

Zakariyya

The next day, Deborah called my room from the front desk as if nothing had happened. "Come on downstairs," she said. "It's time you went and talked to Zakariyya. He been askin about you."

I was not excited to meet Zakariyya. I'd heard several times that of all the Lackses, he was by far the angriest about what happened to his mother, and that he was looking for any revenge he could get. I hoped to see the age of thirty, and it seemed like being the first white person to show up at Zakariyya's apartment asking questions about his mother might interfere with that.

Outside, as I followed Deborah to her car, she said, "Things never went quite right with Zakariyya after he got out of jail. But don't worry. I'm pretty sure he's ready to talk about our mother again."

"You're pretty sure?" I said.

"Well, I used to make copies of information about our mother and give it to him, but he got enough to where one day he cuss me out. He ran at me screamin, 'I don't wanna hear no more stuff about my mother and that damn doctor who done raped her cells!' We haven't really talked about it since." She shrugged. "But he says he's okay

with you askin questions today though. We just got to catch him before he start drinkin."

When we got to Deborah's car, her two grandsons—Davon and Alfred, who were just shy of their eighth and fourth birthdays—sat in the backseat screaming at each other. "Them are my two little hearts," Deborah said. They were strikingly beautiful children, with huge smiles and wide, dark eyes. Alfred sat in the back wearing two pairs of jet-black plastic sunglasses, one on top of the other, each about three times too big for his face.

"Miss Rebecca!" he yelled as we climbed into the car. "Miss Rebecca!"

I turned around. "Yes?"

"I love you."

"Thank you."

I turned back to Deborah, who was telling me how I shouldn't say something or other around Zakariyya.

"Miss Rebecca! Miss Rebecca!" Alfred yelled again, slowly pushing both pairs of sunglasses down to the tip of his nose and wiggling his eyebrows at me.

"You're mine," he said.

"Oh knock that off!" Deborah yelled, swatting at him from the front seat. "Oh Lord, he just like his father, Mr. Ladies' Man." She shook her head. "My son always out rippin and runnin them streets, drinkin and druggin just like *his* father. I worry he gonna get himself in trouble—I don't know what gonna happen to Little Alfred then. I'm afraid he learnin too much already." Little Alfred was always beating up on Davon, even though Davon was older and bigger, but Davon never hit back without Deborah's permission.

When I asked the boys to tell me about their uncle Zakariyya, Davon puffed up his chest, sucked in his nose so his nostrils vanished, then yelled "GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!" his voice deeper than I thought possible for an eight-year-old. He and Alfred burst out laughing and collapsed into a pile in the backseat. "Like one of them wrestlers on TV!" Davon said, gasping for breath.

Alfred screamed and bounced in his seat. "WWF!! WWF!!" Deborah looked at me and smiled. "Don't worry," she said. "I know how to handle him. I just keep remindin him to separate: Rebecca's not one of them researchers, she's not working for John Hopkin. She workin for herself. He kept sayin, 'I'm all right, I won't do nothin crazy.' But if I detect anything wrong we'll leave right back outta there."

We drove for a few blocks in silence, passing boarded-up storefronts, rows of fast-food restaurants and liquor stores. At one point, Davon pointed to his school and told us about the metal detectors and how they locked all the students inside during classes. Eventually Deborah leaned over to me and whispered, "Younger brother always felt like he was cheated out of life, because when my mother had him, four months later, that's when the sickness broke down on her. Brother's got a lot of anger. You just got to make sure you say his name right."

I'd been saying it wrong, she told me, and I couldn't do that in front of him. He pronounced it *Zuh-CAR-ee-uh*, not *Zack-a-RYE-uh*. Bobbette and Sonny had a hard time remembering that, so they called him Abdul, one of his middle names. But only when he wasn't around.

"Whatever you do, don't call him Joe," Deborah told me. "A friend of Lawrence's called him Joe one Thanksgiving and Zakariyya knocked that man out right into his mashed potatoes."

Zakariyya was about to turn fifty and lived in an assisted-living facility that Deborah had helped him get into when he was on the streets. He qualified because of his deafness and the fact that he was nearly blind without glasses. He hadn't lived there long, but was already on probationary status for being loud and aggressive with the other residents.

As Deborah and the boys and I walked from the car toward the front door, Deborah cleared her throat loudly and nodded toward a hulk of a man hobbling from the building in khaki pants. He was five

feet eight inches tall and weighed just under four hundred pounds. He wore bright blue orthopedic sandals, a faded Bob Marley T-shirt, and a white baseball hat that said, HAM, BACON, SAUSAGE.

"Hey Zakariyya!" Deborah yelled, waving her hands above her head.

Zakariyya stopped walking and looked at us. His black hair was buzzed close to his head, his face smooth and youthful like Deborah's except for his brow, which was creased from decades of scowling. Beneath thick plastic glasses, his eyes were swollen, bloodshot, and surrounded by deep dark circles. One hand leaned on a metal cane identical to Deborah's, the other held a large paper plate with at least a pint of ice cream on it, probably more. Under his arm, he'd folded several newspaper ad sections.

"You told me you'd be here in an hour," he snapped.

"Uh . . . yeah . . . sorry," Deborah mumbled. "There wasn't any traffic."

"I'm not ready yet," he said, then grabbed the bundle of newspaper from under his arm and smacked Davon hard across the face with it. "Why'd you bring them?" he yelled. "You know I don't like no kids around."

Deborah grabbed Davon's head and pressed it to her side, rubbing his cheek and stammering that their parents had to work and no one else could take them, but she swore they'd be quiet, wouldn't they? Zakariyya turned and walked to a bench in front of his building without saying another word.

Deborah tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to another bench on the opposite side of the building's entrance, a good fifteen feet from Zakariyya. She whispered, "Sit over here with me," then yelled, "Come on boys, why don't you show Miss Rebecca how fast you can run!"

Alfred and Davon raced around the concrete cul-de-sac in front of Zakariyya's building, yelling, "Look at me! Look at me! Take my picture!"

Zakariyya sat eating his ice cream and reading his ads like we

didn't exist. Deborah glanced at him every few seconds, then back to me, then the grandkids, then Zakariyya again. At one point she crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at Zakariyya, but he didn't see. Finally, Zakariyya spoke.

"You got the magazine?" he asked, staring into the street.

Zakariyya had told Deborah he wanted to read the *Johns Hopkins Magazine* story I wrote about their mother before he'd talk to me, and he wanted me sitting next to him while he read it. Deborah nudged me toward his bench, then jumped up saying she and the boys would wait upstairs for us, because it was better if we talked outside in the nice weather rather than being cooped up alone inside. It was in the nineties with dizzying humidity, but neither of us wanted me going in that apartment alone with him.

"I'll be watching from that window up there," Deborah whispered. She pointed several floors up. "If anything funny starts, just wave and I'll come down."

As Deborah and the boys walked inside the building, I sat beside Zakariyya and started telling him why I was there. Without looking at me or saying a word, he took the magazine from my hand and began reading. My heart pounded each time he sighed, which was often.

"Damn!" he yelled suddenly, pointing at a photo caption that said Sonny was Henrietta's youngest son. "He ain't youngest! I am!" He slammed the magazine down and glared at it as I said of course I knew he was the youngest, and the magazine did the captions, not me.

"I think my birth was a miracle," he said. "I believe that my mother waited to go to the doctor till after I was born because she wanted to have me. A child born like that, to a mother full of tumors and sick as she was, and I ain't suffered no kinda physical harm from it? It's possible all this is God's handiwork."

He looked up at me for the first time since I'd arrived, then reached up and turned a knob on his hearing aid.

"I switched it off so I didn't have to listen to them fool children," he said, adjusting the volume until it stopped squealing. "I believe what

them doctors did was wrong. They lied to us for twenty-five years, kept them cells from us, then they gonna say them things *donated* by our mother. Them cells was stolen! Those fools come take blood from us sayin they need to run tests and not tell us that all these years they done profitized off of her? That's like hanging a sign on our backs saying, 'I'm a sucker, kick me in my butt.' People don't know we just as po' as po'. They probably think by what our mother cells had did that we well off. I hope George Grey burn in hell. If he wasn't dead already, I'd take a black pitchfork and stick it up his ass."

Without thinking, almost as a nervous reflex I said, "It's George Grey, not Grey."

He snapped back, "Who cares what his name is? He always tellin people my mother name Helen Lane!" Zakariyya stood, towering over me, yelling, "What he did was wrong! Dead wrong. You leave that stuff up to God. People say maybe them takin her cells and makin them live forever to create medicines was what God wanted. But I don't think so. If He wants to provide a disease cure, He'd provide a cure of his own, it's not for man to tamper with. And you don't lie and clone people behind their backs. That's wrong—it's one of the most violating parts of this whole thing. It's like me walking in your bathroom while you in there with your pants down. It's the highest degree of disrespect. That's why I say I hope he burn in hell. If he were here right now, I'd kill him dead."

Suddenly, Deborah appeared beside me with a glass of water. "Just thought you might be thirsty," she said, her voice stern like *What the hell is going on here*, because she'd seen Zakariyya standing over me yelling.

"Everything okay out here?" she asked. "Y'all still reportin'?"

"Yeah," Zakariyya said. But Deborah put her hand on his shoulder, saying maybe it was time we all went inside.

As we walked toward the front door of his building, Zakariyya turned to me. "Them doctors say her cells is so important and did all this and that to help people. But it didn't do no good for her, and it don't do no good for us. If me and my sister need something, we can't

even go see a doctor cause we can't afford it. Only people that can get any good from my mother cells is the people that got money, and whoever sellin them cells—they get rich off our mother and we got nothing." He shook his head. "All those damn people didn't deserve her help as far as I'm concerned."

Zakariyya's apartment was a small studio with a sliver of a kitchen where Deborah and the boys had been watching us from a window. Zakariyya's belongings could have fit into the back of a pickup truck: a small Formica table, two wooden chairs, a full-sized mattress with no frame, a clear plastic bed skirt, and a set of navy sheets. No blankets, no pillows. Across from his bed sat a small television with a VCR balanced on top.

Zakariyya's walls were bare except for a row of photocopied pictures. The one of Henrietta with her hands on her hips hung next to the only other known picture of her: in it, she stands with Day in a studio sometime in the forties, their backs board-straight, eyes wide and staring ahead, mouths frozen in awkward non-smiles. Someone had retouched the photo and painted Henrietta's face an unnatural yellow. Beside it was a breathtaking picture of his sister Elsie, standing in front of a white porch railing next to a basket of dried flowers. She's about six years old, in a plaid jumper dress, white T-shirt, bobby socks and shoes, her hair loose from its braids, right hand gripping something against her chest. Her mouth hangs slightly open, brow creased and worried, both eyes looking to the far right of the frame, where Deborah imagines her mother was standing.

Zakariyya pointed to several diplomas hanging near the photos, for welding, refrigeration, diesel. "I got so many damn diplomas," he said, "but jobs pass me by because of my criminal record and everything, so I still got all kind of troubles." Zakariyya had been in and out of trouble with the law since he got out of jail, with various charges for assault and drunk and disorderly conduct.

"I think them cells is why I'm so mean," he said. "I had to start

fightin before I was even a person. That's the only way I figure I kept them cancer cells from growin all over me while I was inside my mother. I started fightin when I was just a baby in her womb, and I never known nothin different."

Deborah thinks it was more than that. "That evil woman Ethel taught him hate," she said. "Beat every drop of it into his little body—put the hate of a murderer into him."

Zakariyya snorted when he heard Ethel's name. "Livin with that abusive crazy woman was worse than livin in prison!" he yelled, his eyes narrowing to slits. "It's hard to talk about what she did to me. When I get to thinkin about them stories, make me want to kill her, and my father. Cause of him I don't know where my mother buried. When that fool die, I don't wanna know where he buried neither. He need to get to a hospital? Let him catch a cab! Same with the rest of the so-called family who buried her. I don't never wanna see them niggers no more."

Deborah cringed. "See," she said, looking at me. "Everybody else never let him talk because he speak things the way he want to. I say let him talk, even if we be upset by what he's sayin. He's mad, gotta get it out, otherwise he gonna keep on keeping it, and it's gonna blow him right on up."

"I'm sorry," Zakariyya said. "Maybe her cells have done good for some people, but I woulda rather had my mother. If she hadn't been sacrificed, I mighta growed up to be a lot better person than I am now."

Deborah stood from the bed where she'd been sitting with her grandsons' heads on her lap. She walked over to Zakariyya and put her arm around his waist. "Come on walk us out to the car," she said. "I got something I want to give you."

Outside, Deborah threw open the back of her jeep and rummaged through blankets, clothes, and papers until she turned around holding the photo of Henrietta's chromosomes that Christoph Lengauer had given her. She smoothed her fingers across the glass, then handed it to Zakariyya.

"These supposed to be her cells?" he asked.

Deborah nodded. "See where it stained bright colors? That's where all her DNA at."

Zakariyya raised the picture to eye level and stared in silence. Deborah rubbed her hand on his back and whispered, "I think if anybody deserve that, it's you, Zakariyya."

Zakariyya turned the picture to see it from every angle. "You want me to have this?" he said finally.

"Yeah, like you to have that, put it on your wall," Deborah said. Zakariyya's eyes filled with tears. For a moment the dark circles seemed to vanish, and his body relaxed.

"Yeah," he said, in a soft voice unlike anything we'd heard that day. He put his arm on Deborah's shoulder. "Hey, thanks."

Deborah wrapped her arms as far around his waist as she could reach, and squeezed. "The doctor who gave me that said he been working with our mother for his whole career and he never knew anything about where they came from. He said he was sorry."

Zakariyya looked at me. "What's his name?"

I told him, then said, "He wants to meet you and show you the cells."

Zakariyya nodded, his arm still around Deborah's shoulder. "Okay," he said. "That sounds good. Let's go for it." Then he walked slowly back to his building, holding the picture in front of him at eye level, seeing nothing ahead but the DNA in his mother's cells.