

LOVE IN THE TOWN OF BIRIYANI



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They say Old Dhaka never ceases to renew your love for biriyani, no matter how strict you are about that no-rice diet. The streets of this part of the town reek of cloves and cardamoms all the time. The town knows food, talks food and loves food. In almost every alley, there is a Maruf or a Belal who smells like chicken biriyani and ripe papayas, with molasses sticking in the gap between their fingernails and a ragged, checked cloth always resting neatly on their right shoulders.

There is no time for romance in this part of the city. The only thing that matters is if the chicken roast is cooked to perfection and if the borhani has all the spices it needs to create magic on your taste buds.

Somehow in this uncanny locality of Mughal delicacies, Farez and Nazia's love story bloomed and wilted over biriyani boxes from Bismillah Biriyani House, the only place in the area that did not belong to either of their fathers, uncles or distant brothers.

Of course they could have chosen the

local KFC for the several thousand dates they had. But they promised each other a love that was as deep as their love for biriyani. Both of them had a thing for the rusted chairs and the cracked ceilings of Bismillah. They did not mind the lack of air conditioners inside that made them sweat incessantly or the manager who glared every time Nazia put her head on Farez's shoulder. All they cared about was each other's company and the scrumptious kachchi the shop served.

But they had their differences too. Farez was the kind of guy who would never miss the chance of taking a picture of his food and immediately posting it on Instagram (#FoodIsLife). He was always late whenever they had a date and he never had his kachchi without extra ghee. Nazia, on the other hand, didn't even have an Instagram account, or a decent internet connection at home. She always asked the Marufs and Belals to put less oil in her kachchi and more salt in her borhani. She hated Farez's tardiness but Farez usually got away with it with his charm and the gift of a Sidney Sheldon book. The author's death meant that this couldn't last and it wasn't long

before Nazia had read everything Sheldon had ever written (including the autobiography); and Farez had only his charm left to satisfy her with. It wasn't enough.

Not even the kachchi was enough to calm her down anymore.

It all happened on a sunny Sunday afternoon when the whole town was busy serving lunches. The office men were on their 30 minute break rushing to all the nearby biriyani houses to please their empty stomachs. The heat and smell of ghee had enveloped the entire town. The Marufs and Belals were running around and asking the men whether they wanted kachchi or tehari, lassi or borhani. Some men were busy trying to hide their tummies peeking out from the gaps in their creased shirts. Some were washing hands in a bowl of lukewarm water and lemon slices. There were so many lovers of biriyani around, yet no romance.

Nazia sat in the corner of a very crowded Bismillah, waiting almost an hour for Farez and superlatively trying to ignore strange men staring at her. It was probably the heat outside, or the burnt smell of the beef roasts that were on fire in

Bismillah's kitchen, Or one of the Belals frequently asking her if she wanted their special tea, but something in her snapped that afternoon.

When Farez finally arrived, Nazia was sipping on a cold lassi instead of her regular borhani. Her hair was already parted on the other side. Her glasses were on the table instead of being perched on her nose. There was a certain kind of rage in her eyes, possibly hotter than the beef curry that was being devoured by the man in the next table. Between Farez's apologies and Nazia's constant nods, something changed. None of them ordered their favorite kachchi that day. Neither did they order tehari, nor any other form of biriyani.

Perhaps they both realized they had had too many boxes of biriyani and it was time to stop.

Over the smell of cardamoms and cloves, many things stay unnoticed in this part of the city. Nobody really noticed when Nazia and Farez stopped visiting Bismillah. Its rusted chairs did not miss them anymore. The house remained filled with biriyani-lovers like always.

WHITE DREAMS AND COTTONFLAKE SMILES

Chapter 2 – A snowy denial

NUSRAT JAHIN ANGELA

Another reason why Hasin doesn't completely dislike winter is coffee. He likes to have an excuse for everything he does or has. And winter gives him an excuse to have a steaming mug of coffee every day. He doesn't make it at home though – he can never get it right. Sometimes, it's the sugar that he gets wrong, on other days it's the cream. And sometimes, he gets *everything* wrong. So instead, he has scouted out a small café nearby his house, which sells nothing but coffee. Hasin likes their commitment to the sacred drink and goes there every day for a cup maybe early in the morning, or late at night;

always at extreme hours. On winter days, the café stays open all day and all night long so it suits Hasin's erratic schedule perfectly. Like Hasin, Sunerah goes to the same café every day for her daily draught of coffee. Unlike Hasin, Sunerah's schedule is inflexible and the time slot reserved for the café is never missed or



altered.

Sunerah even has the table at the café where she sits fixed. It is right beside the window that overlooks the street, a two-seater. She puts her bag, folders, her scarf, and whatever else she is carrying on one chair and sits on the other. The existence of her possessions on the other chair helps to staunch her feel-

ings of bitter loneliness. She tries other methods as well, like reading books or trying to work on song lyrics. But her eyes always wander around, looking at everything and nothing at all. The café is always packed at the time when she chooses to go there. It is the coldest part of the day, along dusk, and the cold drives people in hordes into the small, warm shop. This distracts Sunerah and every time someone new enters, she sighs. She wonders what joy she finds in observing people. Maybe she has been a bit *too* lonely for a bit *too* long. Hasin's only attraction at the warm, snug café is the mouth-watering coffee, *nothing else*; or so he tells himself; he lacks nothing more.