

# DANIELLA

**Mugera Rosemary**

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## **DEDICATION**

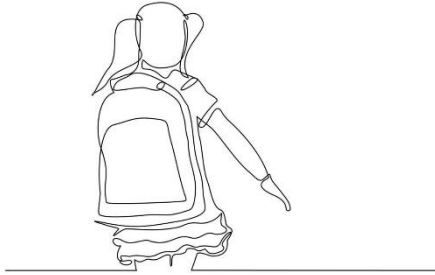
I dedicate this story to Jane Nyambura, my former student.



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

I got in Form One Green excited to teach riddles. I knew it would be an interesting lesson. After the good morning pleasantries, I noticed that Daniella was not at her usual sitting position. She always cleaned the board, wrote the day's date and the subject ENGLISH in calligraphy ready for the lesson. That gesture made me warm up to her. That day, Biology notes filled the entire chalkboard.

Daniella was a special girl. On the admission day, she arrived in school late. She looked pale and worn out. She carried the heavy metal box while an elderly lady, who I presumed to be her grandmother followed her carrying her mattress. Daniella was all smiles after she put the box down sighing with relief. I introduced myself as Teacher Melissa and welcomed them to Laki Girls' High School.

Having completed the admission process, I called Mercy, the school head girl and instructed her to ensure that Daniella took the evening meal for it was already supper time. She was also to ensure that Daniella would get a pair of school uniform for the next day from her peers. The school was issuing the form ones with uniform but Daniella was not lucky to get any that would fit her for she was plumb. The boarding mistress made arrangements for her to get the uniform in two days.

The next day, I found a small coloured envelop on my desk with a small note inside. It was from Daniella.

*“you are like a second mother to me. I love you mum.”*

I was more puzzled than enthralled. When I got to class that morning, Daniella seemed so enthusiastic.

“Teacher Melissa, Daniella is crying because Judy and Leyla told her that her plans of befriending you will fail terribly,” Diana said meekly as the rest of the class giggled. Diana’s words brought my mind back to class. I could hear Daniella sobbing at the back. She was at Diana’s desk.

I had been the Form One Green class teacher for the past three weeks. I had already known half of the students in the class. Judy’s and Leyla’s behavior bordered notoriety.

“I am your class teacher and all of you are like my children. You therefore need not to put any effort to befriend me. I treasure you all in equal measure. Daniella, we need to see the beautiful calligraphy on the board. Kindly, do us the favor.

The class applauded as Daniella walked to the front wiping the tears with the back of her hand. She tried to force a smile. Judy and Leyla frowned as Leyla scribbled something on her book. Daniella wrote on the board the topic of the day, RIDDLES, with beautiful calligraphy as the others wowed. Leyla was calling the attention of Diana to give the note that she had scribbled. I confiscated it before it could get to her. I instructed Diana, Judy and Leyla to see me immediately after the lesson.

That incident was quickly forgotten for the lesson was thrilling. Everyone wanted to form a riddle from our immediate environment. Before I could wrap up the lesson, Daniella volunteered to give the six stages of the riddling process with very captivating examples.

After the lesson, the trio followed me to the office. I had put the note in my English text book. I fished it out to see what Leyla wanted to tell Diana.

*“You are not the prefect to report to the teacher everything that happens in this class. Besides, you have a petite body like a model, can you compare yourself*

*with Daniella who is a pig? Have some respect for yourself, loser!”*

Those words pierced my heart. I did not want Diana to know the contents of the note. She was a very sentimental girl and that would really affect her. I also did not want her to start regarding Daniella the way Leyla did. I released Diana to go back to class having advised her to choose her friends wisely and to never fear reporting anything weird to me.

I took my phone and threatened Judy and Leyla that I would call their parents and report them. Judy started crying saying that it was all Leyla’s fault that she behaved the way she did.

“Does Leyla force you to misbehave at gun point?”

“I am really sorry Teacher Melissa. I promise you, from today I will behave myself. I kindly request that you change my sitting position, Teacher Melissa. I do not want to sit next to Leyla. She does not let me study,” she said still sobbing.

Leyla was rolling her eyes in contempt. I told her that I would not tolerate such unbecoming behaviors from her. She mumbled an apology. I told Judy to go back to class too and that I would consider her request.

I asked Leyla what she would achieve by body shaming Daniella. I really wanted to know what Daniella did to

earn such disdain and hatred from her. She had incoherent explanations.

“Teacher Melissa, Daniella *hua na kimbelembele sana*. She also keeps on referring to you as mum in class.”

“Is Daniella calling me mum what you term *kimbelembele*?”

“yes!” she almost shouted.

“Alright, what if you call me mum too?”

She did not answer. I told her to think about it and give me the feedback at her convenient time. I also demanded an apology from her in writing and I told her that I would punish her if she tried to body shame any member of my class. I referred her to the teacher in charge of guidance and counselling and looked forward to seeing change in her.

\*\*\*

Schools opened for second term. On seeing me, Daniella dropped her bag and broke into a run in my direction. Her hug almost swept me off the ground. I felt uncomfortable. I jokingly told her that I could easily get a heart attack from such hugs. She laughed it off and promised that next time we would shake hands.

“I hope you are not offended by that Daniella,” I tried to probe.

“I am easy Teacher Melissa, but promise me that the next holiday, you will reply my text messages so that I won’t miss you so much like I had done.”

“You texted me over the holiday?” I acted surprised. It has always been my rule not to be so cosy with my students in any social media platforms. This would maintain the teacher – student relationship.

“I texted you severally Teacher Melissa. I only wanted to know how you were doing. I also had English questions that I wanted to ask how best I could answer them.”

“I am sorry Daniella, maybe my boy deleted them while playing games on my phone. You know the twenty first century kids. I hardly have my phone when at home. For the questions that you wanted to ask, I hope you have them with you.”

“Yes Teacher Melissa. In fact, it is a full exam, I will place it on your desk for marking.”

“Very well Daniella. I wish you a fruitful term.”

She said many thanks as she hurried to class.

Later that week, I felt a compulsion to dig deeper into Daniella’s background. I felt she was deprived love and attention when she was young. During games time, I called her in my office. I assured her that she could trust

me with any information, including the most sensitive one. I asked her to open up about her life, her family and anything else she felt was important. I saw tears clouding her eyes and offered her a pocket tissue.

“Before I was born, mum used to live in Kayole, Nairobi. I do not know who my dad is. Mum has never disclosed that to me. She has never loved me. She always says that I was the greatest mistake that has ever happened in her life. My dad left her when she broke the news to him that she was expecting me. Mum was chased out of the house and was told to go and look for the person responsible for her pregnancy. That was how she ended up in the village in Kiambu county. I was born there. At the age of four, I was left with my granny and she went back to Nairobi. I hardly see her and the few times we see each other, she always finds fault in everything I do. When I came to this school, you handled me so well and treated me with so much affection. I have never felt so much loved in my life the way you made me feel. That is why I call you mum. I am sorry if I do make you feel uncomfortable. I know I have even made the other students from my class say that I am always befriending you by trying to impress you all the time. They cannot understand. I know it is God who placed you in my life mum.”

When she was done, I tried so hard to fight tears. I was tongue-tied. I gave her two more pieces of pocket tissue

for the other one was already soaked with tears. I assured her of my support anytime and any day. I also made her promise me that she would do her best in all subjects because I had realized she always put more effort in English neglecting other subjects. She also revealed to me that the shopping she had reported with would not last a term. I promised to take care of that.

After that emotional meeting, I went to the bursar's office. He informed me that apart from the five thousand shillings Daniella's granny paid on the admission day, no other penny had been paid. She had an outstanding balance of twenty-two thousand shillings. I paid two thousand shillings for her hoping that her granny would send something to the school account. The bursar informed me that the students would be sent home by the end of that month.

\*\*\*

Music festival competitions were nearing each day. The students were excited especially the form ones. They had been told by the senior students how fun music festivals always are and that Laki Girls' was known for its traditional dances. Being in charge of music, I had an uphill task in choosing a team that would represent the school in the county competitions. A battle ensued because all the form ones wanted to be in the team. The

senior students argued that the form ones had three years in school to participate in music festivals. Finally, those that were able to keep up with the pressure of practicing even late in the night qualified to join the team.

Daniella was talented in reciting *mashairi*. She was a good soloist too. She had a special composition for class 1116J that later saw her to the nationals at Kabarak University.

*“Toka shule ya mabanati ya Laki, mbele yenu ni Daniella Wanjiru, tayari kuwakariria shairi, lenye mada, SAVA YANGU SIFUNGUI. Daraja, elfu moja, mia moja, kumi na sita ja...”*

Her beautiful voice caught the attention of everyone in the hall, including the distinguished adjudicators. A loud applause followed when she was done with the recitation. Having competed with students from famous national schools in Kenya, she was tensed when the adjudicator took to the stage to announce the results. She emerged position one! I was elated when I was called to receive a trophy for the school from the PS for Education. Daniella also received a certificate. We could not hide our joy.

When we got to where the other students were, the sight of the trophy made them so jubilant. They were at the far end of the basketball pitch practicing class 816J, a meru dance that was to be performed the same day. Daniella

was the soloist. She became a darling to everyone for her exemplary performance. According to the students, her win meant another win in the dance for she was the soloist. Their mood was upbeat.

Their faces on stage told it all. They meticulously formed the patterns on stage as they danced with vigor. Their costume and décor brought out typical meru ladies. When they were declared position one, they were indeed delighted. I promised to take them to Lake Nakuru national park and Lord Egerton Castle the next day. We received an invitation for the gala which was the culmination of the whole festival. Our joy was unmatched!

“Teacher Melissa, I should be filmed while reciting the *shairi* and upload it in the school’s YouTube channel, what do you think? I want to be seen and heard by the whole world!” she said demonstrating the world with her hands.

“I surely will Daniella. I hope as the *shairi* says, *hautafungua sava*,” I said smiling sheepishly.

“I can’t mum. In fact, I am not planning to have a boyfriend while in school. I want to make you proud by getting a grade that will see me to the university. I want to become a teacher, just like you.”

“Oh, really? I thought you wanted to study Theatre Arts. That is what you told me on admission day.” I sounded serious.

“I haven’t forgotten that Teacher Melissa. I will still pursue it once am done with the degree.”

“Perfect. You can have some rest now.”

We were on our way back to school from Nakuru. We got to school late at night. The students took supper and went to bed. They were to go home the next day. The rest of the school had already broken for the August holiday the week the music team left for Nakuru.



## CHAPTER TWO

Time was really flying. Form Two Green could not hide their joy. The fact that they were no longer ‘*monos*’ and that they would choose subjects by the end of term two made them celebrate. Daniella, having been the top student in the country during the music festival competitions the previous year had won the heart of the principal, teachers and a big number of students. When the slots for the new prefect body were announced, she declared her interest for the position of the school time keeper. The interested candidates for all the slots were to campaign for a week then the voting exercise would take place.

Leyla also declared her interest for the same position as Daniella’s. She had a great number of followers. She would go an extra mile by giving her followers her share of bread, fruits or even meals to lure them into voting for

her. The election day approached and the students casted their votes. The team of teachers that was in charge of the elections saw to it that the elections were free and fair.

One Monday morning, the deputy principal who was also the returning officer, was ready to announce the new Student's Council. Contrary to some student's expectations, their preferred candidates did not win. Daniella was announced as the school time keeper. Leyla could not stomach the betrayal from her followers. She used to call them '*mbogi*,' meaning people of her inner circle.

For the few days that followed, the deputy's office was turned into a courtroom. Some students would complain that their mattresses were being soaked with water while others reported that their books were missing from the cabinets. Whoever did these atrocities seemed to be on a revenge mission because all the students that complained belonged to Leyla's '*mbogi*.' After going through the CCTV footage, Leyla was the culprit. She did it together with Paulina, a form four girl who had contested for the position of the school head girl but also lost terribly.

Leyla and Paulina were also inciting some students for a go-slow. A big number stopped attending the morning preps and others stopped taking their meals. Daniella

and a few members of the Student's Council informed the office what was in the offing. Leyla, Paulina and five other rowdy students were planning a mega strike. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The principal immediately summoned their parents.

They met in the school boardroom the next morning. They were briefed why they had been called with urgency. They were instructed to clear from the compound immediately with their daughters carrying their belongings. They were to bring their daughters back after a fortnight. One condition for readmission would be a letter from a counsellor showing that their daughters had attended at least four counselling sessions. Two parents wanted to protest but the principal's word was final. They would face the Board of Management on readmission day.

The school was full of tension after the seven girls left. To the students, everyone became a suspect. No one trusted the other for fear of being reported. They would say that no one knew when their parents would be called to school so they had to maintain a high level of discipline. After a week, normalcy returned. Once bitten, twice shy. It was a lesson well learnt.

When Leyla's group was finally readmitted, no one wanted to associate with them. Even her own '*mbogi*' avoided her like someone with leprosy. Leyla was heard

saying that she would serve someone hot vengeance.  
Human beings never learn, do they?

\*\*\*

Students were opening for second term. As usual, they had to be checked at the gate. It was a way of ensuring that students did not bring to school anything that would endanger their lives, more so drugs. Daniella was all smiles as usual for she was back for a new term. She handed her bag to Mrs. Kiama, the boarding mistress for it to be checked. To her surprise, she saw two cans of 'Guarana' staring at her when she opened the bag. Her shock drew the attention of other teachers and some few students.

"Daniella, beer in school?" she asked bewildered.

"Madam, I do not know whose they are," she tried to defend herself. "Maybe someone planted them in my bag. You see madam, when I went to do my shopping at the supermarket, we were requested by the guard to place our bags at one corner because the luggage section was already full. The students were so many madam. Maybe a student mistook my bag for his or hers and put them in my bag."

"Do you want to mean that you never checked your bag when you left the supermarket?"

“I did not check it madam. The bag did not have sufficient space for the shopping. I opted carrying the shopping with the carrier bag that I had purchased,” she explained trying to control tears.

Mrs. Kiama told her to go to class. All the glory she had been swimming in was going down the drain fast. She was summoned the following day by the discipline committee. Her goose was already cooked. She had to be suspended for two weeks. No amount of persuasion from me could change their decision. What would the other students say? That the discipline committee was lenient on Daniella because she was a prefect? Had she not broken one of the school rules? Was the evidence not enough to send her home?

I tried defending Daniella’s innocence to no avail. I was informed that the discipline committee was an independent body and its decision was final.

“Teacher Melissa, where do I go now? My granny is at the hospital looking after my mum who is currently admitted. I did not get time to tell you this yesterday after what happened. I do not have not even a single coin,” she was uncontrollable.

“It is well Daniella. Here is your fare home. Mum will recover very soon, trust me.” She was reluctant to take the money. When she finally did, I told her to take care of herself and to call me when she got home.

When I got to class that day, Leyla's happiness was evident. The rest of the class was so gloomy.

"Hey Leyla, you look so jovial today. I love that."

"Teacher Melissa, when God fights your enemies, are you not supposed to rejoice?"

"Does 'your enemies' in this context mean Daniella? Wait, don't tell me you are the one that put that beer in her bag yesterday."

"Teacher Melissa, I can't do something like that. I swear before God..."

I interrupted her because the other students had started murmuring. I tasked Diana with the responsibility of keeping time, contrary to Leyla's expectations. She frowned. I left the class forty minutes later, having taught Indefinite Pronouns.

When I got to the office, I found a note on my desk. It was not there when I left for class.

*Teacher Melissa, I know who put the beer in Daniella's bag. It was Leyla. I want to remain anonymous for security reasons. Take her desk before break time and you will find evidence in there. We miss Daniella already and we want her back.*

I could not believe what I had just read. Tea break was thirty minutes away. I had to act fast. I approached Mr.

Hilary, the chairman of the discipline committee. I handed him the note and remained mum. After reading the note, guilt was written all over his face.

“Teacher Melissa, the...se are just spe...cu...lations. I mean, we do not have the evi...dence yet,” he stammered.

“Why don’t we take her desk then and confirm whether the evidence is there or not?”

“I guess you are right, let us do it right away.”

We headed to Form Two Green. Mrs. Kiama was having a Geography lesson. All eyes were on us. Mr. Hilary commanded Leyla to get out of class with her desk. Diana helped her with the desk as the other students wondered what the matter was.

The note was found. It was addressed to Paulina, her all time partner in crime. In the letter, she clearly stated why she had placed the beer in Daniella’s bag. She felt that teachers favored Daniella and that was the reason they chose her as the time keeper. She also claimed that Daniella was the one responsible for their previous suspension. Leyla suspected that it was she who sold them out to the teachers.

Mr. Hilary was dumbfounded. He told Leyla to go back to class. He apologized for making a hasty decision without paying attention to my plea. He tried to

exonerate himself but the more he did it, the more I believed that the decision of sending Daniella home was entirely his and not the whole disciplinary committee. He had dictatorial traits that members of staff knew about, thus no one dared object anything he said.

“Teacher Melissa, I do not want to convene another meeting because of the evidence that we have. I want you to do me a favor. I know Daniella is so dear to you. Please, find contacts of any relative and tell him or her to let Daniella report back to school tomorrow.”

“Sir, you are the chairperson of the discipline committee. I have helped you get evidence that proves Daniella’s innocence. You are the one with the mandate of calling her back to school and deal with the right culprit. I will be happy to see Daniella in school tomorrow. Have a good day.” Mr. Hilary read my face. I was not going to do him the favor he had asked.

That evening, the principal, the deputy principal, Mrs. Daniel, the teacher in charge of guidance and counselling and I met Form Two Green for a counselling session in the multipurpose hall. We encouraged them to air out the issues that were bothering them but they were reserved.

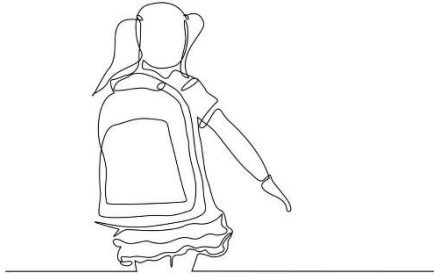
Leyla stood up and started crying as she apologized. She as usual blamed the devil for always being a loggerhead. The rest started shouting at her saying it was because of

her that they had been branded the most notorious class in the school. When the principal finally managed to calm them down, they demanded that Daniella should come back. They were assured that she would be joining them the following day.

After the guidance and counselling session, the principal found Leyla's parents waiting for her. She had summoned them again. Leyla's mum was uncontrollable. She could not believe that her daughter could punish an innocent girl to that extent. She told the principal to clear her daughter right away. She was tired of paying school fees for an ungrateful child who was always causing trouble in school. Leyla begged the principal not to clear her. She promised to change her way-ward ways for good.

I calmed Leyla's mum down and told her that Leyla was busy looking for attention in the wrong way. She needed enough time with her daughter to exactly know the root cause of her weird behavior. The principal released them and they were to report after two weeks.

“Teacher Melissa, I am utterly sorry for always causing trouble since I joined this school. My mind was clouded with jealousy even after you have proved how much you love us like your children. I promise I will come back a changed girl. My grades will also improve,” she said as she teared. I assured her that all would be well. They left.



### **CHAPTER THREE**

Daniella's mum, Aisha, was a member of a cartel that used to smuggle goods in the country. She had thrived in this business for a decade. She had become smarter by day. Daniella had lost touch with her mum because of her numerous trips.

Aisha's fortieth day caught up with her one fateful morning. Juma, a member of her cartel called to inform her that there was a consignment she was supposed to pick in Busia. It had been sent from Uganda. What she did not know was that Juma had alerted the police on the time Aisha would be picking the consignment. He had an unresolved grudge with her for a deal that had gone sour. She had failed to give him an agreed amount of

money in their previous deal. To eliminate her from the group, he decided to blow the whistle on her.

It was a wild-goose chase since Aisha was an experienced driver. She would rival a safari rally driver. At some point, she lost the police. She was muttering under her breath how she would teach Juma a life time lesson. He had played with fire.

Before she could overtake a tanker that was ahead of her, she noticed a peculiar car through the driver's mirror that was reluctant to overtake her however close it was. She decided to accelerate. It was too late because she was cornered after someone shot at the rear tyre of her car. Due to the tyre burst, she wavered off the road and another bullet caught her leg. The police rushed her to the hospital after they had secured the evidence in their car.

\*\*\*

When Daniella got home, she was worn out and confused at the same time. Luckily, her granny had left the keys at their usual place. That evening, her granny never came home. Daniella slept hungry. The next morning, a neighbor who had noticed that Daniella was home offered her breakfast as she enquired why she was home barely three days after opening school.

“Mama Keyla, I feel like God has forsaken me,” she started crying.

“God can never forsake you my child. He loves you so much.” She hushed her

“Why me Mama Keyla?” Mum is hospitalized, I have fee arrears and I have been suspended from school having been alleged to be a drunk. Indeed, misfortunes do not come singly. You know me very well Mama Keyla, I am a teetotaler. I have no reason to live. If the worst happens, tell grandma and mummy that I love them so much.”

“Don’t say that my child. I believe you are innocent. It must have been a misunderstanding. From today, I will take care of you and treat you like my own. I will be the one to take you back to school. For now, I want you to get ready so that we can visit your mum. I want to see that beautiful smile,” she said hugging her tightly.

Daniella was ready in thirty minutes. When they arrived at the hospital, the nurse at the reception was very kind. She directed them to Aisha’s room. They were both shocked to find an officer at the door. He looked at them quizzically but never uttered a word. They were more perplexed when they saw Aisha’s hand cuffed on the bed.

When mum and daughter met, it was a scene to behold. They hugged and kissed as they sobbed uncontrollably. Daniella had not set eyes on her mother for a year.

“I am so sorry my baby. I know I have not been the best mother. I have always projected my anger on you and you did not deserve that. I have deprived you love and care that you needed most. I was supposed to be your friend and confidant but I have failed you. Forgive me my baby.”

“I love you so much mummy, I have nothing against you.”

“Thanks a bunch my baby. I do not know for how long I will be put behind bars. I promise once I am freed, I will compensate all the lost years.” She let the tears flow freely.

“Are you going to prison? What did you do mummy? Tell the officer you are not a criminal. You are a good person mummy, please don’t leave me alone again,” she was inconsolable.

Mama Keyla tried disengaging her from the mother for the visiting hours were over. Her mum promised to explain everything the next time they would meet.

When they got home that evening, Daniella was so grateful to Mama Keyla for having made it possible for her to meet her mum. She said a burden had been lifted

off her shoulders and she felt at peace for reconciling with her mum. She prayed that the jail term would be short.

She asked Mama Keyla to help her contact Teacher Melissa. When she finally hang up, she did not know whether to celebrate or cry. She informed Mama Keyla that she was needed in school the next day. Teacher Melissa's words still rang in her mind.

\*\*\*

“Teacher Melissa, did you manage to contact Daniella's parents? The contact that I have is currently out of service.” Mr. Hilary sounded worried. A week had elapsed and Daniella had not reported back.

“She is coming back today, do not worry,” I said as I hurried to class.

She arrived in the afternoon in company of Mama Keyla. Mr. Hilary, together with the other members of the discipline committee attended to them. They told her that it was a misunderstanding that was fueled by vengeance and that the real culprit was already under punishment. She was thereafter referred to the guidance and counselling teacher and she went to class a happy girl.

“Hey Mama Keyla, thank you so much for accompanying Daniella today. I feel indebted to you. God will surely reward you,” I said as we shook hands.

“It’s nothing, Teacher Melissa. Watch over her, she is psychologically disturbed as I had told you over the phone. She will need a lot of encouragement and support. I will be calling you quite often to know her progress. Here, take this, I hope it will help reduce her fee balance.” She handed me some cash. I appreciated her for her selflessness and bid her goodbye.

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When Daniella got to class that evening, her classmates were ecstatic to see her back. The board was full of endearing messages from each member of the class. What baffled her the most was a gift that she will never forget the rest of her life. It was an envelope that contained an official school receipt. All the arrears had been cleared! It was Diana that handed it to her.

“Daniella, you are my home mate and I know everything that has been going on in your family. After you were sent home, I told the members of our class the hard times you are facing. They suggested that we contribute the little we could afford and through the help of the head girl, we were able to mobilize the whole school to give the little they had. We informed Teacher Melissa and she congratulated us for that noble course. She also informed

the members of staff who also gave us their contribution. That is how we were able to raise forty thousand shillings!”

Daniella could not contain her tears. They had a group hug. She realized she was immensely loved by the whole school. She promised them that she would ensure their efforts would bear fruits by improving her grades. Some helped her in catching up with what was taught in her absence while others helped her to update the notes.

Leyla finally reported back. Contrary to her expectations, she was reaccepted by each member of her class. She and Daniella became great friends. By the end of that term, Daniella improved in her overall mean grade though she did not attain her set target. She did not die heart.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

It was a new year. Members of Form Four Green were euphoric to be in their final year in high school. They were now mature and more focused than before. They were the talk of the school for having defeated the other two streams for a whole academic year in mathematics. The mathematics trophy had camped in their class. Due to the competition that was evident in the three streams, Form Four Green decided to cultivate team work even in readiness for the national examination.

Daniella was now the class prefect. She was the choice of the whole class since form three. During one of the class meetings, they could not contain themselves but laugh when Diana commented that they were almost used as bad examples when they were in form two. Leyla

also commented that she almost made Teacher Melissa run mad. They agreed that all is well that ends well.

Daniella and Leyla embarked on a project that they would present during the county Kenya Science and Engineering fair competitions. It was an Agriculture exhibit on how to incubate eggs using a paraffin lamb incubator. Mr. Hilary, who was in charge of Agriculture gave his all to ensure that the duo would have a quality presentation. Daniella and Leyla once again put Laki Girls' in the lime light after their project qualified to compete at the national level.

On the other hand, the form fours were busy preparing for a Biology symposium that was to happen after a week. Many schools had been invited and had confirmed their attendance. What excited the girls most was the fact that Machakos Boys, famously known as 'Mac Bee' would also be attending the symposium. Mac Bee had a special place in the girls' hearts because of their performance and discipline. It was a very busy week in readiness for the symposium.

When the day finally came, the girls were ready to prove to the other schools that Laki Girls' was a haven for beauty and brains. They were immaculately dressed and some smelled expensive colognes. The form threes were somehow envious. They wished that time would fly fast for them to be in form four and have the same

experience. Those that had friends in Mac Bee looked forward to receiving letters. They would brag with them for some days, giving those who would care to read. Anyone that would receive a letter written on a writing pad and smelling nice would carry the day.

Visitors finally arrived. They were grouped and given sets of questions to discuss. Morning hours were meant for discussions and presentations were scheduled for the afternoon. Daniella's group, which comprised students from Mac Bee, Chala High school and Meta Girls', was the best. She presented on behalf of the group and she earned herself an award from the Chief Examiner who graced the occasion. She received a biology revision book that was very vital in preparation for the national exam.

The symposium finally came to the end. Students were given some time to socialize. Daniella was overwhelmed by the number of students that wanted to say hello to her. They had admired her courage and more so her mastery of Biology content. One boy had liked Daniella so much that he thought of giving her his school sweater as a souvenir. She declined for she did not want him to interpret that the wrong way. Leyla and some few girls could not hide their envy. Leyla had even proposed to keep the sweater if Daniella did not want to.

On the other hand, few from threes were lucky to receive letters. They also reciprocated by writing replies to the senders. Two girls, Lucy and Harriet received the same letter from the same boy. The fight that followed led to their suspension. It was the talk of the school for a week.

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Aisha was put in remand for six months. She was still recuperating. She knew her chances of being set free were minimal. She requested one of the wardens to help her make a call home after she lied that her daughter was not feeling well. When she got the phone, she tried calling some people that would help her be acquitted but once they identified her voice, they hanged up on her. Hopelessness started kicking in.

Juma had it all planned for Aisha. After her trial, she had to serve a five-year jail term at Kamiti Maximum Prison. Juma decided to visit her one Sunday morning.

“I can see they are treating you well in here, you are in fact glowing!” he said as he clapped.

“Away with your sarcasm, idiot. What brings you here? Pray to the gods that you pray to that I don’t leave this place alive, because if I do, I will teach you a lesson that the devil himself will have to take notes.”

“Wow, wow, wow! I am so scared right now,” he burst out with laughter. “On the contrary, it is you to pray to

your gods that you leave this place alive. Life has taught me that if a bed is infested with bedbugs, I should not fumigate it but burn it. I wish you happiness in your next life, Aisha!” he left laughing sarcastically.

His words left Aisha speechless. She went back to her cubical looking so restless. She had to be careful with everyone. It was lunch time but she never went for her meal. For the first time, she thought of escaping but she did not know where to start.

That evening, three ladies that looked masculine visited her cubicle. They wanted to know who Aisha was. When they marked her face, they told her that if she wanted to be protected, she had to pass some tests and they would guarantee her safety because she was still new. After the trio left, Aisha’s roommates warned her against them. They were rumored to be assassins. Her roommate’s words were like a premonition. She had a sleepless and disturbed night.

The next day, there were tasks to be performed. Aisha was tasked to clean the washrooms. The three ladies that had approached her the previous night appeared from nowhere and locked her in. She was warned against screaming. They revealed to her that their master had paid them handsomely to silence her and that was what they had come for.

“Was it Juma? Please spare my life. I promise once I leave this place, I will double what he has offered you,” she pleaded.

“Who knows when you will be leaving this place, stupid woman? Don’t worry, what we shall administer to you won’t hurt, we are sending you to the other world peacefully,” they roared with laughter.

Aisha decided to fight but her efforts were futile. She saw one of them removing a syringe from her pocket containing some brown liquid. The other two pinned her down. They left her motionless on the floor. It was already too late when they found her. An urgent message was sent to her family.

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The form fours did a biology practical, their last paper of the county mocks. Second term was coming to an end. I was busy marking compositions so as to beat the deadline for submitting the marks. Someone knocked on my door. To my surprise, it was Mama Keyla.

“Mama Keyla! You got me by surprise. Daniella will be so happy to see you! But you didn’t have to come see her today yet we are closing school next week. Have a seat.” I was excited to see her but the excitement faded immediately I saw a tear fall.

“What is the matter Mama Keyla? Is everything alright?” I was alarmed.

“I have come to fetch Daniella, her mum is no more,” she said as she wiped tears with her shawl.

I felt dizzy. My head was spinning fast. She helped me to my seat. A long silence ensued. When I finally came around, I gave her my sincere condolences. I took her to the deputy’s office and briefed her why Mama Keyla had come. The deputy proposed that Daniella needed counselling before leaving but Mama Keyla said that there was a counsellor awaiting her at home. Daniella was called and told to get ready to go home.

When they were ready to depart, she came to my office to say goodbye. She tried to enquire from me why she had to go home earlier than the rest. I told her I knew nothing and Mama Keyla had all the answers. I struggled to force a smile and she could tell that I was lying. We agreed to keep in touch over the holiday.

The students left on a Thursday for the holiday. All the members of the teaching and the non-teaching staff were to leave on Friday to be with Daniella during her mum’s burial. The principal had seen it wise to include a few members of her class and she had called their parents to inform them of the same.

Daniella was so joyous to see all of us there. The principal promised her that the school would support her by paying the remaining school fees. She was feeling better by the time we left.

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It was third term, their final lap. The candidates were really busy in preparation for the national exam. The term was short, there was no time to waste. Daniella received psychosocial support from everyone in school. She was able to adapt quickly and got busy like the rest.

The candidates were exposed to very many exams. This saw them waking up very early and going to bed late at night. They had promised a mean score of 9.5 in the final exam. They had vowed to keep their word.

The principal and their class teachers decided to take them out to at least relax and be away from books for a day. The outing was so therapeutic to them. They came back rejuvenated. They were now ready for the exam as the rehearsal day neared.

One Tuesday morning, I went for a class meeting as usual. My girls seemed a bit restless. After the bible reading and prayers, Daniella informed me that the class had a special message for me. Leyla came to the front

with a piece of paper in her hands. It was a letter written by the whole class.

*Mum, you have been the best mother we could ever ask for. Four years ago, we reported to this school, being so naïve. Some of us were very small girls. Look at us now, you have guided, molded and shaped us to the ladies we are. Forgive us for the many times we have erred. We are confident that we will do well in the coming exam. We promise to make you so proud. We pray that God will bless you with long life, so that you will be able to celebrate our future success. Give us your blessings as we sit for the exams. We have a small gift for you, for remembrance. We love you mum.*

When she was done, the rest of the class started a song, *until we meet again*. It had been composed by Talia, a very quiet girl. Diana and Judy brought something bulky that was wrapped and handed it to me. It was a pink duvet! I almost became emotional but I restrained myself. I obliged to pray for them and gave them by blessings, as a mother and as their class teacher.

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Four weeks after the national examination was over, everyone was eagerly waiting for the results. I was in constant communication with Daniella since she cleared school. She was working at Mama Keyla's shop. She called me early in the morning on the day the results

were to be released. She said that she did not have the courage to see the results and requested me to do it for her. She sent me her index number. I told her to relax because I was confident she would do well.

Later in the day, the results were out. I could not believe it. Daniella had an A in English! She had broken the English performance record! In the previous years, A-s' were the highest grades in English. She had an overall mean grade of a B+. The other candidates did very well as well and they attained their target of 9.5. The entire Laki Girls' community was overjoyed.

I let Daniella know her results. She was over the moon having scored an A in English. She accepted the results though she had targeted an A-. I told her that she had done well and I was proud of her. I told her to write a shopping list of everything she would need while joining the university so that I could begin getting them for her.

I asked her if she would want to join a travelling theatre that stages set books in schools. She was ready to start immediately. The Director, *Goodspell Theatres Production*, Mr. Eudicus gladly accepted her to work with her before she could join the university. I was happy that she would be earning something from her talent.

When schools opened for the new year, we were privileged to see Daniella on stage. *Goodspell Theatres*

*Production* was staging *Blossoms of the Savannah*. She had been given the role of Resian, the main character in the novel. Just like Resian, Daniella had had her own share of life troubles. She brought out that character so well. I could not thank her Director enough for giving her a chance to showcase her talent.

During the revision of the courses, Daniella had chosen to pursue Bachelor of Education Arts, at Kenyatta University and still continue staging the set books during her free time. It was wise of her. When the admission day finally came, I joined Mama Keyla and Daniella's granny to take her to her dream university. She began another phase of her life, shaping her career path!

*The end.*