

A Contemporary Romance About Love and Letting Go

The Road Back

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Chapter I

It was a small party, the kind that didn't try too hard. No loud music thumping through walls, no strangers filling every inch of space—just a familiar circle gathered at her cousin's apartment. Voices overlapped easily, laughter rising and settling into the room. Plates of homemade snacks sat on the coffee table, refilled without announcement, the kind of quiet attentiveness that didn't need to be pointed out.

Someone had put on old Hindi songs, low enough to allow conversation but present enough to stitch the evening together, each track slipping into the next like a memory no one had to name.

Mahira Sharma walked in without hesitation, slipping naturally into the room. Her cousin spotted her almost immediately.

"There you are," he said, pulling her into a quick hug. "I was about to call."

"You say that every time," Mahira laughed, slipping her bag onto a chair, her voice already folding into the room's rhythm.

Vibhav rolled his eyes but smiled. "Come, sit. Everyone's here."

Everyone wasn't everyone—just six or seven people, most of them familiar, a few new faces she could place loosely if she tried. Conversations converged but didn't compete, rising and dipping without urgency. It was easy to move between them, to listen, to join, to leave without explanation, to exist without being expected to hold anyone's attention..

She settled into a spot on the rug, cross-legged, leaning forward as someone narrated a wildly exaggerated office story, hands moving as much as their voice.

"...and then he copied everyone on the email," the storyteller said, throwing both hands into the air. "Everyone. Including the client."

Groans and laughter rippled through the room.

"No," Mahira laughed.

"Including the client!"

"You're making that up."

"I wish I was."

"Did he survive?" she asked.

"Barely. He's still apologising."

"I'd have resigned before lunch," Mahira said, making everyone laugh.

"Exactly what we told him."

Someone passed her a plate without asking; she took it absently, more engaged in the unfolding story than in what she was eating. Across the room, two others had slipped into a quieter conversation, while near the window someone hummed along to the music under their breath, off-key but unselfconscious.

At some point, her cousin nudged her lightly, the gesture subtle enough that it didn't disrupt the rhythm of the room so much as redirect Mahira's attention within it.

"You haven't met Hamza."

Mahira followed his gaze and found him seated on one side. He was close enough to be part of the conversation, angled toward it, listening with an ease that didn't require him to assert himself into it.

"Hamza," her cousin called, "this is Mahira."

He looked at her then, and Mahira felt warmth rise behind her ears.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she replied.

"You've been here before?" he asked.

"A few times," she said. "You?"

"Too many."

There was something understated in the way he said it.

She tilted her head slightly. "That sounds like a complaint."

"It isn't," he said, and this time there was the faintest suggestion of a smile. "It's simply a fact."

Mahira smiled.

Vibhav disappeared into the kitchen a few minutes later. Mahira and Hamza kept talking. He spoke only when he had something to add, his dry observations arriving unexpectedly and earning the sharpest laughs. Before long, their conversation had drifted away from the rest of the group.

Another familiar song came on, drawing Mahira's attention for a moment.

"I haven't heard this in years," she said.

Hamza smiled. "My mother still plays it whenever she's cleaning the house."

Mahira smiled. "Mine used to put it on every Sunday morning."

"Funny how everyone seems to grow up with the same soundtrack."

"How do you know him?" Mahira asked, nodding toward the kitchen.

"College," he said. "We've known each other forever."

"That explains why he didn't introduce us properly," Mahira said, a trace of amusement in her voice.

"What would a proper introduction be?" he asked, his attention fully on her now.

"I don't know. Something more than just names."

"Okay," he said, leaning back slightly, pretending to weigh the question with exaggerated seriousness. "Mahira, this is Hamza. He occasionally shows up, eats everything on the table, and leaves without helping clean."

She laughed, the sound immediate and unguarded. "That's better."

"And you?" he asked.

"He'll say I talk too much."

"Do you?"

"Only when I'm comfortable."

He held her gaze for a moment. "So... right now?"

"Undecided," she said, smiling in a way that didn't quite resolve the answer.

There was plenty of alcohol, yet the ease felt entirely natural. No one seemed interested in forcing a sense of looseness or smoothing edges that didn't exist. The ease came from the people themselves, from the

familiarity of the space, from the way the evening allowed pauses without discomfort and laughter without excess.

At some point, someone leaned back, stretching their arms overhead, and said, "Okay, how are people getting back?"

"Bikes," her cousin replied from across the room. "We'll just drop everyone."

Addresses were exchanged, a few halfhearted protests ignored, and within moments everyone knew who was riding with whom.

"Hamza, you take Mahira," her cousin said, already halfway turned toward the door as he reached for his keys.

Mahira glanced at him, the moment small but noticeable.

"You okay with that?" he asked, his tone even, leaving the decision open rather than assumed.

"Yeah," she said. "Of course."

She adjusted her scarf as she stepped out, taking in the stillness of the street, the motorcycles lined neatly along the curb under the dim wash of streetlights.

"Helmet?" he asked, holding one out to her.

She took it and fastened the strap beneath her chin. "You're responsible."

"Always," he said, though something in his tone suggested he didn't entirely believe his own answer.

She swung onto the seat behind him. For a brief second, she hesitated, then placed her hand lightly on his shoulder.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yeah."

The bike started, its low hum cutting cleanly through the quiet of the street as he pulled away.

After a few minutes, she leaned slightly closer, just enough for her voice to reach him without being raised. "You can take a longer route if you want," she said.

He glanced at her briefly through the mirror, just enough to register both her expression and the ease with which she had said it. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Yeah."

He didn't answer in words, but at the next signal, instead of continuing straight, he turned.

Traffic thinned until the roads belonged mostly to them. Shuttered shops passed in quiet succession, and the occasional late-night tea stall cast a warm pool of light onto otherwise deserted streets. A stray dog wandered lazily across an empty intersection, making Hamza slow almost instinctively before easing the bike forward again.

Mahira smiled to herself as he slowed for the dog. Her hand found its way from his shoulder to his waist, her fingers curling lightly into the fabric of his hoodie as they picked up speed.

"Hungry?" he asked, looking at her again in the rearview mirror.

"A little," she admitted.

"There's a place nearby. Opens early."

"How early?"

"Now."

She smiled. "Let's go."

Her cousin was already there when they arrived, seated at a small metal table with his phone in hand. He looked up at the sound of the bike

pulling in, his expression settling into a frown that carried more curiosity than concern.

"Wait," he said, "What?"

Mahira pulled off her helmet, a laugh slipping out at the sight of her cousin's reaction.

"You were supposed to drop her," Vibhav said, turning to Hamza with narrowed eyes that didn't quite hide his amusement.

"I was," he replied evenly.

"And?"

"And then we came here."

Vibhav looked between them, his suspicion softening into something more knowing. "Of course you did."

"So," he said, "should I pretend this was always the plan?"

"Probably."

"Good. Makes me look organised."

Hamza looked up. "That's ambitious."

Mahira slid into the chair across from him, still smiling.

Breakfast arrived without delay—pav still warm, crisp at the edges, and steel tumblers of hot tea. For a while the conversation stayed on ordinary things—someone's impossible manager, weekend plans that would probably never happen, whether the café still made the best chai in the neighbourhood.

It was easy in the same way the evening had been. The conversation moved naturally from one person to another without anyone trying to hold onto it for long.

After breakfast, they stepped out into the morning air, lighter now, the city beginning to settle into its daytime rhythm.

“I’ll drop you now,” Hamza said.

Mahira nodded.

This time, the ride was shorter and more direct. Neither of them felt the need to stretch it any further.

When they reached her gate, she got off, removing her helmet slowly.

“Thanks,” she said.

“For breakfast?” he asked.

“For the ride.”

He nodded, accepting it without adding to it. There was a brief pause.

“I’ll see you,” he said, the words carrying intention rather than question.

“Yeah,” she replied.

She walked through the gate without looking back immediately. When she finally did, he was still there, waiting until she disappeared inside before starting the bike again.



Chapter 2

The next time they met was three days later, without buildup or negotiation, the interval passing quietly until it resolved itself into something simple. His message had been brief, almost indifferent in its brevity—“*Here.*”—arriving without preface, because anything more would have been unnecessary.

Mahira moved toward the window almost instinctively, her hand lifting the curtain just enough to look out without fully revealing herself. He was there, exactly as the message had implied, sitting on his bike with an ease that suggested he had no intention of filling the wait with impatience. His helmet rested loosely in his hand, one foot planted on the ground, the other angled slightly. There was nothing performative in the way he occupied the moment, yet his presence was difficult to ignore.

For a brief second, she simply watched him. The thought came to her uninvited, clear and immediate—that he looked devastatingly handsome like this. She looked away almost at once.

Taking a quiet breath, she picked up her bag, slipped on her sandals, and headed downstairs before she could linger on the thought any longer.

When she stepped outside, he looked up at the sound of the gate. Mahira walked over and stood beside the bike, adjusting the strap of her helmet with small, precise movements.

“Comfortable?” Hamza asked, his tone even.

She nodded, glancing up briefly. “Yeah.”

He watched her for a moment, not in a way that drew attention to itself or made her aware of being watched, but with a kind of quiet attentiveness that felt natural rather than intrusive. Then he reached for the handlebars and straightened slightly.

She climbed on behind him, placing one hand lightly on his shoulder before settling into place.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Hmm,” she replied, the sound carrying agreement without needing to shape it into a full response.

The engine came alive beneath them, a low vibration that travelled upward through her, through the narrow space between them, and then, without any sense of abruptness, they moved forward together, easing into the quiet rhythm of the night.

As the bike picked up speed, she tightened her grip slightly. He noticed and eased his pace almost without thinking.

At the next signal he turned instead of continuing straight, choosing the longer road without mentioning it.

Mahira let herself ease into it, allowing her body to adjust naturally to the pace and balance of the ride. Her hand slipped from his shoulder to a more instinctive hold at his waist, her fingers curling lightly into the fabric of his T-shirt, resting there with a quiet certainty. Her other hand

found its place near his arm, brushing against him now and then as the bike leaned gently into the curves of the road, each contact brief and unremarked.

The wind carried a sharper coolness, brushing past with more insistence, and Mahira found herself leaning in slightly, closer than before, the movement unplanned, her chin almost grazing his shoulder for a brief second before she eased back again.

As they approached a turn, he slowed, choosing it without needing to, allowing the route to drift away from the more open roads into something narrower. Trees lined this stretch, their branches leaning inward and narrowing the space slightly, their shadows stretching across the asphalt in irregular patterns that changed as they moved through them. The air changed here, carrying the sound of leaves rustling overhead and a scent that felt earthier, greener, until the city itself seemed to loosen its hold just enough for something quieter to emerge.

"This is nice," she said softly, her voice adjusting to the quiet without effort.

"Yeah," he replied, the word carried back to her through the wind, low and steady, shaped as much by the moment as by the distance between them.

When he finally slowed to a stop, it felt almost unexpected. The movement had been so steady that she had forgotten it could end at all. Mahira blinked, the change registering a second later, like she was returning from somewhere just slightly removed from the present.

"Why did we stop?" she asked, her voice quieter now, shaped by the lingering stillness.

"Thought we should," he said, without overexplaining it. The decision seemed complete on its own.

Mahira looked at him, "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

She laughed. "Fine. Another one."

"Go ahead."

"Why didn't you ask?"

He looked mildly puzzled. "Ask what?"

"Why I wanted the longer route that day."

He was silent for a moment before answering. "I figured you'd tell me if you wanted to."

"And if I didn't?"

He shrugged lightly. "Then it probably wasn't my business."

She studied him for a second, fitting that answer into the picture she was slowly building of him. "You really don't ask unnecessary questions, do you?"

"Not usually."

"Doesn't that make you curious?"

"Sometimes." He smiled faintly. "But being curious and needing an answer aren't always the same thing."

She looked away for a moment, a smile touching her face before she realised it. "For what it's worth," she said quietly, "I wasn't trying to get anywhere. I just wasn't ready for the ride to end."

His expression softened almost imperceptibly. "I'm glad you asked for the longer route," he said.

She glanced around, taking in the space they had paused in. A small tea stall stood at the corner, while a kettle steamed gently on the stove, the sound low and continuous. The man behind the counter barely looked up, their presence unremarkable, just another pair passing through the night. Neither of them moved for a moment.

Mahira removed her helmet, letting her hair fall loose around her shoulders, slightly wind-tangled, the movement unhurried as she adjusted back into stillness. She exhaled, a small smile forming as the moment settled.

"That was..." She smiled and let the sentence trail away.

"Yeah," he said, the meaning seeming to carry through anyway.

After a pause, she leaned lightly against the bike, crossing her arms as she looked at him, her expression thoughtful but easy.

Neither of them suggested it aloud but after another quiet moment, they drifted toward the counter as though the stop had always included tea.

They got tea, the kind poured quickly into small glasses that held the heat longer than expected, forcing them to sip with care as they blew lightly across the surface, the steam rising between them and dissolving into the night air.

"You always know places like this?" she asked.

Hamza glanced around the nearly empty stall. "Not always. Just the ones that stay open long enough for people who don't feel like going home yet."

She smiled at that. "That sounds strangely specific."

"Probably because it is."

"So this is one of your regular stops?"

He nodded. "Sometimes I come here after work. Sometimes after a long ride." He looked down at his tea. "Nobody expects conversation here. That's nice."

"And tonight?"

He looked back at her, the faintest smile returning. "Tonight I'm glad there was."

She tilted her head slightly, studying him with a kind of quiet observation that didn't intrude so much as take note, placing something rather than questioning it.

"You make it sound like that's unusual."

He gave a small shrug. "Maybe."

"That's a shame," she said.

"Is it?" he asked, the hint of a response forming more in his expression than in the words themselves.

"It is," she replied simply, without softening it or turning it into a joke.

He smiled then, slower this time, more deliberate, the comment catching him slightly off guard. "Noted."

The night seemed to settle more fully around them as they stood there, the earlier movement giving way to stillness, with only the occasional car passing by, its headlights cutting briefly through the darkness before fading again, leaving the space unchanged. The tea stall carried on in its own rhythm, the soft clink of glasses and the low murmur of the kettle continuing without interruption.

A few people stopped briefly at the stall, ordered their tea, exchanged a few familiar words with the owner, and left again without lingering. Hamza greeted one of them with a small nod, receiving one in return before the man disappeared down the road.

"You know everyone here?" Mahira asked.

He shook his head. "Not really."

"They seem to know you."

"You come often enough, people stop wondering who you are."

She smiled. "That sounds like the closest thing to a life philosophy I've heard from you."

"Could be."

Mahira took another careful sip before looking at him over the rim of her glass. "You know," she said, "if this tea turns out to be terrible, I'm blaming you."

Hamza looked at his own glass with exaggerated consideration. "Fair."

She laughed. "That's it? No defence?"

"I thought I'd wait until you've finished it."

She took another sip, pretending to weigh her verdict. "You're lucky," she said finally. "It's actually good."

"I know."

When they got back on the bike, her hand found his waist without hesitation. This time neither of them seemed to notice it.

As they rode back into the city, the streets slowly filled again with traffic, lights, and people beginning their day. Neither of them tried to fill the silence. By the time he stopped outside her house, it no longer felt unfamiliar to be there together.

This would not be the last time.



Chapter 3

They began texting without ever discussing it.

The conversation simply settled into place between them, appearing first in scattered moments throughout the day before becoming something more consistent. Neither of them seemed particularly aware of when it started happening. One day they exchanged a few messages after work, and a few days later they were carrying conversations across entire afternoons.

It was about things that barely seemed worth mentioning.

A photograph of his morning coffee appeared on her screen at 9:17 a.m., the coffee itself pale and suspiciously watery, held in a styrofoam glass.

Bad decision, he wrote.

Looks like one, she replied, studying the photograph for another second before adding, *Why would you trust office coffee?*

Optimism.

That explains a lot.

The exchange should have ended there. Instead, it drifted into a conversation about bad office cafeterias, which somehow became a discussion about workplace survival skills, before dissolving naturally when both of them got pulled back into work.

Later that afternoon, when traffic trapped Hamza at a signal for nearly three full cycles, he found himself opening their chat again without really considering why.

This route is cursed.

Mahira glanced at the message during a meeting she was only half paying attention to.

Take the service lane after the flyover, she replied. You'll save at least ten minutes.

I don't trust shortcuts.

You trusted office coffee.

Fair point.

They never expected immediate replies. Conversations simply resumed whenever they resumed.

Over the next week, the exchanges became more frequent—woven more naturally through the day without becoming any longer, a comment here, a photograph there, a passing observation, or a question that didn't particularly require an answer yet received one anyway.

They developed a habit of sending each other things they would normally notice alone—a particularly ridiculous corporate email, an oddly shaped cloud, a typo on a restaurant sign, a playlist recommendation, or a screenshot of a weather forecast confidently predicting sunshine while rain poured outside. None of it carried any real importance, and perhaps that was exactly why it felt so easy; the conversation never depended on significance, only on the simple impulse to share.

A few days later, music became the subject when Hamza sent her a playlist without explanation or warning, just a link appearing in the middle of the day that Mahira eventually opened during lunch out of curiosity.

Five songs later, she returned to the chat.

Your playlist is deeply concerning.

Deeply concerning how?

I'm trying to determine whether you're secretly forty-eight years old.

That feels excessive.

One of these songs was released before I was born.

It's a classic.

It's poor judgment.

Hamza laughed aloud in his office, drawing a brief glance from his father that he ignored completely as he returned to the conversation. The argument continued for nearly an hour because they were having far more fun than either had expected.

The following week they discovered another difference, this one surfacing during a conversation about travel when Mahira casually mentioned that she planned to reach the airport at least three hours before her flight.

Three hours? Hamza replied.

Minimum.

Why?

Because missing a flight would be inconvenient.

He stared at the screen.

What time do you usually reach?

Depends.

Depends on what?

Traffic. Check-in. Mood.

Mood?

Sometimes ninety minutes. Sometimes thirty.

Thirty minutes?

I've made every flight so far.

That is not the point.

Then what is the point?

The point is reducing unnecessary risk.

Hamza laughed.

You sound like a risk assessment report.

You sound like someone who enjoys creating problems.

There was a brief pause.

I once reached five hours early, she admitted.

Five??

International flight.

Still. What did you do for five hours?

Read. People-watch. Buy overpriced coffee.

You say that like it's normal.

It is normal.

It isn't.

Those conversations gradually changed their first impressions of each other. Mahira had assumed Hamza was controlled and reserved; instead,

she discovered his funniest observations were often delivered with no sign that he had intended them to be funny at all.

Similarly, Hamza discovered that Mahira was far less intimidating than she had initially appeared. When they had first met, she had seemed composed almost to the point of severity, but now he knew she possessed a level of exasperation over small workplace inconveniences that made her far more human than his first impression had suggested.

He knew she had strong opinions about stationery.

You cannot have strong opinions about pens.

You absolutely can.

They're pens.

You don't understand.

Clearly.

The conversation lasted twenty-seven messages—he counted—and somewhere along the way, without really noticing when it had happened, texting her became automatic.

One evening, Mahira sent him a photograph of the sky outside her office just before she left. The clouds had turned a deep shade of orange, the last light catching unevenly along their edges.

You'd like this, she wrote.

A few minutes later, his reply arrived.

I'm looking at the same sky from the parking lot.

She smiled before typing.

You are?

His response came almost immediately. Another photograph appeared beneath hers, taken from a different part of the city. The colours were

the same, but the buildings below them were different enough to make the distance between the two views obvious.

Okay, that's actually nice.

I thought you'd appreciate evidence.

She looked between the two photographs for a moment.

Funny.

What?

Same sky. Different day.

He paused before replying.

Different view.

She looked at the screen a little longer than she meant to before slipping the phone into her bag and heading home.

You'll understand this.

That was how the message began, and a few minutes later her reply appeared on his screen.

Oh no. What happened?

And somehow that was enough. The story became funnier in the telling, the irritation lighter once it was shared, and the day itself slightly easier to carry. Neither of them gave it much thought. It had simply become part of the day.

Somewhere between the jokes, the terrible coffee, the traffic complaints, and the endless workplace observations, it became natural to tell each other about whatever the day happened to bring.

One afternoon Mahira complained that someone had taken her favorite mug from the office kitchen.

Again, she typed.

Again? Hamza replied.

Third time this month.

The conversation should have disappeared along with the inconvenience itself, but instead it evolved into a running joke, and a week later, in the middle of his lunch break, Hamza messaged her with an update request, as if the matter were still under investigation.

Status of the mug?

Recovered.

The same thing happened elsewhere. A throwaway comment she had once made about hating presentations resurfaced several days later on the morning of an important meeting, reminding her that he seemed to remember details she often assumed everyone else would forget.

Good luck today.

I don't need luck.

Confident?

Terrified.

There you are.

She smiled despite herself. He remembered details—not in a dramatic way or one that felt performative, but simply because he listened when she spoke, and over time she realized she had begun doing the same.

A colleague he had once mentioned by name became someone she could reference weeks later without explanation, and a project he had complained about became something she followed through its various frustrations, asking for updates like she had been involved from the beginning.

The rain arrived unexpectedly one evening.

Hamza sent her a photograph of the street outside his office without any caption, just wet pavement reflecting the glow of traffic lights and

blurred headlights stretching across the road in long streaks of color. Mahira looked at it for longer than she intended before responding, eventually sending a voice note instead of a text.

The sound of her voice reached him through his headphones a few moments later, low and unhurried as she described the smell of rain from her balcony, the cooler air, the strange way storms always seemed to make a city feel quieter.

He listened to it twice before putting his phone away.

Later that night, after the conversation had slowed and the day had settled, he found himself scrolling back through their messages without looking for anything in particular. There were photographs, conversations, jokes, fragments of ordinary days, and thoughts he normally would have kept to himself. Only then did he notice how much space she had quietly come to occupy there.

He put his phone away, but the realization lingered longer than he expected.

A few days later he sent a message in the middle of an otherwise ordinary conversation.

Going forward, I think I'll bring the car.

She understood immediately.

Okay. Safer, I guess.

Yeah. Just makes more sense.

I'll miss the rides, she admitted after a pause.

The message arrived with unexpected weight.

But the car will be good too.

He read it twice.

It will be, he replied. *We can actually talk.*

She smiled when she read the message. Conversation had never been the problem, but she understood what he meant and chose not to point it out.

The first few days after the change felt different only because the rhythm had changed.

Before long, even that difference faded. A thought occurred to one of them, and the other heard about it. Neither of them stopped to wonder when that had become normal.



Chapter 4

They met again at her cousin's place, but this time the distance that had once existed between them was gone. Conversation resumed exactly where it had left off, the days between meetings already filled with messages and shared moments. Before long, they had drifted back toward each other without either of them consciously meaning to.

Mahira noticed the change in herself first. She wasn't monitoring her responses or filling pauses the way she usually did in group settings. Around Hamza, she simply participated, and the ease of it surprised her. She trusted him now.

For Hamza, the change appeared differently. He found himself extending conversations instead of ending them, offering details he would normally have left unsaid. He wouldn't have recognised it as it happened, but little by little he was letting her into parts of himself he usually kept private.

Food continued arriving throughout the evening, following the group's usual cycle of overordering, complaining, and ordering more anyway.

At some point, when a box of pastries was passed around, Hamza reached for it without much thought and picked up one with a glossy chocolate glaze before pausing briefly, a flicker of hesitation crossing his face. His hand lingered for only a second before he set it aside, selected a vanilla pastry instead, and passed that to Mahira. In the same motion, he broke off the thin chocolate shard decorating the top and ate it himself, the adjustment made so casually that it seemed less like a decision than a habit.

Mahira accepted it without question.

Her cousin, however, had been watching from across the table with the kind of attention that missed very little. His gaze moved briefly between them before one eyebrow lifted.

“How do you know she wouldn't want the chocolate one?” he asked, his tone light but carrying genuine curiosity beneath it.

Hamza didn't look up immediately. The question seemed too obvious to require any thought.

“She doesn't,” he said.

There was no elaboration, no attempt to frame it as a guess or soften it into uncertainty. It was simply certainty, uncomplicated and unguarded.

Mahira glanced at him then, her expression holding more awareness than surprise. She couldn't immediately remember ever telling him directly. Maybe it had come up once in passing, buried somewhere inside a larger conversation. Maybe he had noticed it through a dozen small moments she herself would have forgotten. Whatever the source, the detail had remained with him.

A little later, when a tray of vegetables made its way around the group, Mahira barely glanced at it before passing it along, her movement automatic and unconsidered. Her attention remained on the conversation unfolding around her as she reached instead for a piece of

chicken from another plate, settling back into the discussion without interrupting its rhythm.

Vibhav, who had already spent much of the evening observing more than he appeared to, caught it immediately.

“You didn't even offer him,” he said, his tone light but carrying the same curiosity that had surfaced earlier. “How do you know he wouldn't have it?”

Mahira answered before she had time to consider the question, her focus still divided between the plate in her hand and the conversation around her.

“He hates bottle gourd,” she said. “In any form.”

Across from her, Hamza was already watching. There was no surprise in his expression, no visible reaction beyond the faintest trace of amusement settling at the corner of his mouth. It wasn't the amusement of someone caught off guard. It was the amusement of someone recognizing the significance of a moment at exactly the same time she did.

Vibhav's reaction was considerably less restrained. His expression changed almost immediately, satisfaction replacing curiosity with such speed that it was impossible to miss, and the look he directed at her was entirely too knowing for her comfort.

“I mean, it's bottle gourd,” she said quickly, attempting a casualness that sounded slightly more deliberate than intended. “I don't think anyone actually likes it.”

“That's not true,” someone else interrupted from further down the table. “I love it.”

The objection arrived so promptly that it dismantled her defense before it had a chance to settle, and a brief silence followed, long enough for

everyone to recognize that her explanation had failed to accomplish what she had intended.

Before she could attempt to salvage the semblance of dignity, Hamza spoke.

“You should let it go.”

Mahira looked at him.

Vibhav studied both of them for a moment longer before leaning back in his chair, looking entirely too pleased with himself. He didn't press the point or attempt to draw the conversation further in that direction; he didn't need to. As far as he was concerned, the conclusion had already been reached.

Mahira exhaled softly and allowed the explanation she had been constructing to disappear. Anything she said now would only draw more attention to what had already become obvious.

Across the room, Hamza caught her eye for a moment and shook his head with the expression of a man who had accepted that reason had permanently abandoned the evening. The look made her smile all over again.

Eventually the evening began loosening at the edges. Conversations slowed. Phones reappeared. People checked the time and reacted with varying levels of disbelief. Several guests announced they should leave before immediately starting entirely new discussions.

The process of actually ending a gathering at Vibhav's apartment had always been considerably longer than anyone anticipated.

Someone was looking for their keys, someone else was looking for the person who apparently had their keys, and Vibhav was attempting to coordinate rides home while receiving almost no cooperation.

At some point while people were preparing to leave, Mahira simply drifted across the room and stopped beside Hamza without thinking

about it. The ease of it caught her slightly off guard. A month ago she would have noticed the choice immediately; now it felt so natural that she hadn't noticed it at all.

Vibhav noticed immediately.

"Not so fast," he said, stepping forward just enough to interrupt the path she had been following. "Someone else is going with Hamza tonight."

Mahira stopped. For a fraction of a second, the words had their intended effect, and the ease she had carried throughout the evening faltered only briefly, too subtle for most people to notice, yet unmistakable to her.

"Oh," she said.

The response escaped automatically, and a second later she wished it hadn't; the disappointment had come too quickly to hide.

Across the room, Vibhav's eyes sharpened, and Mahira immediately knew she had made a mistake; most people missed it, but noticing things he should ignore was practically his specialty.

"Problem?" he asked, entirely too innocent to be believable.

Before she could answer, Hamza turned slightly toward her.

He looked at her once and understood immediately.

"He's joking," he said quietly.

She relaxed immediately.

"Really?" she asked.

A brief smile crossed his face.

"Really."

Behind them, Vibhav released an amused breath. "I didn't even say anything," he said, though the satisfaction in his voice suggested otherwise. Mahira finally turned toward him, fully aware of what he had been doing, and sent him a look that contained enough irritation to

make her point, but unfortunately also enough relief to undermine it. Vibhav grinned immediately.

“Very funny,” she said.

“I didn't do anything.”

“You absolutely did.”

“I just said what I saw.”

“That isn't better.”

“No,” he agreed easily, glancing between her and Hamza. “Probably not.”

Then his expression softened slightly, amusement giving way to something more thoughtful.

“But I wasn't wrong.”

Neither of them responded, and the silence that followed told Vibhav everything he needed to know. For once, he seemed willing to leave it there.

Mahira remained where she was after that, no longer feeling the need to justify the instinct that had brought her beside Hamza in the first place.

Beside her, Hamza said nothing about any of it. He let the moment remain exactly as it was. A faint smile lingered at the corner of his mouth. He understood exactly what had just happened, and that was enough.

Someone called out that they had found the missing keys, prompting a round of exaggerated applause from the room. Conversations briefly scattered again as jackets were collected, leftover food was packed into containers no one had asked for, and Vibhav reminded everyone, for what sounded like the third time, not to forget their phones.

Mahira accepted a container without looking at what was inside and turned instinctively toward Hamza to see if he was ready. He had already

picked up her scarf from the back of a chair where she had forgotten it earlier and held it out to her without a word. She took it just as naturally, murmuring a quiet thanks before draping it over her arm, neither of them treating the exchange as anything worth noticing.

When Mahira finally stepped outside sometime later, the night air felt cooler than she expected. Behind her, voices still drifted faintly from the apartment, while a few steps ahead, Hamza was unlocking his car.

He held the passenger door open without thinking.

She looked at him.

"When did you start doing that?"

He frowned slightly.

"Doing what?"

Mahira smiled.

"Ready."

Neither of them spoke after that. They simply pulled away from the building and disappeared into the quieter roads beyond it, the silence between them carrying another small thing that had become so familiar neither of them had noticed when it began.



Chapter 5

The night felt quieter than usual, softened at the edges in a way that made everything seem slightly removed from its usual urgency. The sounds were still there, distant traffic, the occasional passing vehicle, but they no longer pressed in.

The conversation had been left behind with the apartment, along with Vibhav's increasingly unbearable observations. Even so, Mahira remained aware of it. The look he had given them. The disappointment she had failed to hide. The way Hamza had leaned closer and quietly said, He's joking.

The memory stayed with her longer than she expected.

Mahira rested her elbow against the window, her chin tilted into her palm as she watched the city blur past, lights stretching into indistinct lines, though her attention wasn't entirely outside.

Somewhere along the way, she had stopped being surprised by his messages appearing throughout the day, by conversations that resumed hours later without explanation, by the certainty that if something

ridiculous happened, he would probably hear about it before anyone else. None of it had felt significant while it was happening. It was only now, sitting beside him in the quiet, that she realized how much space those small routines had quietly occupied.

She tried to remember when that had happened, when speaking to him had stopped feeling like an event and become part of the shape of her days instead. There hadn't been a single moment she could point to. The change had arrived quietly, built from ordinary conversations that had repeated often enough to become something she no longer questioned.

Hamza glanced at her, only in brief glances, too subtle for her to catch, but often enough that his focus drifted just slightly, just enough for him to miss a turn.

"You passed it," she said, without looking at him, her tone calm but certain. She didn't need to check to know she was right.

"I didn't," he replied, too quickly, the response arriving before he had actually considered it.

There was a brief pause, the kind that stretched just enough to make the denial feel thinner than intended.

Then she turned, just slightly, her eyes narrowing with quiet amusement as she looked at him. "You did."

He exhaled, a half-laugh slipping through as he let the moment settle, easing his foot off the accelerator as if conceding without fully admitting it. "Okay, maybe."

"Maybe," she repeated, the word carrying more ease than correction. She seemed less interested in being right than in the fact that he hadn't been paying attention.

He didn't fix the route, and the choice felt less like oversight and more like something he allowed, letting the road continue forward without

turning back. Neither of them seemed to feel any urgency about returning to where they were supposed to be.

Instead, he took a quieter road, one that didn't really lead anywhere in particular. The streetlights grew fewer, spaced out in a way that left longer stretches of shadow in between, the darkness settling more fully in the gaps. Shops were in the process of closing, shutters rolling down with a dull metallic sound that echoed briefly before fading, leaving behind dim, half-lit storefronts. It was the kind of road that didn't ask questions or demand purpose, allowing them to continue without needing to explain where they were going or why.

He parked near a dimly lit stretch, the engine still running. Neither of them moved to get out, and the lack of movement didn't feel like hesitation so much as an unspoken agreement to stay where they were. They had done this before, paused like this without needing a reason, but tonight it didn't carry the same casual familiarity.

Mahira shifted slightly in her seat, turning toward him, one knee angled in his direction, the movement so natural she barely seemed aware of making it, her attention settling on him more fully than before. "Why do you like driving so much?" she asked, her tone light but carrying a quiet curiosity that lingered beneath it.

He shrugged, his fingers tapping absently against the steering wheel in a rhythm he didn't seem entirely aware of. "I don't know. It's... easy. You don't have to think too much."

She watched him longer than usual, letting the silence remain exactly as it was. "You think a lot?" she asked, her voice softer now, less casual than the question suggested.

That made him glance at her, the movement brief at first, then held. "Don't you?" he replied, returning the question with genuine curiosity.

She didn't answer.

She looked away instead, her gaze settling on the windshield where the reflection of the dashboard lights floated faintly across the glass.

"Sometimes," she admitted after a while. "I think too much about conversations after they've already ended." A small smile appeared. "I'll remember one sentence three days later and decide I should've answered differently."

He smiled without looking at her. "Three days?"

"That's on a good week."

A quiet laugh escaped him.

"You?"

He considered it for a moment. "I usually know what I want to say," he admitted. "Just not while people are still there."

She turned back to him. "So when do you know?"

"Later." He gave a small shrug. "Driving home. Making coffee. Randomly on a Tuesday."

She laughed softly. "That sounds exhausting."

"It is," he said, smiling now. "You just get used to carrying conversations around longer than everyone else."

She smiled, though there was something thoughtful in it now.

"So that's why you remember everything."

He looked at her. "Everything?"

"The random things." She counted them off on her fingers. "My presentations. The missing mug. The fact that I don't like chocolate pastries."

A faint smile appeared. "I didn't realise I remembered that much."

"You do."

He rested his forearm against the steering wheel, considering it for a moment. "I think..." He stopped, searching for the thought before continuing. "If someone matters to me, remembering stops feeling like effort."

Mahira didn't answer straight away. She wasn't sure she trusted herself to.

Instead, she looked at him for a long second before a small smile returned.

"I guess that explains why you never forget anything."

He gave the slightest shake of his head.

"Not anything," he said. "Just the things I don't want to lose."

Mahira watched him for another moment, noticing the way his fingers tapped absently against the steering wheel. Without thinking, she reached across and rested her fingertips lightly against his wrist. His hand stilled immediately. She didn't press or hold his wrist. She simply left her fingertips where they were. Neither of them moved after that.

Hamza looked down at where her fingers rested, his attention drawn to the contact in a way that lingered for a second longer than it should have, before he lifted his gaze back to her.

"Mahira..." he said, her name carrying something unspoken. But the sentence didn't follow, the words stopping before they could take shape.

She tilted her head slightly, watching him with quiet patience. "Hmm?"

He shook his head, as if letting the thought dissolve before it fully formed. "Nothing," he said, though it didn't sound like nothing.

His voice had changed, lower, quieter, and less guarded than before. Something in him had quietly given way without his permission.

Her hand remained on his wrist.

She could have moved it.

She didn't.

Instead, her fingers moved slightly. They didn't close around him or try to hold him. They simply settled with a quiet deliberateness.

He turned toward her slowly, leaving her every chance to pull away.

Their faces were closer now. The movement was slow and unmistakable.

Mahira felt it first, the change in his breathing registering before anything else, subtle but unmistakable, the rhythm altering just enough to draw her attention inward. A second later, she became aware of her own.

She leaned in, the movement so slight that it could have been mistaken for a simple adjustment, yet it carried a deliberate intention that neither of them could ignore.

That was when he moved. Slowly, carefully, leaving her every opportunity to pull away if she chose. There was no urgency, only a measured closeness that respected the moment even as it crossed into something new.

Their breaths met in the small space between them.

And then headlights swept past them, bright and sudden in a way that cut through the moment without warning, the light spilling into the car and breaking the closeness they had been holding.

The moment broke, the tension dissolving into something incomplete and abruptly interrupted.

Mahira pulled back first, creating just enough distance to steady herself. Hamza leaned back as well, running a hand through his hair as he exhaled.

"Sorry," he said finally, the word arriving too quickly and too automatically. It seemed to escape before he had fully understood what he was apologizing for, or whether an apology was even necessary.

Mahira looked at him, her expression not hardening but changing in a way that carried quiet recognition. She understood more than he had said, and she asked, "Why are you apologizing?"

The question lingered between them.

He didn't answer. Perhaps because there wasn't one.

Neither of them had done anything wrong. The interruption had arrived before the moment could become anything else, yet neither of them seemed able to pretend it had meant nothing.

He started the car again and pulled back onto the road. Neither of them tried to revisit what had almost happened.



Chapter 6

On the drive back, he found himself thinking about her laughter. It stayed with him more persistently than the conversation itself, returning without invitation whenever the road quieted enough for his thoughts to catch up. There had been nothing unusual about it. She had laughed before. Yet tonight it lingered differently, unguarded and unselfconscious in a way that made him feel, irrationally, that he had been allowed to see something not everyone was allowed to see.

The thought should have passed.

Instead it remained, drawing everything else back with it. The missed turn. The way she had rested her hand against his wrist without seeming to realise how impossible it had become for him to think about anything else afterward. The quiet certainty with which she had looked at him when he told her Vibhav was joking. None of those moments had seemed remarkable while they were happening. They had simply followed one another with the same natural ease that had defined the last few weeks.

Only now, with enough distance to look back at them together, did he realise they had never been separate moments at all.

They had been carrying him here.

The recognition settled almost gently. He had imagined a feeling like this would arrive with unmistakable certainty. Instead, it had taken shape so gradually that by the time he recognised it, it no longer felt new. It felt like something he had simply failed to notice.

He loved the way she filled silence without feeling compelled to escape it, the patience with which she let conversations find their own ending, and the quiet, effortless way she had come to occupy his thoughts.

None of those things had appeared extraordinary on their own. Together, they left very little else to call what he felt.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, the movement small enough that he barely noticed it himself.

I love her.

The words remained where they were, quiet enough that nothing outside him had changed, yet impossible to take back now that they existed.

Looking back, it became strangely difficult to remember where friendship ended and something quieter had begun. It hadn't been the evening she had laughed until she couldn't finish her sentence, or the afternoon she had insisted on walking the longer route because the weather was too pleasant to waste inside a car, or the countless conversations that had wandered so far from where they started that neither of them could remember the original subject. None of those moments claimed importance while they were happening. They had simply accumulated, unnoticed, until together they had become a life he found himself looking forward to entering each day.

He had expected certainty to bring clarity. Instead, it left him with a different question altogether.

What did he do with it?

For a brief moment, he allowed himself to imagine saying it, not tonight and not without reason, but someday, when whatever existed between them had travelled far enough that the words would feel like a continuation instead of an interruption.

The thought lasted only long enough for him to understand what it would ask of her.

Until now, everything between them had happened without either of them forcing it forward. Every conversation had continued because neither of them wanted it to end. Every silence had settled because neither of them had rushed to fill it. Even the almost-kiss had stopped where it did because neither of them had crossed the final distance without knowing the other was ready.

That had always been the shape of whatever they were building. Neither of them arrived anywhere alone.

Love was different. It could arrive inside one person long before it reached the other, and for the first time he understood that what he felt didn't necessarily ask the same thing of her.

Until now, he had never really considered that possibility. In every story he had grown up with, love seemed to arrive at the same moment for both people, revealed by a confession that merely gave words to something they had already shared. Reality felt quieter than that. Feelings kept their own time. They weren't unfair because they arrived earlier or later; they simply refused to be hurried into matching someone else's pace. Loving her didn't mean she owed him the same certainty simply because he had reached it first.

If he spoke now, the balance between them would change immediately. She would have to answer something she had never been asked. Even if

she answered gently, even if she asked for time, even if nothing outwardly changed, the quiet ease they had found together would no longer belong only to itself. Every conversation afterwards would exist beside what he had already confessed.

He found himself returning instead to the almost-kiss. He hadn't stopped because he had doubted what he wanted, but because he hadn't known what she wanted. That uncertainty remained. She hadn't moved away, but she hadn't closed the distance either, and he realised now that the difference mattered.

Remembering it now, he realised the moment had asked exactly what it needed to ask. Neither of them had forced an answer before they were ready to give one. The silence afterwards hadn't been failure. It had been patience.

He owed that same patience to this. The decision arrived quietly, without needing to argue with him. He wouldn't tell her. The feeling no longer required certainty; it had already become part of him. What remained uncertain was everything beyond it, and until that uncertainty belonged to both of them instead of only him, the words would stay where they were.

The decision settled more easily than he expected. It cost him something, but it felt faithful to everything that had brought them here. Nothing between them had ever been hurried into becoming more than it was. He wouldn't ask love to be different.

The rest of the drive passed in the same easy silence they had always shared, familiar now for a different reason, because he finally understood what it had been carrying all along.

When he glanced at her, she was watching the road beyond the window, her expression relaxed, the passing lights moving briefly across the glass before disappearing into the dark. Nothing about her suggested she knew that anything had changed.

Perhaps nothing had. The difference existed entirely within him. Whether she loved him remained unanswered, but that uncertainty no longer changed what he knew about himself.

By the time they reached her gate, he was easing the car to a gentle stop before either of them spoke.

Mahira unfastened her seatbelt, the small click sounding unusually distinct in the quiet.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Her hand rested on the door for a moment longer than necessary, a pause that might have meant nothing at all, yet for one impossible second he felt the words rise again, as naturally as they had before.

I love you.

He kept the words to himself. They had lost none of their certainty, but they belonged to him for now, and he was content to let them remain there until the time came when they could belong to both of them.

She looked at him once, waiting to see whether he had anything else to say. He almost smiled. So much had changed inside him, yet the quiet ease between them asked for nothing more than it already had.

"Text me when you go to bed," he said.

She nodded.

"Okay."

He waited until she disappeared through the gate before looking ahead again, his hands remaining lightly on the steering wheel as the quiet settled once more around him.

He didn't start the car immediately. The space beside him had emptied so quietly that it took him a moment to register it. Her absence wasn't dramatic. It revealed itself in small things: the silence returning

unchanged, the seat beside him no longer occupied, the conversation that had carried them through the drive ending as naturally as it had begun.

He remained where he was, his hands resting loosely on the steering wheel, looking through the windshield without really seeing the road beyond it.

The neighbourhood had already begun settling into the quiet rhythm of the dawn. A scooter passed somewhere beyond the gate before fading into the distance. A dog barked once, then again, before silence gathered around the street once more. Nothing in the world had altered to acknowledge what had happened inside him. The road remained the same, the houses unchanged, the lights burning exactly as they had a few minutes earlier. He found something unexpectedly comforting in that. Love didn't require the world to pause and recognise it. It was enough that he finally had.

For the first time that night, there was nothing left to distract him from the thought he had spent the drive trying not to examine too closely.

He loved her.

The words no longer arrived as a question or a realization. They had already become something quieter than that, something that simply existed, asking nothing of the night around him.

He let out a slow breath.

"I love her."

He smiled to himself, started the engine, and pulled away from the curb, carrying the words with him, willing to let them wait until the moment belonged to both of them.



Chapter 7

Alone in her bedroom, Mahira thought of Hamza, of the way he had been with her in the car, the quiet attentiveness that had felt easy at the time but now lingered with a clarity she hadn't fully noticed then.

She began to notice his pauses, gradually, in a way she couldn't quite name or explain, but as something that stayed with her once she allowed herself to think about it, something that had been present in small, unmarked moments.

It was in the way he looked at her sometimes, like he was about to say something and then chose not to, the intention visible just long enough to register before it disappeared, leaving behind a trace she couldn't quite place.

It was in the way his replies came a second late, not distracted, but after briefly retreating into his own thoughts before returning to the conversation, picking up where it had been left without acknowledging the change.

It struck her that she had stopped listening only to what he said. Somewhere without noticing, she had begun paying attention to the spaces around his words as well, to the expressions that appeared before he spoke and lingered after he finished, to the small hesitations that revealed themselves only when someone had become familiar enough to watch without trying. She wasn't sure when that had happened. Perhaps closeness arrived quietly too, changing the way a person was seen long before either of them realised they were looking differently.

The more she thought about it, the more it felt intentional rather than accidental, less guarded than thoughtful, suggesting he was weighing something before letting it surface, suggesting there were thoughts he chose not to voice instead of thoughts he simply didn't have. It made her wonder, not sharply but steadily, whether those pauses held something specific, something he returned to repeatedly and then set aside just as consistently.

She couldn't remember a single moment clearly enough to explain the feeling. It came from a quiet impression rather than anything he had actually said. The more she considered it, the more she wondered whether those pauses belonged to something he wasn't ready to put into words.

She had never questioned those pauses while they were together. They had never felt careless or distracted, only deliberate. He always seemed to choose his words long before he spoke them. Now she found herself wondering what remained behind the ones he never said.

She tried to remember whether he had always been that way or whether she had only begun noticing it because she was paying closer attention now. Perhaps the pauses had been there from the beginning, folded so naturally into their conversations that they had escaped notice until now. Looking back, she found them everywhere.

It made her aware of how much of him she saw and how much she didn't, without feeling hidden or withheld. Instead, it seemed there were layers he moved through quietly, without announcing them.

She realised then that what drew her wasn't the mystery itself. It was the care with which he carried it. He never created silence to appear distant, never left thoughts unfinished in the hope that she would chase after them. Whatever remained unspoken seemed to belong to him rather than to the conversation, held back because he wasn't yet ready to offer it. She found herself respecting that instinct without fully understanding why. Perhaps some things deserved to arrive in their own time. Not everything needed to be understood the moment it was noticed.

She thought back to how he had almost kissed her, to the way the moment had built without either of them forcing it, and to the way he had pulled away just before it could become something more defined, leaving behind a trace that hadn't quite resolved itself.

When he had leaned back, she had watched him for a second longer than usual, her attention lingering on him in a way that felt quieter but more deliberate.

"What?" he had asked, noticing it.

"Nothing," she had replied, the word coming easily even though it hadn't been entirely true.

She had looked away again, letting the moment pass without holding it in place, but the thought had stayed with her, lingering in a way that didn't fade.

There was something about him that didn't fully settle, something she couldn't quite place or define, leaving her with the quiet sense that something remained incomplete.

It wasn't the kind of hesitation she had seen before in others. She had never doubted what had existed between them; she had felt it herself, the quiet pull and the effortless way it had taken shape. What she

couldn't shake was the sense that he had stepped back from something he had already accepted, for reasons that seemed to exist outside the moment itself.

She wasn't trying to solve him. She only knew the moment in the car hadn't ended because either of them wanted it to. Something else had made him stop, and she wasn't sure it was hers to ask about.

The car had slowed near her gate, slower than usual, too subtle to draw attention, yet enough for her to notice, the movement stretching just slightly. Neither of them seemed in any hurry to reach the end of the drive.

Mahira unbuckled her seatbelt, the click of it sounding clearer in the quiet than it should have, marking the moment in a way that felt more final than the gesture itself.

"Goodnight," she said, her voice steady, even as her attention remained turned toward him.

"Goodnight," he replied.

She paused then, her hand resting lightly near the door because she felt it again, that same almost-moment that had hovered between them before. For an instant it seemed the next few seconds might change the shape of what they were becoming. Instead, the feeling remained just beneath the surface before settling quietly back into silence.

"Text me when you go to bed," he said instead.

She wasn't sure why the words disappointed her. They were kind, familiar, exactly the sort of thing he would normally say. Still, part of her couldn't shake the feeling that they had arrived where something else had almost been.

She nodded, accepting it without hesitation. "Okay."

She stepped out of the car, the door closing behind her with a quiet finality, and the night air felt cooler than before, sharper against her skin

in a way that made her more aware of herself, of the change from inside to outside.

As she walked toward the gate, she didn't turn back, keeping her steps steady and her gaze forward, she kept walking, fully aware of what one last look might invite.

Inside, she leaned against the door for a moment, letting the quiet of the house settle around her. The stillness enclosed her, making everything feel more immediate, leaving little room to move past what had happened.

Her thoughts returned instead to what he hadn't said, to the pause that had lingered just before it, to the space that had felt like it might hold something more and then didn't.

Instead, she let it remain as it was, incomplete but present, aware that trying to define it too quickly would only force it into something it wasn't ready to be. There was a familiarity to that kind of moment, the kind that lingered without explanation, and she recognized the instinct to fill it, to reach for meaning where none had been offered yet.

But this time, she didn't follow that instinct, allowing the uncertainty to exist without pressing against it, even as it stayed with her.

There was something deliberate about that pause, as though it held more than the silence itself. She found herself wondering whether he had felt it too, whether he had chosen to leave something unsaid or whether there had simply been nothing to say. She didn't dwell on it deliberately, yet it continued to return to her thoughts long after the moment had passed.

Instead, she moved away from the door, reaching for her phone without fully deciding to, her fingers finding the conversation almost automatically. *Going to sleep now.*

She read the message once before sending it, aware of how neutral it sounded, how it matched the tone he had set, adding no extra meaning beyond what was already there.

He replied almost immediately. *Okay.*

She looked at the single word for a moment longer than she expected to. It was exactly the reply she had imagined he would send, simple enough to leave the conversation where it was, giving her exactly what she had asked for. She wondered, briefly, whether he had stared at her message before replying or answered it without a second thought. The question lingered only for a moment before she let it go. There was no answer waiting inside a guess, only another question pretending to be one.

The screen dimmed in her hand, leaving her own reflection faintly visible for a moment before it disappeared. She set the phone down beside her bed and exhaled slowly, surprised by how much one ordinary evening had managed to stay with her.

She locked her phone and set it aside. Whatever had paused between them tonight remained unfinished, and for now, she found she was content to let it stay that way.



Chapter 8

They didn't meet for a few days, but the messages continued, slipping through their days with the same quiet consistency. The distance left everything intact, changing only its form.

They didn't talk about it, not that night and not the next day, and neither of them circled back to what had almost happened or what hadn't been said, as if leaving it untouched would keep it from becoming something they would have to define.

But it didn't fade, and if anything, it sharpened in the absence of it, the memory of that moment settling more clearly rather than dissolving, returning in fragments that felt more precise with time.

The conversations stayed easy on the surface, moving through familiar ground, small updates, passing thoughts, conversations that remained comfortably within familiar boundaries.

The next time Hamza texted, it was later than usual.

11:12 PM

Drive?

Mahira stared at the message longer than she should have, her eyes resting on the word as if it carried more than it did before, like it had absorbed everything they hadn't spoken about.

She knew it was more than a drive now, more than time passing, but something that existed in the space they had created together, something that had moved beyond what it had been without either of them acknowledging it.

Something had changed, and neither of them had named it, but both of them were standing right at the edge of it, aware enough to feel it, uncertain enough to leave it unspoken.

She typed "Okay" before she could overthink it, sending it before she could question what she was stepping back into.

When she got into the car, it felt different immediately. A heightened awareness, sharper than awkwardness, settled between them, without either of them addressing it.

"Hi," she said, softer than usual, the word carrying a quiet hesitation she hadn't intended.

"Hey."

He looked ahead and started the car. They drove without speaking, the familiar quiet between them carrying a different weight now, its familiar comfort giving way to the weight of everything they had left unfinished. The city slipped past outside the windows before gradually giving way to emptier roads, neither of them suggesting a destination. Mahira watched the passing lights without really seeing them. It wasn't the silence she noticed anymore, but him, his presence beside her filling the space so completely that every passing mile seemed only to sharpen her awareness of it.

"You've been quiet," he said finally, his voice steady but carrying something beneath it.

She almost smiled. The familiarity of it caught her off guard. "So have you."

There was a pause that followed, charged with expectation, and then he said, "About the other night..."

There it was, the thing they had both avoided and yet carried with them, now placed carefully into the space between them without being fully revealed.

Mahira turned to him, waiting, her attention settling more fully now, ready for whatever came next.

But he didn't finish, and she saw the hesitation in him, the hesitation carried intention, not uncertainty, his grip tightening slightly on the wheel, grounding himself before continuing.

"I didn't want to mess it up," he said instead.

Her brows knit slightly, the response not landing where she expected. "Mess what up?"

He exhaled, like the answer was obvious to him but difficult to put into words, his gaze fixed ahead before he said, more quietly this time, "This." The single word carried everything he still couldn't say aloud.

Mahira looked away for a second, the movement brief but necessary, giving herself space to take it in, before turning back to him with a steadiness that didn't waver. "You think pretending nothing's happening is not messing it up?" she asked, her voice even, without accusation, only a quiet honesty that made it harder to deflect.

Hamza tightened his grip on the steering wheel for a moment before speaking. "I knew if I didn't stop..." he said slowly, choosing his words with care, "I wouldn't want to."

Mahira held his gaze, searching his face hoping the answer might already be there. "You make it sound like stopping was the only choice."

"It felt like it was." His voice remained quiet. "Not because I wanted to."

"Then because you thought I did?"

He didn't answer straight away. A faint crease appeared between his brows before he spoke again. "I didn't know what you wanted." He let out a slow breath. "You hadn't pulled away, but you hadn't..." He stopped, the unfinished sentence hanging between them.

He fell quiet again, searching for words that refused to arrive in the right order. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the quiet cabin making even their breathing seem more noticeable.

"I kept telling myself it wasn't enough to know what I wanted," he said at last. "I needed to know you were choosing it too."

Mahira listened without interrupting. There was no uncertainty in his voice now, only the honesty she had come to recognise in him, the kind that took its time because it cared too much to be careless.

"I didn't want you wondering afterwards whether I had mistaken the moment," he continued. "Or whether I had wanted it more than you did." He let out a quiet breath. "If there was even a chance of that, I'd rather stop than make you carry that question."

She looked at him for a long moment, the words settling more deeply than she expected. They didn't feel like an explanation for why he had pulled away so much as a glimpse into the way he thought, into the quiet instinct that had shaped so much of what she had already begun to notice about him.

"Whether I'd kiss you?" she supplied gently.

A small, almost embarrassed smile crossed his face before disappearing again. "No. Yes."

She looked down for a moment, her fingers tracing the seam of her sleeve before becoming still. "I almost did."

The words settled between them more quietly than either of them expected.

When she looked back up, he was watching her with an expression she couldn't quite name, something between relief and disbelief. For a moment, he seemed unable to believe he had heard her correctly.

"I kept thinking about that," she admitted. "About whether I should have."

"So did I."

Neither of them looked away. The silence between them no longer felt uncertain. It felt unavoidable.

"Then why didn't you?" she asked, her voice quieter now but no less direct.

He didn't answer immediately. His gaze stayed on the windshield, his fingers tightening once around the steering wheel before relaxing again. Whatever the answer was, it wasn't one he could reduce to a sentence.

Instead, he pulled over with quiet decisiveness. Stopping felt like the only way to keep the moment from slipping past them again.

The engine remained on, its low hum filling the silence between them.

Mahira's heart began to beat faster, steadily, each beat becoming something she was suddenly aware of, and she knew, without looking, that he could feel it too in the silence, in the way the air between them had grown more charged.

She turned toward him fully now, the last of her hesitation gone, meeting his gaze with a clarity that hadn't been there before. The uncertainty that had held her back had finally settled into something she could act on.

"Don't stop this time," she said, her voice quiet but steady, carrying more intention than anything she had said to him before, deliberate in a way that left no room to misunderstand what she meant.

He held her gaze for a heartbeat. When she didn't look away, the moment quietly deepened.

Hamza leaned in at last. The kiss was certain, unfolding with quiet confidence. In many ways, they had already crossed this distance long before either of them admitted it. She froze for the briefest moment, overwhelmed by recognition rather than surprise, before she kissed him back.

Her hand settled lightly against his shoulder as he drew her closer. For a while neither of them thought about anything beyond the quiet certainty of the moment, until they finally pulled apart, reluctant more than ready.

For a moment neither of them spoke. Words would have made the moment smaller, and neither of them was ready for that yet.

He drew back just enough to meet her eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

Mahira opened her eyes and met his gaze. For once, she met the question exactly as he had asked it.

She held his gaze for another moment before answering, unwilling to step around the question this time.

"Yes, and Hamza, next time, don't decide for both of us," she said, her voice steady, carrying a clarity that didn't leave room for misinterpretation or retreat.

Hamza smiled then, the expression quiet but unmistakable. Something he had been carrying for longer than either of them realised had finally become visible between them. Neither of them spoke again. They simply stayed there for another moment before Mahira leaned back, both of them understanding that whatever they had become tonight no longer needed explaining.



Chapter 9

Morning arrived too quickly, the way it always did after a night that seemed endless until it was suddenly over.

Mahira woke before her alarm, her eyes opening into a stillness that felt unfamiliar for a moment, leaving her with the sense that something inside her was still unfinished.

For a few seconds, she didn't move because she remembered, and the memory didn't come all at once.

It returned in pieces, quiet and precise, the car first, the enclosed space that had felt separate from everything else, then the silence that had held more than words, and the way it had changed without either of them forcing it.

She thought of the way he had said her name without finishing the sentence, how it had lingered in the space between them, incomplete yet unmistakably understood, and then of the way he hadn't stopped this time, the hesitation that had been there before replaced by something steadier.

The memory settled into her with a clarity that made it impossible to ignore, each fragment connecting to the next until the night reassembled itself in a way that felt both immediate and distant at once.

Her eyes opened slowly, and for a moment everything appeared exactly as it always did, unchanged and familiar in a way that might have grounded her if the feeling inside her had matched it.

The room remained the same, with the curtains drawn halfway, letting in a muted softness, the faint hum of early traffic threading through the quiet, and the house still in that in-between state before the day fully began.

She sat up slowly, pulling the sheet closer around her, even though there was no one there to justify the gesture, and she was aware of it even as she did it, unsure whether it was habit or reflex or simply a way of holding onto something that already felt like it was beginning to slip into memory.

Her phone lay on the bedside table within reach, and she looked at it without moving to pick it up, her attention resting there longer than it needed to.

She finally reached for her phone, the movement quiet and unhurried, having delayed it just long enough to prepare herself for whatever she might see. The screen lit up, bright against the stillness of the room, and for a moment she simply looked at it, letting her eyes adjust before taking in what was there.

There were no messages.

Mahira stared at the screen for a second longer than necessary, allowing the absence to settle in fully, to register without immediately reacting to it.

Then she locked it again, the gesture deliberate, and placed it back exactly where it had been, restoring everything to exactly how she had found it.

“Okay,” she whispered to herself, the word small but steady, enough to let the silence remain exactly what it was without asking it to mean more.

Downstairs, the house had begun to wake up, the sounds of doors opening and utensils clinking carrying upward in a rhythm that felt familiar and routine, and yet slightly removed from how she experienced it that morning.

Those sounds belonged to a version of her that moved through the day without this awareness, without the weight of something unspoken sitting just beneath everything, and she recognized that distance without resisting it, allowing it to exist as part of the shift she was still adjusting to.

She moved through it all normally, or at least she tried to, letting her actions follow the same patterns they always had, even as her attention felt slightly displaced, her attention lingering somewhere else, not fully returned.

“Why are you up early?” her mother asked, glancing at her from the kitchen with a casual curiosity that didn’t linger.

Mahira shrugged, pouring herself a glass of water, the motion familiar enough to steady her. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Don’t stay up so late,” her mother said absentmindedly. “It’s not good.”

Mahira nodded without arguing, because there was nothing she could say that wouldn’t leave out the part that mattered most.

If only it were that simple, she thought, if the night could be reduced to something that fit into ordinary advice, something that could be managed with earlier sleep and routine.

Back in her room, she sat at the edge of the bed again, the quiet returning in a way that felt more personal this time.

She let her hands rest loosely in her lap for a moment, surprised by how unfamiliar the morning felt despite everything around her remaining

exactly the same. Nothing in the room had changed, yet it seemed impossible that she had gone to sleep one version of herself and woken as another, carrying a memory that quietly altered the shape of ordinary things. She wasn't anxious about what came next, nor was she impatient for it. She simply knew that whatever existed between them now would have to find its place within the everyday, and somehow that felt more daunting than the kiss itself.

This time, she picked up her phone without hesitation, opening their chat, continuing a conversation that still felt unfinished.

Her eyes settled on the last message.

Drive?

The word looked ordinary now, yet she couldn't read it without remembering everything that had followed. She started typing twice before deleting both messages with a quiet shake of her head.

She exhaled, dropping the phone beside her, the motion carrying a quiet frustration she didn't try to hide from herself.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered.

Across the city, Hamza was awake too, because once sleep had left him, it hadn't returned, leaving him in that still space where thoughts had nowhere else to go.

He had been staring at the ceiling for the past twenty minutes, his hands resting loosely at his sides, his mind replaying everything without pause, the kiss and everything that had come with it, everything that had led into it and followed after.

He kept returning to the way she had looked at him, steady and unafraid, and to the certainty of her words: *Don't stop this time*. More than the kiss itself, it was the trust behind them that stayed with him.

He thought about the way she hadn't pulled away, the way she had stayed in that moment without softening it or turning it into something easier, and how that had changed the way he experienced it entirely.

And then he thought about the way she had said them, the words simple but carrying a weight that had settled deeper than he had expected.

More than the kiss itself, it was the trust in those words that stayed with him. She hadn't simply gone along with the moment; she had chosen it too, and he found himself returning to that realization again and again, not searching for meaning in it, only unable to leave it behind.

He ran a hand over his face, exhaling sharply, the breath leaving him with more force than he intended, as though something in him had been building without his noticing it, only to surface now in that small, unguarded moment. "This is not simple," he said under his breath, the words understated but firm, carrying the weight of a truth he could no longer pretend hadn't changed something.

He picked up his phone, unlocked it, then locked it again without typing anything, the silence beginning to feel less accidental and more like a choice. When he opened their chat a second time, he stopped searching for the perfect words and simply looked at her name for a moment before he began to type.

His fingers moved before he could overthink it, revise it, or turn it into something more careful than he intended.

Did you sleep okay?

He stared at the message for a second after typing it, aware of its simplicity, of how little it said compared to everything he was thinking, and yet also aware that it was honest in a way the other options hadn't been, grounded enough to hold without distorting anything that had come before.

Then he hit send, the small action carrying more finality than it should have, before setting the phone aside. He wasn't done thinking. Even so,

for the first time since waking, he allowed the morning to move forward with him.

Her phone lit up almost immediately.

She looked at his name for a moment before opening the message.

Did you sleep okay?

She smiled despite herself. It wasn't what she'd been expecting. Somehow, that made it sound even more like him.

She typed back, her response coming easily, without the hesitation she might have expected, because simplicity felt right in return.

Yeah. You?

The reply came faster this time, almost immediate in a way that suggested he had been waiting, even if he would not have admitted it.

Yeah.

Mahira lay back against her pillow, staring at the ceiling, a small smile finding its way onto her face. After everything that had happened the night before, they had somehow managed to exchange two ordinary messages and nothing more. For now, that felt like enough.



Chapter 10

Later that evening, he texted again, the message arriving without preamble
Drive?

Mahira looked at the message, her eyes resting on it for a brief moment, reading it once and then again without needing to, and this time she did not hesitate. Her response came from a place that felt steadier, less reactive.

Okay.

She set her phone aside after sending it, not immediately returning to it the way she might have before, not waiting for a follow-up or a confirmation, because she already knew there wouldn't be one

He was waiting outside ten minutes later.

"Seatbelt," he said automatically, the word carrying the familiarity of something he had said before.

She clicked it into place without looking at him, her response just as immediate, just as unembellished. "I know."

He smiled.

"So you're laughing now?"

"I didn't say I was."

"You just did."

"I don't think you saw correctly."

That almost made her smile, the hint of it surfacing before she caught it

They started driving, the car slipping into motion along the same roads they had taken before, the same turns and signals and familiar stretches where conversation came and went without urgency. The radio played softly in the background, more out of habit than interest.

"Today was busy?" Mahira asked.

"A little."

"Work?"

He nodded.

"You?"

"Same."

"Still surviving that American client?" he asked.

She groaned. "Barely. He gave us another lot to work on."

"Already?"

"Apparently he thinks sleep is optional."

He laughed. "That sounds familiar."

"You?"

"A client changed the brief after we'd finished the work."

"Again?"

"Third time this week."

She shook her head. "You're too nice."

"I've heard that before."

"From everyone?"

"Mostly from you."

"You've become predictable," she said.

He glanced at her briefly. "That's a terrible thing to say to someone."

"I'm serious." She smiled. "A few months ago, you'd have complained about the client for ten minutes before admitting you were going to redo the work anyway."

"Probably."

"Now you skip straight to accepting it."

"Saves time."

"Does it?"

He thought about that for a second before giving a small shrug. "Not really."

She laughed, the sound slipping out more easily than she'd expected. He looked at her then, properly this time, his expression softening in response before he turned back to the road.

"There it is," he said.

"What?"

"The laugh."

She looked away, unable to hide the smile that followed. "Don't get used to it."

The silence between them didn't feel empty. It held everything they had left unsaid.

Mahira shifted slightly in her seat, turning just enough that her knee brushed against his arm as he changed gears, the contact so slight it could easily have been dismissed as accidental.

The contact stayed where it was, allowed to exist without either of them drawing back.

Hamza's grip on the steering wheel tightened just a fraction, the adjustment subtle but instinctive, his eyes staying fixed on the road ahead even as his awareness narrowed to that single point of contact, something so small it should not have mattered, and yet impossible to ignore now that it existed.

A second later the car rounded the corner, and she settled back naturally, neither of them acknowledging what had happened.

"You've stopped talking again," he said after a while.

She looked out of the window.

"So have you."

He smiled to himself. "I suppose I have."

They spent the next few minutes talking about ordinary things—a manager who had extended a deadline, a client who had changed his mind after submission, a café that had finally reopened after months of renovation—yet every lull in the conversation circled back to everything they were not saying.

Hamza broke first. "I've been trying to figure something out."

Mahira looked at him. "What?"

He smiled faintly. "If I tell you, you'll expect me to have an answer."

"I probably will."

"I don't."

She waited.

"I keep thinking about last night."

She looked at him steadily. "So do I."

He nodded once. "I thought it would make things less confusing."

"And?"

"It didn't."

A smile escaped her before she could stop it. "I'm glad."

He glanced at her. "Why?"

"Because if you had everything figured out already, I'd wonder what was wrong with you."

That earned a laugh. "I was hoping you'd say something reassuring."

"I am."

"That wasn't reassuring."

"It was honest."

He laughed again, shaking his head. "I'll take honest."

She looked ahead again. "It doesn't feel like before."

"No," he said. "It doesn't."

The next red light caught them halfway through the conversation.

Hamza's hand rested near the gearshift, relaxed on the surface but not entirely at ease, as if it still carried the tension of all that had gone unspoken, his fingers loosely curled, close enough to move but not moving. He was looking at the car ahead.

Mahira's fingers moved before she had fully decided, the motion slight and almost unnoticeable, her fingertips brushing lightly against his as she waited to see what would happen if she didn't pull away.

He didn't move. The contact lasted only a moment, but it was enough for both of them to know it had been allowed to remain.

Her fingers lingered for a second longer before moving almost imperceptibly, resting a little more comfortably against his.

Hamza turned his head slightly then, the movement slow, almost cautious.

She met his gaze without hesitation, her eyes holding his without flinching, without softening the intensity of it or turning it into something easier to carry, and she didn't smile it away either, didn't offer him the comfort of deflection, choosing instead to remain exactly where she was.

The signal turned green, the change registering somewhere at the edge of their awareness, but for a second, it went unnoticed. Silence lingered between them. The traffic ahead began to move, one car after another pulling away, but they remained where they were, their eyes still locked, words suddenly feeling unnecessary. For that brief moment, the world beyond the windshield seemed strangely distant, as though the world outside the car had continued moving while time inside it had paused. A horn sounded somewhere behind them.

Hamza pulled his hand back first, the movement quick but controlled, as though he needed to restore a boundary before it could be questioned, his focus snapping back to the road as he drove forward, the car slipping back into motion with a steadiness that felt slightly forced.

Mahira let her hand fall back into her lap without looking at him, her fingers curling slightly as they settled, and the absence of that contact felt louder than the touch itself, more defined.

"You do that a lot," she said, her voice even, not accusatory, but not careless either.

"Do what?" he asked, though something in his tone suggested he already understood, or at least suspected, what she meant.

She waited a beat. "Stop."

This time he didn't answer straight away.

"I know," he said. "I keep thinking that if I slow everything down enough..." He stopped, unable to finish the thought.

She looked at him. "What?"

A humourless smile crossed his face. "...I'll stop being afraid of getting it wrong."

The conversation faded. The traffic moved around them, but the silence between them felt easier than words. Mahira looked at him for a moment before saying, "You know what happens when you stop?"

He glanced at her.

"You leave the other person wondering if they imagined what was there."

After a moment, he said, "I know."

Neither of them spoke again for a while.

The rest of the drive passed in fragments, the conversation never quite finding a steady rhythm, slipping instead between half-finished sentences that trailed off before reaching anything conclusive and silences that were no longer neutral, but filled with things left unspoken.

When he pulled up outside her house, they stayed where they were for a moment. It wasn't hesitation this time, only the reluctance that comes with ending something they weren't quite ready to leave behind.

The engine idled softly between them while the porch light cast a warm glow across the windshield. A car passed in the opposite direction, its headlights sweeping briefly across the windshield before the darkness returned. For a little while, simply sitting there together felt enough.

Mahira turned toward him. "Promise me something."

He looked at her. "What?"

"Next time you start overthinking," she said, smiling, "let me in instead."

He smiled. "I'll try."

"That's all I'm asking." She smiled. "Not that I'd let you get away with it anyway."

"I'm sure you won't."

"Good." She reached for the door, then stopped. "Drive tomorrow?"

"I was hoping you'd ask," he admitted with a smile.

She nodded. "I know."

She stepped out of the car and closed the door behind her before walking toward the gate. Halfway there, she glanced back to find him still watching. She smiled once, then disappeared inside.

Hamza waited until the front door closed behind her before driving away. For the first time since the night they kissed, his thoughts weren't fixed on what had already happened, but on seeing her again tomorrow.



Chapter II

He pulled over again, not in the same spot as before, but close enough that it carried a sense of familiarity, as though the road had begun to hold fragments of them, of earlier pauses and unfinished conversations, making this moment feel less like a decision and more like a continuation.

The engine stayed on, its low hum filling the space between them, steady and grounding, but neither reached for the door.

Mahira turned toward him first this time, her body angling toward him with an ease that came from clarity.

“Say it,” she said, her voice soft, but carrying a firmness that left little room for deflection, like she was no longer willing to let things remain implied.

Hamza looked at her, confusion crossing his expression, though it didn’t fully disguise the awareness beneath it, the sense that he knew exactly what she meant but wasn’t ready to meet it directly. “Say what?” he

asked, the question buying him a second, even if it didn't create real distance.

She tilted her head slightly, her gaze almost patient, yet never indulgent. "That thing you keep almost saying," she replied, her tone even, simply giving a name to what had already become obvious.

A pause settled between them, long enough for him to realise silence wasn't going to save him this time. He let out a breath and ran a hand through his hair, searching for an easier way out. None came. When he finally spoke, he answered her directly.

"What are we doing?" he asked. The question was simple, but it carried more weight than anything he had said so far.

Mahira held his gaze. She didn't answer immediately. Instead, she waited to see whether he knew the answer himself.

"What do you think we're doing?" she asked instead, her voice calm, returning the question without diminishing it because his answer mattered more than hers in that moment.

Hamza let out a short, humorless laugh, the sound brief and edged with a frustration he couldn't quite hide. "That's not an answer," he said.

"No," she agreed, her tone even, almost thoughtful. "It's not."

He looked away briefly, his gaze dropping toward the dashboard before returning to her.

"I don't want this to be..." he started, the sentence forming slowly, as if each word needed to be considered before it was allowed to exist, and then he stopped, the rest of it catching somewhere between thought and voice, held back by something he couldn't quite push past.

"To be what?" she prompted, her tone composed. She wasn't going to let him stop halfway through the sentence.

He searched for the right word, "something we regret."

"I'm not going to regret something you're unsure about," she said, her voice even.

Hamza frowned slightly, the line between his brows deepening as he processed it. "That's not what I meant," he said, though there was less conviction in the denial than there might have been before, as if he knew he hadn't expressed it fully.

"Then what did you mean?" she asked, giving him the space to explain.

He opened his mouth, then stopped again, a quiet frustration flickering across his face. "I keep trying to find the right words," he admitted. "Maybe there aren't any."

After another brief silence, he said softly, "I like you. A lot."

For a moment, he couldn't bring himself to look at her. The words felt different once they were spoken, stripped of the weight they had carried inside him for weeks. He had imagined this moment countless times, searching for something more eloquent, more certain, only to realize that nothing he could have rehearsed would have felt truer than the simple honesty that had finally found its way out.

When he looked up again, Mahira hadn't moved. She wasn't smiling, nor did she seem surprised. She was simply looking at him with the same steady attention she had given him throughout the conversation, waiting without interrupting the moment by trying to reassure him too quickly.

Something inside him loosened at the sight of that. He realised he hadn't been afraid of saying the words as much as he had been afraid of what they might change. Instead, they had only brought them to a place they had both been walking towards for some time.

The words settled quietly between them, far simpler than either of them had imagined after everything it had taken to finally say them. For weeks they had lingered beneath unfinished thoughts and moments that never quite reached their conclusion, always close enough to be felt but never spoken.

Now that they were out in the open, the silence between them remained, yet it no longer carried the same uncertainty. It had become a place of quiet understanding instead. Neither of them hurried to fill it. They let the moment rest exactly as it was, allowing the words to find their place within everything they had already built together.

Mahira nodded slowly, the movement unhurried, her acceptance certain enough to need no emphasis.

"I know."

For a brief moment, neither of them spoke. The quiet certainty in her response settled over him more deeply than any grand declaration could have. He had expected surprise, questions, perhaps even relief. Instead, she accepted his confession as though it had simply confirmed something she had known for a long time. Rather than unsettling him, her calm certainty eased something inside him. For the first time since those feelings had taken shape, he no longer felt as though he was carrying them by himself.

"You know?" he asked, a faint disbelief threading through his voice, as if he was trying to understand when that knowing had begun, and how she had arrived at it without the same struggle he had just gone through.

"I've known for a while," she said, her tone certain, like the timeline of it mattered less than the fact that it had been clear to her long before he had managed to articulate it.

He looked at her for a moment, trying to decide whether she was serious. "Since when?"

"Long enough."

"That's not very specific."

"You don't deserve specific."

A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth despite himself. "I spent all this time trying to figure out how to say it."

"I noticed."

"You could've made it easier."

"I could have."

"You didn't."

"No."

"Why?"

She considered the question before answering. "Because I wanted you to get there on your own."

He frowned slightly. "That sounds unnecessarily difficult."

"Maybe." A small smile touched her lips. "But if I'd said it first, I would've spent the whole time wondering whether you meant it because you felt it or because I'd made it easier for you."

He took a moment before asking, "So you just waited."

"I wasn't waiting forever."

"That's reassuring."

"I was waiting until you stopped pretending you didn't already know."

He laughed then, the sound quieter than before but genuine. "I hate how often you're right."

"You'll survive."

"Confident."

"Reasonably."

He shook his head once. "I really thought I was hiding it."

"You were hiding the words." She held his gaze. "Not the rest of it."

He looked away briefly before meeting her eyes again. "I guess I wasn't."

"And you?" he asked, the question carrying more weight this time.

Mahira looked at him then, her gaze unguarded, letting him see exactly where she stood.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” she said, the words simple, but grounded in something that didn’t need elaboration.

Hamza leaned back slightly, his shoulders easing against the seat as he took it in, letting her words settle before responding.

He stayed there for a moment, absorbing it, not resisting it, but not entirely at ease with it either, because understanding something and being ready for it were not the same, and he could feel the distance between those two things more clearly now than before.

“So what did that make this?” he asked, the question softer than before, carrying more weight now.

Mahira didn’t hesitate this time. Her answer came easily, from a certainty he was still trying to reach.

“It made it something real,” she said, her voice even.

“And what if I mess it up?” he asked, the question less about doubt in her and more about doubt in himself, about whether he could hold something like this without breaking it.

Mahira’s lips curved almost imperceptibly, her expression warm with understanding.

“Then you mess it up,” she said, her voice level. “But don’t pretend it wasn’t real.”

He repeated the words silently to himself, letting them settle into something more than relief. Real. The word carried a weight he hadn’t expected. It wasn’t dramatic or overwhelming. If anything, it made the moment feel simpler than before. There was no uncertainty left to solve, no hidden meaning waiting to be uncovered. Whatever this was had finally stopped existing only in gestures, unfinished sentences and careful guesses.

He looked at her again, noticing how little she seemed to need from the moment itself. She wasn't waiting for a promise or a grand declaration. She had answered him, and for her that answer seemed enough.

It made him wonder whether certainty had always looked this ordinary. Perhaps that was what had confused him all along. He had expected clarity to arrive with absolute confidence, when instead it had arrived with two people simply choosing to stop pretending they didn't already know.



Chapter 12

The next time they met, Hamza suggested dinner over text, asking if they could meet somewhere they could sit across from each other and actually talk.

She arrived a few minutes after him. The restaurant was warm with low light and muted conversation, but his eyes found her the moment she stepped inside. He hadn't realized how often he had been looking toward the door until he no longer needed to.

Mahira was wearing a well-cut blouse paired with a black saree, the simplicity making the impression even stronger. Nothing about the outfit demanded attention, yet his eyes lingered anyway. The fabric moved cleanly as she walked, understated and effortless, carrying a quiet confidence that seemed entirely natural on her. Her hair was left mostly open, a few loose strands framing her face, and there was something about the combination of ease and composure that made her seem unfamiliar in the best way.

For a brief moment he forgot to move. She hadn't done anything extraordinary. If anything, it was the restraint that caught him.

When she reached the table, their eyes met, and for a moment neither of them spoke. She knew exactly what she'd seen in his expression.

Hamza stood then, a beat later than he normally would have, his composure catching up with him as he did. She took him in just as steadily, her gaze moving over him with the same quiet openness he had shown her.

He was dressed simply, but with the kind of precision that came from knowing exactly what suited him: a crisp, well-fitted shirt in a deep shade that complemented his skin, sleeves rolled high enough to reveal the tattoo winding along his forearm before disappearing beneath the cuff, paired with tailored dark trousers that gave him an understated sharpness.

She looked at him a moment longer than she normally would have. He looked exactly like himself, and somehow not quite the same.

Neither of them commented on the other's appearance. The silence felt more appropriate than any compliment either of them might have offered. It lingered only for a moment before they smiled almost at the same time, each quietly aware that something about the evening already felt different, though neither of them seemed ready to say so.

A waiter appeared almost immediately, asking whether they preferred a table near the window or farther inside. Hamza looked to Mahira before answering, and she chose the quieter corner without hesitation. They followed him through the restaurant, weaving between occupied tables where conversations rose and fell beneath the soft music. Someone laughed nearby. Glasses caught the warm light as servers moved between tables with practiced ease. By the time they sat down, the first awkwardness of arriving had begun to dissolve.

The conversation found its rhythm more easily than either of them had expected. It began with familiar ground, small observations about the place, the menu, the day that had led them there, before easing into

something more natural. Even the quiet moments felt different now. They no longer carried hesitation, only the comfort of not needing to fill every silence.

They spent longer deciding than either of them expected. Mahira changed her mind twice before settling on something she admitted she had never tried before. Hamza raised an eyebrow, asking whether she usually trusted recommendations that easily. She shrugged, saying sometimes the only way to know was to order the thing you kept wondering about. He smiled, deciding to do the same.

Mahira pointed to something on the menu she had been debating since they arrived, asking whether he thought it sounded better than what she had already ordered. He considered it with unexpected seriousness before deciding she had made the right choice. She laughed, shaking her head. "You know you could have just agreed with me."

"I did," he replied. "After thinking about it."

Her smile lingered a moment longer than the exchange deserved. And then, without any clear transition, without a build that announced it, Hamza said it.

Mahira glanced around the restaurant. "Do you always choose places this quiet?"

"Only when I think the conversation deserves it."

She smiled. "That's a dangerous answer."

"Why?"

"Because now I have to decide whether you planned it or you're improvising."

"You'll find out eventually."

"I meant what I said," he said midway through his dinner, his voice quieter than before, but no less certain.

Mahira turned her head slightly, her attention shifting fully to him, her expression attentive but unreadable. “About what?” she asked, though there was a sense that she already knew, or at least understood the direction of it.

He put his fork down then, the small sound of it against the plate marking the moment more clearly than anything else could have, his attention no longer divided, no longer half-occupied by the movement of the evening.

Mahira watched him, her gaze steady, saying nothing, giving him the space to finish in his own way.

Hamza exhaled, looking away for a second before meeting her eyes again.

“I really like you,” he said.

Mahira didn't react immediately. She heard the difference, and answered it with the same care.

“How much?” she asked softly, her voice calm.

Hamza let out a quiet breath, shaking his head slightly, a faint acknowledgment of the question's weight passing through his expression before he answered. “Enough that it's starting to matter,” he said, the words simple, but carrying a kind of honesty that didn't try to elevate itself beyond what it was.

Mahira looked at him carefully, her gaze steady, attentive to the nuance in what he had said, and the way he had said it. “Starting to?” she asked, the question gentle, but precise.

He smiled faintly, recognizing the instinct to hold something back. “A lot,” he corrected, the words quieter, but freer this time.

There was a pause, but this one felt settled, held in place by the honesty that had already passed between them.

“I didn’t plan this,” he added after a moment, his voice quieter now, the words carrying the quiet realization of someone hearing the truth as he said it.

The conversation paused on its own, leaving only the quiet sounds of the restaurant around them. They ate without urgency, the silence between them carrying the same ease as their words had moments before.

Mahira’s lips curved slightly over her glass of wine, something softer settling into her expression. “Do you plan most things?” she asked, her tone light, though the question was genuine.

“No,” he admitted, a faint exhale following the word, his honesty coming more easily now than it had before. “But I usually know what I’m doing,” he added, the statement carrying a quiet confidence that felt familiar, something that had likely guided him through most things in his life.

“And now?” she asked, her gaze steady on him, the question simple but precise, inviting him to stay in that honesty rather than retreat from it.

He met her gaze without hesitation this time, holding it steadily. “Now I didn’t,” he said, his voice even, and after a brief pause added, “And that was... new,” the admission open and unguarded.

Mahira studied him for a second longer, her gaze attentive, taking in not just his words but the way he held them. Then she looked down at her plate, thoughtful, letting his honesty settle before she answered.

“Good,” she said quietly, her voice steady, the word carrying a calm assurance that did not need to be emphasized to be understood.

He frowned slightly. “Good?” he repeated, a hint of disbelief in his voice, his gaze searching her face for something more.

Mahira let the silence remain between them for a moment, her gaze resting on him with a quiet steadiness that made him feel unexpectedly

seen. She wasn't searching for another explanation or waiting for him to qualify what he had said. If anything, it seemed she had already accepted it for what it was, allowing it to settle without rushing to define it. The ease of it caught him off guard. He had expected questions, perhaps even hesitation. Instead, she simply let the truth exist between them.

She nodded. "If you knew exactly what you were doing, I wouldn't trust it."

He held her gaze for a moment before a faint understanding crossed his face.

He didn't say anything after that. There was nothing left to explain. What mattered had already been understood.

They returned to their meal in unhurried conversation, speaking about smaller things again, work, a film one of them had watched, someone renovating a house near her office. The subjects themselves hardly mattered. What had changed lingered quietly beneath each one, altering nothing on the surface while making everything feel slightly different. More than once, one of them looked up to find the other already watching, each meeting ending in the faintest hint of a smile before they returned to their food.

The conversation wandered easily from one subject to another without either of them trying to hold onto any single one for very long. At one point Mahira reached for the glass of water beside her just as Hamza did the same, and they paused with a quiet laugh before one of them gave way.

What had been said remained between them, quiet and unmistakable. Neither of them tried to name it further. That was enough for tonight.



Chapter 13

I meant what I said too,” Mahira said quietly, her voice calm, carrying a similar honesty to his.

Hamza's brows knit slightly. "About what?" he asked, already sensing there was more to it.

Mahira tilted her head. "About being here," she said, the quiet emphasis making it clear she wasn't talking about the restaurant alone.

"I don't do this," she said quietly.

"That's reassuring," he replied lightly.

She didn't smile in response.

"I'm serious, Hamza," she said, her voice steady.

"I don't... stay in things that feel uncertain," she continued, her words measured, not rushed, each one chosen with care. "I don't wait around for someone to figure out what they feel," she added, and there was no edge to it, no frustration or impatience, just a clear articulation of who she was and how she moved through things.

"And yet," he said quietly, the words carrying both acknowledgment and question.

Mahira nodded. "And yet," she repeated.

"I always had," she said quietly.

Hamza frowned slightly, trying to catch up with what she had just said, the phrasing staying with him for a second longer than expected. "Always had... what?" he asked, his tone careful, as though he didn't want to assume more than she was offering, even while sensing that it was more.

Mahira looked at him then, fully, directly. "Liked you," she said, simply.

"Since when?" he asked, the question quieter than his earlier ones, as though he already sensed that the answer might reach further back than he had assumed, and that it might change how he understood everything that had come before.

"Since before it made sense," she said, her voice even, not attempting to explain it further.

He looked at her for a long second, almost as though he was trying to reconcile the woman sitting across from him with every version of her he had known before this. A faint smile appeared before he seemed to catch himself.

"You're telling me," he said, shaking his head once, "that all those conversations..."

She smiled slightly. "Yes."

"Even when we barely knew each other?"

"Especially then."

He let out a quiet laugh, more in disbelief than amusement. "I completely missed it."

"You weren't supposed to notice," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because it wasn't your responsibility yet." She gave a small shrug. "I didn't think I had to be clearer," she continued, "It was already real to me."

"There wasn't a single clue?" he asked, still sounding unconvinced.

"Probably a few," she admitted. "Just not obvious ones."

He searched his memory with an exaggerated seriousness. "I'm trying to think of something."

"Don't," she said, laughing softly. "You'll only start rewriting history."

"I'm already doing that."

She smiled. "I know."

He shook his head. "I thought you were just... easy to talk to."

"I was."

"That's all?"

"That was enough for me."

"And now?" he asked.

She held his gaze. "Now you've made it impossible not to," she said.

Hamza leaned back slightly, taking a moment before he spoke.

"That's a lot," he said quietly.

Mahira nodded. "I know," she said.

"And you were okay with that?" he asked, the question thoughtful rather than doubtful.

She smiled faintly then, and there was nothing uncertain in it.

"I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't," she said.

The waiter appeared beside their table just then, apologizing softly for the interruption as he asked whether they wanted to look at the dessert menu. The timing drew a quiet smile from Mahira before either of them could answer.

Hamza glanced at her. "Dessert?"

She looked at the menu for barely a second before shaking her head. "I don't really have a sweet tooth."

"I don't believe you."

She looked up. "Why?"

"You said that too quickly."

A laugh escaped her. "Some things don't require thought."

He studied the menu a moment longer before closing it. "One strawberry mousse," he said to the waiter, "two spoons."

Mahira gave him an incredulous look. "I just told you I didn't want dessert."

"I heard you."

"And?"

"And I think you're making it up."

She waited until the waiter had walked away before looking back at him. "You're remarkably confident for someone making decisions about another person's dessert."

"We'll find out in a few minutes."

When it arrived, she watched him take the first spoonful before reluctantly accepting the one he held out to her. She tasted it, considered it for a moment, then reached for another spoonful herself.

Hamza smiled.

She noticed immediately. "Don't say it."

"I wasn't going to."

"You absolutely were."

"Maybe a little."

"Insufferable."

"Accurate."

She rolled her eyes before taking another spoonful anyway.

"That's your third bite," he observed.

"Who's counting?"

"Apparently I am."

She looked at him over the rim of the wine glass. "You're enjoying this far too much."

"I enjoy being right."

"That's a dangerous quality."

"Only when I'm actually right."

"We'll disagree on that."

His smile only widened.

Whatever this was, it belonged to both of them now.

Hamza leaned forward slightly.

"I was going to ask you something," he said.

Mahira watched him.

"This weekend," he continued, "a friend's having a house party."

"I want you to come with me," he added, more directly this time, meeting her gaze without looking away.

She understood what he was really asking.

He exhaled lightly, almost imperceptibly, before continuing, "It might not be... easy," he said. "Vibhav will be there, and a few others," he added, a faint hint of something knowing passing through his expression, "and it can get a little loud, a little chaotic," he admitted, "but they mean well."

"Should I be worried?" she asked.

"Only if Vibhav starts telling stories."

"About you?"

"Unfortunately."

"Should I prepare myself?"

"Depends how much you enjoy watching someone's reputation disappear."

She laughed.

"Now I'm definitely coming."

Mahira held his gaze for a second longer.

"I've lived with my cousins," she said, a small smile settling on her lips, "I don't think any amount of raucous boys is going to scare me."

"Good," he said, a faint smile touching his expression now, carrying an openness that felt new.

"I've made a terrible decision," he said.

"Inviting me?"

"Introducing you to my friends."

"Should I assume they're going to embarrass you?"

"That's the part I'm certain of."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Everyone deserves at least one friend willing to tell stories they wish had stayed private."

He laughed. "You'll fit in much faster than I expected."

"That's reassuring."

"I'm not sure it should be."

They lingered a little longer, the conversation slipping easily into smaller things that no longer seemed small simply because they belonged to them. At one point, she reached for her glass just as he did, their hands brushing lightly against each other before either of them could stop. They didn't pull away immediately. It was a small thing, accidental enough to be ignored, yet both of them lingered for a moment. She looked at him, a quiet smile finding its way onto her face, and he returned it without thinking. There was something unexpectedly comforting in how ordinary it felt.

They spoke about work, about a restaurant she wanted to try, about a film neither of them had seen despite insisting for months that they would. The words came without effort now, no longer carrying the careful awareness that had shaped the earlier part of the evening.

When the bill arrived, Hamza reached for it automatically.

Mahira looked at him. "We're not doing that."

He glanced up. "Doing what?"

"Pretending I wasn't planning to pay for my own dinner."

"You can pay next time."

The words settled between them before either of them seemed to register them. Hamza paused for the briefest moment, as though realizing what he had implied. Mahira looked at him, the corners of her mouth lifting into a quiet smile.

"Next time?" she asked.

A faint smile crossed his face. "That was the idea."

She held his gaze for a moment before nodding once.

"All right," she said. "Next time."

For a little while, neither of them made any effort to stand. The plates had already been cleared, the table reduced to two glasses of water and the quiet space between them, yet the conversation continued with the same easy rhythm it had settled into over the course of the evening.

Mahira found herself telling him about a book she had started the previous week and hadn't been able to stop thinking about, only to discover that he had read it years earlier. They disagreed over the ending with surprising conviction, each trying to persuade the other before eventually laughing at how seriously they had begun defending fictional people. It was the kind of conversation that could have continued for another hour without either of them noticing the time.

Only when a server passed by to quietly reset the neighboring table did either of them glance at the time, surprised by how late it had become.

They didn't say anything more about it, but as they stepped out into the cool evening air a few minutes later, it no longer felt as though they were leaving the date behind. Instead, it felt as though they had quietly made room for another one.



Chapter 14

The house was already full when they walked in, the door opening into a space that felt alive before they had even crossed the threshold, the air warm with movement and familiarity, as though the evening was already well underway.

Laughter spilled out before the door even opened fully, music threading through it, voices overlapping in a way that felt chaotic but not disjointed, the kind of noise that came from people who had known each other too long to measure themselves, too long to filter what they said or how loudly they said it, and there was an ease in it that made the space feel claimed, lived in, unguarded.

Mahira hesitated for a fraction of a second at the entrance, her gaze taking in the room in a single sweep, not lingering on any one person, but absorbing the energy of it, the familiarity that existed between everyone already inside.

His hand found the small of her back, the contact light, unassuming, not possessive, guiding her inside.

"Come," he said quietly, his voice close enough that it cut through the noise without needing to rise above it, carrying a certainty that didn't push, but didn't leave space for doubt either.

Hamza seemed different here. Looser, quicker to laugh, more at ease than she had ever seen him.

"Finally," Vibhav called from the kitchen, lifting his glass in greeting. "Look who remembered he has friends."

Hamza smirked. "I was busy."

"Doing what?" Ashwin asked, appearing beside Vibhav with a grin.

"Clearly not answering his phone," Shruti muttered, reaching over to steal a handful of chips from the bowl before her.

And before he could respond, someone noticed her.

"Oh."

There was a pause, not long, but enough to register, enough to mark that something had been introduced into the space that hadn't been there before.

Then—

"Oh."

The tone changed, curious in a way that felt collective, as though her presence had quietly rearranged the moment, drawing attention without demanding it.

"This is Mahira," he said.

Vibhav, who had been halfway through saying something to the others, stopped instead. His gaze moved from Hamza to Mahira and back again, lingering for a moment longer than anyone else's before a small, knowing smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. He didn't say anything. He simply nodded once, as though something had quietly confirmed itself.

She smiled as they shook hands.

"We've heard about you," Shruti said.

Hamza looked at her.

"Not from him," she added quickly. "We just guessed someone had to exist."

"Mahira," Vibhav repeated with an easy nod before offering his hand. "I'm Vibhav."

A laugh moved through the room, taking whatever awkwardness might have settled with it.

Conversation moved easily after that. Someone asked where she'd grown up, someone else wanted to know how she'd met Hamza, and before long she found herself laughing at stories about college that seemed to involve the same three people making increasingly questionable decisions.

There was history in every interaction, in the way names were called out, in the references that passed quickly between them, in the inside jokes that carried meaning she didn't fully understand yet, but could sense nonetheless.

And yet, he kept finding quiet ways to bring her back into it. A brief explanation, a knowing glance, a few words spoken just for her were enough to make sure she never felt like an outsider. Without drawing attention to it, he seemed instinctively aware of when the conversation had drifted beyond her and gently guided it back.

They stood close, the crowded room leaving little space between them, and after a while it became impossible to tell whether it was the room keeping them there or neither of them choosing to move away.

Someone handed him a drink, the exchange quick and casual, but instead of taking a sip himself, he passed it to her first, the gesture

unforced, almost instinctive, as though it had not required thought, and yet it lingered in its meaning longer than its execution.

She took it without thinking, thanked him softly, and after a sip handed it back. Their fingers brushed briefly in the exchange, familiar enough now that neither of them acknowledged it. The conversation carried on around them without pause, but for a fleeting moment it felt as though they had slipped into a quieter rhythm of their own, one that existed easily beneath the noise without asking to be noticed.

Across the room, Vibhav watched the exchange without interrupting it. He had known Hamza long enough to recognize habits, and this wasn't one of them. Hamza had never been absent-mindedly attentive to anyone before. The realization stayed with him, though he kept it to himself.

Later, when she was laughing at something someone had said, her attention briefly elsewhere, her expression open in a way that softened her presence, his hand brushed her arm, the contact light enough to be dismissed, but it stayed a second longer than it needed to, long enough to move beyond accident without becoming overt.

No one commented, no one called it out or made it into something larger than it was, and yet there was a quiet awareness that passed through the group, subtle but present, the kind that comes from people who notice more than they say.

Mahira saw it clearly now, in the way everything around him fit together without effort, in the way these people knew him beyond what was visible on the surface, beyond what he chose to show in quieter, more contained settings.

They didn't perform around each other, and that absence of performance made the space feel unfiltered, as though nothing needed to be curated or adjusted to maintain connection.

He didn't perform for them either, and that, more than anything, revealed something essential about him, because it showed a version of him that existed without restraint, without the careful calibration she had noticed before.

And more importantly, he wasn't hiding her from any of it, not positioning her at the edge, not keeping her separate from the parts of his life that were already established, but allowing her to exist within it without hesitation.

At one point, someone nudged him, the gesture casual, familiar, the kind that didn't need permission. "Since when do you bring people?" they asked, the question light, joking, delivered with an ease that came from knowing him well enough to tease without overstepping.

Hamza didn't deflect, didn't laugh it off or turn it into something easier, something that could dissolve back into the rhythm of the room without meaning anything.

He just said, "Since now."

For a brief moment, the conversation around them seemed to lose its shape. A couple of amused glances passed between friends who had known Hamza long enough to understand what those two words meant. Then someone made an exaggerated show of raising their drink, the laughter returned, and the evening slipped naturally back into its easy rhythm.

Vibhav glanced at Hamza for a second before letting out a quiet laugh, more to himself than anyone else. There was no surprise in it, only recognition. "Right," he said, lifting his drink slightly. "That explains a few things."

Nobody asked him what he meant. Whatever he had understood, he seemed content to keep it to himself.

It was later in the evening, the energy of the room having softened without losing its warmth, the earlier noise settling into smaller pockets

of conversation, where voices no longer competed but overlapped more gently, creating a sense of ease rather than intensity.

The crowd had divided itself naturally, groups forming and reforming in quiet rhythms, the kind that didn't require coordination, just familiarity.

Mahira was sitting, half-turned toward a conversation she wasn't fully part of, listening more than speaking, her attention drifting in and out as she followed fragments rather than the whole, present but not anchored.

Hamza was across the room, standing with a group, talking, laughing, his posture relaxed, his expression open in a way that came easily here, as though he had settled fully into the space.

And then, without any visible effort, without scanning the room or pausing mid-sentence, his eyes found hers, the connection immediate, unforced, as though it had been expected rather than searched for.

He held her gaze for a second, just long enough to make it clear that it wasn't accidental, that he had seen her and chosen to stay there for that brief moment.

Then he gestured, subtle, almost imperceptible to anyone else, a small movement of his hand that carried a clear meaning.

Come here.

She went without thinking, because the invitation didn't feel like something to consider, just something to follow, as though the distance between them had already begun to close the moment he looked at her.

And when she reached him, he didn't step aside to make space in the obvious way, didn't move outward to accommodate her presence.

He created space instead, drawing her into it, pulling her in slightly, his hand resting at her waist in a way that felt natural, unannounced, as though it had always been there.

She stepped into the space beside him without thinking. Only afterward did she realize she hadn't hesitated once all evening. Somewhere between walking through the front door and standing beside him now, this had stopped feeling like Hamza's world and started feeling like a place that had room for her too.



Chapter 15

They didn't leave early, and there was no sense of escape or retreat in the way they moved toward the end of the night, but when they did leave, it happened together, the decision needing no discussion or negotiation, only understanding.

There were no drawn-out goodbyes, no lingering at the doorway, no separate conversations that pulled them in different directions, just a movement toward the exit that felt natural, almost inevitable, the decision to step out together having already been made without a word.

His hand found hers again as they walked out.

Neither of them said anything for a while. The evening no longer seemed to ask for conversation, only company. Their footsteps settled into an easy rhythm across the pavement, matching without either of them noticing. Cars continued to pull away around them, headlights sweeping briefly across the parking lot before disappearing onto the road beyond.

For the first time that night, Mahira became aware of how ordinary the moment looked from the outside. There was nothing remarkable about two people walking to a car together, yet it carried a significance she couldn't quite explain.

The night air was cooler than it had been earlier, carrying the faint scent of rain that had never quite arrived. Behind them, the sounds of the gathering lingered for a few moments, laughter spilling out each time the entrance opened before fading again as the door closed.

They walked without hurrying. A few people were still saying their goodbyes in the parking lot, conversations stretching out beneath the yellow glow of the streetlights, but neither of them stopped. It felt strangely natural to keep walking together, the evening having brought them to each other's side.

When they reached the car, Hamza unlocked it and opened the passenger door for her without thinking. She smiled almost to herself before getting in, the gesture so unforced that it seemed less like courtesy than habit, though she knew it couldn't be one yet.

"That was... different," she said, her voice thoughtful rather than uncertain, still processing the evening even as she spoke.

Hamza glanced at her, a faint curiosity in his expression. "Good different?" he asked, his tone light, but attentive in a way that suggested the answer mattered more than he let on.

She nodded, the movement small but certain, and then, after a brief pause, she added, "I liked seeing you like that," her gaze steady.

He smiled slightly at that, not broadly, but enough to show that he understood what she meant. "And?" he asked, his voice carrying an invitation for her to continue.

She searched for the right words, surprising herself by wanting to find them instead of letting the thought remain unfinished.

"Everyone already knew who you were with them," she said eventually.
"No one was waiting for you to prove anything."

He glanced at her briefly before looking back at the road.

"That's because they've known me for years."

"Maybe," she said. "But it looked... easy."

He smiled faintly.

"It usually is."

"I liked seeing that version of you."

He didn't say anything for a moment.

"You'll probably see it again."

She looked at him then, holding his gaze for a moment before she spoke.

"I liked how you were with me there," she said, her tone calm but deliberate, choosing each word carefully so it would mean exactly what she intended.

When he answered, his voice was quieter.

"I wasn't being different," he said, his gaze holding hers, not looking away.

He hesitated.

"I was just not holding back," he added finally, and the words, simple as they were, carried everything that had remained unspoken before, everything that had been restrained, everything he had now allowed to exist without filtering.

She held his gaze for a moment longer, letting the words settle. They answered more than the question she had asked. Looking back over the evening, she realised there hadn't been a single moment when he had seemed to be measuring himself before he spoke or laughed. The ease

she had noticed hadn't belonged only to the people around him. It had belonged to him as well.

The drive back carried a different kind of stillness from the evening they had left behind. Neither of them seemed in a hurry to fill the silence, and for once it asked nothing of them.

"You were very different there," she said finally, her voice thoughtful rather than questioning, giving words to something she had been noticing throughout the evening.

Hamza glanced at her briefly, his attention moving from the road to her and back again, the question settling in before he responded. "Different how?" he asked, wanting to understand what she had seen.

She thought for a moment.

"Lighter," she said. "A little less controlled."

He laughed softly. "That's just what I'm like with them," he said, his tone relaxed, offering it as explanation rather than correction.

Mahira turned toward him. "And with me?" she asked, her voice calm, but carrying an unmistakable intent that made the question linger.

He didn't answer immediately.

"Still figuring that out," he admitted.

They drove in silence for a minute after that, the road stretching ahead beneath the glow of scattered streetlights. Mahira rested her elbow against the window, watching the city slip by.

"Your friends tease you a lot," she said eventually.

He laughed. "Only because they know I'll let them."

"You don't seem like someone who lets people get away with much."

"Most people don't."

She turned to look at him. "But they do."

"They've earned it."

They stopped eventually in a place that seemed to present itself at just the right moment, the drive having found its own ending without needing direction.

Mahira turned slightly toward him, her movement unhurried, her attention settling fully on him, choosing to step into the moment instead of letting it pass.

"I liked tonight," she said.

Hamza held her gaze. "I know," he replied, his tone calm and certain, suggesting he had been paying attention in ways she might not have realized.

She frowned faintly, curiosity flickering across her face. "You know?" she asked, a hint of surprise in her voice. She hadn't expected him to say it so easily.

He nodded, the movement small but assured, his expression unchanged.

"You were different too," he said.

"How?" she asked, the question meant as much for herself as for him.

He considered her for a moment.

"You didn't overthink everything," he said. "You just... were there."

"That doesn't happen often," she admitted.

"I noticed," he said, and the way he said it, certain and without hesitation or embellishment, carried something that reached deeper than the words themselves.

The space between them felt smaller now, held together by the recognition that whatever had existed between them earlier had narrowed into something more immediate, more present.

Mahira's hand drifted across the seat until her fingers brushed his. He turned his hand beneath hers, lacing their fingers together.

Mahira looked down at their joined hands before meeting his eyes again.

When she spoke, her voice was soft.

“I didn’t feel out of place tonight,” she said.

Hamza’s gaze softened in response, becoming clearer, more open, with the understanding that he had heard what she meant beneath the words.

Silence settled between them.

“You fit,” he added, and the word carried a weight that extended beyond the immediate, beyond the evening itself, into something more lasting.

She lowered her eyes for a moment, her thumb brushing lightly across the back of his hand. The words stayed with her because they reached somewhere she rarely allowed other people to see. She had never expected belonging to come so easily. There had been no dramatic moment, no single conversation that changed everything. Instead, it had grown through small gestures she almost hadn’t noticed until they had become impossible to separate from the way she now thought about him.

She had spent so much of her life trying to adjust herself to different rooms, speaking a little less here, a little more there, measuring every version of herself against what seemed expected. It had become such a familiar instinct that she rarely noticed herself doing it anymore.

Tonight she hadn’t done that. She had laughed when something was funny. Joined conversations without rehearsing what she wanted to say. Fallen comfortably into the rhythm of people she had met only hours before.

Somewhere along the evening, she had stopped wondering whether she belonged and simply existed within it. Looking at him now, she realized he had noticed before she had.

It surprised her how much that mattered. She had spent years believing belonging was something that had to be earned slowly, through caution

and careful adjustment, yet tonight it had arrived without asking her to become anyone else. For the first time in a long while, being understood felt simpler than being explained.

The moment lingered between them, warm and settled. Nothing more needed to be said for either of them to understand it. Hamza looked at her fully, any hesitation gone.

"Come home with me," he said, his voice low and certain, offering the words without expectation.

Mahira held his gaze for a second, aware of what it meant, and of how easily she could step into it.

"Okay," she replied.



Chapter 16

They drove to his place in a silence that felt anything but empty, the kind that carried everything they hadn't said on the way there, every glance, every moment that had built between them, settling into the space without needing to be spoken aloud.

The moment the deadbolt clicked into place, something in Hamza gave way decisively.

There was no pause, no retreat into thought or control. This was where everything between them had been leading.

He crossed the distance between them in two quick steps before either of them could think better of it.

When he kissed her, months of restraint dissolved at once. There was urgency in it, but also recognition. Both of them understood they were finally allowing themselves something they had already chosen long before tonight.

Mahira answered him without hesitation, her hands finding his shoulders as naturally as his found her waist. The kiss deepened almost immediately, driven less by impatience than by the relief of no longer having to hold anything back.

He rested one hand at the back of her neck while the other settled against her waist, drawing her closer until there was almost no space left between them. She leaned into him instinctively, and for a long moment neither of them seemed interested in coming up for air.

When they finally broke apart, it was only by an inch. They stayed in each other's space, the air between them tasting of salt and adrenaline, their lips swollen and slick. Mahira's chest heaved against his, her eyes dark and searching, fixed on the raw, unmasked desperation in his gaze.

"I've waited long enough for this," Hamza rasped, his voice raw, stripped of all its usual composure. "I'm done waiting, Mahira."

He smiled briefly, almost in disbelief at himself, before slipping an arm beneath her knees and lifting her with an ease that drew a surprised laugh from her.

"Still okay?"

She nodded.

"Very."

They reached the bed almost without noticing it, before either of them thought to slow down. There was nothing tentative about them anymore. Every layer they set aside felt like another hesitation left behind, until there was nothing between them that either of them still wanted to hide.

What followed unfolded without hurry despite the urgency that had brought them there. Months of restraint gave way to curiosity and certainty in equal measure. They discovered one another slowly, pausing

as often to smile as to kiss, each small response becoming another reason to trust the next.

Every hesitation disappeared a little more with each passing moment. They learned one another with an attentiveness that gradually replaced nervousness with trust, until desire settled into something deeper than anticipation.

Hamza's kisses wandered lower, lingering across the gentle curve of her stomach before continuing with unhurried certainty. Every touch seemed to dissolve another layer of restraint until anticipation settled through her, leaving her unable to think about anything except him.

When he finally lowered himself to her, months of restraint found their answer. The urgency between them remained, tempered by the same attentiveness that had defined everything between them from the beginning, his focus never leaving her. Mahira's breathing lost its rhythm, each passing moment carrying her a little closer to the edge. She clung to him without thinking, every response encouraging him to remain exactly where he was until the tension that had been building between them finally gave way, leaving her breathless in its wake.

When they finally came together, it felt less like crossing a line than arriving somewhere they had both been moving toward all this time. Nothing about the moment surprised them as much as its inevitability.

The urgency that had carried them into the room slowly eased, leaving behind an unhurried rhythm that felt entirely their own. Every kiss and touch became less about longing and more about knowing one another, until the distance they had once guarded so carefully no longer seemed to exist. By the time they settled into each other's arms, neither of them was thinking about how long they had waited. They were simply grateful they no longer had to.

Later, they lay beside each other in the darkness, neither of them speaking. Her head rested against his shoulder, his fingers absent-mindedly tracing slow circles across her arm.

"You alright?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," she smiled. "More than alright."

He smiled, pressing a gentle kiss into her hair.

For a while they stayed exactly as they were, neither of them seeming inclined to move. The room had fallen completely still, broken only by the slow rhythm of their breathing as it gradually settled into something calmer.

Mahira traced absent-minded patterns across his chest with the tips of her fingers, more aware of the stillness than of anything else. It felt different from the silences they had shared before. Those had always carried questions waiting to be answered, feelings waiting to be understood. This one carried neither. It simply existed around them, comfortable enough that neither of them felt responsible for filling it.

"I kept thinking this would change things," she admitted after a while, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hamza turned his head slightly to look at her. "Has it?"

She considered the question, her gaze drifting toward the ceiling before returning to him.

"Yes," she said. "But not in the way I thought."

A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth.

"How then?"

She let out a slow breath.

"I thought it would feel like we'd crossed some huge line." She paused, searching for words that felt honest enough. "Instead..." She looked back at him. "It feels like we just stopped standing on opposite sides of it."

He took a moment to absorb her words. "I know what you mean," he said.

She studied him, curious.

"I've spent months trying not to rush you," he continued. "Some days I wasn't even sure if keeping my distance was helping or just making everything harder." He gave a small, self-conscious laugh. "Tonight doesn't feel like something changed. It feels like something finally caught up with us."

Mahira smiled then, the expression slow and unguarded. "I think that's exactly it."

Morning arrived softer. The light filtered through the curtains in soft, dusty ribbons, catching the stillness of the room. The frantic, starved energy of the night had settled into a heavy, peaceful warmth.

As they woke up together on the bed, Hamza reached out, his hand sliding slowly up her arm, his touch feather-light compared to the bruising grip of the night before. He cupped her cheek, his thumb tracing the line of her lower lip with a lingering, appreciative stroke.

He leaned in, and this time, the kiss was a slow, tender unfurling—a silent thank you and a gentle promise. Hamza breathed her in, his eyes closing as he savored the simple, unhurried warmth of her. It was the kind of kiss that sought only to cherish; a soft landing after the storm.

She wore his shirt at breakfast, the fabric loose around her, the sleeves rolled twice to keep from swallowing her hands, the collar slipping just enough to reveal the line of her shoulder, and there was something about the way it settled on her that made it feel less like borrowed clothing and more like something that belonged in that moment. It carried traces of him, faint but unmistakable, and she seemed at ease in it in a way that made the space around them feel different, more intimate without trying to be.

She moved around the kitchen without self-consciousness, pouring tea, reaching for things as though she had already adjusted to being there, and he found himself watching her again, not in the sharp, consuming way from the night before, but in something steadier, something that lingered.

He crossed the kitchen and kissed her without urgency this time, lingering only long enough to make her smile before either of them remembered the tea growing cold beside them.

It was a kiss meant to stay. It acknowledged the change between them—a silent, soft-spoken vow that the passion they'd shared wasn't just a momentary collision, but something that could survive an ordinary Tuesday morning.

She smiled against it, the curve of her lips softening the moment rather than breaking it, and then she pulled back slightly, just enough to create space without withdrawing entirely, her hand still resting lightly against him.

"Tea first," she said softly.

He accepted the moment exactly as she offered it, making no attempt to reshape it or hold onto it any longer, and that restraint carried its own kind of weight, unmistakable in its steadiness.

"Okay," he replied just as easily, his tone matching hers, accepting without hesitation, stepping back just enough to let the moment settle where it was.

The drive back unfolded in an easy silence. This time neither of them reached for conversation. They had already said everything that mattered.

When she stepped out, she closed the door behind her and walked toward the house, without hesitation or any need to delay the moment.

Halfway there she looked back.

He was still watching. Their eyes met through the window, and neither of them smiled. The moment already said enough. She turned toward the house knowing he would wait until she was safely inside. He did.



Chapter 17

Things changed after that night. Nothing about it announced itself, and yet everything about it felt different once it settled.

Mahira began keeping her phone on loud at night, a small adjustment that carried more meaning than it seemed to on the surface.

It wasn't for anyone else, and it didn't extend beyond that single, unspoken reason, which was simply that she did not want to miss him if he reached out.

Hamza didn't ask anymore, and the absence of that felt just as significant, because he no longer framed his presence as a question or something that required permission to exist.

He would just send a message, brief and certain.

Coming.

She never asked what time he meant anymore. If the message came, she knew he would appear eventually. If it didn't, she didn't chase it. Somewhere along the way, they had stopped explaining themselves.

Neither of them ever spoke about when that had happened. There hadn't been a conversation, a decision, or even a moment they could point to afterward. It had simply become easier to trust the spaces between words than to fill them.

One night, she got into the car and immediately reached for the playlist, her hand moving toward the console without hesitation or asking, the movement unfolding with the ease of habit.

"You're changing it?" he said, glancing at her, his tone carrying more curiosity than objection, noticing the ease of it as much as the act itself.

"It's bad," she replied simply, her certainty leaving little room for argument.

"It's not bad," he said, though there was no real insistence in it, more a reflex than a challenge.

"It is," she said, already scrolling, already replacing it with something else, the decision made without needing his approval.

The new music filled the car, fitting the moment so naturally that he never thought to change it back.

He watched her scroll through his playlists like they belonged to her too. The thought should have felt strange. Instead, it only made him wonder when it had stopped feeling like his space alone.

They started doing small things for each other without noticing when they'd become habits.

One afternoon, he brought her tea without asking, setting it down beside her with the kind of casual ease that suggested it hadn't required thought, and yet it had been made exactly the way she liked it, with extra sugar, just enough to make it unmistakable.

She noticed immediately, her eyes flicking to him before she looked back at the cup. "You remembered?" she asked, her tone light, but touched with something more than surprise.

He shrugged, as if it were nothing worth pointing out. “You’ve told me ten times,” he said, dismissing it in a way that didn’t quite match the attention it had taken.

“I’ve told you twice,” she corrected, though there was no real challenge in it.

“Same thing,” he replied, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

She smiled into the cup, the warmth of it settling into her hands.

The tea tasted exactly the way she liked it. She wondered briefly whether he'd paid attention that closely all along or whether she'd only started noticing now. Either answer left her strangely pleased.

Another evening, she handed him a napkin before he even realized he needed one, the motion so natural it barely seemed like a decision.

“How did you—” he started, glancing down in confusion.

“You always do that,” she said, gesturing lightly toward the ketchup he hadn’t yet noticed on his hand, her tone matter-of-fact, having seen it often enough to expect it.

He laughed, shaking his head, a faint disbelief in the gesture.

“It’s called paying attention,” she added, her voice calm, not making a point of it, just stating it as it was.

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

Sometimes they drove for an hour without remembering where they'd meant to go. Other evenings they stayed parked, talking until one conversation became another, or saying nothing at all while the city moved around them.

Sometimes Mahira leaned her head back and closed her eyes, listening to the music while the city drifted past outside. She never worried about where they were going anymore.

Hamza glanced across at her once and found himself smiling before he realized he was doing it.

“What?” she asked, her eyes still closed, her voice calm, sensing his gaze without needing to see it.

“You trust me,” he said, and the words came out without hesitation, carrying more weight than he had intended, the realization arriving only after he'd spoken them.

Her eyes opened slowly, a quiet awareness settling over her as she turned her head to look at him, her gaze steady, searching his expression rather than reacting to the statement itself.

“Don't make it sound like a big thing,” she said softly, her tone even, though there was a quiet acknowledgement in it.

“It is,” he replied, just as steadily, his voice calm, his conviction unchanged.

She held his gaze for a moment before looking away.

“Then don't break it,” she said, and though the words were light in their delivery, almost casual, they carried a weight that settled deeper than anything else she had said.

He understood exactly what she meant, and nothing about it felt like something to laugh away.

“Okay,” he said, the word carrying a quiet deliberateness, as though he was answering something larger than the moment itself.

He held her gaze for another second before starting the car. Nothing more needed saying.

The engine hummed back to life beneath them, and the city resumed unfolding beyond the windshield. Neither of them tried to return to what had been said. The silence carried it forward well enough on its own.

After that, it simply became normal.

She began noticing the time without meaning to. If evening slipped later than usual, she found herself wondering whether she'd hear from him. The realization annoyed her at first. She wanted him there just as much as ever, which only made it more surprising that she'd always assumed she was better at guarding her routines than this. Apparently she wasn't.

Hamza noticed the same thing happening in reverse. Places he'd driven past for years began reminding him of her for reasons that made very little sense. A tea stall. A particular turn in the road. A stretch of pavement where she'd once laughed so hard she couldn't finish her sentence. He never mentioned any of it. Somehow those small reminders felt too personal to explain without making them sound larger than they were.

She always sat slightly turned toward him, angled just enough that her attention rested with him even when she was looking elsewhere, part of her seeming to remain oriented in his direction without effort.

He always lowered the volume when she started talking, the movement automatic, before she had even finished her first sentence, giving her voice priority without thinking about it.

Sometimes one of them would start telling a story they had already told before, only to realize halfway through that the other already knew how it ended.

"You've told me this," Hamza said one evening, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as she stopped mid-sentence.

Mahira frowned in mock annoyance. "Have I?"

"Twice."

"You're exaggerating."

"Only a little."

She looked at him for a second before laughing quietly, shaking her head at herself. "You could've stopped me earlier."

"I know," he replied. "But you tell it differently every time."

"Is that your polite way of saying I ramble?"

"No." He smiled. "It's my way of saying I don't mind hearing it again."

She rolled her eyes, though the gesture lost most of its conviction before it reached him, and without thinking she picked the story back up exactly where she'd left off. He listened as carefully as he had the first time, interrupting only to ask a question he already knew the answer to, simply because he liked the way she smiled whenever she realized he was still paying attention.

She stole fries from his plate without asking, her hand moving in without pause or apology, the gesture long past the point of needing permission.

He always ordered extra, the choice becoming so automatic that neither of them ever remarked on it.

She complained about the music, sometimes immediately, sometimes halfway through a song, her tone matter-of-fact rather than critical, expecting him to go along with it.

He let her win easily, her preference mattering more to him than being right.

Every time.

"You're wrong, by the way," she said one evening, looking out of the window, only then remembering the conversation they'd abandoned twenty minutes earlier.

"About what?"

"Earlier."

He frowned. "You've narrowed it down considerably."

She laughed. "About that restaurant."

"I'm still right."

"You're absolutely not."

He shook his head, smiling despite himself.

"We'll never settle this, will we?"

"No."

"Good."

She looked at him.

"Good?"

"Means you'll keep bringing it up."

None of it felt remarkable while it was happening. Each habit was too small to notice on its own. It was only later, looking back, that either of them might have realised how naturally they'd begun making room for one another.



Chapter 18

It wasn't supposed to be one of their nights.

Mahira hadn't planned for it to be, because the evening had already taken shape hours earlier when her cousin had called to say a few people were dropping by, one of those evenings that didn't ask anything of her beyond showing up.

She had said yes without thinking, settling into the simplicity of it, not expecting anything beyond what it was.

But when she walked in and saw him already there, leaning back against the arm of the sofa with that easy, unclaimed confidence that made him seem completely at home, something inside her registered it immediately.

"You're early," she said, slipping off her sandals, her tone light, though her attention had already found him.

Hamza glanced up, a faint smile forming, familiar, unforced. "You're late."

"I'm right on time," she said, stepping further in, her voice steady, the hint of a smile still there. "You're just... unusually punctual."

"Or maybe you're predictable," he replied, the ease between them settling in without needing to be acknowledged.

She let out a quiet laugh, but instead of taking the obvious empty space beside her cousin, she moved toward him without hesitation, lowering herself onto the sofa close enough that the distance between them felt incidental rather than chosen.

Her thigh brushed against his arm lightly as she settled, and neither of them adjusted, neither of them creating space where there was none needed.

She joined the conversation, treating the choice as entirely unremarkable. The evening unfolded easily, the way it always did when the group was this small, when the space felt contained enough for conversations to overlap without losing themselves, when people moved in and out of the kitchen without purpose, and someone insisted on making tea even though no one had asked for it.

Mahira slipped into her usual rhythm without thinking, talking, listening, teasing when it came naturally, moving easily from one conversation to the next.

Hamza stayed where he usually did, somewhere between the center of the room and its edges, his responses measured, his attention steady, observing more than he spoke.

"Hey, Mahira, right?" someone said, dropping into the seat across from her with an ease that suggested he had already decided the conversation would continue.

She turned, smiling easily. "Yeah."

"I've heard about you," he said, grinning. "Your cousin talks about you all the time."

“That’s slightly concerning,” she replied lightly, her tone easy.

“I’m Anant,” he added, extending his hand.

She shook it, her grip firm but relaxed. “Nice to meet you.”

He leaned forward, already settled into the interaction, clearly comfortable in a way that filled the space without asking for permission.

“So what do you do, or should I guess?”

“You should definitely guess,” she said, playing along without hesitation, her posture turning just enough to face him more directly.

“Okay... marketing?” he said, with a confidence that made it sound less like a guess and more like a conclusion.

“Wow,” she laughed, the sound unguarded. “That was very confident for something so wrong.”

“Okay, then what?” he asked, undeterred, his interest steady.

She told him, and the conversation moved forward easily from there, slipping into a rhythm that didn’t require effort to maintain, because he carried it forward without pause, animated, expressive, the kind of person who spoke in full sentences without hesitation.

Mahira matched his energy easily, laughing more than speaking as the conversation gathered its own momentum.

It was the kind of conversation that could have lasted hours without becoming memorable.

On the floor beside her, Hamza noticed them without really meaning to. At first it barely registered—just another conversation among many.

But then he kept looking, and that was what unsettled him.

Anant had the easy confidence of someone who never struggled to fill silence, and Mahira answered him with the same attentive curiosity she gave anyone she genuinely enjoyed talking to. Hamza knew that expression well.

Something tightened inside him, subtle enough to stay hidden, unfamiliar enough that he couldn't quite name it, yet impossible to ignore once he noticed it.

That bothered him more than it should have.

He frowned almost imperceptibly, more at himself than at anything happening on the sofa. There was nothing unusual about the conversation. If anything, it was exactly the sort of interaction he would normally have expected from her. She was friendly. Curious. Easy to talk to. None of that had ever troubled him before.

So why now?

The question lingered longer than he wanted it to. He dismissed it almost immediately, telling himself he was reading too much into an ordinary moment. Even so, when he looked away, his attention returned a few seconds later before he'd consciously decided to look at her.

Hamza stood, the movement unhurried and unlikely to draw attention, just enough to ease himself out of where he had been sitting, as if he'd remembered something he needed to do.

He walked to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water he didn't really want, moving with studied casualness.

From the kitchen he could still see them. Mahira laughed at something Anant said, and he leaned in to answer her, the conversation continuing as easily as before.

He drank the water anyway, although he couldn't have said whether he was thirsty. When he looked back a minute later, they were still talking.

When he came back, the group had shifted slightly, the room settling into a softer rhythm as someone had put on music that hummed low in the background, familiar enough to blend in rather than stand out, while a few people had moved to the floor, plates passing around again in an easy, unstructured way.

Mahira was still talking to Anant, her posture angled toward him, her expression open, her attention fully engaged in the conversation.

She hadn't noticed him, and that registered immediately.

He sat down on the arm of the sofa without interrupting, close enough to become part of the conversation without inviting himself into it.

“—so you just left?” Anant was saying, his tone animated, already sounding invested in the answer.

“Yeah,” Mahira replied, her voice steady, her expression thoughtful. “There was no point staying.”

“True,” Anant said with a grin. “I would’ve done the same.”

Hamza watched them for another moment before speaking.

“She wouldn’t have,” he said.

Mahira looked up then, her focus shifting to him immediately. “Excuse me?”

“You don’t leave that easily,” he continued, his voice calm, the certainty in it suggesting he knew her well enough to say it without hesitation. “You argue first.”

Mahira met his eyes before smiling. “Okay, maybe I argued a little,” she admitted.

“A little?” he repeated, one eyebrow lifting slightly.

She laughed, shaking her head. “Fine. A lot.”

Anant looked between them, amused, his curiosity now more visible. “You two sound like you’ve known each other forever.”

“Not forever, no,” Mahira said, her tone easy, though it didn’t fully contradict him.

When Mahira turned back to Anant, the conversation resumed, though her attention no longer stayed there quite as easily.

Later, when the group thinned out, she found Hamza standing near the balcony, his posture relaxed but his attention turned outward, lingering beyond the room even as he remained in it.

“You’re quiet,” she said, coming to stand beside him, close enough that the distance between them felt chosen rather than accidental.

“You seemed to enjoy talking to him,” he said after a moment, his tone even, though something in it kept the words from settling into casual conversation.

“Were you watching?” she asked, her voice calm, direct in a way that met him where he was.

He didn’t answer immediately, and the pause held just long enough to make it meaningful, caught between softening the truth and leaving it as it was.

“Maybe,” he said.

She smiled then, aware in a way that suggested she understood more than he had said.

“He’s nice,” she said, her tone neutral, stating what seemed obvious to both of them.

“Yeah,” Hamza replied, the agreement coming easily, though it didn’t quite settle into ease.

Then, almost under his breath, he added, “You seemed to think so.”

The words were softer, but they carried something that hadn’t been there before, something that shifted the air between them in a way that was subtle, but undeniable.

Mahira leaned lightly against the railing and turned slightly toward him, her posture relaxed but her attention fully on him now.

“Are you... annoyed?” she asked, her voice even, careful in a way that suggested she was trying to read what he wasn’t saying.

He shook his head immediately. "No."

She studied him for a moment. The answer had come too quickly. She wasn't sure he believed it himself.

She watched him quietly, the pieces settling together almost as they seemed to for him. He wasn't asking because he doubted her. He was unsettled because, for the first time, he'd discovered there was a part of himself he hadn't expected. Somehow that made him seem less certain than usual, and, unexpectedly, more open.

Hamza looked away for a moment before meeting her eyes again. The feeling had never been about Anant. It had arrived the moment he realized someone else could occupy the space he had quietly begun to think of as his.

"Come home with me," he said, quietly but without hesitation.

"Okay," she said. Her voice was quiet, but certain.



Chapter 19

Morning came slowly, the light filtering softly into the room, reluctant to disturb what had settled between them. It reached the sheets, the floor, and finally the quiet space they occupied together.

They woke without speaking about the night before. It wasn't that it mattered less. If anything, it mattered too much to reduce to conversation.

There was an ease in the silence, not heavy, not fragile, just present, as they moved around each other without needing to fill it, the awareness of each other carrying through even in the absence of conversation.

By the time they found themselves in the kitchen, the world had returned to something familiar, almost ordinary: the kettle on, the quiet clink of cups, the low hum of morning settling into place, the kind of routine that made everything feel deceptively simple, letting the night slip quietly into the background.

Mahira leaned against the counter, her hair still loose, falling around her shoulders without effort, her posture relaxed in a way that suggested comfort.

Hamza reached for the sugar before pausing, glancing at her instead.

"One and a half spoons?" he asked.

She smiled faintly. "You remembered."

"You always complain if I forget."

"I complain once."

"You mention it for three days afterward."

She laughed, the sound quiet enough that it barely disturbed the morning. "That's called consistency."

He slid the cup toward her with a small nod, and she accepted it without looking down, already trusting what he'd handed her.

She watched the steam rise from the cup for a moment, quietly taking in the morning.

"Everyone thinks I've disappeared," she said lightly, her tone casual, making the observation without giving it much weight. "I keep cancelling plans."

Hamza glanced at her briefly, his eyes flicking over her before returning to the kettle as he turned off the flame, the small action giving him something to do. "Have you?" he asked, his voice even, not pushing, but not entirely neutral either.

"Not really," she said, shrugging slightly, the movement easy, giving the impression she hadn't thought much about it until now. "Just... moving things around."

"Your cousin called me yesterday," he said, pouring the tea into a cup. "Vibhav? He wanted to know if you were avoiding everyone."

Mahira looked up. "He actually said that?"

“Not in those words.”

“He absolutely did.”

He smiled. “More or less.”

“I’m not avoiding anyone,” she said. “People just keep deciding things at the last minute.”

“And you keep saying no.”

“Sometimes.”

“More often than you used to.”

She picked up her own cup, wrapping both hands around it before taking a sip. “I’ve just been less interested in being out all the time.”

“Doing what instead?”

She thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. “Nothing.”

He looked at her.

“Nothing with you,” she corrected, the corner of her mouth lifting.

“Drives. Tea. Sitting around. Apparently I’m becoming very boring.”

“You don’t seem unhappy about it.”

“I’m not.”

“You know,” she said after a moment, “I used to think every weekend had to be planned. If I stayed home, I felt like I’d wasted it.”

“And now?”

She glanced at him, considering the question before answering. “Now I don’t really think about it. Somehow the day just... goes.”

He smiled. “That’s a very convincing argument for doing absolutely nothing.”

“It isn’t nothing,” she said, shaking her head with quiet amusement. “It just doesn’t need a plan anymore.”

He nodded once. "I like that better."

He watched her over the rim of his cup for a moment, thoughtful rather than surprised. Something about the admission seemed to settle quietly inside him, though he didn't immediately respond. Instead, he took another sip, set the cup down, and let the silence stretch until it felt natural rather than awkward.

Then he asked, "For me?"

She kept her gaze ahead. "Don't make it sound dramatic," she said, her tone steady, but carrying a faint edge of deflection.

"I'm not," he replied, just as calmly, holding her gaze without asking anything more of her.

Silence settled between them, neither of them rushing to fill it.

Then she added with a faint smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, "It's not like this is anything serious," she said, her voice soft but deliberate, the words lingering longer than she intended.

"What?" she asked, her voice quieter now, less certain than before.

He was watching her, his gaze steady enough that she couldn't dismiss the question before he asked it.

"Do you actually think that?" he asked, his tone calm, but precise.

She put her cup down with immense care.

"Think what?" she asked quietly.

"That this is casual," he said, giving the word a weight she hadn't intended when she'd used it.

She gave a small shrug, trying to make the moment lighter than it felt. "I mean... what else would it be?"

"This?" he said quietly. "You and me?"

A small, deliberate pause settled between them, giving the moment shape before he answered his own question.

“No.”

Mahira frowned slightly, caught off guard by how certain he sounded, by how little room he had left for ambiguity, because she had expected some hesitation, some space to negotiate what she had said, and instead he had removed it entirely.

“No?” she repeated.

“No,” he said again, firmer this time, the word carrying a certainty that had been there long before he spoke it.

“Then what is it?” she asked, her voice softer now, less guarded, the question searching now instead of protecting her.

“I don’t know what you want to call it,” he said finally, his voice steady, each word chosen with care. “But it’s not something I just... fit into my day.”

Her fingers tightened slightly around the cup, the warmth of it grounding her even as something inside her responded, not sharply, but in a way that made it impossible to ignore the weight of what he was saying.

“You’re not someone I talk to when I’m bored,” he continued, his voice quieter now, more deliberate, each word placed with care rather than ease. “You’re not dispensable.”

The words landed with a simplicity that made them harder to dismiss. He hadn’t dressed them up or searched for something more poetic. He had simply said what he believed.

Mahira felt her breath catch before she realized it had. She looked down into her cup, watching the surface settle again after the slight movement of her hands, buying herself another second before looking back at him.

“When you don’t pick up,” he added, “it affects me.”

A small pause followed, just enough to let it settle.

“When you’re quiet, I notice it.”

Another, slightly longer this time, leaving room for each part of it to settle before he continued.

“And when you’re not around, it doesn’t feel the same.”

She looked at him without speaking. Whatever she'd expected, it hadn't been this.

“I’m not trying to make it complicated,” he said, his tone even.

“Then what are you doing?” she asked quietly.

“Not pretending it’s simple,” he said.

She looked away, her gaze dropping to the cup in her hands, her voice quieter now, less certain than before. “I didn’t say it was casual.”

“You implied it,” he said, his voice calm, the quiet certainty in it making the words difficult to argue with.

“I was just...” she exhaled, searching for something that felt safer, something that didn’t require her to meet him at the same level of certainty. “Keeping it light.”

He nodded once, a small acknowledgment that he understood what she meant, but not an agreement.

“Yeah,” he said.

“But it’s not.”

“Okay.”

He watched her, not immediately responding, his gaze steady, searching for something in the way she had said it, in whether it carried hesitation or acceptance, in whether it meant what he thought it did.

“Okay,” he repeated, the word carrying more invitation than question.

She nodded, still not looking at him. “Okay.”

Neither of them spoke for a while. The silence had changed again, no longer carrying uncertainty, only the quiet weight of things that had finally been said aloud.

Mahira lifted her cup, though she didn't drink from it immediately. She watched the steam curl upward until it disappeared, her thoughts moving more slowly than they usually did, settling one by one instead of arriving all at once.

"You know," she said eventually, her voice almost thoughtful now, "I think I've been trying very hard not to call this anything."

Hamza looked at her but didn't interrupt.

"It felt easier that way," she continued. "If I never named it, I didn't have to think about what it might become."

A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth.

"And now?"

She met his eyes for the first time since the conversation had shifted.

"Now I don't think pretending makes it any less real."

The kettle had long since gone quiet. Somewhere outside, a car passed along the street, its sound fading almost as quickly as it came. Inside the kitchen, the morning carried on with the same ordinary calm as before, and yet nothing felt quite the same.

Hamza picked up his cup again, more to give his hands something to do than because he wanted another sip.

Mahira looked up at him at last. This time, she didn't look away.



Chapter 20

The kitchen went still as Mahira reached up, her fingers grazing the hair at the nape of his neck to draw him back down.

The kiss was a quiet, deliberate echo. It lacked the jagged, high-velocity heat of the bedroom; instead, it was a slow, restrained contact that felt like a bridge between who they were yesterday and who they had become overnight. Her lips were soft, moving against his with a tentative rhythm that seemed to weigh the gravity of the space they had crossed.

As their mouths met, the silence of the room amplified the words that had finally been spoken. In the quiet friction of the kiss, Hamza's admission—*"When you're not around, it doesn't feel the same,"*—seemed to vibrate between them again. For Mahira, the kiss was a way to process the reality of his patience and the sheer force of the feelings he had kept hooded for so long. For Hamza, receiving her gentleness was a sobering contrast to the wild, graphic reclamation of the dark; it was the realization that he didn't just have her body, but her presence.

It was a kiss of pause and reflection. They pulled apart just a fraction, their lips still ghosting over one another, as the weight of the conversation settled.

She stood there for a moment longer, the quiet between them no longer something to move past, but something to sit within, and then, almost as if arriving at a decision she hadn't been consciously working toward, she set her cup down on the counter.

"Take the day off," she said.

He looked at her, surprised more by her certainty than by the suggestion itself.

"I am," she added, before he could respond, her tone steady now, more certain. "I already decided."

A small pause followed, and then, more quietly, "Stay."

It wasn't framed as a request, and it wasn't quite a demand either. It left no room to question what she meant.

He studied her for a second, and then he nodded, the decision coming without resistance.

"Okay," he said.

And just like that, the rest of the day loosened its hold on them, the outside world receding without ceremony.

Neither of them moved right away.

The decision had been made so easily that it left them standing there with nowhere they needed to be. The kettle had long since gone quiet, and the apartment settled around them with the familiar sounds of a place lived in rather than merely occupied.

Mahira picked up her cup again, taking a small sip before smiling to herself.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That wasn't nothing."

She glanced at him over the rim of her cup. "I'm just not used to asking people to stay."

"You didn't ask."

"No?"

He shook his head, amusement flickering across his face. "You informed me."

She laughed quietly. "And you listened."

"I was always going to."

The words slipped out so naturally that neither of them tried to soften them. They simply settled into the room, finding their place among everything else that had already been said.

Later, they found themselves sitting across from each other, fresh cups of tea in their hands, the morning stretching into something slower, more deliberate.

At one point Mahira reached for a biscuit from the plate between them, only to find his hand arriving there at the same moment.

Their fingers brushed. She looked up automatically, expecting one of them to pull away.

Neither did.

Hamza smiled first, the expression small enough that it seemed meant only for her. "Go ahead."

"You touched it first."

"I'm willing to be generous."

"That's very noble of you."

She took the biscuit anyway, breaking it neatly in half before holding one piece out to him. He accepted it without a word.

It was such an ordinary exchange that neither of them thought much of it in the moment, yet it carried an ease that would have been impossible only a few days earlier.

Mahira sat with her legs folded beneath her, her gaze drifting to him every so often before settling on her tea again.

Hamza leaned back in his chair, watching her with an easy familiarity.

Neither of them felt any need to keep the conversation moving. And in the space between words, in the simple act of sitting there something settled further, not defined, not named, but chosen in a way that made it feel more real than anything they had said aloud.

Hamza let out a slow breath before speaking.

"I just..." The words stalled. He rubbed a hand across his jaw and tried again.

She watched him now, fully, her gaze steady in a way that invited him to continue without pushing him to.

"What?" she asked, her voice calm, but attentive.

Without looking at her, saying it directly felt harder to keep steady, he spoke.

"Do you realise," he said slowly, each word deliberate, "how much of my day is just... waiting to talk to you?"

She didn't respond immediately, because what he had said settled into her in a way that asked to be felt before it was answered, her stillness less about hesitation and more about absorbing the weight of it.

He spoke more quietly now. "It's like—everything else is happening, but none of it really... registers until I tell you about it," he said, his voice

steady but softer, putting words to something he hadn't fully examined until now.

"And when something happens," he added, "good or bad, you're the first person I think of, not because I try to, just... automatically."

Now she was completely still, her attention fully on him, not moving, not breaking the moment with a response that might dilute what he was saying.

He finally glanced at her then, checking whether she had heard it the way he meant it, whether it had reached her the way it had left him.

"I don't know when that started," he said, almost to himself, the admission quieter, less about explaining and more about acknowledging something he hadn't meant to name until now.

She waited without interrupting him, her attention steady, giving him the time to find whatever he was still trying to say.

He looked at her then, and when he spoke again, there was no hesitation left.

"You're the part of my life that feels... real. No noise. No pretending. Just... you."

"That's a lot," she said quietly, her voice steady but softer now, acknowledging not just what he had said, but what it meant for both of them.

"I know," he replied, without trying to lessen it, without stepping back from the weight of it.

She let the silence sit for a moment, her fingers tracing the edge of the cup absentmindedly, grounding herself in something small while everything else felt larger than she had expected.

"Do you mean it?" she asked, finally, her eyes lifting just enough to meet his again, not fully, but enough to hold him in view.

He didn't hesitate this time. "Yes."

She lowered her eyes for a moment before looking back at him.

"You shouldn't say things like that so easily," she said, her voice quiet, carrying more concern than accusation, trying to protect something that hadn't fully taken shape yet.

"I'm not saying it easily," he replied, and there was no defensiveness in it, only a quiet certainty that made the distinction matter.

She looked at him then, more fully this time, her gaze meeting his without hesitation, no longer feeling the need to look away.

"Then why say it at all?" she asked, and the question carried more weight than it seemed to, because it wasn't about the words alone, but about what came with them.

"Because it's already true," he said.

Her fingers tightened slightly around the edge of her seat.

"You don't think that changes things?" she asked quietly.

"It already has," he replied, without hesitation, the words steady, unembellished. He had already crossed that point and wasn't looking back.

"And what am I supposed to do with that?" she asked, softer now, her voice no longer guarded.

He smiled faintly.

"Nothing," he said, the answer simple, but not evasive.

"Just... don't pretend it's not there," he added, his voice softer now, but steady.

"I don't," she said after a while, her voice low, steady in a way that carried more weight than anything louder could have.

He held her gaze for another moment before giving a small nod. That answer, quiet as it was, had been enough.

Outside, the city continued without them. Cars passed beneath the apartment windows. Somewhere in the building, a door opened and closed. Ordinary sounds carried on with quiet indifference, untouched by everything that had changed between them.

Mahira leaned back into the sofa, letting out a slow breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding.

"So," she said after a while, the corner of her mouth lifting, "we're both terrible at taking days off."

He looked at her.

"We've spent half of ours having emotionally life-changing conversations."

A laugh escaped him, genuine and unguarded. "We did."

For the first time that morning, the silence between them felt easy again.



Chapter 21

Later, when Mahira stepped out of the shower, her hair still damp, the ends darkened where the water hadn't yet dried. She moved through the room with an ease that didn't belong to someone visiting, but to someone who had already made space there without needing to ask.

She was wearing his T-shirt, the fabric loose on her, falling slightly off one shoulder, familiar now in a way it hadn't been before.

She caught him looking and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

He blinked, almost as if he'd forgotten she'd noticed him.

"Nothing."

"You're smiling."

He was surprised to find she was right. "Am I?"

"You are." She laughed softly. "You look pleased with yourself."

"Maybe I am."

She crossed the room toward him, drying the ends of her hair with the towel still carried in her hands. "Any particular reason?"

His gaze lingered on her for another second before he answered.

"You look..." He searched briefly for the word before giving up with a small shake of his head. "Comfortable."

She glanced down at the oversized T-shirt and smiled.

"I suppose I am."

The answer settled between them with an unexpected warmth. Comfortable in his clothes. Comfortable in his apartment. Comfortable enough to move through the space without wondering whether she belonged there.

Hamza felt something tighten quietly in his chest.

It wasn't just the sight of her that stayed with him. It was the ease of it. The quiet certainty that she had become part of the room without either of them noticing exactly when it had happened.

He watched her for a long moment. The thought arrived with such quiet certainty that it surprised him only in how natural it felt.

I love her.

"Mahira, I..." he started, the word leaving him before the rest could follow, his voice catching under the weight of what came next.

The rest of the words caught somewhere behind it.

He couldn't make them move.

"Yeah?" she prompted softly, her voice gentle, unaware of the weight gathering in him, only responding to the pause he had left.

He looked at her then, at the way she stood, at the openness in her expression, at the absence of hesitation in her. And in that moment, he

saw the difference for what it was: something that had been there all along, only now becoming impossible to ignore.

He saw how much he was feeling, how far he had already stepped into something he could not step out of. And he saw how much she hadn't said, how much she had held back or left unnamed, waiting for words it had never been given.

Or maybe, he thought, it wasn't just unspoken, but unfelt in the same way, and that possibility settled into him quietly, making the moment heavier without stopping him entirely.

The fear came all at once, cutting through the clarity he had felt just moments ago.

What if this was more for him than it was for her, more real, more certain, more defined on his side than on hers?

What if he said it and she pulled back, quietly, in the kind of way that created distance without either of them acknowledging it?

What if he took something that had been easy, something that had found its own rhythm without pressure, and turned it into something she now had to respond to, something that demanded an answer she might not be ready to give?

His throat tightened slightly, the sensation subtle but unmistakable, the words he had been ready to say now caught somewhere between intention and restraint.

Because right now, this worked, with all its complexities, yet steady enough to trust.

She was here, standing in his space like she belonged there, her presence unforced, her expression open in a way that made everything feel simple. She was smiling, relaxed and unguarded, simply present. She wasn't leaving, and there was nothing in the moment that suggested she might.

And if he said this, if he crossed that line from knowing to saying, he might lose all of that. It wouldn't happen immediately or obviously, only in the kind of way that changed something fundamental, something that could not be undone.

So instead, he chose the safer truth, because it asked less of the moment, less of her, while remaining true.

"I think about you a lot," he said, his voice steady, the words simple enough to pass as something light, even though they carried more than he allowed them to show.

"How much is a lot?" she asked lightly, her tone carrying just enough ease to keep it from becoming heavy, even as the question lingered with more meaning beneath it.

He smiled faintly, the expression small, almost self-aware, as though he understood the space between what he had said and what he hadn't.

"More than I should," he replied, the words closer to the truth, though still not all of it, enough to acknowledge the weight without placing it fully in her hands.

She nodded once.

"You know," she said, "you're terrible at pretending things don't matter."

He looked up. "Am I?"

"You're very convincing for about thirty seconds." The corner of her mouth lifted. "After that, it becomes painfully obvious."

A quiet laugh escaped him. "That sounds unfair."

"It's true."

"And you've reached this conclusion based on....?"

"Evidence."

"Very scientific."

"Extremely." She tucked one leg beneath her as she settled further into the sofa. "Whenever something's on your mind, you go strangely quiet. You answer every question half a second later than usual, and you keep looking at the same spot like it's about to solve your problems for you."

He smiled despite himself. "You're observing me now?"

"I've been observing you for months."

"That feels slightly unsettling."

She laughed again, warmer this time. "You'll survive."

He shook his head, still smiling.

"Probably."

The conversation drifted naturally after that, moving toward things that carried less weight. They argued over which café made the better tea, laughed about Vibhav's habit of turning every family gathering into a debate, and slipped so easily into familiar conversation that it became impossible to tell where the heavier moments ended and the ordinary ones began.

The words he had almost said stayed with him through everything.

I love you.

They remained exactly where he'd left them.

Neither of them mentioned the pauses that had lingered between them earlier. They didn't need to. The conversation carried them forward with the same quiet ease that had slowly become the most familiar part of being together.

Later, when Mahira was lying in his arms, their bodies still warm, the closeness between them unhurried and unguarded, the moment carried a quiet softness that lingered rather than faded, as though nothing needed to be rushed or defined.

She rested against him, her head near his shoulder, his arm loosely around her, the kind of ease that had grown from everything they had shared long before today.

The realization came with a clarity that felt almost inevitable.

I think I love him.

She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the thought settle instead of pushing it away.

And for a second, she considered saying it, simply letting the words exist between them.

She turned slightly toward him, the movement slow and almost unconscious, her body shifting closer without breaking the stillness that had settled around them.

His eyes were closed, his face at rest, the usual control he carried no longer visible, leaving him softer, more open in a way she did not always see, and that made her pause.

She remembered the unfinished sentences from that morning and wondered what he had stopped himself from saying.

At the time, she had accepted the pauses without questioning them. Now they returned to her differently, each unfinished thought carrying the shape of something he had been trying, and failing, to hold back. She wondered how much of him had been living in those silences all along.

Her chest tightened.

If she said it, she knew it would not stay light, no matter how simply she tried to place it between them, because some words carried their own weight the moment they were spoken.

She wondered what would follow, in the quiet, immediate aftermath that mattered more than anything else.

Would he say it back, without hesitation, the way he had said everything else that mattered, meeting her at the same place she had just reached?

Or would he pause, because he wasn't ready to say it yet.

And if he paused, even for a second, even in a way that could be explained, what would that mean for what she had just given him, for what she had placed between them without taking it back?

The thought stayed with her, steady and persistent, because she understood that some moments did not just pass once they were spoken. They stayed, and they asked to be held, not just by one person, but by both.

She looked at him for a long moment. The words sat just behind her lips.

I love you.

They felt true. They also felt early.

So she leaned forward instead and pressed a gentle kiss against his shoulder. Some things could wait a little longer.



Chapter 22

Mahira looked at him for a second longer, her gaze lingering in a way that held more thought than she let show. He wasn't avoiding the moment. He simply wasn't ready to name it, and for the first time she understood that putting words to it now would change something neither of them was ready to change. The thought reached her lips, then faded. She let it go.

She stayed where she was, his arms still loosely around her, leaning back just slightly against him as her gaze drifted past the room, unfocused, looking beyond it rather than at it.

The thought didn't disappear, and it didn't soften in the way fleeting things often did.

I think I love him.

But it changed shape, settling into something she carried within herself rather than something she was ready to offer aloud. Giving it, without knowing where it would land or whether it would be met in the same way, no longer felt possible without consequence.

And for the first time, she didn't find herself wishing that he would say it first, didn't look for it in his pauses or in the things he almost said.

She simply noticed that he hadn't, not as an accusation, not as a disappointment, but as a fact that now held its own meaning.

She let herself stay there, without asking anything more of the moment.

"Why didn't you kiss me that first time?" she asked.

Hamza tilted his head slightly, just enough to look at her properly, surprise flickering across his expression at the fact that she had chosen to ask it now.

"You remember that?" he said.

She let out a soft breath, the sound almost inaudible, but carrying more than the words that followed. "I haven't stopped remembering it."

That settled between them with a weight no playful remark could have matched, steady and unmistakable, reaching back into something they had both moved past without ever really leaving behind.

He watched her for a moment, taking in her words with the same honesty she had offered before answering.

Then he answered, just as simply, "Because I didn't know if you'd regret it."

The words came without hesitation, carrying more than the moment itself. They revealed what it had already come to mean to him.

Mahira turned to him then, fully this time, no hesitation left in the movement, her attention meeting his without distraction. Something in her expression softened even as it opened, no longer holding anything back the way it had before.

"And now?" she asked, her voice steady, almost tentative.

Hamza didn't look away, his gaze holding hers without wavering, without the restraint that had marked him earlier.

“Now I think you’d regret it if I didn’t,” he said, the words simple, but certain in a way that didn’t need emphasis.

Silence settled between them, easy now in a way it hadn’t been before.

She turned a little more in his arms, angling herself closer without disturbing the ease between them, her head lifting just enough to look at him more directly.

“Do you always wait this long to say things?” she asked, her tone light, but carrying something more thoughtful beneath it.

He exhaled softly, a trace of amusement in it, not dismissive, but self-aware in a way that acknowledged the truth of it. “Only when they matter,” he said.

She held his words for a moment before answering, letting them settle without looking away.

“And this?” he asked eventually, his voice more thoughtful now, the question seeming to have been with him for a while before he chose to give it words. “What is this for you?”

Mahira took her time. Whatever she said now would stay with them. She met his gaze and held it.

“It’s not simple,” she said, her voice even.

“I know,” he replied, and there was no hesitation in it, no attempt to reduce what she had said into something more manageable, only an understanding that met her exactly where she stood.

“It’s not safe,” she said, simply naming what it had come to feel like.

“I know that too,” he replied, just as steadily, without trying to reassure her out of it or reshape it into something easier, accepting the risk as part of what it was, not something separate from it.

She exhaled slowly, the breath leaving her as though she was allowing herself to step fully into what she had been circling. “And I don’t think I can do this halfway.”

Hamza took that in before nodding once.

“Good,” he said.

She frowned slightly. “Good?”

He leaned a little closer, his gaze steady.

“I’m not interested in halfway either,” he said, the certainty in his voice needing nothing to soften or explain it.

“This isn’t casual for me,” he continued, the words simple and unforced, carrying a certainty that gave them their weight.

“I don’t meet you just to pass time,” he continued, his voice even, close enough that she felt it more than she heard it. “I don’t think about you the way you think about something temporary.”

Mahira held his gaze.

“And?” she asked softly, the question holding more than curiosity, asking for what came after certainty.

Hamza didn’t look away, his eyes holding hers without hesitation, without the doubt she had expected to find.

“And I’m not seeing anyone else,” he said, the words simple, their sincerity evident without emphasis.

A brief pause followed, and then he added, “I don’t want to,” and in that addition, there was something more than exclusivity, there was intention, something chosen rather than incidental, something that belonged to how he felt, not just what he was doing.

She looked down for a moment before meeting his eyes again.

“I don’t want to either,” she said.

The words came out softly, their meaning already clear in the space between them.

"I tried to keep this... manageable," she admitted, her voice softer than before, finally giving words to something she had been holding back for longer than she had realised. "Something I could step back from if I needed to."

She shook her head slightly, the movement small and thoughtful, acknowledging something that no longer held, something that had slipped out of her control without asking for permission.

"That didn't work."

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Mahira let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding, her fingers absentmindedly tracing circles against his chest before stilling. Hamza watched her without interrupting, his thumb brushing once across the back of her hand, a gentle reminder that he was still there.

The silence lingered a little longer.

"So..." he said at last, his voice calm, almost tentative. "This?"

She answered without looking away.

"It's... us choosing each other," she said slowly. "Not because it simply happened, but because we want to."

Silence settled between them, unhurried.

Hamza nodded once, the gesture carrying recognition as much as agreement. What she had said simply gave words to something he had already known.

"Then that's what it is," he said.

Mahira searched his face, almost expecting to find hesitation somewhere, a trace of doubt that hadn't made its way into his voice.

There wasn't any. He wasn't saying what she wanted to hear. He was saying only what he believed, and somehow that mattered more.

She realised then that this was what had made him different from the beginning. He had never reached for certainty he didn't possess, never offered promises simply because the moment seemed to ask for them. If he gave her something, it was because he meant it. If there were words he hadn't said yet, it wasn't because they were missing. It was because he refused to spend them before they were true.

Neither of them moved.

It wasn't uncertainty that kept them still this time, but the recognition that there was nowhere else either of them needed to be. The conversation had reached something neither of them seemed eager to disturb.

Mahira studied his face with an openness she hadn't realised she had been holding back until now. It wasn't that he looked different. He didn't. But there was something undeniably changed in the way she looked at him now. The uncertainty she had been carrying had finally given way to something steadier.

"What?" he asked eventually, a faint smile appearing when she didn't stop looking at him.

She shook her head once. "Nothing."

His eyebrow lifted slightly.

"You're looking at me like you're trying to memorise something."

A laugh escaped her.

"Maybe I am."

He smiled then, small and unguarded, the kind of smile that appeared before he seemed to realise he was wearing it.

She reached up almost absentmindedly and brushed a thumb lightly along his cheek before letting her hand rest there for a moment.

"You're smiling," she said softly.

"I know."

"You don't usually."

"Maybe I do now."

She smiled too, the expression arriving without effort this time, and leaned forward until her forehead rested lightly against his cheek again. Neither of them said anything else. They didn't need to. For once, the silence wasn't waiting for something to happen. It was simply letting them remain exactly where they were.



Chapter 23

He didn't go home immediately after dropping Mahira. The night simply hadn't settled yet.

Her presence lingered longer than it should have, in the quiet of the car and in the way his hands remained on the steering wheel even after the engine had gone still.

In the space she left behind—not empty, just... altered.

Eventually he reached for the keys and started the engine.

By the time he reached his parents' house, dinner was already on the table and conversation was moving easily from one room to another. He stepped into the familiar rhythm of it without resistance, though a part of him still lingered somewhere else.

"Hamzu, you're late," his mother said, glancing up briefly before returning to what she was doing.

"Got held up," he replied.

He washed his hands, took his usual seat, and let the conversation move around him. Work became traffic, traffic became the evening news, each topic arriving and leaving without asking much of him.

And then it came up, as something quieter, something that slipped into the evening without announcing itself, carrying the ease of something that had been waiting long enough to arrive without resistance.

"You should at least meet her."

His mother said it casually, in the same tone she might have used to suggest something ordinary. She kept adjusting a plate that didn't need adjusting, her voice deliberately light in a way that made the words feel even more considered.

Hamza didn't respond immediately. He had heard versions of this before, not about this girl in particular but about the idea of one, the shape of a possibility that returned at intervals, patient and unchanged.

"I'm not saying anything beyond that," she continued, as if anticipating resistance he had not yet voiced. "Just meet her. What's the harm?"

It sounded reasonable, simple enough that refusing it would have required more explanation than accepting it.

He exhaled slowly before responding, more out of habit than hesitation, as he asked, "What's her name?"

His mother paused, just for a fraction of a second, a brief interruption in an otherwise seamless exchange, as though the answer carried more intention than the question had, and then she said, "Ameena."

"She's from a good family," his mother added, continuing in the same measured tone, explaining that she worked in consulting and describing her as smart and grounded, before adding, almost as reassurance, that she was not complicated. Somehow, that was the part he remembered most.

Hamza nodded once, "Okay."

The first meeting was arranged quickly, more quickly than something presented as insignificant should have been, unfolding with a quiet efficiency that made it feel less like a casual suggestion and more like something that had already been set in motion before he had fully considered it.

They met at a café that felt intentionally neutral, the kind of place chosen because it suited both of them without belonging to either.

Late afternoon light filtered in without drawing attention to itself, settling across tables that were already occupied but not crowded, creating a space that felt neither private nor exposed.

Ameena arrived on time, neither early nor late, and when she spotted him, she smiled with a kind of ease that did not need to be adjusted or reconsidered.

“Hi,” she said, as she took her seat.

“Hi.”

They ordered without much discussion, choosing what was familiar rather than what needed to be decided, and the conversation began without hesitation, moving forward in a way that felt steady rather than tentative.

Ameena was easy to talk to. Conversation came easily. She asked thoughtful questions, listened carefully, and responded with genuine interest.

“So what do you do when you’re not working?” she asked, her tone curious but measured, and he almost smiled as he recognised the familiarity of the question before replying, “Drive.”

“Drive where?” she asked, and he answered, “Nowhere specific,” which she considered with a small nod that accepted the answer as it was, without trying to reframe it or look beyond it, before saying, “That sounds nice.”

The conversations never felt strained. He didn't lean in.

At one point she laughed at something he said. He smiled politely, but the moment passed without leaving anything behind.

For a brief second, without intending to, he thought of Mahira, not in comparison but in contrast, in the way she would not have let the moment settle so neatly and would have turned the conversation slightly off course just to see where it might go, allowing it to expand rather than conclude.

He pulled himself back. This wasn't a comparison he wanted to make, and certainly not one he wanted to make now. He returned his attention to the conversation before him.

When they stood to leave, the meeting felt straightforward. When she said, "It was nice meeting you," he replied, "You too," meaning it completely, but only that.

They walked out together before parting in the parking lot, exchanging another polite smile and a brief goodbye that carried neither awkwardness nor expectation. As he drove home, he found himself replaying the conversation, not because he was searching for anything he had missed, but because he felt he ought to. He could remember nearly everything they had spoken about. The details remained clear. What refused to stay with him was any sense that something had begun.

That night, his mother asked how she was, and he responded with a slight shrug as he said, "She's nice," offering the answer without emphasis, as though it required nothing more.

His mother smiled, visibly satisfied in a way that suggested the response had met an expectation he had not fully acknowledged.

"That's a good start," she said, her tone carrying a quiet certainty that extended beyond the moment itself.

He did not correct her. There was nothing in what she had said that he could clearly dispute without complicating something he had not yet defined.

Because technically, it was.

Over the next few weeks, it continued quietly, steady enough to keep going without demanding a decision.

They met again the following weekend, this time for lunch instead of coffee. The conversation picked up easily where it had left off, moving through work, travel, family, and the ordinary details of everyday life. Aameena spoke warmly about her younger brother, laughed easily at stories about office politics, and asked questions that made it clear she was genuinely trying to know him rather than simply filling the silence.

A week later, their families arranged lunch together. The afternoon unfolded with an ease that seemed to reassure everyone involved. Their parents spoke comfortably with one another, discussing relatives, careers, and places they had lived, while Hamza and Aameena found themselves answering the same familiar questions about work and future plans. Whenever someone looked in their direction, they were already talking, and that alone appeared to satisfy everyone else.

After that came the occasional phone call. Sometimes she rang after work, sometimes he did. They spoke about long days, weekend plans, and whatever happened to come up. The conversations were never difficult. Neither of them struggled to keep them going, and neither left feeling uncomfortable. If either of them missed a call, the other simply called back later. Everything about it settled into a rhythm that seemed sensible, respectful, and remarkably uncomplicated.

Sometimes there would be a brief pause before one of them spoke, not an uncomfortable silence but one that simply waited to be filled. They always found something to say. The conversations never stumbled, yet

they never seemed to linger after they ended either, leaving behind little more than the quiet satisfaction of having gone well.

From the outside, it looked exactly as it should have. Two people getting to know one another carefully, without drama or uncertainty, allowing something to grow at its own pace. Hamza understood why everyone around him saw it as promising. He understood it well enough that, for a while, he tried to see it that way too.

His mother stopped asking whether he wanted to meet Aameena again. Instead, she began asking when they had last spoken, the question carrying an ease that suggested another meeting was already assumed. Sometimes she mentioned something Aameena's mother had said in passing or laughed about a story that had somehow travelled from one family to the other. Hamza answered without thinking much about it, only gradually noticing that the conversations no longer revolved around possibility but around quiet expectation. No one had announced that anything had changed, yet everyone seemed to behave as though it already had.

Mahira belonged to a part of his life that had never asked anything of him except honesty. He avoided holding the two beside each other for too long because he already suspected what the comparison would ask of him later. As long as he kept them separate, he could postpone answering the question that was quietly taking shape.

But later had already begun, not as a single moment but as a series of small changes. A hesitation before answering. A thought he pushed aside too quickly. A silence that lasted a little longer than it used to. The distance he relied on was no longer holding in the way he needed it to.



Chapter 24

At first, it felt like something he could keep contained, as though refusing to look at it too closely would stop it from becoming something that required acknowledgment or a decision he was not ready to make.

He did not think of it as lying because nothing had been said aloud, nothing promised, nothing defined, allowing the absence of clarity to stand in for honesty and justify everything left unsaid.

That was how he sustained it, quietly and conveniently, repeating the logic until it felt less like a justification and more like something he could rely on without questioning what it was built on.

With Mahira, everything looked much the same. He still picked her up at night, they still drove without a destination, and he still listened as she talked through her day in the wandering way she always had.

And yet, there were moments when part of his attention drifted elsewhere. Sometimes she would finish speaking before he realised he

had missed the shape of what she was saying, relying on familiarity to bridge the gaps.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked one night, catching him mid-thought, and he replied, "Am I?" with a lightness that came more from deflection than from certainty, prompting her to say, "You are when you're somewhere else," in a tone that was observant rather than probing.

He shook his head slightly and said, "Nothing," offering the answer with an ease that made it difficult to question, even though it carried less truth than it suggested, allowing it to settle between them as though it were complete.

She let it pass, though her gaze lingered on him a moment longer before she looked away.

They had stopped at a roadside tea stall the way they sometimes did when neither of them felt ready to end the evening. The owner recognised them by now, greeting them with a familiar smile handing them two cups without asking what they wanted.

"You've become regulars," Mahira said, glancing at him with a faint smile.

"So have you."

She laughed softly. "That wasn't what I meant."

He smiled, but his attention drifted for a moment as his phone vibrated inside his pocket. He looked down briefly. A message from his mother.

Ameena's parents are free next Sunday. Let me know if you are.

The screen went dark almost as quickly as it had lit up.

"You checking work?" Mahira asked.

"No." The answer came automatically before he realised it wasn't entirely true.

She tilted her head slightly. "No?"

"My mother," he said after a moment, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

She nodded once. "Oh."

Nothing about her expression changed. She wrapped both hands around her cup instead, her gaze settling on the road beyond the stall.

"What?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing."

He recognised the word because he had used it himself only days earlier. For a moment he considered saying more. There was no reason he couldn't. Nothing stopped him except the knowledge that once he mentioned Aameena, the conversation would become something it had never been before.

Instead he took a sip of his tea.

The silence stayed between them a little longer than usual before she smiled again and asked him about a film she wanted to watch the following weekend.

He answered, grateful for the change of subject, even as part of him knew he had been the one who had quietly created the need for it.

The next time his mother called while they were together, he stepped away to answer. Mahira watched him from where she sat, aware only of the small distance that had suddenly appeared between them.

His voice was lower and quieter, too soft to be clearly heard yet distinct enough to be noticed, carrying a tone that felt different from the one he used with her, more measured, more contained, as though it belonged to a version of him she did not entirely recognise.

When he came back, he slipped easily back into their conversation.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She nodded, but something about the ease of it stayed with her.

Ameena sent him a photograph of a restaurant she wanted to try the following weekend.

"Looks good," he replied.

"Should I book it?"

He looked at the message for a moment before typing,

"Sure."

The conversation ended there.

A few evenings later, Ameena suggested they meet after work. They walked through a quiet park before finding an empty bench overlooking a small lake where families lingered despite the fading light.

"It feels nice here," she said.

He nodded. "It does."

For a while they watched people pass without feeling the need to fill every silence.

Eventually she asked, "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Do you always take this long to let people know you?"

The question wasn't accusatory. If anything, it sounded amused.

He looked at her. "What makes you say that?"

"I've met you a few times now," she said with a small smile. "You're easy to talk to." She paused. "But I still feel like you're standing just outside the conversation."

He smiled faintly. "I didn't realise I was."

"I don't think you're doing it on purpose." She said it gently, as though she wasn't asking him to change, only sharing what she had noticed. "You seem careful."

He looked away toward the water. "Maybe."

She let the answer stand. She didn't press him. Instead she smiled and began telling him about a colleague who had accidentally sent the wrong presentation to a client, laughing at the memory.

He laughed too.

The conversation moved on naturally.

Yet her question stayed with him long after they parted. Because she was right, not upset, when she said that.

As they reached the parking area, Ameena stopped beside her car instead of getting in immediately.

"Can I ask you one more thing?"

Hamza nodded.

She smiled, though this time it carried a trace of hesitation. "Are you doing this because you want to?"

The question landed more quietly than he expected.

He looked at her for a moment before answering. "What do you mean?"

"This." She gestured lightly between them. "Meeting me. Getting to know me."

There was no accusation in her voice, only a sincerity that made the question harder to answer. "I don't think anyone should be here just because it makes sense."

He opened his mouth, then stopped. "I do want to get to know you," he said finally, and the words were true enough that he didn't feel he was lying. They simply weren't the whole truth.

Ameena held his gaze for a moment before nodding. "Okay," she said softly.

She smiled again as she wished him goodnight, and nothing about the moment suggested she doubted him. That, more than anything else, stayed with him on the drive home.

He found himself wishing she had questioned him once more, or lingered over the answer long enough to make him explain it. Instead, she had accepted what he had given her, trusting him without asking for more. The trust sat with him more heavily than any accusation could have.

With Mahira, he did not mention Ameena. Bringing her into that space would have made everything feel more real, giving shape to something he had managed to keep undefined. Once it had a name, it might begin demanding answers he was not ready to give.

And with Ameena, he did not mention Mahira. There was no simple way to explain who she was without making what existed between them sound smaller than it really was. Friendship was too little. Anything more felt impossible to define.

So it remained unspoken, sustained by omission and by his quiet decision not to bring it into focus.

One night, as they were sitting at their usual tea stall, Mahira looked at him for a moment longer than usual, her gaze steady enough to draw his attention before he asked, "What?"

She said, "You've been distracted," in a tone that did not accuse but did not dismiss it either, holding the observation lightly while still allowing it to land.

"I've been working," he replied, offering the explanation without hesitation, as though the ease of the answer might be enough to close the space she had opened.

It was not entirely untrue, but it was not the truth she had paused long enough to notice.

She watched him then without accusation or insistence, as though she were observing something she had not yet decided how to name, something that did not fully align with what she had known before.

“Okay,” she said after a moment, allowing the word to settle between them without emphasis. She accepted the answer, though not with the quiet certainty his explanations usually carried.

Later that night, as they drove through empty roads, her hand rested beneath his on the gear stick as it always had. The gesture was familiar, yet something about it felt different now, though she couldn't have said why.

Hamza noticed it too, less as distance than as a hesitation that had never existed between them before. Instead of asking about it, he let the silence carry them forward, choosing continuation over confrontation once again.

For now, that was enough to keep everything in place, even if it no longer felt entirely the same beneath the surface.



Chapter 25

Mahira never thought of it as a change. It revealed itself quietly in how easily she spoke to him, no longer filtering herself the way she once had.

She began telling him things that meant little on their own—small observations and passing thoughts she rarely shared—simply because they felt worth telling him.

She spoke more freely now, letting thoughts arrive without reshaping them into something easier to explain. There was no moment when she consciously decided to trust him more, yet it revealed itself in the small things she chose to share simply because they were hers.

One evening, she mentioned that she always noticed people's hands first and remembered how they moved long after she had forgotten what they looked like, never quite knowing why.

He glanced at her briefly before looking back at the road and asked, "What do you notice?" not dismissing it, but not quite following yet either, his tone carrying a quiet curiosity rather than expectation.

She shrugged slightly and said, "It's not one thing," before pausing, as though trying to find the words while still staying within the ease of the moment, and then continued, "just whether someone looks like they belong in what they're doing, or if they're holding tension without realising it," her voice thoughtful but unguarded, like she had not planned to explain it this far.

He let that sit for a second, processing it more seriously than she had expected, his attention lingering on what she had said rather than moving past it, and she turned toward him, studying his expression before asking, "What?" in a tone that carried a quiet awareness, touched with curiosity.

He shook his head lightly at first, as though he might leave it there. Then he said, "Nothing." After a moment, he added, "You notice more than you let on."

She held his gaze for a moment longer than usual, allowing the moment to remain exactly as it was.

Another time, she told him she did not like being called "low maintenance," even when it was meant as a compliment, saying it lightly at first before adding that it always seemed to come from people who expected her to need less so they would not have to offer more, as though the label made things easier for them rather than for her, a way of setting expectations without having to meet them.

He glanced at her briefly and asked, "What would you prefer instead?" The question carried a quiet curiosity, suggesting he wanted to understand what lay beneath it instead of offering a quick response that might close the conversation too soon.

She considered that for a moment before answering, "I don't know if there's a word for it," and then, after a slight pause, added, "just being understood without having to explain myself all the time." Her voice

remained steady, as though she were giving shape to something she had known for a long time.

He nodded once, still watching the road, and said, “That’s harder,” the words carrying quiet acknowledgment, recognising the difference between what should be simple and what so often wasn’t.

“It shouldn’t be,” she replied, her tone calm rather than defensive, before adding, “most people just don’t stay long enough to try,” the words offered without emphasis, carrying the quiet certainty of something she had learned for herself.

Neither of them tried to explain the silence that followed. It remained between them without discomfort, carrying its own quiet certainty.

Without either of them recognising when it had changed, their conversations began to weave themselves quietly through the fabric of each day. A thought left unfinished in the morning would be picked up that evening without explanation. Small observations, fleeting frustrations, and moments that would have slipped away unnoticed now seemed to gather naturally between them. The rhythm became so familiar that neither of them stopped to question it. It simply became part of how they understood their days.

Because of that, she never paused to ask what it meant or where it was leading. The certainty she felt in being with him seemed enough on its own.

She smiled to herself as another message from Hamza appeared, rolling her eyes at whatever dry observation he had made about his day before replying almost without thinking. The exchange lasted less than a minute, ordinary enough that she barely noticed how instinctive it had become.

It was Vibhav who disrupted that, not through intention but through the kind of casual observation that carried further than it was meant to, entering the space she had not realised extended beyond her.

The message arrived without weight or emphasis, the kind of question that could have been asked in passing and forgotten just as easily, phrased with a familiarity that made it seem harmless on the surface.

Are you seeing Hamza these days? You two have been out a lot.

She reached for the phone again almost absently, unlocking it before she had fully realised she had decided to. The conversation with Vibhav remained open, the cursor blinking patiently beneath his message as though it had all the time in the world to wait for an answer.

She tried, just for a moment, to imagine replying.

We're just friends.

The words appeared easily enough in her mind, but even before she finished the thought, they felt incomplete.

She imagined sending something else instead.

It's... complicated.

That didn't feel right either. It suggested a certainty she didn't yet have, as though she had already accepted something she was only beginning to recognise.

After a long moment, she locked the screen again without typing a single word, quietly aware that it wasn't the message she was avoiding, but the version of herself that would have to believe whatever she chose to send.

Mahira looked at the screen for a moment longer than necessary because of how easily something that had felt private had become visible to someone else.

Her chest tightened slightly, just enough for her to notice it. The feeling arrived ahead of any clear thought, carrying the quiet sense that something was no longer quite the same.

Vibhav had not meant anything by it, she knew that much. His tone was familiar even through text, observant without being intrusive, noticing

without attaching meaning, the way he often did when he picked up on things others overlooked.

And yet, the simplicity of the question made it harder to dismiss. It suggested that whatever had existed quietly between her and Hamza had begun to take on a shape that someone else could recognise without either of them ever naming it.

She read the message again, slower this time. The words did not change, only the way they settled inside her, making it harder to return to the quiet certainty she had carried until then.

Until that moment, she had not needed to define what this was, not even to herself. It had existed without language, held together by how it felt rather than by what it could be called. Now, for the first time, that absence no longer felt like freedom.

Her fingers hovered over the screen as she considered replying with something light enough to return the conversation to where it had begun.

But instead, almost without thinking, she opened her conversation with Hamza.

For a moment she stared at the empty space beneath his name, the familiar ease of writing to him arriving before she had decided what she wanted to say. She typed, *Something funny happened today. I need to tell you—*

The words sat there for only a second before she erased them, one by one, until the screen was empty again.

She stared at the blank screen, surprised by how unfamiliar it felt. Until now, writing to him had always been the easy part. The hesitation belonged somewhere else, somewhere beyond the message itself, quietly asking a question she was no longer certain she could avoid.

She remained there, her thumb resting against the edge of the phone, surprised less by what Vibhav had asked than by her own instinct to tell

Hamza about it. Until now, reaching for him had never required thought. If something amused her, unsettled her, or stayed with her longer than expected, she simply told him. It had become so ordinary that she had stopped noticing it altogether.

Now she hesitated.

She trusted him no less than before. What had quietly changed was that what she wanted to share had become inseparable from what she was beginning to understand about them.

She closed the conversation without sending anything and locked her phone, setting it beside her.

The unanswered message no longer felt like something waiting for words. It felt like something waiting for her.

What unsettled her was not what Vibhav had asked, but what she could no longer answer simply. Any reply would have required her to name something she had never needed to define before. To dismiss it would feel untrue. To admit it would mean facing a truth she was not yet ready to speak aloud.

For the first time, silence no longer felt like leaving something undefined.

It felt like postponing an answer she already knew she would eventually have to give.



Chapter 26

Nothing announced itself, and neither of them ever stopped to say that something had changed.

By then, the conversations, the late-night drives, the effortless messages exchanged throughout the day had long since become part of their lives. Neither of them questioned those habits anymore. They simply existed, as ordinary and dependable as everything else that quietly filled their days.

What changed now was harder to notice.

The drives remained where they understood each other best.

Sometimes they drove for an hour with no particular urgency to return. Other evenings they parked somewhere quiet and let the conversation wander wherever it pleased, interrupted only by passing traffic or the occasional silence that neither of them felt responsible for filling.

Mahira spoke more easily than she once had. The careful restraint she had carried into every conversation had gradually disappeared. Stories from her childhood emerged without planning, arriving in fragments

rather than complete explanations, each one offered with a trust she never consciously decided to give.

She told him she had always disliked losing control, that she had learned early it was easier to contain everything than risk what happened when she didn't.

Hamza listened without interrupting.

He never hurried her toward a conclusion or searched for the right advice. He simply stayed with whatever she chose to tell him until she had finished, answering only after she no longer seemed to be searching for the words herself. More often than not, he responded by offering something in return.

Their conversations had stopped following any particular pattern. Some evenings they spoke about things that mattered, while others disappeared into subjects neither of them would have remembered the next day. They debated films one of them insisted the other needed to watch, disagreed over music with the same exaggerated seriousness every time, and occasionally spent twenty minutes arguing about something so insignificant that neither could later explain why it had seemed worth defending.

What stayed with them was never the topic itself. It was the ease with which the conversation moved, the quiet certainty that they never had to search for something to say. Even when they disagreed, neither of them felt misunderstood. The conversation always found its way back to the same familiar place, as though they had already learned that being right mattered far less than continuing to talk.

"I don't like depending on people," he admitted one evening, almost absentmindedly, watching the traffic move slowly through the intersection ahead.

Mahira turned slightly toward him.

"But you do."

There was no challenge in her voice. Only certainty.

He glanced at her.

"I do?"

"You're here."

The words settled quietly between them.

He looked back through the windshield without answering.

Until that moment, dependence had always sounded dramatic to him, something obvious enough that it could never arrive unnoticed. Yet as he thought back over the past weeks, he realised it had never announced itself. It had been built one ordinary moment at a time—through conversations he looked forward to before admitting they mattered, through evenings that somehow felt incomplete if they didn't happen, through the quiet relief of knowing there was one person before whom he never needed to explain who he was.

She hadn't accused him of anything. She had simply named something he had not recognised in himself.

For a long time neither of them spoke. The silence felt unusually complete, carrying none of the uncertainty it once might have. Outside, headlights slipped across the windshield before disappearing into the night.

At first, it did not feel like dependence. It felt like comfort. The kind that settled so gradually it became impossible to separate from the rest of life.

Mahira understood what that comfort had become after an unusually difficult day.

Work had drained her more completely than she expected. By the time she reached home she lacked the energy even to switch on the lights, choosing instead to sit quietly in the darkness for several minutes.

Without thinking, she reached for her phone. She didn't open social media or search for a distraction. She opened his chat.

Today was horrible.

His phone rang before she had time to wonder whether she should have sent the message at all. She answered almost immediately. Just hearing his voice eased something inside her. Nothing about the day changed. The meetings still happened. The frustration remained exactly where she had left it. Yet somehow it no longer seemed quite so heavy.

"Tell me," he said.

She spoke without worrying whether the story made sense, jumping from one moment to another exactly as she remembered it. He followed every turn without asking her to organise it, interrupting only with the occasional quiet question whenever she fell silent for too long.

When the conversation ended, she realised she felt lighter. Not because he had solved anything. Because she had never carried it alone.

The habit repeated itself in quieter ways over the following weeks. If something amusing happened during the day, she caught herself wondering how she would describe it to him before she had even finished laughing. When work became frustrating, the thought that she would tell him later somehow made the hours feel shorter.

Hamza noticed something similar in himself. Good news never felt complete until she knew about it, and minor disappointments somehow lost their sharpness once they had been spoken aloud. Neither of them consciously relied on the other for every emotion they experienced. They simply found that life had become easier to understand once it had been shared.

After that, reaching for each other stopped feeling like a decision.

Sometimes his message simply read:

Come down.

She rarely needed another invitation.

Other evenings she arrived without either of them discussing how long she intended to stay. Leaving gradually became the exception rather than the expectation.

Morning found them moving around each other with an ease that still surprised them when they occasionally stopped long enough to notice it.

Sometimes she woke first and wandered into the kitchen, discovering he had quietly started keeping the tea she preferred. Other mornings he woke before she did and lingered for a moment, watching the calm expression that sleep brought to her face before quietly beginning his own morning.

Neither of them spoke about these small adjustments. They simply continued making them.

Breakfast became another familiar ritual. One of them would suggest somewhere nearby. The other would pretend to disagree before giving in almost immediately.

By the time they left for work, it was already understood that they would speak again before the day was over.

The ordinary routines kept expanding in ways neither of them noticed immediately. A charger remained at his place because carrying it back and forth became unnecessary. One of her books stayed on his coffee table with a bookmark tucked halfway through, waiting for the evening she would pick it up again. His spare sweatshirt gradually became something she reached for without asking whenever the air-conditioning felt too cold.

None of these things were discussed. They accumulated quietly, each one too practical to question, until together they reflected a life that had begun making room for another person without either of them ever deciding that it should.

Even their silences changed. There were evenings when neither of them had much to say after work. He might scroll through something on his phone while she read a few pages of a book, both entirely comfortable allowing the room to remain quiet.

Every so often one of them would make a passing remark, and the conversation would continue as naturally as if it had never paused at all.

The comfort no longer depended on words. Being together had quietly become enough.

There were moments when one of them would become aware of how quiet the room had grown and instinctively glance at the other, expecting to find the silence awkward. Instead, they always found the same unhurried ease reflected back. A brief smile, a meeting of their eyes, or the smallest shift closer was enough to acknowledge the other's presence before they returned to whatever they had been doing.

They no longer needed conversation to reassure themselves that the connection was still there. It had settled beneath the surface of ordinary moments, steady enough that neither of them felt the need to look for it anymore.

One evening, without thinking about it, Mahira rested her head against his shoulder.

He didn't acknowledge the movement. After a while, his hand shifted until it rested lightly over hers.

Neither of them looked at the other. Neither of them asked what it meant. There was nothing left to define.

The gesture felt no more remarkable than reaching for his hand while crossing a road or sending him a photograph of something that reminded her of him.

It belonged to the ordinary now.

There had never been a conversation about what any of it meant. No promises had been made, no boundaries deliberately crossed. The relationship had never transformed in a single unforgettable moment. Instead, it had grown through hundreds of ordinary ones, each too small to matter on its own until, together, they quietly became the life they now shared.

Neither of them thought to question it anymore.



Chapter 27

Their drives had become part of their routine, unfolding so naturally that neither of them thought of them as plans anymore. By evening, all it usually took was a message from him, and she would find herself stepping into the familiar space they had quietly made their own.

One night, as they drove without knowing where the road would take them, it stretching ahead without urgency or destination, his phone rang.

His phone vibrated against the dashboard, the sound soft but distinct in the quiet of the car. Mahira glanced over instinctively. A name flashed across the screen before it disappeared. He reached for the phone almost immediately and silenced the call before it could ring again.

“Work?” she asked, her tone light, the question offered without weight, as though it were the most natural assumption to make.

“Yeah,” he said, a little too quickly, the answer arriving before the pause that might have made it feel unremarkable, his voice steady but not entirely at ease, the certainty sounding more deliberate than effortless.

She looked at him for a second longer than she normally would before turning back to the windshield.

The conversation resumed, but not quite where it had left off. The interruption was small enough to ignore, yet neither of them settled into the silence as easily as before.

After a few minutes, he asked her about something she had mentioned earlier in the week, a colleague who had been frustrating her for days, and she answered with the same easy rhythm she always had. She laughed once, shaking her head as she described another absurd conversation from work, and he smiled in return, responding where he always would have.

The interruption faded from the conversation, but not entirely from her mind.

They kept driving, falling back into familiar conversations with the same outward ease they always had. He teased her about something she had said the week before, and she rolled her eyes before laughing, the exchange unfolding so naturally that, for a while, she almost forgot the call altogether. It returned only in passing, surfacing briefly whenever the silence lingered a little longer than usual or when she caught herself wondering, without any real reason, who had needed him badly enough to call while he was with her.

Over the next few days, nothing happened that either of them could have pointed to as unusual. They met when they always did, slipping back into the familiar rhythm that had quietly become the shape of their evenings. Some nights they drove without knowing where they were going. On others, they stayed parked for so long that the city around them seemed to move while they remained still, talking about work,

family, films they wanted to watch, and the small, forgettable moments that somehow never felt forgettable once they were shared with each other.

Whatever uncertainty the phone call had left behind gradually softened beneath the repetition of those evenings. There was no distance between them, no awkwardness that lingered long enough to change how they spoke or looked at one another. If the moment crossed Mahira's mind again, it did so only briefly before being replaced by the easy familiarity she had come to trust, the quiet certainty that whatever had interrupted them had belonged to a part of his life that had nothing to do with what they were building together.

Then the calls began again. They weren't new, only more frequent than before, appearing at times that didn't fit the rhythm she had come to recognise, slipping into spaces that had once belonged entirely to them. They rarely interrupted the conversation itself, but they began to interrupt its continuity.

Hamza noticed it first, in the way his phone would light up at hours it usually would not, late evenings when he was still out, early mornings before his day had properly begun, and in the spaces in between conversations that had once remained uninterrupted, the pattern forming gradually until it was no longer something he could dismiss as incidental.

He ignored the first few, letting them ring out without reacting, choosing instead to return them later when he was alone, separating those conversations from the ones he was already within, unwilling to let them overlap in ways he did not want to deal with.

He did it without thinking at first, then with quiet intention, stepping away when he could not avoid answering, lowering his voice in a way that suggested privacy rather than urgency, keeping the exchanges brief enough to avoid explanation but not so brief as to raise concern.

At first, Mahira hardly noticed. There had always been parts of each other's lives that existed outside the hours they spent together, conversations with family, work, and friends that neither of them had ever felt the need to explain. Trust had settled so naturally between them that privacy had never felt like distance. Even when the interruptions became more frequent, she accepted them without question. The calls themselves didn't stay with her. It was the growing sense that they belonged to a part of his life she had never been invited to see.

She told herself it was natural. They had never expected to know every part of each other's lives, and neither of them had ever treated privacy as something suspicious. Even so, the thought lingered longer than she wanted it to, returning in quiet moments before she found herself setting it aside again.

One night, Mahira was mid-sentence when his phone vibrated again, the sound soft but persistent enough to register even against the rhythm of her voice, threading itself into the moment without fully interrupting it and yet impossible to ignore once it had been noticed.

"...and then she actually said—" Mahira stopped as his attention shifted toward the vibrating phone.

The distraction lasted only a second, but it was enough for her to notice.

"Take it," she said lightly, not making it into something larger, offering the suggestion as though it did not matter either way, leaving him the option without attaching meaning to it.

He shook his head almost immediately. "It's fine."

"It might be important," she replied, still keeping her tone even, allowing him the option without pressing it, as though the moment could still return to what it had been without consequence.

"It's not," he said, the answer coming quickly, just firm enough to close the possibility, his voice steady but carrying a slight finality that suggested he did not want to revisit it.

His eyes flickered back to the screen before the vibration stopped. It lasted no more than a second, but she noticed. She didn't ask about it, and he didn't offer an explanation. Instead, she picked up her story again, choosing—for now—to let the moment remain exactly what it appeared to be.

Later that night, when he dropped her home, she lingered a second longer than usual, not enough to be remarked upon, but enough to exist as something slightly altered from what had come before, as though she had not fully stepped out of the moment yet, her hand resting briefly against the door before she opened it.

"You should probably call them back," she smiled faintly as she said it, as though trying to make sure it sounded as ordinary as she intended.

He looked at her for a moment before nodding. "Yeah."

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then she stepped out, closed the door gently behind her, and disappeared into the building.

He waited until she was inside before picking up his phone, watching until the hallway light flickered off and the door closed behind her. Only then did he unlock the screen.

The screen lit up in his hand.

Missed calls: 5

All from the same contact.

He exhaled, the breath heavier than he expected, as though he had already anticipated the conversation before it began, and pressed call without letting himself think about it further, choosing action over hesitation, knowing that waiting would only make it harder.

"Where were you?" his mother's voice came through immediately, not raised, but direct enough to leave no space for anything else, carrying an expectation that did not need to be stated, familiar in its tone and weight.

“Out,” he replied, keeping his tone even, offering just enough without expanding on it, as though anything more would invite questions he did not want to answer, holding his response within limits he had already set for himself.

“With?”

His answer came a fraction later than it normally would have.

“Friends.”

Another pause followed, longer this time, carrying a weight that did not need to be explained, settling between them in a way that suggested it had been heard but not accepted without question, as though the answer had been noted but not believed entirely.

“You need to be home more,” she said, her voice steady, not accusing but not casual either. “There are things to discuss.”

Hamza leaned back in his seat, his head resting briefly against the headrest as he closed his eyes for a second, as though gathering himself before responding, aware of the distance he had been keeping for longer than he wanted to admit.

“I’ll come this weekend.”

“You’ve been saying that.”

“I will,” he repeated, the words firmer than he felt.



Chapter 28

One night, his phone rang mid conversation. It was subtle, just a vibration against the dashboard, a small interruption that briefly broke the steady rhythm of their conversation.

Sometimes he stepped out to take a call, excusing himself with a quick, "I'll be back," leaving her alone for a few minutes, leaving her alone for a few minutes that stretched just slightly longer than they should have, long enough for the absence to register even if it was not questioned, long enough for her to become aware of the space he occupied when he was there and the way it felt when he wasn't.

Sometimes he let it ring, watching the screen go dark without answering. Even after it stopped, something remained between them that neither of them acknowledged.

Mahira did not ask. She hadn't asked because nothing had been said, and she wasn't someone who searched for answers that had not been offered.

Her noticing did not disappear. Instead, it quietly altered the way she paid attention to him. She began to register the pauses more clearly, the slight delays before he answered, the moments when his attention seemed to drift elsewhere before returning to her. None of it was enough to question on its own, but together it created a subtle awareness that had not existed before.

But one evening, when they were at the tea stall that had become theirs through repetition rather than intention, sitting across from each other in a familiarity that no longer required effort, she reached across the table to take fritters from his plate without asking, the gesture automatic in a way that belonged entirely to them.

As she reached for another fritter, his phone lit up again. The screen was bright enough that she looked before she could stop herself. A name appeared. Ameena. She looked away almost immediately, but not before the name settled somewhere inside her.

“You’re going to finish those?” she asked, nodding at his plate, her tone casual, the question asked more out of habit than actual curiosity.

He glanced down and said, “Yeah—wait, you’ve already had half,” a faint amusement in his voice as he noticed how much she had taken.

“Not my fault you’re slow,” she replied, not bothering to look up as she reached for another fry with the same easy familiarity.

He smiled and pushed the plate toward her anyway, the gesture automatic now. His hand lingered for a fraction of a second before pulling back, even as part of his attention remained elsewhere.

The phone stopped ringing. A moment later, the screen lit up again with a message. This time he turned it over without looking at it, placing it face down on the table.

She leaned back slightly and watched him for a moment, taking in what she had been noticing without turning it into a question.

It wasn't suspicion. Not yet. Only the quiet recognition that what she could see and what she knew were no longer entirely the same.

"You've been busy," she said casually, her tone even, the words placed lightly enough to pass as observation rather than concern, as though she were commenting on something already understood rather than introducing anything new.

"Hmm?" He looked up a moment later, as though returning from somewhere else.

"Lately," she added, her gaze steady but not pressing. "You seem... distracted."

Hamza shook his head quickly, the response arriving almost before the thought behind it had settled. "No, it's just work," he said, his tone measured, but carrying a slight firmness that suggested the answer was meant to stand without further examination.

Mahira nodded. Whether she believed him completely no longer mattered as much as the fact that he had chosen not to say more. She let the answer stand.

"Okay," she said, her tone unchanged, the word offered without emphasis, carrying neither agreement nor resistance, simply allowing the conversation to continue without interruption.

She reached for her tea then, more for something to do with her hands than because she wanted another sip. It had already begun to cool, the warmth fading unnoticed while they talked, and she found herself turning the cup slightly between her palms before setting it back down untouched.

She tried to tell herself it was nothing. A phone call. A name. An answer that could easily have been true. None of it was enough to become a question on its own. Yet certainty, once disturbed, did not always return to exactly the place it had occupied before. It lingered differently, asking nothing aloud while quietly changing the way everything else was received.

Across the table, Hamza looked exactly as he always did, calm, attentive, present. Nothing about him suggested distance, and that almost made it harder to understand why she felt it at all. The version of him she knew had never given her reason to doubt him, and she found herself holding on to that knowledge even as another part of her wondered why, if it truly was only work, he had seemed so quick to close the conversation before it had even begun.

Nothing about her expression gave her away, yet something had shifted beneath it. It wasn't quite doubt, only a quiet instinct to hold a little more of herself back than she had before.

For a while, neither of them spoke. The sounds around them quietly reclaimed the space the conversation had left behind, the clink of glasses against metal trays, the hiss of oil from the stove, voices rising and fading as customers came and went. It was the same place they had returned to so many times before, familiar enough that neither of them usually noticed it anymore, and yet tonight every small sound seemed to stand out with unusual clarity.

Hamza reached for his cup, only to find it already empty. He turned it absently between his fingers before setting it back down, his attention drifting somewhere she could no longer follow as easily as she once had. A few weeks earlier she would have filled the silence without thinking, pointing out something she had seen on the drive over or teasing him about the way he always forgot to finish his tea while it was still hot. The impulse came to her now just as naturally, but this time it stopped before becoming words.

Neither of them seemed uncomfortable. They simply occupied the silence differently than they had before, each aware of something the other had not chosen to name.

They finished their tea and drove for a while afterward, talking as they always did about things that required nothing of either of them. The ease between them hadn't disappeared, but it was no longer entirely

effortless. Something quiet now existed beneath it, subtle enough to ignore, yet impossible to unknow.

Later, when he dropped her home, she did not linger this time, the shift subtle but unmistakable in the way she moved, as though the moment no longer held her in place the way it usually did.

“Goodnight,” she said, already reaching for the door, her voice steady, her hand moving without hesitation, not waiting for the pause that had once been there.

“Mahira—”

She paused then, her hand still on the handle, and looked back at him, her expression open but quieter than before, as though she had already begun to step out of the moment even while still within it.

“Yeah?”

For a second, it felt like he might say something, something real, something important, something that would reach past what had been left unsaid and give it shape, his attention fixed on her in a way that suggested the words had almost formed.

The moment held, not long enough to become uncomfortable, but long enough to carry the weight of what it could have been.

But he did not follow through.

“Nothing,” he said, the word quiet, almost immediate, as though he had stepped back from something he had not fully allowed himself to reach.

She held his gaze for a brief second longer, not questioning and not waiting further, and then nodded once before opening the door and stepping out, closing it gently behind her while he remained where he was, the space between what could have been said and what was left behind settling into the silence that followed.

Hamza watched her walk away, his gaze following her longer than necessary, as though the moment did not end when she stepped out of

the car but lingered in the space she left behind, carrying with it something he had not resolved.

His phone lit up again, the screen bright against the dim interior, drawing his attention back even as part of him remained fixed on the direction she had gone.

The same name appeared.

He didn't reach for it immediately, his hand resting beside the phone as though even the hesitation had become meaningful.

Because for the first time, he understood that silence had become a choice. He knew exactly what he was not saying, and exactly who he was not telling. The realization settled quietly but refused to leave. He remained where he was after the call ended, the silence inside the car filled with everything he had chosen not to say.



Chapter 29

It started with something small. So small that, on its own, it shouldn't have mattered. But it did, because of what it interrupted, the quiet consistency that had made everything feel easier to trust.

Tonight? Mahira texted.

It was the kind of message that didn't need context anymore, one that carried with it an entire pattern—late pickup, quiet roads, conversations that stretched into morning, a rhythm they had slipped into without ever naming it. He usually replied quickly, sometimes before she had even set her phone down, as though the answer had already been waiting.

This time, he didn't.

She noticed only when she reached for her phone again. She was at work, moving automatically between screens and conversations, yet the unanswered message lingered just a second longer than it should have.

She told herself he was busy. It was the explanation that demanded the least from her. Still, she waited, and in the waiting, the silence began to

take on a shape of its own, something that felt increasingly like something withheld, though she could not yet say why.

The reply came an hour later.

Can't today. Work's a bit crazy.

There was nothing unusual about the message. On any other day she might have read it without thinking twice.

And yet—

Mahira read it twice, as though a second reading might return it to something familiar.

She typed a reply, her fingers moving with a deliberateness that felt more considered than usual.

Okay. Late night?

This time, the response was quicker, arriving before she could fully return her attention to anything else.

Probably. Will call?

Okay, she replied, keeping it simple, matching his tone even as a small part of her hesitated before sending it, aware in a way that this was something she was choosing to let pass.

He didn't call.

By the time she got home, she moved through the evening without really noticing it, eating out of habit before scrolling aimlessly through her phone, returning again and again to the absence she was trying not to name.

There were no missed calls, no messages, nothing to suggest that she had been forgotten, and yet nothing to confirm that she had not been.

The next time they met was at her cousin's apartment again, a place that had once made everything feel uncomplicated.

But it did not feel the same.

“You disappeared,” she said lightly when she saw him, her tone deliberately casual, the words softened by a smile that framed it as nothing more than an observation she had not thought much about, even though she had.

It was not an accusation, not in the way she said it or in the way she held his gaze, leaving room for him to respond without pressure.

“Yeah,” he said. “Work.”

He did not elaborate, and that omission stood out precisely because it was new. He usually would have continued without being prompted, offering details that made his answer feel complete.

They drifted back into the conversation without difficulty. Someone asked Mahira about work, another person interrupted with a story, and before long the room settled into its familiar rhythm. She answered when spoken to and laughed when everyone else did, yet part of her attention kept returning to him without her meaning it to.

Someone told a story that drew laughter from the room. Mahira laughed too, her attention drifting instinctively toward Hamza. Once, she would already have found him looking back.

Tonight, his attention stayed elsewhere, fixed on a conversation unfolding near the balcony. He smiled at something someone said, nodded, answered a question she couldn't hear. He wasn't avoiding her. If anything, he seemed unaware that anything had changed. That unsettled her most.

Later, they found themselves alone in the kitchen again, as naturally as they always had. They leaned against the counter as they had so many times before.

“You okay?” she asked, her tone casual, though not entirely without intention.

He glanced at her. "Yeah. Why?"

"You're just..." she searched for the word, aware that whatever she chose would shape how this landed, "...a little elsewhere."

Hamza smiled slightly, the expression brief, almost reflexive. "Am I?"

"You are when you're thinking," she said quietly.

He held her gaze for a moment, long enough that she thought he might answer.

Instead, he reached for her wrist and drew her gently closer.

Mahira did not resist, though she had not anticipated it, her attention shifting from the question she had asked to the nearness of him, to the way his other hand came up to steady her at her waist.

He kissed her then, tenderly, deliberate in a way that felt like an answer without being one, as though it was meant to replace whatever he had not said.

For a moment, she let herself stay in it, because it was easier than holding onto the question, easier than noticing what it avoided.

When he pulled back, it was not abrupt, but it was complete, the moment closing as neatly as it had begun.

"Just work," he said, his voice even, as though nothing had been interrupted, as though the explanation remained unchanged.

She almost asked another question, something ordinary that might have kept the conversation open for another minute. Instead, she let it go. She was beginning to recognize the point at which he stopped offering more, and without deciding to, she had started stopping there too.

"Okay," she said, keeping her tone even, matching the simplicity of what he had given her, letting the moment close without pressing against it.

The evening continued with the same outward ease as always, conversations overlapping and reforming, laughter rising at familiar intervals, the room holding its usual warmth.

They slipped back into conversation with everyone else, but something had changed in the rhythm between them. At one point she made an offhand remark about someone they both knew, expecting, almost automatically, that he would pick it up the way he usually did, turning it into one of the conversations only the two of them ever seemed to have. Instead, someone else answered first. Hamza nodded absently a moment later, his attention already elsewhere, and the moment disappeared before it had the chance to become theirs.

The conversation carried on without noticing what had been lost. Someone else took the joke in a different direction, and laughter moved easily through the room again. Mahira smiled along with everyone else, yet the moment lingered with her. It had been such a small thing, the kind that would have passed unnoticed by anyone else, but she felt its absence with surprising clarity.

Their conversations had always seemed to find each other naturally, as though they shared an instinct for picking up where the other left off. For the first time, she reached for it alone.

His phone vibrated. Then again. Then once more. Each time he glanced at the screen and replied almost immediately, his attention settling there with an ease that had once belonged to their conversations.

She noticed, and this time she couldn't dismiss it as easily as before.

Later, when people started leaving, the energy of the evening loosened in the familiar way, conversations breaking into smaller fragments, goodbyes stretching out near the door, the quiet reshuffling that always followed nights like this.

There was the familiar moment when rides were sorted and people paired off almost without thinking. They would usually end up together without discussion.

This time, it did not happen automatically, and the difference was subtle but unmistakable.

He hesitated before speaking. "I can drop you," he said finally. The words felt offered rather than assumed, leaving space for an alternative that had never existed between them before.

She looked at him, attentive in a way she could not quite help.

"Yeah," she said, and even as the word left her it held more weight than it should have, as though it was holding something she had chosen not to say along with it.

The ride settled into silence almost immediately. Neither of them reached for the small conversations that usually found them without effort. Outside, the city moved past in familiar fragments—traffic lights, storefronts, people waiting at crossings—but neither of them seemed inclined to interrupt the quiet.

She did not suggest a longer route. Once, she almost certainly would have. He did not take one either, and the drive unfolded in the most direct way possible, as though neither of them was reaching for anything beyond what was necessary.

Neither of them reached for the radio, and even the silence seemed louder than usual, filling the space where conversation might once have arrived without either of them needing to begin it.

They stopped at a signal, the red light stretching out ahead of them, the road unusually empty, leaving nothing to distract from the stillness that had settled between them.

"You've been busy," she said, the words opening space without demanding anything from it.

“Yeah,” he replied.

The light turned green, and he eased the car forward without saying anything else. She watched the city pass beyond the window, the reflections slipping across the glass faster than she could hold onto them. Neither of them returned to the conversation. Somehow, that felt like the answer.



Chapter 30

She lay in bed with the lights off, the room settled into a quiet that should have felt familiar, but didn't quite, her mind moving through the evening in fragments that refused to stay where she placed them.

She knew she could have pushed, could have asked more, could have followed the pauses until they gave her something clearer, but something had held her back, not fear and not uncertainty, just a kind of instinct that told her not to press against something that wasn't offering itself.

In her mind, the light turned green again and they moved forward, the ride resuming in that same careful quiet, and she could see it as though she were still there, the road stretching ahead, the absence of conversation settling more firmly than she had acknowledged at the time.

When they reached her gate, she saw herself getting off, unbuckling the seatbelt slowly, drawing out the motion just enough to give the moment somewhere to go, even though it didn't.

“Thanks,” she had said. “For the drive.”

“Yeah,” he had replied.

There had been a moment then, a space where something should have been said, something that might have bridged whatever this was, something that would have returned them to something she recognised.

It hadn’t come.

“Goodnight,” she had said.

“Goodnight.”

She watched it again in memory, the way she had walked toward the gate without looking back immediately, as though giving herself the option not to, and then when she did turn, he had already been turning the car around, the moment closing without pause.

Inside, as she replayed closing the door behind her, the quiet did not feel empty so much as unsettled, as though it carried something unresolved within it.

It’s nothing, she told herself, letting the reasoning line up in the way it was supposed to, just a busy day, a missed call, a slightly off evening, the kind of thing that happened all the time and meant very little if she allowed it to.

And yet, as she lay there staring at the ceiling, her mind returning to small moments she could not quite place or dismiss, she could still feel it, indistinct yet persistent, refusing to dissolve.

Something had changed, and for the first time, she could not tell herself why in a way that felt convincing.

A few days later, it came down to something small, and that was what made it worse, the way it did not arrive as a clear break or a moment she could point to, but as something almost ordinary that carried more weight than it should have.

Mahira was ready by 10:45, earlier than she needed to be, though she did not acknowledge that even to herself, moving through the last details of getting ready with a quiet attentiveness that had less to do with habit and more to do with expectation.

Because he had said he would come, and she had believed him.

She sat on the edge of the bed, her phone resting loosely in her hand.

By 10:52 PM there was still no message. She told herself he'd been late before.

By 11:03 PM she found herself walking to the window without quite deciding to.

She pulled the curtain aside and looked down at the empty street.

She stayed there longer than she intended, one hand still holding the curtain aside while the other rested lightly against the window frame. A car passed at the far end of the road, its headlights sweeping briefly across the parked cars before disappearing around the corner. For a moment her body reacted before her mind did, the familiar sound pulling her attention forward with quiet expectation. It wasn't him.

She let the curtain fall back into place. Waiting had never felt like something she did consciously before. Their plans had always unfolded so naturally that she had never noticed how much trust lived inside that ease until she found herself measuring time in passing headlights and empty roads.

There was nothing, just the same quiet stretch of road, unchanged, offering no indication that anything was about to happen.

Her thumb hovered over his name before she lowered the phone again. She wasn't ready to turn waiting into asking.

By 11:17 PM, the quiet had settled into something more definite, and when her phone finally buzzed, her heart reacted before she could stop

it, a brief, involuntary response that rose and held for a fraction of a second.

Can't make it tonight. Work came up.

Mahira read it twice.

She locked the screen and set the phone down.

She sat without moving, listening to the faint sounds drifting in from outside, distant traffic, the rustle of leaves in the evening breeze, the ordinary night continuing as though nothing at all had happened.

For a few moments she couldn't name what she felt. Then it settled quietly into disappointment. His cancellation could be understood; what lingered was the feeling that her waiting had hardly mattered to him.

"Okay," she whispered, the word meant for no one but herself. It wasn't acceptance so much as an attempt to give the evening an ending it hadn't offered on its own.

She remained sitting for a while, the phone still beside her, the room unchanged in every visible way. The silence felt strangely ordinary, and perhaps that was what unsettled her most. Nothing dramatic had happened. No argument. No harsh words. Nothing she could point to if someone asked why the evening felt different.

She tried to imagine telling someone what had happened and immediately realised how unreasonable it would sound. He had cancelled because of work. People cancelled plans all the time. It should have ended there. Yet the feeling remained. She believed the reason he had given, but she could not shake the sense that somewhere between waiting for him and reading his message, she had become an afterthought in a way she never had before.

She changed out of the clothes she had chosen with more care than usual and folded them away.

She washed her face and avoided looking at herself for long in the mirror.

Then she got into bed, though sleep stayed further away than usual.

What stayed with her wasn't the cancellation itself, but the quiet realization that somewhere along the way, her waiting had stopped carrying the weight it once did.

Across the city, Hamza was not at work, even though that was what he had said.

He was at his parents' home, his phone still in his hand, the message already sent.

His mother was talking about families, timelines and expectations. He barely heard her. His thoughts kept returning to the message he had sent.

His mother paused, waiting for an answer he hadn't realised she expected.

"Are you listening?"

He looked up almost automatically.

"Yeah," he said, though he couldn't have repeated the last thing she had said.

She studied him for a moment before continuing, accepting the distraction without commenting on it. The conversation moved on, but his attention didn't follow. His phone remained face down beside him, and even without looking at it he was aware of it in the same way someone remains aware of an unanswered knock at the door.

He told himself he would explain everything properly later, when there was more time, when he understood what he was trying to say himself. The thought had become familiar over the past few weeks, always reasonable in the moment, always enough to postpone the conversation one more day. Only now was he beginning to realise that postponement

had consequences of its own. Things did not stay as they were while he waited for the right moment. They were shaped quietly in the meantime, just as much by what was left unsaid as by anything he might eventually choose to tell her.

He looked at his phone again, almost without thinking, his thumb brushing the screen as if to check whether something had changed.

There was still no reply, and that felt strange.

Mahira always replied. Not this silence. It left him with the uneasy sense that he had already allowed something important to slip away.

He opened the message thread again and began to type, his fingers moving almost automatically as though the response might come to him through the act itself.

Sorry.

He paused, looking at the word as it sat there on the screen, aware of how little it held on its own, how it did not quite reach what needed to be said, and after a moment he deleted it.

He tried again, the cursor blinking as he searched for something that felt more appropriate, something that might restore the ease that had slipped without his noticing.

Tomorrow?

That did not feel right either, too casual, too forward in a way that assumed something he was no longer certain of, and he erased that as well, leaving the screen empty once more.

Neither an apology nor another plan felt honest anymore. The truth behind his silence was larger than anything he could fit into a message, and for the first time he understood that silence could wound as surely as words. What he had left unsaid had already begun to change something between them, whether he intended it to or not.



Chapter 31

The next day looked exactly like every other day. Mahira moved through it as she always did, though something beneath the routine no longer felt quite settled.

She didn't text him. The impulse simply never came.

Around noon, her phone lit up.

Sorry about last night. Work was crazy.

She read the message once without replying.

The apology arrived too late to change the evening she had already lived through. There was nothing she could challenge in what he'd written, yet something about it felt incomplete, as though it explained the cancellation without acknowledging what it had cost.

She began to type, her fingers moving almost automatically.

It's okay.

She looked at it for a moment before deleting it. Then she tried again, more deliberate this time.

Hope it's sorted now.

It was polite, careful, and revealed nothing she wasn't prepared to reveal.

His reply came almost immediately.

Yeah, just a lot going on.

She read the words again. "A lot going on." They explained everything and nothing at once.

That evening, he texted again, the message appearing with the same ease as though nothing between them had changed.

Drive?

She didn't answer immediately. For the first time since they'd met, she allowed herself to sit with the silence before replying. Eventually she typed a single word.

Okay.

It wasn't forgiveness. It was simply easier than walking away from something she still couldn't explain.

When she got into the car, he smiled at her in the same easy way he always had, as though nothing had changed and nothing needed to be addressed.

"Hey."

"Hi."

The greeting sounded the same. It simply didn't settle between them the way it once had.

The conversation slipped easily into familiar rhythms, but this time Mahira listened differently. She noticed what he left out as much as what he said.

She noticed how easily he moved past details that might have led to more questions.

"So what happened yesterday?" she asked lightly, keeping her tone casual enough that it did not sound like a challenge, even though she was paying attention in a way she had not before.

Hamza answered immediately.

"Work," he said, adding, "last-minute stuff," in the same even tone, as though it was enough to explain everything without inviting further questions.

The answer came too quickly, exactly as it had the day before.

"Sounds hectic," she said.

She let it end there. She already knew she wouldn't learn anything by asking again.

For the rest of the drive, she noticed how easily they could still laugh at the same things, how naturally old habits continued to fill the spaces between them. From a distance, nothing about the evening would have looked unusual. Yet she found herself listening beneath the conversation now, measuring its absences as carefully as its words, aware of everything that remained politely untouched.

The conversation continued, but the ease between them now depended on what neither of them chose to say.

A few evenings later, they stopped at the tea stall almost out of habit, neither of them suggesting it aloud. The owner greeted them with the same familiar smile before disappearing inside to prepare their order, as though nothing about them had changed.

They stood beside the counter while they waited, close enough that their shoulders almost touched. Once, neither of them would have noticed the distance because it had never really existed. Now it seemed to ask quietly to be acknowledged.

"Long day?" Hamza asked.

"A little," she replied.

"Mine too."

The conversation settled there.

He glanced toward the road, watching traffic move past while she traced the rim of the paper cup between her fingers after the tea arrived. Neither silence felt uncomfortable on its own, yet together they seemed to last longer than either of them expected.

When she reached for a fritter, he instinctively pushed the plate closer to her. She smiled in quiet thanks, but the gesture no longer carried the easy teasing that usually followed.

He noticed it immediately. She ate quietly instead, her attention drifting toward the traffic beyond the stall.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

She looked back at him and nodded once.

"Yeah."

The answer arrived easily enough, but it ended the conversation instead of opening it.

Hamza let the silence return. He couldn't point to anything that was wrong, yet he could no longer pretend everything felt the same.

They lingered for a few minutes after they finished their tea, neither of them in any particular hurry to leave. Around them, the evening carried on as it always did. Orders were called out, cups clinked softly against the metal counter, and scooters pulled in and out of the narrow stretch of road beside the stall. It was all so familiar that, on any other evening, she might not have noticed any of it.

Hamza reached for the empty cups and carried them back without thinking, returning a moment later with his hands in his pockets. For a second, they simply stood there side by side, looking out at the traffic instead of at each other.

There had once been an ease to moments like this, an instinctive certainty that one of them would eventually say something, no matter how small, simply because silence between them had never needed permission to end. Tonight, neither of them reached for it.

"We should go," he said eventually.

"Yeah."

She fell into step beside him as they walked back toward the car. Nothing about the evening felt unfinished in any obvious way, yet she couldn't escape the feeling that they were leaving behind something neither of them had quite known how to hold onto.

Outwardly, very little changed. She still met him, still laughed, still sat beside him. But inwardly, she had begun to hold herself differently.

She stopped leaning into him the way she used to, the movement no longer automatic, no longer something that happened without thought.

She no longer reached for his hand first, allowing the space between them to remain unless he chose to close it.

Silences were left alone now, pauses stretching without her instinctively stepping in to bridge them.

One evening they sat parked outside her apartment after the drive had ended. Neither of them made any move to leave.

Hamza unlocked his phone, checked it almost absent-mindedly, then slipped it back into his pocket without replying to anything. Months earlier she would have asked who it was, not out of suspicion but because his life had felt naturally connected to hers. The question came to mind now and disappeared just as quickly.

She realised she no longer expected him to tell her things on his own. Somewhere along the way, expectation had quietly given way to acceptance, and she wasn't sure which unsettled her more.

A few nights later, when the quiet between them had already begun to settle into something more familiar than it should have been, he said, "You're quiet," his tone casual enough to pass as observation, though there was something in it that suggested he had been noticing it for longer than just that moment.

"I've always been quiet," she replied, her voice even, offering the words without emphasis, as though they required no further attention.

"That's not true," he said, the response coming with a certainty that made it clear he was not speaking lightly, that he was responding not to the statement itself but to what had changed.

Mahira met his gaze without answering immediately. She knew exactly what he meant. She simply wasn't ready to repair what she hadn't broken.

Later, as they sat parked with the engine running, Hamza turned toward her.

"Did I do something?" he asked, his tone casual, or close enough to it that the question could pass as light if she chose to treat it that way.

Mahira looked at him for a moment. She could have asked the questions she'd been carrying for days. Instead, she simply shook her head.

"No," she said, her voice soft, easy, giving him exactly what he had asked for without adding anything to it.

It wasn't true.

Hamza watched her a moment longer. Something about the answer didn't sit right. He let it go. It was easier than asking another question he wasn't ready to hear answered.

Mahira looked out at the passing lights. After a moment, she said, "You know, things don't change all at once," her voice even, almost reflective, as though she was thinking aloud rather than making a point.

Hamza frowned slightly and asked, "What do you mean?" his tone careful, attentive in a way that suggested he knew this was not just a passing comment.

"They don't happen all at once," she said quietly. "You only notice after they've been happening for a while."

Something tightened in Hamza's chest.

"Are you saying that about us?" he asked, his voice careful, not confrontational, but carrying an edge of something that needed an answer.

Mahira held his gaze. "I'm saying it happens."

She left the words where they were, asking nothing more of him. Neither of them tried to continue the conversation. Yet for the first time, the distance between them no longer belonged to instinct alone. They could both feel it now, even if neither of them was ready to name it.



Chapter 32

A few evenings later, he picked her up again, and from the moment she got into the car, Mahira sensed something had changed. He was quieter than usual, his attention never seeming to settle fully on the evening ahead of them.

He greeted her the same way he always did, a quick “Hey,” followed by a brief smile that did not quite hold, the expression fading almost as soon as it appeared, offered more from habit than genuine presence.

“Hi,” she replied softly, watching him for a second longer than usual before fastening her seatbelt, her attention lingering on the way he said it, on how his focus seemed to move past the moment almost immediately.

The engine idled for a beat longer than it needed to, the pause just perceptible, as if he'd momentarily lost his train of thought before pulling away.

They pulled out into traffic, and at first it was only small delays in his responses, moments when his attention seemed to arrive a fraction too

late. The drive settled into a familiar rhythm, if she chose not to look too closely.

Then a bike cut too close in front of them, and he braked harder than necessary, the suddenness of it breaking whatever fragile ease had been forming.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath, the word slipping out before he could temper it, his jaw tightening as he adjusted his grip on the wheel, the tension lingering even after the moment had passed.

Mahira glanced at him but said nothing. Even after the road cleared, the tension stayed with him, his attention never quite returning to the drive.

Then his phone buzzed, the sound soft but distinct in the quiet of the car, and he glanced at it quickly, almost reflexively, his eyes dropping to the screen before returning to the road, dismissing it almost immediately.

For a few minutes, nothing seemed out of place, the drive continuing with a surface normalcy that might have held if it had stopped there.

Then it buzzed again.

This time, he glanced at it, then back at the road, then back at it again, a brief hesitation that revealed more than the action itself, before he picked it up at the next slow stretch without further pause.

He typed a quick reply and placed the phone face down beside him, but the gesture only made it more noticeable.

Mahira said nothing. She watched quietly, as she had learned to over the past few weeks.

A few minutes later, the car stalled at a signal, the engine cutting out abruptly in a way that broke the fragile rhythm of the drive, leaving a brief, exposed silence in its wake.

“Shit,” he said this time, more sharply than before, the word edged with frustration as his hand moved quickly to restart it, his movements

efficient but tense, the interruption exposing how unsettled he already was.

The light ahead remained red, the road momentarily still, but the stillness did not ease him, it only seemed to make his agitation more visible, contained but not diminished.

Mahira reached out then, placing her hand lightly on his thigh, the gesture instinctive, something she would have done before without thinking, meant to steady rather than interrupt, a quiet way of grounding him without drawing attention to it.

“It’s okay,” she said softly, her tone even, offering reassurance without pressing it.

He nodded, but her reassurance no longer reached him the way it once had.

Instead, his attention slipped back to the road almost immediately. Even beside him, the distance between them felt unmistakable.

Her hand remained there for a second longer before she withdrew it, aware that it had not done what it once would have.

The phone buzzed again, and then again, the interruptions arriving close enough together that they no longer felt incidental but part of a pattern that was establishing itself in real time.

Each time, he glanced down, replied, then turned the phone face down. The gesture seemed meant to contain the interruption, but only made it more visible.

He answered when she spoke, but his replies were shorter now, his attention always somewhere else.

At one point, her sentence simply faded away as she realised he hadn't fully heard her.

He looked at her then, a beat too late, the delay small but noticeable in a way that made it difficult to ignore.

"Sorry," he said, a slight frown forming, "what were you saying?"

"It's fine," she replied, and this time she meant it. She no longer felt the need to repeat herself.

Instead, she let the unfinished thought disappear. There had been a time when he would have noticed before she did, catching the sentence as it faltered and asking her to continue. Tonight, the silence simply closed over it, and neither of them tried to reopen it.

They stopped at the tea stall not long after, the way they had pulled over at before without planning to, the way that had once extended their drives without needing a reason, but this time it felt less like a pause and more like an interruption.

He got out first, already looking at his phone before the car door had fully closed.

Mahira joined him a moment later. Steam curled from the paper cups as the tea vendor handed them over, but Hamza barely seemed aware of where he was. He answered a message, slipped the phone into his pocket, only to take it out again seconds later.

They stood side by side without speaking.

"Everything okay?" she asked eventually.

"Yeah," he replied, his eyes still on the screen. "Just something I need to sort."

She nodded. Neither of them reached for another sentence. The steam drifted between them, rising and disappearing into the evening air, while the sounds of passing traffic filled the silence they left untouched. It struck her then that they weren't sharing the pause anymore. They were simply standing in the same place. The quiet no longer belonged to both of them. It had become something each of them occupied separately, close enough to stand side by side, but no longer close enough to meet within it.

They did not stay long.

There was no unspoken extension of the evening. At some point, without either of them deciding it aloud, he turned the car back earlier than he would have before.

The silence between them had become deliberate, each of them asking less of it than before.

When he stopped near her gate, the engine still running, the moment that followed felt brief in a way that contrasted with how it used to stretch, as though neither of them was reaching for something more.

She unfastened her seatbelt and reached for the door before he could say anything, then paused, turning slightly toward him.

"You should take some time off," she said, her voice calm, offering the thought without accusation.

He shook his head immediately.

"I'm fine," he said, the response quick, almost automatic, then firmer as he repeated it, "I'm fine," like saying it twice might make it more certain.

"You've been busy," she added gently, leaving the thought there.

"It's just work," he said, a little sharper now, then more firmly, as though reinforcing it would make it sufficient, "it'll settle," the certainty in his tone carrying more insistence than ease.

She held his gaze for a moment. His words were steady, but they didn't match the man she'd spent the evening beside.

"Okay," she said finally. It wasn't agreement. It was acceptance.

She stepped out of the car, closing the door gently behind her. For a brief second she wondered whether to lean back in and stretch the goodbye a little longer. Instead, she stayed where she was, letting the moment remain contained. There had been evenings when one of them would have found another small thing to say, some passing observation

that carried the goodbye into a few more minutes. Tonight neither of them reached for it. The silence ended on its own, and she let it.

“Goodnight,” she said, her tone soft but measured, carrying none of the ease it once might have.

“Goodnight,” he replied.

She turned toward the gate without lingering and did not look back, letting the moment end where it was. She left no opening for it to begin again.

Inside, as she shut the door, the quiet felt clear rather than unsettled. Something had come into focus, and she didn't need to examine it any further.

She set her bag down, slipped off her shoes, and let the familiar rhythm of home settle around her.

She did not message him that night or call. She could see him clearly now, and no amount of patience would bring him back before he was ready.

She picked up her phone once, more from habit than intention, her thumb hovering briefly over his name before the impulse quietly passed. There was nothing left to ask, and nothing she could say that would lessen whatever distance he had already retreated into.

For the first time, she chose not to cross that distance. She would let him come to her when he could. Until then, she would leave the space between them exactly as it was, trusting that anything worth rebuilding could not be carried by one person alone.



Chapter 33

Mahira didn't go on another drive, not the next day or the one after, and as the days passed, the absence felt less like a pause and more like a quiet, unspoken decision. She replied to his messages briefly and politely, her tone measured, acknowledging without inviting, keeping everything contained within what was given.

There was no "come out," no "drive?" nothing that could lead them back to that space they had occupied so easily before, nothing that would recreate the familiarity without first understanding what had changed within it.

Because Hamza did not chase. He never filled silence for its own sake or reached again once he wasn't met. He didn't try to close distance after it had been allowed to form, and she knew that now, something that had revealed itself gradually through the way he moved.

He stepped forward with intention, he held what was there without wavering, and then he stopped just as deliberately, not withdrawing completely but no longer advancing.

Then he waited. Once he had stepped back, he believed the next move belonged to her.

Mahira pressed her fingers to her temple, trying to quiet the steady movement of her thoughts.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go, not in the way she had understood it at the beginning, when everything had felt clear without needing definition. There had been rules, unspoken but understood, shaped by ease rather than conversation, never needing to be clarified because they were lived, not stated. It had been meant to stay happy and uncomplicated, something light, contained, existing between conversations without spilling into consequence. Nothing was meant to carry forward unless they both chose it. But over the past few days, something had changed quietly, without either of them naming it, and in that change, those rules had begun to loosen, no longer holding in the way they once had.

And she didn't know how to rewrite them, didn't know whether they were meant to be rewritten at all, or whether what she was feeling was simply the result of something that had already moved beyond the space it was meant to occupy.

Across the city, Hamza was sitting in his car again, parked with the engine off, the quiet around him unbroken, not moving, not going anywhere, just remaining there as though leaving would require a decision he had not yet made.

His phone was in his hand, her chat open, the familiar thread of their conversations sitting unchanged in front of him, the last exchange carrying more weight now than it had when it was sent.

Twice he typed a message, and twice he deleted it.

Nothing he wrote felt honest enough—not an apology that explained too little, nor a casual message that pretended nothing had changed.

So he remained there, the message unsent, the space between them unchanged, and for the first time, he became aware of how difficult it was to move forward when the simplest action no longer felt simple.

He unlocked the phone once more, his thumb hovering over the keyboard before falling still again. There was nothing left he trusted himself to say.

He replayed it too, again and again, in a continuous loop that returned without effort, as though his mind had settled on it without asking his permission.

Every second returned with a clarity that made it impossible to dismiss.

What stayed with him wasn't the look she had given him or the silence that followed. It was one quiet sentence.

"You've been busy."

That was the part that unsettled him, because it hadn't been hesitation, uncertainty, or disappointment in the way he might have expected. It had been something quieter, more deliberate, suggesting she had already adjusted to something he had not yet acknowledged.

And he didn't know what it was, not fully, not in a way he could name, only that it had altered something between them in a way that could not be undone by ignoring it.

Hamza leaned back in his seat, running a hand through his hair as he exhaled sharply, the breath leaving him with more force than he intended, as though it carried something he had been holding in place for too long.

"What am I doing," he murmured to himself, the words low and unguarded, not shaped for anyone else to hear, not even framed as something that needed an answer.

It wasn't a question, not in the way he might have asked it before, searching for justification or explanation.

It was a realization, arriving without resistance, settling into him with a clarity that made it difficult to step away from.

For the first time, he saw the distance he had created. He still didn't know what to do about it, but he could no longer pretend it wasn't there.

He thought about calling instead, imagining her voice answering before the thought had fully formed. But even that felt wrong now, too immediate for a silence he had been responsible for creating. He had spent days convincing himself that things would settle on their own if he simply gave them time. Sitting there now, he realised time had not been preserving what they had. It had been quietly changing it while he stood still.

Days passed like this, stretched in a way that made them feel thinner than they should have, as though something that once gave them shape had been removed without being replaced, leaving everything intact on the surface yet altered underneath.

Mahira filled her time deliberately, moving through calls, errands, and conversations that did not require too much from her, choosing interactions that stayed on the surface and left little room for stillness to settle too deeply. She maintained the familiar rhythm of her days without appearing to force it, letting everything look unchanged even as something beneath it quietly had.

Yet he appeared in small recollections, in half-formed thoughts that did not fully settle, in the memory of something said or left unsaid that returned without resolution, and each time, it was not the absence itself that held her there, but the sense of something unfinished, something that had not yet reached a conclusion even as it had already begun to change.

Sometimes she caught herself reaching for her phone simply because a thought had reminded her of him, only to stop before unlocking it. The impulse no longer surprised her. What surprised her was how easily she

let it pass. She wasn't trying to forget him or convince herself she no longer cared. She was waiting for the moment when reaching out would no longer feel like carrying something he had quietly set down.

The hesitation never came from pride. It came from knowing that every conversation they had shared until now had moved forward because both of them had stepped toward it. She could no longer be certain that was still true, and the uncertainty itself had begun to answer questions she had stopped asking aloud.

That night, she opened his chat, her thumb hesitating only briefly before the conversation appeared, unchanged and waiting in a way that felt more deliberate than it should have, as though the pause between them carried weight.

She closed it almost immediately, as though the act had come too soon, as though she had not yet decided what she was ready to say or how much of it she could put into words.

A few seconds passed before she opened it again, the cursor blinking at the bottom of the screen, steady and expectant, and she began to type, the words forming quickly at first, almost instinctively.

She paused, reading them back, aware of something that did not sit right, something that felt either too much or not enough, and then deleted them, the screen clearing in a way that felt both easier and more uncertain.

She tried again, slower this time, more deliberate, choosing each word with care, but when she read it through, it still didn't hold.

She deleted that too, the silence returning without offering her an answer.

When she typed again, it was without interruption.

We shouldn't meet like that again. Take some time, Hamza.

Her thumb hovered over the send button longer than it needed to. Once it was sent, there would be no pretending she hadn't seen what had changed between them.

She read it once more. It sounded colder than she felt, but it was honest. She sent it before she could change her mind.

Hamza read the message twice before locking his phone. The words were simple, but the boundary they drew was unmistakable. For a long time he didn't move, his phone still in his hand, unable to look away from how quietly she had changed the shape of whatever had existed between them.

When he finally replied, it was just one line, typed without embellishment, without any attempt to soften or extend what he was asking.

Like what?

Mahira stared at the screen for several seconds. His reply left no room to hide behind vague words. If she answered, she would have to say what she truly meant.

That night, neither of them slept easily. The quiet between them no longer felt neutral.

Because distance didn't erase anything, it only sharpened it, bringing into focus what had once been easy to move past, making it harder to ignore what had already begun to take form.



Chapter 34

It didn't come from him. It arrived quietly, in the middle of an ordinary afternoon, before she even knew she was listening.

There was nothing to suggest the afternoon would become memorable. It unfolded with the same quiet familiarity as every other visit.

Mahira was at her cousin's place, sprawled across the couch with her laptop open, half-working, half-listening, her attention moving in and out of the room without settling anywhere fully, responding when needed but never quite anchoring herself in the conversation.

Voices drifted around her. Vibhav was talking about something inconsequential, someone's engagement, someone else's new job, plans for the weekend, the conversation unfolding the way it always did, loose and overlapping, names appearing and disappearing without weight, stories blending into each other without needing to be followed closely.

Tea was being poured nearby, the soft clink of cups and the steady sound of liquid filling them threading through the background, someone

laughed too loudly at something unimportant, and the moment carried on without pause, without emphasis, without anything to distinguish it.

She wasn't thinking about him at all, which was why hearing his name caught her so completely off guard.

"Do you know Hamza's family?"

The question came in casually, drifting into the conversation without weight, the kind of thing that might have passed without notice if it had been about anyone else, just another name among many.

Mahira looked up, more out of reflex than interest, his name catching her attention before she could decide whether it mattered.

"A little," her cousin said. "Why?"

"They've been talking to someone for him."

"What do you mean?" she asked quietly.

"You know... that girl his parents found," the woman said. "Hamza has been meeting her for a while now."

The words settled slowly, not all at once, but in parts that lingered just long enough to register. Her fingers tightened briefly around the edge of the cushion before relaxing again.

That girl, his parents found, been meeting her, for a while.

"Since when?" she asked, her voice steady, carrying only the question and nothing else, even as something beneath it had already begun to change.

The woman shrugged lightly. "I don't know... a couple of months? It's not serious-serious, but you know how these things go. Families get involved, then it just..." she trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid, though it did not need to be completed for it to be understood.

Months.

Long enough for an entire part of his life to exist without her ever knowing.

“Oh,” she said, the word quiet, almost automatic, the only one that seemed to fit without asking for more.

The woman nodded, still unaware of the shift that had settled beneath the surface. “I mean, he’s been a bit weird about it,” she continued. “Not super into it, but not saying no either. Classic him.”

Classic him.

Mahira said nothing.

She didn’t react, not immediately, not in a way that would draw attention to anything shifting beneath the surface, and instead she asked a few more questions, casually and carefully, like she was gathering information about something that didn’t concern her directly, something she could observe without being part of.

“What’s her name?” she asked, her tone even, as though the question carried no particular weight.

“Don’t remember.”

“They’ve met you say?”

“Yeah, a few times, I think. Families too.”

“And he’s... okay with it?”

The woman hesitated slightly before answering, “I think he’s just... letting it happen.”

He was letting it happen. Somehow, that unsettled her more than certainty would have. It wasn’t a decision she could understand or argue with, only a silence that kept moving forward on its own.

“What’s the girl like?” someone asked, the question light, passing through the room without weight.

“Good family, quiet, well-educated,” came the reply just as easily, as though it was enough to define everything that mattered.

Mahira nodded faintly, as though she was listening to a story that had nothing to do with her, as though she was simply another person in the room, present but not involved.

Because that was what she was, wasn’t she? She hadn’t been introduced, hadn’t been acknowledged in any way that would place her within that context, hadn’t been spoken of or considered in the same space.

And in that absence, in that quiet, unmarked distance, she understood something else too, something that did not need to be said aloud.

She hadn’t been chosen.

Not in any deliberate way, perhaps. Maybe there had never even been a moment when someone had weighed one possibility against another. But the outcome remained the same. While she had quietly made room for him in her life, he had allowed another future to unfold without ever inviting her into the truth of it.

The conversation moved on as though nothing important had been said. Mahira could no longer follow it. Something was rearranging itself quietly in her mind—not shock or confusion, but recognition, steady and unmistakable.

She closed her laptop, the soft click of it final in a way that felt more deliberate than usual, and when someone offered her more tea, she simply nodded before saying, “I should go,” her tone even, leaving no room for it to sound abrupt.

“Home?” Vibhav asked, concerned. “I’ll drop you, Mahira. Don’t.”

“Yeah, I have something to finish. I’ll manage Vibbs,” Mahira replied, the words coming easily, not quite a lie and not quite the truth either, but something that sat comfortably in between, offering an explanation

without revealing what had actually shifted. Vibhav looked very concerned but she dismissed it.

The ride home felt longer than usual. The silence around her left nothing to interrupt the slow rearranging of everything she thought she understood. She didn't rush and didn't check her phone, because there was nothing on it that would change this or alter what had already settled into place. Inside the cab, she looked out of the window as the city moved past her, people passing in blurred fragments, everything continuing as it always did, steady and unaware of anything that had shifted within her.

She didn't reach for him. For the first time, the silence between them felt complete rather than unfinished.

Instead, she let herself think. And the more she thought, the clearer the pattern became.

The missed call, the cancelled night, the distance, the way he said work too quickly, the way he almost said something and didn't, the way she stopped asking, the way she already knew something wasn't there, all of it rearranged itself in her mind, no longer random or disconnected, but part of a pattern she could no longer dismiss.

What unsettled her wasn't any single moment. Any one of them could have been explained away, forgiven, or forgotten. It was only when she saw them together that they became impossible to dismiss. What she had accepted as isolated disappointments had been telling the same story all along, one she had been reluctant to read until now.

And suddenly, none of it felt unexpected anymore. It was simply the truth she had finally allowed herself to see.

She sat on her bed when she got home, her phone in her hand, his name right there on the screen, familiar and constant, unchanged on the surface.

Her thumb hovered over his name before drifting away again.

So she scrolled up instead, moving through messages, through conversations that had once felt easy and uninterrupted, flowing without effort or pause.

Now they looked different. The words were the same, but she was reading them through a different understanding.

She reached one message, the words simple enough on their own, but different now in the way they sat before her.

Will call?

He never did.

Her chest tightened, quietly and without warning, the feeling settling into her with a permanence that surprised her.

She put the phone down, only to pick it up again a moment later, her hands moving before her thoughts had caught up.

She opened his contact and stared at it, the familiarity of it unchanged, his name sitting there in the same place it always had, holding the same ease it once did, even as everything around it felt different now.

Then she closed it.

If she called, he would explain. He would say it wasn't serious, that nothing had really happened, perhaps even that he hadn't wanted it. Maybe all of that would be true.

But it still wouldn't explain why she had learned about it from someone else.

He hadn't told her. Not when it began. Not when it continued. Not when it became something she should have known.

Whatever explanation came now would arrive after the silence that had already said enough.

She realised she no longer needed to hear him explain what she had already understood for herself.

“Why, Hamza?” she said quietly. It wasn't a question she expected him to answer anymore, only one she finally allowed herself to ask.

And for the first time since all of this had begun, she felt neither confusion nor longing nor even hurt. What remained was something quieter, steadier, and far more difficult to ignore.

It was clarity.

Quiet.

Unforced.

Once it arrived, it asked nothing of her except that she stop pretending not to see what had been there all along.



Chapter 35

She didn't reach out, not that night and not the next morning, and not even when habit almost pulled her into it, when her fingers instinctively moved toward her phone at the hour they usually spoke, when a small detail in her day felt like something she would have told him without thinking.

Each time, she chose to leave the moment where it was, aware that stepping back into it no longer felt right.

What surprised her was how little effort it required. Somewhere beneath the habit, something had already begun to loosen. The impulse that had once carried her toward him no longer arrived with the same quiet certainty.

On the second day, he messaged.

You free tonight?

It appeared on her screen as though nothing had changed, the easy rhythm between them continuing as if the last few days had never happened.

Mahira looked at it for a long moment, struck by how easily it tried to slip back into a pattern that no longer felt the same.

There was no mention of the missed call, no acknowledgment of the distance between them, only a quiet return, as though nothing worth addressing had happened.

The message brought something into sharper focus. His words mattered less than the silence around them.

She typed, deleted, and started again.

Not tonight.

She sent it before she could soften it, before she could adjust it into something that carried less weight than it needed to.

His reply came quickly. *Everything okay?*

She almost smiled. The question carried concern, but it arrived after the moment that had called for it had already passed.

Yeah. she replied, keeping it simple, not extending it into something more, and left it there without adding anything that might reopen what she had already chosen to hold closed.

He didn't push, and somehow that made it worse. The silence stayed exactly where it was.

The silence stretched into the next day. By the third, it no longer felt accidental.

Hamza noticed it gradually. Her replies were shorter, the timing between messages different, something in her tone no longer settling the way it once had.

At first, he dismissed it.

She wasn't reaching, wasn't filling the space in the way she had before, wasn't making it easy for the connection to continue without effort.

It was only then that he realised he had mistaken change for a pause. Whatever had been happening between them had never really stopped.

He replayed their last few interactions, the cancelled night, the quiet ride, the way she had said okay and nothing more, each moment returning with a clarity that felt sharper now than it had then.

He found himself searching those memories for the moment he should have recognised what was happening, some missed expression or unfinished sentence that might have warned him sooner. Looking back, nothing stood out on its own. It was only the pattern, visible in hindsight, that refused to be ignored.

Something tightened in his chest, bringing with it an unease he couldn't quite place.

For the first time, waiting for her to reach out no longer felt like patience. It felt like the risk of losing something he had assumed would always find its way back to him.

He called, the decision coming quickly, almost instinctively, as though action might interrupt whatever had begun to settle between them.

It rang until the call dropped unanswered.

There was no callback, and he waited, telling himself she was busy, giving it time in a way that felt reasonable at first and then increasingly deliberate as the hours passed without anything from her.

By evening, he called again, not hesitating this time, the decision carrying a quiet urgency he did not fully acknowledge.

This time, she answered.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi."

Her voice was calm, too calm.

"Were you busy?" he asked.

“A bit.”

“You okay?” he asked again, his tone careful, as though he was trying to reach something without pushing it.

“I’m fine.”

He exhaled slowly, letting the breath settle before he spoke again. “Feels like something’s off,” he said, his voice carrying quiet concern as he searched for something that would make sense of what he was beginning to feel.

“Nothing’s off,” she said.

For the first time since he had known her, he didn't believe her. He didn't call it out. Not yet. He didn't understand it well enough to name it.

“Did I do something?” he asked, and the question came out closer to what he meant, closer to the center of what had been forming between them.

She didn't answer immediately.

When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet.

“You didn’t do anything.”

And this time it was worse because it sounded true, because it removed the possibility of something clear, something that could be named and addressed.

Because now it wasn't a lie, at least not one he could recognise or challenge. It simply left him without anything to answer, nothing to defend against, nothing to fix.

He ran a hand through his hair, pacing slightly, the movement restless in a way he did not try to hide, and asked, “Then what is it?” his voice no longer searching around the edges but moving closer to the center of it.

"I just... need a little space," she said finally.

The words came quietly, without force, but they did not soften anything, did not make the distance easier to hold.

"Space?" he repeated, the word unfamiliar in this context.

"Yeah."

"For what?"

A faint breath escaped her. "Hamza," she said, her voice gentler now, holding its distance without turning cold, "it's not something I can explain right now," and in that, there was no refusal, only a boundary she wasn't ready to move.

"That doesn't make sense," he said, and there was a hint of frustration in his voice now, present without fully taking over.

"I know," she replied, and the agreement did not soften it, did not offer him anything to hold onto.

"This isn't like you," he said, trying again, as though saying the words might bring it back to something familiar.

"No," she agreed. "It's not."

"So what am I supposed to do?" he asked, the question coming from a place that was still trying to find direction, still looking for something that could be acted on.

Even as he asked it, he knew it wasn't what she needed.

She hesitated before answering. "You don't have to do anything," she said, her voice steady, offering him an answer that did not invite him to act.

"I don't like this," he said quietly, the words more honest than anything he had said so far.

"I know," she replied.

“Then don’t do this, Mahira” he said, and even as he said it, the weight of it was apparent, the way it asked for something she was no longer able to give.

“It’s not that simple,” she replied, her voice carrying a certainty that left no room for negotiation.

“Then make it simple,” he said, the frustration more visible now, though still held back from turning into something sharper.

“This is exactly why I can’t talk about it yet,” she said, her tone steady, carrying a quiet resolve that did not invite further pressure.

“What does that even mean?” he asked, the confusion clearer now, the lack of clarity beginning to unsettle him more than the distance itself.

She hesitated. “It means I need to understand something first,” she said finally, the sentence complete but still holding back more than it gave.

“Understand what?” he asked.

She didn't answer immediately.

“Us,” she said, and the word remained between them with a weight that neither of them immediately moved past.

He didn't like how it sounded. For the first time, "us" no longer felt certain.

“What about us?” he asked, his voice quieter now, trying to understand what she meant by placing it there.

“Everything,” she said.

Something sank inside him. This wasn't about the missed calls or the awkward silences anymore. Whatever she was questioning reached further than he'd realised, and for the first time he understood he wasn't standing outside it, trying to solve it. He was already inside it.

“I thought we were fine, Mahira,” he said, the words quieter than before, as though he was trying to hold onto something that no longer felt as certain.

She closed her eyes briefly before replying, “So did I,” her voice steady, simply acknowledging what had once been true.

Silence settled between them.

“I’ll call you,” she said finally, her tone measured, offering a continuation without defining it.

“When?” he asked, the question immediate, as though he needed something more concrete to hold onto.

“Soon.”

Before he could press further, before he could shape the conversation into something clearer, she ended the call, leaving the line quiet in a way that felt more final than it should have.

He stood there, his phone still in his hand, listening to the silence she’d left behind. The screen dimmed before he realised he was still staring at it.

For the first time, he felt the certainty he’d carried through their relationship begin to give way. Something had changed between them long before this conversation, and only now was he beginning to understand how completely he’d failed to see it.



Chapter 36

The memory came back while he was driving, catching him in the middle of an ordinary moment and pulling his attention somewhere else entirely. Only now did he recognise what that quiet evening had set in motion.

“Mahira—”

Her name escaped him before he realised he'd spoken it aloud. The memory arrived whole.

It was the night he had almost said it. The words had been there, complete and unquestioned.

They had been driving without any destination, the windows cracked just enough to let the evening air drift through the car. The playlist had ended several minutes earlier, but neither of them had reached to change it. The silence between them had never demanded filling.

Mahira rested her head lightly against the window, watching the passing lights blur into long streaks of colour. Every so often she pointed out something she noticed—a brightly lit bookstore, a stray dog asleep

beneath a tea stall, a child running ahead of his parents—and he found himself smiling before he even looked, because the quiet delight with which she shared each discovery mattered more than what she had actually noticed.

At one red light, she turned toward him to say something, then stopped, laughing softly at herself. "I forgot what I was going to say."

"Must not have been important."

"Maybe not."

But she stayed turned toward him for another moment anyway.

It wasn't a dramatic moment. There was no confession waiting to happen, no sudden certainty announcing itself. It was simply the ease of being beside her, the absence of effort, the quiet awareness that nowhere else felt as natural as that seat beside him.

The light changed. He drove on, yet something in him remained suspended in that moment.

The city slipped past in quiet fragments, familiar streets taking on the softness that only late evenings seemed to give them. Neither of them hurried the silence along. It stretched naturally between them, carrying the comfort of countless conversations and the confidence that neither of them needed to perform for the other. He realised he couldn't remember the last time being with someone had felt this effortless.

He glanced at her once more.

She had already turned back toward the window, unaware that he was looking.

The road curved gently along the lake, the water catching scattered reflections from the streetlights. Neither of them spoke for a while. The quiet never felt uncomfortable with her. It carried the easy confidence of two people who had stopped worrying about filling every silence.

She lowered the window a little farther, resting her elbow against the frame as the cool night air swept through the car.

"It's nice tonight," she said softly.

He nodded. "It is."

She smiled to herself, still looking outside.

"It's funny," she said after a while. "I don't even remember where we were supposed to be going."

"We weren't."

"Were we just driving?"

"We usually are."

A quiet laugh escaped her.

"I like that."

He glanced at her.

"What?"

"This." She gestured vaguely toward the road ahead. "No plans. No destination. Just... this."

The simplicity of it caught him off guard.

To her, it was only an evening drive. Another ordinary night that would probably blur into all the others.

To him, it had already become something else.

He realised that he had begun measuring time differently. Days and weeks mattered less than the evenings that ended beside her. Somehow, without ever deciding to, she had become the place his thoughts returned to first, the person he wanted beside him whenever something was worth seeing or laughing about, even when neither of them said very much.

The thought arrived quietly, carrying none of the uncertainty he would later convince himself had existed.

He loved how easily she occupied the silence beside him.

He loved the way she noticed ordinary things other people walked past.

He loved that being with her never felt like something he had to work at.

The words rose almost of their own accord.

Mahira turned back toward him, catching him looking before he could glance away.

"What?" she asked, smiling.

"Nothing."

"You've got that face."

"What face?"

"The one where you're thinking too much."

He laughed quietly. "Do I?"

"You always do."

"I don't."

"You do." She folded her arms with exaggerated confidence. "I've known you long enough to tell."

"And what am I supposedly thinking about?"

She tilted her head as though considering it seriously.

"I don't know," she admitted. "Probably something you're never actually going to say."

The words meant more than either of them realised.

He smiled, though something inside him had already gone still.

"That sounds unfair."

"It's true."

She laughed again, light and effortless, unaware that she had wandered closer to the truth than she intended.

"You overthink everything," she continued. "Even choosing where to get tea."

"I like making informed decisions."

"You spent fifteen minutes reading reviews for a place five minutes away."

"It was a good café."

"It was exactly like every other café."

"It wasn't."

"It absolutely was."

He shook his head, smiling despite himself.

"I can't win with you."

"No," she said, still smiling. "You really can't."

She reached across the centre console and gave his arm a quick, playful shove before settling back into her seat.

The touch lasted no more than a second.

For some reason, it stayed with him far longer.

He kept one hand on the steering wheel, though he remained quietly aware of the place her hand had been. It wasn't the touch itself that stayed with him so much as how naturally it had happened, unplanned and unselfconscious, as though closeness between them had stopped needing permission without either of them noticing when that change had taken place.

The conversation drifted naturally to something else after that, as easily as it always did. She began talking about a book she'd started reading, then abandoned the story halfway through because she'd remembered something funny that had happened at work. He listened, adding the occasional comment, but his attention had moved inward.

Her voice had become part of the evening around him, so familiar that he no longer heard it in pieces.

And with that feeling came the words again, clearer than before, waiting just beneath the silence.

I love you.

He had known it then with a certainty that left no room for doubt. Yet when the words reached him, fear had spoken first. Love had never frightened him. Losing what they already shared had.

Now the reasoning felt painfully thin. He had lost her anyway.

He eased off the accelerator without noticing.

"I should have said it," he murmured.

It had never been about the words alone. It was about the certainty they would have carried.

The moment was gone now. Whatever those words might once have changed belonged to another version of their story, one he could no longer reach.

He drove on through the familiar streets, but for the first time they felt like places he had already left behind.

Later that night, lying awake in the quiet of her room, Mahira found herself returning to the same evening. The memory surfaced with unexpected clarity, carrying her back to the moment she had almost spoken the words.

I think I love him.

She remembered how it had felt—quiet, steady, and certain from the very beginning.

She had known it then, quietly and completely, in a way that would have made it easy to say without fear or hesitation, without measuring what it might change or anticipating how it would be received.

And still, she hadn't said it.

Mahira exhaled softly. Understanding had quietly taken the place of regret.

Time had changed what she understood about that silence. It no longer felt like something withheld, only something she had recognised before she knew how to name it.

For a moment, she wondered what might have happened if she had said it.

Would he have said it back, or would he have paused in that way she had come to recognise, holding the moment just slightly away from himself before responding.

She closed her eyes briefly, giving the thought room to settle.

She remembered the quiet certainty she had carried home that night. Nothing remarkable had happened. There had been no confession, no promise, nothing anyone else would have recognised as important. Yet she had climbed into bed with the unmistakable feeling that something inside her had shifted, as though her heart had quietly reached a conclusion her mind would spend much longer trying to understand.

She already knew the answer. He wouldn't have met her where she was, not then, and that would have hurt more than the silence she had chosen instead.

She realised that love could not remain unchanged when it travelled in only one direction. Given enough time, it became something heavier.

Mahira turned slightly, her gaze settling on the ceiling.

“I didn’t need to say it,” she murmured, her voice soft but certain, and for the first time, it felt true.

She had never needed the words themselves. She had only needed to know they already existed between them.

She let the thought come to rest.

It still mattered.

She simply understood it differently now.



Chapter 37

She didn't call him, and that was what unsettled Hamza first, more than anger would have, more than accusations, more than even a message saying they needed to talk, because there was only silence—clean, deliberate, absolute in a way that left no room for misunderstanding.

He checked his phone more times than he needed to, staring at the absence of her name on the screen. He had expected confrontation, even hoped for it. Silence was worse. It meant she had already moved past the stage of asking.

By the time he reached Mahira's building, he already knew that someone had told her.

He didn't know who, and it no longer mattered. The truth sat heavily in his chest as he walked through the gate into a morning that felt far too bright.

The light fell awkwardly over everything, making the driveway and garden seem almost cruel in their ordinary calm while something between them gave way beyond repair.

Mahira was already there, standing near the small stretch of garden by the driveway, her arms folded tightly across herself as though holding herself in place.

She looked composed, and that was somehow worse. Had she been angry or in tears, he might have known how to begin. Instead, this quiet, self-contained version of her made every prepared explanation feel useless before he had even spoken.

Neither of them spoke. In that silence, he realised this was no longer about explanation. It was about whether trust, once cracked, could survive being faced.

He stopped a few feet away, suddenly aware of how little language could do here.

“Mahira—”

“Don’t,” she said. Her voice remained quiet, its certainty alone enough to stop him a few steps away.

When she finally spoke, her voice remained calm as she asked, “You were going to tell me?”

“I was.”

“When?”

He hesitated.

She nodded once. The hesitation had told her enough. “Right.”

“It’s not—” he started, then stopped, forcing himself to begin again because even he could hear how weak it sounded. And he knew he was making a mistake. “It’s not what you think.”

Her lips parted slightly, almost like she was about to laugh, but there was nothing amused in her face.

“That line,” she said softly, her disappointment sharper than anger, “you really went with that?”

“I’m serious, Mahira.”

“So was I.”

She took a step toward him then, moving just close enough that he could no longer rely on distance to soften any of this or retreat behind careful half-truths.

“Then explain it to me,” she said. “Explain how there was a girl your family—you—had been talking to, meeting, planning things with—for months—and somehow, in the middle of all of this...” she gestured lightly between them, the movement small but painfully precise, “...you forgot to mention her.”

“I didn’t forget.”

“Then what did you do, Hamza?” she asked, and now there was something sharper in her voice, still controlled but carrying the edge of something far more dangerous than anger. “Because I’m trying very hard to understand where, exactly, you think you didn’t.”

He ran a hand through his hair, frustration flickering through him, directed as much at himself as at the situation, at the fact that every explanation sounded worse the moment it left him.

“It wasn’t... real,” he said. “It was just something my parents were pushing. I wasn’t even—”

“Don’t,” she cut in again, the firmness in her voice leaving no room for him to continue.

He stopped.

“Don’t reduce it now,” she said. “Not after letting it exist for that long.”

"It didn't mean anything."

There it was, and the moment the words left his mouth, he knew it was the second mistake.

She went very still. For a moment, he wondered if she had heard him at all. Then she looked at him and said, quietly, "You don't get to say that."

"I was telling you the truth—"

"No," she said, shaking her head once, the movement small but absolute. "You were telling me what you thought would make this smaller. Easier. Less... ugly."

Her arms dropped then, the movement born of clarity, as though the truth had settled so completely that holding herself together no longer required physical effort.

"It meant something. Maybe not in the way this did." Again, she gestured between them. "But it meant enough for your family to move forward, and enough for you to let them.

"I kept telling myself there was still time to stop it," he said.

"You didn't stop them. You let me keep believing I was standing somewhere I wasn't."

He had no answer.

"I asked you for nothing, Hamza," she said.

Her voice softened, but it did not lose its strength. "I didn't ask you where this was going. I didn't ask you what we were. I didn't even ask you to define anything that was happening between us."

"I know."

"No," she said, and there was no anger in it, only certainty. "You don't."

When she spoke again, her voice was steadier, as though she no longer needed to soften the truth. "I trusted what I was feeling. That was it.

That was my only... assumption. That whatever this was, it was at least real for both of us."

"It was real," he said immediately.

She looked at him for a long moment before asking, "Then why was I the only one acting like it was the only thing that mattered?"

"You weren't the only one," he said. "I just— I didn't think it would go this far."

The moment the words left his mouth, he knew he had made the third mistake.

She inhaled slowly, steadying herself before she spoke.

"That's the problem," she said. "You didn't think,"

"I didn't think I would feel like this," he tried, his voice softer now, as though lowering it might somehow make the truth less damaging. "I didn't expect you to—"

"To matter?" she finished for him.

He closed his eyes briefly, the words hitting exactly where he had hoped they would not.

"That's not what I meant."

"It is," she said. "It's exactly what you meant. You just didn't like how it sounded out loud."

A long silence settled between them while the world carried on beyond the gate.

"I took risks for you," she said finally.

He looked at her then and understood, with a sinking clarity, that this was the part that mattered most.

"I stepped out of a life that was very... structured," she continued. "You knew that. You had seen it. The timings, the expectations, the way everything was... contained."

He nodded slowly.

"I broke that," she said. "For you. Not dramatically. Not rebelliously. Just... quietly. Repeatedly."

Her voice did not waver as she continued. "I got on your bike at night. I got into your car. I stayed out till morning. I chose to be somewhere I wasn't supposed to be—because I felt safe. Because I thought..." She paused, choosing the word with care. "...I thought you were someone who understood the weight of that."

"I thought I understood," he said quickly.

"No," she said again, and this time there was no softness left in it.

"You understood how it felt," she said. "Not what it meant."

Silence settled heavily between them.

"You had another life running parallel to this," she continued. "One where you were still... available. Still undecided. Still open to something else."

"I wasn't open—"

"You didn't close it. Even after telling me all that, you didn't close it."

He realised he had spent weeks convincing himself that waiting was the kinder choice. Standing in front of her now, it looked exactly like fear dressed up as patience.

She nodded once, like someone who had finally reached the end of a long argument with herself and no longer needed to keep searching for a kinder version of the answer.

"I couldn't be one of many possibilities, Hamza," she said. "Not like this."

"You weren't," he said, stepping closer again, urgency beginning to return despite how little room there was left for it. "You weren't—this was different, you knew it was."

“I knew what it felt like,” she said. “I didn’t know what you chose.”

He stood there, searching for something—words, explanations, anything that could pull this back from the edge—but for the first time, nothing came easily, because this was no longer about what he felt.

It was about what he had done with those feelings—and what he had failed to do when it mattered.

“I need time,” she said.

It wasn't an ending. It was distance, clear and deliberate, the kind that could not be argued away.

“Mahira—”

“I’m not saying this is over,” she added before he could continue, her voice steady enough to make the uncertainty inside it feel even heavier. “I’m saying I don’t know what this is anymore.”

She stepped back then, physically and unmistakably, creating space between them in a way that made the conversation feel suddenly irreversible.

“And until I do... I can’t stand here and pretend this didn’t change everything.”

He remained where he was, listening to the ordinary sounds of the morning carry on around him while the space she had left behind felt impossibly large.

He watched her disappear inside without calling after her again. There was nothing left to say that belonged to this moment. Every explanation had arrived too late.

For the first time since she had stepped into his life, Hamza understood that loving someone was not the same as choosing them in time.



Chapter 38

It came to him in fragments rather than all at once. Each small moment returned with quiet persistence until, together, they became impossible to ignore.

It was there in a message he did not reply to, in a call he let ring out because he did not have the energy to pretend he was fine, and in a conversation at home that felt heavier than usual, filled with expectations he had once learned how to avoid and now could not stop noticing.

Beneath all of it was her absence. It had been weeks, too long to keep pretending time would return things to what they had been.

The drives had stopped, and the late nights had disappeared with them.

At first, he told himself he was simply respecting the space she had asked for. For a while, that explanation was enough. Then he realised space could quietly become distance, and distance, if left alone, had a way of becoming permanent.

At home, the conversations had become more direct, as though everyone had silently agreed that implication was over and decisions now needed names.

"We should move this forward," his mother said one evening. Her voice carried the steady certainty of someone who believed the next step had already been delayed long enough.

"What do you mean?" he asked, even though he already knew exactly what she meant.

"Her family is asking," she said. "And it's fair. You've met enough times. We can't keep it... undefined."

The word stayed with him longer than it should have.

Undefined.

For a second, he almost laughed. The irony was so sharp it felt absurd. The word echoed in his head, carrying him back to Mahira and the day she told him she had never asked him to define what they were, only to be honest about it.

He had kept everything undefined, convincing himself that postponement was caution, silence was patience, and time would eventually choose for him.

But now time was asking something back. For the first time, choosing nothing no longer felt like neutrality. It felt like its own decision.

"I need to think, Ammi," he said.

His father looked at him steadily. "You've been thinking. How much longer do you need?"

His father's quiet expectation made it harder to resist. Without anger or accusation to push against, he was left facing only himself.

For the first time, every answer sounded like fear.

That night, he drove alone.

The roads were unchanged, yet every familiar turn reminded him of the space beside him that no longer held her.

Almost without thinking, he stopped at the tea stall they had visited countless times and ordered the same tea.

The man behind the counter greeted him like any other regular customer.

He stood with the paper cup warming his hands, watching headlights come and go before glancing, almost instinctively, toward the place where she usually stood.

He had spent months postponing one truth.

He loved her.

He hadn't moved on. He didn't want to.

Even now, after weeks apart, she was still the person he wanted beside him. Everything else belonged to the life everyone expected him to choose, not the one he knew he wanted.

Once he admitted that to himself, there was nothing left to postpone.

For the first time in weeks, the future no longer felt divided into competing possibilities. It frightened him, but the fear carried an unexpected clarity. Whatever came next would at least belong to a choice he had finally made.

The next day, he didn't wait.

When he sat down with his parents, something in his tone made them look up immediately. "Can we talk?"

"What is it?" his mother asked.

He exhaled slowly. Once he said it, there would be no returning to postponement.

"I don't want to move forward with this," he said.

Silence settled between them before his father spoke.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” he began, forcing himself not to soften the truth now that he had finally chosen to say it. “I shouldn’t have let it go this far. That’s on me. But I don’t want this.”

“This is not about wanting or not wanting,” his mother said, and her voice was tighter now, carrying the strain of someone trying to remain calm while already anticipating the answer she did not want to hear. “This is about understanding what is right. People are waiting for an answer.”

“This isn’t right,” he said.

His father looked at him steadily before asking, “For what reason?”

He could have said he wasn’t ready, needed more time, was unsure. But this time, he did not reach for delay.

He looked at them and said, “There’s someone else.”

His mother looked at him for a long moment, searching his face as though she might still find some version of this that made more sense.

“Since when?” she asked.

“A while,” he replied.

“And you’re telling us now?” she said.

“Yes.”

The disappointment settled quietly between them.

“You should have said something earlier,” his father said.

“I should have,” he agreed, because there was nothing else to say that would not sound like an excuse.

Another pause followed before his mother asked, more quietly this time, “And this is serious?”

He did not hesitate when he answered. “Yes.”

The conversation remained difficult. Questions gave way to disappointment, and disappointment to consequences that none of them tried to soften.

But through all of it, he did not step back.

For the first time, he did not leave anything open, did not soften his words into uncertainty or hide behind the comfort of maybe. He stayed where he was, inside the discomfort of disappointing people he loved, because finally choosing something meant accepting what that choice would cost.

His mother sat for a long moment before speaking, the disappointment still there, though now tempered by the practical reality of what had to happen next.

“We’ll speak to Ameena’s parents,” she said. “They deserve that much.”

His father nodded once before adding, with quiet firmness, “But before that, someone needs to tell Ameena.”

The words settled between them, obvious and unavoidable. Hamza did not hesitate this time. “I will.”

His mother looked at him, searching his face, but he held her gaze.

“This part should come from me,” he said. “Not from anyone else.”

Neither of them argued.

Later that evening, he sat across from Ameena at the same café they had met at over the past few months, a place that had always felt neutral and easy, chosen because it made difficult conversations feel a little less uncomfortable.

She noticed the tension immediately. Setting her coffee down, she looked at him for a moment before asking, “What happened? You sound strange.”

Hamza exhaled slowly, already hating what he had to say and the fact that there was no version of it that would not hurt.

“I should have said this earlier,” he began, his voice quieter than usual. “And I’m sorry that I didn’t.”

Her expression changed almost instantly, some instinct arriving before the explanation did.

“Hamza.”

“I let this go further than I should have,” he said. “That’s on me. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She stared at him for a moment, still enough that he could almost see the understanding settle before she said it aloud. “There’s someone else,” she said.

He nodded once.

She stared at him for another moment before a short, disbelieving laugh escaped her.

"You've got to be kidding."

She shook her head once.

"Wow."

“Ameena—”

“No, because that’s actually impressive,” she said. “You let families get involved, you let everyone keep moving forward, and all this time there was someone else?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

She gave him a tired look, “Please don’t say that. It was exactly like that.”

He let the silence sit. “I was trying to figure it out,” he said after a moment. “That doesn’t excuse it, but it’s the truth.”

“And while you were figuring it out, what was I supposed to be? A placeholder? A safe option?”

“No,” he said immediately. “That’s not fair.”

Her laugh was short and humorless. “Fair? No, Hamza. Fair would have been honesty.”

When she spoke again, her voice was quieter. “Did you ever actually consider this? Me, I mean. Or was I just the version of life that made sense on paper?”

“I did consider it,” he said honestly. “I respect you, and I care about you. But it would have been wrong to keep going when I already knew my heart was somewhere else.”

She looked down for a moment before meeting his eyes again. “I hate that you’re telling me this now,” she said.

“I know.”

“And I hate that part of me respects that you finally did.”

He nodded, “That’s fair.”

She exhaled slowly, as though letting go of something she had already known was ending.

“Then I think this is done,” she said. “Because I’m not interested in being chosen after hesitation. I’d rather be hurt once than slowly.”

“I understand.”

When she stood, she gave him a small, sad smile. “I hope,” she said, “whoever she is, you don’t wait this long to be honest with her again.”

Then she left, and this time Hamza stayed where he was, understanding exactly why.

Watching her walk away, he realised that honesty could not erase the hurt he had caused. It could only stop him from causing more. It wasn't redemption, but it was the first decision he had made without hiding behind time.



Chapter 39

The first message he sent got no reply.
It was simple. He had learned that apologies sounded weakest when they tried too hard.

Can we talk?

He stared at the screen longer than he should have, watching the delivered mark sit there without changing into anything else, searching it for uncertainty where there was only silence. He knew better.

Mahira had seen it, and she had chosen not to answer.

He told himself not to read too much into it. She had every right to ignore him, and expecting an immediate reply would only prove he still didn't understand what he had broken.

Understanding it didn't make waiting easier. Two days later, he sent another message.

I'm not asking for an answer right now. I just want you to know I ended it. I told my parents. I told Ameena. I should have done it sooner, and I know that.

This time, she replied. It came hours later, after he'd stopped checking his phone every few minutes and convinced himself silence would be the only answer.

When the screen finally lit up, it was only one line.

I know.

That was all.

There was no anger, no softness, no opening he could mistake for invitation. It was simply acknowledgement, clean and restrained. Somehow, that felt harder than anger.

He did not reply after that. He had plenty to say, yet for the first time he understood that not every silence belonged to him to break.

A week later, he saw her at a mutual friend's engagement dinner, one of those carefully arranged family gatherings where everyone knew everyone well enough to make leaving early feel like a statement.

She stood near the balcony doors, speaking to someone with the same quiet composure that had undone him outside her building. The way she carried herself made the distance between them feel even sharper.

She looked fine. Untouched.

For a second, he considered leaving. After everything he had done, approaching her felt like another intrusion. Then she turned, and their eyes met across the room. Leaving would have been another kind of avoidance.

So he stayed.

Later that night, they stood near the quieter edge of the balcony, the city lights stretched below them in scattered gold, both pretending to look anywhere but at each other.

"You've been avoiding me," he said, and even he knew how unfair it sounded the second it left him.

Mahira let out the smallest breath, not quite a laugh, but enough to tell him she had noticed the same thing. “That’s a very interesting way to phrase that.”

He nodded once, accepting it. “Fair.”

She folded her arms, holding his gaze with the steady composure of someone unwilling to let the conversation drift into anything easier than the truth. “What do you want, Hamza?”

The question left no room for performance or careful half-answers.

He looked at her. Careful versions had brought him here. Honesty was all that remained. “You.”

She blinked once. For the first time that evening, something in her composure gave way. Only he seemed to notice.

When she spoke, though, her voice remained calm, “That would have meant more before.”

Disappointment spoken quietly carried more weight than anger. She had already moved beyond the point where apology could change anything.

“I know.”

She looked away then, out toward the lights below, and when she spoke again, her voice was quieter, heavier, “Do you?”

She let the question sit for a second before continuing.

“Because I spent weeks trying to understand whether I had imagined everything, whether I was stupid for trusting you, whether I had built something in my head that never existed for you at all.”

He let her finish. Interrupting now would only have protected him from what he had done.

"I know saying this now doesn't fix that," he said. "I know it probably sounds convenient, because it came after losing you. But it was always real. I was just... late in becoming honest about it."

She turned back to him, and the look she gave him carried none of the relief he might once have hoped for.

"That's the problem," she said. "You keep talking about honesty like it arrived late. It didn't. You chose against it."

There was no anger in the way she said it, only a clarity that made the truth impossible to escape. She wasn't accusing him of being confused. She was accusing him of knowing enough and choosing comfort over courage.

He closed his eyes briefly, because there was nothing left to defend and no version of this that could be softened into misunderstanding.

"I was a coward," he said. "And I kept calling it confusion because that sounded better."

Saying it aloud felt uglier than he'd imagined, yet cleaner too, because for the first time he was not trying to protect himself from the full shape of it.

She fell silent, listening with an attention that left him nowhere to hide.

"I ended it," he continued, "because I finally stopped pretending indecision was harmless. Courage came later, if it came at all."

He met her gaze with the honesty he should have offered much earlier. "Every day I left it unresolved, I was still choosing something. I just kept pretending that not deciding was somehow kinder than admitting what I already knew."

She watched him in silence, weighing whether the truth had arrived too late to matter.

"I'm glad you finally made a decision," she said. "That doesn't erase the fact that I had to survive the version of you that couldn't."

He nodded, because there was nothing in that he could argue with, and said quietly, "I know."

Another silence settled between them, heavy with the decision neither of them was ready to make.

He stepped closer, leaving enough distance for her to step away if she wanted.

"I don't think you understand what changed," she told him after a pause, her voice calm but carrying a certainty that made it impossible to dismiss.

"This isn't just about being hurt. It's about the fact that I don't know if I respect you the same way anymore."

That stopped him.

"Mahira—"

"No, listen to me," she said, and for once he did not interrupt. "I can deal with disappointment. I can deal with heartbreak. What I don't know how to deal with is realizing that the person I trusted enough to step outside of myself for was capable of leading two people on at the same time and calling it confusion."

"I wasn't leading you on," he said quietly. "At least I never believed I was."

She let out a quiet, humourless laugh. "Do you hear how that sounds? Because from where I'm standing, that's exactly what happened."

He looked down for a moment before meeting her eyes again. "It wasn't."

"That's the problem," she said. "You keep saying that, but what exactly was it like?"

She stepped closer.

"Do you know what I keep thinking about? Whether you were like this with her too. Whether you sat with her over tea and let her think she mattered. Whether you kissed her too. Whether she was in your bed

while I was still trying to decide if I was imagining what was happening between us.”

“No,” he said it immediately, firmly enough that even she paused.

“No,” he repeated, quieter this time. “Not like that. Never like that.”

But he could already see the details no longer mattered. Doubt had reached everything.

“She doesn’t know that,” Mahira said. “And I don’t know that. That’s the part you broke. I have to wonder now, about all of it.”

He looked at her, knowing she understood him exactly as he had allowed himself to be seen.

“I know why you feel that way,” he said. “And I hate that I’m the reason you do.”

She folded her arms before speaking again, her voice quieter now.

“I hate it too, because I trusted you. I defended you. I made room for your silences because I thought they meant something deeper, and now I look back and I don’t know if I was being patient or just stupid.”

“You weren’t stupid.”

She looked at him then, the hurt in her eyes beyond the reach of comfort. “Then what was I?”

He had no answer.

She had loved him honestly. He had answered with hesitation disguised as care.

There was no kinder version of the truth. She had trusted him, and he had made her question her own judgment.

After a long silence, she looked at him with a tiredness that felt older than anger.

“I don't know if there's a future here, Hamza. My feelings aren't the problem. I don't know if I can trust the person I felt them for.”

Clarity left very little room for comfort.

He stepped closer, then stopped before he crossed the distance she had left between them.

“I'm still here,” he said. The words sounded smaller than he meant them to.

“I know,” she said. “But sometimes staying after the damage is the easiest part. The harder part is being someone worth staying for in the first place.”

The words settled somewhere guilt couldn't reach. They reached the part of him that had spent too long confusing feeling deeply with doing rightly.

Standing there, he understood that love had never been the question between them.

Character was.



Chapter 40

The message came three weeks later, with no explanation and no careful preface, just a single line that made him stop in the middle of his bedroom with his phone still in his hand.

Are you free tonight?

For a second, he simply stared at it. Her name on his screen had become something he had stopped expecting, something he had trained himself not to hope for too loudly, because hope had a way of turning silence into cruelty if you let it.

He read it twice, as though certainty required repetition, and even then he stood there for a second longer than necessary, letting the reality of it settle before replying.

Yes.

Another pause followed. Then another message appeared.

Come by at ten.

There was no explanation and no promise. It was enough.

By nine forty-five, Hamza was outside her building, sitting on his bike with both hands resting too still on the tank, feeling the kind of nervousness he had not let himself name in weeks. The roads were quiet, the air cooler than it had been all day, the city briefly gentler than usual, as if it had stepped back and left space for whatever this was about to become.

He checked the time more often than he meant to. Every footstep, every gate opening somewhere nearby, made him look up before reason caught up with instinct.

He had been here before. He remembered the first time she'd climbed onto his bike, when neither of them had realised how much those ordinary rides would come to mean. Back then, closeness had felt effortless. Now he understood it had always been a choice.

At ten exactly, the gate opened.

Mahira walked out wearing jeans and a loose black kurta, simple and familiar in a way that made the moment feel even more real, with that same expression she always wore when she was trying very hard not to let herself be read too easily. Her hair was left open, falling softly over one shoulder, and there was something about how ordinary she looked that made the moment feel more significant, not less, because this was not some grand romantic scene. It was just her, and him, and the possibility of trying again.

Neither of them spoke. The silence felt careful rather than awkward.

Hamza stayed where he was, resisting the instinct to fill the quiet with something too eager or too rehearsed. He had learned that some moments asked for patience more than language, and this felt like one of them.

Then she looked at the bike, then at him, and one corner of her mouth lifted just slightly.

“Very original.”

Relief came so suddenly he almost laughed.

“I thought consistency might help.”

She stepped closer, stopping in front of him, her eyes still on him in that steady way that always made honesty feel like the only available option.

“Or nostalgia.”

“That too.”

The answer made her mouth curve a little more, not quite a smile, but close enough that he felt it.

She studied him for a moment, measuring him with quiet caution.

Then, without another word, she took the helmet from his hand. He watched her climb onto the bike. The familiar weight of her settling behind him felt almost unbearably known.

Then her hand rested lightly against his shoulder, not quite the same as before, not yet, but real enough to make something in his chest loosen. The touch was careful, but it was still trust, and he felt the weight of it more than if she had held him tightly.

“Ready,” she said, her voice quiet but certain.

So he started the bike and pulled onto the road. They rode in silence, and for once it felt like possibility rather than distance.

He took the longer roads without asking, and she did not question it. They passed the lake road they used to circle for no reason except that neither of them wanted the night to end, the quiet lane near the university where they had once argued about something neither of them could even remember now, and the signal where she had first leaned forward and said, don’t go home yet, as though those four words had not quietly changed everything.

They passed the small bakery where she had once insisted on stopping for dessert instead of dinner, laughing when he complained that she was

ruining his appetite. He remembered giving in without much resistance, discovering much later that he almost always had where she was concerned.

Hamza stopped before the old tea stall.

She got off the bike, taking off the helmet and looking at the place with a small shake of her head, already understanding exactly what he had done and how deliberately he had chosen this.

“You really planned this.”

“I considered pretending this was spontaneous,” he said.

“That would have been insulting.”

He smiled, and for the first time in a long time, it felt unforced, because for once the memory did not feel like something painful to survive, but something they were both willing to stand inside again.

They stood there with paper cups warming their hands, the road quieter now and the hour late enough that the world had stopped demanding things from them, leaving only the stillness of the night and the conversation neither of them had come there to avoid.

Mahira took a slow sip before speaking, as though giving herself a moment to decide how much honesty the night could hold.

“My mother asked me yesterday if I was still angry with you.”

He glanced at her and asked, “And?”

“I said anger would be easier.”

That made him nod, because he understood exactly what she meant. “Fair.”

She looked at him then, directly, with the kind of steadiness that made it clear she was not interested in softening the truth for either of them.

“I meant what I said before,” she said. “About not trusting you.”

“I know.”

“I’m not interested in apologies that disappear once things feel normal again, or in promises that only exist while things are difficult.”

“You won’t get that.”

“And I’m not going to spend months translating silence, trying to guess what you mean because you’re too afraid to say it.”

He let out a slow breath, because that sentence held the entire shape of what had broken between them.

“You won’t have to.”

She held his gaze for a moment, testing the steadiness of it, as though she was looking for hesitation and finding none for the first time in a long while.

“This doesn’t go back to what it was.”

“It shouldn’t.”

Something in her expression softened then, enough for him to notice.

Mahira looked down at her tea for a moment before speaking, and when she did, her voice was quieter, carrying the kind of truth people only admitted when they were too tired to protect it anymore.

“I was so angry at you because I loved you enough for it to matter.”

He let that sit between them before answering, because some things deserved silence before response.

“I know. And I think I only understood the full weight of that after I had to stand without it.”

She let out a small breath, something between a sigh and reluctant amusement.

“That’s annoyingly honest.”

“I’m trying.”

“I noticed.”

Another quiet settled between them, warm now instead of uncertain.

When they walked back to the bike, it didn't feel like a perfect ending. It felt real.

She stopped before getting on and looked at him with that same careful clarity she had carried from the beginning, the kind that never allowed him to mistake comfort for certainty.

“This is not me pretending none of it happened.”

“I know.”

“This is me saying I'm willing to see what happens next.”

Neither of them spoke straight away. The words seemed to settle around them, asking for nothing except that they be taken seriously. Hamza realised she had not offered him certainty, forgiveness, or even another chance in the way he might once have imagined. She had offered something smaller, and therefore much harder to earn: the time to prove that the man standing before her would remain the same tomorrow, and the day after that.

He nodded before he found his voice, and then said quietly, “That's enough.”

She studied him for another second, as though making one final decision inside herself, and then she stepped closer and pressed a brief kiss against his cheek, small and deliberate, and somehow more intimate than anything else they had shared.

“Good,” she said. “Because that's all you're getting tonight.”

He laughed then, properly this time. She smiled too, the distance between them finally beginning to ease.

When she got on behind him again, her arms settled around him with an ease that made his chest ache. It was a small, ordinary expression of trust, and somehow that made it mean more.

Nothing was fixed. Neither of them pretended otherwise.

For the first time, they were moving in the right direction, choosing each other with open eyes.

And as he drove into the quiet city with her holding on, the road ahead no longer felt like something to fear. It simply felt worth taking.



Epilogue

A few months later, life no longer felt divided into before and after.

It had settled into something quieter than either of them might once have imagined, built less on promises than on ordinary days repeated often enough to become a life.

On a Thursday evening, Hamza waited outside Mahira's office, parked beneath the same tree where he always found shade at that hour. He glanced at his watch, then back at the building, smiling to himself when he saw her emerge almost exactly on time.

She was carrying too many files.

She always carried too many files.

The moment she spotted him, she sighed in exaggerated relief.

"If you say I should've taken a lunch break, I'm walking home."

He held out the cup of tea he'd bought for her before she could open the car door.

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"You were thinking it."

"I still am."

She accepted the tea with a look that suggested she was choosing not to argue because she was too tired to make the effort.

"You're impossible."

"I've been told."

"By me."

"Repeatedly."

She smiled despite herself.

It was a small moment, gone almost as soon as it arrived, yet it lingered with him all the same. Once, he would have thought love revealed itself in confessions and impossible choices. Now he recognised it in remembering how she took her tea, knowing when she had skipped lunch without asking, and discovering that care often sounded less like poetry than quiet attention.

As they drove, she told him about a meeting that should have been an email. He told her about his mother insisting on feeding him enough dinner for three people. They argued briefly about directions before she reminded him, with considerable satisfaction, that he had missed the turn she had pointed out thirty seconds earlier.

"I was testing you."

"No, you weren't."

"No."

He laughed.

"You definitely weren't."

"I appreciate your honesty."

"I've had practice."

He glanced at her for a moment before returning his eyes to the road.

"So have I."

The words settled easily between them.

Neither of them needed to say more.

Instead of driving home, he turned onto the longer road.

She noticed almost immediately.

"We're taking the longer route."

"We are."

"You missed another turn?"

"I chose this one."

She looked at him for a second before smiling.

"I'll allow it."

He stopped outside the same tea stall.

The owner greeted them with the easy familiarity reserved for regular customers, already reaching for two paper cups before either of them had to ask.

"You two are late today," he said.

"We're keeping you in business," Hamza replied.

The man laughed and handed them their tea.

They stood beside the car, watching the road slip gradually into the quieter rhythm of the night.

For a while, neither of them spoke. The silence settled naturally around them.

Mahira looked down at her cup before quietly saying, "You know what's strange?"

"What?"

"I trust silence again."

He turned to look at her.

She wasn't looking at him anymore. She was watching the road ahead, speaking as though she had only just discovered the thought herself.

"I used to think every quiet moment meant something was wrong. That if you weren't saying something, it was because you were pulling away."

She smiled faintly.

"I don't think that anymore."

He reached for her hand.

She let him.

They stood there for a while longer, saying nothing.

Traffic drifted past in the distance. The tea was still too sweet. Somewhere farther down the road, someone laughed before disappearing into the night.

Nothing about the evening was remarkable.

That was what made it precious.

Love had stopped asking to be proven.

It lived here instead, in ordinary Thursdays, familiar roads, shared cups of bad tea, and the quiet certainty that neither of them had to wonder what the other was carrying in silence.

When they finally got back into the car, she reached for his hand before he started the engine.

"Ready?" he asked.

She smiled. "Always."

He pulled onto the road, and the city unfolded quietly before them, familiar now in all the ways that mattered.

For the first time, neither of them was looking back.

They simply drove on.