

Curse



Mark and his girlfriend Lauren were rich. Ok, filthy rich. And young. And pretty. They had it all. Lauren was a cellist for a renowned orchestra, and Mark worked in finance.

They were engaged in every way that mattered – though not yet officially. Mark had the ring hidden away and the perfect proposal planned for very soon. Their families and friends could feel it coming. Lauren could feel it too. On that day, she really had the feeling something special could happen.

They felt like having a relaxing day at the park, so they drove there with Mark's Porsche Panamera and walked around casually, looking for a good spot for a picnic, feeling relaxed.

The afternoon sun filtered through the trees of the upscale park, casting long shadows across the manicured lawns. Mark squeezed his girlfriend Lauren's hand a little tighter. She looked perfect as always – long blonde hair flowing freely, tight crop top hugging her figure, expensive sandals clicking on the path. They were the kind of couple who belonged here: successful, attractive, unapologetically living the life they'd earned. That's when they noticed her.

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A pretty Muslim woman with large brown eyes and brown skin was sitting gracefully on a wooden bench just ahead, wearing a flowing royal-blue dress adorned with intricate gold embroidery that caught the sunlight. A black hijab framed her face beautifully. She looked serene, almost regal. A few hijabs and abaya dresses were lying down on the bench. Neither Mark nor Lauren were particularly hateful towards minorities, but they were conservative and had lots of prejudices against Muslims. So when she talked to them, they weren't particularly pleased.

As Mark and Lauren passed, the woman looked up and offered a gentle, warm smile.

"Excuse me," she said softly, her voice carrying a pleasant exotic accent. "Would you both be open to hearing a little about our culture? It might bring some peace into your lives." She tilted her head slightly, still smiling. "I couldn't help noticing your girlfriend. She has such graceful, elegant features... mashAllah. She would make a truly beautiful Muslimah. The hijab would suit her perfectly. Would you like to try one? I have many colors."



Mark stopped dead in his tracks. Lauren's mouth fell open in disbelief.

"Excuse me?" Lauren snapped, her voice rising sharply. "Did you just tell me how to dress?"

Mark immediately stepped forward, positioning himself slightly in front of her, his protective instincts kicking in. "Are you serious right now?" he snarled. "You don't get to tell my girlfriend how to dress. Who the hell do you think you are? Another one trying to shove your religion down our throats. We don't want your religion, your culture, your hijabs, or your lectures. Go back to wherever you came from and leave us alone." Lauren tried stopping him but it was too late. Lauren tugged at his sleeve. "Mark, come on..."

The woman in the blue dress and black hijab didn't flinch. Her expression remained calm, almost pitying. She looked at them both for a long moment, and whispered a short, melodic phrase in Arabic. Then she smiled again, soft, knowing, and strangely kind. "May you find what you truly need." With that, she stood and walked away, her steps graceful and surprisingly quick. Lauren hesitated, a flicker of regret crossing her face.

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"Wait... I'm sorry, we didn't—" she started, but the woman was already disappearing down the path. Mark scoffed and turned away. "Don't apologize to her. She started it." Lauren shot him an annoyed look but followed anyway, her earlier relaxed mood completely shattered. Lauren's blood was still boiling as she stormed ahead along the grassy path, her long blonde hair swaying with every angry step. The park suddenly felt too warm, too crowded. She needed air. She needed space.

Had she overreacted? The thought crept in unwanted. The woman had been polite... almost kind. But no – she had no right to comment on how Lauren dressed or suggest she'd look better in a hijab. That was crossing the line.

"Can you believe that bitch?" she hissed, not even turning to look at Mark, half-trying to convince herself. "Telling me I'd look good in a hijab? Like I need fashion advice from someone dressed like it's the seventh century. The nerve!"

She clenched her fists tightly. Deep down, a small voice nagged at her. *Mark can be so aggressive sometimes... but I started it, didn't I? I snapped at her first. Her face was twisted in irritation.*

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Mark was a few steps behind, also fuming. “Fucking unbelievable. These people think they can just –”

A strange warmth spread across his skin. He slowed his steps, blinking rapidly. The anger was still there, but now it was mixed with a dizzy, disorienting fog. Mark suddenly stumbled. He looked down at himself in shock as his expensive navy t-shirt and jeans began to ripple and shift like liquid fabric. The material lightened, stretched, and reformed into a long, flowing white thobe that reached down to his ankles.

“Wait... what the hell?” He muttered, touching the garment.

At the same time, an intense itching spread across his jaw and cheeks. Mark scratched at his face frantically and felt thick, dark stubble pushing through at an unnatural speed. Within moments, a full, well-groomed beard had formed – neatly trimmed yet noticeably fuller and darker than anything he’d ever had before. He ran his fingers through it in disbelief, eyes wide. “What is this?!” he growled, his voice slightly deeper.

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He looked up at Lauren, now dressed in a modest royal-blue long-sleeved top and fitted blue jeans that covered her completely. Her tiny white crop top and short Gucci skirt were gone. The new outfit was elegant but far more conservative.

Lauren stared down at herself, realizing the change in that very moment hands running over the soft blue fabric in panic. "Oh my God... my clothes! Mark, what the fuck is happening?! Has she cursed us?" she cried. She spun around desperately, searching for the woman in the hijab. "Wait! We're sorry! We didn't mean it like that! Come back! I'm sorry, okay?! We were rude! I was rude! Please stop this!" But the woman was gone. Lauren staggered forward on the grass, arms outstretched in disbelief as the changes accelerated. "No, no, no— please God, no!"

Lauren still had her long blonde hair and striking features, but everything else felt wrong. She staggered a few steps forward on the grass, her arms held out in disbelief as she stared down at her changing body. The fitted blue jeans and long-sleeved top she had just been wearing began to move on their own. The fabric shimmered, stretched, and flowed seamlessly together at her waist, merging into one elegant, floor-length garment.

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The modest blue outfit transformed into a beautiful, flowing abaya that hugged her figure modestly yet gracefully. At the same time, a warm tingling spread across her face and arms. Her once fair, porcelain complexion began to deepen rapidly shifting from pale European tones to a smooth, warm olive skin with a natural golden undertone that showed on her hands and feet. She also noticed her long blonde hair darkening, the color bleeding downward until it became a uniform, glossy jet black that cascaded over her shoulders and down her back.

“Nooo! My hair! Stop! Oh God, please stop!” she screamed, clutching fistfuls of her transforming locks. “She’s turning us into... them! I don’t want this! I don’t want to be one of them! Please, I’m sorry! We’re both so sorry! Take it back – I’ll never say anything like that again, I swear!” Her voice shifting, now softer, more melodic, and feminine, with a warm, velvety tone and a gentle Arabic lilt.

She touched her face, feeling the new warmth and smoothness of her transformed skin. Mark stood a few feet away in his white thobe, still stroking his thick new beard in horror. His own skin had begun to darken as well, taking on a similar Middle Eastern tone.

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He looked at Lauren and felt a wave of panic crash over him. The flowing blue abaya now felt perfectly fitted, modest, and elegant on her new curvaceous figure and golden-olive skin.

Another wave of heat washed over Mark. His neatly styled light brown hair began to thin, then fell away in soft strands that dissolved into nothing. Within seconds, his scalp was completely smooth and bald, gleaming under the afternoon sun. "Nooo fuck nooo! I'm fucking bald? How is this possible?" He stared at Lauren with wide, disbelieving eyes, one hand still pressed against his freshly bald head. His face and neck continued to darken, the pale European tone shifting into a warm, sun-kissed olive complexion that matched and overtook Lauren's new exotic tone. His thick, dark beard now sat prominently on his transformed face – full, well-groomed. "No... no, this isn't happening," he stammered, his voice now carrying a clear Arabic accent.

Lauren turned toward him, realizing the full extent of his transformation. "Aaah! Who the fuck are you?!" She stumbled backward, eyes wide with terror. "Oh my God... Mark?! Is that you?! You're bald... and your face... your skin... Oh God, I can't even look at you like this! I'm sorry babe, but you look like a terrorist."

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Mark's heart dropped. Suddenly becoming bald became the least of his concerns. "Oh yeah?" he shot back. "Well look at you! You look just like her now! Your eyes are brown too, your skin, your hair – God, you're literally her!"

Lauren looked stunned, but before she could respond, her hands flew to her head with a sharp gasp. A soft black hijab materialized around her hair and neck, wrapping snugly and framing her face in modest elegance. Lauren's hands flew to her head as the final piece of her transformation locked into place.

Mark stared at her – now a stunning, fully veiled Muslim woman in the flowing blue abaya and black hijab – and pure dread twisted across his face. Lauren touched the hijab frantically, her voice rising into a panicked scream, her voice more high-pitched now, velvety and guttural.

"Even your voice sounds like hers! This is insane! We have to find her right now! I saw her walking that way!" He spun around and ran desperately toward the parking lot, his white thobe flapping around his legs and slowing him down.



His words resonated in her mind.

"I... I can't live like this! My family, my friends, what will they say? I can't show up looking like this! Fuck, my job... I can't show up looking like an Arab woman! My whole life is over!" - she whispered, voice trembling with a soft Arabic lilt. Her olive-skinned face, now beautifully made-up yet fully framed by the hijab, showed pure panic. She tried breathing slowly. She noticed people were staring at her. Obviously. A middle-Eastern woman in hijab screaming like that with her man caught everybody's attention. She felt a pang of shame, lowered her head and started walking, feeling deeply picking up the abaya dress to avoid stepping on it.

She looked around for the lady who had turned her into her doppelgänger but she could not see her. Deep down, she knew she was gone for good. She noted something on her bench still.

Feeling constrained by her new modest attire, she walked as fast as she could toward the wooden bench where the woman had been sitting. There, lying crumpled on the bench, was a piece of white paper with handwriting in bold black marker. Maybe there was a way out, after all!

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She picked it up with shaking hands and read it:

"If you want to be turned back, become the most committed Muslimah.

Pray 5 times a day.

Go to the mosque.

Read the Quran every day.

Cover yourself fully.

Cook, clean, and stay at home.

Become pregnant with your husband's children.

And never tell your man about this letter!"

Her eyes widened, in a mix of hope and despair. "Mark!" she called out, clutching the note tightly. "Mark, come back! Look at this!" But as she spoke, the note vanished. Of course, she couldn't tell him about that! She cursed herself, hoping she hadn't failed already her challenge. He didn't hear anything though, so it was probably fine. Right?

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The long blue abaya was tangling around her legs with every step. The flowing fabric, beautiful as it was, made running almost impossible. She felt restricted, heavy, and deeply out of place. Lauren hurried across the parking lot, where he was heading. Every movement reminded her how covered she was – no more bare legs, no more flowing blonde hair catching the breeze, no more turning heads for the wrong reasons. “The most committed Muslimah...” What was that supposed to mean? She had planned to at least get rid of the constricting garment as soon as possible but she would have to stick with it. All of that could have avoided had Mark not overreacted.

Yet when she spotted Mark, her heart ached with unexpected pity. He stood there in his white thobe, looking completely lost.

The long garment kept wrapping around his ankles, his bald head gleaming under the sun, he was gesturing wildly toward the empty parking space where his Porsche should have been. He pressed his hands to his temples, breathing hard. “Zis is not real... It cannot be real! Ze car was right here! I saw her take it wiss my own eyes! Why she do zis to me? She is gone and I lost zat car!” - he stammered desperately, his tongue tripping over the English words.

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Lauren slowed to a stop in front of him, gently placing a hand on his arm. The embroidered blue dress swayed around her as she moved.

For the first time since the curse, she felt a strange softness toward him – this man who now looked nothing like the arrogant boyfriend she once knew. “Habibi...” she said softly, the Arabic word slipping from her lips so naturally it surprised even her. “I think we are more fluent in Arabic by now.”

He looked up at her, eyes wide with growing terror.

“Ya Allah! La’! ‘Aqli... ‘aqli yataghayyar! Ana afham al-kalam al-‘arabi ka’annahu lughati al-umm! Kul shay’ fi ra’si yatahawwal... (Oh God! No! My mind... my mind is changing! I understand Arabic like it’s my mother tongue! Everything in my head is transforming...)”

He stumbled back a step, nearly tripping over the long thobe again, his face full of panic.

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“Hadi’ ya habibi, hadi’. Anta rajul basiti jiddan... taqlaq ‘ala sayyaratik fi wasat kul hadha al-fawda? (Calm down, my love, calm down. You’re such a basic man... worrying about your car in the middle of all this chaos?)”

She gave him a small, almost affectionate smile beneath her hijab, despite everything.

“Wa lakin... hunaka sayyara fi al-mawqif. Jarrab mafatihak. (But... there is a car in the lot. Try your keys.)”

She nodded toward an unassuming old white city car parked a few spaces away – nothing like the powerful Porsche they once owned. Mark stared at it, then slowly pulled out a set of keys from the pocket of his thobe. His hand trembled as he pressed the button. The headlights of the modest old car blinked once in response. Mark’s mouth fell open in disbelief.

Mark (in Arabic):

“La... hadhihi laysat sayyarati! (No... this is not my car!)”

Lauren gently touched his arm again, her voice soft but resigned.

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Lauren looked at him with gentle eyes and continued in Arabic: "... Bit'akid sarat as-sayyara malikha qanuniyan al-an. Mish bas ajasamna illi taghayyarat... Ta'al ya habibi, khallina nrouh lil-bayt." (I'm pretty sure that's legally her car now... Not only our bodies have changed... Come on, habibi. Let's go home.)

He turned the loud, weak engine on but couldn't see the woman anymore. He cursed loudly and slammed the wheel.

"Ya khara! Wein rahet hadi al-mar'a?!" (Damn it! Where did that woman go?!) He turned to Lauren, suddenly a bit more reassured but still shocked by her calmness. "Kif btet'ajjabi la had al-wadi' bi-sur'a? Ana barouh 'aqli! Sur'na zawj 'arabi wa ma fi khalas!" (How are you adjusting so well to this? I'm losing my fucking mind! We're stuck as an Arab couple now!)

Lauren looked at him tenderly. She reached over and caressed his arm with gentle, soothing strokes, her voice meek but steady and full of quiet strength. "Ma fi shi fina nsawe, ya habibi... ana khayfa. Bas lazem net'hammal. Ma dam ihna sawa, ihna lissa fi aman. Khallina nshouf fi talmiha huna, okay?" (We can't do anything, I'm afraid, habibi... But we have to endure this. As long as we're together we are still safe. Let's see if there's any hint here, ok?)

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She just wanted to go home but what was home now? Inside the car they found an envelope with an address and some keys. It left little room for doubt. Mark: "Hadha mish baytna! Lazim nrouh la al-villa tab'ana!" (That's not our home! We should go to our real villa instead!)

Lauren: "Shouf mafatihek, ya habibi. Bet'akid rahou." (Check your keys, habibi. I bet they're gone.)

He searched his pockets. Nothing remained.

"Takhayyal shu rah yseer law beople zayk hawalou ykassrou fi villa tab'ana." (Can you imagine what would happen if people like you tried breaking into our villa?) He nodded.

They drove far away from their quiet, upscale neighborhood, towards an area dedicated to social housing. Both fell silent. Mark slowed the car to a stop. Lauren's breath caught in her throat as the hulking grey brutalist apartment complex appeared – rows of identical concrete blocks stretching toward the grey sky.

They stepped out of the car and checked the address. It was correct. They lived here now – in a social housing complex. They, of all people, in social housing.

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After the first wave of anger passed, the full weight of what had happened finally hit them. They hadn't just been stripped of their old ethnicity... they had lost their social status, their identity, their entire previous life.

Without a word, Lauren turned to Mark and wrapped her arms around his waist. He pulled her close, burying his face in her black hijab. They stood there in the middle of the parking lot, holding each other tightly. Mark: "Ma ba'a 'indna shi... kul shi ra'h." (We have nothing left...) Lauren held him even tighter, her voice soft but steady and full of quiet strength, and replied: "Lissa 'indna ba'dna, ya habibi. Ma dam ihna sawa, ihna lissa fi aman." (We still have each other, sweetie. As long as we're together we are still safe.)

It was surreal how quickly their new reality was settling in. Mark found himself thinking how natural it now felt – speaking in Arabic, the weight of the thobe against his skin, the way Lauren's modest abaya moved when she walked. Even her new scent – sweet, warm, like soft talc powder mixed with a hint of cinnamon – felt familiar. For a brief moment, standing there in the middle of the parking lot wrapped in each other's arms, the world felt just a little less terrifying.

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The long hug, their new aroma, and the sudden tenderness did something strange to their minds.

For the first time since the transformation, Mark found his wife breathtaking. Her warm doe-brown eyes, smooth olive skin, and gentle smile under the black hijab stirred something deep inside him. The memory of her old blonde self suddenly felt pale and strangely plain in comparison.

Lauren felt the same pull. Mark's bald head, strong jawline, and thick dark beard gave him a raw, masculine presence that made her heart race in a way her old "pretty boy" fiancé never had. She could see the desire burning in his dark brown eyes – and it made her quietly happy.

The kiss was slow, tender, and full of desperate need. For a few blissful seconds, the world disappeared.

Then Lauren suddenly pulled away, eyes wide with alarm.

She remembered the cruel rules of their new reality too late.

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Lauren: "Ya Rabbi... ana nasit! 'Be a perfect Muslimah...'
Ma yajouz al-taqbeel fi al-'Alan!"

(Oh God... I forgot! 'Be a perfect Muslimah...'
Kissing in public is not allowed!)

The moment the words left her mouth, her hijab began to shift and tighten. The fabric flowed upward, covering her face completely until only her eyes remained visible – a full niqab had formed.

Mark stared at her in shock, his hand still hovering near her cheek.

Mark: "Shu hadha?! Lauren... wajhik! Hijabik taghayyar!"
(What is this?! Lauren... your face! Your hijab changed!)

Lauren: (voice slightly muffled behind the niqab, speaking quickly and apologetically while gently holding his hand)

"Oh no Mark, hadha khata'... ma kan lazem nsawe kida barra. Ta'al, khallina nudkhul bissur'a qabl ma yseer shi akhar!" (Oh no Mark, this was wrong... we shouldn't have done that outside. Come on, let's go inside quickly before anything else happens!)

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He was mortified, realizing that the whole thing had been his fault. They walked through several identical grey corridors, checking the building maps on the walls, until they finally found their floor – the 7th, as the key holder indicated.

They passed two Muslim women wearing abayas who smiled and greeted them warmly. “Assalamu alaikum! Wa alaikum, Chalma!” (Peace be upon you! And upon you, Chalma!)

They waved at them embarrassed. Lauren’s new name sounded strange in their mouths. Chalma? Their footsteps echoed loudly along the open-air concrete walkway. When they reached their door, both of them froze. There it was. A simple white plastic label, printed with a label maker, mounted beside the door:

O. Boulahrouz

C. Zahiri

A chill ran down both their spines. This was the final confirmation of their new reality.

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Mark: "Ya Allah... shufi hadha. O. Boulahrouz... C. Zahiri. Hadha ihna al-an." (Oh God... look at this. O. Boulahrouz... C. Zahiri. This is us now.)

Lauren stared at the names for a long moment, then spoke softly behind her niqab.

Lauren: "Yeb... yeb, ana Chalma Zahiri al-an, ya habibi. Ma fi khalas." (Yeah... yeah, I guess I'm Chalma Zahiri now, habibi. There's no escaping it.)

Who were these people? Where did they come from? Not that it made any difference at that point, but Chalma wondered about it. Then she remembered the mysterious message she had found earlier. The one that had ordered her to "be a perfect Muslimah"... and specifically to make her husband happy. Her eyes softened behind the niqab.

She took a deep breath, slid the key into the lock, and opened the door. The apartment was small, modest, and very simple – a tiny living room with basic furniture and some photos, a compact kitchenette, and a narrow hallway leading to what were probably the bedroom and bathroom.

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Everything was clean but far from the luxurious life they once knew. Chalma stepped inside first, then turned back to Mark. She reached up and gently removed her niqab, folding the black fabric carefully in her hands. Her face was visible again, soft and a little tired.

Chalma: "Yeb... yeb, ana Chalma Zahiri al-an, ya habibi. Ma fi khalas." (Yeah... yeah, I guess I'm Chalma Zahiri now, habibi. There's no escaping it.) She looked around the modest living room once more and gave a small, resigned smile.

Chalma: "I guess we live here now..." Mark: "Yeb... hazihi hiya darna al-jadida, ya habibi." (Yeah... this is our new home now, habibi.)

On the kitchen counter lay two wallets and a small stack of official documents. Chalma picked them up first, her eyes widening slightly.

Chalma: "Ya habibi... shuf. Ana 'iraqiyya. Chalma Zahiri, min al-'Iraq. Wa inta... Omar Boulahrouz, min al-Maghrib." (Habibi... look. I'm Iraqi. Chalma Zahiri, from Iraq. And you... Omar Boulahrouz, from Morocco.) She handed Mark his ID. He stared at it in disbelief.

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Mark (Omar): "Omar... O. Boulahrouz. Ya Allah, ana Omar al-an. Mish Mark." (Omar... O. Boulahrouz. Oh God, I'm Omar now. Not Mark.) They continued going through the papers.

Residence permits, marriage certificate, bank cards – everything was there. Chalma: "Wa hadha... shahadat zawaj. Ihna mutazawwijin rasmiyan, ya habibi. Min mundhu shahrain." (And this... marriage certificate. We are officially married, habibi. For two months already.) She showed him the documents and gently squeezed his hand, her voice remaining calm and supportive even as the weight of their new reality settled over them both. Chalma: "Ya habibi... tzakart al-risala al-ghariba. Kan fiha kalam 'an 'ij'ali zawjiki sa'idan. Wa ihna 'aishin ma'a ba'd... wa al-nas kulhum ya'rifun. Ya'ni... ihna mutazawwijin al'an. Bi sura rasmiya." (Habibi... I just remembered that strange message. It said I have to make my husband happy. And we're already living together... everyone knows it. That means... we're already married. Officially.)

Omar's reaction was less positive. "Kullu haqiqi... iqama, zawaj, jawazat as-safar... ma fi tarji'." (It's all real... residence permits, marriage, passports... there's no going back.)

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Chalma placed the documents down gently and turned to him, her voice soft and reassuring even as she processed everything.

Chalma: "Ihna Omar wa Chalma al-an... wa ihna zawj wa zawja. Lan net'akhkhar 'an ba'd." (We are Omar and Chalma now... and we are husband and wife. We won't go through this alone.) She stepped closer, offering the only comfort she could in their tiny new living room.

Then, realizing he needed time to process, she headed to the bathroom, small and full of items, took off the hijab and felt her long wavy jet black hair flow down her back.

She looked like an arabized version of her old self, some proportions still hinting at her caucasian physiognomy but with a different color palette and eye shape. Despite the modest clothes, she looked like she still teared makeup, possibly even more than before.

From the cosmetics and hair products in the room, she could tell Chalma took care of her looks, skin and hair.

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Meanwhile, Omar had been searching through the wardrobe. He found a private security guard uniform with his new name embroidered on it. He changed into it – dark navy pants, a fitted shirt with patches, and a duty belt. When Chalma returned to the living room, she stopped for a moment and smiled warmly.

Chalma: “Ya salam, ya habibi... inta shaklak helu jiddan fi al-uniform!” (Oh wow, habibi... you look really good in that uniform!)

She stepped closer and gently adjusted his collar, clearly proud.

Omar: “Shukran, habibti... bas yeb, al-awraq kulha bit’ul inni ana al-mu’ash al-wahid fi al-’a’ila. Wardi al-jayy bada’ ba’d sa’a wa nus. Law ma ruhna, rah yitla’una min al-shiqqah. Lazim aruh al-an.” (Thank you, habibti... but yeah, all the papers say I’m the sole breadwinner of the family. My next shift starts in an hour and a half. If I don’t go, they’ll evict us. I have to leave soon.) He looked at her with a mix of worry and determination, waiting for her reaction.

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Chalma: "Fahimt, ya habibi. Ruh fi aman Allah. Ana rah a'addil kul shi wa akun musta'idda lamma tirja'." (I understand, habibi. Go safely. I'll make sure everything is ready when you return.) She gave him a gentle, encouraging smile and Omar nodded, still looking a bit overwhelmed, then left for his shift. After he departed, Chalma took a deep breath. She went to the small bedroom, lifted the mattress and found a small stack of cash hidden underneath – somehow she knew they had their emergency money there. She took what she needed, then she opened the wardrobe, and chose a simple olive-green abaya with delicate embroidery. She put it on, wrapped her hijab neatly around her head, and looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. She left the apartment and walked to the nearby ethnic mini market. The fluorescent lights and familiar Middle Eastern smells greeted her as she stepped inside. A friendly shopkeeper smiled at her from behind the counter. "Ahlan wa sahan, ukhti Chalma! Kif al-hal?" (Welcome, sister Chalma! How are you?) She replied, surprised he knew her: "Alhamdulillah, bi khayr. Ana jaya ashtari ba'd al-hagat lil-bayt. Omar rah yirja' min al-shighl ba'd shway." (Alhamdulillah, I'm fine. I came to buy a few things for the house. Omar will be back from work soon.)

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Chalma returned to the apartment with two full bags of groceries. She unpacked everything on the small kitchen counter: fresh vegetables, rice, spices, a packet of couscous, lamb, chickpeas, tomatoes, onions, and a few other basics. She rolled up her sleeves, tied her hijab neatly, and stood in front of the stove. For a moment she felt a strange mix of nervousness and excitement.

She muttered to herself: "Yalla, ya Chalma... لازم tit'allami ttabukh. Ma ba'a fi DoorDash wa la talabiyat ghaliya." (Alright, Chalma... you have to learn how to cook. No more DoorDash and expensive deliveries.) She searched on her phone for simple Arabic recipes and began following a traditional couscous recipe. To her surprise, the movements came more naturally than she expected. The small kitchen slowly filled with warm, fragrant smells. As she stirred the pot, a gentle smile formed on her lips.

Cooking felt surprisingly calming. "Wallah, rakhis jiddan... wa ahsan min al-akl al-jahiz. Ma kunt atkhayyal inni rah astamti' bi hadha al-'amal." (It's so much cheaper... and better than ready-made food. I never thought I would actually enjoy doing this.) By the time the couscous was ready, the small apartment smelled like a proper home.