

The background of the cover is a light, textured surface. Numerous pearls of various sizes are scattered across the top and left sides. In the bottom right corner, there is a faint, hand-drawn illustration of a cage with a domed top. A single pearl is placed on the cage's lid.

CAN THEY DEFY
THEIR DESTINY?

When fate was forbidden

A. AMARO

When Fate Was Forbidden

A. Amaro

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Trigger Warning

This book contains aspects of abuse, religion and toxic situations.

*To my family,
I wish I could tell you it's me.*

“The coolest people I’ve ever met have the most colourful pasts, they’ve lived lives of risk, made bad choices, learned lessons, explored, and they’re not afraid of being real. Tattered tapestries, woven of similar threads, they’re my kind of people. My favourite kind of crazy.”

– Stephan. L. Lizotte.

Prologue

*'I loved her against reason,
against promise,
against peace,
against hope.
against happiness,
against all discouragement that could be.'*

-Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

Taimur

There she was.

I could sense her before I even saw her, and for a second, I was under the illusion that she was still mine. I gave myself a moment to take in the sight of her.

Still a vision, but a vision of a woman now.

A breathtakingly beautiful woman at that.

I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Gone was the fearful yet tender girl who passionately believed in the religious scriptures, blindly letting them guide her life without questioning the outcomes. In her place was a confident and defiant woman, who made up her own rules.

Nine years had seen a lot of changes in her; and probably in me.

Her short brown hair fell to her shoulders, for the world to see. Then, it had been only for me. That long, raven hair wrapped firmly underneath a tight head scarf – away from prying eyes. The part of her she used to say was only mine and I loved her for it.

Loved her – past tense.

Now... now I despised her.

I had despised her for nine years.

I tried to push her out of my mind, but it had been pointless. She refused to leave. She had become a part of me, a part of my essence. Cutting her out was as hard as cutting out a piece of my soul.

So, I let her stay.

For me, the line between love and hate had always been blurred. I detested her, and still I knew deep down that I adored her in a way I still didn't understand. I always had and always would.

God knows why.

She owned a part of me that not even I could take back.

Every time I was down on my luck and ready to give up, I located the animosity deep within my soul and was back on track, determined to prove myself.

There I was, rich, successful, and thriving, so why did I still feel like the poor boy she had left behind?

Even as part of me longed for her, anger gripped me, and rage simmered under my skin. The physical ache of having her so close yet so far consumed me, and my mind told me to turn around, get back into my car and drive home.

I had debated all morning whether to drop off the cake or send it by Uber, but my curiosity got the best of me and there I was, standing in front of the woman who broke my heart and ruined my life.

As if she could sense me, she turned around, sucking the last bit of air out of my lungs.

She was beautiful.

Stunning.

Breath-taking.

Her brown hair was loose for all to see, now framing her small, cream-coloured face, soft pink cheeks and big emerald eyes.

Eyes that I used to enjoy getting lost in when she was mine.

When she was mine.

She wore a pair of tight black jeans, fitting her like a second skin and accentuating her every curve, with a pair of striking red soled heels and a large burgundy hoody that didn't belong to her.

I knew who it belonged to.

It always belonged to *him*.

My Pearl.

There was a time she hated dressing up, wishing she could be in her pyjamas all day. When her Uggs were her favourite pair of shoes, and make up was a chore.

"W...W...What are you doing here, T...T...Taimur?" she stuttered.

That meant she was nervous.

I liked that she was nervous.

I was bloody nervous, Goddammit. I was downright tense and trying my hardest not to make a scene. I knew I was going to see her when I decided to drop off the cake, but I didn't know what I expected.

Maybe I expected the same tender girl who'd held me when my father died, or maybe I expected the cold-hearted girl who never picked up my calls after I gave her my whole world.

Whatever it was, it definitely was not what I saw before me.

I stood in front of her for a moment, hands fisted in my jean pockets, clenching the silver charm bracelet I had once given her. The bracelet she promised she would never take off – until she mailed it back to me with no explanation.

I had worn it ever since.

"You invited me. Not sure why, but I am just dropping off the cake and then I'll be gone," I replied harshly, gesturing to the big white box on the ground in front of me.

"T... t... thanks. I didn't invite you."

"I know when I'm not wanted, Layla. At least you have the decency to tell me to my face this time, instead of taking the coward's way out."

I regretted my bitter words as soon as they left my mouth as Layla reluctantly looked down at the ground, unable to meet my gaze. For a second, I saw a flash of the naive, gentle girl I had fallen for. My lifeless heart beat again and my anger began to melt away, bit by bit, like an ice cube in a desert.

I was still in love with the beautiful enemy.

Her gorgeous face frowned, as if she knew what I was thinking, and she bit her bottom lip nervously before moving her big green eyes back to mine.

In that moment, my world stood still.

It was her.

My Pearl.

My everything.

The girl who once covered herself in a head scarf was now all grown up and our emotions were running wild. I could feel it and so could she.

As my anger disappeared, we stood in the garden gazing at each other as if there was no one else around.

I didn't care who saw.

I *never* cared who saw when it came to her because all

I ever saw

was

her.



'Anyone who knew me then would say I loved you far too much. Like a wildfire or the sharp edge of a knife.

Anyone would have told you I stopped being the person I was the second you walked into my life.

They would have said love wasn't supposed to drive you crazy, make you want to scratch at your skin.

And they were right.

Because there was love and then there was you.'

-Lang Leav

Layla

I BLINKED, AND HE WAS THERE, RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME, AFTER NINE YEARS.

Everyone was watching, waiting, curiously anxious, but the truth was, it didn't matter whose eyes were on me, I was always blinded to everyone else when he was there.

"W...W...What are you doing here, T...T... Taimur?" I stuttered, trying to stop my voice from breaking. I listened to the way his name rolled

off my tongue and hated it. Clutching the glass in my hand, I attempted to look up at him as he walked over, hesitantly reducing the space between us.

He was really there.

As the distance between us disappeared, the world seemed to vanish along with.

All I could see was the boy I used to love, now as a man. A very displeased man.

His once, long brown hair I loved twirling my fingers around, was now short and in a buzz cut. His once clean-shaven baby face that I loved to kiss now supported a dark thick beard. His soft features were harder, darker and angrier. He was no longer the care-free boy I had fallen in love with.

“You invited me. Not sure why, but I am just dropping off the cake and then I’ll be gone,” Taimur replied roughly, gesturing to the big white box on the floor.

“T... t... thanks. I didn’t invite you,” the words tumbled out without my consent.

“I know when I’m not wanted, Layla. At least you have the decency to tell me to my face this time, instead of taking the coward’s way out.”

Coward?

Is that what I was?

His piercing eyes didn’t leave mine, burning a hole into my soul, as he handed me a white cardboard box. It wasn’t a pleasant stare, and I didn’t blame him, but the gravitational pull we always had held us in place, causing mayhem in my body.

I was paralysed.

For a second, I was back in a happier time when he looked at me with love and admiration. My eyes started to blur as I remembered what we had.

What we could have had.

It took me a few seconds to shake myself back to the moment and understand what he was saying. My unsteady arms reached out and I took the box from him, making sure our hands didn’t touch.

“There can’t be a p... p... party without cake,” I tried to joke, turning around and walking away from him to place the cake on a nearby table.

My voice came out broken. I was stuttering again after so many years. Dammit, I thought I had overcome my stutter. Pretending to sort out the table, I tried to compose myself, trying to take in a cold breath of fresh air to fill my lungs – but failed.

I could not breathe.

It was a bitter February afternoon, similar to the afternoon that changed our lives. The cold breeze blew through the naked trees, rattling the skinny branches as if to shake them back to life and the auburn leaves fluttered through the garden, causing havoc in their wake. If only I knew what the universe was trying to tell me that day, maybe I'd have not done what I did next, setting off a series of events that would change our lives once again.

"You took it off," his low rumble of a voice whispered behind me, too close for comfort. His warm breath sent electric currents straight to my insides, setting my core aflame and lightening up my body within. I was a girl again, in the grips of an adolescent passion. My skin felt warm and alive after years and my heart beat like a bird trying to break out of a cage it had been trapped in for nearly a decade.

"Took what o... o... off?" I replied, turning to face him.

I knew what he was referring to.

I knew why he was asking.

"You were never good at playing dumb, Layla," he responded, raising an eyebrow like he used to, calling my bluff. "Don't play stupid with me. You know what the fuck I'm talking about."

The words stung in the right places.

He knew it and so did I.

Before he could see the hurt in my eyes, I swiftly turned to leave, trying to balance on my new heels. They were red, high, and uncomfortable but matched my outfit perfectly. I picked up a few dirty plates and gracefully strolled into my house, gladly leaving the conversation behind me.

Trying to calm down, I stood in the kitchen remembering the past few years, and how fast they had gone. Once upon a time I was happy and in love, but that time had passed. Or had I given up? Nevertheless, love was no longer part of my life.

It was the way I'd chosen my life to be.

I held back my tears and began to place the cheesecake onto a serving dish and scrambled around for some more attractive dessert plates I needed.

"Don't you have people to do that for you? Maids or something." The distantly familiar voice spoke again catching me by surprise as my dish nearly tumbled to the floor. Composing myself, I closed my eyes, wondering if he was really there.

"I like doing it myself."

“Can I help?” This time his words were warm, engulfing me with his tenderness.

I didn’t understand.

I turned to see Taimur standing in my kitchen, carrying the rest of the empty plates. His eyes roamed around, stopping at the glass cabinet. “You still collect the shot glasses?”

“No, I stopped. Those are old,” was my uneasy reply, hurrying along the process of cutting the cheesecake and not looking at the gorgeous man standing in my kitchen. “I thought you were leaving?”

“Do you want me to leave, Pearl?”

Pearl.

The name he had given me to signify how pure I was.

Was.

Not anymore.

“D... don’t call me that,” I answered quickly pulling up my jumper to cover my shoulder and turning towards the door.

He was inches away from my flustered body.

“Please move, T... T... Taimur.”

He ignored my request, stopping between me and the doorway.

“Wait, please,” he pleaded, taking the food out of my hand and placing it onto the marble kitchen counter. “Just talk to me. Why is he here, Pearl?”

“D... don’t call me th... that.”

My heart hammered in my chest. My palms were sweating, and my voice came out as a murmur.

Taimur didn’t reply.

“Why is he here?”

“Who?”

“Again, don’t play dumb with me. I know you too well.”

“You don’t know me anymore.”

“But I know him and I’m pretty sure he hasn’t changed.”

“He has.”

He didn’t respond.

He just walked closer, into the kitchen, invading my personal space. like no other man had ever done. I backed away, until my back was flat against the cold fridge.

I was trapped.

I stood there, anxiously.

I recognised that look, the one that said he wanted to devour me in ways my mind couldn't fathom. I could see the need in them, and I wondered if he could see the same in mine. The desire I had locked away. My breath came out short and my mind tried to tell me to do the right thing.

"S... s ... stop, Taimur."

"Make me."

"Please."

"Why?" he asked moving closer.

"I can't," I said, but he was even closer.

"Why?" he whispered, almost touching me now.

"Someone will see."

"I don't care."

Closer.

"Taimur..." I sighed, resting my trembling hands on his rapidly beating chest. It was firmer than I remembered, like a man and not a boy. Looking up at him, I noticed a beautifully designed tattoo revealing itself from under his shirt, snaking up the side of his neck.

"Why are you here? Why did you come?"

"To see if you're happy."

"I am."

"You're still a bad liar, baby," he replied, his face so close I could feel his breath on my lips. His hazel eyes were aflame with hunger and fixed on mine, and the air in the kitchen ceased to exist.

For a second everything stood still.

The rest of the world didn't exist.

It was just me and him.

"You didn't even let me kiss you good-bye."

"I... You... What do you want from me?"

"You've always known what I wanted from you," he said closing the no space between us.

"I don't," I confessed, with my hands shamelessly not leaving his defined chest, still feeling the familiar rhythm of his heartbeat under my fingertips.

"You."

"Tai..." I sighed.

"Bloody hell, you look so damn beautiful, Pearl," he whispered into my ear, taking a few strands of my hair and twirling them in his fingers like he

used to. "I'm supposed to be mad at you. I'm supposed to hate you. I came here angry at you, wanting to hurt you, furious and unforgiving, but one look into those green eyes of yours and I was a goner, just like the first time I saw them, they literally sucked the air out of my lungs."

"Stop T... T... Taimur..." I pleaded, not wanting him to continue talking. I knew the more he said, the weaker I'd be.

"Do you love him?"

I inhaled, trying to look away and slowly nodded.

"Do you love him more than me?"

There was silence.

Moments passed.

"Tell me you love me more and I'll steal you away from them all, from the whole fucking world. It'll be just you and me. Just say the words, Pearl. Say the words and I'm yours."

We stood there, waiting for an answer.

"That's not fair," I said, trying to keep my emotions in check.

"Life isn't fair," Taimur replied, gently placing his palm on my face so that I couldn't look away. I had craved his touch for years, I had dreamt of it for nearly a decade and here we were, face to face, after everything that had happened. "Looking at you is too painful."

"Then look away."

"I can't," he said. "Why did you invite me, Pearl?"

"I... d... d... didn't."

"You still bite your lip when you lie."

"I'm not," I lied.

"There you go again."

"I didn't t... t... think you'd come."

"But here I am."

We both gazed at each other, both knowing we should look away but couldn't, afraid this was a dream, and we'd wake up alone and unhappy.

"I miss you," Taimur confessed, stroking my cheek with his coarse thumb before moving down towards my lips. I felt my cheeks turn hot as I closed my eyes, experiencing the familiar sensation I had missed so much. His warm breath tickled my skin, exciting every nerve in my body, and my mind went blank.

I felt alive.

I felt awake.

I felt like me.

“I miss you, too,” I confided, calmly.

The skies watched two torn lovers gazing at each other.

We would always be linked.

We were supposed to be soul mates.

As our hands interlocked, Taimur leaned in, placing his soft lips on mine and for the first time in years everything seemed right with the world. The light from the open window fell tenderly on us as I gave in and kissed him back gently, savouring the feeling of his lips on mine and feeling two halves of one heart finally come together.

It had been too long.

Separating my lips, his demanding tongue requested entry and I consented, allowing it to caress mine, his mouth leading the dance and his greedy hands explored my body as if it was their first time. My hands found themselves wrapped around his head, searching for the thick strands I used to love as he deepened the kiss.

His kisses became harder and took on a sense of urgency.

Claiming me when I was not his to claim.

I was back to a time when we used to kiss without feeling guilty.

“Layla?” I heard, over the loud beating of my heart. The sound of his staggering footsteps broke us apart, leaving us panting and craving more.

Taimur backed away from me, as I turned my back to the door, opening the fridge for some cool air.

“Does someone want to tell me what’s going on?”

I turned to see my husband walk into the kitchen carrying our daughter on his shoulders, looking from Taimur to me, a million questions in his eyes.

Part One

Nine years ago – University

Chapter One

Taimur

“**S**hit, you’re Muslim?” I said, gawking at the naked girl in front of me.

How the hell had I arrived here? No, no, no, this was not happening to me.

The last thing I wanted was to be involved with a Muslim woman. I hated living in what I felt was a backward community where restrictive religious rules were the basis of everything we did. Where rules set in the seventh century were expected to be followed in the twenty-first century.

In the few years since 9/11, I avoided telling people that I was a Muslim to avoid suspicious looks and the endless political conversations, although having a surname like Khalidi often gave the game away. Then there were the condemnatory looks I got when people who knew my background saw me drinking.

I loved to be free.

I loved to be able to live my life the way I wanted, by my rules and no one else’s.

I loved to party.

I loved girls, drinking and losing myself for the night.

All the things that were forbidden in my religion. Having been up in a strict religious environment all my life, I just wanted to be a normal boy living in London and enjoying my life.

Tired and groggy, the regret of drinking too much hit me as soon as the sun smacked my face. It had been another manic night out with the boys.

A ray of blinding light flowed through the patterned blinds hitting the university furniture as I tried to focus my eyes.

“Shit,” I mumbled, squinting at the girl in front of me. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Chill out, handsome. It’s not a big deal. Just keep this to yourself and we’ll be fine,” she said, as if she’d done it plenty of times before.

“What? Why would I tell anyone?”

“Well, we all know your reputation for kissing and telling.”

“You know me?”

“Oh yes, I do.”

“How?”

“That’s a story for another day. Good work. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must go shower and start my day.”

Trying to adjust my swollen eyes again, I saw a black lacy bra hanging off the side of the bed, an empty Sambuca bottle and yesterday’s clothes scattered across the wooden floorboards. Flashbacks streamed through my mind like a collection of Polaroids – the crazy party, the excessive drinking, the random hot girl and the mind-blowing sex.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes vigorously in an attempt to see clearly but the effect of too many vodka Red Bulls was too strong.

Pulling on my pair of black boxers, I was ready to dress and take on the day but before opening the room door to leave, a pair of hands had wrapped around my waist.

“Actually, how about a little more fun before you go?” A sweet voice asked, running her hands up my abs towards my chest.

She was tall, with extremely long slender legs that seemed to go on forever. Her golden coloured arms held onto a white bedsheet. To my shock, yet delight, she let go of the sheet, allowing it to tumble onto the ground and revealed a very beautiful sight. Her long hair, fell perfectly down her slim body, stopping under her large breasts.

“Round two?” she asked, not coming any closer. I could see the slight hesitation in her auburn eyes.

“Don’t you mean round four?” I winked back.

“So, you remember?”

She came closer, waiting for me to make the next move.

“How could I forget?” I whispered, and with that my mouth crashed into hers, wet and hungry, before my hands began to explore her body once again.

Her kiss was as greedy as mine, all teeth and tongue, and I heard myself groan, losing all inhibitions, ready to get lost in the feeling once again. We stumbled backwards towards the door, until her back was flat against it as I continued my assault on her body, sucking and biting until I knew she couldn't take any more.

"Now," she panted, pulling me up to her lips, her silky tongue sweeping into my mouth. "Now. Hurry."

As the feeling of euphoria started building at the bottom of my spine, I lifted her into my arms, her long legs instantly wrapping around my waist, her opening positioned perfectly for the taking.

"Do you have a condom?" she panted again. "I'm all out."

"Wallet," was all I could say.

I didn't start slow, I powered into her body, her hands bracing herself on either side as I pleased her like she asked me too, fast and hard. My lips attacked every bit of her exposed skin, biting into the soft flesh, making her scream while her naked body rocked against mine, pushing back as hard as I was giving.

Throughout our connection, she kept her eyes closed or on anything apart from me. It should have set off alarm bells if I hadn't been escaping an inner turmoil myself, but in that moment, I let myself go and revelled in the feeling of being free from the pressure of being me.

Our bodies still pulsing and gasping for air, I slowly began to come down from my high, reality sinking in once again. Without looking at her, I cleaned up and began to dress myself *again*. Never having been very good at pillow talk, I decided to stay silent. I hated this part, the anti-climax.

We were not friends.

There was no love lost between us.

We were just strangers having a good time, and that time was now over.

"Thanks for that. I'm jumping in the shower. See you around," she said, grabbing her towel. I watched as she strutted her stuff away from me, admiring the girl's confidence.

"I'm Zoya, by the way."

With that, the morning's euphoria disappeared, leaving me frozen on the spot.

Shit! She was a Muslim. Shit! Shit! Shit!

I had just broken my first rule – never sleep with a Muslim girl. What if she was from my community and what if she knew my family?

I knew I was hypocritical, but the truth was that I was a guy. In our society I could do things and not damage my life. It was a rite of passage for me to have some fun at university, but I still believed that girls should be different. They should be pure, right? Shit, I needed to get out of there.

Still in shock and dying for a glass of water and some Ibuprofen before I left, I made my way into what looked like a typical tiny, two bedroom flat. As I made my way to the shared kitchen, I looked out of a large window in the corridor to get some idea where I was. I recognised the road. It was close to the campus so I could take my time before shooting off to class. Shirt in hand and jeans on but unbuttoned, I kicked my toe on the side of the door as I entered.

“Fuck!” I quietly cursed, shaking my foot and hoping not to wake and bump into anyone in the process, but instead, I was about to bump into my destiny, I just didn’t know it yet.

As I entered the kitchen, I stopped short as I saw a girl was already there, reaching up to get something out of a cupboard above her. It was clear that she couldn’t reach, stretched out on her toes. She couldn’t have been taller than 5 foot. Her beautiful chocolate-brown hair was in a messy wave, falling way past her delicate shoulders, and her slim figure was wrapped by a silky pink robe that matched her flip flops.

My eyes were glued to her from the moment I saw her. I knew I should have offered to help her, or even made a sound instead of watching her like a silent stalker, but the sight in front of me was too entertaining to spoil or look away from.

Not being able to reach higher, she pulled up a wooden chair and carefully climbed on to it.

The large kitchen window was slightly open, and the morning rain flew in, and just like a scene from a movie her hair blew away and one side of the robe fell away revealing gorgeous, light-brown legs in small, white pyjama shorts. As she stretched elegantly once again towards the box of cereal, I pulled out my pack of cigarettes and put one in my mouth. The breeze continued to drag the raindrops inside the kitchen and on to the girl as she turned her head towards the window, basking in the glory of having the rain wetting her face. Finally, she reached the box of Coco Pops and, to my utmost delight, did a small victory dance, shaking her bum around in celebration.

That must have been, hands down, the cutest, most adorable dance I'd ever seen. Unexpectedly, a slow chuckle escaped my mouth and before I could stop myself, I was laughing out loud.

She turned around in shock.

"W... W... What the hell?" she stuttered, moving her now damp hair off her face.

Innocent.

That was the first thing that came to mind.

Like a deer in headlights.

The first thing I noticed about her was her eyes. They were green, with a tint of brown – or were they brown with a tiny bit of green? Whatever they were, they were stunning and burning into me as I stood motionless, paralysed even, not able to look away or say anything. The cigarette that had been perfectly balanced between my lips tumbled to the ground, as did every logical thought in my mind.

"How long have you been standing there?"

I didn't answer. I just kept on staring.

I watched as she quickly jumped off the chair, allowing her bouncy breasts to jump along with her. Why was I always such a perv? My dirty mind started to wonder, but I was interrupted when she dropped the box of cereal onto the wooden table and reached for a piece of white cloth from the cabinet behind me. Call it instinct or impulse, but I moved my arm and reached for it first, fisting the soft material in my palm.

"Can I have my headscarf please?" she asked, tightened the long robe, covering her legs and top. She was now all covered up apart from her long brown hair, but I still couldn't take my eyes off her.

"Shit, you're Muslim too?" I said out loud, as she stared back at me.

"Yes, I'm Muslim. Can you please let go of my scarf now?"

Glancing down, I didn't realise I still had it bunched in my hand, but I didn't let go, just grabbed on to it tighter, not wanting her to cover that gorgeous hair.

"Please let go." she said again, tugging it away from my hand hard, and covering her hair with it as she stared at me angrily. Her large eyes narrowed, sending daggers my way, "What's your problem?"

"My problem is that I can no longer see that beautiful hair of yours."

"Are you trying to flirt with me?" she replied, indignantly. "Who are you?"

“I’m Taimur, but everyone calls me Tai. And you are?”

“Not interested,” she said, trying to get to the door I was blocking. Her small body moved towards me, and for some reason I stopped breathing again, watching her try to escape.

“Could you please move, Taimur?”

“Nope.”

“What do you want?”

“You,” I replied, without thinking. *What? Was I flirting with her?*

“Excuse me?” she replied, stunned and not stammering. Interesting. Her large eyes grew even larger as she gaped at me.

“You heard me.”

“Listen, I’m not your cup of tea.”

“I prefer whiskey anyways.”

“Well, I don’t drink.”

We stood there in silence for a moment, both not ready to step down or break the strange connection between us.

“Okay. Listen, whatever you think is going to happen here is not going to.”

“That’s harsh. What’s the problem? We can be friends. I’m Muslim too,” I replied, to my surprise, still staring at her and wondering why I told her that.

“Whatever,” she replied, rolling those striking eyes at me while walking towards the kettle, switching it on and moving back towards the door.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Can you please move out of my way.”

“Tell me what you mean if you want me to move.”

“Fine,” she replied, taking a long breath. “Guys like you and girls like me cannot be friends.”

“Guys like me?”

“The kind that doesn’t follow the rules.”

“That’s because I make my own rules.”

“And what about God’s rules?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Is that why you cover your hair? Because you believe it’s God’s rule?” I asked, “You think you’re some pearl that needs to be covered by a shell to be protected from the big bad world?”

I saw a spark of anger flutter in her eyes and her nose slightly flared with annoyance. It was easy to provoke her.

“Hijab isn’t about covering your hair. It’s a way of life. And for the record, I don’t think I’m a bloody pearl. I’m covering myself so men don’t look at me in the wrong way.”

The more irritated she got, the more beautiful she looked.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit presumptuous to think that men want to look at you in the first place?” I retaliated, trying to wind her up even more. As the words left my mouth, I knew that there would be no man alive that wouldn’t want to look at her. I thought God himself took a second to admire his work after he’d made her.

She was perfect.

“What do you mean?” she frowned at me, making me put on a ridiculous grin that I could see she wanted to slap off my face. I could sense her hands twitching as she turned away from me and began to make a cup of tea with one spoon of sugar and very little milk.

“Well, you’re under the assumption that every man is after your body because you’re attractive, so you need to cover up your goods. That’s a bit arrogant, don’t you think? I’ll have one by the way, strong, little milk, no sugar, thanks.”

“No that’s...” I watched as she tensed, pulling at her scarf. Her large eyes squinted, and her face turned pink.

Wow, she was exquisite.

“Now, I’m not saying you’re not beautiful, don’t get me wrong. In fact, you are just like a Pearl, but what if the girl is ugly and fat? Does she still have to cover up if no one wants to look at her?” I continued, winding her up further. This was getting pretty entertaining. I was starting to enjoy annoying the cute little specimen in front of me, now flushed with anger. “So, ugly girls technically don’t need to wear hijab?”

“That’s horrible. What the hell? *Wallahi*, you’re an idiot.”

I loved that she used Arabic, *Wallahi* meant ‘I swear’, a phrase all Muslims knew. “Are you even listening to yourself speak right now?” she asked. “How can you even say that? You’re pathetic. And for the record, you shouldn’t even call yourself a human, let alone Muslim, after what you just said.”

“Not agreeing with your beliefs doesn’t make me wrong, Pearl.”

“Don’t call me that,” she mumbled, turning away from me and walking to the table, carrying her Coco Pops box in one hand and keeping her silky robe closed with the other. I didn’t dare glance down at her sexy legs.

I didn’t reply.

“Look, you may look at me and think I’m backward or oppressed and forced into wearing hijab, but let me tell you something Taimur, I’m definitely not,” she explained, calming herself down. She was leaning on the kitchen counter across from me, moving her perfect lips as she spoke, and I had a sudden urge to kiss her. Her fiery eyes were rimmed with disgust glaring into me like the sun and even though I knew I should, I couldn’t look away.

“Tell me something, how does it affect you, my covering my body? How is it any of your business? Why do you care so much? Am I harming anyone? Am I forcing it on others? No! So why is it such an issue for you? It’s okay for a nun to cover her hair, but if I do, I’m oppressed. Why? Why does it bother you so much? Can you answer that?”

I couldn’t.

I think I had just fallen in love.

As she gaped at me for an answer, I stared at her too, memorising her every feature. Her small emerald eyes with a hint of sleepiness still in them, her cute button nose with a tiny diamond nose stud scrunched with annoyance, her glowing skin with flustered cherry-coloured cheeks, and her heart shaped lips – bottom one plumper than the top and bitten in between her straight teeth. Her face was gorgeous, and I’d seen a lot of pretty faces but there was something to hers I couldn’t quite put my finger on. She was not only breath-taking, but also like a breath of fresh air in a room filled with smoke. A flower in a garden of weeds. She was different, and from the first meeting I knew it.

“It’s too early to have this conversation,” I said, being honest. My head throbbed, my eyes burning and the sick feeling I tried to suppress beginning to bubble to the surface. I hadn’t even had my morning cup of tea yet. “Want to...”

Before I could finish the sentence, her phone began to ring. She glanced down at it, sitting on the counter, her body slightly stiffening, and her small hand went to tighten her headscarf before looking up at me, the sparkle in her eyes vanishing as her relaxed demeanour changed. As soon as the phone

stopped ringing her shoulders relaxed but her eyes stayed on the phone screen as she bit into her bottom lip.

“I haven’t met anyone of our generation who feels so passionately about their religion that they are willing to lecture a random stranger they find in their kitchen at ten thirty in the morning. You’re honestly just like a Pearl, unique and scarce. I just don’t understand how you can live in a world where science has progressed and be this traditional,” I continued, not wanting to end the conversation.

“Excuse me?”

Her eyes glared at me once again.

I liked her eyes on me.

“Let me get this straight, Pearl,” I said, emphasising the name I had now given her, giving her my panty dropping smile. She didn’t smile back. “You genuinely believe in the whole Hijab, praying, no drinking and no sex before marriage or you’ll burn in hell nonsense?”

“It’s called religion, and yes I do.”

“So, you believe in heaven and hell?”

“Yes.”

“And prophets that did miracles?”

“Yes.”

“Angels too?”

“Yes.”

“What about fairy godmothers?”

“What?”

“Well, if you can believe in angels, then you might as well believe in fairies too?”

She looked straight at me, throwing daggers with her magnificent eyes, now even bigger with rage.

“Don’t you think you’re too old to believe in fairy tales? Angels, the devil, heaven and hell, miracles?” I pushed, watching her cheeks turn a brighter shade of crimson. My new favourite colour on her.

“Whatever,” she said, moving towards the door. “I can’t expect a guy like you to understand, let alone believe.”

Before I could reply, my pocket began to vibrate, breaking me of my trance.

“What?” I answered, annoyed at the interruption.

“That’s a nice way to greet your twin.”

“What do you want?”

“Do you know where Chubs is?”

“No.”

“Where are you?”

“Nowhere.”

“Are you at the flat?”

“No.”

“Are you coming home this weekend?”

“No.”

“Wow. Someone’s in a mood this morning. Want to talk about it?”

“No,” I said again, watching the girl, now Pearl in my mind, stare at me with disgust. Her resentment shone through her bright eyes, her repulsion couldn’t have been clearer.

“Okay, I’ll go. Love you, twinny.”

“Okay.”

“Say it back or I won’t put the phone down.”

“I’ll just hang up.”

“I’ll keep calling back till you pick up.”

“I’ll put my phone on silent.”

“I’ll leave you hundreds of voicemails.”

“I’ll block your number.”

“I’ll tell Mum.”

Silence.

I had lost.

“Fine, love you too.”

As the line went dead, a wave of guilt washed over me. God, why was I such a prick to her today? I was not usually so bad. The kitchen door flung open.

“What are you still doing here?” Zoya asked, staring straight at me. “And why aren’t you dressed yet? Layla, I need you.”

Layla.

I quickly buttoned up my shirt while the girls exchanged looks, and Layla darted out of the kitchen without even a glance back at me.

“Bye, bye Pearl!” I yelled before the door closed, picking up the cup of tea she had forgotten and taking a sip of the sugar filled brew – disgusting. “I’ll definitely be seeing you around.”

“I see you’ve met Layla.” Zoya said, still looking at me in a strange way. She walked over to the fridge and took out two Red Bulls, passing me one.

“Urg... Your flatmate has a stick up her perky little arse, you know. How do you deal living with someone who is so self-righteous?” I asked, staring at the closed door. I finished buttoning up my shirt as I said, “She needs to loosen up and have a little fun. I bet I can help her with that.”

“Just stay away from her.”

“Why?” I said as I made for the door. Zoya followed me, downing her Red Bull while I lit another cigarette.

“She’s not your type.”

“Oh yeah? How do you know?”

“Because she’s my little sister, dickhead.”

With that she slammed the door in my face.

Chapter Two

Layla

Why did it feel like my world had just been tilted on its axis?

I knew from the second I met Taimur that he was trouble. That gloom behind his hazel eyes, a little terrorizing and a little scary, gave him away, but what I didn't know then was how drawn I'd be to that irrational darkness.

All my life I felt like I had been defending my choice to wear my hijab and for a *Muslim* guy to antagonise me before I'd even had my Coco Pops kind of set me off.

"*Wallahi* Zoy, you really know how to pick them. You know he has a girlfriend, right?" I said as soon as she walked into my bedroom.

"How do you know?"

"I heard him on the phone telling her he loved her. What an idiot."

"What can I say, I attract idiots. Did you see his body though? Ahh..." Zoya squealed.

I tried unsuccessfully to shake the image of Taimur's irritatingly bare chest out of my mind. His broad shoulders and tanned skin had been driving me as mad as his words did. Just because I wore the hijab didn't mean I was blind.

He was attractive, and I hated it.

"I haven't had this much fun in ages. He really knew how to..." she continued.

"TMI!" I stated, covering my ears with my hand like a little child.

Zoya knew I wasn't a fan of her antics – her drinking, partying and sleeping around and I didn't really understand why she needed to do what she did. We were both brought up in the same way, with a level head and a strong background of religion. However, since we lost our mother four years ago religion helped put me back together, but it broke Zoya apart. She and I moved in together when she got into university in London so we could get away from life back home. She was in her final year, and I was in my first. I rarely said anything about her lifestyle, I was sure it was just her way of dealing with her grief, so I let her have her so-called fun.

It had been a rough few years for us all. From a happy family, we turned into a broken one, members scattered across the country like shattered glass. We didn't speak of it often, but that didn't mean we didn't see the hurt in each other's eyes.

“Zoy...” I began, gently trying to steer the conversation towards the thing I wanted to tell her but couldn't get out.

I shook the thought of my mother out of my mind, putting it into a small box before the feeling could overwhelm me. Instead, I stood behind Zoya in front of the full-length mirror, looking at our reflections. She was much taller than me, slightly plumper with longer hair that was now tied up in a sleek ponytail. Her hair was highlighted with a dirty blonde, while mine was dark chocolate. Her eyes were a beautiful light brown, while mine were a strange greeny-brown.

“Are you ready?” she asked, straightening her jumper before taking one of my headscarfs and covering her hair. I corrected mine, took a quick glance in the mirror to make sure I looked acceptable before anxiously opening the laptop and clicking the Skype video call button.

“I called you half an hour ago Layla, why didn't you answer?” The voice boomed before I could say hello. There he was, the man I loved more than any man in the world.

“As Salaam Alaykum, I w... w... was in t... t... the shower,” I answered, hating myself for lying.

“Okay. And you Zoya? What were you doing this morning?”

“I just got up and am going to class. I'm running late. Can we call you in the evening please?” she smiled politely, wringing her hands nervously. It wasn't often I saw my big sister anxious, but when we spoke to our father, we never knew what the outcome could be.

“Okay. Have a good day girls. Behave yourselves.”

“Love you, Baba,” we sang in union before ending the call.

“*Wallahi*, that was close,” Zoya said, sighing in relief. I sat back, taking a deep breath myself. She ripped off her headscarf and pulled her jumper off to leave her in a vest top and jeans. “Next time, pick up as soon as he calls.”

“You want me to pick up when we have a half-naked boy in the kitchen?”

“Well, no,” she replied as I watched her line her eyes with black liner.

“Zoy...”

“Yes Layli, what’s up? I don’t have long,” she replied.

“Ever thought of picking one guy who you can have a relationship with instead of a different guy every few nights?”

“Layli, baby cakes, don’t worry about me. I’m fine. I’m just enjoying myself before I’m locked away in a marriage to Adil once I finish uni.”

Adil was our cousin. Our dad and his mum had decided that Zoya and Adil would get married a few years back, but Zoya had begged our dad to let her finish university first. He finally agreed and set the date of their engagement for the week after she graduated.

Marriage between cousins was a common practice for Muslims around the world. However, here in the West it was frowned upon.

“You’re acting like a guy, Zoy.”

“And? I’m not going to apologise for owning my sexuality, Layli. If they can do it, why can’t I?”

“Because they’re guys. They will get away with it and you won’t. You’ll get caught and labelled.”

“That’s ridiculous Layli. The world is different now. Women and men are equal.”

“It may be different from the fifties, but not that different, and especially not in our world. Why are you acting like you don’t know how our society works? Men can sleep around as much as they want and still expect to marry a virgin.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Then why are you acting like a slut?” I blurted out before I could stop.

“Thanks, that’s all I needed this morning. A phone call from Baba and to be called a slut by my little sister.” she said, her eyes full of sadness. “Let me tell you one more thing little sister, owning my sexuality does not make me a slut. Soon I will be married off to someone I hardly know, and have to

become the dutiful housewife, cooking and raising his kids in the Muslim way. Let me be me for as long as I still can, okay?”

The words cut into me, and I instantly regretted what I had said. I knew my father and Zoya had struggled since they lost our mother, but it had got worse recently. It was easier for me than Zoya, who was living two lives most of the time.

“I’m sorry Zoy...” I began, “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just worried about you. You’re so emotionally detached. I don’t want anyone to find out and for you to get into trouble. I’m sorry. I love you.”

“I’m fine. I’m leaving Layla. Lock up, okay? Bye babes,” she said without turning back to look at me. She didn’t have to look at me for me to know what I’d done.

She left me standing in the middle of an empty room, not knowing how my morning turned from bad to worse – I blamed the infuriating stranger I had met in my kitchen that morning.

Taimur had ruined my first day at uni.

Chapter Three

Layla

Securing my head scarf with sewing pins, I made my way down to my first lecture of the morning. My bad mood lingered over me like a dark cloud even after I had sent Zoya a dozen texts, apologising profusely; but I didn't get a response.

The clouds began to reveal the morning sky, bright rays of sunshine mixed with small drops of condensation warmed the cold British day, as I walked into the lecture room that was already filled with students.

I bit my bottom lip, nervously.

I hated the first day of anything.

I found a comfortable seat next to the window and took out my writing pad, ready to start taking notes. I looked around to see if my friend Moe had made it to the morning lecture, but he was nowhere to be seen. I still left a space next to me for him in case he showed up later.

"Hello." An elderly man at the front of the room began. "I'm Mr. Richardson and I will be teaching you Pharmacogenomics this semester."

As the lecture began, my mind wandered, and I remembered Taimur's piercing hazel eyes, warm and welcoming, with a sense of familiarity in them. I usually stayed away from guys in general, not even letting them into my mind, let alone my life, but there was something about Taimur that I couldn't shake and instead of listening to the lecture I was lost in the thought of him.

Remembering the way he watched me sent goosebumps down my spine, his penetrating stare digging deep into my soul as if to strip me bare. Trying

to concentrate on the task at hand, I scribbled a quick note to myself.

1. *Find the nearest Mosque.*
2. *Join Islam society (ISOC).*
3. *Buy laundry detergent.*
4. *Join the gym.*

“IT’S THE FIRST MONTH OF UNI AND YOU’RE THINKING ABOUT FINDING A mosque?” A voice whispered from behind me. The smell of cigarettes, soap and aftershave gave him away. His voice was deeper than I remembered, and the sound tickled my ear, sending cold vibrations down my body. I hated that I loved that feeling. “Shouldn’t you repent after you’ve sinned, not before, Pearl?”

There he was, wearing a pair of dark blue jeans and a tight blue t-shirt, peering over my shoulder at my notes. Confidence radiated off him and his egotistical demeanour made it hard for me to look away.

“Excuse me?” I said, retying my hijab tighter. I took the piece of material into my hands and nibbled the end of it so I had something to concentrate on rather than his annoyingly perfect face. “Firstly, why are you following me? You were my sister’s one night stand. Don’t get too attached, and secondly, it’s rude to read someone else’s notes.”

“It’s not like I was reading your diary now, was it Pearl? Although, I can’t imagine anything interesting in that either.”

I turned back towards Mr Richardson, but before I knew it, Taimur had climbed over the row of chairs and was sitting beside me, moving my things off the chair I had saved for Moe.

What the hell?

Why is Zoya’s one-night stand following me around?

“It’ll probably go something like this,” he continued, his patronizing eyes scanning my face, coming even closer to me so only I could hear him.

My stupid heart skipped a beat and my skin turned warm when his messy hair grazed my cheek as he spoke closely, murmuring into my ear.

“Dear Diary, today I saw a gorgeous guy with the sexiest body and most charming personality making me think naughty...”

Before Taimur could carry on, I turned to him, glaring into his small hazel eyes. Taken off guard, he jolted.

“Easy, tiger,” he grinned a moment later. His voice was smooth and calculated. I blinked, spellbound. “Those eyes...”

“What?” I said, not moving my angry gaze. His sun-kissed skin glistened and his threadlike stubble was perfectly formed around his masculine jaw line. “I’m curious to know what chat up line you’re going to use next.”

“I was just going to say that those eyes could look really good with some mascara on them.”

“What?”

“Maybe some of that black eye liner thing girls do, too?” He sighed, turning away, the side of his mouth curled upwards in a lopsided smirk, knowing I was still watching him.

The lecture finished promptly, allowing the class enough time to get to know each other before leaving. Predictably, a number of girls came towards us to introduce themselves to Taimur. It irritated me.

“Hi,” Taimur began, turning to look at me with his mischievous smile. “Have you met my friend, Pearl?”

“That’s not my name...” But the girls weren’t listening, instead they were asking him to come out with them that night.

“I’ll come, if Pearl comes too.” I heard him say as I pulled my bag over my shoulder.

“What?”

“Come out with me.”

“Hell would freeze over before I’d go anywhere with you.”

“I guess there’s a blizzard coming then, Pearl.” he grinned His stare was deep, as if he was trying to see into my soul but my walls were up, rising higher and higher as the moments passed between us, not allowing him anywhere near me. Something about his look made me feel more uncomfortable than I already was.

“Stop calling me that.”

“Why do you call her that if it’s not her name?” one of the girls asked moving closer to Taimur. I watched as she stretched her thin arms to touch him, holding herself there while they spoke.

I don't know why, but it annoyed me that he didn't move her hand away, so I absently nudged my elbow against him, as if I had suddenly lost balance. Taimur quickly moved from her, grabbing my arm to hold me and my heart fluttered again at his touch.

"Well, it's quite a funny story actually," Taimur began, and I stood shocked, as his lies fell out of his mouth, as smooth as butter. "We were toddlers and playing house. It was our wedding day, and I gave her a plastic pearl ring. She loved it and didn't take it off for weeks. She wouldn't let anyone take it off her finger. She was quite clingy if you know what I mean, love."

"W...W...What?"

"Then one day..." he continued, still looking straight into my eyes as if to challenge me, "she was nibbling the ring because she has this habit of nibbling something when she's nervous. Just look."

All eyes were on me as I took the pen which I was biting out of my mouth Embarrassed, I gave them a fake smile, placing it in the back pocket of my jeans.

"So anyways, she ended up swallowing the pearl and almost choking on it."

"Oh no!" the girls declared, forging shocked faces at this ridiculously stupid and fake story.

"She nearly died, but luckily I was there and squeezed the ring out of her. From then on, I began calling her Pearl."

"That's so cute. So, if you call her Pearl what does she call you?"

"Oyster, of course."

"Cliche much?" I mumbled, loud enough for him to hear me.

"I'll always be there to protect her from the world," he continued, his full lips tilting upwards and his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Oh my God, that is adorable."

"Oh my God!" I exclaimed, furious. "Just stop."

"So, you're childhood sweethearts? Are you guys together?" Another girl asked.

"No!" I explained before Taimur got the chance to make up more lies to embarrass me.

"She broke up with me and broke my heart." He spoke slowly, placing his hands over his chest and the girls looked at him as if they were the glue

to stick the pieces back together. God, he was good. “That’s why I’m spending the evening with her. I’m trying to win her back.”

“That’s so sweet, why did you break up?”

“I broke up with him...” I began, trying not to get angrier. “... because he slept with my sister.”

“What?” Taimur was not smiling, and I was still mad. I felt my face turn redder with anger and my eyes widen, pushing Taimur aside so I could get out. I heard him finally chuckle behind me as I began to walk away, not daring to look back at his handsome, yet devilish, face.

“Wait Pearl, wait!” Taimur called from behind carrying his bag in one hand and mobile phone in the other, his girlfriends following him. “Hold on a second.”

“What now?” I replied, waiting at the door.

“Can I have your number, Pearl?”

“Are you being serious right now?” I replied, flattered but not wanting to show it. “I thought I made myself clear. I’m not interested and we’re not friends despite the bullshit you just told your fan club.”

“What? Do I hear a tad bit of jealousy?”

“Shut up!”

“That’s fine. I get it. You’re boring. You don’t want to have any fun. I get it. I was trying to have a laugh with you but anyways, could I get the notes off you at the end of the semester?”

“What?”

“It’s the third time I have sat through these lectures since I can’t seem to pass this bloody module, even though it’s a first year module and I’m a third year student... and I need to pass it to graduate.” He began, rubbing the back of his neck as if he was ashamed, before the spark in his hazel eyes returned. “You look like the kind of girl that’s not going to miss a lecture because you’re particular and I’m the kind of guy who’s going to miss most of them because I’m hungover, so could I photocopy your notes by the end of the term?”

I don’t know how long we stayed like that, frozen and gawking at each other, but I suddenly moved, twirled around and stormed out of the lecture hall, but not before he pulled the pen out of my back pocket and placed it behind his ear.

“I take that as a no, then!?” I heard him shout before I shook him out of my head.

Chapter Four

Taimur

That was bloody brilliant.

I don't know why the sight of an irritated Layla made me smile, but for some messed up, deep rooted reason, it did. The look on Layla's face when I made up the story about our childhood was priceless. Those spectacular green eyes that had been haunting me since I left her kitchen that morning, were large and annoyed, just the way I seemed to like them.

"Who was that?" My younger brother asked, coming up behind me and falling in sync with my steps.

My family was small, there was my twin Alia, who was the completely opposite to me even though we looked nearly identical, and our younger brother Kassim.

Kassim, didn't look anything like me but his character resembled mine, just with better morals. We had moved in together at university, but none of his virtues had rubbed off on me. Being less than a year younger than me, we were more like best friends who fought constantly, rather than brothers.

Apart from Kassim, I had two other best mates, my cousins Abdul, who went by Abs, and Nabeel. We were all around the same age and were pretty much brought up as siblings even though it was no secret that Nabeel had been adopted at birth.

"No one," I replied to Kassim's question.

"She's hot."

“She’s a hijabi,” I said, trying to deter him from her, before realising what I was doing.

“So? I hear some are quite freaky.”

“She’s not like that,” I replied, taking a cigarette and lighting it. The smoke filled my lungs, and I could breathe again.

“How do you know? You just said she was no one.”

“I just do.”

“Never thought you’d be interested in a hijabi.”

“I’m not. I don’t do Muslim girls, you know that. They end up wanting commitment, husbands and shit, and you know how it goes...”

“No rings, no strings, brother,” he added, fist pumping me.

“Only dirty things.” I laughed.

I liked girls for a night. Did I use them? Yes, but as much as I used them, they used me. The truth was, girls loved bad boys and I was as bad as they came. The only misconception they had was that they thought they could change me. I wasn’t their Prince Charming and I definitely wasn’t their happy ever after. That was why I knew I had to stay away from Layla, she was not the kind of girl you could have for a night and forget. She was the kind of girl you keep forever, and I didn’t do forever.

“You know, I think I’ve seen her before. Maybe at mosque.”

“What? Our mosque?”

“I think so. I think she’s the daughter of that famous preacher or something. I think she has a sister too. Her dad’s pretty famous in our community actually. Sayed Usman?”

“Dammit.”

“What?”

“I was with that sister last night.”

“Shit bro. You better watch out. You don’t want it getting around, it could ruin everything.”

“I know. I know. I’ll handle it.”

“And keep away from the other one.”

“Yeah, that won’t be a problem.”

I tried to stay away that morning, but she looked adorable, sitting alone, concentrating on the lecture. Her were bright green and awake. Her skin sparkled as the sun from the window hit it and she had a piece of her head scarf in her hand, nibbling it without knowing. There was something about her peace I just felt like violating – so I did.

“Are you coming for lunch?” I asked my brother.

“Nah, I’ve got some things to do. I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

“Right.” I grinned, knowing exactly what things he was referring to.

I walked away from Kassim into the cold outdoors, thinking he was right, I had to stay away from these girls. Fate was not on my side, as the first person I ran into was Zoya. She stood in front of me, the same strange look on her face from the morning.

She looked pretty, but not as pretty as her sister.

“Hey dude,” she said, coming up to me. I could see that she was hesitant. It was strange, only a few hours ago we were naked, and my hands were exploring her personal space and now we felt awkward being metres apart. “Let’s not make this weird. We’re bound to see each other around campus,” she said, breaking the tension.

“Yeah, definitely,” I said, pulling out my hand to shake hers. To my surprise, she held onto my hand, pulling me into a big hug. She fitted comfortably into my arms. “Nice to meet you, Zoya.”

“Nice to officially meet you too, Handsome...”

“Tai.”

“I know, but I like handsome better,” she smiled, we both laughed and made our way towards the student union for lunch. Zoya seemed different from her sister, more relaxed and easier to talk to, while Layla was determined to drive me insane, and I’d only known her a few hours.

“So, I hear you’re Sayed Usman’s daughter?” I said, toking on my fag.

Zoya stopped in her steps, her face turning pale and her eyes filled with worry.

“How did you...?”

“I have my ways. Don’t worry. I won’t say anything.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I do. I know what our community is like. I won’t get you in trouble.”

“My dad would kill me, Tai.”

“Don’t worry, *Wallahi*, I won’t say anything,” I promised.

“Why? You don’t even know me.”

“Because I have a twin sister who means the world to me, and I see how hard our society is on her to be the perfect girl.”

“You have no idea. Thank you.”

“I’m a bit confused how the preacher’s daughter ended up in my bed last night though.”

“Technically it was my bed.”

“My bad, but yeah, didn’t expect that from someone with your upbringing.”

“You don’t know anything about my upbringing so don’t assume, and don’t be a hypocrite. You’re a Muslim, I’m sure you were brought up just like me, but you were still very present last night – *and* this morning. So, what’s the difference?”

“You’re...”

“A girl?”

“Uhhh... not only that.”

“You mean I’m a Muslim girl, right?”

“Yeah, I just expected...”

“Typical male judgemental hypocrite. I bet if I wasn’t Muslim, you wouldn’t bat an eyelid. You have such double standards. Why are you guys so fucking backward?”

“Wow... Okay. Sorry, sorry. You’re right,” I said, throwing my cigarette bud into the bin. “I’m being a hypocrite. Damn, you two sisters have tempers.”

“Yeah, we take after our dad,” she winked.

“Tai...” Someone called. I turned to see Abs, pulling on his hoodie, approaching. Nabeel followed. “What’s up? We on for tonight?”

“Not sure. Are you fighting? This is Zoya.” I said as my eyes scanned the mass of round tables and plastic chairs for someone I didn’t know I wanted to see. The student union was packed, filled with students in their individual cliques. “Zoya, this is Abs and the one with green hair is Nabeel, my cousins.”

Abdul Khalidi was the oldest out of us boys and naturally took the Big Brother role of the group. He was a few months older than the rest of us, giving him that little edge. He liked to bully us but also got us out of trouble, most of the time, burdening the blame from all our parents. If there was one person I knew who would give his life for his family, it was Abs.

With his inappropriate humour and dirty mouth, Abs Khalidi was, hands down, the most genuine person you would ever meet and the closest to me out of the boys.

Nabeel on the other hand was always loud, enough to cause a scene wherever he went. His towering height, trendy style and random hair colour didn’t help his cause since everywhere he went, he attracted attention. His

features were sharp, almost model-like, and his personality was huge, as huge as his ego.

“Have you spoken to Chip today?” Nabeel asked, referring to my twin sister, Alia. “She was looking for you. She needs help with...”

Over the years, we had all noticed that Alia had become Nabeel’s Achilles’ heel, he protected her from the world and the rest of us boys too.

As Abs, Nabeel and Zoya exchanged pleasantries, I found the object of my affection sitting at a table with some guy. I knew I should have stayed away, that she wasn’t the kind of girl I should be associated with, that she was the preacher’s daughter, but I was intrigued. A strange feeling in my stomach began to swirl and my blood began to bubble under my skin.

I was not jealous of him.

I watched as the guy leaned closer to tell her something. Why was he so close to her? Her delicate hand covered her mouth and her eyes widened with shock before she began to laugh. It was a beautiful laugh. Flawless and genuine, not holding back and not caring who was around.

Once every few seconds she picked up a chip from her basket, dipped it into some tomato ketchup and bit into it. How the hell was I mesmerised watching something so mundane? What was wrong with me?

“You done checking out my sister?” Zoya asked, walking past the table towards Layla followed by Abs and Nabeel. There was no jealousy in her voice but a sense of protectiveness that I heard in my own voice when I spoke about Alia.

“What? No...” I stumbled, not knowing what else to say before followed her round the tables like a little puppy dog, trying to get to Layla. After being stopped a handful of times by people I knew, I finally found myself where I wanted to be.

“Guys, this is Tai, Abs and Nabeel. Guys, this is my sister Layla and her boyfriend, Moe. Sit.”

Boyfriend? I felt my inside shift, as if my heart sank to my stomach, a nauseous feeling taking over. Boyfriend? She looked too innocent to have a boyfriend. Layla’s head shot up towards me, our eyes met but before she could say anything Moe spoke up.

“I’m not her boyfriend, Zoya.”

“Well explain why you two are inseparable.”

“*Wallahi*, we’re just friends and he has a girlfriend, Zoy,” Layla said, looking away from me and towards my two cousins who were now sitting

opposite her. I had no idea what she was thinking. I needed to get her attention back on me.

“Why is your one night stand here, Zoy?” I hear Layla whisper to her sister loud enough for everyone to hear, before going back to her chips.

“Wow, she doesn’t seem to like you, bro,” Nabeel chuckled but Abs stayed quiet, without a smile. His trademark hoodie covering his head. “Maybe I should show you how it’s done.”

“Shut up,” I shot back at Nabeel.

“I’m Nabeel by the way. Tai’s older, better looking adopted cousin.”

“Nice to meet you, Nabeel,” Layla said, smiling in his direction but not taking his hand to shake. He understood, she was trying to keep her barriers up. “What are you doing here?” she said, turning to me.

“Don’t be rude, Layli,” her sister said. Moe stretched his hand to greet me and I reluctantly shook it. “I ran into Tai again.”

“So did I,” Layla mumbled, dully.

“Where?”

“Lecture,” I chipped in, “We had a good chat, right Pearl?”

“Wrong, leave me alone.”

“Did Tai just get dismissed?” Nabeel laughed, his pleasure in my pain antagonising me. Layla was giving him perfect ammunition that he was going to have a field day with. “I’d like to apologise for my cousin’s behaviour and want to assure you that I’m nothing like him.”

“Yeah, you’re worse,” Abs said quietly. He always had my back.

“At least I get the girls, which is more than I can say for you,” Nabeel replied to Abs, in their usual brotherly banter. I rolled my eyes.

“What can I say? I have higher standards than you. Not every hole is a goal, you know.”

Moe laughed, like he was in on the joke. Why was he in on our joke?

“Shit, I missed the lecture, again didn’t I?” Moe asked, changing the subject and resting his hand on the back of Layla’s chair. I didn’t like it.

“Don’t worry. I got the notes,” Layla replied, smiling at him. Why was she smiling at him?

“How come he can use your notes and I can’t?” I asked, my mouth running faster than my mind. I needed to stop doing this in front of her.

“Because he’s my friend and you’re not.”

“So, let’s change that. Let me take you out, Pearl.”

“Bloody hell. Will you give it a rest with that name?”

“Do I even want to know?” Zoya asked, confused.

“I’m not in the mood,” Layla chimed in.

“You’re like a little ball of fire, aren’t you?”

“Fire? Then maybe you should call me Arsonist, and not Pearl,” she said. I should have known then that she was going to light up my life.

“But you’re so pure and rare, almost fragile,” I said trying to tease her, winking.

“Uh, are you hitting on my sister?” Zoya asked, eyes narrowing on me.

“What? No...” I began, feeling like a complete idiot. I tried to explain. “I’m trying to befriend your sister so she lends me her notes.”

“Okay. Just give him the notes, Layli.”

“No, he should come to the lecture like everyone else.”

“Even if I went to the lectures, I won’t have notes like you, so please have pity on me,” I said, giving her my best puppy dog eyes. I knew she couldn’t say no to. No girl could.

“Fine. On one condition,” she responded – as predicted.

“What?” I waited for her reply.

“You actually have to attend the lecture you want notes for.”

“What’s the point in him going to the lecture if you’re giving him notes, Layli?” her sister asked.

“It doesn’t matter Zoya, if he wants the notes, he’ll have to be there like the rest of us,” Moe stepped in, speaking for Layla.

Why was he speaking for her? It had nothing to do with him. I pulled my chair closer to Layla, running my hands through my hair and catching her eye. She watched me, biting her bottom lip, not with anger or rage but with something else that made everyone around us disappear.

“Fine, I’ll come. On one condition too,” I whispered to her softly.

What was I doing?

“What?”

“You have to sit with me in every lecture we have together.”

“What? Why?” Layla asked, quietly, looking at me from under her long eyelashes. Our eyes locked as if we were the only ones in the room and slowly the world around us faded. Her green pools held my brown ones, connecting for the first time. I watched as her perfectly plump lips parted, her cheeks turning pink and her breathing shallowing. I was having the same effect on her as she was having on me, and we both knew it.

I wanted it to stop.

I didn't want to feel the things I was feeling.

For God's sake, it had been less than twenty-four hours and I couldn't get this girl out of my head, but little did I know that I was about to find out that Layla and I were a paradox of contradictions. From the outside, we looked like we hated each other, but our bodies told a different story, a story that was going to ruin everyone around that table forever.

Chapter Five

Layla

It had been a few days since I'd seen Taimur and for some reason my eyes searched for him wherever I wandered. I craved to see his perfectly chiselled face again, and still didn't know why.

For some unexplainable reason, every morning I'd walk into the kitchen expecting him to be there, leaning against the countertop, shirt unbuttoned, with his tanned skin glistening under the rays of the bitter September sun but he was never there.

The feeling was new to me, and it confused me more than I was willing to admit to myself.

I didn't date.

I had *never* dated a guy.

I *would never* date a guy outside the rules of my religion – dating with the intention to get married.

Thinking rationally, I recognised that there was no point in my futile emotions. Taimur was not the kind of boy I wanted in my life, and he had slept with my sister. Then why, for the first time ever, did I want to put what was right aside and step over the line I had drawn for myself? Submerged in guilt, I knew I had to keep away from him before the lure of wanting him overrode my logic and I let temptation take over.

Moe removed the textbook from my lap, shaking me to get my attention as we sat studying on the damp grass outside the SU. That was when I saw him next.

“How many guys have you seen now?” he asked, light grey eyes curiously watching me.

“What?” Glancing up, I pulled down my light-yellow jumper so it looked neat and tidy, and swung the material of my hijab over my shoulder to make it look stylish.

“You know, the whole arranged marriage thing your dad’s making you do. How many guys have you seen?”

“About six or seven since January.”

“And?”

“And nothing, I didn’t feel a spark.”

Although Moe was my best friend, I was not blind to how handsome he was. I could see why the girls were trying to get his attention, but he wasn’t for me. I’d known him since we were children and there had never been a spark between us, *ever*.

“What are you thinking about, Lay?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” he smiled the smile that drove other girls’ wild. “You’re thinking about Tai, right?”

“What? No.”

“That’s good, because he’s right over there.”

Before I could stop myself, my head snapped around to where Moe was pointing and there he was, sitting on the wet grass, leaning against a great willow tree with Abs and Nabeel, and some other guys I had never met. It struck me that all three of the Khalidi boys stood out, they were all pleasing to the eye, with Abs’s ruggedly handsome face, Nabeel’s dusky red hair and smouldering looks – but I had to admit that they had nothing on Taimur. His annoyingly gorgeous face and fine body was something else.

In the last few days Zoya had filled me in on the rumours about the Khalidis. They were part of our community, although they did not live close to us. Abs had a girlfriend who his parents wouldn’t accept because she wasn’t Muslim and Nabeel was a good guy, but he was into some bad things. Our community loved to gossip, and these boys were always the hot topic because they stood out and did not always conform.

I could not help being captivated by Taimur, and the way his chaotic, thick hair flopped over his gorgeous eyes, his long legs spread out wide, relaxing with a cigarette balancing between his plump lips. I was so

mesmerised that I nearly missed the girl sitting between his legs, leaning on him. A beautiful blonde – now there's a surprise, I thought.

"You think he's good looking?" Moe asked, watching me gawking at Taimur.

"Uh huh," I nodded, by mistake.

"I knew it. I saw the way you were looking at him in the SU. Like you were about to eat him whole."

"What? No way. He's not my type."

"He may not be your type, but you still like him. What was he whispering to you that day?"

"Nothing. Just that he'll attend the lecture, that's all."

"The lecture you forced him to attend so you could see him again?"

"No, that's not why I told him to attend."

"Say *Wallahi*," he continued, asking me to swear.

"No, and anyways, he slept with Zoy, Moe. That says it all."

"That still doesn't stop you from liking him, Lay. You can try and deny it all you want, but I've known you nearly all your life, I know when you're interested in someone."

"How?"

"It's easy. You get defensive and act like a bitch to the guy. Put up your walls. That's how I know you've never been interested in me, you're always nice to me." he laughed. I didn't find it funny.

"That is not true. I'm mean to him because he's rude, arrogant and a complete womanizer. Someone needs to pull him down a peg or two. Look at the way that girl's clinging to him, it's pathetic."

"I think you're jealous," he teased.

"No," I said too fast, pushing Moe gently. His built body didn't even move as he pushed me back, sending me softly to the ground before he began tickling me on the murky floor.

"Get off me, Moe."

"I'll stop tickling you as soon as you admit you like him."

"I... D... D... Don't..." I stammered, trying to stop him for tickling me. I felt the dampness from the ground seep into my clothes making me wet all over.

"Incorrect answer Lay. Try again."

"S... s... stop please s... s... stop... People are watching..."

"You mean him?"

“Everyone... P... p... please... s... s... stop...”

“Admit it first. He got to you, didn’t he?”

“Fine, fine... He’s got under my skin.”

“And...”

“And I could possibly like him, a little bit.” I emphasised the word little.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“What.....?”

Suddenly Moe’s hands stopped touching me. He sat up, pulling me upright too.

“I didn’t think the day would come when my little Laylay would let her guard down and let someone in, apart from me.”

“I didn’t say I was letting anyone in.”

As soon as I got my balance back, I unexpectedly shoved Moe as hard as I could with all my energy, throwing him to the ground.

I know in Islam it was forbidden to touch another man or be touched by one who wasn’t my father, brother or blood uncle, but it was difficult not to have any contact with the opposite sex when you lived in the West. In fact, in my religion, the way my community saw it, talking to the opposite sex was not encouraged, but how were we supposed to survive on this side of the world where the genders mixed everywhere. It was possible in the Middle East where they had separate sections for women and men wherever you went, but here in the West living that way was not practical. Therefore, when I was away from my family, I felt free to behave in whatever way I saw fit.

Despite Moe and I being best friends, we both knew very well that when we were back at home, we had to act like we weren’t friends. As if we didn’t even know each other, because if my dad got an inkling of our friendship there would be hell to pay. To my family, socialising with the opposite sex was a crime. A crime that could take me out of uni and get me married before I was ready.

“How’s things with Sara?” I asked, trying to change the subject and distract myself from Taimur. Sara was Moe’s girlfriend.

“She wants to get married.”

“Wow, that was quick, you have only been going out a few months.”

“I know. I told her I need more time.”

“At least your parents don’t mind you finding your own wife, you don’t have to go through the embarrassing arranged system like me.”

“Yeah, but she has to be Muslim. It’s not like I can marry anyone I want.”

“Can you really see yourself spending the rest of your life with Sara?”

“I can’t see myself spending the rest of my life with anyone but you Lay.”

“Me too,” I smiled, knowing what he meant.

“But for now, she’s scratching the itch, so I’m good,” he grinned.

“Urgh... Yuck! Why are all you guys the same?” I scowled at him. “Disgusting.”

“It’s in our DNA, Lay. We’re all dogs and any guy that tells you he’s not is just lying to get into your pants.”

“Thanks for restoring my faith in men,” I joked, rolling my eyes.

As I redid my hijab, I slyly glanced around to see if Taimur was watching us, but he wasn’t. Instead, he had turned the girl on his lap so that she was now straddling him with her curvy legs on either side of him and was kissing her neck while she had her hands in his hair. My insides felt queasy, and a bit of my lunch came back up as I tried not to watch them, but they were like a car crash; I couldn’t look away.

“You know he’s not good for you, Lay?” Moe stated the obvious.

“I know that Moe, and anyways, I don’t go out with guys. You know that. I’m going to find a guy the Muslim way and get married like my dad wants me to. I’m going to tell Taimur I’ll give him the notes without him coming to the lectures.”

“That’s big of you. Why do you even like him? He seems like a prick.”

“I don’t even know him. I’ve spoken to him like twice.”

I don’t know how long I sat there, secretly taking in every kiss he gave her and her squeals at his touch before I decided that I had seen enough for a lifetime.

“Where are you going, Lay?” Moe ask me at the top of his voice. I wished he’d kept quiet, as all the attention suddenly turned on me.

I glanced behind yet again, finally catching Taimur’s eye. I pulled at the sleeve of my jumper, nervously, as both our eyes met and unexpectedly, my feet froze to the ground. Stiffening, as his gaze held me in place, his glare burned holes into me.

“Where are you running off to, Lay?” Moe asked again, breaking Taimur’s spell. He was standing up, ready to run after me.

“To the library, Moe. I need to get a book out, then I’m going to my room to pray.”

“I thought you already prayed.”

“You do realise we pray five times a day?”

“Yes Layla.” He rolled his eyes. “You want me to come with you?”

“Nah, you enjoy the sunshine. I need to call my dad anyway. I’ll see you later,” I replied. I was supposed to call my father every few hours, otherwise I would be in trouble.

“Okay, bye,” he yelled, sitting back down.

Before I left, I glanced at Taimur one last time to find him back to his normal behaviour, holding the girl tightly in his arms. For a second I wished I could swap places with her so I could experience his strong arms around me, but I shook off the feeling immediately, telling myself there was no way I was going down that road. I was looking for a good guy, someone who would want to give me the world and would marry me before getting physical.

Chapter Six

Taimur

“**H**ave you signed up to Facebook yet?” Nabeel had asked, taking a drag of his cigarette while tapping away at his laptop.

“What is that?” I replied.

“Some social media site that connects you to people you know.”

“Sounds rubbish.”

“Just get on it.”

“I’ve got better things to do,” my eyes still on Layla who was sitting with Moe on the grass. I had been trying to avoid Layla as much as possible due to the fact she had burrowed under my skin after only two meetings. But the more I evaded her, the more irritated I got with myself. From previous experience, I thought the best way to get over her was to get under someone else, ASAP, so, I tried that, and it didn’t work. Thus, here I was again, annoyingly attracted to a girl that was categorically not my type.

I watched her from the corner of my eye, mesmerised by her every movement and in awe of her simple beauty, but it wasn’t only that. There was something else about her that kept me intrigued. Maybe the fire in her eyes or the belief in her words that first morning, whatever it was, it wouldn’t let me think of anything else.

“You’re starting again, idiot,” Abs said, throwing his dirty hoodie in my face.

“So are you.” I replied, turning my attention to the boys. “Is she still with Moe?”

“Maybe she’ll be into me.” Abs joked, ignoring my question. “She’s hot, in that whole ‘I’m a princess stuck in a tower and need saving’, kind of way.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re a little obsessed.” Nabeel said, looking up from his laptop.

“No, I’m not.”

“Dude, you made us walk the long way around campus just so you didn’t bump into her in the North building ...”

“And you’ve been making us hang here on the grass all week and not use the SU in case she was there.” Abs continued.

“I didn’t ask you to come with me.”

“You should be thanking us.” Abs concluded. “Anyways, you’re right. She’s a hijabi and the daughter of that religious preacher. We should all stay away from her. She’s not worth it.”

“Yeah whatever,” I lied, turning to catch her eye. I had enough of these lot taking the mick out of me. All week they hadn’t given up any opportunity to rub my face into the fact that I was interested in a hijabi, something I swore I would never be.

I watched her glare leave mine before she abruptly got up, picking up her belongings, and I heard her tell her friend she was going to the Library. Had I pissed her off? Was she as jealous as I was?

“I got to go,” I said, my eyes not leaving the back of Layla’s body as she walked away from me.

“Where you going?” Abs asked, following my gaze. “Don’t follow her.”

“See ya,” Nabeel winked, knowing I’d do whatever I wanted.

I was about to follow her to the library, when I noticed Moe walking towards me looking very serious, even a little cross.

“Tai, right?” he began, glancing at the girl, now standing next to me, like he was disgusted. Why were people so judgmental? My cousins stood up, stopping their conversation to see what was going on.

“Yeah,” I nodded, “What’s up?”

“What’s your deal?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

“Do you think I’m stupid? Trying to get in both the sisters’ pants, are you? Layla won’t give it up to you, you’re wasting your time. She isn’t like the other girls that you know.”

“I know that,” I replied, starting to get irritated. I knew she was different and that’s what attracted me to her. “I’m not trying to get into her pants, but if I was, believe me, I would already be there,” I said, regretting the words as they came out of my mouth.

“Layla was right; you are a prick.”

“I’ve been called much worse.”

“Stay away from her.”

“Why don’t you tell the Princess to stay away from him?” Abs now standing beside me retaliated, always ready for a fight.

Who the hell did this guy think he was, coming over to scare me away from Layla? From the moment I saw him, I disliked him. Layla may say that they’re just friends, but men and women can’t be just mates – definitely not possible with a girl that looked like Layla.

“Feeling threatened, are you?” I mocked, grinning. The boys laughed.

“Layla and I are just mates. We’ve been friends for years.”

“Shit, that shit must hurt.”

“What?”

“Being friend zoned when you want more.”

“Who says I want more?”

“Have you seen her? Any guy would want more.”

I saw the spark of heat in his eyes. I wasn’t a prick unless you started on me, then I’d make it my life’s mission to destroy you. I felt Nabeel and Abs behind me, ready to step in if I needed them, making me feel stronger.

“Listen, I know guys like you, and they don’t deserve girls like her.”

He was right. I knew it in my bones. A decent girl like Layla didn’t belong with a guy like me, but I was not going to admit it to this prick.

“All good girls are good, till a bad boy comes and corrupts them.”

“Guys like you don’t end up with girls like her.”

“So, who does? You?” Abs asked. I could see the anger building up in him.

“That’s not the point. Just stay away from her. You got me?”

“Or what?” I sneered.

Before I knew what was happening, Moe grabbed me by my t-shirt and pushed me against the tree, banging my head on the hard-wooden trunk before a punch landed on my jaw.

“Don’t test me when it comes to Layla.”

Taken by surprise, I didn't have time to defend myself but, before I knew it, Abs jumped in, pulling him off me. As soon as I knew what was going on, I used my right arm to punch him in his face. The punch was hard, and I saw him stumble back before I punched him again, this time on the other side of his pretty face. I could feel Nabeel behind me, telling me to stop, but I was just getting warmed up. Then, unexpectedly, I heard a shriek and Layla jumped in front of Moe, right in my line of fire. I stopped abruptly, breathing heavily, my arm frozen in mid-air. She wrapped her comforting arms around her friend, now on the ground, and looked directly at me. She was livid and that infuriated me even more.

"What the hell is wrong with you? What kind of thug are you?"

"Your boyfriend started it," I said, wanting her to take my side. Praying that she would.

"I highly doubt that," she replied sarcastically, kneeling next to her friend and inspecting his face with care. Why didn't she correct me? Was he really her boyfriend? She looked beautiful close up, and for a second, I forgot what was going on. "I told you once and I'm telling you again, stay away from me and my family!"

"I wasn't even in your way. Your boyfriend..." I stated again, jaw clenched with fury and waiting for her to contradict me, "... was rude to me. Ask him Pearl."

"My name is Layla!" she yelled with her beautiful eyes filled with angry tears. I hated that I'd made her this upset but was royally enraged that she didn't even take a second to listen to what had happened and jumped into Moe's lying arms.

"But..." I tried again, looking from Layla to Moe and back to Layla.

"I don't want to hear your pathetic excuses. I know the kind of guy you are. You're pathetic and insecure, that's why you have to be with a different girl every night, to make yourself feel better about your tragic life. You have no self-worth, let alone self-respect. You're feeble and disgusting, and one day you will get what's coming to you."

Maybe it was just words or maybe it was her curse that the universe heard that day and adhered to.

Everyone around us stood still, listening, as her words pierced my defences.

"At least I don't hide behind my religion!" I shoot back. "At least I know how to live."

“You don’t know me.”

“I don’t want to anymore either.”

“Just go! Please leave me alone.” As she continued to speak, her words felt like a knife, slowly digging in deeper, twisting itself into my gut.

“My pleasure!” I bellowed back, indignant, throbbing with a pain I could not explain.

FUMING, I WALKED AWAY NOT GLANCING BACK. I WAS GOING TO GET OVER this girl if it was the last thing I did.

Just as I was about to burst, my phone buzzed and I picked it up without checking who it was.

“What?”

“*Habibi*?” Just the sound of her voice calling me “my love” calmed me down.

“As *Salaam Alaykum* Mum. What’s up? It’s a bad time.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing Mum. Just arguing with the guys as usual. Everything OK?”

“Are you sure? I felt something was wrong.” How did she always know when I was hurting?

“I’m fine, Mum,” I lied, trying to make my voice neutral.

“Are you coming home this weekend?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe next weekend?”

“Okay... I’ll see you then.”

“Mum, is everything okay?”

“Yes *Habibi*. I love you and miss you. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Love you and miss you too Mum.”

“And tell your brothers to pick up their phone the next time I call.”

“Yes Mum,” I laughed. “Bye.”

My mum – my sanctuary.

But the anger simmered back as the call ended, and my mind thought of a way to hurt Layla as much as her words had just hurt me so

I began typing on my phone.

TAIMUR

You free tonight?

ZOYA

Yeah, what do you have in mind?

TAIMUR

Your flat or mine?

ZOYA

Mine.

TAIMUR

See you @ 9.

THAT WOULD GET MY MIND OFF LAYLA, I HOPED.
Boy, was I wrong.

Chapter Seven

Layla

The next morning started badly, I found Taimur beautifully topless in my kitchen again. For some inexplicable reason it felt like something was crushing me, my soul, my self-control at its mercy. My inner sanctity wept as I realised why he was there.

I felt nauseous.

I felt irritated.

I felt disappointed.

He was typing on his mobile phone while a hot cup of something sat on the wooden table in front of him.

Habitually, I pulled out a wooden stool to climb on to get my cereal box from the cupboard above. It was Zoya's way of messing with me, putting it out of my reach. I felt his intense gaze on me, all-consuming and smothering. Even without turning around I felt weak at the knees, like some damsel in a romantic novel. I didn't dare let him see the effect he had on me.

Battling not to look his way, I tightened the unpinned material on my head and climbed the chair, determined not to look back. I could not believe it as I heard him get up and stomp towards me. It took him two short strides to get to me, and for a moment we stood face to face, close enough for me to smell his musky aftershave mixed with the lingering scent of cigarettes. I stood motionless, watching him take out the box of Coco Pops and leave it on the tabletop with a loud thud, before marching back to his chair.

"Thank you," I mumbled, but he didn't reply or look in my direction.

I stormed out of the kitchen.

I wanted never to see him again, but there he was at my 9 am lecture. The fury from the previous day shot through me like a bullet, soaring through my veins without an exit wound. He was there, smug and confident with two takeaway tea cups. If Taimur thought he had felt my wrath yesterday, he had another thing coming.

Dressed like he'd just come off a fashion runway, he sat there staring at me, ready to drive me insane. I found an empty seat as far away from him as possible only to hear a voice over my shoulder and a takeaway cup placed in front of me.

"We had a deal. I turn up. You sit with me."

"I... I... I didn't think you'd come."

"We had a deal. You sit with me," he repeated.

"I... I don't want to."

"I don't want to do a lot of things too."

"I'll give you the notes. You can go."

"Whatever you may think of me, remember one thing *Layla*, I am a man of my word. If I say I'll do something, I will."

He had called me by my name. Why did it make me feel sad?

"Do whatever you want, I don't care. I don't want anything to do with you outside of our lectures."

"The feeling is mutual. Now drink your disgusting sugar syrup."

"What?"

"Your sweet tea," he replied, shoving the cup closer to me.

He took a sip from his cup and yelled, "Yuck."

"What?"

"They got switched, this is yours. I don't take sugar."

"Well maybe yours should. You might benefit having some sweetness."

He looked away, eyebrows furrowed in annoyance, as I picked up the cup, debating whether to drink out of the same place he'd put his lips.

I decided not to.

That was it. For the next hour and a half, we sat side by side in silence, Taimur not moving his eyes away from the whiteboard and me, trying to keep my eyes away from him.

"What the hell, Layli!" Zoya squealed as I stormed into her room without knocking. I had just returned from the lecture and found her still in

the flat in a lacy black bra and knickers, pulling on her leggings. "I thought you were someone else."

"Nope. Just plain old me," I replied.

She rolled her dark eyes, which just pissed me off even more. I was not sure why I was so angry at her, I just was.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," I lied, sitting on her bed with my legs crossed.

"Is it because Handsome..."

Before she could finish the sentence, I blurted out, "Don't call him that, and no, it's not because of him," I lied again. "I don't want to hear the gory details, Zoy. It makes me sick just thinking about it."

"Okay..." she said as she stood, hands on her slim hips, "That's rude but..."

"I'm sorry, but I just don't want to know."

"Alright then," she said, looking at herself in the mirror and doing the 'duck face'. She apparently did not like what she was and slipped out of her leggings, replacing them with a black skirt that stopped above her knees, and a crisp white shirt. She wore less makeup than usual, and her long hair was tightly pulled into a ponytail. Her was dressed more formally than usual.

"Are you going somewhere? We haven't called Baba yet."

"I actually have a presentation today, so I need to rush out. You'll have to call him without me."

"Uhh... ummm..."

"It's fine, Layli. He's on a screen. He can't do anything."

"But..." I began, already anxious about the phone call.

"Just keep calm, answer his questions and tell him you're working hard."

"Ahh OK. I'll do it once you've left. You look nice by the way. What's your presentation on?"

"Something boring. You know, you should apologise to him."

"Who?"

"Taimur."

"Why? Because you're sleeping with him?"

"No, because Moe started the fight yesterday. I was there with Noah and saw it all."

“Who’s Noah?” I asked, sitting on her bed with my legs crossed. My tummy rumbled, asking to be fed, but I ignored it. I knew all of Zoya’s friends because they were also my friends, but I’d never heard of a ‘Noah.’

“He’s the guy from my course that won’t leave me alone. He transferred here from America or something and he’s so bloody annoying, but that’s not the point,” she said.

If I wasn’t so absorbed by Taimur I might have pushed her further, I should have, but I didn’t.

“The first punch was Moe’s, and Taimur was just defending himself. If he wanted to, he could have gotten his cousins involved, but he didn’t,” she said. “To be honest, it was very dumb of Moe to start on him when there was a ratio of one to three.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“I saw it myself. *Wallahi*,” she swore.

“What?”

The scene I walked in on flashed through my mind – Taimur punching Moe, Moe on the ground, Taimur’s cousins holding him back. It was terrifying, and I still felt a chill even thinking about it. Both Zoya and I had seen enough violence in our lives.

“Are you sure?” I said, feeling a wave of guilt run through me. “I just can’t imagine Moe throwing the first punch.”

“He punched Taimur first, then Taimur punched him back. It was all quite sexy to be honest,” she said, beaming at me from the mirror. “Two guys fighting over you.”

“Oh my god... They were not. This is so messed up,” I said, lowering my head to my hands in shame.

“What’s wrong?”

“I said some really horrible things to Taimur, Zoy. I feel really bad now if it wasn’t him who started the fight.”

“It wasn’t, Layli.”

“Urgh... What shall I do?”

“You can start by apologising to Tai,” she said, now fully ready with her make up on, covering the now yellowing bruise only I knew about. I watched as she lined her lips and then coloured them in with a bright red lipstick. I could never pull off such a vibrant colour, but it worked for Zoya.

“Everyone makes mistakes, it’s how you apologise that makes you the bigger person. Just say you’re sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“I just saw him in the kitchen Zoy, and he came to our lecture. He won’t even look to me.”

“Do you blame him, Layli? You yelled at him in front of everyone.”

“Did he tell you that?” I asked again, wondering if he was talking about me to her. “He said some horrible things too. I’m also mad at him.”

“I was there, remember? You provoked him.”

“Now I feel really bad,” I said as we both walked out of her room.

“You should. He’s a nice guy.”

“He is?”

“Yes.”

“What do I do, Zoy?”

“How about the next time you see him you apologise and take it from there?”

“Fine,” I said with another sigh, walking toward the kitchen to finally get some breakfast. “I’ll say I’m sorry.”



AN HOUR LATER, I HAD SHOWERED, EATEN AND PERFORMED MY AFTERNOON prayers and was pacing through campus with a steamy cup of tea in one hand and my mobile phone in the other. I had called my dad, answered his questions, assured him both Zoya and I were not ruining our family name by misbehaving, and quickly said my goodbyes.

The Autumn weather had a chill to it, reminding me that winter was around the corner, and I loved it. Winter meant wrapping up, wearing Uggs and, of course, Christmas lights. My family didn’t celebrate Christmas as Muslims don’t believe that Jesus was born on that day, but I loved the festive ambiance in London. When we were younger, once the Oxford Street lights were switched on, my parents would take us for a drive to see them. After Mum died, we never went back, it was too painful doing it without her there.

I tried not to think of my mum, I tried to put her away in a box deep within my heart, never allowing myself to feel the pain I felt on the day I lost her. After she died, everything that used to make me happy changed and I constantly felt like I had no right to be happy without her in my life.

To keep the ache out, I also didn’t let happiness in.

That was the only way I knew how to cope without her.

I watched my dad pull away from reality while mourning the loss of his beloved wife. Happiness, laughter and joy were words no longer associated with our family. Watching my dad deteriorate to a shell of the man he used to be, I promised myself I would never leave myself open and vulnerable to love and end up like him.

As I walked towards my first lecture, I noticed one of Taimur's cousins standing outside the local café speaking to a girl I knew called Rose. She was stunning with her dark brown hair falling around her white porcelain skin and cherry-coloured cheeks. She was wearing a pair of skin-tight jeans and a white top that stopped under her bra, revealing her very flat and toned stomach, she looked comfortable in her own skin. His blue dyed hair a stark contrast to her natural look.

They seemed to be in the middle of a heated conversation. As I watched, Nabeel looked around, searching for someone. A few seconds later, Rose handed him a bag that he suspiciously stashed in his laptop case before they both burst out laughing. He then gently grabbed her, pulling her closer to him as his muscular arms snaked around her slim waist. Her head fit perfectly under his chin as she closed her eyes for a second. She pulled away, looking up at him through her thick eyelashes, giving him a wide smile before standing on her tiptoes, reaching for a kiss. I watched as their lips lightly brushed together.

It was heart-warming and beautiful.

The happiness faded when his eyes met mine and he let go of Rose, moving away from her. I grinned nervously and hoped he would smile back, but he didn't.

He seemed more nervous than I was.

I wanted to ask him about Taimur, but the nervous look on his face made me think again. It was a hostile stare, questioning why I was there at that moment and what I'd seen. However, Rose smiled, waving for me to come over to them. As I did, I watched his lips finally changed to a forced smile and the tense butterflies in my belly stopped panicking quite as much.

"Hi, Layla," Rose beamed, "how have you been?"

"I'm good thanks. You?" Was my generic reply, my nerves getting the best of me.

"All good."

I noticed her pull her sleeves over her hands as if she didn't know what to say next. That was usually me. It made me feel calmer, more welcome around her, and my nervousness reduced a tad.

"We were just on our way into the Perrin building. We have a class together – Nabeel and I."

"We were just exchanging notes," Nabeel said, cold and calculated, running his fingers through his colourful hair.

"You're Taimur's cousin, right?"

"Yes. We met the other day in the SU," he said, now with a small smile. I felt calmer.

"Cousins! I wondered why the three of you looked so good," I said, before I could stop myself. I felt my cheeks turn red with embarrassment as I tried to save myself while Rose grinned. "I'm... I... mean you three guys look a... a... alike."

"Four actually. I don't think you've met the other one," he corrected. There was another one? "I'm actually adopted."

"Oh, I think I knew, but I forgot, sorry. Actually, I was looking for Taimur and wondered if you knew where he was?"

"Why? So, you can yell at him some more?" I suspected that he would stick up for his cousin, but I didn't expect him to be rude about it. "Tell him how pathetic he is?"

"No, actually I want to apologise."

"Apologise? Oh..." he replied, looking a bit taken aback. Rose moved further away from him, but he looked in her direction, as if to call her back.

"I'm going to get something to drink quickly. Would you like anything?" she asked. I lifted my cup of tea.

"What about you ba..." Before she could finish Nabeel cut her off.

"Cup of tea with..."

"Two spoons of sugar and a lot of milk. I'll bring it to our lecture. See you there." Nabeel smiled at her nervously as she walked away, entering the café behind us.

Nabeel and I were left alone.

Seconds felt like hours.

Awkwardness being my forte, I didn't know what to say. After an uncomfortably long silence he finally looked my way, struggling as much as I was with what to say. It was clear that Rose and he had some kind of relationship, and he was not comfortable about it.

He looked around for a second, maybe making sure we were alone.

"I like the colour of your hair," I blurted out, nervous.

"Thanks. I like changing it as much as I can. This week I was feeling blue."

"Looks nice."

Awkward silence.

"How much did you see?" He asked looking rather fearful, speaking quietly. His strong eyebrows furrowed into a frown.

"Enough," I replied, starting to walk towards away to my lecture. Nabeel followed.

"Tai and the boys don't know," he said.

"Okay."

"It's a long story."

"Okay."

"I don't want to hurt anyone," he confessed, randomly.

"Okay." I replied, not quite understanding.

"I'll tell them soon."

"Okay."

"I would appreciate it if you didn't tell him or anyone in our community what you saw."

"Well, seeing as he's not talking to me, that won't be an issue."

Nabeel's lips twitched, holding back a smile.

"Thanks. You know he likes you."

"No, he doesn't."

"Trust me, he likes you."

"He's just intrigued because I'm the first girl who hasn't fallen for him."

"You haven't?"

"Nope," I lied.

"Hmm..."

"I don't like him,"

"Then I think I like you." He smiled genuinely for the first time with me.

I stretched out my hand for him to shake, but instead he threw his arms around me in a bear hug. I squirmed and he let go.

"Sorry. Sorry. I forgot you were a *hijabi*," he said, tossing the end of my head scarf playfully. "I forgot you don't touch guys."

"It's okay," I replied, feeling my cheeks glow pink.

“Hey what’s the deal with you and that guy then?”

“Who, Moe?”

“Yeah, I didn’t expect you to have guy friends, being quite strict with religion and stuff.”

“And stuff,” I laughed. “I know it’s against Islam to interact with guys, and I wouldn’t because I’m pretty strict about my beliefs, but we’ve been friends since we were kids, and I didn’t see any harm in it.”

“So, you do break the rules sometimes?” he winked.

“Bend them, but my dad doesn’t know, so please keep it to yourself.”

“Sure. You keep my secret and I’ll keep yours.”

“Thanks. I actually need your help.”

“What’s up, Tiny?”

“Hey, I’m not that small,” I said, looking up at Nabeel. He was much, much taller than me.

“Yes, you are. Go on, how can I help?”

“I feel silly walking up to Taimur and just apologising.”

“You’ve got to do more than apologise. He’s really pissed. You said some pretty hateful things.”

“Yeah I know. What can I do?”

Nabeel took a minute to think before a smile broke out on his face.

“Well, you could always buy him some Krispy Kreme donuts. The original glazed ones. He loves them.”

“Okay...” I replied, thinking how strange that was. “Umm.. are you sure?”

“Yeap,” he smiled down at me and I felt warm. “One hundred percent.”

“Alright then. Thanks.”

“Any time, Tiny,” he said, enclosing me in another hug. “Sorry, force of habit.” He grinned, walking along with me.

“So how long have you been seeing Rose?”

“Urgh, do we have to discuss this?”

“No, but I saw the way you guys looked at each other. There was definitely something there.” Nabeel didn’t reply. He ran his fingers through his short hair, resting his big hands on the back of his neck as if he was stressed while momentarily stopping. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone is waiting for me.”

“Ohh... okay. Do you have to go?”

“No, not like that. I mean someone is waiting for me at home.”

“Okay.”

“I made a promise to come back when I was ready.”

“I see...” I said, biting my lip, not wanting to push him to talk. “And are you ready?”

“I don’t know, Tiny. She was supposed to be my forever girl.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know anymore. Is there something as forever?”

Was there?

“Is that why you don’t want to get serious with Rose.”

“Yes and no.”

“Care to elaborate?” I said, swinging the end of my headscarf over my shoulder. I felt a new friendship was being born that I didn’t know would last a lifetime.

“Not now, maybe someday? I might as well trust you since you already caught me, but really, please keep all this to yourself.”

“Yeah sure. Don’t worry. Sometimes it’s easier talking to a stranger.”

“I like Rose, I really do, but she’s not Muslim. My parents wouldn’t be happy. I think they’d eventually accept her if she converted.”

“Hmmm...”

“But how and when do I bring the subject of converting to Islam up when I don’t follow the rules myself?”

“What about this girl back home? Is she Muslim?”

“Yeah, and I love her too, but I haven’t told her.”

“So, you’re in love with two girls?”

“I think so. Take down my number. We might need each other’s help one day,” he said, taking my phone out of my hand without asking.

“Hey... I don’t even know you.”

“Well how are you going to get to know me if you don’t have my number?”

Once his number was programmed into my phone, he called his phone to get my number.

“Sorted,” he grinned.

“Oh okay. Thanks, I guess.”

“Seriously, can I trust you’ll keep this to yourself?” he said, turning towards me as we walked. “The boys wouldn’t be happy if they found out through the grapevine, especially Tai.”

“Of course. *Wallahi*, I promise. Don’t worry, Nabeel. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s fine,” I said, seeing him type in Tiny Layla on his phone and add me to his contact list.

“Perfect. It’ll actually be nice to have someone to talk to about this stuff. I’m tired of hiding. I’m kinda in over my head right now.”

“But why can’t you tell your cousins?”

“They wouldn’t understand.”

“But maybe it’s not about them understanding. Maybe it’s just about them knowing and being there for you?”

“I love them, but they’re still at the stage of going out, getting drunk and sleeping around,” he replied, as he watched my eyebrow shoot up. “What? Come on, let’s not play dumb. I know you know that we drink and stuff, no point lying to you. Anyways, I’ve just grown out of it. I’ve learnt some things... been through some things that the other three haven’t, that just made me grow up recently.”

“I see, but I’m sure if you explain yourself, they’ll understand.”

“Eventually. Anyways, I got to go. I’ll see you later, Tiny. Text me when you’re free, it was nice talking to you,” he said, opening the door to the building for me. “And I’ll talk to Tai for you too, if you want.”

Okay, so I would go get some donuts at lunch and apologise to Taimur, I reminded myself smiling.

Chapter Eight

Taimur

Anger consumed me – the tiny seed now a giant and unwanted tree. The scene in the kitchen replayed in my mind like a song on replay, over and over again, exasperating me further. I charged out of there before I had the opportunity to do something reckless, like knock on her door, grab her and kiss her senseless.

Kiss her?

What was wrong with me? Why was I even thinking about her? I didn't even like her. She had humiliated me in front of everyone. She wasn't even my type, I reassured myself for the rest of the morning.

"Ouch! What the hell?" I shouted as a football hit me on the chest.

I look around to find Abs laughing. He looked good in a pair of black tracksuit bottoms and washed out t-shirt that stretched across his broad chest saying, *'That's not a gun in my pocket, I'm just happy to see you'* a dark hoody in hand. Abs was the bulkiest out of the four of us since he spent more time than all of us in the gym and ate healthier too.

Grabbing the ball, I kicked it back at him, aiming for his face. He dodged it, swaying his body to the left, and the ball hit the giant tree behind him. This was not my day.

"Bad shot, Tai. Had to do it, I called you, but you are somewhere else."

"What?"

"What's up with you?"

"Nothing."

“Okay,” he replied, looking around before taking his phone and starting the stopwatch, “Sixty seconds. Start.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Fifty-six...”

The sixty second rule.

This was something only Abs and I did. When life became complicated, or when we didn’t know what was going on, we gave each other 60 seconds to vent and then we would never speak of it again. We’d been doing it for years.

“Just had a strange night with Zoya. I went over there to get laid, but it didn’t feel right. Then we ended up chilling all night, talking about stuff and in the morning, I ran into Layla again. When I say I ran into her, I mean I made a point of waiting for her in the kitchen. I don’t even know why I wanted to see her. I’m so angry at her, but she gets under my skin, rubs me the wrong way. She’s everything that I hate about our religion, conditioned to believe things without questioning them, but there is still something good and pure about her. She’s a *hijabi*, religious, a good Muslim girl. She’s not my type. I’m not her type. Nothing will ever happen between us, but she’s always on my bloody mind, and I hate it. I even ended up going to the stupid 9 am lecture to see her. What the hell is wrong with me?”

“Times up.”

“Thanks,” I sighed, lighting a cigarette and taking a drag.

He didn’t respond.

I didn’t need him to give me more grief over how I felt about Layla. Frankly, I was too angry with Layla to sleep with her sister, even though, initially, my plan was to do just that, to get back at her. Zoya and I spent the night talking, joking around and having a laugh, and for the first time I could say that I had a mate that was a girl. She had opened up and so had I, finding common ground and understanding the pressures of being Muslim and British.

“Earth to Tai?” Kassim said, joining us as we walked across campus to our first lecture. “What’s up with you today?”

“Layla,” Abs replied, smugly. It was apparent that the boys had filled Kassim in.

“Why don’t you just talk to her and tell her you’re sorry,” Kassim asked.

“Why would I be sorry? I didn’t start the fight. I will not apologise. Just drop it.” My tone was serious as I turned to face him, jaw clenched and seeing red. Both Abs and Kassim knew not to carry on or it would be like a volcano exploding, burning everything in its path and destructing everything – including me.

“Fine,” Kassim replied, while Abs stayed silent. I knew what he wanted to say but he was wise enough not to say it and infuriate me further.

For a change, the weather was colder. The lonesome sun hid behind some menacing clouds while a stiff breeze flew between us, unsettling the trees.

“We’re going out tonight,” Kassim said, not giving us a chance to disagree. He moved his backpack from his left shoulder to his right, wincing in pain. “No one’s getting out of it.”

“Are you hurt?” I asked, noticing my brother’s face.

“I’m fine. I just pulled my back last night while Laura pulled something else of mine,” he grinned, “Anyways, we’re going out.”

“Fine,” I reply, thinking a night out was just what I needed to get my mind off Layla. “Where the hell is Nabeel?”

“He’s...” Before Kassim could finish his sentence we all spotted his blue hair strolling away from us with a girl by his side.

Wait, not just any girl but *my* girl.

The one I couldn’t get out of my mind.

Layla.

I watched him cross over the rain-soaked lawn, and make his way towards the lecture theatre, *with her*. I glared at the sight before me while my hands curled into fists. Resentment swam through me, riling me up like I had never felt before.

Why the hell were they together?

I watched in irritation as she spoke to him, and he started laughing. Layla looked up at him from under her long lashes, amused and giggling. Her green eyes were shining with fascination and she held his attention, both engrossed in their conversation. Her cheeks were red from the bitter wind, or was she blushing?

“What the hell are they doing together?” Kassim asked me, “Do they know each other? Are they friends?”

“Not that I know of, I thought they met for the first time in the SU the other day,” I replied, annoyed and taking a long pull of my cigarette.

“They look pretty comfortable with each other,” Abs replied, watching him hug her. He placed his arms around her, lifting her petite body off the ground, as she shuffled away, her head lowering in embarrassment, and I was livid, feeling betrayal by one of my cousins.

“I can’t deal with this shit,” I fumed, running my fingers through my hair before tugging at the roots. “I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

“What about your lecture?” Kassim asks.

“I’ll get the notes off someone,” I said, throwing the cigarette bud on the floor.

“Fine,” Abs nodded, stepping on the bud, always putting out my fires. “See you later for a round before we go out.”

A pang of jealousy swirled around my stomach as I thought back to the image I had just seen. Why were they together? Why was she okay with him and not me? More importantly, why did it affect me this much? Did she like him? Did he like her? With all these notions swirling in my mind I made my way towards the library. Even when I was infuriated with her, she completely consumed my mind, body and soul, like no one ever before.

The anger inside me increased as the concept of Nabeel and Layla being together scorched through my psyche.

I knew I had no right to be disappointed. I knew she wasn’t mine to be disappointed about, but that didn’t stop me from feeling how I felt. It was time my cousin picked a side. However, knowing the enchantment Layla had on people around her, I worried for the first time that my cousin wouldn’t pick me.

Chapter Nine

Layla

“Excuse me? Is this seat taken?” someone asked.
My head shot up instantly.

His eyes were dark, like the midnight sky, spellbinding, and absorbing me in with his hypnotic stare. I couldn't help notice that his nose was perfectly carved to a point and his curvaceous lips, one more plump than the other, beamed in a magnetic smile, pulling me towards him, making me smile back at the stranger.

I inspected the lecture room to find it fully occupied with no vacant seats apart from the one my bag was on. By the enthralling look on the stranger's face, I realised that, even if there was a choice of seat somewhere else, he would have still come to sit next to me.

“No, It's f... f... free,” I smiled, nervously chewing on my bottom lip.

“Thanks.”

Swiftly, I moved my bag off the plastic chair, spilling the contents onto the floor. Utterly embarrassed by the scene I was making I felt my cheeks burn bright red and my eyes watered as if I was going to cry. The stranger must have noticed and started to pick up my belongings for me. The entire lecture room watched us as we managed to pick everything but a sanitary pad off the floor. The pad had fallen behind a seat on the steps leading down to the next floor. I tried to reach it without attracting too much attention, but it was no use, everyone was watching me.

“That's enough,” the old lecturer said, turning the students' heads back onto him. “If you two are quite done, it would be nice if I could finish off

my lecture.”

“Sorry,” the boy said. “It was my fault.”

“Very well. Please be seated.”

“Thank you,” I whispered to him.

“Don’t mention it.” He smiled a genuine smile which started from his plump lips and finished at his spellbinding eyes. His smile was familiar, like I’d seen it before.

“Would it be okay if I borrowed a pen, please? I was in a rush and forgot mine.”

“Sure,” I said, handing him one of my fancy pens.

“Thanks,” he replied, sticking out a hand in my direction. “I’m Kassim.”

“I’m Layla.”

“I know who you are, sweetheart. It’s not every day a girl gets under my brother’s skin.”

“What?” I said, confused.

“I’m Tai’s younger brother.”

“Oh...” was my only reply, putting the pieces together in my mind. He was “the other one”.

As the lecture went on, I tried to keep my attention towards the front of the class, but once in a while my gaze drifted, landing on the person next to me. As I glanced coyly at Kassim, I noticed him squinting at the board, his small dark eyes growing even smaller and his clear forehead wrinkling, trying to write down what was in front of us. Once in a while he would glance over to my notes then back at the board, huffing.

“Are you having trouble seeing the board?” I whispered to him. He turned his head to look at me and for a second I felt like I had just made a mistake. After a second his midnight eyes grew softer and he bashfully nodded, looking adorable. “Do you have glasses?”

“I usually wear contacts, but I forgot them. I was in a rush.”

“Why don’t you just copy my notes?” I said, feeling sorry for him. His puppy dog eyes sparkled.

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all. Knock yourself out.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Tai was wrong about you. You’re okay,” he said.

Pen in hand, I stopped writing and looked up, taking my bottom lip between my teeth and biting down harder than I should have.

“Shit, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” he apologised straight away, realise what he had just said. “He’s just a bit pissed off about the Moe situation.”

“He told you about it?”

“Well, actually Moe did.”

“You know Moe?”

“Yeah, we have some lectures together.”

“Well, I guess you know that Moe started it.”

“Yeah, I did tell him he shouldn’t have. My brother has quite a temper.”

“I know that now.”

“Having said that, I hear you’re a bit of a hot head too, Sweetheart.”

“I’m usually not, I swear. It’s just something about your brother that...”

“It wasn’t his fault, you know. I would have done the same if someone told me to stay away from you.”

I was not sure what he meant, but I let it pass.

“I made a mistake. I want to apologise but I don’t know how.”

“What do you mean?”

“I feel silly just walking up to him and saying sorry after everything I said to him.”

“Yeah, I understand what you’re saying, Sweetheart. Ummm...”

“Any ideas how I can get him to forgive me for being so rude?”

“I have an idea actually.”

“What?”

“Chocolates.”

“Huh?”

“Get him some Cadburys Whole Nut chocolate. He loves that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeap. He’ll love it.”

“Thanks for that,” I smiled.

“Anything for you, Sweetheart,” he said, winking at me.

“Sure, but how did you know I was in that lecture?”

“I have my ways.”

Even though I was taking notes, my mind was on the conversation with Kassim. He asked why I chose to do the degree and explained why he chose it, we discussed our families and found common people that we knew, and

we laughed about different episodes of *Friends*. By the end of the lecture, we were in a full blown conversation, discussing who was the best housemate in the series.

“I’m a Monica,” I said. “I’m a bit OCD.”

“Then I’m definitely Joey. A bit dumb, love my meat and great with the ladies.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course, just look at you. You’re already in love with me and we’ve just met,” he replied, winking while watching me tug my heavy bag from one shoulder to the next, catching my headscarf. “Here, let me help you, Sweetheart.” He said, taking my bag out of my hands before I could object.

“I can...”

“My mum raised us to be gentlemen. Well, one of us at least. Just say thank you and keep walking.”

“Thank you.”

“Where is your next lecture?”

“I’ve got a free period.”

“Oh... Speaking of *periods*...” Kassim began, pulling out my sanitary towel from his pocket. “Thought you might need this.”

“Umm...” At that moment, I wished the ground would have opened up and eaten me whole. I don’t think I had been that embarrassed in my life before. Saying my cheeks were burning up would be the understatement of the century, I was mortified. I grabbed the pad and my bag out of his hands and hurried off without saying anything else, fearing I would start crying.

“Wait up, Sweetheart,” he said, running after me, his large strides catching up with me too soon. “You’ve turned red. Don’t be embarrassed. Seriously, it’s fine.”

I wanted to cry as he approached me.

“Red is my new favourite colour on you.”

“What?”

“The way your cheeks are bright red right now is amazing. Gorgeous even,” he said, making me blush even harder. “You’re sweet. I can see why Tai likes you.”

“I... thought you... said he hated me?”

“When did I say that? I said he was mad at you, but let me tell you one thing...” he began, following me towards the library, “I’ve known Tai all

my life, obviously, and he only gets mad when he likes someone. If he didn't like you, he wouldn't care. To be honest, he's lucky he saw you first, otherwise I would have called dibs and..." He didn't finish his sentence but the way he winked at me said everything I needed to know. Once again, I was embarrassed and didn't know what to say so he carried on.

"Tai's a good guy. He acts like he doesn't care about much, but he has a heart of gold. If I was ever in trouble, he'd be the first person I'd call and he would be the first person there. Nabeel would be the last because he'd probably tell my sister Alia everything that was going on." He laughed, lightening the mood.

"I see. You three are all so different, but the same – does that make sense?" I beamed up at him.

"Yeah, everyone says that."

"I'm off to the library. I'll see you in micro?"

"You're not getting away from me that easily, Sweetheart. I have a free period too. Let's get somewhere to sit before it fills up."

The library was dead and as cold as a morgue. Everyone was either in their lectures or enjoying the September weather. The few people that were in the library were scattered around, already engrossed in their work with either headphones in their ears or head down studying. I loved it there. The smell of old books and the potential they had excited me, the shelves filled with different specialities of books, from the floor to the ceiling, made me feel at home and the awakening silence gave me space to think in a way I could only do there. It was my retreat, my sanctuary, my heaven.

I hurried towards a empty table, only to feel Kassim grab my hand and pull me in a different direction. His hand casually glided into mine, stopping me in my tracks, not knowing what to do. His hand was much larger than mine, and slightly calloused, and he had a strong grip. I didn't know why he was holding my hand but when I felt him squeeze it softly, I tensed; but for some reason I didn't let go.

I turned to see Abs signalling Kassim to sit at his table. Feeling uncomfortable, I tried to move away, but Kassim's grip on my hand didn't loosen and he pulled me towards Abs. I noticed Abs's smile disappeared at he spotted me, looking at our interlocked hands with a growing frown.

"Come on," Kassim whispered when I realised I had stopped walking and was gawking at a very antisocial Abs. "He won't bite...much."

“It’s o... o...okay. I’ll find somewhere else to sit,” I stuttered, trying to get away, only to be yanked back. A cold shiver ran through me.

“Don’t be silly. You’re sitting with me. Plus, I need to finish copying your notes.”

“I can just...”

“No.”

“You can just...”

“No.”

“We can just...”

“Anything starting with ‘we’ sounds good to me,” he joked, winking at me and I blushed. Abs watched us, his frown growing.

“I’m not getting out of this, am I?”

“No chance, Sweetheart.”

“Fine,” I sighed. This was becoming a very long day.

Making our way towards the chairs I could clearly see Kassim giving Abs a “behave yourself” look while Abs lips turned into a tight grin, that said “Don’t tell me what to do”. Trying to break out of my shell, I decided to introduce myself first.

“Hi... I’m...”

“I know who you are, Princess,” Abs replied, not looking up from his laptop. “Sit.”

“Be nice,” Kassim told Abs. “She’s not that bad.”

“Gee... thanks,” I replied as I got my stuff out my bag before pulling my jumper sleeves over my frozen hands.

“You know what I mean.”

“What are you doing here, Princess?” Abs said.

“What’s up with you guys and pet names?”

“Nothing, why?” Kassim asked, oblivious to the fact that all four Khalidi boys had given me pet names. I didn’t really know how I felt about them, but I guessed it wasn’t that bad apart from Pearl – I hated Pearl.

“So, I hear you want to apologise to Tai?” Abs said, finally looking up from his laptop. He’s grey eyes staring at me. They were different to the other boys’ eyes, duskier and filled with secrets.

“Yeah,” I bit into my bottom lip. “I...”

“Stay away from him.”

“What?”

“Stay away from Tai,” he repeated, his greys burning into my greens.
“I’m warning you nicely.”

“Abs...” Kassim began, “Come on...”

“You’re from two different worlds, Princess.”

“I just want to apologise. That’s all. I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“Apologise then and leave him alone.”

“Ummm... o... o... okay,” I stuttered, trying to break the uncomfortably frozen atmosphere. “Your cousin Nabeel said to get him some donuts and Kassim said to get him some chocolate, to say I’m sorry.”

“I see...” Abs said, looking directly at Kassim. Kassim grinned, “Well in my opinion you should get him some candy floss too.”

“What?”

“You know, the ones you get at a funfair? Cotton candy?”

“She knows what candy floss is, you fool. We don’t call it cotton candy, we’re not Americans,” Kassim stepped in. Abs smirked at his cousin.

“Very well, then I think you should add candy floss to your list.”

“Oh... o... o... kay, thanks for your help. I never picked Taimur to have such a sweet tooth, he doesn’t even take sugar in his tea.” I smiled rubbing my arms through my jumper top then passing my notes to Kassim. He grinned at me, sending another shiver down my spine. Damn those eyes.

“Hey Princess...” Abs said, bursting my bubble. He looked from Kassim to me and back to Kassim before whispering, so only us three could hear. “Why is it okay for him to copy your notes and not Tai?” he asked, pulling the zip down his hoody before taking it off and revealing his enormously muscular arms.

“Because he makes an effort to come to the lectures, and Taimur doesn’t want to.”

“Is that the real reason or is it because you like busting Tai’s balls?” he asked, throwing his hoodie at me. “Put it on.”

“Oh, no... I’m fine. Thanks.”

“You’re frozen. Put it on,” he insisted. Not wanting to be rude, I quickly put my arms through it but left it open as the unfamiliar smell of sandalwood enveloped me. “So, are you just busting Tai’s balls to get his attention?”

“No, *Wallahi*,” I began. “I think Taimur needs to take life more seriously and not think his good looks and charm can always get him what he wants.”

“I see... You think he’s good looking?”

“No, I didn’t mean...”

“It sounds to me like you’ve spent a fair amount of time thinking about Tai’s life in the little time you’ve known each other.”

Oh, if he only knew.

“What? No... t... t... that’s not... what I m... m... mean,” I stuttered.

“I’m a bit hurt you think he’s the good looking one to be honest,” Kassim butted in, looking up from my notes.

“Not again, idiot. Leave this one alone,” Abs shot back, smacking Kassim’s head. He looked hurt, rubbing the back of his head while looking at me with the most innocent expression I’ve seen. He was too cute for his own good.

“Again?” I asked, zipping up Abs’s hoodie as I was still cold.

“Nothing,” Kassim replied, looking sad. His lips dipping into a grimace.

“Stop pouting, Sweetheart...” I mocked, beaming up at him. “You look better when you’re smiling.”

Once again Abs looked from me to Kassim and back to me.

“If only I had seen you first,” Kassim said again, looking away from me and towards his notes. I tried to laugh off the joke but the second time round, it felt more real than the first.

Chapter Ten

Taimur

The next few weeks passed quickly, and I began to look forward to Monday mornings for the first time in my life. At first, it was awkward, us not speaking to one another apart from the times she tried to apologise, which I didn't accept. However, as time passed, our mutual anger began to thaw and as it melted and began to flow freely, so did our conversations.

Every Monday and Friday morning we sat together for an hour and a half, Layla mostly keeping her questioning eyes looking forward and me trying to keep my curious eyes off her. Every time she spoke, I felt more inclined to do something stupid, but I held back, irritation still swarming around my mind, but I never forgot to bring her a cup of tea. It had become a bit of a habit now, making two cups before our lecture, and even though I was still slightly mad at her, the little glimmer of a smile when she saw the tea made my entire week.

Sometimes her annoying friend Moe would join us and I would sit back, pretending that their closeness didn't affect me or that the way she smiled at him didn't burn me inside, but most days he wasn't there and I got to have my alone time with her, peaceful and interrupted. Before I realised, those early mornings had become my entire world.

My brothers Kassim and Nabeel also spent a lot of time with Layla, which was beyond my comfort zone and although they assured me that it was strictly business, I felt the pang of frustration deep within my core every time I saw them together.

The October breeze blew passed me, ruffling my longer hair that needed a cut, as I continued my obsessive thoughts, wondering what Layla was doing at that moment.

Was she in a lecture?

Was she in her flat?

Or was she with Moe?

“What’s up?” Kassim asked, pulling me out of my thoughts of Layla. “I have somewhere to be.”

“Where?” I asked, wondering where my little brother was always running off to at lunch time. I tried to touch base with him daily, making sure everything was going well at uni.

“Claire is waiting for me.”

“Claire?”

“She’s just some fun.”

“Just some fun? Come on, Kassim.”

“You can’t talk. You’re worse than me when it comes to girls.”

“I’m just looking out for you.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.”

“Be careful. You don’t want...”

“I *am* careful,” he replied, turning back to me. We were outside the SU and walking towards the double doors. I knew the other boys were waiting for me there, but I needed another minute with my little brother.

“Kass...” I began, not knowing how to give him some brotherly advice. I loved my little brother, and I didn’t want him making the same mistakes as me. I took a cigarette out of the pack and placed it in my mouth. “How are lectures going?”

“Yeah good?” he challenged back.

“Are you still applying to the States?”

“Yeah, I’ll wait for you to get back and then I’ll go, so the parents have one of us here. When do you leave?”

“Next January.”

“How long did they say you had to be there for?”

“A year, at the least.”

“You better not find someone while you’re out there.”

“No rings, no strings remember?”

There was an awkward pause between us, and we both knew what we were referring to, but never spoke about it. None of us Khalidi boys did.

What was done was done and it had nearly torn us four apart – nearly.

“Isn’t that Layla?” Kassim said, finishing our conversation. My attention anchored towards the doorway as Layla made her way towards us, and an unusual shift in my stiff chest occurred at the sight of her.

In her dark blue jeans, not too tight but not baggy either, her emerald jumper, matching her gorgeous eyes, and a pair of brown Uggs stopping under her knees that didn’t give her the height she needed to fit next to me, but she was still looked perfect, in her tiny, endearing way.

Small thing – big temper.

Then I spotted Moe beside her, hanging onto her every word as usual, like a love-struck puppy, waiting for her to give him scraps to feed on. It was pathetic, but jealousy stirred inside my stomach. They were walking towards the SU, engrossed in a heavy conversation and not looking my way. Their friendship stung, and the subsiding anger returned with a vengeance.

“Tai, they’re just friends,” Kassim said, watching my face change from neutral to annoyed. “I’m sure they are.”

“Look at the way he looks at her. He’s clearly in love with her.”

“Nah... I doubt it. Anyways, why do you care?”

“I don’t,” I lied.

“You’re still mad at her, right?”

“Kinda.”

“But she’s definitely not your type, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why do you care?”

“Just look at her.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“She’s mine.” The words came out before I knew what I was saying.

“I know. God! We’re just friends.” He laughed.

“You coming?” I asked my brother, covering my eyes with dark sunglasses, putting out my cigarette on the wall beside us.

“Stop. Don’t. Seriously, Tai. Don’t provoke her,” he replied, using our brotherly bond and knowing exactly what I was talking about. What he didn’t know was that I was finding pleasure in provoking her. I liked getting under her skin, pushing her till she had no choice but to snap at me.

Before he could yank me back, I marched forward, barging into Moe as if I hadn’t seen him. I crashed into his firm body and his books fell from his

hand and he stumbled backwards, holding on to Layla. She floundered too, her elegant body swaying like the gentle breeze. Her beautiful eyes widened, glaring at me, and her dark eyebrows furrowed, as if to say, 'What the hell?'

"Sorry *bro*, didn't see you there," I grinned, taunting and not helping to pick up his papers, that had littered the floor. Kassim stood next to me, strong arms folded, firm chest pushed out, like my bodyguard.

"You too?" Layla replied, turning to him. "I expect that kind of thing from him..." she pointed at me. "But I thought you were different. I thought you said you and Moe were friends?"

I watched as Kassim's arms fell, as did his baby face, as if he had been scolded by our mum. "You're..."

"It was a mistake, Lay," Moe replied, interrupting her. "I got to go, actually. Meeting Sara's parents. I'll see you later."

"What? Moe? Are you seriously going through with this... with her? Moe..." Before she could say anything else, he strolled off, books and papers in hand, fury in his eyes.

"Was that necessary? I thought we were okay now?" Layla turned to me, irritated, the ends of her headscarf tangled in her hands.

"Like he said, it was a mistake," was my sarcastic reply, not taking my eyes off her.

"I don't think your friend likes us, Sweetheart," Kassim said.

"Do you blame him? If your brother hadn't been such a hooligan, he might have stayed."

"I've been called worse."

"Oh, that's the polite word for you," she replied, and I could see the annoyance in her eyes.

I loved it.

"Oh yes, let me remember what your 'not so' polite words were a few weeks ago." I replied, antagonising her further. "I am pitiful, insecure, have no self-worth or self-respect. Did I get that all right, or did I leave anything out? Or maybe you want to add to that list?"

"*Wallahi*, I didn't know Moe started it..." she replied bashfully, eyes remorseful. "I tried to say I'm sorry."

"Try harder."

"I bought you..."

"It doesn't matter."

“But I wanted to...”

“I thought you didn’t want anything to do with me outside our lectures?”

“I don’t,” she huffed, and I couldn’t help but notice her bite into her bottom lip. “I just wanted to apologise.”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t.”

“Then why are you trying to apologise?”

“Because when I’m wrong I admit it and try make amends, unlike some.”

“But I’m not in the wrong.”

“Actually...”

“As much as I love seeing you two battle it out like some sort of foreplay, the sexual tension is making me anxious, and I’m cold and hungry. Can we go and eat?” Kassim chimed in. I watched Layla’s porcelain cheeks turn red with embarrassment at his words.

“Like I said before, Sweetheart, I love that shade of red on your cheeks.”

She glared at the two of us, mouth slightly open in astonishment and eyes like a deer in the headlights, innocent and naive.

“Natasha,” I mumbled to Kassim, aggravated with his constant flirting. “I already called Natasha.”

‘Natasha’ didn’t only mean I wanted her, which I didn’t, it meant that none of the boys could ask her out even if I didn’t ask her out, which I definitely wasn’t going to – right? A girl called Natasha had nearly torn us apart, so now we called “Natasha” every time one of us was interested in someone to stop future heartbreak – or so we thought.

It made sense.

It kept us civil, and as we always said, we would rather fight the world than fight each other.

“I know. Chill,” he said and placed his hand on my back, pushing me forward before turning to Layla. “Come on, Moe’s gone. You’re having lunch with us.”

“Don’t you have someone to meet?” I asked him, recalling our previous conversation. “Claire or something?”

“She cancelled,” he replied, opening the SU doors to let Layla in. I knew my brother and there was something suspicious about his reply – he

hadn't even checked his mobile phone.

Abs and Nabeel were waiting for us, and I noticed Abs eyebrow raise as we walked in, Layla by our side. It had taken some persuading on Kassim's side, but she had finally agreed to have lunch with us.

"What's going on here?" Nabeel asked, looking up from the table he had saved for us. His gaze moved from Kassim to Layla to me. "Why's Tiny here?"

Tiny?

"Are you high?" I asked him, confused. "It's one o'clock in the afternoon."

Nabeel smiled, as if my words were enchanting.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked Abs, who shrugged.

"I give up. He never listens."

"I love you guys..." Nabeel trailed off, high as a kite. "You are the best brothers ever... my three brothers... should be four..."

"Stop talking," Abs said, handing him some pizza. "Eat."

The guilt swarmed inside me as I remembered why Nabeel was hurting, not that I ever forgot. I just suppressed it the best I could, trying not to think about the hurt I placed on my family.

"Lighten up guys. I was celebrating..."

"Celebrating what, and why is she here?" Abs asked, realising Layla was witnessing the conversation.

"We found her wandering outside," Kassim replied, looking awkward.

"She's so pretty. Can we keep her? Please? Please?" Nabeel replied, smiling like a little child.

"Thank you but..." Layla began, with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes for Nabeel. The smile she wore for my cousin stirred something deep within me that felt a lot like jealousy. I envied and felt sorry for him, he deserved to be happy. I didn't know what exactly I was feeling but there was one thing for sure, the emotion gripped onto my chest, restricting my every breath in a way I hadn't felt before.

"Sit, princess," Abs replied, pushing some pizza towards her. He looked up at her from under his hoody, with his arrogant eyes, judgmental and hostile. I didn't like it. "Eat."

She sat and the conversation between the four of us boys carried on as normal, the three of us trying to figure out why Nabeel was high this early

in the afternoon, as she hesitantly ate away, struggling not to make eye contact with me.

Every few seconds, I felt her move, either crossing her legs gracefully or shuffling her body leisurely, making me peek her way. Our eyes would connect, hold for a moment longer than they should and then relocate to somewhere else, pretending we were not completely aware of each other's every breath.

"Are you listening to me, T?" Nabeel jabbed me in the ribs, his now pink hair flopping over one of his eyes. "I'm talking."

"Yeah, What's up bro?"

"Did you hear what happened to Abs?"

"Shut up, big mouth," Abs chimed in, "I told you not to tell anyone."

"Oh well... I'm high," Nabeel winked. "So last week, Abs ran out of condoms..."

I saw Layla's head shoot up, taken aback by our conversation. I laughed internally at her innocence, loving it in a way I never thought I would.

"Again?" I asked, egging him on just to see her reaction.

"Oh yeah... We got our last stash together from that pharmacy in central, right? Do you remember?"

"Yeah, last week," I replied quietly, my sight staying away from Layla's, out of some kind of remorse, but I didn't understand why.

"Do you remember the pharmacist who served us?" Abs asked me.

"No."

"Well, I didn't either."

"So, while I was home for the weekend, your mum set me up with a surprise arranged meeting with a girl. I was ambushed by my dad and her to go, so I did..."

"Don't tell me it was the pharmacist?" Kassim added.

"Yeap!" Nabeel chipped in, laughing and hi-fiving Kassim.

"What the hell?" I said, now slyly glancing at Layla, who was listening to our conversation with amazement.

"I didn't recognise her at first, but then when we were talking alone, she mentioned the condoms. I literally spat my tea out all over her."

"Very charming of you," a voice said, and all four of us looked towards it. An appalled Layla looked at us from under her long eyelashes, navy head scarf in her hands, wringing it as we spoke.

"Excuse me?" Abs's tone was not amused.

“Why do you even bother going on these arranged meetings when you’re obviously not interested in marrying anyone yet?” she said, looking at Abs.

His intense eyes narrowed in her direction, his lips forming a straight line and wide jaw clenched. I didn’t like the way he looked at her, but I had nothing to do with this. The need to protect her when she was not mine to protect alarmed me.

“Some of us take it seriously, you know. It’s hard to find a decent Muslim boy to marry these days,” she said.

“You’ve got one right here, Sweetheart,” Kassim winked, smiling in her direction.

“You know what I mean,” she replied, easing up, her shoulder relaxing. “If you guys are the average Muslim men then I’m never going to find someone.”

“Who are you calling average?” Nabeel replied. Layla ignored him.

“I’ve met a handful of guys and they all want the same thing.”

“All guys want the same thing,” I replied, coldly.

“No, I’m hoping some are different. Some want a companion. Someone who is their equal. Someone to love.”

“You’ve been reading too many romance novels, Tiny,” Nabeel replied. “All men are dogs. Whether it be your father, brother or husband. We’re just built like that.”

The rest of us boys agreed while she watched, searching for the words.

It was true.

Most of our community of men were regressive and liked their women to stay home with the kids, cook and clean. It wasn’t something said outright before marriage, but it was an understanding that once the woman had children, she had to be a dutiful housewife. The Muslim scripters were pretty strict on women too. Disobeying her husband was out of the question, let alone going against him.

The atmosphere shifted as Layla became more comfortable, discussing what it was like to be a girl trying to find a life partner. Her ideas about men were mythical, almost as if she had conjured up a perfect man in her imagination, and a large part of me wanted it to be me.

As she spoke, the more I realised that I was the complete opposite to what she wanted and I knew, even then, that I didn’t deserve her in my life, let alone as my soulmate.

“I believe God made us all in pairs before he sent us down here,” she said, her hand wringing the end of her headscarf nervously, “It’s our job to find the other half of us, our soulmate, to complete us.”

“You are already complete,” I said, without thinking, again.

“What?”

“A soulmate is not someone who completes you Pearl, a soulmate is someone who inspires you to complete yourself. Someone who challenges you, makes you grow.”

However, the funny thing about soulmates is that you don’t get to choose them, they just enter your life, turning it upside down, take over your mind, body and soul, and leave you yearning for them more than your next breath.

“Umm.. Taimur?” her timid voice said.

“Yes?” I replied, four sets of eyes looked at me.

“Please can we talk?”

“Go on...”

“Alone for a second?”

I thought about it for a few seconds and then said, “Whatever you have to say you can say in front of them, especially since you’ve insulted me in front of them already.”

“Yeah, about that... I’ve tried to tell you I’m r... r... really sorry for the things I said. I didn’t know Moe started it. It’s just not like him.”

“Okay, it’s fine. Anything else you need to say?”

She looked up at me, then towards my cousins and brother sitting opposite us and then back at me. Nabeel signalled me to give her a chance.

“To say sorry, I bought you something.”

She took out a pack of three Krispy Kreme donuts, a purple Cadbury’s Wholenut bar and a clear plastic bag of pink candy floss.

“What the hell?” I said, pushing it away from me like it was poison. I watched as Nabeel picked up the pack of doughnuts, taking one out to eat while Kassim reached for the chocolate and Abs ripped open the plastic bag of candy floss.

“Thanks,” one of them mumbled, through their mouthfuls of sweet goodness. I looked back at Layla, feeling my wrath simmering beneath my skin.

“Do you think you’re funny?” I asked her.

“What?” Her big eyes looked at me, stunned. “Hey, these are for Taimur.”

“Is this some kind of sick joke?”

“What... N... N... No.”

“Hey! chill out, Tai,” Nabeel said, grabbing my arm as I stood up, tossing the tray of lunch onto the floor. There was a smash, and tiny bits of the glass plate scattered around the café. “We were just having fun.”

Abs and Kassim tried to relax me, but rage burned from the inside, like a large fire, heating everything around it. My throat constricted and the back of my eyes burned with fury. She had aggravated me again, just when I was warming up to her and letting her in.

“Do you think you’re funny.”

“No... I...”

“Do you think you’re smart?”

“No....”

“Calm down, Tai,” Kassim said, grabbing my shoulder but I shook him off.

“Are you getting me back for hitting your boyfriend? Is that it?”

“No, I’m trying to...”

“Trying to what? Embarrass me in front of everyone again?” I yelled at her, moving away and picking up my bag.

“She was just...” Nabeel began, but Layla interrupted him.

“Stop,” she yelled, “*Wallahi*, I was being sweet by buying you these.” Her hand gestured to the doughnuts, chocolate and candy floss. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Well guess what, *Layla*, I don’t eat sweets – I’m diabetic.”

With that I stormed out, not looking back at anyone, walking away from my fate once again.

Chapter Eleven

Layla

I felt terrible as the music bellowed from the speakers, some RnB song I didn't know. I tossed in my bed, shoving the light pillow on my head to drown out the aggravating sound. I had left my headphones in the kitchen while arguing with Zoya and didn't want to venture out into the unknown while the party was in full swing.

I wouldn't.

I couldn't.

It wasn't me.

I was pissed off.

I was pissed at everyone.

Taimur, his brother, his cousins and even Zoya. I was mad at them all. Pushing the aggravation deep down within me, I remembered the way Taimur looked as I placed the sweet treats in front of him, uncomfortable and hurt. Even though I knew it wasn't my fault, the guilt still burnt in my chest.

As I lay in my own feelings, I felt the walls in the room shake and the sound of people carelessly laughing tore into me, consuming me with jealousy laced with guilt. Voices echoed in the near distance, behind my locked door, keeping a strong barrier between me and what I was taught was wrong.

I didn't want to go out there.

I shouldn't want to go out there.

It was wrong.

I had come home a few hours ago to find the flat in chaos. The sofas in our living area had been pushed to the side making a make-shift dance floor, the dining table placed against the wall with drinks already set out on it and speakers placed in every corner of the room, music already blazing out from them.

On seeing me, Nabeel and his green hair, stumbled over, evidently already tipsy, before wrapping me in his usual bear hug I'd told him multiple times not to do.

"FLAAAT PAARTYYY!" he yelled over the music, putting me down before Kassim appeared, handing me a drink. I raised my eyebrow, questioning him.

"It's just a coke."

"What's all this?"

"Flat party, Sweetheart."

"What? No way. Where is Zoya?"

"In the kitchen sorting snacks, I think."

"ZOY?" I bellowed, searching for her. It had been a long day of labs and my body was tired, ready to get into my pjs and have some quiet time with a good book. My head ached, my eyes burnt, and my mind was not ready for what was going to happen next. "What's going on here?"

"Flat paaarrrtyyyy babbbyyy," I heard Zoya say as she pulled out crisps, dips and breadsticks from some supermarket bags. Nabeel and Kassim began to help, unpacking while taking sips of their drinks.

"What do you mean flat party?"

"I mean we're throwing a party at our flat tonight. Let's have some fun."

"No, no, no way Zoy... Can we talk about this in private for a second please?"

"It's too late Layli. Texts have been sent out, drinks have been bought and the people are ready to partayyyyyy."

"Oh my god, Zoy. What the hell is wrong with you? You could have asked me. I live here too!"

"I knew if I'd asked, you'd have said no, Layli. It's fine. Chill out. It's a great idea. I don't know why we haven't thrown one already. Once Tai mentioned it, I knew it was going to be epic."

"This was Tai's idea? I should have guessed."

“Doesn’t matter whose idea it was Layli, let’s just have a good night before we have to go home for the weekend and pretend to be something we’re not.”

“But I’m not pretending.”

“Layli...”

“Zoya, you don’t get it. I don’t want to be involved in this party or have music blasting or alcoholic drinks around me. You may not believe it’s wrong, but *Wallahi* I do. I’m not telling you to live your life like me or believe in what I believe in, but at least keep my space unpolluted with all this,” I said, pointing to the many bottles of alcohol being taken from the kitchen to the living room by the boys.

“Layli, I didn’t think you’d be this upset. I’m sorry...”

“Whatever Zoya. Have fun. I’ll be in my room all night,” I replied, moving away from the kitchen to find Abs watching the scene from the doorway, he’s muscular arms crossed over his hoody and an irritating smirk tugging at his lips.

“Hey Layli...” Zoya yelled my way, “Can we borrow your shot glasses you collect please?”

“No way!” I screamed back, angry.

And that was how I had ended up in my room, annoyed but curious about what was happening on the other side of my bedroom door. It was not like I hadn’t seen a party before. I’d watched plenty of films but going to one had never enticed me since Dad always told us how Islamically wrong it was. The drinking, the music and the mixing with the opposite sex were all forbidden, despite what Zoya thought.

It was all wrong.

That was what I was taught.

Time seemed to move slower, and even though it had been an hour, it felt like four before I decided I needed my headphones to drown out the music so I could try and get some sleep. I had texted Moe, asking him to bring them to me, but apparently he hadn’t been told about the party and was already on his way home for a few days. He seemed upset, but I knew when my best friend needed his space, so I didn’t pry.

Making myself look presentable, since the idea of me entering the party in my pjs didn’t seem right, I pulled out a pair of leggings and grabbed Abs’s hoodie which I hadn’t returned yet. Covering my long hair with a

headscarf, I finally mustered up enough courage to venture out into uncharted territory.

The living room was packed mostly with people I didn't know and a few I'd see around uni, pretty girls and cute boys scattered everywhere, some dancing and some simply chatting. I searched for anyone I knew. The first person I recognised was Kassim and my heart did an unexpected jump, relieved for the familiarity. However, once I was close enough, I realised the familiarity was fabricated since he wasn't the same guy I had begun to get to know over the weeks.

Kassim was dressed differently than normal, more styled and his demeanour was more uptight. He sat on the leather sofa, long legs resting apart with a girl perched on his lap, her body stuck to his as his eyes raked over her gorgeous face, moving in so he could hear what she was saying. One of his arms rested on the bare skin of her back, slowly drawing small circles onto her while a dark drink balanced in his other.

I wasn't used to this Kassim.

Our eyes briefly connected, a small smile emerging on his lips before the girl planted her lips onto his and the connection was instantly broken. I pulled away from the crowd, and made my way to the kitchen ignoring the random comments coming my way:

"Hey sexy, can I get you a drink?"

"Where have you been hiding?"

"I haven't seen you around. Are you new?"

I needed to find my headphones and get back to my room.

"Pearl?" His voice came from behind me, too close for comfort, and the smell of alcohol mixed with cigarettes consumed the little bubble we were suddenly in.

"Uhhh... Taimur."

"What are you doing here? Zoya said weren't leaving your room?" he said, coming up next to me, slightly wobbling.

"I... I... I didn't know you were diabetic," I panicked and blurted out. "I... I... feel so bad. I didn't mean to be insensitive. I didn't know. I swear. *Wallahi*. It's not my fault. I... I... I..."

"You what?" he challenged, turning me to face him.

"Nothing."

"What are you doing here? Did the preacher's daughter want to come to the party? Does Daddy know?"

He always looked the same, with perfect hair, perfect clothes and perfect smirk, but today his eyes were slightly red, slightly unsteady and slightly unsure, but as usual, slightly provoking me.

“Zoya is also a preacher’s daughter you know, and she’s the one throwing this party thanks to you. And so? What if I did want to come?”

“I just didn’t think you had it in you. You’re always hiding behind your religion,”

“Our religion.” She corrected.

“I just didn’t expect to ever see you somewhere like this.”

“Excuse me. I’m not hiding from anything.”

“You can’t even see it.”

“See what?”

“Your cage.”

“What?”

“You can’t even see the cage you’re trapped in because you call it religion. How are you going to break free when you don’t even know that you’re trapped in the first place?”

“I’m not trapped,” I spat out, blood beginning to simmer. “I am free.”

“Or maybe you need to be set free.”

“I am free.”

“If you say so,” Taimur slurred, winking my way.

“What is your problem, why are you always trying to get under my skin?”

“Why are you always under mine?”

“What?”

“You heard me. Get out of my head and I’ll get out of your way.”

“Maybe the reason I’m in your head is because you know I’m right and what you’re doing is wrong.”

“I’m doing nothing wrong.”

“Debatable.”

“Come here,” Taimur said, sluggishly grabbing my hand. “Come dance. Come have some fun. Come be free with me.”

“No.”

“Please? God’s not going to strike you down for having one dance, Pearl.” He smiled, and it was probably the first time he smiled in my direction and it hit me.

“You’re drunk.”

“So?”

“Okay, I’m going to find my headphones and go back to my room. I’ll see you around.” I pulled away but he didn’t let go instantly. Our eyes held each others, the bubble still blowing us away, until strong arms lifted me from behind and off the floor.

“Tiny. You’re finally here!” Nabeel said, pulling me away from Taimur and towards the kitchen where it was thankfully quieter. His one hand was in mine while the other held a phone to his ear. “No Chip, you cannot come here. Why would you come to a party?”

The person on the other side yelled as he held the phone away, rolling his hazed eyes, still holding onto my hand.

“Chip, listen to me. You’re not leaving the house. End of story. Don’t make me tell the boys.”

I assumed the other person hung up when he moved his phone away, pushing it into his tight jean pocket before taking out a lighter.

“Can you hold this?” he said, placing a plastic bag in my hand.

“What am I holding exactly?”

“Some green. I just got it from some guy outside.”

“A bag of marijuana?” Stunned, I immediately dropping it on to the countertop.

“You can’t get high from just holding it, Princess,” Abs said, coming to stand next to me, his large body towering over my tiny one, his eyes sparkling with dull amusement on my expense. “Is that my hoodie you’re wearing?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll wash it and give it back to you tomorrow.”

“Keep it,” he replied faster than I expected. “You want me to show you how to roll it?” he asked, gesturing to the bag on the kitchen top.

“No thank you,” I replied, moving away. “I think I can survive through life without knowing how to do that. I’m going to go now.”

“Why?”

“Because this is not my scene. And you can’t smoke in here, the fire alarm will go off.”

“We’re protected,” Nabeel said, pointing to the smoke detector above us which had a strange cover.

“What is that?”

“Protection,” he winked.

“Is that a....”

“Condom?” Abs finished. “Yes, it is.”

“I don’t even want to know,” I said, moving away and forgetting about my headphones altogether. Drugs, drinks and condoms were three things I didn’t need to be around.

I needed to get away.

I pushed through the crowd again, mind going a million miles per hour as I took in every detail of the scene I had vowed never to be in. I looked around, cheerful people swaying to a distinct beat, happily enjoying their lives while I stood watching from the outside, never knowing what it would be like to be part of a crowd who knew how to let go, never holding themselves back.

Taimur’s words echoed in my mind, and for a second, I thought about the life I’d led so far, strict and disciplined with no room for movement, and wondered if I could find the same freeing feeling without breaking the rules. Could my beliefs unshackle me from this feeling and set me free to fly?

I was sure they could.

I was taught they could.

Finally reaching my room, I pushed the door open, happy to feel the surrounding I knew and was comfortable in when a sound came from my ensuite bathroom. I froze, glued to the spot as I tried to listen again knowing I should have locked my door when I went out to explore. Gathering myself, I walked towards the door, pressing my ear to it, trying to hear the noises when the moaning began. Instantly, I knew there were people using my bathroom and the already simmering anger I had felt outside finally overflowed as I pulled open the door to give them a piece of my mind.

My mouth hung open, shocked, and the picture in front of me, etching itself into my memory without my permission, but I couldn’t look away.

I should have.

I should have torn my eyes away.

I should have turned around, slammed the door and forgotten what I saw but alas, my logic escaped me and I stood there, watching. Something flashed in front of my eyes, maybe the pain of my future or maybe the emotions of my present, whatever it was, I still didn’t quite understand that somehow my heart was never going to be the same again. Like a small

piece of it had just broken off, floating towards my stinging eyes and ready to pour down my numb face.

Why did I care?

I didn't even like him.

He hated me.

Our scorching gaze locked, as his head fell back against the bathroom tiles in utter bliss, euphoria seeping out of his every pore as his moan echoed in the bathroom, igniting an hurt inside me I didn't know I had and setting my emotions on fire.

A girl was on her knees, and I felt like I had just been knocked to mine, his strong hands gripping her long silky hair, guiding her head and her mouth most clearly onto his enlarged dick. His jeans were unbuckled, pushing down so she had clear access, his shirt was unbuttoned, showing off his immaculate chest and his eyes were on me.

"Deeper," I heard him groan, his stare not leaving mine, challenging me to watch, and even though I didn't know it at the time, my heart was slowly breaking. "Let me fuck your mouth."

"Come down my throat baby," the girl said, as she released him with a pop, his erection springing free before moving her hand to his balls, sucking them into her mouth. As she sucked on them, a moan escaped him, his head falling back onto the wall again, but his glare never left mine. I watched him slide his hand down to his dick, memorising every movement of what I was seeing, as he stroked himself, the angry head of his cock glistening with moisture.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't think.

I had never seen anything like it before. Suddenly, my breasts felt heavier than usual, my breath coming out jagged and a tingling sensation taking over while my heart beat way too fast, anxiously trying to escape from its cage. His eyes didn't leave mine as he continued to stroke himself, raw and crude, and I wondered for a second, why was it hurting me?

The spell should have been broken when I heard the girl add, "I know how you like it, Tai. Hard and dirty." But I still didn't move, accepting his challenge without words, pushing the feeling of betrayal aside.

He started to move faster, thrusting his hips into her face, his dick disappearing into her open mouth so she could take him in deeper while his

moans repeated in my mind on a loop.

“That’s it, baby.”

“Keep going.”

“More.”

“Faster.”

“Deeper.”

“Fuccck...”

“I’m going to come...”

“*Pearl...*”

As he shattered into a million pieces, soaring higher than I’d ever been, the little bit of feeling I had for him shattered too, knowing we were from two different worlds which should have never collided.

Chapter Twelve

Taimur

I hadn't suggested the party; I wasn't even in the mood for it. I was still mad at the boys for the prank they pulled, but I also knew it wasn't Layla's fault. She was just a pawn in their game.

The party was not my idea. I had simply said that if I had a flat as big as Zoya's I would have thrown a house party by now and she took from that what she wanted and planned it. I for one, didn't even want to be there when Layla realised what was going on as I knew her well enough to know that there would be a hurricane coming when she found out. But my brothers were over the moon and took the opportunity to get more friendly with the two Ahmed sisters.

I watched as they cosied up to them, helping, advising, flirting as I stood back, for the first time not knowing where my place was in their new friendship.

Did I like her?

The preacher's daughter.

Did I?

As the party went on, my mind wandered to what lay behind the closed door – the image of her innocently sleeping on her bed stirred in my imagination until it was seared into my soul.

Why did I want to see her?

Why did I feel like I needed to see her?

I knew what the feeling was even though I hadn't felt it before. It was the innate, raw attraction, building inside me like a heavy cloud of rain. But

I needed to stop it before it started to pour, soaking everything around me, drenching my life in its wake.

One drink led to two, and two led to five. I was soon slurring my words and enjoying the escape of flying freely until I saw my prey surrounded by the hungry wolves, and everything around me stopped.

Everything *always* stopped when I saw her.

She was like a deer in headlights, shocked at everything she saw. Biting her bottom lip nervously as she regarded her surroundings.

She looked innocent.

Naïve.

Caged.

And the need to set her free overpowered me.

By now, everyone was busy. Kassim had his hands around a girl who was straddling him on the sofa, her black dress had ridden up so everyone could see her red lace panties and his fingers played with its thin edges, ready to dive in. Nabeel was in the kitchen, holding a joint, probably arguing with Alia on the phone, while Abs stood against the back wall, a tall girl in between his parted legs while she kissed his neck, her hands down his jeans as he palmed her arse. This was our usual, we weren't shy around each other.

"Hey sexy, want to get out of here?" a girl asked, handing me another shot of booze that burnt my throat as it travelled down.

I needed the buzz.

"I have a better idea baby," I said. I made my way towards Layla's room. I knew she was still in the kitchen, and she was innocent enough to leave the door unlocked. I tried not to notice the pictures scattered on walls, her clothes neatly folded on her chair and her white bed sheets, crisp and clean, as pure as her, when another spark of electricity shot through my mind.

I knew it was wrong.

I knew she would walk in.

I knew she would hate me after.

Moving towards the bed, I noticed the line of different shot glasses displayed on her top shelf. I didn't even notice the girl unbuckling my jeans, as my mind wondered about them. Her hand pushed into my boxers and her eyes widened, noticing how hard I already was. She gripped my

shaft, firmly moving her hold up and down it, while her thumb rubbed my tip like a professional, and I knew she knew what she was doing.

“In here,” I said, clumsily moving towards the adjoined bathroom, a pang of guilt hitting me in the chest, taking the excitement out of what I was doing.

I was drunk. That was my excuse to myself.

Her hands didn’t leave my cock, and as the door closed I pushed her down, closing my eyes.

“On your knees, mouth open,” I said, taking my dick into my hands, stoking myself, as she pulled down my jeans. Her hands grazed down my abs, scratching my skin as she did exactly what I said, glaring up at me from her new position at my feet. “Open up baby. Show me what those fat lips are good for.”

Hot.

Soft.

Guilty.

The scent of another girl’s shampoo seeped through my drunken haze, strawberry and vanilla haunting me as the girl on her knees devoured my cock, twirling her tongue around the tip, licking the underside before swallowing me whole, sucking me into her sweet heat. I felt the back of her throat, making her gag but I didn’t open my eyes, visualising a different girl on her knees, and my erection grew with excitement.

In my mind, those innocent green eyes stared back at me, the rims wet with tears as she struggled to take me in whole, choking but liking it. Her petite hands gripped my thighs, nails digging into my skin as I thrust into her perfect mouth, those plump lips sucking me like never before. My breath quickened, in sync with her rhythm and I heard myself swear, feeling the orgasm build up inside me.

I wasn’t going to last long with Layla on my mind. I felt the guilt, knowing I shouldn’t have been thinking of her, but I was too far gone to even fucking care.

The image of small hands leaving my thighs to guide my erection deeper into her mouth pulled me further away from reality. The thought of that virgin tongue licking my precum, sucking, her pearly teeth grazing my shaft, and eventually allowing me to release my load down her pure little throat nearly sent me over the edge, my knees weakening as I enjoyed the feeling.

As my head fell against the cold tiles, the buzz of the alcohol still igniting my senses, my hands found their way into the soft hair below me, gripping tighter than I usually did but not able to hold back or break from the trance I was in, however, a sudden movement at the door made me snap my eyes open.

Was I imagining it?

Was Layla, the girl in my mind, watching me?

Layla's eyes were focused on the scene in front of her, mouth gaping and her cheeks flushed, telling me everything I needed to know.

I was hurting her, but what I didn't know was, I was hurting myself too.

I was breaking my own heart.

My eyes didn't leave Layla's, as the girl sucking my dick began to lick my balls, twirling her tongue around them before taking them into her mouth. Layla's large breasts were heaving, her white teeth biting into her bottom lip so hard I was sure they would eventually draw blood, and her hands gripped her top, which only made me think of the grip she would have on my dick... or was it my heart?

I needed more.

I needed to drown out my emotions.

I began to move my hips, fucking her mouth at a disrespectful pace so I could chase the feeling, pulling on the girl's hair as I grunted, nonsense spurting from my mouth while I continued to watch Layla standing at the door. My mind drifted back to her on her knees in front of me, my cock shoved so deep in her mouth that her lips touched my pelvis and my balls tightened, but I didn't want to come yet.

I was enjoying my fantasy way too much.

"Deeper," I told her, knowing my words would affect Layla, and like clockwork, her eyes snapped from my face to where my dick disappeared into the girl's mouth, and if that wouldn't send me over the edge, nothing would. The girl mumbled something incoherent but all I could hear was Layla's heavy breath, echoing in the bathroom.

More.

Faster.

Deeper.

Pearl.

Finally, with my gaze still on Layla at the door, I exploded, the orgasm taking over me like I had never experienced before, euphoric and satisfying

but simultaneously laced with unforeseen shame, remorse instantly pulling me down from my high and sobering me quicker than expected.

Was it the fact that I'd just come down another girl's throat in front of Layla? Or was it the way Layla walked out of the bathroom, a hint of betrayal in her eyes? Or was it the lone tear that I caught rolling down her cheek?

Whatever it was, I suddenly realised, I. Had. Just. Fucked. Up.

By the time I sorted myself out, cleaned up, and tucked myself in, Layla was in the living room, surrounded by a group of mainly guys. As guilt burned my insides, I struggled to watch her. A mixture of anger that someone else was talking to her and confusion at her relaxed state, tore into me and even though I knew I had no right to feel possessive, especially after what I had just done, I did.

Her body was relaxed, a familiar large hoodie perfectly hugging her petite frame while her headscarf was loosened, nearly falling off her head and exposing her silky hair. Her lips smiled, directing her beam towards everyone but me, and suddenly my body moved faster than my mind.

"What are you doing?" I asked, annoyed. I balanced my cigarette in my mouth as I placed her headscarf more onto her head, so it was covering all her hair.

"Whatever.... I want." she slurred. "Just like youuuuu."

"Why is your scarf falling off?"

"What? Why do you care? *You* don't even believe in it."

"But you do."

She rolled her eyes, something I'd never noticed her do before, and looked away from me towards her new fan club.

"What do you want, Tai?"

"Since when do you call me Tai?"

"Since I no longer care. Isn't your girlfriend waiting for you in *my* bathroom?"

That was when I *really* looked at her. Her pure jade eyes were glassed over, her creamy cheeks flushed.

"Are you drunk?" I asked, judgement lacing my voice.

"What?"

"What have you been drinking, Layla?"

"You know I don't drink, Tai."

"What's in that glass?"

“Coke.”

“Layla. This is not coke. It’s got something in it. Who gave this to you?” I asked, as I took the glass from her and tasted it, before dropping my cigarette bud inside it.

“WHAT?” Even in her drunken state, she knew something was wrong. She moved towards me, away from her new friends but stumbled. “Oh my God, oh my God, I don’t feel so well. Oh my God, what’s wrong with me, Taimur? What’s going to happen to me now? Oh my God, I can’t pray. Oh my God, my dad is going to kill me!”

“Okay, relax,” I said.

She looked around the room, searching for something before replying.

“I asked for Coke and I specifically told him I wanted only Coke.”

“Pearl, relax. God’s not going to strike you down for one drink.”

She turned to look at me, her eyebrows furrowed and nose crinkled. I realised how patronising my words were.

“This is all your fault,” she said, jabbing a finger into my chest.

“What?”

“You...you....you did this on purpose. Didn’t you? You wanted this party. You wanted me to see you in the bathroom. You wanted to hurt me. You wanted me out of my cage. This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

“What? No, are you listening to yourself?”

“Then why did you get her to suck your dick in my room!?” Those crude words would have never come out of Layla’s mouth if she was sober. “You knew I would come in and see it. Tell me you...you didn’t do it on purpose.”

I couldn’t. I stared dumbly at her.

“You knew it would upset me. You knew I’d never seen anything like that before. You knew I would be angry. The whole show was on purpose, wasn’t it? The girl on her knees in my bathroom, so I could walk in any time and catch you. Why? Why did you want to hurt me when....” she broke off. “You planned this to get revenge for the sweets.”

“No.”

“Did you tell the guy to put something in my drink too? Was this part of your plan?”

“No way. Never. Layla, look at me,” I said, coming closer as she stepped away. I placed both my hands on her face, forcing her to look into my eyes. “Would I do that to you? I know how much religion means to you.

I would never do that. You may be the preacher's daughter, but I'm also a Muslim. I know the rules. I wouldn't do that to you."

"I asked for Coke. Just Coke," she abruptly pulled my hands off her skin as if she was being burnt by my touch.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"This is your fault, Taimur."

"Who was it?"

"Wallahi, I hate you."

"WHO!?" I shouted, just as the music stopped. There was an eerie silence as Layla pointed to the guy by the drinks table, avoiding my stare. I stormed towards him, three people already behind me, and I didn't need to turn around to know who they were.

Kassim, Abs, and Nabeel stood beside me as I took the guy by the collar, pushing him against the wall, knocking the drinks table, spilling them onto the floor.

"What did you give her?" I asked.

"N...n...nothing. It's Coke."

"It's not fucking Coke. What is it?" I spat, my fist itching to connect with his face.

"It's just some E."

"What the fuck!" Abs exclaimed. "Why?"

"I thought she needed to loosen up a bit. Isn't that what you said? She needed to be set free?"

That was when my fist flew to his jaw for the first time.

"She looked upset," he cried.

Another punch.

"I...I...I was trying to cheer her up."

"By drugging her?" Nabeel yelled, pushing me out the way to get a punch in. "You drugged her!"

"She'll be fine in a few hours," the guy said, gasping for air.

"Keep talking, dick and he'll end you," Kassim said from behind me, his hand on my shoulder trying to keep me calm. "Nabeel, let him go."

But as Nabeel stepped back, I stepped forward again, Layla's words recurring in my mind and all I could see was red.

'This is your fault.'

'You did this on purpose.'

'I hate you.'

Punch after punch I laid into him, my vision blurred by anger and my knuckles bleeding with fury.

“You fucking dick!” I yelled, not even noticing that the music was off and everyone was looking at us. “You’re not getting out of here alive. Do you know what you just did? You fucked with the wrong girl.”

Punch, in the nose.

Punch, under his eye.

Punch in his ribs before I kicked him on the ground.

“Stop! Stop!” Kassim shouted. “Stop Tai. Look at Layla. She’s passed out. Stop!”

True to his word, Layla had passed out on the floor behind us, and I sprinted towards her, pushing people away from her, not allowing anyone to touch her apart from me. Pulling her small body onto my lap, I felt her shiver, and my heart broke for her. This was not right. She didn’t ask for this. She was going to hate me forever.

“Where’s Zoya?”

“She’s gone out to get more drinks,” Kassim said. “Take her to her room, Tai. She needs to sleep it off.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll go find Zoya.”

As I lifted her limp body in my arms, I heard Abs’s words from behind me directed at the boy. I turned to look. He now had the ‘bartender’ by the door, pushing him out by his collar. Blood stained his white shirt, and his lip was cut pretty deep.

“Don’t ever come near her again. If we ever see you in the same room as her, we will fuck you up.”

“But we’re in the same lectures!”

“Not anymore,” Kassim said.

“If she’s in a lecture room, you leave. If she’s in the SU, you leave. If she’s in the library, you....?” Abs continued.

“Leave,” he stammered.

“Good. You get the point.”

“If she’s even walking on the street, you cross over the fucking road and walk the opposite way... do you fucking understand me?” Abs continued. “And if we ever see you do that to another girl, whether she’s Muslim or not, you will not be breathing.”

“Do we make ourselves clear?” Kassim asked.

But when the guy didn't reply, Abs got into his face, ready to punch him again and bellowed, "DO WE MAKE OURSELVES CLEAR!?"

He nodded as Abs let go and rushed out the room.

By then, I had Layla safely in my arms. Her head rested on my shoulder as I carried her towards her room, remorse about the last time I was in here still running through me. I shoved it aside, gently placing her on her clean bed, under the warm cover.

I knew I shouldn't have but I undid her headscarf, worried it might strangle her in her sleep and placed it on the bedside table, allowing her chocolate hair to fan out onto the white pillowcase. She was beautiful, I thought as I looked at her.

My own sleeping beauty.

My fingers moved her long hair away from her face, brushing over her soft pink cheeks, and rested on the part of her neck that moved in time to her heartbeat, in sync with mine. My fingers lay there for a second, feeling alive for the first time in a long time, before I moved away - the feeling of her gentle pulse on my fingertips long after I'd left her room.

Chapter Thirteen

Taimur

Guilt.
Regret.
Shame.

Remorse.

I could go on forever.

They say caring makes you weak, that once you cared, your life was now no longer in your own hands and they ended up walking all over you. That's why, the following Friday, I skipped my 9.am lecture, since I couldn't face Layla after what she'd seen me do. The boys and I decided to go home for the weekend. Once we were home our world altered as if we were living in two different realities. From drinking Jack Daniels, we were drinking mint tea, from going to clubs, we were going to mosque and from sleeping with girls, we were sleeping alone in our childhood bedrooms.

Our parents and Alia were overjoyed to have an extra day with us.

"You're not going out, Alia. Get back inside the house!" I yelled, pointing towards the door. My dad, Kassim and I had just come back from the Mosque after Friday prayers with the rest of the boys, and I'd seen her climbing into her friend's car.

Friday prayers were important. It was a time when Muslim men prayed together followed by a sermon from the local preacher speaking about different issues facing the world today. In theory at this stage, it was just a get together to network between people.

"Now, Alia."

I watched my twin sister's face redden as she climbed out of her friend's car. Pulling down her long blue jumper over her leggings, she marched towards me, sending me evil glares which were identical to mine.

I didn't care. She was my sister and there was no way she was hanging out with those girls.

"I hate you," Alia hissed.

I slammed the front door behind her, popping some chewing gum in my mouth to mask the smell of cigarettes from Mum.

"You are ruining my life," she added.

"Don't be so dramatic, Alia. These girls are not good girls. They're not like you."

"They're my friends."

"They're not your friends. They hang out with you to get to me or Kass."

"Are you even listening to yourself? Get over yourself, you idiot!" she yelled, as Kassim walked into the room dressed in a suit. He raised his eyebrow at me, asking what was going on. "You can't control my life," she said.

"Oh, yes I can!" I shouted back.

I followed her into the living room where our parents sat, going through this month's accounts. They both held a different bill in their hands, looking closely at it to find where we could save more.

"If I say no, it's a no," I said.

"Whatever!"

"Don't speak to me like that, Alia. And what the hell are you wearing?" I asked, noticing how tight her jumper really was. I didn't like it.

"Why are your clothes so tight?"

"Mum!" she screamed, stomping over to our mother who was watching us with amusement. "Say something!"

My mum looked at her, retying her perfect ponytail that matched her cute round face that matched Kassim's. She was a happy woman, always supporting her kids that were all now taller than her.

"MUM!"

"Don't you dare yell at Mum. It's nothing to do with her," I said.

"Of course, she's going to take your side. You're her favourite. She won't ever say anything to you."

“What’s going on, princess?” Dad asked, his light eyes moving away from the phone bill. His long legs stretched under the dining table touching mums and a small smile crept on his tired face. A smile he reserved for Alia only. Even at the age of fifty-five, he had a full hair of head which my mum dyed from grey to brown.

“I had plans with Sara and Nadia to go shopping before the fundraiser, but Tai didn’t let me go. He literally made me get out of the car. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Good. I’m glad I raised my sons right,” Dad said, then grinned. “It’s their job to look out for you.”

“Look out for me for what? I’m going shopping with my girlfriends.”

“Would there be guys there?” Kassim interrupted, looking away from his reflection in the mirror as he preened, and stared at Alia.

“Of course, there will be, you fool, it’s a shopping centre. We live in London, not the Middle East. Nothing is separate.”

“That’s why we don’t want you going out like this,” he said, pointing at her clothes. “We’re guys. We know how guys think.”

“Not all guys are like that.”

“I’m sorry to break it to you, princess, but all guys are the same,” Dad said.

She began to cry. I never wanted to make her cry, but I knew what the world was like. Good girls like her needed to be more careful from bad guys like me.

“You guys are so unfair. Tai and Kass get to do whatever they want. Go out with whomever they want, and no one says anything to them but because I’m a girl, I’m not even allowed to go out with my mates. I hate these double standards. I’m twenty years old Dad, this is not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair, Lia,” I said

“You two are the most hypocritical guys to exist,” she spat back. “I wish Mum and Dad knew what you were up to at uni. You shouldn’t have the right to tell me anything after what you two do.”

“Alia...” I warned.

“Go to hell.”

With that, Alia stormed out of the room, and a few moments later we heard her slam her bedroom door.

“You know that you three are being very unfair to her,” Mum said. “She has every right to live the same life as you boys. Just because she’s a girl

doesn't make it right to cage her inside the house."

Cage? Was I caging her?

"You don't know what the guys our age are like, or how they think. We're just trying to protect her," I replied. starting to wonder why Kassim is dressed in a suit.

"And what about the girls you go out with, Habibi?" she asked me. "Who protects them? They're someone's sister too, you know."

"Yeah, that's fine, as long as they're not my sister," I joked, walking up to Kassim and standing behind him whilst he stared in the mirror. His light hair was gelled back in a slick hairstyle, his suit fit him perfectly and his face was unshaven, with two-day stubble decorated around his jaw.

"Taimur. Come on habibi, be fair. Go and apologise to your sister and take her shopping."

"No way Mum. I'm not going shopping."

"Don't do it for her then, do it for me," she said, knowing very well I could never say no to her. She was my world.

"Fine Mum. Tell her to change her clothes and I'll take her to Oxford Street, but only for an hour."

"That's my baby boy," she beamed at me, and I felt a little proud that I'd made her smile.

"Urrrghhh," Kassim coughed in the background.

"I love you too, Sokar," Mum said, calling him by the nickname she gave him, meaning sugar in Arabic. "My boys."

"And me?" Dad winked at her, making us laugh, and I instantly relaxed. These were my people - they were my home.

"Why are you dressed up?" I finally asked Kassim.

"Just trying it on for the black tie fundraiser tomorrow."

"What fundraiser?"

"Bloody hell, do you ever listen to anything other than your own voice?"

"Huh?"

"Alia has been going on about it for weeks, Tai. She even got Layla to help out."

"What?"

Layla.

Her big eyes watching me.

The betrayal seeping through.

“You heard me. Layla will be there.”

“How?”

“Long story short, Alia asked Nabeel, who asked Layla.”

“Oh, whatever. I don’t care.”

“Sure, you don’t,” a voice said.

I turned to see Nabeel and Abs walk through the living room door, one dressed in a similar suit to Kassim and the other dressed in normal attire, jeans and a hoodie. They shook Dad’s hand and kissed Mum’s cheek before turning to Kassim. “Is that what you’re wearing tomorrow?” Abs asked.

“Yeah, it says formal. This is formal.”

“Where’s Chip?” Nabeel asked. Not to any of our surprise, his hair dyed purple. “I need a girl’s opinion on my outfit.”

“A girls’ or hers?” Abs mumbled under his breath, then he sat on the sofa in his usual spot.

“She’s upstairs, darling,” Mum replied, getting up from her chair and walking towards Nabeel. “Taimur upset her, *again*.”

“God, Tai! Great. I’m going up. Wish me luck,” he said, climbing up the short staircase, not waiting for permission. He never did, and never would in the future either.

“And you, dapdoop,” Mum said, calling Abs, ‘a teddy bear’. “You need to clean your room and bring your dirty laundry down.”

“I’ll do it aunty. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I’m putting all three of your clothes in the washing machine by the evening.”

“Thank you,” he said, then smiled, and she kissed his head.

“Now, is someone going to tell me who this Layla is?” Mum asked us, a curious look on her face.

“The girl Tai likes,” Kassim said at the same time as I said “No one.”

“I see,” she smiled in my direction, and it looked like her world started and ended with me, her oldest son and the love of her life. “Is this my future daughter-in-law we’re talking about?”

“Yes,” Kassim replied again at the same time as I said “No.”

Abs laughed in the background.

Our home was small, comfortable and welcoming. My mum had decorated it herself over the years and my dad had mended the broken parts so that we were happy living the way we did. Even though we weren’t rich,

we made the most of our lives there and had the best times in that little house.

We had four bedrooms, one for our parents, one for Alia, a shared one for Kassim and I, and one for Abs. Abs's mum had died when he was younger, and since then my parents had moved him in with us, him becoming their fourth child.

The rooms in our home were an average size, not too big and not too small, but there was only one bathroom for us to share, making school morning very difficult, but we managed. The kitchen was my mum's pride and joy since she spent most of her time there, making new dishes and baking delicious treats for her kids. Above the stove there was a large poster saying 'Keep Calm and put the Kettle On' which fit her to a T. The kitchen and living room were divided by a rolling glass door, separating one big room into two and the furniture was wooden, aged and secure, just the way we knew it. Dark carpet covered the entire house, keeping it tepid and cosy. It was a small house compared to others, but it was enough, for now.

There was a loud bang of a door. Nabeel stormed down the stairs, away from Alia's room and towards the kitchen. He pulled out a glass from the cupboard, filling it with tap water and gulping it down in annoyance. Once again, we were used to this occurrence and glanced at each other, trying to hide our amusement.

Chip and Chubs were at it again.

They fought, they made up and they fought again. It was just how they were- how they were always going to be.

"What happened?" Mum asked, walking towards Nabeel, trying to hide her grin. "What did she do this time?"

"She uninvited me to the stupid fundraiser and said I look like a monkey in a suit, and she hates my hair colour."

"Well, she's not completely wrong," Abs chimed in. "But I think we're insulting the monkey by comparing it to you."

"Shut up," he retaliated.

"And what did *you* do?" Mum asked next.

"I just told her the boys were right to not let her go dressed like that."

"Ahh.. makes sense. I feel sorry for Alia, too many people trying to protect her when she doesn't need protection. She's quite capable of looking after herself." She then turned to an annoyed Nabeel, placing her hand on

his cheek. "Remember darling, my girl doesn't need a knight in shining armour, she already has her own shiny sword."

"But..." He began.

"Okay boys. Relax. Let me make tea. There's nothing that..."

"A cup of tea can't fix." We all chimed, in a chorus as she beamed. Mum didn't need to ask if Nabeel was staying.

He always stayed.

After a while, we all settled down to watch the football while lunch was being made so I made my way upstairs, always feeling guilty when I saw my sister cry.

"Lia?" I called, turning the doorknob to her room.

"Why can't you knock?" she shouted, as I took a step into her pink room. "What if I was changing?"

"Are you?"

"Not the point, Taimur Khalidi."

"Full name? God, she's mad at you Tai," Kassim interrupted from the door, grinning with a tray of three cups of tea.

"You left your phone downstairs," I said, using it as an excuse to enter further into her room and placing it on her table as I saw a message from 'Chubs' pop up saying "MBS, Chip, MBS!".

"Did you go through it, *again*?"

"No," I lied, looking over at Kassim as he held back a grin. "We would never invade your privacy like that."

"Liars."

"We just want to protect you," Kassim tried to explain. "It's a scary world out there."

"Leave me alone. I hate you guys," Alia said, turning away from us toward the wall.

I glanced at my brother and he winked back at me, both of us realising what needed to be done.

I picked her up, baby cradling style while Kassim moved her books off the bed. I then carefully put her down while she struggled to get free, Kassim grabbed the small night-time jug of water off the bedside table and began pouring tiny droplets in her direction. Alia screamed, kicking her legs and trying to elbow me in the ribs, but I was stronger than her.

"Stop. Please. Stop," she begged.

“Say it, or we won’t stop,” I replied, still holding her down as the small amount of water trickled over her face.

“Oh my god, you’re ruining my make up. You can’t always do this...” Splash on her hair. “It’s not fair.”

“Say it,” Kassim laughed, the jug on top of her head now.

“No. Never.” Another splash of water on her face.

“We won’t stop.”

“This is not fair. It’s two against one.” Splash on her small button nose.

“Life’s not fair. Say it,” I said again, not letting go of her in my lap.

“I...I...”

“I what Lia?” Kassim continued, always having my back. *Always.*

“I...I... love you guys.”

And we stopped, fist bumping each other.

“And don’t forget that *little sis*,” I reminded her, turning to lie next to her, breathless from laughing. She was now sandwiched between her brothers, and even though she tried to push me off the bed, I knew she loved it. The mattress was damp, and it squished under me as Kassim placed a towel on her wet hair.

“I’m your twin and older than you Kassim, how am I little?”

“You’ll always be little, even when you’re 50. That’s why we try to protect you,” Kassim replied for me as I stared up at the fairy lights on her ceiling.

“Are you still scared of the dark, Lia?” Kassim asked.

“No, why?”

“Why haven’t we taken the fairy lights off the ceiling then?” I asked, looking at her.

“I like them.”

“They’re a bit tacky.”

“I like them because they remind me of you guys when you’re away at uni.”

“Of us?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember?” she asked, turning to face me, her bright eyes, warm and loving. “I couldn’t sleep on my own and I’d always sneak into yours or Mum and Dad’s room because I was scared. Then dad got me these lights but didn’t have time to put them up so on the weekend, you and Kass got the ladder out the shed and put them up for me so I wouldn’t be scared at night.”

“We only did that because we hated you coming into our room and squashing into one of our beds,” Kassim lied.

“Whatever.”

“You know we love you Lia, right?” Kassim states, sitting with his back to the headboard. Three of us on the bed was a tight fit but we were used to it, we’d been doing this since we could walk. “We just worry about you. We all do. Including Nabs.”

“Can we not talk about him? He’s an idiot, but can we talk about Layla?” she winked, amusement lacing her words.

God, Layla. “No, but what did he *really* do?”

“Doesn’t matter,” she huffed, sitting up next to Kassim, while he pulled her into a hug. “Tell me about Layla. She’s coming to the fundraiser. I’m looking forward to meeting her. So, tell me.”

Just the thought of her made my heart beat at an unprecedented pace and my blood run hot with regret, yet still laced with desire. The image of her large green eyes came to mind first, and a warmth of comfort befell me without me even realising as I relaxed further into the bed, closing my eyes and hoping she appeared out of thin air.

“There’s nothing to tell,” I replied.

“She’s sweet, innocent, kind of hot when she’s mad,” Kassim said.

“She’s not *that* innocent,” I corrected, breaking out of the Layla fog and remembering her harsh words.

“She’s smart too,” Kassim said.

“She’s annoying, but different I guess, from what I can tell. She has really strong beliefs, wears hijab, prays...” I said.

“So? End of the day, she’s still a girl behind all that.” Alia said.

“I guess.”

“But she’s different,” Kassim said, mimicking me.

“How?” she asked.

“She’s not the kind of girl you just mess around with, she the kind you marry,” I answered.

“Oh...” Alia understood. “And you’re not the guy you marry, you’re the guy you mess around with?”

“I’m 20. I have my whole life ahead of me, plus we don’t even like each other.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you don’t,” Kassim laughed. “Would it be so bad if you did like her?”

“What’s the point? It’s not like she’ll date me. You know the kind of guy she’s looking for. Good. Decent.”

“You *are* decent,” Alia confirmed.

“You know what I mean. Someone who deserves a girl like her.”

“And you don’t?” Alia asked.

“You know what I’ve done.”

“Tai, it wasn’t your fault,” Kassim replied.

“You guys keep saying that, but you know that’s not true. I shouldn’t have...”

“It’s in the past. Let’s leave it there,” Alia said, but what my sister didn’t know was the past always came back to bite you in the arse, whether you liked it or not.

“Anyways, there was this incident, and she thinks it was my fault. It just pissed me off that every time something bad happens, she immediately thinks it’s because of me. Am I that bad?”

“No. She probably just misunderstood you, Tai.” Alia said.

“Well, first it was the fight with her best friend Moe, then there was the sweet incident, and then last week the flat party issue. I’m done with her and her blame game. Now tell me what Nabeel did,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter, what matters is that I need to go shopping to get last minute things for tomorrow.”

“We’ll take you, don’t worry,” Abs said appearing in the doorway with a cup of black tea in his hands, always watching from the outside. “Aunty said lunch is ready, then we can leave after.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!” she jumped off the bed and into Abs’s arms for a brotherly hug, nearly spilling his tea on herself. “This is why I love you the most.”

“Do you want another jug of water poured onto you?” Kassim asked on his way out the room. She shoved him aside making her way down the stairs, ignoring Nabeel who was standing just outside her door with a frown on his face.

“Do you have a fight tomorrow?” Nabeel asked.

Abs nodded.

“Okay, what time do you want us there?”

“Around nine?” Abs replied.

“Hey guys.” I said, everyone turned to look at me, curiously. “How do I get a ticket for this fundraiser thing?”

They all burst out laughing.

Chapter Fourteen

Layla

My stomach churned as I tried to eat, nausea taking over my body but knowing there was no way I was going to let it show or excuse myself – that wouldn't be acceptable. My father looked up at me, watching me for a moment before going back to his food.

Did he know?

Could he sense my dishonesty?

Did he think it was my fault?

"It was not your fault, Layla," Zoya had reassured me that morning when my head was pounding and I didn't remember much. "And God's not going to punish you for something that wasn't your fault."

"But it was, I shouldn't have been there in the first place."

Next, my mind drifted to a different furious face, those saddened hazel eyes full of hurt that tugged at my heart strings and seeped into my soul, turning it black.

'Wallahi I hate you,' I had told him. *'This is your fault.'*

But it wasn't.

I hated him for what he had done in my bathroom, the image tattooed inside my mind, but from what I remember, he had also protected me when I needed it the most too. My mind struggled to put the pieces together, trying to convince my heart that he was not right for me in any way. But I was still confused – was he my saviour or my destruction? My friend or my foe?

Friday morning had come and gone, with no sign of Taimur in my lecture but that hadn't stopped me from staring at the door for an hour and a half, hoping he'd walk in, arrogance pouring off him and annoyance in every step, but alas, he was a no show.

I missed his presence and my tea.

I knew I had hurt him and he hated me for it, but I didn't know why it affected me so much. In my mind, I knew the right thing to do was to just let him go, allowing myself to be free of the burden of thinking of him but something else inside me enjoyed the heavy feeling of having someone to think about, and him finding residence in my mind without my permission.

We sat on the large dining table, silently eating our dinner as the cook's bustled in the kitchen. Chicken tagine, couscous and vegetables, our normal meal for three. I watched as Zoya moved the food around her plate, trying not to draw attention to herself. She was as nervous as I was. We were always nervous when it was just the three of us, we never knew the outcome of the dinner.

"Are you wearing nail varnish, Zoya?"

Zoya looked up from her plate, her face already pale and anxious as she shook her head while moving her hands off the table. I had seen her scrub off the colour on her nails before we left uni.

"Speak up, girl."

"No, Baba."

"Do you remember the last time I caught you wearing it?"

"Yes, Baba," she replied, her voice shaking. "I don't paint my nails. I know it's not allowed."

"Your uncle called today. He wanted to set a date for the engagement," Father said, not looking up from his food while snapping his fingers calling the kitchen staff.

I stole a glance at Zoya, her head was also bowed, shoulders tensed and eyes on her food, not chancing a glance at our father in case he saw the lies in her eyes.

"When are you guys thinking?" she asked, her voice quiet and timid, a different Zoya to the one I knew. Only in front of our father did the lioness become a mouse.

"Next September. I assume university will be over by then?" he said, as the staff brought his mint tea to him.

He didn't look at them.

He didn't thank them.

He just kept on eating.

"Yes," she forged a smile.

I smiled up at Fatima, our maid since we were kids, apologetically for my father's briskness.

"W...w...what if she'd...d...doesn't pass and needs a...a...another year or wants to d..do her m..masters?" I didn't know where the braveness came from but all I was thinking about was buying Zoya some time.

"Stop stuttering, Layla! Well-groomed ladies do not stutter," he admonished.

"She can't help it, Baba," Zoya softly stuck up for me, but as usual, he dismissed her comment.

"There is no 'if' in that matter. If either of you fail even *one* module, I will take you out of uni, lock you in your room till I get you married off to the first person I see fit. Do you understand me!?" he bellowed. "Do not make me repeat myself."

"Yes Baba," we replied in sync, knowing the threat was very real.

"And, if I hear you've been messing around behind my back with boys, you know what will happen." He continued, his cold eyes moving from Zoya to me and back to Zoya. Did he know what had happened? Would he punish me? "Do any of you want another haircut?"

"No."

Both Zoya and I knew he was referring to the time he cut Zoya's hair off when he found out she was speaking to a boy at her school, even though it was for her assignment. She was sixteen and needed to get a bob till the cut part grew out. It was a heart-breaking scene I didn't want to remember.

"I would never have allowed you two to live out if it wasn't for your mother's last wish. You can thank her for the temporary freedom you have." He went on, spooning food into his mouth in a respectable manner. "But don't think I'm not keeping an eye on you two. I know everything that goes on at university and I will not have my reputation tarnished because you two are reckless. Do you understand?"

"Yes Baba."

"I will be at the fundraiser tomorrow. You two will also be there in the ladies section, making sure everyone sees how we are as a respectable family in this community. Keep your head down and don't speak too much."

Our father was a well-known preacher in the community who people longed to meet and converse with. Due to his vast knowledge on religion and science, he was called round the world to give lectures and encourage people to come towards Islam. The word of his charity work and humanity had spread around every Muslim community and he had become a distinguished example of a great leader. Now, not only was he one of the communities' most legendary teachers, he was also a world-renowned author of many Islamic books.

However, the pressure of being a religious preachers' daughter weighed heavy on both Zoya and I, but more than that, the importance for us to keep a squeaky-clean reputation for our dad's sake was the hardest part, since any little thing we did could get interpreted in a negative way, disgracing our dad and discrediting everything he preached from the pulpit.

"I have to go early to help out. Is t..th..that okay?"

"Yes, but you know the rules."

"Yes Baba."

"Okay, finish your food and go."

"Yes Baba," We replied in unison before he headed off to the living-room, just like he did every evening.

Being hated by the one person you want the attention from is one of the worst feelings I had ever had, but I was about to find out that being pitied by that person, would destroy me more.

As I walked into the fundraiser the following evening, I admired the elegant atmosphere. The ballroom was enormous with large glass windows reaching high up toward the ceiling, and gigantic wooden doors leading into more scenic rooms. Around each window was an exquisite royal blue curtain with gold tassels, hanging to perfection. On the floor was a rich burgundy carpet with tiny gold designs, without a speck of dust on it. Huge round tables were carefully organised in rows of ten with crisp white tablecloths tightly placed over them, and decorated chairs set up around them. In the middle of the ceiling hung a strikingly gigantic chandelier made of glass, sending fragments of light scattering throughout the room. It was perfect.

Dressed in a long black coat covering my abaya, headscarf, and simple make up, I searched for Taimur's sister, Alia.

"Layla?" A sweet voice behind me asked, making me turn. "Salaam, I'm Alia."

Spinning, I found a tall girl dressed, too, in an abaya. Her hair was covered with a head scarf, similar to mine. She was beautiful in a strange way. She smiled at me, the familiar smile I knew to be Taimur's, and her light eyes reflected his in a way I didn't expect.

"I know. I look just like him, right? A girl version of my brother?"

"Um... yes, sorry I didn't mean to stare."

"It's okay. I'm used to it." She beamed, "Thank you for coming early."

"No problem. Where do I start?"

"Can you help me set these tables please? The others are doing the men's section which is on the other side of the curtain." She pointed to the material separating the two sections since women and men were forbidden to mix in these events.

"Sure thing."

We began placing a gold table mat, followed by the crockery and a plate and ending with a napkin sophisticatedly wrapped in a lace ribbon, on each place setting.

"Are you guys still fighting?"

"Who?"

"You and Tai..."

Not knowing what to say I decided to stay quiet, continuing with the job she had given me.

"I guess you are," she said, smiling.

"It's not fighting really, it's more like we're not talking to each other right now."

"I see, I know he can be annoying, but *Wallahi* he's really sweet deep down, way deep."

I didn't respond. I hadn't seen that side of him.

"He always wore his heart on his sleeve growing up, always took care of Kassy and me, but then he found out he had diabetes and he kind of changed."

"Oh..."

"He's just more temperamental now."

"Oh..."

"It's okay. We're used to him now, but I just wanted to tell you that if you give him a chance, he will surprise you."

"The diabetes really affects him, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it kind of turned his world upside down, overnight."

“It must have been hard for you guys, too.”

“It was. We found him passed out more times than I can count, and it was really frightening watching him have a seizure too. He had to stop playing sports for a while which made his mood worse. He used to be a football player and was trying to go pro. But since the diabetes issue started, he gave up on it.”

“But he’s healthy now?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s under control now. Thank God. He takes insulin injections every day and when he’s at home Mum tries to manage his diet but he’s pretty sensitive about it still.”

“There was this prank...” I said, trying to explain what had happened the other day. “I feel so bad.”

“I know, Chubs, sorry Nabeel, told me. Tai will get over it. Just give him some time. The boys are always playing pranks on each other.”

“Cute name. I bet he likes that.”

“Well he calls me Chip so he deserves it.”

“Chip?” I questioned. “Why Chip?”

“For so many reasons apparently. Because he thinks I look like a chipmunk, or a fried potato chip or because of my tooth.” She grinned so I could see a slight chip in her right tooth. It was miniscule, and if you didn’t look closely you would never notice it. “It’s his fault I have this broken tooth in the first place. He keeps changing the reason every time I ask.”

“And what about Chubs?”

“He used to be a bit chubby when he was younger.”

“Really, I would have never guessed.”

“I know, he’s really toned up now. And would you have guessed that Abs used to be the tallest?”

“He’s the shortest out of them right now, isn’t he?” I asked, copying the way she placed the knife and fork.

“Yup, and Kassy loved playing with my Barbie dolls,” she laughed.

The image of the charming Kassim I knew holding a Barbie made me laugh. “He’s going to kill me for that one,” she said.

“They don’t sound so tough right now,” I joked, “What about Taimur?”

“Taimur...” she sniggered, “No one calls him that apart from our parents.”

“And evidently me.”

“Make sense you would be different.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” she said. “What can I tell you about Tai?”

“Nothing,” a voice came from behind us, startling us. “Tell her *nothing* about me.”

It was Taimur.

Dressed like he’d walked out for a film premiere in a smart black suit, tailored perfectly to his muscular body, crisp white shirt and a grey tie knotted under his chin, he towered over me, holding me with his stare. His usual dark messy hair was slicked back, displaying his impeccably handsome face, his perfectly chiselled jawline was clean shaven, and his gorgeous eyes were smouldering, sharpening their gaze on me. He looked flawless, and I was stunned to my spot, mouth dry and heart beating at a million beats per second.

“What are you doing here, Tai?” Alia asked, taking the words right out of my mouth. I looked around, hoping no one saw him talking to me. This was not like uni, there were rules and eyes watching everywhere, and one small rumour could ruin everything my father had built. “I thought you decided not to come this morning?”

“I changed my mind,” he replied, his eyes still on me.

I glanced around, hoping no one was watching us talking. I felt naked under his stare even though I hardly had any skin exposed.

“What are you laughing about?” he asked.

“Layla is telling me about the fun you’ve been having at uni,” Alia joked.

“What?” he asked, his eyes narrowed on me again, irritation in them like I’d seen many times before and I took a step back from the twins, keeping a good amount of distance between us. “What are you telling my sister?”

“Nothing... I...” I stuttered once again, instantly knowing what he was referring to.

“I thought you hated me, Layla? I thought we decided we’d stay out of each other’s way?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Because, apparently everything that happens to you is my fault. If your friend gets in my face and I defend myself, it’s my fault. If you insult me by buying me sweets, it’s my fault. If someone spikes your drink, it’s my fault? Right?”

“No... It’s...”

“What are you telling my sister? Are you trying to get *your* revenge now? Exposing me?”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Why is it, everywhere I go you seem to be there, either with my brothers and now with my sister. Don’t you not have a family of your own to irritate or do they not want you either?”

I didn’t know what was worse; his cruel words or his cruel actions in my bathroom, but whatever it was, everything cut into me like a knife, twisting in me, causing an ache deep inside me. It stung, throbbed, and left a soreness that made me want to cry. My view blurred and I tried not to blink, keeping the water droplets inside my eyes. Alia must have noticed and pulled her brother away as I ran towards the bathroom. I could hear them arguing behind me, but the words were not coherent since all I could hear was the loud thumping of my stupid fragile heart.

I needed to stop feeling things for him.

He was horrible, and he hated me.

“I’m really *really* sorry, Layla,” Alia’s voice came from behind the toilet door a few minutes later. “He’s never this rude. I apologise on his behalf.”

I walked out of the stall, washed my hands and turned to her. She was holding a pair of eyelash curlers and eye liner in her hands, looking at me.

“It’s not your fault. We just don’t get on. Something always happens as soon as we start getting along. It’s like the universe doesn’t want us to be friends.”

“Maybe the universe wants something different.”

“Huh?”

“I get what Chubs meant now. I’ve honestly never seen Tai this mad. I told him I was joking, and you didn’t tell me anything. The boys think they hide their antics well, but my parents and I all know what they get up to. You know how it is, they get away with it because they’re guys. He left, by the way, you can come out here now.”

“Thanks,” I said and smiled at her, looking at my reflection in the large restroom mirror. My eyes were red and puffy with small streaks of mascara running down my cheeks. I tried to wipe away the marks, but they wouldn’t budge.

“Let me help you with that,” Alia said, taking out her makeup bag and starting to wipe my face with a facial wipe without my permission. She spent the next twenty minutes painting my face with numerous products

until she was satisfied with herself. “There, you’re ready to face the world now.”

My reflection didn’t look like me, but I liked it. The girl staring back had clear skin, contoured cheekbones and perfectly shaped cat eyes, dark around the rims. My eyelashes were elongated and dark due to the mascara and my heart shaped lips were painted light pink, defining them further. I loved it.

“Come on, I’ve finished setting up. Let’s get to the front desk to collect the tickets.”

“Alia?” someone called while we guarded the front desk, checking everyone in and placing them in their correct section so men and women did not mix. At the door stood four dashing gentlemen, all suited like they were walking out of a James Bond film, hair immaculate, clothes impeccable, smiles unadulterated and eyes focused on Alia. I stepped away, knowing everyone’s eyes were on us.

All four boys looked gorgeous.

Kassim with his dark eyes and dimpled smile, Nabeel with his stylish suspenders and killer smirk, Abs without his cap displaying his shaved head and high chiselled cheekbones, and Taimur who was nothing but perfection personified.

“Can you take a picture of us, please?” Aliya asked, handing me her phone. “Why is your hair still purple?” she asked, turning to Nabeel.

“Sure,” I replied, taking hold of it as Alia slipped between Nabeel and Kassim, in the middle of the four boys.

Before I could click a picture, a text message popped up which I had no choice to read since it was right in front of me.

CHUBS

We need to talk about what happened. Meet me later Chip?
MBS!

I QUICKLY CLICKED AWAY FROM TEXT MESSAGES AND PRESSED THE CAMERA icon down trying to forget what I read, but my curious mind thought I saw

Nabeel grasp Aliya's hand but let go too quickly before it was too noticeable, while I took the picture.

"Thank you." Kassim replied coldly, as if we were strangers and the four boys walked past me like we had never met before, their eyes on the ground.

"You okay?" Alia asked, noticing my face drop. "You know they have to pretend like they don't know you, they don't have a choice."

"I know, but sometimes I hate the double lives we have to live. I'm going to make my way inside," I said, worried my dad would catch me outside the event.

It was not like my father didn't allow me to have a life outside of uni, but when it came to community events, he wanted Zoya and I away from the men's section. That meant, even if I was standing in the lobby around men, he wouldn't be pleased.

Halfway through the fundraiser, just as our father took the pulpit to start his religious speech, Zoya arrived. Dressed in one of *my* black abaya and a blue head scarf wrapped around her head, she made her way towards my table, sitting down on the seat I'd saved her.

"...I have two daughters, I know the struggle of bringing up children here in London but we can raise good Muslim children and ensure our next generation is as good as us..."

"Oh God... Not again," Zoya said, placing her head in her hands. "Why did he have to bring us up?"

An old lady hushed us, trying to listen to what our dad was saying on the screen relayed from the men's side. Since the men and women were divided, there was a live feed relayed from the other side so that the women could see and hear what was going on next door.

Once the food had come and gone, announcements had been said, and items were auctioned for the Muslim charity, it was time Zoya and I left to reach home before Father. It was vital that we got there at a decent time and we both knew it.

"I'm heading off," I told Alia, placing my coat over my abaya. The weather was getting colder as each day passed and winter was soon to arrive in full force, covering London with a white blanket of snow. "I'll see you soon."

"No, no, no... You can't leave. I need help cleaning up."

"I'm really sorry I can't."

“Oh no. I assumed you were staying to help me so I told the others they could go.”

“Oh...”

“I’ll be on my own with all the money.”

“Can’t your brothers or cousins stay and help?”

“They’ve already left,” she pouted. “They had some party to go to.”

“Typical,” I replied, knowing exactly what the boys were going to get up to tonight. I took a long moment to think then realized I had to help Alia out since I had already given her my word. “Fine. I can stay for a bit and just help with the money side of things. Let me just tell my sister.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she grinned at me.

I found Zoya and explained the situation and to my disappointment she didn’t understand why I was staying.

“You do realise you’re going to be in trouble when you get home?”

“I’ll explain I was helping.”

“And you think that’s going to be good enough for him?”

“I can’t go back on my word. I had told her I’d help.”

“Fine Layli. I’ll try to cover for you the best I can.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too Layli,” she replied, kissing my cheek.

“I wish I had a sister,” Alia’s said. “It’s pretty lonely having two brothers. Even the younger one thinks he can boss me about.”

I laughed, walking towards the back room to sort out the money as we watched everyone leave.

“Let’s get to it,” Alia said, handing me a stack of fifty pound notes to count.

Worry set in, like a dark cloud over my head as every minute went by. I was trying to calm myself down as we left the building, looking for where our separate cabs were, when I heard a voice behind me.

“How are you getting home?” I turned to find Taimur standing behind me, muscular body leaning against the door frame, tie loosened around his thick neck, suit jacket in hand and a cigarette between his plump lips. His hair was back to being messy, the way I liked it, and his sharp hazel eyes were tired but directed at me. I didn’t know perfection existed until I’d seen him.

I searched around to see who he was talking to but there was no one left apart from me.

“We’re alone. There is no one around, Layla. You don’t need to pretend like you don’t know me.” he said. We both knew the rules. “Now, how are you getting home?”

“Why do you care?” I asked. Feeling brave and not knowing what got into me, I walked up to him, took the cigarette out of his mouth and threw into an ashtray by the door.

He chuckled, as I frantically looked around again, making sure no one could see us.

“Smoking kills, you know?” I said.

“I know, but I thought you might be happy if I was dead.”

“Hmmm...”

“How are you getting home?” he asked again, lighting another cigarette.

“Again, why do you care?”

“I don’t, but I’m not going to let a girl go home alone at this time. My mum didn’t raise me like that.”

“I can look after myself.”

“That was evident at the flat party.”

“That wasn’t my fault.”

“It wasn’t mine either.”

“I... I know. Anyway, I’ll get a cab.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re going to get a cab at this time. Let me drop you home.”

“No.”

“Are you always this stubborn or is it especially for me?”

“Only you,” I replied, turning to find Alia enjoying our conversation. “Plus, why would I go in a car with someone who insulted me a few hours ago?”

“I made a mistake. I apologise. I’m sorry.”

“Wow, did my brother just say he was sorry?” Alia laughed, pulling me along with her.

“And I also wanted to say... you look beautiful,” he said, with a genuine smile that set the butterflies fluttering in my stomach again.

“Um...w...what?”

“Come on, Layla. Let us drop you home. It’s safer and we’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Alia said you were going out with the boys?” I asked Taimur, eyebrow raised.

“Changed my mind.”

“You’ve been changing your mind a lot recently,” Alia chimed in, grinning like she knew a secret. “Let’s go. My feet hurt in these heels.”

Before I could protest, I was in the back seat of Taimur’s car driving towards the south of London even though they lived in the north.

Taimur kept quiet as he drove, while Alia spoke without taking a breath, talking about university, her parents and fashion. It was strange to think of them as twins since they were really so different.

Once every few minutes I caught Taimur’s gaze in the rear-view mirror, sending shivers down my spine and making my heart beat faster. He watched me with his hungry eyes, staring at me like he wanted to say something but didn’t have the right words to say.

“...and that’s why I had to stay home for uni and my brothers got to live out,” Alia finally stopped talking, but I had missed the entire conversation while watching Taimur watch me.

“It’s not that we don’t trust you Lia, it’s that we don’t trust the guys around you,” Taimur said.

“Same difference,” she rolled her eyes. “Anyways, we have a long drive still so let’s play a game.”

“What?” both Taimur and I asked.

“Can’t we just listen to the radio?” he asked.

“No. I want to get to know Layla since I’m the only one who seems to know nothing about you so let’s play 20 questions.”

“I’m sure Layla doesn’t want to play.”

“Actually, I don’t mind,” I said, just to spite him.

“Fine,” his tone was sharp, flicking his cigarette out the window before shutting it. “I’ll start. Why are you so particular about everything?”

“What?” I asked.

“I’ve noticed you in lectures, you are always on time, you sit in the same exact seat, you use the same exact pen, the same pink highlighter, everything has to be perfect... why?”

“Seems like you’ve noticed a lot,” Alia mumbled, holding back a laugh.

“I just like routine. Everything in an orderly fashion? I like to be in control. Why are you the opposite? No pen, random papers to write on, always late.”

“I like living on the edge. Have you ever tried it? Living a little?”

"I don't need to live on the edge to live a little. I live just fine the way I am, thank you very much."

"But *fine* isn't good enough, Pearl. You need more than fine in life."

"So what? Going out every night is living a little? Is that what I have to do?"

"No, just doing stuff you enjoy."

"I do things I enjoy."

"Like what?"

"I like cooking. It relaxes me."

"Cooking... hmmm... would have never pegged you for a chef. Tell me something interesting about you."

"What?"

"Something different. That sets you apart from the rest of the population?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Think."

There was a long silence as I thought about his question.

"I collect shot glasses."

"What?"

"I collect shot glasses," I repeated.

"Those were yours?" he said, more to himself than me.

"Yeah."

"So the girl who's against drinking, who doesn't even sit on the same table as someone with alcohol, collects shot glasses? Interesting."

"I just like them. I like small things."

"Said no girl ever," Taimur said, not missing a beat.

"Oh my god, stop! My turn to ask, Layla," Alia said, breaking the tension in the car. "Favourite colour."

"Pink." Both Taimur and I replied.

"Oh..."

"Favourite drink?"

"Tea." Again, both of us answered.

"Very sweet." He added.

"Favourite food?"

"Cereal."

"Favourite person?"

"Zoya."

“Favourite place in the world?”

“Nowhere.” I said, without thinking.

There was an awkward silence.

“So, I like purple, and Tai’s favourite colour is black. Our favourite food is Lasagne and ummm, where’s your favourite place, Tai?”

“Anywhere you are, apparently,” he replied to his sister, but his eyes were on me in the rear-view mirror and once again, something fluttered in my stomach that felt a lot like butterflies.

“And your favourite person?” Alia asked.

“You,” he said to her, but his eyes were still on me.

When we reached my house, I nervously climbed out the car, and turned to thank Alia for the ride home but she was fast asleep, her light eyes tightly shut and dark hair covered head tilted towards the door, resting on it for support. Her headscarf she had worn just for the event had fallen off and her mouth was slightly open, gently breathing in and out.

“She looks so peaceful,” Taimur said. “I wish I could sleep like her. She has no worries in the world.”

“Me too,” I mumbled back, gathering my things.

“I just want to protect her from everything, you know?”

“You know you can’t, right? She’s going to have to experience things for herself at some point.”

“I know, but I want to keep her innocent as long as I possibly can.”

“I get that, she’s your twin sister.”

“I don’t know if I want to wrap her in bubble wrap and protect her from the world or if I want to wrap the world in bubble wrap and protect them from her – she’s a force to be reckoned with.”

There was something about the tenderness he had for his sister, the love and protection, that pulled at my heartstrings, and gave the first glimpse of the Taimur I had not met yet.

“And Kassim too. They’re my kryptonite. I can’t see them in trouble,” he continued.

“I know how you feel. I feel the same way about my sister,” I replied, thinking of the bond Zoya and I had. It was the same.

“It was strange to see Zoya like that today.”

“Like what?”

“All covered up in hijab. I’m used to seeing her...”

“Naked?”

“No,” he grimaced, his hazel eyes staring at me. “I meant without a headscarf and all covered up in an abaya. She looked so... different.”

“Yeah, she hates wearing it. Anyways, I have to go.”

“Pearl...” Taimur began, and for once I didn’t wince at the name. “I’m sorry about what I said before. I didn’t mean it. I don’t know why... I’m sorry what happened at the flat party too, you know, in your bathroom. I don’t know why. I was just mad at the whole sweet thing. I guess I have a way of being self-destructive. I just wanted you to know, if it’s not obvious already, I like...”

“...Thank you for the ride home,” I interrupted him, not wanting him to finish. It was late, the moon was out and the atmosphere had shifted.

I walked quickly down the road, the cold wind hurrying me along as I shook the feeling of his stare on me the entire ride home. On approaching the front porch, I turned around to indicate to Taimur that he was alright to go as I turned the tight door knob to let myself in. To my shock I heard Zoya screaming and sprinted into the house.

“Zoya?” I screamed back, worried that something had happened to her. Our house was large and it took me a few strides to get to her but when I did, I staggered back. I found her clinging to her arm while sobbing on the steps of the bulky stairs with our father towering over her. Her face was inflamed, with streaks of tears running down her crimson cheeks and her body was shaking, similar to the other times I’d seen her like this.

“W...w...w.hat’s g...g...g...going on?” I asked, alarmed.

“Go to your room, Layla. I got this,” Zoya replied, pulling me into the house and towards the stairs. “Go upstairs and lock your door.”

“No... W..w...what happened?”

“You girls will kill me one day!” our father yelled, turning towards me. “Why don’t you listen to me.”

“We’re sorry Baba... *Wallahi*,” Zoya began, standing between him and me, trying to protect me like she usually did. “Can we just go to bed?”

“What happened, Baba?” I asked, trying to keep him calm but not daring to touch him when he was enraged. “Please tell me.”

“Why should I tell you? Who are you to ask me questions?” He marched up to me, pushing my sister out the way, and grabbed me by my wrist, sending a razor-sharp flicker of pain down my entire arm. He pushed me towards the hefty wall before slapping my two petrified cheeks, one

after the other. "Why are you wearing makeup? Where have you been!? Out with boys, I know it!"

I stood, immobilized, and closed my eyes securely, wishing this wasn't happening but expecting another slap to come soon. However, I felt nothing. Staggered, I timidly opened my eyes, to find Taimur standing between my father and myself. His broad back was to me as he held out his strong arms, stopping my dad from beating me further. Zoya scuttled beside me, trying to pull me into her arms.

"Stop! You can't hit her," Taimur said.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I was driving past and your door was open. I thought someone had broken in."

"You left the door open, stupid, stupid girl," my father bellowed, soaring forward and snatching my head scarf from my head. I screamed as the scarf began to strangle me, my throat constricting and gasping for breath, before falling to the floor displaying my long hair. Taimur abruptly turned towards me, plucking me away from both my sister and father and enveloping me in his arms.

"STOP!" he roared back.

"Please just go, Taimur. I can handle this. *Wallahi*. I swear, Just go," I whispered into his warm chest, tears rolling down my face.

"No, I won't. I'm taking you with me," he replied, anger filling his voice and wrapping his arms around me tighter. I could feel his heart beating frantically, matching mine. "Get back in the car." he whispered in my ear.

"Get your hands off her!" Dad demanded, trying to get to me but Taimur was in his way. "Who the hell do you think you are interfering in our business?"

Taimur ignored him, moving away just enough for me to lift my head and see his eyes. Fire burnt in them, rage against what he had just witnessed and I was afraid to look away.

"You're coming with me, Layla," his stern eyes challenged me to defy him.

"And what about Zoya?"

"She's coming, too."

"And what about tomorrow when we have to come back? It'll be worse," Zoya finally spoke up, knowing that wasn't the solution.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked Zoya, referring to their budding friendship.

“Oh, shut up!” my father bellowed before we watched him stumble up the long staircase, harshly moving Zoya out the way to reach his bedroom then slamming his door shut.

“Go upstairs Zoya. I need to talk to Taimur. I’ll be up soon,” I promised. Zoya nodded and quickly disappeared, knowing I had to convince Taimur not to speak about what he had just seen.

We turned towards each other, silence befalling the room, not knowing what to say next. His eyes mirrored mine with anger, sadness, and apprehension but with a faint glimmer of sympathy too.

I hated it.

The pity.

It broke me further.

“Please don’t tell anyone, Taimur,” I began, trying not to sound like I was begging but my voice came out as a plea. Painful tears rolled down my wet cheeks smudging my makeup along with it. “He’s just had a bit too much to drink.”

“He drinks? But he’s a preacher. It’s forbidden.” Taimur asked, astonished. He moved closer to comfort me again, but I moved away, suddenly realizing our close proximity. “This is why you hate drinking so much?”

“Yes, but please keep it to yourself.” I couldn’t hold back any further. Tears continuously poured down my face like a waterfall with no place to go but crash on the ground. I fell to the floor, shaking with sorrow. “Please just leave.”

“This is why you’re so particular about everything. You’re constantly scared and need to be in control of what you can.”

I didn’t answer.

I didn’t need to.

“And this is why you’re always looking over your shoulder,” he said, as if he was thinking out loud. “It all makes sense now. This is why you were so stressed at the flat party. You were scared he’d find out, weren’t you?”

“Please, Taimur... Don’t tell anyone. He won’t come out of his room now. He’s just hurting. He’ll be fine in the morning.”

Kneeling down, Taimur placed his sturdy hand on my shoulders, not taking no for an answer this time, allowing me to lean on him. He helped

me back to my feet, coming closer so I could rest my head on his firm chest, again.

Unconsciously, he placed his right arm around me so I didn't fall and for a brief moment, I felt like everything was going to be alright. That moment, in the arms of the only man I was ever going to love I felt safe, protected and untouchable. We stood still, basking in the feel of one another for the first time, our content hearts humming as one, until an icy breeze flew in from the opened front door abruptly breaking us apart.

"Thank you. I'll see you at uni on Monday," I whispered, moving away from him and walking up the stairs without looking back. "I still hate you, by the way."

Chapter Fifteen

Taimur

Here she sat, short legs dangling off the brick sidewalk towards the university canal yet not touching the water, like she was suspended in mid-air not knowing if she should stay or jump. A flicker of fear ran through my mind, wondering if she was okay.

There was something so broken about her in that moment, I recognised it.

Broken recognises broken.

She looked cheerless, palms on the cold earth, digging into the wet grass behind the sidewalk and woeful eyes turned away from the world, miles away from where we were. There was something about the way her elegant body drooped and her small head bowed while the breeze tossed her head scarf to the side, which took my breath away. Even in sadness she looked beautiful, and I still couldn't stop watching her.

So innocent.

So untainted.

Heaven personified.

Without comprehending my actions, I found myself travelling towards her, cold hand bringing my cigarette to my lips and hood over my head. It was a chilly night, but Layla was dressed in a pair of black leggings and light jumper, and I couldn't shake the vision of my arms around her, keeping her warm, out of my mind.

When I was close enough, I noticed she was crying. Small tear drops began in her eyes, swam down her cheeks and ended on her chin before she

wiped them away, sniffing the cold air around her.

My heart squeezed and my insides hurt.

In her small hands was a takeaway cup, a small stream of steam escaping the top, and I knew she was sipping her sweet tea.

My feet stepping on the scattered leaves broke her tranquil stare at the water and she slowly peered up at me, eyes red and big, with dejection deeply embedded in them. My throat went dry, and my jaw clenched as our eyes met.

She wiped the water from her face and her gaze reconnected with mine as I saw her walls go up, knowing the vulnerable girl I had just witnessed was now replaced with the one that disliked me, who wanted me out of her life, but I couldn't leave.

"What are you doing here at this time?" I asked, coming closer to sit next to her. I tossed the rest of my cigarette into the water as my body swayed while I sat down, the drinks going to my head. She moved, starting to get up but I held onto her wrist, preventing her from going. Flinching at my touch, not knowing if it was me or the previous bruise that hurt her.

"None of your business, Taimur," was her bitter reply, as cold as the night was. She looked up at me, sipping her tea before placing it onto the ground between us. "You're drunk."

"Not drunk," I justified, not knowing why. "Just had a few."

"You stink of fags, too."

"What's new in that?"

"Shouldn't you be with some girl right now? Maybe my sister? Maybe in my bathroom?" I watched small puffs of condensation released from her warm mouth into the cold air around us.

"Do I sense some jealousy?" I said, picking up her tea and taking a sip of the disgustingly sweet liquid before wincing.

"In your dreams," her soft voice was laced with half anger and half sadness.

"Well in my dreams, you're..."

She quickly covered my mouth with her small hands, stopping me from finishing the sentence. Her fingers were freezing, iced even, and even though she surprised me, I didn't pull away, allowing her to touch my face.

I stared at her, enjoying the feeling of her touch.

She didn't look away, she didn't move her hand, and she didn't breathe. We just sat in that moment, mesmerized by each other.

Eventually, realisation of what she was doing flashed in her eyes, and she slowly moved her hand from my mouth but didn't break contact with my skin. Unexpectedly, she moved her frozen hand to my cheeks, gently grazing my stubble and rested on my cheek bone. Her delicate thumb stroked my icy mouth, and I dared not move. One movement and I knew she'd pull away and I'd be left there, yearning for her touch. The sensation of her hands on me felt different to anything I'd ever felt. Watching her watch me, I relaxed in her hand, leaning into her touch and trying to tell my heart to stop thumping in my chest.

I watched her as the sleeve of her jumper fell down her arm, revealing a very swollen and blue bruise on her wrist. I breathed out the breath I didn't know I was holding, and she broke our connection, moving her hand away like I had just burnt her fingers. She pulled her sleeve down, interlocked her hands and turned back to the canal, watching the dark water flow away just as our moment had.

It had been a few days since I'd witnessed the series of events at her house, but the images were on repeat in my mind, haunting me every second of the day.

"I said I was sorry about the bathroom thing."

"I said I didn't care."

"You shouldn't lie."

"And you shouldn't drink so much. It's bad for your diabetes," Layla said, not looking at me. "And there is a lot of sugar in red bulls and energy drinks I've seen you drink too."

"That's what insulin injections are for," I replied.

There was another long pause between us.

"I love it here at night. It's so quiet and peaceful," she said, eyes still on the view. "And the view is beautiful."

"You could say that," I said, looking at her, she turned her head towards me and I winked, trying to break the uncomfortable aura around us.

"You're either provoking me or flirting with me? Are those your two default settings?" she smiled, and what a smile it was.

"It can be if it gets you to smile like that."

She rolled her eyes and I chuckled, and we were back to the silence. A few serene moments passed while she gradually sipped her drink, before she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Taimur."

“For?”

“For the things I keep accusing you of. First the fight, then the flat party, both weren’t your fault. I’m sorry for the things I said. This person I become when I’m around you isn’t me, I promise. This isn’t me.”

“I think it is.”

“What?”

“I think you are the real authentic version of yourself when you’re around me, Layla. Somehow and for some reason, you let go of your insecurities, and you forget to worry about what everyone else will think, or what’s right and wrong, or what religion tells you to do, and you’re just you. Imperfectly perfect.”

There was a long pause, quiet filling the space between us as the silver moon shone down.

“Who are you when you’re with *me*, Taimur?” she finally asked, her eyes on the water.

“I don’t know Pearl, but I want to find out.”

“Can we call a truce? Can we try to be friends?”

Friends?

Could we be friends?

There was a longer silence this time, and as moments passed, the comfort between us grew, and without realising I started to open up about my life, about my brothers and about the person I never talk about but could not ever forget.

“There was five of us, you know. Me, Abs, Nabeel, Kassim and *Tariq*. Our dads are four brothers, and we too were brought up like brothers. It really pissed Alia off since she was the only girl around at that time. Now she has other girl cousins but they’re still quite small. She’s not close to them,” I finally spoke, breaking the quiet, not really understanding why I was opening up to her.

“Oh. Where’s Tariq? Why isn’t he at uni with the rest of you?”

“He’s not around anymore,” I replied, not being able to go into details about it without my throat constricting and my eyes watering.

She turned to look at me, eyes filled with something I hadn’t seen before, concern?

“It’s been hard without him. Our dynamic has changed, but Nabeel’s taken it the hardest. I don’t know what’s going on with him recently.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s just not himself. And I think he and Alia had an argument because it seems like they’re not talking too. Alia and Nabeel have always been closer than the rest of us. I’m worried that without having Tariq or Alia looking out for him, he might do something stupid.”

“What happened to Tariq?”

I didn’t have a reply. I couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

“Your turn. I’ve just opened up to you, it’s your turn to do the same so I don’t feel so exposed over here.”

Layla signed, looking away from me and towards the water once again, melancholy in her every movement. I didn’t think she was going to speak, until she did and her words hit me like a ton of bricks smashing my aching heart.

“I feel like jumping in.”

“Like for a swim?”

“No.”

“Oh...” I realised she was referring to going in the water and not coming out. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I feel alone. I miss my mum, I guess.”

“What about your sister?”

“She’s amazing, but she’s different to me.”

“And your mum was the same.”

“Yeah, she was my best friend.”

“What happened?”

“Cancer.”

“When?”

“Five years ago.”

“I’m really sorry Pear....Layla.”

“It’s okay.”

There was a beat of silence as we watched the flowing water in front of us.

“What’s your favourite memory of her?”

“There are lots,” she paused. “But going to see the Christmas lights together on Oxford Street. It was always so magical. Then she’d take us to Hamley’s to see the Christmas window and buy us any toy we wanted.”

“That sounds fun.”

“It was, but I haven’t seen the Christmas lights since she died.”

“Why?”

"It just makes me miss her too much."

"I get that," I said, knowing how loss can change a happy memory to sad in a blink of an eye. "How's your wrist?"

I watched her flinch as she touched it, wrapping her small hand around the swollen part. She didn't reply.

"Have you spoken to someone about it?"

"No."

"I'm sure someone can help him if you talk to them."

"We can't Taimur. It'll break him. We're all he has left. If someone found out then he's career would be over," she said, and I understood, but anger still soared through me, and my eyes still burned with fury. How could someone do that to their own daughter?

"It's not right."

"It is what it is. I can't change it. It was meant to be. All of this is. It's my fate. God has a plan for me, I'm sure of it. It's called *Tawwakul*."

"*Tawwakul*?"

"It means that even though I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or what the solution is, I trust that God has a plan for me. I trust that he knows best. That God is with me and will guide me through it. That all this is part of my journey."

"You know what? All my life people told me if it was meant to be it would be, that God has a plan, but that's just bullshit, Pearl. That's an excuse for scared people to wait around for things to happen or not do anything about their troubles. And then when life doesn't turn out the way they want it to, they blame it on fate or destiny, or whatever bullshit you want to call it. They say you can't fight fate, but I think you can. I think you make your own fate. Go out there and get what you want because no one is going to give it to you. The world owes you nothing, Pearl. The world will take from you till you have nothing left to give, so all you can do is fight back, scream and punch till you get your way."

"I can't, Taimur."

"Yes, you can. I see what you're like with your sister, what you're like with Moe and the people around you. You take the broken cookie because you think you don't deserve the full one."

She didn't reply.

"Maybe I am the broken cookie."

“You deserve the full one Pearl. You deserve a full life, and what he’s doing is wrong.”

“You don’t understand... he misses my mum.”

“That’s no excuse for what I saw the other day.”

“Please Taimur, I am literally begging you right now, don’t say anything to anyone. You would ruin us. Ruin me.”

“I...”

“Promise me,” she turned to look into my eyes. I took a few moments to relax, calming myself down before I nodded, agreeing to her demands.

The way she looked at me said everything.

“*Wallahi*,” I swore to her, using the same phrase she constantly used.

“Thank you Taimur. Sometimes I feel it would be better if I wasn’t around,” she mumbled, looking away.

“Better for who?”

“Everyone.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know you very well but from what I’ve seen you’re pretty wonderful. You’re caring, passionate about your beliefs and smart too. You have a sister who thinks the world of you, trust me, and a best friend who would, stupidly, confront a stranger with three brothers to protect you.”

“They don’t know the real me.”

“Who does.”

“No one.”

“I want to.”

“I’m a mess, Taimur. I’m scattered everywhere.”

“So is the sky Pearl, but no one calls it a mess. They still lift their head and pray to it.”

Silence.

We watched the dirty canal water pass us by, as I began the conversation about the weekend we had both been dreading, and Layla began to open up, revealing things that were hard to not only verbalise, but also hear.

“I don’t know what to think of you, Taimur.” She said, wiping her eyes after the conversation.

“I just want you to *think* of me, Pearl.”

I didn’t know where my comment came from but when I looked up at her, seeing the tears held back in her eyes, I couldn’t help but touch her face. As soon as I did, tears began to roll down again, flowing like a

beautiful stream, with no ending. Holding her face between my hands, I stroked her cheeks, wiping away as many tears as I could. I wanted to tell her that it'll be okay. That she'd got me. But that wasn't true, I was just a stranger sitting by a canal at three in the morning, asking her to tell me her secrets.

Layla let me touch her.

She felt soft under my touch, softer than anything I'd ever felt, and her unpinned headscarf slipped off her silky hair, revealing the dark chocolate strands of hair I knew she had.

Under the silver moonlight, in the middle of the black night, in the tranquil silence, she looked like the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on, and I craved her like I had never craved anything before.

"Where have you been all my life?" I whispered, leaning in closer, not pulling her towards me but bringing myself to her, surrendering to her as you may, giving her my heart without even knowing.

A sinner coming to a saint.

To my surprise she shifted closer until our foolish lips were near enough that our breaths were intertwined. I felt her chest nervously rise and fall with every breath she took, and her tender eyes closed, taking in the same feeling I was. I softly placed my mouth on hers, slowly, feeling the salty tears on my lips and closed my eyes too, shuddering at the connection we had just formed.

Realisation hit me as soon as I touched her lips, bringing me crashing down to reality before I could move forward.

I couldn't kiss her.

I couldn't be selfish with her.

I couldn't take what I wanted and walk away, because she was different.

Abruptly, I pulled away. Shaking my head and getting to my feet. I noticed her head scarf on the floor next to us and picked it up, placing it in her hands.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into the air before turning around. "I should..." And without finishing my sentence I raced away from her, away from the girl I was falling for, away from my own destiny.

Chapter Sixteen

Layla

I was supposed to be alone.
Me, the water, the night and my cup of tea.

There wasn't supposed to be anyone around at this time, there never was. Finding a secret spot on the canal wall, I had made myself comfortable, watching the water swaying past like it was in no rush to go anywhere. But that wasn't true, everyone was in a rush to go somewhere whether it was to a job, or a lecture or home. Everyone had a direction, except for me.

I didn't know where I was going.

The weekend's activities ate me alive as I ached to tell someone, confide in another human being, tell them the truth, but I had no one who would understand. It had been eating at me for years, and after this weekend, I had to get it out.

I was scared.

I was terrified.

I was lonely.

"When did it start, Pearl?" Taimur had asked, mid conversation about his family, after he had just told me about his fourth cousin, Tariq and how the sky was scattered just like me.

The genuineness in his voice had initially taken me off guard making me feel like I may have been the only person he'd shared that with.

The look on his tender face when speaking about his cousin told me not to prod for more information and that him even mentioning Tariq to me was

a big deal. I wondered what had happened to him but didn't let curiosity get the best of me, for I knew better than anyone that some secrets were better left as secrets, untouched and unspoken.

"The first time was a few months after our mum's death when Zoya and I went to the cinema," I confessed. Not being able to make eye contact, I sipped my tea.

"What did he do?" he asked, finding my hand on the murky grass and placing his large one over it. He squeezed, encouraging me to keep speaking. I should have moved my hand. Touching him was forbidden, but I don't know why I didn't.

"He just slapped Zoya. I was watching from the top of the stairs."

"Was he drunk?"

"I don't think so."

"When did *that* start?"

"A little after the first time."

"What happens, Pearl?" His sincerity bled from his soft voice, genuinely wanting to hear what I had to say, and I couldn't hold back. For the first time in forever, I didn't feel alone, and I was surprised the feeling came from a guy I had told myself to stay away from.

"He comes home upset, misses mum and starts drinking alone, to try and forget her, I guess. That's when he changes." My eyes were fixed on where our hands were now interlocked, palm to palm.

"Changes?"

I stared into his deeply troubled eyes. "That's when he's not my dad anymore, Taimur. That's when he gets angry."

"And hits you?"

"Sometimes... other times he just yells at us."

After that, Taimur stayed silent, letting me cry in his sturdy arms without moving away, until he did.

And when he did, our lips touched.

I shouldn't trust him.

I shouldn't have needed him.

I shouldn't have wanted him.

It was not allowed, but there was an innate sentiment inside me telling me I could trust him.

It felt like hours before our lips finally met, linking us together for the first time. My faint eyes closed, completely taken in by the new sensation of

his lips on mine and my foolish body spoke to him without me realizing, allowing him to advance, urging him to kiss me even when I knew it was wrong.

However, rejection befell me as he stopped, moving away from me as if I was poison on his lips, giving him the kiss of death. Before I could come to terms with what had happened, he was gone, abandoning me with my thoughts and senseless beating heart once again.

Chapter Seventeen

Taimur

Something between us changed that night.

We had always felt the gravitational pull from the first day we met, but after that moment, it went from a pull to a fierce force, which only began to grow stronger with time. Layla pushed and I pulled, and when I pulled she pushed, none of us ready to accept what was happening between us.

I wanted to get to know her better than anyone else, wanted her to know me like no one else did, and I wanted the whole world to know it too.

It had been a few months since meeting Layla by the canal, Christmas had come and gone, and even though we had spent much time together, in 9am lectures and with my brothers, forming a friendship I never thought we would, we never mentioned what had happened between us again. But, from that day our *friendship* had begun.

Friendship.

Friends.

Yeah, right.

Not mentioning what happened between us at the canal didn't mean that it didn't replay in my mind. Like a song on repeat, I recalled the way her striking green eyes stared at me, hungry and willing, her shallow breath inviting and the way her large chest rose and fell with anticipation of the kiss I didn't give her.

The first time Layla and I spent some alone time together, after the canal incident and outside our lectures, was by accident and it was also the

day I found out she couldn't cook to save her life.

Apparently, everyone had received the memo before me and had decided to slowly excuse themselves from dinner once they saw she was in the kitchen cooking up one of her concoctions. I should have realised the strangeness to the situation when my brothers, Zoya and even Moe suspiciously excused themselves for prior engagements when usually they would never give up an opportunity to be around Layla. But due to the intense urge to spend time with her and the extreme gravitational pull I felt towards her, I didn't ponder on it too much.

Once she had finished making her meal, which she had tried to make as healthy as possible for me, she had laid that table and sat opposite me, her big green eyes watching in anticipation as I took my first bite. The taste wasn't too bad, yet I couldn't say I'd request to eat the same meal again, but after seeing her hopefulness, I smiled down at her, untruthfully telling her it was the best meal I'd ever eaten.

Unfortunately for my stomach but fortunately for my heart, Layla had taken this as an invitation to try out *all* her new recipes on me, every other day texting me to come over for dinner, and being the foolish obsessed guy I was, I made my way towards her like a lost puppy, building a forbidden bond between us and falsely appreciating her food in the aim to spend as much alone time with her as I could.

I knew I had a problem.

Even though we were now friends, every time she was around me my body felt like it was on overdrive, noticing her every movement, her every breath and her every smile. I knew she caught me more times than not staring at her, captivated by her in every way.

"Try one, Taimur," Pearl said one evening when she had decided to try baking instead of cooking and attempted to make ginger biscuits. "I used diabetic sugar."

"You know I can eat normal sugar, right?"

"I know but I just want you to be safe. Did you take your insulin injection today?" she asked, sending a fuzzy feeling inside me that I didn't quite understand.

She cared about me.

"Just try one."

Happily, I took a ginger biscuit in my hand, hoping for the best before taking a bite. The immensely hard crust nearly broke my front tooth as I

grimaced while I chewed the rest of it before it began to burn my mouth.

“Did you.... shit! did you put chili in this?” I asked, grabbing a bottle of water to wash down the cookie as well as to calm the burning sensation in my mouth.

“No, I just followed the recipe I found online. I just adapted it a bit because I was worried about the consistency of the sweetener, so I added a little more ginger powder to it,” she said, her big naive eyes watching me in optimism. “Why, is it spicy?”

“Very...” I coughed, “Very, very spicy Pearl. Didn’t you try it?”

“Oh no no no no no!” She paced the kitchen while biting her bottom lip. I dreamt of pulling that lip out of her mouth and biting it myself before kissing away the pain. I shook my head to get rid of the fantasy and concentrate on what she was saying.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. I’ll survive a little spice. It’s no big deal.”

“It is a big deal.”

I looked confusedly at her, waiting for her to continue.

“I sent a bunch of these in a box to your flat, for Abs.”

“What? Why?” jealousy rising inside.

“Because he hates me, Taimur. I thought if I made something and sent it to him it would make him hate me less.”

“Firstly Pearl, he doesn’t hate you, secondly, why didn’t you taste them before you sent them and thirdly, we might have a bigger problem.”

“What could be bigger than sending him spicy biscuits?”

“The fact that Abs has IBS and can’t eat spicy food without getting a severe stomach-ache.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Taimur, you have to do something. Please. Call him now. Tell him not to eat them.”

“Okay, give me a second,” I said while trying to call him, but his phone went straight to voicemail. I looked up at Layla, her porcelain cheeks now red with anxiety, her tiny nose scrunched with apprehension and her teeth still biting her bottom lip harder than before.

“You have to go get them back, Taimur.” Grabbing my sweaty hand, she tried to pull me off the wooden chair only to be pulled back by my unintentional reflexes. Her light body fell towards mine and before she

could hold herself back, she ended up on my lap, our bodies thrust together. Surprisingly, she didn't move away as quickly as I expected.

"Can you please go and get the biscuits back before he eats them?" she implored.

"Yeah, I'll go do that now." I stood and adjusted my trousers. For once I was happy to get away from Pearl before I did something else that would put us in a compromising situation *again*. "Ummm... I'll see you later."

"Yeah, see you later Taimur."

Unfortunately, I didn't get to Abs in time, and he was not amused after eating a bite of a biscuit. I tried to explain what had happened, but he walked off, slamming his room door behind him irritated but strangely, when I got up the next morning, all the biscuits were gone.

Despite our growing attachment, Layla still spent a lot of her time with all of us as a group, including her best friend Moe. My dislike for him increased day by day while my jealousy towards anyone Layla spent time with expanded into a green monster that reared his ugly head when I least expected it to.

Every time Moe touched her I clenched my fists, holding in anger I didn't know I had. And when Kassim harmlessly flirted with her, I bit my tongue, holding back curse words towards my little brother. And when Nabeel wrapped her in his bear hug I walked away, not wanting to make a scene. Any time she smiled at anyone other than me my blood bubbled, possessiveness circulating around her.

The most difficult feeling was when her dad called her. I watched her demeanour change from relaxed to uptight, now knowing exactly why. I wanted to help her, I just didn't know how without breaking my promise.

Layla had slowly taken over my life and she didn't even know it.

It was only Abs who saw what was going on and stayed away, keeping his distance from her, but sometimes, when he thought no one was noticing, I saw him look at her a moment too long, smile a little too wide and spend a little too much time when she was around.

"Wallahi, I can't breathe," Layla said one afternoon, limping off the treadmill I had forced her on. She was in a loose tracksuit, trainers and headscarf.

"No, no, no." I replied, still running on the treadmill beside her, my sweaty hair stuck to my forehead and my chest dripping with perspiration

under my grey sports t-shirt. “Five more minutes. Come on, you can do it, Pearl.”

“I can’t, Taimur. I really can’t. Wallahi, I’m going to die.” She collapsed on the floor with her pink water bottle in hand, her substantial chest heaving as she tried to gasp for air. I had attempted to look away, but my gaze was glued to the redness on her porcelain cheeks, her bright eyes unapologetically roaming over my sticky body and the water droplets trickling down her chin from the liquid she had just gulped down, and before I knew it, I was being hauled off the treadmill, tumbling backwards towards the glass wall as I lost my footing.

My back smashed into the hard glass and my already sore body suddenly ached all over before I turned to see Pearl abruptly spit out the water in her mouth all over herself, bursting into hilarious laughter at my expense.

“I...” she laughed harder, the sound going straight from my ears to my foolishly beating heart. “You...”

“That hurt.”

“Maybe you should have been concentrating rather than daydreaming,” she giggled, coming to sit next to me and handing me her water bottle. “What were you thinking about anyways?”

“You,” I replied, without missing a beat.

“Default setting?”

I winked at her, not agreeing or disagreeing with her comment before standing and dragging myself to the next machine I was about to use, while Layla stayed back, retying her headscarf and resting.

For the next half hour, I had tried to concentrate on the task at hand, and I turned to Layla she was in the midst of a conversation with another guy. He was large, but not as large as me and it was clear that he had finished his work out by the sweat dripping from him.

“Maybe I can help you train?” he asked Layla.

“I don’t think so,” I replied, before she could. “She’s got me.”

“Taimur, this is Jason. He’s a personal trainer here.”

“And...?”

“And nothing,” she said, staring at me, her eyes telling me to behave.

“Then why is he speaking to you?”

“Because it’s a free country, Taimur?”

“Don’t you have someone to be training?” I had said, turning to Jason.

“I was just trying to help.”

“She doesn’t need your help. Like I said, she’s got me. You can leave now.”

“Taimur!”

“Do you want his help, Pearl?” I asked her, aggravated. Adrenalin firing through my veins.

“Ummm... No, I think I’m okay. Thank you for the offer.”

“That’s great. I can take it from here.”

“Possessive much?” Jason sniggered.

“Pathetic much?” I retaliated.

“Taimur!”

“We’re done here, Layla. Let’s go.”

“I’m sorry about my friend,” Layla said, apologising for me to my dismay. “He doesn’t get out much and I’m his only friend.”

Jason laughed as I had pulled Layla away, not happy with her comment. To my utmost surprise, she hadn’t picked a fight with me when we got back to her flat for dinner or given me grief over my attitude which I knew was incorrect but didn’t care as long as it kept creeps like Jason away from her. Instead, she laughed at the entire incident, setting my mind at ease.

Maybe she had gotten used to me?

Maybe she liked me being possessive over her?

Maybe she wanted to be mine?

Maybe.... I had got it all wrong.

“I’m starving.” Kassim said, bouncing on the bed next to me, checking the time on his phone every few seconds. “How long do we have left now?”

“Five minutes less than the last time you asked me, five minutes ago,” Layla replied, with a giggle.

Nabeel and I rolled our eyes while Abs looked up from his phone just enough, so I could see the sides of his lips slightly twitch.

“Anyway, the sun will set soon and pizza will arrive by then. Patience is a virtue,” she continued.

“Kass doesn’t have any virtues, Tiny. Don’t you know that by now?” Nabeel chipped in, laughing. His eyes not red today, his voice not elated and his hair jet black.

“And you do?” Kassim responded.

“Can you guys not stress Layla out today. She’s not our mum. She doesn’t have to feed us,” I said. “She’s had a bad day as it is.”

“What happened?” Moe asked her, “Are you ill?”

“It’s nothing,” she looked at me. “Taimur’s just worried about me because I felt dizzy in the lecture today. I’m fine. I swear.”

“Can you just sit down and let them fend for themselves for once?” I told her, patting a place next to me on the bed. “It’s not hard to pick up a phone and order a pizza.”

“Can I get you something, sweetheart?” Kassim asked, genuinely concerned for her well-being. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you weren’t feeling well.”

“I’m fine. Taimur’s just overreacting, as usual. I’m just a bit tired because I’m fasting.”

Ramadan was the holiest month in the Muslim year, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar where it is obligatory to observe fasting, abstain from eating, drinking and smoking anything, from sunrise to sunset. It was to test one's will power, resist temptation and purify your mind, body and soul.

“I still can’t get over the fact that you all fast.” Layla glare at us four boys, perplexed.

“Why are you so shocked? We are Muslim,” Kassim said.

“It’s just that you guys drink and stuff, and I’ve never seen you guys pray apart from Friday prayers, I didn’t think you’d take fasting seriously.”

“Oh yes we do. Firstly, our mums would kill us if we didn’t and secondly, what kind of Muslim doesn’t fast in Ramadan. It’s the holiest month of the year.”

“Oookaaayyy,” she muttered, longing out her words, bemused. “But you do realise that your fasts don’t count if you drink alcohol.”

“That’s why we don’t drink in Ramadan.”

“But you have to be clear of any intoxication for forty days before your first fast. So, no drinking or drugs.”

“Semantics.”

“But...”

“Can you rest now, *pleeeaaase*?” I interrupted, trying to get her to sit down next to me. “And can you leave her alone Kass.”

“Do you remember when you two used to hate each other?” Nabeel asked, always the one to bring the awkwardness to a conversation. “And now we can’t separate you two.”

“I never hated her,” I protested.

“Yes, you did,” she laughed, “Don’t lie, but if it makes you feel any better, I hated you too.”

“And now?” I asked, looking straight at her, our eyes connecting and the heavy question weighing us down as the stupid organ in my chest waited for an answer. She looked back at me from under her long eyelashes, her eyes telling me that she could also feel the same way as me, like the stars had aligned, the earth had shifted, and we now had a purpose.

But she didn’t reply.

We were all in Layla’s living room, sitting on her large sofa that leaned against the wall. Our long legs dangled off the soft cushions and our backs were against the backboard while her short legs were crossed as she sat in between Moe and me. She was dressed in a sheer white shirt, inside top and light blue jeans, with her headscarf on, of course.

She always sat between Moe and me, continuously reassuring us they were just *friends* but, that didn’t stop me from noticing the little ways Moe adored her.

I saw it all.

“I forgot my keys, Layli.” Zoya’s voice chimed over the speaker, after a loud buzz breaking me out of my possessive thoughts. “Let me up. I need to pee.”

A minute later Zoya was strolling in the room, little water droplets covering her dark hair and furry winter coat.

“Bloody hell, it’s freezing out there,” she said, hugging her sister. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” I replied, before I could stop myself.

“Layla has a date.”

“What?” Kassim beat me to it, standing from the bed, his large body covering my view of Layla standing at the door. “Since when do you date? And if you are, why aren’t you dating me?”

“But you’re fasting,” Abs said, surprisingly. He hardly ever spoke directly to Layla.

“I’ll break my fast with him.”

“Do we know this guy?” Nabeel said, moving his black hair out of his eyes. “Who is he?”

“Chill out guys. It’s an arranged date, set up by our dad.” She told us, “And Zoya is my chaperone.”

“Chaperone?” Nabeel asked, “What, are we in the 1950s?”

“Our dad is pretty strict. He doesn’t want me alone with a guy, so Zoya has to come along, or my dad would have come himself. But it’s all arranged.”

Her dad.

Just the thought of him made me furious.

“Oh, like for marriage?” Kassim asked again, as I moved so I could see Layla. She was nervously wrapping the end of her headscarf around her hand, not looking my way.

“Yeah.”

“Where are you meeting him?” I asked her, trying to get her attention. Why hadn’t she told me about this? We spoke about nearly everything.

“Pizza Express, off Oxford Street” Zoya said, “Now go get ready.”

“I’m fine to go like this.”

“Guys...” Zoya said, turning to us. “Should she wear that to her first date?”

The four of us boys looked at each other, thinking the exact same thing, I’m sure whatever Layla wore she would always be the one lighting up the room, she was beautiful and didn’t even know it.

“You guys are useless. Come with me,” Zoya pulled Layla out of her room into hers as the pizza arrived, hot and sizzling, just like my temper.

“Come on guys, let’s eat,” Nabeel said, passing me a slice. The sun had finally set, and we could eat.

“No thanks, I just lost my appetite,” I replied, walking out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

Chapter Eighteen

Layla

I knew it was wrong.
The scriptures I believed in clearly stated that a girl and a boy could not be friends, let alone be in such close proximity but I couldn't help it. Something drew me to Taimur, and even though I knew it was forbidden, I couldn't stop myself.

Why did it not feel wrong?

I hadn't wanted everyone to know about my arranged date. It was embarrassing and if I was honest with myself, I didn't want to see the look of rejection in Taimur's eyes like I had. I knew he liked me, and I knew he was holding back for my sake, but it was getting harder to stay away from him. His closeness set my body on fire and his flirtatious looks sent my heart soaring like never before, but I still held back, trying to keep my distance from the guy I knew I was becoming crazy about.

Over the past few months, the boys had become my closest friends and spending time with them had become my guilty pleasure.

Especially Taimur.

Whether it was during lectures or cooking dinner together, I enjoyed every minute of my time with him, but what I didn't realise then was, it was during those nine am lectures and late night canal strolls that I began to fall in love with him, slowly,

Piece by piece,

Moment by moment,

Without my permission,

Knowing I was doing wrong,

He was becoming mine and I didn't even realise I was already his.

I enjoyed peeling back the layers of each Khalidi boy, finding out what they were made of. And as for Taimur, every day I unwrapped him a little more, learning more about the guy behind the bad boy persona and began to feel things I didn't know were possible. I learnt that secretly watching Tom and Jerry made him laugh the hardest and that even though he pretended to have a hard exterior, his eyes teared up at the end of Armageddon when the dad died. I learnt that he looked up to his dad, idolising the way he had sacrificed for his family and constantly wanted to prove himself any way he could, and he loved his mum in a way that brought tears to my eyes.

I learnt that he had a temper that could challenge even the angriest of people, always ready to start a fight to defend me, and that his possessive nature didn't only extend to his family, but to everyone close to him which now included me.

An hour and a half later, I sat in Pizza Express, on a square table, small flower vase in the middle and cutlery set on top of a Pizza Express napkin, starving. The glass windows were large, letting in the nights moonlight but keeping out the winter cold, while the ambiance of the restaurant was chilly, with dark walls and metal furniture.

It wasn't romantic.

Zoya had forced me to change into an evening maxi dress, navy, with a cardigan to cover my arms and a printed headscarf. My make-up was subtle, just the way I liked it and I had on a pair of her heels, giving me a few extra inches to work with.

My dad had called before I arrived at the restaurant, reiterating the rules of the meeting as well as reminding me what was at stake – his reputation. He also reminded Zoya to stay with me the entire time but as soon as she put the phone down, she said her goodbyes and left me to my 'date'.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I was in a business meeting," my date informed, walking towards the table. Dressed a fitted grey suit, white shirt and formal shoes, the young man approached. He looked a few years older than me, with light brown hair and small eyes covered by a pair of designer glasses that rested on his slightly bent nose.

"That's fine. I just got here myself," I smiled, trying not to compare him to Taimur and giving the guy a chance. "I'm Layla."

"I'm Saad."

As we began speaking, the evening kicked off on a pleasant note. Saad was funny, he joked about his job as an investment banker, he spoke highly of his family and simply adored his nephew who he showed me pictures of on his mobile phone.

He was a nice distraction.

“Pearl?” A very familiar voice called from behind me, making me jump. There was only *one* person who called me that.

“Taimur?”

“Fancy seeing you here,” he said. “What a surprise.”

“Yeah... Surprise,” I muttered as he grinned.

“Hi, I’m Tai,” he introduced himself to Saad, shaking his hand firmly, his eyes still piercing into me. “And this is my date, Kate. You remember her, right Pearl?”

Yes, I remembered her, I remembered her on her knees in front of him in my bathroom.

“Katie,” the girl holding his hand corrected. She was still stunning, with her long blond hair, bright blue eyes and perfectly slim figure.

Something stung, jealousy mixed with anger, and it travelled to my mind faster than the spiked drink that night.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, annoyed.

“We’re on a date but our table isn’t ready.”

“Why don’t you join us?” Saad suggested, not realising he was playing right into Taimur’s facade.

“If Pearl doesn’t mind,” Taimur said, winking at me.

“Sure.”

“Why are you calling her Pearl?” Saad asked, looking from Taimur to me and back to Taimur.

“Oh, it’s the cutest story,” Katie replied, revealing the fabricated story Taimur had made up.

“So, she’s his pearl and he’s her oyster,” she finished.

“Oh, so you’re like her protector? Her brother?” Saad asked.

“No.” We both replied.

“But you’ve known each other since you were kids?”

“Yeah, we go way back,” Taimur said.

I stared at him, daggers flying from my eyes to his in irritation, but he simply grinned back, daring me to try him.

Very courteously, Taimur pulled out the chair next to Saad for Katie and placed himself next to me. The signature scent fluttered my way, musky aftershave mixed with cigarette smoke, sending shivers down my spine as I remembered the day we nearly kissed. It was weeks ago but still felt like only yesterday.

“Well, this is quite a coincidence,” Saad said, genuinely surprised. “So, how are you guys?”

“Great,” Katie beamed, pushing her long blond hair out of the way. “How about you guys? How was your day?”

“Pearl had a rough day. She wasn’t feeling very well,” Taimur answered for me. I glared at him, my eyes widening, asking him not to cause any trouble.

“How do you know, babe?” Katie asked, looking over her menu at her ‘date’.

“We spent the day together.” Taimur said, with that wicked twinkle in his light eyes, trying to cause doubt in Saad’s mind about mine and his relationship. “Sorry I don’t know if I’m supposed to say that at an arranged marriage date or how much information I’m supposed to give.”

“A what?” Katie asked as I felt my cheeks turn red.

“Oh, it’s basically when a matchmaker sets you up with someone to meet in the prospect of getting married. Very old fashioned, in my opinion, I prefer to just meet someone and fall for them the natural way.”

“No one asked your opinion,” I blurted out, anger rising in me. He knew how to push my buttons. “And to be honest, what’s the difference between being set up this way and set up by a friend on a blind date? It’s the exact same thing. The only thing different is I’m looking for someone to spend my life with and you’re looking for someone to spend the night with.”

There was an awkward silence between the four of us as Taimur gawked at me, irritation showing clearly in his eyes.

“And, people in the West seem to misjudge the process thinking the girl is forced into marrying someone she doesn’t want to. It’s not like that at all,” Saad explained, much to my relief. “The girl and guy meet a few times, go out, see if they enjoy each other’s company just like you would if you were dating someone. If they do, they take it forward to an engagement but if they don’t, they go their separate ways, no harm no foul.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound so bad actually. I guess it’s like finding someone online, it’s the same kind of principle,” Katie said, smiling at us.

“So, you’re on one of these arranged dates?”

“Yes,” Saad replied, smiling. “And we seemed to be getting on well so far. You never know, you guys could be witnessing the first day of forever for us.”

“Or it could be a big waste of time because she’s already had her first day of forever,” Taimur said, taking hold of Katie’s hand on the table, and I swear I heard him whisper ‘*in the kitchen*’ at the end of his sentence. I watched him, irritated and envious but let the feeling go knowing he wanted a reaction from me.

“Shall we order?” I said to Saad, while twirling my headscarf around my hand. “What would you like to have?”

“Shall we share a pizza and a pasta dish?” he asked, showing me the menu. By mistake, our hands touched while pointing at the item we wanted, and I moved my hand away instantly. Taimur’s small eyes glared at me, warning me not to push him further.

Nice.

Two could play at this game.

“Yes, let’s share. I’m starving, and the sun has set so I can finally eat,” I smiled, noticing Taimur’s jaw tighten in annoyance. “And I’ll get a Sicilian lemonade, please.”

“I like your jacket,” Katie said to Saad. “Very stylish.”

“It’s Tom Ford,” He beamed, winking at me in an aim to impress me.

“Oh, Pearl isn’t going to be impressed with the designer names,” Taimur coldly replied, raising his eyebrow at me with an annoying smile. “She doesn’t know anything about fashion like you do, babe.”

“I do,” I said. “Just because I don’t spend all my time reading trashy magazines doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate fashion or that lifestyle.”

“Are you trying to say that’s what I do?” Katie asked me, her tone sharp and to the point. She flipped her long blonde hair away from her face. Taimur leaned back in his seat, his strong arms crossed and face amused, watching the seeds he had planted grow into an argument. “Are you saying I’m stupid?”

“No Katie. I didn’t mean that.” I apologised before the conversation escalated. She glanced at Taimur as they exchanged looks.

“Then what did you mean, *Pearl*?” Taimur replied, emphasizing his name for me.

“What I meant *Taimur*, was that you don’t need designer clothes to look good. Look at you, you look good without them too.”

“You mean naked?” he winked.

“No.. I didn’t mean that,” I stuttered.

Once again, my cheeks burnt, and I knew I had turned red. I watched Taimur bite his bottom lip, trying to hold back his laugh while tapping the table with his middle finger. Thank God the food came before much more was said.

I scowled at him, uncomfortably eating my pasta but elegantly crossing my legs. I placed one hand on my lap and the other used a fork to twirl my pasta and place it neatly in my mouth. Unexpectedly, I felt someone else’s hold on my hand under the tablecloth. I instantly recognised the large callous hands, interlocking with mine without permission.

Taimur.

I should have moved away, told him to let go but the feeling of his hand in mind felt too innocent to be wrong.

Slyly, he moved his fingers, sensually caressing and squeezing mine. The sensation sent sparks of fire inside me, down to my core. The butterflies in my stomach fluttered like they were trapped, and my palms turned sweaty, nervous at what was going on.

“I think you look beautiful, Katie,” Taimur said, squeezing my hand again as if he was talking to me and not her. “You’re stunning.”

“Ummm...” I began, slowly squeezing his hand back to get a reaction. I felt guilty sitting in front of a guy who could possibly be my husband one day and holding hands with a guy I knew I was falling for, but my mind and body were not in sync when it came to Taimur.

“So, tell me Layla, what’s your journey been like since you started wearing hijab?” Saad questioned.

“It hasn’t been easy. I think it’s more of a struggle here in the West than it would be in Muslim countries since it’s not the norm here. Sometimes I get strange looks, sometimes people tease or say rude things and usually, it’s difficult to find clothes that cover everything but it’s getting better. I think the awareness for it is more than before.”

“Don’t you ever feel suffocated?” Taimur asked. Gently, he picked my small hand and placed it on his knee without anyone noticing, compressing it tenderly. I felt his firm thigh muscle under my palm, big and bulky, and couldn’t help but squeeze, knowing I shouldn’t even be touching him. His

face immediately turned to me, stunned. “Don’t you just want to be free sometimes?” He said, clearing his throat, squashing my hand with more pressure. Hot blood rushed around my body, turning my cheeks red again.

“I am free. What makes you think I’m not just because I choose to follow certain rules?” I said, looking at him so he knew I meant what I said.

“But I mean, don’t you want to be free to live a little, fall in love, find your soulmate?”

“I told you before, I am living,” I replied, anger starting to bubble in my stomach. “I will fall in love and my husband will be my soulmate. What about you Taimur? Are you free from the shackles of society? Are you free to fall in love? Find your soulmate? Or does society tell you that sleeping with a different woman each night makes you free?”

“It’s called multitasking,” Taimur said, now rubbing small circles on my hand while running his finger through his light hair with the other. More sparks flew into me. “Although recently I feel like I’ve met my soulmate.”

Katie beamed from across the table, showing off her perfectly straight teeth.

Soon after, Katie excused herself for the bathroom leaving me stuck between the two guys, fighting for my attention. Taimur hadn’t let go of my hand, but I had started to get used to the feeling, forgetting it was there until he squeezed it, reminding me he still had a hold of me.

“What do you look for in a guy?” Saad asked, politely. His small eyes questioning me.

“Honestly, ummm... sense of humour... caring... umm.” I struggled, thinking of every word opposite to Taimur. “A religious guy with the same morals as me- the same beliefs.”

“I don’t think so, Pearl. I think you’re sweet on the outside but a little devil on the inside,” Taimur interrupted, stopping drawing circles on my hand and now threading his fingers with mine again. I looked at him, shocked, asking him to stop but he didn’t. “You want a bad boy Pearl, someone rude, arrogant and who gets under your skin. Someone who challenges your beliefs, makes you question your morals and breaks your rules... frees you from your cage. You don’t want a good Muslim boy to tuck you in before bed, you want a bad Muslim boy to keep up all night.”

“No, bad boys break your heart.”

“No, good girls break bad boy’s hearts.”

We stared at each other, our eyes speaking the words our lips were not allowed to say before I had to look away, moving my gaze to the glass doorway.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I stated, my eyes following three handsomely familiar figures walking into the restaurant. “This cannot be happening. Was this your idea?”

“What?” Taimur asked, before following my gaze to see his brothers striding towards us, a smirk pulled on each of lips. “Why do you instantly think it’s my idea *Pearl*?”

“Because it usually is, *Taimur*.”

“No, you just usually assume the worst of me.”

“Do you blame me?” I said, gesturing to Katie’s empty seat with my glare. Saad looked amused. “If I find out this was your doing, *Wallahi* I’m going to kill you.”

“What are you guys doing here?” he asked as the boys approached, genuinely confused as me.

“Same thing you are,” Kassim replied, faking an innocent sparkling in his eyes but his grin betrayed him. “We felt like some pizza.”

“I ordered you some before I left,” I said, not missing a beat.

“We finished it and were still hungry from fasting all day.” Nabeel spoke up. “Can’t we join you.”

“Of course. Pull up some chairs,” Taimur replied.

“They’re Taimur’s brother and cousins,” I explained to Saad. “We’re all at uni together.”

“Nice to meet you guys. Any friend of Layla’s is a friend of mine.”

“So, tell us what makes you the right guy for our sweetheart?”

Saad looked at me, confusion in his eyes as I swallowed my last gulp of drink knowing the night was just getting started. Four against one, the odds were in the Khalidi’s favour.

“And you did not have to ask him about his past *experiences*. That’s none of your business,” I scolded Kassim, while Saad had excused himself to the restroom, taken aback by the boy’s questions. “And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Sorry sweetheart...”

“And you...,” I turned to Nabeel, my hand still in Taimur’s under the table for some reason. “What was all those questions about how much he earns? Was that necessary?”

“I needed to know if he could look after you, Tiny.”

“I can look after myself.”

“But did you see his face when Tai asked him if he watches porn?”

Nabeel laughed, and the boys joined in.

“That was *not* funny. This is not a joke guys.”

“You’re lucky that’s all we asked sweetheart.”

“Stop. You don’t need to grill him. He’s a good guy.”

“You don’t even know him,” Taimur said, his warm hazel eyes peering in mine.

“They’re trying to look out for you,” Katie interrupted, listening to our conversation intently.

“You’re one of us now and we look after our own.” Kassim had pulled up a chair next to me. He placed his hand on my knee, squeezing it.

“Like I said, I can look after myself, and I never asked to be one of you.”

“Whether you asked or not is irrelevant, Princess,” Abs’s cold grey stare bore into me, “You’re ours now.”

Not knowing what to reply, I realised we had all finished eating and asked for the bill once Saad had returned. The boys decided to split the bill as Katie and I waited for it to be sorted. Slowly, with a last squeeze, Taimur let go of my hand, only to take Katie’s and walk out of the restaurant followed by the boys.

“We’re going out. See you later sweetheart,” Kassim said, as the three boys left, mischief in their stride, while the rest of us made our way home.

When arriving at university, Katie said her goodbyes and left the three of us to walk towards my room. There was an awkward silence where neither of us knew what to say.

“Do you mind if I pray before I leave?” Saad finally asked me as I directed him towards the bathroom so he could do the pre prayer washing ritual. He promptly left my room leaving Taimur and I

alone,

angry

and annoyed.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked, raising my voice. “What the hell was that?”

“What do you mean?” His voice was as riled up as mine, his light eyes narrowing on me.

“Don’t act stupid, Taimur.”

“I’m not.”

“You came there to ruin my date. You all did.”

“No.”

“Liar.”

“So what if I did?”

“Why would you do that? And with her? Why would you want me to remember that scene?”

“No... Yes... I don’t know.” His hands on his head, pulling at his long hair, frustrated.

“Why are you behaving like this?”

“You know why, don’t make me say it.” he argued back, his voice louder than usual. “Don’t act stupid.”

“I’m not. Were you trying to push my buttons?”

“Did it work?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

“Taimur... Stop! Don’t ruin this. Please. Just stop.”

“No. Why did you go on a date with some random guy when we both know you want to date me?”

“I don’t,” I lied, frustrated. I paced up and down the room, not knowing where this conversation was going. We had worked so hard to suppress our feelings and here we were, about to ruin everything.

“You’re not a good liar, Pearl.”

“And you’re not a good Muslim, Taimur.”

“I know, but that doesn’t stop you from wanting me, does it? I know I’m not a good Muslim boy like Saad out there. I drink, have sex when I’m not married, don’t pray, just about fast in Ramadan but does that make me a bad human? Bloody hell, can’t you see how much I want you?”

“What?”

“Come on Pearl, you can’t be that blind. I...”

“Taimur...”

“Trust me, I’ve tried not to. I’ve run every scenario in my mind, I’ve tried to keep away from you, I’ve tried to be with other girls but whatever I do I can’t shake you out of me,” he reached for me. He held onto my arm, turning me so I was looking directly into his eyes, the truth pouring out of them.

“Taimur...”

“Tell me Layla, tell me you don’t feel this pull between us. Tell me it’s all in my head. Say *Wallahi*, swear to me that it’s only one sided and I’ll walk away and leave you alone.”

“No, don’t,” I said, without thinking.

“It drives me insane being around you, but it drives me *even more* insane *not* being around you. I don’t remember life before you anymore, it’s like I was just existing but since I met you, I finally feel alive, finally feel like I have a purpose. You have become my everything Pearl, you’re the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last person I talk to before I go to sleep. I know it sounds cliché but that’s what we are, we are cliché. From hating each other to loving each other. There’s nothing you could do to make me stop feeling this way and not being with you is killing me. I was broken before you and you fixed me. Actually, you didn’t just fix me, you also stuck a piece of *you* inside me that can’t be removed. I’m lost without you Pearl. I need you more than my next breath and ask my brothers, they’ll tell you that I’d give up everything to just be with you. Tell me you feel the same way, tell me I’m the reason you breathe because I promise you, if you give me a chance, I’ll be your air forever.”

I stumbled backwards, astonished by Taimur’s declaration as he stared at me, waiting for my reply. I wanted to run into his arms, tell him I felt the same way and let myself feel something I’d never felt before, but deep down I knew it was wrong.

It was forbidden.

This was not the girl my mother had raised me to be, and my father would never accept me bringing home my own guy. I had to marry someone my dad approved of, he had made that clear time and time again, and aggravating him would just lead to more heartbreak.

I had no right to feel these emotions for a man I couldn’t have.

This wasn’t right, I knew it and despite what he had just said, he knew it too.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Saad appeared. “I didn’t want to go through the whole process of my mum calling your dad to organise another date so I thought I’d ask you directly, would you like to go out with me again? I think we had a fun night and I’d like to see where this could go.”

I turned my back to Taimur to face Saad, speechless and dazed, while my heart beat like never before, thinking which guy I should answer first.

Chapter Nineteen

Taimur

Six months later, her words still stung as sharp as the day she had said them, burning into my heart and carving themselves onto my soul.

‘I’m sorry, I just can’t,’ she had said, not even looking into my eyes. I had walked out, slamming the door behind me, not even bothering to look back.

Those five words had changed me.

They said it had to hurt to be real, and she hurt me like a son of a bitch.

Layla had decided to ‘date’ Saad, and I had decided to try and detach myself from her, attempting to liberate myself like I used to be, but evidently, it was easier said than done. Over the past few months, I felt like she was everywhere, consuming my every thought and blocking my every move to unshackle myself from her.

Since that fateful night, from speaking all day, every day we instantaneously stopped talking and began keeping our distance from each other. When we were suspiciously assembled together by one of our mutual friends, we kept it civil, falsely smiling but not talking, and even though the people around us had noticed the change in dynamics, neither Layla nor I disclosed the reason for our hostility towards one another.

I listened to what my brothers said about her, struggling to not let it affect me, and kept my mind on other things since I had never been the guy who became emotional over a girl, and even though I had put myself out there, when it came to Layla, I was not going to do it again.

“Hi baby,” Katie whispered, leaning into me for a kiss.

We were standing outside a lecture theatre, waiting for the lecture room to open so we could enter. I had never wanted a girlfriend but trying to get over Layla was more difficult than I anticipated, and Katie had become a welcome distraction.

It was a Monday morning and most the students were either hungover, like me, or still asleep, and as my arms wrapped around my girlfriend, my eyes searched for the girl who didn't want me.

"Come here," I said to Katie, pulling her closer and trying harder to be in the moment with her. Katie wasn't in the same lecture as Layla but came to see me every chance she got. I lifted her onto the window seat, standing between her legs and kissed her.

The July sun shone into the window, illuminating her fair skin and her blue eyes reflected the tranquil sky, unruffled by any clouds. It was a warm day, warmer than it should have been and summer was truly here to stay. "This is what I need."

I sensed Layla before I saw her.

I always did.

The second she walked in, her aroma surrounded me with her unique scent, strawberries and vanilla, and every cell in my entire body responded to her presence, surrendering to her willingly. My blood flowed faster and I'm sure Katie noticed too.

I felt Layla's gaze on the back of my head, burning holes into me from behind and into my chest where my heart should have been. My heart that I had mistakenly given her, and she had inadvertently *not* returned.

Having her so close ached.

All I wanted was for my chest to stop hurting and for her to give me my heart back.

As I continued to touch Katie's body, Layla knew the show was for her. I'd been doing it since the night she had rejected me, and she knew why. Making sure that she was watching, I advanced my seduction of Katie, in an aim to procure any reaction out of her. I let my hands run up and down Katie's slender legs, drawing small circles like I had done on Layla's hands months before. I was leaning in closer, gently kissing the curve of her neck and moving my lips towards her pouty lips, not moving my eyes from Layla for a second, when Layla cleared her throat, trying to act like it didn't affect her. Our eyes kept connected and wrathful sparks flying between them.

“Don’t you guys have a room?” Layla said. I could feel her irritated stare on us as Katie melted into me, loving the attention I was giving her.

“We do but someone forced me to go to my 9am lectures and plus, it turns Katie on when people are watching, right babe?” I push further, never letting her forget about the night in her bathroom.

“I told you, you don’t need to come to them anymore. I’ll give you my notes,” she replied, dismissing my voyeur comment.

“A deal’s a deal, Pearl. I’m not scared of committing to it. I can do commitment.”

Before she could comment, the lecture door opened and students filed in. Layla looked straight into my eyes, wounded.

I wanted her to feel what I was feeling.

Dejected.

Outraged.

Injured.

But I saw nothing.

“Was that necessary?” Layla asked, as I took my place next to her. The lecture room filled with students, merrily chatting and placing themselves in their preferred seats.

My preferred seat was always next to Layla.

“What?” I played innocent, eyes staring at her with fake sincerity.

“I know what you’re doing and it’s not going to work.”

“I’m not doing anything, Pearl. I’m just getting on with my life, like you told me to,” I said. “Why are you getting so upset. You’ve always known what I was like.”

She didn’t reply, turning towards the board as the lecture began.

“How’s Saad? Set a date yet?” I spitefully asked, not looking in her direction.

“No. Come on Taimur, can’t we be friends?”

“We *are* friends.”

“Like we used to be?”

How was I supposed to tell her that we were *never* friends? That from the day I had met her, I had been gradually falling for her and now I had fallen so far down that there was no chance in me getting up intact.

“Have you seen Nabeel recently?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, why?”

“I’m a bit worried about him,” Layla said. “He’s always... different.”

“You mean high?”

“Yeah, I’m worried about him. He’s stopped showing up to most his lectures and he’s cancelled on lunch nearly every day. He’s even stopped dying his hair.”

Damn, she was beautiful. For a second I forgot where we were and what we were talking about.

“I think there’s something wrong with him. I tried to speak to Alia...”

“When did you speak to my sister?” I asked.

“Yesterday. They’re still not speaking, Taimur. Something is wrong.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll try to speak to him today.”

Layla smiled at me, turning back to the lecture and stayed silent the rest of the hour.

On leaving the lecture I kept my promise to Layla, contacting Nabeel to find out what was going on with him. While I messaged him, I met Abs and Kassim and filled them in. We all decided that there was more going on with him than we knew, and it was time we spoke to him together.

TAIMUR

Where are you, bro?

NABEEL

Around.

TAIMUR

Need to see you.

NABEEL

Why?

TAIMUR

I’ll come to you. Where are you?

NABEEL

Why? Behind the science building, by the bike shed.

TAIMUR

What the hell are you doing there?

NABEEL

What do you think, bro? Come smoke up with me.

TAIMUR

Can't. Have lectures all day.

NABEEL

That's never stopped me.

TAIMUR

Stay there. I'm coming.

"OH, YOU'RE ALL HERE." NABEEL SAID, WATCHING US APPROACH WITH HIS bloodshot eyes. In the last few months Alia and Nabeel had become estranged for some reason and even though I'd tried to find out why, neither of them were letting it slip.

"We need to talk to you, Nabeel," Abs said, walking towards the bike shed in his dark tracksuit and cap, his voice serious and face stern.

The bike shed behind the science building was a small area, made up of old wooden bike stands separating the cycles and a thin grey metal covering, allowing the bikes not to get wet. It was commonly known for students to smoke weed and snort lines of cocaine, and even though we didn't believe Nabeel was on the hard stuff, we knew he was on something that had changed him entirely.

"Is this an intervention?" Nabeel laughed, taking a pull of his spliff. His solid body had changed recently, and he looked skinnier than usual, bony even. His tall frame had become lanky, and his handsome face had turned scrawny. His hair was a mess, the dark roots coming through while the rest was blond. Layla was right, something was wrong. This was not him. "You want some?"

"No," Abs replied, taking it out of his hand and throwing it to the floor.

"Oi, I paid for that."

"You need to stop that," Abs continued, taking the lead as always. Kassim and I stood back, being there for support.

"Stop what?"

"Getting high all the time."

"You guys can talk. You all have your vices. This is mine."

"Our vices aren't as bad as yours."

"Listen Abs, I don't think you're the right person to give me any advice, have you seen your knuckles?"

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We all know what you’re like... you’re either battering or bruised.”

“Yeah, but he’s still getting on with his life, he’s not letting it hold him back,” I said, putting the cigarette I was smoking out on the wall beside me.

“You have a problem.”

“Like your problem of not being able to keep it in your pants?” He shoots back at me. “Caught any STD’s lately? Or even better, following Abs’s footsteps, have you knocked anyone up recently? It must really bug you that Tiny doesn’t want to sleep with you, right? You’re so used to getting any girl you want.”

Hearing him mention Layla’s name sent blood soaring to my mind, anger taking over. I knew he was high and probably not realising what he was actually saying but that didn’t stop me from getting enraged.

“I bet I could get into her pants,” He antagonised. “Maybe I already have.”

“Stop,” Kassim finally said, “Why are we arguing. What else are you on, Nabeel?”

“It’s a secret,” he grinned, tapping his nose suspiciously. “A bit like the secret you’re keeping... or maybe like the one Abs is keeping? Hating on your brother’s girl? That why you can’t stand her? Because she gets under your skin too?”

Abs hated Layla?

She gets under his skin?

Abs shot forward, taking Nabeel by his collars and shoving him against the metal doors, causing a thud. Kassim and I jumped up behind him, pulling Abs away from Nabeel before things got out of hand.

“Touchy, touchy,” Nabeel teased, as Abs’s face changed to rage.

“Look, let us help you Nabeel,” I calmly said, coming closer and trying to talk sense into him.

“Piss off Tai..” he growled, in a low voice, fury evident in it. He walked away from me. “It’s your fault in the first place.”

His words stung me more than anything I had ever heard. He was right, it was my fault, and we all knew it even though we had never mentioned it before.

“It was not his fault,” Abs said, sticking up for me.

“Of course, you’d defend him!” Nabeel shouted at Abs, pointing at me. His voice loud and robust. “You’ve always had his back! You always will!”

You know who had my back? Tariq!”

“Tariq isn’t here anymore!” Kassim said, trying to stay calm, his voice monotonous.

“And why’s that?” Nabeel bellowed, voice still raised and walking towards me.

“Because shit happens!” Abs replied, coming in between Nabeel and me.

“No, Because Tai killed him!” Nabeel roared louder, coming in closer so we were eyes to eye. His voice was iced, sending a bitter chill to my heart, and his inflamed eyes pierced my soul. “You heard me Tai, I finally said it, YOU. KILLED. TARIQ!”

There was silence as the dynamics of our brotherhood shifted by a clear dose of reality. The air around me ceased to exist and I could just hear my heart beating in my ears, thumping as loud as Nabeel’s words.

I had to get away from there.

I had to leave.

I turned to move away from them, hand firmly pressing on my aching chest to stop the pain and trying to take as much air into my lungs as I could, only to smack right into Layla, wide eyed, shocked.

Chapter Twenty

Layla

There was no one who could draw a crowd like Taimur could. He didn't even need to do anything special, just be there, smile and be his uncontrollable, magnetic self and the girls came running, flocking around him. His personal harem of women, and he loved it. From the day I manoeuvred our relationship to a different direction than he wanted, denying my feelings for him, he had taken it upon himself to be the life of every place we went, which drove me practically insane.

I missed him.

I missed the way we had spent time together and I missed the way he fit into my life like he'd always been there, evoking a part of me I didn't know existed. I had known it was wrong from the first movement, but I had let my judgement be clouded by the way I felt until I knew it was time to real back to reality.

But every part of me wanted to be a part of him.

Every time I saw him, I felt the same resilient gravitational pull towards him, like the first day we'd met, sending all my senses into overdrive and every time I saw him with Katie my entire body throbbed with pain, feeling the torture and wanting to be the one in his arms instead of her. I watched as he worshiped her, adoring what she could give him that I couldn't.

I was a masochist.

I missed everything about him.

The goofy jokes he cracked, only to make *me* smile, the way he possessively held my hand when crossing a busy road and the way he made

me feel beautiful under his magnificent gaze.

And I missed my tea.

With my father's very stern request, I had started seeing Saad more often. My father believed it was time for me to find a life partner and get married, just as my sister was expected to once she graduated this year. It wasn't as if he wanted to get rid of us but having two daughters was a stress weighing him down and at times we felt like a burden on him. I missed my mum immensely at times like that, craving for someone to talk to about marriage and what to look for in a guy but alas, she was not there and that was my reality I had to live with.

Zoya had her own distraction, and his name was Noah. She too tried not to upset my father, but it was obvious that she was seeing someone who our father would not approve of, and I couldn't understand what she was thinking since Noah was a mixed-race guy, American and a Christian – all things our dad *seriously* would object to.

They say you meet your soulmate when you least expect it and both Zoya and I had just met ours, we just didn't know it yet. However, they also say, the sad thing about meeting your soulmates is that you don't always end up with them, that sometimes you make decisions that drive you away from one another, setting your life on a path isolated from the one you were destined to always love, with no way of returning home.

"Do you think Baba would ever let us marry a non-muslim?" Zoya had asked me, dressing for her day. "Maybe if he converted?"

It was a rhetorical question.

Both she and I knew the answer.

It was a no.

Her phone hadn't stopped ringing for the past half hour, and it was driving me insane.

"Can you pick it up?"

"Nope."

"Why aren't you picking it up? At least put it on silent," I suggested, looking over at the name flashing on her mobile phone. "And what happened to you not wanting a boyfriend?"

"Firstly, he's not my boyfriend, we're just having some fun, and secondly, I can't have a boyfriend Layli, I'm getting engaged soon. This is just my last hoorah, nothing more."

"Does he know that?"

“I was hoping after the first ten unanswered calls he’d get the message.”

“Maybe you should pick up and tell him,” I said, straightening my headscarf. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“With Noah.”

“The same thing you’re doing with Tai.”

“I’m not doing anything with Taimur.”

“Just like I’m not doing anything with Noah.”

I gave her my ‘Don’t try and be cute with me’ look and she smirked, hugging me from behind. She squeezed me in her arms as we stared at each other in the long mirror.

“What’s going on with you and Tai, Layli? I thought you really liked him.”

“I don’t know.”

“You guys were inseparable at one point, even more than you and Moe, what happened?”

I bit my lip, not wanting to get into it.

“Let me guess, he asked you out and you said no and now it’s awkward?”

“Something like that.”

“Why not give him a chance, Layli?”

“Zoy, he’s not right for me. You already know that.”

“Is it because of what I did with him...? Because that was a one-time thing and I’m seriously okay with you seeing him.”

“But I’m not.”

“Is it because of Baba?”

“Part of it.”

“Are you scared of him?”

“Aren’t you?”

She looked at me, not replying.

“I’m really sorry for getting you in trouble.”

“You didn’t Layli. It’s just the way he is now.”

“I miss how he used to be.”

“You mean how he was before everything happened?”

“Yeah, I feel like he’s literally a different person now. I don’t even recognise him.”

“That’s why you need to get away from him as soon as you can. I can’t leave for Canada knowing I’m leaving you alone with him Layli. I need to know you’re safe before I go.”

“I’m safe. Don’t worry. I just wish you didn’t have to go so far away.”

“Me too, but we both know Baba’s not going to let me get out of it. I have no choice. I have to marry Adil.”

“Is that why you don’t want to get close to Noah?”

She didn’t answer again.

“Tell me something Zoy, do you love him?”

“We’re not talking about me right now, we’re talking about you. Do you love Tai?”

“No.”

“Do you like him then?”

“He’s okay,” I confessed.

“I know you think he’s more than okay Layli.”

“I just...”

“Don’t let a great guy slip away because you’re too scared to face up to your feelings.”

“I’m not...”

“You like him Layli, it’s written all over your face every time you’re with him. You’re a different person around him. I’ve never seen you like that before.”

“But...”

“Layli, listen to me,” she said, turning me around to face her. Her beautiful face shining at me, her glamorous eyes twinkling with sincerity and her voice as genuine as I’d ever heard. “Mum would want you to be happy.”

She had said the M word and tears gathered in my eyes. She leaned forwards, encompassing me in a hug knowing I didn’t like talking about our mum. Grief filled my heart, sorrow enveloping me, and before I could control myself, a lone tear trickled down my cheek. Zoya wiped it away, smiling at me.

“I feel guilty feeling like this,” I opened up. “I think I really like Taimur but I know it’s wrong.”

“Having feelings isn’t wrong.”

“Acting on them is, you know that. And every time I see him with that stupid girl, Katie, all I keep imagining is her on her knees in my bathroom,

in front of him, and it's driving me mad. I feel like... like my insides are literally going to combust and I want to punch her annoyingly beautiful face."

"Oh.. I'd pay to see that," she teased, making me laugh. "You know he's only doing that to get a reaction out of you."

"It's working. It's driving me mad."

"Then tell him."

"Tell him what? That I'm crazy about him but can't be with him? What's the point in that? I know it's wrong, the whole situation is wrong, Mum would not be pleased with me."

"Mum just wanted us to be happy, Layli."

"Are you happy?" I asked, concerned.

"I am, I always am."

"Liar."

"And please tell me you're not serious about this Saad guy?" she asked, and I didn't have an answer. "He seems like such a bore."

"He's nice."

"You don't marry *nice*."

On that Monday, after running onto Taimur at our 9am lecture, I had seen Taimur and the boys go out their way to find Nabeel and help him.

I was worried about him.

Over the past few months we had grown closer, spending plenty of time together discussing life. Nabeel had spoken about his situation with Alia and Rose with me, not knowing what to do and I recognised a loneliness in him that I saw in myself. His gentle saddened eyes reflected mine and the perplexity of his situation, despite being different to mine, was something I could identify with. He was one of the good ones and when he started acting self-destructive, I noticed something was wrong with him.

But what I had witnessed between the boys and him, that Monday morning, was more than I had bargained for. Nabeel's words struck me before I had a chance to understand what was even going on.

"YOU.KILLED.TARIQ!"

The words echoed in my mind as I stood there, traumatised by the three words he had just uttered, in rage, towards the guy I care *too* deeply for.

The look on Taimur's face told me that he had been shot in the heart by someone he loved, and was painfully bleeding out, slowly and dejectedly, in front of my eyes. As he hurried passed me, his large strides taking him

away from me, I had to follow. I had left Abs and Kassim to deal with a very high and heated Nabeel while I ran behind the guy I felt for, knowing he should be alone right now.

“That’s a bit cliché, don’t you think?” I asked him, placing my small hand on his as he sat at the SU bar. He flinched but I didn’t move my hand away, rather compressed it harder, trying to squeeze life back in it. “Drinking your sorrows away.”

“Leave me alone, Layla,” he said, lifting the glass to his lips. “I just want to be alone.”

“Speak to me.”

“Why? You don’t even like me.”

“That’s not true. Just because I can’t be with you doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.”

He sarcastically laughed, reaching over to grab a napkin and wipe the water residues that had stained the already dirty countertop, as if he was trying to wipe away his feelings.

“Well, now you know the truth. I was never good enough for you, you were right.”

“It’s not that, Taimur. I never said you weren’t good enough,” I replied, sighing. How to make him understand that this was bigger than me and him. It was about my beliefs.

“Can we just not...”

I sat beside him, my hand still on his, occasionally squeezing it so he knew I wasn’t going anywhere. His intense gaze never drifted from his shot sitting in front of him, apart from when he was ordering another, and the uncomfortable silence between us screamed louder than ever before, hammering into my head and drilling into my heart. I counted seven empty shot glasses in front of us before he spoke again.

“I killed him, Pearl,” he began, tears gathering in his eyes. I watched as one silently escaped, rolling down his cheek and towards his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his hand, before it reached its destination. “I killed my own cousin.”

Our eyes locked for a few seconds, but as fast as the connection was formulated, it broke as he pulled away.

I didn’t know what to say.

I didn’t understand how it was even possible so I stayed quiet, waiting for him to eventually continue, giving him the time he needed.

“It was before I knew I had diabetes,” He spoke again, his voice rough and woozy. “I was around eighteen, just got my driving licence and was driving my dad’s old car. Tariq had asked me to pick him up from football practice because it was raining, and he didn’t want to walk. We lived next door to each other all our lives so it made sense for him to call me and not the other boys. I took my dad’s car without asking and went to get him.”

I stayed quiet, waiting for the rest. I knew he needed to get out the rest before he lost his temporary drunken courage and when he took a visibly deep breath and shifted on the stool, I knew he was ready to continue.

“While we were in the car, I had my first seizure. I hadn’t eaten all day and I didn’t realise my sugar levels had dropped... I lost control of the car and hit a tree.”

“Oh God... I’m so sorry Taimur.” He didn’t look at me but ordered another shot of Sambuca from the waiter. As soon as it came he downed it, cringing at its taste, and ordering another one instantly.

“I think you’ve had enough,” I said, pulling his debit card out of the card machine so he couldn’t pay for any more. I didn’t usually associate myself with drunk people, but this was Taimur, and he needed me. “I’m cutting you off.”

He didn’t respond but continued talking.

“By the time I came back to my senses it was too late. Tariq’s side of the car had been smashed into the tree and he was gone. I knew it as soon as I saw him.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t even remember it happening Layla. I don’t even know how long I was out for before I called the ambulance. What if I had called sooner? Maybe he would have lived.”

“You don’t know that.”

“He died because of me. It was my fault.”

“Taimur... Look at me,” I said, feeling a deep burn in my heart I couldn’t put out. It burnt inside me, burning all my warning to the ground and leaving behind a mass of ashes where my heart used to be. “What wasn’t your fault. You have an illness.”

“Every day I wish it was me that died and not him, you know.”

“But it wasn’t you.”

“He was a good guy, much better than me. You would have liked him. He was a good Muslim, prayed and fasted, never messed around with girls

and never drank or did drugs. He respected everyone. He was the golden child, destined to do greatness. He shouldn't have died, I should have."

"But you didn't die Taimur, you lived and now you have to make the most of this life if not for yourself, then for him."

"I can still remember his last words, Pearl. *'I can't wait to see the day you finally fall for some girl. That's going to be hilarious.'*"

"Look at me, Taimur," I begged, looking straight into his wounded eyes. "That wasn't your fault. You were ill. You are as much a victim to this situation as he was, and you have every right to hurt as much as Nabeel is hurting."

"I have no right to hurt, Pearl, I did that to him."

"Are you listening to me?" I reiterated. Why couldn't he see what I saw?

"Nabeel and Tariq were closer than the rest of us, a bit like how Abs and I are. It was always them two against us two. They were like a dynamic duo and because of me he lost his best friend. Over the years I tried to be more to him, but Nabeel always pushed me away and deep down I've always known why, I just didn't want to admit it till he did today – he blames me."

"He doesn't. He doesn't know what he was saying. He has a problem, Taimur, he was high. He has no right to blame you."

"He does, I killed his best friend."

"You killed no one. It was an accident. Are you even listening to me, Taimur? It. Was. An. Accident!" I said, placing my hands on either side of his face and feeling his stubble on my moist palms. My thumbs stroked his perfect lips, like I had done before by the canal, and my sympathetic eyes bore into his, trying to make him understand. At that moment, I felt like he had laid himself bare, exposing a side of himself that no one apart from me knew and was showing me who he really was. "You're a good person, you are loving and passionate and caring and fearless and a great guy, that's what you are, you are a great guy."

"A great guy you can't be with," he mumbled through his drunken state.

"Wallahi it's not that. I wish I could Taimur, I wish I could be selfish and let myself want you."

His eyes beckoned me to let him in, his body imploring me to open myself up and his mind beseeching me to give him a chance.

Melancholy seeping out of him, testing my resolve.

I was lost.

Confused.

Helpless.

“I think... I think I love you, Pearl,” he uttered, drunk eyes on me and piercing my heart. His warm breath close enough for me to smell the scent of intoxication and his hard body close enough for it to have an effect on me. “I think I’m *in* love with you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Layla

“So, let me get this straight,” Moe said, sipping his morning black tea in my large kitchen. A hot summer breeze left the slightly ajar window, brushing passed us and disappearing into the humid air around. “Taimur Khalidi is sleeping in your room, in your bed, right now?”

“Shh...Yes.” I whispered, glancing toward the door. I cupped my mug in my small hands and took a long sip, allowing the hot liquid to burn my insides, much like Taimur’s words from last night had, setting my body aflame.

I think I already knew he loved me, I just didn’t realise he was in love with me.

“And how did this happen?”

“Well, Taimur had a fight with Nabeel. He was pretty upset and got drunk. I went to see if he was okay, and he was too wasted to go anywhere alone so I brought him here.”

“And you couldn’t have called one of his cousins or his brother?”

“I did. I called Kassim and Abs, but Kassim’s phone was switched off, as usual, and Abs said to keep Taimur with me since he was trying to calm Nabeel down. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Well, I know you two don’t *generally* get along, so I didn’t want to make it awkward for you,” I replied in a loud murmur, raising my eyebrow. “I didn’t want any more drama for the night.”

“Why are you whispering, Lay? You know he can’t hear us in here, right?”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I laughed, still nervous about last night.

“So, he ended up sleeping in your bed?”

“Yeah...”

“So where did you sleep?”

“Eventually, in the bed, too.”

“Eventually?”

“Yeah, I tried to sleep on the sofa, but I was too tired and uncomfortable.”

“Couldn’t you have slept with Zoya? In her bed and left Tai in yours?” he asked, a hint of something unusual in his tone.

Jealousy?

“Well, she was out with Noah again, and her room was locked. I tried to call her too, but she didn’t pick up. I waited for her, but she didn’t come home last night either.”

“So basically, what you’re trying to say is the entire universe *conspired* to get you to sleep together,” he said, repeating my favourite Paulo Coelho quote.

“And she still doesn’t see it as a sign that we should be together.” A hoarse voice chimed in from behind us, captivating all my attention.

Taimur stood in the wooden doorway to the same kitchen we had first met months ago, in all his naked chest glory, each defined peck taunting me. Trying not to stare, I tore my gaze away from his glorious body, only for it to rest of his gorgeous face with his messy bed hair. His hazel eyes were glued to me and on his charming his face he wore a mischievous smirk, knowing I was shamelessly objectifying him. I felt my cheeks turn red and my mouth became dry, thinking about last night.

“Don’t you have a shirt?” Moe asked, gawking at Taimur too.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, still inspecting him. He didn’t look hungover. “Do you want some tea?”

“Actually, I have to go,” he replied, and for a second my heart sank. “Abs just messaged and said Nabeel wants to talk to me. I have to meet them in Edgware Road in an hour and I need to go home first to get my insulin.”

“This early?”

“Yeah. Better to sort it out sooner than later.”

“I guess you guys should discuss everything before it escalates.”

“Yeah...” he replied, shifting his weight from one foot to another.
“Would it be okay if we could talk for a second... in private?”

“I’ll be in your room,” Moe said, standing before I could say anything.

“Pearl...” Taimur began, walking in closer, close enough that we were standing face to face and only inches apart. The closer he got, the harder it was for me to breathe, and even though I tried not to succumb to the pull between us, my body betrayed me, accepting the bond we had made from mutual compassion - empathetic and acceptance, built on trust and secrets.

‘I think I’m in love with you.’

“About last night...” he said, not taking his eyes off me. “I’m sorry for drinking so much. I can’t even remember what happened.”

“You can’t remember anything?” I asked, hurt seeping into my every pore. He didn’t remember telling me he loved me?

“After the amount of alcohol I had, I’m surprised I could remember how to walk home.”

“You couldn’t.”

“Shit... I’m sorry you had to deal with me like that.”

“I’m not going to pretend I condone you drinking, and you know how I feel about you taking your insulin injection just so you can drink, but I know you were looking for an escape yesterday that’s why you did it. I wish you had another escape though. Apart from drinking.”

“Me too.. Umm.. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How did I end up in your bed... in my boxers?”

I felt the redness creep back into my cheeks and I’m sure Taimur noticed, since he’s smirk was back too.

“Umm.. Well, I brought you to mine because Abs thought it wouldn’t be wise for you and Nabeel to be in the same flat when one of you was drunk and the other was high, and since all you Khalidi boys live together, I had nowhere else to take you apart from here.”

“Okay.. but that doesn’t explain how I ended up in my boxers.”

“You said you were hot and decided to take your clothes off.”

“All my clothes?”

“I stopped you before you took *everything* off.”

“Thank you.” Taimur blushed, it was a new look for him. I’d never seen him embarrassed before.

It was cute.

Once again, the memory from last night came flooding back like the British rain, covering everything around.

Me pulling Taimur through the front door and towards my bedroom.

Me trying to call *anyone* to take him to theirs.

Me returning to my bedroom to see him undressing.

Me gawking at his immaculate body.

Me trying to put his clothes back on but failing.

Me being pulled by him onto the bed.

Me lying next to him until he fell asleep, murmuring sweet nothings into my ear.

Me changing into the most covered pyjamas I had and climbing in next to him trying to keep as much distance as possible, only to be pulled against his firm chest and wrapped into his embrace all night long.

Me peacefully falling asleep to the scent of aftershave, alcohol and cigarettes, feeling protected for the first time since my mum died.

But Taimur didn’t remember this and I couldn’t remind him.

“Ahh.. I’m so sorry, Pearl.”

“And I wanted to say thank you for looking out for me last night and listening to me ramble on. Thank you for the things you said too. I remember that part.”

“Taimur...”

“I get it Pearl... I finally get it. You and I are from different worlds. Even though it should be logical because we’re both Muslim, the truth is I’m Muslim by name, and you’re Muslim by heart. We both want something different from life and I think you were right in the beginning when you said we should just keep our distance.”

I stared at him, eyes burning from holding back tears I didn’t know why I had behind my eyes.

“You’re with Saad and I’m with Katie.” He smiled, but as he spoke the words, his eyes betrayed him, showing me how hard these words were for him to say. “I’m just going to stay out of your way from now on. I’m sorry for all the drama I’ve caused. I really do think you are an exceptional person, kind, generous, loving, one in six and a half billion, and definitely beautiful inside and out, and I honestly wish you all the best.”

Before I could react or reply, Taimur leaned in, gently touching his soft lips to my cheek in a supple kiss. I felt my breath hitch on the contact, closing my eyes to steady my heart rate but before it even began it was over. He had turned and walked out of the kitchen, leaving me breathless and speechless, wondering what had just happened. I stood there, watching Taimur take back his love while I felt completely lost.



LAYLA

Not feeling well. Not coming to the lecture.

KASSIM

What's wrong?

LAYLA

Had a rough night.

KASSIM

I heard, do you want me to come around?

LAYLA

Nah, I'm fine. I just need some aloe time.

KASSIM

Did you mean aloe or alone? Because I'm curious to know what 'alone time' is. Sounds kinky.

LAYLA

You're such a comedian. Don't quit your day job.

KASSIM

But did I make you smile?

LAYLA

No...

KASSIM

Lies, see you later Sweetheart.

LAYLA

Bye, Sweetheart.

I SAT BACK, RESTING ON THE HEADBOARD OF MY BED AND MY LEGS stretched, trying to get comfortable. I felt sore all over, and I didn't know if it was because of Taimur or because my period had just started. I hadn't bothered to get out of my pyjamas since morning and my head hurt, hammering into me like it was trying to tell me something. In my hands was the washed shot glass from last night. I didn't know why I had asked the bartender if I could take it, but when he agreed I felt relieved. Another one for my collection, however, this one meant something more to me.

My bedsheets still smelt of him, his aftershave and alcohol scent lingering all around me as I wrapped myself in the quilt, imagining being wrapped in his strong arms instead. Imagining wasn't wrong. Imagining wasn't a sin.

The flat intercom buzzed, shaking me out of my melancholic daydream as I made my way over to it, deliberating who it could be.

"Open up, Sweetheart." Kassim said.

"What are you doing here?" I yelled back over the speaker, a little annoyed at the disturbance.

"Selling girl scout cookies," he replied, sarcastically.

"Kassim..." I challenged.

"Layla..." he defied.

"Go away."

"Let me in, I want to pray."

"Liar."

"Are you denying me the right to pray in your room?"

"Go to the prayer room."

"I don't even know where that is."

"Of course you don't. Fine, come on up."

"Come down and get me, I have too many bags."

"I'm coming."

"That's what she said."

"Shut up!"

Five minutes later we were back in my room, me back in my bed with my pink fleece blanket over me and headscarf on, even though the weather was warm, and Kassim sitting on the table, long legs dangling down.

"What are you doing here, Kass?" I asked, still wishing I was left alone to wallow in my misery.

“I came to check up on you. I know yesterday must have been a bit of a shock, and thank you for looking after my brother.”

“Where were you? I tried to call.”

“I was on a date with some girl. I’m *really* sorry, sweetheart.”

“It’s okay,” I sighed in despair. “What’s in the bags?”

Kassim had come upstairs with a number of heavy bags, some from Tesco and others without any labels. My mind ached as much as my stomach, and I didn’t have the energy to get out of bed and find out what was in them myself.

“Well, I’m glad you asked, sweetheart.” He began pulling items out of the bag. One by one he placed them on the countertop, not turning to me until the bags were all empty.

“Let’s start with this,” he said, handing me a green plastic bottle. “Here’s your aloe juice.”

I looked up at him, seeing amusement in his eyes and I couldn’t help but laugh, slightly washing away my desolated mood.

“Thank you,” I giggled, taking a sip of it for the first time. “What else?”

“Next is a hot water bottle,” he handed me a bright pink hot water bottle in the shape of a heart. The fluffy cover felt like a kitten in my hand, and I hugged it close to my face, closing my eyes like I was in heaven. “If I’d known something this small would get such a reaction out of you, I’d have bought it a long time ago.”

“How did you know?” I asked shyly, feeling my cheeks turn pink.

“That aunt flow is in town?” He winked at me suggestively.

“Uh... Yeah. That.”

“Well, you’re always grumpy when it’s *that* time, never wear white and you don’t excuse yourself to go pray for a week because you don’t need to. Twenty-eight day cycle?”

“Oh my God, Kassim! Please stop!”

“What?” He replied, innocent eyes glaring my way.

“That’s so embarrassing.”

“It’s natural.”

“Anyways...” I said, trying to change the subject. “What else do you have?”

“Chocolate. Lots of different types of chocolates. Mint Aero, Kitkats, Ferrero Rochers, Lion Bar, Crunchie, Galaxy, Dairy Milk. You name it, I

got it.”

“Flake?”

“Oh... apart from flake.”

We both laughed, finally shifting my mood, allowing me to breathe easier for the first time in hours. I moved off my small bed and wrapped him in a tight hug, not having words to explain the feelings I had but knowing the feeling just felt right, even though it was supposed to be wrong.

It could have been my fluctuating hormones or what he had just done, but in that moment, I loved Kassim Khalidi with all my heart.

“There’s more. I got you some pads too, in case you ran out. I just remember the one the fell out of your bag was blue, so I asked the lady at the counter for the blue ones,” he said, blushing. It was adorable and I didn’t know what to say. “And, I got chicken and vegetables to make you some soup...”

“Is it..” I interrupted.

“Halal, yes sweetheart, It’s halal. And finally, some tea bags, because my mum says there’s nothing a cup of tea can’t fix.”

“And you know I’m not ill, right?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know what normal protocol is when it comes to the red bus being in town.”

“Oh my God... Don’t say that. But chocolate is always good, lots of chocolate.” I smiled, picking up a gold Ferrero Rocher and popping the whole thing in my mouth. “Mmmmm...Thank you Kassim, this is just what I needed.”

“I’m not done yet. I’ve got one more thing for you.” He took out the box set of Friends. “How about you put this on while I go make you some soup.”

“Oh My God! You are the best. That would be amazing. I’m starving but let me help you cook.”

“No, no, no, sweetheart. You know I love you, but my stomach can’t take your cooking.”

“What? Taimur never complains.”

“That’s because he loves you more than me.”

“What?”

“Now, sit back and watch the master work.”

“You’re going to make a great house husband someday,” I said, gathering items and walking towards the kitchen.

“Just not yours, right?”

“Kassim...”

“Layla...”

We both giggled as I watched him effortlessly move around my kitchen, cooking up a storm of a soup.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s wrong, now that I’ve fed you?” Kassim asked once he had cooked and cleaned, and we were sipping our soup out of two mugs since I didn’t have any bowls.

“Nothing.”

“You know what makes me laugh, sweetheart?”

“What?”

“The fact that Tai is probably the fussiest person alive when it comes to food, but he happily drinks your pond water soup or you baby-food curry with a smile on his face.”

“Come on, my food can’t be that bad.”

“Have you tasted it? Anyways, now tell me, what’s wrong sweetheart?”

“Nothing Kass, I’m fine. It’s just you know... time of the month.”

“You have your period every month, you never miss a lecture because of it. Something must be wrong.”

“It’s honestly nothing.”

“Layla...”

“Kassim...”

I sighed, thinking how I was supposed to tell him that his brother had told me, in a drunken haze, that he thought he was in love with me then held me the entire night, but in the morning he’d decided that he didn’t actually want me.

I should have been happy.

This is what I had wanted.

I’d been telling him the same thing but suddenly it felt like the universe wasn’t aligned anymore, that the earth had tilted on its axis and something was not right.

“It’s my Tai, isn’t it?” Kassim said, coming to his own conclusion. “What did he do now?”

“Apart from get drunk and tell me he thinks he’s in love with me?” I blurt out.

“What?”

“Oh, c..c..crap. I shouldn’t have said anything... Forget I said that, Kassim.”

“I can’t unhear that, sweetheart. What did you say back?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter anyways. He didn’t remember anything in the morning.”

“Ahh, I see,” Kassim said, smiling like he knew a secret.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Kassim...”

“Layla...”

“Tell me.”

“Fine, I know my brother and it doesn’t matter how much he drinks...”

“...he should drink less. It’s really bad for his diabetes.”

“Besides the point right now.”

“Sorry, yes continue. It doesn’t matter how much he drinks?”

“He never forgets anything. He’s like a bloody elephant.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is that he did the whole ‘selected drunken amnesia’ thing because he probably feels embarrassed.”

I took a second to rethink the series of events, the chat we had in the morning and how we left things and suddenly it seemed to make more sense. Taimur’s nervousness, his random change of heart and his hurried departure.

“Oh... That’s why he told me that it’s best we stay away from each other from now on.”

“He said what? That’s bullshit,” Kassim said, taking out his phone. “Sweetheart, you know I love you and if I could, I’d keep you for myself but trust me when I tell you, my brother is completely in love with you.”

“No, he isn’t.”

“And whatever you say, you’re in love with him too.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You two are the most stubborn people I know. Fine, don’t admit it to me but at least admit it to yourself, you’re crazy about Tai, that’s why you ran after him yesterday, tried to help him and let him stay over. Why else would you care so much?”

I didn't have a reply. I thought about what Kassim was saying and the more I did, the more I realised that he and Zoya were right, I had feelings for Taimur more than I should. I still knew it was not right, and against my beliefs but I also knew in my bones that I was kind of in love with Taimur too.

"And you know how I know that he loves you too?"

"How?"

"Because you don't fall in love with someone who always sees your smile, you fall in love with someone who finds you in the pouring rain, picks you up, and holds you till the storm passes, just like you did for Tai yesterday."

"But I can't Kassim. I'm not into dating anyone and that's what he wants. Plus, my dad wants me to marry Saad."

"Do you always do what your dad wants you to do?"

"No, but... It's not right. I can't date him. I have to do the whole arranged marriage thing, that's how I was raised."

"So, what about your feelings for him?"

"What about them? They'll eventually go away," I replied, hoping what I was saying would be true. "And you have to promise not to tell anyone, please."

"But sweetheart, don't you believe in signs? That sometimes the stars align and you meet people for a reason? Can't you read between the lines and see that some higher power is trying to tell you something? That the universe is forcing you to open your eyes and realise the purpose of which you were designed. To love and be loved."

"Kassim, please, It's not that easy."

"Oh, but it is for you."

"I've never asked you for anything before. I promise if you do this for me, I'll be there for you when you need me too."

"You'll always be there for me, sweetheart, even if I don't do this. You're too caring but I'll keep this secret of yours, only because I'm secretly in love with you too," he grinned, as I swatted his head.

"Stop it!" I replied, getting the plates in the dishwasher as Kassim took a phone call.

"What?" Kassim exclaimed on the phone, grabbing my attention. His voice was loud with a sense of urgency and he began pacing the kitchen floor. It was not like him to sound panicked. "When did this happen?"

There was a silence before he spoke again.

“And all three of them are on the train? Have you heard from them?”

I heard someone speak on the other line, but I couldn't quite make out what was being said, however, one thing I did know, something was wrong and had got Kassim rattled.

“No, Mum, I haven't heard from them since last night. Wait a minute,” he said, placing a hand over the speaker part of the phone. “Layla, have you spoken to either Tai, Abs, or Nabeel today?”

“Not since the morning when Taimur said he was meeting Abs and Nabeel at Edgware road, why?”

“Switch the news on. There's been some kind of attack on the underground and we can't get through to any of the boys. We think they were on the train.”

“What!?” I ran to my room and switching on the TV to see what in fact would later be known as the 7/7 bombing happening before our eyes. There was chaos everywhere, people running around screaming, and trying to find their loved ones. Injured people were being tended to by paramedics and police sirens rang louder than I'd ever heard before. Kassim stood beside me anxious, horrifically watching the scene on the TV as if we were watching a film and it wasn't really happening to us. Kassim repeatedly called his brothers, one by one, but could not get through to any of them.

“Wait, let me call Rose, she might know.”

“Rose?” he asked, but I didn't have time to explain. I hurriedly called her, my fingers slipping as I did so, worried that something had happened to some of the people I loved the most.

“Rose?”

“Hey Layla, how are you? What's up?”

“It's about Nabeel, have you heard from him today?”

“I spoke to him this morning, but he was going to meet the boys in Edgware Road to sort out some fight they'd had. He was pretty upset. Why?”

“Don't worry.”

“Now I'm worried, what's up Layla. If it's to do with Nabeel you have to tell me.”

“Check the news, there's been a bomb on the underground and we think the boys are on that train.”

“What the hell!? Where are you?” There was panic in her voice.

“In my room with Kassim.”

“I’m coming to you.”

“Okay.”

My next call was to Zoya and Moe, to make sure they were nowhere near the area.

Ten minutes later, the five of us, Zoya, Kassim, Moe, Rose, and I, were gathered in my room, wondering what we should do.

Kassim stressfully paced up and down the room, pulling at his light strands of his hair in frustration. Zoya rapidly tapped away at her laptop, trying to find new information about what was going on, Rose kept calling Nabeel’s phone, over and over again in hope to get through to him, and Moe tried to keep us calm, reiterating that the signal could be bad and that was why they hadn’t called us yet.

I didn’t know what to do.

I felt like I couldn’t breathe, like the air in the room was reducing by every minute and suffocating me from the inside. My heart ached like I’d never felt before and worry encompassed me in a bubble that I couldn’t break out of.

I felt sick with fear.

“My mum should have called by now,” Kassim said, breathing heavily and dialling his mum again. She picked up only to tell him that she had no news.

“The guys should have called by now. This is ridiculous. We can’t stand around here doing nothing,” I said, sitting on my bed and shaking my leg nervously. It made a tapping noise on the ground that irritated me more. I had changed into a pair of tracksuit bottoms and hoody, with a dark head scarf roughly thrown over my head. I didn’t care what I looked like, all I cared was to find out where Taimur and the boys were. “I want to go down to Edgware Road.”

“What can we do there?” Moe asked, trying to calm us all down.

“I’d feel better just being there,” Rose replied, “I can’t.... Nabeel...” Tears began to fall out of her bright blue eyes, setting me off too.

“I know,” I said, hugging her tightly. “I think we should go down there.”

“Where?” Zoya asked, getting up from the desk and walking towards me. “To where the bombs were? Are you insane? There could be more coming. I won’t let you go there, Layli.”

“I’m not asking,” I turned to stop Kassim from burning a hole in the ground with his pacing. His face more serious than I’d ever seen before. “Come on, let’s go.”

“No,” Kassim replied, “Zoya is right. I can’t let you go down there.”

“We’re not asking your permission, Kassim. If you don’t want to come with me, don’t but I’m going.”

“Listen to me Layla,” he began, turning me to face him and taking my jacket out of my hands. His face stern and eyes burning into me like two lasers, trying to make me understand. “If the guys are not on the train and come here to find out that I’ve let you, the girl we all love and care about, go to a dangerous bomb site, they’re going to literally kill me, *and*, if they’re on the train, God forbid, then there’s nothing we can do to help them right now. The paramedics, firefighters and police are doing their jobs to find them, and we will just be in their way. The guys know we’re trying to call them and I’m sure they’ll call us as soon as they can get to a phone.”

“Listen to Kassim, he’s right,” Moe said, “I’m sure his mum will call as soon as she hears anything.”

Knowing they were right, I sat back on the bed, in front of the TV with my phone in hand, waiting for news on the boy I had fallen in love with. I swiped my phone open, clicked on Taimur’s name and opened up a new message and typed:

LAYLA

I love you, too.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Taimur

I *lied to Layla.*

That was the first thought that popped into my mind as I heard the first explosion, literally shaking the ground we were standing on.

They said, life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die, but the only thing that flashed before mine was *her*.

I had lied to Layla about last night. I did in fact remember everything about it, including what I'd told her in a drunken fog and I distinctly remembered the look on her face as she heard it, her big emerald eyes widening in horror, stunned by my declaration, which had sounded much more sensible in my mind.

And if that wasn't enough for me to cringe upon, I remembered staggering into her room, taking my clothes off despite my better judgement and her disapproval, climbing into her bed and pulling her close to me. All night I wrapped my semi-naked body around her, finding peace in her warmth like I had never done before and in the morning, I watched her dart away from me, realising what had happened.

Then, I saw the uncertainties in her beautiful green eyes as we spoke in the kitchen, beckoning me to answer her questions, but the more I reflected on my feelings, the more I realised that Layla had always been right, and I was not the kind of guy she was looking for. A girl like her deserved better, a pure man with no baggage. A man who wanted a future and didn't live only for today. A man that could look after her and give her the life she wanted.

A man that was never going to be me.

Now, as the ground shook beneath me and I deliberated if it was the end, I wished I had been honest with her and told her I meant every word of what I had said the night before.

I was in fact in love with her.

"I'm sorry for what I said yesterday," Nabeel had said, walking into a shisha café with Abs and me early that morning. His eyes were still red from the night before and his face was sad, ashamed about yesterday while his hair was the worst I'd ever seen it. Black roots, blond tips. "I just feel lost without him."

"I'm sorry for the part I played in what happened," I replied, sitting down. "If I hadn't left the house..."

"There are a million 'What if's' guys. Whatever happened shouldn't have happened, but it wasn't anyone's fault. It just happened and now we have to stick together, that's what Tee would want," Abs lectured us, always being the most mature out of the five of us. "You guys can't fight like that. And Nabeel, you have a problem. You need help."

"I know," he said, looking away as we ordered our shisha to smoke early that morning. "I don't know how to stop."

"You need to talk to someone that can deal with this. We all know you have an addictive personality and we should have never let it get this far. This is on us too," I said, placing my arm around his shoulders. "Listen, we're going to help you get through this. I swear."

Nabeel nodded, taking a long pull of the shisha pipe and blowing out a big cloud of smoke before getting up to use the bathroom.

"You guys talk. I'm coming."

A moment of silence passed between us.

"Do you hate Layla?" I had to ask.

"It's not like that," Abs finally spoke.

"Then what's it like? No more secrets. No more lies. 60 seconds."

"Fine. I'm not going to lie to you, Tai. She's just so different from the rest. She's just so naïve that I feel like she has no idea about life. She lives in this perfect bubble, always thinking life is a bed of roses, but it's not. And I see the way you're around her and you've changed. You don't realise it, but she has you wrapped around her little finger and you're just going to get deeper if you keep spending time with her. But saying that, I don't hate her bro. She's sweet and innocent and caring and genuine and observant.

She knows when I'm upset. She knows when I'm happy. She knows how to make me laugh and when to leave me alone. She knows how to read me... read all of us boys. It's just that she has this way of making her way into our hearts without our permission and to be honest, it's annoying as hell but I still feel like she needs someone to look out for her, someone to make sure she's okay. Someone to protect her. Yeah, I don't like her for you but that doesn't mean I don't like her at all."

"Is it because you like her for yourself?"

We were in a small café that was situated on the end of Edgware road in a basement. The room was large with smaller cut out sections on each wall making it look like small caves. Multi--coloured cushions were placed on the floors around antique wooden tables that were scattered around the room, and we sat on long hard mattresses, covered with bright coloured materials with gold trimmings, giving it an Arabian Nights feel. Traditional golden lanterns hung from the ceiling above us and the lights were dim, giving the entire café a vintage feel. It was very elegant and stylish.

As we sat smoking, we felt a tremble on the ground, shaking the entire basement like there was an earthquake.

"What the hell was that?" Nabeel asked on his way back from the toilet, as the golden lanterns began to fall from the low ceiling, crashing to the ground and shattering to pieces. We watched the red wall around us crack and a part of the granite roof tumble down, only missing our table by inches. "Let's get the hell out of here. Quick!"

As we stood to run up the stone stairs, the large wooden door caved in, coming off its hinges and tumbling towards us. I abruptly pushed the boys out the way, not thinking of anything other than to stop them from getting hurt, and felt the crack of the door hit my body. I jolted backwards, and before Abs could grab my arm I fell in reverse down the cold steps, surrendering to gravity, followed by the wooden door landing on top of me.

Agonising pain shot through my body like never before, starting in my legs, running through my stomach and chest, and ending in my shoulders, tormenting my every breath.

The pain was instant and excruciating.

I closed my eyes, gasping for air and trying to move my arms to push off the heavy door but couldn't move a muscle without the severe sting of

pain flying through me. As every second passed, I felt the agony elevate, reaching a point I didn't think ever existed.

Trying to make sense of the situation, I gaped around, looking for Nabeel and Abs when I felt the pressure on my chest suddenly lighten and I saw their faces come into view. They stood over me, pulling off the heavy door and trying to come closer to where I was lying, shaking in shock and agony. Their eyes told me that something was wrong and as I tried to move, I felt it too.

"You're going to be alright. We've got you," was the last thing I heard Abs say before I finally shut my eyes, not being able to take any more of my body aching and slipped away from reality to a universe where terrorism didn't exist.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Layla

“I’m fine Baba. I’m just going to my lecture now. I’ll call you later,” I lied to my father, putting the phone down. He’d called too many times to not pick up, and I didn’t have it in me to face the consequences of not being available when he called.

Chewing on my nails, I paced up and down the long corridor outside the inauspicious hospital doors. I never bit my nails, I believed it was a disgusting habit, but as the smell of antiseptic invaded my senses and the distant beeping of monitors brought back memories, biting nails was the least of my worries.

The feeling of my heart hammering against my aching hollow chest, echoed within my entire body, shaking me with fear and my head felt light. I shook away the blurred vision in front of me, trying to remember the last thing he said to me and the water behind my eyes refused to stay at bay.

I knew it now.

I was in love with him.

I was always going to be.

It was him.

Only him.

Abs marched towards the waiting area scattered with plastic chairs and a big TV showing the current news on BBC. He had a brutal look on his face. His grey tracksuit bottoms were smudged with dirty black marks and his hoodie was smeared with dark red blood, murky and dried. My breath caught in my lungs as he strode over towards us, urgency in his approach.

“He’s in surgery,” He informed, pulling Kassim into a brotherly hug that lasted longer than usual. He? Did he mean Taimur? “We’re just waiting for some news now.”

“Are you hurt?” Kassim asked, gesturing to the blood on Abs’s clothes.

“No, it’s not mine. It’s Tai’s.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“What happened?”

Before he replied, Nabeel came limping out of the cloudy glass doors of an examination room. There was a white bandage on his left arm and another cream plaster on his left cheek, just under his defined cheek bone. He stumbled towards us as Rose flung into his damaged arms, sending him flying back a few inches. Both Kassim and Abs scrutinised them, curiosity in their gazes but Nabeel only beamed back, positioning his arms around her and winking over her petite shoulders in our direction. After they exchanged a few words, and a quick peck on the lips, they finally made their way towards us.

“A door fell on him when the explosion went off. It was mental Kass, mental,” Nabeel said, moving to come closer but flinching in pain at every step. “Do they know what caused it yet?”

“The news said it was a terrorist attack. Is he hurt bad?” Kassim asked, making space for Nabeel and Rose to sit next to us.

“He’s dislocated both shoulders, fractured a few ribs, broken his right arm and there’s a piece of wood in his chest that’s quite close to a major artery, the rest are just cuts and bruises that need a few stitches, but that isn’t the problem,” Abs added, worry manifesting in his eyes as he spoke.

“Why is he in surgery?” I asked, “And where were two guys when this happened?”

I didn’t mean for my words to come out like I was accusing them of anything but unfortunately, it did. Abs looked at me like I had just asked the world’s most stupid question.

He still didn’t like me.

I didn’t know why.

“We were with him, *princess*, but he decided to push us out the way and took the hit himself. Do you think we would let this happen to him if we had the power to stop it? I know you think you know him but remember something, we’re his family, and family always comes first. And to answer

your other question, they're putting his arm back together, popping his shoulders back in since they couldn't do it when he was awake and most importantly, they're taking out the piece of wood stuck in his chest. They're worried about the amount of blood he's lost, and he had a seizure in the ambulance on the way here because of his sugar levels. Do you know if he took his insulin injection this morning Kass?" he asked, looking straight at me. "And why are you here?"

"She's with me," Kassim replied while Abs lifted an eyebrow, giving us a distrustful look. "And I don't know if he took his injection."

"I think he did... Just before he met up with you guys," I answered quietly.

"Natasha? Did you bloody forget?" Abs stated, ignoring me and looking straight at Kassim.

"It's not like that," Kassim replied, then swiftly changed the subject before Abs could continue. Natasha? "Is he going to be okay?"

"We will know more once the piece of wood next to his heart is out and they control his sugar levels."

"When did you guys get here?"

"About two hours ago. We would have gotten here sooner if every policeman in London hadn't stopped to check if we were involved just because we are Muslim and not white," he replied, angrily. "They could clearly see Tai and Nabeel were hurt."

As he spoke the blood in my veins ran cold, until it felt like there were icicles burning through me, trying to scorch me from the inside. My body started to heat up, anxiety taking over until I felt the hospital walls begin to close around me. As the fear crept in like a silent thief, stealing my sense of composure and leaving me with a void space in my chest, my head began to whirl, seeing a million hazes of blurred dots clouding my vision and my forceful breath decreased to a level that my body didn't accept. The air around deliberately ceased to exist, and I could hear the sound of my uneasy heart pumping loud in my ears, drumming through me with no place to rest.

I was going to pass out.

Before I knew what was happening, I had two sturdy arms around me, embracing me securely against a firm chest that was beating as fast as mine.

"It's okay," a voice came through the fog like a small ray of sunlight. "I've got you. Just breathe."

“She’s having a panic attack,” another voice rang out, but I didn’t know who it was.

“She needs some air. Get her out of here.” Was another.

I felt myself being lifted in someone’s strong arms, bridal style. My head rested on his hard, thumping chest, and I was being carried out into some fresh air. Once we were outside, I looked up to see Abs. He placed me onto a hard metal bench, allowing the cool air to float into my lungs and the tight feeling around my heart began to slightly loosen.

“Just leave me Abs,” I stuttered, still gasping for air. The bench was situated at the end of a long wooden ramp with a line of ambulances parked side by side opposite us. I watched as a paramedic wheeled another injured person on a stretcher towards the double doors. “I’m fine. You don’t have to stay with me.”

“If you think I’m leaving you out here like this you have another thing coming, Princess,” he said, his alien hands on my damp cheeks as tears began to run down them. He wiped them away with his thumbs, softly resting his forehead on mine. He shouldn’t have been touching me. Someone could see us and report to my father.

Why was he being so nice?

His touch was different to his cousins.

His bruised hands were silkier, and his pressure was lighter, like if he pressed too hard I would break.

“I got you,” he whispered, gently loosening my headscarf but keeping it on my head. “Here, put this on. You’re frozen,” he placed his bloodied hoodie around my shoulders, and my arms instantly pulled it around my shivering body, the foreign metallic smell of blood mixed with a familiar smell of cigarettes engulfing me in a new yet calming sensation.

“Thanks.”

“This is becoming a bit of a habit, isn’t it princess?” He zipped up the hoodie for me.

“What?”

“You in my hoodie.”

“I’m sorry.” I uttered, starting to unzip it only to have him stop me and zip me up again.

“It looks good on you.” He faintly smiled a rare smile, as silence befell us and the afternoon breeze chilled the air. There was one thing that drove me mad about Abs – his ability to always live in the in-between. In the

months I'd known him I'd never seen him happy or sad, angry or calm, playful or serious. He showed me no signs of his real emotions, and it confused me.

We sat together lost in thought, close enough for me hear his anxious breathes but far enough for me to not know what they meant. The bustle of the emergency room still continued around us as we rested there, comfortable in each others presence for the first time.

"I'm really sorry Abs. You don't need to be worrying about me when your brother is in surgery." It had taken half an hour of sitting outside in silence to calm me down before I was even able to construct a full sentence again.

"You don't worry about me, Princess."

"Why are you being nice to me Abs?" I asked, my eyes searching for an answer in his dark ones. "You don't even like me."

"How are you feeling? What happened back there?" He answered, completely ignoring my question.

I looked away from him, picking at the cuticles I'd bitten earlier, wondering if I could speak about it or not. I watched an elderly woman in a nightgown be wheeled in through the double doors while she gripped her wrist and cried out in pain. Moments passed as he patiently waited, giving me the space I needed.

"It's the first time I've entered a hospital since my mum died," I said, the back of my eyes stinging again. Without permission a tear escaped, running down my cheek. I wiped it away. "Last time I was here I was saying goodbye to her."

"Shit," he replied, looking straight at me. "I didn't know. Fuck! Shit! I'm sorry for being a dick. You shouldn't have come." He moved in closer, putting his arm around me.

"I wanted to see if he was okay."

"He's going to be okay. He always is."

"What if he isn't, Abs?"

"Aren't you the one who is supposed to be consoling me, Princess? He's my brother."

"And he's my..."

"He's your what, Princess?"

"Nothing. He's my nothing. Sorry. You're right. He's your brother. He's going to be fine."

“You want to sit out here and not go inside? I can ask the boys to come and give us updates.”

Not knowing what to say, I stayed quiet, relaxing into him as if he was my protector. My head rested on his strong shoulder, tired and drained. Another few silent moments passed between us as we stayed attached, Abs holding me and I comfortable enough to let him.

“Tell me about your mum.” Abs asked, moving his body so he could have a clear view of my face. He took a loose side of my headscarf and placed it over my shoulder. “What was she like?”

“I can’t speak about her.”

“Please tell me, so I have something to think about other than losing my brothers right now.”

Again, seconds developed into minutes as I gathered my courage and methodically organised my thoughts into a clean pile in my mind. It had been a prolonged time since I had actually spoken about her or even thought about her, to be honest. Swallowing the rising lump in my throat and blinking back my hot tears, I tried to speak.

“She was beautiful,” I began.

“So, I guess you got it from her.”

I smiled up at him, his piercing dark grey eyes sparkling like the winter’s night sky.

“She was a doctor.”

“Is that why you went into science?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, I had never disclosed that to anyone before. “She loved life. She would always wake up with a smile, singing all morning while she got us ready for our day, even though she had a really *really* bad singing voice.”

Abs chuckled, and I think it was the first time I’d heard him do that around me.

“She was an amazing cook too. People think you can’t have a career and be a mum, but she was both. I can’t remember her ever being absent for a gymnastic competition or Christmas play. She was always there, and she was there for her patients too.”

“You did gymnastics?” he asked, intrigued, his right hand rubbing his stubbled chin, the five o’clock shadow defining his jawline even more. “Do you still do it?”

“No, Dad made me stop when I was nine and turned baliq.”

“Huh?”

“You know, when I hit puberty. Usually by nine years old a girl hits the baliq age and a guy at fifteen.”

“And that’s when you started praying, fasting and wearing hijab?”

“Yeah. I had been nine when I became Baliq and I didn’t know any better. From as long as I could remember I was always told that when I was to turn nine, I was obligated to change my life in ways that were determined by my religion.”

“Like what? For us guys, life didn’t change much to be honest.”

“Firstly, I would cover my head and body, secondly, I had to stop interacting with the guys the most I could. Living in London, complete segregation was impossible, but I had to attempt to try and keep away from them, thirdly, I had to start learning more about Islam by reading the Quran”

“Oh, I see,” Abs said, with a sympathetic smile, rubbing his arms. I started to unzip the hoodie to return it in case he was cold, but he stopped me. “It must be annoying to have to change your life for God.”

“I don’t really mind now. It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make to show my devotion to him.”

“But don’t you think a compassionate God wouldn’t mind if you didn’t follow the exact rules?”

“He would, I’m sure of it, but if I’m honest with you Abs, I feel naked without my hijab on. Yes, I wore it because I was taught that it was the right thing to do but now, years later, I really want to wear it for me.”

“That’s okay then, as long as no one is asking you to do it. Did your mum wear it?”

“Yeah, does yours?”

“Yeah, she used to.”

“Used to?”

“She died when I was three. Tai and Kass’s mum brought me up after that. I moved in with them when my dad couldn’t look after me,” he said, his glazed eyes looking away from mine, and for the first time I saw the broken boy behind the hard exterior. “He eventually remarried, but I stayed with Tai’s family.”

A tragic vulnerable side to the enigma that was Abs.

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t know. That’s why you’re so close.”

“Yeah, people don’t understand but those three boys really are my brothers. They got me through the hardest time of my life, picked me up when I couldn’t stand, fought for me when I had nothing to fight for and got me where I am today. I owe them everything. I would do anything for them.”

“I don’t think love comes with debt, Abs. And I’m sure you would have done the same for any one of them.”

“Yeah, but anyways, my mum wore it, most our girls do apart from Alia. She didn’t want to and even though Tai tried to make her wear it when she was younger, she fought back.”

“Tai wanted her to wear it?”

“Yeah, he thought it would keep her protected and keep guys away from her.”

“That’s funny, since he hates the fact that I wear it.”

“He doesn’t hate the fact that you wear it, Princess, he hates that fact that it reminds him of how untouchable you are. You’re not like the other girls in our lives Layla, you’re different. You’re unique.”

I felt my cheeks burn as his cloudy eyes didn’t leave mine, his words hanging in the thick air between us, as time moved slower than usual.

“Abs... I think I...”

Before we could continue our conversation, I felt Abs move away, standing up abruptly and looking towards the hospital gates where people were entering, and just like that, our temporary truce of friendship was over.

We had been sitting outside the Accident & Emergency ward, the automatic double doors keeping us out of the hospital and nearer the ambulance car park while we spoke. In front of me I saw a man and a woman scurrying towards us. The man was tall with recognisable features, the high cheekbones and small eyes gave it away that he was Taimur’s dad while the lady was smaller, more petite with a pair of black trousers, navy coat and grey headscarf. Her face was pale, much like how mine was and her eyes were bloodshot, tears streaming out of them. Without thinking, I knew she was their mother.

“Abdul!” she called out, grabbing her son in a tight hug like a mama bear. She intimidated me without even looking in my direction. “How is he?”

“He’s still in surgery, Aunty. We don’t know anything more than what I told you over the phone.”

“Let’s go find a doctor and get some answers,” Taimur’s father said, hurrying her along with his arm gently resting on her lower back. “Come on.”

“I’ll meet you inside,” Abs told them, his bulky body turning to me.

As they hurried off I felt an affable arm go around me, drawing me into a sideways hug. I looked to my right to see Alia, her wet tears resting on my shoulder and nose sniffing into my already damp headscarf. I must have missed her while watching their parents.

“Hey babe,” she said, withdrawing enough to look at me. “Thank you for being here for the boys. I know they really appreciate it.”

“Of course.” I smiled back, feeling her warmth. There was something about this girl that spread light wherever she went. She reminded me of her twin brother.

“Are you coming inside?” she asked, her eyes welcoming and waiting for an answer. Abs looked towards me, now empathy in his stare instead of hate.

“Yeah, I’m right behind you,” I said, knowing it was the right thing to do.

“Thank you,” Abs said, giving my hand a final squeeze before letting go.

The A&E department was extremely busy that morning since Taimur was not the only one injured in the terrorist attack. Many people had been hurt inside the train as well as around the area from various things and the hospital was overloaded with not only patients and their loved ones, but also the media and film crews, trying to break the story first. From what we had learnt, there had been four bombs in different locations around London and they had been detonated in the name of Islam – *again*.

My blood boiled thinking of how hypocritical it was of these *so-called* Muslims to kill innocent people when it clearly stated in the Quran that ‘killing one innocent human was like killing the entire humankind while saving one human was like saving the entire human kind.’ When the scriptures were so clear, why did these people think it was alright to go around killing blameless people in the name of the same lord I followed, giving Muslims all around the world a bad name?

That was not right.

“Where’s Chubs?” I heard Alia ask Abs, giving him a hug. He smiled down at his cousin, gesturing to an examination room.

“They’re just finishing stitching him up.”

“Is he hurt bad?” she asked, her eyes and voice filled with concern. “Is he okay, Abs?”

“He’ll live. I’m just going to take your parents and Kassim inside to see if Tai is out of surgery yet. Nabeel should be out soon. I think he’s in examination room three.”

As Abs, Kassim and his parents walked away, we watched Nabeel exit the room with discharge papers in his hand. The white bandage on his arm was now a hard cast and his plaster on his face was replaced with steri-strips, making him look less damaged than when I had seen him last.

Before he could get far out of the room, Alia was charging towards him and a familiar scene from before replayed in front of me. Nabeel fell backward but this time, instead of seeing a grin on his face I saw concern. Instead of allowing only Alia to hug him and not return it, much like Rose had done, he placed his arms around her, hugging her tightly back. His narrow eyes shut for a second, as if he’d been waiting for her forever and was savouring the moment, while his hands rested on her head, tangling in her long black hair. He gently kissed the side of her head that he was closest to before they abruptly moved away, realising he had an audience.

“You stupid idiot! Wallahi I want to kill you right now,” Alia said, pushing him slightly. “You could have died.”

“But I didn’t,” he winked at her.

“But you could have,” her voice rose, tears now falling from her eyes. “What would I have done? And that stupid fight we had... we haven’t even spoken for weeks, Chubs. I could have lost you and the last thing I would have said to you was that I hated you.”

“You could never hate me, Chipmunk, we both know that, just like you know that even if we’re fighting, I could never hate you, too,” he said quietly. “I’m here. Alive. I’ll never leave you. Mind, body, and soul.”

She beamed back before her smile faded, moving her eyes away from Nabeel and towards Rose who was standing near him. She had walked out of the examination room and placed herself in between Nabeel and Alia.

“Hi,” she said, holding out her hand for Alia to take. “I’m Nabeel’s girlfriend.”

I watched as Alia’s eyes went from Rose to Nabeel and back to Rose, her tearful eyes drying and her innocence fading as realisation smashed into her like never before.

“This is my cousin Alia,” Nabeel introduced, hammering the final nail in their coffin. “Alia, this is Rose.”

“Alia, I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Oh... Nice to meet you, Rose,” Alia replied, a fake smile appearing on her face. “I wish I could say the same, but Nabeel never mentioned you. I’m glad you’re here for him though. I got to go see if my brother is out of surgery, sorry.”

“Alia... wait...” Nabeel tried, holding onto her arm only to have her pull away.

The hurt in both their eyes was evident.

I moved closer to Alia, placing my hand on her shoulder so she knew she wasn’t alone, as she turned to Nabeel again. What was going on?

“You know what you just said *Nabeel*,” she whispered, her voice slightly breaking. I didn’t think I’d ever heard her call him by his name before. “About me not being able to hate you?”

Nabeel nodded.

“Well, you were wrong.”

With that, Alia walked away. Away from the hospital rooms, away from where her family were waiting and away from Nabeel, for the first time.

It had been a few hours of waiting, and even though Kassim insisted I go home with Rose, I stayed in the outer waiting room which wasn’t meant for close family or friends to hear news on Taimur’s operation. Once in a while I walked into the next waiting room just to observe everyone from a distance but not come too close for Taimur’s parents to ask questions on who I was and why I was sticking around for so long. I had just walked through the double doors of the room for the third time when I found Mrs. Khalidi yelling at two police officers.

“You want to question us about the train bombing while my son is fighting for his life right now?” she yelled. “Do you have no heart?”

“It’s not that, Mrs. Khalidi,” one of them replied. He was older with hardly any hair on his head. His skin was wrinkled around his face and his lips were pressed into one straight line, however, despite his age and features, he had kind eyes which seemed to get my attention first. “We just want to rule out anything.”

“Rule out what exactly?” Mr. Khalidi asked. “That my sons aren’t the terrorists.”

“Well, if they’re not, why are you finding it so hard to answer our questions?” The younger, more cynical policeman asked. “Where was your son between eight and nine this morning?”

“We were all in a café together for breakfast,” Abs answered, pulling his cap off and putting it on again correctly. “On Edgware Road.”

“And is it usual for all three of you to meet this early in the morning? On Edgware Road?”

“Yes, because we live together.”

“Then why were you there if you live together? Why not go somewhere closer for breakfast?”

“Because Taimur and I had a fight last night,” Nabeel chipped in. “Abs was trying to get us to make up and thought we could do it over some halal food on mutual ground.”

“Are you questioning all the patients and their family who were brought in from the attack?” Mr. Khalidi inquired. “Or is it just our family because we’re Muslim?”

“I assure you, everyone will be questioned in due time,” the older policeman replied, looking up from his small notepad.

“But first the Muslims,” Mrs. Khalidi said. “We’re not all terrorists, you know.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Just a few more questions,” the older policeman continued.

“Don’t you think if we were the terrorists, we would have kept our own cousin out of harms’ way? That he wouldn’t be fighting for his life right now?” Nabeel asked.

“Not if he *was* the suicide bomber,” the younger one replied. “Maybe he wanted to die for his religion.”

His religion, I thought, rolling my eyes. *If they only knew how much of ‘his religion’ Taimur believed in or followed.*

“That’s enough,” Abs interrupted. “Since it seems like whatever we say is going to be taken in the wrong way or used against us, we won’t be answering any more questions without our lawyer present.”

Before the policemen could object, a doctor dressed in scrubs approached asking for the Khalidi family to inform them on Taimur's outcome. Tears of relief and prayers of happiness followed as I slipped away, knowing it was time for me to leave.

If only I had the ability to actually stay away.



“ARE YOU PLANNING ON COMING INSIDE TODAY OR ARE YOU GOING TO leave without saying hi again, Pearl?”

His voice startled me, sending vibes of pleasure amidst my body and towards my already racing heart. I peered into the room to see him resting on the bed, his gorgeous face still bruised and his striking eyes squinting at me, beckoning me to come in.

It had been *six weeks* since the incident and Taimur was still in hospital. His surgery had gone well but since it was a serious one and his diabetes was giving him trouble, he was told to have complete bed rest while he recovered. His cousins, siblings and parents came to visit him every day while I tagged along with Kassim or Abs, but never managed to enter his room.

I didn’t know if it was because of my mum or because Taimur never replied to the message I had sent him, but I couldn’t make it past the wooden door frame.

On the large chair beside his clinical bed sat Abs, flicking through a women’s magazine and eyes not leaving it to welcome me. The moment outside the hospital had passed and he was back to ignoring me even on the train rides there.

“How did you...?”

“Know? I can see your reflection in the door window, babe.”

“Oh.” I shyly replied, taking a step towards him. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I thought I’d let you decide when you were ready to see me. I didn’t want to push you but since it’s been a few weeks now, I thought it was about time we stopped playing games.”

“I...I...”

“Come here, Pearl,” he waved for me to come closer. I did as I was told, hesitantly walking past Abs who suspiciously vacated the room, giving me suspicious look. “Come here and repeat what you said in your text message to my face.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Taimur

She had messaged me that she loved me, too, but I needed to hear it from her mouth, face to face, while beholding her gorgeous green eyes and memorising her beautiful appearance so I could savour that moment forever.

I loved her.

She loved me

And for the first time, I felt all was right in the world.

I had been waiting for her for weeks now, patiently giving her the time she needed to digest her feelings and wondering if the only reason she said what she did was because she thought I was dying. Doubt clouded my already chaotic mind, and I didn't know if it was because of the painkillers I was on or because apprehension had begun to creep in day by day, but I had started to lose faith in her ever telling me what I was desperate to hear.

Every few days I watched her reflection in the door window, mirroring her innocent features as she ferociously bit into her pouty bottom lip and nervously twirled her different coloured headscarf in her hands. That was when I knew she was in it as deep as me, but she just needed time to accept it, much like I had done.

However, time had passed, and as I lay recovering in a hospital bed, I realised that life was too short not to say how you truly felt. Having such a close call with death, I decided it was about time Pearl had a little push in the right direction and that direction was me.

"I... I..." She stuttered, nerves getting the best of her.

“You?”

“Nothing.”

There was an awkward silence.

I had been given a private room due to my vast injuries. It was small, with one uncomfortable single bed and a hard, wooden chair. The walls were pure white with one tiny window that only opened a few inches to let in a miniscule amount of air, but no way enough for me to smoke out of it.

I was craving a cigarette, but I was craving Layla even more.

“I got this for you,” I said, trying to make her more comfortable. “Who knew a hospital gift shop would sell shot glasses.”

“You got this for me? You remembered?” She took the tiny glass and inspected it. It wasn’t very fancy. Just white with the hospital logo on it. “Why would a hospital sell these?”

“God knows, but as soon as I saw it, I thought it would be a nice addition to your collection.”

“Thank you,” she said, her smile telling me she was more at ease now. “I love it.”

“I read your message.” Again, another awkward silence. “And reread it a few hundred times.”

“I was just worried about you.” She confirmed.

“You were worried about Nabeel and Abs too, did you text them the same thing?”

Her bright eyes widened as a crimson shade invaded her cheeks.

“Of course not.”

“Then why won’t you say it to me.”

“Why won’t you?” she shot back.

“I did.”

There was an awkward silence.

“So, you *do* remember?”

“I remember everything when it comes to you, Pearl.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I asked, confused.

“Yes, why?”

“Because I’m in love with you, Layla,” I replied, having had enough of the game of to and fro. “I know I told you it was better that we went our separate ways, but I lied to you *and* to myself. I told you months ago, before that, and I’m telling you again, you’re it for me Pearl. And when you

messaged me saying you loved me too I thought you had finally accepted that you felt the same way, that your feelings had caught up with mine, but then you disappeared again and I waited, and waited, but I'm done waiting now."

"Oh..."

"I want you, dammit, I need you in my life and not just as a friend anymore." I gave in, running my fingers through my hair, frustrated. My arm twitched in pain, and I felt like pulling at my roots. "I can't see you with another guy, Pearl. I can't even take it when my brothers are around you. I feel like breaking Nabeel's hand every time he hugs you or punching Kassim for flirting with you. And don't get me started on Moe..."

"I...I..."

"And these past few months without you in my life have been torture. I know you feel it too."

She stayed quiet, taking in what I was saying.

"I know you feel it too. I can see it on your face."

Layla glared at me, her bottom lip permanently stuck between her perfect white teeth and her hands wringing part of her headscarf. She stood by my bed, close but not close enough.

I waited as seconds turned into minutes, watching her watch me.

"Say something... Anything."

"I love you, too?" She whispered, so I could barely hear her. Her eyes caught mine, holding me in place and my body froze.

Had I just heard her right?

"Was that a question?"

"No."

"Say it again," I prompted, gently swinging my legs off the bed.

My body pained in ways I had never felt but the feeling of her words masked it. Seeing me struggling to climb out she moved forward, placing her arms around my shoulders to steady me. I couldn't move further but Layla was right there, standing in front of me, between my parted legs with her tender arms draped over me. "Please, say it again."

"I love you, Taimur."

"Pearl, I..." I began but to my surprise she continued, without waiting for me.

"Taimur, you make me feel things I'm not supposed to feel. Things I've been conditioned to believe are wrong until I'm married, but they feel so

right with you. I can't stop it. Trust me, I fought with myself every day because of it, and I've tried so, so hard not to, but I finally give in. I wake up thinking about you, I spend my day thinking about you and I go to sleep thinking about you. It's like I'm addicted to you or something," she confessed, moving slightly closer for the first time. "And when you hurt yourself and I thought I was losing you, I prayed so hard for God to save you and I promised myself if he did, I'd tell you how I felt about you, so here I am, I'm telling you that I'm in love with you, too."

Tears streamed down her beautiful face as she spoke, opening herself up to me like never before. I tried to wipe them away but she didn't let me, so my hands held her head and thumbs caressed her soft lips, still dying to taste them.

"Pearl..." I tried again.

"I'm not finished," she continued, sniffing but leaning into my touch. "The first time I met you I knew you were different, even though you were half naked and arguing with me, I felt it. I thought I knew what kind of guy you were but as time went on you surprised me at every turn, and when you didn't take advantage of my messy state at the canal that night, I realised you were someone I could trust. The more time I spent with you, studying, chilling and in lectures, I realised behind the arrogant persona you show the world, you were hiding a soft hearted, compassionate and loving guy and that's who I fell for. I love the way you unapologetically love your family and the way you protect them, and I love the way you stick up for what you think is right, even though you're usually wrong..."

"Uhhh..." I interrupted. Layla smiled through her tears.

"And even though your innuendos make me mad, I love that you don't hide them from me... And I love the way you look in the morning in my kitchen, all dreamy eyed and confused, with messy hair, and I love the way you say little things to make me angry but then make me smile later when I'm alone. I love the way you kept up your end of the deal and made it to all your 9am lectures just so you could frustrate me, and I love the way you know how to make my tea just right... and I love the way you get annoyed when you see me spending time with anyone apart from you... and I love the way you look at me with your gorgeous light eyes like I'm the most beautiful thing you've ever seen even when it's not true..."

"It is."

“And, I love the way you didn’t give up on me, even when you had to wait for so long.”

There was a long pause between us as I watched her, absorbing what she had just told me, in what it seemed like, one very long breath.

“Pearl...” I finally said, my heart buzzing in my chest with adoration of the girl who just broke down her walls to let me in after months of me trying.

“I’m still not finished,” she said, “I love you, I *really* do, but that doesn’t mean I can be with you, Taimur.”

“What?” I asked, confused. “After what you just said, why?”

“You know why.”

“Enlighten me.”

“We want different things.”

“I want you and you want me.”

“I get that but Taimur, I’m not into dating, I have my beliefs. I want someone forever. Marriage, kids, the whole nine yards.”

“I don’t see what the problem is here.”

“Taimur, I know you’re saying this now but once the novelty wears off, you’ll be after some other girl. You like the chase...”

“No Layla, you don’t get to assume that,” I interrupt, trying to stay calm. “I know you. I know what you’re about and if for a second I thought I couldn’t give you what you needed I would never suggest it. I know I don’t deserve you, everyone’s made it pretty damn clear that you’re the angel and I’m the devil reincarnated, and that it doesn’t make sense for us to be together, but you know what, love doesn’t have to make sense.”

“I...”

“I’m not finished,” I repeated her words back to her, “Give us a go. Let’s see if we get along like we have been doing before we decided to stay away from each other, and if we do, we can take it further and discuss future options, like speaking to your dad about us.”

“And what if we don’t?”

“Then we stay friends.”

“I don’t know,” she said, her face looking adorable as she contemplated my suggestion.

“Pearl...”

“You know I’m not going to sleep with you,” Layla blurted, her cheeks burning red at her own comment. I chuckled at her comment, and she

widened her already big eyes, questioning me.

“Yes, I know,” I said.

“And can you keep it in your pants while we’re trying this out?”

“Do you doubt me?”

“Yes.”

Again, a laugh broke free from me, and she didn’t look impressed. “I promise, Pearl. I will not as much as look at another girl when I’m with you.”

“And what about the parties every night?”

“Stopped.”

“And you’ll sacrifice it all for me?”

“It’s not a sacrifice, Pearl. I don’t have to go out, and to be honest, after the last few weeks I don’t want to either.”

“And I don’t want you drinking because it’s not good for your diabetes.”

“Stopped.”

“And we’ll keep this to ourselves?”

“We will?” I asked, confused again.

“Yes.”

“That’s going to be hard considering the boys are standing outside the room and have heard most of our conversation.”

I watched her abruptly step back from between my parcelled legs, dropping her arms from around me and turn to face the door. Her red cheeks were shining even more brighter as she recalled everything she had just said to me, not realising she had an audience. Four pairs of eyes watched us, one pair in shock, one pair in entertainment, one pair in admiration and one pair scowling.

Kassim, Nabeel, Alia and Abs stood in front of us.

“You just broke my heart, sweetheart.” Kassim said, placing his hand over his chest.

“Wow, hell has officially frozen over guys,” Nabeel spoke up next, pink hair, dressed perfectly, strolling into the room and taking Layla under his arm in a side hug. I saw Alia’s face frown but lose it before anyone else noticed.

She was my twin.

I knew her.

“Shut up,” I said, tossing a small pillow at him, hitting him in the head. “How much did you guys hear?”

“Enough to know that you’re whipped,” he laughed. “Would you mind repeating your monologue though, I only got the chance to record the second half.”

Layla’s eyes widened in embarrassment.

“He’s lying,” Alia chimed in, speaking directly to Layla. “Leave them alone. At least they have enough guts to say how they feel to each other.”

Her face was taciturn, and it was obvious there was a double meaning to her joke, but no one reacted, not knowing what to say.

“Oh, you’re talking to me now, Chip,” Nabeel continued, shaking off her previous comment. Alia’s eyes narrowed and I saw the resentment build in her, shadowing her hurt. What was going on between the two of them, another fight?

“He’s just saying that this is monumental. Taimur Khalidi has fallen in love. There are pigs flying in the sky outside right now,” Kassim said, “But then again, it’s hard not to fall in love with Layla, so I don’t blame him.”

“Do you think this is a good idea? Aren’t you with Katie?” Abs finally spoke up, reclaiming his chair next to my bed.

“Yeah, but I need to break up with her. We both know it was Layla that I wanted.”

“And aren’t you with the arranged marriage guy?” Abs asked again, his stony eyes accusing Layla. I had thought after their heart to heart Kassim told me about, their relationship would have improved but I was wrong.

“I’ll end it. I’ll tell my dad it isn’t working out with him.”

“But we’re all friends and if something goes wrong, it’s going to make it difficult for all of us.”

“Nothing will go wrong.” I replied, starting to get annoyed.

“Are you sure it’s not the pain meds you’re on?” Abs asked again.

“Yes, we’re sure,” came a stern voice I didn’t expect.

It was Layla.

“Yes, we know how we feel, Abs, and I don’t really care if you don’t like me anymore, what matters is that Taimur does and we’re going to give this a go if you like it or not.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as she stood in front of Abs, valiant chest heaving in irritation and intense eyes wide with antagonism, daring him to reply.

We all waited, watching the scene unfold as if it was the climax of a film, tense and on edge.

“Okay, princess.” He finally smirked, winking at a very aggravated Layla. “No need to get your *headscarf* in a twist.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Layla

We were free falling, soaring through the air, devoid of any land in sight and I was relishing in it. For the first time, I was being spontaneous, uncalculated – liberated.

Who knew falling in love could feel so free?

But you know what the problem with falling is? You eventually have to hit the ground.

For now, Taimur made me want things I had never wanted before. Things I was always told were wrong but that felt so right. He had entered my life like a riptide, changing everything I thought I knew and making me reassess where I was going, and I was terrified.

Conversely, the pestering guilt ate at me when I least expected, creeping into my thoughts as I laid soundlessly awake at night, wondering what the unforeseen future held, and took over my psyche like a threatening disease with no current antidote. The weeks at uni were easier, where I lived in a realm Taimur and I had conceived, with love and contentment, but once I was home, remorse captivated me in ways I could not eradicate.

Seeing my father's face did not help.

His stern principled glare burnt through me, trusting me to be the Islamic daughter he raised, and his recurring words repeated in my mind with conviction, chronicling the religious teachings I was brought up on.

Even in the angriest of moods, I knew deep down he loved me, and that what he did was due to his unwavering belief in the religion and due to a grief, which was far worse than what I had suffered. I related to his

heartache the day I thought I was losing Taimur, remembering the panic and anguish that compelled my body to turn into a bitter cold carcass due to the fear of loss, and I had only known him for one year.

My parents had been married for 30.

I was constantly torn in two.

I was stuck between the love for my religion and the love for Taimur, perplexed by the feelings that didn't feel immoral but knowing they were until I got married.

"We'll tell him when you're ready," Zoya had explained that weekend, climbing onto my bed. "When the time is right."

But the thing about time, it was never right. It waited for no one; it simply kept moving whether you liked it or not. Time was the biggest deception, pretending it was in our favour when in reality, it was never on our side. It lied to us, making us believe we had it, that we could control it, wield it as we will but that was the furthest thing from the truth because as time tricked us into believing that we were in control, it was actually controlling us.

"He'll understand."

"Who are we kidding?" I replied. We were both dressed in pyjamas, hers blue with white stripes and mine pink with white hearts and were ready to call it a night.

"If we do it the right way it'll be fine. We'll get Tai's parents to come with a proper marriage proposal, and I'm sure Baba will agree."

"Marriage..." I repeated, lying down so we were sharing one pillow. Zoya's light hair intertwined with my dark ones, displaying a pretty pattern around the floral bedsheets as I played with the latest shot glass Taimur had given me. Every few weeks he'd get me a new one to add to my ever-growing collection. "We haven't even been on a proper date yet, Zoy."

"I know, he'll take you. He's just recovering."

"That's not my issue."

"What is?"

"Marriage."

"What about it? Isn't that what you always wanted?"

"I don't know Zoy. In my mind, it was supposed to be different. I was supposed to have an arranged marriage and start my life."

"And now you've fallen in love and don't know where you're going."

"Yes. I need a plan."

“Layli. You need to let go of the notion of having a plan for everything in life if you want to be free. Release your inhibitions, emancipate your fears, your *planning*. Just let love take you on the ride of your life,” she grinned at me.

“You should write poetry,” I laughed. “But seriously, I don’t even know if Taimur is in this for the long run. He’s never even had a serious girlfriend, let alone thought about marriage. I don’t know how dating like this works. This isn’t like the cultural dating where you know when you initially meet the guy that you both want the same thing as the end...”

“And that’s what makes it so much more fun.”

“What if after a while he finds me boring?”

“Layli,” she began, tugging me up and pulling me so we were sitting crossed legged in front of each other, our fluffy socks touching. “You guys have been friends for a year now and he’s been chasing you for the entire time.”

“Exactly! Now that the chase is over...”

“You’re not like the other girls he’s been with Layli, you’re different and all of us around you can see that I don’t know why you can’t.”

“You have to say that – you’re my sister.”

“What are you really scared of?”

“Baba finding out. I feel so guilty every time I see him.”

“But you’re not doing anything wrong.”

“Says who?”

“Says the world.”

“And God?”

“Tell me this, why would God give you these feelings if they were wrong?”

“It’s okay to feel, it’s not okay to act until you’re married.”

“Are we talking about sex here?”

I stayed quiet, knowing my sister would come to her own conclusion whatever I said.

“Layli, you don’t have to sleep with him.”

“But isn’t that what he’s used to?”

“So, what? He can wait.”

“How long do you think he’ll wait around for before he finds someone else to give it to him?”

“Is he pressuring you?”

“No way, he doesn’t even really touch me, Zoy. The most he’s done is hold my hand and kiss my cheek.”

“Okay...”

“He hasn’t even tried to kiss me,” I said shyly, not knowing how to explain my feelings. “I know it’s wrong of me to want him to but it’s just bugging me. Why hasn’t he tried?”

“Maybe he’s just giving you some time to adjust.”

“We’ve had enough time for that, and sometimes I feel like he’s going to, but then he stops and moves away.”

“Do you want him to kiss you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t like me like that anymore.”

“Don’t be stupid Layli, have you seen the way he stares at you? Like he’s devouring you with his eyes.”

“Urgh....” I said, frustration riling me up. “I hate feeling like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like I want to kiss him, but I know it’s so Islamically wrong.”

“Look Layli, we don’t live in the Middle East or in the 14th century. We have to adapt. In this generation, you can’t just meet someone, have no physical contact and end up marrying them, it’s not possible.”

“Then why do I feel so guilty all the time for wanting to touch him?”

“Because we’ve been brainwashed to see it as a sin. Conditioned that way since birth. It isn’t. I’m not saying to jump into bed with him... like I did...”

My heart fell and I was sure she could see it on my face.

“Sorry, too soon for jokes?”

“I think it will always be too soon for that one.”

“Anyways, as I was saying, Layli, if you really love someone and decide to step over the line you’ve been told is there, it’s not a sin.”

“It is, Zoy.”

“I get that you believe that, but love isn’t wrong, and sex isn’t a sin if you’re in love.”

“It is and I’m not having sex with anyone till I’m married. That’s one thing I will not compromise, *ever*. It’s wrong. Full Stop.”

“Okay, we’re going to have to agree to disagree here. I believe it’s a natural process between two consenting adults. Do you know why in the 14th century you needed to be married before you had sex?”

“Why?”

“Because if you got pregnant you couldn’t prove who the father was. At least if you were married everyone knew who the father was and the man had a legal obligation to step up but if you weren’t, the man could get off scot free. But now, with science being so advanced we can do paternity tests and even though people are not married, legally a father has to finance the child. Also, there was no contraception so if they did have sex, they would most likely get pregnant and that would be frowned upon since they weren’t married.”

“Hmmm...” I contemplated her words. “Zoy, I just feel so guilty being with him at all. What if Baba finds out?”

“You just have to keep it to yourself till you two are ready to let Baba know. Taimur is Muslim, on his way to being a doctor.”

“His family is not well off.”

“So?”

“I don’t care, but you know Baba will have an issue.”

“We can work around that. Listen Layli,” she turned to look me in the eyes. “I need to know you’re safe before I get married and leave the country. I need to know you are happy and protected, and I promise I won’t go anywhere till I know you are. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me, what else are you scared of?”

There was a long pause as we listened to the wind move outside the large window of our double room. When we were younger, we had begged our dad to break the wall between our rooms to make one big one so we could sleep together. As we grew older, we realised that some privacy would be necessary but didn’t want to put the wall back up. Instead, we placed our two double beds at far ends of the room, painting half the room pink, for me and half blue, for her, to display our individual personalities. We were never allowed posters of famous people on the wall, afraid that there would be a negative influence on us, so we kept them plain.

“I’m scared of getting hurt,” I said., voice anxious with apprehension. “I really love him, Zoy.”

“So, that’s the real problem,” Zoya smiled.

“Hmmm...”

“Layli, in love, there will always be a risk of getting hurt but that doesn’t mean it’s not worth the ride.” She said, playing with my hair. She twisted the strands in her hand leaving a slight curl that fell apart soon after.

“It’s supposed to be unpredictable and scary, and agonising at times. Love isn’t supposed to be safe and calculated like you want it to be, that would be boring. Love grows from a friendship like the two of you have and then you set it on fire by falling in love with each other.”

“So, love is friendship on fire?”

“Exactly. A pure fire that burns so bright that it illuminated the gloomy world around you.”

“Or burns everything to the ground, leaving despair and destruction in its wake?”

“Maybe you should be the poet.”

“Have you been in love?”

“Nope. Girls like me don’t fall in love.”

“What do you mean? What about Noah? What’s going on with you two?”

“Nothing,” she smiled, lying herself down so she could finally sleep. “Now can you go back to your side of the room?”

I did as I was told but didn’t drop the subject.

“Zoy... what’s going on with you. You’ve been acting weird since you met him.”

“I’m the same. I just have a lot to think about.”

“Like what?”

“Stuff Layli, just stuff.”

“Like?”

“Wedding? Marriage? Moving away. Now can we go to bed please?”

“Sure. I love you Zoy, you know you can talk to me about anything – no judgement.”

“No judgement?” Zoya laughed, throwing a pillow at me.

“Well, I’ll try not to judge you.”

“I love you too Layi but this one is for me to sort out. Okay?”

“Okay.”

The bedside lamp went off and we both rested our heads to sleep.



“YOU’RE DONE, SWEETHEART.” KASSIM STATED, LUGGING ME UP TO MY feet.

We had been sitting in the library for the past three hours revising for our pharmacogenomics test. After our final lecture for the day, Kassim and I had retired to the library, deciding to help each other catch up on the lecture I missed while Tai was in hospital. During those weeks, once I had realised I was in love with him, I devoted most of my time there, regretfully neglecting my studies.

“I can’t study anymore, I need food, a cup of tea, some air and a sexy girl to relax me. So basically, me, you, some tea and chicken.”

By now, Kassim had become accustomed to his flirtatious witticisms rolling off me like I hadn’t perceived them, and I was familiar with the innocence behind them.

“I can’t leave. I still have...”

“And it’ll be waiting for you when we’re back in an hour. Come on, the guys and I are going to Nando’s for dinner. Hurry up.”

“I really can’t. I still have to pray and call my dad.”

“We hardly get a chance to see you anymore, sweetheart. Pray and call your dad when we come back. You’re always playing house with my brother. We miss you. I miss you.”

“Kassim.”

“Layla.”

“I don’t know,” I tried to argue again, scrambling through my scattered notes and giving him a small smile.

“Don’t worry about Abs, Pearl,” I heard from behind me as if he could read my mind, his voice making me shiver in all the right places, as usual. I sensed his loving embrace around me even before his arms engulfed me in an adoring hug and he tenderly kissed my cheek, not lingering more than a second.

This had become our usual ‘hello’ and Taimur was not afraid of showing his affection in front of the world, nevertheless, apart from a gentle hug, a quick peck on my cheek and possessively holding my hand, Taimur kept our relationship platonic, appreciating what I wanted. Yet, every time he came near me or touched my hand, my heart skipped a beat, reminding me of feelings I had the night I watched the erotic film, but I knew I couldn’t give in to until marriage.

I didn’t think I’d ever *not* be affected by his touch.

We were inseparable.

We were in our own bubble.

And we loved it.

"Let's just go. You need a break," Kassim said, always bursting my fantasy bubble where there was only Taimur and me.

"I think it's best if I keep my distance for Abs. He doesn't seem to like me."

"Don't worry about him sweetheart. Seriously."

"Plus, I haven't eaten all day," Taimur said.

"Why?" I asked, turning my gaze to him. "Have you had your insulin injection today?"

"Not yet."

"How many times do I have to tell you to take better care of yourself?"

"Maybe you should take care of me?" He winked. I rolled my eyes and looked away.

"Okay you two, stop with the sweet stuff or *I'll* end up with diabetes."

"Shut up!" Taimur smacked his little brother over the head. "Why don't you call your own girlfriend to join us, so you can stop hitting on mine?"

"Can't. She's gone home for the week to revise," Kassim said. He had recently started seeing a girl called Anna. I hadn't met her yet, but the boys seemed to think she was nice enough. "Now come on, sweetheart. Let's go."

I glanced up at two pairs of eyes, one dark as the night sky and the other with sparks of sunshine, realising there was no way they were going to take no as an answer.

"Fine," I gave in, getting up from my chair and tucking my laptop into my pink bag. "But *only* for half an hour."

"That's my girl," Kassim happily sang, smoothly tugging me towards him and taking my hefty bag out of my hand.

"*MY* girl," Taimur corrected him, elbowing his brother out the way. I strived not to chuckle at the brothers fighting over me, but a grin crept onto my silent lips.

I loved these two boys.

The walk to Nando's from the university library was approximately twenty minutes and Taimur didn't let go of my hand the entire way. On our walk we passed an old homeless man sitting on the hard cemented pavement. His hair was long and white, and his pale skin showed he had not had an easy life. He was sitting on a thin dirty mattress which I assumed he slept on too and a small blanket with large holes covered him the best it

could. He looked around eighty years old and my heart ached for him. In his arms was a sign: 'I'm old and hungry – any change?'

I stopped beside him, letting go of Taimur's hand, and dug into my handbag for some money. Finding a twenty pound note I placed it in the hand of the old man and smiled.

"God bless you my child," he said, beaming up at me from his place on the ground. "You have a smile that could light up everything. Never stop smiling."

"Thank you," I blushed as Taimur took my hand again, squeezing it gently as we walked away.

"You know he's right," Kassim said, walking in step with us. "Your smile could light up this world."

"Laying it on a bit thick today, don't you think?" I joked.

"You know you're not supposed to give money to people on the street because they end up using it for alcohol or drugs," Taimur said. "You're just feeding their addiction."

"I know but my mum always told me that the hardest thing in life is to ask for money, so if you ever see anyone asking, always give and God will give you more." I smiled, squeezing his hand back. "He's an old man, how can you not help him? We don't know how he ended up in this situation. Today it's him. Tomorrow it could be us. No one knows what the future holds."

There was a beat of silence as the brothers glanced at one another, acknowledging something only they knew.

"I guess this is why I love you, Pearl. You have a way of making me look at things differently. A way of making me see with my heart and not my eyes." Taimur bent down to kiss me on my cheek. "I've never met someone like you before."

"Please stop before I vomit," Kassim joked, scrunching his face as if he smelt something bad. "The brother who taught me 'no ring – no strings' is now talking about love. I think I've entered a twilight zone."

"Shut up. You wait till you find your person."

"I won't ever find my person," Kassim muttered, suddenly changing the conversation from a fun tone to a serious one.

"Why?" I asked, genuinely concerned.

"Because 'No ring – no strings', sweetheart," he laughed.

"Oh, shut up Kass!" Taimur said.

As we arrived at Nando's I tried to free my hand from Taimur's since I didn't want to make Abs feel as if I was rubbing our relationship in his face, but even when we located Abs and Nabeel waiting outside the restaurant engaged in a heated conversation, Taimur kept our fingers interlocked, squeezing them on our arrival. As soon as the boys noticed us they went quiet, both nodding in recognition of our presence. It was clear that there was something wrong and I hoped they were not discussing me.

"Hey Tiny. We're just waiting for a table," Nabeel said, gesturing to the tables inside, brushing his fingers through his long orange hair. Orange? "They said we might have to wait half an hour though."

I grasped Taimur's hand tighter, not wanting to be annoying but knowing I didn't have time to waste having dinner. As if he could read my mind, he understood what I was struggling to say and pulled me away from the rest of the boys.

"Do you want to get some take-away and eat it at home? That way you can eat and study at the same time?" he asked, his beautiful eyes filled with concern.

"Would you mind?"

"I really don't care what or where we eat, as long as we're together Pearl."

"That would be great," I beamed, his declaration sending butterflies straight to my stomach.

"Okay, that's settled then," he gave me a quick peck on my cheek. We turned to catch the guys watching us, Nabeel grinning, Kassim frowning and Abs was impartial, with almost no emotion on his face, as always.

Why didn't he like me?

"So, we're getting takeout and eating it at ours, guys," Taimur informed the rest, his voice stern not leaving any room for negotiation.

"Ours?" Abs questioned.

"I mean, Layla's place," Taimur corrected.

"Actually, I can't stay. I have to get some work off someone," Nabeel replied, looking up from his phone, his expression odd.

"Who?" I said, before I could stop myself.

"Never you mind, Tiny," he said as he walked away.

There was a bizarre feeling in the air. I could feel something wasn't right but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

THE SITUATION BETWEEN NABEEL AND ALIA HAD NOT RECOVERED, RATHER enhanced to a worse condition. It had become evident to everyone that if Nabeel was present, Alia wouldn't be and vice-versa. No one tried to interfere in their business, fearful that their interference could escalate the drama further, resulting in a family feud, but the truth was, even though Nabeel had tackled his dependence on intoxications, he hadn't tackled his addiction to Alia.

He was soon to find out that drugs were not his greatest vice – Alia was. Everyone had one – she was his.

“THE TWO OF YOU OKAY WITH GETTING TAKEOUT?” TAIMUR ASKED, walking into the restaurant with me tightly wrapped around him.

Surprisingly, Kassim and Abs quickly agreed without any dispute, following closely behind us.

The four of us had just walked out of the restaurant doors with our food when a BMW pulled up outside. I recognised the two tall guys exiting the vehicle. They had pestered me before about my hijab when I had run into them at the grocery store a few weeks back. By the way they were staggering it was clear that they had been drinking and were looking for trouble.

I tugged on Taimur's left arm, carrying my drink in the other, aiming to move away before they came any closer, but it was no use, it was inevitable that our paths were going to cross.

“What's wrong?” Taimur asked, feeling me tense next to him.

“Nothing. Let's hurry. The foods getting cold.”

Taimur gently rested his hand on my lower back before pulling me closer to his side. His good arm wrapped around my nervous body, protecting me.

“Where are you going, terrorist?” one of the boys bellowed my way, staggering towards me. “On your way to blow up another train?”

“You got a bomb hidden under that head scarf of yours?” the other barked.

The first guy wore a pair of baggy ripped jeans, and a red t-shirt with a NIKE logo on it while the other was dressed in a grey puffy jacket, black tracksuit bottoms and a backwards baseball hat, both wearing a pair of dirty trainers.

I felt Taimur's body turn rigid around me. His good arm held onto me with a force I hadn't experienced, and his body grew tall, larger than he usually was.

Before Taimur could say anything, I knew Kassim could sense that the situation was about to quickly deteriorate and began to guide us away faster, not wanting to make a scene. I glanced up at him, thankful for his tactfulness, however, before we could get any further, the two guys stopped in front of me, obstructing my way.

I watched as the first guy dragged his malicious eyes over my covered body, taking in my head scarf with disgust, but before I could feel threatened, I sensed Taimur, Kassim and Abs on either side of me, on full alert.

The man's ireful eyes flicked to them and then back at me.

"So, tell me, if a guy can have more than one wife then can a wife have more husbands? Do you all share her?" he sneered, while his friend laughed.

I saw Taimur's jaw stiffen and his arms twitch as the boys' glance at each other, talking through their eyes. I knew I had to do something, so I began to tug Taimur away since our hands were still interlocked.

"Let's go guys. They're not worth it," I said, clenching my drink and hoping and praying Taimur wouldn't retaliate. His arm was not completely repaired and risking his steady recovery due to a pair of racist guys was not justified.

"What's the rush, beautiful?" the other guy said, coming closer to me. "I'd still do you with that cloth on your head." His lustful eyes dropped to my covered breasts and the thought of kicking him in the genitals crossed my mind.

Before I could do anything, Tai was in front of me, pushing the man away.

"Fuck off!" he said, shoving the man hard, with both his arms. Even with a recuperating arm, Taimur was tougher than the average guy, and the second man stumbled backwards before straightening his jacket and walked towards me, again.

"What is it with you Muslim women thinking you're better than us? All covered up, teasing and tempting men to wonder what's under all those clothes you have on."

I had spent enough time with Taimur and Kassim to know how they were going to react next, and thank God for my fast reflexes, otherwise they would have knocked out the two men before I'd even blinked. I used all my strength to move forward, hauling both Taimur and Kassim by the arms so they wouldn't start a fight.

"Please Taimur. Keep moving," I begged, guiding us all away from the scene. "They just want attention."

Abs swiftly moved around me, putting his hand on Taimur's back as if to push him forward and not fight back. I was not used to such abuse, but since the train bombings on 7/7 I had come across it more times than before. It was humiliating to hear it in front of these three boys.

"Oh, come on, you're already sharing yourself with the three of them, why not let us join in? The more the merrier," they said, coming close enough and charging me so my drink spilt on my top. I lunged backwards, the sticky Coke now drenching my top. "Little Muslim slut."

I witnessed the streak of patience rupture in Taimur's eyes as he whirled around to face the two guys but it was too late. To my disbelief, Abs had already dropped his large bag of food onto the dirty ground, leaped towards the obnoxious men and punched one of them brutally in the face. I watched as the man fell to his knees, dark blood gushing out of his now broken nose, as he sprawled on the ground.

His friend hastily moved away from us, raising his feeble arms to surrender. Taimur, Kassim and myself stood there in silence as the man lay on the floor, clutching his face in pain and Abs strolled over to us, wiping his bloody fist on his usual grey hoodie as if nothing had happened before taking it off and throwing it to me. He then picked up his bag of food, not looking up at the three of us and began to walk, passing us on his way.

I glanced from Taimur to Kassim, confused as I zipped the hoodie, covering my wet jumper.

"What just happened?"

"Can you hurry up so we can eat?" Abs called back at us, still power walking ahead.

"You know you thought Abs didn't like you?" Taimur grinned at me.

"Well, he just told you he does." Kassim winked.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Taimur

Days turned into months.
She was breath-taking.
Kind-hearted.

Intelligent.

Compassionate.

Absolutely gorgeous.

Inside and out.

Her gentle words echoed in my head every time she tried to make me understand her point of view and her opinions slowly began to become my new reality, where I held onto everything she said, every kind act and every genuine gesture, knowing it was the right way of living.

“Be kind.” She would tell me, empathy sparkling in her beautiful eyes as she pecked my cheek. “Everyone is fighting a different battle.”

I loved that she didn’t impose her beliefs on me, never telling me to pray or follow any other Islamic ruling, and the only reason she insisted I didn’t drink alcohol was because of the health benefits rather than Islamic ones. I felt like she respected me enough to let me make my own choices which in turn made me respect her even more.

Watching her dedication and devotion to God made me want to believe in something the way she did. A belief that made her feel safe and whole, allowing her to put her worries in the hands of something else and almost being free from worldly issues.

Every day I'd watch her pray, elegantly wrapping her hair and body in a long scarf, gracefully moving to the same positions of devotion and ending by sitting on the floor, her legs bent and her hands in front of her face as she closed her eyes and prayed the supplications for the things I was not willing to pray for.

I was in awe of her.

But I couldn't touch her.

I could hold her hand, wrap my arms around her and just about kiss her on the cheek without her tensing her innocent body, untainted and virtuous. Every time I came near her, my mind recollected her words from our first meeting, and in an aim to prevent her from resenting me, I swallowed my lustful notions, resulting in a lot of pent-up energy I released in the gym.

"You have really bulked up since your accident," Kassim told me, lifting half the weight I could. "What's up with that."

"Nothing. I'm just trying to speed up my recovery," I lied, trying to shake the thought of Layla from my mind, but as usual, she was all I could think about.

By now, we were in our own underwater bubble, swimming together towards a common goal and even though I knew there was a risk of drowning, I didn't want to come up for air.

Every day, she pulled me deeper into her sea of devotion, our joint current growing stronger by every meeting, allowing me to lose myself in her waves and wash away my iniquitous past.

I didn't try and fight the pull towards her, I didn't even try to reason with myself because I knew it was useless, her power over me was overwhelming and I had known from the first time I had met her, I stood no chance against it.

"Frustrated much?" Nabeel teased as I slammed my fists against the punching bag with all my strength. "Haven't sealed the deal yet, hey?"

"Shut up!" Abs responded before I could, picking up a dumb bell I had dropped earlier. "We all know Layla isn't that kind of girl."

"That doesn't mean Tai isn't that kind of guy," Nabeel said, slightly breathless.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing?" Kassim asked, walking over the full-length mirror and rolling up his black t-shirt to see his defined six pack.

“I mean nothing. I’m not trying anything with her. She’s not like the other girls I’ve been with, guys. She’s a Hijabi. It’s not like I can just say ‘Let’s have sex.’ She has these beliefs. Islamic ones. No sex before marriage, no drinking, cover your hair and body from men...” I trailed off.

“Have you *even* kissed her yet?” Nabeel asked.

“Not really.”

“Have you seen her hair, even?” He asked again.

“Nope, not properly.”

“Why?”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t,” Nabeel asked, hollering over Abs as he lifted the bar.

“Isn’t it obvious,” Abs said, clenching. “Layla isn’t the kind of girl he can mess about with and leave. We all know this. If he goes there, then it’s forever and if he’s not ready for that then.”

“You better not break her,” Kassim warned me, walking closer. “She’s a good girl.”

“You think I don’t know that? I’m bloody in love with her, but I can’t take it further. I’ve held her hand like we’re in preschool for weeks now and I’ve kissed her cheek a couple of times but that’s about it. Every time I try to take it further, I feel guilty.”

“Of what?”

“Of being the reason she’s breaking her religious rules.”

“You don’t even believe in the rules, bro.” Nabeel reminded me.

“But she does. I knew it from the first day I met her, she really believes in it all and because of me she’s willing to compromise them. Dammit, even dating me is compromising her beliefs.”

“Do you even believe in God?” Kassim asked.

“I don’t know, but I believe in her,” I said. “She’s so innocent and pure, it makes me feel like there’s something good in this world. The light in her brightens the darkness in me. I can’t explain it. I just can’t take that away from her.”

“That’s her choice too,” Nabeel replied, “I’m not saying to go all the way with her but being physical with her isn’t as wrong as you’re making it out to be.”

“It is to her, trust me, ‘til we’re married.”

“Married?” Kassim asked, concern on his face.

“Yeah, I want to marry her someday. She’s the one.”

All three of my brothers gawked at me, disbelief in their eyes.

“Good for you. I’m glad you found your one,” Nabeel’s said, and I wondered if he’d found his one too.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Taimur

I had to thank Alia for setting me straight.

There was something about having a twin bond that allowed us to know when the other was in need, and as usual, this situation was no different. Recently, I knew Alia needed me, but she continued to reject my every attempt to speak about the issues between Nabeel and her.

“I’m just trying to protect your relationship with him, Tai,” she had told me on the phone that afternoon. “I don’t want things to change.”

“Did he do something to hurt you, Lia?” I asked, worried about my sister. She constantly put on a brave face, being there for everyone else but deep down I knew she was vulnerable, helpless to her own feels much like I was.

“Not like you think. Please, I don’t want to lie to you. Can you just let it go?”

“Is there something going on between...”

“No. Please stop. Drop it!” she insisted. We had never openly spoken about Nabeel and her ‘friendship’ and most of the time, we all pretended that we didn’t see what was going on between them.

“Only if you promise me that you won’t let anyone treat you less than your worth. You’re not like other girls, Lia. You’re different.”

“You have to say that. You’re my brother.”

“Just promise me.”

“I promise,” she sighed over the phone. “When I watch you and Layla, I wonder when it will be my turn to fall in love and be happy.”

“It’s not all sunshine and roses, Lia.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied, sighing to myself this time. I really needed to get a grip on my behaviour around Pearl. My body craved her in ways I knew would upset her but every time we were close, I saw the hungry look in her eyes, asking me to step over the line we had drawn.

“Do you want me to keep asking or shall I just ask her?”

“Don’t!”

“Why?”

“That’s embarrassing.”

“More embarrassing than the time Kassy embarrassed you in front of the boys and that girl you used to fancy?”

“Nothing beats that,” I replied, cringing from one of the most embarrassing memories of my life.

“And do you remember the girls face when she saw you standing there – naked.”

“Bloody hell, I’ll never forget the way she ran out of our house,” I laughed, feeling the tension relieve itself.

We were around fifteen, Kassim thirteen, and our parents had been away for the day. It was in the middle of one of the hottest summers in London and I had decided to take a long shower to cool off before getting ready to go to see a film with the boys. Just as I had stripped and switched on the shower, I heard a loud crashing noise come from the kitchen downstairs. Being the older, more protective sibling, I grabbed the first large towel I saw and wrapped myself from waist down, before going downstairs to see what the commotion was.

I found Alia and Nabeel fighting over how to boil pasta correctly, the pan of boiling water spilt on the ground, and Abs sitting on the sofa, talking to one of Alia’s friends – the one I had fancied for a while.

As my overconfident nature brimmed over, I walked up to the girl, flexing my muscles and starting a casual conversation with her. I remember watching her big eyes scan my topless body, grinning at my overconfident self only to have Kassim run up behind me and yank my towel off, screaming that it was his and not to use it again. Taken by surprise, I didn’t get a chance to stop him, resulting in me being left there butt naked in front of my siblings, two cousins and a girl I used to fancy.

Even though it was hands down, the most embarrassing memory of my life, it still made me smile thinking of it.

“How do you do that?” I asked Alia, “How do you know what I need to hear to make me laugh?”

“The same way you do it, Twinny.” She laughed harder remembering that awful day, “Now tell me what’s bothering you so I can sort it out. I am a girl you know, I know how girls think.”

A few silent moments passed between us where I heard her shuffle against the phone as I walked through the park. It was a nice day. The warm breeze shook the trees in ways I didn’t understand, and I longed for winter to finally appear, covering everything in white sheets of snow.

“I don’t know if I should... or how to... touch her.”

“Ewww...”

“Yeah, you’re right. This isn’t a conversation I’m comfortable having with you. Leave it.”

“No, no, no! Sorry! Listen to me, Tai,” she began, as I kicked some mud on the grass as if it was a ball, aiming it towards an imaginary goal. I missed playing football. “You know what I thought of Layla the first time I met her?”

“What?”

“That she was not your type and that it’d never work with a hijabi.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Sorry, what did you say? The line isn’t very clear.”

“I said, maybe you’re right.”

“I know, I just wanted to hear you say it again,” Alia laughed.

“Shut up!”

“But I was wrong Tai. Even though she wasn’t your usual type I liked her straight away. I thought she’d be up herself since she wore hijab, thinking that she was better than the rest of us and would judge me for being Muslim and not wearing it but she didn’t. She never pushed her beliefs on any of us and she accepted all of us Khalidis for who we were, even Nabeel. I realised from the first meeting that she was different than the rest.”

“And that’s the problem.”

“But being different doesn’t mean she doesn’t want the same things as other girls, Tai.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, woo her. Do some romantic gestures. Spoil her. Make her feel special.”

“With what money?”

“You don’t need money to make her feel special. Look, I’ve never seen you look at any girl the way you look at Layla. You’ve never looked happier, but you know what I also see, I see the way she looks at you too. She’s in this as much as you are. She’s head over heels in love with you too.”

I made a noise on the line, letting her know that I was listening.

“I know you’re used to not working for it. Just flashing your smile and getting the girls in your bed for the night...”

“Oi, what do you know about that?” I interrupted.

“More than I’d like to, but that’s not the point, you’re not turning this round on me right now.”

“Hmmm...”

“Look, out of all the guys, you’re my twin and I know you more than I know myself sometimes. I see how you are with Layla, and I understand why you don’t want to touch her and it’s okay – I get it.”

“What do you get?”

“I get that you respect her enough to not do anything she would regret later. You respect her enough not to touch her and take it too far,” Alia replied, “And that makes me respect you even more than I already did. You like to tell yourself that you’re one of the bad guys, not worthy of finding someone as pure as Layla but you’re wrong. You’re one of the good ones Tai, and you’ve proven it to yourself.”

“I...”

“And you know what, it’s okay to kiss her since I know she wants you to. She’s been patiently waiting for weeks for you to make the next move. She’s been waiting so long that she thinks you’ve lost interest in her.”

“What? How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“When?”

“A few weeks ago.”

“And you’re telling me this now?”

“I just wanted you to be sure about it before you do it because once you break the barrier, there’s no turning back.”

“I’ve got to go,” I replied. “Romantic gesture you said?”

“Yup, that’s what I said.”

“Love you, Lia.”

“Love you too, Twinny.”

HANGING UP, I SENT A MESSAGE TO OUR GROUP CHAT WITH ALL THE BOYS IN it.

TAIMUR

I need your help. Keep Layla out her flat for the day. I have a plan.

NABEEL

About time.

ABS

We got this.

KASSIM

Don't do something stupid... like propose or I'm telling mum.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Layla

I *couldn't shake the feeling that he didn't want me anymore.*

Weeks had lapsed, and I was sure the novelty of being with me had begun to wear off. The chase was over and so was his interest in me.

I knew it.

I could feel it.

Why else had he not tried to even kiss me yet?

I knew it was wrong, I knew I shouldn't want to take our relationship further, but I also knew that in my heart it felt so right. As I tried to condition my mind to not thinking about the physical part of our relationship, the more it was all I could think about.

Discomfort settled inside me like an unwanted disease, my phone vibrated. I was in my psychology lecture, trying to absorb what the lecturer was saying but the thoughts of Taimur consumed me and made it impossible to concentrate.

TAIMUR

What you doing, Pearl?

LAYLA

Lecture. U?

TAIMUR

What's wrong?

HOW DID HE KNOW?

LAYLA

Nothing.

TAIMUR

Good girls don't lie.

LAYLA

Maybe I'm not a good girl.

TAIMUR

Could have fooled me. Tell me what's wrong.

LAYLA

Nothing.

TAIMUR

Look Pearl, I won't be able to concentrate if you don't tell me what's bothering you and the experiment I have today is pretty dangerous. You don't want me burning my handsome face off or something because I'm worrying about you, do you?

LAYLA

That wouldn't be so bad right now since Katie, ur ex, is sitting in front of me.

TAIMUR

Katie???

LAYLA

Tall, slim, blonde, beautiful? Ring a bell?

TAIMUR

Sorry, only girl I remember is so cute and short she has to stand on a chair to get her Coco pops out of the cupboard, has sexy curves for me to cuddle with and has beautiful dark brown hair that she keeps covered from me.

LAYLA

Taimur, I'm serious.

TAIMUR

So am I. The only girl I've ever felt anything for is you Layla.

LAYLA

Then why haven't you kissed me?

MY FINGERS TYPED FASTER THAN MY MIND AND I PRESSED SEND, INSTANTLY regretting my message.

TAIMUR

Shit, Pearl. It's not what you think.

LAYLA

It's okay Taimur. I get it.

TAIMUR

I think we need to talk. I can't do this over text message. I'll come see you later.

LAYLA

Taimur, seriously, there's nothing to talk about. I get it. It's fine.

TAIMUR

?

LAYLA

It's fine if you like me as a friend. You're a great friend and so are your family. I would hate to lose them just because you don't feel what you thought you would feel before we were together. I get that the accident made you emotional and you told me you loved me because of it. It's fine. I'm fine. I would like to be friends if that's possible.

TAIMUR

We can't be friends.

HIS WORDS CUT DEEP INTO ME, SLICING ME OPEN AND LEAVING ME EXPOSED. Not only was he breaking up with me but also wanted to be out of my life.

The scriptures were right.

It was inevitable.

A relationship born in sin could never bring about happiness.

LAYLA

Ok.

THE REST OF THE DAY DRAGGED ON MORE THAN EXPECTED. STRUGGLING TO finish the day, I stumbled towards my flat, ready to get into my pjs and sleep my heartache away.

I hadn't called my dad this morning since I was running late, and the anxiety of what he was going to assume from the lack of my call worried me. I knew I had to Skype call him as soon as I was inside my flat, otherwise he could turn up at university looking for me.

"Sweetheart?" A familiar voice beckoned me. I looked up to see all three Khalidi boys, Kassim, Nabeel and Abs leaning against my flat door. "You're coming with us."

"What? No. I'm tired. I just want to sleep," I said, walking up to Abs and taking the cigarette out of his smirking mouth and placing it onto the ash tray above the bin. He watched me with amusement, chuckling. "And what did I tell you about this cancer sticks you guys keep smoking? Quit it!"

"Not happening, princess," Abs said, not dropping his smile. Maybe he was warming up to me. "Now come on and take this." He handed me his hoodie. "Do you ever wear a coat?"

"Maybe I just like you giving me your hoodie, ever thought of that?" I smiled, putting my arms through it before he stepped forward and zipped it up.

"You can add this one to your collection then. Now come on, hurry up and walk."

"No, no, no... Please guys. I love you three, but I really am not in the mood for brotherly bonding today."

"Who said anything brotherly?" But before Kassim could finish his flirtatious sentence, Abs clapped him over the head. Nabeel laughed, winking my way.

"What would make you come out with us today?" Abs asked me and I took a second to think before I replied with a delicious beam.

"If you three don't smoke those fags while we're out together. I'm tired of smelling like cigarettes every time I get home from seeing you."

"Done!" Kassim replied, knowing that he didn't need cigarettes to keep him content.

"Abs? Nabeel?"

"Urgh..." they both rolled their eyes.

"Fine, princess. You win. But Tai owes me for this," Abs finally said.

“Owes you for what?” I asked, confused by his comment.

“Nothing. Come on, Tiny. Let’s get out of here. You’ve had a rough morning,” Nabeel said as Kassim took my bag out of my hand and swung it over his shoulder. “The pink suits you,” Nabeel teased, and Kassim’s cheeks slightly reddened.

“I might as well, I guess,” I said, starting to walk away from my flat doors. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to spend much time with you guys once Taimur and I break up.”

“Break up!?” All three boys repeated, simultaneously.

“Why?” Abs asked, guiding us towards the gate, letting me through first. “Are you planning on breaking up with him?”

“No, not me.”

“Then why?” Nabeel asked, coming in closer as we walked.

“I wish I knew. I think the novelty has worn off to be honest.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” Nabeel said. “When you find the one, the novelty doesn’t ever wear off. You find new ways of loving each other every day and you can’t imagine your life without them.”

“Well then, maybe I’m not the one.”

“I highly doubt that,” Abs said. But there was something unnerving when I watched Kassim walk in silence, not having anything to say.

“Taimur is used to girls throwing themselves at him and sleeping with him. He unapologetically uses girls – you all do. You just don’t know what it’s like to be the girl on the other side.”

I watched as all three boys took in what I said. Their striking faces were serious, and I didn’t know if I had offended them or not, so I decided to continue.

“He’s bored of me, trust me. He hasn’t even tried to...” I felt shy confiding in the boys, but I had nothing to lose. Maybe they could enlighten me on what was going on in Taimur’s mind.

“Ever thought the reason he hasn’t touched you is because he has too much respect for you?” Kassim asked. “Maybe he realises that you’re not like the other girls he’s been with, and he’s scared to go further. Maybe he realises that you’re one in six bloody billion.”

“Or maybe he doesn’t want to push you to do something you’ll regret?” Abs continued, sticking up for his cousin, dismissing Kassim’s comment.

“Maybe. Anyways, where are we going?”

“We’re going shopping,” Kassim smirked.

“Why?”

“To find Chip and Tai a birthday present, apparently,” Nabeel replied, not looking happy. His voice was laced with discomfort and his eyes gave away that he was wounded.

“It’s their birthday?” I asked, wondering why Taimur hadn’t mentioned it. As I dwelled on the thought, my instinct that he wanted to break up with me confirmed.

“Yup. And we need to find Alia the perfect present since she never forgets ours,” Kassim replied.

“And Taimur?”

“Yeah, yeah, sweetheart. Don’t worry, we’ll get your boyfriend something too.”

“He’s not...”

“He is,” Abs said, while Kassim pulled me under his arm to guide me towards the train station.



“THIS IS CHEATING. YOU GUYS CHEATED,” I SAID, NOT AMUSED WHILE carefully biting into my chicken shawarma wrap.

“No, we didn’t. You said we couldn’t smoke cigarettes. This is not a cigarette.”

“It still causes cancer.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“What? Hookah? No, nothing about it makes me want to try it.”

“Try one toke, Tiny. It’s not that bad. I swear.”

“No thanks.”

“Come on,” Kassim joined in. “Just one puff.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t you want to know what the hype is all about?” Nabeel asked, taking a long pull of the plastic pipe before letting out a cloud of white smoke from his mouth. Next passed it onto Abs who did the same.

“Nope.”

“Leave her alone. If she doesn’t want to try it, she doesn’t have to,” Abs defended me, smoke coming out of his nostrils too.

“How about we make it interesting,” Kassim said.

“What?”

“If you take one toke, a proper one, I’ll stop smoking for a week.”

“What? Why is it so important to you for me to try it? It’s not like you.”

“It just is. Think of it this way, you take one puff and you’ll be saving me from getting lung cancer sooner. One week more to live.”

“By giving *myself* lung cancer. No thank you Kassim.”

“One puff isn’t going to give you cancer Tiny.” Nabeel said, pouring some mint tea for me. A small stream of steam escaped into the air as he stirred some sugar into it.

Moments passed as they watched me, the wheels turning in my head as I thought about it. How bad could it be?

“Fine, but I have conditions too,” I finally said.

“Of course you would” Kassim grinned.

“Make it a month.” I stated. “A month without cigarettes.”

“Fine,” Kassim quickly agreed, “I can do that.”

“And all three of you have to stop.” Abs choked on his hookah pipe, resulting in a coughing fit.

“What?!” Both Nabeel and Abs replied, eyes wide as saucers. “That’s not the deal.”

“Take it or leave it,” I said sweetly, sipping on my mint tea, shrugging my shoulders.

“Come on guys. It’s only a month. We can do it,” Kassim tried to convince the boys.

“Not happening, bro. This is the only thing that gets me through the day now,” Nabeel said.

“And I don’t really want you to smoke anyways, so I’m not in either,” Abs inserted.

“Come on. It’s a month. Prove it to her that we can do it. She thinks we can’t.”

“I know you guys can’t,” I pushed. “You got to have strength to quit something”

“Fine. I’m in,” Abs said straight away, taking the bait. He never backed down from a challenge.

“And you Nabeel?”

“Urgh.... I hate you so right now Tiny, but fine. I’ll do it too.”

“Now take one toke,” Kassim said and grinned at me.

We sat in a large restaurant on Edgware road, the guys continuing to smoke their hookah pipe and I eating a middle eastern meat wrap, discussing possible plans for Taimur’s birthday. We had spent the rest of the long day searching every shop for a suitable present for Alia but had come up empty until Nabeel decided to finally assist us and suggested the boys get her a necklace with her name on it.

It was perfect for Alia and Nabeel knew it before we did.

“What are you planning on getting Tai?” Kassim asked, puffing out a ring of smoke.

“I don’t know if we’re even going to be together on his birthday next week.”

“Stop it,” Nabeel replied, “Stop assuming things. Why do girls do that? A guy falls asleep without saying bye and the girl assumes he’s cheating with some other girl. A guy doesn’t message at 12am on their anniversary and the girl assumes he’s forgotten, when he’s actually planning something special. The guy doesn’t reply to one bloody text message and the girl assumes he doesn’t love her. What’s with that?” He rambles, not breathing in between his sentences.

Abs, Kassim and I stared at one another, all of us wondered if he was talking about Rose or Alia.

“Wallahi, it’s not like that. We’re just sensitive. We’re not like you guys,” I said.

“Guys are sensitive too,” Kassim replied.

“No, that’s just you, bro,” Abs joked.

“Are you telling me you’ve never been upset over a girl?” I asked Abs, trying to uncover more about him.

“Nope. I’ve never let it get that far with a girl before.”

“Wow. Have you ever been in love?”

“Nope.”

“What about you Kassim?”

“Yup.”

“When and who?”

“Every single day when I see you, sweetheart,” he joked, and as always, Abs didn’t look amused. “I’m messing. Chill.”

“I love you too,” I laughed back. “As a brother.”

“Ouch!”

“Anyways, what about you Nabeel?”

“What about me?”

“Have you ever fallen in love?”

“Yeah, and I regret it every day.”

Not knowing what to say I kept quiet, not wanting to push a topic I knew he wasn't comfortable discussing.

“Urgh.” Abs looked towards the back of the restaurant. His face repulsed. “I don't want to see that.”

“What?” Kassim asked, turning to see the view Abs was watching. I gawked towards the scene to find two young guys, dressed in casual jeans and shirts, sitting side by side, their hands interlocked and smiling at one another. It was clear from the view that there were more than friends. Not knowing where to look or what to feel, I looked away.

“Come on guys. Leave them alone,” Nabeel said, dismissing the sight before us.

“Can't they get a room?” Abs said, sending an evil glare their way.

“Why do they have to do that here?” Kassim chimed in.

“Why shouldn't they? It's as natural as you making out with your girlfriend,” Nabeel said. “They're allowed to live their life the way they want.”

“I don't like PDA, whether it's a girl or guy,” Abs added.

“Well, keep your opinion to yourselves. This is the 21st century. Get over it! You guys sound like ignorant fools.”

“It doesn't matter what century it is bro, God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” Kassim joked, taking a long drag of his hookah pipe and blowing out the cloudy smoke.

“That is the most backward thing I've ever heard you say,” Nabeel replied, irritated.

“I can't understand how you're okay with that,” Abs pointed towards the couple. “At least I know Tai and Kassim are normal and think the same way as me.”

“That's not normal bro. You guys are backward. Get with the times. Be on the right side of history.”

“Islamically it's forbidden too. Right Princess?”

“And so is drinking alcohol and pre-marital sex and drugs, but you guys don't seem to have a problem breaking those rules. Hypocrites much?” I

replied.

“So, you’re okay with this Sweetheart?”

“I don’t think there’s something to be okay with. Everyone is allowed to live life the way they want and I’m in no place to judge, especially now. There are things I don’t understand, and to be honest, Taimur has opened my eyes to so much that I’m not sure life is black and white anymore. Just put yourself in someone else’s shoes before judging them, I guess.”

Before I could say more my phone vibrated in my pocket.

ZOYA

Emergency. I need you to come home ASAP.

LAYLA

What’s wrong? Is it Baba? I didn’t call him today. Is he mad?

ZOYA

Just come home. I’m waiting.

“I NEED TO GET BACK. ZOYA NEEDS ME,” I TOLD THE GUYS, HASTILY requesting the bill, panic in my stuttering voice. Before we could split the bill, Nabeel handed the waiter his card and nodded at the rest of the boys, apprising them that it was sorted.

I didn’t have time to argue so I let it go, sprinting towards the station as fast I could. The boys were right behind me, directing people out my way and apologising to people who were nearly run over by me. Thirty minutes later we arrived, and I ran up to my flat, the boys still behind, to find Zoya waiting for me by the front door.

“Thank god you’re here.” Zoya exclaimed, pulling me through the door as the boys held back, gasping for air. “I need your help.”

“What’s going on Zoy? Are you okay?”

“I need your help. I left something in the kitchen. Can you get it for me, please?” Zoya replied, moving through the front door, winking at me on her way out as she left me alone.

I wanted to call her back, ask her to stay with me and be the big sister I needed but there was something peculiar in her eyes that made me question what was going through her mind. She had changed recently, different from the sister I had always known, and I had to find out why.

“Where are you going?” I asked as the door slammed and she mysteriously disappeared. That was when I saw Taimur and my distressed pumping heart stopped, forgetting to beat to keep me alive, and my body trembled in anticipation of the conversation I knew we were going to have.

“What’s going on, Taimur?” I asked, worry lacing my voice as I walked out of the hallway and towards the kitchen.

Taimur stood in front of me. He looked more dressed up than usual and I wondered if he had plans after he had broken up with me. Maybe he was back to his old ways, clubbing and looking for girls to sleep with. The thought of him touching another woman made me see red.

He could have them.

I didn’t need him.

I was going to be fine – I lied to myself.

“Follow me,” he said.

Pulling the handle of the door in agitation, I stormed into the kitchen, frustration now masking the hurt. The lights were still switched off but as I looked around, I didn’t understand what was going on.

“What is this?” I asked, glancing around the room. “What...”

The kitchen was dark, apart from the moonlight streaming into it from the oversized window. All the pots and pans had been put away and each tabletop had a selection of tealight candles inside my shot glasses collection, some I had bought and some he had gifted me, brightening up its surroundings. Fairy lights hung from the ceiling, looking like tiny stars, sparkling in the sky and the smell of strawberry and vanilla encompassed me. In the middle of the kitchen was the normal kitchen table but with a beautiful red tablecloth covering it. In the middle of the table was a beautiful bouquet of fresh red roses surrounded by more tea light candles illuminating them.

“What are we doing here, Taimur? What is this?” I asked, looking at him with confusion.

“Shh,” his stiff finger placed gently on my dry lips. “Enough talking, baby.”

He moved closer to me, close enough for me to feel his warm breath on my face, the smell of his musky aftershave and cigarettes reminding me of every time we’d been this close in proximity but never crossed the line.

I glared up at him.

The light from outside illuminating his face as if he was an angel. His perfect hazel eyes filled with adoration, his plump lips in a gentle smile and his hands now pressed against my hips, hard thumbs digging into my soft flesh.

Before I could let myself think, I broke the barrier between us, leaning forwards and allowing my lips to finally touch his. The impact of our touch immediately knocked the air out of me, sending my heart spinning. He slowly moved in even closer, his mouth gently covering mine and for the first time in my life I knew the meaning of spiritual awakening.

Like the stars had just aligned.

The world around us stilled, our breathing stopped but our hearts beat faster, finding a rhythm of their own, in sync. The heat from his soft lips scorned me in a way I hadn't even experienced before and my body trembled, giving into the feeling I had been fighting since the day we had met.

And when he parted his lips, requesting access to my inexperienced mouth, inviting me to follow and I sensed his tongue caress mine in a hungrier way, I felt like I had finally been found.

Like I'd been wandering this earth, lost and lonely, but for the first time I had purpose, and that purpose was to kiss Taimur Khalidi like my life depended on it.

Our paths should have never crossed, but now as he kissed me, I knew he was my destiny.

I didn't attempt to lead the kiss, but my arm reached up behind his head, possessively curling around his neck and into his thick strands of dark hair. His hand found my face, untangling my headscarf and placed his finger through my long locks, caressing me in a way I had never been touched. One firm hand slid around my waist, moving me closer into him so we were pressed together from head to toe, and it was the scariest yet most liberating feeling I had ever felt.

I wanted to look up at him, gaze in his eyes to see if he was feeling the same connection I was but he didn't let me go, walking me back against the kitchen door where he had stood, a year ago, shirtless and antagonising me. It seems like it had been years since that day, years I'd craved for him to kiss me like I was his last breath.

Realisation slowly seeped into my mind that I was going against my beliefs and what I was brought up believing was right, but I didn't care. All

that mattered in that moment was that Taimur wanted me and I wanted him, needed him.

He consumed every part of me.

My mind scrambled to finish a thread of thought, but it was no use, I had no control over my own body let alone my mind. Pleasure soared through me to places I didn't know existed and I realised that something that felt this good could never be that wrong, it just couldn't.

With every soft caress of his tongue on mine, with every stroke of his gentle hand in my hair, with every breath he took away from me, my heart blissfully surrendered itself to him. Piece by piece, he took it away from me till I had nothing left to give and I belonged completely to him.

We kissed deeper, more passionately, not breaking our connection for a second and after what seemed like hours, we finally came up for air, breathless and panting.

I had just had my first kiss.

My chest rose and fell, trying to fathom what I had just done, and my body buzzed with his closeness, instantly feeling the loss of his lips once we broke apart. Taimur leaned into me, kissing my forehead possessively, panting just like I was, trying to calm both our spiralling hearts. He still held my face, planting small kisses on my cheeks and jawline, not being able to hold back. His glazed eyes watched me with adoration, welcoming me into his confusing world like never before. And before I could string a sentence together, he smiled down, reading me as always.

No words were needed.

Our lips had spoken a language only the two of us understood and it was beautiful. The most beautiful moment I had experience in my life to date and I would hold on to that memory forever.

"You used my shot glasses," I said, gesturing to the tiny glasses with candles in them when he finally came up for air.

"Yeah, I wanted to make it special somehow," he smiled at me. "Although I still don't get your obsession with them."

"I'll tell you one day. Why here?" I asked, changing the subject, as he took every chance he got to touch me. We were sitting by the table, two plates of food untouched as we spoke. He had placed me on his lap, my now exposed hair tumbling over my small shoulders and resting on his, as he took in every part of me I was willing to show him. His hand softly

tugged at the ends of my long strands, admiring me in a way I had never been admired.

“Because this was where I first met you, Pearl. This is where I should have kissed you first – the very first time I met you.”

“That would have been a bit odd. And creepy. I might have slapped you.”

“But Pearl, from the first day I saw you, standing on that chair, reaching for your box of Coco Pops, I knew I was a goner.”

“And I knew that day that I was in big trouble.”

“Why?”

“Because I couldn’t get you out of my head, Taimur. From the first time I met you, even though you made it hard, I knew you were more than the bad boy you pretended to be, and when I broke down your hard shell to find a kind, loving and genuine person, it was inevitable that I was eventually going to fall in love with you.”

“I love you,” Taimur said, pulling me tighter towards his firm body before leaning down and taking my swollen lips in another kiss. “I just wish I hadn’t been such an idiot when we first met.”

“Don’t,” I said, placing my small hand on his stubbly cheek and gently kissing him back. That could quickly become my most favourite thing to do in the world. “Don’t say that. I wouldn’t change our love story for the world. It’s real and unique, and I love it just the way it is.”

As our lips connected again, the heavy kitchen door swung wide open. I abruptly jumped off Taimur’s lap, grabbing my headscarf and placing it on my head before seeing a very smug set of smiles from Zoya, Kassim, Abs, Nabeel and surprisingly, Moe.

“It doesn’t get any easier, sweetheart,” Kassim said, smiling at me.

“What doesn’t?” I asked.

“Knowing that you picked my big brother over me.”

“Kassim,” I challenged.

“Layla,” he responded, and then threw his head back in laughter. “Is there any food left for us?”

“Sure,” I picked up the plate and walked over to the microwave. “Let me just warm it up for you.”

“I thought I told you guys to leave us alone for once. Can’t we get one night alone?” Taimur asked, taking the plate out of my hand and pulling me

towards him. I went willingly, receiving a triumphant look on everyone's faces.

"So, did you finally kiss my baby sister?" Zoya enquired, winking at us.

"Zoy!" I explained, feeling my cheeks burn.

"What? We have a right to know what all the fuss was about."

"Zoya..." Moe began, and I knew he was going to take my side but before he could say anything more, Taimur gently placed his hand on my neck, tugging me into him till our hungry lips were touching and his scorching tongued was stocking the inside of my mouth, sensually. The people around us disintegrated, the world around us froze and for a second, I forgot where I was until I heard Nabeel's wolf whistle and Kassim clear his throat.

Hesitantly, we broke apart.

"Does that answer your question?" Taimur asked, running his thumb across his bottom lip in a teasing smirk while watching me turn as red as a tomato.

"Ouch!" Kassim exclaimed, hand placed on his chest like he was injured but the sparkle in his eyes told me he was happy for us. "Thanks for rubbing it in."

"And don't forget to use a rubber," Nabeel joked.

"Oi!" Abs threatened, hitting him over the head. He walked up to the counter and raised himself onto it, sitting, watching as usual.

"Thank you," Taimur whispered, his lips caressing my ears.

"For what?"

"For loving me when I wasn't loveable." He smiled. "For loving these idiots too."

"They're your family Taimur, that makes them my family too."

"Sure does Tiny, and for the record, Tai couldn't have done it without us," Nabeel said, picking at the cold food placing it in his mouth. "Tiny here was about to leave you if we hadn't persuaded her not to. The least you could do is feed us. This stuff is good."

"It's Alia's recipe," Taimur said.

"Of course, it is," Nabeel huffed, placing the food back onto the plate and walking towards the kitchen door, his fingers combing through his coloured hair. "I just lost my appetite. Have fun, lovebirds."

As he left, we all glanced at each other, words not being enough to relate what was going on between Alia and Nabeel.

“Don’t you guys want to see if he’s okay? Alia and him.”

“Don’t get involved, princess. There’s more going on than you know,” Abs interrupted. “Now let’s eat.”

“But,” Taimur began.

“Let them stay.” I smiled at him, and he pecked my lips. “I can’t imagine a more perfect way to end such a perfect night than with all the people I love.”

“But you love me the most, right?” Kassim chimed in as Abs smacked him over the head and we all burst out laughing while Taimur lit up a cigarette.

“Are we ever going to take that off the smoke detector?” I asked, gesturing to the condom we had put up there months ago.

“Nope,” he winked at me, as I pulled his cigarette out of his mouth after he’d had only one toke.

“Are you ever going to quit smoking?”

“Do you hate it that much?”

“You know I do.”

“Fine. I quit.”

“What?”

“You heard me, no more smoking from today. I’m done.”

“Are you serious right now?” Abs asked.

“Yeah, I’m done. Anything else, Pearl?”

“Wow, in one day she got all four of us to stop. Impressive,” Kassim said, explaining the deal.

“You made her smoke?” Taimur asked, his jaw ticking. “You guys pressured her to do it?”

“No, no, no... Relax,” I tried to calm him before he attacked his brother.

“I have some news too,” Moe thankfully interrupted. “I might as well tell you all now seeing as you’re all here.”

“What’s up?” I asked, moving my attention to my best friend. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s more than okay Lay, Sara and I are engaged.”

For some reason the word “Congratulations” struggled to leave my mouth and I stood up shocked, not knowing what to say to Moe for the first time in my life.

“Congratulations. That’s great,” Taimur said, coming up behind me and shaking Moe’s hand. “I can finally sleep peacefully knowing you’re not

after my girl.”

Everyone laughed while I stood still, my feet stuck to the ground and my eyes glued on Moe.

Why was I so upset?

Why didn't it feel right?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Layla

“We have to stop,” Taimur said, pushing off my single bed and hesitantly walking away from me.

It was a Thursday afternoon, sometime in the middle of winter. After my first kiss in August, we didn’t know where or when the months had flown by, bringing us to the end of the year before we knew it. Our lives were now intertwined so tight that even the strongest power couldn’t break us apart.

Each passing day, our obsession grew darker, more intense, and now we were at the stage where life wasn’t worth living without one another and we both didn’t understand how we got here. But love was a power that was not meant to be understood but to be simply felt, and that’s exactly what we were doing. We were letting it take us on the ride of our life, not wanting to get off even when it was time to stop.

We were both caught in the riptide.

Moe was officially engaged to Sara and after much deliberation with Zoya, I realised the reason I was upset was because I was just scared of losing him. He’d been *mine* for as long as I could remember and for the first time, I had to share him just like he had to share me with Taimur. All our worlds were changing so fast, and we had no control over what was going to happen next.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because if you keep kissing me, I won’t be able to hold back.” He walked towards the desk where he began to straighten up with his shirt and

jeans on. We had been cuddling on my bed watching a film, but before we knew it our lips were touching and the world around us ceased to exist, once again.

Even though we were in love and spent most of our alone time kissing, both Taimur and I had agreed not to cross the line and sleep together. It was not that the thoughts or feelings hadn't crossed my mind, but knowing that Islamically I was already sinning by allowing him to touch me and see me without my hijab, I didn't have it in me to break the final rule and have sex before marriage, but was there a middle ground?

"Sorry."

"Stop apologising, Pearl. I'm not complaining but if I spend another second with my lips on yours, I'm going to lose the little restraint I still have left." He joked, and I blushed profusely.

"Would that be that bad?" I asked, innocence in my question, walking up to him to steal another kiss.

"What are you trying to say, babe?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, moving back onto the bed. "I just don't feel like stopping when you're kissing me."

I watched him walk towards me, placing himself on the end of the bed before turning to me and pushing my hair out of my eyes. He leaned down, taking my lips with his, his tongue sweeping inside my mouth and taking my breath away.

"You know what drives me crazy?" he asked, pulling away to rest his forehead on mine.

"What?"

"That I'm the only one that's touched these lips. That no one knows how intoxicating they are apart from me. That no one will ever know."

"Taimur... Kiss me."

And kiss me he did, passionately, slowly, taking his time to worship me in the only way he knew. Soon the kiss grew hungrier, until we both didn't want to stop.

"Baby... Have you ever..." Taimur asked, his hand sliding from my face down the length of my neck. He sucked on the base of it hard, but not hard enough to leave a mark on my skin, before his lips travelled back up to my mouth.

"What?" I looked up, panting.

"Have you ever.... Ummm... touched yourself?"

I felt my cheeks turn bright red and I knew he already knew the answer.

"Pearl... don't be embarrassed," he said, forcing me to look up at him again. "It's just you and me here. We can tell each other anything."

"No, I've never done anything like that before." My eyes moved away from his in shame when I replied. It was forbidden to masturbate in Islam.

"You've never had an orgasm before?" he asked again. "Have you ever come?"

"No, but... but.... I want to."

"Pearl," he stammered. "Do you want me to give you an orgasm?"

"I... I..."

"Baby?"

"Y...y...yes."

There was a long pause before I managed to look up at him again.

"Pearl?"

"Please," I said, sitting up on the bed. I didn't know where my confidence came from, but I felt comfortable with him, so my hands moved to the hem of my t-shirt, slowly lifting off my body to reveal me in a white cotton bra.

I trusted Taimur.

"Baby," Taimur signed, moving off the bed and stumbling back. "You can't do this to me. I'm dying here." He said, running his fingers through his hair.

"Taimur."

"Can I touch you, Layla?" He walked towards me once more and when I looked up into his eyes, I knew he was as needy as me. "Can I make you feel good?"

"Yes," I stuttered as he came in closer. He gradually reached behind me, unclasping my bra, allowing it to tumble to the bed and release my heavy breasts, leaving me more exposed than I'd ever been. His hands moved to my face, caressing my red cheeks until he moved down to my neck, gravitating towards my collarbone until he reached the swell of my breasts. He cupped one in his hand as I arched into his touch, eager to feel more of him, chasing a feeling I'd never felt before.

"These – these tits are perfection. They fit perfectly in my hand. Can I taste them baby?" He nuzzled into my neck as he squeezed one in his callus hands.

I nodded, not able to form words.

Goosebumps spread all over my body at the first flick of his tongue, strange electric currents going straight from my nipple to my clitoris, moisture already releasing into my panties. As his hot mouth latched onto my hardened nipple, my body shot off the bed in pleasure, my arms instantly coming around his neck, pulling him closer to me, asking for something I didn't know I wanted.

I heard myself embarrassingly moan which only made him suck harder, moving to give my other nipple the same attention while kneading the one he had just left. He was lying on top of me now, his shirt thrown somewhere on the floor and his jeans rubbing against my centre, as I felt his hardness against my stomach.

Nerves built up inside me.

I had never done this before.

I had never been this open, this exposed, in front of another person in my life, and as I felt the guilt build in my chest, another feeling built in my stomach, the need to feel the high that he had created inside me.

As he twirled his tongue, sucking on my soft skin, our bodies touching, skin to skin, my body couldn't help but keep reacting to him. My hands moved from his strong back into his long hair, tugging at the strands as he didn't stop his assault on my nipples, pleasuring me in a way I had never felt before.

I needed more.

I wanted more.

"You're stunning. From now on, every one of your orgasms is mine, just mine. I'm the luckiest man in the world to be the only one to ever see you like this." He said, looking at me, admiration in his hazel eyes and I couldn't help but smile. "Can I take your bottoms off?" he panted, not wanting to do anything to make me uncomfortable.

"Yes," I answered, swallowing.

"Are you sure Pearl?" he asked again, "We don't have to do this. I'm not asking you to do this. I can wait."

"I'm sure, I promise you. I'm sure, Taimur."

As if it was his first time undressing a girl, his nervous fingers found the elastic of my bottoms as my shaky hands found the buttons on his jeans and before long, we were both lying naked on the bed, exploring each other's bodies with our hands. I took a second to admire him, my gaze travelling

from his head to toe, memorising each and every curve, dimple and freckle so I wouldn't forget this moment as long as I lived.

He was beautiful.

"I love you Layla," he said, lying on top of me. "And I've never wanted anyone as much as I've wanted you. You're mine. You will always be mine." He kissed my neck again, moving back to my breasts and then down to my belly. As he looked up at me, I saw the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

His tense hand moved down my flat stomach, down from my curvy hips and between my legs when I heard myself silently moan his name. The wetness seeping out, soaking the bedsheets. I felt his hand stop at my mould, hesitantly hovering over me before he looked into my eyes and spoke.

"Do you want me to stop, Layla?" His eyes were turning dark from desire.

Before I gave myself time to overthink, I shook my head, nervously pushing his hand towards my body, ready to feel anything he was willing to give me. My heart beat fast, anticipating the feeling that I knew was about to come.

"Open your legs for me Pearl. Show me..." I listened to his command, my bent knees shyly falling on either side, open for him. I watched him stare down at me with desperation, his eyes dilated, his breath coming out rough. "I want to hear you baby. I want to hear how I make you feel."

"Taimur..." I moaned again, trying not to hold back.

His rough fingers finally finding their destination. My head fell back on my pillow, my lips parted in pleasure and my entire body shuddered at his foreign touch as he slowly slipped his fingers between my wet folds, lazily rubbing circles while my juices spread over my swollen flesh.

I couldn't think.

I couldn't breathe.

I could just feel.

"Fuck... Baby, you're so fucking wet. You're soaking my fingers. You're dripping down my hand."

"Don't... Don't... Swear..." I huffed, trying to concentrate on his words as I felt his body vibrate when he chuckled.

I sucked my breath, fisting the sheets beside me, an unfamiliar pleasure beginning to grow at the bottom of my spine, beads of sweat appearing on

my damp skin as the most satisfying feeling started taking over my body.

“Taimur...” I panted, my eyes closing in ecstasy. “Oh my God... Oh my God...”

“Open your eyes Pearl,” he said, looking up at me from his hooded ones. “I want to watch you let go. I want you to watch what I’m doing to you with my fingers. I want you to look me in the eyes as you come for the first time.”

I felt his fingers move faster, my juices making an embarrassing noise that I didn’t seem to care about, before his thumb began to rub my hard little nub. He took his fingers, slightly pinching my swollen flesh and a thousand alien butterflies left my belly, soaring towards my clit. I had never felt this before.

“I... I need...” I said, not even knowing what I was asking for.

“I know what you need baby,” he said, and I felt his first finger push inside me. There was an unfamiliar burn surrounded by immense pleasure and as more fluid gushed out of me, I began to shamelessly rock against his hand, my hips moving in sync with him.

“Oh Taimur....”

“Again baby... Say my name again. It’s the only name you’ll be moaning your entire life. This is just my finger, imagine how it’s going to feel when you have my big hard cock inside you.”

I don’t know if it was his fingers or his dirty words, but my body felt like it was going to explode, soaring off the bed, flying through the skies and shattering into a million pieces underneath his touch. As I broke, his mouth fixed upon mine, swallowing all my sounds of pleasure while I no longer had any control over my own body. That was the moment when I realised, for the first time, Taimur was *it* for me.

As I caught my breath, still coming down from an epic high, my body buzzed at the need to feel it again, to feel the comfort I had felt just moments ago, but my mind told me to stop.

I watched him lick my juices off his fingers, sucking them clean and my belly somersaulting at the sight.

“You don’t know how long I’ve been dying to taste you, baby. Are you okay? Was I too rough?”

“No. You were perfect,” I said, kissing his neck while my hands nervously touched his soft skin. I felt his erection on the side of my leg, and I wanted to touch him like he’d touched me.

“We don’t have to do any more, Pearl.” He moved my hand back towards his firm chest.

“I want to make you feel good too.”

“I already feel good, baby.”

“Can I touch...you?” I asked with hesitation, and he instantly knew what I was talking about.

“Ummm... If you want to.”

“Will you teach me how?”

“Bloody hell! I’m trying so hard to not come like a teenage boy, but you’re killing me baby.”

“Tell me what to do?” I requested, moving my hand down his tensing body.

“I... You...” he stuttered, as I reached his length. I didn’t know what to do. “Shall I show you how to do it?”

“Yes... Yes please.”

“First lick your hand.”

“Like this,” I said. He watched my tongue dart out, lubricate my palm in lust, before I fisted his dick in my small hand, rubbing my thumb over the little bead of moisture, spreading it around. He wrapped his hand around mine, squeezing it so I knew how hard to press, before teaching me how to pleasure him. I watched his face change from needy to primal desperation as I moved towards his shaft, slowly moving my fist up and down the hard length. He sucked in his breath, his eyes never leaving my moving hands as I grazed his skin.

“Am I doing it right?” I asked, slowly moving my hand a bit faster, running it up and down inexperiencedly. Too shy to look at him, I kept my head down, watching him grow harder in my hand. “Does it feel good?”

“A..Amazing... Pearl... Don’t stop. Yes, just like that,” he said, reaching for my breast. He pinched my nipple, his fingers sending little sparks of shock back towards my clit. “I... I’ve never felt this good before. Faster baby, jerk me faster.”

I did as I was told, keeping my eyes on his face as his head hung low, his chest heaved and his teeth bit into his lower lip. I moved faster, my hand gripping tighter, and he rewarded me with a heavy groan, his eyes shutting.

“Eyes on me baby,” I said, repeating his words. “I want to see you come.”

As my provocative words slips out of my mouth, long treads of cum sprouted out of his cock, landing on my breasts, white and sticky.

“Fuuuckkkk... I love you.”

My hands didn't stop. I kept pumping him, milking him of every last drop before I pulled away, moving towards him to kiss him breathless mouth. He gripped me behind my head, pulling me close enough so our bodies were touching once again, the cum sticking to both of us and our lips colliding in utter satisfaction.

It felt like hours before we came up for air, our lips puffy and bruised, our bodies exhausted, our minds delirious. As I excused myself for a shower, my brain began to catch up with my body, guilt seeping inside me as the water washed the remains of Taimur off me.

What had I just done?

Was it wrong?

Why didn't it feel wrong?

“Are you okay?” I asked, coming out the shower to find Taimur fully dressed, his elbows resting on his knees and his head lowered. He looked up at me, strangely surprised to see me there before he's eyebrows furrowed.

“Are you okay, Layla?” he asked me, genuine concern in his voice. He came closer, taking my wet strands of hair in his hand. “I didn't mean for it to get this far. I didn't expect it. Wallahi, I swear.”

“From what I remember, I was the one who initiated this, so you have nothing to be worried about. I'm okay. I think.”

“Are you sure Pearl?”

“Yes, I'm fine. Relax.”

“I kind of need to talk to you about something.”

“What's up?” I smiled up at him, reaching for a kiss.

“I don't want you going home for Christmas,” he said, coming in even closer to kiss my lips and sending hot vibrations down my spine.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I want you to stay here over Christmas break.”

“Why?”

“Can't you just do that for me without asking any questions, baby?”

“No, I can't Taimur. Tell me why you don't want me going home?”

“I can't without sounding rude.”

“Just tell me.”

“You're going to take it the wrong way.”

“Seriously just tell me Taimur. I won’t.”

“Fine, but please don’t get mad – okay?”

“Okay...”

“I don’t trust your dad around you, Pearl,” He stated. His words jabbing straight into my heart.

“Excuse me?” I asked, wondering where this conversation was going.

“I don’t trust him with you or Zoya.”

“Taimur,” I began, thinking how I could explain to him that it was going to be alright. I turned away trying to think what to say.

“No, Layla.” He replied, “Whenever you go home, I’m worried. What I saw *that* day has burnt into my mind and every time I let you leave me to go home, my mind goes back to that day. I’m scared something is going to happen to you.”

“I promise nothing will happen.”

“Has he stopped?” he asked, turning my face to his so that I can’t lie to it. I glanced up, allowing our gazes to meet as I saw the concern in his hazel eyes.

I kept quiet.

“I knew it. Pearl, you have to tell someone, do something or I will.”

“Taimur, you promised you wouldn’t.”

“To hell with what I promised, Layla. You’re my girl now and it’s my job to protect you from monsters like that.”

My entire body tensed at his words, faintly shifting so our bodies were no longer connecting.

“My dad is *not* a monster,” I said, in annoyance, my eyes now burning. I got off the bed, my back at the edge of the desk. “Don’t you dare call him that!”

“Then what am I supposed to call him? He beats you Layla, can you not see how wrong that is?” There was seriousness in his determined voice. He harshly wiped his hand down his defiant face, irritation in his stare.

“It’s not his fault.”

“It is,” he tried to take me in his arms, but I backed away, too infuriated to be close to him.

“Stop it! You don’t know what it’s like Taimur. Just stay out of it.”

“I can’t when you’re involved. I love you.”

“Don’t love me then!” I yelled, resentment for his words strumming in my mind. “I never told you to fall in love with me.”

“But you made it impossible not to, Pearl.”

“Then leave me.”

“I can’t”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my air now. I can’t breathe without you,” he yelled back, his voice firmer than it had been a few minutes ago. “I can’t bloody function without seeing you in the morning and don’t get me started about the evenings. I can’t even go out without thinking of what you’re doing. Every time a girl approaches me, I see your perfect face haunting me. Every time I think of smoking, I see your twinkling eyes watching me. You consume every part of me. Every time I breathe, I inhale you a little bit more inside me. You’re stuck in my soul Pearl, and I don’t know what to do or how to protect you.’

“Then trust me Taimur. Just love me and I’ll be okay because I love you too.”

“Can’t you see how worried I am every time you go home? That the next time he’ll beat you so hard you’ll end up in hospital... maybe even dead.”

“Baby... listen to me,” I placed my hands on his stubbled cheeks in an attempt to stop an argument.

“No Pearl, you listen to me. This is not on. He has to stop or I’m going to make him.”

“What are you going to do? Beat him up?” I taunted, anger now masking my love for Taimur. I moved away from him. “He’s my dad. Don’t you get that?”

“A dad shouldn’t lay a finger on his daughters.” He walked over to the desk I was gripping. I watched my knuckles turn white as I tried to control my temper but he’s antagonising words had provoked me in a way I didn’t think they would. As he provoked me further, the battle to abstain from getting angrier was lost and I felt my blood simmer under my skin in frustration.

“Stop it! Stop making out he’s a bad guy. He isn’t.”

“God, you’re so brainwashed.”

“And you’re an idiot. You don’t know anything.”

“I know enough to know that your dad is messed up.”

“Why don’t you look at your own family before pointing fingers at mine?” I retaliated.

“What’s that supposed to mean, *Layla*?”

“You know what it means, *Taimur*.”

“If you’re going to bring it up then have the guts to say it.”

“Fine. We all see it. Alia and Nabeel...”

“Don’t speak about things you don’t know.”

“You’re the one that doesn’t know, *Taimur*.”

“Well, I know enough to know that you’re mine and I’m not sending you home to a pathetic beast of a father.”

“How dare you! Leave!”

“Leave?” he exclaimed, walking towards me. I backed myself against the wall, feeling slightly threatened by his overbearing body over me.

“Yes, leave me alone. I’m not talking to you when you’re like this. All alpha male and possessive. I don’t belong to you for you to tell me what to do.”

“I beg to differ, Pearl,” sarcasm dripped from his voice. “You. Belong. To. Me.”

“Shut up and leave.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” I stammered, my voice shaking with emotion. The back of my eyelids burnt as I held back the tears threatening to release.

“If I leave, I’m not coming back, *Layla*. I’ve chased you for months, now that we’re in a good place you’re asking me to leave. Can’t you see that I’m trying to protect you. Why are you pushing me away again?” He crossed his arms over his large chest and eyebrow tightening in disapproval.

“You don’t need to protect me *Taimur*. Now leave me alone and never in your life speak about my dad like that again.”

“I don’t care what you say, he’s a pitiful excuse for a father for hurting you and I will say it over and over again till I’m blue in the face!” His tight jaw was clenched, his nostrils flared, and his narrow eyes sent daggers my way, the daggers I hadn’t seen in a long time.

This was the old *Taimur*.

“He’s a tragically weak man that preys on his daughters. What he does is disgraceful and if I had it my way...”

Clap!

That was all I heard as my right palm landed hard on *Taimur*’s left cheek. He looked down at me from his dark eyelashes, shock and fury on his face like I’d never seen before. He lifted his hand to stroke his hard

jawline, not taking his irate eyes off mine for a second. My hand stung, but not as much as my heart did.

“LEAVE!” I shouted, not being able to hear one more horrid thing about my dad. “LEAVE. NOW!”

“My pleasure.” He replied, fiercely storming out the bedroom and slamming the door shut behind him.

“What the hell just happened?” Zoya said, running into my room half dressed. Her blue jeans were barely up her slender legs, and her fancy lilac top was falling off her shoulder. “Why were you two yelling?”

Streams of hot tears had already begun to run down my face by the time she entered, not being able to hide away inside my eyes any longer. I cried into my pillow, anger mixed with sadness, misery mixed with rage.

How had this happened?

My heart clenched so tight I thought it would stop beating and my body ached for him even through the fury.

“Breathe.” Zoya instructed, stroking my back gently. “I know you’re finding it hard but just breathe. You’re shaking.”

“I... He...” I blubbered, ugly crying into her shoulder now. “He left.”

“He was mad.”

“But he still left,” I cried, shaking while trying to gasp for air, as the front door opened. Lifting my head in anticipation I prayed he’d returned, to admit his mistake and take me into his arms once again, but alas, it wasn’t him. Kassim strolled into my room, bags of food in his hands.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, coming closer to view my tears-stricken face. I saw him notice my hair, instantly grabbing my headscarf off the bed and handing it to me to cover up. “What the hell happened?”

“Your dick of a brother happened.” Zoya retaliated, anger in her voice. “Wait till I see that bastard. And why the hell are you here?”

“We had lunch plans,” he said. “Where’s Tai?”

“He left,” she said, while I still gasped for air, unsuccessfully trying to breathe a deep breath. Kassim turned back to me, dropping the bags on the floor and hurrying over.

“Hey... hey... hey...” he whispered trying to calm me down while coming closer to the bed as Zoya moved off. “Breathe sweetheart. You’re having another panic attack. You need to breathe.” He gently caressed my back, careful not to move my headscarf off my silky hair but loosening it. “Zoya, open the window wider. She needs air.”

Zoya did as she was told, hovering over us, worried.

“Get her some water,” he instructed, not leaving my side like his brother had. “Shit, he told you, didn’t he?”

I didn’t have energy to respond.

“Sweetheart, he’ll only be gone a year and you guys can make it work long distance till he’s back, then you can pick up where you left off. It’s a great opportunity, this internship to UCLA medical centre. It could change his life.”

“What?” Zoya interrupted, holding a glass of water in her hand. “Did you know about this Layli?”

“I...um... No, that’s not what we fought about.”

“Oh! Shit! You didn’t know.” Realisation hit Kassim like a ton of bricks. His handsome face fell, fathoming the issue he had just created.

“I need to speak to Taimur,” I said, finally able to breathe. I grabbed Kassim’s phone off the bedside table and dialled his number. “He has some explaining to do.”

“What?” Taimur picked up on the first ring. “I’m not in the mood, Kass.”

“YOU’RE LEAVING?” I screamed, my voice shocking both Zoya and Kassim. My tears had run dry, and rage had completely consumed me since I’d heard Kassim’s news about my boyfriend’s future. How the hell had Taimur forgotten to tell me that he was leaving for a whole year?

“SHIT!”

“Yes or no?”

“Pearl. Let me explain...”

“YES OR NO?” I repeated.

“Just let me explain, baby...”

“Explain or think of a bloody excuse?”

“I’m coming back to the flat to talk.”

“Don’t!”

“I was not asking, Pearl,” he said, irritated too. “Open the bloody door.”

“No.”

“Don’t make me ask again Layla. Open the bloody door or I’ll break it the fuck down.”

Before I could reply, the flat buzzer went off and Kassim let his brother in, knowing he had messed up. As Taimur stormed in, followed by Abs and Nabeel, demanding my attention in a way he used to, with fury and wrath,

the intense feeling of betrayal encompassed me in a bubble that I couldn't break out of and the thought of Taimur deserting me after making me fall in love with him stole the pleasure out of everything I felt for him.

"Speak," I said, not bothering with pleasantries.

"I was already accepted into UCLA a year ago, before I met you Pearl," he said, coming closer to me but I lifted my trembling hand, telling him to stop.

He halted in his step.

"Don't touch me. Don't *ever* touch me again."

"I just..." Raking his hands through his hair.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to think about it yet."

"But everyone else knew apart from me?"

"It's not like that," Kassim said, but I turned to him, my infuriated stare shutting him up immediately. I watched the boys and Zoya quickly move away, backing themselves to the bed while I stood fuming at Taimur by the front door. My foolish heart battered in my hollow chest, thumping in agony and a profound soreness I had pushed deep within me began to awaken, surfacing to torture me like a menacing pest, pulling at the same heart strings I thought I had cut out after my mum died.

"You said you loved me, Taimur." Tears forming at the back of my burning eyelids again.

"What's that got to do with anything? You know I do. I love you."

"When you love someone, you trust them! And it seems like you don't trust me enough to even tell me where you're going to be next year. Did you think it wouldn't affect me? What was your plan? Just get up one morning and disappear on me because you didn't want to think about it till then?"

"No, I would never..."

"Then what?"

I could feel my patience wearing thin.

I needed answers and I needed them now.

"Listen, you're overreacting here. It's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal? Seriously?"

"Yes. I don't understand why you're so mad about it."

"You don't understand why I'm mad that you're leaving for a year, and you neglected to tell me? Did Katie know?"

“Pearl... It doesn’t matter.”

“DID SHE KNOW?”

“Yes.”

“Leave.” I tried to sound as calm as I could. “Leave Taimur. Please, just leave.”

“No.”

“I can’t breathe with you.”

“And I can’t breathe without you.”

“Please! Just leave, Taimur.”

“No way. We’re sorting this out now. Both issues. Why do you think I was so worried about you going home? It’s because I won’t be nearby to protect you once I leave.”

“I DO NOT NEED YOUR BLOODY PROTECTION. I NEED PROTECTION FROM YOU!” I yelled, I had snapped, and my body was shaking with rage. “NOW LEAVE!”

“No!”

“THEN. I. WILL.” I replied, picking up my phone and flat keys while I watched Taimur move towards me. My body was shuddering with every movement. “DON’T YOU DARE TOUCH ME!”

“Layla...”

“AND DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT FOLLOWING ME!”

“Princess...” I heard Abs begin, cutting past Taimur and stepping closer to me. He chewed on his nicotine gum, trying to calm his cravings.

“No! Don’t! Don’t protect him like you always do Abs. I’m angry with the whole lot of you for hiding it from me. I loved you guys, I thought you guys were my brothers, but I guess I was wrong. You’re only here because of Taimur. You’re all his brothers – not mine.” I could see the hurt in all their eyes as they stared at me, my words cutting them deep, but it was true. “You’re all nothing to me.”

They all deceived me.

I knew that they wanted to help their brother, explain the intention behind his neglect to tell me such a huge piece of news about his life but they had no words, so they turned to Taimur, shrugging their shoulders in failure.

“Tiny, it’s not like that. We all love you, you know that, and you’re part of our family now but it wasn’t our place to say anything,” Nabeel said, not knowing what to say next, his red hair covering half his face.

“No, it wasn’t, it was Taimur’s, but you all knew and now I feel like I can’t trust any of you.” Before I left the room, I turned to the boys one last time, looking at them with scepticism and disbelief. “Please be gone by the time I come back.”

“Pearl. Don’t take it out on them. It’s not their fault,” Taimur pleaded, following me out of the room and down the spiralling staircase before blocking my path. He stood in front of me, all six-foot-two of him, face to face. I had never seen him look so serious. He strode closer, forcing me back towards the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

The closer he got, the faster my heart beat.

I had nowhere to go.

“Can you just listen to me?”

“There’s nothing left to say.”

“What the hell is your problem, Layla?”

“You are, Taimur. You!”

“You know I didn’t mean to...”

“But you did. You did mean to make me fall in love with you to a point where I can’t bloody breathe without you being near me. You think you’ve got it bad Taimur? Have you seen me? I compromised everything I believed in for you. I sacrificed every Islamic belief I was taught since I was a child because of you. For you. Everything my dad taught me, everything my mum would have wanted for me, I pushed it all aside for you. I went to war with myself, for you!”

“I never asked you to do that!” he yelled back, placing his large hands on the wall either side of my face. “And I didn’t hear you complaining an hour ago when you were coming on my fingers.”

My palms itched to slap him again.

“Yes, you didn’t but you forced yourself into my life and turned it upside down till I didn’t even know what to believe anymore. I had a plan Taimur, but since I met you, my plan went out the bloody window. Things I thought were right, I’m realising might not be and things I thought were wrong, are now looking very right to me. I’ve started to want you in a way I’m not supposed to want you till I’m married. You’ve caused complete mayhem in my life, and now you’re leaving.”

“I might be your mayhem baby, but you’re my calm,” he said, his voice quieter than before. “I lo...”

“I haven’t finished. I can’t function without you and you’re leaving. I bloody love you and you’re leaving, and you didn’t even tell me so I could prepare myself. At least my mum told me she was going, you didn’t even. Bloody hell, I don’t even know when you’re leaving.”

“Pearl. I’m not leaving forever baby. I’ll even be back every holiday.”

“When are you leaving, Taimur?”

“I’ll...”

“Just please, for once, be straight with me. When are you leaving Taimur?”

“Two weeks,” he replied, his eyes lowered in shame. I fell back against the wall, like I’d had the wind knocked out of me.

“Two weeks?” I repeated. “TWO BLOODY WEEKS?”

“Pearl, relax!”

I lifted my palm to slap him again, but he grabbed my open palm, holding me tighter than he usually did. I watched his light eyes narrow on me, his nostrils flared with anger, jaw tightened with annoyance and his chest heaved with irritation.

“I allowed you to get in one hit, don’t think you’re getting another.”

“Two weeks away and you haven’t even mentioned it?”

He didn’t reply. Instead, he squeezed my wrist tighter, making me flinch before pulling me into his firm chest. I tried to stop my body from moving but it was no use, he was too strong, and my face landed just under his beating heart. He held me close, close enough for me to hear his manic breathing average out and the tender warmth from his body rub off on me, igniting my every nerve.

I was going to miss this.

“Let me go. Tai... Leave m...” Before I could finish my sentence, he cut me off, his palms moved firmly to frame my two cheeks holding me in place. He pulled my face up just as his stiff lips take my soft ones, trying to get my mouth open and his tongue to inside.

I pushed at his chest, but he didn’t move, and even though every single cell in my body wanted to kiss him back, I closed my mouth, not allowing his tongue the entrance it desired. His tongue tried to move its way between my lips again, his strong arms wrapping around me, trying to pull my body to his despite my several attempts to push him away but, it’s too much stronger than me.

“Kiss me back Pearl. Just kiss me...” he stammered against my lips. “Please.” And for a second I let myself fall under his spell again, my lips parting, enchanted by his touch and giving in to the sinful dance of our tongues, devouring each other while surrendering my inhibitions and melting into him.

Kissing Taimur was like coming home. Like nothing could feel more heavenly than his lips on mine. Like everything around us was forgotten when his lips were on mine.

However, as quick the kiss began, it ended with me realising how furious I was and a hard, unexpected slap across his stunned face - *again*.

Chapter Thirty

Taimur

“Easy,” My dad said, watching me slam the kitchen cupboard shut. I internally groaned, wanting to be left alone. The rage from the fight with Layla had developed into irritation laced with resentment with a splash of maddening exasperation.

“There’s nothing to eat in the house,” I angrily complained, opening the fridge for the tenth time in ten minutes. “Why isn’t there any food ready?”

“That’s because your mum didn’t know you were coming home,” he said, “And what do we owe this unexpected visit?”

“Can’t I come home now?” I snapped.

“Of course, you can son, but when my son starts smashing mirrors and banging cupboards, I think I have the right to know what’s bothering him.”

“It’s nothing,” I finally replied, moving towards the round kitchen table and collapsing onto a chair. I dropped my heavy head on the counter with a loud thud before closing my tired eyes, rubbing them with the palms of my hands, however, as soon as they shut, there she was. Staring back at me with her emerald pools, pulling me towards her. I saw her perfect face, hurt and holding back the tears I knew were ready to escape because of me.

Why didn’t she see I was just trying to protect her?

Eight days.

Six days till I left for the States.

I went to my lectures, slept at home and essentially avoided her.

It had been eight days since we spoke last and each day the distance between us grew larger, allowing the attachment between us to grow more

potent and each moment I was away from her, my heart ached with sentiments that I no longer had control over.

Sentiments that told me that I could no longer live without Layla.

I was miserable, and according to Zoya, so was she, but Layla didn't get it. Heck, I didn't understand it either. I didn't understand the constant innate need in me to protect her from the world.

I just wished she'd let me.

I wanted to continue to stay angry at her for being obnoxious, slapping me *twice* and telling me to leave, and for the first three days I was, not picking up her calls or calling her but now the anger had subsided, and my only concern was to get her back – if she'd have me.

At that moment, I realised that I was gone. That I was in far too deep. That as much as she was my destiny – I was hers.

“So, it's a girl.”

“No... Urgh... yes.”

“The same girl that was trying to hide from your mum and me on the day of your operation?”

“You guys knew about that?”

“You could say that. Once everything settled, your mum and I had a good laugh about how you two were acting.”

“What Dad, you knew? Mum knows?”

He just laughed but I couldn't lighten up.

“Urgh...” I said, thinking of her and pulling at my roots on my head. I hadn't wanted my mum to meet her like that. I'd pictured introducing them a million different ways, but in a hospital wasn't one of them. “She drives me mad, Dad.”

“I remember that feeling,” Dad said, sitting down across from me. “Your mum drove me to insanity more times than not – still does.”

“I thought you and Mum only met a few times before you got married.”

Dad laughed, chuckling like I'd said something excessively funny. His handsomely aged face wrinkled by his eyes and his mouth turned into a mischievous smile, almost replicating mine.

“That was just the story we told you kids when you were younger.”

“What?”

“Yes, Taimur, your mum and I were going out for a few years before we got married actually. Five to be specific.”

“You were? What the...? Mum...?”

“Yes, why do you seem so surprised son?”

“I just always thought in your generation everyone had strict arranged marriages.”

“Taimur, even in our generation there were ways around it. Your mum and I found ways to see each other without your grandparents finding out, and then when we were ready to get married, my dad sent an official proposal the old-fashioned way.”

“And they said yes.”

“Well, not exactly.”

“What happened?”

“Your grandparents didn’t like me and said no.”

“What?”

“Apparently, my reputation wasn’t as clean as it should have been.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say, you’re a lot like me,” he chuckled again. “As your mum likes to remind me often, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Then what happened?”

“I had to prove to them that I was worth their daughter.”

“How?”

“I got a decent job, working my butt off to buy a house and prove that I could look after your mum.”

“But they didn’t know you and Mum already knew each other?”

“No, they thought your mum was coming to our house to see your aunt Zara.”

“So, you basically tricked Jido and Bebe?”

“Yes.”

“Oh god, Dad!”

“What? I was in love with your mum and I was willing to do anything to marry her,” he said, no remorse in his voice. He walked over to the kettle, switching it on before taking out two cups. “I still remember the first time I saw your mum, you know. She was in the lounge at your grandad’s house, sitting with her back to the door and putting a cassette into the tape player. She was wearing a white tennis skirt and polo, and all I saw was this beautiful long black hair draped over some small shoulders and I turned to your aunt and told her that one day I was going to marry that girl.”

“What?”

“Ask your aunt if you don’t believe me.”

“How do you even remember that?” I asked, coming to the realisation that even in eighty years, I would always remember the first moment I laid eyes on Layla in that kitchen reaching for her box of Coco Pops, but at that point, I didn’t know that one day the same picturesque scene I lived to replay in my mind would become the same memory that would tear me apart, cutting me deeper each time I recalled it. “How did you know?”

“How did I know what? That your mum was the one?”

“Yeah.”

“At first it was just about the way she looked I guess but the more time I spent with her, the more I realised that I’d never met such a kind-hearted, genuinely loving yet ridiculously challenging woman before.”

I laughed, knowing just how eccentric my mum could be when she wanted to.

“Sounds like Layla,” I blurted before I could stop myself.

“So, *she* has a name,” Dad snickered. “If she’s anything like your mum than she’s a keeper son. And she’s mad at you?”

“Yes.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I didn’t tell her I was going to the States for the year.”

“Why?”

“I just wanted us to stay where we were for a second while I adjusted. Just so that I could find my feet. I was enjoying the bubble we were in. I knew that once she knew it would have put a damper on everything. Does that make sense?” I tried to explain. “It took a long time to get us to even like each other, Dad.”

“If she’s getting you this down then you must like her more than you’re letting on Taimur.”

“How did you know it was love and not just...

“Lust?” he asked.

“Urgh... Dad!”

“Lust is when you want to be with the person, love is when you never want to let the person go.”

I thought about what he said.

“Taimur...”

“Yes Dad?”

“I hate to ask you this, but I have to. You know your mum would be upset if you broke the Islamic ruling we have taught you.”

“Daaaad....”

“I was young once too,” he continued, “I understand you but please, remember what we’ve taught you son. And not only the physical forbidden part of a relationship, but also remember to respect the woman you’re with. That’s the first thing our Prophet Mohammed taught us. He respected his wife and daughter.”

“I know Dad. I just don’t understand how religious people still suppress their daughters, thinking they’re doing it for religion or for the woman’s benefit, when in fact it’s just to show their power and not Islam.”

“Well, many people don’t know this, but Muslim women have the same rights as men. Did you know, women could always own their own property in the East but till the last century, here in the West women couldn’t and when they were married, their husbands would get what rightfully should have been theirs.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes. Islam was supposed to empower women. You know, the prophet’s daughter was a female general leader against armies, even before Joan of Arc. She had that much power.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“That’s why I’m saying, respect all women. Help empower them. Help them but don’t suffocate them. Let them be your equal. Women are as powerful as men, if not more.”

And just like that, my dad gave me the answers I’d been looking for without even knowing.

“Hey Dad, Mum didn’t wear hijab back then?” I asked, thinking back to his story.

“No one did, Taimur. We didn’t really have any concept of Islam back then. There were hardly any books or much information on it, but now with the internet and excessive literature everywhere, we are on the right path.”

“Wow, I really didn’t realise you guys had a love marriage.”

Moments passed in silence as I digested what he said.

“What would you have done if you knew Mum wasn’t safe at her home and she wouldn’t let you help her?”

He thought for a second, pouring hot water from the kettle into the two cups. His hand was to me and after a long time I noticed how old my dad had become. His once stiff body was now laxer, his arms were thinner, and his hair was more grey than black. “I would have tried to understand

where she was coming from and why she wouldn't let me help her. And if nothing else, I'd make sure she knew I was always there for her and I would trust her to make the right choice."

I watched him finish making the tea, hoping one was for me but as he walked past me towards the kitchen door, I instantly understood that the tea was for him and Mum. My mum had my dad wrapped around her little finger and he wouldn't have it any other way.

"But that would have been after we had fought about it for days first," he winked at me.

I tossed my head back in laughter.

My dad – My hero.

Chapter Thirty-One

Taimur

“Just go and speak to her,” Kassim grumbled, jabbing his fork into his cold pasta in frustration. “She won’t speak to any of us till you sort out your shit.”

We were all seated in the café on campus, eating our lunch on a bitter December afternoon, nine days after the dispute with Layla. Across the room from us, Layla sat with Moe, never glancing over in our direction or paying any attention to me. She had been ignoring us all week, sitting so close yet so far, and the distance between us increased to a point where every moment without her ached me from the inside. The notion of her being fine without me ate into my psyche and disturbed me in a way that made my life halt in its tracks.

I couldn’t eat.

I couldn’t sleep.

I couldn’t even think straight.

“Just walk up there and apologise for not telling her,” Abs said, to my amazement. “I miss the way she always steals my hoodie and the way she always puts you in your place.”

“And the way she always feeds me,” Kassim chimed in, looking over at her longingly.

“And the way she slyly tries to get info out of me with her nosey little comments about Alia.”

“How the hell do you think I feel?” I asked, my tone aggravated.

“So, sort it out. Better sooner than later bro,” Nabeel chipped in, picking up his sandwich and taking a hefty bite.

“Looks who’s talking,” I replied, referring to Nabeel and my sister’s argument. “Why don’t you take some of your own advice and call Alia? She’s as miserable as you are. You guys have been best friends since she was born.”

“We’re not talking about me, Tai. Just sort out your mess so we can get Tiny back.”

“She won’t speak to me. I’ve tried calling and texting,” I glanced her way again, observing her every move and scrutinising her every action. “I’ve even emailed and Facebook messaged her.”

I couldn’t look away.

I just sat there, enduring it all.

“Maybe try *actually* talking to her? Face to face?” Kassim suggested, but my eyes were locked in her direction.

I watched the way Moe looked at her, devouring her with his sharp eyes and enjoying her every move. His flirtatious looks irritated me and every time he touched her, I wanted to break his fingers, one by one, and feed them to him. Our glances connected every so often, and as he smirked my way, I felt like his performance was on purpose, maybe to get a reaction out of me.

“That’s it. If you’re not going to talk to her, then I am,” Kassim stated, not waiting for my feedback and running up to her. I watched as they exchanged words, trying to read her body language only to come to the realisation that she was still extremely angry with me. Minutes later, a rejected Kassim walked back to our table, head hanging low.

“What did she say?” I asked, as soon as he reached me.

“She asked me about my breakup with Anna.”

“Not about you stupid, about me.”

“Oh yeah. She said, and I quote, ‘tell your brother to go to hell’.”

“What? She’s mental. She can go to hell.”

“Mature. Very mature.” Abs chuckled.

“Did she say anything else?”

“Nothing really.”

“Nothing really?”

“Well, she asked how you were first.”

“She did?”

“And if you had still quit smoking.”

His words made me smile, confirming that behind her intense anger and irrational fury, was still the kind-hearted, caring girl that loved me. She still loved me, and that meant I still had a chance to make it right. The idea relaxed my mind, allowing me to breathe a little easier than I had all week. As I recalled my dad’s words from the night before, I realised once again that Layla was it for me. She was my one and I needed her back.

“I got to go,” I told them, grabbing my books and standing up tall, confidence in my stance. “I’ve had enough. I’m going to sort this out.”

“Finally,” one of them muttered flicking a chip at me.



“ARE YOU GOING TO STOP FOLLOWING ME?” LAYLA ASKED, TURNING around to face me. “Do you think I haven’t noticed you turning up wherever I am all day?”

“Then why haven’t you come to talk to me?” I asked, craving a cigarette. I stood outside her flat, leaning against the hard brick wall, freezing. Dressed in an old winter jacket, jumper and dark jeans, my body shivered from not only the cold weather but the thought of the chance I could lose Layla.

“Why haven’t you?” she replied, coming towards me.

I smirked.

She still cared.

I still had a chance.

“Why am I the bad guy here? You’re the one who told me to leave.”

“And you left.”

“But I came back.”

“And then you kissed me when I was mad at you!”

“And then you slapped me, *twice!*”

As the proximity between us reduced, the gravitational pull we constantly felt yanked us towards each other till we were standing face to face again, waiting for the other to make the first move. It was obvious that we both felt the same way and desired to reconcile, but our stubborn natures rivalled the other, resulting in a standoff.

I blinked.

She blinked.

She bit her bottom lip.

I chewed on mine.

“I don’t want to argue with you, Taimur.”

“Neither do I Pearl. I love you.”

Layla glared at me, confusion in her expression as if I hadn’t declared my love for her months ago. The icy wind blew between us as her headscarf swayed in the breeze and I watched her porcelain cheeks turn red due to the cold.

“I have to go.” She walked towards her flat, her bright green eyes not meeting mine. “I’m late.”

“Why are you leaving so early on a Friday?” I asked as I followed her inside the flat and to my surprise, she didn’t stop me.

“I have a meeting at home,” she said, placing items in her overnight bag. I watched her stomp around the room, carefully placing everything she needed into her backpack, still refusing to make eye contact with me. The atmosphere around us shifted from disappointment to concern.

“What meeting, Pearl?” I asked, putting her kettle on before sitting on her couch and glancing down at my mobile phone. A girl from microbiology had sent a text message but I deleted it without reading it. My left arm found its way round the back of the uncomfortable sofa where I located one of her soft headscarves. I began to play with it, tangling it in my hands as the scent of strawberries and vanilla encompassed me, making my heartbeat speed up and my blood soar faster through my veins.

“Some guy is coming home to meet me.”

There was a moment of silence before I looked away from my phone and up at her, shocked at her words. My piercing eyes glazed with confusion and my eyebrows furrowed. I could see the fearful reaction in her face as she answered.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re excused,” she joked, trying to lighten the mood.

“What do you mean some fucking guy is coming to see you, Layla?” I stated, anger collecting under my skin. My calm face had now turned stern, and my jaw tightened further, clicking, indicating my rage.

“Don’t swear.” She warned.

“Swearing is the least of your worries Pearl,” I moved to turn to face her, manoeuvring her body towards me. “Why is some guy coming to see

you, *Layla*?”

“For marriage purposes, *Taimur*,” she blurted out, waiting for my reaction. “Are you *trying* to make me jealous? Is that what this is?”

“Could you be anymore conceited? The world doesn’t revolve around you, *Taimur*.”

“Then what do you think you’re doing, *Layla*?”

“What are *we* doing, *Taimur*? We’re not even together.”

“Like hell we’re not together. Of course we are. We just had a fight and now we’re making up.”

“We haven’t spoken in a week.”

“Nine days,” I clarified, stunning her.

Her large green eyes widened at my response.

“Nine days of torture Pearl. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was going away and I’m sorry I spoke out of turn about your dad, but you have to understand that everything I do is to protect you. I didn’t tell you about leaving because I didn’t want to put a damper on the time we spent together. We were so happy, baby, I had never been that happy in my entire life and I really didn’t want to ruin that. And I said those things about your dad because I’m angry at the way he treats you and I know I’ll be worried sick while I’m away.”

“*Taimur*...”

“I’m not finished. We’ve been together for months, baby, known each other for over a year now and I know you. You’re running. You’re scared of the way you feel and that’s why you’re running away from me. We had an argument, I hear that happens in relationships, but that doesn’t mean we break up. And do you know what else I think, Pearl? Do you know why you told me to leave and not to come back? It’s because you’ve been waiting for me to mess this up. You’ve been waiting around for shit to finally hit the fan, so you could confirm what you always believed – that what we have is temporary. Your reaction to what happened between us told me that you still don’t trust me and that you think there’s an expiration date to us. There isn’t *Layla*. You’re it for me. Don’t you get that?

Another elongated pause as she stood silently, and I ran my hands through my long black strands of hair, pulling at the roots.

“What are we even doing, *Taimur*?”

“If you need me to answer that question then we’re on completely different pages, Pearl.”

"Is this even going to work? Me here, you there?"

"Why not?"

"I don't..."

"You don't what? You don't want me anymore?"

"No," she said, "I do. It's just that..."

"That what?"

"I just don't know where we're going with this. You're leaving in a few days. I'm here in London. I've never done this before."

"And you think I have?"

"I... umm..."

"Layla, I've never done this either. I'm not denying I've been with girls before but that's always just been for a night. That's it. This is different for me too."

"But I just don't know where we're going," she blurted.

"We're going forward, baby. We're going towards a future where we're together indefinitely."

"I just..."

"You just what? You just don't believe me?"

"I do, I swear I do, but it's like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"What shoe?"

"I mean that I've seen the kind, loving and passionate Taimur. The one that fights for me and makes me feel like a queen. The one that brings me dinner and rings me just to hear my voice."

"And...?"

"But the other day I saw a different side of you. That's when I remembered other Taimur. The one that goes out and gets wasted. And flirts with random girls. And goes out looking for a one-night stand *just* for fun. What happens when that guy comes back out to play while you're bored in the States? Or when your new friends ask you to go out with them? Where do I fit in then?"

There was another awkward silence between us as she stared into my confused eyes, anticipating my reply.

"You don't trust me," I said, standing up from the sofa and walking away from her. She abruptly stood, following me.

"I do."

"You've got a funny way of showing it."

“Taimur... Wallahi, I do trust you, but once you’re in the States there’s going to be temptation everywhere. You’ll be a handsome British guy with the sexy English accent and the girls are going to go crazy for you, trust me, I should know.”

“Thank you, I think. Listen Pearl, let me try and explain something to you.” I paused, making sure she was listening to me. Walking up to her, I placed my large hands on her tiny waist, effortlessly lifting her so she was sitting on the wooden desk, allowing us to be eye to eye. She nervously bit her bottom lip, tensed about what I was going to say.

“I didn’t want to fall in love. I just wanted to have a good time, getting drunk and sleeping around. I loved it. I loved not being restricted and letting myself free. It’s no secret that I am probably the worst Muslim around, and I never felt bad about it. To be honest, I never even thought about it.”

“What are you saying?”

“Then one day, I met *you* and for the *first time*, someone had the guts to call me out on my bullshit and un-Islamic ways. It had never happened before and especially not by a bloody beautiful girl, and just like that, I slowly began to question everything I wanted in my life and realised I didn’t want to be free anymore. I realised that I didn’t want to be the Muslim guy who spent his days wasted and chasing girls with no potential, I wanted to be more. Before you, I didn’t even believe in God but now, having met you, I believe there has to be a higher power with a plan because meeting you that day in the kitchen changed me in a way I didn’t think was even possible.”

“Tai...”

“I’m not finished,” I said, throwing her own words at her. I walked closer to her, placing myself between her legs so our bodies were touching. Slowly, I untied her headscarf, setting her gorgeous long hair free for me to tangle my fingers round. “I know everyone thinks I’ve changed my un-Islamic ways because of you, and to a certain extent you are the reason, but it’s not solely for you. I don’t want to be that guy anymore. Does that make sense? I want to be more, and I have to thank you for showing me what I truly wanted.

“I’ve seen love Pearl. Just because I pretend I don’t see it doesn’t mean I haven’t seen what’s going on between my sister and Nabeel. Us boys have been witnessing it for years. We’ve watched the two of them battle their connection since they were kids and didn’t know they were in love with

each other. It was messy and confusing, and I really didn't want to be like them, dependent on one another for happiness, so I tried to stay away from any emotion I felt but you unexpectedly fell into my life, and I honestly can't imagine my life without you anymore."

"But Taimur..."

"There's no buts Pearl, I love you with all my heart and soul, and I know you love me too. I'm not the guy you met a year ago, I would never even touch another girl, I don't even want to. I need you to trust me baby."

"I do."

"Then cancel on your date Pearl, because it goes both ways."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"My dad won't let me."

"Your dad."

"Stop!"

"Why are you always protecting him? I wish you had my back like you have his. I wish you trusted me like you trust him. I wished you were not scared to open your mouth and tell him something like you're not scared to tell me."

"He's my dad, Taimur. What do you want me to say?"

"Tell him you've found someone."

"I can't."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Don't swear," she warned again. "I just can't."

"Because you don't love me?"

"No, don't be silly."

"Then. Cancel. It." I said, gritting my teeth. I had just exposed myself to her and she was still holding back.

"Tai..."

"No Layla..."

"I just can't..."

"Why don't you get it Layla?" I said, anger fuelling me again.

"Get what, Taimur?"

"I *will not* allow a guy to sit opposite *my* girl, looking at *her* and consider her for his wife."

"It's not like that."

"It. Is."

“Taimur...”

“You still don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“YOU’RE MY WIFE!” I shout out loudly before I could say anything else. I grabbed her face between my careless hands, bringing my face down to her level so she could see directly into my blood shot eyes as I repeated himself with utmost certainty, dismissing any doubt she might have. “You. Are. MY. Wife. Layla!”

Moments passed, and it felt like hours as I held her, my hazel eyes burning holes into her green ones. It was then that I saw it.

The fear.

The inhibition.

The hesitation.

I saw it all.

The love she was too scared to let herself feel due to her innate fear of losing another person she loved.

It all made sense.

The fight, the words she had thrown at me and the apprehension to risk planning a future with me. She was scared of losing me like she had lost her mum. It was all there in her strikingly green eyes, glaring back at me in shock. I was her everything and for the first time in nine days, I leaned forward, melodiously touching my lips to hers with a delicate and sympathetic kiss, as she finally replied.

“Okay.”

“Okay.” I pulled her bottom lip between my teeth, needing to feel her all around me. Our lips fused together, tongues caressing, teeth biting and lips dancing in our own unique rhythm before I moved down her neck, sucking her soft skin behind her ear, just the way she liked it.

It always drove me crazy realising that no one had done this to her before.

“Taimur...” Layla panted.

“Baby...” I groaned, sucking harder. “I love you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I know.” She moaned as I continued to kiss down to her collar bone, gently pulling at her top to give me more access. “I love you too.”

It had been nine days without her touch, nine days without her kisses, nine days without her.

I couldn't take nine days, how was I going to take a year?

I quickly unwrapped her headscarf, throwing it onto the table behind her before moving my cold hands to the buttons of her shirt. She silently nodded, giving me the uncertain permission, I needed, before my mouth found the pulse in her neck. I kissed and bit down to her chest, my teeth and lips grazing her fair skin and leaving teeth marks in my wake, marking her as mine.

Mine.

Unbuttoning her shirt and slipping it down her slender shoulders, I kissed the soft swell of her perky breast, sliding my impatient tongue down the middle of her cleavage before unclasping her pink bra. Pushing the fabric away, I took my time gazing at her, enjoying the view of her beauty and feeling myself grow harder in my jeans. A blush reddened her cheeks and just the thought of her being shy around me, after everything we'd already done, turned me on further.

After adjusting myself, I cupped her firm breast in my hand, my palms rubbing against her pebbled nipples and by the way she pushed into my hold, I knew the sparks were starting to alight.

"You're perfect, Pearl. I've never seen anything as perfect as you baby."

"Baby..."

"I'm so hard from just touching you. This is what you do to me." I took her small hand, carefully guiding it to my crotch where my dick was pushing against my jeans, firm and angry, begging for release. "I need you so bad."

"Taimur..." She moaned against my lips, gripping me through the fabric and squeezing my tip.

She was getting used to me.

Getting used to touching me.

She wasn't so shy anymore.

"But right now, I'm going to make you feel real good. Do you trust me?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Do you trust me?" I asked, moving back down to take her nipple in my mouth. I sucked hard, twirling my hot tongue around the aroused bud until her hands found my face and she pulled me up to her lips again.

"Y...yes..."

Breaking from the kiss, I slowly sank to my knees, carefully popping the button of her jeans before calmly tearing them down her creamy legs. Her eyes shot open, questioning me but not refusing.

“You... I’ve... you don’t have to.”

“I want to baby. I want every part of you.”

I knew this was all new to her, but I also knew that I was opening her up to new possibilities in life, new experiences, taking her out of her cage and teaching her how to fly.

We loved each other and love could never be wrong.

As she hesitantly stepped out of her skinny jeans, I began to kiss her flat stomach, taking my time to leave small love marks on her skin while whirling my tongue around her tiny belly button, gradually making my way down to the place I knew she would enjoy me the most.

The place no man had ever been before.

The place I craved to be inside.

Her skin was scorching now, dampening at my touch while the sound of her soft panting surrounded the room as I grew closer but not close enough to give her what she didn’t know she wanted. My thumbs played with the edges of her panties, teasing her but not removing them just yet, giving her time to adjust to the idea.

Lower and lower I hesitantly kissed, my lips passing her curves, peppering kisses on her hip bone and eventually moving down till I found her perfect cotton covered promised land, where I began to kiss harder, my mouth finally covering her mound, her sweet fluids already trickling through, spoiling her underwear.

“Taimur...” she shifted under my touch, hot and bothered, forgetting everything around her.

“Patience baby. I want to take my time with you today. Let me apologise. Let me make this right.”

“Hmmm...”

“I’ve never done this before. Let me savour it,” I said, gazing up at her from my angle below.

She looked like an angel.

Her cheeks glowing, her big eyes bright and eager and her plump lips parted.

“What?” she whimpered, looking down at me, innocence in her stare.
“What do you mean?”

I began, sucking her through the thin fabric again, her eyes half-mast and struggling to stay open. “I have never...” sucking harder so her head fell back, her breath stuck in her throat. “Gone down on a girl... before.”

“W...w...why.....?”

“Because...” I grazed her hard nub with my teeth, slightly biting it, before pulling back to look up at her again. “Pleasing a girl was never important to me before. It was always about me. With you, it’s different.”

“Oh....”

I lightly licked through her pink panties again, already feeling her clit pulsating and our juices mixing, anxiety running high as the sweet tarty taste of Layla began to leak through the damp fabric and onto my eager tongue. I savoured it, loving everything that Layla was willing to give me.

“Do you want to feel my tongue baby?”

“Oh my God...”

“Yes or no, Pearl?” I started sucking even harder, putting more pressure on her clit, the soft material rubbing against her sensitive skin just right to start her climb.

“Ahhhh....”

“Tell me what you want baby.”

“You... you...”

“That’s good enough for me.”

My teeth latched onto the side of her panties, steadily gliding them down her smooth legs as she stepped out of them, before I made my way back up, leaving open mouth kisses along the way. Her arousal beginning to leak down her inner thigh, I flattened my tongue, licking up towards her dripping pussy, swiping along her pale skin, up her silky leg, straight to her slippery folds, making her shiver all over.

She tasted perfect, her own unique taste, a taste I knew I would be addicted to, never being able to get enough.

A taste I would never forget.

On the first flick of my tongue on her sensitive bundle of nerves, she gasped and I chuckled against her clit, her entire body smacked against the wall, squirming under my touch, her back arching, her hands going straight into my thick hair and pulling at my roots, while yanking me harder towards her.

I loved it.

I loved this imperfect, carefree, trusting version of Layla.

I loved it.

“Spread your legs for me baby. Like this,” I instructed, moving them apart before placing one over my shoulder. “Lean against the wall. I got you... I got you.”

That was when I began to eat her out more greedily, her juices mixing with my saliva, my tongue flicking against her delicate slit, swiping up and down, putting enough pressure to send her legs shaking, her fingers curling harder in my hair making her breathless.

I lapped at her as she writhed, hardly coming up for air, changing between licking her wetness and sucking her clit, and as she began to get even louder, her arousal covered my entire mouth, dripping from my open mouth and down my chin. My heated blood gushed to my cock, making it unbearable to keep it in my pants so I unbuttoned myself, pulling my throbbing dick out and allowing myself more room.

With one of my hands wrapped around her upper thigh, pulling her towards my mouth, my other hand wrapped around my shaft, squeezing the tip before I began to slide my fist up and down, chasing the same feeling Layla was. I moved in rhythm with my mouth, imagining I was wrapped up in her heat while I jerked off to the taste of her on my tongue.

I was in heaven.

As her breathless pants surrounded us, my tongue dove deeper, moving inside her tight hole when I felt it contract for the first time, a burst of creamy fluid gushing into my mouth as I sucked faster, drinking her in. I put more pressure on my cock, tugging it rapidly and pulled her pebbly bud between my teeth to gently bite. As soon as I did, her body began to shake, her eyes rolled closed and her mouth hung open, enjoying the sensation she'd never felt before.

“Oh my God... Taimur... I'm... I'm... oh my God...” she cried, tugging me even closer.

“You're... coming....” I said, between licks and pumping myself faster, grumbling against her swollen flesh as my mouth covered her entire clit, sucking firmly. “All... over... my... face...”

“Oh my God....” she whimpered, and I could feel her pussy palpitate, little spasms taking over her body as she began to come in my mouth, uncontrolled and raw. As she repeated my name like a mantra, my body hit a high I'd only felt with her, toppling me over the edge till I too found the

release I was so desperately chasing, squirting my seed on the floor next to her.

“Fuuuckkk...” I grunted.

“Stop.... I can’t take anymore... stop.... It’s too much. Oh my God... Oh my God... Oh my God...” Layla heaved.

It felt like hours before her hands loosened in my hair falling to her sides, the sound of our heavy breath still echoing in the room as I stood up, coming in close for a kiss. I knew she would be able to taste herself on my tongue and the thought drove me wild. We stood there, face to face, both relishing in the feeling of happiness for a few moments, just coming to terms with what I’d just done, what she’d let happen, and that was when I saw the worry reappear in her eyes.

“Pearl...”

“Oh my God. I love you,” she blurted out, grabbing her clothes and hugging them to her chest while I reached for some tissues to clean up, before tucking myself in. “I really do.”

“I know you're worried. But I’m coming back for you.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise, Pearl.” I smiled, wiping my bottom lip with the back of my hand before winking at her. As she blushed there was a rustling at the door, and we heard the voices of the people we knew very well.

“I guess you guys made up,” Kassim laughed, while the others sniggered. “Can we come in now?”

“Oh my God!” Layla squealed, turning the reddest I’d ever seen her turn, while bolting for the adjoining bathroom.

“Yeah, you said that already, Princess.” Came Abs’s sarcastic remark, before they all busted out laughing.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Layla

“**Y**ou can’t kidnap me, Taimur?” I protested as he slammed the door of his two-seater smart car shut. The headlights were switched off and he was parked around the corner from my house.

“It’s not kidnapping when you’re coming willingly,” he said, handing me a take-away cup while taking a sip of his. I knew it was tea. He always brought me tea. “Shit, they got mixed up again,” he said as he swapped them around.

“Just label them already, and I’m not coming willingly. Let me out. Please Taimur. My dad will notice I’m not home. I’ll be in trouble,” I pleaded. “He’s already acting strange around me. I think he knows.”

“If he knew, we would already know.”

“True,” I replied, an unsettling feeling sitting in my stomach. I had been on edge for a few days now, and since my relationship with Taimur had got more physical, the fear of him leaving me had got more potent too.

However, to my surprise, every time he touched me, the guilty feeling of going against the rules I was brought up believing reduced, getting more and more minimal till I forgot them when I was in the moment with him.

He felt so good.

He felt so right.

He couldn’t be wrong.

At times, I couldn’t believe I’d let him touch me, or that I’d touched him but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted him. He consumed me and sometimes, I couldn’t even breathe when he wasn’t around. I knew

the next year would be difficult, but it would also bring everything into perspective and then maybe, when he'd come back could get married and make everything religiously legal, halal.

No more guilt.

Correct in the eyes of God.

True to what I'd been brought up believing.

"Put this on," Zoya had said moments before, throwing a fancy green jumper with little glittering sequins on it, at me. "And change out of those bloody old pyjamas. They make you look homeless."

"What the hell is going on?" I asked, throwing the jumper back at her. She caught it before it hit her suspiciously happy face. "I'm not changing out of my PJs. I'm comfortable."

"Fine. Suit yourself. Don't say I didn't warm you."

"What?"

"Take your headscarf and jacket and follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"Be quiet Layli. Baba just passed out after drinking a whole bottle of vodka."

"An earthquake couldn't wake him after he's drunk that much."

"True. True. Hurry up," Zoya said, pulling me out the front door and around the side of the house that was more secluded than the rest.

The freezing air hit my face, sucking the warmth out of me and the icy breeze wrapped around me till I was shivering to the bone however, that was before I set my sight on a very handsome, excited and grinning Taimur waiting for me.

"What are you doing here?" I had asked, while he took me into his strong arms that now felt like home. Without answering, he carefully guided me into the car, buckled my seatbelt like I was a child and closed the door behind me. He waved at Zoya, and she winked back, walking back towards our house.

"Taimur...?"

"Hi baby," he beamed, his attractive light eyes crinkling around the edges.

As he pulled onto the road, I bent down, hiding myself from ongoing cars in case someone I knew was to see me and report it to my dad. I watched his plump lips turn into a mischievous smirk, finding my actions

entertaining, but he didn't understand. If I was caught with Taimur, there would be severe repercussions.

"I'm not even dressed properly." I shyly admitted, taking a sip of my tea before putting it back in the cup holder.

"Oh please, Pearl. Don't act you're not happy that you're in pjs. You love being in them and I love you being in them too. That was the first thing I saw you wearing, you know— silky pink pyjamas."

"You're right, I'm my happiest when I'm in pjs, but what are you doing here Taimur?"

"You didn't think I was going to let you say goodbye two days early, were you?"

"I thought we already said goodbye at uni."

"Baby, I'm not saying bye till I *absolutely* have to. And that means you're coming to drop me to the airport tomorrow too."

"I can't. My dad."

"Zoya has it under control. Don't worry Pearl. The boys will pick you up at four."

"I love you." I blurted out. Taimur turned his head to smile at me.

"I love you too, Pearl."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to say goodbye."

"What?"

"Don't worry. You'll understand soon enough."

I grinned, making myself comfortable in his front seat. I removed my Uggs and crossed my short legs, turning my body so I could observe him diving. I gaped at his chiselled face, memorizing his every feature and shape. His piercing hazel eyes that could see beyond my skin and into my heart, his soft lips, the bottom one plumper than the top, that I had become accustomed to kissing, his high cheek bones with a rough beard, I loved stroking my fingers on and his gorgeous clear skin, the perfect olive colour that contrasted my own light one.

"What are you looking at Pearl."

"You."

"Why?"

"I just want to remember everything about you so when I miss you over the year I can think of this memory and smile."

“How about you remember this,” Taimur declared, as we stopped at a red light. He moved his large hand off the steering wheel and onto my face, gently caressing my lips with his calloused thumb. His hungry eyes bore into mine as he leaned in, taking my lips in a sensual kiss that turned heated within seconds. I instantly grabbed the side of his face, allowing his tongue to lick the inside of my mouth and pressing myself harder into him so that there was no space left between our carnal bodies. Our breath quickened, our skin heated, and our hands began to explore. Every time Taimur kissed me, I felt it deep within my soul, burning and calming me at the same time and I wondered how I’d gone my entire life denying myself of the physical feeling of being connected to him. As the cars behind started to honk, we broke apart, panting and realizing the light had turned green.

“And will there be more of that tonight?” I suggestively asked, feeling brave while reaching for my tea.

“Maybe. If you’re a good girl.”

“I’m always a good girl.”

“Says the girl who just snuck out of her father’s house to meet her boyfriend at one thirty at night.”

“Hey, that’s not fair.”

“I’m not complaining. I always knew you had a little rebel inside you waiting for me to come along and let it out.”

“Setting me free from my cage? Right?”

“Something like that.”

As we continued to drive to an unknown destination, Taimur updated me on his schedule once he was in the States and in my mind, I was already counting down the days till he was permanently back in London, so we could start planning the rest of our lives together.

“Why are we driving towards the west end?” I suddenly asked him, feeling my wounded heart beat a tad bit faster as I came to the realisation on where we were heading. “You know I don’t like going there around Christmas-time.”

“I know, but please don’t get mad and hear me out.”

“Usually when a person says, ‘don’t get mad’ the other person is about to get mad.”

“Just hear me out Pearl. Can you do that?”

“Alright. Shoot.”

“And I need you to be brave for me today. Can you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Come to see the Christmas lights with me.”

His words echoed in the silent car, turning the ambiance of it from cheerful to hostile. Taimur knew the reason why I didn’t travel into the west end of London at Christmas time, he knew that seeing the lights was something I did with my mum and hadn’t since she died five years ago, and he knew that I didn’t want to change that.

“Turn the car around, Taimur,” I demanded. “Now.”

“Do you know that this year the lights were turned on by Westlife?” He ignored me whilst he fiddled with the radio in his car. “So, I thought it would be appropriate to play this.”

The sound of the Westlife song ‘Flying without wings’ filled the car as tears welled up behind my eyelids.

“Turn. The. Car. Around!” I repeated, my blood boiling. “Are you looking to fight before you leave tomorrow?”

“And do you know what charity they’re sponsoring this year?” *‘Every bodies looking for that something, one thing that makes it all complete.’* Came from the CD player.

“No, but I have a feeling you’re going to tell me.”

“It’s to raise funds for the Great Ormond Street breast cancer campaign. Can you imagine, kids with breast cancer? How difficult that must be for them?”

‘Some find it in their lover’s eyes...’

“No,” my voice came out shaky and I was sure Taimur noticed because he looked over, sympathetically smiling at me.

‘Who can deny the joy it brings, when you found that special thing, you’re flying without wings...’

“Wouldn’t your mum want you to support such an important cause?”

“Yes, but Taimur...”

“Pearl, baby.” The light turned red again as he turned to me.

‘You find it in the words of others, a simple line can make you laugh or cry...’

“Let me help you heal. I love you and you love your mum, so I want to get to know her through you but till you heal, you can’t open up about her. I know you’re struggling, and it still hurts but you know something, it’s okay. You’re allowed to be in pain but don’t let it hold you back from enjoying the beautiful things in life you used to love. Instead of stopping them, do

them while thinking of her - *for* her. Feel her instead of shutting her out. Let love in Layla."

If I didn't already know I was deeply in love with Taimur by now, after the words he had just spoken, there would be no doubting anything I felt for him.

How had he known what I needed to hear?

How did he know how I felt without me telling him?

It was like he knew me better than I knew myself and I loved him for it, but I just couldn't express it as well as he could.

'Well, for me it's waking up beside you. To watch the sunrise on your face. To know that I can say I love you, at any given time or place...'

Tears burned in my eyes, but I didn't allow them to escape just yet.

"I can't Taimur... I can't. The last time I was here..."

'It's little things that only I know, those are the things that make you mine...'

"You can Pearl. I know you're stronger than this. You were strong enough to walk into the hospital when I was hurt, and you're strong enough to do this too."

We were getting closer.

I could feel it.

"I wasn't going to bring you here you know, I knew you would take it hard, so I told the boys to keep you away from this area without a reason. They probably thought I was being possessive or something, like seeing the Christmas lights was something only I could do with you, but when I found out that this year the cause they were supporting was Great Ormond Street Hospital's breast cancer campaign, I felt it was a sign."

"A sign? I thought you didn't believe in signs or fate or destiny."

"I believe that meeting you was my fate and I believe that you *are* my destiny."

'And you're the place my life begins, and you'll be where it ends...'

"Talk to me Pearl."

'And that's the joy you bring, I'm flying without wings.'

He had caught me off guard and as the lights came into view, the first tear of many began to fall down my cheek and into my mouth. Taimur's gentle yet hand began wiping them away as his eyes switched from the road ahead and my face and I finally let myself grieve in the way I should have five years ago.

Even though Taimur wasn't usually a patient guy, today he drove around the streets of London for an hour, with the same song on repeat, before I finally spoke up, opening up a wound that had never really healed.

Wringing my hands in my lap, I dared to stare out of the window ahead of me, noticing the light properly for the first time. I wiped my tears away, opening the glass to allow the icy breeze into my lungs in an aim to soften the ache I felt deep within.

The lights were spectacular, brightening up the dark sky and illuminating me in a way I hadn't felt since my mum died. Stunning lightened chandeliers hung from the blue lighted banners, reflecting the brightness and contrasting the black surrounding while tiny lights were scattered around large banners, advertising the charity they were raising money for. When we drove down Oxford Street for the fiftieth time, my heart began to feel lighter, the tears in my eyes dampened and my mind went to a place where only Taimur and I existed, so I could open up to him like I had never done before.

"My parents didn't have a love marriage, you know, but that didn't mean they didn't love each other. It was quite the opposite. They grew to love each other to such an extent that there were incomplete without the other one." I began, not knowing where to start to explain everything in the correct way. I wanted to tell Taimur about my mum and what my real dad was like, not the man he had seen. I watched him turn down the Westlife song enough, so it was only humming in the background as I spoke. "I guess that's why I always had faith in the arranged marriage system. Since they found their soul mate that way, I was hoping I'd find mine that way too."

"But you found yours in a university kitchen while reaching for a box of cereal," Taimur smiled, then winked at me. He parked up on one of the side roads so that we could still admire the beautiful Christmas décor around the London streets.

"I had a perfect family, Taimur. Two loving parents who gave me everything I wanted and a big sister who I wanted to be like. We went on two family holidays a year, one was my choice, and one was Zoya's and every December, my parents took us to see the Christmas lights from before I can even remember. It was a tradition in our house. I looked forward to it all year round. It was my favourite thing to do. We would wrap up warm and walk the streets of London, admiring the lights and then we would end

up in Hamley's to buy a toy before we went to Edgware Road for dinner. I always bought a doll from Hamley's. I know, typical right? And Zoya usually bought something creative like paint," I said, wrapping my arms around my mid-section to hold myself together while I told him secrets that I had never told anyone before. "And believe it or not, it was my dad's idea to take us every year. He loved it as much as we did.

"My dad never used to drink, you know. He wasn't an absent father or mean, and I honestly can't remember him telling me off as a child. The dad I remember used to love taking us to Toys R Us, hated eating the same food two days in a row and was terrible at telling bedtime stories but still tried every night. He never missed a gymnastics tournament or parents evening and always told my mum he loved her as he walked out the front door in the morning, for work. That was our dad and he was our hero."

"He sounds like a perfect father."

"Wallahi, he was Taimur. He really was."

"What happened Pearl?"

"Well, back then, Zoya and I were too young to realise that our mum was actually the glue that held our little family together. Then when I was twelve, everything changed and the family we thought was unbreakable completely fell apart. We didn't realise my dad had a temper problem because Mum always calmed him down, had the answers when something went wrong and constantly held our family together, but once she got ill, it got hard for her to do so and that's when we saw the other side of Dad. At first, I put it down to him being worried about Mum since she was so ill but once Mum died, that new person began to appear more frequently, and the old dad disappeared completely."

"I'm really sorry baby."

"I have nightmares about that day Taimur, the day they told us she was going to die." I began chewing on my bottom lip, my voice shaking. I watched Taimur place his hand over mine as I wrapped my headscarf around it, trying to steady me as I spoke but it was no use, it was inevitable that I was about to break down. He held me close to his heart as I continued. My mind was going through the memories like a selection of Polaroids, remembering the right sequence of events as I tried to find the correct words to express how much this memory meant to me, so he would understand the impact these Christmas lights have on my life. "They took us to see the lights, it was around this time six years ago, I was only twelve.

I remember being so excited, I had no idea what was coming. As we drove up to the west end, Mum and Dad kept whispering to each other and I honestly thought they were planning a surprise for Zoya and me. I guess it was a surprise after all.

“We had a great day. We saw the beautiful lights and I swear I saw tears in my mum’s eyes as she watched them, explaining what each one was and making up a story about them like she always did. Then we went to buy our toys, but Mum told us that that year they were going to do it a bit differently. She said that that year she was going to choose our gift for us. I wasn’t happy because I wanted a Barbie but instead, she bought me my first microscope. She told me she would teach me how to use it and that she got her first one when she was my age. She never got a chance to teach me. Then we went for our usual dinner which felt a bit different than every year because Mum and Dad were mostly quiet. I remember thinking that they must be tired but on the way home was when everything changed.”

“Layla,” Taimur whispered as my eyes blurred and hot tears threatened to surface once again. As Taimur softly rubbed his thumb across my cheeks while holding my face, he left light kisses on my skin, leaving a line of scorching heat with his every touch.

As tears drenched my face, I continued.

I felt my heart break all over again as I recalled the memory, ripping at the seams and bleeding out as my words echoed in the car. I needed to tell Taimur everything - I wanted to. He needed to know that I wasn’t the angel he thought I was, he needed to know I was broken.

“It’s strange how one moment you’re a normal twelve-year-old and a moment later your life is turned upside down. On the way home Dad told us that Mum wasn’t well. I watched Mum wipe her tears as Dad explained that she had breast cancer and it was too late to treat it. I remember Zoya asking what cancer was and Mum explaining it. Then I remember Zoya asking what medicines they were going to give her and Mum explaining that they had caught it too late and that there was nothing we could do to help her apart from pray. I didn’t cry. I just kept my eyes on the Christmas lights, pretending I couldn’t hear what my parents were talking about. I barely understood what was going on, let alone what cancer was, but slowly over the next year I understood it more than I wanted to. That night, Mum tucked me into bed and kissed my entire face telling me she loved me and would try her best to fight till her last breath but over the next year, I watched the

cancer gradually take over her body till she wasn't able to do anything herself. She wasn't the same person at the end, Taimur. I watched Dad happily nurse her every day, showering her, taking her to the bathroom, feeding her and making her smile, till he couldn't anymore and had to admit her into a hospice where she died in his arms eleven months later. When I arrived at the hospice that night, I saw the rejected look in Dad's eyes and instantly knew that I hadn't only lost Mum that day, but I had lost Dad too."

My tears streamed down my face faster than I could wipe away and I couldn't shut them off even as I tried. The pain of losing Mum stabbed into my chest over and over again, leaving me in agony and the air in the car quickly reduced till I was gasping to keep myself breathing. I felt suffocated and the sound of my own heartbeat echoed in my ear, deafening me.

I cried for Mum.

I cried for Dad.

And I cried for myself.

"I'm so sorry. Come here Layla," Taimur said, pulling me onto his sturdy lap, allowing me to melt into him. My chest heaved, trying to take in as much air as I could, and I felt him gently rub circles on my back, letting me cry my grief of six years out. "Shhh baby. It's okay," he said, trying to calm me down.

"He's so broken Taimur. I hear him cry for her every night when he gets drunk," I admitted, weeping. "He misses her as much as I do."

For the first time in six years, I let myself go.

I let myself feel.

I let myself miss Mum.

I let myself break apart.

"I'm so angry at her, Taimur. I'm so mad that she left me. She wasn't supposed to die!" I blubbered through my hard cries, pausing for a moment, trying to take a deep breath before closing my eyes and letting myself be held by the guy I was in love with. "When I close my eyes, I can still see her face, it's engraved into my memory, smiling and telling me it was going to be okay, but she lied! It isn't okay! Nothing is okay without her!"

"It will be Pearl. I promise, it's going to be okay," he said, holding me tighter to his chest as I cried into it. I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding, licked my dry lips and wiped away the stream of tears that were drowning my face.

I couldn't breathe.

I was hyperventilating from crying so hard.

I had never cried like that before.

The small car seemed to shrink around me, and my head felt dizzy.

"I feel so alone without her. I feel like I have no one who understands," I wept.

"Breathe, baby," Taimur repeated, opening the windows to allow the cold air in. I rested my head on his chest, tired of struggling and carrying this burden with me for so long. "Listen to my heartbeat and breathe."

I did what he said, concentrating on the continuous banging in his chest and trying to calm myself down to the rhythm.

"Can you hear it?" Taimur asked, "Can you hear my heartbeat?"

"Yes."

"That belongs to you. Every time my heart beats, it's only for you. You are not alone. You have me. You will always have me Layla," he said as I crumbled to minuscule pieces in his protected arms. I felt myself shatter into a million fragments in front of his eyes and I hoped that he could stick me back together after this was over. "I'm here Pearl. I'm not going anywhere. I promise. I know you're scared I'm going to leave but I'm not. I'm yours forever. I promise. I know you. I understand you. I'm coming back for you. I promise."

"Why did God do this to us?" I asked him, large ugly tears continuing to release even after I had tried to stop them. "Is he trying to punish me? I was only thirteen when she died. I did everything God asked me to do. I devoted my life to him. What did I do wrong to deserve this pain?"

"Life doesn't work like that, baby. You don't always get what you deserve because if you did, you would be the happiest girl in the world. You deserve all the happiness in the world Pearl, and I promise I'm going to give it to you," he said, pulling me up so we were looking into each other's eyes. His firm hands held my face while his strong thumbs brushed my tears away before his lips took over, kissing my swollen eyes, followed by my wet cheeks and ending on my trembling lips.

"I hate that you've been dealing with this on your own for so long. I see the grief in you, you know, behind your gorgeous smile and caring eyes, you have this sadness inside you and I wish more than anything that I could take it away. I promise you Layla, someday I will. Someday I'm going to make you so happy that you won't have time to ever be sad again," Taimur promised.



“I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU PEARL,” HE SPOKE SOFTLY, HANDING ME A small black box wrapped with a red ribbon. I rubbed my worn-out eyes before taking it into my hand and slowly opening it to reveal beautiful piece of glittering jewellery inside a small shot glass. “I know it’s not much but it’s all I could afford right now.”

“What is this?” I asked, seeing the hesitation in his face.

“It’s a shot glass because I know you love collecting them for some strange reason and a charm bracelet. I thought we could add things to it as we made more memories together. I’ve already added a few. Look.”

I glanced at the shot glass first, instantly falling in love with it. It was the usual size, red with the words ‘I heart you’ printed on it. I then found the bracelet, dying to see what he had added. Firstly, there was a tiny silver monkey attached to the thin chain.

“A mini monkey?”

“It’s the Coco Pops monkey. This doesn’t only remind me of the first time I saw you Pearl - on that chair, in the kitchen, reaching for your box Coco Pops but also the mornings we’ve spent together eating it,” he said, showing me the cute little monkey. I stroked it with my fingers, feeling the soft metal on my fingertips. “It was definitely fate that I walked into that kitchen that morning and I wish I had kissed you that day when you were in my arms.”

“You can kiss me now.” I leaned in, pecking his soft lips.

Next was a little charm of a winter scarf blowing in the wind, it was made out of silver and had a small green diamond shining in it. I immediately knew it represented my hijab and the first fight we had had. The memory made me smile, reminiscing how he had got under my skin from our first day. That was followed by a small golden UCLH charm, representing the hospital and the first time we declared our love for each other. A large ivory pearl stuck to the next charm and it was evident that it didn’t need any explanation like the following charm did.

“What’s this?” I asked, pointing to three strange charms in a row of the mars symbol that usually represented a man.

“Those three symbols of men are for Kass, Abs and Nabeel. I love how you’ve become a sister to them, and it means the world to be that you

accepted them into your life as much as they've accepted you. My brothers mean the world to me Pearl, you've always known that."

"I love them, Taimur."

"And I know they're going to look after you while I'm away."

"More like I'm going to be looking after them."

"Please keep an eye on Kass for me. He pretends to be tough but he's the opposite inside. He covers up all his feelings with sarcasm."

"Like someone else I know." I smirked.

"But now I have *you* who understand me," he replied, pecking my lips. "I just worry about him."

"I promise I'll keep an eye on him. Don't worry."

"Can you make sure he doesn't do anything stupid?"

"I'll try, but it's Kassim after all."

We both laughed.

"And try and find out what's going on between Nabeel and my sister. I worry about her too. She's really hurting."

"I know. I will."

"And keep Abs close to you. He'll always protect you Pearl, but sometimes he also needs someone to protect him too. A friend who can understand him through his silence."

"I will do that. Don't worry," I repeated, turning to the bracelet again to see a small shimmering Christmas tree.

"That's so that we don't forget today. The day you let love fully back into your heart." He beamed before showing me the last charm attached to the bracelet of a small shining aeroplane which indicated his trip away.

"I love it Taimur. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I'm never going to take it off," I said, kissing him.

"I have one more charm for you," he opened his palm.

It was a gold charm of two single letters - **LK**.

"LK?" I questioned, looking up at him from my now mascara smudged eyelashes.

"Layla Khalidi." He replied with certainty, turning up the volume up the same Westlife song before taking my face in his hands so our noses were touching as he continued to whisper to me. "I can't wait to make you my wife, Pearl."

As our lips touched, I let go of every hesitation and every inhibition I had felt in the past. As his silk tongue slowly caressed mine, I allowed

myself to feel the love I had been denying myself to feel and as he stole my breath away, I willingly let him capture my irrational heart with it, never wanting it to be returned.

“Dance with me Pearl.” He pulled me out of his car and onto the icy pavement of central London. His voice was just loud enough for me to hear through the sound of my thumping heart.

“Here?”

“Yes. Here.” He turned up the song so it vibrated out of the car windows, as we held each other tightly, leisurely swaying our feet to the flawless melody under the glistening Christmas lights. Tiny little snowflakes began to fall from the black night sky, landing all around us and the silver moon lightened our surrounding as if to shine the words spotlight on us alone.

In that moment, life was perfect.



AS I WALKED INTO MY HOUSE ON CLOUD NINE, MY HEAD SOMEWHERE LOST in the heavenly skies and my heart filled with an undying love for a guy I knew loved me back, my phone vibrated in my coat pocket. Thinking it was Taimur I quickly took it out, hearing my new bracelet jingle while checking it, only to find that the universe had a twisted sense of humour because the words I read next contributed to the unfortunate series of events that changed my life in a way I didn't see coming.

KASSIM

Are you with Tai? Our dads had a heart attack. I can't get through to him. Can you ask him to get to the hospital ASAP?

LAYLA

Yes, of course. Is your dad okay?

KASSIM

No. He's gone.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Layla

I wished things hadn't changed.

I wished that I hadn't already lived the best day of my life.

I wished our love had withstood the next trials that came storming our way, but wishing was useless.

Wishes didn't come true.

Everything was written.

"You have to leave now that the funeral is over," Abs had told him the day after the funeral. "Give it a few days, but you have to go for your internship Tai."

"I can't now. Everything has changed."

"I know but..."

"No you don't know. No one knows but me."

"But Tai, you have to understand."

"No Abs, I don't."

"Give me 60 seconds."

"Fine, 60 starting now."

"I understand what's happened, but your family needs you to go and sort out your career, so you can look after them once you're back. You have to do this internship. I know it's going to be a bit of a struggle with cash, but your mum will have the life insurance money till you can come back and support her. Everyone will understand why you had to leave so fast after everything that happened. I know you think Princess needs you right now, and she does, but so does your family. You have responsibilities now

your dad is not here, and Layla is a tough cookie. I know you think I didn't like her but it's not true. We all love her, and we'll be there for her. Wallahi, she has the three of us to look after her while you're away. I know she needs you, but she also needs you to get a decent job and ask her dad for her hand, the old-fashioned way. That's the only way he's going to allow this to happen."

"Times up," he said.

"I know you're hurting. We all are. I lived longer with you dad than my own, he was always more of a dad to me. I know it's killing you, but the bottom line is, if you really love your dad, you'd do this for him. And if you love princess like I know you do, you'd do this for her and your future. There's no two ways about it. This internship is part of your degree. You have to go, or you don't get your qualification and you've always wanted to be a doctor Tai, that's always been your dream."

"Dreams change."

"But reality doesn't."

Ouch.

"What's that supposed to mean, Abs?" I could hear the irritation in Taimur's voice.

"Nothing. All I'm trying to say is that you don't actually have a choice here. If you don't go, you don't get your degree. If you don't graduate, you'll struggle to find a job and you'll have no way to support both your family and princess."

"Let me speak to her first. A lot happened last night."

"Yeah, I can see that. You two have a lot to discuss, I guess. I hope you know what you're doing Tai, or what you've just done," Abs said, leaving the two cups of tea he had brought over that morning as I walked out the bathroom. "Where's your headscarf, princess?"

"Somewhere here. I didn't know you'd be here so early, so I didn't cover up my hair."

"It's okay," Abs winked, "I won't tell if you won't."

"Plus, I don't have to wear hijab to my brother, and what you did for me last night was more than an actual brother would do, so we're good," I said, coming up closer to kiss Abs on his cheek. I felt his body tense as his eyes searched for Taimur, asking permission and when Taimur nodded, Abs arms wrapped round me in a brotherly hug full of protection. "Thank you, Abs"

“Any time princess,” he replied, kissing the top of my head, before turning me to look up at him. His eyes were sad, but hopeful. “Anything for you. You’ve always got me. Don’t ever forget that. I’ll always be there to protect you.” I hugged him close, feeling his thumping heartbeat against my cheek and knew the boy who hardly spoke, had just said a lot.

It had been a long few days since hearing of Taimur’s father’s passing, and Taimur had only spoken about the things he had to organise. He first cancelled his ticket to the States, then arranged the funeral and then started talking to Abs about the financial implications of how he was going to support his family. As much as Abs and Nabeel told him that he had nothing to worry about, Taimur’s life had just been turned upside down and from being a teenager enjoying life, he was now the man of the house.

I had tried to call him after he left my house to be there for him even though I didn’t know what to say, but he didn’t pick up and I assumed he was speaking to his family, trying to understand what had happened that night. Abs had messaged me the next day with the funeral details. However, I already knew about it since my dad had been requested to give a small lecture to the people who were attending.

The last funeral I attended was Mum’s, and even that was a blur, but the universe continued with its twisted sense of humour for pulling me to the funeral of the dad of the man I loved.

I watched Taimur from a distance outside mosque, since the inside part was segregated between men and women, observing his family and friends consoling him as he methodically went through each Islamic rituals of his father’s last rites, washing him, covering him, and placing him in a wooden coffin where he would be lowered into the ground, six feet down.

I watched him take care of his mother, holding her so she could grieve on his strong shoulder, and I noticed him hold onto Kassim’s arm, supporting him through one of the hardest days of his life.

Taimur didn’t leave Alia’s side.

He had always told me that she was a Daddy’s girl, so his passing was the hardest on her. I watched her weep for her father, remembering the feeling of losing a parent and prayed the pain would eventually subside however, I, as well as anyone who had lost a parent knew that the hole left behind in your heart from losing someone you loved, could never be filled again.

Nabeel and Alia had barely spoken before that day, but now that they were both hurting, they use each other to find solace in. However, it was clear to everyone that something had definitely come between them, and her name was Rose.

However, on the day of Alia's father's funeral, they clung to each other like they were both gasping for air on a drowning boat slowly sinking into the wild sea, both holding on for dear life. I watched Nabeel never leaving Alia's side, constantly holding her close to his heart and I wondered if they would continue their reconciliation after the initial shock of this day was over.

Everything was changing.

Everything *had* changed.

As Dad gave a lecture about life after death, my eyes didn't leave Taimur. He mostly stared at his hands in his lap, never looking up or meeting anyone's gaze and as Kassim cried over the coffin, Taimur held himself back. I knew that his tears had now run dry and the emptiness in his heart had established itself, pushing out the love he had for the world.

Trying not to be too obvious, I attempted to get his attention and hoped he'd let me know if he needed me, but Taimur was lost in his own heart-rending bubble, going through emotions for the man he not only loved but looked up to as a role model.

Hours later, after praying and eating, I stood outside the large mosque, waiting for the men to return from the cemetery since women were not encouraged to attend the actual burial, in a hopeless aim to catch a glimpse of Taimur. As the service came to an end and a number of men walked towards the mosque on their return, I saw Abs and Nabeel gathered round a distraught Kassim. I watched his tear-stricken face shaking while his body shuddered in grief, and I couldn't help but feel his pain within my soul.

"We would like to request that only close friends and family to stay behind with the family," a disembodied voice came from the microphone. "Thank you for attending the funeral. Your presence was much appreciated by the family."

I didn't know what to do.

My heart wanted to be with Taimur, but my mind told me to stay back.

I glanced from Dad to Taimur and back to Dad, wondering how I could think of a reason for me to stay behind to support my boyfriend.

Taimur robotically moved behind his family, slowly walking towards the mosque as I made my way forward. My eyes didn't stray from the sight in front of me, the broken guy I was in love with, and when I saw Taimur run his large hands through his hair, pulling at his roots in frustration, I snapped.

Without thinking, my legs carried me towards the love of my life, intertwining between people till I found him. Hazel eyes met my green ones and when a fresh tear fell from his, I knew I had made the right choice.

Without hesitation, Taimur pulled me into his arms, holding me tighter than he ever had before. I felt eyes land on us from all around the entrance of the mosque but Taimur's eyes were closed, not caring about anything but the bubble we were in. Several people turned their gazes to us, curiously judging the preacher's daughter clinging to a random guy and I knew, before the night was over, we would be the hottest gossip of our community.

At that moment, I didn't care who saw.

I didn't care about the repercussions.

I just needed to be there for him.

"I've got you," I whispered so he could hear me clearly. "Wallahi, I'm not going anywhere. I got you, baby."

"He's gone Pearl. My dad is gone," was all he said, and my heart broke again.

And just like that, I watched something inside him snap too, and as he pulled me closer to his trembling body, silent sobs were released from his eyes onto my headscarf. I gripped him tight, tight enough to leave bruises on his skin tomorrow and bury my face in his chest, crying for his loss with him. Fisting handfuls of his black shirt, I wept for him while constantly rubbing soothing patterns on his back. His dejected admission of his loss caused my chest to throb harder and as I tried to wipe my cheeks, I knew it was pointless as tears were not going to stop streaming down my face.

I saw Taimur crumble to pieces in front of my very eyes. I held him so tightly, trying to piece him back together but there was nothing left of him to hold on to.

Seeing him so sad broke my heart.

He cried, and I cried with him.

I felt helpless.

Useless.

It was beyond sorrow, beyond depression.

It was loss.

Abs finally noticed me, turning around with Alia in his arms and mouthed 'thank you.' Before turning back to the mosque, but that was when I looked up and my gaze met a set of icy cold eyes that I recognised very well.

My father's murderous glare was staring straight at me, his nostrils flared with anger and his jaw clenched in utmost fury. Beside him stood Zoya, her eyes wide with shock at my impulsive actions and her hand gripping my dad's stern arm, attempting to hold him back. I watch her trying to tug him away, trying to cool him down, knowing the extent of what was going to happen more than anyone.

My eyes fluttered back to Taimur's as I clung to him, silently asking him, for the first time in my life, to save me from the danger I had just put myself in.

"I've got you too," Taimur replied, kissing the top of my head as his embrace tightened. "Nothing's going to happen to you. Wallahi," he promised.

"What. The. Hell?" Dad bellowed, in an agonisingly slow pace, pulling away Zoya's grip and flying towards me. He grabbed my arm and pulled me out of Taimur's embrace but Taimur didn't let go, both men holding onto one arm. "Is there something going on here?"

I stared at Dad, frozen in my step, trying to think faster in an attempt to think of an excuse. I felt my dry lips quiver and new hot tears brimmed in my terrified eyes as I watched him realise the truth behind my actions, that his innocent little girl wasn't so innocent anymore.

"Baba... it's nothing," I tried to brush it off, acting casual like I hadn't just slipped up, but his petrifying eyes darken with anger, agitating me to my core.

I was terrified.

"It doesn't look like that," he said, shaking his head before yanking me harder so Taimur and my hands fell apart. "Get in the car. Now!"

My eyes move towards Taimur, his distressed stare beckoning me to stay with him and stand up for us, for our love, but alas, my father always came first, and I turned away, still feeling Taimur's stare burning into the back of my head. I turned one last time, mouthing, 'I'm sorry.' to him while

I witnessed the disappointed look on his face that broke what was left of my already shattered heart.

“I’m not letting him take her away!” I heard Taimur yelling behind me, but I didn’t dare turn around in case it set Dad off.

“He’s her father, Tai. What are you going to do?” Abs said, holding him back.

“I’m going over there now. She’s not safe, Abs. She’s not safe.”

“What do you mean?”

“SHE’S. NOT. SAFE!” he shouted.

“Then let’s go,” Abs agreed.

I heard the sound of my heart breaking over and over again, while Dad drove off towards our house, not looking at me or Zoya the entire hour ride home. His stern grip stayed on my leg, pressing into my flesh and making it sting but I kept my face neutral, bearing the pain that was inevitable.

The silence ate at me, and my mind wondered back to Taimur and how I had just turned the worst day of his life even worse. The thought of losing him scared me and I wished that I could turn back time and re live the mesmerising night before.

“Go upstairs, Zoya. Leave us alone,” Dad barked on entering the house. A cold breeze flew in from the door, making me shudder.

“Baba... I...” she tried, holding onto me. Protecting me as usual.

“GO UPSTAIRS NOW!” he yelled, louder than ever before. My entire body flinched from the sound, scared of what was to come. I braced myself, expecting the worst.

“Just go,” I told her, knowing it was the best thing for all of us. “I’ll be fine. If you’re here it’ll just make it worse.”

“Layli...”

“This is my fault Zoy. I’ll be up soon. Please. you’ll make it worse.”

“I can’t leave you.”

“Please Zoy, just go up.”

I watched as a disheartened Zoya walked up the elongated staircase, glancing back on every step, worry written all over her beautiful face.

“Explain yourself.”

“I’m so sorry Baba...” I began, tears swelling behind my burning eyelids. “I didn’t plan for this to happen.”

Dad didn’t move. He just stood there, inhaling the air though his widened nostrils and trying to stay calm but fear gripped my body like a

vice knowing my father's temper and that this was just the calm before the storm.

"Baba..."

"How long?"

"Baba...?"

"How long have you been seeing this boy?" I saw the anger sizzling behind his question and knew I had to answer truthfully, or I would be in more trouble.

"A few months," I replied, nervously.

"So, you've been lying to me for months?"

"I haven't been lying Baba, I swear. It's not like that."

"You've been sneaking around behind my back, that's what you've been doing."

"Baba..." I began, not knowing what to say next

"Did he touch you?"

"Baba, it's not like that?"

"DID HE TOUCH YOU, LAYLA?" he roared, coming closer and pinning me against the wall like he had done many times before. My throat restricted at his touch and my headscarf began to suffocate me. He gripped me by my neck, my throat restricted, and I begged for air.

"No..." I lied, knowing the truth would get me in more trouble.

"DON'T LIE TO ME!" he tightened his hold around me.

I didn't know how to reply.

This was not supposed to happen this way.

Taimur and I had a plan.

I wasn't supposed to do this alone.

"LAYLA. ANSWER THE QUESTION," he demanded, moving to my shoulders to shake me.

"We are in love, Baba," I tried again, hoping he could see it from my point of view. My voice shook with fear.

That was when the familiar slap came across my cheek.

It stung, but I was used to it.

"What?"

"Let me call Taimur," I pleaded, my hand going to my burning face.

"Let's sit down and talk about this. We want to get married."

"I am going to kill that boy," he whispered coming in close enough so I could feel his breath on my face, threatening me in a way he had never

before. "And then I'm going to make sure you never leave this house again. Do you understand me? Give me your phone. Now!"

"No Baba, please," I begged, "Leave him alone. He just lost his dad."

"Oh, he's going to lose more than just his dad when I'm done with him."

"Baba, please. I love him like you loved Mum."

"Your mum would be ashamed of you," he spat. "Your mum would have disowned you for what you have done!"

"No Baba, I haven't done anything wrong."

"Did you have sex with him?"

"No Baba, no. Never," I said, embarrassed at where this conversation was going.

"YOU LIAR!" he yelled. I watched him lift his fist and I moved my head just fast enough for it to land on the wall behind me, as the banging on the door began. "YOU ARE A LITTLE WHORE. HOW MANY MEN HAVE YOU LET TOUCH YOU?"

"Baba... Please... Stop!" I cried.

"YOU DISGUST ME! YOU ARE A DISGRACE TO ME!"

"Please Baba, don't say that."

The banging continued until he moved away from towering over my small body and walked towards the door. I slid down the cold wall, my shaking knees bent, and my tired body curled into a ball.

This couldn't be happening.

I shook with grief and the air around me stood still, not letting me breathe.

"LEAVE!" I heard my dad bellow again as I lifted my head to see Taimur and Abs at my door. They didn't care about Dad's warning and barged inside, both of them running towards me in two long strides.

"I've got you, baby," Taimur said, gently running his fingers over my now swollen cheek. I felt myself flinch as his touch. "Breathe."

"We're here princess. Nothing is going to happen to you. We got you."

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY DAUGHTER!" Dad yelled, pulling Taimur off me and crashing his fist immediately into Taimur's face.

Caught off guard, Taimur stumbled backwards, blood trickling down his nose, taking the impact of his punch as Dad struck again, this time his fist landing on Taimur's ribs. I watched as Abs jumped forward, holding Dad

from behind and Taimur's fists clenched, steadying himself as they were face to face and glaring at each other.

"Stop Taimur. He's my dad!" I cried out before he could hit my father. "Stop. Don't hit him. Please!"

"He's a fucking monster. What kind of man hits a woman? You're a pathetic excuse for a man. You make me sick."

"Come on Princess. You're coming with us," Abs said, from behind Dad. "Go get your stuff. We're leaving now."

I saw the anger in Taimur's heated stare like I had never seen before, his eyes filled with rage, his face stricken with fury and his jaw tight with crazy anger. His fists were still clenched as he decided what to do, watching me with a decision to make.

As Abs loosened his grip on my father to come to me again, I watched in horror as he flew forward, striking Taimur in the ribs again. Taimur's face tightened as Dad continued, shoving Taimur farther away from me with force. I watched as Taimur's patience snapped and he brought his fist higher in an attempt to fight back but I ran in between the two men, placing my trembling body in the middle.

"Stop. Please. STOP!" I begged again. "Just stop."

"I won't touch him if you come with me, Layla," Taimur said, arm still elevated in mid-air, blood dripping down his face and onto the wooden floorboards. "Come with me now, Pearl. Prove to me that you love me."

"Taimur..." I began. "He's my dad."

"And I'm your future – not him."

"Taimur... Try and understand. He's alone."

"If you leave now don't ever step foot in this house again Layla," Dad fumed. He pointed his finger at me, the same finger I clung to when I learned to walk as a toddler. My vision blurred with tears and my heart ached for my family. "You will be dead to me."

"Baba..." I pleaded. "I didn't mean for this to happen. This was not how it was supposed to go."

"Choose Layla. Think, what would you mum want? Me or him?"

"Her mum would want her to be happy and safe," Abs replied, his eyes darker than I'd ever seen as my father struggled against his hold. "Come on Princess."

"And you think this boy can keep her happy with two pence to his name, no father to support him anymore and his grief-stricken family?"

“Baba! Stop!”

“Your whole family is the laughingstock of our community,” he continued. “Your dad didn’t even leave enough money to get his family through a week. That’s how pathetic he was.”

“I suggest you stop talking,” Abs said, tightening his grip on my dad, refusing to back down now. “Tai might not punch you because of Layla, but I will.”

“I know things about your family that will shift the earth beneath your feet boy,” Dad spat. “About your parents... about your brother and sister...”

“BABA! STOP!” I yelled back at him.

“Your sister is the biggest whore...”

“BABA!”

“And your brother...”

“I CHOOSE HIM!” I yelled at the top of my voice to stop my dad. “I CHOOSE TAIMUR!”

Silence befell the room.

Abs let go of Dad.

“I’m sorry, but I won’t let you disrespect Taimur and his family. They are my family too.”

“I am your family, Layla. Only me,” he said, coming towards me but I backed away, moving behind Taimur.

“No Baba, if you were my family, you would want me to be happy and you wouldn’t hurt me,” I said, standing up to my father for the first time. “I know you’re angry at me and disappointed, but you have no right to take it out on Taimur and his family. I choose him. I choose to be with him – that’s not his fault. I fell in love with him myself and I won’t let you disrespect our love or what we have. I love him.”

“THEN LEAVE, YOU UNGRATEFUL CHILD! He continued to shout, coming up to me to push me away. Abs grabbed my arm, pulling me close to him in protection. “LEAVE, AND NEVER COME BACK!”

“Baba...” I begged. “Please...”

“LEAVE!”

“Come on, Princess,” Abs coaxed me, his sturdy arm placing his hoodie around my shoulders leading me towards the front door. “Let’s go. He’s never going to hurt you again *Wallahi*. I promise.”

But promises were made to be broken.

“You don’t need him, Pearl. You got us now,” Taimur said, taking me from Abs’s arms.

“I...I...” Tears streamed down my face uncontrollably. I sobbed into Taimur’s chest. “But I love you Baba.”

“Don’t ever call me that again. You are as dead to me as your mother.”

And that was the last words I heard my dad say before he slammed the door in my face as I left behind my old life, my childhood memories and my sister.

That day, not only did Taimur bury his father,
I did too.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Taimur

It was not supposed to happen like that.
Nothing about the situation was right.
I'd lost my father.

And she'd lost hers.

Looking back now, maybe it would have been better if mine and Layla's paths had never crossed, better if we'd never met, better if we'd never fallen in love, but as I looked down at the girl in my arms, felt her mould herself against my body, kissed her soft lips, her head resting on my heart beat, all she felt like was my destiny.

But the girl that lay on my chest no longer represented the strong vibrant girl I had met a few months ago, rather a vulnerable, shell of a girl who she used to be. I hardly recognised her.

"Pearl," I said, looking into her jaded eyes, red from crying throughout the night, when she thought I was asleep, and moving her silky hair away from her swollen face. "We need to talk."

"No, please. Not now," she whispered against my lips, her sad eyes begging me as I kissed her, hardly coming up for air. "Make me forget Taimur."

"I will but we need to figure some things out. So much has happened."

"I know, but not today. Please. It's all so raw. I just need time to adjust to my new reality, as do you."

"I just think it's better if we speak about it now rather than try and move on like nothing has happened. Baby, you're hurting."

“So are you, so let’s try and make each other forget for a while at least. I need something to switch my mind off, even if it’s for a little while. Please.”

“Do you want me to make you feel good baby?” I said, moving my hands down her body, knowing what she wanted. “Then we talk after?”

“Yes, but I want more.”

“How much more?”

“Everything Taimur. I want you to give me everything.”

There was a beat of silence before I finally replied.

“I can’t,” I said, trying to keep an inch of space between us so I could keep my restraint. “You’re upset, baby.”

“So are you.”

“We both lost something today, Pearl. We’re both hurting.”

“Let’s make the hurt go away then. Let’s heal each other.”

It had been a few hours since leaving Layla’s house and the three of us had made our way towards university. Abs had left us, realising that we had a lot to discuss and reiterating that he was there to support us in every way he could.

Zoya had called, begging Layla to come back, but she refused, telling Zoya to look after their father and that she loved him. How she could love someone so unlovable was beyond me but then I remembered that she also loved me when I was at my worst. This girl had such a big heart, and so much love to give that she couldn’t help but change the people around her till they loved her back. I’d seen it with my brothers, we were all powerless when it came to her, we would always be.

Layla had cried softly the whole way back, her face turned away from me and directed towards the imperfect world passing us by and her small hands hidden inside Abs’s long hoodie sleeves. I had tried to break the uncomfortable ice and I wanted to say so much, but alas, she was not ready to accept what had just happened.

I took that time to try and come to terms with my new reality. My reality without a father to protect me. My reality that Layla was now my responsibility too. I was now the man of the house and had responsibilities far more than I could ever fathom, taking care of the people I loved being the utmost important.

The deep feeling of sorrow burnt my heart from the inside and my eyes constantly watered when I thought of the last conversation I had had with

my dad, and how he told me our family meant the world to him, including Abs. The pain inside me made me light-headed and the feeling of misery crept inside my soul, never hinting a time where it would leave.

I felt empty.

I felt cold.

I felt destroyed.

Layla was hurting in a different way to me. I had just lost my dad without choosing it, but Layla had chosen to cut her father out of her life, and it was because of me. As Abs drove us further away from Layla's past, guilt began to consume me. It cut into my core, a place I had never felt before and I didn't know existed inside me. I felt trapped inside my mind, going over the series of events that had taken place in the last few days and desperately trying to find answers to the million questions floating around aimlessly in my thoughts.

Guilt.

Sadness.

Desperation.

I felt it all.

How had our lives changed in such a short span of time?

How had it changed with a few words in a few seconds?

On the one hand, I was worrying about my family, Kassim and Alia were hurting like myself, and on the other, I had Layla who was broken in her own way. Wherever my mind wandered, there was only pain, and I needed an escape.

"Kiss me, Taimur," Layla mumbled, as I lowered my head to meet her soft lips again. We were lying on her bed, wrapped up in each other, trying to curb the pain that dug into our hearts. I tried to kiss her slowly, making sure to take my time and taste every part of her mouth while in a hope to suck out every ounce of sadness she was feeling. "Kiss me harder. Kiss me forever."

I felt her graze her hands under my shirt, feeling my scorching skin as she left tiny goose bumps in her wake. Her nervous fingers trailed up my firm chest, over the ridges of my stomach muscles and towards my beating heart where she stopped, slowly kissing me back like she had no worries in the world and I wanted to savour her, savour every moment she allowed me to touch her. My melancholy heart beat faster under her sensual touch, sending sharp impulses to the rest of my body to never let her go.

“We have to stop before we get carried away,” I said, pulling back but her arms gripped tighter around me, inviting me to take something I was dying to take but I couldn’t.

She wasn’t ready.

Layla began to kiss my neck, her supple lips sucking on my tender flesh as my hands roamed her exquisite body like never before, sending tingles to all the right places making me crave her in ways I knew was wrong, with the state of mind we were both in. The way she touched me in that moment, with heat and hunger, sent my body in overdrive. Her suggestive hands moved from my chest to cup my cheeks, my bearded scruff under her fingertips and she tilted my head till her sad eyes met mine, both mirroring the pain we were feeling.

“I don’t want to stop today,” she murmured over my lips. “Make me forget Taimur. Please.”

“What do you want from me Pearl?”

“I told you. Everything.”

“Baby, you’re upset. We both are. We can’t.”

“We can. I know what I want, and I want you to make me forget today.”

“I can do the things we’ve done before, okay? I can make you feel good.”

“No. I want more.”

“Layla...” I began, moving away again. “You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re in shock. A lot happened today.”

“Make love to me.”

“I can’t. Making love isn’t about forgetting. You’re not thinking straight.”

“I am. I want you. I love you.”

“This is not you.”

“Is it.”

“You’re just upset.”

“So?”

“And you’re angry.”

“I’m not.”

“Are you doing this to spite your dad?”

“My dad is the furthest thing from my mind right now,” she said, coming in closer so our breaths were one. “Do you not want me? Is that it?”

“No, never baby. I want nothing more than to make love to you, but we decided to wait till we were married. It was what *you* wanted. It’s what *you* believed in. You wanted to wait. You wanted to leave that one thing undone until our wedding night, remember?”

“I don’t want to wait anymore. All I know is that when you kiss me, I want more.”

“Baby...” I sighed, as her body stiffened next to me. She was wearing her silky pyjamas. I watched as a slight blush crept over her cheeks and her eyes lowered with embarrassment.

“I just need more today Taimur. Can you give me that?”

“I don’t think it’s the right time. Let’s wait a bit longer. Let’s figure some things out before we take this step. I don’t want you to regret it.”

“I could never regret anything with you. I know what I want and need now, Taimur. I need to know that this wasn’t for nothing. I want to feel you like I’ve never felt you before. I want you to give me something no one has ever given me. I want to feel at peace with you, our souls connecting, our hearts beating as one.”

Glancing at her, I wondered, was I man looking at a saint on the verge of sinning or was this the right thing to do?

“I want you to show me that you love me. I know I wanted to wait but I realise now that there’s no guarantee we even have tomorrow.”

“Pearl...”

“I’m not finished. One moment we’re here and the next we could be gone. I don’t want to live my life with ‘what ifs’. I don’t want to go another day without knowing what it feels like to be completely yours. Baby, I want you. I need you. I love you. Something that feels this right can never be wrong. We were meant to be one, so why are we waiting? You are my fate, my destiny... This was all written. We were *always* meant to be, it just took me longer to figure it out.”

Her words were my undoing.

My mouth crashed onto her, our lips joining in a way they had been wanting to for too long and my hands tangled in her long hair, pulling her closer, allowing me to feel something other than the ripping of my heart.

This kiss was not like our others, filled with lust and desire, but rather with grief and heartbreak, both of us trying to heal something we had no idea how to fix.

I poured every ounce of my pain into her.

The pain of losing my father.
The pain of my widowed mother.
The pain of my siblings hurting.

While with every breath, sucking out her unbearable sorrow from her heart.

“I need you too, baby,” I whispered to her, tasting her salty tears on her lips. “I need you to make me feel anything other than what I feel right now.”

“I got you Taimur. We’ve got each other. This is forever.”

I slowly laid her down beneath me, placing myself between her parted legs, my erection already pushing at my trousers, angled towards her heavenly core. Her fingers found the hem of my polo and pulled it over my head whilst I began to unbutton her blouse, displaying her perfect breasts I’d never get used to seeing.

Round.

Perky.

Perfect in every way.

As soon as I saw the breath-taking view I froze, the realisation of what we were about to do suddenly hitting me. My anxious hands stopped moving and my breaths came out ragged as I stared back at her, her large green eyes asking me to continue.

“Layla...” I began in a whisper, not being able to take my eyes off the beautiful sight. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’ve never been so sure in my entire life,” she replied, pulling me down on top of her while her uneasy hands reached for the buttons of my jeans.

I stopped her.

“Layla...”

“Taimur, please. Don’t make me beg.”

“We can do other stuff?” I said again, trying to keep calm so I wouldn’t get carried away without her full permission. My heart beat faster than I could ever remember, and my head was spinning in anticipation. “I don’t want to mess this up Layla. I don’t want to take advantage of your state of mind right now. I don’t want you to regret this in the morning.”

“I told you already, I could never regret anything between us Taimur. You’re not taking advantage, Wallahi. I promise you, I’ve been thinking about this for a while now. I love you. I’m *in* love with you.”

I placed my hand under her chin, lifting her face so we were eye to eye to see into her soul.

“Love me Taimur. Make love to me. Make me yours forever,” she pleaded, running her fingers through my hair. I felt the bracelet I had given her jingle by my ear.

“Look at me Layla,” I said, trying to reason with her again, taking her hand and kissing her inner wrist gently, just under the piece of jewellery she hadn’t taken off. “I need you to understand that there’s no going back from this. Once you cross the line, you can’t take it back. Are you sure you want me to take your virginity?”

“Yes Taimur. I trust you.”

“Baby, you’re shivering. I don’t know if this is a good idea,” I said, searching her eyes for an answer while holding her close in my embrace. Our hearts beat in rhythm, playing to their own unique melody.

“I’m just nervous. Will it hurt a lot?”

Her innocence shook me.

“I promise to make the pain go away as soon as I can, but it will hurt at first.”

“I trust you Taimur.”

With that, I took her mouth again, hot and wet, kissing her as intensely as the way she was staring at me, before my tongue requested entrance and I parted her lips, devouring her completely. As her tongue sucked on mine, a carnal groan left my throat, and my body began to hum a tune it had not hummed in a long time.

Once she had undressed me, nervously pulling down my trousers, followed by polo and boxers, her tight fist wrapping around my already throbbing length, I moved her small hand off my excited body, not wanting to finish this before it even started. Pulling down her bottoms, my fingers caressed her soft skin as it came into view, while I gradually took off her clothes, peppering kisses all over her gorgeous curvy figure. Every kiss ignited a different response from her, but whether it was the tiny goosebumps on her arms, the sensual moan or her body arching off the bed, I knew that there was no coming back from what we were about to do and prayed with every lick, such and kiss that I was making the right decision. So, before pulling out an old condom from my wallet, I looked up at her to give me permission for the very last time.

And when I was finally inside her, sombre tears running down her beautiful cheeks, our broken hearts mending together, I knew that that was the closest to heaven I was ever going to be.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Layla

“**T**his is the first time for me too,” Taimur had murmured against my lips, stroking the hammering pulse in my neck before following it down to my thumping heart. He left his sturdy hand there, enjoying the acceleration of the rhythm as the butterflies, only he could ignite, returned to my stomach. “It’s my first time being someone’s first.”

I wanted him.

I needed him.

I loved him.

“I want you to feel me Pearl... I want you to feel me so deep within your soul that every time you need me I’m right there inside you, that every time you touch your skin, you think of me touching you and every time you look at your reflection, you see me in your mind, making love to you,” he had hoarsely groaned, while effortlessly kissing every inch off my naked body, worshipping me like I was his Goddess. “I want to engrave myself so far inside your secluded heart that you never feel alone again and even in a hundred years, you can’t get me out.”

His heated gaze had set my body on fire and my foolish heart thrashed in my chest, going into overdrive at his words. I wanted him to stare at me like that forever, never stopping or looking away, as if we were the only two people who mattered, as if I was the only girl in the world for him.

In that moment, I knew that I was his and he was mine, and there was no way I was ever letting him go.

We lay bare on my soft bed, naked and exposed, wrapped in each other as he cupped my damp cheeks in his large hands, his thumbs stroking my lips while wiping my tears before his plump mouth lowered onto mine. His tongue asked for permission, which I instantly gave, my lips opening for him to take whatever he wanted.

His kiss started slow, sucking and caressing, before it eventually turned frantic, hungry and raw, his arousal as evident as mine, rubbed against my wet folds, sending little sparks of electricity down my spine. And as the anxiety soared through me, I began to enjoy the feeling of the tension building at my core.

My worries were temporarily forgotten.

My mind went blank.

Nothing else mattered.

Taimur's hot mouth continued to devour mine, almost as if he was desperate to feel as much as he could, the intensity of our kiss growing higher at every stoke and graze when I realised that this was the first time that Taimur was not holding back. This was the first time he was also giving me the whole of him and exposing himself like never before, that he too was *entirely* mine.

The raw.

The real.

The reckless.

All mine.

His lips travelled from my swollen mouth, down my pale neck, tasting my skin while sucking on everything he could get their hands on. Once he reached the swells of my breasts, he took a moment to look up at me from under his thick eyelashes, his hair already dishevelled from my fingers running through them and his eyes filled with a new kind of hunger I'd never seen before.

"I don't know if I deserve you Layla, but I'm a selfish bastard and I need you as much as you need me today. I need to forget too. I need to feel anything other than this insane ache inside my heart."

"You've got me Taimur. You've got all of me," I told him as he finally took my left nipple into his mouth. My back arched off the bed as soon as he closed in on it, the sensation of his scorching tongue twirling around my hard nub setting my entire body alight while his other hand palmed my right breast, rolling my other nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Taimur...” I moaned, not having a care in the world that I sounded needy and for the first time, ready to break through every barrier I’d ever placed around myself.

His tongue continued to brush back and forth between my aroused peaks, tormenting me till I was withering beneath him, not able to take anymore and desperate for any kind of release.

“Please... more,” I gasped, as he responded by gently biting into my soft flesh, a feral groan escaping his mouth, while he made his way down my body, his fingers instantly finding my slippery folds and drawing lazy circles with his thumb on my clit.

“I need to loosen you up baby. I need to make you wetter so I can slip inside you easily or it will hurt a lot.”

“Hmmm...” I moaned, just about understanding what he was saying through the pleasure of his touch. My hands found their way down his body, tracing every curve and muscle until I reached his engorged shaft, my tender hand gripping it firmly as I began to stroke him the way I knew he enjoyed. His head fell back, eyelids closing in bliss, but his fingers didn’t stop drawing out the ecstasy feeling I knew was coming soon.

“Baby... I think you’re wet enough to take me. One last time Layla, are you sure?”

“Just make love to me Taimur.”

“Condom,” he muttered, quickly moving around to fish one out of his wallet, ripping it open with his teeth before covering his shaft, carefully pinching the tip. “I wish I could go in raw. One day I will.”

I felt him line himself directly to my aching entrance, his throbbing erection clumsily sliding through my sensitive lower lips, the sound of my juices rubbing against his cock turning me on like never before, till I was ready to fall apart in his arms.

“Baby, this is going to hurt,” he said, remorse in his eyes. “But I swear, I’m going to make you feel so good after.”

“I trust you,” I repeated as I felt the first push of his cock penetrate me, a sharp sting beginning to punish me as he stopped, allowing me to adjust to his girth. My legs clamped around his waist, holding him in place and his fingers found my clit again, massaging my delicate folds till the pain subsided and the pleasure took over.

“Are you okay Pearl? Do you want me to stop?”

“No, keep moving. Deeper. Please.”

“Hold on to me baby. I love you.”

And when he finally entered me fully, breaking through our last barrier and joining us as one, it not only burnt physically, but also in my soul, realising I was giving away a piece of myself I could never get back, a piece I was conditioned to keep with me until I was married. My long nails dug into his scorching flesh, my teeth biting into his broad shoulder trying to curb the fiery discomfort and hot tears welled up behind my burning eyelids as he gradually rocked into me, his eyes not leaving mine, permanently leaving a part of himself inside me - *a part I would spend the next decade trying to remove.*



AS THE MORNING SUN CAME BACK INTO VIEW, SO DID THE MEMORIES OF THE night before. I laid awake most the night, naked and wrapped in Taimur's protective arms, listening to him silently breathe and waiting for the realisation of my actions to sink in, and the guilt to finally invade my mind like an ugly disease, distorting my memories of making love to the guy I was in love with, and just like clockwork, as the first rise of the sun shone through the morbid clouds, the sentiments of the night before came swarming in, bulldozing my post orgasmic state.

My dad.

My mum.

My God?

What had I done? Would Dad find out? Would he ever love me again? Would Mum be disappointed if she was alive? Was I going to hell?

Usually, I woke just before sunrise to pray the morning prayers but today, after breaking such a fundamental rule I had always promised myself I wouldn't break, I couldn't bring myself to turn to God without the guilt eating away at me.

Predictably, guilt didn't come to the party alone, it also brought its friends - remorse and self-condemnation. Between the three, the feeling of contentment I had felt while lying in Taimur's arms vanished and as I watched him sleep, his bare chest rising and falling with every calming breath, I tried to slip away without being noticed.

I needed to get out of there.

I needed to think straight.

What had just happened?

“Good morning, beautiful,” Taimur said, stirring as I moved his firm arm away from my bare stomach. I pulled the white sheets higher, so I was covering most of my unclothed body with them. “I can’t wait to wake up to this every morning when we’re married.”

I felt a small remorseful smile creep onto my face as I heard his words, his nude body beside me making me blush.

“You can’t blush anymore. I’ve seen all of you. I’ve even tasted you,” he said, winking at me. I felt bile rise from my stomach as the memories of last night peeked their head once again. *What had I done?* “You don’t need to be shy. You are breathtakingly beautiful, Pearl.”

“Thank you,” I said, blushing even harder as he chuckled, before moving his mouth to cover mine. He slipped his soft tongue passed my guarded lips and worked his way into my mouth to wake me up in a way I had never been woken before.

When I didn’t respond the way he thought I would, Taimur pulled back, resting his forehead against mine and looking into my sleepy eyes. Both of us were panting, trying to catch our breath, while our racing hearts had accelerated to a higher level than earlier.

“Are you sore?” he asked, looking concerned. “Did I hurt you last night?”

“No.”

“So, no regrets?”

“Ummm... No,” I lied. “You?”

“Never Pearl. There are no regrets with you,” he said, with a hunger in his eyes I found hard to place. Only a few hours ago we had been making love and even though he hadn’t touched me sensually since then, I felt him all over me. “What you gave me last night Layla... I will cherish that forever.”

“I have to go,” I said, pulling the sheets off the bed with me while moving into the bathroom. His words were affecting me, and I needed him to stop. I heard Taimur sigh, sensing my remorse.

I couldn’t hide from him.

He saw right through me.

“Wait Pearl. One minute,” he said, standing to place his boxers on before rummaging through the fridge. I watched him pull out a smaller

toilet bag where he kept his insulin injections and remove an alcohol wipe to prep his skin for his injection. "We need to talk."

"Not now. Please," I begged.

"Layla," he began, placing his injection back into his bag and walking towards me. I clung to the sheets tighter, watching my knuckles turn white with the force. "A lot happened yesterday. We need to talk about it. You said we could talk after."

"Taimur..."

"You left your dad."

"And your dad *died*."

"And we made love."

There was an awkward silence as both of us stared at each other, trying to understand what was going on. Seconds turned into minutes. We both knew that as soon as one of us spoke, everything would inevitably change, and we were not sure if the change was going to be a good or bad one. Not wanting to ruin what we had, we both didn't want to make the first move, denial being our best friend right now.

"You regret it," Taimur finally said, hands pulling at the roots of his thick hair. "Don't you? This was a mistake to you."

"Taimur..."

"Just say it, Pearl."

"It's not like that..."

"What's it like?"

"You've slept with lots of girls before Taimur, don't..."

"Don't what?"

"Don't act like it was different with me."

"Are you serious right now? You're doing it again Layla. How many times are you going to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Push me away when you get scared."

"I'm not..."

"I asked you Layla, I asked you over and over again. God, I'm so stupid. I should have stopped."

"Taimur..."

"Why don't you understand that I love you and last night I made love to someone for the very first time. It's wasn't about sex. It was *love*."

"I...I..." I stuttered.

“I’m sorry. I should never have... Fuccckk!”

“Stop Taimur. Please, this wasn’t your fault. It was mine.”

“Fault...” he whispered, his voice disappearing into the silence. I watched him pace the floor, constantly raking his hands over his hair, pulling at the roots as he did when he was stressed. “So, this was a mistake.”

“I...” but before we could continue the conversation, there was a banging on the front door and Abs’s voice chimed in. I quickly grabbed my clothes and ran into the adjoining bathroom before anyone saw what was going on between us, and that was where I found myself half an hour later, eavesdropping on a conversation between Taimur and Abs about him leaving for the States.

As I had showered, I didn’t know if I was trying to wash away the shame of the night before or wash Taimur off my skin, attempting to scrub him out of my soul. I thought back to the series of events that landed me feeling like I had betrayed everything I had set myself to believe – my upbringing, my religion, my God. And as the water ran down my body, the same body that Taimur had touched last night, making me feel like an angel, I prayed the guilt would wash away with it but alas, my conscience didn’t let go of the blame that easily and I still felt him everywhere.

I felt him everywhere.

I felt his hands in my hair, his stubbly mouth on my skin and his kisses in my soul.

He was so deep inside me now I knew there was no way of letting him out.

My entire body still tingled from the feeling of his touch and the sensation overwhelmed me in a way I didn’t want it to. I ran my hands down my body, tracing the path Taimur had with his lips while watching the water droplets stick to my charm bracelet and analysed the piece of jewellery for the first time since I had put it on.

While I rubbed the silver images in between my fingertips, smooth and wet, I felt an unusual sense of belonging I hadn’t felt since I lost my mum and as each charm stared back at me, indicating a different part of mine and Taimur’s relationship, the feeling of emancipation washed through me, engulfing me in a sort of liberation I didn’t know was possible.

How could something so empowering be so wrong?

How could something that felt so right last night make me feel so iniquitous in the morning?

It was my fault.

I had instigated the entire night.

I had given him my virginity.

I peeped out of the bathroom, trying to stay as silent as possible to listen to the conversation but all I saw was Taimur.

The surrounding blurred and all I could see was him.

I heard him repeat my name, over and over again, trying to explain why he couldn't leave me, but Abs didn't understand. I watched Taimur closer, listening to his words about not leaving me and I began to gradually realise that if he was willing to give up his dreams, his future and the security for his family for the love he had for me, to show me he loved me, I was also able to show him I loved him too.

The look on his face when he realized I regretted last night was as if I'd shot a bullet straight into his heart and was letting him bleed out onto the floor, but what I didn't notice was that, as he bled out, I was bleeding out too. I didn't comprehend that we were now joined as one, our hearts merged so that if one was hurting, the other was in agony and, I didn't recognise that our lives were now united, attached and bound together like threads, where there was no future for me without him in it, and what I didn't understand was that joining our bodies together was little compared to the way our hearts had been bound for the past year.

I began to think of the connection I had just formed, an eternal connection that would one day bring about a future I had not imagined. I came to the conclusion that giving him a physical part of me was natural since he already had the rest of me, and soon we would be joined together in holy matrimony too.

As the realisation crashed into me, my heart began to soar away from my body and towards Taimur, pushing me to tell him how wrong this morning had started and begging him to let me start it again, the correct way.

I didn't regret last night; I didn't regret giving my virginity to Taimur and I didn't regret giving my heart to him either. I was done with running, hiding behind my religion and I was ready to embrace the future, with or without my father's blessings.

“I don’t regret it,” I said, as soon as Abs left the room. Taimur looked up from his phone, eyes trying to understand my words. “I don’t regret a moment with you Taimur. I love you.”

“Let’s get married,” he blurted out, confusion written over his face.

“What?”

“Let’s get married, Pearl.”

“We will. When you come back from the States.”

“No. Now.”

“Why? Because we had sex?”

“Not only because of that.”

“Okay, wait a second. Do you want to marry me because you love me or because I gave you my virginity?”

Silence.

In two short strides, Taimur was in front of me, taking me into his embrace before kissing my lips hungrily. His fiery tongue stroked my soft one, his hard hands roamed my supple body and his painful teeth bit into my plump bottom lip, kissing me with all he had. What seemed like hours later, he broke our connection, his forehead rested on mine as we both panted.

“I want to marry you because I can’t see my life without you in it. I don’t want to. I love you, Layla. I’m always going to love you. You’re my forever. Marry me before I leave for the States. Even if it’s just the Islamic marriage, just marry me baby.”

“Okay,” I said, kissing him again. This was right. This was how it was supposed to me. “We can do our nikah before you leave, we won’t be legally married, but we’ll do the legal stuff when you come back home.”

That night, Taimur made love to me again and again, taking my body to a new level of divine pleasure which changed me in ways I didn’t realise back then. It changed things I didn’t expect to change, and I opened the last part of myself to him, allowing him to plant his seeds deep within my soul to grow into I never knew existed.

I finally understood that love didn’t come with a warning sign and didn’t ask for permission before taking over your life, it didn’t care about boundaries or limitations, but it was selfish and senseless, demanding and persistent, not giving a damn about the consequences of the havoc it left in its wake.



WE GOT MARRIED.

Not legally, but Islamically.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” Abs had asked, worry written all over his ruggedly handsome face while both Nabeel and Kassim frowned in the background of Regents Park Mosque.

It had taken a while to find a preacher who was willing to marry us without my father being my guardian, but once we convinced him that we were over eighteen, doing it for the right Islamic reasons and wanted to spend our lives together, we finally found one that agreed.

“Too much has happened in the last few days. You guys aren’t in the right state of mind to make such big decisions, don’t you think?” Nabeel joined in, his fingers brushing through his electric blue hair.

“I would have to agree,” Kassim replied, “Why are you guys rushing this? Mum’s not even here.”

“We’re not rushing. We know what we want. There’s no guarantees in life. That’s what the last few days have taught us. Wallahi we want this. Taimur *and* me.”

“Look, I’m all for spontaneity, but are you sure Layli? I can keep talking to Dad. We can sort this mess out,” Zoya asked too.

“I think it’s romantic. I love it. Good on you guys,” Alia chimed in, her secret gaze landing on Nabeel who was still pulling at his blue roots, eyes on everyone apart from Alia.

“But don’t you want a big fat wedding, Layli? Where you can wear a beautiful white dress and get you makeup done, instead of this plain pink one with that old headscarf you’ve had since you were nine.”

“It was Mums’. That’s why I picked it for today.”

“She looks perfect just the way she is,” Taimur said, my cheeks turning pink while taking me into his arms. “Now let’s go find the Imam to get us hitched so I can take my bride home and make love to her all night long.”

“TMI!” Alia complained as I playfully hit Taimur’s arm.

“Come on, let’s go get married.”

The process was short. One preacher, one Walli guardian which I chose to be Abs, four witnesses who were the closest people to us, a small amount of money Taimur had to gift to me called Mahr and a promise to love each

other unconditionally until death do us part. Once the religious words were recited, we were married and ready to start our lives together as one.



“I WISH YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO GO?” I SAID, TRYING TO HOLD BACK THE tears that threatened to pour out my eyes as Taimur passed me a disposable cup of tea, that he obviously mixed up by the time he left the coffee shop and got to me. When I glanced up at him, the pain in his eyes mirrored mine.

It had been over a month since Taimur’s dad had passed away, my dad had kicked me out, and we had been living as husband and wife. However, even though we had tried to keep positive about the situation, the hardship that had begun to take a toll on our relationship began to eat at us, slowly seeping through our happiness.

I had been living at university over the Christmas break, not being able to go home and thankfully, Taimur stayed with me, spending all his time trying to make me smile even though I constantly saw the sadness in his eyes.

Taimur missed his dad more than he could vocalise but since he was the oldest sibling, he was able to pretend he was alright and keep it together better than the other two however, at night, when he thought I was asleep, I would hear him cry for his loss. Those nights, I held him closer, trying to use his love for me to ease his pain in any way I physically could, which usually ended up with us making love till early hours of the morning, trying to lose the pain in one another while our minds stopped spiralling out of control for a little while, so we could just feel the moment we were in.

“Just say the word and I won’t go Pearl. I’m sure I can find something here,” he said, our noses touching as he leaned in closer, the smell of his district soap surrounding me.

“No. You have to go,” I reminded him and myself.

“I’m only doing this for us, baby,” he said, threading his fingers in mine. “I have nothing right now, no money, no car, no degree and no house.”

“I don’t care about that stuff, you know that. I just want you, Taimur. You are everything I never even knew I wanted.”

"I know. I just want more for us. I can't ask your dad to accept us if I have nothing."

"I don't care if he accepts us anymore."

"You say that now Pearl, but I know you're just speaking out of anger. I know deep down you want your dad to give you away and once I have my degree and a good paying job I'll ask him, and he'll have no reason to say no. Let me make something of myself for you, baby."

"You already are something to me, in fact you're *everything* to me Taimur."

With that, my hot tears came flooding. Taimur tightened his grip on me, holding me as close as possible while my body shook as I cried onto his pale blue shirt. After a few minutes he held me by my hunched shoulders, pulling me away from him so he could look into my swollen red eyes, and I chewed on my bottom lip.

"I can't leave with you like this, Pearl," he said, wiping the tears off my face only to find new fresh ones coming out. "I'll be worried the whole time I'm away if this is the last picture I have of you."

"I can't help it."

"It hurts me too, but I know that a little sacrifice now will give us a happy future."

"I know you're right," I admitted, taking a long breath to try and calm myself down. So much had happened in such a short space of time. "I love you, Taimur."

"I love you, my sweet little Pearl. Your love consumes me. Since the day you stormed into my life with your box of Coco Pops, you turned it upside down. You gave me purpose. You made me complete. You're the greatest thing that's ever happened to me Layla. You made me believe that there's something good in this ugly world, that there are good people in this universe. You changed me. You're my saving grace, baby. You're my anchor on my shittiest days and my beacon of hope in the darkest. You loved me so fiercely, so completely that you made a believer out of a sinner."

I couldn't speak.

I didn't even know what to say to that, so I came closer, pulling on his shirt, that now had my wet mascara marks all over, and my lips crashed into his.

From the corner of my eye I could see his brothers watching, but for once I didn't care. Taimur was leaving for a full year, and I wanted to kiss him, so he would remember how it felt to be together.

As we touched I melted into him and he took over, pulling me in closer. Taimur's tongue went from gently licking to a greedier movement in seconds, completely devouring my mouth while his hands were on my waist, roughly lifting up my shirt to feel my warm flesh of my stomach, as if he was desperate to feel my skin. His strong hands held me so tight that I was sure I would be bruised tomorrow but I didn't care because that kiss was telling me everything I wanted to hear.

That he loved me.

That he would *keep* loving me.

That he would be back for me.

Suddenly I felt us moving as he backed me into the cold wall and pushed harder so that I could clearly feel how excited he was. Moving my legs apart while not breaking the kiss, he found a comfortable place between my legs where he could push into me harder, rubbing all the right places that sent tingles down my body. I moaned again, wishing I could stop making those embarrassing noises, but it just turned him on further as he groaned back into my mouth. The groan was eaten up by our hungry kiss like it was the last time we would be together, the last time he would feel my lips on him and the last time I would be his to touch.

He finally broke apart, touching his forehead to mine while we both gasped for air.

"That's how you say goodbye," he said, kissing the corners of my mouth slowly. "I love you, Layla."

I loved the way my name rolled off his tongue, but I preferred being his Pearl. I couldn't fathom that I used to hate him calling me that. I smile stupidly back at him, trying not to look at his brothers who have just witnessed the most passionate public kiss between us, but they stroll over.

"Uhum..." Abs said, clearing his throat and looking embarrassed. He was not one for PDA. "You're going to miss your flight if you don't hurry."

"Yeah yeah... I was just saying goodbye."

"That's fine as long as you don't say goodbye to *us* like that," Nabeel joked, but you could clearly see his sadness glistening in his eyes, hiding away behind his sarcasm. I guessed he didn't want to lose his brother too.

"Shut up," Taimur laughed, still holding me. "I'm going."

He finally let go of my hand to hug the three boys one by one, whispering into their ears. I wondered what he was saying. Lastly, he turned to me, looking directly into my watering eyes. His gaze was heated, and I could see them swelling up with tears.

“I have to go now,” he said, taking his hand luggage into his hand. “I love you Pearl, always have and always will. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I love you too. Text me when you land,” I mumbled, trying to keep myself from breaking down. “And we’ll Skype every night, right?”

“Definitely.”

“I love you, Taimur Khalidi.”

“I love you too, Layla Khalidi.”

And with that he began to walk away, turning around every few steps to see me.

“Wait for me Pearl,” he yelled back, turning one last time at the security gates.

“Forever,” I promised him, tears streaming down my face.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Taimur

It took three months for my world to fully fall apart and for me to lose everything I had worked for my entire life.

Everything.

“What the hell is going on?” I yelled down the phone at Alia, panic starting to overwhelm me as I read the e-invite that took over my laptop screen. I had read the email over and over again, and by now I had memorised each sentence, each word, each syllable. “Why won’t she pick up my bloody calls?” I continued to bark at a person who didn’t deserve my anger.

Running my distressed fingers through my long hair, I fiercely tugged at the roots in an aim to feel something other than the pain in my aching chest. I rubbed at it, trying to ease the burn but the more I did, the more my skin stung.

I couldn’t breathe.

I couldn’t think.

I couldn’t live.

I was halfway across the world, livid, with no contact with the girl I was in love with, who I had made my wife. It had been twenty-four hours since I had heard from her and that was extremely unusual since we usually spoke all day, every day in the past months I’d been away.

Three months.

Three months away from her and I physically couldn’t stand the separation so how was I supposed to survive a full year let alone my entire

life?

“I have no idea. I’m as baffled as you, Tai,” Alia informed me, genuinely sounding as confused as me.

Alia had obviously been around from the beginning of mine and Layla’s relationship, so she too didn’t quite understand what was going on as much as I did. She was there from the day we met, to the day we hated each other, to the day we fell in love to the day we got married. She had witnessed it all, along with my other two brothers who had been texting me continuously since the news broke out.

“Have you spoken to him?”

“He won’t pick up too,” she said.

“What the fuck? That’s it.” I decided, pacing my new apartment. I felt physically sick. I had to do something. “I’m coming home on the next flight.”

“But your internship...”

“I don’t give a...”

“But...”

“Is not as important as her, Lia. Nothing is.”

“I get that, but if you leave right now you won’t be able finish your degree. It’s not like the university will take this as an extenuating circumstance. You’ll be thrown out of uni, Tai.”

“The whole point of the degree was for her, anyways. The plan was to get a good degree then a good job and finally legally marry her. That was the plan. Our plan. But if there’s no Layla, there is no fucking plan.”

“Maybe there’s been some kind of misunderstanding. Let me try and talk to them before you fly back home and waste your time as well as your money,” she said, knowing that money was tight at the moment. It wasn’t like our family could afford to fly me back whenever I wanted, and now since dad wasn’t around, it had become even more difficult for our mum to pay the bills. I had worked all summer just to be able to afford the accommodation out here in the States and thankfully they had offered me a scholarship that covered my entire tuition fee for the year.

“Maybe it’s a joke,” Alia continued, trying to calm me down. Nothing was going to calm me down till I figured this out.

This had to be a joke.

This could not be happening.

“There’s no way she would joke about marrying him. Has he said anything to you at all? This is fucking stupid. She loves me Lia, she told me just yesterday.”

“She still does, Tai. You can’t switch off *love* in a day.”

I tried to remember the last conversation I had had with Layla. I knew there was something wrong when she called me yesterday. Her voice was more timid, and she kept pausing as if she wanted to say something but couldn’t. I had called her out on it, but she shook it off saying she just missed me. Hearing that always put my mind at ease and she knew it. Why hadn’t I pushed harder? I knew it was something else, but I was too busy settling in to worry.

“I’m booking my flight now.”

“Wait! Give me a day,” Alia said, “Just one day and then you can decide what you want to do.”

“A day is too long. A lot can happen in a day,” I replied, and at that point I wished I knew how true my words were and how that *one* decision of waiting *one* day would change my life forever.

A lot can happen in one day.

“Okay but...” before I could finish my trail of thought I saw something on Facebook that stopped me in my stride. My breath caught, and my mind went blank as I was a picture of him holding Layla’s hand with a diamond ring on it. Even though the diamond was small, it was the centre of the picture, but it was her face that caught my attention.

Her face was beaming with the smile she usually reserved only for me. She looked up at him from under her thick eyelashes, grinning like they were in the middle of a private joke only the two of them were in on.

She looked beautiful and for a second, I stopped breathing.

She wore a stunning pink dress, her favourite colour, with an elegant white head scarf covering her long auburn hair I loved to comb my fingers through while she slept. As I stared at her, I forgot what was going on and smiled at the picture of my girl, she was exquisite, till I moved my attention back to the guy in a suit, looking very smart – I hated it.

I hated him.

She had captioned the picture ‘Love of my life’.

Love of *her* life?

That was supposed to be *me*.

They say there's a thin line between love and hate, and as my love for one of my brothers shattered into a million pieces, never to be able to be joined again, I clicked on the next picture of my girl kissing him on the cheek.

My girl.

My Layla.

My Pearl.

Mine.

The pain I felt while seeing the pictures was so raw and agonising that the sudden thought of death seemed more appealing than living with it, at least then I wouldn't hurt like every bone in my body was broken, every tendon in my lifeless corpse was torn and every time I breathed, the pain only seemed to escalate.

They said everything happened for a reason, but I didn't believe in a higher power planning my destiny and writing down my fate, but what I did know was that life could change in a blink of an eye, that one decision made in one weak moment, could topple your life, turning it upside down and there would be no warning for you to prepare yourself for the downfall.

This was my downfall.

"Tai? You there?"

"Yeah," I just about managed to croak out as bile rose to my mouth and my head began to spin like I was going to pass out. "I just saw her Facebook picture Lia. They're engaged. This is real. They're *actually* engaged."

"No, they can't be. No one even told me. This is stupid. He would tell me first." I could clearly hear the hurt in her voice, a hurt I recognised in mine too.

"Apparently, he only proposed to her today, at university and they're going to call everyone now."

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I just read a comment on Facebook. Everyone is congratulating them. They wouldn't put it up online if it wasn't true."

There was an elongated pause between us, silence. I didn't understand what was going on. We were supposed to be in love. We were married. We were supposed to have a future. We were supposed to make a family. I didn't understand why she had agreed to marry someone else.

Nothing made sense.

I'd always known that he liked her, even though in the beginning he didn't admit it, I saw their friendship blossom, but I thought that was because of me and I trusted them.

She was my pearl.

She was mine.

I didn't care how much he wanted her because she wanted me.

She told me.

I needed to call her again.

I needed answers.

I needed to see her.

I could always read her. Her expressive eyes hid nothing from me anymore, they were an open book written in a language only I could read.

"What do you want me to do?" Alia finally asked, breaking me out of my thoughts again.

"Try and stall the engagement party until I get back," I said, abruptly pulling a duffle bag out from under my bed and unzipping it. I began to chuck things into it, missing the opening till a bottle of my aftershave smashed against the wall and shattered into pieces.

"What happened?" Alia asked, still on speaker.

"Nothing," I replied, cutting my fingers as I picked up the pieces cutting my fingers but felt no pain.

"You sure about this?"

"Yes. I'm not letting her go Lia. I fucking love her," I roared, trying to explain to my sister how I felt. "She's my wife!"

"Okay, okay... then I'll stall."

"I'm sorry Lia," I replied, remorseful. "Thank you. I'll be there soon."

"Okay. Fly safe Tai," she said before hesitantly hanging up.

I looked back at my laptop screen and at the girl I was in love with.

Why was she doing this?

I needed answers.

I needed them now.

Hurrying, I googled flights to London on my phone and began scrolling through like a mad man, trying to figure out which one to take but not understanding the words on the screen in front of me. My thumbs slipped, and my view was blurred.

I was furious.

I was hurt.

I was confused.

Just then my mobile pinged. Assuming it was one of my brothers, I clicked onto my messages to see what update they had on the situation, but the message I read was one I was not expecting.

One that I wish I hadn't read.

One that I wished wasn't true.

It was from Layla and all it said was:

LAYLA

It's over. I can't do this. I'm sorry.

TAIMUR

Why are you doing this Pearl?

What's wrong baby?

Speak to me.

Pick up!!!

Why the hell are you doing this to us, Layla?

I can't breathe without you.

Pick up your god damn phone!

We're married.

LAYLA!

PICK UP!!!!!!!

Don't do this to us. I love you.

Why are you doing this?

WHY ARE YOU BREAKING YOUR OWN HEART?

Stop it.

Is this some sick joke.

Pearl, you're my air. I can't breathe without you.

I'm suffocating here.

I'm coming home.

LAYLA

Don't.

TAIMUR

Why?

What? Why?

LAYLA

Because I'm in love with your brother.

WHAT?

What the fuck? Kassim.

What?

They say you never forget the *actual* moment your heart breaks, that you always remember the feeling, the sting and the sharp pain that goes with it, and nothing you ever do, or have been though would compare to that feeling of that agony,

that torment

or that torture.

So, as I read her words, realising it wasn't a sick joke, the ground under my feet crumbled along with my heart, and just like that, everything I'd known, everything I'd loved and everything I'd worked for, slipped away from me and into the hands of another man, and on that cold day,

I didn't only lose the love of my life,

I lost my brother too.



[Pre-order book two](#), When Fate Was Rewritten, for the epic finale to Taimur and Layla's love story.

Author's Notes

Thank you for taking a chance on my debut novel. I know the ending is abrupt and you want to know what happens to Layla and Taimur, but I couldn't fit the rest of their love story in this book. Stay tuned, you will get your answers - I promise.

In the meantime, follow me on Instagram @aamaroauthor to find out what I'm up to.

Thanks again for picking me,

A. Amaro

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Zoey, our relationship is one of a kind. We hardly have any barriers left since I've seen things I don't want to mention here. My life would be incomplete without you. Not only is our relationship one of a kind, but so are u-never forget that. I love you.

Suzie, I love you! I hope we get to celebrate our birthdays together forever. From the day you were born, you brought hope into my life and till today you are my sunshine on the rainiest of days. Saying you are special doesn't do justice to what you are.

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