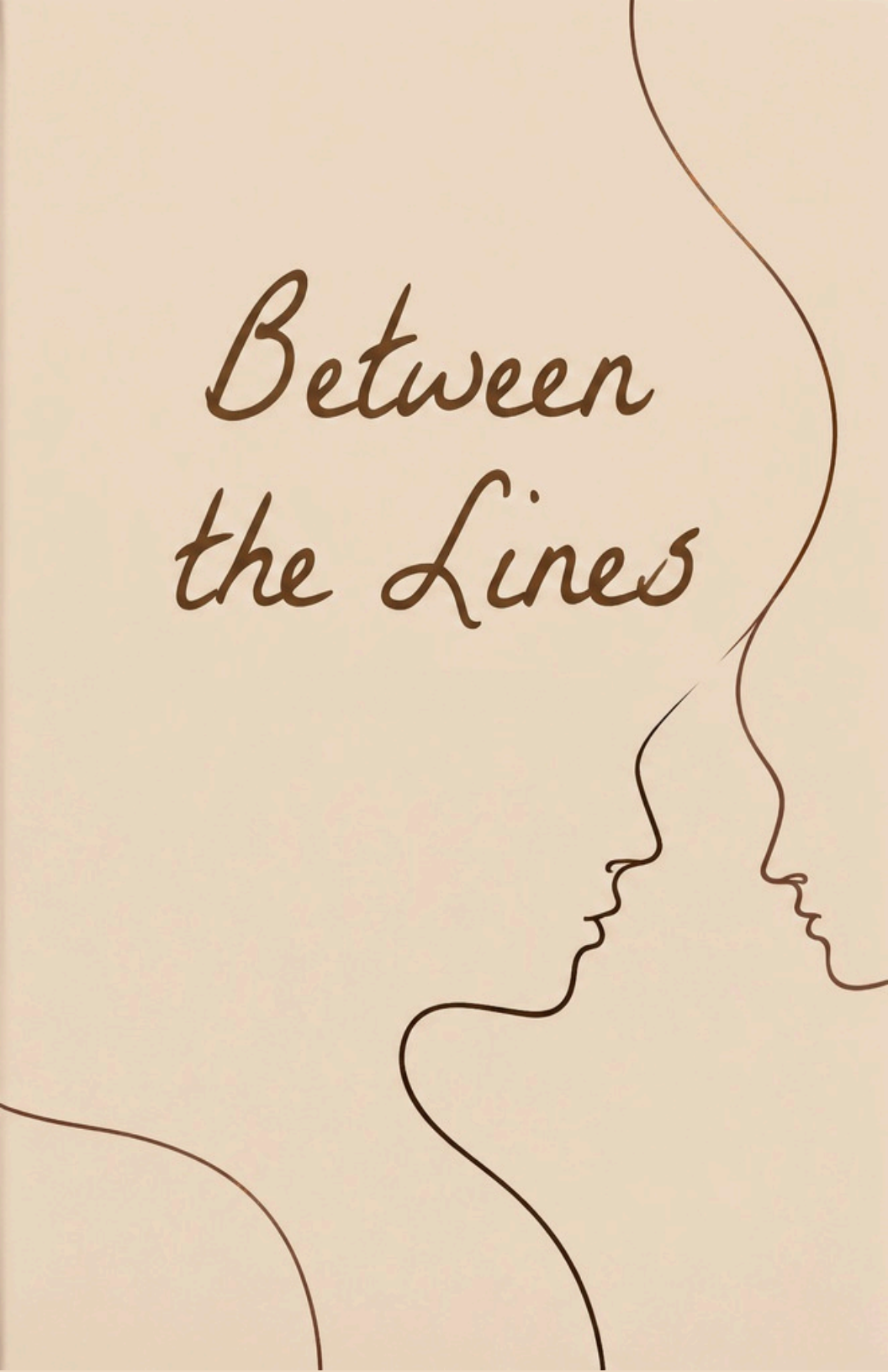
Between the Lines



Between the Lines

From the shelves of Monaj Art. First edition, November 2026.

You may read this book anywhere, with or without tea. No folded corners.

Not for sale.

For Zaynab,
on her twenty-ninth birthday

‘Books *are patient*.’

MAMA RUKAYAT

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CHAPTER 1

The Rainy Monday

IT HAD BEEN raining since morning, and Pages & Tea had been empty for two hours. Zaynab didn't mind. Rain days were for tidying the poetry shelf and drinking her tea while it was still hot, with a cold bottle of apple juice waiting by the till for later.

She was on her knees by the bottom shelf when the bell over the door rang, harder than it should have. A man stood in the doorway, soaked through, holding an umbrella that had clearly lost its fight with the wind.

'Is this a bookshop?' he asked.

'It says so on the sign,' Zaynab said, standing and brushing off her skirt.

'I did not look at the sign. I looked for a dry place.' He glanced at the shelves around him as if they might bite. 'But since I am here, I need a book.'

'Any book in particular?'

‘The best one.’ He said it with the confidence of someone who had never had to choose. ‘It is for my grandmother. She turns eighty on Saturday.’

Zaynab smiled. She pointed to the towel she kept behind the counter for days like this, and he took it with an embarrassed nod. While he dried his face, she did what she always did. She waited.

‘The best one,’ she said at last. ‘What does your grandmother like?’

‘Books?’ He looked unsure. ‘I think she likes books. She has some at home.’

‘What does she like to do on a quiet afternoon?’

He thought about it, and his face softened in a way he probably didn’t notice. ‘She sits by the window. She tells stories to anyone who sits next to her. She laughs at her own jokes before she finishes them.’

‘Then she does not need the best book,’ Zaynab said. ‘She needs a book that sounds like her.’

He frowned. ‘That is not an answer.’

‘It is the start of one.’ She stepped around the counter and walked down the aisle, trailing a finger along the spines. ‘Do you read much, Mr …’

‘Idris. Idris Bello.’ A pause. ‘No. Not since school.’

‘Not at all?’

‘I read contracts and drawings. I am an engineer. If it does not hold up a building, it does not interest me.’ He winced. ‘That sounded rude. I did not mean it that way.’

Zaynab laughed, a short, real laugh that surprised her. ‘It sounded honest. I will take honest over polite.’

She stopped in front of a shelf near the window and pulled out a small blue book with a worn cover. She didn’t hand it to him. She held it close, like something she was still deciding whether to share.

‘Come back tomorrow,’ she said. ‘Tell me more about your grandmother. Then I will give you the right book.’

‘You cannot just sell me this one?’

‘I can,’ Zaynab said. ‘But then it would only be a book. I want it to be a gift.’

Idris looked at the rain on the window, and then back at her.

‘Tomorrow,’ he said, and for the first time since he walked in, he smiled.

CHAPTER 2

The Right Question

IDRIS CAME BACK the next day, and this time he was dry.

He stood at the counter in a pressed shirt, holding a notebook as if he were about to attend a meeting. Zaynab was pouring tea for an older customer in the reading corner. She nodded at him to wait, and he did, though she could tell waiting wasn't something he did often.

When she finished, she walked over and wiped her hands on her apron. 'You came back.'

'I said I would.' He opened the notebook. 'I wrote things down. About my grandmother.'

'You wrote notes?'

'I am an engineer. Notes are how I think.'

Zaynab bit back a smile. 'Go on.'

'Her name is Hajia Safiya. She grew up in a trading town and she still bargains with the vegetable seller even when the price is fair. She has big glasses and

complains that everything is printed too small. She cried at a wedding last year and said it was the pepper.'

'The pepper?'

'There was a lot of pepper.' His mouth twitched. 'She also said once that she never finished school, but she knows more proverbs than anyone I have met.'

Zaynab was quiet for a moment. Then she went to the shelf by the window and came back with the small blue book. She turned it over and showed him the back cover.

'This is *The Salt Merchant's Daughter*. A girl runs her father's business after he falls ill, and everyone in town tells her she will fail. She bargains with the whole market and wins.' She tapped the corner of the book. 'And before you ask, yes, this edition is large print. I checked this morning.'

Idris stared at her. 'You checked.'

'You said she complains about small print.'

He closed the notebook and looked at her. 'Nobody asks about her,' he said. 'When I tell people it is her birthday, they ask what she wants. Nobody asks who she is.'

‘Those are two different questions,’ Zaynab said. ‘The first one gets you a present. The second one gets you a gift.’

He paid at the counter. She wrapped the book in brown paper and tied it with a piece of blue ribbon, and he watched her hands the whole time like he was learning how it was done.

‘Thank you,’ he said, and he meant it more than the words usually mean.

‘Tell her happy birthday from Pages & Tea.’

He nodded and left. The bell rang. Zaynab went back to the tea cups, and it was nearly an hour before she noticed the broken umbrella leaning against the wall by the door.

She picked it up. One of its ribs had snapped, and the cloth hung down like a tired wing. She thought about running after him, but he was long gone.

Instead, she found an old bucket, stood the umbrella in it, and left it by the door.

‘He will be back for it,’ she told Comma, the shop cat, who was watching from the windowsill with his usual expression of disapproval.

Comma blinked once, as if to say he would believe it when he saw it.

CHAPTER 3

Return Policy

ON MONDAY, IDRIS came through the blue door with a paper bag, a slightly guilty look, and no umbrella.

'I would like to return something,' he said.

Zaynab looked up from the register. 'The book?'

'No. Not the book.' He cleared his throat. 'My grandmother finished the book.'

'In two days?'

'In two days.' He set the paper bag on the counter. 'She read the first chapter out loud to the entire family on Saturday. Then she sent everyone home and read the rest by herself. She says the girl in the story reminds her of herself at nineteen. She says she was cleverer.'

Zaynab laughed. 'I like her already.'

'She wants to know who picked it.' He paused. 'I told her a woman at the bookshop who asks a lot of questions. She said to bring you this.'

He pushed the bag across the counter. Inside was a container of puff puff, still warm, wrapped in foil.

'She made it herself,' Idris said. 'She says the shop has to eat. She does not trust people who only sell paper.'

Zaynab held the foil in both hands, surprised by how much it moved her. 'Please tell her thank you. Tell her I have not been called clever by someone's grandmother in a long time.'

'I will tell her that. She will use it for a week.' He glanced around the shop. 'She also wants another book.'

'Does she want a different story, or the same kind?'

'She did not say.' He rubbed the back of his neck. 'I thought I could stay and look. If that is allowed.'

'It is a bookshop,' Zaynab said. 'Looking is allowed.'

He drifted toward the reading corner, hands in his pockets, studying the shelves as if they were a map in a language he was just beginning to read. Halfway there, something soft and heavy dropped into his lap. He looked down.

Comma had climbed into the armchair beside him, circled twice, and settled on his knees like he had always been there.

Idris froze. ‘Is this normal?’

Zaynab stopped sorting receipts. ‘Comma does not sit on just anyone.’

‘What do I do?’

‘You sit very still and feel honoured.’

He sat very still. His shoulders lowered, and a surprised smile came over his face.

Zaynab turned back to the register so he wouldn’t see her smiling too.

It was almost closing time when he finally brought two books to the counter: a collection of short stories from the new arrivals, and a small book of proverbs with a green cover.

‘For the second birthday,’ he said. ‘She says every day after eighty is a birthday.’

‘She is right.’

‘She usually is.’ He took the bag from her, then stopped. ‘I think I left an umbrella here last week.’

Zaynab pointed. It was in the bucket, standing a little crooked, like it was waiting to be asked.

‘Keep it,’ Idris said. ‘It is finished.’

CHAPTER 4

Mama Rukayat's Rules

BY THE THIRD week, Idris had a chair.

Nobody had assigned it to him. It was the green armchair in the reading corner, the one with the sagging cushion and a view of the street. He came on Mondays and Thursdays after work, took off his tie, loosened his collar, and pretended he was only there for the tea.

Zaynab had stopped pretending to believe him. She had also noticed that he looked at the shelves whenever she turned round, and at her whenever she didn't.

'You should know the rules,' she said one Thursday, setting down a cup of ginger tea. 'Since you are practically a resident.'

'There are rules?'

'Mama Rukayat wrote them. There are four.' She counted them off on her fingers. 'One, you may read any book in the shop without buying it. Two, no

folded corners. Use a bookmark or use your memory. Three, the tea is made slowly. If you are in a hurry, you are in the wrong shop.'

'And four?'

'Nobody leaves without being asked how their day was.'

Idris blinked. 'That is not a rule. That is just manners.'

'Mama Rukayat says manners are the only rules worth writing down.'

From the stool by the counter, a dry voice said, 'I also say you talk too much, Zaynab.'

Mama Rukayat was seventy-three and about the size of a handbag. She wore a navy wrapper, thick glasses, and a look that could straighten a crooked shelf from across the room. She had owned Pages & Tea for thirty years and sat on the same stool for twenty-nine of them.

Idris stood up so fast that the cushion bounced. 'Good evening, ma.'

'Sit.' She looked him up and down. 'You are the engineer.'

'Yes, ma.'

‘The one who bought the book for his grandmother.’

‘Yes, ma.’

‘Good boy. Do you read?’

Zaynab opened her mouth to help him, but Idris spoke first. ‘No, ma. I used to. I have not finished a book since school.’

There was a pause. Zaynab held her breath. Most people lied when Mama Rukayat asked that question.

The old woman nodded. ‘Honest,’ she said. ‘Good. Honest people make good readers once they start. They do not pretend to understand what they do not.’

‘I am not sure I will start, ma.’

‘Books are patient,’ Mama Rukayat said. ‘They will wait for you to be ready.’ She gave him one more look, then turned to Zaynab. ‘Give him something small. A big book is a bad first date.’

‘Yes, Mama.’

When the old woman went back to her ledger, Idris leaned toward Zaynab and whispered, ‘Did she just say first date?’

‘She says that about everything,’ Zaynab said, and went very busy with the teapot.

CHAPTER 5

Homework

'A SMALL BOOK,' Idris repeated on Monday. 'How small?'

'One hundred and eighty pages.' Zaynab placed it on the table between them. It had a yellow cover with a drawing of a lamp. '*The Lamp at Number Nine*. You can finish it in a week if you read a little each night.'

He picked it up and weighed it in his hand, like a man considering a stone he was about to throw. 'What if I do not like it?'

'Then you will tell me why. That is half the point.'

'What is the other half?'

'Finishing something.' She said it simply. 'You said you have not finished a book since school. I think you miss it more than you realise.'

Idris looked at the lamp on the cover for a long moment. 'My father used to read to us every Friday evening,' he said. 'My sisters and I would sit on the

floor. He did all the voices. After I went to university, Fridays got quiet and I did not notice when the reading stopped.' He cleared his throat. 'That is a long answer to a short question.'

'It is a good answer,' Zaynab said.

He nodded, then straightened. 'I accept. But I want terms.'

'Terms?'

'A bet. If I finish in seven days, you do something for me.'

Zaynab folded her arms. 'What?'

'You treat me to the ginger tea. The good pot, not the one you give regular customers.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'There is no good pot.'

'Mama Rukayat told me there is.'

Zaynab sighed. She would have to speak to Mama Rukayat. 'Fine. And if you fail?'

'Then you choose.'

A small, dangerous smile appeared on her face. 'If you fail, you read a page out loud at Open Mic.'

'What is Open Mic?'

‘A night once every few months when people stand up and read to a room. Poems, stories, shopping lists. Anything you like.’

‘In front of people?’

‘That is usually what makes it a mic.’

Idris stared at her. She could see him running the numbers, weighing the risk like he would any structure that might not hold. Then he picked up the book and tucked it under his arm.

‘Seven days,’ he said. ‘I will see you next Monday.’

‘Good luck.’

‘I do not need luck. I need a quiet room and a strong lamp.’

At the door, he stopped and looked back. ‘Why do you care so much? About whether I read.’

Zaynab thought about it honestly. ‘A book is better when someone you know has read it too,’ she said. ‘That is all.’

He nodded, as if she had given him a tool he would need later, and went out into the evening.

CHAPTER 6

The Ending He Hated

HE CAME BACK on the eighth day.

Zaynab heard the bell and knew from the way it rang that something was wrong. Idris walked in with the yellow book gripped in one hand like evidence, and he didn't take off his jacket.

'I finished it,' he said.

'You said Monday. It is Tuesday. You are a day late.'

'I know. I counted.' He put the book on the counter. 'I have a complaint.'

'Do you?'

'The ending. The lamp goes out. The woman walks away and they never say anything to each other.' He was speaking fast now. 'Two hundred pages of tension, and they do not even talk. Who writes a book like that?'

Zaynab leaned on her elbows. ‘Someone who wanted you to think about it. Some writers leave the important part between the lines.’

‘There was nothing between the lines. I checked. Twice. I thought about it until two in the morning. I was angry at a lamp.’ He started pacing. ‘She should have turned around. He should have said her name. One word. Anything.’

‘Maybe he did not know what to say.’

‘Then he should have found out!’

Several customers glanced over. Zaynab pressed her lips together, but the laugh was already rising, and she lost the fight. She laughed until she had to hold the counter. It wasn’t polite or small. It was loud and helpless, and she couldn’t stop.

Idris stopped pacing and stared at her. In spite of himself, his face broke too. He tried to stay stern for three more seconds. Then he was laughing as well, one hand over his eyes.

‘Why is this funny?’ he managed.

‘Because you stayed up until two in the morning,’ Zaynab gasped, ‘to argue with a lamp.’

‘It is not funny. It was a very serious lamp.’

They laughed until Mama Rukayat tapped her pen on the ledger without looking up, which was the shop's signal to calm down.

When they finally quieted, Idris wiped his eyes. 'I lost the bet,' he said.

'You did.'

'So I read a page at Open Mic.'

'In September, the first Saturday.' She tilted her head. 'You could back out.'

He thought about it, then shook his head. 'No. I want to read something. I want to do all the voices.'

Zaynab's laughter faded. She didn't say anything. She just reached under the counter, took out the good teapot, and poured him a cup anyway.

CHAPTER 7

Maryam's Verdict

MARYAM ARRIVED AT lunchtime with a plate of jollof rice and a look that meant she had been planning this conversation all morning.

'Sit,' she said, pointing at the nearest table.

Zaynab was only holding her yoghurt bowl, which was what she ate for lunch most days, so she sat. She had never been a snacker, and she liked her meals to have a shape. They had been friends for over ten years, since the first week of university, when Maryam had borrowed a pen and never returned it. She taught Primary Three now, and she spoke to adults the way she spoke to eight-year-olds: kindly, clearly, and without any escape.

'So,' Maryam said. 'Tell me about the engineer.'

'What engineer?'

'The one who sits in the green chair. The one who has come in twice a week for a month. The one you stopped complaining about.'

‘I don’t complain about customers.’

‘You complain about everyone. You complained about the man who wanted a refund on a book he had already read twice.’ Maryam jabbed her fork in the air. ‘You wore the yellow headwrap yesterday. Your whole wardrobe is brown, black and white, and you only wear the yellow one on days that matter.’

Zaynab touched her head. ‘I like the yellow.’

‘You asked me twice whether those earrings matched.’

‘They don’t match. They are meant not to match.’

‘And you wore the good perfume on a Tuesday,’ Maryam went on. ‘The Libre Intense. Amber and oud.’

‘I like how it smells.’

‘You like how it smells when somebody might notice.’

‘Zaynab.’ Maryam’s voice went gentle. ‘I’m not teasing. Well. A little. But look at me.’

Zaynab looked.

'You haven't talked about anyone like this in a long time. You have been so careful. You read the ending of every book first so you won't be surprised. You have read *The Love Hypothesis* eleven times and you still hold your breath at the same page.' She smiled. 'I'm not saying jump. I'm saying look up once in a while.'

'He is just a customer,' Zaynab said. 'He is learning to read again. I like helping.'

'Of course.' Maryam took a bite of rice. 'Promise me one thing. If there's ever anything to tell, you will tell me first.'

'There's nothing to tell.'

'That isn't a promise.'

Zaynab sighed. 'I promise.'

Satisfied, Maryam went back to her lunch. A few minutes later the bell rang, and Zaynab's head turned before she could stop it.

It was only a delivery boy. She turned back and found Maryam watching her over her fork, one eyebrow raised so high it nearly disappeared into her scarf.

'Nothing to tell,' Maryam said sweetly.

'Eat your rice,' said Zaynab.

CHAPTER 8

The Blueprint

THE NEXT THURSDAY, Idris came in carrying a tube of drawings under his arm, and he didn't sit in the green chair.

'I need your opinion,' he said. 'If you have time.'

Zaynab looked around. It was a slow evening. 'I have time.'

He cleared a table and unrolled the paper. Weights from the sugar jar and the stapler held down the corners. The page was covered in neat, careful lines. Zaynab leaned in.

'It is a reading room,' Idris said.

'For whom?'

'For Alfa Close. The street where I grew up.' He touched the paper lightly. 'There is a building at the end of it that has been empty for years. It used to be a

tailor's shop. The owner is willing to give it to the community if someone fixes it. So I am drawing plans in the evenings.'

Zaynab studied the drawing. There was a low shelf wrapped around three walls, a window seat, and a small corner with a rug. She noticed the shelves were drawn at different heights. 'Why are some of these so low?'

'For children. I measured my nephew.' He pointed. 'He is six. If he cannot reach it, it should not be on the shelf.'

'You thought about that.'

'I thought about what it was like when I was six and could not reach anything.' He said it without drama. Then he glanced at her, almost shy. 'I know how to build the walls. I do not know what to put inside.'

Zaynab felt her chest tighten. She had spent six years learning about books, and this man had come to her with something he cared about and asked her to hold the other end of it.

'What do the children on Alfa Close like?' she asked.

Idris blinked. 'I do not know.'

'Then that is where we start.'

‘We?’

She heard herself say it and didn’t take it back. ‘If you want help.’

He looked at her for a long moment, and the usual caution in his face loosened.

‘I want help,’ he said. ‘Very much.’

Zaynab picked up a pencil from the counter and slid a clean sheet of paper next to his drawing. ‘Then tell me about the street,’ she said. ‘Start with the children.’

• • •

They started on Sunday, at the city library, because Zaynab said you could not build a reading room until you had sat in a few good ones.

It was a tall, quiet building with brown stone steps and a smell of floor polish and old paper. Idris slowed down at the door without noticing. Zaynab didn’t slow down at all. She walked in the way other people walk into their own homes.

‘Why are we whispering?’ he whispered.

‘Because it is a library.’

‘Nobody told me that was a rule.’

‘It is not a rule. It is just what the room asks for.’ She led him up a flight of wide stairs and along a row of tall windows to the end of the second floor. ‘Here.’

There was a corner with a low table, a lamp and a deep brown sofa that had been sat in so often it had a shape of its own. Zaynab sank into it, tucked her feet under her, and let out a long breath, as if she had been holding it all week.

Idris stayed standing, drawing the corner with his eyes. ‘The window is on the left,’ he said. ‘The lamp is on the right. The sofa faces the shelf but not the door.’

‘So nobody feels watched while they read.’

‘That is good design.’

‘That is what a comfortable couch is for.’ She patted the cushion. ‘Sit. You cannot measure it unless you sit.’

He sat. He was quiet for a full minute, which was one of the longest silences she had ever heard from him. She took a paperback out of her bag, opened it, and didn’t read it. She let the quiet do its work.

‘I think,’ he said slowly, ‘that I have been building a room for children, and forgetting the people who bring them.’

‘Mothers get tired.’

‘Fathers too.’ He looked at the sofa, then at her. ‘Could the reading room have one of these?’

‘It should have two,’ said Zaynab, ‘and a lamp for each.’

He wrote it on the plan right there, in square capitals: TWO COUCHES. TWO LAMPS. Then, after a moment, in smaller letters: ASK Z WHERE THE QUIET IS. She pretended not to read it upside down.

On the way out she told him that museums were the same kind of quiet, only with the books behind glass, and that he would have to see one. He said he would put it in his diary. She said that was what she was afraid of.

CHAPTER 9

Saturday Market

THE SATURDAY BOOK market took place on a school field, under rows of blue tarpaulin, and Zaynab knew nearly everyone in it.

'Madam Zaynab!' a man called from behind a pile of old encyclopaedias. 'I kept the Achebe for you! And the Ali Hazelwood you were asking about!'

'Mr Dele, you are an angel.' She squeezed his hand. 'I will take it on the way back.'

Mr Dele misquoted Achebe over his shoulder as they walked on, and Zaynab corrected him without turning round. He thanked her. She enjoyed it more than she would ever admit.

'And who is this?' Mr Dele squinted at Idris, who was carrying two empty crates and trying to look like he didn't feel out of place.

'He is building a library,' Zaynab said.

‘Then he is welcome.’ Mr Dele pressed a free bookmark into Idris’s palm. ‘Anyone who builds a library may borrow my best prices.’

By ten o’clock Idris understood how the market worked. You walked slowly. You asked about a bookseller’s day before asking about a price. You held each book like it might be someone’s favourite. Zaynab moved from table to table with an unhurried confidence, and people leaned toward her the way plants lean toward a window.

‘How do you know all of them?’ he asked.

‘I listen,’ she said. ‘People tell you things when you listen. Mr Dele’s wife is unwell. The woman at the third table is saving for her son’s school fees. They tell me and I try to remember.’

‘That is a lot to carry.’

‘It does not feel heavy,’ she said, and meant it.

They filled four crates with picture books, a few early readers, and a battered atlas that made Idris go quiet for several minutes.

At a table of secondhand paperbacks, Zaynab found a Liz Tomforde with a cracked spine and held it against her chest like a rescued animal.

‘You already own that one,’ Idris said. ‘I have seen it behind your register.’

‘I own the good copy. This one is for lending.’

‘Lending?’

‘Some people need to be handed a first one. Then they come back for the rest.’ She paid, and tucked it into the top of a crate.

‘Is that a hint?’

‘It is a policy,’ said Zaynab. At one table, a small girl in a school uniform stood next to her mother and stared at a book about a crocodile who was afraid of water.

‘Do you want it?’ Zaynab asked.

The girl hid behind her mother’s wrapper. Idris crouched down, looked at the book, and said very seriously, ‘I think the crocodile would like you to take him home.’

The girl considered this, then nodded. Her mother tried to protest, but Zaynab was already paying.

Afterwards, in the shade of a mango tree, they ate roasted corn from paper and watched people drift between the tables.

‘You were good with her,’ Zaynab said.

‘I was a child on that street not long ago.’ He shrugged. ‘I remember what it is like to want something small and be too shy to ask.’

She dug in her bag and took out something flat and white. It was the bookmark Mr Dele had given him, which Idris had handed her earlier to hold while he carried the crates. On it, in thin printed letters, were three words: *Keep your place*.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘For your next book.’

He took it carefully, turned it over, and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

‘I do not have a next book,’ he said.

‘You will,’ said Zaynab, and she stood up to brush the crumbs from her skirt.

CHAPTER 10

Wrong Turn

THE CAR STOPPED on a country road between two towns, with a small cough and a long sigh.

'No,' Idris said. 'No, no, no.' He turned the key again. The engine thought about it and declined.

Zaynab looked out at the empty road, the flat fields, and the orange edge of the afternoon sun. In the back seat sat four crates of books, a bag of oranges, and a flask of tea and a bottle of apple juice she had packed that morning out of habit.

'How long will the mechanic take?' she asked.

Idris hung up the phone. 'He says an hour. Maybe two.' He rubbed his face. 'I am sorry. I planned this trip down to the minute.'

'That is probably the problem,' Zaynab said. 'Come. Get out of the car. We have tea.'

They sat on the grass at the side of the road. She poured tea into the flask cup and handed it over first. For a while they played the word game Zaynab always played when she was stuck anywhere. She won three rounds in a row and wasn't at all modest about it. Then they just watched the clouds change colour. A few birds crossed the sky in a loose line.

'You are very calm,' Idris said eventually.

'I am not. I am pretending very well.' She smiled. 'You get better at it with practice.'

He laughed. After a moment, he said, 'Can I tell you something I have never told anyone?'

'You can.'

'The reason I stopped reading.' He looked into the cup. 'It was not school. My father retired and moved back to the village while I was at university. Friday evenings stopped.'

Zaynab didn't say anything. She had learned that silence, when it is kind, can hold more than words.

'I told myself I was too busy to notice,' he said. 'I think I just did not want to read alone. It felt wrong without his voice.'

'What was his favourite voice?' she asked.

‘What?’

‘You said he did the voices. What was his favourite?’

Idris was quiet. Then his face changed. His shoulders dropped and his chin tucked in. When he spoke again, his voice was deep, grand and a little ridiculous.

‘I have travelled across three kingdoms, young man, and I have never once been late for dinner.’

Zaynab laughed so hard she nearly spilled the tea. Idris was laughing too, and under the laughter his eyes were wet.

‘He used to say that,’ he said. ‘Every Friday. He made a different man say it every time.’

‘I think he would love that you remember.’

‘I think so too.’

• • •

When the mechanic’s truck rattled up an hour later, neither of them noticed until the headlights swept across their faces. It was already dark. The tea was gone, and Idris wasn’t in any hurry.

CHAPTER 11

Hajia

'SHE INSISTS,' IDRIS said at the door of a small house with a blue gate. 'She says if you are going to help with the reading room, she needs to inspect you.'

'Inspect me?'

'Her word, not mine.'

Hajia Safiya was waiting in the living room in an upholstered chair, wearing an emerald headscarf and enormous glasses. Her eyes followed Zaynab as she crossed the room. There was a plate of puff puff on the table, and a small bowl of groundnuts, and a distinct sense that the conversation had already been rehearsed.

'So,' Hajia said. 'You are the girl with the questions.'

'Yes, Hajia. I am sorry about that.'

'Do not apologise. Questions are the only honest way to learn a person.' She patted the cushion beside her. 'Sit. Tell me, why is a clever girl like you selling

books?'

Zaynab sat. 'Because I love them, Hajia. I studied literature. I thought I would be a lecturer.' She hesitated. 'Then I started working at the shop. A book on a shelf is just paper. When it is the right book and the right person, you can see it happen. I like being there for that.'

'And what do you like best about yourself?' Hajia asked. 'Do not say your kindness. Everyone says kindness.'

Zaynab laughed, then actually thought about it. 'My brain,' she said. 'It has never once been boring.'

'Mm.' Hajia looked pleased. 'Honest. Most girls say their hair.'

Hajia looked at her a little longer. Then she tilted her head toward her grandson, who was pretending to tidy a shelf by the window.

'Idris, bring my book.'

He brought it: *The Salt Merchant's Daughter*, with its blue cover, soft now at the edges. Zaynab knew it at once. She had wrapped it in brown paper herself, with a blue ribbon.

'You finished it in two days,' she said.

‘Three times since,’ said Hajia. ‘I was cleverer than the girl in the story. But I will allow her the market.’

‘Read me the first page,’ Hajia said to Zaynab. ‘In your own voice. Not the voice of a book.’

Zaynab took it. She read, simply, as if she were telling a friend something that had happened to her. When she reached the end of the page, she looked up. Hajia’s eyes were bright behind the glasses.

‘Mm,’ Hajia said. ‘Mm. That one listens to the words before she says them.’

‘Thank you, Hajia.’

‘I am not praising you. I am observing.’ But she was smiling.

Later, as Zaynab was leaving, Hajia caught her hand and drew her close.

‘My grandson is slow like his grandfather,’ she whispered. ‘It took my husband three years to say what he meant. Be patient with him.’

‘Hajia, we are only working on the library…’

‘Of course.’ Hajia let go of her hand with a satisfied expression. ‘Of course you are.’

She added, loud enough for the whole house to hear, ‘Idris! Walk her to the bus stop. It is getting dark.’

• • •

They walked in a comfortable silence until a smell stopped Zaynab in the middle of the pavement.

It came from a narrow shop with steamed-up windows and a hand-painted sign that said NOODLES. Inside there were six stools and a man behind a counter, stirring something that smelled of ginger and garlic.

‘Have you eaten?’ Idris asked.

‘I had a little puff puff. It is not food.’

‘Then you will have soup.’

‘I was not going to say no,’ said Zaynab.

They sat at the counter. The ramen came in deep bowls, steaming. Zaynab held hers in both hands, closed her eyes for a second, and then ate like someone who had been waiting all day.

‘You check the price of a pencil,’ Idris said. ‘You did not check the price of this.’

‘Food is the one thing I never check. Everything else goes in the ledger. Soup does not.’

‘Why soup?’

‘Because it fixes a bad day without asking you any questions.’ She slurped, unembarrassed. ‘Pepper soup, ramen, anything with a broth.’

He watched her for a while with the expression he used on a good drawing. Then he asked what she liked to watch, and she said anything with Uzor and Bisola in it, and that she would watch them read a phone book.

‘Who?’

‘Uzor and Bisola, Idris. Do not tell me you do not know them.’

‘I know contracts,’ he said. ‘I will watch one tonight.’

‘That is not how you start.’

‘How do you start?’

‘With the one I tell you to.’

At the bus stop she climbed on with a full stomach and a warm face. Hajia would hear about the noodles by morning. She always did.

CHAPTER 12

A Quiet Compliment

IDRIS NOTICED THE shelves first.

They weren't empty, exactly. But the new arrivals table had fewer books than it used to, and the corner where Zaynab kept the poetry was a little thinner each week. On Thursday evening he counted three customers in two hours, and one of them was only there to ask for directions.

'Slow day?' he asked, taking his usual chair.

'Slow month.' Zaynab set a cup beside him and tried to say it lightly. 'People are being careful with money. It happens.'

'Does it happen often?'

'More than it used to.'

He looked at the register, at the ledger on Mama Rukayat's stool, at the brave line of customers who still came. Then he looked at Zaynab, who was

straightening a stack of books that didn't need straightening.

'May I say something?' he said.

'You usually do.'

'This street is different because of this shop.' He spoke carefully, the way he did when he checked a measurement twice. 'When I walk down it, I can tell where your door is without reading the sign. People slow down near it. I think they do not know why.'

Zaynab stopped moving.

'And I think,' he continued, 'that it is you. People feel read in here. A bigger shop cannot buy that.'

She didn't answer. For a moment, she only held a paperback with both hands, and he saw her throat move.

'That is a very kind thing to say,' she said at last.

He gave a small, shy shrug. 'I am an engineer. I only say what I can verify.'

She laughed, and it wasn't entirely steady. 'Thank you, Idris.'

'Is something wrong?'

‘No,’ she said quickly. ‘No. Just a quiet week.’

He wanted to ask again, but she turned away and began rearranging the postcards by the till. Mama Rukayat, from her stool, lifted her eyes over the ledger and met his for half a second, a look so tired and so quickly hidden that he almost thought he had imagined it.

He picked up the book he had been reading and tried to finish the page. He read the same sentence four times.

CHAPTER 13

The Letter

THE ENVELOPE WAS cream-coloured, with a typed address and a company stamp, and it arrived on a Wednesday.

Zaynab found it on the counter beside the morning's other mail. She almost put it in the pile of bills, but something about the weight of it made her stop. She carried it to Mama Rukayat, who was already on her stool with her glasses on.

'This one is for you,' Zaynab said.

The old woman opened it with a letter opener and read. Zaynab watched her face. It didn't change. Mama Rukayat had a face that had held a great many bad days without showing any of them.

She folded the paper once, then twice.

'The building has been sold,' she said.

Zaynab's stomach dropped. 'Sold?'

‘The new owner is a company. They want to renovate. From January, the rent will double. Three million a year becomes six.’ She said it calmly, like a weather report. ‘They have written very politely.’

‘Mama.’ Zaynab found a stool and sat down. ‘Double? We cannot…’

‘I know what we can and cannot.’

For a while neither of them spoke. Outside, a bus rattled past. Comma jumped onto the counter and sat between them, looking from one face to the other.

‘We will think,’ Mama Rukayat said at last. ‘Do not worry the customers. Do not worry yourself too much either. Thirty years is a long time. We have had hard months before.’

‘Not like this.’

‘No,’ the old woman admitted. She patted Zaynab’s hand. It was a dry, steady hand. ‘But I have also never had you.’

• • •

That night, Zaynab sat at her kitchen table with a pencil, a calculator and the shop’s ledger. She added the numbers. She subtracted them. She tried a

different order, then a different method. She moved the tea prices up and the book discounts down. She cut the Thursday opening hours and put them back.

At midnight, she turned the page to a clean sheet and wrote, in her careful, even handwriting, one word at the top.

Options.

Underneath it, for a long time, there was nothing at all.

CHAPTER 14

Plan B

ZAYNAB TOLD NO one.

She was good at it. She had spent years listening to other people's troubles, and she knew how to arrange her own face into an ordinary one. She smiled at customers. She read the specials board in her usual voice. She made tea slowly and correctly, as the rules required.

But Idris noticed.

She had stopped annotating. She used to write small notes in the margins of the shop's own copies, and now her pencil sat unused in the cup. She hadn't worn earrings on Monday, which had never happened. And when the bell rang, she looked at the door first with hope and then with dread.

• • •

On Thursday he stayed until closing. He read. He turned the pages at a polite pace so that she wouldn't think he was watching, and when she began stacking

chairs, he got up and stacked them with her.

‘You do not have to,’ she said.

‘I know.’

They worked in silence. When the last chair was up, she stood in the middle of the shop with a cloth in her hand, looking at nothing.

‘Zaynab,’ he said. ‘Is it the shop?’

‘It is just tired,’ she said. ‘Everyone gets tired.’

He didn’t push. He nodded, the way he nodded at a building he couldn’t yet read, and said, ‘Good night.’

After he left, she wiped down the counter. Under the lip of his teacup she found a folded note, written in his square, careful capitals.

WHATEVER IT IS, YOU LISTEN TO EVERYONE ELSE. I CAN LISTEN TOO.

She read it twice. She put it in the pocket of her apron, where she could feel its edge against her hip for the rest of the night.

Beside the till stood a small bottle of apple juice that had not been there before. She had never told him it was her favourite. She decided he had been paying

attention.

• • •

At home she opened the page marked Options, and under it she wrote three lines.

Move to a smaller place.
Sell books online.
Ask for help.

She looked at the third line for a long time. Then she drew a thin pencil line through it and went to bed.

CHAPTER 15

Open Mic

THE FIRST SATURDAY of September arrived hot and bright, and by seven o'clock Pages & Tea was full.

Chairs filled the shop, spilling out of the reading corner and along the walls. Maryam had brought half of her school's staff room. Hajia sat in the front row in her emerald scarf, holding a plate of puff puff on her knees and guarding it. Mama Rukayat watched from her stool, and Comma lay in the exact centre of the cleared floor, refusing to move.

Zaynab was holding the clipboard. A man read a poem about his mother's kitchen. A student read a funny story about a goat. A woman sang a short verse in Yoruba that made the whole room go still.

'And now,' Zaynab announced, glancing at her list, 'someone who lost a bet.'

There was a ripple of laughter. Idris stood up from the back, buttoning his jacket, looking like a man walking toward an interview. Maryam, two seats

away, mouthed something at Zaynab that looked suspiciously like finally.

He stepped over Comma, who allowed it with a sigh, and stood at the front holding a yellow book.

'This is *The Lamp at Number Nine*,' he said. 'I read it in eight days and was angry for nine. I will read you the last page.' He cleared his throat. 'I will do the voices.'

A hush fell. He opened the book. And he read.

He did the old lamplighter in a creaking voice that made the children giggle. He did the narrator in a low, calm tone. When the woman in the story reached the end of the street and walked away, his voice went quiet, and the whole room leaned forward.

He read the last sentence. Then he closed the book.

'In my version,' he said, looking at the page, 'he turns around. He says her name.' He raised his eyes. 'Amara.'

He said it. And for a moment, to anyone who was watching, it seemed that he wasn't looking at the book or at the audience. He was looking straight at the front of the room, where Zaynab stood with a clipboard against her chest.

The shop erupted in applause. Hajia laughed before anyone else, loud and delighted, as she always did. Maryam put two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

Zaynab heard all of it as if from the far end of a long hallway. She clapped, because her hands knew how to, and she smiled, because there was nothing else to do. But her heart was going fast, and she was only partly sure it was the room.

CHAPTER 16

Halfway

IT WAS PAST ten when the last guest left, and the shop smelled of tea and puff puff and warm paper. The little speaker by the till was still playing, low, one of the old songs Zaynab liked best, the kind with a horn section and a singer who sounded like he meant every word.

Zaynab was folding chairs. Idris, who had stayed behind without being asked, was folding them with her. Neither of them said much. The noise of the evening still hummed in the walls.

'Your page went well,' she said at last.

'Mama Rukayat told me I was too loud.'

'She told everyone that. It means she liked it.'

He laughed. They reached for the last chair at the same moment. His hand landed on the backrest, and hers landed a few inches away, and for one second the space between their fingers was almost nothing at all.

Zaynab pulled back.

She did it quickly, and she hoped it looked like she had remembered something. ‘I should check the kettle,’ she said. ‘I think I left it on.’

‘You did not use the kettle tonight.’

‘Then I should check that I did not use it.’

He studied her. There was no hurt in his face, only a question. He stood the chair against the wall with great care and straightened his jacket.

‘I changed an ending tonight,’ he said. ‘I am not sure I was allowed.’

‘It was a good ending.’

‘Was it?’

She turned toward the counter so she wouldn’t have to answer with her face. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It was a very good ending.’

He waited a moment longer. When she didn’t say anything else, he took a breath and nodded.

‘I will walk you to the bus stop,’ he said instead.

They walked in the cool dark, a polite distance apart. It was the weather she liked best, the in-between kind, when the heat has loosened and the cold has not yet arrived. A late motorbike hummed past. The street smelled of wet leaves and roasted corn, and the stars were far. At the bus stop, Zaynab climbed on without looking back, and through the window she saw him standing under the lamp with his hands in his pockets.

Halfway home, she opened her bag to find her keys and discovered that her hands were shaking.

CHAPTER 17

The Offer

MR OKAFOR CLOSED the door of his office and gestured at the chair. ‘Sit, Idris. I have news.’

Idris sat. Mr Okafor was a tall, grey-haired man who had managed the firm for twenty years and never spoken more than he had to. He slid a folder across the desk.

‘It is the Riverside housing project,’ he said. ‘Four hundred homes, three phases. The client has asked for you by name.’

Idris opened the folder. Drawings, schedules, a salary figure he read twice. He had waited his whole career for a project like this one. His mouth was dry.

‘Where is it?’ he asked.

‘Six hours north. You would lead the site team. It starts in January and runs six months at minimum.’ Mr Okafor folded his hands. ‘It is the best offer I have made anyone in years. I need an answer by the end of October.’

‘By the end of October,’ Idris repeated.

‘Think carefully. Do not decide only with your head.’

He left the office in a daze. All the way down the stairs and across the car park, he felt two weights in his chest, one on each side. He had dreamed of this. He had worked evenings and weekends for it. A younger version of him would have shouted in the stairwell.

Instead, he drove to Alfa Close.

The old tailor’s shop stood at the end of the street, its walls half-patched and its windows clean. Inside, he could see the beginnings of the reading room: the low shelves he had built the week before, the window seat, the corner where the rug would go. The shelves were still empty. They waited, patient as books.

He sat down on the floor in the middle of the room and tried to imagine leaving it.

• • •

That evening, he told Hajia. She was in her chair with her tea, listening, and when he finished she took off her glasses and cleaned them on her scarf.

‘Six months is a long time,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘Have you told the girl at the bookshop?’

He flushed. ‘There is nothing to tell. We are friends.’

‘Mm.’ Hajia put her glasses back on. ‘Then you have a very strange face for a man who only has friends.’

He didn’t answer. But he didn’t tell Zaynab the next day either, or the one after that, and in the quiet gap between wanting to and doing it, the days began to run out.

CHAPTER 18

Not Saying It

ZAYNAB FOUND OUT on a Tuesday.

She had gone to Alfa Close to drop off the second box of children's books. Hajia was there too, supervising the window seat like a foreman. She waved Zaynab over, kissed both her cheeks, and said, cheerfully, 'It will be lonely for this little room when he goes north.'

Zaynab smiled politely. 'North?'

Hajia froze with her cup halfway to her mouth. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh. I thought he had told you.'

'Told me what, Hajia?'

'It is not my place.' Hajia put down the cup. 'Ask him.'

• • •

That evening, Idris was in the green chair when Zaynab came out from the back. He looked up and saw her face. His smile vanished.

‘You know,’ he said.

‘Hajia told me.’ She set the tea on the little table with a steady hand. ‘A housing project. Six months. That is wonderful.’

‘Zaynab…’

‘It is a big opportunity. You have worked for it for so long.’ Her voice was warm and even, the same voice she used for customers who were deciding something difficult. ‘You should go.’

‘You think I should go?’

‘I think it is what you want.’ She smiled. It almost reached her eyes. ‘And if you do not go, you may regret it.’

He looked at her, searching her face for an opening, a word, anything. She held herself as still as she could. She didn’t want to be the reason he stayed.

‘Right,’ Idris said finally. His voice was quiet. ‘Of course. Thank you for your advice.’

‘Of course.’

He picked up his notebook and put it in his bag with the unhurried care of someone trying to decide whether to stay. He stood. At the door he stopped

beside the bucket. After a moment he took the broken umbrella out of it, as if he needed something to hold. He glanced back once.

‘The tea was good,’ he said.

The bell rang behind him. Comma, in the next armchair, lifted his head and looked at Zaynab with open reproach.

‘Do not start,’ she said, and had to sit down.

CHAPTER 19

Silence

AFTER THAT, THE green chair stayed empty.

On Thursday, Zaynab put out a cup of tea at his usual time before she remembered, then drank it herself. On Monday, she kept glancing at the door. By the second Thursday, Comma had claimed the green chair for himself and curled up in the sagging cushion with an air of grim ownership.

'Do not look at me like that,' Zaynab told him. 'I did the right thing.'

Comma flicked an ear.

That night she ran a finger along the shelf behind the register, the one with no price tags, where Kennedy Ryan, Ali Hazelwood and Liz Tomforde sat with their spines creased white. It was the shelf for bad days. She took one down, read the same page three times, and put it back.

She worked. That was what she knew how to do. She wrote out the book list for the reading room in her neat handwriting, one hundred and twelve titles sorted by age. She packed them into crates. She didn't take them to Alfa Close herself. She asked a delivery boy to drop them with the foreman and told him not to wait for a reply.

Mama Rukayat watched all of this from her stool and said nothing for nearly a week. On the eighth day she put down her pen.

'Zaynab.'

'Yes, Mama?'

'Come and sit.'

'I am busy.'

'You are rearranging the same shelf for the third time.' The old woman folded her hands. 'Sit.'

Zaynab sat. Mama Rukayat looked at her for a long while, her eyes magnified behind her thick glasses.

'I was married once, you know,' she said. 'A good man. A quiet man. He never told me what he wanted, and I never asked. We were very polite to each other for twenty-two years.'

‘Mama…’

‘I am telling you so that you do not do the same.’ She pressed her lips together. ‘Politeness is a lovely thing in a shop. In a heart it can be a very long way to be lonely.’

Zaynab said nothing. Her eyes had gone hot.

‘That is all,’ said Mama Rukayat, and picked up her pen. ‘Go and finish your shelf.’

Zaynab went. But the shelf stayed unfinished, and that night she closed the shop early, walked to the bus stop alone, and for the first time in months, didn’t read a single page before she slept.

CHAPTER 20

Maryam Speaks

MARYAM FOUND HER at closing, sitting behind the counter with her shoes off and her head in her hands.

'I let myself in,' Maryam said. 'The door was open.'

'I forgot to lock it.'

'I noticed. Move over.' She pulled a stool close, set down a flask, and unscrewed the cap. 'Pepper soup. Your favourite. I made it for a sick relative, but she can manage without.'

They ate in silence for a minute. The soup was hot and fragrant, and Zaynab felt her chest unclench.

'Tell me,' said Maryam. 'All of it. From the beginning.'

So Zaynab did. She told her about the letter, and the rent, and the pencil line through the third option on the page. She told her about the offer in the north, and how she had said you should go in a voice like

glass. She talked for a long time. Maryam didn't interrupt, which was so unusual that Zaynab almost stopped to check on her.

When she finished, Maryam set down her spoon.

'Two months,' she said.

'What?'

'You have known about the rent for two months. And you didn't tell me.' Maryam's voice was low and level. 'I'm your best friend. I promised to be told first.'

'I didn't want to worry anyone.'

'No. That's hiding.' She softened. 'You're terrible at being listened to, Zaynab. You think if you're quiet enough, nobody will have to carry anything.'

Zaynab's eyes filled. 'I told him to go because I didn't want to be a reason.'

'I know.'

'He has a whole life ahead of him.'

'He also had a seat in your shop, and a reading room he built with his own hands, and a nervous habit of looking at you when he thinks you aren't watching.'

Maryam leaned forward. ‘You’re allowed to be a reason. Do you hear me?’

The tears came then, ordinary ones. Maryam put her arm around her and said nothing for a long time.

At last, Zaynab wiped her face. ‘I think I’ve been reading the last page first for so long,’ she said, ‘that I forgot what it feels like to not know.’

‘Yes,’ said Maryam. She pushed the flask across. ‘Terrifying, isn’t it? Drink your soup.’

CHAPTER 21

The Book He Left

IT WAS COMMA who found it.

On a Wednesday afternoon, the cat leapt down from the green armchair and began to scratch at the lining of the cushion. Zaynab went to scold him and stopped. Wedged between the cushion and the frame was a small yellow book.

The Lamp at Number Nine.

She pulled it out. It was Idris's copy. It had a bent spine, a coffee ring on the cover, and a white bookmark sticking out of the middle: *Keep your place*. Her hands knew she shouldn't read it. Her heart told her hands to be quiet.

She opened it.

The margins were full, and so was every gap between the printed lines. Idris wrote in square capital letters, the same ones he used for his drawings. Next to the first page, he had written:

STARTED. DO NOT KNOW WHY.

Near the middle:

Z SAYS THE LAMP IS A PROMISE. CHECK THIS.

A few pages later:

Z LAUGHED HERE. I DID NOT MEAN THE JOKE. SHE LAUGHED ANYWAY. I LIKE THAT.

By the end of the book, the notes grew longer. She read them one by one, standing still in the middle of the shop. In the final chapter, beside the woman walking away down the street, he had written in pencil, pressed hard:

SHE SHOULD TURN AROUND.

And beneath it, smaller, in a different pen:

SO SHOULD I?

He had told her there was nothing between the lines. He had been writing in them all along.

On the last page, in the white space after the words THE END, he had added one more line, as though he couldn't leave it alone.

DO NOT BE A LAMP. SAY IT.

Zaynab sat down on the floor with the book on her knees. She read the line again. She read it a third time. She pressed her fingers to her mouth.

Behind her, the bell rang, and a customer asked for a cookbook. She got up, wiped her face with the back of her wrist, and sold the customer a cookbook with a perfect smile.

Then she took the yellow book, put it in her bag, and carried it with her for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER 22

Rain Again

THE RAIN CAME back in late October, heavy and sudden, rattling the roof of Pages & Tea like a handful of coins.

It was a Monday. Nearly closing time. The shop was empty, and Zaynab was stacking the last of the cups when the bell rang so hard that Comma jumped off the windowsill.

Idris stood in the doorway, drenched from head to foot, holding something in one hand. It took her a moment to see that it was the broken umbrella, the one from the bucket, which he had somehow opened. It was completely useless. It hung over his head like a wet, sorry flag.

'I think,' he said, breathless, 'that it is time to return this.'

Zaynab stared at him. Then, to her complete horror, she began to laugh.

'It is not funny,' he said. 'I walked here in this.'

‘It is a little funny.’

‘A little.’ He lowered the umbrella. His hair was dripping into his collar, and he looked very tired. ‘I have not slept properly in a week. Last night I sat in the empty library and realised I had already decided. I just did not know how to say it.’

Her pulse jumped. ‘Idris…’

‘Wait. Please.’ He set the umbrella against the wall and took a step forward. ‘Let me say this properly. I have been practising the sentence all the way here, and I am not sure the rain left me any of it.’

She didn’t move. The yellow book was in her bag at her feet.

‘I was waiting for you to say something,’ he said. ‘Anything. Do not go, or go, or I do not know what. Anything but you should go. And you did not, and I thought, she does not care.’ His voice shook a little. ‘I have been wrong about a lot of things this month.’

The rain drummed on the roof. Zaynab’s hands had gone cold.

‘I want to say it first,’ Idris said. ‘If you will let me.’

Then he stood very still in the middle of her shop, dripping onto the floor, and waited.

CHAPTER 23

Words

FOR A MOMENT, the only sound was the rain.

Zaynab crossed the floor, took the clean towel from behind the counter, and held it out. It was the same towel as before. Idris took it, and a wondering smile broke across his face.

'You kept it,' he said.

'It is a bookshop,' she said. 'We are prepared for rain.'

He dried his face and his hair. When he lowered the towel, she was holding out the yellow book.

His smile faded. 'You found it.'

'Comma found it.' Her voice wasn't quite steady. 'Idris, I read all of it. The notes. The last page.'

He closed his eyes briefly. 'I was going to come back for that and bury it somewhere,' he said. 'It was a very honest page.'

‘It was.’ She breathed. ‘Will you say it now? What you wanted to say first?’

He opened his eyes. He stood in front of her, dripping, a tall, serious man holding a wet towel, and said it plainly.

‘I am afraid,’ he said. ‘Of leaving, and of staying, and most of all of going north without telling you that I want to come home to you. I have never wanted to come home to anyone before. I did not know it would feel like a house with the lights on.’

Zaynab put a hand on the counter.

‘Now you,’ he said. ‘If you want to.’

She looked down at the yellow book in her hands. Then she looked up. ‘I am afraid that if I say it, I will become a weight. You have a project and a life. I have a shop that may not survive the new year.’

‘What shop?’ he said. ‘What do you mean, may not survive?’

‘The building was sold. The rent doubles in January.’ She said it to the floor. ‘I have known for two months. I did not tell you because you had enough to carry.’

‘Zaynab.’

‘I know.’

Idris took one step closer. He didn’t touch her. He stood near enough for her to feel the warmth of him through the damp air. She saw him breathe in the amber and oud of her perfume, and look away, embarrassed.

‘You do not have to carry that alone,’ he said. ‘Not for another day.’

She nodded. She couldn’t speak.

‘And I want to be a reason,’ she said at last, almost in a whisper, ‘if that is still allowed.’

‘It is more than allowed,’ said Idris. ‘I had you in the plan already.’

CHAPTER 24

The Plan

THEY SAT AT the big table by the window until midnight, with the rain easing outside and a pot of tea going cold between them.

Mama Rukayat had been called. She arrived in a taxi, in her navy wrapper and her heavy glasses, and took her place at the head of the table like a judge arriving at a hearing. Comma sat in the middle of the paperwork, supervising.

Idris spread out the ledger and the letter. He read them both twice, the way he read a structural report. Zaynab watched his face. He didn't look worried. He looked like a man who had decided a problem was worth solving.

'Here is what I know,' he said. 'I take the northern job. I have to. It is a good project, and Zaynab, you were right to say so. I start in January.'

Her heart dipped, then steadied. 'Good.'

‘But I will come home on the last Friday of every month. And on the other Fridays we will read to each other on the phone.’ He looked embarrassed, then plainly determined. ‘That is not up for discussion.’

Mama Rukayat’s mouth twitched. ‘Fridays,’ she said approvingly.

‘Now the shop.’ He turned to the ledger. ‘I cannot give you money. You would not accept it. But I can read a budget, and yours is better than you think. You are not failing. You are being priced out.’

‘It is the same result,’ Zaynab said.

‘Not to them.’ He tapped the letter. ‘They are renovating. That means the shop stands empty for months while the builders work, and a new tenant will want a rent-free start. Add it up. Six empty months cost them more than the extra rent earns in the first year. They are losing money by losing you, and nobody has told them.’

He took a pencil and slid the notebook across to her. It was open at the page marked Options. The third line was still there under its thin, crossed-out stroke.

Ask for help.

‘I have no idea how to do that,’ she admitted. ‘I have never been good at it.’

‘I will do the sums,’ said Idris. ‘One page, in a form they cannot ignore. You do the part I cannot.’

‘Which is?’

‘The truth,’ said Mama Rukayat. She hadn’t smiled in nearly a month, and now she did, with all the creases in her face. ‘Tell it to the people who come through that door. They have been telling you theirs for years.’

Zaynab picked up the pencil. Carefully, she rubbed out the line through the third option. The paper was a little grey where it had been. She wrote the words again over the top, darker.

Ask for help.

Then she underlined them twice.

CHAPTER 25

Saving the Shop

THE SIGN WENT up on Friday morning, hand-lettered on a sheet of brown card and taped to the blue door.

We are in trouble. Our rent will double in January and we do not know if we can stay. We would rather tell you the truth than close quietly. If Pages & Tea has ever been a good place for you, please come in. Tea is on us today.

Zaynab stood at the counter with her hands pressed flat against the wood. She had spent years making sure nobody ever worried about her. This felt like standing on a roof with no coat.

For the first hour nobody came. A bus went by. Comma washed a paw. At ten o'clock Zaynab decided that the whole street had read the sign and agreed with it, and that she had made a public mistake.

Then Mr Dele came in from the book market, still in his stall apron. He read the sign, took off his cap, and sat down at the nearest table without a word. 'My

wife is better,' he said, to nobody in particular. 'The medicine is working. I thought you would like to know.' Zaynab, who had asked after her every week for two months, had to turn and straighten a shelf.

The second was the woman from the third table, the one saving for her son's school fees. She read the sign twice and put a folded note on the counter. It wasn't much. It was more than she could spare. Zaynab tried to give it back, and the woman closed Zaynab's hand around it and went to sit down.

By noon there was a queue out of the door. People Zaynab hadn't seen in months came in with bags and envelopes. A retired judge offered to write to the new owners on official paper. The women's group from the mosque, with Hajia at their head in her emerald scarf, arrived with enough food for forty people and an announcement that they were starting a membership. A line of schoolchildren came in with their coins and asked, very seriously, if one coin was enough to join.

'Yes,' said Zaynab, who couldn't trust her voice with more. 'One coin is enough.'

By evening Maryam had written a list on the back of a school register. It had two hundred and six names. She held it over her head and shouted, ‘Friends of Pages & Tea!’ and the whole shop cheered.

It wasn’t enough, and Zaynab knew it. Two hundred and six coins wouldn’t pay half a rent. Idris, at the big table that evening with his pencil, told her so. ‘It is not the money,’ he said. ‘It is the proof. Put the list in front of them, next to the numbers.’

• • •

On Monday she and Idris sat down with his one page. It was plain: thirty years of rent paid on time, what an empty building would cost the owners over six months of work, and a five-year lease in place of a gamble. At the bottom was a line she had written herself, in her own handwriting, because Mama Rukayat insisted. We would like to stay.

Two days later a young woman in a grey suit came in with a folder and a careful face. She introduced herself as a representative of the new owner. She walked through the shop, saw the reading corner, the old stool, Comma asleep on a pile of cookbooks, and the two hundred and six names pinned to the corkboard. Idris’s page lay open on the counter. She had a copy in her folder.

‘Whoever worked these figures knows how to read a lease,’ she said.

‘An engineer,’ said Zaynab. ‘He sits in the green chair, normally. He is at work today.’

The young woman was quiet for a while. ‘My director asked me to find out whether this place is worth keeping, or only worth selling the books out of,’ she said at last. ‘I have a daughter. She loves the library at her school. I did not know places like this still existed.’ She closed her folder. ‘He will want five years, and the rent where it is now, with a small rise each year. If you can agree to that, I think he will.’

Zaynab’s mouth was dry. ‘We can,’ she said, and heard Mama Rukayat, from her stool, let out a breath she had been holding for two months.

When the young woman left, Mama Rukayat took off her glasses and wiped them very slowly. ‘Thirty years,’ she said, to no one in particular, ‘and I never thought to ask.’

CHAPTER 26

The Library Opens

THE ALFA CLOSE Reading Room opened on the first Saturday of November, and the whole street came out to watch.

Someone had hung a banner across the door. Someone else had put out plastic chairs. Children in their best clothes ran up and down the pavement while their mothers pretended not to watch them. Idris's sisters had come from two cities away and were already arguing about where the chairs should go. At the front of the crowd, Hajia stood in her emerald headscarf, holding a large pair of scissors and a ribbon, and looking as though she had never been so proud.

'Before I cut anything,' she announced, 'I would like to say a few words.'

'Hajia,' Idris said, from the side, 'you said three sentences.'

'I will say them slowly.'

The crowd laughed. Zaynab stood beside Idris near the door, holding a crate of the last books and trying to keep her face from showing everything it felt. He looked at her sideways. She looked at the ribbon.

'This building was empty for nine years,' Hajia said. 'Now it is full of books. My grandson built this room so that every child on this street would have somewhere to read.' Her voice wobbled, then steadied. 'That is all. Thank you for the puff puff.'

She cut the ribbon. The children rushed in like water.

Inside, the shelves were low, the rug was soft, and the window seat caught the morning sun. Zaynab had filled every shelf herself. A boy of six, whose shelves these were, tested the lowest one with deep suspicion and found it exactly the right height. Mr Dele had donated a full set of encyclopaedias. In one corner, a small girl in a school uniform was holding a picture book about a crocodile who was afraid of water, and when she saw Idris, she held it up with a huge smile.

'He is a friend now,' she said solemnly.

'I am very happy for him,' Idris said.

And then, from the back of the room, a deep and unmistakable voice said, ‘I have travelled across three kingdoms, young man, and I have never once been late for dinner.’

Idris went completely still.

An elderly man in a grey kaftan stood in the doorway, leaning on a walking stick, with a grin that looked exactly like Idris’s. He had come from the village on the early bus. He settled himself on the rug among the children and opened a book, and in the grand, ridiculous voice Idris had imitated at the side of the road, he began to read.

At the front, Hajia lowered her scissors. She didn’t look at all surprised. She looked like a woman who had made one telephone call and kept it to herself.

Idris didn’t move. He only stood there, watching his father read to a room full of children, and Zaynab, without thinking, slipped her hand into his.

He held it tightly. Neither of them spoke.

CHAPTER 27

Birthday Eve

ON THE SEVENTEENTH of November, nobody said a word about her birthday.

Zaynab noticed at nine in the morning, when Maryam called to talk about nothing in particular and hung up before saying happy early. She noticed at noon, when Mama Rukayat told her to go home at two because the shop was quiet. At four, Hajia sent a text that said only, 'Sleep well, my daughter,' which was suspicious in a way she couldn't explain.

'They have forgotten,' she told Comma that afternoon, locking the till. 'Which is fine. It is only a birthday.'

Comma, who knew how badly she was lying, didn't reply.

She walked home the long way, past the market and the closed school. The new letter from the owners had come the week before. The rent would stay where it was for five years, with a small rise each

year, and she had read it so many times she knew it by heart. She still found it hard to believe. She thought about being twenty-nine. She had always imagined a person of twenty-nine as someone who had arrived. She felt more like someone who had finally started walking.

• • •

Her mother called while the kettle was on.

'Happy early,' said her mother, who had never in her life managed to wait for a date. 'Don't tell me you're fine.'

'I'm fine, Mummy.'

'You're always fine. That's what worries me.' In the background Zaynab's sister Halima shouted hello, in a voice that was trying much too hard to sound ordinary. 'I heard about the sign from a woman at the market. A woman at the market, Zaynab. Not my own daughter.'

Zaynab put down the cup. 'I didn't want you to worry.'

‘Worrying is my job. You’re not allowed to take it from me.’ There was a pause, and the sound of a spoon in a pot. ‘And the engineer?’

‘Mummy.’

‘Maryam tells me nothing. Hajia Safiya telephones me most evenings. What’s he to you?’

Zaynab looked at the kitchen table, where her old notebook lay open at the page marked Options. The grey, rubbed-out line. The darker rewriting.

‘I don’t know yet,’ she said.

‘Then find out. And when he asks, because he will ask, tell him he’s to come to the house and do it properly. I’d like to see his face.’

After the call she sat for a while with the notebook. She didn’t add anything to the page. She turned to a fresh sheet and wrote the date at the top, and then, because she couldn’t think what came next, left the rest blank.

There was a knock at the door.

When she opened it, the corridor was empty. On the doormat lay a small folded square of brown paper. She picked it up. On the front, in square capitals, was

written:

DO NOT READ THE LAST PAGE.

Inside, it said:

COME TO THE SHOP AT SIX TOMORROW. WEAR THE YELLOW.

At the bottom, there was a small drawing of a lamp.

She stood there with the paper in her hands for a long time, grinning at a lamp.

CHAPTER 28

The Surprise

SHE WORE THE yellow headwrap over a plain black dress, her best earrings, and the nervous expression of a woman walking into her own surprise party.

The blue door was closed. The windows were dark. She stood on the pavement for a full minute, then pushed the door open, and the whole shop lit up at once.

'Happy birthday!'

There were fairy lights across the ceiling and paper stars on every shelf. The reading corner had been decorated with blue ribbon. Maryam had made a playlist that began with the old songs Zaynab loved, the ones with horns and big choruses, and Zaynab's mother danced to every one. The tables were piled with food, and the shop was so full of faces that she couldn't take them all in. Maryam was at the front, laughing and crying at the same time. Zaynab's mother stood beside her in her best gele, already weeping, while her sister Halima held up a phone to

film it. Hajia was in her emerald headscarf, waving a puff puff like a flag. Mr Dele had brought a wrapped parcel. The little girl with the crocodile book held a handmade card.

And at the centre of it all sat Mama Rukayat on her stool, in her best navy wrapper, wearing a party hat at a very serious angle.

'Do not cry,' said Mama Rukayat. 'You will spoil the tea.'

Zaynab was already crying.

There was a cake in the shape of an open book, with a blue ribbon of icing and a tiny lamp on top. Maryam gave a speech that was meant to last three minutes and turned into a story about a borrowed pen. Hajia gave another one, shorter, with a proverb about patience and a pointed glance at her grandson's empty seat.

Then Maryam carried out a large glass jar. It was filled to the top with small slips of paper, folded in half.

'Everyone here wrote you something,' she said. 'A wish, a prayer, whatever they wanted. There are twenty-nine of them. One for every year.' She

pressed it into Zaynab's hands. 'You're not allowed to read them all tonight. Take your time.'

Zaynab held the jar against her chest. It was warm from the room, and it rattled.

'Where is Idris?' she asked, trying to sound casual.

'Oh,' said Maryam, in a voice of complete innocence. 'He said he had one more thing to finish.'

Behind her, Hajia took a long sip of tea, and the whole shop suddenly became very interested in the cake.

CHAPTER 29

Keep Your Place

THE PARTY HAD thinned by nine. The fairy lights glowed lower, and the shop smelled of cake and tea.

Zaynab was sitting on the floor of the reading corner with her back against the green armchair and the jar in her lap. Comma lay across her knees, purring. She had read four of the slips. One said, *Peace in every season*. One said, *Laughter that comes easily*. One said, *Grace for every new chapter*. One was in the careful handwriting of a six-year-old and said, *Happy birthday I like crocodiles*.

The bell rang. She looked up.

Idris stood in the doorway. He wore a pressed shirt, and in his hands he held a small flat parcel wrapped in brown paper. He looked as though he had run all the way from somewhere, and was trying to hide it.

'I am sorry I am late,' he said. 'I had to finish something.'

'Finish what?'

He crossed the shop and sat down on the floor beside her, which she had never seen him do. Comma opened one eye, assessed the situation, and shifted to rest half on each of them.

'Open it,' he said.

She unwrapped the paper. Inside was a small, dark notebook with a plain cover and thick, creamy pages. She opened it. It was empty. She turned the pages, one by one, and every one was blank until the very last, where there was a single line in his square capitals.

CHAPTER 30 IS YOURS TO WRITE.

'I told you not to read the last page,' Idris said.

'You wrote on the last page.'

'That was a design flaw,' he admitted.

Tucked into the spine was a bookmark carved from pale wood. He had cut it by hand. The edges were slightly uneven, and across it he had burned three small words. *Keep your place*.

'The notebook is from a stationery shop,' he said. 'The bookmark I made. It took four attempts. The first three were terrible.'

‘It is perfect.’

He took a breath. ‘I start in January. I will be six hours away, and home on the last Friday of every month. You know that. I wanted to say it again before I asked.’

‘Asked what?’

‘I would like,’ Idris said, then stopped, then began again. ‘I would like to court you. Properly. Slowly. In the right order. Your mother has telephoned me twice to say that I am to come to the house and do it correctly, and I will. But I wanted to ask you first. I do not know how the story ends. But I would like to be in it.’

‘My mother telephoned you?’

‘Twice,’ said Idris. ‘She is very thorough.’

Zaynab looked at the empty pages in her lap.

‘I do not want to know the ending,’ she said. ‘Not this time.’

‘Then what do you want?’

She closed the notebook, and slipped the wooden bookmark in at the very first page.

‘I would like to write it with you,’ she said.

He took her hand. His was warm, and not quite steady. She held on.

Behind the counter, the speaker had moved on to *Bad Dancer* by Johnny Drille, which was either a coincidence or Maryam.

'I should warn you,' Idris said. 'I cannot dance.'

'I have seen you hold a teacup,' said Zaynab. 'I know.'

They did not dance. They sat on the floor with the cat between them and let the song play out.

Outside, the street was quiet. Inside, the lights glowed. Somewhere in the back room, a kettle began to sing, and Mama Rukayat's voice floated through, dry as ever: 'Books are patient. But please, you two, the tea is getting cold.'

They laughed. She opened the notebook to the first blank page.

The End

A note for you

I could not think of a better birthday gift than a book, because you love them so much.

Thank you for being a friend who feels like a good book: warm, comforting and hard to put down. Happy birthday.

Thank you

To Mama Rukayat, for the rules.

To Hajia Safiya, for the stories, and for knowing everything before everyone else.

To Maryam, for telling the truth even when it was inconvenient.

To Idris, for finally finishing a book.

To Comma, who sat on every draft and approved none of them.

And to Zaynab, for being the kind of person a whole book can be written about.

Chapter 30

Some things are said plainly.
Some are said in silence.

And some are found
between the lines.

