

Fatima No Cry

Chapter 1: Paging Dr. Fatima

*Saint Mary's Pediatric Hospital, Detroit – A
Tuesday in Early Spring*

Dr. Fatima El-Mansouri pressed the end-call button on her phone with the slow, reluctant finality of someone closing a chapter she hadn't even agreed to begin. Her mother's voice still rang in her ears – a whirlwind of excitement, tradition, and not-so-subtle manipulation.

"He's here, habibti. Doctor Abdul Farsi – a heart surgeon! From Los Angeles! Handsome, successful, and ready to settle down. Your father wants you home in the next 45 minutes. Don't keep your guest waiting."

Fatima stood motionless for a few seconds, staring at the blank screen. In that sterile administration room, with its whiteboards and case files, she felt anything but sterile. She felt contaminated—with obligation, frustration, and just the faintest scent of Vicks VapoRub from Nurse Deborah's workstation.

She reached for her coat, then paused. Her eyes fell on a box of Kleenex branded with cheerful cartoon bears and the logo: Saint Mary's Pediatric Children's Hospital. She tucked it under her arm like a comfort object. Maybe she'd need it.

Outside, the spring wind nipped at her scrubs as she walked. She didn't have a plan. She just knew she couldn't go home. Not yet. Not to Abdul. Not to her little sister's giddy matchmaking giggles.

Not to her grandmother inspecting her hands for "bride quality." And certainly not to her father watching the clock like an auctioneer.

She wandered through the neighborhood near the hospital – streets she'd passed daily but never noticed. Brick buildings that faded into her peripheral vision were suddenly alive with detail: ivy creeping between cracks, chalk art on sidewalks, an old man humming near a bench, a teen selling roses.

She usually walked on the other side of the street – the safe, familiar one. Today, she crossed to the side where the small handwritten sign read: "Your Neighborhood Café" in faded blue paint. But something else caught her eye.

*A restaurant she had never entered. Small.
Cramped. Three little tables and six rickety chairs
out front like teeth in need of braces. She recognized
the place. Nurses talked about it – especially the
Jamaican nurses. Always take-out orders. “Jerk pork
this” and “oxtail that.” They never offered her any,
of course. Not because they were rude – but because
she was Dr. Fatima, headscarf and all. The Muslim
pediatrician. Probably too fancy for takeout.*

And maybe... she was.

*But today, her white coat stayed at the hospital.
Today, it was just her scrubs, her sensible sneakers,
and her mood – a tornado of resentment and dread
spiraling toward a fiancé she hadn't picked.*

She sat down.

No one was around. The door was propped open with a bottle of Ting soda. Reggae played faintly from a back speaker, punctuated by a voice singing along slightly off-key. Somewhere in the back, the phone rang. Someone shouted something indecipherable over the sound of sizzling meat.

That's when he walked out.

Nasir. Or at least, she thought that was his name. The guy she always saw here – tall, lean, with dreadlocks tucked under a cap, and an effortless strut that made him look like he was dancing even when he was walking. She'd never actually spoken to him. Sometimes he yelled something across the street when she passed in the summer. Something in patois. Something she didn't understand – and assumed was inappropriate.

She always waved him off with a hand gesture like she was swatting away a mosquito.

Today, he saw her sitting and wiped his hands on a towel. He raised an eyebrow, half-surprised, half-amused.

"No woman, no cry... not here, Doctor Lady."

His tone was sing-songy, half Bob Marley, half bartender sass.

Fatima blinked.

"That's rude," she replied, caught off guard.

"Not as rude as bringing tears into my restaurant. Messes with the vibe." He gave her a mock-serious look.

"What you need is something hot. Spicy. Something to make your nose actually do something useful."

Fatima felt her cheeks flush. She clutched her Kleenex box like a shield.

"Don't pick on my nose," she mumbled.

He grinned. "Don't tempt me."

There it was – the crack in her armor. The flicker of laughter that wanted to escape, but couldn't. Not yet.

"I don't eat jerk," she said finally."

"Look around, lady. Everyone here's Muslim. And I'm still selling out of jerk chicken every day."

The phone rang again. Someone yelled "two more jerk pork, take-out!" A beat-up Hyundai pulled up with a young Black guy in a snapback who hustled through the back door.

Fatima stared at the man in front of her.

His confidence annoyed her. His teasing unsettled her. But mostly, it intrigued her. Because for the first time today, she wasn't thinking about Abdul Farsi.

"Fine," she said. "Bring the jerk chicken. Just don't tell anyone I liked it."

He gave her a wink. "Your nose will thank you."

And with that, something changed.

Chapter 2: No Woman, No Cry... Except You

The plate landed in front of her with a gentle clink, steam rising like a spirit in prayer. It carried the scent of scotch bonnet peppers, charred thyme, and something smoky—deep, ancient, and untranslatable. Fatima stared at it like it might bite her back.

“Relax,” Nasir said, leaning on the counter with exaggerated cool. “It’s not going to convert you to anything but flavor.”

She gave him a look—the kind that a nurse reserves for patients who think they can Google their symptoms.

“I said I don’t eat jerk,” she reminded.

*“And you said ‘bring it,’” he replied, smirking.
“Now we’re both confused. But that’s okay.
Confusion’s good. That’s where the magic happens.”*

“I think that’s where lawsuits happen.”

*He chuckled. “Good. You’re funny. I like that.
Better than crying all over my linoleum.”*

She didn’t respond.

He tilted his head slightly. "You were, crying, right? Crying?" "No."

He crossed his arms. "Your eyes are red, your shoulders are collapsed, and your face looks like somebody just deported your cat."

Fatima blinked. "That's incredibly specific."

"I've seen things."

She sniffled again and looked out the window.

A bus rumbled past, carrying a poster of a handsome Persian cardiologist with the slogan Healing Hearts Across Coasts. She winced.

Nasir followed her gaze. "Ex-boyfriend?"

"Worse," she muttered. "Future husband. According to my mother."

"Ahh." He nodded like a seasoned elder. "Arranged marriage vibes. Classic."

"You wouldn't understand."

"I might."

She glanced at him, skeptical. "You?"

"Just because I'm not wearing a kufi and quoting hadith doesn't mean I haven't had a few 'what's your father's profession' interviews." He paused. "I failed every one. Too much sarcasm, apparently."

Fatima laughed softly despite herself.

"There it is," he said, grinning. "The first crack in the ice queen."

"I'm not an ice queen."

"No. You're just frozen inside with feelings you microwave later."

She folded her arms. "Is this how you talk to all your customers?"

"No. Just the ones who look like they wandered in from a family trauma."

She rolled her eyes. "You're really full of yourself, huh?"

"Only when I'm right." He leaned in, lowering his voice just enough. "And I am right about that jerk chicken."

She stared at the plate again. Glazed, charred meat nestled beside a scoop of rice and peas, and a piece of fried plantain that looked like it had kissed the edge of heaven.

"Maybe... just a bite," she said quietly.

Nasir nodded solemnly. "I won't tell the imam."

She picked up the fork like it was a diplomatic tool.

The first bite lit a fire on her tongue—hot, intense, layered. Her eyes widened.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

"See?" he said, arms wide like a preacher.
"Revelation."

She took another bite, then another. The heat curled up in her throat, and tears sprang to her eyes.

"You okay?" he asked, slightly alarmed.

"I'm fine," she gasped. "It's just... spicy."

"And yet... tears. So what is it, Miss Arabia? The spice or your life?"

Fatima shook her head, laughing as the tears flowed.

"Both," she said. "Definitely both."

Chapter 3: Tears, Spice, and Forbidden Bacon

Fatima wiped her nose with a crumpled napkin, eyes still glossy from the ambush of scotch bonnet heat. The burn lingered on her lips like a kiss she wasn't sure she wanted to admit happened.

"Need milk?" Nasir offered, cocking his head.

She shook hers. "No. That's for amateurs."

He grinned. "Respect. You cry pretty."

"Thanks," she muttered, voice dry. "I aspire to be a spice martyr."

He wiped down the counter with a rag that had clearly lived a few lives. "So let me ask. On a scale from one to halal, how sinful was that bite?"

Fatima stiffened, the smile faltering.

"You know," she said carefully, "I told you I don't eat jerk."

"And yet," he gestured to the now half-empty plate, "your mouth says otherwise."

She put the fork down, suddenly self-conscious. "It's not funny. It's... complicated."

He nodded, surprisingly gentle. "I know. I'm teasing, but I get it. It's not just food, it's culture. You didn't grow up eating it?"

She hesitated. Then: "Not at home. Not when my mom's watching. But... in Canada?" She lowered her voice like a teenager confessing to a crime. "I've had back bacon. On pizza. Like, more than once."

Nasir let out a sharp laugh. "Ya serious? Canadian bacon? That's not even real bacon, I bet it's back beacon?"

*"I liked it!" she said, laughing despite herself.
"It's crispy. Salty. And... weirdly innocent
compared to what you served me."*

*"Innocent?" he scoffed. "That was blessed
fire. What I gave you had depth. Struggle. A
little rebellion in every bite."*

*She looked down at the plate, a bit of
charred meat clinging to the rice like a
confession.*

*"Yeah," she murmured, "it tasted...
rebellious."*

Their eyes met.

"You ever think," he asked slowly, "that maybe some part of you likes breaking rules?"

Fatima's breath caught.

She turned away, flushing. "Not everything's about breaking rules. Sometimes... I just get tired of being so perfect all the time."

Nasir nodded, understanding more than she wanted him to. He poured a small cup of ginger beer and slid it toward her.

"For the burn," he said. "Inside and out."

She sipped, grateful.

"So," he added with a grin, "next time, goat?"

"Goat's halal," she answered primly.

"Not the way I make it."

She laughed, shaking her head. "You're impossible."

"And you're still here," he said softly.

Chapter 4: The Dinner She's Avoiding

"So, you coming back for dinner tonight?" Nasir asked as he wiped his hands on a towel tucked into his waistband. The lunch crowd had thinned, and he leaned against the counter like someone with nowhere better to be – which, ironically, made Fatima feel like she did.

She looked at the clock. It was already past three. Her mother had texted twice and called once. She hadn't answered.

“Actually...” she hesitated, stirring the last grains of rice with her fork, “I was supposed to be home by now.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Big plans?”

She sighed. “More like a big setup. Family dinner. Potential husband attending. My mother’s latest... initiative.”

Nasir chuckled. “Ah. Operation Dubai Doctor?”

Her head shot up. “How’d you—?”

He pointed at her abaya, then at her rolled-up sleeves, and finally at the smudge of eyeliner under one eye. "You dress like you're traditional, but talk like you fight your mother in the group chat. I figured you had a Persian dentist, a Lebanese finance bro, and an Emirati crypto sheikh in the rotation."

Fatima groaned. "This one's a heart doctor. And my aunt swears he's 'handsome in a practical way,' which means he looks like a tired thumb drive."

Nasir burst out laughing. "A tired thumb drive? Yo, that's cold."

"It's true!" she said, laughing. "He has that resting oil-rig face. Like he's thinking about fuel efficiency during a hug."

Nasir shook his head, amused. "So what, you ghosted the dinner?"

"I'm... circling the block emotionally."

He leaned forward, arms folded. "And you ended up on my side of the street."

She tried to smile but it wavered. "I just didn't want to sit through another polite interrogation with my mom watching me like I'm a half-cooked kabsa."

Nasir tilted his head. "Sounds lonely."

"It is. But predictable." She looked up. "You ever feel like everyone has a version of you they're in love with — except it's not actually you?"

He was quiet a moment. "Yeah. All the time."

She looked at him then – really looked. For all his loud jokes and swagger, his eyes were still. Grounded. Maybe even a little sad.

“You ever been married?” she asked.

“Almost,” he said, without missing a beat. “She left me for a man with air conditioning in his car.”

Fatima blinked. “Seriously?”

He grinned. “Nah. It was a Vespa. But she said he listened more.”

Fatima laughed. "So you do have a tragic backstory."

He shrugged. "Just spicy enough."

They shared a moment. Quiet, but charged. Not romance, exactly. But something tugging at the edges of it.

She stood up to leave. "Well, thanks for the unsolicited jerk and unsolicited therapy."

He held the door open for her. "Anytime. I specialize in forbidden flavors and unwanted wisdom."

As she stepped into the sunlight, he added, "Hey—"

She turned.

"If you change your mind about that dinner, you know where to find me. We serve rebellion nightly. No reservations required."

Fatima smiled.

"Tempting," she said. "But I'm trying to be good."

He winked. "Maybe good's overrated."

Chapter 5: Who's Zooming Who?

Fatima barely made it up the stairs before she heard her name.

"Fatimaaaaa!" Her mother's voice boomed from the kitchen like a police siren wrapped in a silk scarf.

She paused at the landing, took a deep breath, and braced herself for the inquisition.

Inside, the kitchen smelled of cardamom, ghee, and disappointment. Her father sat silently, pretending to read the news on his tablet, but the screen was off.

Her younger sister Noor leaned on the counter eating grapes like a smug oracle, and her mother paced near the stove, dramatically lifting pot lids for no reason.

"You missed the visit," her mother declared.

"I had to stay late at work," Fatima replied, shrugging off her bag. "There was an emergency. You know how it is."

"Emergency?" her father finally spoke, looking over his glasses. "You're a doctor. Every day is an emergency."

"Exactly," she said, hoping the confusion would buy her a few seconds.

Her mother crossed her arms. "You could've come late. Abdul was here for three hours! I had to entertain his mother with stale pistachios and Pakeeza reruns. I nearly passed away."

"You've been nearly passing away since 2011," Noor muttered.

Fatima shot her a look, but Noor just raised an eyebrow and continued eating her grapes with saintlike calm.

"And Abdul?" her mother continued, "He brought you French soap. Real, imported. Do you know how expensive French soap is? He left it in a box with a ribbon. A ribbon, Fatima."

"What does that even mean?" Fatima asked, suddenly dizzy with the ridiculousness. "Do men give soap as a... what? Cleansing metaphor?"

"He's a gentleman," her mother snapped. "He's also very offended. He said you ghosted him. Ghosted! Do you know how embarrassing it is to be accused of ghosting by a man who plays squash with three Persian radiologists?"

Fatima blinked. "Wait. You mean he said that? Out loud?"

Her mother nodded furiously. "And his mother hinted that you may not be 'serious about family values.'"

"That's rich coming from someone who wore Louis Vuitton to a samosa dinner."

"Fatima!" her father warned.

Noor finally jumped in, eyes sparkling. "So, where were you really? You smelled like cinnamon and paprika when you came in."

Fatima flushed. "Work."

"What kind of doctor marinates in za'atar?"

Fatima glared. Noor smirked and popped another grape into her mouth.

Her mother shook her head in disbelief. "Just tell us – was it someone from work? Is he... Pakistani? Or God forbid, Lebanese?"

Fatima's heart thudded. She suddenly remembered Nasir saying, to your resistance.

She cleared her throat. "No one. I told you. I stayed late. I completed paper works."

There was a silence.

Then Noor, still chewing, whispered, "You're zooming someone."

"I'm what?"

"You're Zooming someone. Secretly. Like in lockdown, but hornier."

"Noor!" their father barked.

Fatima stood up, yanked her bag from the chair. "I'm going to my room."

As she stomped up the stairs, her mother shouted after her, "You're going to be thirty-two in March!"

"Thirty-one!"

"Same thing!"

In the safety of her room, Fatima closed the door and collapsed on her bed, covering her face with her hands.

Chapter 7: The Next Day, Same Time

Fatima didn't plan on going back.

Not consciously, anyway.

She told herself she was just walking. Airing out her thoughts. Reclaiming the sidewalk. But somehow, her feet curved off the main road and into the quiet lane lined with corner shops and tangled vines.

And there it was again — the little Jamaican restaurant tucked between a halal butcher and a Caribbean hair salon. Its faded hand-painted sign read "Irie Bites" in reggae-colored lettering that had seen better days.

She lingered outside, pretending to inspect the specials chalkboard like a Michelin critic. Her stomach gurgled – it wasn't hunger, but memory. Spice and heat and laughter and... Nasir.

The door opened before she could decide. He stood there holding a mop, grinning.

"I knew it. You're hooked."

She blinked. "Hooked on what?"

"On me, obviously. Or the jerk. But it's usually both."

He stepped aside, motioning dramatically. "Welcome back, Fatima of the Back Bacon Brotherhood."

She exhaled through her nose, amused despite herself. "You're ridiculous."

"Correct. And possibly prophetic. I told the plantains you'd return."

"Do the plantains speak?"

"Only on Saturdays. But today's a bonus."

She slid into the same seat. The table was wiped clean, a napkin flower already waiting. Nasir vanished into the back with the mop, singing a bit of "Waiting in Vain," with more confidence than pitch.

When he returned, he brought a glass of coconut water and placed it in front of her with exaggerated flair.

"To cleanse your soul after your jerk betrayal."

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you always this annoying, or is it part of the menu?"

"Depends. Are you here for the banter or the jerk?"

"I haven't decided."

"Well," he said, leaning against the counter, "maybe I can help you figure it out with an accent."

She groaned. "Please, no."

Too late.

He switched into a bizarre hybrid of British-Arabic-Jamaican. "Ah, my habibti. Welcome to de spiced house of haram. Would you like za'atar wit'ya rice, or shall we bless it with dem Scotch bonnets, seen?"

Fatima burst out laughing. "What was that?"

"Authentic," he said proudly.

"That was a linguistic hate crime."

He bowed. "Thank you."

Fatima wiped her eyes. "Seriously though, it's confusing. Are you making fun of me? Of yourself? Of culture?"

He sobered, just a little. "Making fun with you. There's a difference."

"You sure?"

He nodded. "The world's heavy, Fatima. You gotta tease the weight a bit before it crushes you."

She tilted her head. "That's poetic. Or dangerous."

"Depends what you carry."

There was a pause. A long, golden one.

Then she added, softly, "It's not easy... being in-between. One foot in halal, one in haram. People assume you're confused, not complex."

Nasir sat down across from her, suddenly serious. "I get that."

"You do?"

"I mean, I grew up in a Pentecostal church that served jerk chickens at fundraisers. Confused is our default mode."

She smiled. "So you're allowed to laugh at both sides."

"And cry at both too. But today's for laughter."

She sipped the coconut water. "You're not what I expected."

"Good," he said. "Because what you expected would've been boring."

She raised a brow. "How do you know?"

"Because it didn't bring you back yesterday. But this—" he pointed to himself, then the room, "—whatever this is, did."

*Fatima felt a flutter low in her stomach.
She looked away, out the window.
Somewhere far off, a street vendor's cart
bell rang.*

"I still haven't ordered," she murmured.

*"Good things come slow," Nasir said. "Like
jerk pork. Or trust."*

*They sat in that space, the kind where
flirtation flirts with something deeper.*

*Where the jokes slow down just enough to
make room for risk.*

*Finally, she looked back at him and said,
"Surprise me."*

He stood, victorious.

"You sure?" he teased.

*"Surprise me. But this time—less Scotch
bonnet. My tongue still has PTSD."*

*Nasir saluted and headed to the kitchen. As
he disappeared, she smiled — not just with
her mouth, but all the way down to her
chest.*

*Whatever this was, she wasn't running
from it today.*

Chapter 8: Halal Hearts, Haram Desires

That evening, Fatima stayed longer than she meant to.

The lunch crowd had come and gone, and now the restaurant hummed in a slower rhythm. A ceiling fan wobbled above, reggae played low and distant like a memory, and sunlight pooled gold and lazy across the worn floor tiles.

She was nursing her second sorrel drink, eyes fixed on the melting ice, fingers tracing the condensation. Across from her, Nasir sat with a half-eaten pattie and a gaze far more focused than usual.

"So..." he began, more careful than usual. "You ever gonna tell me what's really eating you?"

Fatima didn't answer immediately. She looked out the window. A couple passed hand-in-hand. The woman wore a hijab, the man a T-shirt that said "STAY HUMBLE." They looked... resolved.

"I don't know how to explain it," she said eventually. "It's like living with two hearts, and both are beating for different futures."

Nasir leaned in. "Try me."

She hesitated, then let it come.

"I'm supposed to get engaged this year. My parents... they've been planning. The man's decent. A Persian cardiologist in Los Angeles, of course."

"Of course," Nasir repeated, smirking gently.

"My sister adores him. My aunt says he has 'no bad habits, not even soda.' And my mom—well, she's already looking at banquet halls."

Nasir's smile faded. "And what do you think of him?"

She sighed. "He's... fine. Polished. Predictable."

But every time I'm with him, I feel like I'm interviewing for a job I already hate."

Nasir didn't laugh. He nodded.

"And you're afraid," he said.

She looked up. "Of disappointing them. Of messing up this perfect Muslim daughter act they've built. My mom wears her prayers like armor. She married my dad in two meetings and a Qur'anic verse. And here I am, sneaking into a jerk shack with a stranger who thinks jerk chicken is a love language."

That earned a chuckle, but only briefly.
Nasir leaned back, staring at the ceiling
for a moment before speaking.

"Can I tell you something I haven't told
many people?"

Fatima nodded, curious.

"I wasn't supposed to stay in Detroit. My
uncle brought me here when I was sixteen.
We were supposed to settle in New York.
That was the plan. Big Pakistani
population, halal meat on every block. Easy
life, clean community, frozen faces but
warm mosques."

"What happened?"

"He died."

Fatima froze.

"Car crash. Two weeks after we arrived. No insurance. No backup. I was left with a cousin who barely knew me, and a choice: either start over in New York with strangers or carve out something here in Motor City with what I had."

"And you chose this."

"I chose me. I found work washing dishes at this place when it was still run by a Trini Rasta named Glenmore."

He taught me how to make pepper sauce and how not to trust landlords. When he retired, I took over the lease."

Fatima was quiet for a moment. "You built this."

Nasir nodded. "With calluses and expired visas and prayer and fire."

She studied him anew, seeing the man beyond the jokes and faux accents. The man who had stayed. Struggled. Fried plantains for survival. Laughed so he wouldn't break.

"I don't know what I'm doing," she confessed. "I don't know how to be me without disappointing someone."

You'll disappoint someone no matter what," he said. "Might as well be honest in the process."

"But what if I want halal love?" she asked softly. "And a little haram heat too?"

Nasir looked at her, eyes warm and steady.

"Then maybe you need someone who knows how to season both."

Their gazes held — not long enough to call it a promise, but long enough to call it dangerous.

*"Outside, the call to prayer echoed faintly
from a nearby mosque, blending with a
passing car's bass thump. Detroit's strange
harmony.*

Fatima didn't move.

And neither did he.

Chapter 9: Shopping for Arabia

Two days passed.

Fatima told herself she wasn't avoiding him – she was just busy. Busy re-organizing her closet, then un-organizing it again. Busy deleting WhatsApp messages from her aunt, who kept sending her filtered selfies of a petroleum engineer holding espresso. Busy pretending she didn't remember the exact shade of brown in Nasir's eyes.

Then her phone pinged.

Nasir: You owe me one forbidden lunch and a tour of aisle 6 at the Arab market.

She stared at the message.

Aisle 6? What was on aisle 6?

Fatima: Is this your version of asking me out?

Nasir: No. This is me recruiting you for a tactical hummus mission.

Fatima: You're ridiculous.

Nasir: And you're scared of dates.

Fatima: Like Medjool dates? Or emotional vulnerability?

*Nasir: Both. But I can help you face one of them.
Meet me tomorrow, 2PM. Hiba's Halal Market. Wear
sensible shoes. The spice aisle is hostile territory.*

*She stared at the screen longer than necessary.
Her thumb hovered.*

*Fatima: Fine. But I'm not carrying your curry
leaves.*

*Nasir: Deal. But you're definitely choosing the
za'atar.*

The next day, she arrived early.

*It was warm, humid, and the parking lot smelled
faintly of cinnamon, car exhaust, and incense
from the nearby sari shop. Hiba's Halal Market
had a dusty sign and no music, just the squeak of
old freezers and gossiping aunties in
headscarves.*

Nasir arrived five minutes late, wearing a faded Bob Marley tee and a bag of confidence.

He held up a woven tote bag. "For our diplomatic mission."

"Are you always like this?" she asked, folding her arms.

"Only with women who cry into my rice," he said with a grin.

She rolled her eyes but followed him in.

They zigzagged through the store – a labyrinth of pomegranate molasses, Iranian saffron, Turkish delight, and suspiciously unlabeled jars.

Nasir grabbed things at random, asking ridiculous questions.

"Do you think this cardamom was blessed by a Sufi monk?"

"Should I get the rosewater or the rose jam? Which one is more emotionally available?"

She laughed despite herself. "You are not normal."

He looked at her then, that half-second longer than usual. "Neither are you."

They stopped in front of a rack of dates — Medjool, Deglet Noor, Ajwa. Fatima picked one up, almost unconsciously.

"I always thought the soft ones were sweeter," she murmured.

Nasir tilted his head. "Is that about dates or people?"

She smirked. "Figure it out."

As they approached the checkout, he tossed in one last item – a box of Moroccan tea glasses, delicate and blue.

"For your arranged marriage?" she asked.

"Nah," he said. "For my resistance meetings."

Fatima looked at him sideways, smile flickering.

Maybe she should've said no. Maybe she should've run from anything that even hinted at improvised intimacy. But she didn't.

As they walked out into the sun, tote bag rustling with rebellion and sumac, Nasir looked over.

"So," he said. "Same time next week? Or are we pretending this was a one-time ceasefire?"

Fatima hesitated.

Then – "Depends. You cooking again?"

He grinned. "Only if you're crying again."

She groaned. "You're the worst."

"Lucky for you, I'm also halal."

Chapter 9: The Princess and the Pepper Sauce

Nasir called it “errands.”

Fatima didn't call it anything. She just showed up – scarf loose around her neck, eyes rimmed in black liner, expression somewhere between curiosity and denial.

Their first outing was the dollar store on Seven Mile – a fluorescent-lit labyrinth of plastic dreams and unlabeled chaos. Nasir grabbed a squeaky shopping cart with a limp wheel that screamed at every turn.

“This,” he declared, “is the chariot of the gods.”

Fatima arched an eyebrow. "What are we even buying?"

"Things I don't need. That's the whole point of dollar stores."

They wandered down aisles of metallic streamers, expired spices, and suspicious Tupperware.

Nasir held up a plastic camel figurine. "Look! Arabian desert vibes. Authentic Made-in-China heritage."

Fatima snorted. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm diverse, princess. It's my cultural birthright."

She grabbed a gaudy mini hookah lamp and dropped it into the cart. "Fine. We'll buy fake Arabia and call it cultural diplomacy."

By the end of the aisle, they had three plastic swords, a bottle of glitter labeled "Desert Stars," and a knockoff oil diffuser shaped like a falcon.

Fatima picked up a dusty spice tin. "Do you think this counts as pepper sauce?"

Nasir squinted at the faded label. "More like 'paprika despair.' Come, we go to a real place."

The halal butcher shop was two blocks down, across from a shuttered laundromat and a hair braiding studio with faded photos of styles from 2007. Inside, it was cool and fragrant – a world of hanging lamb cuts, men in kufis, and the distant hum of a surah playing from someone's phone.

The butcher, an elderly Afghan with a chest-length white beard, recognized Fatima immediately.

"Mashallah! Aren't you Yasmeen's daughter?"

Fatima froze. Nasir, oblivious, asked, "You got any good goat?"

She yanked him by the arm. "Let's go, now."

Outside, she exhaled like she'd held her breath for a week.

"You okay?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

"That man knows my mom. By sunset, she'll think I'm married to a reggae chef and living in sin."

Nasir tried not to smile. Failed. "Well, if we were married, you'd definitely be in charge of the budget. You turned down the fancy dates and went for dollar-store jihad décor."

Fatima swatted his arm. "Shut up."

But they were laughing now, somewhere on the edge of something more than friendship, less than danger – that impossible middle ground where hearts toy with the rules.

Back in the car, she opened the bag and pulled out the plastic camel again.

“I’m naming him Haroon,” she declared. “The royal steed of Arabia.”

Nasir turned the engine. “Long may he reign beside the pepper sauce throne.”

*And as they drove off – past murals of MLK
and barbershops with biblical names –
Detroit swirled around them in color and
contradiction, and the day began to feel
suspiciously like a memory in the making.*

Chapter 10: Jerk Chicken, Gentle Love

The first time she brought him lunch, she almost backed out.

It was a small Pyrex container—grilled jerk chicken thighs, sweet plantains, and a cautious scoop of coconut rice. Not too spicy, not too mild. Just enough to say: I see you. I'm learning.

Nasir met her on the hospital lawn, his face lighting up like a child offered a kite.

"You brought food?" he asked, blinking as if he couldn't believe it. "For me?"

She shifted awkwardly, suddenly unsure. "It's not halal-certified jerk, okay?"

I bought the chicken from that uncle near Woodward. It's clean. I marinated it myself."

He took the container reverently, sniffed the air, and grinned. "If this is a trap to convert me to your culinary sect, I surrender."

They sat on the grass near a half-dead maple tree, legs crossed like kids skipping class. He took a bite. His eyes rolled back.

"Okay. Marry me. Right now. Under this tree. I'll get a leaf."

Fatima laughed, rolling her eyes. "You say that about every meal."

"Because every meal you cook tastes like a prayer I didn't know I needed answered."

Each week, she brought him something new—egg curry with soft rotis, miso-glazed tofu she was experimenting with, even her mother's beef keema recipe (with modifications and a lot of hiding the evidence). In return, Nasir introduced her to his world: ackee and saltfish, peanut porridge, callaloo with shrimp, and sorrel juice that left her cheeks flushed and eyes wide.

"You ever notice how we tell stories through seasoning?" he mused once, between bites.

*"My mother always said you could taste
heartbreak in undercooked rice."*

*"Then I've fed my share of tragedies,"
Fatima murmured.*

But not lately.

Her coworkers noticed.

*"Someone's glowing," said Nurse Patel,
raising an eyebrow.*

*"You've been humming in the break room,"
said Dr. Mo, confused. "You don't hum.
You threaten."*

Even her patients noticed.

"I like when you smile, Doctor," one patient told her, gripping her hand. "It makes the medicine work better."

She kept brushing it off. Just, less stress. Sleep. Vitamin D.

But deep down, she knew. It wasn't just the spices or the sunshine. It was the way Nasir listened to her childhood stories without judgment, how he gave space to her silences, how he never interrupted her dreams—even the ridiculous ones.

*And after every shared bite, every
napkin-wiped laugh, she began to believe
something daring:*

*Maybe love didn't have to arrive in a gold
tray, carried by tradition, or arranged
by anxious parents and WhatsApp
aunties.*

*Maybe it could come in the form of jerk
chicken—tender, surprising, and a little
bit rebellious.*

Chapter 11: Family Matters

Fatima's heart pounded as she entered the family home that evening. The hallway smelled of fresh za'atar and cardamom tea, but the warmth of the scents couldn't soothe the storm she knew awaited her. The moment she stepped in, she was met with the full assembly: her father pacing with impatience, her mother busy fussing over trays of food, her little sister peering curiously from the sofa, and—of course—Dr. Abdul, the polished heart surgeon from Los Angeles, sitting stiffly like a prince at court.

Her father's eyes narrowed the moment they landed on her scrubs and slightly rumpled hijab, freshly torn from a long day at the hospital. "Fatima, where have you been? We were waiting for you to meet Abdul! Your future husband!" His tone was firm, edged with disappointment.

Fatima squared her shoulders, feeling Nasir's words about "owning her own life" echo in her mind. "I was at the neighborhood café," she said simply, "the Jamaican place you always warned me about." She noticed Abdul shift in his seat, awkward and clearly out of place.

Her father's expression darkened. "You don't just wander off, and you certainly don't spend time at such places. We have a reputation to uphold."

Her mother added softly but firmly, "We want what's best for you, Habibti. Abdul is a respected doctor, a good match."

Fatima's voice shook but held steady. "I'm not sure I want what you think is best."

The room fell silent. Even Abdul looked surprised.

Her little sister whispered, "But Fatima, what about the family?"

Fatima looked around, suddenly feeling very small in the weight of their expectations. But she also remembered Nasir's smile, his joke about spicy food healing a sad nose, and the simple joy of being herself, if only for a little while.

"I love our family," she said softly. "But I need to live my own story. Not just the one written for me."

Her father's face softened for a moment, a flicker of understanding in his eyes. "And what story is that?"

Fatima took a deep breath. "One where I choose my happiness."

Chapter 12: The Bob Marley Intervention

Fatima was just stepping out of the hospital after a grueling twelve-hour shift when she spotted him — Nasir, standing by the entrance, unmistakable in his usual confident stance... but today, he was wearing something utterly ridiculous.

A bright, tie-dye suit covered in Bob Marley's face, dreadlocks printed across the fabric, and an oversized Rastafarian hat that seemed to have a life of its own.

In one hand, he held a small bouquet of fresh scotch bonnet peppers, and in the other, a plastic ukulele decorated with tiny Jamaican flags.

People passing by couldn't help but stop and stare. Some smiled, some whispered, and a few even pulled out their phones. Fatima's cheeks flushed. She was mortified, but also secretly amused.

Nasir grinned widely, stepping forward with exaggerated flair. "Miss Arabia! This no ordinary suit. This is my 'Serious Bob Marley Intervention' suit.

Because serious talks need serious style!”

Fatima raised an eyebrow but said nothing, crossing her arms.

He cleared his throat dramatically, cupping his hands and shouting, “No woman no cry, but Fatima – you look like you ready to cry all the time! So, here today, publicly and halal-ly, I propose something!”

A small crowd had gathered now, including a few nurses from the hospital who recognized Fatima and giggled at the spectacle.

Nasir lowered his voice to a theatrical whisper. "Not a marriage proposal. Not yet!" He paused for effect. "A proposal to spice up your life. To choose your own happiness. To break free from the suffocating scarf of family pressure with a little jerk pork on the side!" He held up the peppers like a bouquet of flowers.

Fatima's laughter bubbled up before she could stop it. "You are ridiculous."

"I know!" Nasir threw his hands up. "But sometimes ridiculous is the only way to make people listen."

He strummed the ukulele softly,
breaking into a light, reggae-inspired
version of "Three Little Birds."

"Don't worry 'bout a thing, 'cause every
little thing gonna be alright..." he sang,
nodding at Fatima.

Tears pricked at her eyes, but this time
from laughter and warmth. In that
ridiculous moment, she felt seen – not
as a doctor, a daughter, or a
wife-to-be, but as herself.

She took a step closer. "Alright, Mr.
Marley, what's your plan?"

He winked. "Step one: Dinner at my place tomorrow night. Step two: We talk. Step three: You decide what happiness really means for you."

The crowd around them clapped, a few cheering softly.

Fatima's heart felt lighter than it had in weeks. Maybe, just maybe, this was the start of a new kind of story.

Chapter 13: The Bob Marley Intervention – Family Fallout

Back at home, the house was a volcano of voices, and Fatima was squarely at its molten center.

Her mother, still in her apron from prepping lentil stew, paced the kitchen like a juror deliberating a national scandal. “In front of the entire hospital staff? Like a street performance? What kind of man sings Bob Marley in a sherwani with LED roses?” She slammed a wooden spoon on the counter for emphasis. Lentils flew.

Her father, quieter, sat in the living room recliner, rubbing his temples like he was mentally editing Nasir out of family history.

"What kind of proposal doesn't involve my permission first? What kind of man doesn't call the father?"

Fatima's sister, Yasmeen, leaned on the doorframe, sipping chai like it was popcorn. "I thought it was adorable. The way he rhymed 'halal' with 'girl I want us to install a shared life protocol'—that's Shakespeare meets spice." She grinned wickedly. "You're lucky. All I get are engineers who send spreadsheets of their dowry breakdown."

Fatima, still in her scrubs, dumped her purse on the kitchen chair and tried not to scream. "I didn't ask him to do that! He just showed up! It was...a joke. A gesture."

Her mother gasped. "A joke? Engagement is a joke now?"

"Ma, please." Fatima rubbed her temples.

Her father finally spoke up again, voice softer but weighty. "You humiliated Dr. Abdul Farsi."

That name again.

"You mean the man who texts me spreadsheets of his ketubah draft in Excel? I was supposed to marry him for you, not for me."

Silence.

The tension stretched, then snapped as Yasmeen spoke, her voice unusually serious: "You are glowing, Fatima. Don't deny it. That man—Nasir—whatever he is... he got to you."

Her mother sat down heavily, hand on her chest. "We tried to raise you right. With tradition. With respect."

Fatima exhaled. "You did. But maybe I want something that's not just right. I want something real. And honestly... for the first time, I think I found it."

There was a long pause.

Then, in a rare gesture of sisterly solidarity, Yasmeen stood behind Fatima and squeezed her shoulders. "She's not asking for your blessing," she said to their parents. "She's already blessed. You just didn't notice."

Chapter 14: The Invitation

The house was still. Even the walls seemed to breathe slower.

Fatima sat at the kitchen table long after her mother had gone. The overhead light cast a warm circle across the table, her phone resting in its glow like a sleeping animal. The paratha on her plate had gone cold. She wasn't hungry anymore—she was... humming with something else. Hope? Dread? Both, maybe.

She picked up her phone. Scrolled past group chats, hospital updates, her sister's memes.

Then she paused over Nasir's name.

His last message still glowed blue:

"U alive? Or was that proposal so bad it sent u into exile?"

She hadn't replied. Not yet. But her thumb hovered now. She could still hear her mother's voice, soft as ghee on a hot tawa:
"I see the way he looks at you."

She exhaled. Typed.

Me: Still alive. Even survived the aunties.

Me: ...Are you free Friday night?

She deleted and rewrote three times.

Me: My mom might be making
lamb korma Friday. With real
cardamom this time. No raisins.

Pause.

Me: You should come. Dinner.
Just us. (And my parents. But
less yelling. I think.)

Her thumb hovered.

Send

She stared at the screen, already regretting the "less yelling" part. But a moment later, the three dots danced. Then his reply appeared.

Nasir: For lamb korma, I'd face a thousand aunties.

Another pause.

Nasir: What should I wear?
Please say no suit.

Me: Just... be yourself. And maybe socks with no holes.

Nasir: you ask for a lot.

She smiled, pressing the phone to her chest. Her heartbeat thudded against it. This wasn't a grand declaration.

There was no music, no dance, no Bob Marley blaring over a loudspeaker. Just lamb korma. Socks. And a quiet seat at her family's table.

But in her world, it was as close to a revolution as she'd ever dared before.

Chapter 15: Friday Night Dinner

Nasir stood on the front porch, clutching a modest box of assorted pastries he'd panic-bought from a Lebanese bakery near his place. He shifted from foot to foot, mentally rehearsing Arabic greetings and Urdu pleasantries, only to forget both the second the door opened.

Fatima's younger brother, Ibrahim, eyed him like a customs officer who already smelled contraband.

"You the halal proposal guy?"

Nasir cleared his throat. "That... would be me."

"Cool." Ibrahim turned and shouted over his shoulder. "Maaaaa, he's here!"

Fatima appeared at the end of the hallway like a nervous but radiant empress. She wore a long, embroidered tunic—deep emerald, with gold threading that shimmered when she moved. Her hair was tied back but soft at the edges, and she offered him a smile that was part apology, part dare.

"You made it," she said, taking the box from his hands. "Pastries? Bribery won't save you."

"Worth a shot," he whispered.

Inside, the house was a blend of spice, furniture wrapped in memory, and family photos. Her father sat stiffly on the couch like a man about to testify in court, while her mother busied herself clanking pots in the kitchen. The smell of lamb, turmeric, and toasted coriander filled the air like a warm fog.

Nasir removed his shoes, revealing thankfully hole-free socks, and followed Fatima into the dining room.

The table was already set: silverware lined up with military precision, glass bowls of raita and achar glistening like ceremonial offerings. A covered dish in the center emanated a heat that promised korma. The real kind. No raisins.

They sat. The silence was epic.

Her father, Mr. Rahim, cleared his throat. "So, you work in... a restaurant?"

"Um—feeding the masses.

Mr. Rahim frowned. "Do communities pay for that?"

"Sometimes. But usually for the spices."

Fatima kicked him lightly under the table.

"And you're... Pakistani?" her mother called from the kitchen.

"Half," Nasir called back. "The other half is Jamaican."

There was a short silence. Her sister Zainab, seated at the far end, choked softly on her mango lassi.

"Well," her mother said, finally entering and placing the korma on the table with a flourish. "Spices don't care about passports."

Everyone laughed. A little too loudly. But it helped.

Dinner began.

They passed naan, scooped korma, argued about the best mangoes (Sindhri vs Julie), and teased Ibrahim about his secret crush on the neighbour's cat-loving niece. Nasir complimented the food earnestly—because it was incredible—and even offered to help clear plates, which earned him a begrudging nod from Mr. Rahim.

At one point, Fatima looked up and caught her mother watching them. Not judging. Just... watching. A slow smile tugged at the corners of her lips before she turned away.

Later, over chai, Fatima and Nasir slipped away to the porch. The air was cool, and the moon hung low like it was eavesdropping.

"I think your dad thinks I'm a scammer," Nasir said, sipping his tea.

"You didn't do too bad," Fatima replied. "He didn't bring up the doctor from LA! Once."

They sat in silence for a moment. The kind that wasn't empty, but comfortably full.

Then, quietly:

"You were brave to come," she said.

Nasir shrugged. "You were braver to invite me."

She leaned her head on his shoulder, her scarf brushing his arm.

In the background, inside the house, someone laughed—probably Zainab. A door creaked. A kettle boiled. Life continued.

But on that porch, for just a moment, something shifted. A family door opened, even if only a crack.

And that was enough.

Chapter 14: From Detroit to Windsor

The morning sun was just beginning to stretch its golden fingers over the Detroit skyline when Fatima pulled on her coat and slipped out of her home, her heart fluttering with a mix of excitement and nerves. Nasir was waiting outside, leaning casually against his old sedan, a mischievous smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Ready for your first official adventure with Mr. Marley?" he teased, adjusting his sunglasses.

Fatima smiled despite herself. "I can't believe I'm doing this... driving to Canada for lunch with you."

"Hey, nothing like fresh air, good company, and juicy jerk chicken to make your day," Nasir replied, tossing the keys to her. "Besides, Windsor's got the best spots. You'll see."

They crossed the Ambassador Bridge with ease, the border guard giving Fatima a curious but friendly glance at her scrubs. The city unfolded quietly on the other side—its calm streets a sharp contrast to Detroit's early bustle.

They arrived at a cozy diner Nasir swore by, famous for its "big breakfast" platters that boasted extra crispy bacon that practically melted in your mouth.

As they sat by the window, steam rising from their coffee cups, Fatima allowed herself to relax for the first time in weeks. The vibrant chatter of the restaurant, the smell of frying bacon, and Nasir's easy laughter all wrapped around her like a warm blanket.

"So," Nasir began, watching her carefully, "how's your heart really doing? Not the one you operate on, but yours."

Fatima took a slow breath, her eyes softening. "Honestly? It's complicated. I feel trapped sometimes—by expectations, family, tradition. I'm not sure where I fit anymore."

Nasir nodded, sliding a piece of bacon onto her plate with a grin. "Well, sometimes you just gotta mix the old with the new—like jerk seasoning on Sunday breakfast. Unexpected, but it works."

She laughed, the sound light and free.

As the morning stretched on, they shared stories—about childhood dreams, cultural clashes, and secret wishes.

Nasir told her about growing up
Pakistani-Jamaican, juggling two worlds
with humor and grit. He explained that his
parents met, while working in Dubai. But,
he was borned in Jamaica. Fatima shared
her love for medicine and the pressure of
being the family's "successful daughter."

Between bites and laughter, something
deeper blossomed—a quiet understanding, a
promise of something new and uncertain but
hopeful.

As they stepped outside into the cool
Windsor breeze, Nasir took her hand gently.

*"Whatever comes next," he said softly,
"we face it together. No more running
from spicy food or tough choices."*

*Fatima squeezed his hand back, feeling a
smile spread across her face.*

"Together," she agreed.

Chapter 15: A Meeting of Soles

It was after Maghrib prayer on a Tuesday evening.

The mosque was quieter now, the hum of departing voices softened to a hush. Old men exchanged salams by the door, mothers in hijab herded giggling children into coats, and outside, the night wrapped the building in its deep indigo shawl.

Nasir lingered in the back row of the prayer hall, putting his shoes on slowly.

He'd come alone, as he often did when his thoughts needed sorting. Tonight, they were particularly tangled—with hope, uncertainty, and the weight of making something real with Fatima.

He didn't expect to see her father.

Mr. Rahim stepped out from a side conversation near the imam's office, his white kufi catching the soft overhead light. Their eyes met.

Nasir immediately stood. "As-salamu alaykum, sir."

Mr. Rahim nodded. "Wa alaykum as-salam."

The silence between them wasn't cold—it was thick with unsaid things. Mr. Rahim walked over to the shoe shelf and, with deliberate calm, sat next to Nasir.

"You pray here often?" he asked, eyes on his laces.

"Yes, sir," Nasir replied. "Since I moved to this neighborhood. It reminds me of the mosque back home. The wood smell. The worn carpet."

Mr. Rahim nodded. "Yes. Mosques remember us, even if we forget ourselves sometimes."

They sat in companionable stillness for a moment. The call to 'isha was still half an hour away. The room thinned further, leaving only a few lingerers and the imam wiping down a stack of prayer mats.