shocked myself too,” Koya said, shaking her head. “She hated me when we were together.”

“That’s because she never gave you a chance,” Charlie said, his tone soft, soothing.

“I went to see your mother about the letter you brought me,” Koya said.

Charlie’s gaze narrowed. “Why?”

“I never wrote it, Charlie,” Koya answered. “Your mother did.”

Charlie shook his head in denial.

“Don’t do this, Koya. I know you hate my mother, but to do this—

“It’s the truth,” Koya said. “You know what, Charlie. I got a letter too that day. I wanted answers after you came to Ashi’s house, but when I came to your place, I was handed a letter by your watchman. Do you know how painful that was? Do you?”

“What did the letter say?” Charlie asked.

Koya bit her lip. She hated thinking of that letter. Hated that even though Kim tore it to pieces, the words stayed etched in her brain.

“You said I wasn’t good enough for you. That the fun was over and you needed to focus on important things in your life. Those important things didn’t include me.”

“Koya—

“My letter is in pieces, thrown to the wind,” Koya continued. “I couldn’t keep it because it was too harsh. I couldn’t believe you’d say that about me, about us.”

“I wrote a letter, but that wasn’t what I wrote.”

“I don’t know that it makes a difference.”

Charlie closed the distance between them in fast strides. She looked up at him, holding his gaze.

“I told Ashley to give you the answers you are looking for,” Koya said in a whisper.

“Koya.” Charlie gripped her arms tight. “Tell me the truth. Are you with Kim?”

Koya stared at Charlie’s collar. She wanted to lie and say yes. If she said yes, Charlie would walk out. He would leave, and never come back. Yet, she didn’t want that. Now that she knew the truth about the letters...there was so much to know....so much....

“Koya,” Charlie shook her slightly.

“It’s complicated.”

“Simplify it,” Charlie said.

“I promised to give him a chance. To try—

“That’s not what I’m asking,” Charlie said in a whisper. “Tell me the truth, Koya. For both our sakes.”

Koya closed her eyes, then because her heart wanted to jump out of her chest, she gave Charlie the truth.

“I’m not. Not the way he wants me to.”

“Good,” Charlie pulled her into his arms in a tight hug. “I can work with that.”

“Charlie.”

“The morning I came to your house,” Charlie said, refusing to let her go. “My mother was in the car. She wanted me to end it with you, and never see you guys again. When I refused, she threatened to take away your scholarship: yours, and Ashi. She would have ruined Kim’s family business too. I made her promise not to if I agreed to go away with my father.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Koya asked, refusing to return the hug.

Still her heartbeat was going so fast. Had Ashley done what she’d threatened, Koya would never have afforded Catholic University. She would never have managed to start her business.

“Would you have let my mother’s threats be?” Charlie asked. “You’re stubborn, Koya. You fight even when you shouldn’t. I had to protect you.”

“So you broke up with me,” Koya accused, her voice filled with tears.

“In the letter I wrote, the one you should have received that day,” Charlie said into her ear. “I asked you to wait for me. I wrote you a letter every week after that. When I graduated, and was working I wrote when I could, it didn’t matter that you didn’t reply. Though I wondered, did you never get my letters, Koya? Why didn’t you answer even one?”

Koya frowned, remembering the box Ashley held. Her hands came up, wrapping around Charlie’s waist.

“Charlie,” she gasped.

“What?”

“Where did you send the letters to?”

“The mailbox you used for all your legal papers,” Charlie said, leaning back to look at her. “Remember?”

Her father was thrifty, and had thought owning a mailbox alone was too large a cost. So, he’d joined hands with their neighbor, Kome, and they’d paid for the mailbox in Hurlingham together. Kome worked close there, and had always been the one to collect their mail. He would then sort it and send any with the Kalahari name to their house. Somewhere in between, Ashley must have intercepted Charlie’s letters.

“You never got them,” Charlie said in surprise.

Koya placed her hands on Charlie’s chest and pushed him back. He allowed it, though his hands remained at her waist.

“Your mother went to great lengths to keep us apart, Charlie. Do you think we can come back from that?”

“We can,” Charlie said, his tone decisive. He then smiled. “Because she’s always known.”

“What does she know?”

“How much you mean to me,” Charlie answered.

Charlie held her gaze, then closed the distance between them and kissed her. Soft and gentle, a brush of his lips on hers that sent shivers skating down her spine, then the kiss changed into demanding and urgent. Her fingers bunched his t-shirt, heat flooding her, she closed her eyes and a soft moan escaped. Charlie took her breath away. He always had and it seemed he always would. Charlie pressed her back on the counter and kissed her as though there was no tomorrow. When they broke apart, they were both breathing hard. She pressed her face into his chest, and Charlie sunk his fingers into her braids.

“Don’t run away from me,” Charlie said after a moment.

She lifted her head to look at him.

“I’m not—”

“You’ve been running from me since we met again,” Charlie answered, pressing his forehead to hers. “You still love me.”

“So what if I do?” Koya asked, her tone too soft.

She was caught, there was no use hiding. Charlie always knew her best.

“At least you are not denying it,” Charlie said holding her. “You drove me nuts at the gala. Seeing you and Kim together, I wanted to drag you away from him. Then today in his car, when he leaned over to kiss you, I might have committed murder.”

Koya sighed.

“He’s been my support, Charlie. All this time, since that day,” Koya said, regret colored her words. She was going to need to face Kim now. Meet him and explain...all of this properly.

“And, I’m grateful to him,” Charlie squeezed her possessively. “Let’s drop that subject for now.”

Koya smiled at the ring of jealousy in Charlie’s tone. She chuckled when his stomach rumbled, the sound loud.

“Didn’t you eat?” she asked.

It was almost eleven o’clock at night.

“I came running here when Mama Nora told me you’d visited our house.”

“Where’s your car?” Koya asked. “I didn’t see it when I came in.”

“I left it at home. Thought you’d try to avoid me if you saw it. I used the side entrance at your gate to enter and found no one was home.”

“My goodness, Charlie.”

“Your security is crap, babe. I sweet talked those two dogs, they thought I belonged here. Anyone can walk in as they please.”

“Yet no one does,” Koya said, squeezing his waist.

She let go of him and went to the fridge. There were leftovers from last night’s spaghetti and meatballs.

Charlie sat at the kitchen table watching Koya heat a plate of food for him. She was pretty in a green dress. Her braids falling down her back. He smiled when she glanced at him. She turned back to slicing brown bread.

“Your house has changed,” Charlie said, accepting the mug of coffee she brought him. “What about your dad?”

Koya placed three brown bread slices in the small oven on the counter and set the timer.

“He passed away,” she said. “Got sick and wouldn’t get better.”

Charlie had liked Mr. Kalahari. More importantly, Koya loved her father deeply, his death would have been impossible for her. He met her gaze, her grief so clear in her eyes. No words came to mind. Yet another reason to be angry with his mother. He should have been there for her through that grief, as she’d been for him with Tony.

“If you allow it,” Charlie said after a while. “Can we visit his grave together?”

Koya nodded, gave him a small smile and removed the bread from the oven. The scent of garlic filled the kitchen.

The spaghetti and meatballs was delicious, the brown bread with garlic exquisite. Charlie wondered if it was because Koya was the one serving it. She sat across him as he ate. They talked about Avenue Ad and the Mahali advertisement. She asked about his other businesses, then he told her about his time in Taiwan.

They moved to the living room when they got tired of the kitchen chairs. They talked like old friends, reducing space and time forged by eight years of separation into mere inches.

The next morning, Charlie woke to the sun streaming through the windows in Koya's living room. Blinking, he shifted and smiled when he saw Koya curled up next to him on the large couch. Her head resting on his shoulder, her braids hiding her face. He slipped a finger under them and pushed them behind her ear. Koya was sound asleep.

The last time he'd seen her this way was eight years ago. On the night before his brother's funeral. She had curled up next to him offering comfort. Then, he'd thought they would spend a lifetime together.

Now, she was older, still beautiful and holding a million hurts in her hurt, the biggest hurt was one inflicted by his mother.

Charlie pressed a soft kiss on her forehead. He wanted Koya back. Which meant he needed to deal with Ashley and her brutal meddling once and for all. He would not lose the lifetime he wanted with Koya.

Eleven

"Are you sure you have a driver's license?" Koya asked, shifting so that she sat in the passenger seat facing Charlie.

"Why?"

"Every time I've seen you, you have Kuria driving you."

"Because," Charlie said, his gaze on the road ahead.

"Because?" Koya asked.

"I'm not telling you." Charlie stuck his tongue out at her and she laughed.

"Are you twelve? You're scared of traffic, aren't you?" she asked. "What else would it be?"

"That is so not true," Charlie said, his protest making her think otherwise. "I was waiting on my driver's license."

"I don't believe you," Koya shook her head.

"Open the glove compartment," Charlie said.

Koya did so and sure enough, she found Charlie's driver's license there.

“Fine, I’ll trust you on the road.” Koya grinned. “I can’t believe you’re committing to drive all the way to Diani.”

“It’s a beautiful Saturday,” Charlie grinned. “We should see what the beach looks like.”

Koya returned Charlie’s driver’s license into the glove compartment and glanced out the window. They were halfway to Mombasa. It was ten o’clock in the morning, and Charlie was driving faster than was okay, but this moment was the most free she’d felt in years.

As if sensing her thoughts, Charlie took her hand and squeezed her fingers gently. She stared at their clasped hands and was grateful for this miracle. Her heart was full, now healed after years of doubt, anger and sadness. She could say the sun was finally shining inside her, and boy was it beautiful. Turning up the music on the radio, she settled in for the ride.

They stopped in Voi where Charlie dragged her into local food stalls, and bought kangas like tourists would. When they got on the ferry in Likoni, Charlie urged her out of the car and they ended up watching the crossing from on the top deck of the ferry. The drive to Diani was fast after they left Ukunda, stopping only to shop in a supermarket.

Charlie drove to a private property instead of the numerous resorts and hotels in the area. His friend who owned the property allowed him to visit whenever he was in town.

“This is the first time I’ve taken him up on the offer,” Charlie said, after he finished with the guard who opened the gates for them.

Charlie drove in, and Koya grinned at first sight of the property.

“It’s so pretty,” Koya said.

There were three cottages, built around a round swimming pool. Their roofs thatched with *makuti*, the outside walls painted white.

“There’s no staff,” Charlie said, turning off the car. “We’ll have to fend for ourselves.”

“Looks like you’re under my mercy then,” Koya said. “Will you be okay?”

Koya laughed when Charlie turned a charming smile her way. She got out of the car just as the guard reached them. He greeted her warmly and handed Charlie a set of keys.

“Mr. Carlos recommended the cottage closest to the beach,” the guard said, pointing to the cottage that was furthest. “The small wooden gate there opens right onto the beach. If you need anything, tell me.”

Charlie thanked the man, and took Koya’s hand, leading her to the cottage. Instead of entering the cottage, they headed to the beach. Walking along the beautiful expanse of white sand, then in the water as the waves washed over the sand.

Charlie urged Koya away from the beach when it got too late. The moon was full, mysterious light dancing on the ocean surface. Koya called it beautiful. He thought it a marvel they were even here together. A day ago, she’d been a dream to him. Now, here she stood beside him, he held her right hand tight sure if he let go, she’d disappear. When she squeezed his fingers, relief flooded him.

They ate dinner in a small restaurant.

“This is a shack,” Koya stated.

“The food is better than in that huge place down the street,” Charlie countered.

“Thrifty man,” Koya chuckled, watching Charlie eat. “Who would guess it looking at you?”

Charlie grinned at her and she laughed. He held out a spoon full of meat stew and she took a bite. The food was really good and hot, the atmosphere warm. The s

“I missed this,” Charlie said when they were done.

They had left the little restaurant and were walking along the road, passing clubs, restaurants and pubs. An excited group of youths ran past them, drunken with excitement.

“Noisy teenagers?” Koya clung to Charlie’s arm.

“Of course, look how happy go-lucky they are.” Charlie smiled when she made a face at him.

“That’s not what I miss though,” Charlie said.

“What then?”

“You,” Charlie said. “This, being together, walking along the street, eating together, talking to you...”

Koya smiled this time, her heart filled full, hearing words that resonated with her. She too had missed Charlie. In the same way he described.

“Seeing you smile,” Charlie finished touching the corner of her lips. “I’m sorry I left you alone.”

“I won’t forgive you if you do it again,” Koya said.

“I know.”

“I’ll make you climb mountains higher than Mt. Kenya, if you do.”

“Why would you torture me this way when it would only make you sad?”

“I’m being serious, Charlie.”

“So am I, you’re stuck with me. Aren’t you worried you’ll get lonely again?”

Koya poked his chest, and he groaned.

“Who is lonely?”

Charlie captured her hand, locking their fingers, he led her to a smaller club.

“I want to dance with you,” Charlie said.

“Can you dance?” she teased.

“Can you?” Charlie asked, as they entered the club and headed to the dance floor. The music was fast and loud, the crowd dancing was energetic. Charlie led the way into the middle of the dance floor, pulling her close. He wrapped an arm around her waist, despite the beats being fast, he set a slow dance.

She met his gaze.

“We’re slow,” Koya said, when Charlie only swayed from side to side.

He shrugged, taking her hand, he madder her turn once and pulled her into his arms. They danced to their own rhythm, moving against the frenzied current around them. At first, Koya felt self conscious of everyone else on the dance floor, but then Charlie held her tighter against him, and pressed a kiss on her shoulder, then the curve of her neck. She wrapped her arms around him, the world faded and there was only Charlie.

The next morning, a cold caress on her bare shoulder woke Koya up. She opened one eye to find Charlie perched on her side of the bed holding a glass of orange juice. He grinned and her heart skipped.

“Morning,” he said.

She smiled. “Morning.”

It was Sunday and they were in paradise. Koya rolled to her back, and took the glass from Charlie.

“Did you squeeze the oranges?” She teased when she sipped the cold juice.

“Had to find them first,” Charlie said. “I drove to the supermarket earlier, bought groceries for the day.”

“I guess I can keep you,” Koya said with a smile.

“I certainly hope you will.”

Their gazes met. Koya held her breath, Charlie’s intentions so clear in his eyes.

“What else did you find at the market?” she asked, exhaling softly.

“Eggs,” Charlie said. “Want an omelet *ala* Charlie?”

Koya chuckled.

“How long have you been waiting to use that one?”

“Don’t knock the name ‘til you’ve tasted the omelet.”

Charlie got up, tagging on the sheet.

“Come on, sleepy head. I’ve missed you while you slept. Let’s go to the kitchen.”

“You’re a loud morning person, aren’t you?” Koya complained, swinging her legs over the bed. She pushed the rest of the sheet away and stretched her arms above her head. Her silk night gown was caught around her hips. She stood up and smoothed it over her thighs.

She laughed when Charlie pulled her into his arms and kissed her good morning.

They didn’t leave the cottage that day, much preferring to spend their hours in each other’s arms. Monday morning came and by mutual agreement, they both ignored the need to return to Nairobi.

They played like little kids, made love, played house, taking turns in the kitchen. When Koya's phone buzzed, she turned it off. When Charlie's phone rang, they put them both in Koya's handbag and left them in the car.

She laughed more than she remembered laughing in a long time.

Koya loved every minute with Charlie. The memory of their first love felt immature compared to this time together. Charlie listened when she spoke like a best friend would. He offered support for her business ideas as a partner would. He called her pretty and beautiful, then kissed her and made her believe it.

Koya touched her lips and smiled. Her thoughts on Charlie and how wonderful he made her feel. In the space of three days, he'd managed to obliterate the past and restore her faith in love.

Earlier, she'd fallen asleep at around two o'clock in the afternoon and woken up to a note on the empty pillow. Charlie was out getting them dinner. It was Tuesday night, and Koya rather wished they could hide away here for a month.

"Koya?"

She turned fast, surprised to hear her name.

"It is you."

Koya recognized Hana's voice.

Hana came hurrying along the beach.

"I thought I was going crazy. What are you doing here?" Hana asked.

Koya stared at her, and wondered at that champ called fate.

"Hey," Koya said, when Hana pulled her into a tight hug. "Are you staying close here?"

"The resort Mahali is uses for its clients is right down the beach. I wanted to take pictures of the sunset." Hana smiled. "Look what I got instead. Why didn't you call me if you were coming down?"

"The trip was unplanned," Koya chuckled and glanced back to the cottage. "Uhm...I have news."

"What kind?" Hana asked following her gaze to the cottage. "Are you here with someone? Is it Kim?"

"Yes. No." Koya waver her hand, shaking her head. "I mean, I'm not here with Kim."

"Who then?" Hana asked, then a soft gasp came when Charlie appeared at the small wooden gate leading down to the beach.

He must have returned from the supermarket. He was handsome in a pair of khaki shorts and a blue t-shirt. He reached them quickly, and didn't hesitate when he recognized Hana. Instead, he hurried to Koya's side.

"I'm back." Charlie kissed Koya's cheek and slid an arm around her waist. Pulling her close to his side.

Hana stared.

“Hi Hana,” Charlie said. “You must have walked down from the resort.”

Hana cleared her throat and turned to Koya.

“What’s going on?”

Koya clutched Charlie’s hand. “It’s a long story.”

“One I think I need to hear,” Hana said, glancing at Charlie. “I swear if he’s done *uchawi* on you, I’m going to find a stronger witch doctor.”

Koya felt a laugh bubble up and had to bite her lower lip to keep it down. Hana was not in a joking mood. She was livid.

“Do you think I’d do something like that to your cousin, Hana?” Charlie asked, his tone amused.

“Who knows?” Hana shook her head. “When I left her in Nairobi, she wanted nothing to do with you. Now—,” Hana sighed. “Did you drug her?”

“Hana,” Koya chided. “Really?”

“I didn’t drug her,” Charlie defended himself. “Your cousin and I have sorted our differences.”

“Eight years worth of differences is a lot,” Hana scoffed. She pointed a finger at Charlie. “I don’t want to hear this story from you. Koya, can we talk?”

Koya started to step out of Charlie’s embrace, only for him to tighten his arm around her waist. She sighed and looked up at him. He narrowed his gaze at her and she patted his jaw.

“Give me a few minutes with Hana,” she murmured. “It will be better if you do.”

Charlie held her gaze for a moment, then brushed his lips on her forehead. Turning to Hana, he smiled.

“You’re welcome to dinner.”

Hana frowned as he walked away. When he was a distance away, she turned on Koya.

“Did you go crazy while I was away?” Hana reached up to press her palm on Koya’s forehead. “Are you sick? We need to call Ashi.”

“Stop,” Koya said, taking Hana’s hand. “I’m not crazy, or sick, or witch-doctored, jeez the stuff you come up with, Hana.”

“What am I supposed to think?” Hana asked.

“I—,” Koya stopped, squeezing Hana’s hand tight, then she met her cousin’s gaze. “The truth is...Charlie is innocent. We’ve lost so many years because of selfishness...”

“Koya,” Hana said, her eyes wide. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Koya told Hana about the letters and Ashley’s game. Retelling the story cleared up any lingering doubts in her heart. She was sure of one thing, she could never forgive Ashley for keeping her apart from Charlie. She regretted not taking the box Ashley had offered last week. She wanted to know what Charlie had written to her all these years.

“You still love him, don’t you?”

“I don’t think I ever stopped,” Koya said, wrapping her arm around Hana’s shoulders. “Maybe that’s why I was angry, and couldn’t even manage to give Kim a chance.”

Hana nodded and sighed. “Guess I owe Charlie an apology.”

“Nah,” Koya squeezed her cousin’s shoulders. “He’ll understand.”

“What about Kim?” Hana asked.

Koya exhaled and stared at the crashing waves.

“I will go see him,” Koya said. “I want to keep his friendship, but I realize that might not be fair on him. Whatever he says, I’ll do whatever he wants.”

“You were always going to hurt him,” Hana stated.

Hana turned to the ocean.

“But I guess that’s life, isn’t it?” Hana said, her tone wistful. “We can’t always get what we want.”

Koya pulled her cousin into a tight hug.

“Let’s go in,” Koya said after a while. “Will you try with Charlie?”

Hana grinned as they turned to the cottage.

“Well, first I’ll give him a hard time,” Hana said with a laugh.

“Hana.”

“What? I’m your only family. He should expect that much,” Hana said.

“I have your dad and everyone upcountry,” Koya pointed out.

“I’m like your little sister,” Hana countered.

Koya nodded, loving that description. She did love Hana as she would her own sister.

“Alright, I see your point. Just don’t torture him too much.”

Charlie returned to the cottage, retrieving his phone from Koya’s bag, he came back out to sit on a lounge chair. He turned on his phone, his gaze on Koya as she talked to Hana. With Hana’s appearance, the bubble he and Koya had created was gone.

Just as well, Charlie thought.

He and Koya had amends to make with Kim, and *even Ashi*, he thought.

Then of course, he needed to meet his mother. Thinking about Ashley and what she’d managed made his blood boil, but what was he supposed to do now? She was his mother.

His gaze lingered on Koya watching her hug her cousin.

Charlie smiled because Koya’s choice was made. He’d make sure she would always know it was the right one.

The moment his phone came on, notifications buzzed for a full minute. Skimming through them, Charlie dialed Archer Weru's number first as the man never called him without an urgent reason.

"Boss," Archer answered on the first ring. "Glad you called me back."

Charlie was sure another day of silence would have sent Archer on a quest to find him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nyagah finished his audit report on Mahali Travel," Archer said, his tone too somber. "There are developments."

Charlie had suspected they would find large discrepancies. The travel agency made money, but the profits were off.

"Tell me the worst first," Charlie said.

"Your mother is involved," Archer said. "Tangled in with a Mr. Kouga, an area politician."

Charlie closed his eyes and wiped a hand down his face. His mother's deals were going to be the end of him. She played a dirty game.

"How damaging?" Charlie asked.

"The rest is best discussed in person," Archer said, indicating the matter was too sensitive.

"Any good news?" Charlie wondered.

"Jack and Nyagah have gone ahead and restructured the staff. Jack fired Stanford the moment Nyagah gave him the green light. We have cleaned out the worst of it."

Charlie returned his gaze to Koya. She was heading back to the cottage with Hana. They must have come to an agreement.

"I'm in Diani," Charlie said. "I'll fly back tomorrow morning. Koya's car is here. Find someone to drive it back."

"Yes Sir," Archer said. "Should I also send the final package to her office?"

Charlie smiled wide.

"Yes, please do," Charlie answered. "Leave a wide trail to follow this time."

Archer chuckled.

"I'm glad you're happy Sir."

"Thank you, Archer," Charlie said. "See you tomorrow."

Archer ended the call first.

Charlie muted the rest of his notifications and placed his phone on the table.

"I thought those were to stay off?" Koya teased as she reached him.

"I needed a distraction while I waited," Charlie said standing.

Charlie took Koya's hand, tagging her beside him and gave Hana a nervous glance. He couldn't believe how anxious he felt. Hana was Koya's family. He needed her to like him, at the very least, support their relationship. Hana's approval would matter to Koya.

"I guess you're a victim as well," Hana said with a slight smile. "Your mother sounds like a real ass."

Charlie winced and squeezed Koya's hand tighter.

"I didn't know you before," Hana continued. "All I know is that Koya wasn't the same after you two ended. It wasn't pretty to watch. So, you understand my position, don't you, Charlie?"

"Perfectly," he said.

"Consider me Koya's sister," Hana said. "I won't go easy on you if you hurt her."

Charlie nodded. "It won't happen."

"But it does," Hana countered.

Charlie glanced at Koya, hoping she'd save him from Hana, but she was staring at the ground.

"Your cousin is safe with me, Hana," Charlie said then, making the promise to Koya too.

Hana surprised him when she took a step closer, and looked into his eyes. For a moment, Charlie felt like she was probing deep inside his brain, his heart, her gaze was so sharp. Then she gave a soft sigh and stepped back.

"Oh well, I see the appeal," Hana said. "You're one good-looking man."

Koya chuckled and Charlie squeezed her hand even tighter.

"I'm starving," Hana rubbed her stomach done with her ultimatums. "I didn't get lunch today. You promised dinner."

Charlie nodded.

"Pizza and beer?" he asked.

Hana stared at Charlie for a full minute, then nodded.

"I'll take it," she said and headed into the cottage first.

"Pizza and beer?" Koya asked, turning to him. "Winning dinner."

"Do you wanna cook?" Charlie challenged her.

"No," Koya said, her gaze shifted to the cell phone on the table. "Something urgent?"

Charlie didn't want to ruin their evening, but—

"We need to fly back to Nairobi in the morning."

"My car—

"I'll find someone to drive it back," Charlie said. "You can use mine when we get home."

"But—

“No buts, babe,” Charlie touched the corner of her lip with his thumb. “Let me take care of you.”

Koya held his gaze, then stepped closer and kissed his chin.

“Fine, lets fly home in the morning. Might as well take Hana with us. She won’t want to take the train back.”

“Your cousin terrifies me,” Charlie teased.

“Oh please,” Koya took his hand leading him into the cottage. “You still need to meet Ashi.”

Charlie shuddered. “Can’t you break up with her?”

“She won’t let me,” Koya grinned and he laughed. “Just a warning. Ashi’s planning her wedding, and her temper is short.”

Charlie gave a mock sigh.

“Babe, your friends are going to be the death of me.”

Koya gave him a light punch on his shoulder.

“Owww!” Charlie exaggerated.

Koya laughed and he smiled enjoying the sound of it.

Hana was already opening the pizza boxes on the kitchen table.

Charlie entertained Hana through the evening, determined to charm her into liking him. He told her jokes, his friends stories, travel stories...past Koya stories...Hana relaxed. Once she was over her initial distrust, she turned into a lively funny woman.

She teased Koya mercilessly for moping for eight years over Charlie.

Koya took it with a smile, occasionally meeting his gaze.

“Ah,” Hana placed her empty bottle of Heineken on the table and raised her hands over head in a stretch. “I’m full and happy. I think I will walk it off to the resort now, clear my head.”

“Jeez, not this late,” Koya said, worried.

Hana glanced at the time on her phone.

“It’s only eleven o’clock.”

“Only,” Koya scoffed, clearly unwilling to let her cousin go out alone.

Charlie got the car keys from the kitchen counter and held them out to Hana.

“It’s not good to have you walking alone in the night, Hana.”

“What about you?” Hana asked.

“You can pick us up tomorrow around nine,” Charlie said.

“I have a train to catch earlier than that,” Hana said with a sigh.

“Charlie is flying us back,” Koya said.

Hana grinned at Charlie.

“I knew I liked you.”

Koya laughed and got up to hug Hana.

“Go to bed, Hana.”

“He’s a catch after all, Koya. Definitely don’t let go,” Hana said, jiggling the keys.

“Thanks for these.”

Charlie walked her to the door while Koya cleared up the table. Once Hana drove off, Charlie locked up the cottage and went to find Koya.

She was curled up on the couch in the living room.

“That went well,” Koya said.

“Yeah,” Charlie sat beside her and pulled her into his arms. “Now, we need to do it with Ashi, then Kim.”

Koya buried her face into his chest with a soft sigh.

“It will be fine,” she said. “As long as you’re with me.”

The flight back to Nairobi was faster than Koya anticipated. Charlie’s people were quite efficient. Charlie’s driver, Kuria, picked them up from the airport, appearing even before Koya could ask what next. He even got Hana a taxi when Hana decided to head to the office before going home.

Charlie was making calls non-stop. He held Koya’s hand tight as they made their way to the parking lot. She paused when they got to the black SUV and found a second man waiting for them. Charlie ended his call and introduced him.

“He’s Archer Weru,” Charlie said, opening the back passenger door for her.

She greeted Archer, then slid into the comfortable seat. Charlie closed the door, and walked around to the left side. Archer was in the front passenger seat and as the driver set off, he turned to face Charlie.

“Stanford has been directing funds to Ashley from the travel agency. She’s using the funds to run deals with Honorable Kouga.”

“What kind of deals?” Charlie asked.

Koya frowned, looking at Charlie.

“Are you sure you—,” she started.

“I have nothing to hide from you, Koya,” Charlie said, meeting her gaze. “You should hear it all. My family is now yours.”

She sighed when he took her hand in his right hand and gave Archer a nod to continue.

“Elections are close. Ashley is giving back support as she’d promised,” Archer said.

“Through his political career, Hon. Kouga has helped Ashley gain important tenders, buy assets, going through the history, I suspect even helped build the Dhal Corp building.”

Charlie closed his eyes in disappointment, and Koya squeezed his fingers.

“I have never wanted her dirty deals touching my company,” Charlie said shaking his head. “Do you think it could blow back on us?”

“Nyagah said no,” Archer answered. “Your mother was careful to keep it all out of the books. However, if someone were to dig deeper, they might find more than they bargained for.”

“Have Nyagah clean out the books,” Charlie said, his tone hard, his distaste clear.

“Should we head to the offices?” Archer asked, glancing at Koya.

“No,” Charlie turned to Koya and gave her hand a tight squeeze. “Let’s go see my mum.”

“Are you sure?” Koya asked.

“I think it’s time,” Charlie said.

Koya nodded.

Yes, it was time, she thought.

Meeting Ashley again was surreal. The woman looked subdued as she sat in the same armchair she had the last time Koya had visited. This time though, Koya sat, and accepted a cup of coffee from Mama Nora, who smiled at her in welcome.

“Charlie,” Mama Nora grinned, giving him a thumbs-up.

Charlie laughed and Koya tried not to meet Ashley’s gaze again.

“I’ll be in the kitchen,” Mama Nora said. “*Lakini* call me when you make the big announcement, Charlie. *Sitaki kumiss*.”

Koya chuckled and picked up her coffee. Taking a sip of the delicious coffee, she finally met Ashley’s gaze.

“You’re back,” Ashley said in greeting.

“She is,” Charlie answered before Koya could speak. “With me.”

Ashley smiled. “I guess I couldn’t stop the water from flowing down the river with my bare hands.”

Charlie frowned.

“I know you do what you can to protect our family, but you’ve made me embarrassed of you,” Charlie said.

Ashley winced.

“The letters were a means to get you where you needed to be,” Ashley said. “As I told Koya before, I won’t apologize.”

“But you should,” Charlie insisted. “To her, to me...you damaged us. Sincerely, mother, whether you want it or not, Koya is your future daughter in-law.”

“So you’ve decided,” Ashley said.

“It would have happened earlier had you not interfered,” Charlie said.

“I still don’t regret that decision,” Ashley said, her tone firm.

“Let it go, Charlie. It’s not your mother’s style to apologize,” Koya said, with a slight shrug. “I get that.”

“Still—,” Charlie started.

“Ashley won’t interfere a second time,” Koya cut in, her sitting up straight as she faced Ashley. “Never again.”

“I suppose you’ll stop me.”

“I won’t need to because you’ll get no chance,” Koya stated.

She got up from the couch and moved to perch on Charlie’s armchair, making them a team.

Ashley scoffed and sat back watching them.

“Sign over your share of Dhal Corp,” Charlie said, shocking both Ashley and Koya.

Koya hadn’t expected Charlie would demand such a drastic change.

“Is that Koya’s suggestion?” Ashley asked, her voice strained with shock.

“No.” Charlie folded his arms against his chest. “Mum, I know what you have been doing with Mahali Travel. Siphoning money from a business with serious investors, using Stanford, and directing money to Hon. Kouga. You can’t own Dhal Corp. It doesn’t matter how many people you pay off. Were they to investigate us on corruption, the company would suffer a major blow.”

Koya placed her hand on Charlie’s left shoulder, wondering how he could bear this. His mother’s tricks were hard to understand. This couldn’t be easy for Charlie.

“How did you find it?” Ashley asked.

Archer Weru moved into view and Koya frowned. She hadn’t realized the man was in the room. He was too quiet.

Ashley let a small bitter laugh escape.

“You remain your father’s son,” she said. “He too has an Archer.”

“Retire,” Charlie suggested. “Go to the coast, spend time with Dad. He would love that, has been wishing for it.”

“And this house?” Ashley asked, then her gaze rested on Koya. “Ah…”

“I’ll take care of anything you need,” Charlie said. “I’ll even pay for the shares—

“Don’t insult your mother,” Ashley cut him off. “I’ve only wanted to protect you, Charlie. That’s—

She broke off and stared out the windows.

“Tony,” Charlie said in a low tone, breaking the silence that filled the room. “They said he was murdered, I didn’t want to believe it, but now I do. Was it because of your deals?”

Ashley swiped her palm over her left cheek. Koya thought she was wiping off a tear, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Yes, your father knew,” Ashley said. “We were building so many things those days. The political climate required tactics that were untoward. Threats, blackmail...pressure in the right places.” Ashley shook her head. “Tony was a wild child. He bragged where he shouldn’t.”

Koya suddenly realized why Ashley had felt compelled to send Charlie away. From her own experience, were she a more vengeful woman, she’d have come after Ashley for the deception. Now that she knew that Ashley had threatened to harm Ashi and Kim, she might have retaliated then too. There had to be hundreds of people out there that Ashley treated even worse. The more angry ones would have wanted to punish Ashley, to make a point, which would have included murdering Tony and perhaps Charlie.

Koya’s eyes widened in horror as Ashley looked up and held her gaze. The truth so clear now. It shook Koya.

“I love you, Charlie,” Ashley said, turning to Charlie.

“I love you too, Mum,” Charlie said. “However, I refuse to conduct business the way you do. I don’t want to learn your brand of coldness.”

Ashley shrugged, then nodded in understanding.

“I suppose I’m due a long vacation,” Ashley said. “It will be nice not having to worry what the entire community is doing or planning.”

“You owe me a box,” Koya reminded Ashley, wanting her letters from Charlie.

Ashley startled her with a smile. “I do.”

Ashley got up and left the living room. She returned fast, holding out the box Koya rejected the last time. This time, Koya took it eagerly, cradling it as though it held precious gems. She opened the lid and smiled at the pile of letters inside.

“Thank you,” Koya said.

Charlie stood, took Koya’s hand pulled her to her feet.

“Now, I have to an important introduction to make in the kitchen. Mum, will you excuse us?”

“Sure,” Ashley said, her tone heavy.

Koya watched Ashley walk to the windows, her shoulders slumped. Charlie didn’t give her a chance to see more of Ashley, instead hurrying her to a large bright kitchen. Mama Nora was leaning against a counter peeling carrots.

“Mama Nora,” Charlie said, excitement coloring his words. It reminded Koya of a little boy bringing a gift to his mother. “I’ve brought her.”

Mama Nora dropped the knife in the bowl and wiped her hands on a dish cloth.

“This is Koya,” Charlie said with a wide boyish grin. “She’s the one.”

Mama Nora chuckled and pulled Koya into a huge warm hug.

“Finally!” Mama Nora said, singing as she took Koya’s hand and danced around her.

“I’m so excited to meet Charlie’s woman. I’ve taken care of him since he was boy, you know. I’ve been waiting for this day.”

Koya laughed, loving Mama Nora’s enthusiasm and warm embrace. Why couldn’t Ashley have done this?

Charlie, now relaxed, stole a carrot from Mama Nora’s bowl and got his hand smacked for his efforts.

“Let me tell you, Koya,” Mama Nora said. “You’ve got your work cut out for you. This one’s full of mischief...”

Mama Nora charmed Koya with stories of chasing after Charlie in his underwear. They ate an early lunch on the kitchen table. Mama Nora was a fine cook.

Later in the afternoon, Charlie headed to his office with Archer. He left her a black jeep to use until her car was returned. Too wired from the day’s drama, Koya decided to visit Ashi and clear the situation with her best friend instead of going home.

Ashi was waiting for her outside her bookstore.

“Freeze,” Ashi said in greeting, when Koya parked Charlie’s black Jeep in front of the Oasis Bookstore.

Koya smiled and raised her hands up in surrender.

Ashi stood on the sidewalk with a wide frown.

“I tell you to stop living like a nun and your response is to jump off a cliff.”

Koya grinned.

“On the upside, I now have a boyfriend,” Koya said.

“Crazy chick,” Ashi shook her head. “*Ebu* come out of the gorgeous car and tell me all the details. Don’t leave out the juicy parts.”

Koya reached for the bag on the passenger seat and came out of the car. Locking it, she went to Ashi and held up the bag.

“Peace offering,” she said and smiled when Ashi groaned.

Fried chicken was the way to Ashi’s heart.

“You knowing all my secrets is not fair,” Ashi said, taking the bag.

Koya laughed and hugged Ashi. They entered the bookstore. Koya greeted Ashi’s assistants and then they headed to Ashi’s office.

Koya spent the next thirty minutes retelling the story of Ashley’s betrayal. When she was done, Ashi was finished eating her chicken and ready to defend Charlie.

“Is it possible to have such a dangerous mother?” Ashi wondered. “I mean, it’s hard to know what to think of her. I always thought she was tough, but this...she’s a total villain.”

“What’s frightening is that I sort of understand her,” Koya confessed, remembering Ashley’s expression earlier when she spoke of Tony. “Ashley couldn’t be sure the same people who’d shot Tony wouldn’t go after Charlie. I mean, she was trolling powerful people.”

“But to mess with Charlie’s life, his heart?” Ashi shook her head. “Yours too...it’s not easy, Koya.”

Koya reached for a bunch of bookmarks on Ashi’s desk and sifted through them.

“What’s a little backstabbing in the family? No matter. Ashley’s leaving for the coast and Charlie’s taking over Dhal Corp as the sole owner. I know at some point, we’re going to need to find a way to forgive her. She is still Charlie’s mother.”

Ashi gave a dramatic sigh.

“I’m going to stop complaining now,” Ashley said. “Boy, am I glad my in-laws are normal people. Yours are tough, gal. You might need to invest in body armor.”

Koya laughed so hard, she almost fell off her chair.

Twelve

The next morning, Koya left her office at around nine o’clock and headed to the construction project Kim was running in Limuru. She drove Charlie’s jeep, her car had not arrived yet. She was glad for it too, as the road to the site was rough and muddy. The jeep handled pretty well. She parked outside the site, and walked up to gates, stopping at the entrance when she saw Kim climb into a large truck full of sand. He navigated the truck into place and tipped the back emptying sand into a large pile.

When the truck was empty, Koya stepped back when the truck lurched forward. For a second, her gaze remained on Kim who’d finally noticed her. Kim stopped the truck, and turned it off. He sat watching her for a moment, then he jumped out of the driver’s side.

Kim threw the keys to one of the men standing behind the truck and walked toward her.

“Well this is a beautiful surprise,” Kim said, reaching her with a smile. “I don’t remember the last time you came to a site I was running.”

“You have so many now,” Koya said, accepting a hug from Kim, though she stepped back when he started to brush a kiss on her lips. “My turn to take you out.”

Kim looked back at the busy site.

“You don’t need to be here, do you?” Koya asked with a frown. She needed to talk to Kim, but this place was not ideal. Too many people watching. She certainly didn’t need an audience as she broke her best friend’s heart.

“No,” Kim said, and she sighed in relief. “I have a foreman who is very good at his job. Which is why I’m tipping sand. He’s so efficient, I’m left with nothing to do.”

Taking his hand, she led him out of the construction site and toward the black jeep.

“New car?” Kim asked, resisting her direction, slowing them down.

“I’m borrowing it,” Koya said, giving him a small smile. “It’s a long story.”

“Does it have to do with why you disappeared last weekend?” Kim asked, stopping.

Koya let go of Kim’s hand.

Kim walked up to the jeep, his gaze on a sticker stuck on the back window, and that’s when she saw it. All this time, she hadn’t paid attention, but suddenly the sticker on the back window was so obvious. It read Dhal Corp. Why hadn’t she seen it before?

“Charlie.” Kim scoffed. “I should have known.”

Koya bit her lip. “Kim—

“What did he say to change your heart?” Kim asked, looking at her. His gaze was full of disappointment, perhaps betrayal. “What did he say, that I didn’t?”

Koya wanted to tell the long story she’d given Ashi, but with Kim it was different. She’d truly thought she’d come to care for Kim. That she hadn’t was the problem, wasn’t it?

“You deserve someone better than me,” Koya said, feeling tears sting her eyes.

“I do,” Kim said, stepping back from the car. “You and Charlie deserve each other. What will you do when he hurts you again? Because he will.”

“I love him,” she said, the tears spilling over. “I love Charlie, Kim. That never changed, and you know it. I have never hidden that fact from you.”

“You’re right. I’m the idiot for trying to break you away from him,” Kim said, shaking his head.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It is,” Kim said, glaring at her.

“Kim, please,” she took a step toward him afraid of losing him. “I—

“Leave,” Kim said. “Go, Koya.”

“Don’t do this,” Koya begged. “Please, Kim.”

Kim walked up to her, took her right hand and led her back to the car. He opened the driver’s side door and pushed her to it.

She held on to the door refusing to enter the car, tears really falling now.

“You promised you wouldn’t do this. You said we wouldn’t stop being friends.”

“I didn’t think I would be this angry with you,” Kim said. “Get in the car, Koya. If you want to save our friendship, you will go now.”

Kim turned and headed back to the site.

Koya stood clutching the door watching after Kim, terrified they'd never be friends again.

"He hates me," Koya said. "Truly hates me and I deserve it."

Charlie watched Koya eat popcorn out of a bowl, her gaze unfocused, even though they had a movie on. This was supposed to be an evening of relaxing and chilling, instead, his girlfriend was obsessing over another man.

He took the bowl from her when she started to take more popcorn. Koya looked at him then, her eyes wide.

"I will fix it," he said, placing the bowl on the coffee table.

"How?" Koya asked. "How can you make Kim forgive me, forgive us?"

Charlie smiled. "First, I save the popcorn from you. You haven't changed, you know. When you start worrying, you obsess to the point of madness. It's cute."

Koya threw the bunch of popcorn she had in her hand at him, and he laughed.

"This is a serious problem, Charlie," Koya said, a frown creasing her smooth forehead. "I don't want to lose Kim. Which is selfish, I know, but...he's been part of all our lives forever. How can we let that go?"

"I'll talk to him."

"Not sure that is a solution," Koya sighed, moving closer to Charlie.

She rested her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her. They were in the living at her house, he preferred it here as his mother was still at his house. He didn't intend to go back home until Ashley left. Charlie hooked a finger under Koya's chin and tilted her head up so that she met his gaze.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, needing to hear her say it.

Koya shifted slightly so that she was looking at him, then gave him the world.

"I trust you."

Charlie kissed her then, holding her tight against him. When they broke apart, he whispered into her ear.

"I'll talk to Kim," Charlie promised. "He's my friend too, you know."

"Charlie," Koya pulled back, holding his gaze. "It's occurred to me that I haven't told you something very important."

"What?"

She smiled, the smile that got his heart leaping in joy.

"I love you."

"I was waiting to hear those words from you."

She nodded, and narrowed her gaze.

“And I love you,” he said. “Probably more than you’ll ever realize.”

Finding Kim was easy, getting him to talk was tougher. Charlie blocked Kim’s heavy punch, lifting his hands up as Kim attacked him over and over. They were in a boxing ring at the local gym. Kim was a long term member, and boxing was his preferred sport. So Charlie had brought his gear when he came to visit him. He’d found Kim in the ring.

“Fight back,” Kim growled when Charlie refused to punch back.

“Forgive Koya first,” Charlie said.

Kim punched his stomach and Charlie gasped. The man packed a heavy one. He pushed Kim back moving to create distance between them.

“You don’t get to ask me that,” Kim said. “I’ve been the one here, Charlie. I’m the one who got her through the hell you left her in.”

“And I’m grateful for that,” Charlie said. “I know it wasn’t easy for her. I can never get the years we’ve wasted apart back. I know that but I’m going to do my best to make it up to her.”

“Is that what you said to make her choose you?”

Charlie shook his head. “She made the choice on her own.”

Kim nodded and turned away from him.

“Don’t make her lose you over this,” Charlie said.

Kim cursed under his breath. He turned to Charlie and scoffed.

“Let me punch you out once, and I’ll consider forgiving both of you.”

“Deal,” Charlie said without hesitation.

Charlie almost regretted his decision when Kim came at him. The last thing he saw was Kim’s fist, when he came to, it was to see Koya yelling at a stoic Kim in her living room.

“Did you have to punch him so hard? Why would you do this, Kim?”

“He asked for it.”

“Look at his face, he needs to be in an office tomorrow,” Koya shook her head and turned to look at Charlie, her gentle fingers touching his left eye.

Charlie grinned at her concern and she pushed her finger into his bruise. He yelped.

“Woman, be careful,” Charlie said, capturing her hand.

“Are you crazy?” Koya demanded. “Kim carries building materials on a daily basis. Why would you take yourself to him for a fight?”

“Because your kisses will heal me?” Charlie asked.

“I’m going to punch you out next,” Koya threatened. “Sit still, I need to put medicine on your face. Why would you ruin my merchandise like this?”

Kim laughed and sank into an armchair.

“Ah, listening to you is making me more jealous.”

“I should fine you,” Koya said.

“Punching Charlie was worth it,” Kim said. “He deserved it.”

Koya sighed and spent a few minutes applying ointment on the skin around Charlie’s left eye. When she was done, Charlie took her hand, and shifted so that he could see Kim.

Koya squeezed his hand. “Are we good now?”

“Yeah,” Charlie said, smiling at Kim. “Unless Kim wants to punch me out again.”

“There is no fun in that,” Kim said staring at them. “You two look good together. Always have.”

Koya’s grip on Charlie’s hand tightened. “We’re still friends, right?”

“Always,” Kim said, giving her a wistful smile.

Koya sighed in relief.

“Can I leave you two? I’ll make dinner. I hope there is no fighting.”

She stood up, taking the first aid kit with her and headed to the kitchen. Charlie groaned and sat up on the couch. His head hurt. Kim’s fists were no joke.

Kim came to sit beside him. They sat in silence for a minute, then Kim reached for the remote control and turned on the television. He chose a sports channel, and in the next minute, they both relaxed, watching a rugby match.

Like the years had never separated them. It was the first time Charlie felt he’d truly come back home.

“Mahali Travel,” Koya said. “*Explore your destination, leave the planning to us.* It will do for the season.”

“I played around with the words,” Hana said, holding on to the Mahali Travel poster she’d brought to Koya for approval. “This seemed to sound the most direct.”

“The photos are gorgeous,” Koya smiled, touching the picture of the scuba diver surrounded by exotic fish. This must have been fun to capture.”

“The best,” Hana grinned. “I didn’t want to leave.”

Linda knocked on the door and they both looked up. She held a receipt, a small brown box.

“Found out who is sending the mysterious parcels,” Linda said, hurrying to Koya’s side. “You are the proud owner of a small tiny box.”

Koya took the box, ignoring the receipt. She already suspected who the gifts were from. Hana and Linda watched as she ripped the brown wrapping, to reveal a small box. Inside was a key, and a folded note.

She took the note and key, handing Hana the box. Unfolding the note, she smiled at the words on the paper.

“Thank you for owning it.”

Folding her fingers over the key, she turned to Linda.

“Does the receipt have a Dhal Corp stamp?” she asked.

“How did you know?” Linda asked.

Koya gave Hana a wide smile just as her phone buzzed a message notification. Swiping her finger over the screen, she read the message from Charlie.

Come downstairs.

“I’ll be back,” she said, leaving her office fast, not pausing to explain to Hana or Linda.

“Look at her go,” Koya heard Hana say as she hurried out of Linda’s office.

Linda chuckled and Koya smiled when she reached the elevator and punched the buttons with impatience.

Downstairs, she hurried out of the busy lobby and into a hot afternoon. Charlie was stood by her car. She tried not to break into a run to reach him, and managed a jog.

She stopped a few feet away from him and held up the key.

“The willow tree, the gorgeous statue, and a key,” she said. “I should have known you’d be the one sending me insane gifts. What do they mean?”

Charlie stayed leaning on her car. “You once told me that if we ever owned a home together, we should have a huge willow tree. Then we’d put a swing on it, and watch the kids play there.”

Koya remembered that conversation clearly. Months before Tony’s death, before Charlie knew he had to leave. Those days, she’d loved the thought of planning a future with Charlie.

“And the leopard?” Koya asked.

“They remind me a bit of you, beautiful and relentless,” Charlie grinned when she shook her head at his unique thoughts.

“Leopard, Charlie?” Koya gave a soft chuckle. “You’re insane.

“Aren’t you going to ask about the key?”

She opened her fingers to stare at the silver key on her palm.

“This the key to your heart?” Koya asked.

Charlie pushed off the car, and closed the distance between them.

“It’s the key to everything you and me,” Charlie said.

Koya closed her fingers over the key and slipped her arms around Charlie’s waist.

“You’re just mush in the middle,” she said.

Charlie held her, brushing his fingers through her braids.

“Keep the secret,” Charlie murmured. “Also, the key quite literally opens the door to the house on Ndwaru road. Mum’s moved out. So...baby will you move in with me?”

“I knew there was a secret agenda,” Koya said, leaning back to look at him. “Shouldn’t you make this more official? Why should I move in without ceremony?”

Charlie kissed her in the middle of the parking lot. A swift, abrupt kiss that left her clinging to his shoulders. He ended the kiss and winked.

“So that I can make an honest woman out of you,” Charlie said. “Everyone knows we’re together now.”

Koya frowned, her thoughts scattered, but then Charlie glanced up and she followed his gaze. She gaped when she saw her staff leaning out the windows watching them.

“Charlie!” she punched his shoulder and he burst out laughing.

Ashi’s wedding day came in a whirlwind of preparations and arrangements. Koya loved the forest green dress Ashi’s tailor made for her. It was functional, and gorgeous, definitely one she could wear on any other occasion. She carried two bouquets in one hand, Ashi’s wedding gown trail in the other.

They walked up the stairs at the Riruta Catholic Church and stopped outside the closed front doors. Ashi’s father was already waiting to lead his daughter down the aisle.

Ashi let out a nervous breath and ran a hand down her bodice. She was beautiful in her tailor-made white dress. Koya handed her the bouquet of red roses.

“You look beautiful, Ashi,” Koya said, adjusting Ashi’s veil.

“Keep him at altar until I come,” Ashi said.

Koya chuckled holding her own bouquet. Hana entered the church, and she grinned at Ashi.

“Nic won’t run,” Koya said, in assurance, then followed Hana down the aisle.

Charlie on the second pew, and when she reached the front, he blew a kiss at her, making her blush. Beside him sat Kim, and she grinned because the two were now best friends.

Her heart felt full watching them together like that. Her best friend and the love of her life, how much luckier could she get she wondered.

The wedding ceremony was beautiful, Ashi cried as she said her vows. Nic kissed her in the church to wild applause from the guests. In the early afternoon, as the ceremony came to a close, Ashi gathered all the single ladies in the crowd. Koya tried to stay out of this part of the wedding, but Charlie and Kim pushed her into the crowd of women.

Ashi held up the red bouquet of roses. She threw it up and lo and behold, the bunch of flowers landed right on Koya.

Koya gripped the flowers, and met Charlie’s happy gaze.

Mwisho

Thank you for reading this story.