

Anti-Romantic

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For information contact :

(samama.reads@gmail.com)

<http://www.samamareza.com>

Book and Cover design by : Wenny S.

Concept design by : HafsaAdeel

First Edition: August 2023

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# Dear reader, this one’s for you.

# Prologue

No… I wasn’t supposed to kiss him.We can’t be together.It’ll change everything.

Oh, God. It already has. How did I let this happen? I am *leaving* him tonight.This is wrong. But… Why did it feel so right?

I pushed him away - and my happiness with him.He looked at me – shocked, and then hurt filled his eyes as I stepped away.

“I am sorry, Murad; I can’t let this happen.”

His sad eyes broke my heart into tiny pieces, and I hated being the one doing this to him. I hated myself.

“Why not?” He asked, his voice a husky whisper. “Sara, I love you, I’ve always loved you—”

“I have to go.” I interrupted, my mind still hazy. So I turned and ran. I felt the rain soaking my clothes.

“Sara! Stop! Please!”

I stopped and turned, “I promise, I’ll never stop trying… to show how much I love you every single day I am alive if you just give me a chance.”

I felt my heart break. He remembered what I had said to him, how I never wanted the person who'd love me to stop trying.

I cried.

He walked towards me.

“Stop, Murad, don’t.” My voice broke. “Forget this. Forget me.”

“Don’t tell me to do that.” I couldn’t look into his eyes anymore.

“This will never end well. Relationships end in one way or another, no matter how strong the love is.” My parents loved each other dearly, and now all I see is my dad missing her; all I see is Zainab’s shattered heart. I don’t want that, not for us, not for him.

“Don’t go, Sara. Just hear me out.” He said desperately.

*He doesn’t deserve to be heartbroken.*My mind echoed.

I pressed my hand against my mouth to hide my tears; I don’t cry; I never do.I have to go now.I sprinted.

“Sara!” He pleaded, but I left the boy with the kindest heart behind.

# 1

# SARA

Why do people fall in love? No, seriously, it's such a waste of time. Falling in love makes you happier, changes your perspective, makes you forget about your sadness, and even heals you, but the pain of heartbreak, is that even worth it?

Uhh, maybe yes. Many people would have lived happier if they hadn’t fallen in love, like Romeo and Juliet or Laila and Majnu. In the end, everyone has to die. They just lost a lifetime in the name of love.

But then again, if they hadn’t fallen in love, we never would’ve gotten those epic love stories, so maybe they were worth it. These stories weren’t written for us to swoon over, though; they were messages saying:

*Don’t frickin’ fall in love, you dimwit.*

But I could be wrong. I’m a confused soul and not a love expert.

What I do know is I never wish to be heartbroken. Love stories never end well, and that frightens me. I would rather be the guest than the bride of a wedding any day, just like now.

The sudden zap of the flashlight blurred my vision. I scowled at the photographer who clicked pictures of everyone at the wedding venue.

Wedding parties are supposed to be the most entertaining place in the world, filled with loud music, laughter, and people dancing. However, although I was at a Bengali wedding, it didn’t feel that way. Everything looked too formal, with no music, the fairy lights that hung over the walls in this vast garden the only thing making the place look festive.

I searched for a familiar face and found none. I was at the ladies’ section of the party, so the men – including my dad, sat on the other side of the white fence. Attending a South Asian wedding alone felt lonely, but I was okay with that because I didn’t need to smile at everyone constantly. The aunties didn’t pester me about my marriage as they have been with every eligible bachelor here. They didn’t even know me.

Also, I liked contemplating my surroundings. Everyone here looked terrific. Their make-up pretty, their traditional outfits sparkling, and many showed off their jewelry. However, none of them seemed friendly.

A girl my age matched her beige Lehenga with her little sister. I found that adorable, so I smiled at the older girl, but to my surprise, she twisted her lips at me and walked away.

“Okay…” I mumbled and frowned in confusion. I was right; none of the guests were friendly. I sighed and walked to the white fence, spying into the men’s section of the party to search for my dad, to see what he was up to.

I found him speaking with the people around him at a round table. I knew for sure he was discussing juicy Bengali politics by the excitement in his eyes. Every Bengali liked gossiping in one way or the other, definitely more than we liked fish.

The aroma of the freshly barbecued kebabs reminded me that my dad and I have eaten less this week so we could devour the grand buffet at this party. It’s a cold winter evening here in Dubai, my home, so standing under the open sky felt nice.

I pushed my glasses closer to my eyes and saw the bride’s father – my father’s old friend – arguing with the wedding planner.

I sighed. I didn’t know anyone here - not even the bride. I did meet her once, eight years ago, when her father had invited us over for dinner. I was sent upstairs to their villa to sit with the ladies while my father and other men chatted downstairs, and even back then, I knew we couldn’t be friends. She was mostly in her room (which I had found rude because hey, I’m an interesting person, don’t ignore me like this) - and when she was called out, she was on her phone the whole time, and then she had eaten pizza – which she didn’t offer me a piece of. I think I’m still mad at her for not sharing a slice of her pizza.

 It didn’t matter now, as I had planned to make up for the missed pizza at their mega buffet. My dad and I were here for the food, yes, but also because we had been searching for a reason to dress up fancy for months, and this was the best time to do so, so I wore my pale pink suit that played around my ankles.

I walked into the white tent and sat on a chair at one of the round tables. I glanced at my reflection through the phone to fix my hair. It might sound odd, but I loved admiring myself. I never said it lest I sound self-obsessed, but I adored myself, too.

I got a text from my friend - not *boyfriend* - Murad. I must always specify this to Zainab because she doesn’t stop calling him my boyfriend.

Murad - *How’s it going at the party?*

Me – *still waiting for the food,*

Me – *Didn’t you say you’d be ‘very busy’ tonight?*

He sent a picture of his desk filled with blueprints and papers under a yellow lamp.

Murad – *I am, but somehow I end up missing you.*

My heart skipped a beat. Ah, I should ignore it.

When I felt someone staring at me, I saw the girl who had twisted her lips at me sitting at the same table as me. She now scowled at me. I kept my phone down and bared my teeth into a fake grin.

She looked away, all the seats at the round table were taken, everyone busy in their conversations, including the bride’s mother. My attention fell back on that girl, and when she saw me looking at her again, she glared at me.

I sighed. Here we go again. “Do you have a problem?” I snapped.

# 2

# ZAINAB

I can’t remember what happiness feels like.I can’t even remember what a peaceful sleep feels like, either.All I know is that I'll never be able to sleep in peace again. My heart will forever burn and search for a piece of itself it’ll never find again.

Moonlight seeped through the windows and illuminated my room. I took deep breaths to calm my racing heart down as I sat on my bed.

The nightmares haunt me every day, and it always ends the same way, just to break my broken heart a little more. I can’t stop them from happening. I tried so much, but no matter how much I tried, the ending of every dream ended in despair.

My sister was asleep beside me, and my two little brothers slept on the other side of the room. They were all so blessed; they got to sleep so peacefully every night. The biggest monsters in their dreams formed only from the shows they shouldn’t have watched. I pray they always sleep well and never go through the pain I go through every day. I hope they get to sleep at night without the anguish that keeps me awake.

I couldn’t wish for death, to end my pain once and for all. I couldn't give up on my family, Sara and… my Fawad. Even if it’s hard, I’ll have to live, if not for myself, for them because I love them more than my life itself.

I can no longer explore the world how I used to, can’t find joy in doing the only thing I used to love, and that makes everyone sad. But how could I when everything around me reminded me of him?

The trees,

the wind,

the birds,

the skylines,

the water… everything; so much that sometimes I couldn’t breathe.

Sara, my best friend and my only friend. I once had pushed her away from me because I knew how my grief was intruding on her own life. She didn’t have to miss out on her life because mine was finished.

But I missed her so much that…

I learned to wear a mask of happiness to have her back in my life without ruining hers. Most of the time, though, I could feel her seeing right through me, I hated knowing it did not work on her, and many times I loved her even more for it. She makes me feel normal and as if nothing has changed, even if for a while.

I looked at a picture of my Love sitting next to me on my bedside table. I rested my back against the headboard, looking through the hundreds of photos I had framed on the wall over the last four years. I framed so many of them so often that, at a point, everyone thought I had gone crazy.

Maybe I’m still crazy; I know how to hide it better.

I feel so sorry for myself sometimes. I had so many dreams that I once wanted to complete and things I wanted to see with Fawad. I still wish I could every day.

I wish I had done something. I wish I had stopped him when I had the chance. I wish he hadn’t left. I wish…

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# 4 YEARS AGO

Traveling. I’ve always loved it since I knew how to walk. It’s a plus for me that my father sold airline tickets for a living; I always found my way around the computer to book a flight for myself with the help of some of his employees. I had once traveled to Turkey with my friends against my parents’ will. It was a bold move, I know.But it was my best trip, with scenic views and delicious food.

When I’m not studying, movies are what I love watching. But what I love more than that, more than anything, is this electrifying wish to explore the whole world someday.

I was prepared to get grounded by my parents when I came home from my solo trip to Turkey - I always make sure to be mentally ready just in case, as the last time I had traveled without permission, they were livid. But fortunately, I didn’t get that level of treatment. However, my passport was snatched away, and I was given a new rule: never step out of the house without their approval again. Huh, as if I’d listen.

I knew my way around the locker where my mother kept all the passports anyway, so I let them have it with minimal arguments.

My best friend, Sara, is four years younger than me, but she can still push me around like I’m younger than her.

Sara has the evilest mind with the cutest face. That’s why she's my best friend. I had met her when she was thirteen, and I had just turned seventeen – an age when adrenaline ran through my veins thinking I was only a year away from the freedom to do whatever and go wherever I liked. Little did I know then that I’d still need parental permission to go out and would need to follow curfew timings even after I turned eighteen.

I sat on my bed and called Sara. “Zainab,” Sara said.

“Sara. Why aren’t you ready yet?” I asked. She always got dressed at the last minute, which was frustrating. I didn’t particularly appreciate waiting while she applied lipstick for the third time before leaving her house.

“Do you have secret cameras set in my room?” She asked.

“I don’t need cameras to know how lazy you are,” I said. “Get ready at once. If you’re a minute late when I come to pick you up this time, you can take a taxi to the theaters.”

“I will then! You’re not the only one with a driving license on this planet.” She said as I heard her put her phone on speaker, followed by the noise of hangers in her cupboard clacking. She was picking out clothes to wear.

“I’m the only friend you have with a driving license and is kind enough to drive you around. So until you don’t get your car and permit, I rule over you.” I enunciated the last words.

“I can’t wait to pass my driver’s test.”

“Same here; you’re such an annoying passenger.”

“You’re such an annoying driver.”

“That didn’t stop me from getting my license.” I drawled.

“If I were your examiner, I would’ve failed you instantly.” She said sweetly.

“At least I didn’t fail my test because I drove too slowly.” I teased. Sara had failed her previous driving test for this reason alone.

“Okay, you’re the best driver ever. Happy now?”

“Mmhmm,” I hummed happily.

“Now, please do me a favor and pick me up before seven; I don’t want to miss the movie’s first scene.” She said… always so dramatic. “Okay, okay.”

I picked out a dark brown scarf and wrapped it around my neck; my hair swept to the side, clipped from the back, and I wore a dark green t-shirt and brown pants. It wasn’t something super fancy, but it didn’t stop men from staring my way.

I drove and picked Sara up exactly after 7 pm to annoy her.

“Zainab! I told you to pick me up before 7.” She complained as she got into my car.

I own a purple Toyota Mazda, the unique color of my car had initially drawn me towards it, and now I love it with all my heart.

“You did?” I asked with faked innocence, and that annoyed her further.

“We’re going to miss the movie now!” Sara whined.

“Not if I speed up,” I said, pushing on the accelerator as the car hit the road.

“Slow down!” She barked. I sped up a little bit more.

“Remind me why we are best friends again?’ She asked as she threw her pouch at the back seat, unplugged my phone, and plugged hers into my car’s charger. I scowled at her.

“Because no one else is capable of handling your nonsense?” I suggested, giggling at my joke. She gave me a fake grin and continued grumbling.

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The mall has been our forever favorite hangout place. This was where we always came to watch the movies, play in the arcade, learn to be hot, and be shopaholics.

“You look like a tree,” Sara said randomly as we stood in line for our movie tickets in this crowded mall.

“And you look like a cigarette,” I said back, with her beige pants and white sweater; I wasn’t wrong. We looked at each other again and started giggling.

We shut up - or tried to - when we saw people around us giving us unapproved, annoyed glances.

As always, we burst into the theater a few minutes late. People here, too, looked at us in annoyance as we squeezed ourselves into our seats. *Are we that loud?*

The movie was too good, even better than the Chicken Wings we had sneaked into the theaters inside the tote bags we never carried around on normal days.

I know we’ll genuinely never grow up because we still loved the arcade as much as any kid and loved winning cheap gifts to take back home as souvenirs. It was like a cheap casino that didn’t make us go broke.

We used to come here a lot together when we were younger and studies drained us both to bits, and we needed to unwind. Medical school hasn’t been easy. I preferred looking at the wall rather than studying, that’s how stressful it was, and this was one place I could calm my nerves down by killing zombies or punching monsters with a hammer. I didn’t want anyone to know, but imagining those monsters as my professors was fun. They deserved those punches for making my life hell by giving my class frequent exams and not giving us enough time to prepare for them.

But, according to my curfew rules, I was expected to return as soon as the movie ended. I had found a way around it by telling my mother that Sara wanted to spend an extra hour at the arcade with me, so I couldn’t say no, thus delaying my trips. But my mother is intelligent. She initiated a curfew rule for Sara, too - after a discussion with her dad - and now we are both expected home in time or face the consequences.

So now, as we stood outside the arcade, we wondered if we should disobey our parents and go in there or just go home.

“We’ll be late if we get in there. We have to be back home by 10.” I reminded her half-heartedly because I should, because I am, after all, the older one. “Do you want to play a game, though? Only one game,” I blurted.

“My money… It’s begging me to waste it,” she said dramatically. I bit my laugh and took her words as a yes.

I looked at my watch. It was 9:30 pm. We had enough time to return home now if we didn’t want to get scolded for being late. “We’d play for ten minutes and be on our way back home,” I told her.

“Okay.” she grinned, and I smiled back at her.

We played for an hour straight - until we ran out of money and ran to the counter to pick out toys with the tickets we collected from the arcade games.

“We’re late, Zainab,” Sara said as we walked out, looking around the mall anxiously. It was almost closing down, cozy with dimmed lights and closed stores. There was an odd beauty at this moment; it made me feel at peace, but it was quite the opposite for her.

“What if they close the mall down while we’re inside? I'd have to stay with you for the whole night.” She looked at me as if I were a bug.

I looked back incredulously, and she looped her arm around mine.

“Now quick, do what you’re good at and think up a lie. What will I tell Dad if he asks what took me so long?”

“Tell him you wasted his hard-earned money in the arcade; that’s what took you so long.”

She whined.

I rolled my eyes. “Just tell him you thought you needed to return home by eleven, not ten. That won’t exactly be lying.” I suggested, and she nodded happily. Was I spoiling her into a liar?

I dropped Sara off and went back home, and - as expected - got lectured by my mother, who told me how I was spoiling Sara (referred to by her as ‘that poor girl’). Little did she know of her wicked head. Father told her to calm down, saving me from a lot of scolding.

Sara didn’t go off quickly, either. “I almost thought Dad didn’t notice that I was an hour late, *almost*.” She sighed through the phone as she gave me all the updates later that night.

“He didn’t even ask me why I was late; he simply said, ‘Welcome back, beautiful.’ and asked, ‘How was the movie?’ It was when I was about to get to my room did he say, ‘Oh, you’re grounded for the rest of the year.’”

I gasped, “No.”

“Don’t worry, he says things like these but then forget he made such declarations. I’ll just have to not go out for a week or two before he feels sorry for me.”

“I’m not worried; I’m relieved I don’t have to be your driver for the next few weeks.” I quipped. She mimicked my words, and I bit my laugh down.

“Go talk to your *boyfriend* and don’t waste my time; that desperate guy probably misses your voice already.” She said and yawned.

“Okay, good night.” I smiled.

“Good night and sweet dreams.”

# 3

# SARA

“And she dared to call me a bitch *after ­*she pushed me to the ground!” I said. I told Murad about what had happened last night. He listened to me attentively, resting his hand against his car’s doorframe as I sat sidelong on the passenger car seat.

Last night was disappointing thanks to that girl – Nazia is her name, I later found out - I got in a fight with. She wouldn’t shut up, wouldn’t stop complaining and taunting. Once I left the table with a hot head to get myself some food, she stretched her foot out when I wasn’t looking on my way back, making me trip to the ground. Good thing the plate on my hand fell on her dress; it was the only thing that made me stop breaking her leg.

So to clear my head, as soon as the sun rose to greet us with a new day, I dressed and went for a walk. I live in a calm neighborhood that is blessed with trees, birds, grass, and peace, which is a shocker for where I live because this country is hot as—

Murad is not only my best friend but my neighbor too, so once I returned home, I found him near his car (a white Mercedes G-Class - his prized possession), taking out blueprints and keeping them neatly over boxes.

I wasn't surprised; he is an architect and a good one. He draws for his father's real estate development company, and at the age of twenty-five, he's built and helped build multiple structures people admire today.

He smiled at me as if I was the cutest angry woman on earth, his dark brown hair shining under the early morning sunshine. I frowned at him. I hate admitting this, but he's so handsome he makes me shy.

"I promise our wedding will be much better," Murad said mischievously. I bit my laugh before pushing him away.

"Will you marry me, Sara?" He asked for what felt like the millionth time since I met him. I pretended to think but found an empty water bottle inside his car and threw it his way. He chuckled. "Should I consider that a no?"

"What? No, of course not. When did I say no?" I asked and moved my legs inside and shut the door. “Why are you so confusing?" He whined and started brushing away the dirt of his car with a duster.

"Hey..."

"Yes, *baby*?" He uttered the last word with emphasis. I threw a fake grin his way.

It's my fault; it's me who'd allow him to call me baby.

*"I like the word baby. It is sweet."* I had once said at a sushi restaurant where I tried sushi for the first time upon his insistence. *"Sadly, we can't exactly use that; it's not like we're dating,"* I said.

*"Yes, yes, we're totally not dating."* He said as he bit on sushi with chopsticks. I marveled at the way he held the chopsticks.

*"Exactly, But maybe we can use it sometimes just for fun because, after all, it's not like we're dating."* I insisted.

The way he had grinned next that night made me regret saying that.

"You're so good at washing cars; will you wash my car for me too?" I asked sweetly.

He looked at me for a moment. "Look, I want to marry you and everything, but no. I will not touch that piece of junk."

"Did you just call my car a piece of junk?" I snapped.

"Is it not?" He asked slowly and stepped back, fearing I might throw something at him again. I got out and looked at my car in front of my house next door. It was an old SUV – really old, much older than me, and it was in golden color.

My dad bought me the car when I passed my driver's test, and because I was new to driving back then, he thought I needed to perfect my skills with a tough car before I could step into a better one. It has been four years since. Transportation in my city gets challenging if you don't have a car, so I am grateful for whatever I have.

My car works well. I just have to make sure:

- the radiator has enough water inside it at all times,

- that the tires are all filled in with air on point,

- the petrol tank is filled to the brim because the car tends to drink in my petrol faster than I can drink a soda,

- and make sure no odd or peculiar alert light pops up in the speed-o-meter amongst the many other unresponsive alerts – *every single day before and after every little trip.*

Murad drives a car so gorgeous and expensive that sometimes I wonder why he doesn’t just bubble-wrap it. So he did have a point; even I considered my car a piece of junk. "It's your car that's junk." I lied.

"Expensive junk," He said and grinned. I rolled my eyes at him.

"I can clean your car for you if you marry me." He suggested.

"Ok, clean my car and I'll think about it," I said.

"I need a stronger promise than that; your car is not easy to clean."

I scoffed. "You know what? I'll make sure it's cleaned professionally; at least they don't whine as you do." I said.

"If they scratch your car up in places, don't come crying to me." He drawled. "Don't worry; I won't." I snapped.

He was soon done cleaning, and I would be lying if I said I didn't check him out when he wasn't looking.

"Done? Okay, now clean mine." I said, and he scoffed. "No." He said as he collected all the trash around him. "Ugh." I hated trips to the car wash; they were such a waste of my already useless time.

"Okay! I will *consider* marrying you if you clean the car."

He smirked with confidence.

"Are you sure, Sara? Are you so *desperate* to marry me?"

I scoffed. "Yes, I'm so desperate to marry you," I said sarcastically.

"I'm not shocked; I've got a pretty handsome face; you said it yourself, remember?" He grinned— *I never should've said thatto thisarrogant dog.*

"I never said anything as such." I lied because I had.

He looked incredulous, wondering how I was such a smooth liar.

"Liar," he mumbled. I walked closer. "I might be, but hey, if you do this for me... I'll take you out on a date tonight," I mumbled adorably, looking up at him. He looked at me intently. "Please?" I added with a smile. *The magic word*. He smiled back. "But I thought we weren't dating?"

I frowned. "You just lost my offer," I said with finality and walked away.

"Wait, wait! How about I take you out on a date instead?"

"What *date*?"

"Let me rephrase that... um... I'll clean your car if you let me take you out for a movie."

"Okay!" I said happily, as if we don't go out every other night for dinner dates after Dad goes to bed for the night.

Allow me to explain; watching a movie with a guy, in theaters, or even at home is a straight no if I mistakenly ask my dad for permission. It's not like he has any problems with Murad; he doesn’t even know him; it's every boy ever who has a chance of taking me away from him. He'll be all alone if I did have a boyfriend and get married, and that very idea saddens me and worries him.

I'm sure my dad wants to keep me with him forever and never get me married. This is a blessing for someone like me who doesn't have a boyfriend and is scared of a married life. I am completely relieved and okay with it... yeah, totally, absolutely, without a doubt okay with it... I think.

Ugh! Murad makes me doubt my life choices. It's not like Murad and I are in love or something, so there's nothing to worry about for him here. However, explaining everything to Dad about us will take a lot of work, so I'd rather sneak out than explain.

I know, I know, it's not right to sneak out of the house alone without informing anyone; in fact, it can be controversial, too, especially if you're sneaking out with a guy.

But it can get so exhilarating.

# 4

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

This might sound filmy, but I've loved Fawad ever since I knew what love meant.

Long distance relationships can be challenging for many, especially if the relationship is a secret to the whole family, neighbors, relatives, aunties with big mouths, and their kids, but with the help of our love, everything seems easy.

Fawad lives in a cozy old town in Pakistan – the same old town we used to live in and grew up and fell in love until I had to shift to Sharjah with my family when I was 10. My handsome lovesick boyfriend never gave up on me when I left.

“During excavation, they hit something so loud I shook; I figured the workers broke something important,” Fawad said excitedly through the phone with his deep, rumbling voice - too deep for a curious man like him.

 “So we jumped to the spot where the noise had come from, and after pushing some soil out of the way, we found an old house there.” He continued. “There wasn’t anything inside the structure, but we figured it was once somebody’s home by its design.”

“Wow. Imagine, that house must have held so many memories for someone years ago.” I mused softly.

“The old bricks are still strong, so we plan to build storage for the construction materials. You know the best part about it all?” He asked.

I sat straighter on my sofa and looked at my little siblings to ensure they were still asleep. I hummed back in question, hugging a small pillow.

“My company gave me a bonus for finding the structure that saved them money from making the storage room.” He said. I squeaked but looked at my siblings again, my hand over my mouth, checking if I had ruined their sleep and my privacy. Thankfully, I hadn’t.

“Well, you just made a mistake by telling me that. I’ll shop so much with your money.” I quipped.

“That’d feel like a blessing if you’re with me, Zainy.” He said softly.

I smiled at the phone, the bright moon seeping into my room through the window next to me, illuminating the place. It was such a beautiful night.

“I miss your sweet talks,” I mumbled.

“I miss you too.”

“I wish I could be with you all the time.” I sighed.

“We can, you know… if you want to.” He mumbled.

I knew where he was going with this. “Just say the word, and I’ll speak to my parents about us.”

“Fawad, you know I can’t deal with their questions now. Things can go wrong if they don’t like us together -” Fawad interjected. “But Zainy, look at the bright side; if they accept our relationship, we could be together and love each other and get bored together and travel together, and no one would dare say a wrong word when we do because we’d be married.”

I closed my eyes. Everything he said sounded beautiful; it’ll be everything I ever wanted if my parents accepted the proposal, and that chance was slim. My father hated Fawad’s mother. He’d never let me marry into her family. As much as I know, when we were neighbors, a slight quarrel led to a more significant dispute until their hatred went to a point of no return.

“Things can go wrong if they find out about us. My parents can take away the ways I speak to you and, worse, blackmail me into marrying someone else so that they can diminish my chance of marrying you.” I said.

I could hear him sulk. My heart ached for him. “Maybe if we can convince them enough, surely they’ll agree?” He asked. “Maybe they will… they’ll have to! I won’t marry anyone else even if it kills me.”

“It won’t go that far. I promise you that.” He said a bit sternly.

“We’ll worry about that later. Because I don’t think I even want to get married now, especially when I am only a few days away from graduating medical school.” I said.

He grumbled something inaudible. I didn’t know why I wanted to laugh at that.

“There’s so much I want to achieve before I get married. I want to travel the world and help people who need it, and I can do all that if I get selected as a resident in a good hospital first,” I explained.

“Why do you think you wouldn’t be able to do that if we get married?” Fawad asked. “Because… when I get married, I want to be sure I can be a good wife to you. I love you so much. Don’t think that I don’t Love. I just need more time to settle my mind, you understand, right?” I asked.

“I do, Zainy.” He paused. “I will wait… I love you too.” He said.

I smiled. We were in our own homes, so far away from each other, hearing each other breathe. “I love you more, though,” I replied.

Fawad laughed, and even after being in love with him for so long, his laugh still made my heart flutter.

“Oh, you should know this; I am coming to Sharjah tomorrow,”  Fawad said suddenly. “I booked an airline ticket with the bonus I earned.”

“What?” I yelled, surprised. My siblings stirred in their beds, so I dropped down to a whisper again.

“Fawad. My Love, when?” I whispered excitedly. I heard him smile. “Tomorrow afternoon. I also signed up for a job interview there. If I get this job, I will earn more, thus be able to send more money to my parents and afford to live with you.” he said. “If not, I will still be able to be there for your graduation ceremony.” He added.

“You have no idea how happy I am right now, Fawad. I missed you so much.” I said, resting my hand over my heart. I last met him when my family and I returned to our hometown for our yearly vacation.

This would be the fourth time Fawad comes to Sharjah. “Can’t get enough of me, right?”

“Yes.”

“Will you wait for me at the airport then?” He asked shyly. “Of course, my Love, I won’t even be able to sleep tonight,” I mumbled.

“I don’t think I can, either.” He said.

I frowned at the phone. “Fawad, you said if you got the job, you could afford to live with me; by that, you meant near me, right? You can’t live with me without getting married.” I asked, almost accusingly. I could hear him smile with his dimpled cheeks.

“Fawad, what are you planning to do?”

“Nothing!” He said defensively.

“You’re not going to speak to my parents about us, are you?”

“I won’t, not without asking you first.”

“Good.”

“I do have a plan.”

“What plan?”

“I’ll tell you later, okay bye love you more.” He replied quickly and hung up.

“Fawad!” I yelled, but he went offline. Despite my full efforts, I smiled.

I still can’t sum up the courage to tell my parents about us; I know how they’ll react, so I keep giving Fawad random reasons to delay. We would have to say to them someday, and he always insists on doing so.

But I’m scared to know how they’ll react and what they will do. I am afraid to see the disappointment in my parent's eyes after seeing nothing but pride in them all these years.

It’s not like my father doesn’t like Fawad. He does… hopefully.

 He just dislikes his mother. And I know him well enough to know that he’ll do everything to ensure I don’t marry anyone in her family.

I know it’ll be hard for us to be together, but I won’t give up on us just because of my father's petty fights.

It’s something I’d need to worry about later. Right now, I need to make an extensive plan to make every moment of us together perfect.

# 5

# SARA

I have the best father in the whole world. He never makes me feel like I need my mother (although I miss her), being supportive and understanding in every aspect of my life.

My dad is my family, my home, and a blessing, and wherever he is, I will forever want to be there with him.

That’s the reason why I didn’t choose to study far away. It’s probably also why I decided to take a gap year after high school, then another… and another. My dad never pushes me into anything, so he let me have these gap years guilt free. That didn’t mean I didn’t feel guilty about it, though.

I don’t know what I want to study yet. I love movies but don’t know how to act. I love books, but I’m no writer. I can drive, but I am not a racer. I do like interior designing, buying new furniture and all – an interest I acquired from my best friend Zainab, but I just *know* if I stepped into studying it, I’d eventually hate it, so… It was the lack of motivation, laziness, and no pressure from my dad that caused me not to pursue higher education. I would've graduated by now if I had just picked a random subject and entered university.

But I don’t want to do that. I kind of liked doing nothing. So right now, I’m not studying anything, anywhere. I am still thinking about what to do with my life. I know; I am a 23-year-old without a single plan for the future. I’m being useless, but I try not to acknowledge it as I spend my free time doing, well… nothing.

A knock on the door meant Dad returned home from his office with lunch. He bought my favorite: machine-grilled chicken and soft round loaves of bread with fresh garlic sauce.

I stopped reading my book and kept it under the sofa’s pillow before he stepped in. He can’t understand how I read so much all day, so he asks me that every time he sees me with a book.

He then freshened up, and we ate lunch in front of the TV instead of at the dining table, just like we preferred. Dad flipped to the next channel when the Bangla news finished reporting all of today’s news and stopped at a channel playing a movie about zombies.

“Aren’t these *zombies* you once told me about?” My dad asked. “Yes, and they can be real someday if we don’t stop eating meat,” I said. He burst out laughing, and I scowled at him. “How can my daughter be so dumb?” He wondered out loud. “I got it from you,” I said.

When he realized I indirectly called him dumb, too, he said, “Yeah, well, you were adopted.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s why I look exactly like you,” I said equally smoothly.

I noticed a plate of meat curry my dad might have brought in and kept in a corner on the tea table when I wasn’t looking. He noticed that I noticed it too, but said nothing. “Do you remember the main reason why people turn into zombies?” I asked.

“Please remind me again.” He said.

“It’s because they eat meat. These people ate meat, so they turned into zombies.” I explained seriously and pointed towards the TV. He scoffed.

“I think it’s high time I get rid of those horror books you read and make you read some educational ones.” He said. My dad still thinks I read horror books as I used to in my early teen years; he still doesn’t know that most of my books now are romance, and I’d like to keep it that way.

“I think it’s high time you stop eating old leftover meat curries before I throw them out,” I said and pointed towards the meat curry, annoyed. He considered my words for a few seconds and decided against arguing with me further if he wanted his meat curry in the fridge instead of the trashcan.

“Oh look, your favorite advertisement is on.” He said instead, looking at the Snickers chocolate advert and trying to change the subject.

“That’s not my favorite,” I said.

“But the hungry version of that lady is exactly like you.” He crooned and thus started a newer argument.

# 6

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

An enormous plane whooshed above my car as I drove into the airport's parking lot. The flight landed 10 minutes ago, so I wasn’t entirely late. I strode toward the arrivals exit and waited for Fawad.

My mother knew Fawad was coming to Sharjah, and I didn’t tell her that. Fawad’s mother, Reena auntie had informed my mother, and just like the last three times, they decided it’d be best if he lived with us, as mother never liked keeping her guests at hotels. She deprived me of having my room just so she could keep an extra guest room for any relatives who came by - which was frequent.

My mother and Reena auntie were thankfully on friendly terms, so my mother let Fawad feel welcomed. My father had to begrudgingly shut up, as he never rejected guests, regardless of how much he hated them or their families.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Fawad walking out the exit with a trolley filled with too many bags- with homemade sweets and treats for us from our extended families. The poor boy had to carry so much stuff for us. As he walked closer, I felt my heart ease, like nothing else mattered. As his dark eyes found mine, he gave me a broad smile with his dimpled cheeks.

He looked so handsome, his dark hair neatly brushed to the back. He wore a white shirt tucked into black pants, his suit folded over one of his luggage. I ran towards him, grinning, and he took quicker, longer steps until he let go of his trolley, and we embraced. I hugged him so tight that my tall beloved had to take a few steps back to compose himself. He then hugged me tighter.

“I missed you. I missed you. I missed you.” He grazed his fingers over my hair and whispered in my ears soothingly. I felt my skin tingle. I breathed in the fresh soapy scent of him and tugged him closer.

After a long while, I slowly let go of him, but not before kissing his cheek and that dimple of his I so immensely loved. I flicked his beautiful long nose with mine. “I missed you more,” I said. He frowned.

“No, I did.” He said, and I pinched his nose. He had a small scar over his nose that he had earned in a college fight – which was something entirely out of his personality to get into.

“You kept me waiting for too long,” I said.

“I was one of the first to get out of the plane, but it took me a lot of time picking all these bags out from the baggage area.” He gestured toward the trolley filled with the bags. “And every single one of them weighs more than it should. You have no idea how much stuff I had to take out of the bags and carry with me.” He huffed.

“My relatives can get too emotional when sending things from home. And anyway, lovers can kill and break things just to get a glimpse of their beloved. You’re getting to see the whole of me; all you had to do was carry a bunch of bags. Consider yourself lucky.” I smirked and pulled him towards the trolley.

“Oh, the things I have to do for love.” He crooned.

My father had an important meeting, and my mother had to stay home to attend to my siblings when they returned from school. So my father was generous enough to let me drive his favorite SUV to pick Fawad up. He knew Fawad would be bringing multiple bags of sweets and treats from our hometown, so he gladly gave me the keys to his Lexus when he’d not even let me touch the car’s steering wheel on regular days. He thought I was a terrible driver and never trusted my driving skills.

We quickly shoved the precious bags at the back of the car and sat in the front seats.

I looked in my rearview mirror. “Seatbelts, everyone,” I said as I clicked my seatbelt into place.

“Everyone?” He asked curiously, and as if in answer, Sara peeked out of the back seat and squirmed between the front seats with a big wide menacing grin on her face. Fawad jolted in surprise. Sara and I giggled.

“Oh!” He gave her a mocking smile. “It’s you again.”

“Damn, I missed hating your face,” Sara said sweetly.

“Why are you here again?” He asked back sweetly as he clicked his seat belt into place.

“I’m here to neutralize this meeting into not being romantic because Zainab here doesn’t want her parents even to doubt you two might be lovers. So, in short, I am here to ruin your day.” She said, grinning.

“Heh. Good luck with that.” He looked back and made a face; she made a face too.

I sped off to the main road as Sara flared up the music speakers of the car and played outrageous Bollywood songs from her phone at full volume.

Fawad and Sara made sure to make a spectacle of themselves by dancing along with all the ridiculous songs being played out loud. I couldn’t help but laugh at the terrible singers but tagged along with them.

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My siblings were yelling at the top of their lungs as they fought with their plastic rulers - one of them would be getting hurt any minute now and will start crying. My mother knew that, so she was getting them untangled and dragging them for a shower when Fawad, Sara, and I entered my home.

We lived in the central city of Sharjah, next to Dubai, on the 10th floor of our 3-bedroom apartment.

Fawad and Sara trailed after me as we entered our living room, and I shouted to everyone about our arrival. We then placed Fawad’s entire collection of luggage in a corner.

Mother returned from the washroom and greeted us after ordering the kids to get their showers. “Ah, welcome home, Fawad dear.”

“Thank you, Auntie.” He said shyly. “Looks like you repainted the house. It looks beautiful.” He complimented as he looked around the house approvingly. Mother’s smile grew. “You look so tired! You should go and get fresh in the guest room, dear.” She said kindly. “Zainab, help him with his bags to the room.” She ordered and trotted into the kitchen.

Something smelled delicious, so instead of helping us, Sara trailed after my mother. “You two enjoy some time alone, and don’t do something illicit while you’re at it.” She whispered before leaving, and I gaped at her before pushing her away. She giggled.

“What smells so good, Auntie?” Sara asked when she got into the kitchen.

As I walked into the orange-colored guest room, I realized even if I wanted to enjoy some time alone with Fawad; it wouldn’t have been possible because my siblings had found a way out of the washroom and were now jumping around the newly unlocked room.

My younger sister Arwa, ten years old, still in her uniform, and my two younger brothers, Haider and Hammad, six and eight, in their red and blue shorts, were messing the tidy room up because they weren’t kids; they were little monsters.

“Haider, get out of bed. Now,” I ordered. He ignored me and kept jumping up and down the bed. “Haider,” I warned. He just showed me his little tongue and continued.

I looked at my siblings Arwa and Hammad and found them fighting for a toy I couldn’t see. I slowly dropped Fawad’s heavy bags near the door, ran to my fighting siblings, and attempted to separate them.

“What are you even fighting about?” I asked loudly.

“That’s my toy, *Baji*, and that stupid boy is not giving it back to me.” Arwa escaped my grasp and gripped Hammad’s hair this time. I snatched the toy away from them.

“I don’t know whose toy this is, but none of you are getting it back unless you behave.” I admonished. But they couldn’t care less. I pulled them away again. They scattered away for a moment before getting into another fight. I heard Fawad chuckle. Haider was still jumping on the bed and giggling. I just hoped he wouldn’t fall and chip his tooth *again*.

“Fawad, can you get Haider out of bed, please?” I requested him hurriedly.

“Sure.” He said and dropped his bags, then walked towards Haider. “Hi, champ!” He said softly. “You can come down now. I bought chocolates for you!” He offered.

“Don’t bribe that monster! And no sweets for him! Look at his teeth.” I said quickly. Haider stopped jumping and frowned at me, which cost him. Fawad got a hold of him and picked him up.

I finally untangled my fighting siblings with my hands and feet, but they were still yelling.

“Shut up! All of you!” I ordered them, and yet again, they did not listen.

Haider squirmed in Fawad’s arms until he bit him with his chipped tooth.

Fawad’s bark was loud enough to inform the city of his existence. Haider flipped out of his grip and ran to hide. It was an inappropriate time to laugh, yet I wanted to – so badly. I had to hold my mouth with my hand to stop myself. Fawad looked at me with a sorry face as if it was his fault Haider ran away.

He’s so adorable.

My mother finally walked in with her wooden spoon, ready to strike. Sara came next and leaned her shoulder against the threshold, her eyes filled with amusement.

“*Yeh sab kyachalrahahaiyaha*?” My mother yelled. She asked what was happening here, and my mother’s offspring finally stopped their brawl.

“Mumma, Haider bit Fawad’s arm with his chipped tooth, and Arwa and Hammad are fighting over a toy, even after I told them not to,” I complained like a baby. Mother squinted at them and found Haider hiding behind the bed.

She pulled him out. “Apologize to him-” She scolded Haider, but Fawad interrupted. “Oh no, Auntie, it’s okay; they’re just kids.” Her expression softened at his words.

“Look at how kind he is. He forgives your mischief! Learn from him, all of you.” She glared at them one by one.

“Arwa, Haider, Hammad, get out of the room now and finish your baths.” She ordered. “I better not see you playing with your toys when I get to your room.” She warned as my siblings walked back to the washroom.

“Zainab, come help me in the kitchen.” She added. “And Fawad, dear, get fresh so we can have lunch together.”

I looked at Fawad and smiled, followed my mother into the kitchen, and Sara walked after me, only to sit and watch TV in the living room while I worked like hell.

# 7

# SARA

The late-night wind made me shiver. I needed a jacket, but I chose not to bring one along as I knew I’d feel warm again once we got inside the cinema hall. It’ll be an extra burden to carry.

I wore a tight, low-cut v-neck full-sleeved top and tucked it under my blue jeans, ready to sneak out. I’ve been waiting in my backyard for Murad longer than the decided time, and it’s starting to annoy me.

A narrow pathway at the back of our villas is shadowed by a row of trees from the other side of the path. I usually climb with a tool to the other side of the wall as the front door of our house makes a loud squeaky noise every time I open it, which isn’t convenient when you’re sneaking out.

The landing on the pathway is too low, so Murad usually has to hold me when I jump down from the top; his height helps a lot here. If we ever feel a rush of electricity every time we touch, we never let ourselves admit it.

*Where is that arrogant dog?* I thought and sighed. I received a text.

*Murad: I’m on the other side. You can come up now.*

I walked to the far-end wall of my backyard.

I climbed atop it with a tool and frowned at him.

“What took you so long?” I asked.

“I wanted to look handsome for you.” He said adorably and pouted. He did look handsome. He looked like a perfect boyfriend with a blue sweater and white pants.

*Not that he’s my boyfriend or anything-*

He took his stance and raised his arms, and I jumped. He held me tight and landed me down softly. I tried hard not to acknowledge how he made my whole body tickle with a simple touch and balanced myself while holding onto his arms, not daring to look up at him. I also tried not to breathe in the spicy scent of his cologne that I so immensely loved, lest I seem like a creep. I pushed my glasses up instead.

We began walking towards the exit of this narrow pathway and towards the car he had parked in front.

“Which movie would we be watching?” He asked. I stopped.

“Whose turn is it to choose the movie?”

“My *handsome* self,” He crooned.

I gave him a fake grin. “I swear if the movie is one of those slasher ones you chose last time, I’m going to leave before the interval and drag you out with me.”

“Why do I want to see you do all that?”

I looked at him incredulously before walking ahead, and he followed.

“I’ve been working out for you, so I can hold you better every time you jump down.” He said and grinned. I bit my laugh.

“I didn’t tell you to,” Although I loved how strong his biceps felt when I held them for balance.

 “Plus, I didn’t see you going to the gym,”

“I see you keep notes of everywhere I go. You can be such an ideal wife for me.” He drawled before stumbling, and I held him before he fell. “Careful now, *baby*, or else you wouldn’t be able to handle me with a broken spine,” I grinned mischievously.

# 8

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

Fawad grabbed the safety handle above him with his dear life as I honked into the park. And now, after parking my car, I switched off its ignition and smiled at him.

“Here we are, at my favorite place.” This park is located in the buzzing city of Dubai, which is only 20 minutes away from my home in Sharjah.

“You are a terrible driver, Zainy.” He said after a whole minute, still stunned.

I clicked my seatbelts free. “Why does everyone say that?”

Last night was hectic. I couldn’t even spend a moment with Fawad, let alone talk. But now, under the bright winter sunlight, I finally got time to be with him. I walked towards the trunk of my car, and he followed. The parking was right outside the park, so we could see the trees on the other side of the fence that separated the park from the parking lot.

I looked at Fawad as he stood before me, all curious and excited to get inside. He’s wearing one of his regular suits with a white shirt. I looked at his outfit up and down. He looked handsome but too formal for a park. I knew better than to ask him to wear anything less. He loved wearing shirts and suits.

I opened the trunk of my purple car, and Fawad leaned against the bumper and looked at me. I glanced at him before looking at the contents inside. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking, why are you *so* beautiful?” He asked like he always did with a smirk. “Because you love me,” I crooned, looking into his dark, happy eyes. He slowly stepped closer to kiss me, but I stepped back and pinched his nose.

Fawad still had a hand over his nose as he grinned. The shy boy I used to know is fading away into a confident man, and both versions of him make my heart flutter.

I grabbed my bicycle from inside the trunk to get it out, but Fawad pulled it out instead. I took the food basket out next and closed the trunk.

“And because you’re my boyfriend, carrying my things wouldn’t be a big deal for you, would it?” I slightly pushed the bicycle and basket his way, and he held them.

“You love making me work. Don’t you?”

 “Isn’t that what boyfriends are for?” I smirked and walked into the gray pathway shaded with trees, the sunlight sneaking between the leaves.

Fawad kept my bike in a corner and quickly followed me to an empty spot over a short grassy hill in the park. I laid an old bed sheet, and we sat down. Fawad opened his suit, folded his shirt sleeves, and stretched his legs, leaning on his elbows and looking up at me.

“Did you bring your world’s best chai in this basket?” He asked shyly. I took out the silver flask and began pouring him a cup. I knew he loved milk tea, so I brought some with me.

“You make the best tea in the world, Zainy; I can easily spend the rest of my life sipping them.” He said excitedly as I handed him his cup.

“Love, you don’t have to overload me with compliments just for tea,” I said. “But I want to.” He said and sat up straight to sip his tea.

“Waah, Zainab! Waah!” He said suddenly, and I laughed.

“It’s unfair how you brought only one bike for yourself,” Fawad said after we finished lunch and began strolling around. “I’m the only one in my house with the biggest bike. My siblings have smaller ones, but I’d figured you’d look hilarious riding them, so it’d be best if we shared mine.” I explained, almost laughing at my imagination of Fawad riding my brother’s bike.

The park fell silent- as if we were the only ones here… as if this world belonged to us.

“Do you want to ride my bike now?” I offered. He looked at my bike up and down. “I’d rather look hilarious and ride your siblings’ bike than ride that.”

“Excuse me?”

“The pedal looks like it’d break off at any moment.” He pointed towards the bike I had bought when I was in 8th grade. It was pre-owned before I bought it, and the pedal did break a couple of times before, but it was purple, and I loved it.

I frowned at him. “It works fine; it runs much faster than you.”

“sachmein?”

“Ji haa,” I said adorably.

 “Chalophirdekhtehe,” He pulled up his sleeves and ran.

I quickly got on my bike with a grin and pushed on the pedals. I soon passed ahead of him and got onto a shaded bridge over the highway. He stopped to breathe in before running after me. And suddenly, as if his complaints were true, one of my pedals broke off under pressure. I quickly controlled it by pressing the brakes and putting my feet down.

I stopped, looked at my broken pedal, and quietly turned my bike around – towards Fawad. I had the back of my hand over my mouth as I looked at the damage from my bike’s seat.

We both looked at the bike in stunned silence as some cars whooshed beneath us on the almost empty highway.

I looked at Fawad then, his dark eyes looking right into mine, and we laughed. We laughed so hard that our voices echoed throughout the bridge.

Fawad had his hands on my bike’s handle as he leaned closer to me. “You jinxed my bike,” I mumbled, smiling.

 “But I don’t know how to do that.” He smiled at me with his dimpled cheeks, and my heart fluttered. “Besides, you needed a new one, anyway. Good thing if I did.”

I giggled.

“What are you thinking?” I asked curiously, and he leaned in closer. “I am wondering if I should kiss you.” he mused. My heart picked up a thrilling speed.

“What if someone sees?” I asked and giggled.

“I don’t care.” He said adorably.

I looked around again, but no one was around. “Then I think you should.”

# 9

# SARA

“Can you drive any slower?” I asked with an annoyed smile on my face. He chuckled. “Yes." He said simply enough to make me want to yell at him. Why are all my friends such terrible drivers?

 “Hey… *baby*?”

I gritted my teeth. “Yes, *darling*?” I asked sarcastically.

He chuckled. “You see that new building?” He pointed to his left; I saw a gorgeous new tower. It was beautiful.

I nodded.

“I designed most of it.”

“Wow!” I said genuinely, looking back, fascinated.

“I know.” He drawled with a smirk and brushed his hair back with his fingers.

“No, I meant, wow, you’re such a show-off.” I lied.

He laughed.

“Really?”

“Yes,” I said. “Wait, so that work didn’t impress you?”

“It… kind of did.” He grinned proudly.

“You must have traveled to so many places to have come up with such an amazing design,”

He smiled. “I did travel to many places, but honestly, the shapes and designs of structures, new ideas, they all come up from here” – He pointed to his head – “And the will to make it come to life comes from here.” – He pointed to his heart. I grinned at him curiously before looking ahead.

“Maybe I should start traveling to get inspiration on what I want to do with my life.”

“It’s not so difficult once you get the hang of it.” He said.

“Maybe I can take you on one of my trips. It’ll be fun,” I said and yawned. He looked as if he wanted to say *if we get married, I’d take you around for free*, but my narrowed stare shut him off.

“I’d love to. Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?” He asked instead.

“Somewhere romantic, somewhere I can find someone handsome to fall in love with.”

He looked at me, scoffed, looked ahead, and scoffed again.

“I thought you wanted to travel for inspiration *career-wise.*”

“Finding someone to love is also a full-time job.” He scowled at me.

 “Why do you want to take me with you then?”

“Who will carry my shopping bags while I hang out with my newly recruited handsome boyfriend?”

“Tell your *handsome* imaginary boyfriend to do that instead.”

“Murad, do you have a problem with me finding men other than you handsome?” I crooned,

“I don’t have a problem.” He said.

“If you don’t have a problem, I might marry one of those handsome men. Who knows,” I said again, and he looked so bothered a giggle escaped my lips.

“Someone seems… jealous.” I crooned.

“What? Of course not, it’s just that…”

“It’s just what?”

We stopped at a signal, so he completely looked at me, resting his arm on the steering wheel.

“Look, you are beautiful, and boys are assholes. You don’t know how their brains work; I do. Even I’m an asshole, I just try every second not to be one. It takes effort. Some random asshole doesn’t deserve your love.”

My heart skipped a beat. “So you’re suggesting I don’t like anyone?” I asked with a grin.

“I can’t and would never stop you from liking someone; I only care for your happiness. But I’d like to suggest you don’t give your heart out to any *handsome* guy.”

“Why?”

“Because they won’t care once they win you over. Guys are like that, *assholes*.”

“It’s why I won’t marry anyone,” I said with conviction, and he grinned happily before looking back on the road again as if he was completely capable of changing that.

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“You go get the food; I’ll get the tickets,” I told Murad as we entered the crowded cinema counter.

“Alright, but don’t argue with anyone while I’m gone.” He said.

“What, do you think I’m crazy?” I frowned.

“Of course I do!” He said and laughed. I frowned harder. “Your outfit is making you too sexy, by the way.” He said with a smirk before jogging towards the food court, and I suddenly felt shy. I wanted him to notice, and I’m glad he did.

I stood in line to get our tickets. There were rectangular automatic ticket buyers on the opposite side of the ticket stall, but I couldn’t opt for that as they only accepted visa cards. I usually use my dad’s for shopping, but I can't use it now because he doesn’t know I’m out this late. It would get into his records.

The line kept getting longer behind me- or so I thought until I looked back, and to my surprise, found the sports car driver who stole our parking spot standing too close for comfort, even though no one stood behind him.

The guy honked his way into the parking we were waiting for, and right before I could get out of the car and argue, Murad held my hand and drove off, finding better parking soon after and telling me how he was the ice to my fire because he stopped me from fighting meaninglessly.

I frowned so hard at the man my eyebrows hurt. He dared to look at me up and down and smile. I ignored him and looked ahead, trying to calm myself down.

 “Hey... I wanna talk to you.” The man said, and even though I didn’t want to accept it, I was kind of scared, which fueled my anger.

“About what?”

“What’s your name?”

I stood rigid, feeling uncomfortable. “My name is none of your business,” I said simply, looking at my wristwatch.

 “Where are you from?” The man asked again, neither backing down nor stepping back. I wouldn’t be this pissed if he maintained a respected distance. I looked at him.

“I’m from Jupiter,” I said and looked ahead.

He huffed a laugh, and I wanted to punch his face.

He got closer to my ear a moment later. “We can exchange numbers, so I can know more about your planet and have a little fun there too.” He said and gripped my shoulder. The toxic South Asian side of me wanted to blame my choice of outfit before blaming the man himself for bothering me.

I punched him with the back of my elbow so hard; if stomachs had bones, the punch would’ve broken those, too.

The man grunted as he took decent steps away from me.

I glared at him. “Stay away.” The people that stood in front of me looked back in surprise.

“What’s wrong with you?” he breathed, his hands still clutching his stomach.

“What’s wrong with me? *me*?”  I snapped. “What’s wrong with *you*?  Can’t you see that I’m not interested, or do I have to kick you on the head to make you understand?” I barked.

“Somebody put this crazy woman into the mental hospital!” He yelled.

I gave an angry laugh.

The man looked stunned when I stepped closer to show him what a good slap felt like. My hand flew up and thumped, not on the man’s face but on Murad’s arms. He stepped in between the fight, and a few pieces of popcorn fell from the large yellow bowl he held at the impact.

“Are you alright?” He asked, concerned.

I looked at him for a while, opened my mouth to speak but nodded and closed it.

Murad looked towards the man and glared at him as if he knew what that man was up to and then looked back at me.

The man stood there, stunned to see Murad with me.

“Did he misbehave?” He asked simply. He did not ask why I got so crazy and why I wanted to smack him. I glared at the man and then looked at Murad. “It’s okay; I can handle him,” I said. He didn’t seem convinced.

“I will take that as a yes.” He said. I nodded a no, I know him. His mom once told me how defensive he gets to protect her from street harassers – using threats and punches to show them their place. I couldn’t believe my ears then because I had never once seen him get mad-

“Hold these.” He handed me over the large popcorn bowl and the long Pepsi cups he’d brought. “Murad,” I said sternly. He gave me a small reassuring smile.

Murad dashed to the man and grabbed his collar as he pushed him against a pillar behind them.

“Oh shit! Murad!” I barked. That was so unlike him. He is usually the ice to my fire.

I quickly looked around for a place to keep the items he dumped on my hands, but I couldn’t find any, so I kept them on the floor and ran towards the brawl.

I heard Murad growling something I couldn’t understand in Arabic to the man as he tried getting rid of his grip off his collar, explaining something. He looked so scared. I would’ve laughed if I weren’t so worried about Murad. I didn’t want him to get into trouble or even get a scratch because of me.

I pushed through the small line of the crowd.

“What on earth are you doing Murad?” I asked worriedly as I pulled his shockingly strong arms away. He looked at me, and his expression softened. He let go of the man and took a step back.

He then glared at the man again. “Apologize to her.” He ordered quietly. The man looked around, expecting people to pity him for almost getting beaten up by Murad, but he got none.

“Sorry.” The man mumbled.

“Leave it, Murad, let’s go.” I held his arm – the one I had mistakenly slapped – and pulled him away from the man.

The popcorn and drinks were where I had kept them, so I picked them up. Murad kindly held the drinks for me as if I didn’t just pull him out of a quarrel. *I can’t believe him*. We walked deeper into the dark and cool theater. When I found an empty countertop, I kept the popcorn and pulled his arm to face me.

“What the hell was that?” I snapped.

“What was what?” He asked innocently and kept the drinks next to the popcorn.

“Do you think I’m weak and can’t handle these types of guys myself?” I asked again. He raised his eyebrow.

“No, I know you can.” He said.

“Then don’t try to be a hero,” I said.  “And don’t fight for me and get yourself in trouble,” I added.

“But I didn’t get in trouble. I just told him not to bother you and then left.” He said in his defense.

I stared at him.

“What kind of trouble do you keep talking about?” He asked.

“Well, for starters, he would have punched you back and ruined your handsome face.”

He chuckled as if that was impossible. “Handsome, eh?”

“Not now, Murad,” I snapped, and he obediently shut up.

“If you had punched him, that would’ve been a criminal offense.”

“But I didn’t get in trouble. I didn’t punch him either; I just showed that I could.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble for me, okay?”

“Sara, I could even go to hell for you.” He smiled mischievously.

“Will you take my words seriously for once?” I snapped.

“If someone misbehaves with you, I don’t care if I get in trouble or go to hell for it; I will beat the shit out of him. That man should’ve said thank you for not breaking his jaws.” He said coldly.

I rubbed my forehead in frustration. We stood there for a while.

“Your mom was right,” I said.

He suddenly got curious. “What did she say?”

I shrugged. “A random history about you,” He once punched a man so hard he broke his nose. His fault: harassing his mother on a shady street in New York.

“She told you about when I threatened a man to throw him off a flight of stairs if he asked for my mother’s number again, now didn’t she?”

I looked at him, shocked. “Are you a psychopath?”

“I’m guessing she hadn’t.” He said meekly.

“I am not a psychopath, Sara. I just don’t want those assholes to bother you or make you feel uncomfortable when you’re alone. So if I scare them enough, they won’t bother you or anyone again.” He added.

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“So you’re telling me that guy I just scared will bother another woman again?”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe not for another month,”

“Then that’s better than nothing.”

“Just don’t hit them… or grab their collars.”

“I’ll try not to.” He said, but it didn’t sound convincing at all.

“Can we watch the movie now?” he asked.

“I… couldn’t get the tickets,” I said, and he looked mad again - not at me, but at that man.

“He should’ve gotten the punch then.” He said with an angry laugh. I said no.

“Go get the tickets. I’ll wait here,” I said and pushed him. I didn’t want to show it to him, but I was still feeling shaky by the whole incident – however insignificant it might have been, so I wanted to stay in the dark and reel myself in.

*I shouldn’t have worn such a low-cut top*- I scolded myself for thinking such thoughts. This was in no way my fault.

I could see Murad from where I was standing, getting his card out of his wallet and clicking the buttons to get the tickets. With him, I felt at ease. He made me feel so safe.

“I think my arm still hurts,” Murad whispered as we walked deeper into the theaters. I rolled my eyes at him. “Because I mistakenly slapped your arm instead of that man’s face?”

“Because you mistakenly slapped my arm instead of that man’s face.”

“But I thought you were working out.” I drawled.

“I am.” He said.

“Are you?” I pinched his arm. “Ouch!” He barked.

# 10

# SARA

When it came to sneaking, I had calculated that going out on weekends had lesser risks of me getting caught than on weekdays. Dad always wakes up around 10 am on the weekend; it’s like a cheat day for him because he wakes up early almost every other day during weekdays. The business of bitumen needs a lot of attention.

The yellow street lamps streamed in through the car's windows as we slowly drove towards home, it was late, and the world around us was sleeping.

“My grandparents are forcing me to get to know this far-away cousin of mine - so that I could consider her for marriage,” Murad said suddenly.

“*What*???” I asked a bit too loudly.

“They say they don’t want me to make the same mistake my father made.” I let his words sink in.

“They said those exact words?”

“Not exactly, but they meant that.”

“Because your dad’s from here, but he got married to your mom; who’s from the U.S.?”

“Yes.”

“That’s considered a mistake?”

“In my grandparents’ world; yes,”

A pang of jealousy hit my heart. If that girl has seen Murad, I’m sure he doesn’t need to convince her to like him. I won’t deny that he’s handsome; I know how he looks. I’ve seen how girls look at him, sometimes making me want to glare at them even if I have no right to.

“What is the girl they’re trying to hitch you up with like?”

“I hate her. She’s annoying; she never lets me speak; always tries to touch my hair and is rude, in short - not for me.”

I laughed in relief. “You do have good hair.”

“You think so?” He asked with a smirk.

I nodded. “You can touch my hair if you like; I won’t mind.” He added and tilted his head my way, and I laughed.

“I am not going to get married to someone just because I’m being forced to.” He sighed. He seemed genuinely worried about this issue, so I rested my hand on his shoulder. “No one can force you to marry her if you don’t want to,” I said. He nodded and gave an assuring smile.

“I want to marry someone I know I’ll be able to fall in love with every day and forever,” He said. I smiled at him.

“That’s why I wish you’d marry me.” He said seriously. I stopped smiling and gave him a fake smile instead. “Of course, yes; let’s get married,” I said, and he grinned hopefully.

“In your dreams,” I said and laughed. He bit his smile but gave a sarcastic laugh. I suddenly realized why his constant requests to marry him had intensified significantly over the last few months. His grandparents want him to get married before he can find someone of his choice – whom they probably won’t like- and the thought of seeing him with someone else spiked up my anxiety.

*Don’t fall in love…*

Zainab fell in love, and then what happened? Now she’s so sad no one can help her out of the dark hole she fell into.

“If you can’t marry me, grant me a wish!”

“Genies grant wishes. I’m not a genie.”

He whined.

“Okay, what do you want?”

“For this night to last longer,” He said, and I searched for humor in his eyes, but his request seemed genuine. My heart melted.

 “But it completely depends on you if you want to go home or extend this trip by going to the beach.” He said.

 I thought for a while.

“It’s” – I looked at my watch – “it’s 2:30 am!” I exclaimed. We reached an interchange; going straight would take us back home, and right would take us to my favorite beach.

I looked at his adorable face and said, “Take right.” He grinned as he understood the approval. “The risks I take for you… if I ever get caught sneaking out of the house with a guy by my dad, say goodbye to the late-night trips with me.” I said.

 He looked at me momentarily and then looked back to the road. He was smirking now. “See, if we were married, you wouldn’t have to sneak out of your house to meet me late at night.” He drawled.

 His audacity was worth admiring.My lips tugged themselves upward into a smile.

# 11

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

My father drove, and Fawad sat next to him while my mother and I sat behind, and my little siblings sat behind us, screaming and giving me a headache.

“They canceled the wedding last minute because the bride's father couldn’t pay for the dowry.” Mother said sadly. She heard the news about her cousin’s daughter this morning when she called back home to get her daily dose of gossip.

“That’s unfortunate.” Father agreed. “The bride has been silent since. I can’t believe she’s mad at her father for this.” Mother said. We all nodded in agreement. Fawad cleared his throat.

“I think it’s more the groom’s family’s fault. They have no right to ask the bride’s family for dowry.” He said.

“You’re right, dear.” My mother said,

He cleared his throat again. “As a groom, I will never ask for dowry; nor will I let my family ask for dowry.” He said, and I could feel his pointed attention towards me. I had to hide my eyes with my hand to hide the embarrassment I knew was coming his way.

“Did I ask you?” My father asked. Everyone laughed. “Zahir. That’s not nice.” My mother admonished my father. Fawad smiled and scratched his neck nervously. “That’s an excellent thing you said, dear. You should never ask for dowry.” Mother said to him.

“Papa, did you take dowry before marrying Mumma?” I asked him accusingly.

I saw him grinning in the rearview mirror. “Of course I did.”

“You did?” I asked, piercing him with a glare.

“Yes! Of course, I did because your grandfather was *such a billionaire*, I had to.” He lied sarcastically.

We laughed. He would’ve had to hear a lot from me if he had. Fawad finally relaxed. Mother slapped Father on his arm. “Your grandfather took money from your father instead. He did not trust him at all,” she said as father drove into a parking lot on the roof.

We were at an indoor snow park because, well, Fawad had never seen snow before - apart from the inside of his old refrigerator back home so he wanted to feel some real snow between his fists and also wanted to see a real penguin so I rearranged my plans and squeezed a day at the snow park for us both. However, I had to include my family in this trip, as my siblings had overheard my plans and ran to my parents to tell them about my day alone with Fawad, so before my parents could ask me what I’d be doing at a snow park with a boy I pretended to barely know and flare up suspicions on my relationship with him, I told them I bought tickets for everyone. Fawad didn’t mind, though. He’s happy we have company.

It’s disturbing how I can’t even look at Fawad when my parents are around us. I felt ridiculous. So when my parents and siblings walked ahead of us and stepped into the snow park, I smiled at him.

“This jacket looks… weird on me.” He said. I stepped back, looked at him up and down, and laughed. We were all wearing red, black, and blue colored jackets, a red wool cap, and pants of the same color- given to us by the indoor park. Fawad looked extra funny in that outfit.

I took my phone out, giggling. “What are you doing?” He asked. “Taking pictures of a rare species,” I said. He smirked. “At least I’m not the only one wearing this.

“But that outfit looks better on you.”

“Let’s kiss then,” I said, and he backed a few steps, stunned by my boldness, and looked at my family’s way, worrying they heard me - they hadn’t. So he took it as a clearing and stepped closer with a smirk. I pushed him away, and he fell onto the snow.

I giggled and ran after my family, snow squishing under my shoes.

My siblings began playing around the snow like the little monsters they were, and my father walked around aimlessly as if bored while my mother walked after him with a slight smile on her face, looking up at the chair lifts, happy to be in a new place.

I looked at Fawad again and saw him picking up snow and feeling them between his fists. He grinned so big I almost thought he found gold.

“Is this real snow?” He asked curiously, still investigating the snow with genuine enthusiasm.

“No, it’s not,” I replied sarcastically.

He looked up. “Really?” He frowned.

I laughed. “No, stupid, it’s real.” He looked at the snow again with renewed enthusiasm. I could tell he was wondering if he could take bits of snow with him back home without melting them.

“Good that it is,” I said slowly. He looked up at me again and eyed the snow in my hand, now formed into a ball, and quickly tried pivoting away – but too late, the snowball hit his shoulder before crumbling away.

He gave me an evil, dimpled smile before bending down to build a big chunk of snow, and I quickly moved away as he got up. Our snowball fight began. My laughter echoed throughout the snow park as we hit and hid from the snowballs. My siblings found us playing and joined us, surrounding Fawad upon my command and hitting him with chunks of snow made by their tiny hands. He grinned back at them and hit them with small pieces of snow as they began squealing. I stepped back.

“Such a baby,” I mumbled and smiled.

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“What if they bite?” He asked nervously.

“Oh yes, they’re so scary they might devour you alive.” I quipped. He looked at them curiously, wondering if penguins could eat him alive. *Why is he so innocent?*

“They won’t bite unless you do. Now sit next to the poor baby.” I said, and he slowly sat a few feet away from the penguin. The penguin slowly flapped his cute feet towards him, and Fawad looked at it amusingly. He patted the cute penguin a few minutes later. I know he’d not stop talking about this once we left.

I had to run after my siblings to keep an eye on them while my parents enjoyed the place. Fawad held the hands of my brother and sister and spoke to them adorably as I held the hand of my youngest brother and walked towards the slide kids were playing on. They skittered away once we let go of them and started climbing the steps.

Not moving my eyes from my siblings, I leaned against a wooden fence. Fawad quickly followed after waving at my siblings. He, too, leaned against the wall next to me and slightly pushed me with his shoulder, I did too.

“I bought something for you.” He said. I grinned when he took out a gold heart pendant necklace. It looked expensive. I made him clasp it around my neck, still smiling; I looked above to see if my parent’s chair lift had returned – it hadn’t, so I quickly kissed his dimpled cheek. He looked at me in shock, looking around nervously. I pinched his nose.

“I made sure they weren’t looking,” I said. He smiled and looked away shyly.

I walked ahead and hid my necklace under my shirt when I saw my parents coming towards us. My father called my siblings to come back, but as expected, they did not. My mother glared at me, a suspicion simmering in her eyes- or maybe I was overthinking- but it still made me nervous, so I followed after my father and scolded my siblings to come out.

# 12

# SARA

The road was empty, so Murad and I quickly reached the beach. He parked the car, and we stepped out into the cool night air.

I pulled off my sneakers to let my feet feel the soft and smooth sand beneath me. It felt nice. I pointed to Murad the old yellow lifeguard tower that was no longer in use – my favorite spot to sit and enjoy the view - and he nodded as we quietly walked towards it, the constant waves the only sound.

 I looked up. “Give me the food. You go first.” I said.

 “Ladies first,” He said kindly.

 “Can you just go first?”

 “But ladies always go first.” He looked at me, confused.

 I gritted my teeth.

 “I don’t want you to look up at my backside; that’s why I am telling you to go first, you idiot.”

 “ohh… Okay.” He mumbled and handed me the food.

“I’m not really into backs, but you’ve got a pretty good one.” I pinched his leg as he stepped up the ladder and laughed.

“Women can be so complicated. I mean, I was just being kind.” He said as he climbed.

“And how many women do you know to declare that?” I countered as I saw him reach the top of the tower.

 “Many, many women,” He announced.

“And how many are many for you, *exactly*?” I called back.

 “34 including my cousins,”

 I giggled.

The ladder felt cold under my palms.

I quickly reached the top of the tower, handed him the food, sat down facing the beach, and Murad sat in front of me. The small yellow tower is built with yellow steel pipes and has a red roof. I could see the whole beach comfortably from the spot I was sitting.

The full moon illuminated its brightness onto the magnificent vastness of the sea; I could see it sparkle from where I sat, lights twinkling from the ships lined up far away.

I began eating.

Murad stared at me, smiling faintly.

“What?” I said with my mouth full.

“You know, men write poetry for women like you.” He said, and I laughed to hide the flutter in my heart.

“Where’d you get that dialogue from?”

 “From here, and from here,” He pointed to his heart, then his mind.

 I laughed hysterically.

“How many times did you use that on other girls before?” I asked again, breathing in to control my laugh.

He frowned, “No one! You make me feel…” He searched for the right word. “Different.” He said finally.

I smiled.

 “Hey, can I ask you a question without getting my head bitten off?”

“No.”

“I’ll still ask, and it’s up to you if you’d like to answer.”

“You’re as frightened as one gets before asking a girl if she’s a virgin.”

He gaped in shock. “I wasn’t going to ask that! What the hell Sara where do you get these outrageous thoughts from?”

I shrugged,

“When did I ever ask you something near that?”

“What if you do?”

“You’re so unfair to me.”

I opened up my pack of pasta and dug in without saying anything further.

“Well, now you’ve just left me curious.” He said.

I twisted my lips to keep from smiling but did not look at him.

“Alright, back to my question. What do you think of me… like as a person?” He asked slowly.

I looked into his kind brown eyes. “Are you fishing for compliments right now?”

“Yes.” He said shamelessly.

“Couldn’t you figure it out yourself in all the years we’ve known each other?”

“Kind of, maybe, but I’d like to hear it from you.”

I thought for a while.

“Well, all the guys I knew before you, apart from my dad, were such stupid, arrogant, ignorant, insolent, sexist dumbasses and so unbearably annoying and stupid, but you’re only one of those things,” I lied. He wasn’t any of those things.

 “You said stupid twice.”

 “I know.”

 “I’ll have to let those words sink in.” He said.

I bit my laugh.

“Maybe they were shy?”

 “Who were?”

“The guys you met before me.”

I rolled my eyes at him.

“Why are you advocating for them?”

“I’m not! I was just wondering, as you are quite stunning, some men tend to get confused about how to react.” He opened up his fork and dug into the pasta. “I mean, I, too, got intimidated by your frowns too when I first saw you.”

“Doesn’t give them a clear check to be arrogant sexists,”

“See? Told you all men are assholes,” He said. I nodded.

“Forget them. You were talking about me,” He pointed his fork toward himself.

“You want me to compliment you further?”

“That was a compliment?”

I kicked him a little and thought as he ate, looking at me expectantly.

“Okay, remember the first time we met?” I asked.

He nodded.

“I’ve always felt safe with you, even when I didn’t know you well.” He grinned. I grinned back.

He suddenly looked away shyly. “Don’t look at me like that, or I might get on my knees and beg you to marry me.”

 I scowled. “This is why I never compliment you.”

“That won’t stop me from flirting.”

“Terrible flirting,” I corrected.

“If you don’t wish to marry me, at least find me another girl.”

I scowled at him, possessiveness pinching my heart.

“She’ll just have to be exactly like you.” He said and yawned, and I eased.

I took my phone out of my pocket and searched my contacts. “I do have a few potentials for you,” I said.

He looked at me as if to ask, *are you serious?*

Time ticked away distantly by as we spoke, the waves lulling us to sleep.

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I woke up with a jolt, my heart beating so hard I had to breathe in and out a few times before looking at my wristwatch. The sun had risen; it was 6 am.

I looked at Murad and found him sound asleep in the opposite direction, his head slightly tilted to the side, his innocent eyes closed shut, we must have drifted off to sleep, and we shouldn’t have. For a second, I didn’t wish to wake him up. He looked so innocent.

This isn’t good.

If I get caught sneaking out today, it wouldn’t be good. Panic rose to my throat at the thought, so I crawled up to Murad and rapidly slapped him with my hands to wake him up.

 “Wake up, wake up, wake up!” I growled.

Murad opened his eyes instantly, smiled mischievously, and yawned. “Well, that’s a beautiful face to wake up to.” He said, stretching his hands.

 “Why did you fall asleep? I'm done for if I get caught sneaking out of the house with a guy!” I whispered to him loudly, panicking.

“Don’t worry.” He said. “Not many people wake up at this hour on a weekend.” He added sleepily.

“Let’s go! Get up!” I said.

 “Okay, okay.” He yawned again. “Let’s go.”

He got up from his spot and stretched again, stepping down the ladder and walking towards his car.

I quickly took my phone out of my pocket and checked for missed calls from Dad, there were none, and my panic lessened a fraction, but I know my dad is unpredictable, and he never has the same schedule in the mornings.

I needed to get home *fast*. Murad was already next to his car and opening the door.

I ran towards him, the sand feeling soft under my feet - until I stepped on something sharp. I scowled so hard my eyebrows hurt. I quickly inspected my feet, and it was alright. I then glared at the object that quite practically hurt my feelings.

To my surprise, it was shining. I got down and picked it up.

It was a ring and a glamorous one. The ring's band was silver, and atop it was a sparkly blue gemstone shaped in a circle. It looked ethereal, as if waves crashed within it – I was speechless. I looked around in search of its owner, but I could see none,

*Why would someone throw something as beautiful as this?* I thought. It looked expensive. My imaginative mind quickly made up a scenario – a boy proposing to the love of his life with this ring right here, only to be rejected by her and him throwing this ring away, heartbroken.

What a waste. A sinister part of me wanted to take it for myself… However, stealing was a sin, but finders have always been the keepers from the beginning of time.

I decided to keep some money in exchange for the ring at the spot I found it – just in case the owner came looking for it, it wouldn’t be considered stealing then. I checked my pockets for the money and found a 200 Dirhams note – the money I had saved up to pay for the books I had ordered online.

It wasn’t enough for the ring; the thing looked hellishly expensive. I folded the note, kept it on the spot where the ring was, and put a shell on top of it. At least now my ethics won’t burn me up at night for taking this ring that’s not mine.

I got up and walked away, smiling at the ring adoringly. I tried the ring on, and to my delight, it fit perfectly.

My knees bumped the short wall that separated the sandy beach from the footpath and road. I jumped above it and kept walking, admiring the blue ring that now seemed to be glowing so…. magnificently under the sun’s reflection -

I stumbled and fell hard on the road. My feet hurt, my palms hurt. It took me more than a few seconds to reel myself in. I looked around me instinctively, wondering if someone had pushed me like the last time at the wedding.

I crossed the tall footpath and fell onto the empty cycle track at least four feet below.

I cursed as the pain began swirling within my ankle. I looked at the ring again and wondered if this piece of shi- beauty brought me this bad luck. I pulled it off.

Murad had probably seen me fall from his side mirrors because now he was getting out of his car and running towards me.

 “Are you alright, Sara?” He asked, his eyes filled with concern.

# 13

# SARA

Zainab’s purple car was parked before her workplace, the National Hospital. I didn’t want to come here and annoy her, especially not for a sprained ankle, but Murad was insistent, going as far as picking me up and carrying me to the car and driving here when we should have been at home by now.

I quickly stepped out and tried standing straight before Murad could pick me up again because as much as I loved him picking me up, I didn’t want Zainab to see that. She’d never stop nagging me about it. She already thinks we’re in love–says she can sense it, so I don’t wish to fuel up her delusion any further. Murad and I aren’t in love; she’s wrong, Full stop.

He walked towards me, and I held his shoulder and leaned against him as we slowly walked inside the enormous hospital. My sprained foot felt worse than before. I didn’t want to accept it, but I was glad Murad pushed me into coming here.

After walking a long distance and taking a few turns, I found Zainab in her uniform with a clipboard in hand, speaking to an older person. As she wrote, she looked up from her paper and found me sitting on a table. She smiled, surprised by my visit. I waved at her. The pace of her writing quickened, and she was soon done. Zainab said something to the older woman, and she smiled and caressed my best friend’s arm before she took her leave.

Zainab walked towards me with her usual elegance, looking at me with her big eyes and eyebrows so sharp it’s something I wish I had. She then looked at my hand, still unconsciously holding Murad’s, and raised her eyebrow at me, smiling. I quickly let his hand go.

“I would be lying if I said I’m not shocked seeing you awake so early,” Zainab said.

“Then lie,” I said simply.

She greeted Murad before whispering, “What’s your boyfriend doing here?”

I glared at her, and Murad cleared his throat, smiling but not looking at us. He heard her alright.

“He is not my boyfriend.” I snapped in a whisper.

“I’m thirsty, and because it’s *your* fault I'm hurt; go bring me something to drink,” I said to Murad.

“*It’s my fault*?” He countered incredulously.

“Hurt? Sara… what happened, are you hurt?” Zainab asked, her smile faltering. My heartbeat quickened.

“I told you to take care of yourself, Sara; why don’t you listen to me?” She said, the sadness in her eyes slowly shimmering back into life. That scared me – not of her, but about her. She pretends to be alright, but I know she isn’t.

“No, Zainab, no, I am fine! I just sprained my ankle.” I quickly consoled her.

She closed her eyes and breathed in. “I’m fine, Zainab,” I said again. She slowly sighed as she kept her clipboard on the table and inspected my foot.

“Nothing serious,” I added. She worried too much. People in her hometown still think she hasn’t recovered from her mental breakdown. Who could, after everything she’s been through? I shouldn’t have come here with a sprained ankle to burden her extra.

“I’ll go and bring something for you to drink,” Murad said kindly and left.

Zainab looked up a moment later. “It’s nothing too serious. I’ll arrange something for you; wait.” She finally smiled, and I felt like I could breathe again. Maybe that’s why she smiled at us… to make us breathe. I looked at her straight-as-a-queen posture as she spoke with a nurse, requesting her to bring something.

Zainab folded her arms before her and smiled at me playfully – just like she used to before everything. “How did this happen?” She asked and looked at my foot. “I fell off the footpath at the beach,” I said.

She scowled. “What were you doing at the beach so early?”

“We went on a late-night snack trip but fell asleep,” I said. She giggled, and my heart fluttered. Not many know how much I had missed her laugh in the months – years she didn’t even want to smile.

“Bashir Uncle must be worried; you’re not good at sneaking out.” She said as the nurse brought a bandage-like item for her.

“He doesn’t know that I’m out yet, so can you fix this mess so I can run back home?”

“Stupid.” She huffed as she tore the item open and patched my foot. Murad had come by with the water, but I sent him off to bring breakfast once I drank it.

“It isn’t anything serious.” She told me a few minutes later. “It’ll hurt a little when you walk for a few days; then it’ll be alright. Just keep the bandage on.” She informed me professionally.

“If it still hurts, what’s the point of you being a doctor?” I quipped. She smiled playfully before lifting my feet the wrong way to make it hurt. “I can make it worse.”

I barked and slapped her hand away, biting my laughter and scowling at her.

A handsome doctor walked in just then. I raised my eyebrows at Zainab and gestured to look behind her; she did and smiled reluctantly. “Good morning, doctor.” She greeted simply before looking back at me again, respectfully ignoring him.

“Good Morning.” the doctor said to her. “And good morning to you, too,” He said. I grinned with amusement.

He had the brightest smile, looking more like a football player than a doctor with short black hair. “You’re the most handsome doctor I have ever seen in my entire life,” I exclaimed, and he looked stunned. Zainab ignored him, looking through her clipboard again.

“Ah, thank you,” He smiled coyly. “That must be the best compliment I received.” He didn’t look like he was hurrying to leave, so I took that as enough confirmation to continue speaking.

 “Are you new here?” I asked.

“Officially, yes.”

“Where are you from?”

“From Bangladesh and where-” I interrupted with a loud squeak. “I’m from Bangladesh too!” We high-fived each other and grinned,

“What’s your name?” I asked excitedly.

“Ali.”

“Dr. Ali! I’m Sara.”

The way Dr. Ali kept sneaking glances at my Zainab, I wondered if he was interested in her. I mean, who wouldn’t be? She is gorgeous.

“You must have met my friend Zainab earlier,” I said, still smiling. “She’s the smartest and the strongest girl I know, amazing when it comes to studying, the best healer, and so good at cooking you’ll fall in love with her instantly on your first bite,” I said happily.

Zainab stared at me disappointedly; she did not want me to talk about her like she was a potential bride. I instantly regretted saying it.

Dr. Ali looked at Zainab with a smile. “Is that so?” He asked Zainab.

“She barely ever compliments me; I don’t know what got into her after spraining her ankle to get her to talk like that.” She said simply.

He laughed. “I didn’t know you had a funny side.” He said.

“I wasn’t joking.” She said with the same indifference.

A nurse came by then, murmured something to Dr. Ali, and handed him a file.

“Ladies, I’ll have to take your leave now. I hope your foot gets better soon.” He smiled at me and looked at Zainab for a moment before leaving.

“He’s something,” I said. “He’s got nice biceps, dark, handsome, and a doctor…. wow. Why didn’t you tell me about him before?” I asked Zainab.

“Insignificant.” She said, and when I gestured to her to elaborate, she said: “I don’t know why he acts like he knows me; it’s odd, especially because I have never seen him before.”

“Sounds like he’s interested in you,” I said.

“Well, I’m not. I am not interested in anyone. Nor will I ever be. He should’ve understood that by now.”

Fawad…. That’s why she was so cold towards him. He gave her the kind of attention she’d never want from anyone else again.

I held Zainab’s hand, and she sat next to me. We said nothing and simply appreciated each other’s company. Words couldn’t express our anger anyway, so we held each other tight for a while.

*I need to go back home fast.*

I jumped from the table, and my foot hurt – not as terribly as before, but I still winced in pain. “Where is Murad? I need to go back home before Dad starts looking for me.”

I walked ahead while holding Zainab’s hand for support and found Murad near a vending machine, buying snacks from it – or trying to – he bent down to reach for the food but struggled to see where the snack had landed. Zainab followed my sight.

“So… what’s going on between you two?” She asked curiously.

“Nothing’s going on,” I said. “We’re just friends; it’s not like we’re dating or anything,” I added quickly. “Just like we weren’t the last time you saw me.” I snapped when I saw her smile.

“I didn’t ask if you two were dating.”

I groaned dramatically.

Murad walked back and handed me a Snickers bar. I looked at him. “It took you *this* long to find this?”

“I couldn’t find anything that was tastier.” He said innocently.

I quickly opened the chocolate bar and took a bite. “Thank you,” I said with a full mouth and gave him my free hand. He held it tight as I took a step ahead. “Do you want me to pick you up again like last time?” He asked with a mischievous grin. Zainab gaped at me. I frowned and slapped his hand away. “I can manage without you quite fine.”

I looked back at Zainab. “Let’s go out tonight. I’ll drive.” I offered hopefully. Zainab suddenly looked hesitant. It’s been so long since we went out together. I wanted to whine, to beg her to say yes, but I didn’t. It was her choice.

She smiled sadly. “Sara… I just don’t feel like going anywhere. I’m sorry.” She muttered softly.

I deflated.

“It’s okay,” I mumbled.

“But can we meet at my home? Mumma can cook biryani for us.” Zainab offered quickly.

“Biryani? I’d love that too.” I smiled.

I looked into her eyes; they spoke to me more than words could. Those eyes that once burned bright with dreams, only its embers remained – not for herself, but for us. That broke my heart. It made me want to break this world to bits for reducing my Zainab into embers.

I glanced at my watch instead of her eyes lest she found out I was sad.

I then took out my ring from my pocket. I was so mesmerized that I almost forgot what I had to do, where I was, and what I was supposed to do next. I quickly snapped out of my haze and shoved it back into my pocket. The ring felt hotter than my body heat, which felt unusual.

“I must run back home before I get caught,” I told Zainab. “And fast.” I pointed that out to Murad.

“Okay, *baby*.” He said and gave me his hand. Zainab smiled at me playfully. I scowled at her; she knew why he called me *baby*.

“I will see you tonight,” I said as a goodbye – she didn’t like goodbyes.

“Let’s go,” I said, pulling him towards the exit.

Murad drove out to the empty highway. “You were… panicking while speaking to Zainab about your sprained ankle.” He said slowly.

“I was, Murad…. I had lost my best friend to despair once; I do not wish to lose her again by saying the wrong thing or reminding her about something she lost.” I mumbled and folded my arms on my chest.

“She’s strong, Sara.” He said softly.

“I know… but every time I see that sadness shimmering back into her eyes, I panic. I don’t want to see her as broken as she was again. I just won’t be able to handle it this time.” I said, my voice shaking. I took a long breath to calm my heart down. Murad held my hand to comfort me.

“I won’t be able to handle it….”

# 14

# SARA

As Murad drove into our neighborhood, I wondered if he was going slow to get on my nerves or he didn’t understand my urgency. “If you don’t drive faster, this might be the last time we go out,” I said with a deranged smile, ready to kill. He looked at my smile delightfully before speeding up. I opened the passenger’s door before he could turn and park. I stepped out and limped my way to my home. “No goodbye kisses?” He pouted.

I looked at him incredulously and showed him my hand to remind him of the power of my slap as I limp walked. He laughed as I reached my main door.

This wasn’t my usual entry point whenever I needed to sneak back in, but I couldn’t jump back in from the backyard like usual; my foot was being a complete pain. Even though the door squeaked loudly every time I got in, I had no other option. So I slowly pulled my key out, unlocked and clicked the door open, biting my lip – as if the harder I bit, the slower the squeaking sound would be.

To my amusement (or shock?), the main door did not make its usual loud squeak. I slowly stepped in and moved the door left and right. It did not make a single sound. My dad had finally found the time from his lazy schedule to fix the main door. That meant I could easily sneak out without jumping from my backyard.

I wouldn’t need Murad’s help to get down; I wouldn't need to hold onto his arms either…

Murad didn’t need to know about the fixed door, nor did I.

I stepped into my cozy home, the Turkish carpet beneath me hiding the sound of my sloppy footsteps.

I looked towards the kitchen; I couldn’t hear the sizzling noise of breakfast being cooked or the loud noise of our washing machine either, which meant my dad was still sleeping.

I quietly walked upstairs to get into my room. I heard the door of my dad’s room open just as I clicked my door open, so I dashed in, hoping he hadn’t seen me. I peeped at him from the corner of my door. He yawned as he walked into the washroom, oblivious to my adventure. I sighed and closed the door.

I heard my dad’s footsteps coming towards my room, so I pushed the dummy pillows from under my blanket and got in before he knocked on the door and stepped in. I curled myself fully inside, my jeans making me feel anything but comfortable in my bed.

“Good morning, beautiful.” My dad said. “Breakfast time,” He added, knowing full well that that false detail would get me out of bed faster. I slowly opened my eyes and smiled at him. “I’m coming,” I said sleepily. He stood there for a while and looked around, which was unusual. I dug myself deeper into my blanket.

“Did you wake up before me?” He asked softly.

“Of course not,” It wasn’t a lie, as I didn’t wake up before him. I just never slept – at home.

“Oh, then it was probably your mom walking around.” He said. He did believe Mom came to meet us as spirit – as if she didn’t have better things to do up there.

“Yeah, sure, Mom would *love* to leave the luxury of paradise just to come and find us sleeping.” I quipped.

“Of course she would. You don’t know your mom!” He insisted on his way out.

As he left, he kept the door open and switched the noisy washing machine on a minute later. I wondered what on hell’s realm we had to wash at this hour as my pillow tried lulling me to sleep.

*I’m going to break that machine apart someday*. I thought as I got up and got ready for a shower,

Once done, I changed into my light blue pajama set with rainbow shapes on it and slowly limped outside and into the kitchen.

Dad smiled at me, but that quickly faltered when he saw me limping. “*Ki hoiche? Ebhabehatcho keno?*” -

What happened? Why are you walking like that? He asked in Bengali.

I couldn’t possibly tell him about the real story, that I sneaked out of the house with a guy at night and sprained my ankle at the beach, so I searched for a simpler answer.

“I fell off my bed at night and sprained my ankle.” I lied, unable to make eye contact with him. The lie was believable as I sometimes tend to fall from my bed while sleeping.

“Okay. Sit down; the breakfast would make you feel better.” He said and passed over a plate of scrambled eggs and bread. I felt guilty; I was lying too much today.

“Wow, thanks, Dad!” I said and grinned. “Eat it. Is it good?” He asked, looking at my plate. I took a bite, and it tasted delicious. “It’s fantastic!” *My first truth of the day,*

“You always say that.”

“Because it’s always fantastic,” He simply bared his teeth into a grin – something he did every time he received a compliment - before sitting and having breakfast.

# 15

# SARA

I’m in Zainab’s home… After months! My stomach feels too full with Faiza auntie’s home-cooked biryani, and now I’m sitting on Zainab’s bed with her laptop on my lap and my eyes towards the TV. Zainab sat beside me, resting her back against her headboard and painting her nails after I pushed her to do so.

I searched for a movie for us to watch on the laptop as I kept glancing towards the TV, binge-watching music videos by BTS, who had a big chunk of my heart in their pockets.

We were having a sleepover, so we made Arwa sleep on a sofa beside the window, where she fit perfectly. She wasn’t happy about how we bullied her into fitting herself there while we overtook her spot.

Zainab put down the nail polish on her bedside table and looked at me with a grin. She wiggled her fingers, showing me her colorful nails. “What do you think?” She’s being hilarious today, and my heart feels full.

“Nice, now do mine.”

“No,”

“Rude.”

Zainab had repainted her room from green to pink, and the boys of this room - Zainab’s little brothers, did not like it. So they tried making their side of the room look as boyish as possible with posters of cars and superheroes. One of Zainab’s brothers, Hammad, now growing up a little every day, sat at his desk studying.

To my annoyance, the next music video on TV was of a woman in a black dress dancing. I was about to change it back to another upbeat song from my favorite band when I noticed Hammad looking up from his papers and staring at her. The boy was growing up, I realized with amusement.

I gestured to Zainab to look at him, and when she noticed him watching TV, she hid her smile with her fist. I threw a pillow at him. He looked back and frowned with a frown that looked too much like Zainab’s.

“What is it?” He asked, with just as much venom as he’d throw at his sister.

“Do you like that woman?” I pointed to the TV.

He looked at the TV, then back at his notebook shyly. “No, I don’t.” He mumbled.

I rolled my eyes. “If you like her, just tell us,” I said teasingly.

He looked at her sister, who smiled in amusement but said nothing.

Hammad looked embarrassed that his oldest sister knew he liked a girl. So he loudly closed all his books. “I am going to the living room.” He said stiffly.

“I knew you liked her!” I exclaimed. “What do you like about her?” I asked.

“Shut up, please.” He grumbled, popped out a pair of white headphones from his pockets, and plugged them into his ears, ignoring me.

“Hammad! Go to Mom’s room and see if your brother needs help with his studies.” Zainab ordered. “Yeah, yeah,” He said as he left.

“Why are 12-year-olds like that?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“Like that. Stuck-up,”

“He’s not exactly 12 yet, and about your question, I am not sure.”

“You’re the only one who’s a doctor here.”

“Still a resident, not a full doctor,” She mumbled and cleared her throat before adding – “it’s the hormones.”

I huffed and clicked around her laptop.

“How’s your foot now?” Zainab asked. I rotated my sprained foot and winced. “It’s okay when I’m not moving it,” I confessed.

“Let it rest.” She said softly.

 “Oh, that reminds me, I forgot to stalk that hot new doctor at your hospital!” I said excitedly.

“I had it in my mind when I got in...” I said, and as I scrolled through thousands of people named Ali, I finally found the one I was looking for.

“Found him!” I squealed. Zainab sighed and ignored me.

I looked through his pictures. He had a blog, too, so I clicked on the link and found poetries he wrote. *Intriguing*.

I looked at Zainab watching TV. “He’s a poet,” I said, amazed. Zainab looked confused. I clicked on his latest poem, which was posted a day ago. I read it out loud.

*One-sided love,*

*It’s a love so irrevocable,*

*Yet so beautiful and so careless,*

*A love that has no commitments,*

*No prospects; or boundaries.*

*And yet it’s so beautiful.*

*It’s a love that breaks your heart,*

*Mends it, and then breaks it all over again.*

*Yet we choose to love,*

*Because there’s no love like a love that just loves*

*Love without hope,*

*And yet, the one-sided lovers always, furtively, hopelessly hope. – Ali, the Hopeless Poet.*

“O… okay,” I said. “Do you think he’s writing about you?” I added excitedly.

“No,” Zainab said quietly.

“What if he is?” I crooned.

She gave me a disappointed stare.

“I mean, how can you be so sure? He published it last night.” I said.

“Sara.”

“Zainab, look at this guy. He’s a doctor and a poet, and he’s a perfectly eligible bachelor who’s interested in *you*.” I blabbered on like an idiot.

“*Sara*.” She said sternly, and I shut up. She had to be stern to remind me why she didn’t like to talk about these things and, in a way, begged me to stop, for Fawad…

I sat silently, looking into her dull eyes, my heart filling with guilt. If what I had done was my way to make her move on, it was a terrible idea.

“Fruits! Who’d like some fruit?” Zainab’s mother trotted into the room, thankful for her and for the distraction I received. In her hands was a tray with bowls of mixed fruit. We took ours and started eating.

 “Thanks.” Zainab, Arwa, and I said in unison. Their mom smiled brightly at us.

“Mummaaaa!” Haider called out from the other room.

“I can’t understand this equation!” He yelled.

“Ask your Papa!” She yelled back. “He’s watching the news!”  He complained. Faiza Auntie sighed.

“I am coming!” She called back.

To our annoyance, she trotted out of the room and kept the door a little open. We looked at Arwa, who was busy on her tablet watching a K drama I had recommended with her pink headphones on, her head relaxing on the sofa handle. When she saw us looking, she glared back. She knew what our look meant. She sighed dramatically, paused on the video, got up, and shut the door.

My tremendous love for BTS is one of those things I couldn’t share with Zainab. She couldn’t get into the fandom because of her busy schedule while I had all the time in the world to get to know them, their history, and their culture – something similar to ours, yet not at all. However, it’s something I got to share with Arwa. It’s a special bond we share that Zainab hilariously doesn’t understand and squints at us when we squeak while watching their new music videos or live concerts together.

I closed all the tabs I had opened to stalk Dr. Ali on the laptop and silently ate my fruits as the TV played another song I loved. I sneaked a look at Zainab, and she looked lost again. I hated myself for being so ignorant, for talking about things she never even wanted to think about. I am a terrible friend.

“Zainab,” I said softly. She quickly looked up from her bowl of fruits and smiled. I knew that smile. It wasn’t a real one; it was the one she used to show that she was okay when she wasn’t. I pushed it too far; I can be such a terrible friend sometimes—

“You look like you want to cry.” Zainab quipped between my trail of thoughts.

“Are you okay, Zainab?” I asked. She stared at me as if wondering what to say. “Why do you think I’m not?” She asked quietly.

“Because you haven’t been anywhere apart from your office, mosque, and the market for the last four years, which might be a normal thing to do for many but not for someone like you,” I said.

Zainab did not speak for a long moment.

“I don’t like the idea of traveling anymore.” She said simply,

“Zainab,” I said and rested my hand on her knee. “Talk to me; I am here to listen, don’t keep your thoughts locked in; it’ll… tear you apart,” I mumbled. She looked at my hand on her knee and kept looking at it.

“Zainab?” I called her. She looked up, her eyes blazing.

“Stop talking like a fucking stranger Sara. I wouldn’t ask for your permission if I need to talk to you.” She hissed. If Arwa overheard our conversation through her headphones, she did not let on.

I decided against snapping back at her. I feared she’d shut herself completely again if I dared to push her further. I kept my mouth shut tight and chewed on my fruits.

“I know you want to bark back something equally hurtful.” She said a while later.

 “I do.”

“Why aren’t you, then?”

“I don’t want you to kick me out again,” I said, and that shut her up. She still regretted doing that.

# 16

# SARA

“Can we watch a movie now?” Zainab asked. I stared at her, and she did the same until she cracked up, and I rolled my eyes and grinned. I looked back at the laptop and opened up the options for movies.

“How about romance,” I asked.

“Did you mean Murad?” She asked back with a wicked smile.

I pinched my nose in frustration. “I said romance.”

“But I heard Murad!” She said and laughed. I sighed dramatically.  “So…What’s going on between you two?” She asked curiously. She didn’t want me to talk about guys who might be interested in her, but she loved doing the same thing.

However, in my case, it was so different from hers. Her love was filled with pain and regrets, while mine was filled with anticipation and anxiety.

“As I said at the hospital, nothing’s going on between us,” I said.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“The way he held you in the hospital, the way he looks at you when you’re not looking; sorry if it doesn’t seem that way.”

*He looks at me when I am not looking?*

“But there is genuinely nothing happening between us.” I insisted.

Zainab raised her perfectly sharp eyebrow at me in question.

“We just love talking to each other…”

Zainab smiled.

“I’ve been in love, Sara, and I know its symptoms….” She crooned.

*I can’t be in love.*

I scoffed. “I’m not in love, Zainab,”

“He’s a good guy Sara. I’ve seen him often, and he never gave me the wrong vibe.” She said,

“I’m not in love,” I repeated and then thought momentarily. “And even if I were – which I am not - there’s no way we could ever be together. Dad won’t approve of anyone I bring to him.” I said.

“So that means you do like him; you’re just afraid,” Zainab said softly.

“No,” I said.

“What are you afraid of?” She asked like a psychic in front of a magic bowl.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” I said with the same psychic vibe and held my head high.

I sighed and thought it best to let it all out. She won’t stop nagging me if I don't. “This might sound illogical, but trust me, it’s not,” I explained. She got closer to hear.

“As you know, Dad doesn’t like any guy friend I have. It was never spoken of directly, but I am not to have any friends who are boys at all. It doesn’t matter if they’re Bengali or English. I would lose all his basic trust in me if he found out I made a guy friend behind his back; he’d lose his *mind* if that guy friend turned into a boyfriend. My dad is just like that.”

Zainab nodded thoughtfully.

“You’re a 23-year-old grown-up; aren’t you old enough to have boyfriends without anyone’s approval now?” Arwa suddenly asked, and we jumped.

“You were listening to us?” Zainab asked accusingly.

“Told you to get this eavesdropper out of the room,” I said, and Zainab nodded.

Arwa rolled her eyes at us. “This is my room,” she said.

“Everything in this room is mine. I am just sparing you a spot.” Zainab said, and I cackled.

“And as for your question, if you think you’ll get all the freedom one could think of after you turn 18 - think again,” I said.

“You won’t be allowed to have a boyfriend even after you’re married,” Zainab said in that psychic way again, and I bit my laugh at Arwa’s confusion. “But I wouldn’t want to have a boyfriend after I get married,” Arwa said.

“Exactly,” I replied.

“Now, if you want to stay in the room, wear your headphones again and raise the volume high,” Zainab instructed. She grunted something inaudible but did as her sister said.

“Well, Sara… it’s your life and choices, but I’d like to say it’s not easy to find love, so if you think you’ve found it, don’t push it away.” She said,

I sighed sadly and rested my head on a pillow.

“I can’t risk falling in love with Murad. He means a lot to me. If I attempt to turn it into anything other than friendship, it’ll ruin everything that’s going right in my life right now. Love eventually leads to heartbreaks. Murad is the last person on earth I want to get heartbroken by.”

I look up at my friend from the pillow. “You do understand me, right?” I asked softly. She nodded and smiled.

“You’ll find a loophole between everything like I had with Fawad. You wouldn’t have to work it out; it’ll just happen. Don’t stress about it now. Enjoy the moment.”

I just looked at her. “So you did not understand anything,” I said with a deranged smile. She laughed at me.  “I hope I never do,” I grumbled.

“Love is good. Trust me; all my words will make sense to you someday.”

“Love is good?” I asked annoyingly. *If love was good, why wasn’t she happy?* I wanted to argue.

“You wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about him,” She crossed a finger off as she counted.

“You’ll always miss him,

“Every song about love will start making sense…”

I scoffed.

“Life is not a movie Zainab.”

“That’s what everyone thinks before they fall in love.” She crooned.

“Will you girls shut up?” Arwa slipped her headphones off. “I’m in a crucial scene on this K drama.” She pointed towards her tablet. “Which you suggested,” She pointed her finger at me accusingly. “At least you should know how I feel. So please don’t distract me again.” Zainab and I looked at each other.

“Would you be a sweetheart and take it outside then? We’re having important discussions here.” I said sweetly.

“Important discussions?” Arwa scoffed. “Yea, sure… Oh, Sara, I think you’re in love.” Arwa mimicked Zainab.

“No, Zainab, I am not in love.” She mimicked me this time.

Zainab and I exchanged looks again. We knew what to do. I nodded once before we attacked.

We dashed towards her sofa and tickled her. I attacked her tummy, and Zainab attacked her neck. We laughed like lunatics as we tickled her enough to make her apologize, but that didn’t stop us from tickling her further. Only the interference of Faiza Auntie did.

“Stop being such babies and go back to bed!” Zainab’s mom admonished.

We smiled meekly at her and went back to our bed. Arwa showed us her tongue, her cheeks pink and breathing heavy, before slipping her headphones back on and continuing to play the drama again.

I switched off the lights in the bedroom and tucked myself under the blanket, and Zainab tucked herself next to me.

“We should find a Korean boyfriend for Arwa,” Zainab said, and we both laughed. Arwa stared at us again. “Don’t bother; I tried; they don’t get impressed by me as quickly as I’d like them to be.” She mumbled, and Zainab and I took a moment before we burst out laughing.

Arwa bit her laugh and tried frowning at us.

# 17

# SARA

I needed distractions.It has been a whole week, and the more I tried not thinking about Murad, the more I thought of him. *I can’t be in love with him*. I repeated, hoping I’ll start believing that too.

Avoiding Murad was more complicated than I thought it would be. He always found a way to pop up in front of me with his innocent smile, making my heart feel at ease.

How can I ever avoid him?

This never happened to me before, or maybe I never noticed how I always thought about us, our jokes, our secrets, our stories. I’d think about him for the rest of the day, and as if in a loop, I’d wake up and think about him all over again. Not a day went by since I met him when I didn’t think of him, and it has been years since we met.

I sneak glances at him through the window whenever he plays his violin at night to admire how adorable and serious he looks. I only noticed it this week, and I want to yell at Zainab for pouring her knowledge on love inside my head. What do I do now?

It was another weekend morning, and this time I chose not to go for late-night adventures with Murad and slept in instead.

I got up and took a long shower, got dressed, and sat on the sofa in my room near my window - similar to the one in Zainab’s room - the only difference was that my room was white and not pink, and it was a one-seater, thus not possible for sleeping. And unlike Zainab’s house, which was ten floors high, my room was on the second floor of our villa, so my view wasn’t epic.

I opened the book in hand, sat sidelong on the sofa, and propped my head and legs on its soft handles. “Do your job. Distract me.” I said to the book and began reading.

I read for half an hour, shaking my head every time I pictured the prince charming of the romance novel as Murad. I looked out the window at the noise of a car, expecting to see my dad so that I could unlock the front door for him, but I saw Murad’s car instead. He came back from the mosque with his dad next to him. He was wearing a white Kandura,

Murad’s hair looked ruffled by the wind, probably because he left his car’s windows open to feel the wind. He looked at my house and parking area as if looking for something - or someone.

Murad’s father opened the door of his car’s backseat and got something out. It was a bouquet. It had a bunch of yellow roses. Murad’s father took the flowers, walked toward his home, and gave them to his wife as soon as she opened the gate.

I smiled at them.

*I wish someone would bring me flowers too.* I thought. I remember Murad saying their marriage anniversary was coming up; maybe that sweet gesture was for that.

I got back into reading. I looked up through the window again a few minutes later and saw Murad come out of his home in a crisp white Polo shirt and dark blue pants, his hair neatly brushed to the side. He walked over to his car’s backseat and, this time, took out a bouquet himself. It was a bouquet of pink roses. It was probably his mother’s birthday, then.

My heart picked up speed when he walked over to my door and knocked on it. I didn’t want to accept that maybe he had brought those pink roses for me before knowing for sure.

I ran out of my room and right to the door, only halting to check myself in the mirror. I frowned at myself for doing that. I don’t usually check myself in the mirror before meeting him, do I? *What’s happening to me?*

I brushed my thoughts aside and opened the door.

He smiled at me and stretched the bouquet of roses toward me.

“For the lady who’s sunshine for the hidden shadows of my heart,” He said innocently and smiled, and my heart melted.

I grinned so big my cheeks hurt as I took the roses and sniffed them; they smelled divine. My heart felt *so happy* that I took a step closer to him and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you,” I said. He looked stunned,

“How long did you take to make that dramatic dialogue up?” I asked as I picked through the roses and admired them.

“A day, I think.” He mumbled and cleared his throat as if lost in thought. I looked at him and grinned wider.

“Why do you do such sweet things?”

“hmm... I think because… I love you?” I looked up, shocked. He grinned this time. He always says he'd like to marry me, but I never heard him say I love you. I couldn’t find the right words to speak.

I cleared my throat and gave him a mischievous smile. “I don’t care.” I lied. I did care.

“You’re one cruel lady.” He said. “I am, aren't I?” I drawled and admired the roses in my hand.

I stepped aside and motioned him to come in.

I can’t now, but I’ll return when I’m free.” He said. I smiled.

“Don’t bother.” I quipped.

“You know I would.” He said, jogged out the door but halted, walked back in again, “Can I kiss your cheeks too?” He asked sweetly.

 “Get out of my house, you creep,” I said calmly and tried hiding my laugh.

 “Oh, so I am a creep when I want to kiss you, and you’re not when you kiss my cheek and make me jump out of my body? You’re so unfair.” He mumbled in his husky voice. I shivered.

“Out,” I said.

“This discussion is not over!” He said as he got out of the door. I made a face at him, and he smiled back.

I held the bouquet of roses close to my heart and kept an eye on him until he left. I closed the door and leaned against it to look at the flowers, smiling uncontrollably.

*Don’t fall in love.*

My mind echoed, and my smile faltered.

I shouldn’t fall for him; it’ll only lead us to heartbreak...

# 18

# SARA

I rolled down all the windows of my old golden car and let some air into it. Dad was out all morning but didn’t get any actual shopping done. Who needs a crate of mangoes when you don’t have toothpaste at home?

“Hi.” Murad suddenly appeared next to my open window, smiling. I jumped as he amused himself in my sudden shock at his appearance. I gritted my teeth.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“No, I switched my car on to waste petrol,” I said sarcastically.

“Let me give you a lift. You don’t need to torture yourself with this… dirty thing.” He said as he looked inside the car with a slight frown.

“My face is up here.” I pointed to my face. He looked back at me. “Oh, I know that, and it’s pretty.” He said mischievously.

I gave him a mocking smile. His smile grew.

“My car is not torture,” I said. “And it’s not dirty,” I added. He drew a smiley face over the dust on my car as a response. I threw a crumpled receipt at him. “Go away; I don’t want you to waste your petrol on my errands,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. What’s mine is yours, baby.” He said as he picked up the receipt and looked through it. My heart skipped a beat *again*. I held my breath for a moment to stop feeling this way.

“Wow… does your dad know how much you spent on books last week?”

And the feeling faded.

“Shut up.”

“I was just wondering!” He protested.

I adjusted my rearview mirror.

“I’m going to the mall for shopping; you can join me if you’re free.” I offered.

“In this thing?” said that arrogant dog as he looked inside my car again.

I gritted my teeth as I shifted my gear to reverse. “Okay, okay. Wait. I’ll get in.” He said, walking to the car's other side and getting in.

“Hello.” He said again as he got closer and looked at me as he wore his seatbelt. I pushed his face to his side of the seat with my hand as I hid my smile and reversed my car out of the parking spot.

“Hey, nice ring,” He said. I looked at it then, the blue ring shining.

“Isn’t it? I stole it.” I said, wearing my powered sunglasses, and he laughed as if I couldn't do such a thing. I let myself not feel guilty.

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“Can you believe this?” I asked, annoyed.

“Can I believe what?” Murad asked.

“These pants don’t have pockets!” I said. We had finished my shopping at the mall’s supermarket and now stood inside a clothing store to check out their new clothes collections. Actually, I was standing; Murad just leaned against a table filled with clothes on sale.

He kept heating my ears with random stories as I drove to the mall, or maybe my car was heating my whole body on a cold day. I still needed clarification.

“What do you need pockets for? You hang out with that, anyway.” He pointed to my small pink pouch.

I frowned at him.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, still frowning. “We need pockets just as much as you men do. Did you know we’ve been fighting for our right to have pockets in our pants since the 1800s? We still didn’t fully get what we deserve because of people like your mindset.”

“What did I do?”

“You’re supporting the designers that give no pockets in women’s pants because it’ll ruin their so-called ‘design.’”

“No, I am not.” He said.

“Yes, you are.” I blamed. Murad raised his eyebrows as if to ask, ‘Seriously?’ I just looked at him.

“So dramatic” He huffed and stood straight.

“Why don’t you look for something that *does* have pockets?” He asked. “Or we could look somewhere else,” He suggested.

“I am not leaving without telling them what I think of their new collection,” I said, grabbed the pants I had selected, and headed to the manager.

“Oh, come on.” He complained as he followed me.

I pulled off my sunglasses and kept them over my head as I stood at the counter. “I want to share my thoughts on the new pants you brought for this season.” I kept the colorful pants on the counter and looked at the manager, a lean, tall man, probably from the Philippines – guessing by his beautiful sharp eyes and cheerful smile.

Guessing a person’s ethnicity right without asking them is a talent that flows within you once you start living in the UAE. I’ve only ever been wrong thrice.

The manager smiled warmly at me, one step ahead to help me. But everything suddenly changed about his expression as he looked directly into my eyes. His smile fell, and he stood still.

I stared at him in confusion and looked at Murad, but he was busy checking out tiny notebooks on a shelf beside a counter. I looked back at the manager, and he still looked directly into my eyes… as if his soul had been frozen.

I bristled at this strangeness and cleared my throat.

“Hello. How are you?” I asked.

“Okay.” He replied robotically.

“I wanted to show you these pants. These have no pockets. I always buy at least something from this store every time I step in, but this time I won’t because these don’t have pockets.” I pointed to the pants and suddenly felt extremely silly. Murad was right. “All pants should have pockets, and it should be our choice if we wish to use them.”

Murad sighed dramatically from behind. I looked back and scowled at him. “Just get something that does have pockets.” He murmured.

The man still looked at me with that strange stillness. I continued talking.

“I mean… what’s the point of pants without pockets anyway, right?” I asked a bit nervously. “It’s like… it’s so… wrong and useless… this brand should give these for free, right?” His stillness was making me anxious. Murad sighed dramatically at my nonsense explanation.

The manager blinked and nodded once.

And then my eyes burned like fire – or it felt like it - along with my whole skull. I yelped in pain as my sunglasses fell to the ground. I had to press my hands on my eyes to stop getting hurt. Murad rushed towards me as s stack of notebooks fell behind him.

“Sara, what happened?” Murad held me as I searched for the pain again to check if it was still there, but it was all gone. I looked at him, blinked my eyes a couple of times, then moved my head a few times.

“Nothing,” I mumbled.

He looked at me in confusion. “Really?” He walked towards where my sunglasses had fallen and returned them to me. I took them as my heart beat at a frightening speed. I took a few breaths to calm it down, and once it did – “I think something had gotten into my eyes.” I lied, just to calm him down.

“You want me to bring you some water?” He asked. “Nah, I am good,” I said quickly.

“Okay...” He said unconvincingly and returned to the fallen notebook stall to pick them up. A woman came by and helped as she smiled at him, another woman followed in to help, and another came in ­– *who wasn't even an employee at the store* - to help him out. I gritted my teeth. A different kind of burn now simmered in my heart.

*Is that what jealousy feels like?*

While all this happened, the manager slowly took the pants from the counter, ripped off their tags and alarms, put them in a bag, and handed it to me with a blank expression.

“What are you doing, sir? I don’t want these.” I said.

“It’s so wrong and useless… this brand should give these for free.” He repeated my words robotically.

“I just said that as a proverb,” I explained.

“It’s so wrong and useless… this brand should give these for free.” He mumbled and handed the bag again.

“Umm…?” I asked, confused.

“For free,” He said. I looked at the bag again.

I took out some money from my pouch. “No, for free,” He said.

“Are you sure?” I asked. He nodded once. My dad would not be happy if he found out I took these items for free from this innocent man, but I also liked gifts…

I slowly took the bag and stepped back. “Thank you, I will keep shopping here,” I said. He still kept looking at me. “Sorry to keep you stuck here. I’ll leave you to your work now,” I said nervously. He nodded once and left, my eyes throbbing again, but it didn’t hurt as much as earlier. *I need to take a nap.* I thought as I wore my sunglasses again.

I walked to Murad. He was still surrounded by women smiling at him coyly as he said thank you. I looped my arm with his and smiled broadly at him. “Hi Baby, I am all done. Let’s go.” He looked stunned for a moment. “Baby?” He asked, amused.

“Yes, *Baby*,” I said, pulling him towards the exit.

“Thank you,” I said to all the disappointed women and headed out the exit with him and my shopping bags inside the supermarket’s trolley.

“Baby,” He said again as if tasting the word.

I cleared my throat. He smirked at me.

“Did you call me baby again? Did I hear that right?”

 “No.” I lied.

“The way you said it… did things to me.”

I looked him up and down. “Did what?”

“I can’t say.” He said and walked quickly ahead of me. I stood for a second to frown at him but promptly followed.

“Why did you call me baby?”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

# 19

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

I would graduate from medical school today, so the black graduation suit and hat suited me well.

I have been one of the brightest students in my class - or so I like to think, according to my favorite professor Dr. Asima: with my zing for learning, I’d never stop succeeding in the future. Today I was another step closer to becoming the doctor I’d always dreamed of being. My parents were already calling me Dr. Zainab with big, adorable smiles.

Luckily, I always wanted to be a doctor; my parents never had to force me into pursuing the medical profession – they probably would have if I had something else in the plan because of *our overvalued society.*

I sat across the stage in the auditorium's front row with my classmates expectantly. I looked far behind me and saw my parents talking, their faces glowing, and my heart swelled in happiness. We got called on stage one by one once our professors, the dean, and the valedictorian finished giving their speeches.

Every time a graduate in front of me took their prestigious degree, I took a step closer to the stage. Just when my name was being called, I took a deep, steady breath, and looked at the entrance, as if someone were waiting for me there.

So cliché, there Fawad was, grinning at me and breathing hard, as if he had just sprinted into the place, so I smiled back at my Love.

My classmate nudged me to go forward on the stage, and I did. I proudly accepted the certificate of my achievement. A light of unfiltered happiness filled me, and a tear formed in my eyes.

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We’re at home, and Father has been taking pictures of me in my graduation suit for hours. I pushed my exhaustion aside and smiled up at him. He looked so happy. Mother buzzed around the house with empty frames asking us where we thought she should hang my graduation pictures.

And Fawad has been so supportive and happy for me that I fell in love with him all over again. I couldn’t ask him how his interview went today; it has been bugging me for a while now.

As soon as my father was done clicking my pictures from all angles, both my parents began calling our relatives to share the news. I quickly opened my suit and left it over our dining table’s chair.

“Mumma?”

“Yes, dear?” She asked between the ringing of her phone. “I need some things from the supermarket; I’ll return in a few minutes.” I lied.

“Okay,” She said quickly. “Don’t buy anything we don’t need.” She added as I headed for the door and nodded.

I looked at Fawad - who was on his phone - and gestured for him to follow me. He hung up and followed.

The soft winter breeze kissed my face gently as I sat over the concrete fence of our building’s 11th-floor roof. One of my feet dangled at the risky side, and the other touched the safer ground. One of my slippers once fell and hit a man’s head with a slap. Sara and I hid far inside my room and never wore slippers to the roof again.

The sky was still a mixture of dark purple and orange, the last minute of sunshine shining over the lake.

The roof was just above our apartment, and the staircase to this place was next to our main door, so it almost always felt as if the rooftop belonged to us.

Fawad stood next to me, admiring the lake below. He looked up and smiled at me, his hair ruffled by the wind.

I patted the spot before me, and he sat on the fence facing me.

“So, Dr. Zainab, tell me how you’re feeling.” He smiled.

“Not a doctor yet,” I mumbled quickly, thinking for a while.

“I feel at ease… as if I finally found what I was looking for.” He rested his hand over mine. “And I think I’m proud of myself,” I added, smiling.

“I’m proud of you too.”

“How did the interview go? Tell me.” I whined.

“Today is my luckiest day, Zainy. I got the job!” He said.

I squealed and jumped so excitedly that he had to hold me still.

 “Love, we have to find a new house for you, a car, furniture, and home decor; you already know how much I love buying home decor.” I blabbered excitedly.

“We don’t have to find a house for me… I want us to find a house for us.” He said.

My excitement faltered.

“Fawad… you know Papa will hate me if he finds me living with a guy without marriage.” I joked nervously.

“Let’s get married then.” He said as he held my hand with both of his. “It’s the best time for us to do so, Zainy. I’ve found myself a good job, you’ve graduated, and everything is in just the right place.” He explained. “When we tell our parents about us, they might get shocked, but I’m sure they’ll understand us.”

“You know I don’t want to get married now. I just need some time to settle myself first.” I said. Just thinking about telling my father about our relationship frightened me. I needed Fawad to understand. “I want to travel, I want to get a good job, and I want to help people”—

Fawad interrupted, “And I will be there to help you achieve your dreams. Why do you think we wouldn’t be able to do all that if we were together?” He asked, a bit desperately.

“I just need some time…” I mumbled.

“Are you scared of how your father might react? Is that why you don’t want me to talk about us to our parents?” He asked. I couldn’t sum up the courage to look at him.

“How long then, Zainab?” He asked firmly. When I did not reply, he asked again.

“How much time do you need?”

“10 years,” I said.

He huffed a disbelieving laugh. “You’re not serious.” He said, disappointed.

“Look, Fawad—”

“No, Zainy, I want you to hear me out first.” He said.

“Okay.”

“I just… I don’t want to keep dreaming about us any longer. I want us to start living our dreams today. I don’t want to keep dreaming and hoping that one day we’ll be together when we can be together right now. It’s been too long, Zainy. I just want you to be mine forever.”

“But I am already yours, my Love,” I mumbled.

“I know, but I don’t want to wait another ten years. I want to spend the rest of my life with you from today. I want to wake up every morning to see your face. I want to talk to you every day, see you smile every day, see you laugh, and even get mad. I don’t want things to keep going as they have been, I want to love you without hiding it from the world, and you can’t convince me otherwise, Zainy. I want to be your husband.” Fawad said, his eyes so sad, almost pleading.

“Why don’t you understand, Fawad, if my family ends up hating the idea of us being together, they will have the power to blackmail me into never talking to you, and worse, they’ll force me to marry someone else. Do you want that?” I snapped. He looked hurt, and I immediately regretted using that tone. He did not say anything.

“And… getting married right now feels like a responsibility I wouldn’t be able to handle,” I said. “It has always been my dream to be with you and to marry you too, but the marrying part wasn’t on my list of things to do anytime soon,” I added. “And then getting married means getting forced by society to have a baby immediately… I do want to have children someday, but not right now. Not so soon. I won’t be able to be a good mother at this age.”

“The society can go to hell. If it’s about having children, you don’t have to have a baby as long as you don’t want to.” He said, “And I promise, I will never push you to take any responsibilities you couldn’t handle. I will never stop you from working or traveling. It’ll all be up to you. Everything we will do and plan will be up to you, and then I’ll come at last.” His sheer desperation to convince me was breaking my heart.

“The only reason I ever pursued this job in Dubai so far away from my family, home, and friends was so that I could be with you… please, let’s start this new chapter of our lives together.” He said.

We sat there for a while. Fawad still looked at me hopefully.

“Say something.” He said.

“You can’t force me into this, Fawad. Don’t be so pushy.” I said. He just looked at me, the wind our only companion.

And painful silence,

His dark eyes dimmed, and he looked at me again, disappointed. And I felt so sad, so sorry; I asked myself if I made the right decision.

Fawad stood up and walked to the exit.

“Fawad,” I called. He didn’t stop. “Fawad, just listen to me,”

He didn’t want to listen.

He walked out the door, and my heart cracked. I felt like running after him and apologizing. But apologizing would mean I had to accept his request and tell our parents about us.

He didn’t understand my point… Or maybe I didn’t understand him?

# 20

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

I woke up to hear everyone else in the house active. My sister and brothers, who always slept like they hadn’t slept in a million years, were awake and talking.

I sat up and looked at the clock. The first thought that flew into my mind was that I wished Fawad wasn’t disappointed in me. I wish we never had that argument. He didn’t speak to me after leaving the roof last night.

I went to the living room and saw my mother cooking brunch in the kitchen and my siblings not eating them.

“*Khanakuinahi kha rahehaiaap*?” Mother asked my siblings why they weren’t eating with fake kindness - ready to strike.

“I won’t eat this. It’s not tasty.” Haidar said.

“*khanakhaengeyathapparkhaenge? Aapbataen*.” My mother asked sweetly if they wanted to eat their food or get slapped, their choice. They all began eating. They knew better than to argue with her. She smiled.

“Good morning Zainab. Sit down. Brunch is almost ready.” I quickly sat down and decided to eat whatever she served without complaint; I didn’t want to get scolded.

“Where is Papa and… your guest?” I asked carefully when she sat down.

She stared at me momentarily before putting butter on bread, “You were sleeping so your father took Fawad out for a last-minute shopping. He’s leaving tonight.”

“But there are still four days left!” I exclaimed. Mother glared, so I looked at my empty place instead.

“Yes. I know, but he wants to leave now.” She said.

I ate, frustrated. We were supposed to be doing that shopping together; I had it on my list of things we needed to do before he left for our hometown again.

When my father and Fawad returned home late afternoon, he didn’t even look at me. *What is wrong with him?* He went to his room, telling my parents he had to pack his bags. He didn’t even eat lunch.

He finally got out of his room at night. My parents and I were in the living room when he pulled all his bags into the doorstep. I got up.

“You’re leaving already, dear?” My mother asked.

“Yes, thank you very much for your kindness.” He smiled at them, but his eyes looked cold. I wanted him to look at me and see that he was breaking my heart by acting this way, but he wasn’t acknowledging my presence. My mother smiled back at him.

“Zahir will give you a lift to the airport; those bags are too big for a regular taxi.”

“I can do that too,” I said so he’d look at me. He finally did.

“No. You don’t have to take that responsibility, Zainab. I called for a bigger taxi, and it’s waiting outside right now.” He said stiffly. I winced at his tone. My parents looked at each other in confusion. He barely ever spoke to me in front of them before.

“Fawad dear, you’re going so quickly. You should stay a little longer. The kids will miss you.” Mother said instead. He smiled sadly.

“Do let them know I’ll miss them too.”

“When are you planning to return to start your new job?” She asked.

I looked at him again, waiting for his answer. But he did not look at me.

“I don’t know.” He then looked at me. “The job seems worthless now.” He said to me directly, his eyes bleak. He picked his bags up.

“I’ll take your leave now.”

 He looked at me one last time before walking out the door. And I stood there, looking at him.

*Please, stop.* I tried to say, but my lips couldn’t move. *Please don’t go, not like this.* I tried telling him, but I couldn’t.

I didn’t want him to go. I love him.

# 21

# SARA

“Why are you following me?” I asked once I parked my car and got out.

“Are you busy?”

“Busy? Busy with what? I didn’t even do any homework in the last three years.”

“Oh?” I nodded.

“Then I can help you with your groceries.”

“Yeah, right,” I said, gesturing for him to open the door. He did. I went into the kitchen, the place bright with the afternoon sunlight, and dropped all the bags on the countertop. Murad leaned against the counter and stared at me with a smile. I frowned at him.

“I thought you were here to help with the groceries,” I said as I took out items from the bags.

That got him working. He took out a couple of items and put them in cabinets, he wasn’t doing it right, but because he was helping when he had no obligations, I let him keep them as he pleased. I could fix them later.

My telephone rang. It was Grandma, so I picked it up, put it on speaker, and continued working. “*As’salamalaikum*.” I greeted her.

“*Wa’laikumassalam. Kemon acho*?” My grandma asked how I was doing.

“I’m fine, Dadi. Did you have lunch?” I asked as I began keeping eggs in the fridge.

Murad looked at me speak in Bengali curiously.

“Yes, I did. Did you both have lunch?” Grandma asked.

“Yes, we did. Dad cooked today.” I said.

“Where is your father?”

“He’s having his afternoon nap.”

“Tell him to wake up.”

“I’ll do that right now,” I said.

“No, wait. Wake him up later.” She said.

“Your Aafia Auntie is here. You remember Aafia from the building next to ours, right?” She asked. “Dadi, I do not want to speak to her.”

“Sara,”

“Dadi!” I whined.

“She’s sitting right next to me. She went to the village for a year and is now back, so we’re talking. She wanted to speak to you,” Grandma added.

*I don’t want to speak to her.*

“I’ll wake Dad up right now.”

“First, you speak.” she insisted. “Wait, let me hand over the phone to her.”

“Noooooooo,” I whined. “All she ever does is hand over life advice when she’s not asked – *especially when she’s not asked*,” I said, but my grandma heard none of that.

I rested my elbow on the counter and put my hands in my hair in exasperation.

Murad leaned against the countertop, shamelessly looking at me while sipping a drink he took from a shopping bag- *when did he even buy that?* - thinking he had completed his task well. I scowled at him.

“Hello, Sara?”

I remained silent for a while.

“Hello?” Aafia repeated.

“Hello, Auntie,” I said.

“How are you? It has been so long!” She said in English. I would’ve appreciated her effort to speak in English with me if I liked her. She constantly belittles me for not being exactly like my mom… and it does not feel nice.

“I am fine, Auntie. Yes, it has.” My eyes followed Murad as he threw his empty can into the trash, picked up a packet of chips, and munched it as if he were watching a show.

“I saw your photo on *Phasebook* yesterday.”

“Facebook?”

“Yes. You’ve grown so much, but why is your hair so curly? Don’t you oil it the way I told you?”

I sighed. “I didn’t oil my hair that day.”

“Oh, Allah! Why not? Girls should always oil their hair. I can still remember how nice your mother’s hair used to be. She never would’ve liked you having such curly hair.”

I pinched my nose in frustration.

“I love your hair, by the way,” Murad whispered as he bit into his chips. I suppressed my smile and looked at the phone.

“I will work on it, Auntie.” *I will not work on it.*

“Good.” She said. “And who is that *bedeshi* man standing next to you in one picture? And why are you wearing a top like that?” She asked. She was talking about the picture I had posted with Murad in the theaters a few days ago.

My heart picked up a frightened speed; I didn’t want Grandma to know I hung out with boys. I had forgotten Aafia Auntie was on my friends list. She never liked my pictures or asked about the images I posted with Dad, Zainab, or my other friends. Why now?

I guess because it’s a guy and that, too, a very handsome one. I pressed my lips together in annoyance. At this point, I was glad my grandma didn’t know English.

Aafia had figured out Murad was a Foreigner, therefore calling him a bedeshi.

“She’s talking about you,” I whispered. He raised his eyebrows.

“He’s just my friend and neighbor,” I said to the phone as I held his gaze.

“And your future boyfriend,” He whispered.

“You wish.” I mouthed the words.

“Good. Don’t fall for these *bedeshis,* okay? You can never trust them.” She said. Murad’s smile faltered.

“Remember what happened with Sheila Bhabhi’s daughter? After three months of marriage, her foreign husband left her for another woman!” She said.

Murad looked offended. “Don’t worry; not all men are the same Auntie,”

“Stop talking to him, okay?” She said, and even though she had no right to tell me what to do, I said okay just to make her shut up. Murad looked tensed.

“Did you choose a subject to study yet?” she asked immediately, not pausing before changing the subject.

“I am still thinking about what to choose,” I said.

“Hay Allah! You could’ve gotten a degree by now!” She exclaimed.

*She is right.*

“I don’t want to study something I won’t like, so I am taking my time,” I said meekly.

“Your mother had a master’s degree in education. She wouldn’t have liked to see you sitting around doing nothing.” This was why I never liked talking to her. She makes me wonder if my mom hates me.

“I’ll think about it,” I lied again, as I would not think about it. “Don’t think, Sara, do.”

I remained silent.

“Where’s Dadi?” I asked a bit impatiently.

“Oh, she’s in the washroom.”

*That’s why she’s blabbering so much.* I thought.

“Haye Allah.” She sighed loudly after a moment. “Your mother was such a beautiful woman. Allah took her away so early. Oh, why?” She almost whined. “You’re such an unfortunate girl to grow up without a mother. Cancer is such a terrible illness.”

I sighed. I despise pity. I like people who don’t remind me of my loss at every chance they get.

“You should come to live with me, Sara. I must teach you to dress decently and act like a lady.”

*What’s the worst that’d happen if I swore at her on the phone?*

 “Looks like you both are having a long discussion.” My grandma said in Bengali as she came out of the washroom. I sighed in relief.

“Yes, Apa.” Aafia Aunty said.

 “Can you both speak in Bangla now?” My grandma ordered, then took the phone from Aafia.

“Dadi,” I said as soon as she took it near her ear. “I’ll tell Dad to call as soon as he wakes up,”

“Okay.” She said. “Take care, and don’t eat meat, okay?” I said.

“Okay.” She said like a sweetheart. “*Allah Hafiz*,” She added.

“*Allah Hafiz*,” I said and pressed the phone to disconnect.

I looked over to Murad. He was smirking slightly.

“I love how the Bangla language rolls out of your tongue.” He said.

“Is that so?” I raised my eyebrow and smiled.

“Mmhm.”

I stood before him, rested both my arms on my chest, and sighed. He was still leaning against the countertop.

“Some auntie you have.” He sighed.

“She’s just our neighbor.”

I smirked at him. “She told me to go live with her. What do you think? should I?” I quipped.

He suddenly seemed worried. “I don’t think you should.”

“Excuse me, but why not?”

“Why do you need to go anywhere?” He mumbled.

I stepped closer to him. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because I don’t want you to go anywhere away from me,”

“And why should I listen to you?” I asked.

“Because I would,” He said. “I’d listen to you if you’d tell me to stay. I wouldn’t leave you.” He added. *He’s so damn cute up close.*

I took a minute to let his words sink in. I smiled at him. “You would do that *for me*?” I tilted my head and squealed.

He nodded.

I smiled up at him again. “Look at me.” He did.

“I won’t leave, okay? I promise.”

He smiled back.  “Really?” I nodded happily.

“You wouldn’t be able to leave me, anyway.” He drawled.

“And why do you think that?” I asked.

He leaned in closer. “Because...” His smile turned mischievous. “You love me... but you don’t want to believe it yet.” He said softly in his deep husky voice.

I stood there dumbfounded.

He stepped back and winked before slowly walking out the door, taking my feeble heart with him.

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 “*You love me... but you don’t want to believe it yet*.”  My mind echoed Murad’s words again as I shut my eyes tightly and shook my head, attempting to get him out of my mind as I tried sleeping.

*“You wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about him,” She crossed a finger off as she counted.*

*“You’ll always miss him,*

*“Every song about love will start making sense…”*

*I scoffed.*

*“Life is not a movie Zainab.”*

*“That’s what everyone thinks before they fall in love.” She crooned.*

 “Zainab…” I grumbled.

It’s all her fault. She’s the one who infused this love into me. So she’ll be the one to get it out. I’ll make her.

I turned to my left and, through my window, saw Murad’s room illuminated with a table lamp, him sitting in front of his desk working on something just like he always did.

I looked at him for a while longer, then shook my head and closed my eyes.

*Zainab will see me first thing in the morning.* I thought as I closed my eyes and attempted to sleep.

# 22

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

I couldn’t stand in the living room any longer, tears threatening to drop down my cheeks. I ran to my room and closed the door, letting my tears flow.

“Why are you doing this to me, Fawad?” I mumbled. What does this mean for our relationship? Would he forget about this once he returns home and call me like he always did? Will he forgive me for backing out on his proposal because I was too frightened about my family’s reaction? Or would he simply move on and only recall me with hate in the future? What if he learns to live without me?

*What if he never calls?*

*What if I lose him?*

*What have I done?*

Of course, I want to marry him; he’s the love of my life. But what could I do when every time I think about our future, a feeling of impending doom overcomes me? I’m so scared of the unknown that I can’t even sleep some nights. Only his voice soothes me then, and now, if he stops talking to me, where will I ever find peace?

I know he loves me, but what if I overwhelmed him with all these vague promises? I was tired of hiding and lying, but I was never vocal about it. He was, and I got scared. I began creating excuses, and now he’s mad at me.

I need to stop him.

I pushed the tears away from my face. I wore my shoes, pulled my car keys out, and left my room. I strode towards the main door. “Where are you going, Zainab?” My father asked. My parents were still in the living room watching TV.

“Um… I think Fawad forgot his phone. I should go and hand it to him.” I attempted to lie. My mother looked pissed. “Where is his phone then?” I stilled. It was the first time I got caught in a lie. She was livid when she found me speechless.

“What is going on, Zainab? Why are you lying to us?” She asked.

When I didn’t answer, she looked at my father. “I don’t know what’s wrong with your daughter. She has been acting brainless since I told her Reena’s son was leaving tonight. Her brainlessness wouldn’t have caught my attention if I hadn’t seen them both so close to each other at the snow park. I still didn’t want to overthink it. But it all started looking extremely odd to me when I noticed how she always made extra effort to make us believe she barely knew him.” My father looked stunned. I was shocked, too. How did she even know all this when I tried so hard to hide it?

“Why am I hearing such things?” My father asked, still too shocked to form a specific emotion.

“Papa, I need to go right now.”

“Zainab! You can’t go out now! I can’t believe the things I heard from your Mumma.” He yelled. I can’t deal with this right now. Fawad would catch his flight, and who knew when we’d get to meet again? I need to stop him now. I unlocked the door and strode down the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator.

“Zainab!” My mother yelled, but I did not stop.

I ran to my car and drove out. I tried calculating where Fawad’s taxi might be as I honked my way ahead. I saw a larger taxi heading towards the airport’s road among the regular, average-sized taxis. The back of it was filled with bags, so I knew it was the one Fawad was in. I sighed and sped up.

Fawad’s taxi stopped in front of the airport’s departure area. I stopped my purple car behind it. Fawad stepped out, opened the taxi's backdoor, and took his bags out. I exited my vehicle; shut my door loud enough for him to hear. It worked; he looked up and got stunned to see me. I walked towards him, fuming. I stood before him and glared.

“Zainab, wh... what are you doing here?” He asked, nervous about my angry expression.

I said nothing as I picked up his bags and returned to my car. “Zainab,” He called, but I did not listen. I shoved his bags inside my car with full force. He picked up his remaining bags and luggage and brought them to my car. He gently fitted the luggage in a corner while I shoved the remaining bags inside and opened the door of the passenger’s seat.

“Get in,” I ordered.

“What’s going on, Zainab?” He asked.

“Get. In.” I enunciated. He knew better than to argue, so he got in. I shut the door a nanosecond after he put his feet inside.

I got into the driver’s seat and drove off too fast for his comfort.

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“Where are we even going?” He finally asked.

I honestly didn’t even know that, either. We were probably lost, and I had nowhere to sit and talk to him apart from my car.

I abruptly steered my car towards the sandy dunes, and Fawad stifled a bark. I sped through the thick sandy dunes as the car jumped along.

“You know you’ll get the car stuck in the sand if you keep going deeper,” Fawad said sternly.

I steered my car again and stopped. I got out of the car and shut my door, and so did he. I felt him looking at me instead of the view before us. I walked deeper into the sandy dunes, away from him, but he followed me.

“Zainab—” I interrupted.

“How dare you try to leave me like that? How could you even do something like that, Fawad? How could you?” I shouted.

“What was I supposed to do, Zainab? What was I supposed to do when you turned me down like that?”

“Turned you down like what? Like what? Huh?”

“Like I meant nothing to you,”

His words silenced me.

“You mean everything to me, Fawad, *everything*!” I said, my voice shaky. “I told you I needed time. I needed time to think everything over. And all you showed me were childish tantrums.” I accused.

“I want to get married to you, Zainab! I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And I know you do too.” He said and stepped closer to me. “I know you’re worried, Zainy. I know you’re worried your parents might never accept us. I know you’re worried you wouldn’t be able to pursue your career if we get married.” He explained softly.

“But Zainab,” He held my hands. “I promise you I won’t let them ruin our future. I don’t care what our families think. I will marry you – with or without their approval. But I will try my best to get their approval before we get married. I will never let them force you to marry someone else, we are destined to be together, and I will never accept anything else as our fate.” A tear dropped down my cheek, and he swiftly moved it away with his fingers. I looked up at him. “As for your career, you won’t have to give up on anything just because our ancestors’ created biased rules for women to stay at home and complete house chores against their will for the rest of their lives just because they were insecure about their success. I promise.” He said, and I huffed a laugh.

The way he explained everything made me feel so much better. I felt hopeful. He made me fall in love with him all over again. I looked at him for a while; I smiled at his eyes, lips, nose, and that scar over it.

“Do you also promise to clean the dishes after I cook?” I asked. He grinned so wide my heart skipped a beat.

He nodded. “You wouldn’t even have to cook if you don’t want to. I’ll learn to cook.” I laughed and embraced him.

“So I’ll take that as a yes? Will you marry me?” He looked at me curiously, his arms still wrapped around me.

“Yes, take that as a yes. I will marry you...” I giggled and hugged him closer. I breathed in the fresh and soapy scent of him.

I felt happy, so happy.

# 23

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

The slap didn’t sting as much as my heart did. Father was not happy about us. I knew this was how they’d react, it’s what I had expected, yet it did not feel any less heartbreaking.

My heart broke as I looked into my father’s livid eyes, my hand still on my hurt cheek. I haven’t done anything wrong. I simply fell in love. Why is that considered punishable?

“You were missing all night, Zainab, *all night*! Where were you? Were you with that boy?” My mother asked accusingly. Both my parents’ eyes were filled with fury. I felt my siblings looking at us from the corner of our shared room. I could feel their fear. I wish they had school today so they didn’t have to go through this.

“I was with him, but we did nothing wrong. We’re in love, Mumma, we have been for a very long-” Mother silenced me before I could finish my sentence.

“Is this why I worked so hard to raise you? So you could disrespect us and run away with a random boy? Do we mean nothing to you?” My father asked. His last question hit me like a dagger.

“Is there a shortage of men out there that you had to like the son of the only woman I hate?” He asked again. I could feel his anger rising at the memory of Reena. I slumped on the living room sofa, my hand still on my hurt cheek. My parents were standing in front of me like two angry towers.

“Answer me!” My father barked, and I shook, not meeting his gaze. I was still too stunned to cry.

“Do you have any idea…. how Fawad’s mother will torture you if you get married to him?” He asked again, trying his best to compose his anger. “This Fawad you love won’t even be on your side then, and he’ll end up torturing you too.”

“Papa, I’ve known Fawad and loved him all my life. He’ll never do anything like that,” I mumbled.

My parents glared at me.

“Talking about love in front of your parents, Zainab, have you lost all your shame?” Mother hissed. I closed my eyes.

“Suppose he is not what I think he is, but what of his mother? You won’t only be staying with Fawad. You’ll become a part of that horrendous family.” Father said.

“We’ve planned to shift here in Sharjah after getting married, Papa. That is why he pursued that job here so he could live with me.” I explained almost pleadingly. I desperately needed my parents to see every kind and the beautiful parts of him that made me fall in love. I saw my mother’s expression slightly soften. She knew Fawad more than Father did; she knew he wasn’t bad, so I hoped she might understand.

“And what if he loses his job? Then what? Then you’ll both have to go back and live with his mother; that bitch will not let you live in peace just to torment me!” Father exclaimed.

“We wouldn’t have to go back even if he loses his job, Papa, because… I’ll be working too.”

My father laughed a bitter laugh.

“That’s your plan? If he loses his job, you plan on being your house's earner and caretaker while he sits and does nothing but make you suffer?”

He would never sit idly and make me do all the work; I was sure of that much.

“You shattered all the dreams I had for you, Zainab. How could you do that to us after everything we sacrificed for you?” My father asked. I could feel the exhaustion in his voice, and my heart ached.

“Papa, I’m so sorry. But what can I do if I love him?” I asked, finally looking up at him, “I’ve always loved him. Please try to understand me. I can’t live without him.”

“Then *die*!”

“I will if I don’t have him.”

“Don’t use those filmy dialogues here, Zainab. You’re not marrying him as long as I’m alive!”

“Papa!” I exclaimed, devastated. I didn’t want to lose my father to marry Fawad.

“You kept us all in the darkness; you pretended you didn’t know him.” Mother said.

“I had to do that because I knew this is how you both would react. This is how you’ll treat me.” I said, my anger rising.

“You deserve to be treated this way for lying to us.” My mother replied with venom in her voice, her eyes filled with disappointment and… foreignness, as if I never truly knew her.

“Mumma, Papa, I won’t say anything else, but you should know I won’t marry anyone else if I don’t get to marry him,” I said quietly, with finality.

My father could not stand me for another second. He grabbed my arm, pulled me out of the sofa, and pushed me away and into the guest room. He shut the door behind me, and I heard a key locking it.

“You’re not getting out or going anywhere until your head gets straight, you understand me? If you’re desperate, I will get you married right now.” My father yelled from the other side of the door at me. “Faiza, get me my phonebook; I’ll call my friend Rasheed. His son is still single,” Father said to my mother. My stomach recoiled at the thought of Rasheed’s son. He is an asshole who treats women like objects but knows how to make himself look like a good boy in front of the elders.

“His son was always interested in her, but I turned him down, thinking my daughter was wise and wanted a decent future. She was my pride, Faiza. But I was wrong. She just wants to get married to Reena’s son and ruin my reputation in front of her.” He said, disappointed.

I banged on the door. “I’m not marrying anyone if I can’t marry Fawad, Papa. You can’t force me.” I yelled. When he did not reply, I lightened my tone. “Marrying Fawad will not ruin your reputation; I will ensure that. And marrying him will not change my plans for the future.” I said.

“I’m still your pride, Papa,” I mumbled. Teardrops began streaming down my cheeks.

“You are not! You are a disappointment!” My father yelled, his voice shaking. My heart ached.

“Zahir… calm down. She’s our daughter.” My mother explained softly. He did not reply to her. I heard his footsteps retreat to his room and heard him shut the door hard enough to break it. I heard my mother reluctantly move away from the door and go after him.

I slumped onto the floor and rested my head against the door, my heart a sad, broken mess.

I have always been my father’s favorite… Why didn't he understand me now, if I were truly his favorite?

# 24

# SARA

I looked at the clock hanging against the ceiling above my room’s door. It seemed all blurry. I shut my eyes and reopened them – still blurry. I couldn’t sleep at all last night. Bad – this was bad. I can get bitchy on days I don’t get enough sleep.

I got out of bed, headed for the washroom, showered, ran to my tiny closet, and dressed in my pink pullover and light blue jeans. I picked up my new favorite ring, wore it, and got out.

I looked over to the clock again, this time with my glasses. I frowned at it. It was super early; I usually never woke up at this hour. Either way, it’s good I woke up earlier than necessary on a Saturday morning because I needed to have a very long and thorough argument with Zainab.

My dad was still asleep, so I woke him up, told him where I was going, and he nodded a sleepy okay before tucking himself under the blanket again.

I got in my car and drove over to Zainab’s home. I parked my car four blocks away from her building because it was always so damn difficult to find parking here. *Calm down*. I told myself.

I got in the lift, clicked on the 10th floor, and finally knocked on her door with a water bottle, and Zainub’s mom opened it.

‘*AsalamalaikumAuntie*.’ I greeted happily.

‘*Walaikumasalam dear*.’ She greeted back. She looked sleepy but was wearing her apron. She was cooking something for breakfast.

“Come in! You came here quite early today.” She said curiously.

“Yes, I couldn’t sleep well last night,” I confessed.

“Oh? Why, dear?” She asked.

“Because of the coffee I drank last night,’ I lied.

“Also, I was missing you all. I hope I didn’t disturb you.” I added.

“Not at all, dear. I was just making breakfast. You can never disturb us; this is your home too.” She said and lightly pinched my cheek.

Her words and gestures somehow soothed my crankiness, so I smiled at her.

*Is this how it feels like to have a mother? I would never really know.*

“Where’s Zainab?” I asked Faiza Auntie.

“She’s still asleep. Do you want me to wake her up?’ She asked.

“No worries, I’ll do that,’ I said and walked inside.

I got into my best friend’s room. The curtains dimmed the morning sunlight as Zainab and her siblings slept peacefully. Arwa was sleeping beside her, and her brothers slept on two different beds on the other side.

I stood beside Zainab and looked at her, having a peaceful nap while ruining mine. I opened the cap of my water bottle and poured it on her.

She jolted awake and yelped. Zainab quickly sat up and rubbed her face with her hands.

She looked at me. “You bitch!” She spat.

 “What the fuck are you doing here so early?” She asked and took her phone from her bedside table.

“And it’s 7 am on a Saturday!” She exasperated. I threw her a towel, and she glared at me but took it anyway and rubbed her face with it.

“I couldn’t sleep for the last few days, and here you are, sleeping peacefully.” I gave her a mocking smile. “I can’t sleep, and it’s your fault. You deserve this.” I kept the bottle on her bedside table with a thump.

She looked at me again. “Speak. Your reason better be good.” She said as she rubbed bits of water off from her side of the blanket. For a second, I saw Zainab’s old self again, which made me happy.

Her sister Arwa opened her eyes, looked at us, sighed dramatically, and then flung her pillow over her head.

“You’re the reason I keep thinking about Murad all the time. You are why I’ve started to have these weird feelings in my heart. You. Made. Me. Think. This. Way. ” I hurled the words at her.

“I didn’t make you think this way. You always thought about him. You always spoke about him; I just made you realize that.” She said, getting back into her classy, calm self again.

“Well, then fix it! Don’t just sleep there while I can’t!” I snapped back.

“First, sit down, Sara,” Zainab folded her legs under the blanket, and I sat.

“I think you’re in love, Sara,” Zainab said. Arwa sighed loudly, and Zainab flung a pillow at her without looking as we spoke.

“I don’t think-” I interrupted.

 “You’re in love with him. But you’re scared. And you just don’t want to accept that it’s not under your control to stop feeling this way, to feel love.” Zainab explained softly.

“That’s not true,” I said.

Zainab held my hands. “I’ve been madly in love, Zainab, and I know what it feels like.” She said.

I sat there silently and thought over her words.

*Oh no. What if I truly am in love?*

How did I fall in love? How did I lose complete control over my heart? How will I ever tell my father about this? That I befriended a stranger and fell in love behind his back?

“What should I do now?” I asked softly.

Zainab thought for a moment. “Don’t do anything; let this go with the flow. I am pretty sure everything will fall into place. You’ll understand everything; just give yourself some time.” She said.

I sat there and looked at her blanket in silence, tensed.

Zainab took the bottle I had brought and splashed the remaining contents on me.

I gasped. “Oh, that’s cold,” I exclaimed. She just giggled.

Zainab’s little brothers moved a fraction but went back to sleep.

“Yes, I know that from experience.” She grinned. “You’ll be okay. Now relax and have some breakfast.”

I smiled back.

I’ll be okay.

I hope so.

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Zainab and I were the first to get to the table for breakfast; she sat on a chair before me. Faiza Auntie brought two plates of chicken sandwiches and two glasses of orange juice on a white tray. “Good morning, girls. It feels so good to see you both at this table together, having breakfast after so long. Just like the old times.” she sighed.

I agreed but felt a bitter ache in my chest.

It has not been the same since Fawad… left. We’re slowly climbing the ladder we fell from four years ago, and it’s taking Zainab the longest time, as if she doesn’t want to climb up, as if she found her solitude there, in the dark.

 Zainab’s mom kept the tray on the table and unloaded the items before us. Zainab looked at something behind me distantly. I looked back; it was a picture of Zainab and her family in the snow park, Fawad smiling beside her.

I looked back at her, and she looked so sad. Zainab’s mother looked at her, too, her eyes shining with tears she’ll never allow to fall in front of us. I held Zainab’s hand, and she immediately snapped her attention to me and grinned. “Mumma’s sandwiches are the best, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” I said softly. Zainab’s mom quickly walked towards the kitchen. “Mumma, come and have breakfast.”

“I will, dear. I have some work left.” She replied. As my eyes followed her, I saw her hands rubbing the tears off her cheeks. I didn’t want her to cry.

I looked back at Zainab. “How did you sleep?” I asked her. I had gotten so consumed by my petty problems that I had forgotten about my best friend’s issues with sleep, how she gets nightmares so often… how she chooses not to tell us.

Sometimes I hate myself.

“Nice, until you woke me up.” Zainab lied as she took a bite from her sandwich.

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t be…”

“I am.”

This time she looked at me. “Sara, I know you were kidding. We always kid around with each other, so stop apologizing.”  She said irritably. That scared me. I wonder if she knew how much we worried for her. I didn’t wish to push her to her dark thoughts again.

So I smiled and ate the sandwich.

# 25

# SARA

The road was jammed, and suddenly driving back home felt like an annoying task– I pushed that thought aside. I had worked too hard to get my driving license; I wouldn’t get annoyed by that achievement. At least I have control over that. I gripped my steering wheel tighter.

I won’t take that step toward Murad. It would change things, and I didn’t want any changes. My heart can go to hell.

But how do I let my heart know that? It’s not under my control anymore. It beats every time I think about him, and I think about him all the time. I pushed my glasses up and switched off the radio; I didn’t want romantic background music to my thoughts.

I got honked between my trail of thoughts. I looked back through my rearview mirror and found a car tailgating me. I looked at my speedometer; it had the correct speed limit for that specific road. I gritted my teeth.

*I can’t even drive in peace for one second.*

The driver behind me insistently honked and flashed his lights. He wanted me out of the way so he could speed up his car, and even though I have been a decent driver – much better than Zainab - and at a usual circumstance, I would’ve just changed lanes, I didn’t want to right now.

I sighed, and a couple of long, lazy minutes later searched for the nearest clear way between the traffic and changed the lane. Instead of driving away, the driver drove behind me again and began honking. He seemed pissed because I took so long.

I should’ve just slept in instead. But Faiza Auntie’s sandwiches were worth it. He must have taken it as a challenge when I didn’t move away, and now he’s mad, and I’m madder.

The driver sped up uncomfortably close, still flashing his lights at me. If that guy even so much as touched my old car with his new one, I’d lose my mind. The car next to me turned right to an exit, clearing the road for the driver. The car behind me sped up, came next to me, and honked again angrily. I honked back, anger rising to my throat.

He’s got some nerves.

I glared at the driver next to me, and at first instance, I saw him glare back, eyes filled with arrogance, but then his features fell. He stared blankly at me.

But I couldn’t care less.

“Go crash into someone else!” I barked at him.

His windows and mine were closed, but he seemed to get the message. He nodded once, and I was dumbfounded.

*Did he just nod?*

The driver looked straight ahead. I just looked at him, stunned as he sped up, up, up to a car in front of him –

and crashed his car right into it.

The car screeched as I pressed my brake hard, my heart jumping out to my throat. I impulsively looked at the rearview mirror to check if any cars were behind me. They, too, pressed their brakes in time.

*What did he do what did he do what DID HE JUST DO?*

The ring on my finger warmed around my hand comfortingly as the gemstone began shining brightly.

I panicked, dread overcoming my heart. Something is wrong with this ring.

# 26

# SARA

My dad stopped his car before the gate of the central graveyard, and I stepped out, the sunshine making me feel warm. He told me he’d be back in a few minutes as usual and drove ahead through the asphalt road into the organized graveyard.

Going ahead to meet my mom brought back memories, and made me sad, so I waited outside while he went there alone.

As soon as I got home, I had another round of breakfast with Dad so he wouldn’t notice something was wrong with me. If I told him about the accident I had witnessed, he wouldn’t let me drive for months, so I acted as normal as possible, and then we decided to meet my mom, so here we are.

I went into the store room of the mosque and dragged out a plastic chair. The ladies prayer hall was upstairs with a grand graveyard view. I like telling my friends how I pray my evening prayers there sometimes to showcase my bravery.

I set the plastic chair under a neem tree. In front of me was a gapped fence facing the graveyard a floor below. I sat down, fixing my headscarf. To Dad’s annoyance, I did not dare open my sunglasses after returning.

By now, I knew what was happening; they connected to my ring and eyes, but for some reason, people did not act odd when I kept my sunglasses on.

I saw my dad’s car drive far ahead and then take a right. He stopped and stepped onto the sand to where my mother’s body remained. There are water tanks placed near the graves. When I was young, I used to fill a watering can to water above my mom’s grave. I wasn’t the only one who did that. A lot of other grieving people did too. I don’t know why, though. It’s not like dead people needed water or grew out of plants like in a Bengali folktale.

Right in front of me were little graves of kids. I used to find those fascinating as a child but never knew how heartbreaking their presence was until I grew older. A cool breeze passed through me, the tree above me dancing with the wind. The mosque's imam has a few chickens, and they walk around searching for food.

I was never scared of this place. With me, there were only occasional gusts of wind, birds chirping, silence, and dead people. The imam called for prayer five times a day, every day, his soothing solid voice echoing through the graveyard. My mind was always quiet here, as if in peace. No matter how much they feared death, it’s the kind of place anyone would love to be buried in.

Even after watching so many zombie-based horror movies, I still wasn’t scared of this place. So the fact that I was scared about the blue ring on my finger shocked me.

I know this isn’t a normal ring, and I’m sure I’m not hallucinating.

One would simply never hand over free clothes or crash into another’s car just because someone told them to, not unless the driver was psychotic enough to obey the orders of a person they were just tailgating. Can this peculiar ring make people do things they’d usually never do? Can I make people do anything I order them to? The thought itself sparked a fire within me that felt dominating. It made my lips curl up to an evil smile. I stopped as soon as I realized that. I looked up and wondered if my mom could see me and what she thought of me. Did I make her proud, or was I disappointing her? I wish there were a way I could know without dying.

I still wasn’t sure if this ring had compelling aspects or not. It was just an assumption. Before jumping to conclusions, I had to check if this worked. Dad soon drove back, and I got in the car. I asked him how Mom was doing, and he said she was fabulous.

I wouldn’t check the ring on my dad while he drove. I wouldn’t want us to get into an accident.

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I sat in my living room reading, and Dad sat next to me watching TV. An advertisement caught my attention. It showed us the museums in France. I always wanted to go there, but Dad never agreed to let me have a visit – at least not yet.

If this ring compels people, my dad will let me go to Paris. I wore my ring.

“Dad,”

“Hm?” He said, his attention was still on TV.

“Dad?”

This time he looked. “Yes?”

I widened my eyes a bit and looked directly into his eyes.

“I want to go to France, Paris,” I said. “And you should let me go,” I added.

He looked at me for a moment, smirked, and took his attention back to the TV.

“Okay, before I give you permission to go to France, I want to know, did you watch the movie Taken?”

I sighed dramatically. The ring was crap, it didn’t work a bit, and I knew where this conversation was going.

 “Yes,” I said slowly.

“Then don’t ask for stupid things.”

 But dad! That was just a movie.” I whined. “Everyone who goes to France doesn’t get abducted.”

“It’s a movie based on real things, and I don’t want you to get in trouble.” He said.

 “Dad,” I huffed

“How about Turkey?” I tried again.

“Did you watch Taken 2?” He asked.

 “Dad!” I whined.

I pulled off my ring and put it in my pocket. I’d think about what to do with this later.

\*\*\*

I woke up early the next day and got some work done, and by work, I meant completing house chores. I usually call house chores *work* to make it sound like I’m doing something important. It’s high time I got a job, business, studies, or anything to do with my time.

I now brushed the dust off of my shelves. I looked out my window and saw Murad entering his room. Why does he never draw his curtains until I bark at him to?

He found me looking at him and smirked.

I found another person to check my powers on.

I smirked at him, and he dramatically rested his hand over his heart. I rolled my eyes and gestured for him to meet me downstairs. He raised his eyebrows again.

*Damn, those eyebrows will ruin me someday.* I pushed my pathetic thoughts away and quickly got out.

“Hi, Baby,” I said sweetly when I saw him, my hands behind me. “Something is definitely wrong,” he said.

I took a step closer to him. He looked stunned. “Hi.” He said. I took another step ahead.

He brushed his hair back and smiled nervously. I looked directly into his brown eyes and took another step closer, and Murad’s eyes widened a bit as he took a step back.

I took another step and grabbed his arms, which felt delightfully strong, the spicy scent of his cologne filling in my nostrils. He looked so nervous that I wanted to click a picture of his bravado evaporating with every inch I stepped closer to him. His eyes looked innocently at me, his smirk gone, waiting for something. I looked at my ring for a second and looked back at him.

“I want you to give me the keys to your car,” I said softly. If the ring worked, he wouldn’t mind giving me the keys to his most precious car.

He raised an eyebrow and cleared his throat before asking, “Why?”

“Because… you should,” I said again.

He looked at me. A moment passed by, then another, and another. He laughed so hard I wondered if the whole neighborhood heard him.

“You think I’ll give you the keys to my car that easily?”

The ring didn’t work. The ring *doesn’t* work. And here I was, thinking I could control the most complicated creatures on this planet. That stupid driver was a psycho. He wasn’t compelled.

I sighed and let go of Murad. I bit my lip, looked up at him, and saw his eyes flick to my lips for a moment and back to my eyes again. I wondered what he thought I would do when standing close to him. I took a step back.

 “But… it was worth trying.” I sighed.

“Well, there is a way you can take over the keys to my car, you know.” He said.

I raised my eyebrow. “Oh really? How?”

“Just marry me, then everything mine will be yours.” He grinned mischievously, his bravado sweeping back into him.

 “Are you trying to bribe me into marrying you?”

“What? Not at all!” He said quickly.

“Good. You shouldn’t.” I showed him my tongue and pivoted towards my home.

# 27

# SARA

The fish market in the old town was, well, old. They had a lot of fish on display, and the best part; they had a striking sea view.

I entered the fish market with my dad. The fish smell bothered me, but I pretended not to be as I crossed the rows of fish I didn’t know the names of. I saw small sharks amongst the heap of fish, crabs, kingfish, Hamoor, and a lot of shrimps. The latter is one of my favorites.

The buzzing of people selling their fish flooded my ears until I looked up, and they didn’t. My dad didn’t notice it as he kept inspecting the fish on stacks, but I did all too well.

Everyone I looked at looked back at me with a blank expression. Almost all of them looked; some who didn’t bother looking my way continued doing their work.

My ring warmed around my finger in comfort, the gemstone beginning to shine again even though the sunlight was nowhere near it. I looked back at them again; the ones who looked at me didn’t move an inch.

“It’s happening again,” I mumbled.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?” He asked distractedly as he kept inspecting a hamoor fish. I would’ve told him to buy it if I weren’t so frightened.

“I think I’ll go and wait in the car,” I said nervously.

“Okay,” He took out the car keys and handed them to me. I took it and took a few steps back as I gazed back at the people who stood motionlessly. I quickly sprinted out the main gate.

Our car was parked in front of the sea, so the vehicle was positioned towards it. There was only a footpath that was considered as the fence.

So that’s where I stopped, on the footpath facing the sea, and breathed in and out.

In and out,

In and out,

Seagulls flew above me, and boats crashed against the footpath with the soft wind. Before, I had my doubts. But now I’m sure the ring works. But it didn’t work on the ones I cared about.

*What kind of a rule is that?*

I calmed myself down and thought through everything once again.

*Okay. I found a ring discarded at the beach, which looked hellishly expensive, so I took it and left a 200 Dirham note in that place instead. Then the ring began acting weird – and now it’s compelling everyone I don’t know.*

What do I do now?

I remained quiet for a few minutes. I can do what anyone will do with a ring like this. Have some fun with it. I looked at the ring again, and the blue gemstone reflected brightly under the sunlight.

I jumped back in surprise as a car honked at me after getting into the parking next to our car. I didn’t know why he honked, but he did – and it annoyed me. A man wearing a dark striped shirt came out, looked at me up and down, and smirked at my body.

The man jumped on the footpath smugly and murmured a song, all while smirking at me as he attempted to pass by, even though there were million other ways to go from.

I slipped on my ring and faced the sea. I stopped him, looked into his eyes, and smirked back. He seemed slightly surprised, but his expression turned blank as the ring warmed around my finger.

“Jump into the water and take a swim,” I ordered. “You need to cool off.”

He continued looking at me without any expressions, then nodded. And to my amusement, he did what I said. I gasped as he jumped into the sea.

He swam up a moment later and kept swimming at the same spot, the same unreadable expression plastered on his face.

I smiled at him mischievously.

Wow. Just… Wow.

This is amazing. Who in their right mind would jump into the sea by the order of a stranger?

*Anyone who’d cross my path from now on,*

I grinned. I pulled off my ring again, and a sudden wave of guilt washed over me.

I looked at the man still swimming and felt awfully guilty, which was unusual. I never usually felt guilt.

*All he did was look at me. He didn’t deserve to catch a cold from the water just because of that.*

He seemed oddly focused on me. I wore my ring again. “Give me your hand,” I said, and he did.

I held his hand and pulled him out of the water.

He stood up and looked at me.

“Sorry about that, you can leave now,” I said. He nodded blankly and left, leaving wet footmarks behind.

I can’t let anyone know of this ring. They’ll think I’m insane.

# 28

# SARA

“I swear! This ring has magical powers, and it can compel people.”  I explained for the third time, but my confession seemed useless as Murad laughed at me again. I had decided not to tell him about the ring lest he considers me crazy, but I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

My dad was out for work, and I was home alone. Murad showed up at my door, and I couldn’t tell his adorable face to go away, so I invited him over for a movie. If one of my relatives found out I let a boy into my house while being home alone, my reputation would be tarnished, and yet I let him in, and now look at him sitting on my sofa drinking my soda, risking my reputation and laughing at me.

“Look, I… believe you. But please don’t say that to others. They’ll think you’re crazy.”  He laughed again. And I wanted to pinch him.

“You don’t sound like you believe me,” I grumbled.

“What if I told you I had a magical ring that could compel people? What would you say?” He asked.

I thought for a moment.

“I’d call you crazy and laugh at you,” I mumbled sadly.

He looked at me caringly and smiled. “Don’t worry. Why don’t you compel me to do something impossible? Like… Compel me to hate you.”

“I can’t do that! I just told you I can’t compel people I care about!” I snapped. “You don’t even listen to me,” I huffed.

He brushed his hair back and smiled. “Of course I listen to you, Sara. I listen to you all the time.”

“Yeah, right,”

“Okay. Let’s go outdoors, find someone you don’t care about and get a demo.”

I sighed. “Okay,”

We leaned against Murad’s car, waiting for someone I didn’t care about to leave their adobes. It should’ve been an easier task because I barely ever cared for anyone – but no one was getting out of their houses, and I didn’t want to venture out of my neighborhood for this demo.

“Where did you say you got that ring from again?” Murad asked.

“From the beach that day,”

“And you just took it?”

“Yes,” I said meekly. “But I left a 200 Dirhams note on the same spot, so if the owner came looking for it, they’d be able to buy another one with the money I left,” I said in my defense.

“Show me the ring.” He said. I showed him my hand.

He held my hand softly and looked at me again. “You think this one’s worth 200 bucks?” He almost laughed.

I pulled my hand back. “It’s better than nothing. And anyway, because I’ve paid for it, it’s mine now.”

A middle-aged woman walked out of her house from the opposite direction. Her name was Myra Hassan. I knew because she had it written in bold letters next to her main door.

 “Well, I think we found someone I don’t care about,” I said, walking toward her. Murad followed.

“Hi, Myra,” I said as I reached her. She was texting on her phone and trying to open her car door when she looked up, irritated.

“Yes?”

“How are you?”

“Do I know you enough to have to answer that?”

*Why do some people talk like that?*

 “We are your neighbors. Neighbors can ask their neighbors that question.” Murad replied on my behalf.

“Well, good, enjoy. I am busy.” She ignored him and replied to me instead. I gritted my teeth.

She was always this bitchy; it wasn’t just mood swings or bad days making her talk like that.

“Myra,” I said again, and this time I looked into her eyes, waiting for the ring to heat up and her expression to change. None of that happened.

*This is bad.*

“I want you to break your phone,” I ordered, then waited.

And waited,

And waited.

She looked at us both and gave us a sick laugh. I felt pathetic.

“Could you two do me a favor and take your nonsense elsewhere?” She said and then got into her car and drove off.

*Ah, I hate her.*

Murad scowled at the car before looking at me, “She was being bitchy before you told her to break her phone.”

I smiled meekly. “I swear it worked the last time I wore it. I don’t understand why it didn’t work this time. I don’t care about her at all.” I said sadly.

“It’s alright. Don’t think about it too much.”

“But, it did work before.”

“Maybe it did. But don’t be sad if it doesn’t work anymore… maybe the ring’s having a glitch.” He said.

Murad looped his hand around my shoulder, and I tucked closer. It felt nice. We began walking back.

“If that thing works again, don’t tell anyone about it.” He said.

I stopped and frowned at him. “Why the hell not?”

“Because… They might want to steal it from you?” He offered and smiled meekly.

I smiled up at him and pulled him back towards my home.

I knew very well that he couldn’t believe me even when he was trying to. I wouldn’t have if I were in his place, either. But he still played along and consoled me even when I sounded foolish made me love him even more.

I tucked him a little closer. “Play the violin for me again, would you?” He looked at me as if I was the most precious being on earth and nodded with a grin.

I never want to lose a friend like him.

# 29

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

Later at night, when my father fell asleep, I heard my mother’s footsteps walking towards the guest room, followed by the unlocking noise of the door. I remained seated on my bed, not looking at her as she brought in a tray filled with the dinner I was supposed to have and a glass of water. She kept the tray on the bedside table and was about to leave, but I held her warm hands, and she stopped moving. “Fawad is not a bad person, Mumma,” I mumbled, still not looking at her.

She sat before me on the bed, and I let go of her. “I know he’s not Zainab. He has only shown kindness in all the years I’ve known him. If he were fake, he couldn’t have composed himself to look like a good person for so many years; he would’ve done something bad.” I looked up at her hopefully as she continued. “I’m not mad that you like him. I’m mad that you couldn’t find a friend in me to tell me about it before I found out. I’m shocked that you hid your relationship with him for so many years and didn’t even trust me enough to tell me. You didn’t consider me your friend. And I feel like a failure for that.”

“Mumma, no, I love you; you’re the best friend I can never replace. I didn’t tell you only because I was so scared, and look at everything now. I was right to be scared.”

“If you had told me about your love for Fawad earlier, I would’ve been shocked, even mad, but I wouldn’t have told your Papa about it. I felt betrayed, like I wasn’t a good mother or your friend, so a foolish part of me immediately blurted my suspicions to him, and it all went the wrong way.”

“Mumma, please do something. I can’t marry anyone else, please.” I pleaded.

She sighed. “Your relationship with Reena’s son hit us like a bomb; it had to create havoc when we argued about it after you ran to Fawad. Your father blamed me for your insolence, and I did the same to him. It wasn’t good.”

“I am sorry,” I mumbled.

“If you had told me about everything before, I could’ve suggested how you two would look good; he would’ve been angry a couple of times, but mentioning it over the years wouldn’t have had such a terrible effect. He would’ve been immune to the concept of you two being together.” She explained. “I can’t help you now, Zainab.”

My hopes of her understanding me diminished with her last words. I couldn’t even look at her. My lack of response suggested to her that I was done with this discussion, and I was not happy.

As the sun rose over the horizon once again, I expected the noise of my siblings’ bickering to fill up the house like it always did, but they were quiet today. They probably understood that all was not okay.

I didn’t like that. I didn’t find comfort in this silence.

My phone was at the bedside table of my own shared room; I had forgotten to take it with me in my haste to follow Fawad, and once I came back, I was shoved into the guest room, so I had no way to know if Fawad was calling or texting me right now. I dropped him off at a hotel and made him promise not to enter my house until I called him; I hoped that he wouldn’t break it with all my heart. It’d be horrific if he did.

I drank the water my mother brought for me but didn’t touch the food. I couldn’t feel hungry after everything that happened.

At this point, it seemed impossible to convince my father with words; I needed to take a drastic decision. Running away wasn’t possible now; lying my way out of it wasn’t either. I spent the whole day thinking and made the pathetic yet firm decision to go on a hunger strike. My parents never liked it when I skipped my meals, so I hoped taking this step would make them accept us.

I knew I was stubborn to do so, but I couldn’t find a better option. I had once promised Fawad that I wouldn’t marry anyone else even if it killed me. I guess it was time to fulfill that promise.

Mother had brought in lunch in the afternoon, but upon seeing the plate from last night filled with untouched food, she frowned at me. She knew what I was up to. She knew this was my silent way of protesting.

I spent my time lying on the bed, sometimes fuming and sometimes wondering if I should just eat the food presented to me. *But my love for Fawad was stronger than my hunger* – I strongly reminded myself that every time I felt too hungry - and I wanted my parents to know that.

The medical student in me knew what I was doing was foolish but not wholly outrageous, as many individuals detoxified their bodies by drinking only water for 48 hours.

However, Mother turned out to be smarter than me, she began playing tricks, and by tricks, I mean bringing me a glass of milk instead of water and cooking my favorite meals to lure me into eating. I had no option but to drink the milk, but I did not eat the food. I still held myself strong. I could feel my mother getting worried whenever she found my plate untouched.

“Zainab, just eat your food. Keep your anger aside and Eat. Your. Food.” My mother said, her face filled with fury. But I did not move. She thumped the food on the bedside table and stormed out.

I heard my mother arguing with my father next, but I could not decipher their words.

I did not eat anything for five and half days, and I was starving – maybe even dying, I did not know. I stopped drinking the milk – or pretended to, as I only drank half of it, and then added tap water to make it look like I ate or drank nothing. My mother was worried, so I knew my hardship wasn’t going futile.

Whenever I looked at her, I felt like an asshole, but I wasn’t marrying anyone else; it was either Fawad or death. I wanted to make this decision clear to them.

My food tray today had biryani, and my stomach was growling. I didn’t touch it. I was stunned to see my father walk into the guest room then. I hadn’t seen him for the last five days. I sat up straighter and looked at him as he stood before the bed. It was me who was starving, but it looked as if he was the one who was indeed suffering. His eyes behind the golden glasses looked bleak and so tired. My father was no longer as livid as when I had last seen him; all that remained in his expression was sadness. I felt terrible. I am a horrible daughter. He took the plate of food from the bedside table and sat in front of me on the bed.

“Why aren’t you eating Zainab?” He asked quietly. I didn’t speak.

“If you’re mad at me, then fine, stay mad. Don’t kill yourself for it.” He said, exhausted. He rolled up a bit of the food with his hand and held it before my mouth. I looked at him and looked at the food again.

“If you want to get married to him, go ahead. I won’t say no, okay? You win.” He sighed. “Just eat the food, Zainab. I don’t want to lose my daughter for this.” He added.

My throat closed up, and I wanted to cry. “It’s not about winning, Papa; I want you to understand me. I love him, he’s a good boy, and I want to marry him. But I want you both to be happy about it, too. It’s killing me to know that my father doesn’t understand me when he was the only one who ever did all my life.”  I cried.

“I understand you. We’ll talk about this later. First, eat.” He said softly. So I ate.

30

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

“You’re my daughter, and I’d always want the best for you,” he said.

“Fawad might be a good person, but I don’t like his family, and I fear he might get influenced by them someday and hurt you to hurt me.” I wanted to interrupt and explain, but he gestured for me to listen first. “I spoke to your Mumma about him. She doesn’t hate him.” I looked at my mother gratefully as he continued, “he decided to shift here to a new country only for you, which tells us a lot about him.” He said and sighed. “If you still want to get married to him, I won’t stop you. I’ve tried, but it looks like I can’t.” He added. I looked at the floor and said nothing.

 “Promise me you won’t let Fawad’s mother abuse you like I fear she will if I let you marry him. If they do, promise me you’ll return to us.” He said. I held my father’s hand and smiled.

“I will never let anyone abuse me, Papa. If they do, I’ll come running back to you. I promise.”

My heart found peace again when I saw my father crack a small smile. “That’s what I needed to hear Zainab. Tell Fawad I’d like to speak to him. We need to fix the dates for your wedding.” He said and slowly got up. Mother rested her palm on my cheek.

“Always keep smiling, Zainab. We need it more than anything in this world.” She slowly stepped out of bed and followed my father out the door.

Am I dreaming? It would be terrible if it all were just a dream.

I pinched myself, and I was still in the same world, the real world. The feeling of that impending doom was no longer weakening my soul, and all I sensed about our future was now peace. Can I now spend the rest of my life with my Love, my life, Fawad?

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Forever and ever,

I squealed and jumped excitedly, running out of the guest room for the first time in days, I felt a little dizzy from exhaustion, but that couldn’t stop me from moving. I ran to my parents and gave them the tightest hug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you so much. I love you two so much. Thank you!” I squeaked, and I heard them chuckle.

“Just… be happy, dear.” My father said. I hugged him tighter.

I ran to my room and searched for my phone. It wasn’t where I had kept it. I found my bed completely disheveled, courtesy of my monster siblings, as I searched for it. I looked under the bed and found my phone hanging with the charger still plugged in. I pulled it out and straightened a side of the bed sheet before sitting.

I looked at my phone and found multiple missed calls and texts from Fawad, which was peculiar as he wasn’t a pushy caller. He’d always call only once and wait for me to call back - a thing I found so sweet of him. I quickly opened his messages.

FAWAD: *I’m inside the hotel room now, the view is great, but it’s a little too cold.*

FAWAD: *Do let me know what happens. I’ll be waiting.*

The following few messages were of him updating me about what he ate and did. I swiftly scrolled through them and stopped at one from two days ago.

FAWAD: *I know you made me promise not to step into your house. But I am worried.*

FAWAD: *My mind cannot rest knowing you might get scolded or hurt.*

FAWAD: *I can no longer stay in the Hotel Zainy. Your absence is bothering me. I can’t sleep. Please call me back as soon as you can*.

FAWAD: *I am outside your home, and I will stay here until you come back.*

FAWAD: *Your promise is the only thing stopping me from stepping into your doorstep.*

I panicked. Does this mean he has been staying outside for the last two days waiting for me? I quickly scrolled to his newest messages.

 FAWAD: *I hope you’re okay, Zainy.*

I ran out the door. Thankfully this time, my parents did not stop me. I was in the elevator and out of the building in a minute.

I looked around the busy road and found my Love leaning against a lamppost, his hair disheveled, shirt rumpled, and expression glum. His hands remained folded before him, and his dark eyes seemed distant. My heart ached.

When I walked closer, he looked up, and his expression changed. He suddenly looked so relieved to see me.

“Fawad,” I breathed and fell into his arms.

“Zainy,” He said and hugged me tighter. I missed him so much. My heart hurts. He waited outside for two days- for *me*. The very thought of us being apart now frightens me.

I smiled. A teardrop fell from my eyes, and I rubbed it off. No more tears, no more sadness. I have everything I ever wanted. I would no longer cry. I let go of him and looked into his dark, beautiful eyes. He rested the palm of his hands on my cheeks and looked at me.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Did your parents hurt you?” He asked again.

“No,” I said softly. He rested his forehead on mine.

“I’ve been worried.” He mumbled. “You didn’t call back.”

“I couldn’t…. It’s a long story, but come with me.” I held his hand and pulled him towards the building. He remained silent as I clicked the button to the 10th floor of the elevator, stepped out, and walked up to the rooftop.

I didn’t want to let go of his hand, so I held it tighter. We stood close to each other for a long while.

“You didn’t stay at the hotel,” I said.

“I couldn’t. I felt terrible. The street felt better than the hotel room; at least I was closer to you.”

“Were you crying?” he asked.

“No…Maybe,” I said. “It’s my fault, isn’t it? I shouldn’t have forced you into anything.”

“No, my Love, don’t say that.” I looked into his eyes.

“Papa isn’t pleased about us,” I told him. His eyes went bleak.

“He never liked Reena Aunty. He made sure to specify that,” I said.

“I know...”

“He thinks your family, and… you would abuse me if I married you.”

Fawad looked shocked. “I will never do that, Zainab, never! Nor will I ever let anyone do that to you.” He explained desperately.

“I know. Mumma knows you’re not a bad person, and she said so, but Papa still finds it difficult to see us together.” Fawad was worried.

“Can I speak to your father? Nothing will feel right until I get a chance to explain myself. I love you; I cannot even imagine doing anything to hurt you. I want him to understand that.”

“Yes, you can. He told me to tell you that he’d like to speak to you. He wants us to fix a date for our wedding.” I smiled at his stunned face. Fawad remained silent for a long while. He thought he didn’t hear me right, so he asked again.

“Zainy, do you mean?” - “Yes, Fawad, we can get married. We got their approval!” I squealed.

He stepped back and rested his hand on his head in utmost relief. He grinned so big with his dimpled cheeks that my heart skipped a beat. We embraced each other again, so happy.

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“Promise me you’d never do such a thing again, and always eat on time.” He said.

“I have no other reason to stay hungry.”

He smiled. “We’ll have to make up for all the meals you skipped and eat out more often.”

“You better start making a list, then,” I suggested. That idea seemed to impress him. I tugged him towards my home so he could meet my father.

Father was not pleasant to him. He was rude, asked him thousands of unpleasant questions, and taunted him, but Fawad expressed no annoyance. He answered all his questions and explained how much he truly cared for me.

My mother didn’t ask a lot of questions. She heard Fawad speak, glaring at my father whenever he’d ask a wrong question and smiling whenever Fawad would reply with a sweeter answer. After a long and hard discussion, it was decided that Fawad was to find a new home in Sharjah for us to live in before we got married, as my father did not want to give the hand of his daughter to a person who didn’t even have his own house. We were told to search for a home we found suitable in the next 12 days, as after two weeks, we’d be flying to our hometown to get married.

Father decided to hold our wedding in our hometown as most of our relatives lived there and they’d be more than happy to join our celebration. We could easily host a reception once we returned to Sharjah for our friends here after we got married. I suggested hosting the reception on our rooftop, and my parents liked the idea. Father was good friends with the landlord of our apartment’s building and knew he would be happy to give the rooftop to us for rent.

The following two weeks were just for the two of us, no one specified that, but I knew. Once we landed in our hometown, we’d get so busy with the preparations for the wedding that we’d barely have the time to see each other.

I no longer have to hide my love for Fawad from the world; it felt so liberating. I looked at Fawad once our parents dismissed us for the day. I had never seen my Love so happy in all my life. His happiness made me happier, and I wondered, is this what love means, to find happiness within the joy of your loved one?

# 31

# SARA

I couldn’t understand a thing. There was still so much I didn’t know about this ring. It worked the last time I used it. What the hell happened when I tried using it in front of Murad?

*I am missing something here.*

*What am I missing out on?*

I couldn’t possibly tell my dad about this ring, or he’ll also think I’ve gotten crazy. I need to clear my mind. For that, I need to go out and walk.

“Dad!” I called out as I got up from the sofa and headed toward his desk.

“Yes?” He called back as he shuffled through some of the papers on his desk.

 “What are you working on?” I asked curiously.

“There’s a government tender taking place in our country. They want bitumen. So I’m sending them my offers.” He said. “If I win this tender, you’ll get to buy that car you wanted for so long.” He smiled. I smiled back but also felt a tremendous amount of pity. “Dad, you’ve been trying to win one of those tenders for ten years and didn’t win one. You know how it works there; they don’t let normal companies win.”

“I know, but I have a feeling I’ll win this time.”

That’s what he says every time.

“Okay. But don’t put too much of your effort there.” I said.

 “Oh – I almost forgot to ask, can I go out?”

“For what,”

“Fresh air,”

 “Alright,”

I grinned.

“Oh wait, I forgot to tell you the best part about this tender; if I win, we’ll get to stay in Bangladesh for a couple of months to overlook everything.”

I frowned.

Bangladesh is my beautiful hometown.  Just like every other place on earth, Bangladesh has little flaws, like a mismanaged traffic system and people who dislike following rules. However it may be, I love it there, so it’s not my hometown that’s the problem; it’s the people who have no trigger warnings before their insensitive questions, no sense of other people’s privacy, nor any locks over their mouths, that is.

I’m frequently asked questions like:

*Do you remember how your mom died?*

*Do you remember the last words she said to you?*

*Did you cry when she died?*

*Did your father cry?*

*Were you at her funeral?*

*Were you there when she was buried underground?*

Yes. Yes, to all of those questions. Memory is a wretched thing.

I don’t want to be reminded of what I lost. I want to run away from my memories, and I don’t want to remember how hard she had tried to live but couldn’t because the cancer was stronger than she thought it was, and I don’t want to remember her apology that she couldn’t live longer for me.

*So shut the fuck up with the fucking questions.* But obviously, I can’t say that to those aunties or kids; the best I can do is answer them like the good girl I pretend to be. So, I’d rather stay here, away from those people, than be near them any day.

“We’d be there for *months*. Why so long?” I asked.

“Well, we’ll have to stay at least 7 to 9 months… or as long as it takes for a road to be ready. I think we both know how long it takes for a road to be ready in Bangladesh.”

“Very long,” I murmured. “Do we have to stay that long?” I asked.

“I think so.”

I didn’t oppose him, though. Because for us to go live there for months, my dad had to win the tender first, and I knew very well how much that possibility would come to life.

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As the fashionista I am, I wore a white sweater, white pants, and white sneakers to give out a modern-day angelic vibe. Wearing my sunglasses felt mandatory today as I was wearing the ring, and I didn’t want everyone to stop and stare like they did in the fish market again.

I was still being looked at anyway, but not because of the ring.

I rode my bike out of my neighborhood and far away towards the roads with buildings and shops. I was far from home now; I usually came here in my car for coffee.

I suddenly wanted to have coffee but didn’t bring money from home.

I looked at my ring shining with its unearthly glow. *Let’s see if this works again*.

I stepped into the coffee shop. It was warm inside, the scent of coffee clearing my senses. I stood in a line and waited until my turn came in. I smiled and looked at the person taking everyone’s order at the counter.

“Hello. What would you like to have?”

The woman kept a smile on her face till I pulled my sunglasses off. Her expression changed within seconds, and she stood still.

*The ring’s working again.*

“I’d like a latte with whipped cream on top,” I said, leaning closer. “And make it free,” I added and smiled again. The woman looked at me for a while and then nodded. She made the latte, poured it into a paper cup, added whipped cream, and brought it to the counter.

I dragged it towards me and smiled again.

I looked at her badge. Her name was Mary.

“Thanks for the latte, Mary,” I said and smiled.

Mary’s expression changed from blank to calm and normal again at that moment. I could see life coming back into her eyes.

“Um… Did you pay for the coffee yet?” She asked, confused.

“um,” I didn’t know what to say.

“Not yet.” I smiled meekly and let go of the coffee mug. She dragged it across the counter and took it back.

“You’ll need to pay for it.” She said.

“Yea… I left my purse in the car; I’ll get it.” I lied.

“Alright,” She looked on suspiciously.

I left the coffee shop and stood in front of the door.

*Wait just a minute. Didn’t the ring almost work?*

I sneaked a look at her through the mirrored entrance.

*It did until I… found out her name.*

I stopped a passerby and looked at him. “Sing a song.” His expression changed from shock to blank within seconds. He did as I said, and I tried hard not to laugh, and then I asked him his name.

“Sameer,” And just like that, he looked calm again and stared at me.

“Do I… know you?”

“No.”

“Okay…” He said and walked past me. “Aren’t you going to finish the song?” I asked.

He looked at me as if I were insane and walked away.

*The ring doesn’t work on the ones I know the names of.* I realized as he left.

I figured out how this ring works.

I grinned so big that my cheeks hurt. I looked back, I didn’t get my free coffee, but I know how to use this ring, and I couldn’t be happier.

A woman pushed past me and pulled the coffee shop’s door to get inside. “Hey, move from the door; people are trying to get in… idiots.” The woman snapped.

I gripped her wrist and stared into her eyes.

She looked angry at first, then blank.

“Don’t ever snap at people like that, understand?” She looked at me for a few moments and nodded.

I let go of her wrist. “Good. Now go.” I ordered.

And she obeyed.

I walked away from the coffee shop and smiled.

It never felt so good to be alive.

# 32

# SARA

The sky above me looked like a painting. Huge clouds gave the city its calming shade while giving the sun space to shine.

I am happy because I now know how this ring works, that it isn’t jinxed and doesn’t kill people like magical objects in the movies do – at least not that I know of yet. So I smiled as I sat in front of my home’s main door with a notepad and pen and looked at the sky for inspiration.

*How can I enjoy this ring without destroying the world?*

*What’s the first thing any human would do if they got a ring that could compel people?*

*Rob a bank?*

*Steal a car?*

*Rule the world?*

The latter option sounded exhausting, so I crossed that off my list. Ruling the world would be too stressful for someone who liked doing nothing.

Robbing a bank would be more complicated than it’s worth. I would be able to compel people, but not the cameras, and once all of the compelled bankers get back to their senses, they’ll find me easily.

I thought of something else for a long while. *Stealing a car seems wrong too*.

I sighed noisily and slammed my pen and notepad aside. All this would’ve been much easier if I had no ethics. This ring came to the wrong person.

I sighed again and rested my hands on my head.

“Hi,” Murad said.

I looked up at him. He wore a dark blue T-shirt, dark grey coat and pants. “Hi,” I mumbled. He tilted his head a little and looked at me curiously.

I tried not to smile at the cuteness. I pushed my hair back and clipped it with a hair claw. Murad walked towards me and picked my notepad up.

“What are you working on?” He asked curiously, but I snatched it away before he could read. “Eh, nothing… just writing down what qualities I’d want my future husband to have.” I lied and moved to my right to give him space to sit.

He seemed extremely interested.

“Would you mind sharing some of that information?”

“Yes, very much,”

Murad sat beside me and rested his head on the main door like a hopeless lover. I scowled at him. “I missed you. I feel like we haven’t spoken in months.” He said.

“Didn’t we meet just yesterday?”

“No, we didn’t. We met 72 hours ago!”

“Really?” I asked.

This ring might be the distraction I was looking for. But did I want this distraction, as I missed him too?

He nodded. “So tell me what’s in that list.”

“Why do you want to know?”

He raised his eyebrow. “Why do you think I want to know?”

“Because you’re too nosy,”

“You know that’s not why.”

“Then why?”

“Because I want to look up to all your expectations,”

*No amount of magic can make me forget this handsome, innocent man.*

I grinned mischievously. *Let me give him something he can’t look up to then.*

“Well…” I picked up my notepad again. “I’ve been extending this particular list since I was 13.

”Okay, so firstly –

“He has to have a good heart… be smart, ambitious, can’t have any addictions to smoking, alcohol, drugs.” I ticked on my notepad as I spoke.

“He has to have a sexy personality, you know? Like, a mixture of intelligence with mischief,” I grinned at the clouds as I continued. “Someone who knows how to make me laugh,”

“Ah,” Murad interrupted with a grin. “I think I have what it takes to be your ideal husband. Why don’t you marry me already?”

 “And he has to know how to speak Bangla,” I completed my list and grinned.

 His grin fell.

“Well, that is just unfair.” He grumbled. “You’re going to reject me because I can’t speak Bangla?”

“My dad thinks a married life might get difficult if both partners don’t speak the same language.”

“You barely ever speak in Bangla; you’re always blabbering in English.” He pointed out.

“I do not! I speak to my dad in my mother tongue literally every day.” I pointed a finger at my tongue for emphasis.

 He scratched his head. “So unfair,”

 I giggled.

“But hey, that point in my list won’t matter if that person just loves me… without any conditions.” I sighed. “There’ll always be someone better than me, prettier than me, smarter than me, you know? I just want a guy who won’t care.” His eyes lit up at my words, so I continued.

“I want him never to stop trying… to show how much he loves me every single day he’s alive.”

“That’s so easy...” He said.

“I wasn’t planning on making it easy for you.”

# 33

# SARA

As I walked inside, I got greeted with a bright environment and the aroma of pasta. I sneaked a look at Murad, he looked so hot pulling his coat off. I tried reeling myself in.

*Act normal.*

Murad’s mom insisted I have lunch in their home when she saw me outside, and I couldn’t say no, so half an hour later, here we are.

“*Mama*! Sara’s here for lunch!” Murad said excitedly. Murad’s mom came out and grinned at me. I smiled back at Anna.

“Mama, Sara’s here for lunch,” Murad said again and smiled at me excitedly.

Anna smiled and frowned at the same time. “Yes, Murad, I can see that very clearly.”

I bit my laugh. It wasn’t every day I came into his home, so this was entertaining. “Sara, sweetie, you look lovely.”

“Not as lovely as you!” I said excitedly. She smiled adorably.

“Did you use blush? Your cheeks look so pink!” I touched my cheeks; they’re still pink from the time Murad flirted with me a few minutes ago (which wasn’t terrible for once)

 “Nope, it could be the cold, I think?” I offered. Twenty-nine degrees wasn’t cold enough to give my brown skin pink cheeks, though.

“Aaahhh. You’re so cute.”

I grinned.

“I’ll be having lunch with Murad’s father when he comes back, so why don’t you two go ahead and have lunch first?”

She clicked her fingers before Murad’s face when she noticed him staring at me. That got her his attention. “The plate and food are in the kitchen. Go and get it.”  I tried hard not to laugh.

“I’ll be right back.” He smiled meekly and quickly walked into the kitchen.

“Thank you for inviting me,” I said shyly. “No problem, sweetie! Murad told me you loved pasta while it was being made.” She smiled mischievously - just like Murad, “Was he right?”

“Yes, he was,” I said shyly.

Anna merrily walked behind me and nudged me towards their white sofa. We walked like a human train towards it.

Their home is entirely different from mine. In my home, we have tan leather sofas, white furniture, a shelved wall next to a window dedicated to my beloved books, and many Turkish carpets in all sizes.

Murad’s home looked so contemporary. They had a lot of decor, paintings, and expensive art decorated all over the house. It genuinely looked like an architect’s home.

I looked up at Anna; she wore a white and blue striped shirt tucked into her blue jeans. She’s so beautiful that I am not even kidding when I say if I didn’t know any better, I’d think she’s Murad’s older sister. I’m not just saying it because her son is my friend.

She sat beside me on the sofa. “So, how are you, sweetie?” She asked and pushed a few strands of my hair behind my ear.

I smiled. “I am very good. How about you?” I asked back.

She smiled. “I’m good too. Is my boy giving you any trouble?” She asked in her posh American accent.

That question confused me. “Um… oh, he’s always giving me trouble.” I quipped.

“He is? He shouldn’t be doing that to his girl, but boys can get annoying.”

I wanted to stand up and yell for Murad to ask him what the hell he said to his mother was going on between us, but I didn’t. I smiled meekly instead.

“Come here more often when my boy’s not annoying you, so we can talk and hang out together, and I can tell you more about Murad.” She whispered the last bit.

“Of course!” I grinned nervously.

“What are you two talking about?” He asked as he kept the food on the tea table before us.

“Not you,” She said and giggled.

He raised his eyebrow as if to ask, *really*? I looked away shyly. *What is up with me today?*

He rested his hands behind him and waited for something. He raised his eyebrows at his mom, and his mom raised her eyebrows back in response.

He then looked at his wristwatch; it was his favorite one, a silver chain with a light blue dial.

She frowned at him, and he gave her a pleading look.

“Oh!” – She seemed to suddenly understand whatever her son was trying to tell her – “Oh… kids these days.” She smiled to herself. “Okay,”

“I have some work calls to attend to, so...” She slapped her hands on her thighs and got up.

She looked back at Murad before stepping away. “I like her better than the one your grandparents are forcing on you.” I heard her whisper, and then smiled mischievously at us.

“Mama,” Murad couldn’t even look at her. He simply cleared his throat. I was too stunned to say anything.

*Did she think we were a couple?*

Murad smiled at me, embarrassed.

“Oh no, we’re not really-” “Ugh, keep the excuses for someone else, both of you.”  She interrupted and bit down her laugh. I looked at Murad for help, but he seemed to love the misunderstanding.

She looked directly at me this time.

“Just don’t hurt him, sweetie. He has a lot of love in his heart, he might act smart, but he's just as innocent as he looks. He doesn’t deserve to be heartbroken,” she said softly.

*He doesn’t deserve to be heartbroken.*

Murad cleared his throat. She looked at the clock again. “Oh, I better hurry up… and leave you two alone.” She smirked.

I looked on as she trotted upstairs to her room.I stared at Murad when he slumped on the sofa next to me.“Why does she think we’re a couple? And why didn’t you clarify that we aren’t?”

He cleared his throat. “What if someday we are? I would not want to confuse her with yes and no.”

“So thoughtful of you,” I said sarcastically. He handed me my plate with food.

 “Thank you,” I said with my mouth full. “It’s delicious.”

 “So, Mom thinks we’re a couple – and she approves of us. Why don’t we just confess that we love each other already?”  He drawled.

I almost spit my food out to snap at him. I glared at him instead.

“Um… why are you throwing daggers at me with your eyes?” Murad asked and took another spoonful of the pasta.

“You’re funny,” I said with a plain expression.

“Okay, if you don’t love me, just say so, and I won’t ask again.” He said cutely. That kind of worried me… I didn’t want him to stop trying. I don’t know what I want for myself. I hated him for confusing me so much,

I kept our plates on the tea table and pinched him everywhere.

“Does that give you the answer?” I said as I pinched.

“Ouch! Yes. Ouch! You *love* me.” He crooned and laughed. I knelt and pinched him wherever I found a free spot.

“This is for complicating my life!”

“Ouch, ouch, ouch!” He barked out loud this time.

I pushed my hand over his mouth to shut him up.

“Murad, will you keep quiet? I’m not killing you!” I angry-whispered at him,

I snapped my head at the stairs to see if Murad’s mom had come down to see the commotion's source. She hadn’t. I sighed, moved my hand, and looked back at him.

I was stunned to see that I was so close to him, stunned to feel so comfortable this way, shocked to find his lips so pretty, his brown eyes beautiful this close -

“Murad!” His mother suddenly barked, and we jumped. I pulled myself far away from him in a jolt and leaned against the corner of the sofa.

“Oh shit.” He mumbled, and I hid my face in embarrassment even though we did nothing wrong. Anna slapped the back of Murad’s head.

“Ouch!”

“You’re not supposed to kiss a girl just because you like her! I let you be here alone so you could talk to her, not smooch! *Kids these days*!”

“We weren’t doing anything!” Murad said in his defense, his hand behind his head. “And I’m not a kid anymore. You said you’ll consider me a grown-up if I start earning.”

She pulled his ear. “You think you’re old enough to kiss a girl, you idiot?”

“Ouch! Yes?” She pulled harder.  “You got all romantic with your girlfriend in my house. Have you got no shame?”

“Mama, stop embarrassing me!”

I felt myself burning hot with shame.

“You think you’re smart?” She asked Murad.

“We weren’t doing anything! I should not get a slap when didn’t even do anything.”

“You want to get her pregnant before she’s married? Is that what you want to do? Do you understand the problems she’d have to go through because of you?”

*Oh, good God.*

“Mama, stop it. I would never do that to her. What are you saying?” He was so embarrassed. I never saw him like that.

She scoffed at him. “Go sit there.” She pushed him to sit on another sofa. “Go!”

He did, blushing with embarrassment.

“Now eat.”

 “Letting kids stay alone so they can talk cute, but I walk in to see them all over each other. What's wrong with this generation?” We heard her complain as she walked back up.

She succeeded in her scare because whatever spark we found in the few seconds we were close to each other was diminished entirely after the pregnancy scare.

“Oh God,” I hid my face in embarrassment.

“Sorry.”

“I was the one who got over you. You’re the one who got slapped. I should be sorry.”

“She doesn’t hit that hard. It’s just a lot of noise.”

*I got over him. Over. Him. What’s wrong with me?*

# 34

# SARA

The ring has a mind of its own because as soon as I wore it, I was getting many ideas of mischief.

I have decided to exchange my old car for a new one as that won’t be considered stealing. So I drove my way to the car market.

I looked at my fingers on the steering wheel, admiring the ring’s unearthly glow from behind my sunglasses, hoping to get an idea of which car to choose amongst the many shining ones.

I looked up, and there it was – the car that shined the brightest, a Range Rover. It was a black car with black tires, black windows, black seats, and blacks everything. *Black might be my new favorite color*. I parked my car and got out.

I walked over to the car and looked inside. Everything looked so modern and cozy. “So this is how rich people live…” I mumbled to myself.

I needed to compel the owner directly to exchange this car for my own. I found a man cleaning a car with a red cloth. I greeted him and asked who the owner of that black car was,

 “He is that bald old man with a mustache over there.” He said and pointed to a man talking to a customer a few cars away from me. I gave my thanks and trotted off to my first target.

The mustache man was talking to his clients in Arabic, and as soon as he was done with them, he approached me with his infectious smile.

“How can I help you?” The mustache man asked kindly.

“Is that car for sale?” I pointed to the black car and asked.

“Yes, it is.” He said and began walking towards it. I followed him as he kept informing me about the special features. “It’s too bad no one’s buying the car yet. I am afraid it’ll just keep getting older without being used. The business isn’t going so well right now.” He added sadly.

Usually, I’d be overwhelmed with pity after hearing that, but shockingly, I wasn’t feeling a thing. I looked at the ring again, was this thing making me feel this way? It warmed against my finger as if in answer.

I knocked on the bonnet of the car and smirked. “I’ll take it.”

The mustache man smiled confusingly. “Don’t you want to know the price first?”

“No,” I said. “Because I’ll take it for free,” I pulled off my sunglasses and looked directly into the man’s eyes. His expression changed, and he stood still.

*Perfect.*

“I want to exchange my car over there,” I pointed to my golden car. “With this car over here,”

The mustache man stared blankly at me as I carried on. “Take my keys, and hand me over the keys of this car.”

He briefly processed my words, nodded once, slowly took my keys, and went inside his small office. I leaned against the car for a few minutes, wondering what was taking him so long and worrying if the ring stopped working when he entered the other room.

Thankfully, after three whole minutes, he came back.

The mustache man brought out the key – which was a remote. I grinned and took it.

“Thank you. Now forget this car ever existed in your store.” I said, unlocked the car, got in, and breathed in the new car smell. I didn’t bother looking back at my old car before starting the new one and speeding off.

*Oh my God, this car is so smooth.*

I grinned as I sped up. *This isn’t the last time I’m using this ring. We’re going to have some fun.* I thought as I cranked up the music and drove toward my favorite mall.

\*\*\*

The dress was so purple it almost looked black. The fabric soft and shiny, making the dress look fit for a princess. The outfit’s sleeves fell off my shoulders, and the neckline was low enough to make me nervous, but the glitter of the dress made it all worth it.

To say that I’ve been misusing my powers would be an understatement, as I’ve been entering every store I liked and taking items I wanted ‘as a gift’ out with me, and ordering anyone I found on my way to go and put the heavy items in my car (which was unlocked and far away).

The more I used the ring, the lesser I felt any feelings, as if it were sucking my emotions away, but clearly, I couldn’t care less. I pulled my phone out, took a selfie, and sent it to Murad. I suddenly needed him to know I’m pretty sexy too if I want to be… I frowned at my reflection in the mirror. *Apparently, lust is the only feeling I have left. Hmm.*

BTS was on, so I played the music loud, and when a passerby gave me a look, I increased the volume as I sat in my new car and thought. The only space available was the driving seat, the rest occupied with items I stole- *got gifted ­*from big branded stores.

I couldn’t possibly let my dad know I’d been out shopping for free with this ring for so long. He won’t believe me and start worrying about my mental health.

If I parked this car next to his in front of our home, he’d want to know where I got it from and where my old car was. Why didn’t I think all these through before I exchanged my vehicle?

For now, I needed time to think; I needed to go home without this car and before my dad.

I drove back home and parked it outside my neighborhood, then walked back home in my fancy dress.

“Sara! Are you home?” My dad asked loudly, worried.

“Yes, Dad,” I said, refreshed and in my pajamas.

“Why are all the lights switched off?”

“Energy saving!” I lied. For some reason, I didn’t feel the need to switch them on.

“I brought dinner! I’ll get fresh, and let’s have dinner. I’m too hungry.” He said as I walked to his room.

“What about the lunch you cooked?”

He looked back and sighed. “I forgot about that.”

“We’ll have that tomorrow, then,” I said.

“You know I don’t like old food.”

“But you like old meat curries?” He got back in again without answering.

My dad returned downstairs as I settled the food and plates in the living room in front of the TV.

“Where’s your car, Sara? I got worried when I didn’t see your car.” He sat beside me on the sofa and took a drumstick from the fried chicken bucket.

“Umm… I sent it to a garage because it had some issues.” I lied and chewed on my food.

“Ah. That car is becoming more of a pain every day.” He sighed.

I nodded.

“What took you so long today?”

 “Remember the business requirement I told you about, where Bangladesh requires a lot of bitumen?” He asked.

I nodded again.

“They liked my price! They called me directly to inform me of that. I think we’ll get the job now. I had to be in the office to overlook everything, so it took me a while.” He explained.

I smiled at him. I’m happy that my dad is happy, but for the first time, I didn’t want my dad to win this tender, only because his winning this bid meant me leaving my home for a long time, and I didn’t want that.

I think I hate traveling, I hate every place that doesn’t quite feel like home.

# 35

# SARA

I had the ring on me the whole day, and it was making me feel… odd, as if it was beckoning me to use it more and that I wasn’t using its powers enough. I stared at the shiny ring while lying on my bed; all lights switched off.

*I could hold a private BTS concert or make Kim Namjoon date me.* I grinned widely at the thought. *I could be a queen, a superhero, or the worst villain; I could rule the world, could kill people too…*

My thoughts got darker, so I sat on my bed and pulled off the ring. A sudden burst of pain lashed through me, and guilt overwhelmed me so much that it was hard to breathe. I quickly got out of bed and drank water, my heart still burning with a miserable mixture of guilt and gloom. Once the pain subsided, I threw the ring on my dressing table and paced around the room like a cat, my anxiety level rising.

*What have I done? This is not how I was raised. I don’t cheat on people, misbehave or steal things. Heck, I never even stole candies as a kid. How did I let this ring make me do all that?*

*Joon deserves better than me.*

I wanted to break things, pull my hair out, and cry all night. I never felt this amount of guilt in all my life- I needed air.

I opened my windows to let the winter air in, the breeze doing nothing to make me feel better. I looked back at the ring that made me feel this way, locking all my emotions so it could make me do everything terrible and giving it all back once I pulled it off.

I looked back out again, trying to ignore it.

The outside gave me a direct view of Murad’s room. He never pulled on his curtains, even when I told him to, saying that he felt suffocated by doing so. He should’ve pulled his curtains because his privacy would constantly get breached by a person as snoopy as I living right next door to him.

I squinted into his room and found him sleeping in his bed, or I thought he was, until I saw him pulling his blankets up. *Good*. I called him; I needed him to distract me from my burning heart. The phone on his bedside lit up, and after two rings, he stirred and sat on his bed, looking at his phone.

 “Hey, Baby.” He said in his sleepy, husky voice. I felt a warm chill run through me.

I cleared my throat instead. “Hi,” I said. “Are you sleeping?” I asked.

“I no longer am.” He replied.

I scoffed. “You weren’t sleeping. I saw you move.”

Murad got out of his bed, switched on his desk lamp, and looked directly at me.

 “And you call me the creep?” He smirked. I smiled meekly. “It’s not exactly stalking if you can see me,” I said in my defense.

“Is that so?”

“mhm,”

“Can you play the violin for me?” I asked. Maybe listening to him play would make me feel better.

 “Sure… But am I allowed to come over?” He smirked mischievously.

“No,”

“Will you be coming over to listen, then?” He asked again, smirking.

“Not at night,”

“Why? Don’t you trust yourself with me at night?”

“You wish,” I said, biting my lips. He’s making me feel all sorts of things but guilt, and I like it.

“I’ll play the violin if you wear that dress you sent me a selfie in. I want to see you in it; do you know how restless you made me feel all day?” He said.

I suddenly remembered the selfie I sent him and felt mortified, the neckline of it was so low.

I sighed. “Fine,” something in me wanted him to look at me like he had at my selfie. I quickly wore the dress I *stole­*- I didn’t let the guilt overwhelm me again as I switched on a table lamp and stood before the window.

He didn’t act dramatic like he usually does when I dress up – like pretending to faint or resting his hand over his heart, but stared at me for a long time instead. I didn’t feel shy under his stare, though. I sank in the way he looked at me.

He soon brought his violin out and sat on a chair before the window, holding the phone to his ear again. “Let me come over, so I can see you better when I play.”

I desperately wanted to say yes, for him to come over and sit on my bed and play the violin for me. I looked at my clock; it was 2 am. The way I felt and the way he looked, I knew we wouldn’t just be sitting and talking at this hour. I didn’t trust myself.

“No,” He nodded knowingly with a smile and began playing a tune, the music making my heart skip a beat.

“Play another one,” I said once he was done.

“No,” He said. I scowled at him. “Promise me you’ll first go to the carnival with me this weekend.”

“What carnival?”

“The one that opens in winter,”

“After the way I almost got caught sneaking out the last time; hell no.” He pouted sadly, and I wondered what his lips tasted like. “I wanted to go there with you…” The way he melts my heart without even trying,

“Play another tune, and we have a deal.”

# 36

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

I sat on the floor beside our tea table with papers and a pen. We spent the afternoon listing out the things that needed to be done for our wedding. The list of work was long, so I suggested we distribute the workloads between Fawad’s family and ours so things could get done quickly. All liked the suggestion.

“Mumma, we need to go shopping. I want to match my wedding dress with the shoes I’ll wear.” I said as I rechecked the list and added a few more tasks.

My mother was on the sofa with a cup of tea between her hands, and Fawad sat next to me as he looked through the list I wrote with a smile.

I squinted at him. “Why are you smiling?”

 “I still can’t believe it.”

I suddenly wanted to laugh. I knew what he meant. I still couldn’t believe we were getting married, either.

I looked at my mother as she got up. “Mumma, when are we going shopping? I need to match-” Mother interrupted, “You are the bride, so your dress will be in red. Match your shoes in that way.”

“What if we like another color?”

“We will not like any other color. I wore red, so did your grandma on her wedding day, so did her mother, so you will too.”

“Okay, but I still need to see the dress-” “*Accha beta thikhai*. Let your siblings come back from school; we’ll go shopping after that, don’t bug me until then.” Mother said as she walked into the kitchen.

“Did someone say shopping?” Sara asked as a way of greeting as she walked into the house.

“Hi, Bride!” Sara exclaimed and almost laughed at the word *bride*. “I can’t believe it.” She said.

“Why does everyone keep saying that? Did you all think I’d stay single forever?” I asked.

“Yes.” She said. I scowled at her. She sat on her knees on the floor and hugged me from behind. I handed her the list I made, and she looked through it.

“My best friend is getting married. I still can’t believe it.” She mumbled as she looked through the list. We looked at each other then, and I didn’t know what got into us, but we started giggling.

Sara looked at Fawad, who was looking at the commotion enthusiastically. “You know what we call our brother-in-law in Bengali?” She asked.

Fawad sat forward curiously. “Not yet.” He said.

Sara walked to him on her knees and pinched his cheeks as she said, “Dulha bhai!”

“Akkkhh,” He swatted her hands away and rubbed his cheeks.

My siblings bustled into the house and hugged us all, then started fighting, but upon my mother’s bark, they ran to their room to get changed.

Fawad is their babysitter for the day as Dad is at work, and I couldn’t be more thankful. The kids were annoying whenever we took them shopping; they’d scream and fight like maniacs if Mother ever made the mistake of going out of sight.

“Your siblings are here, go and get ready, Zainab.” Mother ordered.

“Are you sure you want to care for them until we return? They can be very annoying.” I asked Fawad.

“Of course! Don’t worry about it.” He assured.

My siblings ran out of the room in pajamas and began poking Fawad. They wanted to play a game I didn’t understand. All I know is that if Fawad were poked enough times, he’d turn into a monster.

“They can be very annoying,” I repeated.

“I can handle it, Zainy, don’t worry. They might sound annoying, but they are funny.” He said as they kept poking him.

“Are you sure?” I asked again.

“I am. Now go and shop and have fun.” He said.

“I’ll see you tonight.” He added a bit softly. I smiled at him adorably.

Sara folded her arms in front of her. “Can you two stop staring at each other like no one else is in the room?” She asked. I quickly trotted into my room to get ready. Mother yelled at my siblings again, and they ran away from him.

“It’s time for you to get married too, Sara. Want me to find someone for you?” Fawad quipped.

“Have some sense. I’m 19. Who gets married at 19?”

“Many people,” He crooned.

I could hear Sara scowl as I took out a dress from my wardrobe. “Many women don’t get married at Zainab’s age either; want me to stop your wedding?” She asked sweetly.

“What? Oh no, I beg, miss, please don’t do that.” He begged dramatically.

I saw Sara stifle her laughter from the doorway. She looked my way. “Zainab, tell him that I can make you delete him instantly. He clearly doesn’t believe it.”

I nodded eagerly at Fawad. “She can, my Love.” I quipped.

# 37

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

Fawad winced as if I were eating bits of glasses. I smiled at him as I put a pickled carrot in my mouth again. “You must be thinking, why am I torturing myself with these pickles?” I asked.

He nodded innocently.

“It’s because I love torturing myself with this…” - I looked at a pickle between my fingers -“bitter-sweet creation. It’s addictive, just like love.” I explained.

“Love is like a pickle, bittersweet, yet you love having it again once you get the taste of it,” I said as I popped the pickle into my mouth.

“You get my point?” I asked as I brushed the crumbs of shawarma we had off my dress.

He nodded, but I knew he didn’t understand a thing. “I still don’t like pickles, but I like you.” He said shyly.

I grinned at him.

Fawad and I were still going out daily on the ‘quest’ of finding a decent home. I called it a quest because finding a proper home was harder than I thought. Some houses were so tiny I felt suffocated; some didn’t allow sunshine through their tiny windows. One place smelt like garbage, another like sewerage, one had no parking space, and some apartments were so short in height I could almost touch their ceilings.

I looked around; new and old buildings standing tall around us. My wandering gaze stopped at a tall building far away with red-tiled shades over wide windows.

“Want to check out one last building before returning home?” I asked as I tried mapping the exact location of the building with my eyes. Fawad followed my direction. “Sure.” He said and got up.

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The entrance looked marvelous, the beige tiles underneath my feet freshly polished. We walked into the elevator.

The elevator looked stunning with its dark wood theme. Fawad clicked on the 15th floor. “The lights in this elevator are making me look pretty. I don’t care if the flat is crap; I’m taking it if it means I get to be on this elevator every day,” I said excitedly.

“The lights aren’t making you pretty. You *are* pretty.” He pointed out. “And no, we will not be taking an apartment just for its lavishly designed elevato– ” He stopped mid-sentence as the elevator doors slid open, and we looked ahead with gaping mouths.

A large endless window with a view of the prettiest side of Sharjah city greeted us warmly. The lake close ahead, sparkling under the sunlight, knocked our breaths away.

I was speechless.

We quickly found the flat, and he unlocked it, pushing the door open.

We grinned at each other and began exploring. While Fawad looked through the bedrooms, I slid open the wide glassed balcony doors, the fresh cold air feeling like a new life, the view making it feel like a beautiful one.

Cars far beneath us whooshed by as I held the balcony railings and looked below. Fawad walked in and pulled me closer. He rested his chin on my shoulder as I leaned onto him.

“What do you think?” I asked him.

“What do you think?” Fawad asked back. I huffed a laugh.

“I feel like… this is it. This is what we’ve been looking for all along. Everything in this apartment feels so right.” I said. He pulled me closer.

“I don’t think I’d mind waking up to this view with you every morning.” He mumbled.

I grinned.

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After giving the realtor our details, we had to pay a deposit of 6000 Dirhams to book the flat for us. We were told it’d take two weeks for the original agreement to be ready. “We will be going out of the country in a week. Can you keep the agreement ready and aside so we can sign it once we come back?” Fawad asked.

“Yes, sure, but I can only keep it aside for a few weeks and no more than that. The flats are needed quickly here, so I can only keep it empty for this long.” The realtor said. Fawad and I exchanged glances. “It’s not an issue. We’ll be back in a few weeks.” Fawad said.

“Are you happy, Zainy?” Fawad asked as we walked back to my car, which was parked a few miles away. The streets and the roads were calm and empty at this hour.

“I am so happy, my Love.” He looked at me with his dark eyes, hair brushed back, making my boyfriend look handsome.

“Thank you for everything,” I added. He smiled.

“You don’t need to thank me; it’s my responsibility to keep you happy, Zainy.”

I smiled mischievously. “Aw? Am I really that special?” I asked. He pretended to think for a long while, so I slapped his arm and scowled. He laughed.

“You’re everything special. You’re my *everything*,” He mumbled softly. We looked at each other for a while until I quickly leaned in and kissed his dimpled cheek, and he moved back in alert. I laughed.

“If only we could’ve signed the agreement for our new apartment today, we could’ve started decorating the house. You know how much I love shopping for home decor.” I sighed dramatically. He chuckled.

“Zainy! We have all the time in the world to do that; we can decorate that house anytime you want to once we come back. Don’t worry.” He said.

“What do you think of orange curtains?” I asked suddenly. He smiled at me. “I think orange curtains are beautiful.” He said. I tugged him closer to me.

38

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

“Can you not push me to speak to that woman again?” My father protested. My mother frowned at him. It’s been three days since we landed in our hometown. My mother has been pushing my father to officially meet Fawad’s parents to discuss our wedding in detail and plan everything accordingly. He, as expected, has been stubborn since day 1. My mother is not happy about it.

This was the moment my father had been dreading ever since I confessed my love for Fawad, where he would have to confront Reena auntie as the father of her son’s bride-to-be. So I gave both my parents space to fight, complain and prepare themselves to meet them eventually. I hope it all goes well.

Our home was busy with guests welcoming us back home for the last two days, so Father had a good reason not to meet Reena auntie - until today.

Sara also came with us, which was a big deal as it was her first time leaving the country without her father.

I’m so happy that she did. I needed her here with me.

“Zainab, I’m worried. What if you stop calling me every day after getting married, I’ll have to find a new best friend. I don’t want to do that; it’s a lot of work.” She whined last night.

“I’ll have to re-share all my secrets, tell them about my likes and dislikes…” she stated.

“If you stop talking to me after getting married, Zainab, I will be so sad.” She said a bit seriously. We shared the same room in my house because of space shortage, so she had all the space she needed to bug me while I brushed my hair.

Once I was done, I held her hand, and she looked at me. Her eyes were a beautiful combination of brown and black, her eyebrows thick with unsharpened edges, making her look like the sweetest girl on earth.

“No one can ever come between us, Sara. Fawad is my boyfriend, and he'll be my husband in a few days, but you… you’re my best friend. I will never find anyone like you, nor will I ever want to.” I said. She smiled back happily.

“I will never stop calling you, okay? So stop worrying.” I added.

“You promise?” She mumbled.

“I promise.”

Sara’s dad would be coming here on my wedding day, and she would have to leave with him the next day; her driving test and final exams were coming up, the latter a couple of weeks later– but still, she had to leave before us. She wasn’t studying as much as she was supposed to, which stressed me out. Nobody can ever push her into anything, so I hoped she’d do well in her exams.

Sara’s also a charmer, she found a lot of friends to spend her time with – most of whom were my cousins, and right now, she was out with them to try out street foods. I wish I could go out with them too. My parents are stressing me out.

To my astonishment (or amusement?), my mother pushed my father out of the house to go and meet Fawad’s parents. “I’m your husband! You can’t push me around like your children; do you have no respect for me?” My father complained, moving away from the door. “I will respect you when you start acting like an adult.” She hissed.

My parents unofficially met Fawad’s parents before we got into our house on the first day of our visit. Still, it was a very awkward one, mainly because almost everyone from our neighborhood was there to witness the most awaited brawl between my father and Reena auntie. However, thankfully, it had not happened, at least not yet.

After a lot of protest and sighing, my father finally agreed. “I am going. But you’re doing the talking.” He said to my mother. She looked at him for a long while and then sighed. “Okay, now get out.” She ordered.

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We sat on the floral-designed sofa together after being greeted into the house by Reena Auntie – who had a winning grin throughout our entry, which was pointed toward my father. He was not happy.

I could feel my parents’ gaze roving around the house and giving each other curious glances. Reena auntie walked towards the kitchen, and a moment later, we heard some distinct clatter, indicating that she was preparing snacks for us (for the first time.) I slowly took in the house Fawad grew up in, the walls white, the furniture classic, and a few pictures hanging on the wall.

I never came into his house all the years we lived here because Father didn’t want us near Reena auntie. Still, once Fawad flew to the Emirates for the first time – special thanks to me, as I had bribed one of Father’s employees to book a flight ticket against Fawad’s will – he kind of broke the vast chunk of ice between our families. It wasn’t completely gone, but Reena auntie and father did not outright fight again, which was a relief. I still never dared to sneak a peek into his house before.

Fawad was not at home. We were informed as soon as we entered the house. He had to run and pay the electrical bill *now*. I am mad because he could’ve done that anytime later. I needed him to be here in case situations went out of hand and not at a governmental office paying the bill.

Fawad’s father – Uncle Junaid, came out of his room in a crisp light blue Kurta, a welcoming smile on his face; he had a thick black beard and a look similar to Fawad, sweet and friendly but handsome. I felt my father relax slightly beside me.

“*Asalamalaikum.* I hope you all had a good few days of rest after reaching here.” He said as he sat down. Reena auntie walked in with a tray filled with sweets and tea.

“*Walaikumassalam.* Yes, we did. Thank you.” Father said. Reena auntie gave everyone tea with a grin on her plum face. She was wearing a salwar kameez - something my mother and I, too, were flaunting right now.

“It looks like it. You all look very fresh.” Reena Auntie said kindly. I relaxed. “Apart from him, though.” She looked over at my father as she mumbled. I stiffened. That was quite a childish remark from a woman who seemed so immaculate.

I slowly looked at my father; he seemed annoyed by her presence.

*This is not a good start. Where is Fawad?*

As we all sipped our tea, I looked at the pictures hanging on the wall as closely as possible from where I sat. I found Fawad’s childhood picture. His big dark eyes, dimples, and fluffy hair looked adorable. When we were young, I never noticed how cute he was.

“So, as we all know, we’re here to plan the wedding of my Zainab and Fawad.” My mother began. “I was thinking the wedding date to be somewhere early next month?” she suggested before sipping her tea.

“That’s three weeks from here. Won’t it be too short to arrange everything and invite everyone?” Reena auntie asked.

“It won’t be if we divide our work. It’ll get easier for us.” my mother said.

Reena auntie’s skeptical look was making Mother nervous. My father did not say anything, just like he said he would.

“It sounds good.” Uncle Junaid said before Reena could speak.

“You can look; we made a list of everything we need to do.” My mother said. I handed Mother the list I had made, and she nervously gave it to Reena Auntie.

She looked at the list once, twice, thrice, and slowly began frowning at it.

My mother and I jumped when she slammed the paper on the tea table before us. My father glared at her as if he knew she’d react this way.

“What is this nonsense? This list looks like you’re pushing all the expensive works on us!” Reena snapped. Uncle Junaid quickly picked the list up and started looking through it.

My mother and I looked at each other worriedly. Father wasn’t exchanging glances now; he was on the verge of losing his temper.

“You don’t need to book the musicians, decorate the houses and go to the guests personally to invite them. Our list of work is longer than yours. What else do you want us to do?” He said as calmly as he could, but we could feel the heat of his anger.

Reena auntie snatched the list from Fawad’s father. “We have to arrange meals for 1000 guests or more, arrange accommodations for the guests coming from out of town, arrange huge quantities of sweets and flowers and whatnot!” Reena auntie pointed her fingers at the paper angrily on each work she read out.

I was a fool to even hope this conversation might go well.

“You should be glad we are not asking for my daughter’s mahr because we know Fawad just got his job, so the list should be the least of your concerns.”

“Excuse me? What do you mean by that? Do you think you’re very rich and we’re very poor?”

“You wouldn’t have complained about the list if you were anything else.”

Reena auntie’s nostrils flared in anger. But my father continued.

“I thought you wanted a fair share at your only son’s wedding, so I approved of the list. But if you don’t want it, we’ll do all the work ourselves.” My father said. “I didn’t expect anything better from you; it’s in your veins to push everything on everyone else so you can snore your way into a good night’s sleep.” My father added venomously as he smoothed the invisible creases from his white kurta and nodded his head toward my mother, expressing that it was time for us to go.

Reena auntie glared at him.

“And what about you?” She snapped. “You think you’re any better? Do you want me to start talking about your history?”

*What history?*

“You see, you coming here with your head bowed for my average son to marry your doctorate daughter should be enough punishment for you.” she seethed.

My father glared at her so hard I was glad I wasn’t on the other side of it.

But Reena auntie just glared back at him.

My father stood up, and so did everyone else. “How dare you?” He snarled. “I bowed my head in respect, and if that’s what you think of my respect, then shame on you!” I couldn’t believe this was happening; my nightmare was coming true.

“The only reason I’m standing in your rotten house is because of my child. I kept my ego aside for my child and came here, shame on you if you can’t even do that for your son!”

“Shut your mouth!” Reena yelled back.

“You should feel honored, *honored* that my doctorate daughter chose your average son to get married to!” My father yelled back.

“Oh, you just wait till they get married. I’ll ensure your doctorate daughter cries for this choice for the rest of her life!” She snarled.

Uncle Junaid glared at his wife in dismay.

“You just wait; I’ll make sure my daughter makes you cry for the rest of your miserable life.” He spat, venom in his voice.

They kept glaring at each other for a long time, seething.

If I thought this moment couldn’t get any worse, I glanced out the window to see if Fawad was there but found an audience instead. News of this argument will spread throughout the neighborhood like fire.

 My father started to leave. “Zahir Bhai, please stop. We can’t let this fight interfere with our children’s future. I apologize on my wife’s behalf.” Uncle Junaid requested, and Reena auntie did not say anything. Mother held Father’s hand and looked at him pleadingly, and so did I.

If my father left like this, I’d probably die.

He looked at me for a long while and breathed to calm himself down.

He sat down again, and my mother and I sat beside him.

“Sit down, Reena,” Uncle Junaid glared at her. She obediently did.

“We never said we don’t want to have a fair share at our son’s wedding.” Uncle Junaid finally said. “I don’t mind the list, and Reena won’t, either.” He glanced at her in annoyance before looking at us again.

“I know we weren’t on good terms earlier. But now our kids have decided to marry each other. We should keep our past aside and get this wedding done; that’s our responsibility as their parents.” My mother explained calmly.

“Tell us what you want off that list.” My father said quietly.

Reena Auntie looked at him and looked at the list again.

“Nothing, we want nothing off the list.” She said and sighed.

We were all quiet once again.

Fawad quickly burst into the house. He had a coat on, his hair ruffled by the wind, and he took deep breaths as if he had to run his way back home. He meekly smiled at me and whispered an apology. I raised my brows to remind him that our families were staring at everything he was doing. He realized that and apologized again.

Fawad looked at everyone with an apologetic look. “I’m so sorry I am late. I was supposed to pay the bill 2 days ago, but I forgot. Today was the last day to pay the bills if we didn’t want them to cut off our electricity. Hence, I had to run to the electrical department to pay, but the line was extremely long. I wanted to hurry back as soon as possible, but once I was done, there was traffic on the road, and before I knew it, it took me four hours to run back into our neighborhood. I am so-” He blabbered nervously.

I stood up and pushed him to sit down; he did and smiled around nervously. He waited for something – probably for us to start talking.

When he realized we probably weren’t having the best conversations, he looked at me curiously as if to ask if something had gone wrong. I nodded once. Fawad looked apologetic again.

He cleared his throat a moment later, and Fawad took out some papers from the pocket of his long coat and gave it to his mother, “The electricity bill.” He mumbled. She flipped open the paper and looked at it.

He sat up straighter and waited for our parents to discuss us again. Thankfully, his presence made everyone calm down. They resumed discussing the plans for our wedding.

As I looked at my Fawad, he looked back. We couldn’t believe it. Our parents, in a twisted way of fate, were planning our wedding.

# 39

# SARA

I saw the sun rise alone as guilt slowly, leisurely ate me up inside and caved a place within my heart.

No matter how much I tried explaining to myself that I deserved that day of free shopping and that exchanging my car for a much newer one wasn’t cheating, my heart knew better.

I felt pathetic. I have the most unique power in the world and don’t know how to use it. If my life were a book and someone read it, they’d want to yell at me for not using this ring enough, for feeling ridiculously guilty.

*“It’s too bad no one’s buying the car yet. I am afraid it’ll just keep getting older without being used. The business isn’t going so well right now.”* The words of the mustache car salesman popped into my head, and my heart burned even more.

*How could I do that? How did I compel a poor older man just trying to survive in this challenging world?*

I never knew I had it in me to have such ethics. I sighed and pinched my nose in frustration.

I don’t like this.

I’ll have to fix this mess. I don’t even have enough space in my room for everything I stole.

*I didn’t steal them; each individual gave me the stuff for free –*

*Sure, keep convincing yourself with that lie; see how much it helps you*.

If I want to regain my night’s sleep and heart’s peace, I’ll have to give back the things I took.

*I am pathetic.*

I took a pillow from the corner of my sofa and yelled into it.

My mind is a freakin’ chaos!

I knew what I had to do to fix it.

I got out of my sofa, showered, and wore something cute. Just because my mind was chaotic didn’t mean I had to go out in my ugly pajamas.

I picked the purple dress up and had a flashback of how Murad looked at me last night. “Someday, I’ll buy you with my own money.” – *and make him sit closer to me so he can stare at me again, this time closely*.

I walked over to my window and threw the dress out.

\*\*\*

I quickly reached my new car with the dress in hand. I opened my pink pouch and checked how much money I had. After adding up the coins and small notes, I got 200 dirhams, which I will use to keep the things I liked and give everything back, including this gorgeous car.

What I took didn’t feel like mine, and I don’t think it ever will.

As I clicked open the back door to skim through the items I wanted to keep and the things I wanted to give back, a bunch of packets and boxes fell with a thud in front of me.

I sighed loudly and picked the items up. I separated the items and roughly lined them up according to the shops I had bought them from, then picked out two books and a light pink sneaker, and that was it. I picked out three items and was out of 200 bucks already.

*Being super rich and spoiled must be fun.*

I suddenly hate how everything is so damn expensive. Books, albums, clothes… That pissed me off enough to almost change my plan - *almost*. But of course, I didn’t. I needed my peace and sleep back.

I begrudgingly drove to the mall, took out all the items, stacked them at their gates before they opened up, and then drove off to the car market.

I parked my car and found the old mustached man merrily talking to another person. I wore my ring and tapped on his shoulder, he looked back with a smile, but his expression soon changed, and he stood still.

“That black car over there, it’s yours. I came here to give it back.” I said.

He looked at me blankly before he said, “But… that car never existed in my store.”

“I want you to remember that this car was yours before I took it,” I said slowly.

He looked at me and then nodded once.

“Good. Now I want you to take your car and give me mine back.”

He nodded again, walked toward an empty spot, stood there momentarily, and walked back to me. “Your car… has been sold.” He said blankly.

No.

“To whom?” I asked, panic rising in my throat.

“That person – over there,” He pointed to a person with a thick shaggy beard wearing a kandura far behind me. He looked scary, and if I didn’t have this ring, I probably would’ve let him take my car and go. But I have a compelling ring. I looked back at the mustache salesman.

“How much did you sell my car for?”

He took out a thin bundle of 500 dirhams notes and counted. “15,000.”

I gritted my teeth.

How could they sell my car so cheap? Yes, it’s a bit old, and yes, the air conditioning doesn’t work unless you fill its A/C tank every month, but that doesn’t mean it’s cheap! My car drives fabulously on uneven roads. Maybe that feature is why the shaggy bearded guy was buying it in the first place.

“I want you to give me the money so I can give it back to the buyer and take my car back, and you’ll get yours back,” I said.

He blankly nodded and handed me the money.

I still get shocked at how easily people listen to me when I’m wearing this ring.

The shaggy bearded guy got into my car and was about to start the ignition. I sprinted towards him.

For the first time, I was glad my car didn’t start its engine to life on its first try. But by the time I reached my old car, it did, so I had to slap at the passenger side door to tell him to stop. He did.

I looked at the driver, whose expression changed from amused to gloomy to blank.

“Okay. I want you to listen to me.” I took another deep breath. I was too exhausted, and it wasn’t even afternoon yet. “I want you to take your money back and give this car back to me now.”

He looked at me for a while, sinking in my words. Then he slowly got out of the vehicle and stood motionlessly. I took the man’s hand and put his money there.

I hopped into my car – it was just how I had left it yesterday, old, a little dusty, but mine, my car. It felt like home.

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I got back inside my house after parking the car next to my dad’s, and as soon as I got in, I got a whiff of scrambled eggs, so I knew my dad was already awake.

My dad frowned at me in confusion. “I thought you were sleeping.”

I quickly tried thinking of a good lie as I sat on a chair and untied my sneakers. “Where did you go?” He asked.

“I went out to bring my car back from the garage.” I lied, unable to look into my father’s eyes.

“Okay…” He approached the stove and served the scrambled eyes on two white plates. “Can you tell me where you’re going before you do Sara? At least I’ll know where to search for you if you get lost. Do I not let you go wherever you want?” My dad sighed.

“Dad, you don’t need to get so scared,” I said as I moved my sneakers away and sat on a tool in front of the kitchen counter to eat breakfast.

He sighed. “Don’t make me regret getting you a driving license.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you in your sleep. I was being kind.”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t need that kind of kindness. Inform me whenever you’re going before you go out, Sara. And if it’s safe, you’ll be allowed to go.” He said and brought both plates of breakfast in front of us.

“Okay, okay,” I murmured, digging into my scrambled eyes with bread.

“I’ll probably have to put a tracking chip in you as parents do in those movies you watch. At least then I’ll know where you go without being worried.” He said.

“How do I know you don’t have one installed already?”

He contemplated and took a bite at the same time. “Maybe I have.” He gulped down his food. “Do you ever get a numb feeling in your left wrist?”

I dropped my food and pushed around my left wrist to feel for a chip.

My dad chuckled. “I can’t believe my daughter is so dumb.”

# 40

# SARA

With the ring out of my finger and my heart back in peace, I was back to being utterly jobless again. So I took out a small box from my closet and kept the compelling ring inside.

I wasn’t going to throw the ring away, I was pathetic enough not to use it to its full potential, but I wasn’t stupid. I plan on keeping it with me, using it whenever I need it, and then pulling it off quickly lest I wish to feel heartless again. I don’t want to remember what it felt like to live guilt-free. (It felt terrific, but confessing that makes me feel like a bad person.)

I saw Murad in a light blue suit early today, his hair neatly brushed to the side and looking incredibly handsome.

*And hot,*

*And sexy,*

*And cute,*

*And, oh so charming,*

I begged my mind to shut up.

*He’s my friend. I am not in love with him.*

*And yet he makes me feel so happy.*

I stared till he drove off, and since then, I’ve been walking around the house wondering what I should do with my time. I sat on the sofa for a while and noticed myself smiling because of him, so I pinched myself.

I heard Dad park his car outside. He walked in with the biggest grin on his face. I grinned back, confused. He was still smiling as he slumped onto the sofa next to me.

“Sara! You won’t believe what happened today.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I won the tender!” He said excitedly.

“Oh.” Everything inside me fell apart from the smile on my face – I kept that all together for my dad.

*I don’t want to go.*

I wanted to say that but couldn’t, I didn’t want my father to go alone, and I didn’t want that grin to fade away.

“Pack your bags, beautiful; we’ll be heading back to Bangladesh for an all-paid extended trip by the government in two days!” He said gleefully and got up. “We’d need to do some last-minute shopping too.” He added.

*I don’t want to go.*

*I don’t want to go.*

*I don’t want to go.*

But he must have done so many things for me even when he didn’t want to; he never let go of my hand. So for my dad, who never let me break a single bone, never let me get hurt or lost, I smiled, tucking my sadness deep within my heart, and pretended to be excited.

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I took out my pink luggage from the storeroom and began packing, I was glad I’d see all the greenery and Grandma again, but that was about it.

A huge part of me is glad we lived in Dubai, away from toxic relatives after mom died, living around them when grieving would’ve made it impossible for us to heal. They would’ve pulled us back repeatedly, constantly reminding us of what we lost and how we’d never have her back again, and then cry more than us *in front of us*.

I dumped my clothes into my luggage, went to my dressing table, took out my stuff, and dumped them in there, too; I didn’t have the heart to set the items straight. It’s not like we were touring Europe where no one knew us.

I also didn’t think twice before dumping my compelling ring in there. If I needed people to shut the fuck up, I’d just use this. I zipped my suitcase and sat beside it.

I must tell Murad about my extended trip soon and that I couldn’t go to the carnival with him or see each other for almost a year. My heart sank at the thought. I know he’d be sad because I’d be sad without seeing him every day too. We’re so used to each other.

We can only have long-distance calls or texts. He doesn’t have any social media accounts as he believes they take his attention away from the things that matter, so that portal of communication was not an option for us either.

I sighed. I think I’d miss him a lot, every day. Dad and I would go shopping when he finished packing, so I had a little time.

I plucked my phone from the charger and dialed my best friend’s number.

Zainab must be in the hospital now, having her lunch.

She picked it up in the fourth ring. “Thank you for calling me Sara,” I heard her sigh. “Dr. Ali has been trying to flirt again since the morning, and it has been frustrating.” She said.

“He sat in front of me during lunch and wanted to have small talk, but I didn’t. Your call gave me an outing, so I took it, and here I am outside, with my sandwich in my hand, which I think is dripping. Can you wait; I’ll put it back in its container.” She kept the phone somewhere around her and began talking again. “I told Mumma not to add too much mayonnaise to my sandwich, but she doesn’t listen.”

I smiled at the phone; I used to miss these phone calls with her so much back when she’d not pick up my calls.

“Sara.” She said. “How do I get rid of him? There’s a limit, and he’s crossing it.” She sighed again. She wasn’t enjoying his attention at all, I could tell.

“Sara?”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Is something wrong? You haven’t spoken since I picked up the call. In case you don’t know, you talk a *lot*.” She said.

“Really?” I mumbled.

“What’s wrong?” She asked, concerned.

“I’d be traveling to Bangladesh in 2 days… for almost a year.”

Zainab remained silent for a long while. The silence scared me.

“What?” She asked very softly.

“What?” She repeated,

“You’re… not going to leave me, too, are you?” She mumbled.

I panicked, and before I could comfort her, “You’re the only friend I have….”

“And you’re the only friend I’ll ever need, Zainab.” She remained silent.

“You’ll always find me through the phone,” I added.

“Why are you leaving?” She mumbled.

“My dad won one of those tenders he was working on, and now I’m going there with him. It’ll take us at least months to finish and come back.”

“Why do you need to go?”

“You know me… I don’t want my dad to go there alone. I’ll be worried sick if I stay behind.”

She didn’t speak for a long while, deep in thought. I only heard the wind passing around her; she was on the hospital's roof again. It was her spot where she invited me last year.

She doesn’t like the places she used to love anymore, as if those places brought in memories she tried suppressing. So she finds peace in new places; that roof was one of those spots.

“I don’t want you to stay away for so long.”

“I don’t want to, either.”

We didn’t talk for a long time. She sighed.

“This trip will help you to relax from the city life and get refreshed, so that’s good.” She explained a bit happily, being herself again.

“But… I’m already refreshed and relaxed.”

I heard her smile.

“Sometimes you need to venture out of your comfort zone to evolve and progress in life.”

“Why don’t you venture out anymore then?” I dared ask. She suddenly shut up.

 “Maybe I don’t want to progress in life anymore.” She said finally. My heart twisted. Before I could say anything further-

“I’m coming over tonight to have a sleepover.” She said.

“I’d love that,” I mumbled.

I heard her smile.

“So, aren’t you nervous about the flight?” She asked, changing the subject.

“Of course I am!  It’s been four years. I don’t know why I always get nervous on flights.” I said.

“Oh, don’t be nervous, Sara! What’s the worst that could happen anyway?” Zainab quipped.

“I could fall out of the sky and die!” I whined. She got silent again.

*What’s wrong with me?*

“No. No. No…. Nothing’s going to happen to you. You’ll be back very soon, and we will meet again.” She said slowly, but it sounded more like a consolation to herself.

“Right?” She asked, a bit desperately. I wondered if she knew she did that… turned a little crazy sometimes.

“Of course, Zainab,” I said.

# 41

# SARA

Dad picked up a few grapes from the supermarket’s fruit section and popped them into his mouth, then popped some dates, followed by a walnut that he crushed with his teeth before popping its content in his mouth. I frowned at him; this had been our regular argument starter. Just because the food was on display didn’t mean they were free for tasting, plus who knew who sneezed on them?

The employees didn’t dare talk to him while he did, my dad is a scary man, and he’d make a scene if they bothered him.

He pushed the trolley as we filled it with dates, powdered milk, soaps, shampoos, lotions, clothes, phones, shoes, and umbrellas for our ungrateful relatives. I did love shopping, but not for dim-witted people. Dad agreed too but told me to consider every gift given as a blessing to us.

Soon we were done and back home. Dad arranged all the new items in our bags and rearranged my messy luggage.

Zainab came home in the evening as promised and got inside wearing her doctor’s coat. I was delighted to see her, yet I scowled at her outfit.

“Please come to my room and find something germ-free to wear.”

She scowled back at me. “You’re the only germ I can see here.” She grumbled and followed me to my room. She wore my black Palazzo pants and T-shirt and sat on my bed as we ate pizza and watched funny movies.

I missed simple, happy nights like this with my best friend. I know what it feels like to lose her, so I cherish every moment I get to spend with her.

Zainab fell asleep next to me around midnight, or pretended to, as she kept changing positions. I chose not to bother her; she had to reach her hospital early the next day.

I couldn’t sleep.

I would be leaving my home, friends, and comfort for almost a whole year.

These words were so easy to think through, as I knew I’d be back before the year ended. But why were the words so difficult to say out loud whenever I thought about telling them to Murad? Thinking about leaving him for so long did something to me.

*What if he forgets me? What if things don’t stay the same after I come back? And the worst part, what if he finds someone else to care about instead? A lot can happen in a few months.*

Thinking about Murad talking to someone else like he did to me made me want to break things and pull my imaginary substitute’s hair out.

My phone buzzed. It was Murad. I sat on my bed and looked at Zainab. I think she was asleep, so I slowly got up from bed and went to the window facing Murad’s room.

I slightly pushed open the curtains and peeped from the corner. Murad had his phone in his ear. He smiled at me and pointed to the phone near his ear, motioning me to pick it up. I did.

“Hello?” I said softly.

“Hi, Baby. I missed you.” He said in his deep, husky voice.

I huffed a laugh and rested my head on the window, and sunk in him into my mind. I won’t get to see that face for months ahead, and that fact hurt my heart.

“So, is this our new thing, late-night calls?” I asked.

“Only if you want to,” I know I’d miss his terrible flirting the most.

“Where were you all day?” I asked. I missed him.

“We had a meeting with some clients at our office, and that took me a while to return home.” He explained.

“Why, did you miss me?” He asked with a mischievous smile.

I bit my lip and thought for a moment.

“I think I might have,” I confessed.

“Really?”

“Maybe,”

He smirked at me. “I want to come and see you right now.”

“Why?”

“So I can admire you while you confess how much you missed me.”

I huffed a laugh again.

“Do you want me to play the violin for you?” He asked curiously.

“My best friend Zainab’s here, and she’s sleeping. I don’t want us to bother her.”

“And aren’t you tired? You were busy all day.” I asked.

“I’m never too tired for you.”

*How can I possibly go by months without seeing him?* I thought.

“You never stop flirting, do you?” I smiled.

“Never,”

“Good Night!” I said a bit loudly, trying not to laugh.

“Noooo,” He whined.

“Good night.” I grinned and pulled my curtains back, hanging up.

I got a text a moment later from him.

*Good Night.*

I smiled at it and then looked back to my bed. Zainab was wide awake, resting her head on her hand, smiling mischievously.

“Ah… true love.” She said dreamily.

I sat on my bed and threw a pillow at her face, but she laughed instead. I frowned at her.

“I thought you were asleep,” I grumbled.

She looked at the blanket and pulled on a small thread. “I… can’t sleep very well… these days.”

I looked at her, concerned, but she didn’t look up.

“But! I’m getting there. Your bed is comfortable.

“Plus, the entertainment you gave me right now was worth the sleepless night.” She said.

I sighed sadly. “I don’t know what to do with myself, Zainab. I hate how things change with time.”

“Sometimes changes are good, Sara.”

I lie down.

“Love is good.” She said.

“No, it’s not.”

“It is.”

“Love. Is. Good? Really?” I asked, annoyed.

“Look at you, Zainab, you fell so madly in love, and then what happened? Shit happened, hell struck, and now you’re miserable. How can you tell me love is good?” I regretted saying everything the moment I uttered them.

I hated myself. How could I be heartless enough to blame her for supporting love?

Zainab said nothing, and that made me feel worse.

“Good night.” She said and lay down facing the opposite side. I felt terrible. How could I say such a thing? My heart burned.

I hugged her from behind a minute later, but my stupid mouth couldn’t utter an apology.

She held my hand as she slept.

“Love is good, Sara… It’s the heartbreak that isn’t. It’s the pain that isn’t. It’s when you lose them. It isn’t.” She said softly.

I closed my teary eyes, feeling awful for making her feel this way. “I’m sorry,” I said finally.

“Don’t be. You’re scared, I know, and it’s okay to be scared sometimes.” My heart calmed down. So I hugged her tighter. “Now try to sleep for real. Take my tip, keep counting from 1, and don’t stop. Keep counting numbers until you fall asleep.” I recommended.

“You think I haven’t tried that?”

I take a pink eye mask from my bedside table and hand it to her. “Wear this; it helps me a lot when I can’t sleep.”

She took it and wore it quickly, resting her head on the pillow again, and, to my annoyance, pretended to snore and then wake up again. “Wow, it does work!” She said sarcastically.

I hit her with my pillow again. “Go to sleep.” She laughed again as I tucked myself under the blanket and drifted asleep.

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 “Keep your phone with you at all times so I can call you whenever I miss you, okay?” Zainab said as she unlocked her car the following day. We were standing on my lawn.

“Of course,” I mumbled.

We hugged each other tightly, and I felt a significant fraction of my anxiety fly away. I loved hugs.

“I’ll miss you so much,” I said.

“I’ll miss you more.” She blurted but halted as if recalling something. She slowly let go of me. I saw her eyes dim with sadness.

“Please come back. Okay?”

“Of course I will.” I smiled and pushed her towards the car.

“Bye!” I said.

“*See you*.” She said pointedly and got in her car.

“I’ll call you as soon as I land,” I said.

She smiled at me once again as she drove off.

# 42

# SARA

We were to head for our flight to Bangladesh around 1 am from home; as the flight was around 4 am, my dad informed me over breakfast, and once he went out for work, I sat on my sofa and watched TV for a while. I had nothing else to do.

I missed Murad so much. I wanted him to annoy me or show up at my door to watch a movie.

Suddenly wanted to punch Murad,

Suddenly wanted to kiss him before I left,

Suddenly wanted to slap myself,

I waited all day for him, hoping to get the proper time to tell Murad I was leaving before Dad returned, but he wasn’t home yet. I never noticed how he always made my dull days so much fun with his presence.

I texted him: *Text me back once you get back home.*

My phone buzzed a few minutes later.

Murad: *Miss me already?*

I texted back: *No. Just tell me when you’re back so we can talk.*

Murad: *That’s what girlfriends say when they want to break up.* (Sad emoji)

Me: …*What on earth?*

Me: *You seem to be speaking from experience.*

Murad: *You think a girl would want to break up with me after seeing my ‘handsome’ face?*

Me: *arrogant dog.*

Murad was texting…

Me: *Don’t you dare text me back until you return home.*

He stopped typing.

I stifled a laugh.

 Dad returned around 7 pm, and as usual, we ate dinner together while watching a comedy show. It was 9:30 pm by the time Murad texted me back.

Murad: *I am back.*

I sighed sadly. He was too late. I wish I could’ve spent more time with him before I left.

“I think we should nap before heading for the flight tonight,” Dad suggested.

If I met Murad instead of sleeping in, I could finally get some time to speak with him.

“That’s a ridiculous idea,” I said instead, getting him even more adamant about taking a nap.

“It’s an excellent idea. Go to your room and take a nap.”

 “Switch on the alarm so we can wake up on time then,” I said as we walked up the stairs.

“I don’t need alarms.”

“Switch it on, Dad, unless you want to miss the flight,” I said again, and we walked into our rooms.

Instead of heading to bed, I head to my closet. I wore a black overall skirt dress that stopped above my knees and a white turtleneck sweater underneath and paired them with black boots. The outfit was perfect for a secret meeting with a guy I like, but not so much for a trip back to my hometown. I’d need to change as soon as I get back.

I texted Murad: *Meet me behind our backyard at the walkway.*

He texted back at once: *Alright*. I stood behind my bedroom door to hear if my dad was still awake. He wasn’t. I could hear him snoring.

I walked down the stairs to the backyard and climbed up the wall, waiting there. I saw him stride towards me a minute later and smiling up at me, so I stretched my hands out to him cutely as I jumped.

“Hi, *Shundori*,” He said as he held me tight. I snapped my head up and looked at him wide-eyed. “Did you just… call me beautiful in Bengali?”

“Did I say it right?” He asked shyly.

I looked at him in shock for one whole minute. I stepped back and laughed when I noticed how close I was to him. “Murad, why do you have to be so nice?” I wanted to cry.

He grinned shyly. “Are you learning it because I said-”

“Because you said your ideal husband has to know how to speak Bangla.”

I hid my eyes with my hand and laughed.

“*Tumi etobhalo keno*?” Why are you so good? I asked adorably.

He looked at me like I was the cutest woman he’s ever seen.

“uhh…I not that good in Bengali yet.” He said a bit nervously.

“Thank you… for trying so hard for me.”

I expected him to flirt back like usual, but he seemed to be taking my compliment to heart. He cleared his throat and smiled.

He wore a dark gray coat over his black shirt and paired them with black pants and a black belt which had a golden buckle, his hair a delightful mess I wanted to fix with my fingers.

“I need to tell you–”

“Are you ready?” Murad and I spoke at the same time.

“Ready for what?” I asked him, confused.

“The carnival!” He said excitedly. “Wait, did you forget about that?” He asked again.

I wish I had a little more time.

“Murad…” I said softly. “I don’t think I can go out tonight…”

He was sad but didn’t want to show it. “Why not?”

“I… um…” Now was the best time to tell him I was leaving. Why weren’t the words coming out of my damn mouth?

I looked at him again, the sad, innocent eyes melting my heart.

Maybe I could give him another hour or two before I left for almost a year so that we could spend it in the happiest way possible.

“Okay… you know what? Let’s go.” I decided. “But we must be back before 12 and not spend the whole night out like the last time, agree?”

His face lit up like sunshine, and that one smile filled my heart with pure joy. I’d miss him so much…

“Yes!” He said excitedly.

I’d tell him about my departure once we came back home. He extended his hand and grinned, and I grinned back, held his warm hands, and ran towards his car.

# 43

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

It’s the night of my wedding!

Yellow fairy lights glowed outside our houses, brightening up the entire neighborhood. As I dressed, I saw them sparkling like fireflies from my room’s window.

I could hear kids playing outside as one of my cousins helped me wear bangles on each hand that Reena auntie bought for me, along with two heavy gold ones. My father was pleased to see that she bought gold for me as it, in a peculiar way, expressed that she trusted me.

Sara stood beside me, wearing a blue dress, smiling as the makeup artist applied something glittery to my skin. I liked it. I looked at my reflection in the mirror, and a beautiful woman wearing a red wedding dress looked back, hair parted from the middle, and a golden headpiece fitted between them, a gold necklace matching with it.

“Don’t smile, dear.” The makeup artist said and took a wet wipe from her black makeup box to remove the smear of the excess lipstick that crossed my lips after I smiled.

Once the makeup was done, Sara beamed at me.

“What do you think?” I asked nervously as I sat up straighter.

“Zainab, you look so stunning, so elegant.” She said warmly, her eyes shining. She rested her hand on my shoulder, and I held it. “Thank you.”

“You’re so beautiful, Zainab, and I’m not saying this because you’re my best friend.” She grinned as she took a tissue from my dressing table and dabbed it over her eyes.

“Thank you for going through so much trouble just to be here with me; you have no idea how much you helped by staying by my side,” I said. She grinned wider.

My parents stepped into the room. I suddenly felt my emotions overwhelming me. Although part of me is excited about the future, a bitter-sweet pain remains within my heart; I will start a new chapter of my life but leave the life I so dearly love behind.

I’ve been taking deep breaths for hours so I don’t tear up and cry all over my makeup like a baby. My cousins tried fueling my emotions by reminding me that this was the last day of my life with my family. But no, it was not; they just wanted to see me cry. I would live in a house with the love of my life just 7 minutes away from my family.

I smiled at them, eyes shining with unshed tears.

“My daughter has grown up so fast.” My mother said, her eyes shining.

“No, she’ll always be my little girl.” My father said. He tried hard not to cry. “You are the prettiest bride we’ve ever seen.” She said, “Even prettier than me.” She added, and we both laughed.

I looked over at the henna design on my hand while chatting with Sara and my cousins after my parents left; it looked beautiful and dark brown. The make-up artist noticed that too.

“Mashallah! Your henna has turned so dark! Did you know the darker your henna turns out to be, the deeper your husband’s love will be for you?” We looked at her, interested.

“Who told you that?” Sara asked curiously.

“My mother used to tell me that, and it has never been proven wrong, at least never to me.” She smiled shyly.

Sara and I looked at the artist, smiling.

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I’m married.

I’m married??

I. Am. Married.

I’m Mrs. Zainab Ali Khan. The new title feels so welcoming.

Fawad held my hand in front of all our guests for the first time as we sat together on a loveseat in our re-arranged living room, smiling at me after signing our marriage agreement as if he were the luckiest man to have me in his life.

We were guided to the garden next; a stage was installed there, along with sofas with flowers. We sat there. Fawad’s hair was neatly brushed back, his cheeks dimpling with his smiles every time someone said how beautiful we looked together or heard whispers about how he still didn’t let go of my hand. The cameraman took pictures while the videographer recorded everything around the party.

Fawad and I exchanged glances, only communicating through our eyes and clasped hands.

Sara and her friends finally jumped onto the stage, their eyes burning with excitement and their cheeks flushed, grinning as if they had the most beautiful time.

She sat on her knees next to me. “I brought you some food.” She whispered as she presented me a plate filled with kebabs and a can of Pepsi.

I didn’t tell anyone that I was hungry, but I was. My best friend knew me so well.

“But my lipstick-” I tried to say. “Don’t worry about that.” She took a lipstick from her little pink pouch slung beside her. “I’ve got it all covered.” She said proudly.

I grinned at her. “Thank you,” I said, digging into the food and sharing some with Fawad. He bit my fingers as I put a kebab in his mouth; the crowd laughed, and I felt shy.

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After the pictures were taken, the sofa was shifted down from the stage and kept at a comfortable distance away from it. Sara pushed her Dulha bhai and me on the couch.

 “Tonight we’re gathered here for the wedding of my two most favorite people in the world, Zainab and Fawad,” Sara said through a mike, smiling at us.

“I pray that you live the happiest and the most memorable moments of your lives together.” She said. I grinned and sent a flying kiss her way.

“…And I hope you never stop being my best friend; now that you’re married,” she said, and I laughed.

“Never!” I yelled towards her. “You promised.” She smirked. Soon the musicians stepped onto the stage, and many guests gathered around the dance floor and danced to the beat.

I looked at Sara as she danced to the song with a grin.

“I love this song!” I bellowed over the music to her.

“I know! I requested them to play it for you.” She bellowed as she swayed her hips with the beat.

Fawad sang along to the lyrics excitedly as he danced on the sofa - just like he always did when his favorite songs would play during our car rides. I giggled.

“You know, grooms aren’t usually as overjoyed as you are on their wedding days!” Sara told Fawad loudly as she took my hand and pulled me to the dance floor.

“Other grooms didn’t get a wife as beautiful as mine.” He drawled, still dancing.

“RIGHT!” She yelled as we danced to the beat.

The crowd cheered louder as the next song flared up from the prominent black speakers, and Sara pulled Fawad from the sofa and pushed him towards me. Fawad danced, which was hilarious for a shy boy like him. I grinned and danced with him, drinking in the beauty of this perfect night, laughing my heart out.

 “You are so beautiful.” He whispered in my ear, the songs now slow and romantic as the night got darker, and I felt a delightful chill run through my body. We moved slowly, my hands on his shoulders and his on my waist. I looked into his dark, sparkling eyes until I grinned and looked away.

“I’m so lucky to have a wife as beautiful, sweet, and smart as you.” He said softly, smiling with his dimpled cheeks. I would’ve kissed him right then and there if we weren’t in a crowd. He smiled back as if he knew that.

Every girl’s dream is to have the perfect wedding, where nothing goes wrong, and everyone is happy. I’m so blessed to have had a wonderful night like that.

I admired the way Fawad looked at me and felt so lucky to have a husband as loving and caring as him, so I rested my head on his chest and felt his heartbeat match my own.

# 44

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

My cousins wanted me to sit in the middle of the bed as brides did in the movies, but to their disappointment, I leaned against the headboard and rested my legs in front of me, my golden slippers now off. I’m in Fawad’s house, his room, and his bed.

My cousins fiddled with the fresh roses decorated around the room; they were everywhere, including the floor and on the bed, and every time I looked at them, they made me nervous.

Sara sat in front of me, yawning. I smiled at her.

“Okay, I’m sleepy.” She said and yawned again. “Good night. I’m going to go and let you do whatever you brides do on their wedding nights.” She smirked. I scowled at her.

She smiled and got up.

“Wait! You’re leaving?” I asked. She looked at me. “Well, it is 2:40 am. I can’t stay here all night.” She said,

“Just stay, will you?”

“Ew, Zainab, I do not wish to see how you mingle with your husband.”

I threw pillows at her, and she laughed.

“Just sit a bit longer.” I requested.

 “Alright,” She said and leaned against a bedpost sleepily. The room looked rather crowded at this late hour. I could tell the girls didn’t want the night to end either.

Two older cousins walked into the room giggling and sat beside me on the bed, so I sat up straighter. “How are you feeling, Zainab? Excited?” My older cousin Riya asked in her British accent.

“More nervous than excited, exactly,” I confessed.

“So… you know what to do tonight, right?” Her sister Abida asked.

I looked at them silently, stunned. I looked at Sara. She looked just as shocked. “I’m guessing not,” Riya said and giggled. “I’ll start explaining with the basics –”

“*Wow, wow, wow!* Stop right there!” I panicked. “I think I’ve studied enough in school to know what I must do tonight, so please stop!” I said.

Sara stifled her laughter.

“Calm down, girl, we just thought to help,” Riya said.

I rubbed my forehead. “Please don’t,”  I said.

“Okay.” Riya rolled her eyes and walked to the mirror to check herself out, and her sister followed. I sighed in relief and scowled at Sara as she tried to hide her laugh.

I looked towards the door and found my Fawad there, smiling shyly. Sara yawned once again and followed the sight. “Oh! *Dulha bhai*!” Sara greeted and moved away from the bedpost.

“Welcome to your room!” She added dramatically.

She clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention. “Ladies, let’s give the new bride and groom their space.” She announced and winked at me. Everyone smiled and slowly walked out the door as Fawad stood and smiled back shyly. His sherwani had a few buttons down, his hair a beautiful mess.

If I wasn’t freaking out of nerves before, I was now.

Once everyone left, Fawad locked the door, walked towards the bed, pulled off his shoes, and sat on the other side—a moment passed by, then another, and another. I finally summoned the courage to look at my husband and found him looking at me. We looked at each other for a long while until I shyly looked away.

“Honestly, I always thought I’d be more confident when making my first move,” Fawad confessed. I snapped my attention towards him. My Fawad - the boy I love like crazy – is just as nervous as I am.

His confession suddenly made me laugh so hard that my nerves flew away. He laughed as I rested my head on his thighs and looked up at him. Once I composed myself, we began laughing again, this time hysterically. If someone heard us right then they’d think we’re insane.

We can’t believe it. We are married. The love of my life is all mine, and I’m all his, and for some bizarre reason, we found that reality hilarious.

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“You know, if you look close enough, you’ll see that my hair is brunette, not black,” Sara said, admiring her hair from the reflection of the spoon in her hand.

Fawad, Sara, and I sat at the rectangular dining table in Fawad’s home - now my home, too – for breakfast.

I looked at my beloved husband, eating adorably. Just looking at him brought a sense of love and peace within me. Last night was magical, and this morning, I couldn’t stop admiring him as he slept peacefully next to me, his hand over my waist. We never felt each other the way we had last night; we never went beyond a kiss before. It all felt so beautifully right, so divine. I felt so beautiful.

And now, when he saw me looking at him, he smiled, his dark hair still a mess, black eyes tired from staying awake too late. Does he know how much I love him?

He does; I married him and gave my only heart out to him. However, saying it 100 times did not feel enough. I mouthed an ‘I love you’ his way, and his dimpled smile grew. He held my hand from across the table and kissed it. My heart swelled as I smiled wider.

Sara cleared her throat loudly as a warning when Reena auntie walked by, and as a reflex, we let go of each other’s hand. We still aren’t used to being married and holding each other’s hands in public fear free.

I looked at Sara again and still found her looking at her hair’s reflection from the spoon as she ate cucumbers. “Yea, it’s probably the chlorine in your tap water making your hair sun-bleached.” I quipped. She has beautiful hair.

She dropped her spoon noisily and looked at me. “Did I ask for an explanation?” She smiled angrily. I bit my laugh. “No, but I wanted to give you one.” I smiled back sweetly. She scowled.

She bit another piece of sliced cucumber and smiled at us sadly. “So I’m leaving today; my flight is booked for tonight. So you two can be assured I won’t be able to annoy you until you return.” She joked halfheartedly.

I deflated. Everything was new to me, and I selfishly wanted her familiar presence near me until we returned home. I know she’d wait if I told her to, even if it ruined many things for her. But I loved her, and I didn’t want her to lose any more of her last few days at school because of me; it would be unfair to her. She had to skip a whole year of school when her mom died, and it was so tough for her little mind to catch up with everything she missed out on back then.

“Zainab, if you want, I can wait until we all head home together.”

“Absolutely not! I don’t want you to miss out on anything else. Go and pass that final exam and driving test so I don’t have to be your driver anymore.”

She smiled.

“Please do pass the test; at least then, I wouldn’t have to hear you blabber like a radio at the back of my seat all the time,” Fawad said with a sly smile.

Sara gave him a fake smile and kicked his foot under the table.

“Areee-” He whined but gave her a wide grin. “Can’t wait till you leave,”

She smiled sweetly before gathering up her plate and glass from the table. “You won’t be able to get rid of me so easily, *Dulha bhai.* I’ll drive to your new house without a permit if I have to just to bother you.”  She said.

“We’ll change houses then.”

“I’ll still find you.”

“You can’t.”

“You don’t know my stalking talents.”

“You don’t know my shifting talents, either!” Fawad chirped.

Sara made a funny face at him before standing up.

“Also, I have some advice for you. As it’s your first time sleeping with her, you should know she talks in her sleep. So when she wakes you up in the middle of the night to blabber something, don’t ask for logic. Just go back to sleep.”

Fawad looked at me, amused. “How did I not know about this before?”

“There’s always something new to learn about me,” I said.

“Is that so?” He mumbled in his deep flirty tone.

Sara huffed.

# 45

# SARA

The carnival was a few minutes of walking distance away, and *oh my god,* everything looked so magical from here. The giant Ferris wheel, fairy lights, and the distant beat of music made my heart flutter, or maybe it was the man walking next to me who did.

A cool breeze passed through us, and I shivered. My cute dress wasn’t helping me feel any warmer. “Oh, I feel so cold right now.” I blurted. He raised his eyebrows. “Research says that body heat is the best heat you can get on a cozy winter night like this.” He drawled and adjusted his coat.

 “And what do you want me to do with this information?”

“You know…” He grinned pointedly and opened his dark gray coat flap, hoping to get a hug as we walked.

“No, I don’t know.”

“You’ll know once you’re freezing.” He drawled and walked past me as I scowled at him harder.

*That arrogant dog,*

“No one freezes in 21 degrees Celsius weather,” I said in my defense.

“Of course, they don’t.” He said and walked towards an ice cream stall. *Ice cream in winter?*

“You’re crazy,” I said.

“About you? Yes.” I hid my smile as he handed me an ice cream sandwich.

“Well… that’s your problem.” I quipped.

“Fix me then,”

“Where will the fun be in that?” I said, and he laughed. “So cruel,”

“I am,” I said, unwrapping the ice cream.

“Ah, Ice cream in winter.”

“You love that risky idea, don’t you?”

I took a bite and grinned. “I *have* been quite rebellious over the years by sneaking out with a boy behind everyone’s back.”

He grinned as he took a bite of his ice cream adorably. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man look so damn cute eating ice cream in my entire life.

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“Are you telling me that Sara, the girl who isn’t afraid of ghosts, spirits, or zombies, is scared of *heights*?” Murad asked as we waited in line to sit on a ten-floor high drop tower. My hands involuntarily shook in fear as I stared at the seats fall and then rise at full speed, then fall again, making the people in the tower shriek.

“I’m not scared of anything.” I lied, not making eye contact, if I died here while sitting on this ridiculous drop tower…

“You’re such a beautiful liar.”

“If something happens to me tonight and I die of a heart attack, I’m going to haunt you for the rest of your freaking life.”

His eyes widened, looking impressed. So he grinned. “That was a... very sexy threat. Say it again, please.”

I pinched my nose in frustration.

“I wouldn’t mind being haunted by you. It sounds kind of romantic.” He said.

I scoffed and gave him a fake smile. “Just pray I don’t get traumatized by this experience, *Baby*; you wouldn’t want to see my bad side,” I said. He chuckled as he took his seat.

This was the first time I ever heard Murad scream so loud. I laughed hard as the seats dropped at full speed and elevated again.

I couldn’t stop laughing once we jumped out. Murad smiled, embarrassed by how he screamed, his cheeks pink. Something in me wanted to kiss them, but I shoved my desires down my throat and jumped into the roller coaster next.

We spent the next hour running to every single amusement ride that came our way.

“Where do you want to go next?” Murad asked, breathing hard, tired, but looking so happy.

“Umm…” I looked around me, the bright and colorful carnival buzzing with people. A 3-floored high balloon slide caught my attention. It was empty.

“To that slide over there,” I pointed with my finger.

The balloon slide was in a contrast of blue and yellow, the climbing hooks at one side and the slide on the other.

We removed our shoes, kept them in a corner, and stepped onto the balloon. It was so soft and cold. Once we climbed up, we found ourselves in a cozy shaded nook. Murad spread his legs before him and prepared to slide down; I did the same but hesitated.

*What if I fall out of the slide?* I thought worriedly.

Before my mind could discourage me from sliding down, Murad said: “Don’t worry; you won’t fall off the slide.”

 “I wasn’t thinking that,” I lied.

“Yeah, of course, you weren’t,” Murad said and slid off as I scowled at him but got a hold of my ankle on his way and dragged me down with him.

“Murad!”  I yelled as I slid down and fortunately did not fall off the slide.

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

*Don’t laugh so much. It brings bad luck.* My grandma’s warning echoed in my mind, so I composed myself. I climbed back up and rested my back at the corner of the ballooned shade, and Murad sat beside me, exhaling. We could see the whole carnival from up here.

The carnival is so beautiful; it makes me wonder if paradise is something like this, all blissful, exciting, and colorful. I looked at Murad and smiled at him, his hair stuck on his head. He had an adorable smile on his face. I softly moved his hair back and grazed my thumb over his lips. I felt him leaning into the touch.

I huffed a laugh, and he shifted his stare to my lips and back to my eyes again. His gaze locked me into place, and I didn’t mind staying with him like this.

We saw – more like heard - a group of giggling kids climb up the balloon slide, and that broke our eye contact and whatever that moment was, too.

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“I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Why, where are you going?” I asked as we walked on a crowded path with many stalls around us, and I knew he would repeat something flirty by the way his expression changed from innocence to mischief.

“Don’t even dare say it,” I warned.

“I am just going to the washroom!”

“Who’s stopping you?”

“You are!”

“Buzz off.”

“So dramatic,” He left, and I walked around the stalls, window-shopping random things. Murad came back a few minutes later and tapped my shoulder.

“Missed me?” He asked.

“Absolutely not,”

“You missing me was a one-time thing that night now, wasn’t it?” He asked.

I stepped closer to him, looking up and holding his coat between my fingers. “Maybe it wasn’t,” I said adorably, trying to make him nervous again until I noticed a scarf in his hand.

“Wow, Murad. That’s an amazing scarf!” I said, my eyes locked on the satin scarf.

He cleared his throat. “It is, right?”

“Pretty,” I said, my greedy eyes unable to look away from the pretty black and white polka-dotted scarf; half of me hoped it was for me.

“I am glad you like it.” He said but did not hand it over to me.

I deflated but tried not to show it. “Who is it for?” I said, willing curiosity in my voice.

“Hmm… for this girl I know.”

I did not look at him as I walked away. “Who?” I asked flatly. I didn’t even know who the mystery girl was, and I was already fuming with envy.

Maybe it’s for that girl his grandparents like.

“A lovely girl, actually…” He smirked. I glared at him before walking ahead. I did not like him complimenting other women when he spent most of his time with me.

“How come I never knew of this beautiful girl before?”

*I am going away tonight, and he already found my replacement.*

“I think you know her.” He said with a mischievous smile.

I stopped and frowned at him. “Would you just tell me already and be done with it?” I snapped. “Who did you buy this for? That girl your grandparents like? Someone you met at your business meetings?”

“What… no.” He looked at me with a grin then. “No! It’s for the girl named Sara.”

It took a moment to process his words. I pushed him as I grinned back. “You bought that for me?”

“For you,”

“But you didn’t have to!” I yelled cheerfully as he handed me the scarf.

I quickly wore it as a headband. I took out my phone and looked at my face through the front camera; it looked amazing. I couldn’t stop grinning as I pulled out a few strands of my hair to give it a carefree look.

I kept my phone back and grinned at the handsome man standing before me with his innocent face.

“Thank you so much for this, Murad. I LOVE IT!” I yelled as I hugged him, then pecked him on his cheek while he stood there, too stunned to move.

He kept looking at me.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re so easy to cheer up.” I grinned, looped my arms with his, and pulled him towards the food stalls.

# 46

# SARA

We sat on one of the benches near a lake, away from the carnival lights behind us.

Somewhere in some speaker, a sweet tune of violin reached my ears. My heart skipped a beat like it does every time Murad plays his violin for me. I never knew the true beauty of music until I got to know this adorable man beside me.

“You hear that? I think I love that tune…” I mumbled.

“Really? You want me to play that for you?”

I looked at him and grinned. “You can play that too?” Murad listened to the music for a bit longer, sinking in the beauty of its sweet tragedy. “Yes, I can.” He said confidently.

The clouds above us got thicker, the wind blowing faster, and I shivered. Murad noticed that, so he opened a flap of his black coat and grinned, and this time I squeezed myself next to him, and he wrapped me.

I looked back at the city lights beyond, feeling happy, giddy, and tired in the best way possible. I didn’t want that music to end; I didn’t want this moment to be just a memory; I didn’t want this night to be over. I wanted everything to stay the same.

*Why can’t it stay the same?*

I quickly sat back straight and looked at my phone. I’m late.

“Dammit!” I yelled.

“What happened?” Murad asked. I already missed his warmth.

“We need to go back now!” I urged.

“Would you like to sit for a few more minutes?” He asked innocently. “or maybe till the music ends?”

I wanted to say yes, but I couldn’t. Coming out tonight was a reckless choice, but I had fun, so it’s okay. “We must go; I must be back home before 12.”

He looked a little sad, but he smiled anyway and stood up. “Sure, let’s go.” He offered me his hand; I took it and stood up.

Yellow fairy lights twinkled above us as I leaned against him and walked back to his car. I would’ve sprinted my way home if I weren’t so tired. The shops were closing, the crowd gone; I found peace in everything. The clouds looked thick as if it’d rain anytime now. The sudden sound of the thunder shook me.

Tiny droplets of cold water dropped on us at an incredible speed, and it thundered again – this time much louder.

“My clothes!” I whined, shielding my hair and running towards a shade over a closed shop.

It thundered, and my attention snapped toward the sky as I leaned against the wall. Raindrops still managed to get to me, so Murad stood before me, shielding me from them.

I looked up at him, towering over me, his hair wet from rain and eyes locked into mine.

He is my friend… is he just my friend? It always feels more than that, even when I don’t want to accept it. He is such a sweet and loving man, and I love him so much that my heart feels too small to contain it all. It was all I could think about as we looked at each other.

He slowly brought his lips closer to mine and waited an inch away as if asking for my permission. So kind, even now, I pulled him towards me and kissed him.

I kissed him.

And he kissed me back.

He moved his lips with mine, passionately, artfully, as if he had planned for this moment since the day the universe destined us to be together. My heart felt as if it’d burst out of happiness any moment now.

*How did I get so lucky?*

*Why did I not kiss him before?*

*Who am I?*

My hands flew up to his neck as he pulled me closer, his hands moving from my waist to my neck a little more urgently as I melted into the water with the rain, misted into nothing under his embrace.

I wanted to wrap him around my heart, soul, and life. I couldn’t, so I kissed him, unable to recall where I was, what my name was, or why I’d been resenting this, him, and his love. All I could grasp was that I was kissing him, and it all felt so right.

He pulled himself back an inch to breathe. I looked into his heavy-lidded eyes, so beautiful and innocent- he kissed me back again, his lips slowly traveling to my neck.

My hands were entwined in his hair, my body and soul warming under his touch.

It thundered – so deafeningly, and with that, something tugged in my mind, something I needed to remember. I wanted to ignore it and forget everything as he found my lips again, and a thought flashed out.

No… I wasn’t supposed to kiss him.

We can’t be together.

It’ll change everything.

Oh, God. It already has. How did I let this happen? I am *leaving* him tonight.

This is wrong. But… Why did it feel so right?

I pushed him away - and my happiness with him.

He looked at me – shocked, and then hurt filled his eyes as I stepped away.

“I am sorry, Murad; I can’t let this happen.”

His sad eyes broke my heart into tiny pieces, and I hated being the one doing this to him. I hated myself.

“Why not?” He asked, his voice a husky whisper. “Sara, I love you, I’ve always loved you—”

“I have to go.” I interrupted, my mind still hazy. So I turned and ran. I felt the rain soaking my clothes.

“Sara! Stop! Please!”

I stopped and turned, “I promise, I’ll never stop trying… to show how much I love you every single day I am alive if you just give me a chance.”

I felt my heart break. He remembered what I said to him, how I never wanted the person who'd love me to stop trying.

I cried.

He walked towards me.

“Stop, Murad, don’t.” My voice broke. “Forget this. Forget me.”

“Don’t tell me to do that.” I couldn’t look into his eyes anymore.

“This will never end well. Relationships end in one way or another, no matter how strong the love is.” My parents loved each other dearly, and now all I see is my dad missing her; all I see is Zainab’s shattered heart. I don’t want that, not for us, not for him.

“Don’t go, Sara. Just hear me out.” He said desperately.

*He doesn’t deserve to be heartbroken.* My mind echoed.

I pressed my hand against my mouth to hide my tears; I don’t cry; I never do.

I have to go now.

I sprinted.

“Sara!” He pleaded, but I left the boy with the kindest heart behind.

# 47

# SARA

I ran, rain soaking me, my heart a terrible mess, my glasses being an absolute pain by blurring my vision. I pulled it off to see clearly, but it didn’t help.

I quickly got into a taxi, told the driver my location, and then cried. I didn’t breathe; I didn’t speak. I just let the tears flow. If the driver noticed, he didn’t show, and I was grateful for that.

I feel like I just ruined something exceptional with my friend by crossing the line– *The line I created for myself because I couldn’t imagine myself with someone as good as him.*

I wanted to shut myself down.

Even if I did accept his love, my dad would never approve of us; he won’t approve of me with anyone. And when he finds out, he’ll not only lose his trust in me; he’ll deprive me of all my freedom and make sure to send me away from him. I love my dad, and he’s the best father anyone could ever ask for, but I also know him.

 It’ll be better to end this here before it kills me to be apart from Murad.

*But… isn’t it killing me already?* A new set of tears fell from my eyes, thinking of him.

I rubbed them off.

*I’ll explain everything to him, and he will understand, and we will be like we were just yesterday, contented with our friendship.* I soothed myself with a fool's hope. I knew sure as hell he wouldn’t want to go back to just being friends after tonight.

*What if he convinces me that everything will work out? And what if it does work out?*

Then maybe, I’ll let him work it out. *Tomorrow.* I decided and closed my eyes.

*But there will be no tomorrow. I’m leaving.*

I snap my eyes open as the realization hits me. After leaving everything so incomplete between us, I wouldn’t even be able to meet him for months ahead to explain myself. I didn’t even tell him I was leaving tonight. He’d probably think I went because I’m mad at him.

*Oh.*

I shouldn’t have left him that way.

“Oh, no,” I hid my face with my hands.

“Um, I’m sorry, but did I take the wrong route?” The taxi driver asked.

I completely forgot I was in a taxi.

I pulled at my hair roots, mad at myself for coming out tonight in the first place. If I had known my night at the carnival would be so magical, I would’ve skipped it entirely.

“No, you’re going right,” I replied. The rain finally stopped, and my neighborhood looked silent and calm, the familiar roads clearer than ever. Next morning, the sun will beam its brightest sunshine above my city, but I won’t be here to see it.

The taxi stopped in front of my home. Murad still hasn’t returned. I hope he was safe.

*I will have to talk to him over the phone after leaving*. I thought, feeling terrible. I felt like a horrible person. *I’m* a horrible person. I slowly unlocked my home’s main door with the spare key I usually hid behind the doorbell and got in.

I stilled as I looked ahead, shocked to see my Dad sitting on the living room sofa, all dressed in his striped shirt and suit and with our luggage beside him – and he did not look happy.

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I knew this day would come. I knew I’d get caught someday when I began deceiving my dad to sneak out. I used to think using excuses like ‘I just went out to throw the garbage’ or ‘I thought I left my car unlocked, so I went off to check’ would save me if I ever got caught. But none of those lies seemed practical as I looked at my dad and felt all his confidence in me fade away.

His infuriated expression showed me that he had been waiting for me for a long time, and I didn’t know what to say to him to make this seem better. The truth sounded too horrific even to explain. I couldn’t possibly tell him that I spent the whole night with a man he barely knew and kissed him, only to leave him like the bitch I am. I couldn’t think up a good lie, either. I was so tired of lying; I didn’t want to lie to my dad anymore. So I stood there silently, and I let him speak.

“Where were you?” My dad asked quietly.

I looked at my feet and remained silent.

“Answer me!” He yelled, and I shuddered. He stood up.

“I called you a million times, Sara, a million times!”

I took out my phone, noticed it was in silent mode, and I had 45 missed calls from Dad and 20 from Murad – along with multiple text messages from him that I did not dare open in front of my dad.

“I woke up an hour early to find you gone! Do you have any idea what that feels like, Sara?” He asked with an angry, shaky voice.

“What were you even doing out so late, and that too when you know we have a flight to catch?” He waited for me to answer, but I couldn’t even form words.

“Answer me!” He yelled again, and tears rolled down my cheeks.

“You’re scaring me, Sara. I need you to talk to me. What were you doing out so late?”

I breathed in and out to calm myself down. “I… I went to the carnival.” I murmured.

“Why did you have to go before our flight? And why couldn’t you tell me?”

I couldn’t look at him. “I didn’t want to disturb you-”

He laughed a fake laugh and clapped. “Great job, Sara, great job,”

He pinched his nose in frustration.

“­I told you to tell me where you’re going before you do. How could you be so inconsiderate?” I couldn’t speak.

“Be truthful to me, Sara. Is this the first time you sneaked out without my permission?”

I wanted to vanish into nothing, hated every part of this moment, and hated myself for disappointing him.

“No,” I mumbled.

He glared at me.

“I knew you were hiding something from me, and maybe I didn’t want to know what it was… But I know now that I have lost all my trust in you.”

My heart broke as I saw my fear burning away into reality.

“I trusted you to make the right decisions for yourself; if I gave you enough freedom, you’d always do the right thing. But you disappointed me today; you made me realize that everyone who told me not to trust my daughter was right.”

I shook my head and tried to explain, but he gestured for me to remain silent.

“I thought giving you a gap year or two after you finished school would help you understand what you wanted to do, but all you did was sneak out behind my back and lie to my face!”

I cried. I was so tired, inside and out. I hadn’t cried so much in years, and it sucked that even after going through so much grief, I still couldn’t master the talent of holding my tears in whenever I felt sad and broken.

Dad exhaled loudly. “Enough of this… freedom, you’ll come with me now. If you can’t think of something to study between the days we’re in Bangladesh, then you’ll stay in Bangladesh, *away from me*.”

That scared me.

“Hand me your phone, Sara,” Dad ordered. I looked up at him, fear rising in my throat. I’ve never been in a situation like this where my dad was so mad. I didn’t want him to read Murad’s texts; that’d get him madder.

He held out his hand, and I silently handed my phone to him. He took it but didn’t look into it; he threw it on the sofa instead. “Take your bags, we’re leaving now, and you’re not taking your phone.”

I panicked. My phone was my only way to contact Murad. He had no social media accounts, and I never memorized his number. He was always so close to me. How would I contact him?

“Dad, please –”

“Don’t speak to me. Take your bags, and wait outside, now.”

I brushed my tears away, took my luggage and pouch that Dad had kept over it, and walked out the door in the same clothes. They were almost dry now, so they were the least of my concerns. My dad followed me a moment later with his luggage and briefcase and called for a taxi.

I stood in my walkway sullenly and looked beside me to see if Murad had returned. He hadn’t. A taxi arrived a minute later; the driver left his car and took our things to keep them in the trunk.

I got in the back seat, and so did Dad as the driver took a U-Turn and slowly drove off.

I saw Murad’s car enter our neighborhood just as we headed out, so I looked up at him from my window. We were on the speed breaker, so our vehicles were on the same pace, but Murad didn’t notice me. He looked straight ahead as he drove, moving a tear away from his cheek with the back of his hand as he sped off at an angry speed – something he never did – as I looked on. The taxi took me to the airport, but not my heart, as it was with him – with the man with the kindest eyes and the most mischievous smile.

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We are at the airport. Dad’s still mad at me, so he isn’t responding to anything I say or ask for. I hate that my dad is mad at me. I wanted to cry and apologize to him for disappointing him, but it felt too late for that. My foolishness felt unforgivable, or maybe I was too arrogant to apologize.

He walked toward the entryway of the plane, and I followed him. We followed the number on our boarding passes and sat on our seats. I got the window seat, and if I were happier, I would’ve been excited for the journey ahead of me. But I wasn’t happy, and I wasn’t excited about the trip. My dad hauled his briefcase into the baggage compartment and sat beside me. We quietly fastened our seatbelts as the screens and speakers instructed everyone what to do in case of emergencies.

As the flight took off smoothly, I looked out the window towards the night sky and missed him. I missed his smile, his laugh, the way he talked, looked at me, kissed me...

*Love is… not good, Zainab.*

I don’t know how I’ll spend the coming days without him, missing him. I don’t even know if we’ll ever be friends again after I return. I don’t know if he’d completely change and not like me anymore. I don’t know if he’d still love me the way he did, especially after the way I left everything between us. I don’t know a lot of things, and it sucks. It sucks that nothing’s under my control. *I suck.*

I am a bitch, and not in a sweet way my friends call me. I am genuinely a bitch. The bitch that treated the boy who loved her like his feelings meant nothing to her.

I had promised him once that I won’t leave him if he asked me to, yet I did.

*I am so sorry, Murad.* I thought silently, hoping against all hopes that it would reach him and that he would understand me like he always did.

# 48

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

Sara packed all her stuff into her pink eccentric luggage and left the room with me, and then we waited with her dad outside for the car that’d take them to the airport. I looped my arm around hers as we rested our heads together sadly. For the first time, our separation felt different. It felt odd.

Fawad stood next to me, and Sara’s dad stood next to her, holding his briefcase in one hand and Sara’s luggage in the other. The car stopped outside our door, and my heart sank. I didn’t want her to go.

“Sara, time to go,” Her dad said and walked towards the car. After he fitted the luggage and his briefcase inside, he looked at me and Fawad. “Zainab, Fawad, I hope you both have a happy married life. Take care of each other.” Sara’s dad said.

“Thanks, Bashir uncle,” I said shyly. I stood with Sara and did not move an inch until her dad went inside the car, and she had to follow him. She hugged me tight.

“Take care and call me as soon as you return, okay?” She said. I nodded.

“I will,” I mumbled.

“I’ll wait for your call.” She added. She walked towards Fawad, who was now waiting by the car’s door, and smiled at him. “You’re a good *Dulha bhai*.” Fawad smiled at that. “Take care of her, okay? And enjoy because once you come back, I’ll never stop annoying you.” She quipped.

“I will.” He said softly and smiled.

She looked at him for a moment and then pinched his cheeks. “Areee-” Fawad rubbed his cheeks, and she giggled. He opened the car’s door for her and waved us goodbye before she stepped in. The car slowly drove away, out of sight, and then my best friend left.

Life never felt the same again.

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“*Baji*, how can we know its true love if we find someone?” One of my cousins asked. I smiled at all the single ladies who rounded me up and made me sit on the living room sofa for questioning at this small family gathering. They were all looking up to me, considering me their love guru, as I told them everything about my love story and gave them all the tips they asked for.

I contemplated their question. “You’ll know it's true love when everything about him feels right… when you two find happiness together in the simplest things and start finding peace whenever you look at him.” The girls smiled dreamily.

“When did you know you truly loved Fawad *bhai*?” one asked curiously.

I saw Fawad stop near me, eavesdropping on our conversation while pretending to be busy on one of his own. He was with his uncle, and the uncle was talking to him about something. I knew he wasn’t paying attention by the distracted look on his face.

He quickly looked away shyly when he saw me smirking at him.

I decided to give him something interesting to overhear. “Ever since I knew what love meant, I loved him.” I could see Fawad smiling shyly from the corner of my eyes as he pretended not to hear. “I love him a lot, regardless of how *annoying and pushy* he has always been. That’s love, girls. It makes you love such things!” I said as my eyes remained locked on him. The girls giggled.

He snapped his attention towards me and raised his eyebrow amusingly. He mouthed the words ‘*Annoying? Pushy?*’

His poor uncle tapped his shoulder to get his attention back. Fawad quickly looked back at him and apologized. I had to bite my lips to stop laughing.

Mother came by and asked me to follow her to meet one of her friends. I got up and did. My eyes remained locked on my mother as I quickly walked by until a warm, solid hand grabbed my arm, pulled me to a corner, and locked me against the wall. I admired my husband amusingly as he smirked at me.

“*Annoying? Pushy*?” Fawad asked playfully in his deep voice. I bit my lip, highly entertained, he tried kissing me, but I laughed instead.

“You seem to have gotten rather bold after getting married, trying to kiss me in a house full of people,” I said, amused.

“You still haven’t seen the best of me.” He said. “Really?” I mumbled and then looked behind him. “Oh, hi, Reena auntie,” I greeted, and he quickly moved his hands away and looked back nervously.

Reena auntie was not there. He fell for my trick. I laughed.

“Oh, you’re so *bold*.” I quipped and then laughed again. Fawad looked amused.

“I will be looking forward to seeing more of your ‘bold side’ though; it sounds fun,” I said as I moved away from the wall. Fawad just looked on, a faint smile on his face.

“Zainab!” I jolted as my mother called out loudly from the living room behind me. “Where are you?”

“Coming!” I said.

I gasped as Fawad pushed me against the wall and kissed me. I knew I had to move him away before someone saw us, but I ended up smiling and kissing him back before pushing him away when I heard my mother’s clip-clap footsteps approaching.

My mother stepped into the narrow corner and found me. “Zainab, where are you? Come and say hi to the guests.” She said. When she saw me looking stunned, she looked at Fawad questioningly, but he quickly shied away and walked to the living room on the other side.

It took her a moment to realize what we were up to; she was no child herself, after all, so once she did, she hid her smile, and that little sign of her realization made me want to wrap my face with the scarf of my salwar kameez and never come out of it.

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Our rooftop had no fences, nothing to secure us if we fell. It was only a floor high, so if anyone ever fell, they’ll not die but simply break a leg or two. No one had fallen from there yet, so no one considered pulling up a fence.

What I loved the most about our rooftop was the huge tree shade at the corner. My grandfather had planted a tree behind our home a long time ago, which grew and fell like a cozy shade at the corner of the roof. I took out an old carpet and a big pillow and placed them under the leaves of the enormous tree, resting my head on the pillow and waiting for Fawad, the clouds above me moving cinematically.

“Hey Zainy,” Fawad smiled as he appeared beside me, his black hair dancing with the wind and eyes shamelessly sinking me in. I let him.

“Come here… rest your head on my pillow” I moved a little to give him space. “You’ll love the view.” He smiled widely and quickly slumped beside me, and we shared the same pillow.

Fawad and I silently looked at the sky for a while and saw the soft breeze sway the tree leaves.

“Reena auntie asked me if I’d be gifting her grandchildren soon,” I mumbled.

I felt Fawad grin as he shifted his gaze away from the trees and towards me. I looked back at him and scowled. “Not in the next five years, Fawad. I want to accomplish some things in life before I take that step to be a mother.” I explained.

“Did you say that to Ammi?” He asked me nervously.

“What? No, I’m not crazy.” I said. He sighed in relief.

He looked straight above us again. “Take all the time you need, Zainy… You’ve already made me the happiest man by marrying me.”

I smiled, rested my hand on his chest, and tucked my head beside his neck. I breathed in the fresh, soapy scent of him.

“You’re so nice,” I mumbled. I felt him smile as he turned towards me and tucked me closer. “You make me nice.” He said softly.

I flicked my nose with his and smiled, draping half of my long white scarf on him and using it as a blanket.

“You know… we can decide on their names until we decide to have them,” I suggested.

Fawad’s eyes lit up. “You mean our kids?”

“Yes.”

“If it’s a girl, we’ll name her Fatima.” He said quickly.

I laughed. “Have you been planning the names for our babies long before this conversation?”

“Yes…” He said slowly.

I laughed again and thought for a moment. “Fatima’s a good name, but I have too many friends named Fatima.”

“How about Falaq?”

“Nope, I have a friend named Falaq as well.”

“Falaknaz?”

I scowled. “It’s almost the same.”

“Faiza.”

“That’s my mother’s name.”

“Why are all the names I like taken?”

“Why aren’t you more creative with names?”

“How about Flamingo, then?” He grumbled.

I laughed again but suddenly stopped. “You’re planning to name our daughter Flamingo?”

“You’re the one who asked for a creative name. I can bet you have no friends named Flamingo.”

I dug a finger on his chest. “We will never name our daughter Flamingo.” He held my finger and almost bit it. I pulled my finger back.

“Let’s name her Rabia instead,” I said.

“Rabia’s a nice name, too… but I wanted her name’s first alphabet to match mine. Like your name matches your father’s, I think it’s cute.” He mumbled adorably.

“Awww,” I kissed his dimpled cheek. “Let’s name her… Female-Fawad, then,” I quipped.

He chuckled. “That’s a terrible name for a girl.”

“Okay, if we’re matching the first alphabet of our names with our children, then we’ll keep our son’s name Zayed.”

“Um, no, I’ve got a friend with that name.” He said.

“You have a friend named Zayed?”

“Since school,”

“How about Ziyad?”

“Almost the same,”

“Zain,”

“You can’t just cut your name in half and pass it on to our children.”

“Of course I can.”

“Nooooo,” He said pointedly, and I laughed.

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“I guess we could go out for authentic street food,” I suggested to my cousins. “What do you think, Love?” I asked Fawad.

Everyone wooed. “I didn’t know Fawad’s second name was Love,” Riya said. Fawad smiled shyly.

“Hi, Love,” One of my cousins crooned. “Love, will you be my loveeeeee?” All our cousins were crooning by now.

“Stop it, all of you,” I said quickly before getting up. Fawad got up next, and they all began singing a romantic song. I told them to shut up, and they did not.

I grabbed Fawad’s arm, and we went out as they began singing louder. They didn’t stop singing as they followed us out.

Fawad and I walked through the narrow streets surrounded by old buildings; my arm remained looped around his as I looked above me, the sky dark, stars twinkling. The roads weren’t too busy, yet everything felt loud and bright. I had walked through these streets many times before, but tonight, with Fawad by my side, the place looked exceptionally beautiful.

Our cousins followed us behind and thankfully stopped singing that terrible song.

The restaurants were scattered around the brightly lit street we walked into. We all decided to spread around and try different food – whichever we liked. The girls went off to the stall where they sold Gol Gappays, the boys went to get some sweets, and Fawad and I walked over to the small restaurant where they grilled Kebabs; they had one of Fawad’s favorite songs switched on full blast.

The stalls weren’t as busy as expected, so the street felt like ours. Some of my cousins came to the kebab restaurant and ordered spicy kebabs with us.

We took our plates and dug into our food, the spice and flavors of the kebab sinking into my tongue. I smiled at Fawad as he ate his food and moved his shoulders with the song.

The girls giggled at how Fawad danced, so he looked up from his food and grinned with his adorable dimpled cheeks, unashamed of getting caught dancing.

Fawad then looked at me and held my hand and pulled me closer as my favorite song began playing from the giant speaker inside the restaurant.

I couldn’t believe this was my shy boyfriend-turned-husband. I got nervous and looked around; the girls were looking at us, wooing. They looked mesmerized by the way my Love held me close.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Making you dance with me.” He held my hands and swayed me with the music.

“No!” I said, but then laughed as he twirled me with the music. I quickly moved away, still feeling shy from the encouraging woos we were getting from our cousins around us.

And amid the warm spot on this cold winter night, my life felt like a beautiful dream, a dream I never wanted to wake up from. Never.

# 49

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

Sunlight streamed through the curtains behind Fawad as he slept peacefully. He’s so handsome. I admired the calm face of the person who knew me so well. I admired his cheeks, nose, eyes, chin, hair, and everything. How is it possible to love someone so much with a delicate heart?

I whispered an ‘*I love you*’ his way, and as if he heard me, he slowly opened his eyes and smiled when he saw me looking at him, but then went back into snooze mode. I bit my laugh, got up from bed, and went for a long shower.

It has officially been a week since we got married. Soon it’ll be a year, then a decade, then many more. I wondered what things would be like for us in five years as the fast drizzle of water fell on me. I wondered if I’d finally be a full-time doctor and if we’d have kids before then. However it may be, I was prepared for it, ready for a lifetime with him.

Fawad’s fully awake and ready for his turn to go to the bathroom by the time I finish showering and get out. He stood before me, a towel on his shoulder, his eyes still sleepy and dreamy. He kept staring at me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Why are you *so* beautiful?” He asked softly.

I smiled at him. “Because you love me,” I said adorably.

A sudden knock on our door shook us both.

“Breakfast’s cooling down. Wake up!” Reena auntie called. We exchanged looks and laughed.

“What are you two laughing about?” She asked defensively.

“I’ll be there in a minute!” I called out.

“Fawad too,”

“I’ll be there after I shower, Ammi,” Fawad said. “Okay, come quick.” She said and walked away.

I stepped aside and walked towards the mirror. He smiled at my reflection in the mirror as I brushed my hair before he walked into the bathroom.

Like a solid punch in my heart, a sudden surge of unease gripped me, like something wasn’t right. It was so sudden that I had to stop brushing my hair. I couldn’t think straight as that ancient feeling of impending doom abruptly overcame me with full force, so much so that I had to sit down. My heart wasn’t beating right. It wasn’t feeling right.

I am confused. Why am I feeling this way?

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After cleaning up last night’s dishes along with a few of Fawad’s cousins, I quickly ate breakfast and walked back into our room. That feeling of impending doom just wasn’t going away like it usually did, and I wanted to do nothing but sit down and not move an inch until this terrible feeling went away.

Today, comparatively, both our houses were quiet; many guests already left, making the house feel empty. I didn’t like anything about today, and I couldn’t understand why.

Fawad stood before the mirror, dressed in a shirt and pants. He was adjusting a bright blue tie around his neck.

I walked over to him, moved him to face me, and began tying his tie for him.

“Where are you going?” I asked, my attention locked on his tie.

“I’m going out to meet my college friends,”

“Okay…”

“But it’s a little far.” He explained. “We’re meeting at a restaurant near the country’s boundary, my friend Yaqub – remember my best friend I told you about, the one who turned into an army officer?” – I nodded again – “He decided we meet there, as it is near his base and the restaurant he chose has good food, so all my friends will be going there; it’ll take me around 4 to 5 hours to reach-” He babbled excitedly. I interrupted. “Excuse me? 4 to 5 hours to reach?”

“Yes.” He smiled meekly. “It’ll take us all the same time, so I’ll return by tonight. If the food is good, we’ll go there together again.” He explained. When I did not answer, he added:

“The weather and greenery there is amazing, with the mountains. I can’t believe I haven’t met my friends in 3 years.”

I smiled, looked into his eyes, and returned to tying his tie again. I recalled when he almost broke his nose while saving one of his friends from getting bullied in his first year of college. I knew how much he cared for his friends and how happy this trip would make him, so I didn’t say anything against it.

“That’s pretty far from home, isn’t it?” I asked instead.

*I don’t want you to go.* “Yes, but I’ll be back home by tonight for a different meeting with my beloved.” He grinned pointedly.

“Okay,” I mumbled.

“Unless… you don’t want me to go at all,” He said adorably, resting his arms on my shoulders.

I wanted to tell him not to go, that I’d been feeling bad the whole day today, and I wanted him to be here for me, to make me feel normal again. But he deserved a day out with his friends. He’s been so busy for the past month with the plans for our wedding; he didn’t get a single day off for himself. And, once we return to Sharjah, it’ll be a long time before he’ll see all his friends again.

“No! You should go, Fawad, and have a good time.” I smoothed the invisible creases of his tie. “Or else people will say that I’ve bewitched you so much I don’t even let you spend time with your friends.” I smiled up at him.

He chuckled. “I don’t care what people think. I care about what you think.”

I smirked at him. “I think I have bewitched you.” He chuckled. “Or maybe it’s the other way around.” He crooned and looked at the perfect tie I tied around his neck.

He frowned at it.

“I don’t remember you wearing a tie with your school uniforms.” He scratched his chin. “When did you learn to tie a tie?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled shyly.

“Did you learn to tie a tie for me?” He asked softly.

“Not at all… I didn’t learn to tie a tie so that I can tie your tie for you one day.” I lied. It was the exact reason I learned to tie a tie.

He smiled widely, and I pinched his nose. “Go quick, but come back quicker,” I ordered.

“Okay.” He said.

He looked at the mirror beside us. “How do I look?” He asked curiously.

I smiled. “Too handsome, my Love,” I replied.

He smiled back and quickly kissed me on my lips. I looked up at him.

Fawad quickly walked to the door.

“Take care, love you,” he said hastily.

“Love you more,” I called out. He looked back at me from the corner of the door a moment later.

“No, I love you more.”

I laughed, and all my tension flew out the window. “Got it! Now go.”

He smiled with his dimpled cheeks.

And then he left.

And that was the last time I saw him smile again.

# 50

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

I silently sat on the living room sofa, staring at the clock. It was midnight. He was supposed to be back by now. Reena auntie and uncle Junaid roamed the house anxiously, trying to act normal.

*Why wasn’t he picking his phone up?*

*Had he forgotten to charge it?*

*Did he get into a brawl?*

Or did he have so much fun with his friends that he decided to stay over and forgot to call us? He would be getting such a scolding once he came back home. I’ll have no mercy.

“Zainab, you should sleep now; it’s too late. We’ll wake you up once he comes back.” Fawad’s father told me.

“No, uncle, I am okay,” I assured.

“No, dear. Go and take a nap. You look tired.” Reena auntie said.

How can I sleep when I’ve been feeling anxious all day? But when she insisted further, I agreed. I stood up and went to bed. For the first time in my life, I hardly found sleep that night, but somehow, I managed. When I woke up the following day, I did not see Fawad’s calm face sleeping next to mine, and I felt a terrible wave of fear wash over me.

Something was wrong.

I quickly got up and searched for him around the house with shaky feet. I looked into the living room and the rooftop. I frantically ran through the whole house and into my old home, but I still couldn’t find him anywhere. He still wasn’t back. I asked everyone, my concerned parents, relatives, and neighbors, but no one saw him coming or going anywhere today.

“Did you try calling him?” My mother asked, my parents following me back into Fawad’s home.

“Yes, Mumma,” I mumbled as I entered the living room. I tried calling him again once I sat down. I suddenly loathed the person's voice who kept repeating that his phone was switched off.

We all sat in the living room for hours, waiting for Fawad to step into the house late like he always did, for him to pick his phone up or call us. But he didn’t.

“What if something happened to him?” My mother finally broke the tense silence by saying what we all had been worrying about. My heart froze, the terror quickly seeping all over my body.

*Nothing has happened to him*, I said to myself.

“We need to go to the police to ask for help. They can search for him. He could’ve gotten in trouble somewhere. I don’t want us to sit here and wait when he could be in trouble right now.” She said. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

*Nothing has happened to him*, I repeated to myself.

Fawad’s father felt helpless all day; he couldn’t even sit in one place. He kept the main doors wide open to see if Fawad came back. He was more worried than mad at Fawad now. My mother’s advice gave Uncle Junaid the purpose of standing up and doing something.

We all got into my father’s car and quietly drove to the police station. That must have been the worst drive I ever had to go through. I tried calling Fawad again several times, but to everyone’s disappointment, the phone was still switched off. Everything felt so much worse when I stepped into the police station; every second felt restless. I realized the magnitude of the situation when I saw Uncle Junaid stutter while speaking about Fawad to one of the officials.

“Bhai saab, do you have a picture of him?” The officer asked.

Reena auntie quickly stood up and took out a picture of Fawad from her handbag. I got a glimpse as she handed the picture to him. It was a picture from a few years ago, on his graduation day.

After writing down all the details, the officer told us to wait patiently for today, and if he didn’t come back by tomorrow afternoon, they’d issue an official search.

“What if he’s in trouble somewhere? What if he needs help right now?” I asked desperately, my voice shaky.

Everyone looked at me. “Don’t worry, sister, we will try our best to find him. We'll start looking for him tomorrow if he doesn’t return home by tonight.” The officer explained kindly.

I wanted to beg, cry and yell. I wanted the officer to leave his chair and look for my husband. The officer did not move, but he did seem concerned. Uncle Junaid slowly left the station, and Reena auntie sullenly walked after them. My mother held my arm and slowly walked me out of the station.

*Nothing has happened to him*, I repeated to myself once again.

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I couldn’t sleep, nor did I want to. I lay on the bed, restless, worried, sad. I wanted nothing in life, nothing at all but him. I wanted him to come back to me.

I kept my eyes wide open to see if Fawad walked in through the doors silently like he always did so he didn’t disturb my sleep, and I had my ears alerted, just in case he called to let us know where he was. The bed I found so much comfort in just a few days ago has become a small part of hell for me. I tugged his pillow closer to me and breathed in the fresh, soapy scent of him. I willed myself not to cry.

I didn’t even know the friends he went out with, nor did Fawad’s parents know any of them personally enough to have their contact numbers. I could’ve called them to know about my husband’s whereabouts if I had been more interested when he spoke about them. I hated myself for not interrogating him about his friends before he left. I don’t even remember the name of the restaurant he had told me about, nor did I know where the restaurant was in that town far away.

The sun rose very slowly, illuminating its light all around the room. It was the second day without him, and I felt sick.

My heart ached so much I couldn’t breathe.

“Where is he, Mumma?” I mumbled, trying hard to hold back my tears as we all waited in the living room. My mother sat beside me and tried soothing me, but she couldn’t find the right words to calm me down. “Don’t worry, Zainab; he’ll come back soon.” She mumbled.

I hoped with all my heart that he did.

# 51

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

I sat next to the landline phone, waiting for his call, waiting for him to tell me that he was alright, that he lost his phone, that he’ll come back. We were supposed to fly back home today.

*Today wasn’t supposed to go this way.*

Our relatives and friends came by today expecting to give us their farewells in the afternoon but instead found us sitting in distress. They knew something was wrong when they saw us utterly unprepared for our trip. And then came the questions about what had happened, why we were still here, weren’t we supposed to be returning by now, wasn’t today our flight, does this mean we would be missing our flight.

I didn’t have the mental stability to answer any of their questions, so I remained silent and let my parents speak. I know we missed our flight. I didn’t need them to remind me of that. I know, I know, I know, we were supposed to be back home by now, unpacking our bags, going out for furniture shopping for our new home - as my Fawad had promised we would.

But we weren’t doing that. We weren’t starting a new life and weren’t happy; we felt terrible.

*Today wasn’t supposed to go this way*. The sentence repeated itself in my mind.

Our parents quietly explained to them our current situation, and quickly, the story spread around the neighborhood, and many decided to come and check up on us. Many just walked in to see what was up out of curiosity.

I remained seated on the same spot on the sofa for hours, looking at the door, silently, still, invisible, and waiting. The house was busy again, almost like on our wedding day, but all the happiness was dimmed this time, every voice hushed. I hated this noise. I hated everything.

I saw a group of women wander around the house, amused by our situation - interested even, as if our sadness gave them another juicy topic to discuss. I wouldn’t have thought about them this way if they weren’t talking so excitedly behind me, as if they were at a party.

*Stay calm, stay calm*. I told myself. They’re innocent; they couldn’t possibly know what we’re going through. If they did, they wouldn’t have spoken as if they were at a social gathering right before us all.

“I think he ran away.” Roxana, who stood behind me, said. I stilled. I sat so still, they didn’t even know I was there.

“What?” her friend asked.

“I think that man… What's his name?”

“Fawad?”

“Fawad! Yes, I think he ran away because he got frightened of all the responsibilities he had to take over.” The women did not say anything for a long while.

“I don’t think that’s true.” A woman with a light voice objected.

“You don’t know men! He probably just used the young girl as long as he wanted and left her.”

All the women gasped. “How do you know that?” One of them whispered curiously. I closed my eyes tightly and held my breath. I wanted them all to go away.

*Just go away*.

“Don’t get so shocked. I know the men who do that. They lure women into marrying them, and once they're bored of them, done with them, they run away, get a new name to lure other women into their traps all over again.”

I couldn’t believe her words. I couldn’t…I couldn’t believe it. Her words… were like sharp daggers stabbing my mind, heart, and sense. How could anyone say such things about Fawad? *My Fawad?*

My heart throbbed with anger, my eyes watery, and my senses blurred. I had never felt anger so profound brimming within me. I hated them. I hated her. I hated everything. My head pounded, anger consuming my consciousness.

I stood, strode toward Roxana, and slapped her across her face. I hit her hard enough to make its sound echo, to silence the room. She had to grab the sofa to remain standing on her feet.

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

She looked at me, wide-eyed and stunned.

The house quieted, and only the sound of the clock behind us clicked every second, reminding us that the world stopped for no one at all,

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

As she looked on, she knew I heard her, knew why I had slapped her. I glared at her, breathing hard, my heart throbbing, and my eyes blurring. She didn’t reciprocate; she did not move, nor did she speak. Maybe she didn’t have the sense to do so yet.

“Zainab!” My mother yelled and pulled me away from Roxana, asking her if she were alright.

She couldn’t speak.

“Zainab, you insolent girl! Did we not teach you proper manners? How could my daughter do such a horrible thing?” My mother shouted. Father just looked on at us, too stunned to say anything. I glared at my mother - something I never dared to do in all my life - and she was shocked.

“Tell this woman… to get out of this house and never return,” I said quietly. “If I see her again, I swear on my life Mumma; I would either kill her or kill myself instead.” Those words did not sound like mine, but I uttered them.

The room got eerily quiet; no one dared to speak a word. Roxana hastily took her handbag from the sofa it fell on and quickly walked out the door.

I slumped onto the sofa again and rested my hand on my head as the throbbing increased. I couldn’t believe I did something like that. My mother stood in front of me in anger, ready to admonish me more and maybe get my sense – something that was slowly slipping away - back into me. Father walked closer and kept a hand on Mother’s shoulders, gesturing her not to, that I already had too much to agonize about.

# 52

# ZAINAB

# 4 YEARS AGO

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

\*\*Ring\*\*

My heart jumped as I ran into the living room the following day to pick up the phone, but Uncle Junaid was quicker. He picked up the phone and silently listened. Reena auntie and I stood near him anxiously as he spoke.

“Officer, is everything alright?” He asked. We knew by the question that the call was from the police station. My heart beat a terrified beat. Why would Uncle Junaid ask that? He asked a few more times what was wrong, but the officer was unwilling to give him further information over the phone. He slowly hung up but did not look at us. “What did he say?” Reena auntie mumbled.

“The officer told us to come by the hospital as soon as possible.” He finally said.

My heart felt like it could fail me at any moment.

*Did Fawad get hurt? Did he get into an accident? Was he okay?* I silently followed Reena auntie, Uncle Junaid, and my parents into the car and off to the hospital.

I hope he was okay. I hope I can see him today, I hope he will explain himself, and I hope we’ll head back home with him soon.

I hope.

As we slowly walked into the fluorescent-lit hospital, I felt worse. The white-stained walls had seen better days, as did the beds in every ward. The old fluorescent light on top of me kept switching on and off repeatedly to the point of annoyance. But I couldn’t care about it. I only cared about my Fawad and his well-being.

 A while later, we found the police officer who had contacted us standing far ahead in his uniform; when he saw us, he gestured for us to approach him. To our horror, as we walked closer, we noticed he looked depressed.

I was beginning to lose my mind completely. *Why did he look sad? He couldn’t possibly have bad news for us.*

*He won’t have bad news for us.*

*He won’t*. I assured myself half-heartedly.

I stood next to my mother and Reena auntie, and my father and uncle Junaid stood before us.

“What happened, officer? Did you find our son?” Uncle Juanid asked hopefully.

“Did you… watch the news in the past few days, brother?” The officer asked softly.

The fathers looked at each other. “No…” Fawad’s father mumbled. We didn’t have the heart to.

The officer seemed to search for the correct words to continue.

“Where is Fawad?” My father asked, almost desperately.

“I…. I don’t know how to say this…”

“Say what, officer?” Uncle Junaid asked, his voice weakening.

I am so sorry, brothers, but…” The officer still found it hard to continue, and my heart froze.

“Fawad was shot dead… 3 days ago by a group of terrorists.”

# Malfunctioned: Love

(Book two of: Anti-Romantic)

Coming Soon...

# AUTHOR’S NOTE

Hi Bestie, thank you so much for reading my book. I have been alone in my self-built fandom for the last four years, swooning over the characters but not having anyone to talk about them with, but now I have found you! So tell me everything, the moments that made you happy, excited, giddy, and emotional; I want to hear them all.

Anti-Romantic is a fiction inspired by reality, a story I poured every bit of my heart into, a story I fell in love with.

If you liked reading my book, please give it a lot of love, and don’t feel shy to send me an email, letter, or text. You might end up being the reason behind giving this anxious girl the confidence to carry on writing.

# Email: samama.reads@gmail.com

Instagram: @Samama.Reads

Do leave a review on Goodreads, Amazon, or your social media accounts; I’ll save them in my journal for writing motivation.

# Acknowledgments

Alhumdulilah, the little girl who had dyslexia, grew up to be a writer.

Thanks to my family for always hyping me up,

My Dad, who bought me a new computer when he saw me writing and found new keyboards every time I broke them, thank you for being so proud of me even when I did nothing special. You hate to read, so I know you won’t read this even if I force you to, but I hope you know you’re the best father in the world.

My Bhaiya, the most intelligent man I know and so proud to have as my brother, thank you for always being the bravest one for us, the best advisor, the dictionary of our house. Thank you for ditching all your friends to raise me when you weren’t obligated to, being the understanding one, and never saying no to anything I asked for.

Isham, thank you for making me laugh on days I didn’t even want to smile, for always being the funny one, for being the best brother anyone could ask for, for being the best chef and friend, for all things you do every day to make me happy and crack jokes that are so bad they make me laugh.

Enjoy the many thank yous I’m giving you here, as I won’t be uttering them to you in real life.

Thank you, Aiza, for motivating me every time I confided in you with insecurities about my writing and for choosing me as your bestie. You’re the friend every parent wishes their kids have, the perfect friend. Thank you for existing, for giving me so much love. Love you!

Mimi, thank you for being the one who can understand me like no other, motivating me, letting me confide in you in every way possible, and praying for me. My true soul sister, we are equally frustrated with the world and our dark secrets. It’s seriously so cool that we know each other so well.

Thank you - the Zainab in real life - for letting me inspire Zainab and Fawad’s love story from your beautiful yet tragic history and for being such a strong human being and such a lovely friend. Thinking of you gives me strength; I hope you can know that.

Thanks to all my friends - yes, every single one of you, the ones who read my book and fangirled, the ones who gave me the best tips possible, for bugging me to publish my book as soon as possible (you know who you are) thank you from the bottom of my heart. I don’t know what good I did to get such kind, loving, and supportive friends! Thank you so much for being in my life!

And to Sherin, thank you for being my favorite beta reader ever. Your no-nonsense and on-point advice was invaluable, and I will carry them with me forever.

Thank you, BTS, for making me love myself, for lighting up the dark spots within my heart, for creating songs that inspire me to carry on, and to Kim Namjoon, for making me believe that not all perfect men are fictional because you exist. So proud of my heart that it chose to fall in love with you.

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# About the Author

Samama Reza is a Bangladeshi brought up and living in Dubai with her dad, brothers, and nine mischievous cats. As a book blogger and avid reader, her obsession with stories began early, when her mom used to read folktales for her before bedtime. After she passed away, as an eight-year-old, Samama found comfort in watching movies and reading, and as she grew older, being a writer felt like her destiny.

# www.samamareza.com