IN SUCH TREMENDOUS HEAT

KEHINDE FADIPE



DIALOGUE BOOKS

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To T and T, for cracking my heart open

Dara

Beneath the Singapore Cricket Club veranda, Dara watched two teams of lawyers sweat it out in the annual law rugby tournament held every January, and allowed herself a small, happy sigh. Under the cool shade, she felt some mild pity for the poor bastards playing under the sun's sticky glare, but suffering in the heat never lasted long in Singapore; discomfort was always reliably suspended in the blue or yellow taxis that swarmed the city, or through the icy gusts that rushed onto the streets from the malls. It was like a contract signed as a basic human right: *'You shall never perspire for long.'*

Dara sat at the top of the stand beside Lucy, a junior associate on her team, and one of the new trainees. It was a good vantage point from which to keep an eye on her boss, Ian, as he entertained two of his most important Japanese clients at the bottom of the steps. She would be ready whenever he caught her eye and gave her the green light to approach. In the meantime, she tried to feign interest in the losing team in green, which was made up of amateur and semi-professional players from her firm, Morgan Corbett Shaw. She'd given up checking her phone to see if her best friend, Amaka, would make an appearance. Even though Amaka's bank was helping to sponsor the tournament, she somehow always found a way to avoid these work events, something Dara just couldn't afford to do.

Giving up a Sunday afternoon would be worth it, though. Dara felt as confident as Perseus with the Gorgon's head in his bag, being so close to the partnership she'd spent the past six years working for. Work was going so well that it didn't matter that she

was experiencing caffeine withdrawals from missing her hourly fix, or that she was being forced to give up a much-needed day of rest. She usually wasn't in the city much at the weekend; she travelled every chance she got, taking advantage of Singapore's many public holidays, a welcome by-product of a country that officially celebrated three different religions. The past Christmas break had been spent cycling on her own in Laos, a wonderful change from the year before when she'd celebrated with friends of friends who, like her, were avoiding both the English winter and their difficult families, chugging bottomless glasses of champagne in a hotel lacking genuine festive spirit. Whenever her married friends started giving her dating advice (a grown woman of thirty-six!) or tried to fix her up at parties with men they would never have considered for themselves, she reminded herself that she'd been to ten out of twelve countries in Southeast Asia multiple times, and had seen and experienced things that would have been impossible with children in tow. So, whenever Amaka broke off in the middle of a conversation like a puppet, gawking at a nice butt and pulsing biceps (or shiny bag), or Lucy grieved over her latest failed date, it made the imminent payoff of Dara's investment in her career – at one of the largest law firms in the world, no less – even sweeter.

One of the green players – it was hard to recognise his face from this distance – tried to dash across the field; he was brought crashing down by three men in red.

'All the girls I've met here complain about the English guys catching yellow fever, but the guy I've been seeing has been here two years and he's never even *dated* an Asian girl', Lucy boasted, reminiscing about her recent date.

The trainee, who had only been in Singapore a month, looked confused at this bit of casual racism, but Dara stifled a smile, accustomed to the terrified insecurity of the English girls here. Most of the expats she knew were French, British or American; the women mostly dated other French, British or American expats, contracting their pool of dating options, while frustratingly (for them, at least), the men did not.

'He moved out here with his now-ex. They were engaged, but

he said she missed home too much, which I completely understand.' Lucy tilted over the trainee, shaking her curls in earnest. 'But nuking a relationship like that – madness. I'd pack all this the second there's a proposal. Are you kidding?'

'So she went back to the UK?' Dara asked, pressing two paracetamols into her palm. She'd worked for ten days straight and would have given anything to swap the warm cup of wine in her hand for an almond milk latte.

'Well, no actually. Yes and no. Total fluke – Andy said she met someone on the flight back and six months later they were married. They live in Sicily now, where the guy's from, and she's got one on the way', Lucy said ruefully.

'He told you all this?' Dara stared at her suspiciously.

'She invited him to the wedding. Anyway, I still say it was a risky move.'

'Hmm.' Dara couldn't hide a smile as she dug out a small, battery-operated fan from her bag and switched it on. 'I see what you're saying. You've got your career and all she's got is a ball in her stomach, lemons everywhere and a bossy mother-in-law.'

The trainee barked a short laugh and Lucy paused, unsure who the joke was on.

'Speaking of careers . . .' Lucy smiled conspiratorially. 'Now that you've been given lead on the Nairobi case, it's only a matter of time, isn't it? As long as the case goes well, of course.'

'Is that what everyone's been saying?' Dara shrugged and swapped the fan over to her left side, pretending her heart hadn't skipped a beat. Secretly, she was pleased it was so obvious to everyone in the firm. The one area of her life she was truly confident about was her ability to work longer and harder and smarter than everyone else. It was what had earned her a scholarship to a private girls school in St Albans and got her through three lonely, uncomfortable years studying Classics at Oxford where she had never fitted in and couldn't afford the time and energy it took to try. Not for the first time, she wished she'd had some guidance along the way, someone to warn her that actual working life relied on so much more than intellect and being the smartest in the class.

She'd had to figure it out on her own, second-guessing whether she'd been given an opportunity for the right or wrong reason, if she was being too pushy or not pushy enough, if she'd stroked the right ego the right way, or how she would be judged for caring about partnership above everything else. Finally, it seemed, everyone around her was starting to see Dara the way she saw herself: as the best senior associate in the firm.

'Yes, Dara, *everyone*.' Lucy lowered her voice, looking so excited they might as well have been talking about her. 'The clients love you and it's a major arbitration. With the Kenyans so obviously in the wrong, it couldn't be more perfect. And with Ian so close to . . .'

Lucy made a noose gesture and dropped her head to one side.

'OK, let's not talk about that here, with everyone . . . *here*', Dara made a face. 'How did the rest of the date go?'

'Well, after dinner – which was amazing, a little too rich but really nice – we went to a bar in Orchard Towers, just for a laugh.' Lucy's voice carried a whiff of scandal. 'Have you heard of it? I don't know, is that weird?'

Dara had to move – she couldn't take another second pretending to be interested or pretending it was normal for a date to take you to a building that was part of the country's Red Light Guide. It may have been smack bang in the middle of town, surrounded by malls and even a handful of preschools, but no amount of adjacent respectability could hide what took place on the top floors at night. The activities were (apparently) strictly government regulated, and the sex workers were regularly screened, but Dara was sure there were millions of other bars more appropriate. Lucy's date was yet more evidence of the rubbish on offer in Singapore's dating scene.

'Oh crap, sorry, Lucy.' Dara rummaged in her bag until she found her phone and put it to her ear. 'I've been waiting for this call.'

Rising and shuffling to the edge of the bench, she turned her head away from the two women and pretended to speak to someone, relaxing only when she was out of earshot. As much as she

found Lucy's lack of guile refreshing, her big mouth and unsophistication were the last things Dara wanted to be associated with, especially at this critical juncture. She also found Lucy's undisguised hunger to be married and spoken for truly disheartening, if not downright bizarre. No one droned on like this in London, but here, it was as if crossing an ocean made young, working women shed the tough skins they'd developed to conceal their desire for attachment in their home countries, revealing the raw, pink truth their ambition had been hiding all along. A haze of desperation was blowing from Lucy, and Dara needed to remove herself from its path.



Having bought some time, Dara checked her messages, tugging at the polyester T-shirt she'd been forced to wear. She missed the safe, predictable work clothes she relied on and felt most comfortable in. Even though some women found it suffocating, she was never more at ease than in an ironed shirt and pencil skirt. It made her feel connected to her grandparents, who were long gone now, but who had brought her up as their own child in Lagos. She'd been folded between them, safe within their unit, and had never had to question much about her life.

On Sundays at their Baptist Church, her grandmother's hat would always be pinned in place and her grandfather was always suited, a red silk flower blooming from his lapel, pipe tobacco tucked in his inside pocket. After escaping the tortuous Sunday school, Dara would sit between them, listening to the Yoruba sermon in what felt like an airless room. Her itchy dress would scratch her legs and the warm air would waft in her direction from the women's silk fans that fluttered like caged birds. The fans were often souvenirs from funerals and birthday parties, printed with the faces of the celebrants, and Dara always felt like they were leering at her. When the heat and her boredom would make her drowsy, Grandma would pinch her and stare pointedly, until she

went back to clapping and mouthing the hymns she could barely understand. Grandad, unfairly, was able to hide his dozing behind his sunglasses.

At the end of the service, the adults would pour into the church compound, buzzing, blabbing and gisting, periodically reaching into their flowing *agbada* pockets and purses for dirty naira notes to drop into the hands of beggars jutting through the holes in the courtyard walls. No matter how hard Dara tried to sneak away, Grandma would always block her attempts to join the other children buying Walls ice cream from the van by the gate. Dara was rarely allowed to taste the sweet, soggy blocks of ice cream wrapped in paper, since Grandma was convinced they were bearers of typhoid – she had always distrusted the hygiene standards of the factory where they were made. Grandad, Dara's partner in crime, lover of classical tales and ancient mythology and supplier of contrabanded sweets, would push his lips out behind his wife's back as she told Dara off, to show her not to mind the old woman. Dara would burst out laughing and inevitably get in even more trouble, setting off the lecture she'd heard countless times about 'home training', 'following bad company' and 'carrying oneself like a lady'. As members of that uncomfortable class of people who had enough money to buy a good life, but not *quite* enough to afford not to care what other people thought, they set high expectations for their granddaughter, which came with the understanding that she also look impeccable at all times. By the time they'd passed away, Grandad from sickle cell complications and Grandma in her sleep two years later, the foundation for their preferences had already been laid.

When they died, Dara was sent to England to live with her mother, Abigail, who worked in the office of her local Hertfordshire council in the daytime and tried to make it as a mixed-medium artist at night. At first, living with Abigail – who'd anglicised her name from Abisola – had been fun. What eleven-year-old wouldn't have been thrilled to have a mother who dressed in boob tubes and jeans like a Spice Girl, let her straighten her hair and was eager to share her make-up? The

answer to anything Dara asked had been a shrugged *yes*, and the excitement of life with no rules had helped Dara push past her grief. Before long, though, she realised that Abigail's free-spirited liberalism came with never being able to hold down a job, never reading the school uniform list and not caring whether Dara fitted in at her new school. Dara would never be cool or keep up with the popular girls, but she learned quickly that the people who had the power to guarantee her future were not impressed by those things. It was *adults* who could give her As, make her a school prefect to award her academic brilliance and write her references for summer internships. In senior school, despite her mother's example, everything Dara's grandparents had taught her began to kick in. Now, it was completely ingrained in who she was.

So, it was a struggle to feel presentable yet relaxed in shorts and a fluorescent orange T-shirt with her firm's logo blazoned across her chest. It was a size too small for one thing, and, from the reflection in her phone, sweat was beginning to settle across her forehead like pellets of oil on a roast chicken. Her blow dry was beginning to revert in the heat and her foundation – the closest to her colour she'd been able to find in Sephora – was two shades lighter than her natural hue. She put her phone away, reminding herself that her brains and not her beauty were what had brought her this far.

The Singapore Cricket Club was at least something to look at. Colonial, white-stoned and red-roofed, it sat on one edge of the Padang playing field, flanked on one side by traffic and by a river on the other. Its facilities were quaintly old-fashioned, and its members could enjoy a tennis court, two squash courts, billiards and snooker tables, a bowls green, a Men's bar and a reference library – when they weren't making millions tax-free and complaining about the high cost of living, of course.

An army of faceless skyscrapers watched on blankly as the men formed a circle on the field. Arms across shoulders, they grunted against each other, pushing in a scrum until a single player scrambled away, the ball clenched under his arm.

The crowd roared and Dara's eyes turned from the field to the stand. When she'd first moved to Singapore six years before, she used to play a little game with herself, which involved counting how many black people there were at events like these and guessing how long they'd been in the city. If a black person bounced up to her, waved or introduced themselves immediately, she could tell they'd been here for years (or were probably American) and were a little lonely, missed home cooking or were curious about her backstory. They were also usually disappointed to find out that she didn't have kids – she always felt some sadness at the thought of black parents looking for *any* kid for their child to play with who looked like them. If said black person just made eye contact and smiled, then they'd been in Singapore a year and were not yet too fussed about building a community. And if they blanked you, then they'd either just arrived or had come straight from London or New York.

Today, at the match, she counted a total of one: her.

She looked over at Ian again, a little perplexed that he hadn't called her over yet to join him, Mr Sano and Mr Erikawa. They were executives at Hakida, a global construction firm currently in a dispute over a bridge they'd been contracted to build in Kenya. Dara had been working on the case for nearly a year and was practically running it on her own.

There was a burst of applause as a player on the red team kicked the ball, sending it soaring between a large white 'H' on the field. She let the shift in energy pull her to her feet and down the steps to seek Ian out.

Once she'd set off, she wished she'd stayed put. In motion, she regressed from *'Dah-rah'* (tall, elegant, Oxford graduate) to 'DA-ra' (gauche, clueless eleven-year-old fresh off the plane from Lagos's Murtala Muhammed Airport). All those years she'd spent refining a neutral, British accent, dropping the 'l' in 'salmon' and ironing out the pronunciation of words she'd only read but never heard before, dropped away. Never did she feel more out of place than when she was moving. She'd been unaffectionately nicknamed 'Big Bird' at school, for always being at least a head

taller than the other girls – nothing like the peacock or swan she'd always hoped to be. More like an ostrich or flamingo, a fowl capable of elegance, yet disappointingly clumsy.

She quickened her pace down the steps, trying to keep her still-full plastic cup of wine upright. Her flapping must have been eye-catching because Chris, one of her fellow senior associates, huddled down by the barrier with two others, raised his arm and waved her over. She pretended not to see him, but he waved again. Groaning inside, she approached the three men she liked to think of as The Sirens.

A look of bemusement crossed each man's face as they took in her outfit. Various-sized bellies protruded from their cotton polo shirts, and strips of hair bristled down their arms and calves. The obligatory pink cotton shorts were in full attendance.

'Did you hear about Imran?' Chris asked. 'He got cut three days back from his secondment. Effective immediately. Three months loaned out to a client and had to be out of the office the next day. It's absolutely disgraceful the way he's been treated.'

He made another sympathetic noise, in fitting with his role as all-around-good-guy. She liked Chris more than she should. The 'Siren in a Sheep Suit' worked in shipping and seemed harmless on the surface but was ruthless underneath. She'd seen him be incredibly tender with his three boys, then use them to get into people's good books when it suited him.

Ben, 'Baby Siren', a newly made-up senior associate in the finance group, pursed his lips. 'Yeah, it's terrible.'

With brown ringlets curling over his eyes and the back of his collar, Ben was the type of boy she'd spent the last twenty years running after who usually turned out to be gay. He was the kind of young lawyer the partners loved because he reminded them of their own sons – and their younger selves.

'Did you see his team's weeklies? They went below fifty per cent at one point! Everyone saw that coming.' Tim shook his head mercilessly.

Older, single and heavyset, 'Chief Siren' Tim was too many years post-qualified in the general insurance team. One felt he

was always on the verge of being cut, in danger of being thrown away, like a cup of milk left out too long. Everyone knew he'd never make partner; moving in-house to the legal department of some nondescript company (or, as Dara liked to think of it, the sixth circle of hell) was only a matter of time. Tim was the most dangerous of men: bitter and frustrated, with little left to lose.

'He never should have gone on leave', Tim pronounced. 'What a mug. You're a target the minute your billables are down. You don't take a *holiday*.'

'Colin stopped feeding him work.' Dara leaned forward. 'They fell out. That's why he got put on secondment in the first place.'

She knew how to play this game. Sandwiched between the partners and the juniors, the senior associates were hyenas, dangerous pack animals that would turn on each other in a blood-curdling heartbeat. They did the actual work, drafting contracts and drawing up advice for the senior partner leading their team, but orbited close enough to the clients to make them a threat. She supposed she was a hyena, too, but she liked to think of herself more like one of those big cats in Milton's Garden of Eden, playing with a goat, claws retracted, aware of her powers but a vegan at heart.

'Really?' Chris looked put out. He worked for Colin. 'I hadn't heard this. Why'd they fall out?'

'Sorry, my source runs dry', she smiled, sipping her wine.

'Partner's secrets?' Tim smirked, bitchily.

'I really don't . . . It's all hearsay at this point.' Dara looked in Ian's direction, wary of this turn. A couple of yards away, Ian looked like he'd just swapped his usual uniform of white shirt, tie and trousers for a white shirt and slightly *less* formal trousers.

'Come off it. Any day now', Tim said. 'We all know Ian's pushing retirement. If the firm doesn't want to lose its credibility, it has to stick to the rules, right?'

The three men stared at Dara, hungry for a reaction, their smiles doing a poor job of hiding real envy. So this was the real reason they'd called her over. They wanted to know if Ian Breen, a colossus in the firm and one of the founding partners, was really going to

retire after his sixty-fifth birthday and leave his practice to a black girl. It didn't matter that she was Oxbridge and had completed her two-year training contract at Morgan Corbett Shaw's London office, qualifying and working at the firm ever since. Ticking a diversity box was one thing, but when it came to the face of the firm, she stuck out on the website like a beetle in a bag of rice.

'Ian's not going anywhere. He's got plenty of years left.' Dara rolled out the party line, praying the opposite was true.

'Yeah . . .'

'Yeah . . .'

'Course . . .'

A pause settled, pregnant with questions, and in it she felt another tremor of excitement. She was so close, but still . . . you worked like a dog in your twenties and thirties, kissed ass, kept your mouth shut, travelled at the click of a finger, stopped exercising, stopped sleeping, forgot the feeling of a penis inside you, and . . . it actually paid off?

'Well, you've worked your arse off', Chris cut through the silence. 'And it's great timing. You've been lucky the Asian investment into Africa has picked up in a big way – that more companies are willing to fight it out in arbitrations here instead of defaulting to London.'

Luck. Of course.

'How do you get on with some of the . . . *Asian* clients though?' Ben lowered his voice. 'Do you not find some of them . . . difficult?'

Do they like black people, you mean?

'I've got two of *them* standing behind us, so maybe . . .' Dara's voice said, *let's keep it down*. Her client relationships were fine, but you could never let The Sirens try to shipwreck you.

'Oops.' Tim raised an eyebrow in mock apology.

Dara found Ian's eyes gazing over at her. At the small nod of his chin, she took her leave.

'Duty calls', she apologised before moving off.

'*Mata Oaidekiteureshidesi* – It's good to see you again.' She bowed to Mr Erikawa and then Mr Sano, deliberately mispronouncing a syllable.

'Good, good', beamed Mr Erikawa after repeating the phrase correctly.

'I've been practising.' She hoped she sounded humble enough. She'd considered getting more sounds wrong, but she didn't want to appear a complete halfwit.

'After our last Tokyo visit, I insisted she work on it – it was terrible', Ian said dryly.

The clients glanced at Ian, unsure if his comment was a criticism. They laughed a split second later, Mr Erikawa the loudest. As the more junior of the two, Mr Sano deferred to him on everything, letting the older man order for him in restaurants and enter and leave rooms first.

Mr Sano was generous. 'Your Japanese is better.'

'Thank you. And we're really pleased with the progress we're making on the dispute. We've worked with the appointed arbitrator before and the contract is airtight', Dara said. In fact, she'd never seen a case so favourable, and still couldn't believe the Kenyan side had let things get this far. The case had been stalled due to a disagreement between the Kenyan authorities and some disgruntled chiefs, who claimed that the bridge was being built on ancestral land too close to a sacred river and was therefore protected by local law. Now, Hakida was suing the Kenyans for breach of contract on the basis that the chiefs were technically part of the government itself. The Japanese wanted the dispute settled or their investment returned.

'I was just explaining to the gentlemen that it's a fifty-fifty call whether the tribunal will rule in our favour or not. When dealing with unknown entities in Africa – however strong your case – you never know what to expect.' Ian beckoned to a waiter. 'Tonic water, please.'

'We thought that the Kenyan government would settle before we even started this proceeding.' Mr Erikawa crossed his arms in frustration. 'Our men have been in Nairobi for *three* months and do nothing. All the materials for the bridge – they sit there.'

'We want to avoid arbitration, but we're concerned that the Kenyan government has not offered a deal', Mr Sano explained

more gently. 'We just want the problem to go away so construction can continue. We want the bridge; the Kenyans want the bridge. The only ones who do not want the bridge . . .'

'The chiefs.' Mr Erikawa waved his hand in disgust. 'They are the problem.'

'They say the land is sacred, but there is an American hotel under construction there, so we are thinking this is not really the case. Maybe they want to change the terms; maybe they want more money. We are hoping this is an area Ms Dara can be of service', Mr Sano explained. 'As an African woman, she can communicate with our local lawyer in Nairobi? This is just our idea.'

Dara wondered if they thought being African was like carrying a member's card – you flashed it, racked up points and got email alerts when a private sale was on. It had already occurred to her that the Kenyan chiefs were grandstanding so they could be cut in on the construction deal, and she had just begun to form a suitably positive response when Ian beat her to it.

'Dara is an integral part of my team, and her work has been exemplary. I very much hope she will continue to cement her position – I have no doubt that her future is bright.' Ian smiled at her.

Dara smiled back, but Ian's use of such a trite phrase was unlike him; it transformed her growing unease into full-blown dread.

'But you will be pleased to know that I am in the process of hiring another senior associate to join our team. I've been considering it for some time now and I've just made an offer. He's a great guy – Nigerian, like Dara actually, and based over in Geneva. He's got lots of experience in large-scale arbitrations and comes with fantastic Africa contacts, which will be very beneficial in our negotiations. Cambridge man, like myself.'

Mr Sano and Mr Erikawa hummed with excitement.

'In fact, I've just got great news from our HR team that all his paperwork has been approved, and Lani – that's his name – should be with us in a matter of weeks.' Ian made eye contact with each man but avoided Dara's gaze. 'So, rest assured, you will have the very best talent working on your case, and we will do everything we can to settle and get the bridge up on its feet.'

Dara's smile slid off her face. This had to be a joke. But Ian didn't tell jokes.

Another roar of applause. Someone must have scored. The men turned to the field and Dara was forgotten, lost in her confusion.

Nigerian . . . fantastic Africa contacts . . . Cambridge . . .

He'd found a male version of her.

Lani. He appeared to her with blinding clarity, sprawled out in his Premium Economy seat, flirting with the dainty, porcelain-as-teacups Singapore Airlines hostesses. She saw a Cheshire grin stretch across his face, numb from his third cup of whisky, and watched him kick back as the plane lights dimmed. She saw him journey across the ocean, a smug Odysseus, coming to steal everything she'd worked so hard to build.

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