

HUES
OF
LOVE

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HUES OF LOVE





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DEDICATION

PROLOGUE

WHEN I WOKE up by 5am for *fajr*, the sky was heavy. I went back to sleep after praying, enjoying the soft smell of imminent rain.

The sound of heavy down pour woke me by 7am. I rushed to look outside the windows. My newly married neighbours were running to their car. The husband held a big umbrella, shielding his wife from the rain, holding the door for her and blowing her kisses. *Fools, it's not going to last.* I said to myself. I estimated their divorce to happen within the year or two, if they were lucky.

I couldn't believe my mother wanted me to go through that; the torture of marriage. Sometimes, I welcomed the idea, especially when loneliness crept on me to steal my joy. Every birthday reminded me of just how old I had grown. I felt old.

I picked a blanket from the bed to cover myself from the cold, but it was not enough. *Great.*

I used to love the idea of love, but it was men I had a problem with. I could barely stand them. Perhaps, the guy I

had fought with last month was right when he said I was broken deep inside. Maybe this year, I would turn the table and see what it felt like to actually choose love. With my mother on my neck, I knew I would eventually have to settle with a man, even though the mere thought of it filled me with so much bile.

ONE

MY HEART FLUTTERED as I collected the clearance form from the secretary. I was finally done with five years of studying microbiology, a course other departments erroneously considered easy.

Saba Abduljalil, I wrote with glee as I filled in my details. Saba means Breeze. Perhaps, I had been projecting my name in how I lived my life.

I signed and returned the form to her. She directed me to the next two offices I had to visit before I could be officially done with my clearance. By the time I was through, it was close to 1pm.

I got into the sun and raised my head up, squinting...

"Saba Abdul..." The secretary read my name from the form I had submitted. "You forgot your book."

"Oh, thanks ma'am." I turned to take my diary, hoping she resisted the urge to take a sneak peek before returning it to me.

I flipped through the heavy black diary and smiled at my cursive handwriting. An entry I made several years ago caught

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my eye.

Dear diary,
27th July 2010

*I will be twelve years next week, and this is my first dairy writing.
Forgive me if I spell wrong spellings.*

My name is Saba Abduljalil, I have one younger brother and one younger sister, plus one older brother, am the second child of my family and also the firstborn female child and I live with both my parents...

I stopped a cab and sat at the back, flipping through my diary as the we drove out of the university grounds.

My journey of writing in a diary began with my English teacher, miss Fatima Aliyu. I had performed well in an essay assignment, and miss Fatima's enthusiasm was contagious. She advised me to start a journal of my life experiences and she gifted me my first diary ever.

That year marked the beginning of critical thinking and reasoning for me. I started questioning norms and imagining how things could be better.

I was engrossed with reading my old diary when the cab jerked into a stop. I raised my head, looked through the window. My cab driver had made an ugly dent on the back of a black Corolla LE. I picked my diary from the floor and tucked it into my bag.

I got out of the car, just as the cab driver got out too. The owner of the black corolla was fuming, inspecting the damage with disgust on his face.

“*Ya zakayi baka, Baba?*”

My cab driver looked remorseful, but he didn't say

anything

“I'm talking and you are quiet, why would you do something like this?” He demanded again, his voice getting harsher. “I don't know why old people like you bother to do the work they're no longer fit for.”

I got irritated at that moment, I knew he had the right to be upset, but the old cab driver already looked like he was going to cry. Shouting at him would not fix the damage done to the car.

“Err.. I am sure he didn't mean to ram into your car.” I said.

He turned to look at me, acknowledging my presence.

“Miss, you don't have to be involved in this. I am not in the mood for any woman sympathy towards a matter like this.” He flipped his hand at me dismissively.

“Excuse me?”

He turned again and sighed.

“I don't think correcting you about raising your voice and being impolite towards the old man signifies as 'a woman's sympathy'. I am trying to tell you to be polite, regardless of the situation.”

He frowned, staring at me. Other cars passed by, honking for us to park properly and move out of the way.

“I am sorry sir. I thought you were turning right. I am very sorry.” The cab driver apologised.

The man kept staring at me, even after he accepted the cab driver's apology. He nodded, his eyes not leaving me. He turned to his car and spared me another glance as he got in.

By the time I got home, it was few minutes past 1. I waved the cab driver good bye and cursed the rude black

corolla driver for deducting from my nap time.

The security man stood up when he saw me. He rushed to open the gate, smiling. I ignored his greeting and turned to the parking lot. My mother's ash Toyota car wasn't parked. The blue Sharon the driver used to run errands and pick my siblings from school wasn't parked either.

I opened the door, taking in the rich smell of incense my mom loved to burn. I took a glass of water from the kitchen refrigerator, admiring the spotless white of the kitchen decoration. If by some miracle, I ever got married, I'd definitely replicate this design. I went upstairs to my room, grabbing my towel from the wardrobe. When I finally stood into the shower, I felt my tired muscles relax as cold water washed away my sweat and tiredness.

Five minutes later, I stepped out of the bathroom to prepare for *ẓhur* prayers. I changed into something light and spread my prayer mat. At my last *tashabbud*, my phone beeped. I checked when I was done praying and saw it was a message from Aysha.

"I am falling in love again, Saba!!! You should try it too."

I rolled my eyes and called her back.

"Don't call me when he breaks your heart, okay?"

"Haha. You have no idea what you're missing."

"Thank you, but I am fine."

"And besides, it is better to have had your heart broken than not to have fallen in love at all."

The last time she had a fight with Abdul, it had taken me one hour to counsel her.

"I gather you and Abdul are back together again, how long do I have in order to prepare another session of 'how to

get over a breakup'?"

"*bababa*, this is the real deal, girl."

"If you say so."

She laughed and ended the call, promising to leave messages for me on Whatsapp.

I decided to rest a while on the bed before preparing dinner.

"Wake up sleeping beauty," a familiar voice shouted, shaking my shoulder roughly.

I opened my eyes, stretching. I rubbed my sleepy eyes, steadied myself from the wave of dizziness and headache that strove to take over me.

"Habiba what the hell, is that how to wake someone?" I touched my throbbing forehead.

"You are like a dead body, when you are asleep, I called out you name ten times. Anyway, forget about that, we need to get going."

"Where?"

She gasped and move a step back. "Typical of you, Saba. Thank God I stopped by to check on you. If not.." she sighed dramatically and sat on the bed, crossing her legs. Habiba fancied herself as my friend, but I wasn't sure about that. She was always loud and rude, but I tolerated her drama anyway. Since we moved to their neighbourhood two years ago, she made it her duty to barge in and out of my room whenever she felt like it. Her house was just two blocks away from mine.

"What is it, Habiba, stop messing with my head."

"So impatient, Saba."

"How did you even get in?" I tried to remain calm, but

honestly, I'd be glad to have her out of my room at this moment.

"Your sister of course. Farah opened the door for me. What, you think I have a spare key to your house?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, really."

"Cool. Can I have one?" Her eyes lit up and she clapped her hands in glee.

My stony face must have warned her I wasn't in the mood for jokes.

"Get dressed, we are going to Aseeya's house. They have a three-day prayer for her father. They just got back from the village a few hours ago."

I sighed and went to my wardrobe to change. I chose a pink hijab to go with my black leggings and top.

Aseeya's house was five minutes away from mine. Several cars were parked outside their house. I wished I could turn back immediately, I hated going to places like this. Aseeya waved at us, just as I was about to inform Habiba I had changed my mind about coming in the first place.

Aseeya's eyes were dull and sad, despite the smile she welcomed us with. "Saba, Habiba, welcome guys. Come in, my mom will be happy to see you two." She said, trying to sound happy but her sad eyes betrayed her.

I thought about what she must be going through, as we passed a group of elderly men, eating and chatting. Were these men here to fill their stomachs or to pay condolence? I pondered.

I felt at ease when I heard laughter from Aseeya's mother's room. Aseeya flipped the curtain and I saw a group of ladies laughing at a corner of the room. Aseeya's mother

was holding a prayer bead, her head bowed in supplication.

We greeted the women and Habiba disappeared to find a place to sit. Aseeya excused herself and left us.

I turned, glancing from one lady to the other. All five of them were smiling and talking in low tones.

“How is your mother, Saba?” Aseeya's mother asked. She had dark circles around her blood shot eyes. A pang of pity hit me, I couldn't imagine my mother with such a broken face.

I took a deep breath and replied, "she is okay. She hasn't returned from work yet."

One of the ladies made a comment about something that made her colleagues laugh.

The room fell silent and I shook my head. I bit down the caustic reply running through my mind. The thing with condolence visits; some people forgot their sense of reasoning at a poor attempt to lighten up the mood of the bereaved. I left just as I finished talking to Aseeya's mother.

I was sure Habiba would scold me later for leaving abruptly, but I did not care. I just had to get away from the stifling atmosphere of Aseeya's house.

TWO

MY MOTHER KNOCKED on the door, before bursting into to my room. She switched on the light immediately. She called me softly, thinking I was asleep. But after the visit to Aseeya's house yesterday, I couldn't sleep. Every time, I closed my eyes, I saw my aunt's face, her eyes tired and sad. How the house looked empty of its vibrant energy. I was terrified to sleep after that reminisce, so I concluded I was never going to enjoy sleep as well as I used to. After all, falling asleep is synonymous to dying.

I got up from my prayer mat where I had sat since 4am, and yawned. I wanted my mother to believe I was sleepy and tired, so she would cut her visit short.

"*Ya ha kuri*, I know you are tired." She apologised and sat on the bed. "But I need to talk to you, and it is important."

I folded my praying mat and sat beside her on the bed. I knew whatever it was, I would not like it. Since I graduated, I had gotten used to her 'we need to talk moments'. These talks were supposed to create a stronger bond between us, but they usually left me disturbed and worried. I watched her pensive

mood and frowned. My hands and feet got sweaty and I felt the urgent need to use the toilet.

“It's nothing to apologise about.” I started, “what is it mum? What happened?”

“Err... nothing much. Well, your senior aunties...” she held my hands and smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

My senior aunties, my father's sisters who had a say in my life. Even though my mother didn't have a say in their children's.

“Well, they came over yesterday morning after you left for your clearance.”

“And what did they say?” I withdrew my hands from hers, masking my annoyance.

She cleared her throat. “Well, your aunt Halima mentioned a young guy at her place of work, she says the guy is humble, religious, and quite handsome and hardworking too.”

“Mum, don't tell me you believe her. You haven't even met the guy!”

“Your aunt really likes him and you know she doesn't just approve of anyone, you know how tenacious she is, so if this boy has caught her fancy, then I think you two would be a good fit.” She added. “Also, your aunt Hajara thinks your cousin, Jabir, is just as well a good match for you, he just came back from Russia looking quite handsome.”

She smiled brightly as she said, handsome. I felt wounded that she thought me so vain to think the mere appearance of a man would appeal to me.

“She said, that he is thinking of opening a clinic here.” She knew the clinic talk would interest me, because I had

always dreamed of opening a clinic of my own. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at her obvious attempt at match making.

“Mum, you know how I hate match making.” I complained

“I know, but maybe this time would be different, maybe this time if you get to know them, you might actually find someone you like.”

I sighed. It was hopeless trying to convince her and we might just end up arguing, making the house uncomfortable for both of us.

“I will try to think about it.” I promised, even though I already made up my mind. Match making was a pathetic idea, and I wasn't interested.

My mother smiled. “I will let you rest then, but don't take too long. Farah is leaving for your sister-in-law's; you know her condition. So, breakfast is on you. Your dad will be leaving for work soon.”

When the door closed with a soft click, I groaned. Safiyah Abduljalil, my mother who knew exactly what to say to rope me into her will. I was certain she and my aunts already had a meeting, discussing what to do about 'Saba's matter'. When did I even graduate? Why wouldn't they let me be?

A small voice in my head asked me, why wouldn't I just consider both guys?

I shook my head and chuckled. I was barely thirteen when my mother called me to her room to warn me to stay away from boys. Now, she was the one earnestly begging me to look for one. What a twist.

17th May 2011

"Dear diary,

What is this pain in my stomach? My body has decided to turn against me without warning. My mother says I am now a woman, but I don't know what that means. She tells me to stay away from boys unless I wanted to become a mother at thirteen.

I nodded, but a guest speaker at school had explained it better and simpler than this.

I hope this monthly suffering stops soon. If you ask me, I think period is a man in disguise to punish women.

I closed my diary. I was going to be late for work but I didn't care. Until this pain subsided, I could hardly do anything. I settled in bed with a warm towel in my mid-section, and a cup of tea mixed with cinnamon, ginger, rosemary, jasmine and chamomile tea, courtesy of Farah's menstrual cramps remedy.

I got to Sunrise laboratory around 12pm. I had interned here before, and immediately I applied, the manger accepted me on the spot. The pay was terribly poor, but I had to escape my mother and her pestering.

The tea and nap helped me feel better. For some reasons, a wayward memory climbed through my mind, spoiling my mood. six months ago, I had been insulted just before I walked out on the offender. "I think you are traumatised, you must be very sad if you don't believe in love or you are probably high on being a feminist." His words weren't the only thing that stung, he had a smirk on his face, as if he knew something I didn't.

I stopped at the reception to sign the attendance sheet. As I wrote my name and time of resumption, I kept of thinking of ways that meeting could have ended. Should I have slapped him? Insulted him? Or ...

“Earth to Sab,” Mia said, waving her beautifully hennaed hands across my face. Aysha was behind her, chatting online. They were probably taking a walk around the compound for their ten minutes break.

“Are you okay? Even though you're glowing today, I think you still look pale.” She added, rubbing my shoulder.

I smiled, 'it is that time of the month, Mia, hence the glow."

“You still shouldn't have come,” Aysha complained “I texted you to stay home and rest, I have already told the lab assistant.”

“It's okay, I am here now. I might get off on time. It will look good on our attendance if we decide to apply for a permanent position next year.”

“If you say so, here let me help you with your flask.”

“It's Farah's signature tea, you guys should taste it too.” My bag slipped from my hand, as I passed the flask to Mia, pouring out its contents.

They both rushed to help me arrange my items. Mia picked my old journal, studying it. I snatched it from her hands, wishing I had left it at home.

“Oh Sab!!! Don't tell me you are reading your diary because of that man.” Mia frowned.

“NO!!!”

She and Aysha stared at me, waiting for my reply. I frowned as it occurred to me that the NO I screamed was all

in my head. I started to walk swiftly towards the microbiology department and they hurried to catch up.

“So!!!!” Aysha poked my shoulder, with her pen, teasing.

“So, What?”

“Don't pretend you don't know what we are so-ing you for.” Mia rolled her eyes, always ready to talk about anything.

“Fine,” I gave in, “his words have been bugging me.”

They shared a knowing smile.

Aysha cleared her throat. “Perhaps, you think it is his words that's bugging you, but maybe you are smitten?” She clapped her hands together as if she had just made a brilliant discovery.

I turned my lips down and pointed a finger at her. “*You no well*. Only your hopeless romantic brain will suggest such a thing.” Since she was back with Abdul, she expected every other person to have a boyfriend too.

“Or maybe we think it's high time, you put your Men theory aside and then please date someone, Sab you can't be like this forever, you mum might be agreeing with you now, but soon, she's going to want a man for you.” Mia said.

“Don't get me started. I have two compulsory blind dates this weekend.” I started, suppressing my irritation as I spoke.

“Well, now is the time to say we told you so.”

“I don't care.” I snapped.

Aysha and Mia took cups from the dispenser to try Farah's tea. They both had an awful look on their faces which made me laugh. We could pass as sisters, with our similar attributes. Aysha and Mia shared chocolate and dark skins, while I was light in complexion. Mia and I had the same kind of nose while Aysha had Mia's lips.

Mia's shift was at the Chemistry department this week. She looked at the time and excused herself. Aysha was in Immunology while I was in Virology section.

When we were alone, Aysha turned to me, a worried expression cloaking her heart-shaped face.

"Hey, I hope you are alright. Is there more to this diary thing? Do you feel hurt about that guy? Why-"

"Trust me, Aysha." I interrupted "I am currently enjoying reading it, besides, I want to know what went wrong. I mean, I used to love love and now, I can't even stand a guy."

She chuckled. "So now it's love you find repulsive, not men with all the apathy you have for them."

"ugh...you know what I mean."

"You know, Mia and I think you just haven't found the one, but I think you are pessimistic about love and that's why you don't even want to give it a try. Really, I think you should give love and men a chance, Sab. Take me for example, after what happened with Kabir who would have thought I would date again, but see where I am with Abdul." she smiled probably thinking about him.

Three weeks ago, she was singing a different song when she had a fight with Abdul. I shook my head and said, "That's because you're a sucker for love, and I'm not. And for your sake, I hope Abdul turns out differently than the guys before him. I don't even like that guy."

"Trust me, the feeling is mutual." She laughed. "I am serious, though. Give it a thought."

"Fine." I smiled faintly.

"Better, if not I might reach out to your mom and be on board to take you to that Rukiya place she keeps

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mentioning." She tried to keep a straight face, but a smile broke through her face.

“You are jesting, you won't take me to a spiritual house.” I said, placing my hand on my chest.

I could still hear her laugh as she climbed the stairs to immunology unit.

THREE

I FINISHED THE last touches on my simple makeup. My burgundy Abaya was neatly ironed. I reached for my shoe rack and picked black heels to match my black purse.

Najib ran into my room screaming my name, “*Yaya!!!*” He ran to my side and hid behind me, holding my clothes.

Ayan stomped in after him, his eyes bulging with anger. He held up a textbook dripping with water.

I drew Najib from behind me and raised my brows at him. He looked down at his feet, wearing a mischievous glint in his eyes. Even though they were twins, they were different in a lot of ways. They didn't look alike, they didn't like sharing their clothes or toys.

“it wasn't intentional, I was playing water gun and the toy broke on his book.”

“And would you want to explain why you were playing water gun in your room?”

He smiled, showing dimples identical to mine. “Okay, fine. I was bored and I wanted Ayan to play with me, but he

was stuck up. I honestly didn't intentionally wet his book.”

“Why didn't you explain that to him”

He turned to his twin brother and pointed a finger at him, “he won't listen.”

I pulled Ayan close and made Najib apologise to him.

Ayan shrugged. "I will get back at you."

I sighed. It was usually hard to palpate Ayan.

Najib turned to me and smiled, “You look beautiful sister.”

I blushed at my little brother's comment.

“Of course, she looks beautiful, she's trying to trap a man.”

"Okay boys," I interject absolutely flabbergasted by Ayan's remark. “Thank you for your contribution but I am running late, so let's go out, shall we?” I pushed them out as I locked my door.

Downstairs, my mother and Farha were seeing a movie while my dad and Mujahed were arguing about something from the newspapers. Abubakar used to join in these arguments before he got married.

"I am leaving.”

“Goodluck.” They beamed. I knew I would be needing a lot of that to make these dates work.

I waited thirty minutes before my first date showed up. He looked different from the last time I saw him. His shoulders were broad and he looked huge. When he smiled, his face transformed, enhancing his beauty.

I tried not to stare, and I reminded myself to be polite. He was my cousin after all.

“Peace be upon you too cousin, Jabir.”

“Wow—look at you, Saba you are a lady now, it's nice to see you, how long has it been?”

Determined to enjoy the evening, I pushed down the voice telling me to get defensive and analyse his smiles and questions.

“I don't know maybe eight.”

“Eight!!! Wow that's such a long time, isn't it?” he exclaimed. “We should order, what do you want?”

I agreed and we walked to the counter, I ordered a Tiramisu and Frappuccino, since it had been a while since I had coffee cake and whipped cream. He settled for iced coffee. We both paid for our drinks.

We talked about school, life and childhood memories. He looked at his wrist watch and smiled.

“I know aunt Hajara is looking out for both of us, but we also have our choices.”

I nodded, glad he was reasoning right. At least, we could start as friends and take it slow.

“I am really sorry, Saba but I already have someone. I only agreed to meet out of respect for you and our aunt.”

I didn't feel bad but it did sting a bit. I smiled, genuinely happy for him. “It's okay Ya Jabir, I underst-”

“I knew you would say that, but it's okay, I understand too.”

I frowned. Was he expecting me to beg him or cry? He went on and on, advising me not to take his rejection to heart. I would have burst into laughter, if I wasn't so offended. I nodded and nodded as he talked, determined to remain polite all through the date.

I walked him to his car and waited for my next date. It was few minutes to 4 already. Unlike my cousin, I had never met this other guy. To pass time, I opened my journal and read through.

22th August 2012

"Dear diary,

I have a crush on Fabad. He is taller than my younger brother, Mujabeed. And trust me, my brother is really tall.

And this boy is smart! He answered a maths question correctly, even though he resumed late. OMG, he even borrowed my notes. Does he like me too?

I wrote a short note to tell him I liked him and would love to be his friend. But man! Today was crazy. We found out he was dating Maryam, Amal, Fauziyah and Amina. They fought one another and Fabad didn't even lift a finger to separate them.

I am glad I didn't make a fool of myself. When I got home, I flushed the letter into the toilet bowl and promised never to let myself get carried away.

A soft voice caught my attention. I looked up, it was the waitress. "Excuse me, excuse me, we're closing up. "

"What's the time?" I couldn't believe my ears. I looked at my phone and then, turned to the window. It was few minutes past six.

I checked my phone again, to see if I had a missed call or a message from anybody. My heart beat faster, as realisation dawned on me. I had decided to put my heart out, and for the first time in my life, I got a rejection. I stood up, blinking back tears as I left the restaurant.

FOUR

WE SAT AT the dining, eating in silence. My mother believed eating together was a good way to promote love and closeness. I agreed with her because most times, I only got to see other members of the family during meal time. Every other time, I was either out, or locked in my room.

"Sis, why do you look sad? Did something happen on your date today?" Farah asked. I knew she did this deliberately, so I would be forced to reply her.

Everyone stopped chewing and turned to me, the demerit of a family dinner.

I scowled at Farah and she stuck out her tongue.

"So, tell us" Mujaheed's husky voice implored.

Before I could answer, my dad drew out his chair and said dryly, "err..I have work to finish upstairs. Goodnight."

"What, you're not going to stay and listen to what happened?"

"I still haven't gone over the fact that one of my children is married and expecting to be a father. Forgive me if I can't

listen to another planning to do the same. It's not easy on us fathers.” He grinned nervously. My father was always quiet and sometimes, shy. Left to him alone, everybody should be on their own, minding their businesses.

I obliged and narrated my experience to them. The shocked look on their faces made me feel amused.

“Wow, sis. I'm sorry you had to go through all that.” Mujaheed exclaimed.

I waited to listen to any other comment from the rest, but none came.

“It's their loss.” He added and stood up to clear the plates. My other siblings joined him, leaving my mum and I alone.

“Are you alright?” she reached for my hand but I put it under the table. I didn't like that they were making a big deal out of the whole thing.

“I am fine, mummy. I don't understand why you all look sad. Now that it turned out this way, I guess you'll let me rest.” I stood up to leave.

She stood up too, smiling. “I wish I didn't make you go. Your pride would not have been hurt so.”

I chuckled, “next time, listen to me when I say I am not interested in your match-making arrangements with strange guys.”

“Ahh, no your cousin is family.”

“Oh really, I haven't seen him in eight years, and he showed up, looking at me with condescension.”

“At least he showed up, he respected you enough, to come and be straight forward, you can't blame him,” she interjected. “how many have you rejected?”

I huffed. "I just hope Aunt Halima won't get busy anytime soon, hooking me up with more strange guys."

My mum burst into laughter. "Relax, it's not as bad as you think. Just have fun." Amidst her laughter, I could hear her mocking me for all the time I had been rude to guys.

I decided to spend the rest of the night reading until I fell asleep. I was almost dozing off when I heard a knock on my door. I earmarked the page and got the door. Habiba walked past me as though she owned the room. I shook my head and went back to the reading table.

"How to Date a Man When You Hate Men? Really, Saba. This was exactly why you got rejected." She eyed me and looked at the book with down-turned lips..

"How did you know I got rejected?" I asked, not minding her tone. I grabbed my book from her hand.

"As if news don't fly like wild fire anymore." She rolled her eyes. "Someone told someone and I heard. I just had to come."

To come flaunt my failure in my face. I thought sadly.

She jumped on my bed. "See, I am telling you this because I like you. There are three ways to attract a guy. One," she said, demonstrating with her finger, "you have to look amicable, you are always frowning, Saba. Two, you need to stop reading books like that." she eyed the book and sighed. "And lastly..."

I wasn't interested in hearing the third, so I cut her off by saying, "you seem to forget, this is the first time I have ever gotten rejected."

"Yeah, and it's a sign that your prime time is almost over.

If you continue like this, you will end up a spinster.”

“Thank you for your advice, Miss, I Know It All, why don't you wait till I become a spinster before telling me what to do?”

“I was advising you; you don't need to be snappy.” She said and got up from the bed.

“Thank you, you can keep your advice to yourself.”

She scoffed and went out of my room. I locked the door after her and tried to read, but I couldn't. I went online to see messages from Aysha and Mia on our group chat. I braced myself to answer their questions about my date. We chatted late into the night, going back and forth about how if I tried more, I would find the right guy. I told them I was done trying, but they seemed so hopeful.

Me: I am done being sad. You girls should forget about guys. Let's focus on the future: NYSC camp, getting good jobs, etc.

Mia: oops! We're back to Saba's I Hate Guys' Episode.

Aysha: I have a good feeling about this. You just wait and see, love is coming for you.

I laughed and sent a running emoji. I loved that they were trying to cheer me up, but I was done being unrealistic about my life.

I moved on quickly, because it was important to me. I didn't like the idea of feeling sorry or sad because a guy I had never even met, rejected me. I focused on taking online courses and Coursera, processing my NYSC registration and reading more books.

I couldn't believe Aysha was hopelessly in love with

Abdul even after what happened the last time. Why would I give a man so much control over my life? To prove to myself and everyone watching me with worry that I had gotten over the rejection I decided to go out. Aysha had left an invite to our secondary school's reunion on the group chat. Even though socialising wasn't my forte, I promised to enjoy myself and make new friends.

While we were in the cab, Mia and Aysha watched Instagram Reels while I brought out my diary. I dreaded meeting Fahad, and I hoped he would be too busy to show up.

2nd NOVEMBER 2013

Dear diary,

I can't describe myself as a violent person, but remember Fahad, the boy I told you I had a crush on and it didn't go so well? Well, now I find him so repulsive I want to strangle him. To make matters worse, he is now my seat mate. I HATE HIM, he doesn't know when to be serious and when to play, I wish Mr Samson would accept my request to change seats, I really do, before something happens.

Mia and Aysha, social butterflies that they were, sat and laughed with everyone. Even though Mia didn't know most of them, she blended in easily, and I saw her exchanging numbers with a few people. I envied them, and I wished they would stop jumping all over the place to sit with me. I felt out of place, and almost invisible.

It wasn't only my contemporaries that were present today, it was the whole set of 2016 class. Some juniors and teachers showed up too. Nothing had changed, really. The popular students hung out together in cliques, nerds sat

together and the teachers' favourite sat with the teachers, talking about what they had achieved over time.

As the night drew closer, I lost sight of Aysha and Mia. A wave of panic hit my stomach as I wondered if they would leave without telling me. I reached for my bag and phone.

“*I am leaving early, you guys have fun.*” I left a message on the group for both of them.

Just as I drew back my chair to stand up, a familiar voice crooned behind me. “I was looking everywhere for you.”

I turned around sharply. Fahad's mischievous smile never left his face as he sat opposite me.

“Saba Abduljalil.” His eyes had a happy twinkle as if everything was perfectly fine with the world. He was taller than I imagined he would be. I wondered why he had to smell so nice.

“Wow, so you find my name amusing now?” I allowed a tiny bit of my irritation for him come to the surface.

“You haven't changed at all, I am just happy to see you.” He raised up his hands in mock surrender. I felt like punching his ever-smiling face

“Peace offering?” He stretched a plate of cake to me.

I furrowed my brows, suspicious.

“Hahaha. I promise I didn't spit on it, Saba.”

I shook my head. “Why should I believe you?”

“Come on Saba, we have grown past that.” He cut out a piece and ate it. “See? Besides, a little smile won't tarnish your good girl reputation.” Comments like this were part of the reasons we never got along.

“I am afraid with you, it would.” I remarked, I wouldn't want Fahad having any crazy ideas about me.

He shrugged and I decided to tease him. After all, I promised myself to have fun. “Why are you being so agreeable, has Fahad Mua'z grown?” It felt nice teasing him even though he was insufferable.

“I am wounded, Saba.” He placed a hand on his chest. “I can't believe I came all the way from Abuja to see you, only to have you insult me.”

I fell silent, processing his words. I burst into laughter. “Are you flirting with me, Fahad?”

He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable for the first time that night. “Well, you're the only one not in the class group chat. It's been six years since we last saw. I just wanted to know how you were doing.”

“And why would you care?”

“Are you married Saba?”

His question threw me off balance. I took a moment to compose myself before calmly answering him. “What kind of stupid question is that?”

“It's not stupid, I just asked you a yes or no question. Do you know how many times I have been asked that question this evening? Thirty times.” he shook his head in disbelief. “I wasn't asking to offend you, you know.”

“I am leaving.” My chair screeched as I moved back.

“Common, we're having a conversation.” He looked surprised that I began to think I was overreacting.

Who was I kidding? This was Fahad, an irresponsible playboy since secondary school days. “Excuse me,” I said and left.

I brought out my phone as I walked to the gate, only to see that my message to the group did not deliver. I put on my

data. I tried to flag down a cab, but none of them was going my way.

“Saba! Wait.” I turned and saw Fahad running toward me.

“What?”

“I am sorry, I didn't realise it was insensitive asking you that question.”

“It's okay, Fahad.” it wasn't, but I wanted him to leave so I could go home.

“Okay, and I need your contact.”

“Why would you need my contact?”

“Why don't you give it to me and find out?” He arched a brow at me playfully, and I found myself smiling for the first time at Fahad and that evening.

FIVE

15TH January 2014

Dear diary, I know you are just a bunch of paper, but I don't know who else to talk to. Do you get this feeling when you meet new people but it feels like you have met them before, when in fact, you have never met them?

I was discussing it with mum, and my brother happened to hear us. He said that the prophet Muhammed (S.A.W) said in a hadith, that there is a realm called the realm of souls and in that realm our souls get to cross paths with one another. We forget about it after being born and that's why when we come across some people, we feel like we have met them before.

I am mad at Aysha. We had a big fight last week. I don't even remember why we fought. I miss my friend but I won't say sorry first.

My old diary kept me company through my flight to Abuja. Mia and Aysha were supposed to come with me, but Mia was posted to Jigawa, while Aysha got to stay back in Kaduna because Abdul pulled some strings.

“Abdulmajid thinks we should start talking about our wedding, so I have to stay and serve in Kaduna.” She said

softly over the phone when I confronted her about it.

“The fool is already controlling you even before marriage.” I shook my head at her in pity.

“It's not like that Saba, I know you are upset but it is much easier for both of us this way. Planning a wedding from Abuja would not be easy for me.”

“And why couldn't he wait one more year? He's already for waited three years. Besides, Mua'z let Mia go to Jigawa.” I knew I sounded bitter, I just did not like that our plans had to change because one man somewhere said so. I reasoned that even without Abdul's influence, we still might not have been posted to the same state.

“Those two aren't planning to get married yet, and it's not fair to compare us.” Her voice sounded exhausted, as if she was tired of explaining herself to me.

“Well, just don't let him tell you what to do with your life.”

“I am not. It is called compromise. Every couple does it.” She said forcefully, gritting her teeth.

“And you have to be the one to make it, right? Just don't forget your needs.” I knew I hurt her with my words, but I had seen people confuse selfishness for compromise before.

“It was my decision to stay at home and serve Saba, because I want to get married unlike-”

She didn't have to finish her statement because I knew what she was going to say. I couldn't defend myself because she was right, it's what I have always told them myself. Still, it hurt. The rejection of the past few months came at me like a flood, threatening to swallow me. I could never let my guard down again after what happened. I couldn't tell my friend any

of this. I hung up on her and since then, I hadn't heard from her.

The voice of the air hostess vibrated from the speaker, jolting me out of my thoughts. “Attention, ladies and gentlemen, we have arrived at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja. For your safety and safety of those around you, kindly remain seated with your seat belts fastened...”

I looked outside the window and saw that the plane was in the process of landing. I returned my journal into my bag and waited.

I hated being alone, especially when I travelled away from home. My confidence usually dropped to a very low point, leaving me lost and alone. Standing at the queue waiting for my luggage, I felt like an ant among huge elephants, with all the crowd in the airport.

It was difficult to breathe without gasping. My heart started pounding and I felt dizzy. To avoid passing out, I tried to take in deep breaths and release them slowly. I switched on my phone and saw several messages from my parents and siblings.

My cousin was supposed to be waiting for me, but I couldn't find her. Her line wasn't going through either. I sat on a bench, waiting, trying not to panic. I found myself counting the individuals in front of me, a total of thirteen, watching for any oddity with them.

Even though this was a new year, travelling alone and waiting on the line anxiously wasn't part of my new year resolutions. An older woman joined me on the bench and

started talking to me as if she knew me before. I did my best to appear polite, but uninterested, but she was determined to intimate me with her sister's personal business.

“Just two years of marriage and she wants to leave the man. Can you imagine?”

“Oh, no.”

Mia often said I was terrible at holding my end of the conversation. I just believed if the issue at hand did not directly concern me, I couldn't relate with it. I wasn't in the person's shoes, and so there was no way I could understand their problems.

“She should have been patient o.” She searched through her brown bag as her phone rang. The call ended before she could answer it. Hissing, she turned back to me. “She only has one kid and now she wants a divorce.”

The phone rang again and she picked the call. “I have already arrived, I am at the airport, yes, don't worry, mother.” She said and hung up. Her name was announced and she walked up to the register.

Thank God, I sighed. I looked at my queue and saw that I was the only one left. Every other person had gotten their luggage and left. I approached the lady checking out our luggage.

“I have told you ma, there is nothing I can do. I am sorry, but sometimes it happens. Just leave your contact with us and we will give you a call once your luggage arrives.” She said and turned back to the black monitor in front of her, ignoring me.

“Well, when will it arrive?” I was waiting for her to reply me when another lady walked up to my side.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Hi! I have an issue, I can't find

my luggage.”

“Yeah, this lady here has the same issue.” she pointed at me. “Leave your contacts with us and we will. . .”

“Yeah? So when are we getting it?” The new lady snapped.

“I said, leave your con-“

“I know what you said. And I am asking you, when will it arrive?”

“I don't know ma, maybe two days.” she answered with a smile, but she might have as well slapped us with it.

“Okay thank you, you could have just said so earlier.” She said as she scribbled her phone number on a paper. She passed it to me when she was done and I wrote down mine too.

The receptionist glared at us as we left, but I ignored her.

“Thank you,” I said smiling.

“Oh no problem, we are in this predicament together.” She smiled back at me. “Hey, you can give me your contact and I will call you when I get the bags, you don't have to journey back here, you look new.”

“Is it obvious?” I asked. She nodded and we laughed.

“Sumaiya,” she said, stretching her hand for a handshake

“Saba,” I replied accepting it.

“Are you going into town? My brother is picking me up, we can drop you off.” She offered.

“Oh no, thank you. My cousin is picking me up.”

“Okay.”

We separated and I walked outside the airport, finally breathing better. I stood there, looking lost without my luggage. I brought out my phone to dial my cousin's number

again, but I already had a message from her.

“So, sorry Cuz, can't make it, take an Uber, can't wait to see you at home. Heart.”

SIX

I FROZE WHEN I saw the message. What did she expect me to do? Ugly pictures of strangers and crazy uber drivers flashed through my mind. I checked my bag to see if I had the address of the new house. I kept on dialling her line, but each time, I was directed to voicemail.

“Hey, Saba.” Sumaiya shouted from a red Camry. I was glad her brother did not disappoint her like my cousin did to me. She walked up to me, frowning. “Please, tell me the reason why you're standing here, looking like a lost puppy is because your cousin did not show up, and you did not decline my offer for a ride because I am a stranger?”

“Maybe the latter?” I teased, laughing. Something about her always made me smile. She was one of the few people who were funny, but had no idea how they managed to make others laugh.

“Saba Abduljalil?” Her brother opened the door and rushed to join us.

“Fahad? What, you are the brother?”

“The one and only.” He laughed.

“You know my brother? I have to warn you to be very careful-“

“Oh, don't worry about me. I know your brother and all his lines.” I smiled, looking away from him. It was hard to frown around Fahad, especially when he was looking cute and happy.

“Seriously, Summy. Do you want to walk home?” He feigned anger and she laughed, poking him playfully until he laughed again. It was easy to relax with them teasing each other this way. I smiled, Abuja without Mia definitely wasn't going to be miserable for me.

I gave them my address and we pulled out of the airport. They never stopped bickering as we drove on, laughing and chatting. When we stopped at a Red Light, Sumaiya turned to me.

“Saba, what do you think? Should a young lady require her brother as a chaperone in this era?”

“Well, I think anyone can be a chaperone, but I'd feel uncomfortable if my brother were to baby sit me at every date.”

“And I rest my case.” She clapped her hands and turned to her brother who was grinning. “You aren't coming with me, period.” She pointed a slender finger at him and he laughed, throwing his head back. For the second time, I did not find his laughter repulsive. I began to wonder again if I had been wrong in my assessment of him.

Fahad and his sister dropped me at my aunt's duplex. Just as I unlocked my side of the door, the black gate swung open. My cousin ran out, jumping on me.

“Oh Cuz, you are finally here.” She squealed.

“Can't breathe.” I tapped her shoulder.

“Sorry,” she giggled. I introduced her to Fahad and his sister and bade them good bye.

“Where is your luggage?” she turned and made to run after the car, shouting, “wait, wait.”

I dragged her back and explained what happened to her. “Why did you stand me up, Zoya?” I frowned as we went into the compound?”

“I got held up at school.”

“I forgive you. I mean I was annoyed at first, but not anymore.” I assured her.

My Aunt wasn't at home, she had gone to drop off Hanifa at school. Zoya directed me to my oldest cousin's former room.

“Humaira's wedding is nearly a year now.” I said as we entered the room, looking at some of her old books on the shelf. “We should go visit her sometime, I haven't told her I am in town.” I suggested smiling, thinking it would be nice to give her a surprise visit.

“You don't want to go, without calling her first, she's a very 'busy married woman now.'” Zoya stressed and I laughed

“You should wash up, and Cuz. I made your favourite, rice and beans with beef stew, yes? I remember. I will set the food for you.” Zoya had so much energy in her small frame, always talking and jumping all over the place. At the door, she turned to me, “Sab, I am really happy you are here, welcome.”

I was supposed to be overwhelmed, but for some reason, Zoya's smile made me feel relaxed. It took me about fifteen minutes to prepare myself, thank Goodness I didn't stuff all my necessities in my luggage. I took out my phone and

dialled my mum. While I waited for her to pick the call, I decided to tease her by calling her the name she had warned me to stop using on her, because it made her feel old.

“*Mother!*” I said and she fell silent, even though I could hear Najib and Ayan fighting in the background.

“I see you have arrived safely, since you have time to tease.” I could hear a smile in her voice.

“Yes *mother*, how are doing? After two hours without me?”

“I don't even know, because even if you were around, you'd be stuck in your room with your *Wawanchi*.”

I burst into laughter. Even her mild insult made me feel homesick already. We talked for a few minutes more before one of the twins' shout turned into a cry. She excused herself and hung up.

The following morning, I was woken by the call of the Adan. I stood up from the bed to prepare for Fajr prayers. I was in the bathroom, performing ablution when the door to my room opened. My aunt peeped into the bathroom since I left the door open.

“Hey, baby girl.” She said in a sing-song voice. Her skin had a vibrant glow which I envied, that at forty-one, my aunt Khadijah still had a flawless body while I struggled to maintain mine at twenty-four. Nothing had changed about her appearance since the last time I saw her, a year ago. I was proud of what she had achieved since the death of her husband: Humaira was married, Zoya probably had a guy eyeing her, and Hanifa was doing well at boarding school. My Aunt broke the stereotype that a widow couldn't raise three

girls by herself.

I finished up and rushed to hug her.

“Oh darling,” she said, hugging me back. “It’s so wonderful to see you, I came back late yesterday and you were asleep, I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“That’s okay, how was your journey, did you send Hanifa off nicely?”

“Oh, I did, she wasn’t happy she didn’t get to see you, but I told her you were going to be here, for the whole year. *You’re going to be here, right?*”

“Yes ma,” I smiled.

“Okay, let me leave to pray, I will see you when the sun rises.”

Two hours later while taking breakfast at the dining, my phone beeped.

“Hey good girl, hope you have settled in okay. How is everybody? So, since you are new in town, I guess you’d love to see a few places before reporting to camp. So, if you want, I’d be glad to take you out, just to show you around the town. We wouldn’t want you missing your way and landing in trouble, yes? We don’t want to spoil your good girl reputation. (lol).

I caught myself laughing.

“Your boyfriend, huh?” Zoya asked, and my aunt rushed out from the kitchen. She stood behind me and waited for my reply.

“No!” I said, frowning at Zoya. My Aunt returned to the kitchen, looking disappointed.

“Welcome to my shoes.” Zoya whispered when she saw the confusion on my face.

I thought I had escaped my mother and her nagging, but

as it turned out, my favourite Aunt was just as committed to finding a man for me.

SEVEN

ZOYA AND I never left the house since I arrived three days ago. We formed a routine which worked fine for both of us. We cooked, ate, cleaned the house, made plans to go out, cancelled the plans, saw movies or read books.

Today, we were in Zoya's room, going through Humaira's wedding pictures. We laughed at old uncles and aunties who attended the wedding. Every picture brought a funny memory until Zoya's mood changed. She stood up from her bed, with sagging shoulders. She turned to the wall and chose a stool by the bed.

“Saba, ever since Humaira got married it has really been hard on me. *Your aunt,*” she stressed, “had nothing to say to me except, *Zoya, your sister is married. When are you going to bring a man home?*” She mimicked her mother's voice, and I fought the urge to chuckle. One, because I knew how hard it must have been for her, and I could completely relate to her plight. It definitely wasn't funny.

She stood up and crossed her arms on her chest. “I am

sick of it. I went through a bout of depression, you know?”

“Oh, dear.” I sat up, feeling sorry for her. I may have been handling the pressure well, but Zoya was completely different from me. I was sure her mother had no idea what harm she caused her daughter by asking her to get herself a man.

“No, I am okay now, not okay, *okay*, but I am fine. I am just done living my life for anybody. I will do things only because they make me happy, I don't care if that makes me selfish. What do you think?”

I didn't know what to say to her, so I told her the truth. “Zoya, I am sorry about all that. But honestly, I don't know anything.”

“Really?”

“I am serious. There was a time I thought I could handle anything, but these days, I doubt myself. I don't even know what I want.”

She sat on the bed, a shadow of worry masking her face. “What do you want?” she asked softly.

Her question filled me with a sense of emptiness as I answered, “I don't know.” I didn't like the look of pity on her face, so I threw the question back at her.

“I want love, Saba, but I am not sure I can find it. I feel I am not good enough. You get me?”

“Why, you are beautiful, tall, fair. You have beautiful hazel eyes, a straight pointed nose. You have a shape ladies spend money to get. You're just perfect, Zoya. How can you not see it?”

“I am flattered Saba, you are gorgeous too. But I am afraid that is all there is to me.”

“Why? Because you don't have a man? Well, the society

has helped us carve our lives that it is so imperfect without a man." I said, rolling my eyes.

"I swear to you, Sab, It's so frustrating, but my mother thinks I don't want to get married."

"Trust me, my mother talks about it every single day, but at least you want to get married, the idea of marriage repulses me."

"You don't mean that?"

"Oh yes I do."

"You do know, half of your deen gets completed when you get married, right?"

"I know that, but... I just... I don't know."

She laughed. "You probably haven't found someone you're infatuated with yet, trust me." Her expression turned sad again. She had a distant look in her eyes as if she was remembering something she did not want to share with me.

Was karma playing a joke on me? I rejected guys for so long, and now that I was willing to try, I got my first rejection. Now, my beautiful cousin was also getting rejected by guys. I felt responsible at her inability to find love. "I am sorry, Zoya."

"It's okay. We will just keep praying. Perhaps, you are one of those people."

"What people?" I asked, my brows furrowed. The idea of being compared with other people unnerved me. Would she compare me with horrible people, as that malicious man did last year? What if I didn't like what she said?

"You know the people that are afraid to love what are they even called...?" She scrunched up her mouth thinking, "aah huh.....Philophobics."

I released a breath I didn't know I was holding, and scoffed. "Poppycock, I don't have any fear."

"Keep telling yourself that."

After dinner I went to bed early, but I couldn't sleep. I kept tossing about on the bed. When my mind wandered to that horrible man, I searched for my old diary.

11th JULY 2014

Dear diary,

Last night I woke up to noise from my parent's room. And my mother was pregnant! We didn't know why they were shouting in the middle of the night, but when I went to check on her, she yelled at me to go back to bed. I saw a tear drop before she could wipe it off.

I LIKED TO put my phone on vibration whenever I was reading. I was engrossed in the book, that when my phone vibrated, I jumped, toppling the phone to the floor. I answered the call before it disconnected.

"*Asalamualikum*, evening."

"Evening Saba, Fahad and I are at your gate. I have collected our luggage, are you home?"

"Yes, please. I will join you soon."

I took calming breaths, wondering why she had to come with Fahad. I changed my clothes and rushed out. Fahad welcomed me with a smile immediately he saw me. I ignored him and turned to Sumaiya.

"Your majesty, your humble luggage has arrived." Fahad bowed as he rolled my bags to my side.

I felt myself blushing. "I don't know what to say really,

thank you both, but you should have called me.”

“I wanted to but, Fahad said it was better to surprise you.”

I raised a brow at Fahad and he shrugged. Just as he was about to say something, Zoya joined us outside. She smacked my shoulder when she reached my side.

“Ouch!” I yelped.

“I thought something happened, the way you rushed out.”

“Sorry about that.” I said, rubbing my shoulder.

“Hi?” she smiled at Fahad and his sister. “We weren't introduced the last time, were we?”

I introduced them properly and immediately turned to Fahad. “And Fahad you haven't explained yourself.”

“Oh, I just wanted to know if you were alive, you didn't return my message, so...well that's just it really.” He explained and I felt guilty. My Aunt's response when I got his message made me forget to reply it.

“Actually, I was going you call you.” I lied and he saw right through me.

“You...you were going to call me?” He gave me a lazy smile. But I didn't want to give him the satisfaction that I was lying.

“Yes, Zoya and I were thinking about how we needed to get out of the house. I will be reporting to the camp soon, how about we all go out tomorrow?”

“Sure, why not?” Sumaiya chipped in, “I know the perfect place.”

After they left, Zoya blocked my way and started tapping her foot on the ground.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Give me answers, Saba. That guy is clearly into you. This was just an excuse to see you.”

“He was my classmate in school. He was just being nice, common!”

“You're not so naïve not to know that there is no 'just friends' with guys and ladies who are of marriageable age. There is always something else somewhere.”

Maybe I was in denial. If I gave her idea a thought, I might start acting awkward around Fahad, and being who he was, he would surely catch up and take it as a hint. I already regretted agreeing to go out tomorrow.

EIGHT

I WOKE UP to a message that I was supposed to resume camp earlier than I planned. I had miscalculated the dates which meant I had to cancel the hang out we had planned. A part of me was happy about this development, but the other part of me that dreaded spending three weeks in camp, began to panic.

I called Fahad and he promised it was okay if I missed a day, so we could all hang out as promised.

“Please, Saba. I will personally take you there myself. Just give me today.”

“Alright.” I said, smiling.

“And calm down, please. The camp life is not as terrible as you imagine. I have been there before, not like this one, but the training camp for navy officers. And now that I think about it, camp isn't designed for people like you, but I believe you will find your ground.” He said with a smile in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“You'll find out, okay?”

Later in the day, he came to the house to get Zoya and I.

We all went to get ice cream, see a movie and visit the zoo. Throughout the day, his eyes never left me. He noticed every change in my mood and attended to every of my need as they arose. I had never seen this side of him, maybe because I never allowed myself to see any good in him.

“Are you okay, Saba? You look pale. Do you need air?” He whispered to me halfway through the movie and we stepped out.

“Why did you hate me when we were in school?”

He asked, his eyes focused away from me. I was tempted to believe he didn't want me to see how hurt he was.

“Hate is a strong word, Fahad.”

“Okay maybe not hate, but you didn't like me.”

“Everyone liked you, did I have to also?” I raised a brow at him and he chuckled, turning to me.

“No, you didn't have to, but we were friendly with each other when I came to school newly. I thought we were going to be friends and the next thing I know, you were glaring at me and couldn't stand me.”

“I didn't know you noticed, you had a lot of crushes and you were dating Fauziya and why did you even care, was it your ego?” I teased.

“Of course, I noticed. I borrowed your books, and I liked you and then you hated me, and Fauziya was there, and I guess I was angry for a while and it didn't escape me that I vexed you intentionally.” He confessed.

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because, I want you to know. And maybe I haven't gotten over liking you and I would want you to like me back.” He said flatly, holding my gaze.

Hues of Love

“Why?”

“Because I know you Saba, you are a good girl and if I didn't tell you, you are going to keep me in the friend zone and I don't want that.”

I had smiled at him, basking for the first time in the words of a man to me. I enjoyed that he was honest with his feelings, and he acknowledged how important it was for me to reciprocate. The rest of the evening ended with me looking up to catch him smiling down at me.

When I got him, his text message beeped on my phone just as I was about to sleep.

“Hey, Pretty. Thank you for obliging me today. I enjoyed every bit of the time we spent together. Thank you so much.

I'll be at your place by 7 in the morning. Be ready, please. Unless you want me to beg you to stay for an extra day. (smiles).

NINE

A WEEK AFTER I left camp, I began to feel the intense heat of Abuja on my body. It came with the first rain, submerging me in drowsiness. Or, maybe it was fever, burning me from inside out. I kept tossing on the bed, barely comfortable in my skin. I looked outside the window and saw the sun setting. I had managed to sleep all through the day again.

A bowl of water and towel sat at the foot of the bed, which meant Zoya had come to check on me. I forced myself up and went to the bathroom to ease myself, shaking with cold as I walked.

When I came back to the room, Zoya was sitting on the bed. “Hey, you are alive. And apparently still burning.” She touched my forehead. I caught a whiff of nauseating smell from the tray in her hand.

“What is that horrible smell?” I covered my nose, pushing down bile.

“Haha. It's your medication and you will take it, even if I have to force it down your throat.” She got a glass of water

from the jug on my reading table and turned to me.

“Please. I am fine, I promise.”

“Take it, or am telling *your aunt*.” She said, and I saw the eye bags under her eyes. She must have been staying awake to take care of me. My aunt was busy at the bank and we hardly saw; whenever she came back, I was already asleep, and I was usually still sleeping when she left in the morning. Zoya should be editing her project, but here she was, *mothering* me. I smiled and took the tablets and pap from her.

“You will feel better soon, I promise and then you can tell me all about camp.”

“Please don't mention it, it makes me sick.”

“Okay, I won't. Call me if you need anything.” She pulled down the curtain and helped me settle in bed. When she left, I felt drowsy and allowed sleep take me over.

At 2am, I woke up with a start, covered in sweat. Without thinking, I made my way to the kitchen in search of food. Making as little noise as possible, I warmed the left-over spaghetti from the previous night, and ate in the dim light.

I felt better and decided to change my bedsheet, since the old one smelled like Paracetamol. I couldn't find it anywhere in my wardrobe, so I concluded Zoya must have washed and forgotten to return it to my room. I settled with my old journal on the floor. During my three weeks in camp, it kept me company. I was down to the year 2015, a week before Valedictory night.

6th August 2015

WORST DAY OF MY LIFE

Dear diary,

This is the absolute worst day in my life ever, I wish I wasn't born. It is worse than being sick. Why am I so silly? Do you remember my seatmate, Fabad?

Well, nobody had asked to be my partner to the forthcoming dinner party. This morning, Fabad stood in front of me, pacing and looking worried, I thought he was nervous about asking me. Just as I was about to tell him I would love to be his dinner partner too, I saw that it was Fauziya he had meant to ask all along.

I was so embarrassed. I should have learned the first time and now I can't even go to the dinner. How would I face anybody without a dance partner? This is my last secondary school graduation party and I am going to miss it. I hate Fabad.

“**SABA, SABA...** Saba!” I heard Zoya's voice even before I was fully awake. I sat up and tried to smile, despite feeling weak. I had slept off on the floor, reading my old journal and thinking of silly decisions I had made in the past.

“It looks like your fever has broken. How do you feel?” Her eyes bored into mine as she waited for a reply.

“It appears so. I feel better, thank you.” I assured her with a smile. “What time is it?”

“It's 5: 25 am, just almost Fajr.” Zoya saw my journal and reached for it. I didn't want her to read it, but I knew I was not strong enough to wrestle it from her hands.

“Saba's Journal.” She read out loud. “You keep a journal?”

“Yes, I do, why?”

“I don't know,” she shrugged. “You don't strike me as a journal keeper. I sometimes try, but I get blocked. Once, I got to write for a couple of months, but when I reread it, it felt

like I was complaining about my life and things I didn't want to bother me began to. I freaked out and stopped.” She handed it back and sighed heavily. I knew Zoya was an expert when it came to hiding her sorrows with her smiles.

“Are you going to explain, why you switched off your phone for three weeks at the camp? I doubt they confiscated your phones.” She had been bugging me about it, even though I didn't want to recall that moment.

“It's supposed to be a cruel joke.” I lied, I stood up from the reading table to get away from her questions, but she pulled me back and opened the journal.

“You better tell me or I am going to read it.” she threatened.

“Okay fine. I..I made a fool of myself.”

“Keep going, I don't believe it's over, does it have to do with Fahad?”

I nodded. “And I hate myself for it, I loathe every minute of it. If I could change time, I would erase that hour, but it was your fault you know?”

Her hands flew to her chest. “Me?”

“Ah... yes. You. You filled my head with unrealistic dreams about him. And I got delusional.”

Zoya shook her head. “You believed it, Saba. And that's why you acted upon it, it had nothing to do with me.”

We argued on and on until we heard the Adan calling the second stanza for Fajr prayers.

“Suit yourself, Saba.” She said as she turned to leave.

“Zoya,” she turned and waited. “someone told me I lived by a set of ridiculous principles. I didn't like that person's opinion, so I decided to visit my journal to read what I had

written, so I would know where I had missed it. But since I started four months ago, all I had been seeing were my own complains. I guess it's okay to complain, since I am not perfect. In fact, I think keeping a journal is a cheap therapy.”

Zoya smiled and hugged me. When she left, I switched on my phone and got several messages from Fahad, my parents, Zoya and Mia.

“Hey, Sabs, it's been a while. My phone was stolen in camp. I'll be in touch soon. Take care. Mia.”

TEN

FAHAD AND I had a huge fight while I was in camp, because I felt he was messing with my head. Or did I fall into another one of his games? He said he liked me, but he didn't say categorically if we were in a relationship or not. Whenever I asked him about it, he changed the topic. I got annoyed and accused him of being a player.

And now, I thought it would be a good idea to talk things through with him. I should probably explain too that I had issues with trusting men.

“Text me where you want us to meet, please. I am worried about you and we need to talk.” His message said. I chose a place I had seen by the road side, and borrowed my aunt's car.

I was sitting at a corner of the café, waiting for him when the door chimed. I looked up and saw him looking smart in his navy uniform. Sumaiya and a lady I had never seen trailed him into the café. I waved and they smiled. I pretended to force up a smile.

“You gave me quite a scare, I thought you were

cannibalised.” Sumaiya said as the waiter took their order.

“I can't get cannibalised in camp, Su. This is 2022.”

“Actually, it doesn't matter. Currently in Nigeria, rituals are an act of cannibalism. Our newspaper company is publishing a series on that topic.” The lady reeled with a straight face.

Fahad chuckled when he saw how disturbed her comment made me. “Don't mind Khadijah. She likes being blunt, but I promise Saba, she is harmless.”

“This is Saba? Why didn't anybody say so earlier?” Khadijah turned to me as if I was the most important person in the room. “Ya Rabbi, it is so good to finally meet you, Saba. Sumaiya won't shut up about you, she adores you. I am Khadijah, Fahad's fiancé.” She explained.

Even though I suspected this, the shock was no less. I found it hard to breathe, and the only thought in my head was how to escape them without making a scene.

She reached into her bag and passed a card to me. I turned to Fahad, but he avoided my gaze. I took the card with shaky hands.

Fahad and Khadijah with Muhammed and Sumaiya invite your honour to celebrate their nuptial on 22nd April 2022, at 2 pm at the resident address of Alhaji Umar, Jabi, Abuja.

“I can't make it.” I blurted.

“Why not?” Sumaiya asked.

“I have a cousin getting married on that same day, and I have to go back to Kaduna for that.”

Before she could press further, I pushed the card back to Khadijah and stood up. “I have to go now. I have another appointment. Congratulations to you both.” I flashed them a

smile. "Don't bother walking me out, enjoy your snacks."

I hurried out of the cafe, feeling my face burning with unshed tears. I wanted to go home and cry until I could no longer cry. Why was this happening to me now that I wanted to give a try at love? Why couldn't I get it right?

I heard Fahad calling my name. I did not slow down. I quickened my pace until I got to my aunt's car. As I fumbled for the keys in my bag, he held open the door.

"What are you doing?" I snapped at him, I felt an unbelievable anger take over me. How could I have been so stupid? I knew it Fahad, yet I allowed myself stupidly believe we could mean something together. Ya Allah, was I so desperate that I became blind?

"I couldn't let you go without explaining myself, I really did like you Saba." he said, opening his mouth and shutting it without saying anything. He inhaled deeply and covered his face with his hands. "Find a place in your heart to forgive, please?" He looked guilty which made me angrier.

"Is that why you didn't label us? You didn't want to commit because you already had a Plan A somewhere else?"

"See, my family wanted this and I couldn't reject Khadijah. Try and understand."

But it was okay for you to reject me? I wanted to yell these words at him, but I did not want to sound pathetic.

"Well, you can't fix this with sorry. I choose not to accept your apology, Fahad. I do not forgive you, okay?"

He nodded and stepped away from the door. Without sparing him another glance, I drove off, with tears running down my face. When my vision became blurry, I parked by the roadside to comport myself. Did I throw myself at him?

Three weeks ago, I didn't know what I wanted, how come I felt hurt at his rejection? Nothing could ever justify his wickedness.

I reached for my handkerchief, remembering how Aysha must have felt when she broke up with Kabir. She cried while she ate, saw a movie, read a book, and God help us, when she slept too. She loved Kabir, but I couldn't claim to love Fahad. I didn't even know what love was. I just knew I was hurt. I missed Aysha and I needed her at a time like this, more than ever.

A car from behind me hit my car, the impact jolting me forward. I hit my head on the wheel and remembered I did not use the seatbelt.

"Are you okay?" A worried voice reached into the car.

Another voice approached as I tried to clear my head. "Zayn, is he or she alright?"

Zayn? I prayed sincerely to God that it wasn't the Zayn I knew. Oh God, I thought I had had enough trouble to last me for the rest of the year.

I cleared my eyes and gasped in shock. I must have neglected the prayer to avoid disgrace and embarrassment because that was exactly what I was going through this week. And the week had only just begun. I wound down and waited for his face to register recognition. It did not take long for his worry to transform to hostility.

"What's the matter, Zayn? We should be apologising." His cute companion said.

"We hit your car." He grumbled, pointing at the bumper. "Although it's not completely our fault. You should not have parked here." He accused, his voice dripping with

irritation.

"I am sorry." I just wanted to get home and forget about today

"Yeah, a car is not a toy. If you don't know how to use one, you shouldn't even be on the road in the first place. Well, since you apologised, there's nothing we can do about it." Zayn said. His companion looked confused, but chose to keep quiet.

This must be God's way of punishing me for all the time I treated men badly. Why else would he send this despicable man to trouble me?

"You should step out to have a look. We're running late." Zayn glanced at his wrist watch, looking expensive in his white kaftan and shoes. I knew the perfume he had on was the expensive and heady ones that lasted even after the wearer had left a place. This car would definitely smell like Zayn for the rest of the week, even though he did not enter the car.

"Hurry up, please." he snapped, frowning.

I held my spine straight and looked up. "It's okay don't worry, about it."

His companion turned to me, "are you sure?"

"Absolutely." I nodded, turning on the ignition.

Zayn looked at the bump and smirked. "Okay then. Alamin, let's go." He left and his companion hurried after him.

WHEN I GOT home, my aunt was outside, holding a magazine. Her feet were resting on a small stool. She had taken a day off work today because she felt she needed to rest. As I parked the car, she sat up, looking from the car to me.

“Saba, Mé yasa idànuwan ki suka kumbura?” Her hand touched my face carefully as she examined my body.

I rubbed my face. I didn't realise my face had become puffy, and my eyes swollen. *Zayn must have had a good laugh at me.*

I let out an exasperated sigh, “wani wawan mota ne ya bikini ta baya.” I lied, trying to sound displeased so as to show I wasn't happy about the bump either.

“What? What kind of stupid drivers do we have these days, everyone just gets a huge paycheck and they buy a car, even though they don't know anything about driving. How did they get their license? I blame the government.” She moved closer to the bump to take a closer look. “Ya Rabbi!”

I stifled a scream when I saw it too. The left side of the tail light was a complete wreck. The light box had broken off and the bulb was displaced.

“Some people can be reckless. Were they speeding?”

“I don't know.” I lied. It was my fault I park without thinking, but I wasn't going to tell my aunt that, so I lied some more. “I was at the traffic stop when he bumped into me.”

“Did they even stop to apologise? The driver should have compensated you.” She grumbled.

How could I tell her I rejected their offer? I was too ashamed because he caught me crying and my ego was wounded.

I was already lying, it wouldn't hurt to add some more. When she asked if that was why I had been crying, I quickly nodded.

She nodded too, but I could sense her suspicion as she looked from the car to me.

“err...it happened so fast, I was taken aback. I have never

had an accident before while driving." At least this part was true.

"Are you hurt?"

I touched my forehead and winced. The part that hit the wheel was already tender. "I think I am going to have a headache."

"I am sorry about that. Did you at least get to submit your request form at the private hospital."

Shit, I was supposed to do that after seeing Fabad, but things didn't go as planned and I totally forgot about it.

"No."

"Okay," she said. Just when I thought I had finally escaped her questions and scrutiny, she called me again. "Don't forget to take pain killers."

I nodded and rushed upstairs.

ELEVEN

“YOU ARE A girl!” A petite lady, the first person I met in the lab squealed. “Oh my god, this is so lovely.” She hugged me and took a step back to catch her breath. “I can't wait to see Anthony's face when he gets back.” She clapped her hands, her eyes bright with excitement.

I had been posted to the microbiology main laboratory. There were smaller labs for Virology, Culture and Incubation. I took in the equipment and design of the huge lab, happy to be working here temporarily for the period of a year.

“Mrs Adebayo, come quick, they sent a female.” The lady called out, barely sitting still in her seat.

Mrs Adebayo was a woman in her late fifties, tall and agile. She walked briskly to us, smiling. “Calm your horses Sauda, don't give the girl an impression that we are mad in here.”

I chuckled.

“Welcome my dear, you are...?”

“Saba Abduljalil.” I said, reaching out for a handshake.

“Martha Adebayo, and this is Sauda Muhammed, we

have another staff member Anthony Jacob, but he is on vocation now, due to resume maybe in a month's time." I nodded and she continued with a kind smile. "I should warn you, Anthony and Sauda don't get along much—"

"That's because, he has so much ego." Sauda interrupted and turned to me. "He is a Medical Lab Scientist." She rolled her eyes.

"I see." I knew the competition for dominance between Microbiologists and Lab Scientists was no joke in the hospital setting. I found myself forming an idea of Anthony: he was a man and a Medical Lab Scientist, which meant there was no way I would like him. I was tired of men and their pride which always led them to believe they were better than women.

"Last year, I had to deal with five male corp members, plus Anthony, six males. Six!" Sauda continued, holding up her fingers. "I almost quitted."

"Sauda is a little bit enthusiastic. They weren't so bad, they did most of the work." Mrs Adebayo said, laughing.

Sauda scoffed. "Ahh, because they thought they knew better."

I grinned, enjoying their company. I knew work was going to be enlightening and fun for me.

"To tell you the truth, I wrote to the board this year that our department would only take two corp members. One here and one to any of the other labs." She confessed, grinning. "But I couldn't tell them to send a female. They would have seen through my scheme. So, you understand my excitement now?"

"She prayed hard every day." Mrs Adebayo said.

Mrs Adebayo asked Sauda to show me around, much to

Sauda's excitement. She showed me different departments and wards, theatre rooms and who controlled what, but by the time we were done, I could only recall where she told me the cafeteria was. When we got back to the lab, Mrs Adebayo was arranging a few documents on the reception desk.

"Welcome back. You'll be staying at the reception desk for a few months, Saba. After that, you can start working at the main lab. Ethics." She explained with a kind smile.

Even though I knew about this arrangement, my heart sank. Having to attend to patients instead of being in the lab where all the *fun* was, was saddening.

I sat up, toppling over a few documents, as shouts and excited screams rent the air from the corridors. *Today was determined to be full of excitement for me.* I thought as I stood up. Mrs Adebayo and Sauda came out from their work stations looking at me. I shrugged.

Few seconds later, the door burst open and a nurse peeped in. "He's here!!!" She shouted and disappeared.

We rushed out. If I wasn't so surprised, I would have found the scene ridiculous. Grown women: nurses and patients and other female hospital staff, gushing over a young man. By the time we came out, he had passed our office, all I could see was his back. His perfume lingered even long after he had left, ignoring the ladies as if he was used to their drama. His companions, two older doctors led him into an office, promptly dismissing the small crowd.

"What's the big deal about a man walking and breathing?" I asked Sauda and she burst into laughter. A nurse standing close to me gave me a nasty look and left.

"You can't say that loudly, at least not with that tone."

Sauda nudged me and whispered.

"Why?"

"Well because, he is the most handsome doctor around here, and he happens to be one of the best too. I had never seen him either. He left for his PhD in Germany when I was employed."

"Impressive."

"And he is quite young too. Did you see his back in that suit? So perfect and smooth."

I laughed as her eyes got dreamy. Even though I did not like men or want anything to do with them right now, I had to admit I had a soft spot for men who looked good in lab coats, suits and kaftans.

We turned back to our office, just as the hall cleared out. Mrs Adebayo had company. We stood by the door and waited when she saw us.

"There they are." Mrs Adebayo beckoned on us. I looked up and saw that it was one of the older doctors from before, and the tall handsome doctor. I could tell him in suit in a crowd now. When they turned to us, I bumped into Sauda as I stared.

From the way his lips parted slightly, I could tell he was equally surprised to see me here. He looked away first and cleared his throat.

The older doctor, whom I would find out later to be Doctor Sam introduced Sauda.

He spared her a brief nod, his hand glued to his pocket. He turned to me, "and you're?"

"The new corp member. She resumed today." Mrs Adebayo filled in.

He raised a brow, smirking.

"I am Saba Abduljalil sir." I said, shaking off every bit of resentment I felt toward the man in suit. This was a professional setting; I would be civil all through.

"Hhmm, Saba, that's new, what does it mean?"

"Breeze" I said fidgeting with my cloth, this was what I dreaded about my name; having to explain it's meaning everytime. I loved my parents, but really, Saba? "It means Breeze sir."

He laughed, startling every one of us. "Only you would think your name means breeze, Saba. Only you."

If I had doubts before that this was Zayn, his condescending tone and arrogance cleared my doubts, Asma's wedding had brought us together for two weeks, after all.

"Your parents can't name you breeze. Saba is actually a free-spirited and loving individual. He stated and turned to the rest, "when she said breeze, she meant the actual morning breeze we all loved." He explained, finding a way to embarrass me in less than ten minutes of officially meeting me here.

TWELVE

It was impossible to get anything past Sauda. One month after I started working here, I understood this in her pestering. Since our official introduction to Zayn, she had sensed a familiarity between us, even though I did my best to deny it. Since then, whenever we were alone, she'd ask me, "Saba, tell me how you met HoD."

Today at the cafeteria when she asked again, I decided to tell her.

"We meet last year at a friend's wedding, he was from the groom's side, even though he was the bride's cousin. I was the bride's class mate from primary school." I said, spreading stew on my rice. I looked up at Sauda to find her smiling and hugging her spoon.

"*Awwww*, that's so sweet. I feel like am taking a walk in a real-life romance book."

"You read too many books."

"Whatever. Ahem! And now, it is going to be nice to see a love story unfold as we culture microbes from people's poop, urine and blood." She said, drumming her hands on the table.

“Ewww, Sauda.” I said, wrinkling my nose at her. “I am eating.”

She smiled, waving her spoon at me, urging me to proceed with my story.

“He walked around the house with his head up, disregarding everyone else. I hated how he was giving orders here and there, I just didn't like him. To make it worse, I heard him talking with some of his cousins at the reception. I heard him say, women are created to serve men and I don't see why they are so against it.”

“He didn't.” She gasped, a smile curving at the sides of her mouth. “And that wounded you?”

“Why are you smiling? I expect you to be mad at him too.”

“Well, go on. I just find it amusing. I'm on your side though.”

“After that, I called him a misogynist.”

She laughed, throwing her head back, attracting a few stares from people around. “I guess he didn't take that lightly.”

“No, he didn't, which also proves that our country has no gentlemen. When he suddenly said I was delusional and broken, and that I was a bitter feminist. He 'advised' me to keep a diary if I didn't have one already, because I was traumatised.”

“That was harsh.”

“Yeah. I told him that it was because of men like him that women were fast becoming feminists. If men played their parts well, we would not need feminists to teach them.”

“Wow. I am sorry about all that. I am rooting for you

guys though. Let's see who wins this fight, eh?" She winked, clearly enjoying herself. She stood up and I did the same, dumping my plastic plates in the trash.

"You should go back to the lab first, I have a package to receive at the gate." Sauda said, checking her phone.

When I got back to the lab, the door was ajar. I was sure Sauda and I locked it before we left. Mrs Adebayo was not on morning duty today, so who could it be? I tiptoed into the lab and saw the workstation's light switched on. I knew someone was inside. I became jumpy, entertaining horrible scenes from *Scream* in my mind. I had watched the movie with Zoya in the middle of the night. Should I call management? What if the intruder escaped before they got here?

"Who's there?"

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I should be asking you that same question." He stated, his voice low with annoyance. He was dark and shorter than me.

I stood taller as I replied him. "I work here."

"So do I."

He frowned and took a step back. The look on his face when he realised I was the new corp member was priceless. I wish Sauda was here to see this.

"Sauda must be really happy." He said crossing over to my table.

"Yes, she is." I grinned, relaxing a bit.

"You both know the new HoD is a man, right?" He smirked, "that will be two men to three women, we can still tackle you."

"Men and their inflated ego. Keep lying to yourself."

"Ah, I see Sauda has backup, this will be fun. I am Anthony, by the way."

"I know who you are. I am Saba Abduljalil."

"Nice to meet you Saba, and I plead truce." He said, smiling.

I went back to my desk and began flipping through my diary. Whenever I was free, I read old memories and thought about my past choices and decisions.

Sauda burst through the door, smiling cheerfully.

"I can see you are glad with your package."

"Yes my new books just arrived, I waited three weeks for them." As she turned to her desk, she saw Anthony and froze. "You are back." She eyed him as she spoke.

"Sadly, for you yes." He matched her tone, smiling coldly.

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes and sat down, ignoring him for the rest of the day.

ZAYN'S OFFICE WAS being renovated, so he had to work from home all through last week. Those five days were blissful and peaceful for me. There was nobody to talk me down or mock me. And the worse part of it was, because he was my superior, I could not reply him with any of the caustic replies at the tip of my tongue. I had woken up with a sour mood, and I wondered why, since everything was fine with me. It was not until I stepped into the hospital that it dawned on me; Zayn was resuming work today, and somehow, this knowledge had ruined my mood even before seeing him.

I dropped the file I was sent to deliver on his table, and took a sweep of the room before I left. Mrs Adebayo had arranged his shelves according to the outline he sent to her on

Friday. Books with similar colours were together, big books were sorted away from small sized ones, Islamic journals and the Holy Quran were separated from the academic books. I was impressed by his obsession for details, but even with a gun to my head, I wouldn't admit this to anybody.

By 9am patients started arriving, to either get their results or submit samples to be tested. Since Anthony was back, I took turns with him to sit at the reception or work at the lab. Now, an arrogant yet ignorant patient stood in front of me, testing my patience.

“Sir,” I handed him the universal bottle, “I need more than a bit of your urine, you don't have to fill the bottle, just half of it will be enough. I am sorry, but I have to ask you to come back tomorrow with a new sample.

“You, people at the reception always do this. Do you know where I came from? Do you know who I am? I could have gone to any other hospital or lab.”

I wanted to retort with, 'then please go ahead', but I held my tongue.

“I can't go back, use it like that.” He pushed the bottle on the table, and I sighed deeply, checking my mood.

“If it is used like that, we won't be able to detect what kind of organisms are bothering you. If this test wasn't important, the doctor wouldn't have suggested urine analysis for you.” Zayn's husky voice interceded. Was there a time this man did not sound so authoritative? I thought to myself. Frowning, he walked up to the table and examined the man's sample. “Take it back, or you can find yourself another lab as you suggested.”

The man staggered, he took his sample, grumbling. “I

will take a new sample.”

I ignored Zayn and focused on sorting out forms on my table. I could feel his eyes boring holes on my skin, but I wasn't going to let him ruffle me with his presence.

“Do you need anything, sir?” I asked without looking up.

“Aren't you going to write down his details?”

“I already did, the moment he brought in his sample.”

“And if he decides not to return with another sample, you would have wasted our request form.” He declared proudly, satisfied he had found a way to blame me for something, so early in the morning.

I sighed, not taking his bait. “I am sorry sir. I will be more careful next time.”

He cocked his head, surprised. "Good then, I am glad you understand. I wouldn't want you to judge me as a cheapskate." His tone was chatty, and I wondered if he didn't have work to do. "See you around, Saba." He said and left, leaving his heady perfume fragrance behind.

After lunch, I heard Zayn raising his voice at Mrs Adebayo, just as I returned to my desk. A couple had come for a blood test last Thursday and Zayn had asked to cross check the result before the couple returned. There was a disorder with the patient's Complete Blood Count.

"Were you tired when you made this conclusion?" I heard him ask her.

"No sir. I am sorry I missed it."

“His erythrocyte and lymphocyte have increased drastically, the cells are mutated also, I think it might be oncogenic, how could you have missed that?”

Everyone was quiet after hearing that, I felt weak in my

bones. The mental stress level of every hospital staff should really be checked and corrected everyday.

“Tell them to see me when they arrive.” He dismissed her.

When she came out of his office, she looked pale. She went to her desk and covered her face with her hands.

“Mistakes happen.” Sauda patted her back, whispering. “Don't let it get to you.”

“Allow her to own her mistake Sauda, it was a relief the HoD checked it. We could have lost our jobs, you know.” Anthony stated.

“It was a mistake, Anthony, and it could have been any of us.” I glared at him. Even if Zayn was wrong, I knew Anthony would support him still. But would it hurt him to show some compassion?

“It is alright. Thank you, girls. Thank you, Anthony. You are right too. And I am sorry. I am just glad the couple will get the right test result, and they will proceed with treatment as required.”

Just as we went back to our duties, the couple walked in and Mrs Adebayo directed them to Zayn's office.

THIRTEEN

I STUDIED ZAYN closely to see if he would apologise to Mrs Adebayo after the incidence, but he didn't. I did a good job of avoiding him, while Sauda learnt to be on her toes whenever they worked together. Anthony was the only one who seemed to be doing perfectly fine. I concluded it was women Zayn had a problem with, not just us.

Sauda and Anthony were bickering again. “Why won't you give your girlfriend a ride to work Anthon?”

“Because I don't want her to get used to it. What happens on days I don't feel like it?”

“Do you even love her?”

He glared at her. “Of course, yes. The thing is, women can't be pleased all the time. I don't want her to get too demanding. So next time I can't give her a ride, she wouldn't get upset.”

“That is why there is a thing called communication. It's simple, you both would reach an understanding that works for you.” I added, getting irked by his point of view.

He scoffed, “It's not like it is easy to understand your

gender.”

I smiled, nodding. Even I, didn't understand myself fully yet.

I turned back to my monitor to see a cute man standing before me. He must have been knocking for a while, I guessed. His smile and height reminded me of Zayn's companion the day they bumped into my car.

“Is your HoD in?”

“Yes,” I replied, sorting documents, hoping he would not recognise me.

He took a few steps and turned abruptly. “We have met before. You are the lady we bumped into, a few months ago.”

I nodded.

“How's the car, we felt bad, you should have taken a look and we might have compensated you. Did you spend a lot?”

Mr perfect Zayn knew the bump was serious, but he dismissed it with arrogance. My aunt ended up spending quite a lot to fix the car. I couldn't ask her to lend me anymore. Now, I had to take public transport from the allowance the government paid us, which meant I wouldn't be saving much.

That was what I had planned to say, but instead, I smiled. “It wasn't much.”

“Here,” he handed me his card. “Send me your account number I will pay half of it.”

I was going to collect the card, even though I knew I wouldn't send him my account details, I just wanted him to leave my desk. As I stretched my hand, a hand grabbed the card from him.

“You weren't even the one driving, Alamin.” Zayn said and tucked the card into his lab coat.

“It wouldn't hurt to compensate her.”

“I don't want either of you compensating me.” I snapped.

“But you took his card.” Zayn said, challenging me or baiting me as he was wont to do.

“Which isn't any of your business.” Immediately those words left my mouth, I felt like gathering them back into my mouth. Not because I was worried about offending Zayn; he couldn't fire me, and if he wanted to transfer me from the hospital, he would have to go through the state board and NYSC. I didn't have to look up before I knew Anthony, Sauda and Alamin were gawking at us.

Zayn cleared his throat and turned to Alamin. “Why are you here?”

Alamin turned to us, “your HoD is a snappy man. How do you guys stand him?” The softness of his tone warned us not to take him seriously.

“Why are you still friends with me?” Even though Zayn's voice lacked warmth, Alamin burst into laughter.

“Man, it is because I feel sorry for your lonely ass.”

Zayn punched him lightly and led him to his office. Few minutes later, they bounced down the stairs, laughing. I was shocked to see that Zayn knew how to smile. Alamin must be really important to him.

Alamin stopped at my desk and asked, “I didn't get your name?” He smiled, his smile was hard to resist.

“Saba.”

“Nice,”

Zayn came back into the office and stood by my desk. I looked up and held his gaze, refusing to let him intimidate me.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Don't smile at him like that.”

“Excuse me?”

“Alamin is a softie. He already likes you and I don't want you to mislead him, because we both know you are not interested in him.”

“Is it my fault your friend can't take a friendly smile? And what if I am interested in him?”

He fell silent, looking at me with suspicion. After a while, he took a deep breath and apologised. “I am sorry, that was wrong. I was just looking out for my friend. But you know, it is hard to predict ladies.”

“Right.” I said.

He relaxed and leaned against my desk. “You see, if people labelled their relationships from start, we wouldn't have problems.”

“I am not getting into any type of relationship with your friend.”

“Okay. Do you really need the compensation?”

My goodness! “No,” I practically yelled. Sauda peeped from the work station and tiptoed back when she saw Zayn. He ignored her and continued, “why then did you collect his card?”

“I wanted him to leave, he was asking questions about that day, and I didn't want to recall that day.”

“Why?”

“Why do you care?”

“Well, I am a very curious person, and you were crying.”

I fell silent, blocking pictures of Fahad from my mind. I hated him more now, because he was the reason Zayn had

seen me cry.

“Even Alamin noticed. He must have thought you were crying because of the bump. But there's more, right?”

“Alright, Einstein, curiosity killed the cat.” I rolled my eyes at him, wishing he would leave me alone. I preferred him busy and serious to this free and inquisitive pest.

He smiled, nodding. For the first time since I had known him, I caught a glimpse of a dimple on his right cheek.

FOURTEEN

ZAYN WAS RIGHT. Alamin returned the following day and the day after and the day after that. Three whole days in a row. During one of his visits, he tried to impress me by making his voice sound like a child's. I found him bothersome, but I remained polite because he was cute and harmless. For now, at least.

He did not ask me out yet, but I knew he was going to. Everybody knew it. Sauda had long given up on Zayn and I, she claimed we were the perfect definition of like charges. But since Alamin started frequenting the office more, she shifted her attention to him. In a way, she reminded me of Aysha, whom I still hadn't heard from yet. At least, Mia acted as our middle man, updating me about Aysha's wedding plans. I made a note to call her after work.

I tried to let Alamin know I wasn't interested, but he was either dense, or pretending not to get my hints. A soft knock at the door made me stand up from the work station. I opened the door and saw Zayn in faded jean trousers and a T-shirt and so tall.

“What are you still doing here?” He asked, checking his watch.

“I am still working.” I explained. He came into the office and saw the work station's light on. “What kind of work, Saba? I thought you were situated at the desk?”

“Yes, but Sauda had an emergency, something about her family and Mrs Adebayo and Anthony had other engagements, so I volunteered.”

Zayn walked past me into the lab. I was reporting the morphological growth on cultured bacteria. He compared my reports with the culture plates on the desk.

“You are good at identification.” He acknowledged, nodding.

“*Dub*, I have a B.Sc. in microbiology.”

“Trust me when I tell you I have come across many B.Sc. holders who can't do this right.”

“My supervisor, taught me himself.” I didn't know why I was telling him this, but the evening breeze was warm and everywhere seemed calm and friendly.

“Good, but you shouldn't stay late. Have you even eaten?”

My traitorous stomach rumbled and I made a face.

“Go home Saba, this is not your work.” He advised. He picked a folder from his office and left almost immediately.

By the time I finished working and cleaning the work station, it was Maghreb already. I switched off the light and locked the lab.

“I told you to leave an hour ago, you don't listen, do you?” I was startled by his voice. He was leaning casually against the wall. If I didn't know better, I would think he was

waiting for me.

“Why are you still here?” I asked.

“HoD duties.” He said and we walked out of the building together.

“Good night.” I said, turning to the gate while he headed to the parking lot.

After walking for two minutes, I decided to call Zoya but her line was off. None of the taxis I stopped were going my way. I tried calling an uber, but the closest driver to me was forty minutes away. I was beginning to feel helpless. I sat at the bus stop, hoping another taxi would stop soon.

A black Lexus stopped in front of me, with tinted windows. Alarmed, I stood up, preparing to scream for help if I had to.

“Saba, get in.” Zayn called, leaning over.

I took a step back, dreading sitting alone with this horrible man in his car. I did not like the idea of receiving assistance from him.

“It's late, you won't get a taxi around this time, stop over thinking and get in, my car is safe.” He unlocked the door.

His car smelled nice. I gave him my address and he nodded, after taking one look at it. He turned up the radio and we drove in silence, awkward, like a drive with my dad. I chuckled and he turned.

“What is it now?”

“Nothing.”

“You know this weather can do a thing or two to a person's brain, yes?”

I glared at him. “I had a thought, don't ask me about it.”

“Okay tiger.” he smiled.

Since he was in a relaxed mood, I tried to ask for his help with Alamin. “I need your help.”

“Wow, today is my lucky day. The almighty Saba needs my help.” He teased, bowing mockingly as he drove.

“It's Alamin.” I added, getting his full attention.

He took his eyes off the road for a second. “What's up?”

“As I told you earlier, I don't want to have anything to do with him. But no matter how many times I tell him, he doesn't seem to get it.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to help me reject him nicely, I don't want to offend him; he seems nice.”

“Since when did you start caring about men and their feelings?” He turned and flashed me a grin.

“That was before. Lately, I have tasted rejection and it wasn't nice.” We stopped at a red light and Zayn turned to me, studying me. I looked away from his intense stare to watch the darkening sky.

“Okay, Saba. I will do something about it.”

The rest of the drive was in silence. I looked up to see familiar houses and I sat up. “Stop at the next gate, please.”

“Okay, madam. Does this mean we are friends now?”

Was he teasing me? Was this one of his baits to start an argument with me? Friendship with Zayn was an unlikely alliance, but I smiled and nodded.

“And I wanted to apologise for what I said when we first met. It was uncalled for. I am sorry for the hurtful words I said, I got carried away.” He clasped his palms together in apology.

“Apology accepted. So, you are not a fan of misogyny?”

“I am not. Actually, what I said was an innocent statement, I know women were created to serve men, but not in the way you thought. I meant as partners in marriage.”

“Oh. I am sorry for misunderstanding, and for eavesdropping.”

“Right. So, we are friends now?”

I liked that he was labelling it, but it wouldn't hurt to be extra sure. “I hope that is all it will be. I don't like surprises.”

“I am a straight forward guy Saba, you seem to only think the worst of me. And I would like to go to work tomorrow and not find you glaring at me like you want to rip my throat.”

I laughed. “Thanks for the ride, HoD”

This next morning, Zayn called for a meeting in the lab.

“Yesterday I saw Saba doing your work Mrs Adebayo, I won't want that to happen again.”

We all exchanged shocked looks.

“Please I want everyone to do their work. Don't mix your personal business with work.” He looked up and everybody apologised. “And Saba, I would like you to stay at your assigned position.”

“Yes sir.”

Just as he dismissed us, I saw Alamin standing at my desk, waiting for me. I was about to say something mean when Zayn interrupted us.

“Come up Saba,” he said, ignoring Alamin. I went upstairs and stood, while Alamin sat, studying his friend's mood.

Zayn handed me a letter and I opened it. My mouth fell open, shocked that after yesterday, he could do this to me.

FIFTEEN

SINCE MY TRANSFER to the counselling department, going to work became a difficult task. I disliked every bit of it, and my service year no longer looked as promising as I thought it would be. Every minute I spent at the counselling office, talking to clients who needed medical advice, I felt under-utilised. And most of the time, the clients ended up ignoring my advice anyway.

Why was I sent here, when I could be in the lab, doing something useful with my life?

This thought filled my mind every night before I slept, and every morning I woke up. I got up from bed and prepared for work, lazily. Which was fine, because I had been going there late since I started in my new department. No Sauda or Anthony. No Mrs Adebayo or even Zayn. All I had was Rose, a nasty lady who loved to chew gum loudly, and our HoD, who spent more time on her phone than actually working.

Rose was sleeping when I got to the office, which meant the HoD wasn't around, or she was on a personal phone call which usually lasted for hours. I could hear her laughing and

shouting all the way from her office.

I grabbed my diary and flipped through.

11th November 2017

Dear diary, you won't believe what happened today. I went to see Mia, and I found her neighbour pummelling his wife. Her face was bloody, but he did not stop. I was afraid she would die. Mia's parents were not at home, so we both called the local vigilantes.

They arrived promptly and took him away. After an hour, he returned, furious. He banged on the door and started insulting his wife, as if she planned everything. "You shall see, you shall see." He kept threatening as he insulted her.

I looked up, yawning. It was 11 am. It was the fifteenth day of the Ramadan fast, the time when the body started getting lazy. I put my head on the table and dozed off. I dreamt I was beating Zayn, asking him why he transferred me from the lab to this horrible place.

I put on my ear buds, listening to the Qur'an as I followed with the hard copy I had brought along. I closed my eyes, for a bit enjoying the soothing sound when Rose tapped my shoulder.

"I need to talk to you, please. Just pretend it's hypothetical or like a counselling session or something."

"Okay?" I sat up, looking at her with caution. She had never spoken to me before, why was she asking now?

"If you suspect your husband is cheating on you, what would you do?"

"I'll confront him about it first. But I would need to be very sure before talking about it."

"Well, all the signs match. He comes home late, he makes long calls in the bathroom, and his behaviour toward me has changed."

She fell silent when she realised she had shared more than she wanted. I smiled and continued, pretending I didn't hear anything.

"Well, Islam allows polygamy, but I wouldn't want him to insult me by going about it the wrong way. If he wants another wife, we need to talk about it first."

"I am a Christian. I mean the person is a Christian and polygamy is against the rule of marriage."

"The woman should confront him. This is about placing value on yourself. No man should insult you by seeing another woman. Think about your feelings too. He should not hurt you, and continue to do so by seeing her. Unless the marriage is no longer important to him."

She looked up at me, teary. And I hoped sincerely that her marriage would work out.

"Thank you, Saba. I appreciate it. I will tell my friend all you have said."

I shared a knowing smile with her, confident I had made a new friend.

ZAYN WAS NOW old news, long forgotten at the back of my mind. I only remembered he existed whenever Sauda and the others stopped by. I didn't ask them about him, and they didn't mention him to me either, which was a relief.

I called Mia, as Aysha's wedding was fast approaching. She had left a reminder for me on Whatsapp, and I knew how hard it must be for her, being in the middle. Damming my

pride, I put on my big girl shoes and called Aysha. She sounded pleased to hear from me because she knew how much I held on to grudges.

We connected Mia to the call, after our little make-up and it was a beautiful moment of reunion. I didn't realise how much I had missed my friends until we talked late into the night, catching up on happenings in our lives.

I told them about Fahad, and Aysha burst into tears.

"You were there for me, Saba. I hate the fact that you had to go through all that alone."

"Common, it's fine now. I am over him. I am just grateful it happened before I got too involved with him."

We made plans for her wedding, teasing her and having fun. We reopened our WhatsApp group and promised to keep in touch with one another always.

I CAME BACK from taking a walk around my department's block when I saw my aunt's car in the parking lot. I tried calling, but neither she nor Zoya answered their phones. I saw several missed calls from both their numbers. I went to the reception and asked to see the log book.

"Any new admission in the last hour? Please, I think my sister might be in trouble."

"Yes, one Zoya came in with her mother. They brought another person wi..."

"Where? Which ward?" I tried to control my body from shaking as I ran to the counselling department.

Zoya and my aunt were sitting outside the ward, with glum faces. I found it hard to breathe as I approached them.

"Aunty, what happened to Hanifa?" I knelt in front of

her, holding her cold hands.

She burst into tears, holding me tightly. "Where have you been? Where is your phone? I have left over 10 missed calls since we arrived." She said between hiccups.

"I am sorry, my phone was on silence."

"Hanifa is fine," Zoya said, pacing. "It's Humaira."

"Did she have a fall? Accident?" My throat constricted as I spoke. "Why, why are you in my department? Why is she not seeing a doctor?" I relaxed a bit, but my mind cooked up severe cases I had seen in the short time of my working in the counselling department.

"You should see for yourself." Zoya suggested, nodding toward the ward. If she was resting and not talking to any of the counsellors on duty, then it must be really bad.

I peeped into the room, careful not to disturb her in case she was sleeping. One side of her face was swollen and bruised. I covered my mouth, stifling a scream as I moved closer to her bed. Her hair was disheveled, one of her eyes was swollen and plastered. There were bruises all over her hands and thighs. The white bedsheet she laid on had splotches of brown and red from her bleeding wounds.

"She is sleeping now. They gave her something for the pain. She was screaming when we brought her in."

I wiped my tears and turned to Zoya. "Oh God, Zoya. I am so sorry about this. Who did this to her? Where is Hassan?" I asked, hoping he was not responsible for this wickedness.

"I have no idea."

"Who called you?"

"She did. Mum and I rushed to their apartment, but Hassan wasn't there. Mum left a message for him on

WhatsApp, but I don't think I want him anywhere near my sister.”

My aunt came in, more composed now. She handed Zoya her car keys and asked her to go prepare something for Humaira.

“Saba, you should get back to work. I will call you when she wakes up.”

“I will soon be done with my shift.” I said and left.

SIXTEEN

TWO DAYS AFTER Humaira's admission, Hassan came to the hospital with his mother, sister and uncle. Five minutes later, Zayn and Alamin came in, joining him on their side of the room. I wasn't even surprised Zayn knew him, they were all probably birds of a feather. My mother and Zoya sat on the other side with Humaira while I was forced to remain at my desk.

My eyes were on Humaira. She had recovered a bit, but she was still weak and broken. Her shoulders were slumped, burying the confident woman I had come to love over the years. Was she going to go back to Hassan if he asked her to? Was she going to press charges?

The HoD came down from her office with two doctors and asked Hassan and Humaira to come with her.

Zayn got a call and left, and I stood up to use the restroom before Alamin could consider talking to me. When I came out, everybody had left, save Zoya and her mum.

HUMAIRA WAS DISCHARGED yesterday evening. She

followed us back home, and took a nap in her former room which we now shared. When my parents and older brother, Abubakar arrived, she woke up and asked for food. We were happy she was making an effort, but I knew it was because she did not want us to be worried. These past few days had been hard on my aunt especially.

When Hassan's family arrived, we left the sitting room and went upstairs to my room. We sat in silence, trying to hear what the elders were saying, when suddenly, someone's voice rose higher.

“Why won't she go back?”

“Why would you even say something like that?” My aunt's voice was strong as she queried.

“You have pampered her too much, and that's why she's sprouting nonsense about a divorce. As we all know, Allah hates divorce.” Another voice said.

“If you had seen her five days ago, you wouldn't be saying this.”

“She isn't the first one this has happened to; she should learn to forgive and move on. Marriage is all about patience, if you allow her now, what will Zoya learn?” Another voice said calmly.

“Please call Humaira down.” My father's voice broke through.

My brother knocked softly at the door and Zoya told him Humaira would join them in a few minutes. We turned to Humaira and saw that she was crying. I hated that she was in this situation, and there was nothing I could do to help her.

“I am sorry, Humaira. What do you want? Zoya and I will support whatever you decide.”

“As long as she doesn't decide to go back to that fool's house.” Zoya muttered and I glared at her.

“I am pregnant.” She blurted. “I don't know what to do. I don't want my child to grow up without a father, and I am terrified of going back to Hassan after what he did.”

Another knock made us look up. Zayn was halfway in as he asked, “can I come in?”

“You are already in,” I retorted.

He ignored me and sat on a stool, facing Humaira. “Hassan sent me. He says, nothing justifies what he did, and that even if you got forced to go back home with him, things would not be the same.” He studied Humaira before adding, “he also says he is sorry, for what he did, and that you should please forgive him.”

Humaira bowed her head, covering her face with her hands as she wept harder.

“To be honest, he hopes you'd return home with him.” Zayn added softly.

“Are out of your mind Zayn?” I shouted, frustrated that I had to listen to this nonsense.

His eyes did not leave Humiara as he continued talking. “But I think it is a bad idea.”

Humaira looked up, taking in his words. Zoya turned to me and I shrugged, not believing my ears either.

“See, my parents got divorced when I was five.” He said with a faint smile “They loved each other, but they were toxic for each other. They were always fighting, throwing things at each other. One time, my mother threw a jug at me. She had meant it for my dad but he dodged and I got hit. I spent days in the hospital, because the jug had hit my head.” He sighed

deeply. “I guess that was when they decided to call it quits. You should not stay with an abusive partner because of a child. You should in fact, leave because of that child. It is safer for both you and the child that way.” He concluded, as he stood from the stool. He spared me a glance as he was about to leave the room. We stared at each other briefly before I looked away. Those five seconds were the longest I ever had.

We gave Humaira time to calm down before following her downstairs. When she saw Hassan, I saw her visibly shaking, as if she was afraid he would hit her again.

“Mum, I...I...” Humaira broke into tears again as she tried to talk. Her mother held her, whispering softly to her until she stopped crying.

My eyes went to Hassan and I saw that he was crying too.

Hassan's mother sat up. “What Hassan did was uncalled for. No one would want their daughter living with such a man. If Humaira decides to leave him, we will understand.”

“Do you want to leave him?” My father asked

She nodded her head. “Yes, I do.”

“Aren't you pregnant?” Hassan's uncle asked.

“I am.”

“And are you sure of this Humaira, you are too young.” My father asked.

“Yes, uncle. I am sure.”

My father nodded. “Your father, may his soul rest in peace won't want to see you hurting. No father would want their daughter to be unhappy in marriage. Even though Allah doesn't like divorce, he provided it as a way to do justice between a wife and a husband so they don't tie each other

down and commit more sins. Humaira dear, it is hard for a father to see his daughter getting out of a marriage.”

“I am sorry, uncle.”

“But I can't force you to go back, we all can't.” My father concluded with a sad smile.

No one argued with her decision, not even Hassan. He stood up and pronounced two *Talaq* out of three, signifying she was no longer his wife.

SEVENTEEN

1st January 2018

Dear Diary,

It is another year, Alhamdulillah. December last year was hard, we lost a lot of good people, but I don't want to dwell on it, it has me thinking life is actually nothing all. I am glad my parents are alive. I can stand their quarrels, as long as they remain together.

I don't know what to expect this year but I only pray to worship God more, be a better daughter, sister and friend. I pray these stupid ASUU strikes should come to an end soon. Also, Aysba fancies herself in love, she has been dating the guy for about a year and the half now. He is all she has to talk about whenever we meet.

I was going to read the next chapter when Sauda walked in. “Hey, Sauda. It is good to see you.” I put the diary away.

“You didn't tell me you were dating the HoD now. You said it was over between you two and that you weren't interested, but now I hear this rumor.” Amidst her outburst, I could sense her feeling of betrayal too.

“I am not dating Zayn. Where did you hear that nonsense

from?”

“He is Zayn now, even though you two aren't dating?”

“Common, Sauda. I have known the guy before he became HoD.”

“I don't even know if I can trust you anymore.”

“What are you talking about, where did all this attitude come from?” Did I misread her? Was she interested in him?

“You can deny it now, but I know the truth. His friend told me. And he said, the HoD told him himself.”

Nothing I told Sauda seemed to placate her. She stormed out of my office, just as she had stormed in, leaving shocked and confused.

At the close of the day, I rushed out to catch Zayn before he left. I stood by his car, waiting for him. I had no idea how far the rumour had spread, until I started catching whispers everywhere I turned. “She is the one Dr Zayn is dating.”

“You are the last person I expected to ask for a ride from me, Saba.” Zayn said as he approached his car.

“I don't want a ride. We need to talk.” I snapped.

“Okay. Hurry.” He leaned against the car.

“No, the two of us can't be seen together. Haven't you heard the rumours?”

“Of course, I have, but people will always say things when they see a man and a woman together.”

“I don't want them to, I have a reputation to protect.”

“Why do you care what people say, anyway?”

I ignored him and told him I would join him at the bus stop. He drove out of the hospital and I met him waiting.

“Sauda is mad at me because I didn't tell her we were

dating now. Why does the whole world think we are dating, Zayn?" I asked as I strapped on my seatbelt.

"Well, I am flattered you expect me to know the answer to that."

"She said Alamin said you told him."

He fell silent, focusing on the road. "Yes, I did. You asked me to help you deal with Alamin. That was the only solution that came to my mind."

"And why was I sent to counselling department?" I mustered the courage to ask him the question that had been bugging me.

He sighed. "Has Alamin bothered you since I transferred you?"

I shook my head.

"Good. That's why."

"You could have --- Why didn't you try to explain? I have been there for a month." I hated that I sounded like a petulant child, but I couldn't help it.

"I didn't get the chance to, I got called back to Germany that afternoon. When I got back, I was confronted with Hassan's issue."

"That was weeks ago, if you really wanted to explain, you could have sought me out. Wait, did you ever plan to explain yourself to me?" I asked, even though for no particular reason, I also wanted to know why he travelled to Germany, but that wasn't the issue at hand.

"To be honest with you Saba, I had no intention of doing that."

Of course Mr perfect Zayn never explained himself to anyone.

"Wow. And I thought, we were friends."

“We are friends.”

I did not have the energy to explain to him that friends tried to reason with each other. I sighed, already feeling drained.

“We have to stop the rumour somehow, I don't want Sauda to be mad at me.” I said, remembering what had made me seek him out in the first place.

“Why do you care about Sauda so much?”

“She's my friend, and her opinion of me matters.”

“But I am your friend too. And you don't seem to care about what I think, in fact you fight everything I say.” He turned to me, switching to his playful mood again. “Besides, she's not much a friend if she doesn't trust you. Plus, I don't want to tamper with the rumour.”

“What do you mean?”

“Saba, don't you see this is a ruse I made up to court you?” I wish he would laugh and say he was teasing, but he didn't. Instead, he slowed down and parked the car.

My head began to pound as I thought about what he meant. “I thought you only wanted to be friends.”

“I want more, Saba.” He said looking at me earnestly.

I could not believe we were having this conversation, I couldn't fathom why Zayn was suddenly talking about this. We could barely stand each other's guts.

“I am sorry, Zayn. I don't think I am ready to do this.” I said, even though it hurt to reject him. I had been rejected before, so I knew what he must be going through. But this doesn't change the fact that he was spitting nonsense from his mouth. Just like Sauda had said, we were like charges; we could never work together.

He smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. He started the car and we drove on in cold silence.

EIGHTEEN

IT WAS 3 AM in the morning. My head was pounding, and my heart was heavy. I tossed about on the bed, sighing and hissing. More than ever before, I hated Zayn. Why would he put me in such a difficult situation? It was almost as if he was born to make my life miserable.

I went downstairs to snack on bread and juice, since I wasn't fasting. My period came yesterday evening. I went back upstairs to flip through my old diary.

20th October 2019

Dear diary,

It is stressful, but just two more months and it will be over. I don't know how my parents do it, go to work every single day. I don't think I want to work in the future.

Kabir, Aysba's boyfriend broke up with her over the phone. I had seen it coming, but when I warned her, she told me to mind my business.

She had cried until she started feeling feverish. Her temperature rose and she had to see a doctor. Even though the tests said it was malaria, we both knew it had to do with Kabir too.

Love malaria or heartbreak malaria, if you ask me.

After reading that entry, I felt like punching Kabir, Zayn and all the other men I knew.

ROSE WAS ABSENT from work. She left a message on my desk that she had decided to finally confront her husband about his behaviour. I was happy she finally had the courage to do this, even though it could shatter her marriage.

The rest of the day was slow and tiring, as I slept through half of it. Before closing hour, I requested permission to close for the day.

Thoughts of Zayn remained on my mind. I asked myself what I liked about him, and what I didn't like. I respected him more for sharing his story with Humaira, which helped her make that tough decision she had to make.

Zoya knocked softly, whispering so she wouldn't wake Humaira. "Sabs, your aunt wants to talk to us."

I sat up from my desk and frowned. I didn't trust these talks with my aunt. Maybe she had seen men she wanted Zoya and I to go out with. "I hope it's not one of her marriage talks."

"I have no idea." Zoya shrugged and headed downstairs.

When I joined them, my aunt was sitting stiffly, tapping her leg against the floor.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. I hoped nothing had happened again, I could only handle so much at a time.

"Yeah, it's nothing serious." She twisted the hem of her hijab and let it fall abruptly. Then she resumed the process all over. "I already spoke with Humaira. So, there's this colleague

of mine who wants to...I mean, he asked me to marry him and I agreed."

I turned to Zoya and she looked as shocked as I was sure I looked too.

"Mum, you really want to do this? I never thought you wanted to remarry. I mean, wow." Zoya asked.

"I don't know. I have never thought about it too, but maybe I have been lonely for a long time. I just didn't realise it, but now I just feel like this is the right time to move on." My aunt said, brimming with smiles.

"Time to move on?"

"Yes, Saba." My aunt replied. I knew my tone bothered her.

Zoya jumped from her seat, throwing herself into her mother's arms. "I am okay with it, as long as you're happy."

My aunt laughed, hugging Zoya back. "Thank you, my love."

"Have you talked to Hanifa?"

"No, I was hoping you'd help me out."

Zoya nodded, "absolutely."

I got up from my seat thinking they were both crazy. Why was my aunt happy about remarrying? Had she forgotten what happened before? I left them and went back upstairs, I felt like crying. It was too much. My aunt's decision and thoughts of Zayn. I just wanted to be alone to wallow in the misery they had put me.

"Can I come in?" My aunt called from the door.

She leaned against my reading table and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Something is bothering you, I know. Talk to me, Saba."

"I...I..." I sighed, "every time I just...I don't know."

"Yes, you do, we all always know what's wrong. Think hard about it and tell me."

I sighed and turned to her. "When uncle died, you were so broken when you heard about it. You passed out every time because you couldn't stop crying. We thought we would lose you too, I remember vividly how hard it was for you to move on, not until Hanifa came and you held her in your arms. That was when you began to heal. And now, you want to remarry? Aren't you afraid of subjecting yourself to that kind of pain again?"

Her hand flew to her mouth as she cried. She placed the other hand on her chest, shaking her head. "Oh, Saba," she pulled me up and drew me into her arms. "I am so sorry you had to see me like that. It is true I loved my late husband, and truly, when he died, I felt a part of me had died too. That was why I moved to Abuja to start a new life with the girls." She paused, wiping her tears. "I chose not to remarry at that time because I wanted to focus on raising my girls. Marriage is a beautiful thing, and I know my late husband would want me to be happy too."

I nodded, forcing a smile.

"Besides, you girls are going to get married soon, by God's grace. You don't want me to live alone in this house, do you?"

I laughed and she squeezed my shoulder.

"Now, what's the other thing bothering you?" She asked with a knowing smile. "I am sure there is more."

I told her about Fahad and Zayn and what I thought about men. She listened patiently, with no judgement in her

eyes.

“Why do you keep rejecting them?”

In the softness of her eyes and the gentle caress of her voice, I finally got the answer, the truth I needed to tell myself. “I was scared. I was scared and so afraid that if I let myself fall in love with a man, I would lose myself like you almost did, the way Aysha did when Kabir broke up with her, the way mum snapped whenever she and dad had a fight. I don't want to get hurt, aunty. I don't want to give a man so much control over my feelings and life. If he hurts me...I... may never recover the way you guys did.”

“I know what you mean, but you can't define your life by other people's experiences. Yours may be different.”

“What if it's the same? Why should I take the risk?”

“Because if you don't, you will never know, and you will deny yourself of happiness.” Her voice grew stronger as she spoke, trying to convince me, but I couldn't shake off the fear and doubt. “We are women, Saba.”

“What do you mean?”

“We are fighters, we are risk takers not weaklings and that's why God created us for the egotistic men. They don't know that, but we are special and we don't need them to tell us that. It's just sad that some of them are ignorant fools, but we shouldn't limit ourselves because of them.” She said and planted a kiss on my forehead.

“What if it's all a delusion?”

“You are smarter than that, baby. I think you will know when you are being delusional, give yourself some credit.”

She stood up to check on Humaira who was still sleeping soundly. Since the divorce, she had settled into sleeping,

eating and taking long walks to regain some colour to her face. Her natural glow was gradually returning. I knew soon, suitors would begin to bother her.

“Also don't forget, the most important thing the prophet (pbuh) taught us was love. He was a family man, and he would want that for us too. Besides, love isn't just about you, it is about the other person. One who feels at home by being around you. What is more beautiful than that?”

“I am getting goose bumps now,” I joked. I wiped my tears and smiled at her. “I hope your man takes good care of you.”

“Oh, he will. I can't wait for you all to meet him. As a matter of fact, I am considering breaking the news to the rest of the family in Kaduna. How about we all have a change of environment and spend the rest of Ramadan and Eid there?”

“Oh yes, yes I would love that.” I said, already drafting a letter of permission in my head.

NINETEEN

I WAS DONE being a bride's maid, even if the bride begged. Who was I kidding? Mia's wedding was next, and I knew she wouldn't take no for an answer.

After Aysha's wedding, my body felt like wood as a result of the dancing, eating, stress and all. I had fun, not wondering if her marriage would last. I only had good wishes and prayers for Abdul and her, seeing how happy they were and how much they loved each other.

Eid al-Fitr was like none I had had before. Perhaps, it was my aunt's news or the arrival of my older brother, *Ya* Abubakar's baby, but there was enough laughter and love to last for the rest of the year. Not even my other aunts' pep talks or their disapproval at Humaira's decision could dampen our mood. For the first time, my dad intervened, silencing his sisters.

“Let these girls be. As long as they are happy and doing the will of God. The right man will come at the right time. Your pressure and long sermons don't help at all. If anything, you bore them.” He said, and took a long swing from his

bottle of *kunu aya*, disappearing into his room before they could recover from their shock.

I visited Habiba, realising I had missed her drama. I saw that in a way, she was similar to Sauda. Habiba would say hurtful things, but if I listened beyond the words, I would find out that was her twisted way of showing me love.

Immediately I returned to Abuja, I texted Sauda; I had to clear the misunderstanding because I truly liked her. And if she did not like me too, she wouldn't have felt hurt that I got into a relationship, howbeit false, without telling her.

“Coffee and Love, 5pm tomorrow? Please say yes. I miss you and we need to talk.”

She replied, telling me she had a function that evening, but would join me as soon as she left there. “Just know you are paying for my food.” She added, inserting a grinning emoji.

I TEXTED SAUDA when I arrived at Coffee and Love, and she replied that she was about leaving her function to join me. I calculated that it would take her twenty minutes, if she did not get stuck in traffic.

I ordered a plate of fries, scrolling through Instagram as I waited for her.

“Saba?”

I turned to see Zayn, looking good in jean trousers and a white shirt. He was holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a package in the other.

My traitorous heart began to pound.

“I knew it was you, but I had to sure.” He said, grinning as he sat opposite me. I smiled back, wondering why he was

smiling in the first place. With the way our last discussion ended, I had expected that he would pretend he did not see me.

“How was your Eid?” He placed his cup on the table and leaned back, as if he was the one I had been waiting for.

“It was fine.” I finally replied when I found my voice again.

“Masha Allah, but wouldn't you ask about mine?”

“How was yours, Zayn?” I relaxed as I observed his mood. If he wanted to play calm and friendly, I would do so too.

He grinned, displaying his dimples. “It was great. I got to catch up with my cousins. Asma and her husband came visiting too. She asked me to say hi to you, and that you should return her calls. She said you're terrible at keeping acquaintances.”

“Ouch. Well, she isn't wrong, but I promise, I am working on changing that attitude soon.”

“So, I guess you are waiting for someone.”

“Yes, I am waiting for Sauda.”

“Oh, wow. You guys are buddies again?”

“Sort of. I want to explain what happened to her.”

“Why?”

I shook my head. “You know she felt I betrayed her when she heard the rumour. She expected that because we are friends, I should tell her first when something major as getting into a relationship happens....well, even though it was a mere rumour.”

“I don't understand women sometimes, has it ever occurred to you that you don't need to explain everything all

the time? If she knows, then what?"

"Women tell each other, everything." I raised my hand to stop him from replying. "Don't even bother to ask why, it's just a thing."

"Alamin is my friend, but that doesn't mean I tell him everything. I only have to tell him what matters. I shouldn't have to officially inform him when I get a new car, or a new girlfriend."

"Having a boyfriend matters, Zayn."

He snorted. "It wasn't like we were going to get married, Saba."

I felt hurt that he dismissed the idea of marriage so. But then, what right did I have to feel so?

"It amuses me, how so insensitive you are. Aren't you bothered by what people think about you?"

"No matter how I behave, people will always have something to say about me. It is impossible to please everyone, Saba."

"I know that."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"No, don't Saba, you try to hide it, but it's written all over you. You live to please others, and you don't like it if someone isn't pleased with you."

I had never thought of myself like that, but one other thing I knew about Zayn was that he was judgemental, and to be honest, he was usually right. It was hopeless arguing with him.

"So, you are saying it's okay to yell at your co-workers and order people around like you own them?" I raised a brow at

him.

He chuckled. "I see, I yelled at Mrs Abebayo because she messed up, that was professional. I called Sauda out for neglecting her work, because it was her job, not yours or anyone else's, because she was getting paid for it. It is that simple."

"And what do you have to say about your attitude at Asma's wedding? You were practically ordering everyone around."

"I was doing my work, Asma and I grew up with my grandma. So I was typically like a big brother to her, and if I wasn't strict, everyone would have slacked."

He actually made sense. "Fine, you are right."

"I am beginning to think you had so much prejudice against me."

"It wasn't my fault, you had this arrogant look on your face."

He laughed, throwing his head back. "Or it was what you thought of me. And just so you know, even if you had asked then, I would have answered you. You were the only reasonable guest at that wedding."

"There was no way I could have talked to you. You were constantly scowling. And this was even before our 'small drama' at the reception." I replied. "And I even doubt it... didn't you just say you only explained yourself to people that mattered?"

For the first time today, Zayn frowned, lost in thoughts. "You mattered then, Saba. Just as you matter now."

My stomach did a tumble. I shook my head and cleared my throat. "*Err*..yes, Sauda was also mad because ...because

she was always rooting for us.” I stammered, startled by his blunt words.

He lifted his gaze to me again, and I saw that in my nervousness, I had steered him to an uncomfortable topic. He grinned again, winking at me. “Oh wow. I guess that’s why she’s taking her time.”

“I am sure it’s traffic, you know how it gets.”

He nodded and we fell into an uncomfortable silence. I munched on the last of my fries.

He took a sip from his coffee which would have gotten cold by now. I wondered why he wasn’t leaving. I stopped chewing when I realised I actually enjoyed his company. I wasn’t mad that he sat with me, or that he made up a story to court me. Unless I wanted to lie to myself, I knew a part of me had fallen in love with him. Zayn, with his attitude and all. I liked every bit of him, even to the tiny details like how he made an effort to know the true meaning of my name. How he turned on his friend to help Humaira. *I love him, I don’t love him.* I played over and over in my mind.

“I-”

“I-”

“Ladies first,” he bowed slightly, smiling.

“I haven’t thanked you for what you did for Humaira. I hope you did not do it because of me.”

He laughed and it was music to my ears.

“Ya Allah, Saba, you are getting way over yourself.”

I rolled my eyes at him.

“I could lie... but no, it was for the unborn child.”

Should I be disappointed?

“What if I told you to tell Sauda I still hope you and I

would end up together?"

My Aunt's words came back to me and I closed my eyes, fighting them. And then not fighting them.

"Just give us a chance Saba, if you say no this time, I am really going to think you have something on me because of what I told your cousin."

"No, please. It's not that, I have already told you that am actually grateful you told her. It's just... me."

"Then let me help you. I believe we can make this work together."

"Zayn, you say that now, but what about two or three years from now? We will be tired of each other. Look at what happened to your parents, my parents, Humaira, Rose. I don't think I am strong enough for that."

"You and I aren't like them; we could be different."

"That's what my aunt said, but I don't want fake hope, Zayn."

"It's not, if the prophet (pbuh) hadn't married Nana Ayasha, do you think he would ever find the love of his life?"

"He was destined to marry her."

"And what did God say about two people's destinies?"

I chewed my lower lip, hating that I had to admit he was right.

"Tell me, Saba." He grinned, knowing he had gotten me.

"That every soul has a destined partner."

"Right, the only way to meet your destined soulmate is what God didn't specify. It could be after a painful experience, but we know that, because he said all souls will be tested and only the patient ones will reap the full fruit of their labour."

I leaned back against my chair, studying him. I could hardly believe this was Zayn, using words like these, talking about love, destiny and God. I couldn't say no, how could I?

“Why don't you hate your parents?” I asked, changing topics. If I was going to date this man, I had to at least know what went on in his mind.

He shrugged. “I resented them as a teenager when I didn't know better.”

“What changed?”

“After their separation, I hated that I had to shuffle between my mum and my dad. I was five, they had both moved on, but it seemed I was a hindrance to their new life. They dumped me with my grandma and never came to check on me until she died. Those years were horrible. I felt like I was a mistake in their marriage, something that should not have happened. All this changed in my last year in secondary school when my classmate committed suicide.”

“Oh dear!”

“Yes, it was terrible. He left a letter, saying he wished his parents had divorced, instead of staying together. He couldn't enjoy life because of their constant fights. He hated that his friends had peaceful homes, even the ones with single parents.”

“That's so sad.”

“So you see, if they had stayed married, I might have ended up like him.”

“Sometimes, Zayn, I ask myself what happened to the love they thought they had for each other?”

“I wish I knew the answer to that, Saba. But maybe hurting comes with loving. And maybe, choosing to walk

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away or stay is also part of loving.” He took a sip from his cup and added, “I read somewhere that love isn't white or black or even grey, but it is however you choose to see it.”

I nodded, smiling. Listening to him talk with honesty, I realised in that moment that loving him and the idea of getting married wasn't so scary anymore.

EPILOGUE

THE HEAVY RAIN trickled to a gentle drizzle, but I did not trust August rains. I told Zayn it might start pouring heavily again.

“Don't worry. See, it's just light drizzles.”

“Okay, weather expert.”

We were going to visit my aunt, and Zayn did not like being late. I waited to lock the door, while he went to open the gate. As he drove out of the compound, the rain started heavily again. Even more than the first downpour. I burst into laughter when I saw the look on his face.

He came out of the car, holding an umbrella. “I will cry if you mock me.”

I laughed, holding him closer as we walked back to the car. “How long do you think we will last, Zayn?”

“Habibti,” his mouth curved into a smile as he looked at me. “We will do this till Jannah.” He leaned closer to kiss my forehead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT