

JAILBIRDS

Of

THE HORN

FATMA HUSSEIN

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Prologue

Before I took the blade
My insecurity was a masquerade
In a crowd of familiars
I whispered, I'm alone

Its time to let the curtain fall
Time to embrace my story
Try my best to settle my demons
Till I forgive myself

- Fatma Hussein

Contents

Prologue.....	iii
CHAPTER 1.....	7
CHAPTER 2.....	19
CHAPTER 3.....	33
CHAPTER 4.....	48
CHAPTER 5.....	65
CHAPTER 6.....	86
CHAPTER 7.....	104
CHAPTER 8.....	119
CHAPTER 9.....	139
CHAPTER 10.....	159
CHAPTER 11.....	180
CHAPTER 12.....	201
CHAPTER 13.....	219
CHAPTER 14.....	238
CHAPTER 15.....	258
CHAPTER 16.....	272
CHAPTER 17.....	287
CHAPTER 18.....	304





CHAPTER 1.

The *mu'azzin*, caller of the prayer, cleared his coarse voice to make the Adhan. He had summoned people for prayer every morning before the sun rose. His rasping voice disclosed his aging through time. One could only picture a map of wrinkles with a patch of sparse grey hair.

The last *takbeer*; part of the prayer calls the caller says God is great, woke Lucky up suddenly. She rolled out of bed, and made her way through the eerie darkness of her small house. The night had been cold, and the chilly winds licked her face making it numb. She couldn't bear the stiffness scaling for new territory on her body. Her room was a makeshift house famously used by the more impoverished immigrants in the refugee camp. It was made of unusual materials like polythene bags, maize flour sack that served as the roof to the grass thatched hut she called home. Two pieces of wood supported the house from being swept by strong winds and burying Lucky in it.

Her stomach growled, and she squirmed, trying to silence the howling. She felt as if her stomach sneered contemptuously at her because of her disregard. Her eyes glanced at the far corner of her room where the half bag of maize flour stood. The U.N had

recently been minimizing the food ration. Each person was given a sack of flour or rice to last them a week or so. Some of the refugees used these fixed amounts of rice bags and flour as a business venture. They sold their bags at a handful amount to the other starving masses with numerous mouths to feed. Such business bloomed throughout the refugee camps, and these individuals bribed their ways out of the camps to establish a new business in the city

areas. Hence, a new term was coined, urban refugees.

It was half-past five o'clock; Lucky made *wudhu*; a ritual of washing before prayers, with the water in the 20 liters jerrycan, which had previously stored the oil she used to cook with and reused it to store water. Briefly and silently, she grabbed the prayer mat and laid it on top of the Persian carpet. It was made of beautiful harmonious colors, a usual tight fine warp, filling yarns, and a perfect sehna knot to completion. Her Ammi was the one who bought it in Mogadishu, which was their previous resident before the battle royal. It was candidly the eye candy that nipped the eyes of any stranger from seeing the hand-to-mouth existence of Lucky. It was an aesthetic that, without a doubt, made Lucky value this vintage carpet that would be considered worth something with the current obsession over antique items. She felt a sentimental attachment to this commodity, and sadness would dominate her as she recalled with bitterness the profound pain of a knife stab to her heart by this so-called life. Death had been her obsessive friend that was fond of meddling in her happiness.

Steaming the mounts of thoughts out of her mind, she started the morning prayer. She preceded with the order of the prayer and concluded with the *salaam*, the ending, audibly. She began her daily supplication after her morning prayers. Often, she

reflected on her favorite verse, *remember me and be thankful to me*. (Quran 2:152) No words could describe the effects and scope of that divine grace. Supplications bought a sense of security and hope into her ill-fated life. Melancholy, she'd question her doomed fate, "could my middle name be depression? Living in a constant world of sadness like a flowing river, icy and cold."

She turned her head skyward and whispered, "*Allahuma antas salam waminka salam, tabarakta ya dhal Jallalli wa'ikram*." I seek the forgiveness of Allah. O, Allah! You are the king of peace, and from you come peace. Blessed are you, O Owner of majesty and honor. She paused and continued. "O Allah Forgive my parents and brother. Elevate their station among the guided. Enlarge for them their graves and shed light upon them in it. Amin."

Finally, the sun was rising; it filled the sky with the shades of a yellow tinge. The camp sunrise was breathtaking, unlike in the cities that she had heard and read about. It was beautiful chaos of shades after the darkest nights. The rays ignited new things to a new day, a comfort of hope, and new beginnings. For Lucky, today's the day that she finally concludes reading *a thousand splendid suns* by Khaleed Houseen. It was Saturday, and she wasn't supposed to go to the hospital where she volunteered until in the afternoon.

Accordingly, she passed her lonely days reading; books had been her solace from her distress of loneliness. She fancied herself as one of the characters who had undergone so much to emerge victorious on their own, and definitely not a damsel in distress. Despite being a restricted refugee who didn't have the authority to leave without a permit from the Kenyan government, her imagination ran wild through the words of Kenyan writers like Bivyavanga Wanaina, Majorie Oludhe, Meja Mwangi, and the rest. Her imagination took her far beyond the slopes of Mount Kenya to the coastline and on

Nairobi's streets before and after colonialism. She built up her perusal to the rest of the world. It became a touch of urban fiction, historical romances, and an over fixation on women's writings.

"Lucky? Lucky, are you in?" a voice called out from outside the hut.

"Yes, come in," she answered sternly.

A five-foot seven-woman emerged from the door. Her black skin was radiant and absolutely flawless. Her high cheeks complimented her full lips, and her hazel eyes would give her away in the crowd of people. She wore a dark chocolate *abaya*; a long outer garment worn like a dress and a taupe, black *jilbab*; a long garment worn from head to the knees that showed off her curvy figure as she placed her hands on her hips.

Unlike her friend, Lucky was shorter than average, her simplicity made her stand out. She had a caramel brown complexion, lovely thick brows with long lashes that made her eyes pop. Her face would be a cut fit of a Forbes magazine model who was trying on a natural look. She hid her petite body in oversized *dirac*; a long Somali dress that is loosely fitted and *abayas* that still hugged her body and exposed the protruding clavicle bones. It looked like the sternoclavicular joint would lose balance if she just as much coughed.

"*Assalam' aleikum*. Peace be upon you Lulu," the tall stranger said nonchalantly.

"*Waaleikum salam*. Peace be upon you too." Lucky replied with a smile.

"Naima is that a new *abaya*?" she teasingly asked.

"No, it's a tattered piece of clothing I stole from the two mad villagers, sewed it together, and viola I nailed it." She laughed hysterically as she continued, "of course it is brand new."

She moved closer to Lucky, who was sitting on the Persian carpet, which served as a multipurpose object. It was a couch for the guest and a study room for Lucky. "I had sent the old man, Shambure, who had traveled to Nairobi to buy me a gorgeous dress from the street vendors in Eastleigh. That airheaded man got me an *abaya* with a huge hole on the waistline and the bodice part. See this hole. How can he be that blind to miss this?"

A smile formed on Lucky's face; she ran her fingers across the now sewed hole, which still gave the impression of being brand new. "I love the fabric. It's not the fake and cheap fabric used by the tailors at the market." Lucky said acutely to mitigate how Naima was feeling.

"Hey, did you hear of Hafsa's situation?" Naima's voice rocketed from enthusiasm.

"Why what happened? You know I love your tittle tattles about everyone in Hargadera."

"Remember the guy she was romantically linked with online. I can't remember his actual name; I'm assuming its Shukri or a name starting with S. Anyway, she traveled to Nairobi to follow him, and they got married without her parent's approval. I remember talking with her, and she said that Shukri's wealth was the magnetic charge to her happiness. That love was an overrated emotion that doesn't exist." Naima ceased, her eyes had formed into bug eyes, and her facial expressions were mischievously deadpan.

Lucky's giggle turned into a peal of infectious laughter, and the girls brimmed into tears from the uncontrollable laughter. "If I had a penny from every time, I've heard that I would be bathing in my wealth," Lucky said with a scornful smile; she leaned towards Naima to hear more of the story that had captured all of her attention.



Naima took hold of her *jilbab*, the long garment worn from her head to the knees and wiped her tears with the edge of it. "A few weeks ago, she called her parents to tell them about what had happened to her after she arrived in Nairobi. Apparently, when her new husband had traveled back to America, he ghosted her. No communication whatsoever."

The suspense was lethal for Lucky; she pondered on the reasons as to why the man would have left Hafsa like that. She shrewdly asked, "didn't she know anyone from his family?"

"No! he never introduced her to anyone; they just met on Facebook. His mother was from Kakuma, so they formed a relationship because of what they had in common, they are both refugees you see. Seemingly he had planned to travel to Kenya for nostalgic and vacation purposes way before he started talking to Hafsa."

"Didn't Hafsa left here like almost eight months ago? Why was she silent all this while?" Lucky gave a sideways glance and a briskly looked at Naima in a quizzical expression.

"The guy had left her with five hundred dollars to cover the rent, and promised to send her more when he got home. Hafsa literally knew nothing about this stranger but only his Facebook account. They stayed together for the three months summer vacation that he came for. Now the girl got pregnant and has been in a women's sanctuary for the abused. She wants to come back to the camp, but she fears getting arrested because of leaving a refugee center without proper documentation. I pity her." The pitch of her voice fell.

"That is tough; it's the same circumstance with the other two girls from the camp, right? They were both duped by men from

overseas, all in the name of marriage as a means of getting out of here. I can't be that desperate."

Naima got up on her feet, stretched her upper body in static motion, and said. "Don't underestimate desperate people, you never know how far they would go to get what they want. Desperate people actually do desperate things to get by. Anyway, I need to go to the market Fartun hasn't been selling anything. All she does is flirt with the customers."

Lucky heartily waved goodbye as she exited from the old wooded door with loose screws used as hinges. The room had got more quieter without the baritone voice of Naima echoing. Lucky felt the loneliness slithering within her heart. She laid her head on the carpet and balanced her body in a fetal sleeping position. Her eyes surveyed the room watchful, and her thoughts took control of her. She remembered when she became acquainted with Naima. Friedrich Schiller had brought the two girls together as the result of their love for poetry. They bonded over their endearment for poetry in secondary school during a class discussion on the pronto Romantic Movement in German literature. Hence, a lifetime friendship was born. They had crammed the poem as a hopeful ignition. Their class teacher Mr. Chimbo had bought for them piles of books for the two bibliophiles. As soon as the school term ended as he traveled to Nairobi. He was in the quest of the best seller books from the roadside vendors who sold second-hand books. After their final exams in secondary school, hopes for further studies came to a shock still. Their zest to study literature seemed frozen and motionless for eternity. Lucky found herself animatedly mumbling her favorite poem.

*"We speak with the lip, and we dream in the soul.
Of some better and fairer day;*

*And our days, the meanwhile, to that golden goal
Are gliding and sliding away
"Now the world becomes old, now again it is young.
But the betters forever the world on the tongue."*

The alarm ringtone set off and perturb Lucky into reality. It was time to head to the HDF medical camp where she had volunteered for the past year. Her stomach was now vehemently growling in an interval of five seconds, making her realize she didn't eat dinner or breakfast, but time was scurrying fast, and she had to get there early. She put on her black *jilbab*, a long garment worn from head to the knees, a black *niqab*; a veil that covered her face except her eyes, and her beaded African sandals that had a small-scale outsole with multicolored beads on the straps. Her door didn't have a lock, but instead, she made sure the thin layered wooded door could close just a bit to prevent cats and the kids who lived in the same compound from entering. She still thought it was unnecessary to do so. She was poor. Poor as a pauper's pottage. The compound was made up of two houses enclosed by a long bundle of twigs dig deep, held together by woods placed horizontally, which were fastened with wires to hold it together. Lucky's neighbor was a lady in her mid-thirty with five kids. Her husband had several wives in the camp; Lucky could count the number of times the man had visited his wife. She pitied her for raising the children on her own.

When Lucky arrived at the medical camp, she noticed the tension among the workers there. In the waiting room, two nurses were engaged in a keen full conversation. One of them seemed to arch her brows, open her eyes widely, and dropped her jaw every time her friend whispered something in her ear. She observed how her dusty her sandal was from walking before she could flip them and dust them off. Rebeca approached her. Rebeca was a Sudanese

refugee who had to escape the ethnic cleansing in her country, South Sudan. She was an orphan like Lucky, but unlike Lucky, Rebecca's parents were butchered in front of them. Her younger brother was taken hostage and turned into a child soldier at the age of eight. Fortunately, Rebecca made it across the border of Ethiopia from Sudan safely. She followed groups of older men and women fleeing to Ethiopia on foot. They had walked for more than twenty days to arrive in Ethiopia, where they were directed to travel to Kenya for more assistance. Lucky teared up every time Rebeca shared her stories about the horrendous journey she took.

"Dr. Hank is missing since yesterday. Were you the last one to leave here last evening?" her dark chocolate radiant skin and her milky eyes conveyed grief and sadness.

Lucky answered in a confused demeanor, "no! I left James and Hank talking here in the waiting room after I finished moping their offices. What happened to Hank?"

"Nobody has heard from him since last night. The CCTV camera shows that he never went to his staff quarters. None of the patients saw him past 8.30 p.m. The patient in bed ten died last night because of no supervision."

Right then, guilt and sadness reigned over Lucky. She cupped her face in her hands. The patient in bed number ten was none other than little Mulki. She was a seven-year-old girl who had arrived in Hargadera with her mother escaping the drought in Somalia. She was severely malnourished. Her ribs obtruded, and each one of them was visible to be counted. All the veins on her bald head struck out, the body proportion didn't match the big head. The size of her arm was as tiny as a pin. Her eyes would substantially enlarge when Lucky held her. When she smiled Lucky's, heart



melted at the sight of the folded layers of skin at the side of her mouth.

Even though Lucky was just a mere cleaner at the medical clinic. She cared for the wellbeing of the patients, and they treated her like family. The clinic had given assistance to many refugees who had made their way in the camp, especially to women and children who were vulnerable to Somalia's civil war. Dr. Hank was from Munich, Germany, had become famous for the excellent management of the clinic. He was in his late fifty but behaved and talked like a teenager. Whenever he went to the market, the heads turned. He was the whitest person people have ever laid their eyes on. He was able to speak the basic Somali language with a Germany accent. He became a well-known customer among women.

“Why would he go missing?” After gathering all her thoughts, Lucky asked, "are you sure he didn't travel back to Germany?"

"Nop! His wife hasn't heard from him as well. She is scared that something might have happened to him. But I believe her; people are going missing here for the past few months.” Rebecca’s voice lowered, “The Al Shabab have started again. Targeting the foreigners."

Lucky shrugged her shoulders at Rebecca's assumptions, "we don't know yet. But this doesn't add up. A person can't just go missing out of thin air".

The two nurses sitting on the waiting benches listened to the conversation between Rebecca and Lucky. One of them sneered at Lucky for not saying it was the Al Shabab. Lucky was used to the negative attitude of the Kenyans workers. They were convinced every Somalis were in cahoots with the terrorist groups in Somalia. They seldomly interacted with the Somalis in the camp.

Consequently, she had learned to be optimistic through it all. She had learned from her deceased mother that one should always be nice to others no matter what happens in life. Being nice was not a weakness but a legacy someone would leave behind.

"How is the patient's mother handling the situation? I know she really loved her daughter." Lucky said as if in a fight for breath.

Rebecca took a pause then answered her back. "She has been screaming in Somali language, nobody has been able to translate what she has been saying. She called out your name a couple of times. Go check on her. She has been sedated and might seem drowsy, and while you're at it, please clean the vomit stain around bed nine."

The patients ward had white walls with parallel lines of dark blue on the upper part. The room was rectangular, and the bed was aligned on the sides, opposite each other. Lucky loved the fan on the ceiling because that was the only place, she could escape the extreme humidity of Dadaab. Between each bed was a window that lit up the room. Lucky would ensure that the windows were opened to let the fresh breeze break the melancholic atmosphere. As she walked across the room, she noticed that only two people were in the ward. The patient's name was unknown, she was famously known as the patient in bed number nine. According to Dr. Hank, the woman had several underlying conditions that made her discharged and admitted several times. She had vomited chunks of food she had had for dinner. But before Lucky could clean it, she had to check on Mulki's mother. She was sleeping, and as soon as Lucky ran her fingers through her hair, she instantaneously opened her eyes. She was frightened. Her face had turned into hot coal red. A single tear crept out of her eyes; her jaws trembled as she cried softly. The sound of her wails was heard in all corners of the

hospital. Torrents of sympathy coursed through Lucky as she held her in her arms.

She was choking on her own sobs and mumbled inaudibly, "Lucky, they killed my baby. They murdered my baby and took my happiness. I have nothing to live for now. Those good-for-nothing scoundrels were the cause of my daughter's death. They took away the white doctor who would have saved Mulki. What do I do now! May Allah kill those self-absorbed ingrates. May they suffer what I have gone through." Her deep emotion had stirred her verbal outlet as she spilled more tears on Lucky's shoulder. "They first took over our country and turned into their battlegrounds. Countless children dropped like flies because of hunger. We fled to get away from that scorched earth. Yet, they followed us in another country to break us even further more..."

"Hush *hooyo*, hush. Go to sleep, *hooyo*." Lucky said. She held her close to her chest and rocked her gently. "Hush hush, my sweet *hooyo*. My sweet mother."

Lucky understood the pain of losing a beloved one. Nobody had held her like that when her mother died. They didn't show sympathy but rather hurt her with their parting words like,

"you're a big girl, don't cry."

"Pray, and you'll feel better."

She hoped that she could make life better for every refugee in that open jail. "What a doomed fate!" she thought.





CHAPTER 2.

Lucky's traumatic experience was the nightmares of her mother's death. She relived that day after holding Mulki's mother. Her soul was sheathed in every detail. She could recall the smell the room emitted, the fetid smell. The angel of death tasked with pulling out the *ruh*; the soul, took pleasure in the torture of mama Sara. The crowd that had gathered outside consisted of sadist and altruistic. They both rejoiced in the family's misfortune and also helped selflessly.

"*Inna lillahi wa-inna ilayhi raji-un.* To Allah we belong and to Him, we shall return," they'd say repeatedly.

Their words did not console Lucky, for she knew her mother *ruh*; soul was not yet separated from her. She was, therefore, alive as a vision of life to be. The women probably suffered from a real *schadenfreude* condition, hence needed to be medically diagnosed.

That day became a poignant reminder of the sad reality of Lucky's life. It had been five years since, but the day's details remained as fresh and photographic as it occurred. The woman on the death bed didn't resemble her mother. She was frail and kept trembling; her skin color had changed and had become

unrecognizable. Her almond-shaped eyes were then sunken, and the eyes sockets obtruded its outline.

A few months before, she was a healthy and happy widow who loved and treasured her only daughter. Her husband had died of a stroke, and the doctor's results indicated that he suffered a fatal hemorrhagic stroke. A rapture caused excessive bleeding in the space area between the brain and the tissue that covers the brain. No one understood what that meant, they only understood that he died. He was found 65 meters away from their homestead. He had collapsed and died within minutes due to the rapture that caused a lack of oxygen and blood flow. It was *maghrib*; evening time, and people had either gone to the mosque or were locked away in their houses for security purposes. His body was found by young children returning home from a soccer game. His temple was bleeding due to the fall he underwent. His chin had cracked open, and the mandible chin was visible. He was buried the next day after *duhur*, the afternoon prayer.

Mama Sara undertook the task of washing her dead husband's body as she was required by the Islamic law. Lucky harked to that day when she saw her father's body wrapped in plain white cloth. His hands were cold, lacking the warmth of life. His face was a map of injuries, but it seemed painless to him then. That was it. The day she met death, and their forged friendship bloomed.

Mama Sara was a strong-willed woman despite losing her husband, she believed hardship only made her stronger. She had to persevere it all just to provide for her daughter and secure a promising future for her unborn child. She worked all sorts of jobs around the camp; she was a one-woman band. As a shopkeeper assistant, the shop owner paid her in terms of commodities she'd use at home.



Her husband, Farah, held such intense dreams and values for lucky, dreaming big and always figuring out how to make them real. He made her brand-new tailored uniforms when some of her classmates had one pair of tattered uniforms they shared. He was passionate about Lucky's education and dreamed of her succeeding in life. In fact, Lucky's favorite memory of her father was when he picked her up from school all through the lower primary. He would carry her on the shoulder all the way home. They'd play I spy with my little eyes, and her father would thoughtfully make her win. Mama Sara was determined to hold on to her husband's strong ideologies that would contradict their culture. That meant female circumcision and arranged marriage were not on the table. She, therefore, became resilient, independent, and adaptable.

Lucky's parents had an arranged marriage as everyone did. Mama Sara was only fifteen years old, and Farah was twenty-five years. In their culture, parents believed marrying a girl off as soon as they hit puberty would offer protection and reduce the daughter's economic burden to the family. They would save on clothing and educating a girl. Families arranged such marriages with people they knew and trusted. The marriage ensured the girl's financial security and reinforced social ties between the tribes and families.

Before earning the title, mama, Sara being a fifteen-year-old girl, was an enthusiastic and meticulous lass. Mama Sara shared her life story with her daughter every chance she got. Lucky got to profoundly understand her mother. She was a warrior and her conquering hero. Her mother grew up with six brothers; she had developed a tough skin to their stubbornness and dominance. She was the daughter of the first wife; thus, she was expected to conduct herself responsible for her siblings and actively help the other two wives with their chores. The whole compound consisted of three

houses, made of red bricks and a corrugated iron sheet roof. They all shared a pit latrine and a bathroom constructed further away on the left to keep off the flies and odor. The compound was enclosed with an iron sheet slate fence half surrounding it.

Lucky was intrigued by her mother's family. She enjoyed the vivid description of her grandfather's house and her uncles and aunts she had never met. She admired the large families in the camp, and it felt unfortunate she didn't have siblings to fight and play with. Her father didn't have more than one wife like the rest of the men in the camp. That was deemed unorthodox by the Somali men who had a maximum of four wives. This didn't make her father feel inferior. He was unduly devoted to the intimacy he shared with his wife. When he was questioned about his nature to remain with one woman, his response was that he had a fearful apprehension about unrequited love. This became a fugitive ideology that Lucky later learnt.

She took pleasure in listening to her mother's story. They didn't own a television; that was a luxury they couldn't afford. Therefore, Lucky's childhood was a savory relish of stories. Her favorite was about her parent's alliance and their escape from Somalia. By the age of ten, she would narrate the story on her own using the precise words of her mother. This made mama Sara reluctant to delineate the story but let her daughter do it. She always thought that Lucky improved her Somali language through the exaggerated narration she did. Lucky used to wear her mother shawl and hold the candle next to her face to imitate her mother. She'd deepen her voice to capture her mother's attention from serving the food. That memory was a bittersweet kind. Her parent's marriage dwelled in her mind. Would her father have set up her marriage like her grandfather did if he were alive?

The day when Mama Sara got married was unforeseen. Lucky had questioned the circumstance of the day consistently. Whenever her mother told that story, Lucky interrogated her to every detail of the day. As she reminisced about her mother's memory, she recalled the story of their parent's marriage in her disconsolate state. The unforeseen day that brought the two most lovable people together.

Sara had a morning routine of waking up exceedingly early to make breakfast and then got ready for *madrassah*, the Islamic school. The only day she overslept was the day her life made a turn unexpectedly. She rushed to the shed where they cooked; all the firewood was damp. She definitely knew she would get late.

Her father approached her, "my daughter, you don't have to go to the *madrassah* today, and your mother would prepare breakfast today," he lovingly said.

Thoughts flooded her mind as she convinced herself that her father was sarcastic. Had she landed in hot water today? "Okay, *Aboo*," she replied in sheer confusion as she walked away.

The youngest of the wives had a newborn baby, Sara contemplated that day might be the perfect day to bond with the family's newest member. Sara sauntered into the Hafsa's house, she tiptoed to where the baby was. The room had a beguiling décor that was famously made in the 80s and redesigned with additional information. It all looked foreign to Sara, she pondered that Hafsa might be the most spoilt of the wives. Her own mother never possessed such items; all she had in her name was the jewelry she got as her *mahr*; her dowry. But they never allowed the green-eyed monster to fracture their family's bond. All the wives loved and respected each other but behind closed doors, it was all different.

She loved the smell of a newborn; it was intoxicating as she got a sniff of the new baby's head. "Welcome to the madhouse," she whispered. The baby slept next to its mother on the big wooden bed. The mother had used pillows as a barricade obstructing him from falling.

Suddenly there was a simultaneous babel of voices in the compound; Sara couldn't make out who was talking and what the tumult was outside. Avoiding to wake the two who were peacefully

sleeping, she quietly made her exit for the door. She was awestruck by the assemblage of people in the compound.

Outside Hafsa's house, she could catch a sight of the strangers, and she couldn't make out who any of them was. Was there a party that she was unaware of? The crowd gave the impression that they were preoccupied with various tasks. The women kept rushing back and forth from the kitchen shed. The men sat on stools outside the main house. They had formed a circle comprising of middle-aged men as they drank tea from the small ultra-clear cups. The bustle of activity gave the compound a carnival atmosphere. The women held on their large cooking pots, a much older lady was stoking extensive woods in the fireplace and set it ablaze. Sara was confused as a soul heavy laden with the trouble that will not depart.

On the spur of the moment, she spotted her mother talking to one of the guests near the kitchen shed. Like a shot, Sara walked towards her mother.

"*Hooyo?*" She called her; her voice was breathy.

"Yes, Sara, where have you been? Oh Lord! I've been looking for you for the past hour."

"I am here, *hooyo*. But what is going on?"

She placed her right hand on Sara's shoulder, "I need to talk to you. Listen to me carefully, go to Hafsa's house, and avoid any interactions with anyone. Do not leave the house until we've talked. Okay then, go, and I'll get you something to eat as well."

At a fast pace, she marched towards the youngest of the wives' house. Hafsa and the baby were awake, sitting on the couch. She took off her shoes at the door, "*Assalamu Aleikum*. Peace be upon you pretty mama," she teasingly said.

"*Waaleikum salam*. Peace be upon you too. Come and hug me. I barely see you nowadays. You've been absorbed in *madrassah*. Sara wrapped her arms around her and gently rubbed her backs. Hafsa's hugs were warm and felt motherly Sara enjoyed it every time.

The house looked resplendent when the curtains were open to let the sunshine in. The floor was covered with emerald PVC carpets and in the middle stood a custom-made coffee table and on top was a mauve pink vase with a red plastic rose in it. The couch was a 30-inch yellow and pink floral upholstered sofa. The bedroom was separated from the rest of the room by a metallic gold curtain door. All of these items were imported from the famous Paloma bazaar in India. Her husband, Sara's father, was a businessman who traveled far and beyond. Sara thought that Hafsa was born under a lucky star to have all these ravishing things. No one in the whole Baidoa city possessed a wind-mere 2-speed table fan and a radio cassette boom box. If she could sell all these items in the Bakara market In Mogadishu, she'd be quid in with cash flow.

While they were casually sipping tea, which Hafsa had made. At an accelerated speed, Sara's mother made an entrance carrying colossal white shopping bags. She placed them on the table and sank down on the couch beside Hafsa. They nudged each other and slightly nodded their heads telling that something's cooking. Hafsa had glossy skin with no wrinkles, unlike Sara's mother, who had deep trenches of wrinkles that could probably hide a coin. Hafsa's set of dazzling teeth flattered her wide smile revealing her delightful personality. Sara's mother didn't probably own any teeth since she had never seen her laugh.

She faced Sara, who was holding the baby in a cradle position. "You've grown into a bold and self-reliant young woman.

The time has come for us to give you to man, responsible enough to take off our precious little girl." She took a long breath before continuing as she observed Sara, whose eyes were widening, and her eyes moved down and closer together.

Hafsa glanced at Sara's mother and soldiered on with what Sara's mother wanted to say. "I was merely fourteen years old when my father married me off to your father. It's part of who we are, our traditions that must be observed. Marrying you off to this young man will improve our community's social status, and we'll be establishing a new social bond. He'll offer you protection from the shame of being a lady. Your father has selected him from the countless suitors who want your hand in marriage. His name is Farah, and he is a diligent *Ustadh*, an Islamic teacher in Mogadishu. Today is your *nikkah*; your wedding thus the large crowd outside. The ceremony has already taken place at the masjid ul-Nur, and your father, as your guardian, said yes on your behalf."

"U...mmm, pardon me, *hooyo*, so you're saying I'm technically married?" Nervously she asked her mother, interrupting Hafsa.

Her brown eyes filled with tears were gleaming in the sunshine. Most of her friends at the madrassah had got married off as soon as they spotted their first menstrual period. They were considered a ticking time bomb; therefore, marrying them off was the solution at hand. She knew her time would come, but did it have to be that soon? The thought of leaving her family shook her up.

"My love, you'll always be the most treasured person in my life." The endearing diminutive that her mother used only in the most intimate of situations. She wrapped her hands around her and pulled her close, a gentle reassurance that all will be well.



The series of events succeeding after this went without a hitch. The women folks gathered around Hafsa's house, danced, and celebrated the new union. Little did Sara know that this arranged marriage would turn into a tranquil relationship full of love and tranquility until they both die.

That was the last time she set eyes on her family after moving to Mogadishu. Mogadishu was turning into a perilous combat zone between warlords. The notorious militiamen were mercilessly looting and killing people on the streets. In the early 90s, a massive number of people started escaping the city areas. The nation was in turmoil, and rape was an epidemic. Farah was in constant fear of something terrible happening to his newly married wife when militiamen broke into people's houses. Nobody was safe. With certainty, he knew that a country without a government would lead to everyone trying to seize power, and such as the consequences when Somalia was later known as the failed state. By the end of '91, as people started to run for it in the neighboring country, Farah wanted his wife safe and unharmed away from the madness. Therefore, they made a run for it, out of Mogadishu. An alluring city full of history was then a blood bath caused by Aideed and Mahdi's power struggle. Starvation and diseases were arising and mostly affecting children, and all their pleading for food fell into deaf ears.

Farah used all his savings, and with the help of a smuggler, they were to be transported to the border between Somalia and Kenya. They traveled by road in an old dusty Plymouth Sapporo. The journey was tedious, and they would hide along the way because of dangerous bandits. They arrived in Liboi town; a small border town located in the northeastern part of Kenya. The UNHCR used this town as a checkpoint for the fleeing Somali refugees. They

had set up tents for men and women as they waited for assistance. The town was dusty and hot with no infrastructure but only a few houses with corrugated iron sheet roofs. The shrieks of children crying echoed, and the faces of thirsty people melancholically stared at the sky. Some of the groups had walked from Kismayo, and some had escaped death threats concerning their different political stands. After being screened for diseases, the refugees were given water and transported 78 kilometers to Dadaab. Farah and his wife became one of the first five hundred plus registered, and their fingerprints were taken. They settled Ifo camp and later in Hargadera where Farah started his own *Madrassah*, Islamic school for children of various age sets.

Lucky had got home after consoling Mulki's mother at the clinic. She didn't do much of her daily work, so the doctor in charge paid her half her daily wage. The entire day the clinic was swamped with U.N consulates after Dr. Hank was proclaimed missing. The U.N and Germany's government had issued a public statement about anyone having any information regarding Dr. Hank. The hospital staff were questioned one after the other. The atmosphere of the clinic was gloomy, and everyone asked the same question. "Who kidnapped Dr. Hank?"

The official who was investigating the case was discrete to do an interview with Lucky. His questions were presumptuously inclined to disclosing that Lucky might have had a hand in the disappearance of Dr. Hank. He was a Caucasian man with a small mole on his upper lip. He dressed his thin body in a black suit, which had a Germany flag pin.

He'd multiply ask the same question, "You were the last believed to have seen Dr. Hank. Where did you people take him?"

He would pretend like he didn't hear Lucky's answering him, "no," and his mouth twisted into a side placement, creating a crease in the cheek.

"When you murmur like that, it shows that you know something, little girl. You sound guilty. Do you work for Al Mujaheed? What about Al Shabab? Or is it Al Qaeeda. I assume it's even ISIS?"

His accusation tone didn't burden Lucky. She was as innocent as a dove but guilty in their eyes for being a Somali. Nevertheless, they disclosed to the staff at the clinic that they had got another lead regarding the doctor's whereabouts. But he reminded everyone that they were still suspects until Dr. Hank was found.

The day that had started well off was metamorphosed into her living nightmare. Her food had depleted, but her stomach was used to the little it got; nevertheless, it didn't matter. Her encounter with death took possession of her recollections. She had been walking in a garden of memory the whole day.

She placed her body on the thin mattress supported by the narrow steel bed. Despite her attempt to block that day death took her mother; it was still vivid. Her mother's final moments were woeful. Her breathing pattern alternated between loud rasping and quiet breathing. Lucky stayed alarmed by her side. All she could do was hold her cold hands and wipes the sides of her mouth with a damp cloth.

Just two days before at nine a.m., her mother had given birth to a corpse, and by the afternoon time, his *Janaza*, his funeral prayer had commenced. Before she could even grieve, she started to experience heavy bleeding and trouble breathing. She remained quiet about her deteriorating health until Lucky noticed the large patch of bloodstain on the bedsheet.

Lucky rushed through the dusty pathway leading to the KRCS health clinic. She striated home with a doctor who quickly administered IV drip and morphine into her left arm as soon as he located the veins. He cross-examined mama Sara who was far gone by then. She had suffered from amniotic fluid embolism, where the amniotic fluid got into her bloodstream, resulting in massive blood clots. It would have been life-threatening to move her in such a condition.

By the end of the day, she was labeled as idiopathic and likely to die. When it reached two o'clock, her mother was no longer speaking or awake. Lucky could hear her mother periodically breathe, followed by no breath for several seconds. Lucky had had

the most horror-stricken seventy-two hours; she knew she was about to break down after all that but she remained strong for her mother's sake. "Have I become tragedy puppet in the game of life?" She thought to herself. Her situation right then felt unreal, she had lost her baby brother and was on the verge of losing her mother.

Mama Sara's skin has changed to a mauve tinge and had sweat drops on her face. The nurse checked her, there was no pulse. She was no more.

The imam who had sat on the left side of the bed beside mama Sara broke the silence in the room, "*Inna lillahi wa-Inna ilehyi raji-Un*. To Him, we belong and to Him, we shall return" Lucky held on to her mother's hand. Her pain burned into numbness. She buried her face in the mattress; all she could hear is her own heartbeat and the flowing of blood in her veins, which was freezing to ice. The crowd outside the house walked in and swarmed all over her. Closing her eyes, she imagined herself taking her last breath and joining her loved ones in the next life.

"Take me away, Allah!" She murmured in agony.



CHAPTER 3

Naima being a millennial, took to action her open-mindedness regarding everything that surrounded her. She occasionally awakened her dogmatic slumber by asking deep questions that probe profoundly into thinking. She believed the people around her were imprisoned by the culture that they framed into religion.

From a tender age, she questioned her parents and the neighbors in apropos of the female circumcision, early marriages, neglect of children after divorce, and the male chauvinism of Somali men in the camp. She couldn't comprehend the meaning behind some of the practices; hence she audibly criticized it as unpleasant to the neighbors and even her family. They severely excoriated her as an ill wind full of venom and animosity. In addition, she was condemned as ignorant and empty-headed. Her family repeatedly told her that she had managed to besmirch the family's good name in the camp. She discerned that she lived in a society that was not ready to break their ego's shackles and allow criticism and critical diagnosis and that was why they flaunted the word *haram*; prohibited, everywhere.



At the age of eight and a half, she underwent female genital mutilation done by an elderly woman who was their neighbor; she lived just across their house. She had lacked the necessary surgical instruments to perform the procedure. Therefore, she used a razor as an indispensable item. The pain was excruciating, and as Naima tried to move, her mother and two other women grabbed her by her wrist. She gave loud, piercing cries expressing the grave infliction of pain but her mother at best gave her a cloth to bite on.

This tradition was passed down from generation to generation and was socially accepted. They believed that it pinched in with hygiene and preservation of virginity. As a Somali girl, she was required to maintain her virginity until marriage. Naima felt like she mentally suffered as a result of this brutality. As an adult she pondered if the practice was as great as constructed, “why didn't they ask her for her permission? Shouldn't women join forces to better themselves rather than maltreat and take their womanhood?” The questions took over her when she was alone. She carried on as dumb and discreet to the countless questions gushing in her mind. Several years after her friendship with Lucky bloomed, she confided in her concerning her fanatical ideation of a Somali culture that wasn't vile towards curiosity but rather questioned some things.

Naima's story traced back to a particularly small nameless village in Kenya's northeastern part, where she was born. In the year nineteen ninety-seven, the drought had severely affected this pastoral area. There was low milk yield from the livestock, which contributed to hunger and malnourishment. Diminishing pastures and water sources weakened the pastoralists' cattle stocks. It became impossible to sell the weakened livestock, but most manage to sell

them for a reduced value. The limited humanitarian aid had put a strain on Naima's family.

At the peak of that drought, having suffered a significant economic loss, Abdirahman, Naima's father, decided to move to Dadaab and pose as a refugee to acquire the privileges offered by the U.N and other humanitarian aid. Posing as a refugee for these pastoralists came at the cost of losing their citizenship. This is because once their fingerprints and photos were taken; they were recognized as refugees fleeing the civil war in Somali. As they lived as nomads for most of their lives, the importance of acquiring the Kenya national identification card was viewed as unnecessary.

Her father used the money he got and settled them in a *mabati*; iron sheet house. Such houses were considered one step ahead of the shelter given by the U.N. Being a refugee was better than living a nomadic life of extreme poverty. The various humanitarian aids in the camp catered for the lives and the condition of refugees. For Abdirahman, he was then at peace with free education, free healthcare service from the U.N, and a possibility of being relocated abroad with his wife and eleven children. But he soon short-lived his fantasy. It was like a lottery, and the fortunate souls were selected to live abroad leaving the rest rotting in the camp's misery.

Therefore, Naima grew up in the core of Hargadera camp and attended the local school, Hargadera primary school. At the age of ten, the deity of love, cupid, shot Naima with the golden arrow when a boy she had never paid attention to in their class said hello to her. Even though he was only ten, he talked and behaved maturely for his age. He was a fully grown man in a child's body. Naima became infatuated with Ali. After school, she'd look for a pretext to chat with him.



"Mr. Musamba makes mathematics sound fun." She said promptly

"Yes, he makes the class lively. He encourages me to want to pursue something to do with pure mathematics." He said in a warm tone. "Anyway, I can't seem to recall your name." Nervously he continued, "Was it Me... or A..?"

She was automatically stunned by the question. "Actually, it is neither of those letters. My name is Naima, well the only Naima in our class. You said hello to me a couple of days ago, I thought I was unforgettable." She discernibly snorted.

"I am so sorry, Naima." He broke the silence mellowly. "I don't know many of the girls in our class and even in our school."

"It's okay, are you from Kenya or Somalia? How long have you been in Hargadera?"

He chuckled nervously, "you really do ask a lot of questions. Do you know what happened to the girls who ask a lot of questions?"

Nonchalantly she smiled at him, "they get answers?"

He burst out into cachinnation laughter that he was trying to suppress, and the laughter became contagious. Years later, he would use this trick in their worse moments to make her laugh. They had a tête-à-tête until maghrib talking about the most intimate things. Realizing that there was no soul in the school compound, they decided to go home. They walked home five feet apart to avoid the judging eyes of the old men and women. Naima had a photographic memory of that evening with Ali. Firstly, because she had formed a new friendship and secondly was what happened to her after she got home late.

Her mother waited patiently outside the house with an exasperated expression ready to lunge at her neck. Naima was

required to dash back home after school to assist her pregnant mother in cleaning the house, taking care of her siblings and also cooking dinner for the family. Naima didn't come up with an excuse; she was still in trouble whatever she would say. The lashes on her buttocks that night were eased up by the joy in her heart.

Naima always anticipated going to school early to catch a glimpse of Ali. She thought that he looked dazzling in his white shirt, red sweatshirt, navy blue trousers, and tight black shoes. He had long silky hair that he styled in a tiny bun. Perennially, the school warned him of keeping the long hair. But even after a haircut, it would grow back at an accelerated rate. Therefore, the administration became insouciant towards his long hair. He was biracial; his grandfather was from Yemen, who had settled in Kismayo. On that account, his skin color was a recognizable café au lait. This half-caste was neither recognized as a Somali nor Arab. After having had to concede, the camp people acknowledged them as Somali due to their competency to speak the language.

Naima became a sentimental daydreamer about her emotions towards Ali. Notwithstanding, her fantasies of him were distinguished by the sudden reality. Ali was moving to Canada with his family. They had gotten asylum there. The news was circulating through the school that Ali was leaving that day.

The lunch programs at the school were provided by the various humanitarian aids in the camp. Their mission was to cater to the necessary children's right to nourishment, which they said was essential in their development. The food provided was usually *githeri*, a mixture of maize and beans, which was found to be passable, and during events, they would surprise them with moreish rice and stew. As a tradition, students ate lunch on the school

compounds in groups of five or more to offer moral support as they finished swallowing the half-cooked maize grains in the *githeri*.

Naima sat under a big acacia tree alone because she dreaded social interaction and would rather eat alone. A crowd had formed outside class six doorways that grabbed the attention of the rest. Naima espied that it was the boys in their class that has encircled around someone. It was Ali. He gave high fives, bro bumps, and buddy embraces as forms of goodbyes. He started walking in the same direction towards Lucky at a whirling speed. His tight shoes made squeaky sounds, and he would make strut pace in the swept brown soil.

"Hello Naima, you know why I'm here?"

"Yes, to end our friendship. After all the crazy things we talk about, our friendship comes down to this. I'll say goodbye if you promise to bring expensive gifts and try to keep in touch."

"For my own sake, I'll do that. Now that I'm leaving, you won't need to go to a mental hospital looks like you are on the road to sanity again." He said teasingly.

"There's a possibility I might need one; your temporary absence will be boring." They laughed harmoniously in a stentorian voice, followed by a silent, awkward moment.

"See you friend and take care of yourself."

"Bye."

He walked away and shielded his eyes from the scorching sun with his hand. It rarely rained during the January~ February dry season, and as the dust devil was vertically forming, Ali ceased to be visible. As the bell rang, her feelings and emotions wholly dissipated into zilch.

Time is a flowing river—a sly thief with deceptive currents that carry us regardless. As time went by, such was the state of affair

with Naima, who had a partial memory of Ali. The harsh reality of leaving that open jail she called home became unfeasible after high school. She, therefore, helped her mother in the market to sell camel meat and grocery. She offered her assistance to cut and measure the customers' meat quantity as her younger sister Fartun smiled at the customers as an after-sale service. The market was made up of shops and people who displaced their items on the ground to avoid paying rent for the shops. Naima's mother didn't have a shop, but a grocery stall that had a border separating the different groceries and a metal on top that had hooks for hanging the meat. Naima abhorred the noisy environment in the markets. That wasn't the life she had hoped to have after finishing high school with such good grades. The women selling *dirac*, long and baggy Somali dress, would scream the prices to customers buying shoes in their opposite direction. Their noises were like a piece of rhythmless music. They would use English, Somali, and Swahili to everyone who passed near them, "welooocome, *soo dhawow, kaaaribo.*"

In the afternoon she spent her days at home doing the house chores while her mother managed to sell the meat. That meant by evening, her energy was sapped by the various daytime activities. The electricity in the camp was regulated for specific times. It was turned on from seven to eleven p.m., a suitable time for Naima to charge her phone. At night she scoured Facebook pages and profiles; this was a habit she had developed to fall asleep quickly. For a week, she had ignored to accept a friend request from a particular individual with whom they did not share a mutual friend. She decided that night would be the perfect time to act detective and know who the stranger was.

In an edgy way, she double-clicked on the profile of the stranger. The profile picture was a motivational quote by Duke

Ellington. She continued to stalk the stranger scrupulously to the necessary information about him. He worked as an accountant in Vancouver, BC, Canada, and that day was his birthday. A myriad of several people had posted on his wall wishing him a happy and blessed birthday. Suddenly after accepting his friend's request, her phone vibrated, and there was a pop-up Facebook message notification from the same account she was examining.

Was the psychiatrist of any use during my absence Miss Abdirahman?

An opulence of happiness got a hold of her as she grabbed her phone. She placed her fingers gently on the keyboard. *I am keeping sane for the sake of the presents and gifts you promised you would come bearing. How long till thee return?*

She sat upright on her bed, placed a pillow behind her to support her back. She clicked on Ali's saved photos. He had a total of a hundred and thirty-seven photos, but the recently updated photo captured Naima's attention. Ali had posted a photo of him wearing a sleeveless t-shirt in front of a 36 x 60 ultra-clear mirror. He had become almost unrecognizable within a span of nine years. The photo was black and white, and it delightful gave focus on his strong muscular biceps. Naima cleared her throat in response to what she just saw. She scowled down to the comment section. The picture came across as alluring and captivating for women to like and comment on. This came as a dull ache for Naima, and she drew a childish conclusion anent to what she just saw.

There was another notification from the same account. She double-clicked on it.

I come bearing gifts, gifts full of smiles, and hugs, which I am sending to you virtually.

She deleted the conversation, and as she was about to switch off her phone, another Facebook notification was on the bar. *With the grace of God, I can communicate with you online. Which is better than nothing? I noticed that we are both on the Hargadera news community group. I finally gathered the courage to message this account, half-hoping and praying it was you.*

She wanted to reply promptly to save time. *I wondered what would have happened if you had texted a different Naima Abdirahman with your weird question. She would have thought that an insane man was texting her.*

Well, you can call me a mad man looking for his friend.

Naima laughed out loud and shook her head. Suddenly, there was an alert low battery notification. She cut off the conversation with a sayonara, which left Ali a bit reluctant to end the conversation. She switched off her phone and placed it under her pillow. The room was dark and silent, it was half past midnight, and sleep pulled her eyelids, and warmly embraced her immensely.

The very next day was the seventh-day wedding party celebration for her younger sister, Fartun. It was a women's party celebration for the bride known as the *shaash saar*. It involved the elder women placing a silky pattern scarf on the bride's head. It served as a symbol of respect for the newly wedded woman. It denoted that the girl was now a married woman who had earned recognition in their community. Naima shifted her focus from Ali to make her sister the cynosure of all eyes that day. Fartun had been married seven days before, and Naima was skeptical about the new in-law. He was a middle-aged man married with two wives and several children. This did not dishearten Fartun, for she knew her feelings towards this old man were purely platonic. They had met in the market near their mother's meat and grocery stall. This honey

tongue led to flirting, which brought forth their marriage. Even though her parents were at odds with marrying for the sake of love, they became lenient in the view that the old man was with deep pockets renowned in the whole Ogaden community in Kenya.

Fartun arrived home and changed into a *guntino*; a traditional Somali dress with a red and gold decorated border. It was tied over her shoulder and draped around her waist. Her neck was adorned with a beautiful gold-plated three-layered necklace that harmonized with the gold-plated loop earrings. All her jewelry was compromised as part of her *mahr*; her dowry. Naima had not seen her sister for a whole week; she keenly observed her sister. She was glowing. Fartun's elation altered Naima's perception of her brother-in-law. For a minute she thought that maybe she had judged him viciously as those quintessential Somali men who had a fondness for pursuing young girls.

The iron sheet house had two bedrooms and a living room. The rooms were separated by white bedsheets, which served as walls and doors. The girls sat in their room quietly on the bed, waiting for the ceremony to commence. All the eleven children shared that bedroom with a single bed of six by six and a two mattress with a clear dry urine pattern. The room effused a damp smell and a sundry of the urine, but the girls were used to it. Fartun looked uneasy and decided to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Naima, on my wedding day, you didn't seem thrilled. I am not trying to antagonize you by bringing this forth. But you are getting on my nerves. You look lifeless and somber. For Pete's sake, are you envious of your little sister getting married before you? That would really give a clear view of your spiteful tongue toward my husband which I must say I don't like it."



Naima was dumbstruck by what her sister had just said. Her words were like the potent venom of a Sydney funnel-web spider that squashed all her minuscule residue of her self-esteem. "How could you make such allegations against me? Don't you have respect for your elders?" She said in an angry high-pitched voice.

Fartun clenched her jaws tightly, lowered her perfectly shaped eyebrows together, forming lines between them. She gazed directly at her sister without uttering any words for a few seconds. "Respect is earned and not demanded, my dear sister. I assumed that you would have accompanied me to my house after the wedding to help me run my household. Yet you didn't lend a hand to your younger sister."

Naima felt a cloud of shame was cast above her. Melancholy, she gathered her courage and gave voice to all the thoughts on her mind. "I swear to God; *wallahi*, I thought that you didn't require me to come and help you out. Your bridesmaid had perspicuously said that you needed them more than anyone else. Another thing that happened was that the older women like edho Fadhum at the wedding were making cynical criticism. Their comments dreadfully made me downhearted. How could such grey-haired women talk and think as thick as two planks? I hate it"

Fartun moved closer to where Naima was sitting, and she thunderously let out a forced sigh. "A fool's mind is often a frequent change of viewpoints, and surely the prophet peace be upon him said, the worse of people is those who have an interest in other's fault. Let them judge and criticize us. You don't have to prove anything. Naima, there is a huge generational incongruity between the older generation like edho Fadhum and us regarding what explicates the right time to settle. Well, the older generation joined in matrimony in the form of arranged marriages. So, my dear sister,

understand that these old folks are philistine to changes, especially on the twentieth-century wave on love and marriage. I might have got married before you even though I am much younger, but without a doubt, *Allahu Allam*; God only knows. You have big dreams to achieve, unlike me, a class three dropout. Naima, I am a hundred percent sure that you'll make it big *inshaAllah*; if Allah wills."

Their mother interrupted their conversation by bagging on the window as she pointed on her wristwatch, indicating the ceremony was about to take place. The girls rushed out of the house to the compound to receive the guest. Lucky was one of the first guests to arrive, and it delighted Naima that her best friend would make the ceremony livelier.

A U.N tent was laid in the small squared compound supported by the thorny acacia tree. It was decorated with beautiful wildflowers plucked from the bushy forest located on the Far East part of the camp where they collected their firewood. Women had gathered inside the tent, clapping, and dancing. Two women melodiously played the *Baraanbur*; a traditional poetry accompanied by drums. During wedding festivities, Somali women went all out to look pretty. The women wore glittery *dirac*, Somali dresses that matched perfectly with the *gorgorad*; the inner skirt. Since it was a women's celebration, some did not wear the *garbasaar*, the long scarf, and showed off their beautiful long hair.

Lucky and Naima were tasked with serving food to the guests. The food was nothing short of ostentatious. Fartun's husband had ensured that he'd finance every bit of the ceremony no matter the cost. Even though the *shash saar* was a small event, nothing was held back. They slaughtered and prepared a camel and seven goats to feed the guests and neighbors. Rice, biriyani, and vermicelli were cooked in plenty and accompanied by cold hand squeezed mango,

lime, and avocado juice. The food was served on large plates, and the guests ate in groups of four.

After the scrumptious banquet, Fartun was escorted inside the tent by her mother. Naima steadily admired her sister, who looked graceful and alluring. After their earlier conversation, Naima knew her sister was highly intelligent, and it gave her peace of mind that she would take care of herself wherever she was. Fartun was guided to a chair in the middle of the tent, and two women playing the drums uproariously amplified their voices to praise the bride and the guests. The seventh-day event commenced, and one by one, the women placed the *shaash*; the silky scarf on Fartun's head, and dropped the wrapped gifts next to her. The singer praised each individual and sometimes made a humorous tease at some of the women's gifts.

The event came to an end as the upper limb of the sun disappeared below the horizon. Naima was assigned to sweep the heap of trashes tossed all over the compound. After that, she hauled her heavy feet inside the house to make the bed for the younger siblings to sleep. It had been an exhausting day for everyone, and she tossed herself on the bed next to her two younger sisters. It was at half-past eight o'clock, and everyone had slept. Her younger sisters had slept in a starfish position occupying the whole bed, and they snored in a systematic tempo. Naima squeezed herself between the two of them. She felt the thickness of her phone against her chest. She grabbed and switched it on without delay. Her father had bought it for her after a prosperous camel trade that had earned him a bountiful profit. As soon as she switched it on the network mobile data, her phone vibrated hysterically from Ali's numerous message notifications. She clicked on it and noticed that the last message was an audio note of about a few seconds.

I thought that I had gotten used to my daily schedule up until we communicated via Facebook. Miss Abdirahman, you are driving me insane. Woman, you gave me sleepless nights; all I could recall was our last memory together nine years ago. It was one of the best moments of my life, and not being able to talk to my friend was an awful punishment. You cannot fathom how much I've missed you all this while. I'll be coming to Kenya during the summer break, which is in about four months. I'll be delighted if we could reacquaint during my trip, inshaAllah; if Allah wills.

Naima clicked on the audio to pause it. She reflected on how Ali's voice had got deeper yet very audible. His accent became intriguingly different and nice to listen to. She clicked to continue listening.

There's a possibility that my family and I will travel to Hargadera for a few days. Before then, I'd love to communicate with you over the phone.

Naima scowled through all the text messages, and ceaselessly, she found herself listening to the audio note. Listening to his voice had rekindled the old feelings that she tried to conceal all that while.



CHAPTER 4

At Abdirahman's household, every child had a chore to take part in. Naima was the oldest girl and was presumed to undertake every single household chore. She got the younger children ready for *madrasah*; the Islamic classes every morning, washed their clothes, cooked, and cleaned. Her mother would tease her that she would make an ideal Somali wife. She had all the qualities that men were looking for. She'd hint that she had found a suitable suitor for her who was from their tribe. Naima detested when her mother talked to her about such stuff. She wished she could boldly tell her to stop with loads of baloney, but she didn't want to be called disrespectful and called a devil's child. Her mother repeatedly would say, "nobody wants old fruits. They don't have the same taste as the fresh ones."

The suitor's identity weighed on her mind on months end after her mother had told her that. edho Fadhum, who used to say that Naima suffered from logorrhea, was the one who informed Naima about the suitor who was interested in her. This woman's mouth had singlehandedly destroyed several friendships and marriages because of her gossiping habits. It turned out that the suitor was Abshir, a man old enough to be her father. She couldn't

comprehend why her mother would think she'd accept that God-forsaken ill man. He was always with the wrong company eating khat in the market, and he rarely prayed. She perceived that her mother was trying to get rid of her. She had become a burden to her for not getting married. She had stopped low enough to choose Abshir. A grotesque creature allegedly accused of being a pedophile but since it was a shameful thing in their community, the whole incident was brushed off. Even if he's the last man on earth, she would promise herself to never say yes to his proposal. No matter what her mother had up her sleeves, Naima knew that her father would object.

It was a quarter past two o'clock, Naima had finished sweeping the compound with a venda grass broom. The afternoon sun wasn't as friendly as it looked in the semi-arid areas like Dadaab. The heat had a vigorous intensity that people preferred to stay indoors. Sweat droplets on her nose looked shiny and glossy as they ran down her face onto the brown soil. She wore a dark brown *dirac*; a long Somali dress that is loosely fitted that had a red flowery pattern and a long red scarf. Sweat had soaked into her clothes, making them visibly damp. She would pause to fan herself with her hand, but it didn't seem to cool her off. On the squared compound's right side was a small thorny acacia tree that marked a neighbor's boundary. That tree served as a hanging area for the wet clothes that Naima had just washed.

Naima picked up the heap of dirt and disposed of it in the dug-up corner full of trash. They'd set it on fire after the pit was full or had a foul odor. She retired to the bedroom, where she grabbed a dusty A5 spiral notebook underneath her bed. The house was silent as a grave. The youngest of the children were sleeping on the mattress laid out beside the bed, and their mother had gone to the

market. This tranquil atmosphere made her yearn to write on the notebook she considered her journal. It had been long since Naima had written a letter to her future self. Writing gave her a license to talk and advise her future self. No topics were off-limits. It gave her the ability to live in the infinite number of realities her future self might have lived. In high school, she won the best writers award set up by the Philips Education of Australia. That was when she thought of pursuing English literature in a university like her favorite teacher.

It had been a melancholic journey for her to join university. Her father's new business venture that he had started working on failed terribly and the people he owed money to take the motorcycle and the food stall he had established in the camp. This had put a strain on their financial mean. He still promised to enroll her as soon as he got back on his feet. As the days went by, it felt like a dream to Naima. Like a neck-racking lucid dream. She wanted to sound genuinely calm and supportive to her dad, but on the contrary, deep down, she felt like a book missing the last chapter. Books with no ending, blank just like my dreams.

Higher education would be beneficial to her and Lucky. It wouldn't matter if they were still confined in that open jail, they called home. But at least with education, she thought that they'd have the power to give back to the community they grew up in. Education was the predominant force to uplift everyone in their camp. Everyone deserved to realize their full potential and succeed in all scopes of their life. Her dream was to start a school in the camp, which would cater to the refugees' higher education. It felt unfortunate that only two higher education scholarships were offered to the first two students who went to Canada. Even though the rest of the candidates like Naima and Lucky had obtained good

grades that could grant them entry to university, they were ignored. They felt like parasites that even the Kenyan government didn't recognize that they did the Kenya National Examinations. Some charity organizations offered certificate courses to the refugees who had finished their high school level, but this was entirely training individuals for cheap labor. Not many followed through with it. After finishing their secondary level, most became form four levers.

The families with means were able to send their children to study in Nairobi at affordable colleges. One of the famous residents of Haragdera was Yonas, Silver fox, who had several shops in the camp. He was an Ethiopian refugee but became a successful entrepreneur. He had started off by digging pit latrine for people settling in the camp. Later on, he engaged in buying the refugee bag of maize ration and reselling it at measured quantity. With the profit he made, he set up a shop that sold fundamental necessities for use. Yonas was an uneducated refugee; nonetheless, he had the willpower to educate his children.

His older son had scored the 'C' grade; hence Yonas made inquiries to some Kenyans who worked in the different humanitarian aids on information to do with computers. His son was fascinated by computers, and he was always known to be in the cyber computer cafe that his father had recently set up. Through the help of the Kenyans working in the camp, Yonas had gathered much information about which colleges offered affordable and recognizable I.T. courses, the price per semester, and how to get grants from private donors and organizations. He was determined as a child to learn to ride a bike. He traveled to Nairobi with his alien I.D. card and registered his son at NBI College. He organized where he would reside with one of his friends who had got out of the camp for a better and improved life. Yonas son was a few years ahead of

Naima; everyone in their class had become motivated that one of them had gone to Nairobi to study. For a moment, it had felt like it was all of them who had succeeded. Teachers would use Yonas' son as an excellent example for hardworking and motivated the class to be like him.

By then Naima discerned that money moved mountains, and that why Yonas son was able to fulfill his dreams to be a computer wizard. Naima was enduring this unpleasant phase of her life that was down on her luck. She might have lived in this state of penury, but her dreams were as big as life, and she still holds on to the thought of studying and having a career to create their open jail to be utopia and not the fire and brimstone they were used to.

The young children had arrived with a tumult of playful chatter that thwacked Naima to rush and prepare tea for them. The kitchen was adjacent to the house, having an iron sheet affixed with the house's iron sheet. In the middle were logs of firewood the children had gathered from far. The UNCHR had provided a stove as an initiative to reduce firewood because of the dangerous events that occurred when people would go across the land in search of firewood. But they rarely used it once the paraffin had depleted. The firewood was reliable, even though it was time-consuming. The kitchen shed was small enough to fit one person. The cooking pots were arranged on top of each other on the ground, covered by plastic bags to avoid the soil from spoiling them. The iron sheets had changed to pitch-black from the smoke of the firewood. Naima tore the milk carton steadily, powered the milk in the steel cooking pots, then poured petroleum on the woods and set it on fire. When the woods turned red, she used the handwoven handheld fan for the fire. She sat on the kitchen on a Somali stool known as *gambar*, made from a cow's hide as she fanned the fire.

The children laid out a mattress outside near the thorny acacia tree; the two older boys played with their handmade wire toy made from copper wire and fake the wheel was recycled bottled caps. They navigated the car with a stick in the middle. The boys got creative because no one would buy them an actual car toy. They also solely made a toy made out of wire and an old bike wheel and played around the camp with it. As soon as Naima finished making tea, their mother arrived. Her face gave an account of anxiety. She was used to playfully hold Zeituna when she got home. Watchfully, Naima observed how her mother lay on the mattress quietly; She assumed that something must have been wrong with her.

The only time she had seen her mother in such a condition was when Jibreel ran away from home. Jibreel was the oldest child and their parents' favorite. He was a high-spirited lad who was always with the wrong crowd. His friends were comprised of small-time criminals who stole from people's shop and fought almost each and every day. It was a daily routine for them. The more he was around them, the more Jibreel started to conduct himself in their shadow. Bad friendship like the ivy, decays and ruins what it embraces. Jibreel eventually incepted into a bad apple that was rotting without anyone's knowledge. To call him violent was an understatement. Abdirahman had occasionally thumped him with his fist for hitting a nine-year-old and for stealing. Their mother called the sheikh in the camp famously known to perform *ruqya* prayers, an exorcism prayer. She believed that her son had been cursed, or someone had cast an evil eye on him. Her acts bore no fruits; her son was far gone. The selfish lad who had purloined the family's heart was allegedly reported to have run away from home and head to Somalia to pledge allegiance to Al Mujahedeen.

Everything went topsy turvy for the family's reputation. His friends recruited him to the terrorist group by promising him a great future away from *fitna*, the worldly temptations. Al Mujahdeen was ostensibly linked to Al Shabab terrorist group and that they carry out any terrorism group and carry out any terrorist act for their counterpart's sake. Their family name was then placed on the list of the terrorist families on the Kenya Government's watch. Because of that, the family had been denied asylum in different countries. The Kenyan Government wanted them to be repatriated to Somalia with the other families causing trouble in the camp.

Her mother gave a steely stare at the children playing in front of her. Naima pondered on how her mother had turned into a hydra dragon of menopause. "It is why she looked lifeless? Being a woman is confusing," she thought to herself. Her father unbolted the gate, opened it a little, and peeked through the gap to attract the children's attention. Naima observed mindfully how the kids wholeheartedly were cheerfully around their father. The older boy was frazzled around Abdirahman; Mohammed, who was close to Jibreel, was believed to have been influenced by ideologies; he had followed in his footsteps little by little. He had got into trouble at school for calling one of his classmates a *kaffir*, someone who doesn't believe in God. He smashed the boy's rosary into pieces and told him that he had the power and authority to kill all *kaffir* and send them to hell. Abdirahman gifted him with whips, battered him with a shoe, and everything he could get his hands on.

"*Assalamu Aleikum*. Peace be upon you, Naima," her father called her and waved at her with a smile.

"*Waaleikum salam Aboo*. Peace be upon you too." she animatedly replied, bringing herself back to reality.

The children had swarmed all over their father when they discerned that he had a plastic bag with candies and biscuits. "Wait, wait, don't act like deranged children, I have a whole lot for everyone. Naima, is the tea ready?"

Her voice shot up, "Yes! I am pouring it in the thermos; your milk is ready.

"Thank you so much, my daughter, we are having a special guest over today who will be staying with us for a long time."

The children, in a cordial manner, asked, "*aboo*, who is it?"

Abruptly before he could respond to their questions, there was a sudden bang on the metal door outside. Mohammed dashed to open the gate, but Abdirahman stopped him. "I'll get the door, go and get the mat and set it out here for the guest and the children." His voice rose as he addressed Naima who was still sitting on the stool sieving the tea in the thermos. "Naima, bring the tea and cups for everyone, make sure you serve the biscuit on a plate."

Naima nodded in agreement. They all darted to get everything ready, and within no time at all, everything was set in place, and the guest was ushered in. All the children sat on the mat quietly as they inspected the guest standing in front of them. Abdirahman gestured to the guest to sit in the formed circle of the children. Naima poured tea for her and for her siblings. "*Shukran*; thank you for the tea." The guest told her.

Abdirahman sat next to the guest who had come with a suitcase. "How long is she supposed to stay?" Naima thought. The girl seemed to be the same age as Naima or a few years older than her, but she knew that she had seemed to be in the same age bracket as her. Her face was gaunt and grey. Her eyes protruded out of its sockets, making her look like the ghost of a bloody Mary with shaved eyebrows. She wore a red mahogany scarf and a black abaya.

As she sat on the mat, her feet were exposed. They were dusty, the nail of the little toe had rotten with fungal. Her heels had cracked with ugly heel fissures. It appeared that the skin around the toes had turned green. The only pleasant feature that she possessed was her smile, but it got out to shun by the large pimples and acne on her cheeks. She had clearly attempted to bleach her skin that left her with an unfortunate side effect. On the side of the forehead, the blood vessels had become visible. Parts of her face had turned dark, and her skin was flaky.

Abdirahman broke the silence and the stress of the children, "so let me introduce you to this guest. Her name is Habiba; you can call her *edho*, aunt Habiba. She is here to join our family and help your mother to raise you all. Consider her your younger mother. I want you all to respect her; she is your mother, hold her in high regard as you do to your birth mother. Be good to her and listen to her with politeness. You are all good children. I believe that you will be good." He halted and took a long breath from talking so fast.

He introduced each and every child to Habiba, and they shook her hand, making them blush. Vaguely did they know that hell was now loose in their house. Their heavenly sanctuary was being bulldozed to ashes. Naima took the suitcase to their bedroom as a welcoming gesture to her then stepmother. Her mother had sat on the sofa as red as bull's blood jealousy scribbled on her face. It was difficult for her to hide what she was feeling toward the situation. Her anger was boiling; the fires of hatred were sparking in her eyes at Naima's sight with the guest's suitcase inside the house.

"Look after the kids tonight, I'll be sleeping at edho Fadhum's house tonight." She told Naima as her voice was breaking.

With her *gabsaar*; her long scarf she used it to tie baby Zeituna on her back. Zeituna balanced her sleepy body flawlessly.

Naima admired the immaculate innocence of Zeituna on her mother's back. She yearned to be her for a moment. Her mother grabbed her jilbab and covered Zeituna who still in a state of siesta. She fleet-footed out of the compound, Abdirahman stood up confused as he crossed his arms across his chest in bewilderment. Naima cudgeled her brains about why her father would marry a second wife if it had made her mother uncomfortable. Naima felt discombobulated and embarrassed in front of Habiba for the rest of the evening.

When Naima's mother got back home subsequently after her two-week departure, Naima became cognizant that her mother's gloominess was more than just sadness. After taking a trip down memory lane, she recalled the after-school program on health education that lasted only a week. They discussed the different types of mental health issues and ways of tackling them. The program was to assist children from war to cope with the change they were undergoing but it never helped any child at the school. The more her mother tried to subdue her fears and insecurity, sharing her house with another woman, the more she looked defeated and depressed. She didn't move for days or even eat. The sub-Saharan culture, including the Somalis, does not recognize depression as an illness. Many believe that depression and anxiety are a figment of their imagination. If one felt unexplainable sadness for a while that a person had a frail faith in God. Depression and anxiety were unquestionably the least of problems of most people in the camp therefore Naima avoided asking her mother about it.

The younger children became scared of Habiba, their mother fabricated stories to them about Habiba. She'd say, "stay away from that witch, she has cast a spell on your father. Her face looks like that because she is not a human being; she is a *jinn*, a

spirit. If she gives you food, then you'll die. Do you want to die?" As ridiculous as Naima thought her mother's tactics were to drive a wedge between the children and Habiba, she unconditionally stood up for her mother when Abdirahman scolded her. She was on the verge of chasing Habiba out of her matrimonial home when she called Habiba a plague and called several sheikhs in her presence of Habiba to perform *ruqyah* to remove evil and black magic that is causing harm and misfortune in her marriage. The incident provoked Abdirahman; this was the utmost kick of mockery.

Consequently, his resolute was to move Habiba to another house. He regretted the day that he bought his younger wife to live with his first wife and children. His aimed to concoct a happy and loving family under one roof, and as the saying goes, a home without a woman is like a barn without cattle, but a home with two wives is like two Nubian Ibex interlocking horns in a duel.

Eventually, things altered back to the norm around their homestead. Abdirahman would spend more nights at Habiba's house, making their mother angry as a vengeful rattlesnake. Fartun's arrival at home seemed to soften the blow of her husband's favoritism. After all, her favorite daughter being at home would keep her mind off everything. Naima was as pleased as Punch to see her younger sister in one piece. She had been out of reach since leaving Hargadera. Her phone was switched off as soon as she called them to say that they arrived safely. Her husband had later called to inform them that Fartun's phone had been damaged.

Then with her sister was in her presence, she wanted to catch her up with all that happened. "My sister, you missed one of the most epic dramas of the century." She snapped into a giggle and high-fived Fartun.

With bright eyes and bushy-tailed Fartun asked, "what happened? What did I miss?"

"So, the old man took on a younger wife and decided to bring her home," Naima replied in a buoyant mood.

"Why did *aboo* want a second wife? *Hooyo* and *aboo* were in a good place when I left." Fartun said, puckering her lips.

"Nobody really knows what happened." Naima scrutinized her sister closely; her sister had lost a noticeable amount of weight. Her henna gave her radiance as pulchritudinous as the silver moon.

"Where is the woman now? What happened to her?" Fartun asked to break her sister's gaze at her.

"Is that even a question Fartun, she was chased away by *hooyo*. You missed the whole event just a few days ago. Anyway, why do you look like you've lost a great deal of weight? Aren't they feeding you in Mandera?"

Fartun stood up from the mat set outside. Her strong perfume pummeled Naima's nose, the scent was a strong sandalwood scent, and Naima liked it. She remembered her father's warning about young girls wearing perfume; it was strictly forbidden. They were allowed to apply it only when they got married. As a young girl, she had applied a small amount of perfume without her mother's knowledge. Her father came home unexpectedly, as she was serving him tea, he seized hold of her *gabsaar*; her long scarf, and sniffed it. She was thrashed across her legs with a stick for her disobeying nature. After that, she never attempted to touch any perfume or even let the *unsi*; the incense, to leave a fragrance in her clothes.

"Don't get married, Naima, men are a bunch of drama-seeking beings. Musa smashed my phone into pieces for texting a few friends while he was talking to me." She bent her knees and

moved them outwardly. She placed the right foot on top of the left, and after a silent observation, she continued, "that flea has got a horrible temper. He slapped me for taking back at him. But what was I supposed to do? He was yelling at me for a small issue. I know that I am hot-headed, and he's a typical male version of me. So, we do get on each other's skin."

Naima was appalled by what she had heard; her sister sounded considerate towards her husband's behavior; she found her leniency eccentric. Naima had always thought that her mother was blinded by Musa's wealthy status, and she didn't think twice about his character. Fartun was a child bride, and as much as she avoided confronting the monster in the room, it made her sick to her stomach. She felt like her sister robbed herself of the chance to grow and realize herself well.

The more they talked, the more Naima couldn't bear but feel like Musa had ruffled her feathers for abusing her sister. Fartun was dependent on Musa. She disclosed to Naima that she was in a pragmatic love marriage; he used her as a sex object, and she enjoyed the shiny objects in return. After her return to Hargardera, the family members consistently asked her, "are you pregnant yet?" She would calmly riposte, "no, I just ate, I am blotted."

But as she opened up to her sister, Fartun revealed that she felt like she was not physically and psychologically prepared for motherhood. She had been secretly taking birth control pills offered in a private hospital in Mandera. She kept it a secret because their community was against it and was debated as *haram*, prohibited. Fartun was the four-leaf clover that Naima needed; during her visiting period, their mother was distracted, but as soon as she left, her mother's frustration was again fixed on her. She was forcing Naima to say yes to **Abshir**.

"I am your mother; I know what's best for you. Abshir's family is well off. His family members are abroad and earning good money. Look at your younger sister, I coaxed her into saying yes to Musa. Look at her now; she has a piece of beautiful jewelry. She seems happy so I trust my words when I say that I know what's best for you." Her mother had told her from a young age that love between a girl and a boy was *haram*, prohibited. It was a lie and a myth. Therefore, she grew up with the notion that love is an immaturely superficially feeling.

To put an end to her mother's badgering her over the same thing, she said that she would think about it. She had previously thought telling her mother that she would think about it would buy her time until her mother found something else to fixate over. But her mother seemed to have misunderstood what Naima had said. She was assured that Naima was halfway convinced into accepting Abshir.

She told her, "you have made a good decision. I am so proud of you, Naima. You are going to be a wonderful wife and really happy with Abshir."

Naima found herself sharing the possibility of being forced to marry Abshir with Ali. The issue had troubled Naima day after day; Naima talked with Ali; their friendship became as solid as a rock. They shared the most candid, intimate conversation that made Naima feel safe to express her thoughts clearly without the fear of criticism.

Regarding Naima's trouble, Ali had told her, "parents aren't always the easiest to get along with. This means that they're not always right but according to our religion and culture respect to our elders since they're of the utmost Important. The fear of getting cursed is petrifying, and we trust authority without using our

common sense. It's really good that you said no to the proposal even though your mother is unsentimental. Naima, if I am honest, the thought of you with another man is infuriating. It's like a new open wound that someone is piercing a hot blade in it, but my cold blood is apathetic. From the first time I met you, the joy, the tenderness, and the light that emanates from you are more than enough and more than many long generations. You are a gift I would never take back; reconnecting with you made me realize you are my friend that my heart craved for. Every time you laugh over the phone, *hayati*, my beloved, it is different. No word is perfect enough to describe it. I've reached a new level of madness...my...only a few days I can't wait to meet my friend."

As clear as pearls and diaphanous gems, his words hugged her like a happiness blanket pouring warmth and affection on day's end. She was not often used to feelings taking over and dominating her with endless closeness waves and regard. His caring affection was a positive transformation that lightened up her broken parts. It might have been love or not but for her, it didn't matter she was happy. She tried to squash her infectious happiness, hoping that her mother wouldn't notice. But her mother noticed her laughing at the oddest of times and when the donkey owner brought over water to sell to them Naima smiled at the donkey owner until he felt uncomfortable.

In the evening, her father called Naima and her mother for a serious discussion. All the rest of the children were sent away to play. "Haleema, I've heard that you want our daughter to marry Abshir. No. No. No. Don't deny what you were trying to do. You clearly know that man is not good for her. God give me strength." His eyes fell down and raised his gaze at Naima, "and why didn't you tell me all that goes on around here. Are you her goods to be

sold to anyone? Why didn't you tell me you namby-pamby?" His voice shot up and terrified Naima. "So, you think you are the man of this house, Haleema I have had it with you. First, you sold our daughter and I said nothing. Then you chased away my wife whom I had told you before marrying her, if you would be okay with it. Your response was yes. Now you have crossed all boundaries by selling this one to Abshir without having the audacity to tell me. That fool Abshir is boasting to people at the khat stall that he has managed to seize one of Abdirahman's daughters for a wife. Get this through your thick skull, the categories of men like Abshir will never be my son-in-law. My daughter will marry someone of her choosing. Someone religious and of good nature criteria. She is not a transaction commodity neither is she a walking shame for good riddance off because she is a woman. Stop acting as we live in the old times. I am over and done with your manners, I don't have the energy to play with your games anymore. This is unsalvageable. *Khalas*; that's it. I'm divorcing you."

Naima looked at her mother with her mouth wide open from the surprise of what her father had just said.

Her mother was still in shock; tears burst forth like a river. She shook her head in disbelief. Her body trembled from the heavy breathing. Her tears glimmered from the kerosene lantern used for lights.

"*Aboo*, you can't do this." Naima pleaded.

"Shut up!"

Naima stood between her parents. She cogitated that she was her parents' root problem and that was why they were getting divorced. She stared at her father then at her mother wondering what the future held.



CHAPTER 5

In the summer of 2007, Ali and his family arrived at Vancouver international airport with no luggage but a bag full of their refugee documents. They had lived in the Dadaab camp for a few years before gaining asylum. They moved to Hargadera when Ali was seven years old from Kismayo, a port city in Somalia's southern Lower Juba province. Ali was born during the ongoing civil war in Somalia and he had partial memory of Somalia as a young boy.

During his childhood, he distinctly recalled his parents listening to the BBC news. The news reporter mentioned the word refugee several times over and over again. "What were they fleeing? Who were these people?" He vaguely reminisced being told not to walk alone and to avoid playing after-dark hours. His friends had moved away without anyone's knowledge and not a single goodbye. He knocked on his friend's house, but no one answered. Their awe-inspiring houses looked like graves, quiet, and dead.

The remaining chips of his childhood memories were during the period young men walked with guns. Ali thought that they looked spectacular with the Ak 47 strapped on their backside. He set his young heart into getting one as a toy, he innocently asked

his father to buy him a gun, and his father got vexed with him. "It is not a toy. I don't want to hear any more of your nonsensical tantrum anymore," he had warned him.

When they went to the beach, he noticed people with skin that didn't resemble theirs. "Who are these creatures?" He thought. They all wore the same clothes with hats that looked like bowls of food; Ali thought they looked chucklesome. Their guns didn't resemble the ones that people carried everywhere or had in their house. Their cars were enormous in size and could maneuver through the beach sand at an easy pace with its unusual flexible tires.

On the radio news, people said that Aided was their true leader. Then the endless shooting sounds went off until Ali had got used to it. The shooting became the least of his parents concerned they talked in hushed voices about clan cleansing. But Ali couldn't comprehend what they were talking about. He constantly eavesdropped on his parents, and he would ask his older siblings about it, but they shunned him away. His father worked in the Alliance of The Somali Forces; he was a trained military man. Prior to the departure, their father warned them about stepping outside. He had demonstrated to them the response if there was shooting and if an explosive was thrown near them. The whole procedure was entertaining; he felt like Rambo after he had watched it with his older siblings.

But when the bomb went off out of the blue near where they were playing, he became aware that he was no Rambo, and that was an actual war. Everything in that moment was in slow motion. His body was flung by the explosion. In an attempt to open one of his eyes, the ringing in his ears escalated. At the corner of his eyes, he saw a puddle of blood and his ally's body. His torso had been

blown open by the blast; he was one step nearer to where the bomb exploded. The other children playing had regained consciousness.

Ali had disobeyed his father's orders by playing outside; after he was taken home, he knew that he would get punished but instead, their parents started packing their clothes in a single suitcase. Their father had told them, "we are leaving our home to a much safer place, while we are in the truck don't make noise. If someone asks you anything, say that we are poor farmers, and if someone arrests me, don't call me your father."

Their father applied crushed charcoal on their body to avoid intercepting unnecessary attention from their lighter shade skin color. The Abubakar family was packed like luggage with other families fleeing the war in the khat truck. They hid underneath the khat sacks; the smugglers didn't allow them to have a stopover during their journey, and by the time his family arrived in Kenya, most of their limbs were non-functioning. The smugglers left them 300 kilometers from Hargadera camp.

They say home is what you make it besides, home isn't a physical settlement but where the family is. The Abubakar family were in their new country, the third country they had been to. At the Vancouver airport, the agency had sent an employee to pick up the family; he held up a boarding the visitor bay saying, '*welcome home, Abubakar family.*' That still didn't feel like home; Ali felt like the idea of home was cavernous than what most people thought, just like every other refugee.

Their apartment was a three-bedroom house in the housing projects in the downtown eastside. It was a big grey building with shattered window panes, the houses with window panes had placed newspapers to lessen the cheap glass from shattering. It was downright ugly. Outside, the building seemed as though it was on

the verge of collapsing, but inside the apartment, it was welcoming to the eyes with bright yellow hallway colors. Each door had its welcoming mats with exquisite-looking vases that had a variety of plants. Inside their house, the wall was decorated with portraits of beaches. The living room had a single retro square arm sofa with lamps on both sides. The master bedroom had a sleigh bed with built-in closets. The other two rooms had a metal bunk bed placed against the walls to allow the rooms to be spacious than it actually was. The windows had translucent beads that were metallic in color. Ali and his family's minds were blown that people lived in houses that had a toilet inside. In the camp, they shared a latrine toilet with several other people.

Their new houses had machines they had never seen or heard before. When the agency personnel explained how to operate the washing machine, the family flummoxed and were speechless. Ali volunteered to do laundry for everyone just to gain an understanding of how to manipulate the machine. This memory teared up Ali from laughing as he got older. People said that living in the Eastside was a disaster because it was poorly underdeveloped, but to Ali and his family, that was Buckingham palace compared to the living condition in the camp. He wished everyone in Dadaab had a golden opportunity to live in a house with water within their reach and a fridge to fill their leftovers. He wished that the people there had electricity that wasn't rationed but was a finger away from the light switch.

In Somalia, their grandfather had built a bungalow for them in Kismayo in a wealthy residential area. News reached them in the camp that their house was raided and seized by the militia. It was later bombed by the terrorist group operating in the area. Their

family legacy laid in ashes like many refugees; they didn't want to go back and see how their lives had been robbed.

The state required the new arrivals to be financially independent. Meaning that they had to look for work. The state had provided monthly upkeep until the family could get back to their feet. Ali's mother found a job as a cleaner in a hotel, and Abubakar, through the agency's which ensured their transition in the new country to be easy, secured him work with a famous eminent trucking company that dealt with a variety of sectors. He got employed as a garbage loader.

One day he was beaten up in Kitsilano by college students who were drunk in the early hours of the morning. Notwithstanding what had happened, he thrived on challenging circumstances; he took on extra shifts to save money. Ali couldn't hark back to the point he had seen his father relaxed and smiling. He became a consent of the fact that his father had sacrificed all that he had to keep them alive in Somalia; he, therefore, respected him more than anyone. During their interview with the UNCHR in Hargadera, his father had narrated that the Alliance forces had wanted to assassinate him because of his clan. They had labeled him as a spy of the Americans to put a target on his back for the militia. He disclosed that Ali was almost killed because of him. The group was dedicated to assassinating his family and him.

The first time Ali and his family went shopping was at a thrift shop. As a young child in Dadaab, he didn't have many shirts; he would walk shirtless around the clock. They had to stomp on top of each other when the UNCHR brought clothes. Now at the thrift shop, he felt spoilt with numerous choices of clothes. That day he saw the hostility of human beings when an older lady in the store asked them to talk in English because she found their language loud

and bothersome. Their mother told them later that night that they shouldn't feel inferior for talking in their mother tongue. Unlike most people, they had a culture that was beautiful and benevolent to all. Just because they lived in another country, they didn't give them a license to act like white people. They had their culture and religion, which they adhered to.

Ali had an older brother, Mohammud; he was a good role model for his siblings. In the eyes of Ali, his brother acted and carried himself accordingly. After settling in Vancouver, Mohammud married Amina, a Somali girl from their clan who had arrived in Canada as a young child. Their marriage was set up by the imam at their local masjid. For the wedding, Ali's family decided on hosting a small number of people in their house. The small ceremony metamorphosed into a flamboyant party with music. When the crowd had got large, the police arrived. They had a report on what seemed to be a complaint about noise disturbance. After that, Ali became apprehensive towards the police. His father had warned them about getting arrested; therefore, he avoided all interactions with the police. When he heard the police siren went off, he walked in the opposite direction. If he saw police approaching along the streets, he would stand still until they passed.

After the summer had passed, school resumed. Ali was admitted to Montgomery elementary school along E hasting street. His first day at his new school had been full of adventure and challenges. He was assigned a helper who was to assist him in adapting to the school environment. His name was Henry, and he was given the task to show him around and help him gain friends as he transitioned. He had a diminutive figure, thick and wavy red hair with dark freckles under his eyes. he was shorter than Ali, and

whenever they walked, Ali had to lean in a little lower to hear what Henry had said.

He liked everything about his new school; it was different from the one in Hargadera. If he could make a comparison, Montgomery was an enchantment. In the camp, they wore uniforms, but in the new school, the kids wore their clothes. They had the freedom to wear whatever they wanted without anyone imposing their will on them. Every day seemed like a fashion show to Ali; the boys who wore the ripped jeans with printed hip-hop style gained more popularity. On the other hand, the girls were loony over low rise jeans that exposed their belly buttons. They loved to tie their hair in a combo of curled and crimped.

In Montgomery, the teachers were numerous compared to the ones in the former school. Each teacher taught not more than two subjects while back in Dadaab, one teacher taught all subjects from morning to evening. Ali felt the need to fit in with the other students; he eagerly wanted to make friends. He paid close attention to how to make a good impression. He took notes on the hustling and bustling down the school hallway. How friends greeted each other with fist bumps and playful punches. In the cafeteria, the students sat in cliques, and they rarely interacted with the other groups. The sought-after coteries sat in the finest flat bench seats, and the rest of the individuals like Ali without friends sat in the far corner near the washroom.

In grade 6, they were given a history essay explaining their family history; his presentation was on his family journey from Somalia to Kenya and Vancouver. He didn't find pleasure in talking about his traumatic experience, but he didn't want to fail his first assignment. His presentation engaged everyone's attention. They asked questions that Ali thought were vacuous.

"Were there wild animals walking in the refugee camp?"

"Did you see the person who threw the bomb at you?"

"Are there schools and buildings in Africa?"

"Does it rain there?"

In the wake of the presentation, Ali had become known as the African boy. He achieved the recognition he had desired from his fellow students. He got compliments about his hair and his looks from random girls in school. The boys invited him to parties because they considered him cool, but his mother didn't allow him to hang out with anyone past school hours.

He wished that his parents picked him up in a car like most of the parents did. Sadly, his parents didn't own a car, he rode the bus and felt revulsion towards the bus children. They were loud, and they taunted him for his English. They would imitate the way he talked in class. His accent had been the least of his problem up until then. It became a stumbling block. He spent unfathomable hours in front of the TV to learn how to speak with a different accent. He felt panicky and intimidated to talk in front of his peers, he decided to keep quiet until he grasped the art of talking in the Canadian accent.

At the age of Sixteen, Ali was a typical teenager; he had then grasped the modus operandi of being a teenager. His English had improved immensely, and he made sure that he used slang to fit in with the Somalis and colored boys. The Somali boys were known to be rowdy, and Ali felt inclusive because of his ethnicity. He finally felt like he belonged. One of his close friends who always got in trouble at school for carrying weapons; introduced Ali to his gang that consisted of young'uns between the age of 14 to 16. They always walked with knives in case they were attacked by their rivalry gang. In his neighborhood, their gang became abominably popular. Ali felt the necessity to belong with that particular gang; he

loved that people feared him but he remained scared his parents would find out that his friends were degenerates.

Most of his gang friends had been expelled from school for their mischievous acts. Ali remained one of the few who kept his behavior in check while at school. He performed his average best and never caused trouble at school. During the teacher- parents conferences, the teacher spoke so positively about how Ali was one of their brightest students. But when he was with his friends, he put on a charade. He swore and cat-called women in front of the bar at Milwest street and threatened kids in Kerrisdale's posh residential part into giving them their bikes.

One day while they were unwinding with his friends in Stanley park after a thrill of bullying the children with the deep pockets, a couple of teenagers attacked them. They were a blend of black and Caucasian kids that no one had seen before. Ali and his gang ended up receiving blows and boot kicks, which left them severely bruised. It was that day that his other life came to be exposed. He had disappointed his parents that they didn't scold him as he had thought they would. Some of his friends had later ended up going to prison for murder; Ali had changed his ways after that incident. His parents were more important to him than gaining respect and friends, and later in his life, when he had procured a stable job, he was grateful to God and his parents for that single moment he decided on mending his behavior.

His father obtained a better job that didn't make him smell like rotten eggs and a cat's decomposing carcass when he got home. He started working in the airport cargo handling service. The new job didn't require him to rise in the morning's wee hours; he had the option of choosing between the day or the night shift. The Montreal Airline gave the employees working with them free seats and

discounts on the tickets during the slightly less busy times. Through the benefits of his father's job, Ali got the chance to travel to Toronto during the winter. He had on a proper coat, a winter beanie hat that covered his ears, he had wrapped his neck and most of his face with a scarf and had on a pair of warm gloves, but he still felt cold. He had never seen such deep snow covering the streets.

When they arrived at the motel in downtown Toronto, he switched on the AC to the maximum to feel his numb legs. In British Columbia, it rarely snowed like that, winter in the most times it rained since he had been there. In Toronto, Ali and his father went to explore Ripley's Aquarium of Canada; the motel owner had told them that was one of the best places to visit, and so they went. It was awe-inspiring to Ali; the aquarium was massive tunnels, and on both sides were thousands of sea creatures. He saw horseshoe crabs, sharks, scarlet cleaner shrimp, clownfish, and different colorful fishes of all sizes and shapes. Their final destination was at Niagara Falls. He had read about it in school that it was a valuable source of hydroelectric power. The waterfall was frozen; it was a flowing mass of snow and ice. It was as beautiful as an expanding cauliflower cloud. The sunlight reflected on the ice, making it shimmer like a thousand diamonds. The trip was phenomenal; Ali and his father's relationship were close-knit more than ever.

It was in Algebra 2 class that Marie Peter and Ali met. She was the most beautiful girl Ali had ever set his eyes on. She was easy to talk to and be around, her beauty made the other girls feel insecure and when she walked down the school hallway Ali felt his world slowing down. Her braids fell to her bosom gracefully. What caught Ali's attention was Marie's eyes. It screamed to the whole world, 'I smile but I'm on the verge of crying.'

During their sophomore chemistry lesson, Ali was paired with Marie for a class assignment on reaction rates. They came to an agreement that the library would be the best place to do their discussion. After school, they met at the library while the other students had gone for the football pep rally in the school gym. The library was quiet as the night sky. The librarian was absorbed in reading the bible and could care less who was in the library. Marie stood next to the wood bookcase inspecting the books on the shelves that had been arranged in alphabetical order. She grabbed the principles of analytical chemistry and ensconced herself in a chair next to Ali.

"Show me the first two questions, I've attempted the reaction chain in question four. Here take my book and check if it's correct." She said after a long silent observation at her book.

Ali gripped the pen and said, "Here is where you messed up Marie, this is a reaction in which a solid compound is formed when a solution of two soluble compounds are mixed it's called a double replacement. Well the teacher hasn't taught us this reaction but I learnt it while doing seniors AP chemistry for fun. " he smiled and continued. "Dude don't look at me with surprise, I'm a nerd behind this cool body."

"That actually startled me, I didn't know you're this smart. I am really struggling with this chemistry class," she said.

Ali responded to what she said softly, " I can help you catch up with all that you've missed if you want me to."

"Really? You'll do that "she asked gleefully

"Yes of course anything for you."

She raised her hand to high-five him. Ali saw the deep trenches of cuts in Marie's hand. She became self-conscious when

she became aware that Ali had seen her hand. She pulled her sleeves to hide it.

“Are you okay Marie?”

Marie was Perturbed by what Ali asked, " stop trying to seem concerned about me dude, you don't know me and I don't know you."

Subsequent to the episode, Ali had thought that he had messed up all the chances of being Marie's friend until he got an invitation card in his locker to her birthday. It was her Sweet Sixteen birthday party. Ali never comprehended why his peers were overplayed with events like Birthday parties and prom. They would, around the clock, talk about what they'd wear, who they'll invite and how huge it was going to be. Like all refugees Ali didn't have a particular birthday, his was 1st of January like everyone in their family and a lot of refugees. When people turned Sixteen in their class was a big deal, they threw lavish parties.

To attend the party Ali had told a lie to his parents that he'd stay out late making a school project. He didn't want to miss an opportune time to say sorry to Marie. The music was on blast yet people's screams could be heard down the street. The house had well aesthetic neon lights flashing sign saying happy birthday. The house was a Spanish Colonial Revival house with a swimming pool of considerable size in the backyard. Some of the people at the party were his classmates; they were drunk from drinking alcohol from the four-layered fountains. The living room had been changed into a self-service buffet. The tables were systematically arranged and, in the middle, stood the six-tiered cake with pink and white flowers of peonies. Ali thought that the price of the cake must have been equivalent to their house rent. Everything looked lavish from how everyone was dressed to the twinkling starlight dancing floor.

When Ali saw Marie, he studied how stunning she looked. His heart deluged with different unexplainable feelings at the sight of Marie. She wore a magenta ball gown with lace sleeves. People girdled around Marie the whole night and he didn't get the moment to talk to her. Everything looked lavish from how everyone was dressed to the twinkling starlight dancing floor.

Later in the week during the History class, the principal announced to the school through the intercom that they were to assemble in the school gym. The school staff stood at the back of the principal in a horizontal line. They had crossed their arms and lowered their heads. The principal had large eyes and a crooked nose which reminded Ali of an ostrich. He had bushy eyebrows that were uneven in shape, one was slightly higher than the other. His face looked like a dried-up pomegranate. His wrinkles hung from his cheeks down to his neck.

"I am saddened by the news that has come my way that has to do with one of us. It is with great sorrow that I announce the demise of our own, Marie Peter." His silence initiated deafening murmurs. Ali felt like this was a prank, he checked his phone to confirm it wasn't the 1st of April. "To avoid baseless rumors, Marie was diagnosed with deep clinical depression with suicidal tendencies. A day after her birthday she took her own life. Our heartfelt condolences go out to her family and friends. My dear students many of us are suffering behind closed doors as the faculty of Montgomery high school we say, you're not fighting your battles alone. We are with you every step of the way. Talk to us and we will listen. No judgement whatsoever. Therefore, the school is on an underway mission of employing counsellors and new programs are to be launched to help with all rounded health of our students. Thank you so much. Let take a minute of silence to the memory of Marie."

Everyone was at their feet, the one minute of silence to Ali became the longest moment in his life. “Why did she do it? They were rich, she was beautiful and she smiled. How could she want to die after having all that?” He didn’t understand her decision to kill herself. The thoughts repeated in his mind. Marie had become a mystery to him, a mystery he was thirsty to discover. It had haunted him until his adulthood.

Ali's twin sisters; Azza and Azwa were the second last born. They were one year older than him yet they bossed him around for being younger. The twin sisters were popular in school because they spoke their minds. Unlike Ali's easy-going teenage years, the twin’s teenage years were a complex puzzle of confusion for Ali, their parents, and even for the twins. Their moods alternated between happy, melancholic, and with all guns blazing angrily. Ali became scared to talk to them unless they talked to him first.

After Mohammud had moved out with his wife, Ali moved from sleeping in the living room to having a room. Azza and Azwa complained, "Mom, this is so unfair, Ali is okay with staying in the living room, after all, he is a boy, they don't need space. Gosh, it's so hard sharing a room. We need privacy mom." But their mother had set her mind in kicking Ali out of her living room to the bedroom. According to her Ali had turned her living room into a dumpster and she couldn’t stand the rotting smell anymore.

Every day Azza and Azwa showed up with new notions. They became vegans when one of their friends didn’t like the idea of eating killed animals. “Animals were not supposed to be eaten. When their mom served them meat, they pretended to feel sick, " mom we need to stop eating meat, it’s inhumane and cruel the way they kill these animals, and here we are enjoying every piece of their soul. It's unfair."

Ali thought his sisters were done with their action-packed drama but there were just starting. They became feminists after learning about it in Literature class, "men and women should have equal right and opportunity, mom, you should work the same job as other men. Just because you're a woman doesn't mean you should be a maid who cleans."

They'd say. Later on, they became environmentally conscious. They didn't want the family to use plastic bags but instead use canvas bags. They also wanted the family to cut down on the energy used at home. Finally, they drove the family insane when they told their mother that they had become modern Muslims, they felt the wrath of her anger. They told her, "mom, you can't force us to put on Hijab, our dress code our choice. It's old fashioned. And our friends like our hair better this way." She slapped their senses back that day. Thereafter they both started acting like mature, fully-fledged young girls and finally got scholarships to the University of Toronto to study History and Philosophy of Science and Technology.

When it reached Ali's time to prepare for college, he underwent a challenging period when he was required to write a college application essay. His friends in his gifted programs had submitted their essays and were incessantly working on their college interviews. The students in the gifted program were highly competitive in nature. They were overachievers and Ali mostly excluded himself from the group. His class teacher demanded that he took an IQ test to determine if he belonged to the gifted class to channel his ability to an extent. Ali scored 135 and was considered moderately gifted. His class teacher said that she had noticed Ali's ability to grasp content within seconds. He enjoyed intellectual challenges like chess and he bombarded the teachers with questions

upon questions about the things she taught. He was puzzled about what he could write about in his college application essay, he was considered a genius by everyone yet he still looked at a blank page for several days.

He procrastinated writing the essay for a while, whenever he opened the blank page, he felt lightheaded. Time was running out; he felt the pressure from everyone. His class teacher was concerned that Ali wouldn't write the college essay and no college would accept him. His peers offered to help him write an essay for him but he was hysterical about it. No one could capture his essence. Few days before the deadline he paid one of the students in the gifted class to write down his essay for him. His essay stretched the truth about Ali and his life. It made out Ali to be a perfectly all-rounded student. It boasted his achievements and without going into depth of the essay Ali submitted it.

In course of time, he got a date for the interview, Ali didn't feel the need to prepare for the interview. He desired to join Washington School of Business, University of Brighton, British Columbia but he didn't want to feel like his arms were being twisted. He walked in the interview nonchalantly. He had never thought about college all through senior year. He was delighted to be living in the moment.

The interviewer's office was neatly arranged, the mahogany table stood in front of the office. On the left-hand side of the table was a laptop and stacks of papers on the in and out racks. The color of the office wall was a coconut CF 7. At the back of the Mahogany table, was a window that was the size between the roof and the floor.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Ali Abubakar." He shook his hand and continued, "after reviewing your essay we actually weren't

impressed by it but because of your recommendation from several impeccable people we decided to do this interview to know more about you and why you choose this school? Most importantly who are you, Ali."

That question irked Ali. No matter how deep he dug in his head he couldn't answer that question, his frustrations made him convey his feelings. "I don't know of a way to answer that question, umm... This is so hard; I've always been that boy that wanted to fit but I never belonged anywhere. In the refugee camp, I was too light-skinned to be considered Somali. In middle school, I neither belonged with the Africans or the blacks. I never fit in with the gifted group because I was never too smart in their eyes. At times I wish we had never left Somalia; things would have been a little bit easygoing. But they say life is about moving on with hope and not backwards with regret. I like Washington school of business from learning about it in a brochure at the library during the sophomore year. I am fascinated by numbers from a young age at the refugee camp." He laughed and shook his head. "Mr. Musamba was a mathematics genius he once told me that he could solve an equation by closing his eyes. Through his mind, he saw numbers solving themselves and, in a blink, he had answers. I never quite understood him until I became just like him. I love everything to do with commercial organizations' use of mathematics in accounting, inventory management, marketing, sales forecasting, and financial analysis. This is what I'm build for." He smiled and his eyes lit up.

After the interview, Ali was pessimistic about getting into any college. He didn't receive any other letters from other universities he had applied to. He had messed the Washington interview and there were no chances that he was going for higher education. His twin sisters had called multiple times asked if Ali had

received any letters or emails. Ali all together started avoiding his family, friends, and teachers from asking him about college. He spent all his free time swimming or at the gym. To him, it didn't matter.

Finally, he got mail, he had been accepted into the Washington School of Business, University of Brighton British Columbia Washington and the school was all that Ali had contemplated it to be and much more. He maintained a low profile in the classes he took by sitting at the back of the lecture halls. In the finance and management class he settled in his class five minutes before, Ali's face was submerged in his phone as he flicked through Twitter feeds.

"Excuse me, hi there. How many classes has there been so far for finance and management?"

Ali raised his head to catch a glimpse of the one who was talking to him. It was a Caucasian girl wearing a very short shirt dress but Ali was drawn to her face. Her face was like glass and silk, clear and soft. He liked the way her wavy auburn hair covered her eyes. She was the kind of woman that would seem arrogant because of her beauty yet her soft tone indicated otherwise.

"We've only had two classes only; this is the third." He dropped his face on his phone that was on his lap.

"Sorry to disturb you but I haven't seen any updates on our website on the notes to do with finance and management. Has the professor mentioned anything to do with it.?"

Nonchalantly he replied "He had sent them via email, if you haven't registered for it then most likely he didn't send the email to you. Have you registered for his classes yet?"

She looked perplexed; her face looked paler. " No, I haven't, how do I register for these classes? I've traveled from

Quebec last night to show up for my classes here. I didn't know the semester was ongoing. This suck."

He stretched out his hand at her." Give me your phone and I'll show you how to get into these classes you're interested in."

She gave him her phone, " While you're at it, can you drop your number in there." She giggled making Ali smile.

"I have been talking endlessly I forgot to tell you my name is Brittany, pleasure to meet you." "

"I'm Ali and the pleasure is all mine. Here you go, I'm all done."

She widened her jade eyes, "well that was quick, you didn't even ask me which classes I wanted to take."

" It needed a confirmation that's all, you had already filled out a form, remember, of the classes you wanted to take during the orientation, remember?"

She nodded her head in agreement with what Ali said. " thank you so much, Ali, I appreciate it."

Brittany kept Ali on his toes, he invited Ali for coffee, parties, and sometimes to her place. Ali had persistently told her that he was a Muslim and he couldn't do some things because they were considered *haram*, prohibited, for him to do.

"Ali, I wish I was a Muslim too, sometimes I want to live a quiet simple life but I get dragged into putting on this facade so that people notice me. But the thing is that I like getting drunk, it's amazing you've never taken alcohol or drugs. I really wish I could back to the time I was as innocent as you."

Within a short period, the two had become inseparable friends. According to Ali, Brittany was his complicated friend full of baffling lifestyle and life but he still liked her. She had confessed to

Ali during their final year that she had a crush on him but he knew better, Ali's mother had advised him to stay away from white women.

She had told him, "you better not marry these Caucasian women you go to school if you do, I will disown you."

Ali, therefore, avoided Britany until he saw her at the graduation ceremony, pregnant. He had dodged her calls all that while and steered clear into running into her. He avoided going to the library and picked classes that Britany would have avoided. Seeing Brittany pregnant was gut-wrenching to Ali and it shattered his heart. His excuse had been that Brittany had become a handful for him to handle and he didn't see a future with her at that moment he regretted his action. He felt he had failed to be there for Brittany, he had failed her. She was the love he never had.

He stood on the graduation podium to give a commencement speech as the student representing the 68th graduating class, he read his speech yet his mind was preoccupied with the thought of Brittany. People applauded his speech and he could see his parents standing up proud that their son had achieved it. But that day left an imprint in Ali's life; he felt revulsion towards himself. Later that night he stood in the mirror gazing at himself with utter disgust at what a horrible man he was, he held a blade in his left hand. He runs the blunt side of the blade on his neck and flipped the shaper edge on his jugular vein. He had finally understood why Marie did what she had to do.



CHAPTER 6

"Hello Sir, what would you like?" The air hostess asked in a faint voice.

"I'll have the Greek salad only, thank you," Ali replied with a wistful smile. He pulled out the tray table, seized hold of the blanket that was slipping, and covered himself with it. The Greek salad seemed to resuscitate his taste buds from the world of the dead. He had been thrilled about his trip to Kenya that dragooned him into a feeling of fullness.

For the last 72 hours, he had been rushing back and forth between Tiffany & co and the Harling jewellery store looking for the perfect gift for Naima. He had informed Naima that he would bring her a surprise, but his work schedule had got busier by the second. It was until the last minute that he remembered he didn't get Naima anything. While trying to make the gift as cloak and dagger as possible, he'd ask Naima what kind of things she liked, but that didn't seem to have an impact; Naima would say she loved babies, but no store sold babies.

That being the case, he found himself confused at a jewellery store; after all, that's all he knew about women. Women liked jewellery, but he didn't know what exactly Naima would have

liked; it became a difficult decision until he saw a beguiling gift at the store; the Tiffany & co store attendant helped him pick it out and wrapped it in a box.

"On behalf of Kenya Airways, the flight crew would like to welcome you to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. We will be arriving at the gate briefly. Please be in your seats and your seat belt should be securely fastened until the aircraft has come to an absolute stop at the terminal gate. Please, look around you to ensure you have all your luggage before leaving the aircraft. If you are connecting to another flight, someone will be just inside the terminal's door to give you directions to your departure gate. If your final destination is Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, please proceed to the baggage carousels to retrieve your checked luggage. We hope you had a wonderful flight and hope that you choose us for your air travel. We are very pleased you chose to fly with us today and wish you a good evening. *Karibu*, Kenya. Welcome to Kenya." The pilot announced through the speaker.

Ali tapped his father's shoulder to wake him up. His father hardly had hair; the little grey-white hair was perceptible on the sides of his bald head. His forehead was an archaeological site of wrinkles; when he stood next to Ali, one could see a spitting image of a before and after.

He hunched over in his seat and asked, "have we arrived, Ali?"

"Yes, dad, we have."

In a gentle motion, he nodded his head. "*Alhamdulillah*, praise be to God we've arrived safely. We need to text your sisters and mother."

Ali grabbed his father's arm and told him, "we'll do it once we are in the car, okay."

His father had recently retired, working as the head of the National Agency of security. Ali was rock-ribbed into taking his dad for a vacation. No one deserved it more than her. They had planned a family vacation to Grenada, but it fell apart since everyone was hard-pressed with their life.

Azza had delivered a baby, Azwa was a workaholic, and Mohammud's family was ginormous in size, and he was sceptical about traveling without them. His father suggested Kenya because they had relatives living there. Ali altogether knew only one thing about Kenya, and that was Dadaab and Naima.

The airport security presumed that Ali was a Kenyan; they asked him in Swahili, "Boss, can you give us *tea* or something." He understood and spoke little Swahili to get by but he didn't seem to understand what the 'tea' meant.

He had been warned by his family and friends, even though they had never been to Kenya, that Kenyans had the habit of being shady and manipulative. They all harshly criticized the citizens based on what they heard from other people and the news. Ali unwaveringly paid no attention to their assertions. He was in a buoyant mood after landing in Nairobi; the weather was blissfully calm; he was as pleased to be in Africa, his motherland.

His uncle Bishar picked them up at the airport in his old blue Mazda Demio car. His uncle was overjoyed; he hugged Abubakar for roughly ten minutes, fascinating the airport's foreigners' crowd. Since leaving Somalia on that account, he hadn't seen his brother; their reunion was the pick of the bunch of all reunions.

Animatedly he told them, "look at the window, that's KICC building there. The one with the round head thing. There is so much to show you in Nairobi; it's fascinating. The buses here are called

matatus; I hate driving near them; it's driven by a bunch of lunatics. It's cheaper for the average Kenyan to travel because of it."

"Bishar, how did you get to Kenya? I was surprised that you were living in Nairobi all this while and living such a comfortable life here." Abubakar asked his brother.

"I left Mogadishu in 2009 when the Al-Shabaab came about, I travelled and lived in Mombasa for a while; worked in different stores as a shop keeper now I'm in Eastleigh working as a broker. I help people buy and sell the business, houses, and so many other things."

Ali discerned something different about his uncle Bishar's accent he had a different Somali accent; they talked the same language but their accent sounded poles apart when he talked. He felt like a white person speaking Somali.

Eastleigh was beautiful chaos. Ali derived great pleasure in seeing the mosque on just about every corner. The streets were filled with myriads of people walking on the roads. The cars had to pass through the narrow-left road at a slow pace; it was man versus the cars. People sold clothes, groceries, watches, sunglasses, hats, and caps. Every street had numerous stores and malls on the first and second avenues. It was in the evening, yet everything came alive and spry at that time.

The Somali men and women walking down the streets awakened Ali's memory of Somalia when he was a child. For a moment, it felt like home. The home he felt he had been stripped of, the home he had partial memory of.

Happiness soaked in his soul exhaustively as he was travelling to Dadaab in the grey SUV land cruiser. Each stop felt like they were driving backward. He closed his eyes and savoured the moment; the sight of river Tana in Garissa was sensational.

Abubakar had decided on catching up with his brother Bishar in Nairobi, leaving Ali to travel alone to Dadaab. Before his departure, Ali was made acquaintance with Rashid through his Uncle Bishar. Rashid was a postgraduate student in health science from Arizona state university, traveling to Dadaab for his research on the health system in a refugee camp for his thesis. Rashid had acquired a private car for his journey to Dadaab, making it a pail sailing trip for Ali.

Ali's first impression of Rashid was unpleasant; he found Rashid obnoxiously irritating. Rashid complained about the heat, "Yo driver, turn on the A.C. I'm burning here." He complained to the driver. "Kamau, why don't you just hit these mofos for jaywalking, so Ali, back in Canada, would you guys get arrested for Jaywalking?" He promptly asked Ali, who was in the back seat, pretending to be sleeping. "Canadians would probably apologize to the car that was about to hit them. Looks like this Canadian has fallen asleep. Kamau, I've got to tell you this joke. Two Canadians died and ended up in hell. So, the devil decided to visit them, the devil walked into their room and saw them talking and laughing so loud. In a confused manner, he asked them why they were happy in hell. They told him, we are so sick of the cold from where we're from, and this place is nice, toasty just the right one. The devil was annoyed, he stormed away and goes to the boiler room, where he turned up the temperature. He went back to the Canadians' room, along the way, being begged by all sorts of people to put the heating back down. He entered the room to see the Canadians having a barbecue party. He was furious, he asked them what they were doing. They said they couldn't let wonderful weather pass without getting out of their barbecue. The devil realized that he had been doing the wrong thing simply wrong. He then went to the boiler

room and turned it down until it was at the coldest temperature than ever seen on earth. He knew he had won then, so he went back to the Canadians' room, only to find them jumping up and down in excitement. He shouted at them with fury, why they were still happy? They looked at him and shouted at the same time, Hell froze over! That means the Leafs won!"

Ali grinned at Rashid's joke. He only felt at peace when Rashid took a nap giving him moments to have a conversation with Kamau in Swahili, making him able to polish his language efficiency. Past Garrisa town, the road was rough and edgy, "why does the government not properly construct this road for goodness sake?" He asked Kamau in his broken Swahili.

"Well, these politicians rarely use these roads; they have private jets to take them back and forth to the northeastern towns. Dadaab is a forgotten city; it is actually considered the 3rd biggest city in Kenya. Yet, most of Kenya knows nothing about it. It's been stereotyped as the most insecure place, but to be honest, I've taken many people to Dadaab, and I'm always invited to people's places for the night. What more can a man need other than a bed to sleep in and food for the night. Why is it that you're not like this American here? I find him super annoying."

Ali dissolved into a burst of laughter that startled Rashid. "why? Why? What happened?" Rashid asked in a confused state.

"He was making jokes about me for being a Canadian because they're considered too nice by Americans."

Kamau shook his head in quick succession, "In the moment of crisis, the wise build bridges, and the foolish build dams. I guess that's a Nigerian proverb."

Rashid looked at the two men, utterly bemused at the language he couldn't understand what they were talking about,

"come on guys, talk in English so that I can understand, jeez it's so bloody hot here."

For the rest of the drive, nobody talked to one another. Ali listened to the podcast he had downloaded on his phone as he stared at the mirage that looked like a puddle of water. He felt nervous when Kamau announced they were arriving in a few minutes, but his soul was in cock a hoop. The iron sheet house's settlement was perceivable at a distance; the mixed emotions got a hold of Ali. This was it. He had travelled just to see Naima. Was it a mistake he was going to regret? He wondered. In the evening, when they arrived in Hargadera, the power had been switched on, and a beam of lights illuminated through people's homestead.

Ali spent the night at his aunt Samsha's place in the camp. She was a cherry-long tooth woman who lived with her young nephew who in his mid-twenty. She was delighted to host Ali and Rashid to her place for as long as they'd like. Ali recalled calling Samsha, aunt in the camp. She was a family friend, but everyone treated her like a family member when they lived in the camp. She was an old woman with a youthful memory,

"Boy, you've grown up so big now." she told Ali, " I remember when you were going to *Madrassah*, Islamic school, with the same pair of pants that's they gave you. So, I decided to knit you khaki pants that lasted 6 months only." Samsha's nephew had told Ali that she had lost hearing ability in her left ear; therefore, Ali laughed at the top of his voice for Samsha to hear how funny her joke was.

Her house was a corrugated iron sheets house like many refugees, she didn't have a properly structured house as required by the camp's management. In the morning, Ali decided to take a stroll around the camp and left Rashid still sleeping on the mattress that

was laid out on the floor. Rashid complained about the crushed stone dust outside then went on whining about bugs that were only eating his flesh. He reminded Ali of the ‘Oreo’ boys in high school who acted like white people, criticizing their own, but they were undoubtedly black on the outside.

The camp had changed drastically, according to Ali, the conditions were bearable than before. Previously when they lived, there were no adequately constructed houses. The houses were temporary, made from tents provided by the U. N. Still, people had corrugated iron houses with fences with toilets and bathrooms just outside for almost every household. As he walked through the dusty pathway to the U.N offices, he cast his mind back to times he played football with no shoes on the blistering hot soil at school. He only wore school shoes when he went to school, and the rest of the stretch, he walked with no shoes. His heel was cracked with thickened, brittle, crumbly, and ragged nails.

He noticed several humanitarian organizations had been set up in the camp since they had left. He could recollect absolutely every spec of his childhood in Dadaab. He thought back to the moments where they queued for rations of food, one needed to have a ration card to be given his/her necessity if one didn’t have the card then that meant no ration. The longest ques were at toilets, they were so long that one would go before reaching their turn.

His mind repositioned his thoughts to Naima. He hadn't texted or called Naima since he had left Vancouver International Airport. He could no longer wait to meet Naima. As it was custom in Somali culture, his aunt committed to taking him to a different household that knew Ali and his family when they lived in the camp. Hospitality being central in their culture wasn't a shock to Ali. He

was welcomed openly and warmly, for them a guest meant a wonderful gift.

Ali got a piece of good fortune to meet some of his childhood friends who had kids the size of his nephew in Canada; they all asked him the same question, "Why are you not married?"

Each household seemed to offer the same thing; camel meat, chai, and beverage. The food was served on one platter for the men to eat together like it was the custom. Samsha had come up with one phrase to introduce Ali to every family who knew the Abubakar family when they lived in Hargadera. "This is the little white boy. We used to call him *Wiil Cadaan*, a white boy. Do you remember?" She'd start off the conversation.

Finally, after persuading Aunt Samsha, they went to Naima's home. Samsha had informed the families beforehand hence giving them ample time to prepare for their guests. When they arrived at Abdirahman's house, they were greeted by Naima's parents. All the kids were lined up outside to be in readiness to receive the guests. Ali couldn't recall any of Naima's siblings who stood in front of him; most had been born after they had moved out of Hargadera. His eyes fell on every corner of the compound, but he couldn't see Naima. Ali felt uneasy, "where could she possibly be?" He thought.

Ali was full from the several meals he had that day, but since it is essential to accept any drink offered as a mark of friendship, he couldn't refuse. Refusing a refreshment could be perceived as highly offensive and could create a misunderstanding around the friendship even if he wasn't thirsty. He was forced to drink the camel tea prepared by Naima's mother. She had lost a significant amount of weight, according to Ali's opinion. Besides, he found her relatively young-looking and not having aged since the

last time he had laid his eyes on her as a young boy. He could notice the assortment of her features in Naima's pictures.

He took a gulp of the tea that was surprisingly delightful to Ali, "How are the family back home, Ali?" Naima's father asked in a light mood.

"They're all alright, back at home. My *aboo* is in Nairobi. He wasn't able to travel because of his health. Otherwise, *Alhamdulillah*, all praise be to God, he's fine too.

"You've really grown into an old man now. How many kids have you got?"

Ali grinned like a Cheshire cat at Abdirahman." Well, technically, I don't even have a wife. I recall your daughter, Naima, was in the same class as me, is she married?" He teasingly asked him.

"No." His voice rose up." My daughter isn't married yet. Although her younger sister Fartun is married, she is living in Mandera."

Ali nodded his head in acquiescence, he crossed his leg on the uncomfortable Arabic majlis couch that seemed to have been decompressed. Naima's mother poured more tea for Ali when she set her eyes on the empty glass.

"So, uncle, I read a while back that they wanted to close the camp and repatriate people to Somalia."

"Well, they were saying that the camp was heaven for terrorism and other illegal activities. But this home to over a hundred thousand refugees escaping for their safety in Somalia. To be honest, it's group discrimination. Most of us live here with honest means of survival, and most of my children are born here; Dadaab is the only home they know. It's crazy that they're offering money to people to go back to Somalia and start over. Our fate *wallah*! I

swear to God lies in Limbo. *InshaAllah*, if Allah wills. The creator of the heavens and the earth when He says a matter to be then, He only says to it, Be, and it is. "

"Where is Jibreel? We played football together back in the days?"

Abdirahman took a long pause and leaned back on the cushion. Ali felt like he had hit a nerve. He could make out that Naima's father was disgruntled. "Jibreel is not with us at the moment."

Ali felt the need to keep quiet and not ask any further questions. He became impatient as the silence grew. Aunt Samsha was nowhere to be seen. Ali thought that she was busy with Naima's mother outside making stories as it was their tradition for the men and women to sit separately.

Unexpectedly, he heard a tuneful voice saying, "my babies, I've immensely missed you all." He had an aha moment of the voice. It was Naima. She pulled the door curtain to the right to leave enough space for her body to penetrate through. Swiftly her eyes met Ali's, she gawked at Ali, and Her eyes broaden, her mouth froze in open expression, she let go of the baby she had held close to her bosom. Ali had an inclination to startle Naima by winking his left eye and being optimistic that Naima's father hadn't seen it. Naima embarrassingly broke her gaze and sat next to her father.

"Ali, this is my daughter Naima. You guys went to school together?" He asked as he placed his hand on her head.

Naima looked at her father with an authentic Duchenne smile. It melted Ali's heart, just her smile brought technicolour to his world. Her eyes were gentle as they creased at the corner; nothing was more beautiful than that. He had loved her laugh on the phone of how sweet and amiable it sounded but looking at her laugh

evoked deep contentment. He loved how her eyes smiled the first; his brain stuttered for a moment to catch up with reality. He was in the presence of his best friend with whom he had an unutterable mixed feeling for.

"Yes, I clearly remember her." He said in a playful tone.

Naima was stealing glances, and severally his eyes would meet hers.

Aunt Samsha came for Ali in the evening after running a few errands. He spent the night loosening his bowels from the overeating. His loose stools made him rush back and forth to the toilet; therefore, he decided to sit near the pitch-dark pit latrine. Ali's stomach produced cacophonous sounds, but every part of his body came to a standstill as he reflected back to the moment, he saw Naima. His sole purpose became to tease Naima for being a daddy's girl.

The following day he walked to the market early in the morning and pretended to buy her groceries.

"How much is this tomato?" He asked in Swahili.

"Ali, what do you seriously want? You can't even speak Swahili stick to your English and Somali."

Naima picked the tomato from Ali's hand and dropped it on the pile of tomatoes.

"Okay, then daddy's girl." He burst into laughter, compelling Naima to smile.

"Get out of here, Ali, I'll text you later."

"Does your dad know that you're texting me, daddy's girl? Very haram?" His face had turned red from laughing at Naima.

"Gooooooo," Naima screamed, the people in the market turned their heads looking for the day's dramatic moment for the gossiping headline.

Naima had promised to meet and take him around the camp; when they met, Naima was wearing a *niqab*, a veil that covered her face except for the eyes. She feared getting recognized by people in the camp. The camp was a heaven for the circulation of rumours; on that account, she decided to take Ali to the clinic where Lucky worked. Rashid dragged along to be familiarized with the first medical centre to start off his research. Naima introduced Lucky to Rashid; Lucky ushered Rashid inside the hospital, giving the two friends time to converse. They sat outside the clinic in the swept-up compound on the dusty benches. They sat opposite each other to avoid older women from misjudging the situation.

Ali wore a Cotton ribbed knit Jersey, straight creme Corduroy Pants with black closed-toe sandals. The clouds seemed displeased, leaving the sun to burn brightly. Ali rubbed his fingers on his mouth as he calculated the question in his head.

"How is the weather in Canada?" Naima asked, giving Ali a jolt.

"It cold as usual; you need time to get used to it. "

"Why is it that you're not married to a white woman by now?" she meticulously teased him

Ali slightly raised his left eyebrow and smiled." I do actually have a white woman at home. Well, I'm here to catch you as my second wife."

Naima clapped her hands and said, "Ha ha ha, very funny, Mr. You are not my type."

"Well then whom do you assume is my kind of type?"

"First and foremost, a blind person with no personality and who can settle for your taunting."

Ali lowered his face into his hand, "ouch, that went straight to my heart because you are describing yourself." They both

guffawed at what he had said. "You had told me that your parents got into a serious argument. Are they back together?"

Naima nodded and said, "yeah, it was an impulsive decision that my dad made. They later resolved with the help of Sheikh Yusuf. My mom got scared of getting a divorce you know how people here will say negative stuff about such stuff. She decided to be the obedient wife after all."

Ali promptly switched the melancholic mood of the conversation. "I overate yesterday, people here know how to feed a guest. Back in Canada, you rarely get a homemade meal when you live by yourself. I'm used to ordering take away as soon as I get home from work."

"Wait, how does it work? I mean the ordering?" Naima's voice seemed perplexed.

"Well, you can call a particular restaurant; all you need is to tell them your address and what you like to have. You can pay when they deliver. Another option of using an app like where you'll choose the restaurant fills in your details, like phone number, address, and they'll deliver it right to your doorstep. I always feel guilty when I sit on my couch, eating McDonald's chicken, and I cannot finish it. I recall when my mother used to cook a small portion of food to share with our neighbours. We ate together on the same plate, I never had more than 2 scopes of food. Now I can imagine a little boy like me not having enough food, and it makes me feel I'm in the wrong for enjoying such pleasure. It feels like I'm holding a thousand pounds of tears from overflowing. Day in day out, I put on a facade, but I am a hollowness of sadness and pain. The guilt eats me up for not being able to help each and every one in here gives me sleepless nights. I shouldn't have left" Ali instantaneously realized that he had been talking his thoughts out; he

felt a surge of embarrassment in every bone of his body. He wasn't able to look Naima in his eyes because of what he said.

"I know how you feel, Ali. My only dream is to get a chance to be a qualified educator to help each and every child in this camp have a complete educational experience. With that, they can help and support their families with the skills and knowledge they acquire."

Ali raised his head to look at Naima. The sadness that took over him was getting filtered into pure joy draining to every ounce of his cell. He felt that somebody actually understood him. He found himself sharing his struggles and his trauma from when he was a child.

Rashid's annoying nature broke Ali's reverie of his day with Naima. Rashid started off by complaining about the toilet and the bathroom," how can you construct a bathroom outside and it doesn't have a roof? What if a bird flies and sees me like this? On top of it is poorly cemented and doesn't have actual drainage. This is ridiculous." He spoke.

When they were together, Rashid bragged about his life in America each day it was something new for him to brag about. The women in America were much prettier, and they considered him a stud muffin. In his opinion, the women in the camp were easy and desperate. The food was much better than what Samsha served him. After spending time with Lucky at the clinic, He would always complain about Lucky; he said, " I find Lucky to be a challenge; she liked arguing with me over the pettiest things. Like yesterday I told her women are deformed men and that doesn't make them the same as us they're actually inferior, that's why they take on the lesser role, and she dared to call me a misogynist."

Another day he called her repulsive and that he liked that about her. One day at the clinic, when Naima and Ali were talking, they heard Lucky calling Rashid a sell-out. They both knew Lucky's remarks were the absolute truth regardless; they laughed at Rashid, who was stammering because Lucky had hurt his Ego.

Ali decided to pay a visit to Mr. Musamba when he found that his favourite teacher still taught mathematics at the local primary school. The school had changed tremendously since he had left. A properly constructed fence had been placed around the compound with a stupendous gate. New buildings had been constructed on the compound's left side; Ali recalled being part of their playing field. The old building was painted white and blue, but inside the classroom, the walls were filled with writing and cobwebs. It resembled the same condition that he remembered when he went to school there.

Mr. Musamba wore thick glasses. Ali couldn't seem to recognize him as an old man. His enthusiasm was evident in his voice, reminding Ali of the fun mathematic lessons in the hot, lazy afternoon. Their reunion was cut short when Mr. Musamba had to go to a class.

Since the day was still young, Ali made his way to the market to buy some items he had thought his mother would have liked. When he approached Naima's stall, he passed her by and walked over to the woman sitting on a rug selling scarfs. He could feel Naima's eyes were on him.

"*Hooyo*, how much is this *hijab*, scarf?" He asked the woman.

The woman raised her hand to indicate five. He assumed that she had meant 500 Kenya shilling, and he gave her a thousand

shillings and said," keep the rest of the change. Goodbye." He dropped the item in his jute bag that he got at the airport.

"Come get good meat and vegetables." Naima's voice elevated when Ali was walking away.

He approached her stall and pretended to check the onions picking them.

"Where is my gift that you promised?" She asked. Naima had countlessly asked Ali on several occasions the same question.

"Let's meet tomorrow after Friday prayers. I'll finally give you what you've been asking for."

Ali loved *Jumma*h, Friday prayers at the camp. In Vancouver, he never got a free Friday afternoon to pray *jumma*h at the masjid; he only got an inconsiderable amount of time to get lunch, pray the afternoon prayer and return to work. Aunt Samsha had ironed his white *thawb*, an ankle-length garment, with a charcoal iron box that straightened up the toughest creases. Rashid wasn't at home, and that made Ali feel physically relaxed and free from his impertinent. Ali unzipped his tolling suitcase and dipped his hand, looking for the wrapped-up gift he had bought for Naima. He unwrapped the gift at a slow, relatively pace. He removed the red ring case from the wrapper and stared at it.

Questions galloped his head, "why did I buy this ring? This is against our tradition; I shouldn't do this. I'm supposed to go to her father first to ask for her hand in marriage. He will probably be against it."

After Salah, he made his way to the clinic and found Naima sitting on the compound bench. Naima wasn't wearing the veil that covered her face; she had a black *jilbab*; a long outer garment that covered the hair that went straight to her feet.

"Why don't we go to the back so that we can have a chat?" Ali asked.

As they walked, Ali dipped his hand in his pocket to avoid the ring case bulging from standing out. They sat on block rocks, and Ali could care less about his white thobe getting dirty; he was tremendously nervous.

"Where is my gift?" Naima inquired.

"Why do you think I'm here? I'm here to give you your gift, so have patience, woman." Naima twisted her lips to the right side in annoyance.

"Naima, I've written to you so many letters that I ended up burning because I couldn't come up with the ideal words for your exquisite innocent soul." He smiled. "Since I've been here, you've shown me the true meaning of happiness. You have reawakened every feeling in my soul. When I told you about the day, I almost killed myself, you didn't judge me or called me a coward as most people would; you understood me in a way I couldn't comprehend who I really was. You have captured my heart by being a compassionate, loving, sensitive, and well, sometimes a weirdo." He took out the beautiful ring case and opened it.

"No, no no no, please no, don't do this," Naima said, giving Ali a dazed look of bewilderment. She scratched her head and asked, "why are you doing this? If you wanted to ask for my hand in marriage, why didn't you instead go to my father's and ask him? You're such a goofball, you haven't considered there is so much at play here. You live far; how I marry someone who lives in another country?"

Ali covered her mouth with his hand to withhold her from talking at a speedy pace. "Think about this, do feel an unexplainable feeling towards me that you can't explain?" Naima nodded her head

as her eyes stared directly at Ali's." The reason I wanted to ask you first is that your decision matters too. Look, I guarantee that there'll be bad times. I am sure that one or both of us will want to get out of this thing at some point. You're the only meant for me, and I want you to know this from now henceforth, I am yours, Naima Abdirahman, and you are mine." All that while they had maintained eye contact without any breaks off. Only one question that remained in their minds was whether their parents would accept their decision.



CHAPTER 7

Despite the conditions at the camp, Ramadan's *Iftar*, breaking of the fast, was paramount. Like every other Ramadan, Naima's mother hosted Lucky at their place for *Iftar* since she didn't have a family to enjoy the special occasion. That particular Ramadan for Lucky had been eccentric and a heart-rending one without her friend Naima. She yearned to see her friend, but due to the circumstances, she couldn't be with her; nonetheless, she was as happy as a rose tree in the sunshine for her friend. Lucky habitual plan during Ramadan, the Muslim's period of fasting, was to arrive at her host's house in the evening to help out Naima's mother to

cook. Even though Naima's mother had insisted that she didn't want Lucky to help out with the cooking because she was their guest, be that it may be, Lucky avowed to help her with other chores.

Naima's mother made the simplest of food to have an amazing taste. Lucky was astounded by Naima's mother skills in the kitchen; she might have lacked the preeminent world spices, but her ingenuity was mind-blowing. She set the mat with the delicacies like caanjero; fermented dough bread, camel meat, basmati rice, chicken spiced up with coriander, and curry fried in ghee, flatbread, Somali tea. The aromatic smell of the food evoked nostalgic feelings for Lucky. It reminded Lucky of her mother's passion for cooking.

The men's guest sat together inside the house to eat while the ladies and the little children sat on a mat outside. Naima's mother, Lucky, and Fartun ate together on the same platter. There was no room for pretentious behavior; they all finished the exotic succulent food in no time.

Fartun had recently moved back home several weeks before the commencement of Ramadan, the period of fasting. When Lucky met up with her, she noticed her disorientation from time to time. Lucky didn't know her dire state until she saw Fartun screaming and talking to herself; it was clear that she was not of sound mind. Her fits made everyone's blood run cold, she cursed at the invisible person, laughed at everyone, and it got terrifying when she got tonic and atonic seizure that made her drop suddenly. Therefore, she wasn't permitted to stand up for long. When she was of a sane mind, her charisma and her psyche became noticeable. Lucky considerably conversed with her when her little siblings gazed at her with mortification. It had seemed that Fartun wasn't aware of what happened to her when she was of unsound mind.

Naima's mother had warned Lucky not to mention Fartun's condition to anyone in the camp; she came across as abashed with Fartun's behavior. She would stuff a cloth in her mouth when she screamed to avoid the neighbors from hearing Fartun's scream. If Fartun became a handful, her mother would tie her leg with rope at the edge of the bed. Lucky found this to be inhumane. Nonetheless, she couldn't break her free. The guiltiness of looking in Fartun's doleful eyes turned over in her mind.

According to Naima's mother, Fartun was not insane, but rather, it was witchcraft that was at a play. Accordingly, she called a famous psychic tarot reader to determine what had happened to Fartun. Naima's mother had disclosed all the information to Lucky, using her as her outlet to let out her frustrations. She vented to Lucky about the prospect of Fartun's older co-wife having cast a spell on her daughter. The tarot reader was in the opinion that the woman had placed the dark magic portion in Fartun's food during her visit.

Since they considered Haram, prohibited, to seek a tarot reader, Naima's mother made Lucky swear to not tell a soul about her action. Her excuse was that she had to seek knowledge on who had harmed her doting daughter. Lucky couldn't take a stance as to whether Fartun was mentally ill or it was that someone had cast magic on her. She was well aware of how evil people's actions when she witnessed a long thick dead worm being pulled out of the child of her neighbor's scalp after he had hit someone's child, his mother had sworn to seek revenge. Lucky believed the revenge was Black magic.

Naima's mother was a generous lady; she packed the leftover food for Lucky to have for *suhoor*, the food eaten before fasting. Lucky was tremendously grateful to her. Once she got

home, she gave her neighbor, half of her portion of the food. She watchfully watched as the young children devour the leftover food, and the mother not having a single morsel. She felt compassion towards the mother for her sacrifice; as it goes, a mother's sacrifice is incomparable with others, Lucky understood those words right then. As the woman fed the children, Lucky prudently observed her neighbor, who had lost a great weight. She was six months pregnant but had a mere body of a fifteen-year-old. Lucky didn't know much about her neighbor the reason being she never disclosed any information about her life; the sole thing she knew was that the woman was that her husband rarely visited.

Lucky had felt apprehensive about sleeping at her house. She had been living with two stubborn rats who wouldn't leave her side. They ate her soap, her maize flour, and were halfway eating her thin mattress. Every day became a task to drive them away, but no matter how hard she tried to strike them with the broom, they outrun her. She gasped at how energetic the rats were running up and down in her shank after eating her food. Therefore, she decided on naming her rat family. The plump one was called beer belly, which had a little rat that resembled it was named little beer belly, and the other one was named brainiac for the ability to reach the roof in seconds. In a short period, they became the family she had yearned for; she felt like their older sister. She screamed at them when they tipped over her cooking pots and woke her up.

When they drank her water, all chaos broke loose, "Beer belly! How dare you drink my water? You were not there with me when I stood at the water tap to fill my can. Next time get the jerrican and go stand at the water tap that's when I'll allow you to drink my water. You're such a bad influence to little beer belly, led by example, my dear." She told the rat.

The feeling of being indebted to Rashid was deeply revolting to Lucky. She didn't understand why Rashid had helped her. She regarded Rashid as an egocentric, shameful, arrogantly disdainful, and contemptuous high, and mighty individual. When Ali and Naima talked in private at the clinic, Lucky felt she was left to babysit the man child, Rashid. She did her utmost to find common ground with Rashid, but however, they were poles apart. Every ounce of his being annoyed Lucky. Rashid would finish all the water in the dispenser at the clinic without considering anyone; furthermore, he complained that the water had a palatable taste.

"Why are you always reading?" Rashid asked Lucky setting off his question as if lodging a complaint.

Lucky rolled her eyes, squinted her left eye, and placed her left jaw forward in a fit of baffled anger. "Are you paid to torment me? Can't you see I'm reading a fiction book?"

He grinned, flaunting his admirably teeth making Lucky feel appalled. "Lucky." He took a long pause "You should be reading stuff about money, not made-up stories that don't add anything to your life." Lucky paid no heed to his comment and continued reading. She became absorbed in reading her book and oblivious to what Rashid was saying. "Lucky you look unequivocally like a model, your thin figure is what every woman in America dreams of having, but I guess yours is for the reason that you don't have enough food. If you were in America, you'd be obese from all the McDonald's and Popeye's fat."

Lucky halted from reading her book and mumbled to herself, "Lord give me the strength to deal with this man. That's all I'm asking you."

After Rashid's flirtation moment with the nurses, Rashid found Lucky sitting by herself in the reception room, "Hey Lucky,

why are you looking gloomy here by yourself?" Lucky had opted not to answer him. "Why don't you elope with me to Nairobi? You'll have such a satisfying life there. Do you hear me?"

"I can hear you, Rashid; it takes time for my brain to process all the stupidity that comes from your mouth. Try and manage your stupidity sometimes, I know you're a helpless case even God gives up on you."

It became a monotonous humor when Rashid told Lucky to elope with him, and every day Lucky fabricated unhackneyed quick-witted answers. But then she felt indebted to the one person she disliked all because of Umar Khatib.

Umar Khatib was Lucky's classmate in secondary school. Lucky had been the bee in his bonnet ever since he had laid his eyes on her. Many had a formed perception that Umar Khatib's father was one of the kingpins of the Al-Shabaab in Somalia. He made people feel consternation towards him in school by threatening fellow children to respect him. Umar Khatib had an asymmetrical face with a receding hairline, sloppy and narrow shoulders, an inconceivable hawk nose, and wide eyes. No girl found him attractive and especially Lucky.

On her way home from work, Lucky met up with Umar Khatib a few steps from the clinic's gate; it appeared that Umar had been sitting near the clinic's fence for a considerable long time. As soon as he saw Lucky, he approached her fleet-footed.

"Salam Lucky, it's been a long time since I've seen you," he told her.

Lucky's heart was racing, she looked around, but no soul was around. Most of the workers at the clinic had left, and the remaining lived within the premises. The horror in Umar Khatib's red eyes made her paralyzed; the adrenaline rush made all her

muscles tense. She felt cold; her blood had turned into ice. Umar Khatib's reputation for turning violent was alarming to Lucky. She didn't want things to get out of hand. She turned back to go to the clinic.

Suddenly a hand tightened around her wrist and pulled her close. In double-quick time, she bit his knuckles until she heard the cracking of one of the metacarpals. Abruptly, a fist slammed in Umar Khatib's face. He stepped back, let go of Lucky's hand, and broke into a sprint. Rashid gripped Lucky by her hand to support her.

"I didn't need your help. I could have managed it on my own." Lucky said, crossing her arms across her chest.

Rashid broke into a chuckle. "I know you're not a damsel in distress, but that guy would have killed you. He struck me as if he was high on some drugs. Let me escort you home."

She was relieved to have someone to walk with her even though she didn't say it, the horrific image of Umar Khatib had been encrypted in her mind, made her shiver to walk alone anywhere. After that, rumors spread that Rashid and Lucky were in a *haram*, prohibited, relationship but the rumor died soon after news of a major incident took over.

All the people in the camp's attention was captured by the different news was circulating in the camp with no actual authenticity. People had told each other that there were death traits to all *kaffir*, non-believers, in the camp. This caused hysterical panic among the Christian workers at the camp. Some of the nurses at the clinic moved back to Nairobi for fear of being taken hostage, just like Dr. Hunk. Dr. Hunk's whereabouts remained still unknown. His photo still trended on the T.V. the embassy was asking for

information to do with his disappearance. They had given out several contact information to anyone willing to reach out.

Another news broke out and spread within no time; everyone in the camp was talking about it. Everyone, including the children, knew what would have happened. There would be a terrorist attack in the capital of Kenya that would stir violence in Kenya. People started to brush off the information as just another baseless rumor. On the woke of the following week, there was a terrorist attack in Nairobi. A suicide bomber discreetly entered a building and blowing himself. The remaining terrorist used firearms to attack individuals. Lucky got the opportunity to watch the video on Rashid's phone of the event captured through CCTV in a leaked video that went viral on social media.

People exaggerated the news of the incident in the camp. They anxiously waited for the news to be broadcasted in the common area where there was a Tv. Everyone was gloomy, and the mood in the camp was somber. Various police officers were deployed in each of the Dadaab camps after the occurrence; the restrictions had got extremely stern. People were required to walk with their alien Identification card, and anyone with suspicious behavior was arrested in connection to the terrorist attack.

People became wary and cautious about talking about the things that involved the attack; if someone had eavesdropped on them, they would have been in big trouble with the law to know and keep valuable information from the authorities. A few days after the episode took place, a series of beheadings proceeded just near the Hargadera camp. A bus heading to the camp was ambushed by a couple of Al-Shabaab militia who had placed a roadblock. The passengers were lined up outside horizontally, the men were in the front row, and the women were back. One of the terrorists ambled

between the ques and yanked the Christian women by their hair to the face of the other people. The women's screams filled the tranquil atmosphere. On seeing the cold steel Machete, their limbs trembled, and the women rolled their bodies to the ground and pleaded for their lives. The terrorists were chanting the same phrase in reiteration. "Death to all *Kaffir, non-believers!* Death to them all! There is only one God!" All the terrorists had put on a balaclava to hide their identity. They grappled a young man at the left side by his neck and whizzed the machete on his thyroid cartilage, scampering the head out of the body. The headless body reflexively twitched back and forth; the blood spouted like a soda explosion. The Muslim passengers beseeched to the men to spare the rest of the Christians. "If you support a *Kaffir, non-believers* then you are a *kaffir* yourself. We will murder you too!" They screamed collectively.

The video was recorded by the militia group and sent to Facebook and all social media platforms. At the clinic, Rashid broadcasted the video to everyone. He grinned at the nurses' disgusted expressions as they watched the videos. Lucky focused her attention on the screaming of the child, her heart sank at the little child crying for his dead mother. All her gaiety evaporated from her eyes. She clenched her jaw and her eyes beamed from anger while watching the video.

"Dadaab will soon close. Be prepared to go back to Somalia." Rashid growled. "The president of Kenya had announced that the discussion for the closure of Dadaab is underway. Dadaab was illustrated as a portal to terrorism."

Rashid's jokes about the whole situation angered Lucky. Her fear was losing the home she knew. The atmosphere within the camp was of despair. Everything was changing. Many Kenyan doctors and teachers relocated back to their hometown wearing

hijab; the scarf to hide their hair in order to feel safe during their journey.

Ramadan's last day was a fundamentally happy day for the Muslims in the camp for *Eid*, a celebration of the end of fasting, was like the first day of spring. During their last *iftar*; breaking the fast meal, everyone was as happy as a baboon in a banana tree until an old man, the Abdirahman's family friend arrived domicile to share news about Jibreel. Posterior to everyone settling in the house to hear the news the old man began, "I'm sorry to say that Jibreel had died." Naima's mother gasped for air. She sank in Lucky's shoulder and sniveled. "Jibreel went to Libya. "

Abdirahman shook his head to indicate rejection to what the man had said. "No, he is in Somalia. My son is in Somalia."

The old man seized hold of his phone and divulged a photo on his gallery. Naima's mother grabbed the phone, and Lucky meticulously gaped at the macabre picture. A dead body hanged from an olive tree. A wild dog was licking the bloody instep of the left leg. The right leg had been amputated to the calf, the muscles and the fibula hanged loose, blood trickled down the slightly yellow bones. The corpse had no shirt on; the right and left leg had been sliced open and it was slightly visible from where the photo was taken. Maggots were noticeable on the wound in his neck.

"It is him! It's Jibre..." Naima's mother screamed. "The black wound sewed up across his chest. It is him." The tears that had built up in her eyes were uncontrollably falling. Lucky bit her lips to conceal her emotions of seeing Naima's mother sobbing. She had been admirably a champ of hiding her sadness. Her eyes shifted to Abdirahman and Naima's mother. Abdirahman cupped his mouth with his hand, thoughtfully scrutinizing the picture with his other hand. One could perceive the despair in his eyes.

"Who took this picture, and why do you have it?"

Abdirahman broke the silence.

"One of Suleiman's children traveled with some traffickers to Libya, and he met up with Jibreel there in one of the facilities they were holding the immigrants."

"Then why is it that my son is the one hanging on that tree and not Suleiman's son?" Abdirahman asked in a sad tone.

"Jibreel didn't have enough money to be released from the cell; therefore, the smugglers removed his kidneys as a recompensating for taking him to Libya."

Abdirahman stood up and disappeared into the next room leaving the children wondering what was happening. No one in that room understood the pain of loss more than Lucky; she felt guilty once more. Death was interfering with everyone she grew close to. "Who was going to die soon?"

Lucky endeavor to find volunteering work that paid a little extra led her to be a secondary local translator for UNCHR for a couple of days to assist with translation transcripts. She met the work requirements through her ability to speak three languages and her competency in her writing skills. Lucky was guided on the stipulation of the work before authorized by the senior officer in partaking her role in translating. Lucky had trivialized the work as the most straightforward work until she was in front of refugees with incredulous experiences and understood why the job required discretion of information.

On the first day at work, she met with an Ethiopian refugee who spoke fluent Somali, Oromo, and Amharic. He was a member of the Oromo political party, and because of his strong opposition against the government, he was jailed and tortured. His family was imprisoned and killed to compel him into speaking against his comrades. He had been tortured during his indefinite imprisonment. When the man showed his back that was an adornment of deep lash marks. Lucky was shocked by the story, she stopped writing and stared vacantly at the man.

As he escaped, he disguised himself as a Somali and traveled from camp to camp because he feared for his safety. As he told his story, he was uneasy and restless. He demanded to be taken to safety," they are coming after me and once they find me, they will murder me," he told them.

Lucky was astonished that different refugees had different tales to narrate also about the civil war in Somalia. A woman in her mind's 20s gave an account of her escape from Somalia from her Al-Shabaab militia husband, who threatened to kidnap her and the child to take them back to Somalia. Her husband had chopped off her

ears for eavesdropping on his meetings. He kept the ear in a cup in their bedroom.

Lucky was well aware of an unrest nation's effect through the Somali civil war; her parents had lost all connections to their immediate family members after moving to Dadaab. The thought of the closure of Dadaab chewed over in her mind. She knew no family. She felt as hopeless as a musician pouring his notes into the ear of a dead man. The camp was her home.

Everything in the camp, all and sundry, had recommenced back to its run of the mill after the absurd killings that rebuked Somali refugees from Dadaab. Lucky resumed her usual task at the clinic after her translation days ended. She reached the clinic before her usual time to avoid contact with Rashid; however, she ran into everyone, including Rashid, at the reception area. Lucky got a *Deja Vu* feeling seeing the people sitting in groups talking. The nurses' faces were sad, while Dr. John's face articulated ambivalence.

Lucky sauntered across the room to where Rebecca and Rashid were sitting. "What happened, Rebecca?" Lucky asked sternly.

"Why are you always late, Lucky?" Rashid teased.

Lucky pushed the palm of her hand in Rashid's face to break off Rashid from talking further.

Rebecca looked at Lucky vacantly and said, "a picture had surfaced on the news of Dr. Hunk."

"Is he dead?" Rashid arched his eyes brows and laughed. "why do you want to kill the man? He's alive he's merely taken captive by those people."

Lucky opened her eyes widely, "He's alive. That's good news."

Rebecca nodded her head, shrugged her shoulder, and said, "nobody is sure if the picture is a recent one," Lucky's eyes cascaded to Rashid's phone. He had been the only person who had an internet phone; consequently, most people came to the clinic to hear news from him.

Dr. Hunk posed in front of the camera with a wrapped-up turban and a *macawis*, a sarong-like garment wrapped around the waist. His beard had grown into a long-boxed beard that looked raggedy. He held a signboard saying, pay them \$5M for my release. Everyone at the clinic asked each other the same question, "what happens next?"



CHAPTER 8

Lucky steadily and intently looked at the mosquito that was sucking her blood on her wrist. She calmly gazed at the insect that was slurping away her blood. She aimed her left hand on top of her wrist and carefully waited for the ideal moment to strike. Promptly she opened her palms widely and smacked it. The slap resonated with an ear-splitting sound. She withdrew her hand on top of her right, the mosquito lay dead on top of her wrist, the slap had squeezed out its living soul. The blood had splattered around her wrist. She flicked the dead mosquito's body to the floor and wiped it on her bed-sheet. Her mattress felt thinner than it regularly was. She could feel the iron bed slats against her spine.

She gripped her big button phone and dialed Naima's phone number. "Please pick up," she mumbled nervously. She took a long breath out to ease her nervousness. The dial tone suddenly changed, "Sorry the mobile subscriber cannot be reached. *Samahani, mteja wa nambari uliopiga hapatikani kwa sasa.*

Her heart sank. She had missed her best friend. Her life had become more meaningless after she had left. She felt guilty and a little unease, "have I done something to Naima? Why is it that she is ignoring me?" She thought to herself. Fatigue was embedded on

her face, yet she couldn't fall asleep. She had never felt lonelier than that night. Her loneliness grew more profoundly with each minute. For a minute, it felt like the world had gone darker than it usually felt. Her eyes dripped with tears, and at a full tilt, she wiped them away with her sleeves. She became the slaves to her thoughts; the night was as silent as a cloud that sleeps in midday on a mountain peak, yet her thoughts screamed loudly.

She wrapped her arms tightly around her chest in a tight grip and gave herself a tight squeeze. She held herself for some time every night to remind herself of her mother's hug. As a young child, she would sleep next to her mother every single night. Her body was warmer than Lucky's making the cuddle feel like heaven. She never quite understood the struggles of being a refugee; her parents had sheltered her from experiencing any hardship, like missing a basic necessity.

She shook her head to keep the thoughts away, she relaxed her body and breathed deeply in and out to release her muscles' tension. Her thoughts didn't dislodge themselves; it took her back to the day after her mother's death. The mattress scent smelled like a rotting carcass, and each segment held a more pungent foul smell. She stayed up the whole night, staring at the bed where her mother took her last breath. That instance played over and over in her head like a broken cassette.

Women thronged to her house with the provision of food and supplies as a sympathetic gesture. Then one ever came to pay her a visit; she spent endless days by herself in the house without food. She understood the words, *it comes down to all you have is yourself. All the rest is nothing.*

She reminisced about her mother's cooking. Every morning she was woken up by her mother's harmonious humming outside. By

the time she awoke, her mother had finished preparing for her tea and hot *caanjero*, fermented dough bread. All throughout, she had never seen her mother not wearing a smile. Her smiles were warm and genuine, which immaculately divulged her marvelous soul. The only time she had seen her mother different was when she found her mother crying and the time, she spanked her for missing school and hanged out at her friend's place. That night her mother tucked her in bed and meticulously placed the mosquito net ultra-carefully to avoid any mosquitoes from gaining entrance. She told Lucky to expeditiously fall asleep before her father arrived. Lucky was abruptly awakened by the hyperventilating cry of her mother outside.

Promptly she made her way through the uncanny darkness of the house to the outside. Her mother sat on the ground, leaning against the vegetable oil jerrican. Lucky swiftly serenaded her mother with her hug. Her little hands circumnavigated her mother's neck. Her guilt tormented her, "why didn't I ask her what was wrong?" She thought to herself.

The suffocating whispers of her thoughts hushed down to blank. She exhaled slowly through her mouth and shut her eyes; she curled her toes and exhaled. In no time, she was swaddled in a chasmic dream.

When she got home from work the next day, she hurled her body on top of the mattress. "Ouch!" She screamed from the pain of her ribs against the force of the metal bed slats. Her stomach snarled as loud as the silver trumpet's martial noise. She felt lazy and worn out to change her clothes. Her skin was glistening from sweat, her dress clung to her body from dampness. It was a hot season; the skies were barren, the air was as dry as a bone, and the sun was an

oppressive ruler eroding people's energy. It was a time that Lucky wished she had a fan to cool off from the heat waves.

Instantaneously, there was a knock on the wafer-thin door. Lucky was confounded with surprise; she wasn't expecting anyone. Her eyes fell on the edge of the bed where the cooking pot and a rusty pail bucket were positioned. "Are you guys expecting someone cause I'm not"? she asked the rats that were running back and forth underneath her bed. Years later, when she was surrounded by many people, she still yearned for the small conversation she had with a beer belly, little beer belly, and brainiac.

She walked briskly and opened the door and set her eyes on a tall, slender woman with a child. The child struck Lucky as a face she had seen somewhere. She couldn't pinpoint whom the child resembled or where she had caught sight of him.

Lucky gave the stranger a blank look, "how can I help you?" She asked in a straightforward and soft tone.

"Are you Lucky?" Lucky nodded her head in accord. "I asked around for your place, people kept showing me the wrong directions. I ended up going to someone else's house." She giggled. "My name is Maryam; I knew your parents, Mama Sara and Farah. I just came back from Somaliland and heard the news of their demise. I am so sorry." She patted Lucky on her hand.

Lucky ushered her in, she signaled her to sit on the grey plastic chair she had bought at the market. Mariam is what you'd call a classical beauty. Her eyes were large in size, her face was symmetrically proportioned with high cheekbones and a small and evened nose, and with her full lips. Her warm golden undertone enthralled the attention of Lucky to her immaculate heart-shaped face. She simply found her as beautiful as the face of a young Greek god. She wore a silky *abaya*, a long outer garment like a dress that

gave the impression of the exorbitant price. The young child walked around the room and his sudden rush to Maryam described his shock at the penurious state of the house. He clenched Maryam's hand in dismay.

"How do you know my parents?" Lucky asked her as she bent under her bed and seized hold of the small thermos and a red plastic cup. She pinned her hope on the tea being warm since she had made it early in the morning and didn't have tolerable time to drink it. With keen attention, she poured the tea into the cup.

"Thank you so much," Maryam said, looking cheerful and please. "Your parents, Lucky, were an epitome of goodness and graciousness. Your father taught my younger siblings at his *Madrasah*, Islamic school. Therefore, we ran into each other for a while." She nonchalantly said.

"How come you know my mother, then?" Lucky curiously asked.

Maryam took a long paused. She looked at the child, scratched her head and in a hushed tone, she said, "I'll cut to the chase and rip the band-aid off now, many years back I was married to Farah as his second wife. We divorced because of the constant arguing." She stopped to look at Lucky's confused face. "I knew your mother very well. She was my best friend as well the best cowife anyone could even wish for"

Lucky shook her head and widened her jaws. She was utterly shocked, she couldn't believe it, she shrugged her shoulders in disbelief. It absolutely made no sense. "No No No, this can't be. My parents have never told me anything of the sort. You're lying. What are you after?" Lucky asked. The anger in her eyes disclosed how scared she was to find out the truth. She fought through the

pain of her parent's memories; her raging anger boiled down to her core.

"I know it's hard to believe. Listen I know something only you know. Your father wanted to name you Aniso but you were named Lucky after the nurse who delivered you. Your mother thought you were a stroke of luck; you were born with the umbilical cord was caught on your arm. Thus, you were named Lucky. You were their stroke of Luck in her life."

Lucky nodded her head and a smile formed, "that's true. Nobody else knows that." Lucky eyes fell on the little boy and pointed at him, "is that my brother?"

Maryam busts into a snorting laughter, "This is sister's son."

It clicked Lucky where she had seen the child, it was the same child who customarily wandered around the communal water tap without pants on, he was dressed in a long vest that looked like a dress. The little bit evoked the memory of Lucky's brother. He could have been the same age as the little boy if he was still alive. She deliberated as to why her parents didn't disclose such important information. "Did they think I was too young to know about Maryam?" She thought.

She cast her mind back to a disturbing story she heard that could relate well with secrets. A couple who had decided on settling down had to call off their wedding after a baffling realization. The man's family decided to pay the girl's family to officially announce their wedding and for the families to get to meet. During the visit, the man's father was abashed to see the girl's mother. He had sired a child with the woman and the child in question was the bride-to-be. The marriage was cancelled forthwith. The parents put on a

sub rosa. The girl and the man swore not to settle down for the fear of their next being their family.

While Maryam talked, Lucky espied the calmness and her kind nature. Her eyes being the windows to the soul she emitted gentleness." You have the same innocence in your eyes that your mother possessed. I visited you a couple of times when you were a child, you probably can't recall my face."

"No, I can't," Lucky nervously said. "There is no ideal attribute that would elucidate your mother. She didn't possess an ounce of hatred or jealousy. She tried all her best to get me to stay but it didn't work out. It shattered her heart when I left and travelled to Somaliland. I lost all communication with her after that. I recently arrived in Hargadera and found out about the news," she prompted. Her face dropped and she gawked at the little boy.

The conversation between Lucky and Maryam stirred a sense of exhilaration for Lucky. That night her stomach didn't growl like it used to from hunger. She felt full, full from thoughts of her encounter with Maryam. She anticipated the next meeting with Maryam so that she could get firsthand information to do with her parents. Finally, she felt like her innumerable questions would be answered. In the fullness of time, the relationship between the two burgeoned into an inextricable knot.

Lucky relished visiting Maryam's family for the reason she liked the feeling around a large family. Each time she visited them; Maryam's grandmother made sure the younger girls prepared a copious amount of food just for Lucky. "Every time you go home, you lose so much weight, I'll feed you until you get the body of a woman even if I have to get all the USAID peanuts meant for a child," the old woman told her. She sat next to her and made sure

that Lucky finished the substantial amount of food set before her; only when she had finished was when she was allowed to leave.

The first day she met Maryam's grandmother, she callously had a preconceived idea that she was a vicious and unsympathetic woman based on her first impression. Prejudice cannot let us see the things that are there because it makes us look for things that aren't. When Maryam introduced her grandmother to Lucky, she wrapped her hands and snuggled Lucky in her hug.

"I've heard so much about you," Lucky nervously said.

Maryam's grandmother gave her an open mouth smile calling attention to her perfect denture. "Call me, *Ayeyo*. After all, I'm your grandmother, right?" She tilted Lucky's chin up and cupped her cheeks with her hands. "I haven't heard much about you, my granddaughter, but I knew your mother very well. She was widely known for her kind words and actions. Her neighbors retold accounts of her helping them in their time of need. A fragrance always stays in the hand that gives the rose, and your mother left goodness next to her name. She really assisted when Maryam was sick; your mother stayed by her side. It's rare to meet someone who has a beautiful soul that reflects in their beautiful faces. May Allah rest her soul." She said with a smile.

The two developed a special affinity towards each other. Some of Maryam's family lived in Georgia, Atlanta. With the income they received, they remitted to their family in Dadaab. The family invested the money in several businesses around the camp. They started the first Tuk-tuk business that developed rapidly and successfully within no time. They infrequently relied on the rations provided by the U.N. with their hard-earned money. They bought their necessities from stores in the market. The rations and supplies

they received were rounded up, sent as a package to Nairobi to be sold in small quantities to shops.

Unlike Lucky's house-made from twigs, grass, and a U.N. tent usually known as *tukuls*, Maryam's family lived in an up to par constructed houses made from bricks and mud. During the last long rains, Lucky's house was on the verge of collapsing and being washed away by the grace of the almighty, she managed to stay at Naima's house. She cudged her brain as to whether such a finely constructed house like that would ever be washed away in a storm. Their compound was larger than anyone else in the camp. Two thatched huts were built across from each other. Inside the main house were objects Lucky had never before set her eyes on. They possessed a black and water chestnut white strips Majlis sofa, a portable radio with CD and cassette player and a large speaker, a rectangular glass coffee table with a glass-bottom shelf, tabletop curtains, and a solar energy fan. The kitchen was situated inside the house; unlike many people in the camp who cooked outside, they had the privilege of using a 5kg gas cooker with its tabletop burner and a kerosene heater.

Maryam's two sisters lived in the thatched house across from each other with their significant others. The firstborn was known for roaming about the camp and her MMA fighting. Whenever people had a brawl, you will be sure to find Maryam's older sister in the mix. She was notable for grappling her opponents and pinning them down with her upper arm. She was never scared of anything or anyone; she said whatever pleased her without considering people's emotions.

Compared to Maryam's younger sister's children, the older sister's child looked like a motherless boy. Lucky felt pity for her and especially for the little boy. That being the case, she bathed the

boy, who had never been bathed for a long time. Lucky was bewildered by seeing the nappy rashes on his back streaming down to his buttocks. She applied Vaseline to relieve his itchiness. The foot's arch to the ball of his foot had been eaten away due to his mannerism of walking without shoes on the hot sand. Insects formed a perimeter around him. They circled around his body, particularly the circumjacent areas of his mouth.

The younger sister, on the other hand, didn't allow her children to leave her sight. She was a mother hen, very cautious about her children wandering off. The relationship between the three sisters was bizarre. When Maryam bought lollipops or held one of her nieces and nephews, the two sisters made the same droll comments.

"You could have had your own children; instead, you are here going after our own. Get remarried as a third wife. Nobody will care if you're barren," they insouciantly sneered at her.

The family cooked and ate meals together, but instead, the younger one preferred to cook an aromatic *bonne bouche* for her husband and their children. Even though sharing and eating food together on the same platter was regarded as part of their culture, bringing unity and togetherness her behavior earned her the name, selfish *abaayo*

"*Ayeyo*, how was it like growing up in Mogadishu?" Lucky found herself asking the question that had been rattling her head.

"I grew up in the 60s one of the most preeminent moments of Somalia history. Mogadishu was a developed capital city with beautiful architecture and the roads were filled with famous muscle cars and also filled with people running errands. The women walked with no hijab, a veil for the head; we only covered our hair when we got married. My mother wore a beautiful embroidered sleeveless

guntino; a traditional Somali dress that is sleeveless. She let her long beautiful hair elegantly flump on her shoulders to her back. The men had ginormous afro hair, the larger it got the more stylish they looked.

My husband was a doctor and a jack of all trades. He was fascinated with the *balwo*, love lyric music style and he set his heart on being the next Sinimo, bought forth the genre. A few children down the line in the wake of 1990 the civil war brought all our life to a standstill. My eldest daughter moved to Somaliland with her husband. The rest of my family moved to Dadaab. Only my husband and our two youngest children remained back. We moved to a smaller town to avoid the constant insecurity that laid every corner."

Lucky interrupted her, "why didn't you leave with them?"

"Well my husband wouldn't leave, he thought everything would calm down. He was positive about a political breakthrough that would bring back everything to normalcy. Plus, he had a stable job there."

Lucky nodded her head. "continue please," she promptly said.

"Our small town was later infuriated by Al-Shabaab who had taken over a large territory. Everything became strict, we were not to act as the way the *kaffir*; those who don't believe in God conducted themselves. People were publicly whipped and sometimes killed for doing something considered *haram*; prohibited. One night, they barged into our house and ordered us to hand over our two children. My son was fifteen years old and a girl our daughter was fourteen at that time. Some of my son's classmates were forcibly recruited into Al-Shabaab when they were at school and transported to an unknown location. They wanted my daughter to serve as a wife to one of the militiamen and for my son to be their

soldier. My husband declined their offer and told them to leave. They forcefully gripped my son and my husband in an attempt to save our son was shot three times on his chest. The bullet went straight through his spine and exited. They galloped with my son as I stared at my dead husband's body, that was the last I ever seen or heard of my son."

"What about your daughter?" Lucky timidly asked.

"Alhamdulillah, she was at our neighbor's house she stayed safe. After that, we moved to Somaliland and stayed there for a while and finally decided to go to Dadaab to see my other grandchildren. I've been here ever since."

"How was it in Somaliland?"

"It's completely safe and sound."

Lucky had never been anywhere else, the story moved her. She spent days on end by Ayeyo's side. Lucky had enjoyed Ayeyo's prowess in tale-telling. When she slept over at their house, she overheard her narrating old folklores to the grandchildren. She was smitten by the stories Ayeyo told. She felt closer to her culture through the narrations.

When she finally got an alone time with Ayeyo, she animatedly asked, "Ayeyo, do you know the story of the Dagdare?"

"I think it's meant for children but I'll tell it to you. So long time ago there was this man. The man married a beautiful woman and had a son together. Eventually, her husband married another woman. He shared his animals and everything he had into two for the two wives. He then built a beautiful house for his second wife next to the first wife's house. This made the first wife jealous because the second wife was more beautiful. Her jealousy drove her insane and while her husband was at the house of the second wife, she took her baby and left late in the dark night. When morning

came and nobody found her. They search and search but nobody had seen her. The woman had travelled for long until she reached the Nugal valley. In the Nugal valley, an infamous woman called Dagdare lived. She hunted and killed people who set foot inside her valley. While the first wife was walking, she heard footsteps of someone running, the person who was running after her had created a big trail of dust carried by the strong winds. That's when she knew it was Dagdare. She began to run fast and Dagdare also runs faster trying to catch up to her. Ayeyo paused and gazed at Lucky. "why do you want to hear this tale? It's meant for children; I could tell you a tale that would be much fascinating."

Her eyes fell on the plastic carpet "please Ayeyo." She folded her hands together with the fingers pointing upwards and said, "my mother told me the story when I was a child. It reminds me..." she paused and torrents of embarrassment perused through her.

"I understand it, my child," she sternly said and placed her hand on her shoulder and squeezed it gently. "In the Nugal valley, an infamous woman called Dagdare lived. She hunted and killed people who set foot inside her valley. While the first wife was walking, she heard footsteps of someone running, the person who was running after her had created a big trail of dust carried by the strong winds. That's when she knew it was Dagdare. She began to run fast and Dagdare also runs faster trying to catch up to her. But the mother and the son were chubby and that's why Dagdare wanted them. She craved to have them in her mouth. They ran and ran. Still, Dagdare followed them until they reached the hargega holes. These were very deep holes. The woman couldn't cross the holes. She asked Allah to save her before she attempted to jump safely to the other side. Dagdare couldn't jump the holes. She watched the

woman and the baby on the other side. Her mouth still watered all she could think about was the meat on the woman and the child's body.

Lucky bust into laughter and said, "The first time I was a child. I was so afraid to go out at night because I was afraid that Dagdare would take me. I became afraid of stepping outside to go the toilet, so many multiple times I wet the bed for the fear of stepping outside." Ayeyo smiled at her with affection.

When Lucky heard the news that her local primary school had a shortage of teachers, she hastily presented herself at the headteachers office for volunteering work. Her hands were already full from having to balance two work but her sympathy and compassion towards the class eight students with no teachers compelled her to do something regarding their case. Most teachers had a hysterical attitude towards Dadaab due to the terror attack near the camp. Officials had offered them a load of money but they felt alarmed about getting their heads chopped off. Therefore, Lucky rose to the occasion to help the children in need who were sitting for their exams in a month, she created a balance time schedule to fit each of her tasks.

In the early morning, she convened students for class. In the mid-morning, she had decided to poise herself between the clinic and the school. Her first time at the school was undoubtedly a challenge. No student showed up at her morning class. Lucky decided to getting them back for that, on that account right before the bell for the last lesson was about to go off, Lucky made her entrance into the classroom for the lesson. The students boomed and hissed when they saw her with a mathematics textbook in her hand.

"You missed my lesson this early morning so today I'm compensating for my morning lesson. Next time make sure you come early otherwise you'll be missing a lot of football adventures with your friends in the evening." She could notice the disapprovals in their little faces, as much as she wanted to giggle, she retained her deadpan face throughout the lesson.

The following morning Lucky was greatly astonished when she got to the classroom, the classroom was packed full. New faces braced themselves before her. The girls sat on the right side of the classroom on the wooden desk and on the left side the boys aligned themselves. Lucky decided to put away the serious and unrelenting face and to add more fun to her class, she incorporated a classroom game for each lesson. She placed the students in groups and made sure they worked together to solve questions. She knew the importance of each student's participation. During the English lesson, she applied a storytelling game to teach about the tenses. She would start a story expeditiously and ensured each student added a sentence with the correct tense as a continuation to the story. Lucky knew the effective ways to capture each and every student with the use of new teaching techniques.

The students enjoyed the mathematics that they onset had a negative attitude about. Lucky related the lessons to real-life scenarios; she gave them a general idea of the school field when she taught them about the topic: area. She took the lessons outside to get her students to gain a more visual experience for the lesson. Every day became a new experience for them.

In due course, Lucky became their favorite teacher. It was all cut short when they sat for their final national exams for the primary level. It was undoubtedly the most melancholic day or all of them. No tears were held back, their crying sounded like blaring sirens

echoing in the classroom. Lucky was riding on a roller coaster of emotions. She alternated from being happy that her students had finally finished their primary level also, devastated at the thought of not teaching. She had developed a close bound relationship with them in the course of time therefore she bought them lollipops and biscuits with the little savings she had as a statement for the gratitude.

The climate change in the camp brought forth the season of malaria making the clinic bristling with people afflicted with malaria. All the workers in the clinic ceaselessly worked to avoid casualties. The children were mostly the more vulnerable, and the ward was graced with fearful faces of mothers and grief-stricken out of sort children. Since the bed was not enough, women brought in extra mattresses and laid them on the ground. Rashid lent a helping hand to the staff by administering the injection and physical examination to other patients. Even though he wasn't a doctor, he had the fundamental skills with medicine, and within no time, the patients had developed confidence in his ability.

He was gentle with the patients and smiled broadly and not like the smug smile Lucky was used to. The patient and their visitors referred to him as Dr. Rashid. Lucky irresistibly cringed every time she heard that.

"Dr., my son's fever is not coming down. Please do something," the woman pleaded. She had sat on a sisal mat with her baby in her arms.

"Don't worry *hooyo*, let me get the thermometer and some liquid ibuprofen to reduce it." He animatedly said he used the back of his hand to feel the temperature on the child's forehead.

Lucky witnessed a different type of Rashid during that time. Rashid was gentle with the patients. He ensured each and every patient got assistance. As lucky washed the vomit and the stained floorboards, she observed Rashid strolled around the ward to ensure the patients had been assisted.

"Why is he acting so differently," Lucky thought.

Rashid desisted from flirting with the nurses as he was accustomed to. He commenced each conversation with his farewell,

"I'm leaving soon, my time here has ended. It's time for me to get back and finalized my thesis research."

The clinic staff grew more despondent as the days went by. While they all sat together in the reception room, Rebecca made a jesting comment, "take me with you, Rashid. I want to experience the cold weather in Nairobi for my skin to turn a little bit lighter." Everyone uproariously laughed.

Rashid peeped at Lucky and smirked, "I really wish I could take you all to the states with me but I only have room for one person. "Who is it?" Rebecca asked. "None of your business, little miss spy." He used his index finger and exert little pressure on Rebecca's nose. She thrust his hand into his chest and walked away. All the people bust into a belly laugh.

The ward's capacity was reduced by days, and Dr. John discharged the patients who had received treatment and those with mild symptoms. This gave Lucky the opportunity to commence her work at her accustomed hours. When she got to the clinic the nurses had retired back to their quarters after their night shift. Lucky seized hold of her mop and bucket. She removed her long veil and hanged it in the supply room. She put on her small scarf, a heavy-duty gumboot, and made her way towards Dr. Hunk's office. In his absence, Dr. John and Rashid shared the small space.

Unexpectedly as she opened the door, Lucky found Rashid resting on the hospital cot. He opened his eyes abruptly, "hmm, it's you." He rubbed his eyes with his fingers.

Lucky picked up the pieces of ripped papers on the floor and placed them in the dustbin. Rashid sat up on the bed and watched Lucky maneuver the mop under the desk. "Lucky, stop what you are doing, I need to have a conversation with you."

Lucky placed her hand on her hips and watched Rashid like a hawk, "can't you see I'm working? Should I get you a pair of glasses?"

He lowered his eyebrows, slanted them together, and slightly squinted his eyes. "I'm serious. I have something to ask you." He moved closer and sat on the desk. "what's the one thing you hope to achieve or the one thing you desire to have."

Lucky held the handle of the mop closer to her chest. she wondered why Rashid was asking such questions. She was reluctant to answer, but she decided to answer after seeing Rashid's stern face, "definitely go to school. I don't want to be cleaning people's waste for the rest of my life." She said as she continued mopping the floor. Rashid stepped closer behind lucky.

"You are stepping on the floor that I just cleaned with your dirty shoes!" Lucky screamed.

Rashid took the mop from Lucky's hand and dropped it on the ground as Lucky curled her lip in annoyance.

"I'm giving you this offer only this once." He raised his finger at Lucky.

"Rashid, I don't want your nonsensical tantrums please, I have work to do," Lucky sneered.

"Lucky this life you're living here isn't the finest. It's shit. It's full of restriction and misery. I feel pity that you live in such conditions."

"I don't have a choice to be here. It's the circumstances."

"No, I don't agree with you, choose the life you want to live. If you don't choose it. Life will choose for you."

Lucky sarcastically laughed and clapped her hands, " what option do I have? I am in a prison. Should I write it in bold capital letter for you to understand?"

Rashid vigorously shook his head." why are you always stubborn? What I'm saying is that I'll allow you to go with me. I'm traveling to Nairobi tomorrow morning, and I have a seat for you. Lucky, just accept me, and I'll get you everything you desire. I'll get you in whatever you want. Car, school, pieces of jewelry, house, money. You can pursue whatever you want. You can leave this prison once and for all. I'll be waiting for you at the gate by 8 a.m. Don't tell anyone about it, and if you can't make it, I'll leave. The ball is in your court." He walked away with his hands deep in his pocket.

"He is so arrogant, *wallahi*; I swear to God. I can't stand him." Lucky vexed to herself." I can't do this. I really can't do this. He is up to something not good." She murmured to herself.

Rashid's words anchored Lucky into profound confusion. The thoughts of leaving Hargadera devoured her mind. "Perhaps accepting the offer would be fulfilling," she thought. But the thought of Rashid telling her not to disclose any of it was mysterious. She didn't know him. She didn't trust him. After racking her brain, the whole night, she sat on the bed, the sun rays penetrated through the door holes." This is it." She thought.



CHAPTER 9

Naima glared at the television with frustration. She had multiple times attempted to turn on the plasma T.V. mounted on the wall, but her efforts were null. She thought of pressing all the buttons, but nothing turned the television on. She started to simultaneously press everything at once still, and all didn't work. She recalled Ali pressing the red button on the remote, and they got to watch a movie. It evoked a sense of exhilaration and relaxation. Previously she had never seen a movie because they didn't have a television in Dadaab. She spent that weekend binge-watching movies with Ali on the T.V.

At a leisure pace, she walked to the bedroom to get her shawl. The corridor walls were dark cherry red, and on the left side was the bedroom. In the center of the bedroom was a big panel bed with a macaroon cream headboard. Adjacent to the bed was two white wooden nightstands that had the same feature as the bed. The inbuilt closet occupied the opposite wall of the bed.

Naima grabbed the white shawl that was on the upper shelf and wrapped herself in it. Ever since she reached Nairobi, she was constantly feeling cold. She wouldn't leave her bed for the trepidation of coldness eating her flesh. She walked to the balcony

and sat on the teardrop patio chair. She got a buzz from watching Nairobi; she was trying to get used to everything. The first time she arrived in Nairobi, she was astonished by the strange things in her presence. All her life, she had never seen roads occupied with a swarm of people who were not assembling for a specific reason but rather going to work or other errands. Some of the houses bore a resemblance to mosques; she was puzzled about how the actual mosques looked. In each corner, she saw restaurants and small eateries. "These people overeat," she thought after seeing a couple of people available in each of those places. The billboards towered around the tall building advertising different brands, and more than ever, Naima was curious as to how people managed to place the pictures up there. She pondered as to whether they used a specific machine to tear it down and placed another one. She slightly felt abashed to ask Ali about how some of the roads were built on top of each other without collapsing and how people managed to cross the road on bridges above the roads.

On her arrival to Nairobi, she experienced the sudden weather change, her body vigorously quivered from the coldness; Ali handed over his jacket to keep her warm. Their apartment felt surreal to her; she was apprehensive about living on the apartment's 10th floor. She was in constant nervousness of the building collapsing and burying her down with it. If she heard a squeak late at night, she was as sure as day and night succeed each other that the building would collapse any minute, but it never happened.

Ali had acquired a furnished apartment in a middle-class residential part in the South Land area of Nairobi. Regardless of how much Ali tried to explain what a furnished apartment entailed; Naima could comprehend what he meant. In the camp, people moved with all their items, and hearing that one could move into a

place without buying a single utensil was still and all overwhelmingly impressive. She struggled to get used to such an enormous house with appliances she had never used or seen before. She wondered what kind of food is cooked in such an enclosed item when she saw the microwave. But then Ali demonstrated that it was meant for heating up cold food. She was thrilled to heat up the leftover Spaghetti the next morning in the steel plate, but it turned out to be disastrous after she burnt her fingertips. Over the next days, she steered clear of using the kitchen appliances. She became alarmed to even open the fridge, "nothing is safe," she thought.

Back in the camp, the bathroom was in poor condition; there were no accessible showerheads, people used a bucket and a mug to pour water on themselves. It was a mild astonishment for Naima to see the bathroom the size of their house. It had a shower head that poured water like rainfall, and one could adjust the pressure of the water by turning the shower valve to the maximum. The bathroom walls were made of Alpes deco beige and a wall-mounted toilet, it was the first time Naima had even used a toilet instead of a pit latrine.

Ali took her to the mall to have dinner, and the culture shock kicked in. The dressing code was out of the ordinary in Naima's opinion. The women wore unusual short dresses or skirts, revealing their legs was completely unprecedented for her. Naima was mortified on their behalf; she couldn't glance at any of the women walking half-naked she felt self-conscious on their behalf. Some of the women wore makeup that made them duplicates of barbie dolls. As they took a walk, they saw couples sauntering across the mall holding hands and candidly kissed each other; it was entirely reposterous to Naima.

"Why don't they have shame?" Naima innocently asked Ali.

"It's, not a big deal to hold hands; they're expressing their affection that way," Ali said with a joyful tone.

"I don't think I can do that."

"It's not a big deal, well they feel comfortable; hence they hold hands," Ali clutched Naima's hand, and she felt his hands grasping her palms to her fingertips and their hands interlocked. She felt a sensational frisson of excitement she had never experienced before. More than ever, as she sat on the balcony chair, she missed her husband Ali, who had traveled back to Vancouver a month before. There was a surge of happiness as she mused on the happiest day of her life when her father said yes to Ali's proposal.

Ali set a day to meet her father to ask for Naima's hand in marriage. Ali's father traveled to Hargadera the night before to join forces with his son in asking Abdirahman about his daughter's hand. As it was tradition, Ali and his father told Abdirahman about their intention to buy goats and several items for the family. During the day, Abdirahman gathered men with whom he was related to, and older men to announce his daughter's engagement and for the people to meet the other family. No women were in sight. Ali and his father were introduced to the older men, and after that, they presented the gift. Each of the men presents was given five hundred shillings to obtain a blessing on their forthcoming wedding and as a mode of appreciating the family for taking care of the girl. An older gentleman made a blessing for Naima and Ali to prevent the two from being afflicted by the evil eye.

Naima cast her mind to the day when Ali had decided to talk to her father. She oscillated with dismay that her father would say no to Ali after the incident that happened. That day she spent the

whole day with Lucky to avoid any contact with her father; she could still remember the flaming hot veins that were about to burst on her father's face had when he was angry at her and her mother. Ali texted her that things had not gone according to plan; nonetheless, she decided to go home and face the music.

On her arrival, she was greeted with smiles of contentment of her siblings, and her father's eyes glistening with merriment.

"My daughter, you have found such a wonderful husband to be. He might even take you to Canada," her mother touched her cheeks with hers and made a smacking sound like a flying kiss on both cheeks. "You have made me so proud of you. You can finally live in a big house in Nairobi." She said, conveying her gaiety. It was then that she realized Ali was joking about things that had not gone according to plan. Her father had accepted his proposal and was generally full of beans about it.

The wedding date was held a few weeks after the engagement, and her mother had notified almost every soul in the camp that her daughter was getting married to someone living abroad. Everyone waited for the wedding as eager as hunters in pursuit their prey. The night before her wedding Naima was summoned by her mother and few older women for enlightenment and advice to do with marriage. Two of the older women sat on the plastic chair eating Khat that made their teeth brown stained. Their dental formulae made one think of a camel smiling. They stuffed the khat leaves and stem into their inner cheeks, and owing to that fact, they remained silent to avoid spitting it out.

Naima sat closer to her mother on the mat. Her mother added more *unsi*, incense, in the *dabqaad*, the fire raiser, and the hot charcoal burnt it intensely. The smoke at a full-tilt rose up, and the fragrance made a way through the whole house. Her mother poured

the coffee into the small white mirra porcelain cups. Naima poured her coffee in the saucer and loudly slurped her tea. She had done this since she was a child to avoid getting burnt by the hot tea, a regular tendency that couldn't give up no matter how much she tried.

Her mother stuck her hand lightly and said, "stop doing such stuff. You're getting married tomorrow; this means you need to start acting like a woman." She drank her tea and continued, "and it's not even about getting married; it is all about staying married for the rest of your life. Remember this very clearly, if you get divorced, you will embarrass our family. We live in a small community, and people know each other; you will be prejudiced and embarrassed if your marriage ends up in divorce. You'll return to Dadaab, and instead of helping us, you'll become a more burden to your old parents. Do not let your marriage fail; if you have to kiss your husband's feet, then do it if it expresses your loyalty to him. No one in this camp has got the opportunity like you, don't mess it up." She pointed her finger at Naima to warn her. "Don't try to argue with your husband, he is always right and that is why he is the head of the family, and he is the one authorized to make decisions. "

Naima felt uneasy from her mother's words. "Why should he be the one to make decisions? I'm not a human-like him?" She thought. She was perceptibly discomfited.

That moment reminded her of the day that her mother nonchalantly asked her if she was a virgin. This was after she had heard about one of Naima's age mates, who had got married, and the husband babbled to people that the lady wasn't a virgin after spending the first night together. Losing one's virginity and especially for a girl before marriage, was a taboo everyone knew. The girl was taken back to her parent's place, facing the shame of losing her virginity. According to the groom's family, the girl's

parents were forced to return the *yarad*; the worth money paid for the girl before marrying, because they had offered ‘disintegrated goods.’ Her husband accepted her back with only one condition. He was to marry his cousin as his second wife and use girl’s *yarad* to give it to the new bride's family. The girl genuinely agreed to her husband's circumstances, a disconsolate death stamp she placed for herself. Her husband perennially mistreated her like a street dog. She couldn't tell her parents or even leave her husband; she was ill-fated, an embarrassment to everyone.

Instantaneously after the incident, women at the camp started to get their daughters to take a virginity test from the old woman who performed female circumcision. Naima's mother was fearful of her daughter Naima undergoing the same tribulation as the girl. She, therefore, couldn't accept Naima's word that she was a virgin. She needed proof. Thus, she called the old woman to come and test her daughter, Naima's without her knowledge. That day she persuaded Naima to accompany her to visit one of her old friends in the camp. On arrival, Naima and her mother, instead of being ushered into the living room were taken past the living room to the bedroom. Naima became conscious of the unfolding event after seeing the old woman sitting on the mattress, she recognized her as the old woman who executed the female circumcision in the camp. Her sadness and anger were triggered to a maximum range. She outstared her mother as she removed her pants without anyone informing her. Furthermore, she laid her body on the mattress and spread her legs in front of the old woman. The woman inserted her fingers and made Naima feel a faint pain.

"She is still pure," the woman said to Naima's mother.

Naima spotted a hint of embarrassment in her mother's tone, telling her to wear her underwear. Like most Somali women,

her mother had a great deal of pride and couldn't apologize to her. Naima eventually decided to be the bigger person and forgave her mother for her actions.

Nevertheless, as her mother spoke to her, she felt a build-up of detestation for her mother for all that she had done to her.

"You are your husband's property." Her mother said.

She felt repulsion for her mother's backward thinking, but she didn't want to wreck the festive occasion with her conflicting ideas.

On her wedding day, her mother added incense on the hot charcoal in the *dabqaad*, fire raiser, and passed it over her clothes and hair for a long-lasting perfume on her body. The wedding and the 7th-day ceremony were to be held the same day because Naima and Ali were leaving for Nairobi the next day. She wore a green silk *dirac*; a long loosely fitted dress for the main wedding and the same *guntino*; the traditional Somali wedding dress that Fartun wore for the 7th-day ceremony. Unrestrained vivacity swept across the compound, and the women ululated from genuine exhilaration. The women started thunderously playing the drums.

*Hoobe hobaala hoobala hoobalow
hoobala hoobalow*

Hoobe hobaala

*Ee hoobe hobaala hoobalayey hadaba
hobaala hoobalayey habada*

Ee hoobe

*Salaama calaykum safkan meesha joogayow
you O' who have assembled here*

Peace be upon

*Salaama calaykum soomaaliyey dhamaan
you Somalis in your entirety*

Peace be upon

*Gabadhu waa ubax la beeroo uroon indhaha
pleasing to the eyes like a flower sown*

This girl is

<i>Waa iftiin belelayoo waa ilays la shiday</i>	<i>She is a glaring</i>
<i>beam; she is that kindled light</i>	
<i>Ragbaa u janaaney jaaheeda inay arkaan</i>	<i>Many men have</i>
<i>gone mad for a glimpse of her sight</i>	
<i>Kuwaa ka sahwiyeey salaadii Ilaahigay</i>	<i>Some have</i>
<i>blundered and mistaken the prayers of Allah</i>	
<i>Kuwaa riyo moodey oo aan rumaysan weli</i>	<i>Some thinking it a</i>
<i>dream have not believed it yet</i>	
<i>Kuwaa dhuuniga la quutaa dhunkaal ka yahay</i>	<i>For some all</i>
<i>things edible have become but poison</i>	

After the ceremony had concluded, the *xeedho*, wrapped winding item, was presented to Naima and her bridesmaid, Lucky, to open. Even though the *Xeedho* wasn't practiced among their clan once it was presented to them, they had no otherwise but to open it. The *xeedho* was mostly practiced among the northerners in Somali. In the forgone times, *xeedho* was a tradition practiced with the specific ordinance of when and how to open it. The *xeedho* symbolized the bride hence given the same tender handling of the ropes like the bride during her wedding night. The ceremony took place in the bride and the bridegroom homestead after the wedding's cessation on the 7th day.

As it was tradition, the *xeedho* was to be opened by a close relative of the bridegroom, and not the groom wasn't permitted to open it. The male chosen to perform it would open the upper veil off, just like a bride's wedding gown, and then process with the ropes' untying. There would be a woman with a stick who carefully observed the man untying the ropes. The woman observing was behind the twisting of the rope knots; hence, she is well aware of the ropes' opening. Assuming the man placed his hands on the wrong

end of the rope or tries to open the rope from a different knot, the woman watching him would lightly whip him with her stick. This showed that he had to look for another way of opening the rope. The beating would carry on until the *Xeedho* was opened. Once opened, the container inside the *Xeedho* is sliced open, and inside lies things like *oodkac*; camel meat that has been prepared and ready for consumption. Since Naima's family didn't follow such traditions, her family and some of the guest opened the ropes revealing the meat stuffed inside and biscuits which were served to the guests.

After the wedding was over and done with Naima and Ali could not consummate their marriage that night. Since they were traveling to Nairobi the next morning, Naima spent her last night with her family. A newly wedded woman rarely wore her old clothes; the groom was to cater for her new wardrobe. On this account, Naima distributed the gifts she had received that included dresses and bedsheets. She left the next morning, with no luggage but a handbag that had only a tissue napkin. Before their arrival to Nairobi, Ali had made prior preparation in Nairobi; he had sent an agent to secure a safe residential home that was fully furnished. With the help of his uncle's wife, she presided over buying the *dirac*, a long and loosely fitted clothes, for Naima. It turned into a surprise for Naima when she saw the miscellaneous collection of dresses arrayed in the closet.

They teared up the miles to Nairobi in a land rover, and their driver turned out to be none other than Kamau.

"You came alone, and now you're leaving with a wife. You must have such a sweet tongue, Ali to get such a beautiful wife. Congratulations my friend." Kamau said, staring at Ali and Naima through the rear mirror.

Ali gave him the ‘you think you know stare but you have no idea’ wink at him.

"Where is your friend, Rashid right?" Kamau asked.

Nonchalantly Ali replied, "he must have really done a number on you. You can't forget him, can you?" Kamau laughed uproariously and, lightly smacked the steering wheel. "He has a longer summer holiday, mine is about to conclude."

In the spirit of inquiry, Kamau asked, "once you leave, who will be staying with your beautiful wife?"

Naima at once felt a panic setting in she took a quick glance at Ali. "It's all right my love. Don't think about a small issue. I'll always visit you *inshaAllah*; If Allah wills" He whispered in her ears. Naima felt out of breath, her breath increased quickly and promptly. Her heart rate hiked and her pulse pounded. She nibbled her lower lips from pure ecstasy.

On their arrival at the first police roadblock the police officers instructed them to alight from the vehicle with their I.D. cards or passports. While one of the police officers searched the car, Ali seized a hold of the other officer's wrist and walked to the opposite side of the road. Even though the surface temperature of the sun was 5,778 K and 151.88 million km far it felt like the sun as if it was just above her head, and her skin was melting away. Ali and the police officer showed up after they had wandered off in the bushes.

"Naima get in the car we're going." Ali sternly told her.

The officer searching the car pulled the spike roadblock and allowed the car to proceed with its journey. Naima couldn't fathom why the police officers let her pass without her having any proper documents.

"Next time Ali, just hand them the money as you greet them. Slip it in their palm after they ask for her I. D card." Kamau said.

"Thank you so much," he responded.

Kamau shrugged his shoulders and said, "Anytime my friend. Welcome to Kenya where the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed."

The more they got closer to Nairobi, the more the officers at each police roadblock demanded more money. They stipulated a higher price and Kamau negotiated and talked them down by telling them to accept a cheaper price because the economy wasn't favorable for all of them.

Ever since the journey began, Naima was overly thrilled she couldn't take a nap like Ali; at every stop they made, she asked Kamau how far they were from Nairobi. She noticed the roads getting wider and wider. She threw a glance at Ali and then at Kamau,

"This is called Thika superhighway. We are just a few minutes. Kamau said.

Naima's spirit brightened; it cheered her soul when the *matatu*, the bus; the bus driver waved at her. The *matatu*, the bus, had a beautiful Bob Marley graffiti artwork on the sides, and the music was blaring as loud as an ironmonger's clank. They arrived at their apartment half-past 7 o'clock looking and feeling tired, but they couldn't just call it a night for they had fallen in love with the whole world, and their love consumed them into one spirit.

Naima muffled up in a coat and wore her long scarf to head downstairs for a walk. Her next-door neighbor had been playing loud music at obnoxious times, but she couldn't have a discourse

with her since Ali had told her to maintain a low profile. She wasn't allowed to talk to anyone or go outside of the apartment. Ali had called to inform her about Somalis without Identification cards or papers being rounded up and taken behind bars after the terror attack on Kenyan soil. Fear crippled in Naima's nerves, and she became scared to even step outside. She couldn't take being locked inside anymore; she decided to head to the parking area to stretch out her legs. She set foot inside the elevator and pressed the ground floor.

The first time she stepped on the elevator, she was terrified as coal is black, and water is wet; she clung to Ali's arm when the elevator went up, then down she could feel her bladder about to burst. It was the same scenario when she used the escalator. When she stepped on the escalator, her left leg lost balance, and she almost slipped backward. She was no longer in control of her legs, for they were trembling uncontrollably. She pressed them tightly to maintain a vertical posture. When she got off the escalator, she had to jump up to avoid the machine from devouring her feet.

The parking lot was of enormous size; each corner had an alphabetical label assigned to each resident. The lot was mostly midsize sedan cars of all colors and different SUVs. The only car that caught people's attention in the lot was the yellow jeep renegade in block B. At a leisure pace, Naima walked across the parking lot to where the children were playing. She leaned against the bonnet of a Toyota Wish and meticulously kept her eyes on the children playing in front of her. Some of the kids were competing in riding their bikes, and the others were cheering them on.

"You see, Devan is basically a pro at everything he does." one of the girls with a long braid opined.

"You saying that because he just won the race, but that doesn't count. Michelle beat him at the martial combat video game." A shorter girl injected.

"I heard that Michelle's parents are poor, and that's why she goes by bus to school." The long-braided girl said.

"Ugh, that gives me the creeps. Riding the bus is for losers. If my parents don't want to drop me off at school, I'll get an uber X. I can't ride on a bus, that's so tacky." A boy said, twisting his face, as if disgusted.

Naima suppressed her laughter, but the corner of her eyes crinkled, and she smiled broadly. She harked back to the days at the camp when a couple dozen of boys took turns to learn to ride one bike. One could only have a single minute to ride, and the next boy would confiscate it. The Somali girls in the camp weren't allowed to ride any bike for the fear that it may widen their hymen; therefore, she never got the chance to ride a bike.

The children in front of her seemed sheltered from any hardship. They wore the finest clothes, which were as clean as a virgin silver, unlike the children she knew at the camp who wore one cloth from Sunday to Sunday and only took a shower once a week. She had never heard a single child back in Dadaab conversing in English. They were Bonafede experts of their mother tongues, and the little English they learned at school was filtered into execrable disarray of Somali English.

In her lower primary level, they never got to learn actual proceeding knowledge. Each week the teacher repeated the same lessons, and the students could care less; they went to school to simultaneously utter what the teacher was saying in perfect harmony. When the teachers asked what they wanted to be when they grow up, they all shrieked, "we want to be doctors." That was

the only profession they were well aware of since their teacher had mentioned it as the most elite of all professions. Little did they know that those who progressed to the secondary level would later reevaluate their dream career because of hopelessness. Some of Naima's classmates ended up pursuing trade skills like tailoring and masonry to make a life for themselves.

Naima mused on what Ali had told her about creating attention outside; he had often warned about stepping outside. He had recently told her that, "if you step outside and then people see you, they might call the police and say that you are an immigrant because of your hijab." Ever since there was a terror attack, Ali constantly called Naima if she just as much missed to answer his call; he was a worried bird and would contact the watchmen to check if she was at home. Therefore, she made haste to go back to her house.

The house was a quiet nest of monasteries except for the distant blasting music from her neighbor's house. She set her mind to using all the tactics into getting the Television to working. She removed her scarf and wrapped the long sleeve jacket on her waist. She bent close to the T.V. stand that was oval in shape with audio towers. She clutched the T.V. manual book that was on the lower deck. She perused through the manual, and heedfully observed the different wires. She plugged in the black 3 pinned plugs into the socket and switched it on.

The Television screen displayed the company name and promptly showed the channel they were the last watching before Ali traveled. "Viola, the genius has figured it out," she said, holding the remote close to her chest. She turned up the volume on the Indian channel and sat on the couch.

She spent several days watching Indian movies and Telenovelas eating the stocked snacks as her meals. She felt held hostage by her guilty pleasure of watching such romantic movies that she despised but couldn't put a stop to. With a book, she was particularly fussy about what she read. She was fond of Non-fictional prose, and when it came to fictional books, she detested romantic prose. She found no appeal from reading romantic books; she regarded them as unrealistic endeavors, yet she enjoyed watching such romantic movies. Every time she watched the movies, pangs of her conscience ate a chip of her soul. She watched the movies and films but still couldn't keep away the thoughts of Ali, her family and Lucky. Even though Ali gave it her best shot to call Naima as much as possible, she still felt loneliness streaking through her existence like a streaming rain. In return, she shunned away from calling and answering Lucky's phone call for it would have made her feel downhearted and lonelier.

When Lucky called her as she was watching T.V., she was filled with remorse for having left her back in Dadaab. The hair on her hand rose from the panic settled in, she gripped her phone her heart pounded with all might and main and a single sweat made headway from her forehead. She pressed and held the power button until the phone switched off. Like a flash, anger incapacitated through her bringing her to close her eyes.

The thoughts sucked the air in the room and felt like she was choking from out of breath. She opened her mouth wide, but she still couldn't breathe. She stepped outside on the living room balcony that overlooked the beautiful cityscape. She took a long breath to calm her nerves down as she looked over the orange sun merging with the buildings' ridge roof.

"Hey there, I am Naomi," a voice shot from the adjoined balcony that startled Naima.

She recognized the girl as her neighbor. She had seen her a couple of times in the evening during the weekdays with a child in his school uniform. She figured that he was probably her son for sharing almost identical features. Naomi wore tight Knee-length white shorts with a black-white cut-out tank top and she was sitting on a patio chair with a recliner holding a book, '*purple hibiscus.*'

"Hello, I am Naima." She waved at her. Naomi grinned gleefully. "I like Chimamanda Ngozi's novels."

Naomi dropped the book on her lap, "that's wonderful; I've been attempting to read this book for the last one year, but I can't have a single moment to myself. So how many of her novels have you read so far?" She asked.

"Umm, it's only one, Americana," she embarrassingly muttered.

"You can borrow this anytime you want it; it's not like I'm going to finish it. I don't have the zest for books. I might fall asleep any minute I read." Naomi nonchalantly told her. "Your English is pretty good; I actually thought all Somalis have a problem with English. No offense Naima.

"None taken. But what makes you think that I am Somali?"

"I know I'm going to sound dumb, but I usually think that all Muslims who wear the scarf thing on their head are Somalis."

Naima nodded her head, and a smile formed, "not all Muslims are Somalis, Somali is just a tribe and Islam is a religion. Religion is a system of belief just like Christianity; it's something one chooses and beliefs in and it's not limited to anyone. Like anyone can be Muslims doesn't matter what kind of ethnic group."

"You must be thinking I'm such a fool." Naima shook her head. "Thank you for the explanation, you can call me ignorant, but nobody has ever explained anything like that to me. By any chance, are you a teacher, or have you done a course related to sociology?"

Naima responded, "no, nothing serious. Just a short course here and there." She had remembered what Ali had told her about mentioning that she was from a refugee camp, and she refrained.

"Oh well, I went to the University of Nairobi, class of '10. Currently working at the Central Bank of Kenya. My work involves finances. I'm good with numbers but horrible with words." She laughed. "So, Naima, why is it that Muslims blow themselves up, and they especially target Christians?" She promptly asked.

The question gave Naima a jolt; she processed the question in her head, but she couldn't think of a correct answer. Naomi had crossed her legs and squinted her eyes at Naima. "You shouldn't judge a whole religion based on a few bad apples. Islam actually means peace, and there is nowhere in the Quran that justifies killing. At the end of the day, we are all humans, and humanity needs to prevail."

Naomi looked as if she still wasn't convinced; she tapped her index on the side of her lips and asked, "don't you feel like being a Muslim woman you are oppressed for example why is that you wear the scarf and hiding your beauty behind it."

Naima sat on the teardrop chair, swung her body in the direction of Naomi. She knew the discussion would be longer than she had expected it to be. Her voice soared, "my hijab isn't oppression, I wear it because it is my self-identity. My pride. My modest. Nobody has forced me to wear it. I am a grown-up, and I know who I am, and I choose to wear my hijab."

"I totally support you if it's your choice. But why do Muslim men practice Polygamy?" She abruptly asked.

"This goes way back to so many centuries ago back to the time when women got married for various reasons like offering them protection and as means of their survival. The men were allowed to marry more than one wife to assist widows and divorcees shunned away from society. Men who could not invest their emotional and financial abilities equally to all women were not marry more than one wife."

Naomi twisted her lips to the sides and said, "I still think that it's not right. But I like the fact that they marry the divorcees and widows it's a good gesture. But do they still practice polygamy for that case?"

Naima shrugged her shoulder." it a new era in time, so it a different way of doing things, I guess."

Naomi stood up, stretched her long legs, and gave Naima the book she was holding. "Keep it, I'll love to invite you for coffee sometimes."

"Yes, sure, I'd love to," Naima responded.

She perceived Naomi as a bold woman who spoke her mind. She had nearly no hair on her head that made her natural beauty alluring. Naima later learned that Naomi shaved off her hair because she didn't want the pressure of being pulled into society's standards of beauty; she was looking for her own identity on her own terms of what beauty involved.

"It was nice to meet you." Naomi extended her hand at her, and Naima shook it. "I can't wait for you to answer all my questions. I have a lot of questions for you."

"It will be my pleasure to answer them." Naima smiled back at Naomi.



After her conversation with Naomi, she discovered that the people she was set out to avoid were not as bad as Ali's uncle had discerned them. Within a brief moment, she had felt closer to Naomi, and she gained more assertiveness into stepping outside of the apartment unit.

That day the cold weather had altered, and the sun took its rightful place, making Nairobi warmer than Naima was used to. She walked outside and took a step outside of the swinging gates. Her heart was singing melodious tunes of happiness. She walked on the paved pathway at a slow pace, observing the man who grilled corns just near the apartments at close sight. She was compelled to say hello as if she knew him but refrained.

Suddenly she took a step behind, everything was spinning in circles, and she couldn't hold herself from falling. Her face had become pale like the moonlight beams. She plunged into the dusty ground. Everything went dark.

"Hello, can you hear me, Madam?" Naima's eyelids flickered in an attempt to open them, but the lights blinded her. Her head was heavy from the concussion, and she felt a thunderous pounding on her temple. She steadily opened her eyes and gazed at the room. She was in a hospital and with her utmost energy, she exerted herself to sit on the bed.

"Careful there," the doctor-assisted her to sit up. She clutched a small flashlight the size of a pen and slightly pulled down the bottom lead of her eyes, carefully observing them.

"What's your name, young lady?" The doctor swiftly asked.

"Naima."

"How old are you?"

"I am 22," she candidly replied.

"Can you remember what happened to you?"

"I'm not sure, all I can remember was losing my balance as I was walking."

The doctor buried her face in the file she was holding. She was busy putting down notes on the report sheet.

"You were brought here by good Samaritans who paid for your registration and check-up. You haven't been injured, just a few scrapes on your knee which will heal in a matter of days."

The doctor pulled down her glasses to the tip of the nose and gazed at Naima, "avoid skipping meals, your blood sugar went low, and that isn't good for your conditions. Anyway, congratulations, madam, you are pregnant."



CHAPTER 10

The pulse beating on her temples got intense occluding every noise. She ran her finger on her belly a quiet contentment spread through her at the thought of a being growing inside her. The happiness quickly washed off, "what will Ali say?" She thought in view of the fact that they hadn't discussed the right time to start a family.

"Are you able to get home?" The doctor asked her shattering her gaping thoughts into smithereens.

"Which hospital is this?" She asked staring fixedly at the doctor.

"Radiance Hospital," she replied.

"Oh, my apartment is just on the opposite road."

"Okay, then miss Naima I'm not going to recommend any medication for vitamins and nutrients. I want you to have a balanced diet. No more starving yourself." She pointed at her with the pen she was holding on to. "We have an excellent obstetric field. You should consider us as your top service for your childbirth."

"Yes, of course, I'll talk to my husband about it." Naima agreed.

The doctor stood up disclosing her sky-scraping height and her black high heeled laced-up ankle boots. Her sedar brown hair was tied up in a low knotted ponytail disclosing her broad forehead of a diamond-shaped face. Naima focused on the doctor's I.D tag on her breast pocket of the coat. It read, "Dr. Xiomara, Physician," in her head Naima thought of pronouncing the name but it felt difficult to know if the letter x was silent or not.

She shook the doctor's hand and said, "thank you so much, doctor. Mind if I ask you, where is the exit?"

The doctor opened the door and pointed at the reception desk. "turn right and you'll see the door straight ahead."

Naima sauntered across the reception bay hoping to come across the person or the people who helped her but she only encountered faces of ill patients. Her walk home was full of occurring contemplation of how she was going to reveal the news to Ali that she was pregnant with his child. She lay a hold of the phone on her night-stand and settled her fatigued body on the leather

couch. She vacantly looked at her phone, fear crippling in her at the thought of calling Ali.

"Burr Burrr Burrr Burrr." Naima gasped from the vibration of her phone that startled her. It was Ali that was calling her.

"Hello," she answered the phone.

"Hellooooooo my wife, my African queen, I've missed you." Ali tittered. "Please switch to your camera and let me see you." He continued.

Naima pressed on the video icon and titled her phone on the landscape. Ali had put on black Flat-front pants and a tucked-in a white vest. He was holding a white short button-down collar shirt on his right hand and a light blue linen shirt on his left.

"So, which one should I wear today?"

"Umm," she paused, "wear the one on your left, seems like it's ironed."

Ali tossed the white short button-down collar shirt on his bed and unbuttoned the other shirt.

"How is everyone at home?"

Ali sighed, "They are good alhamdulillah, baby I'm sorry but my mom still won't talk to you. She's mad about our marriage." He neatly tucked in the shirt and buttoned it up. "She can't undo what we've already done. We are married and she'll have to swallow the hard pill." He flinched a black tie with a white stripe at the bottom of his neck. "I'm hoping to come to Kenya very soon to see you." Naima nodded her head at a full tilt. "I have sent money for you through my uncle, he'll get you the money soon."

Naima clenched her teeth, "No, please I don't need any more money. I haven't spent any of the money you sent." Her voice implied her annoyance. "Ali I am pregnant!" she shrieked.

Ali's eye widened and he spits the water he had in his mouth and projected it at his bed. He clutched his phone in his hand placing it closer to his face, he nervously laughed and said, "is this a joke? You're joking right?"

"No, why would I joke about something serious like this. I was feeling unwell and I went to the hospital across from here and they confirmed I was indeed pregnant."

"But we practiced...", he frowned. He peered at his watch and said, "I'll call you later, I need to rush to work." He disconnected the call.

"Ugh!" Naima bellowed loudly. The scenario gyrated into Naima's worse nightmare that would later materialize into a woeful matter between the two. A panic settled at the pit of her stomach rising from every doubt in her heart about how Ali must have interpreted the message she dropped on him. She repeatedly thought, "what if I'd have told him the news calmly, would he have responded more positively?" She ceaselessly thought of the right propitious manner in which she could have told him but since water spilt cannot be scooped, she therefore, shouldered what happened.

Several weeks passed and Naima waited for Ali's call but he vanished like a smoke in the thin air. She couldn't get a hold of him. Naima considered getting work to keep her mind wrapped up. She consulted Naomi who suggested that she should start by babysitting the kids at the apartment. The following day, Naomi set the ball rolling by dropping off his son at Naima's apartment. She had written a lengthy note that included her son's sleeping timetable, a list of allergies, things he was allowed to eat, and those he wasn't.

"Don't get him to eat anything made of milk or drink it. He isn't allowed to eat chocolate, sugary drinks, coffee, cream, foods with saturated fat, eggs, yogurt, or any canned food." She handed

her a black duffel bag and continued," I have packed a cooked foodstuff, heat them in the microwave and ensure that it's not hot before you serve it to him. His tongue easily gets sore from hot food. He also needs to sleep the whole afternoon, don't let him out of your sight until he is snoring otherwise, he'll be playing and getting into a silly mischief. In the evening, change him in the heavy dark green jacket make sure to fasten the zip all the way up. He's allowed to play the video game after he wakes up from his afternoon nap. That will keep him busy for a couple of hours until I came back home. I'll be back by 8 pm sharp." She tightly hugged and kissed his son on his forehead bidding him goodbye.

Naima was immensely surprised by the level of consideration Naomi had for her son. She became aware that all the mothers in the apartment had the same tendency when it came to leaving their child at her place. They were all strict about their children's requirements which were a crucial part of her care regime. Naima discerned that most of the children were used to not spending time with their mothers, as soon as they were dropped off in the care of Naima, they ran off to play, resisting the part they had to bid their mother's goodbyes.

With her first earned income Naima's entrepreneurial skills were ignited. Her mind was enthralled by the thoughts of starting a business so as to send money to her parents back at home. She made her way to Eastleigh on a matatu, without an escort for the first time. She thrust through the throng of shoppers along the Garissa lodge street asking for directions to the nearest mall that sold bed sheets at a wholesale price. She was alarmed about someone pickpocketing her money she, therefore, stowed her money away in her bosom. After a hassle bargaining, she bought the bedding and marketed her prepossessing picked-out sheets for her neighbors to buy. She timed

when a parent dropped off their child at her apartment and displayed the variety of beddings telling them, “this bedsheet is imported from Dubai. It's currently the finest bedsheets in the market right now. Its Egyptian cotton, incredibly comfortable and soft. You'll sleep like a baby once you try them." She still laughed at her fabricated catchphrases that made her bedsheets sold within a week making her business burgeon.

The thoughts of what happened to Ali galloped her once a while but she made sure that she was always surrounded by people to annihilate the thoughts. She derived great pleasure from listening to the jibber jabbers of the kids at her home, it cleared out the pain she felt deep within. It was like a piece of sweet love music, with the softest instruments at play balancing the emotions at every beat that makes every listener yearn to increase the volume. The music relaxes the listener licensing them to be as high as the sphere soaring them higher and higher. But at the end of the song, reality hits the listener. Hence when the children left Naima felt as lonely as a deserted ship at sea. The melodious instruments that filled her air restored to her overflowing sadness. At night she lightly pressed her hands over her stomach holding in the tears that asphyxiated her. But as time progressed something else ruminated about in her mind.

Most of the children Naima took care of had become fond of her and they would compete for her attention apart from one single girl named Sophie. She hardly ever talked to anyone. Naima kept a weather eye on her noticing the restlessness and uneasiness in her eyes. Even though Naima stationed all the color crayons for the children Sophie was picky about her grey crayon. She consistently drew the same peculiar drawing of a little girl holding her mother's hand and at the margin of the paper, she drew a monstrous-looking man. She wore her emotions undisguisedly, her smile called to

attention the misery of her dull eyes with an expression of smeared misery.

Naima became wary of the hilt when she saw the dark bluish bruise on Sophie's upper limb as she was drawing with her sleeves rolled up. She became heedful of her sixth sense in regard to who might have harmed Sophie. She, therefore, set out to gather information nonetheless her efforts were slayed the night everything unveiled.

"He...eee...ll" an ear-splitting scream filled the quiet atmosphere reverberating through the apartment "e..l..p me!" The scream walloped Naima light nap in the graveyard shift hours. She deliberated as to whether she was dreaming or she had heard someone screaming.

"My dreams are getting wild; I can almost hear my nightmares screaming loudly," she thought.

Suddenly, the intense silence was pervaded by a scream of trepidation piercing through the freezing temperature. The second scream was unusual, it typified pivotal point of agony, discomfort, and distress. Naima was oblivious to what she had heard until she heard a thump on the door upstairs. She sprinted for the door getting her hand on the gabsaar that was hanged on the door hooks.

"Open this door!" the voices of two men clamored sternly. Naima opened her door and made a way upstairs to the apartment that generated the hubbub of screams.

She found a large number of her neighbors had gathered together in front of the apartment door. A tall and masculine man who had put on a long black hooded bathrobe tried to open the door with a plastic card. He took the card and slid it in slanting it downwards as he held the doorknob and swiftly opened it. The men darted inside the house as fast as the windy flames seizing hold of

the man holding a brick hammer. A detailed account of what had transpired was a plain sail of apprehension hence nobody talked, everyone, sprang into action to help the woman and her little girl who were on the floor exceedingly terrified.

Sophie had a red hand slap mark across her face while one of her mother's eyes was swollen. As she raised her head at the strangers in her house, she revealed the red and slightly purple bruises surrounding her swollen eyes, the middle of her lower lips was split open and the scratches on her face were conspicuous from miles away. Sophie's eye was dripping with tears terrified by the angry face of her father resisting to be held down by the men. Her chin strenuously trembled and she sobbed hysterically. Naima's motherly instincts propelled her to hold Sophie close and hug her. She held her jotted bones as fragile as a lily. Naima was puzzled at the occurring image of a father physically attacking a small child.

She remembered the day Sophie was dropped off at her apartment by her mother, Alice. Her mother had informed her about Sophie's social anxiety but Sophie was bubbly and with a cheery smile around the other kids. It all suddenly changed, her eyes didn't express the smile and she gradually avoided playing with the other children. She spent more time sketching and she saw it as big deal to talk therefore, she didn't utter any word. Naima overlooked her sudden change of behavior as her social anxiety.

Her doubts had manifested themselves Infront of her eyes. She felt dismayed. All the noises of her neighbors talking were hushed down by her musing about her unborn child. "No one will ever harm you as long as you're alive," she thought.

Suddenly, a stout hairy man, he was a plain-clothed officer, came on the scene and cuffed Alice's husband. He tugged the

handcuff for him to stand up. His screech was a loud as the trumpet rolls.

"*Habari*. Hello madam, I want you to come with us so that you can record your statement against your husband."

Alice wiped the droplets of tears on her cheeks dragooning herself to smile at him. Her body was discernibly shaking like a leaf. She staggered behind the officer while the neighbors that entailed mostly men trailed behind her. Sophie had peaceably drowsed on Naima's shoulder and she bore all her weight with her feeble hands making her enervate. She slightly snored and fell into an intermediate phase of her gibberish sleep talking. A police land cruiser was parked outside the gate of the apartment. The officer opened the canvas material cover at the back of the land cruiser divulging two men sitting on the left side of the seat with their hand cuffed behind their back. Their white T-shirts were tainted with a blend of blood and muddy color. The officer yanked Alice's husband leading him to sit next to the other two men.

The black sky was restful, naked with dim lights of the stars. The moon wasn't married to the sky, it hid from the shame that night. Flies had encircled around the land cruiser headlights forming a blanket of darkness. The coal night was an easement to Naima, the pure eerie brought forth numbing cold pain.

Alice settled down on the seat bench that was opposite to where her husband had sat. She struggled to get her child from Naima's hold but Sophie resisted. She cried every time her mother tugged her hand and she clutched on Naima's neck. Naima was therefore compelled to accompany Alice to the police station. It was a new experience for Naima to set a step inside a police station. The street light illuminated through the police station compound that was packed with different types of cars on the left side. The building in

the center was made of mud and the plastering of the walls had cascaded to the middle. The wall had been painted the color of the police force stripes but was in state of dilapidation. Inside the reception, an unusual fairly large desk stood out this was because of the miswritten word, reception that was written as reception. Metal benches were situated on the corner facing the desk. It was small in size and length, for a tall person it would be a recipe of back pains and stiffness. The light inside the room was dull and dim evincing the melancholic atmosphere. The faces of the two officers were of despondency, their faces betrayed their hatred for the job. Behind the desk was a black metal door, noises of people fighting were audibly discernible.

The female officer behind the desk thunderously banged on the door, "Shut up!"

Alice's husband and the two men who had been arrested were led inside a door in the adjacent room that was next to the desk. One of the officers assisted the plain-clothed officer to led the men inside the room. He lay hold of the two men's back belt loop and asked the other man, "are these the side-view mirror from Soweto Downtown?" The plain-clothed officer nodded his head. The officer pummeled the two men's heads, "you'll make my job easier tonight." He said as he led them away.

The female police officer summoned Alice and Naima to the desk but only Alice stood up. She quickly perused through the thick book as if searching for something. She bent and seized hold of a paper that was located inside the desk shelves.

"What is the name?" She sternly asked.

"A..lice." She choked on the first letter. "Alice Kispegi."

"What happened to you tonight? "

Alice fixed her gaze on the edge of the desk. Naima rose on her feet from the chair standing close to Alice. She rocked her body back and forth; her hand drew Sophie closer to her upper body. She put her hand on Alice's hair and stroked it making her to swiftly turn her head. Her eyes enunciated sheer apprehension.

"Madam you speak up now. "the officer shrilled.

Naima coughed, her anger broke loose, "You don't have to be rude. She has gone through a traumatic experience. Give her time to be able to speak."

The officer's face dropped from shame, a torrent of shame gushed through Naima too and she felt rue. "why did I have to blurt out?" She thought.

"My husband lost his job in late June; he became agitated every time to point of becoming a drunkard. He has been abusive throughout but tonight he became like an animal." She paused and sniveled, her body began to quiver. "He found. He found my daughter playing. He slapped her across her face and accused me of cheating on him." Her voice quaked, "I grabbed the knife and threatened him with it but he forcefully caught hold of my arm twisting it. He took the knife and hit my eye with the handle. He then grabbed me by my hair and threw my face on the floor. I couldn't breath and I screamed for help and that's when the neighbors helped me."

The officer finishing writing on the book took the paper underneath the book and nibbled something on it. "Okay, I fill this part, go to hospital opposite with this P3 form. Go to the doctor do a checkup and then come back here."

Alice nodded her head and said, "thank you so much."

When they got home it was quarter past 5 in the morning. They were both tired, Naima's energy was sapped by carrying

Sophie and Alice's fatigue was from crushing back and forth between the hospital and the police station. They had to wait for the officer in charge to arrive to be assisted but the officer was busy watching football on his computer. So, they paid the female officer to be able to get them to meet the officer in charge.

The taxi ride back home was a quiet death, nobody spoke and the radio played 80s soul music. The black sky had transformed into a lighter shade of black. The cloaked stars were visibly sparkling. Naima stared outside of the window; Sophie was still attached to her like a magnet. She felt her warm breath on her chest still sleeping as peacefully as before. She thought Nairobi looked spectacular with fewer people walking around. She could see watchmen sitting in front of apartments each having the same or different type of uniform. She caught sight of women in an alley, she faintly discerned seeing one of the women wearing a skimpy dress. She shivered at the thought of the cold pricking the girl with no jacket or a shawl.

When they reached Naima's floor, Naima proposed that Alice and her daughter should stay with her for the night. She headed to Alice's apartment to grab a few clothes for Alice and her daughter. The door wasn't locked, it was half left open. Naima made her way through the house appalled at the condition of the living room. The pale smoke white tiles were muddy, the book on the bookshelves was flanged all across the dining area. Drops of Blood had sputtered on the living room. A hunch feeling walloped Naima. "Maybe Alice didn't mention what actually happened here." She murmured. Rice grains had been spilled all over the carpet it seemed to have been the dinner that they were having before the wrangle happened. The knife that Alice had mentioned was right in front of Naima's eye. She thought of the prospects in which Alice or her

husband would have been the one laying on the ground if the knife hit either of them.

On the corridors, she saw an irresistible framed picture on the wall. Alice, her husband, and her daughter had posed on a picture together in what seemed to be a park. Sophie had put on a winsome smile standing in front of her parents who were staring at each other with affection. On top of the picture, a crafted board was put on a hook, it was written, 'happy family.' It muddled and unhinged Naima's thoughts. Later, when she got to her house, she found Alice and Sophie had already fallen asleep; she placed their clothes on top of her dressing mirror and switched off the bedroom lights. She cogitated on what the crafted board message, 'a happy family.'

"What's a happy family? I can't really define it since I've never experienced it. Is it a man abusing his family? Is it a husband who never calls? A husband who forgot about his wife even after impregnating her? The concept of happiness is puzzling. This mystifying phenomenon seems like a fallacy, it's a short-lived one." She thought.

She cast her mind to the time she witnessed her father and Habiba passionately hugging at their unusually small house. On no occasion has she ever seen her parents showing any kind of affection. It surprised her when she saw her father displaying that level of vulnerability. "was that genuine happiness?" She questioned herself.

Alice was filled with gratitude towards Naima. Unlike before, when she avoided having a small conversation when she dropped off her daughter, she rattled on about her life after separating from her husband. Naima discovered that divorce wasn't a concern among the women in the city. She found out that the

majority of the women she babysat for were single mothers. She felt the utmost respect for them, which drove her to face her own fears. The fear of being the single caregiver to her unborn baby.

As the days went by, she didn't receive any calls or texts from her husband. She uttered her daily mantra to cope with her stress, "there is absolutely no one I trust more than myself, I am not concerned about everything that has gone wrong, I will focus on everything that's going to happen. My purpose right now is to take care of my unborn child." She perpetually ran her hands through her tummy in an attempt to hear the fetus kicking, but she felt nothing. Her morning was graced with nausea and vomiting. Most of the children she looked after were enrolled in school, which posed a menace to her financial security. She needed money to buy items for her unborn baby as quickly as the flash of a quail's wing.

She walked around and asked the nearest *mama mboga*, a woman who sells grocery, about her grocery supplier. The woman gave her the supplier's number. With the watchman's help, she obtained a wooden market stall like the one they had in the camp that. She placed it against the apartment perimeter wall. The supplier delivered the groceries early in the morning, and as a pleasant gesture, he only collected the money when he delivered the weekly supply. It gave her adequate time to calculate her weekly profit. She found her business undergoing loss because of her kind nature. When people didn't have enough money, she had the credence that they would pay her later. But none of the people that owed her came looking for her. She learned the first rule of business, too many debtors are the wreckage of businesses. Therefore, she became adamant about giving out debts, only compromising when it came to people she knew. The grocery business didn't generate as much profit as she had hoped for since she had to pay the supplier his

commission. She desired to directly acquire her supplies for herself in Gikomba, but her misgivings about getting arrested coerced her not to. The thoughts of paying that monthly rent put a strain on Naima. She lamented about moving to Nairobi; "if I was back home, I would have a safety net to fall back on," she thought.

She set about expanding her business. She washed and ironed her *dirac*, long loosely fitted dresses, hanging them up for sale next to her stall. She coaxed her customers into buying the *dirac*. She inveigled the women that they would woo every man from miles away with the dresses. For the men, she convinced them into buying it for their wives and girlfriend. "Your partner would be the most stunning woman anyone would ever set their eyes on if she wears this." She mindfully asked the men the skin color of their partner and gave them tips on which color of the *dirac* would match their skin tones. She accomplished to sell all the dresses that she had set out to sell, remaining with only four to wear.

She was confused when she found a house rent receipt of the month on her doorstep. She discerned that it had been paid the same day by none other than Ali. Her exasperation was fueled; she ripped the receipt into pieces and set it on fire. She pledged her time to purchasing items for her unborn baby. She bought an electrical remote-controlled baby cot that consumed all her money. She embarked to a pursuit of finding a hospital for her delivery. Her endeavor was blasted into a useless one; all the hospital's delivery charges were exorbitant. She didn't have insurance cover to mitigate the cost. She pinned her hopes on time; she needed more money before her due date, which was a considerable time. Therefore, she placed her hand on another plough by setting out early in the morning at the crack of dawn selling tea and coffee to watchmen. She moved from estate to estate, parading her vacuum flask with a

pump dispenser at the top. She had bought plastic cups to reduce the elbow grease of washing them. Naima wore herself to a shadow, trying to acquire money for a hospital. She experienced lightheadedness as she walked around. She lessened her distance of selling tea and situated it at her stall. Her verve for work sapped her into a state of inert, she became sick she couldn't move properly, she even had to sluggishly move her body to just get into the bathroom.

When her customers and her neighbors realized that their favorite *mama mboga*; the woman who sells groceries, had gone missing for a couple of days, they came in search of her. Her apartment was filled with unexpected guests who had come to check up on her. To keep her pregnancy a secret from everyone, she lied, brushing it off as an inconsequential sickness. She hid her small baby bump with plenty of clothes like sweaters and shawls. Her guests exhibit hospitality by making a homemade meal for her. Her fridge was brimmed with food storage containers having food of different kinds.

She wanted to spend her last day resting in her bed for the entire day before returning to work the next day. Her energy eventually flared up to its normal level. Naima wasn't accustomed to lying in bed; her normal days were as busy as a hen with fifteen chickens in a barnyard. As she spent her last day resting, she disrelished her inactive state and was compelled to immaculately scrub her apartment, which she considered to have been neglected. After her *duhur*, afternoon prayer, she kicked off her cleaning spree in her bedroom. She unlocked her wardrobe and stared at the emptiness with incredulity. She had sold all her dirac, and the spaces looked as empty as a bird's nest in the winter. She gripped the next closet; a mild panic flooded her mind, exhorted her not to open it,

but her body ignored. Her stomach knotted at the scent that suddenly walloped her. Ali's *thawbs*; ankle-length garment Muslim men wear, was still neatly organized in the closet shelves. She bit her lower lips from nervousness until she tasted the metallic taste of the blood, a habit that she had passed on to Lucky.

The last time she had bit her lower lips until it bled was when the *madrassah*; Islamic school. The *Ustadh*, the Islamic teacher, was holding a stick hoping to smack her for not reciting Quran properly. She had been playing dress-up with her sister Fartun instead of memorizing her daily verse. When the teacher hit her hand, she sucked the oozing blood from her lip to assuage the pain. Since they sat on a mat under the hot sun, she submerged her right hand in the searing heat of the sand. The strokes of the teacher didn't matter. Her body was already suffused with insufferable pain. Whenever the thought of *madrassah*, Islamic school, made headway in her brain, she was a terrified farmer who witnesses a cloud of locust. She started to attend the Islamic school, as soon as she could formulate a sentence. At the camp, the Islamic school took place in the open place near a tree serving as a shade from the ever-roasting heat. She had heard about the notorious reports about how the teacher was harsh and relentless when it came to memorization and reading of the Quran; he needed a laborious effort to be placed. But it turned out that the teacher was an austere man who was also strict with timing. If they arrived late, he would command the latecomers to search for a long thick stick that he would use to thrash them with. The number of strokes he gifted each latecomer was according to the minute they arrived late. Whenever it was time for the classes, she invariably persisted with her mother to let her stay at home.

"Wonderful, seems like the princess is the final say around my house." Her mother sarcastically remarked.

Even though her preference would have been to stay at home, she kept her anger at bay when her mother instructed her to go to *madrassah*, an Islamic school. She didn't want to be battered at home and still go to the Islamic school to be thrashed mercilessly. She only had room for one person to trash her since her body's surface area wasn't sufficient for more trashing.

As opposed to the days she used to bite her Lower lips from pain Naima sank her front teeth into her flesh at the sight of Ali's clothes. Uncontrolled, her fingers brushed up against a heavy olive-green jacket that was hanged. She plucked the jacket holding it tight to her bosom and placed the sleeves on her shoulder tightly, wrapping her hands on it. It summoned all the memories of Ali that she had tried to subdue. Yet it gushed out as mighty as rash gunpowder.

During their last day together, Ali had worn the jacket the entire day. When he was about to leave for the airport, he took it off and planted it on Naima's shoulder. Ali didn't want her to escort him to the airport for the fear that something will happen to her if she returns alone. Unexpectedly the jacket still had Ali's cologne. She closed her eyes and pulled it close to her nose to get a whiff of the scent, bringing to mind the intense thoughts of Ali.

"Do you have to go?" She had asked Ali that morning before his trip. The morning atmosphere was of tranquility; Ali and Naima were in bed, gazing at each other.

He ran his hands through Naima's hair and teasingly said, "if you can fit in my bag, I'll take you with me." He laughed. With his curled-up index finger, Ali pulled Naima's chin closer to him. "Maybe I should shrink you, or is it possible for you to turn into a doll so I can keep you everywhere I go," he snorted from laughing.

Naima shoved him, "I'm being serious. We haven't had enough time Ali."

"I'm going to talk to a lawyer so that we find a way to bring you there. If that doesn't work, then I'll consider moving here. But I'll have to first obtain work so that I can move." He said as he slid his hands around Naima's waist, pulling her closer. He tenderly planted a kiss on her forehead and on her cheeks. "I know you'll miss me." He said with a wide grin on his face.

"Yeah, right, as if I'll miss you, you always tease me."

Ali sat up and said, "really now, I'll show you what teasing is." He tickled her back, and when she laid on her back, he tickled her belly. Naima chortled. She couldn't take the tickles, she screamed for Ali to leave her, but it only intensified.

The joy she was clothed in that morning was worn to shreds by evening when she had to bid her husband goodbye. After all his suitcases were loaded up in the taxi, he sprinted back to the apartment for his final goodbye. Naima was leaning against her door, waiting for him. Like a wind, he shot and embraced her in his arms; Naima relaxed in his arms, savoring each second.

"I'll be miles away, but you'll be in the heart. You've fulfilled my soul's purpose by being my life. I will miss you so much, but I promise to come soon. I love you so much."

The sudden reality broke Naima's reverie; she tossed the jacket on the wardrobe and closed it. "Well, promises are just as strong as the person who gives them." She whispered.

She made her way towards the kitchen to take out the trash to the bin outside. The thought of not burning the piles of trash as they did in the camp was a comfort. All she had to do then was pay a small fee for all her trash to be taken care of. She fancied such little luxury that was available within her reach. The trash was full from

the week heap; she held the trash bag in her left hand and opened the door.

She dropped the trash bag on the ground, her eyes slowly blinked from the stuttering of her brain. She froze. Froze from the sight of Ali outside the door. Her mouth opened in search of words, but she couldn't. Ali was standing outside the door with a duffel bag, his hands were dug deep in his pockets. Naima stared into Ali's eyes with burning anger, her heart screamed at her mind to function, but it still remained dumb. She felt as if stuck in space, and the entirety was set in slow motion. Ali waved both his hand at Naima. She still couldn't process what was happening; she stared at him unmoved, her mind as blank as the eyeball of the dead.

"you look b...ig." he remarked.

She looked at her protruding stomach, searching for a reasonable answer, but she was lost for words. She deeply gazed into Ali's eyes in search of why he came.

"Leave! Leave! Leave! Leave! Leave!" Her thoughts screamed. "Why can't I speak? Open your mouth!" She thought.

"Are you okay? You look pale?" Ali asked. His hand fell on her shoulder.

Naima stepped backward and withdrew his hand on her shoulder. Every ounce of her nerve screamed, "Do not touch me! You have no authority to touch me."

A sudden excruciating pain hammered through the back to her stomach then a sharp, stabbing pain on her stomach caused her to moan, and she bent down exhaling loudly. Her back felt as if it was being set on fire. She felt a liquid dripping through her inner thigh; she pulled up her dress and saw that it was blood flowing. Panic consumed every cell in her body and her heartbeat rapidly increased. Her eyes looked up and gazed into Ali's.

"Something is wrong," she whispered.



CHAPTER 11

"What's up, dude, always staying up late," a tall bearded blonde-haired man commented as he leaned his body on Ali's cubicle.

"You know they don't pay that much for extra hours. It's probably a five-dollar difference." Susan, a middle-aged woman across the cubicle, said packing up her lunch box in her bag.

Ali shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I'm desperate for that five dollars."

Susan removed a hip flask and quickly took a sip of the alcohol. Her eyes became lively, "lord knows I needed that for my buoyant mood to elevate. After this, I need a bottle of red wine and a bubble bath as I soak away my uneventful day." She reached for her grey vertical messenger bag and strapped it over her shoulder across her back. She grasped the apple on the adjoining cubicle cleaning it with the lapel of her midnight blue blazer and sank her teeth into the crunchy fruit. "I'm gone, you big babies. See ya," she stretched out her index finger towards and her thumb sideways, folding the rest of the finger indicating the letter L for losers. She stuck it up her forehead and promptly raised her middle finger at the two men and

hurtled for the door, compelling Ali to laugh in the quiet office nervously.

Ali remembered his first encounter with Susan, she had been hired into the company a few days, and it was during his restroom break, he came face to face with Susan. Ali was in dire need of using the bathroom that afternoon after sitting on his desk without moving any of his limbs. He had been tirelessly working on one of the most demanding client's financial records. At full speed, he charged to the urinal to relieve himself. Someone in the toilet behind him was playing the song, little Einstein. The individual was grunting loudly and would sing the main chorus audibly to reduce the splash's sound. The song entertained Ali; he would sing along as it went on repeat.

"We're going on a trip in our favorite rocket ship, Zooming through the sky... Little Einsteins.

Climb aboard, get ready to explore There's so much to find, Little Einsteins. We're going on a mission, start the countdown 5, 4, 3,2..." he paused when the stranger paused the song.

He realized that he had been washing his hands for five minutes; he flipped the tap handle to close it and plucked the hand wipe.

"We're going on a trip in our favorite rocket ship, zooming through the sky. Little Einsteins, climb aboard, get ready to explore There's so much to find, Little Einsteins. We're going on a mission, start the countdown 5, 4,3,2,1" The voice murmured as the individual slammed the toilet door behind them. It was a girl.

Ali couldn't help but giggle that it had been a girl all along playing the childhood nostalgic song. But unlike other girls, Susan was a hoyden girl. She disliked being referred to as a girl; her body was inimical to dress or any particular women's clothing. She talked,

dressed, and cut her hair, typically like a man. Her feminine appearance caterwauled her gender, but she drew a veil over the discussion to do with gender. Her preference was to rub shoulders with the male associates and the bar being their favorite haunt. Ali had never joined his fellow workmates to their stamping ground. He had heard the news about Susan was excessively fond of drinking alcohol at the club, but it didn't astonish Ali for he had surmised Susan to do unexpected things. Dave, the blonde man, patted Ali on his shoulder, petrifying him from the past.

"Bro, if you need extra money, just tell me. I might even hook you up with one of my gigs, which makes good money."

"Dude, I'm seriously okay, head on home. I've got some clients bugging me over these sheets." He unbuttoned his cuffs, flipped the cuffs below his elbows, and rolled up his sleeve into a smooth edge.

Dave's phone vibrated resoundingly. After seconds of looking at his phone, he answered it, "hey KitKat, what's up?"

Ali pulled back his chair, bending forward in his chair, he sat up and raised his hands up, stretching out his shoulder. He extended the arch of his torso, his head and neck backward, and after a second, he lifted it back up.

"This weekend it's you and me, baby, I'm taking you to the aquarium then we gonna hit the pizzeria Barbarella, and you can order your che figata, and you can also have my campagna after that, it's the beach!" Dave animatedly shrieked.

The sun outside had sunk. The bright color of the day was washed away into a velvety magenta and sapphire blue.

"Hey munchkin, give the phone to your mom. Yes. Yes, I heard you. That silly Amy got you in trouble, I'm sorry about that."

Ali's eyes drifted through the room, settling them outside of the picture windows. The overhead fluorescent lights turned on automatically, one after the other lighting up the ultra-white walls. The few heads inside the open office had turned on their desk lamp for more illumination.

"I have to work late; it's one of those days, honey," Dave continued. He looked at Ali shaking his head and then placed his four fingers horizontally. The thumb pointing downwards then snapped them together, repeatedly indicating the other person on the other line was talking too much.

Ali grinned at Dave, he dropped his face and clearly inspected through the Artie's Cafe business's accounting book. He grabbed the general ledger that was underneath.

"Why do you get like this, woman." Dave shrieked. His face turned red; he scratched his neck and placed his hand on his face. "I can't do this on the phone. I'll see you later."

Ali was aware of Dave's 'staying up late at work' meant. Each day, he would call his wife to give her an excuse for why he couldn't come home. Dave hated living with his wife. He would call her the bickering queen. On the phone, Ali had caught them fighting time and time again over trivial things. Accordingly, Dave avoided going home; after work, he would spend his time in a bar in China town where nobody knew him.

"Save me your stupid comments, I fund your expensive lifestyle, and you're beginning to be ungrateful. Bye!" He ended the call, and with all his might, he threw his phone hitting the opposite wall.

This didn't surprise Ali; he was used to Dave's anger problem. On several occasions, their boss had requested Dave to go for an anger management class, but he quit after only two days. Ali

felt compassion for the phone, how he wished he would have given it to him instead to sell. All the phones that Dave had smashed would have amounted to thousands of dollars that Ali would have used. Despite earning the same salary as Ali, Dave drove a red Chevrolet Corvette, a car drive by the creme de la creme. He lived an expensive life.

"I know the figures for Artie's cafe are not matching up. I can tell that you were trying to cook the figures for the owner." Dave beamed.

Ali nervously chuckled and said, "it's just a little favor."

"Hmm, there is no favor without gaining something in return. Stop your small-time crime and join the big league. With your accounting expertise, you'll be instrumental in our team. Within no time, you'll have a yacht, a sports car, a house, and you can even bring that babe of yours here through our portals. We have all the keys to this beautiful city. "

Ali shook his head. He knew exactly what Dave was suggesting, but he couldn't do it. It wasn't right, and it was dangerous. He couldn't risk placing his family in danger. He had applied for work in Toronto for a better position with more salary, but they didn't email him back; it had been months, and he clearly understood that no response meant the job wasn't meant for him. His despair grew more by the days. He yearned to be closer to Naima; her gentle caress and her sweet-tempered nature made his heart-ache. His busy schedule had to bludgeon him into calling her when he only got ready for work.

Each day as he talked to Naima, he noticed the gravity-drawn shoulders with the eyes of sadness, balancing the tears. Her eyes would shift from side to side to avoid eye contact. He resisted asking her about her emotions to further the air of melancholy.

Therefore, he rustled up fun modes of making Naima smile. He wanted to Naima feel salient in his life; he would ask her to help him choose which shirt and tie to wear via the video call. As he promised Naima that he would soon travel to see her, he was revolted by his lies. He tried his best to save up, but the bills added up. He had burnt through his saving to marry Naima and finance her trip to Nairobi. He wanted her to live a comfortable life in a furnished apartment in Nairobi's best residential part. But what Naima didn't know was that it had cost Ali every penny he had saved. Each month he sent money through his uncle, who would pay the rent and give the rest to Naima; this left him barely enough to use. He had to pay his student tuition. Since his siblings had families to take care of, he became responsible for taking care of his parents' bills.

Despite that, his mother was outraged with him. She spurned all his help and his visits. He hadn't informed his mother about how his trip had altered into something unexpected. When they got back from the trip, Ali was unhesitatingly set to divulge what had happened. His family gathered up at their parents' house with excitement upon his return. Before they could inundate him with questions about his trip, he launched the secret, which blasted their happy faces.

"When I went to Dadaab, I got married." He bawled to silence the room filled with hearty laughter.

"Yeah, right, who would marry you?" his sisters said as they high-fived each other.

"This isn't time for jokes. I am serious. Her name is Naima, we used to be in the same class in Dadaab. I didn't expect to marry her, but it happened. I wanted it to be *halal*, lawful; therefore, we did the whole ceremony fast since I was leaving soon."

His family glanced at each other with perplexity. Torrents of relief washed over him, the guilt of not telling his family had eased off, but the trepidation of his mother's quietness build up a knot in his stomach. He pulled out his phone from his pocket and displayed the photos in his gallery of his wedding day. His mother sat quietly across the room; her thumb supported her chin while resting her four fingers on her lips. She had raised one of her eyebrows and squinted her eyes at Ali as if in deep thought. In actively, she watched as her children shared Ali's joy. The messages of acclamation from them seemed to aggravate her.

When Ali's siblings left, they vacated with her silence. His mother fury rose up, and kicked in and overtook her. "I have raised you well, yet you get married to a girl without my permission. So, are you trying to say that I have no power in your life, I am like a rag, useless and you need me when you spill something? You have humiliated me by marrying a refugee in Dadaab..." she choked from her anger. "Of all your siblings, you were the one with the most sense, I have never ever raised my hands on you. When your father beat you, he hugged you and made the pain go away. Now you marry someone I haven't met, someone I don't know their family, a complete stranger, and to make the situation worse, someone from another tribe. You have really embarrassed me. I don't know why kind of *sihr*, black magic, they have done on you, but I will not allow this to happen. Divorce her; otherwise, I will disown you, and I will never talk to you."

His mother was not only upset with him but his father as well. She had called him all deplorable names for his bad decision of letting their son marry a stranger. "Divorce her. Divorce her," her words had played in his head, causing his insomnia. Those specific words had caused his life to be a sad story. He had known his

mother to be a welcoming person in the camp. She had never condemned people based on their tribe; the situation had brought a side he had never witnessed. His calm mother had turned into the opposite of her repose. Truth to her word, his mother shunned him away. He safeguarded Naima's feeling and avoided bringing up the issue and replaced with positive views; he wanted Naima to know that his mother was coming around the fact of their marriage.

"Dude!" Dave exclaimed. "You had zoned out looking at the computer. Let's go home." Dave said. He patted Ali on his shoulders.

"You go ahead, I'll brew some coffee, and I'll finish up with my work." Ali sighed.

He was indeed tired, but he was fearful of sleeping or staying alone in his apartment. An uncanny feeling possessed him when he stayed alone in his apartment, and his sleep was apprehended by a recurring nightmare. Amid the silence, he became panic-stricken by the suicidal thoughts that preyed on his mind. As soon as he closed his eyes, his dreams flared up; he was standing on a stand, his neck was strapped with a barbed wire supported by the ceiling fan. As he looked down, the faces of his family appeared. "Coward, coward coward coward..." a voice whispered in his ear. The wire tightened around his neck, his hands were manacled behind his back, and suddenly, his mother pushed the stand, plunging his body. At that moment, the dream was overhauled by another one. It shipped him to the memory he had stifled, but it was a different sequence of events. He was a young child playing outside with his friends. They were playing hide and seek as much as he enjoyed hiding that time, he had chosen to play as the seeker. He closed his eyes and counted, "one, two, three." A beautiful soft melodious music soared through the current of air. Everything felt

peaceful. He turned and opened his eyes, abruptly the sky turned blood red, a bomb detonated, the sudden rise of the pressure tore apart his arms. Thereupon he would wake up sweaty and out of breath. The dream had terrorized him, and he would go days without sleeping; coffee was the only friend who understood his struggle.

Ali blinked at a fast pace to ax the thoughts. He put on his headphones, plugged it in his phone, and the music application popped. His right thumb steadily towered over the play button. He was reluctant to listen to music; fear clouded his mind. He had been warned about listening to music, "this is an instrument of *shaytan*, of the devil, you'll burn in hell," the *ustadh*, Islamic teacher warned them.

Ali's lips curved outwards, and upwards, his cheeks didn't move, and his eyes were awoken of bliss. It was a smile. A smile of nostalgia as he recalled his innocent childhood. When he was 17, he was bowled over by hip-hop music. From the beats, the culture, and the artist, it all fitted like a perfect puzzle. Afterward, he was dressed in shame for listening to the 'instrument of the devil.' After every prayer, he prayed for forgiveness and vowed to stop listening to music, but his vow weathered only a few hours.

His smile calmed the fear down, he pressed play, and the hip-hop lo-fi boomed through his headphones. His head swayed with every beat spreading its wings of relaxation; he needed it to unwind. He reached for a file written, Echo blue hotels skimming through each page. A cheque dropped on his desk as he jiggled the file. His smile died like a devouring windy flame. That was the part he was revolted by, yet he did it flawlessly. He examined the photo of the Echo blue hotel chairman's signature. He exhaled and seized hold of his pen. Effortlessly his hand moved skillfully and carefully with an after the finish of the exact signature.

The alarm on his phone vibrated loudly; it was 3 A.M, time for him to head home to take a shower. Ali shook his head in incredulity; he had wasted time in his fathomless thoughts. He meticulously hid the file inside the cabinet, burying it with the other files. He stood up, stretched his hands, mentally reminding himself of the Interview he had set up with a lawyer the next morning.

"What's your name, sir?" the secretary asked.

"Ali Abubakar. I have an appointment with Mr. Robert at 8. 30."

"Okay, thank you. Mr. Robert will be with you shortly. Can you take a sit please"?

Ali flumped on the four-seat beam bench. He unbuttoned his collar and placed his left hand on his neck. The collar stand was making his neck hurt more. The excoriating pain triggered a mild migraine. He massaged his neck but the pain intensified as he moved his head. As a result, he struck it repeatedly with his fist.

"Are you okay?" An old woman sitting next to him asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Just exercising."

"You, young people, are doing all sorts of exercises now. You see, I can't make my grandson eat potatoes; he says it's not good for him. He is always in the garage, hitting this huge bag. In the middle of the night, he moves stuff in his room. My room is next to his, and that boy never gets to sleep. He plays this hideous music as he quivers our house to the ground."

"Blame it on the young blood." Ali smiled.

"I wish he put that energy in cleaning my house. It would be spotless." She snorted.

"Mr. Ali, Mr. Robert, will see you now." The secretary injected. Ali nodded and faced the old woman, "Isn't that every parent's dream."

"Hello Mr. Robert, it's nice to see you," Ali said. He closed the door behind him and walked near Mr. Robert to shook his hand.

"Nice to see you too, young man." Mr. Robert crowed as he shook his hand. He gestured for Ali to sit down, "have a seat."

The office was chaotic to look at. The bookshelf on the sides was brimmed with unorganized books that were placed on top of another. The desk was half organized, and the left side was a clutter. The cabinet behind the desk was half-opened by the stack of papers inside it. Dust was visible on the desk, the floor, the cabinet, and the windows blind. It all bore a resemblance to Mr. Robert. You are what you surround yourself with, and Mr. Robert proved the literal meaning of the saying. He was bald, yet his hair on the sides stuck out because it was defying gravity. The spaces between his fingers looked like they were dipped in Cheetos, and he forgot to lick them. His collar stand had turned brown. His shirt's front placket had all different stains that gave the impression of a color splash art. The only facial feature that was endearing was the wrinkles. His skin was tanned with the cheapest product that made his skin orange. Only the skin girdling the eyes was of natural color. Ali was grateful to Mr. Robert; he had contacted him after seeing his poster on the bus, he was offering free consultation.

"Okay, so how can I be of help to you."

Ali interlocked his fingers and began, "I have a wife in Kenya, she is a refugee from Somalia. Their family is blacklisted in Kenya due to the alleged terrorism connection. I want to bring her on a spouse visa, but there is another issue. We did a traditional

wedding facilitated through word of mouth and no actual signed document."

"Without actual documentation, then the marriage will not be recognized. The Immigration officers will need proof of marriage, which is registered with a government authority. Other proof will be photos; if you've lived together, then proof of a shared residency. There is more likely that the application will get refused if she is mentioned to any terrorism activity, and our immigration officers will automatically deny the application. Try to get her asylum here, it will be much easier." He took a breath and continued, "don't lose hope, I'll dig much deeper and find some loopholes. You'll have a smooth sail."

Ali smiled at Mr. Robert. Still, his smile was a forced one. His face was drained of all its colorful color; he was pale. Hopelessness was building behind his eyes. He doubted Mr. Robert's competency, "is he even a lawyer? he questioned himself. "Once I save up enough money, I will hire a more qualified lawyer." He promised himself.

Ali's phone vibrated as he egressed out of the office. "Hey, sup Dave."

"Where... are ...you?" Dave asked. His voice was breaking up on the phone.

"I had some errands to run. I'm along bourbon street. Why what's up?"

"I need some help ASAP. Could you come...to people's coffee? It's.... n...ot that.....far."

Ali picked up speed; he was concerned about how Dave sounded as sober as a judge. Something was undoubtedly wrong if Dave's voice didn't indicate he was tipsy. From the cafe window, Ali caught sight of Dave, he had put on his sunglasses, and his gaze was

fixed on the paper he held with both hands. Ali knocked on the window to seize hold of Dave's attention, but he let out a muffled scream.

"Yoo, dude, that was hilarious. Were you about to pee yourself?" Ali teased. He pulled the heavy metal chair and sat beside Dave. "Dave, my man, you look like a zombie. Looks like nobody gave you your Irish coffee this morning in your sippy cup." Ali suppressed his laughter with little effort.

"My life is in danger, and I need your help." Dave tore Ali's buoyant mood.

"Wh... what do you me...mean" Ali stammered from the bolt of panic that streamed through him.

"I know that you have created offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands. I need you to create one under your own information when I transfer money, I need it to be untraceable." Ali's eyes widen,

"Why? I don't get it, man."

"My child's future depends on it." Dave placed his hands together and continued, "I beg you; they will kill me. I need to secure a future for my family and you are my only hope." He removed his sunglasses revealing his bruised skin around his eyes, the bottom of his eye had a subconjunctival hemorrhage. "I could drop dead anytime and I worry about my children's future. I will pay you 100k. Please just do it for me."

Ali nodded his head.

"Thank you so much."

"It's okay, but I need more information. Who's coming after you?" Ali urged.

Dave's hands were trembling, he looked ill at ease from the question. "It is a Colombian drug cartel that wants to execute me."

He whispered. " I have worked with them to launder their money. They think that I stole from them and they won't hear any further explanation."

Ali fought the rising fear in his mind, his heart rate spiked. "But wha...wha... t happen...ed to..t ..to your ey..eye."

Dave surveyed the room. He seemed apprehensive about someone listening to the conversation. He put on his sunglasses and replied softly, " they interrogated me, they were forcing me to admit to something I haven't done." His voice was shaky just like his body, the fear had unmanned him.

On no occasion had Ali ever seen Dave as serious as then, it spiked his nervousness. Ali removed his laptop from the canvas case. He knew the safest way of creating an offshore account, he had done it for some of his clients through using fake personal information making it safe.

The midday sun was replaced with grey thick clouds and it cried. The rain fell softly on the deserted pathway outside the cafe. Ali had always loved the rain; he liked the grey clouds and how each drop kissed his cheeks and dripped down to his skin. He liked watching it rain how a million drops washed everything and refreshing the air. He enjoyed stepping on water puddles to splash them with his shoes. But nothing could compare to the earthly scent after it rained, he wanted to be dipped in the petrichor.

He ordered a cup of coffee for relaxation as his fingers navigated through his keyboard. "And I am done." Ali pushed the laptop close to Dave. " You can wire the money now."

The street light automatically turned on; it might have been due to how darker it got. Ali watched how the rain cascaded down the cafe Window and how as he breathed out his breath formed a fog

on the glass window. The reflections of the rain droplets against the street light made it look like hanging specks of a diamond.

"Could you please tell my baby girl I love her so much?"

His chin trembled and he eyes dripped with tears.

Ali couldn't comprehend why Dave was that scared, "No, don't say that." Ali begged. "Can't you explain to them what happened?"

Dave snorted, "explain to killers I didn't take their money?" These people don't reason and that's why they do such stuff. Do you know what they do to traitors?" Ali shook his head; his submerged fear came alive. "They will dismember your body, dissolve your body in acid so nobody will ever find it and they will keep your thumb in a jar as a reminder in their office. If they execute you with a sniper then that's their noble death sentence." His voice was edgy from fear. "If you see people following you, be extra careful. Do not leave any evidence that will incriminate you or send you to the Cartel claws. I'm sorry to have put you in any danger. Please be careful, stay away from your loved ones in a couple of days until it dies off, I will notify you." Dave rushed off outside in the rain.

Ali was half angry and the rest was pure terror. Dave hadn't mentioned his safety before he had helped him. He thought it was safe. His legs began to shake in quick movements. "Stay away from your loved ones." The words rearranged every thought in his brain and engulfed him with more fear. "Jeez." He mumbled to himself. He repeatedly hit his head with his fist and repeated the word, stupid after every smack.

Ali's insomnia was fueled by what Dave had said. He laid awake in his complete state of fear. He was tormented with panic whenever he heard strange noises of creaks in his apartment. He

peeped through the window to observe any suspiciously packed cars in front of the apartment. But he couldn't figure out any car that wasn't there before, it had been the first time he had carefully observed them. Therefore, he took notes that night all of the cars parked outside of the apartment. He wanted to discern within a week if there were really any cars following him. Within a span of five hours, he grew skeptical about everything and everyone. The next day he set his mind at ease by a decision of staying away from his family. His mind was a terrified battlefield with a screaming voice. He had an inclination to call Naima and reassure her of what he was about to do. But he couldn't.

Naima pushed him to the edge when she told him she was pregnant. The thought of someone listening to their conversation stole his breath, he was grasped in an anxiety attack. A sharp stabbing pain went through his chest like a sword. "I'll call you later, I need to rush to work." The words turned their relationship into a dead one.

"This can't be happening. Bringing a child to a world of unmentionable things. A world where I won't be able to take care of. Born to a world that he won't have a family that recognizes him. A world he will be an orphan. They would call his father a traitor and a mother with no citizenship, a parasite. My fate is like that of Dave but I won't have enough money for my family to last them after I die." He thought to himself.

The anger pulsed through him, he smashed his phone against the wall and screamed. Instantaneously he was filled with remorse for what he had said to Naima. It wasn't her fault. He was the one who suggested the *azl*; withdrawal procedure, whilst Naima was clueless of the idea. In actual fact, the incident got him late for work. He reached for the landline phone and dialed his boss's

number. "Hello sir, Its Ali Abubakar. My apology I am down with something and I can't make it to work today." He knelt and untied his leather shoes. He gripped his tie knot and moved it from side to side to lessen the effect of the tie asphyxiating him. "Thank you, sir, see you on Monday."

He placed his right shoe near his nose to detect the distinct odor that filled the air. "Ugh," he gagged. He threw the black full-grained leather shoes under the bed. His one-bedroom apartment was messy. Calling it messy would be an understatement, the room was in turmoil. The wall near his bed was adorned with already chewed gums. A bundle of clothes carpeted the floor. It would be abstract algebra to separate the dirty clothes from the clean ones. Piled-up plates were positioned near the bed. A red coffee mug was dropped on the clothes spilling a splash of coffee on a moth gray polo shirt. The curtains were a nest of spiders forming countless spider webs. The kitchen bore the resemblance of the bathroom. The kitchen rack was hanged with undergarments and vests. Pills were disposed of on a plate on the kitchen counter, it would be a safe haven for a drug addict to be served pills on a plate. He got a hold of his duffel bag under his bed and dragged it along with bottles of soda that hanged onto the straps of the bag. He waggled a few clothes on the floor dropping them inside the bag. He smelled the armhole of the polo t-shirt and threw it on the bed. After loading up enough clothes for the weekend and he carried them up against his back. He desired to settle his mind at home. Home would shelter him from himself, Dave, and his laments.

The sun stretched its rays embellishing the sky which had similar feathery clouds, the visible light blue sky surrendered to the cirrus clouds reflecting the illuminating sun. As Ali stepped outside of his apartment the sun rays kissed his skin gently and he felt lost in

the abyss, his hope illuminated and his main focus was going to see his parents. A few years back Ali's parents moved to a small metropolitan town outside of Vancouver in a spacious prairie bungalow. The town constituted of a majority of a white family and only two black families including his own. The taxi pulled up on the asphalt driveway, Ali immediately spotted freshly grown tomato plants in the garden that was Infront of the living room window. "Old age must be making them farmers now." He thought to himself. Each step he took towards the front door swelled up distress. He hadn't been there for a couple of weeks since he had been back. With all the courage that builds up on his hand, he knocked the front door.

"Can I serve you *chai*, tea?" his father proposed when Ali sat down. "No no *aboo*, let me serve you." He smiled.

"Alhamdullilah I'm alright. I've taken tea after *fajr*, morning prayers." He reclined the chair backward and set his legs on the leg rest. "How's everything with you? How is work? How is Naima doing?"

The question about Naima closed up his throat. "It's good," he answered. His heart cried out for the truth. He wanted to tell his father that Naima was pregnant. He wanted to ask him if it was possible to have a doubt about having a child.

His mother strolled into the living room, "*assalam aleikum*. Peace be upon you" she gurgled.

"*Waaleikum salam*. Peace be upon you too." The jovial mood spread through him.

He realized that time had stitched up their indifference and his mother had ultimately forgiven him. He wanted to ask for her forgiveness to be exonerated from his guilt but pride swallowed it up. He watched his mother talk, he loved the sound of her laughter,

how she rolled up her gabsaar hiding her chin, and the echoing sound of his father's voice in the quietness of the house. He felt at home.

Ali went upstairs to stow his bag in the guest room. The guest room had a stack of boxes near the window. He dropped his bag on the floor and run his fingers through the box. Curiosity pricked him and he opened the box on top. His attention was seized by the black aggressive skates. It prompted his memory of the day he saw boys the same age as him in the park jumping on ramps at an expeditiously high speed. Initially, he thought the boots were like cars and the children were driving themselves. With much persistence in the fullness of time his parents bought him the inline skate. He sat at the edge of the bed, he thrust his right foot on the skate but the mouth left the middle and the hind hanging. With much struggle, he removed the forefoot and flung the skate in the open box. Suddenly he felt an itch just below his hairline as he was about to scratch it, he abruptly stopped. He recalled the superstition that scratching near the hairline meant someone was observing you and the eyes had witnessed to the event sending responses to the brain.

He peeped through the window, there was no one walking around. Two black SUV were parked opposite the road from his parents' house. With all speed, he unzipped his bag and removed his notebook. He flicked through the notebook until he reached where he had written the number plates from the night before. He put his hand on his mouth from the shock. Someone was indeed following him. The first car was exactly the same number plate he had nibbled down. He stood there in an array of bemusement.

"Ali," his mother's voice echoed from downstairs.

"I'm coming," he burst out.

Ali's sense of smell ushered him to the dining table. His mother had prepared *muufo*; corn flatbread with lamb chops, pasta with minced meat, and *doolshe buro*; soft cake as dessert. As much as he wanted to dig in, his bowels were seconds away from loosening. His mother sat beside him and serve him a plate full of everything. She poured a glass of milk and placed it next to Ali's plate.

"Only a girl from our tribe will understand how to prepare pasta with saffron the rest only use the basic ingredients." Ali cackled; he swayed his head in disbelief. "If you have something to say just say it."

Ali placed his thumb and index fingers together running them against his lips gesturing that he didn't have anything to say.

"We have a family friend who has a daughter the same age as you or younger by one year or so. She has never been marrie..."

"Stop," Ali interrupted her.

"Bu..."

"Don't bring this up." He begged.

"She is so beautiful; both of her grandfathers were from Yemen and they moved to Somalia. She doesn't mind being a second wife." She promptly babbled.

"I have a wife. Why can't you accept that, I don't need another one."

"She is one of those doctors who check out people's teeth, a dent... a dentistry. A dentist."

"I am not interested," Ali exclaimed.

"Just consider it, forget about the refugee. She won't be of any help to you. Please just consider it. Please." She badgered.

His frustration poured in him like lava, he banged his fist on the table spilling the milk on the marble floor. "Stop doing this,

Naima is my wife and I have no intention of getting married to another woman." He panted from the anger boiling.

As he was trudging his way up the stairs, he heard the news reporter mentioning, "Dave smith Miller." He darted to the living room plunging on the sofa. "Mr. Smith lived the normal Canadian lifestyle in the suburban area of WinchSon with his wife and daughter. He was involved with the Xavier trio cartel group and due to alleged involvement with the police, he was beheaded by the cartel. His body was discovered in a motel just outside of Vancouver with a missing head. The police are on a hunt to find his killers to bring them to justice. In other news...."

Ali lowered the volume of the T.V. He wanted to run and hide but his body was numb. He couldn't move. Death was playing its violin in his head. "Am I next?"



CHAPTER 12

Life and death for humans are like a game of tag; when one becomes weak and fragile, death pulls the rope and wins the match. It is the kind of misfortune that brings together people from all over; loved ones and foes, to celebrate the deceased's life. An individual will never understand bereavement until they experience it. For Ali's case, misfortune struck thrice within a month. The third calamity was in front of him, the body of Mohammud.

He watched the man with white overalls taking ablution before washing his brother's dead body with full attention. The man removed two gloves from the box and put them on. Ali had put on the gloves and he moved closer to his brother's body on the metal bed. The man opened the tap, and the water gushed out into the container placed underneath. The man lifted the upper body with the help of Ali, he then squeezed Mohammud's stomach, producing water mixed with a green liquid. The man proceeded to wash the right side, then the left side of the body three times. During the last wash, the man removed camphor and added it to the water. Ali remembered his father demonstrating to them how to wash the dead body, he mentioned the presence of Angels at the time of the burial, and the camphor gave a good scent to the dead body. The washing

of the body could have been done by Amina, but she was hospitalized from the shock and Ali took up the task. Finally, the man placed Muhammad's hands across his chest, the right hand was on top of the left hand. He was wrapped in a white cloth. The sheet covered all of his body, and a rope was fastened above the head, below the legs. It was then that he realized he no longer had a brother. He was wrapped up and ready to be eaten with maggots in the soil. But Ali couldn't cry. He arched to cry, but he couldn't.

The body was transported carried by people to the Bly Muslim cemetery of Vancouver. Women were silently mourning the deceased; they were not permitted inside the graveyard, they watched from a distance. Hysterical crying and mourning were prohibited but their faces indicated sadness. The body was set near the grave. Ali watched his father's face washed with somber. Yet he still felt the same, empty. He wanted to shed one tear, but he wasn't able to.

They faced the *qibla*, direction Muslims pray facing, with the imam standing beside the body's head and began the *salatul janaza*, funeral prayer. Unlike the normal prayers, prayer didn't have a *rukuh*, bowing down of Muslims when praying or a *sujood*, prostration when praying. The prayer was conducted while they stood up. The body was laid inside in the dug-up grave. He noticed his father standing alone, lost in thoughts. He desired sadness to grip him flooding his veins at the sight of the grave being filled with soil. The thought of him being the only son remaining crept into his mind.

The drive back home was quiet. No one looked at each other, his mother and sisters had fallen asleep in the back seat, and his father stared outside the window. When they got back home, Ali locked himself in the guest room to avoid interactions with the

family friends that had gathered there. That day he didn't care about the black SUV car that trailed him everywhere. He shut the curtains, and the room became dark. He hurled his body on the bed, he took the pillow and planted it on his face.

He screamed for his betrayal. He screamed for feeling empty. He screamed for his mistakes. With all force, he pushed the pillow on his face screaming louder. Relief washed over him, but he didn't cry. He had assumed all the emotions would have caught up by then, but he remained empty. "Is something wrong with me?" The question puzzled his thoughts.

He took out his phone in his *thawb* pocket, an ankle-length garment. He tapped on the call application, his finger moved downwards on the call logs, and his eyes searched for Naima's name. He stopped when he saw his sister's number had called him through the hangout app the day before. He went cold when he remembered that he had thought of not answering her call. The call that sent him rushing like a mad man through Nairobi's streets in search of an airline ticket to Vancouver. "Would it have made a difference if I didn't answer? Maybe I would have spent a whole two weeks with Naima as I had originally planned." He thought.

He tapped on Naima's contact and called her. "Hey, how are you?" Ali immediately asked as soon as she picked up his phone call. But she didn't respond. "Hello, can you hear me?"

Naima sighed, "yes, I can hear you."

Ali scratched his head from overthinking; his mind was crowded with fear. He wanted to say sorry, but he felt the word sorry couldn't delineate how remorseful he was. He didn't tell her sorry when he left her in the hospital alone and crying to rush back to Vancouver, then would he say sorry then? He didn't tell her sorry for abandoning her in a city she didn't know anyone. Would his

sorry mean anything then? His single mistake set ablaze their whole relationship to ashes.

"We just buried Mohammud today." He informed her.

"Sorry about that." She replied nonchalantly.

The silence was long and profound; it exasperated Ali.

"Did my uncle visit you at the hospital? I had Informed him to check on you before I left." Naima didn't answer him. Ali paused and continued after the silence." Naima, at this point, I don't know if I should say I'm sorry. If it means anything to you, I am deeply sorry and ashamed for my action. When you told me you were pregnant, I should have taken responsibility from the word go, but my immaturity... I was in a dilemma when they called me and informed me about my brother's condition. You were feeling much better and.."

"Much better? Ali, I had a dead baby in my arms. Our baby was dead. How was I much better?" Naima interrupted.

The sight of the 6-inch baby's lifeless body, covered in body and mucus flashed through mind. Naima begged the doctor to let her hold him, and he was covered in a pink shawl. He was still sucking his thumb, and Naima hugged it like it was alive. When they took it away, she silently wept for her child. She hid her face with her hands, and all her furnace of strength crumbled down. Her body quivered as her sobs got heart rending. Ali hugged Naima's back; he couldn't watch Naima crumbling down. It was his fault, but why couldn't he cry? It was then that he received the call about Mohammud's demise. Islamic law wouldn't have allowed them to delay the burial, but his father bought him time to get to Vancouver the next day to witness his brother's burial. He was in a state of a quandary on whether to leave Naima, who had lost their son, or

leave to see his dead brother for the last time. It wasn't a matter of priority. His impulse impelled him to go to his family.

"I was in pain too," His voice softened. "my brother had died. My one and only brother. I had to see him and bury his body to actually be okay." He said with a low voice. "I am sorry for leaving you. You can give me any kind of punishment. Beat my behind like those *ustadh*, Islamic teachers, back in Dadaab used to do." Naima chuckled. "Make me squat like a frog for an entire day for being a fool." Naima chuckled turned into a chortle. "It's nice to hear you laugh." He teased.

Little by little, they attempted to knit the holes with the conversation that lasted until the evening. She didn't forgive him. Still, at least Ali's emptiness had a quick flash of hope.

"Before you hang up, I wanted to tell you, I love you." Ali found himself uttering those words.

He went downstairs free from the guilt he had carried everywhere, but the sad faces of his family brought it all back. He felt like an unemotional brother incapable of being sad. He caught a sight of Amina sitting on the couch with her face looking down. The side of her cheeks was as red as a danger signal. Ali had heard that she collapsed when the doctor declared her husband dead; she was immediately hospitalized due to low blood pressure due to the shock. Her children ran around the corridor as they glimpsed at the sight of Ali, a wide smile formed on their faces. Unexpectedly Ali felt warmth. The innocent smile from his nephews suffocated him. He envied their guileless, they seemed unaware of what had happened, and they chased each other like nothing had happened. He wondered if they'll ever discover that their father isn't there as time went by. They will understand loss at a young age.

Their father had an asthmatic attack in the evening. He died while reaching for his inhaler. On day to day basis, the attacks had got serious, the doctor had warned him to seek immediate treatment for his narrowing airways. His parents believed that the cold weather might have triggered the attack. But Ali didn't believe his parents; they were the same people who avoided taking Muhammad to the hospital as a young child for the fear that they might operate on him. They took him to different herbalists in Somalia. Even though Ali was very young, he remembered a jerrican of red liquid, and every morning and evening, Muhammad drank it. Ali once asked him if the liquid was blood, Muhammad laughed and shook his head. He pinched his nose and gulped it. Afterward, he quickly asked for water. When they moved to Canada, he got his first inhaler; by then, his condition had deteriorated. The attacks ambushed him more than once a day. He worked in food delivery but eventually, he became redundant. Their house's roles shifted; he stayed at home with the children while his wife worked two jobs.

"*Assalam aleikum*. Peace be upon him." Ali ruptured the silence.

"*Waaleikum salam*. Peace be upon you too." His mother replied. The rest of the family members looked at him without lifting their lips to answer his greeting. Sadness and fatigue were engraved on their eyes. He switched the lights on to get a view of everyone clearly.

The light from the crystal ball chandelier illuminated the living room. The blue flowery ceramic tiles looked spotless under the light. The double casement windows were covered with white linen curtains. The white curtains reflected from the lights, one needed to squint their eyes for a sight. Ali's mother always opened

the window for some fresh air and the evening breeze gave the room a bouquet of earthly scent. The couch was a brown sandstone cream and a full set of everything; his father sat on the recliner, his mother laid on the rolled armchair and Amina sat on the cabriole. The 60-inch T.V was mounted on the wall opposite of the couch, on the pebble mosaic wall. Underneath was fireplace with no chimney. It was structured only as an eye-pleaser but it didn't serve the function of a normal chimney. The room was large, a three-seater couch separated the dining area from the living room. The dining table was oval-shaped made of glass with white buttoned tuft back chairs. Ali's eye was fixed on the rag underneath the dining table. It was there that the owner of the house killed his wife. No matter how much his mother fancied up the place, they still remembered the traces of blood on the floor when the real estate agent showed them in. His parents were dead set on living there; the house rent was cheap because of the woman's death; it was a gated community and away from the city area.

Amina stood up, her eyes were swollen and Ali assumed it was because of crying. The dorsum to the wings of her nose was pink. Ali's mother attempted to get up but Ali gestured her not to. He walked to where she was standing and supported Amina's hand to the bedroom downstairs. Her hands were shaky and feeble like that of an old person. Amina was a few years older than Ali but what astonished Ali was that she remained as young as the day she got married to his brother. On no occasion has ever talked to Amina without Mohammud's presence, they were practically strangers bonded by their relationship with Mohammud. But he understood her loss, he had lost someone too; his brother and his son. He envied her crying, he wanted to soften his heart with cries but he couldn't.

Amina started her *iddah*; mourning period, which was supposed to last 4 months and 10 days. During that period, she was not to marry anyone, she would move back to her house where she resided with her husband and observe the mourning period there. She was not to beautify herself, forbidden from wearing silken clothes, and wasn't allowed to leave her house until the period completed. As a way of mourning for her husband, she was to pray to God to give her husband His mercy. Ali's mother moved in with her daughter-in-law to help her during the period. This was after the three-day mourning period that the whole family participated in. The three-day mourning included receiving visitors and supplication to God for the deceased.

After the three-day mourning the whole family scattered back to their life, Ali returned back to Vancouver for work. After the news about Dave's death, the CEO of the company became strict. He called for a meeting with all workers and stakeholders of the company to warn against tarnishing the company's name. Any person who was found doing illegal work under the company's roof would be charged and it would be the same fate for the person found working with Dave in his money laundering activity with the company's resources. His work colleagues began making impertinent comments about Dave. He was called all sorts of distressing names by the same people whom Dave financially assisted. Ali's vacation period came at the exact period when everything was heated up, ordered everyone to bring their work records to look for mishaps. The CEO was as ready as a cheetah who saw a gazelle to lay off some of his employees. Ali was relieved that he broke free without presenting his records, he had already filled for his work leave a week earlier and it got approved.

The day his department was submitting the documents he was already on his way to the airport.

Ali knew that the havoc in the office had subsided and he entered the office like a millpond alp set for work. The office had slightly changed, the oil painting of an *Inuit* woman, an indigenous community in Canada, with sealskin dress was replaced with a pastel art of a ship. He moved closer to his desk, it was more disorganized than he had left it, it looked as if someone was searching for a particular file. His cabinet was removed and files were opened and place on top of each other like the leaning tower of Pisa.

He looked up and saw Susan, "what happened?" He shot the question quietly.

Susan moved her lips as if saying something but Ali couldn't understand. He placed his hands behind his ears signaled that he didn't hear. "You" she pointed at him and continued mouthing, "are in trouble."

Ali raised his eyebrows. He tapped his fingers on his chest, "me?" Susan nodded her head.

The cordless landline on his desk rang he pressed the green button and placed the phone on his ear, "Could you come to my office please." The CEO said.

His equanimity kicked in, as he walked across the room with eyes trailing behind him, he knew that was it for him. The CEO's office had all the hallmarks of an exclusive presidential hotel room. It had a six-seat dining table, T.V miniature golf course. He was below the average height for a fully grown man but his voice was deep like Darth Vader's.

"I hope you had a wonderful holiday." He smiled for a second before his face was smoldered into a rage. "Anyway, you left

before I could see any of the work you've been doing. When you left, Mrs. McGuire handled your clients and a little thing came up which unraveled a lot of things. It was a lot. You have been dishonest with the financial records of some of your clients by dishonestly changing the numbers among so many other illegal things. The police came looking for you in regard to Dave's case. You are somehow as devious as he was. I am terminating your employment, for now henceforth you are no longer an employee of this company. I don't want involvement with the police, you have five minutes to vacate this premises."

Ali felt like he was marinated in relief. He had worked extra hours at the office but they never paid him enough, firing him had cleansed him into a new man. He left the office with a smile. "No more official wear." he thought. He hated ties, he always felt like they were designed to chock him and this made him brim with happiness at the thought of wearing whatever he fancied.

He still had the money that Dave gave him, with that he thought of starting a business somewhere in Nairobi so that he could be closer to Naima. With that money in his mind, he wasn't scared of the police. He could buy the whole police station if he wanted. He felt above the law. Invisible. Surprisingly that day he was heavy-eyed, his abducted sleep was set free.

He meteorically ran through the streets to his house. He stripped off his clothes remaining with his undergarment only. His room seemed messier but that didn't concern him, his aim was to sleep until he had revenge for the nights, he laid awake. He placed his body in a fetal position with a pillow tucked between his knees. With the soft sheets underneath him and the light pillow bearing his head, he felt peaceful. He closed his eyes and he wafted into a state of unconsciousness.

For what seemed to be ages, Ali opened his eyes lids from his deep slumber a phone vibration had woken him up. He ran his index finger on his eyes to remove the dried rheum. It was dark and quiet; his mind wasn't subconsciously awake to differentiate if it was daytime or night. He took his phone on the nightstand to check the time. It was 3 a.m. He had slept for 17 hours, missing all the five prayers, and had a missed call from Naima.

There was a dark figure standing in the hallway Ali tried to discern the shape of the figure but he couldn't, the figure was darker than anything else surrounding it. He got out of bed and moved closer; his first thought was that might be a *jinn*, a spirit. Ali felt a cold metal being shoved on his neck.

"Where is computer?" A man's voice asked. He cocked the gun and shifted the position to his head. Ali tried not to breathe loudly to aggravate the man with the gun on his head.

"Bag," he responded his voice was shaky.

The figure in the hallway got clear as it approached, it was a huge an enormously tall individual wearing a black-neck gaiter face mask. He took the laptop bag and walked backward until he was completely covered with the darkness.

"Hand on the head. Now." The man behind Ali roared.

He placed his hand on his neck and slowly kneeled down. He attempted to catch a glance of another intruder but it was dark, he was clueless about how many individuals were in that room. Ali was a trained Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, he took this martial art after finishing college as a stress reliever from being rejected by every company he went to. He was undefeated in his class and he desired to participate in the world Jiu-jitsu championship. He found a job that robbed him of the time to practice what he enjoyed.

At that moment his threat of survival sent fight responses. He nudged his elbow into the man's stomach and hastily snatched the gun from the man's hand when he bent down.

"Get out." He pointed the gun at the man behind him.

The man with the laptop opened the door and hurtled away followed by the other one who had the courtesy of closing the door. "I could steal better than them tsk, tsk." Ali whispered to himself.

He removed the bullets from the gun and stashed it all in the freezer. Ali sat on his bed and let out a long yawn, he covered his legs with the blanket. He wasn't disturbed by the break-in because he had expected the men in the black SUV to enter his house in due time. What he didn't expect was that they were cowards. They were the worse robbers the cartel decided on sending. Instead of taking the laptop, they should have questioned him about the offshore accounts to make it interesting for Ali or to find out where Dave stored the stolen money instead, they took a laptop. They didn't ask what kind of laptop they wanted they just took the one they were given.

Ali wasn't slow-witted as they thought. The laptop they took was mainly used for work. He purposely walked everywhere with it for the people watching him to think that that was his primary source of data. He didn't know the amount that was in his offshore account, he never cared to check after Dave wired the money. He was too scared until he became leery seeing a nine-digit number in his bank account after Dave's death. That gave him strength.

Before he left for Nairobi, he contacted the most notorious lawyers in the city to represent Dave's wife who was being accused by the state of hiding her husband's crime therefore she would be charged as an accessory to the crimes committed by her husband. The lawyer with his notorious wittiness made the state drop the

charges. She was given the full custody of her daughter and the custody battle that had started with Dave's parents came to a standstill. With the help of the lawyer and his financial analysis skills, he secured a trust fund for Dave's daughter. The lawyer was the third party to ensure that when Dave's daughter turned eighteen, she was to be given five million dollars, stocks bought under her name, and a villa in Simmer island.

He procured a beauty and lingerie shop for Dave's wife. On a weekly basis, he sent a small sum of money through money mules. He was undetectable. Ali had kept his promise, he took care of Dave's family but he only gave them a percentage that he was supposed to take for himself. He felt like he needed more than them. Ali had prepared his move back to Kenya, he had bought a restaurant and a mansion in the expensive neighborhood, South of Nairobi. He did the deals through a burner phone and sent his uncle to acquire the necessary papers of ownership. He left the credit card with 50,000 dollars with Naima for safe-keeping and for the hospital use. The rest of the money was hard cash sent to Nairobi through untraceable money agents to his uncle. It was to be laundered into the restaurant business and clean money into his uncle's account. His uncle was in charge of the business until he relocated there. So, Ali's hands were as clean as crystal, no authority would find out anything except that he was friends with Dave and he was guilty of that only.

Ali was set to leave after Amina's *iddah*, mourning days, was completed. After the incident, he moved from motel to motel on the outskirts of Vancouver. His stays were short and discreet. He never gave his actual name. He avoided eye contact with people and he paid in cash to avoid being traced. The day last day of mourning, at last, came, Ali's flight was at midnight therefore he had planned on staying at his parent's house until then.

Ali checked out of the motel in the darkness when everything was covered up and people's dreams waited for the dawn for the good tidings. As a child Ali was afraid of darkness, darkness was his adversary constantly filling his head with unimaginable thoughts about flesh-eating monsters with fangs dripping with blood the size of Mt. Everest and claws that tears into a billion pieces. He realized that he had outgrown the fear as he walked on the gravel pathway to leading the main road. There was no street light on the road, the light on his phone leads him through the foggy darkness. The pathway got narrower as he approached the main road. On the side of the pathway was uninhabited land with grass taller than him. During his late-night at his apartment, he had watched documentaries about snakes living in tall grasses. He walked on his tiptoe quietly to avoid attracting any kind of animal that lived there. "Beep! Beep!" The unexpected car horn made Ali let loose a high-pitched scream. He reached the end of the pathway leading to the main road discerning that it was a taxi that startled him. A Sikh man with a black turban got out of the driver's seat and opened the door. His beard was grey and long, reaching to his chest.

"Wer tu?" He shot the question immediately after Ali closed the door.

"Umm, west port, Trigad."

The driver placed the key in the ignition and turned it to the third position and grabbed the gear swiftly within minutes they were on the highway overtaking trucks that swallowed the whole road. Ali had time and time again thought of buying a car but he was wary about spending money on unnecessary things. All his life he had been cautious about spending money, in Dadaab he kept the five shillings that his father gave to him for more than 10 months and later gave it to the blind who begged in the streets. He spent his

lunch breaks in high school in the library to avoid spending his one dollar in the cafeteria. In college without his parents' knowledge, he worked in an Italian restaurant as a waiter to pay for his books and accommodation. His parents gave him a small amount of money that wasn't enough to buy a decent meal but he told them that it was quite sufficient for all his needs.

"Go straight and take the second left, house number 4467." He said as soon as he noticed the wide iron gate with white glass details at the top.

A black painted wood was attached to the wall WELCOME TO TRIGARD. The gated community had huge ostentatious houses. But what enthralled people was the four-story shingle house with a modern touch that had a raised-up infinity pool in the back yard that was perceivable by all. The taxi driver pulled up in his parents' driveway he checked the price on the metal box attached to his dashboard.

"It th a hundred," he lightly lisped.

Ali removed his wallet and gave him all the money he had which he knew was more than a hundred dollars, "keep the change." The driver placed his hands together and bowed slightly.

Unexpectedly as he walked in, he found all his family members in the living room. The house was swarming with guests and children. "Uncle Ali," the children screamed simultaneously when he opened the door. They ran and, in a succession, they hugged me one after the other.

"What did you bring for me?" Azza's daughter asked. She was a typical younger version of Azza. She inherited her mother's straightforwardness. If she wanted something she wouldn't beat around the bush.

"You promised me the new video game the one you have at your place." Mohammad's older son added.

Ali took off his duffel bag from his shoulder, unzipped it and dug his hand inside. He took out a brown rigid box and placed it on the taller boy's hand. He then removed a packet of jawbreakers for the two younger children.

"Yes! I can't believe you got us the new P.S. This is so exciting. You're an amazing uncle Ali. Thank you so much." The older boy responded.

"But you have to play it together, I don't want to hear you and your brother are fighting over it."

The day involved receiving guests and cooking for them afterward was followed by *duas*, supplications, for the dead hence marking the end of the *iddah*, mourning period for Amina. Since men and women weren't allowed to mix in such any gathering Ali stayed in the bedroom downstairs to talk with Naima on the phone. He had informed her that it was a matter of hours before he could be with her until she would tire of seeing him for the rest of their lives. The news enraptured her; he felt her joy through the phone. He was more than determined to fix all the disappointment and heartbreaks he had caused Naima by simply being there with her.

An abrupt knock on the door drew a close to their conversation. Ali opened the door; it was his mother with a plate of rice and fish sauce. The food plastered a smile on his face., he took it from her hand placed it on the floor as he sat in a straddle position near it. He took a large gulp of the food and smacked his lips.

"Mom, umm... I'm leaving for Kenya today."

His mother opened her eyes, skewed one side of her lips conveying utmost confusion. Her lips lengthened to the side and then upwards, she was smiling as she shook her head. "No! No! No!

You're not going anywhere unless you gave birth to yourself. I'm not giving you that permission." She caterwauled.

Ali crossed his legs facing his mother, "but I'm not a child. I am a grown man with my own say," he bleated. "Why should I stay here when my wife is in Kenya?"

"You have a responsibility here to take care of your nephews and Amina..." she gasped as she quickly shook her head.

"You guys will take care of them, right? I'll be sending money to you all every month. I have a restaurant there and I can financially support you all. Amina won't have to work; tell her I'll pay for everything they require."

"A restaurant?" she asked. "Where did you get the money to start a restaurant?"

"A few investments." He lied as his eyes dropped.

"You were involved with the white man's case. The one you work with, right? That's why you have that money," she accused.

"No, of course not." Ali denied.

She stood up and walked to the door, "you can't just leave." She huffed, "you have a responsibility here. To take care of your nephews. They need a father figure." Her voice shot up. "Your father and I have agreed that it is best for you to marry Amina. Her mourning days have ended and she is okay with the decision."

Ali cupped his face in his hands, he tried to still his rage but it caused chaos inside him. "isn't *dumaal*, wife inheritance, haram? Why would you think of something like this *hooyo*?" He exasperated as he let out a long sigh. "I am never going to agree to this."

"It's funny how you think you have a right to say anything. You will get married to her tomorrow. If will have to hold a gun to

your head for you to be responsible for those three boys then *inshaAllah*, if Allah wills, I will do it. We should take care of our family."

Fury overwhelmed him, he pushed the food with his legs and spilled it on the floor. His mother left and forthwith Ali heard the sounds of the key turn clockwise. He sprinted to turn the doorknob but it was closed. His legs lost their steadiness and he dropped his body to the ground. There was nowhere to escape. The room didn't have a window, only ventilators, it was a store that they transformed it into an extra bedroom. Even if he screamed and banged on the door no one would get him out of the situation his parents had placed him in. He would be shamed for turning down what they considered their culture. He didn't want another woman all he wanted was Naima.

His thoughts ate his flesh on the cold floor, "Mohammad will never agree to this. It will be an insult to share his bed with his wife." He felt like he had been pushed to the wall, they stripped him of his rights and burnt off his tongue. "Am I a man or a child?" He saw Amina like his sister, "why would they force me to wed her? Why didn't she say no? What was wrong with everyone?" He was tormented by everything at that moment. As he blinked tears dripped to the floors. His body remained at a standstill on the ground while the tears set loose like a water fountain.

He grieved for Mohammad, his dead son, and for himself. The memories created a profound trigger for all the emotions he never understood. He stood up and took the bedsheet on the upper bed of the bunk fastening it into a noose that he had learnt in middle-grade gym. He then created a non-slip knot of the end of the bedsheet attached to the metal top ray of the upper bunk bed. He jumped to the top of the bed seizing a hold of his phone. His hands

were trembling as he texted, he held it with both hands for more firm support but it still swayed to the side every minute.

After sending the messages he fastened the noose around his neck firmly against his hyoid bone. He hacked back to the day he almost committed suicide. He was scared of abandoning his family, he quickly stopped and dropped the blade. He pictured their cries and he couldn't do it. But then he didn't want to face them. He pictured them celebrating at his grave and it fueled his rage. He was ready to be released to the shackles they had chained him with.



CHAPTER 13

The concrete floor in the police station never altered its temperature. It was as cold and stiff from the day Lucky got in that cell. If it was hot, and the sunlight hue escaped through the small window rails, the floor was still cold. When it rained, and she heard the rumbling sound of thunder, the floor was still the same. The 30 square meter space was more than she could need; in Dadaab, her house was approximately the toilet size.

As time went by, she had made her stay in the cell more and more convenient. People arrested and released left her small gifts like shawls, t-shirts, and a box to sleep on. She had been in the cell for two weeks, watching people leaving and new people arrested. She assumed the police had forgotten about her. Despite it, she is alright in staying there; after all, she didn't have anywhere to go. In the beginning, when she got to the police station, fear crippled her mind and body. Her mind had echoed and calculated everything that could go wrong. She remained in the corner with her head between her legs until it caused discomfort on her back.

The police were fond of nabbing sex workers; the first few days, Lucky was in the company of masses of sex workers. They made clamorous noises in the cell, from making stories to insulting the officer. What was more comical was when there was the brawling between the sex workers. They pulled each other's hair out, divulging Bantu knots of their natural hair underneath the wig. Although their dress was scanty, they still tore each other's clothes. They scornfully called each other all the different synonyms of a prostitute, stressing who was more promiscuous in their line of work. The other women cheered on the fight until the officers stopped it with force; despite the constant fighting, Lucky noticed a peculiar bond of sisterhood among the women. They did not leave their own behind in jail; they contribute and bribed the officers for their release. They were like real sisters, bonded by their everyday toil to provide for their family.

Gradually Lucky lay the first stone of making new friends by communicating with a pregnant woman who had just arrived. The pregnant woman had been arrested for pickpocketing. She used her pregnancy as an advantage of harrowing her fingers in her victim's bags and pockets. She hid the stolen items inside the

wrapped-up skirt she wrapped her belly with. When the woman got released, she gave Lucky her shawl, which she utilized as a blanket.

Lucky didn't want to be set free; she feared the outside more than the jail. In the cell, she had everything she could ask for; food, a place to sleep, and police officers provided a feeling of safety. Getting used to the bathroom and the food was the stumbling block. The bathroom emitted a repulsive smell, and Lucky tried to avoid using it for as long as she could. The food was undercooked, with weevils swimming in the cold soup of the maize and beans. When a high officer visited the station, they would prepare a decent meal, and that only happened once.

She liked one of the female officers, a Swahili woman. She was the most humane one among the rest. She was a prepossessing sight; when she made rounds, the males in the next holding cell would hoot and yell to get her attention. From her face to her body frame, she mirrored a model. Her Swahili accent indicated that she was from the coastal area delineating the stereotype of the softness of the Swahili women's nature. Then there was officer Tumbo, the man who had arrested Lucky. His face matched his attitude. He had a flat face with a double chin. His left eye resembled a peanut while the right eye was the size of a watermelon. His moustache was small and unevenly bushy and it was located between the distance of his nostrils. It looked like that of a teenage boy who had an unevenly growing moustache during his first period of puberty. His lips could not hold his incisors inside it hanged loosely revealing the 40-yard gap between them. Nevertheless, what made his feature more ill-favored was his stomach. It was a twenty-liter drum that hung below his waist to his thigh. He reeked an intermix of sweat, alcohol and urine.

Lucky was repelled by him; he showed her no mercy despite explaining to him her situation. He called her stubborn and vowed to never let her out of jail. That day Lucky had been walking aimlessly in the street of Eastleigh, she was completely covered up with a *niqab*, veil hiding the face. She was confused about what had happened to her earlier. She, therefore, walked aimlessly on the streets looking for someone to help her. A police van pulled up next to her, there were several people inside the van including women but they were all Somalis.

"I. D madam" A police jumped out of the vehicle and commanded.

"I don't have it?" She responded in Swahili to make them believe that she wasn't a refugee.

Mr. Tumbo arrived and whispered in her ear, "40k and we'll let you go?"

Lucky shook her head. She didn't have any money. Before they reached the station all the rounded-up people removed valuable items like watches, jewelry, shoes and gave them to officer Tumbo who sat at the back of the land cruiser. He cautiously scrutinized the items if it was worth something. In his head, he had calculated the price for each stuff with a total amount that manifested his smile.

"These terrorists sure do have a lot of money. They have business everywhere and our government lets them be," Tumbo complained to the driver.

"They should send them all back to Somalia from where they came from. Then will have all the business to run ourselves and no one will be jobless." The driver raged.

"If we keep letting them in, they will take over this country and turn it into a warzone."

The conversation was the most ignorant thing Lucky had ever heard. Not all Somalis were from Somalia but she couldn't argue with them. She didn't want to be charged with more crimes. Lucky's deficiency of valuable items got her in trouble with the law. But that was the least of her problems. She did not have a plan of action for when she was set free each day in jail, she hoped they wouldn't release her. She had nowhere to go. Despite the fact that she had lice devouring her scalp, not taking showers every day, lightly dimmed room with the mischief of rats eating away her sleeping box she didn't want to leave. This was until she met Hasira.

Lucky didn't try to make a conversation with Hasira. Hasira commenced by talking to herself. It was late at night when the police officers hurled her into the cell.

"Next time officer Simba when I meet you on the streets you'll see." She pointed at the wall. She was mildly intoxicated and this was discernible from the way she talked as she stammered at the last word.

"How can they arrest me over such a petty thing." She paused and leaned against the wall. "Is it an offence to walk outside at 2 a.m.? I might be coming from work who knows?"

She opened her eyes and stared at Lucky. "Why..." she gulped. "Why a... a ...are you here?"

Lucky was enforced to answer the question since they were the only two people in the cell. "I didn't have money." Lucky hesitated.

"Yes! Yes!" I didn't have money too." She situated her index finger on her chin as if thinking, "I actually gave the officer 50 shillings and he said it was an insult. With that 50 shillings I could buy a meal in RedF, these greedy officers keep on increasing their bribes and I'm getting old to keep up with it. I remember back in the

days when someone who had 50 shillings was considered rich. They'd take you out for dinner and they'll still have enough change to last them for another date. Life was easy peasy. But now the money doesn't even have any value, the stench of corruption is everywhere. Last week I saw a child eating grass and sand, I could smell putrescent of his decaying body. But I couldn't help him, I had my 50 shillings that would sustain me the whole day." She stretched out both her hands and raised them up and down. "It was either him or I in the balance of survival and I chose myself. Do you see what this society has turned me into?" She repeatedly sucked her teeth. "it's because of these men. They cause all the problems in this country and also in my life."

"What happened?" Lucky asked as she raised her head to see Hasira.

"Hmm, what hasn't happened?" She guffawed. "At the age of 14 someone sexually abused me in my mother's house. It was by a close relative. Ironic right? A home is supposed to be a haven, a fortress and a celestial place of happiness but mine wasn't. My mother was convinced that his brother didn't touch me. He was innocently sent away to my grandmother's village. They specifically instructed me not to ruin his image." She paused and laughed, "his image. his image. What about mine?" She shrugged her shoulder. "Who cares about young girls anyway? In secondary school I got pregnant. I was only 17 by then and he was in university. I had dropped out of school when the principal found out. I lost my scholarship, everything. I was back to square one. The man told me that he could never marry me simply because he would be a university graduate and I was a dropout. We were not of the same caliber." She giggled. "That is why I... I," she patted her chest, "I,

Hasira will milk these men dry. I will take what's mine." She concluded.

Lucky was moved by the story but what astonished her was the woman's ability to narrate to a stranger her life story. She laughed as she narrated instead of crying, Lucky felt like she needed that to heal from incident. Hasira moved closer and sat near Lucky. Hasira's face is what you'd call repulsive and unsightly. The ratio of her upper lip to her lower lip was out of balance. Her upper lips looked as if she was stung by a bee while the lower lip looked malnourished and withering. The color of her eyes was as red as strawberries in the month of May. Despite this, Lucky admired her hourglass figure was visible from the red slip dress that she was wearing.

"I'm Hasira," she said as she waved her fingers.

"I'm Lucky."

"Bring your hand," Hasira demanded.

Lucky stretched out her right hand out of curiosity.

"Hmmm very very interesting. Your fate line and line of fortune are impressive. You will be a very wealthy woman sometime in your life."

"Sure, I'll have a lot of money, I'll have trees growing them." She jested.

"You have one of the shortest marriage lines I've ever seen. Looks like you'll only be married for a day or so then nothing afterwards. Quite strange."

Lucky shuffled her hands from Hasira's grip.

"I understand. I'm not those type of women who are interested in the marriage too. I can't stay with a man for that long in the same house. I would probably kill them after a few months. I don't understand why your people are forced to marry. I had a

Somali neighbor in RedF, divorced with 7 children. 7 children!" Exploded Hasira. "No job, no support. It's crazy. Marriage is a prison and if you've noticed marriage rings are cuffs basically restricting every single thing you do." Hasira fumed.

"Have you ever heard of tourist bride?" Lucky asked. Her eyes were fixed on the wall.

Hasira shook her head. "Is it like going to marry in a foreign country or what?"

"It's like a temporary union that lasts few days. A girl is lured by a tourist to get married then the marriage terminates when they leave." Lucky clarified as she deeply gazed at the spot with a crack on the wall in front of her.

Part of her wanted to scream because of talking. She was scared, her body trembled, she wrapped her thin hands around to her back. "You can call me naive and simple-minded cause I check all the boxes of an ignorant fool." A half-smiled formed which quickly disappeared. "I am from a very very poor background. Can you imagine a deserted place? In the middle of nowhere. Where poverty smells more than the fresh air. Yep stick to that image that's where I grew up. Where it never rains. It's filled with melancholic memories." She was scared of revealing that she was from a refugee camp at that moment. "So, one day a foreigner came to our dusty place and offered me a way of an escape from my destitution. He promised me everything I could ask for and I blindly followed him here." The memory of Rashid choked her. She cleared her throat and rocked her body back and forth to wash down her tears.

"That evening after arriving in Nairobi, he called an *Imam*, Islamic leader, to conduct a wedding in our hotel room. This hotel was what you'd consider a five-star well that what he told me. I don't know what a five-star meant. The hotel was so fancy that I felt

dirty sitting on the white sheets. We had concluded our wedding in less than ten minutes."

"Ten minutes. what!" Hasira interrupted.

"Yep, within ten minutes, I was already his wife."

Repeated Lucky.

"That's faster than even getting married in court."

"Yep, I guess so." Agreed Lucky. "When I woke up the next day, I found no one in the room."

"He never returned to the hotel? Did you call him? Where was he?" Hasira quizzed.

"His phone was switched off. When I went downstairs the hotel general manager told me to vacate the room. I had nowhere to go, I didn't know any of his family members, nothing about his life. In short, I had married a stranger who had exploited me and I was a fool enough not to realize it from the word go."

Silence unfurled in the air. Both the girls were lost in their thoughts.

"How did you end up here?" Asked Hasira.

"Apparently who knew that being a Somali in this city meant you have to walk with I.D." she shrugged her shoulders. "A walking terrorist," she huffed.

"Which officers arrested you?"

"Tumbo!" Lucky growled.

"That obese man, he is actually harmless. Insulting him is the only solution to get back at him. I once called him a warthog and told him to lose weight, I think I shattered his self-esteem. He let me go" Hasira laughed making Lucky giggle.

"I should have thought of that sooner." Lucky joshed as he highfived Hasira.

"Better late than sorry," said Hasira.

"No no, I think it's better late than never. Lucky corrected.

"The same thing Who cares anyway, I never studied that much to know the difference." Hasira cleared her throat and continued, "all our life they tell us education this education that. But for me, my street smartness provided me with food and money for my baby in the village. I take my fair share from the educated fools. See with their education they still get robbed with their eyes opened but they're still blind." She paused and yawned, "I have to sleep my sister, I'm so tired."

She rested her body on the floor next to Lucky and in no less than a minute she was wheezing. Lucky's sleeping schedule didn't know day from night since she didn't know the difference between the two in jail. She slept during the day and was fully awake during the night. There was a beam of light inside her. It was happiness from when Hasira called her my sister. It had been the first time she had told anyone what Rashid had done to her, her self-loathing retreated and she was overwhelmed with relief and happiness at that moment. "Everything will be alright." She reassured herself. The silence was like a triumphal opening chord that soothed her. She felt peaceful until fragments of thoughts anchored her to wake Hasira up.

"What!" Hasira screamed.

"I have a question, why are you called Hasira?" Lucky asked.

"You just woke me up to ask me this," Hasira grumbled.

"I'm sorry."

"I have issues with my anger and please don't wake me up I'll kill you right here and then if you do it again."

"Has she ever killed anyone before?" Lucky wondered to herself.

She became frantic with worry. When she closed her eyes to sleep, her subconscious mind played animated dreams of Hasira choking her, she woke up out of breath. She couldn't sleep. She watched Hasira peacefully sleeping like a log. The next day Hasira was bailed out.

"I will come for you Lucky." She promised as she left. She kept her promise and, in a few days, Lucky was released. Hasira paid one of the officers and convinced them to let her go.

The outside environment was overwhelming. For two weeks her eyes were habituated to the dim light, the sunrays blinded her when she stepped out of the station. Forthwith her other senses were stimulated. She could hear the different cats passing and the matatu with deafening music.

"Close your eyes for like two minutes. Then open them slowly." Hasira instructed her.

When Lucky opened her eyes, all the colors were bright and a little blindly the sun.

"I will take you to RedF, you can stay with me there." Hasira grinned as she held Lucky's hand.

As they walked Lucky got to see the city. The avenues were wide and she couldn't see any litter on the ground, it was clean. The sidewalks were made of perfectly fit bricks. Everything was exotic; from the people, cars, and the buildings. The skyscrapers looked alike and only differed with their colors. She liked the city fragrance of the fusion between the fumes of the vehicles, the aromatic scent of street vendor foods, and a scent of the perfume wheel. It was more beautiful than anyone could describe it to be. Everything she had seen became an alien to her when they reached RedF.

The air scent in RedF was soaked in misery and foul smell. Dumps of garbage were everywhere. When they tried to circumvent around the trash she stepped on a pool of dirty water. "You just stepped on sewage." Hasira disclosed.

RedF didn't have avenues and walking pathways. The lanes were small, one person at a time could pass through. Streams of black sewage passed through the lane. The houses there were made of mud huts and corrugated iron sheets and they were built with no order. Lucky couldn't see any building made from concrete walls or even a properly constructed house. There were different types of business everywhere. Each corner they turned she saw people selling charcoal. She didn't see any particular salon structure but she saw women getting braided in front of their shanties. All the food stalls sold the same thing. Kuku and chips were available. The wire lines were tangled up and they hanged close to the houses. Closed-up black polythene papers were everywhere Lucky was curious about it.

"Don't step on them or touch them. If you see them flying, dodge it. It's a flying toilet." Hasira warned. It was then that Lucky realized that life in Dadaab was more decent than any slum. The faces of the residents were an articulation of disarray.

"What? What are you staring at?" A woman growled when Lucky smiled at her son.

"Zainab."

"Kadija."

"Mariamu." Idle men sitting in a group called her Muslim names as she walked past them. Others jeered and catcalled her to make her look their way.

As time went by, she discovered more things about RedF. At night time was when the slum came alive. Women wore their

beautiful garments which she found nauseating. House turned into clubs and showcased different DMX lighting to attract customers. Foreigners from all walks of life came to know RedF from the locals as a must-see cheap tourist attraction site. Survival in RedF was crucial since most of the individuals were unemployed, they worked unconventional jobs. For the women prostitution was the only way. The state of affair was complicated for the men in RedF, for them hustling meant robbery. The police officers spared no man living in RedF, they were all a walking target and a threat to the whole nation. Each week there was a man who got shot in broad daylight by the officers. Parents would sometimes pay the police officers in RedF to spare their young boys. This became like a renewable contract where the officers will collect money from the youth, gangs, and parents who did not want to be targeted and killed just because they suspected them of doing something illegal.

Hasira's house was situated in the central part of RedF. Her house which was made of corrugated iron sheets like most of the houses there but hers was more spacious than most. She was among the people who had the pleasure of having electricity. She had over-decorated her house with stuffed animals. Next to her small CRT TV, she had 3 stuffed animals on the sides and 3 on top of the TV. The walls had different a Bob Marley poster stuck to the sides. The floor had torn up boxes to cover up the damp earth that wasn't cemented. Two plastic chairs were set Infront of the T.V and opposite to it was a thin mattress that had no cover. On the sides, the foam was hanging out with visible white teeth marks. A pile of clothes was full inside the brown woven basket and on the verge of collapsing. Next to the basket was a charcoal stove with cooking pots placed on top of each other. People in RedF rarely cooked inside their house because it didn't have a proper ventilation system

ergo they all cooked their meal outside of their shanties. All that Lucky thought about was finding the space to pray inside the tiny space. With her shawl, she squeezed herself between the TV and the iron sheet wall.

Later that evening she met BigM and a ten-year-old girl. Hasira was the caretaker of the girl. She was shy at first, she didn't talk she hid in the corner playing silently with the stuffed animal. BigM was Hasira's friend, he was tall and muscular with yellow and red spiked hair. He had numerous piercings; eyebrow, septum, and labret. When she first saw him, she had developed a preconceived idea of what kind of man he was. He seemed like a man with low emotional intelligence with a bad temper. But he surprised her, he was quite the opposite. He flipped the page in Lucky's head when she talked to him.

"Hello, I'm BigM." He introduced himself. "We call her Girl." She pointed towards the little girl. "She's only shy at the moment. Well to be honest she's always shy. That's why we are close." He smiled.

The girl didn't have a name she was called Girl because of the fact that she was a female. Whenever Hasira came to the house Girl was quiet. She never uttered a single word in her presence. Lucky witness the true nature of Hasira when she sent a girl to buy her a tiger cigarette and she brought a different kind of brand.

"You, bastard parasite." Hasira sneered. She threw the packet of cigarettes at the girl. The girl silently cried in the corner. "Can you believe this insolent killjoy?" She grabbed the cigarette on the ground and lit it up. "Your mother was a prostitute of the lowest-price class. Let me not even begin by mentioning your godforsaken father. A lowly class tea vendor who ran off with Freddy crazy eye's five thousand shillings." Lucky shook her head

at Hasira in an attempt to silence her but she contended with her scold. "He abandoned your mother and you to trend on the heels of his heroin-addicted friends. They were both halfwits on deciding to keep you. This isn't a place to raise a child. RedF is like a personalized hell for every individual living here. Your idiotic parents believed in something called love. No no no, love isn't meant for us, love is for the rich just as starvation and hardship are for us. Our state of impoverishment is the only love that God showed us yet your simpleton parents added you to this misery. I asked God to terminate you while you were in your mother's belly for the reason that your mother drank alcohol like a fish. Nonetheless, you came out healthy and you are still a fascination to me for I knew you'd have fetal alcohol syndrome." She stopped and sneered. "They say a single act of goodness will make an impact. With my money, I hired a midwife for her only for her to die due to child complications. Despite that, I took you in as my own but my act of goodness only brought me more misery. Woe me! Why did I take an extra mouth to feed when I could barely feed my own? You can't pour from a dry cup, right? Hasira takes care of Hasira. So, spare me your tantrum and shut up" Commanded Hasira. "No actually get your lazy body to the shop to buy for me two packets of tiger cigarettes. Tell that loud mouth shopkeeper to add it on my tab I'll pay them later when I get the money."

It finally came the time for Lucky to repay Hasira's kindness by assisting her with her work. This was a few days after she had spent time with Hasira learning the true nature of the work. It was high-risk and unpredictable line of work. Hasira lured men to her house or to their house but instead of selling her body she robbed them the whole kit and caboodle, no penny was spared. She called this her tips that they owed and it was also a way to

maintaining the status quo. She'd say that the rich had enough, so it is their duty to take some of it. This was her means of survival. Once they were highly intoxicated BigM, would hurl their bodies in dirty trenches or tied them up. Hasira emphasized on the need to work like a well-oiled machine. Lucky was to be given a lighter role during the robbery since it was her first time.

That evening Hasira wore glamorous makeup but no matter what she tried couldn't hide the huge pimples and blemishes on her face. She wore a fetching red satin dress to be easily noticed in a crowd of people. Hasira posed as an escort along the well-known street associated with prostitutes. A white man driving a black Range Rover Evoque pulled closer to where she was standing and as soon as he picked her up it was showtime for them. In a white pick-up truck car, they followed them within a close range to his house along Kisimbi road to a luxurious house. They parked the car down the street as they waited for Hasira's greenlight to move in. BigM phone vibrated from a text from Hasira. He reached for his gun and loaded it up with bullets.

"Let's move inside," he told the driver.

A regret clung onto Lucky. Hot wet sweat was dripping from her temples. Her breath quickened as she stepped out of the car. "What did I get myself into?" She wondered to herself.

Hasira was waiting Infront of a well-lit porch that had a colorful dream catcher, vintage cart collage on the left that had beautiful red flowers, and in the middle, stood a yellow wooded rocking chair. Before Lucky could admire the things, BigM rushed past her and started the heist by grabbing the items on the porch and loading them on the truck. Hasira handed Lucky a trash bag and that was her cue to grab the valuables upstairs.

"Are you alright?" Hasira asked.

"Yeah, I'm a little nervous." Lucky replied.

"Yeah, everyone is always nervous during every robbery. Don't let BigM's angry face tell you otherwise. He gets scared and whiny. Alright, go on with your work."

Lucky stepped inside the house greeted by the brightness of the fluorescent lights. The living room walls were hanged with photographs of a family. Lucky observed one of the pictures of the family while they were in their backyard. The children were swimming while the parents posed holding hands as they sat on a side-to-side sun lounger. The wife had put on a monokini bikini suit with a boater hat while her husband wore grey swim trunks. Lucky assume it was the white man who had passed out from the spiked drink that had spilled all over the white fur carpet. Next to that picture was the of the man with his wife, he hugged her from behind and they were all smiling but they looked much younger than all the other pictures. The woman was petite with light autumn hair but in the other pictures, her hair was completely grey. Her husband looked almost the same except for the small patches of grey hair and beard. Lucky wondered where the wife and the kids were, maybe they had left for holiday and he decided to go in search of a cheap thrill.

It reminded her of the famous social media story she had heard in the camp of a wife's revenge on her husband. The husband cheated on his wife when the wife found out she couldn't let go of the betrayal. After her husband went to work, she went to his mistress's apartment sticking fliers and handing them out to passersby. The flier had the girl's photo and her husband's. It had all their information; numbers, place of work, house number, license, and how long they had been seeing each other behind her back. She felt sorry for the man on the floor, she knew that he would suffer the

same fate or rather even worse than that for letting a mere sex worker rob their house.

Lucky tapped her head to focus she had no time for distractions. She made her way to the master bedroom but the house was a maze box. Every corner led her to empty rooms. "How much space can such a small family take?" She thought to herself.

She went up through the bifurcated stairs and found all the valuable items up there. At a turbo speed, her hands reached out for whatever she could grab; fancy bags, watches, and jewelry in the master bedroom. When the trash bag was full of commodities, she left it on the doorstep and loaded it in the truck. The sting was successful and that meant that they could all have a goodnight's rest.

All of Lucky's emotions coalesced into an adrenaline rush. On their ride home all she talked about was how she felt more alive as her heart rate rapidly increased. She was addicted. Addicted to the feeling she had felt.

Her curiosity spiked, "how much is all this stuff worth?" She nervously asked.

"Not much you have to consider that it will be sold as second-hand goods and we are splitting it three-way with my cut being bigger, then it's not much for you," Hasira answered

"If next time you find a suitable customer, then you'll get the bigger cut, promise."

Lucky nodded her head. She wanted to do it again. Hasira's words had got her blood pump, "we do this for revenge." She understood the words after the heist. She felt powerful and untouchable and the feeling didn't wear off. When the day of the next heist came the excitement won over her, her heart raced as fast as a hound dog in search of a meal. She finally belonged.



CHAPTER 14

Lucky was used to the small and very cheap mirror, just about the size of her face that was at Hasira's house. Its mere cost was about twenty shillings, and the back was coated with aluminum that was fading with time. She immensely treasured the small-sized mirror because she loved how her beautiful eyes looked in the small mirror. After a while, Hasira bought a life-sized mirror, and when Lucky stood Infront of it, the reality behind the words, 'recognizing yourself is more complicated than you'd think' hits her. Her face seemed like a stranger, a repugnant alien that she couldn't recognize. Every day she would strip naked in Infront of the mirror to see more of her hideousness that she hid with the baggy dresses. They say it roughly takes about 66 days for one to develop a new habit. Therefore, Lucky proved this to be true, she had developed a new habit that involved routinely standing naked in front of this mirror to examine 'the girl on the other side.' Each and every day, she would carefully analyze her skinny body, the visible projected thoracic arch, and her stomach-turning thigh gaps with knobby knees. Her hair was defying gravity, she only combed it once a week, and it brought the image of the infamous sorceress of RedF to her mind.

The sorceress in RedF was known for wearing a red torn dress with plastic heads of dolls attached to it. Her face was painted black, and below her lips, a red tongue was drawn. Her hair under no circumstance stayed down. The woman walked to people's homestead looking for food; if you treated her well, she returned the favor by chanting to her gods to bless you. If you turned her away or didn't open the door for her, she chanted to her gods to place a curse in your homestead. So, when people were having a bad hair day, they'd say they've been cursed by the sorceress of RedF, and that's why their hair looked awful. As a result, they'd spit three times behind their right shoulder and then their left shoulder to ax the curse.

After stripping off her clothes like every single day, her eyes focused changed that day. They were fixed on her neck; it had a deep dark bluish horizontal bruise, and she got an uncontrollable urge to run her fingers through it, but she felt a sharp pain. It was during their lawless endeavors that she attained the bruise. During the daytime, Lucky worked as a housekeeper; she developed a closer relationship with the wealthy people she worked for; she was quiet, conformable, and diligent in her work. In short, she was a wolf in a sheep's clothing waiting for her time to pounce. She studied them very carefully, where they placed their bedroom keys, items they could steal, and if they had money hidden in the room. She was reading her preys behavioral traits like books, and through that, she developed alternative ways of making an entrance to their prey's house with her gang.

Their final break-in plans went imprecise. Lucky didn't give BigM the instruction to tie up the family; she had told her gang that the family was panicky about everything, so there was no need to use violence. As she walked around guarding their prey, a neck

grabbed her from behind, blocking her airway completely. It was the lady of the house.

"We trusted you; how could you do this to us, you terrorist." She growled.

BigM zoomed through the room to her rescue. He ploughed into her, knocking to the woman the ground. She laid still unconscious. The next day news about their burglary was in the newspaper, *A robbery that left one dead*. Lucky didn't feel remorse for the woman; according to her argument, she deserved it. Not only because she choked her but because she made derogatory comments to her own children. She once called her son a stupid good-for-nothing boy, who would never succeed, who would continue to live with his parents all his life because he would never amount to anything. She also told her daughter that she was an unattractive and fat girl. No man would ever touch her. Her riddance felt like justice to Lucky. The children didn't deserve such a gloom-ridden household. As children, they needed love and affection and not a vile tongue that butchered their self-esteem.

A knock outside brought Lucky back to actuality; she quickly dressed and covered her hair. As she opened the door, the Girl smiled warmly at her. "You're back at home early today."

The girl nodded her head, she never said more than two words to Lucky, even though her shyness had ceased. When Lucky learned that girl had never attended school, she was disheartened by the news. She used her savings from her normal jobs to pay for her uniform and books. She didn't want to fund her education with stolen money that she considered *haram*, prohibited. She wanted her hard-earned money to build Girl's life.

One day, as she was braiding Girl's hair, she asked Lucky, "can you give me a name?"

"What about Kipusa. Do you know the name Kipusa means you are beautiful, visionary, and you fight regardless of the situation you are in?" She squealed as she tickled the girl's body.

Everyone called her, Girl at home except for Lucky; she stuck to the name she had given her accordingly. The girl used Kipusa at school as her official name.

After the girl had changed to her casual clothes, Lucky brought out a black polythene paper hidden behind the T.V.

" This is for you."

She handed it to the girl. It was a ball-jointed barbie doll. Girl's face lit up; she was as jovial as a dog with two tails. "I have never possessed any beautiful item like this before. The only thing close to a doll I had was made from mud. But now I have a beautiful doll with an actual face and with hair. I can't wait to play with it and show it to my friends at school. This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Effused Girl. Suddenly she raised her eyebrows, slightly moving them closer to each other, and the fear in her eyes widened them. She handed the doll back to Lucky. "No, Hasira." Girl quavered.

"It's okay, she won't find out, just hide it inside your school bag." Lucky convinced her.

She hid the doll in between the girl's books and placed another book on top of it. Girl seemed more relaxed after this. Lucky perception of Hasira changed that evening. All the initial caring attributes she had about her were instantaneously changed. According to Lucky, Hasira was a complicated woman to characterize. She was the opposite of goodness; she wore wickedness as perfume and sin as clothes. She never allowed the girl to have any precious things.

When Lucky told her about her decision to take the girl to school, she said, "what a disappointment, you are wasting your money on her instead of looking for a place to live and buying yourself clothes. The girl is just a nuisance; she will make you regret your decision. You'll run out of money very soon, my dear."

That evening when Hasira got home drunk, she was blabbering on and on about the men in pub uptown and downtown. She called the men downtown sophisticated, and the men uptown crude.

"These crude men wa...they... don't want... wan... me to drink during the day... they say... enough... stop... *kwisha*... I say... add more...more... one more glass and... so I... I left to go to My sophisticated people downtown. They gave me.... a whole bottle." She staggered to where the girl was sitting doing her homework. "Why do you waste your time going to school. Education won't get you out of RedF... smell what surrounds us... it is ... fi. Filth. Our life is filth, and our blood is... fi fi fi filth."

Lucky grabbed Hasira's wrist, "please come and sleep." She begged her.

Hasira twisted her wrist to get out of Lucky's grip. "I am not a ...child, Lucky. You should be... the one... sleeping. I just want to...know...what they teach...these...kids nowadays." Hasira pushed Lucky, and she fell on the thin mattress. Hasira flipped the girl's bag, and all her books plunged to the ground. She knelt on her right knee and bent to get the doll that fell with the books. Keenly she stared at the doll that was in her hand. "Anyone who cares to explain what this is." She said, she gained controlled of her voice and she wasn't stammering or taking breaks between each word. She didn't seem drunk anymore.

"I was the one who gave it to Kipusa." Lucky interrupted.

"Oh, so now you're playing parent and child. How sweet!"
Hasira barked.

Hasira managed to kill a non-living thing. She tore off the Barbie's head off and burnt the body using a lighter. After carefully plucking the Barbie's hair from the head, she handed it over to Girl and left with hurtful parting words, "it looks more like you. You can keep your Barbie head, you thief!"

At that moment, Lucky placed her hands on her head. Her thoughts cheered her to take the butter knife inside the cooking pot and repeatedly strike at Hasira's jugular vein until she bled out and couldn't move. She had imagined all the scenarios of murdering Hasira. She thought of hammering Hasira's brain into mush, but the neighbors had the hammer, so that thought faded. She thought of breaking Hasira's empty alcohol bottles near the mattress and stabbing her with them, but she didn't want her neighbors to hear it. By the time she raised her head to and reach for the butter knife, Hasira was already gone. Lucky was resolute about moving out of Hasira's house. She didn't like Hasira's drunken behavior the way she treated Girl.

With the help of BigM, she found a mud house just near Hasira's house, which practically made them be considered neighbors. In as much as Hasira resisted letting Lucky go, Lucky was intransigent about being independent. BigM gave Lucky a bed with a mattress, basins, and a box to place them on the floor as a housewarming gift. For the first few days, BigM visited Lucky to assist her in settling in the new place. He brought her meals and fixed the few mud holes in her house. BigM rarely talked to Lucky whenever Hasira was around. He cloaked his smiles and soft voice and put on an angry, tough guise. Lucky thought he might be doing

that for Hasira to respect her ergo she never intimidated him with her tongue lashing as she did to everyone.

When Lucky got a chance to talk to BigM, he revealed he had a motherless child he was taking care of. His wife had died from a hit and run while she was coming home from work. They never found out who killed her; the only thing the witnesses said was that the car was Audi e-Tron. The locals in RedF identified the body, and she was brought straight to him, dead. For that reason, he worked hard as a bugler and sometimes joined the local gangs to carjack to provide for his daughter. He didn't want her to lack anything.

"I've always wanted to be a writer; write stories about all the things I've heard. My stories won't be nonsensical without a moral lesson. It will be a wise moral lesson. I will talk about things people are most afraid to talk about." Lucky prattled to BigM as they sat drinking tea on plastic chairs.

"Why don't you do it. Start by writing articles. Ukweli newspapers feature different articles from locals. They advertise that if you have an article, you can just drop it, and if it is worth something, then as sure as day, they say they'll feature you in their newspaper. Well, you could try; you never know it might be a good stepping stone." BigM advised.

Lucky was terrified about the idea, but as soon as her hand touched the pen, she knew what she would write. Her emotions took control of her pen; it moved gracefully through each line, each full stop, and paragraph. It awakened her memories of Naima. Naima loved writing more than Lucky. Whenever they had to write an assignment in groups, Naima took charge of the writings while the rest of the group members shared ideas. Her words were eloquent, and her handwriting was neat.

After Lucky had finishing writing, she wrote her name, followed by N.A.K. the abbreviation was Naima's name. She wrote it for Naima as a clue if her work was ever to be published. She hungered for the day she would meet her friend once more. She wished her fate was more like her friend; she imagined that Naima lived in an opulent home like the ones she worked in. She envied her relationship with Ali; nobody was luckier than Naima for getting married to her childhood friend.

"They must have such a happy life," she thought to herself.

She wondered who must have cursed her life to end up with misfortune after misfortune. Her biggest regret was leaving Maryam. She had been driven by the thought of life on the other side. She had pictured a different life in the city. She knew the city like a fairytale. She thought that she could make a life for herself with the help of Rashid. Rashid told her all that she wanted to hear; sweet lies blinded her. It drove her to an impulsive decision, and when she got into the car with Rashid, she couldn't go back. She had set the relationship with her and Maryam's family on fire. Ayeyo had once told her the man who would marry her would be assessed very well before allowing her to get married, but that became a fantasy.

Rashid sugar coated everything. He promised to come back for her every month. He promised to send her money for school. He promised, he promised, and he promised. She believed him. Her reality lenses were finally cleaned when she found Rashid gone. Not a single piece of clothing was in the hotel room. It was like he was never there but just a figment of her imagination. "Had I imagined all of this?" She questioned herself over and over again. She couldn't swallow it. Every thought about Rashid boiled her anger. She imagined herself standing near a hot boiling oil; she shoved Rashid's

head inside the hot oil and watched his skin fall off. The more she remembered the lies, she was frustrated by herself. She imagined Rashid in a pool of his own blood.

After she was done with the article, Lucky handed the paper to BigM to deliver it at the Ukweli Newspapers office. Eventually, as Lucky's life continued, she found new prey, Mrs. Binti. Lucky was hired through a mutual friend to work for Mrs. Binti. Mrs. Binti was a wealthy eighty-year-old woman who lived alone. That meant she would be a perfect target. The gang tried to avoid robbing families that were more than four, those who lived in apartments and houses within the estates. Mrs. Binti's house was a spacious colonial house made of bricks. Inside the house, all her furniture was antiques. She had Victorian sofas, wooded coffee tables, and a canopy bed. She didn't own a television or any electronic device.

"I can't learn to use these technologies," she told Lucky.

Mrs. Binti didn't consider Lucky to be her maid. Whenever Lucky got to her house, she energetically helped Lucky to clean and cook. She forced Lucky to sit down while she served her food. Mrs. Binti reminded Lucky about Ayeyo. She enjoyed how they both treated her like their own. Lucky gazed at Mrs. Binti, who was eating Infront of her. She thought Mrs. Binti should have been dipping one of her legs inside the grave at her age. Her eyesight would have been lost, and she would only see darkness. Her back should have caved in, and she should have been used to walking with a stick. The deep trenches on her face were the only thing that made her look aged. Her hair was dark black, with only a few strands of greyness. But one could put an estimate of a sixty-year-old when they saw Mrs. Binti.

"Are you scared of death?" Lucky one day asked her out of curiosity.

"Of course not. I'm actually ready for it. I have buried my husband, friends, and one of my sons. Once you get this old, you feel like it needs to end. The lonely kills you inside." Mrs. Binti responded.

Every day, Lucky asked one question to find out more about Mrs. Binti's life. "How did you meet your husband?"

Mrs. Binti smiled, she stopped cleaning the bathtub. "It was love during colonial times. My husband was in a powerful resisting group during the colonial period. They were university students who formed a group to push for the country's independence. I was working as a teacher in African indigenous schools. You see there were separate schools, for the whites and the Africans. The white had a more advanced school system. We just taught so that our students got to know how to work for the white men. I met with my husband during a local meeting. They had come to inform people in our area to join forces in their struggle. I loved his enthusiasm from the moment he talked. He was determined, engaging, and goal orientated. We talked, wrote a letter to each other, and finally, we got married. We didn't have phones. Or social media." She laughed. "Kids nowadays meet on the internet and call it love."

"What happened after gaining independence?"

"After gaining our independence, my husband managed to get work in politics. The day we got our independence was a dream comes true. We marched to the street to celebrate. We sang and cried because we were not in a white man's control. Well to be honest they were still controlling us. But at that time, we felt like we were one nation, we all one. But that ended once the leaders changed."

"Is there something you've always wanted to do but couldn't?"

"Swimming. I tried to learn, but it was too late. We didn't have swimming pools like nowadays." Mrs. Binti answered.

"Where are your sons?"

"They are all over the world. My last child is the only one that cares about me. If my late husband didn't leave this house for me, I think my sons would have placed me in those homes for old people. I don't like being a burden. I don't ask them for money, I don't bother their wives and children because I can't force people to treat me with respect. I only keep ties with the one who wants to, and that is my last born. He's the most affectionate of my children. He's not married yet, maybe...maybe..." Mrs. Binti teased.

"Hmm, I will think about it." Lucky chortled.

As Lucky was cleaning Mrs. Binti's house, she found a one thousand Kenyan shillings note below the bed, and she took it to Mrs. Binti.

"I trust you, Lucky. You are very honest." she walked to her bedroom and pulled the mattress aside, revealing a bundle of notes underneath the mattress. "This is where I keep my money. I don't trust the banks. They seem like they will be taking it little by little, and after I die, and what would happen to the money?" She giggled. "I can't even use those cards they give out at the bank. I'd rather keep it at home for safekeeping."

"You can place elsewhere but no under the bed; this might be the first place where a thief might look." Lucky warned her.

"Stop being silly. Nobody can come and rob me on these sides. It's very safe." Mrs. Binti said as she smiled at Lucky.

Shame and guilt hammered through Lucky. She knew the time had come for her to plan the date for the robbery. She wasn't

supposed to work for more than two weeks. In two weeks, she was supposed to gather all the information regarding the items to be stolen, about the owner, and the security details. She enjoyed Mrs. Binti's company and working for her, but the time had come.

"I will handle her," Lucky warned Hasira that evening.

Lucky wore a *niqab*, veil hiding the face, to hide her identity. She didn't want Mrs. Binti to recognize her. They patiently waited for the sun to set outside of Mrs. Binti's house. They all watched the sun disappear, birds flying to their nests across the sky, and the sky cooled after housing the ball of fire. They all stepped outside. The driver opened the back of the pickup while Hasira opened the front door of the house. The house was dark, only a beam of light came from Mrs. Binti's room. They could hear Swahili music playing in her room. Lucky remembered how much Mrs. Binti loved playing *zilizopwendwa*, old songs. When it played, the old woman moved like she was her young self. There was something heavenly about the vibration of the instruments that swept her off her feet. When the melodious singer's voice interjected with the instruments' rhythm at play, the lyrics spoke to Lucky's heart. It relaxed her mind, and it revealed the other version of herself that she was content with.

BigM cannoned into the door, breaking it into half. Mrs. Binti's face looked like the terror had sucked out her breathing. She hyperventilated at the sight of the three strangers.

"Kneel down," Hasira commanded.

"No, she can't. She has a knee problem!" Lucky protested.

"I...s tha...that...you Luc...ky?" Mrs. Binti asked as her voice was trembling.

"Isn't this a wonderful reunion? Maybe we should get you some popcorn, cake, and drink to celebrate that your beloved is a thief." Hasira bantered.

Hasira moved closer to Mrs. Binti, who was sitting on the bed with her white nightgown. She bent low facing Mrs. Binti and then pulled out the gun in her holster strapped across her chest and pointed it on Mrs. Binti's head. "Do you want me to kill you? It will only take you a maximum of two minutes, and you'll finally get to see your dead husband. You'll see him transcending down from heaven, and he'll say hello, my love, I've been expecting you. That's when you'll thank me." Hasira whispered.

Lucky's muscles were tense. She knew there would be a possibility that Hasira would pull the trigger; she didn't trust her. Accordingly, she outstared BigM into talking.

"Hasira, we've got to start; the police patrol will be passing through this area very soon." He prompted.

"Tie her up! I really hate the smell of old people," Hasira exasperated.

Lucky loosely tied up Mrs. Binti's hands together. She waited until Hasira left the room to speak to Mrs. Binti. "I am sorry we are about to steal everything you own. I know how precious these kinds of stuff are to you. Once we leave, untie yourself. Wiggle your right hand out of the rope. It's loosely done. I haven't told them about the cash under the bed. We don't need to steal everything. I'm deeply sorry, madam."

Mrs. Binti remained quiet. Her eyes were mildly swollen from crying when Hasira pointed the gun at her. Anger was consuming Lucky. She wished she had a gun to shoot Hasira right there and then. "Ple...as... do... don't take my husband's pic...tures." Mrs. Binti begged.

"Nobody is going to take them. "Lucky promised her.

To ensure her promise, she went to the living room and took down the pictures. Afterward, she hid them in Mrs. Binti's top shelf in her wardrobe.

"I'm back," Hasira said in a loud voice as he entered the room. "There is one more thing our beloved Lucky forgot to add to her list. Whether you have something precious in this house apart from the furniture, which I must say it's quite in perfect condition. It's like you don't have visitors. You must really enjoy our visit here then."

Hasira had worn a white laced cocktail dress with thigh boots. She had put on a curly wig to hide her sandpaper hair. "Why is she wearing a dress during a robbery?" Lucky questioned herself. More than ever, Lucky hated Hasira's simple existence. She was infuriated by the way she walked, and her shoes made a clattering sound. The way she flipped hair for people to see her neck tattoo. The way she talked and laugh was the most revolting thing Lucky had ever heard. She hated everything about Hasira to simply seeing her breath. Her dream was to see her drop dead. "One day, I will kill her." She promised herself over and over as a calming effect.

"BigM, could you please come here," Hasira called. BigM rushed through the room like a streaming rain. "I want you to remove this mattress, check under the be if there's anything there."

BigM bent low, he flashed his light under the bed. There was a bag there. He moved to the other side of the bed and dragged the bag. "It's just clothes." He said as he removed old dusty military clothes from the bag.

"Check under the mattress while I look inside the wardrobe."

Sweat was draining through every pore of Lucky's body. "They will kill her. They will kill her." She thought to herself. But she remained still. She supported Mrs. Binti tied up a hand to help her get out of the bed. She bit her lower lips with all her force until she felt the taste of her blood as BigM flipped the mattress. There was nothing. The wooden bed frame was empty.

"Nothing here as well." BigM notified Hasira, who was digging through the clothes inside the wardrobe.

Lucky quickly glanced at Mrs. Binti with a startled face, and Mrs. Binti gave her a smirk. Relief flooded through her, getting riddance of the fear.

"Same here. It's empty. This old woman doesn't have any money or jewelry. Let's go." She instructed the gang.

Lucky was in a buoyant mood because Mrs. Binti had listened to her about hiding the money. She felt like she had helped someone for a very long time. It washed the little guilt she held unto. "I am a good person. Right?" She questioned herself as they were on their way home.

"Next time, find a better target. Someone with a lot more jewelry like gold than furniture. The furniture takes a lot of time to sell. The Indians will sell to antique furniture are penny pinchers." Hasira advised Lucky.

Lucky ignored her. She watched outside of the car's window, catching sight of the different cars with people in it. She tried to analyze each and every person inside the fancy cars. A woman wearing a *hijab*, a headscarf, driving a shiny black Toyota Camry caught her attention. "She might be the same age as me of a few years younger, she must have kids, a wealthy husband. A perfect home. Perfect family. Her skin looks like she hasn't been through any problem", She thought to herself. The Toyota Camry

turned left while their pickup turned right at the junction. The air changed. They were entering RedF.

RedF had a famous brothel called Majibaridi. Majibaridi seemed like a town within a slum. The houses had two or three stories high made of *mabati*, iron sheet. The clubs were on the ground floor, while the houses on the upper level were rental rooms. Their next stunt was to take place in Majibaridi because of the holiday season Majibaridi attracted wealthy people. In as much as Lucky hated going there, she bludgeoned herself into doing so. She had been saving every penny she got to get herself into a university. She had made plans on enrolling in a few months; therefore, the more money she got, the faster it would have been for her to stop stealing.

Hasira wore a revealing short dress while Lucky wore a long dress and covered up her hair with a turban. Even though she was a thief, she still held on to her faith. She prayed, covered herself up, and observed everything a Muslim was supposed to do. She believed that God would pardon her soul for all the bad things she did.

Hasira and Lucky stood on the entranceway of one of the clubs called Hyper in Majibaridi. Their objective was to find a new face, not anyone from RedF. They needed to identify if the man was rich by looking at the type of shoes they wore, the bulging of the wallet on the sides pocket or on the chest pocket, and items like watches and the type of phone they had. Lucky found her first target; he was a short a corpulent man; his whole body looked bloated, representing money. As soon as he entered the club, Lucky followed him to where he was sitting. She brought him a glass of gin cider, while she had a glass of coke for herself.

"You don't mind a lady bringing you a drink?" She asked.

"No, of course not." He gulped the drink. "You're so beautiful, are you from around here?"

"Yes, I am." She responded. "My place isn't far from here. Let's get out of here. It's loud tonight."

"Y...yes, of course. Show me the way." The man grabbed her waist, repugnance flickered through her. Immediately she removed the sweaty hands she said, "I am a little shy. Let's get home first."

The instant they reached Lucky's house; the man had lost consciousness. Lucky dragged his body inside the house. She scoured his pockets. She removed the watch, his phone, and his wallet. The wallet had only one thousand shillings.

"Only one thousand," she screamed, throwing the wallet at the man.

She grabbed ahold of the man's face to unlock the phone, then dropped his face of the ground. She disabled all the security on the phone, she removed the sim card and crushed it into pieces. She switched off the phone and placed it on her bed. After that, she called BigM to take the body and the phone to sell. During such robberies, Hasira and Lucky didn't split the money. Each target they got for themselves meant they owned everything they got from robbing that person. Lucky felt her effort that night as a dissipation. She felt more of a wreck when Hasira showed her all the money she had got from that night.

"You don't need to hurry up and capture your prey that fast, play a little and find out if their meat is bountiful or just dry meat," Hasira told her.

The next day Lucky was woken up by loud banging on her door. For a minute, her thoughts rolled her to think that it was a fire

since a fire in RedF was a day-to-day occurrence. It was BigM. He was smiling, putting on display his dark brown gums.

"They..." he paused and breathed out.

"Are you okay?" Lucky asked, concerned.

"They... featured... your article. It on page 5. With your name."

He took out the folded newspaper and gave it to Lucky. Lucky flipped through the papers, her stomach sank when she reached page 5, and she saw her name. "They published it! They did!" lucky chorused with BigM.

"Can you please read it?" BigM pleaded, "I have a reading disability." He laughed. "That's why my teacher gave up on me."

Lucky nodded, she plucked the page of the newspaper "Injustice in the name of religion. That's the title. Ginette Sagan once said, silence in the face of injustice is complicity with the oppressor. By definition, this is oppression, young girls stolen from their cradle, robbed of their innocence to be wives to old men who are old enough to be their grandfather. Marriage in Islam is an important and sacred union between a man and a woman that fulfills half of one's religious obligations. Islam puts a strong emphasis on mutual love and respect between man and wife. One of the main requirements of Islam is consent from both the man and the lady. The consent doesn't constitute a parent coercing the child to get married. It is no secret that the parent may be lured by how well off the man is and therefore bully the child to get married, believing they are doing what's best for them. This is borderline unacceptable, disturbing, and really disgusting people should really speak up. We cannot allow such things to happen just because it doesn't happen to your loved one. This barbaric cultural practice perpetuated in the name of religion is despicable. It's important to understand there's a

difference between religion, Islam, and cultural practices. This is no time for making jokes about it, but rather to speak out, these grotesque old grandfathers need to take a chill and let the girls be girls. They need to retire and plan to die and stop ruining young girls' lives. This is something that affects all of us, and every one of us has a moral responsibility to speak up against this injustice, condone it and shame it. The saddest part is the other family members and even the ones taking such photos and attending those weddings thinking of when they allow such things to happen. Let's stop it together as Malcolm x says that even the illness becomes wellness when I is replaced with we." Lucky stopped and folded the newspaper.

"Wow," BigM stood up from the plastic chair and clapped his hands. "I couldn't understand a lot of the people you mentioned or what you said, but I am so proud of you."

Lucky unfolded the newspaper to see the article once more. She brushed her finger through her name and Naima's initials. The idea behind the article wasn't hers. It was Naima's'. She recalled how Naima being welled up with anger when she heard one of their classmates had gotten married to an old man. She was only sixteen, and he was sixty-seven years old. Naima's anger awakened her anger too. Their hands were tied up at that time. They couldn't stop the marriage because it had already taken place. They swore to each other to never let anything like that happened. At that moment, as Lucky looked at her name next to Naima's initial, she missed her more than anything else. She closed her eyes and let her heart pray to God to let her see Naima one more time.



CHAPTER 15

Lucky had promised to cook the best chicken stew for Kipusa. This was to celebrate that Kipusa was finally in her care. She had found Hasira thwacking the back of Kipusa's knee to her leg with a pair of slippers the day before. The more she cried, the more Hasira added on the intensity. Lucky couldn't stand the sight; she knew it would be a matter of days before Hasira would eventually kill Kipusa. She convinced Hasira to get rid of Kipusa.

"You won't have her as a problem anymore. You'll be more relaxed living without her", Lucky told her. In that moment of rage, Hasira told her to take Kipusa away.

Lucky took her charcoal stove outside with a polythene paper full of charcoal. She dug her hand inside the bag and removed mid-sized charcoal, placing it on the stove until it was full. She then tore a part of the polythene paper and placed it in the charcoal middle then set it on fire. Lucky watched the polythene paper being consumed to nothing. She then poured paraffin oil that she had measured using the bottle cap all over the charcoal, and the fire from the middle portion spread. Kipusa was sited next to her observing all that Lucky was doing.

"Once the fire subsides, open the hole on the stove and blow it. We need the heat more, not the fire." Lucky animatedly said.

That day Lucky beaming face spoke with volumes. It was simply from her cheerful heart. Jovial because that night was to be her last robbery. The creme de la creme robbery would push them out of RedF to a fancy apartment or houses in the best residential area in the city side. They weren't stealing from people's homes this time; they found a jackpot of cash at a lush restaurant called Azza and Azwa. BigM was the one who had discovered their next target. He worked as a server in the restaurant, and he noticed a walk-in vault room with suitcases full of money. He approximated the money to be around 20 million or more. Lucky had already thought of starting a business with her cut and had a housing unit near the university. Her plans involved Kipusa as well. She had found a more suitable school for her that wasn't far the house they would get. She now counted hours until she laid on top of her million shillings with plans and dreams of making a life in Nairobi.

"Hello, Lucky, how are you this morning," Odhisol, Lucky's neighbor, greeted her as she got out of her house.

"I'm good, what about you?"

"I'm alright." Odhisol answered.

She entered her house and came out with a long socket extension. She plugged in a coil, and once it turned red, she brought a deep cooking pan half full of oil. Odhisol ran a snack hotel outside of her house. She cooked *mandazi*, fried dough, in the morning, and from the afternoon, she made bajias and chips. The smell of the snacks hit people in their houses, and the hunger made their stomach grumble, coercing them to buy the cheap snacks.

Lucky filled the cooking pot with water and removed the chicken wrapped up in newspaper and placed it inside the water. She wanted to make the chicken tender by boiling it before making the stew. She tapped her hand over the charcoal stove to see if there was the heat; she set the cooking pot on top and balanced it with the small charcoal on the sides. Lucky's eyes then fixed looked at Odhisol as she pinched a dough from the small basin, placed the small portion of the dough on her wooden stool used the dough roller to make it the dough flat. She then cut the flat dough into a quarter cut and dipped it inside the hot oil.

"How are you able to use the coil? Isn't it expensive to use electricity to cook?"

Odhisol shook her head. "No. We don't pay for electricity. My husband got us free electricity. We don't pay a dime."

"How is that possible?" Lucky asked curiously.

"We hook our electricity cord to the main transmission. So, we never pay anything because the bill goes to other people, not us."

Lucky couldn't believe that all of that happened in RedF. Odhisol was a Christian woman who held prayer nights at her home because she had electricity in her home than most other church members. Lucky felt safe living next to Odhisol because of her faith. But she proved to her that everyone in RedF was a thief one way or another. It was a survival hunting park.

All the houses around Lucky's house resemble each other they were mud huts with holes. There was no distance between the houses. Small sewage drainage passed in the middle separating opposite houses.

"Good morning, my people." Marjorie, their opposite next-door neighbor, greeted them.

"Good morning." Odhisol and Lucky greeted her back in unison.

Marjorie was an albino; she had put on a cartwheel hat, gloves, socks, a long white sleeved summer dress, and a shawl on top. Not an inch of her was visible. She put up an umbrella as she sat on the small pavement outside of her house. The covered-up Marjorie was different from the evening Marjorie. At night she transformed into a dead drop gorgeous damsel. She worked as a bartender in the Majibaridi infamous Kamata Mbili club. All the worse deed possible in the human mind happened in the club. From selling and assembling all the drugs to dealing with human trafficking. That was the best batch of their illegal businesses.

"Odhisol babe, can you give me only one *mandazi*," Marjorie grinned at Odhisol.

"No, this is just for business." Odhisol protested.

"Don't be mean," Marjorie teased.

"Maj," Odhisol called as she dipped more dough into the oil.

"Yeah," Marjorie answered. "Who's the tall gentleman who brings you home nowadays? He looks too good to live in RedF." Odhisol questioned.

"Oooh, there is a new one? I liked Sammy. He was nice. He always said hello to everyone." Lucky added.

"You people are such gossip tarts. Who was I supposed to choose seriously? Sammy is poor, poor than dirt. The tall gentleman has money, and he promises to marry me soon." The quandary of RedF women's decision to get married to rich men or poor men was the daily talk among women.

"But he is very weird." Marjorie's tone softened. "He asked me if it's true that albino's skin cures untreatable diseases."

"Be careful, girl, he might be those people who kill albino and send them to Tanzania." Odhisol fretted.

"In a few days, I will stop seeing him. I need him to buy me a new phone as he promised me." Marjorie jested at Odhisol.

Marjorie laughed heartily as Odhisol grinned at her remarks, unaware that in few days of seeing the tall stranger would result in Marjorie's death with all her organs missing news that would be of a surprise all of them.

"Anyway, is it true that Baba Cele didn't talk to his wife and the kids, and that's why she left?" Odhisol asked. She stood up and tied up her *leso*, wrap skirt, firmly on her waist. "Do you know I thought that the man was mute. Her never talks to women. At all."

"Yes!" Marjorie affirmed. "But I heard another one that she is in a mental hospital right now."

"No way! I would also go mad if I had a husband who wouldn't talk to the kids. But I heard that she only talks to his wife's sister when she visits." Lucky chimed in.

"It's definitely juju." Marjorie said.

"That's what I thought too. His sister in law must have put juju on him. What a sad life Mama Cele has." Odhisol responded.

The mid-morning heat in RedF was unbearable due to the industrial pollution in the area. The iron sheet houses glittered in the blazing sun. There were no clouds in RedF, no birds, trees, or a single grass to take shade. As the heat intensified, Marjorie moved inside her house. With the edge of her *gabsaar*, her long scarf, Lucky removed the boiling pot from the stove. She added more charcoal on the stove and blew air in the opening on the side of the stove.

"Go get me the twenty shillings tomatoes. Make sure they give you the good kind of tomatoes." Lucky instructed Kipusa as she handed her over 50 shillings note that was in her brassiere.

Immediately Kipusa ran to the shop. Lucky recalled that she had forgotten to send Kipusa all that she required for her stew and she ran after her. Lucky saw Kipusa's red dress from behind.

"Kipusa," she screamed after walking two blocks away. Kipusa looked back and stopped. Lucky rushed and held Kipusa in her arms." You still haven't gained any weight." Lucky giggled. She tickled Kipusa and put her down on the ground.

As they walked holding hands suddenly, a strong hand grabbed Lucky's neck from behind. Her first reflex was to scream and do a donkey kick to hurt the intruder, but she couldn't. The air became thick becoming hard to breathe. She gasped for air before she could gather the strength to scream for help. His hand tightened around her small neck until she couldn't breathe. It all seemed surreal for Lucky, and all she could remember was the charcoal in the stove and her chicken. Eyes looked to the sides, but she couldn't see Kipusa. The more she gasped for air, the more she became unconscious.

Lucky's sense of touch had been elevated; she didn't have the strength to open her eyes. Her hands touched the silkiest sheets. Unenthusiastically she opened her eyes to see if she had ended up going to hell or heaven. She blinked severally to regain her vision back. She sat up on the bed and examined the room, which had a crepe pink wall and rosewood touch. That was the work of a feminine mind. Her mind clicked, "where was Kipusa?" She turned around and noticed Kipusa was sleeping peacefully next to her.

"Wake up, Kipusa, wake up." The tone of Lucky's scared whispers woke Kipusa up.

Lucky knew waking her up wasn't a delight, but she had to do it. She still couldn't figure if that was still a dream or a real life. Or maybe It was both. The bed size was enormous with its headboard slat reaching half the wall, and it had the same flowery design on the footboard slat. Footsteps approaching abruptly reminded Lucky of what had happened to her in RedF. Her eyes opened widely when the door opened. That time she was ready for fight and flight response.

"Hello young girls, Had a good rest? You've been knocked out for hours. I took the pleasure of cleaning and tending to the little one's wounds. Sorry I had to hire someone to bring you here. Hasira suggested it. But I was surprised they brought me two instead of one. I had ordered for the little girl, but I will gladly accept you both."

"Hasira? Why would Hasira tell this man to take Kipusa captive? This must be a prank that the witch is playing on me." Lucky thought.

"Why do you seem surprised when I mention Hasira. Didn't she tell you about the deal? Lucky nodded her head to learn more. "well, I've known Hasira since the time she swindled me. As I was one of her first victims, but I managed to have a piece of tangible evidence against her crimes. She swore to make it up to me. I guess we both know what that means. The girl is the only prize possession that Hasira possesses." He took a loud gasp as he flared his nostrils. His glasses seemed to fog up, and Lucky could hardly see his eyes. "Plus, I had to pay an extra amount for this pretty girl's face. I'm glad my men got the two of you. This is more fun. I'm going to give you a name. what do you think of Stacey?" He looked at Lucky. "It has some sort of appeal to it. Stacey, Stacey Sharma. You are both mine now. My property, a reward for Hasira

mischievous acts of crime.” He stared at them and continued, ” I've been lonely most of my life, and you are what my heart had missed all this while.”

He moved from his prior standing position towards Lucky and stroked her scarf delicately, letting the edge fall on his chunky fingers. Everything wasn't blurry for Lucky anymore. She was filled with an empty void of emotions towards Hasira and this stranger. She carefully studied the stranger for any weakness, who only seemed to move closer to her every second. She knew she had to act and to act fast. When Lucky realized the seriousness of her state of affairs, all her limbs flexed, and her reflexive impulse came in hand. She seized hold of the bed lamp that landed in pieces on the head of the stranger. Holding her breath from shock, his body fell thunderously in slow motion. Her legs were against gravity and weak from not having enough food because of work. She grabbed Kipusa's hand, and within no time, they headed for the main door made of mahogany. But It was locked.

"I like it when they act feisty. Feels a lot like my childhood, the hide and seek. It was my favorite up until Sara Catcher and her friends forgot I was playing it, and I was left alone in the playground past school hours. Well, I wasn't the smartest kid." His voice came in the form of an echo from upstairs.

Behind Lucky was the bathroom door, carefully she held on to the doorknob to open it slowly just in case the hinges were squeaky. She opened it, and the girl squeezed themselves there. His voice was getting closer and closer. Lucky was a nerve wrecked with what was happening.

"It's going to be okay." She mouthed to Kipusa, who was silently crying.

"Everyone has the notion that the girls from the low class are willing to do anything to escape their life from the slums. Why are you acting hard to get my Stacey? Girls would kill to live in such a mansion and be spoiled by the luxurious lifestyle for the rest of their pathetic life." His footsteps approached the bathroom door, and he started laughing hysterically, "Little Pig, Little Pig, let me in. I'll huff and blow your house in."

That was it for Lucky and Kipusa. For a second, Lucky considered suicide by drowning her face in the toilet bowl, but that sounded witless. She had already given up her fate in the hands of God when he kicked the door opened. In a sprint move, he grabbed Lucky's neck with both his fists. Lucky felt like a chicken, which is about to get its neck snapped. Anger and frustration were intertwined in his expressions as he choked Lucky's out of my breath. Lucky's air supply was being cut off, suddenly she was overcome with panic when she felt light-headed. "This isn't my fate. This will not be my fate. I must protect her." The thought ringed in Lucky's head.

She accumulated robustness to kick him in the nuts, which she had learned from BigM. The stranger was down on his knees, crying the pain away. Lucky couldn't feel the pain that perused through her body. She was numb. Her game plan then was to find a weapon before the stranger could regain consciousness. At the corner of her eyes, she caught sight of a shiny object tucked behind the man's pants. As he squirmed his body from side to side, Lucky could discern it was a gun. Of course, was used to seeing a gun up-close, the one BigM had. BigM wasn't scared of having it in his house near his child; a gun in RedF was considered the first toy a child lays their eyes on. BigM always carried it with an extra magazine if something went wild during their unlawful errand runs.

Lucky seized the gun from the stranger's back, which seemed to almost fall from his movements. When he turned his head to face Lucky, she pointed the gun at his head. "Move one inch, and your brains will be all over that wall." her voice seemed raspier than usual because of the strangulation. She didn't believe what she had just said until the man tried to grab the front sight of the semi-auto pistol.

BANG! Instantaneously her finger had let go of the trigger. "What have I done?" The body fell on the floor in slow motion. When his body hit the floor loudly as horn blood exuded from his abdominal section. "What have I done?" The question constantly devoured her mind. Her brain was still stuttering, trying to understand what was happening. Her body shut down while her thoughts hold her firm staring at the body. "I am a murder. They will come for me. He is rich, and I am poor. It wouldn't matter if he kidnapped us, but I killed him. My life is over. They will arrest me, and I will be sentenced to a very long time in prison. I wish I never came to Nairobi. My life would have been better back at home with Maryam and Ayeyo." She thought to herself.

She stared at the man's lifeless body. She observed him carefully. He wasn't breathing. Had she killed him? His glasses were scattered in multiple pieces. His eyes were closed. Lucky remembered how the man's close-set eyes had held pique, and they enunciated no fear. But the man who was on the travertine floor looked as if drowning in tranquility. Globules of sweat were perceivable on his amber-brown skin. He was wearing a black suit with a white shirt. The white shirt was soaked in dark red blood. There was something about his lower lips that flustered Lucky's thoughts. They were almost the same color as an eggplant. She had also seen the same color lips in the young men in RedF. They used

Paradiso, a famous recreational drug that they placed underneath their tongue. The long-term effect included the lower lips changing color. When they took the drugs, all their sense was awakened. They spoke and did everything without fear. "But why was this man having this drug? Was he from RedF?"

Kipusa was sitting on the floor of the bathroom holding the door open with her right hand. She had submerged her face in between her thighs and was rocking her body back and forth. Lucky's hand was wobbling from the horror of killing someone, the gun dropped on the body. Lucky picked it up; her palm was bloody. She made her way through the kitchen. The kitchen was a massive space and empty. Every corner of it was spotless. The granite countertops didn't have anything on top. It seemed like someone had rented it for a day. Only the humming of the refrigerator made the empty space sound like it was a home. She opened the tap and let the water flow in her hands. She scoured her fingers together to get rid of the blood. It wasn't just the blood; she felt dirty everywhere. She wanted to scrub her body until it bled.

"Kipusa, let's go." Kipusa didn't move. Lucky bent low and stroke Kipusa's hair gently. It startled her, and she raised her head. "We have to go!" Lucky stressed.

She had found the house keys on top of the refrigerator. She used the keys opened the front door; it led them through a garden of alluring flowers and plants. Lucky didn't know where she was. The houses there were of considerable size with clean street pathways, which meant they were far from RedF. "Did they steal my chicken?" Lucky thought as they walked hand in hand with Kipusa.

They only followed the road that had matatus going to town. When they reach corner Zim, another slum before RedF, Lucky knew they were close by. She knew as soon as she walked in

RedF with Kipusa that someone would tell Hasira. The news in RedF spread like wildfire. Everyone was always watching. Lucky made her way through the dirty trenches of corner Zim. Until they reached near a massive black gate written Umbrella child center.

She bent low to look Kipusa in the eye. "Go In there and tell them what happened. You can tell them, please. In a few days, I will come back to you." She told her.

She wrapped her hands around Kipusa's body. She could still feel her trembling frame. Lucky balanced her tears and blinked severally to avoid them from gushing out like a broken dam. "Hasira has to pay." She walked away without looking back, steering clear of seeing Kipusa's eyes following her, screaming and crying for her.

Lucky had recalled the squabble that Hasira had with BigM the night after the robbing Mrs. Binti. Lucky had just arrived outside of Hasira's house, and she heard the voice of BigM. She could apprehend what they were discussing, but Lucky paid no attention to it. Hasira seemed to bring up the reality that was going on within the community. Girls were being sold to wealthy individuals as slaves. That was no news, young girls were in high demand across RedF slums. Her own neighbor, an elderly woman who had sold her own daughter to pay her debts, had finally got arrested and charged for it.

"But why was Hasira bringing this up?" She had thought to herself. "Why did BigM express annoyance through his voice?"

She finally understood it; all the time that Hasira jested about getting rid of Kipusa, she was, in actual fact being honest. She did want to get rid of Kipusa but giving her to Lucky wasn't enough. Kipusa was already sold to someone. Like a property with no rights, she was handed over to the strange without being told. Lucky was

walking lava about to burst and consume everyone, and it almost erupted

When she reached home to find her pot of chicken and her charcoal stove was missing her anger doubled. In RedF, Clothes and cooking pots were never placed outside for more than a few minutes. There was always a thief spying on people's items. She blamed it all on Hasira, just the thought of her fueled all the rage and anger, and it consumed her.

Her button phone vibrated. It was a message from BigM. *Get ready.*

She seized hold of the black trench coat hanged on the white plastic chair and put it on. She carefully loaded the gun that she had taken from the man earlier on and placed it in her side pocket. She placed her anger on pause while her thought at that moment was focused on the robbery.

The driver packed the Toyota wish at the back of the restaurant. Hasira had got two more hands to assist with the robbery. They were well-built men, almost the same size as BigM. They had guns the size of Lucky's hand strapped across their chest, and they put on masks to hide their identity. The gang waited for 10.20 p.m., the time that BigM had estimated the closing of the restaurant. The aim was to find the owner alone to open the safe, but they found the restaurant workers still inside cleaning the tables. The gang rushed inside through the front of the restaurant while the driver watched the back door.

"Keep your hands up and kneel down!" Hasira commanded the workers who were all wearing black aprons with white shirts and black pants.

Nobody moved. They stared at Hasira and the two well-built men like the unfathomable sight of a falling edge.

"Boom!" The voice of the gun's bullet crashing into the glass table coerced the workers to Kneel down.

"Stretch out your arms. Let me see them!" Hasira shouted. Lucky breathed in and out. "This is my last robbery". The thought of seeing Kipusa once more drove her and lessened the anger when she saw Hasira. She imagined herself at Hasira's funeral.



CHAPTER 16

Naima had never felt such pain in her life. It felt like her period pains but worse. Her stomach felt like stabbing from a thousand knives and the pain transferred to her back until she couldn't feel it. Every minute the pain increased until it became unbearable. It all felt like her fetus was about to rip her open and explode. Her emotions at that time ran a hysterical mile. She slapped Ali's hand when he touched her.

"I can walk by myself." She screamed at him while they crossed the road.

She was scared that something had happened. She was only five months pregnant. "Was it because I never went for a checkup?" She silently questioned herself.

But when she saw Ali in a double-quick time her rage overtook all other emotions. Seeing the pain in her eyes, Ali wanted to support her by holding her hand as they walked to the hospital across their apartment. "Don't you dare touch me!" Naima commanded.

When they arrived at the hospital the security guard rushed to get a wheelchair. As she sat on the wheelchair Naima could feel the blood that was dripping in between her thighs as wet as rain on

her *dirac*. Naima watched her husband hurtling almost about to slid off the slippery floor. She couldn't hold her laughter in.

"I need a doctor! My wife is pregnant and she is bleeding and...and she is in a lot of pain." He told the first person he saw wearing light blue scrubs with a white coat.

"Go upstairs to the obstetrician. The nurses will assist."

Ali pushed the wheelchair through the wheelchair ramp with all his strength. "I need help!" He exploded. But the nurses neglected them. They looked at him like he was an insane person who had escaped a mental institution.

"You have to get her registered before she gets to see a doctor." A nurse wearing a short blue dress with a white cardigan said.

"Can't she first see a doctor first? I'll pay whatever money you guys need." Ali pleaded.

The nurse chewed her gum loudly as she stretched her hand at Ali. Ali dug inside his wallet and placed a few notes on her hands. "Does she have insurance?"

"No, she doesn't."

The nurse eyes looked up at Ali. This won't cover up everything." She said as she held up the money. "what about something for me?"

"I will give you everything that is required. Please get her to the doctor. "Just one second. She is with a patient. You can take a seat."

But Ali couldn't take a seat. Naima watched him move back and forth to the nurses' station to check if the doctor was free. Naima read all the medical posters on the wall to lessen the focus on the pain, but reading the poster about the abdominal pain in pregnancy made it worse. She believed that she had all of those

illnesses from acute appendicitis to ureteral calculus. She had never heard of some of the illnesses but she believed that It was one of them. It had to be one of them. Many years later she wished she had screamed for the doctor instead of sitting down while the pain ate her away like a bag full of popcorn. The doctor didn't have a patient inside, she was talking on the phone. When the Doctor came out of her office, she was disheartened at the state of Naima in a wheelchair bleeding while the nurses made stories instead of assisting her.

After a much-needed struggle, the doctor located Naima's vein and injected her with the IV syringe. The intravenous fluid therapy of five percent dextrose in water was needed because apart from blood loss she had fluid volume deficient.

" I don't hear a heartbeat." The words infused panic and dejection.

The doctor injected her with another fluid that soared the pain to an uncontrollable point. Naima wasn't aware of what was happening.

"You have to give birth to that fetus." The doctor instructed.

She felt was an overwhelming desire to push the baby. She could feel a tiny body making its way out of her. The doctor held it in her hands. It was covered with blood and different types of stains.

"Please can I hold it," Naima begged. The doctor brought a pink shawl with a white pattern on it to cover it with it. She placed it on Naima's arms. Ali sat next to her and watched Naima. Naima reached for its hand. It was cold. The sadness skated her way through her body. She was also cold. She held a thousand tears from falling as she tried to wipe the blood off his face but it was sticky and impossible. The urge to let the tears fall get a hold of her.

"I was going to name you Saeed or Saida. Meaning happiness in Arabic." She whispered softly in his ear as she smiled. She broke down and cried her pain away. If she were to describe the sadness that overtook her when Ali told her that he had an emergency it was like death by a thousand swords being run through her which didn't immediately kill her but bled all her joy. He gave her his credit card and runoff as if the moment would have healed her wounds.

"Al-hamdu Lillaah, innaa Lillaahi wa innaa ilayhi raaji'oon. Praise be to Allah, verily we belong to Allah and unto Him is our return." Naima prayed.

According to their religion, if a fetus died after 4 months then it would be washed and shrouded and would have to have a *janaza*, funeral prayer because after 120 days the fetus is believed to have soul blown into it and it is not just flesh and blood. But it is a being with the attributes of a person. Afterward, it is named and *aqeqah*, a naming ceremony is performed so that during the day of resurrection it will intervene for its parents. But before Naima had the moment to do any of it, that night, she had an unpleasant abdominal pain. She was also still bleeding profusely but she brushed it off as an after-birth pain until it was unbearable.

"Have you ever a UID insertion before?" The doctor asked her during her checkup. She didn't understand what that meant, she shook her head out of confusion.

"You have been circumcised, yes?" Naima nodded her head. "You have a ruptured uterine. Could be as a result of so many complications you underwent through your childbirth or even before. We'll need to do a hysterectomy in the morning."

"What's that?"

"We'll need to remove your uterus."

Naima sat up on the bed. "What do you mean. Umm, why?"

"Naima you might die from blood loss and so many other complications."

"But Dr., what will happen if you remove my uterus," Naima asked softly with her voice breaking up between the words.

"You might never get pregnant."

"Wow okay." Naima sniffled.

"I'd have given you time. But the time isn't on our side." Naima kept quiet.

"Would it be better if I die? Why should I be alive?" She thought to herself. She found no pleasure in living without her baby. But it was considered a sin to kill yourself, the thought held her back.

"It's okay doctor do the procedure. " Naima decided.

Hours before her surgery Ali called. Naima stared at her phone before answering. Ali's name flooded her with feeling betrayed and it thrummed through her. She talked to Ali to ease her up on how much she was scared of the surgery. She found it unnecessary to tell Ali about her surgery. He couldn't do anything for her then. When Ali told her, "before you hang up, I wanted to tell you, I love you," she wanted to tell him, "I will never ever get pregnant in my life. Would you still love me?" But he had already ended the phone call.

"Are you ready to be prepped before surgery? " the head nurse entered the room and asked. Naima nodded her head and got out of bed but she quivered from fear of everything that could go wrong. Even though the head nurse was the superior nurse she was also a cut above the other nurses with how she treated patients. She

was soft-spoken and understanding. Naima was glad to have the head nurse by her side than any of the other nurses.

The sudden knock on the bathroom door brought Naima back to actuality. "If you're done in there, could you please step outside, the Dr. is on her way upstairs for a checkup." Naima recognized the voice; it was the head nurse. As she opened the door, she smiled warmly at her and she smiled back as a form of greeting. It had been a day since her surgery and her stitches still ached. She dragged her body to bed with the assistance of the nurse supporting her waist.

"You know the drill," she said as she gathered her equipment to test her blood pressure and change her wounds. The nurse opened the gauze package cutting them open with a pair of scissors. She put on her medical gloves and removed the old dressing on Naima's lower abdomen that had traces of blood. Naima could see small incisions of cuts on her lower abdomen. The more she looked the more pain she felt. The nurse placed a new gauze placing it over the incision area and taped the sides with a pad. She moved to the corner side of the room near the bathroom and removed the gloves dropping them inside the trash.

Naima turned and faced the nurse. The nurse nudged Naima's memory of her mother. She looked like she was the same age as her mother but they had so much difference. Like most of the women at Dadaab her mother never preferred giving birth in a hospital instead they hired midwives whom they trusted. This mostly resulted in complications for which the midwives were not medically trained for. They never handled high-risk pregnancies with caution because they didn't have the proper machines for detecting such issues like stillbirth, inflammatory, or even high blood pressure. These mothers detested going to the hospital, they

trusted the midwives and sometimes they completely ignored even if the midwives had warned them. These women held on to believes that if they went to the hospital their babies would be killed or interchanged with other babies born at the same time. They were also afraid of showing their private parts to strangers who wasn't a Somali and especially a male doctor. That was just wrong according to them and if a woman did that then there were destined for *jahanam*, for hell.

Her mother was no exception to this, she gave birth to all her children at home. Naima was shocked to see the maternity with Muslim ladies who had given birth with the help of the doctors and nurses who weren't Muslims. She questioned everything she thought was correct according to the women at the camp. Like most women at the camp, she didn't go to the clinic for checkups, she thought it wasn't a must because she had seen none of the women at the camp getting checks up when they were pregnant just like her mother. As she watched the head nurse protruding stomach, she recalled that all throughout she had never seen a pregnant woman at the camp or even noticed her mother pregnancies. These women tried to hide their pregnancy with long and baggy dresses and gabsaar, long scarfs like it was a shame to expose it to other people. That became a reason why Naima avoided exposing her belly she felt shame. Naima felt strange to see the head nurse running her hands over her stomach exposing the real size of her pregnancy as if proud of it. The doctor arrived as soon as the nurse left.

"Hello Good morning." She greeted her.

"Morning," Naima responded. The doctor took a long look at the medical report.

"Your wound is healing up nicely. No clear signs of infection. The C.T scan shows everything is normal. Your red blood

cells have increased as your white blood count. When you arrived here you had a few white blood cells which was risky, we, therefore, used every immune body booster to get you in shape. The results are impeccable and your white blood count has increased since then. I hope you can continue eating healthy and taking your meds. We can let you go home tomorrow."

Naima's house was a blood-curdling nightmare that haunted her psyche as soon as she stepped inside. The house was big and empty. A wave of loneliness hit her when she walked to her bedroom. Her bedroom was an archive of her failure as a mother. The room had a navy-blue electronic baby cot, an aqua green baby bath, and a changing bag that had one pair of white small pajamas for her baby. She had bought the aqua green baby bath from a street vendor not so far from her house. She had pictured herself placing her leg inside the baby's bath and her baby's body would be on top of it as she washed him with a ceaseless smile. She regretted her decision to buy the items before she had given birth. She had forgotten her traditions, a feeling of regret settled at the pit of her stomach. On no occasion had she ever seen her mother buy clothes or any item before giving birth. It was like counting your chickens before they hatch. Therefore, when the baby was born the family and friends of the new mother would buy for her all the commodities for her child's care. Her mother had never bought clothes, she used the same pair of clothes she had bought for the eldest to the youngest. They even received hand-me-down napkins from their family friends.

The electrical cot preyed on her mind, what was she going to do with it then because she would never get pregnant. She remembered the message that she had received when she was leaving the hospital from Naomi. One of their neighbors had given

birth that same day. Without changing any piece of her clothes, she removed the pajama and laid it on top of the bed. Even though the doctor had advised her to stay in bed and warned her about walking, she paid no heed to it. Naima took her bag and hanged it on her shoulder. With her left hand, she clutched the cot and with her right the baby bath and she made her way downstairs to the 4th floor. The house was full of guests; neighbors, strangers, and the woman's family. Naima was greeted with bear hugs from her neighbors and they all asked the same question, "where have you been?"

Naomi was particularly interested in every bit of the information and she dropped the questions like petals from a rose. "I heard that your husband came back and you two disappeared for two days." She giggled. She was wearing a body con mini dress while holding a champagne glass as she sipped every second. Something was different about Naomi, Naima tried to pinpoint what it were and it led her to her hair. She has dyed it Yellow not the Tuscan types of yellow that was cool to the eye but the brightest of the yellow that was close to the hot circular thing on the sky.

"Where did you even hear that?" Naima twisted her lips sideways then shook her head from surprise.

"News around her spread around and I am the queen of that." She said as she stressed the last parts of each word.

"Is that alcohol?"

"Shh, tell me first, where were you? I bet it was Diani beach or was it Mara. Wait, did you fly out of the country?" Naima walked away. "Does that mean yes?" Naomi's voice trudged behind her.

She walked across the hall to the bedroom where her neighbor was after seeing the guest taking the gifts there. The bedroom was crammed up with nicely wrapped up gifts, Naima felt

embarrassed about hers. She dropped the items next to the space left near the room's bathroom and walked near the woman's bedside. She had never seen her before but she felt happy to see her next to the baby. The woman's hairstyle resembled a steel sponge held back by a sweatband. She had put on an oversized pink nightgown that covered every part of her from the hands to her neck. Even though the two women did know each other very well. They spoke like distant friends.

"Congratulation."

"Thank you." She replied weakly.

"You sound tired."

"Yes, I am," she forcibly put a smile on her face.

"I had the longest labor."

"How long?"

"For 10 good hours, I had to push this little one out." She pointed at the small baby next to her that had been tucked away inside the cream baby's nest. "After this, I am closing the business down there. This one is my last one."

Naima felt life had played an unfair game on her, she hoped to be a mother but she was dispossessed of that gift and not on her own will while other women like the one in front of her, wanted to stop having children at their own will.

"But you're glad your baby is alive." Naima beamed.

On the outside, she smiled while on the side she was crying filling up a dam. She had visualized an ideal way of raising her baby when she was pregnant. Her reverie included taking her unborn baby to school when it got bigger, helping it with its homework, and teaching Quran and *Sunna*, a way of life, to her child the appropriate way she knew how to. She was well aware of the neglect she received as a child from her parents. They never helped her with her

homework nor taught her Quran. But whenever she did something bad unaware, she was confronted with the word *haram*, prohibited, and *jahanam*, hell. Her parents never explained to her why they considered stuff like laughing loudly as *haram*, prohibited and that she'll go to *jahanam*, hell, for laughing loudly. She asked and asked but they never explained their reasoning. She never understood what was wrong with laughing loudly. Was she supposed to hide her sense of joy? It lacerated her young brain.

She didn't want her child to undergo that, her child would change up the bad parenting that was rooted in their DNA. She didn't want her baby to go through the physical and emotional abuse at the *Madrassah*, Islamic school like she went through. She wanted to raise it to ask questions instead of telling it that it is destined to go to hell because of questioning simple things. That wasn't Islam. For her Islam meant receiving an answer for every bit about their living. As a child, she was used to the tough love from her parents; especially from her mother. Her mother didn't concern herself with showing fondness or warmth to her children. The tip of her tongue splattered negativity, her nitpicker tongue always found the fault in everything she did. If she cooked her mother called the food tasteless or said it had too much salt. When the food was perfect, she complained and said she wished she cooked like that every day. Her favoritism was also as clear as day. She loved Jibreel more than any of her children. She blessed him for doing the smallest thing while the other children who slaved themselves before her but they received insults only. Naima didn't want her child to be brought up in such a pessimistic environment. She promised herself to show love and care for her unborn baby.

As she looked at the beautiful dark coco-baby sleeping covered by layers of white blankets all her reverie drew to a close

extinguished by the reality, she had lost her child and she would never get pregnant in her life. It was a reality that later she would get used to, and living life like it didn't matter.

Naima eventually got back to her old self in a couple of days. Even though she experienced constant crying spells and overwhelming anxiety that the doctor had warned her, she assumed control of her emotions by blocking them. She reopened her grocery business to keep her busy. She hated being alone with her thoughts. She hated the voices in her head making her downhearted. Therefore, she opened her business early in the morning and closed it late at night even if she didn't have a single customer. Her standard busy day was changed when she read the Ukweli newspapers and hope sprang her back to life with a flicker of hope.

She had a stack of newspaper that she used to fold it with the grocery for her customers. She preferred the newspapers because she had read the effect of polythene papers to the environment, she tried to be conscious. She advised the customers to bring their bags to avoid littering around the front part of the apartment. She tore the first page of the newspaper about politics with pleasure. All the newspapers talked about the corruption decaying the country. But it didn't matter to her, even though she was a Kenyan by birth circumstances had forced her to be a stateless person that living in the same country she was supposed to have rights. So, the politics of the nation didn't have much use for her. She kept plucked out the rest of the newspaper and tore it into two. But what caught her attention after tearing the page into two was her initials. She got curious and looked for the other piece of the newspaper attaching it together. Then she saw Lucky's name and her initial together. She read each word with immense attention even through comma and

the full stop her happiness at moment towered over all her other emotions.

" Is Lucky really in Nairobi."

She wondered. Without frittering away any minute she looked for the contact details of the newspaper at the front and at the back of the newspaper but she couldn't find it. She googled Ukweli newspaper contact details and their number popped up. She tapped on the number which directly showed up on her keypad. She dialed the number and listened to the dial tone with attentiveness.

"This is the Ukweli newspaper, the number one newspaper for the citizen. Dial one, to talk to an agent. Dial two, to uncrib..."

Naima promptly dialed number 1. "Hello, this is the Ukweli Newspaper agent, how can I help you?"

"I would like to get more information about the writer you featured two weeks ago, her name is Lucky. I'm an advertisement agent and I have an opportunity for her." She lied to get her way.

"Okay, one moment please." Naima's heart raced a marathon. "Okay, it's 0 eight hundred triple three four sixty."

"Okay, got it, thank you so much." Naima thanked the woman on the phone.

She saved the number and waited in the evening when she was at home by herself to call. She rehearsed by herself on the flawless way to start the conversation. She walked back and forth in her room talking to herself.

"Hello Lucky it's Naima. How are you, my friend." She stopped and whispered. "My friend. No no. That's not going to work. " she paused and began again. "Hello Lucky. Its Naima. Long time no talk." she removed her *gabsaar*, long scarf and threw it on her bed from frustration. "Hello Lucky. Can you guess who it i?. I'm sorry for what happened. Can I explain what happened?" Naima

sighed. "This is useless. I'm so stupid. " she chided. She felt remorseful about ignoring Lucky's phone calls all those times. "Would it be fair for her to answer my phone call after giving her a cold shoulder? Would she understand that I felt guilty she was there and I was unhappy in Nairobi?"

It summoned the memory of the one and only time she fought with Lucky. It was over the silliest item. A pencil. Lucky had forgotten to carry a pencil to *Madrassah*, Islamic school. The *ustadh*, the teacher, was very strict and required every student to carry their books and pencils. If a student forgot to carry a pencil the *ustadh*, the teacher, would beat the back of their hands with a ruler until another student offered to assist them with a pencil. That day Lucky had forgotten to carry her pencil, she was nervous about the teacher seeing her not writing. She asked Naima to check her bag for an extra pencil but she affirmed that she didn't have one. The *ustadh*, the teacher, finally hit her for not having a pencil all through the lesson. Later when Lucky went through Naima's bag looking for her book, she found a pencil. Lucky's rage overpowered her. She guilty tripped Naima by not speaking to her for a week until they missed each other and forgot what they argued about. But this was different. Naima thought that her actions were unforgivable. She sat on the floor and tapped on the contact she had earlier saved. She called the phone but nobody answered. She dialed the contact again.

"Hello, yes?" A man with a deep voice answered.

"I'm sorry this is a wrong number," Naima replied.

In a heartbeat she was glad that it wasn't Lucky, her words were stolen she didn't know exactly what she would have told her but she was back to square one.

"Where will I find her now?" she thought.

Eventually, her disappointment swerved its way into excitement. "I'm coming to Nairobi. Well, not only that but moving back there." Ali told her over the phone.

"Yeah right." Naima giggled.

"I am serious in a few weeks I'm moving forever there."

There was a serious tone to his voice that avowed he was telling the truth. "I never know if you are serious or kidding." Naima complained.

"I am being serious. I have booked my flight."

"No, what about work?"

"Don't worry about work. I'm coming to be with you," he assured her.

"How will we survive?"

"So now you worry about that. I thought you wanted me to live there all those times you begged me to love," he teased. "Well I have a gift for you that's going to sort our lives forever."

"What is it?"

"Soon you'll see. I hope you'll like it. Of course, you will totally like it. Its mind-blowing." He chatted with excitement.

The gift that Ali had mentioned rose interest in Naima's mind. What was this gift? She felt like things were once more falling back to place. Unaware She promised herself that she would tell Ali the news about her surgery when he got to Nairobi but she had little idea that her secret would remain a secret forever.



CHAPTER 17

I hate to text you this, but my time has come. I'm not a coward anymore. I'm free. My life comes to a stop but my love for you will never cease. When I'm with you I'm the happiest have ever been. Everything wrong turns to the right. Your eyes are the stars I never want to step out of the twilight. I've nothing in my lips but your taste. The longing of this love inside me kills. I am sorry for being the worst husband. The most difficult. I should have made us stronger but I am a weak man. All I wanted is to make you happy. I can't do it if I'm not. All people are telling me is how to lead my life. I don't want to ruin your Life Naima. My love for you drowns my heart but I can't live this life, it's not right. I hope you find someone who will love you as much as I do.

It was 6 o'clock in the morning, Naima had finished her *fajr salah*, morning prayer. She lay in bed indulged in her fantasies. In the semi-darkness of the morning, her eyes were full of excitement. Ali was moving back home. She had baked a sponge cake for her husband's home return and stowed it inside the fridge. She cleaned the house from top to bottom for his arrival.

She stretched out for her phone on the left side of the bed. There was a message from Ali. ~~Heedfully she read the message and~~

her face turned from an upward smile to an inverted one. Her animated eyes were stolen and replaced by desolate. She didn't understand the message. She thought her eyes were playing mind tricks on her. She walked, switched on the light, and again read the message.

She snorted. "This must be a dream. Maybe If I go to bed and sleep, I'll wake up a new." She thought. She tucked herself inside the blanket covering her head too.

"Drrr drrr drrr dr." Her phone vibrated and quaked the whole bed. With one eye closed, she switched off the alarm she had set for 11 a.m. The sunlight rays that penetrated through the curtains burnt her eyes. It took her seconds for her to regain her eyesight back and minutes to regain full control of her consciousness. She recalled the strange dream she had early that morning that felt so real. She checked her phone to confirm it there was indeed a message from Ali and there it was the same message.

Her mind was left confused. She couldn't fathom what Ali meant by his life had come to a stop. She read the first line again. "No, No, No, No." She cried. She understood what he meant by he wasn't a coward anymore. She recollected when Ali told her about his first suicide attempt. He called himself a coward. A coward because he didn't want to leave his family.

Naima's eyes were filled to an overflowing tear, if she just as much blinked it would be like river Nile. She called his number, but he was offline. "Please Ali, don't do anything. I need you, please. Don't rob me off this one thing. I need you too. I'm sorry for everything." She sent him the voice note message. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed hysterically. Each sob, shook her body like an earthquake. Between each sob she sniffled loudly to earn the energy of sobbing again. At that moment she didn't know

everything would turn out unexpectedly. She felt lost, confused and ill at ease. She had nobody to help her, nobody.

She couldn't talk to her parents because they wouldn't understand. Her mother would first be upset that she had lost her child at only five months and to add more worry that she would never give birth. She would blame her for going to the doctors instead of hiring a Somali midwife. Telling them about Ali's possible suicide would cause mayhem. They would call him *kaffir*, a non-believer, for doing such an act. Naima was left with only the solution of calling Bishar to confirm the news.

"*Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*. To Allah, we belong and to Him, we shall return." Bishar began as soon as he answered the phone.

When he said that a part of Naima's soul was cut open and buried with it. Her smile and happiness ceased forever. Her heart rate was rapidly beating out of her chest, she couldn't feel her legs she had a tight block in her throat that made her gasp for air. She couldn't understand what was happening to her. She had lost her control and she didn't know if she was in a reality or in a loop.

"I'm really sorry my dear. This is terrifying. Mind if I come over?" Bishar asked.

"Okay." Naima replied as if being choked.

Naima sat on the couch adrift in her thoughts for hours trying to put her finger when everything went wrong, she once more felt like she was in a prison of her emotions. Bishar's arrival ushered her back to the physical existence. Bishar put on a cheery smile despite having lost his nephew. Naima served him the sponge cake that she had save for Ali and watched him engulf it in minutes.

"I'm sorry I was hungry." He said as he scratched his moustache and stretched out his goatee. Bishar resembled Ali in a

way. If one squinted their eyes really close and looked at him, one could see the resemblance; same skin color and the same shape of eyes.

"I'm really sorry my dear sister, I hope Allah has mercy upon your grieving heart. How did you find out?"

Naima sniffled, "I got a message."

"Yes, me too." He said softly. "I couldn't stop it. I'm sorry. He gave me other directives as well..."

"What happened." Naima interrupted him.

Bishar scratched his head as he thought of the ideal way to break the ice to her. "He hanged himself. "

Naima folded her hands together and leaned forward.

"Why?" Her question shepherded a long silence.

Bishar sighed, "*dumaal*. Wife inheritance"

"What do you mean?"

"His parents wanted him to marry his brother's wife. By force."

Naima's eyebrows spiraled upwards as her lifeless eyes bulged out exposing the dark circles underneath her eyes.

"There was no *janaza*, funeral prayer for him. His father said that he was buried like a dog. "

Naima's heart ached, she blinked and the balancing tear fell on her cheeks. She knew according to Islam suicide was a major sin. Anyone who committed suicide didn't have the same right as a dead Muslim. Meaning that a funeral prayer wasn't conducted for him as a farewell. Just the thought of suicide is believed to be a sin. She remembered learning about that in *madrasah*, the Islamic school.

"Don't cry, it's *haram*, it's a sin. Wipe away your tears. You should be praying for him instead." Bishar advised.

Naima was repelled by people misusing the word *haram*, to control her. She couldn't control her emotions. "What was wrong with tears escaping on their own?" she questioned herself.

Bishar cleared his throat and continued, "I don't understand what is wrong with this generation of Muslims. There all go through a simple issue and they want to kill themselves. One of my neighbors in Mombasa killed himself because of love. That is stupid. The people there had mercy upon him and decided to hold a prayer for him. I still don't get it. He killed himself, so he just left like that, but the woman will still be here and she will be free to love the man she chose. People are stupid." Bishar jabbed out of control.

Naima silently looked at him. She was content and at peace. It didn't matter how people perceived Ali's behavior, she understood him clearly. He had promised to be with her alone and nobody else. He kept that promise but he died because of it. She didn't care if Ali had another wife all she wanted was to be with him but he had already expired.

"All these young people talk about is feeling sad. Very young yet full of misery. A young man once asked an imam about depres... depres... it's like being unhappy all the time. He said that he wanted to kill himself. *Subhanallah!* Glory to God" Naima went cold with anger, she stared at the dining table as her mind silenced the Bishar's talking. "In our times we kept our mind busy to even think about..."

His voice disappeared as Naima's thoughts took charge of her. She thought of going back to Dadaab and restarting her life there. She was daunted by what the people there might say about her and especially her mother. The news there spread like a plague of locusts devouring a field of maize.

Bishar tapped on the glass table to apprehend Naima's attention. "I'm here because there are some things Ali wanted me to give to you. Before he died, he had bought a restaurant and a house here." Naima was visibly shocked by the news but she kept quiet as Bishar talked. "You are the beneficiary of the restaurant and the house. It's all under your name." Bishar removed a document he had folded inside the inner pocket of his jacket.

"The gift." She thought. "But how did he get the money?"

The restaurant was located in the posh Moengoni Street where business and elite people worked. The offices in the street were contemporary architecture skyscrapers with a few brutalist buildings that hypnotized the eyes. The restaurant building stood in between two glass towers yet it spellbound anyone to ignore the buildings. The hotel name was engraved outside of the building in Baskerville Italic, 'Azza and Azwa restaurant.' It was a fine dining restaurant. The restaurant was first owned by an Indian family that sold it after going bankrupt. Ali hired the most competent architecture team to work on the image of the restaurant with the finest interior designers and within a week the restaurant was opened operated by Bishar. Inside the restaurant, everything was as perfect and unique as a snow fleck. The entrance door was an automated sliding door that opened as soon as someone stepped closer to it. It steered them right inside a lounge with leather seats and standing tables. As they made a reservation the people were required to sit or stand as they waited to be ushered inside by an attendant.

Inside the restaurant, everything looked lavish. It had low dangling silver lantern lights that lit up the room into daisy white. The walls of the restaurant were glimmering porous marble. The chairs were black-brown Chesterfield chairs with a slipper chair

design that took up less space than surrounded a round table. The tables were set in a formal dinner setting. The silverwares were placed systematically, on top and on the sides of the plate. On the left the salad fork and the dinner fork. On the right, there was a dinner knife, salad knife, soup spoon, and a small teaspoon evenly spaced. On the top, there was the dessert fork and the dessert spoon placed horizontally opposite from each other. The water glass was above the dinner knife to its right was a white wine glass and above the two was the red glass of wine. Even though the restaurant didn't serve alcohol they maintained a formal setting of a table.

The kitchen was an open kitchen that was visible through the glass window on the right side of the restaurant. All the servers and the workers wore the same pair of uniforms. Black pants, white shirts, apron, and a name tag. Upstairs was meant for conference meetings. The chairs were approximately meant for fifteen people. It was a long leather booth with an adjustable folded table for work and eating. The jazz music played subtly in a low timbre seeming effortlessly with the chatters of the people setting a more relaxed atmosphere.

Naima couldn't believe that all of that was hers she started to feel more reeled into the idea when Bishar introduced her to the staff as the owner of the restaurant. She was given her own office next to Bishar's. Her office had a desktop PC with a small calendar next to it. The wall had landscape photography of a mountain and of a sea. She had decided to go to the restaurant to help out Bishar instead of breaking down crying by herself at home.

Naima had slept through her *iddah*, mourning period, alone at her apartment. She spent the last month watching the addicting Telenovelas and Hindi movies she greatly disliked but couldn't stop watching. She shuddered at the storylines that were dramatic from

the start to the end. Everything about those movies was against what she stood for; the female protagonist had always had to be the one to be saved like a damsel in distress. The storylines were dramatic, from the incident to how the characters talked. It was all unrealistic yet it piqued her curiosity and she watched all of it like a sheep with shamefaced. When she watched the sad scenes, her eyes were flooded with tears from her wounded emotions of never seeing Ali again and she also tumultuously laughed at the hilarious scenes making her emotions running wild. She slept on the couch and didn't move her body unless going to the bathroom or praying. She became a lazy couch potato and she justified it by mourning the loss of her husband.

At the restaurant, Naima managed the small things like reservations over the phone. She got her first tangible work that didn't require her to stay in her office about a reservation of a wedding dinner party at the restaurant. It was a Somali wedding. She recalled in the camp how Somalis were known for their day-to-day endless marriage. Every day there was a Somali getting married. Their wedding was nothing short of spectacular decors, loud music, and food.

The restaurant offered the party a decoration package. From staying at home and watching endless movies Naima had acquired a taste in wedding decors. The walls were decorated with white and creme drapes and flowers on every corner. The stage was gleaming with a blue fairy light on the sides and on the armchair that stood in the middle. During the wedding night, Naima ushered in the guest. She was as curious as everyone to see the bride. She had met the family of the groom since they were the ones organizing the wedding. She could tell the family was well off, despite the

expensive charges of the wedding, they paid in cash like it was a mere transaction.

That day Naima had worn a long-sleeved mermaid turquoise dress that hugged her body and matched with her hijab. She was the face of the hotel and that day she proved to be the owner with her beguiling look. She gazed from a distance as the bride alighted from the Prado car dressed in an edge comb grey gown. But something looked amiss as Naima tried to look at her but she was surrounded by people clapping and singing she couldn't see properly.

As she walked to her office, she noticed the safe behind the pantry door locked. The safe had made her curious, on a daily basis since she noticed Bishar bringing in suitcases inside the safe but she left it all unquestioned. Each day she passed near the safe in order to notice what was inside the suitcase but the safe remained closed. After a few hours, Naima went to observe the wedding party. The bride was given a changing room near Naima's office. Naima hastily went to stand outside of the door to see the bride clearly. The girl was supposed to change into a traditional dress for the second last part of the wedding night.

As soon as she stepped out of the door wearing the red bridal *dirac*, a long Somali dress that is loosely fitted, Naima noticed what was off. That wasn't a woman that was a child. There was innocence behind those eyes and her chest was as flat as a flatbread. She stared at Naima and smiled as she walked away. Her face was dolled up with makeup that made her look inhuman. Naima was torn. "Could I act on her thoughts or not? Was the girl a child or not?" She was ripped apart by the questions. She straight ahead matched to Bishar's office.

"How old is that girl?" She hurled the question as soon as she walked inside.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Don't act like you don't know. The girl getting married. How old is she?" She scolded.

"How I'm I supposed to know that, is she my daughter or my sister?" He sarcastically asked.

"But you know the family. They called you an old friend." Bishar snorted.

"I don't know. Maybe she's young or old. Who cares? Women will still get married even if they're 50. The younger, the better." Bishar remarks, spiked Naima's anger.

"The things you say make you a complete *haywan*, an animal."

Naima spent the rest of the night in her office. She was torn between saving the restaurant's reputation and the girl. Naima grabbed the shawl that hanged on the chair and wrapped it around herself. She felt dissipated for wearing such a beautiful dress for a noxious ceremony. She walked out of the restaurant using the back exit to avoid the gleeful faces of the guest. She didn't know where she was going, but the outside's fresh air was better than the stuffy rationed air inside. Naima couldn't bear to stand the feeling of being out of control. She roamed through the empty streets, frustrated by her decision to walk away. "Could I have done more than that?"

Everything was as silent as death. The dim street lights only revealed the small dirty pods of water. There was no one around except for watchmen guarding outside of the offices. Naima didn't feel the cold that perforated in her sole. She increased her steps. At the end of the street, she took a right turn. She had no idea where she was going and didn't care about anything at that moment.

She heard footsteps behind her running. She looked back, and at a distance, she saw people running.

"You!" A woman's voice called from across the street. "Come here. If they get you, they will arrest you." Naima walked across the street and sat beside the woman on a cut-up boxes "Cover yourself with this," she handed her a blanket.

There was a Miasmatic smell that surrounded them. Naima wasn't sure if it was the blanket or the woman. A group of women and men ran past near them. Women with high pointed heels run like professional sprint runners. At the back of the crowd were a bunch of drunkards. They jogged aimlessly instead of running. "Who is the crowd running from?" Nobody was chasing them. Naima faced the woman. The woman had covered herself with a blanket and had put on a hoodie. Her face was hard to delineate in the darkness, but Naima noticed the furrows of wrinkles on the side of her mouth. At a spaced outdistance next to the woman was a street family sleeping on boxes covered up with layers of woolen blankets.

"Why are they running?" Naima asked the woman.

"Just wait and enjoy the movie now."

Immediately the crowd reached the end of the street; two lorries emerged, one from the opposite side of the street, several police officers alighted from the lorries. Those who ran backward were arrested by the officers standing and waiting for them while the others who proceeded forward were arrested and shoved inside the lorries. It was undeniably the best movie Naima had ever seen. She could picture the perfect song to go along to the women and men resisting arrest in slow motion.

The song, happy together, that she had heard in a movie played in her head on repeat; she resisted the urge to hum along.

"Why were they arrested?" Naima asked as soon as the lorries took off.

"It's the weekend. The perfect time for them to arrest people wandering, drunkards, and prostitutes."

"Interesting." She whispered to herself.

"Here," the woman handed her an extra box. "You can sleep on this one."

That night Naima slept as peacefully as the dew on a leaf. She didn't dream about Ali nor her family in Dadaab. It was one of the dreamless nights she had got since moving to Nairobi. She was woken up by the heartfelt laughter of children. She opened her eyes, and they were graced with the smiles of two toddlers held by their mother. The children looked a complete mirror of each other. Naima got up and made *tayammum*, dry purification since there was no water close by. Ever since she was a child, she had never missed a prayer. Even though it was a public place, she didn't mind praying on the street. She tried to locate the *qibla*, the direction Muslims pray to, using the direction of the hotel. She stretched out the box she had slept on and prayed on it. She could feel the thousands of eyes of the early morning passerby's gazing at her with astonishment.

"You have a beautiful dress." The woman next to Naima complimented.

"Thank you." She replied as she covered herself with the blanket as soon as she was done.

She had felt the morning chill of Nairobi in her home but experiencing it outside was new. She savored every moment of it. She watched the different types of people walking. The casually dressed, official, semi-formal, and those in-between of everything. As the sun came up, Naima didn't want to go anywhere. She

remained covered up with the blanket staring at the strangers walking by.

The woman with the family had two older children about ten- and twelve-years-old boys. They went to the opposite side of the street. Their faces were dusty, and they wore torn-up clothes. They stopped strangers, complimented them, then asked for spare change. They followed the strangers until they gave them something. They did it effortlessly as if they had practiced it many times over. When a stranger gave them food, they rushed over to the other side to hand it over to their mother. The woman next to Naima placed a cup before her, and strangers poured notes and coins from their pockets. The two women were kind enough to shared sodas and coffee the kids brought with Naima.

A book vendor had set up books upon books near where they were. *The invisible man* by HG wells seized Naima's attention.

"Can I read it here?"

"Sure." the old man nodded.

Naima pushed her box near the wall of the tall building. She covered her head with the blanket to provide shade from the baking hot sun and opened the book. The mere smell of the book brought forth the nostalgic memories breaking them loose. The *invisible book* was the first-ever book she had read at the camp. She was in class three and Learner, a literacy program by some humanitarian organization she couldn't recall, had brought books, pens, and different storybooks for the classroom full of children. She was the last one to receive a storybook. The book wasn't new; it had a name inscribed on the first page, Welton. After a few days, Naima was exhausted from seeing the name Welton on her book. She crossed it out until one couldn't read it. Then on the bottom, she

wrote, ' This is the property of Naima. Borrow once buy yours.' Eventually, she lost the book at school, and it vexed her until then.

In the evening, she had to give the book vendor back his book; he packed up all the books in his suitcase and disappeared into the crowd of people heading home. Naima didn't want to leave. In the streets, there was a sort of peace she couldn't explain. She liked sleeping in the open air, her nose got used to the unexplainable smell and using the public toilet.

"You look pretty to be living in the streets," the woman next to her teased as they ate rice together inside a black polythene bag. It prompted her memory of back in Dadaab when they ate together in the evening with her family.

"Where are you from?" She directed the question back at her.

"We are all from RedF, a slum not far from here."

"Why do you live here?" The two women ignored her question. They silently ate the food and prepared their boxes to sleep when the twilight ceased to be visible.

"If we don't have enough money, our tenants kick us out, so we come here to get money." The woman whispered to Naima as they laid their head, staring at the sky full of stars.

Silence exercised its control over the women sleeping on the street. Naima stared at the stars full of thoughts. She made her decision to go back to Dadaab, where she had felt full control of her happiness. She didn't care about the consequences of what would happen to her and what people would say. After all, when the dust settled, the only family remains.

Naima woke up the woman sleeping beside her and handed her a bunch of keys from her small bag. "Listen carefully." She began. The woman had opened her left eyes and pressed her right

eye together before opening the two widely. "This is a key to a house in section 5, old racecourse house number 288. Section 5, old racecourse house number 288. Repeat that."

"Umm...section 5 race ...course house number 2..."

"288," Naima repeated. It's yours now. On the top drawer of the kitchen cupboard, you'll find papers. Keep them safe. Nobody will evict you there. Don't forget, the house number is 288. It's a grey mansion with a green gate. Very beautiful on the outside. You can live with her there." She pointed at the woman with the family. "Or anyone."

"House number 288, section 5, the old racecourse. Yeah, I've got it." She whispered.

Naima stood up and walked away. She tried to retrace her steps back to the restaurant. With her fervent decision to go back home, she energetically walked through Moengoni street after noticing the familiar buildings standing tall. The restaurant was still opened, and Naima walked in like a hungry tiger to the kitchen. The staff was busy cleaning the floor, and the kitchen spotlessly like every other night.

"Hello madam." BigM greeted her.

"Hello," she answered back. "Could you please get me something to eat?"

"Okay, ma'am." BigM responded.

Naima walked to her office and tossed herself on the egg chair. BigM followed behind her with a plate full of pasta with minced meat. "Thank you so much."

She looked at herself on the mirror wall to her left. Her dress had changed its color from turquoise to an unrecognizable brown color. Her face was darker than usual, but her smile still looked good despite not brushing her teeth the previous day.

"Why do they call you BigM. Well, the other staff." Naima prompted the question before BigM left.

"I used to be big in primary school. So, they shortened Michael, and I became BigM."

Naima took the first bite of the pasta; the succulent food created an explosion of different flavors in her mouth." Wow, who made this?"

"The chef. He smokes weed and becomes brilliant at making the sweetest food." BigM laughed.

He exited, leaving Naima, enjoying the pleasure of the pasta. "I must go to Dadaab tomorrow," Naima assured herself.

It gave her an inner peace to think of the dusty, forgotten open prison she had grown up in. The prison didn't feel like a prison; it felt like home, and she had missed her home. She walked over near the pantry, and this time she found the metal safe wide open. The same suitcases that she had seen were on the floor at the end of the safe.

Naima's spirit of curiosity steered her legs inside the safe. She regretted her decision but couldn't back down. She knelt down and opened the two suitcases. It was stacks of cash that filled the suitcase to the brim. Naima was shocked to her core; she couldn't think properly. All her life she had never seen such an amount. Instantaneously Bishar walked in.

"Move away from there." He instructed her with a severe tone.

"What's all this? Where did you get the money? What kind of an illegal business are you running here to have such stacks of money? I know it's not from this restaurant because I check those records every night with the accountant."

"I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do because of your dead husband."

"Here we go blame the dead," Naima said as she tilted her head, supporting it with her left hand.

"You have a sharp tongue, young girl. Your father should have cut it while you were young. They shouldn't teach young women to speak like that to a man." Bishar raged.

"My tongue can be sharper than this. Where did you get all this money?"

"Your husband stole all of it. Where do think he got the money for this restaurant or the magnificent house he bought for you." He paused and looked at her watchfully. "Tsk tsk tsk. He didn't tell you?"

Her world came into disarray. She leaned in against the safe wall and slid her body to the ground. "You're lying." She looked at Bishar.

Bishar crossed his hands on his chest and grinned. "It's as if you live in a bubble of innocence. Accept it, what you've been eating is blood money. Stolen from someone somewhere. Every time you pray, just ask Allah to forgive your soul; maybe the guilt will die."

Naima was at the edge of a shock, trying to understand it all, and it crumbled down to what Bishar said. Her husband was a thief. Their intense moment was distracted by the sudden deafening gunshot. Naima gave Bishar a puzzled look that asked, "what was that?" Bishar darted to close the safe.

"Could you please hurry up and help me close this?" He asked Naima. His voice was shaky, and so were his hands. Naima stared at him with an irritation growing inside her like cancer.

“How could someone wearing such a white *thawb*, an ankle-length garment worn by Muslim men, have a soul dirtier and filthier than the dirtiest river in the world?”



CHAPTER 18

"How long will it take to break that door?"

"Approximately half an hour to cut through that latch."

BigM pointed as he removed the laser-welding machine from his bag.

"We'll be with the hostages if you need us," Hasira said.

Lucky followed her back. It was the driest season, the air they breathed was baked, and it parched up everyone. Lucky was wearing a black *abaya*; a long outer garment worn like a dress and a *niqab*, a veil hiding her face which she used to hide her identity. Each minute, she felt like she was burning inside the clothing layers but she couldn't remove them.

The restaurant staff's hands were tied up to their back with cable ties, and they sat down in the middle of the restaurant, making them visible from every corner. Some were too startled; they stared at the goons with guns like an unbelievable dream. Others were hiding their face weeping over their misfortune. Then there was the right activist, a man who announced to the goons if one of them wanted to go to the restroom. Hasira loathed him, yet she entertained his comments.

"Snow-white says that we should take that woman to the washroom. Who are we to say no to snow, she is the fairest among all?" She sarcastically remarked whenever the man talked. She called him snow-white because he was too pale.

Hasira walked in, dragging the sheer overlay of her golden dress with a portrait back. Lucky shook her head at the sight of Hasira's shoes. It was a platform heel with no heels. Hasira wore preposterous clothing during their different robberies. On no occasion had Lucky ever seen her wearing standard clothing for a robbery. Hasira wanted to engender a sense of 'I am dangerous and not scared of everyone.'

Lucky walked to the kitchen, she felt parched up, she was longing for a glass of water. As soon as she entered, she got a whiff of something familiar. She sniffed in the air long and loudly like a dog trying to find a bone. She found the smell in a metal jar in the automatic coffee machine. She detached it from the coffee machine

and sniffed it. The smell made her moan. It was a camel milk coffee. For a moment, she felt like she was at home by Naima's side, sitting outside while the hot sun was setting drinking camel tea.

She could taste the sour, and the sweet smell of the camel's milk sieved in with the aromatic taste of the grounded cloves and cinnamon. Every evening during the holidays from school, Naima had always invited her every evening for a cup of tea at their house. As she smelled, it conjured all those memories. She remembered all the silly games they used to play together in the evenings. Her favorite was playing as a fortune teller. She took in a long breath to her belly then as she exhaled slowly, she started talking with a deep voice to sound old. She would cover her head with a *gabsaar*, a long scarf, and chanted nonsensical words.

She only emulated what she had seen after going to their classmates' house and watched a Nigerian movie that was full of witchcraft. Lucky would warn Naima to stay away from books that they will make her die alone. She always knew how to come along with comments that would make them laugh, especially Naima. Their fortune teller game come to a standstill as soon as Naima's mother came home. She warned them time and time to stop behaving like the *kaffir*, those who don't believe in God and what they were doing was *haram*, prohibited. That sucked the joy out of their games.

Lucky smiled as she recalled all that. The thought of going back to Dadaab builds up in her mind. "Maybe if I find Naima then I can go." With that money, she thought of hiring someone to locate Naima. She got scared and walked two steps backward. "What would Naima say, will see me as a friend or a thief. She doesn't even want to see me." She thought to herself.

She stretched and scratched the irresistible itchiness at the back of her neck as she walked away to avoid being held captive by her thoughts.

The tension inside the safe was unexplainable. They had locked themselves inside there with no idea what was happening outside. The gunshot had scared Bishar like a rabbit in a wolf's den. It was evident; all that Bishar cared about was the money. He whirled into a panic-stricken state when he heard a drilling sound. He walked back and forth with his hands on his head as if grieving. As the drilling noise increased, followed by the welding noise, Bishar's fear manifested. He grabbed the stacks of cash and hid some on his socks and in his pockets.

He dropped a few on Naima's laps and told her, "hide that in your..." he tapped at his chest.

"No." Naima threw the cash inside the suitcase.

When the drilling stopped, Bishar eyes turned animated, "yes! They can't break this metal door."

Then drilling noise resumed louder with a squeaky sound of the door. Naima couldn't hold the laughter wailing inside of her, and it hurtled out into a sarcastic laughter. The Bishar that was in front of her wasn't the same one she had met many months ago.

When Ali left for Canada, Bishar used to visit her along with his family. He was a shy man who rarely talked. He always put on the cleanest *thawb*, an ankle-length garment worn by Muslim's men and always carried a *misbaha*, prayer beads with which he constantly made *tasbeeh*, praising God. As he managed the restaurant that Bishar, she knew dissipated and was replaced by a talkative Bishar who wore the same *thawbs* but scolded everyone.

Naima felt an itch at the back of her neck. As she scratched it, she felt the need to do it more until she felt it throbbing. It had been long since she had scratched the back of her neck. It only happened whenever Lucky was around. As teenagers, they took this itchiness seriously; they called it 'soulmate communication.'

She shook her head as a smile formed. "We were so stupid." She whispered to herself.

BigM put down his machine and screamed, "we are almost there." Hasira and Lucky galloped to see what he had said. "I'm done with one latch," he pushed the door, and it was squeaky. "One more latch, then we are in there."

"You are taking a lot of time. Even I can do it better than you. Lazy big body. Bring those two people upstairs once you're done." Hasira blurted with rage.

Lucky bit her lower lips until it and folded her fist together to prevent her hands from choking Hasira's throat. "Are you okay?" Lucky asked BigM immediately Hasira left.

"Yes." He smiled and continued working with the heavy machine in his hand.

Lucky was a flame of resentment set off by Hasira. She recalled the lies Hasira had told her, and she became a fireball of anger. Lucky had told BigM what Hasira had told her while they were in jail. He waited for Lucky to finish the story and laughed at that, calling it the best fiction story he had ever heard.

She came to know that Hasira and BigM both grew up in RedF. Much like Kipusa's case, Hasira's parents didn't take care of her. She was left alone for days. She started taking care of herself at the age of ten when both her parents disappeared. She was exposed to different types of distressing situation at that young age. RedF at that time, as BigM described, was a dangerous game park for

vulnerable people like women and children. Women feared walking outside at night. They had to have weapons in their houses in case someone broke in trying to assault them.

BigM fell in love with Hasira when they were teenagers. But his love was turned down, and he remained her loyal friend to that day. Hasira had a wealthy man who had promised to marry her. At the young age of seventeen, she was expecting a child with a much older man than her. The man waited for Hasira to give birth to their child. Hours later, the man disappeared with the child in his arm. He was nowhere to be seen.

Lucky at that time felt pity in a small-scale part of her heart. BigM explained that Hasira was ripped apart by the news of her child missing. Hasira turned into misandry. She swore wrath to every man. But Lucky didn't understand why Hasira was malicious toward Kipusa. She was a child. Hasira should have shown more mercy toward her. After the kidnapping case, Lucky didn't care about Hasira's unhealed wounds; she had crossed a boundary that Lucky considered at a personal level. She would never forgive her for doing so.

Lucky walked around the offices, trying to find a valuable item before BigM broke the safe down. She opened the first office and scoured through the cupboard. All she could find were files of papers that she found useless. She grabbed the remote, switching on the enormous television that was mounted on the wall. It had been ages since she had seen a television that closes; residents of RedF had small televisions that didn't work most of the time. As soon as the television displayed the first image, the volume was blaring the news channel; she clicked the volume's lower button until the sound was low. She pressed the change button since the news was about

sports. Her eyes drew attention to the newspaper on top of the desk. She leaned against the desk and took the newspaper.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!" She screamed. The newspaper's front was Dr. Hunk's photo wearing a *macawis*, a sarong wrapped on the waist, a white T-shirt, and a *kufi*, a short and round cap. He was coming out of a plane, and he looked like he had eaten a whole buffalo. The banner headline said, *free at last*. Lucky laughed loudly by herself. Her eyes unreservedly perused through the page.

What made her laugh even more was the writer has written at the bottom, *has Dr. Hunk become Muslim?* Lucky was well aware that Dr. Hunk liked the Somali culture; the food, the dressing. He joked that if he accepted Islam, then his wife would kill him and bury his body in their backyard back in Germany. Many years later, their dog would be the one who would locate his bone.

Dr. Hunk loved his wife more than anyone else. Lucky was glad that they would get to see him one more time. Lucky adored Dr. Hunk; he looked up to him as a mentor. Dr. Hunk was humble enough to teach Lucky how to perform a CPR despite being just a cleaner. He said that everyone needed to know how to perform CPR and obligated all the clinic workers to learn.

Lucky once more looked at Dr. Hunk's photo, and it still made her laugh. "What were they feeding him? I'm guessing he must now speak pure Somali language." She laughed hysterically, making teardrop falling on the side of her eyes. Finally, a piece of good news made Lucky positive about life.

Naima could see the other side of the door. Bashir's clothes were drenched in his own sweat. The color of his face was washed, and he was pale dead. BigM pushed the door by thumping it with his leg.

"I curse your husband for putting my life in danger!" Bishar screamed at Naima. His voice was shaky as if he was about to cry.

When Naima saw BigM, she felt relief overpowering her. Naima could see it in his eyes that he was sorry for whatever was about to happen. It didn't matter to her. All she wanted was to get far away from Bishar as she could.

"I will give you so much money. Just let me go." Bishar pleaded as he knelt down, placing his hand together at BigM.

Two huge men entered the safe, pointing their gun at Bishar and Naima. They didn't talk but instead instructed them to get out by pointing outside. Naima raised her hands as she had seen in movies to show that she meant no harm. She felt the need to scratch the back of her neck, but she let the itch mentally bother her. She didn't want to place her hands down cause she had seen people get shot in the movies because of imprudent things like that. One man followed them behind while the other one guided them up the spiral stairs to the conference room.

As they walked up the stairs, they could see their staff's hand tied behind their back, Naima quivered with shame. As the restaurant owner, she wasn't supposed to hide like a coward she was supposed to be by her staff's side. She looked at Bishar with resentment, welding up in her chest.

She didn't want all of that. she didn't want the money, the hotel, and the house that Ali had given her. All she was looking for was happiness, but that was far reached. She wondered what was the purpose of her life if she couldn't be a mother, daughter, and wife. If she had a remote to turn back time, she would turn it back and cease to exist, and then maybe happiness would have hurt less.

In the conference room, Hasira was studying the pictures on the wall. She was glued to the portrait calligraphed saying *make love, not war*.

"I think I'm going to keep this; it will look wonderful in my new house." She said as she turned to face Bishar and Naima. "Muslims keep on surprising me each and every day. Your religion says that you shouldn't indulge in sins. I guess we live in a world not controlled by religion but by the power of greed. The money covers up every sin we commit by making us cleaner. Wearing the finest dress and the finest suit. Giving the heartiest charities yet taking more and more from the hands of the poor." She said as she walked closer to where they were standing.

At that instance, BigM entered the room and walked near to Hasira, whispering something in her ear. Hasira's face grated between confusion and anger, her eyebrows remained pressed together. "Where is the rest of the money?" She smiled at Bishar. She removed a gun from her bag, cocked it, and pointed it at him.

"I be...g you. Don't kill me."

"I asked you a simple question, where is the rest of the money you're hiding?"

"I w... I'll gggive it to you pleeease."

"That was my last warning." Hasira moved closer to Bishar.

Bishar knelt down, crying. "Office." He sniffed.

The two huge men with guns walked swiftly away downstairs. Hasira ran the gun on Bishar's hair then situated it on his forehead. "I hate old people." She pulled the trigger.

Naima's eyes bulged out, following the body of Bishar falling. The hole on his forehead was the size of a thumb. His eyes looked upwards, watching his soul leaving his body.

"Why did you do that?" BigM audibly whispered the question to Hasira. "The police will definitely hear that."

Hasira shook her head as she gaped at Naima. She looked like she had enjoyed shooting Bishar. "Kneel down!" Hasira exclaimed.

Naima knelt down, placing both her hand at the back of her head. Unexpectedly instead of feeling scared, she was relaxed despite the gun on her head. All her instincts eased up her fears; she knew it will be alright. The itchiness had spiral uncontrollably, but she twisted her head right and left to avoid scratching it. Suddenly, a woman wearing a black trench coat and a layer of clothing appeared.

Lucky had heard the gunshot while she was walking out of the office. She whisked to where the hostages were held but found them still tied up. The restaurant was quiet; she could hear the siren of a police car at a distance. She streamed through the spiral stairs to warn the gang. "Can you hear the siren?" Lucky asked as soon as she reached the last step of the spiral stairs. She stopped to catch her breath as she scratched the back of her neck. She noticed a dead body with a pool of blood. As she looked at the lady's side face kneeling near the dead body, she thought she resembled someone she knew.

"What happened?" Lucky's voice soared with the question.

Naima instantaneously twisted her head at Lucky. She recognized the voice. The voice she yearned to hear all that while. Out of the corner of her eyes, Lucky noticed the stranger looking at her. At a full-tilt, she shifted her gaze from BigM to Naima. Her heart smiled through her eyes. She pulled the string of *niqab*, her veil, letting it fall on the ground.

"Hey." Lucky nervously gushed.

Naima smiled at her, "hey." She responded, feeling awkward about the situation.

For what seems ages, they stared at each other without talking, yet their heart spoke loudly and giggled like they were young girls once more. Naima was once more at peace. She knew exactly why she was alive. Lucky was a little embarrassed by the situation she was in, but Naima's face alleviated everything. Her eyes didn't judge her, instead, they consoled her. They understood her.

The police siren got audible; it was getting closer. Lucky realized Hasira's gun pointing at Naima. At a gallop, Lucky pulled out the gun from her trench coat, pointing it at Hasira. BigM also pulled out the tucked-up gun behind his pants and pointed it at Lucky. The two girls fixed their gaze at BigM. The emotions in the room run wild, and BigM eyes fell on the ground. He removed his grey beanie cap, throwing it against the wall, he tapped the back of the gun against his head then shifted his gun towards Hasira. It all looked like a stalemate. The police siren got closer to the restaurant, but the guns remained motionless, accompanied by the murky silence of their stares. All the hate suppressed reached Lucky's finger. She released the trigger resounding into a loud click.