

July 2013

“I THINK WE should take Hellen’s concerns seriously and try to address them,” Herbert said as he closed the front door after he and Leah had said goodbye to Hellen.

“Why should we?” Leah asked.

“As a business consultant, Hellen knows what she’s talking about. We should heed her advice and close down the restaurant.”

“No,” Leah answered, sounding irritated. “We may not be making any money from the restaurant but I am not ready to close it down.”

“Darling, it’s not just that we are not making any money from the restaurant. I think we are losing money there and we will lose much more if we don’t—”

“But you and I know that that restaurant is not just a business. It represents a lot more to my mother. It’s her legacy. And I am determined to protect my mother’s legacy at all costs.”

“But darling, that’s not enough to justify keeping the restaurant open. Besides, I will ask you the same question that Hellen asked. Do you really know what takes place at the restaurant since your mother stopped working there?”

Leah stood up, not answering Herbert’s question. She was beginning to lose her temper. “I think it’s time for dinner,” she said, and left the living room.

“That restaurant is bleeding money,” Herbert said while they were having dinner, “and the earlier we close it down the better.”

“Babirye and Hellen behave very much like your mother,” Leah answered, indirectly making it clear to Herbert that she did not want to discuss the restaurant any further. “They want to impose their views on others no matter the outcome.”

“Listen, darling, the matter of the restaurant is up to us. I don’t think Hellen is going to insist on closing down the restaurant or even follow up. I think her major concern now is going to be how to make her long-distance relationship work.”

“Conrad will have to move to America eventually. For how long will Hellen be coming here to see him?” Leah asked as she put another piece of steak on Herbert’s plate.

“We’ll see.”

Herbert realized that Leah was determined to keep the restaurant open. He decided not to bring up the topic again.

* * *

“Do you guys know that Mom and Dad don’t seem to be paying any attention to how their mothers’ businesses are being run?” Hellen said to her sisters after they had finished dinner in Babirye’s home one hour and a half after she had talked to her parents. While the three sisters were talking in the living room, Babirye’s husband Brian, Nakato’s husband Roland and Conrad were discussing English Premier League soccer in the dining room.

“They simply don’t care,” Babirye answered. “But what would you expect? They didn’t build those businesses.”

“You know what? I’m not gonna let that attitude continue. I’m gonna jump right in, even if it means closing down those businesses. Are either of you with me on this one?” Hellen said.

“Yes, you have my support,” Nakato answered.

“You have my support, too,” Babirye said.

“Cool. Stay tuned,” Hellen said. “I’ll think of what to do and I will let you guys know when I am ready.”

A half an hour later, Babirye and her husband Brian said goodbye to Hellen while Conrad, Nakato and her husband Roland drove Hellen to the airport.

THE GIRLS TAKE CONTROL

At the airport, when she finally had to say goodbye, Hellen hugged Conrad and cried briefly. She said that she would miss him. He said that he would miss her too. Conrad put on a brave face because he did not want his sister-in-law and her husband to see him crying but had he been alone, he would have cried. He waved vigorously a few minutes later as Hellen disappeared into the crowd of departing passengers.

* * *

During the flight back to Boston, Hellen's thoughts drifted from Conrad to her grandmothers' businesses. She was certain that the family could not afford to continue operating the restaurant. She'd try to convince Leah to close it down. But even though she hadn't had a chance to analyze the accounts of Ruth's Classic Boutique, she thought it could thrive under better management.

Hellen thought that a brief written report might be the best way for her to share her first impressions of her grandmothers' two businesses with her parents. She switched her laptop on and began to type some notes about her observations.

Under the heading "Ruth's Classic Boutique," she wrote, "I had a one-hour-long conversation with Elsie, the acting general manager. She answered all my questions satisfactorily. I also chatted with the team of buyers. They seem to be on top of things. Although the boutique seemed to be understaffed, it was running well, but it was clear that Grandma's sudden departure left a void. Elsie said that she is supposed to be reporting to Dad, but Dad has visited the boutique only once in the last six months. Uncle Clement visits the boutique regularly and he always asks Elsie to give him cash. Elsie says that Clement has no clue how to run a business. She also said that the poor relationship between her and the other manager, Katana, is her biggest problem at the moment."

Hellen stopped typing and read her notes. *Perhaps I should have stayed a week longer with my hubby.* Images of Conrad's smiling face flashed in her mind. She missed him already. She clicked on a few of the wedding pictures that she had saved on the laptop.

The young man who was seated next to her glanced at them and shifted in his seat. Although she would have liked to play an entire

slideshow of the pictures, she closed the file and resumed typing her notes.

Under the heading “Kyatelejera Restaurant,” she wrote, “Uncle Sam is in charge of the restaurant, but it seems he is there only because he has no other alternative. He failed to answer any of the questions I asked him about the operations of the restaurant. When I visited, there were two customers chatting with Uncle Sam. Most probably they were our relatives. When they finished their lunch, they walked out without paying for their meals. I don’t think there is any chance of turning Kyatelejera Restaurant around. When I asked Mom and Dad about the restaurant, they didn’t provide any satisfactory answers. When I asked if they really knew what takes place at the restaurant, Mom simply laughed at the question and said that she was not ready to close it down.”

Hellen paused to think. *Mom has gotten emotionally attached to the restaurant. My grandmothers worked hard to build their businesses but it’s sad that Mom and Dad have neglected them. It’s not very surprising, though. They don’t care much about the family’s wealth because they didn’t accumulate it themselves. I’ve got to do something to reverse that situation.*

* * *

When Hellen arrived at Logan International Airport, her friend and business partner Gwen was there to welcome her back and to drive her home. They hugged before Gwen put Hellen’s suitcases into the trunk of her car.

“That was one amazing wedding, Hellen,” Gwen said as she started the car. “You are now a wifey! How does it feel? How was Conrad when you left?”

“He was good, although it was clear that he didn’t want me to leave—you know what I mean?” Hellen said. “Thanks for coming and for being there for me. I was glad you were there.”

“I had a wonderful time. Wow! That was like a wedding of a superstar. You guys rocked it.”

“Yeah, it’s been a month full of fun.”

“I can’t believe you are a wifey now!”

“Yes, I am. And I feel great,” Hellen answered.

THE GIRLS TAKE CONTROL

“How will Conrad cope without you?”

“He’s feeling lonely now. But I told him I’d be going back in four months or so to see him. And he was like, ‘That’s too long. How can I live that long without you?’” Hellen said, smiling.

“You do miss him, too.”

“Of course. Poor man, he has never cooked a sensible meal in his life!”

“He can’t cook?” Gwen asked, laughing.

“No, he can’t. He eats out most of the time or he eats at his parents’ home. Sometimes, his cousin who lives in the same neighbourhood cooks him some food. But he found out during the days I was there that she’s been buying groceries too frequently and too expensively.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, apparently Conrad’s been feeding her family too, and he only found that out last week! Obviously the woman was angry with me because she has been doing it for years. He told her right there in front of me that she has been milking him and that she would not get a single *dollar* from him again.” Hellen caught her mistake and laughed. “She would not get a single *shilling* from him again.”

Gwen laughed too.

“The woman couldn’t hide her annoyance with me. You know what I mean?”

Just then Hellen’s cellphone rang. It was Conrad.

“Hey, I’ve arrived safely. I miss you,” she said. “I am with Gwen and we are driving home now. Say hi to her,” Hellen said, turning on the speaker.

“So what adjustments are you planning to make now that you’ve added another facet to your life?” Gwen asked after Hellen had ended the call.

“What was that? Facet? That’s funny,” Hellen said, laughing. “Of course the daily phone calls to Kampala will continue. I have to make the long-distance relationship work and I think that’s gonna be kind of challenging.”

When they arrived at Hellen’s condo building, after Gwen helped Hellen to take her suitcases upstairs, they watched a slideshow of the

wedding pictures for half an hour while they chatted. It was obvious that Hellen was tired after the long flight.

“I guess you need a nap,” Gwen said as she rose. “We’ll catch up tomorrow. Your lunch and dinner are in the oven and please call me if you need anything.”

Hellen did not go to sleep right away. Instead, she went into her home office room and wrote a rough draft of the following month’s to do list, including intervention in her grandmothers’ businesses, pausing for a while to wonder whether she was taking on too much. *Doing all this and making a long-distance relationship work? Oh, well.* Walking out of the office, she dropped the notebook on the couch and went to the bedroom.

She felt an urge to call her husband but before she picked her phone to call, it rang and it was Conrad. They said that they missed each other and talked for ten minutes. Hellen wanted to talk longer but Conrad insisted she rest. Minutes later she fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

Hellen and Gwen had a business meeting the following day. After Gwen presented a business status report, Hellen thanked her for “holding the fort” while she was away. They then chatted a little more about the wedding. Hellen brought up her grandmothers’ businesses.

She explained the situation to Gwen. “Both my grandmothers owned businesses, one a restaurant and the other, a home furnishings boutique, which they built over decades. But my parents have neglected them and they are losing money. I want to stop the losses by closing them down.” She paused. “Actually, the boutique seems to be doing well. It simply needs better management.”

“Did you tell your parents what your thoughts are?” Gwen asked.

“Yeah, I did, but my mom was like, the restaurant is her mom’s legacy and she was like, ‘We can’t close it down when my mother is still alive.’ You know what I’m saying? Like, educated as she is, she doesn’t realize that it no longer makes sense to continue running the business.”

“So, have you thought of a specific action plan for both of the businesses? What will you do about them?” Gwen asked, in full business consultant mode.

THE GIRLS TAKE CONTROL

“Before my sister Nakato talked to me about the businesses’ performance—she is the one who asked me to go see for myself—I didn’t know what was going on there. But now that I am aware, I want to stop the losses and I am ready to do all it takes.”

“Let me know if you need my help.”

“Yes, please help keep me accountable. Make sure that I call Mom and Dad next Wednesday to continue the discussion,” Hellen said as she rose to prepare lunch.

Gwen set a reminder on her phone.