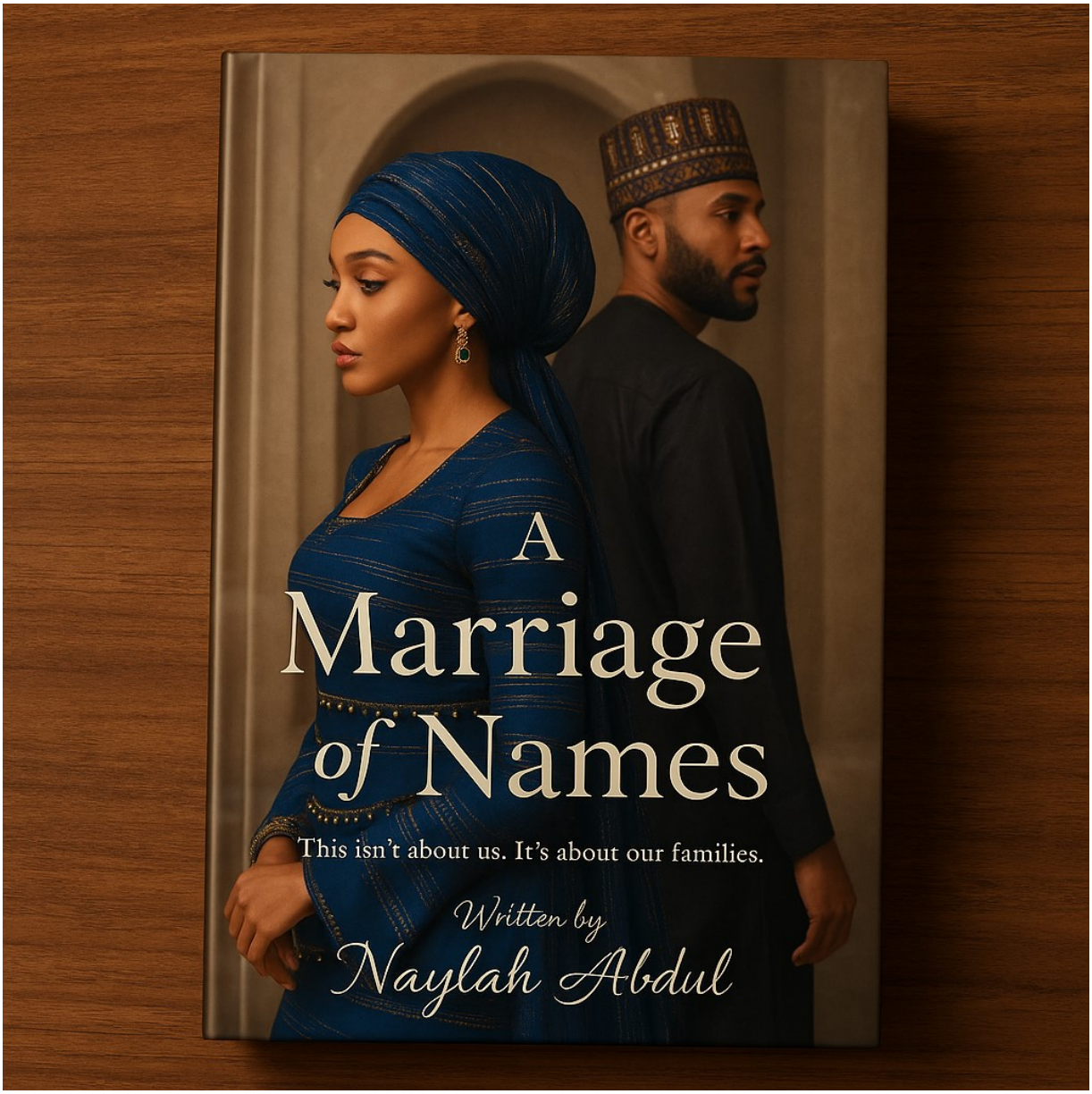
A MARRIAGE OF NAMES

This isn't about us its about our families

By naylah Abdul

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul



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Dedication

To all the amina's who feel like they can change their yasir
And to all the khalids and yasirs out there

To all the broken people
Everyone's fighting their own demons, even when they smiled

This book is for you

To remind you that healing is messy, love is complicated,

and sometimes the ones who feel the most lost

are the ones carrying the most light.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who read, commented, and believed in this story

You made this possible

Every view, every kind word, and every message gave me the strength to keep writing.

I'll forever be grateful for this beautiful little community we've built.

This book found its voice because of you

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Chapter One - samaru

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Zaria, Kaduna State ABU Main Campus

It was final semester, and the Sociology Department buzzed with the usual crowd of sleepy students, hawkers yelling "zobo, gala, pure water!", and scattered pigeons hopping across the sandy courtyard like nosy aunties.

Amina Usman Suleiman stepped out of her last class with her usual grace, binder pressed against her chest, hijab tucked neatly, but her smile her smile was chaos.

She was laughter dressed in silk.

"Guy, that's yasir ," someone whispered. "See how fine he is. That Amina's boyfriend oo"

"Romeo and Juliet?" another voice added, almost reverent.

Because there, parked directly in front of the Sociology building like a scene from a music video, was a black Camaro low, sleek, arrogant. And leaning against it, as if the day belonged to him, was yasir Ibrahim.

Black shades Black kaftan. Half buttoned like he was allergic to full decency. A bouquet of red roses in one hand, and in the other? A cocky smirk that could ignite riots.

"Wallahi, this boy fine like temptation," a girl near the stairs muttered.
Amina rolled her eyes when she saw him, but her cheeks betrayed her.

He pulled off his shades dramatically and grinned. That cocky, dimpled grin she hated loving. "Madam final year," he called out, loud enough for the whole department to hear. "Small small nau, don't injure somebody with all this brain and beauty."

"Yasir, behave!" she said, biting back a smile as she descended the stairs.

"You look like extra marks today," he said, handing her the bouquet with a small bow. "And me, I came to bribe the most brilliant student of ABU Sociology."

"I should slap you with these roses."

"Do it Just make sure you say yes after. I already told my mum you're marrying me."

Amina scoffed. "Your head is not correct."

"But you still love me."

"God will judge you."

"Let Him judge from our wedding reception," he teased. "Maybe in Murtala Square, big tents, food from Kaduna to Zaria . Just don't put me in pink lace I beg you."

She chuckled, inhaling the roses despite herself. "So you just parked in front of my department like you're Wizkid?"

Yasser winked. "Wizkid dey learn At least he no get Sociology Queen on lock."

A group of girls passed, giggling, throwing admiring glances.

Amina glanced at him sideways. "You enjoy this attention too much."

"I only enjoy yours."

"Liar."

"Try me"He opened the car door for her. "Enter, madam. Before I propose in front of your entire class."

She got in, muttering, "I swear you need deliverance."

Once they were inside the Camaro, he turned on the AC and leaned back, watching her. "You look tired. They're overworking you in that department, abi?"

"I'm tired because I stayed up reading last night. You wouldn't stop texting me rubbish till 2 a.m."

"Ah ah, those were love messages Amina, respect literature."

"You sent me a meme of a goat saying 'I miss you'."

"That goat came from the deepest part of my soul."

She burst out laughing, and he beamed like a child who just got his mother to smile. "There she is My baby."

Her laughter softened. "I hate how you make me laugh even when I'm annoyed."

"It's my God given talent. You were born to stress me, and I was born to sweet talk you back."

"Na wa for you."He drove out of campus slowly, waving at security like a celebrity. "We're going to that new restaurant in Samaru. I booked us a table by the window, romantic vibes. So don't fight me today."
Amina arched a brow. "Last time you said that, we ended up in a buka where someone was watching football and shouting offside! in my ear."

"Ah, but the jollof was banging."

"Yasir!"

He grinned. "Fine No football, no buka Just you, me, and grilled fish."
She relaxed into the seat, glancing at him fondly. "Sometimes I wonder how we've managed this long."

"Because you love me," he said without hesitation. "And because I've been loving you since SS3 Remember Essence days? I used to stand outside your class pretending to come collect Biology notes."

"You were failing Biology."

"Exactly I never needed those notes i just needed to see you smile."

She shook her head, heart betraying her again. "You're trouble."

"I'm your trouble."

Their fingers brushed over the gear shift, and he didn't pull away. Neither did she.

Outside, Zaria rushed past in flashes of hawkers, keke napeps , and the call to prayer floating over rooftops.

Inside the car, their world was smaller Softer A space where time bent, and the ache of the future didn't quite exist yet.

They pulled up in front of a quiet spot near Gaskiya Road, one of those newer restaurants with brown brick walls, soft Hausa music floating through open windows, and fairy lights strung up like a wedding tent.

Yasir killed the engine and looked at her. "Behave inside Don't disgrace me with your long grammar."

"I should pour water on your head," Amina replied, unbuckling her seatbelt.
"I'm serious o. No Sociology theories during lunch. If I hear Durkheim or structural functionalism, I'm walking out."

"You don't even know what those things mean."

"Exactly," he said proudly. "I came to eat, not suffer."

They slid into a booth by the window, and a waiter brought pepper soup and grilled fish with soft drinks, plus two bottles of water Amina insisted on ordering "because you like to act like you're not dehydrated."

Yasir leaned in, watching her as she broke a piece of fish and pushed her plate toward him. "So," he said, chewing, "you've been stressed. You're even losing cheek fat."

She frowned. "It's that stupid supervisor, Dr. Danlami. Man is acting like I killed his cat. Every time I submit my work, he marks rubbish with red pen and says, 'You can do better.' Meanwhile, someone that barely shows up for class!"

Yasir dropped his fork. "Wallahi, I go pay am."

"Yasir!"

"I'm serious Name your price Everyone has a price in this Nigeria You want me to find his weakness? He drinks? Woman? Small political scandal?"

She laughed despite herself. "You think everything is like your world of bribes and backdoors."

He shrugged. "It is Only difference is I don't pretend."

She shook her head, smiling into her glass. "God will judge you."

He leaned back, satisfied. "As long as I make heaven with you beside me, I'm fine."

They ate slowly, bantering between bites. He teased her about how serious she looked while chewing; she accused him of being too obsessed with himself. He said she was stingy with compliments she said he was addicted to attention.

Afterward, they stepped back into the cool night air. Zaria had softened less sun, more breeze, and the scent of suya somewhere nearby. They got into the car, and Yasser rolled down the windows slightly before reaching into the glove compartment.

Amina turned to him. "Don't tell me"
He pulled out a small pouch, opened it like muscle memory, and started rolling. "You already know."

"You promised you'd stop."

"I promised I'd slow down. You know I get anxious at night."

"That's not an excuse."

He lit it anyway, the tip burning like a quiet sin, and exhaled slowly, the smoke curling toward the dashboard.

"You mean we," he said, turning to her with a crooked smile, offering it. "You know I don't like smoking alone."

Amina stared at it, then at him. Her lips twitched. "We, you say?"

He raised his brows. "Since when did you become holy?"

She took it from him reluctantly, rolled her eyes, and shook her head. "Allah ka yafe mana (May God forgive us)."

He chuckled. "Don't worry, we'll repent tomorrow."

A beat of silence passed. Amina blew smoke out the window, her eyes unfocused.

Then she spoke. "My dad brought up marriage again yesterday. Someone's son from Kano. Civil engineer. Drives a Benz, according to him."
Yasir's smile dropped slightly. "Your dad still hasn't gotten the memo?"

"He doesn't care for memos, Yas. He wants control. I'm the only daughter. I'm supposed to... obey."

Yasir looked ahead, hands tightening on the steering wheel. "My mum has started her own. Every time I go to Kaduna, it's another girl, another family, another you're not getting younger, Yasser. Like marriage is a Keke she's trying to put me inside."

"But they all know about us," Amina said, softly.

"They pretend not to Your father hates me."

"He doesn't hate you He hates what you represent."

Yasir turned to her, his tone dry "Oh, that makes me feel better Thanks."

She touched his arm gently. "We've been trying for three years They still won't hear us."

He exhaled. "So what now? We just keep loving each other and praying they'll suddenly wake up and clap for us?"

"I don't know I just know I love you."

He stared at her for a moment His voice softened. "I've loved you since you wore that white pashmina in SS1 and refused to talk to me for two weeks because I called you 'madam too fine.'"

"I remember I thought you were so annoying."

"But here we are," he said, reaching for her hand. "Me, still annoying You, still the only girl that can humble me."

She smiled and leaned back. "You know we're not normal, right?"

He smirked"We're extraordinary Like Arewa Bonnie and Clyde."

Amina laughed. "God forbid I'm not dying in anybody's gang war."

Yasir nudged her knee. "Then we better survive Together."

They sat like that for a while windows open, breeze brushing their faces, smoke fading into the dark.

Outside, Zaria glowed in silence. Inside, it was just them two lovers trapped in a country that respected tradition more than hearts.

And neither of them knew it yet…

…but everything was about to change.

Chapter 2 -service Apartment

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

After having dinner Yasir rented a service apartment for them Amina called her roommate khadija telling her she's not sleeping there tonight khadija even teased her a bit .
They arrived at the apartment
Amina picked Yasir's bag took some clothes out and wore them his hoodie and joggers he came into the room the room smelled of strawberry air freshener and sin.

Amina was curled up on the bed, oversized hoodie swallowing her frame, legs stretched out in Yasir's black joggers her hair out now, scarf tossed somewhere over the armchair like an afterthought. Her phone screen glowed in the dim room as she scrolled through WhatsApp yasir was in the kitchen corner, shirtless, boiling Indomie like it was gourmet cuisine.

"Guy," she called out, "Khadija just called me."

Yasir poked his head out. "Shebi it's midnight nau. What happened, she dreamt again?"

"No, this one is real ASUU is planning to go on strike."

Yasir leaned against the doorframe, frowning. "Ah. These people no dey tire? Didn't they just call off strike like... what? A week ago?"
"She said it's on the group chat check." Amina tapped into the sociology class group. And there it was.

ANNOUNCEMENT: ASUU chapter meeting tomorrow Likely indefinite strike. Updates soon.

"Ya Allah," she groaned. "Final semester, Yasir . Just few weeks left Why now?"

From the kitchen, he was too calm. "Wallahi, it's good news for us."

She shot him a look. "You and this your sense that is always upside down."

He came out with two steaming bowls of Indomie and tossed a spoon at her. "Think about it," he said, climbing onto the bed beside her. "If school is on strike, you follow me to Abuja. I'll finally get to wake up beside my wife."

Amina gave him side eye. "Who is your wife, please?"

"You now," he said with a grin. "Or do you want me to start proposing every day like all these instagram vloggers?"

"You haven't even proposed once."

"That's because I know you'll say yes," he winked. "Where's the suspense in that?"

She shoved him with a pillow. "You're unserious."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I'm very serious I've been serious about you since Essence International School. SS3 when you were this small fine thing with oversized glasses in SS1A."

"I hated those glasses."

"I loved them. I knew you were trouble from the first day you corrected my pronunciation during Biology presentation ."

"You said vas deferens like Vaseline, Yasir. It was embarrassing not even in your class in front of us all your juniors ."

He laughed and leaned over, brushing a finger down her cheek. "And yet, here we are Still embarrassing you."

She looked at him. "Do you really love me?"

He didn't even blink. "With everything in me. Even the useless parts."

She looked away quickly, blinking too fast. "Sometimes, I feel like we've loved each other too long."

He paused "Too long?"

"Like... we've done too much Crossed too many lines Maybe that's why our parents don't believe in us."

"Because we didn't keep it halal?" he asked, quieter now.

She didn't answer at first Just stirred her food slowly.

He sat up straighter. "Amina, you know me I mess up, yeah I've cheated I've lied I've smoked too much, talked too much, disappeared when I should've fought harder. But one thing I've never done never is stop loving you."

She looked at him then, lips parted, eyes soft. "Then why do you keep breaking me?"

He swallowed. "Because I don't know how to hold something this precious without damaging it."

Her breath caught For a second, she didn't speak.

Then she whispered, "You say that like you've accepted it Like you've made peace with hurting me."

He shook his head. "No Never I hate it Every damn time Every timeI see your face fall because of something I did... I feel like someone is twisting a knife in my chest. But it's

like I've been in survival mode since I was sixteen. And love this kind of love doesn't come with a manual."

"You think it's easy for me?" she said, her voice low. "To love someone who keeps giving me reasons not to? Do you know what it takes to stay?"

"I know," he said quietly. "Because I've watched you stay Even when I didn't deserve it."

There was a pause Then she said it, like the words had been waiting in her throat for months.

"I've forgiven things that shattered me."

He looked down.

"I've slept on wet pillows and pretended to be fine," she continued. "Smiled in front of your friends like I didn't know about the girl from Gwarinpa. The one you said meant nothing."

He looked up quickly, guilt flashing across his face.

"I told you the truth about her"
"After lying first."

He sighed. "Yeah I lied Because I didn't want to lose you. Because I didn't want to see that look in your eyes."

She gave a sad laugh. "You mean the look I have right now?"

He reached for her hand, gently, like he was afraid she might flinch Shedidn't But she didn't hold him back either.

"I don't want to be this man anymore, Amina."

She looked at him, tired. "Then stop being him."

"I'm trying."

"You've said that before."

He nodded. "And I'll keep saying it, until I get it right."

They sat in silence. The noodles on their laps had gone cold.

Outside, a keke napep sped past. Somewhere in the distance, someone played a Hausa song from their speaker Ali Jita or maybe Morell the rhythm distant but familiar.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I used to dream about our wedding," Amina said suddenly.

He blinked. "Yeah?"

"Yeah Not some big over the top one. Just... you in white babban Riga . Me in gold and white lace with alkyabba . My mum dancing like crazy. You looking nervous but excited."

"I'd be crying like a small boy," Yasir admitted.

"You better not cry Or I'll start crying too."

"Then we'll both be embarrassing."

"Just like your pronunciation of vas deferens."

He burst out laughing, the tension loosening for a moment. "That word has haunted me for years, I swear."
"Good You deserve it."

He smiled and looked at her again. "I want to marry you."

Her heart thumped.

"I want to build a life with you. Not a perfect one we'll never have that. But one where I don't take you for granted. Where I stop running and start staying. I don't want to be that scared boy anymore."

She looked at him, eyes shining. "Then propose properly."

He stared. "Now?"

"Yes Right here."

"In this apartment?"

She nodded "Right now With your chest."

He laughed, then slowly got off the bed and knelt in front of her, spoon in one hand.

"Amina Usman suleiman ," he said, using her full name, "will you marry me even though I'm chaotic and reckless and not what your father wants?"

She stared at him for a beat

Then she picked a spoonful of noodles and fed it to him. "I'll think about it."

He laughed again and jumped back on the bed. "Ah, God. I'm finished You see this emotional abuse? This is why we can't stay apart."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm scared too, you know."

He stroked her braid. "Of what?"

"That we'll end up proving them right. That we're too damaged to survive each other."

"We've survived worse," he said.

"I know But surviving and thriving aren't the same."

He nodded slowly. "Then let's thrive. Let's do the hard work."

She sighed "You make it sound so easy."
"It's not But you're the only one I want to do it with."

Another silence
Then she smiled. "You really loved those glasses?"

"I still have a picture of you wearing them. You were holding choki choki and looking angry."

"Was I angry at you?"

"Definitely."

They both laughed, and this time it reached her eyes.

The Next Day 1:07PM

The sun was already piercing through the curtains. The fan hummed lazily above them. Amina stirred first, one leg tangled around Yasir's . He was still asleep, mouth slightly open, breathing peacefully like someone who had zero worries in life.

She blinked at him. "Lazy goat," she whispered, poking his ribs.

He groaned and pulled the pillow over his head. "Let me be nau. It's still early."

She squinted at the wall clock. "Yasir. It's after 1."

"Exactly Morning hasn't finished."

"Get up, you mumu ."

He popped his head out, grinning. "You slept in my arms and woke up insulting me. Romance is dead in this relationship."

She snorted and reached for her phone on the bedside table. "Let me check something..."

A few seconds passed before she froze.

"Yasir....."

He was already dragging himself toward the mini fridge. "Hmm?"

"Asuu on strike."

He blinked. "Wait, what?"

She turned the phone screen to him. Messages were pouring into her group chat like fire. Una don hear? Strike has started o. Last semester ke? Na wa o. ASUU no get conscience.Make we go protest?'

He leaned back dramatically against the fridge like he had received divine revelation. "Subhanallah This is our time."

She stared at him. "What time?"

He raised both hands. "You,Me,Abuja, Love ,Happiness,Weekend food,Netflix,Light. My own bed You in my hoodie..."

"You're mad."

"I'm madly in love," he grinned.

She rolled her eyes but her lips twitched.

Then her phone rang
Her heart dropped

She held it up slowly

"Daddy."

Panic burst through her chest Her eyes went wide. "Yasser, it's my dad."

Yasir's eyes also widened. "Kashe tv din Off the TV Off the TV!"

He dove for the remote, muted everything, and then sat upright like he was on trial.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina cleared her throat and picked the call. "Salamualaikum Hello, Daddy..."

His voice boomed through the phone, loud enough that even Yasir winced.

"Kina ina ne?! ASUU just announced strike and you didn't even call to inform me. Amina, where are you?"

She straightened, trying to sound normal. "I'm... at the hostel, Daddy Still."

"Which hostel?!"

She darted a desperate look at Yasir. He mouthed, Say something!

"I... I'm getting ready I was just about to go to the park. I'll enter KSTA and get home by evening." She lied

"Kina hauka ne!!!(Are you mad?!)"Her father's voice went even louder. "Have I raised a daughter that enters public transport like common people? You must be joking. I've sent the driver since. He'll be there in a few minutes Don't move Don't enter anything. Don't go anywhere."

The line cut
Silence

Amina dropped the phone on the bed, face pale.

"I'm finished."

Yasir turned to her slowly. "Okay... small question. Why did you say KSTA? You just wanted to kill your father early?"

She buried her face in her palms. "I panicked!"

"You're the child of an oil and gas contractor, not a teacher struggling in Bauchi. You can't say KSTA! You should've just told him you were trekking home barefoot."

"I swear, I'm dead."

Yasir leaned in dramatically. "What did I tell you yesterday? You should've just said you're already in Abuja... with your future husband."

Amina looked up and glared at him. "This is serious, Yasir . If that driver gets to the hostel and doesn't find me there, ha! I'm finished. I'll be disowned before dinner time."

He raised a brow. "So what's the mission, Commander Amina?"

She took a deep breath, then gave him a mischievous smile.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Simple You're driving me to the hostel Now."
He blinked. "Just like that?"

"You're my fiancé, abi?"
He smirked. "Absolutely."

She crossed her arms, "Then you'll meet my father."

He stopped smiling. "Don't be wicked."

She threw a throw pillow at his chest. "I'm joking, jare You'll drop me close to the hostel. I'll wear my hijab , pack my hair, walk to the gate, and lie that I went to buy something."

Yasir exhaled, hand over his heart. "Thank God. For a moment, I thought I was going to end up on the front page of Daily Trust kd boy slapped by wealthy Alhaji for touching daughter.'"

"Serves you right After all your cheating and lying."

"Babe, we've moved past that chapter We're now in the honeymoon arc."

"In your dreams."

"Oh? After everything we've been through? Indomie with pepper, emotional breakdowns, love confessions, and one almost proposal?"

"You're still talking."

"And you're still here."

They stared at each other, then burst out laughing
e leaned in again, eyes twinkling. "At least gimme one kiss For the road Strike special."

She shoved him away, giggling. "Go and brush first, please."

He sniffed his armpit. "Ah! That bad?"

"Very bad."

"Then I'll just kiss you in the spirit."

"I'll slap you in the spirit."

He stood and started pulling on his jeans. "Oya get ready. This rescue mission must be done before your father decides to call your aunty or your coursemates."

Amina stood and reached for her abaya. "Yasir ?"

He looked up. "Yeah?"

She smiled softly. "Thank you."

He walked over, cupped her face gently. "You never have to thank me for loving you."

Chapter Three – Love in the Air

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina hugged herself tightly as she got out of the car. Yasir had parked just outside the hostel gates, in the shade of a tree.
She adjusted her hijab, pulled her and exhaled sharply.

"This is where I turn back to civilian," she muttered.

Yasir chuckled, still lounging in the driver's seat. "You look innocent Like someone who has never disobeyed curfew in her life."

She shot him a look. "I am innocent."

He raised a slow eyebrow. "Ehen?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't say anything."

He held up both hands like a surrendering criminal. "I didn't say anything oo It's your conscience talking."

Amina rolled her eyes, lips twitching. "You're very annoying."

"And yet, here you are Sitting pretty in my front seat, in broad daylight, with my hijab on your scarf."

She sniffed it unconsciously and gasped. "Yasir!"

He grinned. "Too late. Your secret lover boy scent is locked in."

"You're unserious."

"Fully unserious," he nodded proudly. "But I take my unseriousness seriously."

She shook her head, laughing despite herself. "Thanks for driving me."

He reached over and gently squeezed her hand. "Always."

They sat in silence for a second.

She looked at him again "Don't miss me too much."

He smiled lazily. "Too late I already miss you."

"You're so extra."

"I'm just honest," he shrugged. "Wallahi, I haven't even dropped you and my chest is already heavy Like kilishi that refused to digest."

She burst out laughing. "You're mad."

"But you like it."

She opened the door. "Goodbye, drama king."
He leaned forward. "Wait, at least bless me before you go Small prayer na May your fuel last long May the traffic on Kaduna expressway clear for your sake. May the last suya you ate not turn to food poisoning"

She pointed at him sternly. "Yasir Go home."

"Say it with love at least."

She rolled her eyes, then, softening "Drive safe And please... don't follow me again o.o My father has eyes in Kaduna."

He grinned "No promises."

She gave him one last look, then stepped out and slammed the door shut before she could say something foolish like I love you too much to leave you here.

She had barely walked ten steps when he rolled down the window and called out, "Amina!"

She turned

"You forgot your smile."

She groaned. "Yasir, i take god beg you!"

"Wallahi, I'm serious You were smiling when you entered this car, now you're walking like someone going to write WAEC."

She shook her head, adjusting her scarf again. "I'm going to see my roommate."
"Tell her she's doing national service Guarding our secrets."

"She already knows She threatened to start charging you dowry tax."

"She's wise Tell her I'll pay in Indomie and chilled Maltina."

"Bye, Yasir."

He winked. "I'm not really going oo I'll wait here Just in case you forget something again. Like your sense."

She gave him a look over her shoulder. "May Allah deal with you."

"Ameen!" he said happily, revving the engine like a man possessed. "As long as He deals with me by bringing you back."

She shook her head and disappeared through the hostel gate.

A minute later Yasir still outside, mumbling to himself

"Small fine girl from unguwan dosa. See how she's turning me to backup singer for her main act." He leaned his head back. "Ya Allah, this love is not normal."

His phone buzzed

Amina
Get off the street, stalker. The school security man is already eyeing you like a suspect.

Yasir:
I told him I'm your driver.

Amina:
Liar.

Yasir:
Well, technically... I drove you.

The fan overhead rotated slowly, humming like it, too, was tired of the semester. The walls were bare now Amina's books already boxed and zipped. The air smelled of dust, shea butter, and something fried from a far off neighbour's room.

Khadija flopped onto the lower bunk with her usual elegance, pulling her black hijab over her shoulders properly. Amina bent beside the wardrobe, stuffing toiletries into a pink mini bag.

"I still can't believe ASUU went on strike just like that," Khadija said. "Like they've been waiting for me to finally get serious this semester."

Amina chuckled. "You were never serious."

"That's what I'm saying na. I was about to change. I even bought pastel highlighters."

"Pastel highlighters won't save your CGPA."
"Ah, you sound like my dad God forbid a girl likes looking beautiful "She pulled a pillow into her lap, then glanced toward the window. "So... that was Yasir that dropped you, abi?"

Amina paused. "Please don't start."

"I'm not starting I'm just observing Calm down."

"I'm already calm."

Khadija smiled, then said quietly, "You know I like him I do He's funny, he's loyal sometimes , he acts like you're the sun and moon combined... but Amina, haba, the guy has shown you shege more than once."

Amina said nothing She just zipped the small bag slowly and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not judging you oo," Khadija added quickly. "I've stayed in foolish situations too Me that was fasting and still texting umar when he ghosted me for two months Allah is merciful."

Amina laughed under her breath.

"But this Yasir matter..." Khadija continued, turning serious. "You're too deep in Like, emotionally It's like your whole life turns depending on what mood he's in He disappears, you crumble He comes back, you melt It's not healthy."

Amina looked down at her lap Her fingers trembled slightly as they played with the hem of her abaya. "I know."

Khadija tilted her head. "Then why?"

"I don't know," Amina said, voice low. "I really don't It's like... we've been doing this thing for so long, it's part of me He's part of me yasir is all I know"

"You feel like letting go means losing something that defines you."

Amina nodded slowly.

Khadija reached out and touched her arm. "You know you don't have to be loyal to pain just because you're used to it, right?"

Amina sniffed, blinking too fast. "He's not all pain."

"I believe you But sometimes you act like he's the only version of love you'll ever get."

"I'm scared, Khadija Like... what if no one ever gets me the way he does?"

"Wallahi, Amina, people will get you. Good people People who won't love you like it's a war they're fighting with themselves."

The room fell quiet again, the whirring fan above their heads filling the silence Outside, someone dragged a bucket across the corridor. A pigeon landed on the window rail and cooed.

Then Amina chuckled softly. "You've turned to therapist this morning."
"I've been listening to podcast," Khadija grinned. "I'm cleansing toxic thoughts and useless men."

Amina smiled. "You know... it's funny He drove all the way here this morning just to drop me. And now, I feel guilty for not hating him more."

"You don't have to hate him. Just love yourself more."

A beat passed Then Amina asked, "What if loving myself still means loving him, even a little?"

Khadija exhaled. "Then I'll still be here To help you pick up your pieces every time he drops them."

Amina reached for her friend and hugged her tightly. "You're annoying But you're my angel."

"I know," Khadija grinned. "Now let's finish packing before your father sends police to this hostel."

Khadija looked at Amina's phone. "Is that him texting?"

Amina peeked at her screen, smiled. "He said Don't think you can escape. I'm right behind you like JAMB stress."

Khadija rolled her eyes. "This boy is unserious."

Amina texted back Better go home, stalker My father carries gun around .

Just then her phone rang. The screen flashed:

Malam bala driver

Amina picked. "Hello?"

His voice was formal. "Salamualaikum hajiya Amina ina gaban hostel dinku (I'm outside Front of the hostel)"
"Okay ina zuwa (I'm coming,)
My roommate is with me, we'll both be going to Kaduna."

"No problem Just hurry I've been waiting."

Amina hung up and turned to Khadija. "Your ride to Kaduna is officially bougie."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

They walked out together, dragging their duffels behind them. The sun was blazing now, and the tar of the hostel road steamed faintly.

As they reached the gate, Amina turned.

Yasir's black Camaro was there, across the road. Engine running He raised two fingers in a mock salute.

She tried not to smile but failed.

"Stalker spotted," Khadija muttered beside her. "This your love is a whole Netflix category."

They had barely dragged their bags to the gate when Amina's phone rang again She picked on the first ring.

"Ina waje fa (I'm outside)," came the calm, clipped voice of Mallam Bala, her father's longtime driver.

"muna zuwa Malam bala (We're coming,)."

They stepped out to the main road, bags rolling behind them There, neatly parked under a neem tree, was the familiar silver Lexus SUV, its body freshly washed and shining like it had something to prove. The driver tall, dark skinned, in a spotless white kaftan stepped out and adjusted his dark glasses.

"Good afternoon, Bala," Amina said, forcing a smile.

He nodded. "Afternoon, Amina. Ya makaranta?(How is school?)"

She gave a polite shrug. "We thank God ASUU just spoilt everything as usual."

He grunted. "They don't want you people to finish. It's like they enjoy the suffering."

"This is my roommate, Khadija," Amina said quickly. "She's going back to Kaduna too. Her people are not around."

Khadija greeted with a warm smile, "Good afternoon, sir."

"Afternoon, my daughter No problem, just enter, make we dey go."

As they opened the car doors, Amina's phone vibrated again.

Yasir.

Turn around 👀

She blinked, turned instinctively and there he was.

His black Camaro sat idling two cars behind, half-hidden behind a tricycle and a woman selling roasted corn. The sun bounced off the polished hood. She saw him behind the wheel, shades on, arms casually resting on the door.

A laugh escaped her lips.

She quickly typed back:

Are you stalking me now?

Bodyguard duties I must protect the First Lady of my heart.

Behave

Never 😈

She bit her lip to suppress her smile.

Khadija leaned closer. "He's still behind us?"

Amina didn't answer
Khadija peered through the back window and whispered, "God when."

The air conditioning hummed softly. Amina and Khadija sat at the back. Mallam Bala adjusted the rear view mirror and looked briefly at them.

"Hope una carry everything?"

"Yes sir," Amina replied.

"Where are dropping you when we reach ?"he asked khadija

"Barnawa" she replied

"Okay Na steady go, no wahala."

The road buzzed faintly with student movement buses loaded with boxes, students dragging rice sacks, some even hitchhiking.

Suddenly, the radio came on. Liberty FM Zaria crackled through the speakers.

"...and ASUU has announced an indefinite strike, effective immediately Students are advised to return home..."

Mallam Bala hissed. "These people no dey fear God."

Khadija mumbled, "They need deliverance."

Mallam Bala chuckled. "Before you know now, four years go turn seven."

"I'm already planning wedding before graduation," Khadija added.
Amina smiled faintly but her phone buzzed again.

Yasir

Just passed that annoying pothole near your hostel. You know the one that's deeper than Nigerian trauma.

She laughed quietly and replied:

Stop texting and driving, Oga. Or do you want to die for love?

I've already died And resurrected you did not notice?

She shook her head and turned to Khadija. "He's crazy."

"Romantically or generally?"

"Both."

The ride smoothed out. The wind outside blurred past trees, occasional markets, and motorbikes darting across. Road hawkers selling kilishi, gala, and pure water waved at every slowing car.

Amina's phone rang again this time a call. She checked yasir .
She picked, low volume
"Hello?"

"Is this Madam Senator?"

She snorted. "What again?"

"Just checking in. You know, as your personal escort."

"I didn't hire you."

"Free service Package includes stubborn loyalty and occasional sarcasm."

She smiled and leaned toward the window. "Mallam Bala is in the car. Keep your voice PG."

"Oh, you mean I can't say things like"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Don't even try it."

"Fine," he said, mock sulking. "Tell him I'm just your... family friend."

"I will tell him you're my stressor."

"Stress looks good on you, though."

"Yasir."
"Yessir."

She couldn't help but laugh. Khadija glanced at her knowingly.

"Okay," he said finally. "If I disappear, it's because I stopped for zobo at that woman's stand after Giwa."

"Be serious You're still following us?"

"Of course. I said I'll escort you to Kaduna. This is my purpose now."

"What if my dad sees you?"

"I'm parked far Relax I'm not trying to propose today."

"Today," she repeated. "Meaning it's in the plan?"

He laughed. "Focus on the road jare."
They finally reached kaduna

"Almost home," Amina whispered, nervous energy creeping in.

Behind them, the Camaro was still there.

Still following.

Still hers... even if only for now.
They dropped khadija at barnawa and ent back home to unguwan dosa
The house gates loomed Amina's heart started racing. The compound had changed fresh flowers, new paint She suddenly felt small. Guilty Like a girl with too many secrets.

The Lexus rolled in.

She texted Yasir quickly:

We're in.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

I see you Like angel watching from afar.

She smiled.

As the gate began to close behind them, she caught one last glimpse of Yasir's black Camaro outside.

Then her phone buzzed.

Yasir

I just wanted to make sure you got home safe. My heart rests now.

She melted

Thank you
Always

She stepped out of the car, fixed her scarf, and entered the house. Her phone vibrated again.

But next time, I'm coming inside. Official visit. Father in law levels.
She laughed out loud, the sound echoing in the hallway.

You're brave.

I'm in love

Chapter Four –At Breakfast

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The front gate open as Mallam Bala honked once. The old security guard, Malam Tanimu, lifted the latch with one hand and waved lazily with the other.

"Sannu da zuwa, Mallam Bala.(welcome Mallam bala)"

"Yaya gida?(how's the house?) the driver replied.

The compound was just as Amina remembered it swept clean, hibiscus flowers by the side, and the black Prado parked like a sleeping beast under the big mango tree. There was something about the silence of home that both comforted and tensed her nerves at the same time.

As the Lexus slowed, Amina adjusted her scarf and whispered to herself.

"Home sweet home."

She stepped out gracefully, careful not to let her abaya drag on the ground. She didn't want her father saying anything about "spoiling good cloth."

The front door was half open, the scent of burning incense turaren wuta greeting her before anything else. Inside, her father, Alhaji Usman, was sitting like a statue on one of the leather armchairs, kaftan white as snow, newspaper folded on his lap. His glasses were halfway down his nose, a glass of kunu resting beside a bowl of groundnuts on the side stool.

She entered quietly, her voice respectful.

"Ina wuni Daddy.(good afternoon daddy)"

He looked up, eyes sharp as ever. "Lafiya lau. (Fine) How was school?"

She straightened her back. "Lafiya lau, sir.(fine sir)"

He grunted and set the newspaper aside. "ASUU again. Wallahi, this country is cursed."

"Hmm Wallahi, Daddy."

"Your GP nko?"

"Still 4.4."
He gave a brief approving nod. "You know the only thing I expect from you, Amina, is discipline."

"Yes, sir."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Don't bring me shame. Yanda kika fara makaranta ki gama lafiya. Since ASUU sun tafi strike, sai ki nemi abun yi Kinji?(the way you started this school finish it that was since ASUU are on strike look for something to you hear?)"

"In Sha Allah, Daddy."

He watched her a few more seconds, then waved her off. "Go and greet your mother."

Amina turned quickly, hiding her sigh of relief as she made her way to the kitchen.

"Mummy!"

"Ahhh! Babyna ta dawo!(my baby is back!)"Her mother Hajiya Fa'iza chubby, glowing, and always smelling of turaren wuta , pulled her into a warm hug. "Kai! Look at your cheeks! What are they feeding you in Zaria?

"Mummy, please I'm tired Mentally and emotionally."

"Hmm, talk like this again and I will soak hot water for you. Come and sit. You want tea? There's zobo, too."

"I'll drink zobo."
Her mother passed her a cold cup. "Welcome, my baby We missed you."

"Wallahi I missed you too, Mummy."

Just then, two tall figures entered the kitchen, both in kaftans, fresh from ablution.

"Omo Daddy has returned!" said Kabiru, the first son, tossing his prayer beads in the air.

Suleiman, second born and resident troublemaker, grinned. "Wetin you carry for us from Zaria?"

"Stress," Amina replied flatly, sipping her zobo.

Kabiru laughed. "ASUU stress or boyfriend stress?"

She shot him a sharp glare. "I didn't come here for nonsense, abeg."

Their mother hissed playfully. "Kabiru leave my daughter alone! She just came back. At least let her rest before you people start probing her like police."

"Ah ah, Mummy, it's normal interrogation."

Suleiman poked her arm. "So, is it that your Yasir boy we saw on Twitter trending "

Amina stood. "I'm not doing again I'm going to my room."

Her mother laughed. "They've started! Go and drop your bag first jare, your room has been cleaned."

Kabiru called after her, "Abeg no lock the door o! I'm coming to collect gist later."

"Dream on."
In Her Room A Few Minutes Later

Amina dropped her bag by the corner of her pink and cream themed bedroom. Everything was just as she left it her books, framed Qur'an verse, the tiny perfume tray her mum always refilled, and her brothers annoying habit of leaving their chargers in her room.

She collapsed on the bed. Her phone buzzed.

Yasir

"I hope they didn't check your bag this time. 😒"

She smiled.

"No I survived I even passed the GP check."

"Omo, 4.4 babe My pride and headache."
She chuckled and typed:

"My daddy still doesn't like you sha."

"Your daddy just doesn't know how awesome I am."

"Tell that to 2019 when he caught us behind the house 😒😒"

"Ah PTSD."

Just then her door creaked Suleiman peeked in.

"Abeg, come outside Mummy say make you help slice onions."

She groaned. "I just came home !"

"Na you be last born. Own it with pride."

Later That Night After Dinner

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

After devouring a plate of tuwo da miyan kuka, Amina lay belly up on the living room rug while her parents watched the news. Kabiru was on his laptop. Suleiman kept kicking her leg with his socked foot until she threatened to bite him.

Her phone buzzed again.

Yasir.

"I just finished eating My mum started again talking about marriage and grandchildren."

"LOL What did you say?"
"Told her it's Amina or nobody."

"You said that to her?"

"Of course."

"What did she say?"

"She said Kaima kasan babanka. 😂(she said you know your father 😂)"

Amina paused That line hit different.

"Your mum is not wrong Your dad and mine... it'll never be easy."

"Then we'll make it difficult for them."

She smiled faintly, typing slower this time.

Little do they know... her father is already planning something

"Should I run away now or later?"

"Pray first."

The Next Morning

Amina woke to the persistent buzzing of her phone. Groggy, she blinked at the screen Yasir.

"Just calling to check on you. Can we meet before I leave for Abuja? I'm leaving by 2 pm."
She typed back slowly, "I'll see what time."

A few moments later, he replied, "Don't forget, 1 pm sharp."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina smiled faintly, deciding she'd find some reason to step out.

She slipped out of bed and brushed her teeth. Downstairs, the aroma of brewed tea greeted her as she entered the dining room. Her parents were already there, quietly eating breakfast.

"Good morning, daddy, Mama," she said softly.

Her mother smiled warmly, but her father looked up, expression unreadable.

Amina poured herself a cup of tea and packed some kosai and bread slices on a plate. She wasn't planning to eat with them better to avoid the uncomfortable morning ritual of probing questions.

Just as she was about to leave, her father called her.

"Amina," he said sternly.

She turned, "Naam, daddy" , "zauna.(sit)"

He motioned for her to sit. "There's something I want to discuss with you."
Her mother gave her a pointed look across the table.

Amina's heart skipped. She knew that tone all too well.

"You're not getting any younger Now, you're in your final year, ASUU is on strike again," he began.

Last year, he had warned her about this.

"I told you before if there's anyone you want to marry, or seeing, you should tell me. Tell us."

Amina stayed quiet, the weight settling like stones in her chest.

"You didn't say anything you stayed silent," he said, voice rising slightly.

"You're my only daughter, Amina. And I'm not getting younger."

He leaned in, eyes sharp. "So, now, akwai wani ne? Is there someone?"

Amina swallowed hard and finally said, "Yasir."

Her father's face twisted immediately. "Wannan dan iska yaron Amina! That stupid boy."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"He knows nothing apart from his father's money. What has he done for himself?" Baba shot the words like bullets.

"He's working," Amina defended weakly.

But Baba was relentless. "I thought I told you I don
't want him around you. So, kinje kina tare da shi a bayan idona? So you've been seeing him behind my back?"

He stood up, anger boiling. "Kishirya! Gobe za a zo neman auren ki Dama abunda zan fada kenan!!Get ready tomorrow They're coming to ask for your hand in marriage."

Amina shattered inside. "What?" she whispered.

Her mother tried to soothe her. "Dan Allah, Amina, ki yi hakuri(please amina be patient)You know your father."

Amina shook, overwhelmed.

"you shouldn't have mentioned Yasir," her mother added quietly, "But he's trying his best, he's not bad." Amina said

"Ki yi addua(pray) Allah knows best. Allah never tests us beyond what we can handle," her mother said

Amina ran to her room, tears streaming. On her way, her brother Kabs saw her, alarmed.

"What happened?" he asked.

Her mother explained quietly. Kabs shook his head. "Shima Daddy, seriously?"

Amina locked herself in her room and dialed Yasir, crying.

"What's wrong?" his voice cracked with panic.

"Please come pick me up," she begged.

She slipped out quietly, Yasir's black Camaro idling a little down the road.

He opened the door for her. Her eyes were puffy, red from crying.

He hugged her gently.

"Amina, what's wrong?" he teased softly, trying to lift her spirits.

She told him everything.

He closed his eyes, frustrated. "I'm disappointed, but one thing you're not married to him yet. Kawai neman aure ne, right? (Its just asking for your hand in marriage right)It's just the marriage proposal they're coming with."

"We'll find a way to distract him."

"Are you still leaving today?" Amina asked, wiping her tears.

"No Not when my baby is sad."

"Besides," Yasir added, "My mum said I should stay. That cousin of mine, Khalid is coming with some uncles."

Amina's breath caught.

"Khalid?"

Yasir nodded, grim. "Yeah, that apple of my father's eye. The perfect son,Cambridge graduate, valedictorian. Owns businesses here and abroad. My father keeps comparing me to him. Khalid is the smart one. He probably bagged some contract in kaduna and they're coming to sign the deal and celebrate also give my father tge opportunity to rub Khalid's success to my face"

Amina had never met Khalid, only heard Yasir's bitter stories.
And neither knew that Khalid's arrival would change everything.

Chapter Five -khalid Aminu bello

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Evening crept over the rooftops of Unguwan Rimi with that slow northern dusk, warm and gold and humming with quiet life. The compound was unusually lively laughter from Alhaji Usman's sitting room spilled into the yard, and the air carried the rich scent of suya and burning turaren wuta.

Amina tiptoed through the gate, clutching her phone and scanning the compound like a fugitive. The Prado was parked, lights on. Voices men's voices boomed from inside. Her father's friends Inna lillahi...

She dipped behind the hibiscus bushes and slid into the kitchen door like a thief in abaya.

"Amina!" her mother's voice was loud, sharp, and deeply irritated. "Ina kika shiga tun safe? Kin bi kin tada wa mutane hankali haba mana!"

Amina winced, head bowed. "Mummy I'm sorry, wallahi I just needed air. I was overwhelmed."

Fa'iza folded her arms, staring her down like a principal catching a student red handed. "Air? This is not university You're back home. You don't sneak out and vanish. Your daddy almost called your brothers to go look for you. If not for these visitors now, we for scatter house today."

"I'm sorry, Mummy Please Just don't tell Daddy yet I'll explain."

Her mother muttered under her breath and pointed upstairs. "Je sama Before I change my mind and drag you to explain yourself downstairs."

Amina climbed the stairs two at a time, heart pounding, the echo of her mother's anger still ringing in her ears. She reached the top landing, breath caught between guilt and exhaustion. The hallway was quiet, too quiet, save for the distant hum of voices downstairs and the faint buzz of the ceiling fan from the guest room.

She slid into her room and locked the door behind her with a shaky hand, the soft click a small relief in the chaos of her chest. Her scarf came off in one dramatic tug, flung onto the nearest chair like a burden shed. The abaya followed, pooling on the floor as she kicked off her shoes , barely making it to the bed before she collapsed face down into the softness of her pillow.

The silence of her room felt different now no longer comforting, but heavy. Like it knew what she was running from.

The smell of her body lotion lingered in the air, clashing with the suya smoke drifting in through the open window. Outside, the compound lights flickered to life one by one, casting long golden shadows on her wall. The laughter from the sitting room below grew louder her father's voice unmistakable, warm and booming. Another reminder that she was back in his house, under his rules, and her days of quiet defiance were numbered.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina reached for her phone, hands trembling slightly. Her mind was a whirlwind thoughts of Yasir, the looming marriage talk, the tightness in her mother's voice, the way her father hadn't even needed to say anything for her to feel the full weight of his disapproval.

She stared at the screen. One new message From Yasir

A crooked, tired smile crept across her face as she opened it.

Yasir:
"Are you still alive or did they finally sacrifice you for family honour?" 😂😂

Amina let out a short laugh. Trust him to find humour in her near execution.

Amina:
"Barely survived Mummy nearly used me to test that new non stick frying pan."

Yasir:
"LOL 😂😂 I told you to pretend you were in a coma. Works every time."

She giggled, rolling onto her back, her voice lighter now as she hit the voice call button. He picked after one ring.

"Baby girl," he said, in that smug tone of his.

"Yasir, wallahi your head is not correct."

"Thank you, thank you," he said. "But are you okay, really?"

"I'm fine... I just needed to breathe. All this talk of marriage and husband like I'm a tuber of yam to be peeled and boiled before rainy season."

He chuckled. "You're more like...suya Spicy and impossible to forget."

"Eww That's the line you're going with?"

"I'm trying, abeg," he said dramatically. "But don't worry. It's just neman aure, not the actual wedding. They'll come, drink kunu, talk grammar, and go. We'll chase them away like those Jehovah Witness people in Zaria ."

"You're not serious." She sighed "But yeah. Maybe you're right."

A pause

"You okay now?" he asked gently.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Better now that I'm hearing your useless voice."

"Ah, insults already You missed me."

Amina smiled. "Maybe small."

"Only small?"

"Don't push it."

There was a shuffle on his end.

"By the way," he said, voice changing, "I'm about to go downstairs. Apparently, His Royal Highness has arrived."

She sat up slightly. "Who?"

"Khalid of course ," Yasir said with exaggerated distaste. "The Cambridge valedictorian himself. The golden boy My dad's favourite nephew. Honestly, I should roll out a red carpet and wear a kaftan that says Not good enough"

Amina laughed. "You and your drama."

"You don't understand," he said. "This guy walks in and suddenly everyone forgets I even have a WAEC certificate. My father's voice even changes. Khalid this, Khalid that."

"Sounds like you admire him lowkey," Amina said, smirking.

"Sha, I've stopped worrying about that whole neman aure thing."

"Exactly. It's just a visit. Asking for hand is not marriage. We go pursue whoever it is. Simple."

Amina smiled faintly at his confidence. If only they knew.

Downstairs, in the grand reception room where Alhaji Ibrahim entertained only the crème de la crème of Kaduna society, the air was thick with expensive oud, laughter, and reverence. The plush Persian rug muffled footsteps, while the glint of crystal cups caught the light from the chandelier above.

Khalid sat like royalty not loud, not boastful, just present. The kind of presence that spoke before he even opened his mouth. He wore a black kaftan and black cap. His wristwatch gleamed under the lamplight limited edition, of course.

He was the type of man older men respected, younger men envied, and women whispered about at weddings.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Yasir stepped in, hands in pockets, a half smile playing on his lips. He looked like someone who'd just been told to be on his best behavior but chose chaos instead.

Yasir stepped in, forcing a grin. "Khalid! Long time, bro."

Khalid stood, shook his hand firmly. "Yasir. It's been a while."

"Welcome back to boring old Kaduna," Yasir added, tone laced with easy sarcasm.

"Kaduna has its charm," Khalid replied smoothly, eyes glinting.

"Khalid! Wallahi, Kaduna's been quiet without your FBI energy," Yasir said, stepping forward to shake his hand.

Khalid "Yasir You haven't changed."

"Neither have you Still looking like you walk out of Forbes magazine every morning."

Khalid gave a quiet, almost imperceptible smile. "Kaduna suits me."

"Hmm That makes one of us," Yasir muttered.
Alhaji Ibrahim looked proudly between the two men like a coach admiring a team he built from scratch. "Yasir, do you know Khalid was just nominated as Young African Businessman of the Year? Wallahi, I saw his face on Arise News last week. Big people things."

"Really?" Yasir said, eyes wide with fake awe. "I was on TV too Behind Burna Boy during a concert. You probably didn't see me. I was the blurry guy with the suya stick."

The room erupted in light laughter. Some of the guests chuckled. Khalid just sipped his zobo, calm.

"You're still at the software place?" Khalid asked, turning slightly.

"Most days," Yasir replied. "When the bed lets me go We've developed a... complicated relationship."

"You should consider a structured routine," Khalid said. "Discipline builds momentum."

"True," Yasir replied smoothly. "But burnout builds personality."

Alhaji Ibrahim chuckled nervously, cutting through the growing tension. "Yasir is our family comedian But Khalid, I swear this boy is sharp just unserious. His mother says he got it from me."

"I got the looks from you," Yasir corrected. "The unseriousness is definitely Mummy."

"Allah ya shirya ka ," one of the uncles mumbled with a laugh.

Khalid smiled politely. "Maybe you'll find your focus soon. Sometimes, it takes one life changing moment."

Yasir nodded, eyes narrowing just slightly. "Maybe Or one billionaire cousin returning home and raising the family bar."

Another silence Another sip of zobo.

Yasir excused himself and headed up to his room .

Ten minutes later, the door opened . Yasir barely flinched.

Fatima strolled in like she owned the house, barefoot, wearing one of his oversized hoodies and chewing gum like it was a national duty. She stood at the doorway with that smug grin that only younger siblings could master.

"Guy, guess what I heard?"
Yasir groaned. "Don't start, abeg. I've had enough testosterone downstairs to last me a year."

Zayna ignored him and flopped on the bed dramatically, bouncing once. "Khalid is getting married."

Yasir sat up, blinking. "Wait what as how ?"

She nodded like it was nothing. "Yup wlhi I just heard Baba and those your bald uncles whispering it in the parlour. They were talking low low like it's CIA files, but me, I have ears. They said it's already set. Girl is from here."

Yasir's eyes narrowed. "From Kaduna? Which girl? As in do we know her?"

Zayna shrugged, unbothered. "They didn't say the name. But the way Baba was smiling, ehn... That political smile he reserves for serious matters. They even mentioned the wedding might happen quietly at first. You know Baba loves soft things."

Yasir whistled low. "Kai So Khalid is finally entering the marriage club I pity the babe, wallahi."

Zayna giggled. "Kai ko ni. Wallahi, when I was younger, time ina JS3 I used to have this massive crush on him. Until one day I made a joke and he just looked at me like I asked him for a bank loan."

Yasir smirked. "That one? The man is allergic to laughter. I bet his idea of romance is sending PowerPoint slides."

"Or planning a honeymoon itinerary with bullet points and action items."

Yasir laughed out loud. "Imagine him texting: 'Good morning Please confirm receipt of my love.'"

They both burst into laughter.

Zayna rolled onto her side, eyes still twinkling. "But you know, some girls like that kind of serious. Maybe she's a robot like him."
"Or maybe she's trying to escape her own father's madness," Yasir said, lying back down. "Desperation is real."

Fatima popped her gum. "What if she's pretty?"

Yasir turned his head. "Pretty or not, I just hope she has a good lawyer. That guy is emotionally unavailable with a capital E."

Fatima grinned. "You sound jealous."

"Jealous ke? Of what? The gym body? The millions? The international investments? The fact that Baba thinks he's the second coming of Dangote? No o I'm very content with my job my car and Amina of course ."

Zayna snorted. "Don't kill me."

Yasir turned to stare at the ceiling. "Still... from Kaduna, you say?"

Zayna nodded again, casually. "I think so. Maybe someone Baba knows well. It sounded very... arranged."

Yasir shrugged. "As long as it's not someone I know Or worse, someone I'm dating Then we fight."

Zayna laughed, clueless. "Abeg, which babe would leave you for Khalid?"

He smiled wryly. "Plenty."

Zayna stretched, yawning. "Anyway, I'm going to steal cake from the fridge . You want?"

"Obviously."
As she got up and sauntered toward the door, she turned back with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Who knows? Maybe next Sallah, you'll be sharing house with Khalid and your ex."

Yasir threw a pillow at her, but missed She ducked and ran out, giggling.

He stared at the ceiling again.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Kaduna girl,Marriage, Khalid.

Later that night, the sitting room had mostly emptied. The elders had retreated to Alhaji Ibrahim's inner parlour after prayer and political gist. A plate of untouched dates and half empty glasses of kunu sat on the side table, the air now humming only with the quiet buzz of the TV and the occasional drone of a generator.

Yasir wandered back in, barefoot and curious, finding Khalid alone legs crossed, phone in hand, still as a sculpture. His kaftan hadn't wrinkled, his posture hadn't slouched Typical.

Yasir flopped into the armchair across from him, stretching like a cat, trying to look unbothered.

"So, oga fiancé... wedding bells soon, huh?" Yasir began, voice loaded with something between teasing and challenge.

Khalid looked up from his phone, his gaze unreadable. "So they say."

"You mean you say," Yasir smirked. "Unless you're marrying yourself."

Khalid tilted his head slightly. "Actually... Baba suggested the girl."

Yasir blinked. "Wait Baba? Suggested? As in picked her for you?"

Khalid nodded slowly, eyes flicking back to his phone. "Yes He thinks she suits me."
"Ha!" Yasir barked out a laugh. "Amazing Man's marrying like it's a board meeting. No interview, no presentation, just vibes."

Khalid shrugged. "I trust his judgement."

Yasir leaned forward. "Wait so you don't even know the babe?"

There was a pause A long one Then:
"I've heard of her We've not... met Not yet but I've done my enquiry she sounds okay ."

Yasir stared at him like he was an alien. "Wallahi, you're different chap di guy you know there's something called love, right? And women ehn, they love love. You can't marry a girl and give her spreadsheets."

"I'm not offering her spreadsheets," Khalid replied, calm. "Just stability Peace A future."

Yasir rubbed his forehead. "Peace? Future? Bro, she's not a business pitch."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid set his phone down and leaned back slightly. "Not everyone believes love is a requirement for marriage."

Yasir made a face. "And you don't?"

"I believe in respect Compatibility and Shared values Love fades."

Yasir exhaled dramatically. "You're so romantic, wallahi I'm tearing up she must be so lucky"

Khalid smiled faintly. "She'll be fine."

"She'll be bored omo"

"She'll be safe."

"That's not the same thing," Yasir said, staring at him now, a seriousness creeping into his tone.

Khalid glanced away, thoughtful. "Not everyone wants noise, Yasir Some people crave quiet After everything I've seen... quiet is enough."

The words hung in the air for a moment, heavy and unspoken.

Yasir watched him, brow furrowed. "You know, for someone Baba calls the perfect man, you sound tired."

Khalid gave a small, almost sad smile. "Perfection is exhausting."

They sat in silence for a beat.

Then Yasir cleared his throat. "Still though, you should at least meet the babe before you sign your life away."

Khalid's expression didn't change, but his fingers tapped slowly against the armrest. "I will Soon."

Yasir tilted his head. "What's her name?"

Khalid paused. "Amina."
Yasir blinked. "Amina...?"

Khalid looked at him. "Amina Suleiman. I think her father is some retired diplomat. Ambassador Usman suleiman ."

Yasir's stomach twisted. A thread of ice wound its way through his spine.

"...Suleiman?" he echoed, voice low.

"Yes."

Silence.

Khalid stood up, picking up his phone. "Excuse me," he said politely. "I need to return a call."

He walked out.

Yasir sat frozen in the armchair, mouth slightly open, heart thudding.

No
It couldn't be

He reached for his phone with trembling fingers.

Amina's name stared back at him.

Message unread.

He opened it.

"Yasir... I found out who the suitor is."

Another one buzzed in.
"It's your cousin. Khalid."

Yasir dropped the phone
The storm had arrived

Chapter six – Three names one storm

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The moonlight spilled into Amina's room, silvering the corners of her ceiling Her scarf was on the floor her pillow soaked.

She sat at the edge of her bed, clutching her phone, staring at Yasir's last message. Her hands trembled.

Her breath caught in her throat. Khalid The name her father mentioned The name Yasir always mocked.

It couldn't be real.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she got up and walked blindly to her mother's room.

"Mummy," she whispered, her voice already breaking. "Mummy I can't do this."

Fa'iza looked up from her prayer mat, alarmed. "Subhanallah, Amina. What is it?"

She fell to her knees. "Why is Baba doing this? Out of everyone... Yasir's cousin?"

Fa'iza's eyes widened briefly. "You know?"

"I know everything," Amina cried. "I overheard him talking on the phone . He knows Khalid is Yasir's cousin and he still wants to marry me to him? Mummy, why?"

Before Fa'iza could answer, the door opened her father entered, his face unreadable, hands clasped behind his back.

"Leave us," he said gently to Fa'iza.

She hesitated, then stood and left.

He walked in and sat down across from Amina. His voice was calm Too calm.

"Amina, I know this is sudden. But I want you to understand I am doing this for your own good."

"By forcing me to marry someone I don't know? When I'm already in a relationship?" She said not knowing where she got the courage from

He didn't flinch. "That relationship is not marriage You know our religion doesn't allow what you two have been doing."

She opened her mouth to speak he raised a hand.

"Listen to me Yasir is not bad But he is not responsible He's a boy trying to be a man. He jokes too much. He's not grounded. If I die tomorrow, Amina, what will happen to you if you marry someone like him? Do you think love will feed you?"

She looked away, eyes stinging.

He leaned forward. "Khalid will take care of you. He is responsible He prays, he works hard, he fears Allah Zai kula da ke kamar yadda addini ya umarta. (He will look after you according to Islam rulings)Even if I die tomorrow, I know he will not leave you to suffer Yasir? He still depends on his father. What happens when his father dies and he squanders the inheritance?"

Amina's voice cracked. "But Yasir is not what you think"

"Mace bata auri wanda ba mijinta ba," he cut her off , softly. "If Khalid becomes your husband, it means Yasir was never meant to be."

She burst into tears again, and he stood. "They're coming tomorrow afternoon in Allah ya kaimu kiyi addua (if god wills you should pray)."

As he walked out, he added, "It's time to grow up, Amina." He left

Her mother returned, face tender with sympathy She knelt beside Amina and held her.

"Kiyi hakuri, (be patient)Amina. In shaa Allah, shine mafi alkhairi. (By the grace of god it is the best for you) Your father loves you. He only wants what is best."

Her mother's arms wrapped around her, soft and warm like a childhood memory But even that couldn't stop Amina's shaking.

"Amina," Fa'iza whispered, brushing the girl's hair from her forehead. "I know this hurts. I do But you have to breathe, my love. You have to trust Allah. Sometimes what we want isn't what's best for us."
Amina pulled away gently, her tear streaked face looking up. "Mummy... why didn't you tell me? Why didn't anyone tell me? Did Baba not tell you earlier?"

"Of course he did," Fa'iza said softly. "We both knew telling you will break you Your father wanted to believe it was a passing thing. That you were young and would see sense. He said you were just going through emotions, not thinking of your gobe."

Amina's lips quivered. "But Mummy... Yasir loves me. I love him."

Fa'iza sighed. "Love isn't always enough, Amina Especially in marriage Wallahi, your father is only doing what he believes is right. Maybe he's strict, but he's not wicked. He has fears too. He's seen what happens when love fades and there's no tsari, no deen, no maturity. Your cousins Aisha , Salma and Maryam are a perfect example ji yanda suke Wahala yanzun your father dosent want you to go through all that Amina"

Amina looked away

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Fa'iza cupped her daughter's face. "You know how many girls are begging for the kind of life Khalid can offer? A man who prays, works, has no scandal, no addiction. A man who can carry you with honour. ."

"But Yasir...."Amina began, her voice barely a whisper.

Fa'iza placed a finger on her lips gently. "Yasir is not a bad boy But he's still learning how to be a man."

Just then, a phone rang faintly. Fa'iza reached into her wrapper pocket. "Hello? Yes, Alhaji. I'll be right there." She hung up and stood.

"Your father wants to speak with me," she said, smoothing her hijab. "Amina, I know your heart is aching. But ki yarda da kaddara. (Believe in destiny)Allah knows what we do not. Sleep a little, hmm? Yanzun zan dawo(I'll be back now)"
She kissed Amina's forehead and walked out.

As the door closed behind her mother, silence returned Not peaceful silence the kind that screamed.

Amina sat still for a moment, hands folded tightly in her lap, as if to hold herself together.

Then she reached for her phone. Her fingers hovered over Yasir's name.

Her vision blurred as she typed

"Please come I need you Take me out of here."

She hit send

Then crumpled into a ball on her prayer mat, weeping.

Yasir hadn't moved from the edge of his bed in over an hour

Yasir's phone buzzed once Then again

He picked it up and read the message.

His heart stopped.

He didn't even wear his shoes. Just grabbed the keys and ran to his car.

"Where are you going?" his sister zayna called from the parlour couch, surprised.

"To make a decision they won't like," he snapped, yanking open the gate.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He didn't look back.

He didn't think
Outside, the night air was cold and sharp. His Camaro growled awake.
He reached the house

Amina slipped out through the kitchen exit. She wore a black scarf and a dark abaya.
The compound was quiet, the security man already half-asleep on his stool.

The Camaro idled a few houses down.

He parked two streets away. Then he saw her running toward him in a black abaya, scarf trailing behind her

When she opened the car door and slid in, Yasir turned and stared.

She jumped in the car and shut the door, panting.

"you're crying," he said softly.

"So are you," she whispered.

He smiled bitterly. "Oh well."

They didn't speak for a while. Then Yasir turned the wheel and drove.

They drove until the streets were empty. Finally, they parked near a quiet school compound.
Silence Except for her sobs.

They sat in the parked car. The street was empty. The world, hushed.

Amina hugged her knees to her chest.

Yasir tapped his fingers against the steering wheel.

"She's marrying my cousin," he said out loud, like he was still testing how it sounded.

Amina looked at him.
Yasir, looking away. "But it doesn't matter now, does it? Baba made up his mind since I have the perfect girl . He wants me to be like Khalid,Perfect Khalid Cambridge Khalid. Khalid who makes dua before driving.since I can't be like him he's taking away my perfect girl to give to him too"

He scoffed.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Do you know what it's like living under someone else's shadow? Even when you breathe, it's like you're breathing their leftover air."

Amina touched his arm. "Yasir..."

He glanced at her. "And now he wants to give you to him. Like I don't even exist."

Tears filled her eyes again. "Yasir... I begged Mummy. I cried in front of Baba. He said you would never respect me That you joke too much That you're not ready."

He gave a humourless laugh. "Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm not ready to be who they want. But I was ready for you."

Amina cried harder

They sat in it. In all that pain and betrayal. In all the things they couldn't fix.
Finally, Yasir whispered, "Do you remember when we used to talk about our wedding? You said you wanted a navy blue lese and a garden venue."

Amina smiled through tears. "And you said you wanted to arrive on a horse like some Bollywood prince."

"I still would," he said. "If it meant I got to keep you."

Silence
Then she asked, "So what now?"

Yasir looked at her, broken and angry and in love. "Now? We either fight or we pray. Or maybe both."

She nodded.
Silence again
Then Yasir spoke. "He knew."

Amina looked up, confused. "Who?"

"Khalid, earlier When he said he was marrying a diplomat's daughter. I swear, Amina, he knew it was you The way he looked at me, the timing... he dropped it like a bomb."

She didn't respond.

"And my father?" Yasir scoffed bitterly. "As if comparing me to him my whole life wasn't enough. He wants to give you to him now? The only person that makes me feel... seen?"

Amina held his hand tightly. "I didn't know, Yasir I swear."

"I know," he whispered. "But it doesn't make it hurt less."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He leaned his head against the steering wheel and punched it. Once Twice His knuckles bled slightly.

They sat in the dark, the car filled with the weight of their shared grief.

Then, finally, quietly

"I used to think we'd always find a way," Yasir said. "Even if our parents didn't agree. Even if they cursed us out at the wedding. I thought we'd elope if we had to."

"I thought so too," Amina whispered.

"But now... Khalid?"

They both fell silent.

Then Yasir said something that made her cry again
"Do you know what it feels like to lose to someone who doesn't even want to win?"

They cried together A tangle of hands, and memories, and futures dissolving into night.

Finally he drove back home after dropping Amina
The adhan for Subh had not yet begun, but the stars outside her window were starting to dim.

Amina stood barefoot on her prayer mat,The room was still. The walls held the echo of tears, and her heart felt like it had been rung dry.

She raised her hands slowly. Trembling.

"Ya Allah... if he is good for me... bring him to me. But if not... take him far away... and remove him from my heart."

Her voice cracked at the end. It was barely above a whisper.

Then she went down into sujood.

And stayed there.

Face pressed into the rug, breathing in the scent of worn cotton, perfume, and grief. But even in that stillness, her mind refused to quiet.

Yasir
The name thundered through her.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

No matter how hard she tried to push him away from her heart, he lived there. Occupied every corner of it in ways even she didn't fully understand.

Her memories came flooding in, as vivid as yesterday.

She was just 15 when he started showing up in her class corridor.

SS1B.

He'd saunter in during break like he owned the entire block. Tall, scruffy, already charming. Yasir the boy in SS3 who couldn't stay still.

"Hey, small madam," he'd say, knocking on her desk. "I need your notes."

She'd frown. "You're writing WAEC, why would you need SS1 book keeping notes?"

He'd grin. "Ehen nau, isn't it the basics? Everything starts from basics."

He didn't even open the notebook.

But he'd sit there, talk nonsense, laugh loudly. Leave chewing gum wrappers on her desk. Borrow her ruler and never return it.

Annoying,Persistent, Impossible.

And yet... he never really left.

Even after he graduated from secondary school and travelled to Turkey, they stayed in touch. Somehow between school stress, homesickness, and growing up Yasir became hers. Messy, unpredictable, but hers.

She remembered the night he called her after his graduation in Istanbul.

"Amina," his voice had cracked. "Wallahi, I don't know how I did it. But I did You're the first person I called."

She remembered crying alone in her hostel room in Zaria, clutching the phone, her heart full.

When he landed in Nigeria months later, he didn't go home first. He came straight to her sneakers dusty from the airport, smelling like foreign cities and cold air.

"I missed you," he'd said, pulling her into the longest hug she'd ever had.

They'd broken up a hundred times.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Over silly things,Over serious things His mistakes. His pride,His flirtation,His temper his cheating The way he sometimes lost himself to things he shouldn't.

He had hurt her more than once. Ghosted her,Lied to her Promised to change.

Yet every time, when life broke him he came back. He always came back.

She remembered the way he teased her when she started ABU.

"Zaria?" he laughed. "You? You that cannot live without shawarma and AC?"

But he bought her a reading lamp. Sent her money when she didn't ask. Checked her results online before she even saw them.

"You're brilliant," he always told her. "You just don't know it yet."

When he got his job in Abuja, she was the first to know.

When he bought his Camaro, he sent her a picture with the caption:

"Meet my first babe. You're second now."

She replied with

"She better be loyal."
He sent a voice note, laughing for twenty seconds straight.

She remembered that one wild night... when they were both heartbroken over their own lives.

They got high. No words,No judgment, Just music and silence and the soft hum of the city lights outside.

She remembered thinking

We're both so flawed. But at least we're flawed together.

And now...

Now she was going to marry Khalid. A man she had never spoken to.

Her heart screamed no. But her mind whispered maybe.
Maybe this was what Allah wanted. Maybe this was her test.

But it hurt.
God, it hurt so much.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She lifted her head from the prayer mat, her cheeks wet.

She looked around her room every inch of it wrapped in memories of Yasir.
The keychain he gave her hanging from her bookshelf.
The hoodie he once forgot that she never returned.
The pink sticky note that said "Read your books, smart mouth Love, Y."

A sob escaped her lips.

"Ya Allah... if he's not mine... please... please take him out of me. I'm begging You..."

But she couldn't even finish the dua.
Because part of her still hoped God would say

He is yours.

And she didn't know how to let that hope go.
She laid down on the mat

Back at Yasir's house

Yasir sat on the cold tiled floor of his room, back against the wall, arms wrapped tightly around his knees. His eyes were dry, but they burned as if all the tears he hadn't cried were sitting behind his sockets like floodgates trembling.

He wasn't shaking He wasn't screaming.

Not anymore.

His voice had gone hoarse earlier from shouting into the silence. Into the pillow Into his own fists. It didn't help.

Nothing helped
He reached into his drawer and pulled out the half wrapped stash.

His hands moved on their own like muscle memory. He broke the seal Brought out rolling paper Crumbled the bits mechanically.

Just one One hit Maybe then I'll forget. Maybe then I'll stop thinking about how the only person who ever saw the real me is being handed over to someone who doesn't even know her favourite colour.he thought

He lit the lighter

Flame flickered
But something in him paused

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His hand trembled

He stared at the rolled smoke in his fingers for a long time. His heart thudded loud and ugly.

Then slowly... he sighed.

"Astagfirullah..."

He crushed it Every bit of it Pressed it into the ashtray with a long, defeated exhale. Then he stood, stiffly, like someone carrying grief in his bones.

He walked to the bathroom and performed wudu.

Cold water Cold heart.

By the time he returned, his lips were pale, and his hands were shaking.

He reached for his Qur'an.

Opened it.

Stared at the page

The letters danced

He couldn't read.
The words blurred into each other as tears welled up Finally.

He dropped the Quran on the prayer mat beside him, buried his face in his hands, and sobbed. Deep, aching sobs that came from a part of him that hadn't healed in years.

Ya Allah... I'm so tired.

I'm so messed up

Only she knew me. She saw past the jokes, the weed, the sarcasm. She saw me when I was broke, depressed, high, angry. And she stayed.

And now she's leaving. And You're letting her leave. Why?

I know I failed her. I wasn't always the best. But I loved her, wallahi. I loved her more than I ever loved myself.

She was the only thing in this life that made me think I could be good. That maybe I could change. For her and For us.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His body trembled with the weight of everything he'd never said out loud.

Ya Allah, I'm damaged. I know I don't pray enough. I sin too much. I hurt the people who love me. But please forgive me ya rabb I'll change become a better Muslim I won't smoke or do anything haram ya rabbi

Don't take her from me

Don't let him have her

He doesn't know her He doesn't deserve her He doesn't know how she smiles after crying, how she always rubs her thumb when she's nervous, how she says Bismillah before pouring water, even when she forgets to say it before eating.
He doesn't know that she talks to herself in traffic. That she smells like honey and oud.

He doesn't know the poem she wrote about her mother but never showed anyone. But I do.

She's my peace She's the only soft thing I have in this world.

He pressed his forehead to the ground. In sujood Raw Desperate.

"Ya Allah... give me peace. If she's not mine, give me peace. Please."

He cried there for a long time. The Qur'an remained open beside him, the pages fluttering slightly from the ceiling fan above.

Outside, the call to prayer began. The world stirred.

But inside Yasir's room... everything still felt broken.
Downstairs in the guest room
Khalid sat on the edge of the bed, sleeves rolled to his elbows, his laptop glowing faintly beside him, screen filled with numbers and charts he had long stopped seeing.

His phone vibrated again another business update from his Lagos manager. He answered out of habit, voice quiet, professional, almost cold.

"Send the new draft to my email. Make sure we don't offer more than 9.2%, especially with the current exchange. I'll review it before noon."

A pause.

"No No more meetings this week. I'm in Kaduna."

He ended the call.
Silence settled around him.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He leaned back, exhaled, and picked up his phone again. As if drawn by something involuntary, he opened the same message his private investigator had forwarded earlier that evening a folder titled Amina Usman

It was meant to be formal. But what stared back at him now didn't feel like paperwork.

Amina.

The first photo was from a formal family event pale green scarf, soft expression. She wasn't looking directly at the camera, but her eyes were thoughtful, her posture elegant.

The next one her in white lace, a subtle smile, her hands mid gesture like she was explaining something. Her laugh was caught in still frame, gentle and unassuming.

Another standing in front of a university building, bag slung over her shoulder. A confident stride, hijab neatly pinned.

But the one he kept coming back to was the simplest her side profile, shot candidly, unaware. She was staring out a window somewhere, quiet and unreadable.

Khalid stared at that photo.

Long

she looked real. Not like the carefully edited profiles or filtered perfection he was used to seeing in files. There was something raw in her gaze, something achingly human.

Khalid exhaled. He swiped to the next photo.

A school ID Her ABU student card eyes a little tired, hijab navy, the corner of her mouth curved in what might've been a faint smile or just a moment caught between emotions.

The next slide a few screenshots from public Instagram posts, most tagged by her friends her at a study group, another from a bridal shower. Always on the edge of things. Smiling, but never loud. Present, but not posing.

He closed the folder.

He whispered to the silence, barely audible

"I don't know how to love someone like her."

He placed the phone face down. Rubbed his hands over his face The weight of it all was pressing against his chest, slow and unrelenting.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He looked perfect. To the world The reliable one. The responsible one The quiet achiever.
But inside he lived in conflict.

Always.

He had made peace with the idea that love was a luxury people like him couldn't afford. Not with the kind of past he had. Not with the kind of things he buried. Peace, structure, dignity that's what he'd built his life around. That was safer.

This wasn't supposed to be personal.

It's just a marriage arrangement, he told himself again. Our families know each other. She's educated,Polished Well raised. I'll provide for her Protect her. What else does anyone need?

But still...

There was something in her face In her eyes.

Something that made him afraid.

Not of her
But of himself

What if she sees through me?

He stood up, restless now.

Walked to the window. The streets outside were quiet, shadows of trees swaying in the wind.

And then suddenly he turned.

Walked out of his room.Walked upstairs
He stopped outside Yasir's room.

Hand raised, about to knock.

His knuckles hovered over the wood.

He heard movement from inside. Something slammed A muffled sob?

He stood there.

Still

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Frozen
And then... he slowly let his hand fall.

He turned away.

Walked back to his room without a word.

He knows, Khalid thought. And I know too. I always knew.

But maybe some decisions aren't ours to make.

He closed the door quietly behind him. Back to the shadows.

Back to the silence.

He went back to his room

Then stared at the ceiling.

His cousin was in love with this girl Madly,Deeply and Painfully.

And she loved Yasir too. Anyone with eyes could see it.

And yet, here he was the "better" option. The replacement. The arranged suitor with clean hands and polished files.

Khalid stood slowly. Walked to the window. Opened it a crack.

The air was still, the sky just beginning to hint at dawn.

He didn't feel triumphant.

Not at all.

If anything, he felt like he was standing in the eye of a storm that wasn't his a storm with three names, colliding.
Amina, yasir and Khalid.

Three names, One storm.

And somehow, he had been placed at the center of it.

Not because he fought for it.

But because life or fate or maybe guilt, or maybe expectation chose him.

Khalid closed the window. Sat back down Then reached for diary

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He hadn't opened it in weeks. Maybe months But this morning, something felt... unsettling.

He needed answers. Not from files. Not from family. Not even from Amina

But from the One who knew how all storms end.

He whispered quietly to himself,

"Ya Allah... if she's meant to be mine, let it be with honour. But if I am standing between two people whose hearts You already tied together... remove me with dignity. And peace."

He wanted to write in his diary but couldn't
The pages didn't need to speak. His heart already knew what he would say.

He laid back down.

Not to sleep.

But to wait.

Because later that day, when their families would gather, when eyes would meet and fates would be hinted at there would be more than tea and pleasantries in the room.

There would be history.

Regret.

And decisions that could not be undone.

Chapter seven – Neman Aure (marriage proposal)

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina hadn't slept at all

The night dragged like a punishment, each hour heavier than the last. Her body trembled from exhaustion, but sleep refused her. Her mind looped like a broken zikir, playing back every memory, every moment, every word Yasir had ever whispered to her. How did things crumble this fast? How did love, fierce and foolish, become this unbearable?

Her prayer mat lay stretched before her, soaked in silent pain. She had spent most of the night there her forehead pressed to the ground, whispering du'a into the empty air. She asked Allah for guidance, for clarity, for escape. She asked Him to undo whatever fate was writing, to take her back to before all of this began. But her answers didn't come. The silence felt louder than ever.

Her Qur'an lay open beside her. She had read the same verse in Surah Al Baqarah five times before her eyes blurred from weeping.

Around Fajr, she reached for her phone with shaking fingers and texted Yasir.

"Please answer me Talk to me I'm breaking."

It showed as delivered But not read.

She stared at the screen like it held her life. It didn't Just silence and that cursed grey tick.

Her heart crumpled a little more.

Morning came through the louvres in dusty shafts but nothing about it felt like light. The air in her
room was heavy. The faint scent of humra from her drawer clashed with the bitter smell of dried tears. Her eyes were swollen. Her lips chapped. Her soul felt detached from her skin.

Then came a soft knock at the door. Her mother's voice weary, gentle.

"Amina, ki tashi ."

The words echoed like a judgment.

The door opened

Her mother stepped in quietly, dressed in her soft grey abaya, her scarf barely pinned in place, like she too hadn't slept. One glance at her daughter's fragile form, curled on the prayer mat like something broken, and she hurried across the room.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina didn't move. She didn't even lift her head. She simply reached out w small, desperate motion and her mother knelt down and held her.

Amina collapsed into her mother's arms and wept, chest heaving, hands trembling. Her sobs were raw now, stripped of pride. Her mother held her tighter, rocking gently, like she used to when Amina was a child scared of thunder.

They sat like that for minutes maybe longer wrapped in a shared sorrow that neither could fully voice.

"ki yi hakuri,(be patient)"her mother whispered into her ears. Her voice cracked. "Allah ya zaba miki alheri Haka Allah yaso.(Allah knows best)"

Amina shook her head violently against her chest. "Why me? Why now? I begged him... I told him I didn't want this..."
"Ki roƙi Allah,(pray to god)"her mother said, brushing strands of hair out of her daughter's damp face. "Wannan ba aure bane, (it's not marriage)neman aure ne kawai. (They're just seeking for your hand in marriage) Idan ba shi bane naki, (if he is not yours)Allah zai cire shi da kansa Amma ki saurari babanki kibi magananshi Ki daure (God will remove him from your life but for now listen to your father)"

They cried again, holding each other like the storm outside was about to hit their very walls.

Amina's voice cracked as she whispered, "He didn't even reply me."

Her mother sighed, her hands cupping Amina's cheeks. "Maybe that's your answer, Amina."

"I love him," she breathed. "I love him too much."

"I know."

"I feel like I'm dying."

"You're not But even if you are Allah brings us back to life in ways we don't expect."

They stayed like that for a while, the silence between them soft now, comforting in its stillness.

Then, slowly, her mother stood. "Let me get you something warm to drink," she said, brushing off her scarf. "Suna nan zuwa bayan sallahn azahar(they're coming after zuhr prayer)And you... you need your strength."

Amina nodded faintly, still sitting on the mat, her heart bleeding into the floorboards beneath her. She watched her mother step out of the room quietly.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her fingers reached again for her phone.

Still no reply.

Only that single, unread message staring back at her like a broken promise.

By mid morning, the house buzzed with activity.

Amina could hear the chaos from her room the clinking of pots in the kitchen, the scraping of chairs, the voices of her aunties rising like over seasoned stew. The air smelled of jollof rice, fried chicken, and political tension. A few of her uncles had already arrived tall, stern men in freshly starched kaftans and over polished shoes who spoke in slow, authoritative tones, as if clearing their throats was part of the negotiation process. Alongside them came the aunties those nosy, high pitched women with thick barkono red lipstick that refused to stay within lip lines, always fixing their dankwali mid conversation, laughing too loudly and pretending to whisper secrets that echoed through the corridors.

"Haka muke a gidanmu,(that's how we do it in hour house)"one of them announced as she adjusted her veiled chest proudly talking in riddles
Like Shakespeare, if Shakespeare had sold Ankara at Kasuwar Barchi.

They sat in the parlour with plastic smiles, sniffing the air for tension like bloodhounds, scanning Amina's figure each time she walked past as if heartbreak could be worn like a blouse.
Amina avoided them like a curse. She lingered by the corridor, phone still clutched in her hand, checking for Yasir's reply. Nothing The silence was starting to feel intentional.

But chaos wasn't just at her end.

Back at the Ibrahim household, Yasir had just snapped.

He kicked his door open barefoot, shirt half buttoned, eyes bloodshot from sleeplessness and fury. The scent of minty toothpaste still clung to him, but his breath came in heavy bursts. The house froze Plates stopped clinking in the kitchen. The TV in the parlour was abruptly muted. A maid stood mid sweep, unsure if she should run or disappear.

"I knew it! I knew it! You think I'm stupid?!" Yasir's voice shook the air, cracked and sharp.

He stood in the centre of the room like a man possessed.

"I've been with Amina since secondary school. Since I've loved her I've held her through everything. And now now you want to hand her over to him?! Khalid?!"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Alhaji Ibrahim stood slowly from his armchair. His face was cold and stony. "Kai Yasir, ka rufe min baki. (Kai yasir keep quiet)Wannan wauta ce. (This is nonsense)Haba! You're embarrassing us."

"No! You embarrass me! You always do this! Since we were kids, everything I wanted, you gave it to him. The house in Abuja The Dubai trip. The investments The respect. And now Amina? He's not even your son!"

Gasps choked the room

A stillness fell, heavy like cement. Some of the younger cousins exchanged wide eyed glances. One of the older uncles shook his head, lips tight.

Then Khalid stepped out of his room.
Dressed immaculately in a soft white kaftan that caught the morning light, he looked like calm personified. His beard trimmed, his cap pristine, his body language composed. He walked in as though the storm around him didn't touch him but his eyes were watchful, dark with something unsaid.

He stopped in front of Yasir Met his gaze.

"You knew," Yasir said, pointing a trembling finger at him. "You knew about me and Amina. Don't pretend you didn't know."

"I didn't," Khalid replied quietly. His tone was calm, but the edge in it was clear. "I knew you loved someone named Amina. I didn't know it was the same Amina Not until a week ago ."

Yasir's voice broke. "You're lying."

"I'm not."

"Now that you know, will you leave her?"

Khalid looked away, swallowed hard. "It's not that simple."

"She's mine!"

Khalid blinked, slowly. "I'm sorry but She's not a property, Yasir. She gets to choose And if she's being forced, then we can all walk away. But you yelling won't change her pain."

"You're sorry?" Yasir let out a bitter laugh. "You think that means something now?"

That was when it happened.
A sharp crack echoed in the room.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Alhaji Ibrahim had slapped Yasir. A full bodied, old man slap with the weight of power and betrayal.

"Dan iskan yaro! Ka fita min a gida! Kai ka fi kowa hauka ne?! You have disgraced me!"

Yasir stumbled back, eyes wide in disbelief. His hand clutched his cheek. His heart, his pride shattered. His uncles surged forward to hold back the old man, muttering "barshihaka , barshihaka Alhaji."

Yasir stood, lips trembling. He stared at Khalid, then at his father. Then he turned and stormed out of the house.

Moments later, the roar of his black Camaro cut through the air, tyres screeching against the compound floor The gate flung open. And he was gone.

Khalid remained rooted in place.

He wasn't breathing normally. His shoulders were tense. His hands shaking, almost imperceptibly. He clenched and unclenched them by his side.

One of the uncles coughed awkwardly, breaking the silence.

"Toh... za mu yi sallah anan ne ko sai mun tafi gidan Ambassador Usman?(are we praying here or till we go to Ambassador usman's house?)"
Another uncle, older and more composed, stepped outside with his phone. After a short conversation, he returned.

"Ambassador yace mu taho. Za ayi sallar azahar a can, sannan ayi magana akan neman aure.(the ambassador said we hours go there we'll pray there then we'll discuss the marriage proposal)"
Everyone nodded.

Khalid didn't say a word. He turned slowly and walked back into his room, but not before catching the smallest flicker of doubt in his uncle's eyes a flicker that looked far too much like guilt.
They were welcomed into the house like royalty.

Men in crisp babban riga and polished cover shoes stepped out of tinted SUVs, exchanging booming "Assalamu Alaikum"s hand shakes and side hugs in the compound like it was Sallah morning. The house help rushed to open the gate wider, while the aunties peeked through the curtains and adjusted their scarves. The air outside was thick with respectability and the smell of men's perfume, and silent male politics.

Khalid stepped out of the lead car with quiet precision. No sunglasses,No loud swagger,Just calm almost unsettlingly so. He greeted everyone with soft "Ina wuni"s and lowered his eyes as he bowed respectfully to the elders. He greeted Ambassador Usman with both hands cupped over the man's palm and a slight bend of the head.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Ambassador Usman, who once paced this same compound with a cane in his hand, ranting that "ba za a taɓa aurar da diyata ga ɗan gidan Ibrahim ba,(I'll never get you married to Ibrahim's son)"now laughed heartily, squeezing Alhaji Ibrahim's shoulder like an old friend from Hajj.

"Wannan yaron naka, kai, (this your son kai)Allah ya albarkace shi (may god bless him)," he said, gesturing to Khalid with pride, like he was the one who raised him.

Alhaji Ibrahim grinned. "Yau dai Allah ya haɗa zumunci. (Allah has brought us together)Mun bar komai a hannun Allah.(we leave everything to god)"

They chuckled together, like they hadn't once spat curses at each other over mosque politics and old grudges. The hypocrisy was so rich, it nearly dripped from the lace curtains.

Amina watched from upstairs, behind her mother's old net curtain.

She felt like a ghost watching her own life unravel.

Her heart thudded painfully against her chest. The last few hours had dragged like days. Yasir had still not replied. Not a call Not a text It was like he'd been swallowed by the earth Or maybe he had finally given up.

She whispered beneath her breath, "Na shiga uku."

Downstairs, the men had taken their seats uncles lined on one side, the guests on the other, forming a perfect picture of northern nobility. Bottles of malt and packs of Malta sat sweating on the tray. The room smelled of turaren wuta One of the aunties passed behind them with a plate of chinchin like it was a peace offering.

"Allah ya sa albarka," she muttered as she dropped the tray.

Someone sneezed. Someone cleared his throat. Someone else took a loud sip of his drink. Tension wore a kaftan and sat cross legged beside them all.

Khalid sat beside his uncle, upright, his hands still clasped tightly in his lap. He greeted each of Amina's uncles with equal respect, never raising his voice, never interrupting. There was a military air about him calm, distant, but hyper aware. The kind of man you couldn't read, but always noticed.

And Amina's father was positively glowing.

He cracked jokes, made gentle digs at Khalid's Cambridge accent, and told old stories that made everyone laugh. The same man who had once told Amina that she would die before he allowed her to marry yasir or anyone that has his blood flowing through his

veins "dangin Nan wandanda ba su da tarbiyya"was now smiling like it was his daughter's graduation.

Amina couldn't take it anymore.

She stepped back from the window, shut the curtain, and leaned against the wall.

Her hands trembled Her stomach churned Her mother entered again, quietly, holding a little glass of zobo and a bowl of dates.

"You need to eat something," she said softly.

"I can't," Amina whispered.

Her mother sighed, setting it down on the dresser.

"Sun iso Suna cikin parlour yanzu. (They're arrived)Bayan sallah ne za a fara magana da uncles dinki. (After prayers they'll start discussing the proposal with your uncles) Sannan sai kije kuyi magana da Khalid a parlor baki na biyu. (And you'll go and talk to Khalid in the guest sitting room,just the two of you)Just talk You don't even have to smile."

Amina looked at her with a mix of betrayal and sadness.

"You all promised me choice. But this doesn't feel like a choice It feels like a funeral."

Her mother blinked. The words stung visibly. But she didn't deny it. She just nodded slowly, brushing a strand of Amina's scarf out of her face.

"Sometimes, we bury what we want to protect what we need."

And with that, she left.

Amina sat on the edge of her bed, picked up her phone again still no message She typed another one to Yasir.

"They're here."

Then she stood, pulled her veil tighter over her face, with her jilbab on and walked to meet the man the world was pretending she wanted.

The guest sitting room was dim and heavy with silence. The curtains had been drawn to filter out the afternoon sun, casting the room in a mellow shade of amber. A glass jug of water and untouched dates sat on the low wooden table. The only sound was the steady whir of the ceiling fan, chopping through the tension like a slow blade.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid stood the moment she entered.

He looked more nervous than she'd imagined. Dressed in a plain white kaftan that fit him cleanly, modestly No extravagant embroidery, just his signature wristwatch, and the subtle scent of something expensive
“Assalamu Alaikum," he said gently, standing tall, hands at his sides.

"Wa alaikum salam," Amina replied, her voice brittle, almost breaking but she had to answer as the Muslim that she is

She sat across from him without waiting to be offered She didn't care about politeness today. Her heart was a battlefield, and he was the enemy. He sat as well, carefully, like he was trying not to offend the chair.

There was a painful pause. Outside, women laughed in the kitchen someone shouted about pepper a toddler squealed. Inside, the silence pressed on Amina's ribs.

Khalid cleared his throat. "I didn't expect to meet like this."

"I didn't expect any of this," she said flatly.

"I understand." He nodded slowly. "Even I'm against this."

That made her look up sharply. "And you still came?"

He paused, his throat bobbing. "Yes."

"Why?"

Khalid looked at her then properly. His eyes were unreadable, but something old sat in them. Quiet sorrow And something else a secret she wasn't invited into.

"Because," he said carefully, "I wanted to at least speak to you. Truthfully."

She didn't respond. Her eyes dropped to the hem of her jilbab. Her fingers clenched it tightly, her nails biting into her palm.

"I didn't mean to hurt anyone," he continued. "Not Yasir And especially not you But I can't undo what's already in motion."

She scoffed. "Yasir's hurting I'm hurting And you're... calm."

"I'm not calm," he said. "My hands are shaking."

She looked at them. He was right Barely visible, but they trembled slightly in his lap.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I don't expect you to like me," he said, voice quiet. "Or even want this. I just needed to meet you... properly If this moves forward and I'm not saying it should I want to begin with truth, not pretense."

Amina finally looked at him fully. For the first time, she studied his face it was stronger than Yasir's, but colder too. There was calculation behind his composure, but not cruelty. He looked like someone who had seen things he couldn't unsee, and locked them away forever. She saw grief, maybe guilt, but not regret.

"I'm not ready for this," she said, her voice cracking. "I still love him."

"I know."

She glared at him. "Then why are you here?"

Khalid inhaled deeply. "Because sometimes... what we feel doesn't stop what's written. And sometimes what's written comes at a cost."

"That's easy to say when it's not your cost."

He looked away. "You think it's easy for me?"

"Isn't it? You show up here, clean kaftan, perfume, pretending you're the better man."

"I'm not pretending," he said calmly. "I'm just here."

She leaned forward. "I hate you for doing this to him. To me I swear, I'll make this impossible. I'll find every way to break it."

Khalid blinked slowly, then locked eyes with her. His voice, when he spoke, was low not angry, but firm. It held the weight of someone used to being listened to, not because he was loud, but because he didn't speak unless necessary.

"You have every right to hate me," he said. "But don't mistake my quiet for weakness. I'm not here to win. I'm here because I was told this is where duty lies. That doesn't mean I like it."

She narrowed her eyes. "Duty to who?"

He didn't answer He leaned back, jaw tight, as if he had said too much already.

"I'll never want you," Amina said coldly. "And if you think one meeting will soften me, you're wrong. I don't care if you're a saint or a soldier. This isn't yours to take."

Khalid didn't flinch. Instead, he spoke with a stillness that made the air pause.

"I found out about you and Yasir... a week ago."

That stunned her. "What?"

"I didn't know you were his Amina. I had no idea. Not when they first mentioned the proposal."
He looked down, voice tightening.

"And by the time I realised... it was too late. I confronted my uncle. I tried to leave I was told I couldn't."

"Told? You mean you're being forced to marry me? And my dad says yasir is the spoiled one " Her voice rose with disbelief.

"No one can force me to do anything," he replied coolly. "But sometimes you get told 'this is your role now, like it or not.' And when you're part of a family like mine... saying no is more complicated than walking away."

He looked at her again, this time with something more vulnerable in his voice.

"I don't want to be your punishment. Or your replacement. But I also won't lie I came here for reasons bigger than both of us. That doesn't mean I'll ever force you. If you say no then no it is."

Silence.

Amina felt like the ground had shifted slightly beneath her feet. She opened her mouth but her mother peeked in just then, cheerful but awkward.

"A Dan sha ruwa ko?(you should drink some water okay?)she said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Neither of them answered. Her mother left quickly, muttering something about food.

When the door shut, Amina whispered, "You think being soft will change this?"

"No," Khalid replied.

"Then what do you want from me?"

He looked at her, and this time, the mask slipped just a little.
"Nothing," he said. "Except honesty And maybe someday, peace."

Then he stood up.

"If you still love Yasir, fight for him," he said. "But if you ever get tired of bleeding for a war you didn't start... I'll be here I'm not your enemy, Amina. No matter how much you want me to be."

And with that, he walked to the door.

Amina stayed seated, her chest tight, her vision blurred.

She didn't know whether to cry harder... or follow him.

Chapter eight – Becoming Mrs Khalid

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The scent of turaren wuta floated in the air, softening the tension in the parlour, but nothing could dilute what was about to happen.

Amina's father sat surrounded by his brothers and Khalid's uncles dignified men The scent of steaming shayi lingered, but the laughter that once accompanied it had dissolved. The conversation had turned.

Knees drawn close, shoulders straightened, they leaned in as though preparing for something sacred.

"Khalid yana da nutsuwa . Gaskiya muna godiya," Amina's father began, voice calm, measured, but thick with finality. "To me, I see no reason to wait. Why don't we just get them married now? A daura aure kawai Allah ya sanya albarka.(just get them married may Allah bless it)"

There was a pause stiff, respectful but it didn't take long.

"Tabbas Allah ya sa alkhairi,(of course may Allah bless it)"one uncle said, reaching for his tasbaha, fingers gliding over the beads.

"Shi ne dai (that's it)"No need to waste time," said another, already nodding.

No one objected They called Khalid's father immediately.

He didn't ask questions.

"Kayi abinda ya dace(do the necessary)," came the voice on the other end, deep and deliberate. "Yaro zai bi umarnin ka(the boy will listen to you)He is my son."

It wasn't a blessing It was an order. A reminder of power that needed no explanation. The call ended just as the parlour door opened

Khalid stepped in.

His presence drew every gaze. Tall, shoulders squared under a white kaftan that seemed almost too perfect like everything else about him. From the way his wristwatch peeked from his sleeve, to the way his perfume whispered of old money and a darker silence.

He had just left Amina moments ago. Her voice still echoed faintly in his ears, like a forbidden song he wasn't meant to hear again. Her scent lingered faintly on his sleeve. She had asked questions. Questions he didn't have the courage to answer.

"Sannunku ," he greeted, bowing respectfully, his voice a model of composure.

But the room was stiff. Too still Too quiet.

He scanned their faces Something was wrong.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His uncle cleared his throat. "Khalid,Munyi shawara (we've discussed)Your father has agreed. We'll do the daurin aure now."

Khalid's eyebrows furrowed. His voice didn't rise, but something inside him stalled. "Yanzu?(now?)"

"Eh yanzun Nan (yes right now)Right here, right now. Dukkan shaidu suna nan(we all witnesses)Kaga wacce zaka aura. (You've seen the girl you intend to marry)Everything is ready We'll just go ahead."

His gaze flicked to each man in the room, searching for softness For reason.

There was none.

He stood frozen, like a man who had walked into a trap and heard the door click shut behind him.

"No," he said, quietly but distinctly. It was the kind of no that came from someone not used to saying it aloud.
"At least let us know each other a bit maybe fix the date in seven months"
He said
The air in the room thickened.

His jaw clenched His fists curled just slightly at his sides.

One of the uncles sat up straighter voice sharp whispering to him . "After your father has accepted? You want to embarrass us in front of our in-laws ?"

A phone was passed to him wordlessly.

He took it.

Khalid hesitated for only a breath before placing it to his ear.

And then... silence.

Long, still silence

The voice on the other end was soft. Almost kind. But it carried a weight that could crush kingdoms.

No one in the room could hear the words. But they saw it the shift in Khalid.

His spine straightened His eyes lost their light. His fingers stiffened One second, he was a man The next, a boy again told to prove himself Told to obey.
Whatever was said to him whatever was whispered wasn't up for debate.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He nodded once Just once.

"Fine," he said, voice flat, emotionless.

He returned the phone. Sat down Stared at nothing.

He didn't ask where Amina was. Didn't speak again.

And that was it.

No more argument No flicker of protest.

The men around him moved fast. They called the imam. Brought in the documents. Chairs were arranged, and someone went to get goro . The daurin aure would be done, as it had always been done in Arewa tradition by men, in silence with blessings.

Khalid sat still
The room murmured around him dates were passed, zobo poured, prayers muttered but he heard none of it. His mind wasn't in the room.

It was elsewhere

With her

And with the man on the phone.
Inside the house , the air was different. Amina's mother sat on the edge of her bed, her wrapper twisted loosely around her waist, her headtie slipping slightly to the side. She held her phone in both hands, staring at the call log like it might dissolve if she blinked. The screen still glowed faintly with her husband's name.

"They've decided," he had said. "We're doing the daurin aure now Don't panic her. Just keep her inside. Allah ya sa alkhairi.(May Allah bless it)".

Just like that.

Her heart had dropped. She'd felt it physically like a stone thrown into a well, disappearing into the dark.

She hadn't said a word on the phone. She couldn't. She simply nodded even though he couldn't see her. Even though her soul was screaming.
Her sister came in
"Yaya fa 'iza ga waina fa ana soya wa (they're frying the rice cake), inzubo maki?(should I put some for you?)"

"I'm not eating now kisamun a cooler azubawa neighbors (get a cooler and put some for the neighbors)"

She replied
She got up slowly and walked toward Amina's room.

The soft hum of a ceiling fan welcomed her, mixing with the gentle buzz of her daughter's voice playing an Instagram reel of mufti menk . The scent of body lotion and orange scented turaren wuta drifted faintly in the room sweet, innocent, familiar.

Amina sat on the rug, barefoot, legs folded beneath her, scrolling through her phone with the frown of someone expecting something someone. Her jilbab was on the chair her abaya ruffled at the sleeves she had just come back from the guest parlor after speaking to Khalid .

"Mummy," she said, not looking up. "Yasir isn't picking I've called him, like, 190 times. He just disappeared , why's he acting like this now? Why is everything quiet outside?"

She finally looked up, eyes sharp. "Why is all this happening to me all of a sudden ?"
Her mother opened her mouth, but nothing came.

The words were there lodged at the edge of her tongue like glass.

They've decided They're marrying you off now You're about to become someone's wife. Someone you barely know Someone you didn't choose.

Instead, she smiled.

A tight, trembling smile.

"Uhm... ba lokaci(uhm no time)," she said, waving her hand as if brushing away dust. "It's not a big deal. Maybe he's just sad. You know what, just..." She glanced around, anywhere but at her daughter. "Stand up. Go and pray Nafila Yes.l Go and do Nafila It's always good to pray when you're anxious."

Amina blinked. "Nafila? Mummy, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, amina Wallahi, nothing kawai kedai kije kiyi Please.(just go and pray please)"

There was something about her mother's voice too soft, too urgent. Her eyes kept darting, her hands twitching like they wanted to grab her, or hide her.

Amina squinted, trying to read her mother. "Baba ya shigo ciki ne meyace?"

"No yes No. He's outside, I mean Yana parlor with the men. You don't need to worry yourself. Just go and pray."

Amina hesitated.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Something didn't feel right Her phone screen was still glowing. Yasir's name sat there on the call log, unresponsive.

She felt a knot tighten in her stomach.

But she stood up anyway.

"Okay," she said slowly.

She put on her hijab, picked up her prayer mat, and padded toward the smaller prayer room down the corridor The light was already on warm and golden and the air smelled faintly of turaren wuta

She didn't know that every step she took was taking her further from the life she had chosen.

She didn't know that as she whispered Allahu Akbar, her name was being spoken aloud by men in the parlour offered like currency, accepted like a deal.

She didn't know that her bride price had already been agreed

Behind her, her mother stood by the door. Watching her.

She clutched her own hands tightly together and whispered under her breath, Ya Allah, ka basu zaman lfy kanhada Kansu .(Ya Allah bless their marriage let them live peacefully)"

And Amina, kneeling on the soft prayer rug, eyes closed in trust, had no idea she was already being called Amaryar Khalid Aminu Bello.(Khalid aminu Bello's bride)"

Back in the parlour, the daurin aure began.

The atmosphere had shifted completely. The earlier conversation, the banter and hesitant suggestions, had dissolved into a quiet ritual of purpose. Chairs were rearranged in a semi-circle for the shaidu the male witnesses, all close relatives in dignified babban riga and polished slippers, their faces solemn under the whirring ceiling fan. A brass incense burner sat in the corner, smoke curling like a ghost through the room, thick with the scent of turaren wuta and something heavier fate.

The imam had arrived. A gentle, white bearded man from the neighborhood mosque, known for his wisdom and soft speech. He walked in and greeted everyone with a calm presence, bowing slightly as he removed his shoes at the threshold.

"Assalamu alaikum."

"Wa alaikumus salam," the room echoed back.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The marriage documents were spread neatly across the center table. A pristine white prayer mat was laid down. Small cups of zobo and fura da nono sat untouched, forgotten in the weight of the moment.

The fathers of the bride and groom gave their mutual consent in low voices, nodding respectfully at one another. A cousin leaned forward to pour water for the imam. Another opened the Qur'an and placed it beside the documents.

Khalid sat stiffly between two of his uncles, his face expressionless, spine straight. The only movement came from his thumb rubbing slowly against the edge of his ring finger an unconscious tick.
The imam turned his gaze to him.

"Khalid Aminu Bello," he said, his voice calm, formal. "Ka amince za ka aure Amina Usman Suleiman da sadakin da za a ambata?"(do you accept to marry amina Usman suleiman with the bride price you gave)"

Khalid raised his head.

His voice was smooth, almost too composed.

"Na amince," (I accept)he said. "Sadakina ten million naira. (The bride price ten million naira)Two mansions in Abuja And a 2025 Mercedes Benz GLE 580."

A pause Then a collective murmur.

"Subhanallah," one of the uncles breathed.

Another chuckled, almost nervously. "Wannan yaro ya shirya sosai.(this boy came ready)"

The imam's brows lifted, just slightly, impressed but unfazed. He turned to the witnesses.

"Kun ji sadaki?"(have you heard the bride price?)

"Mun ji," (yes we've heard)they responded.

"Kun amince da auren?"(do you accept the marriage)

"Mun amince," (we accept)came the echo.

The imam offered a brief sermon, reminding them of the responsibility of marriage, of the Prophet's words, of the need for gentleness, patience, and sincerity.

Then he turned to Khalid again.

"Ka karbi amana Allah ya sa albarka."(now you've collected a responsibility may Allah bless your union)

Khalid nodded."Amin"

Documents were signed in swift movements, pens passed down the row of men. The wali his signature with a slight tremor in his fingers, but his face remained neutral. When the imam recited the final prayer, every head bowed, every hand lifted to the ceiling in solemn unity.

"Allah ya albarkaci wannan aure. (May Allah bless your marriage)Allah ya bada zaman lafiya. (May you live peacefully)Ya albarka cikin auren da zuri'a nagari."(bless this marriage and bless them with good children)

The last Amin was whispered, deep and steady.

It was done.

Just like that.

No music No clapping No kunshi (henna)No bride Only shadows, tradition, and the weight of choices made in silence.

Khalid sat motionless for a long second after the prayer ended.

Then, slowly, he rose, One of his uncles clapped him on the back. Another whispered, "Masha Allah Ango"

But he didn't respond.
His eyes flickered to the corridor leading to the women's side of the house where Amina was likely still praying, still waiting for a call that would never come.

Still unaware that she had just become his wife.

And he hadn't even looked her in the eye.

Upstairs, Amina sat on the prayer mat, still waiting.

The prayer beads rested on her lap, untouched. Her phone screen lit up every few seconds, and each time her breath caught but it was never Yasir.

She dialed again

No answer

Her thumb hovered above his name in her contacts list. It flickered there, trembling with indecision.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She didn't press it again

Something felt... off Like a door was closing somewhere in the house. Like the air had shifted.

She stood up slowly and walked to the window, brushing aside the lace curtain. The compound below, was filled with cars even more than tge ones that had come earlier Three men in sleek

black jalabiya, unfamiliar faces, slipped in through the back gate. Not relatives Not neighbors Not ordinary They moved like men used to silence.

Her heart skipped a beat She stepped back.

She walked to the full length mirror beside her bed.

And there she was just Amina. Soft featured, dark eyed, heartbroken swollen eyes Her scarf was slipping from her hair, her eyes wide with something she didn't yet understand. Behind her, the prayer mat remained spread, a silent witness.

She didn't know it, but beneath her, on the floor just below, men were reciting verses that had already sealed her fate.

Her name had just been signed beside another's.

And across town, far from the tiled roofs and distant hum of mosques calling for Asr, a man sat in a penthouse above Abuja's glittering skyline.

He sipped slowly from a silver goblet engraved with Arabic calligraphy, ancient and worn.

His name was Aminu Bello.
To the world, he was a businessman. Oil Land Logistics A name in high places. A philanthropist with plaques and foundations. The kind of man who appeared beside governors during award ceremonies

But to those who truly knew...

He was something else entirely.

Some said he owned the underworld. Others said he was the man politicians feared to cross. There were whispers in Zaria, in Kano, in Niamey that he once made a federal minister disappear over a handshake deal gone wrong. That he had eyes in banks, bullets in courthouses, and blood on contracts.

He didn't move in politics.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Politics moved through him.

He sat now, robed in white, ankles crossed, a tiger's skin beneath his feet, and watched the sun dip behind Aso Rock through bulletproof glass. On the mahogany table before him lay a closed folder one that bore Khalid's name in black ink. Thin and clean, but heavy with meaning.

He smiled faintly.

He always knew Khalid would resist. That boy, with his quiet rebellion. His softness His dreams of escape But that's why he'd raised him the way he did. Polished Perfect Contained A mirror shining only in the direction his father tilted it.

He picked up his phone.

One missed call from Kaduna.

He didn't need to answer. It was done.

Khalid had said yes

The boy would always say yes.

Because Aminu Bello knew exactly which words to use. Which memory to touch. Which scar to press beneath the surface of that perfect composure.

Back in Kaduna, Khalid stood outside the parlour now. The sun had started to descend, washing the compound in amber. His uncles were still seated inside, laughing softly, discussing plans, praising Allah for a successful daurin aure.

But Khalid didn't move.

He stared at his reflection in the glass of the parlour window. His jaw clenched. His hands were in fists by his side.

He remembered the way his father's hand once hovered over a candle flame steady, unmoved. "Learn to burn quietly, Khalid," he had said. "Only weak men scream."

And behind him, unseen, unheard, unnoticed Amina, now his wife by law and religion, stood by her window upstairs... still waiting for a message that would never come.

She exhaled against the windowpane. At that same moment, Khalid pressed his hand against the cool glass of the parlour door.

Chapter Nine – What is Written

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina didn't hear the door open. She only felt it a shift in the air, the familiar presence of safety before her body responded. A sharp gasp escaped her lips, her chest jolted.

And then she saw him.

"Yaya Kabir," she whispered, her voice trembling.

She didn't walk she ran. Like a child Like the little girl who used to wrap her arms around his legs during thunderstorms or hide behind him when their father raised his voice. She threw herself into his chest, collapsing into him, and the dam broke.

She wept

The kind of weeping that came from the soul deep, guttural, aching. Her tears soaked through his shirt, her fists balled into the fabric like she could hold on and stop the world from spinning. Kabir said nothing. His arms went around her, strong and sure, like a tree that never bends no matter how wild the wind. He rested his chin gently atop her head and held her as her body shook with sobs.

Then another set of arms joined them, gently wrapping around them both Suleiman.

Younger, more tender hearted. The one who wore his emotions on his sleeve.

He took one look at her tear streaked face, and his own eyes filled.

"Kiyi hakuri " he said softly, crouching beside her. His voice cracked halfway through the sentence.

Amina didn't answer She just cried harder.
And then they were three tangled in an embrace thick with love and sorrow. The quiet grief of a family whose hearts were breaking together.

Kabir, the eldest, the one who always had to be strong, kept his composure as best he could. His jaw clenched. His eyes blinked quickly, fighting the sting. His hand rubbed her back in slow circles, grounding them all.

Suleiman didn't bother pretending. His tears dropped freely, his voice low as he whispered, "Ki yi hakuri, please... everything will be okay."

It wouldn't They all knew that But sometimes, that's all you could say.

After what felt like hours, Kabir gently guided them to sit down. Amina leaned against him like she used to as a child, needing the weight of her big brother beside her just to stay upright.

Kabir took her hand, his thumb stroking her fingers. "Amina," he said, voice low, careful. "We just found out, wallahi We weren't home when it happened If we were... maybe things would have been different."

Amina shook her head slowly. "Yaya Why... why couldn't they wait?"

Her voice broke.

Kabir exhaled deeply. "Because... Aure... ibada ne."

She blinked, confused. "What does that mean?"

"Aure is an act of worship, Amina," he explained, turning fully toward her. "It's not about desire. It's about submission. Just like praying, just like fasting. It's not always sweet. It's not always fair. But it's written. And what is written... you cannot fight."

Suleiman nodded beside them, wiping his face with the edge of his kaftan sleeve. Kabir's voice grew softer. "Sometimes, what we want is not what Allah wants for us. Allah ya fi sanin alkhairi. Wallahi, if you had married Yasir, maybe just maybe something bad would have happened. You don't know. We don't see the future."

"But I'm not married to Khalid yet and I love yasir ," Amina said, barely above a whisper. "Yaya... I still do."

Kabir closed his eyes briefly. That was the hardest part to hear because she had no idea she was already a married woman .

"I know, Amina," he said. "I know And I'm sorry."

She looked at him, her face twisted with pain. "But why Khalid? Yasir's cousin? The one he always talks about like a monster? I don't even know him."

Kabir gave a small nod. "I understand how that feels But listen to me." He gripped her hand tighter. "Qaddara ce You think our parents didn't know what they were doing? They chose him because they believe he can protect you. Because he has stability, a future. He may not be what your heart wanted... but maybe he is what your soul needs."

Amina shook her head, tears still rolling. "But no one asked me."

"They don't always ask," Kabir replied, painfully honest. "Sometimes, they just do what they believe is best. It's not right. But it happens."

Suleiman leaned in. "You're strong, Amina. I know you are. And I promise you, we're here. We won't let them throw you into anything alone. We'll be watching him this Khalid of theirs. If he so much as breathes wrong, wallahi, we will fight for you."

Amina nodded slowly, but her heart still refused to accept it. It beat against her ribs like it was trying to escape. Like it could run to Yasir and undo it all.

Kabir wrapped his arms around her again. "Pray, Amina Even when everything feels lost. Pray Allah listens most when we are broken."

And for a brief moment, in the arms of her brothers, she allowed herself to believe that maybe... maybe this heartbreak wouldn't last forever.

Before Amina could respond, the door opened again.

Her breath caught in her throat.

There he was her father, ambassador Usman suleiman filling the doorway with that quiet, imposing presence she had known since she was a little girl. Her mother, soft and silent, stood just behind him, her eyes unreadable.
"Ku bamu wuri," he said simply.

Kabir and Suleiman both stood up slowly, hesitantly, exchanging quick glances with their sister. Suleiman lingered, his eyes wet again. He reached for Amina's hand and squeezed it once, tightly before letting go.

And then they were gone.

The door closed

Amina's heart was thudding now, wild and anxious, as if her body already knew something irreversible was about to happen.

Her mother walked gently to the bed and sat at the edge, beside her. She didn't speak. Her hands folded neatly in her lap.

Her father crossed the room, unhurried, and sat in her study chair the same one she used every time she studied for exams or memorised Qur'anic verses. That chair now belonged to the voice of finality.

"Toh," he began, his tone calm but anchored with power the kind of voice that didn't invite interruptions. "An ce kana naka, Allah na nashi."

Amina swallowed

Her mouth was dry Her tongue felt heavy.

"Whatever happened today," her father said slowly, deliberately, "is not your fault. Kuma ba laifinki bane. It is destiny Kuma haka Allah ya rubuta."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She blinkedHer ears began to ring again. That dull, hollow sound that always came when she was overwhelmed. When she couldn't fight or flee.

Then, her phone buzzed.

She turned slightly, her heart leaping.

Yasir

His name glowed against the screen, soft and blue, like a light at the end of a very dark tunnel finally

A deep breath escaped her lips the first breath of hope all day. He was calling
Maybe they could still fix it Maybe they could run away together Maybe

The phone rang again

Her father's brow furrowed. "Wacece ke kira haka?"

He turned toward his wife. "Kashe wannan wayar mana."

Amina's mother reached for the phone.

She looked down.

She saw the name

Yasir

For a moment, something flickered in her eyes a deep, conflicted sadness but it was gone just as quickly.

She silently put the phone on airplane mode and turned it face down.
.
Amina's stomach dropped.

Her chest tightened Her hands trembled where they rested in her lap.

Her father continued as if nothing had happened.

"Komai a rubuce yake," he said, steepling his fingers. "Aure da mutuwa you don't get to choose their time. Kuma shi aure... hakuri ne, Amina 80 percent of marriage is patience Da tawakkali. Love comes and goes, but hakuri keeps a home."

Amina stared at him, but his face was a blur. Her breathing grew shallow why was he saying all this it's just an engagement and she'll find a way to break it she thought

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Yanzu dai..." her father paused, then glanced at her mother, who gave a small nod. "Munyi shawara. Mun gama magana Mun yarda."

He looked her in the eye.

"And by the will of Allah, you are now Mrs. Khalid Aminu Bello."

The world stopped.

For a moment, Amina wasn't sure she'd heard him right.

She didn't scream
She didn't speak
She couldn't.

Her body froze Her eyes widened Her mind searched for understanding, for logic, for anything that would make this make sense.

But there was nothing.

Only silence.

Her father kept talking, his words thudding in her ears like distant thunder.

"An daura," he said plainly. "The marriage is done. In a few months, you'll move to your husband's house. We know you like events and the fun of it all, so we'll allow you do your bridal shower and whatsoever you people do these days , the lefe, all the celebration with your friends."

Amina's hands were numb now. Her mouth slightly open, her breaths shallow.

Khalid.

Yasir's cousin

The one Yasir hated. The one he always ranted about. The one who walked like a shadow. Who stood like a loaded gun.

The one she barely knew

She was married... to him?

Her thoughts scattered. Her lips parted but no words came out. Her head spun. She wanted to stand but her knees said no. The walls were bending. The room was tilting.

She felt like she was floating Or drowning Or Or both.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her father's voice was now a low hum, drowned by the ringing in her ears. She could only catch fragments of his sermon.

"...Allah ya sa alkhairi..."

"... ikon Allah..."

"...Be patient, my daughter Be strong..."

She swayed, her legs buckling beneath the weight of it all.

Her mother noticed first, lunging forward and catching her just before she collapsed. She held Amina firmly, guiding her back to the bed with gentle hands. But her grip trembled. Even she was beginning to crack.

Her father, expression unreadable, stood from the chair and left the room without saying a word. No questions No comforting words. Only the echo of his footsteps, fading like the last sentence of a closed chapter.

She didn't even hear the chair scrape when he stood. She only noticed his presence when he was gone, the door closing behind him like a verdict.

"Mummy..." Amina's voice came out thin and broken, like the edge of a sob.

Her mother touched her cheek. "Amina?"

Amina turned toward her, slowly like someone waking from a drowning dream. Her eyes were red. Her lips quivered. She looked like she was sleepwalking through a nightmare.
"Mummy..." she whispered again, her breath shaking. "Na shiga uku."

Her mother's face tightened with sorrow, but she pulled her daughter into her arms, clutching her tightly as though trying to protect her from something that had already happened.

"Baki shiga uku ba, Amina," she murmured, rocking her gently. "Kiyi hakuri. Haka Allah ya qaddara. Allah ya sa albarka. Ya ba ku zaman lafiya. Kiyi tawakkali, Amina."

But Amina couldn't even nod.

She sat limp in her mother's arms, her eyes staring past the room, past the walls, into a future that no longer looked like hers.

Then a knock at the door.

It opened before either of them could answer.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Anty Maryam, her mother's younger sister, stepped in with her usual bright energy, her eyes already lighting up as she walked in like a breeze of celebration.

"Amarya!" she exclaimed but then stopped.

She saw Amina's face.

Saw the tears.

The puffiness in her eyes.

The limpness of her posture.
And instantly, her smile collapsed.

"Subhanallah," Anty Maryam whispered, her hands flying to her chest. "Amarya, tun yanzun ake shirga uban kuka haka toh kada ki damu. Everything will be okay, kinji Amina na . Look ba za mu kai ki gidan miji yau ba. Just rest. This is your home."

Then, like someone trying to lift the mood, she laughed softly and wiped her tears. "Wallahi, ai Anty fati sai dariya take yi downstairs. She said to me, 'oh Wai kinyi baki you have visitors o!'". "She said you should come and greet them."

Amina's mother nodded, forcing a small smile. "Okay Kije, I'll be down soon."

Anty Maryam left cheerful again, unsuspecting, still under the illusion that this was a day of joy.

The door closed behind her with a soft click.

Amina didn't move.

She just stared at the door like it had betrayed her.

Her mother turned back to her and reached out, wiping her daughter's tears with her thumb. Her voice was firmer now still gentle, but laced with urgency.

"Amina, kiyi hakuri. Ki daina kuka before people start gossiping. You know people especially women, especially family dinan namu They'll say, An mata auren dole.They'll twist everything. They'll paint you black in your own story"

She cupped Amina's face in both palms. "Kiyi shiru, Amina Duniya ce We all survive in it the best way we can."

But Amina couldn't stop.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She cried harder not out of weakness, but out of grief. The kind of crying that comes when something permanent has been stolen. When your voice has been swallowed by the choices of others. When you are dressed as a bride but feel like a prisoner.

She cried as though tears could rewind time.

As if each drop falling down her cheeks could somehow erase the daurin aure, undo the signatures, silence the fatiha recitations
Her chest heaved Her body shook.

And still, she didn't touch her phone.

Because what would she say to Yasir?

What words existed for this kind of betrayal?

"Yasir, sun daura min aure. Ba tare da sanina ba. To your cousin To Khalid."

Would he hate her?

Would he come for her?

Or worse would he give up?

The phone sat there, lifeless. The screen still dark. The call log still open from earlier.

She reached for it then stopped.

Her fingers curled back into her palm.

She was too afraid to know what he would say.

Too broken to explain.
Too ashamed to face the storm she hadn't caused but now had to live in.

So she wept.

And the silence around her thick, sacred, suffocating was the only thing that stayed.
Downstairs.

The men were beginning to leave, their voices fading into laughter, blessings, and the polite bustle of Northern ceremony.

Khalid lingered behind.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His frame stood tall, dressed in simple white, freshly ironed. But his shoulders were tight, eyes restless. He kept scanning the stairs, the corridors, the open windows quietly, discreetly looking for her.

He didn't see her

Not even a glimpse
Not even her voice through a door
Not even a shadow on the wall

"Salamu Alaikum," he said to the men clustered near the exit. "Nagode sosai."

They all congratulated him
"Masha Allah!" "Allah ya bada zaman lafiya!" "Kai! The daughter of Suleiman? Wallahi, you're lucky, Khalid!"

He smiled faintly. Said Amin Shook hands.

But he looked like a groom at a funeral.
When he stepped outside and approached the black SUV that was meant to take him home
he paused.

Across the street, he saw a car parked in the shadows.

Yasir's Camaro
Windows rolled down. Music playing faintly. Cigarette smoke curling from the half-open window.

Khalid's jaw tightened.

He turned back

He had to
And the car drove off

He entered the suv and left Amina's house headed back to Alhaji Ibrahim's house

At Alhaji Ibrahim's house, no one questioned him. After all, he was family the golden child, the accomplished cousin. They welcomed him warmly, with slaps on the back and warm Arewa hugs by aunties that heard about it and came as soon as they could

"Khalid! Mijin Amina! Masha Allah!"

He returned the greetings with a tight smile.

But his legs didn't stop moving. He climbed the stairs like a man walking into a warzone.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

At the top, he paused outside Yasir's room.

The door was shut. Music was louder now. Something foreign, American, aggressive.

He knocked

"Who's there?"

Khalid opened it.

The stench hit him instantly.

Kush Burnt and pungent Mixed with alcohol. A cocktail of recklessness.

Yasir sat on the edge of the bed, shirt unbuttoned, his eyes bloodshot, lips twitching with the mockery of a smirk. A bottle of something half full glinted beside him.

He looked wild.

Broken

High
Dangerous

"What do you want?" Yasir slurred. "Here to rub it in my face that you're engaged to the love of my life? That you got my leftovers, my girl, my Amina?"

Khalid stepped inside. Quietly Closed the door behind him.

He said nothing for a moment.

Then: "she's not your leftover at least have some respect I came to tell you that.."

Yasir scoffed, his laugh manic, empty. "That What? That you're daddy's perfect little puppet? That you got a prize without lifting a finger while I bled for her?"

Khalid looked at him.

There was no anger in his face only something tired. A weight Something deeper than sadness.

"I didn't choose this," he said quietly. " I was given an order I protested It didn't matter."

Yasir leaned forward. His pupils were dilated. "So what? You're just going to marry her because Baba said so? Because you can't say no? Because you're scared of him?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid stared
Then said it
The truth

"It's done It wasn't just an engagement. We had the daurin aure today. I'm married to her. As of today."

The words sucked the oxygen out of the room.

Yasir blinked. "Mene ?"

Khalid's voice dropped. "I'm sorry."

Wham!

The punch came out of nowhere sharp, direct, right to the cheek.
Khalid didn't move.

He took it like a wall.

"Fight back!" Yasir yelled, lunging again. "I said fight back, munafiki ! You think you're better than me? That because you wear a suit and speak softly, you deserve her?"

Another hit

Another shove

Khalid stumbled back slightly, his eyes steady, fists clenched but still, he didn't raise a hand.

His face now had a small bruise forming. But he didn't retaliate.

Because Khalid had been raised to control fire to bottle rage and swallow shame To be silent, even when wounded.

Zayna burst in

"Dan Allah, kabari!" she cried, throwing herself between them. "Please! Please stop! Yasir, what are you doing? Meye haka?!"

Yasir broke down.

The high had peaked and broken. What remained was raw.

He crumpled like a dying flame, sobbing, laughing, shouting all at once. His body shaking.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You took her! You took her from me! My Amina! My baby! You...!"
. He was on the floor, knees folded, head buried in his arms.

Zayna tried to hold him.

Khalid stood still hands by his side, breathing hard. The anger in him was coiled, silent. His cheek was swelling. His eyes were burning.

But he didn't strike.

Because Khalid was a man of obedience. Of shadows Of sacrifices made in silence.

He turned to leave

Just then l their mother walked in.

She took one look at Yasir drunk, weeping, shaking and her face snapped with disgust.

"Are you a child? Haba Yasir! Ka naso tara mana mutane cikin gida. Grown men don't behave like this. You're not a baby!"

She looked at Khalid's bruised face her eyes flickered with shame. "Khalid... kayi hakuri Dan Allah. He doesn't know how to lose."

She hissed and walked out.

Khalid's eyes darkened, his voice still calm, too calm. " I never asked for any of this."

Yasir stood up suddenly, stumbling a little. His breath reeked. His hands clenched at his sides. "Then you should've said no!"

"I did," Khalid said quietly. "They didn't care."

A tense silence thickened between them. The hum of the music, the burn of resentment, the weight of years and blood and betrayal hung like smoke in the air.

Yasir's eyes were wild now, glassy. "You always get what you don't even want, Khalid. Everything, you walk in and it's handed to you. Just like that."

Khalid shook his head, slowly. "You think this is a victory?"

Yasir's voice cracked. "It's Amina, man!!! Amina. You don't know what that means. You don't know her You don't love her...."

"You're right," Khalid cut in, sharp. "I don't know her. Not yet And I didn't plan this, Yasir. But she's my wife now And whether I like it or not, whether she likes it or not, I'm going to protect her Even from you."

Yasir's eyes flared. "From me?" he stepped forward, chest heaving. "You think I'd hurt her?"

Khalid didn't flinch. "You already have based on what I've heard ."
That landed like a slap Yasir froze, his mouth open, breathing hard.

"She's in her room," Khalid said "Broken, Crying and Confused. And all she wanted to do today was run to you. And where were you, Yasir? Hiding,Smoking,Drinking Angry at the world Again."

Yasir looked away, ashamed.

Khalid stepped back toward the door, his hand on the knob. "Whatever you two had... it's over. Not because I said so. Because they decided. Because life decided You can fight it all you want. But she's no longer yours to fight for."

He opened the door
Paused

Turned

"And I don't want her to hate me. But if you force her to pick between us, you'll lose her completely Not to me To herself."

Yasir was shaking now, from rage or shame or drugs or all three.

"I'll fight you for her," he said, low and serious. "Wallahi, I'll fight you to the grave if I have to."

Khalid didn't flinch.

"Then pray," he said without turning back, "that she doesn't choose me eventually "

And with that, he walked out.

The door clicked shut behind him.

And Yasir was left with nothing but smoke, silence, and the sound of his own breaking heart.

Yasir stood in the silence, shaking, his breath ragged. He stared at the floor, at the bottle, at the fading outline of his cousin in the doorframe.

Then, finally, he sat back down.

He didn't cry.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Zayna stayed behind, sitting beside her shattered brother. The scent of smoke and sweat hung in the air.

Yasir stared at the carpet, his fingers gripping the edge of the mattress like he was trying not to fall off the earth.

One had lost the love of his life and didn't know how to live without her.

The other had gained a wife and didn't know how to live with himself.

And upstairs, at Usman suleimans house Amina lay curled on her prayer mat.

The room was quiet, except for the sound of her breathing shallow, wet, shaking.

Her tears had dried on her cheeks. Her lips trembled.

The house was full of people Full of congratulations and celebration and powdered faces with painted smiles.
But inside her chest, her heart was breaking slowly, quietly in a city that no longer felt like home.

Then, a knock.

She looked up. "Waye?"

A housemaid's voice floated in: "amina , an ce dinner is served downstairs."
Her mother opened the door looked at Amina. "Do you want anything, my daughter?"

Amina shook her head.

Her mother nodded once, stood, and kissed her forehead.

"I'll call Khadija to come and stay with you tonight in baban ta zai bari You shouldn't be alone."

Then she left

And Amina was alone again.

She sat up slowly, her fingers finally brushing the cold screen of her phone. Her thumb hovered over Yasir's name.

But she didn't call
She turned it off completely.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And placed it under her pillow.

Downstairs, the air was buzzing with subdued celebration.
Aunties were gossiping
Uncles talking about politics as usual
But something about the joy felt… thin. Performed. Like everyone could sense a storm but no one dared speak of it.

Because in Northern Nigeria, a daurin aure meant permanence. The rest, as they say, was adjustment.

And upstairs, a young bride wept.

Not from heartbreak alone.

But because she had no idea who she was supposed to be now.

Mrs Khalid Aminu Bello. A title with no instructions.

Only silence And shadows And the slow, creeping fear that her story was no longer hers.

Chapter Ten – Four days after

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It had been four days since the daurin aure.

Amina hadn't touched her phone. It lay somewhere in the drawer, dark, silent, like a tomb. What would she say to Yasir? How could she explain the unexplainable? Her fingers often hovered over the power button, trembling with the urge to hear his voice. But she never pressed it.

Despite everything despite her stubbornness, her emotions, her storm of contradictions Amina was still a Muslim girl. Maybe not perfect. Maybe not pious like Khadija, with her endless dhikr and rose scented hijabs. But she knew right from wrong. She was someone's wife now. And in her faith, that meant something sacred. Something unbreakable.

Still, nothing felt real.

Everything was soft edged and slow, like a dream sliding between her fingers. Her mother would come in, call her to eat, check her forehead for fever.

She wasn't alone.

Khadija was there

Her best friend Her roommate from ABU The only girl who knew how to reach her without saying too much. Amina's mother had personally called Khadija two days after the daurin aure , voice with worry. They had pleaded with her father explained that Amina needed her. After a few hesitations and a lecture on "modesty and good behavior," he agreed.

So Khadija came with her hijabs and honey scented oils and a little bag of dates And she hadn't left her side since.
"Amina," she said that morning, dropping on the bed with exaggerated flair, "Wallahi, the way you're looking at that wall, I swear it will start talking to you one day."

Amina didn't respond.

Khadija leaned closer and poked her cheek with a finger. "Wake up, ASUU bride. You're trending on the Federal University of Matrimonial Affairs WhatsApp group. We're doing a protest in your honor next week."

Amina blinked, her mouth twitching. "You're not serious."

"da gaske fa, I've drafted a banner Say No to arranged marriage !'"

Amina covered her face, shaking her head slowly. "Khadija, stop abeg."

"Why? This is your reality now, aminatu From Miss Amina Usman suleiman to Matan Aure in three business days. Even ASUU sef didn't see it coming!"

Amina chuckled softly for the first time in days. Khadija saw it the way her friend's eyes warmed, how her shoulders lost some of their stiffness. She scooted closer, sitting cross legged on the bed beside her.

"Look, I know it's hard. I can't even imagine how you feel. But Amina... it's happened. And you're not alone. We're here I'm here Kabir and suleiman too. You've been through worse."

Amina's smile faded slightly. "But this one... this one feels final."
"It's not the end," Khadija said gently. "Maybe not the way you planned. But who said Allah's plan isn't better? Besides look at the hell yasir put uou through you deserve peace and maybe Khalid is that peace "

Amina sighed. Her eyes drifted to the corner where her small Qur'an sat beside her perfume bottle. "I just... I feel guilty Like I've betrayed him. Yasir"

"Don't say that," Khadija said, squeezing her hand. "You're the same Amina I know. But now with a ring and a house in Abuja. Don't let guilt drown you in something that wasn't your fault."

Just then, the door opened

"Mushigo !" Kabir's familiar voice boomed from the hallway. He and his younger brother, Suleiman, stepped in like overgrown children returning from school.

"Two bachelors entering the women's wing?" Khadija teased. "Are you people okay?"

Kabir grinned. "No be you I come see?"

Suleiman threw a pillow at him. "Get sense, abeg. You dey flirt for family crisis?"

Amina smiled faintly, pulling her head tie as her brothers sat on the edge of the bed. Kabir glanced at her, then nodded at Khadija.

"She's looking better, right?"

"She's doing okay," Khadija replied. "She even smiled Once."

"Progress!" Suleiman cheered. "Maybe by tomorrow she'll start singing ali jitas songs."

Amina rolled her eyes. "You people are not serious."
"da gaske fa, I've drafted a banner Say No to arranged marriage !'"

Amina covered her face, shaking her head slowly. "Khadija, stop abeg."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Why? This is your reality now, aminatu From Miss Amina Usman suleiman to Matan Aure in three business days. Even ASUU sef didn't see it coming!"

Amina chuckled softly for the first time in days. Khadija saw it the way her friend's eyes warmed, how her shoulders lost some of their stiffness. She scooted closer, sitting cross legged on the bed beside her.

"Look, I know it's hard. I can't even imagine how you feel. But Amina... it's happened. And you're not alone. We're here I'm here Kabir and suleiman too. You've been through worse."

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"Progress!" Suleiman cheered. "Maybe by tomorrow she'll start singing ali jitas songs."
Amina rolled her eyes. "You people are not serious."

"But for real," Kabir said, voice dropping a bit, "we've got you No matter how twisted this whole thing turned out. Even if it doesn't make sense right now, one day it will. You'll find your place inside it."

"Abi," Suleiman added. "And if your husband misbehaves, wallahi we'll drive to Abuja ourselves mu ci kaniyenshi"
Kabir raised an eyebrow "na khalid you wan cikaniye you and who exactly, you're very funny oo"

They all laughed, even Amina, and for a few brief moments, the room felt less like a prison and more like home.

Later that night, after her brothers had gone back downstairs and the house was quiet, Amina sat with Khadija on the prayer mat. The air smelled faintly of turarenwuta. Khadija, whispering dhikr under her breath. Amina stared at the carpet, her own lips moving slowly in prayer.

"I think..." she began softly, "...I think I'm starting to accept it."

Khadija looked up. "Are you sure?"

"No," Amina admitted. "But what can I do? I'm someone's wife now."

Khadija touched her shoulder gently. "You'll grow into it. And if you ever feel lost again, wallahi I'll be right here."

A silence passed between them, peaceful and thick with quiet understanding. Then Khadija smiled suddenly.

"So," she said, "should we talk about your mysterious husband now, or should we wait till your next year ko Sai an kaiki gidanshi ?"

Amina gave her a side eye. "Khadija please."
"No, I'm serious!" Khadija sat up, eyes twinkling. "You got married to the most mysterious man in Northern Nigeria and you won't even gist me small? The Khalid Bello. Wallahi it's like something out of one of those Wattpad mafia stories."

Amina groaned. "Don't start."

"I heard he doesn't even talk to people unless it's important. Like he just appears, gives one sharp order and disappears. Like one ghost commander."

"Where did you even hear that?"

"My cousin in Abuja works at that design firm next to his company ," Khadija said, smug. "She said he's always wearing kaftan and dark shades, walking like one silent villain in a movie. She called him Mr Ice Cube.'"

Amina laughed, despite herself. "Wallahi you people will not kill me."

"I'm just saying! I mean, have you seen him? He looks like someone who's never smiled in his life. He probably sleeps with a tasbaha in one hand and a pistol in the other."

Amina shook her head, trying not to smile. "He's not like that."

"Oh? So you've cracked the code, ke matarsa? Tell us more."

"I haven't cracked anything. I barely know him."

"Even worse," Khadija gasped dramatically. "You don't even know your own husband? Ha! This is more intense than any K drama I've watched."

Amina's smile faded slightly, her fingers tightening around her. "He's... quiet. Very quiet Like he's always thinking about something heavy Yasir said "

"Hmm," Khadija hummed, serious now. "Like someone who's fighting demons?"
Amina nodded faintly. "I think so He looks like someone who's always pretending to be okay. Everything about him is... controlled. But cold. You can't tell what he's feeling."

"Yeesh," Khadija said. "So like... hot but emotionally unavailable?"

Amina let out a snort. "You're mad."

"I mean, let's be honest. Tall? Check Rich? Check. Silent and intimidating? Double check. Tragic backstory? Unknown, but highly likely. tattoo? Wouldn't be surprised."

Amina blinked. Her heart gave a slight jump.
"Wait," she said slowly, "why would you say that?"

Khadija grinned. "I'm just messing with you! But wallahi it wouldn't even surprise me. He gives sneaky bad boy energy. Elegant, quiet... maybe dangerous. But fine sha."

"You're insane," Amina muttered, hiding a smile.

"I'm just saying. This man is not normal. And you of all people you're the one married to him. I'm not sure whether to cry for you or give you a trophy."

There was a knock at the door again, and Kabir peeked in.

"Y'all still gisting?"

"Wallahi," Khadija said. "We're dissecting your new in law."

Kabir entered fully and raised an eyebrow. "Khalid?"

"Yes who else?"

Kabir folded his arms. "That guy gives me chills."
"You too?" Amina said, sitting up.

"He came to visit Baba once in Abuja when we went for a wedding think that's where they met for the first time ," Kabir said. "Entered the house, gave one long silent greeting like he was doing surveillance Sat down, drank tea, left No small talk No jokes Just Ina yini sir, and then poof."

Suleiman joined behind him, munching groundnuts. "My friend at Federal Ministry said he once walked out of a meeting because someone was five minutes late. Five minutes!"

Amina blinked. "Seriously?"

"Yeah They say he's obsessed with time and order. My friend even said he's 'a dangerous kind of perfectionist.' The type that never raises his voice, but somehow you feel like he could ruin your whole life with just one sentence."

Khadija looked at Amina dramatically. "And this is who they gave you? Kai... it's only you God tests with these kinds of puzzles."

"But lowkey," Suleiman added, grinning, "he's fine sha. Like, ruggedly fine. I'm not gay oh abeg,but if I had his face, I'd never be humble."

Everyone burst out laughing.

Amina rolled her eyes and reached for the pillow, throwing it at Suleiman. "Mumu ."

"Just telling the truth."

Kabir ruffled her hair like the big brother he was. "But for real, we dey your back. Anything he does, you talk. This isn't the olden days where husband is god and wife is grass."

"Exactly," Khadija said. "You're allowed to feel things. To question things Even if you're married."

Amina nodded slowly. Her laughter faded into a thoughtful silence. The laughter had helped. But the truth was still there.

Khalid was a storm behind glass. Beautiful, unprediictable, and out of reach.

And she was now living in the center of it.
At Yasir's house
It was late afternoon, the sun already sinking. Shadows painted long stripes across the marble tiles.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Downstairs, Alhaji Ibrahim sat in his large leather chair in the parlour, wrapped in his white babban riga. He was reading an old copy of Leadership Newspaper when he heard the front door slam Again.

Footsteps Fast Angry.

Then the door burst open.

Yasir stood in the doorway, eyes red, his T-shirt rumpled, voice already shaking.

"Baba."

Alhaji lowered his paper slowly, squinting up at his son. "Yasir?"

"Baba I want to ask you something," Yasir said, his voice unsteady, his arms trembling where they hung. "Just tell me the truth, wallahi I won't be angry just say it."

"What is it?"

"Am I your real son?"

Alhaji blinked. "What kind of stupid question is that?"

"No, I'm serious," Yasir snapped, stepping further in. "Because the way you treat me, Baba... the way you always push me aside, the way you people give everything to Khalid even Amina even Amina, Baba! Tell me now Is he your real son and I'm not?"

Alhaji stared at him. "Wannan wace irin magana ce haka?"

"I'm tired! I'm tired of pretending like I'm not breaking inside! I've loved Amina since I was a teenager. You knew that Everybody knew that. But when he came, you gave her away like I didn't matter. You picked him, again. Like always!"

Yasir's voice cracked then. He choked and sank onto the nearest couch, burying his face in his hands.

"Just tell me, Baba. If I'm not your real son, I'll leave. I swear I'll stop expecting anything."

The silence that followed was loud.

Alhaji sighed, put the newspaper aside, and stood slowly. He walked over to his son and sat across from him, resting both hands on his knees.

"Yasir... daina wannan irin tunanin," he said finally, his voice low but stern. "You think life is about what you want?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Yasir looked up, tear streaked and bitter. "So it's not about love?"

"It's about destiny," Alhaji snapped, his voice sharpening. "Qaddara. What was written for you will come to you, and what wasn't, will never reach you even if it was standing at your door."

Yasir stared at him, blinking.

Alhaji leaned forward. "Lokacin da nake biyama ka school fees a Islamiyya, kana kin zuwa. Now you're crying over something you couldn't even pray for properly. Gashinan yanzun babu knowledge. Sai kace ba Musulmi ba."

Yasir's jaw tightened. "So I deserve this?"
"Nobody said you deserved anything. But it's happened," Alhaji said coldly. "And enough of your tantrums. You're not a boy. You're a man. Men don't sit outside a girl's house like mad men. You think that will bring her back?"

"She was mine," Yasir whispered. "She was mine, Baba."

"She was never yours," Alhaji said, voice like a blade. "She was a girl you dated. And even that, you never respected. Drugs, lies, roaming streets like a vagabond. You think marriage is for jokes?"

Yasir jumped to his feet. "But Khalid is not better! do you even know him?! He's too perfect to be true "

Alhaji stood too, matching his height, eyes sharp. "And still, I trust him more than you. Because when it was time to act, he showed up. You just sat here, crying, complaining."

"I loved her," Yasir shouted. "I loved her more than he ever could!"

"And what has your love done for you?" Alhaji's voice rose now. "What has it built? Has it made you responsible? Faithful? Steady?"

Yasir clenched his fists, chest heaving.

Alhaji adjusted his cap, his tone shifting to that of a commander. "You will go back to Abuja. Immediately. I already spoke to your boss your leave is over. Work starts Monday No more nonsense. No more parading the street like a disgraced poet."

Yasir didn't moveAlhaji raised his voice further. "Banason jin wani abu! You hear me? If you like, cry. If you like, fast for seventy days. It won't change anything. That girl is now his wife. End of discussion."

The words hit like stones.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Yasir stumbled back, his legs hitting the coffee table. His face was pale. For a long time, he didn't speak. His shoulders sagged. His knees trembled.

Then he whispered, barely audible.

"I hate you for this."

Alhaji didn't flinch. "Good Then maybe you'll finally grow."

Yasir turned, eyes hollow, and walked out. The door slammed behind him.

Moments Later

Yasir stepped into the dying light of the compound, walking past the gate as if in a trance. His car was parked across the road, the windshield dusty from days of silence. The mango tree swayed gently, its shadow stretched across the tarmac like a ghost.

He got into the car.

Put his head on the steering wheel
And screamed.

Long Broken Wordless.

Then silence

It was late evening when he arrived in Gwarinpa, Abuja The sun was slipping low, painting the sky with the kind of orange that could cut glass. Khalid walked through the gates of his father's compound with a quietness that came from habit, not humility.

Alhaji Aminu Bello was waiting.

He sat outside on a polished mahogany chair, wearing a spotless white kaftan , his cap embroidered with gold thread. His walking stick stood upright beside him, untouched. Around him, his men stood like shadows, quiet and armed.

The old mafia king looked like a monarch from another century still powerful, still cold, still untouched by time or blood.

As Khalid stepped into the grand foyer of the mansion, the scent of imported incense hit him, sharp and cold like the air around his father. The tiled floors gleamed with obsessive perfection. Every surface polished, every corner neat. Just the way Alhaji Aminu Bello liked it.

And just the way Khalid had been trained to be.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He walked in silence through the corridor, the walls lined with portraits of men in flowing robes judges, emirs, business tycoons. Men who looked like conquerors. His father among them, again and again.

Behind him, the heavy wooden doors closed with a thud.

"Come back."

Khalid froze at the voice. It wasn't loud, but it didn't need to be. His father's words always carried weight. Orders dressed as observations.
He turned back, slowly.

Alhaji Aminu still sat outside, a single cup of zobo sweating on the side table next to him. He had not moved an inch, but his eyes now stared directly into Khalid's soul.

Khalid bent low and greeted him.
"Ina wuni, Baba."
"Lafiya lau. Kun dawo lafiya?"
"Lafiya," Khalid replied, standing straight, eyes lowered.

"Sit."

Khalid obeyed, sitting across from him, spine straight, hands folded.

"I watched the daurin aure video again," Alhaji Aminu began, swirling the cup with one hand. "You looked like a corpse in a kaftan."

Khalid swallowed, forcing calm. "It wasn't my choice, Baba."

Aminu's lips curled into something between a sneer and a smile. "Of course it wasn't. You think men like us live by choice?"

Khalid met his gaze now, defiant. "I should've been allowed to choose To ask her. To"

"To what?" his father snapped, voice cutting like a whip. "To ask her if she wants to marry a broken boy who injects himself to sleep? Or one who dreams of running away every time things get hard?"

Khalid looked away. His chest tightened, fingers curling into fists.

"Spare me your rebellion," Aminu said coldly. "I warned you. I said marry the girl or I shut down everything. Your contracts Your accounts Even the gym you built with your sweat. I own it all. I own you and I can disown you at anytime ."

The words echoed.

Khalid said nothing He had known. Every step he took was still in his father's shadow.

"You think you're special?" Aminu went on, voice calmer now, almost amused. "You think because you have muscles and that Cambridge degree you're a man? You're nothing. I built men before you. I can unmake you with a phone call."

Then he leaned back, folding his arms. "But at least... you did it. Finally, you were useful."

Khalid's jaw clenched. "I never wanted to be useful. I wanted to be free."
"Then die Sai ka huta "

Khalid's jaw tightened. "You told me we were done with that life. That I could leave it."

"I lied," Alhaji said flatly. "You're my blood. And blood always comes home."

Khalid looked away, his face still and cold. "She didn't even know about the wedding until after it happened. She didn't agree to any of this."

"She's your wife now," his father said. "Halal the rest will follow Amina Suleiman will adapt. Or break. Either way, she will stay."

"Not if she chooses to leave."

The old man leaned back, eyes narrowing slightly. "Will you let her?"

Khalid didn't answer.

Alhaji stood, slowly, like a lion uncurling itself from sleep He walked over and placed a firm hand on Khalid's shoulder.

"You have one weakness, my son. You believe your silence can save people. But sometimes silence is a cage."

Khalid looked up at him, eyes burning with quiet fire. "And what about you, Baba? What's your cage?"

A flicker crossed the old man's face a rare shadow of regret, or maybe memory. Then it was gone.

"I burnt my cage a long time ago," he said.

Then he walked back to his chair, sat, and waved Khalid off.

The silence cracked like lightning. Even the guards nearby flinched at the bluntness.

Aminu's voice softened to something dangerously quiet. "Freedom is for the weak. We build empires, Khalid Not feelings."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Behind the curtain, Hajiya Maryam, Khalid's stepmother, sat on the couch, frozen. Her hands clutched a string of prayer beads, fingers trembling with silent dhikr.

She had heard it all.

As she always did.

She had watched Khalid grow from a silent, serious boy into a man wrapped in scars no one could see. She had tried, once tried to get close. Tried to give him warmth. But Alhaji Aminu had shut her down like a gate.

"He is not your son," he had said once. "Don't confuse your position here."
His real mother, Zulaihat, had died giving birth to him at 17 A girl married into a storm. A girl who bled and screamed and left a child behind, and no one dared speak her name again.

Maryam had married Aminu two years later. Khalid was barely walking. He never called her Mummy. Never cried in her arms. Not because he didn't want to, but because he wasn't allowed to.

Aminu had raised him like a project.

A weapon.

Back inside the sitting room

Khalid finally stood.

"I've done what you wanted. She's my wife now. But I won't play your puppet forever."

Aminu raised a brow. "As long as you eat from my hand, you'll dance when I say. Daina jin kanka, Khalid. You're not a prince. You're a tool."

Khalid took a slow breath, his voice low and bitter. "Then one day, this tool will break."

"Then I'll replace you."

With that, Khalid turned and walked away. The guards opened the doors again. His footsteps were quiet, controlled. But inside, he was burning.

His room was cold, metallic. Walls painted grey. A single prayer mat folded on the window ledge. No pictures No softness. Just order Silence and Shadows.

He shut the door and locked it. His breath came fast. Too fast.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He pressed his back to the wall.

His hands shook.
He tried to steady them held them to his chest, whispered something under his breath. But the world wouldn't stop spinning. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't feel his own skin. He was drowning again. Drowning in the ocean of his father's voice.

A framed Qur'an verse on the wall: "With hardship comes ease."

Khalid stared at it for a long time.

But his mind was already spinning. The voices. The control. The woman upstairs who used to try and read him stories when he was ten. The one man who had built him like glass and then dared him not to shatter.

His breath hitched. He opened the drawer, fumbled through notebooks, pens, keys

and then he found the syringe.

Without hesitation, he stabbed it into the side of his thigh Closed his eyes Waited.

The calm came quickly, like rain after harmattan.

He slipped the kaftan off, his chest rising, falling. Sweat ran down his spine.

And there it was inked across his back a large coiled snake tatto . Elegant, black, and deadly. It stretched from shoulder to waist, tongue out, eyes cold.

This was the part of Khalid nobody saw.

Not the polished Khalid of Cambridge. Not the Khalid in crisp kaftans, reciting Qur'an with his cousins on Eid morning. Not the "noble man" Ambassador Usman had chosen.

What was Amina walking into?

A man who shook with panic attacks behind closed doors. A man who followed orders like a puppet, even when it destroyed love. A man who carried a snake beneath his clothes .

Khalid lay still, chest bare, skin damp with sweat, the faint hum of the air conditioner barely cutting through the pounding silence in the room.
His eyes were fixed on the ceiling unblinking, empty. The fan above rotated slowly, casting quiet shadows like ghosts across the concrete walls.

This was his fortress

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

This was his prison

He had built it this way

Everything in its place Everything silent. Controlled and Sterile.

Because outside this room, nothing had ever been safe.

His Thoughts

"Amina..."

The name tasted like guilt in his mouth.

He had married her. Stolen her future Torn her from a boy she loved with a stupid grin and cigarette breath. A boy who deserved her, perhaps, more than he ever would.

But he hadn't done it for spite.

He hadn't done it for pride He had done it because his father had placed a gun to everything he had worked for his independence, his businesses, his sanity.

And pulled the trigger.

"I told him I didn't want to marry her. I told him. I begged him But it didn't matter. My wants never mattered Not since I was a boy."

He turned to his side slowly, his body sluggish from the drug's soft grip. His breathing had steadied, but the hole inside him had not closed.

The snake tattoo burned against his back a quiet reminder.

Of what he had become.

Of the things he had done

People called him a perfectionist. Mr Discipline. Mr Results The serious one.

But nobody knew how hard he had to fight to stay upright.

How every morning, he woke up with a hundred voices screaming in his head, telling him: "You are not enough." "Fix it." "Make Baba proud." "Do not fail."

Nobody knew the darkness that lived under his prayer mat.

Nobody saw the snake.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He remembered Amina's eyes.

He had seen her once, properly, during the daurin aure. He had stood like a statue, numb in his own wedding. Watched by cousins, uncles. They clapped and smiled, but nobody knew the war happening inside him.

The war that had been happening his whole life.

Khalid shifted again, arms resting over his eyes.

He saw Yasir's face now. That loud, chaotic, impulsive boy.

He hated him

Not because of who Yasir was.

But because of what he had.

He had freedom.

Yasir laughed loud. He kissed without shame. He cried without fear. He showed up to houses and screamed for love like it was a right.

He was the kind of man Khalid never got to be.

Because Khalid had been trained, broken, rebuilt. Like a machine. Like a soldier in a war he didn't understand.

The room remained still.

The Qur'an verse on the wall stared back at him.

"With hardship comes ease."

He had memorized it years ago. Recited it during panic attacks, during business meetings, in front of crowds that thought he was perfect.

But tonight, it felt hollow.

Amina was married to a stranger.

And the stranger was him.

He whispered into the quiet:

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Allah Ka yafe min. I didn't want to be this man. I didn't want to take her from him. I didn't want to do this."

His voice broke.

"But what choice did I have?"

A tear slipped down his temple. It stung more than the injection. More than the slap of his father's words.

The drug was dulling his body, but not his guilt.

Not his heart

He closed his eyes

Not to sleep But to escape

Just for a few minutes to imagine a different life. One where his mother had lived. One where his father had loved him. One where Amina had smiled at him without hatred in her eyes

He imagined them in a simpler place

Kaduna , maybe Or Kano

She in a modest gown. He in a clean kaftan, free of blood and secrets. He would take her to eat suya at Murtala Square. He would make her laugh. They would pray side by side. And he was actually inlove with her and She was too
Maybe then...

She would look at him like he was more than a man who took her away from happiness

But Khalid knew better

He wasn't born for peace

He was born into power, fear, legacy And now, Amina was trapped in it too.

And there was no turning back

Chapter Eleven - A new begining

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A week later
The house was quiet the kind of silence that came after storms. Amina sat on her prayer mat by the window, her hijab slipping slightly over her shoulders. Her fingers were wrapped around her tasbih, but the dhikr had long faded from her lips.

Then, a knock Gentle Hesitant.

"Amina," her father's voice came, low,
"Come downstairs "

She stood slowly. Her heart was thumping in that strange way the way it did when you were about to see someone you loved, but feared. She adjusted her scarf and stepped out.

He was not in his usual place not in the study, surrounded by books and titles. He was in the main sitting room, seated dressed in a plain white kaftan. No hula
Just her father Or maybe just a man.

He looked up when she entered and offered a soft nod. "Zo zauna."

She sat on the rug, careful, unsure. The silence between them hung like fog.

He swallowed. Cleared his throat. Then, his voice quiet, breaking

"Amina, ki saurare ni... ba kamar mahaifi ba. Amma kamar wani mutum da ke ƙaunar ki fiye da kansa."
("Amina, listen to me... not as your father. But as a man who loves you more than he loves himself.")

Her breath caught in her throat.

He turned his face away briefly, voice shaking. "I failed to be a gentle father. I chose strength and rules... but I forgot your heart feels pain like mine."

Amina's eyes burned. Her fingers tightened in her lap.

He continued, more hoarsely now:
"Ke kaɗai ce 'yata. Ke ce kadai ya mace da Allah ya bani. Do you know what that means to a man like me?"

She nodded, mouth trembling.

He lowered his head and wiped at his face, but the tears didn't stop.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I made you cry too much. I hurt you with my own hands. I failed to protect you... even when I thought I was doing so I was too strict raising you kuma bawai banasonki bane but I was scared of the outside world ."

Amina gasped softly. She had never not once in her life seen her father cry. But now, here he was. Not the man who shouted at the gatekeepers or silenced her suitors. Just Baba Just a man, breaking.

She crawled closer, voice barely audible. "Baba..."

He took her hands in his rough, calloused, shaking.

"Na aikata kuskure, Amina. Na riga na yanke hukunci ba tare da jin ki ba. Ban tambaye ki me kike so ba even though I knew . I was so afraid of losing you to that boy ."

She broke, sobbing openly now, her head falling into his lap like she was a child again.

"Baba... forgive me," she cried. "Please I was angry... I said horrible things Dan Allah ka yafe mun "

He cupped her head, shaking his own.
"No, no Ki yafe min. It's me who wronged you. Wallahi, ba laifinki bane."

They wept together, quietly,
Then he spoke, slowly, carefully.
"Yasir has a heart. But he has no shoulders. Your heart may love him, but life won't let you grow together. He's not responsible enough amina and this life you need someone strong to take care of you yasir is too soft

She inhaled sharply, still in his arms.

"Na zabi Khalid ba don yana da kuɗi ba. Ba don yana da suna ba. Na zabe shi don na ga cewa zai iya tsayawa da ke, ko da duniya ta juya muku baya."

Amina sniffled, then whispered:

"But Yasir will do thesame"
He nodded slowly. "I know but amina you and yasir have done things I've tried all my life to keep you away from Kuma hakan ne dalilin da yasa nake kuka because I feel like I've failed as a father But maybe, just maybe... this marriage will bring you back to something better Allah's mercy A future,Stability,Dignity."

She pulled back gently, her face stained with tears. "Do you really believe that?"

He looked her dead in the eyes. "I do amina this could be a fresh start for you And I pray every day that Allah turns this marriage into a mercy for you."

She collapsed into his arms again.

"I promise to try," she whispered. "For you For mummy . I will try in Sha Allah But I need time."

He nodded into her scarf. "Take it I'll be here. Komai kiga nida mamanku munyi it's for your own good kinji ."

Then he pulled back, gently cradling her face like he used to when she was five.

"Ki zama matar aure. Amma kada ki daina zama Amina. Don Allah kada ki manta da kanki."
("Be a wife But don't stop being Amina Please don't forget yourself.")

She smiled through her tears, hands over his.

"Thank you, Baba. Thank you for coming back to me."
He kissed her forehead with trembling lips. "Allah ya albarkace rayuwarki ."

And for the first time in a long time, Amina felt like someone's daughter again.

Not just someone's bride.

Later That Day in Her Bedroom

Amina sat cross legged on her bed, her back pressed to the wall, hands resting in her lap. The room smelled of turaren wuta . But everything else felt... still.

Except her heart.

Yasir's bracelet the black leather band he gave her during their last anniversary in Zaria lay untouched in the top drawer of her vanity, next a forgotten bottle of blue nail polish.

Her phone silent for days sat face down beside her pillow.

She stared at it for a long time.

Then, with trembling fingers, she picked it up and pressed the power button.

The screen lit up.

And then came the flood.

114 missed calls on what's app
38 voice notes.

Dozens of messages.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

All from one name
Yasir

She opened the first voice note His voice was broken, breathless.

"Amina... please Let's run away. I swear we can still fix this. I've been thinking we'll go to Lagos. We'll find work. Anything Just you and me."

Another played automatically
"Tell Khalid you want a divorce. He'll understand. He's my cousin, Amina, not your jailer. You don't love him You don't even know him..."

Another. Shaky Almost whispered.

"Please... just talk to me. I'm dying without you."

Her eyes blurred

Her throat tightened

Then came the guilt heavy, thick, familiar.

"Ya Allah," she whispered, tears slipping down her cheek, "maybe this is my second chance... or my final test."

She wiped her eyes, then turned when the door opened

Khadija
She stepped in quietly, in her green boubou, a soft scarf tied loosely around her head. She looked at Amina, then at the phone, then back again.

she said gently, sitting beside her. "Yasir?"

Amina didn't look at her. She just nodded.

A long silence passed Then"I have to see him," Amina said, voice barely above a whisper.

Khadija frowned. "What?"

"One last time."

Khadija's eyebrows shot up. "Amina Haba After everything?"

"I need closure."

"You had closure. You were married in your father's sitting room . You cried yourself into tahajjud. That was closure."

Amina looked at her, eyes bloodshot. "Not for me. Not for my heart. I need to face him. Not as the girl who belonged to him. But as the woman who no longer does."

Khadija exhaled, folding her arms.

"You know that's dangerous, right? He's desperate. You're vulnerable. One wrong word and"

"I won't go back to him," Amina interrupted. "I'm not stupid."

Khadija raised a brow. "You're not stupid. You're emotional Big difference."

Amina smiled faintly. "So are you."
Khadija scoffed. "Me? Emotional? Please The last time I cried was when I dropped suya in the gutter"

They both laughed softly the kind of laugh that carried sadness at its edges.

Then Khadija reached over and took Amina's hand.

"Ami," she said gently. "I know you're doing this for yourself. But promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me you won't hope. Don't go there looking for some last minute miracle. You're married now. You've chosen. Whatever happens with Khalid even if it's just silence it's real. Don't disrespect it by running back in your mind."

Amina nodded slowly, squeezing her hand. "I promise."

"And don't let Yasir kiss you."

Amina blinked. "Excuse me?!"

Khadija pointed a finger. "Wallahi, Amina, you two are like magnets. That man only has to say 'Habibti' and you forget your father's name."

"I do not!"

"You do!" Khadija shot back. "Remember that time he brought you that pepper soup and called you 'Aminooo'? You forgave him for texting three girls in one week."

Amina groaned, covering her face. "Please. Don't remind me."

"I will remind you," Khadija said. "So you don't go soft when he starts crying and quoting Rumi."
Amina laughed again this time louder then slowly leaned her head on Khadija's shoulder.

"I hate that this hurts so much," she murmured.

Khadija rested her head against hers. "It's supposed to. You're shedding old skin. That's not painless."

Silence again.

Then Khadija asked gently, "Where will you meet him?"

"I don't know. Not here Maybe... Ahmadu Bello Park. Or muffins and brownies Somewhere quiet Neutral."

Khadija nodded. "Okay. I'll go with you. I'll wait nearby. In case it gets too much."

"You don't have to."

"I want to I'm your emotional bodyguard now. Deal with it."

Amina smiled faintly. "Thank you."

Khadija stood. "Now go shower and iron that pink abaya he used to love. Then wear something else. Let him know you've changed."

Amina chuckled. "That's evil."

"That's closure," Khadija replied with a wink.

As she left the room, Amina looked back at her phone.

Yasir's voice still echoed in her head. His promises. His panic.

But her heart was no longer sprinting toward him.

It was walking slowly, painfully away. Toward something unknown.

But finally, finally... hers.
She texted yasir
"Meet me at muffins and brownies at 5!!!"

Back at Yasir's house he was getting ready to leave for abuja when the text came in
He picked up his car keys and ran out of the houses

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Meanwhile back at Amina's house khadija convinced Amina's parents that She was taking her for icecream cause she needs fresh air at least so they asked Amina's brother suleiman to drive them
The ride to the restaurant was silent. Not the kind of silence that screamed, but the kind that mourned slow and heavy.

Suleiman's eyes remained fixed on the road. His jaw was tight, hands steady on the steering wheel. But he knew. The way an older brother always knows when his sister is carrying a wound that words cannot touch.

Khadija sat beside Amina in the back seat, holding her hand.

"You can still turn back, you know," she whispered.

Amina shook her head. "This is the turn back."

Khadija squeezed her fingers and said nothing more.

When they arrived at the place Yasir was already inside.

He sat in the far left booth

Slouched Thin Unshaven

His white shirt was wrinkled. His eyes were darker than usual as if sleep had become something foreign.

But when he saw her Amina, in a plain grey abaya, a soft lilac scarf tied modestly, eyes full of sorrow and surrender he stood up abruptly, as if his breath had been knocked out.

He opened his arms.

She stopped

Just one step away

That hurt more than if she had slapped him.

His arms dropped slowly.

"Amina..." His voice cracked dry, broken, almost childlike.

She didn't look directly at him. "Please... sit."

They both sat across from each other. A cracked plastic table between them. And years of memories.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The silence was not awkward.

It was sacred.

Finally, he smiled, but it was the kind that hurt. "I've missed you so much like it physically hurts."

Amina blinked. "I know."

He leaned forward, both hands on the table. "You didn't reply to any of my messages. Not one."
"I couldn't."

"Why?" His voice was soft. Pleading. "Why, Amina?"

She looked up. And this time, their eyes met. "Because I'm married, Yasir."

A full second passed before he spoke.

"What?"

"To Khalid," she said quietly. "Officially. Islamically Sadaki. Everything It's done."

He flinched like she'd punched him in the chest. "Aminaa I know but ....."

Amina swallowed. "I didn't know at first. They did it while I was praying. I was upstairs, making du'a. I was praying for clarity... and they were marrying me off."

He rubbed his face. "What kind of madness is that? What kind of father"

"Don't insult my father," she interrupted sharply, tears forming. "Please Wallahi, Yasir, I've said those words before, out of anger. But I saw him cry. I saw a man crumble in front of me, not because of pride but because of love."
Yasir shook his head, his voice rising. "And you just... accepted it? Just like that? After everything we've been through? After us?"

Amina's lip quivered. "You think it was easy? You think I didn't break inside? I fought for us until my prayers felt like war. But today ... I realized maybe I wasn't fighting for us . Maybe I was fighting my destiny ."

Yasir's breath caught. His shoulders dropped. "So that's it? Just like that?"

"No," she said. "Not just like that. With pain. With guilt With sujood soaked in tears."

He stared at her. Silent , Angryand Heartbroken.

"I loved you," he said finally. "Wallahi, I still do."

She nodded. "I loved you too. I still do."

"Then why"

"Because love isn't always enough," she whispered.

Yasir looked away, blinking fast. "

You used to say we were written in the stars."

She smiled faintly. "Maybe we were. But maybe stars fall too."

He reached for her hand across the table.

And again gently, firmly she pulled it back.

He closed his eyes. His voice trembled. "Does he... does Khalid make you happy?"

"I don't know yet."

"Do you love him?"

"I barely know him. Yasir I met him at my house when they were doing the daurin aure how would I know"

"Then why choose him over me?"

She looked him dead in the eye. "I didn't Allah chose him ."

Yasir looked like she'd stabbed him.

A tear rolled down her cheek. "And I owe my father one last obedience. For everything he's done for me. For the tears he shed in the sitting room where he gave me away."

Silence.

He was crying now full, broken tears the kind men cry when they realize they've lost something eternal.

"I'll never love anyone the way I loved you," he choked.

She nodded. "You don't have to. That kind of love... it only comes once."

Yasir wiped his face, failing miserably to hide his heartbreak. "So this is it?"

She took a deep breath. Then whispered, "Yes."

"But I... I didn't even get to say goodbye."

"You don't have to."

"Why not?"

"Because part of me will always be yours. Even if you can't touch it anymore."

He couldn't speak. So she leaned forward and said softly:

"This isn't the end of you. It's just the end of us."

She stood slowly.

Khadija was already waiting by the door.

Suleiman stood beside the car, watching quietly, like an older brother guarding a wound that couldn't be seen.

Yasir remained in the booth, motionless.

As she turned to leave, he stood.

"Amina," he called softly.

She turned not all the way, just slightly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be the man you deserved."

She smiled through her tears. "You were the man I needed For a season."

And then she walked away.

No dramatic music No last embrace. Just footsteps fading.

She didn't turn back.

And that made it real

That Night Amina's Room

The house was quiet again.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

But this time, it wasn't peace It was aftermath. Amina sat on the rug in the centre of her room not on the bed, not on her prayer mat just there, on the cold floor. Her scarf had fallen loose around her shoulders. Her fingers trembled as they held her phone.

A photo of them stared back at her.

Yasir in his kaftan, grinning. Amina beside him in a blue scarf, her eyes lit up the way only he could light them. A memory of laughter now ghosted in pixels.

She exhaled shakily Then... she pressed delete.

One by one, the memories were erased Photos Voice notes Messages The audio he once sent her saying "Na fi kowa sonki, Amina. You hear?" gone.

The playlists he made. The inside jokes. The voice note where he recited suratul yasin for her during her panic attack. The one where he cried after their breakup. All of it... gone.

But her chest still ached with each tap.

Khadija knocked softly, peeking in. "You good?."

Amina didn't answer at first.

Then in a whisper, "I'm okay Just tired."

Khadija came in, sat beside her. "You did something brave today."

Amina closed her eyes. "It doesn't feel brave It feels like dying slowly."

"Sometimes, dying to yourself is the first step to being reborn."

Amina finally stood. She opened her wardrobe and pulled out a box.
Inside it a bracelet, a perfume bottle, a hoodie that still smelled like Yasir, letters he'd written her, and the tiny suya paper they once scribbled jokes on during a long walk home.

She picked them all out like cutting parts of her own flesh and placed them into a black nylon bag.

She walked downstairs to the backyard, where the housemaids were sorting laundry.

One of them, Rabi, looked up in surprise. "Hajiya?"

Amina handed her the bag. "Take these I won't need them where I'm going."

The maid hesitated. "Is everything okay?"

Amina gave a small, tired smile. "It will be. Insha Allah."

She returned to her room. Her eyes found the mirror.

She looked at herself really looked.

Eyes swollen Soul shattered But something in her face had changed. It wasn't just grief.

It was resolve.

She whispered to her reflection
"I won't let his memory make me sin in my marriage."

Then she picked up her Qur'an, placed it on her chest like armour, and lay in bed.
Meanwhile Yasir's House

The door was ajar. His room was dark except for the blue LED light under his desk, glowing like a fading heartbeat.

Yasir stood in the middle of the room, his bag half packed on the bed. His shoes already on. His body upright.

But his spirit...

Shattered.

His mother entered slowly. She had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, her eyes swollen with quiet sorrow. She didn't say much just came and wrapped her arms around her son she was strict with him sometimes but he is always going to be her child and she knew he was broken inside.

"My baby," she whispered. "Allah ya maka albarka."

He leaned into her hug. For a brief second, he allowed himself to be a boy again held, protected.

Then he pulled back.

"I have to go."

She nodded, eyes heavy. "Abuja ?"

"I don't know. Just... not here Not Kaduna and maybe work will distract me"

His younger sister, zayna, entered and stood by the door. "We'll miss you," she said, trying not to cry.

He walked to her, hugged her tightly. "Take care of Umma for me. Okay?"

Zayna sniffled. "Promise you'll come back next week ?"

Yasir smiled faintly. "I will . When it doesn't hurt to breathe her name."

His father didn't come out of his room. They hadn't spoken much lately. But Yasir didn't expect him to.

He zipped up the bag and grabbed his car keys.

At the last second, he paused.

His eyes scanned the desk... and there it was.

A silver bracelet beaded with white agate and a tiny charm shaped like a crescent moon.

Hers.

The one she gave him on his birthday with a tiny note: "So you remember me in sujood."

He picked it up.

Slid it on his wrist.

And left.

Outside, the cold night air hugged his skin as he walked toward his matte black Camaro. The engine roared to life like a beast mourning its master.

Yasir sat in the car for a long moment, staring at the gate.

Then, softly, he whispered to himself:

"She's gone But I'm still breathing."

He drove through the empty streets of Kaduna past the school where they once sat in his car listening to slow songs, past the roundabout where they fought over jollof, past the masjid where he first saw her praying, palms trembling in the moonlight.

Every corner held her shadow.

But he didn't stop.

He passed the border out of town, then whispered into the night

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"It's time to grow up."

But on his wrist, the bracelet remained.

Because some love doesn't leave with the person.

It lingers Quiet but Alive.

Abuja Khalid's Office

It was nearly 6:30 p.m., but the lights in Khalid's office still burned sharp white against the descending Abuja dusk.

The room was silent except for the rhythmic click of a Montblanc pen tapping against a desk and the soft hum of the air conditioner. Khalid sat alone, sleeves rolled just above the elbows, his shirt collar open. His brows were knit, eyes skimming a document on corporate zoning laws.

He looked every inch the professional precise, hard, unreadable. But beneath that polish, there was always a storm waiting for a reason.

The glass door creaked open.

"Sir?" Alero, his assistant, peeked in with caution.

He didn't look up. "Yes?"

"The regional commissioner's aide just called again. They're hoping to move the meeting earlier."

"Tell them no."

A pause.

"Also, your father's secretary sent an email. Twice."

Khalid looked up this time. His eyes were like still water calm, but deep.

"Delete them both. And Alero..." He leaned forward slightly.
"Any email with his name in the 'From' field, I don't ever want to see it again."

Alero nodded, used to this. He'd been working for him for years, and still didn't know exactly what Khalid Bello had been through. But he knew one thing he didn't bluff Ever.

"Yes, sir."

He returned to his files. As he left, his phone buzzed.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He glanced at the screenOne new message.

Yasir
"She's all yours, man Hurt her, and I promise you'll regret being born. But don't worry... she still hates you As usual Good luck, cousin."

Khalid didn't move for a long moment.

No change in expression. No comment. But his jaw ticked that familiar twitch that came only when something pierced deeper than it should've.

He locked the phone.

Closed the file.

Then stood.

Later His Apartment

The apartment smelled faintly of oud and clean soap Modern Minimalist Stark. He stays there when he dosent want to go home to his wicked father

He tossed his keys onto the counter, removed his shirt in one motion, and walked to the mirror.

His reflection stared back sculpted, lean, but scarred. His back was a web with his snake tattoo

He uncapped the small syringe, filled it, and exhaled slowly. This wasn't about addiction. This was about stillness About control.

He tightened the belt on his arm.

Phone ringing
Unknown Number
He paused Syringe in one hand, phone in the other.

He answered
"...Hello?"

A beat. Then, her voice.
"Amina."

Everything inside him went still.

He blinked once. "Amina ... how did you get my number?"

"My father gave it to me. Yours gave it to him. Congratulations, husband."

He turned from the mirror.

There was a long silence between them.

Then he said, carefully, "Last time we spoke, you said you wanted nothing to do with me."

"I still don't." Her voice was sharp, but the anger didn't last. It fell off like a veil.

"But can you come to Kaduna tomorrow?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because I asked. Please."

He hesitated.

She didn't say much, but something in her tone exhausted, yet composed made him answer.

"...Fine. I'll make arrangements."

She was about to hang up when she added softly,

"See you tomorrow, Khalid."

And then the line went dead.

Khalid stood for another moment.

Then, slowly, he dropped the syringe into the bin.

Amina's Bedroom same Night

Amina sat cross-legged, in an oversized T-shirt and a loose scarf. Her skin was bare of makeup, lips dry, eyes tired.

She had cried earlier. But now... she was just quiet.

Khadija was scrolling through her phone, but watching her best friend with side glances.

"So..." she said finally, breaking the silence. "You called your husband?"

Amina rolled her eyes. "You're enjoying this too much."

"Me? Never." Khadija grinned. "So what did he say?"

Amina shrugged. "He was quiet Calm Said he'd come."

"He didn't sound... weird? Angry?"

"He never sounds anything," Amina murmured, more to herself. "That's the scary part."

Khadija propped herself on an elbow. "But you called him. That's something."

"I called him because Baba asked me to. Not because I want him."

Khadija nodded slowly. "And yet... here we are."

They fell silent for a moment.

Then Khadija teased gently:
"You do know it's haram to deny your husband his rights, right?"

Amina groaned and threw a pillow. "Wallahi you're shameless."

Khadija caught it mid-air. "I'm serious! You're married now. Marriage is ibadah
Intimacy is sunnah."

Amina gave her a look. "He looks like the type who likes control."

Khadija leaned in. "And?"

"Well..." Amina smirked tiredly. "He'll learn how to listen too."

They both burst into laughter not quite joy, but a release of tension.

Then silence again.

Khadija looked at her with a little more care. "Do you trust him?"

"I don't even know him," Amina replied. "But he... didn't sound like the devil Yasir made him out to be."

Khadija folded her hands behind her head. "Sometimes, the devil wears a nice kaftan and prays five times a day."

Amina raised an eyebrow. "Thanks That's very comforting."

They both laughed again.

Then Amina leaned back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Khadee. But I know I can't keep being the girl Yasir loved. I need to become the woman my father wants."

Khadija reached out and squeezed her hand.

"Then start with Bismillah."
Amina smiled, eyes glassy.

"Bismillah."

Chapter twelve – The relationship with no name

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

ABUJA 12:00 PM

Khalid packed in silence.

No one watched

His apartment smelled like lemon bleach and absence the kind of clean that felt clinical. A hotel room, not a home. No shoes at the door. No photographs on the wall. Just a Qur'an gathering dust on the shelf. A glass of untouched water by the window.

A life on mute.

He zipped his duffel bag, slow and methodical every shirt folded like a soldier's uniform. The silence around him was loud and heavy.

He opened the bedside drawer.

The syringes were still there, neatly lined beside the small brown vials. He stared at them. The ache in his chest, that sharp flutter in his ribs, had been building for days anxiety cloaked as silence A ghost of control.

His hand reached for one vial. Then paused.

Not today
He slid the drawer shut, picked only two syringes, wrapped them in gauze, and tucked them deep into the inside pocket of his bag.

His phone buzzed A message from his father, the last conversation still fresh in his mind.

"Amina asked you to come?"
"Yes."
"Then go She's your wife now Do as she says."

No warmth No curiosity No well wishes.

Just orders.

Khalid never did anything without his father's permission. It was not fear not exactly. It was something colder than that Conditioned obedience A leash made of memory.

He'd told his father he wanted to drive alone. That the quiet would help him think.

His father had nodded. "Fine."

But Khalid knew better.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

There would be cars following him silent, discreet, tinted. His father trusted no one. Not even him.

Especially not him ON THE ROAD ABUJA TO KADUNA

He drove with one hand on the steering wheel, the other resting near the gear. The black SUV moved smoothly, eating up the highway. The AC hummed low, and outside, the Nigerian sun poured gold onto the red laterite earth.
He passed Zuba. Then villages without names.

Children played barefoot, chasing tires, kicking rubber balls made from old bags. Boys rode bicycles with bent spokes, girls rode pillion on bikes, their hijabs flying like capes behind them.

They laughed freely They screamed without fear.

Khalid had never known that sound.

His childhood was silent corridors. Nannies who never smiled Security men who never spoke unless spoken to. A schedule as tight as prison chains Morning Qur'an class. Afternoon French. Evening martial arts Night drills with men who taught him how to shoot before he learned how to feel.

He didn't know what it meant to scrape his knees To play To fail To be a child.

He only knew discipline. Performance and Pain
ON THE HIGHWAY

The road bent. He drove past rocks, farmlands, weather worn signposts and check points

The silence inside the car turned into noise in his head.

"You're going to meet your wife."

"A girl you barely know."

"You'll smile Pretend Let them dress you like a puppet."

"And she'll smile too. But she hates you already."

He gripped the wheel tighter.

Why had she called him?

What did she want from him, really?

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Does she know what kind of man she married?
ZUHR OUTSKIRTS OF KADUNA

He pulled into a small mosque dusty, sun bleached, cracked walls but sturdy.

The water was cold. Icy It woke him up as it rushed over his face, arms, feet.

The prayer was short, the imam's voice faltering but honest.

Khalid prayed in the back corner, alone The carpet beneath him was faded, its green threads worn into grey. As he bowed, his forehead touched the floor with more truth than anything he'd said all year.

When the prayer ended, he sat still. Eyes closed.

Whispers escaped his lips.

"Ya Allah..."
"Please don't punish her for my sins."
"She didn't ask for this I didn't either."
"But if one of us has to suffer... let it be me."

A pause

"Because I don't know love. I don't deserve it."
"All I know is violence and Control."
"And she's light Even if she doesn't know it."
"And I..."
"I ruin everything I touch."

The wind stirred through the open windows. Dust motes danced in the sunbeam that stretched across the carpet.

His throat tightened.

Not from tears He'd learned to stop those years ago.

But from the quiet ache of truth.

BACK IN THE CAR

He sat behind the wheel. For a long time, he didn't start the engine.

He stared at his hands.

They looked clean.

But he knew they weren't.

He had broken things.

People.

And soon, he'd have to walk into Amina usman Suleiman's life forever .

Not as a stranger
Not as Yasir's cousin.

But as her husband
AMINA'S HOUSE KADUNA

Amina had informed her parents the night before that she wanted to speak with Khalid properly about the wedding celebration and everything surrounding it. Because that's what they'll want and at this point it was about pleasing them and maybe the preparation will distract her and she won't have to think about yasir or whatever is happening around her she'll make sure she's too occupied and she should at least build some sort of friendship at least with her husband not love no she wasn't planning on letting anyone take Yasir's place not ever but if she's going to live with someone in thesame house forever then she should at least like him ,Her father had given her Khalid's number, saying, "He's your husband now. Call him yourself."

She did.
The call lasted less than a minute.

Khalid answered in that calm, emotionless tone of his. Said he'd come. No hesitation No emotion.

That morning, the household moved like it was preparing for royalty.

At exactly 7 a.m., her mother knocked once before entering her room. She didn't wait for permission.

"Amina, tashi me lalle tazo (wake up The henna woman is here.)"

Amina groaned under her breath. "Mummy... lalle kuma? Why?" She asked
"Mijin ki zaizo and you're asking why"
Her mother replied

"Mummy please...." She said going back to bed

"No excuses," her mother snapped. "Your husband is coming to see you properly. Not as a stranger Not as a guest bawai yazo neman aure ba like the other time But as your miji. You can't meet him looking like one village girl."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She pulled the curtains wide open. Harsh sunlight spilled in, burning the dreams from Amina's eyes.

Her mother called the house girl to bring the abaya she got for Amina and gold accessories, headscarves folded with precision
Amina sat up, frowning. "I don't like any of these."

"You're not dressing for yourself," her mother said firmly. "You're dressing for your husband you now belong to."

Amina's mouth tightened, but before she could argue, Khadija her best friend and the only person keeping her sane strolled in, sipping kunun aya like it was iced coffee.

Khadija raised an eyebrow. "Don't start, Amina. Just do what she says."

Amina gave her a tired look. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am," Khadija said with a grin. "But right now, your mother has the power of ten generals. I don't want to die today."

The henna artist a soft spoken woman from Rigasa got to work. She tied Amina's hands and feet with nylon to hold her still. The paste was cold and wet and tickled a little.

While her mother disappeared to go yell at the cooks, Amina and Khadija sat in the cool of the room, the air buzzing with quiet preparation.

Maids brought fried plantain and eggs with kosai and warm kunun tsamiya Khadija rolled her eyes and took the cup.

"You're not allowed to stain your hands, amaryar Khalid ," she said teasingly. "Let me feed you like a good wife in training. This is how you'll be feeding Khalid when he is hungry like your mum said you belong to him now"

Amina laughed despite herself, mouth full. "You're so annoying."

"Thank you." Khadija winked. "Eat and stop thinking about Yasir."

Amina looked away.

Khadija nudged her knee. "He's gone I spoke to zayna last night Sge said he left to go back to abuja for work . But now you're married to a fine man Cold, scary, emotionally unavailable yes but fine."

Amina scoffed. "He's not even that fine. Just tall, and depressed."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"He's black and white like a chess piece," Khadija said, laughing. "One minute calm like ice, the next like he's holding war in his throat."

Amina shook her head. "He doesn't even talk. Or smile Like he's allergic to joy."

"Well," Khadija grinned. "He's still your husband."

By the time the henna dried and was scraped clean, her hands and feet were covered in elegant, swirling patterns traditional arewa lalle with modern f
finesse.

Amina showered, came out in a white towel, and got dressed in the maroon abaya her mother left on the bed. It shimmered under the sunlight. Khadija tied her turban in a soft, layered style, and dabbed a little nude gloss and light kwalli on her eyes.

When Amina finally looked at herself in the mirror, she blinked.

She looked... like a wife. A Northern bride. Regal Restrained and Quietly beautiful.

"Mrs. Khalid Aminu Bello," Khadija said in a mock announcer's voice. "Wife to the most emotionally constipated man in Northern Nigeria!"

Amina rolled her eyes and tried not to smile. Her hands were trembling.

DOWNSTAIRS

The house had gone quiet.

Too quiet

Even the guards were tense
Then
The gate creaked open. Slowly and Cautiously.

The black matte SUV rolled in like it didn't belong on dusty Kaduna roads. It stopped in front of the house, engine purring low. Doors didn't open immediately.

The staff stood still.

Even the air shifted.

The Bello name meant something Money power and fear

Khalid stepped out tall, dressed in ash colored kaftan and black hula, sunglasses on, his jaw tight. He looked like he'd been carved out of silence and metal.

Her father walked out to meet him, adjusting his white babban riga.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Ina wuni, Baba," Khalid greeted, bowing his head respectfully.

"Ka iso lafiya, my son," Alhaji Usman replied, offering a brief, approving nod.

They shook hands.

Khalid removed his shoes at the door, walked in with quiet precision.

In the sitting room, her mother was already waiting wrapped in her regal blue lace, lips pressed tight. She watched Khalid like a mother hen guarding eggs. His every movement, every blink.

He greeted her politely. "Ina wuni, Hajiya."

She nodded slowly. "Lafiya kalau."

Silence.

Then, Alhaji cleared his throat. "Amina, come down."
" daka bari an kawo mai abinci ai Alhaji " Amina's mother said
"No im not hungry fa mama " he said smiling briefly
"Aa haba bari akawo " as She stepped out Amina was already on her way downstairs
She came down slowly.

Not rushed Not hesitant Just... composed.
Like a woman who'd learned how to carry pain without spilling it.

A maroon abaya, embroidered with gold vines, flowed like a river down her frame Modest and Elegant Not for show but still unforgettable. Her henna hands shimmered softly in the afternoon light, as though someone had drawn poetry across her skin.

Her lips were bare No gloss, no smile.

But her eyes tired as they were held something older than defiance.
As she stepped into the sitting room
"Assalamualaikum "
She said
"Waalaikumusalam "
Her father replied
Khalid looked up For once, he forgot to look away.

She wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

But she was real and his wife And that was rarer.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Something about the way she moved like she didn't want to be touched by anyone's expectations made his chest ache Just a little.

His jaw tightened

He didn't smile

Neither did she

But their silence crackled like a live wire. Not angry Not warm Just... there Thick with unsaid things. The kind of silence that could either bloom into something holy or burn down a city.

Her father cleared his throat.

"I'll leave you both Talk... as husband and wife should."

Then he left without waiting for a reply because men like him didn't wait for emotional permission.

Now they were alone.

In the suturing room the formal sitting room with chairs, glass side tables, and dusty framed portraits of forgotten ancestors. The AC hummed faintly A clock ticked somewhere, louder than it should've.

They sat opposite each other.

Not close Not far

Like two people caught in a wedding neither of them truly attended.

Khalid leaned back, arms on the armrest, legs crossed neatly like a man trained to hide himself. Amina sat with her palms in her lap, her back too straight, the folds of her abaya like armor.

She didn't say anything.
Neither did he

But something hovered between them not romance, not hatred Just... familiarity with distance.

Finally, Khalid spoke.

His voice was low. Careful As if every word had been cleaned before leaving his mouth.

"I wasn't given a choice... the day we married."

Amina raised an eyebrow. "Neither was I."

He nodded slightly. "I know."

A beat passed.

Then another
Khalid leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees His eyes found hers not possessive, not desperate. Just searching Like someone trying to read a language he'd never been taught.

"You didn't want this," he said. "And I... don't blame you."

Amina looked away, her fingers tightening. "Then why did you show up?"

He paused.
A flicker passed across his face brief, but real.

"Because you asked."

She looked up Surprised.

"I thought you didn't listen to anyone," she murmured.

"I don't," he replied. "But... you sounded like you meant it.and you're my wife now It's not like I have a choice"

A strange quiet followed. The kind of quiet that doesn't demand to be filled it just exists, heavy with possibilities.

She studied him. The clean kaftan The precise haircut. The way he barely blinked. There was something robotic about him... but also something deeply broken.

"You don't smile much," she said suddenly.

"I forgot how," he replied without thinking.

That made her pause.

A part of her wanted to laugh. Another part wanted to cry for him. But she did neither. She just looked at him really looked and realized for the first time that maybe... just maybe... he wasn't as cruel as he was caged.

"Do you even believe in love?" she asked.

He looked at her for a long moment.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I dont you don't expect me to love you ? Do you? " he asked softly.
"No I don't "

She inhaled sharply. His honesty cut like a blade, but it wasn't meant to wound.

Still, she lifted her chin. "Well, I'm not going to pretend I like you"

He looked down. A small, breathless chuckle escaped him the ghost of a laugh, nothing more.

"Then maybe you're already braver than me."

Their eyes locked again.

This time, something shifted. Not affection Not attraction.

But recognition

Two strangers
Two wounds
Two halves of a quiet war neither one chose.

And somewhere in that silence, the seed of something slow dangerously slow began to take root.

Not love
Not yet
But the possibility

Amina tilted her head.

"So..." she said finally. "Let's talk "

"Okay " Khalid replied calmly.

"You sound disappointed."

"I'm just confused," he said, his voice steady. "Last time we saw each other, you swore you wanted nothing to do with me."

"I still don't," she snapped, then sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "But culture doesn't care what I want."

He didn't flinch. He just watched her measured, still like someone who was used to standing in burning buildings and not reacting.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I assume this is about the wedding," he said at last.

"Yes," she said flatly. "That ridiculous, staged theatre everyone's expecting."

"A wedding after the marriage," he murmured. "Because... Arewa."

"Exactly." She rolled her eyes dramatically. "We've already done the daurin aure, which may I remind you I wasn't even present for I didn't even know it was happening . But now? Oh no, now we must perform. For society For Instagram For Aunties who'll complain if my veil isn't taller than their expectations."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a folded A4 paper Unfolded it with flair, like a woman about to pitch a business proposal.

"Here's the list Try not to faint."

He took it glanced once. His brow rose a little.

"Meenahs post wedding events 2.0
Henna party,Bridal shower, kamu Dinner in Abuja for your side of the family. And a post wedding photoshoot."

She sat up straighter. "I'm going all out, Khalid. I don't care if it's fake It might be the only wedding I'll ever have. So yes there will be fireworks. A horse Possibly a camel I want the gossip blogs shaking."

He just blinked. "A camel?"

She shrugged. "If you're going to fake a love story, do it in HD."

Khalid folded the list neatly and placed it beside him. Then looked at her Carefully and Quietly.

"By the way " she added "I want a big house Big kitchen, big closet, big mirrors. I'll pick it I don't trust your taste. Something tells me you'd decorate it like a therapy room."

He blinked again. "A therapy room?"

"Grey walls, one sad couch, a copy of The Art of War on the shelf."

"...Accurate," he admitted.

"And the lefé?" she continued. "I'll send you the list. Don't try to shop yourself. You probably think a satin scarf is the same as a turban. Our maybe Just transfer the money and I'll do it myself before you buy me stuffs that'll have me looking like Hassan makeup ."
"And who the hell is that ?" He asked amazed

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You don't know him ?? Oh i forgot you're Khalid how would you know "

Khalid stared at her for a long moment.

Then finally, "Are you... always like this?"

She squinted. "Like what?"

"Bossy,Dramatic, Funny without trying."

She paused mid eye roll. "Wait. Did you just call me funny?"

A twitch

The corner of his mouth lifted.

Khalid Bello smiled

It was small Brief but Real.

Amina blinked. "Did you just smile at me?"

"You made it sound like a crime."

"No, I'm just shocked you have actual facial muscles. I thought they died from disuse."

He looked at her this time, something close to curiosity flickering in his eyes.

"You're different."

"From?"

"From what I thought I'd married ."

"Oh?" She tilted her head. "And what did you think you married ?"

He paused Then shrugged slightly. "Someone quiet and Predictable Grateful and Trained."

She scoffed. "Sorry to disappoint. I wasn't raised to be quiet. Or grateful for things I didn't ask for you knows yasir very well then I'm his female version ."
" about yasir....." he said
" don't..... "
She's replied

He didn't argue. Just looked at her again the way she spoke with her hands, the slight quiver in her voice when she got defensive, the fierce way she held herself like a woman trying so hard not to fall apart.

"You're not what I imagined either," she admitted.

His brows rose, amused. "Do tell."

She smirked. "Your vibe is very haunted but rich. Like someone who reads Qur'an at 2 a.m. then injects himself with trauma."

He chuckled short, deep, surprised.

"That's... not entirely wrong."

"Of course it's not," she said, folding her arms. "You're too neat. Too calculated The way you sat down like a human PowerPoint slide? I bet your socks are arranged by colour."

"They are," he said simply.

She stared at him. "Oh my God."

He leaned back, fingers steepled. "Is it a crime to like order?"

"It's suspicious," she said. "No one's that put together unless they're hiding war crimes."

He smiled again slow this time. The kind of smile that didn't reach his eyes, but made them less cold.

Amina noticed, and looked away quickly.

She didn't want to like anything about him. Especially not the way he smiled.

But it was getting harder. She hadn't thought about Yasir in the last three minutes. That scared her.

She cleared her throat. "So here's the plan we need to act in love Madly Publicly I'm talking hand holding, staged forehead kisses, Instagram captions with Qur'anic references. Wedding blogs The Arewa Digest We're going viral."

"I don't do fake smiles," he said.

"You don't smile at all, remember?"

"Oh well."

They both laughed. This time, at the same time. It was light Brief But something settled in the air. Not warmth Not yet But the absence of cold.

"You're serious about all this," he said finally.

"I have to be," she said, her voice quieter. "If I don't turn this into a story I can live with... I'll drown in the one they forced on me."

He looked at her differently then. As if for the first time.

He'd never met someone like her. Someone who wasn't scared to talk back. Who could joke through a storm. Who held grief like a sword and used sarcasm as a shield.

No one no one had ever spoken to Khalid Bello like this.

And somehow... he didn't hate it.

Outside, the azaan for asr echoed gently across Kaduna.

Inside, two strangers sat almost smiling, almost enemies, almost something else.

Maybe the beginning wasn't love.
Maybe it was respect
Or mutual exhaustion
Or a shared refusal to be broken

Whatever it was, it was real.

And it was just beginning.

He nodded slowly. "Fine. I'll fund everything. I'll show up. I'll wear the anything you want just not too colorful please . I'll smile when necessary. I'll play the part."

"Good," Amina said, folding her arms. "You better."

"But don't drag me into planning," he added, voice flat.

"Too late," she replied sweetly. "You're already in the group chat."

He gave her a long, unreadable look. "What do you want out of this, Amina? Really?"

She hesitated.

The clock ticked

The fan hummed

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Outside, somewhere far off, a hawker called out, "Fura da nono! Furaaa da nono!"

She finally spoke. "Freedom Control and A wedding that feels like mine. Even if the marriage never was."

His jaw twitched. Just slightly. That same flicker of emotion he always buried before it could surface.

He lowered his voice. "You'll have what you need. The venue, the money, the glam. I'll pose for whatever camera they shove in my face. I'll play the part."

A pause

"But don't ask me for affection or friendship ," he said. "I don't know how to give that."

Their eyes locked.

The words hung between them like prayer beads between tense fingers.

"I'm not asking for love," she said simply. "Just... cooperation."

He exhaled, as if relieved. "Then we'll get along just fine."

She stood first. Her maroon abaya shimmered as the light caught the embroidery.

She looked down at him like a queen issuing terms to her unexpected king.

"Welcome to Kaduna... my husband."

Khalid rose graceful, composed towering without trying to.

"Nice to finally meet my wife, for real this time he said.

Not cold Not warm Just real.

They stood there, facing each other married by law, bound by culture, divided by choice.

And still... something in the air shifted.

THE DOORWAY

He had just stepped past the carved doorway when her voice floated after him.

"Oh and Khalid?"

He paused, half turned. "Yes?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"No more talk about Yasir."

He studied her, unreadable. "That chapter's closed?"

She held his gaze. "Burned."

His mouth twitched that ghost of a smirk again. "Now go before I regret being civil," she added.

He smiled fully this time the kind that didn't belong to strangers or weddings or duty.

"Too late," he said.

"Wait I'll inform my father you're going " she added
He waited her parents came asked him to stay and eat but he lied that he had a meeting it was urgent but he'll come back for dinner and left. .

OUTSIDE THE GATE, KADUNA

The gate creaked open slowly, and the house guards always alert now, ever since the daurin aure straightened up with a slight bow of respect.

Khalid nodded politely. His footsteps were soundless on the tiled walkway, his kaftan crisp, unbothered by the rising dust.

He walked like someone who knew where he was going even when he didn't.

His matte black SUV gleamed under the Kaduna sun. He opened the door. Khalid paused before getting in.

For just a moment, he turned to glance at the balcony.

She wasn't there.

Good

He got in, door shutting like punctuation.

Inside the house, Amina sank into the sofa legs folded, face blank, but her heartbeat wild.

Khadija entered quietly, holding two mugs of zobo and a knowing smirk.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

Amina blinked. "He didn't kiss my hand. Didn't compliment my henna. Didn't bring flowers.as mummy wanted"

"But?"

She closed her eyes for a beat.

"But he smiled."

Khadija grinned. "You've got the ice prince smiling? Hmm Plot twist."

"Abeg I'm not playing games," Amina muttered. "This isn't a drama."

"Sweetheart," Khadija said, settling beside her, "it's already a drama. You're just one of the leads now."

And as Amina sipped the zobo, staring out the window at nothing in particular, her mind refused to quiet down.

She didn't want to care.
Didn't want to notice the way he looked at her like she wasn't fragile.
Didn't want to miss Yasir.
And most of all didn't want to be curious about Khalid.

But that smile.

That quiet, unexpected, unasked for smile...

It unsettled her more than anything Yasir ever said.

Chapter thirteen – Aminu bello again

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

KADUNA 5:15 PM

The compound gate shut with a soft groan as Khalid stepped out of his SUV. The rented serviced apartment in unguwar Rimi was modest by Bello standards single story, whitewashed, with red bougainvillaea creeping across the fence. Discreet Quiet and Anonymous.

The security man, old and lean with a crooked cap, shuffled to the car with a respectful nod.

"Barka da zuwa, oga."

Khalid returned it with a nod. "Yauwa Barka dai ina keys in gidan."

"Gashinan sir kuma Light dey. Gas full I also bought all the food items you asked for nasaka a fridge if you need anything, just call my number. Lemme help you with your Bag"

"No badamuwa baba nagode"Khalid said offering him a folded ₦5,000 note without expression.

"Allah yasaka da alkairi, oga You dey welcome."

Inside, the house smelled faintly of fresh paint, wood polish, and silence No one had lived here long. The kind of place chosen by men who didn't plan to stay.

He dropped his bag, and stood by the window for a long moment watching the trees sway

He should've felt relief after the meeting with Amina.

He didn't
He pulled out his phone and made a few calls to caterers, decorators, a luxury housing agent in Kaduna. Things she would never know he arranged. He wasn't trying to impress her.

He just didn't want to be a disappointment.

Then the phone rang.

His father .

He hesitated,Picked it.

"Salam Alaikum, Baba."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Wa alaikum salam," Aminu Bello's voice was dry, sharp. "So yaya ? Kasa me su lfy how is my daughter inlaw?."

"Yes lfy lau Alhamdulilah all good"

"And?"

"It went well."

"'Well'? Don't use that weak word. Did she bow to greet you ? Did she understand you're the man now?"

Khalid's jaw clenched. "We spoke She has plans for the wedding events I agreed to them."

A scoff. "You agreed to her terms? Wallahi, you're getting soft. You think women respect softness? You think they love men who listen?"

"She's not yours to train," Khalid said, low.

"She's your wife now, Khalid. You treat her like I treat mine. Control ,Direction and Obedience. That is what makes a woman stay in her place."

Khalid swallowed. "I'm not you."

A pause Then that voice, cold and amused. "You are my shadow. One day, when she tests you, you'll realize you're more me than you think."

Click
He didn't wait to respond.

He dropped the phone Took off his kaftan letting the soft cotton slide down his sculpted arms and drop onto the floor like shed skin. He walked shirtless to the mirror in the bedroom bare feet quiet on the cold tiles and stood there Still

His body was a contradiction tall, broad chested, sculpted like a Greek statue with Northern edges. Veins laced down his arms like lightning under skin. Each muscle well earned, each scar a quiet chapter. But it wasn't the body that held his gaze.

It was the tattoo

From the edge of his right shoulder and down to the base of his back, slithered a black serpent. The ink shimmered in places like wet charcoal, It coiled like it was alive, carved with haunting elegance fangs bared around a cracked compass.

There was something disturbingly beautiful about it.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Like a warning written in art.

No one had ever seen that tattoo not even by mistake he made sure it was covered all the time
Only he knew why it was there.

He stood there breathing hard, chest rising and falling.

"You are my shadow," his father's voice echoed like a curse. "One day, when she tests you, you'll realize you're more me than you think."

Khalid's lips parted.

His voice was barely a whisper. "I'm not you."

He turned away As if the mirror had slapped him

6:02 PM

He entered the kitchen. Opened the fridge.

Nothing tempted him eggs Greek yogurt Spiced chicken in cling wrap. Protein bars lined up like pills Clean, perfect, untouched all the stuffs he asked the man to get him

He closed it again.

He wasn't hungry He hadn't been hungry since yesterday Maybe longer.

Food felt like a betrayal. Like a demand he didn't want to meet. Eating was control. Not eating was power. He had taught himself that long ago, back in school, when he was just the quiet boy with fists too tight and a home too silent.

Nobody ever guessed
Not when your shoulders looked like that. Not when your body could lift twice its weight. Not when women stared. Not when trainers clapped.

But inside him lived a war.

He walked back to the room opened his bag and pulled out a small tin box matte black, silent. Locked He opened it with a click. Inside were three things a foil pack of prescription pills, a syringe, and a bottle with no label.

He popped two tablets into his palm. Anti anxiety appetite meds. Things meant to "help regulate eating." But what he wanted was not help.

He wanted control
He swallowed the pills dry No water.

And yet his father's words still clawed at his skull.

"Control Direction and Obedience. That is what makes a woman stay in her place."

His stomach turned.

He sat on the floor, back against the fridge. Head in his hands. The air was too still. The silence too loud. He needed to turn it off.

6:40 PM

He brought out the syringe.

Carefully Almost lovingly Like it was a ritual. He didn't do it often anymore just when the world got too loud, too wide, too heavy.

It wasn't heroin. It wasn't something simple. It was one of those synthetic highs that came from Russia or Lebanon or some ghost factory in Lagos. Rich people drugs The kind that numbed without killing Usually.

He tied a strip of fabric around his forearm, found the vein, and pushed the needle in.

The cold rush hit his bloodstream like lightning on bare skin.

First, silence.

Then, floating.

He leaned his head back, eyes fluttering. His lips parted slightly. The world blurred at the edges.

There were stars on the ceiling now. Or maybe memories.

FLASHBACK

His step mother, weeping in the corridor. His father's voice thundering. Broken glass Blood on the banister Khalid, age 12, hiding in the wardrobe with a Qur'an on his lap, whispering Surah Ad Duhaa like it could make the demons go away.

"Wadduhaa... wal layli idha sajaa..."

NOW

Khalid's eyes opened. He was back in the room . Floor cold under his thighs. Breathing slowed.

"Subhanallah," he whispered.

The prayer rolled out of him like an apology.

"I'm not you."

But the serpent was still on his back.

And he didn't know if it would ever leave.

AMINA'S HOUSE KADUNA

7:15 PM

She sat cross legged on the floor in an oversized mint green hoodie, veil wrapped casually over her head, sleeves pushed up to the elbows. Her fingers stained in dark, intricate henna moved fast, dialing, scribbling, arranging One hand held her phone to her ear. The other flipped through fabric samples with deadly precision.

"Laa hawla," she muttered into the receiver, then switched to Hausa. "Ban ce lemon green ba. I said emerald E.....mer...ald. Do you know the difference? Lemon green is for Asoebi. This is for the bride."

She ended the call before the vendor could respond.

"Rashin hankali," she murmured, crossing out the name in bold red ink. Her phone buzzed again She didn't pick.

Across from her, Khadija sat munching chin chin from a small bowl, watching her friend like someone observing a girl possessed.

"Gold lace or royal blue?" she asked, mouth half full. "For the kamu. You said royal blue before, but now I'm confused."

Amina didn't look up. "Gold Royal blue is tired. Everybody did royal blue last year. You saw Maryam's kamu video. It looked like detergent."

Khadija laughed. "Kai, calm down. Na gode, fashion police but I think I'll still go with the blue maybe different shade ."

Her mother hovered in the doorway with a tray of zobo and chin chin, watching. Watching the strange creature her daughter had become.

Was it strength?

Or survival?

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You're seriously into it now?" Khadija asked, picking up another lace sample. "You fought this wedding like Jihad. And now you're... booking decorators with the same energy people use to plan coups."

Amina paused

Just a moment A flicker.

She set down her pen.

"If they've taken everything from me," she said softly, "let me at least own the stage."

Khadija went quiet.

Her mother exchanged a glance with Amina's father, who stood by the archway, silently observing.

"She's trying too hard," he murmured.

"She's surviving," her mother replied. "Let her."

LATER THAT EVENING AMINA'S BEDROOM

8:40 PM

The wedding planning notepad was on her bed now, edges curled, pages full of names and numbers. The scent of bakhoor lingered in the air that deep, sacred smell of oud and memory. Her hair was still damp from a late evening bath. She wore one of her old dress baby pink, soft cotton, frayed at the sleeves.

Her phone buzzed again.

A WhatsApp message from a decorator.

"Do you want indoor fireworks for the entrance walk?"

She ignored it.

Instead, she opened her photo gallery Muscle memory a foolish instinct.

Yasir

His photos was there One with sunglasses. One shirtless at the beach from three years ago, smiling like a boy who never doubted anything. A video of him dancing, stupidly, in front of his car at their university hostel Shirt tied around his head. Chest bare He was laughing. So was she
She forgot to delete that video she thought are more memories going to pop up like This

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her finger hovered over the video.

She blinked
Then closed the gallery

She stood and walked to the mirror. Adjusted her scarf.

"Not today," she whispered to her reflection.

I won't remember him today

BACK IN THE LIVING ROOM

9:10 PM

"Mummy," she called out, walking in with a list. "Do you want to approve the guests for the walima? I made a preliminary list based on last year's event in Sokoto. We can cut down on the politicians if you want those daddies friends I don't like most of them anyways ."

Her mother looked up

"You're really doing this?"

"I'm already married," she said simply. "Let's not embarrass the family by pretending I'm not."

Her voice was calm Too calm
Her mother studied her

"You're hiding something behind this confidence. But I won't ask."

Amina smiled faintly. "Good Because I wouldn't answer."

Her mother looked up. "Zaiyanu said the kamu venue is available. It can take up to four hundred guests."

Amina nodded. "I'll take it Tell them I'll inspect it myself tomorrow. I'll text Khalid and ask him to come with me "
She was spinning this performance with such grace it almost felt real.

Almost
Her mum looked up "ke yakike kiran sunanshi haka chai children of these days at least have some respect he's your husband baa kiran sunan miji haka anyhow "

"Toh fa Nawa oo mummy me na gen z I be oo and I don't think he could careless what I call him honestly I mean look at what you guys married me to " she said laughing

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Later after Amina left her mum and went back to her room
As they lay side by side on Amina's bed in the dark, Khadija whispered, "You haven't thought about him?"

"Who?"

Khadija rolled her eyes. "Yasir Don't act dense."

Amina stared at the ceiling. Silent.

"I do," she said finally. "Sometimes When I see mangoes Or hear that stupid Rema song."

Khadija laughed quietly. "Why mangoes?"

"That day... when he came to see me in Zaria . He brought mangoes wrapped in a nylon bag. Said I was the only girl he knew who liked them soft."

"Ewww Romantic."

They both laughed.

But after a pause, Amina said, "Then I remember the lies The voice notes. The way he made me cry tge cheating Uhmm maybe my father isn't wrong me and yasir won't last a week of we actually got married "

"Yeah."

"I used to pray he would change Now I just pray for peace."

Khadija rolled onto her side. "Do you think Khalid can give you that?"

Amina closed her eyes.

"I don't know I hope so honestly I don't need love from him or affection of any kind but peace I hope so But he carries silence like someone who's been through a storm."

"And that's attractive to you?"

"No That's... familiar."
Just then kabir Amina's elder brother came in teased her a bit and tgey kept gisting he brought shawarma for them .

ABUJA AMINU BELLO'S RESIDENCE

8:45 PM
Abuja

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The compound was quiet in the way only rich men's homes could be not peace, but power. The kind of silence that came from cameras in corners and guards who didn't blink too much.

Yasir adjusted his shirt collar as the automatic gate slid shut behind him The white mansion ahead looked like something stolen from a colonial officer's dream tall columns, reflective windows, and roses that never wilted. Even the air here smelled like money.

He knocked twice on the heavy door. A slim, dark skinned maid opened it with a shallow bow.

"Sannu da zuwa, oga Yasir "
" Yauwa baba yana Nan? " he asked
" he's around " the lady replied
He entered
Inside, the floor clicked beneath his rubber soled shoes. No photos hung on the wall. No Qur'anic calligraphy No warmth.

The living room was neat, clinical a testimony to discipline or fear. At the centre, Alhaji Aminu Bello sat in his starched white babban riga, rosary beads coiled between his fingers like a serpent. His silver rimmed glasses lay folded beside a steaming cup of kunu, untouched.

His wife young, breathtaking, too quiet poured tea from a Turkish pot without once making eye contact.

Yasir approached, heart thudding. He squatted in respect.

"Ina wuni, uncle ."

Aminu gestured. "Sit Enough of the rehearsed greetings."

Yasir sat gingerly, knees close, back straight.

"How is work?"

"Fine, sir Alhamdulillah."

Aminu's eyes narrowed.

"'Fine' is for peasants. Tell me how much they pay you."

Yasir swallowed. "About ₦500,000 monthly."

A pause Aminu leaned forward, his voice a slow, deliberate threat.

"And you think that's enough for your name? For your ambition? For a woman?"

Yasir opened his mouth. Closed it. "It's a good start"

"Good is for people who die anonymous."

Aminu leaned back. "I'm building something new. A hybrid company logistics, tech security, offshore storage. It needs clean faces. Young blood. Legal enough to pass EFCC."

The young wife raised an eyebrow. Her glossy lips curved, barely.

"₦5 million monthly," Aminu continued. "Duplex in Guzape. New Prado Corporate credit card. But loyalty is mandatory."

Yasir sat in stunned silence.

He'd come here expecting lectures, maybe another insult as usual Not this.

"Sir... you're serious?"

Aminu raised a brow. "I don't waste time with jokes. You said you want to prove yourself, yes? Everyone always says Khalid this, Khalid that. But Khalid's not here You are."

Yasir clenched his jaw

That name again Always that name.

He nodded slowly. "I accept."

"Good," Aminu said, cracking his knuckles. "Now we begin."

But then Aminu's tone shifted softer, colder.

"You must understand, Yasir. This is not 9 to 5. This is legacy. You'll do what needs to be done. No questions. No guilt."

"I can handle it," Yasir said quickly, pride rising like steam.

Aminu chuckled. "You'll learn not to speak in absolutes. This world is not straight. It's curved. Like a blade And blood always pays the price."

He handed Yasir a manila envelope. Inside contract papers, NDAs, and a black key fob.

"First assignment is in Kaduna," Aminu said casually, as though discussing the weather. "There's something... I want observed. Quietly. You'll be my eyes."

"Kaduna?" Yasir asked, frowning.

Aminu nodded, lifting his kunu finally. "Family must always be... watched."

Yasir's mind moved fast Khalid? Amina? But he said nothing He wasn't stupid but he needs the money he wants to prove to his father that he's like Khalid or even better

"Understood."

Aminu smiled again. "Good You're not as foolish as you behave online."

His wife finally looked up, locking eyes with Yasir for the first time. Her gaze lingered, unreadable.

"You're brave to sit across from him like this," she said softly.

Aminu didn't scold her. But the warning in his glance was enough. She lowered her eyes again.

Yasir rose, holding the envelope like a sacred object.

"Thank you, sir."

As he walked out, Aminu called after him.

"One more thing."

Yasir turned.

Aminu's voice was quiet. "Don't fall in love with power Just learn how to use it."

OUTSIDE NIGHT

The Abuja breeze was cool, perfumed by neem and the distant hum of luxury generators. Yasir stepped into the night a different man.

More money than he ever imagined.

More questions than he could answer.

And a strange new fear blooming in his chest

KADUNA NIGHT

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

KHALID 11:49 PM

The prayer mat had long dried beneath him, but Khalid hadn't moved.

He lay on it shirtless, muscled arms folded behind his head, eyes fixed on the ceiling that didn't answer back. A single overhead fan clicked softly, too slow to cool the heat that simmered inside him.

He hadn't eaten.

The fridge still held untouched packs of juice, neatly arranged takeaway trays, a basket of ripe mangoes he'd bought but couldn't bring himself to peel.

His stomach didn't growl. It just... folded into silence. Like him.

The phone beside him lit up. Again.

His father .

He didn't want to answer.

But he did.

"...hello."

A long pause Then Aminu Bello's voice filtered through smooth, slow, sharp like a scalpel.

"Yasir was here ?"

Khalid swallowed His throat was dry.

"So?."

A silence Then the cut.

"Don't let her take control That's how you lose a woman. Make her afraid Make her respect you because if you slip she'll take advantage of that with her history with Yasir's both of them will use you"

Khalid's knuckles clenched. "Haven't you done enough ."

"Khalid You only feel this way because you haven't tasted betrayal yet and this is one of the biggest test for you"

Khalid didn't argue

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He just ended the call
Silence rushed back into the room like a ghost.

He sat still for a long time.

The prayer mat beneath him was warm from his skin. The room smelled faintly of perfume , and something darker like suppressed grief.

He got up, walked to the mirror still shirtless and stared.

The serpent tattoo stretched from the top of his shoulder to the middle of his waist, curling in black ink over his muscled back like it belonged there. A serpent of pain Of past lives.

A symbol of everything he couldn't outrun.

"You only feel different because you haven't tasted betrayal yet..."

He closed his eyes.

The first time he stopped eating was at age twelve. After his step mother's silence became louder than his father's commands. When Khalid refused to speak for a week, and his father punished him by locking the pantry.

Therapy had helped for a while. Muscle had masked it. He looked like a god, but he ate like a ghost

He sat at the edge of the bed, drew out the syringe again paused.

Then

"Ya Allah...."

The prayer came out as a whisper.

The injection pricked his skin, and a few seconds later, his limbs eased into numbness.

He didn't do it to get high.

He did it to not feel.

Because tonight, he could still hear his father's voice in his skull like a bell
"You are my shadow."

And maybe, deep down, he feared it was true.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And he was always in his shell now he has to share a house with a girl who hates him probably just pretending to accept him so she could torture him
And his father mentioning Yasir he knew that man too well, he was up to something .
Khalid always believed his father was mentally disturbed because why ?

AMINA MIDNIGHT

The room glowed with soft lamplight. The kind of stillness only midnight brought to a Northern home

Amina sat on her bed in a peach nightgown, a silk scarf around her hair, her notebook open across her thighs.

She scribbled names with focused precision.

"Aunty Larai + husband – confirmed.
Malam Shittu + 3 wives – confirmed.
Yasir's sister? No Cancel Cancel."

She paused. Crossed the name again. As though it would erase the ache.

Khadija was asleep on the other bed, mouth slightly open, the remnants of their puff puff snack scattered on tissue paper.

Amina twirled the pen in her henna fingers. The ink smudged. The list blurred.

Yasir's face surfaced in her mind like an old song. His laugh, his chaos, the way he used to grab her hand without asking, like she belonged to him.

"Wallahi, I'm done with you," she had told him once.

He had smiled.

"You always say that. Then you come back."

She rubbed her chest

There was no coming back now

And yet

Khalid had smiled too Just once

Quiet and Careful. As though he didn't trust himself with joy.

And for some reason, that scared her more.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"He's like a locked room," she had told Khadija after the first meeting.

"Maybe," Khadija replied, "but what if that room hides something you need to see?"

She shook her head.

This wasn't about love Or men.

This was about dignity. About showing the world she hadn't been broken.

If they'd stolen her choice, she'd steal the spotlight.

"Make the kamu big," she'd told the planners. ". I want it to feel like royalty."

She flipped another page. Wrote "Bride's Entrance Zainab Haruna to choreograph."

Her mother knocked lightly.

"You're still up?"

Amina nodded. "I'm almost done."

Her mother stepped in, holding a flask. "You need to rest. Or your face will swell and you'll scare the in laws."

Amina chuckled softly. "Let them be scared. Maybe then they'll respect me."

Her mother hesitated. Then sat beside her.

"You've changed," she said.

"I had to."

"No... not just that. You seem... like someone who's planning a performance. Not a marriage."

Amina didn't answer.

Instead, she closed the notebook, leaned back against the pillows.

Her fingers reached for the tasbih on her nightstand.

"Ya Allah," she whispered, voice trembling.

"Don't let this end in fire."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

But in her chest, something flickered. A strange heat.

Unsettling.

Like the beginning of a slow, burning desire for something she couldn't name.

Not Yasir

Not Khalid Something deeper
Something dangerous
And for the first time, she wondered...

What if this fire was where she belonged?

Khalid was high from whatever he injected himself with

Amina was in her room trying hard not to breakdown again

And yasir drove through the night in his black Camaro

looks out the window and thinks:
"Maybe this is finally my moment."

But none of them know...
They're already entangled in Aminu Bello's game.

Chapter fourteen- Wedding preparations

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It was 5am the prayer was being called
Khalid hadn't slept at all
He stood up to go perform ablution when his phone rang. When he checked it was his father .
He closed his eyes , he didn't want to answer but he picked anyway
"Assalamualaikum, ina kwana baba" he said
" waaalaikumusalam lfy lau "
The father replied
Then silence finally tge father spoke
"I've spoken to Amina's father and we've decided that in two weeks she'll be coming to abuja with you"

"What!!!"
Khalid asked

"Can't you people at least give some times "
"No we can't "he said
"Why wait Saboda Wani bidi'a no and besides you can do everything within that time frame it's just money nothing else " he said.

"Stay there in two weeks come back k with your wife and that's final "Alhaji aminu said ending the call

Khalid stared at the phone for a while then ,

Then picked up Amina's list that she had given him the other day ,

he looked at it he wanted to give her her dream wedding that's the least he could do cause even though he was forced into the marriage as much as she was he still felt guilty for separating her and yasir.

So he started making some calls Later that morning
At the apartment Khalid ,had gotten a punching bag the night before .
The punching bag swung back with a heavy thud Khalid's knuckles were tightly wrapped, his muscles taut and glistening with sweat in the dim golden light spilling through the window of his rented apartment's spare room.

He was in his zone steady breaths, clean strikes, complete silence except for the sound of impact and his low, controlled grunts.

His phone buzzed on the bench nearby Once,Twice, and Then again.

He ignored it a fourth buzz a fifth.

He exhaled, slowing his rhythm, then walked over and picked it up. One look at the screen made him pause mid wipe with his towel.
Amina

Not his father

He picked up

"Need your help," came her breathless voice.

"With what?" he asked, voice low, dry, still catching his breath.

"They moved the wedding, Khalid Two weeks," she said all in one breath, her voice half whisper, half panic.

Silence Only the sound of his breathing, heavy from the workout.

"Yeah I just found out this morning. My father said your he spoke to you father. Apparently, they're trying to 'secure the date' or something. I don't know what game they're playing"
She hesitated. "Ya Allah.....Wait you didn't go back to Abuja yesterday did you ?"

"No I'm still around ."

A sigh of relief tumbled from her mouth. "Thank God Wallahi, I was about to lose it. We haven't done anything yet. The photoshoot hasn't happened. I haven't rented a hall. My bridal gowns haven't even been sewn. My dinki is not even ya Allah, Khalid, I'm not prepared."

He took a deep breath, the old ache in his chest returning. He wasn't surprised. His father moved people like pawns on a board quietly, suddenly, and without explanation.

"Calm down we'll work everything out ."

"You don't get it," she said, voice rising. "Kaduna vendors are not Abuja vendors o. These tailors will collect money, eat suya, and disappear. Even my makeup artist is on another job in Dubai!"

"I'll handle it," he said simply.

"You'll handle it?" she repeated, half laughing, half crying. "Khalid, do you even know what a kamu is?, this is not one of your cold business meetings where you just throw money at people and everything clicks."

"Money helps," he said. "But so does planning. I'll do both."

She went quiet.

Then sighed. "I can't believe I'm going to have to plan my wedding with you."

"You wanted a grand wedding," he replied calmly. "You'll get it."

"No," she said, voice lower now. "I wanted time. I wanted at least a month. To breathe To process. To... just feel ready."

Another pause.

"I didn't ask for any of this."

He didn't reply

She softened. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. I just... woke up feeling hijacked."

"I know the feeling," he said quietly, almost to himself.

She caught that.

"You okay?" she asked, a little gentler now.

"I'm fine."

"You never say anything more than that."

"I never have anything more to say."

Another pause.

"...Right," she muttered. "So this is what I'll have to live with for the rest of my life."

He didn't respond. Instead, he picked up his towel, wiped his face again, and walked toward the kitchen.

"You're not living with me," he said after a beat. "Not yet."

"Oh please You know what I mean."

"Get ready," he said. "I'll be at your place by 8:30."

"You don't even know where to start"

"I do I'll call my assistant to get everything ready the event halls even your dresses send me your measurements ."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

" what?"

She blinked. "You're serious?"

"I don't joke Not about this."

A pause

"...Okayyy but come pick me up still I'll get ready," she said quietly.

"Amina?"

"Yeah?"

"You'll be fine. I'll make sure of it."

She stared at her phone after the call ended. Her heart was racing.

She wasn't sure if it was panic why he was being nice

Or something else entirely.

KADUNA — 7:50AM

Khalid wore black He always wore black, white, or grey as if colour was an emotion he hadn't earned yet. Today, it was a charcoal black kaftan, pressed to sharp perfection, the collar stiff, the sleeves folded up just slightly at the wrist. On his wrist, a vintage silver watch ticked with military precision a birthday gift from his stepmother he'd never worn until now.

He stepped out of the compound quietly.
The gate man greeted him
He got into his car and drove off
The street was just beginning to stir. The neighbourhood mosque had long finished the asuba prayer, and the air still smelled like dew, sand, and leftover smoke from a neighbour's morning kosai.

He sprayed on his Tom Ford sharp, woody, dark. Like him A scent people remembered even after he'd left the room.

Phone in hand, he began making calls. Quick. Tactical One after another No greeting No time.

"Yakubu, book Event halls in kaduna like 5 . Yes, all three days. Kamu, henna and bridal shower . If they say it's booked, offer more. Double, no, triple if you have to. I want the invoice in an hour."

He didn't wait for praise or questions before ending the call and dialing the next.

"Call a very good designer one of the best please . Tell them it's bride's custom package. 100 outfits I don't care if they're overbooked or abroad, fly them in. No, not just kamu and walima also dinner dresses, even casual ones. Yes Full coverage for my wife's lefe and events also I'll forward the measurements to you once she sends it She's conservative."

Another call.

"Fadil, get the kamu decorator Amina wanted the white one with the draped pearls " he said She wrote on her list "Yes, I know it's already taken. Find out who booked it. Offer triple. Promise an upgrade. I don't care how you do it. I need it by next Friday."

A child passed by on a bicycle, wobbling down the road, shouting something in Hausa. Khalid stepped aside without breaking stride.

More calls.
"Photographer? Book . I want pre-wedding, traditional, and studio. All three If he says he's in Dubai, tell him it's Aminu Bello's son. And don't mention that again to me."

His voice was calm. Steady The kind of calm that came after a storm or before one. Like a general preparing for war No emotion Only precision and Purpose.

His jaw clenched Then unclenched

In the mirror, his reflection looked too calm to be real.

Then softly so soft it felt like it escaped him without permission he muttered under his breath

"The marriage was forced ."

A pause A long exhale.

"At least let her have the wedding she wants"
And Khalid Bello drove off not just toward Amina's house, but toward the one thing he couldn't control
Her
His wife

AMINA'S HOUSE 8:30AM

He stepped into the sitting room, removing his shoes at the entrance like he'd been raised properly or like he was trying very hard to behave like it.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Assalamu Alaikum," he greeted, his voice respectful, his posture straight.

"Wa Alaikumus Salam," her father replied, nodding curtly.

Her older brothers, Suleiman and Kabir, who had previously only scowled at him like he was a criminal asking for their sister's hand in ransom, stood up. Kabir extended his hand. Khalid shook it. Then Suleiman.

Progress

Small, but progress.

From upstairs came the sound of feet hitting the stairs fast, light, almost flying.

Amina

She appeared in a flurry of movement, scarf loosely draped over her shoulder, her eyes bright with the rush of panic and caffeine.

"Let's go," she said breathlessly, grabbing his wrist with familiar boldness. "We're wasting daylight."
He looked at her amazed by her audacity
Behind her, Khadija followed like backup, chewing gum and adjusting her hijab with one hand, holding a big handbag with the other.

"Salam, Baba," Amina shouted over her shoulder. "We're going for fittings!"

Her father grunted a response.

Khalid opened the door for the girls, let them settle in, then slid into the driver's seat.what a gentleman

Amina sat beside him in the passenger sit like she owned the world or at least the morning. Khadija sprawled in the back seat, crossed her legs, and leaned forward between them like a nosy chaperone.

"You're even finer in person," she muttered, studying him openly no Shame

Khalid's grip on the steering wheel didn't change. He didn't even look at her talkless of reply ,khadija was used to yasir who talked too much plays around with everyone.

Amina turned and smacked Khadija's leg. "He can hear you, idiot."

"I want him to hear me," Khadija said, undeterred. "Kaftans are my weakness. Especially black ones Masha Allah ."

Amina chuckled. "Shut up don't mind her. She thinks every man in kaftan deserves a modelling contract."

Khalid didn't respond. He shifted gears and pulled out of the driveway.

Amina leaned closer and elbowed him lightly. "You'll smile one day, I swear I'll make it my mission."

He glanced at her briefly, expression unreadable. "Good luck with that " on his mind he thought how is he going to survive with a female version of Yasir

"I like danger," she said airily. "Especially if it comes with fuel and AC."

Khadija cackled from the back. "Wallahi this is going to be an interesting marriage."

Khalid's voice was low. "Where are we going?"

"To Mia Stitches. It's a fashion house in Unguwan Sarki. We will look so good You'll like it."

He raised an eyebrow. "We, as in you and Khadija?"

"No," she said with a smug smile. "We, as in you and me. You said you'd wear whatever I want yesterday. Don't try to deny it."

He sighed. "Right."
"But i already called for a designer " he added
" from? Let's just go to this place they have ready made and they're mad ass designers also" she said
"Turn right at the next junction," she added quickly. "You missed it last time."

"I've never been to Mia Stitches before."

"I meant you missed the turn to humility," she said sweetly.

Khadija nearly choked on her gum. "This is my Roman Empire Keep going."

Khalid gave her a side eye. It lingered a second longer than he intended.

Amina caught it.

"You're looking at me like I'm annoying."

"I'm not looking at you."

"You just did."

"Only to calculate your volume."

She gasped dramatically. "You mean my energy?"

"No Your actual volume. I'm mentally preparing for how many gallons of fabric the tailor will need."

Khadija was laughing too hard now.

Amina's mouth dropped. "Khalid!"

He cracked the tiniest hint of a smile. Barely. But it was there.

Khadija whispered loudly from the back. "I saw that! He smiled!"

Khalid said nothing, but his fingers tapped lightly on the steering wheel.

"Go left," Amina said, crossing her arms. "Since you want to abuse your wife you can at least drive us properly."

"I'm not abusing you."

"You're not praising me either."

"I'm not obligated to."

She gave him a narrow eyed look. "What happened to the sweet, soft spoken guy who said 'I'll handle everything' like some Arewa Idris Elba?"

"He got tired."

"Oh really?"

"Yes Of you talking to much and loud are you always like this?."

Khadija whispered, "This is better than Netflix."

They pulled into a dusty side road leading to Mia Stitches, a modest but elegant boutique tucked behind a high gate. The sign was painted in gold cursive, the entrance lined with flower pots and a red carpet rolled halfway into the hallway.

Amina glanced at Khalid as he parked.

"You sure you're ready for this?"

"Are you?"

She smiled. "I was born ready."

He cut the engine. "Then let's go"
MIA STITCHES FASHION HOUSE 9:15AM

The boutique was a maze of velvet curtains, floor length mirrors, and mannequins in gele and glittering sequins. Soft instrumental Hausa music played from hidden speakers. The air smelled of perfume, steam-pressed fabric, and new lace and mannequins in kaftan

Amina moved like a storm.

"Zara, this one! Yes, I want two versions one with fringe, the other with that stoned neckline. No! No peplum, biko, I'm not an auntie!"

She whirled from rack to rack bridal gowns, kamu dresses, dinner gowns, henna party fits, even a post wedding dresses for their "airport look" that she claimed would "shut Instagram down."

She had the energy of ten brides and the focus of a war commander.

Khalid?

Khalid just watched.

Seated on a white chair , back straight, arms folded, face unreadable. He watched her try on fabrics like someone observing a fire dangerous, dazzling, and unpredictable.

Every few minutes, she appeared with a new outfit in hand.

"Here, this one for kamu. I want us to match," she said, thrusting a rich wine colored kaftan and matching wrapper at him.

He took it silently.

"Don't say thank you or anything," she muttered.

"I thought this was a command," he replied.

She snorted and vanished into the next aisle.

Soon she was back again this time with a pale blue asooke embroidered with silver.

"This is for our kamu . You'll wear white with a silver cap."

He raised an eyebrow. "I thought kamu was women only."

"Traditionally, yes. But these days, the men make an entrance. Everyone will expect you."

"I don't like entrances."

"Tough You're married to me."

He blinked slowly. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Both."

She disappeared again.

Behind her, Khadija strutted with a gold gown draped over her arm and a red gele halfway on her head. "I'm not even the bride and I'm stressed. Wallahi, I pity Khalid."

"You should," he murmured for the first time actually replying her

"Hey!" Amina called. "Come and see this embroidery!"

Khalid stood slowly. Walked to her. She held up a shimmering cream and gold gown, blinking like a child in a candy store.

"Too much?" she asked.

He looked her up and down, then nodded. "A bit."

She pouted. "But it's princess vibes."

"You're not a princess."

"I am."

"You're a warrior ."

She blinked. Then smiled, softer this time. "That's the nicest thing you've said to me."

"I didn't mean it as a compliment."

"Too late I'm taking it."

She turned, handed another outfit to Khadija. "This is for kamu. Wear heels, please. Not those your rubber slippers."

"They're designer rubber slippers," Khadija defended.

Amina waved her off and marched to the counter.

"Zara," she said. "Code Khalid. One point two million."

Zara, the boutique manager, typed swiftly. "Card?"

Amina turned to him, eyes gleaming. "Your card, General."

He didn't flinch. Just handed it over.
Asked for his pin he told her

She entered the pin with confidence.

Then, without hesitation, paid for hers.

And for Khadija.

Khadija blinked. "Wait Did you just pay for me?"

"I need your loyalty," Amina said. "In this marriage Consider it a bribe."

Khadija grinned. "I'll protect you like DSS."

They walked across to the accessories store next door, a smaller space filled with beaded handbags, glittering heels, and rhinestone studded jewelry.

Amina grabbed a silver clutch, held it to her hip, then picked a blood red stiletto heel. She turned to him with mock sternness.

"You'll have me looking like Mumu if I let you dress me."

"I wouldn't dare," Khalid replied, voice dry.

"Oh, you dare plenty things, Mr Shadow."

"Mr what?"

"Mr Shadow," she repeated, selecting matching earrings. "Silent Tall Fine Mysterious Always lurking around like you're in a Christopher Nolan movie."

Khadija cackled. "Wallahi she nailed it."

Khalid said nothing. But the corner of his mouth twitched. A flicker a glitch in his frozen programming.

Amina caught it.

"Ah!" she shouted. "He almost smiled. Somebody give me camera."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I didn't smile."

"You did! I saw it! Khadija, did you see it?"

"I saw shadow smile."

Amina turned to the mirror, clutch still in hand. "Hmm Red or silver heels?"

"Red," Khalid said.

She blinked.

He looked away. "You'd like the drama."

She smiled slowly. "You're learning."

Khadija whispered loudly, "This marriage will enter history books."

Amina turned again, spinning slightly in the mirror. "Not bad."

"You look expensive," Khadija said.

"I am expensive."

Khalid's voice was low. "Ya Allah help me"

Amina stilled.

Just for a second Her reflection met his in the mirror. No jokes No jabs.

Just silence.

She swallowed Looked away. "Come, let's pay."

He followed.

PHOTOSHOOT 4:30PM

The studio in Unguwan Rimi was sleek. Minimalist white walls, soft lighting panels hanging from the ceiling, and a faint scent of hairspray in the air. The air conditioner hummed gently, a relief from the Kaduna heat outside.

Amina was seated on a high stool, her head tilted slightly as the makeup artist carefully dabbed highlighter on her cheekbones. Her eyes were lined with kohl, lips painted a soft shade of oxblood. Her red and black gown shimmered subtly under the ring light.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid sat in the corner, in all black as usual dark kaftan, clean wristwatch, and brooding silence. His phone rang every few minutes. Vendors. His cousin The lighting coordinator. The florist Yakubu complaining that one decorator had fainted from stress. He answered with his usual clipped calm, but every now and then, he'd glance at her.

She looked... different.

Not loud, not fragile. Just radiant Focused. Alive. He wasn't really a fan of make up

Khadija sat behind the scenes on a couch, scrolling Instagram, occasionally grinning at Amina like a proud aunty.

The photographer, a short man with too much energy, clapped his hands. "We're ready! Let's start with something royal. Groom seated. Bride standing. Minimal smile. Let's capture the tension."

Khalid raised an eyebrow. "Tension?"

The photographer grinned. "You're married your cousin's ex there has been rumors ok social media all the gossip blogs and you're about to confirm it There's plenty tension."

Khalid didn't reply Amina choked on a laugh.

He sat She stood beside him in heels, one hand resting lightly on the chair.

"Chin up, bride. Eyes at the camera," the photographer coached. "Groom don't smile yet. You're brooding."

"I'm not brooding," Khalid muttered.

"Exactly! Hold that!"

Amina burst out laughing. "This man is actually enjoying this."

Khalid tilted his head toward her. "You're the one who dragged me here."

"Dragged? You mean graced with my planning excellence."

He looked at her. Her eyes were playful. Defiant. He almost smiled almost.

The camera clicked

They changed outfits

Next was a traditional look Her gown was embroidered, with a silver beaded lined it was a blue kamu dress with a huge long veil she threw dramatically over her head.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid changed into a coordinating kaftan , custom made
"You clean up well," Amina said, adjusting his cuff. "Still no smile though?"

"I smiled in my own way," he said

"Like a villain."

"Villains win."

She scoffed, but her cheeks reddened.

The photographer cleared his throat. "Okay! Final pose."

They both looked up.

"I want intimacy," he said. "No fake smiles. Face each other Hold hands Like you're choosing each other not just posing."

Khalid raised an eyebrow. "Bit dramatic, don't you think?"

"Please The bride paid me to be dramatic."

Khalid didn't argue.

They turned Face to face.

Amina inhaled

So did he

Slowly, she extended her hand.

He took it.

The room fell still. The air, heavier. Even Khadija's gum chewing stopped.

The photographer adjusted his lens and whispered, "Perfect Now smile Just a little."

Amina did Soft, uncertain, but real.

Khalid surprisingly followed. The faintest curve of his lips. Not enough to be joyful. Just enough to say, I see you.

The camera clicked again.

And again

And again

A moment stretched longer than it should have.

"You two have chemistry," the photographer whispered, almost to himself. "This... this is more than a wedding."

Amina smiled wider.

Khalid looked away.

But he didn't let go of her hand

Later, in the dressing room...

Amina removed her veil and wiped her lipstick with cotton wool.

"I didn't expect that," she murmured.

Khadija peeked from behind a clothes rack. "Which part? The way he was looking at you like a Zayn Malik?"

Amina rolled her eyes, cheeks flushed. "Please."

"He smiled," Khadija teased. "I saw it Wallahi, his lip moved."

Khalid appeared at the door just then, back in his black kaftan. "Ready to go?"

Amina nodded. "Yeah."

He paused. "You looked... nice."

She blinked He'd never said that before.

"Thanks," she said softly.

Khadija looked between them and made a mental note to bring popcorn to the bridal shower.

CAR — 8:05PM

They parked in front of Amina's house. The compound was quiet, bathed in the soft glow of a single security bulb.

Her parents weren't home gone to the hospital to check on her father's sister who was admitted that evening.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid sat in the driver's seat, back straight, hands still on the steering wheel like the engine hadn't been off for three whole minutes.

"I'll stay here," he said flatly.

Amina turned to him, surprised. "You're not coming in?"

"I don't enter houses when the parents aren't home. It's disrespectful."

She blinked, then nodded slowly. "Right."

Khadija, ever the energy plug, popped open the back door.

"I'll go call the maids. We have things to carry," she said cheerily, then added in a whisper to Amina, "Also, I'm dying to take off this girdle before I collapse."

She disappeared inside , heels clicking dramatically on the pavement.

Now it was just the two of them.

Amina leaned back in her seat and studied him in the dim interior of the car.

"You didn't eat all day."

"I'm not hungry," he said without turning.

"You said that yesterday too. When my mother offered you food "

He didn't respond.

"You one of those germophobes?" she asked. "You don't eat food unless you cook it yourself?"

"No."

"Okay So maybe it's a weird fitness thing. What's the name of the diet intense fasting for trauma survivors?"

Still nothing.

She tilted her head toward him, voice softer now. "I'm just saying You act like food is a crime."

His jaw tensed

She watched him a moment, then smiled gently, teasing. "Your poor mother must have suffered raising you. You're too perfect. Too neat. Too tense I bet she used to spoil you rotten, right?"

That's when he froze.

His grip on the steering wheel tightened until his knuckles turned white.

Amina immediately sensed it the shift in the air. The ache in the silence.

"She's no more," he said finally, voice like gravel Measured and Distant.

Amina's heart dropped.

Her voice came out small, careful. "Oh Allah Sarki I'm so sorry I had no idea Wlhi I didn't know Allah ya jikanta Allah ya mata rahama ."

"Amin."

She turned in her seat to face him. He still hadn't looked at her.

"I shouldn't have joked I'm sorry."She felt bad

"It's fine."

"It's not."

He exhaled, then spoke quietly. "She died when I was born ."

Amina blinked. "Allah sarki"

His voice was steady, but too steady. The kind of stillness that holds a thousand storms.

"She Slept Never woke up."

Amina was silent. Her chest tightened.

"I'm so sorry."

He nodded once. Still not looking at her. His hands were clenched now, veins rising on his forearms. She noticed how his entire body, for all its muscle and stillness, seemed on edge like a building with a hairline crack in its foundation. He didn't even know why he was saying all that

They sat in the silence again.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The gate opened . Khadija returned with the house girls , both of them balancing shopping bags and garment carriers.

"We've become delivery girls," Khadija said with dramatic flair. "You people did photoshoot and shopping forgot humans have limits."

Amina opened the door and stepped out. She took her bags without looking back, but before she turned to leave, she paused.

"Thank you," she said softly. "For today."

Khalid looked at her Just looked.

"Goodnight," she said again.

He nodded

She hesitated like she wanted to say more. Then thought better of it. She walked away.

He didn't drive off immediately. He sat still. Watching her walk into the house.

Then he rested his forehead briefly against the steering wheel.

Only then did he drive away.

A FEW BLOCKS AWAY 8:40PM

Khalid parked by a quiet roadside, a flickering streetlight casting pale shadows on the dashboard.

He gripped the steering wheel, breath catching in his throat. The heaviness in his chest refused to lift it had been sitting there for years, but today it throbbed more than usual.

He lowered his head, forehead resting against the leather of the wheel.

"Astaghfirullah..." he whispered. Once Then again.

He closed his eyes and whispered a quiet dua.
Not for strength
Not for patience
But for softness The kind he'd long buried under calluses and scars.

AMINA'S ROOM NIGHT

Khadija dropped the last garment bag onto the bed and flopped backwards with a dramatic sigh.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Aunty Bride! Wallahi, I won't lie today was sweet. Photoshoot, designer gowns, rides with tall and handsome. Khalid Omo, you lucky ooo from Yasir to Khalid you've never been with an average guy "

But Amina wasn't laughing. She was perched on the edge of the bed, scarf sliding off one shoulder, fingers playing with her phone.

She was staring at the wall, lost in thought.

Khadija sat up. "Wetin happen?"

Amina shook her head. "He doesn't eat, doesn't smile, barely talks. But... when I mentioned his mum, his whole face changed. Like something just... snapped."

"Wallahi that guy is fine," Khadija said, sitting cross legged, "but he looks damaged. Amina You think you can fix him abi? Just like you always thought you can fix yasir abeg oo karki sakanki inda bazaki iya cirowa ba."

Amina smiled faintly, eyes distant. "I don't want to fix him. I just want to understand."

Khadija raised a brow. "You sure it's not the brooding billionaire charm working on you?"

"I swear, Khadija, he's not charming. He's annoying Cold Like someone who forgot how to be human."

"And yet..." Khadija smirked, tossing her a pillow. "You're here, thinking about him ps uou kept teasing him almost deceived me someone would think you two love each other "

Amina threw the pillow back, laughing softly. "Idiot I just have to at least I'm going to be living with him in thesame house khadija I have to build something between us not relationship or love maybe friendship if that's possible with him plus I joke alot to forget about yasir ."

Then her expression changed again Soft Vulnerable.

She picked up her phone. Typed slowly.

AMINA: Thank you, for today fake husband ☺

She hesitated Read it again.

Then hit send

KHALID'S APARTMENT SAME TIME

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid sat on the edge of the bed in his dim apartment. Shirtless. Muscled frame hunched, a glass of water in one hand, untouched.

His phone buzzed.

He checked it, expecting something from his father, maybe Yakubu with updates about decorators.

Instead her.

AMINA: Thank you, for today fake husband ☺

He stared at the screen.

The word "husband" did something strange to his chest Not fear Not pride.

Something gentler Unfamiliar.

He didn't overthink it.

Just typed:

KHALID: You're welcome.

He set the phone down and leaned back, staring at the ceiling.

He remembered the way she rolled her eyes when the photographer asked them to hold hands.

The way she bossed him around with colour codes and lace fabrics.

The way she looked at him not with fear or admiration, but... curiosity.

She was silly, Smart Stubborn And stunning.
He didn't smile easily it was a muscle rarely used but tonight, it moved. Just a little.

Enough.

AMINA'S ROOM LATER

Khadija had fallen asleep already, one arm draped dramatically across her face.

Amina sat by the window, bathed in moonlight, her phone still in her hand.

She scrolled back up.

Thank you, fake husband ☺

You're welcome.

She saved the message.

Then whispered to the night sky, or maybe to herself
"Maybe this won't be so bad."

Chapter fifteen – Flo app

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

MORNING Amina's house , KADUNA

A soft knock Then another, louder this time.

"Amina, Khadija! Kutashi hakanan!!, it's almost 8," came Faiza's voice from behind the door. "Angama breakfast ."

Amina stirred under her blanket. Her head pounded gently that kind of tiredness that didn't come from sleep, but from emotion. She muttered, "toh , Mummy."

Khadija grunted beside her. "Why does your mum always act like sunday breakfast is JAMB?"

Amina ignored her and reached for her phone under her pillow. It was still charging She unplugged it, stretched, and tapped into WhatsApp, then Instagram. Messages Mentions Memes yet Nothing felt interesting.

Then she saw it her Flo app notification.

Her heart froze

She hadn't opened that app in a while But something made her click it.

Period overdue: 5 days

She stared no she blinked
No no no
Her breath caught in her throat Maybe it was stress. Surely it was stress After all, she'd just been dragged into a forced marriage, separated from Yasir, shuffled like a political chess piece between family negotiations, a father who barely listened, and a fiancé who was... a mystery in himself.
Of course her cycle would be confused. Hormones were fragile Stress was a trigger Right?

But then her mind did something cruel.

It returned, in vivid detail, to that night in Zaria.

The service apartment in Zaria . The dim lighting. The cold AC the smoking together he made indomie before The way he had held her, as if he knew it would be their last time. The way she had let him, because her whole heart was still his.

They hadn't used protection.

It wasn't planned It was... emotional. Desperate and Real also forbidden

The same night she left ABU just before ASUU went on strike.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina sat up sharply, nearly choking on her thoughts Her breath quickened Chest tight.

"Khadija," she whispered.

No response The girl was still in dreamland.

She tapped her. "Khadija!"

"Wai meyene," Khadija mumbled, half asleep.

"I haven't seen my period."

Khadija's eyes fluttered open.
"Since when?"

"Five days."

Khadija sat up. "Five? That's not just since yesterday oh."

Amina nodded slowly. Her face was pale.

"But maybe it's stress nau You've been through a lot, wallahi. You've cried every day this week, you're overwhelmed, your body's probably just confused."

"No," Amina said softly. "I've never missed it. Never Not once in my life."

Khadija's eyes sharpened. "Okay so what are you saying exactly that you might be pregnant?... when last did you and... Yasir... you know..."

Amina swallowed. "The night before we left Zaria At that apartment That night."

Khadija blinked. "Oh wow!!"

Amina nodded.

"You didn't use anything?"

Amina looked away

"Amina!" Khadija's voice rose. "You're telling me you might be pregnant for Yasir and now married to his cousin? Wallahi, your father will bury you alive behind this house!"
"Don't shout!" Amina hissed, covering her mouth. "Please."

Khadija stood and began pacing the room. "No no no This one pass me oo I was supposed to fast today . Amma I can't fast and carry this kind of wahala at the same time."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina's hands trembled.

"I don't know what to do. I feel tired, nauseous, my breasts are even sore. I thought it was just stress but"
"You're describing symptoms like Google. We need to confirm first. We need test."

"I don't want to believe it's true. God, I'm scared."

Khadija stopped pacing. "You know sometimes the test won't even show if it's still early. You remember Aisha from ABU? Hers was negative for two weeks and then few months later ciki yafara nunawa ."

Amina groaned. "God abeg."

"Okay What will you tell your parents? Toh, ina zamuje?"

Amina breathed hard. "I'll lie I'll say Khalid is taking me out for wedding errands."

Khadija raised a brow. "Ehen So he's now your fake driver. Better be sure he's not actually outside, that man sabi appear like ghost."

Amina stood shakily and grabbed her towel. "Let me bathe. I feel hot."

Khadija sat down and clutched a pillow. "Amina, if this test is positive, do you understand what this means?"

Amina didn't answer
"You're married But Islamically, technically, you can't be married if you're already pregnant"
"I know," Amina snapped, then softened. "I know."

Khadija whispered, "Yasir"

Amina turned, teary eyed. "I blocked him remember."

A heavy silence fell

"I feel like my life is a joke," Amina said.

"You're not a joke," Khadija replied gently. "You're just... caught. Like those girls in Hausa films who wake up and everything has changed."

Amina gave a weak laugh and stepped into the bathroom, whispering under her breath, "Ya Allah, please don't make it true."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Outside, the faint sound of motorcycles filled the Kaduna morning. The air smelled of fried akara . Somewhere, the world continued but in that room, time had paused.

Amina didn't even touch the breakfast her mother had lovingly set on the table. She just mumbled something about wedding errands and Khalid waiting at the junction.

"Tell him to greet us next time," Faiza called out. "He's family now o!"

Amina forced a smile. "I will, Mummy."

Khadija nearly choked holding in her laughter.

As soon as they were outside the gate, Khadija whispered, "So Khalid is your escape route now?"

"Please, just go with it before Mummy starts praying over me in tongues."

They flagged down a Keke NAPEP just by the corner of Sultan Road.

The driver a dark skinned man with chewing stick in his mouth and a radio blasting hamisu breakers song squinted at them through the side mirror. "Ina zaku je?"

"Unguwar Rimi, Primalcare Clinic," Amina said quickly.

"Ah ah. Doctor checkup ne? Ko suna don na sauke wasu Wai zasuje suna ta Layin"

"Just go!" Khadija barked.

The Keke pulled off with a jolt. The wind slapped their faces and dust flew into their hijabs. Khadija struggled to tie her veil as it flapped like a flag behind her.

The driver full of energy didn't stop talking.

"Wallahi, these doctors sef, they will just be collecting money. Even malaria, them go do five test. Na wa."

Khadija muttered, "Why is this man narrating BBC Hausa inside our ears?"

He turned to look back mid drive. "Ehn? I dey talk my own, aunty. You young girls, you no dey hear word. Before you know, you go say belly don come."

Amina's heart skipped.

Khadija smacked his shoulder lightly. "Dan Allah Mallam kallo gabanka (Face front, Mallam) !"

"Abeg, no vex. I dey advise una like my pikin."

The man kept talking. About his four wives, his stubborn son in KASU, and one girl that tried to poison her boss because he refused to marry her. It was chaos The wind, the noise, the bouncing Keke. Amina could barely think.

She clutched her handbag like it carried her destiny. Her palms were sweaty. She kept glancing at her phone, though no messages were coming in.

Khadija leaned close. "Are you okay?"

"I feel like vomiting."

"Please don't If you vomit inside this Keke, this man will follow us home and report us to Daddy."

"God."

"Look," Khadija said, trying to calm her. "Even if it's positive, we'll figure it out. We'll go spiritual. I heard ginger mixed with kunu can erase it if it's still small."

Amina frowned. "That's not how pregnancy works, you witch."

Khadija chuckled. "I'm just trying to reduce your blood pressure."

Just then, the Keke screeched past a pothole that almost swallowed one of the tyres. Both girls screamed and held each other.

The driver turned again. "No fear! I sabi these roads pass government!"

"Baba, please face front!"

They passed 44 hospital , then slowed at a military checkpoint. The soldier peeked into the Keke.

"Where una dey go?"

"Clinic," Amina said.
The soldier eyed her. "Wetin do you?"

"Nothing!" she and Khadija said in unison.

The soldier waved them on, muttering, "Una girls these days. Hmm."

Amina whispered, "I'm going to die."

"Shhh Almost there."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

They turned into Unguwar Rimi, passed a row of tailor shops and meat sellers shouting prices of ram legs, then finally stopped in front of Primalcare Hospital, a quiet beige building tucked behind a pharmacy and a suya stand.

"₦1700," the Keke man said.

Khadija handed him ₦2000. "No change, just go."

"Ah! Nagode," he said happily. "May Allah provide husband that will love you, belly or no belly."

Amina's mouth dropped. Khadija yanked her out of the Keke.

"GO!"

As he zoomed off still praying in Hausa, they both stood at the hospital gate, breathing hard.

Amina whispered, "I'm not ready."

Khadija held her hand. "You're not alone."

They looked up at the clinic sign PRIMALCARE WOMEN'S DIAGNOSTIC UNIT.

Amina swallowed hard. "Let's go inside."

Together, they stepped in, leaving the chaos of the Kaduna streets behind.
PRIMALCARE WOMEN'S CLINIC 10:05AM

The white tiles were too bright. The air smelt like antiseptic and hand sanitizer. Amina and Khadija stepped through the glass doors like thieves in daylight.

They paused.

"What do we even say?" Amina whispered.

"I don't know. Say you want to pee on a stick?"

"Khadija, I'm serious."

A young man in a white coat approached them. He looked like an intern awkward, with round glasses and oversized scrubs. "Good morning. Can I help you?"

Amina lowered her voice. "I need... a pregnancy test."

He blinked. "Okay Please go to the reception, ma. They'll register you."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

They walked to the front desk, where a bored looking receptionist with braids and pink lip gloss sat tapping on her keyboard. Behind her, a soft Arewa music track was playing from someone's phone speaker Ali Jita or something mellow.

"Name?" the receptionist asked, not looking up.

Amina hesitated. "Maryam."

Khadija coughed loudly beside her.

"Just your first name?" the woman asked, raising a brow.

Amina bit her lip. "Maryam Musa."

"Phone number?"

Amina gave hers. Khadija elbowed her. "Use my number! Use mine, na."

The woman raised her brow again, but typed in Khadija's number.

"Test type?"

"Urine," Amina muttered.

"Payment is ₦3,500."

Amina dug through her bag and handed over the money. Her hands were trembling.

"Sit They'll call you."

OUTSIDE THE TESTING ROOM

Khadija paced like a soldier awaiting news from the battlefield.

She muttered to herself, "God, please na false alarm. Abeg She just needs to fart and the whole thing will disappear."

Inside, the nurse, a tall woman in her forties with no nonsense eyes, handed Amina a plastic container and pointed to the restroom.

"Just a small sample, no need to fill the bucket."

Amina couldn't even smile. Her hands felt weak.

When she returned the sample, the nurse began asking questions.

"When was your last period?"

"Over a month ago."

"Any nausea?"

Amina nodded faintly.

"Do you take contraceptives?"

"No."

The woman looked up sharply. "So you had unprotected sex?"

Amina didn't answer She just looked down.

The nurse clicked her tongue but didn't say more. "Results will be ready soon. Sit."

OUTSIDE CLINIC ENTRANCE

Amina came out, pale and quiet. Khadija rushed to her.

"Shebi I told you? Stress That nurse looks like someone who wrestled with shaiṭan himself."

Amina managed a small smile. "They'll send the results on WhatsApp."

"Hmm Let's go."
They headed out to get keke napep
They didn't notice the black Lexus SUV parked across the street.

Inside it sat Yasir, sunglasses on, engine idling.

He leaned forward when he saw them step out of the clinic.

His stomach twisted.

Primalcare Women's clinic Diagnostic center.

Not a general hospital Not even a dentist.

Lab,Pregnancy tests, Fertility checks. Confidential scans.

What the hell are they doing there?

He tried to tell himself maybe Khadija was sick. Maybe someone needed results picked up. But Amina was wearing that panicked look he knew too well like when her mother found out she got suspended from hostel in 200L.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His heart raced

He told himself he wasn't going to come to Kaduna again. That he'd leave everything behind. But Khalid's father had offered him a role with that new company ₦5 million naira a month. A way out A distraction.

He was restless, still figuring out if he would continue the job.

Then this

Amina,Here Now.

He watched as the girls crossed the street toward the Keke park, chatting with forced laughter. Amina clutched her phone tightly. Her scarf kept sliding off her shoulder. She looked so small So scared.

He wanted to open the door and call her name.

"Amina!"

He wanted to shout. Ask her why she was here. What was going on But his hand froze on the door handle.

No Not like this.

But he couldn't stop himself.

INSIDE THE CLINIC

Yasir walked in slowly, hands in pockets. He looked around like someone who forgot why he entered.

The receptionist gave him a quick once over. "Oga, yes?"

"I... um..." he scratched the back of his neck. "Someone I know came here A girl Tall White veil Just now She came with someone."

The receptionist squinted. "Sir, we don't give out information about patients."

"No, I'm not asking for anything private. I just need to know what kind of test she did."

She rolled her eyes. "We don't say those things, oga. It's confidential."

Yasir stepped back. His mind was racing. He knew how these clinics worked. He knew what a woman came here for.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His chest tightened

"She's pregnant," he muttered to himself.

Then his fists clenched. "She's pregnant And she didn't even tell me or is She just checking how fertile she is , no that doesn't make any sense "

His world tilted for a moment.

Was it Khalid?

But no Amina had just gotten married. Barely three weeks ago. Even by miracle, that wasn't enough time.

Then it hit him

Zaria The service apartment That last night.

He staggered back into the parking lot like a drunk man.

Inside the SUV, he sat motionless, fists on the steering wheel, eyes red.

"Wallahi, if it's mine... if she's pregnant with my child and she's married to Khalid wait that's not even possible babu aure kenan "

He didn't finish the sentence
But he started the car
Back at the house
The house was too quiet Outside, the midday adhan from the corner masjid floated faintly into the air.

Amina and Khadija sat side by side on the rug in Amina's room. The windows were drawn. The fan spun overhead lazily, doing nothing for the heat that wrapped around them like a blanket of fear.

Neither of them touched the kunun gyada their mother had left earlier The steam had long disappeared.

They just stared at their phones.

Then:

Ping

Khadija's hand moved first. She swiped the notification bar, opened the message from the unknown clinic number.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Pregnancy test result: POSITIVE.

Silence.

Khadija froze.

"Ya Allah," she breathed She couldn't move. Couldn't blink Couldn't even breathe properly.

Then, slowly, she turned the phone and handed it to Amina, wordlessly.

Amina took it Her eyes scanned the words.

Positive.

A single word Simple Final Loud.

Her fingers started shaking Her lips parted but no words came. Her throat dried instantly, like sand.

Then

She collapsed onto the rug like a puppet cut loose.

Sobs burst from her chest, wild and deep, the kind that shook her whole body. Her scarf slipped off but she didn't care.

"I'm dead I'm actually dead," she wailed. "I'm married to Khalid, but pregnant for Yasir. Ya Allah, how?!"

Her voice cracked with every word, shattering under the weight of the truth. Her nails dug into the carpet.

"All these years of doing it nothing ever happened," Khadija whispered shakily. "But now? Just once? That one time?"

Amina rocked back and forth, tears soaking her hijab. "Wallahi it was just that night in Zaria. That night before I left ABU. I didn't even want to. I was just so... so in love. "

Khadija stood up, pacing.

"Why didn't you use something?! Even ordinary withdrawal"

"I wasn't thinking!" Amina screamed, her voice hoarse. "I didn't plan it. I didn't know my father would drag me home. I didn't know ASUU would strike. I didn't know he'd arrange a marriage for me overnight like it was a business transaction!"

She covered her face, gasping between sobs. "I just wanted to feel something" Khadija grabbed her head, almost pulling at her braids. "Amina, are you hearing yourself? You're pregnant! And you're someone's wife!"

"Don't remind me," Amina cried. "I don't even know how I'm still breathing."

"You think your father will survive this one?" Khadija hissed. "If he hears this? If Khalid finds out? Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un. This is not a Nollywood movie, Amina! This is real life!"

Amina let out a dry, bitter laugh. "My whole life already feels like a film. Wallahi, I don't even know what's real anymore."

Khadija dropped to the bed, shaking her leg rapidly, eyes darting around the room.

"So what do we do? What do we do, Amina? Abortion?"

"No," Amina said immediately, choking. "Wallahi, I can't I can't do that. It's haram I'd rather die."

"Then what? You want to start showing belly during your wedding party?" Khadija hissed. "You think all these nosy aunties won't count back the months?!"

"I know!" Amina screamed, pressing her palms to her temples. "Stop shouting! My head is already exploding!"

Khadija went quiet. She looked at her friend her sister crumpled on the rug, drenched in tears, shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"Should we tell yasir he'll know what to do ?" she asked softly.

Amina shook her head. ". He probably thinks I've moved on That I'm happy with Khalid."

Khadija snorted. "I don't think so maybe you should talk to Khalid I mean he seems chill sometimes ."

Amina blinked, staring at the ceiling. "I don't even know who to fear more My father? Khalid?"

Then, without warning, she leaned over and vomited into the waste bin beside her dressing table.

Khadija jumped. "Kai! You've even started vomiting?"

Amina wiped her mouth with her scarf, weak and pale.

"I'm dead," she muttered again, more quietly this time. "Wallahi, I'm truly finished."

Silence hung between them, thick like fog.

Then Khadija whispered, "We can't tell anyone. Not yet You have to act normal. Till we figure something out."

"I don't even know how to pretend anymore," Amina said.

"Then learn," Khadija replied, her voice hard. "Because if this leaks... we're all finished."

LATER AMINA'S ROOM

The afternoon sun had begun to tilt lazily across the sky, slanting golden light through the windows. The room felt too quiet, the silence dense and suffocating, like it knew what had happened and was giving them space to mourn it.

Amina sat slouched on the rug again, back against the wall, legs drawn to her chest. Her scarf had slipped halfway off. Her eyes looked hollow.

"I'm not even properly married," she murmured, almost to herself. "Not Islamically. You can't marry a pregnant woman."

Khadija looked up slowly from her place on the bed.

"So technically..." Amina continued, voice flat, "the daurin aure is invalid. But the wedding... the event... it's still next week."

Khadija's voice was small. "So what now?"

Amina swallowed. Her eyes were fixed on the crack in the ceiling.

"I keep quiet," she said.

"Just for now. Khalid doesn't even like me like that We're not intimate We barely talk about anything beyond guest lists and color codes. Nobody needs to know."

"But what if he finds out?" Khadija asked quietly.

Amina turned to her. Her expression was flat, resigned. "I'll tell him after I move into his house."

Khadija didn't respond. The weight of Amina's shame sat between them like a third person.

A minute passed Two.

Then Amina said something so softly, Khadija barely heard it.

"What if I just... remove it?"

Khadija sat up, her back stiffening. "What?"

"I'm not saying I will," Amina added quickly, eyes darting away. "I'm just thinking... it's only a few weeks. What if I just end it and start fresh?"

Khadija's jaw dropped. "Amina."

"I know what it sounds like," Amina said, her voice cracking. "But this baby... it'll ruin everything. My father will never forgive me. If Khalid leaves me . Yasir"Her voice broke on his name. "Yasir's gone There's no one left."

Khadija stood up, her voice rising. "That's murder, Amina Islamically, you know it is. You of all people know."

"I know!" Amina shouted back. "I know!" She gripped her hair, pacing the floor. "Do you think I don't know? I feel it in my chest, in my bones, every second! But I can't breathe, Khadija. I'm drowning."

She stopped and stared at the phone again, the word positive still glowing like a curse on the screen.

"I've always wanted to be a good girl," she whispered, her voice breaking. "I wore my scarf. I prayed. I avoided boys. I said no to every stupid DM and every rich politician in Abuja. I wanted to do the right thing.but Yasir was always my breaking point made me do things I swore I'd never try , now I understand why it's haram nidai kawai Allah ne ya kamani "

She sank to the floor again, trembling. "Now look at me Pregnant Married to a man I barely know probably invalid marriage In love with another. Carrying a child that could destroy my whole family."

Khadija moved closer and wrapped her arms around her. "You made a mistake, Amina. But you're not evil You're not ruined You're still here."

Amina leaned into her, eyes red. "But for how long?"

They sat there in silence, the only sound being the distant hum of the neighborhood generator and the occasional crow of a rooster that never learned time.

Suddenly, from outside the window, came the familiar low hum of a powerful engine.

A black Range Rover Velar rolled slowly into the compound. It gleamed in the dying light, its presence commanding.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid

The house help quickly opened the gate for him.

He parked neatly, turned off the engine, and stepped out tall, calm, dressed in a black kaftan, dark glasses still on despite the time of day.

Amina didn't move. She stared blankly at the window, her heart beginning to thud.

Khadija peeked through the curtain. "What is he doing here? Are you guys supposed to go out today ?," she whispered.

Amina wiped her face with her scarf quickly. "I don't know "

Khadija nodded.

Downstairs, Khalid stood still for a moment, staring up at the house.

He had no idea what had just happened.

No idea what he was walking into.

But something in the air the stillness, the silence made him pause.

He removed his sunglasses and looked up again.

The wind blew lightly through the neem tree beside the gate.

Inside, Amina closed her eyes and whispered

"Ya Allah, cover my shame."

And then suddenly her phone rang an unknown number she didn't pick it kept ringing until she picked
"Hello" the person said
She knew that voice it sounded very familiar
Yasir.

Chapter sixteen - Tension

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A black Range Rover glided into the compound with a soft hum, its body polished so clean the dull evening light bounced off it like liquid. The hum of its engine was too gentle for such a powerful car, like the man behind the wheel danger wrapped in stillness.

The house help, a boy no older than sixteen with dust stained slippers, scrambled to open the gate. He gave a slight nod as the car passed, eyes wide, respectful Everyone in the house had learned to recognize Khalid's car. It didn't just drive in it announced itself.

Khalid parked with surgical precision under the tree that stood by the far corner of the compound. He killed the engine and stepped out.

Black kaftan, crisp and elegant. Dark sunglasses still in place even though the sun had nearly disappeared. A wristwatch peeked out from his sleeve. There was something princely and cold in the way he moved an elegance honed from years of discipline. He paused, his gaze scanning the house like it owed him an explanation.

Upstairs, behind a rustling curtain, Amina stood frozen.

Her heart thumped loudly too loudly against her ribcage.

Khadija, standing behind her, whispered, "What is he doing here? Are you people supposed to go out today?"

"I don't know," Amina whispered, wiping her tear wet cheeks with the edge of her scarf. Her hands were shaking. "We didn't plan anything."

Khadija frowned, concerned. "He looks... intense."

Amina didn't answer. She couldn't Her throat had closed.

Down below, Khalid took off his sunglasses. His eyes dark, deep, always too observant lifted to the window. He felt something. The house was too still. Not the usual hum of movement, no murmured voices from the parlour. The breeze rustled the neem leaves beside him. Something was off.

He inhaled deeply and adjusted his kaftan.

Inside, Amina whispered under her breath, "Ya Allah, cover my shame."

Then her phone vibrated again
An unknown number
It rang once, twice. She hesitated But something in her gut told her.

She picked up

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Hello?"

Silence

Then: "Amina?"

Her knees buckled slightly.

"Yasir?" Her voice cracked like a matchstick. Raw.

"Yeah," he said softly. And then"Hey love."

That word again. That cursed, sweet word "Love." It meant nothing now Or maybe it meant everything because he still said it And she was pregnant with his child. Her heart clenched.

She should have hung up. But she didn't.

"How... how are you?" she whispered.

"I'm alive," he chuckled "But not breathing properly ."

She bit her lip, suppressing a sob. He always knew how to wrap pain in poetry. He was the kind of man who made heartbreak sound romantic.

Then the silence between them thickened. Heavy,Familiar and Sacred.

"I saw you," he said.

Her stomach dropped

"At the clinic."

She closed her eyes.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she lied Her voice too sharp, too fast.

"No, it's not You're lying I know your lies, Amina."

She looked away, fingers trembling, her other hand resting protectively over her lower belly.

Down the hall, her mother's voice rang out like a warning bell: "Amina! Khalid ya dawo Zo mana kasa."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her entire body went cold She forgot to breathe. He was here And she had used his name this morning. Lied to her parents, told them she was going somewhere with him. If he said the truth now...

She ended the call without another word, tucking the phone into her wrapper with trembling fingers.

The sitting room was quiet when she walked in. Too quiet.

Her parents were gone deliberately gone, she knew. They were being left alone.

Khalid sat near the window, the last orange rays of sunset brushing his profile. His back was straight, almost military his jaw tight, his brows slightly furrowed. His entire presence exuded something... unreadable.

She stood near the entrance, suddenly unsure of how to move.

"Khalid," she said quietly.

He turned

His eyes scanned her face for a moment too long. She looked paler than yesterday She was wearing a loose turmeric yellow atamfa and black veil, but her eyes were the same dark, defiant, afraid.

"You're quiet," he said, finally His voice calm and Controlled.

"I wasn't expecting you," she replied

He tilted his head "You weren't?"

"No We didn't plan anything."
He nodded, then turned back to the window, hands still "Right."

She hesitated, then said, "I told them... I told them I was with you this morning."

He looked at her, eyes narrowed slightly. "Did you?"

"I had to I needed to go somewhere."

"Somewhere," he echoed

She didn't answer

"It's okay," he said. "I told them I dropped you off."

Relief spread across her face damage control

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He walked to the armchair and sat down with a sigh. "I'm leaving for Abuja tonight Thought I'd at least say bye to your parents before the event."

She blinked. "You're leaving?"

"Yes I'll be back in a few days For the whole... wedding circus."

He stood again. "Anyway, just wanted to be polite I'm leaving now."

He made to walk past her, but something in her snapped.

"Khalid... can we talk?"

He paused and Turned. "Sure," he said, walking back slowly. "What's up?"

She looked down, gathering courage from somewhere buried deep.

"You know Yasir and I... our relationship wasn't completely pure We did things.....Haram things."

He didn't flinch Just watched her.

"If you're telling me you're not a virgin," he said, "I really don't care It's not like we have an actual relationship And even if we did... I don't judge."

She nodded slowly Then her lips trembled.

"I think I'm pregnant."

He blinked
No shock No loud reaction Just a stillness.

"Pregnant?" he asked.

She nodded, barely breathing.

"So... you're telling me you're pregnant. Amina, is this your way of asking me to end the marriage?"

"No!" she said quickly "It's not like that."

"And Yasir? Did you know before all this started?"

"Yes," she whispered. "It happened before the daurin aure."

He stood still for a moment, then let out a long breath.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"And you didn't use protection?"

"Why ask?" she snapped. "It's me It's Yasir The two most careless people you know, right?"

He gave a small, humourless laugh. "Are you done insulting yourself?"

She turned away, tears forming.

"So technically," she said, voice cracking, "This marriage is invalid Islamically Right?"

He looked at her. "Yes."

A long silence
Then he exhaled again longer this time. "So what are you planning to do?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "That's why I need your help I can't abort it. Yasir saw me at the clinic He's already suspecting If he finds out..."

She looked up at him. "He'll create a scene. And if my parents find out I'm dead meat"

That's when Khalid's face changed Slightly Barely But she saw it His jaw locked. His voice dropped.

"They can't especially not my father ," he said.

She took a step back The way he said it...

"Khalid... why? Why can't they know? I mean I know my reasons and honestly I know you could care less about me so why ?"

He didn't answer His eyes darkened.
"What will happen? Why are you afraid of your father?"

A long pause

Then he said, too quickly, "Look We'll go ahead with the wedding. Then we'll figure something out."

"You mean I leave my parents house to live with you? In a marriage that's invalid? With your cousin's child inside me?"

He tilted his head. "Do you have a better plan?"

"No," she admitted

"Then let's do what we can Minimize the damage."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She sat on the edge of the sofa, suddenly exhausted. "I can't go on with all the events. Maybe just one Cancel the rest."

The sitting room was quiet Too quiet.
"Okay " he said I'll make the arrangements

"You'll be busy this week," Khalid said without looking up. His voice was low, composed. "Henna booking, the gele trials, your final fitting . I already moved your hair appointment to Friday."

"You... moved it?" she asked.

He looked at her then, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I didn't think you'd want to wait six hours for that bridal stylist you like."

"You remember her name?"

"Of course, you mentioned it a million times yesterday " he said simply I listen."

She swallowed, unsure how to respond to that. Her fingers tightened around the edge of her scarf.

"Fine," she murmured.

He pulled out his phone. "Oh And the house. Here are the options."

He walked over slowly, closing the space between them He stopped just beside her. Not touching. Not even brushing sleeves. But she felt his presence like gravity.

He leaned in slightly and turned the phone screen to face her.
She smelled his perfume , and something darker Something masculine and unsettling. Not sweet and Not safe. But... magnetic.

Her heart did something strange.

He scrolled slowly. "You said you wanted Wuse II. Here's the duplex Five bedrooms. Courtyard. Study Kitchen. Big everything."

She blinked. "It's perfect."

"I put the initial deposit down already. You'll like the lighting in the dressing room."

She looked up at him. "You've been planning all this?"

Khalid shrugged. "You asked me to handle it. So I did."

He paused, then added, "Also... the lefe It's being brought tomorrow. Along with the shadda, gold, perfumes, makeup, prayer mats, and The full convoy for your instagram gossip blogs"

Amina nodded, then looked away. "You really do listen don't you?"

"What about the underwear's bet you forgot that" she said
"No I didn't " he replied

She turned sharply. "You don't even know my size."

He raised an eyebrow. "I actually do."

She narrowed her eyes. "How?"

He chuckled, just barely. "You don't want to know."

"Khalid," she said flatly. "Tell me."

He looked at her, really looked His eyes were dark, unreadable He didn't smile this time. "No."

The room felt too warm.

She stepped back slightly, cheeks hot. "You're unbelievable."

"I've been called worse."

They stood in silence, neither looking away.

A distant call to prayer echoed faintly from a masjid nearby. Maghrib was approaching. The sky outside had turned a soft, dusky purple. The scent of suya drifted from a nearby junction. Somewhere outside, a child's laughter rang out, breaking for a moment the stillness in the room.
Khalid broke the silence. "I have to go."

She nodded stiffly, unsure why disappointment twisted in her gut.

He moved toward the door, pausing just before the frame. Then he turned halfway, his profile bathed in the last light of the sun.

"Just... keep yourself healthy, okay?"

There was something in his voice gentle, almost tender but restrained.

Amina looked down. "Allah ya kiyaye hanya," she said softly.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He didn't move

She glanced up

He was staring at her.

And for a moment just a moment it felt like something shifted. Like he might walk back, say something reckless, reach for her hand, or confess something neither of them could handle.

But he didn't
He just nodded, eyes unreadable, and opened the door.

The breeze from outside drifted in, carrying the scent of sand and diesel and the first hints of harmattan dust.

Then he was gone.

Amina sat down slowly, trembling slightly. Her fingers still smelled faintly of him

She was marrying a man she barely knew. A man who noticed everything but revealed nothing. Who listened more than he spoke, whose pain she could sense but couldn't name. Who made her feel... seen, but not safe.

She wrapped her arms around herself.

Somewhere in her womb, a secret stirred.

Upstairs...

Khadija sat cross legged on the prayer mat near the corner of Amina's room, her scarf loosely tied, eyes glued to her phone screen. Her expression had gone still, lips slightly parted, fingers frozen mid-scroll.

"My dad just called," she said finally, her voice quiet.

Amina turned from the window, where she'd been staring out at the neem tree rustling under the moonlight. "Everything okay?"

Khadija looked up, her face pale. "I have to go back home. Tonight."

Amina's stomach dropped. She had known this moment would come Khadija's visit wasn't permanent but it still felt like someone was peeling off the last piece of armor she had left.

"It's been days," Khadija continued. "He says people are starting to
ask questions. About me, I need to be seen at home."

Amina nodded slowly. "I understand."

But she didn't Not really. She wanted to scream Don't leave me, but she couldn't. Not when Khadija had already done more than enough , staying by her side, sneaking her to the clinic, helping her pray through waves of anxiety.

"I'll miss you," Amina said, her voice cracking as she pulled her friend into a tight hug.

Khadija hugged her back fiercely, holding her for a long moment before pulling away. "You're not okay."

Amina looked down, wiping her face with her scarf. "I'm not," she whispered. "I don't even know who to talk to anymore."

"You have me," Khadija said.

But they both knew what that meant. You have me... for now. And soon, Amina would be alone. In a strange house. With a man she couldn't read. A baby growing inside her from a love that had ended too late

Khadija looked around the room still cluttered with samples, gold jewelry, gele fabrics folded on the bed, an unopened envelope of wedding invitations. She reached out and picked up one, flipping it open.

"Khalid Aminu Bello & Amina Usman Suleiman
Khadija exhaled through her nose. "You know you don't have to go through with this, right?"

Amina closed her eyes.

"I already did."
“But you didn't choose it."

"No I didn't." She sat on the edge of the bed. "But I'm still in it. I'm in everything now, Khadija. This house, this baby, this marriage. It's all happening... with or without me."

Khadija walked over and sat beside her. She took Amina's hand, rubbing soft circles into her palm. "Allah is with you. Wallahi, He is."

Amina's voice was small. "Even when I sinned?"

"Especially then."

The room was silent for a while. Just the sound of distant horns from the road, a barking dog somewhere down the street, the slow tick of the wall clock.

Then Amina's phone buzzed again.

Yasir

The screen lit up his name Again.

Her heart stuttered. Her finger hovered over the green icon. Then the red.

She let it ring

And ring
And stopShe tossed the phone aside and pressed both hands over her face.

Then, finally finally she cried.

Not the soft tears she'd shed in silence for weeks, but the full, broken kind. Her shoulders shook. Her breaths came sharp and loud. She buried her face into Khadija's lap like a child, her sobs filling the room with ache.

Khadija stroked her back, whispering "Sannu... sannu, Amina..." but she couldn't stop the flood.

Because Yasir had been her friend. Her sin. Her love Her mistake.

And now Khalid was her husband Her wall. Her stranger,Her fate.
Meanwhile... in The Ibrahim's house

Yasir was pacing.

His room was a mess. Clothes flung across the chair. A half eaten bowl of tuwo untouched on the desk. His laptop still open to a paused episode of Attack on Titan, long forgotten.

He held his phone to his ear. No response.

Again
He dialed
No response

He cursed under his breath, then sat heavily on the bed, his hands on his knees.

"What's going on with you, Amina?" he muttered. "Why are you doing this?"
He thought of the last time he saw her frail, covered, eyes swollen from crying, hands shaking And now... silence.

He redialed

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Voicemail

He threw the phone across the bed and stared at the ceiling fan spinning lazily above.

He felt useless Furious and Helpless.

And scared

He had seen her at the clinic.

He knew

Was she pregnant? Was it his? Was she married now?

The truth pressed on his chest like a stone.

He covered his face with both hands and whispered, "Ya Allah, don't let me lose her completely I thought I could do this but I can't "

Somewhere on the Kaduna Abuja Expressway...

Khalid drove with one hand on the wheel, the other tapping rhythmically against the steering. The night stretched ahead dark, still, endless.

The car hummed smoothly beneath him . The dashboard glowed in the dark. The road was mostly empty now, only the occasional trailer roaring past in the opposite lane.

The city lights of Kaduna had faded behind him. His thoughts wouldn't stop.

Amina Her eyes when she said "It's perfect." The way her fingers trembled when he mentioned the underwear. The way she watched him like she wanted to ask something but couldn't find the words.

She was slipping away
Not from him She had never been his to begin with.

But something in her spirit, something he couldn't name it was dimming. Like she was carrying something she didn't know how to put down.

He could see it
He knew that weight

He adjusted the AC slightly. The cold air blew gently across his face.

His phone vibrated once.

A message from his father:

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Where are you? We need to speak."

He ignored it.

Instead, he opened his audio player. Played a Quranic recitation softly. Surah Maryam by Omar hisham

The voice echoed into the silence of the car.

فَأَجَآءَهَا ٱلْمَخَاضُ إِلَىٰ جِذْعِ ٱلنَّخْلَةِ قَالَتْ يَـٰلَيْتَنِى مِتُّ قَبْلَ هَـٰذَا وَكُنتُ نَسْيًا مَّنسِيًّا ٢٣

"And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, 'Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten.'"

Khalid blinked

Amina

She was suffering

And he didn't know how to save her without breaking something else inside her.

He pressed harder on the accelerator Abuja was still hours away But his mind was back in Kaduna

With her

Chapter seventeen – A day to the big day

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The house was full, but Amina felt empty

Kaduna's night air was hot and heavy, the way it always felt when rain was threatening but never came. Heat stuck to her skin despite the fan's tired wheeze The air smelled of rose perfume, fried oil, and exhaustion.

Downstairs, the sitting room had turned into a warzone of wrappers and wedding noise. Her aunties were in full force now some from Zaria, others from Kano, even a few from Abuja. They sat cross legged on throw pillows, wrappers tied tightly around their waists, surrounded by opened boxes from the lefe. The you know who's and subtle insults flew with perfect Arewa politeness.

"This lace, ehn, it's original from Dubai o. Khalid's mother has taste See the embroidery."

"Haba, ten million sadaki? That boy is not a human being, he's oil block!"

"Wetin concern me? My own is, they better not serve those small chops with cold puff puff again. This one na real wedding, not children play."
"Allah sa dai baya bin mata " one whispered
"Irin wanan ai da wuya bayayi" the other said

Children ran between the legs of women, sticky with zobo and chinchin. Her cousins had claimed the corridor for TikTok dances, twisting to Hausa remixes of Nigerian pop songs. In the kitchen, someone was blending pepper. Outside, the compound was a theatre of logistics decorators measuring tables, men testing fairy lights, a tailor delivering last minute blouses with apologies.

And through it all, upstairs, in the far corner room with the pale curtains, Amina sat on her bed like a guest in her own life.

Her scarf was falling off one shoulder Her fingers gripped the edge of the mattress. Her back was straight, but her eyes were distant.

They had posted the lefe on Instagram that morning.

~~₦~~10 million sadaki.
Cartier watches.
Bundles of Swiss lace.
Two iPhones.
A key to a duplex in Wuse II The caption read:
"The one and only Khalid Aminu Bello. Sorry ladies, he's taken 😍💍 #Kamu2025 #KadunaToAbuja #AREWARoyalty"

But what the blogs didn't know what no one knew was that the bride to be was sick with silence.

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Not that she was pregnant.
Not that she hadn't seen or heard from Khalid in days
Not that she still thought of Yasir every single time her phone lit up.

And not that her heart felt like it was dying by degrees.

The nausea came in waves now, not just in the morning. It sat in her throat, bitter and quiet.

Her mother had come in earlier, excitement in her voice and a gele in each hand.

"Amina, baby, kidan gwada wannan mugani and try the peach one. I swear, if you wear it with the silver stone necklace, Khalid's people will just faint. Ehn? You want to disgrace your mother tomorrow?"

Amina had smiled faintly. "I think... I need the bathroom."

She made it in time. Threw up nothing but bile. Then sat on the cold tile floor and stayed there, forehead against the door.

The perfume from the lace musky and powdery still clung to her skin. Funny how tge symptoms didn't appear until She realized she was pregnant crazy how the brain works

Now, alone again, she sat in the bathroom, knees drawn to her chest. The mirror above the sink was cracked in one corner. She stared into it, quietly, until her reflection no longer looked like herself.

"Whose face is this?" she whispered.

The girl in the mirror had pale lips, dark eyes, and a faint red line on her cheek from where her scarf had been too tight.

She looked broken.

She looked like someone pretending to survive.

There was a soft knock. "Amina?"

It was her mother again Of course.

"You've been in there long," she said gently. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mummy," she said, too quickly. "Just... tired I think the jollof made my stomach turn."

There was a pause, then the sound of slippers fading away.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The gown for the kamu hung from the wardrobe, still wrapped in plastic, untouched.

It shimmered even in the low light soft chiffon, silver threaded embroidery across the bust and down the waist. Amina stared at it, bile rising in her throat again.

It was beautiful
She hated it

She stood, shakily, and reached for her phone.

Still nothing from Khalid.
Since he'd left for Abuja he hadn't called, hadn't texted, hadn't even checked on her. Not a word Not even "How are you?"
And khadija was supposed to come that day but she had things to do and Amina didn't really have many friends she was always around yasir
Meanwhile Yasir...

Her screen was flooded with messages.

Yasir: Amina please, I'm going crazy. Just tell me it's not true
Yasir: They said they've moved the event in a few days
Yasir: Amina, I love you If this is punishment, I deserve it But talk to me.
Yasir: I'll wait outside I just need five minutes. Say the word.

Her thumb hovered. She had typed and deleted ten different replies today And one dangerous one

Come and Take me Now.

But the thought of her father tall, stern, tired from years of raising his children without scandal killed the idea before it reached her lips. He had finally smiled yesterday. For the first time in weeks. She had done too much to upset him at least make him happy

She couldn't break him.

She couldn't disgrace her mother.

She couldn't disgrace herself.

Ya Allah, why did I do this?

She stood shakily, gripped the sink, and whispered: "I want to go to him."

The mirror stared back in silence

Outside her room, she could hear her brothers arguing playfully.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Wallahi, I'm not wearing babban Riga in this heat. It's not even my wedding!"

"Amina is the only sister you have, and you're complaining about heat ? Mumu."
"Abeg, let me wear kaftan and be free. Shebi the husband is rich his own will cover all our own sins."

Amina closed her door.

She wanted to scream.

She wanted to tell them I'm not okay. I'm not ready. I'm pregnant I don't even know if this marriage is real. I don't even know who I am anymore.

Instead, she lay back on her bed and stared at the ceiling fan, its blades spinning lazily.

Her stomach ached and Her chest burned.

Then her phone buzzed.

Khalid
Her heart stopped
But it wasn't a call
It was a message

Khalid: "hey just arrived in kaduna hope you're okay?"

A single line Dry and Empty.

After days of silence, that was all?

She stared at it, tears stinging her eyes.

She typed:

You left me
Deleted it
Typed again:

I'm not okay
Deleted that too.

Finally she replied:

Amina: "I'm fine."

She turned off her phone.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And she allowed herself to cry like a child quietly, into the crook of her elbow until her whole body ached with it.

Outside, the house buzzed with joy.

Inside her room, Amina began to grieve.

Not for Khalid Not even for Yasir.

But for the girl she used to be.

The girl who believed in love.

The girl who still believed in herself.

That night, the compound buzzed louder.

More relatives had arrived some from Birnin Kebbi, some from Suleja. Slippers slapped the tiled floors. Suitcases were dragged across the floor . The sitting room had turned into a storage unit of celebration: gele in every shade of gold, wedding bangles jingling in Ziploc bags, perfume bottles lined up on the mantelpiece. Empty Coke bottles and Fanta cans cluttered side tables. NEPA light flickered like it wasn't sure if joy deserved electricity.

Someone's child cried nonstop a tired two year old who refused to sleep without their mother's breast. In the backyard, the caterers fried waina under a zinc canopy, their laughter mingling with the hiss of hot oil. Smoke curled up into the dark Kaduna sky. Women gathered near the staircase older ones warming their voices, humming low wedding tunes:

"Khalid, angonmu mai kudi..." "Allah ya ba ku zaman lafiya, ku haifi twins har shida..."
Shida Ke?
The drum was coming tomorrow. The talking drum. The women would dance. Her mother had ordered the horse too a real white stallion, for show. Amina was supposed to ride in on it for her kamu entrance.

But upstairs, in the last room at the end of the corridor, Amina lay curled on her prayer mat like a child hiding from monsters.

The room was hot despite the ceiling fan above. The rug pressed into her cheek. Her scarf was twisted behind her neck. Her phone buzzed beside her again.

Yasir

Yasir: "I'll leave you alone if you want. But I need to know Please, Amina. Just tell me the truth."

She didn't reply.

She couldn't

Instead, she wept quietly, silently, trembling into the plush fabric beneath her. The kind of crying that made her shoulders shake, her breath catch, but her mouth stay shut.

She could almost hear Yasir's voice, that annoying grin he always wore when teasing her.

"You again? Wallahi, every time I see you, you're holding that pink water bottle like it's your child. Amina, are you in love with the bottle or with me?"

"You know your head is too stubborn. If they scan it, they'll find concrete."

"One day you'll marry someone like me and I'll say 'I told you so'."

"I swear I won't cry at your wedding. I'll just faint. Right there In front of your in laws."
He always teased her
She laughed then Quietly Bitterly The sound broke in her chest before it reached her lips.

Yasir was always joking, always playing, always acting unserious until the day he wasn't. Until the day he stood at her gate in the rain, soaked and shaking, saying he wanted to marry her. That he was ready That he'd talk to her father.

And she had believed him. For one second longer than she should have but
Now... now every plan they had is ruined

She had tried texting Khalid once. Just one message. Are you okay?

She stared at it for three minutes.

Then deleted it before pressing send.

What was the point?

He wasn't her husband Not really Not in the way that mattered. Not in the way that felt like anything close to comfort. Not when he hadn't even called since he left.

No "how are you."
No "are you eating."
No "do you need anything for tomorrow."

Nothing.

Just silence.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She stared at the glow of her phone. Messages from Yasir stacked like unanswered prayers.

Yasir: "Do you love him?"
Yasir: "Just say it. Even if it kills me."
Yasir: "Say goodbye, at least I'll go."

Amina placed the phone face down and hugged her knees to her chest.

The silence in her room had its own voice now loud, thick, almost physical. It wrapped around her throat like a scarf pulled too tight. She wanted to tell someone Anyone.

Her brothers? No.

What would she even say?
Hi, I'm pregnant With Yasir's child Also, I think my nikkah might be invalid because I wasn't even aware I was pregnant . Surprise!

Even her older brother, kabir the one who always protected her when they were kids would lose his mind.

Or worse, his disappointment would break her.

So instead... she said nothing.

Her mother had knocked earlier. Tried to coax her out with mango slices and warm kunu.

"Amina, they're calling you downstairs. We need to pick your entrance song kuma baki gaida kowa ba ."

"Ina zuwa ."

"You've been coming for two hours."

She hadn't moved. She lay on the prayer mat, fingers tracing the embroidered threads mindlessly. In her stomach, a dull ache spread through her sides. Nausea Guilt Hunger She hadn't eaten more than a biscuit all day. The thought of food made her sick.

The thought of her wedding tomorrow made her want to disappear.

Outside, someone had begun playing the talking drum anyway. A teenage cousin, showing off. Girls clapped and squealed. Someone shouted, "Ango! Ango is coming!" and the house erupted in laughter.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She heard her auntie say, "This Khalid is too fine, ehn Amina is lucky o. That one na full package. Face, chest, bank account."

Someone else replied, "I heard he doesn't talk much."

"Those are the dangerous ones."

Laughter More laughter.

Amina pressed her palm against her stomach. Her eyes welled again.

Ya Allah ka yafe mun she believed her sins were catching up to her

She got up slowly Her legs felt weak. She walked to her wardrobe, unzipped the hanging kamu dress and touched the fabric soft It looked like it belonged to someone else.

She turned to the mirror.

Her face was pale Her eyes looked hollow Her lips were dry.

She whispered to her reflection, barely audible:
"I don't want this."

Then louder:
"I don't want this."

But no one heard. No one ever did

That night, in a house full of food, laughter, family and drumming, Amina slept on her prayer mat.

Not because she was pious. Not because she was tired.

But because it was the only place where she still felt like herself.

And even that was fading.

Kaduna, That Same Night

GRA Service Apartment, 8:13pm

Khalid was pacing the hallway of the apartment like a man trying to escape his own skin.

This wasn't the small, older flat he used for work trips. No this one was bigger, shinier, more expensive. Marble floors. Smoked glass doors. Imported furniture. A gift from his father, of course. Everything in his life came with a price tag and invisible strings.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Downstairs, his cousins were making noise the kind of noise men made when they wanted to feel important. Someone had brought shisha. Another one had invited girls from Instagram, claiming they were "just influencers kd babes ." They were all laughing at something vulgar, the bass of Burna Boy thudding from portable speakers.

Khalid shut the door to the guest room he'd claimed for himself and locked it behind him.

Silence
He pulled off his kaftan. It dropped to the floor in a soft heap. The light caught the edge of the full length mirror, just enough for him to see the shadow of his tattoo a black serpent, coiling from his left hip all the way up his back, the head vanishing into the ridge of his shoulder blade.

He stood still Barefoot Shirtless and Breathing.

Then moved to the chest of drawers.

There, tucked beneath a layer of pressed boxers and cufflinks, was the small vial.

He picked it up turned it in his fingers. The liquid shimmered inside, cold and familiar. He hadn't used it in days . He'd promised himself he wouldn't. But lately... lately, the world felt louder, heavier, darker. Like a tunnel with no exit. He brushed his fingers against the syringe beside it.

Then stopped
His phone was vibrating.

He glanced at the screen.
It was a message from work then he checked Amina's messages
Or rather her number. He hadn't saved it with a name. Not because she didn't matter, Naming her on his phone made it real. And real things were dangerous.

He stared at the phone. Then sat slowly on the edge of the bed, his back tense, jaw locked. His thumb hovered. Then pressed "Call."

It rang.

Twice

Then she picked up.

A hush And then
"Hello, Khalid."
Her voice was a whisper, like she was somewhere small and fragile.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He swallowed. The sound of her name in her own voice always struck something in him. He kept his tone low. Careful.

"Are you okay?"

A pause Too long.

Then:

"No."

His chest tightened. He didn't know what hurt more the honesty in her voice, or the fact that he already knew the answer before she said it.

He stood up instinctively, pacing the rug in slow, tight lines. The snake tattoo moved with the strain in his muscles. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to say it. So instead he asked:

"Do you want me to come? I just arrived now, not too long ago..."

The last part slipped out.

He didn't plan to say it. He wasn't even sure why he said it. Maybe he needed her to know. Maybe he just wanted to see if she was okay

But Amina didn't answer.

The silence dragged.

And then the line cut.

No click No goodbye Just silence.

Khalid stood there for a second, phone in hand, blinking.

He didn't say a word. Just picked up his car keys from the dresser. His wristwatch from the edge of the sink. Slid his feet into black loafers.

It was 8:13pm.

In His Head:

The drive to her house would take less than twenty minutes. Ten if the roads were clear. But time wasn't the problem. It was what he was driving into that weighed heavy on his chest.
I 'm not ready for this, he thought.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Not ready to live in a marriage that felt more like a sentence than a promise. Not ready to hold a woman in his house knowing she loved someone else. Not ready to raise a child that didn't belong to him.

A child he hadn't created but would protect with his life.

Because she didn't deserve shame. She didn't deserve silence.

None of this was her fault.

It was his father's fault. Everything was his father's fault.

Aminu Bello the great lion of Abuja, the shadow king of Arewa power circles. The man who built empires off other people's ruin. The man who forced Khalid's hand with one phone call, like always.

"You owe me your life Now you'll repay it through hers."

His father never asked. He demanded And Khalid had spent his whole life obeying, submitting, suppressing. He had done terrible things .He had disappeared people. Not literally. But in the kind of ways that didn't leave blood, only ashes.

And now he was married.

To a woman who didn't even know what she had signed up for.
Or was he even Mattie to her really??
"Maybe if I pretend long enough, she won't see the truth."

But Amina wasn't the type to stay blind.

She was observant Sensitive and Brave in a quiet way. He remembered the way she looked at him that first time they met properly, in her father's parlour with suspicion, but also something else That flicker That question.

"Who are you, really?"

He didn't have the answer then. He still didn't.

All he knew was that his father would never get to destroy Amina the way he had destroyed Khalid's mother. He wouldn't let that happen.

If he had to fake this marriage long enough to protect her... he would.

If he had to play the villain in her story so she could end up free with Yasir one day... so be it.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

If it meant keeping her dignity intact until the man she truly loved could take over until his father finally died then Khalid would endure it.

He didn't believe in love

But he believed in mercy
And she deserved at least that

Outside, the air was heavy with Kaduna heat thick with diesel smoke, fried oil, and night jasmine. His engine hummed. The city moved in slow, dusty silence.

Khalid pulled out of the driveway, his face blank, tattoo hidden under his shirt, and his hands steady on the wheel.

Not because he wasn't afraid.

But because someone had to be.

Kaduna | Unguwan dosa | 9:07pm

The road was dark and winding, silent except for the whirring of insects and the occasional roar of a passing keke napep. Khalid's Range Rover cut through it like a shadow silent, sleek, blacker than the night itself.

He didn't speed He wasn't in a rush. But his hands... his knuckles were stiff on the steering wheel, white from pressure. The chilled air inside the car felt heavy. The soft recitation of Surah Maryam by Omar hisham Al arabi hummed through the speakers, a voice so delicate it almost sounded like heartbreak itself it had a way of calming him

The verse slipped into his ears like balm. But Khalid's mind was loud.

He was thinking of her.

Of Amina

Of the small tremble in her voice when she said "No."
Of how she hadn't responded after that.

She was alone.

Not physically. No the house was crowded. Loud. Packed with women tying gele, tailors rushing with asoebi, children crying, wedding songs being rehearsed with off-key tambourines.

But he knew that kind of aloneness. The kind where everyone sees you, but no one knows you. The kind where people talk to your shadow and never notice you're fading.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid parked two houses down. Not directly in front of her gate. He didn't want attention.

He looked at his phone.

Typed slowly:
"I'm here If you want to talk."

Sent
Then nothing.

No blue ticks No typing No reply.

He exhaled, leaned back, and placed his phone on the armrest.

He wasn't going to force his way into her life. Into her space. He didn't believe in that. He knew how men like his father moved controlling, entitled, invasive.

Khalid was many things.

But not that.

So he waited.

Inside the House...

Amina was pacing her bedroom like a trapped animal.

Her scarf was loose. Her eyes were tired, swollen. Her phone sat face down on the bed, buzzing once, then going still. She hadn't checked it yet.

She couldn't
She was too busy walking back and forth, back and forth barefoot across the rug, her body restless, her mind spiraling.

How had it come to this?

She was married Married.or not

But pregnant with another man's child.

A child created in joy. In trust In the soft bubble of forbidden love.

And now... now she was someone else's wife. In name, in papers, in all the ways that mattered except one: her heart.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She went to the window. Looked out The compound was quiet now. All the loud aunties were inside. The light near the gate flickered once, then steadied. She could see two street dogs chasing each other down the road.

A breeze moved the curtains.

Something inside her cracked.

She needed air. Real air The type you couldn't breathe in a house filled with secrets.

Amina grabbed her hijab a soft navy chiffon and wrapped it quickly, not caring about the perfect pins this time. She slipped on her abaya, pulled the zipper halfway, and quietly opened her door. The house was dim. She tiptoed past the corridor, down the stairs, and out the side entrance near the kitchen.

She didn't even know where she was going.

She just needed out
Outside... The moment she stepped onto the road, the wind kissed her cheeks cool and soft and real. The kind of wind Kaduna was known for after 9pm, when the sun finally gave up and the city exhaled.

And then she saw it.

The car

Black Familiar and Waiting.

As if it had always been there.

Before she could even second guess herself, the door opened.

Khalid.

He stepped out slowly, like he wasn't sure she'd come at all.

No words Just movement.

He didn't smile.

He didn't ask questions.

He simply walked around the front of the car, opened the passenger door with quiet grace, and stepped back. His kaftan fluttered slightly with the breeze, his expression unreadable.

Amina stared at the open door.

Something inside her maybe pride, maybe fear, maybe defiance told her to turn back.

But her legs moved forward.

She entered the car. Khalid gently closed the door behind her, like she was something sacred, not fragile. Then walked around again, got into the driver's seat, and turned off the Qur'an recitation.

Still, neither of them spoke.

The car smelled like him and something older something lonely.

Far Behind...

Unseen in the shadows of a neem tree further down the road, parked quietly beside a yellow transformer, a car sat still.

Not just any car.

A black Camaro.

The engine was off. The headlights were dim. The driver didn't move.

Yasir

He had been coming every night Just to see her Just in case she decides to talk to hk Just to feel close to whatever was left of their story.

He wasn't stalking He wasn't desperate.

He was in love.

The kind of love that made you stupid Silent and. Faithful to a memory.

He had waited hours tonight.

And now there she was.

Amina
His Amina

Coming out

His heart had jumped, praying she was coming toward the road, toward freedom. Toward him.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

But then...

She entered his car

Khalid's.

And Yasir watched the man his cousin open the door for her.

Like a husband

Like a gentleman that he is

Like someone who had won.

Yasir's throat closed His fingers curled around the steering wheel. His vision blurred, not from tears no. From pressure and pain.

He didn't cry
He didn't scream

He just sat there

Still
Burning

Dying quietly

Inside the Camaro

Watching the only girl he ever loved get into a car with the only man he couldn't beat.

Chapter eighteen –The night before

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Location: Kaduna Night before the Kamu

The car was still, parked under the dim shadow of a mango tree. The glow from the compound light spilled in through the windshield, painting soft golden lines across their faces. The world outside moved gently the occasional barking of street dogs, the hum of a gen set down the street, the distant hiss of akara frying in roadside oil.

But inside, everything was still.

The silence between them wasn't just quiet. It was loud with things left unsaid.

Khalid sat with both hands on the steering wheel, fingers locked tight. His jaw was tense, like he was chewing on thoughts he couldn't swallow. Amina, beside him, stared at the dashboard clock, her arms folded, her heart loud in her ears.

polite silences, avoidance dressed in decency. But now... now something was cracking.

Her voice broke it soft, but sharp.

"Why didn't you call?"

He didn't respond immediately Just shifted slightly, surprise flickering across his face.

" Meyesa?" she asked , still not looking at him. "Tunda ka tafi not a text, not a call. Is it because the marriage doesn't count anymore? Because I'm pregnant with Yasir's child? Or maybe you just don't see me as your wife. So I'm what disposable now?"

Khalid slowly turned toward her, his eyes dark with quiet confusion.

"Amina..."

She cut him off, turning to face him fully.

"Look, I'm not asking for love. Or even affection But we're going to be living in the same house, Khalid. Your house We can't act like strangers. You're not a stranger to me anymore."

He looked down, his thumbs pressing hard against the steering wheel.

"I was caught up with work," he said finally. "I didn't know what to say. But I was worried."

She gave a dry laugh.

"So you're the kind of man who cares in silence? Thinks that's enough?"

He didn't reply

"I get it," she said, softer this time. "You're the quiet type But you bottle up too much. It's not healthy."

She turned her face to him.

"Let it out Sometimes kagani I cry all the time "

That's when he looked at her. Really looked. His eyes the colour of over brewed tea, rimmed with sleepless shadows searched her face like he was memorising something.

Then... he smiled. Just a little a soft, uncertain smile. "There it is," she whispered, her tone shifting. "Smile more It looks good on you."

Khalid glanced away, clearly embarrassed.

"You didn't do your wedding henna," he murmured, almost like he regretted saying it aloud.

Her head snapped toward him again. "You noticed?"

He nodded. "It's a small thing... but it mattered to you you won't stop talking about it the other day ."

Amina was quiet for a beat. "Don't even know again honestly "

He said nothing, but the answer was clear in his expression.

Then his voice came again, low and cautious.

"How are you feeling?"

Amina leaned back in her seat, eyes on the ceiling of the car.

"Like I'm dying," she whispered. "Like... the world is ending. For me Everything I was, everything I wanted gone."

He stiffened beside her.

"Don't say that," he said, a little too fast. "It's just a phase It'll pass."

She laughed not out of joy, but the kind that comes when your heart's too heavy.

"Have you ever felt like you're in a room full of people, but it feels like no one's really there? Like you're completely alone?"

His answer came quickly. "All the time."

Amina turned slowly to him. His face was still, unreadable but something flickered in his eyes. Something raw.

"You're a closed book, Khalid."

"I know."

"I'll open you."

He turned slightly to her, and for the first time, didn't look away.

"Good luck with that," he murmured.

She smirked. "Don't worry I'm not trying to be your friend."

That made him blink. Then unexpectedly a quiet chuckle escaped his lips. It was low, brief, almost disbelieving... but it was real.

"Two imperfect people," Amina said, "about to live in the same house."

"This is going to be a movie," he said, eyes now back on the windshield.

"What kind of movie?"

She smiled, then looked away.

"Definitely not a romantic one."

But something in the air had shifted. She felt it. And so did he.

For the first time since everything had fallen apart, there was peace fragile, temporary but real.
They both looked forward now. Their hands on their laps, inches apart. Almost touching. The nearness was unbearable. The tension quiet but present like love was trying to squeeze itself into a space that neither of them had invited it into.

Amina swallowed. "Tomorrow," she said softly. "They'll bring me to your house."

"Our house," Khalid corrected gently.

She looked at him The sincerity caught her off guard.

"I just... I want to be clear," she said. "There has to be boundaries."

He raised a brow.

"Boundaries?"

"I know this is a... unique situation. But we're going to be pretending. To the world. To your cousins. Your father Everyone That were a normal couple. But inside the house? We need to be honest. Clear rules I sleep in my room. You sleep in yours."

He nodded slowly. "Fair."

"No crossing boundaries. No pretending inside. Outside, fine Inside, we respect each other. We co exist. No expectations."

He was quite Thoughtful.

"Got it," he said at last.

Amina glanced at him. "You're not disappointed?"

Khalid shook his head. "No I'm relieved. I've never really... lived with anyone before. Not in that way."
"Don't tell me you've never been in a relationship before?"
She asked amazed
"Nope "he replied

"Oh wow this is interesting how have you been surviving you know yasir called you a walking Microsoft Word I always though he exaggerated "

"I just never thought of it or tried "
He said

"This is so weird I'm not gonna lie"
She said

"Why?" He asked
"Cause....." she murmured

"Cause life without love is meaningless "
He completed it for her

"Nidai bance ba " she said

They both sat there again, silently.

Then she said it, almost without thinking:

"Do you want me to cook?"

He blinked. "What?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"When I come to the house. Should I cook? Or are you one of those men who's all gym body but secretly lives on takeout?"

He gave her a look

"I can cook."

"Really?" she challenged, smiling now.

"Yes."

"Hmm. I'll believe it when I taste it."
"You'll eat your words."

"Only if they're fried."

They both laughed. The sound was light, fleeting and it scared her. Because in that moment, she almost forgot
Almost
"I'll hire a chef you don't have to worry about cooking you can when you feel like it" He said
"Thank god cause I really hate cooking"She replied
"Well lucky you" he said

Then they fell quiet again.

Then a knock came sharp like a slap in the silence.

Amina flinched
Khalid's jaw clenched so tightly, she could hear his teeth grind. In the still car, their breath had just started to sync, their silences just beginning to soften into something unspoken but warm.

Then reality slammed its fist on the glass.

She turned toward the window.

A figure stood outside. eyes red rimmed from sleeplessness or something darker. His chest heaved like he'd been running or pacing.

Yasir

Her heart dropped

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She threw the door open faster than she meant to, stepping out before Khalid could stop her
"Yasir?" Her voice cracked.

He didn't answer immediately. Just looked at her. Then looked past her at Khalid still in the driver's seat.

And when he spoke, his voice came with an edge sharp enough to slice skin.

"Khalid."
"Amarya da ango, ko haka ba?"
(Bride and groom, isn't that right?)

Sarcasm bled from his tone poisonous, but wounded.

Amina swallowed. "What... what are you doing here?"

Yasir laughed bitterly but there was no humor in it.

"What am I doing here?" he snapped. "what are you doing in his car, Amina? It hasn't even been a full month. Not one full month! And here you are at night in his car, just like you used to sneak out to see me."

Amina opened her mouth. Nothing came out. She looked to Khalid, but he hadn't moved yet.

"Yasir" she began.

But he was already spiraling.

"You're even doing zance now?" His voice broke. "You've fallen for him already? Just like that?"
Khalid opened his door, stepped out slowly. Deliberately He didn't rush, didn't raise his voice. But his presence changed the air like thunder rolling in before a storm.

"Ya ishe ka ," Khalid said, quiet but firm.

Yasir's eyes widened.

"Oh? Mezakayi ?" Yasir stepped forward, reckless. "You'll hit me? You'll finish the job you started when you stole her from me ?"

Khalid still didn't flinch. But his jaw moved a tick. A shift. A quiet, dangerous signal.

"Yasir," Amina said, placing herself between them, voice shaking. "Please. Don't do this."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"He took you, Amina," Yasir snapped.

Khalid saw the motion. Noted it Didn't speak.

But something... hardened in him.

"You said you'd never love someone else," Yasir continued. "But here you are. In his car. Laughing Whispering Like I never mattered. And I've been calling and texting you for days to please come out and talk to me even if it's once Amina"

"That's enough," Khalid said again.

This time, his voice was lower. Firmer The kind of quiet that comes before a gunshot.

Yasir took another step forward.

"Or what?" he said. "You'll beat me? Lock me up? Be your father's son?"

Khalid's fist curled. Then with sudden force he grabbed Yasir by the collar, lifted him slightly off balance. The fabric bunched. Yasir's feet dragged an inch back.
Amina gasped. The street around them quiet except for the bark of a dog in the distance and the dull whirr of a generator seemed to freeze.

"Don't say another word," Khalid said through clenched teeth.

"Or what?" Yasir hissed. "You'll show your true colors? Do it kashe ni. Just like your father would."

Khalid's grip tightened the veins in his forearm bulging. His shoulders were coiled like a spring, face inches from Yasir's.

But then

Two fingers Just two.

Amina reached out and touched his wrist.

"Khalid..." she whispered. "Dan Allah."

And just like that, his entire body folded. Like she'd unplugged his rage. He stepped back letting go instantly. Yasir stumbled, breathless.

His body... folded.

Like her touch unmade him.

He let go instantly, stepping back. Yasir was stunned.

Khalid turned. Gently took Amina's wrist. "Let's go."

She followed him, confused, glancing back only once.

"Amina," Yasir called Broken.

Her eyes welled up. She wanted to run back to him. Tell him everything.

I'm pregnant

But she couldn't

She followed Khalid through the gate.

"Amina"Yasir's voice cracked. "Please. Don't leave me like this."

Inside the House

The heavy compound gate clanked shut behind them.

Silence.

Then in one sharp motion Amina yanked her hand from his grip like it burned.

She turned on him, eyes blazing.

"What the hell was that, Khalid?"

Khalid didn't flinch. His face remained calm, but his eyes... they were already far away somewhere else. Distant and Guarded. Like he'd built the walls back up in seconds.
“He was insulting you," he said simply.

Like that was explanation enough.

"And who gave you the right to defend me?" she snapped, her voice rising.

He met her gaze, still collected.

"You think I should've just stood there? Let him say those things to your face?"

"He wasn't going to hurt me!" she fired back, stepping toward him. "He just he gets like that when he's angry, okay? He's been through hell these past few weeks! As if you haven't hurt him enough already by marrying me behind his back now you want to humiliate him too?"

Khalid's voice dropped, low and dangerous.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I can't believe you've been putting up with that kind of behavior."

"You don't know him." Her voice was shaking now. "He's not like that He's just... broken."

"And I'm not?" he replied quietly. "You think you're the only one mourning something here, Amina?"

His calm was cracking. She could hear it in the way his breath trembled beneath the surface.

But she wasn't ready to see it. Not now.

"Don't turn this into a sympathy contest," she said coldly. "Don't you dare."

"I wasn't," he said. "But maybe if someone had defended you sooner, you wouldn't be here married to a stranger, crying in silence every night."

That stopped her

Just for a second
Amina's throat tightened. But pride was a shield she refused to lower.

"Just go," she said finally, voice stiff. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He looked at her. Long and Silent. As if weighing whether to say more.

"Amina"

"Did I ask you to defend me?" she cut in, sharper this time. "Did I?"

He opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

There was something fragile in the air like glass about to shatter. So he stepped back, slowly, careful not to let anything else fall apart.

"Goodnight," he murmured.

And turned toward the gate

Inside the House Wedding Eve

The moment she stepped through the door, the noise swallowed her.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The house was alive loud, chaotic, thick with perfume and heat and the scent of fried meat. Laughter spilled from the parlour. Voices overlapped in a tapestry of gossip, teasing, and instructions shouted over ringing phones.

Aunties everywhere. Flowing wrappers, jangling bangles, geles tied like crowns. Lipstick smudges, perfume clouds, and pots clanging from the back of the kitchen.

"Amina! Yaya amarya?" one aunty called, rising from a cushion with a dramatic grin. "Kin rame Haba! Amarya fa, ki Sha lafiyayyen fura da madara!"

Another chuckled and grabbed her wrist.

"Ke! Sai kace ba amarya ba. Look at you sneaking in like a thief No henna No smile. No excitement. Kin tsorata da first night ne?"

Laughter erupted.

Amina forced a small smile, her head pounding, her stomach twisted in knots.

"Just a headache," she lied softly.

"Headache ai common ne. Marriage stress fa. Ko kin fara missing gida already ?" another said, her eyes twinkling wickedly.

"Wallahi, I remember my own kamu like it was yesterday. Hajiya Dije nearly burnt my feet with hot water from the steaming!"

"Kai! Allah! And that massage from the kaftan woman ban sake jin jiki na ba for three days."

"Have they brought the kunshi artist for you? You've not done your henna fa. Kai, Amina, me kike jira? The photographer is coming tomorrow!"

"This girl no dey smile oh! Ko dai... akwai wani problem?"

The questions flew fast, without pause, like stones thrown into her chest.

She nodded, nodded, smiled faintly, nodded again. Each second felt heavier.
One aunty reached up to adjust her scarf like she was a mannequin.

Another kept inspecting her skin tone.

"Your complexion don't pop yet. You need a turmeric scrub tonight. I'll mix one for you."

"And coconut oil. Your body must shine like zuma tomorrow."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Don't forget to shave oh! Ko kina so mijinki ya tsorata?"

More laughter

More instructions

More heat

Amina's smile strained. Her jaw ached from holding it in place.

"I'll just go upstairs Rest small."

"Okay, amarya. But no sleeping too much o! Tonight is your last night in your father's house better enjoy the pampering now!"

"Tell your mother to let you soak in hot scented water. It helps for the first night..."

She laughed lightly. Nodded again And slipped away like a whisper.

Upstairs Her Room

The moment her door shut, the world went silent.

She turned the key in the lock. Backed away. Slowly.

The laughter from downstairs dulled into a distant hum.

She dropped her hijab onto the chair. Her slippers kicked off. Her scarf half unwrapped.

And then

Collapsed

Onto the carpeted floor. Palms flat against it. Breath shallow.

She stared at nothing.

This was too much All of it.

The noise The pretending and The lies.

The pregnancy

Yasir's broken eyes

Khalid's silence

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The unspoken contract of a life she didn't want but couldn't walk away from.

She reached for her phone with trembling fingers. Scrolled to the one name she trusted.

Khadija.

Pressed call.

The moment her best friend picked up, she couldn't even speak.

She just

Wept

No words
No explanations

Just sobs that came in waves deep, shaking, silent at first, then choking.

"Amina?" Khadija's voice was sharp with concern. "Amina, talk to me. Me ya faru?"

She tried to answer, but all that came out was a broken whisper.

"I can't... I can't breathe."

"Is it Khalid? Yasir? The wedding?"

Amina's chest heaved. The tears flowed freely now, soaking into her sleeves.

"I want to disappear."

"Ya Salam... Amina, calm down. Inhale Please. You're not alone, okay? You're strong, and Allah is with you. Wallahi, I'm herebTalk to me. Start anywhere."

And in that quiet room above the chaos above the frying oil and the laughter and the aunties gossiping about "first nights" Amina finally let it all out.

Every secret Every fear.

Even the one growing silently inside her.

Outside
The gate creaked shut behind Khalid as he stepped into the stillness of the street.

The night was quiet again but not peaceful.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The air was thick. Hot and Hostile.

Yasir stood under the flickering security light by the side of the compound wall, arms folded tightly across his chest, breathing hard. His jaw was clenched, his eyes red rimmed part rage, part something unspoken.

Grief, maybe.

Khalid walked toward him, slow, measured, like a lion approaching another over disputed territory.

He stopped just inches away. Looked him straight in the eye.

"She's my wife now," Khalid said, voice low but firm, every syllable deliberate. "And if you ever raise your voice at her again"

"You'll what?" Yasir snapped, stepping forward. "Kill me?"

His voice cracked slightly.

"Don't tempt me," Khalid said, barely above a whisper.

The words were simple, but the weight behind them was dangerous.

A silent beat

Then Yasir's hands curled into fists.

"You ruined everything," Yasir said, eyes burning. "You think you're better than me? You think your silence makes you superior? Brooding around like some saint with scars? She used to cry to me about everything "

Khalid didn't flinch.

"I didn't steal her," he said. "You lost her. That's on you."

That stung.

Yasir's mouth twitched.

"She's not yours," he hissed.

He stopped himself.

Too late.

Khalid's eyes narrowed. The tension spiked, shifted sharpened.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Say that again," Khalid murmured, stepping in.

Yasir swallowed.

"Go ahead," Khalid said, almost calmly now. "Say it again. Let the whole street hear it."

The only sound was the quiet hum of a generator down the road. A dog barked somewhere far off.

Then Yasir lunged forward not to strike, but to challenge, nose-to-nose, chest puffed out like the street boys they used to avoid growing up.

"You think you're man enough to protect her?" Yasir said. "Wallahi, you're just your father's shadow."

Khalid's face darkened.

And then

He shoved him.

A hard, brutal, open palmed blow to the chest that sent Yasir stumbling back a few steps, nearly hitting the compound wall.

"Touch me again," Yasir growled, steadied himself. "Just touch me again"

But he didn't step forward this time.

Khalid didn't move either
His voice was low, teeth clenched and Controlled. Barely.

"I'm not like him. I'm trying not to be like him."

A pause

Then quieter

"Don't give me a reason to fail."

Yasir looked at him.

Really looked.

And maybe for the first time, he saw it the way Khalid was trembling beneath the surface. Not from fear But from something worse.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Restraint

Yasir's chest rose and fell. His fists loosened. His eyes dropped, then hardened again.

"She won't love you," he said quietly. "Even if she says she does. She won't She's mine."

Khalid didn't blink.

"Then why did she follow me inside?"

Yasir froze.

Something flickered in his expression disbelief? Pain?

He turned without another word.

Stormed off down the dusty street, muttering curses under his breath.

Khalid stood there for a long moment.

Breathing in the hot Kaduna night. Listening to the crickets. To the blood pounding in his ears.

He didn't go to his car immediately.

He just leaned against the gate wall, eyes closed, fists clenched in his pockets.

Trying to breathe

Trying to remind himself

You're not him.

the Service Apartment – Past Midnight

The gate clicked behind him. The air was thick with Abuja perfume, cologne, and burnt suya from someone's takeaway bag.

From upstairs, you could already hear the life of the party.

Music pulsed low Burna Boy, faint and auto tuned. Male laughter The unmistakable sound of girls giggling, then a champagne cork popping.

"Guyyy! Who bring dis Belle babe come sef?"
"No try me o, na my connect be that na KASU babe she be"
"Khalid don dull jare, wallahi. Rich guy, dead guy."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

As Khalid stepped into the cool marble tiled foyer of the duplex, a burst of hot air, beer breath, and ego met him from above.

"Khaaaalid!" one of them called from the mazaaaa . It was Usman, or maybe Sadiq Khalid barely remembered which name went with which designer kaftan. "You dey dull o! Na your bachelor party be this! Come upstairs jare!"

Another cousin leaned over the railings, holding a green Solo cup.

"We just dey warm up for tomorrow. You gats bring energy, ogbeni. You be ango ooo!"

Khalid didn't answer

He didn't smile

He never did

Just raised a hand curt, wordless and walked past them toward the stairs like a ghost in his own house.

His crisp black kaftan clung slightly to his back with sweat. He hated Kaduna heat. Hated Abuja noise. Hated the performance of it all.

All of this

This wasn't a wedding

This was a circus

His father had arranged everything. Everything

Including the people.

"You need groomsmen," Aminu Bello had barked weeks ago. "You need boys. Do you want people to say the groom has no friends? Call your cousins The clean ones."

So here they were
Cousins he barely knew
Cousins whose fathers owed Aminu favors.
Cousins who called him "Chairman Pikin" when they thought he wasn't listening.
Cousins who didn't know a damn thing about what he was carrying.

He reached the door to his room .
Unlocked it entered
Closed it behind him.

Locked

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Dead silence
No music No laughter
Just him.

And his thoughts

He didn't even take off his kaftan Just walked to the far wall.

And punched it.

Hard
Once
Then again
Then again
His knuckles scraped against textured paint. The dull thud of flesh against cement filled the room like a drum.

He stopped Breathing hard.

Then sat down at the edge of the bed, elbows on knees, head in his hands.

Yasir's words wouldn't leave him.

"She's mine."
"Be your father's son."
"You think she's really yours?"

He whispered into the quiet:

"Ya Allah..."

And for a moment just a breath he felt like that boy again.

He ran his hand down his face, over his jaw.

The scar on his chest burned like memory.

He looked down at his shaking fists.

Then got up.

Opened his drawer.

Removed a small injection case a pale blue, sterile thing Sealed.

He stared at it

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Long
Didn't touch it
Not tonight
Instead, he walked to the bathroom. Turned on the tap.

Washed his face Again And again.

Until the water couldn't hide the shaking anymore.

Then he looked up.

At the mirror
And whispered to himself
"I'm not him."

But his own eyes didn't believe it.

Not yet.
Next Morning: Kamu Day

Kaduna woke slowly
The sky was still a shy blue, the breeze laced with dust and distant echoes of Qur'an recitations from loudspeakers in the neighborhood.

But inside the Alhaji usmans compound, the morning was anything but slow.

It was war

Chaos

By 6:45 a.m., masu aiki (housemaids) were already running back and forth, their matching aprons stained with pepper and palm oil. The kitchen air was dense with the scent of mai shayi tea leaves, fried akara, and meat stock boiling for the jollof that would be started by mid-morning.

Outside, tent decorators were hammering steel rods into the red earth.
Canopies Plastic chairs White ribbons. Bougainvillea flowers from the neighbor's compound were plucked and tied into garlands. Loud Hausa music blared from a Bluetooth speaker.

"Kai! Kuyi sauri ku gama nan fa!" someone yelled at the decorators.
"A d'aura canopy din a gefe kadan! The sun dey shift!"

Goats bleated from a tied corner. A toddler screamed. Three tailors arrived late with gele fabric that should've been ironed yesterday. The dry cleaner came with the men's kaftans. One was missing.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The compound was a wedding battlefield.

Inside the House

Upstairs, the air was different.

Still Heavy Like grief wearing perfume.

Amina hadn't moved from her prayer mat.

She was no longer praying. Her lips had stopped moving hours ago. But her palms were still raised, trembling caught somewhere between a dua and a goodbye.

Her eyes were open

Dry,Red and Distant.

She heard nothing.

Not the pounding pestle in the kitchen. Not the laughter of her younger cousins running in and out with bangles on their wrists. Not the Spotify playlist they had connected to the parlor speaker, blasting Ali Jita and Morell.

A knock Gentle.

Then Khadija stepped in, barefoot.

"Amina?" she whispered.

Amina didn't answer.

Khadija walked slowly toward her, in an oversized t shirt and baggy trousers , hair tied back in a scarf with a veil and her big bag of clothes She was wearing for the event later She knelt beside her.

"You didn't sleep?"

Amina blinked, just once.

"Today... I leave my father's house," she whispered.

Khadija's face softened.

"You're not leaving it behind. You're just... carrying it with you. In a different name."

Amina looked down at her palms.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"But what if... I'm not ready?"

Khadija took her hands. Held them.

"Then we fake it We smile We get through today. And you can fall apart later. In privacy. In silk gele."

Outside the Room

Someone banged on the door.

"AMINA! MAMAN KI NA NEMAN KI !"

It was her youngest cousin, Nusaiba barely 12 and already wearing lip gloss.

Khadija helped Amina up, slowly.

The room was half empty now. Her clothes were in boxes. Her shoes, carefully wrapped in pairs, waited by the door. Her favorite mirror was gone. The perfume tray wiped clean.

She was no longer living in this room.

She was passing through.

In Her Mother's Room

Her mother stood by the window, tying her wrapper tighter as the morning heat thickened.

When Amina walked in, her mother turned and something in her face cracked.

Not tears

Just... softness.

She came forward and pulled Amina into a full, desperate embrace.

No words

Just a long silence that mothers use to say everything.

Then she pulled back slightly, her hand cupping Amina's cheek.

"You know I only did what I thought was right," her mother whispered.

Amina nodded once, but her chest ached.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"They moved the kamu to afternoon. You'll leave around five," her mother added, voice strained. "Khalid booked the flight"

Amina looked down.

"So that's it?" she asked. "By Maghrib, I'm his wife In his city."

Her mother exhaled deeply.

"It's God's will."

"Is it?" Amina whispered.

Meanwhile...

Outside, three makeup artists had arrived. So had the caterers.
Screaming ensued over party jollof pot measurements.

"We said two bags of rice!"
"No it was three!"
"Who packed the souvenir bags? We're missing 15 wrappers!"

The MC was already mic testing under the mango tree.

"Mic check, mic check. One two. Ladies and gentlemeeen... are you ready for an Arewa fairytale??!"

The DJ played a remix of a Hausa love song with Fally Ipupa vocals. It was too loud. Everyone shouted louder to compensate.

The photographers had arrived too. They requested a drone shot. It got tangled in the neighbor's clothesline.

And Yet...

Upstairs, Amina sat in front of her mirror.

Khadija began wrapping her golden gele.

Her mother came in holding dukkah for her feet and oud for her wrists.

The sun climbed.
Her hands shook.

And somewhere in the city, Khalid zipped up his suitcase, fixed his cufflinks, and checked the time

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He was taking a wife home today
Fake wife
A wife carrying a secret A girl becoming a woman whether she wanted to or not.

Chapter nineteen - Kamu

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The scent of turaren clung to the air like a prayer left behind It curled around the compound gates, mixing with the heavier smoke of turaren wuta rising from brass burners at every corner.

The music was loud Hausa love ballads with thumping kalangu drums and high pitched praise choruses. A DJ with a red cap twisted knobs from inside a decorated corner tent, playing tracks that bounced between Arewa love, Naija pop, and the occasional remix of Ali Jita or Hamisu Breaker. Guests in glittering lace, heavy gele, and gold plated heels drifted around the compound like royalty on parade.

It was a kamu the traditional unveiling of the bride. And today , Amina was the bride.

But upstairs, away from the laughter and shimmer, Amina sat like a prisoner about to be paraded.

The room was warm from too many bodies. Khadija was tugging at the edge of Amina's headwrap, tucking pins into place they had just finished her makeup

"Hold still, abeg," she muttered, mouth full of bobby pins. "This veil is already too heavy."

Amina didn't speak.

Khadija stopped, looked at her reflection in the mirror. "He still hasn't called?"

No answer
Khadija frowned. "I called him Just now. Told him you were asking when he was coming." She adjusted one of Amina's coral bead strands over her shoulder. "He said you should go in first. That he's coming soon."
Amina still didn't speak.

Khadija sighed. "I lied I'm sorry."

Amina blinked slowly, but said nothing.

She was tired. Not from the bridal attire , not from the hundreds of beads resting heavily on her body , not from the tight head wear wrapped like a crown. She was tired from inside. From the weight of what nobody else could see.

Her eyes drifted to the door. Her room Her home. It still smelled faintly of the turaren wuta . The prayer mat was still folded near the wall, her Qur'an open from earlier that morning. Her suitcase was zipped in the corner, half filled with the clothes she hadn't even packed herself.

She was leaving This was it.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She had grown up in this room. Dreamt in this room. Laughed, cried, prayed. Whispered secrets to Yasir on late night calls when she was supposed to be asleep. This room had seen her heartbreaks, her university stress, her first time fasting a full Ramadan as a teenager. And now... she was being led out of it, veiled and silent, to go live with a man she didn't even know.

A man who, after weeks of strange calm, had chosen to humiliate Yasir the only person she had truly loved right in front of her she didn't see that yasir started it and Khalid was just defending her

Her fingers trembled in her lap.

Khadija looked at her. "Are you sure you still want to do this?"

Amina finally looked up. "Do I have a choice?"
Khadija swallowed hard.

The MC grabbed the mic again.

"The bride is readyyyy! But before she comes in, let's welcome the Uwar Amarya mother of the bride!"

Outside the room, they could hear the DJ switching tracks, the MC shouting into the mic:

"Where are the bride's aunties, o?! This event no fit start without Uwar Amarya!"

Amina's mother appeared in the doorway, regal in her flowing shadda gown with gold embroidery.

"Amina ," her mother said softly. "It's time."

Amina nodded once Her lips didn't move. She stood slowly. Amina's mother entered first, surrounded by her own age mates,, each one in coordinated lace with gele wrapped high, and purses the size of royal scrolls. dancing in slow rhythm, it old school front the throwing symbolic naira notes on the floor as the DJ played the song

Make some noise for the Uwar Amarya the mother of the bride!"

Amina's mother danced into the open space beneath the tent, smiling wide, throwing Naira notes in slow, practiced motion while the women behind her clapped and sang. Phones flashed. Aunties ululated The DJ played old school music for them

Then came the flower girls,
Then... Amina

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The hallway felt surreal Her brothers were waiting downstairs, dressed in matching babban Riga , looking nervous and proud. Khadija ran ahead, fixing the position of the flower girls three small cousins in glittery white dresses who kept picking petals from their baskets too early. Khadija took the lead. Amina walked behind her, her two brothers flanking her like gentle guards. Her steps were slow, deliberate, the veil softening the lights and blurring the world. She couldn't see their faces, but she could feel the weight of their eyes. Hundreds of them.

"She's so pretty!"
"Is that George from Dubai?"

"See the beads, wallahi!"

She felt each murmur like a thorn Her heart was pounding like the drums in the speakers. All of it was noise She was here, yet far away. Like she was watching herself walk not living it.

Somewhere deep in her belly, nausea rose. The baby...

She didn't want to think about it Not here Not now.

Not when she was about to walk into a marriage she wasn't even Islamically allowed to be in.

20 minutes away from the glowing compound and rose petals and MC's loud microphone, in the high rise calm of a serviced apartment tucked near Kaduna Millennium City, a different kind of groom sat still.

Khalid.

Pressed in all white his custom made kaftan navy hula cap tilted slightly forward.Designer wrist watch peeking beneath the cufflink he had already adjusted ten times. He sat on the edge of a couch like a soldier awaiting deployment spine straight, hands tense on his thighs, gaze fixed ahead like he was watching something no one else could see.

Around him?

Chaos

The kind only Abuja boys bring to a wedding.

"Guy abeg who carry my perfume? No be Creed Aventus I keep here?" one cousin shouted, already shirtless with half a singlet poking out of his trousers.
"Wallahi na Chuka carry am!" another replied from the corridor, spraying something suspiciously cheap smelling. "This one na Nivea, no be Creed o!"

Chuka strolled back in, grinning with wicked innocence. "Guy, no be perfume dey marry woman na confidence."

The room erupted in laughter.

"Chuka wan go kamu with Nivea Black & White?! She go faint!"

Another one was standing by the mirror, trying to tie a turban. Failing. Re-tying. Failing again.

"Ah! Abeg who sabi do this na?" he groaned.

One of the older boys Malik, their cool headed older cousin in dark shades leaned back, chewing gum. "You think say kamu na Fashion Week? You dey overdo. Put ordinary cap and come down jare."

"Malik shut up! You na old man."

More laughter Jokes flying. Someone plugged in a speaker and played a soft wizkid track in the background mellow love music, the kind meant to calm nerves but made the room feel even more surreal.

But Khalid didn't move

Didn't laugh

Didn't even blink

He was watching them all this chaos of cousins, this brotherhood of noise and scent and teasing and overconfidence. Watching as though he were seeing it all through bulletproof glass.

He hadn't smiled all day.
He didn't want to be here. Not really.

He just wanted to get it over with.

He had done this kind of thing before formal family events, press heavy fundraisers, political dinners with his father's cold shadow behind him. But this... this was different This was personal. And it wasn't his choice plus his father's

Then, the phone rang.

He stood instantly. Picked it up before the second ring. His heart stuttered.

"Amina?"

There was a pause.

"No o," came Khadija's chirpy voice, laced with her usual playfulness. "Calm down, groom of Kaduna It's me."

His lips thinned. "Oh."

"She's asking if you're coming Should she go in first?"

Khalid looked at the floor for a moment. Something unreadable moved across his face.

His voice softened. A low baritone made gentler.

"Tell her to go I'll join ." "In shaa Allah," Khadija said, voice too casual.

Then she hung up.

He stared at the screen for a second longer, then dropped the phone on the side table like it burned him. He knew she hadn't told Amina anything Amina did not ask her to call. He could feel it.

Behind him, another cousin was now reading from a worn out notebook.

"Listen to this, wallahi I'm going to say this line during the kamu games: 'I will pay 20 cows, 50 camels and my entire NYSC allawee to see the bride's face!'"

Laughter burst again
Malik groaned. "Abeg don't disgrace our family. You no even do NYSC, which allawee you wan lie about?"

"Leave me joor. It's the energy that matters!"

Someone grabbed the bottle of non alcoholic wine and poured it into mismatched glasses.

"To Khalid!" one of them toasted, raising his cup. "Our own Alhaji, finally retiring from the streets!"

The room whistled and clapped.
"Which street sef Khalid and streets na opposite direction them follow oo" someone whispered

Malik added, "Toast now before he disappears into married man depression."

They all turned to look at Khalid.

He raised his eyes Slowly Gave a small, polite nod.

Then went quiet again. "Ah ah. Guy, talk na. Say something."

Chuka narrowed his eyes. "Abi he dey fear?"

"Fear no dey near Khalid," Malik cut in. "But this one pass fear. This na reflection."

A beat passed.

Then someone else asked, more softly, "Khalid... you good?"

He hesitated

Then nodded once. "I'm fine."

But he wasn't
He hadn't been, not since last night.

Not since Yasir

The memory played in loops. Yasir's face. His fists. The trembling in Amina's voice when she'd tried to stop the fight. The way Khalid had seen himself become his father in that one split second of dominance and control. All his therapy. All his prayers Cracked.

He closed his eyes.

The snake tattoo on his back itched.

"Let's go," he said Malik clapped. "That's the energy!"

Chuka was still spraying something suspicious on his armpits. "Wait! At least let me blend this perfume with Vaseline that's how it lasts longer."

Khalid had already turned to the door.

He didn't wait for them.

just as Khalid rose to leave, the low, throaty growl of an engine echoed into the compound like thunder approaching quietly.

Heads turned.

The cousins paused mid banter, squinting toward the entrance.

A sleek, Camaro cruised in, low to the ground, body glinting like polished obsidian under the northern sun. Tinted windows. Number plate custom: YASIR 01.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Malik whistled low. "Ah ah. This one na entrance o. Who dey come? Governor?"

One of the cousins laughed. "If na Abuja wedding, now now camera go dey roll!"

The Camaro hissed to a stop, engine humming even after the key turned. The door swung open.

Yasir stepped out like a character from a Nollywood Meets Arewa film: tall, clean cut, navy blue kaftan flowing like water He wore no cap just a subtle wristwatch and a smirk, like the day belonged to him.

Like his heart wasn't in ruins. "Yasirrrrr!" Malik bellowed, arms open. "Shege! You came!"

Yasir smiled that lopsided, too calm grin. "I go miss free small chops? Never."

The boys laughed and surged forward, slapping backs, exchanging fist bumps, teasing as they always had since their JSS3 days at Essence College Kaduna.

One cousin rubbed his kaftan sleeve against Yasir's. "Yaneee Guy, this cloth na royalty! You sure say you no be the groom?"

Yasir grinned. "Wallahi, if I enter that tent, dem go switch bride."

More laughter

Malik pulled him into a one armed hug, then stepped back to study him.

"You dey wear smile but your eyes look like say you sleep with lion last night."

"I did," Yasir replied easily, adjusting his wristwatch. "The lion's name is Regret."

The boys howled.

"Kai! That one deep!"

"Khalid go quote am for therapy session!"
They laughed even harder.

Khalid, a few steps away, didn't laugh. Just watched.

Yasir turned to him now. Eyes steady The smile, thinner now, but still there.

"You're ready early," he said, with a tilt of his head. "Perfect as usual."

Khalid didn't reply.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Yasir stepped closer. Not confrontational but close enough to make silence uncomfortable.

"Let's go then," he said quietly. "Let's go see your bride."

His tone was breezy, but Malik noticed the tightness at the corner of his mouth. The way his fingers clenched the Camaro keys like they were a lifeline.

Still, Yasir smiled.

Still, he joked.

Khalid thought No one needed to know what lived in his chest.

Not even his cousin
Especially not him

Khalid gave a single nod, face unreadable.

The cousins began to move, grabbing perfumes, caps, wallets. Malik called out, "Oya! Groom's convoy, mount up! No dulling!"

They moved toward the SUVs like a local version of a bridal battalion black kaftans, brown sandals, bants bouncing between them like football.

Yasir turned back and slid into his Camaro, alone.

He shut the door gently.

Inside, silence.

He blinked once. Then again.

Then placed both hands on the steering wheel and whispered, "Ya Allah, hold me today."

Then he started the engine.

It purred like something alive.

And the convoy rolled out towards a kamu where two men were arriving for one bride.

Only one would leave whole

The Groom ArrivesThe music cut mid beat.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The DJ dropped his mic slightly, adjusted the volume, then thundered into it:

"Ladies and gentlemen, please rise o! The moment we've all been waiting for make una give space, give respect as we welcome... the ANGOOOOOO!"

A roar of drums. The kalangu thudded alive, followed by a remix of boy skidoo's "Ango" blasting through the speakers.

Amina's heart didn't skip.

It sank
Sank deep

Not from love

From dread

Everything slowed around her. The tent, the lights, the gossiping aunties fanning themselves with glittery programs, the flower petals on the floor, the flashes of cameras they all became a blur of movement and noise she couldn't quite process.

This was real.

This was happening.

From the tent entrance, a sudden wave of perfume oud, turaren wuta ,
curled into the air as the groom's party entered.

First, his cousins.

A wall of tall, bearded Arewa boys in matching kaftans, dark shades perched like a uniform of cool. They walked in choreographed slow motion, chests high, grins wide, all laughing like movie extras in a wedding video shoot.

Malik shouted mid walk, "Make una clear road for Abuja boys!" and the crowd erupted in cheers. And laughter

Someone from the back yelled, "Na dem!"

Another added, "They came with money and muscles!"

The MC was already screaming into the mic.

"Ah ah, see cruise! Na wedding or Netflix series we dey watch like this?"

Amina's hands trembled slightly on her lap.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And then he appeared.

Khalid.

Tall Statuesque Draped in pristine white babban Riga . His cap was simple, northern, matching the clothes. A faint glint of his watch caught the light. He didn't smile. He didn't wave. He walked like a soldier trained for silence.
The MC gasped dramatically.

"Haba! Ladies, hold your hearts! If your blood pressure rise, no blame me!"

Amina's heart gave a single, loud thump.

But not because of Khalid.

It was who stood behind him.

Yasir

Her Yasir

Wearing the same navy kaftan he'd arrived in, his eyes hidden behind brown tinted glasses now, his shoulders square, his grin barely a flicker. But he was looking directly at her. Through the lights, the tent, the veil his eyes were on hers.

Unmoving Unblinking Unapologetic.

Khadija, beside her, froze.

She whispered under her breath, low and sharp.

"Akwai kura..."

A problem
A storm
But it was too late

The cousins were already dancing toward the center stage, Malik and another cousin spraying symbolic naira notes in the air while shouting, "Ango don come o! Respect!"

The guests laughed and clapped. Aunties stood to spray them Phones went up. Lights flashed.

Khalid walked to the couch on stage that wide, velvet wedding seat shaped like a throne.
The MC announced again:

"Ladies and gentlemen, see how he's looking straight at the amarya! Love is already showing on their faces o!"

Khalid's face didn't show anything.

Until he reached her

He sat beside her, slow, dignified. Let the noise pass. Leaned slightly, whispering: "You okay?"

Amina didn't answer Couldn't.

Her mouth was dry. Her chest tight. She could feel Yasir's presence like a second heartbeat.

But then gently, without fanfare, Khalid took her hand.

Just her fingers

No squeeze No demand Just presence.

Amina blinked Something shifted.

Yes, this was the man who hurt Yasir. The man who let her be married off without her knowledge.

But also... the man who is helping her cover up her pregnancy
And now he held her hand.

Lightly Like someone afraid to break something already fragile.

She looked at his fingers. Then his profile.

Her heartbeat slowed Just slightly.

The cameras flashed. The guests clapped.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Yasir standing in the crowd, smile gone now, his face unreadable.

But his eyes were still on her.

And she didn't know why but she looked away first.

The Kamu Begins

The drums changed.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

From romantic remixes to the pulsing, rhythmic beat of traditional kalangu. A rawer sound. More northern More ancestral.

The MC's voice boomed again, voice dripping with drama.

"Ahhh, ladies and gentlemen the time has come o! The groom wants to see his bride. But in Arewa land, you must pay the price! This is not Dubai wedding, this is KADUNA KAMU!"

Laughter.

Amina sat perfectly still on the decorated stage couch,. Her face remained hidden behind a thick veil of silk and beads, swaying slightly with every movement she made. But her heart was pounding.

Beside her, Khadija adjusted the edge of the veil again, whispering behind her teeth.

"Don't cry o. If you mess up this makeup, wallahi I'll fight you."

Amina didn't laugh. Just blinked once.

Khadija rolled her eyes, playfully nudging her shoulder.

"You know you're fine like this. If Khalid doesn't pay ₦10 million, I'll marry you myself."

Then they came.

Aunts, aunties, aunties of aunties.

Dressed in every shade of headties fanned into glorious gele peaks, smelling of turaren wuta, oud, musk, and foundation. The ones with gap teeth smiled the widest. Bracelets clinked as they swayed forward, clapping, humming, fanning themselves dramatically.

One of them was Yasir's mother, wearing a deep red lace, eyes lined in kohl. She didn't smile much but her presence commanded respect.

The MC shouted again:

"Aha! They're coming to block the bride o! Aunties, you must negotiate!"

The groom's party mostly Khalid's aunties and Khalid's cousins joined stood opposite the women, forming a circle of banter.

Malik stepped forward first, arms up.

"How much to see the amarya today?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khadija crossed her arms.

"₦10 million."

Laughter The DJ hit a short horn. Piinnn!

"Ten what? Are we in Banana Island?"

One aunty smirked, "This one is not ordinary wife o! She's Amina She's smart, she's loyal, she's fair, and her gele is worth one plot in Barnawa!"

Someone shouted from the crowd, "And she cooks tuwo without lumps!"

Amina gave the smallest laugh not enough to betray emotion, just enough to remember she was still alive.

Malik folded his arms

"We no get that kind money."

Khadija raised her brow.

"Oya go now! No wife for una!"
Another cousin held out fake dollars and sprayed them mid-air. "₦5k dollars from Abuja boys!"

The aunties made mock faces. One clutched her chest.

"You want to buy our Amina with play money?"

Another aunty danced forward, wagging her finger like a market woman:

"She's finer than Beyoncé. Smarter than Ngozi Okonjo. Taller than your expectations."

The crowd roared. The MC could barely keep up.

"Ah ah, these aunties too sabi!"

Finally, Yasir's mother stepped forward quietly, her red lace shimmering. She took the mic and the room hushed slightly.

Her voice was calm. Measured Almost regal.

"Marriage is not just a game. It is sacred A sacred bond. In Islam, the wife obeys the husband with kindness. And the husband protects her with his life. Provides for her. Covers her faults Prays for her Loves her."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She turned, gaze sweeping the crowd.

"May Allah bless this marriage. With peacevWith forgiveness With joy With healthy children. A safe pregnancy Strong babies, In shaa Allah."

Amina's stomach twisted. Not a flutter a knot.

She looked down. Her hands clenched the beaded fabric of her lap. Her breath came shallow.

Beside her, Khalid's hand reached across Quietly.
He didn't pull or press

Just offered

She let him take it

"It's okay," he whispered.

Just two words. But his tone was different now.

Not cold Not commanding.

Careful Almost... human.

And for a strange second, Amina believed him.

There was a silence between them not empty something thick, dense, raw Not love Not yet Not really.

But not nothing

It was something
They sat that way, hand in hand, as one of the younger aunties finally leaned forward and lifted the veil.

The crowd gasped in delight.
Finally tgey negotiations finished and the brides veil was lifted
"Masha Allah!"

"See her eyes!"

"Kai, this bride fine no be small!"

Cameras flashed Phones clicked. Naira sprayed.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The MC screamed into the mic:

"Ha! They are already exchanging love glances! Look at this honeymoon people o!"

Amina forced a smile. She didn't want to. But it came anyway shaped by expectation, tradition, exhaustion.

Khalid glanced at her His eyes lingered.

Softened

Something in her chest stuttered

Then she looked up.

Across the tent
Across the faces
And saw him
Yasir

Standing in the back row of groomsmen. Hands behind his back. His face carefully blank.

But his eyes

His eyes were not blank
They were thunderclouds Watching her Seeing everything And she couldn't look away.
Her hand was in Khalid's.
Her heart?
Still breaking in Yasir's.

And her body dressed , wrapped in perfume and makeup and lies sat between two men.
Two fates.

Two pasts And one impossible future.

And no one not even she knew what would happen next.

Chapter twenty – A new life

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The air inside the kamu hall was thick with perfume and heat. Lace and glitter shimmered under the canopy of fairy lights strung like stars across the ceiling. Gold draped chairs while women fanned themselves gently. The drums had gone quiet, their rhythm now only a memory, and the MC had taken a break to sip zobo. What lingered now was the low hum of tired laughter, clinking cutlery, and whispers and Everyone was eating .

From the corner, a generator buzzed faintly. The scent of jollof rice and grilled chicken hung in the air, layered beneath expensive oud and white musk.

Then the MC grabbed the mic again.

He adjusted his cap with flair, cleared his throat, and beamed into the crowd like a stage actor searching for his cue.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he said, voice crackling with artificial cheer. "Our ango dey humble, but make we still hear small about am! One of the groomsmen abeg, come say few things about the ango. Who knows him best?"

He turned to the groom's side, gesturing with an open palm.

"Are you people shy !"
"Abuja boys and shy na opposite direction them follow oo" some said
A gentle wave of laughter rolled through the room. Heads turned. Eyebrows lifted
Laughter gave way to murmurs.

A few of Khalid's cousins exchanged awkward glances. Malik, the eldest among them, looked down at his Rolex and pretended to fiddle with the clasp. Another cousin quietly scrolled through WhatsApp on his phone, pretending not to hear.
None of them stood.

Because the truth was uncomfortable they didn't know him Not really.

He was always the quiet one. The one who arrived late and left early. The one who rarely called, never chatted. At family weddings, he stood at the edges , solemn, unreachable. When he did speak, it was brief. Measured Like every word cost him something.

Their mothers called it "Abuja pride." Their fathers said, "That boy has too much silence in his eyes."

Malik leaned toward the cousin beside him and whispered, "Na wa So we're his groomsmen but not even his friends?"

The cousin snorted. "Guy, we dey here on contract."

More nervous laughter from the guests.

The MC tried again. "Nobody? Ah ah! You mean say nobody sabi this our fresh ango well?"

Then Yasir stood.

And the atmosphere shifted

Eyes turned Necks craned.

Even the servers paused mid step.

Khalid, seated beside Amina But his posture changed just slightly. His spine straightened. His hand, resting lazily on his thigh, curled into a slow, deliberate fist His jaw clenched.

Yasir walked slowly toward the stage, all ease and charm. He took the mic with a casual confidence that only deep pain could fuel. His kaftan caught the lights just right. But his smile his smile was too tight. Too calm The kind of calm that hides a storm.

He tapped the mic once, then looked straight at Khalid.

"Ah, Khalid..."

The room quieted.

"We've known each other since we were children," Yasir began, his voice smooth as silk. "He was always the... quiet one Serious Sometimes scary serious."

Laughter rippled through the hall.
Khalid didn't blink.

Yasir paced a step or two across the stage, holding the mic like a preacher giving a sermon.

"You know those children that didn't play with sand?" he asked, eyes twinkling. "That's Khalid. While we were chasing kites and stealing mangoes, he was inside Probably reading books. Or planning world domination."

The laughter grew louder this time. A few aunties clapped. The groomsmen chuckled uneasily.

But Khalid didn't move. His eyes were locked on Yasir now, sharp and unreadable. No amusement. Just quiet scrutiny.

"But..."

Yasir's voice softened, and he stopped pacing.

He looked at Amina for a brief moment just a heartbeat then back at Khalid.

"He's grown. Matured Clean shaved. Clearly well fed."

Louder laughter now. Even the MC chuckled nervously.

But the tension under it was a string pulled tight.

Then Yasir's voice dropped, almost too quiet for the mic.

"And today, he's here. Marrying a woman who deserves... honesty And protection."
A silence fell like a curtain

No one laughed

Khalid's knuckles turned white where his fingers pressed against each other. His lips tightened.

The air grew heavy again.

Yasir stood for a beat longer. Then handed the mic back to the MC, with no bow, no flourish just a quiet, final gesture.

He didn't return to his seat.

He walked out of the hall

Just like that

The gate opened and closed behind him. The soft whoosh of it sounded louder than it should have.

For a moment, the hall remained frozen.

Then, as if pulled by invisible strings, Malik jumped up and shouted, "Abeg, mic don too hot make we cool am with zobo!"

The hall erupted in nervous laughter. Aunties slapped their thighs. The MC grabbed the cue and laughed along.

"Na so o! Zobo for everybody!"

But Khalid didn't laugh.
His hands stayed clasped. His shoulders rigid.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Still Still like before a storm.

Amina stared at him , heart pounding with a question neither of them could say aloud

What now?

By 3 p.m., the kamu had finally come to a slow, glittering end.

The music faded, first to a murmur, then to memory. Guests filtered out in clusters aunties adjusting their veil, cousins giggling over snapshots. The scent of fried puff puff, sugared zobo, and expensive perfume lingered in the humid air like the ghost of celebration.

Amina slipped away quietly, Her gele had loosened slightly. Her lashes felt too heavy for her eyes. The noise of the day still rang in her ears the drums, the mic, Yasir's voice but it was all muffled now, distant, like it belonged to someone else's life.

Inside her room, the curtains were drawn against the sun. The room glowed soft and dim, her prayer rug already laid out. Amina changed her outfit to a simpler one and cleaned up the make up performed ablution and started praying asr prayers with trembling lips. She recited slowly, carefully, as if each word might hold her together. But her breath kept catching. Her chest rose too fast Tears welled beneath her closed eyes.

When she finally said Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullah, her voice was barely audible.

She rose to her feet unsteady, dizzy and barely made it to the bathroom before it happened again.

She vomited violently, gripping the edge of the sink with both hands, the lace sleeves of her dress bunched around her elbows. Her body shook with each retch. Nothing came up but bile and air.

"Amina!" Khadija's voice was urgent from the doorway. She rushed in, her chiffon wrapper flaring behind her like a storm cloud. "Are you okay? "

"Anxiety," an aunty said dismissively from the open door. "She's just nervous. First night jitters. It's like that for new brides."

Another woman leaned in, her voice full of false sweetness. "Yourhusband's house is not prison o You'll enjoy it, In shaa Allah."

They laughed that loud, knowing aunty laughter that didn't invite response, only tolerance.

But Amina didn't laugh.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She was crouched on the tiled floor, one hand braced against the wall, the other resting protectively on her abdomen.

Khadija turned, annoyed. "Please close the door."

The door shut Silence returned like a balm.

Khadija knelt beside her, grabbed a clean towel, and dabbed Amina's forehead gently. "Again?" she whispered, lowering her voice.

Amina nodded slowly, not looking up. Her eyes were glassy, her lips pale.

"It's getting worse," she said, her voice raw.

She didn't say the word. Neither of them did.

But it hung there between them.

Amina's fingers curled slightly over her belly, as if to shield something. Someone Or maybe just the truth.

And Khadija's silence said it all.

They knew
And now they couldn't unknow it.
Downstairs, the sitting room buzzed with soft chatter, now dimmed by the late afternoon sun filtering through sheer curtains. Most of the guests had gone. The sound of distant laughter echoed from the compound, where groomsmen were packing wedding boxes into car trunks, preparing for the long journey back to Abuja.

But inside, Khalid sat on one of the large chairs in the family parlour, surrounded by a small circle of aunties older women in richly embroidered atamfa, their wrists lined with gold bangles, their eyes sharp with decades of knowledge, survival, and tradition.

One of them leaned forward, her palms pressed together like she was delivering a khutbah.

"You're the head now," she said, voice steady, with the authority of a woman who had lived through many marriages hers and others. "You're her husband . Her protector Her amanah Do you understand what that means?"

Khalid nodded slightly. "Yes, aunty."

Another aunty, this one with hennaed fingertips and a stern brow, adjusted her gele before speaking. "A wife is not a maid or a slave, ba? The Prophet, peace be upon him, treated his wives with mercy. Mercy, Khalid. Even when they upset him."

A third added, her voice more gentle, as if she sensed the stiffness in him, "Women are delicate, especially newlyweds. There's a way to love them Gently and Consistently. Even if she annoys you, you bear it. It's part of the sunnah."

Then came the oldest of them, her voice sharp and unfiltered.

"And don't let your mother control your home," she said pointedly. "Or any other woman. May Allah guide us all."

The others muttered a quiet "Ameen."

Khalid sat still, legs neatly crossed at the ankle, his hands resting on his lap in the same position he'd held them for hours. His white babariga was still perfect not a wrinkle out of place but inside him, something was unravelling.

He nodded again, respectfully. Always respectfully.

But he wasn't really hearing themNot truly

His mind wasn't here. Not in this room, not with their advice Not even with their prayers.

It was still on the stage On Yasir.

On the way Yasir had stood bold, casual, careless and taken the mic. On the words he said. The ones he didn't say.

And worst of all, on Amina.

On the way her face shifted when she saw him. Not shock Not love.

Something deeper Something rawer.

She hadn't cried

Not yet

But Khalid knew tears when they were hiding. He'd known them since he was a boy the kind that live behind the eyes, waiting for silence, for darkness, for privacy to fall like a curtain.

He'd seen it in her then. And he was still seeing it now.

He looked up as another aunty reached forward and touched his shoulder gently. "Khalid, are you hearing us?"

He nodded once more, forcing a small smile. "Yes, aunty I hear you."

They all smiled, satisfied.

But Khalid's mind stayed elsewhere.

In a room upstairs, with a girl who would soon become in his house as his wife. A girl who couldn't even look at him the same way she looked at his cousin.

And maybe never would. In her parents' wing, the air was quiet. Thicker than silence. The kind of hush that comes only when something sacred is breaking.

Amina sat on the edge of her mother's bed, her gold trimmed lace dress heavy on her body, her gele slightly loose from the weight of the day. Her mother stood behind her, adjusting it gently, tucking a pin near her temple, her fingers trembling just slightly.

"You're a wife now," she said softly, as if saying it too loud would make it more real than Amina could bear.

Amina swallowed hard. Her voice came out in a whisper, thin and honest. "I don't feel like one."

Her mother smiled, but her eyes glistened. "You will. It's not about feelings, Amina. It's about niyya. Intention And sabr."

She touched Amina's shoulder lightly, then motioned for her to stand.

Amina followed her into the hallway, their footsteps muffled by the plush carpet. Each step toward the parlour felt like a step away from her childhood.

Her father was already seated inside, dressed in a spotless white kaftan, a finely embroidered hula on his head. His prayer beads slipped rhythmically through his fingers, each bead moving like a silent reminder of time passing of promises made and being kept.

He looked up at her as she entered. Not immediately speaking Just watching her.

Amina stood still.

Then, finally, he spoke calm, measured, firm.

"Aminatu ," he said. "Aure... ibada ne Marriage is worship."

She lowered her gaze.

He set the prayer beads aside, hands resting on his knees.

"You will want to run Don't." His voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. "You will want to reply. Don't and you know exactly what I'm talking about kiji tsoron Allah (fear god) The

angels write everything. Every word Every sigh You must be gentle. Be kind Be strong listen to your husband "

Amina bit her lip, eyes welling.

"Don't gossip Don't compare Don't dishonor your home. Serve Allah through your marriage not through your comfort. Through your effort aminatu kiji tsoron Allah (amina fear god)
And be patient, listen to your husband ."

Her chest heaved.

His voice softened. "You are our daughter. But now... you are also someone's amanah."

She looked up, eyes full of water. "Baba..."

He met her gaze Silent.

And the words tumbled out, broken and fragile. "I don't want to go."

His hand, mid bead, stilled.

"I want to stay," she whispered, voice cracking. "Please I want to stay here. I can't go."

Tears broke free, sliding down her cheeks in hot, helpless streams. She turned to her mother, clutching her arm, sobbing like the girl she still felt like.

"Mummy , please..." she wept. "I'm not ready..."

Her mother's arms came around her, holding her close, smoothing her head even as her own tears fell silently into Amina's veil.

Her father stood. Crossed to her. Wrapped her in his arms quiet, strong, unmoving.

And for a moment, it was as if she was a child again, bruised from a fall, held between the two people who knew her best.

But it didn't last.

The knock came on the door.

A firm voice outside, softened only by habit and custom. "It's time," an aunty said. "The cars are ready. The flight is in 30 minutes they have to reach the airport ."

Silence followed the knock.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And then her mother slowly stepped back, dabbing her face with a soft white handkerchief.

Her father kissed her forehead. "Go with peace," he whispered. "Allah is with you."

But Amina's feet wouldn't move.

Not yet

Her sobs still echoed faintly through the corridor. And the tears still hadn't stopped.

Outside, the compound buzzed with quiet urgency the last flurry of farewells before departure. The sun hung low, casting long shadows across the courtyard tiles. Aunties in sequined wrappers adjusted their headscarves, murmuring du'as under their breath. Khalid's cousins moved briskly, lifting ornate gift boxes golden, beaded, wrapped with ribbons into the trunks of black SUVs. The groomsmen, already sweating through their babban Riga some removed , changed hurriedly into more practical kaftans for travel. The air smelled faintly of perfume, fried chicken, and dust.

Then Amina stepped out.

Her face was veiled, . A soft net of golden tulle lay over her features, doing little to hide the wetness of her cheeks. Her eyes swollen, red blinked against the light.

A hush fell over the activity.

She didn't wail She didn't speak.

But she was crying.

Each step forward shook something loose inside her.

Khadija gripped her arm tightly. "It's okay I'm with you," she whispered, trying not to cry herself.

Amina's mother walked close behind, her face already crumpled with grief. She kept one hand on her daughter's back, murmuring Qur'anic verses, her voice breaking mid ayah. Amina turned toward her and clung no, clutched like a toddler refusing to be dropped off at school. Her sobs finally broke through, ragged and gasping, the kind that leave your chest hollow after.

Then a voice broke through it all.

"Suleiman!"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her elder brother had just returned from an errand stepping out of a car, confused by the sudden stillness in the compound. His gaze landed on her.

"Suleiman!" Amina cried again, louder this time, stumbling out of the circle of aunties.

She ran
He froze for a heartbeat, then opened his arms just in time.

She crashed into him, burying her face in his chest.

He didn't ask anything.

He just held her
He cried too not loudly, not messily. Just tears that slipped out from the corner of his eyes, because this wasn't how he pictured it either. Not like this. Not with so much weight in her eyes.

Then Kabir appeared at the top of the stairs, tall and composed in a pale blue kaftan. He walked down slowly, shoulders squared, face soft.

When he reached them, he didn't speak at first. He just opened his arms, and both siblings leaned into him.

"Kai, Amina..." he murmured, voice thick, "we're one phone call away One Wallahi."

She nodded, trembling.

"We love you," he said simply, brushing her veil gently out of her face to wipe her tears with the edge of his sleeve. "Be strong Kin ji? It'll be fine in Sha Allah "
Amina nodded again. But the tears kept coming.

Still holding Suleiman's hand, she turned for one last look her home glowing in the late afternoon light. The guava tree she'd planted with her brothers in primary school, now tall and leafy. The upstairs window with the pink curtains, still slightly open her room. The long verandah where they ate fried yam on Eid mornings. The kitchen door, where her mother used to call them in with a voice full of love.

Her heart clenched She let go of Suleiman's hand.

And walked to the car.

The door was already open. Khalid was standing near the door quiet and still, his white babban riga crisp

He had watched everything the tears, the desperation, the aching finality of it all.

He didn't move

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She got in beside her auntie , slowly. Adjusted her wrapper Closed the door with fingers that still shook.

Silence fell between them.
Khalid got into the drivers seat with khadija in front
Khalid turned slightly, just enough to glance at her. He saw the tears still slipping down her cheeks, the way she tried to control her breathing, the way she looked everywhere but at him.

And something inside him twisted.

He didn't understand it not fully.

But he hated the way her pain sat in the car with them.

He hated that he didn't know how to stop it.

So he just looked away, jaw tight, and said nothing

The door closed

The engine started.

And the convoy began to move.

Away from childhood
Away from certainty
Into marriage Into silence Into whatever waited next.

At the small private terminal of the Kaduna airport, the tarmac shimmered under the late afternoon sun. Parked beside a sleek black SUV was a private jet white and glinting with understated wealth. A subtle crest was painted on its tail the emblem of one of the most powerful families in Northern Nigeria.

Aminu Bello's doing Of course.

Inside the car, no one spoke as the convoy rolled to a halt. Doors opened One by one, they stepped out.

Amina moved slowly, her golden lace wrapper neatly pinned, face partially covered in a sheer veil that fluttered in the warm breeze. Her eyes remained downcast. Two aunties flanked her one on either side adjusting her wrapper and hijab, murmuring instructions she didn't fully hear.

"Don't touch your face too much. The makeup still fresh," one whispered.

The other added, "Smile small when they record. At least make people think you're happy."

Amina didn't respond.

Her heels clicked lightly on the tarmac as they guided her up the short flight of stairs into the jet.

Inside, the air was cold. Quiet Polished beige leather seats, mahogany trim, a tray of packaged snacks and chilled zobo waiting near the bar.

Amina sat in the middle row, back straight, body tense. One aunty settled to her left, already sighing dramatically about her knees. The other opened a small Qur'an app on her phone and began scrolling silently. Khadija had taken the window seat in the front, already lifting her phone camera, smiling.

Click

She panned it around.

"Our girl is now a WIFE!" she whispered to herself.

She posted it quickly on Instagram, captioned in her usual playful tone:
#AminaWedsKhalid loading...
Mrs. K in transit ☺✈□
May Allah bless this union □

Khalid boarded last

His white kaftan was freshly pressed, his cap crisp, but his expression unreadable. He nodded politely to the aunties, barely made eye contact, and took the seat beside Amina stiffly, like someone unfamiliar with their own body.

She didn't turn to him Just shifted slightly, creating a narrow distance between them.

He glanced once
Her eyes were closed Her hand rested lightly on her stomach, fingers twitching every few seconds as if she was fighting off a thought.

Her chest rose and fell slowly, deliberately.

"You good?" he asked, voice low.

She didn't answer
Didn't even flinch

He waited a beat, then nodded to himself and looked away Pulled out his phone Swiped aimlessly through nothing.

Outside, the door sealed shut.

The hum of the engines started. The vibration moved through the cabin, soft and steady.

Amina opened her eyes, just briefly, and stared ahead blankly. Her lips moved slightly. A whispered du'a. A memory A question It wasn't clear.

She didn't look at Khalid

He didn't look at her

Side by side, they lifted into the sky. Not as husband and wife. Not yet Just two strangers bound by something far heavier than love silence, family, obligation, and a secret she carried in her womb that only he and one other person knew

They landed in Abuja just after Maghrib, the sun dipping low behind the hills, painting the sky in soft shades of rust and violet.

At the private airstrip, a convoy of black jeeps and SUVs waited like soldiers in formation. At the front, a Hilux pickup with tinted windows. At the rear, a police escort with sirens off but presence unmistakable. Armed SS men stood motionless beside the vehicles, sunglasses still on despite the fading light.

Khalid stepped out of the jet and stiffened immediately.

"This isn't necessary," he muttered to the head officer.

The man a broad shouldered Northerner in uniform saluted smartly. "Orders from the oga, sir Everything is arranged."

Amina emerged next, helped down the steps by one of the aunties. She still wore her bridal wrapper, although the gele was slightly askew now. Her eyes were tired, face pale, but composed.

She said nothing

They entered the back seat of the lead vehicle, her aunties following into the next car. The convoy began its slow, smooth procession into the heart of Abuja gliding through traffic like royalty, motorbikes clearing the way with quick whistles and arm signals The journey was quiet

Khalid looked out the window

Amina looked at her hands

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

No music No talking Just the soft hum of tires on asphalt and the occasional radio whisper from the walkie talkies.

By the time they reached Aminu Bello's estate in gwarimpa, night had fallen completely.

The gates opened before them.

Inside, the compound was alive with lights and low murmurs. Extended relatives and political well wishers were already present seated on Persian carpets under the long awning beside the inner house. Steaming flasks of tea and fura da nono sat on side tables. Aunties in sequinned veils. Uncles in kaftans. Some strangers too men Khalid didn't recognize, but knew from experience not to ask about.

Tradition demanded the bride be formally received.

So Amina was gently ushered in through the family wing her shoes removed, wrapper adjusted, scarf re tightened. Her aunties whispered blessings in her ear.

"Ki zauna lafiya Ki zama mace ta gari."
(Sit in peace Be a righteous woman.)

Inside the large sitting room, soft Qur'anic recitation played on a speaker. The air was cold with expensive air conditioning. The smell of turaren wuta lingered in the curtains. Everyone sat on the carpeted floor.

Khalid followed behind, reluctant.

Amina was led to the centre of the room a spot marked by a small decorative mat. She knelt there, head lowered, modest and quiet, as custom required.

Khalid was asked to sit beside her
Then the room went still

A door creaked open from the far side, and he entered.

Aminu Bello.

He wore a simple cream colored babban riga, no cap, prayer beads coiled in one hand. He didn't smile, didn't scan the room. He walked straight to his chair and sat.

A hush fell over everyone.

"Alhamdulillah," he began, voice calm and steady. "This is a house of blessing today. And marriage... is amanah A sacred trust."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He turned his gaze on Amina first. "My daughter, you are no longer just your parents' child. You are now a wife. What you bring into this home will shape your generations. Bring patience Bring grace."

He turned to Khalid. "And you..."

Khalid raised his eyes. Expression neutral.

Aminu's tone softened, fatherly, performative. "You are now a husband. A protector ans A leader Do not fail this woman. Do not break her spirit. The man who hurts his wife Allah ya isar mana da shi. May Allah deal with him."

The room murmured an "Ameen."
Aminu bello was acting like a good man only the ones who knew him knew what he was "Speak with kindness. Touch with gentleness. Do not compare her to any other woman. And never bring what happens outside into your home."

More "Ameen" responses.

Khalid kept his face still this is thesame man who treated his wife like shit treated his son like a prisoner in his own home told his son that he should use an iron hand on his wife and show her who is in control.

Then came the entrance of the stepmother.

Zainab Bello swept in, draped in designer lace, her jewellery glittering in the chandelier light. Two of her sisters followed closely, faces bright with daga can smiles. She leaned down dramatically and took Amina's hands.

"Amina!" she exclaimed, almost too sweetly. Hugging amina "Welcome to this family. We've waited so long to see him like this."

She looked at Khalid, her eyes warm but distant as if she were meeting him for the first time in months.

"May Allah bless your womb," she added, placing a hand briefly on Amina's shoulder.

Khalid flinched

Just a blink a twitch of the jaw But he flinched.

Because here was the woman his father never let him call mama. The one who stayed in one wing while he was left alone in boarding school after boarding school. And now here she was smiling, performing, claiming kinship in front of everyone.

He looked at the relatives she brought strangers to him. Laughing.m Taking selfies. Wishing him "A happy married life "

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It was all an act.

He knew it He had always known it.

And yet... he smiled faintly Politely A smile honed over years of pretending.

He nodded where needed. Said Ameen where expected. Kept his head low. Because the man who sits in front of a lion doesn't yawn.

He couldn't wait to leave.

Later that evening, Amina was quietly ushered into a black Lexus SUV — the final leg of the day's long journey. She sat in the back seat beside Khadija and two aunties. Her veil was still drawn low, face composed but distant, hands clasped tightly on her lap.

The house they were headed to was in Wuse II — a private duplex gifted by Khalid's father as part of the sadaki. Rumour had it the house was fully furnished by an interior designer flown in from Turkey. Everything custom. Everything imported. Nothing ordinary.

Khalid did not go with them.

As tradition demanded, he would arrive later for the sayan baki — the ceremonial visitation of the groom to the bride's new home. His groomsmen would first negotiate light-heartedly with the women of the house before officially 'handing him over' to his bride. It was meant to be playful, but it carried deep roots in Arewa custom: the groom shows respect, waits his turn, enters only when welcomed.

So Khalid stayed behind, standing beside the rear car with tinted windows, watching silently as Amina's SUV pulled away.

From where he stood, he couldn't see her face.

But he didn't need to.

His heart already carried the weight of her silence.

As the cars pulled into the gated compound of the new duplex, Khadija pressed her face to the window.

"Subhanallah..." she murmured.

The house was massive Tall, gleaming white walls framed by golden lighting. Palm trees swayed in the front yard, trimmed perfectly. A marble water fountain gurgled gently in the centre of the driveway plants every where roses and all

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Inside, the air conditioning hummed like a gentle breeze. The sitting room was vast, the ceilings high. Chandeliers hung like moons. Plush sofas Gold trimmings Tall glass windows. Persian rugs A wide, curved staircase in the middle of the house led upstairs like something out of a movie.

Amina stepped in quietly, right foot first, as taught.

"As salaamu alaikum," she said, her voice low but clear.

Entering with the right foot Making salaam It was Sunnah.

The aunties behind her chorused loudly in return: "Wa alaikumus salaam warahmatullah! Allah ya sanya albarka!"

They waved their arms as they entered, the way older women often did sweeping invisible dust away with their shawls.

"May Allah make this house peaceful," one prayed, placing a hand on the door frame.
"May your children play in these halls," said another.
"May this roof never see tears," whispered a third, touching Amina's head gently. "May you grow old here in laughter."

Amina remained still, taking it all in.

Khadija wandered from room to room, her eyes wide.

"Wallahi this house is not house this is estate," she whispered, peeking into the first kitchen. There was a second one. And a third

The living rooms were expansive two upstairs, one downstairs, each more luxurious than the last. Glass panelled bathrooms, heated towel racks, rain showers, and tubs that looked like bathtubs in foreign movies. Marble floors. Sensor lights.

In the master bedroom, the bed stood like a throne king sized, with grey backing and golden detailing. There were full length mirrors on either side, dimmable lights, a walk in closet that could fit three people, and a Quran shelf already stocked.
Just like she wanted it just how she told Khalid even better he wanted to make sure she was comfortable
Still, Amina said nothing.

Her feet felt heavy Her chest hollow.

As the aunties whispered prayers around the sitting room, then Amina was walked slowly upstairs, her footsteps echoing faintly on the tiles.

She entered the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Just sat
They said they wanted to pray she needed to praye too
Khadija followed, quieter now. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Amina looked around Then down.

"I don't know how to live here," she whispered.

"You will."

Amina didn't reply

Downstairs, the aunties were laughing, opening bottles of zobo and small chops. S
Outside, the groomsmen were already arriving for sayan baki.

Khalid would be here soon.

And Amina... she still didn't know what she'd say when she saw him

But she knew one thing for certain

This was her house now

Her prison
Her palace
Her battlefield

All at once

Chapter twenty one –The first night

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It was already 11pm

But the aunties were still fussing tying their wrappers tighter, adjusting their hijabs, whispering and bustling around the living room like the night had just begun. The air smelled of bukhoor some of their relatives in Abuja had come to see the house too

Khadija sat quietly in one corner, her eyes following Amina. Then she spoke gently, carefully, like someone walking on eggshells.

"Maybe I should just sleep in the same room with her," she said. "Just for tonight We're going back to Kaduna early tomorrow anyway..."

For a second, no one answered. Then one of the older aunties turned around sharply, her glasses sliding down her nose.

"No, no, no It's not proper," she said, frowning.

The other auntie chimed in, wagging her finger like it was court. "Ah ah, haba It's not even about comfort. This is religion A man must sleep with his wife on the first night. That's the Sunnah."

"Wallahi," a third auntie added, nodding firmly. "Even if they're shy, even if they don't touch each other they must sleep under one roof. That's the beginning of the blessing." They said shamelessly
Amina's stomach twisted, tight like a fist.

She stood up quickly, one hand clutching her chest, the other grabbing the edge of the chair to steady herself. Her head felt heavy. She swayed.

Then rushed out.

The bathroom door clicked shut just in time.

They could hear her retchingViolent, dry heaves.

Khadija didn't wait. She was already beside her, holding back her veil, rubbing circles on her back. "Breathe, breathe Just take it easy. Wallahi it's okay," she whispered.

In the parlour, the aunties exchanged glances, muttering.

"Eyyah," one said. "It's nerves All brides feel it."

"Or maybe she hasn't eaten well," another added, even though the truth was obvious.

"Shebi we said she should rest. They were doing makeup and photos all day. The whole house was noisy and then the flight she hasn't rested at all," someone else said.

By then, one had already picked her phone and called the driver.

"Khadija, pack your overnight bag, biko," said the eldest aunt, in that calm but final tone only older women could use. "The driver is waiting."
"But"Khadija started.

"No buts You'll see her tomorrow, inshaAllah. This night belongs to her husband."

Khadija bit her lip, looked towards the bathroom door again. Then she obeyed. Her small trolley bag rolled behind her like a visitor at the end of a wedding.she was taking it to the car

Amina was still weak when they brought her into the master bedroom. She didn't even argue.

The room was quiet, the white wall lights casting a warm glow. The AC hummed softly, but Amina still felt cold.

They sat her down at the edge of the bed. Her wrapper felt too tight around her waist. She loosened it slightly.

The aunties arranged themselves around her in a semi circle, their Ankara wrappers swishing as they sat on the edge of armchairs, the ottoman, and even the floor. Their scents hung in the air Ameerah perfume, Robb, and turaren wuta
One auntie handed her a small glass of something warm.

"Here, drink this. It'll help your stomach settle before your husband comes," said her maternal aunt, pressing the cup into her hand with gentle firmness.

It was thick, the colour of honey, with bits floating inside something gritty, like coconut or millet. The smell was familiar.

"Kunu?" Amina asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her aunt chuckled, touching her cheek lightly. "Kunu, yes But this one is special We added ginger, dabino, tiger nuts... it's tradition. It helps you feel relaxed."

Amina sipped

It was sweet

Too sweet Her tongue recoiled slightly, but she swallowed it.oh she had no idea
Then came the talk
The real talk

The one every Arewa bride dreads and expects.

The women took turns, voices soft but serious.

"Respect him, even when he annoys you. Men don't like mouth."

"Don't ever compare him to anyone. Even in joke. Especially not... your past."

"A man's peace is his wife. If you deny him peace, someone else will give it."

"Don't reject him tonight. That one is very bad. It can scatter a marriage before it starts."

"Smile for him."

"Touch him first, before he even thinks to touch you."

"Be soft, not stubborn."

"Endure the pain, if it comes. The first time might not be sweet. But be patient. Allah rewards the obedient wife."
Just imagism all these aunties sef
Amina stared at them. She wasn't hearing them anymore

Her ears were ringing

She was pregnant From Yasir

This was not just a marriage

It was a performance. A carefully designed performance where only three people knew the truth:

Her

Khadija

And the man driving in now.

One of the aunties leaned forward, cupped Amina's face in her henna-stained hands.

"May Allah bless your womb, my daughter ," she said softly.

Amina blinked Forced a smile Or something like it.

Too late, she thought.

Khadija came in quickly to hug her one last time. Her eyes were red

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You're always a call away, wallahi," she whispered into Amina's ear. "Once ASUU calls off the strike, we're back in class like nothing happened... only difference is, you'll be someone's wife."

They both laughed a small, helpless sound.

Then they cried
And laughed again

Then the aunties returned to their duties. At the door, they gave her final advice in quick, overlapping voices.

"Don't be shy."

"Pray before anything."

"Hold him Let him feel you're his."

"Don't turn your back."

"Pray two rak'a before he enters."

Then they left
Just like that

The gate opened with a heavy creak as their car reversed slowly into the dark Abuja street.

Amina sat frozen on the bed

Then Headlights poured into the compound.

The room brightened briefly from the car's beam outside.

Khalid had arrived.

He stepped out of the car slowly, dressed in a soft grey cotton kaftan. His face was unreadable, quiet. The gateman nodded quickly and mumbled, "Welcome, oga."
The aunties paused a moment enough to throw quick marital tips at him.

"Don't scare her tonight, ehn."

"Go gently First nights are delicate."

"Don't argue. Everything small becomes big with women."

"Allah ya sanya albarka."May Allah bless you

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He nodded politely Didn't speak much.
But was wondering how shameless they were
Watched as their car pulled away into the night.

The gate shut behind them with a final metallic clang.

And just like that, the house fell into silence.

Khalid walked into the duplex slowly, locking the door behind him with a soft clack. He paused for a second in the hallway. The air inside was warm and scented a mixture of fresh paint and turaren wuta , The sitting room lights were dim, golden and low, casting long shadows against the floors. Someone had turned on the hallway diffuser lavender and oud. His shoulders relaxed, slightly. But his pulse? Still thudding.

Upstairs, he could hear the faint creak of the master bedroom door.
He adjusted the cuffs of his soft grey cotton kaftan and climbed the stairs slowly, each footfall deliberate. Silent His prayer beads tucked into his right pocket. He'd been rotating them in the car on the way here. Too tense to think Too tired to feel.

He reached her door. The wood was carved, polished, silent like everything else in this house.

He raised his hand
Knocked once
Then softly said, "Assalaamu alaikum."

No answer

But he heard movement inside a shift Cloth brushing fabric. He waited.

Then slowly, he turned the handle.

The room was quiet. Warm toned light filtered in through the bedside lamp. Cream curtains, drawn. Ceiling fan spinning lazily overhead. The air conditioner hummed faintly in the background. It smelled like rose water and coconut oil.

Amina sat on the edge of the bed, legs folded beneath her like a schoolgirl. Her veil was loose, hanging down one shoulder. Her eyes were puffy not swollen, just tired. Washed out. She looked up at him briefly.

But she didn't speak

Her lips parted like she wanted to.

Then closed again

Her gaze dropped. First to his hands, then to his lips, just for a second Then she turned away.

Khalid cleared his throat gently

He stayed near the door.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice calm. "Do you want water? Or food? Tea?"

Still nothing

She didn't shake her head or nod Just looked down at her lap, her fingers curled tightly.

Khalid hesitated. Then stepped forward.

He reached into the pocket of the small black box he had brought from the car and pulled out a white paper bag. Took a few more steps, then sat down on the far edge of the bed giving her space. A respectable distance.

"I brought these," he said quietly, placing the bag between them.

Inside were small, practical items: vitamin supplements, folic acid tablets, ginger chews, calming tea sachets, herbal mints for nausea. Not the kind of things a typical groom brought on his wedding night.

Amina stared at the bag
Then at him

"When did you become a doctor?" she asked, finally.

Her voice cracked at the edges, but she didn't let it show.

He glanced at her Shrugged slightly.

"I'm not," he said.

"But I spoke to one. Just... early pregnancy things In case."

His tone was quiet No arrogance. No assumptions.

Just facts
Amina's breath caught for a moment.

You didn't have to

The words were in her mouth. She almost said them. But stopped herself.

He did, though.

She heard him say it.

"I did."

She blinked Her chest tightened.

Something in her wanted to scream at him why are you being kind?

Why didn't you fight this?

Why are you making it harder?

But she swallowed it all down. She just whispered, "I'm good."

He nodded
Didn't push
Didn't speak again

For a while, they sat in silence. The distance between them thick with tension. Charged, electric. She could smell his perfume now something clean and dry, with cedarwood and incense.

Khalid leaned forward just a little.

Not close enough to touch her.

Just to be nearer

Amina felt the heat roll into her chest again. Her belly fluttered violently. She clenched her fists in her lap.

Why is my body doing this?

She hated it.

She hated that part of her wanted him near. Wanted to fall into his arms and sob until she slept.

She hated the softness in his voice. The way he kept his eyes down.

She hated that she wanted him.

Even now
And worst of all he didn't even know.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She didn't know that the kunu was mixed with kayan mata she felt burning a fire in her belly.

Didn't know why her skin felt too tight
Didn't know why she badly needed to be touched, just to calm the storm or maybe ignite it fully.

But Khalid just sat there. Quiet Still.

His eyes lifted Met hers.

Then dropped briefly to her lips.

Then back up.

She could barely breathe.

"Touch me," she whispered, so faint it sounded like a prayer.

Then louder Sharper. "Touch me, and I'll scream."

He didn't move
Didn't flinch
His voice was even softer when he replied.

"Then scream," he said, calmly. "You're already mine"

Not cruel Not mocking.

Just the plain, bitter truth.

But he never touched her.

Not even the hem of her veil.

His hands remained on his lap. His body still.

That restraint his stillness burned hotter than any touch could have.

She watched him pick up the bag again and place it gently on the table beside her.
That was what he was going to do why was her mind going somewhere else
Then he stood.

Adjusted his kaftan

His eyes softened for a moment. Not romantic softness just... care. Human and Gentle.

"Goodnight," he said. "Sleep tight. If you need anything, knock. I'll be in the other room."

Then he walked out

Closed the door behind him

The latch clicked Softly

Amina stared at the door Frozen.

She wanted to cry again.

Or scream

Or pull the kunu out of her veins and throw it out the window.

Her whole body felt like a riot.

A burning, aching riot.

She curled her fists tightly and pressed them hard against her thighs. Like she could hold herself together.

Like she could press away the fire.

Astaghfirullah, she whispered

She had sinned enough
And she was already paying for those sins.

She wouldn't add more.

Not tonight
Not with him

Not like this

In the other room across the hallway, Khalid closed the door behind him with a soft thud. He leaned against it for a moment, head bowed, fingers pressed to the wood as if it could hold him upright.

Silence
Then he pulled away and began undressing slowly. Like someone unpeeling skin.

He slipped out of his grey kaftan and dropped it onto the armchair. The air was cool against his bare chest, but it did nothing to cool the heat crawling under his skin.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The bathroom light flickered on. Harsh and fluorescent.

He stepped in front of the mirror.

His face looked the same.

But his eyes darker than usual. Tired and Hollow.

The kind of tired that sleep couldn't touch.

He turned
His back wide, carved with muscle from years of punishing discipline glistened faintly under the bathroom light. The snake tattoo slithered down his spine like a secret carved into his bones. Black ink Sharp lines The mouth open near the base of his neck, fangs ready.

Only two had ever seen it.

The man who inked it in a dark room in South Africa, while Khalid bled into the chair and said nothing.

And God.

He stared at himself for a long time.

Then stepped into the shower Cold water.

He let it hit him full force, his breath catching slightly at the sting.

Still no relief

The water pounded over him, but the burn under his skin only deepened.

When he stepped out, his towel wrapped low on his hips, he didn't look clean. Just... damp. As if the dirt inside him refused to wash off.

He stood by the sink. Palmed his face Exhaled.

His mind was a warzone.

He didn't understand himself.

Didn't understand why she this girl he barely knew, this girl who looked at him like he was her punishment had sunk her nails into his thoughts like this.

He didn't love her

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He didn't even know her

They weren't friends. They weren't lovers They weren't anything.

But she was in pain

And something in him wanted to make it stop

That disturbed him more than anything

He wasn't supposed to care. Caring made you weak. His father had made sure of that.

"You care too much, you die faster. You care too little, you survive longer Pick one."

Aminu Bello's voice always echoed when he didn't want it to.

Khalid opened the drawer beside the bed.

Slow

Deliberate

He pulled out the little black string wrapped case.

The syringe kit.

His old escape
He sat on the edge of the bed. Unrolled it.

The contents gleamed in the soft light a small vial, the needle, alcohol swabs, cotton.

He stared at it
This used to be how he disappeared.

After long nights of trauma , after quiet threats delivered in boardrooms, after burying things literal and otherwise in places only God knew.

It made him feel nothing Which was better than feeling everything.

His hand hovered

Trembled slightly

Then a flash.

Amina

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her voice

The way she sat curled on the bed like something broken trying to glue itself back together.

The quiver in her jaw when she whispered, "Touch me and I'll scream."

Not fear but anger and
Pain.

He closed his eyes. Rubbed the towel against his wet hair, breathing deep.

She was pregnant
She was living under his roof

Her father that proud, complicated man had entrusted her to him.

Even if the marriage was a fraud. Even if she hated his face. Even if she never spoke to him again.

What if something happened to her?

What if she needed help?

What if she screamed, and he was too high to hear it?

Khalid stared down at the needle again.

For a second, his fingers twitched.

Then he slammed the kit shut.

Hard

Like it had insulted him
The echo bounced off the guest room walls.

He shoved it back into the drawer Locked it.

Then sat back on the edge of the bed, palms pressed against his face, elbows digging into his knees.

Not tonight
Not when someone else was under his protection.

Not when the past was already waiting like a dog outside the door.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He stayed there for a long time
Listening to the ceiling fan

Counting his breath
Trying not to feel anything
But he did
And that the fact that he still could scared him more than any needle ever had.

Meanwhile, Amina lay on the bed in the master bedroom, curled up like a question mark, the blanket pulled tightly to her chest as if it could shield her from herself. The muted golden lighting from the chandelier cast soft shadows on the cream walls. The faint hum of the air conditioner filled the silence, steady and impersonal.

Outside the large window, Abuja was asleep the gated estate lit with streetlamps and the distant hiss of security patrols on night rounds. Somewhere down the hill, past the manicured fences and bougainvillea hedges, the city still buzzed faintly. Traffic on the expressway. The occasional siren. Life continuing.

But here, in this bedroom that wasn't hers, she thought inside this house that smelled of him and unfamiliar money everything had paused.

She picked up her phone

Unlocked it

Yasir's number was still saved
She stared at it. Her finger hovered over the call icon.

What if she just called him?

Told him everything?

He was the only one who had ever made her feel seen. Known Safe. The only man who had ever touched her and meant it not just physically, but with soul.

But she couldn't
She was desperate, not suicidal.

There was a line between longing and betrayal, and she'd already crossed too many. This new version of her the girl who walked around with someone else's last name, the girl with a secret growing inside her didn't deserve Yasir's voice anymore.

A sharp, unwanted wave of heat rippled through her again.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

That kayan mata kunu her aunt had made her drink claiming it'll calm her had turned into poison. It coiled inside her, sharpening everything. Her skin felt too tight. Her limbs restless.

She sat up

Almost stood

Almost padded barefoot across the hallway.

Almost knocked on his door

Almost said, "Please, just... hold me. Break the tension. Sleep with me and let's pretend it never happened."

But she didn't

Instead, she dragged herself into the sleek, marbled en suite bathroom.

She washed her face. Her neck Her hands Her arms.

Then her feet

She stepped out into the room, the cold tiles against her soles grounding her.

The weight of everything the secrets, the sin, the pregnancy, the silence pressed down like a stone.

She stood on the grey prayer mat folded in the corner.

Performed wudhu properly this time.

Then faced the qibla

And prayed two long rak'ahs.
Silent tears slid down her cheeks as she bowed

She didn't know what she was praying for anymore.

Forgiveness?

Strength?

Or maybe just for the fire inside her to go away. For the desire to dim. For her body to stop reacting to a man she didn't want to want.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Ya Allah, cool my chest, she whispered in sujood. Don't let me fall again. Don't let me ruin everything.

When she was done, she put the mat away.

She changed into her soft cotton pyjamas pale lavender, with little stars stitched along the sleeves
She climbed back into the king-sized bed.

Lay there quietly.

Her hand drifted to her belly still flat, still unchanged.

But something was inside her

A future a complication and A child.

What happens next? she whispered into the dark.

The only answer was the soft whirr of the air conditioner.

She reached over Switched off the bedside lamp.

The room fell into darkness, broken only by the faint city glow filtering in through the sheer curtains.

Across the hallway, Khalid sat hunched over his sleek MacBook, bare chested, track pants hanging low on his hips. A mug of untouched coffee sat beside him on the table, steam long gone cold.

The room was darker more functional. A study table. A muted painting of Zuma Rock. Shelves with books he hadn't touched in years. But he brought them with him Prayer beads hung from a wall hook. A half read copy of The Forty Rules of Love lay beside his laptop why he had that only he knew

But Khalid wasn't reading Or working.

He was staring at the screen, scrolling through architectural files he wasn't absorbing.

His jaw clenched. His left leg bounced restlessly.

All he could think about was the girl on the other side of the hallway.

The way she looked at him like she wanted to vanish.

The sound of her voice when she said, "Touch me, and I'll scream."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The way she didn't scream
The way she didn't ask him to stay

She was crying herself to sleep, and he could feel it like heat bleeding through the walls.

And it made something ache in his chest.

Not pity

Not even guilt
Just... ache

He wasn't supposed to feel. He had trained himself not to. His father made sure of that beat it out of him with words sharper than fists.

But somehow, she'd slipped under the armor.

He didn't know what she meant to him. Not yet.

But he knew this
She was suffering.

And he hated it

And that was how the night ended.
Not with love

Not with passion
Not even with answers

Just with longing Unspent Unspoken Unresolved.

And both of them a few doors apart lay wide awake in the quiet heart of Abuja, surrounded by things unsaid, touched only by shadows.

Chapter twenty two – Bello group

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Morning in the house began with birdsong and filtered sunlight through linen drapes but Khalid had already been awake since Fajr After his prayer, he went for a run around the high walled estate Security trailed discreetly behind him, but he ignored them as always, earbuds in, sweat soaking his grey dri fit shirt. He needed the silence, the movement, anything to drown out the echo of his father's voice in his head.

By the time he returned, the sun had begun its slow rise over Abuja's hills. The chef was already in the kitchen. Khalid wiped his brow with a towel and said in his usual quiet voice, "Make something for her. I don't know what she likes, so... everything. Just make everything."

He didn't wait to explain. He moved to the mini gym, where the sound of metal clanging drowned out his thoughts. Deadlifts. Push ups. Battle ropes. He needed the burn.

By 7:30 a.m., he was upstairs again, shirtless, his back slick with sweat. He stepped into the bathroom, letting the hot water wash over the scars and the black snake tattoo that crawled across his spine. His body might've looked like control, but inside chaos.

Then, a buzz
"Come to the office. Bring your wife. Now." Aminu Bello

Khalid stared at the screen.

What does he want now? It's the first day after the wedding.
But he knew better than to ask questions. With his father, there were no explanations only orders. Disobedience had a price. Khalid sat on the edge of his bed, phone still in his hand, the screen glowing with that one line message from his father
"Come to the office. Bring your wife. Now."

He didn't replyHe never did
What was the point?

With Aminu Bello, messages weren't conversations they were commands.
Khalid's jaw tightened. His hand trembled just a little as he dropped the phone beside him and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, still dripping water from the shower. The towel around his waist clung to him. Steam fogged the mirror, but he could still see the faint reflection of the black snake tattoo crawling across his back.

It wasn't just a tattoo.

It was a memory
A scar that ink couldn't hide.

His mind pulled him back to childhood. To silence. To screaming To blood Not his, always someone else's. He was never allowed to cry. Never allowed to ask questions. His father had trained him like an animal, not a son.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Men don't feel."
"Pain makes you stronger."
"You're mine."

Khalid remembered being barely nine when he first saw someone get beaten in front of him. His father had turned to him calmly and said, "Look carefully. This is what happens to weak men. And I won't raise one."

That day, something broke in him. And something else formed.

Obedience
Not love.
Never love
Just survival

Even now, as a grown man with muscles carved by years of training, money of his own, a house bigger than most estates in Abuja he still felt like a boy when he saw that name pop up on his screen.

Aminu Bello.

The man everyone in Abuja respected. The man they bowed to in public. The same man who used to make Khalid kneel on stones with salt poured on just to test how long pain could be endured. Who'd lock him outside in the rain for coming second in class. Who once made him punch a driver for speaking "too softly."

And now... now he wanted Khalid to bring Amina
To his office
The morning after their wedding .

Why?

Khalid didn't trust him
Not for one second

This wasn't a father's curiosityIt wasn't to check on his son's new marriage No. Aminu Bello didn't believe in "checking on people." He believed in control.

And Amina?

She was the one thing Khalid hadn't been able to control.
She spoke back
She looked him in the eyeShe laughed She cried she confused him.
And most of all, she reminded him that he was still human.
And aminu bello definitely has spies in kaduna and here and there hypocrite father of his knew everything,
And maybe that's why his father wanted to see her.

To ruin that part of him too because that's what he does

Khalid stood up, water still dripping down his skin, and stared at himself in the mirror. His eyes looked calm. Too calm Like someone used to hiding everything.

He dried off, pulled on his black kaftan, clean and sharp, slipped his watch on, sprayed perfume lightly behind his ears, and picked up his phone again. He didn't reply to his father. He didn't have to.

He just started walking.

To Amina's room.

But even as his footsteps echoed in the quiet corridor of the Bello mansion, his mind was spiraling.

Was he becoming like his father?

Or was he just trying not to become worse?

He didn't know.

All he knew was if he didn't take Amina to that office this morning, there would be consequences.

And deep down, the boy in him the one with bruises hidden under long sleeves was still afraid.

Khalid walked straight to Amina's room, the dark, polished hallway swallowing the sound of his footsteps. The house was quiet too But his heart wasn't.

He raised his hand and knocked.
No responseHe knocked again, firmer. "Amina?"

Still nothing

A strange tightness bloomed in his chest. Worry? Fear? Maybe just irritation. Or maybe something he didn't know how to name yet.
But he was scared what if something happened to her she's pregnant and depressed that he knew s
He pushed the door open slowly.

The curtains were still drawn, letting in a soft, sleepy gold light. The air smelled faintly of turaren wuta and new bedsheets. And there curled sideways like a lazy cat, limbs tossed in every direction, blanket half kicked off was Amina.

Khalid froze at the door.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She was so still
Peaceful
A part of him panicked Was she okay? Did something happen? But then her chest rose gently with breath.

She was just asleep.
Deeply, carelessly, almost childishly asleep.

He exhaled.

Khalid took a step closer, eyes not leaving her. Her scarf had fallen off in the night. Her hair was wild, tangled over the pillow. She had drooled a little on the edge of the sheets.

He blinked

So this is what peace looks likeHe didn't remember the last time he slept like that. Arms loose, face soft, heart steady. No weight in the chest. No voice in his head. No dreams full of blood and broken things.

She shifted slightly in her sleep, sighing.

He knelt beside the bed, still watching her. And for the first time in a long time, something softened in him. Something that wasn't fear or caution.

He whispered, almost just to see if she'd stir.
"Amina."

Nothing
"Amina wake up"
Still nothing
Then, gently, he said a name no one else called her. A name he remembered hearing once, in a passing conversation with khadija.
Where she said no one ever called her that and that's when she knows it a stranger.
"Meenah."

Her eyes snapped open like a fire alarm had gone off.

She sat up in bed with a jolt. "WHAT?!"
She was confused didn't even recognize who he was at first
He didn't flinch. Just raised a brow, as calm as ever. "Good morning."

"What are you doing here?!" she demanded, squinting. "Were you just watching me sleep?! That's creepy!"

"You sleep like someone in a coma. I thought you were dead."

She glared at him. "And your first response was to kneel beside me and whisper Meenah like a ghost?!"

He smirked. "It worked You woke up oh and Meenah is what I'll call you form now on it seems to scare you"

She threw a pillow at his face. He caught it without effort. "Get out!"

He stood up, not moved. "Get ready We're going to the office."

Her face wrinkled. "Whose office?"

"My father's."

She snorted. "No thanks I'm not a staff."

Khalid's face tightened slightly. "He asked for us Both of us."

"Tell him I'm tired Or better yet, tell him I'm sick. Tell him I got food poisoning from your family's nonsense jollof rice."

He didn't laugh. "Amina"

"No."

"Don't do this."

"Do what?" she sat cross legged on the bed, arms folded. "Say no to your father? I thought I was your wife, not his PA"

"You don't know him," Khalid said, voice lower. "Please Just get ready."

Her voice sharpened. "I said I'm not going anywhere! This is my house too! She picked up her phone "
He was silent

Then, calmly, he walked forward.

"What are you doing?"

"Helping."

"Khalid, no"

In one sudden, smooth motion, he lifted her right off the bed.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"WHAT The Khalid!"

He slung her over his shoulder like a rolled up mat, her fists pounding at his back She hit him with her phone

"Put me down!! Are you mad?! What kind of caveman nonsense is this?"

"You're wasting time."

"I will end you!"

"You'll fall," he said mildly. "Stop moving."

"You smell like sweat and expensive perfume pick a struggle!"

He opened the bathroom door with one hand, then gently dumped her inside like a sack of sugar. She stumbled upright, hair in her face, blinking like she'd just landed from space.

"You're insane!" she shouted.

He calmly closed the bathroom door Click Locked.

"You locked me in?! Are you okay?!"

"You have thirty minutes."

"This is kidnap!"

"Take your bath, Meenah."

"I swear, I will haunt your generation!"

He sighed from the hallway. "You already do."

Inside, she leaned on the door and groaned. "I hate you."

Outside, he leaned back against the wall, arms folded. "That's fine You can hate me after your shower."

Then her voice lowered sharp, cracking.

"Khalid please , I'm already troubled enough living in thesame house with you while I carry Yasir's child "

Silence.

She sniffed. "You don't talk because you know it's true You can't fix this You can't control it. You can't control me."

For a long moment, there was only the hum of the AC vent.

Then Khalid's voice, deep and quiet:

"Maybe But I can protect you. Even if you hate me for it."

Then she heard his footsteps walking away.

And for a strange, breathless moment, Amina sat on the tiled floor of the bathroom, chest tight, heart loud.

She didn't understand him.

And maybe that was the scariest part

Amina stood frozen, arms limp by her sides. Her heart was racing, face flushed with a mix of anger, shock, and something else she didn't want to name.

She looked around the massive tiled bathroom more like a spa than anything else. Glass shower. Gold fixtures A wall length mirror. Even a chandelier. And yet, she felt like a prisoner.

Then
Buzz
Her phone vibrated on the sink counter. She lunged for it like a drowning woman grabbing a rope.

Khadija.

She answered in a shaky whisper. "Kadyy kuntafi ne (have you left?)"

"No we're waiting for aunty Salma she went to get some stuff Allah these your aunties eh chai "
Khadija replied
"Oh by the way how are you and how did the first night go " khadija Sai laughing
"He's crazy Wallahi, Kaddy. He picked me up like a bag of beans. Just dumped me in the bathroom like one orphan child."

Khadija didn't even pretend to be shocked.
"Ha! Wahala marriage!" she said, laughing. "But why now mystery man with muscle and trauma.' You're enjoying now."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I'm not enjoying!" Amina snapped. "I'm in prison! Do you know he locked me in? LOCKED. Like I'm his daughter! He wants me to follow him to work that his father had requested I go"

"Ahh," Khadija said, enjoying herself too much. "At least he didn't bring the cane."

"Kaddy!"

"Amina Look at your life. You're married to a fine, emotionally damaged, morally questionable billionaire gym rat. Living in one rich man's mansion Wallahi, some girls will gladly enter cage for that life."

Amina let out a dry laugh. "Yeah? Then they should come and carry him. This is not 'dream life,' it's nightmare with AC"

Khadija hummed. "But admit it the house is mad."

Amina glanced around the bathroom again marble floors, art on the walls, even the soap was probably imported. "Yeah... the house is mad. The bed? I sank inside like puff puff."

"Exactly!Fake married to one tall, fair demon with Range Rover keys. Amina, you're living your Pinterest board abi Wattpad story "

"I didn't know my Pinterest board or Wattpad stories would come with forced marriage and father in law that sounds like a cult leader."

Khadija chuckled. "This is what they call luxury suffering."

Amina sighed and sank onto the soft bathroom ottoman. "Kaddy I'm not happy I look around and I should be happy that at least I get to hide the pregnancy in a perfect way But I'm not. I'm just... empty."

Silence
Then Khadija's voice, soft for once:
"I know. But it's okay to feel that. You've been through a lot. You lost Yasir, you got married without even planning it, you're hiding the biggest secret of your life, and now you're waking up next to a man who talks like he's preparing for battle."

Amina didn't respond. Her throat was tight.

"You have to pray about it, Amina ," Khadija continued. "Wallahi Don't just sit inside AC and cry. Take it to Allah Even this kind of wahala has a solution You're not alone pray about it please "
"I don't even know what to pray for," Amina whispered. "A way out? Or a way through?"

"Pray for peace One step at a time Pray for peace in your heart first, then clarity will come."

Amina swallowed hard. "You're really becoming one motivational speaker, Kaddy.kawai kifara wa'azi (just start preaching)"

Khadija laughed again. "Well, someone has to be serious."

Amina gave a tired smile. "He thinks he's helping me."

"He's helping you enter early menopause. You better dress up before he enters that bathroom and gives you a sponge bath."

"God forbid!"

"Thirty minutes o. He said it with that deep mafia voice, ba?"

"Wallahi. 'Be ready in 30 minutes' like he's talking to a hostage."

"You are a hostage But you're a hostage with silk bedsheets and ₦10 million sadaki."

Amina groaned dramatically. "I hate you."

"I know Now go and brush your teeth, fake Mrs Bello That office visit better be worth it."

"Wait what if his father tries to interrogate me?"

"Act confused. Say 'pardon?' in Queen's English. Look expensive and stupid. It works."

Amina burst out laughing again. "I swear I'm blocking you after this call."

"Block me after you dress up. You've got 24 minutes."

Amina stood slowly and looked at herself in the giant mirror. Puffy eyes Disheveled hair. A heart full of fire and fear.

But somewhere under it all... she was still standing.

She inhaled
She exhaled
She began to reach for her toothbrush.

Maybe today, she would survive.
Maybe tomorrow, she would fight.
But today she would go to the office.
With her head high.

Even if it killed her

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Exactly thirty minutes later, the knock came.

Not loud Not soft. Just precise like everything else about him.

Knock Knock.

Amina exhaled deeply and opened the door.

There he was. Khalid Bello. Tall, clean cut in a kaftan, his sleeves folded just enough to show the veins on his forearms. His scent hit her immediately expensive and something sharper underneath. Power Patience and Restraint.

He didn't say anything at first. Just looked at her.

Amina adjusted her scarf awkwardly, heat creeping up her neck. She wore a soft peach bubu with light embroidery modest, elegant, but her fingers kept fidgeting with the hem. Her lip gloss was already fading.

"You're ready," he finally said, voice low.

Amina raised a brow. "For the first time in my life," she muttered, "I made it in thirty minutes. Out of fear. That you might kil me"

A corner of his lip lifted the ghost of a smirk. "Fear works."

She narrowed her eyes. "So that's the plan? Terrify me into submission?"

"No," he said, stepping aside so she could pass. "Just into punctuality."

She rolled her eyes, walking past him. "You sound like a dictator in disguise."

"I sound like someone who doesn't like waiting," he replied calmly, following behind.

They descended the wide staircase in silence, their steps echoing off the marble. Sunlight spilled through the high windows, bathing the grand foyer in gold. Outside, she could already hear the faint hum of a car engine the black Prado waiting.

"So," Amina said, her tone dry as they reached the door, "are we going to see your mafia father, or is this a trap to ship me to Lebanon?"

Khalid opened the door for her. "My father prefers Kenya Less extradition."

She paused, startled.

Then realized he was joking.
Maybe.

He blinked. "You want me to lie?"

She gasped dramatically, hands on her chest. "Subhanallah! You're impossible."

And for the first time since she woke up that morning...
She wasn't sure if she wanted to understand him
Or run.

Downstairs, the dining table looked like something straight out of an Arewa wedding not even a small one. It was full puff puff, kosai, golden fried eggs, steaming pancakes stacked neatly, fresh fruits cut into heart shapes, chicken sausages, thick pap in glass pots, cookies, sugar waffles, even sautéed green vegetables like someone had been told a vegetarian was coming.

Amina stopped at the bottom of the stairs and blinked. "Wait... how many people are coming to breakfast?"

Khalid was already standing behind one of the chairs, casual as ever in his kaftan, arms folded. "It's for you."

She turned to him, squinting. "For me? This whole thing? I'm not a buffet."

He shrugged lightly. "I didn't know what you liked. So I asked him to make everything."

Amina rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched. "Perfectionist tendencies. Scary."

Khalid sat down quietly, not touching anything.

She pulled out a chair, still staring at the table. "Okay. So... you don't eat either? Or is this another 'intermittent fasting type of trauma thing?"

He gave a small breath through his nose. Not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh.

"You noticed," he said simply

"I noticed the first time in Kaduna. At my house you didn't eat anything when my mother offered . Not even water," she said, pointing at him with a piece of puff puff. "Then again when we went out with Khadija to that wedding shop. You didn't even touch your smoothie. What's the story?"

He didn't answer Just picked up a cup of tea, stared into it like it was a puzzle.

"Okay... strong silent type," Amina muttered. She took a small bite of the pancake, but the sweetness hit her too fast. Something turned in her stomach.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Uh oh.

Without a word, she stood and half jogged down the corridor to the guest bathroom.

She barely made it before everything came back up.

A minute later, she heard his footsteps.

Khalid didn't knock. He just appeared in the doorway, quiet but alert, one hand resting on the frame. "Are you okay?"

Amina was on her knees, wiping her mouth with tissue. "Is that a rhetorical question?"

He walked in and handed her a clean face towel. "You didn't eat that much."

She glared at him. "Pregnancy doesn't care how much. It just hates food All food."

He stayed quiet His gaze lingered for a moment, then dropped to her hands.

"I'm fine," she said stiffly, getting up and rinsing her mouth. "Can we go now, Commander Bello?"

Outside, four black SUVs were waiting in the driveway. The morning sun cast golden light across the smooth tiles. Drivers were already in place.

Amina stopped. "Who's coming with us? Dangote?"

"Only us," he replied.

She turned to him sharply. "So why four cars?"

"My father loves showing off."
"And what about the cars over there" she asked the ones parked in the parking space , one was the car he gave her as part of her sadaki
"Two are yours" he said
She blinked. "Come again?"

"The sadaki was real," he said, without emotion. "Even if the marriage isn't Both cars are in your name. One for Kaduna One for Abuja or you could use both of you want"

She stared at him. "You enjoy spending money, don't you?"

No answer Just silence.

"Khalid," she said. "You have to talk sometimes. You can't just say half of a sentence and expect me to understand your billionaire language."

He looked at her then collected the keys from the security driver, before going to the driver's seat himself.

"You're driving?" she asked, surprised.

"I don't like other people touching my steering," he said.

"Oh, so now you talk," she said, climbing into the front seat. "You only open your mouth for topics like engine control, precision, and mysterious silence. Wonderful."

He didn't respond.

She sat back with a sigh. "You know, this is someone else's dream life. Mansion Cars Rich, gym bodied husband. But me? I just want peace. No vomiting No awkward silences And definitely no mafia in laws."

Still, he didn't say anything.

She leaned her head back and whispered under her breath. "This is not the life I prayed for."

Khalid glanced at her. "Maybe you didn't pray loud enough."

She turned to him slowly, eyes wide. "Did you just..... was that a joke?"
A ghost of a smirk crossed his face. "Maybe."

She gasped. "You're more dangerous than I thought."

He adjusted the rearview mirror. "Put on your seatbelt, Meenah."

She obeyed, muttering under her breath. "Meenah? Wallahi, one day I'll throw you out of your own car."

His voice came cool, calm. "Try it it's bulletproof."

She scoffed. "Of course it is How very mafia of you.scared someone might bomb you?"

As the car pulled out onto the clean roads of Abuja , winding past embassies, tall hedges, and the early glimmer of Abuja sunlight the ride was quiet. But not heavy.

Something was changing
Not trust
But maybe...
a strange, cautious beginning.

The drive was quiet, smooth. She watched the Abuja skyline blur past.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Khalid, why does your father want to see me?"
"I don't know But whatever it is, it's not random."

He said no more
As they arrived they greeted by staffs and congratulated they went into the elevator to go to aminu Bello's office
The elevator doors whispered open. The moment Amina and Khalid stepped out, the entire office exploded into applause.

Amina blinked

Rose petals scattered across the marble tiles. Balloons in white and gold danced above sleek glass walls. And smack in the middle of the floor to ceiling windows overlooking Abuja's skyline, a massive banner fluttered under the AC vent:
"CONGRATULATIONS, MR AND MRS BELLO!"

Khalid's expression didn't change, but his hand inched into a fist.

Amina smiled awkwardly, nodding, trying to keep her heart from launching out of her chest.

She whispered, "Did you plan this?"

"No."

"Swear?"

"I don't lie."
"And why will I even plan this"
Then came the real welcome.

A slow clap echoed ,Measured ,Commanding and Manipulative.

Aminu Bello

Standing in the center of it all, in a navy kaftan tailored too perfectly for a man his age. His cap tilted slightly, shoes shined like obsidian with a pen in his front pocket , his face set in that familiar political smile calculated and venomous.

"Khalid," he said, stepping forward, arms open like a televangelist. "My son My daughter. Welcome"

Khalid twitched barely but Amina saw it. The word daughter tasted like poison in his mouth.

"I trust the night was… restful?" Aminu's eyes twinkled with something darker than joy. "Married life suits you both Especially in the headlines."

He turned, raised both hands like a conductor. "Ladies and gentlemen the future of Bello Group is here!"

A hushed murmur ran through the crowd of employees. Some clapped again Others just stared.

"From today," Aminu said, his voice rising, "I am officially stepping down from day-to day operations. Effective immediately, this company belongs to the newlyweds."

A beat.

Then"Sixty percent to Khalid. Forty percent to my new daughter Amina."

Gasps

Then applause, confused and thunderous.

Amina froze. Her head swam. Forty percent? She didn't even ask for this job.
What on earth is she doing here god abeg

Khalid's jaw flexed His eyes locked on his father. What game are you playing now, old man?

Before Amina could respond, the elevator dinged again.

Someone stepped in, holding a cake box.

Yasir
She forgot how to breathe.

He looked tired. Under slept. His shirt untucked under a blazer too thin for AC this cold. His eyes did a double take at the sight of her standing beside Khalid.

He held the cake box like it weighed more than it should.

Aminu, smiling too wide, clapped again. "Ah, Yasir! We thought you got lost."

Yasir approached, barely looking at Amina. He placed the cake down on the glass coffee table, then straightened and cleared his throat.

"Traffic," he said with a dry chuckle. "But I made it before the cake melted. Victory."

Some of the staff laughed.

Amina didn't Neither did Khalid.

Yasir's eyes flicked between them briefly resting on Amina's hand.

She looked away Her stomach twisted He doesn't know He can't know Please, Ya Allah.

Then Aminu picked up the ceremonial knife gold plated, dramatic and shoved it between Khalid and Amina's hands like he was officiating a horror movie.

"Go on," he said. "Let's immortalize the moment."

Khalid played along, stiff and tense. Amina's hand trembled slightly as she gripped the handle. Yasir just stood there beside the table, arms folded, his usual sarcasm dulled by something heavier.

Click Flash Snap.

Aminu took the photos himself, camera steady. "Perfect Just like I planned it."

Khalid leaned close to Amina and whispered, "just play along ."

"I will," she whispered back. "But why is he doing all this "

Then, as if the air hadn't already shifted enough Aminu raised his voice again.

"Oh, and one more announcement."

Amina blinked. No Not another one.

"Yasir," Aminu said, "will be your personal assistant, Amina Shadowing you directly from now on."

Silence.

Yasir's face didn't change not immediately. But his neck tensed. He looked at Amina. Her breath caught in her throat.

Khalid stiffened.

Amina managed to whisper, "This man... is a demon."

Yasir finally met her eyes. And in that second, everything stopped.

The last time she saw him was on the night of her wedding .

Now?

She was married well not really but living with his cousin in a fake marriage
Pregnant with his child

And assigned to work side by side with him.

And worse he didn't know any of it.

Yasir's gaze moved to Khalid, sizing him up like a riddle he hadn't finished solving. Something passed between them. Not friendship. Something older hatred maybe He looked away first.

"Well then!" Aminu clapped once, too pleased with himself. "Welcome to the family business."

Khalid didn't clap.

Amina stepped away from Yasir, breath shallow. Her voice was tight. "Why did you agree to this?"

Yasir gave a short laugh. "I'm just here to carry your bag and make sarcastic comments. Can't complain."

"You're okay with this?"
She asked
"You're not going to make a scene?"

"Should I?"

"I don't know." He leaned closer, voice low. "I just came to work, Amina. Not to beg Not to cry Not to fight. But if you think I'm happy, you're madder than I am but it's time to grow up and accept that you belong to him besides the pay is really good , at least my father will have some peace of mind now that I earn in millions and I'm working under Khalid's father, the hypocrisy will forever be funny to me . I mean he always claims Khalid is better Khalid this Khalid that but now that I'm working under his brother he feels proud , why couldn't he be like Khalid's father then but anyway , I'm doing this for me and don't worry I won't get in the middle of you and your husband "

She didn't respond.

Then he added, joking as always but not really: "Besides, I get to sit next to you all day. Isn't that every assistant's dream?"

Her chest tightened. "Yasir, don't."

But he was already walking away toward the office wing Not looking back.

Amina looked at Khalid.

Khalid's eyes were hard, expression unreadable.

"You have to play along don't say ,you won't work I'll find a way out ," he said.

"Okay just for the main time ," she said honestly. "If it gets too long I'll ask for resignation oh I can't resign then I'll just find a random person and sell the shares to them" she said with a devilish smile
He didn't respond.

Aminu, behind them, was smiling still that chilling, rehearsed smile.

"Let's begin your reign," he said. "Shall we?"
In Amina's heart silence
In Khalid's rage
In Yasir's ache
In Aminu's strategy
And in the air between them all war.

Welcome to Bello Group.

Chapter twenty three – The crazy father

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The office was cold. Air conditioned to the point of discomfort, deliberately sterile the kind of place designed to remind you who had the power. High glass walls looked out over the Abuja skyline, where cranes built more towers for the rich and hopeless. The shelves were lined not with books, but with files and plaques —awards from oil consortiums, international investors, and blood stained politicians.

Khalid stepped inti his father's office The door clicked shut behind him like a vault sealing.

He didn't sit

He stood like a man ready for war

Aminu Bello didn't look up He signed a document with his black Montblanc pen, slid it into a tray, then tapped his gold Rolex before finally raising his eyes.

"You're late. I texted you 7am and you came here 9"

Khalid's voice came low, cutting. "You made that girl marry me.and that wasn't enough for you now you're giving her shares of your company "

Aminu leaned back slightly, exhaling through his nose like a lion mildly entertained by a fly.

"So?"

"You forced her family."

"I negotiated Like any good businessman."
"You blackmailed her father," Khalid hissed. "You threatened him right in front of me"

Aminu finally tilted his head, amused. "Usman Suleiman forged documents to cover ₦200 million of missing funds. He was already on the EFCC radar he made a stupid mistake he tried to defame me and I simply accelerated the consequences."

"And made him offer his daughter as payment," Khalid said bitterly.

"She's your wife now ," Aminu said casually, as if they were discussing furniture.

"I didn't ask for a wife."

"You didn't ask for a gun when I put one in your hand at fifteen, either. But you learned to shoot."

That stopped Khalid. For half a second, his breath caught in his throat.

Aminu smiled.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Don't pretend you're new to this, Khalid. You've known what I am since you were a boy."

"You never gave me the chance to be anything else."

Silence

Then Aminu pushed a brown file across the desk. "Here Your next assignment."

Khalid stared at it Didn't touch it.

"You heard what I said," he muttered. "This is wrong."

"And I told you," Aminu said sharply, "I don't respond to tantrums You're not a child You're my son."

"No," Khalid said, voice shaking. "I'm your weapon."

Aminu's face hardened. "You are what I built. From nothing."

"I'm not yours to use."

"You are mine," Aminu snapped. "The moment your mother died and left me with you and a trail of debt, I made a decision. You'd never be weak. You'd never beg You'd never kneel to any man. Not even me."

"And at what cost?" Khalid asked quietly. "My soul? My sanity?"

Aminu stood. Slowly and Calmly. He walked to the floor to window and stared out over Abuja, that glittering jewel of corruption and ambition.

"You see that city?" he said softly. "It belongs to men who can pay for silence."

"You're sick."

"I'm rich," Aminu corrected. "And you you are my legacy and as your father I need to put you on the right track cause I'm not letting my generation go into poverty"

Khalid swallowed. "You're not a father You're a tyrant."

"Don't be dramatic. Tyrants get overthrown. I get re elected without running for office." He turned from the window, face unreadable. "Khalid, you want to feel sorry for yourself? Go ahead But don't insult me with weakness."

"I'm not weak."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You're whining over a girl."

"She's not a girl She's my wife like you said"

Aminu raised a brow, smirking. "Is she now? You haven't even touched her I'm sure"

Khalid's jaw clenched.

Aminu circled him like a vulture. "You still pray five times a day, thinking it'll cleanse the blood on your hands. Still afraid of touching women because of what happened that night in Kano." He leaned in "Tell me do you even remember the name of the first man you...."

Khalid's lips parted His eyes trembled.

Aminu smiled coldly. "Exactly."

"I was seventeen," Khalid whispered.

"And I was building you into a man," Aminu snapped. "This world doesn't reward innocence. It crushes it You're alive because of what I made you."

Khalid turned away, breath shaky, fists clenched. "No you didn't make me you destroyed my life as if that wasn't enough for you now you want to destroy hers "

A beat

Aminu blinked. "Whatever you say "

"Don't do this ."

Aminu's mouth twitched a flicker of genuine interest.

Then he sat back in his leather chair, slow and calculating. "The Suleiman girl? Why are you so worried about her ?"

Khalid nodded, reluctantly. "She's young full of life She dosent deserve this ."

Aminu laughed once. Low and wicked "oh really ."

"It's not funny."

"Oh, but it is." He steepled his fingers. "Do you know how easy this makes everything?now I can use her to control you more also yasir is here because I want to test her loyalty to you ."

"Is there a time where you didn't "

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Of course there was as for her being in the same office with her former lover? While married to the owner That's a novel That's scandal That's control "
Khalid stepped forward, trembling. "This is a game to you isn't it? If you touch her Iswr...."

Aminu stood too No smile now Just steel.

"You've threatened me before, Khalid You never follow through. Because deep down, you're afraid of being alone. And without me you have no name. No protection No power and that girl will belong to your cousin"

Khalid took a slow breath. "Then I'll build my own."

Aminu leaned in. "Do it But understand this: the presidency bows to me The courts work for me. The police take my orders. You don't walk away from me. You orbit me. Like a dog on a leash I'll do what I want and Amina has the shared to one of my corrupt companies oh and she actually has 100% shares I just said you had so it won't look suspicious so if anything goose wrong she gets caught I'm killing two birds with one stone see you married her but I'll still destroy her father indirectly using her what a shame now get out of my office before I do something you won't like"

Khalid stared

Then turned

He walked to the door

Just before he stepped out, Aminu's voice rang out, calm and cold: "Test her See if she chooses you, even when she knows she's carrying another man's child. That will tell you everything."

Khalids heart dropped how does he know
"Don't ask me how I know"
He closed the door behind him.
But in his chest, something cracked open.
Something sharp
And something that might one day become free

The corridors gleamed with imported marble, polished to the point of reflection. The walls bore modern calligraphy etched in bronze silent verses of power. Every step Amina took echoed slightly, a soft click of her heels on glassy stone, her pale peach abaya fluttering faintly around her ankles.

Her hand wouldn't leave her stomach A small, unconscious gesture Protective Guilty she Afraid.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her other hand clutched her handbag too tightly.

Her breath hitched as she saw him.

Yasir

Leaning against a glass wall near the elevators, grinning like always. The same crooked smirk from campus days. The confidence of someone who never took life seriously or at least pretended not to.Lb but the cocky glint in his eyes made him look like a boy who still hadn't grown up.

He spread his arms theatrically.
"Madam CEO. Follow me, abeg Your new office's this way. We even put AC inside."

She hesitated

Walked slowly toward him, every muscle in her body stiff. Her eyes flicked quickly, then again to the office Khalid had just entered
The tall glass doors had closed behind him. The name on the metal plaque still gleamed: AMINU BELLO – EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN.
Yasir noticed her glance, but pretended not to.

"Still moody?" he asked lightly as they began walking. "Amina Usman Suleiman From ABU 400 level strikes and Malam Musa's boring lectures to executive suite overnight? Walahi, na only ASUU remain wey una no get PhD for."
He chuckled
She didn't
Her expression was too tight Her eyes refused to stay still flicking across every corner, every hallway, like she expected the walls to speak, to swallow her whole.

Yasir slowed, frowning slightly.
"You good?"

"Yeah"
They reached a large door marked ASSISTANT VICE PRESIDENT her new office. Too big Too cold and Too clean The handles were gold. The floor smelled like lemon polish and hidden secrets.

She didn't enter
She turned to him, arms crossed over her chest like a shield.

"What are you doing, Yasir?"

He blinked, caught off guard. Then he shrugged. "Just... vibes Bants You know me."

She stared at him Harder this time
"What are you doing here disgracing yourself like this?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He met her eyes, and for a second, something flickered a hesitation, a sadness then vanished behind his usual grin.

"You know me," he repeated, quieter. "Same old Just trying to... help you That's all."

Amina shook her head.

She wanted to scream. Why are you here? Why are you working for the man who destroyed my life? Why do you still look at me like I'm yours?

But she said none of those things.

She just stared at the office door Khalid had gone through.

Something in her was breaking open again.

Her breath started coming in shallow bursts. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, deafening.
She was scared of she spent too much time around yasir she might spill
And then

She turned khalid had just left his fathers office
She followed him from behind , but no matter how fast she was he was faster
She didn't say a word Didn't look back Her heels clicked urgently against the polished floors as she raced back down the corridor, hands clutching her stomach
Yasir called out sharply.
"Amina!"

She didn't answer

The security guards at the end of the hallway looked up, startled, but she didn't see them. All she could see was the office door at the far end.

KHALID AMINU BELLO.

She reached it Paused.

Her hand hovered over the doorknob.

Her heart was thundering.

The door slammed shut behind her.

Inside the man she was now married to. The man she had not chosen. The man who had become her fate.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

But most of all...

Her truth

The secret she had buried

The life growing inside her

She opened the door.
"Khalid!" Amina called out, the panic already rising in her chest. "What the hell....."

She stopped
He stood near the far corner of the office, not facing her. His broad shoulders were tense beneath the sleeves of his kaftan sleeves , and his left hand was trembling visibly. His other hand gripped the edge of the shelf like it was holding him up.

His breathing came in short, uneven bursts, chest rising and falling too fast Not just anger. Something else Something darker.

"Khalid," she said again, quieter now Softer. Her voice carried no judgment only concern. "Hey... talk to me."

He turned

And for the first time, she saw it.

His eyes were red not from rage, but from something deeper. Old grief maybe Something raw and hidden, cracked open in this silent office.

His lips parted like he wanted to speak, but no words came out. His hand still shook. Just slightly. But enough to betray him.

Amina's heart dropped

She stepped forward

"What's wrong ."

"I'm fine," he snapped, instantly backing away, as if her concern was a knife. "Happens I'll deal with it."

"Your hands Your eyes Your everything is screaming help," she said quietly.

He turned away again, jaw clenched so tightly she thought his teeth might shatter.

"What happened ?" she asked. "Did Yasir say something? Or your father?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid exhaled harshly, hand dragging across his jaw. "It's not that It's just...a bad migraine "

A pause

"Just go to your office," he added tightly. "I'll send a car later if you feel sick."

But she didn't move

She stared at him Then did something she'd never done before something he wasn't used to from anyone.

She walked up to him.

And gently, she took his hand.

Khalid flinched

Every instinct in him screamed to pull away. He was not used to softness. Softness always led to pain. Or loss.

But her grip was light. Warm Not asking to control just to be there. "Khalid," she said, voice steady, like prayer. "You're having a panic attack it's not a migraine "

He didn't reply
"Come "she said pulling his hands "Sit down."

He hesitated

But he obeyed

She guided him to his leather chair and gently pushed him down into it Then, to his utter confusion she knelt in front of him. Not out of submission But out of care.

Her eyes met his, and her hands gripped his again.

"Look at me," she whispered.

He did.

"Breathe with me In And out."

Her voice was soft, but commanding. Not like a wife. Not like a stranger Like something he'd never had before.

A friend

"Breathe in," she said. "Now out." He mirrored her breath, slowly Once Then again. The ringing in his ears started to fade. The weight on his chest began to lift. His hand, still held in hers, stopped shaking. His pulse steadied.

And for the first time in years, he let someone see him without his armour.

Let someone stay
Let someone stay long enough to witness the collapse and not run.

Amina studied him quietly. His features were sharp, handsome, but strained. There were old battles written into his face battles he'd never spoken of.

She stood slowly, went to the office fridge and poured him a cold glass of water He didn't protest.

When she handed it to him, his fingers brushed hers again.

This time, neither pulled away.

"Thank you," he said. Barely a whisper But it was real.

"You don't have to thank me," she replied.

"You do realize this is the most we've ever... talked like deeply " she said smiling a bit

"I know." She gave a small, tired smile. "We're married In the weirdest way possible."

"Strangest nikah in Arewa history."

She laughed softly. It felt strange on her tongue like something she hadn't done in weeks.

There was a pause

Then her voice dropped. "Khalid... why do you do it?"

He looked at her, confused. "Do what?"

"This," she said. "Push people away Pretend you're made of glass and fire. You're not You're just... human."

He looked down at the water in his hands. "Because I don't know how not to."

She blinked
He continued, quietly, "I've never had softness. Not the kind that stays. My father made sure of that."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A long silence passed between them The office felt too big for two people suddenly having a real conversation.

"You're allowed to want gentleness," she said eventually. "Even if you don't know how to ask for it."

He glanced at her

And something in his face shifted a softness. A crack. Not the kind that destroys. The kind that lets light in.

Then
The door opened.

Yasir of course it's always yasir

He walked in, froze. His eyes moved quickly from Amina standing by Khalid, to their joined hands, to Khalid's uncharacteristically vulnerable posture.

Silence
Yasir blinked, dropped the file roughly on the desk.

"Uncle aminu said to give you these."

His tone was clipped

He turned and left without another woord.

The silence he left behind was louder than any shout.

Amina let go of Khalid's hand, startled. She stood too quickly Her heartbeat was all over the place

Khalid didn't move

She turned to him, tried to mask the tension with a teasing smile. "So... Mr Bello. When do I get to go home? I'm so hungry "

"I'll arrange a car for you but first what do you want to eat something that won't make you puke ."

She hesitated. Looked at the door Then looked back at him.

"There this new place I saw on instagram bleucafe looks really nice Come with me?" She said

He didn't meet her gaze. "I've got work."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"It can wait come on Khalid you need fresh air after almost dying " she joked
"Fine" , he stood up

There was something about that moment their silence that felt like a door had opened and neither of them was brave enough to walk through it yet.

But the crack was there now.

And maybe just maybe they were both falling without realizing it.

Falling into something that looked dangerously like hope.

In his office Aminu bello sat watching the tv which was connected to the cctv camera in Khalid's office

And yasir was in his office working but thinking about what he had seen earlier how their hands were .

Meanwhile Khalid and Amina had just gotten into the car driving to the bleucafe .

Chapter twenty four – The cafe

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina stood in her office, stuffing her phone into her bag when she heard the door click behind her She turned.

Yasir
"You're back," he said, smiling like old times. "Shall we continue our conversation?"

Her throat tightened. His presence always threw her off too familiar, too dangerous. The kind of person who could read her silence like it was a paragraph.

"I have to go," she said quickly, swinging her bag over her shoulder
"What? Why?"

"Because I have things to do, Yasir," she replied, already halfway to the door.

He stood. "Amina wait"

But she didn't. If she let him talk longer, he'd unearth everything. Her face would betray her. The truth about her marriage, the pregnancy, Khalid. Yasir had always known how to crack her open.

She stepped out, shutting the door behind her like slamming a memory shut.
Outside the Office Khalid Waiting

Khalid had stepped out a few minutes before her eyes squinting under the harsh Abuja sun. The world around him was loud, security guards murmuring into their radios. But inside him, it was all... still.

Still, except for the replay
Her hands
Her voice
Her kneeling
Her touch on his chest, whispering for him to breathe.

Nobody had ever seen him like that. Especially not his father. That kind of weakness wasn't allowed. Emotions were considered a disease in the Bello household. He was raised to be unshakable. Untouchable Perfect And yet... she saw everything.

He heard the click of heels behind him. He didn't turn, but his pace slowed as she caught up.

Amina walked beside him, adjusting her scarf that had begun to slip from the soft wind. She said nothing but her presence was oddly soothing, like cool water on a burn.

When they reached the car, Khalid instinctively went for the driver's door then hesitated. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, then walked around to the passenger side and opened her door instead.

Amina raised an eyebrow, surprised. "Thank you."

He shrugged awkwardly. "It's nothing."

In the Car Tension and Tired Hearts

The doors shut with a soft thud, trapping them in a quiet far thicker than the city's noise outside.

Khalid's fingers gripped the steering wheel like it was a lifeline. His knuckles were pale. Amina stole a glance at him he looked calm, but too calm. The type of calm that meant his mind was loud.

"So..." he said finally, his voice a bit dry. "Where's the cafe?"

"I don't know." He turned to her, surprised. "I thought you said you wanted to eat at that café."

"I just saw it on Instagram," she replied, smirking. "Wuse, I think."

He sighed. "You don't even know the name?"

She snorted. "Wow This is why I didn't want to ask you in the first place. You're so grumpy."

"You dragged me into this," he muttered, starting the car.

She looked out the window, grinning. "Men and your pride. You know we could just go home and eat rice and stew like normal people."

"I said I'll take you," he replied, turning out of the parking lot.

A moment passed. Then she took out her phone. "Fine. I'll Google it. You're clearly one of those men who get lost in Garki and blame the traffic."

He rolled his eyes but said nothing. She found the name bleu cafe, and gave him directions.

On the Road Subtle Shifts

They drove through the wide streets of Abuja. The city buzzed with life sirens in the distance, bike men weaving between cars, billboard ads of political campaigns and telecom promos. The jacaranda trees along the median were blooming, their purple petals drifting like confetti onto the roads.

Amina leaned her head back and stared at the sky through the car window. The silence stretched again, but this time, it felt heavier.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she said softly.

Khalid blinked. "What for?"

"For seeing you like that I didn't mean to... I mean, I wasn't trying to embarrass you."

He kept his eyes on the road. "You didn't."

She looked at him. "You just seem... different."

He shrugged. "People don't usually see me like that." "Why not?"

He hesitated. Then: "Because weakness isn't allowed where I come from."

Amina studied him. "You think that was weakness?"

"That's what I was taught."

"I think it was human."

He glanced at her, surprised again. "You're not what I expected."
"I get that a lot," she replied, smiling faintly. "People always think I'm just... happy Loud and Stubborn. But I notice things."

"You noticed too much."

"And you hide too much."

Another pause. He exhaled through his nose like he was tired of running, but didn't know how to stop.

"Can I ask something?" she said.

He nodded

"When was the last time someone just... sat with you, without expecting anything?"

He didn't answer. That was answer enough.

Arrival at the Café

It sat tucked behind a high white wall, hidden from the main road. It looked like one of those places rich aunties go to after yoga. Small garden, hanging lights, and soft music playing from somewhere inside.

Khalid parked. For a few seconds, they sat there in silence.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Let's go," Amina said, opening her door. She looked pale suddenly, a little too still.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Nausea," she muttered. "It's the first trimester. I'm either hungry or about to throw up."

Khalid's jaw tightened. "You should have said."

"And listen to you say I told you so?" She gave a tired smile. "No, thanks."
"You know we need to go see a doctor right ?" He said
"Yes I know "
He surprised her then walking around the car and offering her his arm like a gentleman from an old movie.

She blinked. "What are you doing?"

"Helping you walk. In case you faint in the middle of the cafe ."

She laughed softly but didn't resist. She took his arm, steadying herself.

As they entered the café, neither of them noticed the two men parked across the road in a rusted blue Corolla Watching and Waiting.

Café Bleu was nestled in one of the quieter corners of Wuse, surrounded by tall ficus trees and the hum of distant traffic. Not loud, not flashy the kind of place you stumbled upon by accident and never forgot.

It was all soft white walls, cane furniture, and slow jazz that melted into the background like it belonged there. A wide glass window let the hazy Abuja sunlight stream in, casting gold across the tiled floor.

Khalid held the door open as Amina stepped in, one hand on her belly not because she was showing yet, but because the dull ache in her lower back had been persistent all morning. Still, she didn't mention it. If there was one thing she'd learned quickly, it was that Khalid didn't know how to deal with discomfort. His or anyone else's.
The waitress approached with a soft "welcome ," her hair tucked in a neat scarf. She led them to a quiet booth by the window.

Khalid sat down, eyes scanning the room with practiced detachment like someone always checking exits, always on edge.

Amina, meanwhile, flipped through the menu with genuine interest. "Everything here is nice. I don't even know what to order," she muttered.

Khalid barely glanced at the menu. "Order whatever you want."

She looked up, one brow raised. "You sure? Because I'm eating for three now, remember?"

He froze, his lips parting slightly. "Three?"

She gave him a sly smile. "Relax It was a joke. One baby,One mama, One appetite."

He looked away, but she noticed the twitch at the corner of his mouth almost a smile Almost.

She placed her order jollof rice with grilled chicken, pepper sauce on the side, and a tall glass of ginger juice. Khalid, after a bit of convincing from the waitress, ordered a chapman, but no food.

Amina squinted at him. "See? You have a problem with food."

He didn't respond, just rested his elbow on the table and looked out the window like he was trying to ignore everything.

She didn't let up

"You know," she said casually, stabbing at her rice when it arrived, "you don't have to keep bottling everything in like you're some kind of robot from 'Men Don't Cry Inc.'"

He blinked "What?"

"You had a panic attack today. That's not nothing."

Khalid stiffened"It was nothing."

"Nothing doesn't make your hands shake and your eyes sweat," she said, deadpan.

He turned to her sharply. "I wasn't crying."

She shrugged, not looking up. "Fine Sweating from your eyes then. Must be a medical condition."

He exhaled Short Sharp. But this time, it sounded almost like a laugh reluctant, but real.

"I just don't like confined spaces," he said finally.

"Sounds like trauma," she replied, sipping her drink.

He looked at her like she'd peeled a layer he didn't know was showing. "Everything doesn't have to be trauma."

"In your case? I'd bet my last suya wrap it is."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The silence between them stretched, but not awkwardly. It was full like both of them were thinking through too many things at once. Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the bougainvillea vines growing along the café fence.

Amina took another bite of her chicken, but her face twisted a little. She dropped the fork and leaned back.

Khalid frowned. "Not hungry?"
“

Morning sickness," she muttered. "Even though it's clearly not morning."

He glanced at her plate. "Should you even be eating peppery food?"

She tilted her head. "Wow Are you suddenly a doctor now?"

"No," he said quietly, "just... asking."

She studied him for a second. His face was closed off again, but his fingers tapped restlessly against the table like something was bothering him.

"You really care about the baby?" she asked gently.

He hesitated Then nodded. "No child deserves to be born into scandal. Or shame Especially not in this society."

Amina's eyes narrowed slightly. "And me?" she asked, voice low.

Khalid looked at her really looked for the first time since they sat down. But he didn't answer.

She leaned back, chewing slowly. "You know," she said, "if we're going to live in the same house, share the same air, maybe raise the same child... we can't keep pretending like we don't exist."

"I'm not pretending," he said.

"You're hiding," she replied. "That's worse."

He frowned. "You talk a lot."
"And you don't talk enough."

A beat passed. Then, to both their surprise, they smiled. Just slightly. Not peace, not yet but no longer war either.

Later Outside the Café

As they stepped outside, Amina wrapped her scarf tighter around her. The sun was beginning to dip low, the sky washed in dusty pinks and soft golds.

Khalid walked beside her in silence, but something had shifted. She noticed the way he glanced her way when she stumbled slightly on the steps the small flicker of concern that crossed his face before he masked it.

"Next time," she said, "we go somewhere uou want . And maybe you order food too "

"I don't like eating in public," he admitted.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "People watch I don't like being watched."

Amina stared at him for a moment. "Khalid... do you realise you're literally one of the most watched people in Abuja? Bello's son. CEO-in-training. Arranged marriage guy Everyone's watching."

He gave a tired smile. "Exactly why I don't eat."

She shook her head. "You're exhausting."

"And you're loud," he shot back, unlocking the car.

She got in, but not before muttering, "Still not louder than your trauma."
Khalid blinked, gave a soft laugh under his breath, and started the engine.

Her face went pale, lips pressing tightly together as she clutched her stomach lightly.

Khalid noticed immediately. His hand froze on the door handle. "Are you alright?"

Amina gave a small, breathy laugh the kind that tried too hard to be normal. "Yeah Just... a wave of nausea. Classic pregnancy stuff."
She placed a palm flat over her lower belly and closed her eyes for a second. "It'll pass."

But the way her voice cracked at the end told him it wasn't just the nausea. She looked... tired. Not physically Soul tired Like someone who'd been carrying things alone for too long.

Without a word, he stepped forward and opened the car door for her.

The gesture was small, but it made her pause.

"You're getting dangerously good at this gentleman thing," she said, raising an eyebrow as she slid in.

Khalid gave her a blank look. "It's just basic manners."

"Sure," she muttered, "but considering our introduction included a lot of anger from me this feels like progress."

He didn't answer Instead, he shut the door softly like he didn't want to break her. Then walked around to the driver's side.

Just before he got in, she leaned out the window a little and said, quieter this time, "You know... you're not a bad guy, Khalid."

That made him pause, one hand resting on the top of the door.

He didn't look at her. "You don't know me."

She tilted her head, eyes scanning his expression. "I know that broken recognizes broken," she said softly, almost like she hadn't meant to say it out loud.

That stopped him for a beat the words hanging between them like smoke. A little too intimate. A little too real.

For a while, neither of them spoke. The silence wasn't cold. It was heavy, loaded like a thousand things were sitting between them that neither knew how to say yet.

The car rolled out of the parking lot, merging into the early evening traffic. Abuja's streets were quieter now the sun slipping behind the dusty skyline, casting the buildings in a soft amber glow. Hawkers on the median sold bottled water and gala. The faint sound of a distant adhan floated in the air.

Inside the car, the silence broke.

"Do you always say things like that?" Khalid asked suddenly, eyes still on the road.
"Like what?"

"'Broken recognizes broken'... stuff that sounds like it belongs in a therapy session?"

She smirked. "Only when I'm around emotionally constipated men."

He raised an eyebrow. "That's specific."

"You'd be surprised how common it is." She glanced sideways at him. "Especially among guys who wear expensive watches and think eye contact is a crime."

He looked down at his wrist instinctively, then scoffed. "This was a gift."

"From your father?" she asked.

He hesitated. "Yes."

She made a face. "Tragic."

He shook his head slightly, but the corner of his lips twitched. A smirk Barely there.

They reached a red light . He slowed to a stop, the soft hum of the engine filling the space between them.

Amina shifted in her seat. "You know what's weird?"

"What?"

"This." She gestured between them. "Us. Having a civil conversation No arguing No sarcasm war No storming out It's almost like..." She trailed off.
"Like what?"

"Like we might actually not kill each other before we find a way out of this " she said with a shrug.

Khalid let out a low exhale, almost a laugh. "That's a low bar."

"I like to keep expectations realistic," she replied.

He looked at her then, just for a second. Really looked. She had this way of hiding pain behind jokes, strength behind sarcasm. And still despite everything she was soft with him. Not because she was weak, but because she was strong enough to care.

The light turned green, and the car moved again.

They drove off into the gathering dusk, Abuja's skyline painted in soft firelight, the air between them no longer sharp with tension but warm, complicated, and just beginning to shift.

Not love
Not yet
But something

Something that could grow.
The drive home was mostly quiet after that, save for a few dry jokes from Amina and Khalid's occasional amused scoff. As they entered the familiar streets of Wuse II, the orange glow of dusk had faded into the deep indigo of night.
Khalid pulled into the compound, headlights flashing briefly on the gate before the maigadi (gateman) opened it with a tired but respectful "Inna wuni, oga(good evening oga)"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Lfy lau Yaya gidan (fine how's the house)?" Khalid responded, his voice distracted.
"Fine sir ,sannu Ma " he said
Amina replied to him

The gate closed behind them.

Inside, the house lights glowed softly from the balcony. The domestic staff had started winding down for the evening. The cook was probably finishing up dinner. Everything looked normal Peaceful and Ordinary.

But peace, Khalid was beginning to learn, was always temporary.

Amina stepped out of the car slowly, one hand at her back, the other holding her scarf. Her feet felt heavier than they had earlier, and that dull ache in her back had sharpened. She brushed it off maybe it was just from the jollof rice.

She gave Khalid a tired smile. "See? We didn't fight once today. A miracle."

He gave a low hum, following her up the steps.

Halfway up the stairs, her fingers gripped the railing more tightly Her breath caught.

Then her knees buckled.
"Amina!" Khalid shouted, just in time to catch her limp body before it hit the marble steps.

She slumped into him, unconscious.

For a moment, he froze pure panic slicing through his chest like glass. Her head lolled against his shoulder, skin cold, body still.

The housemaids screamed.

"Subhanallah! Madam! Madam!"

"Call the driver!" one shouted. "hospital!"

But Khalid didn't wait.

He swept her into his arms like she weighed nothing, jaw clenched, heart thudding like a drum. "Open the gate!" he barked.

The maigadi barely had time to respond before the engine roared and the tyres screeched out of the compound.

He ran every red light on the way to the hospital.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Meanwhile, back at Aminu Bello's office...

The room was dim, cold, and quiet a large mahogany desk separating Aminu Bello from his nephew, Yasir, who sat on the leather chair opposite him like a schoolboy waiting for punishment.

Aminu leaned back, swirling a glass of ginger-spiced kunu in one hand, his voice low but sharp.

"You know, Yasir," he began, "to get to the top... to really get to the top in this country, you have to do what the average man would never dare to do."

Yasir shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I didn't get here by playing fair. Neither did your cousin Khalid. He just doesn't know how much dirt was done for him to sit where he's sitting."

He placed the glass down, steepling his fingers. "You want power, Yasir?"

Yasir hesitated. "...Yes, sir."

Aminu gave a cold smile. "Good Because it's your turn to earn your place. You're my blood. I need to see if you have what it takes."
He opened a drawer and slid a file across the desk. "There are some men who need a reminder of who holds the strings in this town."

Yasir picked up the file with trembling fingers. Inside were coordinates, some numbers scribbled. No names no photos

"I want them taught a lesson. They'll be in a car. Beat them enough that they don't forget it. But don't kill them. I'm not done with them yet."

Yasir stared at the papers, throat dry. "...You want me to get thugs?"

"Do you have someone?" Aminu asked coolly. "A plug? You boys always know someone."

"...I think I do," Yasir mumbled. "But why me? Why not your people?"

Aminu's voice turned ice cold. "Because I'm testing you. I trusted you once. You failed Now I'm giving you something else."

There was silence. The kind that crawled under your skin.

Yasir nodded slowly. "Okay I'll handle it."

Aminu smiled, pleased. "Good boy I'll tell you when. And Yasir..."

He looked up.

"This time, don't disappoint me."

Back at the hospital...

The corridors smelled like antiseptic and fear. Khalid paced like a madman, fists clenched, heart hammering. The nurse had taken Amina in fifteen minutes ago. No one had come out.

His mind was racing.

What if something happened to her?

What if something happened to the baby?

He didn't even realize he was praying under his breath.

Then the door opened. A nurse stepped out. "Mr Khalid?"

He rushed to her

"She's stable She's resting. But..."

"But what?" he barked.

"There was a lot of stress on her body. She's a few weeks pregnant, and the doctor's concerned. She's not miscarrying, but she's at risk. She needs complete rest. No stress No movement. Nothing."

Khalid felt the blood drain from his face. His throat was dry. He nodded mutely, taking it all in.

"Can I see her?"

"In a few minutes. Let her rest."

He stepped back slowly, leaning against the wall. The hallway felt like it was spinning.

This was his fault.

He shouldn't have taken her out. He should've noticed she was feeling worse.

He should've protected her.

Across town, in a shadowed room, Yasir stared at his phone, a list of numbers and a contact open.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His hands trembled slightly.
He had no idea no idea that the men he was about to send thugs after...
was Khalid and Amina

A slow heartbeat
A woman unconscious
A man about to unknowingly destroy his cousin and the love of his life
And a father watching everything from behind the curtain...
smiling.

Chapter twenty five – The attack

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The hospital hallway was quiet, almost unnaturally so. Just the faint shuffle of nurses' feet and the rhythmic beep of machines in the distance. The pale blue walls, meant to be soothing, felt sterile and cold like the kind of place where hope was rationed.

Khalid stood outside Room 204, shoulders tense, fists clenched by his sides. He had been pacing the corridor for nearly thirty minutes, his phone vibrating with unanswered calls, his heart thudding like a distant war drum.

When the nurse finally emerged and gave him a soft nod, he took a deep breath and walked in.

She lay there still. Too still.

Amina The girl who never shut up. The girl who rolled her eyes at everything he said and mocked him even when she was half asleep. Now, her face was pale, her breathing shallow under the soft hiss of oxygen. A cannula ran across her cheeks, and the IV line in her wrist looked almost too big for her hand.

Something in his chest twisted Not pain exactly Not even panic. It was something deeper Raw and Unfamiliar.

He stepped closer. Slowly Almost afraid. As if getting too near might wake her or worse, confirm something irreversible.

He sat down on the chair by her bedside, his eyes scanning her face. Even unconscious, she looked stubborn. Her lips slightly pursed, her jaw tight. Like she was holding in some internal argument with the universe.

"Amina," he said, his voice low, hesitant. "You scared me "

His hand brushed hers fingertips barely making contact.

Then it started to tremble.

He snatched it back. No. Not here He couldn't lose control now. His chest tightened, his breath grew short. His head turned toward the doo he needed to get out, to breathe.

But just as he rose, her hand closed around his wrist.

He froze

Her fingers were weak but warm.

He turned
Her eyes were open, just barely. Glazed, but aware.

"You're so dramatic," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "I'm not dead."

Relief hit him like a slap. "You scared me," he said without thinking

She tried to smile. "Had no idea you cared this much, Mr Bello."

"I don't," he said stiffly, but the tension in his jaw betrayed him.

"Liar." She tried to sit up and immediately winced, her hand going to her stomach.

"Don't move," he said quickly, stepping in to help her. His hand supported her back as she adjusted.

Once settled, she gave him a look. "So this is how you react to a little fainting spell?"

"You collapsed, Amina You passed out on the stairs. Do you have any idea what that looked like?"

"They said it's just exhaustion I'm pregnant, not dying."

He didn't answer immediately. Then, "You're not going anywhere until the doctor says you're fine. No arguments."

She scoffed. "You're bossy."

"And you're reckless."

She laughed a tired, amused sound. "Perfect match then, huh?"

His gaze flicked toward her, something unreadable in his expression, but he didn't speak.

A moment passed between them. Not comfortable, but not hostile either.

Then his phone vibrated in his pocket.

He pulled it out.

Aminu Bello

He stared at the name for a second Of course.

He answered without a greeting.

"How is she?" Aminu's voice was calm. Too calm.

Khalid looked at Amina, now sipping from a small bottle of water a nurse had brought in. "She's fine. Just needs rest."

"And the pregnancy?"

Khalid's jaw clenched. "That's none of your business."

There was a pause on the other end. Long enough to make it clear that Aminu was taking note of the tone.

Then the call ended. No goodbye. No threat. Just the silence of a man who never forgot.

Khalid exhaled slowly, lowering the phone.

"Was that your father?" Amina asked.

He didn't answer.

"I guessed." She set the water bottle down and shifted slightly. "He wanted to know why we left early ?"

Khalid looked at her then. "Yes "he lied

Khalid blinked. For a moment, it felt like she could see straight through him. And he hated how he lied .

"Don't let him turn you into him," she said softly.

"I'm already halfway there," he replied.

"Well," she said, adjusting her pillow, "that's why I'm here."

He turned to her. "Why?"

"To stop you."

She smiled again, her eyelids growing heavier. "Even if I have to do it while pregnant and half conscious. Maybe that's why god brought us together so I can pull you out of this mess"

He didn't respond. He just watched he watched her fight sleep, fight everything. And something inside him shifted again.

Not love Not yet

But something close.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Back in his mansion , Alhaji Aminu Bello sat like a king in exile regal, commanding, and deeply dangerous.

The living room was soaked in golden light from the ornate chandelier above, its warm glow reflecting off polished marble floors and imported furniture that had never known dust. Outside, the peacocks in his courtyard squawked faintly, and inside, a soft Arewa classical tune hummed from hidden speakers. The air smelled faintly of oud and political arrogance.

Aminu sipped his chilled zobo from a crystal glass, slow and thoughtful like a man who hadn't just hung up on his only son in the coldest way possible.

His wife, , walked in quietly, carrying a silver tray with a steaming plate of tuwo shinkafa and miyan kuka, her footsteps barely audible against the glossy tile. She knew better than to disturb him uninvited. But worry made her reckless.

"I overheard your call," she said softly, placing the tray on the side table. "Amina... is she alright? Can I go see her at the hospital?"

"No," he replied instantly, his tone flat, emotionless.

"But....Alhaji she's my daughter-in-law," she pleaded, keeping her voice steady. "I should"

"She is nothing to you," he cut in sharply, without even glancing at her. "I've always made that clear. You didn't give birth to Khalid, remember?"

Habiba stiffened. The old wound reopened, like it always did when he reminded her.

"You never let me," she said quietly, her voice breaking. "You kept me under lock and key like one of your properties. I begged you for a child of my own. You refused."

He rose from the leather chair slowly, the way only powerful men do when they want to show their dominance with silence. He walked toward her, the hems of his immaculate babban riga brushing the floor, his sarki-like presence filling the room.

He stood before her now tall, broad, and terrifying in his calm.

"I've spent years molding that boy into a man fit to carry my name," he said, voice low and venomous. "But Khalid... Khalid is soft. Romantic. Morally upright He thinks this world is ruled by goodness But I? I know better. You don't rise in this country unless you're willing to bleed others dry."

She shook her head, terrified. "He's not soft. He's just kind. That's not weakness, Alhaji"

"Silence," he snapped, his voice like a slap. "He's weak because he dares to love. Because he's still naïve enough to believe loyalty should be returned. Now... let him love her. Let him protect her. Let him think she's his salvation."

He leaned closer now, and for the first time, Habiba noticed something terrifying in his smile a kind of manic satisfaction.

"She's pregnant. And it's not his child."

Her eyes widened, hand flying to her chest. "Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un."

"I have the test results," he said, lifting a gold embossed file from a drawer like it was a trophy. "She's carrying Yasir's child. And Khalid? He's helping her hide it Yasir dosent know yet but he'll find out cause the girl loves
Him that's why I made him her assistant that way she'll break and tell him and then drama unfolds she goes back to yasir and Khalid he'll understand that he's on his own "

He circled her like a lion with prey.

"I'll watch him fall," he said coldly. "Watch him give everything to a woman who doesn't belong to him. When the truth comes out, it will destroy what's left of that fragile will of his. Then and only then will he become like me."

"Please, Alhaji," she whispered, near tears. "Let him go. Let him live. Don't drag him down just to prove a point."

He stopped walking and turned sharply, eyes blazing. "Do you know how men like me are made? Not through peace. Not through love. Through betrayal. Through war o have crushed men,. I have bought judges, rewritten contracts, rewritten people's histories. And you want me to play house with sentiment?"

His voice dropped to a deadly whisper.

"If I hear even a whisper of what I've said leave your lips, Habiba, wallahi, I will deal with you."

She swallowed hard, stepping back as he towered over her.

"You think you're his mother," he said. "You never were. You were just the woman I kept beside me for appearances. Don't make me remove even that."

She bowed her head, hands trembling. "I won't say a word."

"Good," he said, walking back to his seat. "Now leave."

She backed away, the weight of his words crushing her like chains. As she reached the door, she paused looking once more at the man she had once believed she could soften. But he was too far gone.

Behind her, Aminu resumed sipping his zobo with calm satisfaction, already making the next call.

Because in his mind, this wasn't just a family matter

It was strategy
And Khalid?

Khalid was the final piece on the chessboard.

Back at the hospital, Amina finally managed to drink some kunu, her nose wrinkling with every sip.

"This thing tastes like soaked wood," she muttered, setting the cup aside.

Khalid, seated beside her again arms folded, back straight like a soldier guarding something didn't react. His gaze was fixed on her, intense and unreadable.

She squinted at him. "You know you're scary when you stare like that."

He blinked but didn't respond.

"Seriously, stop. You're going to bore a hole through my forehead," she added, a lazy smile playing at her lips.

Still nothing.

"Khalid," she said softly, nudging him with her elbow. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he muttered, jaw clenched like always.

"Well, I'm fine, by the way. In case you were wondering." She sat up slightly, hand resting on her stomach. "Get used to this. The nausea, the weird cravings, the constant whining. I might cry because a hawker doesn't have boiled groundnuts. Or laugh randomly. Or throw kunu at your face."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Your life is about to become very, very uncomfortable," she added with a smirk.

He gave her a look. "Sounds like a threat."

"Only a warning A free one, in fact. You're welcome."

A knock interrupted their banter. The doctor stepped in, clipboard in hand, smile gentle but firm. "We need to do an ultrasound."

Khalid stood immediately, already stepping back. "Alright I'll wait outside."

"No," Amina said, without missing a beat. "I want you to come."

He paused. "Why?"

She turned to him, one eyebrow raised. "Because you're the father Or did you forget?"

There was something about the way she said it not bitter, not accusatory. Just matter of fact. Like she was done pretending they weren't in this together now even if the child wasn't his besides he's a public figure so to avoid any scandal they need to keep pretending

Khalid didn't argue He followed.

The examination room was small and quiet, lit with soft fluorescent lights. Amina lay back, shirt lifted slightly as the technician prepared the machine. The cold gel made her shiver.

"Ugh Why is this so cold?" she mumbled.

"Sorry," the technician said politely, adjusting the probe. "Just a moment."

Khalid stood by the side, arms crossed again. But this time, he was watching the screen, not her. His brow furrowed.

The technician moved the probe gently, and then there was a flicker on the screen. A blurry movement, like a small fluttering moth inside the darkness.

"That's the heartbeat," the technician said, pointing.

Amina stared, her throat suddenly tight.

But Khalid?

He leaned forward. "I... I can't see anything."

Amina rolled her eyes, a tear escaping anyway. "It's right there, Mr. Too Serious. That little blob? That's my child Say hi."

"That?" he blinked. "That looks like an akara floating in space."

The technician coughed to hide a laugh. Amina chuckled, her eyes still wet.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You really need to work on your emotional range," she said, reaching for a tissue. "Most people cry at moments like this. Or at least say aww."

Khalid just stared at the screen, mouth slightly open. Then slowly the edges of his lips lifted. Not a smirk. Not that usual condescending curl.

A real smile

It was awkward. Hesitant Like a man doing something he hadn't done in years.

Amina turned to him, surprised. "Be careful, Mr Bello," she said softly. "I might start to think you actually have a heart."

He looked down at her, still smiling and somehow, without realizing it, his hand reached for hers.

She noticed

And this time, she didn't make a joke. She just squeezed his hand gently and stared at the screen.

"Do you hear it?" she asked.

He nodded

"It's fast," he murmured.

"Yeah," she said. "That's how small hearts sound when they're just starting to live."

They stayed like that quiet, connected, listening to the steady rhythm of something neither of them had planned for, but were beginning to understand.

In the background, the screen pulsed with light.

A life A beginning.

And maybe just maybe the first crack in the walls they'd both spent years building. Meanwhile...

In a dimly lit backroom , the air was thick with cigarette smoke and silence. Yasir leaned forward, elbows on a scarred wooden table. Across from him sat three young men hard faced, eyes shadowed, tattoos peeking from their sleeves. The kind of boys society had forgotten long ago. They spoke Hausa in low, clipped tones, every sentence laced with danger.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You'll get paid in full," Yasir said, trying to sound cold, in control even thing he wasn't "Just do what the man asked. Two people One car. Don't kill them just... teach them a lesson."

"Waye su? Who are they?"one of the boys asked, flicking ash from his cigarette.

Yasir hesitated.

He pulled out his phone On the screen were two blurred faces. Aminu Bello had sent them deliberately. Not Amina and Khalid's real photos. He knew He knew Yasir wouldn't agree to hurt her otherwise.

Yasir stared at the screen too long. His mouth was dry.

"This is nothing personal," he muttered to himself.

But it was.

It was very personal
Later that night...

Amina's discharge was quiet.
Just Khalid and a nurse handing over instructions.

He helped her down the steps, his hand barely touching her back. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she whispered, though she looked exhausted.

As they approached the car parked in the lot, Khalid glanced around. It was... too quiet For once, his father's guards weren't lurking in corners. No tinted Prado idling nearby. Just shadows and empty air.

Strange

But he ignored it

He opened the passenger door, helped Amina settle in, then moved to the driver's side. The engine hummed to life, and they pulled out into the cool Abuja night.

Inside the car, the silence grew heavy.

"You know..." Amina began. "We haven't really talked."

"About?"

"This." She gestured vaguely between them. "About what we agreed to. About the marriage. It's invalid, Khalid. We both know that."

He said nothing.

"I mean, yes we agreed to it. We agreed to cover the pregnancy. And with yasir being my assistant. And now, look at us." She gave a bitter laugh. "Living a lie Still pretending."

"How long do you think I can hold it together?" she asked, turning to him. "It's Yasir, Khalid. The only man I've ever loved."

The words sliced through the silence.

Khalid gripped the wheel tighter.

He didn't know why that hurt. It shouldn't have.

"If he finds out," she continued, voice low, "Yasir won't stay quiet."

"I know," Khalid replied. "We'll figure something out. Just... not yet."

She nodded slowly. "For now, I guess I'll focus on resting."

"I need you to look after yourself."

"Why?" she teased, turning toward him. "I have you."

He glanced at her.

"True," she added softly. "You know... somehow, I trust you."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because you've been through a lot. And yet you're so composed. I mean, no offense, but Yasir? He throws tantrums. I dated him, remember. Whatever you've gone through he hasn't experienced even a quarter."

A smile tugged at Khalid's lips.

"Can I ask you something?" he said suddenly.

"Sure."

"Even after we figure this out... and you go back to Yasir. Maybe even marry him. Would you still let me be in the child's life?"

She paused.

Then smiled a soft, sad smile. "Of course. You saved my life, Khalid."

And he smiled too. Really smiled.

But then
Boom.

The car jerked

Khalid slammed the brakes. The tires screamed before going completely flat.

"What the hell"he muttered, stepping out.

All four tires were slashed. Clean, deliberate. He knew immediately this was an ambush.
His blood went cold. He turned back to the car
Crack

A blow to the back of his head sent him to the ground.

"Khalid!" Amina screamed, scrambling out of the car.

Three men. Hooded Aggressive.

One of them punched Khalid again. Another pushed Amina roughly to the side.

She screamed his name again, running to him
But one of them turned sharply and swung a wooden stick hard into her stomach.

Her body crumpled
Blood A sudden, spreading stain on her dress.

She let out a guttural cry and dropped to her knees.

"No! No!" Khalid roared, dragging himself toward her, barely able to move.

The men took off into the night, laughter trailing behind them.

Amina was gasping, both hands on her belly. "Kha....li....d," she whispered, her eyes fluttering.

He caught her just as she collapsed completely.

Blood coated his hands.
Her head on his laps His voice cracked. "Somebody help us! Please! Somebody!"

She was sobbing now, weakly, barely conscious.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He pulled her into his arms, rocking her like a child. "Stay with me Please, Amina just stay with me."

She touched his face with trembling fingers. "The baby..."

He held her tighter. "You'll both be fine. I promise I swear."

But in his heart, he wasn't sure.
He screamed for help but no one came

The night around them was thick with darkness.

And somewhere far away, in a mansion with golden gates, Alhaji Aminu Bello smiled.

Chapter twenty six –Garki hospital

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The fluorescent lights of the hospital corridor buzzed faintly, casting long, cold shadows on the cream tiled floor. The air was thick with disinfectant, the metallic tang of blood, and the soft murmurs of fear. It was almost 2 a.m. The emergency ward of Garki General Hospital was unusually quiet, yet heavy with urgency.

Khalid sat slumped on the floor outside the operating theatre, his back pressed against the wall, legs sprawled out before him like a broken doll. His fingers... they wouldn't stop trembling.

His eyes were wide, rimmed red, dry from too much crying too fast. People passed him nurses in navy scrubs, a doctor with a clipboard, a janitor dragging a mop but no one looked too long. Some averted their gaze, as though looking at him would make it worse. Others stole quiet glances filled with pity. But no one dared speak.

"She's losing too much blood," a nurse muttered to another as they wheeled a trolley past.

He heard them.

But he didn't move
He hadn't taken his injection His hands twitched His chest rose and fell too fast. Too shallow.

The world tilted

He pressed his palms to the cold tiles, willing the floor to stop spinning.

His vision blurred

His throat tightened
He couldn't breathe
The white lights above him seemed to stretch into lines, buzzing louder, longer.

He staggered to his feet like a drunk man, ignoring the calls of a young nurse who had seen him struggle. His steps were unsteady, almost limp He wandered down the hallway like a ghost, barely seeing the rooms around him. The glass door to a small, unused storeroom caught his eye. Without thinking, he opened it, stepped inside, and locked the door behind him.

Silence

The kind that pressed against your skull.

He dropped to the floor Curled into himself.

And broke

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His breathing turned ragged, sharp, desperate.

He clawed at his throat like something was stuck there like if he could just tear open his skin, the pain would come out with it.

His body shook violently.

He pressed his back to the metal shelves and gripped his knees, trying to hold himself together. But his thoughts were like wind scattered, wild, and loud.

Then
Flashbacks
Blood soaked sleeves. His arms around her limp body in the backseat of the car.

The way her head had lolled to the side, eyes barely open, lips pale and trembling.

Her voice, barely a whisper A breath
"The baby..."

Khalid squeezed his eyes shut, willing the memory to go away, but it only played louder.

And then another one came.

"Even after we figure this out... and you go back to Yasir. Maybe even marry him. Would you still let me be in the child's life?"

She had paused. Then smiled.

That kind of smile that held both peace and sadness.

"Of course. You saved my life, Khalid."

And he had smiled too.

Not the polite smile he gave to dinner guests. Not the fake smile he gave to his father.

A real one
One that reached his eyes

But that felt like a lifetime ago now

Here, now, in this tiny storeroom that smelled of iodine and mold, all he could see was blood.

All he could feel was her slipping.

And all he could hear was the sound of his own breath breaking apart.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The walls felt too small The room too quiet.

Everything had stopped but somehow, he was still falling.

And the woman he'd risked everything for his peace, his name, his safety was on the other side of a door, somewhere between life and death.

And he had no idea if she or the baby would make it back.
Meanwhile, Across the City...

The soft hum of the AC filled the room, blending with the distant honking from the streets . Yasir's apartment was dimly lit, the curtains drawn halfway, casting shadows on the floor. On the center table lay a half eaten box of Domino's pizza, a can of malt, and someone's forgotten car keys.

Yasir lay sprawled on his couch, shirtless, sweatpants slightly rolled up to his knee, his phone in one hand, scrolling aimlessly. Beside him, his friend Zayyad paced around in his socks, gesturing animatedly as he spoke.

"Wallahi, this Abuja no go kill person. Guy, imagine one babe tell me say make I come pick am from Wuse, say na urgent, only for me to reach there and she dey with her actual boyfriend. I become Uber."

Yasir laughed, shaking his head. "You sef! You no dey learn Which kain sharp girl go dey call you at 10 p.m. say 'just come, I'm not feeling well'? Na your papa be doctor?"

"Guy!" Zayyad clapped his hands, laughing. "But wetin you dey even talk? At least i dey chop an . You dey here dey firm loyal for person wey marry your cousin"

Yasir rolled his eyes. "Abeg, it's not easy"

Zayyad shook his head, then glanced at him seriously.

"For real though... how you dey cope? This whole your cousin marrying Amina situation... and you dey work for him papa?"

Yasir paused, that lazy smile still playing on his lips. "Ah ah, my guy, na love and loyalty now. You know say me and Khalid na family."

Zayyad gave him a look.

Yasir grinned. "Okay okay... I go lie? E pain me small. But wetin I go do? Life na cruise. Me I no go cry because person carry bucket first go fetch water."

Zayyad chuckled. "You no get sense."

They both laughed.

A moment passed. Zayyad picked up his car keys and slipped on his slippers.

"Guy I dey go I wan link that same babe wey disgrace me na apology dinner this time."

Yasir raised an eyebrow. "Ehn ehn? Loyalty dey scarce now o. Use protection."

"Idiot," Zayyad said, laughing as he walked out.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Yasir exhaled, the silence settling.

He tossed his phone on the table, stood to stretch, and was about to head to the kitchen when it buzzed.

Incoming call: Unknown Number.

He frowned and picked up.

"Hello?"

A voice low, nervous, unfamiliar. accent rough.

"Oga... you no tell us say woman go dey for the car o. You show us two men. The man we beat no even match the pictures. But sha... we don do am. Car stopped Just as you said."

Yasir blinked.

"Wait what are you talking about?" He straightened, tone sharp now. "What car? Who was inside?"

But the line cut
He stared at the phone, confused Called back.

Number unreachable

His heartbeat quickened.

"What the hell..."

He scrolled and tapped Aminu Bello.

Ringing...

No answer.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Again.

Still no answer.

The third time, the call connected.

Aminu's voice came through, calm, almost amused.

"Yasir."

Yasir swallowed, pacing.

"Uncle... I think there's a problem. The boys they just called me. They said someone was in the car. A woman She was bleeding. They... they think they hit the wrong people."

"They didn't."
Aminu's voice was flat.

"What...?" Yasir froze. "What do you mean they didn't?"

Silence
Then Aminu repeated, more slowly:

"They hit the right car."

Yasir's blood ran cold. "But there was a woman in the car, sir. I didn't know she would be there "

"Yes I know."

The line went silent again.

Yasir couldn't breathe for a moment. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

He stared at the floor, heart thudding painfully, his fingers suddenly slick with sweat.

Then

A flicker of movement on the muted TV caught his eye.

He turned slowly
The screen was on AIT News. He hadn't even remembered it was on Zayyad must've left it playing.

The banner read

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

BREAKING: Prominent Abuja Couple Attacked by Armed Robbers at Midnight.

Yasir's feet moved on their own, like in a dream, until he was standing directly in front of the screen.

There was a short video playing on loop grainy phone footage taken by a bystander.

Khalid Soaked in blood His kaftan almost unrecognizable. Carrying someone limp in his arms. Screaming into the hospital.

"Amina," Yasir whispered.

He saw her face. Pale Motionless.

His world shattered.

"No... no no no no no," he whispered, stepping back like the screen was burning him.

He grabbed his car keys, palms shaking, and stumbled to the door. Knocking over the pizza box Nearly tripping.

His heart thudded like a drum.

He ran out of the apartment barefoot, didn't even lock the door.

He wasn't thinking anymore.

He just knew one thing:

Amina was bleeding.
And somehow, he had caused it.

At the Hospital...

The sterile scent of antiseptic clung to the air like a second skin. Machines beeped softly in the background. The corridor was quieter now quieter than it had any right to be. Nurses still moved up and down the hallway, but their steps had slowed. Their faces were drawn.

Khalid stood by the wall, arms folded tightly, as if holding himself together.

The doctor finally emerged from the emergency theatre, his gloves removed, his expression grim. A slim man with tired eyes and a heavy heart. He took off his cap slowly, walking towards Khalid.

Khalid's eyes didn't leave him.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The silence between them lasted too long.

Then, the doctor spoke, voice low, respectful.

"Alhamdulillah... she survived the surgery."

Khalid closed his eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to breathe.

But the doctor wasn't done.

"The baby..."
He paused, swallowing visibly.
"...was lost We're so sorry."

Khalid didn't move.

Didn't blink Didn't flinch.

He just stared at a spot on the wall. His jaw tightened. His hands trembled slightly.

The doctor shifted on his feet.

"She suffered significant trauma to her lower abdomen. Internal bleeding a lot of it. The surgery was difficult, but we were able to stabilise the bleeding for now."

Still, no reaction.

The doctor looked down, then back at Khalid, more cautiously this time.

"There's a chance" he hesitated, "a strong one... that she may have complications in the future. Fertility may be affected. We can't say for certain until more tests are done. We'll know more when she wakes."

A pause

"For now... she's unconscious. Not stable yet, but holding on."

Khalid finally spoke, voice hoarse, cracked.

"Can I see her?"

The doctor hesitated. His eyes softened.

"Just for a few minutes. But..."
He stepped closer, dropping his voice.
"Prepare yourself. She's still on oxygen. She looks... very fragile. Try not to disturb her."

Khalid nodded once.

No emotion on his face. But his hands his hands clenched tighter, turning red from pressure.

The doctor led him down the hallway, past a few half lit rooms, until they reached one with the curtains drawn halfway. A nurse stood just inside, adjusting Amina's IV line. She looked up as they entered, nodded quietly, then stepped aside.

Khalid walked in slowly.

His breath caught in his chest.

Amina lay on the hospital bed like a shadow of herself. Pale and Still. Tubes running from her nose, machines beeping softly beside her. Her arm was bandaged. Her hospital gown too loose on her frame. Her hair always neat was matted to her forehead with sweat.

He moved closer, every step heavier than the last.

His throat burned.

He took the chair beside her and sat, as gently as possible, not to disturb even the air around her.

For a moment, he just looked at her.

Then, quietly, his voice came barely a whisper.

"If you leave me now... you'll never know the way I felt holding you tonight."

He stared at her face, at the tiny scratches on her cheek, at the bruise forming just under her jaw.

"Covered in your blood. Feeling more afraid than I've ever felt in my entire life..."

His eyes filled, but no tears fell. Just a long silence, where all he could hear was the beep of the machines and the ticking of the wall clock.

He reached for her hand carefully. It was cold.

He wrapped both hands around it, held it to his forehead.

"I'm so sorry."

Amina didn't move.

But then just as he was about to speak again she stirred slightly.

Her lips parted, dry and faint.

Then, the softest sound.

"Yasir..."

Khalid froze
His entire body went still.

She said it like a prayer. Like a call in her dream.

"Yasir...?"

He didn't react. Didn't pull away. Just placed her hand gently back on the bed, adjusted her IV tube quietly, and sat up.

He swallowed hard. Pressed his palm to his mouth. Nodded once, slowly.

And whispered

"It's okay."

Then the doctor returned, peeking in from the door.

"She's stable... for now. But we're not out of danger yet. We'll know more in the next 24 hours. We're trying everything."

Khalid nodded, stood slowly, and left the room without a word.

Hospital Room. 3:12 a.m.

The silence was suddenly shattered by a loud bang

The door flew open.

Yasir stumbled in, chest heaving, face drenched in sweat.

"Where is she?! Amina! Where is she?!"

He looked like a man who had just run through the pits of hell. His shirt was inside out, his slippers half on, and his eyes wild, frantic, already full of tears.

Before he could take two steps forward, security guards blocked him.

"Oga calm down this is a hospital!"

Police officers were right behind, one already pulling out a phone.

"You're not allowed here. Who are you? This ward is restricted."

"Please abeg wait!" Yasir pleaded, voice breaking. "I just need to see her just one minute I'm family, I swear I'm Khalid's cousin please let me in I didn't know..."

His voice cracked like dry wood. His knees wobbled.

"Please... I'm begging you. Let me see her."

Then, from the side room, Khalid stepped out.

The hallway fell into silence.

For a moment, both men just stared at each other.

Yasir's chest rose and fell like a man drowning in air. His lips parted, trying to form the right words.

"Wallahi... I didn't know she was in that car," he said, barely audible now. "I thought it was some... I would never I swear I would never"

Khalid didn't answer he didn't even understand what Yasir was saying

He looked at Yasir like someone studying a stranger. His eyes were tired. Sunken. Too quiet.

Then, slowly... he moved aside.

No words Just a gesture.

Yasir didn't wait.

He rushed in.

Inside Amina's Room

The fluorescent lights overhead made the room look colder than it already was.

There she was Amina.

Hooked to machines. A nasal tube running under her nose. Her lips pale. Her face still. Like someone caught between two worlds. Not dead. But not truly alive.

Yasir froze in the doorway. The sight knocked the breath out of his chest.

"Subhanallah..."

He took two shaky steps forward.

Then fell to his knees beside her bed.

His hands reached out shaking, afraid as he gently cupped hers. The same hands he used to hold with pride, back when everything was simple. Back when she was his.

"Amina..."

His voice broke as soon as he said her name.

He bowed his head against her hand.

"Amina... baby, I'm sorry."

His shoulders trembled.

"Wallahi, I didn't know. I didn't know you were in the car. If I had known I swear to god I would have stopped everything. I would've taken the hit myself..."

He started crying really crying. Loud, raw sobs that came from his chest. He tried to muffle them against her hand.

"They told me it was some other people . I was angry, yes I was stupid. But I never wanted this. Not to you Never to you."

He looked up at her, his eyes swollen and wet.

"You don't deserve this. You've never deserved even half the pain life has given you."

He touched her forehead gently with his.

"I remember when you used to laugh. That real laugh. You know the one that sounded like a melody? Even my mum used to say your laughter was medicine. Where is that laugh now? Where is it, Amina?"

He broke again.

"Wake up. Please wake up. I can't breathe with you like this."

He kissed her hand.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I still love you. I never stopped. Even when you married him even when you pushed me away even when you said I was no good I never stopped. You are still... everything to me. Still the one I pray for at night when no one is watching."

He sobbed louder.

"Forgive me Please, forgive me. I failed you I let my pride blind me. I should've been the one protecting you. Not hurting you. Not... not this."

Behind him, Khalid stood by the door.

Watching

Hearing every word

His heart twisted Not out of anger. Not out of jealousy.

Just... sadness
Yasir's words weren't fake They weren't performative. They were real Too real.

Khalid looked at Amina still unconscious, unmoving. And then at Yasir, bent and broken before her.

His own chest ached.

He didn't understand half of what Yasir meant by "I didn't know she was in the car."

But he understood something deeper.

Love

Raw , Ugly Real love.

Khalid stepped back slowly, out of the room.

He sat on the bench in the hallway and buried his face in his palms.

From inside, he could still hear Yasir crying softly.

"Don't leave me. Please, don't leave me like this..."

Hospital Room 4:02 a.m.

The machines beeped softly.

The air was cold, still heavy with the scent of antiseptic and sorrow.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid opened the door quietly and stepped back into the room.

Amina hadn't moved

Still unconscious Still fragile
Still caught in the space between life and something else.

Yasir sat by her side, her hand still wrapped gently in his. His thumb brushed against her knuckles in slow, repetitive circles. His head was bowed. His tears had dried but his heart had not quieted.

Khalid paused by the door, just watching.

He didn't feel anger.

Not tonight
Not after the blood. Not after the silence.

He walked in and sat down on the other side of the bed. Across from Yasir Across from the pain. Across from a mirror of himself.

Nobody spoke at first.

The only sound was the soft inhale and exhale from the oxygen tubes, and the ever-steady beep of her heart monitor.

After a while, Khalid let out a long breath.

"You can keep holding her hand," he said softly. "She'd want that."

Yasir looked up slowly

Their eyes met again.

There was no fire between them now. Just exhaustion. Regret. And love twisted and tangled in different forms.

"She always liked when i held her hand like that," yasir said . "Even when she was angry with me."

Yasir's lips trembled.

"I don't deserve to be here," Yasir whispered. "I... I should be in jail for what I did. I should be somewhere far away Not near her."

Khalid didn't argue he really did not understand anything

Instead, he looked at Amina's pale face. The flutter of her lashes. The small bruises on her arms. The way her lips twitched slightly when she breathed in.

"She'd want you here. That's all that matters."

"Even after everything?"

"Even after everything."

Yasir broke again.

His voice was lower now, like someone confessing to God.

"Do you know I used to think I was the only man who'd ever love her right?" he said. "I thought she was mine forever. From the first day I saw her."

He smiled through the tears.

"She was standing beside the canteen, pretending to hate suya but stealing mine when I turned."

Khalid chuckled softly.

Yasir looked at him.

"But now she's yours."

Khalid shook his head slowly, eyes still on her.

"I don't think she belongs to anyone. Maybe she never did. She's just… hers Always has been."

He leaned forward, brushing a strand of hair from Amina's forehead.

"But I care about her," he said.

The words came out like a secret.

Like a wound.

He looked across at Yasir.

"You love her ."

Yasir nodded No use pretending now.

"I do Wallahi, I do But I keep hurting her. Over and over again. Even now..."

His voice cracked again.

"I was supposed to protect her Not be the reason she's lying here."

Silence settled again. Long Heavy and Sacred.

Then Khalid said, voice quieter than ever:

"You know the strangest thing?"

"What?"

His voice trailed.

"I felt something. Something I've never felt before. Like I finally mattered to someone. Like I wasn't my father's shadow. Like maybe, just maybe, I could become a good man."

Yasir didn't speak.

He just gripped Amina's hand tighter.

"But when I laid her down here..." Khalid continued, "...and she murmured your name in her sleep..."

His throat tightened.

"It crushed me."

His eyes glistened. But no tears fell.

"You still called for Yasir," he whispered, almost to himself. "I wish I had that kind of love."

Yasir closed his eyes
"I wish I had your kind of strength."

They sat like that Two broken men. One woman. One love.

And between them... the memory of laughter, the weight of regrets, and a future none of them could fully see.

The TV flickered in the background, replaying the same grainy footage on loop.

Khalid Aminu Bello, blood soaked, frantic, shouting for help as he carried Amina into the emergency room.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The camera shook as it caught the moment. Her limp body. His broken face.

Aminu Bello sat in the darkened parlour, bathed in the dim blue light from the screen. He wasn't smiling anymore.

The drink in his hand had gone warm.

He watched the footage again.

And again

Then... the silence was broken.

His phone rang.

Caller ID: Abdulkareem Junaid.

A name no one ever wanted to see on their phone at that hour.

Aminu stared at the screen for a moment.

His pulse quickened.

He picked up.

"Aminu," came the calm, gravel thick voice. "One of my shipments worth ₦5 billion is being held at the port."

Silence.

"I want it released before the day ends."

Still silence.

Aminu adjusted in his seat, his throat suddenly dry.

"That might not be"

"Don't lie," Junaid cut in sharply, but his voice remained calm. "You have hands in this . You always do."

A beat.

Then that voice softened, almost mockingly.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I heard about your little drama in Abuja tonight. That's unfortunate using your son as a toy very sad ."

Aminu's fingers tightened around the glass in his hand. How did he know

"You're bleeding, old man," Junaid added, his tone dark now. "That's when predators start circling."

Aminu cleared his throat, forced calm into his voice.

"Why would I sabotage your shipment?"

"You wouldn't," Junaid replied coldly. "Unless you've gone mad."

There was no threat in his voice.

Just fact

"Make it right," he added. "By noon."
"And I'll be in Abuja tomorrow to come pay my friend a visit and check on his wife that you tried to kill , might even tell him"
Click.

The call ended.

The room fell silent again.

Aminu stared at the blank screen of his phone. Then at the TV. His own son's name in red at the bottom of the news ticker.

His hands trembled.

Not from guilt

From something far worse.

Fear

Not of scandal
Not of the police

Not of Khalid

But of the two people in Nigeria he had no leverage over.

Abdulkareem Junaid

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And his wife, Ayah Kareem.

Young ,Brilliant and Cold.

They were wolves wearing crowns.

And in one night, they had destroyed Niamey the rival cartel Aminu had spent ten years trying to destabilize with such precision and force that even men like him paused.

They didn't play politics

They didn't play with hearts

They played for power And they never warned twice.
Abdul was always one step ahead of anyone and that young man was the only friend Khalid ever had not a friend but we can call him an acquaintance
Aminu's mansion suddenly felt colder.

His silence louder

For the first time in a long, long time...

He blinked.

And somewhere far away, in the dark corners of his mind the ones even he didn't visit often a crack formed.

Because even the most powerful man had a weakness.

And tonight... it was fear.

Chapter twenty seven – Abdul junaid

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The first light of dawn filtered through the hospital blinds, casting soft golden rays across the stark white walls. The air was still, heavy with the sterile scent of antiseptic and the quiet hum of machines. Outside, Abuja slowly stirred awake drivers honking in the distance, muezzins finishing Fajr, and keke NAPEPs buzzing back to life.

But inside the Room, time had stopped.

Amina stirred, her lashes fluttering like trapped butterflies. Her breathing deepened, and the with the faintest groan her eyes opened.

Yasir sat up instantly, dropping the prayer beads he had been absentmindedly rolling through his fingers.

"Amina?" he whispered, leaning in, voice trembling. "Amina... you're awake?"

She blinked, her vision blurry. The white walls, the low ceiling fan spinning lazily above. Her mind swam. Then it came like a violent wave crashing against her chest.

The car The attack The blood.

Her breathing quickened.

"Khalid..." she croaked, voice rough, barely a whisper. "Where's Khalid? Is he okay? They were... they were beating him."

Yasir leaned closer, trying to calm her. "Hey, hey... he's okay He's fine He went to pray. You're safe now."

She blinked again, finally focusing on him.

"You?" she said, eyebrows knitting. "What are you doing here?"

Yasir exhaled sharply, stung by the comment. "I came as soon as I saw the news"

She looked away. "Why yasir? You know this could create problems what if my father in law comes to check up on me?"
"I wasnt thinking "
That silence again long and sharp He looked down, swallowing the guilt pressing into his throat. He had been the one who arranged the attack.

Then she gasped Clutched her side.

A deep, dragging pain throbbed across her abdomen.

Her hand flew to her stomach. "My baby..."

Yasir's heart skipped. "What did you say?"

She looked down at her belly, the hospital gown clinging loosely over it. Her hands trembled. "My baby... is the baby okay?" Her voice cracked. "Tell me Yasir, please Is the baby okay?"

Yasir stared, stunned. "Baby? What baby, Amina?"

And then like a dam breaking her eyes widened She realized what she had just said.

She had never told him

"Oh my God," she muttered, covering her mouth with her hand. Her eyes filled instantly with tears, and her body shook as sobs erupted from her throat.

"I didn't mean to... I didn't want you to find out like this... I was going to tell you wallahi, I was going to tell you, Yasir just not now"

He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Amina, what baby?"

"I'm pregnant," she cried. "I was... I am... I don't know anymore It's your baby, Yasir."

Yasir's body went still.

He pulled back slightly, staring into her eyes. "You're... pregnant?" His voice cracked.

She nodded, tears streaming down her face. "I didn't know how to tell you. I wanted to... I wanted to find the right moment. But everything's been a mess since the wedding. I didn't want anyone to know. And then... this."

Yasir stood up, turning away, running both hands down his face.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "I don't understand anything anymore."

Amina tried to sit up, wincing in pain. "Yasir..."

He turned back to her, eyes wet. "Amina, how far along are you?"

"About few weeks," she said quietly.

His hand covered his mouth as he sat on the chair again, his whole body trembling.

"I had no idea," he whispered.

"I know."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I should've known I should've seen something. I suspected when I saw you at the clinic back in kaduna... But I thought it was because of the marriage, not..." His voice trailed off, thick with grief and confusion. "Not this."

"I wanted to But now..." She placed a hand on her belly again. "I don't even know if the baby made it."

Yasir's eyes widened with realization.

"You were in that car," he said slowly. "With Khalid."

Amina nodded. "We were going back home. I fainted when we reached home the doctor said to put me on bed rest But they attacked us. They hit me, Yasir They hit my stomach."

Yasir suddenly stood, panicking he was responsible for all this he new knew he has messed up big time

Silence hung again, thick and stifling.

Then Yasir whispered something barely audible.

"Oh my God..."

"What?" she asked, confused.

He stepped back, pacing. "Amina... the attack..."

She looked up at him, alarmed. "What about it?"

His voice trembled. "I....."
Amina froze. "What did you say?"

""Wallahi, I swear on my life, I didn't know. Aminu Bello came to me weeks ago. He said he..... He said that the marriage was fake and that Khalid was manipulating you. He said if I really loved you, I should work for him and he'll find a way to make you mine"
Amina's face drained of color. "Yasir... what did you do?"

"I didn't know it....." Yasir cried. "He gave me a time and a location"

Amina sat back, clutching her stomach, eyes wide.

"Yasir what did you do?," she said slowly, her voice shaking, "tell me"

He fell to his knees by her bed. "I didn't know, Amina. If I had known, I would never... I didn't think he would go that far I didn't think.I didn't know you were pregnant."

Her mouth trembled. "Yasir...stop beating around the bush talk to me "

Tears streamed down Yasir's face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry If anything happens to you or the baby, I'll never forgive myself. I was stupid. I was selfish I just wanted you back."
Outside
Khalid stood alone by the pavement, one hand in his pocket, the other clutching a bottle of water now warm from his grip. He hadn't slept. Not really He hadn't even processed everything that happened in that hospital room Not yet.

Her voice saying "my baby."

Yasir's arms around her.

The way it had hurt, deep in places he didn't know he could feel.

His phone vibrated in his hand. A familiar name flashed across the screen.

Abdul Junaid

That name alone pulled Khalid into another timeline cold nights in Bloomsbury, quiet corners of East London cafés, arguments over books and broken systems. They had bonded not through softness, but through shared scars. Sons of powerful men. Survivors of men who broke everything they touched.

Khalid let the phone ring once more, then answered.

"Abdul," he said simply.

A pause
"Khalid," came the reply Crisp and Measured. The tone of a man who didn't waste syllables.

"It's been a long time," Khalid added, adjusting his position against the wall.

"Too long," Abdul replied. "But then again... we've both been busy surviving."

A short silence followed. It wasn't awkward. Just... calculated Like two men waiting for the other to make the first move on a chessboard.

"I heard what happened," Abdul continued. "It's all over the networks. Car attack Hospital Your name in the background. Your father's fingerprints all over it."

Khalid exhaled through his nose. "You know how he is."

"I do That's why I'm calling."

Another pause

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I land in Abuja by this afternoon," Abdul said. "Insha'Allah, I'll pass by the hospital. But let's not pretend this is just a friendly check in. I have a proposition. And I think it's time we stopped letting men like your father control every inch of the board."

Khalid didn't respond immediately. His fingers tightened around the water bottle.

"Things have changed," Abdul added. "And they're about to change even more."

"Sounds like you're planning something," Khalid said finally.

"Always," Abdul replied smoothly. "But this one... it concerns you directly."

Khalid stared out at the busy road, jaw tight. "I'll be waiting ."

"I know you will," Abdul said, and ended the call.

The line went dead.

Khalid lowered the phone slowly. He didn't need to ask questions. He knew Abdul. Every move was precise Every return was timed. If he was flying into Abuja, it wasn't nostalgia It was war.

And if Abdul Junaid was declaring war... it meant someone was about to fall.
Back in the hospital room, Amina was calmer. The doctor had checked her vitals and confirmed she was stable, though still weak. Yasir held her hand, his usual playfulness returning like a ghost from their past he decided since she didn't understand he won't tell her immediately.shes been through enough already he said

"You know, I always said you were stubborn... but keeping a whole pregnancy from me? That's next level, babe."

Amina chuckled softly, tears still lingering in her lashes. "You'd have thrown a tantrum. Probably stormed my house and yelled at my dad."

"I'm grown now Mature, refined..." Yasir grinned.

"Oh yeah?" She raised an eyebrow. "You, Mr Maturity?"

"I wear perfume now that costs more than your shoes. That's growth."

They both laughed. The banter felt familiar, safe. She leaned into it, into him For a moment, it was almost like the old days.

Then she asked again , "Where's Khalid?"

Yasir's smile dimmed. "He's not back yet... but I'm sure he will be Look, Amina, I need to say something."

Just then, the door creaked open.

Khalid walked in quietly, holding a tray of bottled water and fruit. The moment their eyes met, Amina instinctively shifted away from Yasir, guilt tightening her features.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"I'm good You're awake," Khalid said, his voice gentle but distant.

"I am ... apparently "
"welcome back."

"Thanks."

The tension in the room was sharp. Yasir felt it, too.

"Khalid," Yasir broke the silence, "She wasn't going to tell me about the pregnancy. At least you could've said something."

Khalid looked at Amina, stunned.

"It wasn't his place," Amina defended, her tone defensive. "I didn't want you to know like this."

"So what now?" Yasir asked. "The marriage is invalid. You can't keep living like husband and wife, Amina. Eventually, your families will find out."

Khalid stepped forward.
"See why I didn't tell you?" Amina whispered.

"If they find out we're not legally married," she continued, "they'll just do the Nikkah again quietly this time. Especially now that I'm not pregnant anymore..."

Khalid didn't respond. He couldn't He didn't understand why it hurt so much to see her with Yasir This was supposed to be a game. A cover But why did it feel like a knife twisting in his chest?

He turned to leave

"Excuse me," he said.

"Khalid?" Amina called. "Where are you going?"

"I thought you both might need some privacy."

"Yes," Yasir said

"No," Amina said at the same time
Yasir turned to her, shocked. "Amina?"

"Stay," she said firmly. "Please."

And for the first time, even she didn't understand what she was feeling. Yasir was here, apologetic, present. But when Khalid tried to walk away, something inside her cracked.

Was it guilt? Was it worry from seeing him break down yesterday during the panic attack? Or... was it something more?

Something unspoken.

Khalid stood by the door, torn between dignity and confusion. He wasn't supposed to feel anything. He had never loved anyone before. He didn't even know what love was supposed to feel like.

But now... this?

This burned
The knock on the door came gently, almost hesitant.

Khalid turned instinctively, and before anyone could answer, the door creaked open

There they were Ambassador Usman Suleiman, his wife Faiza, and Amina's elder brothers, Kabir and Suleiman. All four entered the hospital room with quiet urgency, their faces pale, drawn from anxiety and the long drive through Abuja's early morning traffic.

Yasir immediately stepped away from Amina's bedside, instinctively straightening his kaftan. There was a distance in his eyes not guilt, but something close. Amina's father caught sight of him and frowned deeply, his brow creasing. Yasir greeted him politely, "Assalamu alaikum, sir."

Ambassador Usman didn't respond He walked right past him.

"Mummy..." Amina's voice cracked. "Mummy..."

Faiza rushed to her daughter, dropping her handbag carelessly on the floor as she wrapped her arms around Amina. "Amina... ya Allah, I've been dying every minute since the call came."

Amina broke into tears again, the kind she'd been holding back ever since Khalid left the room. "Mummy I was so scared. I thought I was going to die."

Her mother kissed her forehead repeatedly. "Ssshhh, no, no, don't say that. You're fine now. Allah ya zai kareki He'll protect you always."

Kabir and Suleiman each moved closer, standing stiffly on either side of the bed, unsure whether to touch her or not. These were Northern men, taught to hold emotion behind silence. Though they only held it around their father and unfortunately he was there But even they couldn't hide the tension in their jaws, the slight redness in their eyes

"We came as soon as we heard," Suleiman muttered.

Ambassador Usman finally turned to Khalid and extended his hand. "Thank you, my son."

Khalid bowed slightly in greeting and took the older man's hand respectfully. "Sir."

Khalid turned to shake Kabir's and Suleiman's hands too, both of whom nodded at him with quiet acknowledgment. Khalid wasn't one of them, not really, but in that moment he was the reason their sister was alive. That earned him more respect than words.

The room was filled with the soft murmur of family tears, reassurances, praises to Allah.

Khalid stood slightly to the side, watching it all. The warmth The care The way her mother cupped her face like she was still ten. The way her brothers stood guard without saying a word. For a brief moment, something sharp twisted in his chest.

He had no memory like this. Not one No mother rushing into a hospital room No father grateful to see him breathing Just Aminu Bello cold, calculating, transactional.

He turned his gaze away just as Ambassador Usman touched his shoulder.

"Khalid, come Let's speak outside for a moment."

Khalid nodded, following him into the hallway.

Outside, the hospital was slowly waking up. Nurses changed shifts, a janitor mopped the corridor, a child cried faintly in the paediatrics ward down the hall. Khalid stood by the railing, waiting.

Ambassador Usman joined him, hands clasped behind his back.

"I don't know how to thank you," the older man began. "Not just for today, but for everything you've done for me for my family ."

Khalid shook his head. "Please, sir Don't thank me. It was never about gratitude. I did what I could."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I know the marriage... the way it happened... it was rushed Complicated But wallahi, you've protected her all of us . I owe you."

Khalid's throat felt tight. "Amina deserves more. I'm just trying not to be part of the damage."

Usman looked at him for a moment, as if weighing something. "You're not part of the damage. You're the one thing keeping her steady keeping my family steady Allah ya maka albarka (may Allah bless you)"

They stood in silence for a while.

"Her mother and I... we worry," Usman continued. "About the world she lives in now. Politics Power Names like Aminu Bello circling our lives I feel bad for going into that life now look at me helpless I hope you know what you're in."

"I do, sir," Khalid said quietly. "And I've stopped pretending I can escape it."

Later that afternoon, Khalid drove home briefly to collect some things for Amina. She had sent him a message with a list her purple prayer hijab , her strawberry scented body cream, her bonnet, her blue iPhone charger, and oddly enough the small brown Qur'an that used to sit on her bookshelf.

He found it exactly where she said it would be.
Dosent even know how she kept it there all in one night
Her handwriting was scribbled on a paper by the side : "Al-Fatiha Ayatul Kursiyy Every night, always."

He paused for a long second before folding the paper back in smiling

By the time he returned, it was just after Zuhr. He had prayed in the hospital masjid, his mind too scattered to focus, but he did his best.

Amina's mother was back in the room, helping her eat small spoonfuls of rice. Faiza turned when Khalid entered and smiled.

"Wallahi, the way you two communicate... like old friends Best friends, even though it's been what two days?"she said, half joking, half sincere.

Amina smiled faintly. "He listens I like that."

Khalid looked up, surprised. Their eyes met briefly, and she looked away.

Something warm flickered in his chest again.

It was at that exact moment that the sirens arrived.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The convoy of matte black Toyota Prados pulled into the hospital gates with quiet authority. Uniformed security men moved like shadows, clearing paths before anyone asked. Conversations stopped. Nurses paused. Patients stared.

Inside the main car, the door was opened by one of the guards. Out stepped Abdulkareem Junaid.

Dark sunglasses Navy blue kaftan. Designer wristwatch catching the light. He walked with the air of a man who feared nothing, and earned every stare he got. A small golden pin on his chest shimmered the official symbol of his campaign.

The man the north called the next storm. The one even Aminu Bello feared.

He entered the hospital with four security men. No one dared stop him. Whispers followed in his wake.

"That's him."
"The one running for governor in kaduna"
"He's so young..."
"And so fine, wallahi..."

He knew exactly where to go.

When he knocked on Amina's room, her father answered. The whole family was seated Amina on the bed, Faiza beside her, Kabir and Suleiman standing. Yasir had somehow remained in the corner shamelessly unwilling to leave. Khalid was leaning near the window, silent as ever.

Abdul entered with grace. He greeted with perfect manners.

"Salaam Alaikum, sir," he said, bowing slightly to Ambassador Usman.

"Wa alaikum salam," Usman replied, standing.

"I hope I'm not intruding. I came to visit a friend... and offer my prayers for a speedy recovery," he said, glancing at Amina.

Faiza smiled warmly. "It's kind of you to come."

He then turned to Khalid and shook his hand.

"It's good to see you again."

"You too," Khalid replied.

"I'm Abdul," he said to the family. "A friend of Khalid's from London. We... we go way back."

Amina blinked Khalid has friends? Real ones? She'd always thought of him as someone built out of solitude.

Abdul gestured to one of his men outside. Moments later, a large basket of fruits, bottled juices, and expensive chocolates was wheeled in.

"Just a small gesture," Abdul said. "For the patient."

Amina smiled politely. "Thank you. That's very thoughtful."

Ambassador Usman looked at Abdul with a blend of curiosity and admiration. "Young man... I've heard of you Your campaign is impressive. To contest at your age takes boldness."

Abdul gave a modest smile. "Sometimes boldness is the only choice we have."

Then he turned to Khalid. "Can we talk?"

They both stepped out.

In the corridor, Abdul removed his sunglasses and faced him directly.

"It's been too long," he said.

"I know," Khalid replied. "I've missed this."

"So Marriage," Abdul said casually, his tone unreadable.

"It happened fast," Khalid said.

"You were in Kaduna. You didn't even stop by my house once."

Khalid exhaled. "I wasn't thinking straight."

"It's fine," Abdul said. "But you know what's not fine?"

"What?"

"Your father The attack The whole damn setup."

Khalid's eyes narrowed. "How did you find out?"

"I didn't need to know. I felt it The moment I read the report, I knew his hands were all over it."

"I knew too," Khalid admitted. "There were no security men following me that night. He always has someone tailing me. But that day... nothing I knew something was off."

"And Yasir?" Abdul asked.

Khalid snorted. "He's been apologizing nonstop He doesn't even know Aminu tricked him into arranging it."

"I called him," Abdul said. "Gave him a warning."

Khalid raised an eyebrow. "How did you even find out?"

Abdul shrugged. "I know people And I watch everything."

Then his voice lowered.

"There's something I found out recently. It's... heavy."

Khalid turned to him fully.

"What is it?"

Abdul looked him dead in the eye.

"I know this will sound absurd. But... Aminu Bello might not be your real father."

Khalid froze
The hospital hallway disappeared around him. All he heard was the echo of those words, vibrating in his chest.

"What did you say?"

Abdul stepped closer. "I'm not saying it to mess with your head I have... information. Documents. And questions Enough to start digging. And I think it's time you knew."

Khalid's hands slowly clenched at his sides. The rage, the confusion, the grief it all began to boil.

Because deep down, something inside him already knew.

Chapter twenty eight – Aminu bello again

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The faint hum of generators echoed through the Garki Hospital complex, a low, constant reminder of the Abuja power cuts. Outside the private ward, the air was still, the scent of jasmine from the hospital's small garden mixing oddly with the sharp sting of antiseptic and anxiety.

Khalid leaned heavily against the wall, fists still clenched, breathing hard. His finely tailored kaftan was slightly wrinkled, his cufflinks undone. A man so usually composed, sharp as a blade now he looked like a hollowed shell.

The truth was tearing through him.

Aminu Bello might not be your real father.

Abdul stood beside him with a kind of practiced calm like a man who'd seen too much to flinch anymore.

"Just breathe," he said again, voice calm but firm. "In through your nose... out through your mouth."

Khalid didn't respond. His chest rose sharply. One breath Another Then

He crumbled Just for a moment.

His knees buckled. Abdul caught him with ease, guiding him down to the hard bench in the corridor like someone who'd done this before for soldiers, for spies, for broken men.

"Wallahi, you're stronger than this," Abdul murmured, crouching in front of him. "But I get it This one? This one hits different."

Khalid looked up, eyes glassy

"I feel like my whole life's been a lie." Abdul nodded slowly. "Maybe it has But we'll find the truth We'll start with blood Quiet DNA test. And I'll dig through school records, hospital archives, even the woman who was your nanny."

Khalid said nothing.

"I'll take it from the top Just breathe for now."

The silence between them held, thick with something unspoken. Two men of pride, sitting like orphans in a place built to heal the broken.

Then

"Are you okay?"

They both turned

Yasir was standing nearby, arms folded He looked uncertain, caught somewhere between pity and curiosity.

He hadn't heard their conversation but he'd seen Khalid's collapse And that alone was enough to shake him.

Khalid straightened almost instantly, as if embarrassed to have been witnessed in a moment of weakness. He stood, adjusted his kaftan, and looked Yasir in the eye.

"Yeah I'm fine."

Yasir raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't look like it."

Khalid exhaled sharply. "Did you need something?"

"I was just coming back from praying I saw you. That's all."

"Then keep walking and when are you leaving?." Yasir hesitated, then said, "I'm not leaving yet. Not until I know my Amina's okay."

Khalid's eyes narrowed. "Your Amina?"

Yasir squared his shoulders, though his voice betrayed a trembling undercurrent. "Yes Since the marriage is invalid, she's still mine."

There was a beat of silence A dangerous one.

Khalid stepped forward, his voice low but lethal. "The same Amina you sent thugs to attack? Do you even know what you did?"

"I didn't know she was in the car!" Yasir cried. "I swear! It wasn't supposed to go down like that"

"You killed the baby," Khalid said, voice cracking for the first time.

Yasir froze "What?"

"The baby, Yasir She lost the child. Your child."

"No No No, please ya Allah no "Yasir staggered back like he'd been slapped. "Tell me it's a lie."

Khalid said nothing.

Yasir clutched at the wall. "Don't tell her Please Don't tell Amina She'll never forgive me. She'll hate me forever."

"She probably should," Abdul muttered.

Yasir looked down at the floor, chest heaving. "My father's been using me my whole life. Turning me into some puppet, some emotional bomb to throw at people. I resisted him. You don't know what it's like to grow up like that" Khalid said
Yasir looked up, startled.

"I was raised like a weapon," Khalid continued. "But the difference is... I never even tried to give in . The first time Aminu pointed, I disobeyed . The first time he lied, and now ?"Khalid said

Yasir continue . "Now I've buried my own child."

The words hit them both like a punch to the gut. Khalid's mouth parted slightly. He said nothing.

Khalid turned to leave.

"Aminu's promises mean nothing," he said. "If he promised her back to you, it's just another lie. He doesn't care about you He doesn't care about her He just enjoys the game."

Yasir's voice was small. "I know that now."

"Then act like it."

And with that, Khalid walked away, footsteps sharp against the marble floor. He had barely rounded the corner when Yasir's phone rang. He glanced down and the name on the screen made his stomach twist.

Aminu Bello.

He answered it with trembling fingers.

"Stay away from Amina " Aminu hissed on the line. "I'm warning you."

"Please," Yasir stammered
"I have the footage," Aminu snapped. "I have the receipts. You want to go viral? One post on Twitter, and the whole country will know you arranged the attack that killed your unborn child."

Yasir's legs gave way and he sat on the hospital steps.

"What do you want from me?"

"Meet me at 9 a.m. My office No questions Come alone."

The line went dead.

Yasir stared at the phone, shaking, his entire world unraveling in slow motion.

Abdul checked his Rolex. "I have to go," he said, straightening his kaftan . His outfit looked expensive but understated, the kind of quiet power that didn't need to announce itself. A car waited just outside the glass door, two SSS officers already standing by.

"But listen," Abdul said, turning to Khalid. "That girl? Amina? Don't play stupid with her."

Khalid frowned.

"I see the way you look at her," Abdul said. "It's rare. You're trying so hard to stay guarded, like it'll protect her. But love doesn't work that way. She makes you feel things, doesn't she? Makes you quiet in places where you used to be loud."

Khalid didn't respond

"Don't let her go, Khalid Not because you're afraid Not because of pride You're not your father. And she's not your prisoner."

"She's been through enough," Khalid muttered.

"So have you," Abdul replied. "But you're still here. You think that's coincidence?"

Khalid looked at him. His face still carried the pain of the morning, but there was something else now resolve.

Abdul clapped him on the back. "I'll be back this evening. We'll talk about everything the DNA test, Yasir, your father, the political pressure. But for now?"

He gave Khalid a knowing smile. "Hold her hand Tell her the truth."

The doors to the hospital slid open automatically. SSS officers rushed to open the bulletproof Prado. Abdul stepped in without looking back. Within seconds, the convoy roared to life siren muted but present, flashing blue against the Abuja sun.

And Khalid was left standing alone.

Not just in the corridor. Not just in the hospital.

But in his truth.

A man with nothing left to lose.

Except maybe the one woman who could still save him.

Khalid had spent the time walking circles in the parking lot behind the hospital, his fine leather shoes gathering a layer of red Abuja dust. The sun was cruel, already high in the sky but he didn't feel the heat.

He made three phone calls

The first to a private investigator in Lagos. A quiet man. Efficient Paid well enough not to ask why.

The second to a doctor at a private lab in Maitama. Discreet paternity testing. No government record. Results in forty eight hours.

The third to a family lawyer based in Ikoyi, Lagos. One of the only men in his life who had never bowed to Aminu Bello.

"I need you to pull up old birth records. Mine. From Zaria General Hospital. 1996."
"That'll take time," the lawyer replied.
"Then work faster."

By the time Khalid returned to the hospital room, his kaftan was wrinkled, his throat dry, and his mind filled with too many versions of a life that may not have belonged to him at all.

The ward smelled of Dettol and home.

Laughter poured from Amina's private room before he even opened the door.

He paused for a second at the entrance.

Inside, it felt like a different world.

The small space had transformed. Amina's brothers were sitting on the couch, one of them scrolling through TikTok, the other arguing over who had the worst driving skills. Amina's mother was feeding her mango slices and laughing at something she said. Someone had brought a flask of fried yam and pepper sauce, and the smell filled the air with something familiar and comforting. The hospital food tray had been pushed aside like an unwanted stranger.

Amina was sitting up now, her back against the pillows, scarf tied loosely around her head. Her cheeks glowed not just from recovery, but from the joy of being around people who loved her unconditionally.

Then she saw him

"where's your mysterious friend?" she asked, beaming.

Khalid hovered by the door. "He left."

She tilted her head, teasing. "I didn't know you had friends Does he actually like you?"

Her brothers burst into laughter.

"Amina!" her mother scolded gently, swatting her arm.

Even Khalid cracked a smilebjust a twitch at the corner of his lips. But he didn't sit down. He stayed standing, hands clenched, body stiff. He looked like a guest at his own wedding.

Amina noticed first His fingers.

They were trembling
The laughter faded from her face.

"Khalid," she said softly, "are you okay?"

He didn't reply
Her mother noticed the shift instantly. Mothers always do.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat, "I think we've overstayed. Let's start packing, boys."

Amina sat up straighter. "Wait, so fast? It's just barely evening "

Her eldest brother stood, adjusting his cap. "Wallahi, we have to start heading back before the Kaduna road gets bad."

"But you just got here," Amina said. Her voice cracked just slightly.

Her mother tried to sound cheerful. "You're okay now, Alhamdulillah. No broken bones. Just minor bruises."

Her father, who had been sitting quietly on the armchair in the corner, finally spoke.

"You're in good hands," he said, giving Khalid a respectful nod. "Your husband is here. It's time we left."

Amina blinked, tears forming. "Can't you just... stay one more night? PleasebJust one."

Her mother smiled sadly. "We've done what we came to do. Now let your husband take care of you. That's the right thing. You know our rules."

Rules

The same Arewa rules that taught daughters to be soft and silent. To smile through tears. To thank people for leaving.

Khalid stood frozen in place as Amina looked from one family member to the next, her eyes pleading. No one met her gaze.

"Amina," her father said, not unkindly, "I've raised you to be strong. This is where we step back, and you step forward."

Khalid felt the weight of the words in his bones.

He wanted to say something Anything.

But his tongue felt useless.

So he watched helpless as each of them leaned in, hugging her, murmuring prayers into her ears.

"Allah baki lfy (may Allah heal you)" her mother said, kissing her forehead.

Her brothers teased her softly"Next time don't enter a car without a gun so you can shoot them before they touch your husband Mrs bahubali," one joked, trying to make her laugh. She tried. But it came out as a sniffle.

Then they turned to Khalid.

"Thank you," her father said, extending a hand. "For being there For protecting her."

Khalid shook his hand firmly, even though his palms were sweating.

"She's safe with me," he said, though his voice barely rose above a whisper.

"I trust you."

And just like that, they were gone.

The door closed behind them. The room was suddenly too quiet.

Amina stared at it for a long time, even after the last echo of their footsteps disappeared down the hall. Then she wiped her face quickly, like she didn't want him to see the tears.

But he saw them.

She turned toward him. "I hate when they do that. Act like I'm fine just because I'm breathing."

He didn't respond. He was still standing by the door, as if unsure whether he was allowed to step inside this world she had created.

The room had gone quiet.

Amina leaned back on the hospital bed, trying to focus on the patterns in the ceiling. Anything to distract her from the storm she could feel building in Khalid. He hadn't sat He hadn't smiled. His jaw had been clenched since her family left.

She watched him, watched his silence stretch like elastic thin, tight, and threatening to snap.

"You good?" she asked gently.

Khalid gave a curt nod.

She studied him. "No, you're not."

He turned to her with the kind of stiffness that told her he didn't want to be asked again.

"You looked tense earlier," she continued. "Talk to me, Khalid."

"I said I'm fine."

"Don't lie," she said, a soft challenge in her voice. "I thought we had some kind of friendship now."

He didn't respond. Just started pacing the room, eyes sharp, mouth tight.

"Was it Yasir?" she asked, hesitantly. "Did he say something?"

Khalid stopped His shoulders tensed.

"No."

"Then what is it, Khalid? What happened?"

"I said it's nothing!"

His voice thundered across the room, loud, sharp so uncharacteristic, so sudden, it made Amina flinch like he'd slapped her.

Silence fell like a slap in return.

"You don't have to yell at me," she said quietly, her voice trembling. "I've been through enough."

Khalid sighed harshly and ran a hand down his face. "I didn't mean to shout."

"You're scaring me," she whispered. "I'm just trying to understand"
"I'm not trying to scare you."

"Then what are you doing?" she asked. "Why are you pushing me away?"

He opened his mouth, but words didn't come. Just silence, thick with fear and pride.

"You can't keep doing this. You act like nothing matters, but I see it, Khalid. You're breaking inside. And you won't even let me in."

She paused, then gave a broken, bitter laugh.

"Or maybe... don't tell me you're falling in love with me," she said half joking, but her eyes betrayed the hope hiding behind the sarcasm. "Because the way you looked at me and Yasir..."

Khalid took a step back.

"You think I wanted this?" he asked, his voice suddenly cold. "You think I wanted you?"

The words sliced through her like razors.

Her throat tightened.she didn't understand why she didn't love him she loves yasir

"Then why do you look at me like that?" she whispered. "Like I mean something."
The words slipped out of her mouth
"You took everything away from me she said "

"I took everything?" He asked surprised by what she said
Amina shot back, her voice rising. "I lost everything My freedom My choices My name! I was passed around like a burden! Like some cursed file in an office no one wanted to sign!"

"No, Amina," Khalid said through gritted teeth. "They gave you to me. I didn't ask for you. But I didn't say no either Hell I couldn't."

"What do you mean you couldn't?"

He opened his mouth again. But the truth was too tangled to say aloud. The father who wasn't his father The war he didn't ask to be born into. The love he didn't know how to name.

"You need to rest," he muttered instead.

"Oh," she scoffed bitterly. "So now you care about my rest? After shouting at me like a madman?"

"I didn't mean to"

"I'll stop worrying about you then," she said, eyes stinging with tears. "I'll just worry about my baby."

She said it out of frustration. But the moment the words left her mouth, Khalid froze.

His entire body locked, like a man hit by a bullet he didn't see coming.

Amina noticed.

"What?" she asked, frowning. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Khalid's lips parted. "Amina..."

She sat upright now, her heart beginning to race. "What? What is it?"

He took a slow step toward her bed, then another. Then he sat down, the weight of his body heavy with guilt. He reached for her hand, but hesitated before touching it.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said quietly.

Amina's heart dropped. "You're scaring me."

His voice broke. "The baby..."

Her breath caught.

"They couldn't save it."

Silence

Pure, deafening silence.

She stared at him blankly, like she didn't understand the language.

"What?"

"They tried, Amina They really tried But..." His voice cracked. "It was too late."

She blinked once Then twice.

"No."

Khalid's lips trembled. "I'm so sorry."

"No, no, no it's not true," she said, shaking her head wildly. "It's too early It was just... a few weeks. You're wrong I saw the heartbeat. Just two days ago I saw it." Her voice cracked, rising into hysteria.

"Amina"

"I saw it," she sobbed. "Ya Allah, I saw it move."

She began to cry violently, her hands clenching his kaftan in raw grief.

"I didn't even want it at first," she choked out. "I was so angry when I found out. I thought it was punishment. I blamed myself . I blamed myself ." She paused, shaking. "But then... then I saw it. On the screen It was tiny but alive. Alive, Khalid."

He nodded, tears falling freely down his cheeks now. "I know."

"I didn't even get to name it," she whispered.

Her voice cracked completely.

"I didn't get to hold it... or say sorry."

Khalid reached out and pulled her to his chest. This time, she didn't fight it. She collapsed into him, sobbing like a child who lost everything they didn't know they needed.

"I'm so sorry, Amina," he said, over and over again. "I'm so sorry."

And then like water rising through cracks Khalid broke.

He cried too.

For the baby he never knew he wanted. The baby that wasnt even his For the girl in his arms who was never supposed to be his. For the father who might not be real. For the guilt, the silence, the damage.

They stayed like that, holding each other, crying into each other's pain. The sound of grief filled the room ugly, human, holy.

Outside, Nurses passed by their door and said nothing No one interrupted.

Because sometimes... there are no words.

And sometimes... even the strongest hearts bleed quietly behind closed doors.
The knock on the door was sharp. Final. Like a gavel hitting wood.

Khalid and Amina jolted apart, wiping away tears in panic. Khalid stood up slowly, adjusting his sleeves, masking the storm on his face with forced calm. He opened the door.

And there he was.

Aminu Bello.

Powerful. Imposing. Dressed in his signature navy-blue babbar riga, silver wristwatch catching the light, a fresh miswak tucked in his left pocket like he'd just come from the masjid.

The man who had made and ruined so many lives.

"Assalamualaikum," he said casually, almost sweetly.

"Wa'alaikumusalam," they both replied, voices dull with confusion and dread.

Amina sat up straighter in her hospital bed, already pulling her scarf tighter around her shoulders.

"Aminatu," Aminu said with a fatherly smile, walking into the room like he owned it. "How are you feeling?"

"Alhamdulillah, Baba. I'm better now," she replied, voice tight but polite. She looked down at her lap. Her hands were shaking.

Khalid watched it all in silence. His fingers were curling into fists again. There was a dangerous calm about him now the calm before a man loses control.

Aminu sat in the chair next to Amina's bed and crossed his legs, perfectly composed "Don't worry, my dear. Whoever did this to you, wallahi, they'll regret it. I'll find them, insha'Allah. And I'll make them pay."

Amina swallowed. "Baba, please It's okay It was probably just"
He raised a hand, silencing her gently.

"Seems like you don't know me too well yet. Khalid hasn't told you much about me, has he?" His voice was cool. "I don't let things slide. Especially not when it comes to my family."

Amina smiled weakly, more out of fear than comfort.

Khalid stood, arms folded, watching the whole thing. He wanted to lunge across the room and strangle the man. But something about Aminu's presence always left people feeling small. He had a way of weaponizing calmness.

Then Amina's phone rang.

It was on the tray beside her. Aminu reached for it before she could. His eyes scanned the screen briefly. Then he answered without hesitation.

"Hello."

A pause

Then
"Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un."

Amina sat up, heart thudding.

"Baba, lafiya? Hope all is well? Who died?"

Aminu didn't respond immediately. He hung up slowly, almost theatrically, then turned to them with a grim expression.

"I don't think you'll like this," he said, his tone deliberately serious.

Khalid's heart dropped. He recognized that voice. The performance He knew it well.

Amina looked between them, confused. "What's going on?"

Aminu let out a long breath.

"I just found out who was behind the attack."

Khalid's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Amina's body tensed. Her fingers curled around the blanket.

"Yes, Khalid." Aminu said, looking him dead in the eye. "And I know you may not like this since he's your cousin."

Amina's heart stopped.

Yasir.

Aminu turned to her.

"For some reason, he's trying to kill Khalid. Maybe he wants to eliminate him and come back for you. Allah knows best. But don't worry, Aminatu. I'll deal with him Today."

Amina's world crashed.

"Yasir?" she whispered, her stomach twisting violently. "Yasir did this?"

She felt sick. Her head was spinning. Her hand went to her belly her empty belly and the realization hit harder.

He killed her baby?their baby ?

"Why?" she asked, her voice breaking. "Why would he do that?"

Khalid's eyes were already dark with rage. "What sick game are you playing,?"

Aminu looked at him, feigning calm. "Relax. Don't scare the girl. You don't have to show your bad character in front of her. Wallahi, I raised you better than this."

Then came the dagger.

"Oh, and I hope you're not injecting yourself with those needles anymore. You're married now. You need to stop Maybe let your wife become your new addiction."

He chuckled at his own joke.

Something snapped.
Then .....the punch.

It landed hard and fast— Khalid's fist crashing into Aminu's face, sending the older man stumbling into the chair for the first time in his life Khalid raised a hand in his father

Amina gasped, hands flying to her mouth. "Khalid!!!"

Aminu staggered back, a small cut forming just above his eyebrow. Blood mixed with pride.

"Khalid!" Aminu roared. "Are you mad?!"

"You want to talk about madness?!" Khalid shouted, voice trembling. "You want to talk about bad character?! Wallahi, you are evil you manipulate everyone around you like they're pieces on a chessboard."

"I protected you!"

"You used me You used all of us!"

Amina stared at both of them, lips trembling, tears sliding silently down her cheeks.

"You're angry because I told the truth," Aminu said, adjusting his cap. "That boy you're defending, Yasir, almost killed your wife. He put her in the hospital"

Khalid flinched. So did Amina

"But you want to hit me," Aminu continued bitterly. "The only one who actually protected this family."

"You don't know the meaning of family," Khalid hissed. Aminu smiled again. "You think you're better than me now? You think you're in love with her?"

The silence between them was like broken glass.

Khalid didn't answer.

"Let me warn you," Aminu whispered moving very close to Khalid , but ego intact. "That girl will be your ruin if you let her get too close. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Then, like the monster he was, he turned to Amina.

"I'll handle Yasir. You focus on healing, Aminatu. You'll be home soon."

He exited, leaving behind the bitter smell of power and control.

Amina sat frozen

"Khalid..."

He turned to her slowly

"Is it true? Did yasir?...."she asked.

He couldn't lie
He nodded once
Amina broke

Her sobs came low at first then louder, more ragged. The pain was no longer silent. It was thunderous.

Khalid reached for her.

She slapped his hand away.

"Leave," she whispered.

"Amina, please"

"LEAVE!"

He stepped back, wounded.

Her cries echoed through the hospital halls as Khalid left the room, fists shaking, heart broken, and mind clouded with vengeance.

Outside, the sky over Abuja had gone grey. Rain was coming.

And so was war.

Chapter twenty nine – Something like love

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Garki Hospital, Abuja 9:48 p.m.

The walls felt colder than before Sterile Too clean for a world so stained. Amina sat hunched on the hospital bed, her hospital gown crinkling beneath her. Her fingers trembled as she held her phone, the white light of the screen too bright for her swollen eyes.

Her hands were clammy. Her voice cracked before the words even formed.

The line connected

"Khadija..." she whispered, barely audible. Her lips quivered. "Khadija cikina yazube, (I had a miscarriage)"
Her fingers lost strength. The phone slipped, tumbling off the bed and hitting the tiled floor with a dull thud. It didn't shatter. But she did.

On the other end, Khadija froze.
It was a good thing she thought but then she remembered the attack and the way Amina was speaking she had become attached to that child one way or the other.

"Amina... Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un." Her voice was already breaking. "Ya Allah Are you... are you okay? What.....what happened? Talk to me."

But Amina couldn't Not yet

Her shoulders shook with a silent sob, her teeth clenched to stop the scream bubbling inside her chest. She reached down slowly, picked the phone back up, and rested it on her chest. Her breath stuttered, shallow and shaky.

"It was Yasir."
"Kikace Mene?(what did you say?)"
"What do you mean it was Yasir ?"

"They said... they said Yasir sent them. Those men. The ones who attacked us. Who kicked me, who"her voice shattered again, "who made me lose my baby."

Khadija didn't respond She couldn't.

The words sliced through the silence, brutal and unreal.

"No, that can't be true..." she finally said, but even she didn't sound convinced. "Yasir? NoHe would never Amina nasan Yasir kema kinsanshi (anina I know yasir even you know him) he'd never"

"Abunda nayi tunani kenan (That's what I thought too)," Amina said, her voice raw now, full of disbelief. "But why else would they know we were there? Why else would they come straight for us? Why me? Why? Why would he..."

Her voice dropped into a whisper.

"Why would Yasir want me dead?"

"Astaghfirullah," Khadija whispered.

Amina was crying now no longer quietly. Big, body shaking sobs. Painful Grief, tangled with betrayal. The kind that changes your voice forever.

"I swear I loved him, Khadija. I love him so much. Even when he treated me badly. Even when I knew he didn't love me the same way."

She let out a dry, broken laugh through her tears.

"I loved him with my whole chest. I thought... I thought maybe one day, he'd come back. Maybe we'd be okay again just maybe watarana zantashi(one day I'll wake up) and it's all a dream That stupid, hopeless kind of love."

Khadija sniffled on the other end. She was crying too now.

"You didn't deserve this Wallahi, Amina, you didn't."

Amina's voice turned bitter. "And I was carrying his baby. Yasir's child I didn't even get the chance to decide what to do with it. I didn't get to hold it. Or see it Or....."she choked, "or even say goodbye."

"I'm so sorry, love I'm so, so sorry."

"I didn't want this life. This marriage This mess." Her voice cracked. "All I ever wanted was peace. A home Someone to love me like I loved them."

Khadija paused, then said softly, "You're not alone, Amina Don't ever think you are you have me and even khalid "

"But I feel alone," she whispered. "So alone I feel like my whole life just ended. Everything's gone. My baby,My trust, My dignity. Everything khadija I had an ultrasound, khadija bakiganshi ba khadija (you didn't see it) it was so beautiful at that moment I didn't care how I got pregnant or the consequences I just wanted to bring it into this world and hold it in my hands ." Amina burst into tears again so did khadija

There was a long silence. Just the sound of quiet crying on both ends.

"You're still here," Khadija said gently. "You're breathing You're alive You're strong. You're not broken, Amina You're just wounded. Wounds can heal."

Amina closed her eyes, letting the warmth of that voice wrap around her heart.

"Pray, okay? Even if it's with tears Even if it's just sitting there and asking Allah, 'Why?' Just... pray."

Amina nodded, as if Khadija could see her.

"Will you come?" she asked in a broken whisper.

"In Sha Allah "

Amina sniffled again. "Thank you."

"Wallahi, I love you, Amina You're going to be okay. not today not tomorrow But one day."

Amina looked out the hospital window. The city was dark, but the sky was scattered with stars. Faint Quiet But still there.

"Goodnight, Khadija."

"Goodnight, love."

The line went dead.

But the ache remained.

And Amina? She curled into herself on the stiff hospital bed, eyes open, heart hollow, hand resting on her stomach like she could still feel the baby there.

But it was gone

Just like everything else

Garki Hospital Parking Lot 10:04 p.m.

The Abuja night was cool, calm too calm for how violently the world had shifted for Khalid Aminu Bello.

A full moon hung above the Garki Hospital, casting a soft silver glow over the pavement. Muffled generator hums filled the distance. The scent of exhaust and suya smoke wafted faintly in the air.

Abdul Junaid leaned casually against his matte black Lexus SUV, arms crossed over his chest, tailored kaftan pristine despite the long day. His Rolex gleamed in the moonlight. He looked relaxed but there was a tension in his jaw, a predator just beneath the surface.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid stood a few feet away, hands in his pockets, head bowed. The cigarette in his fingers burned slowly, but he never brought it to his lips.

"He told her the truth," he muttered. "About everything Aminu he told her about Yasir The attack. And I didn't deny any of it"

Abdul glanced at him, his voice even. "And now she wants nothing to do with you."

Khalid gave a bitter laugh. "Exactly."

"She's hurting," Abdul said. "But so are you."

Khalid exhaled smoke into the sky. "It doesn't matter She was right to kick me out."

Abdul pushed off the car and walked slowly toward him. "I know what you're doing."

Khalid raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"You're punishing yourself again Blaming yourself for Yasir's mess For Aminu's evil For things that were never yours to carry."

"They are mine." Khalid's voice was low, guttural. "I'm the son of a monster I've done monstrous things. I don't get to play the victim."

"You don't have to play anything," Abdul said firmly. "You just need to know the truth."

Khalid looked at him, jaw clenched. "Did you find something?"

Abdul folded his arms again, lowering his voice. "I think you need to speak to someone else."

"Who?"

"Your uncle."

Khalid snorted "I have plenty Which one?"

Abdul looked him dead in the eye. "Ibrahim Yasir's father."

The name hit like a punch.

Khalid straightened slowly, features tightening. "Why him?"

"Because based on what I've gathered..." Abdul stepped closer. "He might know the truth about everything your past, your mother, and whether Aminu is really your father."

"And if I don't want to know?"

"Then you'll keep living someone else's lie."

Silence

The moon shifted behind clouds. Shadows danced over Khalid's face. His features were sharp, beautiful, but tired and Haunted.

"Ibrahim wouldn't say anything He's loyal to Aminu."

"He was," Abdul corrected. "Until Aminu crossed him too And trust me nobody turns on blood faster than politicians pretending to be saints."

Khalid looked away, tension in every inch of his body.

Abdul sighed, pulled out his phone, and scrolled through contacts. "Let me handle Aminu."

"How?"

"I've been cutting the strings quietly." Abdul smirked. "One by one His shell companies? Bleeding. His allies? Scattering Tonight I leaked half his Kaduna assets into public domain Legally."

"How the hell did you"

"Remember Ibrahim Kolo? The judge whose son I pulled out of prison? Favors, my dear brother I collect them like prayer beads."

Khalid stared at him. "You never stop playing this game, do you?"

Abdul grinned. "I don't play I move." He tapped his temple. "Aminu built his empire with fear. I'll tear it down with silence."

He paused, then added, quieter now:

"But I'm not doing it just for revenge. I'm doing it for you you deserve peace my brother ."

Khalid stiffened. "Don't bring her into this."

"You think you'll never escape Aminu." Abdul's voice dropped, raw and personal. "But you will You're already halfway out, Khalid You just don't see it yet."

There was a pause. Abdul turned to walk back toward his car, but stopped and made a single phone call.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It was brief

No names No greetings.

Just: "Open File 17. Make the next drop. And if he resists... burn it all."

He hung up

Khalid blinked. "Who did you just call?"

Abdul smiled without humor. "A friend in DSS. Don't worry He's not loyal to Aminu. Not anymore."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"What if Ibrahim tells me something I don't want to hear?" Khalid finally asked, voice softer.

Abdul looked at him, eyes dark.

"Then you decide who you want to be. Not who raised you. Not who broke you. Just you."

Khalid nodded slowly.

"I'm going back to Kaduna."

Abdul offered his hand Khalid took it.

"You're not like him," Abdul said. "You've got fire, yes But you have soul Aminu has only power. And power always falls."

He got in his car

"I'll be expecting you soon Khalid"
"In Sha Allah will be there to celebrate your success once you become governor "

"In Sha Allah "
The engine purred, and within seconds, he was gone his taillights disappearing into the Abuja night, leaving Khalid alone beneath the stars.

But for the first time in years, Khalid didn't feel entirely alone.

He turned and looked up at the hospital window.

Amina.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Maybe they weren't lovers. Maybe not yet. Maybe never

But something had started. And with the truth unraveling, the storm had only just begun.

The room was dim, washed in the soft blue hue of the wall lamp near her bed. The steady humming of the AC battled against the late Abuja heat, while the faint sound of distant sirens bled through the window.

Amina lay motionless, staring at the ceiling, her face pale and puffy, lips chapped from crying. Her IV line clicked faintly beside her. Her body ached. But it was her soul that felt... hollow.

Then the door creaked.

She turned her head weakly.

Khalid stepped in.

He didn't speak at first. Just stood there. His kaftan was wrinkled, his face unshaven, eyes tired but soft haunted. His hand trembled slightly as he closed the door behind him.

Their eyes met.

It wasn't the same look anymore.

It wasn't anger or discomfort. It wasn't even pity. It was something much heavier, much sadder.

"Hey," he said quietly, almost like a stranger reintroducing himself.

"Hey."

A small, broken smile danced on her lips, quickly falling.

"You good?"

She let out a short, dry laugh. "It burns," she said, voice croaky. "But I'll live."

He pulled the metal chair beside her bed and sat, the screech of its legs loud in the silence.

"I'm sorry," he said after a long pause, staring at the floor. "For earlier I shouldn't have shouted."

"I'm sorry too," she murmured. "I wasn't trying to blame you I just... I didn't know where else to aim my pain."

There was a silence then one of those rare silences that wasn't awkward or forced. It was soft but heavy, filled with all the things they hadn't said yet. All the pain that couldn't be explained with words.

And then Khalid spoke. Really spoke Not like before. Not his usual guarded, distant tone.

Something in him cracked open.

"My father..." he began. "Aminu... he's not a good man Amina But neither am I."

Amina's brow furrowed gently. "What do you mean?"

He exhaled Long and low.

"I've done things. Things I can't even justify. Things I used to think made me strong."

He leaned back, neck resting against the cold wall. His eyes were far away, as though he was seeing ghosts.
"Every one sees me as the perfect young man, the role model, the definition of humble some say but no one really knows me , how horrible I am"
"I was twelve when he gave me a gun." He laughed bitterly. "Twelve He placed it in my hand like it was a toy. Told me if I didn't pull the trigger, he'd shoot me instead."

Amina gasped.

"I shot a man in the leg," Khalid whispered. "Some low level thief that worked for one of Aminu's rivals. I can still hear him scream. I was twelve... and that night, Aminu bought me shawarma and said I'd become a man."

She covered her mouth, heart pounding.

"And after that?"

He shrugged. "More guns More 'tests.' In college, I started injecting fentanyl. Everyone in Abdul's circle was addicted to something money, sex, numbness. I picked the easiest poison."

He turned to her slowly.

"I'm not a good person, Amina. You see this version of me, the one that sits quietly beside you and brings you oranges? That's not the whole picture."

Amina's voice was soft but clear.

"I don't want the whole picture. Not yet But I do want... the truth."

A long pause
Then she said, quietly, "You told me not to blame Yasir earlier. Why?"

Khalid's jaw tightened. He didn't want to say it but he did.

"Because I know my father. I know how he moves people like chess pieces. Yasir might've been manipulated. I'm not saying he's innocent. But I know what it's like... to be a pawn."

Amina sat up straighter, wincing slightly.

"Pawn or not," she whispered, voice trembling. "He killed my baby. I can't forgive that. I can't look past that. Maybe someday... I'll forget But right now... it feels like he took everything."

Khalid nodded, eyes on her.

"You've changed my life," she said suddenly. "You didn't mean to But you have I see things differently now ,life isn't a hed of roses Whatever this thing is between us... I like it."

Her voice broke a little, and she laughed through the pain. "Maybe it's friendship Maybe it's just... understanding. But it feels like home."

She held out her hand. "Friends?"

He hesitated

Then took it
Her fingers were cold, but her grip was steady.

"Friends," he said
She grinned weakly. "No secrets, okay?"

Khalid looked away Something tugged at him.

"There's one more thing."

He stood, slowly taking off his kaftan.

Amina's brow rose. "Khalid meye haka?(what's this?) What... are you doing?"

He didn't respond Just turned his back to her and slipped the fabric off his shoulders.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her breath caught in her throat.

There, across the length of his back, was a massive, coiled black snake tattoo, elegant and cruel. Its tongue curled out, its eyes red and menacing. The snake twisted over old scars healed wounds, like stories never told.

"Oh my God..." she whispered.

Khalid turned to face her again, silent.

"I got it in South Africa Abdul forced me. Said if I already carried the blood of a snake, I might as well wear it."

He touched his shoulder gently. "This snake? It's Aminu And it's me The part of me I try to kill every day."

She moved closer Tentative Then without thinking, she reached out her fingers traced the outline of the snake, soft and curious.

His breath hitched. He closed his eyes for a second. Her touch was light, reverent almost.

There was silence, deep and loaded.

Then she spoke
"I don't judge people I smoke too," she said. "Weed Yasir got me into it."

He chuckled . "Of course he did."

"I tried to stop But every time I did, he'd get distant. Cold So I kept using. Just to keep him close."

Khalid turned to her For the first time, no judgment in his eyes.

Just recognition
"I want to stop too," he said. "The drugs The hiding The pretending."
"I want to know what real life is all about, when I saw you earlier with your family all happy . I want that I want to experience all that "
She nodded. "Let's help each other No more poison No more silence."

"It won't be easy," he said. "We'll fallbWe'll fight."

"I know."

"You'll break."

"I might."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Will you still try?"

She held his gaze.

"Yes."

A long pause Then he smiled. "Then I will too."

Their eyes lingered on each other. Not lovers. Not strangers Something in between.

The air between them grew thick with tension.

Amina whispered, barely audible, "I like this friendship."

Khalid almost said it"I like you."

But he didn't.

Instead, he nodded. "Me too."

And for that night, it was enough.

But outside, the city pulsed with secrets, and in the Room, two broken souls had just begun the slow, beautiful journey of healing together.

Kaduna Yasir's Family Compound

9:14 p.m.

The courtyard was unusually quiet. The mangwaro (mango) tree in the centre swayed gently in the breeze, its leaves rustling like whispers. The smell of wet dust lingered from the rain.

Inside the family parlour, dimly lit by a single wall sconce, Alhaji Ibrahim sat on the old leather sofa, his babban riga draped loosely over his shoulders. He looked ten years older than he did the month before.

His wife, Hajiya Maryam, poured tea into two small cups, her eyes lingering on her husband's restless hands.

"He hasn't called me," Ibrahim said quietly, breaking the silence. "Not since the wedding. Not once."

Maryam handed him the cup He didn't take it.

"He's angry," she said. "But that's not the real issue, is it?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He closed his eyes

"No."
"And I'm not talking about yasir , I'm talking about Khalid he usually calls to greet me at least once a week"
She sat beside him, her voice low, almost afraid. "You're the one who made the promise. To your mother To Aminu That you would stay silent."

"It was wrong." His voice cracked.

"You did it to protect everyone," she said. "Especially Khalid."

He finally looked at her, eyes wet. "But he was never protected, was he? Aminu raised him with fear. With violence And I sat back. I let it happen."

Maryam reached for his hand. "He's your son, Ibrahim Just like Yasir You can't keep pretending one doesn't exist and yasir he needs you too"

He pulled his hand away gently, rubbing his face.

"What if he hates me? After he finds out "

"What if he forgives you?"

He stared at her for a long moment, then stood slowly, walking to the open window. The night air was cool now. Crickets chirped. From a far mosque, the faint call of the late Isha prayer still echoed in the wind.

He clenched his jaw.

"I can't stay silent anymore," he said, almost to himself. "That boy deserves the truth. He's been through too much already."

He exhaled deeply, the kind of exhale a man gives when surrendering to fate.

"It's time Khalid knew I'm his father."

Garki Hospital Room Abuja
Amina lay back against her pillow, her face still. Her eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. But this time, there was a strange peace in her expression like the worst had already come, and she had survived it.

Beside her, Khalid sat quietly, Not speaking. Just being there His presence had stopped feeling strange Now, it felt like gravity quiet and constant.

Every so often, Amina's eyes would flicker to him. Just for a moment.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She didn't say it aloud. But in her silence, something had shifted. And he could feel it too.

Somewhere in Maitama Abuja
Abdul Junaid stood in his private office, eyes fixed on a map of Abuja pinned to his wall. Red pins dotted properties, ministries, and bank accounts.he didn't go back to kaduna

His phone buzzed.

"It's done," a voice said on the other end. "The first two companies are under investigation. Aminu's foreign account in Dubai has been frozen."

Abdul's eyes narrowed.

"Next phase begins tonight. Make sure no one talks. And tell Alhassan... the Emir is off limits for now. Aminu will expect a strike there."

He poured himself a glass of water. The war had begun.

Kaduna bIbrahim's Private Office
Alhaji Ibrahim held the phone to his ear for a long time. Not calling Just holding it.

His thumb hovered over the screen. His heart beat faster.

He didn't know what he would say.

But he knew he had to say something.

Finally he dialed.

The screen read: "Khalid Bello."

It rang

Once

Twice

Unanswered

He stared at the screen, swallowed hard, and whispered to himself,

"Tomorrow. I'll try again tomorrow."

Yasir's room

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Yasir sat at the edge of his bed Shirtless. Drenched in sweat. A fan spun weakly above his head, doing nothing.

A small pistol lay on the table beside him. Gleaming Cold and Waiting.

His hands trembled.

A torn piece of paper sat next to it. The ink smudged where his fingers had rested too long.

It read:

"I never meant to hurt you Or the baby. But now... I've lost everything Amina kiyafemun (forgive me)"
Then just then something moved in him
He stood up went straight to the toilet
Performed wudhu and started praying death wasnt an escape no only Allah is .

He blinked back tears, chest heaving. His face was pale Jaw clenched He looked like someone whose world had stopped, but time hadn't noticed.

Aminu Bello's Private Mansion Maitama, Abuja 12:35 am.

The heavy chandeliers sparkled overhead, casting gold light over the plush Persian carpets and mahogany furniture. A thick haze of cigar smoke hung in the air.

Men in flowing white baban riga and threaded caps lounged in leather chairs, sipping from crystal tumblers. Security guards stood by the door, stiff as statues.

Aminu Bello, dressed in a flawless white agbada, sat in the middle of it all like a crowned lion smug, powerful, untouchable. He sipped his drink, then leaned forward, elbows on knees.

"Gentlemen," he said, voice calm but commanding. "The plan remains unchanged. Abdul Junaid must fall before the elections. He's become a threat. Too popular Too clean. The masses love him."

Laughter rippled through the room. Someone scoffed.

"The masses are idiots," muttered Senator Yahaya, adjusting his turban. "They'd vote for a goat if it wore a clean kaftan."

"True," another chuckled. "But this goat is dangerous. He knows too much And he's gathering loyal men in the North. Even some traditional rulers are listening."

A third leaned forward, face half lit. "Let's shake the throne. Take down the Emir of Zaria. He's Abdul's biggest backer. We pin it on him. A scandal, an assassination public chaos."

There was a pause, then approving murmurs.

"We'll use the DSS to spread misinformation," said Hon. Gambo, a former Intelligence Director. "Leak fake audio tapes. Plant fake receipts. Feed it to the right journalists."

Aminu smirked, pleased. "Speaking of journalists, what about that snake—Bashir Yalwa?"

"Bashir is greedy," a man replied. "He's been begging for access. Give him a brown envelope, he'll write anything."

"Good," Aminu said. "I want him to release a story about Abdul Make it viral. Tomorrow."

Someone lit another cigar.

Then Senator Lami Musa the only woman in the room, eyes sharp behind her veil spoke up.

"What about his wife?" she asked coolly. "Ayah. She's always by his side. Too vocal. Threaten her. Or better yet... record something."

"A scandal?"

"Yes," she said. "A fake affair Link her to one of her security aides. Plant cameras Catch 'intimate moments.' The North will never forgive that kind of humiliation."

Laughter and applause filled the room. Aminu raised his glass.

"GentlemenL he paused, smiling "and Lady Lami... you're all devils. And I love it but ayah is not someone you'll catch with cheating we'll find something else to pin on her her cartels maybe"

Just then, his phone buzzed. He glanced down. The screen read: Barr Ahmed (Private Line).

He stepped away from the group and answered.

"Yes?"

"Sir," the lawyer's voice was shaky. "There's a problem. Three of your Abuja properties have been made public domain. Two seized outright. Court documents are moving fast. It's happening."

Aminu blinked. "Which properties?"

"Gwarinpa. Asokoro And the Maitama duplex near the mosque. All under scrutiny Sir, the documents have federal seals. This came from someone high."

"You told me they were protected under shell accounts!"

"I did But those shells are being cracked open. Whoever's doing this has access DSS level. Maybe even higher."

Aminu gripped the phone tighter, face turning red. "Fix it Or I swear to God"

"There's nothing to fix, sir They moved too clean Too fast."

Click The call ended.

Aminu stood frozen, staring into space.

Senator Yahaya called out. "Is everything alright?"
Aminu forced a smile, walking back slowly. "Just business. Minor hiccup You know how land issues are."

But his voice was different now hollow.

He sat down again, but the throne felt colder. The walls felt thinner.

His allies were still laughing. But now, to Aminu, it sounded distant.

Something was wrong.

He had ruled Abuja for decades with an iron fist.

But tonight, that grip had loosened.

And for the first time in years... Aminu Bello felt afraid.

Chapter thirty –Abuja-Kaduna

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Wuse II, Abuja Midnight

It had been days since the attack.
And things had gone... strangely quiet.

Even Aminu Bello had gone silent. No sudden calls No new threats No messages And in that silence, there was something more terrifying than the noise uncertainty. Amina had been discharged from the hospital few days ago. Khalid had driven her home himself. The staff at the Wuse II house welcomed her warmly, but their voices were hushed, as though afraid to break the delicate calm.

It was past midnight now

The walls of her room stood still, painted like a dull bruise, the curtains swaying softly from the air conditioner's breeze. Amina lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

She had tried to read But the pages of her novel blurred. She had tried to call Khadija again. No answer Even the playlist she'd once loved now sounded foreign Everything had changed She had changed.

She turned to the side, hugging the extra pillow The silence grew louder She was tired of pretending she was fine. Tired of acting brave tired of thinking about what Khalid had done

So she got up

She wrapped her veil loosely around her shoulders, her feet bare against the cold floors. The house felt too big Like a mosque after prayer Empty... holy... but the house felt haunted .
She walked to the door across the hallway and knocked twice, gently.

A few seconds passed. Then the door opened with a soft creak.

Khalid stood there, glasses sliding slightly down his nose, the sleeves of his light grey kaftan rolled up.

His eyes softened when he saw her

"Hey," she said, trying to smile.

He blinked, surprised. "Hey You okay?"

"I'm bored," she shrugged.

He leaned against the frame. "It's almost 1am."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I'm still bored."

"I'm working."

She raised a brow. "Can I help?"

He scoffed, a small amused smile tugging at his lips. "What do you know?"

"I know a lot," she said, brushing past him without waiting for permission.

She walked in casually, arms folded behind her back like she owned the place. His room was... so him. Painted a deep slate grey. Cold but beautiful, Masculine and Clean. Even the air smelled like him and something spicy and sharp.

The bed was made military tight. A laptop sat open on his desk with a bunch of spreadsheets on the screen. A bookshelf stood in the corner, books arranged by size Not color Size.

"Wow," she muttered. "You know... if we were actually married and in love, I'd be in serious trouble."

He looked at her sideways. "Why?"

She walked to his shelf, inspecting the arrangement. "Because this is scary organized. Like... FBI level."

He raised a brow. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I haven't folded the clothes I wore two days ago," she muttered. "Meanwhile your sock drawer probably has a security code."

He laughed It was quiet But genuine.

She smiled at the sound. "You're actually kind of cute when you laugh, you know."

He looked at her, startled Then lowered his gaze, uncomfortable.

"I mean, don't get carried away," she teased. "Just a little cute. Not like, puppy cute."

He rolled his eyes and sat at his desk. "What are you doing here, Amina?"

"I don't want to be alone."

He paused

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She walked to his window, looking outside. "I get anxious when I'm alone for too long. I start thinking too much About everything."

She turned and leaned against the window.

"Speaking of everything... what do we do now?"

He looked at her quietly.

She met his gaze.

"You're no longer pregnant," he said softly. "The marriage is invalid."

She gave a small laugh, but it was dry. "Maybe we wait for your father to die. Since he's the bigger problem here."

He didn't laugh

She walked to his bed and sat on the edge.

"We can just say the marriage didn't work out. You be the bad guy Say you're no longer interested My dad will still blame me, regardless."

There was silence

Then he asked, low and careful, "And Yasir?"

She looked down
There was something in the air that shifted.

She gave a small, practiced laugh. "You should really arrange your books by colour. Much more aesthetically pleasing."

He looked at her for a moment, eyes studying her face like he could see through the deflection. But he said nothing.

She stood up. "I should let you work."

As she turned, he caught her wrist gently.

She stopped.

The warmth of his palm against her skin sent a shiver through her chest. Her heart stuttered.

He didn't let go.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Come with me to Kaduna tomorrow," he said. "I'm visiting my uncle You should come At least you'll be home."

Her eyes searched his.

"Is it about work?"

"No."

"Then why?"

He didn't answer.

But he didn't let go of her wrist either.

She swallowed Her voice barely a whisper. "Okay."

He let go slowly

She gave a soft smile. "Are you this awkward with everyone or just me?"

"Just you," he muttered.

She chuckled and backed away, stepping out of the room.

As the door closed behind her, Khalid sat still.

And he realized something dangerous.

He wanted her to come back.

Amina's Room 1:47am

She leaned against the door once it closed.

Her heart was racing.

That wrist touch That softness That look.

She looked down at her palm like it was foreign Like it had just been branded.

"Akwai matsala (there's a problem)This is bad," she whispered, crawling back into bed.

But for the first time in nights... she smiled as she closed her eyes.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Kaduna Yasir's Family Compound

The compound was quiet, the moonlight casting long shadows across the gravel. It was nearly 8pm.
But Yasir hadn't slept in days.
He just arrived from Abuja
The engine of his black Camaro purred low as he drove in through the open gate. The crunch of gravel beneath his tyres echoed like thunder in the silence. He parked near the main entrance and stepped out slowly, eyes bloodshot, shirt wrinkled, body trembling like he'd walked through fire.
"Salamualaikum " he said stepping into the house
"Waalaikumusalam " his mother replied
His mother was the first to see him from the corridor.

"Yasir? Subhanallah, what happened to you? You've lost weight!"

But he didn't answer her He just walked inside, past her, like a ghost.

He walked into the sitting room.

There, on the prayer mat near the window, sat his father, Alhaji Ibrahim reading from his phone , his reading glasses resting gently on the bridge of his nose. His jalabiya was simple white cotton,

Yasir dropped to his knees before him.

Ibrahim looked up, startled. "Yasir?"

Yasir's voice cracked. "Baba... please forgive me."

The air changed.

His mother rushed in, alarmed. "Lafiya? Yasir, me ya faru?"(is everything okay ? Yasir what happened?)"

Ibrahim slowly put aside the phone,. "Tashi, na yafe maka. Amma me ka yi?"(stand up, I've forgiven you but what did you do ?)"

Yasir shook his head, eyes brimming. Then it all poured out, in broken words and sobs.

"Baba , uncle Aminu Bello offered me a job... and I took it."

Ibrahim's eyes darkened immediately. "I warned you I told you that man is a serpent"

"I know," Yasir choked. "But I wanted to make you proud. I wanted you to stop comparing me to Khalid. I thought if I earned more, did more, maybe... maybe you'd see me too."

There was a beat of silence.

"I was desperate," he whispered. "So I said yes. He made me Amina's assistant. Gave her 40% shares in a new company. Khalid had 60%. I stayed. I thought if I played smart, if I waited... maybe I'll make it to the top like he promised and in the process she'd come back to me."

Ibrahim's face turned to stone.

Yasir wiped his face with shaking hands. "Then Aminu started testing me He said if I wanted to rise, I had to get my hands dirty... like Khalid did.he said even Khalid isnt as perfect as we all think"

His mother gasped audibly. "Astagfirullah!"

Yasir broke. "He gave me pictures of some men Told me to hire boys... to 'warn' them. Beat them I didn't even ask who. I just did it."

He looked up at his father, face soaked. "I didn't know it was Amina Or Khalid. Wallahi, Baba I swear by Allah, I didn't know."

Silence fell like a guillotine.

Ibrahim shut his eyes and muttered, "Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un..."

"And Amina..." Yasir whispered. "She was pregnant. With my child. I didn't know wallahi bansani ba(I swear I didn't know)"
His mother staggered back and let out a full wail. "Wayyo Allah na!(oh my god)"

She sank onto the floor, holding her head. "Kai Yasir! Me ka aikata! Na haifi azzalumi? (What did you do ? Did I give brith to a wicked boy?) You've become a killer? You've disgraced us! You killed your own child!"

"I didn't know!" Yasir screamed, voice hoarse. "I didn't know..."

Ibrahim stood up slowly, hands trembling at his sides.

"Amina lost her baby?" he asked in a quiet, dangerous voice.

"Yes," Yasir croaked. "Sheclost the baby after the attack. And now Aminu is blackmailing me. He has pictures Documents Voice notes If I don't do what he says... he'll send me to prison."

Ibrahim's lips pressed into a thin line. "What does he want you to do?"

Yasir hesitated. Then whispered, "He wants me to assassinate Abdul Junaid during the campaign."

The room froze.

A coldness swept in like a desert wind.

His mother let out another cry this time deeper, guttural, shaking the walls. "Na shiga uku! Abdul Junaid fa? (I'm in trouble Abdul Junaid?)Wallahi if you do that, kashe ka zasuyi!(they'll kill you)You will never know peace, Yasir!"

She stood and began pacing like a mad woman. "Kai mutumin banza ne! (You're very stupid)Me ya karasa da za ka bi mutumin kamar Aminu?"(what did you lack that you'll follow someone like aminu?)"

Yasir collapsed fully on the floor.

"I killed my own child," he wept. "I didn't even know. I didn't ask. I just obeyed."

Then his body shook with sobs.

"I didn't know, Baba. I didn't"

Zayna rushed in from the hallway. She had heard everything.

She didn't speak
She just knelt beside him, placed his head on her lap, and hugged him tightly. She stroked his hair like they were children again, her own tears falling silently.

"It's okay," she whispered, even though it wasn't.

Even though nothing was okay
Her mother was still pacing, wailing and clutching her chest.

Her father was standing, unmoving, staring into space.

Yasir stayed curled up on the floor, clutching his sister, the weight of what he'd done pressing him down like a mountain.

The call to prayer from a nearby mosque began to echo faintly through the night.

But in that house...

There was no peace

Wuse II — The Next Morning

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The Abuja sun had barely risen, but the streets were already waking. Birds chirped in the trees lining Wuse II, and a soft breeze rustled through the curtains of Khalid's house. In the driveway, his black Range Rover Sport was polished, engine humming low as the gate slowly slid open.

Amina stood beside the passenger door in a simple black abaya and grey veil, Her sunglasses were perched on her head, and her face was fresh no makeup, no filters Just her Real and Radiant.

"You're not dressed like someone going home," Khalid said, unlocking the door with his key fob.

"What does that mean?" she raised a brow, sliding in beside him.

He got in behind the wheel. "You look like someone going to a wedding ."

She smirked. "That's rich, coming from a man whose shoes probably cost more than my entire wardrobe."

He gave her a side glance. "That's not true."

"Oh really?" she crossed her legs. "Then why did your house help tell me the other day you ordered coffee from Dubai?"

He didn't respond. He just adjusted the AC and muttered, "Are you ready?"

"Ready for a 2 hour trip with a grumpy driver and zero music ?" she teased.

He glanced at her again. "I'm not grumpy."

"You are."

"I'm reserved."

"You're repressed"

He sighed. "This is going to be a long trip."

She smiled. "Exactly what I'm hoping for."

The Road Begins — Leaving Abuja

The traffic was light on Kubwa Expressway. The Range Rover glided along the tar, the city slowly shrinking in the rearview mirror. Amina stared out the window for a while, chin resting on her hand. Khalid had one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the gear.

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Silence stretched between them. Not awkward Just... there.

"You always this quiet on road trips?" she asked eventually.

He gave a slight shrug. "What should I say?"

She turned to him. "You could start with 'Amina, tell me your worst road trip memory'."

He gave her a sideways glance. "Okay Amina, tell me your worst road trip memory."

She laughed. "That was lazy, but okay Hmm... Once, my dad forgot me at a filling station in malumfashi ."

His brow lifted. "Forgot you?"

"Yes! I went to buy gala and La Casera Came out and the car was gone."

He blinked. "How old were you?"

"Eleven."

Khalid shook his head. "Your dad deserves jail."

She laughed again, the sound light and sincere. "Wallahi I thought I was going to die there. I even started reciting Suratul Ikhlas and ayatul kursiyu "

Roadside Stop Suleja Bypass

About an hour into the journey, Amina suddenly tapped the window.

"Stop!"

Khalid frowned. "What is it?"

"Stop, stop. Yam and egg! That woman under the tree!"

He slowed the car, skeptical. "You want to eat road yam?"

"Don't disrespect it. That's spiritual yam. I grew up on that yam Park jor."

Reluctantly, he pulled over.

Amina practically bounced out of the car. The seller, an older woman in a wrapper and scarf, grinned widely when she saw her.
"Ina wuni mama?" (Good afternoon mama)
"Lafiya, (fine)my daughter."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Wallahi mama, I've missed you," Amina said, already pulling out a ₦1000 note. "One wrap and two eggs."

Khalid leaned against the hood of the car, arms folded, watching in quiet disbelief.

When she returned with two steaming packs, she offered him one.

"I don't eat roadside food."

"You don't live," she countered.

He took it reluctantly, opened it and paused. The aroma was nostalgic. Sharp pepper, oil, egg, and perfectly fried yam and egg.

"This is actually good," he admitted after the first bite.

She grinned. "Told you You Lagos boys think everything not imported is poison."

"I'm not from Lagos," he said.

"I know But your energy is very Ikoyi."
"Have you ever met a Lagos boy before?" He asked out of curiosity
"No just saying "
He gave her a side glance, but his lips curled slightly.

Somewhere Between Laughter and Silence

As the kilometers rolled by, the sun climbed higher. Amina adjusted the seat and leaned back, feet up on the dash. Her scarf had loosened, framing her face softly. She hummed a Faze song under her breath Kolomental the time they reached Zuba.

They talked about everything.

About university

About how she hated WAEC and wanted to write it in miracle center but her father won't let her

About the one time she dyed her hair red and got suspended for "spiritual disobedience." And her parents found out what she had done

He told her about the first time he smoked a cigarette behind his father's back, and how he got caught because the house help ratted him out for ₦2000.

She laughed so hard she choked on her Pure Bliss biscuit.

But somewhere between Jere and Kaduna Junction... things got quiet again.

Khalid looked over at her. "You never answered me."

She blinked. "About what?"

"Yasir."

Her smile dimmed slightly. "Oh."

He didn't press. Just waited

She hesitated. "I don't know what I feel anymore. I loved him I think I still... care But every time I think about what happened, I feel sick."

He nodded. "You're allowed to be confused."

"And you?" she asked, voice softer. "What do you want?"

He took a long breath. "For once, I want something that's mine. Not my father's Not inherited Not arranged."

Their eyes met

Long

Quiet
Then she looked away, heart thudding a little too fast

Reaching Kaduna

By the time they crossed into Kaduna city, the sky was golden. The trees swayed in the soft northern breeze. One thing about kaduna is the trees the pants how green it is it's peaceful . Khalid drove past Murtala Square slowly, as if the city itself calmed him.

Amina looked around with a small sigh. "I didn't realize how much I missed home."

He smiled faintly. "You can come home whenever you want."

Her eyes met his again

They didn't say it
But it was there

In the way his hand lingered on the steering wheel.

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In the way she didn't want to get out of the car when they finally pulled into the compound. Unguwan Dosa Kaduna

The black Range Rover pulled into a familiar compound, its tyres crunching over gravel and dry leaves. The scent of fried onions and Maggi and turaren wuta floated in the evening air. Amina didn't wait for Khalid to park properly she jumped out, barefoot, holding her slippers in one hand.

She ran straight into her father's arms.

"Baba!" she said, breathless, throwing her arms around him.

"Ah, Aminatu ," Alhaji Usman laughed, pulling her close. "We just came to see you in Abuja. And now you've followed us back here?"

Her mother stepped out from the kitchen corridor, flour on her hands, apron tied around her waist.

"See this girl o," she said, smiling. "You've only been married two weeks and already causing drama. Wallahi, if this is what love does to people, I fear for my sanity."

"Mama!" Amina laughed, hugging her next. "Please don't start."

From inside, her elder brothers Suleiman and Kabir came out. Suleiman was in a kaftan and rubber slippers. Kabir was already chewing meat pie from the oven.

"Amina the drama queen has landed," Kabir announced.

Suleiman gave Khalid a nod. "Welcome, ranka ya dade. (May you live long)Hope you survived the road trip with her."

Khalid gave a polite smile. "Just barely."

They all laughed

Amina glanced at him, eyes twinkling. There was something about seeing her surrounded by her family again. The way she came alive. The sparkle that had dulled these past weeks... it was back.

Her father motioned to Khalid. "Hope everything's okay, son?"

"Yes sir Thank you for asking."

"You'll stay here tonight, of course."

Khalid shook his head. "No, thank you sir. I have some things to attend to tonight. I'll just check into a hotel nearby"

"Laa ilaaha illallah," her mother interrupted. "Hotel? Haba! When her room is empty?"

Amina blinked. "Mummy"

"No arguments You two will stay in her room. Your husband and wife, ko ba haka ba?"

Khalid froze Amina froze They exchanged a glance awkward, intense, wordless.

Suleiman burst out laughing. "Eh, this marriage is about to get interesting."

Kabir elbowed him. "See how they're both sweating."

"Mummy please," Amina said, covering her face. "We just got here."

Her mother just waved them inside. "Go and change, jare. Food will soon be ready."

That Evening The Balcony

The city lay before themvKaduna's quiet heartbeat pulsing under golden streetlights. Amina stood on the balcony of her childhood home, changed into a soft maroon hijab and loose lounge dress, arms folded, hair slightly damp from a quick shower.

Khalid joined her, handing her a cup of zobo.

She raised a brow. "You drink this stuff? I thought you're Mr Healthy?"

"Zobo is healthy," he said, sipping. "Don't let the streets fool you."

She smiled. "Sweet or gingered?"

"Extra ginger I like pain."

She grinned. "Explains a lot."

He raised a brow. "You walked into that one."

She chuckled. "Fair enough."

The silence between them now was different. Warm. Full Like two people holding a secret fire between them, scared it might go out or worse, burn too bright.

"You're not as serious as you pretend to be," she murmured.

He turned to her. "I'm not as cold either."

She looked at him. "I know."

And there it was again that unspoken thing between them. She could feel his gaze lingering just a second longer than it should. The way he took in her smile like a man watching sunlight after weeks of storm.

She sipped the zobo. "Do you think we're broken?"

Khalid hesitated. "I think we're the most unfortunate couple in Nigeria right now."

She laughed quietly. Then... her voice softened.

"But are we healing?"

He looked at her.

"Slowly," he said. "But yes."

There was something raw and honest in the way he said it. Something that wrapped itself around her chest.

And then... he reached out and gently tucked a strand of hair behind her scarf. His fingers grazed her temple. Her breath caught he didn't mean to did not even know why he did .

It wasn't a kiss

It wasn't a confession

But it was everything

And it was enough for now
Later That Night

"I have to go," Khalid said gently, setting his cup down. "I need to greet my uncle. He'll expect me."

Amina nodded, her chest tightening. "Okay."

She almost thought he was going to walk away when her father appeared at the door with a smile.

"Khalid," he said. "You're going to your uncle's house, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good Amina, go with him."

She blinked. "Me?"

"It's tradition," he said. "Newlyweds greet together Especially since the family hasn't seen you since... everything."

Amina hesitated. "But I"

"You'll be fine. Just wear something decent. Not that your mother's ."

She glanced at Khalid. He looked just as surprised. But he gave her the smallest nod.

She went inside and returned a few minutes later in a sky blue abaya No makeup No jewelry Just herself.

They drove in silence. The roads were quieter now. Streetlights cast long shadows.

Amina fidgeted with her fingers. "I don't want to go there."

He glanced at her. "Why?"

She stared out the window. "Because that house holds too many truths."

He didn't ask more.

But as they drove through the gates of Alhaji Ibrahim's large compound, neither of them could shake the feeling.

A feeling that something was about to change.

The House of Secrets

Yasir was upstairs in his room Alone The doors were shut. He hadn't left since yesterday after the confession. His mother had brought food that remained untouched.

Downstairs, the lights were on. The house staff greeted them warmly Amina stepped in beside Khalid, heart thudding.

She didn't want to be here. Not in this house. Not near the man who had broken her and didn't even know she knew.

But what choice did she have?

As they entered the sitting room, a wave of memories flooded her.

This was the house where she had once waited for Yasir after Juma'at when his parents had travelled to Saudi

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Where she had sat on this same couch and fantasized about being part of this family.

Now, she was Khalid's wife.

And Yasir?

Yasir was upstairs Crushed under the weight of the secret he had told yesterday.
Amina didn't know if she hated him more for what he did...

...or for still loving the boy he used to be.

She looked at Khalid beside her. Quiet Guarded and Noble.

He didn't know what she knew.

He didn't know that this house could ruin both of them.

Because tonight...

He was here to ask a question.

A question that could change everything.

Was Aminu Bello really his father?

But he didn't ask.

Not yet

Because something heavier filled the air.

As Amina sat beside him in the same house where her ex lived upstairs, and her new husband or fake husband sat beside her like a storm waiting to break...

One thought echoed in her mind.

In this house tonight, secrets would be revealed... but which one?

Chapter thirty one-The weight of the truth

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The air in Alhaji Ibrahim's living room was thick with awkwardness and nostalgia.

Amina sat politely beside Khalid on the leather cushion. Her posture was composed, back straight, hands folded, her face calm but distant. Her eyes roamed the elegant décor of the home she once visited in another life, back when she was just Yasir's , girlfriend. Now, she sat here as someone else's wife.

Yasir's mother, a graceful woman in her fifties with tired but kind eyes, offered them a tray of drinks and small chops. Her smile was warm but slightly strained. "It's good to see you both... newlyweds, mashaa Allah," she said with a nod, her eyes resting on Amina a little longer than necessary.

Amina smiled back, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Just then, the loud thuds of hurried footsteps echoed from the stairs. Zayna Yasir's younger sister and Amina's classmate
ran upstairs with urgency, her voice rising in excitement.

"Yasir! Amina is downstairs! She came with Khalid!"

Seconds later, the thunder of feet descending signaled his arrival. Yasir appeared at the base of the stairs, slightly breathless, his white kaftan creased and his expression caught somewhere between guilt and longing.

His eyes locked onto Amina immediately. He stopped.

Amina didn't look up. She didn't flinch. Her gaze remained glued to the glass cup in her hand, her expression unreadable.

Yasir's face twitched, almost like he wanted to speak. But he said nothing.

Khalid looked up at him briefly no emotion, just that cold, quiet way he'd learned to survive.

Alhaji Ibrahim rose, straightening his babban riga. His voice was gentle but firm.
"Khalid, you said you needed to see me?"

Khalid nodded. "Yes, sir It's... something serious."

"Come with me."

He led Khalid into a smaller, more private sitting room across the hallway. The silence between them as they walked was deafening.

Yasir, unsettled, lingered behind. He leaned against the wall near the door, pretending to check his phone, but his ears strained for anything.

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In the kitchen, Amina followed Zayna. The reunion was awkward. They exchanged polite smiles and memories that no longer felt warm. They both had changed grown in different directions. But Amina's mind was elsewhere. Something in Khalid's eyes today scared her. Not because it was angry or sharp. But because it was too quiet. Like he was bracing for a storm that had already started inside him.

Inside the private room, Khalid sat stiffly, hands on his knees, avoiding eye contact.

Alhaji Ibrahim offered him a drink. He declined.

"Baba..." Khalid began, his voice low, controlled, almost too calm. "A friend of mine recently did some digging. He found something... about my father. About Aminu Bello."

Alhaji Ibrahim's expression didn't change at first, but something shifted in his posture. He sat up straighter. His eyes became watchful.

"What about him?" he asked.

Khalid drew in a breath through his nose. "He's not my father, is he?"

There was a silence so loud it made the clock ticking on the wall sound like a gunshot.

Ibrahim slowly leaned back in his seat. He removed his cap and placed it on his lap. Closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were glassy with emotion.

"Khalid... you're old enough. And Aminu... Aminu has done enough damage. It's time you knew the truth."

Outside the door, Yasir froze mid scroll.

Alhaji Ibrahim began, his voice thick with memory. "Years ago... after our father passed away, Aminu took over the family, being the eldest. He was always intense, but... something changed. He wasn't just controlling. He was... sick. A sociopath, the doctors said. But we hid it. Our mother your grandmother Allah yajikan ta(may her soul rest in peace), believed marriage and children would 'fix' him. She forced it on him. Tried to help. But..."

He shook his head.

"He married once. It ended after two weeks. The girl left crying."

Khalid's eyes narrowed. He was listening, but distant like trying to understand a language he'd once forgotten.

"I.....I was in love," Ibrahim continued. "Her name was Aisha. A beautiful, kind soul. Pure The kind of person who brings light into every room. I loved her, Khalid Wallahi, I did. We were young, but we were serious. We didn't plan to sin. We just... fell. She got

pregnant before we could marry she was a half cast partly from Saudi her mother was Arab"
Khalid flinched his hands clenched.

"I was ready to take responsibility. But our mother said no. She said it would bring shame. She told Aminu... and he offered to cover up. To let her stay in his house. Pretend she was his wife. That you were his child. Her parents also agreed to it"
The air turned heavy. Khalid blinked rapidly, his throat dry.

"I wanted to marry her still. I was ready But my mother begged me not to. She said this was the only way. That no one would ever marry her if they knew. That our family name mattered more. Aisha agreed... reluctantly. She loved you too much to risk it."

Khalid's voice cracked as he whispered, "And then?"

"The day she gave birth... I wasn't there. I was in Sokoto for work. Aminu took her to the hospital. You were born healthy... but she didn't survive. She bled too much."

Khalid's body went still.

Ibrahim closed his eyes again, his voice now a whisper. "When I returned, it was done. My mother said there was no other choice now. Aminu loved the child. She saw it in his eyes. She thought... maybe this would save him. So we lied And I... I let it happen."

"You let it happen?" Khalid said, standing now. His voice was quiet. Too quiet. "You let him raise me like that?"

"I watched you suffer," Ibrahim admitted, tears now visible. "And it destroyed me. But I swore. I swore to my mother I'd never say a word."

"You watched him beat me. Humiliate me. Control my entire life like I was nothing." Khalid's voice cracked, but he was trying hard not to let it. "I thought... I thought he hated me because I was weak. Because I wasn't enough. But he hated me because I wasn't his."

"I didn't know it would turn out like this," Ibrahim whispered.

Khalid took a shaky step back. His hands began to tremble. His chest heaved.

Outside, Yasir stood frozen. His entire worldview crumbling. The person his father always compared him to always loved more was his brother. His own blood The man who married the girl he could never forget... was his brother.

Khalid pushed the door open with a trembling hand. Yasir, who had been eavesdropping just outside, stumbled back in shock. His eyes were wide, jaw slack, as the truth he'd just overheard shattered his understanding of the world.

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Khalid didn't even see him.

His feet moved on instinct fast, unsteady. He walked past the corridor like a ghost, barely registering the faces in the room. His breath was shallow. His limbs were numb. His entire reality had just... split open.

Through the frosted glass of the dining room, Amina caught a glimpse of him. She immediately froze.

His hands were shaking
His eyes were bloodshot
His lips moved, but no sound came out.

He looked like someone who had seen a ghost and survived.

"Khalid?" she called out, already on her feet.

But he kept walking, like he didn't even hear her.

She rushed after him. "Khalid!"

By the time she caught up, he was outside, on the driveway, gulping air like it was water. His chest was rising and falling at an alarming rate. The harmattan wind did nothing to cool his skin he was sweating. He gripped the edge of the car for balance, knuckles white.

"Khalid. Khalid!" she repeated, grabbing both his hands with urgency.

He tried to pull away.

"I can't breathe," he gasped, voice hoarse.

"Just look at me," Amina said, her voice cracking. She held his face. "Wallahi, just look at me. I'm here. I'm right here."

His eyes finally met hers and it broke her heart.

They were not just wet with tears. They were angry. Confused and Destroyed.

A man who had kept everything locked inside for too long... now unraveling.

"I've been living with a man who treated me like an animal," Khalid choked out, his voice rising, wild. "All these years. I thought I was weak. Stupid. Not good enough. I begged him to love me. And he wasn't even my father he wasn't even my father."

Amina shook her head, trying not to cry. "It's not your fault. You didn't know."

"I called him Baba," Khalid said bitterly. "I used to defend him. Even when he hit me. Even when he told me I was a failure, I thought it was me I thought I deserved it!"

His knees buckled. Amina caught him.

He dropped to the cold tiled pavement of the driveway, kneeling, shaking, his head pressed into her stomach as he let out a guttural sob. His arms wrapped around her waist tightly desperately like a child afraid to be abandoned again.

She held him. Just held him.

Rocking him gently. Whispering, "It's okay... you're okay... I'm here... just breathe..."

Yasir stood a few meters away. Frozen. Watching the woman he once loved still loved hold his half brother in a way she had never held him. Not even when she was his.

Amina didn't glance at Yasir.

Not once

The wind carried silence for a few long minutes, except for Khalid's shaking breath and the gentle murmur of Amina's voice. Then the front door creaked open again.

Alhaji Ibrahim stepped out, visibly shaken. His voice was hoarse. "Khalid..."

Khalid didn't respond.

"Khalid, dan Allah, listen to me," he pleaded.

Still nothing.

"I didn't want this. Wallahi, I didn't. I was a coward. I was young. I thought silence was the best way to protect you."

Khalid finally turned his face upward.

Ibrahim flinched. "Please."

Khalid stood slowly, eyes blazing.

"I wanted to tell you so many times," Ibrahim whispered.

"I didn't think you'd forgive me," Ibrahim admitted.

Khalid laughed bitterly. "So you let me suffer instead?"

Amina stepped in gently. "Khalid, let's just go. Please Let's go home."

But Ibrahim took another step forward. "I can't undo what's been done. But I can make it right. Come back inside. Let's talk all of us. I owe you answers. You deserve the truth."

Khalid looked at Yasir then for the first time. Their eyes locked.
Another heavy silence

Khalid turned back to Amina. "Please I can't stay here another minute."

She didn't argue

They walked toward the car. Amina opened the door for him, and as she turned to enter the passenger side, Ibrahim's voice rang out again.

"Khalid, I loved your mother," he said. "And I love you."

Khalid froze

He didn't turn back.

"You don't even know me," he replied quietly. "You never tried."
He whispered to himself
Then he got into the car
Amina hesitated a moment. She looked at Ibrahim, who now stood with his hands on his fore head, helpless. Yasir behind him, equally stunned.

She entered the car and shut the door.
Khakid drove out of the house but couldn't go far he parked somewhere
Inside, Khalid leaned back against the seat. His hands were still trembling, but his jtears had stopped.

Amina reached over and gently placed her hand over his.

"I don't need you to talk," she whispered. "Just know I'm here."

Khalid turned to her, his eyes now red and tired.

"I feel like I don't know who I am anymore."

"You're Khalid," she said, voice firm. "You're the man who stayed beside me when I was hurt , you're the man who protected me from your father despite not knowing me .
You're the man who brought me to your house knowing fully well I was pregnant and marriage was in valid . You're the man who helped me feel safe again. That's who you are."
As she was saying it She was realizing something too, that khalid is the greenest flag she's just too blond to notice.

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He closed his eyes A single tear slipped down his cheek.

"I feel so alone."

"You're not," she whispered, squeezing his hand. "Not anymore."

They sat in silence, the engine off, the street quiet. The car parked beneath a neem tree swaying in the wind.

For the first time, Khalid reached out his hand finding hers in the dark.

And just like that, no words were needed.

"I'll just drop you off, I can't go back to your parents house like this "Khalid said stiffly, his voice barely masking the chaos inside him. His hands gripped the steering like he was holding onto the last bit of control he had left.

"No," Amina replied, her voice soft but certain. "I'm coming with you."

He scoffed under his breath and gave a humorless shake of his head.

"You don't have to play wife now," he snapped. "It's not real."

The words were sharp, but she didn't flinch.

She looked at him, really looked. His eyes were glassy, unfocused. His shoulders were slumped, his jaw tight Not angry Just... exhausted and Broken.

Her voice came lower this time, almost a whisper. "Maybe not But you are my friend And I'm not leaving you alone, Khalid."

He said nothing

Instead, he veered the car slowly to the side of the quiet road near Malali, where the streets thinned out and the city lights gave way to the soft hum of Kaduna's sleeping outskirts. The road was lined with silent trees and low fences, their shadows dancing under a flickering streetlight.

Khalid turned off the engine and stepped out, his movements robotic, like his soul hadn't caught up to his body.

Amina followed without hesitation. The night breeze tugged at her scarf. Her slippers crunched over gravel. Crickets chirped nearby, as if mocking the silence between them.

"I don't know how you feel ," she began gently, "but you're not alone, Khalid."

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He stopped walking. Slowly turned.

There, under the pale orange glow, she saw it.

His pain.

Raw and Undiluted.

"He's my father, Amina," he said, voice cracking. "Ibrahim All this time..."

She stepped closer, heart thudding.

"I lived my whole life being treated like I was less. Like a burden Beaten and Controlled. Observed like some... some experiment," he choked out. "And the one person who could've saved me my real father stood back and watched."

Her throat tightened. She couldn't find the words. Not right away.

"I know," she finally said, tears gathering in her eyes. "I know it hurts."

Khalid laughed bitterly, the sound hollow. "I used to envy Yasir, wallahi. He had everything. The attention, the love, the freedom. The normalcy. I thought I was just unlucky. Just born into the wrong house. But now..."

He looked at her, eyes glistening in the night.

"Now he's my brother."

The words hit her chest like a stone. The ache in his voice wasn't just grief. It was betrayal. Confusion. A lifetime of emotional starvation now spilling over like a broken dam.

Without thinking, Amina reached for his hand.

And... he let her.

Their fingers interlocked, hesitant at first. But then his grip tightened, desperate. Like he was trying to hold on to something solid in a world that had just flipped upside down.

"I'm here," she whispered. "I'm here, Khalid."
"For how long?" He asked
"Forever " the word slipped out even she had no idea why She said it
He didn't look at her
"Forever as in till you and yasir get back together and get married"
"No khalid even if we all go back to our respective homes and leave this fake marriage,we'll always be friends " the word friend stung , she didn't understand why but she didn't want to be just friends m any more

And then "what if I don't want to be just friends" Khalid said without thinking
"Khalid....." amina said
"It's fine " he cut her offf
"You don't have anything "
He blinked quickly, swallowing hard, but the tears were already falling. Not loudly Not violently. Just silently Like something sacred being released.

Amina stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. She felt him freeze for a second then melt into her. Shoulders slumped, chest heaving. He pressed his face into her neck, breath hot against her skin.

He didn't speak
He didn't have to

She held him tighter, her hands gently stroking his back like she was trying to soothe every wound life had ever left on him.

And in that quiet, sacred embrace, something shifted inside her
It wasn't pity.

It wasn't obligation

It was love
Not the teenage kind with butterflies and sweet text messages. Not the reckless kind that once bound her to Yasir.

This was different.

This was grown love
Raw love Patient love Real love

Love that saw the mess and still stayed. Love that looked grief in the face and said I'm not leaving.

She hadn't planned on loving Khalid. In fact, for weeks she had fought it buried it beneath banter and sarcasm and pride.

But now, with his arms around her, his tears soaking into her veil , and her heartbeat echoing against his chest she knew.

She loved him
Madly,Completely In a way that terrified her.

When his sobs finally slowed, she pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. They were bloodshot, his lips trembling.

"Let's go," she said gently.

He nodded

She walked him to the car like a mother would a wounded child. But it wasn't weakness she saw in him it was strength. The strength it took to feel. To not pretend. To finally fall apart in front of someone and trust they wouldn't run.

Inside the car, he sat down slowly, like his body was too heavy.

She got in beside him, still holding his hand.

His breathing steadied. But the silence lingered.

"I'm sorry," he said after a long while, his voice hoarse. "For shouting earlier. I just... I didn't know where to put the pain."

"You can give it to me," she said softly, turning to face him. "I can carry some of it with you."

He turned to her, truly seeing her now. His eyes searched hers quiet, unsure, but full of something unspoken.

He didn't say anything else

But he didn't let go of her hand either

And for the first time in his life, Khalid didn't push someone away.

Not because he was strong

But because she stayed... even when he had nothing left to give
And then he did something without thinking pulled her hands to his chest and held it more tightly and just closed his eyes . Amina watched him and in that silence both of them knew that they didn't want to ever leave each other.

Then.."we should find a hotel before someone kidnaps us ,we can't stay here all night"Amina said
"I wish I knew how to drive all this won't be an issue " she added

"Don't worry I can Khalid "Khalid sat properly turning in the engine and just like that they drive away.

Chapter thirty - two tangled hearts

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The hotel room in was dimly lit, the silence between Amina and Khalid filled only by the sound of running water from the bathroom. Amina sat on the edge of the bed, her legs crossed, arms wrapped around herself. Her heart was still thudding from everything they had just gone through the confrontation with Alhaji Ibrahim, Khalid's meltdown, the car ride filled with heavy silence.
Khalid entered the bathroom to take a shower

Her phone blinked on the bedside table A message

Yasir

She hesitated before unlocking it, then her fingers moved.
"hey baby ... please don't ignore me. I miss you. I can't believe he's my brother don't know what to do with that. I can't breathe knowing all I know
Come back to me, Please!Let's fix this?You and me against the world, just like it used to be?I have a lot to tell you Don't let go of us."

She stared at the message, breath shallow. Her eyes blurred Her thumb hovered She didn't know what to say.
She hated yasir for what he had done ,but she still loved him regardless at least she thought she still loved him
Amina stared at Yasir's message like it was a wound she couldn't stop touching. Her chest ached. Her brain was spinning. She hated him. But somehow... somehow she still loved him.

At least, she thought she did
She searched Khadija's name min her call log
She hit call

The line barely rang before Khadija picked.

"Ahn ahn, this one that you're calling me at this time, hope say dem never break your head finish o? I've been calling you since, you no pick! Where you dey?"

Amina's voice came out soft. "I'm in Kaduna."

"Kaduna ke? For what? Wetin you come find here? Hope bawai angane bane (hope they didn't find out)that you were pregnant ???Amina talk now!"

Amina paused, her eyes wet again. She whispered, "We came to see Yasir's dad."

Silence

"We? We as in... you and who?"

"Khalid."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Ye! Amina don enter one chance. You and your husband travelled together to Kaduna?Toh come and see your exs father Nawa oo"
"He's not really my husband, Khadija. You know that."
"But world no know o! In the eyes of your parents, his parents, society, even the chief imam he's your husband o! Aswear you sef you dey live in film."

Amina gave a weak laugh, but it quickly faded. "Today has been crazy Khadija... they're brothers. Yasir and Khalid Half brothers."

Another silence

Then
"What???"

"Wallahi."

"This life no balance I swear Kai! Na so you go just dey write your own Season Film like this? 'Two Brothers and a Baby That Never Happened.'"

Amina blinked hard at her words.

Khadija immediately realised.
"Oh my God, Amina, I didn't mean it like that"

"It's okay," she whispered, voice shaking.

"No it's not I'm sorry. I just dey talk anyhow. Please forgive me, abeg."

Amina wiped a tear. "You're fine I just... I don't even know how I feel anymore Yasir texted me."

"Hmm Wetin him say this time? That he misses you? That he wants you back?"

Amina nodded, biting her lip. "He always does that when he's drowning. You know na. Anytime things get hard, he comes crying to you. He never changes, Amina."

"But he sounded broken this time," she said quietly. "I could feel it through the text. Like he's losing it."

"Good Let him feel small of the pain he caused you. Have you forgotten what he did? Or you want me to remind you?"

Amina's silence was heavy.

"He was the one that led those boys to attack you, Amina unknowingly or not, it was still him You lost your baby his baby . You almost lost your life Wallahi, if I catch that boy ehn"

"I know," Amina choked, her voice cracking. "I know he messed up. I know he's not safe for me, but... I still care. And that's what's killing me."

"You dey mad, you just dey fall in love with the same person over and over again "

"Thanks," Amina muttered.

"Sorry jare But make I ask you one thing. Wetin you even see for Yasir sef? You've been carrying him on your head like this for years, and what has he given you in return? Lies, hurt, and baby you couldn't even keep in your belly."

Amina let out a sob.

Khadija softened. "Amina I'm sorry I no mean to remind you but it's the sad truth, I've been telling you for years but you don't seem to understand"
"It's fine," she sniffed, wiping her eyes. "I'm just... tired Tired of choosing people who don't choose me Tired of loving people who break me."

"You've always been the one giving, never receiving. Even Khalid sef... I know it's supposed to be fake marriage, but the guy dey really try Look how he carried you to hospital, sat with you, stayed with you when you cried he even faked a marriage to cover up your pregnancy and the guy... he's hurting too haba amina open your eyes to the reality, and stop living in this fantasy"

"I know," Amina whispered. "Today, he cried Properly Like, sobbing."
"Wahala Fine boys crying You sure say una no shoot romantic movie for there?"

"Khadija please," Amina laughed weakly.

"Sorry, but abeg tell me say na separate rooms una dey."

Amina's silence was the answer.

"Ah Omo You this girl, you wan kill me."

"Khadija it's not like that He booked two rooms but I couldn't let him stay alone tonight. He looked... finished Empty."

"So you carry pillow go join am Nurse of the year."

"Stop it," Amina smiled sadly "We didn't do anything. We just sat Talked He's been through so much. He found out his father isn't really his father, his whole childhood was fake, and now he's brothers with Yasir. He's just... broken And I see myself in him sometimes."

Khadija grew quiet

"You like him," she said after a pause

"I don't....i don't know"

"But you trust him That one alone says everything."

Amina rubbed her eyes. "I was thinking of calling Yasir... telling him to come to the hotel"

"Are you okay at all? Come to where? The same hotel you're staying with your husband? Amina be like say madness dey scratch your brain small small."

"I just want him to be okay too." "You want everybody to be okay but who's taking care of you? You lost a baby You lost your sense of self. You almost lost your life And you still dey think of how to help man wey help destroy you? Amina you need to wake up."

"I can't just abandon him."

"Then don't But don't invite more chaos into your life either. If you really want to heal, you need to sit with the people who actually want to heal too. Not people that drown you every time you try to breathe."

Amina closed her eyes

"You're right."

"I always am."

"I just wish... everything was simpler."

"It's not But you're stronger now You've seen the worst of men The worst of love. And somehow you're still here. Still caring. Still soft That's your superpower."

"Thanks, Deeja."

"You're welcome But abeg, one last thing if you even think about kissing Khalid tonight, make sure you brush o. I no wan hear 'morning mouth romance' gist tomorrow."

Amina burst into laughter.

"I hate you."

"I love you too Now go cuddle your accidental fake husband and don't forget, I'm always one call away. And if Yasir tries to do anything stupid, I'll call his mummy Rubbish boy."

They both laughed.

"I'll check on him in the morning," Amina said, voice calmer.

"Good Now sleep Love you plenty."

"Love you too."

The call ended

And Amina just sat there, breathing deeply in the stillness of the room. Khalid was still in the bathroom. Her phone lay beside her. The ache in her chest wasn't gone, but at least it wasn't eating her alive anymore.

She looked at the door

And whispered to herself
"One day at a time."

The bathroom door creaked open.

Amina looked upband forgot how to breathe.

Khalid stepped out into the soft yellow light of the hotel room, a towel hanging around his neck, nothing on his upper body except drops of water trailing slowly down his chest and stomach. His black trousers clung low to his waist. His skin glowed like warm bronze, the curve of his muscles rising and falling with every breath.

But it wasn't just his body that stole her breath.

It was the look in his eyes dark, hollow, almost tender. His shoulders were strong but slouched, like he carried too many stories he could never tell. His snake tattoo curled around his ribs, slick and glistening It looked alive under the low light. Dangerous and Beautiful.

He didn't know he was doing this to her
Didn't know he looked like heartbreak with a heartbeat.

He rubbed the towel through his damp hair, drops flicking off. His abs flexed, and for some reason, Amina's entire body reacted.

Ya Allah

She was staring, shamelessly No apologies.

Her brain? Offline
Her dignity? Missing

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her heart? Galloping
Khalid noticed her gaze and paused

"You good?" he asked, voice low, deep, steady

She blinked Twice

"Yes Yes! I mean yeah I'm fine." Her voice cracked like dry harmattan

He raised one brow, clearly amused, but let it go.

He walked across the room, calm as ever, and dropped the towel on a chair Then he turned to her again, voice gentler
"You don't have to stay, by the way I'm okay now."

Amina stood, arms crossed, chest still heaving

"Oh, I'm not leaving this room We agreed to keep each other clean, remember? I step out now, you'll inject yourself again So no, you're stuck with me."

Khalid's face shifted, like something inside him cracked quietly, painfully
"This is why I don't tell people things," he muttered.

"Well, too late for that," she replied softly, walking closer to the bed.

He sank into the armchair, his hand rubbing the back of his neck, tired and Broken She sat on the bed, facing him Her eyes never left him She could see it the way he stared at the floor, like it held answers he didn't want to say out loud.

The silence between them stretched

Heavy and Honest

She spoke first

"What did you mean earlier?"

Khalid didn't look up. "About what?"

"You said... what if you didn't want to be just friends."

He shifted slightly. "I don't remember saying that."

"Liar."

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of his lips. He finally met her eyes.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You're annoying."

"Yap And you're stuck with me the whole night," she teased.

He stood slowly and walked toward the bed.

Every step felt like thunder rolling into her chest. Her breath caught when he leaned close, just inches from her face. His skin smelled like soap and something uniquely him Her fingers twitched. Her lips parted slightly.

She thought no, she hoped he'd kiss her.

No pressure
No pity
No past

Just now

But instead, he reached past her, grabbed a pillow, and turned to walk back to the chair.

She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding.

"You okay?" he asked, confused by her reaction.

"Yeah," she said too fast. "Yeah, I just... need to use the bathroom."

She scrambled inside and shut the door behind her, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She leaned over the sink and looked in the mirror.

Cheeks flushed Lips trembling Her body still humming.

She wanted him.

Not just his body but his pain. His secrets His scars She wanted the quiet parts of him he never showed anyone else The darkness The honesty The softness.

She splashed cold water on her face, took a deep breath, and stepped back out.

Khalid was sitting now, the pillow behind his back, staring blankly at the ceiling like someone carrying centuries of pain in his chest.
Amina sat on the bed again. This time, facing him fully.

"How are you going to confront him?" she asked quietly.

He didn't move. "Aminu?"

She nodded

He inhaled slowly, like the very name cost him something. "I don't know I've never looked at him and felt small before. Until today Today I realised I was never his son. I was just a project An experiment a toy ."

"You don't have to face him alone," she said gently

He looked at her His eyes searched hers.

"Why are you still here, Amina?"

"Because you need someone And I know what it's like to feel like no one sees you I see you, Khalid. Even when you try to hide."

He looked away quickly. Like her words hit a nerve.

"I don't want to be seen," he said, voice low. "It hurts too much when people see you and still leave."

She whispered, "Then let me stay."

The air thickened He swallowed hard.

"I don't know how to let people stay. I destroy everything I touch."

She smiled sadly. "Then maybe I'm already destroyed So no harm done."

They both laughed softly, broken laughter that meant more than comfort.

Khalid stood again, walked to the window, pulled the curtain back and stared out into the night. Amina watched the way his back tensed, the long scar that ran just above his hip. She wanted to ask, how did you get that? but she stayed silent.

"What if I can't be good, Amina?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

She walked over and stood beside him. Her voice was clear.

"Then I'll still be here. Even if you're not good. Even if you're angry Or sad Or distant I don't need you perfect I just need you real."

He turned to her then, eyes full of things he didn't know how to say.

"Don't fall for me," he warned.

She smiled. "Abeg "

Their eyes held. Neither moved The silence said everything.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

They didn't kiss
They didn't touch
But it felt more intimate than anything else they could've done.

Two broken hearts, finally beating in the same rhythm.
The mansion in Asokoro was quiet, wrapped in a stillness that felt unnatural. Outside, the compound was patrolled by armed guards, their boots crunching faintly on the gravel. Inside, the only sound was the clink of ice swirling inside a half-empty glass of whiskey.

Aminu Bello sat alone in his study, the lights off, the curtains drawn. Only the faint glow from the wall sconce behind the shelf lit the space, casting long shadows over his framed portraits images of him shaking hands with governors, smiling beside senators, and posing at international summits.

A predator in babanriga.

He leaned back in his leather chair, one leg crossed, thumb tapping the edge of the glass. His face was unreadable. But his mind his mind was racing.

Then his secure line buzzed

He picked it up immediately, no greeting.

"Malam Yalwa is dead," a low voice said on the other end.

Aminu's grip on the glass stilled.

"And Abdul Junaid...?"

"He's moving. With speed Kaduna to Abuja. Looks like he's gathering momentum."

The glass slipped from his hand, shattering on the tiled floor.

Silence
He stood, breath caught in his throat. "What did you say?"

"Yalwa died But there are whispers. The media will start spinning the story by morning. Abdul already held a closed door meeting with PDP defectors. It looks like he's pushing to reclaim the North Central bloc and he might announce his Senate bid."

Aminu's hands trembled slightly. He turned toward the window, staring out at the dark skyline of Abuja.

"Call Danlami Now. I want to speak to the NSA."

"Yes, sir."

He hung up.

Then quickly dialed another number one of his personal security aides, stationed at Khalid's residence in Wuse II.

"Where is he?"

"Oga, he travel Since morning "
"Travelled?" Aminu's voice dropped to a cold whisper.

"Yes sir No tell anybody He carry his wife with him"

Aminu's jaw clenched. "So this boy now has wings? He thinks because I raised him, he can fly without my permission ?"

His fingers were already moving He dialed Khalid's number Switched off.

He tried again

Still off

He threw the phone on the floor. The screen cracked.

"You ungrateful little bastard," he muttered. "After everything."

He turned and poured another drink, hands no longer steady.

His phone rang again. It was Alhaji Shehu Danlami, former Minister of Interior, one of his oldest allies and now a high ranking fixer in the presidency.

He picked up.

"Alhaji," Danlami said, voice grave. "You need to handle Junaid now. The man has Malam Musa, that young tech guy from Kaduna, the two Kano senators... he's pulling the northern youth card, sir."

"Then we break him," Aminu snapped. "We leak. We bribe We destroy him from the inside out."

"Easier said than done. The press is in his pocket now And Khalid? I heard he was seen in Kaduna probably came to see Abdul . That boy knows something."

Aminu's voice dropped to a deadly hush.

"He knows everything."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

There was silence

Then Danlami spoke carefully. "You trained him too well, Aminu If he turns..."

"He won't." Aminu's eyes were burning now. "I made him. I built that boy from scratch. He's mine."

"Not anymore, it seems."

Aminu ended the call.

He stared out again into the Abuja night. The walls felt like they were closing in.

He had outmaneuvered politicians, bribed judges, silenced journalists.

But this? This was personal.

His own son

No his own weapon might have turned against him.

For the first time in years, Aminu felt something cold slither through his chest.

Not rage or pride.

Fear

And he hated it

He picked up the broken phone. Dialed a different number.

"Bako Prepare the black file. We're going to bury Abdul Junaid before Sallah."

Back in Kaduna...

Yasir sat slumped behind the wheel of his black Camaro, parked beneath a flickering streetlight outside a near abandoned filling station in Ungwan Rimi. It was past 1 a.m. The entire street was asleep. The fuel attendant had long since dozed off in his kiosk, chin resting on his chest.

Yasir's fingers trembled around the leather of the steering wheel, the ghost of his message to Amina still burning in his chest.

"Amina... please don't ignore me."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It had been read
But not replied
His heart thudded painfully. He felt like he was slowly drowning in silence.

Suddenly, his phone lit up. Khadija.

He answered immediately. "Hello?"

Her voice came through soft and teasing, like zobo. "Hey you."

He swallowed. "Hey"

"You good?" she asked gently, though she already knew the answer.

"I've been better."

There was a pause. Then he said, "Did Amina call you?"

"She did," Khadija replied carefully.

"So what... she's too busy with her fake husband to talk to me now?" Yasir's voice cracked with bitterness.

Khadija sighed. "Yasir, haba nau. The guy just found out say una be brothers. Think about how crazy that is His whole life was a lie."

"And what about me?" Yasir snapped, voice rising slightly. "You think I'm fine? I lost her. I lost everything. And now I have to call the guy who married my girl brother? Like, are you hearing yourself?"

Khadija kept quiet for a moment. She knew better than to argue when a man was spiraling especially Yasir

"I get it," she said softly. "You're in pain But she's hurting too. And Khalid... that guy is shattered, Yasir This whole thing is not just about you."

Yasir let out a harsh laugh. "Of course it's not. It never is."

"Yasir"
"I need her, Khadija," he whispered, eyes glistening. "Wallahi, I need her I can't breathe without her I wake up and she's the first thing on my mind. It's like a sickness. And now she's there, with him. And I'm here... parked in front of a dead filling station like one molue reject."

Khadija let out a small laugh before catching herself. "Sorry, sorry But that image just killed me. You dey cry inside Camaro for girl wey dey hotel room with another man. Na so love strong reach?"

Yasir groaned. "Don't do this to me, abeg."

"You wan cry?" she teased. "Big bad Yasir, Kaduna's finest? The one wey dey oppress girls?"

He chuckled weakly. "You're wicked."

"Small wickedness dey important. Builds character."

"Just tell her to call me, please," he said, voice suddenly raw again. "Just... even if she wants to shout at me. I just want to hear her voice."

Khadija paused, her tone softening.

"I will But you need to calm down, wallahi. You need to face yourself first This thing wey you and Amina get it's deep. But you hurt her. Deeply And you no even gree admit am fully."

"I know," he murmured. "I know I messed up."

"She lost the baby, Yasir."

Silence
"I know," he said again, but barely audible. "Every time I close my eyes, I see her bleeding. I did that."

"You didn't mean to," she offered gently. "But that's the thing about actions, they don't need intention to cause damage."

He blinked hard, trying to stop tears from falling. "I still love her."

"I know"

"And Khalid? He doesn't care for her I know"

"Hmm," Khadija hummed, choosing her words. "How do you know?Khalid na different kind of man, Yasir but the question is can you love her without breaking her again?"

Yasir fell silent
"I'll tell her to call you But promise me you won't do anything stupid."

"No knives No weed No driving into fences. I promise," he muttered.

"Good Lover boy, go and sleep Tomorrow is another emotional rollercoaster."

"Goodnight, Khadija."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Night, Romeo. Try not to drown in your own tears inside Camaro, okay?"

He managed a laugh She ended the call.

Khadija stared at her screen and sighed.

"Kai… this one go pain person. Even me sef no fit pick who to root for."

She leaned back on her pillow, shaking her head.

"Two broken men One broken woman And no happy ending in sight. Na real wahala be this."

Chapter thirty three- The beats unleashed

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The ceiling fan whirred quietly

The dim yellow light in the corner cast long shadows across the cream colored walls of the modest Kaduna hotel room. Outside, the city was quiet resting. Only the occasional sound of a passing keke or distant barking dog broke the stillness of the night.

Inside the room, the air was still

Amina lay on the bed, wrapped in the white sheets, sleeping like a child. One hand curled under her cheek, her lips slightly parted. Her soft breathing filled the space with a kind of calm Khalid had never known She looked so peaceful, like the world hadn't tried to destroy her heart. Like she hadn't bled, cried, lost.

Khalid sat at the edge of the armchair by the window, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor. His back was hunched, his fingers running through his hair over and over again.

He hadn't slept

He couldn't

How could he sleep when everything he believed about his life was crumbling?

Aminu Bello

That name had once meant everything Power,Discipline, Authority, Pain, But also... home,Family, Baba. The man he tried to please every day of his life. The man who taught him how to hide his emotions, to fight his tears, to be perfect To never make a mistake.

And now?

He wasn't even his father

Khalid let out a slow, trembling breath
So who am I, then?

Was he even anybody without Aminu's shadow?

He turned slightly to look at Amina Her face that softness that calm.

His chest tightened

This girl this woman. This firecracker of a soul who teased him like a child, argued with him like an old friend, and comforted him like... like she knew him. Not the version of him that Aminu created but the broken, bare, real one.

He didn't even know what to call what they had.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

They weren't just friends
They weren't exactly lovers either

But when she touched him, when she looked at him, when she held his hand without judgment, it did something to him. Something deep.

She didn't ask him to be strong
She didn't expect him to be perfect

She just... stayed

And that scared the hell out of him

Was this what love felt like?

Was Abdul right all along?

Could someone like him even love someone like her? Was he allowed to? Would it ever be fair?

But she loves Yasir, he reminded himself bitterly.

Yasir The boy she'd grown up with Her first everything. The one she saw when she closed her eyes at night. The one whose name she whispered in her dreams.

Khalid rubbed his palms against his trousers, suddenly feeling cold.

You don't get to want her, he told himself.

She deserves her own choice. Her own happiness.

And maybe that's not you

You were just the guy who married her because Baba said so.

Just the one who stepped in to protect her when things fell apart

Just the man who caught her when Yasir let her fall

She never chose you

Not really
His heart clenched

He stood up, slowly, quietly His bare feet padded across the tiled floorbHe reached for the side table and picked up the room key card. Then, he looked at her one more time.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She shifted slightly, murmuring something in her sleep. Her hand reached out toward his side of the bed empty

He almost walked back Almost.

But he didn't

Because if he stayed any longer, he would never leave.

He grabbed his keys from the table, ran a shaky hand over his face, and walked toward the door.

Every step felt like a betrayal
A part of him wanted to wake her up To tell her everything To ask her to stop him To beg her stay with me,Choose me.

But he didn't
He couldn't

The door clicked softly as it shut behind him.

And just like that, Khalid was gone into the cold Kaduna night, heart heavy, mind racing, still wondering what love truly meant... and whether he was strong enough to let it go.

Outside the hotel – 3:13 a.m.

Yasir sat slouched in the driver's seat of his black Camaro, parked under a flickering streetlamp at Ungwan Rimi. The engine was off, the night air drifting in through the half cracked window. Kaduna nights were different quiet, heavy, like the city itself was holding its breath. The street was empty except for a sleeping mai tea cart across the road and a stray cat rummaging near a dustbin.

His phone sat forgotten in his lap, screen black. He hadn't moved for over an hour. His head rested against the leather headrest, eyes bloodshot and burning not from tears, but from everything he was holding in. Confusion,Guilt,Regret,Jealousy.

He had send Amina a message two hours ago.

No reply since

He had even typed out, "I'm sorry Please talk to me." But he didn't send it.

What was the point?

She wasn't his anymore Maybe she never was.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His phone buzzed suddenly, vibrating against his thigh, sharp and jarring in the silence.

He jumped slightly, heart racing.

KHALID.

His fingers fumbled slightly as he picked up. For a moment, hope flickered in his chest.

"Amina?" he said quickly

A pause

Then came the reply, calm but tired. "No It's me Khalid."

Yasir sat up straighter in the seat, blinking, heart dropping. "Oh..."

Another silence

"Where are you?" Khalid asked.

Yasir frowned. "Why?"

"Can we talk?" Khalid's voice was low Not aggressive Not cold Just... worn.

Yasir paused, trying to gauge the meaning behind those words. It wasn't what he expected.

"Yeah Sure."
"Where are you?" Khalid asked

"Unguwar Rimi"
"Come to the hotel premium suites "
He glanced around him. "I've been outside Hotel Premium Suites, Ungwan Rimi Been here a while."

"Stay there I'll be down in a minute," Khalid said, then ended the call.

Yasir dropped his phone onto the passenger seat, rubbed his palms against his face, then reached for the small bottle of water in the cup holder. He took a slow sip, nerves crawling in his chest.

The same guy he used to hate. The same guy who married the girl he loved. The same guy who'd protected her better than he ever could.

What the hell did he want to talk about?

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Downstairs, Hotel Parking Lot 3:26 a.m.
Ungwan Rimi, Kaduna

The night was still. The only sound was the soft hum of the distant generator and the occasional bark of a restless dog echoing from the next street.

Khalid stepped out into the parking lot, The ground was still slightly damp from an earlier drizzle, glistening under the amber glow of the streetlight.

He found Yasir leaning against the sleek black Camaro, arms crossed, eyes wary. The younger man straightened slightly as he saw Khalid approach.

The air between them was thick Not with anger but something heavier Grief ,Confusion and History.

Khalid stopped a few feet away, voice low.

"What's up?" Yasir asked, cautious, eyes scanning his face for clues.

Khalid took a breath. "I know this whole thing... this revelation about Aminu... about our father... It's a lot."

Yasir gave a slow nod, lips pressed together "You think?"

Khalid cracked a weak, bitter smile. "Yeah For me too I've lived my whole life under that man's shadow Trying to survive him. Worshipping someone who never saw me as a son... just an accident."

Yasir looked down at his feet. "At least our acknowledged you You were the golden boy I was just... the inconvenience. The bastard from the wrong wife."

They both laughed softly. Hollow laughter But it was something
Khalid looked at Yasir, really looked at him for the first time. "I never wanted to be in the middle of you and AminabWallahi, I didn't I was just... thrown into it Arranged marriage Political moves I didn't even know she was your girlfriend ."

Yasir nodded. "I know I used to think you stole her. But now... I don't even know if I ever had her to begin with."

Silence

The city felt asleep around them, but inside both men, something was slowly waking up. Truth.

Khalid exhaled sharply, glancing at the hotel. "Now that I know who I ambor who I'm not I have to do something. I'm going back to Abuja. Tonight. I need to face AminunEnd this."

Yasir's brows furrowed. "Bro... are you sure? That man is not normal He's dangerous."

"I know But so am I. I'm not afraid anymore. I've been afraid all my life."

Yasir stepped forward. "And what about Amina?"

Khalid hesitated His jaw clenched, eyes suddenly cloudy. "You stay with her She needs someone she knows. Someone familiar She trusts you She loves you."

Yasir swallowed hard, guilt crawling up his spine. "After what I did... I don't know if I deserve that trust."

"She still sees something in you," Khalid said "I don't know why But she does."

Yasir shook his head. "But youbshe's soft around you. Real You calmed her when I couldn't. You held her when she broke."

Khalid's voice was low, pained. "Doesn't mean I get to keep her."

There was a long pause Both men breathing in the heaviness of their shared grief.

"I'll talk to her father when I get back," Khalid added. "If she wants to marry you, then so be it. Maybe... maybe she deserves to choose for once."

Yasir stared at him. "Why are you doing this?"

Khalid's voice cracked slightly. "Because I'm tired Of pretending Of being molded into someone I'm not I've been Aminu's puppet since I was born . I want to live for myself now."

Yasir rubbed his forehead. "I used to hate you, man. You were everything I wasn't Confident Rich Respected."

"And I envied you," Khalid admitted. "You were free You loved openly You laughed like you had nothing to lose. I wanted that."

Yasir blinked, surprised.

Khalid took a step closer and offered his hand.

"Whatever happens next... we're brothers. We didn't choose it. But maybe we can stop the cycle before it ruins more lives."

Yasir looked at the hand. Then slowly, he gripped it, firm and honest. "No more lies No more war."

"Deal," Khalid said.

Then they hugged awkwardly at first, then tighter. Two men with scars from the same monster, finally realizing they were on the same side.

Khalid pulled back, keys jangling in his hand.

"Take care of her."

"I will," Yasir said softly. "And you... take care of yourself."

Khalid nodded once, then turned toward his car.

As he got in and started the engine, the headlights lit up the parking lot, briefly casting Yasir in a halo of white light.

He didn't wave

He didn't look back

He just drove into the night toward truth, toward danger, toward the final reckoning.

And for the first time, Yasir stood alone without hate in his heart.

Just quiet respect

And hope

Kaduna 7:42am
Hotel, Ungwan Rimi

Amina's phone buzzed loudly on the nightstand, dragging her out of a heavy, restless sleep. Her lashes fluttered open as she groaned softly, head pounding with leftover anxiety. The morning sun filtered weakly through the dusty curtains, casting warm streaks across the bed.

She reached for the phone, still half asleep, and her hand brushed against someone's arm.

A small smile crept onto her lips. "Khalid?" she murmured, turning to face him.

But it wasn't Khalid

It was Yasir

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His eyes opened lazily. "Morning, baby," he said with a sleepy grin, stretching like he belonged there
Amina's body went stiff
She sat up in bed so quickly her heart skipped a beat. "What the hell... Yasir?!"

He rubbed his face, unfazed. "Relax, babe Khalid left early. He called mebsaid he had to handle something urgent in Abuja. He asked me to stay with you That's all."

Amina's mind was racing Abuja? Her breath caught in her throat.

"No, no, no..." she muttered, already reaching for her phonebHe wouldn't Not alone.

She dialed Khalid's number with trembling fingers Once ,Twice.

Switched off

She tried again

Still switched off

Her panic grew She stood abruptly, grabbing her wrapper from the floor, pacing barefoot across the cold tiled floor

Yasir sat up. "Why are you freaking out? I thought you'd be happy I'm here. I stayed for you."

She whirled around. "Happy?! Yasir, do you even know what Aminu Bello is capable of?! That man is a devil, wallahi. Khalid he's going straight into a lion's den!"

Yasir frowned, voice defensive. "You're seriously this worried about him?"

Amina's voice cracked. "You don't understand. He's not like you. He carries everything alone. He never asks for help. If he snapsbif he loses it I don't know what'll happen. I need to be there. He needs me."

Yasir stood, lips tightening. "Are you listening to yourself? What about me? What about how I feel? You never panicked for me like this. Never chased after me."

She blinked at him, hurt flashing in her eyes. "Yasir, this isn't the time."

"But it's true, isn't it?" His tone was sharp now, jealousy bubbling just beneath the surface. "You love him Admit it."

Amina looked away, her breathing shallow. "I don't know what this is, YasirbI'm confused Everything is a mess. But right now, all I know is... I can't sit here and wait while he walks into hell alone."

Yasir's voice dropped, almost a whisper. "So I was just a mistake."

She didn't answer

He stepped closer, grabbing her wrist not violently, but firm enough to stop her. "How will you even get there? You don't have a car here. You don't even know where he went."

She pulled away, tears burning behind her eyes. "I'll take the train Or a bus I don't care I'll find him."

"Are you mad?" Yasir snapped. "It's not safe You're not even fully recovered."

"I don't care!" she shouted, voice trembling. "You don't get it, Yasir! I watched that man cry for the first time. I saw what's behind his walls. I saw the pain he's been hiding from the world and from himself. And now he's going to face the man who made him like that Alone."

The room fell silent

Yasir's face changed The cockiness faded. He looked down, swallowing hard.

"You... you really love him," he said quietly.

Amina wiped her face, her voice soft but firm. "I don't know But I won't let him go through this alone."

There was a long pause

Yasir nodded slowly the he picked up his keys from the table.

"Let's go."

She turned to him, stunned. "What?"

He didn't look at her. "I'll drive you to Abuja. If you're going, you're not going alone."

Amina hesitated For a moment, it felt like the old Yasir the boy who used to walk her home from school even when he was broke. The boy who always showed up, even when he was hurt.

She gave him a small nod

"Okay," she said

They didn't speak as they dressed. The tension still hung thick in the air. But beneath it something quieter lingered.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Regret,Jealousy, Worry And somewhere buried deep... loyalty.

Yasir started the car. Amina sat beside him, staring out the window, praying silently that they would get to Khalid in time.

And that it wasn't already too late

Abuja 9:56am

Aminu Bello's Mansion, Asokoro

Khalid stood still, staring up at the towering gates of the mansion that had once been his prison. The sun beat down on his back, but inside, he felt cold Empty Focused.
He stood their went back to his car came back didn't know what to do

Spent more then two hours doing thesame thing then finally
He pressed the bell with force.

A long pause

Then the gates creaked open, slowly, as if the house itself had sensed the weight of what was coming.

He walked in.

Past the hedges trimmed to perfection Past the silent marble fountain that hadn't worked in years. Past the same garden where he'd once knelt in the rain for hours as punishment for speaking out of turn.

His shoes echoed across the glossy tiles of the main corridor His heartbeat was calm and Steady.

He didn't knock when he entered the living room. He didn't greet anyone.

He just called out

"Aminu!!!!!"

Footsteps upstairs. But first.....

A woman appeared at the archway. Fair skinned. Hijab loosely draped over her . His father's second wife. Timid and Always pretending not to see the bruises.

She gasped. "Khalid? Subhanallah, (lfy?)what what are you doing here?"

He didn't answer He was staring past her. Through her

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Ina yake ?(Where is he?)"

She stepped back nervously. "Please... Khalid, tell me what happened. Is everything okay?"

"Where...Is... He?"

She hesitated

He moved

Climbing the stairs two steps at a time, the house growing darker, heavier with every footfallbThe walls seemed to whisper the ghosts of his childhood. "You'll never be enough." "Speak when spoken to." "Aminu Bello's son does not cry."

He reached the door to the study

The one place where voices were raised behind closed doors. Where punishments were delivered in silence. Where decisions were made.

Boom
He kicked it open.

And there he was

Aminu Bello

Sitting behind his massive mahogany desk. Calm and Collected. A steaming cup of tea in one hand, newspaper in the other. Wearing a starched white babban riga like it was just another peaceful morning.

He didn't even look up right away.

When he finally did, his lips curled into a thin, knowing smile.

"I see the prodigal son has returned."

Khalid stepped inside slowly. Like a man walking into his final exam. Or his execution.

No words

Just the slow, terrifying motion of him reaching under his shirt ...
Pulling out a pistol

And pointing it straight at the man who claimed to be his father.

Aminu didn't move Didn't blink.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Good morning... daddy."

Aminu's brows rose faintly, the smugness undisturbed. "So It's come to this?"

Khalid's grip was tight. Unshaking The weight of the gun nothing compared to the weight in his chest.

"No," he said
"This is just the beginning."

Downstairs 12:12am

The housekeeper screamed as the front door flew open.

Amina ran in, breathless, her scarf slipping from her head. Sweat clung to her back, her eyes wide and wild. Yasir stumbled in behind her, still parking the car as she burst through the hallway.

"Where is he?" she cried to his stepmother .

The woman just pointed upstairs, speechless.

"Khalid!" Amina shouted, taking the stairs two at a time, her heart pounding in her ears. "Khalid!!!"

Upstairs

"Why?" Khalid's voice was raw. "Why did you lie to me my entire life? You beat me, broke me, controlled every step I took why, when I wasn't even yours?"

Aminu leaned back in his chair, folding his arms calmly

"Because I could Because you were useful."

The words hit like a knife.

Khalid's finger twitched on the trigger His jaw locked.

"You killed my childhood."

Aminu smirked. "You never had one to begin with."

Khalid's eyes flashed. The gun rose higher.

"Do it," Aminu whispered. "Be like me be the man I've always wanted you to be ."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Just then

"Khalid, no!"

Amina burst through the doorway, her voice tearing through the air.
He turned slightly just slightly and for a moment, his hand wavered.

Tears streamed down Amina's cheeks. She stepped forward slowly, like approaching a wounded lion.

"You don't need to do this. You're not him You're not a monster.dan Allah Khalid kar kayi !(please khalid don't!)"

Behind her, Yasir appeared at the doorway, speechless, watching everything.

Khalid looked at her. Looked at the trembling gun in his hand. Then at Aminu still seated. Still smirking Still in control.

He took a deep breath.

And then

Click

He emptied the magazine

The bullets clattered

Chapter Thirty four – The fall of Aminu bello

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The silence was a living thing

It breathed in the corners of the lavish study wrapped in heavy mahogany, old money, and thick curtains that dulled the morning light. It crawled up the walls lined with oil portraits of power hungry ancestors and hung between the expensive air conditioning and the sweat on Khalid's brow.

Khalid stood motionless

Chest heaving Eyes rimmed red The black pistol in his hand trembled barely but it did.

His fingers clenched and unclenched around the grip, knuckles pale.

Across the room, Aminu Bello sat in his oversized leather chair like a king surveying a failed prince. His white babban riga immaculate, prayer beads clicking lazily in one hand. He didn't blink.

Still seated still smirking still in control.

Behind Khalid, Amina stood in the doorway eyes wide, lips parted Her voice broke into the tension like a whispered prayer.

"Khalid… please."

He didn't look at her

He didn't move
But his breathing changed From shallow gasps to deep, heavy exhales. Like a drowning man finally hitting the surface.

Click
The magazine slid out of the gun
A soft clatter of metal. Then one by one the bullets were tipped onto the glass coffee table. They hit the surface like small silver truths, like secrets finally confessed.

Clink Clink Clink
Then he dropped the gun.

It hit the floor with a hollow, final clang

Amina gasped and rushed forward not running, not yet, but as if her legs had only just remembered how to move. She reached for the weapon, her fingers brushing his.

He was trembling

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She didn't care

She wrapped her arms around him from behind Gently Then tighter

Holding Khalid like she needed to remind herself that he hadn't just crossed a line that could never be undone.

He didn't resist

But he didn't respond either
He stood there, arms by his side, chest pressed against hers, like a man whose entire identity had collapsed inside his ribs.

"I'm done being your weapon," Khalid said finally, his voice calm but cracked, low like thunder before a storm. "I'm not your tool. I'm not your property And I'm not your son."

That's when Aminu's smirk vanished.

Just for a second
Just long enough
But Amina saw it Khalid felt it.

The monster flinched

"You ungrateful bastard," Aminu growled. "I made you."

Khalid didn't even turn around. "No You broke me And now I'm fixing myself."

Aminu stood slowly The way snakes rise before they strike.

"You think this is over because you dropped a gun?" he sneered. "You think love makes you free? You think this girl makes you a man?"

His voice rose Contorted with a rage that was older than Khalid's trauma. "You're just like your father Weak Emotional You let a woman dictate your worth just like he did."

Amina flinched, but her grip on Khalid only tightened. "Stop it," she said sharply

But Aminu kept going
"Your mother cried the day you were born. Not because she was happy But because she knew you were going to be useless Just like her that's why she didn't even fight to survive A child born with a soft heart and no spine. That's what I've had to deal with all my life."

Khalid's jaw clenched His fists balled.

Amina turned to face Aminu fully

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her voice came out strong and clear Not broken or shaking.

"He's nothing like you," she said. "And thank God for that And he's never going to be That's why you hate him. Because he's free Because you can't control him anymore."

Aminu laughed bitterly, stepping forward. "You think I can't control him? You think you've won because you made him cry into your lap? You're a placeholder A distraction."

Khalid looked up, eyes narrowed His voice was quieter now, almost pitying.

"Even now... you don't see it I'm not afraid of you anymore."

Then
A sound a soft rustle a shift in the corner.

Khalid blinked Amina turned.

Yasir
Standing in the corner, frozen, quiet, unnoticed until now.

His face shattered. Eyes bloodshot Shirt wrinkled Shoulders slumped.

He had watched the whole thing.

And Amina... she hadn't even looked at him.

Not once
Not since she walked in Not since she touched Khalid Not since she whispered, "It's over."

He took one slow step back
And another
Then he turned No dramatic exit No speech No confrontation.

He just walked away

OUTSIDE

The Abuja sun was high, too hot for this early.

Yasir's feet moved on their own, mind blank except for the image of her Holding him.

His hands shook as he climbed into his car

The Camaro's leather was hot, but he didn't notice. He just sat there. Breathing hardbThen

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Bang

He punched the steering wheel

Three times

He didn't stop until his knuckles split

And still, the pain inside didn't go away.

His forehead slumped against the wheel.

"Ya Allah..." he whispered, brokenly. "Help me forget her... Make me better... Please... I can't keep doing this..."

He squeezed his eyes shut

He had been trying to hold on to something that wasn't his anymore.

Maybe it never was

Maybe Amina had just stayed with him out of loyalty Out of fear.

But not love
And now he knew.

And it was Khalid
It had always been Khalid

Not the cleanest Not the softest But real.

The man she trusted with her tears. Her pain maybe even her body Her heart.

Yasir stared at the blood on his knuckles.

And for the first time in a long time

He felt truly alone

BACK INSIDE MOMENTS LATER

Khalid collapsed into the nearest armchair. Breathless

His heart was racing, but his soul?

Still

Amina knelt in front of him, both hands holding his.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

He stared at her

And his walls didn't go up. he let it all out The fear the grief. The boy who just wanted to be loved.

"I'm tired," he whispered

"I know," she said
"I didn't want to be him I fought it But sometimes... I think the monster is inside me too."

Amina shook her head. "You fought it That means it didn't win."

And slowly, like something divine

He believed her
Aminu bello watched in disgust
Then
SIRENS

Loud Piercing and Sharp like razors in the air.

Then the thunder began.
Cars Doors slamming. Boots hitting the ground.

The entire mansion trembled as power arrived.

Through the long glass doors, a fleet of black SUVs rolled into the compound, tyres crunching gravel, lights flashing silently. Armed men poured out DSS, Police, CID, all moving fast, focused, trained.

The security guards at the gate didn't even try to resist.
They just stepped aside, heads bowed.

Static hissed from the mansion's security monitors. The cameras had been cut.

Inside the study, Khalid and Amina watched in stillness.

Aminu Bello stood, suddenly unsure of his legs.
His smirk had died long ago.
Now he looked like what he truly was an old man who was finally cornered.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Then
She entered

AYAH ABDULKAREEM ALASSANE

Navy blue abaya flowing behind her like a judge's robe
Shades still onBadge clipped to her chest.
Her voice?
Cold,Steady, Sharp.

Like a blade straight from Kano.

"Alhaji Aminu Bello," she said, walking straight into the lion's den. "You are under arrest for conspiracy, financial fraud, abuse of political office, obstruction of justice, and attempted murder."

She paused

Then added, "Among... other things."

The room froze

Aminu's face turned white

"You can't do this," he hissed. "I am Aminu Bello. I was a senator before you were even...."

".....Corrupt," Ayah cut in smoothly, removing her sunglasses. "And now, you're caught."

Behind her, Abdul Junaid stepped in
Black white and crisp. Cap angled like a true Arewa don.
He didn't speak right away

He just looked around slowly, eyes calm but calculating.

His gaze stopped on Khalid

Then on Amina
And finally on Aminu

He smiled Just a little The kind of smile you give your enemy when you've already buried them in silence.

Aminu growled. "You're behind this, aren't you?"

Abdul stepped forward

"You taught me everything I know," he said simply. "How to build power How to cover my tracks How to destroy a man without lifting a finger."

He tilted his head slightly

"You just forgot to teach me how to lose."
Abdul and ayah had framed aminu of crimes tgey had committed themselves and added his crimes to it too
"Take him," Ayah ordered

The officers didn't wait

Two DSS agents rushed forward, grabbed Aminu by the arms. One snapped silver handcuffs onto his wrists.

Aminu shouted, "Unhand me! I said unhand me! Do you know who I am?! Do you know who I AM?!"

He struggled, but it was useless
The men were younger and Stronger. And they had orders.

He turned to Khalid

"You think you've won? You're nothing without my name! You'll always be nothing!"

Khalid didn't blink
Didn't even look afraid
He just watched

Amina was beside him, holding his hand tightly.

And then Aminu looked at her.

The girl he once tried to erase

"You ruined him!" he spat. "Just like your kind always ruins strong men. You..."
SLAP

It wasn't Amina
It wasn't Khalid
It was Ayah

One clean slap across his face

The whole room went quiet again

"You're done talking," Ayah said. "You will speak to your lawyer, and no one else."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Aminu stared at her, dazed
He had never been hit like that before
Not by a woman
Not in public
They dragged him away

He kept shouting as they pulled him through the main hallway

"This isn't the end! You hear me?! I will be your end!"

But outside, the sirens drowned him out.

IN THE SILENCE THAT FOLLOWED

Khalid sat down heavily, like his knees gave out.

Amina stayed close, kneeling in front of him.

He was sweating Quiet ,Eyes distant.

She touched his cheek

"Khalid..." she said softly

He looked at her slowly, like someone waking up from a nightmare.

"She's gone," he said. "My mother... she can rest now."

Amina nodded, lips trembling. "You did it You broke the chain."

Ayah walked up to them, her voice now gentler.

"Hey," she said to Amina. "You good?"

Amina stood, wiping her face with her scarf. "I think so... I don't know It feels like a dream."

Ayah gave her a sad smile. "Trauma feels like that. But it's real And you survived."

She looked at Khalid

"You too You're free now."

Khalid shook his head. "Freedom doesn't come cheap."

Abdul Junaid walked over and placed a hand on Khalid's shoulder.

"Nothing worth having does," he said.

Then he looked him in the eyes.

"And now, you have a decision to make, Dan uwa na(my brother)Do you build something new... or keep burning what's left?"

Khalid looked down at his shaking hands.

Amina held one of them again

"I don't want to burn anymore," he whispered.

Abdul nodded once. "Good."

He looked outside, where Aminu's convoy was disappearing down the street.

"Then let the ashes stay behind. We've got work to do."

The city was just waking up.

The sun was stretching its arms across the horizon, painting the Abuja sky with strokes of gold and soft orange. The streets far below were still quiet. Just a few cars A few calls to prayer floating in the air like afternoon perfume.

Amina sat knees to her chest, staring out at the distant hills.
Beside her, Ayah Kareem walked out barefoot, holding two steaming cups of tea.

"Milk no sugar ," Ayah said, handing her one. "Just lemon today."

Amina took the cup with a small, grateful nod. "Thank you."

They sat in silence for a few seconds, the way women sometimes donno pressure, just space.

Then Ayah sipped slowly and said, "You remind me of me."

Amina blinked. "Me? How?"

Ayah smiled slightly. "That soft fire The kind that doesn't burn loud... but lasts."

Amina looked down at her tea. "I don't feel strong. I feel... lost."

Ayah chuckled. "That's exactly how it starts."

She leaned back, letting the cool breeze brush against her face.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You know," Ayah said, "If I told you I hated my husband when I met him would you believe it?"

Amina tilted her head. "Depends How bad was it?"

Ayah glanced sideways. "He kidnapped me."

Amina almost choked. "Wait What?! You're joking?"

"I wish," Ayah laughed softly. "It's a long story ."

Amina stared at her, stunned. "And now you're married to him?"

"Five years strong," Ayah said, raising her tea cup. "Funny, huh?"

"That sounds like madness," Amina whispered.

"It was At first," Ayah nodded. "But I saw something Beneath all the anger, the silence, the violence I saw the man."

She looked at Amina

"And I stayed I fought for him Because I knew he wasn't evil. He was just... broken Like so many of our men."

Amina was quiet for a long while

Then she said softly, "Khalid... he has demons."

Ayah didn't speak for a moment. Then she nodded slowly. "Yes He does a whole lot of them"

"Sometimes I feel like I'm holding a storm," Amina whispered. "And if I let go for even one second, it'll destroy him."

Ayah reached out and gently placed her hand on Amina's.

"That's love," she said. "Not the Instagram kind Not the fairytale kind. The real kind. The kind that hurts."

Amina's throat tightened.

"Does it get easier?" she asked.

Ayah shook her head, smiling sadly. "No But you get stronger. Your heart learns to hold more. Your soul stretches And one day... you wake up, and you don't feel afraid of the fire anymore."

Amina's eyes watered. "Sometimes I wish I had a simple love. Clean and Easy. Not one soaked in trauma and blood and secret"
Ayah laughed gently. "We're Northern women, Amina When have we ever had simple lives?"

Amina smiled through her tears. "True."

There was silence again.

Then Ayah spoke quietly. "I've met Khalid before. A few times Always neat Quiet Respectful. But controlled Too controlled."

She glanced at Amina
"He's not cold He's haunted."

Amina nodded slowly. "I've seen glimpses. The tattoos. The scars The way he flinches when he hears his father's name..."

"He's not like them," Ayah said. "But he's capable of everything they are That's the danger That's the power."

She turned to face her fully now.

"That's why you matter, Amina Because you pull the good out of him. You remind him he has something to lose. You make him want to be more than what they raised him to be."

Amina whispered, "But what if I fail? What if I'm not strong enough?"

Ayah leaned closer, her voice firm. "Then try anyway Even when you're tired. Even when he pushes you away ans trust me he will Stand stay . Let him fall apart in your arms if he needs to. And when he's ready... help him rebuild."

Amina couldn't hold it anymore. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

"I loved someone else once," she confessed. "But that love felt like a lie compared to this."

Ayah nodded. "That's because it probably was."

They both laughed quietly Broken women, healing.

Amina reached for Ayah and hugged her tightly.

For a long time, they stayed like that two women caught in the storm of politics, power, trauma, and men. But still standing.

Still fighting

Ayah pulled back and smiled. "You're stronger than you think."

Amina wiped her face. "I hope so."

They sat in silence again, sipping their tea.

Below them, the city kept moving. People honking. The scent of fried akara wafting through the air. The sound of a suya man setting up his stall nearby Abuja was fully awake.

Ayah whispered, "You know, when I met Abdul... I thought he was the devil."

Amina laughed again, genuinely this time. "And now?"

"Now?" Ayah grinned. "He still scares me. But I love him And he loves me back Fully and Loudly Without shame That's worth something."

Amina looked out at the sun rising over the hills and said, "Maybe I want that too."

"You do," Ayah replied. "That's why you're here."

Then she stood and reached for Amina's hand. "Come. Let's start this day."

And as they walked inside, barefoot and teacups empty, it felt like a new chapter had begun not just for Khalid or Abdul or Aminu Bello.

But for them
The women
The quiet strength behind all the storms.

The air still smelled faintly of sweat, gun oil, and fresh tea. Outside the glass window, the police convoy was now a distant hum, the dust slowly settling in the driveway.

Khalid stood silent, one hand tucked into his kaftan pocket, the other loosely holding a glass of untouched water.

Abdul Junaid joined him at the window, sleeves rolled, cap pushed slightly back like he'd just walked out of a council meeting or a war room. He wasn't smiling Just breathing. Like a lion that had finally sat down.

They stood in silence for a while, men like them didn't always need words.

Then Abdul spoke

"You're free now."
His voice was low Almost gentle
"Legally,Emotionally,Spiritually Aminu Bello is finished."

Khalid didn't move His eyes were still fixed on the road.

"All his assets?" he asked finally, voice rough.

"Being transferred as we speak. His shares, estates, offshore accounts every naira he ever buried in the shadows. I'll make sure you own it all."

Khalid nodded once. Slowly.
"I don't want his blood money."

"It's not about the money," Abdul replied. "It's about taking power from a man who used it to destroy everything he touched. You survived him. That's enough to claim what he never thought you deserved."

Khalid didn't answer

Abdul turned, studied him for a second.

"He called you weak."
He chuckled. "But you were the only one strong enough to walk away without pulling the trigger. That's power Not bullets."

Khalid exhaled sharply. "You think it makes me soft?"

Abdul raised a brow. "Soft men don't stare down their demons with empty hands. You were raised in fire, Khalid. But you still chose mercy. That's harder than revenge."

There was silence again. The kind that came after long battles.

Khalid glanced sideways.

"You think I still have a chance with her?"

Abdul tilted his head, a knowing smirk tugging at his mouth.

"Amina?"

Khalid just nodded.

Abdul stepped back from the window, leaned against the wall. Crossed his arms.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"When I told Ayah how I felt," he began, "she was still in love with Jamal."

Khalid turned, surprised. "Wait the Jamal? Your ex best friend?"

Abdul nodded. "The one and only. She used to cry over him in my presence. Said I'd never understand what real love meant."

"Ouch," Khalid muttered.

"Yeah I wanted to shoot him Twice." Abdul smirked. "But I waited and I stayed I showed up every day. Quiet and Steady. And then one morning, she woke up and realized I was still there And he wasn't."

Khalid swallowed Something in his chest shifted.

"And now she's your wife."

Abdul looked down at his wedding band, twisting it slowly.

"Five years and a son "

Khalid chuckled. "You're a madman."

"Mad in love," Abdul replied, tapping Khalid's chest lightly. "And so are you Stop pretending like it's just guilt or duty."

Khalid didn't argue

Instead, he looked out the window again. The sun was higher now. A gentle orange warming the city skyline.

"You think she'll forgive me?"

"She already has." Abdul said it without blinking. "The only person still punishing you... is you."

Khalid said nothing.

Then Abdul stepped closer, lowering his voice.

"Listen to me, Khalid. Don't let Yasir's ghost haunt you. That boy had his chance. He broke it. You didn't steal Amina. You showed up when she needed someone who wouldn't disappear."

Khalid's eyes softened.
"But she still looks at him like..."

"Like he was her past." Abdul cut in. "But not her future."

There was a long pause.

"You know," Abdul added, grinning, "I see the way she looks at you now. Like she's waiting for you to give her a reason to stay."

Khalid muttered under his breath. "What if I don't know how to be that man?"

"Then learn," Abdul said simply. "One step. One prayer One day at a time. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to show up. The rest is God's work."

Another silence.

Then Khalid reached for the half full water glass and downed it.

"I should tell her how I feel."

"Definitely," Abdul said. "Preferably without a gun this time."

They both laughed. Not loudly Just enough.

"You sure you're not secretly a therapist?" Khalid asked.

Abdul grinned. "No Just a mafia boy who fell in love and survived."

He paused, then added

"Now go Before she thinks you've run away again."

Khalid took a breath

Then nodded and walked toward the door.

And behind him, Abdul whispered with a proud smile
"Madmen like us... we deserve happy endings too."

The chaos had died down. Officers were gone. DSS vans had cleared out. What was once Aminu Bello's empire now stood stripped of its power, soaked in quiet and dust.Abdul and ayah had left

Khalid remained near the fountain in the courtyard, where silence felt the heaviest. His kaftan clung to his back, soaked from sweat and emotion. He hadn't spoken since the last SUV drove out.

He just... breathed

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

From behind him, the sound of sobbing.

"Khalid..."

He turned slowly.

It was his father's wife His stepmother.

She stood at the edge of the archway, her expensive wrapper folded neatly, but her face was bare no makeup, no gele, no pride. Just tears. Her hands trembled as she clutched her prayer beads.

"Khalid, please," she whispered again, stepping closer.
"Just... just hear me out."

He didn't speak Just watched her.

Her voice cracked.
"I'm sorry."

Khalid looked away, jaw tightening.
"Now?"

"I know I have no right," she said, her voice shaking. "But I have to try."

He folded his arms. Eyes hard.

She moved slowly, like every step carried years of shame.

"I was afraid of him," she said, choking on her words. "I let Aminu rule my life. I let him tell me what to feel, how to act. When I married him, I thought I was entering a palace. I didn't know it was a prison."

Her lips trembled.

"I wanted children," she confessed softly. "But he said I didn't need any. That I already had you. And then... he made sure I could never carry. And he made sure I could never get close to you or take you as my son"
Khalid frowned slightly.

She looked him in the eye.

"The injections, the pills. I didn't know what they were until it was too late. He controlled everything. My body My womb My life."

A beat of silence.

"And you," she whispered. "You were just a boy. And I watched him... crush you I watched him slap you, beat you, lock you up. I watched you flinch whenever his voice came near. And I said nothing."

Khalid's chest rose and fell. Slowly Tension in his arms.

"Why?" he finally asked. His voice was low. Quiet. "Why didn't you stop him?"

She broke.

She fell to her knees.

"I was weak!" she cried. "I was so scared. I didn't know how to fight him. I didn't even know how to fight for myself. I told myself it wasn't my place. That I was just a wife. But that's not true."

She sobbed, face in her palms.

"I should have protected you. I should have stood between you and him. I should have been your mother."

Khalid didn't move. His fingers twitched at his side.

"He made me believe love was a weapon," she continued. "But it's not It's what I should have given you."

She looked up, tears streaking down her cheeks.

"I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. I know I failed you, over and over. But if you let me..."
Her voice broke again.
"I want to be your mother. The way I should've been. Not out of guilt. But because I love you. I always did. Even when I was too much of a coward to show it."

Silence
Heavy

Khalid looked at her Really looked.

She was not the perfectly adorned woman he remembered. Not the quiet shadow in the background. She was broken. But honest.

He stepped forward. Slowly.

Then he opened his arms.

She gasped. Crawled into his embrace like a child.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered again and again.
"I know," Khalid murmured, his voice hoarse. "It's okay It's over now."

She held onto him like she was holding a second chance.

From a few feet away, Amina stood watching. Her heart full, tears pooling in her eyes. She'd never seen Khalid hug anyone like that. Not even her. He looked like a boy again just a boy who'd been waiting all his life to be held.

She turned away, blinking fast.

And then
Her stomach twisted.

"Yasir."

She spun around, eyes scanning the driveway, the hallway, the sitting room.
The gate. The garden.

He was gone
"Where's Yasir?" she whispered.

She walked forward, her voice rising.
"Yasir?!"

No one answered.
Just the sound of birds and dry wind.

Khalid pulled away from her and turned to Amina, confused.

"He was here?..." she said breathlessly. "He was right here..."

But the space where he had stood was empty now.

Yasir had vanished

Khalid turned to her slowly.

He looked tired. Not physically but soul tired. The kind of exhaustion that came from years of fighting battles no one saw.

"Thank you," he said, voice low.

Amina blinked. "For what?"

He looked down at the ground for a moment, then back at her.

"For being here For staying For helping me survive today."

A small, tentative smile touched her lips.
"You don't have to thank me, Khalid."

He nodded once. Then took a step back.

"You're free now."

Amina tilted her head slightly, confused.

"What do you mean?"

Khalid's voice was steady but distant.

"I mean... you don't owe me anything. We made a deal. And I dragged you into a war."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he raised a hand gently.

"You've lost enough because of me. You deserve peace."
A pause
"You deserve Yasir."

Her smile froze Just slightly.

"What?"

Khalid looked away, his jaw clenched.
"I saw the way you looked at him. After the hospital. After everything."

Amina's eyes widened.
"Khalid, I..."

"It's okay," he said quickly. Too quickly
"He was your first love. He's changed I saw it. Maybe he deserves a second chance. Maybe... maybe you do too."

She stared at him, the words crashing against her chest like rain on tin.

He thought she wanted Yasir
He didn't know
He didn't see the way her heart leapt every time he walked into a room. The way she held her breath when he sat beside her. The way she waited for his eyes to meet hers not out of fear, but something else. Something softer.

But now now he was setting her free.

And it almost hurt more than being trapped.

"Right," she said, nodding slowly She blinked hard. "Of course."

Khalid searched her face, as if waiting for her to fight it. To stop him But she didn't She couldn't.

Amina turned away, folding her arms again.

"He's not what I thought he was," she said after a long pause, voice barely above a whisper.

Khalid raised a brow. "Yasir?"

She didn't answer. Just kept staring at the horizon, where the last of the sun was fading behind rooftops.

He watched her carefully. There was something in her tone. Regret? Resentment? Maybe even... heartbreak?

But for who?

He didn't ask
Because he thought he already knew the answer.

And she didn't explain

Because she thought he didn't want to hear it.

They stood there, side by side, both feeling further apart than ever.

The breeze moved gently around them. A car passed in the distance. Somewhere, a call to prayer echoed softly in the air

But neither of them moved.

Neither of them said what they truly wanted to say.

And in that silence thick, aching, and almost unbearable they both misunderstood the same thing

That the person they wanted... was standing right there

Chapter thirty five - let's go home

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The adhan for Maghrib echoed faintly from a mosque nearby

The air was thick with silence a warm, heavy quiet that settled deep into the bones.

In the bathroom Khalid stood at the marble sink, water dripping from his fingers The tap was still running, ignored

His face was pale, eyes locked on the mirror.

This wasn't the boy Aminu Bello raised not the obedient son not the shielded heir not the pawn.

This was the man

The man who had walked into the lion's den and chose not to pull the trigger.

The man who knew the truth and still bore the weight of lies.

His jaw tensed as Abdul's words echoed again.

"Don't let Yasir's ghost haunt you."

For the first time, he understood

It wasn't about Yasir nor was it about Aminu

It was about him

Who he wanted to be

Who he could become if he chose to let go

He reached for a towel, wiped his face slowly. Let the silence wrap around him like a cloak.

And then.....

The soft click of the door

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He didn't move he didn't need to he knew that presence.

Amina

She stepped in gently, like she didn't want to disturb the room's stillness. She was still in her scarf dusty blue cotton wrapped loosely around her head. Her long gown was wrinkled from the day's chaos her face bare, tired, raw was still so achingly beautiful.

Their eyes met in the mirror

She closed the door behind her, leaning her back on it.

"Hey," she said softly, voice almost a whisper.

He turned, slowly

"You good?" he asked, barely above a murmur.

"No," she replied immediately, stepping forward. "Are you?"

He hesitated. "I'm fine"

"Liar no, you're not" Her voice dropped, firm but gentle. "Please stop lying, Khalid Talk to me."

He leaned back on the counter, head bowed. His fingers trembled slightly

"I thought... I thought putting an end to Aminu would give me peace Like once he was out of my life, I'd finally feel something... clean Like freedom."

He looked up His eyes were haunted.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"But he's gone now and I still feel... nothing. Just the same anxiety The same hollow ache. Like I've been carrying a wound for so long, I forgot what it means to feel anything else."

She walked toward him, step by step Careful as Slow

"Khalid... breathe," she said, close now. "Please Just... breathe."

He gave a bitter chuckle, his voice breaking.

"He ruined me, Amina He didn't just lie he designed me Crafted me like a weapon. Every decision I ever made was about proving something to him Even now, I can't stop hearing his voice in my head."

He looked up at her, eyes glassy.

"I'm too damaged I don't have anyone."

Her face softened

"That's not true he just left today ," she whispered

She closed the last bit of space between them and wrapped her arms around him

"You have me," she said firmly. "You have your stepmother she loves you. You have your weird friend Abdul You even have your real father Alhaji Ibrahim Maybe it's not perfect yet. But you're not alone You've never been alone, Khalid. You just... didn't know how to let yourself be loved."

He couldn't hold it in any longer

His knees gave way He sank to the floor.

She followed him down without hesitation.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

On the cool tiled floor, he buried his head in her stomach, arms wrapped tightly around her waist like a drowning man clinging to shore.

And she held him not like he was broken,not like he was weak,But like he was hers.

"Think about the good things," she murmured, stroking his hair. "Think about the fact that you survived. That you walked away without blood on your hands. That you still have choices."

He was silent Breathing unevenly.

"Khalid... I'm here," she said, her voice trembling now. "I'll always be."

He didn't speak for a long time His breathing slowed and Calmed.

Then he stood slowly, brushing his face with the back of his hand His cheeks were wet.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry for breaking down again For making you see me like this."

"No," she said, standing with him. "Don't ever apologize for that. There's nothing to be sorry for.besides I'm used to this I was in a relationship with a cry baby for years" she laughed

She placed a hand on his chest, over his heartbeat.

"You're allowed to break down You're allowed to feel. That's how we heal, Khalid. That's all you need right now Someone to see you and stay."

Their eyes locked again and in that quiet moment, there was no noise no trauma no ghost of Yasir no shadow of Aminu.

Just them

Two broken people... trying to be whole.

She smiled faintly. "We should probably go home."

He nodded. "Yeah."

They didn't let go of each other until they reached the hallway

The Ride Back

They came downstairs together quiet, composed, but something between them had shifted.

The air outside was cooler now, tinged with the after rain scent that made Abuja streets smell like wet sand and leaves. The sky had turned charcoal grey, with the last remnants of daylight fading.

Khalid didn't say much He simply reached into his pocket and handed his car keys to one of Amina's uniformed drivers, who nodded and opened the back door of the tinted black Prado SUV.

Khalid waited for Amina to slide in first. She did, her scarf slightly slipping from one side as she settled into the leather seat. He followed quietly, closing the door behind them.

The car pulled out of the driveway with a low hum.

Inside, the air was cold from the AC. Outside, the streets of Maitama rolled past them quiet diplomatic zones, the glow of NTA offices, men in kaftans sitting on plastic chairs outside buka joints, arguing about football.

Neither of them spoke.

Amina stared out the window, her hand resting quietly on her lap. Her mind was busy her thoughts circling Yasir like an orbit. Where had he gone? Was he okay? Was he still sitting in his car outside? Or had he driven off into the Abuja night with regret crawling up his throat?

And then... she felt it

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid's hand brushed hers, hesitant at first

She looked down

He didn't say a word

He just took her hand slowly, gently as though asking a question without speaking it and she answered

She let her fingers slip into his, soft and sure. Her palm rested in his her thumb traced his scar.

He squeezed back softly She didn't look at him.

He didn't look at her

But they both felt it the quiet agreement the comfort,the warmth.

In the front seat, the driver turned the radio on low. An old Arewa song crackled through the speakers something from Ali Jita, mournful but sweet, with lyrics about home and longing and the kind of love that hurts in silence.

They passed Gwarinpa

Amina shifted slightly, her shoulder brushing against Khalid's. He didn't move away he just adjusted, letting her lean into him like it was the most natural thing in the world no kisses no declarations just nearness,Quiet tension and Safety.

Outside, hawkers were lighting small fires to roast corn. The smell drifted in faintly when they stopped at a traffic light. Men waved lanterns near the sidewalk. A woman with a baby tied to her back was selling suya by the corner, fanning the smoke with an old magazine.

Life went on around them, but inside that car... time slowed.

They didn't talk about Aminu. Or Yasir Or the news headlines already circulating online.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

They didn't talk about the night's tears, or the way Khalid had sunk to the bathroom floor they didn't need to.

Some grief didn't need conversation. It just needed company.

As they approached Wuse II, Amina's eyes started to close. She hadn't realized how exhausted she was until that moment emotionally and physically. Her fingers remained wrapped in his.

Khalid glanced at her. She looked so peaceful like she was finally letting go, even if just for a while.

When the driver pulled into the compound, the gates opened slowly.

Khalid gently unlinked their fingers and opened the car door.

Amina stirred awake. "We're here?"

He nodded "Yeah."

She stepped out, fixing her scarf instinctively, suddenly shy again.

They walked to the front door without speaking. The crickets were loud now. A distant dog barked somewhere down the street. The night air was thick with earth and silence.

At the door, she paused

"Khalid," she said quietly, turning to him.

He stopped, looking at her his eyes soft, unreadable "Thank you," she whispered

"For what?"

"For not shutting me out."

He didn't smile But something in his face relaxed.

"Goodnight, Amina."

She nodded. "Goodnight."

Then they each went to their rooms.

The house settled into silence again but this time, it felt different.

Khadija's Call

Amina sat on the edge of her bed, her scarf slipping off one shoulder. The room was dim, lit only by the soft glow of her bedside lamp. Her phone buzzed again.

Khadija

She picked up, already bracing herself.

"Yooo, what's happening?! Where are you?!"

Khadija's voice came in hot, full of chaos and concern.

Amina exhaled slowly, rubbed her forehead "Aminu is gone."

"Gone as in dead gone?!" Khadija's voice rose with her signature mix of sarcasm and worry. "'Cause if that man finally dropped dead, I need to throw suya and puff puff in the air."

Amina let out a weak chuckle. "No jare Arrested Abdul and Ayah came with DSS. It was... intense."

There was a beat of silence. Then, "Ya Rabb..." Khadija's tone softened. "Thank God that man put all of you through hell. I was scared for you, wallahi. And Khalid? How is he holding up?"

Amina's voice dropped. "I don't know He says he's okay but... he's not I can see it He broke down in front of me, Khadija. Properly Like, on the floor."

"Wallahi, that man is going through it. You sef, what are you doing in your room when he's in his? Haba, Amina! He's in pieces and you're giving him space? For what? Oxygen is already free!"

Amina sighed, pulling her knees to her chest. "He thinks I still love Yasir."

Khadija scoffed. "Do you?"

"I don't know I cared for him... a lot Maybe I still do, in some way. But it's not like before. It's more like guilt. And worry Not... love."

Khadija was quiet, waiting.

Amina continued, voice soft. "With Khalid, it's different. I feel... safe. Like he understands the parts of me even I hatebWe're both... broken. But somehow, when I'm with him, it doesn't feel like a tragedy. It feels like... healing."

Khadija gasped. "SisbThat's not 'different.' That's love."

"I'm scared."

Her voice cracked slightly.

"So is he I'm sure if it But look at mebif you don't tell him, you'll regret it Don't let trauma stop you from receiving something good. You deserve this."

"I don't even know what love is anymore, Khadija. Everything with Yasir confused me. Was it real? Or just... survival?"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khadija took a deep breath. "Let's unpack that. Yasir he gave you highs and lows. You were addicted to the idea of him, the dream, the drama. It wasn't love, Amina. It was chaos He made you doubt yourself more than you smiled. He dragged you into dark places and made you believe it was normal."

Amina was quiet, absorbing the truth like it stung.

"But Khalid... tell me How does he make you feel? Don't overthink it Just... say it."

Amina wiped a tear, then whispered:

"He makes me feel like I'm not broken. Like I matter Like I'm enough without having to pretend or shrink myself. When he looks at me... it's not with pity or pride. It's peace He sees me... and still chooses to stay."

Khadija screamed. "You're in love, girl! That's it! Game over! Soft launch your wedding ring already!"

Amina smiled weakly, but then went quiet again. "What if I lose him? What if I tell him how I feel and he... shuts down? Or worse, pulls away?"

"My dear Amina, have you met Khalid? He's already halfway in love with you. The guy gave you his trauma, his tears, and his leftover wahala . He's gone Finish him off!"

Amina giggled through tears. "You're mad."

"I'm serious Don't overthink it. Just go to his room. Sit with him Hold him again if you want. You don't even have to say 'I love you.' Just let him feel it. Wallahi, men like Khalid don't get many safe spaces. Be his own."

There was a pause

Amina frowned. "But Yasir... he was here earlier. He saw Khalid break down. And he just... left. I don't even know where he went. I still worry about him."

Khadija softened. "It's okay to care You shared a history. You lost a child together even though he is the reason why that doesn't vanish. But don't confuse care with love."

Amina's voice wavered. "He was my first... everything. That part of me still aches. I keep wondering what if he'd changed? What if... we were meant to try again?"

Khadija answered gently. "Maybe you were meant to. But trying again doesn't mean staying again Some people are chapters. Not endings. He was your beginning but Khalid? He might just be the whole damn story."

Amina bit her lip

"Also? Yasir knows He saw the way Khalid looked at you. The way you leaned into him. He's letting go because deep down, he knows he lost something good."

Amina's heart thudded.

"So go Don't let this moment slip. Tell Khalid you see him.m That he matters. That you're here not because you pity him But because you've fallen in love with the man he's becoming."

Amina whispered, "What if he doesn't believe me?"

Khadija laughed. "Then kiss himYou know Arewa boys can't resist physical proof."

Amina rolled her eyes. "I'm hanging up."

"Go, my dear! Go give my future brother in law a reason to breathe tonight And text me updates or I'll barge in I'm serious."

Amina shook her head, smiling as she ended the call.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Then a call came in

Amina picked it was her mother

"Haba aminatu you don't sleep in the house kuma today Sai dai mukaji(we just heard) you're in Abuja"

"Mummy I'm so sorry , it was urgent"

Her mother scolded her and finally ended the call

She looked at her reflection in the mirror.

No makeup Puffy eyes Still wearing the same dress from earlier.But something had changed

She lay in bed, eyes open, thinking about everything but too scared to move

She wanted to go to his room. To talk to say something anything.

She didn't

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Chapter thirty six- the morning after

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Late that night

The clock ticked past midnight. The air in the house was still, almost too still. Even the hum of the AC felt distant, like a sound coming from far outside his mind.

Khalid stood in the corridor, barefoot, wearing only a dark grey T shirt and sweatpants. His hair damp from the cold shower he'd taken to clear his head It hadn't worked.

The hallway light cast a faint glow on Amina's door He didn't knock He didn't even think.

He just... walked in quietly .

The room was dim, lit only by the flicker of a bedside lamp she must've forgotten to switch off. Her scarf was draped over the chair, and a copy of the lions of Alkebulan by her side opened

And there she was curled on the far side of the bed, under a thin white duvet, fast asleep.

Her breathing was soft. Her lips parted slightly. Her hand resting beneath her cheek like a child's.

He stood there, frozen.

She didn't know he was here

She had no idea the man who had once been feared across politics and underground rings in northern Nigeria... was standing in her room like a helpless addict, high on nothing but the sight of her this girl this woman.

He used to think love made men weak. But whatever this was it didn't feel like weakness.

It felt like madness

Beautiful,quiet and gentle madness.

He sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to make a sound.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Just sat And watched.

Her lashes fluttered lightly in her sleep. Her face was bare no makeup, no filters. Just her Soft skin, worry lines faint on her forehead even in rest. She always overthought, even in her dreams.

He knew her tells.

The way she played with the hem of her dress when she was anxious. The way she smiled with her eyes before her mouth caught up. The way she called his name when she was angry low, controlled, like it burned her throat.

He watched her chest rise and fall.

He didn't touch her

Wouldn't dare

Because he wasn't her man not . Maybe not ever.

But he was hers in every other way Mind, body, soul.

And that terrified him more than any gun ever had.

She stirred slightly in her sleep, murmured something under her breath, then went still again. His heart jumped. He swallowed.

What the hell was he doing here?

He'd seen blood Torture done things even the devil wouldn't confess. And yet, this...,this fragile, sleeping girl held the only power over him that ever made him feel truly exposed not the DSS not Aminu Bello not even fentanyl.

Just her

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clenched tightly. Staring at the floor now. Breathing shallow and Struggling.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I don't know what you're doing to me, Amina," he whispered, too low for her to hear. "But I swear... if you asked me to burn the whole world down, I'd do it Just to make sure you slept this peacefully forever."

The words felt heavy coming out. Too honest and too real.

He looked up again

Her fingers twitched. Her brow creased slightly. A shadow of pain passed over her face, even in sleep.

He hated that hated that she still carried pain.

That someone like Yasir, who had her first, hadn't protected her from this. That he Khalid had come too late, too broken, too dangerous.

And yet, here he was.

Addicted to her peace Obsessed with her storms.

He stood finally, slowly.

One last glance

Then, just as quietly as he'd come in, he left.

Not because he wanted to.

But because he knew that if he stayed one minute longer, he wouldn't leave at all.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And the last thing he wanted was for her to wake up and see him like this unguarded, desperate, a man on the edge.

He closed her door softly behind him.

In the hallway, he exhaled shakily. His palm brushed the wall as he walked back to his room.

For now, that was enough Watching her sleep.

Keeping his distancev

Protecting her in silence.

Because even if she wasn't his yet...

He was already hers.

THE NEXT MORNING

The smell of something burning hit first sharp, smoky, unmistakable.

Then the sound of coughing.

Then clanging metal

Khalid paused in the hallway, brow furrowed. He followed the chaos into the kitchen barefoot, wearing a plain black T shirt and joggers

What he saw stopped him.

Amina, in one of the oversized Cambridge T-l shirts she stole from his wardrobe god knows when , stood barefoot on the tiled floor, wielding a spatula like a sword.

The frying pan in front of her was smoking like a generator. The yam was black completely burnt and the windows had been flung open for air.

The chef stood nearby, hovering nervously. One of the housemaids tried to step in, but Amina raised a finger.

"No! I've got this!" she declared confidently, eyes watering from the smoke.

Khalid leaned on the doorway, arms crossed.

"You sure?" he said.

She turned to face him, flour smudged across her cheek

"Oh Katashi kenan (you're awake)Morning," she said innocently. "I was just... cooking."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that what this is?"

"Hey," she pointed her spatula at him. "Don't judge me. I can cook just not when I'm nervous or distracted or hungry."

He chuckled lightly despite himself. "So... always?"

She glared playfully. "You're not helping."

The chef tried again. "Madam, I can....."

"No!" Amina waved him off. "Please Everyone rest I've got this."

"You've got smoke," Khalid muttered under his breath.

She heard it

"Wow You think you're funny today?"

"I think I'm hungry," he replied, stepping forward. "And that whatever that was.."he pointed to the frying pan "should be reported to NEMA."

Amina burst out laughing, finally giving up and pulling the pan off the stove. "Okay, fine Fried yam was a disaster. But guess what? I also tried pancakes."

He looked at the trash can

"Those too?"

She nodded dramatically. "They betrayed me. But in my defense, I forgot i needed a whisk. And the flour looked suspicious. Plus, the stove was being disrespectful."

Khalid shook his head, biting back a smile. "So you picked a fight with yam, flour, and the stove?"

"Yes," she replied. "And I lost all three battles. But I looked cute doing it, so I consider that a win."

He couldn't help it he smiled. Just a little. Just enough for her to notice.

"There it is!" she pointed. "A smile! From the dark prince himself."

"I'm not smiling."

"You were," she teased, wagging the spatula. "A whole grin. Don't lie."

He turned to the counter to hide the smirk. "I'll make tea."

"Let me help"

"Please don't," he said quickly.

She burst into laughter again and backed away with both hands up. "Wow No faith in my abilities."

"None," he said flatly, grabbing a kettle.

She sat on a stool at the kitchen island, chin in her palm, watching him move with quiet ease pouring water, setting the flame, reaching for the Lipton box like he'd done it a hundred times before. His jaw was still tight. His eyes still tired.

But he looked better than he had last night.

"Thanks," she said softly.

He glanced at her. "For what?"

"For letting me destroy your kitchen."

He shook his head. "It's not mine It's ours"

A pause

"It's more of a home now," she said, almost too quietly.

He didn't respond

The kettle whistled

He made two mugs of tea no sugar for him, two cubes for her and slid one across the counter to her.

She looked up, surprised.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You remembered how I take it."

He shrugged. "You talk a lot It's hard not to remember."

She smirked. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"It wasn't"

"It was"

He sat across from her, sipping slowly. They drank in silence for a few moments. The kitchen, though still a mess, now smelled of Lipton and something warm and human.

And Khalid who barely ate anything was having tea with her

"Hey," she said after a while, tapping her mug. "Can I ask you something?"

He looked up

"Were you in my room last night?"

He stilled

For a second, everything stopped his breath the air even the sound of the AC.

She tilted her head, watching him.

"I... woke up around 3am. And the light was off. But I remembered leaving it on."

He said nothing

"Also, the chair by the bed had moved."

More silence

"You were there," she whispered.

He stared at her, mug in hand. Then finally, softly:

"I couldn't sleep."

She didn't speak

"I didn't touch you I just... needed to see that you were okay."

Amina's expression softened. She didn't smile. She just looked at him like she understood.

"You can always come to me, Khalid," she said gently. "You don't have to sneak in like a thief."

"I didn't want to scare you."

"You didn't," she said. "You calmed me Even in sleep, I felt you there."

That hit him like a whisper in a quiet mosque.

He looked down at his mug.

"You're dangerous, Amina," he murmured. "I don't know what to do when I'm around you."

"Then don't do anything," she said. "Just sit Drink tea. Burn yam together. That's enough."

He smiled again This time, a real one.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And for a brief moment, in the middle of the messy kitchen, with burnt oil and sugar cubes and mismatched mugs

They were just two people. Broken,Healing. Together. Then Amina's phone rang.

Khadija again.

She rolled her eyes with a half?smile, expecting more banter. "Hello"

"Amina!" Khadija's voice was frantic. "check Twitter Check Instagram X. That stupid Arewa Gistlover blog. They've posted your picture. You and Khalid. From Kaduna."

Amina sat up straight. Her stomach twisted. "What?"

"Just check. Now I'm shaking wallahi, I'm shaking."

With trembling hands, Amina opened her browser. Her heart was already racing. She typed in the name, hoping Khadija was being dramatic.

There it was.

The top trending post.

A blurry shot her and Khalid

The caption screamed:

"HELLO TUEH TUEH"

"THE REBEL SON AND HIS 'FAKE' BRIDE Abdul Junaid's Puppets?"

Amina's throat closed up She scrolled.

Another post. Screenshots of hospital documents her miscarriage, redacted but still too clear. Another with Khalid's addiction history, tagged: "Spoiled child of the elite. Fentanyl Suicide watch Inheritance war."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The final post?

"Amina Usman suleiman the former sweetheart of Yasir Ibrahim turned fake wife to the son of Aminu Bello and cousin of yasir her ex Tragedy or tactics?"

She dropped her phone like it burned her. It clattered to the marble floor.

Her legs gave way, and she sank to the cold kitchen tiles.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "My dad My name My life..."

Khalid, still standing by the kettle, stiffened as he read the same posts on his phone. One by one.

His face didn't move but his chest rose. Then again and again Harder.

The comments were a battleground of mockery, sympathy, and judgment. Some called her a prostitute in disguise, others said she faked the miscarriage, and worse, some hinted she had been part of a political sex for influence scheme.

And Khalid? They called him a junkie heir, a useless rebel, a drug addict funded by stolen Northern wealth.

"Who did this?" Amina's voice cracked. "Who hates us this much?"

Khalid said nothing

He just stood there, frozen His body tense. His jaw clenched so tightly, it looked painful.

"I'll fix it," he said eventually, voice low. "I'll talk to your father. I'll explain everything. I'll make it right for you. For us You and Yasir"

"Stop!"

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her voice was sharp. Loud. Wounded.

Khalid blinked, startled. He'd never heard her raise her voice like that.

"Stop deciding for me!" she cried, standing shakily. "Stop pushing me away like I'm some fragile thing you're trying to protect! I'm not a victim in this story I'm a person! A woman!"

He turned fully to her now, lips parted. But no words came out.

"You think I want Yasir?" she said, her voice trembling. "You think I don't see what you've been doing? Sacrificing everything? Carrying everyone's burdens mine, yours, your father's, even Abdul's but never once saying how you actually feel?"

Khalid still said nothing

He just looked at her His eyes dark, desperate and Haunted.

"I almost died with you, Khalid," Amina said softly. "I was ready to bleed to break to bury myself next to your pain. And I still stayed."

A tear slid down her cheek.

She stepped closer

"Doesn't that tell you something?"

He opened his mouth

She beat him to it

"I...."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The phone rang
Amina stopped

She looked at the screen. Her whole body went cold.

MUMMY

She picked up.

"...Hello?"

There was silence. Then a single, shaking voice. Low Sharp and Heavy.

"Kin kashe babanki. Kin huta."

(You've killed your father. Are you happy now?)

Amina's face crumpled

She couldn't speak
She couldn't breathe

Khalid watched her

And she stood frozen.

Phone still pressed to her ear.

Eyes wide.

Chapter thirty seven- Giwa hospital

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Amina couldn't breathe

Her lungs locked, stiff and useless in her chest. Her body froze. Every part of her went still except her heart, which was thudding like a distant war drum.

Her phone was still pressed to her ear.

And then, the voice. That voice. Her mother's voice. Cold, cracked, soaked in grief and rage.

"Kin kashe babanki Kin huta."

(You've killed your father Are you happy now?)

The world tilted

She didn't remember her knees giving out, but she was suddenly on the floor, slumped like her bones had vanished.

"Amina!" Khalid's voice tore through the fog.

He caught her before her head hit the cold marble tiles Held her against his chest like something precious Fragile and breaking .

Her phone slipped from her hand, clattering uselessly to the floor, and began to ring again,Yasir,Khadija,yasir,Khadija.

Even numbers of people she’s not talking to even aunties and cousins, calling to gossip.

But Amina… she couldn't move Couldn't answer Couldn't speak All she could do was sob.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Loud, aching sobs that spilled from deep inside her chest. The kind of crying that made you feel like your own skin was too tight. That left your throat raw. The kind of crying that made everything inside you echo with pain.

Khalid held her like he was afraid she'd shatter if he let go

"It's okay," he whispered, over and over, voice hoarse. "It's okay I've got you Wallahi, I've got you."

She shook her head violently. "No... no, no... I didn't mean to... I didn't mean to..."

"I know," he said, tightening his arms around her. "I know You didn't."

"Nakashe babana khalid (I killed my father khalid) I killed him" Her voice cracked, barely above a whisper. "She said I killed him."

Khalid closed his eyes That sentence tore through him like glass.

Her mother's words

Harsh ,Final and Unforgiving

He couldn't imagine how it felt to hear that from the woman who gave you life. Couldn't imagine that kind of pain. But he saw it all of it written on Amina's face.

Her entire body trembled in his arms. Like she was falling apart.

He pulled her closer, her head tucked under his chin. Her tears soaked through his shirt, but he didn't move. Didn't flinch.

In his head, there was chaos rage at her mother,grief for her pain Guilt for not protecting her better.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He wanted to scream,To punch something. To burn the whole world down if it meant she'd stop crying.

He'd always tried to be calm, to be in control unlike his father. Unlike Aminu Bello, who let rage rule him. But right now, Khalid felt that monster in his chest too. Scratching,howling ans angry that he couldn't do anything except hold her and whisper useless words.

Amina cried harder

"She hates me," she choked out. "She…she really hates me, Khalid."

"No, she's angry Grieving," he said softly. "She doesn't hate you. She's just… broken."

"I want to see him," she whispered suddenly, her voice small.

Khalid pulled back just enough to look into her eyes. They were bloodshot, full of panic.

"Who?"

"My father I need to go to Kaduna. I need to see him before… before..”Her breath hitched again.

He didn't ask questions

Didn't hesitate

Khalid stood and scooped her up to her feet gently. "Let's go."

30 minutes later

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The car sped past the outskirts of Abuja, silence thick between them. It was dusk, the sky painted with streaks of orange and purple. On another day, Amina would've taken a photo.

Today, she barely looked out the window.

She sat curled against the door, hands clasped in her lap, face turned away from him. She hadn't spoken since they left.

Khalid kept glancing at her. He wanted to say something. Anything.

But what did you say to someone who thought they killed their own father?

Still, he reached for her hand

She didn't pull away Her fingers laced with his, weakly. Quietly.bHe squeezed Soft and firm.

She didn't look at him, but her tears fell again.

Khalid tightened his grip, voice low. "Wallahi, if I could take your pain, Amina... I would." She still didn't answer

So he kept driving Quietly raging at a world that kept hurting her.

Khakid called her brother suleiman who confirmed that he was alive he had a heart attack. They rushed him to Giwa Specialist.

But Khalid didn't tell Amina ,not yet he did not want to get her hopes up because the way suleiman described his condition,they could loose him.

Giwa Specialist Hospital, Kaduna. 9:12PM

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The hospital smelled like antiseptic and sorrow.

Amina burst through the doors ahead of him, her scarf halfway falling from her head. Her feet couldn't carry her fast enough.

"Khalid," she whispered, as they reached ICU. "Please come with me."

He nodded. "Always."

But the nurse raised her hand. "Only family," she said Khalid stepped back Amina stepped in.

The ICU was dim and sterile, the beep of machines humming in the background.

Her mother sat in the waiting chair, eyes red and puffy, her abaya wrinkled and thrown on like she hadn't planned to leave the house. She didn't look up when Amina entered.

"Mummy….."Amina rushed forward.

Faiza didn't respond

"I'm sorry… I'm so, so sorry…kiyi hakuri kiyafemun(please forgive me)

Her mother stood, looked her in the eye. The hate in that look hit harder than any slap.

"You should not be here," Faiza said quietly. "Leave."

"Mummy, please….."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You've done enough Haven't you?"

Amina crumbled Her knees hit the floor again. "Please don't say that. Please..."

But Faiza turned away

Then footsteps came from the hallway. Kabir, her older brother, carrying a plastic bag. He stopped dead when he saw her on the floor.

"Amina?"

She looked up, eyes wild and wet.

He dropped the bag and rushed to her. "Amina!" He pulled her into his arms, holding her the way big brothers do when everything is falling apart.

"Yaya kabir I didn't mean to..."

"Shhh," Kabir said, gently. "We're not talking about that now Baba is alive You hear me? He's alive."

Khalid stood at the entrance, watching it all.

The way Kabir held her. The way her mother refused to even look at her. The sterile halls. The tears. The pain.

And suddenly, it was too much.

He turned around and walked out.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Meanwhile Somewhere in Kaduna.

The sky was dimming into a soft orange, and the call to prayer echoed faintly from a distant mosque.

Yasir paced the tiled courtyard of his family home in, barefoot, restless. His t shirt was wrinkled. His curls were a mess, one hand buried in them as if trying to pull the confusion out.

The compound was quiet except for the whirr of the generator in the background and the occasional barking of a neighbor's dog. His parents were inside, probably whispering again. Probably watching AIT or Channels, replaying that viral post over and over.

His phone was pressed to his ear, his voice shaky. "Khadija, wallahi... I don't know what to do I swear I don't."

On the other end, Khadija's voice was calm but tired. "She's not okay, Yasir."

Yasir swallowed. "I know."

"None of them are," she continued “That post everything. Her dad's in Giwa Specialist now. Her mum... only god knows how she’s feeling."

Yasir's chest tightened. He paused near the tree by the back gate, leaning on it as if the trunk could steady him.

"Are you serious?"

Khadija's sigh crackled through the line. "Which kind question is this sef ,Sha it’s bad yasir very bad "

Yasir's voice broke slightly. "Ya Allah..." There was a pause.

"I know Amina She's not strong you know how she is even when she pretends to be and... this kind of disgrace? This public madness? The whole North is watching her. Like hyenas. Reading headlines, judging, laughing..."

"She's trending on TikTok and Twitter," Khadija said quietly. "I had to delete my account this afternoon. The comments were getting to me."

"Everything is a joke to people until someone dies."

"Exactly"

Silence

Only the low hum of his parents' generator

"I was just telling her last week," Khadija said after a moment. "She deserves peace She's been through hell and back. Now look at all this. Wallahi, it's too much."

Yasir sat down on the compound stairs. The tiles were cool against his bare feet. He looked up at the sky.

His voice dropped, softer than before.

"I still love her, Khadija."

Khadija didn't speak

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He ran a hand down his face. "I know she probably doesn't want me anymore. Maybe she hates me Maybe she should But... i need to be with her right now " His throat caught. "Even if she hates me cause I'm the reason she's in this mess"

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"I know, YasirbBut you have to understand intention doesn't erase impact."

"I never wanted her hurt. I never wanted her to lose the baby."

A beat

"She lost everything, Khadija."

"I know," she said. "But she's not the only one. You've been hurting too. And this guilt... it's eating you alive."

Yasir was quiet

A night breeze passed through the guava trees. He could smell it sweet, faint, nostalgic.

"Come pick me up ," Khadija said suddenly.

"What?"

"Come now let's go to the hospital . You said you don't know what to do then come. Sit with her if she'll let you. Sit with me if she won't. Be useful. Be present We'll figure this

out somehow I know Amina even if she hates you right now you're still her best friend someone she's considered you more of her best friend than me ."

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"Then you leave But at least you'll know you tried."

He closed his eyes For the first time all day, his breathing slowed.

"I'll be on my way "

Khadija smiled faintly on the other end. "Hurry And bring kunu from Unguwan Sarki, the good one."

Yasir chuckled. A weak, broken chuckle but still something.

"Copy that."

Chapter thirty seven- Giwa hospital

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

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A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

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A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

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"Copy that."

Chapter thirty eight- the one where Khalid snapped

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Later that evening at the hospital where Amina's father Alhaji Usman was said to be in a coma

Everyone was sitting down even some relatives who kept gossiping and giving Amina a side eye

Then Footsteps familiar voices.

"Amina!"

It was Yasir

His voice rang through the corridor, loud and desperate. Like a prayer finally answered. Like a man running toward something he'd almost lost forever.

Amina turned

For a second, she didn't think she just ran.

Ran like a child running home Straight into his arms.

Yasir caught her before she could fall. His arms wrapped around her tightly, like he was afraid someone would pull her away. Like she would vanish if he let go.

"Amina..." he whispered, pressing his face into her hair. "I'm so sorry I'm so sorry."

She didn't reply

She was crying, loud and broken, her hands clutching the back of his shirt like she was drowning and he was the only thing keeping her alive.

The nurses stared, confused A few family members in the waiting room shaked their heads in disbelief and disappointment But most just watched and gossiped.

"Is she not married kai girls of these days very shameless, imagine!!"

"She just confirmed what the gistlover said " someone else muttered

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid just stood by the entrance of the hallway frozen .

Completely still

He had brought her here. Held her through her breakdowns. Fought battles she didn't even know about.

But now, she was in Yasir's arms.

And she hadn't even looked at him not once not even a glance.

He swallowed hard, jaw tightening. His hands were balled into fists at his sides, the veins in his forearms visible. There was something hot rising in his chest not just jealousy, but confusion,Pain Maybe even betrayal of his own mind believing they could have something

But he said nothing

Across the room, Khadija arrived She had come with Yasir but had stayed behind to speak with the nurse.

Now, seeing the scene before her Amina sobbing into Yasir's chest, Khalid standing like a ghost she moved quickly.

She slipped between them, gently pulling Amina away from Yasir's arms.

"Shh," she whispered, wrapping her arms around her best friend. "I'm here I'm here."

Amina didn't resist. She just turned and fell into Khadija's embrace, still crying, still shaking.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Yasir stepped back, breathing hard, his face wet with tears he hadn't noticed.

Then, slowly, his eyes met Khalid's.

It was only for a second. But the look between them held everything:

Regret,Pain,History and Resentment.

Neither of them blinked no words

Just that sharp, heavy silence that felt louder than shouting.

Khalid looked away first.

Without saying anything, he turned around and walked out of the corridor

Down the hallway Past the nurses Past the prayer room.

Out

Khadija watched him go So did Yasir.

But Amina didn't She didn't see him leave.

Or maybe she chose not to. Later Abdul Junaid's Private Office, GRA Kaduna

The air inside the office was cold. Still The type of silence you find in old mosques before Fajr prayer.

Abdul Junaid sat behind his giant mahogany desk, his laptop open beside a stack of political files. The walls were lined with awards and framed photos of international visits

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

UN conferences, African peace summits, charity drives. A Nigerian flag stood behind him, stiff and untouched.

But in front of him chaos was coming.

The door burst open with a bang

Khalid walked in. Fast,Angry Eyes burning.

"I want him dead."

Abdul didn't flinch.

Didn't look up right away either. Just took off his glasses slowly, placed them on the desk, then leaned back in his chair.

"I figured this was coming."

Khalid stood at the edge of the desk, fists clenched. His jaw was tight His breathing, unsteady. His entire body was vibrating with rage.

"You saw the post?" he asked, voice low.

Abdul nodded once. "Everyone did."

Khalid swallowed. "Her mother said she killed her father. She broke down in my arms, Abdul. She couldn't breathe."

His voice cracked

And then it went cold again.

"That bastard made her cry. He made my girl cry."

Abdul raised an eyebrow. "Your girl?"

Khalid looked away. "Not officially."

Abdul sat forward, serious now. "We traced the IP."

Khalid's eyes locked on him

"Where?"

"Tudun wada Behind a mechanic's shop. Guy's thirty four. Works in freelance media. Mostly online gossip and viral campaigns. Very skilled. Paid off by... god knows who he's been a menace creating scandal up and down ."

"But I believe aminu bello is behind this one, cause no way in hell could he have accessed rhis much information"

Khalid let out a bitter laugh. "I should've killed Aminu when I had the gun in my hand ."

Abdul stood up now. Calmly picked up his Keys

Khalid was still pacing.

"I don't care who this man is," he said. "I'm not warning him. I'm not talking to him. I want him begging."

Abdul glanced at him. "You sure you want to do this? You're not your father, Khalid."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid paused

"No,I'm worse Because I don't hurt strangers. I hurt those who deserve it and you know that more than anyone”

Abdul nodded slowly, the corner of his mouth lifting in a cold smile. "Good”

He picked up a Glock from his drawer. Cocked it. Slipped it inside his kaftan.

They both stepped out into the dark Kaduna night.

Two quiet men Two guns.

No mercy

Tudun wada – 20 minutes later

It was a small flat, hidden behind a noisy mechanic yard. Boys were fixing keke napep outside, music blasting from a small Bluetooth speaker.

The man inside had no idea the devil was coming.

They kicked the door open.

He was at his laptop, mid type. He jumped up immediately.

"Ah! What's going..”

Khalid pistol!whipped him. The man hit the floor. Blood

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Screaming.

"Please! Wallahi! I have family..”

Abdul shut the door behind them. Calm and Silent.

Khalid pointed his gun at the man's hand and fired Crack.

The scream was almost inhuman.

"Who paid you?" Khalid asked, quiet.

"Please, I beg.....Aminu Bello! Aminu Bello!"

"How much?"

"Four million. Just to post the pictures and some details. I didn't know it would go this far, wallahi!"

Khalid shot him in the shoulder

Another scream

Abdul looked away Not in guilt Just boredom.

"You think you can make money from other people's tears?" Khalid said, leaning down. "From her pain?"

The man was crying now.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Delete the post," Abdul said. "All of it. Apologize publicly. Say it was a lie Make it clean."

"I will....I will.....I swear!"

Khalid stepped back. "If I see your name again... Your body will be delivered to your family in a sack."

Abdul took out his phone. Dialled a number.

"Clean it up," he told whoever was on the other side. "Leave him breathing For now."

They walked out

As they got into the car, Abdul looked at Khalid.

"That was dark, even for you."

Khalid didn't answer immediately.

Then he looked out the window and said, "That's what love does I guess. Even when you don't own it."

And they drove into the night.

Giwa Hospital — Kaduna

The waiting area was quiet.

Not peaceful just tired. The kind of silence that came after too many hours of crying, pacing, and staring into space.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The air smelt of disinfectant, Nescafé, and exhaustion.

Amina's family sat across two rows of worn out chairs her mother had refused to go home, even after the nurses begged. Her father was still in ICU, stable, but unconscious.

Her brother, Suleiman, sat quietly near the vending machine, legs crossed, headphones in, pretending to be calm but clearly shaken.

Her other , kabir, paced in slow circles, fingers tapping against his phone.

Across the room, Yasir's father, Alhaji Ibrahim, sat on a brown prayer mat near the window, quietly whispering Suratul Yasin, prayer beads in hand.

Next to him, Khalid's stepmother, she had come as soon as she heard , sipped from a flask of Lipton, her eyes scanning Amina now and then with a strange mix of guilt and sympathy.

Khadija had taken the seat beside Amina.

She held Amina's hand the way mothers held newborns gently, like it could break.

No one had spoken in over ten minutes.

Then buzz.

Khadija's phone lit up. She blinked Looked down.

Her eyes widened.

"Wait…"

She tapped her screen Scrolled fast.

"Wait, wait, wait…" Her voice rose. "Wow!"

Everyone turned.

"What is it?" Amina's mother asked, stiffly.

Khadija stood up, voice loud now.

"Arewa Gistlover just apologized!"

People straightened in their seats.

"He dismissed everything! He said the post was fake! Planted by political enemies! He even said Amina and Khalid are innocent he said it with his chest!"

"Subhanallah," someone whispered, covering their mouth.

"Show me!" Suleiman said, rushing to her. "Let me see it!"

Khadija handed him the phone.

The entire post was there big bold letters.

"Hello TUEH TUEH

We were misled. We regret posting false information about Amina Bello and Khalid Aminu. The couple is innocent. We apologize to their families, friends, and supporters. This page will never again be used to fuel political agendas."

A gasp rippled through the room.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Even Suleiman removed his headphones.

Amina just stared. Frozen As if someone had unplugged her fear.

She turned her head slowly...

And found Khalid standing quietly in the corner Face unreadable,Eyes on her.

She swallowed Her lips trembled slightly.

"Khalid," she said softly, like she'd only just remembered his name.

He didn't move

Just gave her a short, firm nod One time.

That was all

No speech,No drama,No just the I did it for you kind of look

But Amina's chest lifted her breath catching in her throat.

Because in that one small nod... she understood everything.

He fixed it for her He faced her shame.He walked into the fire.And didn't say a word about it.

She didn't cry She didn't hug him. She didn't even say thank you.

But her eyes red, tired, and full of something like awe locked on his.

And in that moment... her silence said it all.

Thank you.

Outside – Giwa Hospital Parking Lot, Kaduna

The air was still crisp, holding onto the last breaths of morning cold before the Kaduna sun claimed the sky.

Yasir leaned against his sleek black Chevrolet Camaro, arms crossed, a stick of TomTom in his mouth. His eyes were puffy, red rimmed not from sleep, but from everything else.

He looked like someone who hadn't felt peace in years.

Then footsteps.

Khadija, still in her black abaya and white sneakers, walked toward him. Her scarf had started to slip, and she didn't bother fixing it.

She stopped a few feet away, eyeing him.

"You good?" she asked, voice gentle but pointed.

Yasir didn't look up. "Yeah."

"You sure?"

He finally turned. Gave her a tired half smile. "100 percent."

Khadija squinted. "That's the fakest '100 percent' I've heard since the president promised change."

He chuckled, just a little.

"Where are you going?" she asked, stepping closer.

He shrugged, looking out toward the dusty road. "Nowhere Just... not here."

A pause

Then Khadija tilted her head. "Can I come?"

He looked at her, surprised. "You? What about Amina?"

Khadija scoffed. "Please She's surrounded by ten people and a miracle. She won't notice if I disappear for twenty minutes."

Yasir raised an eyebrow. "That miracle being Khalid?"

"Obviously." She rolled her eyes. "Don't make it weird."

He laughed, for real this time.

"Alright then," he said, opening the passenger door. "Hop in, Princess Kaduna."

She slid in, grinning. "Thank you, Mr Midlife Crisis."

"Excuse me?"

She nodded toward his dashboard. "This whole Camaro thing. You're driving like you've just divorced your third wife and started lifting weights."

"Oh wow." He looked wounded. "You really came for my life like that?"

"Always," she said, snapping her seatbelt. "Drive, old man."

He started the car, the Camaro's engine growling like a warning to the quiet street.

As they pulled out of the hospital gate, the golden sun began to rise over the city. People were sweeping in front of shops, tea sellers were already setting up mai shayi tables, and early buses filled with sleepy students rumbled past.

Inside the car, the mood shifted.

Comfortable and Easy.

"You know," Yasir said, stealing a glance at her, "you talk a lot for someone who claims she's shy."

"I'm not shy I just pretend to be."

"Ohhh." He grinned. "The lost girl behavior."

She laughed Loud and real. "And you're definitely one of the lost boys."

"Lost but cute," he added.

"Debatable."

They drove on, exchanging banter and soft smiles as the city woke up around them.

And for the first time in days, Yasir wasn't thinking about Amina.

And for some strange reason...

That didn't feel like betrayal.

It felt like possibility to be able to move on

Back in the ICU Waiting Area Giwa Hospital, Kaduna

The air in the waiting area was cold, not from the air conditioning which barely worked but from the heaviness of waiting. Of breathing pain. Of shared silences no one knew how to fill.

Amina sat on the edge of her chair, arms crossed tightly around herself Her fingers still trembled slightly. Her scarf was crooked, but she didn't care.

Khalid stood against the wall, quiet, eyes glued to the linoleum floor. He hadn't said a word in over twenty minutes.

Then the door creaked open.

Two doctors walked in, holding clipboards and wearing the same practiced, tired expression that said: We're used to this.

One of them spoke gently.

"Only one person can stay overnight. ICU rules."

Everyone in the room looked up.

"I'll stay," Amina said quickly, rising to her feet.

Her voice cracked slightly, but her face was firm.

Her mother, seated beside her stood too. Her eyes were swollen, mascara smudged.

"No," she said sharply. "I'll stay He's my husband."

The words landed like a slap.

Amina blinked, then slowly sat back down. "Okay."

There was an awkward shuffle as people started preparing to leave

Khalid still hadn't moved.

Just then, a voice echoed across the room.

"Khalid,Amina, Ku zo nan."
(Come here.)

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It was Alhaji Ibrahim Yasir's father and Khalid's too apparently.Standing by the corridor, regal in his simple white kaftan and a navy blue cap that sat neatly on his silvering head. His presence alone silenced the room.

Amina exchanged a glance with Khalid, then slowly followed.

Khalid dragged his feet, hands in his pockets. He looked older than his years. Worn out. Haunted.

They followed Alhaji Ibrahim into a quieter corner of the hospital hallway, near a dusty window overlooking the back garden.

He turned, his posture stiff, eyes unreadable.

Then he spoke, calm but firm. Every word deliberate.

"I know about your 'marriage.'"

Amina froze

Khalid stared ahead, expression unreadable.

"It's invalid Haram," Alhaji Ibrahim continued.

Amina opened her mouth, then closed it. Her throat was dry.

"I understand you were both under pressure," he said, softer now. "You were trying to protect yourselves from that man, Aminu and from hurting your family But this..." He sighed. "This was not the way."

Khalid's jaw tightened. He still said nothing.

Alhaji Ibrahim's eyes shifted to him.

"You think I'm judging you I'm not."

Silence

Then

"You left me," Khalid said, voice low. "So don't talk to me about protecting anyone."

Alhaji blinked Something flickered in his eyes. Guilt, maybe.

"I was wrong I should've done more"

Khalid cut him off. "Save it."

Amina touched Khalid's arm lightly, but he didn't respond.

Alhaji's voice softened again. "I say this not to humiliate you, but to protect you both. The world is watching. This scandal might be 'over' on social media, but Allah is the judge. And the gossip never really ends."

Amina looked down at her feet. "Baba what should we do now , if I move out and come home the scandal will be confirmed to be true"

Alhaji Ibrahim sighed. "No!I'm saying you need to make things right. Either do it properly... or walk away before it eats you both."

He turned to leave but stopped.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Khalid."

The younger man raised his eyes.

"If you ever want the truth about your mother, your blood, and why I did what I did come to me. Not to Abdul To me."

Khalid didn't nod Didn't blink Just stared.

Then Alhaji walked away, his steps echoing against the tiled corridor.

Amina exhaled, long and heavy. She leaned against the wall, silent.

Khalid finally spoke. "He's right."

Amina looked up. "About what?"

"About us About... this."

She looked at him really looked at him.

His eyes were tired and distant But not cold.

Just... broken

Like hers

And in that moment, standing in a dim corridor of Giwa Hospital, neither of them felt like husband or wife. Not even lovers.

Just two broken people tied together by lies, secrets, and something neither of them could yet name.

Still bound ,unsure but holding on to something.

Chapter thirty nine - Hospital confession

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Outside Giwa Hospital, Kaduna

The scent of wet earth lingered in the night breeze, mixing with the faint smells of Dettol and diesel. A nurse wheeled an elderly patient past them, but the world seemed to pause around Amina and Khalid.

They stood in silence, just far enough not to touch, but close enough to feel the heat between them.

Amina's arms were crossed over her chest. Her hijab fluttered slightly in the wind. Khalid's hands were buried deep in his pockets. He looked like a man trying to hold something in pain, joy, longing... something vast.

He smiled, barely.

It wasn't a cocky smile. It wasn't even confident. It was the kind of smile that said, I'm afraid if I say anything, I'll fall apart.

She looked up at him, her eyes already shining with unspoken thoughts, then looked away just as quickly.

So many things had led them here.

The fake wedding. The long drives The hospital rooms and hidden bruises. The attack , Aminu bello . The morning he held her hand while she miscarried. The way he looked at her like she wasn't broken just becoming.

Finally, her voice came. Barely above a whisper.

"Yesterday... you said I could go back to Yasir."

Khalid's entire body stiffened. His jaw clenched. He turned slowly toward her, heart dropping like lead in his chest.

She was looking at the ground, twisting the cheap silver ring on her finger the one they used for the fake wedding.

"Did you mean it?" she asked

He swallowed

"I didn't," he said His voice cracked. "Wallahi, I didn't I don't even know why I said it. Maybe... maybe I was trying to let you go before you walked away yourself."

She looked up at him now, her eyes trembling.

"I don't want to go back to him, Khalid."

And that was it

The air shifted Something fragile cracked and let light in.

"I thought I did," she continued. "I thought Yasir was my forever person. First love,First kiss,First everything." Her voice wavered. "But what kind of love makes you feel like you're drowning? What kind of love punishes you for saying no? I was always proving myself. Fighting for attention. Apologizing for not being enough."

She stepped closer

"But with you... i feel like I don't have to fight. You see me. You hear the things I'm not even saying. You hold my silence like it's something sacred. When I was bleeding in that hospital room, you sat beside me and cried like it was your loss too."

Her eyes brimmed with tears.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Another step closer.

"You carry my pain like it's yours, Khalid."

He couldn't speak His lips parted, but no sound came.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you in a way that scares me, in a way that heals me And I just... I needed you to know that."

Then she turned away, overwhelmed by her own vulnerability.

But he reached out.

His hand slid into hers, firm but gentle.

"Meenah," he breathed

She turned Her cheeks were wet Her chest rising and falling like she couldn't breathe.

Khalid was looking at her like she was the moon and he was finally seeing light for the first time.

"I've never done this before," he said. "I don't know how to love someone. I don't even know how to be loved."

Amina stared

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I've only known survival,Trauma,Secrets, Drugs, Nights I don't remember and mornings I didn't want to see. I used to look in the mirror and not recognize the person staring back."

His voice was shaking now

"I've been used I've been invisible I've watched people I loved walk away and never come back. But then..."

He took a slow step toward her.

"Then you walked into my life Loud,Stubborn and Bright Like a sunrise I didn't ask for but desperately needed."

Tears filled Amina's eyes.

"You make me want to fight for something For once You make me want to be better. You make me want to smile To breathe You make me believe Allah hasn't abandoned me."

He looked away for a second, then back at her.

"You're not just someone I want. You're someone I need. In my blood In my bones. I can't sleep unless I know you're okay. I can't think when you're crying. You're the only thing that silences the noise in my head."

Then with the kind of quiet intensity that could shatter mountains he whispered:

"I love you, Meenah. I love you like a man who's seen darkness and finally found his light. You are that light."

She gasped, a soft sob escaping her lips.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He smiled, finally

Then, without warning, he dropped to one knee in the middle of the hospital garden, with the smell of kunu from a nearby vendor and the sound of a hawker shouting "Suya! Fresh suya!" in the background.

No ring

Just heart

"Would you marry me again?" he asked. "But this time, for real For us Not for our parents or pretense. Just... because I don't want to live a single day on this earth without you beside me."

She covered her mouth.

Then laughed through her tears, through her shaking shoulders.

"You're serious?"

"Wallahi," he said, standing now. "But on one condition."

She waited

"No touching, no kissing not until you're my wife. Properly Nikkah and everything No haram."

She blinked

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"What?"

"I've done enough wrong in this life But not with you I want this to be right I want Allah to bless it Because haram always leads to heartbreak And I can't survive another heartbreak, Meenah Not when you're the only reason I'm still breathing."

Amina just stared at him

This was love ,Real love Love that knew restraint. That honored God before desire That protected before it pursued.

All she had known was Yasir love that demanded, love that punished. Yasir who grew angry when she said no. Yasir who always wanted more.

But Khalid... Khalid was something else entirely.

He was definition of halal love of dignity and intentionality.

She reached for his hand, but he gently pulled back.

"Not yet," he whispered. "Let's do this the right way."

She nodded, eyes shining. "Okay."

He smiled

"After your dad wakes up," he said, "we'll talk to him. We'll plan everything. A proper wedding. I want you . I want to pay your bride price with pride."

She laughed softly.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You're going to make me cry again."

"Then cry," he said. "You look beautiful when you do."

They stood there for a while, hands inches apart, hearts burning, souls already tied.

Later That Night At Alhaji usmans house in Kaduna

The night air was heavy and still, the kind of quiet that only came after rain. Outside, the scent of wet earth and hibiscus lingered, wafting in through half open windows. Inside the house, a single yellow bulb glowed faintly in Amina's room, casting long, sleepy shadows on the wall.

She lay curled on the bed, wearing one of Khalid's oversized shirt she asks him to give her when they got back soft, faded, and still carrying the scent of his cologne. Her bare feet peeked out from under the wrapper wrapped around her waist. The ceiling fan spun lazily above her, each creak and hum syncing with the ache in her chest.

Her phone buzzed. She reached for it.

A message from Arewa Gistlover was still pinned to her screen an ugly, scandalous caption accusing her of sleeping her way to power, with blurry hospital photos and a fake screenshot of Khalid "rescuing" her from Yasir. It had gone viral before anyone could blink.

Her father had collapsed that same night.

Now he was in a coma Her mother wasn't talking to her and now she’s been calling her after they returned to know how his doing but she’s not answering her calls.

Amina blinked hard, then called Khadija.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Hello?" came the familiar voice on the second ring, background noise crackling faintly.

"Where are you where did you go to? You're not home?" Amina asked.

Khadija laughed softly. "Nope I'm out."

A pause. Then a voice

"Oh my God," Amina gasped, sitting up. "Don't tell me... is that Yasir?"

Khadija groaned. "Amina, please I'm just trying to help the boy breathe. He's a mess."

Amina didn't say anything at first. Her lips parted, then closed. For a second, she felt something sharp a tiny pinch of jealousy.

But it faded almost instantly. Because Yasir no longer lived in her heart.

Her heart was with Khalid now.

"I'll gist you later," Amina said gently. "Please be safe."

"I will, wallahi And Amina..."

"Hm?"

"In sha Allah daddy will be fine ."

Amina dropped the call and stared at the screen for a few seconds.

Then she got up.

She didn't want to text. She didn't want to overthink it.

She wanted to see him.

Downstairs – Guest Room

Khalid stood by the window, shirtless, one hand resting on the glass as he stared out into the moonlit compound. His snake tattoo coiled around his back, sharp and dark like a shadow from his past. His breath fogged the window as the ceiling fan hummed lazily behind him.

He heard a knock, soft. Then a gentle creak as the door opened.

"Amina?"

She peeked in, her eyes searching.

"Can I come in?" she asked quietly.

He turned fully to face her. "Yeah Of course."

She stepped inside barefoot Her face was tired, her eyes red. But still, she managed a small smile.

"I can’t sleep," she said.

He gestured toward the bed. "Neither could I."

They both sat, quiet at first.

She looked down at her hands. "My dad's in a coma."

He nodded slowly. "I understand

She turned to him. "Hmm"

She blinked fast. "I didn't even get to say sorry. I didn't get to tell him…or beg for his forgiveness”

Her voice cracked, and she turned her face away.

"I just wanted him to be proud of me, Khalid. Even with all the mistakes. Even after Yasir. Even after the pregnancy. I thought maybe if I fixed my life, he'd forgive me. And now he's just… lying there."

He reached over, gently placing a hand over hers. "He's still here He's fighting and he’ll walke up in Sha Allah then you can ask for forgiveness”

She didn't look up.

"I feel like a burden. To everyone Even you."

He pulled his hand back slightly. "You're not."

She sniffed, and after a long pause, said softly, "Do you think Allah will listen if I pray for him?"

"Allah always listens."

She turned to him. Her eyes were wide, hopeful and scared at the same time. "Will you pray with me?"

Khalid nodded. "Let's make ablution. We'll pray two rak'ahs together. Then we can make du'a."

She stood. "You're sure? You're not tired?"

He smiled faintly. "Tired, yes But not from this."

They performed ablution together quietly. The water splashed gently in the guest bathroom, and when they returned to the room, Amina had her hijab on They spread two prayer mats s his a dark green one with gold thread hers a floral design she found in the closet.

they prayed.

Khalid's voice was low and steady as he led. Amina stood behind him, trembling slightly but holding her composure.

After the salam, she raised her hands slowly.

Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Ya Allah... protect my father. Heal him i know I've made mistakes, but I'm trying. Please... don't take him yet."

Her voice cracked again.

Beside her, Khalid kept his eyes closed.

When she was done, she wiped her face quietly with her palms and sat back.

"You did good," he said. "And Allah listens. Especially to hearts like yours."

She looked down at their intertwined fingers. "Do you ever... wonder what your mum was like? "

His gaze darkened slightly, but not with anger. With a quiet kind of sadness.

"I used to," he admitted. "But..."

Amina's heart ached.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "It's just... emptiness. I grew up not knowing what a mother's voice sounded like. But I know what pain feels like. So when I saw you hurting tonight..."

He trailed off

She looked at him, her eyes full of emotion.

"I'm glad you're here," she whispered.

"Me too."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And for the first time in a long time, neither of them felt alone.

They didn't kiss

They didn't touch

They just sat breathing the same air, facing the same qibla, two broken souls with quiet faith and full hearts.

Outside, Kaduna slept.

Inside, peace bloomed like a prayer answered too soon to believe.

Chapter fourty - Forbidden love

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

It’s been days since the arrest of aminu bello , the arewa gistlover scandal and Amina’s father being in a coma

Each morning, Amina and Khalid drove from unguwan dosa to Giwa hospital in Kaduna. The routine became sacred pack water bottles, fruit, Qur'an, shawls for the cold hospital hallways. They would sit beside Alhaji Usman's still body, his breath shallow under the beeping machines, and read surahs aloud, whispering du'as between silences.

Some days, Amina held his hand. Other days, she couldn't even look at him without crying.

"I feel like I'm being punished," she said one day, her voice trembling as they sat on the metal bench outside the ward. "For everything."

"You're not," Khalid said gently, "Sometimes Allah slows us down to force us to feel. But it's not always punishment. Sometimes it's mercy especially sickness”

She didn't reply. She just leaned her head on the wall

Things were... changing with them

Slowly, and then all at once.

He watched her more than the pages. She noticed, and blushed.

One evening, she leaned over the kitchen counter and said playfully, "What are you always staring at?"

Khalid blinked, caught. "Nothing. I mean just the steam from the rice."

"Liar," she said, smirking.

He smiled . "You."

They were falling into a rhythm.

A fragile, beautiful one.

But nothing broken stays perfect for long.

One Afternoon Three Weeks Later

It was raining heavily. The skies were grey. The house smelled of wet grass and lemon-scented disinfectant.

Khalid was in the guest room now unofficially his room shirtless, pacing, tense. His hands shook. There was a scar near the bend of his elbow Old and Ugly.

He stared at the small vial and needle in the drawer.

Earlier that day, he had seen Alhaji Ibrahim againhis real father who had invited him for lunch . It was supposed to be simple. A chance to talk.

But then someone had approached their table. A politician,a friend of Aminu Bello.

And he made a comment

Something inside khalid had cracked.

Now he was in his room, breathing fast.

The needle kissed his skin. The burn was familiar. The rush immediate.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

When Amina walked in without knocking, everything froze.

Her eyes locked on the needle. His arm The vial.

"Khalid..." her voice broke.

He yanked his arm back, hiding it, but it was too late.

"Meye haka (what's this) why?"

He stood. "Amina, wait. I....."

"Don't!" Her voice was sharp, cutting. "Don't you dare lie again."

He reached for her. "I was triggered..."

"So what? You promised menYou said you'd fight it. I thought you were healing!"

"I am trying," he snapped. "But healing isn't clean! It's ugly and slow and...."

"And what?" she cut in. "You hurt yourself? You kill yourself quietly? While I sit here loving a man who doesn't love himself?"

She said out of anger

The silence was thunderous.

He looked away

Amina stepped back, her face twisted in pain.

"I lost a child," she said quietly. "I almost lost my father. And now I'm losing you to something I don't even understand."

"I didn't ask you to save me," Khalid said coldly.

She swallowed hard. "Then maybe I shouldn't try."

She turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

Later That Night

Khalid called yasir and asked him to come

They never liked each other but they both had one thing in common

Amina

And Khalid really needed help dealing with her

Yasir arrived

He didn't knock. Just walked into the house like he owned the place

Khalid looked up, still seated on the floor in his room.

Yasir sat beside him, uninvited.

"Where is she?" Khalid asked quietly.

"She's upstairs probably Crying."

A pause

"You messed up."

"I know."

Yasir looked at him, serious for once.

"Khalid, I know I'm the last person you want advice from. But I knew Amina before you did. I knew her when she was stubborn and insecure and brave and soft all at once."

Khalid didn't reply.

Yasir continued. "She needs patience. She needs truth. And when she fights you, it's because she's scared of being abandoned. You have to hold on tighter when she pushes you away. That's how you win her."

Khalid's jaw clenched.

"And for what it's worth," Yasir added, standing up, "I think she loves you. But she won't fight for someone who won't fight for himself."

“Don’t ruin my sacrifice please “

Then he left

The Next Morning –Giwa Hospital

The beep of the heart monitor was steady.

Amina sat beside her father, reciting Surat Yasin, her voice trembling but strong.

Then suddenly a twitch.

His hand

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her Qur'an slipped from her lap.

"Baba?" she whispered, heart thundering. "Baba, can you hear me?"

His eyelids fluttered. His mouth twitched.

"Alhamdulillah!" she gasped, standing. "Nurse! Doctor! Somebody please he's awake!"

Within minutes, the room filled with white coats and nurses and machines.

And Alhaji Usman opened his eyes.

After a few hours of him waking up he was steady but weak

Finally amina got the courage to enter cause after she saw him wake up , she left the room

His gaze found hers, weak but warm. "Amina..."

She dropped to her knees beside his bed, tears pouring. "I'm sorry, Baba. I'm so, so sorry.dan Allah kayafemun(please forgive me)

He touched her hand, his grip barely there.

"I didn't raise a coward," he whispered.

"I know," she cried. "But I messed up. Please forgive me."

His eyes softened. "I already did."

His lips parted. Dry and Pale But his voice — still his.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"...Amina."

She let out a sound that wasn't quite a sob, not quite a laugh. Relief poured out of her as she stood and leaned closer.

"Baba, I'm here I'm right here."

His eyes drifted away, like he was remembering something.

Then his jaw clenched.

"That blog," he muttered. "Arewa Gistlover. The shame..."

Amina's breath caught.

"Baba... I'm sorry," she said, tears already falling. "I didn't mean for it to happen this way. Wallahi, I didn't. I never wanted to shame you or bring disgrace to our name."

"You were pregnant," he said quietly. "And your marriage to Khalid is invalid . And worse, he's a... he's a junkie?"

Amina looked down. "There's a lot you don't know, Baba. About him About me About everything. But please... please forgive me."

He didn't speak

She leaned forward, resting her head near his hand.

"I was confused. I was scared. I lost the baby, Baba. I almost lost myself. But I tried to fix it. I tried to do right by you."

His voice was softer now.

"You think I'm angry because of the pregnancy? The fake marriage?" He sighed, eyes distant. "I'm angry because I let you suffer in silence. I raised a daughter who could not come to me when she was hurting. That is my shame. Not yours."

She cried harder now, clutching his hand.

"I forgive you, Amina," he whispered. "And I beg you… forgive me too."

She nodded quickly, unable to speak. She kissed his hand and held it to her forehead.

"I love you, Baba."

He closed his eyes. "And I love you more than you'll ever know."

There was peace in that moment. Quiet and Gentle. Like something had been lifted from the room.

A knock

They both turned

Khalid stepped in slowly, respectfully.

"Ina wuni daddy(good afternoon)" he said.

Usman looked at him. Really looked For the first time, since waking up.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid's beard was trimmed. His kaftan clean. His eyes tired but clear. He looked like someone trying to change.

Alhaji Usman looked at him

Then looked at Amina’s mother

"And the scandal The drugs. The lies,Were they true?"

Khalid didn't blink.

"Some of it. Yes."

Amina looked up sharply. "Khalid..."

But he raised a hand gently.

"It's okay."

Usman's expression turned cold.

"You’ve done so much for me . You protected me from your father but khalid You are involved with hard substances. You let the world think you were good when you were not."

"Yes," Amina replied. "But he never touched me. Never disrespected me . He protected me with everything he had. Even when it meant people would drag his name through the dust."

Usman looked at Amina.

"Do you love him?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

"Enough to suffer again? To explain to your children one day that their father was once addicted to fentanyl? That their marriage started as a lie?"

She looked down.

"I love him enough to heal with him. To build something honest. This time."

Usman didn't reply. He looked at Khalid again. His eyes sharp now.

"You are not who you say you are, Khalid. You are not a Bello. You are Ibrahim's child. You were raised in chaos. You carry darkness inside you."

Khalid didn't deny it.

"I know," he said. "And I'm trying to fight it every day."

Usman's voice turned firm. The room grew colder.

"You will not marry my daughter again."

Amina froze.

Her head snapped toward her father. "What?"

"You heard me," he said. "This marriage this second chance is over. You may have protected her, but you are not worthy of her Not now I can’t let my daughter marry

Khalid's jaw tightened.

He turned and walked out.

Amina sat in stunned silence.

Her father closed his eyes again, tired.

"You'll understand one day, Amina. Sometimes love is not enough."

She didn't answer

She didn't cry

But deep inside her... something began to burn.

Khalid closed the door behind him as quietly as he could. But the moment it clicked shut, it echoed louder in his ears than a gunshot.

He couldn't breathe.

His legs moved, but his chest felt like it had caved in. He didn't look back. He didn't wait. He just kept walking down the hallway, out into the hospital courtyard, past the vending machine, past the guard, past the flowers lined up outside the ward.

He didn't stop until he reached his car.

And even then, he didn't get in.

He leaned against it. Head low. Hands on his knees.

She wasn't his Not anymore Maybe not ever again.

Inside, Amina was about to follow him. She had reached the door already when her father's voice cut through the room like cold metal.

"Don't you dare."

She froze Turned slowly.

Alhaji Usman Suleiman was sitting up now. Weak, but his eyes were sharp. Hard.

"Don't take one more step after that boy."

"Baba, please," she begged, voice trembling. "He didn't even do anything"

"He did everything!" her father snapped. "He fooled this whole family. I gave him my trust. I gave you to him, thinking he was better than Yasir. Turns out, he's worse."

Amina's heart dropped. "He's not worse. Wallahi, he's not"

"A drug addict and a pretender . And still walking around carrying my daughter's shame like a badge. What kind of man hides under a fake marriage just to cover scandal? What kind of man injects poison into his veins?"

Amina's knees buckled.

She turned toward her mother

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Mummy..”

Her mother didn't hug her. She just said, quietly:

"Your father is right, Amina. I know you love him. But that love is dangerous. You need to listen this time. We won't lose you again."

Amina sat slowly on the floor. And cried not small tears. Not silent ones.

The type that cracked from her chest. The kind that shook her ribs.

OUTSIDE Giwa Hospital Parking Lot

Khalid opened the car door with shaking fingers.

He didn't even realize he was crying until the drops landed on his shirt.

His Meenah. And now he'd lost her.

Because of his name Because of his past. Because of what ran through his blood.

Because of who his father wasn't. Because of who he never got to be.

And worst of all?

Because of the truth He was still addicted.

He had fought it. Every day,For her.

But pain has a way of digging up old ghosts.

He opened the glove box.

The small black box was still there. Hidden beneath his Qur'an.
Irony

He stared at the vial.

His hand hovered over it.

"No," he whispered to himself. "You promised her."

But then he heard her father's voice again in his head.

"He's worse than Yasir."

He heard her mother's voice.

"That love is dangerous."

He saw Amina's face. Crying Not following him. Choosing to stay behind.

And just like that the battle ended.

His fingers grabbed the syringe.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He loaded the vial Eyes burning.

One jab to his arm. Quick Like muscle memory.

The sting,the warmth the shame.

He slumped into the driver's seat. Breath slowing.

Eyes red Fists clenched.

"You're weak," he whispered to himself. "You'll never be enough for her."

He hit the steering wheel.

Once

Twice

His arm ached. His heart throbbed.

Inside the hospital, she was crying.

Outside in the parking lot, he was breaking

INSIDE AGAIN – HOSPITAL ROOM

Amina sat by the window now, arms wrapped around her knees, her cheek resting on her thigh.

"They don't understand," she whispered.

Her mother sat silently, watching her daughter fall apart all over again.

"Baba wants me to marry who? Someone holy? A perfect man? What about someone honest? Someone who chose me even when he had every reason not to?"

Her voice cracked.

"Khalid stayed when Yasir left. He stayed when I collapsed. When I miscarried. When I lost myself."

"He made me feel like I was worth loving."

Her brother Kabir walked in quietly, hearing her words but not saying anything.

They all knew it

They all saw it

But in the face of scandal, truth didn't matter.

Reputation did.

And in the silence of that hospital room, a decision had been made.

Amina and Khalid could not be.

Not now

Maybe not ever

Chapter fourty one - Homecoming

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Unguwan Rimi

Kaduna One Week After the Hospital Confrontation.

The iron gate to the compound squeaked as it opened. The sound of slippers shuffling against cement followed. Women in colourful abayas flooded the corridor. Children ran in and out of the parlour like it was Eid day. The scent of Dettol, turaren wuta and fried yam filled the air.

Alhaji Usman Suleiman had been discharged.

He was back home fragile, slower, but alive. And like clockwork, the house became a community hall.

Aunties arrived with coolers of kunu and fried rice. Uncles came with plastic bags of apples and Lucozade. A cousin from Kawo brought a gallon of zobo, and three others squeezed onto the rug beside Baba's bed, even though he was still hooked to oxygen and half asleep.

"Wallahi, I told them they discharged him too soon," one aunty said loudly in Hausa, folding her arms. "He still looks pale Ko ba haka ba?(doesnt he?)"

Another chimed in, not even whispering. "And this their daughter… she looks sick too Look at her eyes. Black like engine oil."

Amina passed by, holding a tray of water bottles. She smiled politely. "Sannu da zuwa,(welcome)"she said, soft and formal.

"Yauwa Mungode (thank you)," they replied, not making eye contact.

Her mother paced in and out of the room, adjusting Baba's drip, fluffing pillows, speaking to the nurse they hired from the hospital . Her face was tense, her scarf already slipping

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

In the parlour, the men were gathered. Talking politics, petrol prices, and briefly scandal.

“I saw it online. Arewa Gistlover posted something, then deleted. But ehn, they don’t just post for nothing,” someone said.

“And all of a sudden he had a heart attack hmm where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” another murmured.

Kabir, Amina’s older brother, shot a glare across the room. “This is my father’s house. Respect it or go and sit outside.”

The man raised his hand casually. “Sorry o. I was just saying…”

In the kitchen, Amina was washing a tray when Khadija called.

Phone Conversation Amina & Khadija

“Wallahi, I don’t know where he is, I’ve asked every source I know “Khadija said, sounding frustrated. “He’s off grid. Hmmm guess who called me .”

“Who?” Amina asked

“Abdul”

Amina turned away from the noise of the kitchen, pressing her phone to her ear. “Abdul? His friend ?”

“Yes he said he wanted to see me ”

A pause

“He’s worried too.”

Amina gave a bitter laugh. “Since when does Kaduna’s mafia don worry about anybody?”

“Since the man he considers a brother disappeared after his heart got ripped out.”

Amina was quiet. Then softly: “He hasn’t even texted. Not once.”

“I know,” Khadija replied. “But you know Khalid. When he’s hurting, he goes dark I’m sure he’s that type of person That’s how he protects the people he loves.”

“I don’t want protection. I want honesty.”

Khadija was silent for a moment.

“Maybe you need to give him space,” she said. “Maybe this time, he needs to fight alone.”

Amina sniffed, trying not to cry. “Why does love feel like war?”

“Because in this world,” Khadija said gently, “peace is earned. And you both started with fire.”

Back Inside Later That Day

“Bring more plastic cups!” someone shouted. “The men are still drinking malt.”

Amina entered the room carrying a tray. Her wrists ached Her back hurt And still… she served.

One aunty with too much perfume and too many opinions said, “Amina, come and sit na. You’re walking like you’re not the one who caused all this.”

Kabir stood from his corner. “Enough.”

Amina touched his arm. “It’s okay.”

She forced a smile. “I’ll sit.”

She dropped into a plastic chair beside her brother suleiman, who was scrolling through his phone, ignoring everything.

“You okay?” she asked him.

He nodded. “They’ll get tired soon.”

“I’m already tired.

Her Room That Night

She lay on her bed, face to the wall. The sounds of the house had dimmed. Most of the guests were gone. Only the heavy slippers of the night nurse remained.

Her scarf was still on. Her phone lay on her chest.

She typed Khalid’s number again.

It rang

No answer

Her heart cracked a little more.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She opened WhatsApp

Last seen: 5 days ago

She dropped the phone Covered her face

She didn't cry

But she didn't sleep either

Somewhere Across Kaduna Khalid

He sat on the floor of a quiet bungalow in Malali, hands wrapped around his knees. The only sound was the faint buzz of air condition

His phone buzzed He stared at it.

Amina

He let it ring out

Then silence

He opened a manila envelope beside him. Inside were documents from lawyers. He was working daily to shut down Aminu Bello's shell companies.

He held the paper like it was holy.

"This is your redemption," he muttered to himself.

Not for himself.

For her

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Later that Evening Abdul & Khadija

The café in GRA was quite too quiet for Khadija's liking. It wasn't the type of place she would usually be found No boys yelling about suya. Just soft jazz in the background and cold AC biting at her wrists. She pulled her scarf tighter around her shoulders.

Across the small round table, Abdul Junaid sat like he owned the world.

A black kaftan. Black sunglasses, even though the sun was already setting. His phone on the table, facedown. The kind of man who didn't ask twice and never begged once.

Khadija glanced around, then sipped from the bottle of drink the waiter had just placed. She didn't even like it like that. But she needed something to do with her hands.

"This is weird," she muttered, eyes fixed on the straw.

Abdul nodded calmly. "Yes But necessary."

She glanced at him. "Why me?"

He turned slightly, arms crossed. "Because you know her. And she listens to you."

Khadija frowned. "I still don't get why you care."

He tilted his head. "Because Khalid is not just some friend. He's my brother Not by blood By loyalty. We've seen things together Survived things."

She leaned back slightly. "You're Abdul Junaid. Power, guns, Ayah, blackmail. DSS probably has a whole file on you. You don't ask for help."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I don't. But I'm not asking for me."

She narrowed her eyes, unsure. “Are you trying to fix him?”

Abdul sighed quietly Removed his sunglasses and placed them on the table. His eyes, when bare, were sharp and tired at the same time. Like someone who had spent his life in shadows and didn’t know what peace looked like anymore.

“I know what it’s like,” he said softly, “to love someone and not deserve them.”

Khadija stiffened.

He wasn’t looking at her. His voice didn’t tremble. Just calm and Controlled.

“I made Ayah wait,” he continued. “For a while I built an empire soaked in silence and threats. She should have left me. But she didn’t. She stayed. She prayed,She fought for me even when I didn’t ask.”

Khadija shifted uncomfortably. “That doesn’t sound romantic.”

He looked at her finally. “It wasn’t It was painful But it worked.”

They sat in silence for a moment. The sound of a generator humming somewhere outside the gate. The waiter walked past again, carrying a tray of pepper soup for another customer.

Khadija finally spoke, quietly. “So what do you want me to do?”

Abdul leaned forward, elbows on the table, his tone never changing.

“Just remind her. That her silence is killing him Slowly.”

Khadija raised an eyebrow. “You know she’s hurting too.”

“I know,” he said. “But Khalid won’t come back for himself. He doesn’t think he’s worth saving Not after everything.”

She tapped her fingers lightly against the plastic bottle. “They both think they’re the broken one.”

“Exactly.”

More silence

Khadija sighed and leaned back again, looking up at the ceiling. “You and I sitting here like this… wallahi, if someone sees us, my mother will kill me she’ll think I’ve started sleeping with politicians ”

Abdul smirked. “Relax I’m not trying to corrupt you.”

“You couldn’t if you tried,” she muttered.

He nodded with quiet approval. “That’s why I called you.”

Khadija stood, adjusting her scarf. “I’ll talk to her. But I’m not promising a miracle.”

“I’m not asking for one,” he said, putting his glasses back on. “Just a nudge in the right direction.”

She looked at him a beat longer, then turned to go.

“Tell Ayah she’s lucky,” she said before walking away. “Not many men like you stay loyal.”

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Abdul chuckled under his breath.

“She’s not lucky,” he murmured after her. “I am.”

Amina’s Home Midnight

The house was finally quiet.

For the first time all day, no one was boiling water for tea. No aunties were gossiping in the parlour. No cousins were running in and out asking for iPads and leftover meat pies. Even the nurse who’d been pacing the hallway had gone to lie down in the visitor’s room.

Only Amina remained awake.

She sat by the window in her room legs folded under her, phone resting lightly in her palm. The bulb outside the house flickered against the compound wall, casting soft shadows across the faded curtain.

Her scarf had slipped halfway off her head, loose like her thoughts. Her eyes dull from too many days of pretending.

Outside, the street was alive in its own quiet way.

The smell of roasted corn drifted in someone down the road was still fanning suya beside a crackling charcoal fire. A group of boys in kaftans argued faintly over football near the corner kiosk, their voices rising and fading. A mosque speaker crackled softly in the distance, not for prayer just an old Quran recitation playing on repeat.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A generator hummed next door. That deep, vibrating sound Kaduna homes knew too well. It was the same generator that used to keep her up as a teenager. Now, it felt like a lullaby.

She looked down at her phone.

One missed call history

One name on her mind

Khalid

She inhaled deeply, then pressed the call button again. Watched it ring Once… twice… five times.

No answer

The line went silent

Amina lowered the phone slowly Placed it on her lap. Her heart twisted a little more.

The night breeze pushed the curtain gently aside, brushing her cheek like a question she didn't know how to answer.

She stared at the dark street. Blinked slowly.

Then she whispered, "You said you wouldn't leave."

Her voice was barely audible. Not even a full voice just breath, shaped by pain.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A small, bitter smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“But maybe… I don’t deserve to be chosen either.”

She leaned her head against the window frame. Cold metal met warm skin.

And still no tears came.

Not because she wasn’t hurting. But because the ache had settled so deep, it was no longer something she could cry out.

There were some kinds of sadness only silence could hold.

A car passed on the main road outside. Headlights swept across the wall and disappeared.

She stayed there

Stil

Waiting

Not for a call Not for an apology.

Just… for the pain to soften.

Just for the night to end.

But it didn’t

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Not for a long, long time

Khalid's House 3:42AM

Khalid sat on the rug in the middle of the sitting room. The windows were closed, but the breeze still whistled through a cracked pane. The compound outside was dead quiet. No suya man No mosque echo. Just the hum of silence and the soft creak of the ceiling fan swinging above his head.

A single yellow bulb lit the room dim, flickering. His Qur'an lay open in front of him on a low wooden stand, untouched for over an hour. His legs were folded beneath him, but one had gone numb. He didn't move.

His phone buzzed beside him.

He looked down

Amina.

His chest clenched

He didn't reach for it

He watched it ring, the green light flashing like a pulse.

His name on her screen. Her name on his.

Five rings Then silence.

He picked it up slowly. Stared at the missed call. Let out a long breath through his nose. Then flipped the phone over, face down on the rug.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

His hand went to his face, dragging down slowly, as if trying to rub the exhaustion off. But it was deeper than skin.

He reached for the Qur'an again. His fingers hesitated. Shaking slightly.

He opened it. Read the first verse on the page aloud, voice low and broken:

"Fa inna ma'al usri yusra."

"Verily, with hardship comes ease."

His voice caught

His throat burned

He closed the Qur'an gently. Not out of disrespect. Out of shame.

He wasn't looking for ease anymore.

He wasn't even looking for peace.

He just… needed purpose. Something to make the next breath worth taking.

His eyes shifted to the drawer beside the rug.

The one he never opened during the day.

He stared at it for a long time.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Then slowly… quietly… he reached for it.

The old black pouch was still there.

Inside the same vial of fentanyl, half used. A syringe,Cotton,Alcohol swab,Clean and Ready.

Sin always waits quietly.

Khalid placed everything on the rug in front of him.

His hands trembled.

“No,” he said under his breath. “No, no, no, no.”

But his fingers were already reaching.

He tore the packet of alcohol. Swabbed the inside of his arm.

The familiar scar was still there. Still angry looking. Still healing.

The needle hovered over it.

He blinked

He saw her face

Amina

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The way she looked at him when he told her he'd try.

The way she held him on the floor that night, like he was worth saving.

The way she cried when her father said no.

He dropped the syringe

It clattered on the tile.

He covered his face.

But then he heard her voice in his head.

"You're not fighting for me. You're fighting for you."

And the pain came rushing back.

He picked the syringe up again.

This time, quick Numb. Like muscle memory.

He injected the drug

The sting came first

Then warmth

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Then stillness

Then… silence

He slumped back against the wall.

Head leaning, eyes unfocused, breathing shallow.

His thoughts blurred. The Qur'an blurred.

Everything blurred.

But guilt?

Guilt stayed clear.l

A few minutes passed Or maybe an hour

Khalid sat like a corpse propped up by regret. Sweat gathered on his temples. His shirt stuck to his back.

His phone buzzed again.

Another call

He didn't pick it

He just sat there

Alone

Ashamed

And still very much alive

But barely

Chapter fourty two - Maybe never

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Early Morning Khalid's Car, Somewhere in Malali

It’s been a month since the incident

The sky above Kaduna was still half dark, washed in grey and the last breath of night. The streets of Malali were nearly empty no schoolchildren, no buka noise, no mosque announcements. Just the distant crackle of a radio from a mai shayi stall and the occasional bark of a dog in the next compound.

Inside the car, the air was thick.

Not with heat But with something heavier.

Regret

Khalid sat in the driver's seat of his black Prado, parked under a tree, deep in a quiet backstreet he knew too well. He hadn't driven far the night before just far enough from his house to avoid the silence. But somehow, it had followed him anyway.

His head rested on the steering wheel. His breath fogged the windscreen in slow, uneven bursts. His entire body sagged like it had lost its bones.

He hadn't slept Not really

He had drifted

Slipped

And now... the crash

He blinked slowly

Groggy,Weak and Ashamed.

The back of his throat was dry, and his limbs felt foreign. Like they belonged to someone else entirely. The inside of his mouth tasted like metal and guilt.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He lifted his head, squinting against the soft light leaking in through the windshield.

Then he looked down.

The mark was there.

A small puncture near the crook of his arm. Barely visible to the world, but to him it screamed.

"Sh*t," he whispered, turning away from it. His voice was hoarse. Dry Like it had been scraped raw by the inside of his own chest.

He yanked his sleeve down. Quick Almost angry Like covering the wound would erase what he did.

But it didn't

Nothing erased it

Not even the Qur'an in his back seat. Not even the prayer beads still looped around his gear stick. Not even the image of her Amina crying quietly in that hospital corridor while he walked away.

His stomach turned

He closed his eyes. Leaned back Let his head fall against the headrest.

A cool breeze slipped through the half open window. It carried the faint smell of burnt sugarcane and wet earth Kaduna's post rain perfume. Normally, he loved that smell.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

But today... everything felt hollow.l

His phone buzzed again

He ignored it

Buzz

Buzz

Still ringing

He didn't move Didn't speak.

Just stared at the roof of the car like it might give him answers.

"I can't keep doing this," he whispered.

But even as the words left his mouth, they felt weak. Pointless.

Because he didn't know how to stop.

Not really

He had survived warlords. Shot callers DSS interrogations. Rehab Fentanyl withdrawal. Amina's silence. Her father's rejection.

But this... this silence inside him? It was killing him louder than any gun ever had.

He reached over, opened the glove compartment.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The syringe was gone

He had thrown it out around 3AM.

But he still felt its presence.

Like sin had memory

He pressed the heel of his palm against his eyes Hard.

Then he let out a breath.

Long and Shaky.

That night, when he finally dozed off in the car seat, head tilted, arms wrapped around himself like a broken child, he dreamed.

Of a woman he had never met.

She sat near a window, on a soft brown prayer mat. Her scarf was tied loosely. Her face was kind. Familiar and unfamiliar all at once. She was reading the Qur'an aloud, voice soft like lullaby.

When she noticed him standing there young, scared, trembling she smiled.

Not sadly or pityingly

Just… like someone who knew.

Then she spoke

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Allah ya Barka da rai Badan ka Wahala ba ..."

"You were given life, not punishment."

He woke up gasping

His face was wet

He hadn't even noticed the tears until they soaked through his collar.

Outside, Kaduna was waking up.

Roosters crowed. A young boy cycled past with bread in a blue sack, shouting "Bread! Bread mai zafi!(hot one)!" A mosque began the Fajr azaan from a nearby loudspeaker. The world carried on.

But inside the car, Khalid stayed still.

Fighting a war no one could see

And not knowing yet... that someone was on their way to remind him how to fight.

Same Morning Amina's Room, Unguwan Rimi

The house was already awake.

Plates clinked faintly in the kitchen. A baby cried in the neighbouring house. Somewhere outside, a hawker's voice rang out “Fura da nono! Mai sanyi! (Millet balls and cow milk cold one)”Cars passed slowly along the dusty road beyond the compound wall.

But inside her room, Amina had drawn the curtains tight.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The faint gold light that filtered through them cast soft shadows on the pink walls of her childhood. A shelf held old trophies from school. A framed Qur'anic verse above her bed, gifted to her after her graduation walima. But none of it brought her comfort now.

Her room, usually tidy and full of scented candle smells and neatly folded scarves, looked undone. The bed wasn't made. Her scarf collection was scattered across the reading chair. A half drunk bottle of kunun aya sat by the side table.

And on the floor the only thing still in its proper place her prayer mat.

Amina knelt in sujood

Her body trembled, not from fear, but from sheer exhaustion. Her scarf was soaked with sweat and stuck to the sides of her face. Her elbows shook with each motion. She had been praying since subh, losing count of how many raka'ahs had passed. It no longer mattered.

Between each sujood, she whispered the same du'a over and over:

"Ya Allah... Ka samun natsuwa. Ka zabamin mafi alheri."(Ya Allah calm my mind choose whatever is good for me)"

(Give me clarity Give me peace Give me something good...)

Her voice was hoarse now. Stripped of eloquence Stripped of power.

Just raw breath and quiet pleading.

After a while, she sat back on her heels, wiped her face with both palms, and remained there. Still. Like a statue carved by sorrow.

The Qur'an lay open beside her mattress, but she hadn't read a single ayah.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her eyes kept falling back to her phone.

It was cracked in the corner from that night she dropped it on the kitchen floor when the blog post broke.

She hadn't changed the screen. Maybe she didn't care to.

Maybe she liked the idea that something else in her life was visibly broken.

Around 8:13AM, the rest of the house stirred louder.

She heard her mother arguing softly with the cleaner. Her father's nurse knocked twice and entered his room. Her brother's voice floated through the hallway probably on a business call. Life was continuing.

But for Amina... the world had stopped somewhere between heartbreak and shame.

She tapped her phone screen again. Her fingers hesitated before she opened Instagram.

She hadn't posted in months

Not since the whole wedding thing

The app loaded slowly, then burst to life full of filtered smiles and curated happiness.

She scrolled absentmindedly. Watched people getting engaged. Brides in shimmering George lace. Skincare ads Ankara hauls. Abuja girls in boubous and white sneakers laughing over brunch Even the new labubu trend

Then... one image made her pause.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A couple standing hand in hand at the Botanical Gardens.

She recognized the spot.

She had gone there with Yasir once. Years ago. When they were still pretending the world was kind.

Now someone else stood there. A girl in a teal hijab. A man in a grey kaftan. Hands clasped gently Eyes closed Faces soft.

The caption said:

"We found love when we found Allah first."

Amina stared at it for too long.

She wanted to believe it.

She wanted to be happy for them.

But something inside her cracked again.

She dropped the phone gently on the bed beside her pillow.

Her chest rose

Then fell

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She brought her hands to her mouth, cupped tightly over her lips.

And that's when it came
Not a scream

Not even a sob
Just one sound,Low and Broken.

Like something inside her had finally given up.

But still... she didn't cry loudly.

She didn't wail

Because she was tired

Tired of weeping in ways that people could hear.

Tired of being the subject of whispers.

Tired of looking weak.

So she stayed there body curled on the rug, forehead pressed to her prayer mat, tears slipping silently into the fabric.

The azaan for prayer rang softly from a mosque in the distance.

She didn't move

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She just stayed there

Afternoon Khadija's Interlude

The sun was hot that afternoon.

Inside the Suleiman household, it was cooler fans humming overhead, curtains drawn to keep the light away. The smell of boiling lemongrass water drifted from the kitchen. And also turarenwuta Someone was heating kunu in a silver flask.

Khadija walked in through the back gate, carrying a nylon bag of oranges and groundnuts.

Her abaya was wrinkled. Her scarf sat a little too far back on her head she'd clearly tied it in a hurry. Her white sneakers were dusty, and her face wore the look of someone who had walked through heat and noise and gossip to get here.

She removed her shoes at the kitchen step, greeted the cleaner respectfully with a small smile.

"Assalamu Alaikum."

"Wa alaikum salaam," the woman replied, bowing slightly. "They're in the parlour."

"No," Khadija said, her voice soft but firm. "I'm going upstairs."

She passed through the corridor quietly. Amina's mother was sitting on a low stool near the window, Khadija greeted her with a lowered head.

"Good afternoon, Hajiya."

Hajiya Faiza nodded without looking up. "Welcome."

There was a pause.

Then Faiza added, "She hasn't eaten."

Khadija's heart clenched a little.

"I brought oranges," she replied softly. "Maybe I can convince her."

Faiza didn't respond.

Khadija climbed the stairs. Step by step.

Her heart was heavy.

The last time she had seen Amina like this was after the miscarriage. But even then, there had been a fire behind her friend's grief. Now... it just looked like ash.

She knocked once. Then entered.

The room was dim. Curtains closed tight. A soft whir from the ceiling fan barely moved the humid air.

Amina sat on the edge of her bed, legs drawn up, arms around her knees. Her scarf had slipped down to her shoulders. Her face was bare no gloss, no kajal, no filter. Her eyes were swollen, lips dry, phone tossed carelessly by the pillow.

She didn't turn when the door opened.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khadija didn't speak

She simply walked in. Set the nylon bag down. Sat on the bed beside her.

A moment passed.

Then, without asking, she reached for Amina's hand.

Warm Weak and Trembling slightly.

She held it gently, like it was something sacred.

And then said, in a quiet voice:

"Even prophets were rejected by their own people, Amina."

Her thumb brushed lightly over Amina's knuckles.

"You're not weak because your father said no."

Amina's breath caught.

She didn't cry Not yet.

She turned her face away, whispering, "I don't even know who I am anymore."

Khadija didn't flinch.

"You're someone who survived," she said simply. "Someone who still prays. Someone who didn't lie when the whole world was whispering behind her back. That alone makes you worthy of love."

Amina stared at the ground. Her chest rose slowly and Then fell.

"But I feel like shame," she said. "Like I walk into a room and people stop breathing. Like my name is now a burden."

Khadija chuckled softly. "That's because you're still seeing yourself through their eyes. Stop doing that. Look at yourself through your own du'a. Through what Allah knows, not what people think."

Another pause

"I'm not even angry with my father ," Amina said after a while. Her voice was tight. "He's just... scared. They all are."

"I know," Khadija replied. "They're scared of what might go wrong

They’re not wrong for feeling that way ."

Amina looked down. "I know ."

Khadija nodded. "That's okay It doesn't make you weak. But don't let their fear make you forget your light."

Silence again

The fan creaked

Amina's grip on her friend's hand tightened.

Khadija leaned her head on her shoulder.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I miss him," Amina whispered.

Khadija didn't ask who.

She already knew.

They sat there like that for a while.

Two girls. In a dark room. Holding hands.

No solutions

Just survival

And in that quiet space between heartbreak and faith, something small began to shift.

Not everything

Just enough.

Later That Night – Malali, Khalid's Hidden House

Abdul dropped onto the old couch near the dusty shelf, stretching one leg out, the other bent casually. He removed his cap, wiped sweat from his brow with a white handkerchief, and poured himself a cup from the untouched Lipton thermos.

He took a sip. Winced. "Too cold."

Khalid still stood, leaning against the wall, arms folded, as if holding himself together.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

There was a long pause between them. The kind of silence that only men who've buried too many truths can sit comfortably in.

Then Abdul said quietly, "They're moving him."

Khalid's head snapped up. "Aminu?"

Abdul nodded. "Tonight Private air ambulance. Headed for Switzerland. Mental health facility. Maximum lockdown. No phones,No press,No favours."

Khalid blinked. "He agreed to that?"

Abdul laughed darkly. "He didn't have a choice. They sedated him after he broke a bottle on one of the DSS nurse's heads."

Khalid chuckled. Dry Bitter.

Abdul added, "He's finished, bro. No more calls. No more threats No more haunting your shadow His empire is dust."

Khalid's shoulders slumped slightly. "I should feel peace."

"But?"

"I feel... tired. Like winning still cost me more than I had."

Abdul finished the tea, set the cup down. He rubbed his jaw, eyes narrowing.

"You want my advice?"

"No," Khalid muttered.

"Good," Abdul said. "I'll give it anyway."

He stood up, towering over him.

"You need to go see that man."

"Who?"

"Her father. Alhaji Usman Suleiman."

Khalid scoffed. "He said I would never marry his daughter."

"And? He's not Allah."

Khalid frowned. "You don't get it. I'm not clean. I relapsed Twice Her mother sees me as a curse. Her name still floats in whispers because of me."

"Wallahi," Abdul said, stepping forward, "if love was only for the clean, no one would deserve it. You want Amina? Then fight for her. Not like a thug Like a man."

Khalid looked away. "What if he slams the door in my face?"

"Then stand at that door again tomorrow. And the next. You think I married Ayah by being soft? I fought my ex best friend and two assassination attempts."

Khalid raised a brow. "You also kidnapped her at one point."

"Semantics."

They both laughed

Then silence again

Khalid ran a hand through his hair. His voice dropped. "You think she's really still waiting?"

Abdul didn't answer immediately. He stared at him for a long time.

Then said, "She's praying. For clarity For peace. For you. I know because Khadija told me. And women like that... don't waste sujood on strangers."

Khalid swallowed hard

Then nodded.

"I'll go."

Abdul clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Good Wear white Be respectful. Take something in your hand. Don't raise your voice. And don't try to be poetic. Just be real."

Khalid smirked. "You sound like my mother."

"You've never met your mother."

"Exactly."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

They both paused

Then Abdul turned serious

"One more thing."

"What?"

"If that man insults you... if he threatens you... if he calls you names..."

Khalid squared his jaw.

"...you listen. You absorb it. You don't fight back. Because this isn't about pride. This is about niyyah. Your intention Go as a man. Not a boy."

Khalid's chest rose slowly.

Then fell

"Got it."

Chapter fourty three- The Visit

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The sun had barely risen over Kaduna when Khalid arrived at the Suleiman compound in Unguwan Rimi.

He came alone

No Abdul No tinted SUV No entourage.

Just one white kaftan, crisp and plain, and a small brown envelope tucked under his arm.

He paused outside the gate.

Breathed in the scent of soaked earth and neem leaves.

Then knocked

The mai gadi (gate man)peeped through the wicket gate, startled. "Kai! Oga Khalid?"

"Please," Khalid said, voice low. "Is Alhaji Usman home?"

The gate creaked open.

Inside, the compound was waking up. Two women were sweeping. A little boy with chalk dusted feet ran across the tiles chasing a chicken. One of the cousins sat near the kitchen window, peeling yam.

Everyone paused when they saw him.

Because everyone knew who he was

And everyone knew he had no business being here.

How do they know?

Cause the walls have ears

But still he came.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

He was led to the inner parlour, the matsuguni, where only trusted family friends sat.

The walls were lined with photo frames. Old Hajj portraits. Amina's graduation picture in a dusty gold frame. A shelf of Qur'anic texts and Arabic calligraphy

Khalid stood waiting

Then the door opened and Alhaji Usman Suleiman entered, slowly, walking stick in hand.

He looked better Stronger than last time. But the heaviness in his eyes had not left.

He paused when he saw Khalid.

Then gestured. "Zauna (Sit)"

Khalid obeyed

Alhaji remained standing, leaning on his stick. His voice was firm and Controlled.

"You came for what exactly to get me to accept you ?"

"No, sir," Khalid said. "I came to return something that belongs to you ."

He slid the brown envelope across the glass table.

Alhaji looked at it, unmoved. "What's inside?"

"Everything Aminu Bello stole from you. Land titles, Shares,Confidential contracts,The accounts he froze. The name he tried to bury I spent the last month cleaning it all. Legally. Quietly."

Alhaji blinked

Khalid added, "I don't want to build my life from the wreckage of a wicked man. I came to return what belongs to you. Not for favour Not to impress your daughter. Just to give a father back what was his."

Alhaji slowly sat.

Opened the envelope. Read one of the titles.

His brows twitched.

"This land was seized in 2017. We tried everything and Lawyers Auditors."

"I know," Khalid said. "I used to help forge the blocks that buried it."

A long silence stretched

Then Alhaji looked up

"You said this isn't to impress Amina. But you're here for her, aren't you?"

Khalid looked him straight in the eyes.

"I am."

He stood Then knelt.

Right there on the rug between Alhaji and the old prayer mat leaning in the corner.

"I'm not here to prove I'm perfect, sir. I'm here to say I'm better than I was. I fell I sinned. I broke. But I never touched her Never disrespected her. I kept her name. Her honour. Even when I had none of mine left."

Alhaji's eyes narrowed, unreadable.

Khalid continued, his voice low but steady.

"In Islam, they say baraka follows sincerity. I have nothing to offer your daughter but a sincere heart, clean hands, and a soul that's still learning how to heal."

"I don't want to hold her hand in public. I want to hold her hand in prayer."

"I don't want to just share a house with her. I want to build a home. Where Qur'an is louder than Netflix. Where peace is louder than pride."

"Let me marry her. Properly With witnesses. With dignity With your permission. Let me give her the name she chooses not the one scandal forced on her."

He paused

Then finished softly:

"And if you still say no... I'll accept it. I'll walk away. But I will walk clean. And I will never speak her name again except in du'a."

Silence

Only the fan buzzed.

Alhaji stared at him for a long, long time.

Then:

"I thought you'd come here begging."

Khalid said nothing.

"But you came with your head bowed and your hands clean. That... I didn't expect."

He sighed. "You know she's still in pain."

"I know."

"She prays for you."

"I pray for her more."

Alhaji nodded slowly.

"You may speak to her. If she accepts... then I will consider the rest."

Khalid's head dropped slightly. "Thank you, sir."

He stood.

Khalid was already halfway to the door when Alhaji Usman's voice stopped him again.

"One more thing."

Khalid turned slowly, unsure if it would be another warning.

But the old man's expression had shifted.

It was no longer stern.

Just... thoughtful.

Measured.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Alhaji leaned back in his seat His walking stick now resting across his lap. His voice was quieter, not so sharp this time.

"What I said in the hospital... about you not being worthy of my daughter. About being worse than Yasir. That... was anger And fear. I thought I was losing her. I didn't know where to throw the blame, so I threw it at the easiest man to hate."

Khalid stayed quiet.

Alhaji continued, looking him straight in the eye.

"But I know now... you didn't deserve all of it. Not with what you've carried. Not with the childhood you had. You were born into fire, Khalid. Raised in ashes. It's a miracle you still have anything soft left inside you."

Khalid swallowed hard, chest tightening.

"I know what your real father did or didn't do. And I know you've spent your whole life trying not to become any of the men who raised you."

Alhaji nodded slowly, then added, softly:

"But give him a chance."

Khalid blinked.

"Alhaji Ibrahim. He may not have raised you, but you carry his blood. Let him explain. Even the Qur'an says, wa bil waalidayni ihsana. And to parents, do good/be kind Honour your parents especially when they return to you with humility."

Khalid said nothing

His jaw tightened slightly. But he nodded.

Then to Khalid's shock Alhaji Usman smiled.

A real one

Small and Tired But genuine.

"If you like, you can call me your third father," he said, chuckling. "One left you One lied to you. Let the third one guide you."

Khalid let out a short, surprised laugh. It caught in his throat.

"Three fathers," he muttered. "Wallahi, no wonder I'm confused."

Alhaji smiled wider.

Then his face grew serious again not harsh, just firm, the way fathers get when they're about to give real advice.

"Let me tell you something as a man. And as a Muslim. Love alone is not enough. It's not enough to feel. You must protect. You must provide. You must lead with softness, and correct with adab, not anger."

Khalid bowed his head respectfully.

Alhaji pointed gently with his stick. "Your father may not have taught you that. But Allah has shown you. Now follow Him."

"Pray together. Talk gently And if she ever shuts the door on you, knock with patience. Not pride."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid breathed in slowly.

"I will, sir InshaAllah."

Alhaji nodded once, satisfied.

Then turned to the housekeeper standing silently at the doorway.

"Please tell Amina to come here."

The woman hesitated, wide eyed.

"She's in her room with Khadija. She doesn't know..."

"Tell her," Alhaji said, calmly, "her father is calling her."

The woman scurried out.

Khalid stood frozen.

Hands behind his back.

His heart had not raced like this in years.

Upstairs – Amina's Room

Amina was cross legged on her prayer mat, facing the open window. A soft scarf wrapped around her head, and her Qur'an lay closed beside her. She looked calm on the outside.

But inside, she had not felt peace in weeks.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khadija was on her stomach, flipping through her phone and humming an old Ali Jita song. (uwar gida mai capacity)

Then a knock.

"Amina?" It was the housekeeper. "Your father is calling you. Downstairs."

Amina blinked. "Is everything okay?"

"I think... I think you should just go."

Khadija sat up slowly. Their eyes met.

"You don't think...?"

"No," Amina said quickly. "He wouldn't be here."

But something in her voice cracked.

Hope, uninvited, slipped into the room like sunlight through broken blinds.

She stood slowly.

Tied her scarf properly.

And walked toward the stairs.

Not knowing that the man she thought she'd never see again...

was already standing in her father's parlour.

Waiting

Chapter fourty four - Reunited

Guest Parlour Unguwan Rimi, Late Afternoon

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The room was still.

The kind of stillness that holds its breath not because it's peaceful, but because it's waiting.

Amina stepped in slowly, the edge of her scarf tucked tightly in her fingers. Her slippers made a soft shuffle against the tiles, but in her chest her heart was thunder.

And then...

She saw him.

Khalid

Standing near the old glass bookshelf. Dressed in white, the kind of white that made him look almost innocent. His beard was neatly trimmed. But his eyes they were the same. Dark ,Watchful,Tired but Alive.

He didn't move at first

He just stared

Then he smiled.A small, breathless smile.

"Meenah," he said, like the name was heavy with all the things he didn't know how to say yet.

Her breath caught in her throat.

She froze for a second. Then took a step forward. Then another.

And then she ran.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Not dramatically Not like a movie. Just a small, desperate run, like a girl trying to get back something she thought she'd lost.

But just as she reached him arms stretching toward his chest

He took a step back.

Gently

Like wind slipping away before the rain hits.

"No," he whispered, voice low. "Not yet."

Amina blinked

Stumbled back

"What?" she breathed

Khalid gave a small, shaky smile. "Till we make it halal Remember?"

She stared at him.

Eyes wide Lips trembling.

"You're serious?"

He nodded, still smiling. "Wallahi."

Her face crumpled, and she burst into tears the kind that looked angry but sounded relieved.

"I hate you," she said, laughing and sobbing at once. "Wallahi, Khalid, I hate you. For disappearing. For going ghost like I was nothing. For making me think I was the only one suffering."

He looked down, ashamed. "I was ashamed."

She scoffed. Wiped her cheeks with her palm. "You should be I was crying like a widow and you were somewhere bleaching your sins with Dettol and Lipton."

He chuckled

"I wasn't bleaching anything. I was dying."

"You could've just texted," she snapped.

"I didn't think I deserved your reply."

She stepped closer. "Don't do that again Don't ever go that quiet on me. Not for a day Not for an hour. Not even for a minute. Do you hear me?"

He nodded like a schoolboy being scolded.

"Loud and clear, madam."

She raised her brows. "Madam?"

"I'm practicing," he said, eyes twinkling. "For marriage."

She sniffed, fighting a smile.

They stood there now. Just staring. No more words between them. No touching. Just breath and unsaid things and the sound of the wall clock ticking behind them.

"You look different," she said finally. "Better."

Khalid shrugged. "Still broken Just... stitched better."

"Did you miss me?"

"Every second."

She lowered her gaze.

"Did you still pray for me?"

"Even when I didn't pray for myself."

She looked up again, and there it was that soft tension. That strange, beautiful ache that comes with seeing someone you love and not being able to touch them.

She raised her hand, brushed the edge of his chest with the end of her scarf.

"So this is what restraint looks like?"

He exhaled. "It's killing me."

She grinned. "Good Suffer small."

He laughed the first real laugh in weeks. The kind that sounded like healing.

Then silence again

Until she whispered:

"Are you okay?"

He didn't lie.

"No But I will be. With you."

Their eyes locked. They didn't move.

They didn't need to.
“I spoke to your father , he accepted”
“Accepted what?” She asked
“Us “ he replied
Then suddenly, as if something snapped inside her Amina turned.

Bolted out of the parlour.

And ran straight into the main sitting room.

Khalid blinked after her.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Wait...what....where are you going?!"

"To hug the man who made this possible," she shouted over her shoulder. "Don't follow me yet. You're still on halal probation."

He grinned Shook his head.

"Ya Allah," he muttered, sitting gently on the edge of a chair. "This girl will finish me."

And for the first time in his life...

He didn't mind.

Main Sitting Room Moments Later

Unguwan Rimi, Kaduna

The room smelled of warm cloves and Vaseline. The sun filtered through the beige curtains in stripes, casting golden lines across the brown carpet and the lace doilies on the armrests. In the corner, a wall clock ticked softly, the sound swallowed by the low hum of the ceiling fan.

Alhaji Usman sat by the window, glasses perched low on his nose, reading an old copy of Riyadh us Saliheen his favourite. His jalabiya was clean but wrinkled at the elbow. His face, freshly shaved that morning, bore quiet dignity and just a touch of fatigue.

And then

"Daddy!"

He looked up.

Just in time to catch his daughter as she threw herself into his arms like a child who hadn't seen her father in years.

He dropped the book.

"Amina..”

But she didn't let him speak.

"Thank you," she whispered over and over again, her voice shaking, her fingers clutching his shoulder. "Wallahi, daddy... thank you. Thank you Thank you."

He held her. Gently and Carefully. The way only a father who has once buried a grudge can hold a daughter he never stopped loving.

"You're squeezing me," he muttered, but his tone was light.

She laughed through her tears. "Sorry I forgot I'm hugging a retired diplomat ."

"Correction," he said. "A retired diplomat with three slipped discs. Shift small, please."

She shifted slightly, still wiping her face with the edge of her scarf.

"Thank you," she said again, voice quieter now. "For giving him a chance. For giving us a chance."

He let out a slow breath. Then stroked her back the way he used to when she was little and afraid of thunder.

"Don't thank me yet," he said, smiling faintly. "You'll hate me by Friday. I've already made two WhatsApp groups one for the nikkah, one for the guest list. I've divided your cousins into ushers and tasbih distributors."

Amina laughed, nose sniffling. "You're serious?"

"Deadly."

She sat beside him now, holding his hand like it anchored her to the earth.

"So... when?" she asked softly.

He looked at her, eyes warm.

"A week," he said. "Next Saturday, In shaa Allah. In the compound. Early in the morning, before the heat comes."

She nodded slowly. "Just like Mama's own?"

He smiled. "Exactly."

"No drama?" she asked, teasing.

"In this family? Impossible But I'll try."

She giggled, then grew quiet.

"I wanted something bigger," she admitted after a pause. "A stage. Pictures You know, the proper ones this time. Where nobody's hiding behind scandal."

He didn't interrupt.

"I wanted... music. Not haram, just... joy. I wanted people to clap for us. To say 'masha Allah' without whispering after. But now..."

She looked down, voice tight.

"Now, even if we do it in Mecca, some people will still believe the Gistlover version of our story."

He reached over and took her hand.

Warm Firm.

"Then let them," he said gently.

Amina looked up. Confused.

"Let them talk," he continued. "Let them carry your name from salon to mosque. From buka joints to university halls. Let them turn your pain into banter. You know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because they'll eventually get tired. But you..."he touched her forehead lightly "you will still wake up every morning beside a man who chose you. Who didn't just write your name on paper, but wrote it into his tawbah. Into his repentance. Into his du'a."

Her throat tightened. She blinked fast.

"What people say," he said, "is temporary. What Allah sees... is forever."

She buried her face in his shoulder again.

"Wallahi, daddy . I didn't think we'd come back from this."

He smiled against her head. "Neither did I."

"Are you sure?" she asked, voice small. "That you want to do this? After everything?"

He chuckled. "Me? No I'm just a tired old man. But Allah gave me back my life. And I'll spend it trying to fix what I broke between us."

She didn't reply.

She just held him tighter.

"You know," he added, his voice teasing again. "You still have to apologise to the chief Imam. And to that nosy auntie from Unguwan Sarki who swore she dreamt that Khalid was a wizard."

Amina burst into laughter, falling sideways onto the cushion.

"Please That woman said I was cursed. I owe her nothing."

"You owe her a 'thank you' for making this story juicy enough to trend."

She groaned. "Kaduna people will never let me rest."

He patted her head. "Then stop seeking rest. Seek peace."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

She looked up. Eyes shining.

"And what if I already found it? In him?"

He smiled.

"Then marry him. And fight for that peace every day."

Abuja – One Week Later

Jabi District, Late Afternoon

The sky above Abuja was a soft, forgiving blue. Not the kind that scalded, but the kind that made the city breathe slower. Birds wheeled above the palm-lined streets of Jabi, and the smell of roasted corn and exhaust mingled with the low hum of traffic from across the dual carriageway.

Yasir sat at a corner table at café by Abuja car . His sleeves were rolled up, shirt slightly wrinkled, fingers smudged with black printer ink and the faint green of a dried highlighter.

Blueprints lay spread out in front of him rough sketches of a housing project somewhere near Apo Foundations Measurements Drainage patterns. The kind of work that made his brain ache and his hands itch to do more.

He didn't mind

It was good work

Work that reminded him he still had something to offer.

For the first time in years... he had purpose.

No chaos No screaming No weight of unspoken guilt clinging to his shadow.

Just work,And prayer And a soft, unfolding kind of peace.

In the evenings, after the noise of site visits and contractor meetings faded, he would drive to Wuse Zone 4 a modest masjid near the tyre market and sit in the corner of a small Islamiyya class for adult men. Tired men. Men with grey in their beards and mistakes in their eyes. Men who stumbled through Surat al-Baqarah like it was Everest. Men who closed their eyes when the teacher reminded them:

"The one who returns to Allah after sin is more beloved than the one who never left."

Yasir never spoke much in the class. But he listened.

And slowly, his voice stopped shaking when he recited aloud.

Sometimes, he'd stay after class and help stack the plastic chairs.

Sometimes, he just sat under the fan, letting the words of the Qur'an wash over him like cold water.

And sometimes, after all that...

He'd call Khadija.

Nothing serious.

Just check ins.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Random rants Shared memes Updates on Amina's father, on Kaduna weddings, on Abuja rent prices, on which suya spot was officially overhyped.

They had become friends.

Surprisingly good friends

Honest, blunt, sarcastic

No tension No ghosts

She called him "Ya….Sir..Please" when he was being dramatic.

He called her "Hijabi FBI" when she sent him unsolicited Instagram stories about personal growth.

Today, she had texted him a meme.

A stick figure imam farting loudly in ruku', with the caption:

"When you eat moimoi and egg before Maghrib."

Yasir snorted.

Actually snorted in public.

The guy at the next table a UN intern with noise canceling headphones and banana bread crumbs on his laptop glanced up, confused.

Yasir just smiled, shook his head, and typed back:

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"You're going to hell, but at least you'll have data there."

Khadija replied immediately:

"Good I'll send you the location pin."

He laughed again

This time, softer

And for the first time in what felt like years...

He didn't think of Amina
Not in that aching way.
Not with longing or grief

Just quiet

Just peace

He folded his blueprint gently. Took one last sip of warm malt from the bottle beside him.

And whispered to himself, like a du'a not meant to be loud:

"Ya Allah... maybe I'm finally okay."

Chapter fourty five - an daura

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Unguwan Rimi, Kaduna Mid Morning

The sky was a soft, forgiving grey. A breeze moved lazily through the trees in Alhaji Usman's compound, rustling bougainvillea petals and carrying the scent of fresh soap, perfume, and something simmering in the kitchen jollof rice or tuwo masara, maybe.

It was not a grand event. No music No decorators No matching aso-ebi. Just white kaftans, soft footsteps, quiet laughter, and faith stitched into every corner of the house.

The front parlour had been cleared.

A long prayer mat rolled out

A few chairs arranged in a circle.

Only the essential people were present.

Kabir sat at the front tall, calm, and quietly protective. He was Amina's wali today. Her older brother. Her witness Her shield.

Beside him was Suleiman, younger but already growing into his own steady grace. Alhaji Usman, still recovering, sat in the far corner on a low cushion, his face composed but deeply reflective.

Alhaji Ibrahim had come not with bodyguards or noise, just with two trusted friends, men from the mosque, people he knew would keep quiet and offer real prayer, not gossip.

Abdul Junaid stood beside Khalid, dressed in a dark kaftan, sunglasses tucked into his front pocket, his wristwatch blinking. His phone was on silent, but the tension in his jaw hinted that his world never really rested.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And Khalid?

He sat on the prayer mat, heart beating louder than the imam's voice, palms pressed to his thighs. His white kaftan was freshly ironed. His beard trimmed. His eyes... steady.

Not shaking Not afraid Just ready.

The imam spoke gently. Read the Arabic like a lullaby. Asked the necessary questions.

Kabir answered clearly on behalf of his sister.

There was a pause. A moment held in the air like breath.

Then Khalid's voice low, sure, trembling only at the edges said:

"I accept."

A small wave of relief passed through the room.

Du'as followed.

Soft ameen after soft ameen.

Alhaji Usman's eyes glistened, but he didn't speak.

Only when it was done fully done did he look at Khalid and say, in a voice low but full of weight:

"You have my daughter now. My blood,My prayer My trust,Keep them all safe."

Khalid placed his hand over his chest and nodded. "InshaAllah."

Abdul gave a small smile. "Now go hug your wife, lover boy."

Laughter rippled gently through the room.

And upstairs

Upstairs – Amina's Room

Amina sat in front of the mirror, hands trembling as she adjusted the lace veil over her face. The scarf shimmered faintly in the afternoon light, and the gold jewellery around her wrists jingled as she tried to keep still.

She didn't feel like a bride

She felt like someone reborn.

"I still can't believe it," she whispered, wiping her eyes gently. "Khalid Me Married Properly. Halal."

Khadija smiled, adjusting the scarf on her head. "Allah writes the best stories, even if we fight the plot."

Amina laughed through her tears. "Wallahi, I used to think I hated him. Remember how I ranted to you after that first night in Abuja?"

"You said you'd rather eat burnt danwake than be stuck in a room with him."

"And now... I feel like I can't breathe when he's not near me."

Khadija squeezed her shoulder. "That's what love is. Breathing someone else's peace."

Then, downstairs, someone called softly.

"AminaCome down."

Khadija helped her up.

She adjusted her veil. Took a deep breath.

And walked

Step by step.

Main Parlour – Unguwan Rimi, Kaduna

The room held its breath.

The midday sun filtered gently through lace curtains, casting gold-tinted shadows on the floor. The walls, usually filled with the sounds of family and fuss, were quiet like even the house itself knew something holy was unfolding.

The carpet had been freshly cleaned. The air smelt of incense and rosewater. Amina's cousins peeked from the kitchen door. An auntie muttered "Masha Allah" under her breath, hand over her heart.

And in the centre of the room, under the soft hum of a ceiling fan stood Khalid.

White kaftan. Fresh His hands trembled slightly, clasped in front of him as he waited.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Kabir was recording on his phone, trying not to look too emotional, even though his throat tightened. Suleiman stood beside him, arms crossed, muttering:

"If he hugs her for longer than five seconds, I'm dragging him off. Wallahi."

Khadija was beside them, holding a tissue under her chin. Her mascara was already suffering. "Ya Allah," she whispered, half laughing, "this is the same girl that once called him an agent of the devil. Now look."

Then the sound of footsteps.

Soft Certain.

The door creaked.

Amina entered slowly.

Her face was covered in soft white chiffon. Gold earrings peeked from beneath her scarf. She walked barefoot. Her hands were laced in front of her, henna still dark on her fingers, trembling slightly.

The entire room hushed.

Khalid's chest rose, deep and shaky.

As she stood before him, her eyes locked on the only person in the world who made her feel like home.

And then with hands that had once held nothing but guilt and grief he reached up.

Carefully

Respectfully

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

And removed her veil
Amina blinked
Her eyes, wet with tears, met his
She smiled

A soft, quiet thing. Not wide,Not dramatic, But honest.

A smile that said:

"You are my beginning now."

Khalid exhaled shakily.

"You're crying again," he whispered, voice barely above a breath.

"You made me," she replied, laughing through the tears.

"Fair."

He was supposed to just smile.

Maybe step back

Be composed

But his hand lingered over her cheek.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Her breath hitched.

And then with a tenderness no one in the room had expected he pulled her into his arms.

Gently and Firmly. Like he was anchoring himself to this moment.

She didn't resist

She melted

Not because she needed to be saved, but because this was the safest she had ever felt.

The room reacted instantly.

A soft clap.

A few "Awws."

Phones clicked

Kabir sniffed but quickly blamed the "smell of incense."

Suleiman nudged him and muttered, "Tell him the hug is halal but not rent free. We still dey watch am."

Khadija just wiped her eyes again. "I'm done for," she whispered to herself.

Even Abdul Junaid, standing in the corner in his dark kaftan, arms folded, let a smile pull at the corner of his mouth.

But Khalid didn't care about the room.

Not right now

He didn't rush

He didn't let go

He held her like he was memorizing every inch of this feeling. Her warmth,Her scent
The quiet sob she tried to swallow.

And then, just before he pulled away, he bent his head slightly.

Whispered into her hair:

"Wallahi, I'll never leave you again."

Amina squeezed her eyes shut.

That was it.

That was the moment her heart finally exhaled.

She pulled back slightly, wiped her face again with the edge of her scarf, and said:

"You better not. Because next time, I'll come find you myself."

The room laughed.

And with that, the hardest chapter of their story ended.

And a new one halal, soft, sacred began.

Outside Front Compound, Unguwan Rimi, Kaduna Just Before Maghrib

The sky was soft grey, streaked with hints of orange. Birds flew low. The air smelt of hibiscus, dust, and something unspoken.

Abdul stood by the far wall of the compound, a cigarette between his fingers. But he didn't smoke it. He hadn't smoked in years not since Ayah told him she wouldn't kiss poison.

Old habits die slow

Khalid walked up beside him, hands in his pockets, barefoot. He had changed into a plain white kaftan. His eyes were tired, but for the first time in years, they were clear.

They stood in silence for a moment.

Two men

Quiet and Still.

Then Abdul broke it.

"You got the girl"

“I got the girl”

Khalid replied smiling

“She's yours now," he said, eyes still on the sky.

Khalid nodded slowly. "Alhamdulillah."

Abdul turned to look at him.

"No more running?"

"No more hiding," Khalid replied. "No more lies. No more names that aren't mine."

A soft breeze passed. The azaan for Maghrib began in the distance the call echoing gently through Unguwan Rimi.

"And the enemies?" Abdul asked.

Khalid inhaled deeply. "Let them post. Let them gossip. Let them spin their stories. I'm done living in fear of people who feed off shame."

Abdul's eyes lingered on him.

"You sound different."

"I feel different."

Abdul smiled faintly, tapping the ash off the unlit cigarette.

"Spoken like a man who's finally free."

Khalid looked at him really looked. The kaftan. The shadows under his eyes. The quiet grief in the way he stood.

"Are you?" Khalid asked gently. "Free?"

Abdul didn't answer right away.

Then, voice low:

"No man who's lived the way we've lived is ever fully free. We just learn how to chain the demons before they swallow everything good."

Khalid swallowed hard.

"Do they ever sleep?"

Abdul chuckled darkly. "Sometimes When we hold the right hand. When we stop choosing chaos. When we finally accept that we deserve softness... even if we don't feel worthy of it."

Khalid nodded slowly.

"I never thought I'd survive to see her become mine Not properly or halal."

Abdul looked at him, something warm flickering behind the hardness in his eyes.

"You did you suffered You healed. And you didn't touch her until Allah allowed you to."

He placed a hand on Khalid's shoulder.

"Wallahi, if I had had half your restraint at your age, Ayah wouldn't have spent the first three years of our marriage wondering if I'd die or disappear."

Khalid smiled a little.

Then buzz.

Abdul checked his phone.

His face changed.

"What is it?" Khalid asked.

"Emergency alert. House alarm Ayah's not picking."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid's body tensed. "You need backup?"

Abdul was already walking briskly toward the black Hilux parked just outside the gate. "I am backup."

He reached the door. Opened it.

Paused

Turned back.

And this time there was no smile No swagger Just truth.

"You have your woman now," he said. "I have mine. Keep her Even if the world burns."

Khalid's throat tightened. "I will."

Abdul nodded once

Then added:

"You're not Aminu. And I'm not who I used to be. We don't fix what we broke by hiding from love. We fix it by protecting it."

Then he drove off tyres crunching over gravel, Hilux disappearing into the soft Kaduna dusk, the azaan still floating in the air.

And Khalid stood alone

But not lonely

For the first time, he wasn't just surviving.

He was ready to live

Chapter fourty six - A new life

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A day after the Nika khalid took Amina out she had no idea where they were going

They approached the syde resort hall

Inside syde resortEvent Hall, Kaduna

The first thing Amina noticed was the scent warm cinnamon, rose petals, and freshly turaren wuta scent The second was the light

soft, golden, filtering down from woven chandeliers like the kind her grandmother used to hang during Eid.

And the third?

The quiet joy in the air.

There were no crowds. No Instagram stories from overexcited cousins. No massive DJ booth. No wall of photographers yelling "pose here, bride!" None of that.

Just love

Simple,Soft, Clean.

In the middle of the hall, a round cake glistened under a spotlight white fondant with gold trimmings. Delicate calligraphy read:

"Halal Love Finally."

And beside it, a single chair draped in white lace the kind used in northern bridal prep rooms.

Amina blinked rapidly. "Khalid... is this...?"

Khadija appeared, waving like she was in a Nollywood cameo. "Your real reception, sis. The 'no scandal, no stress, no loud aunties' version."

Amina gasped. "You planned this?"

"She planned the aesthetics," Khalid said, gesturing at Khadija with a smile. "I paid And panicked."

Kabir, seated by the left wall in an ash kaftan, raised his phone. "Wallahi, I haven't seen you this stunned since you got caught watching K-Drama during Ramadan fast."

Suleiman burst into laughter. "Or the time she said she was going for tahajjud but was actually watching BTS videos in her room."

"Suleiman!" Amina hissed, covering her face. "That was one time"

"Three," Khadija said, grinning. "I counted."

Amina turned to Khalid, speechless.

He stepped forward, hands in his pockets like a shy boy who just finished building a sandcastle.

"You said you always dreamed of wearing blue. Of taking a picture that wasn't stolen by bloggers. Of having a moment that was fully, unapologetically... yours."

She nodded, eyes glistening.

"Well," he said softly, "this is yours. No photographers. No crowd No Gistlover."

"Oh that name will traumatize me forever" Sge said

"Hello tueh tueh" khadija joked

Everyone laughed

He pointed gently toward the chair. "Just one dress. One cake And two very nosy siblings recording everything anyway."

Khadija raised her phone proudly. "We're doing it for the memories, abeg."

Kabir nodded solemnly. "And for potential blackmail material."

Khalid rolled his eyes. "Ignore them."

Amina turned to Khadija. "You really helped him pull this off?"

"I basically carried the whole plan," she said with a wink. "Ordered the dress from a small designer in Sokoto. I even told the tailor you had that stubborn waist that always argues with zippers."

Everyone laughed. Even Khalid.

"And this makeup," Khadija added, pointing at Amina's barely done face. "Is from Hajiya Farida. You're glowing like someone who just found true love and inheritance."

Amina smiled so hard her cheeks hurt. "You people are mad."

"We're mad in love," Suleiman said, tossing a flower petal at her.

Then they all quieted.

Khalid walked up to the chair. Picked up the gown. Held it like something holy.

"You can change upstairs," he said. "There's a mirror,, perfume everything. But only if you want to."

Amina reached for the dress, fingers trembling. "I want to."

30 Minutes Later She Returned

The room went still again.

Amina descended the stairs, barefoot, gown trailing behind her. She wore a soft veil over her hair, her gold bangles clinking lightly with each step.

Khadija clapped her hands together, dramatically. "See wife! See angel! Subhanallah!"

Kabir placed his hand on his chest. "Is it too late to cancel and marry her myself?"

Suleiman threw a paper serviette at him. "Calm down before I report you to Mama."

And Khalid?

He just stared.

His jaw clenched. His breath caught.

And quietly, reverently, he whispered:
"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

She smiled at him. Teary Proud and little shy.

He walked up, took her hand.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"Can I have this dance?"

"There's no music," she whispered.

He nodded to the soft Hausa melody in the background Ali Jita's voice crooning a love song that had once been banned for sounding too romantic.

"There is now."

They Danced

Not like in the movies

There was no dramatic spin No fireworks.

Just two people swaying gently. Side by side. Hearts pressed close. One rhythm. One prayer.

When she rested her head on his chest, he whispered:

"Thank you for choosing me, Meenah Even when I didn't choose myself."

She closed her eyes

"You've always been mine, Khalid I just didn't know how to hold you yet."

Final Moments Back at Their Table

Amina sliced the cake. Khalid helped her hold the knife. Khadija recorded like a proud aunty. Kabir made du'a loudly: "Ya Allah, may she finally let this man enjoy peace. And suyaAnd leg space."

Everyone laughed.

And when it was time to go...

Khalid kissed her forehead gently, right in front of everyone.

Suleiman groaned. "Hugging is fine But forehead kisses? Wallahi, this is oppression."

Even the housegirls cheered.
A Quiet Ending

As they left the hall, arms linked, walking under the fairy lights...

Amina looked up at Khalid.

"This... This is what I wanted."

Khalid smiled. "Then I'll give it to you. Every year Every time."

She rested her head on his shoulder as they got into the car.

And in that moment no blogs, no scandal, no grief just them.

Husband and Wife.

Home

A day later at Alhaji Ibrahim's house

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

The compound was quiet.

Khalid stood outside the sitting room for a long moment before knocking.

Inside, the air smelled of turaren wuta and fresh paint. A Qur'an played softly from a Bluetooth speaker in the corner. The room was simple two long couches, framed Islamic calligraphy, a prayer mat folded neatly in the corner.

Alhaji Ibrahim was seated near the window,

He looked up as Khalid entered.

Didn't smile

But he nodded

"Assalamu Alaikum."

. "Wa Alaikum Salaam,."

A beat

Alhaji set the book down. "You came alone."

"Yes."

"Good."

Khalid didn't sit until he was offered

Alhaji gestured. "Zauna."

(Sit.)

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Khalid sat quietly, back straight, hands on his knees.

There was a long pause

Then:

"I the nikah went well," Alhaji said.

"It did Alhamdulillah."

"I also heard... you've been clean for four weeks."

Khalid nodded. "Thirty days, today."

Alhaji leaned back.

"I watched you disappear under that name for years. 'Khalid Bello.' As if Aminu gave you anything but trauma. As if he raised you."

Khalid said nothing.

"I should have come for you," Alhaji said softly. "I should have fought for you. But I was afraid. Afraid you'd hate me more if I showed up too late."

"You were right."

Alhaji blinked

"I did hate you," Khalid continued. "For leaving For letting Aminu turn me into something ugly. But I don't anymore."

Alhaji looked at him closely.

Khalid's voice trembled, but only slightly.

"I understand now what silence costs. I understand that not every absence is wicked. Some are just... weak."

The older man's eyes softened.

"I want to know you," Khalid said. "Not as a stranger. Not as a politician. Not as someone who watched from afar. I want to know you as my father If you'll let me."

A long pause

Then, slowly, Alhaji Ibrahim reached for a glass of water. Drank.

Set it down

And smiled

A real one

"You sound like a man now."

"I feel like one."

He nodded

"I never stopped praying for you," Alhaji said. "Even when I didn't have the right to call you my son. I watched you from a distance and cried. When you disappeared into drugs. When Aminu took you to Istanbul. When you came back with shadows in your eyes."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

"I want to do better," Khalid said quietly. "Not just with Amina. With myself With Allah With you."

Alhaji leaned forward.

"Then let's start small. Come for breakfast. Call me on Fridays. Let me be the one to teach your child how to ride a bicycle. Let me earn back what I lost."

Khalid swallowed. Nodded.

"I'd like that."

A silence settled between them.

Not awkward Not painful.

Just… full.

Alhaji Ibrahim stood and opened his arms.

"Come here, dana."

(My son.)

Khalid stood. And for the first time in all his years in earth

He hugged his father his real father .

Not as a symbol

But as a son

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

Two days later khalid and Amina left for abuja after saying good bye to their parents but first khalid met his father

On the Road to Abuja Early Morning

They didn't talk much at first.

Amina leaned against the car window, one leg tucked under her, fingers playing with the gold ring Khalid had slipped onto her finger during the nikah. Her scarf was loose, her lashes heavy with sleep, but she refused to doze off.

Khalid had insisted on driving them himself.

No driver No convoy.

Just them.

The road curved gently, framed by flatlands and the soft gold of a post rain sunrise. Every few kilometers, they passed slow moving trailers, vegetable sellers, old mosques glowing faintly in the distance.

Khalid reached for the bottle of water in the cup holder Opened it Offered it to her without a word.

She took it Sipped and Smiled.

"You okay?" he asked, glancing at her.

She nodded. "You?"

"Better than I've ever been."

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

A beat of silence.

Then she added softly, "I still can't believe we did it."

He chuckled. "You married me. Twice That's commitment."

She smirked. "I must be mad."

"Madly in love."

She rolled her eyes. "Cringe."

He grinned. "You like it."

She did

They reached the outskirts of Abuja just after Fajr.

The city was still waking. Newspaper vendors setting up. Uniformed school children with sleepy eyes waiting for keke. The skyline of Wuse glimmered faintly, like something out of a faded photograph.

Amina sat up straighter.

Khalid reached over and gently tucked her scarf behind her ear.

"If this is what love looks like after war," he said, "then I'd survive it all again. Just to find you on the other side."

She turned to him. Slowly Carefully.

"You're not perfect, Khalid. But you're real," she whispered. "And that's exactly what I prayed for."

Wuse II Their Home 9:12AM

The compound gate opened with a soft groan. The chef and two housemaids stood waiting by the side of the front door, smiling widely. Not one camera. Not one guest.

Just quiet Just peace.

Khalid parked, stepped out, and walked around the car to open her door like it was a ritual.

"Welcome to the chaos," he said.

"No scandal?" she teased, stepping out.

"Not today."

The front door clicked open.

The house smelled faintly of warm bread and Dettol. Air-conditioned and still. A gold prayer rug lay neatly by the bookshelf. A bouquet of jasmine sat on the console table, untouched.

They stepped in together.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then Khalid dropped the keys beside the Qur'an on the shelf.

Turned to her.

Took her hand.

Pulled her into his chest gentle, sure and whispered:

"Welcome home, Mrs. Khalid Aminu Ibrahim."

Amina laughed, eyes tearing instantly. "Say it again."

He held her tighter.

"Home This is home And you are everything in it."

She melted into him.

One of the maids clapped softly. The chef cleared his throat awkwardly. "Madam, should I prepare jollof or just fry yam?"

"Fry yam," Amina whispered, still holding Khalid. "But don't let it betray me like last time."

Everyone laughed.

Upstairs Later That Afternoon

They both showered, separately Respectfully.

Khalid stepped out of his bathroom in fresh white kaftan, beard trimmed, hair damp. Amina was seated at her dressing table, fixing her scarf. Her reflection caught his eye in the mirror.

He leaned on the wall.

"You see the worst in me," he said quietly. "And you stay. I love you, Meenah. You are my life."

She turned slowly.

"I thought loving you would be a risk," she said. "But you became the safest place I've ever known."

He walked closer.

"Our love isn't loud," she said, fingers smoothing her scarf. "It's in the way you refill my water before I ask. The way you sit quietly when I cry. It's in the stillness."

Khalid knelt beside her chair.

Took her hand.

"I don't love you gently, Amina," he said, voice low. "I love you like a man drowning clings to air. Like something stolen from me in another life. If you leave me... I won't die. But the part of me that knew peace? He's going with you."

She covered her face, crying again. "You're not allowed to say things like that when I just did my makeup."

He smiled. "Then I'll ruin it again."

Later That Night The Balcony

They sat outside with warm tea, wrapped in shawls, the Abuja breeze tugging at her scarf.

No noise,No scandals, No parents,No secrets.

Just two broken people who had chosen each other anyway.

Khalid leaned in, his arm around her.

"You know," he said, "you were never just a girl I wanted. You were the voice in my head when I was about to do something stupid. The reason I checked my phone at 3AM. The only prayer I was too scared to ask for."

Amina looked at him.

"And you," she said, "you were my grief. My test.my redemption But now... you're also my healing."

They clinked their mugs gently.

And when they went inside, she whispered:

"Let's pray."

Two raka'ahs

"Then.....?" She asked

"Then everything else Together." He winked

Just then she received a notification on her o phone

"After a 12 hour meeting Asuu have decided to call off the indefinite strike!!!!"

"Oh wow" they both laughed

The end...

Final Note to the Reader

To anyone who's ever felt like they were drowning in their own chest:

This is for you.

To the girl who prays in whispers because she doesn't think her voice deserves to be heard.

To the boy who deletes his messages before hitting send because he's sure he'll be misunderstood.

To the one who sits quietly in a crowded room, feeling like a ghost in their own life — this is for you.

Anxiety lies. It tells you you're too much. Or not enough. It makes your own breath feel like an enemy.

But listen carefully:

You are not a burden.

You are not weak for shaking.

You are not wrong for needing more time to feel safe.

Healing is not linear. Some days you will laugh. Some days you will crumble because someone said your name the wrong way.

It's okay.

A marriage of names - Naylah Abdul

You do not need to be perfect to be loved.

You do not need to be spotless to be chosen.

You just need to keep breathing even if it's slow. Even if it hurts.

Sometimes love won't arrive as a prince on a horse. Sometimes it will show up quietly. In a text that says "Did you eat today?"

In a voice that says "Come home" not to a house, but to peace.

Sometimes it will come in the form of a man who says "I see you" and means it.

So hold on to your faith.

Even when your voice trembles.

Even when your heart races.

Especially then.

Because Allah sees you.

And one day, when the storm passes, when your breath returns to you like a gift you'll sit in a quiet room, next to someone who stayed, and you'll whisper:

"This is what I was waiting for. This is home."

THE END.

Author's Note

I didn't write this book because I had all the answers.

I wrote it because I had questions. About pain. About shame. About faith and what it means to choose love even when the world tells you you're undeserving.

A Marriage of Names is fiction, but it's built from truth. From brokenness. From the quiet survival of people who are misunderstood, mislabeled, misjudged.

If you've ever felt like you don't fit, like your name isn't enough, like healing is taking too long I see you.

And I pray you find your own version of home.

— Naylah Abdul

If You're Struggling with Anxiety or Trauma

You are not alone. Consider reaching out to:

- **A trusted therapist or counselor**
- **Your local Imam or a female Muslim chaplain**
- **Support groups for grief, addiction recovery, or mental health**
- **Apps like Mindful Muslim, QalbyApp, or Woebot**
- **Books like "Reclaim Your Heart" by Yasmin Mogahed or "The Mountain is You" by Brianna Wiest**

Du'a is a weapon So is therapy and So is rest.