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Opening extract from

From Somalia With Love

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Chapter 1

Last weekend Hoyo, my mum, gave me the best news ever and the most shocking news ever. After five long years of looking, waiting, meeting and negotiating, my *habaryero*, my mum's sister, is finally getting married. That is the best news ever.

And then the most shocking news ever: after twelve years of absence, of being missing, Abo, my dad, is finally coming home from Somalia.

It was last Saturday morning that Hoyo got the phone call. Abdullahi, Ahmed and I were sitting in the kitchen, eating hot *anjero* with loads of butter and sugar. Ahmed was entertaining us with another one of his crazy stories when Hoyo came in. As soon as I saw her face, I knew that something major had happened. She had tears in her eyes and the colour had drained from her face.

"That was Abo," she whispered, her lips trembling. "He's coming home..."

And I felt everything around me freeze: silence from the street, steam frozen in mid-air, me, unable to move or think or say anything. Abo? Coming home?

Just over a year ago, we had received the news that Abo was still alive. Before that, we all assumed that he had been killed during the fighting in Somalia. So many other families had lost relatives in the war – we thought that we had too. That was until last year when Uncle Yusuf received a letter from his cousin's nephew, telling him that Abo was alive and that he was trying to find us. But I don't think we understood; don't think we thought it was real. We knew about the war, about stolen passports and smuggled visas. But I don't think any of us thought we would really see our father again.

Abdullahi was the first to speak. "Abo's coming home, Hoyo? *Wallahi*? Really?"

Hoyo nodded as the tears began to run down her cheeks. "Haa, haa! He finally found a way to get out, to come to us."

Abdullahi smiled and shook his head. "*Alhamdulillah*! Praise be to Allah! That is fantastic news!" He gave Hoyo a hug and she laughed through her tears.

"*Alhamdulillah*!" she cried. "Allah is Great!"

Then Ahmed went to hug her and, though I was numb with shock, I got up too. She held us all, looking into our faces with new pride, her eyes shining.

"Just wait until he sees what a fine family he has,

masha Allah," she said proudly.

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I crept into the boys' room later than night. I couldn't sleep.

"Ahmed," I whispered. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah," came the voice from the mound of covers. He was wide-awake: I could tell from his voice.

"Ahmed, I want to talk to you..." I waited for him to disentangle himself from the sheets and sit up. "What do you think about Abo coming home?"

He sighed and ran his fingers through his mop of tight curls.

"Safia-girl, I don't know... I really don't know what to think."

That was not the answer I had been expecting. "But aren't you pleased he is finally coming over?" I needed Ahmed to make me happy about Hoyo's news, to change my heart from the awful heaviness that I had been carrying all day to something lighter and easier to bear. But he didn't.

"All I know is that things are gonna be different with Abo around."

"What do you mean?" I asked, playing dumb.

"Well, for a start, he hardly knows us and he doesn't know this country – it's gonna be a livin'

culture shock for him when he gets here and finds us all westernised and not even speaking proper Somali! You know Muhammad, from Ealing? His old man came home and had a fit when he saw that his kids were all smoking, clubbing and going out with *cadaan* girls... he couldn't cope in the end and went out to the Middle East – but not without beating them all first!"

I laughed because Ahmed laughed, but I wasn't sure whether the last part was a joke.

The heaviness in my heart became worse, like a rock weighing down on my insides. I could feel dread spreading through my veins like the bitterest blood. And I knew then that I would not be getting much sleep that night.

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It sounded strange to say that my father was coming 'home'. My home was a three-bedroom flat on an estate in Tower Hamlets, in London. His home was somewhere I didn't remember, in faraway Somalia. I'd never really wanted to go there.

For the first eleven years of my life, I had hardly thought about him, to tell you the truth. My family was Hoyo, Abdullahi, Ahmed and my mother's extended family. But hearing that he was still alive, hearing his voice over the phone had changed all that.

Now I had a father, but one I didn't know.

I went over what Hoyo said a thousand times in my head. I let the words roll off my tongue: *Abo is coming home.* So many emotions were fighting inside me: anxiety, nervousness, fear and hope, all at the same time. It took me ages to fall asleep.

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"Come on, class, settle down... settle *down*!"

I watched my favourite teacher, Miss Davies, hand out a batch of forms to my wild Year 9 class.

She smiled at me briefly as she handed me a creamy white paper. I looked at it: not another school survey! I rolled my eyes at my best friend, Hamida, who was sitting next to me as usual.

She grinned and shrugged her shoulders. "Less time for poetry today – woo hoo!" she whispered.

I stuck my tongue out at her – she knew how much I looked forward to English lessons. I sighed and looked down at the form.

Ethnicity: Somali

I was never sure which box to tick on those ethnicity forms. Sometimes, I was 'Black African', other times I was 'Somali'. On some forms, I was labelled 'British' (because of my passport) and on

others I was down as 'Muslim' (because of my religion). Although, for most people, the word 'Somalia' reminded them of war and bloodshed, it held a different meaning for me. I grew up surrounded by the Somali *daqaan* – the food, the clothes, the language, the unspoken rules – and they were a part of me.

Religion: Islam

I couldn't tell anyone what it's like to be a Muslim: it was all I had ever known. It was also a part of me, just like eating and sleeping. I had always been aware of the existence of Allah. I had been learning about the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, since I was knee-high and, while other children had nursery rhymes, my mother recited the Qur'an to get us to sleep.

Praying five times a day, fasting in Ramadhan, going to *duksi* to learn how to read and recite the Qur'an, wearing *hijab*, not eating ham sandwiches – all these things were all second nature to me now. So there you go.

Name: Safia Dirie

Strictly speaking, Dirie was not my surname. Dirie was my grandfather, Awowo's first name but that's the way we Somalis name ourselves: you are 'so-and-so

the daughter of so-and-so' and you stay 'daughter of so-and-so', even when you get married. But my mum didn't understand about surnames when she had to fill in birth certificates and NHS registration forms for us: she just put down my Awowo's name as our last name. So that was how she became 'Mrs Dirie' on school letters, even though her name is actually *Nawal bint AbdelQadir*: Nawal daughter of AbdelQadir.

Age: 14 ?

In some ways, I felt a lot older than I was. I always considered myself mature for my age, especially compared with the other kids in my class. My theory was that it was because I had quite a lot of responsibility at home and had to be 'sensible' most of the time. I didn't get the space to behave like a spoilt baby at home – I had to do my bit, especially as the only girl! I remember complaining to Hoyo once about how all my friends got to do absolutely nothing at home and never had to worry about cleaning or looking after younger nephews and nieces. She gave me a funny look then.

"Safia, do you know how easy you have it here compared to back home in Somalia?"

I had heard this speech before.

"By the age of 11, I was cooking meals for the family and, as you know, your auntie was married by

the time she was your age!"

Married? At my age? No way! Hoyo took one look at my horrified face and laughed.

"Don't worry, Safia," she giggled, "I'm not planning to marry you off just yet... you still need to learn to make *anjero*!"

At that we both laughed. There was one thing that Hoyo wanted me to have almost more than anything else: a good education.

"With a good education, Safia," she often said to me, "you can do anything, *insha* Allah."

But some of the things the girls talked about in the changing room made my eyes bug out of my head. If Hoyo only knew! The parties, the drinking, the clubbing, the boys – she would have a heart attack. So, although I was more mature than the other girls in some ways, in others I was still a baby. I didn't know anything about guys and going out and, to be honest, I didn't think about it that much. In our school, everyone knew that the Muslim girls who wore the *hijab* were 'straight'. Some were nasty about it and called us 'boring', 'uptight' or worse. Any guy with an atom of sense in his head knew that it wasn't worth chatting us up or asking us out: it was a complete non-starter. Besides, my brother Ahmed always said that a guy who chatted up a girl in *hijab* had no respect and deserved a beating!

So, anyway, fourteen-and-a-half, half responsible young woman, half baby.

"Safia," Hamida hissed, "you've been ages with that form! What are you day dreaming about?"

I smiled at her ruefully and then quickly answered the rest of the questions. Nothing exciting there, just the usual demographic data.

Then Miss Davies was at the head of the class again, looking mildly frazzled. "OK, class, please open your books. Did anyone memorise the poem I gave you for homework last week?"

There was a collective groan.

So far, so predictable.

My classmates were not into poetry at all and there was always a huge outcry when we had to read poetry in class. The other kids really tried their best to spoil it: they read in flat, boring voices, or completely missed the rhythm, or skipped out words or pretended that they don't understand even the simplest metaphor. "But Miss, why's he have to call Juliet a sun when she ain't: she's just a bird!"

Miss Davies was patient though. She didn't give up trying.

I admired her efforts to get Year 9 to appreciate clever similes or interesting metaphors. She had even started introducing modern poets and urban spoken-word artists to the syllabus, anything to get the

class to respond.

Benjamin Zephaniah had gone down well the week before, but fourteen-year-olds have short memories. Seven days was enough to erode that small victory so, here we were again, stuck with Stacy Haversham reading...

We know who the killers are,
We have watched them strut before us
As proud as sick Mussolinis,
We have watched them strut before us
Compassionless and arrogant,
They paraded before us,
Like angels of death
Protected by the law.

... as if it was the menu at McDonalds! I could have cried!

At last, the bell, and the pain was over. I was the last to leave the class and I saw Miss Davies sitting at her desk, her head heavy in her hands. She sighed and lifted her head, massaging her temples with her fingers. Then she saw me and a smile lit up her face.

"Safia," she said to me, "you are like an oasis on a desert landscape." She didn't need to explain that simile. I'd often thought of our school as a barren desert.