

PROLOGUE

When the doorbell of her Manhattan penthouse chimed, Niya Londres hurriedly clipped on a pair of heavy gold loop earrings, pulled a black cashmere sweater over her head and stuck her long legs into a pair of white leather pants. With a quick glance into the mirror above her sleek granite vanity, she gave her full red lips a glossing lick, and then turned around to glance over her shoulder to assess her curvaceous backside. An appreciative smile touched her lips.

Not too long ago, Niya would have been irritated to see that her hips were so prominently rounded below her tiny waist, but now she considered the extra pounds she had put on during her month-long stay at a Nevada resort to be exactly what she needed to soften her too-thin figure. She was perfectly content with her new, curvier image.

At thirty-one, Niya was as shapely and hot-looking as any twenty-two year-old woman and she was proud that her Afro-Cuban heritage was definitely showing out once more. Years of professional dancing had kept her five-foot-eight inch body lean and toned. Good genes had meant little concern with skincare habits, leaving her with a flawless sepia complexion. Her tousled black hair, shot with golden undertones, now touched the tops of her shoulders, and her dark eyes, which sparkled with spirited energy, created a glow that lit up her heart-shaped face.

Remaining barefoot, Niya hurried from the dressing room off her master bedroom and into the short hallway leading to the entry, praying that Ginger Drew had come through for her. Niya hated wasting time with people who were neither organized, committed, nor talented, and she had been informed by four different references that Ginger was the perfect graphic designer to create what Niya wanted, and would happily work double-time in order to meet Niya's deadline.

The doorbell chimed for the second time just as Niya pulled open the teak paneled door.

"Hello!" she welcomed her guest.

"Miss Londres?" the young woman standing at her entrance remarked. "I'm Ginger Drew. We had a ten o'clock appointment."

"Yes, yes, Ginger, please come in," Niya replied, assessing the young woman, who had short, blunt-cut dark brown hair, a ruddy complexion, and a small round face which was dwarfed by a pair of large red-frame glasses. "Good to finally meet you, Ginger, and I'm so happy you were able to meet with me here."

"For you, Ms. Londres, no problem. I was happy to come into town. It's only a short train ride into the city from Newark, and I gladly set aside my other projects to do this for you. And what an honor! I loved you in *Morning Stars*. I saw it four times! To be able to say that I designed the wedding invitations for the famous Broadway actress

Niya Londres! That's a real coup for any graphic artist."

Smiling, Niya simply nodded, aware that her name was fast becoming as recognizable as that of any movie star, though she paid little attention to the tabloids. Fame. Money. Adulation. They had all fallen her way so quickly and so unexpectedly that she was still adjusting to the notoriety that her critically acclaimed performance on Broadway in the smash hit, *Morning Stars*, had brought. Though pleased to hear that Ginger saw her on stage four times and considered her famous, Niya had no time to chit-chat about the theater. She had only one thing on her mind today -- focusing on the most personal and important day of her life -- her upcoming wedding, and Ginger Drew was going to play a very important role.

"Let's go into the study. I'm anxious to see what you have for me." Niya led the young woman into an oak paneled room that had two walls lined with books. Silver-framed photographs of Niya with celebrities, friends, and fellow actors in many of her performances had been carefully arranged on table tops among unusual accessories that gave the room a rich ambiance. Three oil paintings, all of the same island landscape and framed in rustic wood, hung on the wall above a teak writing desk, while a gleaming ebony concert piano occupied a far corner of the room. Open sheet music was scattered across its top.

The room had the quintessential feel and smell of a celebrity's private space: furnished with expensive, though tailored leather couches, heavy brass lamps, and intricately designed oriental rugs on the floor. A new flat screen television sat in a corner near the fireplace, where a cozy fire now blazed.

After settling down on the curved black leather sofa, Ginger handed Niya a zippered portfolio, and then sat back while Niya eagerly opened the packet. She removed a fragile-looking piece of parchment-like paper edged in gold and held it up to the light.

"Beautiful," Niya murmured, examining the hand-crafted piece in the bright November sunlight that was streaming into the room through one of its tall, narrow windows. "Your work is exquisite. This is exactly what I had I mind."

"Thank you. It's real papyrus," Ginger stated with pride. "Two years ago, I took a course in paper making from an Egyptian artist on how to craft authentic papyrus according to the ancient Egyptian methods. One piece at a time. Lovingly. Each sheet is unique. The sample you are holding took me three days to complete and the lettering was done in pure fourteen carat gold. However, if you wish, I could use gold-tone ink and save you quite a bit of money. But I thought you'd probably want the real thing, so I made up this sample for you."

"I'll use the real gold, I assure you," Niya murmured, scrutinizing the paper.

"And my calligraphy is hand executed," Ginger continued with pride. "I don't farm out any of my work."

"Oh, of course," Niya vaguely replied, clearly intrigued by the beautiful sheet of paper. "I love everything about this sample, but could you change the lettering to a less formal script? Perhaps something more whimsical? Maybe with a Caribbean flair?"

"Absolutely," Ginger agreed. "I know exactly what you want."

"And don't worry about the cost. Make them beautiful. These invitations must be breathtaking. And unforgettable."

Ginger reached into her giant-size handbag and pulled out a pad and a pen, ready to write up the order. "How many invitations will you need?" she asked.

After thinking for a moment, Niya decided, "A dozen. Yes, I have exactly twelve guests I plan to invite." She stopped to think, and then added, "No, make that fourteen invitations, one for the groom and one for me. That will be perfect."

"Fine," Ginger stated. "Now, the wording. What would you like on the invitations?"

Settling deeper onto the sofa, Niya thought once more about the words that had tumbled around in her head for the past four days as she'd struggled with what to say, and how to say it. She had paced the floor with a mini tape recorder, stopping to jot down a phrase or two, only to discard them and try again. The final decision about the invitation wording had only just come to her, while dressing this morning, and now she was certain of what she wanted to say.

"My message will be short, uncomplicated, and direct," she began, one finger at her lips. Standing, she walked to a window and faced the city skyline for a few moments, and then turning to Ginger, lifted her chin and began. "This is what I want on the invitations," she started. "Niya Londres invites you to join her in a special day of celebration and to share in her joy at her wedding. Villa Tropical, Acapulco, Mexico on ....."

"Uh, Miss Londres," Ginger interrupted. "I think it's customary to include the groom's name in the opening, and then to refer to him in your wording by using the words 'us and we'. I have some samples here, if you'd like to see them." Ginger began rummaging again, in her large leather bag and pulled out a bundle of folded papers. "I think, since you are....well, mature...and your parents aren't giving you away, that a non-traditional type of wording would be appropriate. There are so many ways to ..."

"I *know* what's traditional and customary," Niya stopped Ginger with a resolute tone. "But my wedding will be neither customary nor ordinary. Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

"Well, fine. It's your wedding, but...."

"Right. That it is," Niya confirmed. "So the wording will be as I want it. Now where was I?"

Shrugging, Ginger shook her head. "You were at, Villa Tropical, Acapulco, Mexico," she read from her notes.

"Yes." Niya pursed her lips, and then went on. "On Sunday December 13, 1998 at five-thirty in the evening. RSVP Required. Invited guests only. Reception to follow in the Villa Tropical Ballroom." She held both hands, palms up, at Ginger, signaling that she was finished.

"But Miss Londres. Really. You don't want to send out a wedding invitation and omit the name of the man you plan to marry."

Niya chuckled aloud, tilting back her head, clearly enjoying the young woman's confusion. "Oh, yes, I do....and I plan to."

"But why?" Ginger wanted to know.

"Because I want the invitation to my wedding to be so original, elaborate and intriguingly worded that each person I invite will immediately RSVP, *and* show up."

Ginger made a soft clucking sound with her tongue, but then sighed and scribbled some notes on her pad. "Well, an invitation that looks and reads like yours will certainly guarantee attendance. I'm sure you won't have to worry about no-shows, unless springing for a trip to Mexico is a problem."

"Oh, I'm going to take care of all the travel and lodging expenses," Niya clarified with a wave of her left hand, on which she wore two rings: an emerald-cut yellow diamond surrounded with rubies, and a brilliant round solitaire diamond set in an intricately engraved silver band. "A plane ticket will go out to each person who RSVP'S, and I've rented the entire villa for a week. All my guests have to do is show up."

"That's pretty classy." Ginger nodded her approval. "But what about the groom? Won't he be a bit annoyed when he sees that you left his name off the invitation?"

Niya shrugged. "No. The wording on the invitation is of little concern to the man I plan to marry. He's away on business, so he asked me to do whatever I wanted. All he has to do is put on a tuxedo and show up, prepared to walk down the aisle. So you see, I can do exactly as I please."

"Oh, I do see," Ginger vaguely agreed, snapping her portfolio shut. "Well, I gotta say... this is one of the strangest assignments I've ever worked on, but I have to admit, it's the most intriguing, too. Please, Ms. Londres. Let me know....after the wedding, of course, how it all turns out."

"I will," Niya said as she escorted Ginger to the door. Pausing with her hand on the doorknob, she said, "Today's November 5<sup>th</sup>. Can you get the invitations to me by the fifteenth?"

"Sure," Ginger replied. "I'll get started on them today."

Once Ginger had left, Niya returned to her study and sat down at her dark teak writing table. The red leather address book that contained contact information for Niya's close personal friends and professional acquaintances lay open to the letter K, and a cream colored business card with bold black script on it was wedged between two pages. After studying the card for a few seconds, she removed it and rubbed her index finger over the raised lettering.

"Bert Kline," she read from the card. "Private investigator for the discriminating client." Taking a deep breath, she picked up the phone and dialed the number on the card, both nervous and eager to hear what he had to say.

"Do you have the information?" she asked as soon as Kline's secretary put her through to the man she was trusting to determine her future.

"It's on its way to you now," Kline assured her in his familiarly gruff voice.

"Were you successful?" she asked, scooting to the edge of the chair, her head lowered as she focused on the faded blue flowers in the Oriental rug. She had gone to great lengths and paid Bert Kline an exorbitant amount of money to secure his services on short notice. She had been worried that he might refuse her request because he was currently involved in a high profile murder case that required him to testify daily in court. However, because Niya's name carried star-power weight of its own, she had been able to convince him to take her on as a client. Now, Niya expected results. "Tell me what you found."

"I can't do that over the phone," he replied with a professional clip to his words. "I'm sending my report over to you by courier, and it includes everything you asked for. Call me later if you want to discuss anything."

"Will I be pleased?" she prompted.

"It all depends," Kline vaguely replied.

"On what?" Niya pressed, wishing the man would not be quite *so* discriminating. The sounds of rattling papers came over the line before Kline spoke again. "It all depends on how badly you want to get married. Anything can be worked out, you know?"

Niya tensed her jaw and held her tongue, reflecting on this non-committal answer. Bert Kline's report was only one piece of a complicated situation, but a piece she needed very much. "Yes, I know," she agreed. "We often have to make trade-offs to get what we want."

"Right. So, call me after you've read my report and we'll go from there."

"I will. And thanks, Bert for squeezing me in. I know how busy you are."

"My pleasure, Ms. Londres," he tossed back, then clicked off.

*Anything can be worked out?* Niya thought, the private investigator's comment

still hanging in her mind. *What, she wondered, had he meant by that?*

Too jittery to concentrate on finalizing the wedding reception menu, she shoved the folder filled with lists of hors d'oeuvres and beverages aside and impulsively opened the side drawer of her desk. She removed a piece of monogrammed stationery and a matching envelope, and began writing a letter to her mother back in Cuba.

After years of silence, they were finally able to communicate, and Niya took pleasure in keeping her mother updated on what was happening in her crazy, fast-paced American life. When Niya left Cuba ten years ago, Olivia's parting words to her daughter had been, "Make a home for yourself in America, but never forget that you are Cuban, first," and Niya had struggled to honor that advice, though it had made her life difficult at times.

Today, Niya's letter to her mother was filled with details about her approaching wedding, and words of sorrow over the fact that her mother would not be there. Even if it had been possible for Olivia Londres to leave Cuba and travel to Mexico, Niya worried that her mother's health might fail if she tried to make the trip.

Finished with the letter, Niya sealed it and set it aside. She pressed her hands together as if making a silent prayer, nodded, and then removed three photographs from beneath the blotter on her desk. Carefully, she lined the pictures up in a row, pausing to study each man's face.

"I love you all," she admitted in a soft, wistful tone. "And I know that you love me, too. Each of you wants to marry me, but which one will hear me say, "I do"? Which one of you can I trust with my heart?"

She picked up the first photo. A tall man with smooth brown skin, a strong jawline and keenly carved features and was standing at a microphone; his head thrown back, his thickly lashed eyes closed, a saxophone at his lips. His white, open-collared shirt was wrinkled and thick drifts of cigarette smoke swirled around his head. Niya could almost feel the pulse of the rhythm he was belting out and hear the music that was coming from the golden horn in his hands.

"Tremont Henderson. My first love," she whispered. "You rescued me from a dreary life without hope and proved to me that I was worthy of being loved. With you, every day was filled with sunshine; our time together was an exciting journey packed with passion, good times, and beautiful music. Life was one big party back then, but it ended very badly, in spite of everything we tried to keep it alive. Is it possible for us to pick up where we left off, or have we lost the spark that fueled our passion?"

After tracing her finger over Tremont's chiseled features, Niya tightened her lips, set the photo aside, and picked up the next one from the desk.

"Granger Cooper," she said with pride, studying the image of a mature white man wearing a black tuxedo who was standing on the sidewalk in front of the famous

Metro Theater. The wind had ruffled his longish sandy brown hair and he was smiling as he posed before a giant playbill poster of his smash hit, *Morning Stars*, which had introduced Niya to Broadway. "My wise manager, my enthusiastic lover, my solid rock who never failed me. When you took me under your wing and into your heart, you turned my life around."

After placing this photo back on the desk, she took up the third one, a chuckle escaping her lips as she assessed the tanned face and smiling brown eyes of a youthful, well-fit man who was sitting on a beautiful palomino horse, a desert landscape spreading out behind him. "Astin Spence, my rugged Marlboro man," she said, shaking her head with a smile. "So damn full of energy and so damn handsome. You challenged me to take so many risks; emotionally, personally, and even professionally. With you, I was real... I was simply me ... Niya Londres, the girl from the barrio of Cerro, Cuba, who wanted only to dance. Yet, you made me feel like a star. How could I resist falling in love with you?"

With a sweep of her hand, Niya brushed the three photos back under the desk blotter and then stood. There was nothing to do now but wait for Kline's report and then she would have her answer.

The quietness of the empty apartment suddenly seemed oppressive and she was much too restless to concentrate on anything of importance. Impatiently, she pressed the power button on the television's remote control and flipped to the national news, desperate to occupy her mind as she waited for her door bell to ring.

As the newscaster droned on about the outlandish price of real estate in southern California, Niya let her mind drift back over the years, unable to keep the memories at bay.