

WHAT HAPPENED  
TO JANET UZOR

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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MASOBE

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To Sisiyeko, for making me to break free from the  
chains of regular storytelling.

To Som, for reading every single story I scribbled  
down in a notebook.

To Chima, Ebuka, Mum and Dad.

And to the many readers who believed in me  
And kept prophesying that I'd get published someday.

We did it, guys!

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*“There is always a pleasure in unravelling a mystery,  
in catching the gossamer clue which will guide to certainty.”*

*– Elizabeth Gaskell*

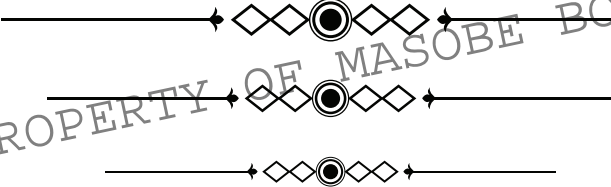
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# PAMELA

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Three horizontal decorative lines are positioned below the title. Each line features a central circular motif with a dot inside, flanked by two diamond shapes. The lines extend to the left and right of these central elements.

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# Chapter 1

*Freetown Street, Port Harcourt*

*December 15th*

Pamela woke and jolted upright, her heart threatening to jump out of her chest. It was pitch black and silent, so quiet that for a moment, she didn't know where she was. Moments passed before sounds began to filter through the stillness—the ticking of a grandfather clock, crickets chirping outside the window—and she slowly realised that she was home in her bed, safe.

She found her torch with a shaky hand and clicked it on to illuminate the room. The pile of unwashed clothes in the corner, her school bag slung across the frame of her chair, and the stack of books on the desk weren't monsters after all. The only monster was the faceless one in her nightmares; the one she was convinced wouldn't be there at all if not for Ebere

and her conspiracy theories. She leaned back into the headboard and took in a few deep breaths to ease the tension in her chest and shoulders.

“Just wait until I catch you,” Pamela muttered. She squeezed the blanket strewn across her legs as though it was the front of Ebere’s blouse.

Her bedside alarm clock showed 4 a.m. She wouldn’t be falling asleep anytime soon, so she reached under her pillow for her pride and joy: her Infinix phone. Sure, it was London used, and sure, she had somehow cracked the screen and the sharpness of the camera wasn’t exactly top-of-the-range, but she loved that it was bright orange and covered in faux rhinestones. This phone was her gateway to an online world that she could always escape into, so long as she had data. She typed in her passcode and the screen lit up.

No new messages except for some marketing spam for Christmas ‘Ember’ sales that she couldn’t afford. She opened Instagram.

“Let’s see what Regina Daniels is up to.”

In a fair world, Regina would be her best friend, and they would hang out at her movie sets together, fly private, and only dwell in mansions. But Pamela’s real life involved scrolling through Regina’s feed as she

swatted away aggressive mosquitoes out for her blood. And her actual best friend might be crazy.

She reached for her glasses on the nightstand. The sight of them drew another pitiful sigh out of her, and an eye roll thrown in for good measure. Three years ago, her father made her get the ugliest spectacles he could find. Pamela didn't need a soothsayer to tell her that these glasses were selected with the sole purpose of repelling boys. The only other person who had glasses like these was Harry Potter. *Is it not bad enough that I don't have a mum, that I am short-sighted, and that our house is one of the smallest and shabbiest in Freetown? Must he now insist that I be as ugly as possible too?*

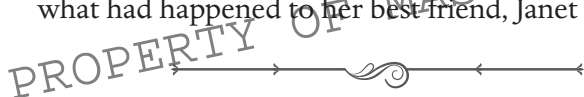
Her aunties called it love. She would thank him later when she was older. Pamela wasn't so sure. The only redeeming feature of the horrible glasses was their golden hue.

She read somewhere that jewel tones and yellow gold looked great on dark-skinned people, so, in a way, the gold-coloured, round frames suited her features and made her stand out. She smiled to herself. Pamela Lawson – 1, Daddy - 0.



She must have fallen asleep scrolling through her phone. The morning light streaming through the curtains jostled her awake. She stayed in bed, going over the day ahead. The only thing she had lined up was a shift at her father's auto shop. And, of course, her plan to kill Ebere.

Something else nagged at her, tugging at the corner of her mind like a child pulling on the hem of its mother's dress for attention. Today was the anniversary. Unlike most days, she couldn't suppress the painful memories from bubbling to the surface, thoughts about what had happened to her best friend, Janet Uzor.



They were once a trio. Pamela, Ebere and Janet. She had been the vivacious one, Janet. The queen bee. The one who could get whatever she wanted. The definition of beauty and brains. Pamela still couldn't bring herself to think about the incident. All she knew was that one minute, Janet was alive, and the next, she was dead. Ebere, on the other hand, liked to remember things, every little detail, and like a buzzing fly, she never let up. She hadn't been the same since Janet died. Ebere had been annoying before, but now, she was often unbearable.

When Janet's body arrived at the mortuary, a twenty-three-year-old resident doctor, who happened to be Ebere's aunt, received it. Ebere had been so adamant that Janet wasn't dead, that it was all a huge mistake. She had camped outside the hospital for hours waiting for confirmation. Her aunt had to deliver the truth to her personally. But she told Ebere something else, too, and had unknowingly planted a seed in her mind that managed to grow into a mighty oak. During the autopsy, her aunt had noticed something strange. Janet's lungs didn't have the amount of water one would expect for a drowning victim.

"If I didn't know any better, I would say she was already dead before she got into that river."

Ebere became an investigator. In the months afterwards, she started to research and piece together deaths of other kids in their town, and she narrowed them down to four suspicious cases, all the victims from Afobiri Secondary School. There was James Iyaye, the senior prefect whose spleen had been ruptured by a car as he crossed the street. A year later, Paul Tamunowari was found dead in a well and the next year, Martha Attah had been discovered by her mother lying twisted at the bottom of the stairs with a broken neck. Then, exactly

a year ago today, Janet Uzor was found unresponsive on the shallow banks of Ibeto River.

“Don’t you think it’s odd how every year for the past four years, someone in our school has died?” Ebere had said.

Six months after Janet’s passing, Ebere had invited Pamela to their favourite fast-food joint, *Eat and Smile*, on Lagos Street for spicy jollof rice and fried plantain. It wasn’t even her birthday or anything. She should have known it was a trap. Pamela had chewed her food thoughtfully as she plotted a way to remove herself from the situation.

“People die, Ebere. That’s life.”

“So that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, forget the ones we don’t know, James and Co. Let’s talk about our friend that we know very well. Janet had been swimming in Ibeto River since JSS1. How many regional and national competitions did she win, Pam? How could she drown just like that?”

Pamela heard the emotion straining her friend’s voice and found herself swayed by it.

“I don’t know . . . I really can’t explain it. But it was an accident, Ebere. It only takes one mistake. It only has to happen once.”