

Healing Scars,

One thing Rukia loved as much as books was probably her village, Shala Bila. A rural kebele snuggled around 15 kilometers from ArsiNegele. Leaving Shala Bila, her family, and everything familiar was tough. But it was a cost she had to pay for a shot at her future.

The dusty, stretched road to Arsi welcomed her with a ray of hope, which she embraced with wide-eyed excitement. When homesickness hit and she missed her tiny village, Rukia reminded herself: This town might serve as a springboard for her aspirations to attend university. Sometimes, on her way to school, she would catch herself fantasizing about her future education. Her desire to become a doctor would burn brightly as she would silently promise herself, "Soon, I'll earn my place." Plus, she had Sirgut, her childhood friend. They were inseparable growing up. When they decided to move to ArsiNegele for their secondary school, they pooled their student money and rented a cramped room in the slow rural town. Their tiny room was sparsely furnished with just the basics. They brewed coffee on weekends, a common practice for folks in

Chasing Dreams

that area. Sirgut claimed it helped her stay alert for studying. Rukia, on the other hand, was a different breed.

"You usually crash right after a cup," she'd tease Sirgut.

"Remember when I pulled an all-nighter for chemistry?" Sirgut chuckled.

Both loved coffee, but Rukia routinely stayed up late reading, coffee or not. "You're such a nerd, you know," Sirgut joked affectionately.

Rukia's dedication and passion impressed Sirgut. They studied together for exams, but otherwise, Sirgut was carefree and social. However, as their national exam neared, she joined Rukia more often.

Focused on preparing for the university entrance exam, Rukia poured all her energy into books. Days were a blur of classes, frantic note-taking, and late-night cramming. Looking at Rukia's whirlwind of focused energy, one might wonder how they became friends. Sirgut, on the other hand, was easygoing, playful, and drawn to the social scene.

Across the street, a few houses down from their rented room, lived a young construction worker named Abdi. He was always friendly and respectful when their paths crossed. One day, Sirgut got the idea to invite him over for coffee.

Another time, Sirgut leaned in and whispered, "Abdi's been talking non-stop about you. He has a crush on you."

Rukia remained silent. Reservations flickered, but somehow, the attention appealed to her. One day, Sirgut invited Abdi for coffee. Rukia was hesitant but went along.

The conversation flowed, Abdi sharing stories of his childhood and the village he left behind for city work. Laughter filled the room before Abdi asked if they had any soft drinks. They didn't. Sirgut excused herself to buy some at a nearby shop.

"I'll be back soon," she said, smiling brightly.

The door shut behind her, and a heavy silence replaced the laughter. Before Rukia could react, Abdi's hand clamped onto hers forcefully. The unexpected grip tightened, leaving her shocked, scared, and confused. Tears welled up, blurring her vision. Panic flooded her. She wanted to scream, to run, but her body felt frozen.

Rukia was caught off guard and speechless, unable to defend herself against Abdi's aggressive actions. Shame washed over her. How could she have been so naive? She'd trusted him.

Despairing, she blamed herself. She thought she brought this upon herself. Yet, the fear and violation felt too heavy to confide in anyone, not even Sirgut. How could she explain the confusion and shame?

So, Rukia buried her secret deep, a heavy burden in her stomach. Rukia tried to move on, but every day was a struggle. The trauma gnawed at her, a festering wound beneath her brilliant mind. Still, she pushed herself to study, using her books as a sanctuary. Textbooks offered solace, equations a temporary escape.

Everything seemed to vanish when she finished the National School Leaving Exam with high marks, a green pass to join any University she wants. Ecstatic, she was soon struck with a nagging pain that consumed her body and mind.

She began experiencing unusual weakness and persistent stomach cramps. And she had to visit a nearby clinic, even if that's not her to go to. To her shock, the Nurse

informed her she was pregnant. Each syllable from the Nurse's mouth in the sterile room felt like a hammer blow. Pregnant. The weight of it crashed down on her, stealing her breath. Tears streamed down her face as a choked sob escaped her lips. "No," she rasped, A desperate plea to rewind time. Shame burned in her throat, echoing Abdi's violation. But shame couldn't erase the truth. She blamed herself for not knowing her body as much as her books, 'how come I was unaware of this?' Taking a shaky breath, she blurted out the horrifying details, her voice trembling with each word, a shard of her broken spirit. "I... I need help," Rukia stammered, her voice barely a whisper. "Is there anything I, you.. .can do?"

But the nurse informed her that there is nothing they can do at the clinic to help her and told her she would have to go to a higher clinic to terminate her pregnancy. 'I'm sorry, but we can't offer the service here'.

Welled up with shame and fighting with her tears she then goes to a health center. The healthcare worker there was impassive. His gaze held no sympathy, only a flicker of judgment. His focus seemed to be on delivering a harsh lesson, not

medical guidance. With a disapproving sigh, he began, "So, Ms. Rukia, you find yourself in this situation. Did you consider the consequences of your actions?" His tone implied carelessness, not the lack of awareness she felt.

Tears welled up as he continued, his voice laced with judgment. "This isn't just any procedure, Ms. Rukia. We're talking about God's creation, a potential life lost." He emphasized "potential" as if diminishing the weight of her decision.

The sterile room felt suffocating, filled with the stigmatized words rather than empathy. Rukia opened her mouth to speak, but the judgment in his gaze silenced her. Defeated, she rose unsteadily, his parting words echoing: "Remember, Ms. Rukia, these choices have consequences."

Lost in a new town with limited knowledge and no support system, Rukia spent the next day desperately searching for a service provider that could provide the care she needed discreetly. And finally she went to a private clinic and they told her they offer the service. Unfortunately, the fees there were beyond her means. Feeling helpless and desperate, she decided to confide in Sirgut.

Sirgut was understanding and knew exactly who could help. Together, they went to see a familiar nurse. The nurse listened attentively to Rukia's story; her face etched with empathy. Understanding the urgency, the nurse connect her to a provider at the same health center where she was denied the service. Rukia finally secured an appointment for the very next day.

The journey to this point from realizing she was pregnant to seeking care had been fraught with challenges.

It seemed strange even for her, here is a young woman who could dissect complex equations at school but didn't recognize her own body was changing and pick up the signs it was sending her. But with Sirgut's support and the empathetic guidance of the nurse, Rukia felt empowered to navigate this difficult decision.