THE LIFE BETWEEN WINTERS

Some wounds change the way you see the world,
but they also teach you where to find the light.

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Dedication

To all the little boys who suffered in silence, who carried wounds they could not name, and who, despite everything, found the courage to find their voices, rebuild themselves, and create the peaceful lives they once deserved.

I see you.

I hear you.

I feel you.

Contents

Chapter One: The House That Was Never His 1

Chapter Two: A Boy Made of Silence 197

Chapter Three: Things Nobody Taught Him 300

Chapter Four: The Night Has Teeth 317

Chapter Five: The Road Does Not Ask Your Name..... 342

Chapter Six: The Room Behind the Boxes 383

Chapter Seven: The Woman Who Called Him Beautiful ... 406

Chapter Eight: What Kindness Can Teach a Damaged Mind 416

Chapter Nine: A Man Begins Where the Boy Was Abandoned 427

Chapter Ten: The Life He Never Thought He Deserved... 439

Chapter Eleven: The Day She Let Him Go..... 451

Chapter Twelve: The Boy Who Stayed..... 467

Chapter One

The House That Was Never His

There are some losses a child remembers as an event, and others he remembers as weather. For Aariz, his mother's death was both. He did not remember the exact hour she died. He did not remember who had carried him away from her room, or which adults had whispered behind closed doors, or who had brought the white flowers that stood in vases throughout the house for several days afterward. He remembered fragments.

The smell of rosewater. The rustle of women's clothes.

His father's shoes walked quickly across the marble floor.

A silver bowl filled with something he was not allowed to touch.

And his mother's hand.

Warm.

Soft.

Still.

He was three years old.

At three, a child has no philosophy for death. There is no understanding of permanence, no language sophisticated enough to comprehend that a person can exist one morning and become an absence by evening.

Aariz only knew that his mother had been there.

And then she wasn't.

For several weeks afterward, he kept looking for her in places where she had once existed.

Behind doors.

At the end of corridors.

Near the staircase.

In the courtyard where winter sunlight gathered in pale rectangles.

He would wake from sleep and call for her.

Sometimes nobody answered.

Sometimes someone else did.

That was worse.

Because a child's mind is stubborn about love. It does not immediately accept substitution.

He wanted her.

Not another woman.

Not another voice.

Not another pair of arms.

Her.

He had been a beautiful child, although nobody had ever taught him that beauty could be dangerous when it makes people assume that a child must therefore be happy.

His skin had already begun to carry the warm copper undertone that would become striking in adulthood. His eyes were unusually large and bright, dark and luminous beneath lashes far too long for a little boy. His hair was thick, soft and

unruly, always falling over his forehead no matter how carefully the women combed it.

He had been cheerful before his mother's death.

A little mischief-maker.

A child who laughed too loudly.

A child who ran rather than walked.

A child who climbed furniture he had been told not to climb and hid behind curtains when adults searched for him.

He had once believed that the world existed for the pleasure of discovering it.

Then, very quietly, the world changed.

His father changed too.

Grief made him distant. Perhaps grief had made him incapable of giving what the child needed. Perhaps he had never known how to be tender. Perhaps the remarriage that followed was, to him, an attempt to reconstruct a life that had broken apart.

Aariz did not understand any of this.

Children rarely possess the luxury of understanding adults.

They understand the consequences.

They understand who comes when they cry.

Who notices when they are hungry.

Who asks why their eyes are wet.

Who remembers what they like?

Who pulls a blanket over them at night.

Who does not.

And gradually, Aariz learned.

His father remarried.

There were new routines.

New relatives.

New voices.

Eventually there were four children who were not his mother's children.

His step-siblings were not monsters. The story was never that simple. They were children themselves, growing inside a family whose adults had their own wounds, expectations and loyalties.

But Aariz was no longer the centre of anyone's universe.

And then, one day, he was sent to live with his paternal uncle.

The family called it practical.

They said the house was large.

They said there were cousins his age.

They said the arrangement would be good for him.

They said many things.

Nobody asked the three-year-old whether he wanted to leave.

The house stood in a quiet Swiss town where winter seemed to arrive with particular authority.

It was large enough to contain too many people and still somehow make each person feel alone.

There were polished wooden floors, high windows, heavy curtains, framed photographs, brass lamps and furniture that had been inherited rather than chosen.

The family lived together in the manner of households that had carried their traditions across countries without allowing geography to dissolve them.

There were cousins.

Two paternal uncles.

Their wives.

Children.

Guests.

Relatives appear without warning.

Phone calls that lasted an hour.

Arguments over money.

Arguments over food.

Arguments over who had said what to whom three years earlier.

The house was rarely quiet.

And yet Aariz discovered, very early, that loneliness could exist inside noise.

His eldest uncle loved him.

That much was true.

The man would sometimes call Aariz into his study, pull him onto his lap and ask about school even before Aariz was old enough to have much of a school to talk about.

He bought him little things.

A book.

A toy.

A warm sweater.

Once, after Aariz had fallen while running in the courtyard, the uncle had cleaned the blood from his knee himself.

"Does it hurt?"

Aariz had shaken his head.

His lower lip trembled.

His uncle smiled.

"Brave boy."

Aariz had believed him.

For those few minutes, sitting beneath the yellow light of the study, Aariz had felt something dangerously close to belonging.

But love from one person could not silence the temperature of an entire household.

The women of the house did not hate him.

That would have been easier to understand.

They simply did not love him in the way they loved their own children.

There were distinctions too subtle for a child to articulate and too obvious for him not to feel.

Their children received softness.

Aariz received instructions.

Their children could leave a glass on the table and have someone pick it up.

Aariz was told to put his away.

Their children were fussed over when they were ill.

Aariz was told to rest and not make a nuisance of himself.

Their children could misbehave and be called mischievous.

When Aariz misbehaved, he was difficult.

The distinction was never written down.

Nobody announced it.

But children are excellent historians of affection.

They remember everything.

As he grew older, Aariz became particularly sensitive to voices.

Not words.

Voices.

A sentence could say come here and mean affection.

Or irritation.

Or contempt.

He learned to tell the difference.

A certain pause before his name meant he had done something wrong.

A certain exhale meant somebody had noticed him.

A cupboard closing too hard meant an argument was coming.

Footsteps approaching his room could make his stomach tighten before he even knew why.

His body learned things before his mind did.

That was how fear settled into him.

Not dramatically.

Not all at once.

It accumulated.

A little each day.

He began spending as much time outside the house as possible.

He would leave in the morning and find reasons not to return.

The cold did not bother him.

The streets did not bother him.

The darkness did not bother him.

Home did.

Outside, he could breathe.

Outside, nobody was comparing him.

Nobody was asking why he could not be more like somebody else.

Nobody was reminding him that he should be grateful.

He could walk for hours through streets washed in winter light, watching bicycles pass, buses sigh to a stop, strangers carry grocery bags, couples walk shoulder to shoulder beneath umbrellas.

He envied ordinary affection.

He envied the smallest things.

A mother wiping her child's mouth.

A father adjusting a little girl's scarf.

A woman reaching instinctively for the hand of the person beside her.

Sometimes he watched from a distance for too long.

Then he would turn away.

He did not know why those scenes hurt.

He only knew they did.

At school, Aariz was different.

He was intelligent, but increasingly unwilling to use it.

Teachers noticed his restlessness before they noticed his loneliness.

He talked when he should have been quiet.

Interrupted.

Forgot homework.

Provoked other boys.

Laughed at inappropriate moments.

Sometimes he was charming.

Sometimes impossible.

He became the child teachers warned other children about.

His friendships changed.

The children who were studious and careful gradually moved away from him.

The boys who liked trouble did not.

They admired his fearlessness.

At least, what looked like fearlessness.

Aariz discovered that being feared was sometimes easier than being pitied.

If people thought he was reckless, they did not ask whether he was sad.

If they thought he did not care, they could not discover how desperately he cared.

So he became louder.

Funnier.

More reckless.

More difficult.

He began constructing a personality around the absence of the person he used to be.

At home, the situation deteriorated.

He was given chores.

Then more chores.

Then responsibility for things no child should have been expected to carry emotionally.

He learned to clean.

To serve.

To fetch.

To carry.

To remain silent when adults were talking.

To move out of the way.

To anticipate.

He learned that usefulness was the closest thing he could reliably obtain to approval.

If he was useful, people needed him.

If people needed him, perhaps they would not send him away.

That logic would follow him for years.

It would eventually poison his understanding of love.

Because somewhere inside him, without anyone explicitly teaching it, Aariz began to believe:

If I am useful, I am worthy.

And if he was not useful?

Then perhaps he was nothing.

One winter evening, when Aariz was still small, snow began falling before dinner.

He stood near the living-room window watching it.

The glass was cold beneath his fingertips.

Outside, the garden had disappeared beneath white.

A streetlamp burned through the snowfall, turning each flake briefly gold before it vanished into darkness.

He heard laughter behind him.

One of his cousins was being called to the table.

"Come, darling."

Another voice.

"Don't let the food get cold."

Aariz remained at the window.

He waited.

Perhaps somebody would call him too.

He waited longer.

The laughter continued.

Plates touched the table.

Chairs scraped.

Someone complained about the weather.

Someone else laughed.

Aariz's fingers slowly left the glass.

He walked toward the dining room.

Nobody had noticed that he had been waiting.

He sat at the far end.

He was quiet.

One of the women looked at him.

"Why are you sitting there? Go and bring the bread."

He stood.

"Yes."

He went.

It was such a small moment that no one remembered it.

Aariz did.

That night, he lay awake.

His room was dim.

The house had finally become quiet.

Through the window, snow continued falling.

He turned onto his side.

Then onto his back.

He pulled the blanket toward his chin.

He thought about his mother.

He no longer remembered her face properly.

That frightened him more than anything.

He remembered her hand.

Her smell.

The sound of her bangles.

But her face was becoming uncertain.

He closed his eyes tightly, trying to summon it.

Nothing.

A blur.

A feeling.

A warmth.

Then emptiness.

His throat tightened.

He pressed his face into the pillow.

He did not yet know that grief could survive even when memory became unreliable.

He did not know that a child could mourn someone for decades.

He did not know that abandonment could become a language the body spoke long after the mind stopped remembering its first sentence.

He only knew that he missed someone.

Someone he could no longer properly see.

And for the first time, in the darkness of that unfamiliar room, Aariz whispered a question that would return to him many times throughout his life.

"Why did you leave me?"

The room offered no answer.

Outside, snow covered the garden.

Inside, a little boy learned how to cry without making a sound.

Morning came without mercy.

Aariz woke before anyone called him.

For a few seconds, he remained perfectly still beneath the blanket, staring at the pale ceiling. The room was blue with early winter light. Somewhere outside, a car moved slowly over the snow, its tyres making a soft, wet sound against the road.

He listened.

The house had its own language at dawn.

Pipes murmured behind the walls. A cupboard opened downstairs. Someone coughed. A tap ran. A door closed.

Then came his aunt's voice.

"Aariz."

He closed his eyes.

"Aariz!"

"Yes."

"Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you still in bed?"

He sat up.

There were mornings when he wished he could remain beneath the blanket until the world forgot he existed.

But the world had never been particularly good at forgetting him when it needed something.

He dressed quickly.

His clothes were clean but rarely new. He had learned not to ask for things unless absolutely necessary. Asking created questions. Questions created irritation. Irritation created explanations. Explanations eventually became reminders of everything the household already provided for him.

He came downstairs.

The kitchen smelled of toasted bread, cardamom tea and butter.

His cousins were sitting at the table.

One of them was laughing about something that had happened at school.

Aariz stood near the doorway.

Nobody looked at him.

Then his aunt glanced up.

"Before you eat, take those plates to the dining room."

He did.

Then he returned.

"Now put the laundry away."

He did that too.

By the time he sat down, the tea had gone cold.

He drank it anyway.

He was hungry.

He had become accustomed to being hungry quietly.

His eldest uncle entered the kitchen.

He stopped when he saw Aariz.

"Did you eat?"

Aariz nodded.

His uncle looked at the untouched plate.

"You call that eating?"

Aariz lowered his eyes.

The man sighed.

"Come."

He pulled a chair beside him.

"Sit."

Aariz sat.

His uncle pushed his own plate toward him.

"Eat."

"I already—"

"Eat."

There was no anger in the word.

Only care.

Aariz picked up a piece of bread.

His uncle watched him for a moment.

"You are getting too thin."

"I'm fine."

"You always say that."

Aariz smiled faintly.

His uncle reached across and briefly touched his hair.

The gesture lasted perhaps two seconds.

Two seconds.

But Aariz remembered it for years.

Children become experts at collecting crumbs of affection.

A hand on the head.

A smile.

A favourite sweet.

Someone waiting at the door.

Someone remembering your name.

Someone asking whether you slept well.

Aariz collected these things the way another child might collect marbles.

He kept them somewhere inside himself.

He needed them.

Because most days there were not enough.

His uncle tried.

But even love has limits when it exists inside a complicated household.

The man had his own children.

His own wife.

His own responsibilities.

His own exhaustion.

Aariz understood this much later.

As a child, he only understood that sometimes his uncle was there and sometimes he wasn't.

And when he wasn't, Aariz returned to being everybody else's responsibility.

Which meant, in practice, that he belonged to nobody.

Years passed quietly enough that Aariz did not notice himself growing.

His face changed.

His limbs lengthened.

His childhood softness disappeared gradually, replaced by the beginnings of the striking young man he would become.

His eyes remained his most remarkable feature.

Large.

Bright.

Almost startlingly expressive.

People noticed them.

Girls noticed them.

Teachers noticed them.

Strangers sometimes smiled at him because of them.

Aariz did not understand why.

He had learned to distrust compliments.

Praise confused him.

When someone said he was handsome, he sometimes laughed it away.

When someone said he was intelligent, he doubted it.

When someone said he was kind, he looked almost embarrassed.

He had developed an internal contradiction that would remain with him for years:

He could believe that strangers found him attractive, but he could not believe that anyone could genuinely love him.

Beauty seemed possible.

Love did not.

By twelve, Aariz had become difficult at school.

By thirteen, he was notorious.

By fourteen, he had discovered that laughter could hide almost anything.

He made other boys laugh.

He performed.

He exaggerated stories.

He played the fool.

Teachers became frustrated with him.

One afternoon, a teacher kept him after class.

The classroom had emptied.

Outside the windows, rain moved across the glass in diagonal lines.

"You are capable of much more than this."

Aariz shrugged.

"Maybe."

"You don't care."

He looked at her.

The statement irritated him.

Not because it was entirely false.

Because it was profoundly incomplete.

He did care.

He cared so much that caring had become exhausting.

But he did not know how to explain that.

So he smiled.

"I'll try."

She sighed.

"That's all you ever say."

He left the room.

Halfway down the corridor, his smile disappeared.

At home that evening, his eldest cousin called him.

"Aariz."

He stopped.

"Yes?"

"Did you finish the work?"

"Which work?"

The boy stared at him.

"The work I told you about."

"I had school."

"So?"

Aariz said nothing.

His cousin stepped closer.

"You think because you go to school you don't have responsibilities here?"

"No."

"Then do it."

Aariz nodded.

He went.

There were times when he resented everyone.

There were times when he hated the house.

There were times when he hated himself more.

That was the dangerous part.

Because anger directed outward can eventually find a door.

Anger directed inward builds a room.

And Aariz was already becoming an architect of such rooms.

His mother began appearing in his dreams.

Not as she had actually been.

His mind reconstructed her.

Sometimes she wore a pale dress.

Sometimes she stood beside a window.

Sometimes she was younger than he remembered.

Sometimes she did not have a face at all.

But she was always reaching for him.

And every time he ran toward her, he woke before he could touch her.

He began sleeping badly.

He never told anyone.

He was afraid they would laugh.

He was also afraid they wouldn't understand.

So he carried the dreams alone.

One morning, after waking from another, he sat at the edge of his bed and stared at his hands.

He was fourteen.

His body was changing.

His thoughts were changing.

Everything around him seemed to demand that he become a man before anyone had taught him what it meant to be one.

He looked at the mirror.

A handsome boy looked back.

Bright eyes.

Long lashes.

Messy hair.

Copper skin.

A mouth that smiled easily for other people.

He touched the glass.

"Who are you?"

The reflection remained silent.

He smiled at himself.

It looked almost convincing.

"You're fine."

He said it again.

"You're fine."

He did not know yet that sometimes the people who are suffering most become the most practiced at saying those words.

That winter, something in Aariz began to harden.

Not completely.

There was still kindness in him.

Too much, perhaps.

But it became buried beneath defensiveness.

He started spending longer hours outside.

He found boys who did not ask questions.

Boys who smoked.

Boys who drank.

Boys who laughed at rules.

They liked Aariz because he was entertaining.

He liked them because they did not ask him to explain himself.

For a while, that was enough.

He began staying out later.

Then much later.

He learned the smell of cigarettes.

The taste of cheap alcohol.

The thrill of doing something adults had forbidden.

He began discovering that intoxication could make certain thoughts quieter.

Not gone.

Just quieter.

And quiet, to Aariz, was already beginning to feel like mercy.

He didn't yet understand that relief and healing were not the same thing.

He only knew that on certain nights, after drinking, he could lie down without thinking about his mother.

Without thinking about his father's absence.

Without wondering why the women in the house looked at him differently.

Without asking whether anyone would miss him if he disappeared.

For a few hours, the boy inside him became silent.

And Aariz mistook that silence for peace.

One evening, his eldest uncle found him returning home late.

The man was waiting in the hallway.

Aariz stopped.

His uncle looked at him for a long time.

"Where were you?"

"With friends."

"What friends?"

Aariz shrugged.

His uncle's expression changed.

"You smell of alcohol."

Aariz looked away.

"I only had a little."

His uncle stepped closer.

"Aariz."

Something in his voice made the boy look up.

There was disappointment there.

But beneath it was fear.

Real fear.

His uncle had seen something Aariz had not yet recognised.

A road.

A dangerous one.

"Listen to me," he said quietly. "You don't have to become like people simply because they accept you."

Aariz swallowed.

"I know."

"No. You don't."

Silence.

Then his uncle placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You are not a bad boy."

The sentence struck him strangely.

Aariz looked down.

Nobody had called him good in a long time.

His uncle continued.

"Whatever happens, don't let people convince you that you are worth less than them."

Aariz nodded.

But the words did not enter deeply enough.

Not yet.

He wanted to believe them.

He simply did not know how.

His uncle walked away.

Aariz remained standing in the hallway.

For a moment, he felt something warm in his chest.

Then, from another room, someone called his name sharply.

The warmth vanished.

He lowered his head.

And went to do what he had been told.

Outside, snow began falling again.

Softly.

Endlessly.

As though the sky itself had not yet learned that some wounds cannot be covered simply by making everything white.

By fourteen, Aariz had become very good at disappearing without actually leaving.

He could sit at the dining table with six other people and make himself smaller than the empty chair beside him. He could walk through the hallway without being noticed, take his plate to the sink, wash it, dry it, and return to his room before anyone asked where he had been. He learned which floorboards creaked beneath a careless foot and which ones remained silent. He learned which doors could be closed gently and which had to be pulled until the latch clicked. He learned how long his aunt's temper usually lasted after a difficult day, how his

cousins' voices changed when they wanted something from him, and how his uncle's footsteps sounded when he was tired.

He learned the weather inside the house. Outside, Switzerland had seasons. Inside, it had moods. And Aariz learned to dress himself accordingly.

On good mornings, he was careful.

On bad mornings, he became invisible.

There was a strange intelligence in that kind of childhood. Not the intelligence that teachers praised on report cards, but another, quieter kind, the intelligence of survival. Aariz could read a face before the person speaking had finished the first sentence. He could hear irritation hiding beneath politeness. He could sense when laughter was about to become ridicule.

What he could not understand was himself.

He knew when other people were unhappy.

He did not know why he was.

He knew when someone needed comfort.

He did not know what comfort felt like when it was given to him.

He knew how to apologise before he had done anything wrong.

He knew how to say, "It's okay," when it was not.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly, he stopped expecting anyone to ask.

At school, the teachers noticed the change before the family did.

Aariz had once been the child who asked too many questions. He had wanted to know why snow could look blue

in certain light, why some birds disappeared during winter, why people cried when they were angry, why adults sometimes lied when telling the truth would have been easier.

Now he rarely raises his hand.

His notebooks became increasingly untidy. Homework remained unfinished. He forgot assignments he had completed and remembered things he had promised himself he would forget. Sometimes he stared out of the classroom window for entire lessons, watching snow collect along the branches of trees.

The teacher would call his name.

"Aariz?"

Nothing.

"Aariz."

He would blink.

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"What did I just say?"

A pause.

"I'm sorry."

The class would laugh.

He would laugh too.

That was becoming his favourite trick.

Laugh first.

If you laughed at yourself, perhaps nobody could hurt you with the joke.

He began sitting at the back with boys who found amusement in everything adults disliked. They smoked behind buildings, stole small things from shops, skipped classes, swore at teachers, and spoke about girls with the exaggerated confidence of boys who were still trying to convince themselves they were men.

Aariz liked being around them because nobody there asked him to explain why he was sad.

They did not care.

And strangely, that felt like acceptance.

Sometimes indifference was easier to mistake for belonging than love.

One afternoon, a boy handed him a cigarette.

"Try it."

Aariz looked at it.

He knew he shouldn't.

That was precisely why he wanted to.

He placed it between his fingers.

For a second, he thought about his uncle.

Then his mother.

Then nothing at all.

The smoke burned his throat.

His eyes watered.

The boys laughed.

Aariz laughed with them, coughing into his sleeve.

"Looks like you're dying," one of them said.

Aariz smiled.

“Maybe I am.”

They laughed again.

None of them understood that the sentence had not been entirely a joke.

That evening, he came home smelling faintly of smoke.

His aunt noticed.

“What is that smell?”

“Nothing.”

“Don't lie.”

“I didn't.”

She stared at him.

Aariz stared at the floor.

His uncle was sitting nearby, reading the newspaper. He lowered it slowly.

“Aariz.”

The boy looked up.

“Have you been smoking?”

Silence.

His uncle's expression hardened.

“Answer me.”

Aariz shrugged.

“Once.”

“Once?”

“I don't know.”

His uncle folded the newspaper.

"You are fourteen."

Aariz said nothing.

"You have everything here. Food. A roof. School. Clothes. Why are you behaving like this?"

The question entered him differently from the way his uncle intended.

Because he did not know how to answer it.

Everything.

The word sat heavily between them.

Everything.

Aariz looked around the room.

There was food in the kitchen.

There were clothes in his cupboard.

There was a bed beneath him.

There was a roof above him.

There were people in every room.

And still, somewhere inside him, there was an enormous coldness.

He wanted to say:

I have everything except the thing I keep looking for.

But he did not know what to call that thing.

Love felt too childish.

Attention sounded selfish.

Mother sounded impossible.

Home sounded like a word other people were allowed to use.

So he lowered his eyes.

"Sorry."

His uncle sighed.

"I don't want you to become a bad boy."

Aariz looked up.

His uncle's voice softened.

"You are not a bad boy."

For one brief second, something inside Aariz moved.

Something young.

Something hopeful.

Then his aunt called from the kitchen.

"Aariz, come help me with these dishes."

The moment disappeared.

He stood.

"Yes."

His uncle watched him leave.

Perhaps he wanted to say more.

Perhaps he did not know how.

Perhaps that was the tragedy of the house—that there were people who cared for Aariz in fragments, but nobody who understood how desperately he needed those fragments assembled into something whole.

That night, Aariz lay awake.

The room was dark except for the pale light coming through the curtains. Beyond the glass, snow covered the

garden in a smooth white sheet. The world looked peaceful from his window.

He wondered whether peace was something that existed only from a distance.

He pulled the blanket over his chest.

For a while he listened to the house breathe.

A tap dripping somewhere.

A radiator clicking.

Someone walking upstairs.

A door closing.

A muffled laugh.

Then silence.

He turned onto his side.

His eyes remained open.

He thought about his mother.

The memories were becoming dangerously small.

A hand.

A smell.

A voice he could no longer reproduce.

The softness of fabric.

A warm cheek against his forehead.

He was beginning to fear that one morning he would wake up and remember nothing.

That frightened him more than loneliness.

Because loneliness meant someone was absent.

Forgetting meant losing them twice.

He closed his eyes tightly, trying to summon her.

Mama.

Nothing.

He tried again.

Mama.

A vague warmth appeared somewhere in his mind and vanished before he could hold it.

Aariz pressed his face into the pillow.

His shoulders began to tremble.

He did not make a sound.

He had become skilled at that.

He cried the way people learn to pray when they believe nobody is listening.

Silently.

Completely.

Until the pillow beneath his face was damp.

Then, sometime after midnight, he whispered the question that would return to him for years.

"Why didn't you stay?"

The room gave him no answer.

Outside, snow continued falling.

And somewhere beyond the sleeping houses, beyond the neat streets and yellow windows and dark silhouettes of the mountains, the world was continuing exactly as it always did.

Cars moved.

Trains passed.

People slept beside people they loved.

Children were tucked beneath blankets.

Mothers kissed their foreheads.

Fathers checked locked doors.

Someone, somewhere, was probably telling a child that everything would be all right.

Aariz did not know that yet.

He only knew that morning would come.

And when it did, he would get up.

He would wash his face.

He would put on his clothes.

He would go to school.

He would come home.

He would do what was expected of him.

He would smile when required.

He would apologise when necessary.

And little by little, without anyone noticing, the cheerful boy who had once believed the world was made for him would begin constructing another self inside the silence.

A harder self.

A louder self.

A self that would one day confuse being desired with being loved, attention with tenderness, possession with belonging, and escape with freedom.

But that boy did not exist yet.

For now, he was still fourteen.

Still standing at the window.

Still waiting for something he could not name.

Still secretly hoping that one day somebody would look at him—not because he had completed a chore, earned good marks, behaved properly, or made himself useful—but simply because he was Aariz.

Because he was there.

Because he was worth looking at.

Because he was worth keeping.

He did not know it then, but that longing would follow him for many years.

It would lead him into places where he should never have gone.

Into friendships that would wound him.

Into hands that would not be gentle.

Into nights he would spend trying to forget himself.

Into mistakes he would later struggle to forgive.

But it would also, much later, lead him toward something he had never believed existed.

Not rescue.

Not perfection.

Not a life without pain.

Something quieter.

Something far more difficult.

A person who would look at him and, without asking him to earn it, make him believe that perhaps he had always been worth loving.

But that was still years away.

For now, Aariz turned away from the window and pulled the blanket over his head.

The snow kept falling.

And the boy slept, carrying an ache too large for his small body, unaware that some wounds begin long before we possess the language to name them.

Morning came without apology.

At six-thirty, the alarm in the hallway began its thin, metallic ringing. Aariz woke before anyone came to call him, though for a few seconds he did not remember where he was.

There was a strange softness in that moment between sleep and waking. His mind had not yet rebuilt the walls around him.

He had been dreaming of his mother.

Not clearly. Never clearly anymore.

She had been standing somewhere warm, wearing something pale, perhaps cream, perhaps yellow. Sunlight had fallen across her shoulder. He could not see her face properly, but he knew her anyway.

A child always knows his mother before memory learns her features.

In the dream, she had held out her hand.

Aariz had run toward her.

Then the alarm rang.

He opened his eyes.

The ceiling stared back.

For several seconds he remained still, his heart beating with the peculiar grief of someone who has just been abandoned for the second time.

Then came the footsteps.

The house was awake.

He sat up.

The dream disappeared.

That was becoming the cruelty of memory: the happier it made him for a moment, the more painful waking became.

He dressed quickly, folded his blanket, and left the room.

In the kitchen, his aunt was already moving between the stove and the counter. Steam rose from a pot. Someone had left a window slightly open, and the cold air slipped through the gap.

"You're late," she said without looking at him.

"I woke up early."

"Then why aren't you ready?"

Aariz glanced at the clock.

He was not late.

He knew it.

But he also knew better than to argue.

"Sorry."

"Take these plates."

He took them.

That became the rhythm of his mornings.

Take this.

Clean that.

Bring this.

Move those.

Don't forget.

Be quick.

Don't make a mess.

Don't waste food.

Don't answer back.

He became useful before he became happy.

And usefulness was a dangerous substitute for belonging because it could imitate love from a distance.

When people needed you, you could almost convince yourself that you mattered.

Almost.

At breakfast, his cousins were talking about school.

One had received money for a class trip.

Another complained about having to wake early.

Someone laughed about a teacher.

Aariz ate quietly.

His aunt placed another piece of bread on her daughter's plate.

“Eat, sweetheart.”

Aariz looked down at his own plate.

He was not hungry.

But something inside him noticed.

It is always noticed.

That was the problem.

Children notice differences adults believe are invisible.

They notice who gets the bigger piece.

Who gets asked twice whether they are cold.

Whose clothes are washed separately when they are sick.

Whose birthday cake is chosen carefully.

Whose mistakes become funny family stories.

And whose mistakes become evidence.

Aariz did not hate his cousins for being loved.

That was important.

He hated himself for wanting what they had.

There was shame even in the longing.

He began telling himself that he did not need anything.

That he was fine.

That other children were spoiled.

That he was stronger.

That perhaps he was simply different.

It was easier to call yourself independent than to admit you were lonely.

At school, loneliness became noise.

He started laughing more.

Not because he was happier.

Because laughter gave him control over the room.

If people were going to look at him, he wanted them looking where he chose.

He became funny.

Then reckless.

Then it was difficult.

Teachers began using words such as wasted potential.

He hated that phrase.

Potential felt like another word adults used when they wanted to tell you that you had disappointed them.

One afternoon, after he had been sent out of class for arguing, Aariz sat alone beneath a covered walkway.

Snow had melted along the edges of the pavement, leaving thin ribbons of water that reflected the grey sky.

A boy from his group sat beside him.

"Are you coming later?"

"Where?"

"Behind the sports hall."

Aariz shrugged.

"Maybe."

The boy pulled a cigarette packet from his pocket.

Aariz looked at it.

"You want one?"

He hesitated.

Then nodded.

The cigarette was passed to him.

He lit it.

This time he did not cough.

The other boy smiled.

"See? You're learning."

Aariz smiled back.

He had no idea what he was learning.

Only that the smoke made his chest feel occupied.

For a few minutes, he did not think about home.

He did not think about his mother.

He did not think about being the child nobody quite knew what to do with.

He simply breathed smoke into the winter air.

That relief frightened him.

Because anything that could make pain disappear for five minutes could eventually become something a person was willing to destroy himself to keep.

Aariz was still too young to understand that.

He only knew that, for those few minutes, his mind was quiet.

And quiet felt like mercy.

When he returned home that evening, the house was already tense.

His aunt was angry about something.

A cousin had broken a glass.

Someone had misplaced money.

A younger child was crying.

His uncle was arguing with someone on the phone.

Aariz stood near the entrance, watching the chaos.

Nobody noticed him.

He quietly removed his shoes.

He went to his room.

He sat on the edge of his bed.

For the first time, he realised something that frightened him.

He preferred being outside.

Not because the world outside was kind.

It wasn't.

But outside, at least, nobody pretended that he belonged.

At home, every room reminded him that he did not.

He opened his schoolbag.

There was a notebook inside.

On the first page, in handwriting he barely recognised as his own, he had once written:

Things I want when I grow up.

Underneath were childish answers.

A car.

A big house.

Travel.

A dog.

Lots of books.

A happy family.

He stared at the last line.

Then crossed it out.

He did not know why.

Perhaps because it seemed impossible.

Perhaps because wanting impossible things had begun to feel humiliating.

He turned the page.

There was nothing written there.

He picked up his pen.

For several seconds, he thought.

Then he wrote:

I don't need anyone.

He stared at the sentence.

It looked strong.

It looked grown-up.

It looked like something a person wrote when he had already given up asking.

Aariz closed the notebook.

He did not know that children sometimes turn their deepest needs into their strongest declarations.

I don't need anyone.

Often means:

Please don't leave me.

I don't care.

Often means:

Please notice that I care too much.

I'm fine.

Often means:

I don't know how to tell you that I'm not.

That night, when the family gathered for dinner, Aariz barely spoke.

His uncle asked him about school.

“Fine.”

“How are your studies?”

“Fine.”

“You have exams coming.”

“I know.”

“You need to concentrate.”

“I will.”

His uncle studied him for a moment.

“You've changed.”

Aariz looked up.

“How?”

“You used to talk all the time.”

Aariz almost smiled.

“I grew up.”

His uncle's expression changed.

Perhaps the answer hurt him.

Perhaps he understood more than Aariz thought.

“You don't have to grow up so quickly.”

Aariz looked down at his plate.

He wanted to believe him.

But childhood had already taught him something different.

Nobody had asked him whether he was ready.

The years simply kept arriving.

And he kept becoming whatever they required.

That night, after everyone had gone to sleep, Aariz stood alone in the kitchen drinking water.

The refrigerator hummed.

The clock moved.

Moonlight rested on the floor.

He looked at his reflection in the dark window.

His face was changing.

The softness of childhood was beginning to disappear. His features were sharpening, his shoulders broadening, his eyes becoming more guarded.

He looked older than he felt.

He touched the glass.

For one strange moment, he imagined another boy standing on the other side.

A small boy.

Three years old.

Bright-eyed.

Laughing.

Waiting for his mother.

Aariz stared at him.

Then whispered,

"I'm sorry."

He did not know what he was apologising for.

For becoming difficult.

For needing too much.

For not being good enough.

For forgetting her face.

For surviving.

Perhaps for all of it.

He went back to his room.

And the next morning, he woke up and did it all again.

That was how childhood sometimes ends—not with a single dramatic moment, but with repetition.

One ordinary morning after another.

One swallowed cry after another.

One compromise after another.

Until the child inside you stops asking when someone will come.

And starts learning how to go without them.

Aariz was beginning to learn.

He just did not yet understand the price.

By fifteen, Aariz had learned which streets stayed busy after dark.

He liked the ones with cafés still glowing behind steamed-up windows, buses sliding past in the snow, and strangers

moving quickly beneath umbrellas. Nobody knew him there. Nobody knew whose nephew he was, whose son he had become, or what he had done wrong that day.

He could simply walk.

Sometimes he stayed out until the cold reached through his jacket.

When he finally returned, the house would be quiet.

He preferred it that way.

One evening, he came home just before midnight.

The front door opened with a soft click.

He slipped off his shoes and carried them upstairs so they would not make noise on the wooden floor. The hallway smelled faintly of detergent and cooked onions. A strip of light showed beneath his uncle's bedroom door.

Aariz stopped.

For a moment he considered going inside.

He could say goodnight.

He could ask how his uncle was.

He could sit there for five minutes and listen to the television.

Instead, he kept walking.

His room was cold.

He shut the door, changed his clothes, and sat on the bed.

His phone vibrated.

A message from one of the boys.

Coming tomorrow?

Aariz typed:

Yeah.

Another message arrived.

Bring money.

He stared at it.

Then put the phone face down.

A minute later, he picked it up again.

How much?

The reply came immediately.

He looked at the number.

It was more than he had.

Aariz opened his wallet.

A few notes.

Some coins.

He counted twice.

Then he opened the drawer beside his bed.

Inside was a small envelope.

Money his uncle had given him for school expenses.

Aariz held it for a while.

He put it back.

For the next few minutes he sat motionless, listening to the house.

Then he took the envelope out again.

By morning, most of it was gone.

He told himself he would replace it.

He didn't.

A week later, his uncle asked about the money.

Aariz said he had spent it on school.

His uncle stared at him.

“On what?”

“Books.”

“Which books?”

Aariz's mouth went dry.

He looked away.

His uncle understood.

The disappointment on his face was worse than anger.

“Aariz.”

The boy said nothing.

“Look at me.”

He did.

“Why are you doing this to yourself?”

Aariz swallowed.

“I don't know.”

His uncle rubbed his forehead.

“You have to stop.”

“I will.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

His uncle nodded slowly.

“Go to school.”

Aariz turned toward the door.

“Aariz.”

He stopped.

His uncle's voice softened.

“I don't want to lose you.”

Aariz stood still.

Something tightened behind his ribs.

He wanted to turn around.

Instead he nodded once.

“Okay.”

He walked away before his face could betray him.

At school, nothing changed.

He began missing classes more frequently.

When he did attend, he slept through lessons or stared at the clock. His marks dropped. A teacher called him after class and placed his latest examination paper on the desk.

“Do you even care?”

Aariz looked at the red marks scattered across the page.

“Yes.”

“Then show it.”

He folded the paper.

“I'll try.”

“You've been saying that for months.”

Aariz said nothing.

The teacher sighed.

"You're brighter than this."

That sentence followed him into the corridor.

Brighter than this.

He wondered what this was.

A boy who could not concentrate?

A boy who smoked?

A boy who lied?

A boy who went home reluctantly?

A boy who slept badly and woke up angry?

A boy who could sit among thirty students and feel as though he were nowhere at all?

He shoved the paper into his bag.

Outside, the afternoon had turned silver.

Snow was beginning again.

He walked toward the bus stop with his hands buried in his pockets.

A group of girls passed him.

One of them glanced at him, whispered something to her friend, and laughed.

Aariz looked back.

The girl smiled.

He smiled too.

For the first time, he noticed how quickly a single look could change his mood.

He carried that feeling home.

It was small.

But he carried it carefully.

That night, he stood in front of the bathroom mirror longer than usual.

He examined his face.

His hair.

His eyes.

The line of his jaw.

He turned sideways.

Then back.

There was nothing remarkable about the ritual, except how seriously he performed it.

He ran a hand through his hair.

The boy in the mirror looked older now.

He smiled.

The reflection smiled back.

Aariz whispered, almost experimentally,

"Handsome."

He laughed at himself.

Then stopped.

He looked at the reflection again.

For a few seconds, the room was silent.

"Maybe."

He turned off the light.

The following months blurred.

School.

Friends.

Cigarettes.

Arguments.

Late evenings.

Occasional kindness from his uncle.

Aunt's irritated voice.

Cousins asking him to do things.

Money disappearing.

Promises to change.

Promises forgotten.

He began discovering girls in the complicated, awkward way boys do—through glances, messages, teasing, borrowed confidence and endless speculation.

A girl once told him he had beautiful eyes.

He remembered it for weeks.

Another said his smile was attractive.

He replayed that conversation until he fell asleep.

A third stopped replying after learning he did not have much money.

That one stayed with him longer.

He did not tell anyone.

He simply stopped messaging her.

The next morning, he went to school as usual.

He laughed with his friends.

He smoked behind the sports hall.

He came home late.

Nobody asked what had happened.

By sixteen, he had begun collecting small proofs that he mattered.

A girl's message.

A friend's invitation.

Someone noticed his new jacket.

A compliment.

A hand briefly resting on his shoulder.

A person wanting something from him.

He kept them all.

He did not yet understand the difference between being wanted and being valued.

That distinction would cost him.

One Saturday evening, his uncle found him sitting alone on the back steps.

The garden was covered in frost.

"You're quiet."

Aariz shrugged.

His uncle sat beside him.

For several minutes neither spoke.

Then his uncle asked, "Are you happy?"

Aariz looked at him.

The question seemed strangely difficult.

He gave the answer he had become accustomed to giving.

"Yeah."

His uncle smiled faintly.

"Good."

He stood and went inside.

Aariz remained on the steps.

He watched his uncle disappear through the kitchen door.

Then he looked across the garden.

The snow had begun melting.

Tiny patches of dark earth were appearing beneath it.

Aariz reached down and pressed his fingers into the cold soil.

He kept them there until they hurt.

Then he pulled them back and went inside.

The first time Aariz stayed out until dawn, nobody came looking for him.

He had not planned to stay away.

He and two boys from school had gone to a small gathering at someone's apartment. There was music, cheap alcohol, cigarette smoke hanging beneath the ceiling, and the nervous excitement of teenagers pretending they were older than they were.

Aariz drank more than he intended.

At some point after midnight, he sat on the balcony with a girl beside him. She was wearing a black sweater, her hair pulled into a loose ponytail.

"You're quiet," she said.

"I'm tired."

“You're always tired.”

He smiled.

“Maybe.”

She nudged his shoulder.

“You think too much.”

He looked at her.

“What do I think about?”

“I don't know.”

She laughed.

“That's why I said think. I don't know.”

He laughed too.

For a while they watched cars move along the road below.

The girl rested her head against his shoulder.

Aariz became very still.

He could hear her breathing.

Nobody had ever leaned against him like that.

Not without wanting something.

Not without making him nervous.

He did not move.

“Comfortable?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

She stayed there.

Aariz looked toward the city.

The lights were blurred by the glass.

For those few minutes, he felt strangely calm.

When she eventually lifted her head, he missed the weight of it immediately.

Later, someone handed him another drink.

He took it.

By four in the morning, the apartment had become quiet.

People were sleeping on sofas and floors.

Aariz stepped outside.

The air was bitter.

He checked his phone.

No missed calls.

No messages asking where he was.

He stood there for a long time.

Then he laughed once under his breath.

"Of course."

He walked to the bus stop.

The first buses had not started yet.

So he walked.

When he reached the house, the sky was beginning to pale.

He unlocked the door.

The hallway was silent.

He expected anger.

Questions.

Someone is waiting.

Nothing.

He climbed the stairs.

His uncle's door was closed.

Aariz stood outside it.

His hand lifted.

He almost knocked.

Then lowered.

He went to his room.

At seven, his aunt woke him.

“Aariz.”

He opened his eyes.

“You're still sleeping?”

He sat up.

“What time is it?”

“Seven.”

He rubbed his face.

“I just came home.”

She stared at him.

“Where were you?”

“Outside.”

“Outside where?”

“Friends.”

She shook her head.

“You have school.”

“I know.”

“Then get up.”

He looked at her.

For a moment he wanted her to ask something else.

Are you all right?

Did something happen?

Why were you out all night?

Instead she said, “And your cousin needs help with the laundry.”

Aariz looked away.

“Okay.”

She left.

He sat on the bed.

Then he laughed quietly.

Not because anything was funny.

He simply did not know what else to do.

Winter deepened.

The lake froze at its edges.

The mountains disappeared behind low clouds for days at a time.

Aariz's sixteenth birthday passed without much ceremony.

His uncle remembered.

He gave him a small box.

Inside was a watch.

Aariz stared at it.

“For me?”

His uncle smiled.

“Who else?”

Aariz turned the watch over in his hands.

“Thank you.”

“Put it on.”

He did.

The strap was slightly loose.

His uncle adjusted it around his wrist.

“There.”

Aariz looked at the watch.

Then at his uncle.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

His uncle nodded.

“Good.”

Aariz smiled.

That evening, he wore it to dinner.

His cousins noticed.

“New watch?”

“Yeah.”

“Who gave you that?”

"My uncle."

One of them reached for his wrist.

"Let me see."

Aariz pulled his hand back instinctively.

The cousin laughed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Aariz smiled.

He finished eating.

Later, in his room, he took the watch off and placed it carefully inside the box.

He did not want it scratched.

For years afterward, he would remember that watch.

Not because it was expensive.

It wasn't.

He remembered the way his uncle had adjusted the strap.

Small things stayed with him.

A hand on his shoulder.

A plate pushed toward him.

A sweater bought without being asked.

A book left beside his bed.

They were brief moments, but Aariz held them with the care of someone carrying water in his palms.

The following year was worse.

His drinking increased.

Not every day.

Not even every week.

But often enough that he began knowing exactly how much it took to make his thoughts slow down.

He started spending more time with girls.

Some genuinely liked him.

Some liked his appearance.

Some liked the attention he gave them.

Sometimes he knew the difference.

Sometimes he didn't.

He was handsome now, and he had begun to understand the effect of that.

Girls noticed his eyes.

His smile.

His confidence when he wanted to appear confident.

He learned how to flirt.

He learned how to make someone laugh.

He learned how to keep a conversation going late into the night.

And he learned that loneliness became quieter when someone wanted to hear your voice.

One girl asked him about his family.

Aariz paused.

"What about them?"

"Your parents."

He looked at the road ahead.

"My mother died."

"Oh."

She waited.

"And your father?"

"He remarried."

"Do you live with him?"

"No."

"Why?"

Aariz smiled without looking at her.

"Long story."

She reached across and touched his hand.

"Tell me sometime."

He nodded.

He never did.

One afternoon, his uncle found him asleep on the sofa.

The television was still on.

A half-empty bottle sat on the floor.

His uncle picked it up.

"Aariz."

He woke slowly.

"What?"

His uncle held up the bottle.

"What is this?"

Aariz sat up.

“Nothing.”

His uncle looked at him.

“You're seventeen.”

“I know.”

“This isn't funny.”

“I didn't say it was.”

His uncle placed the bottle on the table.

“Come with me.”

Aariz followed him into the kitchen.

His uncle filled a glass with water and pushed it toward him.

“Drink.”

Aariz did.

“Look at me.”

He looked up.

“Whatever you're doing, stop before it becomes your life.”

Aariz stared at him.

“I can handle it.”

His uncle shook his head.

“No. You think you can.”

Aariz's jaw tightened.

“I said I'm fine.”

His uncle remained silent.

The boy stood.

"I have things to do."

He walked away.

Behind him, his uncle said quietly,

"I wish you'd let somebody help you."

Aariz stopped.

He did not turn around.

His fingers curled around the edge of the doorway.

For several seconds he stood there.

Then he walked upstairs.

He closed his bedroom door.

The watch his uncle had given him was still in its box.

Aariz opened it.

The glass had a tiny scratch now.

He ran his thumb over it.

Then he put the watch on.

It was still slightly loose.

He tightened the strap himself.

By eighteen, Aariz had stopped keeping track of how many times he had promised to change.

The promises usually arrived after something had gone wrong.

A bad night.

An argument.

A drink too many drinks.

A message he regretted sending.

A morning when he woke with his mouth dry and his clothes smelling of smoke.

He would sit on the edge of his bed, stare at the floor, and decide that this time would be different.

By evening, life usually had other plans.

One Friday, he came home with a split lip.

His aunt noticed first.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Your mouth."

He touched it.

"Someone hit me."

"Why?"

Aariz shrugged.

His aunt looked at him for a moment.

"Sit."

"I'm fine."

"Sit down."

He sat at the kitchen table.

She brought the first-aid box and stood between his knees, dabbing antiseptic against the cut.

Aariz flinched.

"Hold still."

"It stings."

"Good. Then you'll remember."

He smiled faintly.

She put the cotton aside.

“Who did this?”

“I told you. Someone.”

“Someone has a name.”

Aariz looked at the table.

“I don't want trouble.”

She closed the box.

“Neither do I.”

He nodded.

She touched his chin and turned his face toward the light.

“Don't get into fights.”

“Okay.”

“And don't bring this nonsense into the house.”

“Okay.”

She walked away.

Aariz remained at the table.

After a moment, he touched the corner of his mouth.

The antiseptic had left a sharp taste.

He wiped his finger against his jeans.

His uncle found him the next morning in the garage.

Aariz had been helping with small repairs whenever he could. He liked the smell of oil, rubber, metal and cold air. Machines did not ask questions. If something was broken, there was usually a reason. If you found the reason, you could fix it.

His uncle leaned against the doorway.

“Are you working today?”

“Yeah.”

“School?”

“Finished.”

His uncle nodded.

“What do you want to do?”

Aariz looked up from the engine.

“Work.”

“That's not what I asked.”

Aariz wiped his hands with a rag.

“I don't know.”

His uncle stepped inside.

“You should think about it.”

“I am.”

“Think harder.”

Aariz smiled.

His uncle shook his head.

“You're becoming stubborn.”

“Maybe.”

“That's not something to be proud of.”

Aariz returned to the engine.

His uncle watched him for a few seconds.

Then he said, “Come for dinner tonight.”

"I will."

"Promise?"

Aariz looked at him.

"Promise."

His uncle left.

Aariz kept working.

At eight that evening, his phone showed three missed calls from him.

Aariz was somewhere else.

By the time he returned, the house was quiet.

The dining table had been cleared.

On the counter sat a plate covered with another plate.

He lifted it.

Rice.

Dal.

Vegetables.

He stood there for a moment.

Then warmed the food himself.

His uncle was asleep by then.

Aariz ate alone.

When he finished, he washed the plate and dried it.

Before going upstairs, he opened the refrigerator.

There was a small piece of cake inside.

A birthday cake left over from one of his cousins.

He stared at it.

Then closed the door.

At nineteen, Aariz moved through several jobs without staying long enough to call any of them a career.

A garage.

A repair shop.

Air-conditioning work.

Loading deliveries.

Anything that paid.

He learned quickly.

He could take apart an old machine and understand its stubborn little logic. He could climb ladders with tools balanced against his hip. He could work for hours without complaining about heat, grease or cold.

When Friday came, most of his wages disappeared.

Some went toward the household.

Some toward cigarettes.

Some toward drinks.

The rest seemed to vanish.

He rarely knew where.

One afternoon, he came home early and found two of his cousins arguing in the hallway.

"Give it to me."

"No."

"You took it."

"I didn't."

Aariz stepped around them.

"Move."

One cousin looked at him.

"You're home early."

"Yeah."

"Do this for me."

"What?"

"Take these upstairs."

He looked at the boxes.

"How many?"

"Six."

Aariz picked up two.

"Not all at once."

"Then go twice."

He carried them upstairs.

Then returned.

By the fourth trip, his arms were aching.

Nobody thanked him.

He went back for the last two.

That night he received a message from a girl he had been seeing.

Where are you?

He replied.

Home.

Come out.

Can't.

Three dots appeared.

Then:

You always say that.

He stared at the screen.

He typed:

Fine.

He changed his clothes.

He checked his wallet.

There was barely enough money.

He went anyway.

She was waiting outside a café.

“You look tired.”

“Long day.”

She looked at his jacket.

“Is that new?”

“No.”

She touched the sleeve.

“It's nice.”

Aariz smiled.

“Thanks.”

They walked inside.

She ordered.

He looked at the menu.

“What are you having?”

"Whatever."

She looked at him.

"You're paying, right?"

He hesitated.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Good."

He nodded.

Later, when they stepped outside, the temperature had dropped sharply.

She slipped her arm through his.

Aariz looked down at her hand.

He did not say anything.

Neither did she.

He walked her to the bus stop.

When her bus arrived, she kissed his cheek.

"Call me."

"I will."

She climbed aboard.

Aariz stood on the pavement until the bus disappeared.

Then he checked his wallet.

He counted the money left.

He put it back carefully.

The wind came down from the hills.

He pulled his jacket closed and started walking.

At twenty, he began renting a tiny room near the garage.

It was cheaper than the old family house.

The room had one narrow bed, a metal cupboard and a window overlooking the back of another building.

He liked the window.

In the mornings, sunlight came through it for about twenty minutes.

He put a chair beneath it.

Sometimes he sat there with coffee before work.

No one asked him to hurry.

No one called his name from another room.

No one told him to carry anything.

The silence should have felt strange.

Instead, he slept deeply.

For a while, he thought this was what freedom meant.

Then the evenings arrived.

The room became too quiet.

He began going out again.

Sometimes with friends.

Sometimes with girls.

Sometimes alone.

He drank.

He smoked.

He came home late.

On Sundays, he washed his clothes in a plastic basin and hung them near the window.

He bought a second-hand bookshelf.

Then three books.

Then five.

He had not planned to become a reader.

He simply liked having something in the room that did not move, speak, demand, or judge.

One rainy evening, he opened a book after work and read the same page four times.

He shut it.

His phone was beside him.

He picked it up.

No messages.

He put it down.

A few minutes later, he checked again.

Still nothing.

He turned the phone off.

Then turned it back on.

He laughed softly.

"Idiot."

He tossed it onto the bed.

Outside, rain ran down the window in long crooked lines.

Aariz stood and made tea.

He carried the cup to the window.

For a long time, he watched the street.

People passed beneath umbrellas.

A couple stood beneath an awning, arguing quietly.

A father lifted a little girl over a puddle.

The child shrieked with laughter.

Aariz looked away.

He took another sip.

The tea had gone bitter.

He drank it anyway.

The room behind the garage became quieter as winter returned.

Aariz worked longer hours now.

He left before sunrise, came home after dark, and often smelled of metal, dust, and machine oil. His hands had become permanently marked by the work. Small cuts appeared across his knuckles. Grease settled beneath his fingernails no matter how hard he scrubbed.

He didn't mind.

Work gave the day a shape.

One Tuesday, the garage owner handed him an envelope.

"Your pay."

Aariz counted it beside the workbench.

The owner watched him.

"You're sending most of it home again?"

Aariz folded the notes.

"Yes."

"You don't have to."

Aariz shrugged.

"I know."

"Then why?"

He slipped the money into his wallet.

"Family."

The owner nodded and returned to the car he was repairing.

Aariz went back to work.

That evening, he transferred the money.

Then he sat on the edge of his bed with his shoes still on.

His phone rang.

His aunt.

He answered.

"Hello?"

"Did you send it?"

"Yes."

"Good."

A pause.

"Your cousin needs money for his course."

Aariz looked at the ceiling.

"How much?"

She told him.

He rubbed his forehead.

"I'll see."

“What does that mean?”

“I said I'll see.”

“You're earning now. You should help.”

Aariz said nothing.

“Hello?”

“I'm here.”

“Then don't forget.”

“I won't.”

The call ended.

He placed the phone beside him.

His wallet was almost empty.

He opened the cupboard.

There was a packet of noodles, two eggs, bread, and a bottle of water.

He smiled.

“Luxury.”

He cooked the noodles.

While they boiled, he opened a beer.

Then another.

By the time he finished eating, the room had begun to tilt pleasantly at the edges.

He put on music.

Something slow.

He sat on the floor with his back against the bed.

The phone remained beside him.

He picked it up.

Scrolled.

Stopped.

Opened a conversation.

Typed:

Are you awake?

He stared at the message.

Deleted it.

Opened another.

Typed:

Want to meet?

Deleted that too.

He placed the phone face down.

The music continued.

Outside, snow began gathering along the pavement.

Aariz closed his eyes.

For a few minutes, there was only the song.

Then the bottle slipped from his fingers and rolled across the floor.

He opened his eyes.

"Shit."

He reached for it.

The bottle was empty.

He laughed.

Then laughed again.

The laughter faded quickly.

He remained sitting on the floor.

The room seemed smaller than it had a moment ago.

He looked around.

The metal cupboard.

The mattress.

The single chair.

The small bookshelf.

The damp patch near the window.

The old jacket hanging from a nail.

Everything he owned could be seen without moving his head.

He reached for the book nearest him.

He opened it randomly.

A sentence caught his eye.

He read it once.

Then again.

He couldn't concentrate.

He closed the book.

The room was quiet.

Aariz leaned his head against the bed.

His eyes closed.

His breathing slowed.

Then his phone rang.

He opened his eyes.

Unknown number.

He let it ring.

It stopped.

A message appeared.

He looked at it.

Nothing important.

An advertisement.

He put the phone away.

He stood, went to the sink, washed his face, and looked at himself in the small mirror above it.

His eyes were red.

He wiped them.

Then stood there.

A drop of water slid from his hair to his cheek.

He brushed it away.

His reflection remained.

"Thirty," he muttered.

He shook his head.

"Not yet."

He smiled at himself.

"Twenty."

The smile disappeared.

He went back to bed.

That night he drank until sleep arrived before the thoughts could.

A few weeks later, his uncle called.

“Come home this weekend.”

“I'll try.”

“No. Come.”

Aariz was quiet.

“Why?”

“Your aunt is making food.”

“What food?”

His uncle laughed.

“You're impossible.”

“What?”

“Just come.”

Aariz looked at the calendar.

“Sunday?”

“Sunday.”

“Okay.”

“Don't disappear.”

“I won't.”

On Sunday morning, Aariz drove toward the old house.

He parked across the street.

Through the window he could see movement inside.

Children running through the hallway.

Someone carrying dishes.

His aunt opened a cupboard.

His uncle was sitting at the table.

Aariz remained in the car.

He watched them.

His hand rested on the steering wheel.

After a few minutes, his uncle looked toward the window.

Aariz lifted his hand.

His uncle smiled.

He pointed toward the door.

Aariz smiled back.

He got out.

The front door opened before he reached it.

His uncle stood there.

“You came.”

“I said I would.”

His uncle pulled him into a brief embrace.

Aariz's arms remained at his sides for a second.

Then he hugged him back.

“Come inside.”

The house smelled exactly as he remembered.

Spices.

Laundry soap.

Wood.

Something sweet baking in the kitchen.

His aunt glanced at him.

“You've become thin.”

“I eat.”

“You don't look like it.”

She turned toward the kitchen.

“Wash your hands.”

Aariz smiled.

“Yes.”

His cousins came downstairs.

Someone asked about his work.

Someone else asked about his car.

Another complained that he had not visited recently.

The questions came quickly.

Aariz answered them one by one.

At lunch, his uncle served him another helping before he could refuse.

“Eat.”

“I've had enough.”

“You're thin.”

“I know.”

“Then eat.”

Aariz looked at the plate.

Then ate.

His aunt placed a bowl of salad beside him.

“More.”

He nodded.

Nobody noticed when he smiled.

Or perhaps someone did.

After lunch, he helped clear the table.

His aunt tried to take a stack of plates from him.

“Leave them.”

“I'll do it.”

“Sit with your uncle.”

Aariz looked at her.

“It's okay.”

She took the plates from his hands.

“Go.”

He wiped his palms on his trousers.

Then went into the sitting room.

His uncle was watching television.

“Sit.”

Aariz sat beside him.

For a while, neither spoke.

The television played quietly.

His uncle leaned back.

“You're doing well?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

Aariz looked at him.

"Yeah."

His uncle nodded.

"Good."

Aariz looked at the television.

His uncle reached for the remote.

"Want to watch something else?"

"No."

"Tea?"

"Sure."

His uncle got up.

Aariz watched him disappear into the kitchen.

A few minutes later, he returned with two cups.

He handed one to Aariz.

"Careful."

"Thanks."

They drank tea.

Outside, the afternoon light fell across the snow.

Aariz stayed until evening.

When he finally left, his aunt packed food into a container.

"Take this."

"I can cook."

"I know."

She pushed it into his hands.

"Still take it."

Aariz looked at the container.

“Okay.”

At the door, his uncle said, “Call when you reach.”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

Aariz smiled.

“Promise.”

He drove away.

At the first red light, he looked at the container sitting on the passenger seat.

He reached over and touched its lid.

The light turned green.

A car behind him honked.

Aariz started driving.

✅

At the next traffic light, Aariz looked at the container again.

He smiled.

Then his phone rang.

His father's name appeared on the screen.

Aariz stared at it.

He answered.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?”

“Coming back.”

“From your uncle's?”

“Yes.”

A pause.

“You went there?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Aariz tightened his hand around the steering wheel.

“I was invited.”

His father made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a laugh.

“You're old enough now to stop behaving like a child.”

Aariz said nothing.

“You have work tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Then come home early. Your brothers need the car.”

“I need it for work.”

“You can take the bus.”

Aariz looked through the windshield.

The light was still red.

“I need the car.”

His father's voice hardened.

“You're always making things difficult.”

Aariz swallowed.

“Okay.”

“Bring it tonight.”

The call ended.

The light turned green.

Aariz drove straight.

He did not turn toward his father's house.

He went back to his room.

The food container remained on the passenger seat.

He carried it upstairs.

For a while he stood in the middle of the room with it in his hands.

Then he opened the lid.

Rice.

Chicken.

Vegetables.

A small piece of cake wrapped in foil.

He sat on the bed.

He ate slowly.

The food was still warm.

Halfway through, he stopped.

His phone rang again.

This time it was his cousin.

“Where's the car?”

“I'm using it.”

“For what?”

“Work.”

“You don't need it tonight.”

“I do.”

A pause.

“You always think about yourself.”

Aariz looked at the plate.

“Okay.”

“Can you bring it?”

“No.”

His cousin laughed.

“Fine. Don't.”

The call ended.

Aariz put the phone down.

He finished eating.

Then he washed the container and dried it carefully.

The next morning, he drove to work.

His father called three times.

He didn't answer.

At noon, his uncle called.

Aariz answered immediately.

“Hello?”

“You didn't give them the car?”

“No.”

His uncle was quiet.

“They told me.”

Aariz waited.

"Why didn't you?"

"I needed it."

"I know."

Another pause.

"Your father is angry."

Aariz looked across the garage.

A mechanic was welding beneath the hood of a van.

Blue-white light flashed across the concrete floor.

"He can be angry."

His uncle sighed.

"Aariz."

"What?"

"You're still part of the family."

Aariz rubbed his thumb across a grease stain on his palm.

"I know."

"Then don't make things worse."

Aariz looked at his hand.

Something in him wanted to say, When was anything ever easy for me?

Instead he said,

"Okay."

They hung up.

That evening, when Aariz returned to his room, there was a message waiting from his father.

Come Sunday. We need to talk.

Aariz read it twice.

He put the phone down.

Then picked it up again.

He typed:

About what?

No answer came.

He waited.

Ten minutes.

Twenty.

An hour.

Nothing.

Eventually he switched off the phone.

The next Sunday, he went.

His father was sitting in the living room.

The television was on although nobody was watching it.

Four younger children were moving around the room.

One of them was doing homework on the floor.

Another was eating from a bowl.

His father's new wife was in the kitchen.

Aariz stood near the doorway.

His father looked up.

“Sit.”

He sat.

“You're earning now.”

“Yes.”

“You need to contribute more.”

“I already sent money.”

“Not enough.”

Aariz looked toward the kitchen.

His stepmother came in carrying tea.

She placed one cup in front of his father.

One in front of herself.

None in front of Aariz.

He noticed.

He said nothing.

His father continued.

“You spend too much on yourself.”

Aariz almost smiled.

“On what?”

“Your car. Your clothes. Going out.”

“I work.”

“So?”

“So I need things.”

His father leaned forward.

“You've become very independent.”

Aariz looked at him.

“Is that bad?”

His father's expression changed.

“You think you're better than us?”

“No.”

“Then behave like family.”

Aariz stared at the carpet.

A little boy ran through the room and stopped beside him.

He looked at Aariz curiously.

“Are you my brother?”

Aariz looked at him.

“Yes.”

The boy frowned.

“Why don't you live here?”

Nobody answered.

Aariz looked at his father.

His father looked away.

The boy asked again.

“Why?”

Aariz smiled.

“I used to.”

“Where?”

“With Uncle.”

“Why?”

Aariz opened his mouth.

Nothing came.

The little boy ran off before he answered.

His father cleared his throat.

"You're making a scene."

Aariz looked at him.

"I didn't say anything."

"Your attitude says enough."

Something changed in Aariz's face.

Not anger.

Not yet.

He stood.

His father looked up.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"This is your home too."

Aariz looked around the room.

At the toys.

The children's schoolbags.

The family photographs.

The wedding picture hangs above the cabinet.

His father and his new wife smiling beneath flowers.

Four children standing around them.

Aariz searched the frame.

He was not there.

He looked at it for another second.

Then he said quietly,

“I don't think it is.”

His father stood.

“Aariz.”

But Aariz was already walking toward the door.

He put on his shoes.

His father followed him into the hallway.

“Don't be dramatic.”

Aariz opened the door.

Cold air entered the house.

His father said his name again.

This time Aariz turned.

For a moment, they simply looked at each other.

Then Aariz said,

“I'll keep sending the money.”

His father frowned.

“I didn't ask you to…”

“I know.”

Aariz stepped outside.

He closed the door.

He stood on the porch for a few seconds.

Then walked down the steps.

Snow had begun falling.

He did not look back.

When he reached the car, he sat behind the wheel but did not start the engine.

Through the windshield, the house looked ordinary.

Warm windows.

Curtains.

A light above the entrance.

A family inside.

Aariz put both hands on the steering wheel.

Then he started the car.

He drove away.

This time, he did not make a promise to return.

His father followed him into the hallway.

“Don't be dramatic.”

Aariz stopped.

He turned slowly.

“I'm not.”

“You're behaving like an ungrateful child.”

Aariz laughed once.

“Ungrateful?”

His father frowned.

“Watch your tone.”

Something in Aariz's face changed.

“What tone?”

“That one.”

“Which one?”

His father stepped closer.

“You think because you're earning a little money now, you can talk to me however you want?”

Aariz's jaw tightened.

“I work for my money.”

“So?”

“So don't talk to me like I owe you my life.”

The hallway went quiet.

His stepmother appeared near the kitchen.

One of the children stopped on the stairs.

His father pointed toward the door.

“Get out if you're going to behave like this.”

Aariz stared at him.

“Gladly.”

He reached for the door.

His father caught his arm.

“Don't walk away when I'm talking to you.”

Aariz jerked his arm free.

“Don't touch me.”

His voice was louder now.

The child on the stairs flinched.

His father stared at him.

Aariz breathed heavily through his nose.

For a second, neither moved.

Then his father said, quieter,

“You've become impossible.”

Aariz looked at him.

“No.”

He pointed toward the room behind them.

“I've just stopped being quiet.”

His father raised his voice.

“Then leave.”

Aariz grabbed his coat from the chair.

His father followed him.

“And leave the car.”

Aariz stopped.

“What?”

“The car stays.”

“I bought that car.”

“I paid the down payment.”

“I paid every month after that.”

“You wouldn't have had it without me.”

Aariz turned sharply.

“Fine.”

His father held out his hand.

“The keys.”

Aariz stared at the hand.

Then pulled the keys from his pocket.

For a moment, he almost threw them.

Instead he placed them hard into his father's palm.

The metal struck his skin with a sharp little sound.

"There."

His father closed his fingers around them.

"You'll come back."

Aariz opened the door.

"No."

"You'll calm down."

"No."

"You're still my son."

Aariz froze.

He looked back.

His face had gone strangely still.

"Then you should've remembered that before taking my car."

He walked out.

The door slammed behind him.

He stood on the pavement, breathing hard.

A neighbour across the street looked over.

Aariz kicked a small mound of snow from the curb.

Immediately, he stopped.

He looked at his foot.

Then at the house.

He lowered his head.

The anger was still there.

So was the embarrassment.

He started walking.

The next morning, he arrived at the garage without the car.

His employer looked up.

“Where's your vehicle?”

“Gone.”

“What happened?”

“Family.”

The man waited.

Aariz picked up his toolbox.

“I'll take the bus.”

“You can't carry that on the bus.”

“I'll manage.”

“You always say that.”

Aariz looked at him.

“What do you want me to say?”

The man raised both hands.

“Nothing.”

Aariz looked away.

“Sorry.”

He walked toward the door.

“Aariz.”

He stopped.

“Don't fight with everyone who annoys you.”

Aariz gave a humourless smile.

“I don't.”

The man looked at him.

Aariz sighed.

“Not everyone.”

He left.

The first job took twice as long.

By evening his shoulders ached from carrying equipment between buses and streets.

On the way home, a man bumped into him while getting off the bus.

“Watch where you're going.”

Aariz turned immediately.

“What did you say?”

The man looked back.

“I said watch where you're going.”

Aariz stepped toward him.

The man's friend grabbed his arm.

“Leave it.”

Aariz stared at them.

His hands curled into fists.

For three seconds he stood there.

Then he stepped back.

“Forget it.”

He walked away.

Halfway down the street, he stopped.

His fists were still clenched.

He slowly opened them.

His palms were marked with his fingernails.

He shoved both hands into his pockets and kept walking.

That night, his uncle called.

Aariz almost didn't answer.

He did.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Your father told me.”

Aariz sat on the edge of the bed.

“He took the car.”

“I know.”

“He said I was ungrateful.”

His uncle was silent.

Aariz rubbed his forehead.

“I shouldn't have shouted.”

“No.”

“I shouldn't have slammed the door.”

“No.”

Aariz looked down.

“But I was angry.”

“I know.”

A pause.

Then his uncle said,

"You're allowed to be angry."

Aariz said nothing.

"But you're responsible for what you do with it."

He leaned back against the wall.

"Yeah."

"Did you hurt anyone?"

"No."

"Good."

Aariz looked at the photograph inside his wallet.

His thumb pressed against its edge.

"I almost did."

His uncle was quiet.

"So don't let it become a habit."

Aariz nodded although his uncle couldn't see him.

"Okay."

After the call ended, Aariz remained sitting there.

His phone rested beside him.

The room was dark.

He looked at his hands.

Then at the photograph.

He put the photograph back into his wallet.

He turned off the light.

And for once, when anger came, he stayed still long enough to let it pass.

The next morning, Aariz woke before the alarm.

For a few seconds he did not move.

The room was grey with early light. Beyond the window, snow had settled over the parked cars and the narrow garden wall, smoothing everything into the same pale silence. Somewhere downstairs, a cupboard shut. Then another.

He reached for his phone.

6:12.

Three missed calls from the garage.

He sat up.

The room was cold enough that the floor bit through his socks. He pulled on his work trousers, a black sweater, and the jacket that still smelled faintly of engine oil. His old work boots were near the door.

He stopped when he saw the empty space where his car keys usually lay.

He had given them back yesterday.

He had done it without thinking long enough to regret it.

Now he regrets it.

Not because of the car.

Because he had allowed his father to take something he had paid for, maintained, repaired, and depended on simply because his father had spoken as though possession were a birthright.

Aariz picked up his tool bag.

It was heavier than it looked.

He went downstairs.

His aunt was already in the kitchen, stirring tea. She glanced at him.

"You're going?"

"Garage."

"Eat something."

"I'll eat there."

She looked at him for a moment.

"Sit."

"I'll be late."

"You'll be late whether you eat or not."

He almost smiled.

Almost.

He pulled out a chair.

She put two pieces of toast on a plate and slid them toward him.

"Your father called last night."

Aariz's hand stopped halfway to the cup.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"That means something."

She sighed.

"He asked whether you had reached home."

"I don't live there."

"I know."

"He knows."

"I know."

Aariz took a bite of toast.

His aunt watched him chew.

"He sounded angry."

"He always sounds angry."

"No."

She lowered the flame.

"This time he sounded worried."

Aariz laughed once.

It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"About me?"

She didn't answer.

He looked down at his tea.

A minute passed.

Then she said quietly, "People can be two things at once."

Aariz rubbed his thumb over a crack in the ceramic cup.

"Maybe."

His aunt put a second piece of toast on his plate.

He didn't argue.

The bus was already crowded.

Aariz stood near the rear door with one hand around the metal pole and the other gripping his tool bag. Every time the bus turned, the bag swung against his leg.

At the third stop, an elderly man got on.

Aariz moved aside.

"Thank you," the man said.

Aariz nodded.

A few minutes later, the bus stopped abruptly.

Someone behind him crashed into his shoulder.

"Sorry," a man said.

Aariz turned.

The man was younger than his father, older than Aariz. Heavy coat. Wet hair. Cigarette smell.

"Didn't see you."

Aariz stared at him.

The man's eyes narrowed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're looking at me."

Aariz tightened his grip on the pole.

The man stepped closer.

"You got a problem?"

For one second, Aariz's body moved before his mind did.

His shoulders squared.

His jaw locked.

His hand left the pole.

The tool bag dropped against the floor with a metallic clatter.

The man looked at him.

Aariz took one step forward.

Then stopped.

The bus was silent around them.

The driver glanced into the mirror.

Aariz bent down and picked up his bag.

“Forget it.”

The man muttered something under his breath.

Aariz heard it.

He didn't turn around.

At the next stop, he got off.

It was still seven minutes' walk to the garage.

He walked the rest of the way in the snow.

By noon, his boots were wet.

By two, his socks were wet.

By four, his temper was worse.

A compressor refused to start.

Aariz hit the side of it with the heel of his palm.

“Don't.”

The garage owner looked over.

Aariz turned.

“It's not listening.”

“The machine?”

“Yes.”

The owner laughed.

“You're going to beat it into working?”

Aariz stared at him.

Then the corner of his mouth moved.

"Maybe."

"Come here."

Aariz wiped his hands on a rag and walked over.

The owner pointed to the wiring.

"You're rushing."

"I know."

"Then slow down."

Aariz crouched.

The owner stood beside him.

"Are you angry about something?"

"No."

"Good."

Aariz looked up.

"Why good?"

"Because angry mechanics break expensive things."

Aariz looked at the compressor.

Then at his hands.

"Fair."

The owner walked away.

Aariz worked.

Twenty minutes later, the compressor came alive with a low mechanical hum.

He sat back on his heels.

For a moment, he simply listened.

The machine was working.

He smiled.

It was small, but real.

That evening, he walked home.

The snow had stopped.

The streets were wet and reflective, streetlamps breaking across the pavement in long yellow streaks. Cars passed with their tyres whispering over the road.

He stopped outside a bakery.

The smell of butter and warm bread came through the door every time someone entered.

Aariz checked his wallet.

He had enough.

He bought two pastries.

One for himself.

One for his aunt.

He carried them home in a paper bag tucked carefully beneath his jacket.

When he entered the kitchen, his aunt looked at the bag.

"What is that?"

"Nothing."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You bought food and you're calling it nothing?"

"It's for you."

She looked at him.

“Why?”

Aariz shrugged.

“You like these.”

She took the bag.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then she touched his cheek.

“Thank you.”

He looked away.

“Don't make it dramatic.”

She smiled.

“Sit.”

“I have work tomorrow.”

“You can sit for five minutes.”

He sat.

She opened the bag.

They ate in silence.

Outside, someone laughed in the street.

Aariz listened.

The kitchen smelled of cardamom and sugar.

His aunt pushed the larger piece toward him.

“You take this.”

“You take it.”

“I don't want it.”

“You're lying.”

She smiled.

"You've become very clever."

"Very."

She laughed.

And for five minutes, there was no father.

No car.

No shouting.

No money.

No garage.

Only two people at a kitchen table, eating something sweet while snow melted against the window.

Aariz finished his piece.

Then he stood.

"Good night."

"Good night."

He reached the doorway.

"Aariz."

He turned.

His aunt hesitated.

"Nothing."

He waited.

She shook her head.

"Go sleep."

He nodded.

Upstairs, he placed his phone beside the bed.

There was one new message from his father.

Come Sunday. We need to talk.

Aariz stared at it.

His thumb hovered over the screen.

He typed:

About what?

He deleted it.

Typed:

Okay.

Deleted that too.

Finally, he switched off the phone.

Sunday came with rain.

Not snow.

Rain.

The kind that turned the sky colourless and made the windows look permanently dirty.

Aariz stood in front of his wardrobe for several minutes before choosing a dark shirt.

He almost stayed home.

Then he put on his jacket.

His aunt saw him at the door.

"You're going?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to come?"

"No."

She nodded.

"If you need me, call."

Aariz opened the door.

"Auntie."

"Yes?"

He looked at her.

Nothing came.

"Nothing."

She understood anyway.

"Come back before dinner."

He nodded.

His father's house looked exactly as he remembered it.

Large.

Clean.

Expensive.

Warm.

The difference was that now he noticed the things he hadn't been old enough to notice before.

Photographs.

Family holidays.

Birthdays.

School ceremonies.

Christmas mornings.

Children standing between parents.

Arms around shoulders.

Hands resting on heads.

Everyone is smiling.

Aariz stood beneath one of the photographs.

His youngest half-brother was six in it.

His father had one hand on the boy's shoulder.

Aariz looked at the picture for a moment.

Then the hallway door opened.

His father appeared.

“You're late.”

“Traffic.”

“You came by bus?”

Aariz said nothing.

His father noticed.

“Where is the car?”

“You took it.”

“I bought it.”

“I paid the instalments.”

“I said I bought it.”

Aariz looked at him.

His father sighed.

“This is exactly what I mean.”

“What?”

“You always turn everything into an argument.”

Aariz's jaw tightened.

“I didn't start this conversation.”

“Sit down.”

Aariz remained standing.

His father walked into the living room.

“Your uncle says you're becoming difficult.”

Aariz laughed under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Say it.”

“I said nothing.”

His father turned.

“You think you're a man because you work a few hours in a garage?”

Aariz's expression changed.

“I work more than a few hours.”

“You drink.”

“Sometimes.”

“You waste money.”

“I send money here.”

“You owe this family.”

Aariz stared at him.

“For what?”

His father looked offended.

“For raising you.”

The room went quiet.

Aariz's fingers curled.

“You didn't raise me.”

His father took one step toward him.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

“I gave you a roof.”

“My uncle did.”

“I paid for your school.”

“My uncle did.”

“I fed you.”

Aariz looked toward the kitchen.

Then back at him.

“Did you?”

His father's face hardened.

“You ungrateful—”

Aariz stepped forward.

“Don't.”

“Don't what?”

“Don't call me that.”

“You are ungrateful.”

Aariz's voice rose.

“And you're a liar.”

His father went still.

Aariz breathed heavily through his nose.

For a second, it looked as though he might say something worse.

Instead, he turned toward the door.

His father caught his arm.

Aariz jerked around violently.

“Don't touch me.”

His father's hand released him.

The youngest boy appeared at the hallway entrance.

He looked frightened.

Aariz saw him.

The anger on his face faltered.

The boy whispered, “Bhai?”

Aariz stared at him.

His little brother held a toy car in one hand.

“Are you leaving?”

Aariz swallowed.

“Yes.”

“Again?”

Aariz didn't answer.

The boy came closer.

“Will you come next week?”

Aariz looked at the toy in his hand.

Then at the boy's face.

“I don't know.”

“Why?”

Aariz crouched.

For a moment, the anger disappeared completely.

“Because sometimes grown-ups are stupid.”

The boy frowned.

“Are you a grown-up?”

Aariz almost smiled.

“Unfortunately.”

The boy giggled.

Aariz stood.

His father was watching him.

Aariz walked toward the door.

Behind him, his father said, “You're still my son.”

Aariz stopped.

His hand remained on the doorknob.

He didn't turn around.

“Then act like my father.”

He opened the door.

Cold air entered the house.

He stepped outside.

The door closed behind him.

He walked for almost an hour before realizing he had no idea where he was going.

The rain had soaked through his shoulders.

His hands were cold.

He stopped beneath a railway bridge.

Trains passed above him, one after another, the sound rolling through the concrete like distant thunder.

Aariz leaned against the wall.

He took out a cigarette.

Held it between his fingers.

Then put it back.

He took out his phone.

His father's number was still at the top of the call list.

He stared at it.

Then at his aunt's name.

His thumb moved toward her.

Stopped.

Moved away.

He put the phone back into his pocket.

A train passed overhead.

The bridge shook.

Aariz closed his eyes.

For a few seconds he stood there listening.

Then he opened them.

Across the road, a small café was still open.

He walked toward it.

The café was nearly empty.

Aariz sat near the window.

The waitress brought him coffee.

"You want something to eat?"

He shook his head.

"Just coffee."

She nodded.

He wrapped both hands around the cup.

The heat slowly reached his fingers.

A couple sat at the table beside him.

The woman stole a piece of cake from the man's plate.

He pretended to be annoyed.

She laughed.

Aariz looked away.

Outside, the rain had become a fine mist.

He took out a small notebook from his jacket.

It was old.

The cover was bent.

On the first page, years earlier, he had written:

Things I want when I grow up.

Below it were several lines he had crossed out so violently that the paper had torn.

He turned the page.

There were newer entries.

Numbers.

Garage expenses.

Money sent home.

A phone number.

A half-written sentence.

He stared at it.

Then, beneath everything, he wrote:

Buy new boots.

He looked at the sentence.

For some reason, he laughed.

Quietly.

He closed the notebook.

When the waitress came to clear the cup, Aariz asked,

"Do you know if there's a shoe shop open nearby?"

She pointed down the street.

"Two blocks. Maybe."

"Thanks."

He paid.

Then he went outside.

The rain had stopped.

That night, he returned home with a new pair of boots.

His aunt was folding laundry.

She looked at his feet.

"Those are new."

"Yes."

"Good."

Aariz took off his jacket.

She glanced at him.

"Did you eat?"

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Coffee.”

She stared.

“That isn't food.”

“It had milk.”

She threw a towel at him.

Aariz caught it.

For the first time that day, he laughed properly.

His aunt shook her head.

“Come.”

He followed her into the kitchen.

There was a covered plate waiting on the table.

He lifted the lid.

Rice.

Chicken.

Vegetables.

He looked at her.

“You made this?”

“No. A ghost did.”

He smiled.

She pointed at the chair.

“Sit.”

Aariz sat.

She served him.

He began eating.

Halfway through the meal, she said,

“Your father?”

Aariz kept eating.

“Same.”

She nodded.

He swallowed.

“He said I owe the family.”

His aunt stopped moving.

Aariz continued eating.

“He said he raised me.”

She looked down.

Aariz's spoon struck the plate.

“He didn't.”

His aunt said nothing.

Aariz looked at her.

“I know you didn't either.”

Her face changed.

He immediately regretted it.

“I didn't mean—”

“I know.”

"I just—"

"I know."

He put the spoon down.

The room became very quiet.

His aunt sat opposite him.

After a while she said,

"You were difficult."

Aariz looked up.

She smiled sadly.

"You were loud. Angry. You broke things. You lied. You stayed out all night. You frightened me."

Aariz looked down.

"But," she continued, "you were also a child."

His throat tightened.

She reached across the table.

Not for his hand.

For the serving spoon.

She put another piece of chicken on his plate.

"Eat."

Aariz stared at the food.

"You're not going to lecture me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you're thirty years old."

He looked at her.

Then laughed.

"I'm not thirty."

"I know."

"I'm not even twenty-five."

"I know."

"Then why did you say thirty?"

She shrugged.

"You looked tired."

Aariz laughed again.

His aunt smiled.

He ate.

Neither of them mentioned his father again.

Much later, when the house had gone quiet, Aariz lay in bed.

The new boots were beside the door.

His phone was charging.

The photograph of his mother was on the shelf.

He reached for it.

This time, he didn't ask her anything.

He simply looked.

Her face was soft in the old photograph.

Young.

Almost impossibly young.

Aariz ran his thumb along the edge of the frame.

Then he put it back.

He turned off the light.

The room became dark.

For years, darkness had meant thinking.

Tonight, it meant sleep.

Outside, somewhere beyond the glass, a car moved slowly through the wet street.

Its headlights passed across the ceiling.

Aariz closed his eyes.

And when anger rose again—hot, immediate, familiar—he did not feed it.

He breathed.

Once.

Twice.

The feeling remained.

Then, slowly, it moved on.

He did not know it yet, but this would become one of the smallest victories of his life.

Not because anyone saw it.

Because no one did.

Winter returned before Aariz was ready for it.

The first snow came in November.

It began after midnight, so lightly that nobody noticed. By morning, the garden had disappeared beneath a thin white sheet, the branches of the old pear tree bent under the weight.

Aariz stood at the upstairs window while fastening the buttons of his school shirt.

He watched his cousins run outside.

Two of them were already throwing handfuls of snow at one another.

Someone screamed.

Someone laughed.

A door slammed downstairs.

Then his aunt shouted that they would catch a cold.

Aariz smiled faintly.

He finished dressing.

His schoolbag was already packed.

On the way downstairs, he passed the dining room.

His youngest cousin was sitting on his mother's lap, refusing breakfast.

"Just one more bite," the woman pleaded.

The child shook his head.

"Please."

"No."

"Then two spoons."

The child laughed.

She kissed his forehead.

Aariz stopped for half a second.

Nobody noticed.

He continued downstairs.

His uncle was at the table reading the newspaper.

"Come."

Aariz sat.

His uncle looked at him.

“You have gloves?”

“Yes.”

“Scarf?”

“Yes.”

“Lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Money?”

“Yes.”

His uncle lowered the newspaper.

“You're answering too quickly.”

Aariz grinned.

“I know everything.”

“You know nothing.”

“I know more than you.”

His uncle folded the newspaper.

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me something.”

Aariz thought.

“You snore.”

His uncle stared at him.

Then laughed.

The sound filled the dining room.

Aariz laughed too.

For those few seconds, he was simply a boy.

Not the child who had been sent away.

Not somebody else's responsibility.

Not the boy who had learned to read the temperature of a room before entering it.

Just a boy making his uncle laugh.

His uncle reached across the table and ruffled his hair.

"Eat."

Aariz looked at his plate.

There were two boiled eggs.

He took one.

His uncle pushed the second toward him.

"I don't want it."

"You're too thin."

"I am not."

"You are."

"I exercise."

"You walk to school."

"Exactly."

"That isn't exercise."

"It is if you're late."

His uncle laughed again.

Aariz ate the second egg.

At school, snow became an excuse for chaos.

By lunch, half the students were wet.

Aariz had snow in his hair and a red mark on his cheek from being hit with a snowball.

He chased the boy who had thrown it across the courtyard.

“Come back!”

The boy ran faster.

Aariz caught him near the bicycle racks.

They both slipped.

They landed in the snow.

For a moment neither moved.

Then they began laughing.

A teacher appeared.

“What is going on?”

Aariz looked up.

“Science experiment.”

“What experiment?”

“Gravity.”

The teacher stared.

The other boy covered his mouth.

Aariz's expression remained perfectly serious.

The teacher sighed.

“Both of you. Inside.”

They got up.

As they walked toward the building, the other boy nudged him.

"You're crazy."

Aariz shrugged.

"Probably."

Inside the classroom, he sat at the back.

The teacher began mathematics.

Aariz understood the first problem.

Then the second.

By the third, he stopped writing.

Outside, snow continued falling.

The teacher called his name.

"Aariz?"

He looked up.

"Yes?"

"Answer the question."

He looked at the board.

He knew it.

He gave the answer.

"Correct."

The teacher continued.

Aariz leaned back.

The boy beside him whispered,

"You're actually smart."

Aariz looked at him.

“Don't tell anyone.”

“Why?”

“They'll make me study.”

The boy laughed.

Aariz smiled.

But when the bell rang, he was the first one out.

That afternoon, he didn't go home immediately.

He walked toward the lake.

The cold had turned the air sharp. His breath appeared in small clouds before disappearing.

He sat on a bench.

Across the water, mountains stood beneath a sky the colour of steel.

He took a cigarette from his pocket.

He didn't light it.

He rolled it between his fingers.

Then he heard footsteps.

“Aariz?”

He looked over his shoulder.

It was his uncle.

Aariz immediately put the cigarette away.

His uncle sat beside him.

For a while, neither spoke.

“You were supposed to come home.”

“I know.”

“Why didn't you?”

Aariz shrugged.

“Didn't feel like it.”

His uncle looked at the lake.

“You can't stay outside forever.”

Aariz kicked a little snow away with his shoe.

“Why not?”

“Because you'll freeze.”

“I have a jacket.”

His uncle smiled.

“That wasn't what I meant.”

Aariz looked at him.

His uncle didn't ask about the cigarette.

He didn't ask why Aariz had been avoiding home.

He simply sat beside him.

A few minutes passed.

Then he said,

“Come.”

Aariz stood.

They walked home together.

Halfway there, his uncle stopped at a small shop.

“What do you want?”

“Nothing.”

“Choose.”

"I don't need anything."

"That's not what I asked."

Aariz looked through the window.

Books.

Pens.

Chocolate.

Small toys.

He pointed at a notebook.

"That."

His uncle bought it.

On the way home, Aariz held it under his jacket so the snow wouldn't touch it.

That night, he opened the notebook.

The pages were blank.

He sat at his desk.

For several minutes, he didn't write.

Then he wrote:

Things I know.

He paused.

Underneath:

Uncle loves me.

He stared at the sentence.

Then added:

Maybe.

He crossed out maybe.

Then he crossed out the entire line.

He turned the page.

He wrote:

Things I don't know.

He waited.

Finally:

Why do people change?

He stopped.

The pen remained between his fingers.

From downstairs came the sound of plates being washed.

A woman's voice.

A child's laughter.

His uncle's deeper voice.

Aariz listened.

Then he closed the notebook.

He placed it beneath his mattress.

The following weeks passed without anything dramatic happening.

That was perhaps what made them harder to remember.

There were mornings when nobody spoke to him.

Evenings when his aunt complained about his shoes in the hallway.

Sundays when everyone ate together and Aariz was told to get up twice to fetch something from the kitchen.

Birthdays came and went.

His cousins received wrapped presents.

Aariz received money from his uncle and was told to buy something he liked.

He bought a watch.

Not an expensive one.

A simple black watch with a silver dial.

His uncle fastened it around his wrist.

"Looks good."

Aariz looked at it.

"Really?"

"Very."

Aariz smiled.

"Thank you."

His uncle squeezed his shoulder.

"Happy birthday."

That night, Aariz slept wearing it.

By fifteen, he had learned how to lie convincingly.

Not because he enjoyed lying.

Because questions had become things to survive.

Where were you?

At a friend's.

Which friend?

You don't know him.

Why are you late?

The bus broke down.

Why do you smell like smoke?

Someone else was smoking.

Where did the money go?

Food.

Why is your shirt torn?

Football.

Why are you angry?

I'm not.

He could answer without hesitation.

Sometimes he even believed himself.

One evening, he returned home after midnight.

The front door opened quietly.

He took off his shoes.

The hallway was dark.

He was halfway upstairs when the light came on.

His uncle stood at the bottom of the staircase.

Aariz froze.

“What time is it?”

Aariz looked at the clock.

“Late.”

“I can see that.”

Silence.

His uncle looked at his face.

Then at his clothes.

Then back at him.

“Where were you?”

“Outside.”

“Doing what?”

“Nothing.”

His uncle waited.

Aariz sighed.

“With friends.”

“Which friends?”

“Why?”

“Because I asked.”

Aariz's voice sharpened.

“I said friends.”

His uncle's expression changed.

“Don't speak to me like that.”

Aariz looked away.

His uncle came up two steps.

“You think because nobody can control you outside this house, you can speak however you want here?”

“I didn't say that.”

“You're angry.”

“No.”

“You are.”

Aariz laughed.

“You always say that.”

“Because you always are.”

Aariz looked directly at him.

“Maybe I'm tired.”

His uncle's face softened slightly.

“Tired of what?”

Aariz opened his mouth.

Nothing came.

He looked toward the ceiling.

Then down at his shoes.

“Nothing.”

His uncle remained on the stairs.

“You don't have to tell me tonight.”

Aariz nodded.

“Okay.”

“But don't disappear.”

Aariz swallowed.

“I won't.”

His uncle went downstairs.

Aariz remained where he was.

He watched the light disappear.

Then he went to his room.

He did not sleep.

At three in the morning, he opened the notebook.

The old pages had yellowed slightly.

He turned to a blank one.

He wrote:

Things I want when I grow up.

He stared at the sentence.

This time he didn't cross it out.

He wrote slowly.

A house.

He stopped.

Then:

A room with a window.

Another pause.

A kitchen.

He almost laughed.

He continued.

A table where nobody is afraid to speak.

His pen stopped.

He read the sentence again.

Then added:

People who stay.

He closed the notebook.

For the first time, he did not hide it beneath the mattress.

He placed it on the desk.

The next morning, his cousin entered without knocking.

“Aariz.”

"What?"

"Mom said to clean the storage room."

"Why me?"

"Because she said."

"Tell her I have school."

"She said after school."

"I have work."

"Then after work."

Aariz stared at him.

His cousin stared back.

"Fine."

He left.

Aariz got dressed.

At school, he thought about the storage room.

He thought about his notebook.

He thought about the word people.

By the time he returned home, he had forgotten most of it.

The storage room was worse than he expected.

Old furniture.

Broken lamps.

Suitcases.

Boxes of clothes.

Christmas decorations.

A bicycle with one missing wheel.

Aariz rolled up his sleeves.

He worked for two hours.

Dust covered his hair.

His hands became black.

Nobody came to check.

When he finished, he stood in the doorway.

The room looked different.

Not beautiful.

Just usable.

His cousin walked past.

He glanced inside.

“Finally.”

Aariz stared at him.

“You're welcome.”

His cousin didn't answer.

He walked away.

Aariz stood there alone.

Then he laughed once.

A short, humourless sound.

He picked up the broom.

That evening, his uncle came into the storage room.

He looked around.

“You did this?”

Aariz nodded.

“It was a mess.”

His uncle looked at him.

“Good work.”

Aariz shrugged.

His uncle pointed toward the door.

“Come.”

“Where?”

“Outside.”

“Why?”

“I need help.”

“With what?”

“You'll see.”

They went into the garage.

His uncle opened the boot of his car.

Inside was a large cardboard box.

“What is that?”

“Books.”

“For who?”

“You.”

Aariz stared at him.

“Why?”

“Because you keep stealing mine.”

“I don't steal them.”

“You return them with food stains.”

"That was one time."

"Three times."

Aariz smiled.

His uncle handed him the box.

It was heavy.

Aariz carried it inside.

He opened the first book.

Then another.

Then another.

Novels.

History.

Travel.

Art.

Psychology.

Poetry.

He looked at his uncle.

"Why did you buy all these?"

His uncle shrugged.

"You like reading."

Aariz looked back into the box.

"I do."

"I know."

Aariz picked up one of the books.

His fingers moved over the cover.

“Thank you.”

His uncle nodded.

Then, almost casually, he said,

“Don't become like everyone else.”

Aariz looked up.

“What does that mean?”

His uncle smiled.

“It means stay curious.”

He walked away.

Aariz remained sitting on the floor.

Around him were books he had never asked for.

Books nobody had required him to read.

Books that belonged to no school assignment.

He opened the first one.

Outside, snow began falling again.

He read until midnight.

Years later, Aariz would remember that winter differently.

Not because it had been kind.

It hadn't.

There were still doors he learned to approach carefully.

Still voices that could change the temperature of a room.

Still nights when he stayed awake longer than he should have.

Still mistakes waiting for him.

But there had also been a man who bought him books.

A kitchen where someone sometimes saved him dinner.

A black watch around a thin wrist.

A notebook filled with impossible things.

And a boy who, despite everything, had not yet completely stopped imagining a life beyond the house.

That boy was still there.

Quietly.

Waiting.

The first time Aariz understood that a house could have rules no one had written down, he was seven.

It was his cousin's birthday.

The house had been awake since morning.

Balloons had been tied to the staircase. A paper banner stretched across the dining room, its letters slightly crooked. Someone had brought a cake from the bakery in town, the kind covered in white icing with little chocolate curls around the edge.

Aariz had been forbidden from touching it.

“Don't go near the table,” his aunt had said.

“I won't.”

“And don't run.”

“I won't.”

“And don't spill anything.”

“I won't.”

She had looked at him for another second.

"Good."

Then she turned toward her daughter, who was standing beside her in a pink dress.

"Come here, sweetheart."

The girl's hair was brushed into two neat braids.

Her mother adjusted one of the ribbons.

"Beautiful."

The girl smiled.

Aariz watched from the doorway.

He was wearing a shirt his uncle had bought him the previous winter. The sleeves were slightly short now.

His aunt noticed.

"Why are you standing there?"

"I was just looking."

"Go play outside."

"Can I have cake later?"

"Of course."

Aariz smiled.

"Okay."

He ran outside.

The garden was covered with thin snow.

His cousins were already there, throwing handfuls of it at one another.

Aariz joined them.

For nearly an hour, he forgot about the cake.

He built a crooked snowman with one eye made from a bottle cap and the other from a stone.

His cousin laughed.

"He looks stupid."

"He looks intelligent."

"He doesn't even have a mouth."

"He doesn't need one."

"Why?"

"He's your uncle."

The boy stared at him.

Aariz burst out laughing.

The cousin threw snow at his face.

Aariz chased him around the garden.

They slipped twice.

By the time the birthday guests began arriving, Aariz's trousers were wet from the knees down.

His aunt opened the back door.

"Inside."

Aariz came running.

"Take off your shoes."

He did.

"Not there. There."

She pointed.

He moved them.

"Your jacket."

He took it off.

“Hang it properly.”

He hung it.

“Wash your hands.”

Aariz went to the sink.

His cousin ran past him.

His aunt caught the boy by the shoulders.

“Slow down.”

She kissed his wet forehead.

“Come. I'll dry your hair.”

Aariz turned the tap off.

Water dripped from his fingers.

He looked toward them.

Then he dried his hands.

The cake was brought out after lunch.

Everyone gathered around the table.

Aariz stood near the wall.

His cousin's mother lit the candles.

The birthday girl closed her eyes.

“Make a wish!”

Everyone laughed.

Aariz smiled too.

The candles went out.

People clapped.

Someone took photographs.

"Move closer," an uncle said.

The family gathered around the child.

Aariz remained at the edge.

"Come, Aariz," his eldest uncle called.

Aariz stepped forward.

"There."

His uncle put a hand on his shoulder.

The photographer raised the camera.

"Smile!"

Aariz smiled.

Flash.

For the photograph, everyone belonged together.

Aariz did too.

For one second.

Then the photographer lowered the camera.

The room returned to itself.

The cake was cut.

The first piece went to the birthday girl.

The second went to her mother.

Then her father.

Then her brothers.

Aariz waited.

His aunt looked at him.

"You'll get one."

He nodded.

People kept eating.

Conversation moved around him.

He watched the plate of cake slowly empty.

His cousin's little sister took a piece and immediately said she didn't like the icing.

Her mother laughed.

"Then give it to me."

The child pushed the plate toward her.

Aariz looked down.

His aunt finally cut a piece and put it on a small plate.

"Here."

"Thank you."

He carried it to the corner.

He ate slowly.

The icing was too sweet.

He ate it anyway.

Later, when the guests had gone, Aariz found one of the balloons caught beneath the staircase.

He reached for it.

It slipped away.

He caught it again.

His cousin came running.

"Give it to me."

“I found it.”

“It's mine.”

“How?”

“It was my birthday.”

“That doesn't mean everything is yours.”

The boy grabbed the string.

Aariz held on.

“Let go.”

“No.”

“Let go!”

“No!”

The string snapped.

The balloon rose toward the ceiling.

Both boys watched.

The cousin began crying.

His mother came running.

“What happened?”

“He broke it!”

Aariz stared.

“I didn't.”

“You did!”

His aunt looked at him.

“Aariz.”

“I didn't!”

"Why are you always fighting?"

"He pulled it."

"I said he didn't!"

The boy cried harder.

His mother pulled him close.

"Come here."

She kissed his hair.

"It's okay."

Aariz stood there.

His aunt looked at him.

"Go upstairs."

"But—"

"Go."

He went.

He sat on the edge of his bed.

The house below was still noisy.

Plates.

Laughter.

Footsteps.

His cousin's crying gradually stopped.

Aariz looked at his hands.

There was a thin red mark across his palm where the balloon string had burned him.

He rubbed it.

Then he heard footsteps.

His uncle opened the door.

“Why are you here?”

“I was told to come upstairs.”

“I know.”

His uncle sat beside him.

“You all right?”

Aariz nodded.

His uncle looked at his hand.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

His uncle took his wrist gently.

“Let me see.”

Aariz showed him.

“It's only a mark.”

His uncle got up.

He returned with a small tube of ointment.

Aariz watched him squeeze some onto his finger.

“Hold still.”

“It doesn't hurt.”

“I didn't ask.”

Aariz smiled.

His uncle rubbed the ointment into the red line.

Then he closed the tube.

“Better?”

"Yes."

His uncle stood.

Aariz looked at him.

"Uncle?"

"Yes?"

"Was I bad?"

His uncle stopped.

"No."

"I didn't break it."

"I know."

"He said I did."

"I know."

Aariz looked down.

His uncle crouched in front of him.

"You don't have to prove everything."

Aariz frowned.

"What?"

"Nothing."

His uncle tapped his knee.

"Come downstairs when you're ready."

He left.

Aariz remained sitting.

A few minutes later, he followed.

The next morning, there was a photograph on the dining table.

Aariz noticed it while reaching for his schoolbag.

The birthday picture.

Everyone is smiling.

His uncle's hand on his shoulder.

Aariz stood slightly behind everyone else.

He looked at the photograph for a long time.

His aunt came into the room.

“Don't touch that.”

“I wasn't.”

She picked it up.

“Your uncle wants copies.”

“Okay.”

She walked away.

Aariz put on his shoes.

At the front door, his uncle stopped him.

“Wait.”

Aariz turned.

His uncle handed him a small paper bag.

“What is it?”

“Open later.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

Aariz smiled.

At school, he opened it during lunch.

Inside was a small chocolate bar.

And a pen.

On the pen was his name.

AARIZ.

He turned it over in his hand.

His friend leaned across the desk.

“What's that?”

“My uncle gave it to me.”

“Why?”

“Birthday.”

“But your birthday was last month.”

“I know.”

His friend shrugged.

“Can I have the chocolate?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It's mine.”

His friend laughed.

Aariz put the chocolate back into his bag.

He kept it there until he got home.

He never ate it.

The years did not change the house all at once.

They changed it in inches.

A chair moved.

A room changed owners.

A cousin grew taller.

Another child was born.

A new photograph appeared on the wall.

The family learned new routines.

Aariz did too.

By ten, he knew which aunt disliked wet towels.

Which uncle wanted the newspaper folded exactly along the middle.

Which cousin would tell on him.

Which cupboard he could open without asking.

Which footsteps belonged to his uncle.

Which belonged to his father when he visited.

He knew when dinner was about to begin from the sound of plates being placed on the table.

He knew when an argument was coming from the way doors closed.

He knew when someone was in a bad mood without seeing their face.

And he learned something else.

If he finished a task before being asked, people were less likely to be angry.

So he began finishing tasks before anyone asked.

He took the rubbish out.

Carried groceries.

Folded clothes.

Cleaned shoes.

Wiped the dining table.

Helped with younger children.

Sometimes someone said thank you.

Usually nobody did.

He stopped waiting for it.

One afternoon, when he was eleven, he came home from school and found his schoolbag on the floor outside his room.

He picked it up.

His homework book had fallen open.

A page was bent.

He straightened it.

His aunt appeared at the end of the corridor.

"Where were you?"

"School."

"You're late."

"We had practice."

"For what?"

"Football."

"You should have told me."

"I didn't know."

She looked at the muddy shoes in his hand.

"Clean those."

Aariz looked at the clock.

"I have homework."

“You can do it after.”

He put the shoes down.

“Can I eat first?”

His aunt stared at him.

“Everyone has already eaten.”

Aariz looked toward the dining room.

“There's food left?”

“Yes.”

He went inside.

There was rice.

Cold.

He served himself.

His aunt walked past.

“Don't make a mess.”

Aariz nodded.

He ate alone.

Halfway through, his cousin came in.

“Can I have that?”

Aariz looked up.

“Have what?”

“The chicken.”

“There's more in the kitchen.”

“Mom said this is mine.”

Aariz looked at the piece on his plate.

He pushed it across.

"Take it."

His cousin took it.

"Thanks."

Aariz continued eating rice.

His cousin left.

He finished the meal.

Then washed his own plate.

That night, he sat at his desk doing mathematics.

He had the same problem three times.

He kept getting the answer wrong.

He tore the page out.

Started again.

Wrong.

Again.

Wrong.

He pressed the pencil so hard the tip broke.

Aariz stared at it.

Then threw the pencil across the room.

It struck the wall.

He immediately stood.

He picked it up.

Looked at the small mark it had left.

His breathing was fast.

Someone knocked.

“Aariz?”

He froze.

“Yeah?”

His aunt opened the door.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

She looked at the wall.

Then the pencil.

“Why did you throw that?”

“I didn't.”

She looked at him.

Aariz looked away.

“Don't lie.”

He swallowed.

“I got angry.”

“At what?”

“The homework.”

She sighed.

“You're becoming impossible.”

He said nothing.

She left.

The door closed.

Aariz sat back down.

He sharpened the pencil.

Then solved the problem.

The answer was correct.

He stared at it.

He did not feel proud.

He simply turned the page.

A week later, his uncle took him to the lake again.

They walked without speaking.

Aariz was taller now.

His hands were nearly as large as his uncle's.

“You're growing.”

“I know.”

“You'll be taller than me soon.”

“No chance.”

His uncle laughed.

“You're very confident.”

Aariz kicked a stone.

“Uncle?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I'm bad?”

His uncle looked at him.

“No.”

“Everyone says I am.”

“Who?”

"People."

"Which people?"

Aariz shrugged.

"People."

His uncle stopped walking.

"Listen to me."

Aariz looked up.

"You can make bad choices."

Aariz said nothing.

"You can lose your temper."

Nothing.

"You can hurt people."

Aariz's eyes dropped.

"But that doesn't make you a bad person."

Aariz looked at the lake.

His uncle continued walking.

After a moment, Aariz followed.

Neither spoke again.

By twelve, he had started staying outside longer.

By thirteen, he knew where the older boys gathered after school.

By fourteen, he had learned that nobody asked questions if he was holding a cigarette.

The first time he smoked, he coughed so badly that his friends laughed.

“Don't laugh.”

“You're terrible at it.”

“Give me another.”

“You'll get sick.”

“I said give me another.”

He took it.

This time he inhaled less.

He leaned against the wall.

Someone turned the music up.

Someone passed around a bottle.

Aariz looked at the house behind them.

The windows were glowing.

His phone remained silent.

He took another drag.

The older boy beside him said,

“See?”

Aariz nodded.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The boy laughed.

“You look like you've been doing this for years.”

Aariz smiled.

“Maybe I have.”

He hadn't.

But nobody there knew that.

And for the first time in a long time, nobody there knew anything about him at all.

He liked that.

At home that night, his uncle was waiting.

Aariz opened the door.

His uncle looked at him.

“Where were you?”

Aariz took off his shoes.

“Out.”

“Where?”

“Friends.”

“You smell like smoke.”

Aariz looked at him.

Then on the floor.

“I was near people smoking.”

His uncle's expression tightened.

“Aariz.”

“What?”

“Don't lie to me.”

Aariz's jaw moved.

“I wasn't doing anything.”

“Look at me.”

Aariz did.

His uncle saw the challenge in his face.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then his uncle said quietly,

"You are not a bad boy."

Aariz looked away.

"Go upstairs."

Aariz went.

His uncle didn't follow.

In his room, Aariz opened the notebook.

The old pages were still there.

A house.

A room with a window.

A kitchen.

A table where nobody is afraid to speak.

People who stay.

He added another line.

A door I can close.

He looked at it.

Then he added:

A door I can open.

He put down the pen.

Outside, snow began again.

Aariz went to the window.

Across the glass, flakes drifted slowly through the yellow light of the streetlamp.

He pressed his palm against the cold pane.

Behind him, the house was quiet.

For once, nobody was calling his name.

He stood there until his hand became cold.

Then he returned to his desk.

Opened his mathematics book.

And began to work.

The mathematics book remained open for almost an hour.

Aariz solved three questions.

Then he stopped.

The fourth refused to make sense.

He read it again.

Then again.

He turned the pencil between his fingers.

From somewhere downstairs came laughter.

His cousins were watching television.

Someone shouted at the football match.

A woman laughed.

A man told someone to lower the volume.

Aariz stared at the page.

He could hear all of them.

He could also hear the refrigerator humming in the kitchen.

The radiator clicking.

The wind brushing against the window.

He closed the mathematics book.

The house seemed louder when he was alone.

He opened his notebook instead.

The last sentence waited for him.

A door I can open.

He ran his finger beneath it.

Then, after a long hesitation, he wrote:

Maybe somewhere else.

He closed the notebook.

This time he did not hide it.

At fourteen, Aariz began spending more time outside.

At first, nobody noticed.

Then they noticed he was coming home late.

Then they noticed he was eating less at home.

Then they noticed his school marks.

His mathematics teacher called his uncle.

The meeting happened on a Thursday.

Aariz knew because his uncle came home carrying the school report in one hand.

He placed it on the dining table.

Aariz was standing near the sink.

"Sit."

Aariz dried his hands.

He sat.

His uncle remained standing.

"You used to do well."

Aariz looked at the report.

“I still do.”

His uncle pointed to the marks.

“This is not going well.”

Aariz shrugged.

“It's one test.”

“Three.”

“Okay.”

“Three tests.”

Aariz leaned back.

His uncle pulled out a chair and sat opposite him.

“What is happening?”

“Nothing.”

“Don't give me that.”

Aariz looked toward the window.

“I'm tired.”

“Of school?”

“Everything.”

His uncle was silent.

Aariz rubbed his palms against his trousers.

The words had come out before he could stop them.

“I don't want to go back tomorrow.”

“Why?”

Aariz shook his head.

“Just don't.”

His uncle studied him.

“Did someone do something?”

“No.”

“Are you being bullied?”

“No.”

“Are you fighting?”

“Sometimes.”

His uncle's eyebrows lifted.

“Sometimes?”

Aariz looked at the table.

“Not serious.”

“Then what?”

Aariz didn't answer.

His uncle waited.

Eventually he said,

“You can tell me.”

Aariz's throat tightened.

He looked at him.

There was no anger on his uncle's face.

No impatience.

Still, the words wouldn't come.

“I don't know.”

His uncle nodded slowly.

“Okay.”

Aariz looked surprised.

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“You're not angry?”

“I didn't say I wasn't disappointed.”

Aariz almost smiled.

His uncle leaned back.

“But I'm not going to drag the answer out of you.”

Aariz stared at the report.

His uncle folded it.

“Tomorrow, go to school.”

Aariz groaned.

“I knew it.”

His uncle smiled.

“After school, come straight home.”

“I have plans.”

“Cancel them.”

“What plans?”

“You haven't told me.”

“Exactly.”

His uncle laughed.

Aariz couldn't help it.

He laughed too.

The report remained on the table between them.

He did not come straight home the next day.

He went to the football ground.

Then to the river.

Then to a small convenience shop with two boys from school.

They bought cheap cigarettes.

Aariz held one between his fingers while they walked.

"You're going to get caught," one of them said.

"By who?"

"Your uncle."

"He doesn't know where I am."

The boy laughed.

"You're finished."

Aariz lit the cigarette.

Smoke curled upward into the cold evening.

He coughed.

The others laughed.

"Shut up."

"That's your third time."

"I know."

"You still don't know how to smoke."

Aariz inhaled again.

This time he managed it.

He leaned against a wall.

Across the street, families were walking home.

A little boy sat on his father's shoulders.

The father was carrying groceries in one hand.

The boy's red scarf had come loose.

His mother fixed it while they waited at the crossing.

Aariz watched them until the light changed.

One of his friends said something.

Aariz didn't hear.

“Hello?”

“What?”

“I asked if you wanted another.”

Aariz looked down at the cigarette.

“Yeah.”

That evening, his uncle waited until dinner.

Aariz entered through the back door.

His uncle was sitting at the table.

“Where were you?”

“Out.”

“With?”

“Friends.”

“Which friends?”

Aariz sighed.

“Why does it matter?”

“Because you're fourteen.”

“So?”

“So I am responsible for you.”

Aariz looked at him.

“I didn't ask you to be.”

The words landed harder than Aariz intended.

His uncle went still.

Aariz's own face changed.

For a second, he wanted to take them back.

Instead he said,

“I'm tired.”

His uncle stood.

“Then go upstairs.”

Aariz did.

Halfway up the stairs, his uncle called after him.

“Aariz.”

He stopped.

“Don't make yourself someone you won't recognise later.”

Aariz didn't turn around.

He continued upstairs.

He remembered the sentence.

Not every day.

Not even every week.

But it stayed somewhere.

Years later, he would remember his uncle's exact voice.

Not the words.

The voice.

Quiet.

Almost tired.

By fifteen, the boys he spent time with had changed.

Some were older.

Some had already dropped out.

One had a motorcycle.

Another had a fake identity card.

Aariz didn't ask where it came from.

They met behind a garage, beneath an overhang where the rain couldn't reach.

There was music from someone's phone.

A bottle passed between them.

Aariz took it.

The first mouthful burned.

He coughed.

Everyone laughed.

"Don't be a child."

He took another.

This time he swallowed.

The burn remained.

Someone slapped his shoulder.

"That's better."

Aariz grinned.

The night became easier after that.

Not happier.

Easier.

He didn't think about school.

He didn't think about the house.

He didn't think about his father.

He didn't think about why his phone never had messages asking where he was.

He simply existed inside the noise.

Later, when the others began talking about girls, Aariz listened.

One boy described a girl from school.

Another boasted about kissing someone.

Aariz said nothing.

"Your turn."

"My turn for what?"

"Don't act innocent."

Aariz laughed.

"I have nothing to say."

"You've never kissed anyone?"

Aariz looked at him.

"Why?"

The boy grinned.

"You're lying."

Aariz smiled back.

"Maybe."

The next day, he invented a story.

Nobody questioned it.

He discovered that people believed confidence more easily than truth.

At home, he became quieter.

His aunt complained that he never helped.

His cousins complained that he was rude.

His uncle complained that he was wasting his intelligence.

Aariz stopped defending himself.

Sometimes silence was easier.

Sometimes it wasn't.

One evening, his younger cousin left muddy shoes in the hallway.

Aariz was told to clean them.

He stared at the shoes.

"Why me?"

His aunt looked up from the kitchen.

"Because I asked you."

"His shoes."

"And?"

"He can clean them."

The room became still.

His cousin looked at him.

His aunt put down the spoon she was holding.

"What did you say?"

Aariz repeated himself.

"He can clean his own shoes."

His aunt's face hardened.

"You have become very disrespectful."

"I'm just saying—"

"You are living in this house."

"I know."

"Then behave like it."

Aariz laughed bitterly.

"How?"

His aunt stared.

He pointed toward the hallway.

"Clean his shoes. Clean the kitchen. Pick up his clothes. Take his bag. Do everything."

"No one told you to do everything."

"You tell me to do everything."

His voice had risen.

His cousin disappeared into the other room.

His aunt said,

"Enough."

Aariz stepped backward.

"No."

"What?"

“I said no.”

He was breathing hard now.

His aunt looked almost shocked.

Aariz looked at the floor.

Then at her.

His voice dropped.

“I'll clean the shoes.”

He picked them up.

He carried them outside.

He sat on the step.

The shoes were covered in dried mud.

He scrubbed them until they were clean.

His hands hurt.

When he finished, he placed them beside the door.

Nobody said anything.

He went upstairs.

That night, his uncle knocked.

Aariz was lying on his bed.

“Come in.”

His uncle opened the door.

He didn't sit.

“I heard.”

Aariz looked at the ceiling.

“Everyone hears everything.”

“You shouldn't have spoken to her like that.”

“I know.”

His uncle nodded.

“You're angry.”

Aariz turned his face toward the wall.

His uncle waited.

Then:

“Don't punish everyone because you're hurt.”

Aariz turned back.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

His uncle looked at him.

“Maybe not.”

He left.

Aariz stared at the closed door.

After a while, he sat up.

He took the notebook from the drawer.

The pages were filling.

He turned to the list.

A house.

A room with a window.

A kitchen.

A table where nobody is afraid to speak.

People who stay.

A door I can close.

A door I can open.

He added another line.

Nobody tells me I owe them for existing.

He stared at it.

Then scratched it out.

Not because it wasn't true.

Because he didn't want to see it.

The following summer, something changed.

Not in the family.

In Aariz.

He began noticing girls.

Not simply as classmates.

He noticed perfume.

Hair.

Hands.

The way someone smiled when they were nervous.

The way a girl looked away when she realised he was looking at her.

Attention felt different from everything else.

It did not come with chores.

It did not come with criticism.

It did not come with someone telling him what he had done wrong.

A girl could look at him and smile.

For a few seconds, that was enough.

One afternoon, a girl from school asked,

"Why do you always look angry?"

"I don't."

"You do."

"Maybe that's my face."

She laughed.

"You have nice eyes."

Aariz looked at her.

"Really?"

"Very."

He smiled.

She touched his sleeve.

"You're cute when you smile."

Something in his face changed.

He looked down.

"Thanks."

She smiled again.

He spent the rest of the day thinking about it.

That evening, he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror.

He brushed his hair back.

Then forward.

Then back again.

He smiled.

The reflection smiled too.

He laughed at himself.

"Idiot."

But he kept smiling.

The first time a girl called him handsome, he remembered it for weeks.

The first time someone rested her head against his shoulder, he stayed awake that night thinking about the weight of it.

The first time a girl told him she missed him, he checked his phone several times afterward to see whether the message was still there.

He didn't understand why he needed those words so badly.

He only knew that when they arrived, something inside him became quiet.

And when they stopped, everything became loud again.

At sixteen, he began staying out until dawn.

Sometimes with friends.

Sometimes alone.

Sometimes with girls.

Sometimes simply walking.

One night he sat on a bench outside a closed café at four in the morning.

The city was almost empty.

A delivery truck passed.

A street cleaner pushed water along the pavement.

A woman in a dark coat walked quickly toward the train station.

Aariz checked his phone.

No missed calls.

He put it away.

A few minutes later, he checked again.

Nothing.

He laughed quietly.

"Of course."

He leaned back.

Above him, the sky was beginning to lighten.

For some reason, he thought of the little boy he had once been.

The one who had wanted a house.

A kitchen.

A table.

People who stayed.

Aariz rubbed his face.

"Grow up," he whispered.

He wasn't sure whether he was speaking to himself or someone else.

When he finally returned home, the front door was unlocked.

He stepped inside.

His uncle was waiting in the living room.

Aariz stopped.

“Where were you?”

“Out.”

His uncle looked at the clock.

“It's five.”

“I know.”

“You've been gone all night.”

“I know.”

“Did you drink?”

Aariz hesitated.

“Yes.”

His uncle closed his eyes for a moment.

“Come sit.”

“I don't want to.”

“Sit.”

Aariz remained standing.

His uncle looked at him.

“Aariz.”

Something in the tone made him sit.

His uncle leaned forward.

“I cannot make every decision for you.”

“I know.”

“But I need you to understand something.”

Aariz waited.

“People who care about you are not trying to trap you.”

Aariz looked at him.

His uncle continued.

"Sometimes someone asking where you were is simply someone asking because they were worried."

Aariz stared at the carpet.

"No one called."

His uncle was quiet.

Aariz looked up.

"I checked."

The words were barely audible.

His uncle's face changed.

He reached toward Aariz.

Stopped.

Then placed his hand on the back of the chair instead.

"I'm calling now."

Aariz looked at him.

His uncle's voice was steady.

"I am telling you to come home."

Aariz looked away.

His eyes burned.

He rubbed them quickly.

"I came home."

"Yes."

A pause.

"That's enough for tonight."

His uncle stood.

“Go sleep.”

Aariz nodded.

He walked upstairs.

At his bedroom door, he stopped.

He looked back.

His uncle was still standing downstairs.

Aariz almost said something.

He didn't.

He entered his room.

Closed the door.

Locked it.

Then sat on the floor with his back against the bed.

For several minutes, he simply remained there.

The sky outside was turning pale.

He opened the drawer.

Took out the notebook.

Turned through the pages.

His handwriting had changed over the years.

The letters were larger now.

Harder.

Less careful.

He reached the old list.

He read every line.

Then, beneath the last one, he wrote:

I want someone to wait for me.

He stared at it.

His hand began to shake.

He closed the notebook.

Pressed it against his chest.

Then lowered it.

Outside, morning arrived.

Aariz lay down without changing his clothes.

He pulled the blanket over himself.

And for the first time in weeks, he slept before the house fully woke.

Outside, morning arrived.

Aariz lay down without changing his clothes.

He pulled the blanket over himself.

For a while, the house remained quiet.

Then somewhere downstairs, a door opened.

Footsteps.

A woman's voice.

Water running.

The ordinary machinery of another day begins.

Aariz closed his eyes.

He thought of the sentence in his notebook.

I want someone to wait for me.

His breathing slowed.

He was almost asleep when he heard his uncle's voice from downstairs.

Not loud.

Not angry.

Just serious.

“Aariz's father called.”

Aariz opened his eyes.

The voices became quieter.

He couldn't make out the reply.

Then his uncle spoke again.

“He wants him back.”

Aariz sat upright.

For a moment he didn't move.

The blanket slid from his shoulders.

Downstairs, a chair scraped against the floor.

His aunt said something.

His uncle answered.

Aariz couldn't hear the words.

He got out of bed.

Barefoot, he crossed the room.

The floor was cold.

He opened the bedroom door.

The hallway was empty.

He walked toward the staircase.

Stopped.

Below him, his uncle was standing near the telephone.

His back was turned.

His aunt stood beside him.

Neither had noticed Aariz.

His uncle spoke quietly.

"He's still a child."

Aariz's hand tightened around the banister.

His aunt whispered something.

His uncle shook his head.

"No. Not now."

Aariz could hear his own heartbeat.

His uncle looked toward the staircase.

Their eyes met.

Silence.

Aariz didn't ask what his father wanted.

He already knew.

His uncle walked toward him.

"Aariz."

Aariz stayed where he was.

"Is he taking me?"

His uncle stopped.

The question seemed to empty the hallway of every other sound.

"Aariz—"

"Is he?"

His uncle looked at him for a long moment.

Then he climbed the stairs.

When he reached him, he placed both hands on Aariz's shoulders.

“No one is taking you anywhere today.”

Aariz stared at him.

“Today?”

His uncle's hands tightened slightly.

“I said today.”

Aariz looked past him, toward the front door.

Outside, snow had begun falling again.

He nodded once.

Then went back into his room.

He closed the door.

He did not lock it.

On the desk lay his notebook.

Aariz opened it.

His eyes went to the last sentence.

I want someone to wait for me.

For several seconds he stared at it.

Then he turned the page.

The next page was blank.

He picked up his pen.

He thought for a long time.

Finally, he wrote:

If I have to leave, I will take myself with me.

He stopped.

Read it once.

Then closed the notebook.

Downstairs, the telephone rang again.

Aariz did not move.

The ringing continued.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

He sat on the edge of his bed, listening.

And for the first time in his life, he understood that a childhood could have an ending long before a boy knew what came after it.

Chapter Two

A Boy Made of Silence

The telephone stopped ringing sometime before breakfast.

Aariz noticed because he had been listening to it.

He sat on the edge of his mattress, one sock on, the other still in his hand, staring at the pale rectangle of winter light beneath the curtains. The house was waking slowly. Pipes groaned inside the walls. Someone downstairs dragged a chair across the kitchen floor. A cupboard slammed.

Ordinary sounds.

He waited for the one that mattered.

His father's voice.

It never came upstairs.

By the time Aariz entered the kitchen, the adults had already moved on to other things. Tea. Bread. School. Work. Weather. Someone had forgotten to buy coriander.

The conversation had folded itself neatly away.

Aariz stood near the doorway.

"Who called?"

His aunt looked up.

"Your father."

"What did he want?"

She hesitated.

"Nothing."

Aariz almost laughed.

Nothing.

That was how his father existed in his life. In phone calls that meant nothing. In obligations that had no tenderness attached to them. In a surname that belonged to him but never felt like something he could hold.

"Did he ask about me?"

The question escaped before he could stop it.

His aunt's eyes softened.

"He asked how you were."

Aariz looked down.

"Oh."

She placed a plate on the table.

"Come eat."

He sat.

There was toast, butter, eggs, and tea.

He ate quietly.

Nobody mentioned the phone call again.

Years later, when Aariz would try to remember his father, he would not remember a particular embrace.

There would be no smell of aftershave, no hand resting on his head, no voice saying, Come here, son.

He would remember telephone wires.

Distance.

A closed door.

And the strange knowledge that a person could be alive and still be absent.

School became difficult that winter.

Not because Aariz could not understand the lessons.

He simply stopped caring whether he did.

His notebooks filled with half-finished exercises, drawings in the margins, names of footballers, cigarette brands he had heard older boys talking about, and occasionally sentences he wrote without knowing why.

I want to leave.

He never wrote where.

The teachers began noticing.

"Aariz."

He looked up.

His mathematics teacher stood beside his desk.

"Where is your homework?"

He shrugged.

"You had a week."

"I forgot."

"You forget every week."

A few boys laughed.

Aariz smiled too.

That was becoming his favourite defence.

If they laughed at him, he laughed first.

It made humiliation feel almost voluntary.

The teacher placed his book on the desk.

"You are capable of much better."

Aariz stared at the page.

There it was again.

Capable.

People liked telling him what he was capable of.

Nobody seemed interested in whether he had the strength to become it.

At lunch, he sat behind the sports building with two older boys.

One of them handed him a cigarette.

"You smoke?"

Aariz looked at it.

"No."

The boy grinned.

"Then today you do."

Aariz took it.

The first drag made him cough so violently that both boys laughed.

He laughed too.

His eyes watered.

For a few seconds, surrounded by smoke and laughter, nobody asked him about school.

Nobody asked him about his marks.

Nobody asked him to clean anything.

Nobody told him he was disappointing.

He discovered something dangerous that afternoon.

Sometimes numbness felt like freedom.

By the time Aariz was thirteen, he had become exceptionally good at reading footsteps.

His aunt's footsteps meant chores.

His uncle's meant conversation.

One cousin meant trouble.

Another's meant somebody wanted something.

His father's footsteps were almost mythical because they rarely appeared.

Aariz could hear the front door open from upstairs and know, within seconds, who had entered.

He could tell from the force with which a cup was placed on the table whether dinner would be quiet.

He could hear anger in the way someone breathed.

He could hear disappointment before anyone spoke.

He became careful without becoming obedient.

There was a difference.

He learned when to disappear.

He learned which rooms were safest.

He learned how long he could stay outside before someone began asking where he was.

And he learned not to ask for things.

That last lesson came quietly.

One evening, his school announced a small educational trip.

Aariz brought the form home.

He stood beside his uncle while the older man read it.

"How much?"

Aariz told him.

His uncle nodded.

"We'll see."

Aariz waited.

His uncle folded the paper and placed it beside the newspaper.

Aariz waited another minute.

Then he picked up the form.

"It's okay."

His uncle looked at him.

"You want to go?"

Aariz shrugged.

"Not really."

He went upstairs.

That night, he tore the form into four pieces.

He did not feel angry.

That frightened him more.

At fourteen, he stopped going to school regularly.

At first, he missed a day.

Then two.

Then an entire week.

When someone asked, he had an answer.

Fever.

Headache.

Work.

Forgot.

He became skilled at lying because the truth required too much explanation.

Eventually the school called.

His uncle went.

When he returned home, he did not shout.

That made Aariz more nervous than shouting would have.

"You're leaving school."

Aariz stood near the kitchen doorway.

"Okay."

"Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes."

His uncle looked at him for a long time.

"You're only in Class 8."

Aariz said nothing.

"You're a child."

Aariz's jaw tightened.

"I can work."

"That isn't what I said."

"I don't want school."

"Why?"

Aariz looked away.

Because I don't belong there.

Because everyone else seems to know what they're becoming.

Because I don't know where I belong.

Because I am tired.

Because I don't think anybody would notice if I disappeared.

Instead, he said:

"I don't like it."

His uncle exhaled slowly.

"You don't have to like everything you do."

Aariz's eyes flashed.

"You didn't have to live my life."

The kitchen went silent.

His uncle absorbed the words.

Aariz expected anger.

It did not come.

"You're right," the old man said quietly.

Aariz looked at him.

"I don't know what it is like to be you."

That answer unsettled him.

His uncle pulled out a chair.

"Sit."

Aariz didn't.

His uncle didn't insist.

After a moment he said, “If you leave school, don't leave learning.”

Aariz frowned.

“You can learn without a classroom. But you cannot spend your whole life refusing to learn because life has been unfair to you.”

Aariz looked toward the window.

Snow was beginning to fall.

Small flakes disappeared against the glass.

“I'll work.”

“I know.”

“I'll make money.”

“I know.”

“I don't need school.”

His uncle's voice softened.

“Maybe not. But one day you may wish you had stayed.”

Aariz said nothing.

He walked upstairs.

That night he packed his schoolbooks into a cardboard box.

He kept one.

A battered English book with a torn cover.

He did not know why.

Perhaps because the words inside it did not ask who his parents were.

The first job came through someone his cousin knew.

A garage.

Small.

Cold.

Always smelling of oil, rubber and metal.

Aariz liked it immediately.

Machines were easier than people.

If an engine failed, there was a reason.

If something rattled, you found the loose part.

If something stopped working, you opened it.

People were not like that.

People could look directly at you and still not see you.

At the garage, nobody cared about his family.

The owner shouted when Aariz was slow.

Aariz shouted back once.

The entire workshop went silent.

The owner stared at him.

Aariz stared back.

Then the older man laughed.

"You've got fire."

Aariz didn't know whether it was praise.

He decided to take it as one.

He worked harder after that.

He learned quickly.

He carried tools.

Cleaned parts.

Changed oil.

Watched engines being dismantled and rebuilt.

His hands became permanently marked by small cuts and black grease beneath the nails.

At home, nobody asked how his day had been.

So he stopped expecting the question.

His fifteenth birthday passed on a Tuesday.

There was no cake.

No candle.

No gift.

No photograph.

No one said his name differently because it was his birthday.

Aariz woke before sunrise, dressed for work and went downstairs.

His aunt was kneading dough.

"Tea?"

"Yes."

She poured it.

He drank.

That was all.

Outside, the morning was silver and bitter.

On the bus, he realised the date.

He checked his phone.

15 February.

He stared at the screen for several seconds.

Then he locked it.

At the garage, he worked until his fingers ached.

Around noon, one of the other mechanics brought sweets because his daughter had passed an exam.

Everyone congratulated him.

Someone slapped his shoulder.

Someone else said they would celebrate that evening.

Aariz smiled.

"Congratulations."

The man offered him a sweet.

Aariz took it.

It tasted too sugary.

He ate it anyway.

That evening, when he returned home, nobody knew.

Or perhaps nobody remembered.

He went upstairs.

Sat on his mattress.

And for the first time, he wondered what it would feel like if someone actually remembered the day he was born.

Not because he needed a party.

Not because he wanted an expensive gift.

He wanted someone to look at him and say:

I'm glad you're here.

He lay down.

Pulled the blanket over himself.

And waited for the feeling to pass.

It did.

Eventually.

But something inside him had begun keeping count.

The following year, Aariz discovered girls.

Or perhaps he discovered what happened when girls looked at him.

The distinction mattered less to him than the feeling.

One afternoon, a girl from a nearby neighbourhood watched him repair a bicycle outside the garage.

"You have nice eyes," she said.

Aariz looked up.

"What?"

She smiled.

"Your eyes."

He laughed awkwardly.

"Nonsense."

"They are."

She walked away.

Aariz stood there holding a wrench.

For the rest of the afternoon, he made mistakes.

He replayed her voice.

You have nice eyes.

Nobody had ever said it like that.

Not as a joke.

Not as an insult.

Not because they wanted something.

Just—

nice.

He went home and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror.

He studied his eyes.

For perhaps the first time, he wondered whether there might be something about him worth looking at.

The thought frightened him.

So he smiled at his reflection.

Then laughed.

Then turned away.

He did not yet understand that when a person grows up starving for affection, even a crumb can feel like a feast.

And he was beginning to mistake hunger for love.

By the time Aariz left school, nobody held a farewell for him.

There was no last day worth remembering.

No teacher stopped him at the gate.

No friend stood beside him and said they would miss him.

His books simply disappeared into a cardboard box, and the next morning he did not put on the uniform.

That was how easily a life could change.

He woke at the same hour.

Washed.

Ate whatever was left.

Put on old clothes.

And went to work.

For several weeks, he expected someone to ask when he was going back.

Nobody did.

Eventually, he stopped expecting it himself.

The garage became his classroom.

He learned through his hands.

A stubborn bolt.

A damaged belt.

A leaking pipe.

A dead battery.

A compressor that refused to start.

The owner would sometimes explain something once.

Aariz remembered it.

If he didn't understand, he watched.

If watching wasn't enough, he took the machine apart.

Sometimes he put it back together incorrectly.

Sometimes he broke something.

Sometimes he stood in the corner while an older mechanic cursed at him.

He learned anyway.

Machines rewarded patience.

People rarely did.

At seventeen, he could hear an engine and tell when something was wrong before the older men noticed it.

That gave him a strange kind of pride.

He never said it aloud.

But sometimes, when a customer came back and thanked the garage for fixing his car, Aariz would stand a little straighter.

Nobody at home knew.

Nobody asked.

His money disappeared quickly.

A little for the house.

A little for food.

A little for cigarettes.

A little for himself.

The first time he bought something expensive with his own money, it was a pair of shoes.

He stood outside the shop for several minutes before going in.

The salesman showed him several pairs.

Aariz chose black ones.

Simple.

Good leather.

He paid.

When he returned home, one of his cousins noticed.

“New shoes?”

Aariz nodded.

“How much?”

He told him.

The cousin laughed.

“For shoes?”

Aariz looked down.

“They're good.”

“Waste of money.”

Aariz said nothing.

The next morning he wore them to work.

By the end of the day they were dusty.

He cleaned them carefully before putting them away.

Nobody ever knew that he did.

His eighteenth birthday came and went.

So did nineteen.

There was no bitterness left by then.

Bitterness required expectation.

Aariz had become efficient at living without it.

He did not tell people when his birthday was.

He did not mention it at home.

He did not post anything.

He did not wait for a call.

On his nineteenth birthday, he worked until almost midnight.

When he returned, the house was dark.

He opened the refrigerator.

There was half a container of food.

He ate standing up.

Then he went upstairs.

He took off his shirt, sat on the edge of the bed and looked at his hands.

Grease was lodged beneath his fingernails.

A small cut ran across his knuckle.

He smiled faintly.

"Happy birthday."

He said it to himself.

The words sounded ridiculous.

Then, unexpectedly, they hurt.

He lay down.

Turned toward the wall.

And slept.

At twenty, Aariz had become handsome in a way he did not fully recognise.

His face had lost the softness of childhood.

His jaw had sharpened.

His hair was usually untidy.

His eyes remained large and expressive, but there was something older in them now.

Something watchful.

Women noticed him.

He noticed them noticing.

And because attention had become one of the few things that made him feel visible, he began seeking it.

A smile could change his entire evening.

A message could make him stay awake until two in the morning.

A woman calling him handsome could erase an entire day of feeling insignificant.

He learned how quickly affection could become addictive when you had grown up without enough of it.

He also learned how easily loneliness could disguise itself as desire.

There were relationships.

Short ones.

Messy ones.

Some tender.

Some selfish.

Some neither.

Aariz was not always the wounded one.

Sometimes he hurt people too.

He could disappear when someone became too close.

He could become jealous.

He could become controlling.

If someone ignored him, he might ignore them harder.

If someone insulted him, he knew exactly where to strike back.

He carried anger like a matchbox.

He did not always light it.

But he liked knowing it was there.

There were nights when he drank too much.

There were mornings when he regretted it.

Then there were nights when he drank because he had regretted something else.

The reasons changed.

The habit remained.

One evening, he returned home after midnight.

The house was quiet.

He climbed the stairs.

Halfway up, he heard laughter from one of the rooms.

Family.

Together.

He stopped.

For a moment, he simply stood there.

Someone inside said something funny.

Everyone laughed.

Aariz smiled without meaning to.

Then he continued upstairs.

His room was waiting for him.

The mattress.

The boxes.

The broken fan.

The old suitcase.

The clothes folded on the chair.

He sat down.

Through the wall, he could still hear the family laughing.

He stared at the floor.

He wondered what it would be like to walk into a room and know that your absence had been noticed.

Not because you needed to do something.

Not because someone wanted money.

Not because you had broken a rule.

Just because, you were not there.

He lay back.

The laughter faded.

The house became silent.

Aariz closed his eyes.

For a few seconds, he imagined someone opening the door.

Someone saying:

"You're home."

He almost answered.

Then he opened his eyes.

Nobody was there.

His relationship with his uncle remained complicated.

The old man still cared.

Aariz knew that.

But care had never been enough to repair everything.

Sometimes his uncle tried.

Sometimes Aariz allowed him to.

Sometimes he did not.

One Sunday afternoon, they sat outside while the snow melted from the roof.

His uncle was drinking tea.

Aariz was repairing a small radio.

"You could have done well in school," his uncle said.

Aariz kept working.

"Maybe."

"You're intelligent."

"So you keep saying."

"I mean it."

Aariz tightened a screw.

His uncle watched him.

"You're angry with the world."

Aariz smiled without looking up.

"Is that illegal?"

"No."

"Good."

His uncle sighed.

"You don't have to fight everything."

Aariz finally looked at him.

"What happens if I don't?"

His uncle had no immediate answer.

Aariz looked back at the radio.

"That's what I thought."

His uncle smiled sadly.

"You're still young."

Aariz's hands stopped.

Young.

People kept calling him that.

But nobody treated him like someone worth protecting.

He wondered whether being young was supposed to feel this lonely.

That winter, Aariz began spending more time away from the house.

He took long drives when he could borrow a vehicle.

Sometimes he drove without knowing where he was going.

He liked roads because roads did not ask questions.

They simply continued.

He would stop somewhere unfamiliar, buy coffee, sit alone and watch people.

Families.

Couples.

Children.

Old men walking hand in hand with their wives.

A father tying his daughter's scarf.

A mother wiping something from her son's face.

Small gestures.

Nothing dramatic.

They hurt more than cruelty sometimes.

Cruelty at least had an explanation.

Tenderness reminded him of what he had missed.

One evening, he watched a father teach a little boy how to ride a bicycle.

The child fell.

The father immediately ran to him.

"Are you hurt?"

The boy began crying.

The father picked him up.

Aariz looked away.

He started the car.

For several minutes he drove without seeing the road properly.

At a red light, he wiped his face with the heel of his hand.

The light turned green.

He drove on.

By twenty, he had learned how to survive almost anything.

He could work tired.

Sleep hungry.

Laugh when he was angry.

Drink when he was sad.

Lie when he was frightened.

Walk away when he wanted someone to follow.

He could make a woman feel beautiful while secretly wondering whether she would leave him too.

He could enter a room full of strangers and make them laugh.

He could leave that same room and feel completely alone.

He had become very good at being needed.

He had no idea how to be loved.

And perhaps that was why, when something small and unexpected began to change in his life, he almost missed it.

There was no announcement.

No prophecy.

No dramatic entrance.

Just an ordinary afternoon.

Aariz was twenty.

He had grease on his hands, a cigarette tucked behind one ear, and a temper he had not yet learned to put down.

He was about to meet a woman named Elara.

She was twenty-five.

And she had no idea that the young man standing a few metres away had spent most of his life believing that love was something other people were born entitled to.

She was not going to rescue him.

She was not going to become the missing piece of his life.

She was simply going to notice him.

And sometimes, for a person who has spent years disappearing inside plain sight, being noticed is where everything begins.

The afternoon had begun with a broken air-conditioning unit.

By four, Aariz was standing outside a small café with a smear of grease along his wrist and no particular reason to be there.

The repair had taken less time than expected.

His employer had told him to wait for the customer to return.

Aariz hated waiting.

So he walked.

The café was not the kind of place he usually entered. Too quiet. Too clean. Bookshelves covered one wall, and there were small paintings near the windows. People sat alone with coffee and notebooks, speaking softly as though the room had its own rules.

He stood outside for a moment.

Then went in.

He ordered coffee.

While waiting, he noticed a book lying on the counter.

He picked it up.

"Don't."

A woman's voice came from behind him.

He turned.

She was smiling.

"It's terrible."

Aariz looked at the cover.

"You're the one who put it there."

"I know."

"Then why?"

"To see whether anyone would pick it up."

He raised an eyebrow.

"So you set traps for strangers?"

"Only literary ones."

He laughed.

It surprised him.

She smiled.

She was perhaps twenty-five, he guessed. A little older than him, though not by much. There was something composed about her. Not stiff. Not superior. Simply comfortable.

"You're reading it upside down," she said.

Aariz looked down.

He was.

"I'm testing the book."

"Of course."

He put it back.

"Happy?"

"Very."

The barista called his name.

He took his coffee.

She moved toward a table near the window.

Aariz should have left.

Instead, he found himself looking at the book again.

Then at her.

She noticed.

"Are you going to stand there all afternoon?"

"I might."

"That's concerning."

He smiled.

She gestured toward the empty chair opposite her.

"You can sit."

Aariz hesitated.

He was not accustomed to invitations that carried no hidden condition.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

He sat.

For several minutes, neither spoke.

Outside, people hurried along the pavement.

A tram passed in the distance.

The sky had begun turning grey.

The woman closed her book.

“I'm Elara.”

“Aariz.”

“I know.”

He looked at her.

She pointed toward the coffee cup.

“Your name is written there.”

“Oh.”

She laughed.

Aariz smiled.

It was an ordinary conversation.

Almost forgettable.

Except that something about it stayed with him.

Perhaps it was the ease.

Perhaps it was the absence of judgment.

Perhaps it was simply the strange experience of sitting across from a woman who seemed genuinely interested in what he might say next.

They talked for nearly an hour.

About nothing important.

Food.

Music.

The city.

Books.

Bad movies.

Good coffee.

She asked what he did.

“I work at a garage.”

“You like it?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you actually like?”

Aariz thought about it.

“I don't know.”

Elara tilted her head.

“You should find out.”

He smiled.

“Is that advice?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“A suggestion.”

He looked down at his hands.

They were still stained with grease.

He suddenly felt embarrassed.

Elara noticed.

“You have something on your hand.”

“I know.”

“I wasn't criticising you.”

“I know.”

But he wiped it against his jeans anyway.

She didn't comment.

That mattered.

When they finally left, the air outside had become colder.

Elara wrapped her scarf more tightly around her neck.

“You have a car?”

“No.”

“You walked?”

“Yes.”

She looked at his hands.

“You work with machines and walk everywhere?”

“Mostly.”

She laughed softly.

“That's one way to save money.”

Aariz shrugged.

They stood at the corner.

Their paths were different.

Elara looked toward the road.

“See you around, Aariz.”

He nodded.

“See you.”

She walked away.

Aariz remained where he was.

He watched her disappear into the evening crowd.

Then he looked down at his hands again.

Grease beneath the nails.

A small cut across one finger.

The same hands.

The same life.

Nothing had changed.

And yet, as he began walking home, he found himself thinking about one question she had asked.

What do you actually like?

He had spent years answering questions about what he could do.

What he could earn.

What he could fix.

What he owed.

What he had done wrong.

Nobody had asked him what he liked.

He walked through the cold with his hands in his pockets.

For the first time in a long while, he had a question he could not immediately answer.

And somehow, he did not hate that.

He carried it home with him.

Like a small, unfamiliar light.

The next morning, Aariz had almost forgotten her.

Almost.

The day began badly.

A customer complained about the price of a repair. The garage owner blamed Aariz for taking too long. A delivery arrived late. Someone misplaced a tool and accused him of having taken it.

By noon, Elara had disappeared beneath the ordinary weight of the day.

That evening, however, while searching for a screwdriver in the drawer beneath the workbench, Aariz found a folded receipt in his pocket.

The café.

He stared at it.

He didn't know why he had kept it.

He almost threw it away.

Instead, he folded it again and put it back.

Three days passed.

Then five.

He did not return to the café.

He told himself he had no reason to.

On the sixth day, he found himself standing outside it again.

He hated himself a little for smiling before he even entered.

Elara was there.

She was sitting near the window, reading.

She looked up.

"You came back."

Aariz shrugged.

“I was nearby.”

“You weren't.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I've seen you walk.”

He laughed.

“You've been watching me?”

“Unfortunately.”

He pulled out the chair.

“Can I?”

She closed her book.

“You've already sat down.”

He looked at the chair beneath him.

“Fair.”

That became their rhythm.

Not dramatic.

Not immediate.

A coffee.

A conversation.

A walk.

Then another conversation.

Sometimes three days passed between meetings.

Sometimes a week.

Elara never demanded explanations.

Aariz found that strangely comforting.

He had spent much of his life around people who believed access to him was a right.

Where had you been?

Why are you late?

Why didn't you call?

Who were you with?

How much did you earn?

What did you spend?

Why didn't you do this?

Why did you do that?

Elara asked different questions.

"What made you laugh today?"

"What was the best thing you ate this week?"

"Have you ever been somewhere beautiful and not taken a picture?"

"What kind of music do you listen to when you're sad?"

Aariz often answered with jokes.

She learned to wait until the joke ended.

Eventually, he answered properly.

One rainy evening, she found him sitting alone outside the café.

"You look terrible."

"Thank you."

"I meant emotionally."

“That makes it better.”

She sat beside him.

For several minutes, neither spoke.

Then she asked, “Bad day?”

Aariz shrugged.

“Normal day.”

She looked at him.

“Sometimes normal is worse.”

He smiled faintly.

“You always talk like you're in a book.”

“And you always talk like you're trying not to be.”

That made him laugh.

Then, unexpectedly, he became quiet.

Elara waited.

Aariz stared at the wet street.

“My father called.”

She did not interrupt.

“He doesn't call often.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

Aariz smiled bitterly.

“He asked about money.”

Elara looked down.

“I'm sorry.”

Aariz shrugged.

"It's fine."

She didn't say, It isn't.

She didn't tell him how he should feel.

She simply remained beside him.

After a while, he said,

"He doesn't know me."

Elara turned toward him.

Aariz continued looking at the road.

"I don't think he ever did."

His voice had changed.

Quieter.

Younger.

"He's alive," Aariz said. "But sometimes I think having a dead father would have been easier."

Elara's face remained still.

Not shocked.

Not frightened.

Just present.

Aariz immediately regretted saying it.

"Forget it."

"No."

He looked at her.

"You don't have to take back everything you say because it sounds ugly."

Something in his expression shifted.

She continued softly.

"You're allowed to be angry."

He looked away again.

"I don't know how not to be."

"You don't have to stop being angry today."

Aariz rubbed his palms together.

"Then what do I do?"

"Learn what your anger is trying to protect."

He laughed quietly.

"That's a very expensive sentence."

She smiled.

"Coffee's cheaper."

He laughed again.

The tension broke.

But something remained.

Not a solution.

Something better.

A place where the truth could exist without being punished.

A few weeks later, Elara invited him to a small art exhibition.

Aariz almost refused.

"I won't understand anything."

"You don't have to."

"What if I hate it?"

"Then hate it intelligently."

He smiled.

"Fine."

The exhibition was full of paintings he did not understand.

People stood in front of them with serious expressions.

Aariz whispered, "They're pretending."

Elara whispered back, "Probably."

He laughed.

They moved from one painting to another.

Then he stopped.

It was a simple painting.

A small house beneath a wide sky.

Nothing extraordinary.

But Aariz stared at it for a long time.

Elara noticed.

"You like that one."

"I don't know."

"What do you see?"

He looked at the painting.

"A place."

"What kind?"

He took a breath.

“A place where someone would notice if you didn't come home.”

Elara did not answer immediately.

She simply stood beside him.

Aariz looked at the painting again.

For once, he didn't feel embarrassed by what he had said.

Their friendship grew slowly.

Elara introduced him to books.

Aariz introduced her to cheap street food.

She taught him how to hold a wine glass properly at a formal dinner.

He taught her which mechanic in the city would overcharge her.

She made him try food he couldn't pronounce.

He complained about it and secretly ordered it again later.

She dragged him to a cinema.

He insisted the film was terrible.

Three days later, he quoted a line from it.

She laughed.

“You liked it.”

“No.”

“You remember the dialogue.”

“I have a good memory.”

“For terrible movies?”

“Exactly.”

There were long drives too.

Sometimes they went nowhere.

That was the point.

They drove through quiet roads outside the city, music low, phones untouched.

Sometimes they talked for hours.

Sometimes Aariz watched the landscape pass through the window.

The first time they drove for several hours without speaking much, he became restless.

He reached for his phone.

Elara glanced at him.

"Leave it."

"Why?"

"Because we're here."

He looked at her.

"Here where?"

She smiled.

"Here."

He put the phone away.

Outside, mountains appeared through the mist.

Aariz watched them.

Something unfamiliar settled inside him.

Not happiness exactly.

Peace.

It was so unfamiliar that he almost didn't trust it.

One evening, after they had been friends for several months, Aariz arrived at the café in a foul mood.

He dropped into the chair.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Elaborate."

He looked at her.

"People are idiots."

"That's true."

"I mean everyone."

"Also true."

He smiled despite himself.

Then he told her about the garage.

A customer had insulted him.

Aariz had nearly hit him.

"Nearly?"

"I wanted to."

"But you didn't."

"No."

"Good."

"I don't need praise."

"I'm not praising you."

She took a sip of coffee.

"I'm noticing something."

"What?"

"You stopped yourself."

Aariz looked down.

It was such a small thing.

Nobody had ever noticed it.

He had always been noticed when he failed.

Not when he succeeded at something invisible.

"I suppose I did."

Elara nodded.

"That's worth noticing."

He didn't know what to say.

That night, walking home, Aariz thought about the conversation.

He had spent years believing achievements had to be large to matter.

Money.

A promotion.

A car.

A house.

Something people could point at.

Elara had noticed something nobody could see.

He had been angry.

And he had chosen not to hurt someone.

It was a tiny victory.

But for the first time, Aariz wondered whether perhaps a life could be rebuilt from tiny victories.

He didn't know yet.

He was still drinking.

Still angry.

Still lonely.

Still making mistakes.

Still carrying things he could not name.

But something had changed.

Not because Elara had fixed him.

She hadn't.

She had simply begun teaching him to notice himself.

And for a man who had spent most of his life waiting for someone else to notice him, that was the beginning of a very different kind of education.

The following weeks passed without becoming remarkable, which was perhaps why Aariz remembered them so clearly later.

He continued working at the garage, coming home late, sleeping badly and finding reasons to stay outside. His friendship with Elara remained new enough that he did not yet think of her as someone who belonged to his life. They met when their paths crossed, spoke when they had something to say, and sometimes spent an entire afternoon together without making any plans beyond coffee.

Aariz was careful not to become dependent on it.

He had learned early that anything which felt too good could be taken away.

So he kept a little distance.

Elara seemed to understand.

She never asked why he sometimes disappeared for a week. She never demanded explanations when he arrived in a bad mood. If he wanted to talk, she listened. If he didn't, she allowed the silence to remain.

That freedom made him trust her more than any promise could have.

One Sunday afternoon, they drove beyond the city.

The road climbed gradually through the hills, and the buildings thinned until there were more trees than houses. Aariz drove with one hand resting loosely on the steering wheel while Elara sat beside him with the window slightly open.

"You drive differently when you're happy," she said.

He glanced at her.

"How?"

"You stop looking angry at the road."

"I don't look angry."

"You do."

"I look concentrated."

"You look personally offended by traffic."

He laughed.

"I hate traffic."

"You hate everything."

"Not everything."

She turned toward him.

"What don't you hate?"

He thought for a moment.

"Food."

"That's your deepest answer?"

"And sleep."

"Very philosophical."

He smiled.

They stopped at a small roadside restaurant overlooking the valley. It was nothing like the places Elara sometimes took him to. Plastic chairs, mismatched cups, a menu taped to the wall. Aariz relaxed immediately.

They ordered too much food.

Elara stole something from his plate.

He complained.

She stole another piece.

"You're impossible."

"You're slow."

He reached for the plate.

She moved it away.

For a few minutes they behaved like children.

Then, as often happened with them, the laughter gradually gave way to conversation.

Elara asked him about the garage.

Aariz told her about a customer who had brought in a car with a problem that turned out to be almost absurdly simple.

She listened, asking questions that made him realise she was genuinely interested.

Then she asked, "Do you like what you do?"

He looked at the valley.

"I like being good at it."

"That isn't what I asked."

Aariz smiled.

"You really don't let things go."

"No."

He considered the question.

"I like fixing things."

"Why?"

He shrugged.

"Because when something is broken, you can usually find out why."

Elara was quiet.

Aariz realised what he had said.

He looked down at his hands.

"You think that's stupid?"

"No."

She took a sip of water.

"I think it makes sense."

He didn't know why those four words stayed with him.

A few weeks later, something happened at the garage that might once have ended very differently.

A customer arrived already angry.

His car had been repaired twice elsewhere, and he had convinced himself that everyone working in a garage was trying to cheat him.

Aariz explained the problem.

The man interrupted.

"You people always say that."

Aariz kept working.

"I'll show you."

"I don't need you to show me anything."

The man stepped closer.

"Just fix it."

Aariz straightened.

"I am fixing it."

The man's voice rose.

"So do your job properly."

Aariz felt the familiar heat begin behind his ribs.

His hands tightened.

For a moment, the old response came easily: step closer, raise his voice, make the other person regret pushing him.

He looked at the man's face.

Then at his own hands.

He stepped back.

"Come back in an hour."

The man stared at him.

"What?"

"I said come back in an hour. I'll have it ready."

The customer muttered something under his breath and left.

The mechanic beside Aariz looked at him.

"You all right?"

"Fine."

"You nearly hit him."

"I know."

The older man grinned.

"You're getting old."

Aariz laughed.

That evening, he told Elara what had happened.

She listened without interrupting.

When he finished, she said, "I'm proud of you."

Aariz looked at her.

"For what?"

"You were angry and you didn't let the anger choose for you."

He shrugged.

"It's nothing."

"No. It is something."

He looked away.

Nobody had ever celebrated restraint.

People noticed explosions.

They noticed failures.

They noticed mistakes.

Nobody seemed to notice the moments when a person stood on the edge of doing something terrible and chose differently.

Elara did.

That night, Aariz lay awake longer than usual.

He thought about how much of his life had been spent reacting.

To voices.

To insults.

To rejection.

To fear.

To loneliness.

He wondered what would happen if, one day, he learned how to choose his response before the anger chose it for him.

The thought was unfamiliar.

But it was not unpleasant.

His uncle noticed changes too.

Not dramatic ones.

Aariz still came home late.

He still smoked.

He still drank.

He still argued.

But occasionally he came home carrying a book.

Once, his uncle found him reading at the kitchen table at nearly midnight.

"What are you reading?"

Aariz closed the book halfway.

"Nothing."

His uncle smiled.

"You're holding it."

Aariz opened it again.

"It's a book."

"I can see that."

His uncle pulled out the chair opposite him.

"Who gave it to you?"

"A friend."

"A good friend?"

Aariz hesitated.

"Yes."

His uncle nodded.

He did not ask anything else.

After a few minutes he stood.

"Don't stay up too late."

Aariz looked up.

"You're not going to make fun of me?"

"For reading?"

"For anything."

His uncle smiled.

"You've finally found something that doesn't involve breaking rules."

Aariz laughed.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

It was a small conversation.

Neither man knew how much time they had left together.

That winter, Aariz began writing occasionally.

Not seriously.

Not well.

Just fragments of thoughts, descriptions of places, things he heard people say.

Sometimes he wrote about the garage.

Sometimes about roads.

Sometimes about people he had watched from cafés.

He never wrote about his mother.

He never wrote about his father.

He never wrote about the house.

Those subjects remained behind a locked door inside him.

One night, however, he opened an old notebook.

The pages were yellowing.

Near the beginning, in handwriting much younger than the person he had become, was a sentence:

I want someone to wait for me.

Aariz stared at it.

He remembered writing it.

He remembered the boy who had written it.

The boy had believed that someone would eventually come.

Aariz closed the notebook.

For several seconds he held it against his chest.

Then he put it back in the drawer.

He did not know yet that the sentence would follow him for years.

He only knew that, at twenty, he was beginning to understand something painful:

wanting to be loved had never made him weak.

It had simply made him human.

And perhaps the real danger was not that he wanted love.

Perhaps it was that he had become willing to accept almost anything that looked like it.

The notebook stayed in the drawer for several days.

Aariz did not open it again, but he began noticing the sentence everywhere.

He noticed it when the garage closed and everyone else seemed to have somewhere to go. He noticed it when his phone remained silent through an entire evening. He noticed it when he passed a restaurant and saw a family arguing over what to order, the youngest child leaning across the table to steal something from his sister's plate while their mother pushed it back toward him with an exasperated smile.

He had spent years imagining that being loved would feel dramatic. Perhaps someone would arrive with the right words,

put a hand on his shoulder and somehow make the past rearrange itself into something bearable.

Elara did something less impressive.

She remembered things.

The first time they had coffee together, Aariz had mentioned that he hated raisins. He had forgotten saying it. Two weeks later, when she ordered pastries for them, she pushed one across the table and said, almost casually, "I checked. No raisins."

He looked at the pastry, then at her.

"You remembered that?"

She glanced up from her book. "You said it."

"That doesn't mean you have to remember everything I say."

"No," she replied. "But I can."

There was nothing sentimental in her voice. She returned to her book.

Aariz ate the pastry slowly.

It was such a small thing that he almost felt embarrassed by how much it mattered.

Their friendship grew without either of them announcing that it was growing. Elara never interrogated him about his childhood, and Aariz never offered the whole story. Pieces surfaced when they were ready.

Sometimes he spoke about the garage. Sometimes about his father. Once, while they were driving through the outskirts of the city, he told her about dropping out of school.

"You wanted to leave?" she asked.

"No."

"Then why did you?"

He watched the snow-covered fields passing beyond the window.

"Life became expensive."

She waited.

He smiled faintly. "That's the polite answer."

"I wasn't asking for the polite one."

He looked at her.

She was driving with both hands on the wheel, eyes on the road.

"The real answer," he said after a while, "is that nobody seemed to care whether I stayed."

Elara did not immediately respond. She didn't give him a speech about education or tell him how tragic his life was. She simply slowed down as the road became slippery.

After a few minutes she said, "Then let's not waste any more time deciding your future according to what people failed to give you."

Aariz looked out of the window again.

"That's easy for you to say."

"Yes."

He turned toward her, expecting an argument.

Instead, she smiled.

"And you are allowed to tell me when I'm wrong."

He laughed.

"Are you always this annoying?"

"Usually."

The conversation moved on.

That became one of the things he liked about her. She could enter a painful place without turning it into a ceremony.

A few weeks later, she took him to an art exhibition.

Aariz knew almost nothing about art. He stood in front of a large painting for several minutes, pretending he understood it.

Elara came beside him.

"What do you see?"

"A painting."

She laughed. "Very profound."

"I didn't come here to embarrass myself."

"You're doing beautifully."

He looked again.

The painting showed a small house surrounded by a vast stretch of pale landscape. There was a single yellow light glowing from one window.

"Someone lives there," he said.

"Yes."

"Someone knows when you come home."

Elara became quiet.

Aariz realised what he had said and shrugged.

"Maybe that's why I like it."

She didn't tell him what the painting meant.

She only said, "Then perhaps you should find more places like that."

He smiled.

"I don't know if they exist."

"They do."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've found some."

He looked at her.

She smiled at the painting rather than at him.

For once, Aariz didn't ask another question.

His behaviour did not change overnight.

He still drank.

He still lost his temper.

He still chased attention from women who made him feel wanted for a few hours and empty afterward. Sometimes he knew exactly what he was doing and did it anyway. Knowing better and doing better, he was beginning to discover, were two different skills.

One evening at the garage, a customer shouted at him because a repair had taken longer than expected.

Aariz felt the familiar heat rise behind his ribs.

The man's voice became louder.

Aariz's jaw tightened.

For a second, the old response was already there—the sharp answer, the step forward, the desire to make the other person feel smaller before he could make Aariz feel small.

Then he stopped.

He looked at the man's face.

"You're angry," Aariz said.

"Yes, I'm angry."

"I understand."

The customer seemed almost disappointed.

"Then fix my car."

"I will."

Aariz turned away.

That night, he told Elara what had happened.

She listened while stirring sugar into her coffee.

"You didn't fight him?"

"No."

"Did you want to?"

"Very much."

She smiled.

"That counts."

"What?"

"Not doing what you wanted to do."

Aariz frowned. "That sounds depressing."

"It is less depressing than being arrested."

He laughed so loudly that the couple at the next table turned around.

Elara grinned.

Then she reached across the table and tapped his wrist lightly.

"I am proud of you."

He looked down at her hand.

Those words still had the power to disorient him.

She noticed.

She always seemed to notice.

But this time she didn't explain anything.

She simply withdrew her hand and returned to her coffee.

Aariz looked through the café window at the dark street outside.

For most of his life, praise had been something attached to achievement. Good marks. Good behaviour. Useful work. Obedience.

Elara had somehow made room for another kind.

The kind that came when nobody had won anything.

The kind that said: I saw what you chose not to become.

He didn't tell her that.

He wasn't ready.

Instead, he picked up his coffee.

"Where are we going next weekend?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Why?"

"You said you wanted to show me something."

"I did?"

"Yes."

"I don't remember."

"You said it."

She stared at him for a moment.

Then she smiled.

"Fair enough."

Outside, snow began falling again.

This time Aariz watched it without thinking about leaving.

The next weekend arrived with a pale sky and roads still edged with old snow.

Elara did not tell Aariz where they were going.

"You're kidnapping me?" he asked as she handed him a coffee.

"I'm driving you somewhere."

"That sounds suspiciously similar."

"You complain too much."

"You've known me long enough to know that's not true."

She laughed and started the car.

They drove for nearly two hours.

The city thinned behind them. Buildings gave way to fields, then wooded slopes and scattered houses whose roofs carried white caps of snow. Aariz sat with one elbow against the window, watching the landscape change.

For once, neither of them played music.

He had begun to understand that silence with Elara was different from the silence he had grown up with. At home, silence meant someone was angry, disappointed, asleep, or

simply unwilling to speak to him. With her, silence did not demand anything.

It could simply exist.

Eventually she turned onto a narrow road leading toward a small town tucked between the mountains.

Aariz looked at her.

"You brought me to Switzerland."

"We are already in Switzerland."

"You know what I mean."

She smiled.

"I wanted you to see this place."

They parked near a lake.

The water was dark beneath the winter sky, almost perfectly still. Mountains rose beyond it, their peaks fading into cloud.

Aariz stepped out of the car and stood there.

Elara walked beside him.

For several minutes neither spoke.

Then Aariz said, "It's beautiful."

"It is."

"I've lived here for years."

"And?"

"And I've never seen this."

Elara slipped her hands into the pockets of her coat.

"That's the problem with surviving."

He glanced at her.

She continued before he could ask.

"You become very good at getting from one day to the next. You forget to look around."

Aariz looked toward the lake again.

The sentence stayed with him.

They walked along the shore. The cold bit through his gloves, and the wind lifted the collar of his jacket. Elara complained about her hair, and he laughed at her. They stopped at a small café and ate soup and bread while snow began falling outside.

It was an ordinary afternoon.

That was what made it important.

No one was being rescued.

No family crisis was unfolding.

No woman was promising him forever.

No one was asking him for money.

He was simply sitting at a table with someone who enjoyed his company.

Aariz watched Elara tear a piece of bread and dip it into her soup.

"You know something?" he said.

"What?"

"I think I've never had an ordinary day."

She looked at him.

He immediately regretted saying it.

But she didn't pity him.

She only asked, "Would you like one?"

He smiled.

"Yeah."

"Then let's have one."

So they did.

They walked until their shoes became damp. They argued about which film was better. Aariz insisted that her taste in movies was terrible. Elara threatened to leave him beside the lake.

He told her she wouldn't.

She asked why.

"Because you know I don't know the way back."

She stared at him.

Then both of them started laughing.

Later, when they returned to the car, Aariz found a small wrapped box on his seat.

He picked it up.

"What is this?"

"Open it."

Inside was a dark blue notebook.

He ran his fingers over the cover.

There was no name on it.

He looked at her.

"Why?"

"Because you keep writing in scraps of paper."

"You saw that?"

"I see more than you think."

He opened the notebook.

On the first page, Elara had written only one sentence.

Write the things you want before you decide they are impossible.

Aariz read it twice.

Then he closed the book.

"You didn't have to buy me this."

"I know."

He looked down.

The notebook was simple. Not expensive. Nothing about it was impressive.

Yet he held it as carefully as if it could break.

Elara started the engine.

A few minutes later, Aariz said quietly, "Thank you."

"For the notebook?"

"For remembering."

She didn't answer immediately.

Then she said, "You should get used to being remembered."

He turned toward the window before she could see his face.

Snow moved across the glass in thin, white streaks.

That night, after returning home, Aariz placed the new notebook beside his old one.

He opened the older one first.

The pages smelled faintly of dust.

There were old sentences, angry ones, embarrassed ones, things he had written when he didn't know how to say them aloud.

Then he found the line.

I want someone to wait for me.

He stared at it for a long time.

Then he opened the new notebook.

His pen hovered over the first blank page.

For several seconds, nothing came.

Then he wrote:

I want to know what I would become if I stopped waiting for someone to save me.

He put the pen down.

The sentence frightened him.

Not because it was hopeless.

Because, for the first time, it wasn't.

A knock came at the door.

Aariz quickly closed the notebook.

His aunt stood outside.

"You're awake?"

"Yeah."

She held a plate.

"Eat."

He looked at it.

Two warm parathas. Yogurt. A small bowl of vegetables.

He stepped aside to let her in.

She placed the plate on the table and noticed the new notebook.

“Another book?”

“Notebook.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“A friend.”

His aunt nodded.

“Elara?”

Aariz looked up.

She smiled faintly.

“I've heard her name enough.”

He laughed.

“She talks too much.”

“She sounds sensible.”

“Don't encourage her.”

His aunt sat on the edge of the bed.

For a moment she said nothing.

Then she looked at him carefully.

“You seem different.”

Aariz shrugged.

“Maybe I'm just getting older.”

“No.”

She shook her head.

“Older is not what I mean.”

He waited.

"You are less angry."

The words landed quietly.

Aariz looked at the floor.

"I still get angry."

"I know."

His aunt reached for the plate and pushed it closer to him.

"But now you sometimes come back from it."

He looked at her.

She stood.

"Eat before it gets cold."

After she left, Aariz sat alone for a while.

Then he picked up the new notebook again.

He turned to another page.

This time he wrote without stopping.

Not about his father.

Not about his mother.

Not about the house.

Not about women.

Not about money.

He wrote about the lake.

The mountains.

The ridiculous argument about films.

Elara's terrible driving jokes.

The soup.

The snow.

The feeling of being somewhere beautiful without having to earn his place there.

When he finished, he looked at the page.

It was the first time he had written about his life without making pain the centre of it.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the household settled into sleep.

A door shut downstairs.

Water ran briefly through the pipes.

Someone coughed in the next room.

The old house remained exactly what it had always been.

But something in Aariz had begun to move beyond it.

The change was not obvious enough for anyone in the house to name it.

Aariz still worked long hours. He still came home tired, sometimes irritated, sometimes smelling faintly of oil and metal. He still argued when someone pushed too hard, and there were evenings when he drank more than he intended.

But small things had begun to shift.

He started arriving home before midnight.

He stopped answering every insult.

He began putting money aside.

Not much. A few notes at a time, folded carefully and hidden inside the back of a drawer beneath old clothes.

When his cousin asked why he was suddenly saving, Aariz shrugged.

"I'm buying something."

"What?"

"I don't know yet."

His cousin laughed. "Then why save?"

Aariz closed the drawer.

"Because I want to."

It was a new kind of answer for him.

There was no justification attached to it.

At the garage, the owner noticed the difference before anyone else.

One afternoon, he found Aariz reading beside the compressor while waiting for a part to arrive.

"What are you reading?"

Aariz closed the book.

"Nothing."

The man took it from his hand.

He looked at the cover.

"Psychology?"

Aariz shrugged.

"You're becoming a doctor now?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I just want to understand people."

The owner laughed.

"Good luck."

Aariz smiled.

He took the book back.

"I need it."

The owner shook his head and walked away.

But Aariz kept reading.

At first, the books were difficult. Some sentences seemed designed to make him feel stupid. He read them twice, sometimes three times. He underlined things. He wrote questions in the margins.

He began discovering words for experiences he had previously carried without names.

Attachment.

Boundaries.

Self-esteem.

Emotional regulation.

He did not immediately understand them.

More importantly, he did not use them as excuses.

If he recognised something of himself in a description, he would sit with it.

Sometimes the recognition embarrassed him.

Sometimes it made him angry.

Once, after reading about people who confuse attention with affection, he shut the book and threw it onto the bed.

"This is bullshit."

He walked out.

Ten minutes later, he returned and picked it up.

He continued reading.

Elara noticed.

They were sitting in a bookstore café when she looked across the table and saw the book open beside him.

"You're frowning."

"I'm reading."

"You look personally offended by the author."

"Maybe I am."

"What did he say?"

Aariz hesitated.

Then he pushed the book toward her.

"He says some people accept bad treatment because even negative attention feels better than being ignored."

Elara read the paragraph.

Then she looked at him.

"And?"

"And nothing."

"Aariz."

He sighed.

"And I don't like it."

"Why?"

"Because it sounds like me."

She closed the book.

"You don't have to like every truth you discover about yourself."

He stared at the table.

"Does knowing make it easier?"

"Sometimes."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then you keep knowing."

He laughed under his breath.

"You have an answer for everything."

"No. I just don't panic when there isn't one."

He looked at her for a moment.

That was another quality he wanted to learn.

Not certainty.

The ability to remain when certainty was unavailable.

Their friendship began changing the rhythm of his weeks.

There were long drives where they talked about childhood, food, films, books, family, money and ridiculous things neither of them would remember the following day.

Sometimes Elara drove.

Sometimes she handed him the keys.

The first time he drove her for several hours, he was stiff behind the wheel.

"Relax," she said.

"I am relaxed."

"You're gripping the steering wheel like it owes you money."

He loosened his hands.

"Better?"

"A little."

"Do you trust me?"

She looked at him.

"Yes."

The answer came so easily that he nearly missed the turn.

"Watch the road," she said, laughing.

"I am watching."

"No, you're having an emotional crisis."

"I am not."

"You nearly drove into a sign."

He laughed.

By the time they reached the mountains, he was driving comfortably.

They stopped at a viewpoint overlooking a valley.

Elara bought two coffees.

Aariz stood against the railing, holding the paper cup between both hands.

"You know what I like about driving?" he said.

"What?"

"No one can tell me where I'm going."

She smiled.

"You're the driver."

"Exactly."

She looked at him for a moment.

"Remember that."

He didn't understand why she said it so seriously.

Years later, he would.

Not everything between them was easy.

One evening, Aariz arrived late to meet her.

Forty minutes late.

He had been drinking.

Elara took one look at him and didn't sit down.

"We're not doing this."

Aariz frowned.

"Doing what?"

"This."

"I came, didn't I?"

"That isn't the point."

He felt the familiar irritation rise.

"So now you're angry because I drank?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I'm angry because you promised me you wouldn't drive after drinking."

"I didn't drive."

"I know. You took a taxi."

"Then what's the problem?"

She held his gaze.

“You think because you found a way around the rule, the promise doesn't matter.”

Aariz's face hardened.

“You're not my mother.”

“No.”

“Then don't talk to me like one.”

The silence that followed was immediate.

He knew he had gone too far.

Elara picked up her bag.

“I'm going home.”

“Aren't you going to forgive me?”

She looked at him.

“I haven't decided whether I need to.”

Then she left.

Aariz remained at the table.

For several minutes he sat there, furious.

At her.

At himself.

At the entire world.

He nearly called her.

Stopped.

Called again.

Stopped.

Finally, he went home.

The next morning, he sent her one message.

I was wrong.

Nothing more.

She replied hours later.

I know.

He stared at the screen.

Then another message arrived.

Being sorry is useful when it changes what happens next.

Aariz read it twice.

He put his phone down.

That afternoon, he poured the remaining alcohol from his room into the sink.

He stood there watching it disappear.

It wasn't a dramatic decision.

He didn't swear never to drink again.

He simply decided he was tired of losing pieces of himself and calling it freedom.

That night, he opened the blue notebook.

He wrote:

I don't want people to love me because they are afraid of losing me.

He paused.

Then added:

I want to become someone I don't have to destroy to be loved.

He closed the notebook.

For the first time, the sentence did not feel like a wish.

It felt like work.

The following weeks were not a transformation.

They were in argument.

Aariz argued with his temper, with his habits, with the part of him that still believed affection had to be earned quickly before it disappeared. Some days he won. Some days he did not.

He began arriving at the garage earlier.

Not because anyone had asked him to.

He liked the quiet before the machines started. The building smelled different in the morning—cold concrete, metal, old oil and the faint sweetness of coffee from the owner's thermos. Before the others arrived, Aariz would sometimes sit on an overturned crate with his notebook and read for twenty minutes.

Then the shutters would rise.

The day would begin.

One morning, the owner found him asleep over an open book.

He knocked twice on the metal table.

"You're going to become educated enough to become useless."

Aariz opened one eye.

"Good morning to you too."

The owner laughed.

"You've changed."

Aariz sat up.

"How?"

"You used to come here looking like you wanted to fight the world."

"And now?"

"Now you look like you want to understand it."

Aariz smiled.

"Maybe I'm tired of fighting."

The owner shrugged.

"That's probably more expensive."

Aariz laughed.

He went back to work.

The first serious opportunity came without announcing itself.

A customer brought in a damaged vehicle that several mechanics had already refused to touch. The electrical system was complicated, and the fault was intermittent. Every time someone thought they had found the problem, the car behaved perfectly.

The owner spent half a day on it.

Then he called Aariz.

"Try."

Aariz crouched beside the engine compartment.

He listened.

Checked.

Waited.

Tested one connection, then another.

Nothing.

He almost gave up.

Then he noticed a tiny irregularity in the wiring.

It took him three more hours.

When the engine finally started cleanly, the owner stared at him.

"How did you find that?"

Aariz wiped his hands on a rag.

"I kept looking."

The owner smiled.

"You're good."

Aariz shrugged as though it didn't matter.

But on the way home, he kept hearing the words.

You're good.

Not handsome.

Not useful.

Not obedient.

Good.

He stopped at a bakery and bought himself a small cake.

He carried it home carefully.

His aunt looked at the box.

"What is that?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"I fixed a difficult car."

She smiled.

"Congratulations."

He opened the box.

There was a small round cake inside.

His aunt looked at it.

"Whose birthday?"

"Mine."

She stared at him.

Aariz laughed.

"Not really."

She understood.

He cut the cake anyway.

His aunt took the first piece.

Then she pushed the second toward him.

"Eat."

He did.

Neither of them mentioned the birthdays that had passed without cake.

They didn't need to.

A few days later, Elara called him.

"Are you free tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I need help."

"With what?"

"Cooking."

Aariz laughed.

“You need help cooking?”

“Yes.”

“You're asking the wrong person.”

“I know.”

“Then why call me?”

“Because you're cheaper than hiring someone.”

He smiled.

“What are we making?”

“You'll find out.”

The next evening, he arrived at her apartment with groceries she had forgotten to buy.

“You said you had everything.”

“I thought I did.”

“You have six kinds of cheese and no onions.”

“I like cheese.”

“You can't cook with only cheese.”

“Watch me.”

They spent the next two hours making a meal neither of them had planned properly.

Aariz chopped vegetables badly.

Elara corrected him.

He deliberately did it worse.

She threw a kitchen towel at him.

He laughed until his stomach hurt.

At one point, flour ended up on her cheek.

She didn't notice.

Aariz pointed.

“What?”

“You have something here.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

He wiped it away with his thumb.

For a second, they both became still.

Then Elara smiled.

“Thank you.”

Aariz nodded.

Nothing more happened.

They returned to cooking.

Later, they ate at the small table near the window.

The food was imperfect.

One dish was too salty.

The bread was slightly burned.

Neither cared.

After dinner, Elara put on music.

“Dance.”

Aariz looked horrified.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I don't dance.”

"You're lying."

"I am protecting you."

She stood and held out her hand.

"Come on."

He stared at it.

Then took it.

They danced badly.

Very badly.

Aariz stepped on her foot twice.

She nearly fell laughing.

He laughed too.

For a few minutes, he wasn't thinking about his father, the house, money, school, women, the past, or what might happen tomorrow.

He was simply a twenty-year-old man dancing badly in a kitchen with someone who cared about him.

When the song ended, Elara didn't let go immediately.

She looked at him.

"You know something?"

"What?"

"You laugh differently now."

Aariz raised an eyebrow.

"How?"

"Before, you laughed like you were trying to prove you were having fun."

He looked away.

“And now?”

“Now you forget to perform.”

He didn't answer.

She released his hand.

The music continued quietly behind them.

That night, on the drive home, Aariz thought about what she had said.

He had spent so many years constructing versions of himself for other people.

The funny one.

The tough one.

The desirable one.

The angry one.

The one who didn't care.

The one who could survive anything.

He had worn each version until it became difficult to remember which one had existed first.

But with Elara, he had begun discovering something uncomfortable.

He didn't need to perform.

And without performance, there was a frightening amount of empty space.

He did not yet know what belonged there.

So he began filling it.

With books.

With work.

With long drives.

With better conversations.

With learning.

With mistakes he admitted instead of defending.

With small decisions nobody applauded.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly, the boy who had spent years asking to be chosen began learning another possibility.

He could choose.

Not everything.

Not everyone.

Not the family he had been born into.

Not the childhood he had lost.

But what happened next.

That distinction would take years to understand.

For now, it was enough that he had begun.

By the time winter began loosening its grip on the city, Aariz had developed a habit of walking after work.

He would leave the garage, wash the grease from his hands, pull his jacket tighter and walk without deciding where he was going. Sometimes he stopped at the lake. Sometimes he sat in a café with a book. Sometimes he simply wandered until the streets became unfamiliar and then found his way back.

He liked not knowing exactly where the evening would end.

For someone who had spent most of his childhood being told where to stand, where to sit, what to do and whom to obey,

choosing a direction—even a pointless one—felt strangely important.

One evening, he found himself outside a small bookstore.

He had passed it dozens of times.

That night, he went inside.

A bell sounded above the door.

The shop was warm and smelled of paper and wood. An elderly woman sat behind the counter reading. She looked up briefly, smiled, and returned to her book.

Aariz wandered through the shelves.

He picked up one book.

Put it back.

Picked up another.

Then he saw a shelf devoted to psychology.

He stood there for several minutes.

He chose three books.

At the counter, the woman looked at them.

"First time?"

"Yes."

"Reading psychology?"

"Trying to."

She smiled.

"Trying is usually how it starts."

He paid and stepped outside.

The books were heavier than he expected.

He carried them home anyway.

His reading changed the way he listened.

At the garage, when two mechanics argued, he noticed the argument beneath the argument.

When his cousin complained about money, Aariz began wondering whether the anger was actually fear.

When his aunt snapped at him for leaving his shoes in the wrong place, he didn't immediately snap back.

Sometimes he still did.

But not always.

He had begun inserting a pause between feeling and action.

It was small.

It was unreliable.

It was his.

Elara noticed the difference.

They were sitting in a café one afternoon when Aariz told her about a disagreement with his cousin.

"I almost hit him," he said.

Elara looked up.

"But you didn't."

"No."

"What happened?"

"He called me useless."

"And?"

Aariz stared at his coffee.

“I told him to say it again.”

Elara raised an eyebrow.

“I thought you said you didn't hit him.”

“I didn't.”

“Progress.”

He smiled.

“Don't sound so impressed.”

“I am impressed.”

He shook his head.

“You make everything sound like an achievement.”

“Some things are.”

He looked at her.

“What?”

“Stopping yourself.”

She took a sip of coffee.

“People think change is dramatic. Most of the time it is boring. You get angry. You notice you're angry. You make a different choice. Nobody applauds. Then you do it again.”

Aariz leaned back.

“That sounds exhausting.”

“It is.”

“Then why bother?”

“Because the alternative is exhausting too.”

He laughed.

That answer stayed with him.

His relationship with women began changing more slowly.

That part was harder.

Attention had been one of the few currencies he had always known how to collect.

A smile.

A compliment.

A late-night call.

Someone wanting him.

For years, each one had given him a temporary feeling of importance.

But now he was beginning to notice what came afterward.

The emptiness.

The irritation.

The questions he avoided.

One evening, a woman he had been seeing asked him why he never talked about his family.

Aariz became defensive immediately.

"Why does everyone want to know about my family?"

"Because I want to know you."

He looked at her.

The sentence should have pleased him.

Instead, something tightened in his chest.

"You don't need to know everything."

"I didn't say I did."

He stood.

"I should go."

She looked hurt.

He saw it.

For once, he didn't turn her hurt into an accusation against himself.

He simply said, "I'm sorry."

Then he left.

Outside, he stood beneath a streetlamp while the cold settled over his shoulders.

He could have gone back.

He could have said whatever was necessary to keep her interested.

He knew exactly how.

But he didn't.

He walked home.

It was not a victory.

It was simply a decision.

And for the first time, he understood that walking away from something could feel lonelier in the moment and still be healthier.

A week later, Elara called him early in the morning.

"Pack a bag."

"For what?"

"Two days."

"Where?"

"You ask too many questions."

"Because you never answer them."

"Exactly."

He laughed.

"What should I bring?"

"Warm clothes."

"That's all?"

"And your notebook."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

He smiled.

"Fine."

Two hours later, they were on the road.

The mountains slowly rose around them.

Aariz had his notebook on his lap.

Elara drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting near the gear shift.

After nearly an hour of silence, Aariz asked, "Why do you do this?"

"Drive?"

"No. Take me places."

She thought about it.

"Because you like seeing new places."

"That isn't an answer."

"It is."

"You could go with someone else."

"Yes."

He waited.

She glanced at him.

"Would you like me to?"

"No."

"Then stop asking questions you already know the answer to."

He smiled.

After another stretch of road, she added quietly, "You deserve good memories too."

Aariz looked down at his hands.

The sentence touched something in him, but he didn't chase it.

He opened the notebook instead.

For the next hour, he wrote.

Not about trauma.

Not about his childhood.

Not about what had been taken from him.

He wrote about the road.

The changing light.

The smell of coffee in the car.

The ridiculous song Elara had played three times because she liked it.

The mountain appearing between two buildings.

When he finished, he looked out of the window.

The landscape had opened.

Snow-covered peaks stood in the distance beneath a clear blue sky.

Elara turned toward a smaller road.

Aariz smiled.

“Where are we going?”

She smiled back.

“You'll see.”

And for once, he didn't need to know.

He simply let the road carry them forward.

The road climbed steadily, narrowing between dark forests and patches of old snow.

Elara eventually turned into a small mountain town where the houses seemed to have been built against the slope rather than upon it. Wooden balconies hung over stone walls. Smoke curled from chimneys. Somewhere nearby, a church bell marked the hour.

They stopped at a modest guesthouse.

Aariz looked at her.

“You planned this.”

“Obviously.”

“You said two days.”

“It is two days.”

He picked up his bag.

“You're becoming bossy.”

“I've always been bossy. You were simply too distracted to notice.”

He laughed.

That evening, they ate at a small restaurant overlooking the valley. Aariz ordered too much food. Elara complained that he would never finish it.

He finished everything.

"I hate being wrong," she said.

"You'll survive."

"Unfortunately."

They laughed.

Later, they walked outside.

The town had gone quiet. Snow reflected the yellow light from the windows, and their footsteps made a soft crunch beneath them.

Aariz stopped near a stone wall.

"Do you ever think about how strange life is?"

"All the time."

"I thought I'd be dead by twenty."

Elara stopped walking.

He looked at her.

"I don't mean literally," he said quickly.

"I know."

He looked toward the valley.

"I just didn't think I'd make it this far."

She didn't tell him that he should be grateful.

She didn't tell him that life was beautiful.

She simply stood beside him.

After a while, she said, "Then perhaps twenty is a good place to begin."

Aariz smiled.

"Begin what?"

"Your life."

He looked at her.

She smiled.

"Don't make that face. I'm not giving you a motivational speech."

"Good."

"I'm hungry."

He laughed.

"Again?"

"Yes."

They walked back toward the lights.

When Aariz returned home two days later, the house looked exactly as it had before.

The same walls.

The same voices.

The same expectations.

But he was beginning to understand something he had never considered before: leaving a place did not require physically escaping it.

Sometimes you could return without becoming the person you had been there.

That evening, his cousin asked him to do a chore.

Aariz almost refused.

Then he noticed the irritation rising in himself.

He finished the task without saying anything.

Later, in his room, he opened the blue notebook.

He wrote:

I cannot change this house.

He paused.

Then:

But I can decide what it gets to become inside me.

He closed the notebook.

For once, he did not need to write anything else.

The months that followed brought their own difficulties.

There were arguments.

There were nights he drank again.

There were women he should have walked away from sooner and people he hurt because he had not yet learned how to separate wanting affection from deserving a healthy relationship.

But there were also mornings when he went to work sober.

Evenings when he read instead of drinking.

Days when he saved money instead of spending it to impress someone.

He began asking questions at the garage instead of pretending he knew everything.

He learned more.

He earned more.

And, slowly, he began to imagine that his life might contain something beyond survival.

One afternoon, the garage owner offered him additional responsibility.

"You'll manage the electrical work."

Aariz looked at him.

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"You trust me?"

The owner frowned.

"Don't make it emotional."

Aariz laughed.

"I'm just asking."

"Then stop asking and do the job."

Aariz nodded.

He did.

It was the first responsibility he received that felt like an invitation rather than a burden.

He went home that evening and told his aunt.

She smiled.

"Your uncle would have been proud."

Aariz looked down.

For a moment, the room became very quiet.

Then he said, "I think so too."

He didn't cry.

He didn't need to.

At twenty, Aariz had spent enough years being defined by what had happened to him.

He had been the motherless child.

The unwanted son.

The nephew who owed gratitude.

The boy who dropped out.

The difficult one.

The angry one.

The boy who drank.

The man who chased affection because he didn't know what to do with emptiness.

But another identity was beginning to form beneath all of that.

Mechanic.

Reader.

Friend.

Driver.

Learner.

Someone capable of keeping a promise.

Someone capable of apologising.

Someone capable of walking away.

Someone capable of staying.

He still didn't know what he would become.

That uncertainty no longer frightened him as much as it once had.

One evening, he sat beside the lake with the blue notebook resting on his knees.

He opened to a fresh page.

For a long time, he watched the water.

Then he wrote:

I used to think my life would begin when someone finally chose me.

He stopped.

Crossed it out.

Started again.

Maybe my life begins when I stop waiting.

He closed the notebook.

Behind him, his phone rang.

Elara.

He answered.

"Where are you?"

"Outside."

"Outside where?"

"The lake."

"You went alone?"

"Yes."

A pause.

Then she laughed softly.

"Good."

Aariz smiled.

For the first time, being alone did not feel like being abandoned.

He looked across the water as evening settled over the mountains.

There was still a long way to go.

He simply didn't know yet how far.

The next morning, Aariz went to work before sunrise.

The garage was still dark when he unlocked the door. He switched on the lights one row at a time, and the familiar machines emerged from the shadows.

For years, he had thought of this place as somewhere he worked because he had nowhere else to go.

That morning, it felt different.

It was something he had built a little piece of himself inside.

He made coffee, opened his notebook, and read the pages he had written during the past few months.

Some sentences embarrassed him.

Some made him angry.

Some belonged to a boy he barely recognised.

He did not tear any of them out.

He closed the notebook and placed it beneath the counter.

Then he began working.

At ten, his phone rang.

Elara.

“You're working?”

“Unfortunately.”

“I'm inviting you to dinner.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to.”

He smiled.

“All right.”

“And Aariz?”

“Hmm?”

“Wear something decent.”

He looked down at his grease-stained shirt.

“I always look decent.”

She laughed.

“No, you don't.”

The call ended.

Aariz stood there smiling at the phone.

Then he noticed the expression and shook his head at himself.

The garage door opened.

Work resumed.

That evening, he wore the new shirt Elara had given him months earlier.

Before leaving, he looked at himself in the mirror.

The face staring back was no longer a child's.

He had sharp features now, broad shoulders, tired eyes and the beginnings of a confidence he did not yet know how to carry.

He adjusted his collar.

For a brief moment, he remembered another boy.

A boy standing at the edge of a family photograph.

A boy waiting for someone to notice there was an empty place beside him.

Aariz looked away from the mirror.

He didn't pity him.

Not tonight.

He simply whispered, "You'll be all right."

Then he left.

Outside, the evening air was cold.

He walked toward the street where Elara was waiting.

She leaned against her car, smiling when she saw him.

"You're late."

"By three minutes."

"Exactly."

He opened the passenger door.

"Where are we going?"

She smiled.

"You'll see."

Aariz got in.

The car pulled away from the kerb, carrying them into the lights of the city.

He watched the streets pass through the window.

For the first time, the future did not look like something waiting to happen to him.

It looked like somewhere he could go.

And he was finally learning how to choose the direction.

Chapter Three

Things Nobody Taught Him

By sixteen, Aariz had become very good at leaving the house without being noticed.

He knew which floorboards complained under weight, which door needed to be lifted slightly before it closed without a sound, and which window could be pushed open from the outside when everyone downstairs had gone to sleep.

He had learned these things without anyone teaching him.

There were other things nobody had taught him either.

How to tell affection from possession.

How to recognise kindness without immediately wondering what it would cost.

How to say no without feeling guilty.

How to understand that someone could want his company without wanting something from him.

Those lessons would come much later.

At sixteen, he only knew that being wanted felt powerful.

And power, to a boy who had spent years feeling powerless, was difficult to resist.

The older boys near the neighbourhood noticed him around that time. They were eighteen, nineteen, sometimes

older. They smoked behind a closed shop in the evenings and drank from bottles wrapped in paper.

Aariz began sitting with them.

They treated him like one of them.

That was enough.

The first cigarette made him cough so badly that they laughed.

"Again," one of them said.

Aariz took another drag.

This time he managed not to cough.

They cheered.

Something inside him straightened.

It was ridiculous, but he liked it.

Nobody had applauded him for solving a difficult problem at school. Nobody had celebrated his birthdays. Nobody had made much of the things he could do.

But here, a group of boys laughed when he smoked, slapped his shoulder and called him a man.

So he returned the next evening.

And the next.

Soon there was alcohol.

Then girls.

Then stories he pretended were true because the truth seemed too small.

He told them about women who wanted him, fights he had won, money he had spent.

Sometimes they believed him.

Sometimes they didn't.

He didn't care.

For those few hours, he could become whoever he wanted.

Then one night, everything changed.

There were four of them in an abandoned storage room behind one of the buildings.

Someone had brought alcohol.

Someone else had locked the door.

Aariz remembered laughing.

He remembered the smell of smoke.

He remembered feeling suddenly uncomfortable when one of the older boys moved too close.

"Relax," the boy said.

Aariz stepped back.

"I am relaxed."

The boy laughed.

"No, you're not."

What happened afterward remained in Aariz's memory in broken pieces.

A hand he didn't want.

A door that wouldn't open.

His own voice becoming smaller because shouting seemed dangerous.

The others laughing.

The sickening realisation that nobody was coming.

When he finally got away, he ran until his lungs burned.

He did not tell his aunt.

He did not tell his uncle.

He did not tell anyone.

The next morning, he went to work as if nothing had happened.

The world did not stop.

That frightened him more than anything.

Cars still passed outside.

People still bought bread.

Someone complained about the weather.

A child laughed near the road.

Aariz stood beneath the garage lights with grease beneath his fingernails and understood that something terrible could happen to you while the rest of the world continued eating breakfast.

He buried it.

Or tried to.

For a while, he became reckless.

He drank more.

He stayed out later.

He chased girls with an urgency he could not explain.

If a girl called him handsome, he wanted to hear it again.

If someone touched his arm, he remembered the feeling long after she had left.

If someone wanted him, even briefly, he mistook that wanting for safety.

He didn't know that the two things were different.

He only knew that being desired was easier to understand than being loved.

One girl told him he had beautiful eyes.

He thought about it for three days.

Another called him cute when he smiled.

He began smiling more around her.

A third asked why he never talked about his family.

He stopped seeing her.

That question frightened him.

Because the answer was too large.

And because somewhere inside him was the fear that if someone saw everything, they would leave.

So he learned to give people pieces.

A joke.

A smile.

A confident voice.

A body that looked older than it was.

Never the frightened boy underneath.

At seventeen, Aariz had his first serious relationship.

He was possessive.

He checked where she was.

He became angry when she spoke to other boys.

When she tried to leave, he accused her of never loving him.

She cried.

He shouted.

Later, alone, he hated himself.

But the next time he felt threatened, he behaved almost the same way.

He didn't understand why.

He only knew that losing someone felt unbearable.

One evening, the girl said, "You don't trust me."

Aariz stared at her.

"I do."

"No, you don't."

"I do."

"You need me to prove everything."

He had no answer.

She looked exhausted.

"I can't keep doing this."

He felt panic rise through him.

"Don't leave."

She looked at him sadly.

"I think you need someone who can teach you that love isn't a cage."

Then she walked away.

Aariz remained on the pavement long after she disappeared.

He wanted to hate her.

Instead, he hated himself.

That night he drank until the room blurred.

His aunt found him asleep in the chair the next morning.

She didn't ask where he had been.

She only covered him with a blanket.

When he woke, there was food on the table.

He stared at it.

For several seconds, he almost called her.

Almost told her everything.

The boys.

The room.

The fear.

The girl.

The drinking.

The constant feeling that something inside him was broken.

But the words remained behind his teeth.

He ate breakfast instead.

At eighteen, Aariz had become handsome enough that people noticed him when he entered a room.

He had learned how to dress well with very little money.

He had learned how to make women laugh.

He had learned how to appear confident.

He had learned how to hide fear.

He had not learned how to be loved.

That distinction would cost him dearly.

One winter evening, he sat alone in his car outside a restaurant.

Through the glass, he could see families eating together.

A father was cutting food for his daughter.

A mother was wiping something from her son's cheek.

The little boy complained.

The father laughed.

Aariz watched them longer than he intended.

His phone remained silent.

He looked at the screen.

No messages.

No missed calls.

He started the engine.

He drove without knowing where he was going.

After an hour, he pulled over beside a frozen lake.

The headlights illuminated the snow.

He turned off the engine.

The silence returned.

Aariz rested his forehead against the steering wheel.

He whispered, "What is wrong with me?"

There was no answer.

He stayed there until the cold forced him to move.

At nineteen, he stopped expecting an answer.

That was when something inside him became harder.

Not stronger.

Harder.

He stopped asking people to stay.

Instead, he tried to make himself impossible to leave.

He spent money he didn't have.

He gave gifts he couldn't afford.

He answered calls at three in the morning.

He allowed people into his life before they had earned the right to be there.

And when they eventually walked away, he told himself he had never cared.

He became skilled at lying.

Especially to himself.

Then, at twenty, on an ordinary afternoon in a café he had entered only because it was raining, Aariz met a woman who would quietly disrupt everything he thought he knew about being wanted.

Her name was Elara.

She was twenty-five.

She was sitting alone beside the window with a book open in front of her when Aariz walked past carrying a box of books from a nearby cultural centre.

He nearly dropped them.

One book slid sideways.

Elara caught it.

She looked at the cover.

Then at him.

"You're holding that upside down."

Aariz glanced down.

"I know."

"Why?"

"Testing it."

She smiled.

"Did it pass?"

He looked at her for a second.

Then smiled back.

"Not yet."

She handed him the book.

Something about the exchange felt strangely ordinary.

No performance.

No demand.

No bargain.

Just two strangers laughing because a book had been upside down.

Aariz didn't know it yet, but the next chapter of his life would begin with something he had spent years searching for in all the wrong places.

Not desire.

Not rescue.

Not possession.

Recognition.

Aariz expected to forget her.

People usually disappeared from his life as quickly as they entered it.

But the following afternoon, when he passed the café, he looked through the window.

Elara was there.

Same table.

Same book.

He stood outside for a moment, debating whether to go in.

Then he did.

She looked up.

"You're back."

"I forgot something."

"What?"

He glanced around the café.

"I don't know yet."

She laughed.

"You're terrible at lying."

"I wasn't lying."

"You were."

He sat opposite her.

She closed her book.

"Coffee?"

"Sure."

That was how it began.

Not with destiny.

Not with a grand encounter.

Just coffee.

Over the following weeks, Aariz discovered that Elara was different from the people he usually met.

She didn't seem impressed by money.

She didn't care about his clothes.

She didn't flirt with him to keep his attention.

She asked questions and actually listened to the answers.

One afternoon, she asked, "What do you like?"

Aariz looked confused.

"What do you mean?"

"Books. Music. Food. Places. Anything."

He shrugged.

"I don't know."

"You don't know what you like?"

"No."

She studied him for a moment.

"Then we'll have to find out."

"We?"

"Yes."

He smiled.

"You've decided that already?"

"Apparently."

They began with books.

Then films.

Then food.

Then long drives.

Sometimes they talked for hours. Sometimes neither said much.

Aariz slowly discovered that silence did not always mean rejection.

One evening, while they were driving through the mountains, Elara asked about his father.

Aariz's hands tightened around the steering wheel.

"He doesn't really know me."

"Do you want him to?"

A long pause.

"I used to."

"And now?"

Aariz watched the road.

"Now I don't know."

Elara didn't push.

After a while, he said quietly, "Sometimes I think having a dead father would have been easier."

She glanced at him.

"That sounds painful."

"It is."

Nothing more.

No lecture.

No attempt to repair the sentence.

Aariz appreciated that.

A month later, Elara took him to an art exhibition.

He stood before a painting of a small house beneath an enormous sky.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"A house."

She smiled.

"Obviously."

Aariz looked again.

"One window is lit."

"Yes."

"Someone is inside."

"Probably."

He remained quiet.

Then he said, "Someone would know if you didn't come home."

Elara didn't look at him.

She simply stood beside him.

Aariz suddenly felt embarrassed.

"Forget it."

"I won't."

He looked at her.

"Why?"

"Because you saw something."

He didn't understand what she meant.

But he remembered it.

His life did not become easy because Elara entered it.

He still drank sometimes.

He still became angry.

He still had nights when old memories surfaced without warning.

But something had changed.

There was now one person in his life before whom he did not have to pretend.

One evening, he arrived at their usual café exhausted.

Elara took one look at him.

"Bad day?"

He nodded.

She didn't ask for details.

She simply moved her chair closer.

Aariz stared at his coffee.

"I don't know why you are kind to me."

Elara frowned.

"That's a strange question."

"People usually want something."

"I don't."

"You say that now."

"I've known you long enough to know you're difficult."

He laughed weakly.

Then his face changed.

The laughter disappeared.

He looked down.

“I don't know how to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Be okay.”

Elara reached across the table and held his hand.

“You don't have to be okay tonight.”

His eyes filled.

He turned his face away.

She waited.

Eventually he whispered, “I'm tired.”

“I know.”

He swallowed.

“I don't want to be this person anymore.”

“You don't have to become someone else.”

He looked at her.

“Then who do I become?”

Elara squeezed his hand.

“Yourself. Just a healthier version.”

Aariz laughed through the tears.

“That sounds difficult.”

“It will be.”

For the first time, he believed her.

Not because she promised to save him.

Because she didn't.

She simply stayed.

And somewhere beneath years of anger, shame, hunger and fear, Aariz began to suspect that perhaps he had never needed someone to rescue him.

Perhaps he had needed someone to show him that there was still a person inside him worth rescuing.

He was twenty years old.

He had no idea how long that work would take.

But for the first time, he was willing to begin.

Chapter Four

The Night Has Teeth

The first time Aariz realised that fear could live inside a familiar room, he was seventeen.

His older cousin had been drinking.

Aariz knew from the smell before he saw him.

The bedroom door opened sometime after midnight.

The house was silent.

Aariz lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

The older boy entered and shut the door behind him.

“Move.”

Aariz shifted toward the edge of the mattress.

The man sat down.

For several seconds, neither spoke.

Then he reached toward Aariz.

Aariz pulled away.

“Don't.”

The man laughed.

“Relax.”

Aariz stood.

“I said don't.”

His heart was beating so hard that he could hear it.

The man stood too.

What happened next was confused and frightening. Aariz pushed him away, shouted, and stumbled toward the door. The man caught his arm.

Aariz screamed.

His aunt woke.

The door opened.

"What is happening?"

Aariz pulled himself free.

"Nothing."

His aunt looked from one boy to the other.

She understood enough.

She sent the older boy out and stayed with Aariz until his breathing settled.

He sat on the floor, shaking.

She brought him water.

"You're safe."

He nodded.

But he didn't feel safe.

Not in that room.

Not in that house.

Not with people he was supposed to call family.

The next morning, nobody spoke about it.

That silence was almost worse.

Aariz went to work.

He returned home.

He ate dinner.

The household continued.

But something had shifted.

He began locking the bedroom door whenever he could.

He stopped sleeping deeply.

Every sound outside the room woke him.

A footstep.

A door.

A hand on the handle.

He hated himself for being afraid.

He hated the person who had frightened him more.

And because he had never been taught how to process either feeling, he did what he had always done.

He buried them.

The second humiliation came months later.

Aariz had begun exploring his own body without understanding much about sexuality, boundaries or privacy. He was young, ignorant and embarrassed by things nobody had ever explained to him.

One night, while sleeping in a shared room, he was discovered.

His aunt woke him.

The shame was immediate.

The story travelled through the household before breakfast.

By afternoon, his father had been called.

Aariz stood before him with his eyes lowered.

His father looked furious.

"What is wrong with you?"

Aariz said nothing.

"Answer me."

"I don't know."

The slap came before he could move.

His head turned sharply.

For several seconds, the room disappeared into silence.

His father said something about shame, family reputation and how he had been brought up.

Aariz barely heard him.

All he could think was:

I don't know what I'm doing.

Not because he believed he had done something unforgivable.

Because nobody had ever taught him.

His father hit him again.

Aariz stepped backward.

"Don't."

His voice was quiet.

His father raised his hand.

This time Aariz caught his wrist.

They stared at each other.

Aariz's whole body was trembling.

“Don't touch me.”

His father looked almost shocked.

Perhaps because the child who had once stood silently before him was gone.

Aariz released his wrist.

Then he walked away.

He went upstairs.

Closed the door.

Sat on the floor.

And began to cry.

Not loudly.

He had become too experienced at that.

That night, he packed nothing.

There was no plan.

No money.

No destination.

He simply couldn't remain there.

He walked out wearing the clothes he had on.

The cold struck him immediately.

He kept walking.

Snow had begun falling.

Behind him was the house.

Ahead was darkness.

He did not turn around.

For several hours, he wandered through streets he knew and streets he didn't.

At one point he sat beneath a covered entrance and looked at his hands.

They were shaking.

He thought about calling his aunt.

He didn't.

He thought about calling his uncle.

He couldn't.

He thought about his father.

He laughed bitterly.

Then he started walking again.

By dawn, his feet hurt.

His throat was dry.

He had no idea where he was going.

He only knew where he refused to go back.

The next morning, a truck driver found him near a roadside café.

"You work?"

Aariz looked up.

"Yes."

"What can you do?"

"Anything."

The man studied him.

"Can you handle a truck?"

"Not alone."

"Then learn."

Aariz climbed into the passenger seat.

The heater barely worked.

The cabin smelled of diesel, old fabric and cigarettes.

As the truck pulled onto the road, Aariz watched the town disappear behind them.

He felt no triumph.

Only exhaustion.

The driver handed him a cup of tea.

"What's your name?"

"Aariz."

"How old?"

"Seventeen."

The man frowned.

"You look older."

Aariz looked through the windshield.

"I feel older."

The driver didn't ask why.

For once, that was a relief.

The road became his new classroom.

He learned how to check tyres, secure loads, read routes, handle tools and sleep wherever there was space.

He learned that truck stops had their own language.

Drivers shouted.

Helpers joked.

People came and went.

Nobody knew his family.

Nobody knew his history.

Nobody knew why he sometimes woke from sleep sweating.

Nobody knew why he hated being touched unexpectedly.

Nobody knew why he stared too long at families eating together.

For a while, anonymity felt like freedom.

Then one night, it became something else.

The truck had stopped outside a service area.

Aariz was sleeping in a small room shared with another helper.

He woke to movement.

The man was beside him.

Too close.

Aariz froze.

Memory rushed through him.

The locked room.

The hand on his arm.

The laughter.

He shoved the man away.

“Don't touch me.”

The man grabbed him again.

Aariz fought.

This time he was stronger.

He struck him once, broke free and ran outside without his shoes.

He kept running.

The cold air tore through his lungs.

He didn't stop until the lights of the service area were far behind him.

Then he collapsed beside the road.

For several minutes, he could not breathe properly.

He stared into the darkness.

A terrible thought came quietly:

Maybe there is nowhere safe.

He hated the thought.

But he believed it.

By morning, Aariz had made a decision.

He would not return to the truck.

He would not return to the men.

He would not return home.

He would survive somehow.

He spent the next days moving through the city with almost nothing.

He slept where he could.

Ate when he had money.

Worked when someone needed an extra pair of hands.

He avoided familiar streets.

Yet every night, his mind returned to the same house.

His aunt's voice.

His uncle's face.

The kitchen.

The bedroom.

The things nobody had explained.

The things nobody had stopped.

One evening, he stood outside a public telephone booth for nearly ten minutes.

Then he called his aunt.

She answered.

For several seconds, neither spoke.

"Aariz?"

His throat tightened.

"It's me."

"Where are you?"

He closed his eyes.

"I don't know."

She began crying.

"Come home."

Aariz looked down the empty street.

Home.

The word hurt.

He almost hung up.

Instead, he whispered,

"Will you let me come back?"

His aunt was silent.

Then:

"Yes."

Aariz swallowed.

"I'll come tomorrow."

He hung up.

The next morning, he began walking toward the place he had spent weeks trying to escape.

He did not know that returning would not mean being welcomed.

It would mean entering the same house with a different kind of silence.

And this time, Aariz would have to decide how much of himself he was willing to leave behind.

For several days after the night in the bedroom, Aariz slept with his back against the wall.

He told himself it was because the mattress was uncomfortable in the middle. He told himself he had always preferred the corner. He told himself several things, none of which survived the moment someone opened a door.

The house had acquired sounds he had never noticed before.

A latch lifting.

A floorboard complaining beneath a heel.

The faint scrape of a chair being moved across the corridor.

His body heard them before his mind did.

Sometimes he would wake with his heart already racing, staring into the darkness, unable to remember what had frightened him. Then the memory would arrive—not as a complete picture, but in pieces. A smell. A weight beside him. Breath too close to his face. His own voice, suddenly loud in the sleeping house.

He would lie still until morning.

He did not tell anyone what happened.

Not properly.

When his aunt asked if he was all right, he said yes.

When she asked why he had become so quiet, he said he was tired.

When she put a hand on his shoulder one afternoon, he flinched so violently that she immediately withdrew it.

For a second they simply looked at one another.

"Sorry," Aariz said.

His aunt frowned. "For what?"

He had no answer.

That was becoming the problem.

He was beginning to apologise for things his body did without asking permission.

He stopped changing clothes when anyone else was nearby. He began locking doors even when there was no

reason to lock them. He kept his shoes beside the bed. Sometimes he slept fully dressed.

Once, his cousin laughed and asked, "What are you expecting? A burglar?"

Aariz smiled.

"Something like that."

The lie came easily.

That frightened him more than the question.

At school—or what remained of it—he found himself watching boys differently. He noticed hands. The distance between bodies. Who stood behind whom. Which boys were drunk. Which ones joked too loudly. Which ones touched people when they spoke.

He had always been observant.

Now observation had become a form of survival.

There were moments when he hated himself for it.

A normal afternoon could become unbearable for no visible reason. Someone would laugh behind him and his shoulders would tighten. A stranger's hand would brush his arm on a bus and anger would flash through him so quickly that for one terrible second he wanted to hurt the person.

Then came the shame.

Not because he had done anything.

Because he had wanted to.

He began to fear his own anger almost as much as he feared other people's hands.

He also stopped understanding what affection was supposed to feel like.

Before, he had thought wanting someone meant wanting them close.

Now closeness had become complicated.

He wanted people near him desperately, and then, the moment they came too close, something inside him recoiled.

Come here.

Don't touch me.

Don't leave.

Don't come closer.

The contradictions exhausted him.

He did not know that trauma could make two opposite needs live inside the same body.

He only knew that he was becoming difficult to himself.

At night, he sometimes stood in front of the bathroom mirror and stared at his own face.

Nothing looked different.

That was the cruelest part.

His eyes were still his eyes. His mouth was still his mouth. The same scar remained near his chin from when he had fallen off a bicycle as a child.

The world had changed, but his reflection had not received the message.

Once, he whispered, "It wasn't my fault."

He waited.

The sentence sounded foreign.

He tried again.

"It wasn't my fault."

This time his voice broke.

He turned on the tap so nobody outside could hear him cry.

He did not know who he was talking to.

Perhaps the boy in the mirror.

Perhaps the boy who had been too frightened to scream.

Perhaps the child he had once been, who still believed adults knew how to keep children safe.

The next morning he behaved as though nothing had happened.

He went to work.

He carried boxes.

He laughed at something stupid one of the boys said.

He ate breakfast standing beside the kitchen counter.

And when his aunt asked whether he had slept well, he nodded.

"Yes."

The word came out perfectly.

That frightened him too.

Because he was beginning to understand that a person could survive something and still become very good at pretending it had never happened.

Years later, he would understand that silence had not protected him.

It had only taught the pain how to hide.

But at seventeen, Aariz knew none of that.

He only knew that something had been taken from him, and because nobody had given him the language for what had happened, he carried the absence instead.

He carried it into his anger.

Into his drinking.

Into the girls whose attention made him feel powerful for a few hours.

Into every room where he needed to know exactly where the door was.

And, most dangerously, into the way he would one day mistake being wanted for being loved.

The first thing Aariz learned was that people could touch you without touching you.

A laugh from the next room could do it.

A shadow passing beneath a door.

The sound of someone turning a key.

A hand resting casually on the back of his chair.

His body had become an unreliable witness. It reacted to danger before danger existed.

He began choosing seats with walls behind them.

At the garage, he stopped working beneath cars when another mechanic was nearby. If someone approached from behind, he would jerk upright so quickly that he sometimes struck his head against the chassis.

"Relax," one of the men laughed once. "I'm not going to kill you."

Aariz smiled.

"Good."

He returned to the engine.

His hands were shaking.

He hated that.

He hated the shaking more than the memory.

The memory belonged to a night that had already happened. The shaking belonged to now, and now was supposed to be his.

So he began fighting his own body.

Whenever his heart accelerated, he forced himself to breathe slowly. Whenever his hands trembled, he clenched them beneath the table. Whenever fear rose in his throat, he swallowed it.

He thought this was strength.

It was not.

It was the beginning of a habit that would follow him for years: turning every feeling into something he had to defeat.

His aunt noticed the changes before anyone else did.

She noticed he no longer slept deeply.

She noticed he stopped leaving clothes on the floor.

She noticed that he always checked the bedroom door twice.

One evening, while folding laundry, she said quietly, "You don't have to be afraid here."

Aariz kept looking at the shirt in his hands.

"I'm not."

She waited.

He folded the shirt again even though it was already folded.

"You're allowed to tell me if something is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong."

The lie was gentle.

That made it worse.

His aunt sat beside him.

For several seconds, neither spoke.

Then she said, "You don't have to protect everyone from your truth."

Aariz looked at her.

Something moved across his face. Anger first. Then fear. Then something younger than both.

He wanted to tell her.

He wanted to say everything.

Instead he stood.

"I have work tomorrow."

"It's Sunday."

"I know."

"You don't have work."

He stared at her.

She knew.

Perhaps not the details. Perhaps not the whole story.

But she knew there was something sitting between them.

Aariz walked away.

That night he cried without making a sound.

Not because he had suddenly become brave enough to admit what had happened.

Because someone had come close enough to the truth that he had almost let her see it.

And he wasn't ready.

After that, something strange began happening.

Aariz started seeking situations in which he could be the one making the decision.

He chose where to sit.

He chose when to leave.

He chose who could come close.

He chose when a conversation ended.

If someone raised their voice, he raised his.

If someone challenged him, he stepped closer.

If someone tried to control him, something fierce rose inside him.

Once, at the garage, the owner grabbed his wrist to stop him from walking beneath a suspended engine.

Aariz spun around.

"Don't."

The word came out so sharply that the entire workshop went quiet.

The owner released him.

"I was stopping you from getting hurt."

Aariz looked at the hand that had held him.

His breathing had become shallow.

"I know."

He turned away.

The owner said nothing.

Neither did Aariz.

But later, while washing grease from his hands, he stared at the water running black into the sink.

He knew the man had not meant harm.

That was what made it confusing.

His body did not care about intention.

His body remembered helplessness.

And helplessness, to Aariz, had begun to feel like death.

So he chose anger instead.

Anger was hot.

Anger was loud.

Anger made people step back.

For a boy who had once been unable to make someone stop, that distance felt almost like safety.

It also frightened him.

Because there were moments when he enjoyed the power of it.

He could make people uncomfortable.

He could make them retreat.

He could become the person nobody wanted to corner.

He didn't yet understand that surviving violence could sometimes teach a person to confuse fear with respect.

He only knew that when people were afraid of him, they left him alone.

And being left alone felt safer than being trapped.

His relationship with girls changed too.

At first, he became careful.

Then careless.

Then both.

He liked women looking at him.

He liked being called handsome.

He liked late-night messages.

He liked the moment someone reached for him first.

There was relief in being desired.

Desire was simple.

It required no history.

No explanation.

No family.

Someone could look at him and want him without knowing where he came from.

For a few hours, that felt like being chosen.

But the moment affection became serious, something inside him tightened.

He wanted constant reassurance.

Where are you?

Who are you with?

Why didn't you answer?

Do you still want me?

Questions became demands.

Demands became arguments.

Arguments became apologies.

Then he would buy flowers or perfume or take the girl somewhere expensive, as though generosity could repair whatever fear had broken.

Sometimes it worked.

Sometimes it didn't.

Once, a girl looked at him across a café table and said, "You don't trust anyone."

Aariz laughed.

"I trust you."

"No."

She shook her head.

"You want to own certainty."

He stared at her.

"What does that even mean?"

"You want to know I won't leave before I have a chance to leave."

He had no answer.

She reached across the table.

He pulled his hand away.

Her face changed.

Not fear.

Hurt.

Aariz immediately regretted it.

“I’m sorry.”

She looked at him for a long time.

“I know you are.”

He waited.

She sighed.

“But being hurt doesn't give you permission to hurt someone else.”

The sentence stayed with him.

Not because he fully understood it.

Because some part of him knew it was true.

She eventually left.

Aariz watched her disappear through the glass doors.

For once, he didn't chase her.

He sat alone until the coffee went cold.

That evening, he went home and found his aunt in the kitchen.

She was chopping vegetables.

“You're quiet,” she said.

“I'm always quiet.”

“No.”

She glanced at him.

“Sometimes you're loud when you're hurting.”

Aariz almost smiled.

“That's ridiculous.”

"Maybe."

She pushed a cup of tea toward him.

He sat.

For a while, they listened to the knife against the cutting board.

Then Aariz said, very softly, "What if something is wrong with me?"

His aunt stopped cutting.

She did not immediately answer.

That mattered.

She didn't rush to tell him he was fine.

She didn't tell him to forget.

She simply looked at him.

"What makes you think something is wrong with you?"

He rubbed his thumb against the rim of the cup.

"I don't know how to be with people."

His aunt returned to chopping.

"Then learn."

He looked up.

She smiled faintly.

"People learn everything else. Why not that?"

He lowered his eyes.

It was such a small answer.

But something about it stayed.

She had not called him broken.

She had not called him dangerous.

She had not told him that what happened would decide the rest of his life.

She had simply left room for the possibility that he could learn.

That night, Aariz opened the notebook he had hidden beneath his mattress.

He stared at the blank page for several minutes.

Then he wrote:

I don't know what love is supposed to feel like.

He crossed it out.

He wrote again.

I don't know what safe feels like.

He almost crossed that out too.

Instead, he closed the notebook.

For the first time, he left the sentence standing.

Outside, snow began falling against the window.

Inside, Aariz lay awake, listening to the house breathe.

The night still had teeth.

But somewhere beneath the fear, beneath the anger, beneath everything he had learned to do in order to survive, there was a quieter possibility.

Perhaps surviving was not the only thing a person could learn.

Perhaps, one day, he could learn how to live.

Chapter Five

The Road Does Not Ask Your Name

When Aariz returned home, nobody asked where he had been.

That was almost worse than being questioned.

His aunt opened the door, looked at the clothes he was wearing, and stepped aside.

"You're hungry?"

He nodded.

She warmed rice and lentils for him.

He sat at the kitchen table while she moved quietly between the stove and the counter. There were no accusations. No dramatic embrace. No interrogation about the days he had spent away.

Only food.

A steel bowl was placed in front of him.

"Eat before it gets cold."

Aariz stared at it.

His throat tightened.

He picked up the spoon.

The first mouthful tasted like nothing.

The second tasted like home.

He hated that.

He hated how easily something as ordinary as warm food could make him feel like a child again.

He ate everything.

His aunt watched without speaking.

When he finished, she took the bowl away.

"You can sleep tonight," she said.

Aariz looked at her.

"Where?"

She hesitated.

"Your room."

His eyes moved toward the hallway.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then she understood.

"You can sleep in the sitting room."

He nodded.

That night, he slept on the sofa with a blanket pulled to his chin.

He did not dream.

He woke before dawn anyway.

The house had not changed.

That was the first thing he understood.

The same curtains.

The same polished table.

The same cupboard with the broken handle.

The same family voices drifting through the walls.

Someone complained about breakfast.

Someone shouted for a missing shirt.

A child laughed.

A door slammed.

Life had continued while Aariz had been gone.

It seemed almost offensive.

He had spent nights wondering whether he would survive until morning, and the house had carried on arguing about groceries.

He began going to the garage earlier.

Then earlier still.

Work was easier than thinking.

Machines did not ask him how he felt.

Engines did not demand explanations.

A broken compressor had a reason for failing.

A damaged belt had to be replaced.

A loose connection had to be tightened.

Problems could be opened, examined and repaired.

People were different.

People carried their damage beneath their skin.

Sometimes even they didn't know where it was.

At seventeen, Aariz began spending more hours at the garage than at home.

He learned quickly.

He could hear an engine misfiring before the others noticed it.

He could tell when a machine was about to fail by the sound it made under pressure.

The owner started trusting him with difficult jobs.

"Your hands are good," he told him one afternoon.

Aariz looked down at them.

Grease beneath the nails.

A small cut across one knuckle.

A burn healing near his thumb.

"That's all I have," he said.

The owner laughed.

"You've got a brain too."

Aariz smiled.

He didn't believe him.

Not yet.

He became harder to frighten.

Or, at least, harder to see frightened.

There was a difference.

When someone shouted at him, he no longer stepped backward.

He stepped forward.

When an older boy tried to intimidate him outside the garage, Aariz stared until the boy looked away.

His reputation grew quietly.

Not because he was violent.

Because people sensed that he had very little left to lose.

That frightened him.

One evening, he got into a fight over something insignificant.

A man had shoved him while arguing over a parking space.

Aariz shoved back.

The argument escalated.

For several seconds, he felt strangely calm.

Then the man's hand came toward his shoulder.

Aariz froze.

Not because he was afraid of the man.

Because for one instant, he was seventeen again.

The street disappeared.

The noise disappeared.

There was only the memory of a hand coming toward him when he had nowhere to go.

He struck the man's wrist away.

"Don't touch me."

His voice was low.

The man stepped back.

Aariz walked away.

He didn't stop until he reached the garage.

He locked himself inside the washroom and stared at his reflection.

His breathing was uneven.

He splashed water over his face.

"It's over," he whispered.

Again.

"It's over."

Again.

"It's over."

But the words did not make the memory disappear.

Eventually he understood something he had not known before:

The past did not need permission to enter the present.

It could arrive through a smell.

A voice.

A hand.

A room.

A particular kind of silence.

And when it came, he could not always reason with it.

So he began building a life around avoiding its doors.

At nineteen, he had become very good at appearing fine.

He could walk into a room smiling.

He could make women laugh.

He could drink without showing how much.

He could work through exhaustion.

He could flirt.

He could lie.

He could leave before anyone had the opportunity to leave him.

That last skill became his favourite.

If a relationship began becoming serious, he created a reason to disappear.

If someone asked too many questions, he became irritated.

If someone wanted to know where he had been, he heard accusation.

If someone loved him too openly, he became suspicious.

He wanted affection.

He distrusted it.

He wanted closeness.

He feared it.

He wanted someone to stay.

He kept giving people reasons not to.

The contradiction exhausted him.

Yet he didn't know how to solve it.

One night, after drinking more than he should have, he returned home at nearly three in the morning.

The kitchen light was on.

His aunt was sitting at the table.

She looked tired.

"You're awake," Aariz said.

"I was waiting."

"For me?"

"For the door."

He stood there.

She looked at his face.

“You've been drinking.”

“Yes.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Did you hurt anyone?”

Aariz hesitated.

“No.”

She nodded.

“Then drink some water.”

He poured himself a glass.

She watched him.

“You don't have to punish yourself every night.”

His hand stopped.

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

He looked at her.

“For what?”

She didn't answer immediately.

Perhaps she knew there were questions that could not be answered for him.

She simply said, “Go to sleep.”

He went.

But the sentence followed him upstairs.

You don't have to punish yourself every night.

He lay in darkness until morning.

He wondered what exactly he was being punished for.

He could not name it.

That was the problem.

At twenty, he met Elara.

Not dramatically.

There was no thunderstorm.

No collision.

No strange certainty that the universe had arranged their meeting.

There was simply a café on a cold afternoon, a stack of books, and a woman who looked at the book in Aariz's hand and said,

"You're holding that upside down."

He looked down.

He was.

"I know."

Elara raised an eyebrow.

"I'm testing it."

She laughed.

It was an easy laugh.

Not mocking.

Not pitying.

Just amused.

Aariz found himself smiling.

"I'm Elara."

"Aariz."

She looked at the books.

"You read all of these?"

"No."

"Then why are you carrying them?"

He considered the question.

"I don't know."

She smiled.

"That might be the most honest answer you've given today."

He laughed.

Something about her was different.

He could not have explained what.

She did not stare at his scars.

She did not ask why he looked tired.

She did not treat him like a wounded boy.

She simply spoke to him as though he were a person worth knowing.

They talked for nearly an hour.

Books became films.

Films became food.

Food became travel.

Travel became childhood.

Then Aariz stopped.

He had said too much.

Elara noticed.

She did not push.

She simply changed the subject.

That small act would stay with him.

Years later, Aariz would understand why.

She had given him something he had rarely received.

A boundary without rejection.

She had shown him that a person could say not now without saying not ever.

For someone like Aariz, that distinction would become important.

Very important.

But he didn't know that yet.

He only knew that when he left the café that afternoon, he looked back through the glass.

Elara was reading.

She glanced up.

Their eyes met.

She smiled.

Aariz smiled back.

Then he walked into the cold.

For the first time in years, he was not running away from something.

He was walking toward something he did not yet have a name for.

The second time Aariz saw Elara, she remembered his name.

He had not expected that.

People remembered useful things about him. His phone number. The money he owed. The work he could do. The time he was supposed to arrive.

His name was different.

Names belonged to people who mattered.

"You came back," she said.

Aariz smiled. "You sound surprised."

"I wasn't sure whether you actually liked books."

"I don't."

She laughed.

"I knew it."

They sat outside the café because the afternoon was unusually clear. The mountains beyond the buildings were pale beneath the winter sky, their edges softened by distance.

Elara asked him what he did.

"Garage."

"What kind of work?"

"Anything that needs fixing."

"Cars?"

"Cars. Machines. Air conditioners. Whatever people are willing to pay me for."

"You like it?"

Aariz shrugged.

"I'm good at it."

"That wasn't my question."

He looked at her.

She waited.

He looked away.

"I don't know."

She accepted that answer.

That was another thing he noticed.

She didn't seem determined to fill every silence.

Most people treated silence as an emergency.

Elara allowed it to exist.

After a while, she asked, "What would you do if money didn't matter?"

Aariz laughed.

"That sounds like something rich people ask."

"Probably."

"I'd sleep for a year."

She smiled.

"After that?"

"I don't know."

"You really don't?"

"No."

She looked toward the mountains.

"Then maybe that's something worth finding out."

Aariz said nothing.

The sentence followed him home.

A week later, Elara gave him a book.

He turned it over in his hands.

“I haven't read this.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“Because you haven't read many books.”

He looked offended.

“I've read books.”

“Three.”

“Four.”

“One of them was a car manual.”

“Still a book.”

She laughed.

He took it.

“How much?”

“Nothing.”

“I'll pay you.”

“I didn't buy it for you to owe me.”

He looked at her.

Something inside him resisted the kindness.

He didn't know where to put it.

Gifts had always had weight.

Money.

Expectation.

Debt.

A favour that would be collected later.

He had learned to calculate affection because calculation made it safer.

"What do you want in return?" he asked.

Elara frowned.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

He studied her face.

She looked completely serious.

That unsettled him more than if she had asked for something.

"People don't give things for nothing."

"Sometimes they do."

"Why?"

"Because they want to."

Aariz looked down at the book.

The cover was blue.

He ran his thumb along its edge.

"All right."

"Good."

He put it carefully inside his jacket.

He would not tell her that he kept it beside his bed that night.

He would not tell her that he touched the cover before sleeping.

He would not tell her that the thought of someone remembering what kind of book he might like felt strangely intimate.

Not romantic.

Something more frightening.

Care.

Their friendship did not transform him.

Not immediately.

He still drank.

He still lost his temper.

He still disappeared when life became too complicated.

He still slept badly.

He still had days when he hated himself without knowing exactly why.

Elara never pretended otherwise.

One evening, Aariz arrived late to meet her.

He was drunk.

She looked at him once and said, “I'm not getting into a car with you.”

“I didn't ask you to.”

“You were about to.”

He stared at her.

She remained calm.

"I can call you a taxi."

"I don't need one."

"Then walk."

He laughed bitterly.

"You're serious?"

"Yes."

Something in him snapped.

"You think you're better than me?"

"No."

"You're acting like it."

"No. I'm acting like someone who doesn't want to die because you're too drunk to understand that driving is dangerous."

He stared at her.

His anger rose quickly.

He wanted her to soften.

To apologise.

To reassure him.

She did none of those things.

Instead, she waited.

Eventually he looked away.

"Fine."

She called the taxi.

They sat in silence until it arrived.

The next morning, Aariz expected her to lecture him.

She didn't.

That somehow made him more uncomfortable.

"You're not angry?"

"I was angry yesterday."

"And now?"

"Now I'm waiting to see what you do with it."

He frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"Being sorry isn't very useful if it doesn't change what happens next."

He looked at the floor.

Something about the sentence entered him quietly.

Not as punishment.

As a responsibility.

That evening, he went home, opened the bottle of alcohol he had hidden in his room, and stared at it.

Then he poured it into the sink.

He stood there for a while.

It wasn't a miracle.

He bought another bottle three days later.

But the next time he wanted to drink, he remembered the sink.

That was how change actually began for him.

Not dramatically.

Not permanently.

With small choices repeated badly, then better, then badly again.

Elara also introduced him to things he had never considered important.

A museum.

A proper restaurant.

A film that had no explosions.

A bookstore where people whispered.

A small gallery tucked into a side street.

Once, she took him to a hotel restaurant high above the city.

Aariz looked at the menu and immediately closed it.

"Too expensive."

"You're not paying."

"Still."

She opened the menu again.

"You're allowed to sit somewhere beautiful without earning the right first."

He looked at her.

The sentence was so simple that he almost laughed.

But he didn't.

He looked through the window instead.

The city glittered beneath them.

For most of his life, beauty had seemed like something belonging to other people.

Other families.

Other children.

Other men.

Other lives.

He had spent so long standing outside the glass that he had forgotten glass could open.

Elara ordered.

He tried everything.

He disliked half of it.

She laughed at his expression.

“This is terrible.”

“You've eaten worse.”

“That doesn't make it good.”

She laughed again.

And for a few minutes, Aariz was simply twenty years old.

Not damaged.

Not abandoned.

Not a boy trying to catch up with childhood.

Just a young man sitting across from someone who made him laugh.

He didn't know then how important that ordinary afternoon would become.

Months passed.

The friendship grew without either of them announcing it.

Sometimes they drove for hours.

Sometimes she drove.

Sometimes he did.

They would leave the city without a plan, stop at roadside cafés, argue about music, talk about books, watch the landscape change beyond the windows.

One evening, after nearly three hours of driving, Elara turned off her phone.

"You should try it."

"What?"

"Nothing."

She placed the phone in the glove compartment.

Aariz did the same.

They drove in silence.

For the first ten minutes, he was uncomfortable.

For twenty, he kept thinking of things he should say.

After an hour, he stopped trying.

The road climbed through the mountains.

Snow gathered along the edges.

The sky turned silver.

Elara was driving with one hand resting lightly on the steering wheel.

Aariz looked through the window.

He realised he had spent most of his life believing silence meant something had gone wrong.

That night, silence meant nothing was required of him.

He could simply exist.

He closed his eyes.

Not to sleep.

Just to rest.

Elara noticed.

She said nothing.

And that, perhaps more than anything, was the beginning.

Not healing.

Not yet.

Just the first experience of being beside another human being without having to perform.

Aariz would still have years of work ahead of him.

There would be relapses, anger, mistakes, bad relationships, old habits returning when he was tired or frightened.

Elara would not rescue him from those things.

She would do something harder.

She would keep reminding him that he was responsible for what he did next.

And slowly, painfully, Aariz would begin to understand the difference between being responsible for his wounds and being responsible for the person he became because of them.

The road continued beneath the headlights.

For once, Aariz wasn't thinking about where it ended.

He was watching where it went.

By twenty-one, Aariz had learned that a person could have a good day without having a good life.

That distinction mattered.

He could laugh with Elara in the afternoon and still drink alone at night.

He could repair an engine perfectly and spend the money he earned on things he did not need.

He could sit beside his aunt at dinner and feel grateful for the food while resenting the house around him.

Nothing had become simple.

But something had changed.

He had begun noticing himself.

That was uncomfortable.

Before Elara, anger had simply happened. Now, sometimes, he could feel it arriving.

A tightening in his jaw.

Heat behind his ears.

The urge to say something cruel before someone else could hurt him.

Sometimes he stopped.

Sometimes he didn't.

When he failed, Elara never called him a monster.

She asked, "What happened?"

He would tell her.

She would listen.

Then she would ask, “And what did you do?”

He learned that the second question mattered more.

Not because the past was irrelevant.

Because it wasn't an excuse for making another person bleed.

Slowly, his apologies changed.

They became less theatrical.

He stopped buying gifts after every argument.

He began saying things like, “I was wrong.”

At first, the words felt humiliating.

Eventually, they became ordinary.

That was progress too.

One Sunday, Elara arrived at the garage carrying two coffees.

Aariz was underneath a car.

“You're late,” he said.

“I wasn't aware we had an appointment.”

“We did.”

“When?”

“Now.”

She put one coffee on the workbench.

“Then I'm early.”

He slid out from beneath the car.

She looked at him.

"Your hair."

"What about it?"

"It looks like you've been fighting the engine."

"I won."

"The engine disagrees."

He smiled.

She handed him the coffee.

He took a sip.

"Too sweet."

"You always say that."

"And you always bring it."

"Because you always finish it."

He looked at the cup.

She remembered.

It was such a small thing.

But small things had become dangerous to him in a different way.

He had spent his childhood learning that people remembered his mistakes.

Elara remembered his preferences.

She remembered that he hated raisins.

That he liked his coffee strong.

That he became quiet when overwhelmed.

That he hated crowded restaurants.

That he liked driving at night.

That he pretended not to like sentimental films and cried during them anyway.

She remembered.

And because she remembered, he began believing that perhaps he could be known without being judged.

At twenty-two, Aariz started reading seriously.

Not because he suddenly became scholarly.

Because he had questions.

He read psychology books.

Memoirs.

Novels.

Books about attachment, grief, behaviour, philosophy.

Half the time he understood very little.

He read anyway.

One evening, he underlined a sentence and closed the book.

Elara looked over.

"What?"

"I think I know why I get angry."

"Why?"

He hesitated.

"Because anger is easier."

She waited.

"Fear makes you feel small," he continued. "Anger makes everyone else move."

Elara nodded slowly.

"That sounds possible."

"That's it? No speech?"

"You don't need a speech every time you discover something."

He laughed.

Then his expression changed.

"What if I can't change?"

"You can."

"You don't know that."

"No."

She smiled.

"But I know you already have."

He looked down.

He wanted to argue.

He couldn't.

Then his uncle died.

Aariz was twenty-three.

The news came on an ordinary morning.

There was no warning.

No dramatic final conversation.

No opportunity to say everything that needed saying.

One phone call.

One sentence.

And suddenly the man who had once touched his scraped knees, bought him books, shared food with him, and called him brave boy was gone.

Aariz did not cry at first.

He sat on the edge of his bed.

His phone remained in his hand.

The room seemed strangely small.

His aunt was crying downstairs.

Someone was speaking to a relative.

Doors opened and closed.

The house was filled with people.

Aariz heard all of it from a distance.

He finally stood.

Then sat down again.

He whispered, "No."

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

Just once.

"No."

At the funeral, people spoke about his uncle as though they had known him completely.

They remembered his generosity.

His humour.

His stubbornness.

His work.

His family.

Aariz stood among them and thought about smaller things.

The chocolate he had once been given.

A hand resting on his hair.

A plate pushed toward him.

A voice saying, You don't have to prove everything.

Those were the memories that broke him.

Not the grand ones.

The ordinary ones.

When they lowered the coffin, Aariz finally understood what death could do.

It did not only take a person.

It took every future conversation you had imagined having with them.

Every apology.

Every thank-you.

Every ordinary Sunday that would never happen.

He walked away from the grave and cried so hard he could barely breathe.

Elara found him outside later.

She did not ask him to stop crying.

She simply stood beside him.

Eventually Aariz said, “He was the only one.”

“I know.”

“I didn't tell him enough.”

Elara looked at him.

"You loved him."

"I should have said it."

"Maybe."

He wiped his face.

"I don't know how."

"You're saying it now."

Aariz looked toward the graveyard.

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Then, very quietly:

"He was my father."

Elara did not correct him.

Perhaps because she understood what he meant.

His biological father had been alive for years without becoming one.

This man had never given Aariz his surname, never created him, never been responsible for his existence.

And yet, somehow, he had been the closest thing to a father Aariz had known.

Grief made the truth impossible to hide.

After the funeral, Aariz changed again.

He became quieter.

Not the old silence.

Something different.

He began to understand how quickly a person could disappear.

That frightened him.

For several weeks, he called Elara almost every night.

Sometimes they spoke for hours.

Sometimes neither said much.

One night, after a long silence, Aariz said, "What if I die and nobody remembers me?"

Elara answered without hesitation.

"Then make your life worth remembering by you."

He frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"It means stop measuring your existence by who stays."

The words struck somewhere deep.

He didn't answer.

Outside his window, snow covered the street.

For years, Aariz had believed his life would begin when somebody finally chose him.

His uncle's death forced him to confront something harder.

People could love you deeply and still leave.

Not because they wanted to.

Because life did not negotiate.

The question was no longer only whether someone would stay.

The question was what Aariz would do with the life he still had.

He did not know yet.

But the question had changed.

And sometimes, that was where a life changed direction.

There was one thing everyone eventually noticed about Aariz.

He did not like being touched.

Not casually.

Not affectionately.

A hand on his shoulder could make him stiffen.

Someone ruffling his hair would make him step away.

A congratulatory pat on the back made him smile politely while his body moved instinctively out of reach.

He tolerated handshakes because handshakes had rules.

Everything else was uncertain.

But Elara was different.

The first time she touched his hair, she asked.

They were sitting in her car after a long drive. Aariz had fallen asleep for perhaps twenty minutes, his head against the window, his hair disordered from the cold air coming through the slightly open glass.

When he woke, she was looking at him.

"What?"

"You have terrible hair."

He immediately reached up.

"I know."

She smiled.

"Can I fix it?"

He stared at her.

It was such a strange question.

No one had ever asked him that before.

People touched children because they could.

Adults touched one another without asking.

Aariz had learned early that the body was sometimes treated like public property.

But Elara waited.

Her hand remained in her lap.

"Can I?" she repeated.

He swallowed.

Then nodded.

Her fingers moved gently through his hair.

Nothing happened.

No demand.

No threat.

No laughter.

No humiliation.

Just warmth.

Her fingertips moved slowly, untangling one stubborn section near his forehead.

Aariz closed his eyes.

Something inside him loosened.

Not completely.

Just enough.

"You're very tense," she whispered.

"I'm fine."

"You always say that."

He smiled faintly.

She continued smoothing his hair.

After a while, he said, "Don't stop."

Elara's hand paused for half a second.

Then continued.

"All right."

He kept his eyes closed.

For perhaps the first time in his life, being touched did not make him prepare to defend himself.

It made him breathe.

The first hug happened months later.

Aariz had received bad news at work.

Nothing catastrophic.

A business opportunity had collapsed. Money was lost. A man he trusted had lied to him.

Aariz had spent the entire day pretending it didn't matter.

When he reached Elara's house that evening, she opened the door.

He didn't say hello.

She looked at his face.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

She stepped aside.

He walked in.

Five minutes later, he was sitting on her kitchen floor with his back against a cabinet.

He stared at his hands.

"I don't know why I'm like this."

Elara sat down opposite him.

"Like what?"

"Everything feels like a fight."

She said nothing.

His eyes filled.

"I'm tired."

That was all.

Two words.

But they carried years.

Elara moved closer.

Then stopped.

"Can I hug you?"

Aariz looked at her.

His face crumpled.

He nodded.

She opened her arms.

He moved into them so quickly that it almost frightened him.

Her arms closed around him.

Firm.

Warm.

Still.

Aariz froze for several seconds.

Then his forehead dropped against her shoulder.

And something inside him gave way.

He cried.

Not the quiet crying he had perfected as a child.

Not the controlled tears he could wipe away before anyone noticed.

He cried like someone who had finally found somewhere he did not have to hide.

Elara did not tell him to calm down.

She did not tell him to be strong.

She simply held him.

Her hand moved slowly over his hair.

Again.

And again.

“I've got you,” she whispered.

His fingers tightened in the fabric of her sleeve.

For a while, the world became very small.

Her shoulder.

Her breathing.

The warmth of her arms.

The faint scent of her perfume.

Nothing else.

When he finally pulled away, he looked embarrassed.

"Sorry."

"For crying?"

"For…"

He couldn't finish.

Elara touched his cheek.

"You never have to apologise to me for needing comfort."

His eyes closed.

Her thumb brushed away one tear.

"It's okay, baby, it happens but I am so proud of you. You are a beautiful soul."

He looked at her.

No one had ever said anything like that to him.

Not after failure.

Not after fear.

Not after weakness.

Especially not after weakness.

He leaned forward and rested his forehead against her shoulder again.

She let him.

After that, something quietly changed.

Aariz still disliked being touched by other people.

He still stepped away when someone tried to hug him unexpectedly.

But Elara became different.

She was the one person whose arms never felt like a trap.

The one person whose hand in his hair never made him flinch.

The one person whose cheek kiss could make his entire face soften.

She sometimes kissed his forehead before he left.

Sometimes his cheek.

Sometimes she simply placed a hand against the back of his head and pulled him gently against her shoulder.

There was nothing romantic in it.

There was something more fundamental.

She had become family in a language his body understood.

With her, Aariz did not have to perform masculinity.

He did not have to be strong.

He did not have to be successful.

He did not have to be useful.

He could be tired.

He could be frightened.

He could be ridiculous.

He could be silent.

He could cry.

He could simply exist.

And she would still be there.

Eventually, he began calling her when he couldn't sleep.

Sometimes at two in the morning.

Sometimes after an argument.

Sometimes after a bad day.

Once, he called and said nothing.

Elara stayed on the line.

After several minutes she asked, "Do you want me to talk?"

"No."

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Yes."

So she stayed.

Neither spoke.

Aariz listened to her breathing through the phone.

It was enough.

She had become his safe place.

His peace.

His first experience of a human being whose presence did not require payment, performance, obedience, or fear.

He began to associate safety with ordinary things she did.

The way she said his name.

The way she waited for answers.

The way she never laughed at his vulnerability.

The way she asked before touching him.

The way she never used his wounds against him during an argument.

The way she could tell him he was wrong without making him feel worthless.

The way she could hold him without possessing him.

That last lesson took him years to understand.

Love could hold you without owning you.

Care could be strong without becoming control.

Touch could comfort without demanding anything in return.

But Elara knew something Aariz didn't yet understand.

She could be his safe place without becoming his entire world forever.

One evening, while they were sitting beside a mountain lake, Aariz rested his head against her shoulder.

"I don't know what I'd do without you."

Elara looked toward the water.

"You'd survive."

He lifted his head.

"That doesn't sound very comforting."

She smiled.

"It isn't supposed to be."

He frowned.

She touched his hair.

"You should love having me in your life. You should trust me. You should come to me when you need me."

She paused.

"But I don't want you to believe you cannot breathe when I'm not beside you."

He looked away.

"Why?"

"Because I want to be your safe place."

Her fingers moved gently through his hair.

"Not your prison."

He became quiet.

She continued.

"One day, Aariz, I want you to feel safe in your own hands too."

He didn't fully understand.

Not then.

He only leaned against her again.

She let him.

For that moment, it was enough.

Years later, he would understand what she had been doing.

She wasn't teaching him to need her.

She was teaching him what safety felt like so that, eventually, he could recognise it within himself.

And perhaps that was why her love changed him so completely.

She did not ask him to become less wounded so that he would be easier to love.

She loved him carefully enough that he finally began learning how to love himself.

Chapter Six

The Room Behind the Boxes

After his uncle died, Aariz moved into the smallest room in the house.

Nobody formally assigned it to him.

There was simply nowhere else.

The room had once been used for storage. Cardboard boxes leaned against one wall. Old suitcases were stacked beneath a window. A broken lamp sat beside a sewing machine nobody used anymore.

There was barely enough space for the narrow bed.

Aariz cleared a corner for himself.

He kept his clothes in one suitcase.

His tools stayed in a metal box beneath the bed.

His books occupied the only shelf.

It was not a bedroom so much as a place where someone had made room for a body.

He did not complain.

He had learned not to expect rooms to belong to him.

At night, the house settled around him.

Pipes clicked.

Floorboards creaked.

Someone coughed in another room.

A television played softly downstairs.

Aariz lay awake and looked at the ceiling.

His uncle was gone.

His father was still alive somewhere, but the word father had never meant what it was supposed to mean.

His mother had been dead since he was three.

The house around him was full of people.

And somehow he felt more alone than he had ever been.

He reached for his phone.

There was one name he wanted to call.

Elara.

He stared at it.

It was nearly midnight.

He didn't call.

Instead, he placed the phone beside his pillow and closed his eyes.

Ten minutes later, it rang.

Elara.

He answered.

"Hello?"

"You're awake."

"How do you know?"

"Because you always answer when you're trying not to sleep."

Aariz smiled despite himself.

"I'm fine."

"I didn't ask."

He went quiet.

She waited.

Finally he said, "I miss him."

"I know."

"I thought I was ready."

"You don't have to be ready."

"He was the only person who…"

His voice broke.

Elara didn't interrupt.

Aariz swallowed.

"The only person who made me feel like I belonged somewhere."

There was silence.

Then Elara said softly, "Then let yourself miss him."

Aariz pressed the phone against his ear.

"I hate this."

"I know."

"I don't want to cry."

"You can."

"I'm a grown man."

"And?"

He laughed weakly.

“And grown men aren't supposed to cry.”

“Who told you that?”

He didn't answer.

Elara's voice softened.

“Cry, baby.”

That was enough.

He covered his face.

The tears came.

She stayed on the phone.

She didn't try to fix the grief.

She simply made sure he didn't have to carry it alone.

A few days later, Elara came to the house.

She brought food.

Aariz opened the door.

“You cooked?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“Food.”

He looked inside the containers.

“You bought this.”

“Yes.”

“That's not cooking.”

“I didn't claim it was.”

He laughed.

She smiled.

Then her eyes moved past him toward the storage room.

She didn't comment immediately.

Instead she walked inside.

Aariz followed.

She looked at the boxes.

“You sleep here?”

“Yes.”

She turned toward him.

“Do you like it?”

He shrugged.

“It's fine.”

“That wasn't my question.”

He looked away.

She understood.

“Would you like to change it?”

“With what money?”

“We'll start with what you already have.”

She pointed toward the shelf.

“Books.”

Then toward the wall.

“Your photographs.”

Then the small table.

“Your notebook.”

Aariz stared at her.

“You're serious?”

“Very.”

“It’s a storage room.”

“It can become your room.”

He almost laughed.

“You can't change a room by moving three things.”

“No.”

She looked at him.

“But you can begin.”

They spent the afternoon clearing boxes.

Some belonged to relatives.

Some contained things nobody had touched in years.

Aariz carried them downstairs.

Elara dusted the shelves.

They argued about where his books should go.

She won.

He pretended to be annoyed.

By evening, the room looked different.

Not beautiful.

Not luxurious.

But his.

Aariz stood in the doorway.

Elara leaned against the wall.

“Well?”

He looked around.

“I can breathe.”

She smiled.

“Good.”

He sat on the bed.

His eyes moved over the shelf.

The blue book she had given him was there.

Beside it, another book.

Then another.

His notebook.

His tools.

A photograph from a mountain drive.

A small framed picture of his uncle.

Things he had chosen.

Things that belonged to him.

He touched the edge of the photograph.

“I never thought I'd have a room.”

Elara sat beside him.

“You have one now.”

He nodded.

Then, without thinking, he leaned against her.

She put an arm around him.

He closed his eyes.

For a few minutes, neither spoke.

The room slowly became a place where Aariz could think.

He began spending evenings there instead of wandering outside.

He read.

Sometimes only a few pages.

Sometimes until two in the morning.

He wrote.

Mostly badly.

But he wrote.

He started keeping track of his money.

Then his work.

Then his goals.

The lists were embarrassingly small at first.

Fix five cars this month.

Save enough to buy better tools.

Read one book.

Stop drinking on weekdays.

Sleep before two.

He failed several.

He wrote new lists anyway.

Elara never praised him for perfection.

She praised consistency.

"You went three days without drinking."

"Then I drank on the fourth."

“Four days is still four days.”

“That doesn't sound like success.”

“It sounds like data.”

He laughed.

“You make everything sound like psychology.”

“Because everything is psychology.”

“No. Sometimes people are just stupid.”

“That too.”

He laughed again.

The laughter mattered.

His life was beginning to contain things besides survival.

One afternoon, Elara brought him a notebook with a dark blue cover.

She placed it on the table.

“What now?”

“Write.”

“I already write.”

“Write something different.”

He opened it.

On the first page, she had written:

Write the things you want before you decide they are impossible.

Aariz stared at the sentence.

“What if I don't know what I want?”

“Then write that.”

He held the pen.

For several minutes, nothing came.

Then:

I want to know who I am when nobody is hurting me.

He stopped.

Read it again.

Elara did not look over his shoulder.

That mattered.

The page belonged to him.

Eventually he wrote another line.

I want to become someone I don't have to destroy to be loved.

He closed the notebook.

Elara looked at him.

"Good."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to tell me what it means?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you already know."

He looked at her.

For once, she was right.

His first serious ambition began almost by accident.

A customer brought an old machine to the garage.

Nobody wanted the job.

It was complicated, time-consuming and likely to cost more than the customer could afford.

Aariz took it.

He spent three days studying the problem.

He failed twice.

On the third attempt, it worked.

The customer stared at him.

"How much?"

Aariz named a price.

The man paid.

Then he returned two weeks later with another customer.

Word spread.

Aariz began getting work outside the garage.

Small jobs.

Repairs.

Installation.

Maintenance.

Nothing glamorous.

But for the first time, he saw something clearly.

He was good at something.

Not because someone had praised him.

Because the results existed.

Broken machines worked again when he touched them.

People paid him because his work solved problems.

He opened another page in the notebook.

Maybe I can build something.

He stared at the sentence.

Then underlined it.

That evening, he met Elara for dinner.

She asked, "How was work?"

"Good."

"Just good?"

He smiled.

"I got three new customers."

"That's good."

"I think I can do this properly."

"Do what?"

"Build a business."

She looked at him.

There was no surprise in her face.

Only quiet pride.

"I think you can."

Aariz looked down at his plate.

"I don't want to be rich."

She smiled.

"That's convenient because you're currently not."

He laughed.

"I mean it."

"I know."

"I want to be independent."

"That sounds more like you."

He thought about it.

Then nodded.

For years, he had wanted money because money looked like protection.

Now he wanted something else.

Choice.

The ability to leave a place without fear.

The ability to say no.

The ability to help someone without becoming indebted.

The ability to buy himself something without calculating whether he deserved it.

The ability to build a room and call it his.

He looked across the table at Elara.

"Thank you."

She shook her head.

"For what?"

"Everything."

She reached across and touched his hair.

Aariz closed his eyes.

"It's okay, baby, it happens but I am so proud of you. You are a beautiful soul."

He smiled.

For the first time, he believed her.

Not completely.

Not every day.

But enough.

And that was enough to begin.

Outside, evening settled over the Swiss streets.

Inside, Aariz sat beneath warm lights, surrounded by food, books, plans and someone who had taught him that being loved did not require him to disappear.

For years, he had believed home was a place someone else had to give him.

Now, slowly, he was learning how to build one.

The business did not become successful overnight. For almost a year, it remained little more than Aariz, a borrowed van, a toolbox that was slowly becoming his own, and a list of customers whose names he wrote carefully in the back of his notebook. He took jobs other mechanics considered too small, travelled farther than he needed to, and sometimes spent an entire afternoon repairing something that earned him less than the fuel had cost. There were weeks when he wondered whether he was building a future or simply finding another way to keep himself occupied.

Elara never romanticised the struggle. When he complained about a customer who had refused to pay him on time, she listened and then asked whether he had written down the terms before starting the work.

"No."

"Then that's the first thing you change."

"I thought you were going to tell me to believe in myself."

"I can believe in you and still tell you that you need a contract."

He laughed, but he wrote it down.

That was one of the things he trusted most about her. She could be tender without becoming indulgent. When he was frightened, she did not tell him there was nothing to fear. When he failed, she did not turn failure into a lesson before allowing him to feel disappointed. She simply stayed close enough that he did not have to face the disappointment alone, and practical enough to stop him from turning one bad day into a verdict on his entire life.

Their long drives became more frequent as his work allowed it. Sometimes they left early on a Sunday and crossed into another canton simply because the weather looked good in the distance. Other times they drove until they found a village they had never visited, ate something neither of them could pronounce correctly, and spent an hour walking through streets too quiet for Aariz's usual restless mind. Their phones were usually left in the car or switched off, and gradually he became comfortable with stretches of silence that would once have made him anxious.

On one such afternoon, they stopped beside a lake surrounded by dark green hills. Elara spread a blanket across the grass while Aariz unpacked the food they had bought on the way. He complained that she had ordered too much, then ate most of it. She laughed at him for pretending to be annoyed, and when she reached across to remove a crumb from his hair, he instinctively leaned toward her hand instead of away from it.

Neither of them mentioned the change.

She simply let her fingers remain there for a moment, smoothing his hair back from his forehead before withdrawing.

Aariz watched the lake.

"Do you ever get tired of me?" he asked.

Elara looked at him with mild amusement. "You ask that question whenever you're tired."

"Maybe I'm asking it because I want an honest answer."

"My honest answer is that I occasionally get tired of your nonsense."

He laughed.

"That wasn't what I meant."

"I know."

She tucked her knees beneath herself and looked across the water. "People who love each other are allowed to become tired. It doesn't mean the love disappears. Sometimes it means somebody needs a little space, a little sleep, or a conversation they have been avoiding."

Aariz considered that.

The idea was still foreign to him. In his experience, closeness had always seemed temporary. People either wanted something from you or they were preparing to leave. He had spent years trying to detect the first sign of withdrawal, often creating it himself before anyone else had the opportunity.

With Elara, distance did not automatically mean abandonment.

That was perhaps the most important thing she taught him without ever announcing that she was teaching it.

She could leave at the end of an evening and still return the next day. She could disagree with him and remain

affectionate. She could tell him that he had behaved badly without making him feel that he had become bad. She could hold him when he cried and, the following morning, expect him to take responsibility for whatever he needed to change.

Her affection had boundaries.

Her boundaries had affection.

Aariz slowly learned that the two did not cancel each other out.

There were still nights when the past returned without warning.

One winter evening, several years after the abuse, Aariz woke from a dream with his chest tight and his hands numb. For a few seconds he did not know where he was. The storage room, the corridor, the locked door, the sensation of being trapped—all of it seemed to exist simultaneously with the dark room around him.

He reached for the phone.

He almost called Elara immediately, then stopped.

He remembered something she had told him months earlier.

You can come to me. But I also want you to learn how to stay with yourself when I'm not here.

He sat up and placed both feet on the floor.

The room was quiet.

He named what he could see: the bookshelf, the lamp, the blue notebook, the photograph of the mountains. He listened to the heating system click on. He took a slow breath, then another.

The fear did not disappear.

But it changed shape.

It became something happening inside him rather than something happening to him.

After several minutes, he picked up the phone anyway.

Elara answered after the second ring.

"Bad dream?"

"Yes."

"Are you safe?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to come?"

He closed his eyes.

The old part of him wanted to say yes immediately.

Instead he looked around his room.

"I think I can stay here."

There was a small silence on the other end.

Then she said, "Good."

He smiled.

"Don't sound so pleased."

"I am pleased."

"I still want you to stay on the phone."

"Then I'll stay."

He lay back down.

They talked about nothing important for nearly twenty minutes. She told him about a book she had started. He complained about a customer. She laughed. Eventually the tightness in his chest eased.

When they said goodnight, Aariz placed the phone beside him rather than holding it against his chest.

It was a tiny difference.

But it mattered.

He had reached for her without surrendering himself.

By twenty-four, the small repair business had become something more organised. Aariz hired one mechanic, then another. He rented a proper workspace and bought equipment instead of borrowing it. He learned accounting badly and then learned it again. He made expensive mistakes. He trusted the wrong person with money. He once signed a contract without reading the final page and spent weeks fixing the consequences.

Each failure embarrassed him.

None destroyed him.

That was new.

He had once interpreted mistakes as proof that he was fundamentally defective. Now he could sit across from someone, admit he had made a bad decision, and ask what needed to be done next.

The distinction seemed small from the outside.

For Aariz, it was enormous.

His aunt noticed it too.

One evening she found him sitting at the dining table surrounded by invoices.

"You've become serious," she said.

He looked up.

"I'm always serious."

She smiled. “No. You used to be angry. That's different.”

He laughed.

Perhaps she was right.

He had not stopped carrying the past. He had simply stopped allowing it to make every decision.

Later that night, he called Elara to tell her about the new workspace.

She answered while cooking.

“Congratulations.”

“You haven't even seen it.”

“I don't need to see it to know you're proud.”

He smiled.

“I am.”

“Good. You should be.”

He leaned back in his chair.

There was a time when praise had made him suspicious. Now he could receive it without immediately searching for the price.

That, too, had taken practice.

His twenty-fifth birthday was the first birthday anyone had ever deliberately planned for him.

Aariz had forgotten the date himself.

Elara had not.

She picked him up in the afternoon and refused to tell him where they were going. He guessed several places. She rejected every guess.

Eventually she stopped outside a small restaurant overlooking the city.

When Aariz saw the table, he stopped.

There was a cake.

Not a large one.

Not extravagant.

Just enough for two people.

His name was written across the top.

He stared at it for a long time.

Elara watched him carefully.

"You're allowed to celebrate yourself."

He swallowed.

"I've never had a cake with my name on it."

Her expression softened.

"I know."

"How?"

"Because you told me."

He looked at the cake again.

Something old and young moved through him at the same time—the boy who had once stood at the edge of somebody else's birthday photographs, and the man sitting now in a restaurant where someone had remembered that his birth was worth marking.

Elara did not make him talk about it.

She lit the candle.

"Make a wish."

He laughed quietly.

"I don't know what to wish for."

"Then don't waste time trying to make it impressive."

He looked at the flame.

For a moment, he thought about money, success, the business, the future.

Then he closed his eyes.

His wish was simpler.

He wanted to remain capable of feeling this.

He opened his eyes and blew out the candle.

Elara clapped.

He laughed.

And when she leaned across the table and kissed his cheek, Aariz did not stiffen.

He smiled.

The gesture was so familiar now that his body accepted it before his mind had time to question it.

For years, touch had meant danger, obligation, humiliation, or loss of control.

With Elara, it had become something else entirely.

A hand through his hair.

A cheek kissed before goodbye.

An arm around his shoulders.

A forehead resting briefly against his.

A hug that could last until his breathing slowed.

Nothing was demanded afterward.

Nothing had to be repaid.

He could simply receive it.

And somewhere in the years between the frightened boy and the man sitting beneath the restaurant lights, Aariz had begun to understand that perhaps this was what safety had always been supposed to feel like.

Not the absence of pain. The presence of choice.

Chapter Seven

The Woman Who Called Him Beautiful

By the time Aariz was twenty-six, the business no longer depended entirely on his hands.

That frightened him more than he expected.

For years, work had given him something he understood: if he stopped, everything stopped. Every problem had a physical shape. Every repair ended with a machine running again. He could measure his worth in completed jobs and money collected.

Now there were employees, accounts, suppliers, schedules, contracts and decisions that could not be solved with a wrench.

He hired people reluctantly.

Then he learned to trust them.

Then he learned that trusting someone did not mean surrendering control.

It meant allowing another person to carry part of the weight.

That lesson followed him into everything else.

His relationship with Elara had become so familiar that sometimes he forgot how unusual it was. She knew when he was overwhelmed before he admitted it. She could tell from the

way he placed his keys on a table whether he had had a good day. She knew that after a difficult meeting he needed ten quiet minutes before discussing it, that crowded places exhausted him, that he disliked being approached from behind, and that if he became unusually cheerful after something went wrong, he was probably hiding how badly it had affected him.

She also knew when to leave him alone.

That was perhaps why he trusted her so completely.

She did not demand access to every part of him simply because he loved her.

One evening, after a long day, Aariz arrived at her apartment without calling first.

She opened the door and looked at him.

"Bad day?"

He nodded.

"Come in."

He stepped inside.

She was wearing an old sweater, her hair loosely tied, and there was a half-finished book beside a cup of tea on the sofa. The ordinary sight of her home seemed to lower something inside him.

He removed his shoes and sat down.

Elara brought him tea without asking what he wanted.

"You remember everything," he said.

"I remember useful things."

"I'm not useful."

She gave him a look.

"You're occasionally useful."

He smiled.

She sat beside him.

For several minutes he said nothing.

Then he leaned sideways until his head rested against her shoulder.

She didn't comment.

Her hand moved through his hair slowly, the way it had years earlier in the car.

Aariz closed his eyes.

There was no urgency in the room.

No one needed anything from him.

The silence did not ask him to perform.

He breathed.

After a while, Elara said, "Do you want to tell me?"

"Not yet."

"All right."

Her fingers continued gently through his hair.

That was enough.

Aariz's relationship with touch remained unusual.

He could shake hands with clients. He could tolerate a colleague's brief pat on the shoulder. He could sit in crowded rooms without panicking.

But affection remained different.

He did not hug most people.

He did not like strangers touching him.

He did not enjoy casual physical closeness.

There were only a few people he trusted enough to let inside that boundary, and Elara stood completely apart from everyone else.

With her, there was no calculation.

If she opened her arms, he could step into them.

If she kissed his cheek, he smiled.

If she rested her palm against his forehead when he was exhausted, he would close his eyes.

If she ran her fingers through his hair while they watched a film, he might eventually fall asleep.

Once, after a particularly difficult week, he arrived at her home and said nothing at all. Elara looked at him for a moment, then opened her arms.

Aariz crossed the room.

The hug lasted a long time.

He rested his face against her shoulder, breathing slowly while her hand moved over his hair.

"It's okay, baby, it happens but I am so proud of you. You are a beautiful soul."

He whispered, "Stay."

"I'm here."

He held her tighter.

There was nothing romantic in the moment. No hidden promise, no confusion about what they were to one another. Elara was family to him in the deepest sense of the word, and Aariz's attachment to her had become the first relationship in which tenderness and boundaries could exist together.

She could hold him without possessing him.

He could need her without owning her.

That distinction would become one of the foundations of his adulthood.

At twenty-seven, his father died.

The call came in the middle of a workday.

Aariz was reviewing figures with his accountant when his phone began vibrating.

He almost ignored it.

Then he saw the name.

His father.

The accountant continued speaking, but Aariz was no longer listening.

He answered.

A relative spoke.

There had been complications.

His father was gone.

Aariz said nothing.

When the call ended, he remained seated.

The accountant looked at him.

"Everything all right?"

Aariz stared at the papers.

"My father died."

The words sounded strange.

Not heartbreaking.

Not yet.

Just factual.

He went home that evening and sat alone in his newly renovated apartment.

He expected grief.

What came instead was confusion.

He remembered being three years old.

His mother's hands.

His father's shoes.

Then the years afterward.

The distance.

The calls about money.

The rare meetings.

The feeling of being a son in name and an inconvenience in practice.

Aariz cried eventually.

But he wasn't grieving the father he had known.

He was grieving the father he had spent his entire childhood waiting for.

That grief was harder to explain.

Elara came over that night.

She found him sitting on the floor beside the window.

She did not immediately touch him.

She sat nearby.

“I don't know what I'm supposed to feel,” he said.

"You don't have to know."

"He was my father."

"Yes."

"I hated him."

"I know."

"I wanted him to love me."

"I know."

Aariz covered his face.

"And now he's dead."

Elara moved closer.

"Would you like me to hold you?"

He nodded.

She gathered him into her arms.

He cried against her shoulder.

Not only for the man who had died, but for the boy who had waited for him.

After a while, Aariz whispered, "I don't forgive him."

"You don't have to."

He looked at her.

"You're not going to tell me I should?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because forgiveness isn't a debt you owe the dead."

He stared at her.

Then slowly rested his head against her again.

That night, Elara stayed until he fell asleep.

Before leaving, she pulled the blanket over him and stood for a moment beside the bed.

Aariz opened his eyes.

“Are you leaving?”

“Yes.”

His expression changed.

The old fear appeared so quickly that she could almost see the child beneath the man.

She sat beside him again.

“I'll see you tomorrow.”

He nodded.

She touched his hair.

“You are safe.”

He closed his eyes.

This time, when she left, he did not get up to check whether the door had really closed.

He trusted that she would return.

The following weeks were strange.

Aariz expected his father's death to free him.

Instead, it made the past louder.

He began thinking about all the things he had once wanted to say.

Why didn't you come for me?

Why wasn't I enough?

Why did you build another family and leave me outside it?

Why did you make me believe there was something wrong with me?

There would be no answers now.

For a while, he was angry about that.

Then one evening, sitting beside Elara during another long drive, he said, "I think I've spent half my life waiting for an explanation from someone who couldn't give me one."

Elara kept her eyes on the road.

"What would you do if you stopped waiting?"

Aariz looked out of the window.

The mountains were turning dark beneath the evening sky.

"I don't know."

"That's all right."

He smiled faintly.

"You always say that."

"Because you keep trying to know everything immediately."

He laughed.

Then he became quiet.

After several minutes, he said, "I think I want to know who I am without all of them."

Elara glanced at him.

"That sounds like a good place to begin."

The road continued through the darkness.

Aariz watched the lights of distant houses appear and disappear between the trees.

For most of his life, he had defined himself through absences: the mother who died, the father who never became a father, the uncle he lost, the home that never felt like his, the affection he had spent years chasing.

Now, for the first time, he was beginning to wonder what might remain if he stopped defining himself by what had been taken.

He looked at his hands.

They were no longer the hands of a frightened boy waiting for someone to rescue him.

They were the hands that had built a business.

The hands that had learned how to repair broken things.

The hands that could still tremble sometimes.

The hands that, years earlier, had finally learned to accept tenderness from one person they trusted.

Elara reached across the centre console and briefly squeezed his hand.

Aariz squeezed back.

Neither spoke.

For once, silence did not need to explain itself.

Chapter Eight

What Kindness Can Teach a Damaged Mind

Success arrived gradually enough that Aariz barely noticed it at first.

The second workshop came before he felt ready for it. Then a third. His name began travelling through conversations he wasn't part of, passed from one customer to another whenever someone needed work done properly and didn't want excuses. He learned to negotiate without shouting, to refuse unreasonable demands without feeling guilty, and to fire people when necessary without humiliating them.

The last lesson was particularly difficult.

For years, Aariz had believed that being kind meant allowing people access to him. Elara slowly dismantled that belief.

"You can care about someone and still say no," she told him one afternoon when he was complaining about an employee who repeatedly took advantage of his generosity.

"But he needs the money."

"So do you."

"He has children."

"You can help him without allowing him to damage your business."

Aariz looked irritated.

“You make everything sound easy.”

“I don't think it's easy. I think it's necessary.”

He sat quietly for a moment.

Then he called the employee and changed the arrangement.

It was uncomfortable.

It was also fair.

That evening, Aariz wrote in his notebook:

Kindness without boundaries becomes another way of abandoning yourself.

He stared at the sentence for a long time before underlining it.

His relationship with Elara continued to deepen in ways that neither of them needed to name.

She remained the first person he called when something important happened, whether it was a new contract or a terrible mistake. She knew when he needed advice and when he simply needed someone to sit beside him while the disappointment passed. At times she still found him asleep against her shoulder during films, his head heavy against her, one hand loosely curled into the fabric of her sleeve. If he woke embarrassed, she would only smile and tell him to finish the movie.

He trusted her with physical closeness in a way he trusted almost nobody else.

The difference was visible.

A colleague once reached toward his hair jokingly after Aariz had successfully closed a difficult deal. Aariz immediately stepped back.

"Don't."

The man apologised, surprised by the intensity of the reaction.

Later that evening, Elara noticed Aariz rubbing the back of his neck.

"You all right?"

"Someone touched my hair."

She understood immediately.

"Without asking?"

He nodded.

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then she lifted her hand toward his hair and stopped several inches away.

"May I?"

Aariz smiled.

"You don't have to ask anymore."

"I know."

Her hand settled gently against his hair.

He closed his eyes.

That tiny ritual had become one of the quietest forms of trust in his life. She never took his comfort for granted, even after years of being allowed close.

Aariz's twenty-eighth year brought another kind of change.

Elara met someone.

She told him over dinner.

“I've been seeing someone.”

Aariz continued eating.

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Then he smiled.

“Is he good?”

She laughed softly. “That's your first question?”

“It seems important.”

“He's kind.”

“Good.”

“He makes me laugh.”

“Also good.”

“He listens.”

Aariz put his fork down.

“And?”

Elara looked at him.

“I think I love him.”

The words were gentle.

There was no accusation hidden inside them.

Still, something inside Aariz tightened.

He hated the sensation immediately.

Not jealousy exactly.

Fear.

The old fear that every important relationship eventually changed beyond his control.

He looked at his plate.

"I'm happy for you."

Elara watched him carefully.

"You don't have to say that because you think it's what I'm supposed to hear."

"I am happy for you."

"You can also be sad."

Aariz looked up.

She knew him too well.

He smiled faintly.

"Maybe I am."

She reached across the table.

He gave her his hand.

"I don't want anything to change."

"I know."

"But it will."

"Yes."

He looked away.

Elara squeezed his fingers.

"Change doesn't always mean loss."

He gave a quiet laugh.

"You really believe that?"

"I've learned it."

He thought about the years behind them: the café, the books, the long drives, the arguments, the birthdays, the nights when she had held him until his breathing slowed.

He understood what she was saying.

He simply wasn't ready to feel it yet.

When Elara eventually married, Aariz attended the wedding.

He stood among people he had known for years and watched her walk toward the man she had chosen.

She looked happy.

That mattered.

More than the ache.

More than the strange emptiness that appeared when he imagined the future differently.

He had once believed love meant being chosen above everyone else.

Elara had taught him something harder.

Sometimes loving someone meant being genuinely happy when they chose a life that did not revolve around you.

After the ceremony, she found him outside.

“You came.”

“Of course.”

She looked at him for a moment.

“You're all right?”

Aariz smiled.

“I'm sad.”

She nodded.

"But I'm happy."

Her eyes softened.

"That sounds about right."

He opened his arms.

She stepped into the hug.

For a moment, he held her tightly, breathing in the familiar scent of her perfume.

Then she rested her hand against the back of his head.

"I am so proud of you."

He closed his eyes.

There were no promises that things would remain exactly as they had been.

There didn't need to be.

Their relationship had survived too much truth to depend on illusion.

Marriage changed Elara's life, but it did not erase Aariz from it.

Their long drives became less frequent. Their spontaneous dinners required more planning. There were new responsibilities, new people, new rhythms.

Aariz initially struggled with that.

He called less often.

Then stopped calling altogether for several weeks because he was afraid of becoming a burden.

Elara eventually confronted him.

"You disappeared."

"I've been busy."

"No."

She knew him too well.

"You're afraid."

He sighed.

"Your life changed."

"Yes."

"And I don't want to interfere."

"You aren't interfering."

"I don't want to need you too much."

Elara became quiet.

Then she said, "Needing someone and respecting their life are not opposites."

Aariz looked down.

"You're still my family."

The word struck him.

Family.

Not because they shared blood.

Because they had chosen responsibility for one another without ownership.

He nodded.

"I missed you."

"I know."

"I'm still getting used to everything."

"You're allowed."

She reached toward him.

Aariz leaned into the gesture before her hand reached him.

Her fingers moved gently through his hair.

He smiled.

The gesture was familiar, but it no longer felt like the only place safety existed.

That was the change Elara had been waiting for.

Aariz could miss her without collapsing.

He could love her without needing to possess her.

He could watch her build a life with someone else and still know that what they had was real.

For years, she had been the place where he felt safe.

Now he was beginning to carry some of that safety with him.

His business expanded rapidly after that.

Aariz began investing rather than simply earning. He hired people better than himself in areas he did not understand. He learned that leadership was not knowing every answer but knowing whom to ask.

Money accumulated.

Then multiplied.

He bought a larger home.

A better car.

Properties.

Investments.

Things that would once have seemed impossible.

Yet sometimes, standing in a beautiful room surrounded by things he had purchased himself, he would remember the storage room behind the boxes.

The boy sleeping beside discarded furniture.

The child who had once wondered whether anybody would notice if he disappeared.

He no longer pitied that boy.

He felt tenderness toward him.

That was new.

One evening, while cleaning an old cupboard, Aariz found the blue notebook Elara had given him years earlier.

He opened it.

The pages were filled with old handwriting.

Some ambitions had happened.

Some had been abandoned.

Some had become things he no longer wanted.

Near the beginning, he found the sentence:

I want to know who I am when nobody is hurting me.

He sat down.

For a long time, he stared at it.

Then he turned to a blank page.

He wrote:

I think I'm finally finding out.

And beneath it, after a moment's hesitation:

I am not the boy they failed to love.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the city lights had begun appearing against the evening.

Aariz stood by the window and watched them.

He had spent years believing that one day somebody would finally give him permission to belong.

He no longer needed permission.

The life in front of him was not a replacement for the childhood he had lost.

Nothing could replace that.

But it was his.

And for the first time, that was enough.

Chapter Nine

A Man Begins Where the Boy Was Abandoned

The first time Aariz lost a serious amount of money, he was thirty minutes away from signing another contract.

The mistake was his.

He had trusted the wrong supplier, ignored two warnings from his accountant, and convinced himself that he could fix the problem before anyone noticed.

He couldn't.

By the time the numbers were laid out in front of him, the loss was large enough to hurt.

Not ruinous.

But large enough to remind him that money did not make him invincible.

He sat alone in his office after everyone had gone home.

The building was quiet.

Through the glass wall, the workshop lights reflected against the dark windows, turning the room into a strange double image: the man sitting at the desk and the faint outline of the boy he had once been.

His phone rang.

Elara.

He almost didn't answer.

He did.

“Hello?”

“You sound strange.”

“I made a mistake.”

“What kind?”

“A very expensive one.”

There was a pause.

“Are you safe?”

Aariz looked at the untouched glass of water beside him.

“Yes.”

“Then tell me what happened.”

He did.

She listened until he finished.

“Are you going to fix it?”

“Yes.”

“Then fix it.”

He smiled despite himself.

“That’s your advice?”

“My advice is that you are allowed to make a mistake without turning it into a verdict about yourself.”

Aariz leaned back.

“I hate failing.”

“I know.”

“I worked too hard for this.”

"I know that too."

He rubbed his eyes.

"What if I lose everything?"

"Then you'll still be Aariz."

The answer irritated him because it was so simple.

But it stayed with him.

He spent the next six weeks repairing the damage.

He renegotiated contracts. Took responsibility with the employees affected by his decision. Cut unnecessary expenses. Rebuilt the supplier network. Worked late without turning his exhaustion into cruelty toward anyone else.

The business recovered.

More importantly, he recovered differently.

The old Aariz would have hidden the mistake until someone discovered it and then blamed himself so viciously that anger became easier than shame.

This time he admitted it.

He learned.

He moved forward.

It felt strangely ordinary.

Perhaps that was what growing up looked like when nobody was watching.

As the years passed, Aariz became increasingly successful.

His company moved beyond repair work into manufacturing and technology. Investments followed. Then partnerships. Then international expansion.

There were interviews.

Photographs.

People who wanted to know how he had built everything so young.

They expected a story about ambition.

He gave them one.

He simply never told them the whole story.

He did not tell journalists about the storage room.

He did not tell investors about the nights he had slept with his back against a wall.

He did not tell them that, as a child, he had once stood outside a birthday celebration and wondered why happiness seemed to belong naturally to everyone except him.

Those things belonged to him.

They were not marketing.

They were not inspirational material.

They were memories.

And memories did not owe the world entertainment.

At twenty-nine, Aariz returned to Switzerland after several months of travelling for work.

The mountains were already beginning to gather snow.

He rented a car at the airport.

For years, long drives had meant escape.

Now they meant something else.

He drove without a destination.

The road curved through familiar country, past dark forests and small villages with warm yellow windows. Snow rested along the shoulders of the road, untouched except for the marks of tyres.

He stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the valley.

The engine ticked quietly as it cooled.

Aariz stepped outside.

Cold air entered his lungs.

He stood there for several minutes.

No phone.

No meeting.

No employee waiting for instructions.

No contract to sign.

Nothing to prove.

His phone vibrated.

A message from Elara.

Reached home?

He smiled.

Yes.

A second message appeared.

Eat something.

He laughed.

I just got out of the car.

That wasn't an answer.

He shook his head.

Some things, apparently, would never change.

He took a photograph of the mountains and sent it to her.

Beautiful.

Her reply came quickly.

You finally looked up.

Aariz stared at the screen.

Then he put the phone away.

He looked at the mountains again.

She was right.

He had spent so many years looking ahead because looking backward hurt.

He had forgotten that looking around was also possible.

His thirtieth birthday approached quietly.

He did not announce it.

He had never been particularly interested in birthdays.

Elara knew.

So did everyone else who mattered to him.

That morning, he woke before sunrise.

For a few seconds he did not know why he felt unsettled.

Then he remembered.

Thirty.

He walked into the kitchen.

A small box sat on the table.

There was a note attached.

He knew the handwriting before he opened it.

For the boy who once thought nobody would remember.

Inside was a simple fountain pen.

Nothing extravagant.

Aariz stood there holding it.

His throat tightened.

Elara had always understood something about gifts that money could not teach.

The value was never in what they cost.

It was in what they remembered.

He called her.

“You didn't have to do this.”

“I know.”

He laughed softly.

“You're impossible.”

“Happy birthday.”

He sat down.

For a while, neither spoke.

Then Aariz said, “Thirty feels strange.”

“How?”

“I thought I'd feel different.”

“You probably do. You just don't know it yet.”

He looked at the pen.

“I used to think if I became successful enough, I'd stop thinking about everything.”

“And?”

"I still think about it."

Elara was quiet.

"That's not failure, Aariz."

"I know."

"You've stopped letting the past decide what happens next."

He looked toward the window.

Snow was falling.

Not heavily.

Just enough to soften the edges of the street.

"I used to think surviving was the whole point."

"And now?"

He considered the question.

"Now I think surviving was only the beginning."

There was a pause.

Then Elara said, softly, "I'm proud of you."

His eyes closed.

He smiled.

"I know."

That evening, Aariz went back to the house where he had spent much of his childhood.

He had avoided it for years.

Not because he was afraid.

Because he had never known what he would feel.

The building looked smaller than he remembered.

The corridor seemed narrower.

The ceiling lower.

Even the room that had once felt endless now seemed almost painfully ordinary.

An old relative recognised him.

There was surprise.

Then awkward conversation.

Questions about his business.

Questions about money.

Questions about where he lived.

Nobody knew what to say about everything that had happened between childhood and now.

Aariz didn't blame them.

He walked through the house slowly.

His old room was no longer his room.

Of course it wasn't.

It had become storage again.

He stood in the doorway.

There were boxes against the wall.

For a moment, the years folded strangely.

He could almost see the boy who had slept there.

Small.

Angry.

Terrified.

Trying to become invisible.

Aariz did not walk away.

He entered.

His fingers brushed the edge of an old cupboard.

Then he sat on the floor.

He stayed there until the room stopped feeling like a threat.

He did not forgive everyone.

He did not need to.

He did not suddenly discover that everything had happened for a reason.

Some things had simply been wrong.

Some adults had failed him.

Some people had hurt him.

That truth did not require revenge.

It required honesty.

Aariz stood.

Before leaving, he looked around once more.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

He wasn't sure whether he was speaking to the child or to himself.

Then he corrected it.

"No."

His voice was steadier this time.

"You did well."

He walked out.

Later that night, he called Elara.

"I went back."

"To the house?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"Small."

She laughed.

"I know."

"I thought I'd feel something dramatic."

"And?"

"I just felt tired."

"That sounds human."

He smiled.

Outside his window, the mountains disappeared into darkness.

For years he had imagined healing as a moment when everything inside him would finally become quiet.

He had been wrong.

The memories were still there.

The anger sometimes returned.

Certain smells could still pull him backward. Certain voices could still make his shoulders tighten. There were still nights when he woke from dreams he couldn't remember.

But the past no longer held the steering wheel.

That was enough.

Aariz looked at the pen Elara had given him.

He opened a fresh notebook.

For several minutes, he did not write.

Then he began.

I spent years waiting for somebody to tell me that my life mattered.

He stopped.

Crossed the sentence out.

Started again.

My life mattered before I knew how to prove it.

He put the pen down.

Outside, snow continued falling over the Swiss streets.

Inside, Aariz sat quietly in the room he had built for himself.

Not rich.

Not successful.

Not damaged.

Not exceptional.

Just a man who had finally stopped asking the world for permission to exist.

And somewhere inside him, the boy who had once been abandoned was beginning to understand that he had never been the one who needed to be ashamed.

Chapter Ten

The Life He Never Thought He Deserved

By thirty, Aariz had acquired the kind of life people liked to photograph.

The house overlooked the mountains. There was a garage large enough to hold more cars than he actually owned, an office with glass walls, a kitchen he rarely used, and a dining table designed for twelve people even though he usually ate at one end of it.

His company had grown beyond anything he had imagined during those first years at the workshop. There were offices in different cities, employees whose salaries depended on decisions he made before breakfast, lawyers who used words he sometimes had to ask them to explain, and accountants who occasionally reminded him that buying another property simply because he liked the view was not a financial strategy.

He had money.

More than enough.

And, occasionally, it still amused him.

Aariz could remember standing outside a shop as a teenager, staring through the glass at a pair of expensive shoes he knew he couldn't afford. Now he could buy the entire shop without needing to check his account.

The irony was not lost on him.

Neither was the fact that he still sometimes hesitated before buying something for himself.

One afternoon, his assistant placed three watches on his desk.

"Which one do you want?"

Aariz looked at them.

"They're all watches."

"Yes."

"They all tell the same time."

His assistant smiled. "You asked me to shortlist them."

"I did."

"And?"

Aariz picked up the least expensive one.

"This."

"You're sure?"

"It's a watch, not a personality transplant."

She laughed.

"Fine."

After she left, Aariz looked at the watch again.

He had once believed expensive things would make him feel important.

They didn't.

They simply became things.

A beautiful car remained a beautiful car.

A house remained a house.

Money solved problems that money could solve.

It did not answer the questions that had followed him since childhood.

So he stopped asking it to.

His wealth also changed the way people approached him.

Relatives who had once forgotten his birthday now remembered it weeks in advance.

People who had called him difficult as a boy suddenly described him as hardworking.

Someone once introduced him at a dinner as "the self-made success story of the family."

Aariz nearly laughed.

His uncle had taught him to repair machines.

Elara had taught him how to sit at a table without apologising for taking up space.

The garage owner had taught him that a broken compressor could be fixed if you understood where to look.

Aunt had once quietly left food outside his bedroom when he refused to come downstairs.

There had been people who had helped him.

There had also been people who had hurt him.

He refused to turn either group into a convenient story.

At a family gathering, one of his cousins slapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"You've changed, Aariz. You don't visit anymore."

Aariz looked at him.

"You don't call."

The cousin laughed, assuming it was a joke.

Aariz smiled too.

Neither of them pursued it.

Some conversations didn't need a second sentence.

Elara visited Switzerland for a few days that winter.

She arrived with her husband and stayed at a hotel nearby rather than at Aariz's house, despite his insistence.

"You have seven bedrooms," he complained.

"I also have a husband."

"He can have a bedroom."

She laughed.

"You're impossible."

They met for dinner instead.

The restaurant was quiet, warm, and softly lit. Outside, snow had begun falling against the windows.

Elara studied the menu.

Aariz watched her.

"You're still choosing food like you're preparing for an examination."

"I take food seriously."

"You once ate chips for dinner."

"That was different."

"You were twenty-five."

"I've matured."

"Clearly."

He smiled.

Their conversations had changed over the years.

There were still serious discussions, but they no longer needed to revolve around his childhood.

They argued about films.

Books.

Politics.

Travel.

Whether expensive restaurants were actually better than small family-owned places.

Elara accused him of becoming impossible to impress.

Aariz accused her of ordering dessert before dinner.

She denied it.

He showed her the menu.

She laughed so loudly that the couple at the next table glanced over.

For a while, Aariz simply watched her.

There had been years when every meeting with Elara carried the weight of what she represented to him.

Now she was simply Elara.

His family.

His friend.

The woman who stole fries from his plate and still remembered that he hated raisins.

It was strangely comforting.

The next morning, Aariz went to work early.

One of the younger employees was sitting outside his office, staring at a spreadsheet.

"You've been looking at that for twenty minutes," Aariz said.

The man looked up quickly.

"I'm trying to understand it."

"Do you?"

"No."

"Good."

The employee looked confused.

Aariz pulled up a chair.

"Then don't pretend you do. Show me where you're stuck."

They worked through the numbers together.

Halfway through, the employee made a mistake.

He froze.

Aariz remembered that expression.

The instinct to hide.

The expectation that a mistake would become a judgment about the person who made it.

He closed the laptop.

"Again."

The employee looked nervous.

"You're not angry?"

"I didn't hire you because I thought you'd never make mistakes."

Aariz reopened the file.

"I hired you because I thought you'd learn."

The young man nodded.

They continued.

Nothing extraordinary happened.

The spreadsheet was fixed.

The employee returned to his desk.

Aariz went back to his own work.

Yet something about the morning stayed with him.

Not because he had become some perfect leader.

Because he remembered what it felt like to be young, frightened, and certain that one mistake could cost you your place at the table.

He knew what kind of manager he wanted to be.

That was enough.

That evening, he cooked.

Badly.

The pasta was overcooked, the sauce too salty, and the kitchen looked as though a small argument had taken place between several vegetables.

Elara called halfway through.

"What are you doing?"

"Cooking."

There was a pause.

"Should I call emergency services?"

"Very funny."

“What are you making?”

“Pasta.”

“Why?”

“Because I can.”

“That doesn't answer the question.”

Aariz looked at the ruined saucepan.

“I wanted to.”

That quieted her.

Then she said, “Good.”

He smiled.

They stayed on the phone while he tried to rescue dinner.

She told him to add water.

He added too much.

She told him to lower the heat.

He forgot.

Eventually he ate it anyway.

“It’s terrible,” he admitted.

“I knew it.”

“You could at least lie.”

“I respect you too much.”

He laughed.

When the call ended, the kitchen was still a mess.

Aariz didn't call anyone to clean it.

He washed the dishes himself.

It took fifteen minutes.

He stood at the sink, sleeves rolled to his elbows, looking out through the window at the snow-covered mountains.

There was no audience.

No photograph.

No achievement attached to the moment.

Just warm water, dirty plates, and the quiet house behind him.

He found himself thinking about the boy who had once eaten cold leftovers alone.

The thought came and went.

He kept washing.

A week later, he received an invitation to speak at a university.

The subject was entrepreneurship.

He almost declined.

Then he remembered dropping out after Class 8.

He accepted.

The lecture hall was full.

Students watched him with the particular attention people give to someone whose life sounds improbable when compressed into a résumé.

One student raised her hand.

"Mr. Aariz, what was the biggest thing that helped you become successful?"

He considered the expected answers.

Discipline.

Risk.

Hard work.

Persistence.

All true.

None sufficient.

"I made a lot of mistakes," he said. "I was lucky enough to meet people who corrected me without making me ashamed of learning."

The student wrote something down.

Another asked, "Did you always know you would succeed?"

Aariz smiled.

"No."

"What did you think you'd become?"

He looked across the room.

"For a long time?"

"Yes."

"Nothing in particular."

The room became quieter.

Aariz didn't elaborate.

He wasn't there to turn his childhood into a motivational speech.

He spoke about business instead.

About hiring people smarter than himself.

About failure.

About cash flow.

About treating employees fairly.

About the danger of believing that success gives you permission to become careless with other people's lives.

When the lecture ended, students gathered around him.

One young man waited until everyone else had left.

“I dropped out too,” he said.

Aariz looked at him.

“I don't know what I'm doing.”

“Neither did I.”

The young man smiled uncertainly.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“What did you do?”

Aariz picked up his coat.

“I started with what I knew.”

“What if I don't know anything?”

“Then start with what you can learn.”

The young man nodded.

Aariz left.

He didn't give him a grand speech.

He didn't promise that everything would work out.

Somebody had once given Aariz something more useful than certainty.

Someone had stayed long enough to let him figure out the next step himself.

He understood the value of that now.

That night, Aariz returned home alone.

He put his keys on the table.

Removed his coat.

Made tea.

Opened a book.

Outside, the snow kept falling.

His phone remained beside him.

He could call Elara.

He didn't need to.

He could call anyone.

He didn't need to.

He turned a page.

The house was quiet.

For once, quiet did not demand an explanation.

And somewhere between one page and the next, Aariz realised he had stopped measuring his life by the number of people sitting beside him.

He looked at the empty chair across the room.

Then back to the book.

And kept reading.

Chapter Eleven

The Day She Let Him Go

Aariz knew something was wrong before Elara said a word. It was a Sunday afternoon in late autumn.

The trees outside her apartment had turned copper and gold, and a thin rain had been falling since morning. Aariz had driven over with coffee and a box of pastries she liked. He had planned to complain about work, steal her food, and spend the afternoon doing nothing.

Instead, when she opened the door, she looked at him differently.

Not cold.

Not distant.

Just sad, but with a smile.

He noticed immediately.

"What happened?"

"Come inside."

He didn't move.

"Elara."

She took a breath.

"Please."

Something in her voice made him put the coffee down.

He followed her inside.

The apartment was quiet. Her husband was away for the weekend, and the television was off. A book lay open on the sofa. Two cups were already waiting on the table.

Aariz looked at them.

"You knew I was coming?"

"I asked you to come."

"That's not what I meant."

She smiled faintly.

"I know."

They sat opposite each other.

For several seconds neither spoke.

Rain tapped against the windows.

Then Elara said, "I think we need to change things."

Aariz stared at her.

"What things?"

"Us."

His face changed.

"No."

She hadn't expected him to answer so quickly.

"Aariz—"

"No."

His voice was quiet, but the fear underneath it wasn't.

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

“Then why are you saying this?”

She folded her hands in her lap.

“Because something has been happening for a long time.”

He shook his head.

“I don't understand.”

“I know.”

That hurt more than an accusation would have.

Elara looked at him carefully.

“You have built a beautiful life.”

Aariz said nothing.

“You work. You create things. You have people who depend on you. You travel. You read. You make decisions. You have friendships. You have a life.”

“Yes.”

“And yet whenever something happens, good or bad, you still look for me first.”

His eyes dropped.

“I like telling you things.”

“I know.”

“You're my family.”

“I know.”

“You're my best friend.”

“I know baby.”

His voice tightened.

“Then what's wrong?”

Elara swallowed.

"I think I've become too much of your world."

The room seemed to become smaller.

Aariz stared at her.

"No."

"Aariz."

"No."

He stood.

"You're not too much."

"I didn't say I was."

"Then don't make this about that."

She remained seated.

"I am not saying you have done anything wrong."

"Then what am I being punished for?"

"You're not being punished."

"It feels like it."

She looked down.

"I know."

He began pacing.

The same room he had once found comforting suddenly felt unbearable.

"You said you would always be here."

"I am."

"Then why are you leaving?"

Elara's eyes filled.

"Because sometimes staying exactly the same way is not the same thing as staying."

He stopped.

She continued before he could interrupt.

"I love you, Aariz."

His face crumpled slightly at the words.

"I love you like family. I love the man you've become. I love the boy I met before he knew what to do with kindness. I love the ridiculous things you say. I love your terrible cooking. I love that you still hate raisins. And I love the person I become when I am with you."

A tiny, broken laugh escaped him.

Then she said, "And because I love you, I can't keep being the place you run to every time the world becomes uncomfortable."

He looked away.

"I don't always run to you."

"You do."

"Not always."

"No."

She smiled through wet eyes.

"Not always."

He sat down again.

His hands had begun trembling.

"What are you asking me to do?"

"I'm asking you to step back with me."

"How far?"

She hesitated.

"Far enough for you to hear your own thoughts."

Aariz looked at her as though she had spoken in another language.

"I hear my thoughts."

"Sometimes you hear mine louder."

That silenced him.

She reached across the table.

He stared at her hand.

Then he took it.

Her fingers closed around his.

"I don't want to lose you," he whispered.

"You're not losing me."

"It feels exactly like losing you."

"I know."

He tightened his grip.

"Don't do this."

Her eyes closed briefly.

"I have to."

"No."

"Aariz—"

"No."

The word came out almost childlike.

He looked at her.

"I've already lost everyone."

Her expression broke.

“You haven't.”

“I can't do this again.”

“You're not doing it again.”

“You're leaving.”

“I am stepping back.”

“It's the same thing.”

“It isn't.”

“It is to me.”

She moved closer.

Aariz pulled his hand away and covered his face.

His shoulders began to shake.

He tried to stop.

He always tried to stop.

Elara had seen him cry before.

But this was different.

There was no anger underneath it.

No alcohol.

No performance.

No attempt to make anyone feel guilty.

Just grief.

Raw and frightened.

She sat beside him.

For several seconds she didn't touch him.

Then she asked quietly,

"Can I?"

He nodded.

She pulled him into her arms.

Aariz broke.

His forehead pressed against her shoulder.

His hands gripped the back of her sweater like a frightened child holding onto the only familiar thing in a collapsing room.

"Please don't go."

Elara held him tighter.

"I am not disappearing."

"Then stay."

"I will stay in your life."

"Not like this."

"No."

He cried harder.

She rested her cheek against his hair.

"It's okay, baby, it happens but I am so proud of you. You are a beautiful soul."

The words that had comforted him through so many years now made him cry even more.

He whispered against her shoulder,

"I don't know who I am without you."

Elara went still.

That was the sentence she had been afraid of.

She gently lifted his face.

"Yes, you do."

He shook his head.

"You just haven't met that version of yourself yet."

"I don't want to."

"I know."

"I want you."

Her eyes filled again.

"I know."

"I need you."

"I know."

She touched his cheek.

"But I need you to learn the difference between loving someone and needing them to hold your entire life together."

He looked at her.

"I don't want to become someone who doesn't need you."

"You won't."

"Then what changes?"

"You won't need me to tell you who you are."

He said nothing.

"You'll still call me. We'll still talk. I'll still come when you need me. I'll still tell you when you're being an idiot. I'll still remember your birthday. I'll still send you books I think you'll hate and make you read them anyway."

Aariz gave a wet, unwilling laugh.

"But there will be things you discover without me."

He looked at her.

“And some things you won't tell me.”

The thought visibly hurt him.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because they're yours.”

He stared at the floor.

Elara continued softly.

“I want you to travel somewhere because you want to see it, not because you want to show me.”

His jaw tightened.

“I want you to sit alone in a café and enjoy your coffee without wondering whether I would like the place.”

A tear slid down his face.

“I want you to fall in love with your own company.”

He looked at her.

“And if I hate it?”

“Then hate it.”

A small smile touched her mouth.

“But don't run from it.”

He lowered his head.

For a long time they sat there without speaking.

The rain continued against the glass.

Eventually Aariz asked,

“How long?”

Elara understood.

“I don't know.”

“That isn't fair.”

“No.”

“Six months?”

“I don't know.”

“A year?”

“I don't know.”

He looked frightened again.

“Then how am I supposed to know you're coming back?”

She reached for his hand.

“You're going to have to trust me.”

“That is very difficult for me.”

“I know.”

He laughed bitterly.

“That's a terrible thing to ask me.”

“I know.”

She squeezed his fingers.

“Which is why I'm asking you.”

He did not want to leave.

That was the worst part.

There was no dramatic door slam.

No betrayal.

No cruel words he could use later to make the separation easier.

Elara packed him the pastries he had brought.

He stared at her.

“Why are you doing that?”

“You'll forget to eat.”

“I might.”

“I know.”

At the door, he stopped.

She stood in front of him.

Neither moved.

Finally he said,

“Promise me something.”

“What?”

“Don't disappear.”

“I won't.”

“Call me.”

“I will.”

“Even if I don't call first.”

“I promise.”

He nodded.

His eyes were red.

She lifted her hand toward his hair, then paused.

He leaned forward himself.

Her fingers moved gently through it.

Neither spoke.

Then she kissed his forehead.

"Go home, Aariz."

He didn't move.

"Please."

He looked at her for several seconds.

Then he stepped backward.

One step.

Then another.

He reached the door.

She smiled at him, though tears were still sitting in her eyes.

"I love you."

His face tightened.

"I love you too."

He turned.

Walked down the corridor.

Reached the lift.

The doors opened.

He stepped inside.

At the last second, he looked back.

Elara was still standing in her doorway.

She raised her hand.

Aariz raised his.

The doors closed.

He stood alone inside the lift.

When the numbers began changing above him, he pressed his palm against his mouth.

His chest hurt.

Not metaphorically.

Physically.

A deep, aching pressure beneath his ribs.

He wanted the doors to open again.

He wanted to run back upstairs.

He wanted to tell her he would change anything.

He wanted to promise that he would need her less, call less, ask less, become stronger, become better, become whatever she needed him to become.

But beneath all those thoughts was the one truth he could not escape.

She wasn't asking him to become better for her.

She was asking him to discover who he was when she wasn't standing beside him.

The lift reached the ground floor.

The doors opened.

Aariz walked outside.

Rain had stopped.

The pavement was wet.

He stood beside his car and looked back at the building.

One window upstairs was still lit.

He could imagine her behind it.

He almost went back.

His hand reached toward the door handle.

Then stopped.

For the first time, the hardest thing he could do for someone he loved was not hold on.

He got into the car.

He didn't start the engine.

He sat there for several minutes, staring through the windshield.

Then his phone vibrated.

A message.

From Elara.

You don't have to become someone else.

Another message appeared.

Just become someone you know how to live with.

Aariz closed his eyes.

Then the final message:

I'll see you soon. I promise.

He pressed the phone against his chest.

And cried.

Not because she had stopped loving him.

Because she hadn't.

And sometimes the deepest kind of love was the one that could look at the person it had protected for years and finally say:

Now go find yourself.

Aariz started the car.

He drove home alone.

This time, he did not call her on the way.

Not because he didn't want to.

Because he understood that the silence between them was not an ending.

It was the beginning of something neither of them yet knew how to name.

Chapter Twelve

The Boy Who Stayed

The first morning after Elara left, Aariz woke before his alarm. For several seconds he did not remember why the room felt different.

Then he saw the empty chair beside the window.

He had grown accustomed to her presence in his life in ways he had never fully noticed. A message in the morning. A call while he drove. Her voice asking whether he had eaten. A photograph sent without explanation. A book left on his table. Her hand moving through his hair when words failed him.

Now there was nothing.

Not abandonment.

Not anger.

Just absence.

He lay still beneath the blanket and looked at the ceiling.

His phone was on the bedside table.

He could call her.

He didn't.

Not because he was trying to prove anything.

He simply knew she had asked him to learn how to stay with himself.

So he stayed.

The days that followed were not noble.

Some were ugly.

There were evenings when Aariz came home exhausted and stood in the kitchen without knowing what to cook. Once, he burned dinner badly enough that the smoke alarm screamed through the apartment.

He opened the windows, coughed, and laughed.

Then he ordered food.

Another night, he sat in his car outside his building for nearly an hour because going upstairs meant entering a quiet apartment.

He considered calling Elara.

Instead, he started the engine again.

He drove.

There was no destination.

He followed the road out of the city, through villages already dark, past houses glowing warmly behind curtains.

Snow began falling somewhere beyond the windshield.

Small flakes struck the glass and disappeared.

Aariz slowed down.

He remembered another night.

Another road.

Another boy.

A child walking through snow without a coat, without money, without knowing where he would sleep.

Aariz gripped the steering wheel.

He could still remember the cold.

He could still remember the humiliation.

He could still remember believing that the world would be better if he simply stopped needing anything from it.

But that boy had kept walking.

He had survived long enough to find books.

Long enough to find work.

Long enough to discover roads he had never imagined.

Long enough to meet Elara.

And now he had to keep walking without her beside him.

Aariz drove until the snow became heavier.

Then he turned around.

For the first time, he did not feel that turning back meant failure.

Months passed.

He continued working.

The company grew.

People argued with him. Employees disappointed him. Deals failed. New opportunities appeared. He made mistakes and corrected them.

Life became wonderfully ordinary.

He learned that adulthood was not one great transformation but hundreds of small decisions nobody applauded.

He began eating breakfast properly.

He stopped answering work messages at midnight.

He travelled alone.

He went to restaurants without feeling embarrassed by an empty chair opposite him.

He sat in cafés and read for hours.

Sometimes he still ordered two coffees before remembering.

Sometimes he caught himself reaching for his phone to tell Elara something.

Sometimes he sent the message.

Sometimes he didn't.

She never disappeared.

A short message would arrive every few weeks.

Eat properly.

How is the company?

Did you finish the book?

He always smiled when her name appeared.

He still hoped.

That part of him had not died.

Perhaps it never would.

There were nights when he imagined the possibility of her returning—not as a fantasy in which she rescued him, but simply as a woman walking back into his life because life had brought them together again.

He never made that hope a demand.

He kept it quietly.

Like a light left on in a distant room.

On his thirtieth birthday, Aariz woke before sunrise.

There was no party.

No crowd.

No photographs arranged for social media.

He made himself coffee.

Then he opened the drawer beside his bed.

Inside was an old blue notebook.

He had carried it through more years than he had expected.

The cover was faded.

The corners were bent.

He opened it.

The first pages belonged to a boy who had written his wishes as though wishes themselves were dangerous.

I want someone to wait for me.

Aariz ran his thumb across the page.

There were other sentences.

Angry ones.

Desperate ones.

Some were so young that reading them hurt.

Near the middle, he found a page written much later.

I want to know who I am when nobody is hurting me.

He smiled sadly.

He turned another page.

There was a small envelope tucked inside.

He had forgotten it was there.

His name was written across the front.

Aariz.

He opened it.

Inside was a short note.

The handwriting was unmistakable.

Elara.

His fingers trembled before he even read it.

There was no birthday speech.

No advice.

No explanation.

Only a few lines.

For the boy who once thought nobody would remember him.

Keep becoming.

Not for anyone.

Not even for me.

For yourself.

I am proud of you.

— Elara ❤️

Beneath the note lay a pen.

Simple.

Elegant.

Black.

And engraved across the metal in small golden letters was his name.

AARIZ

He stared at it for a long time.

Then he laughed once, softly, though his eyes had filled with tears.

He remembered another pen.

A much cheaper one.

A small gift from his uncle when he was a child.

He had kept that one too.

For years he had thought the important thing about being given something was the object.

He knew better now.

It was the act of remembering.

Someone had remembered his name.

Someone had thought of him when he was not there.

Someone had believed that there would be more pages for him to write.

Aariz placed the note carefully back inside the envelope.

He kept the pen.

That afternoon, he drove into the mountains.

The road was covered with a thin layer of snow.

The same country that had once seemed impossibly cold to a frightened child now stretched around him in enormous white silence.

The mountains rose on either side.

Pines stood heavy with snow.

The sky was beginning to turn gold.

Aariz stopped the car at an overlook.

He stepped outside.

The cold immediately touched his face.

For a while, he simply stood there.

His hands were in his coat pockets.

The engraved pen rested against his fingers.

He looked down at the snow beneath his shoes.

He remembered tiny shoes.

A child's footprints.

A boy walking because he had nowhere else to go.

He closed his eyes.

For once, he did not ask his mother why she had left.

He did not ask his father why he had never stayed.

He did not ask the family why they had not loved him differently.

He did not ask God why his life had begun that way.

Those questions belonged to another time.

Some answers would never come.

He had learned to live with that.

Aariz opened his eyes.

The mountains were glowing now.

He took the pen from his pocket.

He opened the blue notebook to a blank page.

For several moments he held the pen above it.

Then he wrote:

I stayed.

He looked at the words.

Nothing more came.

He closed the notebook.

Behind him, the car waited.

Ahead of him, the road disappeared around a bend and climbed higher into the mountains.

He thought of Elara.

He still loved her.

He did not know whether she would ever return to his everyday life.

He hoped she would.

That hope did not frighten him anymore.

Love could remain without becoming a chain.

Missing someone could hurt without destroying the person who missed them.

Aariz looked once toward the empty road.

Then he walked back to the car.

He placed the notebook on the passenger seat.

The pen lay on top of it, his name catching the last light.

He started the engine.

Snow began falling again.

The first flakes landed softly against the windshield, just as they had on another road many years ago.

But this time, Aariz was not a frightened boy walking through the snow because he had nowhere to belong.

He was a man choosing where to go.

The road curved ahead.

He put the car into gear.

And drove.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

If you have reached these final pages, you have travelled a long way with Aariz.

You have seen him as a child who wanted very little—someone to notice when he came home, someone to remember his birthday, someone to ask whether he had eaten, someone to make him feel that his existence mattered.

You have also seen the ways in which that longing followed him into adulthood.

This book was never meant to be a story about a broken boy who was magically repaired by one extraordinary person.

It is a story about what happens when a person grows up without learning the language of love, and what it can take to slowly learn it later.

Aariz's experiences are painful. Some are deliberately difficult to read. The neglect, humiliation, sexual abuse, loneliness, anger, alcohol, unhealthy relationships and desperate search for affection are not included to make suffering beautiful. They are there because childhood experiences can leave complicated traces in adulthood.

But there is something I hope you noticed.

Aariz was never the only thing that happened to him.

His trauma influenced him, but it did not become his identity.

His mistakes mattered, but they did not make him irredeemable.

His anger had a history, but that history did not excuse every choice he made.

And his need to be loved was never something shameful.

He simply did not yet know how to carry that need safely.

Elara, too, is not meant to represent a magical cure.

She does not save Aariz.

She does something quieter and, perhaps, more important: she shows him what affection can look like when it is consistent, respectful, patient and freely given. She listens. She sets boundaries. She celebrates small things. She teaches him that kindness does not require surrendering yourself.

And eventually, she has the courage to step away.

That part mattered deeply to me.

Sometimes loving someone means staying beside them.

Sometimes it means giving them enough space to discover who they are without you.

Aariz's story is therefore not about finding the one person who will make life bearable.

It is about learning that another person's love can illuminate a path without becoming the path itself.

If you have ever felt unwanted, forgotten, different, too much, not enough, difficult to love, or afraid that the worst things that happened to you have already decided the rest of your life, I hope you remember this:

What happened to you deserves to be acknowledged.

What you do with your life afterward still belongs to you.

And if you are carrying something heavy, please do not romanticise carrying it alone.

Real healing is not always beautiful.

Sometimes it is therapy.

Sometimes it is medication when clinically appropriate.

Sometimes it is learning to sleep properly, eat regularly, leave an unsafe relationship, apologise when you have caused harm, establish boundaries, ask for help, or simply make it through one difficult evening without returning to an old pattern.

Sometimes progress is almost invisible.

Please also remember that mental illness and trauma do not look the same in every person. A fictional character cannot represent every survivor, every family, or every psychological condition. Aariz is a character—not a clinical case study—and his journey should not be used to diagnose yourself or someone you know.

If parts of this book felt painfully familiar, please be gentle with yourself.

You are not weak because something hurt you.

You are not permanently damaged because you struggled afterward.

And you are not required to become extraordinary to prove that your life has value.

Sometimes the greatest victory is much quieter.

You stay.

You begin again.

You learn.

You choose differently.

You allow yourself to be loved.

And eventually, perhaps, you learn to offer some of that love to yourself.

I wrote this story for the people who were waiting for someone to come back.

For the children who learned to become quiet because being heard felt dangerous.

For the adults who still carry those children inside them.

For anyone who has ever wondered, Why wasn't I enough for them to love me?

And perhaps most of all, for the person who needs to hear:

You were never required to earn your right to exist.

Thank you for walking beside Aariz.

I hope when you close this book, you don't only remember the boy who was abandoned.

I hope you remember the man who stayed.

— Anjum J Parveen