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FICTION

Fiction

A gilded cage

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For 15 years she's lived in this polished cage with Rizwan—a man more myth than husband. Their marriage, a union of convenience and status, had been celebrated with televised grandeur. But love?



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

The automated blinds of the penthouse in Gulshan, an upscale area, rise with a soft hum, revealing a picture-perfect Dhaka morning. The skyline is a wash of hazy gold, the city already pulsing beneath a rising sun. From the eighteenth floor, everything seems calm. Controlled. Distant.

Aisha stands at the window, her silk robe cinched neatly at the waist, coffee cooling in her hand. The air smells faintly of bergamot and eucalyptus, diffused from an automated dispenser timed to activate every hour. Perfection surrounds her—climate-controlled rooms, voice-activated kitchen systems, curated modern art hung on muted walls. It's all flawless.

And yet, she can't breathe.

For 15 years she's lived in this polished cage with Rizwan—a man more myth than husband. Their marriage, a union of convenience and status, had been celebrated with televised grandeur. But love? Real, messy, unpredictable love? That never came.

Rizwan is a ghost with a calendar. CEO of a major conglomerate, executive member of an elite club, and perpetual chief guest at every art opening or charity gala, he rarely makes it home before midnight. When he does, his body collapses into bed beside hers, perfumed with cigar smoke and exhaustion. He mumbles a few words, sometimes touches her shoulder absently, then disappears into sleep.

And Aisha? She lies awake, staring at the ceiling, her heart restless, body untouched for months, thoughts spinning like broken fan blades.

One humid afternoon, stuck in Gulshan Avenue's relentless traffic, Aisha's eyes drift from the wheel to the pavement. That's when she sees him; he's tall, lean, his skin sun-kissed, and posture unhurried. He doesn't shout or wave like the others —drivers, vendors, beggars. He just stands, still and watchful, a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. Something in his eyes—quiet, wounded—hooks her. Before she can think, she jerks the SUV toward the curb. She is a seasoned jeweler; she never fails to recognise real gold!

Honks erupt behind her.

She rolls down the window. "You...looking for work?"

He steps forward slowly, cautious but composed. "Yes, apu. Ride, or...other things. I can help."

Her heart pounds. She nods. "Get in."

*

For Fahim, it's luck—divine or cruel, he can't say. The day has been long and the light now falls in heavy orange streaks. His morning had been generous—a Baridhara woman with cash and kindness to spare. But as evening sets in, his legs ache, hunger gnaws, and the room he rents in Tongi, which he shares with two other struggling men, feels more like a box with bars than a home.

His roommates think he runs a business—something ambiguous but respectable. They don't ask questions. He sends 25,000 taka home to Rangpur every month, and that's all his parents need to believe he's doing well. He never tells them the truth: they don't know he sells intimacy in a city built on loneliness.

5000 taka per session. On a good month, he can manage 15 clients at the most, if his health holds. Some clients tip, linger, look at him with something like yearning. That always leaves him shaken. Gratitude mixes with guilt.

Then comes Sara, a girl turned voluptuous woman: she had been his school and college friend in Rangpur.

It begins with spilled coffee—a small accident in a cramped Banani café. Her laughter is light, her eyes curious. She doesn't seem to see him as a service, but as someone—someone who might matter. That terrified him more than any client ever could.

"I think you're smarter than you let on," she had said one evening, tucking her hair behind her ear as they sat near the Banani-Gulshan lake.

He tried to laugh it off, but her belief in him was relentless. Dangerous.

From then on, they started meeting regularly. No money is exchanged. She makes plans, spins dreams like silk. They talk about opening a small catering service together, escapingthe noise of the city.

Then comes the proposal.

A court marriage. Just the two of them. She buys new clothes for both. Tells her mother she is in love.

But he doesn't show up.

At first, she waits. Then she calls, messages relentlessly. Silence in return.

Weeks later, she confides in a friend—a successful businesswoman. One who, in an earlier, lonelier conversation, had admitted to using discreet services to fill the void in her own sterile marriage.

The friend goes pale when Sara mentions Fahim's name. The silence that follows has said everything.

"No," Sara whispers, stepping back. "No, it can't be."

Her friend hesitates, and then quietly hands over a phone number.

When Sara calls, a woman from the Tongi Community Hospital answers. Her voice is heavy, hesitant.

"You're calling about Fahim?" she asks. "He's...in the hospital. Advanced AIDS. Stage four. He's not expected to—" Her voice cracks. "Sorry."

Sara stares at her phone long after the call ends. Around her, the world continues—horns blare, birds wheel overhead, a child cries. But inside, something dies.

All the dreams she had built around him—every plan, every whispered promise—collapse like paper in rain.

Back in Gulshan, Aisha drives her SUV, stops a while where Fahim would stand, but a chill goes down her spine—where could he be? Something wrong?

Amid the passing hullabaloo, a cruel silence wrecks her bone almost. On the electronic overhead screen at the Gulshan 2 circle, she sees him—eyes dark with stories he could never tell. Is it the "real he" she is desperately looking for, or somebody like him promoting "Black Panther"?

Later that night, she lies in her dim bedroom, the city lights winking beyond glass. Rizwan hasn't called. She doesn't expect him to.

She thinks of Fahim. Or perhaps Sara whom she never met, or countless people who drift through this glittering city with hollow hearts and perfect smiles.

And she wonders, not for the first time, what it truly means to be loveless and alone in a gilded cage.

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