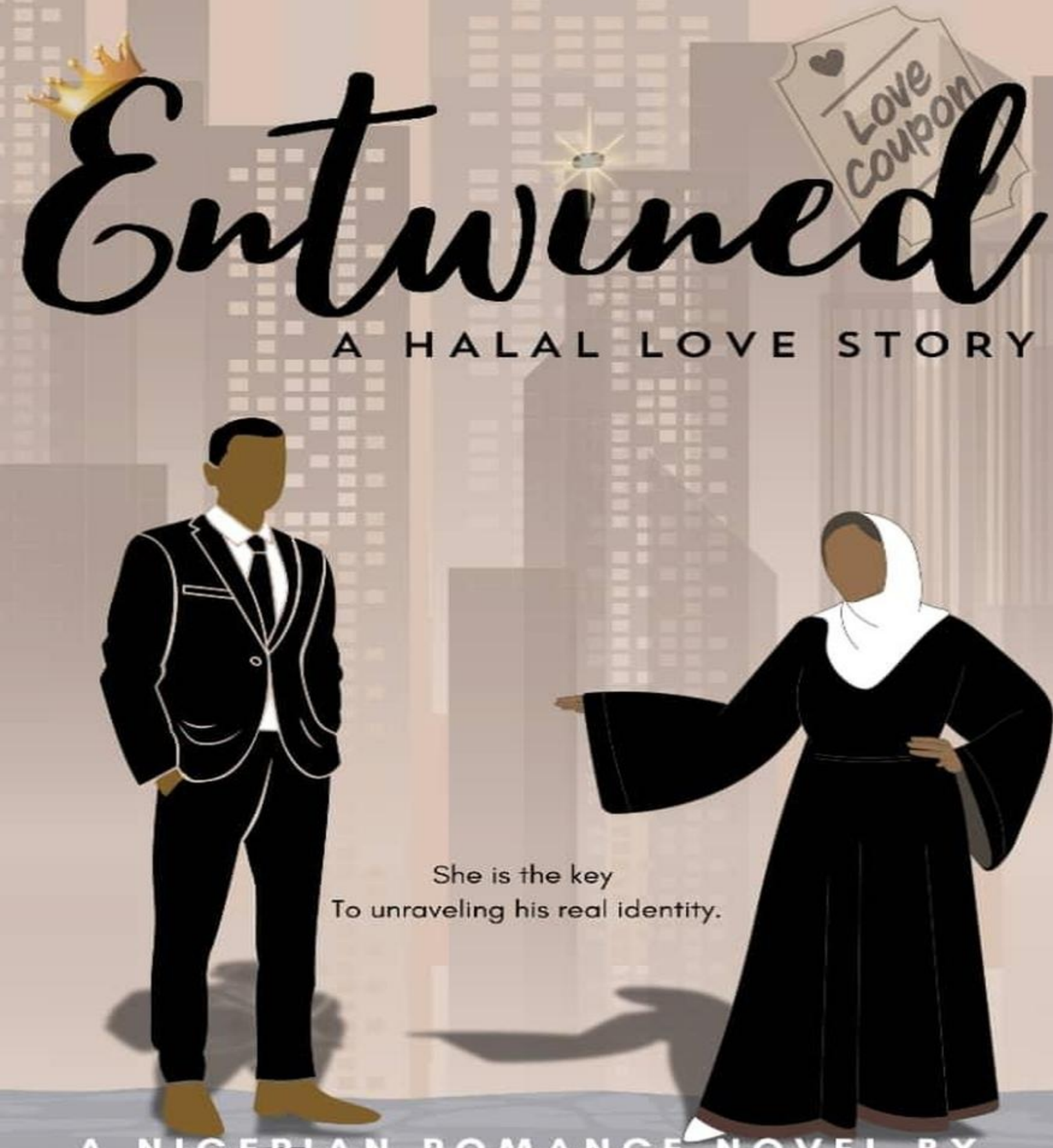
BOOK ONE:
ENTANGLED TRILOGY

Entwined

A HALAL LOVE STORY



She is the key
To unraveling his real identity.

A NIGERIAN ROMANCE NOVEL BY

AISHATU E.A

ENTWINED

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About the Author

In a world that weaves love with trials, only those brave enough to endure it's storm can claim it's right. Love is not a destination-- it is the journey, the sacrifice, and the courage to rewrite one's story amidst chaos.

Aishatu E.A

Copyright Page

Title: Entwined

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up Entwined. This story holds a special place in my heart, and I hope it captures yours too. Rayyan and Farida’s journey is one of love, pain, and finding home in the least expected places.

This book is for those who believe in love—the real, complicated kind. I hope you see a piece of yourself in these pages.

Happy reading.

Synopsis

Is he truly the man he believed himself to be?

Is she really with the man she thought she knew?

Fate has been cruel—especially to him.

Raised on a foundation of lies, he never questioned his world—until she became the reason the truth was uncovered.

Can he forgive the deception that shaped his life and build a future with Farida?

Or will his identity ruin everything?

Prologue

There are moments in life that define everything. Moments that shift the course of your existence in ways you never expected.

For me, it wasn't some grand revelation or a life-changing decision. It was her.

Farida.

The girl I never saw coming. The girl I wasn't looking for. And yet, somehow, she became the one thing I couldn't ignore.

If someone had told me years ago that I would find myself caught between duty and desire, between the weight of my name and the weight of my own heart, I would have laughed. I wasn't the kind of man who got lost in emotions. I had a plan, a structured life, a path laid out before me that I had no intention of straying from.

But then she walked into my life with her sharp tongue and soft heart, her stubbornness and unexpected kindness. And suddenly, all the things I thought I knew didn't make sense anymore.

I've made mistakes. I've let pride, fear, and the expectations of others dictate my actions. But if there's one thing I know with absolute certainty, it's this—she was never just a passing moment in my life. She was the moment.

And now, I have to prove that to her.

Even if it means tearing apart everything I once believed to be true.

– Rayyan



Life has always been good to me. I was born into comfort, raised with love, and surrounded by people who cared. But even with all that, I've come to realize that wealth and privilege don't shield anyone from life's uncertainties.

Love, for instance, isn't something you can buy. It doesn't follow logic, nor does it always make sense. It just happens—unexpectedly, deeply, and

sometimes, in the most beautiful way possible.

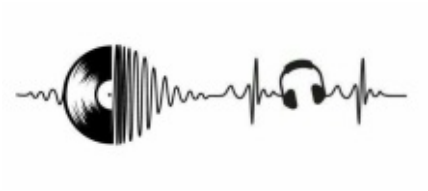
I used to think love stories belonged in books and movies, the kind where the girl meets the perfect man, and everything falls into place effortlessly. But life isn't a script, and love isn't always easy. It tests you, challenges you, and sometimes, makes you question everything you thought you knew.

Yet here I am, standing at the crossroads of my own love story, feeling like a Cinderella who never had to lose her shoe to find her happiness. Because for the first time in my life, I am exactly where I am meant to be—with the person who sees me, chooses me, and reminds me that I deserve this kind of love.

And that is more than enough.

–Farida

Playlist



- Fallen- Halal beats
- The future (Vocals only)- Halal beats
- Focus (Vocals only)- Halal beats
- Blinded (Vocals only)- Halal beats
- Climbing- Halal beats
- Let me go- Halal beats
- Overcome- Halal beats
- On my way(Vocals and drum)- Halal beats
- Sugar- Zubi

Dedication

For the ones who love deeply, dream endlessly, and believe in a love that's worth everything.



Chapter one

.Farida

I haven’t spoken to him in six months.

Six long months where I replayed every conversation, every lingering glance, every word he didn’t say out loud.

Sometimes I wonder if this was what fate had in store for him, for us. Maybe it was never meant to be peaceful, perhaps we were destined to ruin each other and watch the ashes fall.

He took the crown that wasn’t his to claim—or so they said. A prince born into dust, raised in shadows, and now cloaked in power. And I... I became something I never thought I’d be. Silent.

But how could I speak when the truth was louder than anything I could ever say? It’s ironic, really. I loved a man built on lies, yet it was that truth—the one they all whispered about—*that made me love him even more.*

We were Lovers once. Dreamers, fr I'miends. Until we weren’t. Until one moment rewrote the script for all of us

The delicate sounds of laughter echoed in the hall, mingling with the soft hum of classical music. Glittering chandeliers hung like frozen fireworks, illuminating the room in golden light. I stood at the edge of the gathering, my dress—a modest but elegant green gown—flowing lightly around my legs. To everyone else, I must have looked poised, calm even. Inside, I was anything but.

I sat at one of the long tables, picking idly at the dessert in front of me. Beside me, my younger sister Maryam talked animatedly, her hands slicing through the air as she explained a story I’d barely been following. She had always been the livelier one between us, effortlessly filling any silence with her humor and charm.

“ Ya Farida!” she exclaimed suddenly, tapping my hand. “Are you even listening to me? Wallahi, you can be so annoying!”

I blinked, jolted out of my thoughts. “What? Of course, I’m listening.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, suspicious. “Oh yeah? Then what did I just say?”

“Uh...” I searched my memory for the fragments I’d caught earlier. “Something about... Ummi telling you to talk less at events?”

She smirked, clearly unimpressed. “That was five minutes ago. Try again.”

“Fine” I admitted, sighing. “I wasn’t listening. What’s your point?”

“You’re impossible” Maryam said, shaking her head.

“I was telling you about that woman—you remember Aunty Fatima, right? Well, you should’ve seen her at the engagement party last week. She tried to ‘subtly’ suggest I was next in line to be married. It’s like she was talking in italics!”

I laughed at her exasperated tone. “Aunty Fatima’s been matchmaking since we were kids. She once tried to set me up with her neighbor’s son.”

“Exactly!” Maryam said, throwing her hands up.

“And I told her the same thing I tell everyone—marriage is on my terms, thank you very much.” She paused, then added slyly, “Although... if the right person came along, I wouldn’t completely dismiss the idea.”

“Oh? Should I start shopping for wedding fabrics?” I teased, nudging her playfully.

“In your dreams.” she said, rolling her eyes. “But seriously, aren’t you tired of all these events? Sometimes, I wonder if people enjoy anything besides showing off their gold and arguing over who owns the biggest house.”

Her bluntness made me laugh. Maryam always had a way of cutting through the noise, stripping situations down to their simplest truths.

“I know what you mean,” I said, leaning back in my chair. “But this is part of it, I guess. These gatherings have their place. Plus, we both know Umma loves being part of all this.”

“True,” she said with a small grin. “Anyway, forget the boring stuff. When we get home, I’m forcing you to watch that new series with me. No excuses. You need to relax.”

“Relax?” I raised an eyebrow at her. “You call watching back-to-back episodes of a detective drama relaxing?”

“You love it, and you know it.” Maryam replied with a cheeky grin.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of polite conversations and endless trays of food. I kept myself busy, flitting between relatives and old friends who seemed intent on dragging me into every discussion. But by the time the night began to wind down, I was exhausted.

Outside, the cool night air was a welcome relief from the crowded, stifling hall. I wandered toward the fountain near the entrance, hoping for a moment of peace before heading back inside. The sound of trickling water calmed my racing thoughts, and for a brief moment, I felt... okay.

Then I heard footsteps behind me.

“You always did find the quiet corners.” came a voice that had haunted my every waking moment for six months.

I turned slowly, my breath lodged somewhere in my throat.

It was him.

Oh well, I can’t lie—I was expecting to see him. After all, this is his friend's wedding, and the bride, the *Chiroman Kano's daughter*, no less. He might still be new around them, but deep down, I just knew he would come.

And now, there he is.

My Rayyan.

Just look at him—shining in his beautifully sewn babban riga, draped in that elegant alkyabba, and wearing a Zannah Bukar cap like it was made just for him. He looks so perfect, so out of reach, yet so heartbreakingly familiar.

“Farida,” he said, looking straight into my eyes, without an ounce of shame or fear.

Shameless. Absolutely Shameless.

“Hi.” *Hi?* Hi? Come on!

Hello hell - here's a new sinner , someone better be coming soon, because I swear - I might kill someone.

“Hi?” I responded , my voice laced with confusion and annoyance.

He stepped closer, each movement careful, deliberate. “I saw you when you arrived.” His gaze was steady, unflinching. “I wasn’t going to approach you, but...”

“But what?” I whispered.

“I couldn’t stay away.” he admitted, his voice low, as if the admission burned.

The words struck something deep within me, a whirlwind of anger, relief, and heartbreak colliding all at once.

“And all I could get was a Hi?" He smiled, looking at me like nothing had changed. Am I really this blind? The red flags are glaring at me now.

I can’t believe I fell for this heartless creature. How could I be so stupid? What’s wrong with him? Can’t he see my eyes are about to spill over with tears —tears that have no right to fall for someone like him? He doesn’t care. He never did.

I hate him, and somehow, it feels like a relief.

"Do you have anything else to say?" I forced out through clenched teeth. My voice was barely above a whisper, but it trembled as if ready to shatter.

His gaze softened, but it didn’t feel like warmth. It was pity—calm and cold, like someone looking down on something fragile but already broken.

“I had to see you.”

"Rayyan, you know what?"

I looked him straight in the eyes, the weight of everything between us settling heavily on my chest.

“You should’ve stayed gone,” I whispered, my voice shaking with the force of everything I’d been holding back. I didn’t care about the pride or the hurt that lingered; at that moment, the truth was the only thing that could escape.

"I hate you."

There, I had said it—those words I had buried so deep, and yet, here they were, echoing in the space between us. He had taken so much from me. All my trust, my hope, and most of all, my sense of peace. *Could I really hate him?* Part of me doubted it, but I couldn't deny how it felt in this moment.

"Is that what you want?" he asked, his tone low, and yet, his words felt empty, as if he only asked because he thought I’d change my mind. But if he had truly cared about what I wanted—if he had been there—he wouldn’t have done this. He wouldn’t have destroyed me the way he did.

"Yes."

It felt like a final exhale, the last breath before breaking free of the suffocating hold he had over me. The answer was final, and the words cut through the silence between us like a blade.

"Leave my life, Rayyan." I said, barely able to keep my voice steady. I didn't wait for his response. There was nothing more to say. He had already said everything with his silence and his actions.

I turned, my back to him, letting my feet carry me as far away as possible from the man who had once meant so much to me but had become the very thing I couldn’t bear.

But as I took those steps, my eyes couldn't help but steal a glance back at him. Was this truly what I wanted? The question swirled in my mind, but the answer remained unclear. Could it be? I didn’t know anymore. I just couldn’t stand seeing him like this—this detached, uncaring version of the person I once loved.

♡

“I love this video, babe,” I said softly, my eyes fixed on the screen. I could feel Rayyan’s gaze on me, but I pretended not to notice.

“I love you” He said starring at me as I kept watching the video.

I stared at the video as I remember everything that happened that day.

He may have loved me, but not enough. Not enough to fight for me, or perhaps, to fight against himself for me.

And honestly, I didn’t care anymore. At least, that’s what I kept telling myself. I’d made my peace with it—or so I thought.

Peering out of my window, I spotted Maryam still sitting in the car with her boyfriend. She had been there for so long, laughing and talking as if the world outside didn't exist.

I sighed, trying to shake off the thoughts swirling in my head. Grabbing my phone, I decided to edit the videos I had taken earlier for my content. But just as I was syncing the clips, my phone buzzed in my hand.

It was Surayya.

"Oh no," I whispered, realizing I had forgotten to call her back. She'd been wanting to talk to me for days, and I'd completely forgotten.

"Hi, Faree," she said, her voice cheerful as always.

"Hi, girl. *Yakike*?" I asked, switching the call to FaceTime. How are you?

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking," she replied, smiling brightly. "But why didn't you call me back? I've been waiting for your call forever!"

"*Wallahi,* I just got home," I said, rubbing my temple. "Things have been hectic. That wedding took every bit of my energy."

"Oh, that makes sense," she said, nodding.

Surayya had been my closest friend since my college days. Me, her, and Selin were roommates back then. We were an inseparable trio—always laughing, crying, and facing life together. Now, they're both married, thriving in their own lives, and I couldn't be prouder of them.

When I think about everything we went through—the late-night talks, the tears we shed over heartbreaks, the exams we barely survived—it feels surreal. We've grown so much. And honestly, when I reflect on those moments, I feel like there's nothing in this world that could scare me anymore. We've faced the worst and come out stronger.

Selin used to call us the "Iron Trio" back then, and even now, I'd like to think that title still holds true. Their lives may have changed, but the bond we share hasn't. They're still the sisters I'll always lean on, no matter how much time or distance comes between us.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked, leaning back into my chair.

"Well," she began, her eyes lighting up, "me and babe went out today for the family picnic. Of course, you know Shareef would be there, right? Wallahi, Faree, the guy wouldn't leave me alone! He followed me around the whole time like a lost puppy."

I burst into laughter. "Oh my God, Surayya. You're too much."

"No, I'm serious!" she said, laughing along with me. "I could barely breathe. But anyway, wai, kinyi blocking dinshi on all your social accounts."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course, I did. You don't understand. Wallahi, he disturbs me too much. I hate clingy guys—you know this. Like, what's wrong

with him? Why can’t he just behave like a man?”

Surayya was laughing so hard now that I couldn’t help but laugh too.

“Yes, I get it,” she said, showing her annoyance too.“But honestly, just send him a message or something. He’s driving me crazy about it.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll do it,” I said, throwing my hands up in defeat. “How’s the baby? And how’s the pregnancy treating you?”

She smiled, placing a hand on her belly. “The baby’s doing fine, and so am I.”

From the background, I heard her husband’s voice calling her: *“Matana!”*

My Wife.

Surayya rolled her eyes playfully. “Let me go and meet this man before he starts complaining. I think he’s done praying.”

“Alright, talk to you later,” I said, ending the call.

I nodded and smiled while ending the call.

Just as I ended the call, Maryam walked into the room.

"You’re back?" I asked, my eyes falling on the box in her hand, which looked like it held a dress.

"Yeah, I’m back," she replied, holding out the box with a small smile. "Look at the dress I got for us for Mama and Adda Fati’s birthday. I thought it would be fun if we twinned."

She handed me the box, and I placed it on the bed without opening it.

That’s when it hit me—I had completely forgotten about the birthday. Not only that, but I also forgot we were supposed to plan a dinner for them. We had all talked about how their 50th birthday should be unforgettable, something really special.

But as much as I knew I should focus on that, my mind drifted to something else. I couldn’t stop thinking about him—whether I might see him or not.

Would he be there? Would I even want him to come? Or should I not go there at all.

♡

Khalid was coming to pick me up for a date.

I couldn’t say no, well, because I owed him one for the help he gave me last time. But honestly, I was already stressed thinking about it. Today, I wasn’t in the mood for endless small talk or non-stop conversations. I just wanted peace. But how do you say no to someone so persistent?

Khalid had been such a good friend during my work days in Maiduguri. He made my transition into the office smoother than I ever thought possible. When I told him I’d be in Kano for a wedding, he insisted we meet up since he was also here for the holidays.

I got ready quickly—I hate being rushed—and to my surprise, Khalid arrived exactly when I told him I'd be done.

"Hi, Farida," he said as he got out of the car and opened the door for me.

"Hi, K." I smiled at him. Giving people nicknames has always been my thing. It's something I love about myself—it makes things feel personal yet playful.

"You look great," he said, flashing a warm smile.

"Of course I do," I replied confidently, grinning back at him.

To my surprise, the car ride was silent. Khalid was never silent. Not for a minute. This guy could talk about anything and everything under the sun. But today? Silence.

Okay. This is... unusual. I couldn't help but wonder what was going on with him, but I decided not to press it.

When we arrived at the park, I was immediately struck by how beautiful it was. The view was breathtaking—the kind of place that makes you want to sit and just soak in the beauty of nature.

But as I stepped out of the car, my mood soured.

An unpleasant face.

What is he doing here?

Rayyan.

The last person I wanted to see today.

I decided to do the smart thing: ignore him.

"Hi, babe," he said suddenly.

Babe?

Excuse me, is the 'babe'in the same room with us?

I ignored him entirely and turned to face Khalid. It seemed like he wasn't pleased with Rayyan's presence either, but that wasn't my business.

"Khalid, muje koh?" I said, motioning for us to keep walking.

"Sure," he replied with a smile. He looked genuinely happy that I hadn't paid any attention to Rayyan.

Just as I thought we were in the clear, Rayyan's voice rang out again.

"Farida, don't go." he said, stepping closer and grabbing my hand.

Out of nowhere.

The nerve of this guy.

I sighed deeply, trying to stay calm. The fact that he had followed us here made him look like a stalker. And now, he was holding my hand and telling me what to do? Seriously?

"I think if you have a bit of sense, you'd know this isn't the right thing to do," I said firmly, looking at him in the eye. "The last thing I want to do is insult

you to your face, so don’t make me.”

“Please,” he said, his voice softer now, almost pleading. “Just listen to what I have to say first.” He sure looks desperate, but do I care?

No.

“Why would I do what you want? I don't th-” I shot back, trying to pull my hand away.

Before I could say anything else, Khalid spoke up.

“As you can see,” he said, stepping forward, “we’re together. We’re on a date, as a couple. You should at least respect that her boyfriend is here and stop bugging her.”

What?

Wait. What?

I stared at Khalid, dumbfounded. Did he just call himself my boyfriend? When did we agree to that?

I couldn’t even process what was happening.

“Farida, is this true?” Rayyan asked gently, his voice trembling slightly as if he was on the verge of tears.

I didn’t respond. My mind was blank. All I could do was keep staring at Khalid. This day had officially gone from bad to worse.

I thought we were clear on being just friends. I thought he understood me. What is this?

“Let go of my hand, please,” I said, turning back to Rayyan.

He immediately let go, his face filled with regret. That’s one thing about him—he always respected my boundaries, even when I was mad at him.

I pulled out my phone to book an Uber. Maryam wouldn’t be anywhere close to save me from this chaos, so I had to take matters into my own hands.

The silence was suffocating as I stood there waiting for the Uber. Neither of them dared to come closer, probably because they could see how furious I was.

Twenty-four minutes.

That’s how long I stood there, awkwardly shifting from one foot to the other, feeling both their eyes on me. When my Uber finally arrived, I got in without saying a word to either of them.

What kind of life is this?

As the car pulled away, I leaned back and closed my eyes, letting out a long, exhausted sigh.

I didn’t know what annoyed me more—Rayyan’s sudden appearance or Khalid’s unnecessary claim. Either way, I was done with both of them for the day.

Chapter Two

Farida

One year ago....

"*Assalamualaikum,* Adda Fati," I greeted as I stepped into her spacious living room. Visiting her always brought a sense of comfort, and this trip was no different. Staying here for the holiday felt like a much-needed retreat—and an excellent opportunity to create content in her vibrant space.

Adda Fati is Mama's twin, and what's amusing is how identical they still look. Their resemblance is so striking it's almost uncanny.

"*Wa'alaikumussalam*! Faree na! How have you been?" she responded warmly, her smile lighting up the entire room. Adda Fati's warmth always made me feel special, and deep down, I knew I had a soft spot in her heart. My family loved me for reasons I didn't entirely understand, but hey, who's complaining?

"Oh, *Adda* Fati, I've missed you so much!" I said, rushing to hug her tightly.

"I've missed you too, my love," she replied, her arms holding me just as firmly. "*Jakadiya* Indo, *zo ki tayata dauko kayanta!"* Come help her bring in her things.

I smiled as Indo appeared, beaming with excitement. She had been working for *Adda* since she was eight years old, and we practically grew up together during the time I stayed with *Adda* at the palace.

"*Yaya Farida, sannu da zuwa. Ina wuni.*" Welcome, good evening, she said, grinning widely.

"*Ke Indo, ba nace miki ki bar kirana Yaya ba?*" Indo, didn't I tell you to stop calling me Yaya? I teased. The lady is four years older than me, but she addresses me as her *elder sister*.

Something I don't like.

She laughed as she picked up my bag and headed to the room.

The house felt quieter than usual. Someone I had been looking forward to seeing wasn't around. Curiosity got the best of me.

"Wai, ina Yaya Ibrahim da Rahina ne, Adda?" I asked. Where are brother Ibrahim and Rahina, *Adda*?

"Wallahi, ban sani ba, Faree," she replied. Honestly, I don't know, Faree.

"He's been out with Rahina all morning. She's been pestering him to take her shopping for her birthday gift since he missed her actual birthday," she added with a chuckle.

Ah, Rahina. I couldn't help but smile at the thought of her draining his pockets. She truly knows how to get her way.

"*Adda*, don't blame her. You know we won't see much of him once he flies out again."

"True. Have you forgotten he's graduating this year?"

"Really?!" I exclaimed in surprise. Time had flown by so fast. I could still vividly remember the day he left for his studies abroad. It felt like yesterday.

Just then, we heard a knock at the door, followed by a familiar voice.

"Knock knock."

"*Assalamualaikum*," came the husky voice of none other than Yaya Ibrahim.

"*Sunguma* Faree!" Rahina yelled before pulling me into a suffocating hug.

"Let me breathe, girl!" I gasped, tapping her back for her to let go.

Then there he was—

"Look who we have here. Hi, Big Head," He teased, grinning at me.

"Yaya Ibrahim, *Ina wuni*" I greeted formally.

"*No mbido, jamm e jam?"* How have you been, my dear? he asked in Fulani.

I smirked. Two can play this game.

"Ngam to, ngarma," I replied in Kanuri. I've been fine, brother.

"Mama, wai gasa akeyi ne?" Rahina interjected with mock annoyance. Are they competing now?

We all burst into laughter.

"Faree, when did you become so good at speaking Kanuri?" Ibrahim asked, raising an eyebrow.

"With a little practice," I replied nonchalantly, though I was secretly proud.

He looked so good. Everything about him was just... I don't know! Yaya wasn't just my cousin; he was like the elder brother I never had. *And my first love*..

♡

I don't know what to do. Academically, I'm cooked! "When did we even cover all of this?" I muttered to myself, staring blankly at my notes. The silence around me only made my frustration worse. I'm such a fool—why did I even expect an answer?

To be honest, I don't study much. Actually, I only study during exams. Maybe it's because I think I don't need to? Does that even make sense? Well, I don't know. But it's true—I barely crack open my books, and somehow, I still manage to pass. Except for one course. That course is my nemesis. The bane of my existence.

Some people assume I'm a diligent student just because I have a 3.96 GPA. If only they knew the truth.

“Faree,” Yaya Ibrahim called out, his voice getting closer. I couldn’t let him see me like this. Quickly, I grabbed my glasses and perched them on my nose, then picked up my notes, pretending to look studious. Never mind that I didn’t understand a single word I was staring at.

“Here you are,” he said, stepping into the room. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“*Yaya*,” I said, trying to sound as convincing as possible, “I have so much schoolwork to catch up on. That’s why I haven’t been hanging out much.”

He raised an eyebrow but didn’t call me out on my lie. “Alright, that’s good.” His smile said otherwise, though. It was the kind of smile that told me he wasn’t buying my act, but he wasn’t going to push it either.

“Faree, you create content, right?”

My eyes lit up instantly. *“Yesssss!”* I replied with so much enthusiasm that it caught him off guard. I couldn’t help it, though. Talking about my content creation always made me excited. I’ve been creating content for six years now, and I absolutely love it. There’s nothing else I’m as passionate about. Whenever someone asks me about it, I feel seen, like they’re acknowledging the part of me that matters most.

“Well,” he began, “I have this friend, Rayyan. His company is looking for content creators. It’s a digital marketing company.”

A digital marketing company? That’s not exactly what I usually do. But since it’s Yaya’s friend, how could I say no? I’d do it just to make him proud.

“That sounds interesting. Thank you for thinking of me, Yaya,” I said sincerely. “I’d love to give it a try.”

I couldn’t hide the happiness in my voice. It felt good to know that Yaya recognized my talent and trusted me enough to recommend me to his friend. It was like all my hard work wasn’t in vain.

“When are you less busy?” he asked.

“Well, since I’m here, I guess I’m free anytime,” I replied with a small smile.

“Alright then, *sai mu je gobe, ko*?” We’ll go tomorrow, right?

“*Toh, Yaya*” Alright brother. I agreed, still smiling as I watched him walk out of my room. Just before he left, he reached out and affectionately patted my head.

The ringing of my phone jolted me out of my thoughts. When I saw the caller ID, a smile tugged at my lips.

“*Mamana*,” I said warmly, recognizing Umma’s voice.

Her tone wasn’t as warm. “*Sai yau nasan ba ki da hankali, Farida*,” she began. I’m just now realizing you don’t have sense, Farida. “You arrived at your

aunt’s house without giving me a call. You always do this whenever you visit her.”

I winced at her words. “I’m sorry, *Umma*, *Yi hakuri da ni*.” I replied softly, guilt creeping into my voice. I hadn’t meant to forget.

She didn’t reply. The line went dead. She’d hung up on me.

I tried calling her back three times, but she didn’t pick up. Left with no other option, I sent her a message instead. I couldn’t let her go to bed angry. If she woke up still upset, it would turn into a whole different issue tomorrow.

For now, all I needed was sleep. Tomorrow would be a good day—I could feel it.

I set my alarm for *Tahajjud*, read a few verses of the *Qur’an*, and then drifted off while reading a new manga I’d recently discovered.

♡

Baking is everything to me—a whole love language, and it happens to be mine. I pour my heart into it, and today, I baked soft, golden bread buns for breakfast. The smell alone was enough to brighten my morning, and seeing them come out perfectly soft and golden was just the icing on the cake.

"You see why I love having you here? We always get to eat fresh and delicious food," *Adda* said, smiling warmly as she took a bite. Her happiness is all the validation I need. Watching her enjoy my cooking fills me with pride and comfort.

"Thank you for breakfast today, Faree," Yaya Ibrahim’s voice rang out from the doorway. I had asked one of the maids to take some buns to his room earlier since we were going out together. I wanted him to eat before we left.

He gave me a thumbs-up as he bit into the bread. "You’ve outdone yourself again." he added. *He loved them, too—another bonus for me*. It was little moments like this that made my mornings feel complete..

The roads of Maiduguri were alive with activity—women bargaining in the market, children laughing as they ran around, and the aroma of street food lingering in the air.

“Remember that suya spot?” Yaya asked, pointing to a small stand. “They haven’t changed the recipe in years.”

“Ah, don’t remind me. You made me eat the spiciest suya once, and I cried for an hour,” I said, laughing.

“And I bought you kunun aya to make up for it,” he added with a proud grin.

“You were the villain and the hero at the same time,” I teased.

As we approached the office, Yaya kept the conversation light. We talked about childhood pranks, his upcoming graduation, and how much we both missed *Adda* Fati’s cooking.

Rahina was just here, but it didn't feel like she was present at all.

She said she wanted to tag along with Yaya to drop me off and also hand something to the person I was going to meet for his sister—it seems they're friends, or something like that.

Her mind was buried in her phone, her fingers typing away furiously. She reminds me so much of Maryam and her endless love for pressing her phone. The two of them are so alike, from their attitudes to their habits—it's almost scary sometimes.

I watched her for a moment, trying to decide if I should interrupt her or let her be. She was laughing softly at whatever she was reading, completely lost in her little world. It was almost amusing how oblivious she was to everything else around her.

When we arrived, the receptionist directed us to a waiting area. Yaya was busy adjusting his parking and told us to go ahead without him. Just as we stepped inside, my phone buzzed—it was Selin calling.

"Hey, Sel," I answered.

"Hi! Faree, did you take that file I left on your table the other day? I need it urgently," Selin's anxious voice came through the phone.

"Calm down *na*, madam. I think I kept it in your closet before I left. Check it there" I replied, trying to reassure her.

"Oh, okay, babe. Thank you!" she said, sounding slightly relieved.

As soon as I ended the call and turned to leave, I bumped into someone.

"Ah, sorry!" I exclaimed, quickly stepping back to create space.

The man I had bumped into stood tall, his tailored suit fitting perfectly, exuding a quiet yet commanding presence. His sharp features and intense gaze caught me off guard. I felt momentarily flustered as his eyes met mine.

Chapter Three

Rayyan

Focus, Rayyan. This is getting....out of hand?. I dreamt about that place again.

Honestly, I feel so childish worrying about a dream, but what am I supposed to do? This is the... what, fifth or sixth time? God knows how many times I've had the same dream. It's exhausting.

"Hello, brother." came a familiar, teasing voice from behind my door. Of course, it was Billy. She chimed, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Younger siblings are a whole other level of exhausting—they never let you have your way. Privacy? Forget it. Peace? Nonexistent.

Billy barged into my room as if she owned it, holding her phone in one hand while balancing a bowl of cereal in the other. Her energy was always on a hundred, no matter the time of day.

Last night had been chaotic. We played Truth or Dare for Muneer's birthday, and somehow, I got dragged into it. Normally, I'd never get caught up in their games. My evenings are reserved for work—usually till midnight—but yesterday was different. I let my guard down because they begged me. And now, here she was, using it against me.

"Menene wai?" What is it? I said in a tone I hoped would sound frustrated enough to make her leave.

"You won't get away with whatever you're trying to do," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Ehen? What do you want, madam?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten our deal! You lost to me yesterday. Or should I remind you that you're supposed to drive Muneer and me to school for a month?"

"That means I'll have to wait for you two to get dressed, eat breakfast, and then drive you to school *BEFORE GOING TO WORK?"*

I had to stress that last part. I hate anything that disrupts my punctuality—something I pride myself on. Missing a single morning at work could destroy my reputation,

My mentality.

Let alone an entire month. *Shit, I don't like this.*

"You're such a workaholic," she muttered, pausing long enough to shoot me one of those *I hate this guy* looks. I braced myself for whatever was coming

next.

"You’re mean too," she added, piling on as if I wasn’t already running on fumes. Here we go again. Billy—my little sister I never thought I’d have. Mom gave birth to her when I was ten, and then Muneer followed four years later. They’re still babies to me, no matter how old they claim to be. Maybe I pamper them too much. Whenever they start going on about how I don’t do spare enough time for them, I just stay quiet and listen.

"You don’t even have time for us," she continued, her tone sharp but not entirely unkind. "We just want you to be a proper, caring brother—not someone who thinks buying us stuff is enough. Sure, you’re caring, but it’s not always about material things. You don’t even see us at night! And in the morning, you’re gone before we wake up. *Haba, Ya Rayyan*."

She stormed out before I could even muster a response. *This girl!* She’s always like this—so dramatic. Whoever said girls are the less troublesome creatures must have never met Billy. The way she turns every conversation into an emotional ambush? Exhausting.

It was already eight, and they were running late for school. But to my surprise, they were still waiting for me. Muneer sat in the living room scrolling through his tablet, while Billy leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed like she was silently judging me.

♡

The knock on my office door was firm but unhurried—familiar. Before I could respond, Dad stepped in, balancing a flask of kunu and what looked like a neatly wrapped parcel of masa. His presence had a way of filling any room, commanding attention without effort.

“*As-salamu alaikum*, Son,” he greeted, a teasing smile already on his lips. “You’ve turned this place into a prison. When will you come out to see the world? Or, at the very least, eat like a normal person?”

I stood quickly, surprised but not entirely. He had a way of showing up unannounced when he thought I was overworking. “*Wa alaikumus salam*, Dad. Prison? Isn’t that too much?” I grinned, gesturing to the flask. “But if being in prison means I get kunu and masa delivered, maybe I shouldn’t complain.”

“Hmm,” Dad chuckled as he settled into one of the chairs opposite me. “I had to agree to bringing it because I know you. Since when do you prioritize eating over work? Sit, sit. Let’s eat before you collapse here and ruin my name.”

I laughed, grabbing the cups from the cabinet beside my desk. The moment I opened the parcel, the scent of masa filled the air—warm and inviting. “This is from Mom, isn’t it? It smells too good to be anything else.” My mom is a good cook.

A *very* good one.

Her foods, tastes like heaven. *Too good.*

“Who else?” Dad raised an eyebrow. “You think I’ll buy masa from some random woman by the roadside? I was heading to work when your mom wouldn’t stop complaining that you left without eating, so she made me bring this to you."

We both laughed, and for a few minutes, it felt like old times—simple and easy. Dad's humor had always been sharp yet comforting, cutting through any tension without effort.

But then, as the last piece of masa disappeared, his tone shifted. His gaze lingered on me longer than usual.

“Rayyan,” he started, his voice steady. “You’ve done well, *da na.* You’ve made me proud, *Alhamdulillah*. This company of yours, your achievements—people talk about them.”

I smiled, lowering my cup. “It’s your support and du’a, Dad. I only followed the path you showed me.”

“You’ve gone beyond that.” he said, leaning back slightly. “But let me tell you something, Rayyan. All this hard work, this success... it feels empty when you don’t have someone to share it with. Don’t you think it’s time to start thinking about a wife?”

Ah. Here it was—the talk. Again. Nobody wants to spare me today, huh?

I stifled a groan, leaning back in my chair. “Dad, not this again. I told you, I’m not rushing into anything.”

He laughed, the sound deep and knowing, as if he’d predicted my exact response. “I’m not saying rush. But, Rayyan, the right time doesn’t wait forever. And the right person? You have to recognize her before it’s too late.”

“Every time you and mom bring this up,” I said, shaking my head, “you make it sound like you’ve already picked the person for me.”

He smiled slyly, his eyes twinkling. “We don’t pick; we guide. Allah picks. But love isn’t something you delay until life feels ‘perfect.’ It’s something you build along the way.”

His words sank in for a moment, stirring something in me I wasn’t ready to address. But before I could respond, his expression changed. The warmth in his eyes dimmed, replaced by something heavier—distant, almost sad.

“There’s a friend of mine, his daughter is serving now. If you want, I could arrange for you two to be introduced,” Dad said casually, leaning back in his chair.

He knows I can’t say no to him.

He knows.

I just nodded, pretending to consider it, but my mind was already racing. How do I handle this? How do I make it clear this isn’t what I want? The last time something like this happened,

Mom was the one behind it.

The girl she introduced me to was...well, let’s just say it was an experience I don’t want to relive.

I still cringe when I think about it. The things she did, the way she acted—it was unbearable. Every moment we spent together made me uncomfortable, and it took everything in me to finally get her to leave me alone.

Now, here I am again, stuck in another setup. This time, How do I politely dodge this one?

I stepped out of the office for a moment, needing a breath of fresh air before diving back into work. The hallway was quiet, almost too quiet, but as I rounded the corner, I nearly bumped into someone.

Ah, sorry!” she exclaimed, quickly stepping back to create space.

"Watch where you’re—" I stopped mid-sentence when I saw her. She was glaring at me, arms crossed, a scowl plastered on her face.

And... she's beautiful.

Does she work here? I've never seen her before.

I frowned, instinctively backing up a step. "Sorry, didn’t see you there."

Her eyes narrowed. "Yeah, clearly." she shot back.

Something about the way she said it set me off. I raised an eyebrow, trying to maintain my patience. "It’s a small hallway. You could’ve stepped aside."

She scoffed, not even looking apologetic. "Excuse me for existing in a space you think is yours."

The tension between us hung in the air as I blinked, unsure how we went from a simple bump to exchanging barbs in an instant.

Before I could reply, Ibrahim walked up, throwing an arm around her shoulders. "Rayyan, this is Farida. You two might be working together soon."

I didn’t know if I should laugh or groan. This? This was the content creator he mentioned?

Chapter Four

Farida

The heavens were not on my side today. What I thought would be a good day had quickly spiraled into chaos.

First, Mama was furious with me—and I had no one but *myself* to blame.

The girls too, Surayya was livid. She complains way too much for my liking, but at least selin didn't say anything. I hadn’t checked in with them since I left for my holiday, and she made it very clear through her cold replies that she were not pleased.

And now, this. Staring at the man I had almost been “rude” to, my stomach churned with embarrassment. Well, he started it first. I clearly remember apologizing—until he ruined it by snapping at me, telling me to watch where I was going.

When the realization hit that he was the same man Yaya Ibrahim had mentioned earlier, I wanted the earth to swallow me whole. Of all the people in the world, why him?

“Good day, sir,” I managed, my voice steady despite the nerves.

“Good day. Rayyan, please.” he replied, his voice smooth and professional.

I glanced around his office—it was way too cozy and organized for a man’s space. Everything seemed pristine, from the arrangement of books to the neat desk. The scent of vanilla and sandalwood lingered faintly in the air.

“I wasn’t sent her portfolio, and..” Rayyan began, addressing Yaya Ibrahim with a raised brow while looking at me.“I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“Rayyanu, I spoke to her last night,” Yaya said lazily from the three-seater couch, stretching his arms. “I planned to bring her in myself, so I didn’t bother asking for her details upfront.”

“*Amma kar ka damu,* she's actually good.” Don't worry.

“Can I see some of your works?”

“Ah, yes sure” *What is this? Why is my voice shaky!*

I handed him my iPad where I've already swiped through to check my portfolio.

“I like that you're not camera-shy” he said smirking while watching my videos.

“ Yes, I'm not. I also recorded when people are staring too, so I'm quite confident.”

“Why are your hands shaky?” He talk-whispered.

Seriously..

“ Today is not a good day as I thought it would be, that's all.”

I could really act because the lie was so fluent and direct.

“Okay, Here I thought it was because I look scary.”

“No.. Are you?”

He glanced up briefly, then returned to his work, completely ignoring me.

Well, this is embarrassing. Did he just pretend not to hear me? Or worse, did he hear and decide what I said wasn’t worth acknowledging?

Whatever.

♡

Being in a one-sided love is hard. I can’t take my eyes off Yaya. He looks so effortlessly good driving, his hands steady on the wheel, his jawline sharp under the soft sunlight streaming through the car.

What if he catches me staring? The thought alone makes me snap out of it, forcing myself to focus on anything but him. I end up stealing glances at him, hoping he doesn’t notice.

Why can’t I just tell him? What’s holding me back?

Maybe it’s the fear of rejection, the idea that I’d pour my heart out only for him to look at me with pity.

Or maybe it’s the fear of how to face him afterward if he says no. *How do you go back to normal after that?*

Or worse, what if he doesn’t even give me an answer? What if I’m left in limbo, overthinking every moment and second-guessing everything?

Either way, I’m scared. And that fear is enough to keep me silent. For now.

“Farida, Rayyan is a very difficult person. It’s so hard to please him, but I feel like you two will get along well as long as you don’t get on his bad side. So, do your best as you always do, and make me proud,” he said, smiling as he patted my head.

“Insha Allah, Yaya. I'll try.”

Yaya is the only man I'm too close to ever since Baba left. He was always there for me, Mama, and Maryam—for all of us. That was when I fell for him.

He’s my first love. *I’ve loved him since I was nine.*

Crazy? Right?

Being cousins gives me a sense of assurance that maybe, just maybe, I could make him like me back. I can’t see myself with any man other than him.

“Girl, *baki kyauta mana ba gaba daya.”* You didn’t try at all. Surayya said.

“Guys, I’m so sorry! Wallahi, I haven’t had time for myself since I came here,” I said, placing the phone on my mirror as I removed the pins from my

hijab.

“Ha, abi na because you dey see your guy—na why you dey ignore us so?” Surayya teased.

“Kai, Surayya, stop it now,” I said, laughing. “We’re on FaceTime, someone might hear you.” The girl has no shame at all.

“That’s your problem. I wonder why you still haven’t told him you like him. Even if you’re going to get rejected, just say it and get an answer to your confession.”

“*Da gaske fa*, Faree—true, Faree,” Selin said. I almost forgot she was on the call. Surayya always dominated the conversations.

“*Naji*.” I sighed. “Ah, I almost forgot—he even got me a job.”

“A job?” Surayya sounded surprised.

“Yes. It’s more like an internship though, so it’s not permanent or anything serious.”

“What’s the job about?” I knew Selin would ask—she’s the mother of our group, always checking on us and ready to help if we mess up.

“It's just what I normally do. It’s the company of his friend. They needed a content creator, and then he referred me,” I explained, feeling the weight of their curious stares as they nodded along.

“That reminds me, Sel, did you see the file you were looking for?” I asked, glancing at Selin, who was scrolling through her phone absentmindedly.

“Oh, I found it! Turns out I left it in the drawer under my desk. Wallahi, I thought I lost it for good,” Selin said, smiling sheepishly.

“Good, because the way you were stressing over it earlier, I thought the world was ending,” I teased, earning a playful glare from her.

Surayya was busy adjusting her apron, her face glowing from the leftover flour on her cheeks. A baker through and through, she had been the first friend I made in school. I still remember how we met—she had been selling her homemade cupcakes in the cafeteria to raise money for a project, and I, being the foodie I was, had been her most loyal customer that day. We had been inseparable ever since.

And then there was Selin. She had come into our lives later, joining us as our roommate. She was Turkish and had this calm, almost regal aura about her. I don’t even know how it happened, but we just clicked. Over time, she became an integral part of our little circle, adding her unique flavor to our group dynamics.

We were talking like the world was about to end, and I was already showing signs of exhaustion. Selin noticed and told me to get some rest.

“And please, take care of yourselves. I don’t want to hear any of you complaining about how tough things are or how you don’t have time for

yourselves," she said.

"Yes, mummy," Surayya and I said in unison, chuckling.

♡

The royal houses are always bustling with activity. Every day brings a new event. This morning, my alarm wasn't what woke me up—probably because I spent the entire night reading manhwas and went to bed late. Instead, the sound of the *algaita* drifted into my room, rousing me from sleep. Uncle Ibrahim was preparing to welcome the new daughter-in-law into the family. His brother's in-law, who was arriving today, had already been the center of the family's excitement, and preparations were in full swing..

"Aunty Faree." Rahina's voice called out softly by my side.

"Please help me with my makeup."

"Good morning," I replied, my tone teasing.

"Good morning, sorry," she said sheepishly.

"Just your makeup?"

"Yes."

I sighed playfully, stood up, and headed straight to the bathroom to brush my teeth. *Lord, please let today be a good day.*

The atmosphere at the office was warm and welcoming. The employees greeted me with bright smiles and words of encouragement. I already felt a bit more at ease.

To make a good impression, I decided to stop by Mr. Rayyan's office to greet him and let him know I had arrived. Yesterday was not it.

"Good morn—" I started but abruptly stopped.

I was greeted by a very distracting view.

Was it because I hadn't really looked at him properly yesterday?

He was even more handsome than I remembered. My thoughts spiraled briefly and before I knew it his eyes were opened.

What is this?

This is going to be the second time I embarrassed myself in front of this man!

He looked up, his expression unreadable. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice sharp and full of curiosity.

What would I have been doing here, young man? I muttered under my breath, uncertain if I should have voiced it at all, letting him know I was annoyed.

I didn't appreciate him questioning my presence.

"You don't know how to knock?" he added, as if I were the one in the wrong.

Excuse you, mister.

I was left speechless for a moment, not sure whether to get angry or just laugh at how bold he was.

“Sorry, someone told me to just come in; you’d be at your table,” he said, clearly trying to defend himself, but it only made things worse. The irritation was creeping in now.

Na small thing dey vex me, abeg.

“Anyway, welcome, Farida,” he said in a way that sounded like he couldn’t care less. It was the kind of response people give when they want you to stop bothering them, or maybe that’s just how it felt because I didn’t like him, or his guts, at all.

He had this way of acting like he was untouchable, and it only made my annoyance grow.

Great, I thought. *Perfect start to the day.*

I was introduced to the team I was going to work with, and it didn’t take long for Khalid and me to get along. In fact, just a few minutes into our introduction, he had me laughing so hard my sides hurt.

I was so surprised to meet someone who studied Computer Science at Baze University here. It felt like such a small world.

“I also hate Prof. Muhammad. He’s the worst professor to ever exist,” Khalid said, his tone dripping with exaggerated annoyance.

I couldn’t stop laughing. “That I agree! There was this one time I was just scribbling on my notes during his most boring class, and out of nowhere, he’s like, ‘Hey, the blue-head girl, can you excuse yourself out of my class.’ I was just sitting there wondering when he even saw me do anything!”

Khalid rolled his eyes dramatically. “That man has eyes everywhere. I’m telling you, he’s the villain in his own made-up story.”

We shared another laugh, but I made a mental note to focus and not let the day slip by unproductively.

♡

Since I had some free time after reviewing the content outline and schedule for shooting, I decided to shoot a quick OOTD (Outfit of the Day) video. If I was going to be productive, I might as well add a little personal flair to the day, right?

It felt like someone was staring—so intently, *for me to feel it.*

I turned around but the person was going already. *I think I recognize this suit.* It was Mr. Rayyan.

Why was he here? I don't know. Well, back to what is my business.

A sudden call from my sister, Maryam, distracted me. I hope it's not billing, because she just bankrupted me yesterday.

“I don't have money oo, madam” That was the first thing that came out of my mouth.

“*Haba,* faree. Can't I call my sister to check up on her again” she replied laughing.

“ How is school?” She happened to be the one lucky baby of ours. She's far away from home to study whatever she calls it.

“School is fine *oo.* I'll even be at home this November insha Allah.”

“Masha Allah.”

“ Is there any latest gist?”

“*Omo, ba komai fa.”* There's none.

“These our aunties and their wahala, I heard something *oo.”* As I heard her say that, I found a place and settled to hear what it might be.

She always had an update whenever she called. The funny thing is, she wasn’t even in the country, yet somehow, she always had the latest scoop about our family members. Maybe it’s because she’s closer to them than I am—or maybe she’s just nosy like that.

“What happened again?” I asked and busted into an unrecognizable laughter.

“There's a matchmaker in our family, kharima has someone one through *Adda* zainab. She even sent me her wedding invite sef.” *Wahala*

Kharima used to be one of my closest cousins, someone I trusted, laughed with, and shared my secrets with. But everything fell apart when she accused me of ‘snatching’ her boyfriend. The audacity of that girl! To this day, I can’t wrap my head around why she’d believe such a lie—or worse, why she’d want to make others believe it. She didn’t just confront me privately; no, she made sure to drag the entire family into it, turning a simple misunderstanding into a full-blown scandal.

I still remember the way the family tried to intervene to settle the matter. Adda Fati and Mama, being the peacekeepers they’ve always been, stepped in to calm things down. But it was humiliating for me. There I was, sitting in the middle of the living room, while Kharima spewed baseless accusations, claiming I’d ‘stolen’ someone I barely even noticed. She made such a scene, yelling and crying, that even now, some family members still believe her story. And the worst part? Her lies left a permanent stain on my reputation.

Adda Fati did everything she could to set the record straight, defending me against her baseless claims. Mama, too, pleaded with Aunty Fauzia—Kharima’s mother—to help talk sense into her daughter. But Aunty Fauzia was just as unreasonable, claiming her daughter couldn’t possibly be lying. Instead of making Kharima apologize, she doubled down, choosing to cut ties with Mama

and *Adda* Fati. To this day, she doesn't speak to them, all because of an argument that never should've happened.

Because of an *archaeopteryx* in *Hari's* voice.

I can't say it doesn't hurt. It does. Even now, when I see some relatives side-eyeing me or whispering behind my back, I know they still think I actually snatched her boyfriend. And what about the guy? He didn't even stay with her.

Funny right?

The same guy they were shouting he would marry her.

Yet somehow, it's still my fault. Men and accountability? Rarely in the same sentence.

It's exhausting, really, to have to carry the weight of someone else's insecurities.

"Toh, however she and her future husband met, *Allah ya basu zaman lafiya*" I said with a shrug. May Allah bless their union.

"*Ameen*. Yaya, I just wish I was like you. You're too good for this world" my sister said, grinning.

Her words made me laugh out loud. She always had a way of brightening my mood. We talked endlessly, about everything and nothing, until lunch break rolled around.

As I headed out of the office, I bumped into Khalid right at the doorstep.

"Where have you been? I was bored and needed someone to gist with. You were nowhere to be found! At first, I thought you'd left, but then I saw your bag still hanging" he said with a playful pout.

It was impossible not to laugh. This guy really knew how to lighten any moment.

"I was at the hallway. I think it's my comfort place now."

" Alright, let's go get something to eat."

He is so gentle and kind. Khalid has been guiding me since earlier and I love him for that.

I turned to the view of the *honorable* typing and looking so serious through the transparent window.

"Don't worry about him. He's an alien." His words caught me off guard, and I couldn't help laughing. The only time I've ever seen him went out of his office was during prayer time, but he's always there as if it was his home or something.

We turned to leave and I got even more excited when I heard I can get as much plantain as I want since it's Khalid's treat.

Have you ever caught yourself just... staring? Not at something, but at someone—a particular somebody—because they're just too attractive to ignore?

Ever since I got here, that’s all I seem to do whenever I catch a glimpse of this man. It’s embarrassing, really. But how can anyone not stare when someone looks like that?

I was going to go, I really was, but instead, I found myself standing there, staring at this man—this enigma—who looked as though he’d designed every detail of his appearance himself. *Kamar shi ya zauna ya tsara kanshi da kanshi.*

"God abeg," I whispered to myself. I’m not stupid, I swear. I’m just here waiting for Yaya to pick me up.

Earlier, I’d called the driver to come get me after lunch since I was done with everything for the day. But, of course, Yaya had intervened, insisting he’d pick me up himself. And now, hours later, I was still here. Four hours, to be precise, and it was almost six. Yet here I was. Still waiting.

I hate waiting. Absolutely hate it. But because it’s him, I’ve been patient, sitting and watching the minutes drag on.

The building was practically deserted now. Everyone had left. I'm the only person here. *Since I was told the other one is an alien.*

Chapter Five

Rayyan

Anything that would make me involve myself with someone who talks too much is an automatic NO for me.

30 minutes ago...

I had been observing her from the corner of my eye. Ever since I left her earlier, all she's done is talk—nonstop. She's like a female version of her brother, constantly chatting. I don't even know, *Doesn't she ever get tired?*

And when did she get so close to him?

I noticed the way she kept laughing at everything Khalid said. Everything. It makes me wonder—what on earth could he possibly be saying to make her laugh like that?

Is she... okay?

I sighed, I was busy enough as it was, drowning in emails and deadlines, when my phone buzzed. It was *her* brother.

"*Yane*" I answered casually.

"Wassup?" he replied, his tone way too upbeat.

"I'm good. How're you doing?"

"Man, you're too polite for my liking," he said with a laugh, and I could practically hear him rolling his eyes. "Anyways, can you do me a favor?"

"What is it?" I asked, already sensing where this was going. And honestly, I don't think I want to hear whatever he's about to say.

"I was supposed to come pick Faree up, but my car tire got patched," he started, the words spilling out in a rush. "I'm sorry, please drop her off for me." He paused briefly, then continued before I could even speak.

"I couldn't get hold of the driver, his line isn't reachable. And I don't want her getting an Uber. For security."

Before I could get a word in, the line went dead. He'd hung up. Typical.

The kind of people I have in my life, I swear.

I sighed, stood up, and stepped outside to find her. She was completely engrossed in her phone, typing furiously or scrolling—who knew?

"Hey," I said, my voice calm but firm, waiting to see how she'd react to my sudden appearance.

"Hi," she said cautiously, her words followed by a slight pause. "Ahm, my brother is coming to pick me up, that's why I'm still here—in case you're

wondering."

"He's not coming anymore," I replied flatly. "I'm to drop you off. Meet me outside, I'll just bring my car out from the parking garage."

I didn't wait for a response—*why should I?* I could almost feel her thoughts chasing each other as I walked away, but that wasn't my problem. Let her think it over, overanalyze, or whatever it is she always does. My job was simple: drop her off, nothing more.

The car was silent. But, as if on cue, my phone lit up with a call from Bilkisu. I picked up, barely shifting focus, the car's Bluetooth automatically connecting the call to the speakers.

"Hi, brother."

"Yes, what is it?"

"The least you could do is at least say 'hi' back." Her voice carried its usual mock annoyance. "Anyways, I called to ask you for a favor. Can you please help me buy ice cream? You know I can't study without it. I just checked the freezer and there's none. Help my life *dan Allah*."

"Alright," I replied curtly, cutting off the call without wasting another second. Silence returned, even louder than before.

"Are you going now?" she asked suddenly.

I glanced at her briefly. *I thought you were scared to speak.* All she'd done in the car was take videos or something, I'm not really sure.

"No, I'm not. I was just reserved." Her response was quick, almost defensive.

Wait, did I say that out loud?

"Yes, I am." I added smoothly.

"Alright, I'd like to get myself some too."

"'Kay," I replied, keeping my tone neutral.

This girl sef.

Last time, I bought her TEN big tubs of ice cream. *Insane!*

What in the world? Is that her daily diet or what?

We arrived at Today's Supermarket, and I headed straight to the ice cream section—my one and only mission here. Noticing Farida trailing behind me, I tried to act like this was just a normal errand. Why did I even care how I walked or looked right now?

We picked out the ice cream, and I moved to the counter, ready to pay and end this day in peace. But then she brought out her card to pay for hers too. Why? I stared at her, confused and slightly annoyed. *What was she trying to do?* My day, which was supposed to end on a calm note, had suddenly taken an irritating turn.

"Why would you pay?" The question escaped before I could stop it.

"Because I got it for myself. It's only fair if I pay for it too," she said, her tone calm yet firm. Was I glad to hear that?

No.

But this was the first time I was hearing something like this from a lady. All the women I'd been associated with, one way or another, always made me pay their bills, and I never minded. But sometimes, it felt like the only thing they did was ask for handouts.

I don't even know what I'm saying but whatever.

I scoffed lightly, my annoyance flaring. "We don’t do that here, young lady. You’re with me, and I'll pay for it. Do I have to spell it out for you?"

We both stood there, cards in hand, locked in a silent battle. The cashier looked from me to her, visibly confused and uncertain about whose card to take. I gave him a sharp look that screamed, *Don't even think about it* and, reluctantly, he took my card, ignoring hers completely.

I paid for everything and grabbed all the bags before she could utter another word. *If she wanted to stand there and argue further, she might as well make herself comfortable.* I was too irritated to care. She stepped out looking furious, muttering to herself as if she were scared to voice her thoughts. But honestly, who cared?

♡

I was late, and my baby was fast asleep while waiting for me to bring home her ice cream.

“Billy,” I called gently, kneeling beside her. She stirred slightly, murmuring under her breath but refused to fully wake up. Her pout was evident even in her half-asleep state. I couldn't carry her, nor could I leave her on the couch.

She has this habit of falling asleep whenever she's waiting for me, even when she knows I'll be home late. Whenever she wants something or wants to talk, she’ll wait, but by the end of the day, she always falls asleep waiting for me.

“Billy, wake up,” I tried again. This time, she opened her eyes but stayed silent. She sluggishly stood and started toward her room, her small feet dragging across the floor. I had to guide her carefully, making sure she didn’t stumble on the way.

Once she was safely in bed, I tucked her in and went back to the kitchen. After stocking her ice cream in the freezer, I sat down at the dining table, my mind drifting. The thought of Farida surfaced unexpectedly. With no reason to resist, I unlocked my phone and scrolled to her page, curiosity driving me to learn more about this lady.

She's much prettier in real life. I stared at her pictures, tilting my head slightly. *What is this? Does she edit her pictures?*

Somehow, the thought felt wrong—because I liked her better in real life. *Why?*

I couldn't place why that thought lingered, why it bothered me enough to make me pause.

As I scrolled, I kept coming across things that amused me. Then I saw a picture of her with someone—looks like a friend. They looked so happy together. Then, I stumbled upon another picture of her with Ibrahim. They looked so close, almost like a couple.

They looked like.

I couldn't help but think that's how they appeared.

How did we become friends? I still don't know.

It started with a random group assignment in one of my first-year classes. I remember walking into the room, trying to find my seat, when I noticed that I was paired up with someone I had barely spoken to before—let's just say, he wasn't exactly the type of person I would've picked to work with. Ibrahim was the guy who always seemed to be a little too relaxed, the one you'd see chatting with everyone, but never really focused. I was the complete opposite—quiet, always buried in my notes, and serious about getting everything right.

At first, it was awkward. He'd suggest taking breaks every hour while I was still trying to figure out how to get everything done. I'd make fun of his *let's not stress* attitude, and he'd laugh it off, saying, *It's only university, man, relax a little.* Over time, I realized he wasn't just procrastinating, he had a different way of looking at things—sometimes, you could just breathe through the chaos, not get worked up over everything.

Till date, I still think about how we became friends. We were so different back then, yet we ended up finding common ground. The whole thing just felt so random at the time, but somehow it worked. And that's how Ibrahim became a friend, without either of us trying too hard. It just happened.

What was I even doing? I dropped my phone on the table like it burned and rubbed my face, annoyed at my own distraction. I had no business analyzing someone's face at this hour.

Chapter Six

Farida

I was never nervous when it came to recording.

Why should I be?

Today, I was going to shoot my first project for the company, and I couldn't wait to get started. I had already practiced the script, so there was really nothing to worry about.

But as I was making my coffee, I glanced at Rahina, I noticed she wasn't in a good mood today. Her face looked gloomy, and I couldn't help but wonder—what was going on? Did she not want to go to school? I thought to myself. My curiosity got the better of me, though, because I couldn't stand seeing someone cheerful suddenly turn so quiet and distant.

"Rahina, *meke faruwa*? Why does your face look like this?" What's going on? I asked, sitting beside her on the chair, waiting for her to respond.

"Aunty Farida, let me ask you something," she said, her tone soft.

"Sure, go ahead. Menene?" I replied, intrigued. What could it be?

"Okay, I have this friend,right?" she said, her voice soft but tinged with frustration.

I nodded, encouraging her to continue.

"Well, we've been best friends for a long time, but lately... it's been different. She doesn't like it when I hang out with other people, especially if they're people she doesn't like. Whenever I talk to someone else or get close to anyone, she gets distant, like she's upset. It's like she doesn't want me to have other friends."

I raised an eyebrow, confused. "But does she hang out with other people, too?"

"That's the thing. She doesn't care about my own feelings if she talks to other people or if they're spending time with them. She doesn't want me to say anything about it. But when I'm with someone else, she... she acts like it's a problem. And when we fight, it's like nothing else matters. We don't talk, and I don't know what to do."

I nodded slowly, trying to process what she was saying. "So, you and her had a fight yesterday?"

Rahina nodded, her face clouded with frustration. "Yeah, we did. I don't know why, but she got so mad at me for spending time with someone else.

She doesn’t even want to hear my side. Now she’s acting like everything is my fault, and I don’t know if I can keep dealing with this anymore.”

She paused for a moment, shaking her head as if to shake off the thoughts. “It’s like I’m walking on eggshells with her. If I don’t do what she wants, she just shuts me out, and I don’t know how to fix it because I'm tired of it. I’m starting to wonder if maybe I should just leave her alone.”

“Rahina,” I began, my voice calm but firm, “if you feel like she’s trying to control you, just leave her alone. Wallahi, you don’t need this stress. Focus on yourself. You already have friends who care about you, so why keep forcing a friendship that makes you feel like this?”

She looked up at me, her expression a mix of confusion and hesitation. “But, Aunty Farida, she’s been my friend since primary school. I feel bad leaving her like this.”

I crossed my arms and leaned forward slightly, meeting her gaze. “It doesn’t matter how long you’ve known someone if they don’t respect you. Look at Maryam—she’s been there for you through everything, and she’s never judged you or made you feel guilty for being yourself. Stick with people like her. You don’t need to fight to keep a friend who doesn’t treat you right.”

She sighed deeply, her shoulders slumping. "So, *kina nufin kawai na bar ta?*” So, you’re saying I should just leave her alone?

“Yes,” I said firmly. “You’ve tried enough. Don’t waste your energy on someone who doesn’t appreciate you. Focus on yourself, on your studies, and on the people who actually value you. If she’s really your friend, she’ll come around. If not...” I shrugged, letting the rest of the sentence hang. “Then at least you’ll know you made the right choice.”

For a moment, she stayed quiet, processing what I’d said. Finally, she nodded slowly. “You’re right, Aunty. Maybe it’s time I stop trying so hard.”

I smiled, feeling a little relief at her response. “Good. Let’s go now before we leave home late.”

We stepped outside together, the bright morning sun making me squint. Both our cars were waiting, the drivers standing nearby.

“*Nagode,* Aunty Farida” Thank you, Aunty Farida. she said, turning to look at me as she opened her car door. Her voice was soft, but there was a hint of relief in it.

“You understand me more than anyone else.”

I waved her off, smiling. “Take care of yourself, forget the rest. Your peace of mind is what matters.”

She nodded again and got into her car. I entered mine as well, settling into the back seat. The drive was silent, giving me time to reflect. I could only hope

Rahina would truly take my advice. Sometimes, walking away was the hardest thing to do, but it was always better than holding on to someone who dragged you down.

♡

The clips turned out perfect, as they always do. The team's reaction was priceless, a mix of surprise and admiration. Maybe they didn't expect much because they hadn't come across any of my blogs.

"You really did well, Farida. It came out perfect" one of them said with a smile.

"Thank you very much," I replied, trying to sound professional but barely suppressing my pride.

"All that's left is just a little touch-up here and there." Khalid chimed in, glancing at the screen. He was in charge of editing, his fingers already flying across the keyboard.

I got distracted by my phone ringing. It was my girls.

Am I the only one with no rest during the holidays? Well, who am I kidding? This is my first time working during a break, and it only proves I was the jobless one among us all.

"My girls, how are you guys?" I greeted as I picked the call and stepped out of the office.

Their laughter filled the line, a familiar sound that warmed me instantly.

"Finally, we caught you! Are you too busy for us now, big working lady?" Surayya teased.

I chuckled, leaning against the railing. "*Abeg, leave me o*. It's not easy at all."

"I just finished baking the worst cake ever." Surayya complained, her voice laced with frustration.

"Well, well, I also had a bad day with Prof. Zayd." Selin chimed in, rolling her eyes dramatically.

I scoffed, unable to help myself. Things between Selin and her professor had been a circus ever since he became her supervisor. "You two and your drama," I said, shaking my head. "What happened this time?"

Selin groaned, leaning into the call. "He rejected my entire thesis proposal! Said it lacked depth. Can you imagine?"

"And my cake? It's literally as hard as a rock," Surayya interrupted, clearly unwilling to let Selin's professor troubles outshine her kitchen catastrophe. "Do you know how long I spent on that thing?"

I couldn't hold back my laughter. "You both need a holiday from holidays." I teased.

“Guys, earlier I mentioned needing your help, right? Well, the launch day of the program we’ve been working on is in a week, and I need a dress!”

“Girl, you don’t have to worry about a thing. You know you can always trust me to handle that,” Selin said confidently, as though she already had everything sorted.

Of course, she will.

“I’ll send you the perfect dress for this kind of event. You better wear it,” she added with a giggle. She loves dressing up so much that she practices on us, and we never complain because she has the best taste in clothes.

“I can already imagine the number of stares you’ll get—oh my God!” Selin was being dramatic, as usual. Some days she’s the most level-headed person I know, and other days? Well, this was one of those dramatic days.

“You’re such a sweetheart, Sel. Thank you!” I replied, smiling. “Bye, guys—Rahina is calling.” I quickly said as her name flashed across my screen.

Me and Rahina had spoken earlier this morning. I promised to come and pick her up so we could go for our makeup together for the *durbar* for Yaya Aminu, my uncle's nephew and judging by her call, she must have been waiting.

I was heading out when I bumped into the *honorable*. He was carrying a box of something that looked suspiciously like donuts. Just the sight had my mouth watering. That's how much I love donuts—I automatically think anything in those kinds of boxes must be donuts.

“Hey,” he greeted casually, as though we were friends.

This shameless man. How could he act so calm after the way he’d practically shouted at me the other day, all because I tried to pay for what I bought myself? And even after I had the courtesy to thank him, he’d stayed grumpy about it.

“Hi,” I replied, trying to keep my expression neutral.

He surprised me by extending the box toward me. “Here, it’s for you.”

It’s donuts. The first love of my life.

Yaya might be the second when it comes to food. I lied the whole time.

How could I say no to this perfection?

“Ahn, thank you. But... what’s the occasion?” I asked, trying not to sound completely clueless.

“You did well. That’s the occasion,” he replied simply.

Wait. Did he just smile? I have never seen him smile the whole time I’ve been here.

And honestly? He looked a hundred times better with a smile on his face. But also... it was creepy. Why would he smile?

“Thank you so much,” I said, shifting my gaze back to the donuts. My mind was already debating how to devour them. I felt the urge to start eating right

now, but I fought it. I could wait until he left.

I think.

Chapter Seven

Rayyan

Didn't he say my heart should recognize the one I want to spend my life with?

Or was that not what he said?

I never, ever thought I'd find myself in an arranged date or relationship. I am a grown man—I know what I want for myself. I have taste, and I believe these women—not that they're not good people—but I just feel... uncomfortable around them.

I should really learn how to say no out loud when Mom or Dad suggests something I know I don't want.

Haneefah. I've known her for a while now, and never, not once, did my thoughts wander to the idea of being set up with her. She's Muneer's sister, one of my friends and maybe, she wanted this arrangement more than I did. Every time I've been around her, she's made it a point to bug me or confess her feelings without shame. I swear, sometimes I feel shy for her.

"Hi, *masoyi*." My love. She greeted me, smiling.

This.

I hate it whenever she calls me that.

Was that even a proper greeting?

"Hi, Haneefah," I said, my tone flat. I wasn't about to fake enthusiasm. She could probably see it from the look on my face.

"Why do you look like that? Aren't you glad to know I'm the one you're meeting?"

"I'm not. And I'm very sure you know that. I don't care if it's you or anyone else," I replied bluntly.

"Alright, alright," she said, laughing. It sounded more like she was mocking me.

She was wearing a dress that looked like a rag—so immodest, with her hair all out for everyone to see.

How could I associate myself with someone like this?

"You should've at least considered the type of outfit to wear, knowing you were meeting me," I said, my voice teetering on rudeness.

"You know how I dress, *masoyi*," she said with a smirk. "But since you don't like it, I'll try my best to change. Anything for my love."

“I don’t want you to change for me, Haneefah. Change for yourself. This isn’t how you’re supposed to dress—your body is too exposed.”

“Here it is. Your modesty talk—every time,” she scoffed. “I said I’ll change, but can’t we talk about something else? We’re on a date, let’s enjoy it.”

The day dragged on endlessly. During our so-called date, all I did was tap my legs impatiently and steal glances at my watch, counting down the minutes until I could leave. Two hours with her felt like two weeks, and I could barely take it anymore.

All I wanted to do was get home and rant about this mess to Billy. She was always there to listen to my endless complaints about my problems with women, offering her sarcastic remarks and exaggerated facial expressions that somehow made me feel better.

After Mom, Billy was the only woman I could be completely free with. I could tell her anything without judgment, and she’d either tease me about it or tell me to ‘fix up’ and move on. I’m glad she’s my sister.

♡

It was time for prayers, and as I walked out of my office, I caught a glimpse of her by the window. She was sitting there, completely engrossed in her phone, watching what seemed to be a group of boys dancing—Chinese boys, maybe? I couldn't really tell. I paused for a second, noticing how she was smiling, completely absorbed in whatever she was watching. I couldn’t help but wonder how she found joy in watching these people dance. But then, I shook the thought off and walked away.

I had my own business to attend to.

After prayers, as I made my way back, I overheard Khalid, Joshua, and a few other guys talking in hushed tones. Their laughter echoed through the area I was passing.

“I don’t know, I’m just attracted to her,” Khalid said, sounding like he was trying to justify himself.

“Attracted, you say? Why aren’t you that attracted to Sheila or Beenayah? They've been working here for years!” Joshua teased, causing an eruption of laughter among them.

I didn’t stop or react. Whatever nonsense they were discussing wasn’t my concern. I walked past them without a second thought.

I didn’t care.

Arriving at my office, I was immediately greeted by a sight that irritated me—Haneefah.

What was she doing here?

“Hi, my love,” she said, walking toward me with her arms outstretched, clearly intending to hug me. I instinctively stopped her with my hand, keeping her at arm’s length. Just why?

Why did she come here? Was it because of the setup? Did she think that gave her the right to show up whenever she pleased?

I could feel my irritation rising, and yet, she seemed oblivious to it. Couldn’t she see I didn’t want her here?

“What are you doing here?” I asked, though I already knew what she’d say.

“I came to see you, babe,” she replied with a bright smile, completely unfazed by my tone.

The smile only fueled my annoyance.

“What right do you think you have to show up at my workplace unannounced?” I asked, my voice sharper than intended.

From the looks of it, she finally seemed to understand me, and suddenly her expression shifted.

“Why are you always harsh to me? Is it so wrong to fall for you?” she asked, her voice quieter, almost hurt.

So, she does have feelings, after all. I had assumed she didn’t, especially since she always brushed off the things I intentionally say to annoy her most of the time.

“I’m harsh because I don’t like you, Haneefah. And you’re trying to force something that isn’t there,” I said firmly. “Please leave.”

I glanced around, my discomfort growing. The last thing I wanted was for someone to see me with her—it would only add to the unnecessary drama.

That’s when I felt it—a gaze, sharp and unwavering, directed at us.

Following the sensation, my eyes landed on Farida.

She stood in the distance, watching, her brows were slightly raised, and her lips curled into a faint smirk, the kind that screamed, *So, this is what a lover’s quarrel looks like.*

It was obvious what she was thinking, and that annoyed me even more. I wanted to correct her, tell her this wasn’t what it seemed, but how could I explain myself without making it worse?

Haneefah noticed the change in my focus and turned to look at Farida too.

“Leave, Haneefah,” I repeated, my voice dropping lower as I tried to maintain my composure. Farida’s amused expression wasn’t helping.

Chapter Eight

Farida

Did I just witness a lover's quarrel?

Oh, I just did.

I couldn’t help but laugh quietly to myself. The way he was standing—like *Guk-doo* from *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon.* All nonchalant, pretending to be unaffected, but clearly bothered.

My God.

I can’t wait to tell Yaya about this. Does he know his friend is secretly a lover boy?

I didn’t even try to listen to their conversation, not because I couldn’t hear them, but because I didn’t care. The sight before me was entertaining enough.

I was supposed to step out and meet a delivery man, but I couldn’t bring myself to walk past them. So, I just stood there, peeking from my spot.

I think they were done talking, because she stormed off, her heels clicking angrily against the floor. From the way she was walking, it was clear she was upset.

And him? I thought he was heading back to his office until I saw him turn in my direction.

Oh no.

Did he see me?

I think he did, because now he’s walking straight toward me, his eyes locking onto mine. I couldn’t even pretend I wasn’t there.

There was no escaping this.

I stepped out of my hiding spot before he could catch me crouching like a child playing hide-and-seek.

“What are you doing there? Why are you hiding like a mouse?” he asked, his tone a mix of amusement and annoyance.

“Nothing. I was just about to go out, that’s all. I wasn’t hiding,” I said quickly, trying to sound casual.

He nodded, but the look on his face told me he didn’t believe a word I said. As if what I said didn’t matter, he glanced away, about to leave.

But before he could, he turned back.

“I think there are better things you could do when you have no work to keep you busy. Watching and fangirling over Chinese guys isn’t one of them. I could

find something more useful for you to do if you want."

Excuse me?

What does he even mean by that?

"Chinese?" I shot back, offended. "They're not Chinese!" Why would he call my oppas Chinese?

Does he even know the difference?

And wait—when did he even see me watching them?

Gosh.

This is beyond embarrassing.

This guy always has a way of getting under my skin. I seriously hate his guts.

"Whatever." he said, dismissing me with a wave of his hand before turning to head back to his office.

I stood there, glaring at his retreating back.

Was this the same man who got me donuts?

The one Rahina defended so passionately, claiming he was "nice"?

I doubt it.

This version of him seemed worlds apart.

♡

The event is starting in the next two hours, and I'm almost done with my makeup. Maryam, being Maryam, had booked a makeup session for me despite me clearly saying I didn't want to do anything fancy. This morning, I got a call reminding me that my reservation was set for five in the evening.

Yaya, make sure you look good xx ♡♡.

That's what she texted me, as if I had any choice. I mean, it's not even that big of an event—it's just work-related. Nothing that warrants all this extra effort. But apparently, she thought otherwise.

And then there's Selin. I trusted her completely when it came to my dress, and once again, she outdid herself. She picked out a stunning emerald-green gown that has me feeling like royalty. It's floor-length with delicate golden embroidery tracing along the neckline and cuffs. The fabric flows effortlessly, light and graceful, and it comes with a matching chiffon hijab edged in gold. Simple, classy, and absolutely perfect.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling as I admired it in the mirror. "I love it," I whispered.

"Make sure you bring me a son today, Faree," *Adda* Fati teased, her voice dripping with mischief. This woman suddenly wants a son-in-law.

The girls had already showered me with enough compliments about how good I looked; I'd heard it all. Their words made me feel so happy and

confident, as if nothing could go wrong today.

But little did I know, that happiness wouldn’t last long before my day was ruined.

I did get the stares the witch said I would, and it made me so uncomfortable. Usually, I don’t care. I get them all the time. But this—this was overwhelming. Too much for me to handle.

“You look really pretty, Farida. I mean, you're always pretty, don’t get me wrong, but tonight... you look breathtaking,” Khalid said. And he had been saying variations of that non-stop.

It was getting to me now. Making me uncomfortable.

“Thank you, Khalid,” I replied, trying to sound as polite as I could.

In that instant, my eyes caught someone in the crowd. Was that Yaya? If he were here, wouldn’t he have called? But even from this distance, I could recognize that face.

It was him. I was sure of it when I saw him more clearly.

I didn’t want to yell his name, it looked like he was on a call. Instead, I started walking toward him, but just as I got closer, he turned and walked out of the hall.

Curious, I followed him. From the entrance, I saw a woman waving at him.

And then he ran to her.

He *hugged* her.

My eyes stared blankly as he showered her with affection.

And then... he *kissed* her.

Was he supposed to do that?

"*Subhanallah*" I whispered, my voice trembling.

Worry about yourself, dummy.

But how could I?

I didn't even realize tears were streaming down my cheeks until I felt the cold sting of them.

I turned and ran as fast as I could, away from everything, from the sight of him, and from the noise.

I ran until I reached a quiet poolside. There, finally alone, I sat on the edge.

That’s when it all came crashing down.

And I burst into tears.

Chapter Nine

Rayyan

She's crying.

Did she love him?

I saw everything unfold. Because, well—I had been following her around.

Earlier, as I was in the hall, I spotted Haneefah—again. She had shown up unannounced and uninvited, as always.

The sight of her alone was enough to make me lose my composure. I quickly slipped out of the hall before she could notice me.

The last thing I needed was to lock eyes with her by mistake, or worse, endure an awkward encounter. I couldn’t even bring myself to imagine how I’d feel if that happened.

Every hiccup, every soft gasp of pain she let out as she cried made something in my chest ache.

But why? Why do I care?

Should I comfort her? The thought kept pulling at me, but before I could make up my mind, an unpleasant someone appeared. Khalid.

Would she even want me there? Would my presence even matter?

That was the real question.

It’s better this way, I thought. If Khalid is there, she doesn’t need me.

I turned around and left, hands in my pockets, fighting the urge to go back.

Your comfort doesn’t matter, Rayyan. Others can do that, too.

I couldn't shake her from my mind. Worry settled deep, gnawing at me like an unwelcome guest refusing to leave.

"Ya Rayyan, let's go get pizza," Muhseen's voice snapped me out of my spiraling thoughts.

"Alright," I replied, gripping the wheel as I focused on the road. Maybe food would help, or maybe just a distraction.

But it didn’t. My mind circled back to her, her tears, and the broken look in her eyes.

Should I call Ibrahim for her number? What can I possibly do to stop this incessant worry?

The question lingered as I grabbed my phone and messaged him. He replied almost instantly, sending her number. I wasted no time—I called.

Rings.

Nothing.

I tried again. *The number you are trying to call is not reachable.*

Not reachable? My brows furrowed. Was she still with.....that thing?

My stomach churned at the thought.

Should I call him too?

No. I put my phone aside and forced myself to bed. This worry, this helplessness—it’s maddening.

“She’ll be fine.” I repeated, shutting my eyes.

♡

Mom was the one to wake me up today. For the first time in years, I didn’t manage to rise before Fajr. My sleep schedule has always been chaotic, but last night was something else.

That was how tired I was.

After praying and getting through my morning routine, I stepped out of my room. I was already dressed, waiting for Billy and Muneer to finish up. Mom, however, came to serve me breakfast personally.

"I'm not a kid, Mom. You don't have to do that—I can serve myself," I said, laughing.

She gave me one of her soft smiles, the kind she reserves when she wants something. "You’re still a kid to me, Ray. My day of sunshine."

My brows furrowed. "Mom, what is it now?" There was something in her tone, something playful yet calculated, and I just knew she was up to something.

"Rayyan, both your dad and I aren’t getting any younger," she started, her voice dipping into an exaggerated seriousness. "Can’t you pity us and give us a beautiful daughter-in-law already?"

"Don’t force him, Hajiya," Baba said as he walked in, saving me from her usual antics. He added with a grin, "He’ll get married when he meets the right person." He even gave me a thumbs-up, like this was some heroic journey I was embarking on.

"Sure, but isn’t now the right time for him to do so? Why won't he give haneefah a chance?" Mom pressed on, raising a brow. "He’s clocking thirty soon, you know."

And then Billy chimed in. She always picks the worst times. "Mommy, Yaya has someone he likes already!"

My heart dropped. *Where did this girl get such nonsense from?* I was thinking she'd be the one to save me from this. Was I wrong?

"What do you mean?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Billy smirked like the mischievous troublemaker she is. "The day I fell asleep on the couch, I came out to get water. I saw you staring at some girl's

video or pictures or something. Maybe that’s why you didn’t hear me pass by the fridge."

Mom’s eyes lit up with glee. "Really?! Who is she?"

I felt the heat rise to my ears. "Mom. Dad. See you later," I said quickly, draining the last of my coffee in one gulp. I grabbed my things and left the room, ignoring the laughter that exploded behind me.

Should I get her donuts? The question had been bouncing around my head since morning. I have never worried this much about someone elses feeling. I've always been the *minding my business* type of guy and I love myself for that. But what is this unsettling thing happening to me?.

The first time I bought her donuts, I didn’t think much of it—just Ibrahim mentioning her fondness for random little gestures like that during one of our Sunday meet-ups. At the time, it felt insignificant, but when I saw the way her face lit up, it stuck with me. That *smile* wasn’t something you easily forgot.

So here I was again, holding the box, wondering why I cared so much about doing this. Maybe because I wanted to see that smile again.

She usually arrived around nine, or nine-thirty at most. I watched the clock drag past nine-forty and still, no sign of her. My foot tapped nervously against the floor, a habit I didn’t realize I had until now. What was I even doing? I wasn’t like this with anyone else, not even my employees when they were late.

Standing in the hallway, I waited for her, trying not to let impatience take over. When a car finally pulled up and dropped her off, I noticed right away—her face was different. It lacked its usual glow, the brightness that seemed to follow her everywhere she went.

She looked distant, almost troubled. And for reasons I didn’t want to think too much about, it made something in my chest twist.

Oh my faree..

What was that?

“Good morning.” she said briskly as she walked past me, not giving me a chance to respond.

“Wait...” My voice instinctively stopped her steps, and for a second, we both paused.

She turned slightly, her expression unreadable, the usual spark in her eyes dulled.

“Ah... good morning, Farida,” I finally managed to say, trying not to sound awkward.

Her blank stare held mine for a beat, as if waiting for me to get to the point.

“Here. It’s for you.” I extended the box of donuts toward her, noticing how her expression flickered, just briefly, between hesitation and something I

couldn’t place.

It took her a couple of seconds longer than I expected before she reached out and accepted the box from my hand.

“Thank you.” she said softly, her tone distant as she walked away without looking back.

She really can't resist donuts.

I found myself glancing at her through my window every now and then, but there was something off—she seemed drained, like she’d lost that spark.

A buzz from my phone snapped me back to reality. It was a message from Ibrahim.

"Wassup, bro. Can you keep an eye on Faree for me? She looks like she’s sick. Thanks!"

This guy.

Was he really that clueless? I never pegged him to be this... foolish.

Does he not realize she likes him? Or is he just pretending not to know?

Chapter Ten

Farida

It felt like Rahina knew. She was the one comforting me for days since when it happened.

I hate myself for being so stupid. What did I expect? Of course, he'd have a girlfriend, considering his age. But I think I set my hopes way too high.

Surayya was furious, her words tumbling out in a way that barely made sense. She swore she'd deal with him, promising to make him regret everything.

But it wasn't his fault—it was mine.

For not confessing. For being too scared of rejection.

Now, he's rejected me without even knowing I like him.

I stared at the box of donuts sitting on my desk. Slowly, I grabbed one and took a bite, trying to suppress the ache in my chest. It tasted sweet, but it couldn't mask the bitterness I felt inside.

The door creaked open, and the one person I wasn't ready to face walked in —Khalid.

I hadn't even processed how vulnerable I'd been around him. Crying my heart out while he stayed by my side. I don't think I can face that pity again.

"Assalamualaikum" he greeted softly, his voice tentative as he stepped inside.

I didn't look up immediately. My hand froze mid-bite, and I forced myself to swallow the lump in my throat

Our desks were so close it almost felt intentional, like someone designed it that way just to ensure we spoke to each other every chance we got. I don't think I like this anymore.

"Waalaikumussalam. Hi, K." I said, trying to sound casual but ending up a little awkward.

Khalid didn't bring up what happened, not even a hint. Maybe he thought I didn't want to talk about it. Or maybe it didn't even cross his mind. Either way, we carried on talking like it was any other day.

"The pictures turned out so perfect—you looked breathtaking" Mummy Twins chimed in from the other corner of the room, her face glowing with warmth.

"Thank you, *Maman 'Yan Biyu*" I said with a smile.

“Stop calling me Mummy Twins oo,” she laughed, placing a protective hand on her belly. “If I give birth to twins, you’ll have to take one.”

We all burst into laughter. Her energy and determination were truly something. I couldn't imagine myself working while being this heavily pregnant.

♡

It was time for Dhuhr prayer, and we all stepped out. As we made our way to the prayer area, I caught a glimpse of the *Don* leaving his office.

One thing I’d noticed about him: he never went out to eat, but he never missed prayer time. That alone was one of the most admirable—and frankly, hottest—things about him.

A man that doesn't joke with his prayers? 10/10.

After praying, I walked over to *Iya Kunle’s* to grab my regular, plantain and jollof rice. As I was placing my order, a thought crossed my mind.

With an extra food flask in hand, I made my way back and headed to his office.

“Assalamualaikum.” I greeted, reaching for the door handle. But a flashback from the other day stopped me in my tracks—I decided to knock instead.

“Waalaikumussalam.” came a voice, but not from inside the office.

I turned around, and there he was, standing right behind me.

Wait, he wasn’t even in?

“Aren't you going in? Can you do that so I can pass?” He said, while I was trying to regain my composure.

I turned too quickly and nearly stumbled, but his hand shot out to catch me, steadying me firmly.

What is this tension?

He was staring at me, and I found myself staring back.

Was I able to handle it? Not even remotely. I quickly looked away and pulled myself from his grasp.

“Sorry,” I muttered awkwardly.

“What did you do?” he asked, his gaze still locked on me.

I couldn’t answer. *What did I even do?*

Clearing my head, I extended the food toward him. “Here, please accept this as my repayment for your kindness. Thank you.”

He didn’t take it. Instead, he just continued looking at me with an expression I couldn’t read.

“Is... everything okay?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” he said after a moment, his voice steady. “Can you come in?”

That. *That was hot*. The way he asked, so composed yet polite—it hit differently. It felt like a quiet command wrapped in pure charm.

I followed him into his office, unsure of what to expect. He gestured to the three-seater couch for me to sit, and then sat there too, keeping a polite yet close distance.

“I called you the other day, but your line was not reachable. Same thing today. Is your line fine?” he asked, his tone casual but his gaze steady.

Why would he care to ask that?

“Yes, it’s fine. I just don’t get calls from unknown numbers. You heard it that way because I don’t have your number saved.”

“Alright.” That was all he said before opening the flask of food I’d brought for him.

Then, out of nowhere, he asked, “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, I have,” I replied.

For some reason, I couldn’t look away as he opened the food flask. This was the first time I’d actually seen him eat. I didn’t even think he did that during work hours. It felt... humanizing in the strangest way.

“Thank you for the food, Faree.” he said after a bite, his voice softer this time.

Oh my God! Did he hear this name from Yaya? I love the way he just called me.

Faree.

It didn’t even sound like my name anymore. I swear, someone might think it’s a word from some exotic Russian language.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Rayy—”

“Just Rayyan. Please.” He cut me off, almost pleading, his voice laced with a kind of vulnerability I hadn’t seen in him before.

“Sure... Rayyan,” I said, the name rolling off my tongue effortlessly, feeling a strange warmth bloom in my chest.

“I'll be leaving early today. Would you want me to drop you off?”

“Yes, sure. Thank you. I’ll call my driver and inform him not to come.” He gave a small nod.

It’s starting to feel awkward. I’m just sitting here, watching him eat. That’s all.

Let’s get out of here...

“Thank you for the donuts, really. I loved them.”

“You’re welcome,” he said simply, glancing up at me.

“Just so you know, you’re like one of the best guys out there on my list now. Donuts are my favorite, and you’ve gotten them for me twice without even knowing.”

He raised a brow, the faintest smirk pulling at the corner of his lips. “You never know. Maybe I knew because I have powers?”

I couldn’t help but giggle at that, standing to leave.

“Well, thank you anyway, Mr. Psychic,” I teased, heading toward the door.

I smiled to myself as I closed the door.

He’s really a soft guy trapped in the body of a tough guy. I think I’m starting to see it now.

Chapter Eleven

Rayyan

I was suffocating. I confirmed something today, and I think it's going to be the end of me.

I didn't see her as just an employee, a temporary worker, or my friend's sister. Today, I looked at her, talked to her, and thought of her as a *woman*. And I realized she'll be the end of me.

Was that me giving her a signal? Was I showing my interest in her, or was it something else?

What just happened?

It was like a flash of light—everything happened so quickly.

Since she started working here, I can't seem to think straight for even thirty minutes without her thoughts invading my mind. I find myself constantly glancing at her, distracted.

Where do I even begin?

I can't ask her brother for help—he'd undoubtedly demand to know who the woman is. That's out of the question. Asking Billy isn't an option either; her mouth runs faster than a broken tap.

Then there's this unsettling truth I might not want to admit—*I'm scared.* I haven't loved anyone since my first love went horribly wrong. The thought of opening myself up again is terrifying.

I remembered what had just happened and couldn't help but let out a bitter, sarcastic laugh. It's almost laughable—me, Rayyan, unable to handle his own emotions.

Can I really drive her home?

I questioned myself, doubts creeping in. What if I lose focus, trying to steal a glance at her and end up getting us into an accident?

For the first time in five years, I felt truly nervous. She does that to me—makes me second-guess everything. The thought of her, the possibility of her reaction when she finds out *I loved her,* it's all consuming.

Could I even confess? Could I open myself up like that? What if she doesn't feel the same way? The fear of rejection lingered, gnawing at the edges of my confidence.

How could I convince her to love me if she turned me down? I shook my head. No, Rayyan. You can't force someone to feel the same. That's not love.

Two o’clock came faster than I expected. Through my transparent window, I watched her gather her things, preparing to leave. I hurried to do the same, yet somehow, I was the one left waiting. She seemed to be finishing a drink or something.

Just as she stood up to head toward my office, I beat her to it, meeting her at the door.

"You’re ready? I'm heading out now." I said, as if I hadn’t just been waiting for her.

"Yes, I’m done for the day," she replied, her voice carrying that effortless sweetness.

We walked to the car in silence, and before I could think twice, I did something I’d never done before—I stepped ahead and opened the door for her. She paused, momentarily caught off guard, before slipping inside.

"Thank you," she said softly.

I shut the door and exhaled. *What the heck?*

She wasn’t doing anything, and I didn’t like that.

The last time, she had been filming the road and the car. Was she not impressed by it? Did she not like the ride? I shook off the thought.

“So, I heard you’re in your final year. When are you expected to finish?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Early October, insha Allah,” she replied, her excitement clear in her voice.

“Good to hear. I wish you the best. *Allah ya baku sa’a.”*

Silence settled in the car again.

Then, out of nowhere, she spoke. “The other day, I saw you leave.” She hesitated before adding, “Did you... see something?”

I glanced at her briefly. “What day was that?”

She blinked, as if reconsidering her words. Then she shook her head. “No, never mind. It’s nothing.”

If there was one thing I hated, it was being left in doubt. But what could I do? I couldn't force the words out of her. If it was something she didn’t want to remember, I had no choice but to let it slide.

"Can I have your phone to save my number? I might call you more often now," I said, extending my hand toward her.

She didn’t move, didn’t say anything—just looked at me like I had said something wrong.

“For work,” I added quickly.

That seemed to snap her out of it, but the hesitation in her eyes remained.

I’ve never liked being in a crowd, and it’s worse when the crowd is filled with people I consider friends. It’s stifling and awkward. Why?

Because I’m just an ordinary guy living a straightforward life. I’m not putting myself down, most of my accomplishments are things seventy-five percent of them wouldn’t be able to achieve.

They, on the other hand, come from powerful, influential families—the son of a king here, the son of a minister there. All they do is sit around and discuss things I couldn’t care less about, things that hold no value to me.

The wedding was for one of our friends. I had already arrived with Ibrahim, but as expected, he clung to his girlfriend, leaving me alone, seated and just observing.

Masha Allah, I saw her. The moment I turned left, I couldn't look away.

She hadn’t mentioned she was coming to the wedding.

What do you even mean to her? Not now, please.

My thoughts came to a halt when I saw her walking toward my side. She looked so stunning, and never in my life had I admired a woman like that. It was as if the dress she wore was crafted solely for her. No matter how she dressed, it was always modest, yet effortlessly elegant. The color of her dress—purple—suited her perfectly, enhancing her beauty even more.

Chapter Twelve

Farida

I never wanted to be here. Since I got the information about kharima's wedding I made up my mind not to go.

But Mama and Maryam surprised me. I know that if I mentioned not wanting to go, it would turn into something else entirely. Mama is the type of person who doesn't really care for excuses—I think that's the best way to put it. She tends to forget things easily and moves on quickly.

Adda Fati, on the other hand, had already sworn not to attend because of how Aunty Faiza disrespected her and Mama. But Mama, being who she is, didn't seem to mind as much. She was more concerned about what people would say if we were absent from the event.

Maryam didn't even tell me she was coming. I only realized when I walked into my room and found her there, casually waiting for me. That time, Mama and Rahina were out, so it caught me completely off guard.

Rahina was wrapped around Maryam since she arrived and Mama was too busy chatting away with old friends. I was alone. Again.

I don't have any cousin my age

They're all older or younger and always with their groups.

So, maybe that was why I walked over to him. Or maybe it was something else—something I didn't have a name for.

I slid into the chair beside him, resting my arms on the table. "Hi" I said lightly.

His eyes flickered toward me, unreadable. Then, just as quickly, they shifted away.

I waited. Nothing.

Was he ignoring me?

I frowned. "You know, you could at least pretend to be having fun. It's a wedding, not a business meeting."

Still, nothing.

I huffed, tapping my fingers against the table in mock impatience. "Okay, I get it. You don't want to talk. Fine. Just blink twice if you want me to leave."

His lips twitched slightly—so fast that I almost missed it. And then, finally, he spoke.

"Hi," he said, his voice calm, measured. "Just thinking."

“About?” I asked, curious.

He hesitated. And at that moment, I knew he wasn’t going to answer me.

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. “You really are the worst person to talk to.”

This time, I caught it. The smallest, faintest ghost of a smirk.

And for some reason, it made my chest feel... warm.

His smirk had already faded, but I wasn’t letting him off the hook that easily.

“You know, if you don’t want to talk, you can just say so,” I said, resting my chin on my palm. “Blinking at me like a statue isn’t exactly a conversation.”

Rayyan exhaled through his nose, a ghost of amusement in his eyes. “You’re persistent.”

“And you’re impossible,” I shot back. “It’s honestly a miracle that you have friends.”

He raised a brow. “You think I don’t?”

“Oh, I know you do,” I said, glancing around. “Your people are scattered everywhere. But, let me guess—you’re more of a ‘sit back and watch’ type?”

He didn’t answer, which told me everything.

I grinned. “See? I knew it.”

I sighed dramatically, crossing my arms. "So what’s your excuse for looking like you don’t want to be here?"

He exhaled, glancing back at the dance floor. "Weddings aren’t really my thing."

"Yet, here you are."

"Obligation," he said. "Same as you?"

"More like forced attendance," I admitted. "Mama would have dragged me by my scarf if I refused."

Rayyan let out a short chuckle, low but genuine. I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard him laugh before.

Encouraged, I tilted my head. "So, if not weddings, what do you actually enjoy?"

He paused. "Quiet places."

I raised a brow. "That’s vague."

"Well," he said, his gaze flicking to me, "I’m not the one who started an interrogation at a wedding."

"Touché." I grinned, shifting my weight slightly. "But you didn’t answer my question. Quiet places like what? Libraries? Caves?"

He smirked. "Why would I be in a cave?"

"I don’t know," I teased. "You have that whole ‘mysterious guy with secrets’ vibe. Maybe you have a secret lair."

Rayyan shook his head, amused. "I prefer places where I can think. Somewhere without too many people."

"Ah, so you’re a loner."

"Not exactly." He hesitated, then shrugged. "I just like my space."

I nodded, understanding. "I get that."

He didn’t seem convinced.

I sighed. "Okay, fine. Maybe I *don’t* completely get it. I’m used to being around people, even when I don’t want to be." I gestured toward the crowd. "Like this. You see all these people? Half of them I don’t even know, yet I still have to smile and act like I belong here."

Rayyan studied me for a moment, as if seeing something new. "So, you’re faking it?"

"A little," I admitted. "Aren’t we all?"

He hummed in response, and for a moment, neither of us spoke.

"*Kinyi kyau."* You look beautiful.

That came out of nowhere. I didn’t even know how to react, and it sent my heart racing far too much.

“Thank you... Rayyan.” I smiled back, genuinely happy—because he made me.

A comfortable silence settled between us. For a moment, my eyes wandered over the balcony, my thoughts drifting. Then, without really thinking, I said, “*Kai ma, kayi kyau*.” You look nice too.

“*Toh nagode.”* Thank you

When he did, his voice was softer.

His lips twitched like he was fighting a smile.

I didn’t know when it happened, but somehow, the loneliness I had felt earlier was gone. And for the first time that night, I didn’t feel like I was pretending.

Chapter Thirteen

Rayyan

I had been like this for over an hour, trapped in the cycle of a single thought—Farida.

The soft knock on my door was barely enough to pull him out of his thoughts. But then, Billy’s voice followed.

"What?" I said, sitting up.

Billy pushed the door open, holding her phone in one hand and looking far too amused for my liking.

"You were at a wedding," she said, walking in.

I raised a brow. "That’s not news."

Billy rolled her eyes and tossed her phone onto the bed. "It is when you start making headlines."

I picked up the phone. It was an Instagram story, a slideshow of photos from the wedding. Elegant decorations, guests dressed in their finest, the groom and bride beaming at the camera.

And then—

Me and Farida.

It wasn’t anything scandalous. Just a picture of us talking at the balcony, caught in a moment where I was actually—smiling, *widely.*

I exhaled sharply, shoving the phone back at Billy. "So?"

Billy grinned. "So? You look like you actually enjoyed yourself for once. And with a girl, no less. Should I be worried? Should I tell Mom?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Go away, Billy."

She laughed but eventually left me alone, still chuckling as she closed the door behind her.

We looked really good together in that picture. I’ve already decided—it’s going to be my wallpaper.

Not long after Billy left my room, Haneefah’s call came in. Of course, I didn’t pick up.

This girl is just too much; even a stalker wouldn’t go to the extent she does.

Her first message popped up, and I reluctantly read it:

Who is that lady with you?

Attached to the message was a screenshot.

Before I could even think of replying, another message came in.

Why won’t you give me an answer?

And then more messages—one after another—before her call came through again.

I finally picked up but didn’t bother to say anything. Instead, I muted the call and let her talk to herself.

All I know is this,

I—Rayyan—will never marry this woman.

Because what is this stalker-like behavior?

♡

The more I get to know her, the more I fall for her. Today, I found out something weird about her. Then again, I can’t really judge—after all, I’m someone who can’t sleep in a room unless it smells like vanilla or my own bed.

But mukbangs? Seriously?

I personally hate the sound of people slurping on their food. The thought of watching someone do it? Even worse.

Yet, she walked into my office today, takeout bags in hand.

"I noticed you don’t eat well," she said, setting the bags down. "And since you’re a nice guy, I’ll force you to eat whenever I’m around."

That’s it.

"Why do you even watch this... stuff?" I asked.

She paused, then gave me the most unexpected answer. "Because I don’t like eating alone." Another pause. "Not that I’m lonely—no, no, never! But... at the same time, I kinda am?"

"What does that even mean?"

"Okay, hear me out," she leaned in. "There are some days when my friends aren’t around, and I have to eat. I hate eating alone. But I also hate eating with people who feel like they aren’t really there—like you."

She blinked at me, waiting for a reaction.

I just stared. Some parts of what she said went over my head, but honestly? I didn’t care. I liked hearing her yap.

“Anyways, i’ll be going back to Abuja next week. We’re resuming," she said as I paused mid-bite.

I was silenced by her words. My mood shifted faster than I expected.

"So soon?" I asked. It had only been a month since she arrived. What did she mean by leaving already?

"Yeah, our holiday is over" she replied as if it was nothing. It might be to her, but I– I wasn't ready to let her go.

"Okay." I kept my expression neutral—maybe too neutral, because she didn't ask what was wrong. But something in my chest tightened, making me feel

almost sick.

"But don’t think that just because I won’t be here, you can stop taking care of yourself. I dare you," she teased, laughing.

"Yes, ma’am." I didn't know why I said that, but I hoped it would help me get over the fact that she was leaving.

"Can I call you anytime?" I asked, waiting for the answer I desperately wanted to hear.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Psychic. You can."

At least that was something.

♡

I promised myself I would make her feel happy with me in the days she had left here. She was always happy, but I wanted to be the reason for it.

Today, we were going to the park, the theater, the art center—anywhere she wanted.

"Hi, Rayyan," she greeted shyly, almost like we were a couple.

I want us to be.

"Hi, Faree."

As we walked to the car, she scrolled through her phone, a soft hum escaping her lips.

“You hum when you’re in a good mood,” I pointed out.

She glanced at me. “I do?”

“Yes. And you tap your fingers against your thigh when you're thinking.”

She chuckled. “You notice too much.”

“Maybe I just notice you.” I said without thinking.

She blinked, then quickly looked away, pretending to focus on her phone.

She was just busy taking and snapping videos or so. I was too busy watching the way her eyes lit up when she talked about something she loved.

We drove in silence for a while, the kind that wasn’t awkward—just peaceful. Then she spoke again.

“My convocation is next month.”

I turned to her, surprised. “That soon?”

“Yep.” She smiled. “You should come.”

For a moment, I didn’t respond.

“You want me there?” I finally asked.

“Of course,” she said like it was obvious. “Why wouldn’t I?”

I didn’t know how to explain how much that meant to me. Instead, I just nodded. “I’ll be there.”

She grinned. “Good.”

By the time we reached the park, the sky had taken on a golden hue. It was breathtaking—the kind of place you only see in movies, with flower-lined paths, a fountain in the center, and food stalls scattered around.

“This is nice,” she said, taking it all in.

“You have good taste,” I admitted.

“Obviously.” She smirked. “Now, let’s get ice cream.”

We walked to a small stand, and she immediately ordered vanilla. I watched her as she took the first bite, her eyes closing slightly in satisfaction.

“What?” she asked when she caught me staring.

“Nothing.” I shook my head, suppressing a smile.

I ordered mine—chocolate,

Well, I didn't. I dislike it. But because she said it suited me and just got it, I can't say no to her.

We sat on a bench, ice creams in hand, feet lightly kicking the gravel beneath us. The sound of laughter filled the air, children running around, couples strolling by.

“This is nice” she murmured again, leaning back against the bench.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

But it wasn’t just the place. It was her. The way the light hit her face, the way she smiled between bites of ice cream, the way she made the world feel softer.

I had never felt like this before.

If another heaven existed, I was in it.

Chapter Fourteen

Farida

I had just arrived in Abuja when Adda Fati's call came in.

"*Faree na.*" she greeted warmly. My Faree.

I smiled, already knowing what she was about to say. She would tell me how much she missed me, and the truth was, I missed her too.

"Na'am, *Adda*." I responded.

"You haven't even been gone for two days, but I already miss you. Your next holiday better be here—I don't like this one bit." she said, making me laugh out loud.

"Haba, *Adda*. Don't worry, you'll see me again soon. I'm all yours," I reassured her.

"*Sunguma* Faree!" Rahina's voice suddenly chimed in.

"Yes, my love. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Aunty Farida. How was your trip?" she asked sweetly.

"It was exhausting, Rahina, but what can I do?" I replied with a tired but sly smile.

"Toh, I wish you all the best," she said, handing the phone back to her mother.

"Alright, Farida, take care of yourself. And don't forget to call if you need anything, okay?" *Adda* Fati reminded me.

"Yes, Mummy. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Ibrahim said to greet you," she added.

For some reason, I felt a sudden pang of guilt. Ever since things changed between us, I hadn't been talking to him as much. The surprising part? It didn't feel like the end of the world anymore, unlike before, when missing a conversation with him would ruin my entire day.

"Take care, *Adda*." I said softly before ending the call.

Just as I ended Adda Fati's call, another one came in—it was Rayyan. I had planned to call him since I promised I would after our last-minute meeting before I left. Was he really so impatient that he couldn't wait?

"Hii," I answered, smiling as I picked up.

"You promised you'd call," was the first thing he said, his voice slightly accusing.

“Of course I did. I didn’t forget. You’re just being impatient,” I replied, laughing because he sounded like a child.

“How was your trip? Are you okay?” he asked, his tone soft.

“My trip was fine. And yes, I’m okay. Thank you for asking, Rayyan,” I said, my smile widening unconsciously.

We ended up talking and talking—about everything and nothing—until it was almost time for Maghrib. Had I ever talked to anyone this long before? Apart from the girls, no, I hadn’t.

Sel suddenly banged on my door, pulling me out of the conversation. She stood there, arms crossed, staring at me.

“Who are you on the phone with for almost two hours that you don’t even have time for me?” she talk-whispered, narrowing her eyes dramatically.

I chuckled. “I’ll call you later, Rayyan. Bye.”

“Sure, Faree. Bye,” he replied, and the call ended.

Me and Sel were chatting, but the house felt... off. I don’t know, maybe not lively enough?

Surayya hadn’t arrived yet, and we were all hoping she’d walk through the door any moment now. The emptiness in the air wasn’t sitting right with me.

Then we heard it—the sound of the passkey being pressed. Excitedly, we ran toward the door, giggling as we tried to hide behind it, ready to scare her just for the fun of it.

The door opened, and there she was.

“Boo!” we yelled, expecting to startle her.

But nothing.

The air in the room shifted immediately. The laughter died as we stood frozen, unsure of what had just unfolded.

"Surayya?" Sel broke the silence, her voice trembling with concern as she stepped forward.

Surayya’s sobs grew louder, her hands shaking as she tried to cover her face. Something was clearly wrong, and it wasn’t the lighthearted reunion we had all imagined.

I exchanged a worried glance with Sel, and the unease in my chest deepened. Surayya didn’t say a word; she just dropped her bag and crumpled to the floor like all her strength had left her.

"What happened?" I finally asked, moving closer but hesitating to touch her.

Her voice came out in broken whispers, barely audible between her tears. "I...I don’t even know where to start."

That statement hit hard. Whatever had happened, it wasn’t simple. It wasn’t small. Something had shattered her world, and we had no idea what we were

about to uncover.

Chapter Fifteen

Farida

Not all men, but every woman has a story to tell about a man.

I—no, we—never imagined Surayya's story would be one of those. Never.

Today, I heard something I never thought I'd come across in my entire life. The lively, spirited Surayya we all thought we knew... was a fake.

She had hidden so much from us. And what's shocking is that it never seemed so. She was always the bright light in our group, the one who laughed the loudest and carried us through tough days.

But now, standing in front of us, she wasn't that person anymore.

From her bag, she brought out a card—a delicate, decorated card that immediately caught our attention. It looked like a wedding invite. She handed it to Selin without saying a word.

Sel gasped, staring at the card, unable to believe what she was holding. Her eyes darted back to Surayya, then to me, before she shakily handed the card over.

I glanced at it and then at Surayya, confused and unsure of what to say. "You're getting married?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes," she replied, her voice quiet, almost breaking.

Rayyan's sudden call pulled me back to reality. Ever since Surayya came back, none of us had been ourselves.

"Hi," I said softly as I picked up the call.

"Hi, Faree," he replied, sounding almost like an excited kid.

"How are you?" I asked, trying to keep my tone normal while folding clothes from my box into the cabinet.

"I'm fine. You?"

"I'm fine too, Rayyan," I said, though I wasn't sure I sounded convincing.

"What happened? What's wrong with your voice?" His question caught me off guard. It seemed like he noticed something wasn't right.

"Nothing, I'm just stressed," I lied. How could I tell him what was actually happening? I couldn't. Not now. Maybe someday, if we got closer, but not today.

"Are you sure?" he asked again, his tone filled with concern.

"Yes, I'm fine, Rayyan. I'm glad you noticed. Thank you," I said, trying to assure him.

"I told you, Farida, I notice everything about you."

“Yes, you said so. And I’m glad.”

I was already feeling sleepy, but I couldn’t bring myself to end the call. I didn’t know why—I just couldn’t. It was....good talking to him.

If there’s anything wrong, you can talk to me. I’ll always be here to guide you and help you with it, Faree. Good night ♡.

That was the text, *with a heart!*

♡

In a month, Surayya was getting married, and today we finally got to meet the man she was going to marry. Honestly, the first look he gave us was the scariest look ever. His eyes held an intensity that made me uneasy, but at the same time, he didn’t look like someone who would hurt her.

He had come over to take Surayya to pick up her wedding items and her box, but after knowing everything Surayya had confided in us, there was no way we were letting her go alone with him. We all decided to tag along, and for the first time in days, Surayya’s mind seemed a little more at ease.

As I was about to get in the car, adjusting my hijab and mentally preparing myself for the ride, a voice called out.

“Farida!”

The tone was loud and commanding, almost startling. I turned around quickly, and to my surprise, it was Rayyan.

What was he doing here? He didn’t tell me he was coming. He didn’t.

I mean, yes, I told him I was staying at Suncity Estate, but how did he manage to locate our dorm so easily?

“Sel, you guys can go ahead. I’ll catch up with you,” I said to Sel, closing the door gently.

“Alright, Faree,” Sel replied before closing the car door.

I watched as they left, noticing how silent Surayya had been the whole time. I’d never seen her like this before—so withdrawn.

Turning back to Rayyan, I saw him walking toward me. He looked so handsome, effortlessly so.

“Hi, Rayyan,” I said, my mind racing. Maybe it’s time I came up with a nickname for him. Something personal. *Ray*? No, too plain.

Rayyanu? No, Yaya already calls him that. *Ray-Ray*? Ugh, I don’t know.

He smiled at me but didn’t say a word. Just stood there, staring, his gaze warm and reassuring.

“What?” I finally broke the silence, raising an eyebrow. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re fine.” he said, his voice laced with relief.

“What do you mean? Of course I’m fine” I replied, a little confused.

“You haven’t been sounding like yourself since you left Maiduguri,” he said softly. “I was worried... about you.”

I ended up not going after Sel and Surayya. Sel had texted me, saying Surayya told her not to worry and to stay back with my “guest.” The word itself felt odd in this context, like I was hosting a visitor I had no idea what to do with. I felt torn—part of me wanted to follow them, especially knowing what Surayya was dealing with, but another part of me felt it would be rude to just leave Rayyan after he came all this way to see me.

Inviting him inside our dorm was out of the question. The girls would never let me hear the end of it. Besides, it felt... too personal. Instead, I slipped into his car, trying to avoid his gaze.

“Do you want to go somewhere?” he asked, his tone casual but his eyes fixed on me as he started the car.

I hesitated, fiddling with the strap of my bag. “I guess we could go to an art center,” I said, quickly pulling up the address on my phone to show him.

He glanced at the screen and nodded, the corners of his lips lifting slightly. “Alright. Let’s go.”

The ride was quiet at first, but not uncomfortably so. He eventually started talking, mostly about his day—or, more specifically, how he hadn’t skipped a single meal since I left Maiduguri.

“Not even one?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not even one,” he said, glancing at me with a faint smile.

“You’re acting like I’ve been gone for months, not five days.” I teased, laughing softly.

“It feels longer.” he said simply, his eyes returning to the road.

There was something about the way he said it that made my chest tighten, but I brushed the feeling aside.

When we arrived at the art center, I was struck by how peaceful it felt. The large windows bathed the room in soft, natural light, and the walls were covered in colorful paintings that seemed to tell stories of their own.

“Let’s paint.” Rayyan suggested, catching me off guard.

I raised an eyebrow. “can you paint?”

“Not really. But I can try.”

Curiosity got the better of me, and I followed him to one of the easels. As he picked up a paintbrush, I couldn’t help but watch him. He looked so focused, his brow furrowed slightly as he dipped the brush into the paint.

“What are you painting?” I asked after a while, leaning slightly to see his canvas.

He turned it toward me, revealing a chaotic mess of lines and colors.

I burst out laughing. “This is what you came up with?”

“It’s abstract” he said, smirking.

“It looks like something a toddler would make.”

“Maybe toddlers are geniuses and we just don’t appreciate their art.” he shot back, his grin widening.

“You’re ridiculous.” I said, shaking my head.

“And yet, you’re still sitting here with me.” he said, his tone teasing but soft.

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t stop the smile spreading across my face. Moments like these with Rayyan felt... different. Like the world was just a little brighter.

The day felt... short, and I didn’t want it to end. Being with him made me so happy that the thought of him dropping me off filled me with a strange sadness. We talked and talked, and yet, I wasn’t tired at all.

I turned to look at him as he kept his focus on the road. There was something about the way he looked—calm, composed, and steady. And then, out of nowhere, I realized I was giving him that look. The same kind of look I gave Yaya when I thought I loved him so much.

What am I doing?

That thought hit me like a wave, and just as quickly, another memory crept in—the time I saw him with a woman back in Maiduguri. It was a random day, and I hadn’t thought much of it then. But now... now that memory wouldn’t let me go.

Should I ask him who she was? But deep down, I knew I shouldn’t. She looked at him in a way that wasn’t for a brother or a friend—it was different. She had to be someone important to him.

No, I shouldn’t ask. I shouldn’t cross that line.

Chapter Sixteen

Rayyan

She did ask about her. I thought she had forgotten about who she saw or decided it wasn't worth mentioning. It's just like her to suddenly bring it up out of nowhere, and it had me thinking the entire ride back.

Farida's curiosity about Haneefah wasn't something I wanted to address, especially not with her. I wanted to forget Haneefah existed entirely. She made me restless, and it frustrated me to see how one careless arrangement was beginning to creep into my life in ways I couldn't avoid.

That night, after I dropped her off, I couldn't sleep. Her voice lingered in my head—soft, questioning, and somehow, it felt like she cared. Maybe it wasn't just curiosity; maybe she wanted to understand.

I called her the next morning, just before leaving for Maiduguri. She picked up on the first ring, her cheerful voice instantly easing the tightness in my chest.

"Hi, Rayyan," she said, her tone bright.

"Hi, Faree," I replied, settling into the car. "How's your morning?"

"Rushed," she said with a laugh. "I have an early class, so I'm heading out soon. You?"

"I'm on my way back to Maiduguri," I told her.

"Oh, you're leaving already? Safe travels then, Rayyan. I would have seen you off if I didn't have class."

"It's okay," I said, trying to sound casual. "You can make it up to me later."

She laughed lightly, and for a moment, it felt like we were in our own little bubble.

"Don't forget to eat something," she added, her voice softer now.

"I won't," I assured her. "Take care, Faree."

"You too, Rayyan. Call me when you arrive, okay?"

"I will," I promised before ending the call.

♡

Arriving at Maiduguri, I didn't even bother going home first. My mind was focused on getting work done, so I went straight to the office. Hours passed, and by the time I left, exhaustion had set in, but at least I had completed everything I needed to.

When I finally walked into the house, the sight that greeted me made my jaw tighten.

Haneefah.

She was sitting in the living room with my mother and Billy, laughing and being all cutesy in a way that grated my nerves.

“You’re back,” my mother said, smiling warmly. “Haneefah has been waiting for you all day. She said you were traveling.”

“I had an urgent meeting,” I replied, my voice tight. My eyes flicked to Billy, who was watching the exchange with an amused smirk.

“I didn’t know,” Billy muttered, just loud enough for me to hear. She clearly knew what was going on and wasn’t on board with it.

“Haneefah,” I said, turning to her, “can I talk to you outside?”

She beamed, clearly misunderstanding the intent behind my words, and followed me out.

Once we were outside, I turned to her and got straight to the point. “Why are you here?”

She blinked, startled. “I came to see you, Rayyan. Why else?”

“You shouldn’t be here,” I said firmly. “Haneefah, I don’t like you. I’ve told you this before. Why are you forcing something that doesn’t exist?”

Her face fell, but she quickly composed herself. “Rayyan, I think we have something special—”

Special? Bullshit.

“No,” I cut her off. “We don’t. This whole arrangement is nothing but a setup. You might like me, but I don’t feel the same way about you. Please respect that and stop this.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but I didn’t give her the chance. “Haneefah, there’s someone else I care about. Someone I’m serious about. Please, let me go.”

Her lips trembled, but she nodded slowly. Without saying another word, she turned and walked back to her car.

I sighed deeply, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders. It was about time I put an end to this.

I was just watching the clock, waiting for six o'clock to strike so I could call her.

I called her, and she picked up almost immediately.

“Ray,” she said absentmindedly, and I froze. Never in my life has anyone called me that name apart from Mom—not even Billy.

“Ray?” I repeated, raising an eyebrow even though she couldn’t see me. “Is that a nickname for me now?”

“Oh, uh...” she stuttered, probably realizing what she had just called me. “It just slipped out.”

“Slipped out?” I teased. “I kind of like it, though. Ray. It sounds... cool.”

“Don’t get used to it,” she said quickly, but I could hear the smile in her voice.

“Well, if you’re giving me a nickname, I should give you one too,” I said. “What do you want me to call you?”

“You figure it out,” she said with a laugh. “I came up with yours, so it’s only fair.”

“Hmm, let me think,” I mused, pretending to be deep in thought. “How about... Faree?”

“That’s what everyone calls me,” she said, clearly unimpressed.

“Okay, okay. How about something unique? I’ll come up with something special, just for you.”

“What do you want to call me?” she asked curiously.

“Hmm, how about Tink?” I didn’t even think twice about it, it just slipped out.

“Tink?” she repeated, laughing softly.

“Yeah, like Tinkerbell. Small but full of surprises.” I explained.

We ended the call on a light note, both of us laughing and teasing each other. For the first time in a long while, everything felt... right.

♡

I sat at my desk, staring blankly at the laptop screen. The numbers and words blurred together, and for the first time, I couldn't concentrate on work. Something tugged at the back of my mind, something I couldn’t shake. Then it hit me.

Her birthday.

Farida’s birthday was in two days.

How could I forget? I could almost hear her teasing me if she found out. The thought brought a small smile to my lips.

I leaned back in my chair, letting out a deep sigh. Farida wasn’t just anyone. She was the only one who had made me feel this way—this strange, unshakable pull toward her. I had to see her. I had to make this special. I had just gotten back from Abuja two days ago, yet here I was, considering booking another flight. I didn’t care.

It wasn’t rational, I knew that, but nothing about her had ever been rational to me. It wasn’t just her birthday—it was her. The thought of not being there, of missing the chance to see her smile, wasn’t something I could live with.

That settled it.

I grabbed my phone, checked the earliest available flight, and booked it without a second thought.

The moment I landed, I made my way straight to the mall. If I was going to surprise her, I had to make sure everything was perfect.

First, donuts. I remembered how her eyes lit up every time she talked about them. She once said she could eat donuts every day and still crave more. I found a bakery that made the most beautiful donuts I'd ever seen—decorated with cream, sprinkles, and even tiny edible flowers. Perfect.

Next, I stopped at a tech store. She'd been complaining about her camera for weeks, saying it was outdated and glitchy. She deserved better. I picked out a sleek, high-tech digital camera that I knew she'd love.

Finally, I found a jewelry store. A delicate gold bracelet with her initials caught my eye. It wasn't flashy, but it was meaningful—just like her.

As I left the mall, I couldn't help but imagine her reaction. Would she be surprised? Happy? Or would she roll her eyes and call me extra? Either way, I just wanted to see her smile.

Come outside. I'm here.

It didn't take long for her reply to come in.

Here where? What do you mean you're here?

I smirked, leaning against my car as I waited. When she finally stepped outside, the look on her face was priceless.

"Rayyan?" she said, her voice filled with disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

I held up the box of donuts with a grin. "Surprise. Happy early birthday, *Tink*."

She stared at me, her hands covering her mouth, before finally breaking into a laugh. "You came all the way to Abuja...for me?"

"Of course," I said casually. "How could I forget your birthday?"

We ended up at her favorite art café, the one she'd mentioned during one of our late-night conversations. I handed her the box of donuts as soon as we sat down, watching as her eyes lit up.

"Rayyan," she said, her voice filled with excitement. "You actually remembered?"

"How could I not?" I teased. "You've only mentioned donuts a million times since we met."

Her laugh was music to my ears, and I found myself smiling like an idiot.

"You're unbelievable," she said, shaking her head.

"Only for you," I replied, leaning back in my chair.

After the café, we went for a walk in a nearby park. The evening air was cool, and the stars were beginning to appear in the sky. She was holding the camera I'd given her, fiddling with the settings like a kid with a new toy.

“This is amazing, Rayyan,” she said, looking at me with wide eyes. “Thank you.”

“You deserve it,” I said simply.

As we sat on a bench, I handed her the bracelet. She looked at me, her expression unreadable, as I fastened it around her wrist.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“Not as beautiful as you,” I said softly.

She blushed, looking away, but I didn’t mind. I just wanted to make her happy.

If a man expects a woman to be an angel in his life, he must first create heavens for her to dwell in.

Chapter Seventeen

Farida

It's my convocation day!

Surayya was the one who did my makeup as if she wasn't busy too right, but what can they do, I'm their baby, they'll have to take care of me first.

“I can't wait to meet this man, God.” She said while rolling my hijab for me.

“Me too!” Selin rushed out of the bathroom, her excitement almost knocking over a chair.

I raised a brow, laughing. “Look at you. We’re late already, and all you can think about is a man. A man you don’t even know that well.”

Selin gasped dramatically, pointing a finger at me. “Who said I don’t know him? He’s a guy close to you. Why wouldn’t I know him?”

Ever since I came back, Rayyan had been everywhere—on the phone with me constantly, helping me with one or two things, saving us when it came to advanced algorithms.

I despise that course with all my heart.

He visited whenever he had meetings in Abuja, always there when I complained about anything, no matter how small.

There was this one time when we talked, and I told him about the most annoying thing that had happened to me that day.

"Did you get hurt?" he asked, as if I hadn't just told him I almost did.

"No," I said. "I didn't, Rayy—"

His sudden words made me pause.

"Farida, you make me worry, and it scares me more than I want to admit. Please, just be careful. I can get you a driver if you want—just so you don’t have to stress yourself to the point of almost getting into an accident. I can't handle that thought too."

Mama, Rahina, *Adda* Fati, and Yaya are all here already. After them, I don't think anyone else really matters. But the one person I was most eager to see? Nowhere in sight. And I don’t like it at all.

The ringing of my phone snapped me back to reality, and instantly, a smile spread across my face.

It was my *Ray-ray*.

"Hi, *Tink.*" His voice was bright, warm—just the way I liked it.

"Hiiii, *Ray-ray*. Are you here already?" I asked, excitement bubbling in my chest. I couldn't wait to see him.

"No, I'm so sorry."

"Me yasa?" Why?

My heart sank.

"I have an unexpected meeting in Lagos. I won't be able to make it. Sorry, Faree."

"Oh... it's alright. I wish you the best, Ray."

I was angry. Really angry. But if it was for work, that meant he was progressing, right? That was supposed to make me happy.

I told myself it did. But the truth was—I wasn't happy at all.

"Are you really that sad that I wasn't coming?"

That golden voice.

I turned around so fast it almost gave me whiplash. And there he was—standing right in front of me, looking as effortless as ever.

"Why'd you lie?" I asked, still a little annoyed.

"It was to surprise you." His lips curled into a smirk. "Congratulations, *Tink*. Allahumma barik."

Then, he handed me flowers and a donut bouquet.

A donut bouquet.

I didn't even know such a thing existed, but now that I did—and now that he was the one who got it for me—I was ridiculously happy.

Rayyan had this look on his face. I'd seen it before on our video calls, the way his eyes held mine like I was the only thing that mattered. But today... today it felt different. More intense. Hotter. Like there was something unspoken hanging between us.

Was it just me, or was the tension way too thick?

Was something wrong with me?

"Wassup, Rayyanu."

Yaya's voice cut through the moment, breaking our eye contact instantly. Just like that, the tension evaporated.

Rayyan turned to him, his lips curving into a small smile.

"Yane," he replied, reaching out for a handshake.

Yaya looked happy to see his friend, completely unaware of whatever had just passed between us.

Ever since I found out yaya had a girlfriend, I'd kept my distance. I wasn't as attached to him as before. Maybe he noticed, maybe he didn't. Either way, I didn't care. Or at least, that's what I told myself.

"Hi, the *honorable*." Surayya appeared faster than I expected. She had been with her mom earlier, so I didn't think she'd show up this quickly. *Please, Ya Allah, don't let her say anything stupid, or I swear I'll change her appearance today.*

"Hi, Surayya," Rayyan greeted her casually.

"You two know each other?" Yaya asked, as if it was his business.

"Why wouldn't we?" Surayya replied, almost sounding rude.

She swore to get back at him for making me cry, but I told her it wasn't his fault. I was the one who didn't confess, so if she wanted to blame anyone, she should blame me. That's only fair.

"Anyway, you guys are going out later, right? Can I tag along?"

"NO." I practically shouted.

"Why?" She smirked, clearly enjoying this.

"Why would YOU come with us?"

At this point, both Yaya and Rayyan were laughing hard as Surayya and I bickered like little kids, arguing over why she shouldn't be invited.

♡

We arrived at a beautiful lakeside restaurant just as the sun was setting. The golden glow reflected off the water, making everything look almost unreal. The place was quiet, perfect.

Rayyan ordered for both of us before I could even look at the menu. Typical. I didn't complain, though—I trusted his choices since he also ordered plantains.

We talked about random things—how I almost tripped on stage, how Maryam had been making jokes the entire ceremony, how my mum kept hugging me like I was going off to war.

He laughed really hard today, and I was so happy knowing I was the reason he was showing this side of himself.

Then, out of nowhere, "Talking to you brings me a lot of peace... I feel like I'm in a safe spot whenever I'm around you, Faree. And that's something I value more than you think."

"Yeah, I know, right?" I responded casually, but my heart skipped a beat and then started racing.

But he didn't react the way I expected. He didn't laugh or tease me like usual. Instead, he looked serious—too serious.

"I worry about you too much," he continued. "I think about you without even trying. When I'm with you, it feels like I'm in some kind of earthly heaven. No matter how my day starts, it always ends well if I've talked to you. I knew I was in love, even when I tried to ignore it. I told myself I should just be the person you need whenever you need someone, but I couldn't... And that's when I knew

I was finished—because pretending not to have feelings for you would mentally destroy me."

He was waiting for a response, but I was dumbfounded.

All my life, I've always had an answer for everything—even if it was wrong, I would still have something to say. But now? I was silenced.

"I love you, *Tink*."

His voice was steady, sure—like he had thought about this for a long time. Like he meant every single word.

He meant them all.

No man had ever held my hand apart from Yaya, Baba, and Uncle Ibrahim.

Now that he held my hand, I felt... I don't know. Loved? Cherished? Something unfamiliar yet warm. But at the same time, a small part of me was scared—scared it won't exceed this.

I didn't pull away. I didn't stop him from holding my hand. Yet, as if he could sense my hesitation, he let go.

He's a gentleman. Everything about him is so effortlessly captivating.

If I say yes, I'll end up in a relationship with the most amazing man on earth. I win.

My heart wants Rayyan for itself too. But something—something I can't name—is stopping me from saying the words that are already sitting on my tongue.

♡

I was *dumbfounded*!.

I sat in my room, staring at the ceiling as Rayyan's words echoed in my head. *I love you, Tink.*

He said it so effortlessly, as though he'd been waiting to say it for years. My mind couldn't wrap around it. Rayyan—my Rayyan—loved me?

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, breaking my train of thought. It was Selin calling.

"Faree, where are you? Surayya and I are waiting for you!" I'm the one eagerly waiting for them, dying to talk about this, but when I got back, they weren't home.

I sighed, grabbing my scarf, I needed this girl talk more than anything right now.

When I arrived at the parlor, Surayya and Selin were already seated, deep in conversation. Surayya spotted me first and waved enthusiastically.

"Finally!" Selin exclaimed. "We thought you got lost."

"Sorry," I said, sliding into the seat next to Surayya. "I had...a lot on my mind."

They exchanged a look before Selin leaned in, her eyes narrowing. “What’s going on, Faree?”

Surayya smirked. “Spill it. You look like someone who’s just been proposed to.”

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. “Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?” Selin echoed. “What does that mean?”

I peeked at them through my fingers, feeling my cheeks heat up. “Rayyan confessed. That he uhm...loves me?”

For a moment, there was silence. Then, Surayya practically jumped out of her seat. “WHAT?! He confessed?! Rayyan? Your Rayyan?”

I nodded, my face burning. Why does she have to say it like that? *My Rayyan.*

“Ya Allah,” Selin whispered, her eyes wide. “What did you say?”

“I...I didn’t say anything,” I admitted.

“You didn’t say anything?” Surayya repeated, looking at me like I’d grown a second head. “Are you okay? Did you hit your head or something?”

“I was shocked!” I said defensively. “What was I supposed to say?”

“Uh, maybe yes?” Surayya said, throwing her hands in the air. “Faree, do you even realize what this means? He loves you! Rayyan loves you! Do you know how rare it is to find a guy like him?”

Selin nodded in agreement. “He makes you happy, doesn’t he? He’s always looking out for you. Who do you think would do all of that for a lady if he didn’t care for her?”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Surayya said, pointing at Selin. “Faree, this guy traveled all the way to Abuja just to surprise you for your birthday, and your convocation. Let's not also forget the fact that he's always there for us too as your friends. He literally brought you donuts, a camera, a bracelet—and he calls you with a nickname, *Tink*! If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

I sighed, resting my chin on my hand. “I know all of that, but...”

“But what?” Selin asked gently.

“What if things don’t work out? What if it ruins our friendship? And the fact that he's my brother's friend?”

Surayya rolled her eyes. “Haba, Farida. He is your *cousin*, not your brother. What would he possibly do? Stop overthinking it. You’ll never know unless you try. And honestly, I think you’re just scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Of being happy,” she said simply.

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. Was I really scared of being happy?

Chapter Eighteen

Rayyan

I am scared of being rejected by her.

By Allah, I want Farida for myself.

Her presence by my side is all I need.

The car feels too silent for my liking, especially when she says she's sleeping.

Does she not want me to the point where she's pretending to be asleep?

I'm doing my best to have faith that she'll say yes to me. I'm not giving up.

I stopped at the doorstep and called her name.

"Faree... baby, wake up, we're home."

"Oh, okay." She opened her eyes and saw me looking at her. Our eyes met, and the tension between us was almost too much for me to handle. I don't want to act like a beast and kiss her out of nowhere. That would scare her.

I moved aside for her to get out of the car while I helped her with her bag.

"Thank you for today, Ray-ray," she said, smiling as she took her bag from me.

"Say less, my love. Sleep well, okay?" She nodded and went inside, while I waited for the light to go off before leaving.

It’s been eighteen hours, thirty minutes, and thirty-six seconds. She hasn’t replied to my night messages.

I sent another message this morning:

"I'll be leaving Abuja by 3, tink. Do you want to meet?"

The message was read, but I got no reply. And I’m genuinely scared I’ve been rejected.

Was my confession not what she expected?

How should I confess next time?

I kept asking myself random questions.

Suddenly, my phone rang, breaking my thoughts.

“Hi.” The voice was so familiar. Why was she calling from another number?

“Hi.” I replied as quickly as I could.

“Can we meet now? If you're not too busy, of course.”

“Yes, I’m on my way.” I responded without hesitation.

♡

I arrived at the estate, and she was already outside, waiting for me. She looked stunning, as always. I feel like I don’t praise her beauty enough.

“Let’s have a date before you go,” she said casually.

What was that?

We were in the car when, unexpectedly, she held my hand. I nearly caused an accident, it caught me that off guard.

She looked at me and asked, “What? You don’t want your girlfriend to hold your hand?”

I immediately parked the car, because I had heard something I’d always wanted to hear.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, noticing my gaze.

“Nothing, that... It caught me off guard. Farida, do you mean what you're saying?”

“Yes, Ray. I wouldn't have said it if I didn’t love you too. You notice the tiniest things about me. You’re always there for me when I need you. You're my biggest supporter, after my mom and my sister. How could I not like you back?” She paused, then added, “What? Were you thinking you wouldn’t stand a chance?”

“Yes. I was thinking that. I couldn’t sleep at all, Farida. I thought about it so much that I regretted confessing. I don’t like it when I don’t talk to you. I feel like a madman trapped in the body of a stranger. I don’t know if you understand what I mean.”

She stared at me as I spoke, her eyes eventually drifting back to our hands, still holding each other.

We arrived at the restaurant, and I went ahead to order some desserts for her. I didn’t think I could eat; I was just too happy right now.

"Do you have anything to say? You're staring too much." she said, laughing shyly.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. I just can't believe I have you for myself now. I'm so happy."

"I know you are. I thought about how happy you feel whenever you're with me, and when I'm with you too. I can't afford to lose that. You're the perfect one for me, and I hope Allah guides us both to a great future together."

"Ameen, tink. I love you."

"I love you too, Ray," she replied sweetly. I think Mom would be jealous if she heard Farida call me Ray, because she was the only one who did until I met her.

We talked and talked until it was two-thirty. I didn't want to leave. I felt like I’d lose myself if she wasn’t with me.

We arrived at the estate, and she was about to get out of the car.

"I don't want to leave again. Should I stay for a while? Until you're completely done with school?" I asked, but I knew she wouldn’t let me do that.

"No, don't do that. You're making me look selfish. Why would you stay when you have tons of work to do?" She didn’t need to remind me; I knew I had plenty of work.

"Alright, babe. Take care." I said, holding her hand.

I wanted to hug her, but I was scared. I was afraid I might want more. That’s when the thought of marriage hit me, but I quickly pushed it out of my mind. She might not want that.

She came closer and asked, "Hug?"

I didn’t think twice. I did it because I wanted to, and I couldn’t say no to her.

"This is your limit, young man," she said, pulling away and turning to walk.

"Safe flight, Ray."

"Take care, tink."

Chapter Nineteen

Farida

The sound of Rahina's laughter echoed through the house, filling every corner with joy I hadn't felt in weeks. Today was her big day—her graduation from secondary school—and the entire family was buzzing with excitement.

I was the last to get ready, as usual. Rahina had insisted I do her makeup, claiming no one else could make her look as "elegant" as she wanted to. Honestly, I was happy to do it.

"Are you done, Faree?" Mama's voice came from outside my room.

"Almost, Mama!" I called back, carefully applying the finishing touches to Rahina's makeup.

She turned to look at herself in the mirror, a huge grin spreading across her face. "Thank you, Yaya Faree! I look so pretty!"

"You're welcome, my love. You deserve to look your best today." I replied, smiling at her enthusiasm.

Adda fati walked in, dressed in a deep blue gown that made her look regal. "Rahina, you look beautiful! Faree, thank you for helping her."

"It's nothing, Mummy." I said, adjusting Rahina's hijab one last time.

Mama's phone buzzed, and she glanced at the screen. "We should leave soon. Ibrahim is on his way to pick us up."

The mention of Ibrahim, Yaya's name made my stomach do an involuntary flip. I hadn't seen him since... well, since Rayyan and I started our relationship. I knew it was only a matter of time before he found out, but the thought still made me nervous.

Rahina, oblivious to my inner turmoil, grabbed my hand. "Let's go, Yaya! I don't want to be late!"

We all piled into Ibrahim's car when he arrived. The ride to the school was filled with laughter and playful teasing, mostly from Rahina, who couldn't stop talking about how she planned to celebrate with her friends afterward.

When we arrived at the venue, the place was bustling with students, parents, and teachers. The school had outdone itself, decorating the hall with bright colors and lights that made the occasion feel extra special.

As we took our seats, I couldn't help but notice how happy Rahina looked. She kept glancing at the stage, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Rayyan arrived shortly after, looking effortlessly handsome in a navy blue agbada. He greeted everyone politely, his gaze lingering on me for just a moment longer than necessary.

“Farida,” he said, his voice low and warm.

“Rayyan,” I replied, feeling my cheeks heat up.

Adda fati, ever observant, raised an eyebrow. “Hmm, Rayyan, you’re here for Rahina’s graduation too?”

“Yes, Mama,” he replied with a polite smile. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

Mama’s gaze shifted between the two of us, her expression thoughtful but unreadable.

The ceremony began, and we all watched with pride as Rahina walked across the stage to collect her certificate. She looked radiant, waving shyly at us from the stage. Mama clapped so loudly I thought her hands might fall off.

After the ceremony, we took dozens of pictures. Rahina insisted on capturing every moment, dragging Rayyan into a few shots with her.

“You two look good together.” Mama commented, her tone light but meaningful.

I froze, glancing at Rayyan, who only smiled.

“Mama!” I whispered, embarrassed.

Rahina, ever the playful one, chimed in, “They do, don’t they?”

Ibrahim, who had been quiet the entire time, suddenly spoke up. “Wait a minute... Are you two...?” He trailed off, looking between us.

My face turned crimson. “Yaya, it’s not what you think—”

“It’s exactly what you think.” Rayyan interrupted, his tone calm but firm. He sounded like a bodyguard or so, as if he was protecting me from Yaya.

Mama and Ibrahim stared at us, their expressions a mix of surprise and disbelief.

“Since when?” Mama asked, her voice laced with curiosity.

“Recently,” Rayyan admitted. “But it’s serious, Mama. I care about her deeply.”

Mama’s expression softened, but she still looked at me for confirmation.

“It’s true.” I said quietly, avoiding everyone's gaze.

Rahina clapped her hands excitedly. “I knew it! I knew there was something between you two!”

Yaya shook his head, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Rayyan, I swear, if you hurt her—” He wasn't surprised at all.

“I won’t,” Rayyan said, his tone resolute. “You have my word.”

Adda fati sighed, her smile returning. “Well, if you two are happy, that’s all that matters. But Rayyan, you better not mess this up.”

“I won’t, Mama,” he promised.

The rest of the evening went by smoothly, though I couldn’t shake the feeling of relief that came with finally being honest about our relationship. As we prepared to leave, Rayyan walked me to the car.

“Thank you for today,” I said, my voice soft.

“Anything for you, Faree,” he replied, his gaze warm.

As we drove home, Rahina chattered on about her plans for the future, but my mind was elsewhere, replaying every word, every glance, every smile from Rayyan.

Chapter Twenty

Farida

Maiduguri's air carried a buzz of celebration that day, and Rayyan's office had never looked livelier. The success of his latest project was still fresh, and everyone in the company seemed to be riding the wave of joy. As I walked into the Rosebud office, the familiar smell of coffee and polished wood filled my senses.

"Farida!" Joshua called out, waving at me from the front desk.

"Hi, Josh! How's *Maman* twins doing?" I replied, smiling.

"Oh, she's great! She gave birth to a baby boy last week," he said, beaming with pride. "Healthy as ever. He was named Ahmed."

"Ahmed? Such a beautiful name. Congratulations to her! Please send my regards to Mummy Ahmed." I said, genuinely happy for her.

"Thank you, Farida. You're always so thoughtful." he said, his grin widening.

I made my way down the familiar hallways, passing by colleagues who greeted me warmly. It felt like I belonged here. Perhaps it was because of Rayyan, or maybe because I had grown fond of everyone in this space.

As I turned the corner, I spotted Khalid standing near my desk. He looked hesitant, like he had been waiting for me.

"Farida," he called out as soon as he saw me.

"Hi, Khalid," I replied, a little unsure.

"Can we talk for a minute?" he asked, his tone more serious than usual.

"Sure," I said, setting my bag down and crossing my arms.

He glanced around, almost as if he were checking to see if anyone was listening. "Can we go somewhere more private?"

I raised an eyebrow but nodded, gesturing toward the small break room nearby. Once inside, he closed the door behind us, and I suddenly felt a little uneasy.

"What's going on, Khalid?" I asked, leaning against the counter.

He rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze dropping to the floor. "I've been meaning to say this for a while, Farida. I just didn't know how."

"Khalid..." I began, but he held up a hand to stop me.

"Please, just let me finish," he said, his voice filled with emotion.

I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“I’ve liked you for a long time, Farida. I don’t know how it happened, but somewhere along the way, I fell for you,” he admitted, his words tumbling out awkwardly. “I thought, maybe, if I gave it time, you’d notice me. But then Rayyan showed up, and...”

He trailed off, his eyes meeting mine briefly before darting away.

“Khalid,” I said gently, trying to find the right words. “I appreciate your honesty, and I value our friendship, but—”

“I know,” he interrupted, forcing a smile. “I can see it in the way you look at him. You don’t have to say it.”

There was a pause, heavy with unspoken words.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said softly. “But my heart is already taken.”

He nodded, his shoulders slumping slightly. “I figured as much. I just... I needed to say it, you know? To get it off my chest.”

Before I could respond, the door opened, and there he was—Rayyan, standing tall and calm as ever.

“Khalid,” Rayyan said, his voice steady but carrying an edge. “We need to finalize the reports for the project. Can you join the team in the meeting room?”

Khalid blinked, clearly caught off guard, but he nodded. “Yeah, sure. I’ll be right there.”

Rayyan’s gaze shifted to me, his eyes softening. “Farida, I was looking for you.”

“Really?” I asked, feeling my cheeks heat up.

“Yes,” he said simply, offering me his hand. Without hesitation, I took it, and he led me out of the room, leaving Khalid behind.

As we stepped into the hallway, Rayyan didn’t say anything at first. He just kept holding my hand, his grip firm but comforting.

“You heard, didn’t you?” I finally asked, glancing at him.

He stopped walking and turned to face me, his expression unreadable. “I did.”

“And?” I pressed, curious about what he was thinking.

“And nothing,” he replied, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I already know where your heart is.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You’re so confident.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” he teased, his eyes twinkling.

“Well, you’re right,” I admitted, leaning closer. “No one else could ever have my heart, Rayyan. It’s all yours.”

His smile widened, and he reached up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “I like the sound of that.”

We continued walking until we reached his office, where he closed the door behind us.

“Thank you for being here today,” he said, his tone more serious now.

“Of course,” I replied. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

He stepped closer, his hands resting lightly on my shoulders. “You’re my world, Farida. You know that, right?”

I felt my heart skip a beat, but I didn’t look away. “And you’re mine,” I said softly.

For a moment, we just stood there, lost in each other’s presence. It was a quiet kind of love, one that didn’t need grand gestures or elaborate words. It was simple, pure, and perfect.

♡

Later that evening, as we drove back home, I couldn’t help but laugh at the way Khalid had confessed earlier.

“What’s so funny?” Rayyan asked, glancing at me.

“Nothing,” I said, still giggling. “I was just thinking about how awkward Khalid’s confession was.”

Rayyan chuckled, shaking his head. “Poor guy.”

“Don’t feel too bad for him,” I teased. “He’ll find someone who’s perfect for him someday.”

“Maybe.” Rayyan said, his tone playful. “But right now, I’m just glad that someone isn’t you.”

I reached over to squeeze his hand. “Don’t worry, Rayyan. I’m already yours. No one else could ever come close.”

He smiled, bringing my hand to his lips for a quick kiss. “Good. Because I’m not letting you go, Farida.”

And in that moment, I knew he meant every word.

Chapter Twenty-one

Farida

The day had been long. I had spent the better part of it running errands for *Adda* Fati. By the time I returned to the house, the sun was already setting, painting the sky a soft pinkish-orange. I opened the door with a sigh of relief, thankful to finally sit down and relax.

"Maryam!" *Adda* Fati's voice rang out from the living room, and my heart stopped for a moment.

"Maryam?" I repeated to myself as I dropped my bag and walked into the house. My younger sister was standing there, her suitcase next to her, wearing a huge grin.

"Yaya Faree!" Maryam called out, rushing toward me with open arms.

"*Ke dai Maryam! Sai yanzu kika dawo?* "Maryam! So you've just returned?. I said, smiling as we hugged tightly.

"I just arrived a few hours ago," she replied, her voice filled with excitement. "I didn't want to disturb you, so I stayed here with *Adda* Fati. But where have you been?"

"Errands." I replied vaguely, brushing off the question.

Mariam raised an eyebrow, giving me that look of suspicion she always had when she thought I was hiding something. But before she could pry, *Adda* Fati joined us.

"*Kin ga yadda yaran nan suka hadu?"* Look how these sisters have reunited. Adda said, smiling warmly. "It's so good to see you both together."

We sat down in the living room, catching up on Mariam's time in Switzerland. She talked about her studies, the people she met, and the places she visited. I listened intently, happy to have her back. But I could tell there was something on her mind.

Later that evening, while I was helping her unpack in the guest room, she finally spoke.

"So, you're not going to tell me, huh?" Mariam asked, her tone sharp.

"Tell you what?" I replied, confused.

She folded her arms and gave me a pointed look. "Don't play dumb, Yaya. I saw the pictures in the family group chat. You and some guy named Rayyan? And you didn't think to tell me?"

Oh, no. My stomach sank.

“I don’t enter the family group chat, *Mami*. You know that.” I said quickly, trying to defend myself.

“Well, maybe you should! Because apparently, our whole family knows you’re dating this guy except me. And I’m supposed to be your sister!”

“Maryam, it’s not like that,” I said, sitting on the bed and rubbing my forehead. “It’s just... complicated.”

“Ya Farida, I thought we told each other everything,” she said, her voice softening slightly. “Who is he? And why didn’t you tell me?”

I hesitated, unsure of how to explain everything. “Rayyan is... He’s someone special. We’ve been seeing each other for a while now, but I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure. It’s not that I didn’t want to tell you, Mariam. I just wanted to handle it on my own first.”

She sighed, sitting next to me. “Fine. But I want to meet him. If he’s going to be part of your life, then I need to see what kind of guy he is.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, laughing. “You’ll meet him soon, I promise.”

♡

I found myself sitting nervously in Rayyan’s car. He had invited me out on a date, and I had agreed, not realizing that Billy would insist on tagging along.

“Is this the famous Aunty Faree?” Billy said, grinning as she sat in the backseat.

I turned to look at her, feeling slightly embarrassed. “I guess that’s me.”

Billy leaned forward, resting her arms on the front seat. “ Ya Rayyan talks about you all the time. I had to come and see for myself who’s stealing my brother’s attention.”

Rayyan groaned. “Billy, don’t start.”

“Me nayi?” What did I do? she replied, shrugging innocently.

I smiled awkwardly, unsure of what to say. Billy was younger than Rayyan but had a presence that couldn’t be ignored.

“So, Farida, sorry! Aunty faree,” Billy continued, ignoring her brother’s protests, “what do you like about ya Rayyan?”

“Billy!” Rayyan snapped, his face turning red.

“It’s fine,” I said, laughing nervously. “What do I like about him? Well, he’s kind, funny, and... he’s always there for me.”

Billy nodded as if she was mentally taking notes. *“Toh, shikenan. Amma idan ya baki matsala, ki kira ni.”* Okay then. But if he gives you trouble, call me.

“Billy, please stop.” Rayyan said, clearly embarrassed.

The rest of the car ride was filled with lighthearted teasing and laughter. By the time we arrived at the restaurant, I felt much more at ease.

As we sat down for dinner, I couldn’t help but notice how Rayyan kept glancing at me. It was as if he was checking to make sure I was okay, making sure I was comfortable.

“*Na gode da kika zo*, If not Billy will not let me live in peace.”Thank you for coming. He said softly, leaning toward me.

“Of course,” I replied, smiling.

Billy watched us from across the table, her expression a mix of amusement and approval.

After dinner, as Rayyan drove us back, Billy suddenly said, “I like her, ya Rayyan. You made a good choice.”

I laughed, feeling a sense of relief. If Billy approved, then maybe things were going to be okay.

When we reached home, Rayyan walked me to the door. “Thanks for today, Billy is such a a sweetheart.” I said, looking up at him.

“Anytime.” he replied, smiling so sweet at me as he always did.

As I turned to go inside, I heard Billy shout from the car, “Don’t forget, Aunty Faree! If he gives you trouble, call me!”

I shook my head, laughing as I walked into the house.

That night, as I lay in bed, I couldn’t stop smiling. Things were falling into place,and I felt truly happy.

Chapter Twenty-two

Farida

I never imagined a day like this would come, where Ray and I would be thinking about marriage, to the point of arranging for our parents to meet.

Since Dad isn't here, uncle Ibrahim, the king, has been the one to take care of me all these years, and he’s the one who will be my guardian.

“I can't wait for us to be together and inseparable, baby. Let’s make this happen,” Rayyan had sent in a message one random night while we were talking.

And we will make it happen.

I’ve gotten so close to his mom and Billy that we’ve even started shopping for kitchen utensils together while Mama was busy.

During this time, Maryam came back to Nigeria for the holidays and is now here with me in Maiduguri. Mama will be back soon too. She doesn’t want to, but she’ll have to—if everything goes as planned, the wedding will take place here.

The guests—Rayyan's guardians—were set to arrive in the next thirty minutes, and everything was in place. But suddenly, I felt nervous. How did he know? I didn’t even say anything. Then, he sent me a box of donuts with a note attached:

“Hey, tink, don’t be nervous. You know I’ll always be there for you, and nothing bad is going to happen. We’ll go through all of this together. I love you.”

That made me calm down.

Everything seemed to be going well. Uncle called for both me and Yaya.

He was getting married too.

The representatives from Rayyan’s side had left, and now the uncles were all set to go ask for Yaya’s girlfriend's hand in marriage.

“Farida, everything is arranged, but before you’re given to him, we’ll need to investigate things about him, as you know, it’s a tradition.”

He looked at me as he spoke.

“Yes, uncle. Insha Allah. *Nagode*.” Thank you.

“*Yawwa, Allah yasa muje abu mai kyau.”* May Allah guide us to a good outcome.

“Ameen.”

I knew Rayyan came from a good background. His appearance alone spoke for that. I had nothing to worry about.

At least, that's what I thought.

Our dreams shattered before our eyes.

♡

That Sunday felt different. I could tell from the way the sky looked—heavy, with clouds hanging low, almost as though they wanted to drop something they couldn't carry. Uncle Ibrahim called me that afternoon, and I was so eager to hear from him. My heart fluttered at the thought of him calling to finalize things for Rayyan and me. Maybe the wedding plans would begin soon. Maybe, just maybe, nothing could stop us now.

But I was wrong.

His voice on the other end wasn't what I expected—it lacked warmth, and the weight of his words hit me like a boulder.

"You can't marry him, Farida," he said.

I froze. It felt like my entire body went numb, like my heart had been ripped out of my chest and stomped on.

"What do you mean, Uncle?" I managed to whisper, my voice shaky.

"He doesn't have parents, Farida. Do you know what that means?" His tone was sharp, cutting through any hope I had.

"But Uncle—"

"He was thrown out as a baby. They found him in a carton, abandoned on the side of the road. *Dan shegiya ne*." he said coldly. He's a bastard.

I felt my world tilt. That word echoed in my mind, louder and louder until it drowned out everything else.

"Uncle... please. You can't mean that," I said, my voice trembling. My heart raced, my palms sweaty as I clutched my phone tighter. "Rayyan is not just anyone. You've seen how he treats me—how can that matter?"

"Farida, this is bigger than how he treats you. You're my niece, a part of this family. And our family cannot accept something like this." he said firmly.

"We can't accept *him.*"

I could hear someone murmuring in the background, and then the phone was taken from him.

It was Uncle Musa. Mama and *Adda* fati's eldest brother.

His tone was calm, calculated, yet it carried the same sharpness as Uncle Ibrahim's. "Farida, your uncle is right. Think about it. A man with no lineage, no identity, no honor. Is that the kind of man you want to tie yourself to?"

"No honor?" I repeated, my voice breaking. "Uncle Musa, how can you say that about Rayyan? He has more honor in his actions than most people I know."

He ignored my words and continued, "Do you think society will accept this? Do you think people will respect you, or him? What about your future children,

Farida? They will carry the same shame."

Shame? Shame? My chest felt heavy, and I could barely breathe.

"Uncle Musa, please stop," I said weakly, but he didn't.

"Farida, listen to your uncle. You deserve better. This isn't personal—it's just the way things are. We are only trying to protect you."

Protect me? From what? From someone who has done nothing but love me?

I wanted to scream, to fight back, but my throat felt like it was closing up. My hands shook, and tears streamed down my face.

"Uncle Ibrahim, Uncle Musa, please," I begged. "Rayyan is a good man. You know that. You've seen it. Why does his identity matter more than who he is now?"

"Because, Farida, his identity is everything. You can't erase it," Uncle said, his voice final. "End this now before it's too late. It's for your own good."

The call ended, but their words stayed. They lingered like a poison, spreading through my veins and suffocating me.

I collapsed onto the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. My chest heaved as I tried to catch my breath, but the weight of their words crushed me.

Dan shegiya ne. He's a bastard.

That single sentence replayed in my mind over and over, louder each time. It felt like the walls around me were closing in, suffocating me. I tried to think of Rayyan, of his kind eyes and the way he always made me feel safe, but even that thought was tainted by the harshness of what I'd just heard.

I was suffocating in a sea of expectations, judgments, and the unrelenting weight of society's rules. The people I thought would support me were the ones tearing me apart. How could they be so cruel? How could they reduce a man like Rayyan to a single word? A word that didn't even define who he was.

Rayyan must have heard too. I kept calling him, but he didn't pick up. Then, his phone was switched off. My worry wasn't about what Uncle Ibrahim said—I only cared about Rayyan. Was he okay? What if he did something reckless? I was scared of what he might do to himself.

I called Billy, and she picked up quickly, but instead of saying anything, I heard a familiar voice ranting.

Rayyan.

His voice was shaking, raw with pain.

"You shouldn't have picked me up from there. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't have met her and learned about my real self through her."

His words hit me like a punch.

"How should I face her now? How should I handle losing her? I don't think I can live without her in my life, but I'll have to do that now because I have no

other choice.

"I’m sorry for myself for being a bastard. I’m sorry for making you take care of me without telling me who I really am. I know that must have been the hardest thing you’ve ever done. I’m sorry for myself for falling in love and dreaming about a life like people with real identities do."

I couldn’t listen anymore. I switched off the call and kept crying until I unknowingly fell asleep.

For days, I couldn’t get a hold of Rayyan. I knew it was hard for him to process all of this, but he didn’t think of me at all.

I was now forced to go back to Sokoto. Maryam was going back to school from there, so I had to travel alone. Was this how I would leave? Without seeing him one last time?

Adda Fati came into my room and saw me crying.

"Faree, your head might burst if you keep crying. Leave everything to Allah. He’s the only one who will sort everything out for us, not your tears."

I looked at her and saw Mama’s face. Adda Fati was Mama’s twin, but their personalities were different. If it were Mama, she would have shouted at me or said things in a hurtful manner.

♡

Yaya was the one going with me. I wasn’t able to say goodbye to Uncle Ibrahim, I couldn't face him, because he called Rayyan a bastard.

So what if he is? There are better ways to say it, right?The car suddenly stopped and I got scared for a second when I saw the face that had been hiding from her for three days.

My Rayyan.

Does he not eat? He looks so skinny.

He opened the car door, and Yaya looked at me.

"This is the least I could do for you, Farida," he said as he got out, leaving me and Rayyan alone.

Rayyan stared at me.

"Farida, what happened to you? Why do your eyes look like this?"

"Why do you care?" I said, pulling myself away from his grip.

"Farida... babe, I’m sorry." His voice was low, filled with regret.

"Why did you leave me with too many things to worry about?"

"Farida, you won’t understand."

"Tell me what you think I won’t understand. Did you think I’d leave you just because of what they’re saying about you? Rayyan, I love you. And I’ll fight for you just so we can be together. Why did you push me away?!"

He hugged me tightly as I broke down.

"C’mere, baby. I’m sorry."

He stared at me as I sipped the water he handed me.

"You look pale. Just how much did you cry?" I sighed in a mix of sorrow and exhaustion.

Rayyan leaned in slightly.

"Listen to me. I’ll fight for you too. For *us*. I will never give up on you, you shouldn’t think that way.”

He said and leans closer

“Uhmm?. So don't worry about a thing and go wait for me. Baby I'll come get you back for myself.”

“I won't dare to give up on you, Farida. I promise you.”

I really didn’t want to leave him behind. But I did. Because he pleaded. Because he promised that he'll come back for me.

Chapter Twenty-three

Rayyan

I never thought there would be a day I would cry over something.

I feel like life would have been better for Farida if she had never met me.

I don’t know what to do or where to start. I loved her in a way words couldn’t capture—more than the life I thought I had, more than the identity I was clinging to. They say I don’t belong to this world... but what does it matter when I’ve never belonged to anything the way I belong to her?

To leave her now would mean turning my back on everything I ever wanted.

I will fight for her, for the life we could have.

Even if I’m not who I thought I was, I know she’s everything I need.

How could I live without her?

But how could I give her what she deserves when I don’t even know if I’m worthy of her love anymore?

They can take away the identity I thought I had, the future I imagined, but I refuse to lose this.

Her.

Mom came into my room, and I forced a smile.

"Rayyan, son, can I come in?"

"Yes, Mom."

She sat beside me on the edge of my bed.

"Ray, I know things are hard for you right now, but I hope you’ll take it easy."

I sighed and nodded.

"I have something to tell you," she said, pausing before continuing. "I think it might help you find your parents."

She didn’t mean it—not really. I could feel her pain.

"Twenty-eight years ago, I found you. At that time, I was told I was infertile and couldn’t bear a child. But then, one of my mother’s housemaids had you with her. She always carried you around, even though you were just thirty days old.

"She didn’t seem like your mother—she was too young to have a child. But who knows? Then, you got sick. You had a terrible cold because the place she lived in was too open for a baby as young as you. That was when we took you in.

"When we took you, she promised to leave you with us forever and never involve herself in your life again, because she couldn’t take care of you."

She told me everything with tears in her eyes.

"Rabi is still alive, and hopefully, we might find something useful from her."

We heard Dad’s voice from the doorway.

"Mom, I know it wasn’t easy for you to tell me all this. No matter what happens, even if I find my real parents, you will always be my mother."

We all hugged, and Mom insisted on feeding me because she said I hadn’t eaten her food in three days—which she was not happy about.

Dad helped in finding Rabi, and I had to continue from where he left off.

♡

I greeted the people of the house and went straight inside.

"Assalamualaikum," I greeted a man sitting on a mat. Then, the woman from the picture I had been shown came out.

I recognized her immediately.

"Wa’alaikumussalam," she replied.

"I am looking for Inna Rabi. Mallam Ahmad sent me here."

"I see... you're Rayyan?"

When I nodded, she burst into tears.

Why?

"Alhamdulillah, look how much you’ve grown."

"Thank you."

"Come sit. I have something for you."

Now, I was scared.

What if she didn’t have anything useful?

I questioned myself as she went inside and returned with a bag—one that looked like a jakan wanzamai (a traditional barber’s apprentice bag).

Instantly, I felt confused.

This bag... I had dreamt about it countless times.

I watched as she took out a book. Inside the book, there was something.

A letter.

It looked old—like it had been kept there for too long.

She handed it to me.

"Here. It’s yours."

♡

I don’t believe this bullshit.

Why is everyone doing this to me?

What did I do to deserve this?

A prince?

This has to be a joke.

Doesn’t this person know that someone’s life is at stake here?

Or is my life just a game for people to mess with?

My mother had worked in the palace for over thirty years. Then, she suddenly had to stop after falling ill. One day, before she left the palace for good, she came back with you in her arms. She never told me where she found you or who you were."

The woman paused, wiping her tears before continuing.

"It had only been fifteen days since she brought you home when she passed away. The day she died was terrifying—I was so scared of what might happen to both of us. Before she took her last breath, she told me a secret I never expected to hear.

'He is a prince, Rabi. Take care of him with everything you have. Do not let anyone know he is a prince until it is time for him to know.'

"That was when she handed me this letter and told me to run away from Maiduguri. But I couldn’t. Instead, I was given shelter at Madam Rahma’s house. They took care of me until you became sick, and that was when I handed you over to them."

She fell silent, looking at me.

What was I supposed to say?

This was nothing like what I had expected.

"You must be joking, right? There’s no way you expect me to believe I’m some prince out of nowhere just because of what’s written on an old piece of paper. A prince who was switched at birth? That makes no sense at all."

I looked back at the letter.

"On the day you are reading this, you may have grown up well. You may have been challenged to find out who you really are. What I’m about to say might break your heart. Your real parents didn’t abandon you—you were switched at birth, taken by a ruthless woman who believed her son deserved your place."

I paused midway through the letter, afraid to continue.

"Larai and I had worked at the palace since we were nine. Then, suddenly, she got pregnant. How? I had no idea. She and the queen gave birth on the same day—it was a miracle. That was when I overheard her say,

'My son deserves this throne, not yours. He is also the king’s son.' That was when I knew that the father of her baby, was the king, Your biological father.

"She switched you both—I saw everything she did. Later that night, she left the palace, and I followed her. She abandoned you with no clothes on, nothing to keep you warm. And that was when I took you... after she left."

I read everything, but I couldn’t bring myself to believe it.
If I was the real prince...
That meant I was Farida’s cousin.
Ibrahim was an illegitimate child.
And his mother... was my mother.

Chapter Twenty-four

Farida

We had been talking on the phone, but suddenly, I lost contact with him.

For the past two days, I kept thinking he had given up on me—that he had lied about coming back to get me.

The only ones keeping me strong were Selin and Surayya. They reassured me, telling me everything would be okay.

Mama walked into my room while I was getting dressed. She stared at me for a moment, then, out of nowhere, pulled me into a tight hug. She was crying.

"Mama, what happened? Why are you crying?" I asked, my heart instantly filling with fear.

"Farida, get ready. We're going back to Maiduguri."

That was all she said before walking out of the room. No explanation. No reason for her tears.

We arrived in Maiduguri at three in the afternoon. Mama was still crying—nonstop.

I expected to see Yaya, but instead, the driver and Rahina came to pick us up. The moment Rahina saw Mama, she, too, broke into tears.

Was I the only one who had no idea what was going on?

Adda Fati couldn't speak to me. She sat in silence, looking like someone who had just been paralyzed.

At this point, I was genuinely scared.

We were all gathered in the room, and no one said a word.

Then, I saw Rayyan.

He wouldn't look at me. Even when our eyes met, he quickly turned away.

His parents were here. Billy was here too.

Okay... now what was going on?

Why was no one giving me a clue or telling me what I needed to hear?

Then, finally, someone spoke.

"It has been confirmed. Rayyan is your son, Your Majesty. Here are the DNA test results."

That was when *Adda* Fati broke down.

I... couldn't say anything.

Everyone was crying now.

He had no idea he called his own son, a bastard?

And in that moment, I felt the same betrayal that had made *Adda* cry like that.

Larai, the woman who had an affair with Uncle Ibrahim, also confessed—she was the one who switched them.

And Yaya's DNA test results showed that he was the king's son too.

But... not *Adda* Fati's son.

He wasn't my cousin.

He wasn't who we all thought he was.

If Uncle Ibrahim had an affair with Larai, then he was no saint either.

He had committed *zina*. Adultery.

And the punishment for *zina*... was *rajm*—stoning to death.

There were more than four witnesses here.

That was the only right thing to do.

A thousand thoughts flooded my mind.

Rayyan would now be the king.

He was also my cousin.

I should have been happy.

But I wasn't.

Where were we supposed to start from?

The betrayal was too much to handle.

Rayyan still wouldn't look at me.

But I could see it.

He was furious.

He stood up and walked toward Uncle Ibrahim.

"I will never forgive you for giving me a life I never wanted."

Then, he turned and walked away.

I quickly followed.

"Ray..." I called, waiting, hoping for a response.

He finally turned to look at me.

"Farida, I'm sorry. I don't think I can keep my promise to you."

That was all he said before walking away.

I stayed in Maiduguri for weeks, but I never saw him again after he returned to the palace.

A lot of people believed he shouldn't be king yet—that he needed to be trained first, while some still don't accept the fact that he *should* be king. So the *Galadima* took charge until he was ready to take over.

We lost Uncle Ibrahim.

Yaya left us.

And after everything that had happened... nothing was ever the same again.

August 30th..

I couldn't sleep well last night. I had been up late editing wedding videos for my content... and thinking about Rayyan.

I had moved on with my life—or at least, I thought I had. Not seeing him made it easy to believe that. Until I saw him yesterday.

"Ya Farida!" Maryam called out, practically shouting like she was my mother.

"Yes, Ma," I teased.

"Since we're in Kano, let's go check out the new place that opened last week. Pretty please? I'm dying to go there!"

"Alright, alright..." I gave in.

We got ready, and surprisingly, I was done before her.

Rayyan was standing at our doorstep.

I turned to Maryam, narrowing my eyes.

I was going to end this girl, I swear.

Did she plan this with him?

I ignored him and turned toward my car, but Maryam snatched my keys before I could reach the door. I was annoyed at this point.

"Hi, *Tink*."

That name.

The name I never wanted to hear again.

I didn’t respond. Instead, I turned to walk back inside.

"Yaaya," Maryam grabbed my hand. "Please listen to him. You know you want to talk to him. Don’t let your anger take over what your heart wants. Please."

I did want to talk to him. But why should I?

He had shown me that I wasn’t worthy of his time or attention when he ignored me for almost a year.

I pulled out my phone and set an alarm.

"Fifteen minutes." My voice was cold. "You only have fifteen minutes to say what you need to say and walk away."

I wanted him to feel what I had felt when he left me without a word.

"Baby... I'm sorry," he began. "I know I didn't do right by you. I left you all alone, but what matters now is that I'm back for you. Farida, give me a chance, a chance to—"

"Stop, Rayyan."

I cut him off. This wasn’t what I wanted to hear. In fact, I didn’t want to hear anything anymore. I was fed up.

I took a deep breath and met his gaze.

"Let me ask you this, Rayyan. Have you ever loved me as much as I loved you?" My voice wavered, but I pushed through. "If you had, you wouldn’t have left me like that. You know I didn’t deserve that."

He was silent.

I turned around and walked away.

Maryam moved as if to block my path, but I shot her a look. She must have seen the tears brimming in my eyes because she stepped aside.

I left him there.

And I didn’t look back.

Chapter Twenty-five

Farida

All this guy does is disturb me.

Was he not a prince? Did he not have a whole kingdom to take care of?

I stepped out, fully dressed, ready for a relaxing day at the spa. But the moment I spotted his car parked outside, I rolled my eyes.

I didn't care.

I got into my car, started the engine, and was about to leave—until my car suddenly jerked to a stop.

Frowning, I stepped out and checked.

Flat tire.

Just great.

At this point, I gave up.

I sighed, rubbing my temples in frustration. Today was supposed to be peaceful.

I turned to go back inside, but just as I did, I heard a car door open. I didn't even need to look.

"Need a ride?" Rayyan's voice was laced with amusement.

I scoffed, ignoring him.

I grabbed my phone, already dialing the mechanic. But before the call could go through, it was snatched out of my hand.

"Rayyan!" I turned, glaring at him. "Give me my phone."

He held it up, just out of my reach. "You're wasting time. You're dressed, you clearly want to go somewhere, and I'm right here offering to take you."

I folded my arms. "And why would I want to go anywhere with you?"

"Because you don't have a choice." He smirked. "Or do you plan to wait an hour for the mechanic under this sun?"

I clenched my jaw, looking back at my car. The tire was completely flat, and I knew Maryam wasn't home to drive me.

Rayyan, of course, was enjoying this.

I exhaled sharply. "Fine."

His smile widened as he opened the passenger door. "After you, Your Highness."

I shot him a glare but got in anyway, making sure to slam the door harder than necessary.

He chuckled. “Still dramatic, I see.”

I refused to answer, crossing my arms as he started the engine.

I didn’t want to be in his car.

But here I was.

♡

The car was too silent. It felt heavy, like there were words trapped in the air, but neither of us was willing to set them free. I kept my eyes glued to the window, watching the city pass by, refusing to acknowledge him.

Rayyan tapped his fingers against the steering wheel before finally breaking the silence.

"*Ina zaki?*" Where are you going to?. His voice was calm, almost hesitant.

I sighed, crossing my arms. "Elora Spa."

He gave a small nod, gripping the wheel a little tighter. "Alright."

And that was it. He drove in complete silence, not even attempting to make conversation. I hated how aware I was of him—the way his scent filled the car, the way his hands moved smoothly over the steering, how his jaw tensed as if he was holding himself back from saying something.

But then, just as we were nearing the spa, he finally spoke.

"Farida," his voice was softer now, almost pleading. "I'm sorry."

I looked straight ahead, pretending not to hear him.

"I know I hurt you. *Na sani*. And *wallahi*, I regret it every single day." His grip on the wheel tightened. "I miss you, Baby. More than you can ever imagine."

I let out a bitter chuckle. "Oh, so now I'm ‘Baby’ again?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "Farida, please. Give me a chance. Just one."

Before I could answer, the car slowed to a stop. We had arrived.

Without a word, I unbuckled my seatbelt and reached for the door handle. But before stepping out, I turned to face him, my eyes burning with unshed tears.

"You left me for six months, Rayyan," my voice trembled, but I forced myself to continue. "Six whole months *ba tare da ko da kira ba, ba da text ba, ba komai*. And now you think you can just show up, say sorry, and everything will be fine?" No calls, no text messages, Nothing.

His face fell, pain flashing through his eyes.

"Things were hectic for me too, Rayyan. But I didn't have the luxury of disappearing." A tear slipped down my cheek, and I quickly wiped it away before stepping out of the car.

Chapter Twenty-six

Rayyan

I have never been good with words, but for Farida, I would try.

Leaning against my car, I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated. "What have I done?" I muttered to myself. I had been watching her from afar, hoping she would at least look at me, but she never did. Not even once.

The past months had been hell. I thought staying away was the best.

What if I get to know something again through her?

But now, standing here, seeing her walk past me like I was nothing, I knew I had only made things worse.

"Farida..." I whispered under my breath, remembering the way she used to smile at me, the way her eyes sparkled whenever she talked about something she loved. I missed everything about her—the way she teased me, the way she got mad at me over small things, the way she made me feel like I was the only man in the world.

I let her go once, but *wallahi*, I won't do that again.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, pulling me out of my thoughts. I pulled it out and saw Maryam calling.

"Hello?" My voice was rough, tired.

"Ya Rayyan," her voice was urgent. "Farida is leaving Abuja today. If you don't come now, you might never get the chance to talk to her again."

My heart slammed against my chest.

No.

"Maryam, please try and stop her, at least for a few minutes."

"Yaya, if you really want her back, get here now." And with that, she ended the call.

I didn't think twice. I jumped into my car and sped off, my heart racing faster than my thoughts.

I reached the house just as she was about to get into the car. My pulse quickened. She looked breathtaking even in her simple outfit, but I could see the pain in her eyes—the pain I caused.

"Farida!" I called out, breathless.

She turned, her face blank. "What do you want, Rayyan?"

I swallowed hard, stepping closer. "Please don't treat me like a stranger."

She scoffed. "Isn’t that what you wanted? You left me, Rayyan, By yourself. And now you want me to act like everything is fine?"

"Farida, I was stupid, I was wrong. I know I hurt you, but I swear to you, I never stopped thinking about you." My voice cracked slightly, and I hated how weak I sounded, but it was the truth.

She turned away, but I stepped in front of her. "Not a single day passed without me thinking of you. I couldn't sleep, couldn't breathe properly without you in my life. I thought staying away was what I needed, but I was only punishing myself."

She folded her arms. "Then what do you want now?"

"I want you, Farida. I want to make things right. Wallahi, I love you more than anything in this world. I can't think of anyone else because I already have everything in you. You are my peace, my happiness."

She blinked rapidly, her lips parting as if she wanted to say something, but she stayed silent.

I stepped even closer, my voice low and desperate. "Please, Farida, forgive me. I know I don’t deserve it, but give me another chance. I swear, I will never hurt you like that again."

Tears welled in her eyes, and for the first time in months, I saw my Farida—the girl who loved me with everything she had.

"I missed you too," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Rayyan, don’t ever do this again. Don’t ever leave me like that."

I reached for her, pulling her into my arms, holding her as tightly as I could. "Never, baby. *Wallahi*, never again."

She melted into me, gripping my shirt as if letting go would make me disappear again.

This time, I wouldn’t.

This time, I was here to stay.

Epilogue

Farida

I had imagined this day a million times, but nothing could compare to the overwhelming joy I felt as I stood in the center of our wedding reception, surrounded by the people I loved most.

The hall shimmered with golden lights, the soft melody of Hausa music playing in the background. I could see Mama laughing with Adda Fati, their faces glowing with happiness. Rahina and Maryam were dancing together, their hands clapping in sync with the beat. Everyone was celebrating, and for the first time in a long time, everything felt perfect.

I turned to my husband—*My Rayyan*—who stood beside me, looking impossibly handsome in his embroidered navy-blue *babban-riga*. He caught me staring and smirked, leaning in to whisper,

"You look breathtaking, baby."

I blushed, swatting his chest lightly. "You better say that, after all the stress I went through to look this good."

He chuckled, his grip tightening around my waist. "I would’ve married you even if you showed up in your pajamas."

I rolled my eyes playfully, but my heart swelled with love. This was real. We were married.

As if the moment couldn’t get any better, a sudden loud cheer erupted from the entrance. I turned towards the door, and my breath caught in my throat.

Yaya Ibrahim.

I hadn’t seen him in months.

He stood there, looking slightly different—his beard fuller, his face more mature—but his warm smile remained the same.

"Yaya!" I ran towards him, hugging him tightly. "I can’t believe you came!"

He laughed, hugging me back. "Of course, I did. I wouldn't miss my little sister's wedding for anything."

Tears stung my eyes as I pulled away. "We missed you so much."

"I missed you too," he said, looking over my shoulder at the celebration. His eyes landed on *Adda* Fati, and for a second, they just stared at each other. Then, to my absolute shock, she smiled.

She still thinks of him as her child.

Mama placed a hand over her chest, as if she couldn’t believe this was happening. "*Allah ya kara maku albarka"* May Allah continue to bless you both.

she murmured, wiping her tears.

Rayyan walked over, shaking Yaya Ibrahim’s hand firmly. "Good to see you again, Ibrahim."

"You too, Rayyan," he said, nodding approvingly. "Take care of my sister, or else—"

“ I’ll take care of her better than myself," Rayyan cut in, his voice filled with certainty.

Yaya grinned. "Good answer."

The night continued with laughter, dancing, and an endless flow of delicious food.Surayya and Selin, my two beautiful bridesmaids, were right by my side. Surayya, glowing with happiness, rested a hand over her small baby bump as Selin whispered something to her that made her laugh.

"You’re glowing, Surayya." I said, smiling at her.

"Pregnancy will do that to you," she teased. "Don’t be surprised when it’s your turn soon."

I nearly choked on my drink while Selin laughed, shaking her head.

Billy, Rahina, and Maryam gave heartfelt speeches, even making fun of Rayyan for once being a 'walking red flag.'

Rayyan groaned, leaning into my ear. "I swear, I’m never going to live that down."

I giggled. "Nope, never."

♡

The noise from the palace hall was deafening. Laughter, chatter, and the rhythmic sound of drums filled the air. I adjusted my veil nervously, glancing at *Adda* Fati, who was beaming beside me.

“You’ll be fine, Farida,” she said, patting my hand. “It’s your day. Enjoy it.”

I nodded, but my palms were clammy. It was my *kamu*—the traditional unveiling ceremony—and the entire royal family was present. It wasn’t just about Rayyan and me; it felt like the whole kingdom was watching.

The women in the hall, dressed in vibrant fabrics, surrounded me, their songs loud and joyful. My heart raced as Rayyan’s family approached with gifts, negotiating with the *yan biki* to “claim” me.

“*Wai angon yana so amma kudin ba za su biya ba?”* one of the women teased. The groom wants her, but he doesn’t want to pay the price?

Laughter erupted as Rayyan’s cousins handed over envelopes, fabrics, and trays of sweets. The women kept teasing, raising the stakes.

“*Yana iya biya,”* came a confident voice. He can afford it.

I turned my head slightly, recognizing the voice. It was Rayyan’s friend, Surayya's husband, Yasir, and his confidence made everyone laugh even louder. My cheeks burned as the negotiations continued, until finally, the women stepped aside and lifted my veil.

“Ah, she’s stunning!” one of them exclaimed.

I lowered my gaze, overwhelmed by the attention. Rayyan was standing at the back, dressed in a royal blue *babban riga* with gold embroidery, his *zanna* cap sitting perfectly on his head. His eyes met mine, and for a moment, the chaos around us faded.

He smiled.

As the celebration started to wind down, Rayyan took my hand, leading me outside where the stars shined above us.

"I love you, *Tink”* he said softly, his forehead resting against mine.

Tears welled in my eyes again, but this time, they were happy tears. "I love you too, My *Ray*.”

We stood there, wrapped in each other’s warmth, knowing that no matter what life threw at us, we had each other.

And that was all that mattered.

♡

The trip to Dubai felt surreal, almost like stepping into a dream. Everything about the city screamed luxury, from the glittering skyline to the gentle hum of life that never seemed to stop. Rayyan held my hand as we walked out of the airport, the warm evening breeze brushing against my skin.

“You’ve been quiet,” he said, glancing down at me with a teasing smile.

“I’m just taking it all in,” I replied, my eyes fixated on the dazzling lights reflecting off the Burj Khalifa in the distance.

“Don’t worry,” he said, squeezing my hand. “By the time we’re done, you’ll be tired of me spoiling you.”

I laughed softly, shaking my head. “I doubt that. You’re the one who’s going to get tired of me.”

“Never.” The firmness in his voice made my heart flutter.

Our first evening was spent wandering the streets of Downtown Dubai, marveling at the breathtaking fountain show by the Burj Lake. Rayyan surprised me by booking a private dining experience on a yacht, where the city’s beauty sparkled against the dark waters.

“You know,” I began as we sipped on juice, “you’ve outdone yourself with this trip.”

He smirked, leaning back in his chair. “Nothing is too much for you, Faree. You deserve it all.”

The way he looked at me in that moment, as though I was the most important thing in the world, made my throat tighten. How did I get so lucky?

The next morning, after a long day of shopping at the Dubai Mall and exploring the Miracle Garden, we returned to the hotel, utterly exhausted. Rayyan had bought me so many things that I'd lost track—dresses, shoes, and even a new gold pendant with my initials engraved on it.

As we entered our suite, the sound of the Maghrib adhan echoed softly from the speakers in the room. I turned to Rayyan, who was already heading toward the prayer mat.

We prayed together, side by side, the peace of the moment wrapping around us like a warm blanket. As I finished my dua and folded my hands, I glanced at Rayyan. He was still sitting, his head slightly tilted upward as he whispered his prayers.

When he was done, he turned to me with that soft smile that always melted my heart. Without saying a word, he shifted closer and rested his head on my lap.

"Rayyan," I said, laughing lightly, "what are you doing?"

"Resting," he mumbled, his voice muffled against my dress. "Don't move. You're comfortable."

I smiled, brushing my fingers through his soft hair. It was moments like these, the quiet and tender ones, that reminded me how deeply I loved him.

"You're impossible," I said softly.

"Hmm," he murmured, his eyes closed, a peaceful expression on his face. "But you love me anyway."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "I do."

For the next few minutes, we stayed like that—him resting on my lap, me stroking his hair, and the world outside fading away.

"Do you think we'll ever get tired of this?" I asked after a while, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Never," he replied without hesitation. "This is all I need, *Tink*. You and moments like this."

And just like that, I realized that no matter where life took us—whether it was the bustling streets of Dubai or the quiet of our home—it would always be enough as long as we had each other.

Epilogue

Farida

Six months later....

The house was alive with laughter and joy. Everyone had gathered to welcome the newest addition to the family—Surayya's baby girl. She was wrapped in a soft pink blanket, her tiny hands peeking out as she slept peacefully in Surayya's arms.

We were all huddled in the living room, each person taking turns to hold the baby. Selin and her husband were here too, their faces glowing with excitement as they admired the baby.

"She's so beautiful," Selin cooed, gently stroking the baby's tiny fingers. "Mashallah, Surayya, you've outdone yourself."

Surayya laughed softly, her face radiating happiness. "Thank you, Selin. I think she gets her beauty from her aunties, though." She winked at me and Selin, making us laugh.

Rayyan was sitting beside me, unusually quiet, his gaze fixed on the baby. I could tell he was lost in thought, his lips curving into a soft smile.

When it was my turn to hold the baby, I couldn't help but feel a wave of emotions wash over me. She was so small, so perfect. Her tiny breaths felt like a miracle in my hands.

"She's going to be such a blessing, Surayya." I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Thank you, Faree." Surayya said, her eyes glistening with tears.

♡

As the evening drew to an end, everyone started saying their goodbyes. Selin and her husband left first, followed by a few others. It was just Rayyan and me now, walking out of the house hand in hand.

The night air was cool, the stars shining brightly above us. Rayyan squeezed my hand gently, breaking the comfortable silence.

"I can't wait to have a child with you, babe." he said, his voice low and filled with emotion.

I turned to look at him, my heart skipping a beat. The sincerity in his eyes made my chest tighten.

"Ray..." I started, but he cut me off with a soft smile.

“Not now, of course. When you’re ready. I just... I want to create a family with you. You, me, and our little ones.”

I didn’t know what to say. My heart was full, and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

“I want that too.” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

He pulled me into a gentle embrace, his warmth enveloping me as we stood there under the stars, dreaming of a future that already felt so close.

One year later....



And I did give him a child. No, children.

Twin boys.

Ayyan and Ayman.

The moment they were placed in my arms, I felt my entire world shift. They were identical, their tiny faces the perfect mix of Rayyan and me. Their eyes were still closed, but their presence was more powerful than I could’ve ever imagined.

Rayyan stood beside me, his face glowing with pride and awe. He looked at them as though they were the most precious treasures in the world—and they were.

“I can’t believe it,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “You’ve given me not one but two miracles, Tink.”

I smiled weakly, exhausted but happy. “They’re ours, Ray. All ours.”

The room was filled with warmth as our families gathered around to admire the twins. Mama and *Adda* Fati were over the moon, taking turns to hold them.

Maryam and Rahina were there too, their faces lit with joy as they congratulated us.

“They’re so beautiful, Ya farida.” Rahina said, her voice soft.

“I told you,” Maryam chimed in, teasing. “Ya Farida and Ya Rayyan would make the cutest kids.”

As the evening went on and the visitors started to leave, Rayyan and I were finally alone with the twins. He sat beside me on the bed, gently stroking their tiny heads.

“Ayyan and Ayman.”he said, his voice reverent as he repeated their names. “Ayyan, meaning light. Ayman, meaning blessing. That’s exactly what they are to me.”

I watched him as he spoke, my heart swelling with love for this man who had become my everything.

“Thank you, Faree,” he said, looking at me with tears in his eyes. “For giving me a family. For giving me everything I could’ve ever wanted.”

I reached for his hand, intertwining our fingers as we gazed at our sons.

“You’re welcome, Rayyan. But thank you, too. For being my partner, my support, my everything.”

♡

The sun was warm but not too harsh, with a light breeze blowing through the streets of Istanbul. We had all come to Turkey to visit Selin, and for the first time in months, everything felt peaceful. It had been Selin’s idea to bring us all to a park near her home—she insisted it would be the perfect place for the kids to run around.

And she was right.

“Ayyan, *ka bari!* Don’t pull her dress!” Stop it. I called out as my little troublemaker tugged at Nawal’s dress.

“Mommy, he’s disturbing me!” Nawal turned around with a dramatic pout, clutching her little yellow dress like it was a prized possession. Whenever she calls out "Mommy," we all get confused about who she's referring to.

“Nawal, *zo nan*,” Come here, I said, crouching to her level. “He’s just playing with you. Don’t mind your baby brother, okay?”

She folded her arms, her two-year-old sass already in full display. “*Amma ni ba baby bace*! But I’m not a baby!” she declared, pointing at Ayyan, who was staring at her with his big curious eyes.

I tried not to laugh as I adjusted her curls. “Yes, you’re not a baby, but he is. You have to be patient, *kin ji?”* Do you hear me?

“Hmm.” She nodded reluctantly before stomping off toward the swings.

“She’s going to make a great lawyer one day,” Rayyan said from behind me, his voice laced with amusement.

I stood up, shaking my head. “Or a drama queen.”

“Drama queen or not, she’s got you wrapped around her little finger,” he teased.

“Oh, please. She’s Surayya’s daughter; that’s all the explanation we need,” I replied, grinning as I watched Nawal run toward the swings.

Surayya and her husband Yasir were sitting under a shaded tree nearby, chatting quietly. They looked so happy, so at peace. It was hard to believe that just a few years ago, Surayya was in such a difficult place. Now, she had a husband who adored her and a little girl who was the light of their lives.

“Mummy, *ki kawo mini ball din nan*!” Bring me that ball! Nawal shouted from the swing set, her voice carrying over the noise of the park.

I turned to Rayyan, who was already holding the small red ball in his hand. “She’s ordering you around now?” I teased.

“She gets that from you,” he said, smirking as he tossed the ball toward her.

Nawal caught it and beamed. “Yay! Uncle Rayyan, you’re the best!”

Rayyan leaned closer to me, whispering, “See? She likes me more than you.”

“Keep dreaming,” I replied, rolling my eyes but smiling nonetheless.

Meanwhile, Ayyan and Ayman were waddling around near the bench where Selin sat with her husband, who was busy unpacking the picnic basket. The twins, barely a year old, were still unsteady on their feet but determined to explore every corner of the park.

“Ayyan, slow down!” I called out as he toddled toward a nearby fountain.

“Don’t worry,” Selin’s husband said, getting up. “I’ll keep an eye on them. You relax, Farida.”

“Thanks, but I can’t relax with these two around. They’re little hurricanes,” I replied, shaking my head fondly.

“Ah-ah, you sound like you’re tired already,” Surayya teased, walking over with Yasir.

“Surayya, your daughter is giving me a run for my money,” I said, nodding toward Nawal, who was now trying to convince Ayyan to kick the ball with her.

“Nawal, *a hankali*! Careful!” Surayya called out, but her daughter was already charging ahead, completely ignoring her mother’s warning.

“She’s fearless,” I said, laughing softly.

“She gets it from me,” Surayya replied, flipping her hair dramatically.

Yasir rolled his eyes. “Fearless? More like stubborn. She refuses to take no for an answer.”

“She’s determined,” Surayya corrected, glaring at her husband playfully.

“Determined to stress us out,” he muttered, earning a slap on the arm from his wife.

Rayyan chuckled beside me, shaking his head. “This is why I love watching you two. You’re like a comedy show.”

Surayya turned to him with a mock glare. “Laugh all you want, Rayyan, but wait until you and Farida have your own kids. Then we’ll see who’s laughing.”

Surayya is a full-time comedian. This lady thinks of Ayyan and Ayman as her own kids and somehow forgets that I’m their mother. Or what? She always pulls that ‘wait until you have your own kids’ line, as if I don’t already struggle to have enough rights over my own children. Sure, they’re hers too, in a way, but whenever she says that, I feel like I’m not a mother at all.

I felt my cheeks heat up at her words, but before I could respond, Nawal came running over, tightly holding Ayman’s tiny hand.

“Mommy, look! I taught him how to kick the ball!” she exclaimed proudly.

“Good job, sweetheart,” Surayya said, bending down to kiss her daughter’s forehead.

“*Ba zan yi wasa ba*,” I won’t play, Ayman mumbled, his little face scrunched up in frustration.

Rayyan crouched down to his level, ruffling his hair. “Why not, champ?”

“He’s tired,” I said, picking him up. “Ayyan, too. They’ve been running around all morning.”

As if on cue, Ayyan waddled over, his tiny arms outstretched. “Mama, carry me!”

“Me too!” Nawal chimed in, tugging on her father’s shirt.

“Yasir, she’s your daughter,” Surayya said, backing away with her hands raised.

Yasir sighed, scooping Nawal into his arms. “Fine, but only for a little while.”

“Let’s take a family photo,” Selin suggested, pulling out her phone.

We all gathered under the tree, the kids sitting on our laps while Selin’s husband took the picture. It was chaotic—Ayyan kept trying to grab the phone, Nawal wouldn’t sit still, and Ayman was dozing off—but somehow, we managed to capture the moment.

Afterward, Surayya and Yasir decided to take the kids for a walk around the park. Nawal was leading the charge, dragging her parents along as they chased after her.

Rayyan and I stayed behind, watching them from a distance.

“They look happy,” I said, leaning into him.

“They are,” he replied, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “And so are we.”

We stood there in comfortable silence, the sound of laughter and children’s voices filling the air.



The End.

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With love and endless gratitude,

Aisha



ENTANGLED TRILOGY: BOOK 2
TEASER

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About the Author

Aisha, a self-taught baker, chef, and makeup artist, is a passionate writer who crafts suspenseful, romantic tales with strong, powerful characters

Her stories often feature slow-burn romances, unexpected plot twists, and relatable grounded characters. With a deep love for storytelling and a creative spirit, she is looking to make her next project even more captivating than the last.

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