LINES ON PAPER

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by

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Dedication

For every dreamer who built something beautiful with nothing but their hands, a little faith, and a scrap of paper.

Epigraph

"Even the tallest tree once started as a seed buried in darkness."

— African Proverb

CHAPTER 1

The rain had stopped hours ago, but the ground still squelched under Naima's battered plastic sandals as she picked her careful way through the narrow alley behind the tin-roofed shops. Mud clung stubbornly to her toes, cool and sticky. The air hung thick with the smell of damp earth, acrid smoke from cooking fires, and the sharp, metallic tang of sewage that never quite disappeared, no matter how long the sun beat down or how many times the council promised repairs.

Up ahead, a knot of people had formed near the crumbling cement wall behind Mr. Githinji's welding shed—a wall so patched and weary it seemed to sigh in defeat. It had collapsed overnight—again.

Naima quickened her steps, clutching her schoolbooks tighter against her chest, their spines digging into her arms. One side of the wall had caved in completely, exposing what had once been someone's sleeping space: a battered plastic basin cracked clean down the middle, a pair of flip-flops crushed under a slab of concrete, and a mosquito net, torn and ghostly, fluttering weakly in the breeze like a forgotten prayer. The rawness of it stung.

Miraculously, no one had been hurt, though the crowd's murmurs crackled with blame, frustration, and a weary kind of surrender.

"They built too close to the drain again," someone muttered, their voice thick with the dust of long-swallowed anger.
"Concrete without support. Just like last time."
"They never learn."

Naima said nothing. Words felt too heavy, too small. She just stared at the wreckage, her fingers twitching, hungry for the familiar weight of her sketchbook. In her mind, lines and curves already began to bloom, tracing the story the fallen wall could not speak for itself.

She shifted her books to one arm and slipped her free hand into the pocket of her skirt, feeling for the worn edge of her pencil. If the world around her insisted on crumbling, maybe—just maybe—she could find a way to sketch it into something new.

Back home, Naima crouched on the frayed edge of her thin mattress, toes curled into the threadbare fabric, while her siblings bickered over who had taken the last scrap of sukuma from the dented aluminum plate. The room pulsed with the noise of living: the clatter of spoons, the shuffle of feet, the low hum of old arguments resurfacing like stubborn weeds.

Their mother moved swiftly around the cramped, one-room house, her steps sharp and efficient—a conductor in a symphony of survival. She stirred a pot balanced precariously on the jiko, sorted coins with a clink and rustle, adjusted the paraffin lamp whose weak flame painted the peeling walls in strokes of gold and shadow.

Naima opened her schoolbook with a sigh, pretending to read, but her mind snagged and drifted, tugged away from history dates and the unfinished algebra problems waiting like abandoned cities.

Almost without thinking, she flipped to the last page—the secret page—and let her pencil whisper across the paper. Light at first, cautious, like a bird testing the air. A wall took shape under her hand, but this one was different: it had proper drainage running behind it, a slight, deliberate angle to carry the rainwater away. She added a sloped roof pieced from reclaimed iron sheets, a clever ventilation flap at the top to let the heat escape, gutters feeding neatly into a salvaged tank.

Each stroke of the pencil was a quiet rebellion against the way things were.
Each detail—the flowerbed hugging the foundation, the smooth stone set under the window for sitting—felt like breathing easier. Like a place that would endure storms instead of crumbling under them.

It wasn't much. Just graphite and hope.
But it was *better* than a wall that fell every rainy season.
It was *something*.

She was so deep inside her imagined world that she didn't notice her mother's shadow falling across the page until it darkened the house she was building with her bare hands.

"What's that?" her mother asked, wiping her damp hands on a faded kitenge, her voice soft with exhaustion.

Startled, Naima snapped the book shut, trapping the dream inside. "Nothing," she mumbled. "Just notes for school."

Her mother gave a tired, lopsided smile—the kind of smile worn thin by too many years of making do.
“Don’t forget the real tests next week,” she said, her voice kind but heavy. “Drawing won’t put food on this table.”

Naima nodded, folding her hands protectively over the book, feeling the pressure of unspoken dreams pressing back. She didn’t argue. Not tonight.
Instead, she tucked the hope away, quiet and burning, where no rain could wash it out.

Later, when the others had drifted into restless sleep and the city had softened into its usual nighttime rustle—whispers of distant radios, the creak of settling roofs, the low grumble of a motorbike in the far-off dark—Naima reached under her mattress with practiced fingers.

She pulled out her real sketchbook—the sacred one, hidden away where no careless hand or curious eye could reach. Its cover was worn smooth from years of secret handling, the pages inside a patchwork of dreams: some edges curled and yellowed with age, others smudged by charcoal dust and the weight of hopes too big for daylight.

She turned carefully to a blank sheet.
A clean beginning.
A silent promise.

In the soft, uncertain glow of the flickering paraffin lantern, Naima began to build.
Not with bricks heavy and crumbling.
Not with cement that cracked and forgot its promises.

But with lines on paper—fine and deliberate, each stroke a foundation.
Walls rose from the emptiness, strong and sure. Roofs spread wide like sheltering wings.

Windows opened to skies that didn’t leak. Gardens bloomed along tidy paths. Tanks filled with captured rain.

In this quiet hour, she was not poor, not cornered by crumbling walls or leaking roofs.

She was an architect of *what could be*.

And somewhere deep inside, she promised herself:

Someday, she would build a house that no storm could tear down.

Not just on paper.

For real.

CHAPTER 2

Naima liked mornings best—those tender, trembling hours before the city fully woke up. Before the shouting started. Before the dust rose thick in the air. Before the scramble for water at the cracked taps or the mad jostle for space on the rumbling matatus.

In that stillness, when the streets yawned and stretched and everything smelled faintly of dew and ash, she could almost pretend her world had more room in it. More breathing space. More possibilities.

The path to school twisted past rows of iron-sheet kiosks patched with scraps of tarpaulin, past crumbling walls layered with the ghosts of old election posters and the heavy breath of charcoal smoke. Naima always walked quickly but carefully, her sandals slapping softly against the dirt, her eyes never still.

She scanned the ground, yes—but more than that, she scanned the world itself.
Mentally rebuilding it as she moved.

If they just tilted that roof differently, the runoff wouldn't flood the neighbor's doorway.
If someone widened that narrow walkway by half a meter, kids wouldn't have to dodge bodas skimming past like angry wasps.

If this alley had a proper light—just one—maybe Mama wouldn't worry so much when I walk home late.

Naima didn't see a broken world.

She saw a badly built one.

And deep in her chest, fierce and certain, she knew: *it could be fixed.*

Not someday. Not by someone else.

By her.

At school, the courtyard buzzed with restless energy, a hive of noise and color. Students leaned against cracked walls or clustered near classroom doors, dodging prefects who prowled like street cats, flicking crumbs off their uniforms and trading sweets for gossip. The air smelled like dust, cheap cologne, and fresh mandazis from the canteen.

Naima moved through the crowd like smoke—there, but too quick, too light to catch. She weaved past a group tossing a paper ball, ducked around a shouting match by the notice board, and slipped into her usual sanctuary: the back row of the class, where the peeling green paint curled away from the walls like dry leaves.

She slid into her seat, tucking her sketchbook carefully between her battered history textbook and a dog-eared dictionary missing its front cover. She barely had time to exhale before Leila crashed into the seat beside her, breathless and grinning like she had swallowed the sun.

"Did you hear?" Leila gasped, shoving a crumpled flyer into Naima's hands. "There's a new art competition. *National*, Naima. Winners get a trip to Mombasa for the finals. *Mombasa*, can you imagine? Hotels. Buffets. The ocean!"

She fanned herself dramatically with another paper like it was a VIP ticket to another life.

Leila grinned wider, practically vibrating. “It’s called *‘Rebuild Your Future.’* You can paint, build, write, whatever. They just want you to show what you think the future should look like. They’re even bringing in engineering students. And reporters. Maybe even Nation TV!” She gave a little squeal and grabbed Naima’s sleeve. "Imagine—*us* on TV. Your name on a poster. Your face in a magazine!"

Naima gave a small, uncertain laugh, glancing down at the flyer. Bright colors. Big promises. She could already see the cracks.
“It’s just for show,” she said, shaking her head. “They pick the kids with rich uncles and private art teachers. Kids who have supplies... studios... time.”

Leila jabbed her sharply in the ribs. "Stop it. You don't need fancy stuff. You have *that brain* of yours. You have *this*," she said, tapping Naima’s sketchbook pointedly. "You draw buildings better than actual engineers. I've seen it!"

Naima shrugged, trying to act casual, but her cheeks warmed. “Sketches don’t win competitions.”

"They don’t yet," Leila said, leaning in, dropping her voice like she was sharing a secret with the universe. "But maybe yours could." She wiggled her eyebrows. "Plus, think about it—*Mombasa*, girl. White sand. Coconut ice cream. Boys with proper haircuts."

Naima snorted, finally laughing for real. "You’re impossible," she said, nudging Leila’s shoulder.

"And you’re *brilliant,*" Leila shot back, grinning fiercely. "So go ahead. Enter. Blow them away. Show them how it’s *really* done."

Naima shook her head again, but softer this time, the no already losing its strength.
Because even as she tried to bat the idea away, somewhere deep inside, she could feel it

growing: a seed catching light.

A blueprint unrolling itself.

A future she could *build*—one line, one dream at a time.

That afternoon, Naima lingered behind after the final bell, pretending to sharpen pencils at the old, scarred sharpener bolted to the wall. The classroom emptied slowly, buzzing with footsteps, laughter, and the scrape of chairs across concrete.

She waited.

Waited until the last student shouted a goodbye and the door swung shut with a sigh.

Then, in the thick, humming quiet, she spread her sketchbook out across her desk like it was a sacred map.

The sunlight angled low through the dusty windows, slanting gold across the pages. Naima turned to a fresh sheet, heart thudding, pencil trembling slightly in her fingers—not with fear, but with *the weight of possibility.*

She didn’t draw the future from the shiny posters or the blinking billboards—the ones with gleaming glass towers scraping the sky, silver trains slicing through invisible air.

That wasn’t *her* future. That wasn’t *her* city.

She drew what she *knew*—what *could be* if people just listened, if people just *cared*.

She sketched a reimagined version of her neighborhood: homes built low and strong, each one angled to catch the morning sunlight and dry the walls after the rain.

Pathways that curved with the land's natural bends, flowing like rivers instead of cutting through like scars.

Drainage systems that didn't just dump water into the alleys but carried it away cleanly, safely.

Community kitchens—big, open spaces where no one had to choose between cooking indoors and choking on smoke.

Shared courtyards strung with clotheslines and laughter, gardens carved into the corners, benches tucked under trees.

The kind of place where no one's roof leaked in the night, where no child had to climb over rubble to get to school, where no mother had to check if the walls would hold after a hard rain.

Naima's pencil flew across the paper, shaping, shading, dreaming in lines and curves.

She didn't know if it would be considered "art" by the judges with their glittering eyes and expensive shoes.

She didn't know if it would win or even be noticed.

But she knew one thing, steady and sharp as a blade inside her chest:

It was hers.

And that was enough to keep drawing.

That evening, after the dishes had been scrubbed and her siblings had collapsed into piles of worn blankets, Naima climbed the narrow stairs to their tiny loft. The space was barely bigger than a closet, wedged under the slant of the corrugated roof, but it was hers—*hers* in the way secret places always are.

She crouched next to the pile of discarded cardboard Mama used for packing sukuma for the market. Her hands sifted through the mound—thin, stained sheets bent from rain; a few battered bottle caps; a broken wire hanger twisted into something almost bird-like.

No fancy supplies.

No gleaming tools.

Just scraps.

But architects, she reminded herself fiercely, didn't always start with steel and glass.

Sometimes they started with the things other people threw away.

Sometimes they started with nothing but a stubborn spark and a battered ruler.

By the unsteady light of the paraffin lamp, she traced the base of her model onto the flattest piece of cardboard she could find, the edge of her school ruler catching on the soft, splintering surface. She cut and glued with the careful precision of someone stitching a wound.

Walls rose from nothing.

Paths curved into being.

Tiny homes, courtyards, drainage canals—all forming under her hands, rough and imperfect but *real.*

The glue oozed between her fingers, sticking to her skin, but she didn't stop. Her eyes burned from the smoke of the lamp. Her back cramped from hunching over. Still, she kept working.

Because right here, in the quiet hum of the night, she wasn't just building a model.

She was building a beginning.

When she finally leaned back, rubbing her aching hands on her skirt, the model sat there—wobbly, a little crooked, smelling faintly of onions and glue—but *alive.*

Possible.

Tomorrow, she'd bring it to school. Quietly. Anonymously. She'd tuck it behind her books, slip it onto the competition table without anyone noticing.

Just in case.

Because maybe, just maybe, the future didn't need grand gestures or glittering speeches.

Maybe it could start with a few lines on paper.

And a model made from trash.

And a girl trying her lack.

CHAPTER 3

The model was swaddled in one of Mama’s old kitenge scarves, the bright fabric worn soft from years of washing but still fierce with color—reds and oranges and deep blue spirals that looked like storms.

Naima carried it like a secret, like something fragile and sacred, cradled her lap as if it were a sleeping bird she was afraid to wake.

She perched on the edge of the matatu seat, knees jammed against the metal frame, ignoring the curious glances tossed her way. A boy with dusty shoes kept sneaking peeks. An old man muttered something under his breath—something about "girls and their toys"—and clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

Naima just stared out the window, arms tightening protectively around the bundle.

They didn’t understand.

They didn’t have to.

Every bump in the road made her wince, imagining the delicate cardboard crumpling, the tiny walls collapsing. But she kept her face blank, kept the model steady, willing it to survive the rattling, coughing ride through the waking city.

At the school gate, a prefect stepped forward, clipboard in hand, his tie crooked, his face full of self-importance.

"What's that?" he asked, squinting suspiciously at the lumpy bundle in her arms.

Naima didn't break stride.

"Homework," she mumbled, head down, weaving past him before he could ask another question.

Behind her, she heard the prefect snort and shout at another student about untucked shirts.

Naima allowed herself a tiny, hidden smile.

Let them think it was homework.

Because in a way, it was.

It was the realest assignment she'd ever done.

A blueprint for a future she wanted to give a try.

Inside the art room, the other entries were already lined up like soldiers for inspection, crowding two long, chipped tables near the dusty windows.

Paintings bloomed in wild, vivid colors—futuristic cities with shimmering towers and floating cars.

A charcoal sketch showed a robotic farmer sowing neat rows of grain under a neon sun.

Someone had crafted a gleaming sculpture out of soda cans and glitter-glue sticks, its spirals catching the morning light.

Naima hovered at the doorway, heart thudding against her ribs.

Her bundle felt heavier now, as if it knew how different it was.

No bright paints.

No smooth curves.

No silver or neon.

Just matchboxes, plastic straws, the stiff flap of an old cardboard box, and a bent fork that had once been part of Mama's kitchen drawer.

It wasn't shiny.

But it was *measured.*

Functional.

Real.

Taking a breath so deep it almost hurt, Naima moved forward.

She found a small patch of table near the corner, away from the big, dramatic entries.

Carefully, reverently, she set her bundle down and peeled back the kitenge.

The scarf puddled around her hands, and there it was—her tiny neighborhood, crooked but proud, a dream stitched from scraps.

A few students nearby craned their necks to look. One girl—older, someone Naima had only ever seen from a distance—let out a low whistle.

"You did this?" she asked, eyebrows lifted, not mocking—*curious.*

Naima nodded, cautious, the old reflex to shrink back fighting the stubborn lift in her chin.

Before she could answer properly, a teacher bustled past, clipboard in hand, reading off names. He caught sight of the model and slowed, squinting at it over his glasses.

"Did you submit a description?" he barked, barely looking at her.

Naima blinked, tongue dry in her mouth.

"No, sir. I—I wasn't sure if—"

"Well, go write one. Now."

He was already turning away, shouting something about deadlines and neat handwriting over his shoulder.

Her hands shaking slightly, Naima grabbed a battered handout from the bottom of her backpack—the back was mostly blank except for a doodle in one corner. She crouched at the edge of a windowsill and scribbled, the words tumbling out faster than she expected:

"A reimagined low-income settlement built from local, affordable materials. Solar-powered shared kitchens. Rainwater catchers. Community gardens. Safe pathways for children."

She paused, reread it once. It wasn't perfect.

But it was *true.*

At the bottom, she signed it simply:

Naima.

No surname. No bravado.

Just *Naima.*

She tucked the paper under the edge of her model and walked away before anyone could ask more questions, each step feeling like she was threading a needle across a canyon.

She didn't look back.

Not yet.

Sometimes the strongest thing you could do was *leave your work standing and trust it to speak for itself.*

The results were to be announced the next day during a class assembly.

Naima sat on the hard courtyard benches, squeezed between restless classmates who swatted flies and whispered about weekend plans.

She didn't expect to win.

She barely dared to hope.

All she wanted, deep down where she hardly admitted it even to herself, was for *someone* to have seen it.

To have *really seen* it—the crooked little dream built from cardboard and late night sleep and hope.

The head teacher, a tall man with a silver whistle forever dangling from his neck, stepped up to the cracked podium.

The microphone squealed once, causing a ripple of snickers.

He adjusted his papers with theatrical slowness, scanning the courtyard like he was searching for someone.

Naima tucked her chin down, heart thudding.

Probably announcing some painting with flying cars, she thought.

Probably—

His voice boomed, slicing the morning air clean in two:

"First prize in the regional 'Rebuild Your Future' competition goes to… Naima Atieno."

For a full second, the world held its breath.

Even the crows on the microphone wire seemed to pause mid-caw.

Then—

The courtyard *erupted* in whistles, shouts, claps—some genuine, others teasing or sarcastic.

Some boys near the back mock-cheered; someone banged a locker for extra noise.

But Naima barely heard any of it.

She sat frozen, her fingers digging into the worn fabric of her skirt.

Her mind tried to catch up, stumbling over itself.

She had won.

She. Had. *Won.*

The teacher called her name again, gesturing impatiently for her to come forward.

For a flicker of a second, she thought about staying seated, about disappearing into the cracks in the cement.

But then something deep inside her—something stitched together from late night sleep and bent forks and old kitenge dreams—stood up first.

Before her legs even knew what they were doing, Naima rose to her feet.

Not fast. Not flashy.

But sure.

Sure in a way she had never felt before.

The claps swelled as she made her way down the aisle, each step setting something in her chest ablaze—something wild and possible and *hers.*

And for the first time, she let herself imagine it:

A future she could build, one hopeful, brilliant piece at a time.

Later that morning during break time, Naima wandered the hallway, still a little dazed, her shoes dusty from standing on the stage.

The certificate tucked into her notebook felt impossibly heavy, like it was made of stone instead of cheap paper.

She was halfway past the science lab when a hard shoulder slammed into hers, knocking her sideways.

She turned, blinking in surprise.

It was Kesia—her classmate, the girl whose uncle just so happened to be the headteacher. Kesia's polished braids swung over one shoulder as she leaned in close, voice sharp as broken glass.

"You think you're clever?" Kesia hissed, loud enough for the nearby students to hear.

Naima frowned, confused.
"What—?"

"I saw that model online," Kesia spat, her lips curling in a sneer.
"From some YouTube channel. Some white guy building slums for charity. You *copied* it."

Naima's stomach dropped.
"I didn't—" she started, but Kesia was already raising her voice, sharp and theatrical, designed to catch ears like a hook catches fish.

"She cheated!" Kesia cried.
"Ask her! Ask her to show the plan! She doesn't even know what a scale is!"

The hallway shifted instantly.
Heads turned.
Whispers bloomed, fast and choking as wildfire:
Cheated?

Copied?

I knew it…

She's not even good at math, is she?

Naima's throat tightened.

Her fingers itched to yank out her sketchbook, to show them the pages worn thin from nights hunched over drawings.

The sketches. The calculations. The way she measured every line by hand because she couldn't afford a proper scale ruler.

But her mouth stayed frozen.

Because she knew—*once people wanted to believe something, it didn't matter what you showed them.*

Lies traveled faster than truth ever could.

Then—

A flash of color.

A rush of sandals.

Leila.

Leila shoved her way through the forming crowd, face fierce, cheeks flushed with anger.

"You're lying, Kesia!" she snapped, planting herself between them like a shield.

"I saw her making it. In class. After school. Every day. She didn't steal anything!"

Kesia rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Yeah, right. Best friends covering for each other. Classic."

"You’re just mad she’s better than you!" Leila shot back, voice trembling with rage.
"And if you actually watched the videos you’re talking about, you’d know *Naima’s design isn’t even the same!*"

For a half-second, Naima thought the crowd might actually believe her.
Might actually *listen.*

But then—From the corner of her eye, she saw a figure step out from the staff room—Mr. Muli, a deputy headteacher known for his clipped sentences and suspicious eyes.

"Naima," he called sharply, beckoning her with two fingers.
"We need to speak with you."

The crowd parted, murmuring like vultures circling something not-quite-dead.

Naima clutched her sketchbook tighter to her chest, every step toward the staff room feeling heavier than the last.
Not because she was guilty.
But because she knew that sometimes—*truth isn’t enough when the world wants a villain.*

The staff room was thick with stale heat, the windows shut tight against the swirling dust outside.
A battered pedestal fan whirred half-heartedly in the corner, doing nothing to move the heavy air.

Three teachers sat in a row behind a desk like judges in an invisible courtroom.
Their faces were carved from stone — blank, careful, heavy with the kind of suspicion that weighed more than words.

The deputy head leaned forward, steepling his fingers.

"We've received a complaint," he said, his voice low and measured, *"A serious one."*

Naima's heart hammered against her ribs. Her mouth was sandpaper.

"I didn't copy anyone," she said.

Her voice didn't tremble—but it was barely above a whisper.

The teachers exchanged a glance that felt heavier than a shout.

"Do you have the original sketches?" one asked — the English teacher, the only one who ever bothered to learn all their names.

Naima nodded quickly.

"Yes. In my notebook. I can bring them."

Another pause. A breath held in the stale, buzzing air.

"Tomorrow," the deputy said at last, tapping a pen against the desk. *"Bring everything. Notes. Drafts. Measurements. If you have them."*

Naima clutched the strap of her bag tighter, nodding again even though her whole body felt too loose, like a puppet with fraying strings.

"Until then," the deputy continued, his voice slipping into the cold register of official business, *"You are disqualified. Pending review."*

Disqualified.

The word didn't just sting—it *hollowed* her out.

It left her standing there, emptied of something she hadn't even realized she was carrying.

When they dismissed her, she stepped outside into the brightness of the courtyard, the sun hit her face like a slap.
Around her, life carried on: shouts, footsteps, laughter.

Nobody even noticed the girl walking home with a heart scraped raw.

That night, Naima sat cross-legged on the cracked floor, a dull knife in her hand, peeling cassava with slow, mechanical strokes.
Her siblings chattered around her—bickering about who got the bigger piece, laughing over stories from school—but their noise seemed far away, muffled, like she was sitting at the bottom of a deep, lonely well.

The soft scrape of blade against skin was the only sound she really heard.
Over and over, steady and numbing.
The peels piled up like small failures at her feet.

Her mother moved around the room with her usual quiet efficiency, her silhouette a blur against the wavering light of the paraffin lamp.
At one point, she paused by Naima's side.

"You're quiet tonight," her mother said, voice low, more statement than question.

Naima just shrugged, her shoulders tight as knots.

"You lose something?" her mother asked gently.
The words were simple, but they cracked something small and brittle inside Naima.

She nodded without looking up, afraid her voice might shatter if she tried to use it.

Her mother didn’t sigh. Didn’t frown. Didn’t ask for explanations Naima didn’t have the strength to give.

She simply reached into the woven basket by her side, picked out another cassava root, and placed it firmly in Naima’s palm.

“Then start again,” she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

The root was cool and rough against Naima’s skin.

Heavy. Real.

She pressed the blade to it, and this time, her hand steadied.

Not because the sadness had vanished.

But because maybe—*maybe*—this was how you built a future too:

Not all at once.

But peel by peel.

The house was asleep.

The steady breathing of her siblings filled the room, a kind of rhythm that made the shadows feel less lonely.

Mama’s soft snore drifted from behind the curtain, steady as a heartbeat.

Naima sat on the edge of her mattress, her bare feet pressed into the cool earth floor.

The lantern had burned out an hour ago, but she didn’t need light.

She reached beneath the mattress and pulled out her notebook.

The one with frayed edges and pages stained with charcoal and longing.

She flipped through the sketches slowly—finger tracing the margins where she’d written tiny notes in pencil, nearly illegible now.

“Gutter angle.”

“Community sink drainage.”

“Toothpick = 1 meter.”

She stopped on the page with the first sketch.

The one she’d done in the back of her history book, the lines wobbly from trying to draw while standing on the matatu.

It wasn’t perfect.

It wasn’t polished.

But it was hers.

She closed the notebook gently, like tucking in a child.

And placed it at the top of her bag.

No speech.

No declaration.

Just the quiet, deliberate act of choosing not to disappear.

Tomorrow, she would walk back into that office.

Not to defend herself—

But to *be* herself.

Because the future wasn’t made for people who waited to be chosen.

Sometimes, you had to show up with your name still shaking in your throat,

And say it anyway.

CHAPTER 4

The art room was still again.

The hum of competition had faded. No buzz of students, no flurry of judges or cameras. Just silence.

The smell of old paint clung to the air, mixed with the faint scent of dust and sun-warmed wood.

Naima stood just outside the doorway, her schoolbag dragging slightly from her shoulder. Her feet stayed rooted to the floor.

She wasn't sure why she had come—curiosity, maybe. Or just the ache of not knowing how to let go.

Her model was still there.

But it had been shoved to the far edge of the display table, half-buried beneath someone's forgotten lab coat and a roll of masking tape.

The cardboard had begun to warp at the corners. A plastic straw gutter had come loose.

A thin spiderweb stretched from the edge of the water tank to the miniature roof, trembling in the light breeze through the cracked window.

Naima stepped forward and reached out, fingers hovering above the web—careful not to break it, unsure if she even had the right to touch what she had made anymore.

“It’s a shame,” a voice said behind her. “They’ll never see what you really built.”

She turned, startled.

A tall man stood a few feet away, leaning slightly on a walking stick with a polished wooden handle.
He wore dark brown slacks, a crisp, cream-colored shirt with sleeves rolled neatly to the elbow, and he held a weathered notebook under one arm.
He wasn’t a teacher. Not one she knew, anyway. But something about him—the quiet presence, the steady way he stood—felt like he belonged.

“I’m sorry—do I know you?” she asked, her voice cautious, small.

He smiled gently, not intruding. “No. But I know good work when I see it.”

Naima looked away. Her fingers curled against her skirt.

“It wasn’t good enough,” she said. “They said I copied it.”

“Did you?”

“No,” she said softly, the word like a stone dropped in a deep well.

“Then that’s all that matters,” he said, his voice even, unshaken by the world’s noise.

He stepped closer to the table, examining the model with the same care a jeweler might give to a flawed but brilliant stone.
His fingers traced the edge of a footpath made from paper strips. The miniature courtyard. The shared kitchen tucked between low walls.

“Your placement of green space between dwellings—was that intentional?”

Naima blinked, surprised. “Yes. For cooling. And for children to play. It helps community safety too. I… I read that.”

He nodded slowly, impressed. “And the shared kitchen?”

“Cross-ventilation,” she answered without hesitation now. “And it brings women together. It’s safer. Some cookfires cause respiratory illness, especially indoors, so open-air design matters. And it builds community.”

Her words picked up speed, her hands beginning to gesture as the ideas poured out—the water runoff, the communal storage, the sloped roofing to redirect rainfall, the light wells. She didn’t notice how her voice filled the room again, like she was casting a spell that turned cardboard and bottle caps into stone, glass, and future.

When she finally stopped, breath catching, the man was quiet for a long moment. Then he said simply:

“You think like an architect.”

Naima stared. The words didn’t feel real. They felt like someone else’s dream.

He extended a hand. “I’m Mr. Barasa. I used to teach architecture at the university. Retired now, but I run a youth urban design program here in the city. We teach design basics, hold workshops. Sometimes we even build what we draw. Small things, but real—benches, kitchens, shaded gathering spots.”

Naima hesitated. “Like… real buildings?”

He chuckled softly. “Yes. Real enough to sit on. To shelter under. To matter.”

She looked back at her model, wilted but still standing.

He continued, “We could use a mind like yours. Would you come by one weekend? Just to see.”

Naima bit her lip. Her heart thudded. “Me?”

“Yes, you,” he said, with no doubt in his tone. “You’ve already started building the future. You just need to learn the language.”

She didn’t know what to say. So she just nodded.

Not because she was certain.
But because something in her had already begun to rebuild.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor.

A moment later, **Mr. Muli** walked in, with **Ms. Rukia** and **Mr. Ndung’u** trailing behind him.

They froze at the sight: Naima mid-explanation, notebook open, the model now uncovered and glowing in the daylight like something rediscovered. And Mr. Barasa, unmistakable in stature and bearing.

“Mr. Barasa?” Ms. Rukia said, blinking.

Barasa straightened. “Good morning. I was just having a look at this young lady’s work.”

Mr. Muli stepped forward slowly. “We’ve been reviewing a complaint against her submission. Questions of originality.”

“She’s already walked me through her entire process,” Mr. Barasa said calmly. “Detailed sketches. Incremental revisions. She even improvised structural supports with toothpicks—clever, really. And every design decision has a function.”

Ms. Rukia moved to the table, flipping through Naima’s notebook. “She brought it this morning. I hadn’t finished reviewing.”

Mr. Ndung’u thumbed through a few pages and whistled under his breath. “This is… meticulous.”

Naima stood still, hands at her sides, every muscle coiled. She wasn’t sure if they were about to praise her or punish her.

But then Mr. Muli’s eyes met hers. Not hard. Not cold. Just quiet, like he was thinking.

“Why didn’t you bring this with you yesterday?”

“I thought it wasn’t needed for the competition.”

Barasa looked at Mr. Muli. “Well, I believe her. And more than that—I think she needs mentorship. Guidance. She’s not copying some online video. She’s reverse-engineering real problems with local solutions. That kind of thinking doesn’t come from watching a screen. It comes from *living inside the problem*.”

Mr. Muli nodded slowly. “She’ll stay in the competition. We’ll send the sketches to the committee with a statement.”

Naima’s eyes flicked between them. “So… I’m not disqualified?”

Mr. Muli actually smiled. Just a little. “On the contrary, Naima. I think your real test just began.”

Barasa chuckled softly. “She’s already passed the first one.”

Naima exhaled for what felt like the first time all day. The weight didn’t vanish. But it shifted—became momentum.

She walked home that day with her sketchbook pressed tightly to her chest, her heart knocking against her ribs in a rhythm that felt like a yes.
A soft, rising yes that matched her steps.
The sun hung low behind heavy clouds, and the roadside puddles reflected slivers of light like broken mirrors. A matatu splashed past, but Naima barely noticed. Her shoes were soaked, her socks squished with every step, but she didn’t flinch. For the first time in days, her feet felt light—as if the ground had finally stopped trying to swallow her dreams.

Even the busted pipe by the corner kiosk, where water spilled into the road like a small rebellion, couldn’t touch her mood. She smiled when someone shouted about broken drainage. *One day,* she thought, *I'll fix that too.*

At home, the evening unfolded in the usual rhythm—helping her siblings with homework, rinsing lentils for dinner, fetching a basin of water to scrub the floor. But there was a hum under it all. Like something blooming in her chest, quiet and green and hopeful.

Later, when the younger ones had drifted off beneath their thin blankets and the night sounds began—the rattle of wind against iron sheets, the hum of a far-off generator—Naima lit the lantern and pulled out her notebook.

She turned slowly, past the rough drafts, the sketches with curled edges and smudged lines. Past the drawings she’d made in anger and fear. She found a clean page. White. Waiting.

Then she drew.

Not for a prize.

Not for the school.

Not even to prove anything to Mr. Muli, Kesia, or the panel of judges.

Just to remember what it felt like to believe in the work again.

She drew rooftops that smiled in the rain, staircases that wrapped around gardens, and doorways wide enough for possibility. Her pencil moved like breath. Steady. Sure.

She wasn't sure where it was all going. But for now, that didn't matter.

What mattered was that the page was no longer empty.

During the Weekend

The community center looked like nothing much from the outside—just a squat concrete structure at the edge of a weedy football pitch. Its roof sagged in places, and the green paint flaked off like old dreams. One of the window panes was missing, replaced with cardboard and masking tape. But to Naima, it was a marvel.

To her, it looked like potential.

Inside, the air was thick with the scent of sawdust, warm dust, and ambition. A fan whirred weakly from a corner. The buzz of conversation filled the space—sharp, fast voices bouncing between laptops, drawing boards, and stacks of reused timber. Someone was explaining the difference between passive ventilation and cross-ventilation. Another group debated soil compaction ratios.

A mural stretched across the far wall—chalk outlines of a future skyline. One half gleamed with tidy solar rooftops and tree-lined streets. The other was smudged and wild, like memory trying to catch up to hope.

Naima hovered at the doorway, arms crossed tightly over her chest, trying to look smaller than she felt. Her eyes scanned the room like she was walking through someone else's dream.

Mr. Barasa spotted her and gave a small wave. "No one bites. Come."

She stepped inside slowly, her feet careful on the scuffed tile floor.

He led her around, introducing her to a cluster of students from the polytechnic, an intern named Mumo who had once worked on a real drainage upgrade in Mathare, and a quiet girl called Alvine who specialized in sustainable insulation using banana fiber. Everyone wore different things—some with overalls, others in school uniforms or dust-covered hoodies. No one looked the same, but somehow, everyone belonged.

Naima didn't say much. She nodded, murmured a few words. Mostly, she watched. How they measured twice before cutting. How they checked wind direction against street orientation. How their hands moved across graph paper like it was second nature.

By mid-morning, she was leaning over a workbench with a borrowed pencil, sketching a small community playground tucked between repurposed housing blocks. The jungle gym was made of old tires. The benches were molded from compressed sandbags. Salvaged fabric stretched across poles like sails, casting shade over children's paths.

One of the interns peered over her shoulder, eyebrows raised. "You think like a site planner, not just a designer."

Naima blinked. "Is that… good?"

The intern grinned and patted her on the back. “It’s the best thing you can be. Dreamers build towers. Planners build places people live in.”

Naima smiled. Not the small, polite curve she gave teachers or aunties. A real one. The kind that reached her eyes.

Because for the first time, it wasn’t just a dream on paper.
She was building something that might stay.

CHAPTER 5

A Week Later, Back in the Art Room.

The model was still there. Naima visited it often, quietly, after school. She'd brush off the dust, adjust a fallen wall. Like checking on an injured friend.

That afternoon, the sun slanted through the high window in wide golden bands, warming the cardboard rooftops and glinting off the bent fork she'd used as a structural brace. She stood beside it, not touching, just looking.

Then footsteps. Two sets. Familiar.

She turned.

Mr. Muli entered first, crisp in his grey suit, lips drawn tight. Behind him was **a woman in a navy blue dress suit**, unfamiliar—except for the badge that read: *National Art & Innovation Council*.

Mr. Muli cleared his throat. "Naima."

She straightened, heart thudding.

“This is Ms. Kagwiria. She’s from the national panel overseeing the competition.”

The woman stepped forward, expression unreadable. Then she smiled—gently, but with the kind of seriousness that means: *we owe you this.*

“I came to see the original work myself,” she said. “And to apologize.”

Naima blinked. “Apologize?”

“The accusation against you was reviewed. We found no evidence of plagiarism. In fact, your sketches and notes—the ones submitted during the investigation—show clear, original development over time. We even ran portions of it past our university panel.”

She looked at the model now, fingers tracing the curve of a pathway.

“One of our judges—a renowned urban planner—called this ‘the most grounded and community-aware entry we’ve seen in five years.’”

Naima stared, unsure whether to breathe or burst.

“You’re officially reinstated as the **regional winner**,” Ms. Kagwiria continued. “And we’d like to take your model to Mombasa for the **national showcase** next month. With your permission, of course.”

Mr. Muli shifted awkwardly. “Your perseverance… speaks volumes.”

Naima felt a flush rise in her cheeks. Not shame—*strength*. She nodded slowly, then with more certainty.

“Yes. You can take it.”

Ms. Kagwiria smiled. “One more thing. Would you be open to presenting it yourself? At the event?”

Naima's eyes widened.

"You don't have to," the woman added quickly. "But I think they'd want to hear from the architect."

Naima looked at her model. The cracks. The plastic roof. The tiny paper people she'd placed in the courtyard.

She took a deep breath. "I think I'd like that."

Later that Afternoon

The sun was beginning to dip, casting long amber shadows over the corrugated rooftops. Naima walked home with her sketchbook hugged to her chest, the same way she had that first day after meeting Mr. Barasa—but now her steps held something more.

The weight wasn't fear.

It was *possibility.*

She hadn't even reached the courtyard when word started to reach the others.

"Mama Naima!" someone called from outside the house. "Your daughter's going to Mombasa, eh?"

Her mother, squatting beside a jiko stirring maize flour, looked out, brow furrowed. "Mombasa?"

A neighbor shouted from across the alley. "Yes! That design of hers! The competition thing—it's true! My cousin's girl is in that school. Said they reversed everything. The judges came in person!"

Naima stepped into the yard just then, blinking against the sun and the sudden flood of attention.

Her younger brother ran out barefoot, breathless. “Naima! They said you beat all the others! You’re on the list! Mombasa!”

One of the mamas from the other plot, known mostly for her brutal gossip, now leaned on a wall, smiling with all her teeth. “We knew it, eh! All those drawings weren’t just wasting time! That girl’s hands were blessed.”

Her mother stood now, eyes on her daughter, the cooking spoon still in hand. She didn’t say anything right away. Just walked up and gently touched Naima’s cheek.

“Is it true?”

Naima nodded. “They changed their minds. They said… I’ll present at the Nationals. In Mombasa.”

Her mother’s eyes welled up, but her voice stayed steady. “Then go. And don’t just show them drawings. Show them who built them.”

Kids from the next compound peeked in, someone shouted “engineer girl!” and an older man with a walking stick offered a proud “Wewe ni wetu!”—You’re one of ours.

The alleys were alive. Someone even started sweeping the area in front of their shared gate, as if preparing for a guest of honor. Others murmured about finding a way to send her off properly. A borrowed suitcase. A new blouse. Even a fundraiser from the mama mbogas.

In that twilight hour, Naima wasn’t just a student anymore.

She was **a symbol**.

A seed of hope.

A sketch brought to life.

Proof that even a girl with matchboxes and bottle caps could reimagine the skyline—and be heard.

The Next Morning at School.

The morning bell hadn't rung yet, but the school grounds pulsed with an electricity Naima had never felt before. The buzz wasn't just the usual morning chatter—it carried weight, a sense of something shifting. Word had moved faster than she ever expected: **Naima Atieno was going to Mombasa.** Not just in whispers, but in full voice. Not as an accusation, but as a fact. Her name was back on the list. The competition committee had reversed its ruling, citing "compelling original documentation" and issuing a typed apology that now fluttered in the breeze on the staffroom noticeboard, just above the weekly duty roster.

As she stepped through the gate, it felt like the air itself had changed. Lighter. Sharper.

A Form Two boy gave her a thumbs-up and called, "Well done, Naima!" before ducking away shyly.

Two girls from the science club nudged each other and glanced at her with grudging admiration—not a sneer in sight. Even the prefect manning the entrance, a no-nonsense Form Four with a hawk's gaze, broke character just long enough to nod at her, solemn and almost proud, before spinning around to shout at a student dragging their bag.

Naima's stomach did a slow somersault.

She’d barely reached the courtyard when Leila came flying down the corridor, her hijab trailing like a superhero cape.

“You saw the letter, right?” Leila beamed, grabbing Naima’s wrist. “Pinned right there on the board like some kind of royal decree. Headteacher read it aloud in briefing—Mr. Muli said they’re organizing school transport. And get this—Miss Kamau wants you to do a small presentation at next week’s assembly!”

Naima blinked, stunned. “A… presentation?”

“Uh-huh. You. A mic. A sea of faces. You’ll be brilliant,” Leila said, practically bouncing in place. “Better start writing your speech now. I’ll help. We’ll practice during lunch. And break. And… maybe math.”

Naima groaned, but it came out as a laugh. A real, full-bodied one. The kind she hadn’t let out in days.

In the classroom, the shift continued. Mr. Gikonyo—usually stingy with compliments and allergic to enthusiasm—paused at the doorway and gave her a brief, meaningful nod before beginning his lesson on quadratic equations. He didn’t say much, but that nod spoke volumes.

At the front of the class, scrawled in faint, dusty lettering on the chalkboard, someone had written:

NAIMA FOR MOMBASA!!!

The teacher had half-erased it, but the words lingered—like ghost graffiti, like hope that refused to be wiped clean.

Naima slid into her seat, her sketchbook open on her lap but untouched. Her pen rested on the edge of the page, but her hand didn't move. Not because she didn't want to draw—but because something inside her had stilled.

She let her gaze wander around the room, the windows glowing with the rising sun, the buzz of students somehow sweeter than usual. For the first time in a long while, it was enough just to be still. To breathe. To feel her own name being spoken not as a rumor, but as a promise.

She was going to Mombasa.

The Week of Presentation

The courtyard was packed. Morning sunlight slanted over hundreds of uniforms lined up in perfect rows—white shirts catching the light, navy skirts and trousers swaying slightly in the breeze. The metal mic stand stood awkwardly at the center of it all, a single speaker crackling beside it. From the front steps of the administration block, it felt like facing an ocean.

Naima's hands were damp. She wiped them on her skirt, then immediately regretted it. Too late.

Mr. Muli leaned down to her, speaking quietly. "Take your time. Just speak from the heart."

She nodded, even though her stomach was doing a full gymnastics routine.

As he stepped forward to introduce her—"Our very own Naima Atieno, representing us next month at the National Rebuild Your Future Expo in Mombasa"—a ripple of claps passed through the courtyard. Some genuine. Some polite. Some just following the wave.

Naima stepped up to the mic.

It squealed.

She winced, adjusted it, and took a breath that felt way too small.

“Hi.”

Her voice came out smaller than she’d meant. Someone coughed. Somewhere near the back, a pigeon landed on the fence.

She gripped the edges of her note card.

“I… I wasn’t going to enter the competition,” she began. “I didn’t think people like me were the kind that win things. Or even try.”

A few murmurs from the students. Some curious. Some hushed.

“But I drew something anyway. Not for points. Not for marks. Just because I saw the place I live and wanted to see it better.”

She glanced up, and her gaze caught on Leila—beaming so hard she looked like she might combust. She gave a huge thumbs-up and mouthed, *“Told you.”*

Naima swallowed a laugh.

“Someone once said I copied my idea. That I didn’t know what I was doing. And honestly? At the start… I didn’t. I was just trying to solve a problem I saw. A roof that leaked. A courtyard full of mud. A kitchen without light. But then… someone believed me. And I started believing too.”

The courtyard was quiet now.

“I didn’t build a future out of glass towers and flying trains. I used matchboxes, straws, bottle caps. Because that’s what we had. But what I learned is—it’s not about what you have. It’s about what you build with it.”

A pause.

“I’m not going to Mombasa because I’m the smartest or the most talented. I’m going because I didn’t give up.”

Another pause, softer now.

“And I hope… I hope someone out there sees my work and thinks: maybe I can build too.”

She took a breath. “That’s it.”

A beat of silence. Then the courtyard cracked open with applause—not thunderous, not over-the-top, but warm. Steady. Real.

As she stepped down, Leila ran over, almost knocking into her.

“You absolute *legend*,” she whispered. “That was so good I nearly cried. I mean, I didn’t help you write it or anything—but still! I was there in *spirit!*”

Naima rolled her eyes, laughing. “You were there in volume.”

Miss Kamau gave her a squeeze on the shoulder. Mr. Muli handed her a printed itinerary for the trip. And someone from the lower school—someone she didn’t even know—pressed a folded paper into her palm with a tiny drawing of a house and the words *“I want to design too.”*

And just like that, her hands weren’t shaking anymore.

She wasn’t just going to Mombasa.

She was carrying voices with her.

Weeks Later

The room was cramped, yes—but that night, it breathed like a cathedral. Not for its size, but for what it held: hope, hush, and something sacred.

Naima sat cross-legged on the cracked cement floor, her sketchbook lying open beside her, the spine soft from use. In front of her was a half-zipped suitcase, dented at one corner, its handle frayed from a life before hers. The whole house felt suspended—like it was holding its breath for her. Even her siblings, normally a choir of chaos, tiptoed instead of tumbled. They peeked around doorframes like she was something rare—an artifact or a comet.

She picked up a plain cotton blouse. It was off-white, with tiny embroidered flowers around the collar. Folded crisp. It smelled faintly of rosemary water and charcoal soap. Auntie Mwanajuma from across the alley had handed it to her that morning with a wink.
"*For your luck, Naima. And make sure Mombasa knows your name.*"
Into the suitcase it went.

Next came her sneakers—worn thin at the heels, but cleaned within an inch of their life. She and her younger brother had spent the afternoon scrubbing them with an old toothbrush and toothpaste. They now gleamed with the quiet pride of things made new by effort, not money.

She added a bar of soap, a tiny jar of petroleum jelly, toothpaste wrapped in a mismatched sock, two pens, one pencil, a watermelon-slice sharpener. A cloth pouch with her tiny stash of hair ties and safety pins. A sliver of home tucked into every object.

Then her mother handed her a small, folded envelope. Inside were exactly **240 shillings**.
"Emergency fare," she murmured. "Or a mandazi if you get hungry. Only if you're *really*

hungry."

Naima smiled as she tucked it in beside her toothbrush.

But the most precious thing—the core of everything—was the folder. Handmade from cereal boxes and bound with three stretched rubber bands. Inside, carefully organized, were the pieces of her journey:

- Her first sketches, pencil smudged and dog-eared
- Scale measurements in the margins of math homework
- Diagrams drawn on the backs of school memos
- Photos Mr. Barasa had printed for her at the community center
- Pages that still carried the faint smell of glue and sawdust

Each sheet felt like breath. Each line: a rebellion. A seed.

As she zipped up the bag, her mother sat beside her on the edge of the old mattress, folding her hands in her lap like she was trying not to reach out and hold her too tightly.

"You've never seen the ocean, have you?" she asked.

Naima shook her head. "Only once, in a geography textbook. But it was just… blue."

Mama smiled. That rare smile—wide, unguarded, full of something ancient and knowing. "It smells like salt and wind and beginnings," she said. "Go breathe it in, *sawa*?"

Naima nodded. Her throat was thick with unsaid things. "*Sawa.*"

Later, the others slept—curled against one another like puppies in dreams. But Naima stayed up by the dim lantern's light, sketching slowly in her notebook. Not a building this time.

This time it was waves.

A small dhow boat.

A girl standing at the edge of the sea, wind in her hair, paper in her hand, and the world rising to meet her.

The suitcase waited quietly by the door.

And above, the Nairobi sky stretched endless and star-pinned, whispering its benediction:

You're ready.

Departure Morning

The sun hadn't even risen, but the whole house was awake.

Steam curled from a chipped kettle on the charcoal jiko, filling the single-room home with the scent of strong tea and smoke. Naima sat on the edge of the bed, her knees bouncing, the packed suitcase beside her like a small, loyal animal.

She wore her best—a navy skirt with only one visible repair stitch, and the gifted cotton blouse. Her mother had oiled her scalp and braided her hair into neat rows the night before. She felt… polished. Nervous. A little unreal.

"You've eaten?" Mama asked, adjusting the hem of Naima's skirt for the third time.

Naima nodded. "A little."

Mama didn't press. She handed her a small paper bag with two mandazis, still warm, and a boiled egg wrapped in newspaper. "For the road," she said, tucking it into her backpack. "Eat while you are halfway the journey."

The younger kids were still half-asleep, heads bobbing, but they stood in a crooked little line like sentries. Her brother nudged her shoulder and whispered, “Bring us sea sand.”

Naima smiled. “I will.”

Outside, the neighborhood was just beginning to stir. A boda-boda buzzed down the dirt path, and a neighbor’s rooster screamed like it had been left out of something important. Mama flagged down a van that usually delivered bread—its driver had agreed to take them to the bus stage for a small fee.

At the junction, they found the *Dreamline* coach already humming, its blue sides streaked with dust, windows plastered with decals of dolphins and coconuts. MOMBASA ROUTE scrolled across the digital board above the windshield.

Naima stood still for a moment, her suitcase in her hand, watching passengers load up. Most were adults with polished shoes and wheeled luggage. She felt small beside them—but ready.

Miss Kamau stood a few steps ahead, waving her forward. She had traded her usual heels for sturdy flats and wore a soft denim jacket over her blouse. A navy tote bag hung at her side, stuffed with forms, painkillers, and bus snacks.

“You good?” she asked.

Naima nodded. “Just… big butterflies.”

Miss Kamau smiled gently. “That means it matters. Now let’s get our seats before we end up near the toilet.”

Naima turned to her family. Her mother kissed both her cheeks, then held her close, her voice a soft murmur:
“*Head high, Naima. But eyes open. And don’t let anyone make you feel small.*”

Her siblings hugged her all at once—awkward, tight, like they weren't sure if she was leaving for a week or forever. Someone handed her a pack of peanuts wrapped in a twist of brown paper. Another gave her a tiny drawing of a house with a garden and a solar roof: her model, reimagined in crayon.

The bus conductor checked their names against a printed list and tagged their bags. *"Safari Njema."*

They climbed aboard and settled into their spots—window and aisle, row seven. Naima pressed her forehead to the cool glass and watched the city blur past as the engine rumbled to life. Hawkers yelled their last-minute deals outside. Somewhere nearby, a baby wailed. But inside the bus, it felt like a cocoon.

Miss Kamau pulled out a boiled egg wrapped in newspaper and passed it over. "Eat something before you start fainting from nerves."

Naima laughed softly and peeled the egg, her hands still trembling slightly. "You've done this before?"

"A few times. Science fairs. Debates. But you…" She paused, glancing at Naima's eyes. "You're taking your whole neighborhood with you."

Naima swallowed hard. That part hadn't fully hit her yet.

As the Dreamline Coach pulled out of Nairobi and onto the open highway, she leaned back and closed her eyes—heart pounding, not with fear, but anticipation.

She was going to Mombasa. And she wasn't going alone.

CHAPTER 6

The Dreamline Coach pulled into Mombasa just as the sun dipped low, casting everything in honeyed gold. The city was awash in warm tones—coconut palms silhouetted against an amber sky, tuk-tuks zipping by with neon lights flickering like restless fireflies. The ocean breeze rolled in thick with salt and humidity, wrapping itself around Naima the moment she stepped off the bus.

It smelled like spice and sea. Like something beginning.

Her back ached from the long ride, but her eyes drank in everything—painted storefronts still open, children weaving through narrow alleys, the distant call to prayer rising like a song above the traffic hum.

Miss Kamau stepped down behind her, stretching with a groan. “Mombasa heat hits different, right?”

Naima nodded, squinting toward the horizon. “It’s like the air is heavier. But softer.”

“Exactly.” Miss Kamau adjusted the strap of her bag. “Let’s grab our luggage. The youth hostel is just a short ride.”

They clambered into a tuk-tuk, the driver cheerful and chatty, his dashboard cluttered with beaded charms and a tiny Swahili Bible. They rode through narrow streets lit by a thousand different colors—shop lights, tail lights, flashes of TV screens through windows, and the soft yellow glow of open doorways where families gathered for supper.

By the time they arrived, night had settled fully, but Mombasa pulsed with life. The hostel was modest but tidy, nestled between a mosque and a closed bakery. Their room had two single beds, blue mosquito nets tied neatly above, and a ceiling fan that clicked like a lazy metronome.

Naima dropped her bag and walked to the narrow window. In the distance, beyond rooftops and palms, she could just make out the shimmer of the ocean, dark now, but alive.

Miss Kamau sat on the edge of her bed, kicking off her shoes. “Tomorrow, we visit the exhibition center, meet the others. Just rest tonight, okay?”

Naima nodded. She peeled back her blanket, and whispered a quiet goodnight to the window.

From outside, the city murmured back in waves.

She was here. Mombasa.

And tomorrow, she’d show them everything she’d built.

Naima woke to the whir of the ceiling fan and the call of gulls outside. For a second, she didn’t know where she was—then she saw the blue mosquito net and everything came rushing back.

She was in Mombasa. And today was the day.

Miss Kamau was already dressed, her kitenge blouse crisp, sipping tea from a small thermos. “Morning, sleepyhead,” she said with a grin. “There’s bread and boiled eggs in the dining area. Eat something. We leave in thirty.”

Naima dressed slowly, her fingers trembling just a little as she laced up her cleaned sneakers.

At the hostel entrance, a van waited, already half-full with other students from different counties. Some clutched models wrapped in cloth, others carried sleek tubes or rolled-up presentation boards. Everyone looked nervous. Focused.

At the exhibition center, things moved fast.

Registration. Name tags. A hall filled with booths and panels. Banners fluttered above their heads, bold and bright: **"National Showcase – Rebuild Your Future"**.

Naima was directed to a booth near the center of the hall. Her assigned space had her name printed in bold on a folded card: *Naima Atieno, Form Four – Nairobi Region.*

She placed a folder carefully on the table. Then, unwrapping her model with hands steadier than she expected, she set it down. It wasn’t flashy. It wasn’t perfect. But it was hers.

Next to her, a boy was arranging a model of a floating school made of plastic bottles. Another girl had built a water filtration system powered by a bicycle. There were drones, blueprints, smart roofs, vertical farms.

It was dazzling. But Naima didn’t feel small anymore.

Miss Kamau gave her shoulder a squeeze. “You belong here.”

Naima exhaled slowly and nodded.

Judging would begin after lunch.

So for now, she stood quietly behind her display, watching the light stream through the tall windows, watching the judges and visitors stroll by, until someone finally paused at her booth and said:

“Tell me about this settlement design.”

And just like that, her voice found its rhythm.

Hands moving. Words flowing.

The story of her model—its gardens, its shared kitchens, its safe walkways—began to rise again like the buildings it imagined.

After a quick lunch of pilau and bananas eaten on plastic chairs under a jacaranda tree, Naima returned to the exhibition hall, nerves pulsing in her palms.

The judges had begun their rounds.

Three of them—two men in navy blazers and a woman in a red scarf—moved from table to table like clockwork: asking questions, jotting notes, murmuring to each other. A fourth trailed behind, younger, distracted, occasionally snapping photos with a tablet.

Naima adjusted her name card and stood tall as they approached her booth.

“Naima Atieno?” asked the woman in the red scarf, her tone brisk but not unkind.

“Yes,” she said, hands clasped behind her back to hide the slight tremble.

“What are we looking at here?”

Naima launched into her explanation—clearly, calmly. She spoke about community safety, shared resources, the power of affordable design. She pointed to the solar kitchens, the shaded courtyards, the rain catchment system.

The judges nodded politely, one scribbling something in shorthand. The younger man looked up from his tablet and asked, “Did you work with any mentorship group on this? Or was this entirely student-led?”

Naima opened her folder and showed them her sketches, the cereal box folder with taped edges and pen-stained pages. “I worked alone at first. But after regionals, I got advice from a retired architect—Mr. Barasa. He runs a youth design group in Nairobi.”

One of the men raised an eyebrow. “You were mentored after the regional submission?”

“Yes, but only to refine my presentation. The model was already done.”

There was a pause. A long one.

The woman in red whispered something to the others. They leaned closer, exchanged murmurs.

Then one of the judges stepped forward and gently closed her folder. “It’s a strong concept, Miss Atieno. Very strong. But mentorship after initial submission technically violates the individual category guidelines. We’ll need to review that.”

Naima froze. “But he didn’t change anything. I just learned how to explain it better.”

Another pause. The younger judge gave her a sympathetic look but said nothing.

The panel thanked her and moved on.

Naima stood there, numb. The folder in front of her felt suddenly heavy. Unfairly so.

Miss Kamau was by her side in moments, having caught the tail end of the exchange.

“What did they say?” she asked quietly.

Naima repeated it, the words dry in her mouth.

Miss Kamau frowned. “That’s not mentorship. That’s education. That’s support. There’s a difference.”

Naima nodded once, eyes glassy, jaw tight. “Doesn’t matter. They’re not considering me.”

“They haven’t said that yet.”

But in her chest, Naima felt it. The slow shifting of hope. The crack in the sky she’d dreamed under.

Still, she stayed until the end of the day. Stayed as students packed up, as the hall emptied out, as the banners flapped gently overhead.

She had come all this way.

And she wouldn’t leave early.

The sun had already begun its slow descent when Naima unfolded the printed itinerary Mr. Muli had given her back at school. She had kept it tucked in her folder like a secret map—mostly filled with competition logistics, meal times, and check-in points. But near the bottom, in small bolded font under “Optional Excursions (Time Permitting),” was a simple line:

Evening beach walk – Public access route, 6:00 PM – 7:00 PM (chaperoned)

Miss Kamau, perhaps sensing the weight Naima carried after the judging, gave her a gentle nudge. “Take some air, Naima. It’ll help.”
And just like that, permission.

The walk to the beach was quiet—just the crunch of sand and the distant call of vendors wrapping up their day. When the trees opened up and the sea revealed itself, Naima slowed to a stop.

She had never seen anything so wide.

The ocean wasn’t blue like in textbooks. It was layered—gray near the shore, greenish further out, then a deep, endless indigo that made her feel small and infinite at once. The air was full of salt and something older—wind, yes, but also memory. A breathing silence.

She kicked off her shoes and stepped into the water’s edge. Warm foam lapped at her toes. Her hem got wet, but she didn’t care.

Further down the beach, a few students played football. Others took selfies. A teacher waved from a distance. But Naima stayed where she was, ankle-deep in the ocean, eyes out where the horizon melted.

She didn’t cry.

Not because she didn’t want to.

But because this wasn’t the kind of sadness that begged for tears. It was bigger. Wiser. Like the ocean itself—it simply held her.

She pulled out her sketchbook, still slightly curled at the edges from the coastal humidity, and knelt down in the sand. The pencil moved on its own: not buildings this time, not layouts. Just waves. Sky. A single figure facing the ocean, hair lifted by the wind.

As she drew, she remembered her mother's words: *It smells like salt and wind and beginnings. You go breathe it in.*

Naima closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

The day hadn't ended how she hoped.

But it wasn't the end.

Just a turning tide.

Back in Nairobi

The matatu hissed to a stop near the dusty roadside that marked the edge of Naima's neighborhood, brakes squealing like tired lungs exhaling one last breath. She stepped down, a little slower than usual—her legs stiff from the long ride, her backpack heavier with sand-laced clothes, folded notes, half-dulled pencils, and the memory of ocean wind still tucked in the collar of her shirt. The air was drier here, less scented, less forgiving, but it still wrapped around her like an old sweater.

In the same vehicle, Miss Kamau remained seated, already leaning toward the driver with a laugh and a gesture—something about which turn to take for her cousin's place in Donholm. She caught Naima's eye and waved goodbye.

Naima smiled faintly, nodded, then turned toward the narrow path that led to their plot. The ochre dust clung to her shoes again, familiar and gritty. A rooster darted past, chased by a toddler with one shoe and a grin too big for his face.

Then the voices came.

“Naima’s back!”

“She went to the ocean!”

“Did you win?”

“She brought sea water?”

She just lifted her hand like a returning voyager, too tired to explain anything yet but quietly thrilled by the noise, the thrill of being someone who had gone far and come back.

At the doorstep, Mama was waiting. Arms folded, a headscarf looped tight, her eyes unreadable under the browns of evening shadow. For a second, Naima’s heart dipped—what if Mama thought the trip wasn’t worth it?

But then her mother stepped forward and broke into a quiet, crooked smile and pulled her in close—tighter than necessary, longer than expected. The kind of hug that spoke volumes without needing sound: *You did well, whether or not anyone clapped for you.*

Inside, the house smelled like sukuma and maize flour, earthy and warm, grounding her like gravity. Her little brother had drawn an ocean with crayons on the cement floor. Her other sister held out a mismatched plastic cup filled with water. “Ocean?” she asked hopefully.

Naima chuckled. “Close enough.”

She placed her bag carefully on the little table, unzipped it slowly, and sat on the edge of the bed, watching as her youngest sister tugged at her shoelaces with practiced curiosity, looking for treasure.

“I didn’t win,” Naima said at last, her voice soft, unsure.

“I know,” Mama said, crouching next to her. “But you came back more than you left.”

Naima looked at her, confused.

Her mother touched her chest. “This. It’s fuller. That’s enough.”

Naima blinked, nodded.

“Sometimes the prize isn’t a trophy,” Mama added, standing to stir the pot simmering nearby. “Sometimes it’s the story you come home with.”

Outside, the compound buzzed. Neighbors leaned in through the doorway. An old man from across the way shouted, “Eh! So now we know someone who’s seen the Indian Ocean!” Another asked if she’d brought sand. Someone else slipped in a small mango as a gift, calling it “hero fruit.”

Inside, away from the curious eyes, Naima opened her sketchbook—not the sea this time. No, now her pencil moved with a quieter joy. She drew faces. Hands. The girl who’d smiled at her at the beach. The woman who sold her a pineapple near the hostel. Mr. Barasa in his linen shirt. Leila, flustered and loyal.

And then, her model. Not the cardboard one with its snapped joints, but the real idea—reborn in lines and perspective. Clean. Whole. Alive again, no longer hidden behind doubt or accusation.

She was home.

But not the same.

CHAPTER 7

A few weeks later

The community center was buzzing with weekend noise—wood being sawed, hammers tapping rhythmically, someone laughing too loud over a joke in Sheng. But in a quieter corner near the supply shelves, Mr. Barasa stood waiting, a manila envelope in his hands.

“Naima,” he said, voice low but serious. “There’s a technical institute here in Nairobi—off Thika Road. They’re offering a scholarship. Full ride. Girls only. Design and construction. I think… no, I *know* you should apply.”

She blinked. “Me?”

He nodded, slipping the envelope into her hands like it was sacred. “You’ve got the talent. You just need the papers to match it.”

That night, Naima didn’t sleep. Not even for a moment.

She lay on her mattress with the envelope propped against the lantern’s light, rereading the printed page until the letters nearly blurred: **Requirements**—ID or birth certificate, school recommendation, fee waiver letter, parent or guardian confirmation, portfolio sample. Things she’d seen on posters before, on school walls, on distant noticeboards meant for other people.

But this time, for the first time, it felt possible.

By morning, she had already packed her bag.

The headteacher, Mr. Omondi—wrote a glowing recommendation. “Naima Atieno is a rare mind,” he scribbled. “Creative. Grounded. Problem-solver.”

Mr. Muli helped draft the fee waiver letter, signed and stamped in triplicate. Even Miss Kamau typed up a brief description of Naima’s community involvement and attached a photo of her presenting at the school assembly.

At home, Mama signed the parent confirmation form with the tip of her tongue peeking out, carefully tracing each letter twice—*L-Y-D-I-A*—just to be sure it was legible. “This name,” she said, “it must walk ahead of you now.”

Naima clipped everything neatly together in a new clear folder, borrowed from one of the girls at the community center. Her fingers trembled slightly as she checked it all again. Portfolio? Check. Photos of the Mombasa model? Check. Sketches, notes, the sea-dampened site plan? Check.

Then she paused.

There, in bold font near the top:

Certified copy of birth certificate.

And her stomach sank.

She didn’t have one.

Not because it was lost, but because it had never been there. She’d been born at home. No paperwork. No hospital file. Just her mother’s memory and a single, faded clinic card from when she was two. It had never mattered—until now.

She sat on the edge of the bed, clutching the envelope like it might dissolve. Around her, the house pulsed with quiet activity—water boiling, a broom swishing across the floor, her little sister humming tunelessly as she washed cups. But inside, Naima felt like a single thread had snapped loose from the dream she was trying to weave.

She stared at the form again.

All that was left was the one thing she didn't have.

But now… she knew what she wanted.

And that, too, was something.

The government office was slow, hot, and full of shouting.

A fan creaked somewhere overhead, doing nothing but stir warm air and the scent of sweat, ink, and frustration. Rows of benches overflowed with people—mothers cradling babies, men in oil-stained overalls, elderly women clutching papers in plastic sleeves that had turned foggy with age.

Naima stood in the long queue with her mother, the manila folder tucked under her arm like a lifeline. Every shuffle forward felt like an hour. By the time they reached the front, her shirt was sticking to her back, her throat dry from holding in words.

The clerk didn't even look up.

He was young, maybe late twenties, but already had the glazed eyes of someone used to saying no for a living. His name badge was cracked. His keyboard had no letters left on the keys.

He held out a hand. “Documents.”

Naima’s mother handed over her national ID, a worn-out clinic card, and the baptismal note from the church that doubled as a makeshift birth record. The clerk gave them a cursory glance and sighed.

“Your father?” he asked, still tapping at the computer.

Naima’s mother hesitated. “Deceased.”

“Name?”

“Juma Otieno.”

The clerk paused. His eyes flicked to the screen. Then he frowned.

“There’s no marriage record. No ID for the father. No birth certificate on file.”

Naima leaned forward, heart pounding. “He died when I was little. In a construction accident. Mama never had the documents.”

The man looked at her like she was trying to sell him a dream. “Then we can’t issue a certificate. Come back when you have proof.”

“That’s it?” she asked, voice cracking with disbelief.

He shrugged without apology. “That’s it.”

Naima’s fists clenched at her sides. The room was too loud, too bright, too heavy with other people’s problems. Behind her, someone cursed at a printer jam. A baby wailed in the corner. Outside, a boda boda revved its engine and sped off into the dust.

She wanted to scream. But she didn’t.

She just took a deep breath, picked up the manila folder, and turned away—her head held high even though something inside her chest was splintering.

Mama touched her shoulder gently. “Let’s go.”

Naima nodded once. She didn’t cry. Not there. Not in front of that window. But her steps were slower on the way out, as if each one had to carry the weight of being denied her own name.

On the walk home, her mother was quiet, clutching the manila envelope like it had grown teeth—something dangerous and alive that might bite if she loosened her grip.

Their footsteps echoed against the cracked pavement, past boda bodas idling at corners, fruit stalls sagging in the sun, and stray dogs napping in dusty shadows. The city was still its noisy, familiar self, but Naima felt like she was walking through glass—everything muffled, distant, unreal.

She didn’t cry. Not in the office. Not on the street. Not even when old Mama Achieng leaned over the fence and called, “How did it go, eh?” with her hopeful smile and sun-wrinkled eyes.

Naima just managed a tight nod, a twitch of the lips, and kept walking.

At home, she slipped off her shoes like a ghost, went straight to the small table in the corner, and placed the envelope down with careful hands—as if it might explode. Then she slid to the floor and sat there, legs folded under her, eyes fixed on the wall as if it might offer her answers the world refused to give.

It had taken her years to believe the door might open. Years of late nights under a flickering lantern, of sketchbooks filled with dreams that no one asked for—but that she gave anyway.

And now?

Now the system had slammed the door shut. Not because she lacked talent. Not because she hadn't worked hard enough. But because of a piece of paper she never had a say in. A line left blank before she even knew how to hold a pencil.

In the kitchen, water boiled in a tin kettle. A radio murmured the weather report, cheerful and pointless. But Naima didn't move. Her whole body felt like lead—dense with disappointment, heavy with the weight of dreams deferred once again.

Across the room, her youngest sibling peeked in, then tiptoed away, as if sensing that the silence wasn't just quiet, but sacred.

That night, Naima opened her sketchbook with hands that trembled—not from fear, but from the slow-burning ache of trying to hold in too much for too long. The lantern cast soft, flickering shadows over the page, like hesitant whispers.

She didn't reach for her usual ruler. Didn't map out scale or perspective. No sharp lines. No clean geometry.

Instead, she drew from feeling.

First came the barrier. A tall gate, iron-wrought and heavy, each bar etched with silent rules and invisible histories. She shaded it dark, let the pencil smudge at the corners. The kind of gate that didn't just block—but dismissed.

Then came the child.

Small. Still. Standing just on the other side, fingers curled around the bars, eyes wide, watching something just beyond—sunlight, maybe. A place where dreams had room to stretch their limbs. A place with color.

But the child wasn't crying. Just watching. Waiting.

Naima paused, staring at the image for a long time. Her chest felt tight.

And then, in the bottom corner of the page—half defiance, half prayer—she drew a ladder.

It wasn't perfect. It leaned slightly. One of the rungs was crooked. But it reached.

She sat back, her fingers stained with graphite, her breath finally softening.

Maybe the world had locked her out with paper and protocol. Maybe the gate would never open.

But that didn't mean she had to wait forever.

If there was no key, then she would build another way in.

And with that quiet vow pressed between the pages, she closed the sketchbook, turned off the lantern, and let the darkness hold her gently, like it understood.

CHAPTER 8

The sky had that dull, heavy look that came before rain—low clouds bruised with the promise of thunder, air thick with silence. But Naima didn't care.

Her sketchbook was rolled tightly under her arm, its edges curled and stained with fingerprints. Her sandals were already dusty from the uneven footpaths, her hem brushed with dry grass and rusted tin debris. But her steps were steady, her eyes focused. Her mind was miles ahead of where her feet touched the ground.

She wasn't going to wait.

Not for a piece of paper.

Not for permission.

Not even for the system to change its mind.

If she couldn't build her future right now—she'd build one for someone else. Or at least clear the space for it to begin.

She turned the corner, past Mama's stall and the row of rust-colored mabati fences, until she reached it:

That forgotten patch of alley.

The place where every rainy season turned into a swamp of ankle-deep trouble. Kids tiptoed through it with schoolbags hoisted to their chests, hopping from slippery stones like contestants in a cruel game. The water was a sick shade of gray, tinged with the sheen of oil, sometimes scattered with crushed skeletons of old flip-flops.

It stank. People dumped anything there—plastic wrappers, burst jerry cans, a chair with only one leg, and the infamous soggy mattress that had now merged with the soil like it was growing mold roots.

But Naima saw it differently.

She saw potential.

A threshold.

An act of rebellion, disguised as care.

She stood in front of it, hands on her hips, heart pounding like a war drum. Not from fear—but from that strange, electric certainty that sometimes blooms in the chest before a leap.

From her rolled sketchbook, she pulled out a sheet she'd torn from the back—rough, stained, but ready. She crouched down, balancing on the cleanest patch of dry ground, and began to sketch—drainage ideas, raised stepping stones, a simple wooden walkway made of scavenged pallets. She scribbled notes in the margins: *Must not rot. Kid-proof. Use tires?*

Her fingers flew faster than the clouds overhead.

It wasn't a grand building.

It wasn't a skyline.

But it was a beginning.

One drawn from need.

One drawn from now.

And Naima, soaked in dust and resolve, was done waiting for rain—or anyone else—to wash her path clean.

She was going to build, anyway.

She gathered a few of the younger boys—those wiry, restless ones who sometimes trailed behind her when she patched leaking jerry cans or helped Mama carry bag of sukumas to the stall. They came for the curiosity more than the cause, their bare feet slapping against the warm earth, eyebrows cocked with suspicion.

Naima stood in front of the flooded alley like a general surveying a battlefield.

“We’re going to make it walkable,” she told them. “Clear the trash. Build a drain. Maybe even add benches. Plants.”

“Us?” one boy asked, squinting like she’d offered him a spaceship. “We’re not engineers.”

Naima grinned. “Neither am I. Not yet.”

There was a pause. Then a shrug. Then a small, ragged chorus of nods. They were in.

The next morning, they showed up early—tired but curious—some in oversized T-shirts, others barefoot and blinking. Naima handed them rice sacks to wrap around their hands. Not proper gloves, but enough to start.

They began by pulling out garbage: plastic bottles, twisted metal, ancient clothes that disintegrated when lifted. A chicken watched from a rooftop. A toddler clapped like it was a circus.

Naima drew plans in chalk on the ground, measuring slope by laying a stick across a half-filled water bottle, adjusting angles with pebbles. They argued over what looked straight. They laughed when someone fell into a soft patch of mud.

By midday, sweat traced their spines, and the alley had started to shift—from dumping ground to possibility.

That afternoon, an older welder from the corner kiosk lent them a wheelbarrow, shaking his head but smiling like he knew a secret. A retired mason offered bricks from a half-demolished wall. Word fluttered like laundry in the breeze.

Leila arrived the next day with extra sacks, sleeves rolled up and determination scrawled across her forehead. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” she announced, “but I brought biscuits and insults.”

A mama from two doors down brought chai and mandazi in a tin that smelled like memories. A street preacher showed up with a shovel and a quiet nod.

By the end of the week, the trench was dug—a narrow channel lined with pebbles and bits of tile, sloped just enough to catch the water and carry it away. The path was no longer a swamp, but a thread of hope stitched into the earth.

Naima placed paint buckets—salvaged and scrubbed—along the alley’s edge, each filled with soil and sukuma seeds. The green would take time, but it would come.

One of the boys, using the side of a nail, scratched names into an old wooden plank. The letters weren't perfect, but the message was:

Community Way.

And just like that, the path had a name.

A name carved not from concrete or policy—but from sweat, laughter, stubbornness, and the belief that even if you didn't have the key, you could still open doors.

The final touch was Naima's idea—a long seat, made from leftover bricks stacked carefully and cemented with a paste of mud, water, and prayer. She'd painted it white using the dregs of old wall paint someone's uncle had left behind in a rusted can. It dried uneven, patchy in some places, but when the sun hit it just right, it glowed.

That Sunday afternoon, she sat on it with her elbows on her knees, sweat turning her T-shirt dark at the back, her legs streaked with dust. Her sandals sat beside her, forgotten.

Down the path, her siblings played tag—no longer leaping over puddles or stepping on broken glass. They ran freely now, laughter echoing off the walls like music.

It wasn't much.

But it was *clean.*
It was *safe.*
And it had been built from scraps, sweat, and belief.
Not blueprints. Not approvals. Just need—and the will to answer it.

She leaned back on the seat, breathing in the scent of wet soil, paint, and something else she hadn't known could grow in this alley: peace.

Mr. Barasa arrived that evening as the last gold of daylight settled over the rooftops. He didn't say much—just nodded when she waved, then walked the length of the path slowly, his hands behind his back like he was pacing through an exhibition.

He stopped to inspect the trench. Noted the symmetry of the bricks. Touched the paint buckets gently, as if checking for real roots.

When he reached the end, he turned to face her. His face was unreadable at first, then it softened—his eyes carrying something between pride and awe.

"You waited for permission?" he asked quietly.

Naima stood, brushing paint flakes from her skirt. She shook her head.

"No," she said. "I just started."

Barasa nodded. "Good." He smiled, slow and sure. "The best builders never do."

That night, Naima didn't sketch.
Not because she was tired—though her body ached from lifting bricks and scrubbing walls—but because some victories weren't meant to be captured in pencil lines. They were meant to be sat with. Felt. Breathed in.

She sat with her back against the wall, knees drawn up, her head tilted toward the ceiling. Through a jagged tear in the iron sheet roof—one she'd promised Mama she'd patch soon—she could see a patch of sky. The stars blinked like stubborn little promises, scattered across the Nairobi night.

A breeze slipped through, carrying the scent of charcoal smoke, damp earth, and far-off music from someone's tiny radio.

She didn't have the right papers.
She didn't have a scholarship.
She didn't have a birth certificate.

But she had this.

She had the sting of calloused palms and the warmth of community tea shared under a makeshift shade. She had the memory of children racing down the alley she used to tiptoe through. She had a bench where old women now rested and gossiped in the afternoon sun.

She had something *real.*
Something that wasn't granted—but made.

A clean alley.
A real bench.
A name people would remember not because it was printed in a brochure, but because it was spoken with respect in dusty courtyards.

Naima closed her eyes.

Tomorrow, she'd find a new project. A cracked wall. A crooked step. Another forgotten corner of the world that just needed a little faith and a few willing hands.

Because builders don't wait.

They don't ask for applause or permission slips.

They build anyway.

CHAPTER 9

It started with a photo.

Leila had taken it on a warm Sunday afternoon, just as golden light spilled through the alley like a blessing. Naima was standing on the new path, dusty and sunburnt, holding a rusted trowel like a badge of honor. Her sketchbook—creased and smudged—was tucked under one arm. Kids dashed in the background, laughing, barefoot and fast, their joy echoing against the freshly built bench and bucket-planters lining the trench.

The photo wasn't posed. It was real. Raw. Beautiful in that way only truth can be.

Leila didn't wait for permission. She uploaded it to the school's WhatsApp group with a one-line caption that hit like a matchstick:

"Naima Atieno, turning trash into hope. You people sleeping on her."

When Naima saw it later that evening—after hauling stones, organizing paint buckets, and patching her sandal with wire—her stomach dropped.

"Leila!" she groaned, waving her cracked phone screen. "Why would you post that?"

Leila, unfazed, was already sipping hot uji. "Because I know a moment when I see one."

“I look like I haven’t slept in a week.”

“You haven’t,” Leila said, “and that’s exactly why you look like someone who built something instead of just talking about it.”

Naima sighed. “I didn’t build it for likes.”

“Good,” Leila grinned. “Then let the likes find you.”

And oh, did they find her.

By nightfall, the photo had already jumped class groups. The head prefect reposted it with “👏👏👏” emojis. Someone in Form Four commented: *“Architect without a certificate. Give her the bricks and stand back.”*

But then it went further.

A youth-led architecture Instagram page with thousands of followers reposted it under the hashtag #UrbanHope. Their caption read:
“Grassroots brilliance. Nairobi’s next masterplanner? Keep watching.”

A small local NGO chimed in: *“Can we meet her?”*

Another user replied: *“This is the kind of talent we ignore until it leaves the country.”*

Naima tried to ignore the flood of reactions. Tried to ground herself with dishes and sketches and chores. But her heart drummed all night.

Then, the next morning—just after she’d come in from fetching water—a message popped up from Mr. Barasa.

“Call me. Someone from the Urban Summit saw the photo.”

Her fingers froze on the keypad.

The Urban Summit?

She didn’t know what that meant exactly, but she knew it sounded big. Bigger than WhatsApp groups. Bigger than community benches. Bigger than what she’d let herself imagine.

She called.

Mr. Barasa picked up on the first ring.

His voice was calm, but there was a spark in it—like he’d been waiting for this moment.

“They’re organizing a youth panel,” he said. “Designers. Planners. Innovators. Someone forwarded them your photo. They want you to present your project. Just ten minutes. But it’s a start.”

Naima gripped the edge of the doorway to steady herself.

“But I don’t have a certificate,” she said.

“I told them,” he replied, “you have something better. Vision backed by blisters.”

There was a long pause on the phone.

Naima sat on the edge of her mattress, one hand gripping the threadbare curtain, the other holding the phone tight against her ear. Her heart thudded so loudly, she was sure Mr. Barasa could hear it.

“Me? Speak? In front of architects?” she whispered.

On the other end, Mr. Barasa's voice was steady. Calm. "You. With your model. With your sketchbook. With your truth."

She looked down at her feet, still dusted red from the path outside. "But I'm not… I'm not like them. They have degrees, software, portfolios—"

"You have bricks and sketches and a path that wasn't there before," he said. "And that's more than most."

She didn't speak right away. The line crackled faintly.

"You built something out of nothing, Naima," he added. "That's the whole point of this summit. They want stories like yours."

Naima blinked at the wall, where her drawing of the ladder still hung, thumbtacked above the table. A quiet defiance.

"I'll think about it," she said at last.

"Think fast," he replied gently. "They want your name on the program by Friday."

And then he hung up.

Naima sat there for a long while, the phone still in her hand, the static still humming faintly.

Then she opened her sketchbook again.

And this time, she drew a stage. Not grand. Not perfect. But solid. At the center of it stood a girl in dusty sandals with a trowel and a dream.

And a mic.

The next morning, the light broke soft over the rooftops, spilling gold over the alley Naima had helped remake. She stood there barefoot, staring at the white-painted bench. Someone had chalked a heart on it. A child's clumsy hand.

She ran her fingers over the bricks, still cool from the night.

Leila appeared at her side, holding two mugs of strong tea. She didn't say anything at first—just handed Naima one and sipped from her own.

"So," Leila finally said. "Are you gonna do it?"

Naima exhaled, slow and long. Her reflection shimmered faintly in the puddle by her feet—no longer the girl squinting through locked gates. She felt the weight of everything she'd built—not just the path, but the belief.

"I'm scared," she admitted.

Leila bumped her with her shoulder. "Good. That means it matters."

Naima smiled faintly.

She took out her phone. Scrolled to Mr. Barasa's number, thumb hovering for only a second before she hit "Call."

When he answered, she didn't let herself hesitate.

"Tell them yes," she said. "I'll go."

There was silence—then his voice, bright and proud. "Good. I'll help you prepare."

She hung up. The sky overhead was wide, wild, and waiting.

Naima looked up at it, one hand on the brick bench, the other holding her tea.

She had no certificate. No degree. No polished portfolio.

But she had something to say.

And now, the world was listening.

Preparation began.

Naima turned their cramped single room into a makeshift studio. She spread her sketches across the floor like puzzle pieces, taping some to the cracked wall, pinning others with thumbtacks to a string stretched between two nails. Her model—the small one she'd rebuilt using leftover cardboard and matchsticks—stood proudly on a stool, its corners slightly worn from travel but intact.

Every evening, after chores and school, she stood in front of the mirror practicing.
"How do we reclaim underutilized spaces for community benefit?"
"Equitable spatial planning…"
She stumbled on that one—every time. Equi-table. Spatial. Planning.
Over and over, like a chant.

Leila sat nearby, legs crisscrossed, chewing a pencil and pretending to be a tough crowd.
"Speak louder. No slouching. Smile like you believe in it."
"I do believe in it."
"Then let your voice show it!"

Naima rewrote her speech five times. Then a sixth. She cut out technical words that didn't feel like her and replaced them with stories—what it smelled like to clear the trash, the feel of the rice-sack gloves, the first time a child skipped down the path without falling.

“You’re not pitching a product,” Leila said. “You’re telling them why it matters.”

Clothes became their next crisis. Naima didn’t own much—just school shirts, faded dresses, and one shati with missing buttons.

Leila dug through her own pile, rejected two before holding one up. “This. It’s simple, neat. Not too bright. Still sharp.”

It was deep blue, with rolled sleeves and a stiff collar that gave Naima unexpected posture. Mama watched quietly from the doorway, then disappeared. When she came back, she held a pair of flat black shoes in both hands—soft-leathered, slightly too big.

“They were for interviews,” Mama said. “But I don’t need them anymore. You do.”

Naima slipped them on, standing up slowly. For the first time, she looked like someone stepping into something larger than herself. Mama moved closer, adjusting the collar of the blue shirt with the tender precision of memory.

“You look like your father did when he left for the city the first time,” she whispered. “Scared. Proud. Ready.”

Naima’s eyes stung.

But she didn’t cry.

She just nodded, heart pounding, and said quietly, “Let’s build this next thing.”

The summit hall was cool and white and full of people who moved like they belonged. The kind of place where the walls echoed with buzzwords and the floors swallowed sound under expensive shoes. Lanyards swung from the necks of young professionals and grad students,

each tag stamped with logos and credentials: MIT, University of Nairobi, Cape Town School of Architecture. Their tablets glowed. Their conversations flowed—fluent in theory, policy, and design.

Naima stood near her table, spine straight, palms sweaty. Her exhibit was tucked in a modest corner between a solar housing prototype and a modular classroom unit. She hadn't brought posters or banners. Just her model—rebuilt from scratch the week before using recycled wood, wire mesh, and bits of brown paper painted to look like sand and brick.

She had painted it light brown. Earth-colored. Honest.

Her sketchbook lay open beside it, pages fluttering gently under the AC breeze—drawings of drainage channels, plant boxes, and the original alley before they cleaned it. She'd even printed the photo Leila had taken—the one that started it all. It sat in a clear frame next to the model: her holding a trowel, children playing behind her.

People passed by. Some slowed. A few asked polite questions and nodded before moving on.

And then came the judges.

Four of them—two women, two men—each carrying a tablet and stylus, faces unreadable. They stopped at her table. Naima took a breath so deep it made her ribs ache.

She greeted them with a soft "Good morning," then launched into her explanation: how the flooding happened, how she'd measured slope using a water bottle, how the benches were built from scraps, how the alley had become a corridor of pride for her neighbors. She showed them her original sketches, construction notes scribbled in pencil, and photos of each phase—from trash heap to path.

The older man nodded appreciatively. One woman leaned in, her eyes scanning every angle of the model.

Then the younger woman asked the question that always came, eventually:
"Where did you study?"

Naima hesitated just a heartbeat too long.

"I didn't," she said. "I just… looked at what was broken. And I fixed it."

For a second, no one spoke.

Then the woman smiled, and it wasn't a polite smile—it was something deeper. Recognition. Respect.

"Sometimes," she said, "that's where real design starts."

And just like that, the space around Naima felt a little less cold. A little more hers.

Later, after the talks, the polite applause, the panels on equitable zoning and climate-resilient infrastructure, came the hard part: awkward networking.

Naima drifted through the crowd like a leaf caught in a stream. People clustered in laughing groups, swapping business cards and LinkedIn handles. Words buzzed around her—"retrofitting," "sustainability matrix," "collaborative urban prototyping." She held a paper cup of juice she hadn't touched, her badge turning slightly with every step: *Naima Atieno, Community Builder – Nairobi.*

Then, just as she was considering an exit, a tall man in a crisp blue suit approached. His gait was purposeful but easy, like someone used to moving between boardrooms and dusty sites.

His badge read: **Director, East Africa Institute of Spatial Design.**

“We’ve been following the story of that alley,” he said, voice warm but precise. “Even before the summit reposted it. Very few young people manage to link vision with action. Fewer still manage it without resources.”

Naima blinked. “I just… did what needed doing.”

“That’s why I’m here.” He offered a firm handshake. “We run a fellowship program for emerging community urbanists. People who work with their hands *before* they work on paper. You’d be a great fit. We’d like you to apply.”

Her heart stuttered.

She swallowed, eyes darting away. “I… don’t have a birth certificate.”

He smiled, the way someone does when they’ve heard every version of *that* barrier before.

“We have lawyers,” he said. “We’ll figure it out.”

Naima didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. So she just nodded, the breath in her chest finally loosening, her hands curling tighter around the edges of possibility.

When she left the summit hall that day, the air felt thinner. Lighter. As though the sky had bent just slightly, pulling closer to the ground, a promise of more within reach.

The crowd still swirled behind her, but she didn’t feel like part of it anymore. She wasn’t caught up in the noise of names or titles or lanyards. The clatter of conversations faded as she stepped out into the sunlight, the world outside the hall sprawling wide before her.

She didn’t walk fast.

She didn’t walk small.

Her steps were steady, measured, like someone who had found her place and wasn’t about to shrink from it. Each footfall on the pavement felt like a decision. Like she was marking the path of her own future, unshaken by the distances between where she was and where she’d dreamed of going.

She walked like someone with a blueprint in her pocket, the rough edges of her sketches smoothed by the weight of possibility, and the city itself under her shoes, ready to be shaped, one alley, one bench, one brick at a time.

CHAPTER 10

The letter arrived in a plain envelope—no gold seal, no embossed crest, no rustle of importance. Just her name, “Naima Atieno,” written in blue ink, and the return address of the **East Africa Institute of Spatial Design** printed neatly in the corner.

Naima didn’t tear it open.

She sat with it for a long time, legs folded beneath her on the white-painted bench she and the boys had stacked from salvaged bricks. The same bench where old mamas now rested with their market bags, where toddlers pulled at each other’s sleeves, where conversations about rent, school fees, and weekend plans filled the afternoon air.

She held the envelope against her lap, fingers brushing over her name again and again as if to make it more real. The paper felt warm from the sun, warm like the hope she hadn’t dared name until now.

Across the alley, someone had tied up a fresh row of flower tins—recycled paint cans with holes punched in the sides, filled with soil and tiny green shoots. A boy dribbled a plastic ball down the narrow path, careful not to disturb them. A neighbor perched on the low wall with an ear of roasted maize, humming an old tune.

Nobody asked what she was holding.

Nobody stared.

And maybe that was the beauty of it—this quiet corner of the world she had helped shape was still moving, still growing, with or without the name of an institute stamped on a letter. None of them knew what the envelope meant.

Maybe they didn't have to.

Because she did.

And that was enough.

Inside, the letter was short.

But its words landed like thunder.

Congratulations, Naima Atieno.
You have been accepted into our 12-month Urban Futures Fellowship.
Your tuition, housing, and supplies will be fully covered.
We believe in your voice. We believe in your vision.
Welcome to the team.

She read it once. Then again. Her hands trembled just slightly, but not from fear—this was something else. Like her bones had remembered they were made to carry more than survival. Like the future had finally turned to face her and nodded, just once, in recognition.

Naima didn't cry.

There had been tears before—tears of frustration at government counters, quiet disappointment at lost chances, tears pressed into her pillow when no one was looking.

But this wasn't that.

This was a smile.

A slow, almost shy smile that pulled at the corners of her mouth and came from somewhere deeper than her lungs or her chest—somewhere belief had been quietly, stubbornly rooting itself all along.

Outside, someone called her name. A child maybe. Or a neighbor. The alley was still alive, still humming with life. But Naima sat there a moment longer, the letter folded gently between her fingers.

And in her mind, she whispered not just *thank you*, but *finally*.

She packed that weekend—just one bag.

A notebook filled with sketches and dreams.
A compass, slightly rusty, but always true.
Two neatly folded shirts.
Her mother's cooking spoon—wooden, smooth, a talisman of home and survival.
And a tiny model of her first community project, the alley path, sealed with tape and hope.

Each item whispered: *You are going somewhere. But you came from somewhere, too.*

That morning, as the sun slid slow over the rooftops, her mother sat behind her on the edge of the bed, parting and braiding Naima's hair in steady rows.

Not rushed. Not like other mornings. Like every braid was a blessing. Like every twist of hair was a thread between generations.

“You always saw the shape of things before they were built,” Mama said softly, tying off the last braid. “Even when I didn’t. Even when the world didn’t.”

Naima turned, her eyes bright. She reached for her mother’s hand—rough and warm and full of stories that never made it to paper.

“I’ll send pictures,” she said. “Of everything. The buildings. The studios. Even the food.”

Her mother smiled, eyes shining but unspilled. “Just don’t forget this place. Your hands started here. Your courage started here.”

“I won’t forget,” Naima said, standing with her bag slung low on her back. “But I’ll come back.”

She paused, then added, with quiet certainty:

“To build something better.”

Outside, the alley waited. The path she had built. The bench where children now sat to tie their shoes or watch the clouds. Neighbors waved as she passed, some unaware it was a goodbye, others pretending it wasn’t.

But Naima walked tall.

With her blueprint in her mind.

And home braided into her hair.

The fellowship campus rose behind a tall gate etched with metal shapes—maps, buildings, trees. A mosaic of what cities could be.

Naima stepped out of the matatu and adjusted her bag on her shoulder. The model of the alley path was wrapped in a kikapu and cradled against her side, fragile and precious. Her notebook pressed against her ribs like a second heart.

The guard at the entrance glanced at her ID letter, then waved her through with a smile. “Karibu, engineer,” he said, half-joking, half-prophetic.

Inside, the grounds were clean, quiet, impossibly green. Trees lined the walkways, and benches weren’t broken—they had backrests. Solar lamps stood like sentinels along the paths. Modern buildings gleamed with glass and light steel. It smelled like books and soil and future.

She passed a sculpture garden. A water harvesting station. A mural painted by someone from Malawi—its colors bold, its message louder: *Build like you belong.*

And then she reached the dormitory. A long, sun-warmed structure with blue shutters and wide eaves. Her name was on a printed tag above the bed: **Naima Atieno. Urban Futures Fellow.**

She sat on the edge of the mattress—too soft, too clean—and exhaled. Not disbelief. Not fear. Just…arrival.

She unpacked slowly. The compass on her desk. The cooking spoon tucked into a drawer like a secret. The model placed carefully on the windowsill, facing out.

Outside, a group of fellows laughed as they walked past, lanyards swinging. One of them waved.

Naima waved back, hesitant, then stronger.

She didn't know the codes. Not yet.

But she'd learn.

Because the architecture dream wasn't something out there anymore.

It was here.

And this time, she had blueprints in her bag and belonging in her bones.

Her first workshop was called "Ground Realities: Designing With, Not For."

The room looked nothing like a classroom. No chalkboard. No rows. Just a circle of chairs, a projector humming in the corner, and a giant map of Nairobi spread out on the floor like a patient waiting for diagnosis.

Twelve fellows from across the continent. One from Kampala who used bamboo to build community kitchens. Another from Dar es Salaam who sketched rainwater systems in his sleep. Everyone had a story. Naima had a path made from trash and belief.

Their instructor, a wiry woman in a kitenge blazer and silver rings on every finger, didn't waste time.

"Forget everything you think you know about cities," she said. "Forget blueprints. Forget budgets. I want to know this: *Who is your city ignoring?*"

Naima blinked.

The others started talking—street vendors being evicted, children with no safe place to play, informal settlements flattened without warning. The words flew like bricks and blueprints colliding.

Naima hesitated, then raised her hand.

“In my neighborhood,” she said, “there’s this alley. It used to flood. Everyone tiptoed through it. Now it has a bench. And sukuma growing in paint tins. It’s not big. But it changed how people walked. How they saw the space.”

The instructor nodded slowly. “That’s design. Not the size. The shift.”

Then she gave them their first challenge: *Redesign a single square meter of space from your home community.*

“But do it,” she added, “with what you already have. No fantasy budgets. No imported solutions. You’ve got one square meter. Make it matter.”

Naima’s mind lit up. She thought of a corner outside Mama Benta’s shop, where kids sat on crates after school. She saw it already—painted tires as stools, a book rack made from pallet wood, a shade cloth stitched from old curtains.

By the time the session ended, her notebook was full of sketches, margins stained where her palm had pressed too hard. She hadn’t spoken much after that first story.

But she had designed like she belonged.

They had three days to build.

One square meter. That was the rule.

The fellows scattered across the campus grounds like seeds on wind—some headed to the recycling bins, others to the tool shed, a few to a local market for secondhand treasures. But Naima? She went slow. She walked the edge of the compound, looking for the right spot. Not just any patch of ground—*a place that asked for something more.*

She found it behind the cafeteria: a patch of bare earth between two stone steps, just where a narrow path curved into shadow. People passed it, but never paused. It was overlooked. Forgotten. *Perfect.*

She sketched her idea again, right there on the concrete, crouched in the dirt with a stub of charcoal. A U-shaped bench from stacked bricks. A small shelf—books, yes, but also a mirror, so girls could check their hair before class. A patch of shade from a bent scrap of metal she'd found near the workshop bin, curved and draped with old curtain fabric she'd wash and dye.

On day one, she sourced everything.
Day two, she began building.

Her hands remembered what to do. Mixing sand and water. Lining bricks. Wiping sweat with the back of her wrist. By midday, some of the other fellows had wandered over, curious. One helped lift the shelf into place. Another shared extra paint—mustard yellow.

Leila texted to ask how it was going.
Naima sent her a photo of the half-finished bench, captioned:

"One square meter. Infinite space."

Day three, she painted the final touches. Small vines curling up one side. The word *Karibu* on the shelf, hand-lettered in blue.

Then she sat.

Just for a minute.

And waited.

Within ten minutes, a boy from the kitchen staff wandered over, sat down, and pulled out his phone. A girl joined him, flipping open a notebook. Another leaned on the shelf to tie her shoelaces.

The instructor strolled by, sunglasses on, and said, “That’s the thing about human-centered design. People recognize it before they understand it.”

Naima didn’t reply.

She just smiled—and wrote in her notebook:

“1 square meter. Used to be empty.
Now it’s *a pause.* A perch. A pocket of peace.”

They gathered under the open-air pavilion, its wooden beams wrapped in flowering vines, ceiling fans buzzing overhead like curious bees. One by one, the fellows took turns presenting their one-square-meter projects. A solar-lit bench that charged phones. A collapsible herb garden for cramped apartments. A low-cost handwashing station made from broken plumbing parts.

Each project got five minutes.

Two to present.

Three for feedback.

Naima sat near the end, her sketchbook balanced on her lap, fingers tapping a slow rhythm against the spine. She watched as others spoke—some confident, some nervous. The air buzzed with words like *sustainability, modularity, equity.* A few fellows got applause. One got a gentle grilling.

And then it was her turn.

She walked to the front with a quiet steadiness, the kind she'd built in alleys and long nights. She placed the small, recycled model of her bench-shelf-shade hybrid on the table, right beside a printed photo of the real one.

She cleared her throat.

"I found a forgotten space behind the kitchen. One meter wide. I built for people who pass through—not just to use it, but to feel noticed."

She explained her materials. Her choices. Why the shelf was low enough for a child to reach. Why the shade curved like a wave. Why *Karibu* was written in a soft, welcoming blue.

When she finished, the silence stretched—but it wasn't heavy.

A girl from Rwanda raised her hand first. "It's elegant. Unassuming. But intentional. It feels… kind."

Another added, "I love that it invites without demanding anything. Sometimes public space tries too hard. This doesn't."

One of the instructors, a tall woman in black boots who'd worked on refugee housing in Tunisia, leaned forward. "Did you consider drainage for the bench during rain?"

Naima nodded. "The fabric's removable. And I cut holes under the bricks—it drains through sand underneath."

The woman raised a brow. Impressed.

Another hand: “What would you do with ten square meters?”

Naima blinked, then smiled. “Make ten different one-meter projects. Each one listening to its space.”

Laughter. Nods. A few soft *wows.*

As she stepped back into the circle, a warm ripple passed through her chest. Not pride exactly. More like *proof.* That what she built made sense to others too.

As the next fellow stood to present, Naima jotted a note in her book:

“Design isn’t just what you build.
It’s what people *do* when you’re done building.”

CHAPTER 11

Week 3: Field Lab — The Team Build

The announcement came on a crisp Monday morning, dew still clinging to the edges of the corrugated campus roof. The fellows gathered around a pinned board like contestants in a low-budget reality show, jostling politely as names and numbers were handed out. A hush fell as the program instructor, clipboard in hand, spoke:

“This week, you don’t just build on a one squared space—it’s something an entire community can depend on.”

Naima’s hands trembled slightly as she unfolded her assignment slip. It read:

TEAM 4 — SITE: KAWANGWARE EDGE, WARD 6

Assignment:

Co-design and build a semi-permanent public seating structure with stormwater adaptation for a high-footfall urban fringe.

Timeline: 10 days

Budget: 15,000 KES

Materials: Local only.

It was the kind of challenge she was prepared for: small budget, tight timeline, messy context — but real. Real people. Real ground. Real sweat.

Her team was a cocktail of personalities and philosophies:

- **Joel**: An architecture student from Nairobi who spoke in floor plans and metaphors. Always clad in dusty canvas overalls, he strutted like he'd built half the city himself. His laser measure swung from his belt like a duelist's blade — he called it *The Truth Stick*.
- **Afiya**: A soft-spoken civil engineering student from Zanzibar, with calm eyes and ink-stained fingers. She carried a weathered notebook full of elegant structural sketches and coastal drainage doodles. When she spoke, it was as if she were narrating equations to the wind.
- **Chuks**: A Nigerian systems hacker turned sustainability nerd, who believed any problem could be solved with a solar panel and some Python code. He'd already mapped the sun's trajectory over their site before they even stepped foot on it.
- **Naima**: Armed with a fraying sketchbook, a well-worn tape measure, and a quiet but growing confidence. She believed in spaces that breathed with the people — lived, changed, adapted. Spaces that listened.

Day 1

The sun bore down with the indifference of a furnace, baking the red earth into cracked plates beneath their feet. The site pulsed with urban life — dusty, noisy, defiant. Shoe vendors barked prices beside rainbow piles of rubber sandals. A banana hawker balanced her basket

like a crown, peeling and selling with royal grace. Boda bodas zipped through the crowd like they had diplomatic immunity, honking through invisible lanes, trailing diesel and curses.

It was chaos with a heartbeat.

One side of the lot was hemmed by a crumbling, graffiti-tagged wall, part boundary, part canvas. The other edge dropped into a shallow trench that choked on plastic wrappers and the faint tang of sewage — a souvenir from last week's rain.

Joel stood with arms crossed, his laser measure hanging limp.

"This place needs a bulldozer, not a bench," he said, disgust curling his lip.

Afiya didn't even turn to look at him. She just raised a single eyebrow, like a queen surveying a rude peasant.

"It needs dignity," she said simply, brushing her ink-stained fingers across a page where she'd already begun to sketch the site contours.

Naima didn't speak right away. She walked slowly, deliberately, eyes scanning like a cartographer of lived experience. The sound of life buzzed all around her — a child's laugh, a kettle's whistle, the thrum of nearby speakers blaring afropop.

She crouched beside the runoff trench, brushing aside debris with her fingertips. She pulled her tape measure out, stretched it from the edge of the wall to the trench, and paused.

"If we curve a channel from the midpoint," she murmured, "we can guide runoff into a gravel soak pit here. Maybe even use local stone. It's not about fighting the flow. It's about shaping it."

Joel snorted.

“That’s textbook idealism,” he muttered, sketchbook hanging at his side like a surrendered weapon.

Naima didn’t respond. Not with words.

She stood and looked at the space again — not as it was, but as it could be. She saw kids sitting on reclaimed timber seats, elders chatting in shade, the air a little cooler from stored rainwater beneath their feet.

This wasn’t a dump. It was dormant.

It didn’t need a bulldozer. It needed belief.

Day 3

The group huddled in a borrowed classroom, blueprints splayed across a wobbly plastic table. The walls were covered with pinned sketches, rough elevations, and post-it notes of ambition. Sunlight filtered through dusty windows, catching the steam from mugs of too-sweet chai.

They had ideas. Too many.

Joel stood at the front, pacing like a commander before battle.

“We go concrete and steel — something that *lasts*. Brutalist. Honest. Let it contrast the chaos.”

Chuks leaned back in his chair, arms behind his head, eyes glittering with circuitry.

“What if we added motion-sensor lights? Maybe even an app — QR codes for civic messages or wayfinding. Interactive.”

Afiya, quiet but unshakable, unrolled a delicate sketch of arched bamboo ribs.

“Steel absorbs heat. Bamboo breathes. It bends but doesn’t break.”

Each idea was a flare — bright, burning, clashing mid-air. No clear path. No harmony yet.

Naima sat at the edge of the chaos, flipping through her notes from the site visit. Muddy footprints lined the margins. A smudge of mango juice from a vendor’s child she’d spoken to. These pages weren’t theory — they were people.

She looked up.

“Can we... just pause? And think like the people who’ll actually use it?”

The room stilled.

“Shoe sellers who stand ten hours. Tired mamas balancing groceries and babies. Kids on their way to school. This can’t be just about looking clever. It needs to feel like... *welcome*.”

Silence. Long enough to notice the fan squeaking above them.

Joel scoffed, arms crossed.

“We’re not building for comfort. It’s an *installation*. It should be bold. Make a statement.”

Naima met his gaze, steady.

“It should invite people. Not just impress panelists.”

She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t have to. Her conviction carried more weight than volume.

Chuks, usually the futurist, looked at her differently now. Not like a quiet teammate, but like someone anchoring the group to something real. He tapped his pen on the table, thoughtful.

Then nodded. Slow. Intentional.

“People first,” he said. “That’s the only future that scales.”

And just like that, the storm of ideas shifted course — toward something grounded, something human.

By Day 5, the site had stopped being *just a site*.

It was no longer an abstract sketch or a theoretical problem. It was mud under fingernails, brick dust on brows, bamboo splinters and sunburned shoulders. It was laughter echoing off the wall that used to be crumbling but now stood proud — waiting to wear paint like a badge of honor.

The breakthrough didn’t come all at once. It emerged — slow, stubborn, beautiful — through layers of disagreement, revision, and shared exhaustion. It arrived not in thunder but in pencil and sweat.

The final plan was stitched together like a patchwork dream:

- A **curved brick bench**, low and inviting, cradling the contour of the trench like an embrace.
- Overhead, a **bamboo shade roof**, woven with care and anchored in recycled metal piping, filtering sunlight into soft lattice shadows.
- Beneath their feet, a **gravel trench**, lined with terracotta tiles — functional, local, breathable — guiding runoff with quiet efficiency.
- Behind it all, the reborn wall — soon to be a **hand-painted mural** that doubled as a chalkboard, a canvas for community stories, lessons, and spontaneous theatre.

They built it in shifts, bodies aching, clothes stained with effort. The sound of hammering mixed with Swahili slang and bad jokes in three accents. Hoarse voices sang off-key as bricks found their place. Blisters bloomed, but no one complained. There was no time for ego — only rhythm, only forward.

Naima didn't bark orders or seek credit. She led with presence. Quietly adjusting measurements, smoothing mortar, offering water, sketching in the dirt with a stick when words fell short. She was the steady drumbeat beneath the symphony.

And then, one evening — just as the sun melted over the rooftops and the bamboo cast golden shadows — a boy walked by, schoolbag slung loose, dust on his ankles.

He stopped, pointed at the structure, eyes wide.

"That's our new *stage*!" he shouted, grinning.

They laughed — all of them — tools in hand, sweat on skin. But in that moment, it *was*. A stage. A seat. A shelter. A beginning.

The build wasn't finished yet. But the soul of it had arrived.

The final afternoon glowed golden, as if the sun itself had come to bear witness.

Vendors leaned over their makeshift stalls, pausing mid-transaction to watch. A boda rider idled his engine just to stay a little longer. The usual rush of Kawangware Edge had slowed — not out of order, but out of reverence.

The structure stood complete, humble but proud — a small revolution built from brick, bamboo, and belief.

Children had already claimed the space. Some perched on the still-drying bench like royalty, giggling as they swung their legs. A girl traced the edge of the mural with her finger like it was a treasure map. A woman rinsed greens at the nearby trench, humming softly, and smiled like she'd been waiting for this day for years without knowing it.

The mural behind them shimmered in the late light — a dance of bold color and chalkboard black, etched with shapes that meant different things to different people. Birds. Letters. Spirals. Hope.

Their mentor, a grizzled urbanist with a voice like gravel and gospel, clapped once — sharp, deliberate.

“You made a stage, a seat, a classroom, and a rain solution,” he said, gesturing wide, “all in one square of dirt.”

Applause rose — not just from the fellows, but from the street. Not polite. Not performative. *Real*.

Joel, now wearing less swagger and more humility, leaned toward Naima, flexing his sore shoulders with a wince.

“Alright,” he said, voice low but honest. “Maybe comfort’s not such a bad concept after all.”

Naima turned to him, eyes soft, lips tugging into a grin.

“Told you.”

And in that moment — surrounded by joy, by chatter, by something they’d summoned from dust — she didn’t feel like a student anymore.

She felt like a builder.

A shaper of spaces.

A citymaker.

Twelve months later.

Nairobi basked in late-afternoon amber, the kind of light that made even cracked pavement look like memory. The city's constant hum was still there—matatus honking, preachers preaching, life never pausing—but something about the noise felt gentler now. Or maybe she had changed. Maybe both.

Naima stood at the edge of the campus courtyard, the same place where it had all started. She remembered that first morning—awkward in borrowed shoes, notebook clenched like armor, tripping over the phrase *equitable spatial planning* like it was a tongue-twister invented by strangers.

Now it rolled off her tongue like a lullaby. Like a mission.

Around her, the final exhibition buzzed with energy. Fellow urbanists moved through the space in tailored confidence, their models gleaming under string lights. Judges circled, clipboards in hand. Laughter rang between display boards and fabric banners. Lanyards swung like medals.

But Naima didn't need a spotlight. Her work spoke in walls touched, in corners transformed.

She had built five community projects over the year. Five seeds sown in different soils:

- A **shaded market stall redesign in Kibera**, using salvaged iron sheets and thoughtful shade angles, co-created with women who knew every corner of that place.

- A **rain garden for a flood-prone school**, where students now planted seedlings and learned water cycles not from textbooks, but from their own backyard.
- A **mobile play structure** — collapsible, colorful — for the children of roadside vendors who once played in traffic lanes.
- A **reimagined matatu stop**, with solar charging ports, shaded benches, and art by local teens — where waiting now felt like belonging.
- And the crown jewel: a **participatory redesign of her own neighborhood alley**, once forgotten, now lit, clean, and alive. Locals renamed it *Path of Many Hands* — and they meant it.

Each project had been a teacher in disguise.

The market stalls taught her how to *listen* without interrupting.

The rain garden taught her how to *bend*, to adapt when plans got swept away — literally.

The play structure taught her how to *see through children's eyes*.

The matatu stop taught her how to *negotiate with bureaucracy and still keep soul*.

And the alley? The alley taught her how to *stand firm*. To claim space — not just for others, but for herself.

She took a breath and let it stretch.

This was not the end. This was a landing pad before the next launch. She hadn't just learned how to build structures.

She had learned how to *build trust*. *Build belonging*. *Build futures*.

The final evening came gently, like dusk pulling a blanket over the year.

The fellows gathered in the main hall — the same hall where they'd once tripped over jargon, argued over site plans, and fueled late nights with bad coffee and bold dreams. Now, the lights were dimmed. The models had been set aside. No lanyards. No judging panels. Just people.

Someone lit a candle in the center. Tradition, they said. A reminder that not all light comes from above. Some is built from below.

One by one, they stood. Each voice carried pieces of the year: moments of failure, flickers of triumph, things they'd lost and found. Laughter danced with tears. Some spoke with practiced rhythm. Others with trembling hands.

When it was Naima's turn, she stood slowly. No notecards. No sketchbook. Just her.

She glanced at the circle — faces she now knew like street maps. Joel, arms crossed but eyes soft. Afiya, blinking back emotion behind her usual stillness. Chuks, nodding before she'd said a word.

"I came here without papers," she said, voice even, clear.

There was a rustle. Heads tilted. Listening closer.

"But I leave with proof. Not the official kind—though that came too."

"I mean the kind you build with your own hands. With sweat. With doubt. With community."

She let the silence hold for a beat.

"I used to think *builders* were the people with hard hats and blueprints. But now I know…"

She looked around the room — eyes shimmering in the candlelight.

“Builders are the ones who see broken things… and *choose not to walk away*.”

Silence.

Then — like thunder cracking through reverence — came the applause. Loud. Long. From deep in the chest, not the palms. Chuks was first on his feet. Joel followed. Afiya smiled — wide, rare, radiant.

Somewhere in that echo, Naima could almost hear Leila — irreverent as ever — shouting something like *“That’s my girl!”* from the back row of the universe.

Naima smiled at the thought.

This wasn’t the end. It was a send-off. A relay. A call to keep building — no matter where you land next.

The Last Morning

The sun rose slow that day, like it knew it was being watched.

Naima packed again — this time with the practiced rhythm of someone who’d done this before, but not like *this*. Two bags now. One sturdier, patched at the corners. More shirts. More tools. But still: her compass, her sketchbook, and her mother’s worn cooking spoon, wrapped in a handkerchief. She always said it was her first measuring device — the way love could be served in ladles.

She zipped the final bag and stood for a moment, breathing in the room’s stillness — air thick with the scent of wood glue, old posters, and memories.

Footsteps behind her. It was her mentor — same salt-and-pepper hair, same well-worn boots that had walked through a dozen cities before her. He didn't say much. He never did when it mattered most.

"Where to next?" he asked, voice soft but curious.

Naima turned to the open window. Past the courtyard gates, Nairobi pulsed — matatus honking, children laughing, distant thunder threatening rain or revelation.

"Home," she said. "Then the coast. Then maybe Kampala. I've got a few alleyways in mind."

That last part made him grin — not with pride, but recognition.

"Keep disrupting."

Naima nodded, shouldering her bag.

"Builders don't stop."

She walked out with the dawn. No parade. No last glance. Just movement — forward, intentional.

Because she wasn't chasing a job or a title.

She was chasing the next broken thing that needed someone who wouldn't walk away.

The city beyond the gate was loud and chaotic and full of sharp corners. But Naima didn't flinch.

The road ahead was uncertain — cracked in places, rising in others, a patchwork of detours and dead ends.

But her feet?

Her feet were sure.

She walked with the poise of someone who had once measured space in centimeters — and now claimed it with her whole body. Shoulders square. Head high. She carried no banner, no anthem.

Only conviction.

She moved like someone who knew exactly how much space she needed.

Just one square meter.
Enough for a bench. A mural. A story.
Enough for people to gather. To rest. To dream.

Enough to start a revolution.

And she was just getting started.

EPILOGUE: FIVE YEARS LATER

The coast. Midday.

Heat shimmered off the corrugated rooftops, casting wavy halos around solar panels and climbing vines. The ocean breathed in the distance—salt and wind and possibility. Bougainvillea burst over gates like fireworks caught in bloom. Somewhere, a radio played taarab low and steady.

Down a stone path flanked by wild basil and flowering paint tins, a little girl skipped, her red school uniform bright as flame. Her feet landed on painted stepping stones—each one etched with a single word: *dream*, *build*, *belong*, *restore*.

Behind her towered a mural, sun-faded but defiant:

“SPACE IS A RIGHT, NOT A PRIVILEGE.”

And below it, block letters, hand-brushed but unwavering:

Naima Atieno Community Studio

Inside the open-walled studio, the air was thick with sawdust, laughter, and warm maize. The smell of paint and purpose.

Naima stood barefoot on the cool cement floor—her sketchbook in one hand, the other resting gently on the shoulder of a teenager leaning over a model of their fishing village.

Cardboard walls. Paper boats. String pathways. A new pier was rising—not yet in real wood and concrete, but in intention.

“Where does the sun hit in the morning?” Naima asked, soft but certain.

A girl in braids pointed. Another turned the miniature roof. A boy adjusted the waterflow system with a pencil.

Behind them: scraps of timber, chalk maps on canvas, repurposed jerrycans full of brushes. A baby giggled in a woven carrier. Someone’s aunt laughed from just outside, where maize sizzled on a charcoal stove.

No fanfare. No press.

Just the quiet revolution of people designing their own lives.

Naima didn’t need to lead from the front anymore. She led by standing beside. By showing how. By stepping back so others could step forward.

Her World Now

Naima never did follow the expected path.
No glossy brochures. No dorm keys. No cap-and-gown photos pinned on a parent’s wall.

Instead, she built her own curriculum—hand-drawn and hard-earned.
A living syllabus of **people, places, and problems**.

- She spent a year in Lagos, waist-deep in the complexity of informal settlements—listening more than she spoke, sketching solutions on scrap cardboard under zinc roofs.
- In Kisumu, she co-designed **climate-resilient housing prototypes**, blending local wisdom with smart adaptation—walls that could breathe, roofs that could harvest.
- Later, she joined a Pan-African team digitizing **vernacular building techniques**, crafting an open-source library of blueprints rooted in culture, not colonization.

But through it all, her compass stayed pointed to the grassroots.

Always small-scale.

Always community-first.

She wasn't out to dazzle with mega-towers or chase after fame in foreign magazines.

Instead, she poured herself into something quieter, but deeper:

The Naima Atieno Community Studio — part school, part lab, part lighthouse.

Young people came with wild ideas and sharp questions.

Naima helped them shape those dreams into blueprints—then into budgets, pitches, bricks.

They didn't just learn how to build.

They learned how to listen.

To lead from the side.

To leave space for the future to grow through the cracks.

She doesn't chase clients anymore.

They come to her now—NGOs, urban planners, even government delegations with shiny boots and cautious optimism.

But before she signs on, she always asks just one thing:

“Have you asked the people who live there?”

And if the answer is no?

She hands them a notebook and says,

“Come back when you’ve done your homework.”

Because in Naima’s world, *every* revolution begins with listening.

A Message on Her Phone

Evening settles soft over the coast. The light has that watercolor hue—lavender and gold—where day doesn’t end so much as *exhale*.

Naima sits on a long white bench, toes buried in warm sand, the scent of seaweed and fried maize swirling around her. It’s *that* bench—the very first one. Moved all the way from her old alleyway in Nairobi. Still standing. Still sturdy. Repainted every year with care and ceremony. It bears the fingerprints of a hundred children and a few quiet tears of elders who found rest on it.

She leans back, sketchbook on her lap, watching the studio lights flicker on behind her like stars rising from the earth.

Then her phone buzzes.

A simple message. No capital letters. No formalities.

i saw your name in a book. we have a muddy corner we want to fix. can i show you our idea?

From a girl in Kibera. Probably no older than Naima was when she first picked up a broken ruler and drew something brave.

Naima smiles. That same ache-in-the-chest kind of smile. The one that knows what it's like to be young and full of questions.

She replies without hesitation:

"Of course. Bring chalk and imagination."

And just like that, it begins again.

A new bench.

A new mural.

A new revolution in one square meter.

And so, She Builds

The nights are quieter now—but her mind still hums.

Long after the studio empties, after the last child runs home clutching a model made of matchsticks and dreams, Naima stays behind.

She still sketches by lamplight—pages smudged, corners curled. Her lines are cleaner now, but her questions are just as bold.

In her worn work bag, among tape, charcoal, and chalk dust, she still carries her mother's spoon. The wood darkened with years, the handle worn smooth. A compass, not for direction, but for *purpose*.

And yes—she still believes.

Fiercely. Quietly. Unshakably.

That one square meter of space—just one—is enough.

Enough to gather.

Enough to teach.

Enough to imagine something better.

And to begin.

Because she knows now, with marrow-deep certainty:

The future isn’t handed down.

It’s hammered out.

Poured and patched and painted.

Built by those who don’t wait for permission.

Real builders?

They don’t stop.

They build anyway.