**Being That Girl**

**I**

The doorbell sounded like a cacophony of banging drums. I turned over in bed, ignoring to respond to this disturbance. Eventually, I got up thinking about how I had complained to my father about this noise pollution a million times to no avail. Stomping down the stairs, I realized that the house was empty. Maybe my little brother, Abdullah, was out playing with his friends. My elder brother Ali Bhai must have gone to his college. Mum was most probably out shopping, and Dad would be in the university teaching.

Why am I home while everyone else is being productive in some way? I have the flu. The flushed skin, red nose, and puffy eyes were the river Nile-up-my-nose-flu symptoms. I grab my headscarf and quickly tie it trying to look at least half decent as I open the door to see the person who has disturbed my restless sleep.

“Yes?” my voice comes out all gravelly and my eyes squint to identify the silhouette, I clear my throat and ask, “Can I help you?”

“Uh, yes. Asalaam-o-Alaikum,” a male voice says. I respond to his greeting with a modest shake of the head and try to think why that voice sounds so familiar. “Is this the house where Dr. Ahmed Khan lives?”

“Oh, yes. He’s not here at the moment, though. Would you like me to pass on a message for you?” I survey him shortly and conclude that he indeed seems familiar. I might have met him in one of my father’s weekly parties he loves having at his house during weekends.

My father, Dr. Hamza Khan, is a man who can make many feel insecure. His intelligence and vast knowledge of history, books, and literature may be threatening to some. His desire to reverse chaos whenever he encounters it has made me realize just how lucky I am to have such a father, Alhamdolillah. Bhai disagrees, though. He thinks Baba should spend less time on his books and more time with his children. I never felt that way, though.

I always found it oddly funny seeing my father reading those ridiculously huge collections of Rumi, Hafez, or of Farid ud-Din with his glasses hanging on the slight curve of his nose and his cup of tea steaming by his elbow on the hand rest. Whenever he would finish his hour-long dhikr, his tea would have gotten cold and he would complain about it. He would get up and tell me, “Alia, when you get older, make sure you have a reliable cup of tea that will warm you to the bone.” I always used to laugh and tell him that it wasn’t the cup’s fault but his, because he would always let it get cold and keep on reading. He used to say that it wasn’t his fault that the book was so captivating that his eyes just couldn’t leave the page. That’s why he started calling me his page. His exact words were, “The day I laid my eyes on you, I realized you were more beautiful than any dhikr I had read and it was hard to take my eyes off you. I could be in the cold of the Antarctica, but I would still feel warm when I would see you, my child. You’re my page.” When I was young, I used to giggle and jump into his lap as he recited the works of Rumi. Whenever Ali Bhai walked into this scene, he stomped back to his room without a word.

The man suddenly coughs loudly, abruptly shaking me out of my daze.

“Oh, I’m sorry, you were saying?”

“Yes, well – my name is Hamza Imran. It would really be helpful if I could tell me when I could meet Dr. Khan.”

“Hamza Imran?” My eyes widened with recognition when I realized this was my school classmate. I don’t think he has recognized me yet. All the better for that, because I was the girl who once spilled juice all over him in class.

“Yes, so, is there a way I can contact him?” He looks different. I slap myself in thought; these rhino viruses are affecting my ability to focus. Of course he looks different; it’s been four years since I saw him last. And ten years, since we last spoke. He used to be really chubby when we were kids, part of the reason why he used to hang out with me. I used to be a real pudgy kid. But as we got into the teens, it just got awkward.

“You can reach him at the New York University. He teaches poetry there.” I was about to close the door, because I felt strangely hurt that he did not remember me. Of course I was just disappointed, because it was bad manners not to acknowledge an old friend – even if this friend was a female.

“Alia?” His voice was soft and he looked as if he was laughing. His eyes barely contained his mirth. So he did know who I was.

“Hamza?” I repeated with rising intonation. I really had no intention of standing at the door for hours with my flu congestion and I certainly wasn’t going to invite him in with nobody in the house. I just wanted him to go away and let me go sleep. Oh, bite me for being so honest.

“You really thought I wouldn’t remember you?” he said smiling attractively. “You haven’t changed a bit. You look great, MashAllah.”

“Thank you,” I said politely. What else am I supposed to say to him? Get off my property, I want to sneeze? Nope. He rocked on the balls of his feet and gave me a card from his pocket. I took it. On it was his phone number and address with his name signed at the bottom.

“Can you pass this on to your father? And could you tell him that I would like to speak to him whenever he can find the time?”

“Sure,” I said with a slight smile. As I opened the door a little more, I realized I was wearing a robe with pockets overflowing with tissues and I also remembered that my house was untidy, so I hastily almost pushed it shut and smiled at him through the narrow opening.

“So, I should get going, then. It was nice meeting you again, Alia. Please give my regards to your family and my message to your father. Allah Hafiz.”

I nodded and shut the door, holding the card he had given me.

“Allah Hafiz,” I murmured. I went to the kitchen, set it there on the counter, and sat down to remember the last time I had seen Hamza.

**II**

Amna and I were late. We were running to the history lab when I tripped and fell.

“Astaghfirullah, Alia! Come on, get up!” she pulled me up and was trying to hide her laughter. Amna was my best friend since kindergarten. And every time I fell, and that happened a lot, she had to laugh first and help later. I brushed the dust off my clothes, fixed my scarf, and continued to run.

“Excited for the last day, aren’t we?” I heard my history professor ask as we entered the classroom. Mr. Mikael was a balding man, who looked like he was in his fifties, but everyone knew he stopped caring about his appearance since his wife had left him. I’m not a gossip, but since his personal life was supposed to be a secret everyone knew about it, naturally. He laughed good-naturedly and gestured us to take our seats: “Get in. I can’t really coddle you kids anymore.”

Amna laughed loudly. She was so confident and brave. She always spoke her mind and I always envied her, because I was more reserved. We took our seats and were not really shocked when we got to know that we would be having a group discussion. History was a strong suit of mine; it fascinated me. I always wondered how our ancestors lived and what they would think about our present world.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” The class murmured consent and the questions began. I wasn’t really paying attention as I was staring off in space, when I realized Amna was nudging me.

“What?” I whispered to her, afraid of getting caught. She pointed to the far end of the class and I saw Hamza standing. He was being asked a question. Amna knew how I felt about him. I mean, she knew he was my childhood friend. That’s it.

“So, Mr. Imran, tell me. What’s your thought on history repeating itself?” I saw him think about it for a minute and smile widely. I guess he had a good answer.

“I don’t agree it happens.” He grinned and all the girls in the back seats sighed loudly. I scoffed and rolled my eyes. I don’t know why it was so annoying to me when I saw girls fawning over him like he was some gorgeous male model. He had straight black hair and dark eyes. His voice had a deep tremble to it and it started cracking. He looked normal; there was nothing exceptional to drool over. In primary and middle school, we used to be the best of friends. His family knew mine, and we were pretty close.

“Is that so? Could you please elaborate?” Mr. Mikael clearly liked Hamza and his confidence. He just smiled and waited for the answer.

Hamza twitched his nose, an action I used to find cute when we were children. He said: “Looking at it from a historical and factual point of view, maybe you can find some similarities. But looking at it from a logical perspective, I don’t agree it happens. I mean, come on, how can you expect a series of events that happened a while ago, happen all over again in the exact same manner?” His answer was so smug and he sounded so sure of himself that it irritated me. So, I raised my hand.

“Yes, Alia?” As Mr. Mikael said my name, I saw Hamza look at me with a slight smile on his face, but his surprise was evident. I really couldn’t blame him. I don’t answer questions till someone asks me. “Do you have a counter argument?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Stand up, then. I would like to see where this leads.”

“Historical recurrence is an actual thing. Rise and fall of empires have been compared on a timeline for ages. I’m not saying it follows the exact pattern; I’m saying there are situations, albeit small, that happen again and again.”

“You seriously think that people don’t change over the course of time?” he asked.

“You think they do?” I alwarully countered.

“I think people can learn from their mistakes and do better,” he stated.

“What you think people can do is not something that they will do. Why do you think the concept ‘History repeats itself’ was made up in the first place?” I asked.

Hamza gave me a smile, and looked up at me with his eyebrows raised: “History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”

I recognized the quote and my eyes went wide with shock. He remembered? How could he remember? Everyone was looking at us, and I saw Amna chuckle. She knew the story. It was years ago, when Hamza and I sat under our mango tree, and listened to my father read us famous quotes and explaining what they meant. He left the book on the chair for a while, and Hamza lay back on the grass, while I went and picked the book up. He had asked me what I was doing, and I sat on my father’s chair, and started reading Mark Twain’s quotes. And I acted like I was the teacher and he was my student. He clapped after I finished one quote and then the other. Each time, he clapped. The first quote I read was the one he just said. “History doesn’t always repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” And he had given me a look of complete attention and adoration. The same look he was giving me now.

I blushed and sat down. Amna started giggling uncontrollably and didn’t stop until I slapped her arm. Mr. Mikael told Hamza to be seated and I glanced in his direction only to see that he was smiling at me. I opened my book and pretended to read smiling to myself, thinking about the moment we just had. He remembered.

**III**

“I think she’s asleep,” I heard Abdullah say, “Should I wake her up, Ammi?”

“Let her sleep, she’s tired,” replied my father. It’s a habit of mine to pretend to be sleeping so I can find out what my family talks of when I’m not around. It’s a really good technique if you want to know what they think of you. And my mother never disappoints.

“She’s been such a good girl; she cleans and works all day. It’s a sad thing she’s sick and couldn’t come play bridge with me and Mrs. Saif. Khan Sahib, she has a really nice boy named Zain. He has been showing interest for Alia for years. She is of age now too; what do you think?”

I mentally groaned at my mother’s constant, unrelenting attempts to get me married. I honestly don’t know why a girl, who is 23 years old, cannot enjoy her life as it is and has to get married. I waited for my father’s reply, because I knew what he would say.

“What am I supposed to think? If he’s such a nice boy, why isn’t he married yet?” My father said with a chuckle.

I giggled softly and opened one eye and my father winked at me. He always knows when I pretend to sleep.

“Because he hasn’t met our daughter yet!” my mother said with an annoyed undertone. Oh, Baba needs to be careful now or there will come a full blown war.

“Well, I have no intentions of stopping our daughter’s education as of yet. When she expresses a wish to get married, she can choose a husband and if I find him acceptable, I will say yes. Why force her when she’s not ready?” I saw my father open his newspaper and look at Ammi with a small smile on his face, but his eyes were serious. He was going to let me choose? He was going to give me the option to choose with whom I will spend the rest of my life? I relaxed subconsciously. But then I felt guilty. I was being given the option many girls were denied.

“Fine, who listens to me? I’m just a wash woman and a cleaner you’ve hired, Khan Sahib!”

“Well, that’s not true at all. You cook too.” I saw my father grin at my mother and that resulted in me laughing and my mother discovering I was awake the whole time.

“Aliaa!” Abdullah screamed in delight and jumped into my arms. I hugged him and kissed his forehead. He is ten years old and although he is almost a teenager, I cannot help but pamper him. “Alia Api, are you going to marry?”

“Why would I marry, when I have you, Abdullah?” I asked him and tickled his tummy, causing him to erupt in giggles and my mother to huff and leave the room.

“Your mother means well, Alia,” my father said, straightening his paper, “she’s a mother; that’s how they are.”

“I know, Abbu. It’s just, I don’t want to get married till I can stand on my own feet, you know?”

“Meaning?”

“If something bad happens, I can be independent.”

“I see, so what did you do all day, page?”

“I was resting, Abbu. Oh, I almost forgot. Do you remember my schoolmate Hamza Imran?”

“The boy who liked my poetry collection?” he asked with curiosity clear in his eyes. “What about that lad?”

“He came over, and gave me a card. He said he wanted to speak to you.” I shrugged, implying my nonchalance at the matter, yet I was so curious. I really wanted to know what Hamza wanted to talk about with my father.

“I do miss his father. He was such a nice man. I will contact him soon.” My father resumed reading and I resumed thinking.

It was already dark outside. I pulled Abdullah with me and took him to his room, which he shared with Ali Bhai, who was three years older than me. Bhai never got along with Abbu, because they were exactly the same. Bhai always thought Abbu should spend more time with the family and not read so much or spend too much time in the University. Ironically, he spent all his free time in his room. Bhai always kept to himself. This annoyed me, because we were really close when we were young.

I knocked at the door and waited for Ali Bhai to let me in. When I didn’t hear anything, I peeked inside and nobody was there. I walked over to Abdullah’s tiny bed and tucked him in. I loved that little boy with all my heart. He always managed to make me laugh. When I started University here, I never thought of how mean the girls could be and I always came home upset. Then Abdullah used to do his funny faces or dance just to cheer me up. He was the universal charger to my dying battery. Ali Bhai used to be my best friend till he changed so much that I couldn’t even have a straight conversation with him. I had two brothers who were polar opposites.

“Is he asleep?” Ali asked. I nodded and alwarul him to come outside to the hall. I quietly closed the door and looked at him in anger.

“Where were you? Mom and dad were downstairs trying to fix me up getting me married and whatnot. Why aren’t you ever there when something is being discussed in our family?”

“You’re only twenty-three. Dad won’t let you get married so young. And I’m not there because nobody takes my input on things anyway, Alia. Twenty-three years in this house and you still don’t get how you’re the favorite and I’m the good-for-nothing son?”

“Oh, don’t you dare put this on me! I am not a favorite. You just don’t show your face and blame dad for being an “absent” father. How can you say that, when you’re the absentee yourself?”

“Alia, enough. It’s late, I’m going to bed and you should go use a tissue paper.” He walked off and shut himself in his room. I just stared after him, irritated and a little ticked off because of the tissue paper comment.

I went to my room and just sat on the bed, thinking about Hamza, Ali Bhai, Abdullah, and Dad. A bit about Mom as well. What could Hamza want? I remember Amna telling me in school how she was sure that Hamza would marry me someday. It seemed like a pathetic notion at that time, but now, it didn’t seem so extreme. Hamza is a nice man, mashAllah, and I have known him since childhood. But I know Ali Bhai will not agree. He always thought that Hamza was proud. But why should I care what he thinks? Isn’t it my life and won’t he be my husband? But his opinion does matter because he is my older brother and I love him despite his flaws. I remember the days when we used to sit with each other and read books aloud. He used to make fun of me when I pronounced something incorrectly. And then he used to hug me. That’s it. I am going to talk to him. I removed my headphones and paused the music. The house seemed eerily quiet. I got off of my bed and went to their room. I knocked on his door and peeped in when there was no response. I saw Abdullah’s and Ali Bhai’s empty beds. Then I saw the scattered papers and the haywire bedsheets. The table was a mess and the cupboard looked as if it had been thoroughly searched. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears. It was nearing midnight and I heard a small noise downstairs and almost screamed. What was happening? I ran to my room and got my headscarf. I saw the fruit bowl and knife on my table. I picked up the knife and held it firmly. I went downstairs very softly while my imagination was going haywire. What if there is a burglar?

I reached the last step and saw that the living room was dark, but someone was speaking very softly. I murmured bismillah softly and switched on the lights.

**IV**

“Alia?’ I heard my husband calling from downstairs, “Alia, where is my tie? I threw it on the sofa last night!”

“You threw it, darling!” I replied with sarcasm dripping in my voice, “That is the perfect way to keep something and to find it later on!”

“Stop kidding around, love,” I heard his voice coming closer until he showed up at the door, “I throw things around because I know you will clean up after me.” He grinned. I have known him since I was a child and he has not changed at all. He took my hand and sat next to me on the bed. He was wearing his depressing suit. The one he wore to the funeral. The one I cried on uncontrollably. I don’t know why he kept it, but it’s a miracle it still fits.

“Are you okay?” he asked me with concern obvious in his eyes.

I sighed. It’s been ten years. And it still hurts. Everything had changed that night.

“No. I miss them.” I did miss them. I felt guilty too.

“We all do. Come on, we should be leaving now.” He pulled me up and kissed my forehead.

“I’m ready, I just need to call Amna and ask her if Raiya is alright.” I took my phone and called Amna. She had flown in from Pakistan and had taken my daughter with her. Raiya was only two years old and she didn’t understand much of what was going on, but she did know that mummy was sad.

“Hello, worried mother. Stop calling your best friend, because she can actually take care of your little baby girl!” Amna always managed to make me laugh. Even on a day like this. She got easily annoyed with my worrying habits.

“Funny. I am just calling to ask if she is okay.” My voice faded into a whisper at the end.

“She’s fine, Alia. Stop worrying. We are going to Roshina Ammi’s house now, okay? See you there soon, InshAllah.” She always called my mother Ammi. She was like the sister I never had, but always wanted.

“Okay, tell Raiya I love her and that I will be there soon,” I said.

“Here, talk to her,” Amna said exasperatedly and after a few seconds of explaining who was calling, my baby started talking.

She giggled as she said, “Mama!”

“Asalaamo-alaikum hayati, are you having fun with Amna Khala?” I asked, knowing the answer already. Raiya had good vocabulary considering her age; however, she was very selective with her words. She used “yes” for everything. Even if asked her if she wanted vegetables, she would say yes, but she would look like she was being tortured while eating them.

“Yes, Mama! We go to park and eat many ice creams!” she sounded so jubilant, I couldn’t scold her about the ice creams. I could hear Amna exclaiming: “I told you not to tell mummy about ice cream!” in the background. Realizing her mistake, she corrected herself and said: “Mummy we didn’t have ice cream. Ama Khala gave me vegecables.” Her baby talk made me laugh out loud.

Hamza came in and alwarul our departure. I gestured him to talk to Raiya and he came.

“Hello, page! How are you?” he asked with a huge smile on his face. He called her page now. Like Abbu used to call me. I felt like crying. I got up to wash my face. I could hear Hamza saying goodbye as I fixed my scarf in front of the mirror in the washroom.

We got in the car and I was unnaturally silent. I closed my eyes and the memories of that horrible night became alive.

**V**

I saw the guns first. Then I saw the neighbors standing over my parents, kneeling on the floor. I saw Ali Bhai, tied and gagged next to the television. Then I saw Abdullah, struggling in the arms of a man with a mask covering his face. My heart was beating sporadically as my brain tried to make sense of what was happening.

“Welcome to the show, Alia!” the man with the mask shrieked, “this is all for you, every bit of it!”

“What?” I managed to mumble. I felt numb. I couldn’t understand.

He took off his mask. It was him. Mrs. Saif’s ‘nice’ son. I didn’t remember his name.

“Surprised?” he laughed and kicked my father in the back, making me scream. “Don’t be. You destroyed my dreams about us, Alia. Now I am destroying yours.”

I looked to the right and saw Ali Bhai trying to break free of his bonds. He alwarul me to keep the crazy stalker talking. I remembered his name now. Zain.

“Zain? Why are you doing this?” I asked feebly. My voice couldn’t accept the urgency of the situation. I understood now how I could never survive in a panicky atmosphere. My senses completely dulled down.

“To prove to you that I am still ready to be yours! But first I must free you from everyone else that you love. So you can love me and me only! It’s so poetic, isn’t it? You love poetry, don’t you? I remember you walking down the street to the bus stop carrying your poetry books. We could be in them one day, Alia. Our love story can be one everyone yearns to be in.” He said all of this so earnestly, I found myself feeling sorry for him.

Zain was looking at me. I was looking at the ground crying and shaking in fear. He was a monster; the kind of monsters no fiction book can describe. Monsters in Greek myths or the Lord of the Rings have vulnerabilities. Monsters like Zain are of an unpredictable kind. One could never guess their true color. Their vulnerabilities made them monsters. But these monsters can be distracted.

“What if I ran away with you? Will you let my family go?” I asked him. “Please let them go. Please, let my family go!” I could see my father shaking his head and my mother crying. I turned my eyes towards the monster. I could see how he liked the idea of running off with me, but then the woman who was holding my mother down coughed pointedly. That reminded him of their original plan.

“As much as I wish I could, Alia” he said with some rising tremble in his voice, “it is all done now; I will have to go with the plan.” He continued to address me as he motioned to the man and woman next to him. “After all, I cannot defy my parents’ wishes.”

Mrs. Saif, that traitorous monster-mother, had been pestering my mother for my hand in marriage for ages!

“You’re blind, Roshina!” she cackled like the witch she was. “My son is perfect for any girl and you say no to him?”

Her husband did not say much. He was my father’s associate in the department. I could see the jealousy in his eyes whenever Abbu carpooled with him on meeting days. Now, I could see that jealousy transformed to murderous rage and confusion.

“Let’s get this done with, son,” he said with a sense of urgency and determination. The monster’s father was no exception to the family’s character.

The next few minutes many things seemed happened at once. Ali Bhai broke free of his bonds and kicked Mr. Saif who was standing next to him and Abbu to the floor. The gun he was holding fell out of his hand when he hit the ground. Mrs. Saif screamed and rushed to her husband’s aid. Ali Bhai jumped at Zain, with a guttural snarl. I rushed to Ammi, removed her gag and pulled her behind the sofa. She couldn’t stop crying and I tried to calm her. Abdullah ran towards us and I told him to take care of Ammi. I got up and saw Zain reaching for the gun as Ali Bhai tackled him to the ground. I ran towards Abbu to help him as I heard a shot ringing out and something heavy falling hitting the ground. My heart seemed to stop and I turned only to see Zain clutching his leg, screaming, and blood dripping onto the vinyl flooring. I heard Mrs. Saif scream some more, completely incapacitated by the injuries to her family. Maybe she was not such a heartless monster after all. Ali Bhai ran towards us and started helping Abbu get to his feet.

“Alia, take them and run! Call the police and don’t come back!” He was out of breath.

“I am not leaving you, Bhai,” I said impulsively.

“I have not done much to make this family proud, Alia. But I will not let anyone get hurt,” he said. “So get out, now!”

“Are you crazy? This is not the time to be a hero when –” Before I was able finish my sentence, I heard a bang and saw my brother Ali Bhai drop to the ground with a red spot spreading on his white t-shirt. He did not move. I heard a gut-wrenching and blood-curdling scream. It was me.

As I saw Ali Bhai’s lifeless body on the ground and my father trying to revive him, I felt my throat close up. I looked up to Zain with the gun in his hand now aiming at my father. I took the first thing my hand could find and ran towards him hitting him as hard as I could. Even though the object I had grabbed was only a sofa cushion, he fell to the ground and the gun fell out of his hand and skittered across the floor. I started punching the brute’s face. I reached for the gun and hit his head hard with its butt. He dropped to the floor unconscious.

With the crisis temporarily halted, I ran back to my father crying over Bhai. I was shaking and crying, but I knew I had to do something. I went to see Ammi behind the sofa clutching the crying Abdullah. I told her to stay there. I saw Abdullah had a cut on his forehead and it was bleeding. Ammi got up and screamed when another shot rang out and a body thumped on the floor.

I got up just in time to see Mrs. Saif standing with the gun in her hand, smoke rising from the barrel, and my father lying next to my brother. Dead.

**VI**

I opened my eyes. We had arrived. Hamza got out of the car and opened the door for me. I saw the house which memories I had just relived. It was just a lot darker and bloodier in my head. I don’t know why they still lived here. I kept asking them to move and live somewhere else, but Ammi wanted to stay. She couldn’t bear to lose the connection she felt here.

I got out and rang the bell. The door opened to show a strapping young man standing with Raiya in his arms. The concern on my face changed into a smile of evident relief.

“Abdullah!” I hugged him and started to cry. Raiya got worried and she pulled away from her uncle and called: “Mama! I want mama!”

I wiped my eyes and kissed her cheeks. She saw Hamza coming in and started jumping out of my arms: “Baba! I want baba!”

Everyone laughed. I heard a very masculine laugh from the corner of the room. For a second it felt like Ali Bhai. This laugh belonged to a tall young man, almost as tall as Abdullah, standing with a woman. I felt I should know who this was.

“Alia Api, you remember Asad my classmate from school? And this is his wife, Irum” Abdullah said. His friend got up and shook hands with Hamza. He looked at least two years older than Abdullah. I now remembered him clearly, because he was one of the few friends Abdullah had retained over the years.

“Asalaamoalaikum, how are you?” Irum greeted me. Her hands were very soft. I had half a mind to ask her for moisturizing tips.

“Alhamdolillah. It’s very nice to meet you. Abdullah has been talking about you both a lot recently,” I said. “I think he’s hinting at marriage.”

Everyone laughed at this and Abdullah squeezed my arm. Asad started teasing Abdullah as I saw my mother coming down the stairs, greeting me with a smile. I ran towards her to hug her. I helped her to the sofa in the living room. Everyone came and scattered themselves on the available seats.

“You’re fine. We are fine,” Ammi said.

Her words brought back the painful memories. She had said the same thing when the police was standing over the criminals and were handcuffing those monsters. Ammi was then standing next to me and Abdullah. I also remembered the days we had to make the funeral arrangements. I remember Hamza condoling us and looking at me with great concern. I remember him sitting next to me during the sermon and holding my hand. I remember how I cried on his shoulder uncontrollably and he not saying a word about my tears wetting his suit. I remember Amna sitting to my left, crying and holding the book of proverbs my father had given her. I remember everything as if it had been yesterday.

“It’s been ten years,” my mother said holding my hand. She was not just addressing me, but was speaking to everyone gathered there. My husband was holding my other hand, looking at me lovingly. Sitting next to him was my baby brother with the scar on his forehead from that night. Asad was sitting beside Abdullah, looking at me with a brotherly smile. Irum was playing with Raiya, making her promise to never say vegecables again and Amna was standing under the arch with her arms crossed, holding the same book she was holding ten years ago when we had to bid farewell to our loved ones.

“And we are okay,” I finished for her. I was okay. I did miss them every day. I did miss my father calling me page. I did miss my brother teasing me and being annoying. I missed everything. Missing was a part of it. The worst part was thinking that I could have done something, but knowing that one cannot defy fate. Life had been hard. I lost half my family when I least expected it. My happy life had been shattered by insanity and I had believed I could never be happy again. But I have a new life now. I had to experience the worst kind of pain imaginable to become stronger. Eventually, I married the man whose path had crossed mine and with whom I had felt a strange affiliation since schooldays. Life is good this way. Life is good being that girl.

**Mahnoor Anees Khan**