

ADRIENNE THOMPSON

If

(Wasif's Story)

A Been So Long Prequel



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Pink Cashmere Publishing

Arkansas, USA

Cover art from dreamstime.com

Cover design by Adrienne Thompson

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing 2014

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“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...” 1 John 4:18 NIV

Dear Lord, I know that mere words will never be enough, but thank You so much for just being God,
for loving me despite myself, and for never leaving nor forsaking me.

This book is dedicated to the fans of the *Been So Long* Series, especially the members of

#TeamWasif 😊

Soundtrack provided by Ms. Janet Jackson

"If"

"Back"

"Any Time, Any Place"

"The Body That Loves You"

"Be A Good Boy"

"Love Will Never Do (Without You)"

"What'll I Do"

"Livin' In A World (They Didn't Make)"

"Hold On Baby"

"Control"

"Because Of Love"

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“If”

November 1996 – University of Arkansas at Fayetteville

I first saw her in the student union at the U of A. Up to that point, my day hadn't been going too well. I woke up late that morning, walked out to the parking lot to discover that I had a flat tire, and had to call AAA to fix it. I only had twenty minutes to take the test I'd studied for all weekend. And then my father called and announced that I needed to come home the next weekend for a family gathering. And I didn't want to go home.

So when I stepped into the student union with a couple of guys from the soccer team, I had a lot on my mind. But when I saw her, my heart stopped and my mind went blank. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in person or on TV or in the movies. Absolutely beautiful with smooth, brown skin and green eyes that were almost otherworldly in their brightness. I lost my breath for a moment. And when she was introduced to me, her voice was like music or poetry or something. Mo was her name, she said. *Mo*.

Odd name, but her name could've been Bill and I wouldn't have cared. Because when she looked up at me and said, “Hi,” that was it. I knew I had to get to know her better. I needed to get closer to her.

She left the union shortly after we were introduced and I found myself standing there staring at the exit, wanting to follow her.

“Uh, you okay, man?” my friend, Keith, asked.

I turned my head and looked at my friends and, for a second, I was confused. She was the only thing on my mind. “Uh, yeah, man. I'm fine. I, uh... I forgot something. I'll catch you guys later.” I left before anyone could reply. I had to catch her. I *needed* to catch her.

When I made it outside, it didn't take long to spot her. She stood out from the others. There was a way about her that I really can't describe, but everything about her—the way she walked, the way her ponytail bounced from side to side—intrigued me. My feet were moving before I realized it, and my mouth had a mind of its own as it called her name. “Mo!”

She turned around and my mind went blank again for a second. She was *so beautiful*. “That's your name, isn't it? Mo?” I asked.

She nodded. "Um, yeah. Mo... Mona, actually. But almost everyone calls me Mo."

I smiled nervously. I wondered if she knew just how lovely she was. "Um, okay. Mo, I-uh-I'm Wasif."

She smiled slightly and her eyes twinkled. My heart fluttered. *What is she doing to me?* I wondered. "I know," she said.

I'd forgotten just that quickly that I had introduced myself to her before she left the union. I felt like an idiot, but it wasn't my fault. How was I supposed to keep my cool around her? How could anyone? I was a little embarrassed, but I couldn't let that stop me. I had to get to know her. I just had to.

I invited her to dinner and after protesting because she had a boyfriend, she finally accepted my invitation. She was impressed with my car, so that made me feel a little better. Over dinner we talked about our lives both inside and outside of school. We talked about our backgrounds—me being from Little Rock, Arkansas and her being from Jacksonville, Arkansas, me being Pakistani and her being black. I asked her about her boyfriend, but I honestly wasn't that concerned about him because any guy who would let a girl like her walk around campus alone was either crazy or a fool. She was way too gorgeous for that. As she talked, I watched her. I could tell that she had no idea how beautiful she was but, if I had my way, I would show her.

After dinner, I dropped Mo off at her dorm and headed to my apartment. My roommates, Kabir and Rafi, were sitting in the living room watching TV when I arrived and, no sooner than I walked through the door, Rafi informed me that my father had called several times looking for me. I sighed as I made my way to my room. The last thing I wanted to do after my dinner with Mo was to ruin my mood by talking to my father, but I had no choice. He *was* my father, after all.

I sat down on the side of my bed and dialed the number to my family's home in Little Rock. My father answered. "Father," I said. "It's Wasif."

"Where have you been?" he asked in a voice that always intimidated me.

"I was out with friends for dinner. Rafi said you've been trying to reach me?"

"Yes, I have. I even tried your car phone."

"Oh, well, I guess I didn't hear it."

"I see. Well, I have good news. Everything has been agreed upon. Your wife has been chosen. I am sorry this took so much longer than it should have. This should have been finalized before you finished high school. But I do believe Uzma will be worth the trouble I had to go through to secure her hand for you. She comes from an excellent family and her father tells me that she's been trained to be a wife since she was a small girl. And from what I hear, she is quite beautiful. I do believe she will make you happy," he said, his voice full of pride and excitement.

"That's great," I said, trying to match his enthusiasm.

"You don't sound very happy, Wasif."

"I am... I'm just tired. Been a long day."

"Well, get your rest. I will see you this weekend for your cousin's wedding. You will see what you have to look forward to."

"Yes, okay. Um, goodbye."

"Goodbye."

I hung up the phone and fell back onto the bed. I stared at the ceiling and sighed. I had really hoped the whole marriage negotiation thing would fall through and that, maybe, in the time it took my father to find another suitable candidate to be my wife, he would reconsider and possibly let me choose my own wife. But no such luck. In a few, short years I would be forced to marry a complete stranger. Love would have nothing to do with this arrangement. It was all about family status and respect. It was respectful for me to honor tradition and to unite my family with Uzma's. It would bring dishonor to my family if I refused to do it.

I was expected to marry her and produce sons and live my entire life with her—me as her husband and her as my wife. That was not what I wanted for my life, but it was my fate. My career had already been chosen for me years ago. My father had informed me that I would be a doctor, but not just any kind of doctor. I had to be the same kind of doctor as him. This had been drilled into me for so many years that I never even developed any dreams of my own. My whole life had been decided by him and I had absolutely no say in any of it. As I closed my eyes and began to fall asleep, I wished more than anything that I could change my future.

“Back”

As I pulled into the driveway of my home, my chest began to tighten. For as long as I could remember, I'd been having attacks of anxiety. When I left for college, it had been such a relief to know that I wouldn't have to spend so much time under my father's watchful eye. He watched and scrutinized everything I did. He always said it was because I was his only child and he loved me. He lumped back-breaking expectations onto me and deep inside, I knew I'd never be able to live up to them. My worst fear was disappointing him, but I knew it was only a matter of time before I did just that. I wasn't perfect and I didn't want the life he had mapped out for me. Sooner or later, my true feelings would show and his only possible reaction would be disappointment.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. I told myself that it was only for two days. Sunday, I could go back to Fayetteville and maybe I would be able to see Mo again. I smiled at the thought of her.

I opened the door and grabbed my backpack from the passenger's seat of my car. Then I slowly headed towards the front door and unlocked it. The house was quiet, but then again, it always was. My father ruled our home. Usually, neither my mother nor I spoke at all unless we were spoken to. The exception to that rule was when he was away at work. I didn't see his car in the driveway, but that didn't mean anything. He could've parked it in the garage. I hoped more than anything that he wasn't home.

As I walked through the house, I found that neither my mother nor my father was home. They were most likely somewhere together since my mother rarely left the house alone. I breathed a sigh of relief as I headed to my room and shut my door. I sat on the side of my bed and looked around. I smiled at the Janet Jackson posters on my wall. That room was my sanctuary before I left for college. When I wasn't at school or hanging out with friends, I would stay in my room and listen to music. I didn't have a real girlfriend in high school because it was not our custom to date, but there were a few girls I hooked up with. I never felt anything for them, but they were a good way to pass the time.

Mo was different. I'd just met her, but there was something about her that made me want to know her a lot better. Maybe it was her looks or maybe her body—because I had never seen a body like that ever before. Curves for days—and that sway in her walk. Those hips could hypnotize you and that butt? Wow! I really wanted to kiss her after dinner the other evening, but I didn't want to move too fast. I liked her, though. I liked her *a lot*.

I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes. I didn't want to be there—at home. I knew that whenever my parents returned, I would get the third degree from my father about how school was going—my grades, the soccer team. He was concerned because everything I did, everything about me, was a reflection of my family, of him. I was expected to perform at a higher level than anyone else, to exceed my competitors at all times. And who were my competitors? *Everyone*.

And then he would go on and on about how fortunate I was to be marrying someone as beautiful and well-trained as Uzma Qadir and how happy she would make me with all of the sons she was sure to give me. All the while, I would be wondering how it could be fortunate to have to marry someone I didn't know or love.

I sighed as I sat up and began to undress. I needed to shower and be ready for the wedding when my parents returned home.

The wedding was beautiful and so was my cousin Saad's bride, Yasmin. They looked so happy together. Saad acted as if he had won a great prize in Yasmin. He was smiling widely and looking at Yasmin as if he adored her. A few months back, I'd asked him how he felt about marrying a stranger. He'd simply said, "From the moment I knew I was to marry her, I began to think of her as my wife and not a stranger. I accepted my fate, cousin, and you must accept yours."

It was good advice—excellent advice, really. Marrying the lovely Uzma was my fate. It was an inevitable truth that I had to face. I needed to begin seeing her as my wife and as the mother of my future children. Maybe, if I tried hard enough, I could make myself love her. Maybe, if I really put my mind to it, I could be happy with her. Maybe, in time, I would stop thinking about Mo. But right at that moment, there was no one else on my mind.

“Any Time, Any Place”

I couldn't stop thinking about her. I tried to, but I just couldn't. When I saw her walking across campus, I had to do something.

I stepped behind her and watched her walk for a minute before I spoke. “Where you headed?” I asked. When she turned around, I smiled. She was just as beautiful as the first time I saw her. Maybe even more so.

“Uh... lunch,” she said and then quickly looked away from me.

I asked to join her and she gave me a hesitant yes, but along the way, she brought up her phantom boyfriend again. I said something I probably shouldn't have said about her relationship with him. It was something along the lines of him allowing her to eat without him. Evidently, I hit a nerve, because the next thing I knew, she was yelling at me, and the sad thing about it is that her anger kind of turned me on. I *really* wanted to spend more time with her after that, so I apologized and after a little begging on my part, she agreed to have lunch with me.

After lunch, I took her back to my apartment. Luckily, both of my roommates were gone, so we were alone. We talked a little about school and things like that. Then we both fell silent and I just looked at her and I knew I had to kiss her. I mean, I literally *had* to. When our lips met, something came over me and I pulled her closer and kissed her deeply. My heart pounded in my chest and my hand shook as I threaded my fingers through her soft hair. She made me feel... *alive*. There was something about her, about the way she smelled and the softness of her lips that was *intoxicating*. I had to pull myself away from her. Did she know what she was doing to me? Did she feel the same way?

When I dropped her off at her dorm, I sat and watched her walk into the building and then I stared at the closed doors. I wanted this girl like no other. It was like something beyond my control. I had to have her. *I had to*.

I saw her before she saw me. As a matter of fact, I'd been watching her for a few minutes before she noticed me. She was sitting with some guy who was probably her boyfriend, but I didn't care, because if I had my way, *I'd* be her boyfriend before long. Our eyes met and I smiled. As I motioned towards the exit, I felt a heat rising inside of me—the same feeling I always felt around her. She looked back at the guy in front of her and then nodded. I stood from my table and headed out to the hall where I only had to wait a couple of minutes before she arrived.

I took her hand and led her down the hall a little further and once we rounded the corner, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. Then I said something smart about her boyfriend again. I honestly don't even remember what it was, but I remember that it made her mad and, once again, her anger turned me on. She started to leave and I panicked a little. But I was able to stop her and lead her even further away from the library. I led her into a supply closet and there, I kissed her again. After our kiss had ended, I stood there and looked at her for a moment. I knew the time was right. The place was wrong, but the time was definitely right. It *had* to be right, because I couldn't leave that room without fulfilling a need that was causing me to ache inside.

She was breathing heavily, looking at me in anticipation. She felt it, too. She wanted the same thing I wanted. I wondered if she could sense my nervousness or if she knew I was trembling. I wondered if she knew how badly I wanted her. As we became one, my nervousness heightened. I was nervous when I lost my virginity, but that feeling didn't at all compare to what I felt at that moment with Mo, whom I desired more than I ever had anyone in the world.

It was a moment in time I knew I'd never forget, and I believed in my heart that she shared my feelings. And when we were finished, the only thing I could think about was doing it again. I wanted more of her. I wanted *all* of her. But she had to get back to her boyfriend, she said. So, I let her go and I returned to my table. It wasn't long before she left the library altogether. As she passed my table, our eyes met. She looked a little sad, or maybe it was guilt that I saw. Whichever was the case, that look was soon replaced by the familiar look of desire. Her face told me that she regretted what we'd done, but it also told me that she couldn't wait to do it again. The feeling was definitely mutual.

“The Body That Loves You”

I was home for Thanksgiving break, sitting in my room actually thinking about someone other than Mo. I was thinking about Donna Jo Middleton. Donna Jo was tall and blond with Cyan blue eyes. She was a pretty girl by any standards. I lost my virginity to her during my junior year of high school. She wasn't my girlfriend or anything. Truthfully, we barely knew each other at all. Donna Jo was a soccer trainer, which basically meant that she took care of the teams' medical supplies, water, and snacks. She was always around us and she never missed a game whether it was at home or away.

One night, after a game, she asked me for a ride home. Donna Jo was nice, so, of course I gave her a ride. When we made it to her house, she invited me inside. I knew it wasn't a good idea, but I accepted her invitation because, frankly, I didn't want to go home. I *never* wanted to go home. So I followed her into her big, empty house (both of her parents worked nights) and she fixed me a soda and told me how much she liked me.

That night, I lost my virginity to Donna Jo Middleton. After that, I lost count of the number of times we had sex. Our relationship ended a year later when she told me she loved me and I didn't reciprocate. I hurt her feelings and she never spoke to me again.

Donna Jo was on my mind because I saw her at the gas station when I first made it back home to Little Rock on the previous evening. She looked good, but when I said, “hi,” she didn't even acknowledge me. She still hated me even after all of the time that had passed. She had loved me once, but I just didn't feel the same way about her despite all of the sex we had together or the time we spent together. I wanted to feel something for her. I really did. She was a nice girl, fun to be around, and getting to experiment with her had made me nearly an expert at sex, but I still didn't love her.

I couldn't help wondering if things with Uzma would be the same. What if I couldn't love her and what if she despised me because of the lack of love? If we had children, how would that kind of relationship affect them?

As I mulled over my past and my future, I heard the phone ring, I almost let my mother answer it, but then I remembered I'd given the number to Mo.

“Hello?” I said.

“Um, may I speak to Wasif?” said a voice that always made my heart race.

“Yes, this is he. Mo?”

“Yeah. I hope it was okay to call you. Are you busy?”

“No... no, not at all.”

“Um, I was wondering if you could come and pick me up. I’m... I’m in Jacksonville.”

The heat inside of me began to rise again. I felt like I was on fire. “Sure, what’s the address?”

“Uh... you can pick me up at the Exxon on the corner of...” She went on to give me the address and I was so excited at the thought of seeing her and touching her again, I nearly fell while trying to put my shoes on. As I rushed towards the front door, I yelled to my mother, “I’m heading out for a while!”

“Okay. Don’t stay out too late. Remember your meeting tomorrow,” she called back.

I closed the door behind me without acknowledging her statement. I couldn’t think about meeting with Uzma because my mind was occupied with thoughts of getting to Mo as fast as I could without having a wreck or being hit with a speeding ticket. I raced from the house and sped from Little Rock to Jacksonville in no time. When I pulled onto the lot of the gas station and saw her standing near the payphone, I wanted to run to her and pick her up and kiss her. Actually, I wanted to pull her into my car and undress her right then and there. But instead, I walked around to the passenger’s side and opened the door for her. I was trying to keep my cool and not appear anxious, but it was hard.

Once I climbed back into my seat and started the car, I looked over at her and smiled. She smiled back at me, but I still saw the familiar sadness that was always hidden behind her eyes. She was so much more than just a pretty face. There were things in her life that I knew nothing about and probably wouldn’t understand, but I wanted to know her. I wanted to know all about her. I wanted to be a part of her life.

“You okay?” I asked as I merged onto the highway and headed back to Little Rock.

She looked over at me and nodded. “I am now.”

I smiled again. I knew exactly how she felt. “Um, you wanna get a room?”

She shrugged. “That’s cool.”

I took her to the Holiday Inn, paid for the room, and headed to the elevator. I held her warm hand in mine—anticipation taking over my senses. Once inside the room, I sat on the bed and watched as she walked over to the window and opened the curtains. She gazed at the scene outside and I wondered what was on her mind. She was deep in thought when I walked over to her, wrapped my arms around her waist, kissed her neck, and breathed in her scent.

She leaned against me and placed her hands over mine. Then she turned around and looked at me and the sadness in her eyes was replaced with a look of longing. Did she long for me the way I longed for her? Had she missed me as much as I'd missed her? Could she possibly want me as badly as I wanted her? I couldn't wait another minute. In no time, I undressed both of us and relieved the hunger that had gripped me since the last time I was with her.

As I lay there with Mo in my arms, I realized that I was in love with her; I loved this girl whom I barely knew. I loved her and the realization of my feelings was excruciating. I loved her and she had a boyfriend and I had a wife—or at least that's the way I saw it. Uzma was my wife, wasn't she? At least she *would* be. Despite that, I hated the thought of another man touching and being with Mo. I truly hated it. If only I could convince her to stop seeing him—at least for a while, maybe until I married Uzma. That would make things much better for me.

I rubbed the soft skin of her arm and closed my eyes. I shut off all thoughts of her boyfriend and of Uzma and my future. What mattered was that moment. I was right where I wanted to be, with the girl I loved. I was happy. Why ruin it?

"It must be nice having money," she said, breaking into my thoughts.

I shrugged. "I guess."

She sighed. "I've been poor all my life. I hate it."

"I'm sorry," I said softly. I wanted to add that if I had my way, she'd be treated like a queen, but I knew that was a promise I couldn't live up to.

"Not your fault."

We were silent and then I said, "Having money doesn't make everything all right. I've got problems."

She lifted her head and looked me in the eye. "What problems? You've got a nice car, your own apartment, your own credit card. You're smart. What problems do you have?"

I looked into those green eyes that seemed to absorb me. "You have a boyfriend, Mo. That's a big problem for me."

She chuckled lightly. "Yeah, right. You're getting what you want from me, Wasif."

I sat up in the bed. Did she really not know how I felt about her? "This is not all I want from you, Mo. I care about you. I care a lot about you."

She sat up beside me. "But you don't even really know me."

"I know enough. I know how you make me feel."

She looked away from me and didn't say a word.

I stood from the bed and walked over to the window, sure that no one could see my exposed body from the busy highway below. "It doesn't matter, anyway. Even if you didn't have a boyfriend, we couldn't ever really be together."

She walked over to me. "Why? Because I'm black?"

"No, of course not. A... a wife has already been chosen for me." I felt like a fool for having to speak those words aloud.

"Huh?" she said.

My thoughts began to tangle as I spoke, and I felt the same sense of panic that I always felt when I thought about marrying Uzma. "I'm to have an arranged marriage. There's no way out of it."

The look on her face mirrored the emotions inside of me—shock, confusion, and disbelief. I watched in dismay as she began to gather her clothes.

"Where... where're you going?" I stammered, feeling a mixture of relief for finally having told her about Uzma, and desperation at the thought of losing her.

"You know, if you wanted to break things off with me, you didn't have to make up some crazy story about an arranged marriage. It is not that serious! I have a man, remember?" she spat at me.

I reached for her, touched her arm. "No, that's not it at all. I'm telling the truth and it kills me to know that I have to do this. I don't want to marry her. I really don't. Especially now that I've met you."

She looked at me, belief registering on her face. "Why can't you just *not* do it, then?"

"Because it would upset my parents," I said.

"So?"

I sighed. I knew there was no way she would understand. How could she when I didn't even understand? "So, I care about what they think of me. I don't want to disappoint them."

She whispered something that I couldn't make out.

"What?" I asked. I felt hopeless as I sat down on the bed and gripped my head.

She sat down beside me. "Nothing. I'm sorry things are that way for you. But I mean, it's not like we're in love or anything, right?"

I looked into her eyes, *those* eyes. "Speak for yourself."

She shook her head, gave me an incredulous look. "You don't love me."

So I said what had been on my heart since the second I got her phone call. "I think that maybe I do. I think about you all the time. I miss you so much when we're apart."

She dropped her eyes. Maybe she didn't feel the same way about me, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was that I loved her and we were together at that moment. All that mattered was us being together.

I lifted her chin and she brought her eyes to mine. "You don't have to say it back," I said, and then I kissed her and caressed her and loved her. I loved her right back into that bed.

We spent the entire weekend together. I missed the meeting with Uzma—didn't even bother to call home. None of that mattered to me at that moment. I had other things to deal with. In my mind and in my heart, I hoped that I would get tired of Mo and get her out of my system, but the more I had of her, the more I wanted of her, the more I loved her. Without even knowing it, she had taken control of me. My every thought was of her. I realized that if my father wasn't insisting that I marry Uzma, I would've married Mo in a heartbeat. I wanted to be with her *forever*.

As I lay in that hotel room with Mo sleeping next to me, my heart ached. I didn't want the weekend to end. I didn't want the reality of my life to return. I didn't want to have an Uzma and I didn't want Mo to have a Corey. I watched her sleep a little longer before sliding closer to her and wrapping my arm around her waist. I tried to think of something that felt as good as her skin against mine. I could think of nothing. I smiled as I buried my face in her hair. "I love you," I whispered.

"Be A Good Boy"

My ears were assaulted by a rapid-fire string of Punjabi obscenities when I took the phone from my roommate, Ravi, and placed it to my ear.

"Father, slow down, I can't understand you," I said when he finally took a breath. I understood him fine, but I was hoping to calm him down by replying in English. Or to at least confuse him a little as he decided which language to respond to me in.

He chose English. "What happened to you Friday?! Your mother said that you left Thursday and never returned. Where have you been, Wasif?!"

I hesitated, tried to formulate a lie, decided against it. "I was... with a girl."

"A *girl*?" he growled.

"Yes, a girl that I've been seeing. Her name is Mona. I really like her."

My father was silent for several seconds. Then I heard him loudly harrumph into the phone. "Wasif, I am only going to say this once. If you do not marry Uzma, you will cease to be my son. You will be cut off from this family. You will never be allowed to see your mother or me again. Do you understand me?"

"Father, I don't—"

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!" he bellowed.

I closed my eyes, a feeling of defeat overtaking me. "Yes, I understand."

"Good. I will set up another meeting and you will be sure NOT to miss this one, correct?"

I sighed lightly. "Correct."

We hung up and I handed the phone back to Ravi, who was two shades darker and about a foot shorter than me. Ravi was lucky in my book. His parents hadn't been able to find a suitable bride for him. Ravi's eyes were wide as he said, "Are you okay, Wasif?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm not. I'm getting married." And with that, I shuffled to my room and fell across the bed. I lay there for hours wishing and hoping for things that would never come to pass and, after a while, I wished and hoped myself to sleep.

My father wasted no time in rescheduling the meeting. The following Saturday afternoon I found myself sitting in my parents' living room wearing a pair of slacks, sweating rings into the armpits of my stiffly starched Oxford shirt. As I sat and awaited Uzma's arrival, I fought the impulse to run from the house and never return. I was staring at the front door when my mother walked into the room and sat down beside me.

She placed her hand over mine. "I remember how nervous I was when I met your father. I was so afraid, but everything worked out well, as it will for you."

I gave her a smile as I wondered how she could believe that things had worked out. My father was overbearing and had ruled over her for as long as I could remember. He'd been very verbal about his disappointment in her for only giving him one child. He'd been cheating on her with another woman for years, though he thought that I didn't know it. I'd never seen my parents so much as hold each other's hands. I supposed my mother loved him, but I was sure her affections were not returned. Exactly how had things worked out?

My mother kissed me on the cheek. "My Wasif. Always so handsome," she whispered, and then she left me to wait alone. Thankfully, the wait ended just a few minutes later. The doorbell rang and my heart rate doubled. My nervousness, my fear, went into overdrive.

My father answered the door and ushered in a distinguished-looking older couple, and right behind them was Uzma. Wearing a teal hijab, she was everything my father had said she was—lovely, quiet, respectful. Our parents left us alone in the living room, and we spent about ten minutes in total silence. I was the one to break the uncomfortable muteness.

"I guess you know my name is Wasif?" It was an odd introduction, but then again, the entire situation was odd.

Her eyes darted from the floor to my face and back. "Yes," she said softly.

"And yours is Uzma, right?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Well, I guess you know I'm in college. When I'm done, I plan to attend medical school."

She smiled at me.

“You already know that, too?”

She nodded.

Man, she really is well-trained, I thought. “Um, well, why don’t you tell me about you? Are you in school?”

That’s when the floodgates opened. She told me that she worked at her family’s store every day. She had no goals or aspirations of going to college. She had been trained since she was a girl to become someone’s wife, and a mother. She’d been taught to be respectful. She was deeply religious, and I had to admit that she was very, *very* beautiful. I could see her as my wife and a good wife at that. I could see myself having sex with her; after all, I’d had sex with girls that I didn’t love before. I could see her as the mother of my children. I could see us living together in a big house—me with my own practice, her at home waiting for me. Sitting there listening to her, I knew in my heart that she could easily learn to love me. I knew she’d be true to me and respectful of my position in our family. Any man would be honored to have Uzma for a wife. My father had truly outdone himself in selecting a bride for me.

But as I escorted Uzma and her parents to the door and walked back to my bedroom, I also knew that I could never truly be happy with her. I could never love Uzma... because I loved Mo.

“Love Will Never Do (Without You)”

I saw Mo and her boyfriend walking together on campus the other day. It hurt to see them laughing and talking. It hurt and it made me angry. Then I thought of Uzma and realized I had no right to be angry. What Mo did, and who she did it with, should not have bothered me. It shouldn't have been my concern at all—but it did bother me. It bothered me *a lot*.

So why was I lying in bed with her? Why was I holding Mo in my arms? Why did I pick her up when she asked? Why did I *always* pick her up when she asked? It was because I loved her. That was the only logical answer, wasn't it? Yes, I loved her and I'd told her as much. She'd never reciprocated. So, why did I still want her so badly?

One moment she was a blazing fire, destroying anything in her path, and the next, she was like a scared child—vulnerable and soft and in need of protection. And other times, she was as cold as ice. Sometimes, even when we were together, it seemed that she was somewhere else. She once said there were things she needed to forget. Things from her past. Mo was an enigma and I guess that's why I loved her. There was a magnetic force around her that pulled me in more and more. I was in way too deep with her and the funny thing is, I only wanted to dive deeper.

“What are you doing for the holiday break?” I asked, interrupting the silence.

“I'm going to spend it with Corey and his family,” she said softly.

I hated hearing her say his name. I actually kind of despised him for being with her. “Go away with me instead,” I said.

“I can't do that. I promised Corey I'd spend more time with him.”

I rolled over, fought the urge to scream. Why was I doing this to myself? “I think you spend more than enough time with him.”

“Actually, I don't. *He's* my boyfriend, but I spend almost every night over here with you.”

I turned and looked her in the eye. “And I think that means it's time for you to break up with him.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right.”

"I'm serious, Mo."

"Why in the world would I break up with him? Corey and I have a future together. I'm not gonna sit around and watch you marry some other chick and then be alone."

I sighed. There had to be a way to convince her to leave him alone. I needed her, *all of her*. If that made me selfish, then I guess I was selfish. "Look, Mo, I've got to marry her. I don't have a choice. But I need you in my life. I *need* you."

She gave me a softer look. Maybe I was getting through to her. "When are you supposed to marry her, Wasif?" she asked.

"After med school."

"How long is that?"

"Five, maybe six years."

"So you plan to give me six years tops when Corey plans to give me a lifetime? I might not be the smartest chick in the world, but I can add and those numbers don't add up for me. I like you, but I've had a hard life. I've got to choose a stable future. Sorry."

I turned my back to her and listened as she began to gather her clothes and redress. That was it. She wasn't going to let him go, and I couldn't go on loving her with him in the picture. So, that was it. She was gone. Just like that, it was over.

It's strange how you can barely know a person, how you can meet them one day and love them the next. Before Mo, I wouldn't have thought it was possible. Before her, I didn't even know what love felt like. Before her, I'd never been in love.

I read somewhere that first loves are life-long loves. You never get over them. They are always with you—even when you fall in love with another person later in life. When I first read those words, I laughed, thought that the author was crazy. How could any feeling for another person be that strong? How was it possible for love to transcend space and time?

Now I knew first hand. I knew what it felt like to want to stop loving someone, but to be powerless to do so. I was powerless in my feelings for her. I thought about her all the time. I dreamt of her when I

slept. I still felt her touch. It was like I was losing my mind. I needed her almost as badly as I needed air to breathe. Loving Mo Dandridge was like an involuntary reflex.

My plans for the winter break had involved driving out of state, maybe to Memphis or New Orleans, and getting a room or renting a condo and spending every waking and sleeping hour with Mo in my arms—not holed up in my bedroom in my parent’s house. But that’s where I was—lying in my bed listening to the silence that was so characteristic of my home. I had to listen to music through headphones because my father hated hearing the music that I loved. He hated the posters on my walls. He hated my friends. It seemed to me that he hated everything about me. He once even said that my having been born in America had ruined me. The arranged marriage was his way of redeeming me, of saving me.

I closed my eyes and tried to do what I had failed to do since the day Mo left my apartment and never looked back. I tried to block her out of my mind and out of my heart. I tried to forget her smile, her eyes, and the sound of her voice. I tried to forget her touch and how she made me feel. But the more I tried to forget her, the more I thought about her. I groaned as I stood from the bed, walked over to my dresser, and grabbed my portable CD player. I placed the earphones over my ears, but before I could press play, there was a knock at the door.

“Yes?” I said.

“Wasif, may I come in?” I was thankful to hear my mother’s voice and not my father’s.

I opened the door for her and then sat back down on my bed. She sat next to me and placed her hand over mine. I smiled at her. My mother was a beautiful woman with long, flowing black hair, dark eyes, and dark brown skin. She had gained weight over the years, but she was still breathtakingly beautiful. I was sure that many fathers had wanted their sons to marry her.

“How is school?” she asked.

I shrugged. “It’s fine. I got all A’s this semester.”

She smiled. “That is no surprise. I expect as much from you.”

I nodded.

“How are things besides your classes?”

I frowned. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She tilted her head to the side. “There is a girl? Your father told me.”

My face began to heat up. “Um... yes.”

My mother clutched my hand. “Tell me about her.”

I looked up at her. Her eyes were sparkling as she nodded.

"She... she's beautiful, Mother. She... I love her." My eyes began to fill with tears.

My mother squeezed my hand. "Oh, Wasif. Are you certain that you love her? Surely this is nothing more than a boyhood crush."

I shook my head. "No. I... I think about her all the time. I can't get her out of my head and, believe me, I've tried."

"Well, dear, you are promised to Uzma and she is promised to you. What are you going to do?"

I shook my head and wiped a single tear from my face. I wasn't supposed to cry. *Men aren't supposed to cry.* "There's nothing to do. It's over between us. But I miss her so much."

My mother placed her hand on my cheek, a look of compassion in her eyes. "First loves can be consuming, but you can get over them. I got over mine."

I frowned slightly. "Mother... you?"

"Yes. I loved a boy when I was a girl. But we both knew nothing could come of it. It was hard, but I finally got over him. And I finally came to love your father. I know you think that you can't love Uzma, but you can, and you will, in time." She hugged me. "I love you and I know you will do the right thing, Wasif. I believe in you."

I rested my head on her shoulder. "Thank you, Mother."

She stood from my bed and walked to the door. "Your father is a hard man and I know that he can be severe at times, but he loves you, too, Wasif. He only wants what is best for you. I hope you know that."

I nodded. "Yes, I know."

In the days that followed, I listened to music, watched TV, read books, slept as many hours as possible, went for walks in the morning, drove around Little Rock at night, and I still found her in my thoughts. I still loved her.

When my new cellular phone rang, it startled me. Only a handful of people had the number—including my parents, and since they were both home, I knew the call wasn't from either of them. I also doubted it was from one of my roommates. Though we shared the same living space in Fayetteville, we didn't run in the same social circles. The only people left were my friends Keith and Derrell, a couple of people from some of my classes, and Mo.

Mo.

My heart jumped at the possibility of her being on the other end of the phone. I picked it up, stared at it, and, against my better judgment, answered it. "Hello?"

"Wasif, it's Mo."

I closed my eyes and walked over to my bed. A voice in my head screamed at me to hang up. I knew it would've been the right thing to do, but my hand wasn't listening to my head. So I held the phone.

"I'm in Jacksonville. I... can you come pick me up?" she asked timidly.

No! My mind screamed. *Tell her no.* I gripped the phone tighter and tried to breathe. I opened my mouth to say no, but nothing came out.

"If you can't, I understand."

"Where are you?" I asked. My heart had won the battle. I loved her. And I was completely helpless when it came to resisting her.

I listened as she gave me the location. Then I pulled on my shoes and walked quietly through the house. I didn't even bother to say goodbye to my parents before I left. I couldn't face them.

When she climbed into my car, I felt a mixture of excitement and guilt and anger. By being with her, I was betraying my parents, being true to my heart, and breaking my heart all at the same time. She was still with that other guy, had spent most of the time after our break-up, up to this point, with him. Had probably made love to him. And despite the fact that I had no right to dominate her time or make demands about her love life, it hurt to know that the woman I loved belonged to another. It also hurt to know that every second I spent with her was stolen, that what we had could never go further, and that by being with her, I was disappointing my parents and turning my back on a tradition that was as old as time itself.

I glanced over at her and wished that she was Uzma. I wished that I felt even a fraction of what I felt for Mo for Uzma instead. That would make life so much easier.

Once we made it to the hotel, I paid for the room and we boarded the elevator. I watched as the lights on the panel lit up one by one, signaling our ascension. *One... two... three...*

Her scent filled the elevator, nearly sending me over the edge. By the time we reached the sixth floor, our destination, my heart was pounding furiously, my hands were trembling, and my entire body was overheating. *Is this what drug addicts feel like?* I wondered. It had to be close to that feeling, because if I didn't touch her, hold her soon, I was sure I would die.

I unlocked the door and held it until we were both inside. My mouth and hands and feet seemed to take on a life all their own as I grabbed her and kissed her. I undressed us both and then I went about the business of relieving a pain inside of me that only Mo could relieve.

We loved, we argued, we loved some more. She asked to leave; I took her back—part of the way. Then I begged her to stay with me. That was us—all passion. There was nothing cerebral about our relationship, nothing even rational. When I touched her, I forgot who I was. I forgot who she was. I forgot to *think*.

What we had, what we shared, was animalistic at best. But it was also very pleasurable and extremely addictive. We didn't make sense together, but we were absolutely perfect for each other. That day, I realized what she really was to me. She was a necessity. Just like air and water, I needed her to survive. Because before Mo, I wasn't truly alive.

“What’ll I Do”

She was pregnant.

Mo was pregnant.

When she told me, it felt like a bomb exploded inside of my brain, destroying my ability to comprehend the simplest of statements. *Pregnant?* How could that be? She was supposed to be on the pill.

Pregnant? How would I explain this to my family? What would my father say? What would he do? What was *I* supposed to do?

Pregnant?

And she wanted to keep it... and it was mine. She said that it was mine and I believed her. A part of me wanted to run away. Another part of me wanted to hurl. But yet another part of me was kind of relieved. She was carrying my child which meant she would be mine and mine alone. She couldn’t be with another man while she was carrying my baby. She wouldn’t do that no matter how she felt about him. I knew she wouldn’t. And I also knew that if she was truthful with me and with herself, she’d have to admit that she loved me. I could feel it. *I knew it.* And our child would pull us closer together.

The only problem would be dealing with my parents and their reactions. How was I going to convince them that I needed to marry Mo instead of Uzma? Surely they would be able to understand that this was the right thing. I needed to marry her and take care of my child. It would be honorable to do so.

I was so nervous when I picked up the phone to call them, to tell them about the baby, that I could barely breathe. My hands were trembling so badly, I actually dialed the wrong number at first. When I redialed, I closed my eyes and hoped my father wouldn’t be the one to answer. I needed to talk to my mother first. Maybe I could make her understand. Maybe she’d be on my side. Maybe...

“Hello.” It was my father.

My head began to throb; nausea suddenly attacked me. “Father...” My voice sounded strangled, as if something was constricting my airway.

"Wasif?"

"Yes, father-I-uh... um, I..."

"I'm glad you called," he said, ignoring my unintelligible words. "I have set up another meeting for you with Uzma. You are to meet with her this weekend. You are coming home this weekend, aren't you?"

I gulped and took a deep breath. "Um... no, I hadn't planned on coming home. I need to stay here and—"

"Change your plans. I do not want you to miss this meeting. Do you understand?"

I sighed deeply, wiped the sweat that had inexplicably appeared on my forehead. "Father, I-I need to tell you something. It's about the girl I've been seeing. She—"

"Wasif! I will hear no more of this nonsense about this *girl*! Do you hear me?! No more! I expect to see you this weekend. I will drive you to her house myself. I have worked hard to secure her hand for you. There are ceremonies and celebrations to be planned. You will meet with her. You will marry her. That is what will happen. If not, you are as good as dead to me!"

"Father, please—"

Then came the Punjabi. His words were spewing from his mouth so hastily that they began to run together. I'd been speaking both Punjabi and English my whole life and I understood them both with no problem. But when he was like that, when he was angry, his words would jumble together, making them nearly impossible for me to understand. However, I didn't need to understand every single word to know what he was saying. I would be as good as dead to him. No longer his son. He'd rather die than to know that his son dishonored him. I heard all of that loud and clear.

So I held the phone and closed my eyes and said, "I'll be there."

My father was so adamant about me not missing this meeting with Uzma that he actually drove to Fayetteville and picked me up. Mo was so sick, she'd basically been staying with me so that I could take care of her. When he called to say that he was going to pick me up instead of letting me drive home, she was upset with me. I was upset, too, because I really had no intentions of going home for the meeting. I had no intentions of leaving Mo's side. But that's exactly what I did. I took her back to her dorm and went back to my apartment to wait for my father.

A few hours later, I sat in the passenger's seat of my father's car and stared out the windshield in silence, the same thoughts playing over and over in my mind: *Men shouldn't cry. Crying is a sign of weakness. Men shouldn't cry. Crying is a sign of weakness. Men shouldn't—*

"You don't look happy, Wasif," my father said.

I kept my eyes on the windshield and my mouth shut. There was nothing I could say that wouldn't make him mad. And besides, if I didn't keep my concentration on the road ahead of us, I was sure to cry.

"Uzma is an excellent choice for you. Beautiful, well-trained. Imagine the sons you and her will have! You should be smiling."

I quickly glanced at him; then I fixed my eyes on the windshield again.

"Well, say something," he said.

I dropped my eyes and tried to steady my voice. "What do you want me to say? Thank you?" My voice was a little unsteady, but not enough to clue him in on how upset I really was. If I wasn't dependent upon his money, I would've run away with Mo and never looked back. But I needed his money and I hated to admit it, but I also needed his acceptance and approval. I didn't want to be on his bad side. I didn't want to be dead to him. But I also didn't want to marry Uzma. I felt like I was on the way to the funeral of my best friend instead of a meeting with my future wife.

"Yes, that would be appropriate."

"Maybe I don't feel all that thankful," I muttered. And then I snapped my mouth shut. I couldn't believe what I'd just said. I'd never even thought about speaking to my father in that manner before.

"What?" he asked gruffly.

He'd heard me. He was just trying to see if I was bold enough to repeat myself. I wasn't. "Thank you," I said softly. I glanced over at him again.

My father smiled. *He actually smiled.* He never smiled—at least not at me. As hard as I worked in school and as respectful as I tried to be, he never seemed pleased with me. But at that moment, he was smiling at *me*. And then he reached over and patted my hand. "I'm proud of you, Wasif. You are going to be an excellent surgeon. You have the hands for it. And as soon as you have completed your education, you and Uzma can marry and things will be good for both of you. She is excited about becoming your wife, eager to please you."

I nodded.

"I know that you think you care about this other, uh... *girl*. Your mother told me all about it. I'm glad that you broke it off with her. She had no place in your future. Uzma is your future..."

He went on and on about Uzma and the benefits of marrying her like he was a salesman at a car lot trying to convince me to buy some car that he knew I really didn't want. I tuned him out and glued my eyes to the windshield again. Soon the scenery outside morphed into a reflection of Mo's face. I smiled.

"Yes, yes, you see it, don't you?" my father asked, obviously mistaking my smile for a reaction to whatever he was saying.

I turned and faced him, the smile still on my face. "Yes, I see it clearly."

“Livin' In A World (They Didn't Make)”

The ride from Fayetteville to Jacksonville was uncomfortably quiet. I caught myself glancing over at Mo every few seconds, trying to read her face. Well, I wasn't really trying to read it because, for the first time since I'd known her, every emotion she was feeling was clearly evident—pain, depression, anxiety. Her eyes were fixed on the window and she was biting her bottom lip while twirling a piece of her hair around her finger. She sighed over and over again as she tapped her foot rapidly, not anywhere near keeping time with the rhythm of the song that was playing on the radio. Her rhythm was off and usually, her rhythm was perfect, *absolutely perfect*.

I hated this—having to take her home. Judging from the look in her eyes when I picked her up that morning and the condition she was currently in, she hated it more. But what choice did I have? My roommates were tired of her being around all of the time and I couldn't risk one of them telling their parents what was going on, because I was sure that their parents would tell *my* parents. I definitely didn't need that. My father's money and credit cards were the only way I was able to help Mo at all. If he cut me off, *she'd* be cut off. I couldn't bear the thought of not being able to help her. After all, she was carrying my child—no, my *children*.

Twins.

I have to admit that it made me feel proud as a man to know that we were having twins. What if they were both boys? That would truly be an honor! Even my father would have to admit that. I had decided to wait until after the twins were born to tell him about them. Then he would understand that I couldn't marry Uzma. Then he would see that I belonged with Mo, that we belonged together. He would understand that I loved her and *only* her.

I just hated that she was so sick. I'd heard of morning sickness but Mo was sick twenty-four hours a day, almost non-stop. It wasn't as bad as it was when we first found out that she was pregnant, but it was bad enough that she'd had to drop out of school. That was why I was taking her home. I would miss her so much. It was going to be unbearable being so far away from her, not being able to touch her or see her. She was my happiness. Being without her was going to be hard, very hard.

We stopped by a grocery store on the way to her mother's house. I held her hand in mine as we walked up and down the aisles and she tossed food into the buggy. She could've filled the thing up to

the rim if she'd wanted to and I wouldn't have minded at all. Whatever she needed, I wanted to provide. Whatever made her happy made me happy. I watched her every move, smiled at the way she would play with her ponytail. I tried to memorize her face and her body so that I could call them into memory when we were apart.

At one point, I felt her squeeze my hand, and when I looked up, *he* was standing in front of us. He looked upset, maybe even hurt. I couldn't blame him. If things had been the other way around, if he had been standing there holding her hand instead of me, if she'd left me for him, I would've been hurt, too.

Neither of us said a word. Corey, her ex-boyfriend, just stood there and stared at us. I wrapped my arm around her waist... because I could. Because she was mine and I was proud of it. He stood there a second longer and then he left. Mo looked so sad. I could tell that she felt sorry for him.

I leaned in close to her and she smelled so good, I almost forgot what I was going to say. "You okay, babe?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. I don't want to be here, in this town," she said as she laid her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes.

I rubbed my hand up and down her arm and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry." And I really was. I wished more than anything that she could stay in Fayetteville with me.

She shrugged. "Not your fault."

But I felt like it *was* my fault. She was my responsibility, now. I needed to take care of her. After the twins were born, I would make sure my father understood that.

When we made it to her mother's home, my stomach dropped. *This is where she lives?* I wondered. She'd been careful not to show me her home before. I always picked her up and dropped her off at a gas station or some other public location and, seeing that place for myself, I understood why. She didn't deserve to live there. *No one* deserved to live there.

Her home was a small, dingy-looking cinder block duplex. The white door was dirty. The grass in the yard was skimpy—there was more dirt in that yard than anything. There was trash strewn about the yard and as far as I could see from left to right, the entire street looked the same—dirty, unkempt, and dismal. No wonder she didn't want to come home. Just pulling into the driveway had depressed me. I knew that people lived like that, but not Mo. Not my Mo.

I stopped the car in the driveway and killed the engine. I looked over at Mo. She sat there staring at the duplex—frozen. She didn't move or say a word. After several minutes of silence, I said, "This is the place, right?" *Maybe it isn't. Please tell me this is not where you live.*

She looked over at me and nodded. I could see the tears in her eyes as she reached for the door handle then let her hand fall. "Will you... will you help me with my stuff?"

"Of course," I said.

A few minutes later, we approached the door to her home. She knocked and then grabbed my hand. She looked so... so afraid. That threw me off a little. Yes, the place looked horrible, but this was her home, where she'd grown up. One look at her and anyone would think she was headed to the gas chamber.

After we stood there for a minute or so, Mo knocked again. The door finally flew open and my eyes stretched wide at the sight on the other side. Standing there was an older lady with the same green eyes that mesmerized me a few months earlier. But there was something different about her eyes. Mo's eyes held a myriad of emotions—fear, passion, love, disappointment. This woman's eyes held nothing but anger, and, after she noticed me—lust.

After Mo cleared up the fact that I wasn't a cab driver and introduced us, I shook her mother's hand. The way she looked at me and gripped my hand felt weird. I'd never had a woman her age come on to me before and the fact that she was the mother of the girl I loved made it feel even stranger. And if the way her mother was looking at me didn't make me feel uncomfortable enough, the fact that this woman was wearing only a beige bra and red panties definitely made me want to close my eyes and keep them closed.

I walked into the dark living room and found that the inside of the place was no better than the outside. Walking into that duplex was akin to walking into a dungeon. If I felt that way, I couldn't even imagine how Mo felt. At least I didn't have to stay there. My heart ached for Mo.

As I followed Mo to her bedroom, the scent of stale cigarette smoke nearly choked me. Her mother must've smoked twenty-four hours a day, nonstop. I laid Mo's clothes on the bed then took her food to the kitchen where the smell of rotten food mixed with the cigarette smoke. One look at the overflowing trash can and I understood why. I was relieved to walk back out to my car.

Outside, I wrapped my arms around my beautiful love and kissed her. I promised to call and check on her every day, and I meant it. I didn't want to let go of her. I didn't want to leave her. I could tell she felt the same way. But I finally said goodbye to her and backed out of the driveway.

As I left, on my way back to Fayetteville, I kept telling myself that if crying was really a sign of weakness for a man, then I must've been the weakest man in the world, because I cried all the way back to my apartment.

"Hold On Baby"

I dialed Mo's number and hoped she'd be the one to answer the phone and not her mother. I hated talking to her mother.

"Hello!" her mother shouted into the phone.

I sighed. "Um, hello. May I please speak to Mo?"

"Hold on!"

Then I heard loud music, laughter, yelling, and I thought I heard her drop then pick up the phone. I heard her yell again and then, "Hello?" Finally, it was Mo.

I cleared my throat. I never knew exactly how to feel after talking to her mother. "Hey, babe. Sounds like there's a party going on."

"There is," she said, sounding a little sad.

"Uh, having fun?" That was a stupid question. Of course she wasn't. She sounded as if she wanted to cry.

"Nope. Not my party. It's my mother's."

"Well, how are you?" I asked. I quickly regretted asking that question.

After a moment of silence, she answered me with frustration and venom in her voice. "I'm tired of being here. I'm tired of living here. I don't want to raise my children here, Wasif."

I closed my eyes. "I know. I'm trying to figure things out."

"Yeah, well, you've been *figuring things out* for months now. I'm due next month, Wasif. My blood pressure is out of whack because of the stress. My blood sugar is out of control because there's hardly anything decent to eat here. I'm alone, and I hate it. I'm tired of waiting for you!"

I frowned. "You're not eating? But I send money for food."

"And my mother and her damn friends eat up everything in sight. I am so damn tired of this place! You need to do what you said you'd do. You need to take care of me!" she shouted into the phone.

I gripped my head. "Mo, I'm doing the best I can. You know I don't have a job. I have to depend on my father to help."

"Have you even told him about the babies?"

I held the phone. I couldn't answer her. I just couldn't.

"You haven't, have you?" she asked, her voice softer.

I squeezed my eyes more tightly shut. "Mo..."

"You know what? I should never have messed around with you in the first place. At least I could depend on Corey!"

Click.

I held the phone for a few seconds. I couldn't blame her for how she felt. I understood. I needed to do more for her and really be there for her. But my hands were tied. What was I supposed to do?

I fell back onto my bed and stared at the ceiling. Then I rolled over and picked up the phone. I held it in my hands and took a deep breath before dialing the number. *I can do this. This is MY life. I can do this. I can tell him.*

"Hello?"

At hearing my father's voice, which was always laced with a combination of authority and superiority, my throat began to close. My heart thudded as if it was headed for some unknown exit door in my chest. And then my chest tightened as if it was trying to keep my heart from escaping.

I opened my mouth to speak and released a low croak. And then a gasp. For a second, I couldn't breathe.

"What? Hello? Who is this?" my father quizzed.

I sucked in a breath. I was thankful that my parents didn't have Caller ID. I hung up and fell back onto the bed, tried to steady my breathing. *Crying is a sign of weakness, crying is a sign of weakness. Men shouldn't cry.* Those words, uttered in my father's voice, echoed in my mind. I closed my eyes and willed myself not to cry.

"Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it," I told myself over and over again.

I thought about my father's giant hands, how he would slap me if I made anything less than an "A" in grade school. How he'd ridicule me if I cried.

"I thought that you were a boy, not a girl. Crying is a sign of weakness. Men shouldn't cry, Wasif. Be a man!" he'd say.

I remembered wanting to stop my tears, but the pain delivered by his heavy hand lingered. My pride was fractured. I'd tried so hard but had still made a "B." I'd tried so hard...

My mother stood to the side, concern in her eyes. But she didn't help me. She never helped me. She *couldn't* help me because she was just as afraid of him as I was.

As I lay there in my bed, in my apartment, I didn't feel like a young man with twins on the way. I didn't feel like a man at all.

Crying is a sign of weakness. Men shouldn't cry.

I took deep breaths, one after the other.

Crying is a sign of weakness. Men shouldn't cry.

I thought of Mo, of the future we would never have together. I thought of her in that dingy, dismal place with her mother. I thought of my children. What would become of them?

Crying is a sign of weakness. Men shouldn't cry.

I couldn't hold the tears back any longer. I couldn't... I couldn't. I opened my eyes, stared at the ceiling, and I cried.

I'd always heard people talk about what a gift a child is, what an honor it is for parents to be blessed with children. It was even more honorable if those children were born healthy and strong. But for a man in my culture, there was no greater honor than to be gifted with a son. I received that great honor twice in one day when Mo gave birth to two little boys. *Two sons*. She named them Blair and Morgan.

And even as I sat in Mo's hospital room and held them, I couldn't believe it. *Two sons*. Two beautiful, healthy little boys with brown skin and black hair and strong lungs. One looked more like Mo than he did me—I could already see her in him. In the other, I could see myself. As I held them, my heart was filled with a kind of love that I never knew existed. It was the kind of love that made me want to change the world just so it would be a better place for them. The kind of love that gives you superhuman strength.

I ran out and bought enough clothes and formula and diapers to last for weeks. I wanted them to have it all—everything they could imagine. Becoming a doctor took on a different meaning for me. No longer was I just doing what was expected of me, I was doing what was best for my sons. *My sons*.

Mona's home was not ideal, and after I dropped the three of them off and headed back to school, I knew I'd worry about them. Mo's patience with me was running thin. So was my patience with myself. But I was still afraid, afraid of my father and how he would react. I was a child in a man's body when it came to him. But time was running out. I was going to lose her. I could feel it. I was going to lose Mo. I was going to lose my sons. I couldn't let that happen.

"Control"

I hadn't been home in weeks. I'd tried to call my father and tell him about my boys so many times I'd lost count. I was surprised my parents hadn't changed their number or reported my hang-up calls to the police. Calls to Mo were more and more strained. She hadn't pushed me out of her life, yet, but I had a feeling that she would if things didn't change. I had a feeling that my sending money would eventually not be enough for me to hold on to her.

I sighed as I picked up the phone to call Mo. It hurt to hear the sadness and frustration in her voice, but I had to hear it. I missed her. I missed her badly.

Her mother answered again. Her "hello!" was followed by loud music and loud voices.

"Hello, ma'am. May I speak to Mo?"

Music, voices, and then, "Mo, telephone!"

The next voice I heard was Mo's. "Hello?"

I cleared my voice. "Hey, Mo?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"What's going on? What's all the noise?"

"Come on, now. You know what that noise is. My mother's having a party."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. *Another party?* "Well, where are the boys?"

"In my bed."

I sat there and stared at the little newborn pictures of the twins that I kept on my bedside table. They deserved better. Mo deserved better. So did I. "Pack everything up. I'll be there tomorrow afternoon to get you and the boys."

"Where are you taking us?" she asked, sounding surprised.

I have no idea, I thought. But I was taking them away from there; that was for sure. “I don’t know, yet, but I’m getting you out of there. I’m gonna talk to my dad. If I have to, I’ll beg him to help. Just pack.”

“Are you for real? Please don’t be playing with me. What if he won’t help?” Her voice had shifted from surprised to excited.

I smiled and felt a little excitement, myself, at the thought of being with her again and with that excitement came a sense of boldness. “Let me do the worrying. All you need to do is pack and be ready. I’m coming to get you and the boys. I love you, Mo.”

“If you get me out of here, I’ll love you forever. I don’t care who you marry, I will love you forever! That’s a promise.”

My smile widened. “I’ll be there around two. Be ready.”

“I will!”

I hung up the phone with a renewed resolve to talk to my father. At the same time, I remembered something about him. Something that would make it easier to tell him what I needed to tell him. I pulled on my shoes and grabbed my keys. As I walked through the living room, Rafi asked, “Where are you going so late?”

I reached for the doorknob. “Home.”

I let myself into the house, stopping in the kitchen to speak to my mother. I found her at the table, reading a book, though it was after 10:00 P.M. “Wasif!” she said with a bright smile on her face.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Are you here for the weekend? Why didn’t you call first?”

“I’m not staying. I just need to speak with Father for a few moments. Is he here?”

She nodded with a slightly confused look on her face. “He is in his study. Is everything all right?”

I looked at her for a moment. “I hope so.” I patted her hand and left the kitchen.

Once I reached the study, I knocked on the door facing.

My father turned his head and, when he saw me, he turned back around to his desk. “Wasif? I didn’t know you’d be home this weekend.”

I squared my shoulders and stood tall. I steadied my shaky hands. As afraid as I was of him, I knew the last thing I needed to do was to show him my fear. He would respect me even less for that. “Father, I have something to tell you, and I’m sure it’s going to upset you, but I have nowhere else to turn. I need your help.”

He turned back around with a frown on his face. “Help with what, Wasif? What is going on?”

“The girl I’ve been seeing, Mona, I care a lot about her.”

“Not this *girl*, again! Wasif, you know what your obligations are. I thought you were no longer seeing that girl. If you think you can back out of marrying Uzma—”

A rush of courage and a little anger hit me. “No, Father! This has nothing to do with me marrying Uzma. It has nothing to do with her at all. You want me to marry her? Fine, I’ll marry her. That’s not what this is about.”

“Then, I am confused. What is it that you need from me?”

“Mona is in trouble. She needs my help, and it’s my responsibility to help her.”

“How is it that this girl is your responsibility? Does she not have a family of her own?”

“She is my responsibility because she is the mother of my sons.”

My father’s entire facial expression changed into a form I couldn’t initially describe. Was it rage? Anger? No, it was disgust. That was it—disgust. “She’s pregnant?! You got that girl *pregnant*?! How could you be so careless?! Well, she can’t have the baby.”

“No, Father, she’s not pregnant anymore. The babies are a month old now—twin boys.”

“What?! Wasif, what have you done?! I always knew that you were weak and emotional, but never did I believe that you could be this foolish, this... this careless! Do you realize the shame you have brought on this family?! Do you!?” he shouted, his voice booming so loudly that Mother came running into the room. “I sent you to that school, the school of *your* choice, to get an education, not to throw your life away with some girl you just met! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!”

I dropped my head. “She’s not just some girl. She has given me *two* sons. *Two*, Father. And... and I love her,” I said weakly.

My father raised his eyebrows and shook his head. “*Love*? What do you know of love, Wasif? You are only a boy!”

I looked up at him. Yes, I was afraid of him but what I felt for Mo was strong and undeniable and I wasn't ashamed of it. Not anymore. "A boy for whom you've already chosen a wife!" I said before I could stop myself. "I'm *not* a boy. I'm a father and I am asking you to help me take care of my sons."

"Your sons," he scoffed. Then he uttered a long string of Punjabi obscenities.

I pulled my wallet from the back pocket of my jeans and dug out a photo of Mo holding the twins that I'd taken at the hospital. "Yes, my *sons*," I said as I held the picture out to him. He took the photo and studied it as I continued to speak. "Where she lives is not safe for her or the babies. I need to help her move. I need to take care of them."

He sighed. "A black girl? You have two sons with a *black girl*? What were you thinking?"

"What difference does it make what color she is? Her skin is lighter than mine or yours. And it wouldn't matter to me if she was white or black or Pakistani. I love her and there's nothing I can do to change that. I have two sons, now, and I need to take care of them."

He handed the picture back to me. "And how will you do that?"

"I was hoping you would help me."

"No," he said without hesitation.

I dropped my eyes. "*Please*," I said softly.

"What did you say?"

"Please."

"Are you begging me?"

I looked up at him. "If that is what it takes to convince you to help, then yes, I am. I'm begging you to help her... *for me*."

"And if I don't?"

I glanced at my mother who was standing just inside the doorway of my father's study, hanging on our every word. "Then I guess I'll have to quit school and get a job."

"Quit school?" he said as if it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard.

"What other choice do I have? They are my responsibility."

"You would give up your future for her? She means that much to you?"

"Yes."

My father turned and rested his elbows on his desk. "Two sons, you say?"

I nodded. "Yes. "

"That is quite a responsibility for you. How are you going to manage things when you marry Uzma? Because, make no mistake, if I help you, you *will* marry Uzma. Is that understood?"

"Father—"

"No! I agree, these boys are your responsibility, but I refuse to let you throw the rest of your life away because of one—no—*two* mistakes. I will help you but only under the condition that you marry Uzma and you end things with this girl."

I leaned against the bookcase and closed my eyes. "I will marry Uzma. I will go to medical school. I will do all I can to uphold the honor of our family. But I love Mona and I can't end things with her."

"You can't or you won't?"

"Both."

He stood to face me. "Are you challenging me, my son?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm only saying what I've been saying since this conversation began. *I love her*. I don't think I can live without her."

My father reclaimed his seat and shook his head. "You will not die without this girl, Wasif."

I observed my mother from the corner of my eye and then leaned forward until I was only inches from my father's ear. "I know about Irene. Can you live without her?" I whispered. I was taking a chance by bringing up my father's mistress, his *African American* mistress. It was a desperate move, but these were desperate times.

My father's head snapped up and he glared at me. I backed up a little. I had definitely made him angry.

"Fahad," my mother softly addressed my father. My father and I looked in her direction, both of us shocked by her intrusion into our conversation. I hoped she hadn't heard me, but then again, she knew about Irene. She just didn't realize that I knew as well. "May I speak?" she asked.

My father looked at her for a moment and then said, "No, Hala. I have made my decision. Leave us."

My mother nodded and then quickly backed out of the room.

"Irene is none of your business! Who told you about her?" he said in a harsh whisper.

"I've always known she was more than just your nurse. You've been seeing her since I was a boy. You must love her. Why is it so hard for you to believe that I love Mona?"

"Irene is not black. She is of mixed race. Her mother is white."

“What difference does that make? She’s not Pakistani, is she, Father? And she’s not your wife.”

My father sighed. “You are sure that these are your sons, Wasif?”

“Yes, *positive*.”

“If these are your sons, then you are right, they are your responsibility. What kind of help does this girl need?”

“She needs to move to a different place. There is a vacant apartment in my building. I need to be able to pay the rent and utilities for her. I need to be able to provide for her and the boys. Once I finish school, I can take over. Please, *please* help us.”

“Very well, I will set up a fund for them. And you can continue to see her until you get her out of your system. But you will continue with your studies and when the time comes, you will marry Uzma and you will respect her. If I even *think* you are considering backing out of marrying her, I will withdraw my help from this girl and her children.”

“My children.”

“Have I made myself clear, Wasif?”

I nodded. “Fine. Whatever you want.”

“And I want to meet her.”

“No—”

“If I am going to support this girl *and* her children, I want to meet her!”

“O... okay.”

“Here,” he said, handing me a check.

I left the study and headed towards the front door where I was met by my mother. “He is going to help?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said with a relieved smile.

She returned my smile and then reached up and placed her palm on my cheek. “I’m glad.” She hugged me and then said, “Can I see the picture?”

I pulled the picture from my wallet again and handed it to her. She held it in her hand and stared at it with a little smile on her face, then she held it to her chest and said, “They are beautiful, Wasif, and so is she. *Very* beautiful.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

"Can I keep this picture?"

"Yes, of course." I kissed her cheek. "I need to go, now."

"Okay. Goodbye. I love you."

"I love you, too, Mother."

I left the house, climbed into my car, and headed back to Fayetteville. I would lease the apartment in the morning.

“Because Of Love”

I paced the floor of the apartment for so long; I think Mo was beginning to worry. Her green eyes were clouded with concern as she sat on the sofa feeding Morgan. Blair was content in his baby swing. With each click of the swing and each tick of the clock that hung on the wall, I felt my heart jump. My own footfalls startled me. My chest tightened more and more with each second that passed.

When the knock finally came at the door, I literally jumped. Then I just stood there and stared at it.

“Want me to get it?” Mo asked.

I frowned as I turned and looked at her. “What? No... I’ll, uh, I’ll get it.”

I turned and walked toward the door. I took a shaky hand and turned the lock, and then I took a deep breath and turned the knob. I didn’t bother to ask who it was. I knew it was him. I even knew what expression would be on his face—the same one he’d worn for most of my life when he looked at me—a look of disappointment.

I squared my shoulders and tried to at least appear confident when I faced him. I opened the door and my heart fell a little. He was alone. I had hoped that my mother would make the trip with him. Seeing her would’ve eased my tension and anxiety a little. My father stepped into the small apartment that Mo and I shared without awaiting an invitation. I didn’t suppose he needed one, though. After all, it was his money that was paying for the place. He’d paid for everything from the furniture to the bottle that Mo held in her hand as she fed Morgan.

I stood to the side and watched as he took in his surroundings. My throat began to close as his eyes settled on Mo. What would he say to her? What would she say to him? Mo wasn’t one to hold her tongue. That was actually one of the things I loved most about her. But I wasn’t ready for a verbal sparring match between her and my father. I wasn’t ready for that at all.

“You are Mona, I presume,” he said in his usual stern, emotionless voice. If you didn’t know my father, he could be hard to read sometimes. But I could read him loud and clear. He was displeased. Displeased with me, displeased with Mo, displeased with the whole situation.

“Yes. Nice to meet you, Mr. Masood,” she answered. I cringed.

"Dr. Masood," he corrected.

"Yes, I'm sorry," she said, almost demurely. It seemed that he'd intimidated even her.

He looked from Mo to Blair who giggled at him. I think I saw the hint of a smile on his face. "Well," he began. "I just wanted to be sure you were clear about this arrangement. You are aware that Wasif is already promised in marriage?"

Mo slowly nodded and dropped her eyes. "Yes."

"Does that not bother you?"

With her eyes still downcast, she said, "No. I love him. I'll stand behind him no matter what he has to do."

I looked at her and smiled. I'd never heard her speak those words before. I'd said them a thousand times, but she'd never said them back. Hearing those words come from her mouth was like breathing for the first time. And at that moment, I was no longer anxious or afraid. *She loves me*. With that new bit of knowledge, I felt as if there was nothing I couldn't do—including marrying Uzma.

My father was silent. He appeared to be taken aback by her response. After a few moments of tense quietness, he said, "Very well. Wasif, can I speak to you for a moment?"

I nodded and followed him into the breezeway outside the apartment.

Once outside he said, "Well, I certainly see why you feel that you need her. She's, uh... quite magnetic. But be sure of one thing: our deal still stands. You will marry Uzma. If you want to keep this other young lady in your life until you've had enough of her, I won't protest, but Uzma is to have a place of honor and respect in your life."

I fixed my eyes on the concrete surrounding our feet. "I understand."

"Good. I must be getting back. Your mother sends her love."

I looked up at him. "I had hoped she'd come with you today."

He scoffed, "Did you really think I would bring your mother here so that she could look upon your shame?"

My eyes clouded a little. My sons weren't my shame. I wanted to tell him as much, but decided there was no need in starting an argument with him. He was leaving, and after he left, I could go back to my life with the woman that I loved and my sons. So I simply said, "Give mother my love in return, please. Tell her I will call."

He nodded and then turned and walked away.

I walked back inside and sat down beside Mo. Neither of us spoke a word at first. She reached for my hand and squeezed it in hers. I looked over at her and she smiled at me.

"You told him you loved me. Did you mean it?" I asked.

She nodded as she reached up and caressed my cheek. "Yes, I meant it."

I leaned in and kissed her deeply. "Thank you."

She cocked her head to the side. "For what?"

"For loving me. For being with me. For giving me these beautiful sons."

"I'm the one who's thankful. You rescued me from a living hell. *Thank you.*"

I smiled as I cupped her face in my hands. "That means we're perfect for each other because you rescued me, too." And then I kissed her.

She smiled. "Yeah, we are."

If you enjoyed *If (A Been So Long Prequel)* and want to read more about Mona, Wasif, and Corey, be sure to check out the rest of the *Been So Long* series, told from Mona's point of view:

Rapture (A Been So Long Prequel)

Been So Long

Little Sister (A Companion Novel to Been So Long- told from Cleo's point of view)

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